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# The Changes in Irish Dance Since Riverdance

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THE CHANGES IN IRISH DANCE SINCE *RIVERDANCE*

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors Program Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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2010

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## ABSTRACT

During the past 15 years, traditional Irish step dance experienced dramatic changes. As a traditional dance form, Irish step dance lends itself to and is dependent upon innovation and change; it is a living and flexible art form, and thus, change is expected and necessary to keep it novel, fresh and progressive. However, its “traditional” signature is now a focus of debate as its “modern” signature gets explored and as traditional Irish dance scholars study the impact touring Irish dance shows have caused. The seven-minute interval act *Riverdance* during the 1994 *Eurovision Song Contest* ignited the debate. Moreover, the rate at which these changes occurred is extraordinary and foreign to Irish step dance. Its impact on the developing Irish national identity, its worldwide practice, its current style, its current competition costume, and its current employment opportunities have all changed since *Riverdance*.

Keywords: traditional Irish step dance, *Riverdance*, [Conradh Na Gaelige](#), the Gaelic League, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha.

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## CHAPTER 1

### IRISH STEP DANCE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Dance in Ireland is referenced in early recordings by English travelers, tracing back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> The history of dance prior to this is relatively unknown because traditional Irish dance and music faced hindrances in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under Queen Elizabeth I. Dancing did exist, which is evidenced by a reference in an English poem in the 14<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> but its practice can only be inferred.

Irish dance historian Dr. John Cullinane defines three moments that changed Irish dance:

1. the advent of the traveling dance masters in the early 1700s
2. the foundation of the Gaelic League in 1893
3. the *Riverdance* performance at the *Eurovision Song Contest* interval act in 1994, just 100 years later.<sup>3</sup>

The current form of traditional Irish step dance started with the traveling dance masters in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The transient dance masters traveled from town to town teaching youth. Their arrival was welcomed warmly because it meant the town would have song and dance for the duration of the teaching, which usually lasted about six weeks. The masters taught the jig, reel and hornpipe. Dance masters focused on teaching carriage (holding a proper upright torso while dancing) and deportment (similar to



carriage but maintaining the overall proper hold of the dance). Dancers who excelled kept their arms straight to their side and torso rigid.<sup>4</sup>

The formation of Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) in 1893<sup>5</sup> in an attempt to reinvent traditional culture<sup>6</sup> standardized Irish step dance through its control and selection of traditional Irish dance movements. The League members had no expertise in Irish dance and thus relied on dance masters to help them choose movements. These chosen masters hailed mainly from Munster, and consequently the chosen movements were influenced heavily by the Munster style, which had a more extensive repertoire of dance.<sup>7</sup> This further factionalized the traditional dances into regions and styles.

Irish step dance received further control through the Gaelic League's appointment of An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (the Irish Dance Commission) in 1929. The Coimisiún regulated Irish dance and required all teachers to register with the organization by acquiring a Teagascóir Choimisiúin le Rincí Gaelacha (TCRG). This denotes a Coimisiún-certified Irish step dance teacher. In 1939, the Coimisiún published ten dances in detail, the first in a series. The Coimisiún evolved into the governing body of Irish dance, and in 1969 established the World Championships.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the Coimisiún has grown to be the largest governing board for Irish step dance with more than 700 dancing teachers under its auspices.<sup>9</sup> Competition has enabled Irish step dance to evolve and remain popular.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *RIVERDANCE: A BRIEF HISTORY*

“Once in a decade, something happens in musical theatre that really reinvents itself. In the 90s, it was *Riverdance*.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1994, Ireland hosted the *Eurovision Song Contest* because it won the competition the year prior. The host country is responsible for creating the interval act that reflects the its culture, so producer Moya Doherty decided to create an intermission act showcasing traditional Irish hard-shoe and soft-shoe dance.

The audience response was overwhelming. John McColgan, director of *Riverdance*, remembers the audience’s spectacular and immediate reaction.

“I was in the audience in the Point that night, and at the end of *Riverdance* 4,000 people from all over Europe in an instant, in a heartbeat, jumped to their feet. I’ve been 35 years in the business. I’d never seen a response like that before, and I knew we had something special.”<sup>2</sup>

Almost instantly, people became interested in this unfamiliar style of dance. Although Irish step dance had existed for hundreds of years, *Riverdance* inspired a love for the dance form through its first global performance. Doherty and her husband,

McColgan, saw the potential of a touring Irish dance show and began working on extending the seven-minute interval act into a full-length touring production.

