at the Crossroads?

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Maintaining, Redefining and Challenging Dance Boundaries: Irish Traditional Dance within Third Level Education.

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Ideological, cultural and historical factors impact on dance, or any culturally structured movement system, at specific points in its historicity. Dance in Ireland has historically traversed many conceptual crossroads in maintaining, redefining, challenging and shaping what constitutes Irish dance. And, although the notion of Irish dance is one that is currently almost taken-for-granted among Irish people in general, I would contend that it has achieved this doxaie status by passing through a number of conceptual, ideological and historical crossroads. In so doing, it has elevated Irish dance onto the world stage and into domestic universities. This paper identifies and addresses these conceptual “crossroads” and explores how they have shaped our understanding or notions of Irish dance and how they have had implications for Irish dance within current third level education.

Due to the fact that the body is the primary tool or instrument of dance, dance in Ireland has, since the 1700s, been the subject of some ridicule and indeed criticism. The source of these criticisms has largely been the Catholic Church who in its Christian mission, endeavoured to civilise the behaviour of its flock – the majority of the Irish people. The perceived “out-of-control” behaviour of Irish people at social and indeed religious events, such as Patterns, was measured against a civilised “Other”. The behaviour, including dance behaviour, of Irish people was perceived to be immoral and indecent and as recent as the twentieth century - and indeed, well into it, we find references to the church’s objections to dance in Ireland. However, Ireland was not the only country where dance was not perceived to be a “civilised” behaviour. With his nineteenth century unilinear evolutionist tendencies, the American scholar, Henry Schoolcraft stated that dance

“is observed to be the last thing abandoned by bands and individuals in their progress to civilisation and Christianity. So, true is this, that it may well be regarded as one of the best practical proofs of their advance to find the native instruments and music thrown by, and the custom [dance] abandoned”

(Schoolcraft 1851, pp. 221-2).

Together with objections to dance as part of the “civilising process”, dance was also implicated within the legacy of Cartesian dualism, a mind/body split which dis-empowered the body and consequently dance. Dance drew attention to the body and as such dance was interpreted as drawing attention to the sexual forces in men and women. Consequently, with the appropriation and institutionalisation of dance by Gaelic League revivalists at the turn of the twentieth century, dance, in assisting to promote a cultural nationalism, took on a more “civilised”, “decent” and “asexual” image, one which would eventually become equated with Irish dance (see Foley 1988).

Within the cultural nationalist agenda of the Gaelic League, dances were selected and institutionalised for both staged and social contexts: contexts which were both controlled and supervised. The selected dances were from the rural confines of Ireland, particularly the west of Ireland, and as part of an “inventing Ireland” project (see Foley 1988; Kiberd 1996), these dances were elevated to a position of “purity” and authenticity. In addition, an asexual construct of Irish step dance was configured: a construct that has shaped our conceptualisation of Irish dance. Consequently, we find that notions of sexuality and the body in dance in Ireland have been at the centre of debates for some centuries. Indeed, when in relatively recent tabloids there were references to Irish dance as being “sexy”, these were met with some comic and light-hearted debate by the media, lay people and performers alike. “Imagine”, somebody said to me, “they are
saying that Irish set dancing is sexy". From the person’s facial expression, nothing could have been further from the truth.

With the construction of a particular configuration of Irish step dance at the turn of the twentieth century, a significant historical moment in dance history in Ireland was created. I suggest that the process involved in constructing this configuration developed around a structure of binary oppositions. Indeed, structures of binary oppositions marked the cultural and ideological debate of twentieth-century Ireland - authentic/in-authentic, pure/modern, moral/immoral; rural/urban; west/Europe; Irish/Other, et cetera.

Binary Oppositions - “Violent Hierarchies”

Jacques Derrida speaks of binary oppositions as being in a structure of “violent hierarchies”. That is, one of the positions – both in actual terms and concepts, takes on a dominant position and it is only through inversion that this structure can be broken; the high becomes low or indeed, the low becomes high. The revival movement of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century politics in Ireland played on this structure of polarities. It prioritised the culture of the rural, west of Ireland, and elevated the culture of the previous lowly of the system – the rural poor, to a superior position. In addition, the Literary Revival also championed rural values and culture in the construction of an Irish literature. Within the binary oppositions paradigm, the alternative available at the time, was one that would demythologise the past and focus on a secular, pluralist future (see Kearney 1985). However, within the cultural nationalist structures of binary oppositions, the progressive, urban culture and its associated values, was positioned low. Likewise in the case of dance, those group dances (céilí dances) associated with the rural west of Ireland were selected, prioritised, and positioned high by the Gaelic League, and later by An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaeilacha under the auspices of the Gaelic League. And although these dances assisted in contributing to the cultural nationalist dynamic during the struggle for Independence and later with the construction of the Irish Free State, the selection process would later be questioned from within Ireland and from within the Irish dance world. In my earlier work I discussed the ideological and cultural agenda at which, and for which, specific dances were selected. I argued that the selection process assisted in marginalising other dances and other dance communities in Ireland (Foley 1988; Foley 2005). The selected dances – believed to be pure and authentic, were promoted and popularised by Irish cultural nationalists from the early decades of the twentieth century. This process shaped and reshaped these older dance practices and also moulded perceptions of Irish dance practices in Ireland for the best part of the twentieth century (see Foley 1988; 2001; 2005).

