Imeall-Siúl: A Choreographic Exploration of Expressive Possibilities in Irish Step Dancing

Brendán de Gallaí

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Breandán de Gallaí
Supervisor: Dr. Catherine Foley
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To Declan …

You moved in, and I moved to Limerick … well, very part-time

… which this PhD definitely was not!

Thank you for your support and patience.
ABSTRACT

Breandán de Gallaí

Imeall-Siúl: A Choreographic Exploration of Expressive Possibilities in Irish Step Dancing

This thesis explores potential expressive possibilities in dance performance and choreography, with Irish step dance as its point of departure. The core data for this exploration derives from two newly choreographed ensemble works, Noé nú and Rite of Spring.

The opening chapter introduces the work’s structure and provides a broad overview of its key approaches and paradigms. Chapter Two situates the research theoretically and methodologically within the framework of arts practice research. It introduces key research methods including but not limited to autoethnography and narrative inquiry as an approach to interacting with, and the documentation of practice. It also explores choreographic work-making methods employed in the studio-based strand of the investigation. Chapter Three provides a contextualization of Irish dance in terms of its history, stylistic features and its ongoing evolution with a particular focus on the impact of spectacle shows such as Riverdance. Philosophical, psychological and ethnochoreological contexts are also introduced, drawing on phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, performance studies and a number of practice theories.

Chapters Four and Five introduce the two major works upon which this research is based. The works are presented and reflected upon, employing the researcher/practitioner’s voice, the voices of the dancers who embodied the work as well as the voices of the critics who viewed it. This thesis suggests an alternative approach to professional contemporary Irish dance ensemble work, highlighting the opportunities and challenges associated with navigating this relatively uncharted landscape for this particular idiom.

The investigation produced evidence that despite a general expectation that Irish dance as a form tends to favour displays of virtuosity, which are meaning-loaded for both the Irish step dancer as well as the observer, there exists untapped expression. The research asserts that Irish step dance is an evolving tradition, and maintains that the aesthetic lens with which the choreographer engages with the dance landscape, and art in general, is a function of phenomenological and psychological factors.

Additionally the investigation highlighted several dimensions that appeared to characterise the nature of the choreographed and performed experience, including subjective, relational, and transformational dimensions. Key also to the creative process and its expressive possibilities was the element of chance.

The research builds on Irish dance scholarship, as well as dance studies in general. It contributes to the field of ethnochoreology, giving insights into how Irish step dancers behave in a creative environment that might be at variance with their expectation. Furthermore, it makes a case for practice-based research as a rich and rewarding approach to work-making as it straddles the disciplines of theory and practice opening up novel creative approaches and opportunities. The thesis argues that pushing boundaries within dance genres steeped in tradition is a precarious endeavour, but worth the risk when potentially new untapped expression can emanate from the tradition-holder. It posits that embodied within the tradition-holder is a potentially rich distinctive reimagining of said tradition.
I would like to begin by thanking everyone at the University of Limerick: the students I taught; those who danced in my works-in-progress; and the great minds of the faculty who make the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance what it is.

Special thanks to my supervisor Catherine for being there, at all times, in every capacity, throughout this journey. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Helen Phelan and Prof. Micheál Ó Suilleabháin for including me as one of the first candidates on this wonderful new Arts Practice programme. Thanks to Helen for her guidance in her capacity as programme director. Thank you also to Simon Ellis for his invaluable contribution in the first year of the programme.

Sincere thanks to Orfhaith Ní Bhriain and Mairéad Ní Bhriain, whom I shared house with whilst in Limerick. They were always available for deep intellectual discussions, even over breakfast! I would like to credit Ériu dancer Ashlene McFadden for conducting the Noctú interviews … many hours of hard work and a job well done.

Do mo theaghlach – chan fhaca sibh mórán domh le tamall mar gheall ar seo – go raibh maith agaibh as a bheith tuiscineach.

To Declan for the wonderful photographs (and everything else), James for the graphic design and other computer-related creativity, Francis Ward for proof-reading the text, and the various production teams involved with the productions.

To RTÉ and Stirling Productions for allowing me to make Noctú all that it could be.

A massive thank you to Rhonda Tidy, whose vision and support was unprecedented. Making Rite of Spring was a huge personal achievement, and it would not have happened without Rhonda’s support and generosity.

But especially the dancers …


… thank you from the bottom of my heart. These wonderful people, the members of Ériu Dance Company, were with me every step of the way. None of this would have happened without you. You, as dancers, as artists, as people, are the essence of all of what this is. You are my Ériu family.

Tá mé go mór faoi chomaoin agaibh go léir,

Breandán
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(Links to these productions can also be found at: www.eriu.co)
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis explores potential expressive possibilities in Irish step dance through choreography, research and reflection. To that end two new ensemble pieces (*Nočti* and *Rite of Spring*) were created and performed. The process revealed a shift in my choreographic concern from a strong emphasis on virtuosity found in the Irish step dance tradition to a focus on the affective, with this impulse generating a more visceral aesthetic. The investigation highlighted several dimensions that appeared to characterise the nature of the choreographed and performed experience including subjective, relational, and transformational dimensions. Key also to the creative process and its expressive possibilities was the element of chance.

Background to the Research

In 2003 I performed for the last time in *Riverdance*¹ where I had been employed as principal male lead for seven years, nine years with the company in total. My time with *Riverdance* had followed a seventeen-year engagement with Irish step dance competition culture (see below, p.6). I took the decision to leave professional dance performance to find my own voice as a choreographer. This reflected the experience of others, similar to me, who were also searching for novel approaches to explore their creativity. Many choreographers from traditional and indigenous dance practices globally² were questioning their practice and looking at western theatrical art dance for possible approaches to creating and presenting their work, perhaps the motivation being to make it more acceptable and accessible to the western arts audience. In my own case, this was certainly a factor.

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¹ *Riverdance* is a theatrical show predominately employing Irish step dance. It also showcases a variety of other dance styles. It originated at the 1994 Eurovision song contest as the interval act. It is amongst the most successful touring shows of its time (see Foley 2001; Hall 2008).

² For example Akram Khan – *Indian*; Peter Badejo – *West African*; Andrea Conger – *Hungarian*
Returning to Ireland from the bubble of a touring dance company, I was taken by surprise and somewhat disheartened by how fragmented and un-cohesive the wider dance world was in Ireland. I joined APDI (Association of Professional Dancers in Ireland), now Dance Ireland, and enrolled in regular professional classes in ballet and contemporary dance as part of my professional development and for choreographic inspiration, but more specifically to penetrate the dance world and make friends within it. I discovered that although the professional dance world is small, and in a perfect world would be supportive to each other by attending colleagues’ classes and performances, this was not always the case. It seemed to me that this community felt that the funding (Arts Council, City/County Council, etc.) available was inadequate and there was a typical Darwinian struggle to secure the largest portion possible, if they were lucky enough to secure any at all. For these niche dance genres it was ‘survival of the fittest’. From conversations with those loyal to the particular genres, I found that it was not uncommon for the ‘other’ genre to be dismissed, rejecting its worthiness for funding. In general, ballet, according to the contemporary dance community, was for ‘bun-heads’ whose focus was on technique and virtuosity, and dealing with old-fashioned and irrelevant narratives; contemporary dance, according to the ballet dancers, was for those who could not cut the rigours of the classical dance world – their rejection of the form seen as too lazy to work hard at achieving bodily ‘excellence’ in terms of virtuosic ability and form; Irish dance was indeed the Cinderella of them all:

... [Irish dance] was seen as backward in its nationalistic, rigid aesthetic and not cultured in line with Western art aesthetics (Foley 2001, p.38)

Because of its recent association with the commercial arena, it appeared that presentations that offered high-octane entertainment were its domain with the expectation of having the capacity of offering little else. It also seemed to me that it was the perception of the wider arts world that Irish dance was self-sufficient and in no need of arts body funding support. It could be argued that that perception was justified. At that time (2003), very few, if any at all, were applying for the Arts Council of Ireland dance bursaries with projects involving traditional Irish dance. Besides, Arts Council support of the traditional arts was a relatively recent activity.

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3 The Arts Council of Ireland was the first in Europe to appoint a traditional music officer in 1979 (source: conversation with Prof. Micheál Ó Suilleabháin, 3rd May 2013). A fund known as Deis exists now which is dedicated to work being developed in the traditional arts sector.
Perhaps I was idealistic. I believed that the remit of an Arts Council was to fund work that was important to produce but that would not be self-sustaining, regardless of the genre. Several contemporary dance companies and one or two independent ballet companies were now being annually funded, with more money in the coffers of a now prosperous Ireland, but there was very little happening in this arena in terms of traditional Irish dance.

This left quite an impression on me. Juxtaposing my experience of the impact of Riverdance on the broader cultural landscape – the initial national enthusiasm inspired by the show and its international acceptance and recognition – with the Irish dance artist’s position on the general dance hierarchy a decade later, the reality of the matter came as a shock. It seemed to be a case of international ambassadors of all things cultural and Irish by virtue of being a member of Riverdance, to patron of the poor relation of the dance community in Ireland.

The political significance of my journey would now sink in. Making new, experimental Irish dance work that sought to be challenging, was faced with its own challenges. The genre would need to engage and alter the wider arts world’s perception of the significance and potential of traditional Irish dance. An additional challenge for me was engaging the wider Irish dance community as a contemporary Irish dance artist. Having had a long career as a principal dancer with Riverdance, I had no inclination to make work on my own body and to perform it. At this point in my dancing career I was fulfilled in terms of performance. But in terms of ensemble work, the challenge associated with the significant additional cost of supporting dancers in a company was now compounded by finding the dancers who would be willing to take a creative risk. It was as I attempted to navigate my way through this alien and unwelcoming dance landscape that I came upon my research question, which in turn fed my creative output.

The Motivation

It was clear to me from early in my professional career as an Irish dancer that this yearning to create new work would need to be satisfied. My understanding of my process, and its ongoing development, was that I was drawing from the Irish dance tradition I grew up in for my material.

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4 This has changed again recently. I am currently developing a duet that I will perform with company dancer Nick O’Connell.
although, what was emerging was heavily influenced by experiences such as exposure to other
dance genres as well as life experience (see Chapters Two & Three).

However, despite my passion for creating new work, presenting it publicly did fill me with trepi-
dation. Moving outside the tradition is not always well received by staunch traditionalists.

The Irish step dance community is large and varied, and members can now be found throughout
the world. Most are introduced to Irish dance through extra-curricular classes. In my own case
An Coimisiún was the umbrella organisation, whose objectives are to preserve and promote Irish
dancing with a secondary aim to promote the Irish language. One of their main activities is to run
feiseanna (singular feis), or competitions. These days, many of the more accomplished dancers
aspire to joining the professional touring companies, but also returning to a vocational engage-
ment with the dance form through teaching, adjudicating and examining is often a common goal.

When Riverdance was devised and presented to a massive European television audience, anec-
dotal conversations might suggest that many staunch traditionalists were silenced only as a result
of the show’s phenomenal success. The national reaction to the 5-minute interval act was unprec-
edentedly positive. To many, this was a presentation of Irishness that was modern, urban and
sexy. And although very few would consider the show to fit comfortably in the contemporary arts
world, at the time (1994), this was a presentation of Irish dance that seemed to be very modern,
very bold, and that took risks musically, contextually and in particular, choreographically. With
so many in the Irish dance community benefiting in some way from the show economically,
critics within the tradition who might have condemned this modernisation and tampering with the
aesthetic were silenced.

As we head into a new era, one where the Riverdance model seems to be losing its sparkle⁵, one
would imagine that a new take on the Irish step dance tradition would be hoped for and welcomed.
I believe Riverdance had power over the traditionalists to embrace change and innovation, but
this will be difficult to replicate. The next Irish step dance metamorphosis is unlikely to have the
economic and capital potential as Riverdance, and I believe that the traditionalists will be more

⁵ See several references to “Riverdance fatigue” in Wulff 2007.
vocal in their disapproval. But in the wake of the commercial shows are dancers, myself included, with a hunger to continue to work professionally, and to push themselves in terms of how they consider themselves as Irish dancer artists. With Riverdance and shows of this nature winding down, new opportunities need to be created. The model may well be very different – smaller; fewer and less frequent gigs; reduced remuneration; less glamorous touring conditions – but these sacrifices are inevitable if dancers want to continue to be considered professional performers.

Through the creation of a company of dancers\(^6\) and the presentation of experimental and explorative work, I believed that I could explore and investigate my research concerns. I also believed that by making new dance work (choreography), an overarching research question would surface as I grappled with not only my corporeal practice, but also the dance landscape within which I attempted to work.

My entry on to the PhD Arts Practice Research programme followed an MA Ethnochoreology thesis/choreography in which I created a choreographic work, Firebird (music by Stravinsky), and reflected upon its significance as a contemporary Irish step dance piece. As I formulated my PhD research journey, I did so with an initial query around the Irish dance tradition holders and their appetite for new work, and questioning at what point in the experimenting with Irish step dance did the work cease to be considered Irish step dance by them. I was soon to realise that this did not matter to me, but had acted as an apt starting point as a way of allowing my true concern to come to the fore.

My MA research revealed that significant adaptation of the Irish step dance form was slow to be subsumed into the tradition, even though innovation was at the heart of its competition tradition. It seemed to me that smaller modifications were being included almost unbeknownst to the Irish dance community as a consequence of the gradual nature of their inclusion. This intrigued me and demanded further investigation. In making new experimental Irish step dance work, I wondered what factors would impact on the Irish dance community’s acceptance, or not, of the work, and indeed those of the dance/theatre audience at large.

\(^6\) I set up Ériu Dance Company in 2010 with the purposes of creating and developing Noctú and the Rite of Spring.
The Research Question

In this thesis I explore potential expressive possibilities in Irish step dancing and address these possibilities through my choreographic work. The title of the thesis includes the phrase *Imeall-Siúil*, Gaeilge for *Edge-Walking*, aptly expressing this sense of being “neither here nor there” (Heaney 1994) that I experience as I reimagine myself and my work as an Irish dance artist.

You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open (Heaney 1998)

On one hand, as a tradition holder, I am keenly aware of the importance many of the community place in maintaining a respect and loyalty for our dance tradition, yet all the time I am also being pulled towards this need to dance my own unique identity. Walking this tightrope, the conflict of one’s heart being blown open with the excitement of the infinite possibilities juxtaposed with due regard for that ‘other’ who may wish for things to remain the same, leaves one feeling unsteady, the conflicting forces pounding from opposite directions.

The objective of this thesis is not to elucidate all the potential expressive possibilities, or to claim that until my work expression in Irish dance was limited. Indeed, as an insider in this community, I believe that the impact of the dance on the tradition-holders can be profound and bewitching, but is so intangible that it almost defies explanation. Indeed the frustration I feel in highlighting these nuances is partially responsible for the work I make. Rather than the motivation being to raise the spirit of the observer and the heightening of their heart rate, which I observe to be generally associated with Irish step dance, I emphasise the darker and deeper emotions (fear, hurt, anger, remorse, inadequateness, etc.) that are often neglected in the form.

Two key impulses are explored in my work and are the genesis of the choreographed material. Firstly, I explore the sense that there is something more at play in the danced traditional material that is beyond the virtuosic. This quality which is difficult to articulate by the tradition holder, and not immediately available to the uninitiated, was not an immediate concern for the company of dancers involved in this work.
Secondly, the creation of a movement vocabulary novel to the traditional Irish step dance form required a deep reflection on the source and impulse of the material as well as its location in the body. It was important to in some way understand its meaning, and to distill and communicate this knowledge to the ensemble of dancers so that their interpretations of the work might be similar to mine, or at the very least, would in some way matter in some significant way to them. This, I hoped, would lead to a performance of the finished work that might be both transformative for the performer and the audience. Whilst the physicality of the work was important to me, in the end, it was negligible in comparison to the experiencing of this impulse. Feelings and emotions may be located in different places for each individual, but for me they reside very much in the gut. It is difficult to be certain if the dancers felt the impulse and location as I had in the work’s inception and as I performed it, but I believed it was a noble pursuit. The evidence suggested that their view of Irish dance performance did indeed alter.

This choreographic exploration of Irish dance has led me to a place that moved from the strong value based on virtuosity (Royce 2004), to an interest in the affective and the potential of a visceral impulse in generating a reimagining of the Irish step dance tradition. In addressing this overarching question around expressive possibilities of Irish dance, other issues arose as part of the pathway.

Practicalities around creating a contemporary Irish dance company, raising money to make the work, finding presentation platforms, generating interest in dancers to take part in the work, and generating an audience, all impacted on how I evolved with this project over the four years of this PhD programme. Many of these minor questions raised are answered by default. Indeed the first performance presentation addresses many of these questions through the work itself.

**The Thesis Layout**

In Chapter Two I situate myself and my practice in four sections.

In Section One, using autobiographical writing, I explore my practice, disinterring the possible events that led me to work as a dance-maker with a unique aesthetic code. This is examined with reference to my competitive dancing career, subsequent training in other dance disciplines and a
decade in the commercial Irish step dance world. Section Two substantiates Arts Practice Research as an appropriate methodology to investigate my research concern. Section Three presents the field of practice-based research and the discussion around this approach to scholarship (Candlin 2000; Dowmunt 2004; Frayling et al. 1997; Nimkulrat 2007; Wood 2005; etc.). Section Four and Five are dedicated to the methods I use to make the dance work, as well as those implemented in engaging with it and in its documentation (Blom & Chaplin 1982; Bourdieu 1977; Cancienne & Snowber 2003; Chang 2008; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Gere 2003; Lavander & Predock-Linnell 2001; Rodriguez and Ryave 2002).

Chapter Three includes the contextual and philosophical points of departure. It highlights my standpoint in terms of how it is I engage with the aesthetic world around me. It is divided into four main sections. Section One introduces the Irish step dance form and gives a brief history outlining its stylistic attributes and factors that influenced its evolution (Foley 1988, 2001, 2007; Hall 1996; Kealiinohomoko 1976; Ni Bhriain 2011; Wulff 2007). The practice/research philosophical framework underpinning this thesis is presented in Section Two including a discussion on phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Bailly 2009; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). This framework is continued in Section Three and explains the use of ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1977 forwarded initially by Mauss 1973) in this thesis. Section Four introduces performance and practice as theoretical concepts (Schatzki 2001; Schechner 1988, 2003), and discusses how these contested terms apply to my approach to work-making.

Two avant-garde contemporary Irish dance works, Noćtú and Rite of Spring, were created and performed as part of the research work. In Chapters Four and Five the ramifications of these major choreographic works, creatively, culturally, socially and politically, are explored and reflected upon with the research question in mind. Chapter Six concludes this thesis.

The Performance Presentations

Two performance presentations are expected as part of the final PhD presentation.

Performance One, Noćtú, seeks to tell ‘our’ story, the story of the Irish step dancer, as I saw it. As the research progressed I discovered that, although my version of ‘our’ story resonated with many,
it was in fact ‘my’ story and all characters created for the purposes of the narrative represented some aspect of me.

The show evolved with each run of production (three in all), and all included dramatic choices that deliberately explored emotions that were not to be found in other professional Irish dance productions that I had been exposed to. It presents the dancer stripped of his/her traditional adornments which are either personally chosen or foist upon them – a rejection of the tradition’s overemphasis on image and costuming in competition or the commercial dance show. Choreographically and symbolically, this acts to expose the dancer, the dancing body and the dance concerns of the community as I saw them.

Some of the dance is recognisable as directly from the tradition (competition-style forms of step dance and approaches common in the commercial sector), but as the show unfolds more experimental choreographic choices are presented. The main thematic choice in Nočtú is marginalization. I suggest through the work that we all suffer from isolation and disenfranchisement at some point in our lives.

The tonal choices include parody, comedy and pathos. In an attempt to create a mood of isolation and solitude, set and costumes are kept to a minimum. The emphasis is on simplicity so that the narrative and choreography can breathe. At its heart, Nočtú showcases Irish dance in a manner that may not have been seen before.

When it came to producing Performance Two, Rite of Spring⁷, many of the difficulties associated with creating Irish dance work that did not reflect the accepted norm had already been engaged by the company, and both me, as director and choreographer, and indeed the dancers, went about its creation and presentation with a confidence which did not exist to the same degree for Nočtú (see Chapter Five). Expressiveness in the movement is the piece’s primary corporeal focus. The dance remains very much in keeping with the evolving company style, but it is this expression – often concealed, strongly experienced and rarely overtly conveyed – that is the source of the choreographic signature.

⁷ Composer – Igor Stravinsky
In this work, two impulses are unearthed and explored: an emotional response to the movements and gestures I choreograph; and the undisclosed affective impulses experienced on a personal private level. Allowing these impulses to surface on the Irish dancer’s body in novel ways is key to the choreographic process. Unleashing these movement possibilities allows for the creation of a choreographic vocabulary, including gestures and facial expressions that add a new and visual layer to the Irish dance performance. This new choreographic vocabulary is incorporated into the production.

The piece’s ultimate objective is to explore ritualistic behaviour within contemporary group dynamics. Thematically, this area resonated with me and I would later discover its autobiographical significance through the research (see Chapter Four). Those themes appearing in the work include: mob mentality, alpha-, beta-, vulnerability, victimism, homoeroticism, and persecution. These performance presentations will be further examined in Chapters Four and Five.

In terms of dance, a key perspective of my own is that ‘what it is does not matter’. It is the integrity in its creation that I feel is important. Its subsequent consumption by the dancer as they dance it, and reception by the observers as they watch it, will ultimately affect how and if the work survives. What the public who engage with dance find satisfying in my opinion, will be influenced by many factors and will vary and evolve as others impact on those opinions.

The process of exploring expressive potential in Irish dance by creating choreographies highlighted several dimensions that appeared to characterise the nature of the choreographed and performed experience. These dimensions included the relational and subjective engagement with the process that I experienced, as well as that of those key individuals who also engaged with it. Those individuals include the central actors close to the work and those who were less privy to, or intimate with the process and work, and whose commentary on the work was expressed publicly and valued.

It is significant, and of particular importance to me that the work had a profound effect on those involved. This transformational dimension recorded not just the attitudes and perspectives which evolved as a consequence of the work, but indeed its life-altering nature for some (see Chapters Four & Five).
The dimension of chance highlights that the outcomes in terms of what the work is and its impact on the world of dance has much to do with factors that are beyond the control of the players/actors. It is irrelevant if work is considered to be ‘good’. The reality is that unless there is intervention from appropriate outside sources, there is no guarantee that the work will persist.

I believe that we all have an inborn and innate awareness of the poetic potential of movement. This movement may not always be the conventional genres and disciplines to be found in dance studios or on stages and platforms dedicated to established forms of dance. But given the chance to flourish, this potential can create a much wider and richer sphere of movement choices. What we need to remember is that once the creator dances with honesty and integrity, and remains true to their individual, unique corporeal movement system, that which emerges can be expressive and transformative.

*I just want to make dances and for people to see them (Author’s Journal, 16th December 2009)*
CHAPTER TWO

Situating Self, Situating Practice & Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to situate myself and my practice as an Irish dance artist. It also positions my research within the world of practice-based research, and introduces the debate around this area of scholarship. In addition, it presents the methodological approaches I used in making of the dance works and also my engagement with, and documentation of the practice.

Using autobiographical writing (e.g. Bruner 1993), I articulate key formative moments as a way of situating myself and my dance practice in Section One of the chapter. In particular, I examine how my practice has evolved from its origin in the competitive world of step dance, its development in the commercial world, to its new home in the university. Other voices are included in this self-disclosure through interviews, correspondence and conversations.

Section Two situates the research and discusses the emergence and continued evolution of practice-based research over the last two decades (Candlin 2000). My understanding of this recent approach to scholarship and my reasons for choosing to conduct my research this way is also explored. Finally, the challenges associated with this approach, in addition to the opportunities it offers are discussed here.

In the Section Three I explore the relationship between my practice and my research question. I discuss the importance of practice and the central and crucial role it plays in elucidating, developing and solving the research puzzle. The section also highlights and demonstrates that the artefact (the ‘work’) is knowledge generating, making a practice-based approach to the research key in exploring the research question. It also introduces the two major dance works Nočtú and Rite of Spring.
Section Four introduces the methodology associated with the representation and interaction with practice. It also explores and discusses emergent and controversial techniques such as narrative inquiry and autoethnography (Anderson 2006, Chang 2008, Denzin 2006, Ellis 2004). Other techniques such as journal writing, audio-visual recording, interviews, and correspondence, and why these methods were chosen, are included here.

The final section, Section Five deals with the work-making methods I employ, with emphasis on improvisation and habitus (Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1973). Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is further explored in Chapter 3 as part of the theoretical points of departure underpinning this research.

Throughout this thesis I include passages from my journal (in italics). They serve as a device to lead the reader on a journey, clarifying the theoretical points of departure and assisting in sharpening the reader’s grasp of the role these concepts play in my practice and research.

**Section One – Situating Self / Situating Practice**

In situating myself and my practice, I do so with reference to two ethnographic interviews with professional and academic colleagues, Dr. Catherine Foley and Dr. Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain.

I have had a professional relationship with Dr. Catherine Foley since 2004. She is my primary supervisor for this PhD. She is also course director of the MA in Ethnochoreology programme which I undertook from 2008 – 2009 at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick. This followed my 4-year term as external examiner for MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance at the Academy, also directed by Dr. Foley. Dr. Foley has therefore a considerable understanding of my academic career to date, and has been privy to my ongoing development as a dance artist and choreographer.

As an Irish step dance teacher, adjudicator, and musician with *An Coimisiún*, Dr. Ní Bhriain brings her knowledge of my formative years as a dancer to the discussion, and has also witnessed my process and my work within the University of Limerick. Both Foley and Ní Bhriain are lecturers at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick.
This section will also reference personal narrative writing, describing key formative moments in the development of my practice.

**Biography**

My years of training and experience with Irish step dancing began at the age of 7 with formal lessons at a local school hall, initially Bun an Inbhir with Michael Quigley and later in Falcaragh with Mary Soal and Danny McCafferty, both in Co. Donegal. Both schools engaged with competition culture presided over by the organization An Coimisiún le Rinci Gaelacha. This seventeen-year period was followed by nine years of involvement in commercial professional Irish dance work with Riverdance (1994 – 2003), seven of which were as Principal Male Lead; choreographing and completing a 90-minute dance show, Balor in 2003; working as a freelance choreographer; and engaged as the dance director of Riverdance (2007 – 2013).

I left Riverdance to develop a show that I believed could be the next step for the Irish dance show model. Balor was based on a myth from the locality I grew up in. The story intrigued me as it had a narrative thrust that was similar to Shakespeare’s Macbeth and its universal themes reflected many of the contemporary struggles humanity faces (greed, envy, lust, power, destiny, retribution). The desire was to create a piece that was theatrical and dramatic, rather than a revue, which I considered Riverdance and its imitators to be. Certainly, there was a market for shows of this nature, and their success is a testament to that (see Foley 2001; Hall 2008), but I believed that it would be an exciting challenge to attempt to use Irish dance differently, less so for its displays of virtuosity, and more as a method of expression and as a tool to drive a narrative. My experience with the Balor production made it clear that the commercial route was not an option for me. The ‘permitted’ content, context and presentation platforms had to remain what producers and funders

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8 *An Coimisiún le Rinci Gaelacha,* commonly referred to as *An Coimisiún,* is the largest Irish dance organisation, established in 1930 with the mandate of promoting Irish step dance in addition to the Irish language. The organization runs competitions known as *feiseanna* (singular *feis*).

9 Fellow ex-Riverdance dancers Colin Dunne and Jean Bulter were involved in a similar project Dancing on Dangerous Ground

10 Balor was created with the commercial market in mind. As I created the work I encountered various difficulties, one of which was the perception of the key funders and producers on what that particular market was demanding. A discussion on this matter can be found in de Gallai 2007
were willing to back. Large-scale commercial productions such as Riverdance and derivatives of this model were the only templates it seemed, but also in that particular climate – seven years since Irish dance hit the world stage – there was an insistence that newer shows had to run on a shoestring budget and thus, in my opinion, sacrificed quality.

This journey led me to the University of Limerick. Initially I was invited to be an external examiner for the MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme for four years (2004 – 2008), and following this I registered as a candidate on the MA in Ethnochoreology programme, which I completed in June 2009. I continued to work as a choreographer and performer, and in particular, I had the opportunity to research and to broaden the Irish dance genre in my capacity as a tutor within the context of the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme.

As I pursue an arts practice-based PhD at the University of Limerick, my own course of study involves the creation of new work that pushes the boundaries of Irish dance. This experience has positioned me to be acutely aware of the challenges associated with creating new work and securing a platform on which new dance work can be presented. Within the University I found academics, performers and an audience who were critically engaging with this Irish dance genre:

I look at the ponytail as, almost – ‘bold boy’ … ‘cause I want to!’ And I like that – it’s a little bit of spunk. It’s – ‘I’m doing this because, this is what I want to do, and I’m going to see how it pans out, but this is what I want to do with it!’ You’ve got quite a set agenda in your own head …
I suppose that is what it is – ‘different’ is the word I’d use – different, Breandán – I think you’ve always taken a different approach! (Interview, Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15th April 2010)

This infamous ‘ponytail’ that Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain (Irish dance teacher/adjudicator, and dance academic) refers to, is symbolic of rebellion in her mind as she remembers me in Irish dance competition culture when I was in my late teens. To say that a radical hairstyle juxtaposed with the overly formal and traditional Irish dancing male costume (kilt, suit jacket and tie), would have been frowned upon in those days, would be an understatement. Throughout my dancing life, there was always an urge to do it differently – to always go about its performance and practice differently – to stand out from the crowd – so much so that I often jeopardized opportunities and
prospects by not toeing the line. Pandering to the rules and regulations of organizations such as the very conservative Coimisiún is something that never mattered to me:

I suppose if I think about your dance practice – I’ll leave Riverdance aside for a minute – I suppose my first memory of you dancing is in a kilt with a ponytail. And I would’ve seen that at the All-Ireland and at the Worlds, and at the Leisters\textsuperscript{11}, which to me was strange because you were Northern, so that’s my first memory of you …

[And I thought] … what’s the ponytail stating? That’s breaking a boundary already. Because I recall people saying to you, ‘wouldn’t you cut your hair, and you’d look much better on stage?’ But the point was that obviously the ponytail was meaningful to you on some level. So the convention of competition, even at that stage – I won’t say you disregarded it – but maybe you wanted to transcend it. You thought – ‘I’m going to dance – I like my hair, it’s my hair, so I’m going to wear it whatever way I like!’ Maybe? I don’t know. This is just my impression of watching that. (Interview, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15\textsuperscript{th} April 2010)

When Orfhlaith spoke about Riverdance, she stated that it was not a revelation when she heard I was promoted to lead dancer:

So when you were doing the lead I was not all that surprised, because for me you were always one of those people who was doing things – how will I put this – your own way. But when I saw you doing the lead, I didn’t know you personally, only as somebody who had finally cut his ponytail, and now had short hair. (Interview, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15\textsuperscript{th} April 2010)

Being different was always a recurring theme in Orfhlaith’s understanding of me:

… the other thing that intrigued me was the Irish language thing, because that marked you off as being different for me from a lot of the dancers … the Gaeilge\textsuperscript{12} thing. And I had a recollection that you also spoke French, I don’t know where I got this, but I was fascinated by that. So I had this notion – this is really interesting – this is Gaeltacht\textsuperscript{13}, Irish, French, ponytail, science\textsuperscript{14}, dancing. That’s quite an eclectic mix. (Interview, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15\textsuperscript{th} April 2010)

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{11} The Leisters (or Ulsters when I lived in my home county Donegal) are the qualifiers for the World championships. The All-Irelands were the second largest international championships in my day.

\textsuperscript{12} Gaeilge – The Irish language

\textsuperscript{13} Gaeltacht – Regions in Ireland where the Irish language is the first language of the community

\textsuperscript{14} Orfhlaith is referring here to the fact that I have a B.Sc. (Hons) in Physics
\end{flushleft}
I have spent quite a lot of time trying to isolate when my desire to be a dancer began, and it is very difficult to pinpoint a particular event. More than likely, the initial urges began at a very early age, a period of our lives when most people have only sparse recollections.

As I reflect on those issues for the purposes of my research – situating myself as a springboard into the world of practice-based doctoral academia – a number of events stand out as pivotal in creating the ‘me’ which would take every opportunity to push my own dance agenda. I find it interesting that I knew I was not a complete natural, with a perfect body for dance. I had to work hard at looking athletic and I would argue that I don’t have a perfect physiology for dance. I did not have high arches or good flexibility, and being a couple of inches taller would have been useful for partnering. Unlike many of the other male dancers I encountered, I had to work hard on diet and exercise to keep my body fat in check. I was not particularly fast at picking up steps. In fact, when I finally got to take my first ballet class at seventeen, the confusion that ensued with more than just two feet to contend with almost resulted in a throwing in of the towel, such was the frustration and the inner critic. What I did have was a fire in my stomach whenever I heard certain music and moved to it. It was simply this that I knew I had to satisfy.

**So what was the catalyst?**

A very early dance-related memory is that of the National Ballet of Ireland, based in Cork, who often toured the country, and one of their regular stops was *Gaoth Dobhair*, Co. Donegal – the parish in which I grew up. This was probably the furthest point away from the ballet’s home in Cork that the company could travel in Ireland, without leaving the country altogether. It was the mid 1970s, and when all my other siblings got to go to the local tiny cinema, my father coaxed me into going with him to the ballet. He had great enthusiasm for live entertainment, in particular dance, and considering the rarity of such an event, I was not being able to say no to him and I reluctantly went along to *Amharclann*15 *Ghaoth Dobhair*. This was, if I remember correctly, even before I went to Irish dance classes. I hardly remember what I saw, but I certainly remember thinking it was something magical. I have no memory of giggling at men in tights, or the strange-

15 *Amharclann* – Theatre
ness of the dance form or accompanying music, considering dance to me was jigs, reels and horn-pipes. But I do remember that I just knew that I wanted to do something like it.

Seeing the movie ‘Fame’ (1980) was another pivotal moment in my life. I was only ten or eleven years old, and its profound affect is still with me. A gritty and aggressive world, Alan Parker (director) depicted the less than glamorous road to stardom. Showbiz hopefuls toiled a tough and competitive path, where failure and heartache was the norm. Watching ridiculously virtuosic, fit and determined dancers be put through their paces, ‘ass-kicking’ being a regular occurrence, was just an inspiration. These young hopefuls never rested. I could definitely identify with them. I even found myself dancing their moves when no-one was looking.

Sunday afternoons in granny’s house were an opportunity to watch television in the middle of the day – a completely forbidden activity in my own house. Television was rationed by my father at the best of times, but he truly hated the thing being on during daylight hours. RTÉ\textsuperscript{16} regularly scheduled the big musicals of the 1940s and ‘50s for their Sunday matinée, and they were my secret addiction. This third dance memory is significant. The big song and dance numbers, with huge energetic and skillful male solos were thrilling to me, again igniting something in my gut that convinced me that this was something that was meant to be for me.

Once I had decided that this was to be my journey, opportunities presented themselves as if some greater force was conspiring with the universe to make this dream of mine come true. My father spent the summers painting houses in Chicago. I helped him each summer from my mid-teens until I finished University as a way of paying for my education. During a working holiday with my father in Chicago when I was 16 (1986), I performed a hornpipe for a few of his friends, who convinced me to audition for a dance school in Evanston, a suburb of Chicago. Gus Giordano’s school offered yearlong scholarships to talented dancers with all dance tuition paid for. As I walked in the door on audition day, my heavy shoes under my arm, it was immediately clear that these tryouts were set up to cater for dancers with experience in many genres of dance – and Irish dance, naturally, was not one. Dancers were expected to take part in four types of class – Jazz, Ballet, Tap, and Modern – none of which I had any experience in at all. I was told to return and do

\textsuperscript{16} RTÉ – Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland’s national radio and television broadcaster.
my ‘thing’ in a private audition another time. When I returned, again I was quite intimidated by
the erect spines and impossibly tight-bunèd and skinny ballet mistresses who sat at the mirror to
watch me dance the ‘Blackthorn Stick’17. Thinking that this would not be to their taste at all, and
having experienced what it was they were after in the official audition, my expectations were not
high, and in fact, I was a little mortified to be dancing what I considered to be a backward, ethnic
and redneck form of dance. Nothing could have prepared me for the response that I received –
short of being a standing ovation, they could hardly contain their excitement. The dance to them
was so exotic and unusual; their lack of knowledge of the dance form coupled with what I hope
was a fairly spirited performance on my part had left them thrilled. I was immediately offered
a scholarship, and was reassured that I would not need to go directly into the more advanced
classes. I was directed to spend the first semester perfecting the basics of all the disciplines, and
to then progress as quickly as I felt comfortable during the following two semesters.

My parents gave me permission to take this year off, once I finished my Leaving Certificate18 at
the end of the following school year, on the condition that I would defer my entry to university,
returning to get a ‘proper’ third level education when that year was up.

The Chicago experience was life changing. While I enjoyed jazz and tap, I gravitated towards
the modern and ballet classes, feeling always that I was very much at home in these two genres.
I loved watching those who took to these forms naturally, and tried to mimic their every move.
The teachers were inspiring, many of whom had studied under the pioneers who invented the
movement system they were now teaching (Graham, Limón). I attended my teachers’ perform-
ances in small downtown theatres and knew that both the practice of and supporting of ballet and
contemporary dance would be something that I would continue to do once I returned to Ireland. I
watched the advanced classes and aspired to taking part in them at some stage. By the end of the
year I was enrolled in the advanced level classes of both contemporary and ballet.

17 The ‘Blackthorn Stick’ is one of many dances known as ‘set-dance’. It is a solo dance generally in Jig
or Hornpipe time. There are countless Jig and Hornpipe tunes, but a set-dances has specific title and a
unique tune. Set-dances can be danced at various tempos and tend to showcase the dancer’s ability at
competitions.

18 Leaving Certificate – Scrúdaithe na hArteistiméireachta, commonly referred to as the ‘Leaving Cert.’
is the final examination in the Irish secondary school system.
An interesting aspect of some modern dance practices is the ‘fall and recover’ phenomenon (Limón, Humphrey). The technique encourages the use of the weight of the body and gravity in the creation and continuance of movement. Teasing and playing with musical phrases is encouraged, and falling behind the beat and making up time in the music later in the dance phrase, is encouraged:

[Humphrey’s] greatest contribution came from her thought of dance as existing in an arc between two deaths: the body lying prone or standing firmly erect – both stable, both lacking in theatrical excitement. Kinetic interest was stirred when the body, venturing from its position of stability, encountered the pull of gravity, defied it, and triumphantly reclaimed its equilibrium. The theory of ‘fall and recover,’ as it was called, was at once a pure movement idea and a dramatic concept. The threat motivated action that engendered designs in space and time; it also symbolized the eternal conflict between man’s longing for security and his desire to risk the dangers of the unknown. In Humphrey choreography, he always dared the dangerous adventure and always emerged victorious. (Cohen 1977)

A live performer would play for all contemporary dance classes. One particular musician, an African-American man, who played percussion and sang, once remarked on how high I jumped. I told him that once the music inspires me to the right degree, I felt like I could stay in the air as long as the musician held the note or phrase which was meant for the airborne section of the danced phrase. His music had this effect on me. He asked if he could toy with how long he could ‘hold me there’ – to see how long I could hang in the air. I was only too delighted. It was like I was taking flight! He played the music to my rhythm – the musician following the dancer, rather than dancer keeping in time with the regular beat of the music. That day I felt like I transformed as a dancer. A year later, after I returned home, I was causing no end of frustration in my Irish dance class in Dublin. I was finding it terribly difficult to land in time with the music – the regular strict beat of a reel. I was being told I was out of time, but for me I was ‘falling and recovering’, Humphrey’s style, within the Irish dance tradition. My explanations were not well received.

I didn’t know until then that you had that year in America – I found that fascinating … and that showed me that you had thought about dance performance in a way that many other people who did Riverdance wouldn’t have done had Riverdance not happened. Cause anybody who’ll go to America and try different things is already wanting to do something different … to actually put yourself in that position. (Interview, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15th April 2010)
As I took on the role of external examiner for the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance (2004 – 2008) I discovered a space where the artist had the luxury to create and experiment. Different choreographers and dancers were invited by Catherine Foley to work with the MA students to choreograph and produce new dance work. Following nine years with Riverdance (1994 – 2003) it was refreshing to see Irish dancers being presented with new opportunities and fresh approaches:

When you then came here as extern, I thought that was interesting, because you had done all the dance-y things … you had done all the razzamatazz … but also the physical grueling pain of … going up through the ranks … but you had always wanted more than that. I suppose when you came back here as extern I saw you in a different light again, cause that was a new role. (Interview, Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15th April 2010)

This performance platform at the University of Limerick imposed none of the conditions of the industrial word – producers demanding a certain genre or aesthetic that they believed the public demanded. There was simply a stage to present interesting lunchtime performances, where like-minded people came to enjoy and critique. This led me to the MA in Ethnochoreology:

Going into the field of Ethnochoreology, to me would have been, the journey of you personally wanting to reflect about the journey that you are on, and to be able to distance yourself, to ‘other’ yourself, to look at the practice itself, and from there to position yourself from within that practice, and to develop it. (Interview, Catherine Foley, Office IW1-22: 14th April 2010)

And then coming back as a student, I think that was an even bigger challenge, because you had done it – I don’t mean backwards … ‘à l’inverse’ – you had been at a top level of examiner – so to actually come back in at entrance level, even though it’s a doctorate, is actually very difficult to do. You have critiqued a system from the top down, now you have to reengage with that system knowing that some of the operational logistics of it are going to frustrate you as an artist and a creative person, because you would have had an opportunity to observe that from assessing other students works. So to embark on something that is a four-year programme shows either foolishness or courage, because it’s something that is not a quick fix, it’s showing what you always showed in terms of dance commitment that you were ready to commit to something in terms of time … and it’s a process that can really wreck your head. So for something that you are doing which is in performance and academia mixed together, that can wreck your head and your body. I think that’s very challenging. I think it is very brave, but I also think it’s very exciting, because it gives you options, it’s not even in terms of career, you have a lot of options in terms of television, media – you have a lot of different things – why would you put yourself through … I don’t know … I was just wondering why you would put yourself through the rigours of this at this exact point? Sorry – I obviously know an awful lot about you (laughing) … (Interview, Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15th April, 2010)

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The MA in Ethnochoreology (2008 – 2009) allowed me to build the knowledge I lacked, helped me articulate what it was that I was doing, and begin to question what I was searching for. It allowed me to deliver a practice-related final presentation, *Firebird* (2009), which was an opportunity to consider research/performance from a novel point of view. The University was developing an arts-practice model of PhD, and I was considering it. I clearly had connected with the University of Limerick to satisfy some inquiry within me. This practice-based PhD was the answer to that search – a platform to research my artistic concerns practically and theoretically:

You [seem to] have a hunger, a need within you to see, “well what can I do with the dance form” … So if I had to put a word on it I would say it’s got to do with ‘yourself’. It’s got to do with your journey. Finding out who you are through the dance, and what it is that moves you. (Interview, Catherine Foley, Office IW1-22: 14th April 2010)

Within the walls of the university, without commercial demands, all experimentation is possible. I wanted to try everything, without feeling the pressure to please. This means trial and error, but also unconventional methods and contexts:

Stravinsky’s music allows you to express maybe that aspect that is within you – that drive, that pulsating drive that is within you … There is an intensity to your work … It has got to do with conflict – maybe not even resolving conflict – The notion of the divide, a conflict of some sort – and that conflict can come out in your work … Identity, tension and conflict, those are words that would come to my mind … You’re trying to express human feelings through the dance – I was feeling things watching the *Rite of Spring* or *Firebird*. (Interview, Catherine Foley, Office IW1-22: 14th April 2010)

The walls of the University are a nice, safe fortress, where I am protected from the high expectations of the outside world. A cozy, comfortable location with interested practitioners and supportive peers. Somewhere I can let down my ponytailed hair:

In your own head, I think you come up with new ponytails though, cause when you’ve done it, then you’re thinking, ‘OK now this has been driving me, but I don’t want it to drive me anymore, because you don’t want to conform, even to yourself. It’s kind of almost the multiple – you’re not a Gemini are you? (I am). Schizophrenic – it’s a bit schizophrenic, which is good because it is all the multiple possibilities. So is this the *Gaeilgeoir*? Is this the scientist? Who is this? … ‘Which part of me is this?’ (Interview, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, Office IW1-14: 15th April, 2010)

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19 *Gaeilgeoir* – An Irish-speaker
Section Two – Arts Practice Research

There has been a healthy and spirited debate around the area of practice-based research (also referred to as practice as research/arts-practice research/practice-led research) since the early 1990s, driven initially by the discipline of Art and Design and subsequently in Performance scholarship. Academies are often reluctant to recognise the ‘doctorateness’ (Ó Conchubhair 2005) of this relatively recent form of research, but reluctance on the part of universities to engage with change has always been common and has occurred regularly over the last few centuries. This section of the chapter deals with the notion of practice-based research, my understanding of this field of scholarship, why I have chosen to conduct my research in this particular manner, and the challenges and the opportunities associated with this approach. It also addresses areas of anxiety in higher education particularly around competence and peer review/assessment, and the importance of the text-based strand and supervision.

PhDs

Discipline hierarchical struggles are not a new phenomenon, and many ‘knowledges’ once at the margins of academic legitimacy are now well established within the institution and the struggles for acceptance long forgotten: from the medieval university model to the 19th century context, the transferring of medicine, science and humanities across domains to the university site are well documented and are obvious examples (Wilson 2005). Even the notion of many PhD programmes in Irish universities being ‘structured’ and ‘taught’ models is oxymoronic if considered in PhD terms.

According to many of the handbooks and manuals issued by various colleges and institutions, governments and publishing houses (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 1997; Dinham and Scott 2001; Phillips and Pugh 1987), criterion in relation to the ‘doctorateness’ (philosophiae doctor, meaning “teacher of philosophy”) of a research PhD include:

◆ Purposive – identification of issue or problem worthy and capable of investigation

◆ Inquisitive – seeking to acquire new knowledge

◆ Informed – conducted from an awareness of previous related research
◆ Methodical – planned and carried out in a disciplined manner

◆ Communicable – generating and reporting results which are testable and accessible by others. (Ó Briain 2005)

Although the above-mentioned criterion can be argued to apply equally to the work of the arts practitioner, being accepted as a new scholarly approach and PhD-worthiness within the walls of the University is not a new phenomenon, and practice-based research is no exception.

**Anxiety in Higher Education**

Artists often work in the cognitive idiom as much as they do in the expressive. Many research methods akin to those of the academic institution (exploring ideas, gathering preparatory information, sourcing music scores, referencing historical information) are utilized throughout the artistic process. But tension begins as the artist passes through the doors of the university. The academic tradition, having become detached from the concept of bodily activity, reintroduces it with trepidation – the formal demands of the university at variance with the artist’s approach to art making as research.

Candlin (2000) draws attention to the anxiety which is also experienced within higher education authorities when expressions such as “the need to clarify the use of new doctoral titles and to protect the significance of the PhD/DPhil” are published. (*Survey of Awards in Eleven Universities*, HEQC, 1997, p.5). Candlin explains that statements such as these imply that validating practice-based PhD could undermine or threaten the more “obviously valid doctorates”. Doubt over “the capacity of images to function as research” could be read into the report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* (UKCGE) (Candlin 2000, pp. 1-2).

**Practice-Based … / Practice As … / Arts-Practice … / Practice-Led …**

Debate not only surrounds the doctorateness of practice driven PhDs, but also, what it is that practice brings to the research table. Nimkulrat explores suggested nuances between practice-based and practice-led research:
Practice in practice-based research can be carried out freely for its own sake in order to produce artefacts. This is fairly similar to the general conception of art/design practice. On the contrary, practice in practice-led research is conscious exploration with the knowledge involved in the making of artefacts (Nimkulrat 2007, p.2).

Secondly she explains that in practice-based research the role of the practitioner may be more central than the researcher’s role. In practice-led research the two are of equal importance, the research conducted in dialogue with artistic production/the research becoming intertwined in the practice.

Initially I wasn’t sure if my research would be practice-based or practice-led ... there seems to be an argument for both. Part of my investigation is to ascertain how Irish dancers react to new exploratory work, and how their proximity to the work affects how they feel about it. With that in mind, I could create work, perform the work (or have it performed), and from that gather data to understand at what stages and what elements of the work made the participants feel at odds with it. With that data analyzed and the results in mind, the following/subsequent choreographic projects would have intrinsic in them new tests as a way of moving closer to what it was I was looking for. But this makes me uncomfortable. My work is not meant for scientific rigour – it is purely material, created out of my habitus20, and crafted into a performance piece, meant to be whole, complete and perfect (hopefully). So with the obvious editing and tweaking that may occur following work-in-progress performances, my aim as a choreographer is to produce something that is complete in itself, and not experiments in the scientific sense, which are to provoke a way of getting answers for my research. This should not be ‘action research’. The practice must be a free expression, and transparency should be around the process of creating, developing, transmitting, performing and editing / reworking / tweaking. (Author’s Journal, 4th November 2009)

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20 Habitus refers to lifestyle, the values, the dispositions and expectation of particular social groups that are acquired through the activities and experiences of everyday life – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitus_(sociology) [accessed 21st June 2013].
Why an Arts PhD?

Another question discussed in terms of practice-based PhDs is, with such reluctance on the part of the University to include an anti-Cartesian model, why bother with this outmoded, it would seem, form of study, when there clearly is resistance? Nuala Hunt asks if a rigorous investigation of art-making be recognized in its own right rather than “in order to fit research criteria developed at governmental level” (Hunt 2005, p.27). Criteria, she hazards has more to do with economic targets and less to do with the development of lived culture (Hunt 2005). She also wonders if “research, art, design and economics, can be happy bedfellows?” (Hunt 2005, p. 27). She questions if multiple methodologies and perspectives can be recognized in developing research frameworks, without canonising one over the other.

Perhaps as Webb suggested, a degree of importance lies in the desire and challenge to change the traditions of the PhD (Webb 2000). To behave as a theorist one needs a vantage point, she suggests, which is what the academy provides.

In her discussion of the relationship between research in the ‘academy’ (or university) and practice in the ‘field’, Prof. Angela Wood asks, “What good would a PhD have done them?”, when discussing prodigies such as John Galliano and Alexander McQueen (fashion designers) who completed their education with a BA and an MA respectively. She suggests that many talented students deserve further academic support, otherwise:

[T]heir ideas, concepts and prototypes may otherwise wither without the provision of a unique research environment that can enable them to develop and contribute to the aesthetic, technical, material, cultural and commercial application of design in its broadest sense. (Wood 2005)

The creation of a forum within the walls of the academy, in my experience, has allowed for a fundamental unleashing of creativity and research almost impossible to create otherwise. Through support, facilities, paedagogy and access to eager and talented students, innovative thinking is supported and sustained, allowing for artistic excellence to germinate. Outcomes from such a forum may have had the effect of fusing the ‘academy’ (the university) with the ‘field’, with research outcomes having practical real-world applications – and if the fusion is a partnership
from the outset, this results in “giving the ‘value added’ ring of confidence and of course benefits to all parties” (Wood 2005, p.25).

This was also Dowmunt’s experience\(^\text{21}\). A shift in industrial demands with regards to elements of production was an encouraging factor for him in considering arts practice as an alternative to continuing to function in the normal workforce. Dowmunt revealed that two out of the three shortlisted documentaries for “Social Documentary”, the most prestigious category at the Grierson Awards\(^\text{22}\), were autobiographical documentaries, the genre of documentary that was at the heart of his own research. He observed that:

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\text{… although it might not be shown at seven-thirty on Channel 4 … there is a clear professional trajectory, whereby it can be both research and be situated within a more industrial context. (Dowmunt 2004)}
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That said, he felt that a very formulaic approach that was very heavily formatted, was being demanded within the industry, which would generally exclude work of this nature. Even with respect to agencies who tended to commission new exploratory work, the nature of what would be commissioned was changing and being driven by audience numbers or ratings.

