



STILLNESS *in* MOVEMENT

ONE YOUNG MAN'S TRIUMPH
OVER ADVERSITY HAS LED TO A
PROMISING CAREER IN DANCE

Words by **Allison Livingstone**

Most people understand the parallels between top dancers and elite athletes: the training, the discipline, the physical and mental demands, and that's before you've even taken to the stage, or the field. And like sport, those who want to dance for a living are training from an earlier and earlier age.

Which makes Gilbert Ratcliffe's journey that much more remarkable. The talented 18-year-old from Helston (known as Gil to his friends) has just finished his two-year extended diploma in dance at Truro College, and has been enrolled in one of Europe's top dance conservatoires, Trinity Laban in London.

Perhaps the thing that people find most surprising is that Gil also has Tourette's Syndrome. Tourette's is often associated with verbal tics, including swearing or the repetition of certain words, although this affects only a small minority of those with Tourette's. It also causes physical tics, and in Gil's case, this includes facial tic. "You feel the tension building and you have to tic. And if you're tired and stressed they happen more," he explains. "Since primary school, I've learnt how to hold the tension in other parts of my body. So when I feel it building, I move it around my ears and jaw, so it's not around my eyes or mouth which are more obvious. Therefore, it doesn't hinder me in dance. There are almost no tics because my body is working so hard and my brain is so busy."

At Laban, there will undoubtedly be periods of tiredness and stress, and while some dance is explosive and fast, other pieces are about small, slow movements, or even moments of stillness. "Stillness is the hardest thing for me to do, but I've learnt over the years how to cope," says Gil.

It seems appropriate that Laban is twinned with Trinity Music College, because Gil is also a talented drummer and percussionist playing with Cornwall Youth Wind Orchestra and Carrick Winds – in July, he travelled with Carrick to

take part in the National Festival of Music for Youth at the Birmingham Symphony Hall.

In dance and drumming, Gil believes his Tourette's has been a help, not a hindrance. His mother, artist Melanie Young, recalls: "When Gil was much younger, the tics were worse. Sometimes you couldn't even understand what he was saying - it was really quite debilitating. So we looked for things where he could use his energy, and one of the first was drumming. When Gil drums, there are no tics.

"At some point, he started to think differently about his

Tourette's because without it, he wouldn't get the benefits, which include the ability to think and process information so fast, and see things on stage, he doesn't just know what he needs to do, or where he needs to be, he knows what everyone else is doing, and where they need to be as well. All these processes means there is no energy left to tic."

Gil's training, workload and physicality will increase immensely over his three years at Laban, with daily ballet, as well as contemporary, improvisational dance and Pilates classes. During the first year, tutors take students back to basics, looking at

how they stand and walk, and their posture. "I will hit brick walls, and I need to see how I'll get over them - but I will get over them," says Gil with determination.

If it's possible to think so far ahead, what happens post-Laban? "I'd like to go to Europe," he says. "Arts funding is better there than in the UK. I'd like to do a Masters, join a company and build up my skills. Maybe with more experience, I could get into choreography."

You wouldn't bet against him achieving all this, and more.

Gil is currently looking for sponsorship from local companies. Contact gilbert@watergatefarm.com

For further information, visit

<http://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/> and

<http://www.trinitylaban.ac.uk/>