Declan Kiberd in his book, Inventing Ireland (1995), locates the invention of modern Ireland at the turn of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries. It was, according to Kiberd, the renaissance of Irish culture. Thus, the Gaelic League and the Literary Revival, among others, contributed to this renaissance and the cultural dynamic that shaped modern Ireland. However, by the 1990s a different society was emerging in Ireland: a society that was entrepreneurial and economically competitive (see Foley 2001). This period, popularly coined the Celtic Tiger, was perceived by some to be a more open-minded, liberal, and culturally confident Ireland. O’Donnell refers to this period as the “Reinvention of Ireland” period – seeing it as breaking with “the Invention of modern Ireland” period and its associated values.

The 1990s era has relevance for Irish dance. From the point of view of dance, the 1990s marked the advent and global success of Riverdance, the dance show that marked the arrival of Ireland into the modern, global world - culturally and economically. With the advent of Riverdance (1994) came a mixture of critical acclaim, disdain, professionalism, homogenisation, synthesisers, new compositions, commodification, and a healthy questioning of what constituted “tradition” and, indeed, what constituted “Irish” dance. However, Riverdance symbolised a
modern and relatively recent cultural and economic crossroads for Ireland. It symbolised the Celtic Tiger era with its attendant economic growth and the cultural confidence that accompanied it (see Foley 2001). However, it would be a mistake to think that Celtic Tiger Ireland benefited all. The Celtic Tiger period, although materially and economically benefiting some, also assisted in polarising the extreme ends of the social order in Ireland. From the point of view of Irish dance and Irish culture, Riverdance, as symbolic of this period assisted in creating another crossroads – materially and conceptually. This crossroads – a postmodern crossroads for Irish dance, motivated one to move forward with an unprecedented open and liberal cultural confidence that was rooted not only in Ireland but also within the Irish Diaspora. However, as I mentioned elsewhere (Foley 2001), it also brought the margins, sean nós dance and other traditional dance forms into representation.

Thus, to date, different conceptual, ideological, historical and cultural crossroads have contributed to shaping dance practices in Ireland, and particularly, Irish step dance practices. In the next section I will address how these historical junctures have challenged Irish dance pedagogy within third level education. In particular, I look at Irish Traditional Dance within the Master of Arts programme in Dance Performance, at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick.

Engaging with Binary Oppositions: Maintaining, Redefining and Challenging Dance Boundaries

In 1999, the first Masters degree in Dance Performance in Ireland commenced at the Irish World Music Centre (original name for the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance), University of Limerick. This postgraduate degree concentrated on two separate dance performance specialisations: Irish Traditional Dance and Contemporary Dance. This paper focuses on one of these: Irish Traditional Dance Performance.

The MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance was the first degree in the world specialising in Irish traditional dance, and to the best of my knowledge this was the first Masters degree in any indigenous dance tradition in the world. Therefore, one, it established a precedent for traditional dance within the university system; two, it created a situation where existing binary oppositions could be challenged; and three, by its presence as a degree within the university context, it promoted dance as knowledge. Consequently, being asked to design this Masters programme brought many challenges: challenges relating both to the above-mentioned binary oppositions and to my own background as an Irish step dancer, musician and ethnochoreologist.

The first challenge was to identify what constituted a “tradition” within the context of Irish dance. This is a controversial and awkward term but one which carries meaning among performers and indeed non-performers in Ireland. But, what constitutes a tradition for these people? How can we validate what a tradition is, to both ourselves and others? All dance forms have their own traditions and histories but what are the emic categorisations of dance in Ireland that are understood to be “traditional”. In the case of Ireland, there are distinct dance fields that are emically regarded by the general populace as being “traditional”. These are step dancing, set dancing and céilí dancing, each with its own history or histories, social structures, dance practices and dance aesthetics. These are the dance genres that are interpreted as being “traditional” or “indigenous” in Ireland, but they are not all perceived to be performance dance. Although step dancing, set dancing and céilí dancing may all be danced within performance contexts, step dance is the one which is immediately identifiable as performance dance. This is due to the dancer’s orientation always being towards or conscious of an audience. Also, step dance is a soloist’s art. Thus, it was that step dance and step dancers became the primary focus of the MA degree.
This MA performance programme set out to validate Irish traditional dance within a university context and the following were its objectives:

- To provide a learning environment for advanced performance in Irish traditional dance practices;
- To explore aspects of repertoire, style, and choreography through engagement with a diverse range of master tutors;
- To facilitate interactivity through an elective system with other related and available areas of study;
- To honour the artistic integrity, history and identity of Irish traditional dance within an academic and performance orientated context;
- To engage in critical debate with academic modules;
- To acquire the academic and performance skills required for further research or performance;
- To find one’s own individual voice through the medium of Irish dance performance practice;
- To equip students with a qualification in Irish traditional dance performance.

