

A black and white portrait of actor Barton Cowperthwaite. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. He has dark hair styled back. He is wearing a light-colored jacket with a zipper. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a white curtain or fabric.

BARTON

COWPERTHWAITTE

photography Luke Dickey
styling Krisana Sotelo

IN THE CUTTHROAT WORLD OF BALLET, THERE IS NO PLAN B. NETFLIX'S UPCOMING SERIES *TINY PRETTY THINGS* EXPLORES THE COMPLEXITIES AND TRAUMA THAT YOUNG BALLET DANCERS ARE SUBJECTED TO REGULARLY AND FROM AN EARLY AGE.

Barton Cowperthwaite plays Oren, a young ballerina suffering from an eating disorder, crippling anxieties and sexual confusion. Cowperthwaite started his career when at age 12 — which is a late entrance into the world of ballet. Despite this late start, his technique surpasses his years of experience and is about to once more when he takes his pointe shoes on to the silver screen. Ahead of the release of *Tiny Pretty Things*, the 28-year-old dancer opens up about body dysmorphia, the demanding regimes of the ballet universe and how listening is just as essential as communicating.

jacket
N.HOLLYWOOD
top Baracuta

Your upcoming Netflix show *Tiny Pretty Things* is a mixture between *Gossip Girl* and *Black Swan* with a dose of thriller thrown in. What drew you to it when you were initially handed the script? What drew me to the project was that it was rooted in truth in the ballet world. The ballet world doesn't need a lot more drama than it already has. I think the show illustrated that and there wasn't anything over the head or overly dramatised to the point where it was no longer believable. There are also a lot of essential aspects to Oren, my character, that I'm passionate about telling. People could potentially be going through similar things, and I hope that the show is going to make them feel less alone – seeing someone going through what they are on screen.



THIS PAGE jacket 40s & Shorties jumper + trousers Dries Van Noten trainers UNTUCKit

You started your career around the age of 12 so quite a late bloom, especially for a ballet dancer. What were your motives at that time?

At the time, I was doing every sport under the sun and never really felt at home. I was a nerdy, skinny kid and I loved being active — but I never really felt alive and at home until I got into a dance class. I was moving, there was music, and it was the first time that I felt like I was vibrating.

My little brother started before me, and he was complaining that he was lonely. He was like, *'I'm the only boy! Come and take a dance class with me!'*

And I did. And that's how I ended up falling madly in love with it. So, my little brother will forever take credit for getting me started.

In *Tiny Pretty Things*, we see that in the world of ballet most dancers start their careers from a very young age because of their family's influence upon them. Did your family play a part in your career choice, or were you one of the lucky ones who got to decide for themselves?

I was very, very fortunate to choose for myself. Even with the late start, I had a very supportive family that encouraged me to take the less beaten path. A lot of male dancers don't have that kind of support system. I was very fortunate to have parents that were excited about the fact that I found something that made me happy.

Your character Oren struggles with his sexual identity and an eating disorder. It's widespread in the world of ballet to develop body dysmorphia... Is that something that you've encountered in any companies? If so, what would you say is the best way to combat it?

Absolutely. It happens in the world of sport as well, so it applies to athletes too, but especially to dancers. We are forced to be at odds with our self-image, and we're continually looking at ourselves in the mirror. There's a specific body type to become a professional dancer, and the pressures and expectations are incredibly high. Oren is struggling with intense levels of anxiety and he's developed an eating disorder, and that's common in the ballet world. There's a stigma that only women are susceptible to an eating disorder but, in reality, one in three people who have an eating disorder are male. In sports or ballet, men who have an eating disorder or men who lose weight at a rapid pace are applauded by their coaches for having self-discipline when, in reality, it's an unhealthy practice. So, there is no equal treatment for men and women who are dealing with that issue. I think young men must see someone like Oren — especially if they are pursuing an active passion and dealing with a disorder — to know that they're not alone, and then to recognise the signs and stick to a proper diet and ask for help when they need to.





BOTH PAGES hoody + trousers **MARCELO BURLON COUNTY OF MILAN** boots **Dr. Martens**

Ballet dancers are subjected to a strict regimen from a young age; it's like being in the army. Do you think there is a link between that lifestyle and them going off the rails? There is this demanding structure for ballet that forces dancers to put all of their eggs in one basket. So, you see dancers coming out of their short careers and not knowing what to do next. They never had coaches who encouraged them to experience life as they should. It's my opinion that experiencing life will inform your artistry, will make you a better dancer and will give you that opportunity to branch out into other fields or pursue other passions later in life. It's rare to find a coach that will support your explorations outside of dance.

In the show and the world of ballet, there's no plan B. What does movement mean to you? Movement, to me, is communication. It's always been one of the most primal ways of conveying emotions. It's storytelling. That's what I've come to understand through my career and my explorations as an artist. The better your technique is, the better you're able to tell a story. You're embodying a character, and it doesn't matter if it's a full ballet programme or a short contemporary piece where you're conveying abstract ideas as opposed to a more specific character. To me, movement is really about communicating with other people.



At the same time, what does stillness mean to you?

It's in the same realm of communication. When you're moving, you're speaking. When you're standing still, you're listening. If you're on stage and you're standing still, you're listening to the audience, you're looking at the lights; you're feeling your pulse and the temperature of the light on your skin. You can feel the house breathing. You can feel the energy. At this time in the world, when there are such powerful movements for our people, it's vital to find a place of stillness so that we can listen and learn.

Do you feel that you've reset and recharged your view of the world?

I think that it's shifting. I don't know if I can call it a reset. It's like an explosion and a slow rebuild. There are so many things that I was being taught and shown growing up that I need to re-evaluate. It's not a quick reset. I think that for me, I'm just trying to be mindful moving forward. And I'm hoping that us as a society can be more mindful going forward. We need to continue to reset at every step of the way.

jacket + trousers **CHRISTIAN WIJNANTS**
boots **Dr. Martens**



jacket MARCELO BURLON COUNTY OF MILAN jacket (worn around waist) CHRISTIAN WIJNANTS trousers N.HOOLYWOOD

What would you say has been your most significant rebellion to date? I think it's trying to stay 100% true to who I am. It's about not conforming to the stereotypical masculine mould. I am a straight white male who's a dancer and who supports Black Lives Matter. I am someone who sees value in every being and doesn't have to rely on a hard-exterior shell. I think my most significant act of rebellion is consistently trying to stay vulnerable and willing to be wrong and willing to make changes when I need to.

What can dance teach us about life? I think dance can teach you the intrinsic joy of being alive. I believe dance has inherent electricity that speaks volumes to what it is to be awake. To what it is to be able to see and hear the air and connect with other people by looking into their eyes or by watching them present something. Dance can teach people how to be vulnerable, how to get up on a stage with just their body and tell a story.

*Barton stars in **Tiny Pretty Things** premiering this Fall on Netflix!*

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