



Contemporary Irish Dance Choreography T is for Tradition, Trophy, Theatre and Time to Dance

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This essay focuses on contemporary developments within the Irish step dance genre in 21st century performance contexts. It examines in particular a number of eminent Irish dance choreographers who have made significant contributions to the body of work choreographed since the beginning of the 21st century, incorporating recognisable elements from within the Irish dance tradition.

Significantly, many of these choreographers served their performance apprenticeship through participation in, and lengthy engagement with, the process of formal competitive step dance events, winning awards and accolades at national and international level and later joined the ranks of professional Irish dancers performing leading roles in *Riverdance*, *Lord of the Dance* and other Irish dance extravaganza spectacle performances. Notably, they also shared a desire to further investigate the dance form which brought them fame and success and yet on occasion, also restrained and restricted their artistic desires and impulses.ⁱ

As competitors within the Irish dance idiom, these dancers who competed at an elite level over a long period of time demonstrated dedication and commitment and also a passion for their chosen performance art. They not only pursued success but also recognition as innovators and dancers who constantly pushed and sought to challenge the boundaries of Irish dance.

For the remainder of this essay I will concentrate on four male choreographers all of whom have backgrounds in successful competitive Irish dance careers and also illustrious touring careers. Moreover all have been critically acclaimed as choreographers and solo performers. The four artists in question are Colin Dunne, Breandán de Gallai, Alan Kenefick and John Carey.

Colin Dunne: *Out of Time 2008*

Born in Birmingham, England to Irish parents, Colin is a leading figure in the world of traditional Irish step dance who has successfully crossed over into contemporary and theatre dance performances. My focus here is on his 2008 solo choreography entitled *Out of Time*. In 2008 Dunne created a full-length multi-media solo performance where he continued his investigation of his Irish dance virtuosity equipped with his training in contemporary dance. The title of the piece is noteworthy for a dancer who spent a significant part of his performing career working within the regulated metronomical structures of Irish dance music and later confined by the parameters of *Riverdance*. Dunne has made several efforts to escape this rigidity and to inhabit the space or groove in between the music.

In *Dangerous Ground*, choreographed alongside Jean Butler he sought to reframe the legend of Diarmuid and Gráinne within a contemporary setting.ⁱⁱ They assembled a troupe of gifted step dancers and the level of dancing achieved in this performance was excellent. At the time it represented a moment of excitement in Irish dance, using the Irish dancing body in different ways and on different planes, but commercially it was perhaps ahead of its time for those who were expecting something closer to the lines and aesthetics they had experienced in *Riverdance*.

The solo performance *Out of Time* was conceptualised drawing from a very traditional dance idiom and utilised recordings from earlier decades of the twentieth century

featuring virtuosic performers of a previous era. These included footage recorded in Cork in the mid-1930s featuring the Hayes brothers and Jim Murphy, a performance of a hornpipe by Áine Ní Thuathaigh recorded in Limerick circa 1955 and footage provided by RTÉ filmed in the 1970s featuring Páidí Bán Ó Broin, John Cullinane, Mairtin O'Gríofa, John Kennelly and Kevin Massey.ⁱⁱⁱ Dunne's desire not only to investigate the Irish tradition, but also to interrogate and reframe it with a modern technological dimension, reflects his respect for the tradition and knowledge of what had preceded him in terms of Irish dance.

Furthermore, his daring engagement with the past and the possible future directions of Irish dance compelled us to reflect on our own understanding of what constitutes a meaningful performance of Irish dance. He interrogated the basic dance forms and questioned the very essence of jig rhythm, illustrated through his use of the 'rashers and sausages' rhyme.^{iv} He also blended traditional musical sounds from players of the caliber of Martin Hayes^v with new technical effects to create the effect of time, space and genre disjuncture. He applied techniques from contemporary dance choreographic practices using release technique and other contemporary tools, interwoven with his musicality and Irish dance technical brilliance the overall effect was captivating, leaving the performer and the audience to an extent physically and mentally exhausted, and slightly overwhelmed by the feeling that they too had engaged in a very meaningful and involved way with the physicality of the dance performance.

