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Perceptions of Irish Step Dance:
National, Global, and Local

Catherine Foley

The spectacular popularity of Riverdance in 1994, in Ireland and abroad, prompted critical reflection on notions of cultural authenticity, ethnicity, and identity. The attention focused on step dance led to increased discussions of national characteristics. This essay argues that the perceptions of Irish step dance, at first local, then nationalized and globally exported, reflect larger issues of relevance to the Irish state. Although these perceptions have influenced the development of Irish step dance locally, nationally, and globally, the dance practices themselves have assisted in molding and maintaining these same perceptions. I will illustrate how the commodification of Irish step dance practice, particularly during the past five years, has acted as a major catalyst for the emergence of marginal dance practices and has reenergized the Irish step dance tradition.1 Throughout this essay, I use the expression “marginal dance practice” to contrast with competition dance culture, which I interpret as the mainstream, accepted canon.

Although no one grand theory of globalization exists, considerable thinking on the subject has emerged over the past several decades among theorists from both the humanities and the social sciences. The term “globalization” appeared in the mid-1980s to replace others such as “internationalization” and “transnationalization” as a description for our ever shrinking world and the perceived process of “cultural homogenization on a global scale” (Hoogvelt 1997, 114; King 1991, viii). Different paradigms exist in the literature and, for the most part, they fall within two areas: international relations and world-system-theory.

Those theorists writing from the perspective of international relations examine the development of the nation-state and its subsequent worldwide spread through increased patterns of interdependence among states. Generally speaking, these theorists claim that these states, with their European origins, initially emerged as separate entities with almost complete administrative control within their own boundaries; as they matured and engaged with each other in the international arena, a “global-nation-state system” developed, marking a movement toward “one world” (Giddens 1990, 66). The second theoretical area, that of world-system theory, particularly associated with Immanuel Wallerstein, focuses on capitalism as a fundamental globalizing influence based on economic rather than political power. This theory has

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promoted the idea of “core” and “periphery” zones with the “core,” or center, regarded as the dominant and determining force, and the “periphery” as passive. Both perspectives have been criticized for neglecting to include a cultural dimension (Featherstone 1990, 5); the latter has also been criticized for its “cut-and-dry” distinction of core-periphery relations and for not enabling a more active and creative role between these two zones. Although it may appear that the two theoretical paradigms are polar opposites—one with a strong sociopolitical base, the other with a strong economic base—I suggest that both the state and the market within world-system theory are relevant frames for this present discussion on the globalization process within Irish step-dance practice and, by extension, Irish culture itself.

Irish step dance is a technical, solo performance genre, and although there exists a canon of ceili dances (group dances) performed by Irish step dancers, it predominantly has solo associations. Generally, Irish step-dance is performed to Irish traditional dance music by either male or female dancers. These dancers wear light shoes (pumps), hard shoes (jig shoes), or everyday shoes, depending on the step-dance type, the step-dance event, and the age and gender of the dancers. The step dance performance ranges from informal to formal contexts, from informal to formal dress, from age groups of five to eighty, from improvisatory performances to set repertoires, and from spatially confined to theatrically lavish stage performances. Within all these forms lie existing perceptions of Irish step dance that are located in, and speak from, a specific history and place. In this discussion, I contend that globalization, nationalization, and localization are interconnected phenomena that can be read at both diachronic and synchronic levels.

The National Perception: The State
The construction of an Irish cultural identity emerged at the end of the nineteenth century within the context of colonialism. This is particularly relevant to the present discussion since, according to King, colonialism was “critical to the historical and contemporary processes of globalisation” (1991, viii). For the nationalist movement in Ireland, a cultural representation was needed to establish an Irishness that was positive and different from Englishness. Therefore, the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge), an Irish nationalist party established in 1893, had as its primary agenda the deanglicization of Ireland. The League selected various cultural practices to assert a cultural nationalism. Irish culture, particularly the Irish language and later Irish step dance, became a focal point for Irish cultural representation. Eric Hobsbawn stated that: “the history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so” (1983, 13).