Implied within these objectives is the notion that master-students in Irish traditional dance performance acquire both performance and academic knowledge within the university context. Within the Irish step dance institutions outside the university context, for example – An Coimisín, An Comhdháil, The Festival Dance Teachers of Northern Ireland, and CRN, training in Irish step dance performance is the main business with little regard for academic or theoretical knowledge (CRN is an exception to this rule in that candidates for the Diploma in teaching with this organisation are required to write a mini thesis). Consequently, although training in advanced performance practices; although engaging in processes of composition; students on the programme also participate in theoretical and ethnochoreological discourses in relation to dance in culture. In effect, students learn to know the history of their art both in mind and body. Carthesian Dualism of mind/body split is hopefully a notion of the past, and through the dancing body students learn that mind and body are not perceived as two separate entities, but as an integrated whole.

When is Irish Dance no Longer Irish Dance?

Therefore, for the MA programme in Irish traditional dance performance engaging with, challenging and resolving established binary oppositions was important. Consequently, dance genre which had been previously marginalized by institutions of dance were taught on the programme – sean nós, set dancing etc; and dances not considered to be Irish were also taught on the programme – Flamenco, Nigerian, Swedish Polska, Cape Breton etc. Indeed, engagement with these other dance forms extended dancers horizons and hopefully led to both self-understanding and understanding of others through dance.

Finding one’s own individual voice though the medium of step dance was and is listed as an objective of the programme. In some instances this requires a process of deconstruction; deconstructing concepts already established within the orthodox arena of Irish traditional step dance. Concerning deconstruction, the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, states:

"Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to intervene in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of nondiscursive forces. Each concept, moreover, belongs to a

systematic chain, and itself constitutes a system of predicates... Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated”

In this paper I am looking at particular aspects of Derrida’s notion of deconstruction, particularly in relation to his suggestion that deconstruction practices an “overturning of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system”. Within the MA in Irish traditional dance performance, it is not a case of ‘overturning’ or indeed, “displacing” the system but more a case of understanding the system in order to deconstruct aspects of the accepted and orthodox representation of the system. In relation to music composition, Professor Aloys Fleischmann, my old Professor of Music in University College Cork, once stated “it is only when you know the rules, that you know how to break them”. Consequently, for purposes of dance composition within Irish step dance, deconstructing concepts or aspects of an aesthetic nature in relation to Irish step dance practice, means knowing the rules of the system, and knowing how to break them. However, while attempting to extend boundaries, it is also a case of honouring and respecting the artistic integrity, history and identity of Irish traditional dance. Indeed, in relation to extending boundaries, when teaching my students I sometimes ask them the question: When is Irish Dance no Longer Irish Dance? What are the characteristics that it must have for it to be still considered to be Irish dance, and what aspects can you change or play with?” It is a case of attempting to look to the past, present and future at the same time. Also, it is a responsibility to a dance “tradition” that is constantly changing.

With the transnationalisation of Irish dance due predominantly to the global success of Riverdance, Irish step dancers were no longer Irish. This also brought challenges to the MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance. Step dancers were not all from Irish backgrounds; neither had they all trained in Irish step dance from the age of 6. Step dancers were now applying to do the MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance who had only become aware of Irish step dance through the stage show – Riverdance. Takayuki Hayashi is a case in point. Takayuki graduated with an MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance in 2005 and now teaches Irish step dance in Tokyo, Japan. With the transnationalisation of Irish step dance and the increase in Irish step dance classes worldwide – including adult dance classes; and with the professionalisation of Irish step dance since Riverdance, Irish step dance is indeed at a crossroads where there are now a number of choices for Irish step dancers. A university degree in Irish dance is now a possibility together with the option of teaching, choreographing or performing.

Within this climate, dance and the body are no longer perceived to be alien; indeed studies of dance and the body are becoming, if I may say, “trendy” and the philosophical stance of Cartesian dualism are indeed being challenged. Irish step dance itself is also being challenged. From its perception in the eighteenth-century as a rural, “immoral” activity, to the nineteenth and twentieth century perception of it as an “asexual” cultural nationalist dance form; to the more recent perception of it as a “glitzy” and showy virtuosic dance form; Irish step dance today responds to current cultural challenges. The university arena provides one context where these challenges create a discourse for furthering dance knowledge and dance practice. However, it also provides a context where Irish dance boundaries may be maintained, redefined, shaped and challenged while honouring and respecting the tradition from which it has come.

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