Several years later another former lead dancer with *Riverdance* also sought to create his own choreographic footprint.

Brandán de Gallaí: *The Rite of Spring* 2012

A native Irish language speaker from Gaoth Dobhair in Donegal, de Gallaí played traditional fiddle as well as training for many years as a competitive Irish step dancer. He also studied ballet, jazz modern and tap dancing and was part of the original *Riverdance* line up that performed in the Eurovision interval act in 1994.

Almost 100 years after it was first performed in Paris in May 1913 de Gallaí reframed the acclaimed *The Rite of Spring* by choreographing what could be termed as a contemporary Irish dance ballet to the pulsating music of Stravinsky. De Gallaí's *Rite* was premiered in Cavan as part of the fringe festival of events around *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* and was supported by his dance residency with Cavan County Council. This project had a long gestation period. It was presented as part of de Gallaí's Arts Practice PhD at the University of Limerick and developed over time since he ended his touring career with *Riverdance* after more than nine years as principal dancer. It was not his first engagement with groundbreaking choreography. After many years as a world class competitor and professional Irish dancer he initially ceased touring to concentrate on *Balor*, a ninety minute contemporary Irish dance show to music composed by Joe Csibi. Unfortunately the funding did not materialise and the project was not realised. However certain choreographic possibilities and options had now become part of de Gallaí's creative process and some of this somber mood and physically challenging choreography is later identified in elements of the choreography evidenced in his *The Rite of Spring*. He also sought to highlight the potential versatility of Irish dancers and their deep engagement with the art of Irish dance in his treatment of the trials and

tribulations of Irish dancers depicted through *Noctú*^{vi} which was originally filmed as a reality television show and later toured in Ireland and performed at The Irish Repertory Theatre in New York.

The performance of de Gallaí's *Rite* in association with Fidget Feet Aerial Dance Theatre and Cavan Arts Office in August 2012 was a spectacular event, which framed Irish dance in an artistic, innovative and exciting manner. Staged in the open air, using the backdrop of Cavan Cathedral and extending the boundaries to the sky and beyond with the Irish dancers and aerial dancers combining to create a magnificent effect, with Stravinsky's imposing score performed live by Michael Joyce and Sabine Ducrot. The powerful rhythms of the musical score were skillfully interpreted by the talented cast of Irish dancers, who embodied the innovative Irish dance motifs created by de Gallaí. While incorporating many recognisable facets of Irish step dance in terms of rhythm and stepping, he altered the posture elements significantly and opened out the upper body and challenged the dancers to use arms, heads and torso in a demanding manner. He also deviated from the fifth position crossing of the feet which has historically been of import to and adhered to by Irish dancers and used a wide open dance posture with limbs moving away from the body and extending diagonally and backwards.

This deviation from the crossed closed position was further developed by Alan Kenefick who also extended the demands made on the upper body of the contemporary Irish dancer.

Alan Kenefick: *Prodijig/Footstorm*

This young Cork choreographer also served his performance apprenticeship competing successfully at all major competitions organised by *An Comhdháil*^{vii} and *An Coimisiún*. He performed with *Riverdance* for a number of years and left to concentrate on making his own work. He was founder member and choreographer of the group Prodijig who were acclaimed following their success on Sky television's 2012 *Got to Dance* series.