The perception of Irish step dance as a symbolic embodiment of a cultural nationalism is ideologically located in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, but particularly after the newly founded state of the Republic of Ireland was formed in 1922. Needing to assert its identity both to itself and others, the new nation-state did so against that which it was not. Irishness was not that which was perceived by the eye of the imperial Other—in effect, Irishness was different from Englishness. Historically, English identity was positively represented at the expense of negatively representing Ireland. Indeed, as Stuart Hall has noted, “Identity…. is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative” (Hall 1991, 2). And although Irish step dance
had been featured in the Gaelic League’s cultural agenda, with *feiseanna* (festivals with competitions in dance) and step-dance classes, the official appropriation of step dance by the League occurred only with the establishment of An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha (The Irish Dancing Commission) in 1929. This organization, commonly known as the Coimisiun, remains today one of the leading institutional structures in Irish step dance, overseeing all aspects of competitive Irish step dance under its jurisdiction, both in Ireland and abroad.

Since its inception, An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha has gradually established official regulations concerning dances, dancers, teachers, adjudicators, dance events, *feiseanna*, clothing, and music. The agenda and the rulings of this hierarchical cultural and political organization served to centralize, homogenize, institutionalize, and standardize Irish step dance. In so doing, the Coimisiun declared itself the mainstream, or *center zone*, in Irish step-dance practice, while at the same time assisting, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the gradual demise of both the transmission and performance of Irish step-dance practices in the margins and thus placing them on the *periphery* (Foley 1988).

Under the auspices of the Gaelic League, an *Irish* dance configuration was constructed and based on difference—difference in perceptions of dance, values, sentiments, aesthetics, and Irishness itself. Prescribed books published by An Coimisiun in 1939, 1943, and 1969 documented the various *ceili* dances permitted to be performed at *ceili* dance competitive events, and eventually the organization established an official examination for the registration of Irish step-dance teachers. Since competition became the primary focus for these registered teachers and dancers alike, the *ceili* dances came to be perceived as *the* Irish group dances. Although group dances were practiced in the various regions of Ireland, they were neglected in favor of the thirty chosen for ideological purposes. Indeed, outside the competitive context, and until very recently, the Gaelic League selected some of these *Irish* dances, particularly *Ballai Luimni* (Walls of Limerick), *Ionsai na hInse* (Seige of Ennis), and *Baint an Fheir* (The Haymaker’s Jig), to be danced at all *ceili* dance events. Consequently, the *ceili* dance competitions featured these standardized dances year after year by every school of dance. With the establishment of the World Irish Dancing Championships in 1969, schools of Irish dance from the Irish diaspora—America, Canada, England, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand—were included.

In solo competitive performances, step 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. Young female dancers, in particular, have dominated the prescribed national aesthetic of high frontal and large spatial movements. With their curled hair and heavily embroidered dance costumes, they are considered representative of the *national* perception of Irish step dance. (plate 1) The emergence of this dance style owed much to urbanization in the 1920s, when schools of step dance emerged in the bigger towns and cities of Ireland. Generally speaking, one teacher at a fixed location ran these schools for young children, predominantly girls between the ages of five and eighteen (this reflected the belief, until relatively recently, that dance is a girls’ preoccupation and too “sissyish” for boys). Since the turn of the twentieth century, boys in the cities were well catered to by the Gaelic Athletic Association, founded in 1893, with physical activities in the form of hurling and Gaelic football. Thus, for many girls in the cities, the *national* physical outlet was Irish step dance.
The dances comprised both light-shoe and hard-shoe dances. The light-shoe dances, particularly the reel and slip jig, emphasized graceful and airborne qualities, while the hard-shoe dances, such as the hornpipe and the double jig, emphasized rhythmic dexterity and timing. All Irish step-dance forms aim for precise timing, erect posture, accurate execution of dance steps (and characteristic movements accompanying those steps), and competent use of the actual performance space.

