



How do you solve a problem like ballet in Ireland?

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Ballet. Yes, my daughter is enrolled. Just passed her exams. You know, her teacher passes more Grade 5 students than any other teacher in Ireland.

Ballet. Oh, I got my tickets to *Swan Lake*. Yes, we'll be sitting in the corporate box with my husband's clients. I believe this *Swan Lake* is the best one that's being presented in the whole of the world today.

Ballet. Oh, there's no real ballet in this country. All we see are *Swan Lake* and *Nutcrackers*. I have to go abroad if I want to see anything else.

Ballet. Where's the money? Did you hear the company in town actually might be folding?

Some words evoke such powerful associations they immediately ignite the imagination and the senses. In Ireland, the word ballet evokes surprisingly incongruous reactions. And the confusing remarks gain a momentum of their own until ballet's somewhat precarious foothold in this country seems all the more in question. Ballet has become a loaded word here.

Today becomes history

It needn't be that way, considering this island enjoys an immense pride of place in ballet's world history, due to one young dancer from Wicklow who launched what is now one of the most prestigious schools and companies in the world. As a child, Dame Ninette de Valois danced her first Irish jig on a farmhouse kitchen floor, and years later, her family moved to England and she devoted herself to studying with the best Russian, Italian and French teachers of her day. She seized the chance in 1931 to found her own school and company – what is now London's Royal Ballet and Royal Ballet School.

Throughout her life de Valois remained proud of her Irish roots, as chronicled in several books, including her autobiography, *Come Dance With Me*. But the connection between one of the world's most influential ballerinas and indigenous Irish ballet has never come full circle, as if the pattern initially knit by her was left as merely a thread hanging over the Irish Sea.

Despite spawning one of history's best ambassadors for ballet, Ireland has since shown a largely ambivalent attitude toward the dance form. The nagging question remains: why does Ireland seem to embrace ballet with less enthusiasm than it does the other arts?

A non-native living in this country might notice immediately the emphasis placed on the thriving arts scene here. Several full-time, state-sponsored orchestras, a long list of renowned theatre companies, a theatre festival, fringe festival, opera festival and even a dance festival, not to mention an unparalleled literary heritage. Everywhere you turn you bump up against a top-notch arts organisation. Opera experiences its own tumults, but when assessing ballet's place in Irish culture, one wonders, "where is the full-time ballet company, and what about the school that feeds into it?"

Successful ballet schools and companies have existed here, first when de Valois founded the Abbey Theatre School of Ballet in Dublin with W.B. Yeats in 1927. Back then she travelled to Dublin once every three months from London to set ballets and oversee the

Abbey school, but eventually her tasks in England and throughout the world lured her away. Two of her former students took over the Abbey Theatre School of Ballet in 1933, but after several incarnations, it gave way to an entirely different system.

So much has happened since the school's initial founding (much of it expertly chronicled by Victoria O'Brien in *A History of Irish Ballet from 1927 to 1963*), that understanding ballet's place in Irish society becomes a puzzle where some of the parts have gone missing. Money has been an issue, and so have clashing personalities at the helms of ballet companies. Combined with periods where Ireland has experienced a dearth of dancers, it's a wonder that ballet has survived here at all.

It has persevered because since the 1920s individuals have gone to great lengths to promote what they love – from de Valois and her students to the next generation of directors such as Joan Denise Moriarty and Anne Campbell-Crawford. Now directors such as Anne Maher and Katherine Lewis carry ballet's torch, among many other passionate members of the ballet community. College of Dance Artistic Director Joanna Banks has consistently remained a champion of ballet here. For those determined to see ballet endure, the economic downturn of the past few years merely reflects the kind of belt-tightening with which ballet organisations have always had to grapple.

Show me the money

When you ask anyone working in the field today what presents the largest challenge in terms of fostering ballet, ultimately the discussion leads to funding. Groups supported by the state hastily add how grateful they are, but still, the big classics are expensive to produce.

As director of Irish National Youth Ballet, Lewis operates on a €50,000 annual budget and puts on two or three productions each year. She estimates theatre rental generally costs more than €5,000 per production, in addition to fees for choreographers, teachers, costume designers and rehearsal space. Last season INYB also hired an amateur orchestra for live music in some performances, leaving enough of a salary for Lewis to at least say she is not working for free. Yet she still wants to set up a satellite INYB company near Limerick.

In 2012 Cork City Ballet lost all its funding from the Arts Council, but director Alan Foley remains determined to present *The Sleeping Beauty* within the same year, in honour of what would have been the late Joan Denise Moriarty's 100th birthday. He says he will rely on in-kind donations, as well as support from the Cork City Council and the Cork Opera House.

