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Acrobatic dance teacher trains *Billy Elliot* cast

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Ruthy Dunec never dreamed that a childhood love of gymnastics would result in her opening a gym and then later working with the cast of the Tony Award-winning musical *Billy Elliot*.

Dunec is known for developing a children's fitness program called Dance Trix, which helps competitive dancers improve their acrobatic and dance techniques.

When *Billy Elliot* – about a boy who gives up on boxing to fulfil his dream of becoming a ballet dancer, with a score by pop superstar Elton John – opened in previews in Toronto last month (the official opening was March 1), the producers turned to Dunec for help.

The Toronto production team realized that the cast, which includes 18 children, would benefit from working with an expert who could teach dance and acrobatic techniques in a safe, fun and professional manner.

Dunec, 30, enjoyed gymnastics and dance as a kid. She went to Associated Hebrew Schools and continued her education at the Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto. Her passion for the arts led her to study



Ruthy Dunec helps dancers improve their acrobatic and dance techniques.

kinesiology at York University. Since the age of 16, she's taught gymnastics, and she realized she had a flair for working with children and that her students liked her technique.

Her passion for finding a balance between art and fitness led her to take over the ownership of the Steeles West Gym, which offers programs for children. Dunec is the program director of KinderBounce Gymnastics as well as Dance Trix, which are part of an umbrella company called Fit 4 Life.

The producers of *Billy Elliot* heard about Dunec through the Toronto dance-industry grapevine. When they contacted her, she went through a rigorous interview process, after which she was hired to train eight cast members to do acrobatic tricks.

As someone with lots of experience working with dancers, Dunec understands the types of movements a dancer needs to present themselves properly on stage. She also makes sure the actors are learning tricks safely and are perfecting their dance and acrobatic skills.

"One thing I noticed immediately was that they [the cast of *Billy Elliot*] are extremely hardworking and talented kids. The show is very demanding physically and they do a lot of different tricks and skills, like doing a round-off off the piano with no hands. If they don't train properly, they could get really injured," said Dunec.

In addition to the eight cast members, Dunec has also been working with the ensemble cast who provide acrobatic elements within the show. She said she's committed to training the *Billy Elliot* cast – she commutes downtown at least twice a week to work with the actors, teaching them new acrobatic skills, improving their existing skills and making sure they are well trained.

"The kids are very young, ranging from age 12 to 14, which is a major growth time, so if they don't have constant maintenance, they could lose a lot of their skills and sustain injuries, so it's really different from working on a normal Broadway show, because a lot of hard work goes into just keeping these kids at



Dunec "spots" (assists) a girl at her Steeles West Gym.

the level they are at," said Dunec.

Although this is her first time working on a Broadway show, it isn't the first time she's been involved with a popular dance production.

Dunec said the stars of *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* – a Gemini Award-winning TV series that features dancers who compete to win cash, a car and the title of Canada's Favourite Dancer – also frequently train in her gym.

Dunec said she enjoys the challenge of juggling her duties at the gym, the gymnastic programs she runs and working with the *Billy Elliot* cast.

"Overall, it's been so rewarding. I'm honoured to be working with these kids, and I'm excited about doing this again in the future," she said.

One thing is for sure: she now sees Broadway shows in a new light.

"I've been a big fan of Broadway musical theatre forever, and now that I'm part of the behind-the-scenes crew, I can never really look

at a show the same way," she said.

"I've realized all the hard work that goes into putting on such a show, and I know that every word, movement and action took 20 to 30 hours to rehearse."

Dunec loved the experience working on this show and hopes to work on another show in the future.

"Anything I do, I really put in 120 per cent. I'm taking it beyond just teaching the kids acrobatic elements, and I try to stick around afterwards to watch some of their numbers and really understand the purpose of what I'm teaching," she said. "The whole process has just been so exciting and rewarding."

For more information about Dunec's programs, visit www.fitforlifegroup.com.



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