Plate 1. Fourteen-year-old Colleen Cahill, from the Schade Academy of Irish Dance in New York City, performing a competitive, Irish step dance at the All Ireland Championships, 2001, in Ennis County Clare. Photograph by Catherine Foley.
However, this **national**, institutional, and competitive form of Irish step dance, iconic of the state and its cultural homogenization program, is perceived ambivalently in Ireland. Dancers, parents (particularly mothers), teachers, adjudicators, and those involved in this subculture perceive it alternately as fun, a way of life, an embodiment of their cultural heritage, a discipline, a sport, or an expression of their own individual identity. However, other sectors of Irish society perceive Irish step dance from a postcolonial perspective; they view it as **backward** in its nationalistic, rigid aesthetic and not cultured in line with Western art aesthetics. In other words, it is not a dance form to be taken seriously. Still others feel indifferent toward it. Therefore, the **national**, competitive style of Irish step dance carries different meanings, values, and associations for different elements within Irish society—meanings that reflect the multiplicity of identities in Ireland.

Indeed, in framing this discussion within the state scenario, outlined above, it is important to point out that from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1960s, Ireland remained politically and culturally inward-looking. The latter part of this period in politics was very much influenced by the government of Eamonn de Valera (the prime minister from 1932 to 1973) and its nostalgia for the past, particularly a Catholic, rural past. It was against this backdrop that the **national** perception of Irish step dance emerged. However, since the 1960s and the end of the traditionalism associated with the de Valeran era, Ireland gradually began to take its place in the global village. In 1962, the newly-established Telefis Eireann (The Irish national television station) paved the way for Ireland’s entry into the world of mass communication. Rock ’n’ roll music soon became the fashion of the day. Then, in 1972, Ireland became a member of the European Economic Community, which allowed for the interdependence of European states. Finally, by the 1980s, Ireland had shifted from an agricultural to an urbanized, industrial economy. Beginning with the popularity of Irish traditional music in the international arena in the 1960s to the more recent success of Irish rock groups such as U2, The Cranberries, The Corrs, and Bewitched, Ireland slowly made its mark internationally. All of these developments helped to establish a movement toward greater global awareness, which has influenced Irish step-dance practice today.

**The Global Perception: Riverdance**

On the evening of April 30, 1994, during a seven-minute interval in the popular music event *The Eurovision Song Contest*, Irish step dance entered the world of popular culture before a television audience of three hundred million. Under the title *Riverdance*, this performance dramatically altered the Irish perception of Irish step dance and the people’s perception of themselves. But what was it about this particular performance that empowered Irish step dance to such a degree? As a performance genre it had existed in Ireland for more than two hundred years and was well established in the diasporic locations of England, Scotland, North America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. So, what was different about this performance?

In the view of some theorists the processes of globalization have diminished the relationship between the nation-state and national cultural identity (Giddens 1990, Hall 1991). Generally speaking this would appear to be the case in Ireland. Indeed, as the Irish journalist Fintan O’Toole notes, “Many of us may be glad to see the back of holy Ireland, martyred Ireland and peasant Ireland. Most of us may have wanted nothing so much as to be normal, prosperous Europeans” (O’Toole 1999). Although Irish competitive step dance, for the most part, continues to exist under the auspices of the Gaelic League, the phenomenal global pop-
ularity of Irish step dance as seen in stage shows such as *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* has given rise to critical reflection on notions of cultural identity.

As noted earlier, developments over the past two to three decades in communication, transportation, global economics, and internationalization of labor have, according to Anthony King, "been matched over the past decade for institutions, groups, and individuals to 'position themselves globally,' whether in relation to markets, media, or global cultural politics" (1991, viii). These, King states, are the conditions for the globalization process. *Riverdance* was an attempt at positioning Ireland globally and culturally, representing a contemporary Irish identity to both the Irish themselves and to the world. Indeed, the Irish have long been represented within popular culture. For example, films such as *Finian's Rainbow, Darby O' Gill and the Little People*, and *The Quiet Man*—all American films—depict the Irish in a romantic, nostalgic, and quaint manner; more recent Irish films take a more realistic slant. However, *Riverdance* was an Irish dance stage piece based on actual Irish dancing, with real Irish dancers, traditional musicians, and singers. What, then, was its global attraction, which turned the seven-minute interval piece into a full-length commercially successful stage show (*Riverdance—the Show*) to be subsequently followed by yet other full-length Irish step-dance shows?  