This is an area I exploited in the making of my first performance presentation \textit{Noctú}. Using the national television network’s interest in this project allowed it to have higher production values, as well as reaching a much larger audience, both through broadcasting, as well as the publicity generated by the television series for the live staged version of the production. The network initially demanded that the television show element of the project have a heavy ‘reality’ slant, but this was a sacrifice I was willing to make.


\[\text{\textsuperscript{22} The Grierson Awards recognize and celebrate documentaries from Britain and abroad that have made a significant contribution to the genre and that demonstrate quality, integrity, creativity, originality and overall excellence – http://www.griersontrust.org/grierson_2009.htm [accessed 7 December 2009].}\]
Competence and peer-review / assessment

Now that many universities in Northern and Western Europe have accepted this new practice-based approach to research, a debate continues around the area of assessment. As one of the more vociferous champions of practice as research, Candlin has struggled with the criteria of competence when discussing this new academic research approach:

[H]ow do you produce or examine a PhD? [...] Should the artwork be assessed in relation to contemporary art practice or should it be viewed as a thesis in images? Does the theoretical or intellectual investigation take place in relation to practice, or through the accompanying text? Does the artwork, like academic research, put forward a hypothesis and demonstrate a mastery of a canon or should the emphasis be placed upon technical ability and if so, how is technical ability judged? Should practice-based doctoral students be expected to write thesis of the same proficiency as conventional PhD students? (Candlin 2000)

Candlin emphasizes the concerns of the report (Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design, UKCGE, 1997) around the difficulty of assessing artwork. Although the artwork may clearly demonstrate originality, its intellectual and scholarly worth, it seems, is inaccessible without a written component to contextualise the material or artefact. But she argues that artwork is often judged without a textual explanation and wonders why, if this is possible within art departments, why not the practice-based PhD? The contentious question asks to what degree should the role of the artefact play and that of the text? This varies from country to country and institution to institution. Some believe that a body of performance work can encapsulate the research and generate new methodologies – a “thesis in images”. Katy McLeod, in her paper on the function of text in practice-based PhDs asserts that “art is a theorizing practice; it can produce the research thesis; it cannot be said to be simply an illustration of it” (McLeod 2000, p.7).

Interestingly she points out that:

[C]ontemporaneously, theory is seen to be the domain of cultural, critical or art historical theorists rather than to artist theorist. This is theory which is not written; it is made or realized through artwork. This theory is the result of ideas worked through matter [...] It may well be dependent upon the relationship between the written text and the artwork but it is demonstrative of the intellectuality of making, which is not the same as the intellectuality of writing. (McLeod 2000, p.7)
But “pursuing an enquiry through practical activity … or other practical interventions” (Wilson 2005) can manifest itself in many paradigms depending on the artist-researcher’s intention. One can view the ‘performance’ of research across a broad spectrum. One extreme considers text as the only means to present research – the traditional hundred percent text model. The opposite extreme considers the final presentation being a body of work in the form of artefacts, performance, compositions, etc. – a thesis only in the form of images, being the method, theory, and the significant contribution to the domain of knowledge in its own right, having the capacity “to reframe or provoke further action” (Marshall and Newton 2000). Stephen Scrivener warns us that “when the artefact is put forward as the goal of the research – the embodiment of new knowledge” the debate becomes intense. He then reminds us that the “issues in this debate are political, conceptual and practical” (Scrivener 2000). So when one considers the aforementioned tension of such practice-based research models being a tall order in the first instance for the university to grapple with, many institutions require at least fifty percent of the final presentation to be text based.

The area of competence and peer-review is complex. There is an expectation that the grounds upon which work is judged should be clear, with some degree of maintaining the boundaries of an aesthetic criteria. But the area of art production and originality intrinsically points to production of work to a level which expects to blur, push or surpass existent boundaries and norms, making this criterion difficult to maintain. Boundary flux is what contemporary art is often about. A traditional hundred percent text-based thesis has clear guidelines and expectations, allowing the academic supervisor, novice or otherwise, a clear position from which to judge the work. With practice-based models, co-supervision from outside the department is wise, but as Candlin also points out:

It is an overlap between art practice and academia that potentially makes students, staff and management anxious. (Candlin 2000)

But two sets of “incompatible competencies” are required in my opinion, satisfying the demands of the university and the outside world of art production. I would go even further than Candlin to add, that the research model is still in its infancy and this partnership is required to bring the academics from within the walls of the institution to the outside world of different driving forces,
and vice-versa. This will allow the worlds to meet, interact, understand each other, and in time, supervisors who have come through the traditional PhD route have much to offer in terms of their understanding of the demands of a PhD research programme in general terms. Their craft – the tacit understanding of structure, expected outcomes, deadlines, and in particular the text-based strand, is a valuable competence contribution to the process. The text strand is also an area that supervisors are sure that they can assess. Candlin also introduced areas such as demonstration of mastery, technical ability, and the judgment of these areas, in her earlier quote.

Ironically, on reflection, I’m all for the text component, because I don’t know what criterion is required to judge my work. Those who are doing it – the same as me – would be competitors and perhaps suffer from a little schadenfreude (as I would be capable of with them – we’re only human!) Those I would like to judge it, may not be actively doing it (i.e. making work), but would be willing me on to success, perhaps. In an ideal world, if those who must, or who are in the best position to judge, were to embody the work (physically, emotionally, be privy to its journey and struggle) to whatever degree possible, so that it’s meaning becomes part of their worldview understanding, this would situate them better to be in a position to judge its competence and worthiness. And a central issue of my thesis may be, that what I’m researching is that worthiness is tied up in relationships with and proximity to the creator. I realise that this is unlikely in the short to medium term. (Author’s Journal, 17th February 2010).

So what will be the established criteria of competence?

Many practices are now thoroughly institutionalized, for example, feminist and conceptual art practices; these were once were considered utterly inaccessible. So too will the arts-practice PhDs Candlin suggests. Much of the newly created art-work in PhDs such as these may be so inaccessible to the general public and even to peer-review, that without an additional written contextualization, it may be impossible to judge or access. If work is groundbreaking, those not involved to some degree with the process of its conceptualisation and making could be ‘out in the cold’ when it comes to engaging with it or even be qualified to assess it (see Candlin 2000, for
more in depth discussion). External examiners have refused to examine in some instances, citing that they do not feel qualified to do so.

Candlin (2000) believes that to become an expert you have to have a specialized field, which can only be mastered if it is enclosed, or defended and if its borders are clearly defined and policed. She argues that this is to believe that art historians know their art history and are better equipped to judge. My own anxiety with regards to this is determining who is in a position to judge new work which challenges the history of the original tradition, undoing the canons it holds dear? Surely, here is an opportunity for a conflict of interest? The crossing of boundaries creates unease, particularly in areas where boundary-crossing is traditionally unwelcome in those fields—PhD final presentations being a well-established example, as well as traditional Irish step dancing (my own research area of concern). But boundary-crossing is nothing new, and what was once almost considered unrecognizable as art is now accepted and recognized popular forms—conceptual art for example. Avant-garde work is deemed successful simply by virtue of the fact that it crossed existing boundaries.

**Supervision**

Another area where competence is concerned and also a cause for apprehension, not only with the institution, but also for the student and supervisor alike, is the area of supervision. John Hockey speaks of the “practical, intellectual, interactional and organizational” skills demanded of supervisors as a craft, a tacit knowledge, which cannot be learnt in the short term. This skill, although formed by theoretical knowledge, is essentially a practical endeavor (Hockey 2003). According to Hockey, the result of a study dealing with students of an artistic nature, who were generally unfamiliar with the formal demands of the university, showed that producing academic writing (as a typical example), was seen as an “unfamiliar and arduous task”, and many students had little exposure to or expertise in the area of the practice of research. As the practice approach to PhD research is so recent and new to many institutions, many supervisors would not have come through the same/this academic path. In many instances a supervisor would need to develop a ‘craft’ knowledge of practice and practice-based research, and gradually claim ownership of it.

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(Dormer 1994). In sum, both teacher and student seem to be finding themselves in new unchartered territory.

Perhaps the necessity for text for all or most theses will disappear as more and more practice-based PhDs are awarded and these artists/academics enter the 3rd level education system as supervisors and examiners. In the meantime, the text strand is certainly one way for those with traditional PhD qualifications to contribute to the process and indeed to assess work – the text stand representing the supervisor’s personal tacit practice.

**My PhD Approach**

According to Frayling et al.:

> [T]he practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice. An original/creative piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. (Frayling et al., 1997)

It goes on to say that a “substantial contextualization” of the creative contribution accompanies the artefact(s) which is a “critical appraisal” that clarifies the originality and location of the work in addition to furnishing grounds with which to assess the presentation.

I see my thesis as arts practice based, in which the research question would not be possible to elucidate without the performance element. The choreographed pieces of work are epistemological objects, knowledge-generating in their own right. They will speak for themselves to those who are Irish dance practitioners with a critical and/or academic engagement with Irish dance as well as with the wider dance/contemporary art world. From this vantage point there exists a spectrum where all others are situated, with varying degrees of understanding of the work. For all, the text strand will shed light on the artwork, clarifying its intention, explaining the process and making sense of the context of the work. Included in the text are outcomes generated from the process of performance. The data is the commentary generated by the community at large, expressing their understanding of the evolution of the work, the performing and experiencing of the work, and the engaging with the work as spectators. The voices considered in the commentary
include my own, those of the dancers who embody the work, those of the individuals who were privy to its evolution, and finally the voices of those who engaged with the work in some less intimate capacity.

In terms of my own research and artistic journey, viewing the artefacts I produce as a “thesis in images” is somewhat too far along the spectrum of the debated notion of what a PhD potential could be. And although it is my belief that every model, from the most traditional of models of one hundred percent text, through to pure performance, are all possible (in time) – my own research question is better served with a combination of performance and reflection; literature review and academic text production; qualitative engagement with informants; and combining all artistically, creatively and academically to produce a final PhD presentation.

Section Three – The Relationship between Practice and Research Question

Choreography:

… acts as a mirror to my culturally inscribed body  (Cancienne & Snowber 2003, pp. 243-244)

... is a system of meaningful motions ... a means by which the choreographer and the performer can communicate an interpretation of the world in which we live.  (Author’s Journal, 11th January 2010)

In this section of the chapter I address the relationship between my practice and my research question. I attempt to shed light on why a practice-based approach at the heart of the inquiry is an appropriate approach in my particular research journey.

This section also introduces the two performance presentations created as part of the PhD thesis.

Edge Walking and Expressive Possibilities

Ultimately, my central concern is to discover if there are untapped expressive possibilities within the Irish step dance genre. It goes without saying that all Irish step dancers feel in some way that
what they do is a form of expression, but in my experience, many reduce that to its performative virtuosity and how that can animate the observer as well as the performer.

As a way of answering this question, the most effective approach seemed to be the creation of work, its transmission and presentation, and observing its ramifications creatively, culturally, socially and politically. Although ‘new’ work is being created all the time in the Irish step dance genre, much of this is within the confines of the competition world and commercial world models, and would employ their associated templates. There are a handful of Irish dance artists who work in the contemporary arena, but the work is solo and is performed by the choreographers themselves.

The involvement of the Irish step dancers in this ensemble work acts to reach the community who would rarely attend the theatrical spaces dedicated to work which questions its own practice. The Irish dance world is huge in terms of numbers, but extremely tight-knit and fairly easy to penetrate, particularly as many of the Ériu dancers return to touring shows such as Riverdance when not involved in my projects. Many also teach workshops or assist their own teachers during downtime. They carry with them the work, as well as their transformation because of the work in their bodies and attitudes.

As a consequence of the significant penetration of the dance work in terms of engagement with various facets of the dance public, including the Irish dance practitioners, general dance practitioners, and dance enthusiasts, the practice and work and its impact can be monitored, recorded and analysed.

**The Performance Presentations**

Two performance presentations are expected as part of the final PhD presentation, which also includes a 40,000 words written thesis. My desire is that the performance presentations contain within them the essence of the research in terms of research question, methodology, theory, data and analysis.

The first presentation, *Noctù* (Sept 2010; April/May 2011; Sept/Oct 2011) aims to question how the Irish step dancer is perceived in the wider world, and the impact of the commercial show
(Riverdance and others which imitated this model) and competition culture on this perception (see Foley 2001; Hall 2008). My ongoing observation was that the Irish step dancer was being reduced to dramatis personae in some ‘other’s’ narrative of the world we inhabit. It seemed to me that we were often misunderstood; for example, producers within the commercial arena would often see us as naïve, convent and Christian Brother educated ‘children’ with simple, unsophisticated concerns. To me, as they observed us, the culture-bearers, it seemed that this ‘other’s’ focus fell on our surface, and its adornments, with no urge to penetrate deeper. Their skewed judgments about us seemed to be based on what they wanted to believe to be true rather than how we viewed ourselves. It was my understanding that my competition and professional dance colleagues felt the same.

Noctú aims to redress this notion. To me Noctú is an ethnochoreological and autobiographical representation of the Irish dancer – a telling of our story through me – a glimpse of the world from our (my) viewpoint, and not that of those who have a vested interest but who are not tradition holders (producers and venture capitalists for example). Through text and experimental dance pieces, Noctú offers an insight into how the Irish step dancer might present himself/herself and their dance, given the opportunity. The boundaries of what it is an Irish dancer considers to be their performance dominion is pushed in terms of the activities which are expected of them, sometimes very much outside of their comfort zone. Noctú is the dancers’ first experience of a work where process and exploration is central to its creation in a professional show. Although Noctú aims to be the voice of the dancer, it in reality cannot represent the voices of all, and in fact I discovered through the research that it very much is a representation of my own perspective. However, (through ethnographic fieldwork), I also discovered that the show’s thrust resonates with many Irish dancers who came into contact with it (see Chapter Four).

Noctú also acts as a stepping-stone to the second, more provoking production.

In the second presentation, Rite of Spring24 (Aug 2012) I challenge the notion of posture and verticality in Irish dance – the most visual and globally recognized trademarks of the genre. My own

24 Composer – Igor Stravinsky Rite of Spring was first performed on the 29th May 1913 in Paris by Ballet Russes.
dancing style was altered by virtue of its corporeal history, life-experiences and age, and I wished to generate a movement system that reflected this. Using various techniques from the modern, post-modern and contemporary dance world, the Irish dancer is reconstructed in a process which allows them in some way to understand and embody my work. New gestures are added to a dance form, which traditionally almost exclusively utilizes the lower half of the body only. Emotion, normally hidden inside, personally felt but not overtly expressed, is let loose, translated into upper body gestures to add a new and visual layer to the Irish dance performance. This method builds to the production of *Rite of Spring* (see Chapter Five).

**Section Four – Methodology**

This section of the chapter seeks to illustrate the methodology which I will use in representing and interacting with my practice. It will introduce techniques such as narrative inquiry and autoethnography, as a way of understanding the self as situated in an area of research dedicated to delving deep within one’s practice and performance. In addition, it will discuss established methods consistent with ethnographic practices utilized in commonplace fieldwork, such as journal writing, audio-visual recording, interviews, and conversations, which will be used to unpack my research concern. Finally the reasons for choosing methods consistent with a practice-based research approach in terms of my particular area of inquiry will be elucidated.

**Narrative Approaches to Inquiry**

The contentious areas of narrative inquiry and autoethnography are the subjects of much debate. Terms such as ‘narcissistic’, ‘self-absorbed’ and ‘egotistical’ are not uncommon among its critics (e.g. Anderson 2006), and can be forgiven considering the nature of much of scholarly inquiry to date. But the methods do have their champions, urging the academic collective to embrace narrative approaches as a way of understanding the researcher as situated in their area of investigation.

Harrison speaks of how writing promotes and encourages self-awareness. One appreciates more the thoughts, emotions, decisions that evolve enabling a sharper appreciation of the entire process (Harrison 2002). That said, textualizing self-awareness (Biggs 2004) is notoriously difficult which reinforces the importance of the artefact as central to the communication of the research.
When a research question originates from within practice, the artistic production, and experience (the facts, the feelings, the attitudes), the expressive potential of narrative methods captures nuggets of valuable data important in an endeavor such as performance research. This combination of material – snippets of visual/textual/audio journaling; rehearsal recordings; conversations; interactions with others – with personal narrative and autoethnography, “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” (Jones 2005, p.765).

As Nimkulrat stated:

Documentation renders the implicit artistic experience accessible and discussable in the context of disciplined inquiry (Nimkulrat 2007, pp. 6-7).

**Autoethnography**

Culture shapes individuals’ “standards for perceiving, evaluating, believing, and doing” (Goode-nough 1981, p.78). Cultural standards are reflected in what we value. In autoethnographic study, Chang informs us that the collecting of self-observational and self-reflective data (actual behaviours, thoughts and emotions as they occur in their natural contexts), allows for a useful “analysis of personal values and preference” (Chang 2008, p. 96). She considers autoethnography to be ethnographic participant observation, in which the data that is collected, rather than being of the lives of others, is concerning the researcher’s own life. Self-observational data, she informs us, captures actual behaviours, thoughts, and emotions at the time of data collection (Chang 2008).

Self-awareness and self-consciousness can affect your data – but raw data from the present enables one to preserve vivid details and fresh perspectives. Careful planning is key and what to observe is determined by the research purpose. Decisions on how the data is recorded: at certain time intervals; by occurrence; in the narrative format or pre-formatted recording sheets; immediately, or after leaving the action field; can all contribute, but all have positive and negative outcomes. If recorded on-site, immediate emotion can be captured, the perspective is likely to be less tampered-with, and memories are recorded more vividly. This immediate approach can be disruptive in the field and a high level of self-awareness can “taint” data. While waiting to retreat from the field to record data may allow a natural flow of activities and occurrence in the field, it may also yield less-fresh memories. Chang suggests keeping time-lapses to a minimum.
Time-lapses should be kept to a minimum, Chang warns.

The recording of self-observational data from the present – daily and weekly routines; what you do in solitude/with others; what you say; what you feel; what you think; whom you include/exclude in your interactions – when compared with personal memory data, can reveal changes and continuity in ones life over time.

Self-observational data is useful because it gives access to “covert, elusive and/or personal experiences like cognitive process, emotions, motives, concealed actions, omitted actions, and socially restricted activities” (Rodriguez and Ryave 2002, p.3), and brings to the surface what is “taken-for-granted, habituated, and/or unconscious matter that … [is] unavailable for recall” (Rodriguez and Ryave 2002, p.4).

In an effort to seek to better understand themselves or aspects of their existence, authors utilize autoethnography, but critics, such as Anderson (2006) of the more “creative” or “evocative” styles, point to the importance of avoiding “self-absorption” and “author-saturated texts”. Anderson and his allies see this as unnecessary and counterproductive. Delving too expressively into the experience for the autoethnographer acts to “lose(s) its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption” (Anderson 2006, p. 385). But this attitude hinders the potential of this unique methodological skill which can enable and unleash discoveries crucial to the researcher’s inquiry. Self-absorption can be avoided in this highly self-reflective and introspective process, by methodically keeping a distance from the process. Journaling helps to move in and out of the self-reflective.

Is my incentive for making art a desire to make and convince people to see the world as I do? (Author’s Journal, 1st April 2010)

Narrative Inquiry

An autoethnographic approach resonates particularly well with the importance of cultural context to this research endeavor; however autoethnography is only one approach within the wider methodological umbrella of narrative inquiry.
From a formalistic approach, people, if identified at all, are looked at “… as exemplars of a form – of an idea, a theory, a social category” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p.45). The traditional institutional objectivistic stance in studying people tends to be the metaphoric “god’s-eye-view about what the world really is like” (Johnson 1987) – the reduction of the whole to a formulated set of rules. It does not matter what a person believes – there is a ‘correct/true’ view of the world, truth and meaning being depersonalized.

Narrative inquiry begins with:

… the researcher’s autobiographically oriented narrative associated with the research puzzle (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p.41).

In narrative inquiry, people are looked at as “ … embodiments of lived stories” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p.43):

We might say that if we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively. For us, life – as we come to it and as it comes to others – is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities … For us, narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. In effect, narrative thinking is part of the phenomenon of narrative. It might be said that narrative method is a part or aspect of narrative phenomena. Thus, we say, narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of the social sciences (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, pp. 17-18).

The emergence of narrative inquiry from the field of knowledge management, with its focus on understanding behaviour through anecdotal material, has in recent years been incorporated into the field social science qualitative research. This means that it is now a useful analysis tool in fields such as cognitive science, organizational studies and knowledge theory, among others.

Its value in the area of practice and performance-based research as a way of understanding experience cannot be underestimated. Clandinin and Connelly define narrative inquiry as a method that uses the following field texts as data sources: stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, artefacts from the field (photographs, memory boxes – items which trigger memories collected in the composition of lives) and life experience (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, pp. 98-115). ‘Experience’ is key in performance-based research, an
unremarkable term in educational language, but a term which has been transformed by Dewey to one of inquiry. Dewey believed that in the analysis of the individual, one must also consider the social context of that individual, and that a ‘continuity’ surrounded an individual’s understanding of experience. In short, nothing or no one exists in isolation. Wherever individuals position themselves on this continuum – “the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future” – each point is informed by past experiences and lead to an experiential future (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, pp. 2-3).

**Performative Writing / Personal Narrative Performance**

“We only believe those thoughts, which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body.” – W.B. Yeats

Movement methods can be used as a way to posing critical questions; connecting with the emotions of the participants; understanding theoretical concepts; discovering the ‘self’ as a site of discovery; and as a representation of research through performance for an audience (Bagley & Cancienne 2001). In the words of Cancienne & Snowber, “We are moving researchers” (Cancienne & Snowber 2003, p. 273). Thus dance is a form of inquiry in addition to an expression of the research outcome of the activity. From a phenomenological viewpoint we as individuals are separated from the world and from others, but only by experiencing our bodies do we access bodily knowledge (Grosz 1994, p.86). As dancers, it is our bodies and our actions that:

… excavate the nexus of knowledge, insight, and understanding (Cancienne & Snowber 2003, p. 239).

As Sklar points out:

… movement embodies socially constructed cultural knowledge in which corporeality, emotion, and abstraction are intertwined (Sklar 1994, p.12).

The inclusion of choreography in a research process is profound in that it switches the perception from “we have bodies to we are bodies” (Cancienne & Snowber 2003, p. 239).
To write performatively:

… we access a way of writing from the body, a way in which theory meets practice so that the deep listening to life actually spills over from blood to ink (Cancienne & Snowber 2003, p.248)

but

… writing becomes not just a recording of details but a process by which we are awakened to the details of experience. In the same way, dancing becomes not just a recording of knowledge but a process by which we are awakened to new insights (Cancienne & Snowber 2003, p.248).

Judging by the examples I have read, this is not an easy process, and in my opinion and many grapple with it unsuccessfully for the most part. But evidence exists that the process releases useful insights, valuable to the research process. The method is worth exploring, but requires practice to achieve expertise.

A successful performative writing exercise is that of Teri L. Varner’s “Am I A … ” (Varner 2000). The genesis of this piece was a truthful, deeply personal and courageous autobiographical staged personal narrative performance, which was both provocative and disturbing. It is the honesty and the success of the live venture which was crucial in the written performative incarnation working so well. It is certainly an approach worthy of consideration in any practice-based PhD.

**Interviews**

In exploring my practice, other than myself, the bulk of the data comes from those closest to the work – the dancers. Their proximity is not limited to the embodiment of the choreographic material, and includes their physical and emotional closeness to me, the choreographer. Therefore, the insights of the dancers are central to the exploration.

Although my relationship with the dancers transcends the professional, comprising a great level of trust and friendship, I wanted them, as they divulged their thoughts and beliefs about Nočtù, to be as frank and uninhibited as possible, with no sense that they could jeopardise their position in the company. My strategy to achieve this was to reassure them that their honesty was the most valuable thing they could offer, but also, I did not interview them myself, only transcribing
and analysing the interviews later, when the Noctú run had ended. Naturally, the dancers knew I would eventually hear what they had to say, but I believe that they spoke more freely without having to look me in the eye.

I chose Ashlene McFadden, Ériu Dance Company member to conduct the interviews which she recorded on my iPhone for convenience. She had recently graduated from the MA in Traditional Irish Dance Performance programme and had quite a bit of experience in research methods associated with the social sciences. We agreed on the questions and I also spent some time discussing my research concerns with her. In addition, she had a genuine interest in dance scholarship and a healthy interest in my research direction, and this made her a more than suitable candidate for the task.

For Rite of Spring I conducted the interviews myself. I also asked the dancers to write about their experience, and provided key words to aid those who requested guidance.

**Interviews with others**

Yeah – I don’t know what they [emotions] were suppose to be, but they were definitely high level emotions – maybe such as anxiety, or maybe … not so much anger … anxiety would sum it up in terms of both the facial expressions, but also the physical gestures, especially by the top half of the body and the way the arms were used.

… but then this – using your breath, and it wasn’t even speaking it was – well you kind of sit up in your chair and you were thinking … it made it more intimate, I think because breathing is something that is intimate anyway. I mean if you can hear somebody’s breath, it implies that you are very close to them, physically, maybe in other ways. I think for me I though it was very, very effective … (Recorded interview, Francis Ward, 3rd Dec 2009 – 13:50, F1 030, University of Limerick Foundation Building)

The central informants in my work are those who embody my work, but in research such as this, one can be surrounded by colleagues and friends who are key informants – people who live the area of one’s research concern. Constant engagement with these people allows for ongoing monitoring of one’s progress, and becomes a second pair of eyes to raise the alarm when personal immersion of the researcher leads to a sullying of their perspective.
Interviews Conducted on the Researcher

An area I find fascinating is the researcher being interviewed, the interview being recorded for their own analysis later. Putting the power in the hands of another may allow for insights which would find difficulty in surfacing if other methods of reflection were to be used. The pressure and incentive associated with an ‘other’ in the interview ‘driving seat’, is a position difficult to create alone. It is crucial that the interviewer have a knowledge of work of a similar nature to my own, as well as having deep insight into who I am, personally and professionally.

Conversations

She felt that I was definitely driven by the music, that the movement was a visual representation of the score – which I like to believe is the case – and although I said that many choreographers in the contemporary genre encourage you not the be a slave to the music, she didn’t feel that I was. She found the breathing section very unsettling and thought that she could never do it had she been asked … that it felt too exposing and made her feel vulnerable. She wondered if the dancers had had a problem with it. She said that, for her, it seemed like the fighting in ‘Fight Club’ (film) where, when she watched it, the blood and gore didn’t bother her, but the sounds of the blows really upset her. The section is obviously very emotive, which pleases me. (Documented conversation, Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain, 2nd Dec 2009 – 11:35, Orfhlaith’s house)

Opportunities often arise where one has the chance to extract valuable information from an informant. The opportunity must be grasped as it may be difficult to recreate, or the person may be normally inaccessible. The recording of conversations subsequent to them happening is a valuable technique, but keeping the distance between its occurrence and its documentation must be kept as short as possible.

Audio-Visual Recordings

Much of my improvisational work is recorded in the studio and analysed later. This is discussed in more detail in ‘work-making methods’ below.
Section Five – Work-Making Methods

Making Work and the Habitus

The predominant source from which I draw my movement material is Irish step dance, but I wish not to be impeded by the strict canons of that tradition. I am now older and feel less attached to some of those aesthetic rules. I have many dance genres colonising my body, all with varying degrees of proficiency, not to mention the myriad life experiences which heavily influence how I move and how I critically engage with poetic movement.

To access the source, the fountain of one’s creativity, I believe that it is important to allow the work to surface in an unaffected, unblemished fashion. Improvisation has proven to be a useful studio technique as I have found that it acts to access a portal to the honest self – so although all of what we know has been presented to us throughout our lives and experienced by us with our bodies, it is our integration of all of this, coupled with our genetics that makes us unique. Accessing this in an un-censored, un-sanitised fashion, and creating a piece of work informed by those elements, is therefore in my opinion distinctive and innovative.

To improvise is:

… to create and perform spontaneously or without preparation (Apple Dictionary Version 2.0.3 (51.5))

According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary to improvise is:

… to compose, recite, play, or sing extemporaneously
… to make, invent, or arrange offhand (Merriam Webster 2010)

The understanding of improvisation varies from dance culture to dance culture. Puri & Hart-Honson state that:

… whether a dance is considered to be improvised or composed depends on culturally specific distinctions that reflect the values of a given society (Puri & Hart-Honson 1995, p.158)
Jackson (2001) in his paper “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing” argues that there is no division between improvisation and composition for this community (Jackson p. 44).

Stearns states that African diaspora:

place(s) great importance upon improvisation, satirical and otherwise, allowing freedom for individual expression; this characteristic makes for flexibility and aids the evolution and diffusion of other African characteristics (Stearns 1968, p.15)

In terms of contemporary dance, Blom & Chaplin argue that:

improvisations serve as a preparation, as mental-physical-emotional ‘seeding of the bed’ out of which your choreography will grow (Blom & Chaplin 1982, p. 5)

and that

improvisation is not a substitute for composition … composition is always the result of planning and selection on the part of the composer (Hayes 1993, p.25)

Blom, Chaplin and Hayes are referring without doubt to the European and Euro-American modern dance, classical ballet and musical theatre – the proscenium-arch environments or concertized modes of presentation – with a separation between performer and audience. Towards the end of the twentieth century, modern and postmodern dance idioms did place value in more vernacular, grounded approaches, challenging the Cartesian-dualism25 notions – examples being contact improvisation and Cohen’s Body-Mind Centering (for a more detailed discussion see de Gallai 2011).

I have chosen to touch on these dance traditions because there is a shift in the world of Irish dance which parallels improvisation practices in both tap and contemporary dance. In terms of my own choreography, the view of Blom & Chapalin, as well as Hayes, applies to a great degree. I endeavour to create out of my habitus. It is important to set out an environment that allows for complete openness – closing off the inner critic – that child robbed of its creative confidence.

25 Cartesian Dualism considers the mind to be independent of the body, although it accepts that they interact. It is the understanding that the self is located in the mind which is only affected by the brain. Believing that the mind only knows the world because it is experienced by the body is a rejection of this paradigm.
Improvising alone is my starting point in achieving this. I aim to empty my mind as much as possible – exhausting the body is a technique I have found that aids in keeping the mind at peace. I record these improvisations using a camcorder or iPhone.

**The Place of Improvisation in my Work**

Wulff states that:

> To the many uses of the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) belongs the insight that the practice of dancing reveals dispositions, i.e. perceptions and actions that are being inscribed in a dancer’s body. (Wulff 2007)

*(Italics, Author’s Journal 14th December 2009)*

> As an improviser I want to unleash the unknown – allow my body/bones to let the traditional aesthetic evolve

> When speaking of that unknown Foster states:

> “It is that which was previously unimaginable, that which we could not have thought of doing next. Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be “taken by surprise’’”. (Foster 2003, p.4)

> This is how I want my work to be created

> To be:

> “A Body with a Mind of Its Own” (Zaporah 2003, p.21)

> I play the music, press record on the camera, and leave my conscious mind outside the room

> Music communicates directly with the body – to stimulate the nerves and the muscles to move how they please

> With my mental attention elsewhere – my body does its own thing

> I want to let the deeper stuff emerge – I can judge and evaluate, or direct later

> An exploration of real life surfaces – issues are grappled with – meaningful content created
... unearthing the subterranean geographies of the self ... turning over the wet rock to reveal its mossy underside (Gere 2003, p.xiv)

I let the body think ...

This I do with a black sack over the studio door window – blocking off the prying eyes of passers by

Like Wigman and Graham I agree that:

Improvisation is for private reflection and discovery ... Composition and the rigors of choreography must follow

Then –

I censor/edit
I transmit
I censor/edit

Improvisation is also informative for me – letting go and allowing material to emerge, I reach depths that I may not access if critically engaged with the creative process. Although to many these are just moves or rhythms – they to me have meaning and unearth/disclose/let slip truths about the self and what the self wishes to communicate

Improvisation facilitates this unleashing

It is a way of developing new approaches to the Irish step dance aesthetic, allowing the material to emerge from deep within

‘Impulsing’ the forgotten, ignored, unknown and letting that float to the surface—dismantling the mind – letting the body think for itself – allowing it to tell its story, disconnecting the inner critic determined to edit/censor and interfere with the entire self’s desire to tell its own story. (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)

It seems to me that when I am at my most effective, my most creative, I am in a state of what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to as “flow”. He speaks of an intense and focused condition with no anxiety or boredom. The present moment is all that matters, and that “experience seamlessly unfolds” (Csikszentmihalyi in Snyder & Lopez 2002, p.89). This state, when one “operates at full capacity” (cf. de Charms, 1969; Deci, 1975; White, 1959), includes but is not limited to:
Merging of actions and awareness
Loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)
A sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next
A sense that time has passed faster than normal
(Csikszentmihalyi in Snyder & Lopex 2002, p.89)

Music for me is central, and I begin the improvisational process having chosen the pieces I wish to work with, often improvising on my first or second hearing. It is ironic/surprising that much of what I consider to be the best material can be found in the first take. There are instances where several phrases can be extracted from these recordings that I slot directly into the piece – no need to tweak, edit, fix or amend.

Sometimes a posture raises its weary head for a split second that contains the essence of a work. In this instance, a grueling process begins to understand why it has the power to intrigue me, but more difficult is trying to isolate its relevance –
What is it about it?
Is it just the gesture or move?
Is it its location in the musical phrase?
Is it not so much where the arms and legs are, but something intangible?
Will I be able to reproduce it?
Will I be able to transmit it? (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)

Video and editing technology therefore plays an important role in the process. Getting to grips with the technology is vital to ensure that the ‘good’ material is recorded, but in a fashion that the brain is disengaged, with no need to remember. ‘Switching off’ also mutes those voices in the head that prevent one from letting go – the avoidance of the ‘chattering monkeys’. But also, tons of material ends up on one’s laptop and hard drive, so practice at being ruthless is imperative – making sure that plenty ends up on the ‘editor’s floor’ as they say in the movie business. Decisions need to be quick, excerpts need to be cut out in bite size pieces to be analyzed later. And of course there is the head time – the luxury of allowing the time and head space to ponder, wonder, let the concept or idea re-enter the body by osmosis so that it can be used, developed and taught to the dancers
I am often amazed at the wonderful choreographic ideas some of my colleagues have come up with over the years. And it’s surprising that their reaction to my reaction, apart from being pleased with the compliment, is often one of not being particularly astonished by their creation. It is just something they do … something that came out of them without any level of sacrifice.

I’ve also been pleasantly surprised at the reaction of fellow dancers when engaging with my work. They joke about the material, exclaiming that they are bewildered about where it comes from. There then follows a tendency to make claims such as: “It’s really you … very Breandán!”

A good friend and colleague Dearbhla Lennon describes how she imagines the inside of my head as “a monkey banging cymbals”. A supporter of my choreographic vision but steeped in the traditional Irish step dance world, this is meant as a compliment, although the material is something she may never have imagined as Irish dancing. (Author’s Journal, 1st September 2012)

Although I may not be aware of the precise detail of my movements in my studio setup, I certainly have a sense of ownership, a kinaesthetic sense that I am responsible for the movements. I have an experiential sense of agency, or a pre-reflective sense that the movements are my own, or in other words, that I am the author of the movements (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 pp. 160-161). Even though I feel as I reflect in autoethnographic journaling, that I am “lost in the movements”, my experience is that I am in control of my action.

Definitions of improvisation imply a level of spontaneity – that there is an invention of something new in the act of the improvisation. My approach draws from traditional competition Irish step dance as a way of creating new and interesting rhythmic patterns and leg gestures, but in addition, I follow a contemporary dance model as a “seeding of the bed” (Blom & Chaplin 1982, p. 5). This is crucial as a way of allowing the traditional aesthetic to evolve, allowing the emotions and reactions associated with the traditional movements and gestures to drift to the surface, relocating

26 Dearbhla Lennon is a former professional Irish dancer and a teacher and adjudicator. She was co-presenter of Dance Off which is the TV series made for RTÉ (Irish national broadcaster) on the creation of Noctú.
and being represented in some way in the upper-body. Improvisation for me allows material to emerge from my habitus, stimulated by facets of the creation process – music, mood, concept, context, and purpose. It is what happens subsequently that matters in terms of the making of the dance.

Lavender & Predock-Linnell argue:

To make a work of art one must continually make aesthetic decisions. (Lavender & Predock-Linnell 2001, p.195)

We need to complement our improvisation experiences with skillfulness in:

… identifying and exploiting the full aesthetic and expressive potential of the movement material (Lavender & Predock-Linnell 2001, p.195)

I attempt to a choreographer by allowing:

… the development of critical consciousness; the ability to describe, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and imagine/implement revisions to their own and others’ dances. (Lavender & Predock-Linnell 2001, p.195)

We invent and explore during the improvisational process, but the “art-making is inherently critical” (Lavender & Predock-Linnell 2001, p.195).

**Devising Situations**

During the making of *Nočtú*, I was eager to have a company of individuals who were wholeheartedly on the choreographic journey with me, rather than a group of ‘gigging’ dancers\(^\text{27}\), just learning material to perform as part of a paying job. To that end, I actively involved them in scripting aspects of the show. I began by looking at each of them personally, asking them to talk openly about their emotional engagement with the practice of Irish step dancing, and the challenges they had experienced. The rehearsal period was intimate, and we became close very quickly so getting the dancers to open up was not difficult. Subsequently I put the dancers in groups and got them to script and act out ‘situations’ that seemed to matter to them. The outcomes tended to be experi-

\(^{27}\text{Dancers who go from Irish dance show to Irish dance show purely for the work with no other objective such as artistic and personal development or up-skilling.}\)
ences that were consistent with all our lives. I gathered that the significance of the events were such that they had remained with them, and were in some small way responsible for who they had become, and therefore were cathartic to reveal. Although some of these situations were used in the first version of the show they were eventually removed for the final iteration. However the character types remained and appeared in a more subtle way in some of the numbers.

The Score

Being choreographic actor, I discovered, is a much smaller fraction of the performance of making work and bringing it to completion. The score can be created and recorded in many different and diverse ways – from notation to video records – but none will be as pure as the ideal of carrying the work inscribed and encoded on my body; the real task being its communication to the performer, the deep intrinsic meaning of the gestures and moves. This choreography is a tacit activity for me – it would have been unleashed from my corporeal knowledge. Transmitting this is the challenge. In fact, it is not so much the transmission rather than the ignition of the intention of the work within the actors themselves.

Ryszard Cieslak, in his explanation of his understanding of the ‘score’ to Richard Schnecher in 1970, illuminated for me, the significance of the score and how the actor brings it to life:

The score is like the glass inside which a candle is burning. The glass is solid, it is there, you can depend on it. It contains and guides the flame. But it is not the flame. The flame is my inner process each night. The flame is what illuminates the score, what the spectator see through the score (Schechner 2003, p. 47).

Or as Grotowski suggests that the score is the “two banks of a river” and the “water flowing between those banks” being the performer’s process (Schechner 2003, p. 47). In many practices, “… skills are shared, that is, they are the same in different individuals, nexuses of activity are rooted in, though not for most theorists exclusively in, shared understandings” (Schatzki 2001, p.9). It is in the reaching of this apex that I in my role as author, see the ultimate challenge.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter I situated myself and my practice in the creation of two dance works *Nočtú* and *Rite of Spring*. It also presented the methods associated with the development and engagement with that practice.

The ‘self’ and how it is located in the practice is elucidated using methods such as autobiographical writing as well as the voices of others using interview, reviews and conversations. I presented key formative moments which led me to explore my practice in an academic fashion, to consider the work and process as research, and to realise how the practice has evolved and developed in recent years. I also presented he unconventional approach of situating this process within the setting of the University.

How practice has lead me to my research question was explored – indeed, the epistemological value of practice as a central element of the approach was presented, and the contributory nature, relevance, and importance to the clarification of the research concern was also offered.

The emergence, as well as the inevitable challenges of practice-based research were presented and discussed. My understanding of this approach to research and scholarship was explored in addition to my reasons for choosing to conduct research in this way and the opportunities that the approach presented to me. This was informed by many scholars of performance and practice, and in particular, those whose journeys were similar to my own.

In addition, I explained how I hope to interact with my own practice through the use of newer and more controversial research methods such as narrative inquiry, autoethnography and performative writing, as well as the tried and tested anthropological methods of interviews and “thick description” (Geertz 1973). I also explained the importance and cruciality of audio-visual records for research of this nature, and emphasized why I chose to go down this research road rather than a traditional PhD approach.

Finally, I introduced my work-making methods, which include improvisation as a tool to create novel vocabulary, followed by a critical engagement with the material as it is being fully fleshed out at the workshop and rehearsal phases. In addition, throughout the chapter, the importance of trusting ones ‘gut’, or instinctual response to the work as it is being fleshed out and edited, is highlighted.
CHAPTER THREE

Contextual and Theoretical Points of Departure

Introduction

The following chapter is in four sections.

Section One deals in brief with the history of traditional Irish step dancing, introducing its stylistic attributes and how they came about, how it continues to evolve, and the impact of Riverdance on the traditional aesthetic.

Section Two addresses the various philosophical points of departure I have chosen as a way of investigating my research question. Phenomenology is introduced and its place in my research process explained (Armstrong 1968; Damasio 1999; Gallagher & Zahavi 2008; Gallese 2001; Husserl 1973a; 1966a; 2001; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Sartre 1956; Searle 1983; Thompson 2007). The area of the Lacanian ‘Other’ is presented as a framework to explain how I understand aesthetics as a member of the Irish step dancing community and my belief in how this might impact on how the Irish dance form evolves (Bailly 2009; Knorr Cetina 2001).

Section Three deals with the theoretical starting points in the process of making work. I introduce the notion of ‘habitus’ and its place in my choreographic process (Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1973). A discussion on the ageing dancing body makes up a portion of this discussion (Cameron-Dalman 1996; Schwaiger 2005a; Wulff 2007).

Section Four explores various theoretical approaches to ‘performance’ and ‘practice’, my understanding of these contested terms, and how they influence my approach to the research (Marranca and Dasgupta 1989; Melrose 2007; Phelan 1998; Schatzki 2001; Schechner 1988; 2003).
Section One – Contextualising Irish Step Dance

Working in the professional arena, I focused on delivering the best possible version of what I thought the male lead role of Riverdance should be. My aesthetic choices were based on those of my predecessors', in addition to the wishes of the creative team, but they were also based on my interpretation of what I thought the role should be. It seemed to me that the non-traditional material – the postural shifts from the original aesthetic – was being informed by the dance genres of classical dance, musical theatre and the likes. I felt I had some experience in this area and I felt that perhaps I was in a position to make small improvements.

Many years later I find myself in the University of Limerick questioning what is considered to be good dance and good dancing and why there is a sense amongst the tradition-holders that there is a definite ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and why everyone yearns for someone ‘who just knows’ to tell them what is right and what is wrong. I am left with the conundrum – is there really any right or wrong? When you look at how dance form continues to evolve, any amount of possibilities could be viable.

Who holds the keys to the Irish dance Kingdom? I don’t think it is the actual individual dancer. The Lacanian ‘O’ther – that mythical force out there that is all seeing and all knowing seems to be helping us carve out a path to some eventual point of aesthetic perfection and universal truth. How could this be true of art ... of anything?

As a consequence of this, I wonder, what if the keys were handed back, what would happen? What would our taste demand if the shoe was on the other foot, removing the ‘O’ther from the equation? Let us, the dancers decide, and stop the critiquing. Stop using phrases like ‘good dancing and bad dancing’ – ‘well crafted choreography and badly crafted choreography’, and instead simply say – ‘I like this and I do not like that’.

So, if this were to be the case – what would be next for us, the dancers? Dr. Catherine Foley encapsulated my quest in the statement:

And what is the future for the Riverdancers after Riverdance? Do we see the establishment of small Irish step-dance companies or freelance individual Irish step-dance performers? (Foley 2001, p.43)
I want there to be something more ... I fear social commentators will say – “It was only a fad” – “I knew it would last only so long” – “Do you remember that Irish dance Riverdance craze of the 1990s?” But I care too much about the dance to let our day in the sun slip away too quickly. (Author’s Journal, 7th February 2011)

This initial section looks at the history and evolution of Irish step dance in terms of its significance to me as an Irish dance practitioner from the mid 1970s until the present day. The canons of traditional Irish dance are discussed, referring to the works of Irish dance scholars Foley (1988, 2001, 2007), Hall (1996) and Ni Bhriain (2011). The classifications of Irish dance listed by Kealinohomoko (1976) will also be presented.

Irish traditional step dance is instantly recognisable by its verticality, its erectness, and its rigidity. With the help of the phenomenal success of Riverdance came a culture of parodying the aesthetic. Acts such as Stavros Flatley of Britain’s Got Talent fame (2009) made a decent living from poking fun into what the public recognised as that Irish dance look. Foley lists the general stylistic features of traditional Irish dance as follows:

Step dance, as the name implies, concentrates on the art of intricate stepping in harmony to music. In the hard shoe dances the rhythmic possibilities of the music is heard beaten out. The timing of the dancer with the music is of the utmost importance and this is a quality that is often referred to when one dancer speaks of another dancer’s ability as a step dancer. One of the outstanding features of this dance type is the swiftness with which the feet move in and out of positions and gestures. Good positions of the feet are basic requirements in step dance. The posture or carriage at all times remains erect and a good posture is always admired by observers, especially those who understand the principles of Irish step dance. The hands are held loosely by the sides. (Foley 1988)

Many an inaccurate and humourous anecdote has been spun about why Irish dancers never use their arms, but Hall points out that there is no one reason for the aesthetic to have evolved as it has (Hall 1996). His research in the area of Irish dance illuminates the factors that merge to form an ethos that has precipitated the particular development of Irish dancing, including its posture. According to Hall, how Irish dance played a role in the agenda of nationalism, its use in physical education classes in the schools and the processes and requirements of formalised competition all contributed to the appearance of the dance so globally recognisable today. “The Irish character” is what Irish dance was meant to express, and although the posture is described a “stiff”
and “rigid”, teachers who are quizzed about how a dancer is meant to hold him/herself insist that rather than being “stiff”, simply a “good-bearing” attitude is what is desired. Irish dance focuses on the intricate footwork and with a still upper body, distraction is kept to a minimum (Hall 1996, p. 251).

In “A Comparative study of Dance as a Constellation of Motor Behaviours Among African and United States Negroes”, Kealiinohomoku states that:

> The most important aim in Irish dance is the achievement of complicated foot rhythms. (Kealiinohomoku 1965, p.130)

She mentions how Kinney characterises Irish dance as follows:

> ... the body is held almost undeviatingly erect, and the arms passive at the sides, and this is in accordance with unquestioned usage. (Kinney 1935, p. 175 in Kealiinohomoku 1965, p.132)

She also makes the comparison that:

> ... Irish clog dancers maintain a rigid upright posture during performance, while tap dancers characteristically bend forward and swing flexed arms forward and back. (Kealiinohomoku 1965, p.131)

In her classification of Irish dance motor behaviour patterns, she lists the following as some of the stylistic designs of Irish dance:

> Emotionality is not permitted as a part of dance performance, and facial expressions reveal the seriousness of purpose
> Performance for exhibition but with no communication projected by the dancer to the audience
> Dances are abstract designs and sometimes symbolic; they never include true pantomime (Kealiinohomoku 1965, p.136)

She also observes that the:

> ... Irish use of space is columnal and vertical. Movements by these dancers unfold symmetrically. (Kealiinohomoku 1965, p.150)

The stylistic features mentioned above by Foley (1988), Hall (1996) and Kealiinohomoku (1965) could be considered accurate observations of the current desired nature of the execution of
traditional Irish step dance within Irish dance competition culture, and to a lesser degree commercial Irish dance performances.

A discussion in the area of posture cannot be complete without exploring the role the socially mobile communities played at the turn of the last century. Ireland was emerging from extreme poverty and actively pursuing the status of Saorstát or free state for the country. The wealthy and educated were pushing the Irish nationalist agenda, and flying the flag for all things Irish including sport, language, the music and dance, in addition to self governance. This community desired a global public face of Irishness to be something other than an uneducated, uncivilised community: something aspirational that presented a sophisticated nation which would rival the courts and palaces of the empires of Europe. This stylistic postural aesthetic discussed above seemed to meet their needs in this area. (Ni Bhriain 2011)

Another important trait of Irish dance is the emphasis on virtuosity. Royce speaks of the appeal of virtuosity and having:

... no ambiguous middle territories ... no space without labels ... (Royce 2004, p.6)

She suggests that western culture has placed such high value upon virtuosity that it is perhaps why westerners value winning competitions so highly. Indeed, many Irish dancers spend vast amounts of their formative years practicing for and attending Irish dance competitions or feiseanna (singular feis). So although virtuosity has always been central to the dance form for centuries, the material being executed these days is almost acrobatic in nature and some believe that it places demands on the dancers beyond what is acceptable for young children. Irish dancers now borrow from many other dance genres, from tap (although, this is a two-way stream), ballet and even ice-skating (‘axel turn’ is a term that is often used nowadays).

Although Boas stated that:

When we speak of art, we have to bear in mind that all art implies technical skill. (Boas 1955, p.535)
Royce agrees that

Performance implies a certain level of competence ...
(Royce 2004, p.8)

but

… what happens between that technical competence and interpretation has to do with style and with artistry ... (Royce 2004, p.8)

In my experience the virtuosic nature of Irish dance becomes less important as one matures and the artistry of the dance form becomes the more appealing quality.

The 1990s saw a major shift in the world of Irish dance. Ireland were to host the Eurovision Song Contest, and Moya Doherty, the Executive Producer, wanted the programme to represent Ireland as a modern urban country, rather than project the traditional image of Ireland which included thatched cottages and red-haired colleens dancing at the crossroads. To this end, everything from the studio set, to the idents (station identification), to the interval act had a contemporary feel. That interval act was a 5-minute music, song and dance piece known as Riverdance, and was to become a phenomenon that would be known all over the world within a decade. In 2015, the 20th anniversary, it is estimated that Riverdance will have played on every continent to a live audience totaling 22 million people (source – conversation with Julian Erskine, Senior Executive Producer, Riverdance, The Show).

Riverdance’s impact on the Irish dance world, not to mention Ireland and the world in general cannot be underestimated. Up until 1994, only those associated with Irish step dancing had any degree of understanding of the genre. To many (those not directly involved with the world of Irish dance), it was the domain of ringlets, fake tan and overly ornate dancing dresses. It was also considered to be “backward in its nationalistic, rigid aesthetic and not cultured in line with Western art aesthetics”, as Foley suggested (Foley 2001, p.38). Diana Theodores had identified “the solitariness of Irish dancing, with its historic resistance to physical touching” (Theodores

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28 The Eurovision Song Contest is an annual song competition held among many of the active member countries of the European Broadcasting Union. Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eurovision_Song_Contest [accessed 28th July 2013].
1996, p. 204), but this was to change with Riverdance. Helen Brennan’s statement accurately sums up how the perception of Irish dance changed with Riverdance:

… this was Irish dance as it had never been seen before: an unashamedly spectacular display which, for once, accepted the sexual undertones of the dance and revelled in its power. (Brennan 1999, p.155)

Not only did this show capture the imagination of the Irish people, allowing ex-Irish dancers to “come out of the closet”, it captured the imagination of the international community, working equally as well as a performance piece in Nagoya as it did in New York, in Berlin as it did in Boston, an Irish diaspora not a prerequisite for success, despite the fact that “dance usually requires some cultural introduction” (Wulff 2007, p.2).

For the Irish, here was a new expression of Irishness – a modern and global one in which they could place their pride. Expressions of Irishness would have often been suppressed, initially by virtue of the long colonial history and associations with the latent and endemic notion of Irishness being identified with the stuff of poverty and backwardness. So although, as Wulff wrote – “In Ireland, the idea of tradition is both cherished and contested, loaded with claims of authenticity and authority” (Wulff 2007, p. 18), and that there is often much discussion around tradition and modernity, Wulff again states that “In the debate on tradition and modernity, we need to consider that one person’s tradition is another person’s modernity”. But Riverdance had the power to circumvent all of this for the most part, with few arguing that it laughed in the face of tradition and authenticity. It was generally accepted that this was Irish dance coming of age. As Friel so aptly argued:

… tradition, if alive, must keep changing, evolving and adapting. Each generation must find some element within a tradition that it can relate to and make its own. This process is alive today in Irish music and dance. (Friel 2004, p.54)

With the arrival of Riverdance, other traditional dance forms, rather than slipping away into oblivion were reinvented and had the spotlight shone on them. Seannós29 was suddenly embraced as “the real McCoy”, as the unashamed tradition, unbastardised, authentic and the original (see

29 A form of traditional Irish step dance found in the more remote areas of the west of Ireland, that up until recently was not taught in a formal fashion.
Brennan 2001). But in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, in the *The Invention of Tradition*, traditions that “appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm 1983).

**Section Two – Phenomenology & Lacan**

I am a ‘child of the times’; I am a member of a we-community in the broadest sense – a community that has its tradition and that, for its part, is connected in a novel manner with the generative subjects, the closest and the most distant ancestors. And these have ‘influenced’ me: I am what I am as an heir. (Husserl in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.86)

... so although I am a member of this we-community – the nearest being my immediate family followed by my ‘local’ community (home, school, college, dancing, gay) – I see much the same as many of them. That said my various communities and I can also disagree on plenty. To what degree does that (perceived) small difference in perspective resonate within me? If I could measure it – give it a number on a calibrated scale – how would this compare to that of an outsider’s evaluation? Could it be that to the onlooker, their perceived measure of difference in perspective seeming negligible, whilst resonating or weighing on me, the possessor, significantly? (Author’s Journal, 5th April 2010)

Human existence is characterised by historicity … I carry my history around with me … my anticipations are structured in accordance with inherited forms of apperception and comprehension (Husserl in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.86)

I see things the way others see them. I learn what is normal for others, and I thereby partake in a common tradition which stretches back through a chain of generations into a dim past. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.86)

The philosophical tradition of phenomenology originated in Europe in the early 1900s. Husserl was the pioneer of this approach to consciousness and experience, and the notion of embodied cognition took strength throughout the early part of the 20th century with contributions from Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. This philosophical movement objected to the Cartesian model of mind-body dualism and rejected the paradigm of cognition being represented by a disembodied computer program or “brain-in-a-vat”, the favoured model of philosophers such as Ryle and Dennett.