Ballet companies' fates lie largely at the mercy of the Arts Council, which becomes troublesome when budgets tighten. This begs the question: when relying so heavily on one source of funding, is it possible for ballet companies to take artistic chances? And if companies do deviate from the kind of work that has secured their funding in the past, will subsequent Arts Council revenue be channelled to another organisation instead? It's an alarming proposition when livelihoods lie at stake. But since private and corporate philanthropy has not entered the public consciousness here the way it has elsewhere, ballet companies, like other arts organisations, become bound to these state subsidies.

The Arts Council's propensity for dismantling ballet companies goes back to 1963, when it decided that rather than fund two ballet companies, Joan Denise Moriarty's Irish Theatre Ballet and Patricia Ryan's National Ballet School and Company, it would amalgamate the two companies and support a new National Ballet Company.

An article in the Evening Press at the time (excerpted in O'Brien's book) eerily foreshadows that company's demise: "the policies are poles apart, and it will be difficult to reconcile them in a unified set up." Within months after its debut performances, the company folded.

Continuing to follow ballet's tangled thread around that time, O'Brien writes how Moriarty received £40,000 from the Arts Council ten years later in 1973, from which she established Irish National Ballet. This company enjoyed a relatively long life cycle, until its funding was completely cut in 1989.

No wonder a sense of mild panic and fear of losing valuable Arts Council support vaguely permeates conversations with ballet artistic directors today. It's impossible not to wonder how many more chances might be taken when presenting ballet choreography, were the funding more secure or received through a greater number of channels. In a society deeply committed to supporting charities, is a similar level of philanthropic support for arts organisations possible?

Monica Loughman Ballet has developed a different funding model, relying on corporate sponsor Allianz. This private sponsorship model has weathered the recent economic turmoil so that Loughman has managed performances at the Convention Centre and the Helix, as well as in cities around Ireland. It will be interesting to see how that develops should she choose to regularly employ a greater number of professional dancers and fewer students, potentially a more expensive proposition.

Build it and they will come

One of the most promising arrivals in the past few years amounted to disappointing houses when the Birmingham Royal Ballet performed at the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in July 2011. A well-established company presenting something other than a Tchaikovsky ballet in a purpose-built theatre could have ignited ballet lovers' hope for the future, yet the summertime crowd failed to fill houses. Sadly, the best ballet company this country has seen during the past seven years has not returned.

One explanation of ballet's difficulties here is that no Irish company employs a consistent group of full-time dancers. Audiences see visiting troupes swoop in, present a full-length classic, then leave a void until their return. The big Russian troupes at the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre have mastered luring Irish audiences by repeating the same story ballets, and while this is helpful in at least getting ballet onto Irish stages, it does little to educate the public on what a ballet company really looks like and how it functions behind the scenes.

Ballet Ireland faces its own conundrums when hiring a changing roster of dancers to put on mostly classic fairytales. Yes, the company needs to sell tickets to fill houses, but safe programming leaves little room for patrons to experience the more thrilling possibilities of an art form that can be edgy, thought-provoking and multi-dimensional.

George Balanchine took years to build an audience that appreciated his neo-classical work.

Wouldn't it be great if the public felt a kind of protective ownership over its ballet artists, the way it does over its writers, musicians and athletes? Having regular cadre of full-time ballet dancers working together would allow audiences to watch the dancers progress through their careers – stumbling blocks, and all – so that patrons would cheer on their favourite performers in new roles and watch them develop as artists. A permanent, full-time resident company would also give aspiring ballet dancers role models to emulate.

Still, dancers want to work here, as evidenced by Ballet Ireland's current lineup of 16 dancers from a total of eight different countries. Monica Loughman Ballet also hires Russian dancers to headline its performances. Cork City Ballet brings in guest artists from abroad, as does Galway-based Chrysalis Dance. Ballet Ireland artistic director Anne Maher says hiring a small core of full-time dancers may be within her company's realm of possibility in the near future, which might help push ballet more favorably into the public consciousness.

Where's Jiří Kylián?

Another hope for ballet aficionados lies with the Dublin Dance Festival, whose budget outranks every individual dance company in the country, and whose reputation attracts contemporary dance companies from around the world. If ballet could appear as part of an upcoming festival, even briefly, but repeatedly, audiences might have a hope of understanding why ballet stripped of its tutus and storylines remains so utterly relevant today.