*Riverdance* debuted at the Point Theatre in Dublin in February 1995. Doherty and her husband chose cities and countries strategically. *Riverdance* toured, opening first in Dublin, then in London and finally in New York City. Its overall popularity remained uncertain and was being postulated. Each performance garnered more interest, and *Riverdance* quickly was becoming an entertainment phenomenon. Its success was completely fortuitous. Eventually the demand for *Riverdance* allowed for it to tour in the United States, Europe and Asia. Although the cultures differ greatly in these countries, the audiences always react similarly - awed and inspired.<sup>3</sup>

Since its inception, *Riverdance* has toured consecutively for 15 years. During these 15 years, it has offered more than 10,000 performances to more than 21 million people in 300 venues spread throughout 32 countries in four continents. Its global television audience is even more staggering - 2 billion.<sup>4</sup>

During that time, *Riverdance* expanded into three touring companies - in North America, in Europe, and recently, in Asia, positioning traditional Irish step dance on the global entertainment radar.

## CHAPTER THREE

### IDENTITY

#### Branding an Identity

The 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a cultural revolution for Ireland. After obtaining its independence as the Irish Free State in 1921,<sup>1</sup> Ireland began an image makeover. Now, no longer under England's rule, the Irish were free to develop an identity without an English shadow - a liberty never truly experienced in the country's history.

But who were the Irish?

What were their customs?

What differentiated the Irish way of life?

This gave Ireland the chance to answer these questions.

In 1893, the impetus for fostering Irish nationalism among its people began when the government created the Gaelic League. The Gaelic League sought to reprise the Gaelic language and started an all-encompassing language revival initiative.

“...the government, anxious to establish its legitimacy in the face of the republican's uncompromising zeal, had, in language revival, a cause of unexceptionable nationalist authenticity.”<sup>2</sup>

The Gaelic League, aware of the importance of a national identity, especially an *authentic* national identity, began articulating sports, music and dancing as “Irish.” In the same year, the plain term “step-dancing” acquired the moniker “*Irish* dancing.” Irish dance had existed for hundreds of years, but now it became branded. It became *Irish*.

“Thus Irish dancing, at least in name, had its origin in the foundational work of the Gaelic League. In addition, this new nationalist designation of the form provided a necessary ingredient to the institutional organization of Irish dancing and the modern competitive model through which the form developed and is practiced today.”<sup>3</sup>

In an attempt to standardize Irish dance, the League selected which dances would be “Irish.” Since the League members were not experts in Irish dance, they turned to dance masters for help with selecting dance movements. A range in dance styles such as the Dublin-style and the Munster-style, existed in Ireland. Most of these masters came from Munster, and thus the Munster style greatly influenced the movements deemed the traditional step dance of Ireland. These movements could just have been as easily influenced by other circulating styles.

Once established, the League developed a “superiority dance complex.” Other forms of Irish dance were essentially viewed as “degenerate.” Residents were discouraged from and reprimanded for dancing “foreign” dances, and the League condemned those who taught such dances. Even dance forms identified as coming from Irish cities such as the “Dublin style” were criticized and forbidden. The League urged

and demanded that all teachers be registered, and allowed only those who could speak Gaelic to teach.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the Gaelic League's main effort centered around the "deanglicization of Ireland",<sup>6</sup> and therefore, it had no tolerance for dances that it did not esteem as "Irish." During the early 1920s, Irish dance schools opened under the auspices of the Gaelic League. They taught dances the League had deemed appropriately Irish.

The government's prudent actions to invent and identify an Irish culture and tradition offered a means to keep the Irish free.<sup>5</sup> Organized traveling dance teachers, through the Gaelic League, successfully taught "ceili" (group) dances and later traditional step dances,<sup>6</sup> which coincidentally spread Irishness. To secure this developing Irishness, members and teachers of Irish dance were forbidden to attend dances that were not Irish.<sup>7</sup>

The Gaelic League organized local competitions called "feiseanna" to promote Irish culture on a larger scale. By encouraging competitions, the Gaelic League could garner more interest and nationalize the dance. At one feis in Miltown Malbay, County Clare in 1899, only those who spoke Irish could compete in the actual dancing. Although this county had numerous Irish speakers, this was another method to identify the Irish as *Irish*.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, those who chose to participate were making subtle political assertions that they sided with Ireland.