In a sentence – phenomenologists just begin with experience.


**Perception**

The phenomenologist’s concern is perception, and in particular, the meaning it has for the subject. Gallagher and Zahavi state that:

… perception is not a simple reception of information; rather, it involves an interpretation, which frequently changes according to context. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.7)

Perception is augmented and supplemented by experience in addition to the everyday and customary modes of experience, and should not be thought of as “perception plus thought” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.7), i.e. perception comes already enriched by habitual and time-honoured manners of experience.

*When I look at my car I can describe it as ‘an estate model that is green, has four doors, four wheels, runs on diesel and is adequate (just) for the 2 hour early morning drive to get me from Dublin to the University of Limerick in time for the rehearsals before the lunchtime performance ... ’*

*But I only see 2 doors, and 2 or maybe 3 wheels. I assume that the rest of the car is there when I check it from the kitchen window as I hurriedly eat my breakfast.*

*But, in reality, I don’t really see my car in terms of its physical makeup. As I gaze at the car, with no room for error this morning, the car intends to me as a heartache – a ‘banger’ that is undependable, burns oil and vibrates when I accelerate over 100km/h. It reminds me that I come from a house of old, second-hand ‘bangers’ – and one would think, that having had that experience for all of my formative years, I would treat myself to a good car, once I had the resources to do so. But as my father says – “a car is just for getting you from A to B” – except those cars back then, and this one now, does not always even do that ... (Author’s Journal, 23rd November 2010)*

With perception there exists a certain tacit anticipation. We never see a complete object all at once, but as we move around the object a more exhaustive presentation of it is revealed to us, and not as disjointed fragments, but synthetically integrated by our perception. Phenomenologists speak of there existing a “perspectival incompleteness” about the object (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.8).
The phenomenologist would say that perceptual experience is embedded in contexts that are pragmatic, social and cultural and that much of the semantic work (the formation of perceptual content) is facilitated by the objects, arrangements, and events that I encounter. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.7)

As Nagel puts it – perception is the “what it is like” for you to experience (Nagel in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). When the phenomenologist studies perception, s/he is not only interested in the subjective phenomenon, but in how it is lived through by that embodied agent who is in the world, with his/her motivations.

**Scientific Objectivity**

*From a very young age I had a reputation of thinking that I was right and others were wrong. ‘Tá Breandán i gcónaí ceart!’ my mother would always insist sarcastically. I suppose this is a common trait of a narcissistic child who questions everything and wants to believe that their perspective is the truly right and truly universal one. So although this truth/world may not be universal, it is the world that I know – and it is certainly true for me. I was just not well-positioned to be the voice of the grand capital ‘O’ ‘Other’ (Lacan – see below) – well not yet, and not in this situation. (Author’s Journal, 9th June 2010)*

It is said that scientific objectivity requires good observational access to the environment of research with a third-person perspective of the studied phenomena. As Jack and Roepstorff so aptly put it:

… the moment we conceive of an experimental paradigm, through piloting and refinement, to the interpretation of results, we are guided by considerations of our own experience and the experiences we attribute to others, understood by proxy to our own. (Jack and Roepstorff in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.18)

There is no such thing as a pure third-person perspective – “there is no view from nowhere” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.19), or as Thompson states – “Mental events do not occur in a vacuum; they are lived by someone.” He also suggests that:

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30 *Gaeilge* – “Breandán is always right!”
Phenomenology is anchored to the careful description, analysis, and interpretation of lived experience. (Thompson in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.19)

In *The Phenomenological Mind* Gallagher and Zahavi state that ordinary science operates:

… on the basis of a tacit belief in the existence of a mind-, experience-, and theory-independent reality. Reality is assumed to be out there, waiting to be discovered and investigated. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.22)

Husserl suggests that this “natural attitude”, as he termed it, is fundamental, and deep-rooted, not only within the positive sciences, but in our daily pre-theoretical life.

*As I sit back to critique a performance of an excerpt of the ‘Rite’ (Spring Rounds/Ritual of the Two Rival Tribes/Procession of the Oldest and Wisest One) that the dancers from the MA programme and I performed at the end of semester performance, I am struck by the realisation that they couldn’t be seeing it the same way as I do. The recording is dark and grainy and although the camera person did a good enough job of keeping us in shot all the time, much of what I want to come across in the piece seems to be absent – although, that is not entirely the case either. Some of the dancers are doing exactly as I want. Some are making mistakes, jumping on to the next section of the piece far too soon, and I am definitely one of the culprits in this case. Some are much stronger dancers than others, and it is clear that the weaker dancers are just doing their best to get through the piece without messing up too often. I also reflect on the fact that it is just a work-in-progress. Completing a 6-minute piece in the small number of hours available is a tall order. But that all said – I am quite happy with what it is. The dark grittiness of the recording adds to the mood and tone of the piece. In some cases the vacuous focus of the terrifi ed weaker dancers it exactly the visceral effect I want. Naturally, I see sections that I know I should change, but it is fairly complete as it is. But, it is how those around me are seeing it differently from me that is what I suddenly find so striking. And at least they performed in it! What if I presented this as work-in-progress to an art’s funding organi-sation? How would they ever see potential, making it worthy of financial support? Yet I know, or certainly believe, that if I were to polish the piece – spending the required hours on making it tight – ensuring that all dancers had the piece in their bones – and invited
people to experience it live – I know, or certainly believe the experience of the observer would be monumentally different, even though it would be exactly the same material. To me, intrinsic in the piece is its essence ... its purpose ... it is what it is. But that will not be the case for others – that is certainly going to change simply due to context. (Author’s Journal, 25th January 2011)

Husserl insists that it is important to delve into the experiential dimension of a subject and reveal their cognitive contribution, rather than simply focusing in a selective fashion on the objects of knowledge. He believed that science had practically ignored this contribution. We should adopt the “epoché”, a position Husserl coined in which we suspend our natural realistic inclination – the moment where all judgments and actions of the external world are suspended. The epoché entails a change of attitude towards reality – and not the exclusion of reality. The only thing that is excluded is naivety:

... the naivety of simply taking the world for granted, thereby ignoring the contribution of consciousness. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.23)

i.e. the contribution of consciousness should not be ignored. According to phenomenologists, consciousness is our only access to the world. Consciousness is world-disclosing.

As Husserl writes:

[T]he objects of which we are “conscious”, are not simply in consciousness as in a box, so that they can merely be found in it and snatched at in it; ... they are first constituted as being, what they are for us, and as what they count as for us, in varying forms of objective intention (Husserl in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.24)

So although scientific objectivity is a noble goal, it always depends on the observations and experiences of individuals. To then assume that science provides us with an absolute description of reality, that it “mirrors the way in which nature classifies itself” is in phenomenology an illusion (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.41). Metaphysical realism argues that “there is a clear distinction to be drawn between the properties things have ‘in themselves’ and the properties which are ‘projected by us’” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.40). But when two or more first person perspectives coalesce an intersubjective account of the observed object or phenomena is created/agreed.
Phenomena

So what is this phenomena? Phenomena is often assumed to be a smoke-screen or a veneer of sorts, behind which the reality of object hides. Gallagher and Zahavi put it as follows:

... the phenomenon is understood as the immediate ‘givenness’ of the object, how it appears to us, how it apparently is. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.21)

and that

... the reality of the object is not to be located behind its appearance … It is the distinction between how objects appear in the best of circumstances, be it in practical use or in the light of extensive scientific investigations. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, pp.21-22)

As I delve into the world of phenomenological philosophy I realise that I no longer care as much about what the object is in terms of physical content and make up ... in chemical composition, how heavy or light the thing is or what the colour is. And in terms of the art, or the dances, or the movements – what seems to matter more now is what they do for me ... what they mean for me “how they appear, and thus as correlates of our experience” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.25). It is clear that, in a way, it really doesn’t matter what they are in themselves but the impact they have on me or on others, and that simply comes down to how we are manufactured to experience them. When they are presented to us as works of art, many outcomes are possible. The cynic in me thinks “Says who!” The Lacanian subject in me says “Pay attention, you may learn something!” In the absence of the ‘O’ther, what would my opinion be? What would I intend on the object? (Author’s Journal, 27th January 2011)

Intentionality

The term intentionality, originally introduced by Bentham with the purpose of differentiating between acts that are intentional and those that are not, was later to be adopted by Husserl. He stated that consciousness is always intentional, and defined intentionality as the “aboutness” of an object. He believed that intentionality was the thoughts, beliefs, desires, hopes, etc., deliberately and purposively directed towards some object:
This is the idea that experience, whether it is perception, memory, imagination, judgment, belief, etc., is always directed to some object. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.11)

Pre-Reflective Awareness

We are aware of what we experience without using introspection precisely because we have an implicit, non-objectifying, pre-reflective awareness of our own experience as we live it through. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.15)

It’s cold as I get into my car – the 13-year old banger – it is only 6:30 and very few lights have come on in the neighbours’ houses. I have so much to do once I get to the University. I leave my drive and find myself on the canal road leading to the ‘Red Cow’ interchange. I think of the list of tasks I’ve made for myself. There is very little on the roads, and I don’t sit for very long at junctions. I’m on the M7. I need to get that book out of the library while I’m in Limerick. It would be great if I could get this project with Declan off the ground. I must find time to discuss it with him. Our get-togethers over pints can be very creative ... Before I know it I’m pulling into the university car park. Where did those 2 hours go?! (Author’s Journal, 27th January 2011)

Armstrong spoke of the “long distance truck driver” problem (Armstrong in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.45) – this typical episode of completing an activity with no real recollection of it – activities which clearly need some sort of consciousness, and in some cases, activities which can be very involved.

Sometimes in the studio, as I improvise to create dance vocabulary and motifs to develop ... when I am in a state of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi), I feel like that “long distance truck drive”. Reviewing the material subsequently I almost don’t recognise myself and find it hard to believe that the material emerging is mine. (Author’s Journal, 27th January 2011)

Almost all experts in the field of phenomenology accept that a constant feature of our conscious experience is some degree of self-consciousness. The experience for the experiencing subject is a first-personal givenness, very much a ‘my experience’, described as a ‘pre-reflective’ self-consciousness. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, pp.45-46)
... self-consciousness must be understood as an intrinsic feature of the primary experience. Moreover, it is not thematic or attentive or voluntarily brought about; rather it is tacit, and very importantly, thoroughly non-observational (that is, it is not a kind of introspective observation of myself) and non-objectifying (that is, it does not turn my experience into a perceived or observed object) ... The experience was already present to me, it was already something for me, and in that sense it counts as being pre-reflectively conscious. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.46)

Self-consciousness is not just something that comes about when one “scrutinises one’s experience attentively” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.49) but exists in many different forms and to varying degrees. We can speak of being self-conscious when we perceive an object, because in that perception we are not only acquainted with the perceptual object, but also the experience of the object:

In its most primitive and fundamental form, self-consciousness is simply a question of the ongoing first-person manifestation of experiential life. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.49)

Gallagher and Zahavi speak of one’s experiential life involving “a primitive form of self-referentiality” or “for-me-ness” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.49), and this for-me-ness/mineness/Meinheit should not be considered in contrast to the experience of others:

It doesn’t refer to a specific content of experience, to a specific what, but to the unique mode of givenness or how of experience. It refers to the first-personal givenness of experience; it refers to the fact that experiences I am living through present themselves differently (but not necessarily better) to me than to anybody else. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.50)

*It seems to me that the world we access is an averaging of a series of 1st person intersubjective ‘experiencing’ of that world. An averaging, if you like, of each subject’s experiencing of those objects. What follows is anomalising to the left and right ... none of us sit directly on the average. Locating that ‘fence’ helps those who want to stand out in the crowd, stand out, and those who don’t, not stand out. (Author’s Journal, 7th January 2011)*

Phenomenologists suggest that in many cases, our experiences go unnoticed by us, or are unattended experiences. They also suggest that to consciously experience an object or phenomena we must first be acquainted with that experience. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.55)
I’ve always wondered why it is we like what we like? Why is it that we end up having a specific taste in music, in food, in clothing?

There is something significant in the way that it is possible to compartmentalise what it is we like. It’s not just the satisfaction in the experiencing of the object/event/emotion, but the fact that we are drawn to repeats, likenesses, samenesses in things. It is as if we are somehow already acquainted with a response and the stimuli responsible for that response can be categorised for each of us … individualised ticking-of-boxes that makes those objects satisfying for us. In music, I think we respond well to riffs and motifs and collections of notes … or moves and steps in dance … or words, in the case of poetry, lyrics and prose, that we have learned to love, ensuring a warm, captivating experience of engaging with it. It is as if there is a nostalgic attachment with whatever it is. Is this why we return to the same musicians and singers and dancers and poets and writers?

But what if something is brand new? What if a writer wrote a new play – never produced before? Where does my argument fit here? Perhaps, because we can say that an artist has a ‘style’, a signature, that although I may not know what to expect or what is coming next, there is a part of me, so intimately involved with the artist’s process/style/approach that it is almost familiar. So it may not seem so brand new. Maybe, the earlier engagements brings you intimately close to the contributor that they seem like ‘family’ – that you care for what they do because they somehow belong to you, like a sibling, an off-spring or a parent. Or maybe you just put that artist on a pedestal – s/he can do no wrong in your eyes...

I often find myself a little on edge and irritable when listening to a favourite recording artist’s new album. I just need to get over the first hearing – to get it out of the way so that I can get on with enjoying what it is I like about what they do. And then it is the hearing over and over again that I enjoy most – finding new depths in the recordings each time I listen. (Author’s Journal, 25th January 2011)

Receptivity involves responding to something that is passively affecting me; it presupposes a prior affection. Affection concerns affect and the feeling of being influenced or perturbed. In perception, whatever becomes noticeable to you must already have been affecting you; it must have pre-established an affective force that manifests itself as it captures your attention. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.100)
It is also interesting that in phenomenology, the term representation is used in a novel and unique fashion. There is a tendency to put the emphasis on the first syllable – that an object or phenomenon ‘re’ presents itself when it is represented. (Author’s Journal, 27th January 2011)

Optimal Giveness

Optimal giveness, according to Husserl, is the amount of giveness that provides as much information as is discriminately possible (Husserl 1966a/2001, p.205). But as Damasio points out, although we may describe what we see and agree it to be the same, much remains a mystery:

When you and I look at an object outside ourselves, we form comparable images in our respective brains. We know this well because you and I can describe the object in very similar ways, down to fine details. But that does not mean that the image we see is the copy of whatever the object outside is like. Whatever it is like, in absolute terms, we do not know. (Damasio in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.93)

So, what can we say happens when we engage with the world? Merleau-Ponty suggests that with every judgement we make and with every perception we have we include sensory faculties and a cultural positioning that do not belong to us. He argues that as we view the world, a function of our own consciousness, we observe the behaviours of others intending upon that world, therefore presenting a world, no longer only a function of our consciousness, but of any consciousness we could encounter. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.338 & 385). As Sartre so powerfully puts it:

Thus suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting. (Sartre in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p103)

From the moment we arrive on earth we perceive things in a joint fashion – others are present from the beginning – we perceive things in joint attention. Even when the other is absent, they do not cease to inflict on my perceptions – “they are potentially and implicitly involved in the very structure of my perception.” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.103)
My story is awaiting me, already created by those who came before me. The part I play is how this story unfolds as I select, choose, decide – but I am always part of a larger picture – one with a history and a structure which is meaning-laden and communal. But how we got here reminds me of Schrödinger’s cat, and makes me wonder about the infinite number of alternative stories that could have awaited me on my arrival. I also think about the stories I give life to and the infinite number of others that don’t make it on this journey.

So in terms of what is deemed fit – there is much (perhaps wonderfully satisfying objects/experiences/stuff) that didn’t quite make it. Maybe once my first-personal conviction is strong enough to cause a shift, a move towards a meaning-giving source is possible, which is mine, but which we can all share in. (Author’s Journal, 15th December 2010)

I often think about how languages are taught, or even how we learn language for the first time. We are expected to understand new words ‘in context’ of the sentence. So our understanding of most words is directly linked to a very unique context. (Author’s Journal, 15th December 2010)

… in the midst of this world already provided with meaning, I meet with a meaning which is mine and which I have not given to myself, which I discover that I “possess already” (Sartre in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.169)

**The Other – Knowing the Other / Being the Other / Understanding the Other**

In the contemporary theory of mind debate, here are two schools of thought around how it is we understand others – theory theory (TT) and simulation theory (ST). With theory theory, a theoretical viewpoint is adopted such as folk psychology, which provides an insight into why it is people behave the way they do. In terms of simulation theory, we gain our understanding of the other by placing ourselves ‘in their shoes’, simulating their beliefs, emotions or desires in ourselves and projecting this outcome onto them. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.172)

As I create my choreography, a gesture or movement strikes me as powerful in that the actual act of making that gesture arouses a sensation or mood or emotion in me. My belief is that, if the piece of work is to be accurately interpreted by the ensemble of
dancers, it needs to be properly executed physically, but in addition there needs to be some deeper verbal explanation and elaboration by me, as well as a general open discussion by the group. Only now is there some hope of the ensemble having a similar emotional response to the gesture – rather than just imitating the physical outward manifestation of the gesture. (Author’s Journal, 7th May 2009)

Gallagher and Zahavi pose the questions – “When we project ourselves imaginatively into the perspective of the other, when we put ourselves in his or her shoes, will we then really attain an understanding of the other or will we merely be reiterating ourselves?” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.177)

According to Ryle this ignores the diversity of the actions of others’ actions:

If I project the results of my own simulation on to the other, I understand only myself in that other situation, but I don’t necessarily understand the other. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.177)

So it would seem that simulation will only let us understand ourselves in a different situation and never enable a accurate understanding of the other.

Recent neuro-scientific research supports the view that as we encounter an other, our motor system reverberates or resonates with that other. According to Rizzolatti et al., mirror neurons in the human brain are activated when we either engage in actions or observe those intentional actions of others (Rizzolatti et al. 1996, 2000 in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008). Grèzes and Decety (2001) list the following to cause similar brain activations:

… engagement in an intentional action; observing an other engaged in that action; imagining oneself or another engaged in that action; and as one prepares to imitate the action of another. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p. 177)
Gallese’s claim sums it up:

Whenever we are looking at someone performing an action, besides the activation of various visual areas, there is a concurrent activation of the motor circuits that are recruited when we ourselves perform that action … Our motor system becomes active as if we were executing the very same action that we are observing … Action observation implies action simulation … our motor system starts to covertly simulate the actions of the observed agent. (Gallese in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.178)

So the only mind that we have direct access to is our own, and our only access to the mind of the other is mediated by his/her bodily behaviour. We can infer by analogy some knowledge about the other, but this knowledge is not exhaustive and does not allow us to actually experience that mind.

**Empathy**

The phenomenological mode of consciousness known as ‘empathy’ can be defined as:

… a form of intentionality in which one is directed towards the other’s lived experiences.

(Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.183)

A body is given to us not only by the actions and expressions of the body, but in a context that is meaningful:

In empathy, we experience the other directly as a person, as an intentional being whose bodily gestures and actions are expressive of his or her experiences or states of mind

(Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.183)

Since we accept the notion of intersubjectivity, Merleau-Ponty suggests that there must therefore exist a link or connection between being self-acquainted and ones acquaintance with the other – “my own experience of my own subjectivity must contain an anticipation of the other”

(Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 353, 448).

The mind is revealed to us in expressive behaviours and I agree with Gallagher & Zahavi who write of the belief that:

… to understand other persons I do not primarily have to get into their minds; rather, I have to pay attention to the world that I already share with them.” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.191)
Lacan

… the Other becomes more remote, less directly manipulable, but less terrifying, and the child recognizes the truth of the matter: the Other is ‘out there’ in the wider world, which the child is now more inclined to engage with. (Bailly 2009, p.81)

Lacan had great confidence in teaching using ‘realisation’ rather than ‘information’, believing that if he led his students and followers through this method of realisation, their grasp of a concept would be much deeper, more insightful. This makes the study of his work difficult, and grasping his complex theories extremely challenging. Lacan published few academic papers and Lacanian scholars depend on transcripts of his seminars, a poor substitute for actual attendance.

An advocate of Saussarian linguistics, Lacan realised that patients attached an emotional load to signifiers, the sound/acoustic image making more of an impression on our senses rather than the signified. This led to an important maxim for Lacan, in that humans are largely oblivious to their own Subject, which he defined as identity. One thinks of one’s identity as that which one wishes to say about oneself – Lacan refers to this as ego:

Lacan’s Subject is composed of and revealed by signifiers, which it utters without knowing what they mean. (Bailly 2009, p.29)

*I like to parallel the Lacanian Subject and the concept of Habitus ... that the habitus is the physical embodiment of true identity. This identity that reveals itself “in dreams, the unsuccessful/self-defeating acts, the slips of the tongue” (Bailly 2009, p. 42) (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)*

This development of ego takes place in a child at what Lacan refers to as the “Mirror Stage” and is crucial for the development of identity:

The mother’s gaze is the child’s first mirror; the child’s identity or notion of itself as a whole being is first formed in that gaze; it is a narcissistic manoeuvre that underpins the development of identity. (Bailly 2009, p.37)

Central to Lacan’s thinking is this concept of ‘otherness’. The ‘O’ther (capital O) is a mysterious force which is ‘out there’, ahead of us at our birth, informing how it is we should see the world.
Lacan’s approach to the Other is a useful point of departure in situating desire and envy as part of my research argument:

Wanting or desire is born in envy of the perfection of the image in the mirror or of the mirroring response of the parents; the lack is permanent, since there will always be a distance between the subjective experience of a lack in our existence and the image in the mirror, or the apparent wholeness of others. (Knorr Cetina 2001, p. 185; see also Lacan and Wilden 1968, Alford 1991)

We live this life with a continuous awareness of the apparent wholeness of the ‘O’ther. It is that which took ‘Mother’ from us. ‘Le petit autre’ – lower case ‘o’ other, derived from the “Mirror Stage” is not a real other, but the reflection and projection of the ego. Eventually there is the realisation of all other people being ‘little others’.

Lacan spoke of the lower case ‘o’ other as being those around us who seem fully formed and three dimensional; un-fragmented, beginning with our own image in the mirror. The capital ‘O’ Other in Lacanian psychoanalysis refers to Society, Law, and even language:

The Other is Society, the Law, etc. – the whole set of hypotheses within which the Subject is constituted – it is an illustration of the fact that the Subject is part of an order which predates its birth and is exterior to the self. This order is symbolic, and because its most elaborate and influential manifestation is language, the Other is sometimes used to designate language itself. (Bailly 2009, p.66)

Our perception of the omnipotence of the other causes continual feelings in us of fragmentation in comparison.

Naturally, it is not the same for all people – we all envy differently. But in the ‘best’ of circumstances, the ‘right’ group dynamic experience the perfection and wholeness of a chosen ‘other’ – that other being accepted as the contributor and possessor of the ‘real’ stuff ... the ‘stuff’ of worth, of value, of ‘universal truth’. (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)

The Lacanian Subject exists in the discourse of the Other. Before a baby is born, parents talk of it, their hopes and dreams for it, creating it before it comes into the world. This they formulate from their own Subjects and unconsciousness within the Other. In other words, in acquiring language
from the mother, the child acquires her attitudes, opinions, rules, and assumptions – the whole Other of the mother:

Language pre-existed the child, and the child’s parents; it is a lexicon of words and a rule-book handed down over the millennia. It was created by humankind and is the primary form in which the human subject experiences the human-ness of Society. The psycho-analyst, listening to the speech of the Subject upon the couch, hears this Other discourse. It is not a discourse that the Subject intends, but that it cannot help but produce; it is obvious in the unintended emergence of repressed signifiers, be they slips of the tongue, in dreams, or in pathological symptoms. (Bailly 2009, p.66)

Lacan speaks of the “Lacanian Phallus” as that which we reach for, that which we aspire to possess. It is “a representation or image of potency” (Bailly 2009, p.75) that the ‘O’ther has and that we desire to be our own, something we want to claim. When the Subject makes a demand, this signals a lack the Subject experiences and expects the Other to satisfy; however what is demanded is never what is actually needed, and it is in this space, between what is needed and what is demanded, that desire is borne. The Subject assumes that the Other has what it needs, but the Other is as lacking as the Subject. Lacan’s understanding of desire is as follows:

… a condition that plays a structuring role in the Subject; it is a component of other affects – without desire, you cannot have jealousy, anger, disappointment, narcissistic wounding, or enjoyment (Bailly 2009, p.110)

The Other is first of all language and the set of rules that govern the Subject, but it is also represented by individuals. (Bailly 2009, p.111)

Later the Subject will encounter other Others (initially it is the mother, followed by father at castration). These other Others will be embodied by the Subject’s peer group for example:

As the Subject is moulded by the discourse of the Other, it will fabricate, out of all these Others, its own version of the Other and its own authentic desire, and it is this above all that is the prize in its quest for self-determination. (Bailly 2009, p.111)

*At times a separate group of ‘others’ will wish, and be willing to invest in the perfection and wholeness of yet another ‘other’ – different from the first – and to them, this ‘stuff’ is the ultimate ‘truth’.*
It seems that politics now plays a role. The other with the loudest voice, the voice of authority – however this was originally bestowed upon them – holds the position of power and influence. Groups now shift position, reconsider, realign to another set of values. Are there only two real groups? … those who experience envy and subsequently mimic; they wish and attempt to embody that glorious ‘other’ – and then there are those, the second group, whose tact is to reject this assumed perfection of that other and live with an internal struggle of denial?

We all just want everyone to see the world as we see it. (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)

Section Three – Habitus

Schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and taste are some of the key terms associated with habitus.

In Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977) Bourdieu defined habitus as:

… systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules (Bourdieu 1977, p.72)

My Habitus

When I dance in an unengaged way in the studio, I don’t like to scrutinize my movements. I don’t want to think with my mind about what to do next or judge what I have just done. When I manage to disengage, it is as if the music wafts through the air like the wavy lines common in childish comics, visible and representing the undulations of sonic or musical motifs, with the ability to act to physically lift me to create movement, almost like a marionette, without my intentional or cognitive input. When the moment is right, the dance makes itself – I’m just the vessel. (Author’s Journal, 14th December)

Seventeen years of competition culture, nine years in the commercial Riverdance world and a soupçon of other dance disciplines, such as modern, classical, jazz, Latin and various folk dance styles make up the complement of dance knowledge in my habitus.
Cameron-Dalman states that in western culture the image of the dancer is:

... of agelessness, of continually having a brilliant technique and youthful agility. Therefore, after about the age of thirty-five, the dancer has to confront not only the natural thresholds of age but also the social pressures of our culture, in particular the pressures within the dance culture. (Cameron-Dalman 1996, p.33)

With age, I find some of the rules of good Irish dance execution – well placed and crossed feet, erect posture etc. – less vital in my choreography, although, as I have mentioned earlier, these make up the essence of a good Irish dancer (see de Gallai 2007). Schwaiger’s discussions with aging dancers reveals that with the reduction of physical capacity comes a new and important set of qualities which are valued more highly than technical ability and virtuosity, such as:

... a more integrated physical-emotional-spiritual approach to dancing ... and an ability to focus on performance and audience ... (Schwaiger 2005a, p.111)

This becomes more prominent with age, resulting in emotional maturity and increased self-confidence. The consequence of aging has also influenced my choreography.

**Agency**

Finding oneself in a studio, warming up, tying dancing shoes and turning on the stereo is an intentional act requiring decisive deliberation. Being in the moment and attempting to unconsciously make dance is not the work of an automaton. Indeed, a situation where one suddenly finds oneself in a studio preparing to dance is something that would happen in pathological fugue states or in epileptic automatism. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.159)

Our understanding of agency is as follows: we consider agency to be actions caused by an agent when that agent has some consciousness of intentionally causing those actions. It is also true to say that a person responsible for an action that they did not intentionally cause is not considered to be an agent. That said, one can say that there are different degrees of agency – a very high order where there exists an explicit consciousness of an action, and other times when the awareness is thin and pre-reflective. Gallagher and Zahavi put it as follows:
In its proper sense, we understand agency to depend on the agent’s consciousness of agency. That is, if someone intentionally causes something to happen, that person is not an agent (even if they are a cause) if they do not know that they have intentionally caused it to happen. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.158)

and

The kind of conscious knowledge involved in agency does not have to be of a very high order; it could be simply a matter of a very thin, pre-reflective awareness … (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.158)

For example, if I walked towards the bus stop and suddenly saw the bus coming, I might start to run to catch the bus, but without making a clear decision to do so. One might say that “I decided with my feet”, as in, the decision was in the action, not something separate from it, what Searle calls “intention-in-action”. (Searle in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.159)

When we get up off our chair, move towards the door and set off out to do the shopping/go to the gym/head into work, we are unlikely to be thinking of our legs moving, our feet on the floor, or the keys going into the ignition. We do not necessarily attend to every movement. We have a pre-reflective sense, but our minds might be elsewhere – “I need to get this chapter started today at college”. Gallagher and Zahavi talk about this pre-reflective awareness as being “… recessive and rather vague, in a sense that it does not involve attention.” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.159) An intention to act corresponds to an employment of the will, but being involved with an intentional action does not necessarily imply a comparable level of employment to that in which I am parsing an action.

**Making Work from My Habitus**

I would argue that the Irish step dance tradition has been invented, and indeed capable of being reinvented (Hobsbawm). A particular reinvention will persist, I believe, if the tradition holders’ experience it in a satisfying political, cultural, temporal light, its capacity to remain in the tradition a function of a positive phenomenological engagement with the work. With this in mind, I choose my starting point to be an ‘honest’ representation of my baseline aesthetic sense. Wulff suggests:
To the many uses of the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) belongs the insight that the practice of dancing reveals dispositions, i.e. perceptions and actions that are being inscribed in a dancer’s body. Such dispositions consequently have an impact on the dancing as well as on the social life of dancers, but also on dancers’ movement patterns outside dancing (cf. Wulff 1998: Wainright and Turner 2003). (Wulff 2007, p.46)

If I approach my dance in a reflexive manner, my point of departure must be to allow the ‘truth’ to surface; to refuse to edit too soon, preventing the wilful ego, so politically motivated, to interfere with what may emerge. At least I can argue that what it is is real, not cleverly thought through by monitoring the world around me to satisfy the ‘O’ther. It is innovative in that it is authentically me, giving mankind a sneaky look at the world through my lens, sharpening their focus on what is revealed as art to me in terms of my perception.

_I want to create my dance out of the Subject – at the pre-reflective self-conscious state, reflecting and making critical aesthetic choices at a later stage._ (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)

**Section Four – Performance / Practice**

This section of the chapter introduces the contemporary thinking surrounding the concepts of practice and performance. It also discusses my research approach, and how it has been influenced by my understanding of these disputed terms.

**Performance**

If the diversity of human culture continually showed a persistent theatricality, could performance be a universal expression of human signification, akin to language? (Herbert Blau in Phelan 1998, p.3)

In keeping with many of the methods and concepts discussed in this thesis, “Performance is an essentially contested concept” (Strine, Long and Hopkins 1990). Although there is much disagreement and there are many differences in the struggle to define performance, Conquergood reminds us that disagreements are not negative things and seek to provide a “fuller understanding of the conceptual richness of performance” (Strine, Long and Hopkins 1990, p. 183). Indeed Schechner states that “there is no finality to performance studies, either theoretically or operationally” and
that “anything can be studied ‘as’ performance” (Schechner 2003, p.1). But just as he asserts that “values are a function of culture, groups, and individuals”, and that his values and his understanding of performance as a field of scholarship is that of “one particular person in the eighth decade of his life” (Schechner 2003, p.1), there is quite a different approach, which is quite at odds with Schechner’s view on this; this approach exists in the European side of the Atlantic, and particularly in the United Kingdom. Susan Melrose and many like her in the UK, amazed at the rapidly changing face of university education as the numbers engaging in higher degrees in music, dance, theatre and performing arts increased, felt as a matter of urgency the need for a scholarly engagement with performance and practice. They advocated a shift from the focus of away from the older knowledge-based models as a way of allowing engagement with the swiftly changing college landscape. Crucially, their understanding of performance and practice is that of “disciplinary mastery and expertise in performance-making” (http://www.sfmelrose.u-net.com/), a sub-set of the Schechnerian model, leading to quite a difference of opinion on what is worthy of study.

Critics exist on Schechner’s own turf, and a spate of tit-for-tat articles in the late 1980s made for revealing reading31, a debate to which I owe the conviction of my own allegiances. In the article, Performance Studies: The Broad Specturm Approach 1988, Schechner, through impressions attained traveling through India and China, noticed a search similar to his own experience in the US. In the paper he acknowledged the continued importance of professionals in the field of arts and entertainment, but he stated that:

… as distinct from any of its subgenres like theatre, dance, music, and performance art – is a broad spectrum of activities including at the very least the performing arts, rituals, healing, sports, popular entertainments, and performance in everyday life (Schechner 1988, p.4).

He argued that the time was ripe for treating performative behaviour, regardless of whether it is the performing arts or not, as a subject for serious scholarly study. He believed in the reconstruction of performing arts departments in terms of curricula and the ending of the academic’s “bitter resistance” that was suppressing any point of view that judged performance outside the confines of western theatre/concert traditions (Schechner 1988). Marranca and Dasgupta, editors

31 Marranca and Dasgupta, Performing Arts Journal
of PAJ (Performing Arts Journal) at the time, met this thesis with extreme resistance (Marranca and Dasgupta 1989). Their disappointment and disgust provoked a retort that was tantamount to snobbery and ethnocentricism, revealing a western high-art notion of artistic endeavour, which could be used to exclude all performance but the legacy of aristocratic sensibilities:

… his approach shifts performance to the realm of the social sciences, rather than that of art … Schnechner offers no secure place for the dramatic text in his ‘broad spectrum’ of things. Like it or not, the main purpose of theatre is founded on the staging of texts, just as the main purpose of the music world is to acknowledge the playing and singing of musical texts (Marranca and Dasgupta 1989, p.5).

It would seem that these editors of PAJ buy into a “realm of art”, which is in the words of Schechner, “an elitist cover-up for making art (both works and artists) into consumer objects and capitalist fetishes” (Schechner 1988, p.8).

He also points out that:

Theatre and dance are especially vulnerable because their “products” are evanescent, what people do, labour if you will, with no residual object financially appreciating in the attic of its possessor. (Schechner 1988, p.4).

Considering the challenges I face with ‘contemporary’ Irish dance and the difficulty in finding support, performance platforms, and indeed the acceptance of the various dance communities, the Schechnerian performance model seems to legitimize my view of dance presentation.

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman (1959) claims that performing is a mode of behaviour that may characterise any activity. Schechner thus speaks of performance as a “quality” that is something that can happen in any situation, not just a “fenced off” genre. John Cage has argued that all that is necessary is to “frame” an activity “as” performance in order to make it so (Cage in Schechner 2003, p.22).

Not only are programmes such as the NYU performance studies model often on the edge of academic society, they are also in contest and struggling with other performance schools of thought. The “critical mastery” approach to performance has within it the potential of deeming all but western art music/theatre/dance irrelevant, not satisfying the criteria of fastidious taste, in their ‘less-than-broad’ spectrum understanding of the nature of performance.
In terms of dance, a common western notion of what it is to be artistically perfect can be revealed in Levinson’s musings on a transcendent form of art.

Levinson, in 1925 said:

… the constant transfiguration … of the classic dancer from the ordinary to the ideal is the result of a disinterested will for perfection, an unquenchable thirst to surpass himself. Thus it is that an exalted aim transforms his mechanical efforts into an aesthetic phenomenon (‘The Spirit of the Classic Dance’, in André Levinson on Dance 1925, p. 48).

Notice the gender imbalance as well as perhaps the suggestion of the absence of artistry that may be located outside the ‘royal’ ballet theatre.

What is my fascination with using other musics other than Irish traditional music in my process of making work? And why so much Stravinsky? I have written extensively around this topic in my MA thesis and I claim that my choices lend themselves better to the movement system that is emanating from my Irish dancing body … that when I improvise to regular Irish music, what emerges from my habitus is normal Irish dance vocabulary, but when I consider other musical choices, novel ideas surface. But there is a small part of me that worries that, subconsciously, using music that I consider to be acceptable, or cool, or of a higher order, is perhaps a way of looking for acceptance from those who search for “transcendent forms of art” – those with a powerful and influential status. They are not my peers, but it is as if I am looking for their approval, as a way of legitimising my work. (Author’s Journal, 12th November 2009).

Practice

When naming the “primary generic social thing”, that is to say the “structures”, “meaning”, “life world”, “events”, and “actions”, theorists of today would include, with the same measure of importance, “practices”. Impulses from within the community of philosophical practice thinkers (Wittgenstein 1958, Dreyfus 1991, Taylor 1985: part one in Schatzki 2001); the social theorist (Bourdieu 1977 & 1990, Giddens 1979, 1984 in Schatzki 2001); the ethnomethodologists (Lynch 1993 in Schatzki 2001); the cultural theorists (Foucault 1976, 1980, Lyotard 1984, 1988 in Schatzki 2001); as well as the practice theoretical study of science and technology (Rouse 1996b;
Pickering 1995a in Schatzki 2001); are attempts to move current ways of thinking of practices, and to free it from the old school approach of objectified social structures and systems. Given the diversity of subjects, motivations and differences, it is not surprising that there is no unified approach to practice (Schatzki 2001). “Arrays of human activity” (Schatzki 2001, p.2) is how most theorists refer to practices, Turner (1994) and Dreyfus (1991) among others defining them as “skills, or tacit knowledges and presuppositions, that underpin activities” (Turner 1994; Dreyfus 1991; in Schatzki 2001, p.2). But what is generally understood by practice theorists is that practices are embodied human activity, “materially mediated” and “centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (Schatzki 2001, p.2). Here they place an emphasis on the character of human body and how these forms of activities are entwined with it. The highlighting of embodiment by practice theorists points to the belief that “bodies and activities are ‘constituted’ within practices” (Schatzki 2001, p.2).

The beauty of practice and its relevantly recent acceptance into contemporary academic culture is its anti-Cartesianism. The traditional view that allowing the body to infiltrate reflection and research can ‘taint’ or ‘contaminate’ the work, leaving the results not a ‘truth’ and in some way less than valid, is slowing changing. As Bryson puts it in his paper on perspective painting, “style” was seen as the “residue of the body” betraying itself, sullying the Truth, one’s corporeal self being theoretically and morally wrong (Bryson in Schatzki 2001).

Practice theories embrace “embodied cognitive capacities”, and embodied understanding is the recognition “that the body is the meeting points both of mind and activity and of individual activity and social manifold” (Schatzki 2001, p.8).

Practice theorists claim, instead, that practices are the source and carrier of meaning, language, and normativity (Schatzki 2001, p.12).

Bourdieu’s understanding of practices as self-organising and self-propagating multiples of activity, and his notion of habitus (practical understanding) – the human body being a point of connection between the individual and the social (Bourdieu 1977) – is a point of departure for me and my creative work. Allowing the movement system to emerge from my habitus in an unself-conscious way, the performance of my practice will unleash, not only a method of working, but also the theories I am exploring and questions I am researching.
Aristotle had a more fluid view of art to that of Plato’s crystalline form. He believed that art imitated action, and not so much things or experience. Art, he believed imitated “patterns, rhythms and developments”, and that, like nature, things are born, they grow, flourish and decline:

Everything has its own life-plan, its own “indwelling form”. It is this form which art imitates (Schechner 2003, pp. 28-29).

This is how I understand my process: the first insight – that ‘eureka’ moment – is when the tiniest kernel of an idea is brought into being. Contained within that is its “fulfillment” – the intrinsic requirements of the artistic creative completion and performance; it is my job to facilitate its realisation:

the artwork makes its own demands in accord with its indwelling form or action (Schechner 2003, p. 29)

Schechner argues that “[M]aking art is the process of transforming raw experience into palatable forms” (Schechner 2003, p. 30). He makes the analogy that life is the raw food and art is the cooked form. In my own opinion, the rawness of life is often played down and performed with a blind eye turned to its cruel reality, a way of protecting the young, weak and vulnerable. In my second performance presentation, some of the harsh realities at play in everyday life are explored by exaggerating events, framing them in a way that illuminates and illustrates the phantasmagoria of barbarism which is intrinsic to the human condition.

You must now go home, where everything – you can be quite sure – will be even falser than here. (Speech by Irma in “Le Balcon”, Jean Genet, 1957)
Chapter Summary

The third chapter of my doctoral thesis introduced the contextual and theoretical points of departure underpinning my practice-based research.

Traditional Irish step dancing was discussed in the context of its history, its stylistic attributes, and the factors affecting its evolution over the last century.

Philosophical viewpoints were introduced and discussed which form the thrust of the research concern. Phenomenology elucidates our understanding of how we embrace and consume the aesthetic world around us, whilst Lacanian psychoanalysis is used as a way of understanding identity, the wider community around us and how these affect our formation as creative individuals.

The making of work is central to this thesis. To that end, the concept of habitus is discussed as it underpins my creative departure point.

Finally the concepts of performance and practice were introduced. The Schnecherian broad-spectrum view of performance was discussed, as was my understanding of this contested term. I explored why my practice aligns with this model, and how it influences my approach to my own research. Practice is embraced for its anti-Cartesianism, welcoming the virtues of allowing the body to ‘taint’ the art.
Chapter 4

Noctú: Bare, Strip, Uncover – Liberating the Dance

Introduction

This chapter addresses the practice-based work associated with the creation of two new choreographic works as part of my PhD Arts Practice research doctorate. Its main focus will be on the first choreographic work, Noctú. Rite of Spring, the second choreographic work, will be discussed and examined in detail in Chapter 5.

By way of introduction to the practice-based strand, Section One of this chapter gives a general background to how both dance works came into being and to the individuals who played a role in effecting this, including those who commissioned the performances, the producers, and the dancers. It highlights elements of chance, and how that was significant to the life of the work, which was one of the outcomes of the research. Both works are also introduced and the various performances of each listed.

Section Two acts as backdrop to the work-making process discussing innovation in Irish step dance, my own creative processes, and my vision for a possible contemporary Irish dance signature. I also draw parallels between my plight as a dance-maker and that of the pioneers of the modern and post-modern eras.

Section Three deals exclusively Noctú. It presents the inspiration for the work and discusses the motivation for developing this particular project first as part of the PhD research. There follows a breakdown of the production, detailing the show content, music, and choreography, including the narrative importance of each piece, as well as its historical, social and cultural significance. This will be completed with reference also to the theoretical frameworks introduced in Chapter Three. A general analysis of the entire production of Noctú follows, beginning with
a detailed choreographic analysis of a section of the finale, *UnderWorld*. The choreographic work is discussed in general terms focusing on process, stylistic features, music and the autobiographical nature of the themes. The relational, subjective and transformational dimensions that arose as a result of the research concern were uncovered through ethnographic interviews conducted with the dancers; in turn this highlighted the new forms of expression that emerged, and the impact the work had on the dancers. I conclude by comparing the movement qualities and performance approaches that emerged in *Noctú* with both competition and commercial shows styles of the genre.

Throughout both Chapters Four and Five I include notes from my journal which include ethnographic, autoethnographic, autobiographic, and narrative inquiry voices. These extracts are dappled throughout the formal academic text and are in italics.

I rely heavily on personal memory, and as Chang claims, with autoethnography “you openly acknowledge your personal memory as a primary source of information in your research.” (Chang 2008, p.71)

Chang also writes:

> Personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past. As an autoethnographer, you not only have a privileged access to your past experience and personal interpretations of those experiences, but also have first-hand discernment of what is relevant to your study. What is recalled from the past forms the basis of autoethnographic data. (Chang 2008, p.71)

Artefacts are also included such as excerpts from dance residency and arts funding applications, photographs and programme notes.

Opinions are included of those who shared their thoughts on the work, as well as reviews of those employed to critique the arts and who are published in reputable publications.

Of particular importance to my research is the rich perspective offered by the dancers who make up Ériu Dance Company. In much of the analysis, I let their voice resound as it reflects my own perspective. These voices are denoted by ‘

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Section 1 – The Work, the People, and the Funding

The two major performance works for this PhD were Noctú (2010, 2011) and Rite of Spring (2012).

I chose the studio contributions of the PhD research to be ensemble productions. This inevitably gave rise to a significant cost implication: each dancer incurring a fee, an accommodation cost, and a per diem. Without funding, the making of these ensemble productions would have proven very difficult impacting on the quality of the work. Plan ‘B’ would have been to ask friends to make their time available voluntarily. This would have meant limiting rehearsal time which would have repercussions on what I wished to achieve. Additionally, with no funds to cover production costs such as costumes, lighting and sound design, the presentation would have had a work-in-progress quality rather than the professional industry standard productions I aspired to.

Noctú

Stirling Productions, RTÉ and “Dance Off”

From 2004 – 2008 I undertook casual work as a television presenter for various independent production companies who make shows for networks in Ireland and Britain. My work with Belfast-based independent television production company, Stirling Productions, tended to focus on dance-related documentaries. Anne Stirling (director/owner) approached both RTÉ and TG4 with the idea of documenting the making of my first PhD performance contribution Noctú. RTÉ commissioned a 6-part series, each lasting 30 minutes. The show, Dance Off, was to follow a reality TV / fly-on-the-wall documentary style which meant a television crew would need to record much of what unfolded in pre-production and at the première of the work. This created challenges in terms of getting on with the business of making a stage show, but the injection of funding completely outweighed these challenges, and I could proceed to make a version of Noctú which could be closer to my vision, rather than what might have been at best a work-in-progress with amateurish production values.

32 Teitlís na Gaeilge – Irish language network
Auditions took place in Dublin (7\textsuperscript{th} July 2010), Belfast (10\textsuperscript{th} July 2010) and Aix-en-Provence\textsuperscript{33} (15\textsuperscript{th} July 2010). The 30 successful candidates were then invited to Belfast for a boot-camp which lasted 5 days (Monday 9\textsuperscript{th} – Friday 13\textsuperscript{th} August 2010), with a number of dancers being dismissed each day until, by the Friday, only the final company of 13 dancers remained.

During this period I taught what I considered to be the most challenging numbers in \textit{Noctú} (\textit{Firebird} for example), during this period to ascertain who had the most potential in terms of tackling my new material. The dancers were also asked to create character sketches and to perform them. I was not necessarily looking for the best actors, but for individuals who seemed to demonstrate some personal depth. The boot camp period was particularly challenging as there was a large television production team recording every move, looking for interviews and reactions, and stopping rehearsals to set up shots.

Once boot camp had finished and as we began the rehearsals proper, we saw quite a bit less of the television production crew and could get on with the making of \textit{Noctú}. Although there was money available now to pay the dancers’ costs, studio time, and eventually a design production team for the show, time was limited with only 3 weeks to complete a brand new production.

\textbf{Noctú Performances}

There were three iterations of the production.

\textit{Noctú}, in its original version was staged in 2 acts: Act 1 running 55-minutes and Act 2, 35-minutes. It included monologues, dialogues and short sketches to support a loose narrative. The music was varied including popular songs, classical pieces and some original compositions. It also included some traditional Irish dance music. The most recent version, which played in New York, was a 1-Act, 70-minute show.

\textsuperscript{33} Auditioning in Aix-en-Provence was a Stirling Productions decision. I happened to be teaching an Irish dance workshop in Aix at this audition stage of production and it was felt that, from a visual and television perspective, it would present an alternative landscape to Dublin and Belfast.
To date Noctú has been presented 45 times – the première on September 10th 2010 in Lisburn, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland; 11 performances as part of the Irish national tour which lasted from the 18th April until the 1st of May 2011, that breakdown as follows:

Civic Theatre, Tallaght, Co. Dublin (7 performances); An Grianán, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal; University Concert Hall, Limerick; Siamsa Tíre, Tralee, Co. Kerry; Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork. The New York residency, including rehearsals, previews and performances ran from August 27th until October 2nd, 2010.

It transpired that there were three versions of the production, the national Irish tour being an improvement on the première with the monologues and dialogues rewritten and strengthened, and the New York run being significantly different with much less spoken text and an additional choreography. The reasons for these artistic changes in programme are detailed below.

Having had the opportunity to make Noctú a professional production, I aspired to have Rite of Spring equaling, if not surpassing it in terms of quality.

**Rite of Spring**

**Dance Artist in Residence and Cavan Arts Manager & Rhonda Tidy**

In 2011 Rhonda Tidy, Arts Manager for Cavan County Council, employed me as dance artist in residence for the county. In her experience, she had limited success with appointments of this nature, as traditionally a contemporary dancer/choreographer is the desired choice, but with very little contemporary dance activity in the area, these appointments made little impact on the community. Traditional Irish step dancing is particularly strong in the area, so my own artistic direction of a contemporary approach to Irish dance was something that she felt might work, and this aided me in securing the position. My first project was to create a flashmob which would include professional dancers, younger accomplished dancers as well as dance enthusiasts and non-dancers. This piece was performed several times outdoors in the town centre during Fleadh
Cheoil na hÉireann\(^{34}\) festival on the weekend of 19\(^{th}\) – 21\(^{st}\) August 2011. The following year Tidy wished to kick off the ‘Fringe’ element of the festival the weekend before the Fleadh proper with a selection of events, and Rite of Spring was commissioned to provide a ‘spectacle’ in front of Cavan Cathedral. She asked me to be artistic director and to include aerial dance company Fidget Feet in the piece. Here the element of chance is significant. Although Tidy had commissioned a flashmob from me the previous year, it did not demonstrate my abilities as a choreographer or director. Rite of Spring was to be a spectacle of a suitable scale and standard to open one of the largest festivals in Europe, requiring significant investment in terms of capital and personnel. Tidy arguably took a risk in commissioning such a large scale work with relatively little knowledge of what it might be, not to mention the nature of the work being quite experimental for a traditional music festival. She trusted her intuition, a quality I believe is worth nurturing.

**Rite of Spring Performances**

I chose to create *Rite of Spring* with 12 Irish dancers. I selected 8 Ériu Dance Company dancers who had performed in Noctú, and the remaining 4 were auditioned or invited. Rehearsals took place in Gateway House, Capel Street, Dublin 1 (18\(^{th}\) July – 10\(^{th}\) August 2012). There were 2 work-in-progress performances during pre-production: a short 5-minute excerpt during the joint NAFCo\(^{35}\) and DRFI\(^{36}\) conference in Derry, June 29\(^{th}\) 2012; and the first half of the entire work at the 27\(^{th}\) ICTM Ethnochoreology Symposium at University of Limerick, 26\(^{th}\) July 2012. We worked with the Simon Rattle, Birmingham Philharmonic recording of the music until the two pianists, Michael Joyce and Sabine Ducrot from Cork, joined us for the remaining 5 days of rehearsal. The transition from recorded orchestral version of the score to the 2 live pianos version went surprisingly smoothly and some sections worked better as we had much more control over tempi.

*Rite of Spring* was premièred at the opening of the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann Fringe Festival on August 10\(^{th}\) 2012, and to date has not been repeated. At the time of completion of this thesis, *Rite*

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34 *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* is a traditional Irish music festival and attracts up to 300,000 visitors to the host town each year, making it the largest music festival in Europe

35 NAFCo – North Atlantic Fiddle Convention

36 DRFI – Dance Research Forum Ireland – www.danceresearchforumireland.org
of Spring had been shortlisted for the coveted Allianz Business to Arts\textsuperscript{37} award. I had also being invited to present a paper about my Rite of Spring choreography at an international conference, ‘Scare Celebrations’, at York University in Toronto, Canada (18\textsuperscript{th} – 20\textsuperscript{th} April 2013), alongside academics and practitioners with an interest in Rite of Spring. Papers dealt with Stravinsky’s seminal work from a musical, historical, and choreographic perspective.

Phases of the Work

Studio Work

Studio work includes private reflection, workshops, works-in-progress performances, company rehearsals and the major performances.

Almost all of the choreography is created alone in private studio time. I improvise from my ‘habitus’ to the chosen musical pieces, video recording all my efforts. I then review the recordings, distilling the emergent dance themes and concepts which resonate most with me for further development.

In the cases of the Stravinsky compositions, I occasionally reference the musical scores/text for the more complicated rhythmic passages.

For the development of choreography for No\textcurrentr{\c{t}} I was in a position to test some of the numbers using students of various dance programmes in the University of Limerick. ‘Shadow Dolls’ and Firebird/UnderWorld were both performed at the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme end of year concerts (from 2008 – 2012). I created ‘Anxiety’ for the 4\textsuperscript{th} year BA Irish Music and Dance students’ ensemble requirement. A short excerpt of ‘Tango’ was workshopped in a masterclass I gave BA Irish Music and Dance students. All these pieces evolved from their original form when they became part of No\textcurrentr{\c{t}}

\textsuperscript{37} The Allianz Business to Arts Awards recognise businesses, artists and arts organisations that develop creative partnerships, bringing the arts and artists into mutually beneficial relationships across society. http://www.businesstoarts.ie/awards/
The creation and development of *Rite of Spring* incorporated significant interfacing with performers and audience in advance of the première of the work. For two and a half years (2009–2011), a 4-5 minute excerpt was created and workshopped with candidates and alumni of the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme as well as other dancers living in the environs of the University, and presented to audiences at end of semester lunchtime concerts. This was an invaluable tool to explore not only how to achieve my aesthetic desires and to test the ability of the dancer to deliver the work, but also the research which I will discuss later.