An impassioned conversation that continues to take place at an international level between critics, company directors, presenters and funding bodies is how to balance the demand for the more classical story ballets and contemporary, cutting-edge choreography. Audiences love crowd pleasers such as *The Nutcracker* and *Sleeping Beauty*, (or at least some box office records show), but an incredible wealth of choreography exists in which a tutu, pantomime or happy ending never appears.

That more contemporary style seems practically non-existent in Ireland, which is a shame, considering Irish audiences support such ground-breaking endeavours in other art forms, and especially in light of the rich body of work out there by masterminds such as Balanchine, Jiří Kylián and William Forsythe, to name only a very few. These choreographers take away the swan feathers and still keep the proceedings staggeringly beautiful to watch, so much that an entirely new generation of dance-makers has sprung from them.

The Dublin Dance Festival's new director Julia Carruthers grew up thinking her family's outings to Covent Garden to see The Royal Ballet was a natural part of life, so perhaps the festival's commitment to dance will include contemporary ballet sometime soon. And under the festival's auspices, we can presume the choreography will be performed by dancers who have been trained and given permission, which has been one factor in other companies here trying to acquire short, contemporary works by well-known choreographers.

These ballets can be expensive to put on, the same way gaining permission to produce an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical can be. A choreographer or his or her foundation must grant permission for the ballet to be shown, and then someone authorised to teach the dance must attend rehearsals and performances to ensure everything is exactly as the dance's creator intended. Irish audiences deserve this level of authenticity.

In the case of presenting a Balanchine work, for example, the fee for a single ballet can run to \$25,000 and upwards. Foley discovered this when two of his dancers performed a Balanchine's pas de deux without permission from the Balanchine Trust. When a representative from the Trust questioned him about it and discovered the size of Cork City Ballet's budget, Foley says he basically received a slap on the wrist for the transgression, then sympathy for having to operate a ballet company on so little money.

Certain progress has happened recently in terms of championing new choreographic voices, though, such as Ballet Ireland's ongoing relationship with resident choreographer Morgann Runacre-Temple. Once a dancer with the company, Runacre-Temple now has to her credit three full-length dances created here - *Cinderella*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Scheherazade*. Some resulted in greater success than others, as is the case with any artist and their craft, but Runacre-Temple's continued relationship with Ballet Ireland gives the returning dancers a strong common knowledge base from which to work, and audiences a benchmark to gauge the company's progress and artistic choices. Her contemporary slant also hints at what is possible when ballet dancers are allowed to take off their tutus.

One step forward

Ballet's strongest foundation in Ireland still resides in training – one of the threads de Valois left behind that has been picked up by others, albeit on a smaller scale than in other major international cities. Joanna Banks and her staff at the College of Dance consistently prepare dancers to train and work abroad in other schools and companies. Private teachers around the country offer pre-professional training so that students become prepared to study at the College or the equivalent abroad. Anica Louw enjoys a strong reputation for her ballet training at her Longford retreat Shawbrook, bringing in international guest teachers. Yet regardless of the quality of dance instructors, the most talented ballet dancers still must emigrate to find permanent work. De Valois unknowingly set in motion this pattern of leaving Ireland to dance, and it has continued for nearly 100 years.

Perhaps the most positive development during the past six years has been the opening of DanceHouse, the state-of-the-art facility that houses all kinds of dance classes and rehearsals. The space allows ballet companies to finally shut the doors on cold, drafty practice halls that carried them through the 1980s into the 21st century and gives high-calibre ballet artists more inclination to work here.

On any given day, DanceHouse's six large, airy studios are humming with dancers shuffling in and out, preparing for rehearsals, congregating in the common areas, or watching others during a break. The Sunday before this essay went to print, DanceHouse felt particularly alive as the dance community united in "A Day of Dance for Lily Mae."

At that event DanceHouse donated its space and teachers taught more than 40 classes

as a fundraiser for a ballet director's 4-year-old daughter who is battling a rare form of cancer. The conviviality reached near palpable level. Worries of budgets, auditions and upcoming productions seemed worlds away.

Sometimes it takes a major step back from a problem to solve it, and that "Day of Dance" offered a chance to take a deep breath and re-examine where exactly ballet stands in Ireland. Yes, obstacles within the ballet community appear insurmountable at times, and the daunting prospect of losing funding still looms.

But the words of well-respected American dance critic Alan Kriegsman, who passed away last month, spring to mind when calculating why it's worth still advocating for ballet here. Before retiring he wrote: "No matter what hindrances the future may pose, so long as there are men and women able to move, dance will continue to be a powerful avenue of human expression."

So why, with all its struggles, should ballet carry on in a country so hesitant to champion it? Very simply, it leaves a fleeting dot of beauty where there was none before.

Citations

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