"Participation in dancing and language classes was a way to directly involve oneself in the deanglicization and preservation of Ireland."<sup>9</sup>

Irish dance encountered further restrictions in 1929 when the An Coimisiún le Rinci Gaelacha (The Irish Dancing Commission) was appointed. The Coimisiún was

founded to compensate for the Gaelic League's lack of expertise with Irish dance. It hand picked rules and details on how to perform Irish dance.<sup>10</sup>

“The achievement of the Gaelic League was significant. It won the day. It accomplished with dancing what it could not accomplish with the language, that is, it fashioned a standard dialect of Irish dancing and continued to exert control over it for much of the century.”<sup>11</sup>

The Gaelic League and the Coimisiún took root in instilling an Irish pride, but Ireland's political and economic changes challenged the identity these two institutions sought to create.

### An Uncertain Identity

World War II shifted the focus from establishing a cultural identity to the ensuing economic crisis. During this period, Ireland had no “distinguishing marks of language and a hermetically sealed national culture.”<sup>12</sup>

The 1950s fostered the prospect of for a gloomy future. Unemployment rose, and the Irish Diaspora, when thousands of Irish left Ireland for new land, grew. In 1957, 78,000 people were unemployed and 54,000 emigrated out of Ireland. By the late 1950s, Ireland was ready to modernize its economic view to mirror those represented by the rest of the Western world,<sup>13</sup> but it lacked the confidence to do so. Ireland was struggling economically, politically and culturally.

However, radical economic policies developed in the late 1950s to attract foreign markets, transformed the crippling economic gloom of the 1950s. Ireland experienced a

“rapid transition from a society ostensibly dedicated to economic nationalism and its social and cultural concomitants, to a society prepared to abandon much of its past in the interests of swift growth in the context of modern British and Western European economies.”<sup>14</sup>

Social changes in the 1960s and 1970s set the stage for a modern Ireland. Education reforms in the early 1960s, population increases in the 1970s and urbanization transformed Ireland. The rift between Catholics and Protestants narrowed as the Irish became more religiously tolerant and attempted to deal with diversity. The Catholic and Gaelic identity of the Irish became dated. Irish self-awareness, through books about Irish folklore, music, architecture and design, experienced new actualization.<sup>15</sup>

But in the 1980s, Ireland struggled with understanding its modernization and newly forming identity.<sup>16</sup> How should Ireland interpret these sudden changes? Ireland never experienced such drastic economic or social change. It was overwhelming.

### Modern Ireland

Much of the early to mid-1990s confirmed the new Irish identity. Dubbed “the Celtic Tiger,” Ireland experienced rapid economic growth in the mid 1990s which lasted for nearly a decade. Ireland’s encouragement of foreign investment, reduction in capital and personal taxation and position as a hub for information technology culminated into the Celtic Tiger economy. Citizens started to consume more goods and services, and in 1999, the Irish consumer spent £23 billion on goods and services. Four years later, Ireland’s unemployment rate stood at 2 percent.<sup>17</sup>



As the economy soared, Irish traditional step dance and Ireland were showcased through a new medium: *Riverdance*.

By the time *Riverdance* emerged and exploded into a full-scale touring show in 1995, Ireland's identity was in a fragile state of incubation.

Dr. Catherine Foley, course director of the master's in Ethnochoreology and the master's in Irish Traditional Dance Performance, said:

“*Riverdance* was an attempt at positioning Ireland globally and culturally, representing a contemporary Irish identity to both the Irish themselves and to the world.”<sup>18</sup>

The immediate positive reaction and popularity of *Riverdance* brought global attention to Irish dance and Ireland. Much as the Gaelic League and the Coimisiún branded Irish dance, *Riverdance* helped brand Irish culture and identity. *Riverdance* was very much in tune with Ireland's thriving economy and unprecedented growth in the mid-1990s. It was upbeat, fresh and *new* - part of the *new* Ireland.

Shane McAvinchey, who has his TCRG and toured with *Riverdance* for 3 ½ years said,

“When *Riverdance* first took off, it was the start of the Celtic Tiger economic boom in Ireland. All of a sudden Ireland was out on the world stage performing an outstanding show. Meanwhile, off the stage, the world was beginning to recognize Ireland as a prosperous country with plenty to offer in terms of business, travel etc. Irish dance and music played along with this and the world saw the Irish as a lively, fun loving, innovative people.”<sup>19</sup>

*Riverdance* strengthened the appreciation for Irishness within Ireland and abroad, while helping transform the uncertain Irish identity into an exciting, modern Emerald Isle. “Under the title *Riverdance*, this performance dramatically altered the Irish perception of Irish step dance and the people’s perception of themselves,” Foley said.<sup>20</sup>