**Pre-production**

Pre-production included: securing funding or residencies; creating performance opportunities; negotiation with production crew; and collaboration with designers. Aspects of this process involved networking – an activity I was unaccustomed to.

**Sourcing the Talent**

I was fortunate in that those who became members of Ériu Dance Company for either the Nochtú or *Rite of Spring* projects were talented professional (or at the very least semi-professional) Irish dancers. Many of the Nochtú cast were very young, a number having only turned 18 as we began rehearsals. Most had not finished college.

In my experience as director of my own company and as Riverdance Dance Director, Irish dancers are not generally formally trained to be a gigging/professional dancer. The skills required for such a life are acquired up on the road. To secure work in an Irish dance show, the dancer needs to be considered to belong in the elite category (generally based on their success in the competition world) to secure an audition in the first instance. Adaptability and a decent level of maturity are also sought, but not always obviously at the audition stage.

There were other risks associated with joining the company. I knew that my work would be outside the comfort zones of most Irish dancers. There was a significant possibility that the material would be at odds to their perception of what should make up an Irish dance show. The

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38 University of Limerick
show concept was an untested entity and the process would be new to both the dancers and for
me. Negotiating all these unknowns, in addition to the presence of television cameras, might be
considered daunting.

The dancers chose to take part in the TV series Dance Off/Noctú audition for several reasons. Some
just wanted to be in a touring show. Some were either fed-up with the competition world, or had
been looking for Irish dance work, but had yet to be taken on by a professional company. Others
admitted that, as I was dance director with Riverdance, there would be no harm in me seeing them,
even if it were to be for another project. (This is documented on the TV show Dance Off)

I was getting bored with competition style and wanted to go into show dancing. Because this was a new show I thought that it would be great to be part of something from the beginning and obviously with Breandán, I thought it would be a good show too – something new, something different. The TV series added a bit more excitement. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

To be perfectly honest it was just because it was Breandán doing it. Because he has quite a high profile in the Irish dance world, I just thought, regardless of what came out of that project I thought any opportunity to dance in front of him would be a good chance to take. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

Some had plenty of professional experience, but were intrigued by the fact that the project claimed to be different, and this was supported by the fact that there was to be a TV series shot around the making of the production. A couple of dancers came to work with the company after the première because they liked what they saw and wished to be part of it (Ashlene was in the audience for the première in Belfast and James saw Noctú in Dublin). Another (Aislinn), got involved because I approached her, but serendipitously, she was just about to contact me as she had just heard from friends about the project.

I saw it in the Civic39, related to it and just had to do it. I thought it was so powerful, the music – it was so strong and striking. Also it was so intricate, so many smaller details, in unison – it was strong. The dancing, formations, things like facial expressions, were drilled to a ‘t’. The smaller things made it very strong (James Greenan 9th July 2012)

39 A theatre on the outskirts of Dublin – The Civic Theatre, Tallaght, Dublin 24

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The Dancers

Aislinn Ryan

Performed in both Noctú and Rite of Spring, joining Ériu for the Irish national tour of Noctú aged 27. She has performed lead for Riverdance and appears in the role of principal female lead in the Live from Beijing DVD (2010).

She currently works as Development Officer in the English Touring Opera. She holds a BA in English Literature and History, with an honours year in History.

Ashlene McFadden

Performed in both Noctú and Rite of Spring, joining Ériu for the Irish national tour of Noctú aged 25. She has performed the lead role in Celtic Legends.

She holds an MA in Pharmacy, University of Strathclyde (2006), and an MA in Traditional Irish Dance Performance, University of Limerick (2011)

She currently works as a dance tutor at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance as well being as freelance dancer, choreographer, dance-film maker and pharmacist.
**Callum Spencer**

Performed in *Noctú*, joining *Ériu* at the beginning aged 18. He performed the lead role “Patrick” in *Noctú*. He subsequently performed as troupe dancer with *Lord of the Dance* and *Riverdance* and is currently a principal male lead with *Riverdance*. He has been accepted by University of Birmingham to read Sports and Exercise Science which he has deferred to pursue his dancing career.

**Ciarán Connelly**

Performed in *Rite of Spring* aged 31. He has performed lead in *Lord of the Dance*, and appears in the DVDs of *Feet of Flames*, *Celtic Tiger*, *Storm Force* and *Irish Celtic*. He has also appeared in three Bollywood Films. He has training in Bollywood, Moscow folk ballet, Jazz and Contemporary dance. He toured with *Footstorm* which opened mid-April ’13.

**Ellen Bonner**

Performed in *Noctú*, joining *Ériu* at the beginning aged 19. She subsequently performed with *Irish Celtic* and is currently in *Riverdance*. She holds a BA (hons) in Accounting and Finance (DCU 2012)
**Gyula Gláser**

Performed in *Nočtú*, joining Ériu at the beginning aged 24. He has won 3 consecutive European championships. He has been touring with various dance productions such as *Magic of the Dance* since 2007, and has performed lead with *Flames of the Dance.*

He is currently working in Berlin as a dancer, choreographer and event organiser.

**Jack Anderson**

Performed in both *Nočtú* and *Rite of Spring*, joining Ériu at the beginning aged 19. He performed understudy for both “Patrick” and “Oisin” roles in *Nočtú.*

He has toured for several years with *Rhythm of the Dance.* He is currently in professional training at the Scottish School of Contemporary Dance.

**James Greenan**

Performed in *Nočtú*, joining Ériu for the New York run in the Irish repertory theatre aged 21. He currently performs lead in *Riverdance* and completed a tour with *Footstorm.*

He has completed a year studying architecture, but has put that on hold to pursue his dancing career.
**Joey Comerford**

Performed in Noctú, joining Ériu at the beginning aged 31. He performed as troupe dancer with Riverdance and as principal male dancer with Ragus and Gaelforce. He holds a B.A. in Business and French and an M.A. in Traditional Irish Dance Performance, University of Limerick (2011). He currently works as a freelance dancer, choreographer and finance analyst.

**Katrina O’Donnell**

Performed in both Noctú and Rite of Spring, joining Ériu at the beginning aged 24. She has performed in various shows such as Celtic Legends and Dance of Desire, and has performed one of the lead roles in Ragus. She currently works as a freelance Irish Dancer. She holds a BA (hons) in Business Studies (2008).

**Kienan Melino**

Performed in Noctú joining Ériu at the beginning aged 25. He has since performed as troupe dancer for Gaelforce, Dance Masters, Damhsa, and Spirit of Ireland. He completed the 1st year of B.Sc and B.Ed at Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia 2004. He has deferred to pursue a professional dance career.

**Kyla Marsh**

Performed in Noctú joining Ériu at the beginning aged 22. She holds a B.A. (2011) in English and is currently completing a postgraduate certificate in public relations.
**Maggie Darlington**

Performed in *Rite of Spring*, aged 23.

She has performed as a troupe dancer with *Riverdance*, and as lead female in *Battle of Dance*, Las Vegas, and *Celtic Fyre*, Busch Gardens Theme Park, Virginia, USA.

She has won the World Irish Dancing Championship, North American National Championship and the All-Ireland Championships.

**Megan McElhatton**

Preformed in *Noctú*, joining *Ériu* at the beginning aged 18.

She has performed around the world with *Celtic Legends*, *Dance of Desire*, *Celtic Nights*, and has performed lead in both *Celtic Dream* and *Spirit of Ireland*.

When she finishes her dancing career she plans to study midwifery, settle in Australia, and open her own dance school.

**Morgan Comer**

Performed in *Rite of Spring* joining *Ériu* aged 23.

He performed as lead male with *Rhythm of the Dance* and is currently performing lead with *Lord of the Dance*.

He holds a B.Hons in Physiotherapy (2012).
**Niamh Darcy**

Performed in *Nochtú*, joining *Ériu* at the beginning aged 24. She has performed with various productions including *Spirit of Ireland* and the *Irish Harp Orchestra*. 

She holds a BA in Irish Music and Dance, University of Limerick (2008), and a Certificate in Exercise and Health Fitness, University of Limerick (2009). She currently works in retail and as a freelance dancer.

**Nick O’Connell**

Performed in both *Nochtú* and *Rite of Spring*, joining *Ériu* at the beginning aged 25. 

He performed lead roles “Oisín” in *Nochtú* and “The Chosen One” in *Rite of Spring*. 

In June 2013 he completed a run of *The Rising*, a vaudevillian play by Joe O’Byrne in collaboration with Breandán de Galláí. This was Nick’s first role as an actor.

He holds a BSc. in Mental Health Nursing, and is currently working as a Psychiatric Nurse and a freelance dancer/actor.

**Orlagh Carty**

Performed in both *Nochtú* and *Rite of Spring*, joining *Ériu* at the beginning, the youngest member at 18 years of age.

She has toured with *Irish Celtic, Dance Masters, Rhythm of the Dance and Footstorm*. She is currently working for *Riverdance*.
**Patrick O’Mahony**

Performed both in **Noctú** and **Rite of Spring**, deputising in **Noctú** for 3 shows during the national Irish run aged 25. Has performed with many shows such as **Footstorm** and **Gael-force**. He is currently a troupe dancer with **Riverdance**.

**Peta Anderson**

Performed in both **Noctú** and **Rite of Spring**, joining **Ériu** at the beginning aged 22. She performed the lead role “Aisling” in **Noctú**.

Subsequently she performed as lead dancer in **Rhythms of Ireland** and **Sounds of Spain**. She was both lead dancer and assistant choreographer in **Celtic Illusion**, and troupe dancer in **Dance of Desire**. She is currently performing as a troupe dancer with **Riverdance** and in rehearsal for **Heartbeat of Home**.

Peta has a diploma in Performing Arts, which she gained in Melbourne in 2006-2007.

**Peter Wilson**

Performed in **Rite of Spring** at age 19, and was his first professional Irish dance engagement

He studied Media, Culture and Society at University of Abertay Dundee.

He has diversified his dance training to include Modern dance and is currently on tour with **Rhythm of the Dance**. He will join the **Riverdance** company in January 2014.
Section 2 – Reflections on the Practice-Based Work: An Introduction

Innovation in Irish dance

Central to competitive Irish step dancing, and in particular amongst the elite dancers is a desire, and indeed a need, to be innovative. The competition is tough, and there can be thousands of competitors working hard towards the coveted world title. The dancer needs to stand out, and not just in terms of natural talent, technical ability, musicality and polish, but also a predisposed physicality that lends itself to the desired aesthetic. Many dancers will present with all of the above in spade-fulls, and so devices that might draw positive attention to the dancer in a sea of wonderful competitors must be considered, and it is in the area of the material, i.e. the dance vocabulary, that dividends can be paid. Innovative and clever choreographic choices will make a dancer stand out, capturing the adjudicatos’ attention in an otherwise oversubscribed event easy to be lost in.

It is within the strict rules and boundaries of the step dance tradition that creativity flourishes – the very nature of the inflexibility of the hierarchical demands that generates a platform for innovation.

My own love of innovation ... to be different ... clearly stems to some degree from my time as a competitive dancer. That necessity to be noticed, stand out, make an impact – that has remained with me ... (Author’s Journal, 5th June 2010)

This was certainly my experience in the competition world. Researching, experimenting, exploring, tweaking and changing the dance were part of my every waking hour. That desire for, and love of innovation in the world of Irish step dance – “that necessity to be noticed, stand out, make an impact, has remained with me” (Author’s Journal, 5th June 2010) – followed through into my post-competition, post-commercial show life. I continue to get excited about the possibilities of the Irish dance form, being blown away by colleagues’ contributions, envying new ideas of others wishing they were my own.
Habitus, Improvisation and Innovation

In creating a new work, I use a personally developed approach to improvisation. This is certainly not groundbreaking and I am not suggesting that it is unique. The material that I consider to be interesting seems to emanate from my habitus – a surfacing of deep structures – habits, schema, dispositions, sensibilities – the culmination of all my physical, genetic and emotional histories, that have mingled, mixed and fused. These ideas surface in the shape of gestures, rhythms and physical interpretations of music, and blend with my aesthetic thrust to make up my final set of choreographic choices⁴⁰. In the words of Gere:

… unearthing the subterranean geographies of the self … turning over the wet rock to reveal its mossy underside. (Gere 2003, p.xiv)

This habitus, in terms of formal dance training, includes hints of classical ballet, modern dance (Graham, Limón, Cunningham), Flamenco, and other social dance forms such as Tango, in addition to the predominant Irish step dance.

What seems to be significant to its development [my evolving choreographic style] is the environment, the music, the movements and styles I encountered, but much more importantly it has much to do with the individuals who moved/enacted/performed those movements. These bodies made me lust after the knowledge of how to do what they did. I wished to inhabit their beautiful frames, learn how to be them, as if like a vapor inhabiting and accommodating every corner of their physicality hoping to learn how they tick … how to make those movements inhabit my body … all this, in that room, with that music being played, with that group of people moving around me, creating a frisson – an electricity spark about in the air. It is this complex system that had more to do with what I wanted to do as a dancer than any one thing. It’s like feeling like a young child again where every last entity and activity is a thing of wonder. (Author’s Journal, 24th December 2012)

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⁴⁰ Discussion on improvisation and my creative process can be found in de Gallai 2010.
It was during the year I spent at Gus Giordano’s Dance in Chicago when I was 18 (1987-1988) that I first understood my psychological and libidinal Lacanian engagement with the physical ‘O’ther in motion. As I took class with other dancers, who, to me, seemed to have had more training and talent than me, my aesthetic sensibility was being sharpened based on them and what they did. Those ingredients included the dance genres we learned, but was certainly not limited to only these. This reflected my experience as a child in dancing class – waiting my turn; watching the older kids; wishing I were them, doing the stuff they were doing – my Lacanian and phenomenological experiencing of these beings, in the best of circumstances.

Subsequently, the formative dance moment in a modern dance class mentioned earlier was responsible for a shift in what I believed dance could be, altering how I viewed myself as a dance artist. It was one of those moments when everything feels perfect. So although the dance phrase would be considered ‘modern’ in terms of genre, I had a sense of what it felt like to ‘be’ one of those ‘O’thers I yearned to be like, and I also had a strong awareness of feeling my Irish dancing body with no associated shame. Now there seemed to be no limitations – the rules and regulations, the ‘good’ technique and ‘proper’ conditioning methods we all encounter in dance disciplines from all genres, seemed irrelevant. Indeed my self-inflicted limitations seemed to dissipate.

A New Dance Ideology

What was now important is what it meant for me (the dancer) – how it felt.

As I experimented with movement using my Irish step dancing body, the dance’s content; the fact that this might be considered a mishmash did not concern me. I began to believe in allowing this dance to breathe regardless of whether it was “neither one thing nor another”. Suddenly there was no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Whether the remnants of the Irish step dance elements failed to fulfill the tradition’s desired code, did not matter; whether the Modern/Classical/Latin/etc. elements were acceptable to those of those communities, did not matter. Besides, the various vocabularies were only a minor aspect of what it was. It was how they were synthesised, how my particular body performed them with my motivations and history, that were its essence. And it felt good, and indeed, ‘right’ to me.
Great dancers aren’t great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion. (Martha Graham)

Good technique, and how satisfying it feels to behold, remains with me, but something had changed. I began to believe that how a piece comes together in a motif or a completed work – how different vocabulary sits together – does not matter. The body, how it moves, and the choices it makes cannot be the property or custodianship of individual movement systems – movements cannot be register-able and copyrightable – dance genres cannot take ownership of them. It is ultimately up to the choreographer to put a series of moves in a particular order in a manner of his/her pleasing. Whether or not the ‘routine’ and this new ‘other’ system thrives has more to do with the infinitude of the context. The honesty and pureness of the creator, in addition to his/her drive, is all that matters at this point of creation in my opinion.

Avant Garde Irish Dance – What can new Irish dance be?

Sally Banes suggests in “Terpsichore in Sneakers” that modern dance can be treated as a “series of avant gardes” which can be related to many other dance genres including, but not limited to post-modern, ballet, folk and popular dance, Western and non-Western (Banes 1987, p. xi). I believe that as I explore Irish dance I do so coming from
the competition culture I grew up in, influenced somewhat by commercial culture, in particular Riverdance with its inclusion of Eastern folk dance and flamenco, but more significantly has a great deal to do with time spent in Chicago learning the modern dance techniques of the great early/mid 20th century modern dance pioneers. I see what I do as comparable to a modern or contemporary dance movement system, not because of the influence of these pioneers, but because it rejects in some way the culture from which it stems. (Author’s Journal, 24th December 2012)

In recent years I have felt that there seems to be an urgent need to reconsider what this medium of Irish dance might continue to be. There is the unacceptable situation of individuals who are not Irish dance artists often in control of the artistic nature of the material that is being presented at home and abroad, which tends to focus on imitating, poorly and cheaply, the larger well established companies (Riverdance and Lord of the Dance). Even in Riverdance, the final say in terms of creative decisions rests with individuals who are not Irish step dance tradition holders. As a consequence, there are few opportunities for the holder of the tradition to present publicly their own work. Many factors can be attributed to this, but in a nutshell, Irish dance is considered to be self-sufficient, not requiring philanthropic or arts development agency support in the way the contemporary arts seeks to be supported. So those of us without the backing of venture capitalists and businessmen hoping to cash in on the commercial ventures of the Irish dance show generation, find it terribly challenging to have our work presented.

Within these shows and their imitators, the narrative agenda of the good versus evil, good girl/bad girl, good boy/bad boy model of Irish dance show still emerges even when the dance artist has a little more carte blanche, which only reinforces the argument that the influence of the venture capitalist and producer is far-reaching and has an impressive indoctrinatory effect. Perhaps with less interference and judgment, and more nurturing (which I found in the Irish World Academy) – perhaps even a sense that there was less at stake financially – one might see interesting things emerge.

41 Director/Owner John McColgan; Producer/Owner Moya Doherty; Senior Executive Producer Julian Erskine; and Composer Bill Whelan.

42 Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick
One of my concerns is – “What can new Irish dance be?”

If I scrutinise closely what it is I am choosing to do, how I seem to be going about it, and the challenges associated with its realisation, I am drawn to the fact that my plight is not unlike that of the 20th century modern dance pioneers. It seems to me that they maintain a position of in some way feeling at odds with the established concert dance form, in particular ballet – this dance landscape which favoured an aesthetic that placed demands on the dance artist which few humans could achieve physiologically – is not completely unlike my own perception of this ‘Irish dance’ problem. Physical and technical demands which can be mastered only by the very few lucky ones, with the appropriate genes, is only one of the parallels that I draw between Irish dance and Ballet. Themes and narrative subject matter, which I find overdone, rehashed, un-stimulating and simplistic is the other. That would be all well and good, but because of the prevalence of these features, it is almost impossible to argue that there could be another approach! This plausible parallel with the modern dance movement in the early to mid 20th century is an interesting angle as I investigate and research my creative thrust. I wonder if I can I look at, or draw from that shift that happened in the modern dance era’s 20s to 60s and the post-modern 60s and 70s as a way of understanding in the Irish dance context, what is happening, what will unfold and what the future might look like? Is it fair to assume that no matter what age or era and what discipline, human nature decrees that we will follow a similar path and face the same opportunities and challenges?

Rejecting Virtuosity

Sally Banes in discussing ballet, this “… academic dance de l’école, with its strict canons of beauty, grace, harmony, and the equally potent, regal verticality of the body extending back to the Renaissance courts of Europe” (Banes 1987), resonates with my own perception of Irish dance.

Irish step dance values sharp articulation, virtuosity, clean movements, slavery to the rhythm and timing, verticality etc., with no room to manoeuvre. An aesthetic ‘line’ has become prized which a certain physiology reproduces more readily than others. Turnout, flexibility, limb and torso ratios are God-given qualities, no amount of work
by the passionate, natural mover will provide this if born without it. More and more the
‘perfect’ physique now being a prerequisite and talent, passion, ability, musicality only
come into play once the body makes the grade. The older body is nowhere to be seen ...

(Author’s Journal, 9th June 2013)

Obviously Irish step dance differs significantly to ballet. Irish step dance does not strive on the
benevolence of the aristocracy or investment from government agencies. It is not considered the
diversion of the elite. I am referring faithfully only to areas of stylistic features, and emphasis on
their physical nature.

It is also interesting that Irish dance has now transcended the boundaries of the Irish
and Irish diaspora and reached far into the ‘exotic’ cultures of Asia, Eastern Europe and
South America, much as ballet did. Irish dance performance, of course, does not take
place in national dance companies funded by arts councils with royalty sitting on their
boards, and instead for coveted titles. (Author’s Journal, 9th June 2013)

This dance I am developing departs, I believe, from the competition and commercial aesthetic,
my own aesthetic impulse perhaps similar to that which might have been the mindset and crea-
tive force of the Martha Grahams or the Isadora Duncans, and subsequently the Yvonne Rainers,
to reject that which was so established and mainstream, and indeed powerful, to follow a new
path – the road less travelled. Even before these dance movements, much earlier in the 19th
century, Fokine moved away from the gymnastic nature of ballet, rather emphasising interpreta-
tion (Royce 2004).

I tried to tie meaning to the movements and poses; I tried not to make the dance resemble
gymnastics. I endeavoured to make the student aware of the music so he would not treat
it as a mere accompaniment. I tried to make the student not content with having just
a superficial connection between the movement or a measure of music, but to seek to
interpret the phrases, the accents, the musical nuances and the whole phrases. (Fokine in
Royce 2004, p. 45)

All this said, many virtuosic dancers maintain a great degree of artistry. In addition, delivering
artistic performances which focus on interpretation and the desires of a choreographer require the
dancer to possess some level of sensitivity, skill, and therefore a different kind of virtuosic talent.
Meaning and the Codification of a New Expert Practice

Emphasis for me now is on meaning in the dance. And certainly virtuosity (see Royce 2004 for a discussion on virtuosity) is an important source of meaning in dance for many, no group more so than the Irish step dance community:

One kind of meaning in dance has always been the skills and complexities of sheer virtuosity. (Banes 1987, p.xxvii)

But if this meaning is often reduced to that sense of exhilaration and communitas (see Turner 1969) experienced by those holders of the tradition on witnessing great corporeal feats, I would argue that much more is going on in the dance – that other meanings prevail and need to be unleashed. These meanings may rarely be articulated by the tradition-holder and ignored by or unavailable to critics of the form. To me these subtleties make Irish step dance special.

I believe that a couple of approaches can be implemented to ensure that this meaning is more evident. The physical adaptation of the form – the choreographic choices is one approach. The second is to realise the thrust of the work in a fashion that is inclusive in terms of sharing: in that it can demonstrate to those within the tradition (initially the company) that they exist, and that they are accessible and exploitable through the physical and affective engagement with the dance. This approach, I believe, ensures that the choreographic choices can then be executed with certain success. An egalitarian work-making approach that values impulse, passion and the individual dancer in my opinion is the approach to unleash this ‘hidden’ meaning. Thereafter, for those with no history of Irish dance embodiment, or for those new to the form with no cultural starting point, this meaning might be witnessed within this new Irish dance signature I wish to share.

But as one is faced with the final choreographic detail, absolute denial of virtuosity and the embracing of an ‘any’ body ideology proves to be difficult.

Although this initial impulse, similar to that of the modern and postmodern choreographers, denying virtuosity completely and letting the body move naturally, “to act freely”, “to refuse to differentiate the dancer’s body from an ordinary body” (Banes 1987), resonated with my choreo-
graphic and ideological desires, in reality my own work did not end up suitable for the everyday body and the untrained dancer.

As I establish my choreographic signature, I claim that there are no real rules, only choices that are made during the final stages of the construction of the piece. What does become clear as the polish/finesse stages take place, is that the vocabulary in certainly not a ‘free for all’, or a “just do your version of”, but rather an expert practice, laden with rules and very specific musculature, aesthetic lines, etc. (Author’s Journal, 24th December 2012)

I did, and still do reject the rigour demanded by the competition world, but the material I create does have its own technical demands. My initial intentions were well meaning and egalitarian, aiming to include all body types and all levels of ability, but the movement system became challenging, demanding talent and training, which the untrained dancer can not reproduce. And indeed, when faced with the choice of a fit, trained body and one that is not at an audition, it is difficult not to choose the former:

Rather than freeing the body and making dance accessible even to the smallest children, rather than bringing about social and spiritual change, the institution of modern dance had developed into an esoteric art form for the intelligentsia, more remote from the masses than ballet. (Banes 1987, pp.xiii-xvi)

**Directing the Gaze Inward**

The work aims to do something else other that enliven the audience or present a nostalgic and romantic impression of Ireland. For me it seeks to present something much more personal, accessing darker moods and emotions.

The workshop approach will assist in probing the interior depths of the performer, and question where the impulse of the movement is located and allowing for alternative channels to open, seeing how the expression breathes in other areas and in other ways. The hope is that the human in the dancer is unleashed, allowing those impulses to activate the dancing body on surfaces with expressive gestures rarely found in present-day Irish step dance. This exploration is expected to uncover deep emotional structures which will
There is a focus in my work to some degree on process and directing the gaze inwardly. This is not unlike the post-modern dance tradition which Kirby summarises as follows:

In the theory of post-modern dance the choreographer does not apply visual standards to the work. The view is an interior one: movement is not pre-selected for its characteristics but results from certain decisions, goals, plans schemes, rules, concepts, or problems. Whatever actual movement occurs during the performance is acceptable as long as the limiting and controlling principles are adhered to. (Kirby in Banes p.xiv)

My creative concerns also parallel those of the post-modernists in areas such as the use of pastiche, irony, historical reference, and parody, in addition to the use of pedestrian and vernacular movements. Where I differ is, it is not a case of process over product. Yes, there is a desire that the work address and ‘upset’ the boundaries between art and life, and indeed the interface of the artists and its traditional audience, but this would not be uncommon in the current presentations of contemporary performances, and is in fact particularly typical of the postmodern tradition.

Whilst there are a handful of Irish dance practitioners and choreographers who are choosing other paths, similar to Banes’s argument with respect to the post-modernists, these Irish dance choreographers are not necessarily united in terms of choreography but more so in the desire to challenge and re-conceive the concurrent trends in the tradition.

Section 3 – Noctú

New Work, Trust and Belief

Finding dancers who believe in the work and who trust the creator is the major hurdle when it comes to new work. Traditions can be steeped in history, and rules can be difficult to negotiate. This is not just the case for the choreographer. Often the Irish step dancers cannot be seen to turn their backs on the organisation that ‘created’ them.

So although there is a tradition of innovation in Irish step dance, not everyone is permitted to innovate and not all innovation is accepted. Tipping about at the boundaries, or edge-walking,
is appropriate only if a variety of factors exist. In terms of competition dancing those factors may include: being the right person; having the right reputation; from the right school; with the right amount of talent; presiding in the upper echelons of the competition world. But even then, that innovation must not cross too far over that vague line in the sand that marks the tradition boundary. In terms of the commercial dance world, I believe that boundary crossing was only tolerated because of the accompanying economic capital. The producers and investors of Riverdance were not the only people to gain financially because of the show. Irish dance schools filled to capacity all over the world as a result of the show’s success.

Understanding the challenges associated with interfering with the Irish dance aesthetic, but needing to create a landscape where an Irish step dance Rite of Spring could be produced and performed, I felt that a strategic project was required so that the Irish dance community, dancers and audience, could tolerate a bolder work. An initial new work that would pave the way was required. I felt that the project Noctú was the right approach to start the questioning of what it was people thought of as suitable Irish dance work. Noctú was to be a standalone project and had already being in my mind for quite some time (I had my initial thoughts about what it should be in 2004 – see below). Although the concept was very much a ‘modern’ interpretation of the Irish step dance show genre, to me Noctú would not be too avant garde whilst still challenging the perception of what Irish step dance could achieve.

In the ‘infinitude of the context’, the random event, that stroke of luck may set in motion a series of happenings that position the choreographer/the work/the team in such a way that he/it/they are singled out to represent a new voice for the form. I am not suggesting that my work is the new voice of Irish dance, but securing a television show documenting the making of Noctú was a great help, not only to cover its costs, but in giving the project caché. Perhaps happenings such as these, which may have very little to do with the aspiration of the choreographic work, position that work so that it is perceived as something valuable and worthy of engagement.
Noctú as Launch Pad

Thus Noctú was chosen as the first performance presentation for my PhD Thesis. Its content and how I scripted, choreographed and workshopped it, had a great deal to do with what I wanted to do subsequently with Rite of Spring.

NOCTÚ

NOCTÚ: nɒk tuː m. (gs. nočta). 1. Bare, strip, uncover. 2. Baring, exposure; disclosure, revelation; appearance.

NOCTÚ address marginalization. It uncovers the sidelined individual who is forced to occupy the uncomfortable spaces where they are expected to conform. NOCTÚ discloses the story of the estranged dancer.

As the work develops these awkward spaces are rejected and the marginalised unite – their uniqueness celebrated as exceptional. We champion three central disenfranchised characters as they negotiate a new space in which to function – one in which they feel they could belong.
NOĆTÚ climaxes with an unrefined and coarse tribal celebration, a return to our bestial beginnings. This savagely danced piece is a lustful and reckless display of that which lurks beneath the skin, yearning to penetrate the surface.

Here there are no boundaries, no rules, no expectations – only pure organic movement – an unexplored, visceral aesthetic is bared. This, the centerpiece of the show, illustrates the world as the dancer sees it – from their point of view … through their lens. This is an unearthing of a personal narrative … an archaeology of the self. It is a shameless display of that which was previously unimaginable … a devil-may-care attitude to the conventional. It is an honest celebration of who we really are.

Choreographed and directed by Riverdance Principal Dancer Breandán de Gallai, NOĆTÚ (to bare or reveal all) is a totally new departure for the Irish dance show genre. It pushes the boundaries of the Irish dance aesthetic and explores new expression possibilities. This performance lets us get under the skin of those who perform this dance world and allow us a glimpse of what it is that matters to them.

Be taken by surprise by the potential and boundless possibilities of Irish dance

NOĆTÚ … Exposed Dreams – Revealed Passions – Naked Truths

(Noćtú Press Release, New York, September/October 2011)

Noćtú was to tell the story of the Irish dancer …

The subject matter and narrative theme rationale was two-fold: to present to the public the world of the Irish dancer as we the Irish step dancers see it (or more accurately how I see it); and to, hopefully, dispel myths the general public may have about Irish dance, based on the negative press the competition world receives (e.g. the emphasis on image; the sense of pageantry; etc.). I also wanted to push the boundaries of the tradition by creating dances that included corporeal movements not normally seen in Irish dance and to use scripted spoken text. Dealing with themes that mattered to me was a central concern, avoiding Celtic mysticism and the standard Irish dance show narratives which include Irish mythology, forces of good versus evil, the plight of the Irish in the face of war, famine, etc.
This had a number of effects. As I have mentioned already, the venture capitalists have created a commercial show landscape that pushes the agenda of only presenting a view of Irish dance that is modelled on the two main success stories – Riverdance and Lord of the Dance. This is more than likely to do with the fact that these productions have generated massive profits. With models such as these being the only options, the vast majority of Irish dance makers in this world are, rightly or wrongly, led to believe that this model is the only commercially viable one, and are unlikely to flex their creative muscle in any other way.

The Genesis of Nochtú

We walked into the Central Hotel, Exchequer Street, Dublin 2, and although it didn’t have a suitable room, I thought – this could be the joint! – It had an olde worlde feel about it; a traditional hotel with dark primary colours of green and red, with dark wooden floors and open fires. All I would need is a decent performance space, a good floor (this could be installed), and enough room for 150+ audience. Many of the hotels were doing a ‘trad’ Irish show – “Stay in the hotel and for €50 more get your dinner, entertainment and social dancing after until the wee hours of the morning.” It was 2004 and the Irish economic Celtic tiger was roaring. There was no end of touring Irish dance shows – Riverdance, Lord of the Dance and all the rest that were a complete rip-off of those, or a combination of each, sometimes with a bit of the ‘3 Irish Tenors’ thrown in. The Dublin, Galway, Cork, etc., hotels were putting on Irish entertainment – and guests in hotels were encouraged to go. Bus loads of visitors bought tickets off the drivers who recommended the show highly (they received a cut of every ticket they sold) and venues filled well. Dancers wandered in off the streets, donned their costumes, hardly warmed up and danced ... easy gig. These were the 3rd generation show – yet another step down from the touring ‘copycat’, ‘me-too’, ‘cookie-cutter’ shows on the road. It was an easy number for the performers, and a no-brainer for the promoter. The American visitor wanted only one thing – a bit of didilyidil; something that could be mistaken for Riverdance; a bit ‘Danny Boy’; a bodhrán/male Irish percussive dancer question answer routine; a ‘colleen’ singing twee ‘Oirish’ songs; female dancers in ‘sexy’ costumes.
Maybe the Central Hotel on Exchequer St could be the place to create a show about what we/I wanted to say about Irish dance. To dress the dancers in what we/I would like to dress in; to makes choices about what the dance looked like, based on what we/I thought looked well; to showbiz it up in a way we/I thought was an organic progression; to present the Irish dancing body as a celebration of what was unlocked in 1994 when Riverdance altered the public’s perception of Irish dance; to create the next generation of Irish dance à la ‘us’; to tell our story – the story of us.

I had spent 2003 and 2004 (having left my comfortable, secure position as principal dancer of Riverdance) developing my dance project Balor and looking for investors and promoters. With a contract in our hands – €2 million to make something that reinvented Irish dance again, just as Riverdance did for the 90s, our theatrical event was to be the new shift for the naughties. It was to compete on the same platform as Riverdance – a sizable show that could play large venues and theatres; a big cast and grand production values; a newly composed cinematic musical score. There was no need to be nostalgic or sentimental about Ireland’s turbulent past. Ireland was a new place filled with confident people who, for once, had plenty of disposable income. We were creating a show that defined us as new urban Irish, European, global. The composer (Csibi) and I had traveled the world, performed on the biggest stages in grandest cities in the world. We were Irish, and what we hoped to create would certainly have an Irish stamp on it, but we did not feel the need to pull at the heartstrings. We cared about themes that affected all of humanity – destiny, envy, power, lust, retribution. Pipes, low whistles and fiddles were not replaced, but moved sideways for bassoon, music box, glockenspiel, marimbas. Costumes were to be Prada-esque rather than Druid-esque. We wanted the image to be a notional 21st century version of a fictional Nazi landscape. We wanted the production to resemble the most expensive and opulent of operas, where cost is not a concern.

We were soon to realise – there would be no more expensive Irish dance shows – not unless cash-rich, connected and independent Riverdance were prepared to make Riverdance 2, funding it themselves. The reality we learnt the hard way was that shows now had to be created on a smaller scale.

And this is why I found myself thinking about the Central Hotel. After being almost there with Balor (we had booked the Point Theatre in Dublin, scheduled the Irish Film
Orchestra to record the music and put a production team in place), it was clear that the investors had promised more than they could deliver. This was to end up being a huge personal financial and emotional cost on me and my collaborators and it would be a while before I could face a project again. I did not want to create a cheap show – I hated them and felt they often gave a bad image to Irish dance. Themes were naive and dancing and production values sloppy.

But standing in the Central Hotel it occurred to me that I could create an inexpensive show. Here is where Nochtú were borne. A script came several months after this epiphany and it would not have a name until 2010 – but the seed was sown that day and germinated until one day I created my 3 central characters as well as several situations/skits that put a shape on what I wanted the world to see.

And of course it didn’t happen in the Central Hotel, or any hotel for that matter – but it happened – and not the way I had planned. In true arts practice tradition, it took on its own life and I had to go with the twists and turns it chose to take. (Author’s Journal, Frankfurt Airport, 16th February 2012)
Opening Sequence / Warm-up

“Miss Brown to You” – Mary Coughlan (music track and artist)

At first I felt a little uncomfortable starting off the show with Warm-up, thinking it is kind of a strange way to start a show – but then as we’ve gone on I absolutely love it! Strangely enough, probably halfway through the run I had a friend from New Zealand in, and he is one that would have really thought about the show afterwards. I met him a couple of days afterwards and he said “I’ve been thinking about the show and my favourite number was the opening – the warmup”. I love that – and then a couple of the actors came in – a couple of my dates (laughing) – came to watch, and interestingly both of them said they loved the opening – they loved the warm-up. It’s so engaging. It really sets the tone. So I think from an audience perspective Noctú is really, really special in that from the get go the audience are being invited ... and obviously with the stage and the way it was here in New York, with the audience almost sitting on stage ... there was something in that the audience are a major part of this and I think there was something really special about that. It is probably really different for every audience, but I imagine some audiences would really be receptive to that and would’ve – like I know I would’ve been “this is really brilliant”, again feeling that you were part of the show – I know some other audience would feel quite uncomfortable with that – sometimes you like to sit down and feel like there is a barrier between you and the stage. It really depends on each individual person. But yeah, I think with Noctú the audience is drawn in, you don’t have a choice – drawn into it from the get go. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)
One of the central themes of *Noctù* is the portrayal of the dancers as they really are, stripped of the facade which is projected onto them, or which they choose the hide behind. This number gives an insight to the pedestrian versions of the characters. These are real people with real concerns. There is predominately an emphasis on presenting or “performing” a version of self that is “just fine” ... having a laugh and getting on with it.

Here we find the usual characters and the usual antics. We recognise these personalities – the confident, the bold, the ‘messers’; the late comers giving grand and dramatic excuses only to waste another couple of minutes embracing their friends ... as if they haven’t done enough already! We notice the serious ones, eager to be seen to ‘toe the line’, or too shy to stand out. Costumes for the imminent performance are double-checked. There is a lot of ‘news-updating’ even though they eat, live, sleep, and work together.

I felt that it would be appropriate and interesting to have the show open with a glimpse of these people doing what tends to happen in a dance class, or company warm-up for the show, or any general warm-up situation. These are activities that they take for granted, but a bonus might be the athleticism executed, even though there is no demonstration of a particular effort – a practice as effortless as breathing or walking. Post-modern dance choreographer Steve Paxton would have used devices such as this in his dance presentations.

I did not want there to a definite event – but that this activity could be related to by anyone from any dance genre, or indeed any situation in life. Ultimately, the hope is that each audience member would recognise the people on the stage as people in their lives, but also to be intrigued by these particular dancers ... this cast ... and their own unique histories.

Brián O’Byrne, an Irish Tony-winning actor spoke about this to me after seeing the show. He liked it as an approach and when the show ending he suddenly found himself wanting to return to the opening number to find out who these individuals are, to be reminded of how they presented themselves. To him, this was not an ensemble but a cast of individuals.

George Heslin, Artistic Director of the 1st Irish Theatre Festival, which ran during our time in New York, was less certain and asked if I felt that the approach was a little risky.
A very definite theatrical device and staging decision was to have the principals seem removed from the remainder of the company – their movements slower and deliberate – the small elements that give them their uniqueness terribly subtle – exhibiting a sense of disenfranchisement. With a lowered eye line they stand out as separate even on the tiny space of the stage. They represent the ‘us’ of the shy, left out, marginalised; the ‘us’ that have voices, but do not allow them to be heard; the ‘us’ that wishes we had the assertiveness to ‘perform’ (in the Schechnerian “broad spectrum” sense) hyper-real version of ourselves; but our life experiences did not conspire to make us those people. Our experiences joined forces to rob us of our confidence to do so.

The show begins with a warm-up that happens onstage … they look like any young Irish person on the streets of Dublin … It is the most unaffected, informal way for the audience to get a sense of who these dancers are as people, but in a way it’s also very misleading, because by the end of this complex and challenging work you’ll be hard put to think of them as ordinary at all. (Cahir O’Doherty, Irish Voice New York)

**Stretching**

*“Deer Stop” – Goldfrapp*

“Warm-up” becomes “Stretching”, and the dancers get dressed for performance. Subtle actions can be noticed and are available for interpretation. Aisling is handed (or thrown more like) the ugly dress, too big and long for anyone. Again, we yearn for her, feeling her pain, understanding it only too well, as we have all been there at some stage in our lives … perhaps not backstage … maybe on the sports pitch, in the board room, at an academic conference.

We also sense the awkwardness that inhabits the central characters’ as they have to partner up with others who seem more confident than them. Patrick is partnered with Aisling – he lacks confidence; she is the ‘loser’ of the company.

I chose the music because of the extraordinary sadness it instills in me. This will hopefully sharpen the audience’s focus on the activities I wish for them to notice.
Starting out with the bluesy voice of legendary Irish chanteuse Mary Coughlan singing “Miss Brown to You,” the dancers perform a get to know you piece that’s followed up with Goldfrapp’s utterly gorgeous “Deer Stop” (Cahir O’Doherty, Irish Voice New York)

The Céilí

“Cu Chullain’s Despair / The Slip-on Gang” – Beoga

... then you have the Céilí, although maybe not everyone would understand it... it is a satire of Irish dancing, it’s easing them [audience] into it, it’s the kind of dancing that they have probably seen before (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

This number presents the recognisable sub-genre of Irish traditional dance of Céilí
dancing. A Céilí dance is a social team dance and may seem relatively complicated to the non-dancer but could be mastered by a trained dancer in an afternoon. The original dances were gathered by dance collectors during the 1900s and are included in feiseanna (competitions). The major dance governing bodies encourage these dances lest they be lost. They could easily be ignored in the larger competitions because they are not technically demanding and perhaps unexciting to the elite dancer. Very few qualify to compete in solo dancing at the World Championships.

The social element of these competitions is significant and dancers who do not cut it from a solo competition point of view need a reason to be there – these Céilís act as this excuse. For the teacher they are an effective way of keeping the non-elite dancer in the class, keeping the numbers and class attendance high.

The umbrella organisations such as An Coimisiún have introduced competitions which encourage a newly choreographed Céili dance and can include up to 16 dancers. The ‘Invented Céili’, or more accurately ‘Invented Figure Dance’ is based on simple round and long dances from this Céili tradition and are choreographed by the dancing teacher and/or by the members of the dancing school. In typical Irish dance competition form, the more imaginative the dances are, the more likely they are to succeed in competition. Since the introduction of this competition, the

43 A Céili is a social event where team and couple dances take place. In the competition world the dances are known as figure dances or Rince Foirne, but are often commonly referred to as ‘Céilís’.

44 My own position on this is that a dancer trained in a different genre would not necessarily look like an Irish dancer, but would seem to be doing a decent job to the untrained eye.
dances have gradually become less and less like the traditional versions, despite the ruling bodies enforcing strict rules. As I watched one of these competitions I found myself wondering when the cheerleading moves would start making an appearance. This number is a parody of this aesthetic and cultural shift in the form, and although not everyone notices it, many without a cultural ‘in’ do. Even if the gag is just a silent nod to the Irish dance audience – a wink and a nudge, a poking a little fun into ourselves ... just for ourselves, I am satisfied.

Strangely, they keep switching instantaneously from dour faces to beaming grins for no apparent reason, but with precision choreography. (Gus Solomons Jr., Downtown Express New York)

Noctù is more a string of separate vignettes than a cohesive story or narrative, and it is hard to find a true theme tying them together other than their break with tradition. It begins with the dancers warming up for an exaggerated piece mocking what we all know Irish dancing to be. The skirts are short, the faces serious, and the cheerleading component with comically large smiles is creepy. The show introduces what Irish dancing has turned into in order to then demonstrate all that it can be. (Sarah Lucie, Show Business New York)

This number highlights the less talented Aisling as that dancer – good enough to be in class, but not good enough to be in competition. These dances are easy but she can still “fuck it up” (inferred in the monologue which follows this dance).

The final position of Céili, for the sharp-eyed spectator reflects the poster art-work of the show.
As I also wanted there to be a chronological introduction to the dance – beginning with the more basic and traditional versions of Irish dance, and getting more contemporary as the show progressed – this piece was a suitable introduction to the dancing.

**Aisling’s Monologue**

“Night of the Swallow” – Kate Bush

Nochtú is informed by the backstories of the three principals in brief monologues presented in a confessional spot (Gus Solomons Jr., Downtown Express New York)

Aisling’s Monologue

*I know they talk about me*

*I know they wonder why I even bother*

*I only get to dance when there’s been some sort of disaster and even then I seem to mess it up*

*I’m not built to be a dancer ... I don’t have the natural ability ... apparently*

*It seems to come so much easier to them but they all end up looking the same*

*It’s just ... it’s just that I fucking love dancing*
I may not do it the way it’s meant to be done, but

When I dance … I feel … amazing …

Many commentators felt that the text was superfluous and could or should be dropped. The original version of the show included many more monologues and dialogues, giving an insight to many more characters and their ‘confessions’, but were removed for the New York run. There were several reasons for this. The venue in Manhattan had an agreement with Equity that if they were to employ actors from Ireland in a production in America they would have to create an opportunity for an American actor in Ireland. Any risk of these performers (all 16 of them) being viewed as actors would put the Irish Repertory Theater in a difficult position. The Artistic and Production Directors of the Irish Rep Theater also felt that the dancers’ ‘acted’ performances were too weak for the venue’s reputation. Some of those performances that I showed them from the première in Belfast 2010 were indeed weak and had, in my opinion, improved for the Irish national run as a result of re-writing and maturity in the delivery, but I had no recording of these. In addition, the Directors requested a 1-Act, 70-minute show, and the dance pieces alone made up that amount of time.

I shortened Aisling’s and Patrick’s piece and left the Oisin character silent.

**Aisling’s Dream**

“Night of the Swallow” – Kate Bush / “Slip Jigs (Tailor’s Wedding)” – Olive Hurley

This is Aisling doing that dance one does in private – the dance that nobody sees and as you move about your bedroom the spotlight in a prestigious theatre is on only you. The material she dances is the stuff of the world stage – that of the principal dancing the big female lead solo, but as the number draws to its conclusion we get a glimpse of the reality.
In terms of style, I wanted the piece to remind the audience of the female lead of the *Riverdance* model show, but for it to include motifs that may not exist in those pieces. The music was carefully chosen to represent longing and passion, but also a sense of freedom and flight. It also helped that the musical breaks had an Irish feel, particularly with the use of the *Uillean Pipes*\(^\text{45}\).

Bill Whelan, composer of *Riverdance*, arranged the strings and pipes in this song for Kate Bush.

“Aisling’s Dream,” danced by Peta Anderson, is simply stunning. Anderson makes the dance look effortless with her long lines and bounding leaps, and she radiates a contagious joy. (Sarah Lucie, Show Business New York)

Peta speaks about her relational and subjective reaction to the piece.

- … from the first day you get put your own feeling into the number … with choreography that you can add your own personal feelings
- … in the number I feel like I’m taking on the world – I really get an adrenalin rush at that point… it’s a real emotional feeling … being able to make it your own because … you

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\(^{45}\) *Uilleann pipes* (originally known as the “Union pipes”) are the characteristic national bagpipe of Ireland. Uilleann, an Irish word, means elbow. This is where the pipes got their name as they are powered by the elbow to *pump* the air. The uilleann or union pipes developed around the beginning of the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century. The term “uilleann” came into use at the beginning of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century.
get to create your own way of doing things, but Breandán is the perfect person to steer you in that direction

“I’ll show you!” – that’s how I see that number (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

The entire company get to perform this number at the end of the show as a reprise. Kienan remarks on how the choreography makes him feel and how it transformed him as follows:

I never really enjoyed light shoe too much, but once we started to learn “Aisling’s Dream”, it felt like it was such a functional way to move. It had all elements you would find in light shoe ... but because you could use your whole body with it – there were no restrictions – able to move through the moves – it felt completely different – with everything moving at the same time, it felt much more functional to me [the steps might have been the same but the overall body approach made it feel more natural] (Kienan Melino, 1st August 2012)

**Shadow Dolls**

*Shadow Dolls – Joe Csibi (originally known as ‘Fairies’ for Balor)*

“they all end up looking the same”

Ash: Shadow dolls is a funny one actually (during a discussion about people’s facial expressions)
Kat: It’s sort of eerie – I’d say if you were to watch it you’d almost get a chill from it – it’s creepy
Ash: With masks it’s unhuman
Kat: Which portrays what he’s trying to say – that the dancers end up looking the same and it is not natural (Katrina being interviewed by Ashlene, 1st October 2011)

The principle behind this number was to highlight the virtuosic ability of the Irish dancer and their capacity to dance with perfect synchrony, executing difficult steps but exactly as each other. But removing the face by using a mask, coupled with lonesome and sorrowful music, leaves an eeriness which unsettles and upsets. This reflects the ongoing need for the competitive dancer to dress and present themselves like the winners, yet only succeeding to make themselves replicas of the rest. The idea is to stand out, but all that is managed is to get lost in a sea of dolls – all identical to each other – and yet they don’t see it.
Boland’s poem speaks of the sense of entrapment experienced by women in marriage in Victorian times and that their married lives reflected that of the doll in the glass case which sported their wedding day dress.

THE SHADOW DOLL

(This was sent to the bride-to-be in Victorian times, by her dressmaker. It consisted of a porcelain doll, under a dome of glass, modelling the proposed wedding dress.)

They stitched blooms from ivory tulle
to hem the oyster gleam of the veil.
They made hoops for the crinoline.

Now, in summary and neatly sewn –
a porcelain bride in an airless glamour –
the shadow doll survives its occasion.

Under glass, under wraps, it stays
even now, after all, discreet about
visits, fevers, quickenings and lusts
and just how, when she looked at
the shell-tone spray of seed pearls,
the bisque features, she could see herself
inside it all, holding less than real
stephanotis, rose petals, never feeling
satin rise and fall with the vows
I kept repeating on the night before –
astray among the cards and wedding gifts –
the coffee pots and the clocks and
the battered tan case full of cotton
lace and tissue paper, pressing down, then
pressing down again. And then, locks.

– Eavan Boland

On a more professional level, dancers are at the mercy of directors and choreographers and live
with the constant stress of avoiding being hurt – and not through injury. Daily creative and
personnel decisions in the area of casting and solo positions can leave dancers regularly on tenter-
hooks. A common strategy to avoid being overlooked is to in some way emulate the ‘chosen’
– copy their shape, their style, their makeup and hair – a Lacanian focus on this other’s physical
stuff rather than making themselves a better version of themselves.

In “Shadow Dolls,” the female ensemble wears white dresses and white masks empha-
sizing the norm in the Irish dance world – keeping it inside the box. The dancers move
as one, a corps de ballet, but this is no ballet, it’s hard shoe and it’s magnificent. (Patricia
Harty, IrishCentral.com New York)

de Gallai flexes his choreography muscles with “Shadow Dolls,” a commentary on being
a faceless, mindless, robotic member of the crowd, or in this case, the dance ensemble.
(Sarah Lucie, Show Business New York)

In one particularly moving sequence, the women clad in angelic white dresses dance
alone; their faces covered with white masks seem to be controlled by a puppeteer.
(Jordana Landres, Women Around Town New York)
The softness of Anderson’s fantasy solo [Aisling’s Dream], leaping and wafting in a dress like a pink, chiffon cloud, contrasts with the obduracy of the conformists: female cadres wearing masks and tapping out vicious rhythms in their jig shoes. Here de Gallai gives the conventions of Irish dance spectacles a newly mournful, narrative purpose.” (Robert Johnson, The Star Ledger New Jersey)

Interestingly, although I find it to be a simple, straightforward piece, many have commented on its power. A colleague from my own professional dancing days, Kevin McCormack, made a point of singling out the number as one that had a significant effect on him.

The dancers commented on the number as follows ...

- **Kyla:** Shadow dolls, masks, emotionless ... sometimes I do wonder if the audience are getting the message because they can’t see our faces … but masks, the unity … people still say to me that it is so strong with all the girls together and the way we move. It still touches them and makes them be taken aback. They feel awkward but in a good way
- **Ashlene:** Interesting – facial expressions taken away, which is normally the way you get emotion across and with the masks that’s removed so the expression is got across in the way we move? Maybe in fact it is these postures?
- **Kyla:** Exactly, especially the way we go from abrupt to these eerie slow, pacing moves. (Kyla Marsh being interviewed by Ashlene McFadden, 1st October 2011)

- **Aislinn:** I’m going to go back to Shadow Dolls again and talk about how that the rhythm for me, was quite unsettling. I think that probably adds, especially for the audience, the masks – there’s this kind of off beat thing going on and I’d say that makes it even more unsettling for the audience. We as dancers struggle a little bit with the rhythm and the audience the non-dancers it would be like quite an unsettling experience which is what Breandán is really trying to create anyway. And that number is empty and kind of ...
- **Ashlene:** … there is something quite eerie and unsettling about it that is hard to really pinpoint – is it the lack of the facial expression? Is it you’re not getting that personal connection? (Aislinn Ryan being interviewed by Ashlene McFadden, 3rd October 2011)

**Patrick’s Hornpipe**

**Advanced Hornpipe – Seán O’Brien**

The rationale behind this number, apart from introducing the character Patrick, and Oisin as he looks on, is to present the traditional competition-style male Irish dancing in an unadorned manner – to remove the competition costume and the elements that camouflage what is actually going on
underneath. The dancer Callum, as Patrick, is in a sports kit. We see his arms and legs – his body is more obvious through the light and short fabrics.