Global mass culture seems to operate according to two assumptions: global culture is essentially centered in the West; most forms of cultural representation tend to become homogenized (Hall 1991). *Riverdance—the Show* is undoubtedly centered in the West as reflected in its plot, technology, clothing, lighting, music, and structure of dance routines. However, what lends this stage show its mass appeal is its hybridity, that is, the way it includes representations of disparate cultural dance forms, such as tap dance, flamenco dance, and Russian folk ballet, along with Irish step dance. These diverse dance forms, intermixed with speech, choruses, and instrumentation contribute to a sharing of human experience. To quote from the *Riverdance* program, "We are one kind. We are one people now, our voices blended, our music, a great world in which we can feel everywhere at home. Ni neart go chur le cheile: together we are strong."

*Riverdance* introduced star performers, with the chorus line masked in the background, reminiscent of MGM musicals. Although the chorus line performed Irish step-dance motifs from, or influenced by, competition culture, they also employed movements from other vocabularies, such as stylized Western balletic or theatrical walks, hands on hips movements, and eye and hand contact made in a theatrical way. The Irish step dancers were suddenly required to move in a theatrical manner previously not expected of them. The particular attention to pacing and dynamics occurred through contrasting (and sensitive) use of slow and fast music, and female soft-shoe dancing with male hard-shoe dancing. In effect, then, *Riverdance* theatricalized Irish step dance from a Western point of view.

The hybrid nature of *Riverdance* is equally evident in the music. Influenced by East-European rhythms (particularly Bulgarian), composer Bill Whelan broke from the usual eight-bar, regular structure of Irish traditional dance music and choreographed foot motifs to adapt to the new musical phrasing. Rock music, too, influenced the show. For example, the *Riverdance* orchestra appeared onstage at all times, so that the audience could see the interplay between the musicians and dancers. Often individual musicians took center stage and performed with rocklike gyrations, not typical of the traditional Irish musician. (Eileen Ivers's fiddle performance in *Riverdance—the New Show*, at Radio City Music Hall, exemplified this
trend.) Also, in “Trading Taps,” item thirteen of the show, Whelan blended American swing for the tapping with Irish music for the step-dance routine. The end of the tap performance alluded to a dance routine by James Cagney in the American musical Yankee Doodle Dandy.

The show used various elements to emphasize contemporary Western male/female gender roles. The female dancers wore short dresses and had long hair in contrast to the heavily embroidered competition costumes; the male dancers wore shirts and trousers in contrast to the kilt, associated with male dancers in competition. Again, soft-shoe dances performed by the women contrasted with hard-shoe dances performed by the men; however, at high theatrical, climactic moments, all the performers pounded out precisely and sharply their unison hard-shoe rhythms.

With the success of Riverdance the other Irish step-dance shows followed suit, drawing such ingredients from the Riverdance recipe for success as adding virtuosic soloists to contrast with the chorus-line dancers. The dancers who auditioned for these parts in the Irish step-dance schools had to be hard-hitting, fast, and precise, so that their performances would lend themselves to a spectacularly visual theatrical experience. The best dancers became soloists or potential soloists; others joined the chorus lines. These Irish step-dance shows used, for the most part, floor patterns that were straight lines, crosses, or circles. These patterns were already well established within competition and exhibition Irish step dance. However, in the context of the stage show they were visually more spectacular owing to the quantity and quality of dancers, and to the theatricality and tempo of the music. Because of the success Whelan’s music for Riverdance had, these new shows also commissioned new music, and they employed live musicians. They also hired Irish step-dance choreographers, dance captains for the training of stage-show dancers, physiotherapists, wardrobe mistresses, stage managers, and lighting technicians—just like their sister shows.

The success of Riverdance was determined by economic, temporal, and dance and music structures already in place. However, it was the particular combination of dance, music, lighting, costume, and technology on a “big stage,” presented in a Western theatrical manner, that enabled Irish dance to become acceptable to popular audiences. All of these aspects of Irish dance stage shows contributed to what is currently a global homogenization of the representation of Irish step dance.