Fifteen years after its initial tour, *Riverdance* has become synonymous to Irish step dance and Ireland. Irish step dance, through *Riverdance*, helped build an Irish national identity that has transcended onto the popular culture icon. Irish dance has become so recognizable that it has been parodied and portrayed in American pop culture since *Riverdance* first premiered in the Point Theatre in Dublin in 1995. Its ability to be recognized after two or three steps by those who have and have not seen *Riverdance* demonstrates how *Riverdance* and Irish step dance have entered the “consciousness” of pop culture and how Irish dance has become something greater than a traditional dance.<sup>21</sup>

### Popular Culture References

1. The movie “Norbit,” 2007. A dance teacher tells the class to “Rivedance.”
2. The television situation comedy “Friends” - In a trivia game, it is revealed that the phenomenon and Irish jig guy Michael Flatley scares the “bejeezus” out of Chandler because “his legs flail as if independent from his body,” Season 4, airdate Jan. 15, 1998.
3. Arby’s Commercial, monkeys dance to Irish traditional music, original airdate 2007.

4. The movie “Duplex,” 2003. Ben Stiller attempts to mimic the choreography from *Riverdance* after his neighbor is listening to the show.
5. The movie “The Story of Us,” 1999. At the end, Bruce Willis’ character expresses his joy by “Riverdancing.”
6. The movie “Shrek,” 2003. Characters in the movie do an Irish dance.
7. Folger’s Commercial, circa 1999. The commercial highlights Irish dancers as one in particular wakes up to a cupajoe.
8. The movie “The Road to Perdition,” 2002. A traditional Irish dance is in the beginning of the movie.
9. Missy Elliot’s “Pass That Dutch” music video, 2003. An Irish dance inspired dance sequence in the rapper’s music video combines a few elements of Irish dance.
10. The Irish Dance Barbie premiered in 2007.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE NEW FACE OF IRISH DANCE

Previously, *Riverdance* Irish dance remained an art form practiced predominantly by the Irish or those one or two generations removed from Ireland.<sup>1</sup> It was a way to connect with Irish heritage or for Irish immigrants and their children to maintain a connection to the motherland. Irish dance was by no means popular. But during the past 15 years, it has evolved into a worldwide phenomenon with a wide range of participants in all parts of the world.

#### Growth and Diversity

Until *Riverdance* Irish dance was relatively unknown and not practiced beyond Ireland and places affected by the Irish Diaspora. Where the dance was familiar and practiced, it had no real momentum or vigor. Former *Riverdance* lead Colin Dunne describes the perception of Irish dance before and since *Riverdance*:

“I think certainly in Ireland for a number of years it’s [Irish dance] kind of been the dog of the arts, and was never really appreciated, even at home. And now that we have some great music, and the right production values assigned to it,

it's put in the theatre the proper way, then, you know, it's engaged people.”<sup>2</sup>

*Riverdance* revitalized Irish dance by making it novel and “sexy.” An art form that was once practiced solely by the Irish no longer appealed to only the Irish. As former *Riverdance* lead Breandán de Gallaí said, “*Riverdance* has changed Irish dancing forever. It brought it to the world.”<sup>3</sup>

After *Riverdance* premiered, Irish dance schools doubled in size.<sup>4</sup> The influx of dancers caused championships on the global scale to lengthen the actual duration of the competitions. In 1999, the All-Ireland dancing championship hosted 2,000 to 3,000 competitors, expanding it from a two-day event, like it was in 1930, into a seven-day event.<sup>5</sup>

Countries unaffected by the Irish Diaspora and without a strong Irish ancestry started opening dance schools. Cullinane was the first to introduce Irish step dance to South Africa in 1999. Now there are about 600 students throughout South Africa.<sup>6</sup> China, Mexico, Argentina, Norway, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, and Russia all have Irish dance schools certified with the Coimisiún.

### Appeal

The remarkable aspect of Irish step dance is its appeal to those who have no Irish heritage or ancestry. The “Irish” quality of the dance has no real effect in encouraging those to take up the dance. Instead, it is the movement and rhythms of the dance and music that entice people to take up their first jig.

“It is the intricate nature of the dancing especially the heavy dances (with their beats and taps) that makes it so attractive throughout the world,” Cullinane said.<sup>7</sup>

*Riverdance* played a fundamental role in exposing Irish step dance. An interest was born out of a seven-minute interval act. The line of dancers in “precise time, thundering their rhythms”<sup>8</sup> captivated people and mesmerized them. The performance, as an intermission act, managed to capture the world, and as a result, place Irish step dance in a world market with a world appeal that it had never before experienced.