… for those worried that tradition is all but lost, Callum Spencer dances a hornpipe that will blow you away. (Sarah Lucie, Show Business New York)

Patrick is not dancing for anyone (he doesn’t know that the character Oisín, played by Nick, is watching). This is not to be read as Oisín ‘in’ Patrick’s garage while he practices – it fulfills many theatrical objectives:

◆ How we learn to dance as Irish dancers has more to do with sitting watching – absorbing by osmosis

◆ It can be a challenge for boys to continue dancing as they get older, being an activity often associated with girls. I believe, and this was certainly true for me, that watching the older, bigger, virtuosic boys dance – that sexiness of their super-human ability – is a draw that is hard to ignore (this Lacanian “apparent wholeness of others”).

◆ Oisín encompasses this confusion that many male dancers I have encountered are presented with – the sexuality question – “Do I want to be him ... Do I want to be like him … Do I like him?!”

This scene demonstrates the phenomenologically satisfying experiencing of the dance in the best of circumstances which overrides the difficulty many dancing males face.

A Slur of Insults

Almost every derogatory term for homosexual in the book is screamed at Patrick.

*Here you! Ya wee fruit Faggot Queer Homo Girl ... you’re a pussy ponce poof sissy bender ...*  
*Here nancyboy twinkle toes shirt-lifter arse-bandit ... you’re turd-burgler puddin’-slammer cock basher pillow-biter ... Here did I say fruit ... ya wee fruit!*

There’s a bit of Billy Elliott set up to one of the main story lines in Noctú, which seems unavoidable. For a young lad growing up in rural Ireland, becoming an Irish dancer is a bit like announcing you’re going to design women’s dresses for a living. Noctú doesn’t pretend that your path will be
smooth, but it reminds you very forcefully how beautiful your life can become. (Cahir O’Doherty, Irish Voice New York)

Still, the greatest pleasures of Nočtú are to be derived when the spotlight is on principal dancer Callum Spencer. His first solo … to hornpipe music by Sean O’Brien is a dazzling display of virtuosic footwork that signals a presence of a major talent. (Brian Scott Lipton, Theater Mania New York)

Patrick’s monologue

“Survival Skills” for a Male Irish Dancer

1. Go to school far far away where nobody knows you.
2. Always maintain your strong manly gait
3. Try throwing of the scent a little – play some manly sports – football boxing rugby. My mother always maintained that no one was looking … or they were just jealous. But they’re not jealous. If only they could see the way that I see it.

The stereotype that Irish dancing is a girly activity is matched by an ironically masculine traditional hornpipe performed by Spencer, a clear athlete with a strikingly robust build. (S. J. Velasquez, Irish Central New York)

… proactively presenting himself as macho (S. J. Velasquez, Irish Central New York)
Oisin certainly sees it the way Patrick would like it to be seen.

Throughout the years I’ve felt that the only way Irish male dancers stuck it out and put up with the onslaught of abuse because they danced had something to do with how they engaged with the ‘O’ther that presented itself in the dance class. Certainly in my case, it was that sitting and waiting for your turn, but watching in awe the older children, particularly the boys, do the more virtuosic and impressive stuff. This display would leave me (and from what I can gather all my dancing male friends) bewitched ... wishing to be taught those moves and to be able and allowed to do them – executing them as well as I was beholding them.

This is just simply an internal feeling ... a rush of something that excites and is life-affirming ... well, certainly for me. How it is received is a different matter. For the community of lads hanging around the back of the hall between practices, it is impressive stuff that fills them with lust and testosterone ... for the ‘O’ther, the boys down the town, it
is sissy prancing. For the contemporary dance critic, it is ‘folk’ dancing with nothing to offer other than a ‘wow’ moment, but badly executed in terms of their ethnocentric dance world viewpoint, as they evaluate it in terms of classical dance technique which everything stems from, or so they would like to lead the rest of us to believe. I can’t help but sense a bias – a negative association with the traditional arts – embracing only what they see as the authentic, rejecting the possibility of the dance maker and the dance having the ability to question the practice and their practice. (Author’s Journal, 9th March 2013)

To me, Flamenco and Tango dancers carry themselves in a way that is manly, macho and sexy, and how I carry myself as a dancer, or even a person, fails to be just that. I discovered recently through teaching workshops abroad, the non-diaspora male Irish dancers, the Russians and Eastern Europeans with no cultural connection with the Irish, who came to Irish step dance late and by choice, ironically buy into it predominately because they think it is very macho. Here we negotiate the power of the exotic. In my post-colonial, lacking-in-confidence, negativity towards my Irish disposition, I reject the Irish step dance aesthetic a little. I explore what it could be if it were shifted slightly into a box that represented what it was that I found sexy, manly and macho – my Lacanian attempt of making my dance more “whole”.

In the best of circumstances, when I dance straight Irish step dance, feeling confident and strong, with none of those negative emotions, in ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 2001) what I experience as I dance is similar to that whilst watching the ‘O’ther, exotic forms.

In one unconventional number, tango music works surprisingly well in showcasing the potential for masculine force within the dance, as well as its ability, like tap dance, to tease infinite rhythms out of any beat. (Megin Jimenez, NYTheatre.com New York)

The straight guy joins the other men for a macho fusion number of Irish dance to Argentinean tango, but it’s not as dazzling as a real tango. (Leigh Witchel, NY Post New York)

Interestingly, Callum, 22 years younger than me, related to the Latin element of the Tango number, just as I did, demonstrating a positive phenomenological reaction to the piece.

The lunges in Tango are inspired by something else – the fact that they are masculine and strong and powerful – a tense position – you can see the power in the lunge – it’s a motivation number. (Callum Spencer, 1st October 2011)
"Violently Happy" – Bjork

This number was added to the show for the New York run. Bjork’s ambient techno track “Violently Happy”, with its synth-pop and house influences, was always included in my possible score for Nočtú, but due to time restrictions before the première in Belfast, did not make an appearance until a year later. Initially it was to represent the short-lived euphoria of success (winning a competition / being chosen as principal) and the crippling low that follows when the reality of “you’re only as good as your last success” kicks in. But as the show evolved, the emphasis switched to the mindless conforming of the world around us. I needed, for the purposes of narrative, having introduced the main characters Aisling, Patrick and Oisín, to have them in some way reject the path that was laid out for them. Up until Tango, there is a sense that they must and try to fit in, but privately, they yearn to operate in a world of their pleasing – or of their invention – one in which diversity is celebrated.

I was really in awe actually of both the way he went about formulating the steps and also the way he taught them. In terms of the steps – I’m going to use Violently Happy as an example because we spent lots of time working on that. He was on his laptop and referring to videos he had taken of himself ... obviously he had come up with all these different sequences that really fitted the music or that really express ... like the energy of them … they really reflected the music so, so well ... so he had obviously come up with
all these things actually worked it out from start to finish – how it was going to work; how many people you’d have where (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

But with Violently Happy, at first I was baffled at how he’d be like – ‘you’ ... random people, he would just pick them ... “you just do this phrase, and you and you come through and do this phrase”, and it was almost like trial and error and there was something so satisfying about it. You could feel it coming together and it was taking shape ... it was almost taking shape out of thin air. To me it seemed like – how can he just – how can he be so blasé about it. He hasn’t thought out who goes where. I really enjoyed that whole process. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

The process of making this piece was quite different to the original pieces. Because it happened after both the première and Irish tour, I felt a lot more confident and didn’t feel the need to come into the studio with the piece completely authored. I did have quite a bit of work done in terms of motifs created ready for transmission, and I had plotted out the floor plan, but the blurry image in my head would have been very difficult to articulate, and it was only when the piece was almost completed with the dancers that this image finally sharpened. It is almost as if the image was in there somewhere, but could not be realised until it was made manifest with the company.

The choreography represents the path in life and the search – the typical life trajectory is represented onstage as a line from upstage left moving diagonally downstage right. Almost all fall into line, conform and go with the flow around them. Some choose a path less travelled. This is the plight of our three protagonists: being strong enough to ignore the voices in your head put there by those who cannot imagine a world with a different set of rules; being brave enough to fight, ignore, step back, and carve one’s own route; and, to reject the common practice. Everyone else is functioning in a world that wears them out, constantly dogs at them, making them part of a machine – a cog that alone has no purpose.

_I have always found myself attracted to people who seem to be doing their own thing, and in my mind’s eye, I actually did see it (visualise it) as everyone else on this hum-drum, monotonous march across wasteland to death, whilst these ‘attractive’ individuals busily and excitingly buzzing about in all directions, filled with a libidinal hunger for living._

(Author’s Journal, 7th March 2012)
Practices are often cited in order to explain things, including notably their own enactment. It may be said, for example, that something is done because it is traditionally done, or routinely done, or done because it is part of the practice of the collective. The problem of why human beings should enact the practice is thereby completely glossed over. It is as if the cavalry has to charge, twice a week perhaps, simply because it can charge, as if there is something automatic and compelling about the enactment of practices which makes it unnecessary to consider what moves or inspires the human beings involved. (Barnes in Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, Von Savigny 2001, p.21)

Most unique are the pieces danced barefoot. The electronic effervescence of Bjork’s “Violently Happy” is made manifest when the loud shoes are replaced by a light-as-air bounce form the company. (Megin Jimenez, NYTheatre.com New York)

This scene heralds the approach and central themes in the Rite, which are discussed below.

**Anxiety**

“*Some Vague Utopia; 3rd Movement*” – West Ocean String Quartet

“Fruit, homo, gay-boy, Faggot” (To Patrick)

“You’re shit … you can’t dance – just give it up” (To Aisling)

“What are you trying to say – just spit it out” (To Oisin)
A natural follow-on from ‘Violently Happy’, this was also adapted for the New York stage. For the première in Belfast many more characters were developed, from different dancer ‘types’ to the adults in their lives, and the text in the original version repeated the ‘dogging’ associated with all of their lives. This was distilled down to the focus which came from the opportunities attributed to presenting in the Irish Rep Theatre. As the dancers enter, if one listens carefully we hear their own original anxiety that had been developed in the original version of Noctú. That is available for the audience who want to dig a little deeper, but the overarching reason for this is to unsettle and upset – to present a landscape that is filled with tensions, bullying and torment, and to demonstrate how deafening the world around us can be in manipulating and forcing on us an opinion and a way of life. As the music begins, we watch the principals retract and reject this cesspit of negativity and indoctrination – leaving behind chaos and madness resolving into conformity.

There was something really frantic, kind of like you feel like you are on a tightrope, something unbalancing but I always feel good doing it. So that one [Anxiety] for me I really could get a sense of how Breandán felt when he first heard the music. And for me the steps really reflected that. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

**The Mattress Sequence**

For me, the mattress sequence was to be a solo for each of the main characters as they negotiate their newfound relationships with the other marginalised individuals.
The setting was to represent the protagonists in their own private space, negotiating their new direction in life as it was unfolding. No longer alone, we have just seen them opening up a novel line of communication with each other, but now facing the exciting reality of this new association, trying to unpack its relevance and potential.

It was risky to put the dancers in their underwear, from the point of view of the connotations that could be associated with it. The intention was not one of shock factor, or the marketing value of such an exercise. I certainly did not want to objectify the body, but to celebrate it. I felt nothing exploitative about it. I did fear that it would be read as trying to outdo Flatley and his ‘Strip Jig’ in Lord of the Dance, in which I feel there is an appalling message and certain objectification — and only that of the woman’s body. But there were as many reactions as there are commentators. On one hand it was read as risqué, on the other, it was no “Oh, Calcutta”60 — which is what one reviewer claimed that I was trying to do.

For me, it was an effective device to symbolise the stripping away of the interference and white noise demonstrated and addressed in the earlier number (Anxiety) — leaving the pure white, simple body — un tarnished, unsullied — stigmas, blemishes and damaged bits peeled away — a chance to start again, and follow one’s own path, one’s own heart — to dance to one’s own tune. This is the habitus as it begins its journey anew, entering the world with only a body and its genetics.

There was always the hope that, as the production moves into the final number Firebird, that there might be the sense that this (Firebird) is another potential approach to dance, or life or whatever you wish to read into it. But certainly to me, “The Mattress Sequence” resolved the issues associated with the fear of going it alone, differently, since you were never really isolated — there would always be others that may be different to you, but different, like you are different. The culmination of this theme is Firebird/UnderWorld, with not only its chaotic nature, but the symbolism associated with the nature of how different the dance is — an evolution of the familiar form ... or “a return to its bestial beginnings” (Press release, Noctú New York)

This was not always clear to the onlooker:

The stripping promised in the title comes from a ménage a trois: two men and a woman each doing solos in their underwear. It’s never clear why, and there’s no follow-through – just on to the next sketch. (Leigh Witchel, NY Post New York)

… a truly enjoyable suite of four dances, highlighted by Spencer’s sweet turn to Leonard Cohen’s “Dance me to the end of Love” and O’Connell’s all-stops-out interpretative number, set to Cake’s alt-rock rendition of the disco classic “I Will Survive.” (Brian Scott Lipton, Theater Mania New York)

I chose to choreograph the Mattress Sequence as a suite of soft shoe numbers deliberately to showcase the idiom being performed by male Irish dancers. Having worked as a troupe and principal dancer, as well as director for Riverdance, I am often struck by the commercial show creatives’ position on soft and hard shoe dancing. I have been privy to situations arising where it was suggested that the female lead dance hard shoe in a similar virtuosic style to the men in the show. This was rejected immediately as inappropriate. Once, as I warmed up by doing soft shoe steps with a couple of the male troupe, I was approached by the Riverdance stage director who enquired why we were doing the ‘girls’’ steps. Granted it was the early days of the production, and the oversight is forgivable if creative decisions on Irish dance matters were always negotiated with those who know. Unfortunately this is not always the case.

Interestingly, I notice that many Irish dancers return to a love of soft shoe dance as they get older. If there is a step to be done at a social event such as a wedding, a soft shoe reel is most common.

… de Gallai deliberately choreographed reels to be performed by the men. He said that he’s sometimes stuck explaining to people that all Irish dancers – male and female – begin with light dances. Too often, audiences unfamiliar with traditional Irish dance mistakenly associated hard shoes with masculinity and soft soles with femininity. (S. J. Velasquez, Irish Central New York)
Oisin’s Dance

“I Will Survive” – Cake

A coming of age

I deliberately chose the gay anthem “I Will Survive” to act as a subtext for this number. Although I did not wish to present a “coming out” story, or deal directly with gay issues, I did want the audience to have some notion that there existed some sexual ambiguity. More importantly, it was this liminal space that needed to be negotiated by young men who are at a turning point in their development that was much more important to me.

During a meeting with Tony Micocci (Noctú’s agent at the time) regarding the show and a discussion on its emphasis on this particular theme, he forcefully debated that in New York nobody cares – that this really is a non-issue. On reflection, with the other voice of Eugene Downes, CEO of Culture Ireland, in my head – “You shouldn’t make work for your critics”, I feel justified in its inclusion in the work. Micocci longed for Noctú to be well received by his peers and had taken it on his books to represent as agent. He commented to me that Firebird was one of the finest pieces of choreography that he had seen on stage, which was high praise coming from an agent who represented legends like Marcel Marceau, and who had been President and Executive Director, City Center Theater, New York (1986 – 1992) and General Manager, Flynn Center for the Performing Arts (1981 – 1986). But New York is probably one of the few places on Earth where dealing with homosexuality is not a challenge. That aside, issues such as sexuality can be viewed as monumental or insignificant depending on the individual’s own personal experience. The reluctance of the Irish dancing male to ‘come out’ is a very real issue and additionally unusual in that many believe that, being part of the entertainment world would make that transition all the more effortless and uncomplicated. Things have improved since I was in my early twenties, but I am amazed at how much of a challenge it still can be.
The grungy version of the song, coupled with deliberately avoiding camp and stereotypical gay gestures were central concerns in creating the piece. The Oisín character is simply asking questions – “What exactly am I experiencing? What am I feeling about Aisling/Patrick? What do I loose out on by making these decisions now? What if I’m isolated even more? How do I find myself at this point and how did I manage to ignore it for so long?” – reflecting those Lacanian concerns I continue to refer to.

There was no lack of expression, power and strength in dancer Nick O’Connell’s reel, performed barefoot to a modern rendition of “I Will Survive” by Cake. This particular dance was both unexpected and exhilarating. The combination of gymnastic choreography and O’Connell’s gallant stage presence was anything but delicate. (S. J. Velasquez, Irish Central New York)

Solo numbers are also a nice break from tradition – Cake’s 1996 cover of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” turns out to be a fitting expression of male longing. (Megin Jimenez, NYTheatre.com New York)
“Oisin’s Dance,” danced by Nick O’Connell, is also exceptional and perhaps the most successful at expressing pure abstract emotions.” (Sarah Lucie, Show Business New York)

His work is personal – “I will survive” – his journey – he really says who he is through that number, because that’s exactly how he felt – that’s one of the best choreographed numbers in the show – all the beautiful steps – real emotion – so many people trapped – looking in the mirror and looking at yourself (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

Aisling’s Dance

“My Big Bad Handsome Man” – Imelda May

A loner no more ...

Quite simply, this piece was to be a dance of joy, celebrating new friends and unexpected possibilities: the marginalised suddenly belonging.
It is common in Irish dance, and perhaps universally, that those who excel at dancing for example, can often be a high achiever in other aspects of their lives – good grades at school, musically talented, etc. A motivational life coach Connolly⁴⁷, whom I met after the première of Noctú found that he had to look at the ground as the Aisling character spoke of her sense of being different and not good enough to be part of the group, for fear of crying. He told that me he encounters this in almost every class that he works with. Invariably, he claimed, the least talented would sit alone and often be overweight. It was common for no one to reach out to them yet he is certain that this dancing class would be the highlight of that child’s week.

There’s a seductive pas de trios to Imelda May’s My Big Bad Handsome Man that made me wish I had taken more chances when I was in the 20s. (Blog by The Unbearable Banishment New York)

Here, Aisling, the most sidelined character we encounter on stage, permits herself to leave behind isolation and embraces her newfound companions.

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⁴⁷ Sean Connolly is a motivational coach and works with many Irish dancing schools.
Patrick’s Dance

“Dance Me to the End of Love” – Leonard Cohen

How is it that I never notice her before!

The Patrick character is simply the guy who dances – only because he loves it. There are no sexuality issues, just a passion for an uncommon (in comparison to his mates) pastime. He is also quite a clueless individual, unaware of the effect he has on those around him. For many he is that “petit autre” (Lacan), creating longing in them, Oisin being its embodiment. Although he thinks of himself as underwhelming, many around him admire his dance ability, his understated-ness. He is more imposing that he gives himself credit.

In this number he deals with how he has fallen for the most unlikely of girls – a ‘nobody’ to all others he is intrigued by her. Much of this narrative is more obvious in the earlier versions of Noctù, and it is not important in the grand scheme of the work to spell this out, other than to engage with someone who is reaching out for someone who wants him to reach out to her.
The Triumphante

“Getting some Fun out of Life” – Madeleine Peyroux

We may not be like the rest and we may not be like each other, but we’re all different together, and we have each other together

Although the Mattress Sequence acts to represent the dancers, alone in their own private spaces, this number is about their shared understanding and this shared experience. This is now a virtual shared space, all privately coming together in a realisation that they all have fears about embracing this new friendship and bonding opportunity. Through each of their solos they overcome this reluctance and accept certain realities – Oisin’s realisation that he cannot have both a longing for Aisling and Patrick, and also that he does not loose them if they end up together romantically – that there is room in all their lives for both of the others.

The number is meant to be simple, whimsical and fun – to represent that old adage not to take things too seriously and acknowledge the wonderful things that you already have.
Firebird / UnderWorld


By the “Mattress Sequence” I have attempted to establish that carving out one’s own path in life is desirable, and that everyone striving to be different together is virtuous. My intention for Firebird was to realise this in dance form. It is not a rejection of Irish dance, or to pretend that we are something other than Irish dancers, but that we can dance our dance to our own tune.

and towards the end descends, in a piece entitled “UnderWorld” to an almost violent war dance complete with body paint, it’s tribal that morphs into a sort of beach party. (Patricia Harty, IrishCentral.com New York)

Firebird/UnderWorld as a choreography was developed during my MA Ethnochoreology year and became my final MA presentation (choreography and thesis). The musical choice relates to the impact Stravinsky’s Firebird Suite had on me when I encountered it as a prescribed work on my Leaving Certificate48 Music syllabus. Our music teacher presented us with classical works from various eras, and the Mozart, Beethoven and Wagner works seemed very palatable in comparison to that of the Stravinsky and Britten. Frankly, I was appalled by what passed as ‘music’ and the snobbery attached to this ‘high art’ music. The composers from the Baroque, Classical and

48 Final exam at the end of secondary level education in Ireland
Romantic periods as it turns out were simply just more recognisable. As time went on I became enchanted by the *The Firebird Suite* and *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings* (Britten), finding beauty in the harshness and dissonance, and an intriguing subtleness in their architecture.

Of all the dances in *Noctū, Firebird* is the piece that almost all (dancers or otherwise) refer to when discussing my developing choreographic style.

> ... knees bent ... heaviness in the movement ... real gravitational move of the body ... (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

In an attempt to ensure that the number be performed as I had intended I taught *Firebird* first in rehearsals. I believed that the longer it was in the dancers’ systems, the more likely a positive phenomenological engagement with the piece would occur, thus achieving my choreographic aims.

> The first thing we did was begin with *Firebird*, and I remember just feeling absolutely at sea – what was going on?! … so I don’t think I really appreciated it so much until later on when I got a bit used to it. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

> It was a completely different approach to the dance – not just in terms of what you do, but how you do it and how your body works, how your body feels. It came as a shock. Once we got to know Breandán better and his way of working it got into our body. (Gyula Glaser, 30th September 2011)

Their reactions when being first taught this number were as I expected. Almost all were giving it their best shot, but not everyone was prepared for what was very different and challenging from their point of view.

> I went into it very open-minded prepared to try anything, but I really enjoyed everything that came along, even day 1 and *Firebird*. It was so different for everything I’ve ever done. (Niamh Darcy, 29th September 2011)

> When Breandán introduced parallel feet I though here we go, this is good, this is taking it to the next level. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

> I thought it was weird, I couldn’t get it at all. I didn’t get the whole animalistic style, especially the feet parallel and using your core. It was almost uncomfortable. I was used to head to waist straight! I had never done any other style of dance so I never used my upper body. It was really hard to get into. I found the first day very difficult. As the week
went on and our upper body got a little more flexible. It was easier to nail what he was looking for and the picture he wanted. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

The piece did eventually become a favourite with many of the company.

It’s taken me so long. I mean, God, it’s been 6 months and I knew it was going to happen. I was telling myself “Firebird will become your favourite number, I know it will!” But I just had this stumbling block with it. When I finally could understand the music and really feel what Breandán was trying to create, then dancing it felt so so good, but it has taken me 6 months to really understand it. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

But it took some time before the number was reading correctly from my point of view. In fact, although the stage in New York was far too small for Firebird, it was during this run that I felt that it really worked, which demonstrates the amount of time since its inception that the piece needed to be in the dancers’ bones. And even then, there were times when the slightest deviation caused it to change for me and reduce its impact.

Those little things … those little drums all have a meaning and that’s where your head goes and that’s where a lot of people faltered. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

This number required that the dancers ‘dig deep’ and access some internal energy and motivation in its execution. The connection of affect and movement eventually made sense to the dancers.

I get quite intense. I don’t know how to describe it. It’s not an anger but it’s almost that. Generating those emotions, you find something inside of you, some fuel in you to get that out every night. Even if you are wrecked it pushes you to keep it up. It takes mental stamina. I have a firebird space of mind now which I didn’t have at the start. (Niamh Darcy, 29th September 2011)

In Firebird there is an awful lot of movements I feel inside me … I suppose when you feel it you can dance it better.

I get most satisfaction out of that dance [Firebird]. I think it is so intense, very much a dance we can allow our anger to move off of us. I suppose the music has an awful lot to do with it as well – the intensity of the music and the different material that we’ve been given has allowed us to show more emotion. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)
According to Witchel, *Firebird*, of all the numbers was “the most creative one”. He described it as:

… imagined as a primitive tribal dance; the dancers are smeared with body paint doing furious unison stamping. The precise, staccato raps of the cast’s feet are an unexpected and uncanny match for the complex rhythms of Stravinsky. (Leigh Witchel, NY Post New York)

Interestingly, he comments “The next time someone wants to give step dance a plot, how about the Rite of Spring?”

**General Analysis of Noëtí**

There were several key areas where Noëtí deviated from the Irish step dance aesthetic in terms of the dance vocabulary, context, choreographic process and mood and tone. This section discusses these with reference to my own creative concerns, the reaction of the dancers, and that of the critics and others. The dimensions including the relational, subjective, and the transformation which emerged from the research are referred to here also.

I will begin with a choreographic analysis of a section of the Finale – *Firebird/UnderWorld*.

**Choreographic Analysis – ‘UnderWorld’**

There follows a short choreographic analysis of the first half of *UnderWorld*. Not every number was created exactly as follows. My process has been changing over time which can be attributed
to greater confidence, amongst other factors. The amount of time available to create the work affects the choreographic process, as does the stimulus, which for me is generally the music. But that said, the method recounted below has resonance with all of the material created during this PhD studio period.

*Firebird/UnderWorld* is the final number in *Noctū*. It is followed by Reprise 1, which is *UnderWorld* repeated, with a slightly different floor plan; and Reprise 2, a repeat of ‘Night of the Swallow’, which the entire company performs.

Through a process of improvisation I devised the various motifs for this piece, some being as short as 1-bar, others the equivalent to 1 full step (8-bars). In comparison to the first half of this number *Firebird*, the motifs used in *UnderWorld* are relatively straightforward in terms of difficulty for a trained Irish dancer, and unlike *Firebird*, the musical composition is in regular 8-bar phrases which all Irish dancers would be accustomed to.

There is a deliberate use of repetition, with only a few variations being used to construct the number. Every so often some of the motifs alter slightly from the original iteration – a development of the original idea of sorts.

The basic motifs include:

*Motif: Opening shapes*

8 different bodily positions are to be struck by the end of a 3, or sometimes 4-note riff.

In rehearsals I began by asking the dancers to strike any pose that occurred to them on the moment. This was to loosen them up to the choreographic idea, but mostly to let them become accustomed to the structure of the section musically.

This was followed later by a discussion about what these poses could be. I wanted whatever they chose to have meaning for them, but most ‘winged’ it initially and subsequently found that they repeated positions that they felt comfortable with. Others had a story, each position making up their own little personal little narrative:
e.g. Peta:

“I imagined I saw something far away whilst bending down
Then I straightened my knees, my hand shading my eyes looking into the distance;
I would point at someone.
Followed by picturing myself as a broken music-box ballerina, etc.”

Ultimately, the most important things to me were that no two dancers looked alike at any one
time; that all would come to absolute stillness by the end of the 3/4 note riffs; and that there was
a sense of randomness in each statuesque pose, giving each ‘picture’ a richness which could be
interpreted in any way the observer chose.

_Motif: Heels_

Beginning on the right, tapping alternating heels 1,2,3,4 (×16) … with the emphasis on the first.

Knees were to be bent; hands on thighs, halfway between knees and hips; fingers together and
facing in; spine 45º from the normal and straight; buttocks sticking out; feet in parallel, and flat
on floor.

I wanted the company to look like a swarm occupying as small a circle as possible, yet having a
‘window’ – i.e. that they were never behind anyone and could be seen by the audience (as much
as is possible – those at the back inevitably ended up being mostly hidden).

There can be a tendency with Irish step dancers not to drop the heel hard enough, especially for
my liking. In this motif the heels are to be heavy, strong and clear. With quite a bit of emphasis
on the first heel, there was a natural body undulation pronounced on the right side which I encour-
aged and drilled so that it was very visible and executed with the same level of effort by all.

_Motif: Step heel heel step heel heel step_

Parallel feet; bent knees; mostly in relevé; back now vertical.

Step(R) heel(L) heel(R) step(L) heel(R) heel(L) step(R) x8
Apart from very heavy heels (as in earlier motif), the ‘step’ in this motif had to be executed as a very strong stomp, almost causing the ball of the foot to skid on impacting the floor. This would be uncommon in Irish dance and reminded me of how Flamenco dancers might execute such as step.

The parallel feet in this instance gave me the impression of cloven hooves from the front. The motif also moved the company slowly forward, which gave the sequence an animalistic quality, as if preparing to pounce on its prey.

Arms were to be away from the body; Left cupped, palm down and below naval; Right “Preparatory Position” (ballet) except more to the side, figures pointing towards hip. This gave a strong squareness across the chest and shoulders, and the shape gave the impression of the dancer/character being in control/in charge. This posture also read to me as in some way significant to the ‘group’ / tribe. It also added to that sense of being ready to pounce or attack at any moment.

(This upper body posture remains as described above for most of the number)

The head was to be tilted forward, with a slight lowering of the chin. The eye line was to be straight forward. I often described this “as if you are looking directly at someone but through your eyebrows.” This achieved an intimidatory effect.

Motif: 8-bar step

This included a phrase repeated 3 times, each time with a different ending. The final section was a stamp clap motif, ending with an arm movement (described below).

The main body of the step had a swaying effect, resulting from the dancers moving from crossed feet (normal Irish step dancing) to a feet apart configuration (not found in current Irish step dancing).

This swaying, side-to-side movement was a choreographic choice, but an up and down motion was to be avoided. Therefore, what would normally be hops were replaced with heel drops on the supporting leg instead – i.e. the level was not to change.

The 1st ending was simply a toe-heel(R), feet apart
The 2\textsuperscript{nd} ending was the leg(R) raised across the body, knee bend, foot flexed. This would be undesirable in traditional Irish step dancing.

The 3\textsuperscript{rd} ending was simply stamp(R)-stamp(L) … but back into parallel

… this led into the stamp-clap section, clapping taking place to the left of the head by the ear, head slightly turned away from hands, and eye line remaining forward.

The sequence ended with the hands clasped (after final clap), swinging above the head (initiated by the left tricep to cause the movement) to the right side of the head. The arms were to create a square box around the head, the elbows creating 2 of the box’s corners, diagonally across from each other, the clasped hands and shoulder the other 2 corners.

Again, this has no tangible relation to anything in particular, but surfaced as an option through improvisation, and worked in that it appeared to be something that this ‘tribe’ might do.

**Motif: Hand pulses with stomping**

This was to be executed without bending the elbows. As the foot stomped the floor (ball of foot only), the arms and fingers would stretch to a point beyond their natural range of motion. The entire body was to be rigid on at the point each stomp made contact with the floor.

I described this to the cast as follows:

“… it is almost as if when the ball of the foot connects with the ground, a pathway is opened up through the body to allow a high-voltage electric current to pass through your body exiting through the tips of the fingers. Imagine that the electricity is lighting, like when you touch a plasma globe in a museum.”

All of the repetition reflects the music. In fact, the percussive elements and the rhythmic upper body movements reflect very closely the pulse and melodic thrust of the music.

Many of the musical motifs are repeated, only modulating or being swapped from one instrument to another. I wanted the bodily motion and the rhythmic patterns to create a hypnotic effect, almost as if this is how this particular tribe overcame their enemy.
The general mood was one of menace with the music building as if to some frightening climax was imminent.

**Process**

The choreographic signature that was emerging from my habitus was revealing movement elements that a contemporary dancer might manage relatively easily but an Irish dancer would perhaps struggle with. Creating my first major work *Balor* in 2003 highlighted that if I make dance work as an Irish dancer (which I claim I am), the work must be made on Irish dancers. The contemporary dancers I worked with on *Balor* did not have the Irish dance basics nor the style and gait of an Irish dancer which was an important aesthetic quality which I held dear (see de Gallai 2007).

> I love how Breandán has really held on to Irish, you know the Irish dancing element of *Noctú*. I mean I know that no other dancer, no contemporary dancer could come in and learn what we do. You just can’t … you’ve got to be one of us who’ve done it our whole lives. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

However, those qualities that are not part of the Irish dancers’ lexicon did present a significant challenge. I managed to get the dancers to perform the authored work to my satisfaction by carefully considering my approach to the transmission process. This is where the relational dimension of my research surfaced and gave rise to the subjective and transformational. I needed the dancers to relate to and believe in all the creative elements so that the work could live and breathe:

> … the effective transfer of tacit knowledge is not something that can be easily achieved, requiring as it does a high level of personal contact and trust. (Brohm in Freeman 2010, p.179)

Years of strict training to attain a very precise dance discipline is hard to undo. What I choreograph feels comfortable on my body, not because I was more talented or have more training, but because it was coming from my habitus which just happens to be informed by, amongst many other things, some ballet and modern dance training, which the majority of the company had little exposure to.

> There are aspects in some of the dances as well where we have to have parallel feet and that in itself is a major challenge ... I suppose it doesn’t sound like much but after
learning and training for so long to have your feet turned out or crossed and then to step into having the parallel, shoulder width apart it doesn’t seem like such a big thing but like – even still now sometimes looking down and thinking they’re parallel but they are still turned out a bit. So I’m still adapting. (Nick O’Connell, 29th September 2011)

On a positive front, the young adults I encountered as I cast for Noćtū are very different from those I worked with in Balor. The Balor showcase was performed in 2003 by some of my colleagues from the Riverdance company as well as myself. The Noćtū cast come from a different socio-economic Ireland with less of a post-colonial mindset. They would have been described as ‘Celtic Cubs’, the children of a more prosperous ‘Celtic Tiger’ Ireland. In comparison to my Riverdance colleagues and I, they are more confident, more worldly and street-wise, certainly in comparison to us at their age. To them Riverdance had always existed. They were born into a world where Irish dance was a profession, which contrasted greatly with me and the Irish step dancers who came before me. I could hardly believe I was making a living from something which would have previously been know as a hobby. These young (Noćtū) dancers are more willing and more able to assimilate the new corporeal information, although they also are not without their limitations.

My own opinion is not supported by a dance blogger from New York, who strongly criticises the dancers, remarking on their surprising inability to do the most basic contemporary dance moves:

One wonders how such expert Irish dancers can be so inept at performing movements from other genres and so unpersuasive when they try to imbue their dancing with acting (Lisa Jo Sagolla, Backstage.com New York)

I discovered with Balor in 2003 that I had to be willing to adapt my choices if the choreographic outcomes were to be desirable. If the most talented dancer in the company struggles with the move/motif/etc., chances are it is unsuitable and perhaps ill-conceived. In some cases the time is not right, and the current project is not the one for that particular idea, but it may be possible to resurrect it in the future. Re-trying ideas successfully with a subsequent project is something I experienced as I went from Balor to Noćtū, but even more so as I produced Rite of Spring in the wake of Noćtū. I attribute this to the earlier work laying a foundation for the subsequent work to be more ambitious.
To achieve the best results, I believed that a possible approach would be to bringing the dancers on a similar journey to my own. I truly believed that if they, for example, could relate to Stravinsky’s ‘Infernal Dance’ as much as I did, they would dance it in the way that I wanted. The importance of the musical elements that inspired me in Noctú’s creation, even if it was the tiniest musical motif lost in the impenetrable labyrinth of sound, there is where the meaning lay and the dancers had to get into the music to find it so that the dance at that point would be what I wanted it to be. If I could insure that the impulse is similar for all, the movement might be as authentic for them as it is for me.

• He explained postures as “toffee”, which clearly means something to him ... the coherent exact feeling translates to you. It’s how he describes it – you have that vision in your head. Firebird for example, “2 walls 1 inch wide that you are trying to move through” … “one-eyed jack” … that’s what you think of. Be as 2-D as possible [describing a particular motif].” (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)

• How Breandán explains how to feel and how to move gives me my starting point ... every point he makes after we dance it starts to make sense in my head. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

• I felt that the way he explained how to do things made it very easy ... he explained where that was coming from, so I found it easy to work with because he was explaining it well. (Niamh Darcy, 29th September 2011)

• He paints a vision in your head by describing what he thinks it is. Best of all, he can show you himself, he’s fit enough and able enough. He can do it with you so you can see exactly what it is meant to be. He definitely uses a lot of descriptive language to get the point across. (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)

An intimate and trusting two-way relationship between choreographer and company was the strategic approach I implemented, where the dancers trusted me and believed in the approach, thus achieving a creative environment where experimentation could thrive. ‘Living’ the process therefore became a modus operandi for Ériu Dance Company. The company became a family: rehearsing together, living, eating, sleeping together and supporting each other. It was this that aided the kinesthetic transmission of the vocabulary.

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“This is very Pilobolus” (Ashlene McFadden during rehearsals in Gaith Dobhair as the 19-strong team eat dinner together in my sister’s house)

They found the work to be onerous at the beginning, but the overall picture became visible eventually. They began to appreciate that just imitating the move is not enough. They recognised that this new approach would take time and effort, and that I would have to continuously appraise the process, making changes where necessary.

I remember the general consensus being it was kind of off the wall, completely new, but everyone was enjoying it, learning it, finding it tough and a challenge but there seemed to be an underlying excitement about it as well. There was something more in it rather than just your run-of-the-mill reel or jig. (Nick O’Connell, 29th September 2011)

Breandán had a much much deeper understanding of what he wanted to achieve, so for someone to hear that at the start, it’s almost overwhelming … “he’s mad, that’s crazy”. The more you grow the more you understand it, the deeper you go … you can feel that way too. This is good too, because it takes us out of the Irish dancer status and moves us closer to a dancer that does Irish dance as such. (Joey Comerford, 5th September 2012)

You might not get the movement right straight away. You could try and just imitate that physically, purely physically, and you could get results that way, but if the intention is right that’s going to be closer to what he is going for. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

Breandán takes movements from ideas and once the movement is there it will kind of develop the way he wants for the sake of the movement. A movement for a purpose rather than movement for movement’s sake. Then it’s got the deeper meaning – like a method actor almost. (Joey Comerford, 5th September 2012)

Verbal explanations using simile and metaphor proved to be a useful way of transmitting ideas and material, particularly since many were accustomed to only needing to learn Irish step dancing movements in other shows or for competitions.

Personal input from the dancers is important to me. If I want them to relate to the project, it had to have meaning for them and this could be achieved by making them part of the process.

Breandán tells us how he would like it to look but he also gives you a chance to work with it yourself. So although he has choreographed it and given us the material, we get to bring out our own personality and our own individuality to the show. It’s a good thing

49 Our situation was not quite as intense as Pilobolus and only lasted the duration of the rehearsals and the run of production.
in the show – it is not fake, it’s very much real. Like the warm-up we do in the show, it’s not rehearsed, it’s completely free flowing. It’s what you would act like … it’s showing the dancers and what goes on in warm up right through to the show. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

This process was a new departure for the dancers and something that did not come easily. By the time I was doing the 2nd performance presentation, things had changed dramatically.

There’s a major difference to the way I perform it now to last year when I was just learning it. I didn’t understand it. It took a year to let it settle. Understanding the feeling behind the dances really makes you understand it more and be able to perform it better, not just do the steps but feel the emotion that goes with it. (Katrina O’Donnell, 1st October 2011)

Once the dancers related to the approach their views on the business of dancing and making dances altered, moving in line with my own.

**Stylistic Features**

The dancers struggled with the introduction of techniques and approaches that were new to their normal studio/rehearsal experience. Remembering the characteristics not common in Irish step dancing was also a challenge. Features included parallel feet (traditional Irish step dancing encourages turned out feet), bent knees, upper body movements, being hunched over, amongst others. How I wanted the feet to create the rhythm was also new to the dancers. Because of the aerial nature of Irish dance, hard shoe dance is often danced with quite a bit of movement across the space as well as including leaps. In creating percussive rhythm, the focus in *Noctú* is sometimes into the ground using stomping motions with only the ball of the foot. The knees are to be bent to execute the move. This may seem like a small request when described in a couple of sentences, but requires a huge shift in mental and physical engagement for the Irish step dancer. Their training is so concentrated and specialised, that years are spent ensuring that what I am asking of them would not happen, even accidentally. The material that I created which was atypical of the Irish step dance tradition therefore required monumental shifts in corporeal and cognitive engagement from all the dancers.

He uses very unique stances. A lot comes from the body and the lats [latissimus muscle]. It’s more hunched over. (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)
I think steps-wise it is a whole body experience, unlike normal dancing with just the feet which is also true of even Riverdance. They throw some arm movements in, but it’s more mechanical. There is a fluidity about it. It’s fluid, the whole body. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

Breandán’s postures are animalistic, to be down to the ground, digging the heel into the ground. (Gyula Glaser, 30th September 2011)

He has developed his own style. He makes up his own dance moves and positions and probably without him knowing it. (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)

The mood and tone of the work impact the dancers as well. Words to describe the finished product include animalistic, dark, eerie and sinister. This is very different from their understanding of how Irish dance shows are constructed.

He moved away from whole Irish dancing thing of tall and bright and happy. He wanted to get into the darker side, lower and parallel and very direct. It’s like you are peering into the audience. He uses a bunch rather than a line – a group – I think he calls it a swarm. And a lot of repetition. (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)

Formations are mentioned by almost everyone, the move away from the traditional circles, lines and various ‘V’ shapes to what we call the ‘clump’ or ‘swarm’.

My intention always in terms of floor patterns and the spacial organisation of the company was one of egalitarianism and randomness. Although there are times when the principal characters must stand out for narrative purposes, I never pick people out to be in front because they are stronger dancers. The approach is having dancers take up their position wherever they happen to find themselves.

There is no front line back line. It’s more of a clump of dancers rather than a particular formation and that is something that Breandán never said back in rehearsal period. It was the way that dancers fell rather than “you are front and centre and you are left corner.” He just kind of nearly let that come into a natural progression I suppose. (Nick O’Connell, 29th September 2011)

They understand my love of the beautiful uniqueness of the various bodies and appreciated the power rooted in that.
We had to hit the same shape but everybody’s body was different – that was the beautiful thing about it – everybody would move together, but because everybody’s body was different, it had a different appeal. (Kienan Melino, 1st August 2012)

Music

It has been said to me many times by many people, that music seems to be very central to me in terms of the motivation and stimulus behind making choreographic work. Certainly, it is very difficult for me to create a piece to music I do not like, and this I’ve had to do professionally over the years.

When it came to creating Noctú, the inclusion of certain music was beyond question. There were four pieces that I had workshopped separately to the Noctú project itself, which included Tango, Shadow Dolls, Anxiety and Firebird/UnderWorld. Intuitively I knew that these pieces were destined for a large-scale work, and being able to develop them to varying degrees of completeness at the University of Limerick meant that I was well positioned as the Noctú project began. On this occasion, working with one group of dancers for an intense and extended period, meant that I could attempt new things with the numbers that were not possible at workshop stage. In reality, the pieces did not really come into their own until the Irish Rep Theatre run in New York. These musical pieces had captivated me, either on my first encounter with them, or as I delved deeper into them on subsequent listening. The remaining musical numbers came from a shortlist that I drew up with some suggestions from my life partner.

Hearing ‘Anxiety’ (West Ocean Quartet) for the first time is a perfect example of a satisfying phenomenological encounter with an entity that is suddenly filled with meaning for me. The concert took place in my hometown of Gaoth Dobhair (venue – Ionad Cois Locha). The live version of this piece, with its sense of urgency and tension, had me elated and wishing I had a studio there and then to get started on creating something. Rarely does a first hearing of a piece of music have such an impact on me, but the fact that the performance was live and delivered by such fine musicians played a major role.

Shadow Dolls and UnderWorld are original compositions by friend and collaborator, composer Joe Csibi. Both pieces of music (with different names at the time) had been written for the dance
project Balor and were my favourite movements from the show. I felt it would be a shame if they never got to be heard by the public.

Firebird was one of those pieces that I disliked at first and within six months my attitude towards it completely transformed. It was part of the Leaving Certificate music syllabus and I had no choice but to study it, but it opened up the world of Stravinsky for me.

All the pieces impacted me on a gut level, something resonating viscerally when I heard them. I wanted to work with music that I liked, and in some way they were loaded with meaning for me and would work for the dance number in question.

It reminds us that we live in a cosmopolitan world, with a “shuffle” option on music from all kinds of times and places. (Megin Jimenez, NYTheatre.com New York)

As the rehearsal period began, I quickly noticed that not everyone would have the same reaction to the music as I did, and indeed would listen to it very differently. Part of the work-making and transmission process became isolating the phrases or musical motifs for the dancers that I choreographed directly to. This was not always straightforward. In authoring the dance I found I often chose (not deliberately) very subtle passages, or instruments that were very low in the soundscape mix.

» I feel like he is very musical. I feel like the music is always the starting point... and a lot of the time what comes out of that... ends up being something quite different... he knows where he’s going... he is very thorough. I feel like he’s never quite happy with it until it is exactly right.

» And I think his own personal musical taste is definitely influenced what he’s done a lot because I know Breandán likes jazz a lot, and obviously he has used that sort of music in the show and that’s worked really well. He’s using music which he likes personally and that’s probably, apparently why the choreography is so good because you’re dancing something that you really love. It means that you can really get into it and it means that you feel it and that’s what makes it exactly what it is, because if his taste was different, if he had picked something by Beethoven rather than Stravinsky, it would have been completely different you know. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

» Breandán’s style is very abstract... he doesn’t feel like he has to go with the Irish dance technique he just goes along with how he feels with the music... how he styles it is exactly how he feels. Other choreographers would worry about what other dancers would think. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)
You are not just dancing a dance. He actually makes up the steps to music … little beats that we don’t even hear, he’s actually making up the dance to. (Ellen Bonner, 1st June 2012)

He can hear something, this one thing, and we don’t hear it. We could be listening to something completely different. It does take a little bit of time to listen to the music the same way he does. Something in the music may be so strong to him and we may not have even heard it before – the soft sounds in the background verses the strong stuff in the foreground. I had the music playing in my car all the time (Kyla Marsh, 1st October 2011)

The other thing about his choreography is how so closely it reflects the music. I feel like you could give Breandán any piece of music, anything at all, and he would find a way of using the whole body and really capturing a rhythm that maybe no one else would even hear in the music. I think he’s got a 6th sense when it comes to that. There is such a musicality about it – the choreography. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

The way that I did end up learning it, ironically, was sitting in the car and just listening to the music over and over again, even though I didn’t know the steps I could see like, just the formations on stage, it was just by osmosis that I really had to learn it which is completely different from any other way I’ve ever learnt dancing. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

He has a very alternative view on music. He’s always listening to it differently ...
He’s very artsey as well. He thinks in a different way, even when he sitting there he’s always thinking … I don’t know what it is that drives him. (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)

What I find particularly satisfying is how the dancers talk about the music now that they have danced to it. Experiencing it positively, in these best of circumstances, altered how they listened, transforming them and their opinions.

When you first hear it you just hear it as a piece, whereas now you hear the little instruments in the background that the actual beats are being danced to. It gives you a great understanding of the piece, if that makes sense. I feel like I know the music inside out. (Ellen Bonner, 1st June 2012)

*Feelings Emotions Expression*

… the body … creates its own object of knowledge, as something that unashamedly elevates body-feeling over mind-knowing: the root and branch of practice as research. (Artaud in Freeman 2010, p.179)

As mentioned, a key theme is an affective engagement with the work. The purpose of this intensely intimate process approach is for the dancers to feel in some way what I feel as I conceive
the work, having as close a relationship with its meaning as I do myself. Whether this was to be possible or not remained to be seen, but certainly an outcome had to be the feeling of *something* not only in the delivery of the narrative but indeed in the embodiment and execution of the steps.

> I think the most important thing is that we interpret how Breandán means them [postures/motifs/choreographic ideas] to be interpreted ... you’re almost entitled to have your own opinion, but at the same time you have to have the understanding of his meaning ...

> Things have meaning to him – they have soul in that sense – even if people don’t get it, that’s not the point, when you perform his choreography it’s important to appreciate the meaning of it, provided you do that, what people appreciate or don’t appreciate is up to them, it doesn’t really matter to him. That is the foundation of what he wants, it’s not really about the greatest technical Irish dancer in the world nor does it mean that you need to be the greatest contemporary dancer in the world ... it’s a matter of being able to perform the meaning of the choreography to him. (Joey Comerford, 5th September 2012)

Although I had a clear and definite outcome in my head about what the end product would be, I encouraged the dancers to script situations, monologues or dialogues so that the work contained meaning for them. In the editing process, I would make choices based on what it was I wanted from the outset, but their involvement led to an embracing of the work that might not have been as acute otherwise. Sometimes their unique contribution, although different from my own, was ‘perfect’ and included unedited or amended.

> The process of developing not just the number but the style was an organic process. We felt we were part of it – nothing was ever set, nothing was made specific. We’d run and run a piece and then someone would move differently, just because of the way they move and Breandán would notice, it would intrigue him, you could see it on his face – we learned to pick that up – we learned to read those signs. We all actively developed as a group ... that little ‘mistake’ could change the whole dynamic ... that is what I liked about his way of teaching and choreographing us – it was never really forced. (Kieran Melino, 1st August 2012)

Very often I make definite choreographic choices, such as the position of the head relative to the body and limbs; the eye-line; how the knees plié; or the position of the feet, etc., but a thrust of my work is to allow expression, internally felt, to surface in some way on the body. It can be an incredibly subtle, hardly visible movement, gesture or posture. Regardless of the size of gesture it is important that how it is articulated begins with some internal energy. This expression, and
how it manifests on the body and in facial expressions is another attribute of the work that stands out to the dancers.

> Intensity in our eyes – a few dances you can see a different expression on different people’s faces (angry for e.g.) ... everyone has their own way of showing it. That would be unique to Breandán’s style. I’ve never seen that in any other show. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

So although this expression in the end might be precisely articulated, often with definite structure and architecture for the greater objective of the ensemble work in the production, all dancers feel like an individual within the show. This, I believe has to do with their own unique internal energy, how they generate it, how they harness it, and how they channel it to achieve the desired affect. This personal, individual approach is important to them. This is something they did not experience when working with other companies. In those situations material was just taught and they just executed it ... nothing deeper or transformational.

> He’s trying to tell a story from the beginning, not just using the 3 main characters – to show emotion through the dance – to give a picture to the audience of the dancer themselves not just the 3 lead dancers. Also as an ensemble showing our individuality, showing ourselves as dancers – what kind of dancer we are what we feel when we dance the emotions we feel when we dance. When we’re dancing the audience are getting a little clip of what we are as dancers and how we feel as a dancer. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

**Biography**

Self-portraiture ... in performance terms ... is reliant on four elements for its existence ... artist as subject (model, as theme); the event or object that accommodates the expression; the image of the self, the ‘myself’ within the artist’s own notions; and finally the reading of that work undertaken by spectators and/or viewers ... By putting one’s own body and experience forward within a live (arts) space the artist becomes both object and subject within the frame of the work and, as a consequence, this situation allows the artist to interrogate and articulate that relationship. (Freeman 2010, p.177)

It seems now, on reflection, that many of themes and the central characters in Noctú are informed by me and my personal life story. They mirror my insecurities and struggles, and perhaps the work is to act as a cathartic release in some way. A significant theme is how we allow people to rob us of our confidence, causing a change in our status, self-opinion and general life-direction.
In the last few years I have got to know him [Breandán] really really quite well through the *Riverdance*. I had a few experiences there and he was really supportive which was awesome, but in saying that I’ve got to know him as a person, so straight off the bat when I first saw the video of Noctú – the Lisburn performance – straight away I was “that’s an autobiographical piece”. I think those 3 lead characters in Noctú, he’s pulled from aspects of his own life and his own experiences to create those characters. Straight away it was obvious to me. I know it wouldn’t be obvious to the audience, but the fact that it comes straight from him as a person and as a dancer, you know, the characters are really 3-dimensional. They are more than just the character you’d get in any other play that has been imagined up as something. They are real – like it’s him!

I don’t think you can put a label on any of those characters because there is just so much going on and it’s purely because it has come directly from Breandán himself. I think as dancers we can sense that, because he had allowed us to get to know him so well, I think that’s why we can perform the show ... that’s because it is deeply personal I think. His work is really personal. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

I think I learned more about you from watching Noctú than all the time I’ve known you. (Mairead Ni Bhriain, colleague and friend, in conversation)

Times have changed and Irish dancers of today are different from my peers and I, but all dancers mention relating to the themes of isolation addressed in *Noctú* having either experienced something similar or seeing others they care about suffer in a similar fashion.

This show is completely about Breandán, it’s about him telling his story, but also the way other dancers feel. I definitely think Breandán has taken different types of dancers, all different types of personalities. He has allowed the audience to feel a little more emotion and not just the footwork and how we look – more so how we feel, and as a dancer what we experience. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

By adapting a traditional dance form and placing it on a different dance platform, one where it would rarely be presented, I was opening myself up for criticism by those belonging to this platform who might not be particularly welcoming. This might be a space that is minded and policed enviously with eminent custodians well positioned to exclude and reject those whom they might believe do not belong.

