

A Guide to Independent Choreographers & Dance Companies (1st ed. 2007)

This introduction essay was commissioned by Dance Ireland from dance writer Seona MacRéamoinn for the directory *A Guide to Independent Choreographers and Dance Companies*. A copy of the publication is available to read from the Artists' Resource Room at DanceHouse.

Introduction

Dance and Ireland. Several pictures are likely to come to mind when you entertain this duo together; a snapshot of comely maidens dancing at a crossroads blurring with some riotous chorus line céili? But, Ireland is a surprising place. Our maidens are ever comely but our crossroads are currently pointing in new directions. The roads being travelled are not to ports of emigration and local house céilis. The cultural and social landscape is changing even as I write and our definitions of national and cultural image and identity are being interrogated and challenged. These days Ireland and dance are forging a dynamic new partnership as we set sail into a more culturally cosmopolitan world.

Dance is no stranger in our historical and cultural environment as Irish music is and has been a constant. Dance tunes are at the heart of that tradition and even the names of the tunes conjure much movement. A fiddle tune called *Round the House and Mind the Dresser* needs no footnoting and the social integration of dance is deeply embedded in the native culture. The dances even have an international provenance as along with the jigs, reels and hornpipes, there are waltzes, polkas and mazurkas, gathered and traded no doubt by musicians and dance masters on their travels within and without the country. Other dance forms are not so indigenous of course, so the more globally recognised forms of ballet, jazz or modern dance owe their development here to more recent times.

We have long been in the import and export business with people, languages and the arts, but without a past of patronage, tsars or palaces, ballet performance was merely a visiting phenomenon until the brief appearance of the Irish National Ballet (1973 to 1988). Joan Denise Moriarty, choreographer and artistic director was a doyenne of the early years and being conscious of the other Irish cultural traditions, she looked to dance's collaborative instincts to create a work that would fuse both theatre and dance. Her challenge was how to merge two traditions and yet make the work visibly Irish. In other words, how to meld the local dance tradition, which is without a narrative vocabulary, with that of classical ballet. Her *Playboy of the Western World* (1978) took on JM Synge's hymn to the west of Ireland, infused it with even more physical energy, engaged The Chieftains to write the music and it became a successful foretaste of things to come.

Ballet's role in our new century has been in training and touring, educating audiences, stimulating interest, exposing and familiarising us with a classical repertory. One of the drawbacks of being an island without an opera or dance house stage has always been the intermittent visits by touring companies. So in the last decade, three International Dance Festivals have made a substantial contribution to the expansion of our knowledge and exposure to dance styles and forms. The occasion in May 2002, when the Merce Cunningham Dance Company stepped on to the stage of the Abbey Theatre marked a watershed in how we have matured as a nation, acknowledging dance as a legitimate art form.

One of the challenges in a culture where the word has enjoyed dominance over any other medium of expression has been whether to turn your back on it, politely keep your distance or

find a way to negotiate a neighbourly, if not intimate, relationship. The narrative strain, given that we have fostered generations of storytellers might initially have been a more likely path for our dance makers to follow but, intriguingly, they have mostly not taken that road. Instead, their choices have been far ranging. They embrace the process driven and non verbal work of Rex Levitates, the text flecked dance works of CoisCéim and Irish Modern Dance Theatre, and the technology embracing work of Dance Theatre of Ireland. In effect, apart from some reinvigoration of Irish folk drama/dance as produced by Siamsa Tíre in County Kerry, there has been a shift away from fully representational work. The move has been towards innovation and the more experimental techniques and collaborative processes which have mined local and international resources of technology, music and design.

Still, there are distinctive features to the development. Many Irish dance artists tend to complement their movement skills with quite an extensive acting and emotional range which gives a distinctive tenor to the dance performances. Also, quite uniquely, the rhythms and tones of our other language, Irish, has provided a wealth of oral and written sources for two dancers/choreographers, Fearghus O Conchúir and Ríonach Ní Néill. Through background and education, both have a past steeped in the Irish language and culture. Now elements of their work seek to question and reach beyond some of the myths and stereotypes emanating from that tradition.