Fintan O’Toole, for *The Irish Times*, said:

“It [*Riverdance*] was taking something that most Irish people I think had probably written off as a very boring, stultified art form, and it was taking that, and it was making it very exciting and very contemporary and giving it a relevance to the Ireland of 1994.”<sup>9</sup>

*Riverdance* was so riveting it prompted 28-year-old Taka Hayashi in November 2001 to quit his IT job in Tokyo, withdraw his \$100,000 savings and learn Irish dance. “I realized at that moment what I wanted from my life – to be a Riverdancer,” he said.<sup>10</sup>

Despite being considered and told he was too old, he practiced eight hours a day, and two years later earned a spot in the *Riverdance* troupe at the 2003 Special World Olympics. He qualified for the world championships, and earned a master’s degree in traditional Irish dance performance at the University of Limerick. Now, he and his wife run the Irish Dance Academy in Tokyo.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### STYLE

Presently there are three discernable regional styles of Irish dance: the Munster style, the Northern style and the Sean-Nos style of Connemara. The Munster style is considered the “modern” style of Irish dance; its dancers are the ones seen in *Riverdance* and other productions.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the Munster Style is the focus of style change in Irish step dancing.

Throughout Irish dance’s history, the style of dance has changed drastically, which is to be expected. Unlike other popular dance forms, Irish dance is a traditional dance form that thrives from the introduction of new steps and the solidification of traditional dance norms.

Tradition is the manifestation of culture; culture comprises tradition. Traditions vary from generation to generation because as culture lives and changes, tradition lives and changes through its association and extension of culture. Therefore, dance traditions differ and have evolved from generation to generation.

Within these past 15 years, competitive Irish dance has changed at an incredibly fast rate. Irish dance has become more aerial, athletic and acrobatic. Technique is exaggerated, and the dance requires more power.

Three components have contributed to the evolving Irish dance style:

1. The creation of new moves
2. The preservation of traditional moves
3. The influence from other genres.

### Creation of new moves

As a traditional dance, Irish dance is living and flexible. It relies on innovation to keep it fresh, lively and ironically traditional. Author of *The Terminology of Irish Dance* Orfhlaith Ni Bhriain says, “Change is inevitable if the tradition is to remain strong and organic.”<sup>3</sup>

But this doesn't mean that *anything* can become an ingrained movement in Irish dance. Those that favor verticality and “up-ness” (appearance of being pulled straight into the air) and represent the values of Irish dance are more suited to assimilate and become regular and repeated movements in the dance.<sup>4</sup> For example, movements that exaggerate the vertical lines of Irish dance and the dancer's lift (pushing movements off of the ground) will experience an easier transition into Irish dance norms.

### Preservation of traditional moves

Irish step dance incorporates ingrained dance aspects, such as arms held rigid at the side of the body, with newer developments to maintain its Irish dance resemblance and appeal. The body is held upright, and the dancer dances on the ball of his or her foot. Dancers still perform a step in eight bars on the right foot and then complete the dance by repeating the movements on the left foot for an additional eight bars.<sup>5</sup> All Irish step dance



forms aim for “precise timing, erect posture, accurate execution of dance steps, and competent use of the actual performance space.”<sup>6</sup>

Before the dance begins, the dancer stands in “fifth position” (the feet are turned-out and the right foot is placed in front of the left foot), and the torso is held tall and proud. The position has evolved into its current form, which is an extreme overcrossing of fifth position with a diamond shape between the two legs.

In hard shoe, dancers still dance with their heels off of the ground, unless it is used in a particular move,<sup>7</sup> and “rhythmical dexterity and timing” remain fundamental characteristics.<sup>8</sup> The framework for executing trebles exists as it did several years ago. The tip of the foot, specifically the big toe, brushes against the floor, extending outward to create the first beat, and brushes back for a second beat. However, the execution of style has changed. Today, more emphasis is placed on turnout than there was in the past. Dancers need to be louder and crisper. They are expected to have their heels high off of the ground, more than the two inches Brennan writes, and legs must be locked.

The movements of soft shoe, emphasizing “graceful and airborne qualities,”<sup>9</sup> remain as intrinsic and endemic in Irish step dance. However, as a traditional dance form, an evolution has occurred. Turnout and locked legs have become exaggerated and mandatory for success in competitions. Dancers should be as high on the ball of their feet as possible. Even particular dances are less practiced. The single jig, a once popular dance, is now rare.<sup>10</sup>

### Influence from other genres

Since innovation is integral to the progression of Irish dance, movements from other genres have been introduced and “Irishified.” Regional director for the Irish Dance Teachers Association of North America (IDTANA) Southern Region Judy McCafferty says Irish dance must stay true to the fundamentals of Irish dancing (knees closed, feet turned out and crossed), but also draws on movements that were once reserved for ballet, tap and jazz.<sup>11</sup>

Movements from other genres that blend well with Irish dance tend to be the more successful introductions. For example, those that have a verticality and up-ness to them appear to have a more intrinsic Irish quality than those that abandon the traditional element of the dance.