Cultural Capitalist Enterprises

Essentially, one can view Riverdance and other Irish step-dance stage shows, as capitalist enterprises, which depend for their production on competitive markets; according to the criteria characteristic of capitalist enterprises, they are both competitive and expansionist (Giddens 1990). These shows operate independently of the Gaelic League, although An Coimisiun, and a second organization, An Comhghail, have been, and remain, the training grounds for current and prospective dancers for these shows. Riverdance has been cloned and has expanded to include, to date, three Riverdance shows, together with a flying squad. As Wallerstein notes, “Capital has never allowed its aspirations to be determined by national boundaries” (Wallerstein in Giddens 1990, 69). These stage shows compete on the global market for commercial success. Individual entrepreneurs have capitalized on Irish step dance as a cultural commodity. In turn, this has transformed perceptions of Irishness, its cultural representation, and Irish step dance itself. Indeed, reviews of the performance have referred to the precision, excitement, energy, and sexuality of the dancers (Riverdance: the Journey). This perception of
the global representation of Irish dance has had mixed responses in Ireland. 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. As Hall notes, “One of the things which happens when
the nation-state begins to weaken, becoming less convincing and less powerful, is that the
response seems to go in two ways simultaneously. It goes above the nation-state and it goes
below. It goes global and local in the same moment” (1991, 27). By comparison, we see
responses to the nation-state and its cultural representations “go above” (as in “going global”) with Riverdance and the other Irish step-dance stage shows, but also “going below” to the
local.

Local Perception
In reaction to the global representation of Irish dance in the form of Riverdance, through its
hybridity and “inclusiveness,” the margins have become represented. The step-dance practices
in the margins of Ireland are those that have survived the processes of modernization.
Individual performers, representative of particular rural regions, are currently in moderate
demand on television programs, concerts, workshops, and summer schools in Ireland and
abroad. This current popularity results from both the entertainment value of these dancers,
who demonstrate the diversity and richness of traditional Irish step dance, and to the percep-
tion of them as bearers of an older system of values and sentiments, custodians of a rural, more
integrated and autonomous way of life. They and their dances can be located within the frame-
work of the familiar, as opposed to the unfamiliarity of the global; in effect, they provide the
illusion of stability, except to those for whom Irish dance holds little meaning.

These marginalized dance practices are rooted in nineteenth-century rural Ireland, a time
when dance was perceived to be integral to the way of life of the people and played a facilitat-
ing role within the rural mutual aid system (Foley 1988). Indeed, up to the end of the nine-
teenth century, Irish traditional dance was seen as predominantly a rural activity. Step-dance
performances took place at fairs, patterns (festive religious days in honor of local saints), wed-
dings, house dances, harvest, and cross-road dances (held in afternoons or evenings at the
junction of two roads). Although women step danced, throughout the nineteenth century and
early twentieth century it was principally a rural and male-dominated activity. (plate 2)

Transmission of these dance systems was both formal, from traveling dancing masters,
and informal, from family, friends, and neighbors. The movement systems representative of
each form of transmission, and their respective aesthetics, varied from region to region, but all
systems were closely linked to the regular, eight-bar music structure of each of the primary
step-dance music types: the Reel, Jig, and Hornpipe. Also, according to oral tradition, a gen-
eral rural aesthetic regarding the performance of step dance demanded the use of a small, con-
ﬁned space: the sayings were that the step dancer should be able to dance within six square
inches or on a dinner plate—such was the aesthetic requirement for neatness of footwork and
lightness of body weight, together with a thorough knowledge of the local step-dance move-
ment system.