Perhaps if it didn’t promise so much, Noctú wouldn’t be such a great disappointment. (Lisa Jo Sagolla, Backstage.com New York)

Sagolla compiles a list – that which Noctú claims it offers which she does not believe it delivers – “aims to push the boundaries of the Irish dance tradition … a new departure for the Irish dance
show genre … deliver powerful performances through text and dance” (Noctú press release, Sept 2011). In reality, the only thing she can accurately claim is that these performances to her are not powerful. All the other claims are in fact true. I have met no one close to the Irish dance world that would dispute that Noctú pushes the boundaries; departs from the Irish dance show genre; or delivers performance through text and dance. Perhaps there are Irish dancers who might agree with Sagolla that they are not powerful, but that is where agreement would end.

So what did I achieve then according to Sagolla?

Instead, it offers a string of Irish dance routines, many performed in the precision ensemble fashion of “Riverdance” and others consisting of solos in which skilled dancers season their well-executed Irish steps with feeble attempts at modern dance-like movements. (Lisa Jo Sagolla, Backstage.com New York)

She then evaluates some of the finest dancers I have worked with:

One wonders how such expert Irish dancers can be so inept at performing movements from other genres and so unpersuasive when they try to imbue their dancing with acting (Lisa Jo Sagolla, Backstage.com New York)

The juxtaposition of the stoic competition-style and commercial-style dancing in the ‘Ceilí50’ was lost on her it seems … “Their big, happy smiles, alternating with pained expressions” (Lisa Jo Sagolla, Backstage.com New York). Many others reviewing with no cultural departure point of the nuances of Irish dance, understood its relevance:

It begins with the dancers warming up for an exaggerated piece mocking what we all know Irish dancing to be. The skirts are short, the faces serious, and the cheerleading component with comically large smiles is creepy. The show introduces what Irish dancing has turned into in order to then demonstrate all that it can be. (Sarah Lucie, Show Business New York)

In addition, the “zombielike stares, and stern glaring at the floor, convey nothing” to her. Her one complement, backhanded at best as she demonstrates no real interest in who might be responsible for the piece, is followed by more criticism:

50 Ceili, in the Irish dance vernacular can refers to a group dance for the step dance community. A Ceili is actually a social event where team dances are danced.
And why is the choreography (presumably by de Gallai) of the Irish steps and patterns in the group numbers so well crafted while the non-Irish movements consist of nothing more than chest contractions, heel bounces in lunge positions, overhead arm stretches, and some silly pantomimed actions? (Lisa Jo Sagolla, Backstage.com New York)

Sagolla and I clearly have a very different corporeal ideology. She seems to recognise these movements as the stuff of modern dance, set carelessly in the context of an Irish step dance routine. I argue that I simply encounter them on my life journey and they are filled with meaning for me. Whether I found them in a Modern dance class or otherwise is irrelevant. Some are movements to be found in any culture. Their execution may alter on my body and as I mentioned earlier, this is common in the assimilation of material in the Irish step dance world.

I would argue that through a choreographer’s unique creative process, motifs emerge that are stimulating, perhaps based simply on stuff we observe around us, or that has entered our bodies as we experience life. If that motif or movement feels right, satisfying our aesthetic sensibility, it remains and may appear quite often in our work. Then owing to a combination of that choreographer’s uniqueness, power, position, personality, and especially performance of said motif, it might be welcomed by peers into the theatrical dance lexicon. It becomes a codified movement signature associated with that choreographer because of their particular articulation of the motif. I believe this could be true of many of the great dance pioneers.

The actual reason that those movements exist in my choreography can only really be known by me. To claim that I threw them in because I thought it would ‘contemporise’ the Irish dance is a mistake.

“The entire show is marred by its creators’ lack of imagination and inability to capture an audience’s interest” – the show achieved a standing ovation almost every night. This is not to claim that the show was liked by all, or that it was worthy of appearing on the stages of New York again, but nobody walked out, people applauded, reaction to me and the dancers was always positive, and 90% of those who reviewed it did so positively.

The negativity about the show continues … “Even the costumes and lighting are uninspired.” Granted, the costumes were deliberately understated for the purposes of the Noctú, or stripping
back theme, but Michael O’Connor is a very well respected lighting designer and highly sought after even in the Sagolla’s contemporary dance world. (O’Connor lit Jean Butler’s ‘Day’ and ‘Hurry’, both well received by the New York Times).

The pieces of text were “artless attempts to express two highly unoriginal ideas, both of which have been explored more convincingly and meaningfully in a host of other dance and theater pieces.”

She does admit to the Irish dancing being “exemplary” but the piece having a juvenile feel due to the “production’s young cast, naïve themes, and unsophisticated interpretations of pop music selections” … describing the dance as … “reminiscent of those lyrical jazz routines popular at dance competitions” … the show having a quality “out of sync with its Off-Broadway audience.”

She finishes with “While boundary pushing is often a good thing – and Irish dance shows might well benefit from it – this production is pushing in the wrong direction.” Ironically, the community Sagolla claims to be an expert on – the Broadway/Off Broadway world – nominated Nočtú for two Drama Desk Awards\(^1\): “Outstanding Choreography” and “Unique Theatrical Event”.

Brian Seibert’s review (New York Times) begins with, “Pity the poor Irish dancer”. The New York Times have very open and vociferous dislike for Riverdance and Seibert in this review sets out his position very clearly in the first paragraph. Riverdance and anything that has followed in that vein he calls “assaultive and inane”, so “Presenting Irish dance any differently has proved a daunting challenge.”

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\(^1\) The 58th Annual Drama Desk Awards

**Outstanding Choreography Shortlist:**

**Winner** – Christopher Gattelli, *Newsies The Musical*

**Unique Theatrical Event Shortlist:**
*Give Me Your Hand; Gob Squad’s Kitchen (You’ve Never Had It So Good); Nočtú; The Complete & Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O’Neill, Vol. 1: Early Plays/Lost Plays; The Ryan Case 1873; White*

**Winner** – *Gob Squad’s Kitchen (You’ve Never Had It So Good)*
Like some others he is not a fan of the monologues – “all mercifully brief.” His description of the dance vocabulary is “traditional Irish, capering feet set against a rigid upper body”. He seems to understand that the mattress sequence represents a private moment for all three central characters but makes a snide remark about them being in their underwear … “Or are they meant to be baring their souls?” In his opinion “nothing is resolved”, but seems to accept that some other emotions are present in this use of the movement genre – “Slightly relaxed and mussed, it vaguely gestures at sexual excitement, longing and loneliness, emotions that may or may not be directed at other characters.” The constant return to the dancers in “their skivvies” and references to “Calvin Klein” makes it clear that to him this costuming decision is not a good idea. It seems that nudity, or semi-nudity can only be done in a certain way, and that what is achieved in Noctú is simply about marketing.

The biggest difference to other Irish dance work is musical according to Seibert when he compares with Riverdance and Lord of the Dance. Noctú is not the only work at the mercy of this expert – Grammy winning music from Riverdance is also up for criticism, the score being described as “awful modernising of Irish music”. He uses the word ‘schlock’ for Csibi’s original music in Noctú. He finds the other musical choices therefore better than Riverdance, but believes that they “don’t spur Mr. de Gallai to any corresponding invention”.

Clearly an expert in Irish dance, he remarks that “the choreography is Irish dance of little distinction”, and the adjustments to the form as “boilerplate borrowings from modern dance”.

Firebird is the best routine “surprisingly”, he describes the cast as moving like a “gang of zombies … the stiff torso of Irish dance serves well as rigor mortis”. He feels the number would work better on a larger stage.

_I realise now that Noctú was meant to exercise demons – to confront crippling timidity, look it in the eye and to let it go. A work that was meant to act as catharsis and healing was the very thing that lead me into the lions den – a world were bullying and meanness not is only allowed, but nurtured!_ (Author’s Journal, 9th June 2013)
Opening myself up to this level of criticism is like reliving all the feelings Noctú is meant to address. This is not an easy task, but it is one of the repercussions from the risky road I choose to navigate.

I do not believe that Noctú was objectively evaluated by Sagolla or Seibert as biases shine through. But they do illustrate perfectly the culture of exclusivity in ‘clubs’ such as the ethnocentric world of the ‘high’ arts.

I feel like the message is ... we’re dancing in our own way that is totally different. It doesn’t mean that it is right or wrong but we’re just kinda doing our own thing. It’s totally unique but it works for us – that is effectively the nature of dance ... or should be ... is that if it feels right and it works for you then ... that’s it. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

**The Genesis and Why of the Movement**

Individuals have suggested that some of the movement they see in my work can be traced back to various dance and movement systems I have experienced throughout my life. This is true but not actively striven for or intentional. Clearly, as I mentioned above, the baseline source is traditional Irish step dancing. Many of the upper body gestures could be categorised as ‘modern’ in the mid – to late-twentieth century dance-sense of the word. They would have entered my habitus as I experienced their nature on a more 3-dimensional-than-me, unfragmented, significant ‘O’ther in phenomenologically positive circumstances. My approach to the percussive elements can sometimes emulate Flamenco. In the soft shoe dances, some ballet vocabulary makes an appearance. There are South American influences in the form of Tango as well as a short moment of Salsa. The Tango is not danced in pairs, and includes Irish dance foot percussion. But the intention in this number, to me, is Latin. Professional ‘modern’ dancers, ballet dancers, and south American tradition-holders of the Tango and Salsa genre might well scoff at the feeble attempts to ‘fuse’ their traditions to Irish dance, but it is here that the first big mistake might occur in the work’s evaluation. Although I might have picked up some of these moves in the modern classes of Gus Giordano’s in Chicago, or performing alongside Yolanda Gonzales Sobrado, my flamenco colleague in Riverdance, ‘fusion’ was not an intention in creating this work. No one style exists with the baseline Irish step dance in any one number. In the mix there also exists a unique personal approach to its execution – minute subtle movements, pedestrian actions, the ingredients
being drawn together in an Irish dancing body. Everything influences, relating to and being informed by the world of individuals around me:

I am a ‘child of the times’; I am a member of a we-community in the broadest sense – a community that has its tradition and that, for its part, is connected in a novel manner with the generative subjects, the closest and the most distant ancestors. And these have ‘influenced’ me: I am what I am as an heir. (Husserl in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.86)

To the non-dancer audience member, they see movement that either excites them and speaks to them on a gut level, or not. To the dancer or dance expert, there seems to be a culture of claiming motifs or movements as exclusively from a particular genre, almost claiming that they belong only there:

… boilerplate borrowings from modern dance (Brian Siebert, New York Times)

You reminded me of when he [Breandán] said during this run that these modern dancer or contemporary dancers who are really critical of Noćtū, and he was “who are you to have a monopoly on movements” … and it is funny how I guess it is in every walk of life and in the dance world there is an opinion almost that each genre has been assigned a certain style or way of moving or a set number of movements. If you move away from that then you’re changing genres. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

My belief is that when Martha Graham ‘contracted’ or José Limón ‘fell and recovered’, it felt right to them for very complex and personal reasons. Their peers, I imagine, reacted positively to this novel dance action, partially due to their psychological engagement with the choreographer as a significant ‘O’ther in terms of dance-making. But the randomness of the universe decreed that, due to their artistry, excellent technique, drive, as well as some fortunate turns of events, the work persisted and flourished. They may have explored the world of movement around them, actively or passively to arrive at the point they did, but at the end of the day, it is how they did it – their ratio of movement ingredients that made it their signature.

Still Irish Dance?

Interestingly, all of the dancers continued to relate to the dance as Irish step dance, still feeling like Irish dancers performing the material.
It is still very much Irish dancing to me anyway. It may not be to the traditionalists. Obviously it does have its contemporary influence, and ballet. It’s unique in that way in that it is an amalgamation. (Niamh Darcy, 29th September 2011)

The dancers are united in their use of language in how they see the material and what dance forms might have influenced me. Ballet, modern and contemporary were common terms used to describe what could have impacted on my choreographic process. ‘Contemporary’ is a word that I am not convinced the dancers use in the strictest sense in terms of dance classification, but ironically they use it more accurately in terms of what the word actually means in a general sense. Modern or contemporary dance to them is exactly just that – dance of today. Those stylistic features can vary from musical theatre to popular theatrical dance to the avant garde – basically the movement they see around them.

There was mention of it being a new approach to Irish dance, a new generation:

I think it is the new generation Irish dance. I still consider it Irish dance. Loads of people out there want to bring Irish dance in a new direction. I’d still class it as Irish dancing but taken to a whole new level – the next step. (Ellen Bonner, 1st June 2012)

With myself being in the higher age bracket ... relearning ... it was Irish dance but it wasn’t Irish dance. It was liberating. It’s something if I sat and watched I would appreciate but I would never think I’d be doing myself. (Kienan Melino, 1st August 2012)

It’s hard for me to say cause I don’t know a huge amount about what else is out there in the wider dance world, but I certainly feel that Breandán’s choreography is … there’s no real precedent to it. I wouldn’t say there’s anything else, or anyone else that’s doing the same thing just now, certainly not at this time. I feel like it’s gone out on a limb. It’s very unique because it’s still Irish dancing effectively but it’s so different from anything else that any other Irish dancers are doing. But because it is ‘Irish dancing’ it’s not the same as anything else that’s happening in contemporary dance either. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

Although many thought of it as new Irish dance vocabulary, some felt that copying it would not lead to a success:

**Kyla:** I think if someone was to copy this style they would be just copying. I don’t think it is necessarily a new style of Irish dancing because it is Breandán’s style. If someone copied, it would hard to do.

**Ash:** To be clear … copying his style, it would recognisably be a copycat because his style is so unique? You would say “hold on that’s Breandán’s style that you just copied?”
Kyla: Yeah! (Kyla Marsh being interviewed by Ashlene McFadden, 6pm 1st October 2011)

My analysis of the conversation above is that, distilling the work down into a series of possible moves which seem central to the style would not lead to a successful choreographic outcomes. It is the process and the central themes of this particular work that made sense of this material, rather than these ‘moves’ becoming part of the Irish dance lexicon.

**Comparison to Other Shows**

In terms of stylistic features to be found in the commercial show world, all dancers shared the view that the ‘wow’ factor of these productions could be attributed to floor patterns of lines, circles and V-formations, as well as a ‘frontal’ approach to their presentation, a feature that was not new and could be seen on the West End and Broadway stages long before 1994\(^2\). There was general agreement, which mirrored my position, that since *Riverdance* had a large degree of success with this approach, there existed a belief in the sector that an audience has a tacit expectation of presentations employing these devices. This, they believe, led to a lack of imagination creatively, leading to copycat shows simply imitating rather than inventing something new. Although the dancers do not articulate this point exactly in this manner, there is certainly a transformation in how they value presentations, and their experience with *Noctú* is one, that in the absence of these stylistic approaches, the audience do not have a poorer experience as a result.

All the dancers feel compelled to compare the atmosphere and culture that surrounds *Noctú* and other shows they had been involved with and how it differs dramatically. In their opinion, there is also a social culture rampant in the commercial shows that can be toxic. Competitiveness is encouraged and positions of responsibility and principal roles are enviably solicited or held on to.

Also, the importance of their personal, unique contribution owing to their own distinctiveness, is valuable to them and how they feel being part of *Noctú*. So although they are *Noctú* ensemble dancers, they are not just a body to make up a long line of dancers dancing in unison. This too is always my intention.

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\(^2\) The first performance of *Riverdance* as the interval act of the Eurovision Song Contest.
... Riverdance/Lord of the Dance were successful because there were lines etc. – the “wow look at them in one line” factor. Here [Nochtú] the show is all about individuals, the diversity of the world. You don’t have to have these strict formations that the others shows have, it’s all about being a mass of people and within that mass there are different people. (Gyula Glaser, 30th September 2011)

One of the most significant comments describes the level of cognitive and physical engagement the dancers need and want to provide for Nochtú. In other shows dancers can go on autopilot very soon into the run of performances.

You never let your mind wonder ... in other shows you are spotting people in audience, thinking of what you are doing afterwards. It becomes autopilot. With Breandán’s stuff you don’t get to do that. That’s what I loved about it. You kind of involved yourself so much you forget about the whole world. You felt you owed it to the dance ... you focused on the intensity and energy ... and maybe even anger ... the dark with light ... in tune and in touch ... if it had to be delicate you did that. You had to be in that frame of mind. (Kieran Melino, 1st August 2012)

It is accepted, and this is informed by my own experience, that troupe dancing in the commercial show genre can leads to a comfortable disengagement, although principals, being in the spotlight and performing solo with often more difficult material, do not disengage to the same degree. In contrast, in the performance of Nochtú, it seems that the sense of being an individual, almost a soloist in your own right in each ensemble, aids in creating a performance atmosphere that is conducive to a hundred percent commitment at all times.

They also commented that the ‘boss’ – choreographer/director/company manager/owner, being a dancer, made life more bearable. My agenda, according to them, is purely for the good of the production, and nothing is ever personal. Taking notes and direction is much easier as a result.

The commercial/professional shows ... for me are “budget, cut to nothing” shows ... it is refreshing to have someone who is not dancing in the company teaching and drilling you ... instead of some 20 year old “lead [principal] on a power trip”. That’s refreshing. It’s good to have the creator telling you what it is, so you have it way it should be. (Niamh Darcy, 29th September 2011)

All the commercial shows I’ve been in do not give a fuck about the show. They have a contract and when the contract is finished they go somewhere else. If it goes down the toilet it doesn’t matter cause they have work elsewhere. Here it is very different, I think most of the people do believe in what we are doing and believe it’s meant to be done now and meant to be done here – this is a way of doing it as well. As a dancer I am not
looking forward to going back to the other shows cause I know I will be annoyed with the people that are just there and they do not a shit about what they do and they might resent me having a different point of view, trying to make things better or taking things a little be more seriously. For them it’s good craic\textsuperscript{53} ... for me, it’s a passion. It’s what I do … it’s what I want to be good at. (Gyula Glaser, 30\textsuperscript{th} September 2011)

What pleases me the most is how the company felt like a family. The Noctú runs were not without their dramas, but in general the company feel tight, close-knit and supported.

- This is a much more intimate, small company and with Breandán taking on the role of looking after pretty much everything as well as making the show, you don’t see that is your boss. He’s there all the time. You build up a good relationship with him ... you can go to him if you have a problem. (Callum Spencer, 1\textsuperscript{st} October 2011)

- I felt it was different. I had done different shows before working with Breandán. It was more like a class on a school trip. Everyone was so close but we got the work done. It was more like a family, people were much closer – it wasn’t so much like a job. People were expressing themselves, and you felt free to do that. Nobody would look down at you … there was no right or wrong way. (James Greenan, 9\textsuperscript{th} July 2012)

- There’s more of a team ethic. At the end of the shows everyone strips to their under-wear, everyone gets a bow and there is a massive feeling of team spirit, everyone’s dancing for the same reason. It’s so powerful. You’re not just dancing for yourself. Everyone gives 110% and we’re dancing for each other and not just for ourselves. It’s a powerful feeling. (James Greenan, 9\textsuperscript{th} July 2012)

- Breandán has a different way of working. It’s not a business or employee-employer relationship. He want’s to know the person – he’s more interested in the person and where they’ve come from and their background … who they are rather than if they can do a step right. That’s what I found. It’s more like a family. He’s like a father figure. He cares about the people, rather than bodies to fill up his piece. That’s the big thing I can say about that. (James Greenan, 9\textsuperscript{th} July 2012)

- It was such an incredible opportunity to be part of it. I’m glad I got to do it. The people in Noctú are different from other shows. They may not be the best Irish dancers in the world … that doesn’t matter it’s what they’re dancing for and why they’re there. It’s a different feeling. (James Greenan, 9\textsuperscript{th} July 2012)

- Breandán cares about the show more so than other bosses in other shows. They didn’t really care what the show looked like, it was more about how much money they could make. Whereas Breandán cares about what it looks like. He wants it to be perfect which I think is amazing. It shows that he’s not selfish I guess. It’s not about the money for him.

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\textsuperscript{53} Craic – an expression used in Ireland which refers to ‘fun’
– it’s about showing how he feels and showing his story. He wants his story to be told. That’s up to us to do it the best we can. (Katrina O’Donnell, 1st October 2011)

There was a recognition that who you are mattered more to me that what you have achieved. They also appreciate that their opinions and contributions are listened to and implemented.

Breandán is not your typical choreographer. He wouldn’t just pick you because you are world champion. He sees potential in everyone – that alone made me work even harder. I have opportunities here even though I’m not world champion. He doesn’t need us to be technically perfect. He questions “what is perfect?”

I think Breandán puts his heart and soul into his work. I’ve worked with others making up steps on the spot, but Breandán has a work-in-progress for years, and everything he does he wants to be perfect. It means so much to him. His passion for his show makes us want to work harder and perfect for that reason. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

For him nothing is right nor wrong ... he allows for someone else to interpret what he has done and maybe present it in a different way and I love it that he allows that. And I don’t know if many choreographers would. They’d be “no no no this is the way it is and just do it and I don’t care if it feels really fucking awkward!” (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011)

This leads to a professionalism and commitment that is hard to find.

I feel like even though now we’ve done the show for quite a long time, especially here [New York] – 5 weeks of doing it sometimes twice a day – I feel like I’ve never got bored. I’ve never been just going through the motions. I feel like when you are dancing that you are always really connecting with it, really going for it. I don’t feel like I have to struggle to put a lot into it because I enjoy it so much and because I find the choreography so powerful and ... I don’t know ... I feel like it’s … it’s like I was saying to you one day, I feel like every time I dance Firebird and Underworld, even if we’re just marking it for rehearsal, I can’t help but really put everything into it because – it’s just the way you feel when you are doing it. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

**Personal Impact of Nochtú on Dancers**

The dancers speak passionately about how being involved with Nochtú affects them immeasurably as people. A broadening of their knowledge of, and interest in the dance world in general is mentioned by almost all. This is something they had heretofore felt naïve about. Most significantly, an increased confidence, self-belief in what they can achieve as dancers and in life in general is the most common transformation they experience.
It’s totally opened my mind. I’m literally willing to try anything. I feel like it’s freed me up. (Ellen Bonner, 1st June 2012)

I suppose before meeting and starting to work with Breandán I never would have realised my potential or the potential an Irish dancer could have. I suppose we’re probably too sheltered as Irish dancers and there are boundaries there to be pushed, and Breandán is certainly doing that. And maybe it will show the Irish dance world that you can give a lot more and do a lot more. (Nick O’Connell, 29th September 2011)

I think this show has been the best thing I’ve ever done as a dancer. In a sense it’s given me – it’s hard to explain – I guess I was always the type of person, I was always too shy, or if I tried something people would think I was stupid or looked stupid. I was always afraid to just let go and try it. I guess this show has helped me with that and has helped me with my confidence. It was low before it [Noctū] and I was always quite happy to stay at the back and dance away. I’ve never ever gone [put myself forward] for anything before. In this show I’ve pushed myself to do things that I would never ever do in a million years in any dance show or even in my competitive career. I had OK results [in competitive dancing] but I never believed in myself and I guess this show has given that to me. (Katrina O’Donnell, 1st October 2011)

When I completed my MA thesis which explored my choreographic work on Firebird, I found that the company of dancers involved took ownership of the work, once they passed the uncertainty of the contemporary, non-traditional nature of the material. They felt entitled to question any changes I would subsequently make, even though they might have been at odds with the work initially. This experience, which was a fulfilling one for me, is repeated with Éríu Dance Company and the material in Noctū. The dancers feel as close to the work as I do and protect its integrity forcefully.

I nearly feel emotionally attached to the different dances. I feel like I can relate to the different pieces – I get a great thrill from it. (Ellen Bonner, 1st June 2012)

They recognise that I have a very open mind with regards to the wider world of dance and see its influences in my choreography. Some began to explore other movement possibilities. Jack and Gyula made their way from our company accommodation in New Jersey almost every morning to take ballet in the Alvin Ailey studios in Manhattan.

Gyula reflects on how his perspective on what being a touring dancer means:

The reason I absolutely love doing this show, and it’s not because this is an interview for Breandán, but because I am challenged in every single second on stage, which I’ve
never experienced anywhere else. When I toured before, I used to think I am touring, I am dancing, but now as after this, I don’t just think of myself as a touring dancer but a dancer who’s life is on stage. I think of myself as a dancer more than before, because I want to extend myself into the different areas of dance, that’s why I took ballet classes. It’s really just the whole show and the choreography and his way of thinking about dancing. My eyes are opened to how much more is out there in the dancing world to learn, how much more I could pick up and that would have me become a better dancer and have me do stuff that I wouldn’t do had I not been part of this. (Gyula Glaser, 30th September 2011)

They speak about how they change as dancers because they feel that it is their show, their story.

If I hadn’t have done it I wouldn’t be the dancer I am today. I felt my body mature into the movement. I felt myself change throughout this whole experience both personally and emotionally. It’s taken us so many places, plus the fact that it’s so innovative and brand new movement. It’s not just another dance show. Being here from the very beginning ... being able to see how a lot of ourselves are part of the show … All the stories are our experiences. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

The significance of the work resonates on a gut level:

The type of work he does, it really moves you. It really moved me. The choreography really tells a story. It is my life through dancing. I had to sacrifice a lot. I didn’t really have many friends when I was growing up, it was all dancing or school. I didn’t party until 17/18. All the friends I had were through dancing, I had no social life with school friends ... That’s what really drove me in the show. (James Greenan, 9th July 2012)

Watching Noctú was a little bit like watching bits of my life being performed on stage. (S.J. Velasquez, Irish Central New York)

Feeling something when they dance and expressing themselves is very important to the company, and they feel they got to do this in Noctú. This leads to the feeling of being a ‘real’ dancer.

I definitely feel a lot more when I dance and I never really felt that before. In this show I can call myself a dancer and express myself through dance rather than just dancing for the audience, or dancing for judgement [competition]. Now I’m dancing for myself a bit more I suppose – I can feel movements, feel what he [Breandán] feels. I can feel more expression coming from my inside. I can feel it inside of me more than just my legs and my feet. (Orlagh Carty, 1st October 2011)

This definitely has showed me that we can be more than just Irish dancers. We can be performers. I think Irish dancers were never really seen as performers to a high standard like say ballet or contemporary and I think this proves that we can do that, and we take it very seriously as well … so definitely we can move forward and we aren’t limited to
Irish dancing. We can do more than that. I don’t know what our limit is yet. (Katrina O’Donnell, 1st October 2011)

The dancers welcome doing something that might challenge the Irish dance world’s perception of dance:

- I think we’ve done things that a lot of people never thought Irish dancers would be able to, which is brilliant. This is only the beginning and hopefully it will go further as well. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)

Kienan in particular speaks passionately about how significant being part of the Noctú process affected him. He always struck me as easy-going and centered, but his interview revealed his personal life-challenges and the impact being in this dance situation had on his outlook.

- It has adapted me as a dancer. I’m a lot more open, not only dance but in life in general. It’s changed my perception of things. One thing I hated was to be stereotyped or pigeonholed, one thing I would never do, judge on first impressions. A lot of that came to me because of the things we had to do – stuff that I had to let go – things that other people don’t see. There are things in your own psyche. That was a massive thing for me – to go that far, to throw myself into something so foreign to me. It changed me as a dancer so much.
- It wasn’t until a certain point that you become aware of all these other people like Pina Bausch. I had no idea. I never really observed other forms or opened my mind up to an alternative way to move – to watch stuff. Now I see where that [Breandan’s approach] originates from. But Breandán has put his own interpretation on that. Since then I’ve become really intrigued and I’m watching and reading up on various dance forms. I wouldn’t have done that previously. It’s part of the inhibitions thing.
- It’s something that’s changed my life, not just in dance but in everything that I do. I’d love to be involved with more. I’m looking forward to working with him again. I’m thankful that Breandán is turning traditional dance into something modern and very aggressive, but nice, strong, and still delicate – that’s what I love about it. (Kienan Melino, 1st August 2012)

**The Future and Noctú as Preparation for Rite of Spring**

As I suspected (and hoped), Noctú acts as a point of departure to other, perhaps bolder projects for all the dancers.

- I can’t wait to get my teeth into something new again. I think it will be really interesting to see what kind of things he [Breandan] comes up with next. I’d absolutely love to be a part of it. (Jack Anderson, 3rd October 2011)
They believe after Noctú, there might be an appetite for the next step in terms of contemporary Irish dance in the public consciousness.

Now that people are getting a glimpse of something new and exciting Breandán will take it to the next level and he wants to put on Rite of Spring which will be even more abstract again. This [Noctú] was the perfect transition before he gets to something even more mental. (Peta Anderson, 1st October 2011)

When asked whether they would be interested in tackling the Rite of Spring, all express a strong interest in being considered.

I’m really intrigued about this whole Rite of Spring project and his idea of having live pianists on stage and really interweaving with the music. I mean that’s never really been done before. It’s a really special project and no doubt what he’s planning for it now probably will change or something else will come up and be bigger and better than he has even thought about ... that’s just the way of the world. Also it’s the energy behind all of his work. There’s a special energy to it, and you can’t tell where it is going to go but that it is going to go somewhere special. (Aislinn Ryan, 3rd October 2011).
Chapter 5

Rite of Spring: Death, Revival, Rebirth
– Possessing the Dance

Introduction

This chapter follows on from the discussion initiated in Chapter Four. It focuses primarily on Choreography/Performance 2, Rite of Spring.

The chapter is divided into two main sections.

Section One deals with the ambitious undertaking of producing an interpretation of Stravinsky’s seminal music composition, Rite of Spring, using Irish step dancing as its movement source. To begin with, the motivation and vision for the project is presented. This is followed by an analysis of the work in terms of style, mood, tone and subject matter and themes. This discussion also includes an examination of the visual design choices (costumes and lighting). The rationale behind the various theatrical and choreographic choices is then illustrated, followed by a discussion on the significance of the work and its profound impact on all involved.

The chapter concludes by drawing together the theoretical and practical elements underpinning both performance presentations, fleshing out the overall argument of the thesis, and interpreting and analysing the outcomes of this Arts Practice work.

Rite of Spring

In the words of Husserl, “I am a ‘child of the times’; I am a member of a we-community” (Husserl in Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.86). It is impossible to ignore my ongoing dialogue with the makers of dance and theatre work I encounter almost every day. Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring is considered iconic in the world of dance and many Rites have been created, almost as if the piece
is considered by dance-makers as a choreographic Rite of Passage. In an attempt to ensure that my version was very much my own, I sought to conceptualise themes, tones and moods, and create vocabulary, motifs and sequences, avoiding as much as possible the versions that have gone before. But it is impossible to remove the traces of the short excerpts that I had seen, most significantly, Pina Bausch’s and Nijinsky’s versions (Joffery Ballet reconstruction 1989). Bausch’s version in particular moves me tremendously with each and every viewing, and her work in general is a significant influence.

Although there have been no Irish dance interpretations of Rite of Spring until my own, some Irish choreographers have created versions using the contemporary dance idiom. Recently Fabulous Beast co-produced a production with the English National Opera (2009). Coiscéim, one of Ireland’s most established contemporary dance companies, produced a version in 2002. I did not see either production but have supported much of their other work. Again, I cannot but be in dialogue with these choreographers and their work. Keegan-Dolan, artistic director of Fabulous Beast, makes bold choices in terms of using spoken word which encouraged me to do so with Noctú. Coiscéim also often include text. Matthew Bourne’s Swan Lake had a significant impact on me as he used an all-male cast as his corps de ballet of swans. My original intention was to have an all-male company performing Rite of Spring, but this never materialised.

There were no programme notes for the première of Rite of Spring, but the following includes some of the text written around the piece. The excerpts below were for funding and residency applications, as well as text included on programmes for lunchtime concerts, which included excerpts of the Rite of Spring as work-in-progress.

I would like to continue to explore new Irish dance vocabulary with a second (ongoing) project related to my PhD research. This Irish dance interpretation of the “Rite of Spring” challenges canons of the Irish dance aesthetic in areas such as verticality.

Although the rigidity of Irish dance is one of its most recognisable attributes, it has always remained of secondary importance to me. In the words of Pina Bausch when speaking of her dancers – “I’m not so interested in how they move as in what moves them” (Schmidt 1984, pp.15-16). The workshop approach will assist in probing the interior depths of the performer, and question where the impulse of the movement is located and allowing
for alternative channels to open, seeing how the expression breathes in other areas and in other ways. The hope is that the human in the dancer is unleashed, allowing those impulses to activate the dancing body on surfaces with expressive gestures rarely found in present-day Irish dance. This exploration is expected to uncover deep emotional structures which will be encouraged to surface in evocative movement patterns. A key aim of the project is to move away from the conventional linear narrative focusing more on a visceral aesthetic.

The piece’s ultimate objective is to explore ritualistic behaviour in male group dynamics. It questions the plight of men in contemporary society – the exploration shedding light on areas such as the alpha – and beta-male; vulnerability; risk; and homoeroticism. This piece is a significant undertaking in terms of the scope and the requirements of the project and realistically only select elements of the research will be possible during this residency. (Dance Artist in Residence application for Cavan County Council, March 2010)

Ériu’s latest piece is Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring”. This seminal piece casts a new light on the aesthetic and expressive possibilities of Irish dance. The risqué production coincides with the 100th anniversary of Stravinsky’s groundbreaking work, which has continued to challenge and inspire audiences throughout the last century. Ériu Dance Company adds an unprecedented element to this extraordinary music, marrying traditional and modern art forms.

The piece’s ultimate objective is to explore ritualistic behaviour within contemporary group dynamics. Themes appearing in the work include: mob mentality; alpha-; beta-; vulnerability; victimism; homoeroticism; and persecution.

In terms of how the physicality of the dance manifests itself, the new dance vocabulary challenges canons of the Irish dance aesthetic in areas such as verticality. Company work begins as the interior depths of the Irish dance performer are probed, questioning where the impulse of the movement is located and allowing for alternative channels to open, seeing how the expression breathes in other areas and in other ways. Deep emotional structures are encouraged to surface in evocative movement patterns. There is an emphasis on a more visceral, brutish aesthetic, harnessing the individual gestural
signatures of the dancers and encouraging higher level emotions to surface. (Press release, August 20112)

It has always been an ambition that at some stage in my choreographic life I would create an Irish dance ballet. What exactly I visualised that to be varied at different points in time. Choreographing Rite of Spring was the opportunity to give life to this “ballet”. Anna Mackey, a dance scholar, reviewer and connoisseur of ballet wrote to me in a letter after seeing the show as follows:

Firstly, I commend you for calling your piece a “ballet”. This is not just because I am a “ballet person” simply because your work is more than just dance. It is ballet in the true sense of the word: a blend of dance, drama, music and decor. (Anna Mackey, Letter to the Author, 17th August 2012)

In terms of what the Rite was to others, Jack (dancer) put it very well when he wrote:

- It’s very difficult to say exactly what the Rite ‘said’ to the audience – having been involved in the whole process, I think it’s impossible to view it objectively. Certainly I think the general sense of it was dark, dramatic and intense. However, for me personally as an audience member (I was able to watch large parts of the work as an outside eye due to being injured in rehearsals) the intention of the piece was effectively shown largely through subtle nuances (facial expressions, slight changes in posture) and I feel that this may have been lost in the large-scale production in Cavan. I also felt that the contribution of the aerial artists (and in particular, their remixed version of Stravinsky’s music) before and after the Rite proper gave the event an almost carnival atmosphere – whether this contrast confused or enhanced the intensity of the Rite, I’m not sure.

He goes on to emphasise how it is difficult to pigeonhole the work, but that my choreographic approach ensures that expression is central:

- The Rite was utterly different to anything (that I am aware of) that has been done with Irish dance previously. Aside from incorporating movement outside of the standard Irish dance lexicon, the main difference for me was that it used Irish dance in an expressive way, whereas I feel that in general Irish dance is used for pure entertainment without any particular meaning. Although there are a number of artists currently doing ‘different’ things with Irish dance (most prominently, Prodigig54), in my opinion most of these have not moved very far from standard commercial Irish dance – where they have injected some ‘unusual’ shapes into unison Irish dance routines, the Rite used (I believe) an unprecedented style altogether, and took Irish dance into a format more commonly reserved for

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54 A company of ex-Riverdance dancers who in 2012 won ‘Got to Dance’, a reality show dance competition produced for Sky 1. The company went on to create a stage show Footstorm in 2013.
classical or contemporary dance. This is not to say that one of these approaches is necessarily more or less valid than the other, but I do feel that the Rite is unique within Irish dance at the moment.

With my newfound signature of using Irish step dance as a vehicle to express emotion, Rite of Spring was a project which allowed for this like no other work to my mind. I had longed to choreographically negotiate Stravinsky’s epic composition and imagined it as my opus magnum. I also saw it as a vehicle to explore the practice of coercion and domination, and how we all can be victims and perpetrators of this.

The tone of Rite of Spring is dark, sinister and foreboding. This is achieved not only by the music, but various creative approaches such as lighting, costuming, and theatrical devices such as having the dancers engage with activities they are unaccustomed to practicing.

The choices in terms of costume design are to read as homogenous – a uniform with a sense of being foist upon the community. There are deliberate overtones of the ‘Children of the Corn’.55

55 Short story by Stephen King (1977) – Movie version released in 1984
The females’ costumes read as convent schoolgirl uniforms. The males’ costumes are deliberately ‘Geek Chic’ – although in vogue at the time, it gives the male members of the company a ‘Mammy’s boy’ look.

The piece begins with Jack and Nick performing the opening melody.

Stravinsky pitched this motif so high in the bassoon’s register that the melody, at the time (1913), sounded strained and uncomfortable\(^56\). I replicate this by asking the dancers to perform these motifs using voice and flugelhorn, deliberately positioning them out of their comfort zone.

\(^{56}\) Because of improvements in technique, contemporary bassoonists are able to play these notes with relative ease
Although Jack is an accomplished musician, Nick has never sung publicly before. He has a good singing voice, but the uncertainty in his voice is a quality I found satisfying.

A lone boy opens the main section singing the first phrase of the Introduction a cappella, the theme then being passed to the French horn as per the original score. This device gives a humanity and authenticity to the work: a real person will be sacrificed before the night is out. The vocalisation of the notes transforms them from a musical motif to a cry from the heart. This is the first of several examples where de Gallai shows his keen musical sensitivity. (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, Review of *Rite of Spring*)

Although the score includes clearly named sections illustrating Stravinsky’s narrative desire for each movement, I did not follow these faithfully. It did not matter to me that my narrative arc was not in line with established practices. The choreographic choices and structure are purely a reaction to the music without reference to the specific movements. My only concern was to ensure that Nick be the final ‘odd-man-out’ ... ‘The Chosen One’ before the ‘Sacrificial Dance’ section. Throughout the piece I randomly chose dancers to take the alpha role, leaving much to chance, picking whoever was, in my opinion, well positioned at the time.

That is not to say I had no strategy or plan. Each section had a clear resonance for me (for example sensing a sinister waltz in the music convincing me to pair the dancers at that point). I let the music tell me when a new alpha would take charge, or when an alpha lost his/her power.

Similar to de Gallai’s ability to get inside the music with steps, he uses broader choreographic devices and patterns to show us the multiple facets of the drama unfolding. Dancers step in and out of line, changing places like children picking teams in school. This theme of chance is later developed in a ballroom dance scene: as the couples swirl around, the odd man (and woman) out is desperately trying to cut in, showing the “musical chairs” randomness and desperation felt by the virgins. (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, Review of *Rite of Spring*)

*Rite of Spring* is a non-propositional piece of contemporary Irish dance work. The dance does not necessarily represent a thing or a narrative; rather, it represents arrays of activities. In the case of the ‘Rite’ community, activities are those things that one undertakes because all do – the central concern being to endeavour to never initiate or change an activity – *Ná bris nós, na déan nós*\(^57\)

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\(^{57}\) Old Irish saying – “Don’t break a custom, don’t create a custom”
– the very culture that this choreographer wants to reject. These nexuses of shared understanding are expected to be absolute and unvarying: a change of direction or a new way of looking at the activity is to be avoided. What the work highlights is that sometimes someone actually causes there to be a new understanding. Their alpha-ness causes a disturbance. There is dismay and confusion, but as quickly as it happens, the older established practice is forgotten.

When individuals change an activity, sometimes it was with a sense of defiance; other times they do so almost unintentionally, taking themselves by surprise.

I wished to explore the human activity that I encounter all too often, in which people, perhaps out of fear, or laziness, or uncertainty, have a modus operandi of persecuting those whose activities are other than the norm. Having a shared practical understanding is not a bad thing and I don’t reject this – I only wish for a world where diversity is embraced. I cannot help feeling sometimes that this concern for social order can spiral into an obsessive compulsion. One of my creative intentions is that perhaps creating a dark and sinister world in the form of this Rite of Spring might promulgate this depressing world-view and force us to face up to it and accept its unpleasant truth.

A superb visual representation of the shifting loyalties of man is shown after The Chosen One is released. Rather than be comforted by his friends, the dancers close ranks to form a phalanx, refusing to acknowledge their former classmate, and turning their heads away from him in a beautiful and effective theatrical gesture. (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, Review of Rite of Spring)
In this production of the Rite we are continuously faced with some faceless and invisible authority. This represents my reading of the ‘O’ther. It is as if there is something bigger and greater pressing down on the community and forcing them to fear … to conform ... but this actually comes from within. With this perpetual rebirth of the Alpha in its many guises (it can be anyone; it might be the same person twice; for a very short moment it was two members sharing the role together), we realise that we ourselves are creating it.

The community represented in the *Rite* work as a whole and only do what the others do, rarely questioning who causes the newer practice to initiate, forgetting immediately the old. There is often blind faith in the individual who suddenly takes on the role of alpha, demonstrating our lack of direction and certainty. As Barnes puts it:

> When one member successfully engages in a practice, what this invariably betokens to others is the possession of a competence or a power. The inference from performance to capacity is made. Thus, the membership as a whole conies to know itself not as a performing membership but as a membership with the power to perform – as, that is, a set of competent members. (Barnes 2001, p.20)

The piece explores practice and its influence, especially on those of us with no knowledge of the practice. But *Rite of Spring* also exposes how the practitioner is uncertain, reflecting my belief that many of us may claim to be enacting a knowledge when actually wandering aimlessly. I
believe that we often take ourselves by surprise, and what might surprise us most is others’ belief and admiration how we perform our practice, realising that

To engage in a practice is to exercise a power. (Barnes 2001, p.28)

In the Rite there is the constant shadowing of the most confident, the most certain, a devotion to that person’s choice to shift, never questioning if that practice shift is in any way well-conceived. This is clearly a statement of my belief that ‘the blind leading the blind’ is an ideological starting point in terms of my worldview.

This reflects a major philosophical outcome of the research in general. Often I observe practices being enacted simply because there is a tradition to do so. There does not seem to be a cognitive engagement with the “what it is”, or the “why”, only a sense of certainty that it must be executed. It is also important to emphasise that I am not only speaking of the general public or the community at large with other more important and pressing every day concerns, but I include those with their foot in the theoretical world. We all seem to have this compulsion to act without question, performing the Hussurlian natural attitude.
Barnes again:

Practices are often cited in order to explain things, including notably their own enactment. It may be said, for example, that something is done because it is traditionally done, or routinely done, or done because it is part of the practice of the collective. The problem of why human beings should enact the practice is thereby completely glossed over. It is as if the cavalry has to charge, twice a week perhaps, simply because it can charge, as if there is something automatic and compelling about the enactment of practices which makes it unnecessary to consider what moves or inspires the human beings involved. (Barnes 2001, p.21)

In *Rite of Spring*, this concept is its underlying thrust. Individuals can affect the practice; to interfere with the organisation of the activity, as well as the activity. Change sometimes happens by accident. Rebellion comes on suddenly and clumsily, and is fueled by fear, anxiety or anger. Random conditions decree whether it is embraced and obeyed.

Why do these individuals change things? Barnes states

… some few may be so remarkable that they play major roles in extending existing conceptions of what the practice is (Barnes 2001, pp.24-25)

But whatever remarkable qualities, they may not present themselves simply as high-octane personalities or genetically superior survivors. What they possess may be nuanced and subtle. How they are related to as remarkable does not seem to be governed by laws. Those witnessing them are simply psychologically drawn in. But presenting with an authority is crucial.

Barnes suggests

Within the community the way to assert influence, the way to be recognized, the way to matter is to assert an identity. (Barnes 2001, p.82)

The remainder, as Wittgenstein suggests when we obey a rule, we simply act blindly.
I feel compelled to engage with the fallout that Nick experienced having danced the Rite, and in particular, the principal role of the chosen one. There were a number of troubling moments during the rehearsal period. I felt a terrible reluctance to finish the work. The final movement, the ‘Sacrificial Dance’, being the finale and Nick’s big solo would normally be a priority to develop, and although elements and motifs had been workshopped to a certain degree in the University, something was preventing me from finishing it. It was as if the completion would unleash or expose something that needed to be exorcised but that I was afraid of confronting. It was also unfair on Nick to leave such an important section so late in the rehearsal period. Like me, he needs and likes to have the material for quite some time so that it is ‘in his bones’ with no need to be actually remembering the steps and movements. This inability to move forward was so strong that on one occasion we went into the pub next door to ‘take the edge off’ before we continued with the section’s creation.

Once the choreography was finally committed to, Nick’s performance of ‘The Chosen One’ was upsetting me more and more each time it was performed. As the pianists played the final chord, I would find myself fighting back tears and frantically trying to swallow back the huge painful
lump in my throat so that I could give the company their notes. Apart from being shy of anyone seeing me this way, I would be in a little shock at how emotional I had become. Nick would have looked literally like he had danced himself to death and would be recovering on the floor, but apart from exhaustion, he exhibited no other dark or negative emotions, from what I could see.

A week or so after the première I was approached by a company member who was worried about Nick. He was back on night duty in the teenage psychiatric unit where he worked as a psychiatric nurse, and had been in floods of tears regularly since the performance. This individual believed that he had a case of ‘post-gig blues’, and perhaps if someone explained this – that his emotional reactions were simply a case of missing rehearsals, the company, etc. – that this might help.

When I met Nick to work through this, his opinion was that the dance had had a profound effect on him – that it unleashed something and had left a mark on him.
During our interview, for the purposes of this research, 7/8 months later, the memory of the experience still had the power to move him ...

I was there and doing a job [Ériu Company Dancer], a job that I was loving, but I was not really reflecting on it ... not really thinking about it, I was just ticking the boxes – I was feeling it [the intensity of the work] at the time – but not really, I don’t think, because I had a job to do and we had a date and it had to be completed and it had to be performed. So until it was all done and dusted and we were all elated, then I suppose the realisation of what had just happened and what we had all just achieved … and yeah for me, what I had achieved. I suppose then going back to the rehearsal period when I was picked as the Chosen One ... I didn’t see it at the time, because all the members of the company are great friends and stuff, but I suppose – it was lonely is a word ... it’s upsetting me now thinking about it (he begins to cry) ... Like, it was one of the best experiences of my life and maybe that’s an element, maybe I’d hoped to get the opportunity to do it again maybe that’s why I’m getting upset but I really don’t think that’s the reason ... very dark ... affected me in so many positive ways ... I wouldn’t even say it affected me negatively even though it’s upsetting me ... it just sent me to a place – a very reflective place that I think ... had I not done ... the Rite of Spring or “The Chosen One”, I don’t know if I’d be where I am in my personal life at the minute. It did change me as a person I suppose is a way of saying that ... Obviously after I performed it I went into ... I was very upset for a very long time afterwards … didn’t really ... couldn’t identify why. I was probably putting down to the fact that it was all over – but I think subconsciously it sent me into a self-reflective mode ... Kinda, what I was doing; where was I going in my own personal life ... and it made me make decisions, it made me change that path that I was on ...
We spoke at length about the possibility of how the elements of the performance that I had demanded off him – for example, singing in public for the first time in his life; doing the aerial elements of the work – how they may have been such a challenge that perhaps it could have been this monumental sense of relief and achievement, that with the performance behind him, he assimilated the gravity and significance of the piece. We also looked at other possible challenges such as the difficulty associated with being chosen as ‘The Chosen One’ when so many excellent dancers in the company would have loved to attempt the role. But Nick did not believe that these factors were central to this overwhelming emotional response.

Initially, yeah I suppose … obviously then in the profession that I’m in [psychiatry], I knew that there is a reason for this, it’s situational, but what is the situation? Is it the fact that we’ve just performed this amazing … had this amazing experience and created this amazing performance and it’s all over? No, I don’t think so, so it made me go to that self-reflective mode … why do I feel like this? When did I first get upset? And the reality was it was, after I dropped Peter off in Cavan. And I knew I was going to miss Peter as I was going to miss Orlagh, Jack and Patrick and Ciarán and everyone part of the company. But I had said goodbye to so many of them already … And I just kinda … yes I did get on very well with Peter but just something was sticking in my neck about that. I was starting to think that I was getting upset because of my current situation now but it’s not … it is the Rite of Spring, that … that innate, I don’t know … not innate, what’s the word? … it’s just, it’s part of my core now I think … It stirs something in me still, like I said to you, I’m avoiding doing the other stuff because I don’t want to think about it … and there’s me not addressing the issue again. It just … it put a stamp on my soul I think, but a beautiful stamp … I wouldn’t be without the stamp … (Interview Nick O’Connell, 2nd April 2013)

Jack’s experience in Rite of Spring also intrigued me as he spoke about how the lines between the work and real life began to blur for him. Again, this was satisfying for me to hear. I understood that there was more at stake for me in comparison to the other contributors, what I was experiencing was so monumental, I wondered if it resonated with the others.

I also found the work to have a great effect on me mentally and emotionally. It felt necessary to really get inside the piece and feel the emotions of my ‘character’ – not only did I use personal experience to try and create an emotional aspect to my performance, but I found that at times the piece itself (be it the relationships between dancers on stage, or the physical intensity of the dancing) made me feel things naturally, including fear, despair, determination, desperation, camaraderie, power and relief. The most notable thing was how effectively we managed to create a sense of being ‘creeped out’ and how
this seemed to linger outside of the piece as well. It’s hard to articulate now, but at times it felt as though the lines between the work and reality were beginning to blur. For example, I remember noticing one day that when walking to the shop during our lunch break, we had all gone in a group but left one person behind (i.e. the ‘chosen one’) and I wondered to what extent we were subconsciously living out the ideas of the Rite for real. This became intensified during the last week or so leading up to the performance – I remember feeling somehow on edge and I don’t think I was the only one who had a sense of dread, even though I was very excited about the performance. It just all seemed very real; at the time I don’t think it would have felt outside the realms of possibility that on the night Nick would have literally danced himself to death. Reading this back now it sounds improbable, but I think the fact that I had moved to Dublin specifically for the project which made it somehow removed from ‘real life’, and that as a group we were spending almost all of our time together and so had quite intense relationships, affected the way everything felt. (Jack Anderson, written reflection, 7th March 2013)

On reading Jack’s piece I felt compelled to write ...

I just read Jack’s reaction to the questions and felt a very strong wave of emotion – a reaction to the impact the work had on him – almost igniting something inside of me. It is not that long since I interviewed Nick and he cried as he spoke about the aftereffects ... it seems that not just one or two were moved by the work. Ashlene, also wrote beautifully about the experience – with intelligent insights into the work. But Jack and how he speaks about the blurring of the lines between the outside world and the world we created in the studio in making the Rite gave me goose bumps. Although I don’t want anyone to suffer unnecessarily it pleases me that these emotions existed in the room and
on the stage. It’s like, the nature of whatever it was – this energy permeated everyone and something upsetting but special happened. We all felt it – we all now function differently because of the work and we are all altered by the work. (Author’s Journal, 27th March 2013 – Coffee Society 13:12)

Aislinn drew parallels with real life too

The Rite of Spring struck many chords with me. The sacrificial theme was particularly meaningful and one that I felt we could all relate to in some way – while we’ve never been required to literally dance ourselves to death (not quite anyway!), we have all made significant sacrifices in our lives in order to become professional Irish dancers. This career path has also brought a degree of vulnerability, another major theme in the Rite of Spring. The fact that I could relate to these themes in one way or other made the piece very emotional and I felt much more connected to it than I have with any other production. I think this was true for all the dancers – as the music changed pace, and the loose narrative developed, so too did the energy on stage. By the end of the piece, the emotion on stage was palpable. While the pack gave off a sense of apathy towards the Chosen One, we could all feel Nick’s despair during the Sacrificial Dance. That specific moment was a very moving experience – even in rehearsals – and one that we all regularly commented on throughout the rehearsal period and after the performance. (Aislinn Ryan, written reflection)
Feeling & Emotion

One of the thrusts of this research is the area of experiencing and feeling the dance rather than just going through the moves. This is well documented in the discussion about Noctú, but it seems that this sense of ‘living the work’ came into even sharper focus with Rite of Spring.

It changed the way I look and feel about dance/Irish dance. In Irish dance you are told to dance dance dance, but never to feel what you are dancing, which to me is so important ... If you don’t feel what you’re doing then how can the audience feel what you are trying to get across to them? (Ciarán Connolly, written reflection, 8th March 2013)

The dancers were personally invested in the piece. Apart from willing the Rite to be well received, there was a sense that something special could happen and that the payback might go beyond the applause as the work finished.