Toe stands are an influenced move that caught on quickly. In hard shoe, the dancer stands on top of his or her toes, similar to going en pointe in ballet, from which it is influenced. Toe stands were introduced in the late 1980s<sup>12</sup> and were able to assimilate into Irish dance because of their verticality. It exaggerates the illusion of being upright and looks like it could be within the confines of the dance. In other words, it compliments Irish dance.

However, many have questioned the authenticity of the Irish dance development. People have reacted differently to the incorporation of non-indigenous steps; some favorably and others unsatisfactorily.

“At the time when this movement [toe stands] entered the repertoire of champion dancers, however, there were two reactions to the innovation: ‘That’s not Irish dancing,’ a spoke criticism by

whoever is concerned with changes in the form at the time; and  
'That's now Irish dancing,' the argument of the dancer performing  
the movement in a contest."<sup>13</sup>

Skater "spins" have become widely popular in soft shoe dance. Influenced by axel spins from ice skating, dancers push off of the ground with one leg, cross their legs in the air and make a revolution, landing with either the leg the dancer pushed off with in front or behind. This move was able to catch on because it resembled the dance verticality inherent in Irish dance. Despite its ice-staking influence, skater spins have been adapted to fit the mold of Irish dance.

#### How the Changes Occur

Through the prevalence and importance of competition in Irish dance, dancers constantly seek new movements to set them apart from other dancers. This competitive aspect provokes a narrowing of style, and the higher standards, consequential of the increased competition, call for innovation. As dancers vie to be recognized as the premier champion dancer, dancers must keep up with the dance and the dance must keep up with the dancers. Therefore, the introduction of a new step plays a crucial role in highlighting the dancer. But for the dancer's novel step to be successful, it must remain consistent with the traditional element of Irish step dance.<sup>14</sup>

The new move catches on when, during a competition, a dancer with the new move is marked well and placed high. Dancers and teachers from different schools see the new move and its associated success, and thus decide to adopt and replicate it.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, it is through the adjudicator's approval (high marks) that new moves are able to infiltrate Irish dance.

As a result,

“Dancers gradually came to resemble each other. The dances that were successful in competition established a constantly changing kinetic vocabulary that negotiated between already established movements and novel, innovative ones.”<sup>16</sup>

The introduction of new steps is risky and gradual. The adjudicators play a decisive and definitive role in the style change with the intent to preserve the traditions in Irish dance and to allow for the traditions to grow. If an adjudicator dislikes the step or finds it to be out-of-touch, the dancer's score could be penalized. The movements that express the verticality or “upness” of Irish dance are more likely to be scored higher by the adjudicator, and embraced and adopted.

### Traditional versus Modern

There has been a growing schism between traditional Irish dance and modern Irish dance, which springs from traditional Irish dance and continues to evolve. Brennan describes the modern dance schools as “producing dancers who will enter and hopefully score well in competitions.”<sup>17</sup>

Although traditional and modern styles are composed of the same stepping elements, the execution is different. Modern dancers execute fast, ornate tricks, and move all over the stage. The growing divide is so grand that modern Irish dancing is starting to lose its traditional aspect.

“Their repertoire is still based on the traditional dances, but their dancing style is moving further and further away from the source: the old-style southern traditional dance techniques.”<sup>18</sup>

However, as a traditional form, Irish dance lends itself to adaptations and introductions of new steps. The style changes within the past two decades have been as apparent as when the Gaelic League originally sanctioned Irish dance. Maybe now a drift is being noticed because the “modern” style of Irish dance is now being truly developed and recognized.

Moreover, Irish step dance was basically created out of political motives. When a government chooses its tradition, is it ever an authentic tradition? The government’s ignorance in dance and other “traditional” styles floating around Ireland at the time of the selection perhaps engendered a style of dance that would become reliant on progressive change.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE COMPETITION LOOK

Beautifully embroidered Celtic knot-work dresses paid tribute to the ancient history of the Irish, while kilts linked the present to the past, as dancers flowed through competitions and the dance halls. Once a representative of the national perception of Irish step dance,<sup>1</sup> this iconic look has morphed into a more modern, less traditional Irish costume as Irish step dance becomes homogenized.