Indeed, another contributory factor in the rise of popularity of Irish dance as art can be attributed to the significant increase in televised talent shows and reality television presentations. Prodijig winners of the 2012 *Got to Dance* series electrified audiences in Ireland and Britain from their initial audition performance to their winning piece, which captivated the adjudicating panel and an audience in excess of 1.9 million throughout Britain and Ireland. Quite apart from the exuberant fast moving technical brilliance and virtuosity, there was a conscious attempt by Kenefick as choreographer to move beyond traditional perceptions of the relationship between Irish music and dance as the group performed to a more techno rhythm. Additionally the male and female dancers performed the same physical technically challenging moves and the futuristic costumes were devoid of any attempts to reflect conventional male/female stereotypical norms. This move away from the exaggerated competition attire now associated with competitive step dance competitions serves to highlight the physical action of the dance and artistry of the dancing body, rather than have it obfuscated by glitter and costuming.^{viii}

Certain elements of the traditional dance genre prevailed. All dancers were superb technical exponents of Irish dance with precise footwork and distinctive rhythmic clarity.

The upper body however reflected a more athletic and demanding physical engagement than previous upright postures associated with Irish dance would require. The verticality of posture initially associated with the acceptable canon of Irish dance, as set out by the Gaelic League vision in the early twentieth century was associated with morals and manners of that time.^{ix} The same lack of emotional engagement in terms of facial expression was also in evidence. When the choreographer and ensemble developed the full-length performance show, *Footstorm*, they further developed the skill and artistry of this expanding Irish dance vocabulary while incorporating popular themes of love, friendship and power.

Nowhere is the relationship between power and dance more prevalent than in the most recent creation by choreographer John Carey. This, the final and most recent choreography under consideration speaks to themes of relationships and diaspora and also merges Irish step dance with other dance forms.

John Carey: *Heartbeat of Home* 2013

John Carey a native of the English midlands was also born to Irish parents and won every major award for competitive dancing. He performed in *Riverdance* and left a university career at Oxford to dance in Michael Flatley's, *Lord of the Dance* where he played a leading role for many years. He is very active on the competitive circuit as a teacher and adjudicator and his ongoing passion is for Irish dance choreography. In 2013 he was invited by John McColgan and Moya Doherty to be the specialist Irish dance choreographer for *Heartbeat of Home*.

Produced by the directors of *Riverdance*, this dance spectacle, which premiered in Dublin in October 2013, seeks to reflect a new Ireland within a modern context. Building on the reputation of *Riverdance*, they leaned into the formulaic process of a large band of music with a specially commissioned musical score composed by Brian Byrne and fronted by a troupe of outstanding dancers from within Irish, Afro-Cuban, flamenco and contemporary dance genres. The overall staging and choreography was by David Bolger renowned for his work with CoisCéim Dance Theatre.^x

The manner in which dancers were selected for this show is also indicative of the changing world in which we live, with Irish dancers worldwide being given the opportunity to submit their auditions online. Other dancers were also invited to attend auditions. As a result, top class Irish step dancers from around the globe, many with cross training in a variety of dance genres comprise the talented, versatile Irish dance troupe with all the youth, energy and technical excellence required to do justice to Carey's physically challenging and demanding choreography. The strength and agility required of the male and female dancers for this performance cannot be underestimated.

It is interesting to note that the Irish dance troupe comprised dancers from Australia, Canada, USA, Britain and Ireland, perhaps an interesting reflection on the broad scope and appeal of Irish dance as a global art form today. Furthermore the youth and energy levels are perhaps reminiscent of an emerging sense of 'Irishness' in a modern world, an Ireland that extends beyond the geographical parameters of the island and across the world where 'Irishness' can be embodied in a variety of ways in a global society through an engagement with dance and other aspects of Irish culture.

Conclusion

So now to consider the points of intersection relevant to the choreographers discussed above. At the outset, it was my intention to give an account of Irish dance performances since the advent of the noughties.^{xi} Consideration was given to those choreographers who had choreographed spectacle shows, which were performed in Ireland since the millennium. The artists emerged due to the following deliberations and reflections: in the first instance Irish dance has up until now largely been developed through the competition arena, and while all the choreographers under consideration here came through the competitive ranks, they also performed leading roles in theatrical Irish dance shows and then continued their dance careers as performers and as independent choreographers. It is also significant that the Irish diaspora is once again to the fore in terms of how Irish dance develops as an art form. Thus in a cyclical way just as the Irish in London were responsible for the first *céili* in 1897, and Michael Flatley and Jean Butler the two leading dancers in *Riverdance* in 1994 were from the Irish American diaspora, Irish dance in the 21st century also has influential diasporic luminaries as evidenced by the achievements of Dunne and Carey among others.