I felt that the Rite broke down barriers between the dancers and the audience and, by throwing ourselves – both physically and emotionally – into the performance, the audience could take so much more away from it. (Aislinn Ryan, written reflection, 29th March 2013)

Performing in the Rite of Spring made me feel, for the first time, like an artist. Despite having experienced many years as a professional dancer, I have always been slightly apologetic for the fact that I’m an Irish dancer – not a classical or contemporary dancer, which people tend to expect when I mention that I dance. I felt that the Rite was a bold statement about the possibilities of Irish dance. Performing alongside incredible classical musicians and aerial artists, all of whom had utmost respect for what us dancers
were doing on stage, increased the sense that we were creating art that would captivate, surprise and hopefully inspire the audience. (Aislinn Ryan, written reflection, 29th March 2013)

As a company we were exploring very primitive ideas, as in the roles of ‘alpha’s’ and ‘beta’s’, as we called them, within community. This brought to the surface very raw, primitive emotions, characteristic of the human nature. Each time we rehearsed it in full or performed it, it felt to me, like a new journey that you let yourself be taken on, from start to finish. You were fully in the moment throughout it; there was no room to disengage. Not that we would have wanted to step out of the little world we created for ourselves, within the 45min of music. It was both physically and mentally draining and I can honestly say we poured our entire selves into it every time. That’s the other thing about the Rite, there was so much room given to us for personal expression, that we became very clear individuals within the work. That was one of the remarks I heard a number of times over form people who saw the work; that although we performed as a cast of 12, our own identities and voices were clearly carved out in it.

For all of those reasons, it was not just another show. It was an exploration that each one of us invested ourselves in. We were also educating ourselves as Irish dancers and performers whilst doing it. (Ashlene McFadden, written reflection, 30th March 2013)

Thinking about it objectively now ... this is just after coming to me ... it’s the feeling that I’m coming back to really, and not executing the material. At the time I’m trying to be focused on the material but the feeling is always there. It’s just a different mindset altogether. It consumes you – I think without that intrinsic feeling that I get with your material it wouldn’t portray – I suppose my goal is to portray what I’m feeling inside to match your material under your direction obviously

I think the intrinsic feeling comes from different aspects – you may give a background story when you are teaching the choreography, or you’ll tell what you want to feel or what you want expressed and then the material is added or put together and they just seem to mirror and mesh and I think without that mesh it wouldn’t work for me. (Interview Nick O’Connell, 2nd April 2013)

Ciarán felt that something happened on stage that night in terms of Irish dance and perhaps a new beginning:

My favorite part of the performance was when we had just finished this one part of the performance and the lights went out and I could feel the wind across my face the sound of heavy breathing from everyone on stage and a stillness from the crowd that was WOW we have just seen the change that we were all hoping for. (Ciarán Connolly, written reflection, 8th March 2013)

It’s a source of great pride for me that the dancers completed committed to the roles – more so than I ever expected.
Irish dancers often talk about how we feel as we dance, most will say that when we’re dancing you don’t see anything on stage regardless of whether its in competition or in a professional show we go into autopilot. For me, Rite was different, each of us became a character with our own personality and it was our prerogative to portray that character to the audience. This desire to act coupled with the spectacular setting created a scene that we wanted to be a perfect part of. (Peter Wilson, written reflection, 25th February 2013)

I will never forget the feeling I had 10 minutes before I went on stage to perform Rite, I closed my eyes to create the character I wanted to portray in my dance and suddenly it all made sense, in any other Irish dance show you go on stage hands by your side, straight back you either smile or not depending on the dance number but in Rite I had to dig deeper to get what I wanted out of the performance. (Patrick O’Mahony, written reflection, 11th March 2013)

I do ... I can’t help but feel every step or beat and portray it on my face and body ... it’s part of me, your choreography, it stirs something in me that ... I can’t help but portray with my whole body my whole expression and it lucky that that’s just what you are looking for. (Interview Nick O’Connell, 2nd April 2013)

Drawing it all together

Schrödinger’s Cat

The actual purpose of the Schrödinger’s cat thought experiment is to illustrate that the nature of matter on a macroscopic level does not behave as it does on a microscopic level, but it is often used as a useful metaphor to illustrate a view, one which I hold, of the possibility of a multiverse and that how in terms of the world around us, anything is possible, and what we accept as reality could have been any infinite number of alternatives. Each event presents infinite possibilities and as decisions are made, one path remains with all other possibilities collapsing.

Applying this to our reality, in particular our aesthetic world, what we consider to be beautiful has much to do with the random events that cause the collapse of infinite other paths, setting us on the one we find ourselves on, not for any higher-order intervention reason, purely chance. In that case, there could have existed (or could exist) to us a world where all we hold to be beautiful would be/is opposite to what it is now.

Therefore, I argue that feeling too strongly about one’s perceived understanding of beauty a little precarious, as it could very easily have been completely different if those random events caused
our current path to collapse and others to persist. This makes blind conviction in a universal truth
then difficult to maintain.

This “Irish Character”, an aesthetic associated with the Irish dancer, which I maintain has come
about because of random events, never really resonated with me, although some Irish diaspora
consider Irish dance to be an expression of their identity:

- Personally, Irish dance is an expression of my own identity. Having been brought up
  in a Donegal Irish community, within Glasgow, Irish dancing was an expression of my
  heritage and cultural upbringing, outside of Ireland. The people I was taught by, danced
  with and competed against were, for the most part, from the same Donegal commu-
  nity, living within Glasgow. We went to school together, danced together, played music
  together as our parents and grandparents had done so, in Glasgow or at home in Donegal,
  Ireland. For me Irish dancing was never just a physical activity it has always been an
  expression of who I am. (Ashlene McFadden, written reflection, 30th March 2013)

- As a youngerster growing up in New Zealand, Irish dancing was a direct link to my
  Irish heritage, and traditional Irish dance was imparted on me within the greater cultural
  context of music, poetry and social gatherings. The cultural element of Irish dance is still
  very important to me and it always will be. (Aislinn Ryan, written reflection, 29th March
  2013)

Many of my dancing friends who grew up with Irish parents outside of Ireland were introduced
to Irish culture (music, dance, sport, language) as a way of maintaining a connection with home.
These days, because of the globalisation of Irish dance, many others have no connection with
Ireland and are immersed in the dance as a physical activity that for them it is mostly a pastime
or a lifestyle, and its historical significance is lost on them or just not a concern. For many of my
Ireland-based Irish step dance friends, it is not an expression of their Irishness. For me, as I Irish
step dance, I am simply expressing myself. Although I have established that the physicality of
the dance changes over time, this does not alter my engagement with what I believe it to be, or
what it means to me.

Irish dance has always included and borrowed movements and motifs that can be found in other
dance forms, for example ballet, as is true with many traditional folk dance forms. The cabriole,
for example, was always part of the dance lexicon as far as I remember. In the late 80s and the
early 90s as I came to the end of my competition days, I witnessed the introduction of entrechats.
Sometimes these motifs would be borrowed and executed exactly as they are in ballet, sometimes
they were altered – perhaps not mimicked exactly, but this version proving to be satisfying to the
culture bearer. Through time, the motifs begin to go unnoticed as anything unusual and become
subsumed into the dance canon.

I saw the most appropriate use of batterie ever: entrechats adding touches of sparkle, rather than being hijacked for male virtuosity or female fussiness ... Later in the piece
punchy, powerful cabriole were used to show the dancers’ fight against their fate. (I kept
thinking “Wow, I have never seen female dancers accomplish that step so well”. Only
afterwards did I realise that I was not witnessing classical ballet, rather hard core Irish
dancing – who would have ever thought that these two disciplines would dovetail so
neatly?) (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, Review of Rite of Spring)

Related to my research questions was the practicability of creating an Irish dance ballet. In the
eyes of some, without being pressed about the matter, it seemed I achieved that.

I have an internal conflict. Fundamentally all I want to do is to make work, the perform-
ance being quite simply just one in the Schechnerian sense, because I choose to frame it
as such. Whether it fits cozily into a performance model box is neither here nor there for
me. The reality of the dance landscape is that, whether it is in early discussions about the
work or in grant application stages of development, terms need to be used to satisfy the
others engagement with it. And I would be guilty of labeling my work in the early days of
my choreographic practice until I encountered performance theory. (Author’s Journal,
2nd May 2012)

How work is labeled is not a concern of mine. I perceive in the wider arts community, and indeed
in the general public, that it is convenient to be able to put stuff in boxes. Reviewers need to
be able to say what it is, which seems ironic when the platform is the contemporary arts, where
anything can happen and description of the event would be more appropriate.

So why did I want to create a ballet? Perhaps it is as simple as creating that thing of beauty and
magic in line with what I encountered in our local theatre as a child when the national ballet
presented work on our tiny stage. Almost 40 years later my ‘ballet’ is obviously not going to
resemble Joan-Denise Moriarty’s ballet interpretation of *The Playboy of the Western World*—being informed by many different experiences, and generated from Irish step dance—but it may have been the catalyst.

Although I am a ballet enthusiast, I would be less interested in the overly dramatic expression code often used in the more traditional romantic-style pieces. But expression is a real concern of mine, and how it is made manifest on the body.

*Much of the contemporary dance work I encounter in Ireland reduce the expressive potential to the execution of the gesture, whereas what I find aesthetically satisfying are minute and subtler upper body gestures, drama displayed on the face, whilst the grander, more powerful rhythmic movements, remaining true to the Irish dance tradition, persist from the waist down, the source for all this expression coming from the same impulse. I guess that the beauty I encounter in this particular combination of performance traits: the integrated expression approach of percussive, corporeal and facial expression, was probably ignited by my encounter with Flamenco in Riverdance and wonderful dancers such as Yolanda Sabrado Gonzalas.* (Author’s Journal, 2nd May 2012)

My yearning to access the exotic Other cannot be ignored as a relevant factor affecting the inclusion of this influence—in that, argued earlier, a post-colonial insecurity conspires to instill a ‘lack’ in my perception of what it is I do, and a ‘wholeness’ in what it is the more three-dimensional Other presents with. Indeed there is the libidinal attachment, wishing I could inhabit that vessel that moves with such exotic sexual vitality. These genres, in which I have no training (Flamenco, Tango, etc.) “intend” upon me a form of dance that men could only feel proud to display (Lacan—the significance of the “wholeness of the other”). But this also ties into the reason I felt so attached to Irish dance and “what the older kids were doing” (quote monologue *Noctú*).

As I watched the teenagers practice with the wide-eyed wonder of a child, I experienced the Irish dance form in the ‘best of circumstances’. I longed to be them, doing what they were doing,

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58 Moriarty founded the Irish National Ballet and one of its major successes was her Ballet interpretation of Synge’s play *The Playboy of the Western World*. Although I cannot be certain, this, or excerpts from this ballet could have been included in the performance I saw as a child.
experiencing what they seemed to be experiencing. In my more confident moments, there are times when I feel what I imagined those feelings might be, even when I am doing Irish step dance in its most traditional form. I feel what I witness in those exotic ‘O’thers.

I return to Lacan and the statement I found in Knorr-Cetina’s article:

Wanting or desire is born in envy of the perfection of the image in the mirror or of the mirroring response of the parents; the lack is permanent, since there will always be a distance between the subjective experience of a lack in our existence and the image in the mirror, or the apparent wholeness of others. (Knorr Cetina 2001, p.185; see also Lacan and Wilden 1968, Alford 1991)

There is a libidinal quality to the way I envy or want, and unlike Freud and his claim that the human’s instinctual impulse is for a reduction in bodily tension, I maintain that it is more so the maintenance and manipulation of this tension that I lust after. I believe that I have a lust for what it is they do, and for those who do it well. I looked in awe at those that were older and allowed to do the more difficult, the more interesting stuff.

“I just wanted to do what the older kids were doing ... we just ended up sitting around a lot” (original Noctú monologue)

I fell in love with my scholarship colleagues in modern and ballet classes in Chicago who had trained from a young age in these disciplines, not to mention their natural talent and professional dancers’ bodies. The ‘O’ther can seem so complete, so whole that we in turn feel two dimensional, fragmented. I (perhaps we all) embrace this tension knowing it will never be reduced. We will never achieve that perceived ‘wholeness’. Bakhtin also spoke of this

For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others. (Bakhtin in New York Review of Books 1993)

This longing is bewitching, as I mentioned earlier in the thesis, and is something that is present in me in terms of dance. It defines me. Clearly the world of dance is filled with many who claim this and might account for physical, emotional and psychological struggles many dancers are willing to endure.
... while we’ve never been required to literally dance ourselves to death (not quite anyway!), we have all made significant sacrifices in our lives in order to become professional Irish dancers. This career path has also brought a degree of vulnerability, another major theme in the *Rite of Spring*. (Aislinn Ryan, written reflection)

When I developed *Firebird* as part of my MA thesis, there was a profound shift in the attitudes of the dancers involved. Trepidation was their view of the work to begin with, until later when they felt that the piece was as much part of them as it was part of me. This experience was replicated with the *Ériu* dancers.

Proximity, I therefore argue, is a powerful agent in the creative environment – this sharing of one’s personal lack. This is supported by how many of the *Ériu* dancers were swept away with both the impact that *Noctù* and the power *Rite of Spring* had on them. As mentioned earlier, the work took over, the performance became their real life and it had the capacity to change them intrinsically.

**Assessment in Terms of Contemporary Dance**

The dancers who embodied the work described my signature approach to Irish step dance as a new contemporary approach to the form. They based this view on its physicality, its context and how I created and rehearsed the material. Embodying the work was not a prerequisite to having this opinion, and this was the view of some of those who attended the performances. There were a couple of reviewers, whose area of expertise is the contemporary dance arts in New York, who had little deep knowledge of Irish traditional dance, who claimed otherwise.

I am not an expert on Irish dancing at all, but if this “Contemporary Irish dance” is a new genre that you have created, mark it as your own. Dance is SO competitive that you need to be careful that someone else doesn’t grab your dance style and claim it as theirs. You should be thinking about developing and codifying “de Gallai technique”, or “Breandan Technique” – seriously. Once the PhD is in the bag that will be the next project – no rest for the wicked! (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, in an email to the Author)

There is a danger when evaluating work, that one’s focus is sullied by the field that the evaluator resides in. Certainly, you can decide what it is you see, but you need to be careful that you don’t claim that the intention of the work is actually how you receive it. As Susan Melrose says when
discussing her concern of expert spectating, that what you might engage with – that “sign” or
that “signifier” – is merely where that spectator was drawn to let his/her gaze fall. And many art
makers wish to allow the spectator find in the work something which resonates with them – good
or bad. To assume that the intention of the choreographer was actually your interpretation is a
risky endeavour.

In other words the term “the sign” – if we must persist with the term – is a site, seen from
the space of spectating, wherein “something happens”. That “something” may well be
banal and conventional (Melrose 2002)

This “unit of currency” is the site where the spectator’s gaze fell, and may be the basis for an
assessment about the work that may be at odds with that of the creator’s intention. Evaluating the
“not-yet-identified”, as Melrose terms new work, also raises questions when you consider that:

Worth is a rule-governed, multi-participant practices of judgement, performed in ritual-
ised events (Melrose 2002)

The audience enters the performance space and many have preconceived notions of what to
expect. What the performer would like to convey and what the spectator or audience perceive
may be quite different. The context can affect how the work is received. How the audience
around you reacts can influence you. The meaning that the spectator attributes to the work, the
genre that the work is claimed to be, the positioning of the individuals involved, their world-view
and judging the performance from that point of view, can all affect the experience. There is also
the emotional load attached to the importance of the event, the venue, who attends, and who
reviews; the traces of other performances the spectator brings into the room; whether the work is
current, old-fashioned or innovative – they all carry weight.

I claim that this work is non-commensurable. It is after all Irish dance on the contemporary arts
stage and therefore many who reviewed it did so with no cultural starting point in terms of Irish
dance, other than their knowledge of the commercial shows, and although there is some contem-
porary Irish dance work out there, it is very likely that it was not yet on their radar. All that it
could be based on is their own judgments of taste and value. Its intelligibility must be based on
an openness, not only to the traditional arts, but also a tolerance of those arts being presented on
other platforms. As reviewer Megin Jimenez puts it – “The production [Noctú] is an odd hybrid, but it works” (Megin Jimenez, NYTheatre.com New York).

Noctú was generally well received by the general theatre critics and not so by contemporary dance reviewers. The reaction of the critics ranged from “The embarrassingly awful show”, claimed by Lisa Jo Sagolla, who’s scholarly interests lie in integrated arts genres, such as the Broadway musical, dance, physical theatre, American social history, popular culture and entertainment, to “Arguably the most challenging Irish dance work ever seen on a New York Stage”, by Cahir O’Doherty, Arts Editor, Irish Voice New York, born and raised in Donegal with MFA from Yale University.

There were three negative reviews published – Sagolla (Dance Blog), Siebert (New York Times) and Asantewaa (Arts Blog), although Asantewaa was a little more constructive that the former two. The remaining 20 or so reviews were extremely positive, being written by reviewers of arts/entertainment publication for the Irish community in New York, general magazines, but mostly Theatre-related publications. Noctú was nominated for two Drama Desk awards, “Outstanding Choreography” and “Unique Theatrical Event”, the panel made up of individuals based in the Theatrical/Musical world, from critics to practitioners (a community that Sagolla claims to be of scholarly interest to her).

… experiences I am living through present themselves differently (but not necessarily better) to me than to anybody else. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.50)

No one individual can see the artefact in its absolute completeness. I believe there exists a spectrum, which is based on proximity to the art form. This could be considered to span from the Irish dancer performing the work, to a New York contemporary dance critics with no Irish heritage. For the Irish step dancer embodying the work it is in sharp view, the contemporary dance critic not perceiving the artefact with the same degree of visibility. Within that spectrum one might find the Irish ballet scholar claiming little expertise or dealings with Irish dance.

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59 Master of Fine Arts
De Gallai pushes the musical and dramatic limits of The Rite of Spring without pretension or overwork. The lights fade and the evening turquoise sky is now pitch black: mission accomplished, a dramatic triumph. (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, Review of Rite of Spring)

O’Doherty, not a dancer, Irish or otherwise, is also somewhere on the scale. He is clearly qualified to review the arts, and does so in the same city as Sagolla, Siebert and Asantewaa, possibly attending fewer contemporary dance pieces but many more Irish arts events.

We all have varying degrees of “perspectival incompleteness”, all of our views incomplete to some degree: the fragments that reveal themselves to us are a function of our individual histories, as we integrate them to create a more exhaustive view of the object.

The phenomenologist would say that perceptual experience is embedded in contexts that are pragmatic, social and cultural and that much of the semantic work (the formation of perceptual content) is facilitated by the objects, arrangements, and events that I encounter. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.7)

Those with the ear of the New York arts public, for example, might feel strongly about their ability and unique position to critique work, indeed it is be expected of them. But in an unwillingness to assess and accept the limitations of their (albeit) vast knowledge in terms of the wider, global context one might be tempted to accuse them of assuming evaluation is a simple matter of unveiling the truth.

… a tacit belief in the existence of a mind-, experience-, and theory-independent reality. Reality is assumed to be out there, waiting to be discovered and investigated. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, p.22)

This natural attitude (Husserl) is so fundamental and deep-rooted that even those mandated to commentate on the world they encounter often forget that that which presents itself cannot be claimed to be the same for all.

Although there may be concurrent fashions, I believe that there are countless approaches to work-making in the contemporary arts world and that it is how the work impacts and persists that matters. Work lingers (or not) because of those with particular histories intending upon it. This is what gives it life and vitality, or not.
Intuitive and Tacit Knowledge

I feel that the significance of casting Nick in the company and consistently considering him to be principal dancer cannot be overstated. It relates to a sense of catharsis I realise now as being a central motivation in making the work. Although a beautiful mover, he would not have the accolades of others in the company, and he would often receive more notes than many of the others, but from the moment I encountered him during my trawl for dancers at his last World Championships in City West, Dublin 2010, I knew there was something special about him and that, regardless of his dancing ability, he would bring something to the projects that I believed no-one else could.

*I recognised a few that I knew from before and I would like to be in the show – Nick, the Comhdháil dancer. Beautiful looking with his curly hair and dewy skin. An amazing physique and something in his eyes. A great sexual energy in him – that is so subtle.*

(Author’s Journal, Noctú Audition Day, 8th July 2010)

Nick: And then there’s something else that over the years just popped into my head or whatever. I don’t know whether you can identify in me something that you might ... what way am I trying to say this ... you might see something in me that’s in you ... I’m saying that totally arse-ways, what is that ... Something in me reminds you of yourself – I think – maybe I’m totally wrong, but it’s something that flitted into my head ... (long silence) The emotion part maybe (long silence) ...not the underdog but the (long silence) the lack of self-belief (long silence)

Breandán: I was talking to Catherine, my supervisor, and she said ‘I think if you were younger you would have done that part yourself.’ I said, I don’t think I would’ve been able to do it the way Nick did it. She said ‘I think if it was a different time you would’ve done it’ ... I thought it was interesting that she made that observation ... so it’s interesting to see somebody else notice it. Do you think anybody else would’ve noticed it that way? Say your friends ... the rest of the company ... what do you think they think?

Nick: It’s funny ... it reminded me of where that idea ... of how I might remind you of you ... it was Peta. She said that to me ... it was either New York or ... but I can remember her saying vividly – I can see her face but I don’t know where we were ... She said ‘I think you remind him of him’ and I remember kind of sitting back and going ‘What?’ and then it kinda resonating for a while I suppose I started to make sense. (Interview Nick O’Connell, 2nd April 2013)
Final Thought

In the opening chapters of this thesis I wrote about how I felt the necessity to create work that might fly in the face of the traditionalists; work that would feel like an act of rebellion; a devil-may-care attitude to the dance values held dear to many culture bearers, but that mattered less to me. My observations of the tradition provoked this response. As a teenager I would be bombarded the dogma of “that’s just the way it is”, or “that’s a girl’s move” only to see these absolutes change over time, and not centuries or decades, but simply over several years. I was also acutely aware of these organisation’s\(^6\) willingness to embrace the “Disney-isation” (as one radio interviewer put it to me once) of Irish dance by Riverdance and the other commercial shows – this embrace widely accepted as economically motivated. There seemed to be a double standard. The compulsion to rebel is not all that surprising.

Jack hit the nail on the head

- Being part of the Rite, and Ériu Dance Company, feels like a rebellion in a way because Irish dance seems to be slow to innovate – the competition scene has had largely the same rules and rulers for decades, and Riverdance still leads the commercial scene despite being almost entirely unchanged in nearly 20 years. Coming from a competitive Irish dance background, where newly created moves are often banned for not being strictly Irish dance, it feels liberating and exciting to discover how we can use the fundamentals of the form to do something other. (Jack Anderson, written reflection, 7\(^{th}\) March 2013)

- It is probably inevitable that many Irish dance purists would not immediately understand or approve of the Rite, and for this reason it is frustrating that there has only been one performance so far. Although this may or may not actually be the case, it felt like we were creating something for an audience who weren’t going to like it (in a way, similar to Nijinsky’s original Rite) and that it would take lots of promotion and exposure to win over the Irish dance community. However, I don’t believe that catering to this audience should necessarily be an objective of the work. (Jack Anderson, written reflection, 7\(^{th}\) March 2013)

\(^6\) Umbrella organisations such as An Comisiún, An Comhdháil, CRN, etc, with responsibility for running and monitoring Irish step dance competition.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

This practice-based PhD sought to discover if the Irish step dance genre possessed the potential for expressive possibilities that to date remained to date untapped. Owing to the nature of this choreographic journey, other questions and concerns surfaced that were answered as a consequence of this exploration. The investigation was conducted with reference to the current state of play in terms of performance opportunities and platforms and how challenges associated with this landscape are perceived by the central players – myself as choreographer; the dancers; the producers; and those who consume the work.

Method & Framing Theories

In the opening chapters of this thesis I introduce several approaches to engaging and interacting with practice as well as several framing theories which underpin my research.

When you and I look at an object outside ourselves, we form comparable images in our respective brains. We know this well because you and I can describe the object in very similar ways, down to fine details. But that does not mean that the image we see is the copy of whatever the object outside is like. Whatever it is like, in absolute terms, we do not know. (Damasio in Gallagher and Zahvai 2008, p.93)

What we are conscious of is always intentional and our first-personal experience of an object – its ‘givenness’ to us – is very much ‘my experience’. In narrative inquiry, people are looked at as “embodiments of lived stories” (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p.43). I represent my experience here as well as that of the ensemble of dancers as it comes to us as a narrative, and document it using narrative inquiry – narrative being “both the phenomenon and the method of the social sciences” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, pp.17-18).
The framing theories include phenomenology, Lacanian psychoanalysis, performance theory, and practice theory including the concept of habitus.

Using the Schechnerian broad-spectrum approach to performance allows me to frame my work as a legitimate performance regardless of the tacit anticipations and genre stereotyping of the various audience types that encounter it. It also allows me to frame ‘as’ performance, those who engage with the work, as performing their identity in their capacity as naïve audience member, through enthusiast, to the ‘connoisseur’, which includes the critic. This ‘performance’ is also represented in the production of *Rite of Spring*, as the characters display “arrays of activities” or practices. They perform the everyday performances we force ourselves to perform – cognitively rehearsing performed versions of ourselves to meet the expectations of those ‘others’ around us.

Phenomenology underpins many aspects of the work. It highlights the Husserlian’s “natural attitude” that prevails – the naïvety that considers reality to be out there waiting to be discovered, taking what is being presented to us for granted, “ignoring the contribution of consciousness” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 p.23). This supports my belief that the art we conceive of is not sitting on an evolutionary continuum, ever approaching some divine endpoint where all artistic contributions are the stuff of beauty for all humanity to appreciate equally. What it is in terms of how we experience it is “projected by us” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 p.40) – that phenomena we encounter as art has the quality of “givenness” – its unique appearance to us.

In terms of my engagement with the stimuli that brought me to a place to make work as I make it, phenomenology suitably frames my experiences in how I encountered them in a joint fashion with that ‘significant’ other in the best of circumstances, that Lacanian “petit autre” presenting a bewitching “wholeness” and organising in me a unique artistic sensibility.

In addition, if I wish to create an environment that the dancers are willing to invest in, I need to wilily present this new work, these pieces of music, this unusual performance context, in the best of circumstance – to create a Lacanian “lack” in them – in some way to present me to them with a “wholeness” that I encountered, so that they desire to tap into what I propose (Knorr Cetina 2001, p. 185; see also Lacan and Wilden 1968, Alford 1991) – to be their “petit autre” (see Lacan in Bailly 2009).
Having carefully chosen the music the choreographic work grew out of my improvisations conducted in “a very thin, per-reflective awareness …” condition (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 p.158), whilst in a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi in Snyder & Lopez 2002). I created “my dance out of the Subject … reflecting and making critical aesthetic choices at a later stage” (Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009), “brilliant technique and youthful agility” no longer a concern, emphasising rather “a more integrated physical-emotional-spiritual approach to dancing” (Schwaiger 2005a, p.111), deliberately allowing the work to be tainted and contaminated by the body, creating it directly from my habitus.

Rejecting the Formal Demands of the Tradition

In Irish step dance, elements as basic and as fundamental as crossed feet and verticality place demands on the body which become much more evident as one ages, yet I was eager to continue to work as I aged, rejecting this notion of it being a vocation for the young and athletic. Those less available, visceral aesthetic qualities, which can often diluted in a sea of virtuosity and choreographic tricks, come to the fore with physical and emotional maturity, yet the dance, to me, continuing to be beautiful and valid, without the expected emphasis on the tradition canons. This negotiation brought me to a place where I began to reject the formal demands made by the tradition, but also allowed other material to surface from my habitus, and by blending both, creating a novel vocabulary and style. The work continued to be virtuosic, but in different ways. In the initial stages as I focused on developing my choreographic signature, it was the emphasis on expression that I most enjoyed. This acted as an emotional, expressive and satisfying release. But having spent most of my adult life as a professional dancer, choreographing and dancing purely for my own pleasure was short-lived, and I soon had the urge to share the work. This investigation of the expressive potential of the dance form put me on a path where penetration into the various dance worlds needed to be explored.

At no stage in this thesis do I suggest that Irish step dance is without expression or meaning. Indeed, it is the fact that I was often met with negativity towards the form that compelled me to undertake the research. I encountered claims being made about its lack of expression, and that its only purpose was for displays of technical ability, with the current performance contexts (competition, commercial, etc.) suggested as all that should be available to it. I found some
commentators claim that Irish step dance’s close relative, seannós dancing, to be superior in that it was improvisational, heartfelt, and authentic. This improvisational prowess, apparently lacking in the Irish step dancers, others too had in spades, such as the tap-dancers, who were akin to jazz musicians, or so we (the Irish step dancers) were told. Claims that Irish dance was simply the repeating of repertoire were common, and that it lacked the cognitive engagement and corporeal exploration of contemporary dance. I knew, as did many of my colleagues as well as the dancers from the genres mentioned above, that those claims about them (the seannós/tap-dancers/contemporary dancers), as well as the claims about the step dancers may not be entirely true all the time. The bad press that Irish step dance receives because of the community’s high regard for competition culture and its emphasis on appearance, which confuses the outsider of what is being evaluated in these pageant-like events, has led to much of this lack in understanding. Altering this negative, and often incorrect perception of the dance form was the fuel I needed to realise my own unique choreographic voice.

I have a notable reaction to Irish step dance, which is supported by the tradition-holders around me. The virtuosic performances, which represents inborn talent as well as years of extremely hard work, is what tends to excite us most. But also present, not only in how I experience my own performance of the dance, but in what I see in those who particularly engage me as they dance, is something special which I find difficult to articulate. My felt experience and that observed experience may not be exactly the same thing, but was worthy of investigation to my mind. Indeed, this quality is what separates, for me, the very good dancers from those who are in the elite category. I also find that apart from finding it hard to articulate what it was, many who are not tradition-holders fail to see that quality. And that would be fine and well, except some of those who are vocal about the genre and what it lacks in terms of expression are sometimes well-positioned to have their voices heard within the wider world. To a great degree, purely out of passion for the dance, I was compelled to attempt to intervene in the debate. As a practitioner who is going to make work regardless, a performance/research model presented this opportunity. The work I hoped to create was not a deliberate argument to show these commentators the error in their ‘appraisal’ ways. This was work that was continually in progress and had already been on my choreographic agenda. Ironically the pieces address, with their content and themes, the concerns associated with their making and their presentation.
Accomplishments

The first of two major choreographies, Noćtú, had as its purpose to simply unveil the dancer behind this constructed myth. Noćtú reveals the real lived stories of the types found in the world of Irish step dancing, with qualities such as being hard-working, artistic, and dedicated to process, research, and practice in common, as well as sacrificing much for their art. Noćtú addresses, from an ethnochoreological perspective, our community’s plight as I see it, as well as exorcising my autobiographical demons. It acknowledges and greets the concurrent emphasis on the form’s surface adornments, but deals with them by using irony and self-deprecation. It then strips all of that away and presents a more internal aesthetic.

Noćtú suggests a fresh approach to the physicality of the dance, based purely on my habitus and how I am moved to move. It proposes a novel strategy in the process of the making, development and presentation of the work, and aims to execute this in the best possible circumstances. The show introduces emotional layers rarely attempted by the Irish dance show genre and are tackled and felt on a deep level by the dancers.

Autobiographically, I engage with the ‘o’ther – that intangible, all-seeing all-knowing entity which questions ones every move, preventing self-realisation by confidence-robbing. We bestow this quality on others, and indeed there are people and situations that we can pinpoint as responsible for our own self-doubt, but in fact we create and feed those internal demons ourselves and allow them to cripple us creatively.

This story I had to tell so that my new story of contemporary Irish dance could begin to be told – a paving of the way to the more contemporary and challenging work – Rite of Spring.

Emotion and feeling is the dominant thrust of this second work, Rite of Spring. Surfacing on the bodies of the dancers, these layers of meaning that I feel exist subtly within the essence of the dance are unleashed and developed in a dance work that I hope would silence the aforementioned critics and commentators of the form and its lack of expression in their opinions. With the help of an exemplary company, exhibiting them and the work in the best of circumstances, Rite of Spring
is a display of deep felt expression by all concerned. Thematically it negotiates blind faith in practices and the propensity to comply without question.

This choreographic pathway – the particular approach to the realisation of the work, its presentation and embodiment by the company of dancers, and its consumption by others – led the work to be considered as contemporary Irish dance, with the intention that it prompt emotions in the observer other than animating them with virtuosoic displays, commonly Irish dance work’s main or only intention. The work was located in a western concert format and on its platforms.

Why would I bother with such a space?

If a performance captures my imagination, I will support it regardless of its ‘perceived’ genre. To me, the nature of the entertainment or art we consume is purely a matter of taste, whether that be popular culture, western ‘high’ arts, traditional/indigenous forms, etc. – no one style or genre is better or more sophisticated than another. Some are self-sustaining as they target and draw a much larger public. Others are expensive to produce, may be considered niche, and require support from arts funding bodies. A satisfying phenomenological engagement with the artefact (art, entertainment, etc.) is all that is required for a positive experience, that experience being loaded with meaning and remaining significant to the beholder. I believe that most people evaluate entertainment and art in this organic fashion.

But it seems to me that there exists an elitist judgement on art forms in terms of their acceptability and worthiness. I encounter a notion that there is a vast difference between western ‘high’ art (indeed any art proclaimed to be ‘high’ in any corner of the planet) and everything else, the standards of measurement used often inadequate or irrelevant when applied to other idioms.

Perhaps, because of my experience of the ballet my father brought me to as a child had enchanted me so, I longed to see my work presented in a similar space. Maybe it had to do with a yearning to have traditional Irish dance work accepted in the world of the ‘high’ arts. More probable is that I had no choice but to inhabit this space simply as a consequence of the nature of my dance work. As it is not the domain of the commercial world, I needed to position myself in this ‘high’ art arena if the work was to secure a presentation platform. Like it or not, endorsement by this
community acts to legitimise and promote such work, with desirable outcomes including being well-positioned for further financial support ensuring that the work, choreographic signature, and company persist.

The Journey in Search of Expression and Resulting Outcomes

This choreographic journey, which brought me from challenging the strong value based on virtuosity in Irish dance, to an interest in its potential expressive possibilities, highlighted several dimensions that appeared to characterise the nature of the choreographed and performed experience including subjective, relational, and transformational dimensions, as well as the dimension of chance. The transformational potential of the dance proved one of the more moving and satisfying aspects of the work.

Relational

The work altered the dancers’ perception of the Irish dance form. As the productions developed so too did the dancers, relating to the process, the themes and the darker tones and moods. They began to engage differently with the music and to delve into its finer details and nuances to find meaning and motivation, rather than blindly taking direction. They turned their gaze inwards, and embraced the importance of the impulse to move, being aware of its location, and using this as an arousal to display the work. The dancers found themselves digdig deep to within themselves to find their characters and its performance. They reinvented this with each iteration and chose not to see each performance as simply repeating repertoire.

As I established above, the work is autobiographical. This is strongly revealed in some of what seemed to be blind choices I made. The casting of Nick disclosed itself as remarkably significant. Nick, the random dancer I encountered at a competition amounted to much more, highlighting one’s intuitive strength and how we should place more value in this quality. Something about him connected with something in me on a gut level. I knew I was not picking him because he was the best dancer. Instinctively I related to the qualities he possessed other than his dancing ability. I must have known that those qualities would eventually far outweigh his dancing ability. At the time of our meeting, I had only watched him dance for a very short amount of time, and although
I loved his movement quality, I did notice some technical weaknesses. I was unaware at the time of the artistic demands that would eventually arise, in particular in *Rite of Spring*, but without formally auditioning or interviewing Nick I tacitly knew he possessed something I did not yet know I needed, above and beyond his dancing talent. The research reveals that I believed simply, that he seemed to be the best version of me that was not me. And now his current autobiographic narrative reads very like my own. My intuition, it seems, revealed more to me than what might be available if I approached casting in a more conventional fashion.

**Subjective**

I had put myself in an invidious position. As I embarked on this journey, I thought I needed to ‘prove’ that certain things I observed were true ... and they are, for me. Therein lies a vital realisation that these views can only undoubtedly be true to oneself, after that there lies a continuum: those closest to me (the dancers who embody the work; the tradition-holders with an appetite for something new; etc.) having similar but not identical views as myself; those furthest from me, with a remarkably different view, their personal unique aesthetic landscape, appreciably distant from my own. A mistake, I maintain, is to believe too strongly in the ‘truth’ you place in that landscape that presents itself to you. In terms of the art one enjoys, it may seem perfect, complete and beautiful. In our inevitable scheming narcissism, we feel the urge to alter the views of the people around us – coerce them into seeing it our way. Perhaps that is why artists create their art. They, through objects and artefacts, create a portal for others to glimpse the world as they see it, presenting the Schrödinger’s cats in other universes that didn’t quite make it in the others’ views of the world.

I would like to suggest that here we find two poles, structure at one end, agency at the other. We all lie in a continuum between both, favouring one side or another at different times in our lives and as a result of different situations that are presented to us. One pole represents the unrelenting alignment with the social structure that is presented to us as we enter the world, whilst the opposite pole is a devout rejection of those norms. The experiences of belonging or marginalization are key to the agent’s choices, and are influenced by the hierarchy around him – willfully falling in love with that status-holder or actively shunning and abandoning him/her. How then these agents are considered and judged by others in turn depends on their level of status in the eyes of
each beholding individual, and how that community’s engagement melds with one another (again dependent on their perceived torchbearer) in respect of their intersubjective gaze.

I return to Lacan and the statement I found in Knorr-Cetina’s article (2001): the sense of the “wholeness of others”, that three-dimensional completeness in others that I perceive in that ‘attractive’ other, that which I assert to be absent in me. This seductiveness that I identify in the ‘O’ther and in shared practices draws me in, and I let it touch me. In terms of the aesthetic world around us, we allow these others to influence what it is we make, who it is we want to love it, and how it is we choose to consume it. Resonating and creating with that is a cathartic expression that makes it all (life) worthwhile. Theirs is the way – our libidinal engagement with what they seem to have, which is absent in ourselves – their perceived completeness.

**Transformational**

Having been involved in many choreographic and performance situations, the impact of the work, both Noćtu and the Rite of Spring, altered all dancers involved in a manner I had never experienced before. Naturally there was the sense of pride attached to watching my work be embodied and performed by the dancers and being embraced by an audience, but that was not the most satisfying aspect of this journey.

There was a sense of unity which was experienced by all. The egalitarian approach to making work and democratically managing the dancers on stage was something that many had never experienced in other companies. This led to a feeling of being part of a large family, where the concerns of the group outweighed personal desires and ambitions, yet their individual voice was valued and heard. It was widely accepted that this was because the performance situation was not so much about making money for producers, but because of the essence of the work.

All the dancers related to the themes of marginalization and torment presented in Noćtu, particularly the men. Challenges of being compelled to, or being expected to blend into the crowd with no room for individual worth, was an experience common to many. All had longed for permission to be themselves and the dance work eliminated the barriers which they felt prevented them from achieving this.
The newfound regard for process in performance came with a sense of appreciating that Irish dance work can be personal, and that drawing from their life experience would enhance and fuel their performance, perhaps even altering them fundamentally.

There was an awakening in interest in dance in the broadest sense – an urge to continue to look for new dance adventures rather than being locked into an unchanging tradition. Feeling apologetic about being an Irish dancer had been common, but the potential of infinite possibilities of expression for the dancer and the dance changed that perception and there was this new sense of there being no right or wrong. We created a new space where we could make dance with a more intense agenda, bold and innovative in its themes and in its statement, in its physicality and in its context. We lost the need to pander to the traditionalists and those with a negative attitude to the dance, only to make work that mattered to us and not catering for the sensibilities of others.

But most beautifully, the work itself, in an extraordinary and bewitching way, left a mark on all of us. We left the performance space as altered individuals and faced life with a new agenda. As Nick put it when referring to the impact dancing the Chosen One in the Rite had on him:

> … it put a stamp on my soul ... a beautiful stamp ... (Interview 2nd April 2012 Nick O’Connell)

**Chance**

An important lesson learned is that of not being overly concerned about what one perceives the expectations and wishes of the general public to be, or the niche contemporary arts public for that matter. The work should not be made with the agenda of others in mind. As Eugene Downes, CEO of Culture Ireland said to me: “One should never make work for the critics.” (Sept 2011)

The artefact I learned, does not really matter. It only needs to be made with honesty and integrity. As I argued throughout this thesis, we have little control over the randomness of the world around us. No one can really predict how art is going to be received. No one can say how something captures the imagination of their desired audience. In hindsight, it is possible to form a hypothesis, but that will only be relevant for that event, at that time under those infinitely complex set of circumstances.
Contributions & Future Directions

This research contributes to several aspects of scholarship including practice-based research, performance studies, and dance studies, specifically Irish step dance. It contributes to the field of ethnochoreology, giving insights into the Irish step dancer and their behaviour and perspectives as they navigate a creative and performance landscape that is at variance with their expectation. Here they alter their understanding of performance-making and reinvent themselves as dance artists. They see this creative environment as a space where the Irish dance artist can create something personal and unique – saying something about themselves rather than simply repeating repertoire.

The thesis also makes a case for practice-based research as a rich and rewarding approach to work-making as it straddles the disciplines of theory and practice, opening up novel creative approaches and opportunities.

Throughout the research a space was created where the choreographer and Irish step dancers found themselves ag Imeall-Siúl, or ‘Edge-Walking’, “being neither here not there” (Heaney 1994). Pushing boundaries within dance genres steeped in tradition is a precarious endeavour, but worth the risk when untapped expression and fresh perspectives could be the bounty. Consequently the thesis posits that embodied within the tradition-holder is a potentially rich distinctive reimagining of said tradition.

Like most research, this thesis only marks a point in its ongoing journey.

Given the opportunity, I would mount both works again and explore how they could evolve even further. At the time of completion of this thesis there are talks taking place to tour Noctú in the Netherlands and perhaps further afield on mainland Europe. With the centenary of the Rite of Spring coming to a close, Rite fatigue may have set in and programmers may be unlikely to present a production such as my own in 2014, but it would be interesting to adapt and perform the work in a small intimate indoor venue where its impact can be enriched as a result of proximity to the performers.
In the future, my choreographic aspiration is to build on the work initiated in *Rite of Spring*. I intend to further push this approach of using the affect as impulse in the generation of novel Irish dance vocabulary and its performance, and to work towards codifying the *Ériu Dance Company* movement signature. *Ériu* will continue to address themes that question who we are as Irish step dance tradition holders.

There are two projects currently in development:

*Linger* (working title) is a duet which will be performed by myself and company principal Nick. The work seeks to explore themes such as identity, sexuality, and the aging dancing body, and how we manage tension in these areas. One of Freud’s tenets is that the human is driven towards tension reduction. This investigation will look at how we feel empowered through tension manipulation.

I am also in talks with theatre director Joe O’Byrne to create major ensemble work based on Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*. We envision this to be a contemporary Irish dance play, interpreting Oscar Wilde’s work using some, if not all of the spoken text and setting it in a contemporary world of greed and decadence, perhaps reflecting the world we remember at the height of the Celtic Tiger economic boom. It reflects a further development of the *Ériu* style of multimedia approaches to dance work.

I also intend to allow *Ériu* to act as a platform for the company dancers to realise their own choreographic voices.

**Coda**

We leave ourselves open to a system that is not perfect. “*I just want to make dances and for people to see them*” (Author’s Journal, 16th December 2009). To ensure that there was an audience I needed to join a club: the club of the commercial world and make sacrifices in terms of content; or the club of the contemporary arts world leaving myself open to rejection. Artists are no strangers to rejection.
This journey of making new work demonstrated to me expressive potential of Irish dance. It transformed my understanding of human movement, moving my position from one of professional dance performance being reserved for the skilled, trained and the young, to a position of believing that all humans have corporeal poetic potential in terms of its performance and/or its creation. And like everything, there is a continuum – from the arthritic octogenarian with limited mobility to the principal of the New York ballet. All movement qualities are valid.

In my case I worked out of my trained but older Irish dance body enhanced by an enthusiasm and an engagement with other dance genres. What surfaced was a modified or altered or transformed version of Irish step dance. I chose to work with Irish dancers that were skilled and trained, but it certainly didn’t matter that they were the most talented or had impressive résumés.

This movement potential, innate to all, will not always find a place amongst the conventional genres and disciplines to be found in dance studios or on stages and platforms dedicated to established forms of dance. But given the chance to flourish this potential creates a much wider and richer sphere of movement choices.

In terms of my genre, Irish step dance, the “Irish character” discussed above in relation to the stylistic features of Irish step dance - the stiff, rigid verticality; the complicated foot rhythms; the absence of emotionality; the exhibitionism with no communication projected; this “seriousness of purpose”; came about as a result of a set of random social, political and cultural events. The work I make may have been pushing the boundaries of the tradition, but this is a tradition that is no stranger, from my experience, to innovation. Even within the confines of the strictly policed competition world, dancers/choreographers find ways of wowing the spectator with novelty.

But at any given moment many claim that the canons they behold are constant, having remained for the most part unchanged and believing that they should continue to persevere as such. The public cries out for rules to follow, never questioning them, only demanding a template to adhere to. This Husserlian natural attitude is adopted even by those with a critical and theoretical grasp of life which results in the conviction that “that’s just the way it is and always was”. Over time dance forms evolve, sometimes becoming more and more virtuosic resulting in a situation where those with a physiological advantage are seen as the superior dancers, the demands now much
more about skill and less about passion and an ability to poeticise movement. Just as modern
dance was an expression of rebellion against classical ballet, perhaps Irish dance can follow suit.
Virtuosic and physiological qualities once again becoming secondary to the poetic potential of the
bodies we are born with.

This is not a campaign to reject the dance forms which tend to eventually favour the physiologically
fortunate, only offering a new space where a different emphasis might endure.

To create work, to be innovative, one must also have the power to affect cultural positioning.
This cultural positioning is a function of others intending upon objects, and it is clear that some
intending consciousnesses are more powerful than others.

And in terms of the art, or the dances, or the movements – what seems to matter more now
is what they do for me … what they mean for me “how they appear, and thus as correlates
of our experience” (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 p.25). It is clear that, in a way, it really
doesn’t matter what they are in themselves but the impact they have on me or on others,
and that simply comes down to how we are manufactured to experience them. (Author’s
Journal, January 27th 2011)

Innovators whose contributions endure have the power to alter perception. They possess a catalog
of qualities, from the ability to make something new, to possessing a personality that captivates.
They perform their work and themselves in such a way that their contribution to the world endures.

It is all performance. To perform a dance work, is to create a space for others to perform them-
selves in their engagement with the work. In this performance some ‘perform’ themselves with
such intentionality they challenge that of the performance-effort presented on the stage.

If the diversity of human culture continually showed a persistent theatricality, could
performance be a universal expression of human signification, akin to language? (Herbert

Rather than letting the work intend upon them its vitality, they can cripple it, immobilising it as
it attempts its intension upon them. They are poorer as a consequence. They are searching for
truth and denying illusion, which is a possible reality-in-waiting. Others simply passively let the
performance wash over them. It may transform them. It may not. At least it has a chance.
Embodied within the tradition-holder is a potentially rich reimagining of his tradition. Working from my habitus, these non-discursive knowledges can be unleashed perhaps offering value in as much a fashion as those offered by cognition. Indeed this unleashing of embodied wisdom may give life to the ignored – the objects of beauty left behind – the Schrodinger’s cats that did not quite make it.

My Lacanian response is emerging from my habitus – my aesthetic lens a phenomenological response to years of various experiences and influences culminating in a codified and novel Irish dance aesthetic, which I hope, in sharing with like-minded practitioners in a positive and desirable environment, will result in a phenomenological reaction in them which will give life to the work allowing it a small space in the world of dance to flourish. (Author’s Journal, 5th December 2010).


APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Reviews
Dreams, Passions, and Naked Truths

Principal dancers Callum Spencer, Pete Anderson and Nick O’Connell in Brendan de Gallai’s “Noctu” at the Irish Repertory Theatre through October 2.

Movement vocabulary articulates Irish step dancing in Eriu Dance Company’s “Noctu”

BY GUS SOLOMONS JR. | The small stage of the Irish Repertory Theatre seems an unlikely setting for a dance spectacle, but the Eriu Dance Company’s “Noctu,” which opened there September 12 for a three-week run, worked surprisingly well.

This production from Ireland, conceived and directed by Riverdance alumnus Brendan de Gallai, is an attempt to let us "under the skin of those who perform in the dance world" to understand the passion that drives them. “Noctu” is informed by the backstories of the three principals in brief monologues presented in a confessional spot — a grid of light on one wall (Michael O’Connor’s lighting making the most of a limited stock of equipment).

As with other popular folk forms like hip hop, “Noctu” turns Irish step dancing, popularized by Riverdance and then Michael Flatley’s “Lord of the Dance,” into a movement vocabulary that can express a full range of emotion, not just virtuosic display. The intimacy of the theater suits the production, even though its small stage limits the amplitude of the high-legged prancing. Many of the big group formations face head-on, shoulder to shoulder, like canned sardines, but solos and smaller groups are more three-dimensional.

The dancers stroll onstage in bright colored rehearsal clothes — shorts and tank tops or T-shirts — chatting with each other. They stretch their quads and hamstrings and do an aerobic warm-up class — there is, after all, a lot of jumping and hopping in Irish dance.

Next, they strip off their practice togs and don black kilts and fitted tops (costumes by Nikki Connor), giving us tantalizing glimpses of their nicely toned physiques. They’re young, fresh-faced, and strong-legged. Oddly, considering their prowess in the Irish styles, only seven of the 16 dancers are natives of that country.
The first big dance, “Senior Celli Invention,” crams all 16 onto the bite-size stage doing brisk, kaleidoscopic formations. Their close-order, unison precision is as impressive as the accuracy of the intricate, lightning-fast footwork. Strangely, they keep switching instantaneously from dour faces to beaming grins for no apparent reason, but with precision choreography.

Emotions carom somewhat randomly in subsequent sections, too, from “Anxiety” to “Violently Happy” — danced to music by Björk. In “Shadow Dolls,” seven waifs in white tunics and masks dance as one. A repeated motif has them freeze momentarily on one foot and fix us with a menacing stare from their featureless faces. Then, Callum Spencer dances to hornpipes by Sean O’Brien, blasting from a boom box, while Nick O’Connell sits motionless in a downstage corner.

The attempted “human interest” feels superfluous; in this case, wonderful dancing doesn’t need text to enhance its emotional impact. The crackerjack skill of the ensemble and its disarming charm drive the show.

There are solos and a trio — including a brief pillow fight — for the three principals — Peta Anderson, ugly duckling turned swan; Spencer, the kid who’s taunted by rugby-playing mates for wanting to dance; and dear-in-the-headlights O’Connell, who speaks volumes with his tautly held trunk and spectacular legs.

DeGallai’s eclectic musical taste ranges from traditional Irish music to Cake, Kate Bush, and Leonard Cohen. Traditional Irish steps fit the contemporary rhythms like a glove. And in the finale, the ensemble even takes on the “Infernal Dance” from Igor Stravinsky’s “The Firebird,” as well as pulsing, high-powered original music by Joe Cisbi, with a pounding and ferocious tribal intensity that’s pretty irresistible.

Shortlink:
Noctú
Ériu Dance Company at the Irish Repertory Theatre

Reviewed by Lisa Jo Sagolla
SEPTEMBER 12, 2011

Perhaps if it didn't promise so much, "Noctú" wouldn't be such a great disappointment. The embarrassingly awful show is conceived and directed by former "Riverdance" principal dancer Breandán de Galláí, who explains in program notes that the production "aims to push the boundaries of the Irish dance tradition" he calls it "a new departure for the Irish dance show genre" that will "deliver powerful performances through text and dance." Unfortunately, "Noctú" is and does none of the above.

Instead, it offers a string of Irish dance routines, many performed in the precision ensemble fashion of "Riverdance" and others consisting of solos in which skilled dancers season their well-executed Irish steps with feeble attempts at modern dance–like movements. One wonders how such expert Irish dancers can be so inept at performing movements from other genres and so unpersuasive when they try to imbue their dancing with acting. Their big, happy smiles, alternating with pained expressions, zombielike stares, and stern glaring at the floor, convey nothing. And why is the choreography (presumably by de Galláí) of the Irish steps and patterns in the group numbers so well crafted while the non-Irish movements consist of nothing more than chest contractions, heel bounces in lunge positions, overhead arm stretches, and some silly pantomimed actions?

The entire show is marred by its creators’ lack of imagination and inability to capture an audience's interest. Even the costumes and lighting are uninspired. The short passages of text that motivate the solo dances are artless attempts to express two highly unoriginal ideas, both of which have been explored more convincingly and meaningfully in a host of other dance and theater pieces: the frustrations of those who love to dance but are constantly told they are not good enough and the plight of young male dancers tagged as gay and taunted by name-calling peers.

Despite the exemplary Irish dancing, the production's young cast, naive themes, and unsophisticated interpretations of pop music selections (reminiscent of those lyrical jazz routines popular at dance competitions) give it a juvenile quality that feels out of sync with its Off-Broadway audience. "Noctú" is not the kind of show one expects to see at the esteemed Irish Repertory Theatre. While boundary pushing is often a good thing—and Irish dance shows might well benefit from it—this production is pushing in the wrong direction.