The role of the competition look - dress/kilt, wigs, shoes, socks - has changed significantly. As dancers try to stand out, the look has become almost as important as the dancing.

The once modest Irish dance look - a velvet dress with Celtic symbols - has been replaced with a glitzy, pageantry, “Barbie” look. In figure dancing, many of the dresses have become shorter and sexier, similar to the dresses in *Riverdance* and other touring Irish dance shows. Cullinane says,

“I do not know what the costumes represent now, but they have no Irishness in them and do not express the original ‘Irish national identity.’”<sup>2</sup>

Many dancers believe they will score higher marks if they are in the latest designs, even though judges have disagreed with this notion.

As a result, female competitors have dolled up themselves with spray-on tans, heavy wigs, and jeweled headbands. A typical female Irish dancer in the U.S. will wear an eye-catching dress, “fake tan” on the face and legs only, a massive wig, shoe buckles and socks that have been bedazzled. Black slacks, a fancy vest and dress shirt have replaced the kilt worn by males.

The expense to compete has also grown. New Irish dance dresses can cost up to \$2,000. The dresses are bold and glitzy - to help the dancer stand out.<sup>3</sup> Poodle socks have become glamorized with the addition of rhinestones and an average price tag of \$24. With the pressure to look their best, many experienced dancers replace their dresses every one or two years. But the attention given to the look has resulted in the Coimisiún to address the issues of fake tan and make up. Starting in 2005 girls younger than the age 10 are not allowed to wear fake tan, and girls younger than age 12 in the beginner or primary levels are forbidden from wearing fake tan or makeup.<sup>4</sup>

In her Irish dance training video, original female *Riverdance* lead Jean Butler is asked what she thinks about Coimisiún’s decision forbidding girls younger than the age of 12 to wear make up or fake tan. She says,

“I don’t think you should be wearing loads of makeup and fake tan. It’s really about your dancing. It’s also about what you look like. But at the end of the day, it’s really about your dancing. Like I don’t think you should be marked higher if your legs are more orange than Cormac’s.”<sup>5</sup>

## Modifications

The progression and evolution of the dance initiated modifications in the competition look.

Dresses, once made primarily out of heavy velvet fabric, have become shortened and lightweight to help dancers spring higher into the air with more ease and finesse. Wigs have been designed to give the illusion of more lift to the dancer through the bounce of the curls.<sup>6</sup>

Tina White, who works for Irish dance shoe distributor Rutherford Products, says higher tech shoes have also been brought about. In the past, dancers used to have to dance with what they were given.

“Years ago when I danced, the noisemaking pieces on the shoes were leather pieces imbedded with nails to make the sound – the tips were built up in this way and the heels the same. The shoes were all leather and very stiff. And we never expected the shoes to actually fit. It was always a case of take what we can get our hands on. The shoes simply were not available as they are today.”<sup>7</sup>

But now dancers have options and footwear that can improve their dancing. For example, Rutherford Products’ shoes have revolutionized Irish dance footwear. Its Super Black Suede Sole Flexi allows for more flexing with the foot. This helps in competitions as dancers are to maintain a curl in their foot, and this enables the adjudicator to see this effort.

After clicks (one leg is brought through, with the heels on both legs striking to produce a click) had been introduced and became a standard move in the 1980s, Irish



dance shoe companies started manufacturing hard shoes with a bubbled heel, which became a standard feature in many shoes, to help dancers click their heels together. The shoes are also lightweight allowing for more intricate movements from the dancer.<sup>8</sup>

### Devaluing Irish dance

As the competition scene continues to become more glamorous, has Irish step dance been devalued?

Is part of the ethereal traditional element weakened as female competitors lather on the fake tan?

Does Irish step dance still have its charming folklore spirit?

With a more homogenized look, how will dancers stand out if they start to look like one another, if the intent is to differentiate oneself through costume?

Although not every competitor is dolling himself or herself up, the “Barbie” look remains popular.

As the look of the dancer becomes more showy, will Irish dance progress slower than it normally would have? Although this is an implication of a traditional dance becoming modern, certain traditional elements must be preserved to maintain the essence and inherent qualities of Irish step dance. After all, it was the dancing that made it so alluring, not the shiny dresses or vests, fancy socks or orange legs.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### PROFITABILITY

With the rising popularity in Irish step dance, employment opportunities have either been enhanced or created.

#### Vendors

With the increase in Irish dance enrollment, came the increase for Irish dance products. As the competition look gains more importance, the range of products needed grows. Vendors sell practically everything Irish-related: Poodle socks, shoes, tiaras, headbands, earrings, hairclips, shoe clips, dresses, vests, music, DVDs, candies and chocolates, Christmas ornaments, etc.