Repertory (or lack thereof) has been a distinctive feature of particular rural regions of step
dance. The system espoused by the early traveling dancing masters emphasized repertory,
while informal systems of transmission placed much less emphasis on it (Foley 1988;
Brennan-Corcoran 1994). For example, the Munster region (representative of the dancing
master tradition) placed great value on repertory of steps. Consequently, dancers were prepared to walk miles to a dancing school to acquire a different step. This was particularly true in North Kerry, where Irish step dance was taught by traveling dancing masters in “dance schools” in the rural townlands. Dances were later modified by the dancers themselves according to individual competence and desire (Foley 1988). The personality and aesthetic preferences of the dancer were embodied in the dance step, which, in turn, came to be associated with a particular dancer. Specific variations of dance steps were implicitly “owned” by certain dancers. (plate 3)

For the step-dance communities in Conamara, repertory of steps did not hold the same importance, partly owing to the lack of traveling dancing masters in the region. The flat-footed stepping and heel movements, together with loose, raised arm movements, were associated with this region’s particularly male-dominated movement system. However, with the drive toward an Irish cultural identity at the end of the nineteenth century, the Munster orientation, with its emphasis on repertory of steps was adopted to reinforce a national representation of Irish dance and Ireland.

Currently, the step-dance styles representing these rural and regional movement systems differ according to their mode of transmission and inherited performance practices within their respective geographical areas. The renewal of these dance practices in response to the globalization and commodification of Irish step dance may be perceived as an attempt to reinstate
its rural roots, sociocultural associations, and traditional values. However, these dance practices have themselves been subject to an ongoing process of change. They are not constants; they are not pure and homogenous forms. They have gradually assimilated related forms and styles that satisfy the needs of individual performers or meet sociocultural and political aims.

**Conclusion**

Although globalization may increase local distinctiveness, it would be a mistake to think that local, national, and global operate totally independently of each other; they are interconnected, each relying on the other for inspiration as well as economic and cultural survival. In a direct manner, *Riverdance* and the other Irish step-dance stage shows are dependent on the “nationalist” institutions of An Coimisiun and An Comhghail for their dancers; these organizations benefit from the stage shows through the global promotion and popularizing of Irish step dance and the professional employment afforded their better dancers. Moreover, the competition dancers and the show dancers know one another perfectly well. Thus, there exists a symbiotic relationship between dancers and teachers within the organizations and dancers in the stage shows. For many of the current competitive dancers, the better show dancers are held in high esteem—almost like gurus. However, dancers within both the organizations of step dance and the Irish step-dance stage shows have had little if no contact with the dance practices out in the regions. Perhaps this is a result of the fact that to be a successful competitive Irish step dancer means total immersion in the dance form and the lifestyle associated with it; to know the dancers and dances from the “margins” is not on the agenda of the Coimisiun or the Comhghail. They belong to different dance communities, each with their own system of values, practices, and meanings.

Are the current, marginalized dance practices, depending on their marketability and selling potential, becoming future commodities for the global stage? Will *Riverdance* be a model for the appropriation of dance cultures elsewhere? How many stage shows will the market support, and for how long? 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? These are questions that may well be answered in the near future.
Notes

1. This research is based on both my own experience and involvement as an Irish step dancer for some thirty-five years; my experience as an Irish step dance teacher and director of the M.A. in Irish Traditional Dance Performance at the University of Limerick; and on ethnographic fieldwork carried out intensively in regions of Kerry and Cork during the past fifteen years. This work is constantly in process.

2. This differed from the East European countries, where it was the newly founded nation-states that appropriated cultural expressions for the same purpose.

3. Besides the Coimisiun there is another organization, the Comhghail, established in 1969, the second largest in the step-dance world. It holds its own competitions for its members, and step dancers within Comhghail do not compete with Coimisiun step dancers and vice versa. Its members are confined predominantly to the British Isles.

4. Female dancers either curl their own hair or buy long-haired curled wigs matching the natural color of their own hair. Hair extensions are also available, together with the “banana clip.” Extensions and wigs range from IR£6 to IR£70 (the full wig costs IR£70; the banana clip costs IR£40). Ladies’ embroidered dance costumes cost between IR£500 and IR£800.

5. Other Irish dance shows include: Gael Force, Dancing on the Moon, Feet o Flames, and Magic of the Dance.

6. Currently, sean nos dancing is being revitalized, particularly among the set-dancing community.

Works Cited


**Videography**


*Lord of the Dance*. 1996. VVL Production for Unicorn Entertainment Ltd.