The strong role of the individual artist in our literary and theatrical culture helped to give the dance artist a place that was not perhaps well funded but at least acknowledged and tolerated as an important contributor to the cultural mix. So, with the burgeoning of a modern dance culture over the past thirty years, contemporary choreographers have been equally visible in the vanguard along with the performers and dancers. This has led to highly original and creative instinct in contemporary dance in Ireland, relative to the brevity of its presence here and the number of choreographer led companies is further evidence of that impulse. There is also, as you will see in the following pages, testament to the support of the individual artist as many choreographers work independently and freelance of a full supporting company. Further fertile ground for individual dance artists has been uncovered as playwrights and theatre directors including Tom McIntyre, Conall Morrison and Vincent Woods have sought the skills and imagination of dancers and choreographers to underline the visceral elements of their work.

Ireland's island position, perched between influential continents has offered us a unique perspective on the richness of surrounding comparative cultures from which we could learn. As our economic fortunes soared in recent years, the question posed often was would we look to Boston or Berlin? In dance terms, we have taken the 'both and' approach, absorbing and reworking both the European and the North American styles and conventions, which has allowed for difference to flourish. Abstract, intellectual, expressionist, they have all found their way into the vocabulary of dance here. However, in the way of post colonial nations, we are well used to assimilating the habits of our visitors and there is already evidence that our native culture has made its mark. We have engaged and exchanged with performers and individual artists from many countries, inviting in, and stepping out, while two major companies are currently led by artists from the United States (Dance Theatre of Ireland) and Austria (Daghdha Dance Company).

Traditional Irish dance is also on the move. The revival of the social form of set dancing and more recently of the pure Sean Nós (solo 'old style' performance) has offered a couple of parallel routes for Irish dancing to take following the high profile of dance garnered by *Riverdance*. Whether you see that show as light entertainment or as reinventing the idiom, one point is certain. It has revealed that there is more to this culture than the more recognisable eloquent voices of poetry and song. Just one blast of the liquid energy emanating from the

performance of Connemara native Seosamh Ó Neachtain would make you pause, not only in admiration but also in reflection. Two veterans of Irish traditional dance, Jean Butler and Colin Dunne, have stopped on that road to re-evaluation and are keen to investigate the percussive roots of their dance training and performance. Both were raised in families and communities borne of our emigrant culture, one in New York, the other in England, places where the badges of ethnic identity were conserved and carried over the generations in dance, song and language.

Those once indelible patterns of emigration have almost completely evaporated. We are now the destination of European, Asian and African migrants; economic, political and many who have the luxury of choice. This has happened with incredible speed and sometimes has caught us off balance, but we are eager to embrace the opportunity and challenge such diversity offers. Our dance community has been touched too and while, in the spirit of an island nation has looked out rather than merely within, the new influx of so many people and cultural backgrounds has opened up so many more possibilities. Visiting dancers, who come to perform, stay on and contribute to this exciting new world. There are opportunities emerging to participate in international festivals, take work abroad, perform for new and larger audiences and test oneself in a wider context.

There are sudden moments of illumination which underline the force of change we are experiencing. John Scott's *The White Piece* (2005) a collaboration between his Irish Modern Dance Theatre and clients from the Centre for the Care of Survivors of Torture in Dublin is one such moment. The work celebrates and evokes human frailty and hope, drawing on and performed from true personal events, and watching it one realised this could never have been conceived, let alone produced in an Ireland of ten years ago. Then it would have had little resonance, few imaginative connections.

So, here, in these pages, Irish dance presents itself. It is a survivor of economic privation through lack of funding, sponsorship or patronage, but that is balanced with old and new generations of dancers and choreographers whose extraordinary resilience and talent, collective energy, wit and spirit has ensured not simply survival but a creative future. Dance's international language is currently acquiring a new and distinctive Irish accent. In our post Celtic tiger, post *Riverdance* world, Irish dance is celebrating its coming of age.

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