White says the business has grown tremendously in the past 15 years. As result, their inventory and competition have grown too, which was not always the case. White says,

“But since the Internet went into everyone’s homes, and since *Riverdance* made its big splash onto the dance scene 15 years ago, we have been getting steadily busier with each passing year. We now have to hire out workers as where our small family used to be able to take care of the business.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1995 Teresa Kelly established Youngblood Wigs. Its selection has expanded into nine different wig styles available in 28 colors. Her inventory has grown into thousands of wigs, and she has distributors in Ireland, England, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Orders come from throughout the world, even from Africa and the Middle East. The industry has also grown. During Nationals, there were 13 vendors, six of which sold wigs.

“When I started the wig business I was the only one selling wigs.  
Now it seems like everyone is selling wigs.”<sup>2</sup>

### Dance Schools

As Irish dance garnered more interest and enrollment increased, the need for Irish dance schools grew, especially in areas outside of Ireland. Dance teachers can earn a considerable living in places affected by the Irish Diaspora - Britain, the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.<sup>3</sup>

Even foreign lands without Irish ancestry have been able to establish self-sustaining dance schools. Fernando Marcos, TCRG, founded an Irish dance school in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The school has 60 students, and the interest in Buenos Aires continues to grow.<sup>4</sup> Alicia Mosti, TCRG, opened an Irish dance school in Mexico, and the response was huge. Her school now enrolls 400 students.<sup>5</sup>

### Professional Career

Before *Riverdance*, Irish dancers could only earn a profit through their art by becoming teachers. No production value or professional careers existed. Brennan says,

“Between *Riverdance* and the newer *Feet of Flames* and *Spirit of the Dance*, there are almost 200 positions for professional dancers who have been trained by Irish dancing schools.”<sup>6</sup>

Due to *Riverdance*'s success, several “*Riverdance the Sequels*” have toured, creating a niche market for Irish dancers. “They’ll get to earn money off of their dancing, which they never could do before,” Butler said.<sup>7</sup> To date, 1,500 Irish step dancers have danced in *Riverdance*.<sup>8</sup>

Some Irish dance spin-offs:

1. Lord of the Dance
2. Celtic Tiger
3. Celtic Feet
4. Celtic Dance Fusion
5. Dance of Desire
6. Gaelforce Dance
7. Magic of the Dance
8. Rhythm of the Dance
9. Spirit of the Dance (1-9) Toronto star, p. E06 2009
10. Dancing on Dangerous Ground

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSION: THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF *RIVERDANCE* AND IRISH STEP DANCE'S POPULARITY

Through *Riverdance*'s overnight success and ability to live beyond its 15 minutes-of-fame, Irish step dance became a trend, and now a staple to the national identity of Ireland. As *Riverdance* is a commercial and profitable show, people have begun to question the cultural authenticity, ethnicity and identity of Irish step dance, *Riverdance* and their relationship.

*Riverdance*'s capitalistic nature and the entrepreneurs of the various touring Irish dance productions competing across the global markets for audiences has changed and challenged the perceptions of "Irishness, its cultural representation, and Irish step dance itself." The cultural Irish quality of *Riverdance* has garnered mixed reactions. As Foley says,

"To some, it is a great promotion of Irish dance, Irish culture, Irish tourism, and Irish identity making its mark in the 'global village,' while to others it is an Irish version of the American movie *Dirty Dancing* and a betrayal of tradition."<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that *Riverdance* is not pure Irish step dance; it is a hybrid of styles. However to the untrained person, *Riverdance* is traditional Irish step dance; the

audience does not know any better. Although *Riverdance* is inspired by traditional Irish step dance, it is indeed not traditional; instead, it is a fusion. This misconception enables an inaccurate perception of what Irish step dance is, and what it should look like.

Foley also argues that *Riverdance*'s influence by the Western theatrical manner - "the combination of dance, music, lighting, costume, and technology on a 'big stage'" - enabled Irish dance to become acceptable to popular audiences,<sup>2</sup> and perhaps even, appealing to popular audiences, engendering the current global homogenization of Irish step dance.

As the two drift apart and become independent of one another, the connection between the two cannot be denied. Although neither no longer relies on the other for awareness, had *Riverdance* not premiered or become as popular as it has, Irish step dance would remain a dance practiced by those with a connection to Ireland; not by those in Argentina, United Arab Emirates, China, or anywhere unaffected by the Irish Diaspora. *Riverdance* promoted and changed Irish dance, whether for better or worse is still to be determined.

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