Presented by and at the Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St., NYC. Sept. 12–Oct. 2. Tue.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., and Sun., 3 p.m. (212) 727-2737 or www.irishrep.org.
Young, nearly naked, lithe and Irish. 0% body fat.

Friday, September 9, 2011

I could take the high road and say I was interested in seeing this show to study its aesthetics, but instead I’ll tell the truth. I was intrigued by this provocative and highly effective ad:

![Noctú](image-url)

Just look at them. Couldn’t you just eat them up? They’re dancers and you can see them in a blast furnace of a show called Noctú that’s in previews at the Irish Rep.

I’ve started this sentence three times and still cannot find the right combination of words to convey how much fun this show is. And, mind you, I’m not a big fan of dance. It’s choreographed and directed by Riverdance Principal Dancer Breandán de Gallaí, but to simply call it “Irish dancing” seems wholly inadequate. It uses traditional step dancing merely as a jumping off point.

Maybe it’s because the Irish Rep is such a small venue and the dancers are right in your FACE. (I’m not certain it would work as well in a larger house.) Or perhaps it’s the perfect song selections. Or maybe it’s because they’re such accomplished dancers (they all have impressive bios). But this is such a powerful piece of theater. I wish I could take you to see it.

13 superb dancers wind their way through routines choreographed to the likes of Björk, Goldfrapp, Leonard Cohen (of course) and Kate Bush. There’s a seductive pas de trois to Imelda
May’s *My Big Bad Handsome Man* that made me wish I had taken more chances when I was in my 20s. There’s a section of Stravinsky’s *Firebird Suite* that’s worth another viewing (which I hope to get before word gets out and tickets vanish). Although, please, can you spare me the false ending? It’s unnecessary. False endings are right up there with audience participation for spoiling my night out.

* * *

Can the Irish Rep ever do wrong?!! It would seem not. Their next show is the rarely performed *Dancing at Lughnasa* by Brian Friel. The autumn theater season is just underway. Tonight, it's seasoned pro Frank Langella in Terrence Rattigan’s 1963 drama *Man and Boy* at the Roundabout. It’s time, once again, for those dreary theater posts that you all pass over.

**Blog by The Unbearable Banishment**
Dreams, Passions, and Naked Truths

BY GUS SOLOMONS JR.

Published: Tuesday, September 13, 2011 11:57 PM EDT

The small stage of the Irish Repertory Theatre seems an unlikely setting for a dance spectacle, but the Enu Dance Company's "Nocți," which opened there September 12 for a three-week run, worked surprisingly well.

This production from Ireland, conceived and directed by Riverdance alumnus Brendan de Gallai, is an attempt to let us "under the skin of those who perform in the dance world" to understand the passion that drives them. "Nocți" is informed by the backstories of the three principals in brief monologues presented in a confessional spot — a grid of light on one wall (Michael O'Connell's lighting making the most of a limited stock of equipment).

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**Essentials:**

**ERIU DANCE COMPANY**

"Noctu"

Irish Repertory Theatre

132 W. 22nd St.

Through Oct. 2

Mon. at 7 p.m., Tue.-Sat. at 8 p.m.

Wed., Sat., Sun. at 3 p.m.

$55-$65; [irishrep.org](http://irishrep.org)

Or 212-727-2737

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InfiniteBody

A blog on arts, culture and the creative mind by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

Thursday, September 15, 2011

NOCTÚ: A breakthrough in Irish dance?

Be neither dismayed nor motivated nor distracted in any way by the glam lingerie-ad look of the publicity shot. Or by the title's invocation of the Irish word for 'bare, strip, uncover.' Fun—if misplaced—marketing, that's all.

You'll quickly discover that NOCTÚ—presented by Breandán de Gallá's valiant Éiriú Dance Company on the tiny stage of the Irish Repertory Theatre—has nothing more salacious about it than an impossibly vague, if happy-go-lucky, ménage à trois moment (including lovely, lisome Peta Anderson who always looks as if she's just waiting to be scooped up for a Broadway musical, preferably not Riverdance.) The stripping down—literal and metaphoric—is all about emotional and psychological transparency, as well as finding the freedom to be yourself and finally dance what's in your heart!!

And despite de Gallá's attempt to slip the ties that once bound him to the massively successful Riverdance and its ilk, there's not a lot of uprising happening here. Take a traditional form of cultural dance—in this case, Irish step dancing—punk up the look of the dancers, interweave contemporary movement, hint at a few characters and some kind of narrative, and set it all to music by Björk, Cake, Kate Bush, Leonard Cohen and, very briefly, The Talking Heads? Nothing here is going to frighten the horses, at least no New York City horses. It's not going to send today's typical theater-going tourists screaming into the night.

I'm not immune to the pleasures of Irish step dancing, which can be as cool as tap or as fierce as flamenco. And I respect Éiriú's performers; these champs—hailing from Ireland and several other nations—work their asses off and look terrific doing so, especially in those authoritative black clogs with their little silver buckles—very sharp, very sharp. I think we can celebrate these dancers while also questioning how well the show works its premise (to reveal what's really going on in the minds and souls of talented dance artists), its text and dramatic expression (obvious, awkward, superficial) and its overall episodic structure.

The fastest way for me to explain what's dispiriting about de Gallá's structure is to ask you to imagine picking up a book of about twenty short stories. The book's cover photo is, of course, as mildly titillating as the publicity photo for NOCTÚ.

You start reading the first story. Within the first few paragraphs, you've got the point of it. But the story has ten or fifteen more pages. Dutifully, you keep reading to the end, hoping for a turn or twist or deepening or revelation that never comes. You take up the second story. Same deal. Within minutes, you know everything you need to know about the characters and the narrative.
Even so, you keep reading its remaining pages. Story #3... Need I say more?

NOCTU lasts a little over an hour but feels as if it's that length only because most of the various cuts of music are used in their entirety, the choreography expanding to fill this time.


Now through October 2, Tuesday-Saturday, 8pm with 3pm matinees on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Limited seating.

Tickets or call 212-727-2737

The Irish Repertory Theatre
132 West 22nd Street (between 6th and 7th Avenues), Manhattan
NOCTU Sexy For The Irish Rep

By John Mooney

The Irish Repertory Theatre opens its 2011-12 season with the Eiriu Dance Company’s provocative new Irish dance/performance piece called NOCTU.

In many ways, it is a stripped down version of Riverdance - both literally and figuratively since NOCTU, means ‘bare, strip, uncover.’ The work is one in which the performers expose, disclose, and reveal themselves and their emotions. The attractive looking cast (let’s be honest, there’s no place to hide extra pounds when performing nearly naked) makes the dancing visually intriguing.

Conceived and directed by Riverdance principal dancer Breandan de Gallai, NOCTU is a new departure for the Irish dance-show genre. It presents the story of Irish dance from the viewpoint of the dancer through movement, narrative, music, and pathos. It pushes the boundaries of Irish traditional dance by incorporating ballet, jazz and contemporary dance movements.

Highlights include “Shadow Dolls,” with music by Joe Cibis, the former musical director of Riverdance. The piece is something of an Irish Swan Lake with dancers in costumes reminiscent of the Austin Powers ‘fembots.” “Horripipes” showcases the talents of principal dancer Cailum Spencer, who expresses that Irish male dancers react to ridicule by playing ‘manly’ sports like football, rugby and boxing. There is an air of autobiography to the performance as Spencer is described in the playbill as an “all around sportsman” who plays tennis and rugby competitively.

“Tango” presents the dancers as gladiators in black. Peta Anderson is a standout among the female performers. Throughout the production the Aussie proves she is an exceptional dancer although her character overcomes uncertainty about her talent. The trilogy of Ossie’s Dance/Aiding’s Dance/Patrick’s Dance Features Spencer, Anderson, and Nick O’Connell in revealing white costumes dancing in a rotating spectacle. The finale, “Underworld,” brings the show to an energetic, rhythmic conclusion.

Although the production incorporates some traditional tunes, it also utilizes diverse music including “The Firebird Suite: Infernal Dance” by Igor Stravinsky, a modern take on “I Will Survive” by Cake, and the jazzy “My Big Handsome Man” by Imelda May. If your preference is for Irish dancing to the traditional tunes of Altan and The Chieftains, you have come to the wrong show.

“A flower finishing tour for Riverdance, I would often find myself sitting in small, beautiful theatres wondering what I could do with such places. Many of the post Riverdance shows followed a similar model and lent themselves to larger stages with a separation of the performers and audience. The nuances of the dance are often lost,” said Breandan de Gallai, who conceived and directed the production.
The director’s professional dancing career began with Riverdance in Eurovision 1994, and spanned 9 years. As principal dancer for 7 years, he toured the globe and led the company at the opening ceremony of Special Olympics in 2003. He has shared the stage with principals of The Royal Ballet and has performed live for Presidents McAleese and Robinson of Ireland, Queen Elizabeth, Princess Diana, Prince Rainier of Monaco; Queen Sonja of Norway, and the Emperor of Japan.

His show illustrates the world as the dancers see it, presenting their viewpoint as a personal narrative. He calls it “an honest celebration of who we really are.” As the work unfolds, marginalized characters find a sense of belonging.


Support for this production was provided by Imagine Ireland.

“It’s about young Irish people finding their way in the world. It exposes their inner turmoil, as well as the pain and joy of being an Irish step dancer,” said Ciarán O’Reilly, co-founder and producing director of the Irish Rep.

Co-founded by Ciarán O’Reilly and artistic director Charlotte Moore, The Irish Repertory Theatre opened its doors in September 1988. Its mission is to bring works by Irish and Irish American masters and contemporary playwrights to American audiences and to encourage the development of new works focusing on the Irish and Irish American experience and a range of other cultures.

Performances of NOCTU run September 12 until October 2 at The Irish Repertory Theatre (132 West 22nd Street, betw/ 6th and 7th Ave.). Tues-Sat at 8 pm with 3 pm matinees on Weds, Sat, and Sun. Tickets are $55 and $65 at the office, by phone at (212) 727-2737 and online at IrishRep.org
Watching Noctu was a little bit like watching bits of my life performed on stage. Talking to the show’s creator-choreographer Breandan de Gallai after Saturday’s evening show, I learned that was exactly the desired reaction.

Noctu, which just wrapped up a short run at Manhattan’s Irish Repertory Theatre on Sunday, is what de Gallai called the autobiography of an Irish dancer. Through the eyes of three disenfranchised characters, de Gallai unveils the conflicts within every dancer, including feelings of inadequacy and simply being misunderstood, in stark contrast to joy and camaraderie.

While it surprised me that de Gallai, a legend in the Irish dance world, might’ve ever felt inadequate in his dancing ability, he explained that these emotions are in every dancer -- from beginners to world-class champions. De Gallai, who himself ranks among the world’s most esteemed step dancers, said assuredly, “Everybody has those feelings -- the times when no matter what you do, you just feel awful.”

The theme of inadequacy was personified by the lead female character, played by Australian dancer Peta Anderson. In this role, Anderson portrayed a passionate dancer who’s natural skills didn’t quite match up with her bursting enthusiasm for dance. In her solo, a dream sequence, she bounds gracefully across the stage. But when the dream is over, Anderson’s character clumsily bops along to a few bars of a slip jig tune.

Principal dancer Callum Spencer offered an inside look at the struggles of being a male Irish dancer, who is constantly ridiculed and proactively presenting himself as macho. Still, Spencer’s character is berated with homophobic slurs by his peers. The stereotype that Irish dancing is a girly activity is matched by an ironically masculine traditional hornpipe performed by Spencer, a clear athlete with a strikingly robust build.

In a related -- and “intentional” move -- de Gallai choreographed soft shoe dances for the male dancers. Unlike Riverdance, Lord of the Dance and other popular Irish dance stage shows, de Gallai deliberately choreographed reels to be performed by the men. He said that he’s sometimes stuck explaining to people that all Irish dancers -- male and female -- begin with light dances. Too often, audiences unfamiliar with traditional Irish dance mistakenly associated hard shoes with masculinity and soft soles with femininity.

“There’s a lot of expression in what we do in soft shoes,” he said.
There was no lack of expression, power and strength in dancer Nick O’Connell’s reel, performed barefoot to a modern rendition of "I Will Survive" by Cake. This particular dance was both unexpected and exhilarating. The combination of gymnastic choreography and O’Connell's gallant stage presence was anything but delicate.

Noctu was refreshing. It was honest. De Gallai described it as an "exploration of the possibilities of Irish dance," and it was exactly that. From the contemporary soundtrack to the interculturally influenced choreography, Noctu strips Irish dance of its stuffy reputation. Yet, somehow, de Gallai's creation was in ways more traditional and representative of Irish dance than its famous step dance show predecessors.

For more Irish dancing news from North America's favorite magazine delivered to your mailbox, subscribe today!
I just saw the most incredible performance -- the kind of thing that completely takes you out of your head.

I rarely used the overused word but here it is, "mesmerizing." It was so unexpected because I didn't know what to expect. Noctú, an Irish word that you are going to have to look up, is an Irish dance group in New York as part of the Imagine Ireland series. They had their opening last night at the Irish Repertory Theater.

I might not have caught it if it was anywhere else, but I'm rarely disappointed by the Irish Rep and besides, it was a free ticket.

I didn't look at the program or read about Noctú so I was expecting something along traditional lines. This left me little wondering at first -- the dancers were dressed as if for volleyball game at the beach or an aerobics class and indeed, I later discovered, the first dance is called "Warmup."

The stage is small at the Irish Rep and allows for great intimacy.

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Sitting four rows back the intensity of the performances (an unbelievable 17 dances by 16 dancers) left me exhausted and elated and almost weak from emotion. I was taken along as the dancers turned the world of Irish dance upside down. I was taken inside the world of Irish dance -- treated to the slurs flung at Irish male dancers, "Faggot," "Pussy."

"You have to be more macho, play a macho sport, it's best to go to school somewhere far away," a male dancer laments, while a female dancer emotes that she knows she's "shite" but she loves to dance, her way, and "really while the others are very good but they are all the same."

The different dances are a comment on the strictures of Irish dance -- yet the tradition of Irish dance is honored too -- throughout. In "Shadow Dolls," the female ensemble wears white dresses and white masks
emphasizing the norm in the Irish dance world – keeping it inside the box. The dancers move as one, a corps de ballet, but this is no ballet, it's hard shoe and it's magnificent.

This is no Riverdance, this is a new thing, a new departure that is rooted in traditional Irish dance but pushes the boundaries to the limit and towards the end descends, in piece entitled "Underworld" to an almost violent war dance complete with body paint, it's tribal that morphs into a sort of beach party.

I am not an expert on dance, so I know not of what I write, but I found myself so moved by the experience that I had to try and express it. Go and see for yourself. Noctú is at the Irish Rep (132 West 22nd Street) until October 2nd. Hopefully, some wise producer will come along and put it on Broadway.

The talent, the beauty, the stamina, the love of dance, all shine through. Noctú pays homage to Irish dance and tradition and yet it is its own new thing. And it's beautiful.

Topics: Irish theater, Irish dance, Irish Rep

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Noctu Irish Dance at The Irish Repertory Theatre: Kill for a ticket

With his new show Noctu, Irish dance director and choreographer Breandan de Galli has created arguably the most challenging Irish dance work ever seen on a New York stage.

Noctu, which means stripped or laid bare in Irish, sweeps away everything before it in a work that breaks all the rules.

In tomorrow's Irish Voice Cahir O’Doherty talks to the show's choreographer and has one piece of advice for you: kill for a ticket.

Topics: Theatre, Irish entertainment, Dance, arts

Find this article at:
Shockingly provocative Irish dance show NOCTU to take to Irish Rep stage

Irish Republic show to shake things up

By CAHIR O’DOHERTY, Irish Voice Reporter

Published Thursday, August 25, 2011, Updated Thursday, August 25, 2011, 8:27 AM

NOCTU is the name of an exciting, sometimes violent and decidedly sexy new dance work by Irish choreographer and former Riverdance principal dancer Breandan de Gallai that will begin at the Irish Repertory Theatre on September 6 and run through October 2.

It’s an appropriate venue for a performance that takes an axe to the frozen sea of Irish tradition, because that’s what the Irish Rep has been doing onstage for decades itself. Without much fanfare NOCTU has arrived as a shockingly new Irish dance performance that seems calculated to divide the critics who enjoy the work’s beauty, whilst questioning its formal choices.

But director and choreographer de Gallai welcomes all that controversy. Having toured the world on the Riverdance stage, the director and choreographer had ample time to think about what does and does not work on stage in Irish dancing. He also had time to contemplate what, if anything, has been missing. NOCTU is the result of years of exploration.

Since 1994 Riverdance has launched the careers of countless Irish dancing stars who would still only have good things to say about the whole experience, but after the first few minutes of NOCTU unfold you’ll realize that Riverdance never looked this provocative or took these kinds of risks.

First of all there’s the costumes. For the men that features chest bearing black kilts or simple white slip on’s; for the women it means barely there white two pieces.

Vulnerability, passion, nudity? This is hardly the traditional get-up at your local Feis Ceoil.

The Irish Rep’s producing director Ciaran O’Reilly told the Irish Voice why the theater decided to open its fall season with the new work.

“Breandan came by to see myself and artistic director Charlotte Moore and he basically pitched it. He brought along some stunning video of the performance in Ireland, which he was about to take on a national tour, and it just blew us away,” says O’Reilly.

“How vigorous and young and vibrant and sexy it is. It really took us further than anything we had ever seen in Irish step dance. He was able to break into other forms as well as holding onto traditional ones.
It’s certainly fantastic to look at.”

Irish traditional dance enthusiasts come in many forms, and the only thing that unites them is disagreement. Some argue that the traditional steps have been handed down from time immemorial and they should be preserved forever without change or alteration.
But others say that modern Irish dancing is a modern reworking of a lost art, and innovations that respect the spirit of the tradition should not have to be bound to it.

You’d be surprised how passionate these abstract debates can become in real life. Spend five minutes trawling Irish traditional dance discussion boards and you’ll see the ease with which people insult and belittle each other’s efforts with the same fiery intensity we have come to expect on American Idol.

It’s a serious business, art, in other words. And so is the business of growing up, which gets explored in the show.

“It’s about Irish stepdancers or just young Irish people, funding their way in the world in the world. It exposes their inner turmoil. It explores the pain and joy of being an Irish stepdancer. It’s certainly an inside look at that,” O’Reilly says of NOCTU.

After his many years with Riverdance de Gallai worked as a master choreographer, and he could restage the whole of Riverdance simply from memory.

“He’s very much a part of the tradition of that, but he’s not afraid to step outside of it," says O’Reilly.

“There’s music in the new show that’s certainly well away from stepdancing music. There are other surprises too.

“There are those who bitterly object to Breandan de Gallai taking liberties with the form in any way at all, but he’s unfazed. Many people still feel that it should all be frozen in time. So we’d be interested to see if any controversy erupts over this one. We half-suspect it’s going to.”

The Irish Repertory Theatre is located at 132 West 22nd Street. For tickets and showtimes call 212-727-2737 or visit www.irishrep.org.

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Copyright © 2009 IrishCentral LLC
Irish dance director and choreographer Brendan de Gallai has created arguably the most challenging Irish dance work ever seen on a New York stage. Nocturne, which means stripped or laid bare in Irish, sweeps away everything before it in a work that breaks all the rules. CAHIR O'DOHERTY reviews the show, talks to its choreographer, and has one piece of advice for you — kill for a ticket.


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DANCING LIKE IT SHOULD BE

CONTINUED FROM PG. 18

own voice as a choreographer, and I realized I probably wouldn’t get paid working on something on the scale of Edgerton again.”

Like most dancers, de Gaillais has nothing but praise for his years in Ireland.

“I was very, very proud to be in it and it made a huge difference to the world of Irish dance when we reached Tokyo to St. Petersburg. Time then to go now. It’s all about the dance,” he says.

Searching for a show of his own, created from the lessons he had learned, de Gaillais turned to his own hands when it became apparent that it would be difficult to interest producers in any new directions for Irish dance. Michael Holley’s success seemed to provide them all with a blueprint of the kind of path to take, all after all.

“Dancers had a very clear idea of what the audience wanted and they weren’t shy about saying so,” de Gaillais adds.

By Cahal O’Doherty

SOME 40,000 children are being under-

cared for, tortured, raped and murdered in so-
daughter or sex slavers by the IRA (Irish Resistance Army) in southern Sudan and northern Uganda since 1980.

That’s such a staggering

message — and such a foul crime — that the imagination has trouble taking it in. It’s the kind of

story that can make you want to go to the cheers of the scale of the humanitarian mis-
ter that led to it. What kind of horror can be

accomplished when so many within it are left to live to tell the tale of the children who are suffocated and

worse than animals.

Can Prochazka, the Harris

report, and inspirational new film that opened Friday with Gerhard Butler and Michelle Monaghan in the star-

ning roles, that story is told — as the story of one man’s determina-
tion to resist it.

The film tells the story of Cahal’s relationship with the real life ex-Kinshasa turned war dance dancer who

is transformed by a trip to East Africa. Helping to repair homes and schools, the children are outraged to be faced by the region’s sexual violence and the demands their parents are making on them.

Since Machine Gun Prochazka in Iraq, the real-life story that the script

author the actor attended to give over what a multi-petitured Irish child had been born (with the help of his wife) he turned his life around.

But his dark past gave him an insight into others.

Once he was a home and a heroin addict on the road to nowhere, and when we first meet Children he’s coming out of prison and very

likely on the fast track back to it.

But to the interval his wife Lynn (Monaghan), a former sniper, has found God and begun a process of finding a new story for herself and a new future for her family.

That story slowly works its change on his life and he

Eventually he finds himself

working on a short

woman in Kandahar, she’s a home builder

... with that real-life message of finding a new story for herself and a new future for her family.

That story slowly works his change on Children too, and he

eventually finds himself

working on a short

woman in Kandahar, she’s a home builder

... with that real-life message of finding a new story for herself and a new future for her family.

The fact that those people are flawed, that they’re not perfect, that I found that inspiring. I think the story of how it com-

es together in the end will be familiar with Monaghan’s outstanding performance.

In去年’s Baby Done. But what they might not know is that her family has

nothing to do with Monaghan’s film.

Children. In her last name too, she need never feel ashamed.

“My parents have been wonderful to say that I haven’t yet. They got me there and absolutely loved it. It’s

African context.

would like to be Irish and I’m proud we kept the ‘U’ in our surname long after he was doing God’s work,” she said.

“I know quite a few of them from Monaghan. That was a huge part of the boat and dropped it right away. There’s no

It’s a real, these two who have gone to hell and back. She’s had a lot of sleepless nights in Kandahar before he was doing God’s work,” she said.

I have found that

of the military controlled by the

... with the real-life film is all the more动人.
The film tells the story of how the Children who have been born (with the help of his wife) he turned his life around.

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That story slowly works its change on his life and he
Noctu at the NY Irish Rep - Dancing like it should be - VIDEO

Arguably the most challenging Irish dance work ever seen on a New York stage.

By CAHIR O’DOHERTY, Irish Voice Reporter

Published Thursday, September 22, 2011, 8:46 AM
Updated Thursday, September 22, 2011, 8:46 AM

Irish dance director and choreographer Brendan de Gallai has created arguably the most challenging Irish dance work ever seen on a New York stage. Noctu, which means stripped or laid bare in Irish, sweeps away everything before it in a work that breaks all the rules. CAHIR O’DOHERTY reviews the show, talks to its choreographer, and has one piece of advice for you -- kill for a ticket.

Who knew Leonard Cohen and Bjork were writing reels and jigs? They probably didn’t and -- to be honest -- until I watched Noctu at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York I would never have imagined how effortlessly their music could lend itself to the rhythms and steps of Irish dancing.

The first thing to say about the new dance performance Noctu (the name means stripped, or laid bare in Irish) is that it is the most ambitious Irish dance work I have ever seen.

Currently playing at the Irish Rep (which is overdue an award as the most consistently brilliant theater makers in the country) through October 2, the show has been directed by the Gweedore, Co. Donegal visionary choreographer and dancer Brendan de Gallai.

The show begins with a warm-up that happens onstage. You hear the Irish accents of the dancers greeting each other as one by one they get in line (some of them turn up late, this is Ireland we’re talking about) and dance in unison. In their O’Neal and Umbro sweatys they look like any young Irish person on the streets of Dublin.

It’s the most unaffected, informal way for the audience to get a sense of who these dancers are as people, but in a way it’s also very misleading, because by the end of this complex and challenging work you’ll be hard put to think of them as ordinary at all.

There’s a good reason for this -- Irish dancers aren’t. Most of them live in their calling like monks live in their faith. They are terribly fit athletes who are also artists, and as Noctu makes clear early on, at the end of the day “they just f***ing want to dance.”

There’s a bit of Billy Elliott set up to one of the main story lines in Noctu, which seems unavoidable. For a young lad growing up in rural Ireland, becoming an Irish dancer is a bit like announcing you’re going to design women’s dresses for a living. Noctu doesn’t pretend that your path will be smooth, but it reminds you very forcefully how beautiful your life can become.

Starting out with the bluesy voice of legendary Irish chanteuse Mary Coughlan singing “Miss Brown to You,” the dancers perform a get to know you piece that’s followed up with Goldfrapp’s utterly gorgeous “Deer Stop,” and then with Kate Bush’s Irish inflected “The Night of the Swallow.” This is seriously discerning, wildly beautiful pop music and it is matched with some impressive dancing.
“We follow those sequences up with music by a friend of mine called Joe Csibi and that's followed by a traditional hornpipe and then by a tango,” de Gallai tells the Irish Voice. “Those sequences are followed up by Bjork's “Violently Happy.”

If you haven’t understood the beats and the rhythms of these famous tracks that take an axe to the frozen sea of Irish dance tradition you soon will when you see how they erupt onstage. Noctu is focused, energetic, and uproarious and -- yowsa -- is it sexy.

Cast members wear black kilts, then leotards, then just their underwear in a clear effort to break free from all the distracting neon colors and tossed curls that have taken over competitive Irish dancing.

Noctu isn’t making fun of all that modern showbiz excess; it just wants to purely focus on the dancing and the dancers body in motion. It’s a wise and refreshing choice.

“I came up with the idea for Noctu after I left Riverdance,” says de Gallai, who danced for years in the show himself.

“I was working with the composer Joe Csibi and I really wanted to have my own voice as a choreographer, and I realized I probably wouldn’t get to work on something on the scale of Riverdance again.”

Like most dancers, de Gallai has nothing but praise for his years in Riverdance.

“I was very, very proud to be in it and it made a huge difference to the world of Irish dancing from Tokyo to St. Petersburg. To me then and to me now it’s all about the dance,” he says.

Searching for a show of his own, created from the lessons he had learned, de Gallai took matters into his own hands when it became clear to him that it would be difficult to interest producers in any new directions for Irish dance. Michael Flatley’s success seemed to provide them all with a blueprint of the correct path to take, after all.

“Venture capitalists had a very clear idea of what the audiences wanted and they weren’t shy about saying so,” de Galli adds.

“But I was more interested in making dance from the perspective of the artist. So the argument became we know what the audience wants versus my idea that they only wanted it because that was the only thing available to them now.”

All of those financial considerations are a million miles away from the work of art that de Gallai has delivered. Quite simply it’s the most engaging and iconoclastic Irish dance performance this reviewer has ever seen.

Merging elements of hip-hop, jazz, tango and the avant-guard legacy of Martha Graham into Irish traditional dancing, it’s like punk rock meets step dancing meets Stravinsky. It’s completely mad in other words, and it will startle you with its brilliance.

De Gallai’s choreography can achieve hypnotic or thrilling broad strokes, but there are times when it falters over the subtler emotions. There’s a lack, at times, of searching tenderness or humor, and deep interaction between the dancers (although suggested) is usually kept to a minimum.

But those issues are more than made up for by the sheer ambition of what de Gallai is doing. At its best Noctu is an astounding work and it bodes very well for his future as a visionary choreographer.

What is truly remarkable about this show is that it has somehow managed to reach past the rule-bound 19th century Irish dancing tradition to a much more ancient and atavistic thrum of Ireland itself. That’s a
literally incredible achievement that made some audience members almost fall of out of their chairs.

It’s the first time this reviewer has ever seen genuine violence, fury and eroticism in Irish dancing, and on seeing it I was glad of the restoration. De Gallai deserves to receive massive support to pursue his vision because it is coming from a place that runs much deeper than the bureaucrats of An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha (the Irish Dancing Commission) will ever dig.

“If you do something with integrity and honesty it may be different to things that people are accustom to seeing but they may enjoy it,” says de Gallai.

“Irish dancing is more than just in your feet, I believe. I have always improvised around music I enjoy myself and I consider myself to be an Irish dancer. The challenge in Noctu was to teach other Irish dancers to move that way. I had to win their confidence to do it, to let them believe in what I did.”

Now that he has found a way to communicate how easily tradition and modernity can live side by side, de Gallai has done something few Irish artists ever accomplish. He married the past and the present in a way that is recognizable and authentic.

“I’ve had my day as a dancer. Now I really want to choreograph and I really want to direct,” he adds.

“With this show and the dancing that’s in it, it’s a chance for us -- the Irish -- to tell our story and to include in it some of the characters that we meet in the wider world.”

For ticket information and showtimes, visit www.irishrep.org.
Irish maverick goes bare: De Gallai pushes boundaries with 'Noctu'

Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger

NEW YORK—A man whose native tongue is Gaelic, and who has made step dancing his profession, would seem to have his Irish credentials in order.

Yet Breandán de Gallai, choreographer of the Irish dance show "Noctú," which makes its debut this week at the Irish Repertory Theatre, says that growing up in dance he felt like an outsider.

"I felt extremely marginalized being an Irish dancer," de Gallai confesses. "Although I come from Ireland, you know, guys don't dance. It's the same, I suppose, all over the world. You're always kind of set apart. And I was quite shy as a child."

This sensitive young man also had a streak of originality that did not endear him to the judges monitoring the orthodoxy of Irish dance competitions. Although de Gallai was a virtuoso who eventually triumphed at the All Ireland Irish Dancing Championships, his long hair and flashy leg beats raised disapproving eyebrows. "It didn't always pay off," he admits. "In a tradition like Irish dancing, you need to push the boundaries so that you're noticed. But you definitely don't want them to think you're a loose cannon."

De Gallai became an original cast member in "Riverdance," starring in the show from 1996 until 2003. Yet his maverick sensibility, and his observations of young dancers struggling to conform inspired him to create "Noctú," a dramatic work whose three protagonists—two men and a woman—don't fit in. In championing these individuals and their burning desire to dance, de Gallai says that "Noctú" (the name means "stripped" or "bare") offers an insider's view of the hermetic world of Irish dance.

"Noctú" itself pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable in Irish dance circles, with a musical score that ranges from contemporary vocalists Imelda May and Kate Bush to an excerpt from Stravinsky's "Firebird." The finale includes a commissioned score by "Riverdance" collaborator Joe Csibi.

While the choreography is steeped in tradition, de Gallai's influences range broadly. After high school, he spent a year in Chicago where he was exposed to American modern dance and tap. In "Riverdance," he jammed with flamenco dancers, performing to the rhythms of a Djembe drum in the number "Heartbeat of the World."

After leaving the stage, de Gallai earned a master's degree in ethnochoreology at the University of Limerick, where he is currently pursuing a doctorate. The program involved studying Afro-Cuban dance, and more flamenco. He also has worked
as an announcer for RTÉ television, which produced a series about the making of Noctū,” enabling de Gallai to expand the show.

“Turned-out feet, straight legs—those things are very pleasing to somebody who knows Irish dancing. But I don’t have an awful lot of turned-out feet in ‘Noctū,’ and the knees are often bent,” de Gallai says. “The stimulus that makes me want to dance and create movement isn’t about those canons, it’s about a feeling that can surface in the body anyway.

“That doesn’t mean it’s not Irish dance.”

Robert Johnson: rjohnson@starledger.com

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No singular sensation
By LEIGH WITCHEL

If "Riverdance" and "A Chorus Line" had a baby, it would be "Noctu."
That's Gaelic for "stripped" or "exposed," and this pint-size dance spectacle promises a peek throug
lives of Irish step-dancers.
Instead, it's best when it sheds the flimsy plot, cuts loose and dances.
"Noctu," which opened this week, crams its cast of 16 onto the Irish Rep's small stage. Happily, the
around intricate tapping footwork and minimal arm movements -- looks good when squeezed tight.
As for the dancers' stories: If you've seen "A Chorus Line," you know them. There's a girl who has tc
she can't fit into a group, and a guy who laments how rough it is to be a straight male dancer. But t
sketchier than "A Chorus Line," and leaves you to fill in most of the blanks.
The dancing doesn't help explain things. To show how she can't fit in, the girl wanders around aimle
routine. The straight guy joins the other men for a macho fusion number of Irish dance to Argentine
as dazzling as a real tango.
The stripping promised in the title comes from a ménage a trois: two men and a woman each doing
underwear. It's never clear why, and there's no follow-through -- just on to the next sketch.
Still, you can overlook the shortcomings in the plot and focus on the dancing, much of it very fine. T
to Irish music. There are numbers to Bjork, Talking Heads, Kate Bush and -- the most creative one -
"Firebird."
The last is imagined as a primitive tribal dance; the dancers were smeared with body paint doing furic
The precise, staccato raps of the cast's feet are an unexpected and uncanny match for the complex
Stravinsky.
The next time someone wants to give step dance a plot, how about the "Rite of Spring"?
Noctu

nytheatre.com review

Megin Jimenez · September 10, 2011

Pictured: A scene from Noctu (photo © Carol Rosegg)

The international success of Riverdance has been a mixed blessing for the living art of Irish dance. While the show has nurtured welcoming audiences across the world, it also threatens to confine notions of the dance to the foggy realm of nostalgia for all things Irish. Noctu, a new "dance play" from the Éiriú Dance Company, approaches this tension from the dancer's perspective. A spare storyline takes the point of view, on the one hand, of a female dancer feeling choked by the conformity exacted by tradition and, on the other, of a male dancer facing homophobic derision for pursuing dance. The focus, wisely, is on telling a story through movement rather than words. Ultimately, the intimate perspective is a means for the company to show the versatility of Irish dance, with choreography that tackles music ranging from Stravinsky to Leonard Cohen.

For all the experimentation, purists needn't doubt the company's credentials. The show was choreographed and directed by Riverdance principal dancer Breandán de Gallai, and the company is made up of international Irish dance champions at the top of their game. There are a handful of more traditional numbers which mostly bring out the great power and military precision of the dance, with high kicks and percussive steps. The costuming also updates tradition, with kilts reduced to an austere black. Often, dancers are wearing simple spandex outfits, removing cultural context altogether and highlight the body instead.

In one unconventional number, tango music works surprisingly well in showcasing the potential for masculine force within the dance, as well as its ability, like tap dance, to tease infinite rhythms out of any beat. Most unique are the pieces danced barefoot. The electronic effervescence of Björk's "Violently Happy" is made manifest when the loud shoes are replaced by a light-as-air bounce from the company. Solo numbers are also a nice break from tradition—Cake's 1996 cover of Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" turns out to be a fitting expression of male longing.
The production is an odd hybrid, but it works. It reminds us that we live in a cosmopolitan world, with a "shuffle" option on music from all kinds of times and places. The dancers of Noctú give motion and a physical charge to this mix with the tools they have, and from this perspective, the show makes sense. The small-scale Irish Repertory Theatre is a great space to watch it from up close.

"Noctú" is the Irish word for the verb for "to bare or uncover," and at several points the dancer's bodies are indeed stripped nearly bare. Questions of tradition, modernity or post-modernity aside, at its most basic level, Noctú offers a chance to appreciate the beauty of the human figure in the rapture of a perfect movement.

**Opened:** September 12, 2011  
**Closes:** October 2, 2011

**Show Info**

**Synopsis:** The American premiere of a new Irish dance performance from Êríu Dance Company.  
**Venue:** Irish Repertory Theatre  
**Running Time:** 1 hour, 10 minutes; no intermission  
**Prices:** $55.00 - $65.00

**Artists Involved**

- **Cast:** Jack Anderson, Peta Anderson, Ellen Bonner, Orlagh Carty, Joseph Cornerford, Niamh Darcy, Gyula Glaser, James Greenan, Kyla Marsh, Kieran Melino, Megan McElhatton, Ashlene McFadden, Nick O'Connell, Katrina O'Donnell, Aislinn Ryan, Callum Spencer  
- **Costumes:** Nikki Connor  
- **Lighting:** Michael O'Connell  
- **Music:** Joe Csibi  
- **Conceived and Directed By:** Brendan de Gallaf  
- **Producer:** Êríu Dance Company  
- **Production Stage Manager:** Caesar Arroyo
Tradition, Stripped Down and Set to a New Tune

By BRIAN SEIBERT

Pity the poor Irish dancer. Before "Riverdance" took the world by surprise in 1994, there were practically no performance opportunities outside of a closed circle of competitions. Since that blockbuster made its debut there has seemed to be only "Riverdance" and its progeny of lucrative spectacles, mostly assaultive and inane. Presenting Irish dance any differently has proved a daunting challenge.

Breandan de Gallai, an alumnus of the original "Riverdance" cast, is the latest to try. In a program note he describes "Noctu," which he created, directed and choreographed, as "a new departure for the Irish dance show genre," adding, "it strives to tell the story of Irish dance from the viewpoint of the dancer." The American premiere took place on Monday at the Irish Repertory Theater, a space that could never accommodate "Riverdance."

Maybe pity is what Mr. de Gallai wants. Insofar as his 90-minute show has a structure, it centers on three barely sketched misfits. Peta Anderson falls out of step with the group but expresses her love of dance with a spoken expletive. The presumably heterosexual Callum Spencer resents how his dancing brings upon him homophobic slurs. Nick O'Connell is crippled by shyness.

Each confesses his or her woes in a "Chorus Line"-style monologue, all mercifully brief. Mr. O'Connell's is silent.

A central sequence of fantasy numbers seems to take place in these characters' separate bedrooms. There are pillows onstage, and the choreography resembles what Irish dancers might do in private. That must be why they're in their underwear. Or are they meant to be baring their souls?

The movement vocabulary is Irish traditional, capering feet set against a rigid upper body. Slightly relaxed and mused, it vaguely gestures at sexual excitement, longing and loneliness, emotions that may or may not be directed at the other characters. Nothing is resolved. The dancers come together for a playful trio but remain in their skivvies, as if happiness were possible only in a dream or a Calvin Klein ad.

The beginning of the show is slow to warm up, as the 16-member company does just that, stretching and bouncing to no effect. Later the thread of story is discarded for an ensemble finale that outlasts its welcome.

The production is truly a revue, and apart from scale, the difference between it and the "Riverdance"
clan, including its “Lord of the Dance” and other Michael Flatley spinoffs, is musical. The score is made up mostly of pop songs: Kate Bush, Björk, Leonard Cohen.

Compared with the “Riverdance” score, with its awful modernizing of Irish music, and the similar schlock of original music provided here by Joe Csibi, a former “Riverdance” musical director, the genuinely hipper sounds are an improvement. But they don’t spur Mr. de Gallai to any corresponding invention.

Performed barefoot or on fiberglass soles, the choreography is Irish dance of little distinction, with boilerplate borrowings from modern dance. The best routine, surprisingly, is set to part of Stravinsky’s “Firebird Suite.” Slashed by body paint, the full cast moves like a gang of zombies. The unison floor-pounding fits the undead, and the stiff torso of Irish dance serves well as rigor mortis. But this pushy, penultimate number would register better on a bigger stage. Mr. de Gallai recommends “Noctu” as frugal. That it is: no set, minimal costumes. He bemoans how the nuances of Irish dance are lost on arena stages. But those go missing here, too. A closer look doesn’t always help.

“Noctu” runs through Oct. 2 at the Irish Repertory Theater, 132 West 22nd Street, Chelsea; (212) 727-2737, irishrep.org.
Noctú

By Sarah Lucie

Irish dancing faces tough criticism at times. *Riverdance* won the nation's heart, but shows like *Lord of the Dance* and *Feet of Flames* dug Irish dancing into a rut of flashy (and often cheesy) shows emphasizing glitter and high jumps over creativity or expression. Irish dancers generally fall into the category of athletes rather than artists. Breandán de Gallai is trying to change all that. After touring with *Riverdance*, de Gallai sought to create a more honest portrayal of Irish dance from the dancer's perspective, where expression is the goal. Thus, Noctú was born.

Noctú is more a string of separate vignettes than a cohesive story or narrative, and it is hard to find a true theme tying them together other than their break with tradition. It begins with the dancers warming up for an exaggerated piece mocking what we all know Irish dancing to be. The skirts are short, the faces serious, and the cheerleading component with comically large smiles is creepy. The show introduces what Irish dancing has turned into in order to then demonstrate all that it can be.

From the moment the first solo begins, the show takes on a new life with brave choreography that dares to move beyond the traditional Irish requirements. The soft-shoe dances take on a more modern and balletic feel involving the arms and upper-body movement. The hard shoe dances are also innovative, with interesting, multifaceted rhythms made possible by freedom from perfectly crossed feet and eight repetitive bars of Irish music.

"Aisling's Dream," danced by Peta Anderson, is simply stunning. Anderson makes the dance look effortless with her long lines and bounding leaps, and she radiates a contagious joy. "Oisin's Dance," danced by Nick O'Connell, is also exceptional and perhaps the most successful at expressing pure abstract emotion. De Gallai flexes his choreography muscles with "Shadow Dolls," a commentary on being a faceless, mindless, robotic member of the crowd, or in this case, the dance ensemble. And for those worried that tradition is all but lost, Calum Spencer dances a hornpipe that will blow you away.

Noctú is moving Irish dance in the right direction, although bolder steps may need to be taken. While the choreography is more daring and the music varied, this production seeks to express only the viewpoint and emotions of the Irish dancer. I hope that next time the
something greater. Until then, though, the energy and pounding rhythm of these championship Irish dancers will leave you pulsing in rhythm and wanting more.

Nocti; Conceived and directed by Breandán de Galláí; Performed by Eriu Dance Company; Irish Repertory Theater, 132 West 22 Street, New York, NY.

Related stories
Irish dancers let it all hang out in 'Noctu'

Published: Saturday, September 17, 2011, 8:22 AM   Updated: Saturday, September 17, 2011, 9:11 AM

By Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger

NEW YORK—With the local premiere of "Noctû," at the Irish Repertory Theatre, another contender enters the arena vying to create a newly expressive Irish dance theater.

The effort naturally can be traced to "Riverdance," where the creator of "Noctû," choreographer Brendan de Gallai, served his apprenticeship.

After "Riverdance" loosened the bonds of traditional Irish dancing and expanded the imaginations of its practitioners, it seemed to some that the next step forward would not be necessarily another rave awash in Celtic mysticism but instead a work of drama. "Noctû" wants to reflect the sometimes gritty reality of youngsters devoted to dance, taking viewers behind the scenes where three troubled souls endure the taunts and tribulations of those who don't naturally fit in.

As the dancers saunter onstage, an ordinary, happy clan chattering and casually rifling through a costume rack in the first of the dressing scenes that will become a theme ("Noctû" means stripped, or bare), the three outsiders remain aloof. The worried expression on Peta Anderson’s face explains itself when, after the warm-up, she loses her way among the labyrinthine patterns of a Ceili, earning scornful glances from the other dancers. In a monologue she confesses her ineptitude, pleading for the right to be herself. "But they all look the same!" she wails.

The softness of Anderson’s fantasy solo, leaping and wafting in a dress like a pink, chiffon cloud, contrasts with the obduracy of the conformists: female cadres wearing masks and tapping out vicious rhythms in their jig shoes. Here de Gallai gives the conventions of Irish dance spectacles a newly mournful, narrative purpose.

Three stories, however, may be too many to tell in this pocket-sized production. Winsome Callum Spencer gets his monologue, too, ruefully offering survival tips to the male dancer hounded by homophobic invective after Spencer is the object of a string of insults so lengthy that it almost becomes ridiculous. Yet the third member of this trio of outcasts is short-changed. Nick O’Connell remains silent, and we don’t learn until very near the end why the Harpo Marx of "Noctû" skulks and broods.

Noctû
Where: Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St., between Sixth and Seventh avenues
When: Through Oct. 2. Tuesdays to Saturdays at 8 p.m., with matinees on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays at 3 p.m.
How much: $55 and $65. Call (212) 727-1737, or visit irishrep.org.
Although the narrative strands of "Noctù" are original, they are slim, and the dancing of its inexperienced cast is less thrilling than the sight of these handsome, young underdogs in their underpants. When "Noctù" attempts to become the "Oh, Calcutta!" of Irish dance, however, it fails. Looking well-scrubbed in their tighty-whities, the principals merely underscore the hopeless prudery of this situation.

"Noctù’s" music is another story. De Gallai is being genuinely naughty when he includes not only torch songs ("I Will Survive"), jazz classics and contemporary ballads, but also a ritualistic excerpt from Stravinsky’s "Firebird." This choreographer is a whiz at parsing rhythms, and he works marvels with the tango, giving the male ensemble a soulful, stomping rendition of "La Cumparsita." What a good idea! Some day, musical insights like this one may provide a worthy successor to "Riverdance."

Robert Johnson: rjohnson@starledger.com

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Reviews

Noctu

Reviewed by: Brian Scott Lipson  Sep 13, 2011 - New York

Put most succinctly, Noctu, the entertaining dance piece by the Eriu Dance Company now at the Irish Repertory Theatre, is not your grandmother's Riverdance. While this 75-minute compendium of short pieces has been conceived and directed by a former touring member of that international megahit, Breandan de Gallai, and the dances utilize the form of traditional stepdancing made famous by Riverdance, the often-inventive choreography and the eclectic use of music -- which ranges from Bjork to Stravinsky -- allows Noctu to appeal to a more diverse audience.

As one might expect, the Irish Rep is far from a traditional place to do large-scale dancing, and the 16-member ensemble deserves kudos for deftly navigating the tiny stage in their group numbers. One often fears they might crash into a wall or fall into the audience, but no such calamity ever occurs.

The ensemble -- a youthful and fleet group -- work very well together in such numbers as "Violently Happy" (set to the song of the same name by pop star Bjork), the aptly named "Anxiety" (set to "Some Vague Utopia, 3rd Mvt." by the West Coast Quarter), and, especially, the extremely intense "UnderWorld" (set to music by Joe Caldi), in which the black-clad (and some bare-chested) dancers have markings all over their bodies, and which might not seem out of place on an episode of True Blood.

Still, the greatest pleasures of Noctu are to be derived when the spotlight is on principal dancer Callum Spencer. His first solo -- the sixth number presented -- to homopipe music by Sean O'Brien is a dazzling display of virtuosic footwork that signals a presence of a major talent.

Later in the program, Spencer joins Nick O'Connell and Peta Anderson -- all three clad only in white skivvies -- for a truly enjoyable suite of four dances, highlighted by Spencer's sweet turn to Leonard Cohen's "Dance Me to the End of Love" and O'Connell's all-stops-out interpretative number, set to Cake's alt-rock rendition of the disco classic "I Will Survive."

I could do without both Spencer's and Anderson's monologues -- hers is about how she doesn't think she's a natural dancer, while his concerns the difficulties of being a male dancer in homophobic Ireland (and which is accompanied by another dancer calling him derogatory names). They are heartfelt and honestly delivered, but a bit jarring in this context -- and it seems odd no one else gets to have their say. And ultimately, it's the legs and feet of these performers that do the talking in.
Dance Listings

For Ankara St. L.J. Myskysy "Russo. St. 253850. The plays at the Philharmonic Nova continues with When the Umbrella. A performance of the first time by German composer W. A. Mozart. For more information, call 888-888-8888.

Session 19:00-20:30 on Thu. See Thru.

Tuesday 27

Little Firecracker by the New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The performance features works by Paul Taylor, Jerome Robbins, and others. For more information, call 888-888-8888.

Saturday 27

New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The performance features works by Paul Taylor, Jerome Robbins, and others. For more information, call 888-888-8888.

Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival 2011

Jacob’s Pillow is a major annual dance festival, with performances by dancers from around the world. This year, the festival features works by Paul Taylor, Jerome Robbins, and others. For more information, call 888-888-8888.

Wednesday 4

New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The performance features works by Paul Taylor, Jerome Robbins, and others. For more information, call 888-888-8888.

Events

FREE "Emerging Creative Colleagues" with William Bennett, New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The New York City Ballet, with music by Philip Glass, is performed at the Lincoln Center Festival. The performance features works by Paul Taylor, Jerome Robbins, and others. For more information, call 888-888-8888.

Noctu Strips Down and Delves Deep

Saturday, September 24th, 2011
by Jordana Landres on Playing Around

by Jordana Landres

Who to give a more comprehensive and clear window into the world and emotional life of Irish stepdancers on and off the stage than another acclaimed Irish stepdancer? Director and creator Brendan de Gallai, a veteran dancer and principal who toured with the show Riverdance, is at the helm of the play Noctu.
Although modern dance is woven throughout Noctu, the pieces that center on traditional Irish stepdancing are the loveliest. In one scene, a dancer struggling to keep pace with her peers during a rehearsal fears she’s just not as talented as they are. In another piece, a male dancer flares at peers who berate him for being effiminate because he loves to dance. Principal dancer Peta Anderson, tall, lithe and deceptively delicate is a lovely and constant focal point. Gifted with exceptional timing, she appears to hover lightly in the air before smashing her feet to the floor in unison with the rest of the cast during harsher dances, the soles of her feet themselves becoming instruments of percussion.
Sexes separate for vignettes. In one particularly moving sequence, the women clad in angelic white dresses dance alone, their faces covered with white masks seem to be controlled by a puppeteer. The men in turn go it alone. Clad in warrior black, stripes of paint smearing their faces, they gracefully leap, twirl, stomp and bash the ground in unison. The primal need and love for dance is palpable.

The dancers do strip down to their underwear, but the effect is less effective than distracting. In Noctu, the energy and emotion exhibited by the dancers when executing the steps and moves is revealing enough.

Noctu
Irish Repertory Theater
132 West 22nd Street
Through October 2, 2011
What the Critics Have To Say...

“NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER’S RIVERDANCE. The often-inventive choreography and the eclectic use of music — which ranges from Bjork to Stravinsky — allows Noctu to appeal to a more diverse audience. The greatest pleasures of Noctu are to be derived when the spotlight is on principal dancer Callum Spencer. His first solo to hornpipe music by Sean Ó’Brien is A DAZZLING DISPLAY OF VIRTUOSIC FOOTWORK THAT SIGNALS A PRESENCE OF A MAJOR TALENT.” — Theatremania

“DANCING LIKE IT SHOULD BE. Irish dance director and choreographer Breandan de Gallai has created ARGUABLY THE MOST CHALLENGING IRISH DANCE WORK EVER SEEN ON A NEW YORK STAGE. Noctu, which means stripped or laid bare in Irish, sweeps away everything before it in a work that breaks all the rules. It is the most ambitious Irish dance work I have ever seen. IT WILL STARTLE YOU WITH ITS BRILLIANCE. NOCTU IS AN ASTOUNDING WORK AND IT BODES VERY WELL FOR HIS FUTURE AS A VISIONARY CHOREOGRAPHER. What is truly remarkable about this show is that it has somehow managed to reach past the rule-bound 19th century Irish dancing tradition to a much more ancient and atavistic thrum of Ireland itself. DE GALLAI HAS DONE SOMETHING FEW IRISH ARTISTS EVER ACCOMPLISH. HE MARRIED THE PAST AND THE PRESENT IN A WAY THAT IS RECOGNIZABLE AND AUTHENTIC.”
— Irish Voice

“The production is an odd hybrid, but it works. It reminds us that we live in a cosmopolitan world, with a “shuffle” option on music from all kinds of times and places. The dancers of Noctu give motion and a physical charge to this mix with the tools they have, and from this perspective, the show makes sense. The small-scale Irish Repertory Theatre is a great space to watch it from up close. Questions of tradition, modernity or post-modernity aside, at its most basic level, NOCTU OFFERS A CHANCE TO APPRECIATE THE BEAUTY OF THE HUMAN FIGURE IN THE RAPTURE OF A PERFECT MOVEMENT.”
— nytheatre.com

“I just saw the most incredible performance — the kind of thing that completely takes you out of your head. Sitting four rows back the intensity of the performances (an unbelievable 17 dances by 16 dancers) left me exhausted and elated and almost weak from emotion. I am not an expert on dance, so I know not of what I write, but I found myself so moved by the experience that I had to try and express it. Go and see for yourself. THE TALENT, THE BEAUTY, THE STAMINA, THE LOVE OF DANCE, ALL SHINE THROUGH. NOCTU PAYS HOMAGE TO IRISH DANCE AND TRADITION AND YET IT IS ITS OWN NEW THING. AND IT’S BEAUTIFUL.” — Irish Central

“From the moment the first solo begins, the show takes on a new life with brave choreography that dares to move beyond the traditional Irish requirements. THE ENERGY AND POUNDING RHYTHM OF THESE CHAMPIONSHIP IRISH DANCERS WILL LEAVE YOU PULSING IN RHYTHM AND WANTING MORE.”
— Show Business