An element of fusion and cross training in different dance genres was another feature common to all the choreographers. A very broad and diverse taste in music was also noted with choreographers once bound by the 4/4 of the reel and 6/8 of the jig tempi opting for new compositions, or reframing classical scores or simply dancing between the jigs and reels with a dance vocabulary that could be described as now Irish rather than not Irish.^{xii}

All four choreographers push the boundaries associated with competition and I also wonder if they each impact on each other?

Nevertheless, each has his own particular choreographic voice and unique creative impulses and influences. Dunne, although concerned with being rooted in and part of living tradition - which is perhaps unsurprising given his ex-pat background - he is none the less able to move beyond it. De Gallaí is particularly concerned with giving Irish dance the same status and respect as other art forms such as ballet, and in proving that all genres are constantly in flux and cross-fertilizing. Neither he nor Dunne seek to be identified solely through the prism of Irish culture or cultural nationalism. De Gallaí does not perceive of dance as an expression of national culture or identity but rather as an ontological expression of being. Kennefick blurs gender boundaries and is similar to De Gallaí in that he wants to showcase the physicality of Irish dance as independent from traditional music and broader Irish cultural settings by matching it with what seems most alien, namely techno music.

Finally, Carey is all about the spectacular and the virtuosic. For him, it is about producing something showstopping which is always climactic and exciting. In a way, the music for Carey is the rhythm created by complex heavy shoe dexterity. The percussive emphasis is an important element of his choreography, as is the pace with which the dancers move on stage.

And so the dance goes on. What once began as a 1,2,3, or simple promenade step, now has infinite possibilities. Irish dance from humble beginnings in rural Ireland, continues to evolve and take its place on the world stage. It is clear from new trends in choreography that Irish dance is not only an expression of Irishness and cultural identity but also an international independent art form or a dance 'genre'.

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ⁱ See reference to competition culture in *Deconstructing Irish Dance* by Deirdre Mulrooney in 2003 in Dance Magazine.

ⁱⁱ Colin and Jean began a very successful dance partnership in 1992 and toured with the Chieftains. Their dance show *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* received critical acclaim in New York but closed in June 2000 as it failed to impress critics and London audiences.

ⁱⁱⁱ All of these dancers were recognised as virtuoso performers in their own era and genres.

^{iv} The syllabic iteration of the terms ‘rashers and sausages’ are used to soundout the 6/8 jig rhythm.

^v Virtuoso fiddle player from County Clare, noted for performances with Denis Cahill and also the Tulla Céilí Band.

^{vi} This Irish title means to expose or lay bare. One of the aims of this performance was to present the individual Irish dance and highlight some of the trials and tribulations and challenges encountered by those who are passionate about the art of Irish dance.

^{vii} Kenefick competed for the Mc Teggart School under the auspices of An Comhdháil, an organisation established in 1969 to promote Irish dance. He also trained and competed with the Cowhie Ryan Academy registered with the Irish Dancing Commission, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, established in the 1930s.

^{viii} See Cullinane, Robb and Ní Bhriain 2010 for a more comprehensive discussion on this topic.

^{ix} See Foley 1988, 2013, Brennan 1999, Hall 2008, and Ní Bhriain 2010 for further detail in relation to posture and Irish dance.

^x Bolger is co-founder and artistic director of this vibrant dance contemporary dance company.

^{xi} *The Pirate Queen* choreographed by Carol Leavy Joyce could also have been examined here but I decided to dedicate a separate paper to female choreographers.

^{xii} See Hall’s observations in his publication for the Scattering Conference held in Cork in 1997.

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