

ULRR

Negotiating boundaries in Irish step-dance performance practice: Colin Dunne and piano one (i)

Item Type	Article
Authors	Foley, Catherine E.
Citation	Inbhear: Journal of Irish Music and Dance;1 (1)
Publisher	Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick
Download date	2026-05-18 00:42:54
Item License	https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/10344/4297

NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES IN IRISH STEP-DANCE
PERFORMANCE PRACTICE: COLIN DUNNE AND PIANO
ONE (i)

Catherine E. Foley



Colin Dunne (photograph courtesy of Maurice Gunning)

The cultural construction of Irish step dance embodies diverse performative meanings: meanings which are shared by different communities of step dancers. From informal, improvisatory performances to formal, stylised and highly structured performances, step dance adapts, is adapted and appropriated to give meaning and kinaesthetic expression to both the individual step dancer and the group within these diverse dance communities. In this paper I look at notions of conceptual and aesthetic boundaries in Irish competitive step dance and at how step dancers attempt at negotiating these boundaries. In particular, the paper focuses on one

particular step dancer, namely, Colin Dunne, and explores the artist's attempts at negotiating the aesthetic and structural boundaries in Irish step dance performance practice and the artistic strategies employed by him to assist in this negotiation process.

However, before addressing this particular issue I would like to locate myself. Having trained in Irish competitive step dance from a young age; having performed most of my life; and currently course directing the MA in Ethnochoreology and the MA in Irish Traditional Dance Performance at the Irish World Music Centre, University of Limerick, Ireland, I am close to, and indeed, directly involved in, some current developments in Irish traditional step dance practices on a day-to-day basis. This paper then is theoretically framed based within performance practice and draws on both my own experience as an Irish step dancer, teacher, and researcher, and my observations of one dance artist's creative attempts at reinterpreting the doxaic, conservative and shared aesthetic system within Irish competitive step-dance practice for artistic and theatrical purposes. As Barnes states: "We need to watch these systems.....in action, to study tactics and strategy, not merely the rules of the game" (Barnes:1980). This paper briefly looks at the relationship between the dance artist as human agent and his attempts at negotiating the rules and aesthetic concepts inherent in the Irish competitive step-dance system of performance in which he had been trained.

Similarly for the majority of Irish competitive step-dancers' training everywhere, competition is a significant motivating factor. Mastery of a specific technique and aesthetic through years of training is the ultimate goal and winning championships such as the World Championships (*Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne*) is the ultimate achievement. Within the competitive context, step dancers perform their particular step dance choreographies within specific conceptual and aesthetic parameters: parameters which are taught within the dance classroom context and which are assessed in competition; these parameters include concepts of timing, execution, carriage and steps. These concepts will be discussed below and examined in relation to Colin Dunne's artistic and strategic processes in his choreographic piece, *Piano One*.

Time

Time within Irish competitive step-dance practice is paramount; that is being on time to the accompanying, metrical, Irish traditional dance music. Indeed, it is inconceivable for an Irish step dancer to progress beyond the basic level without having internalised the significance of metrical time in Irish step-dance practice. Through teachers' vocalised, repetitive mantras to particular rhythmical and kinaesthetic motifs, step dancers steadily acquire an understanding of the importance of timing in relation to music.

Execution

The second concept in which competitive step dancers are assessed is execution. When looking at the execution of a step dance, adjudicators focus on how the step dancer delivers or performs the actual step dance in question. Is the dancer performing the choreographed movements accurately? Is she crossing her feet? Has she good positions? Is she pointing her toe? Is she bringing her feet back? Is she bringing her legs up behind? Has she a nice turn-out? Is she bringing her legs up high enough in front? Is she using the stage space well? Is she dancing gracefully and musically? These are some of the questions that arise when looking at execution but which adjudicators automatically assess due to their own years of training and internalising the aesthetic knowledge of Irish step dance practice.

Carriage

Carriage is the third concept within the assessment of the aesthetic. Carriage alludes to the posture of the dancer and within Irish step-dance practice the posture is held erect and hands are held still at either side of the body. I am not going into the semantics of the posture here since I just wish to categorise it as an aesthetic concept, one which Irish step dancers generally take-for-granted. The carriage is a constant and slight deviations are inadmissible within Irish step dance competitions. Different strategies are used by different teachers in the classroom to instil this “correct” use of carriage: walking with books on heads in the classroom; raising a fallen shoulder with a shoulder pad on a dance costume in competition; or velcro-ing sleeves of a dance costume to the actual dance dress in competition. These are some of the strategies employed to give the “correct” visual impression of the Irish competitive step dancer.

Steps

Steps are the fourth category within the assessment of the Irish step-dance aesthetic. Steps comprise a combination of traditional and novel kinesthetic movements in keeping with the particular genre of dance in question. In other words, there are Reel steps, Jig steps, Hornpipe steps, Slip Jig steps, etc. These are generally 8 bars long in keeping with the accompanying structure of the music and comprise traditional and innovative, syntactic, rhythmical and kinaesthetic arrangements. The actual movements selected for these step dance choreographies depend on individual choreographer’s artistic and conceptual preferences. Steps are continuously being created, developed, altered or adapted depending on dancers’ skills and actual dance performance contexts, but what does not change within the competitive context is the 8-bar structure of the step (excluding solo set dances). Within the context of competitive adjudication, steps are assessed according to their

interest value, their rhythmic and kinaesthetic interaction with the music, and their adherence to the current conceptual and aesthetic understanding of a good step.

The four categories, as discussed above, of time, execution, carriage and steps are the four categories of aesthetic assessment within competitive Irish step-dance practice. The next section looks at Colin Dunne, as a dance artist but also as an experienced Irish step dancer with nine World Championship titles to his name, and his attempt at negotiating aspects of this aesthetic system for performance and artistic purposes.

With the advent of Riverdance- the Show (1995), Irish step dancers were exposed, not only to the professionalism and the theatrical world associated with Riverdance but also to other dance genre. Riverdancers were scheduled to perform eight shows a week and over long periods of time, and this had consequences for Irish dancers. In an interview with Colin Dunne he had the following to say concerning his introduction as principle dancer to Riverdance:

“I was very unprepared as a performer and as a dancer....I knew nothing about theatre and etiquette....or about warming up...I never even thought of diet. I never really considered my body to be the body of a dancer in the same way as a ballet dancer.....or a contemporary dancer or a jazz dancer. I mean in most other (Western theatrical) dance forms one is trained in performance skills as you go along.....With Irish dance we were really only ever taught skill and it was about perfecting that skill as best you could in order to win the biggest cup that you could or the biggest title that you could. Beyond that there was very little”

(Colin Dunne, interview with Catherine Foley, 2001).

Dunne felt that as a dancer he had little notion of proper training, injury prevention, body awareness, etc. aspects taken-for-granted by other Western theatrical dancers. It was this awareness that motivated Colin Dunne, and other step dancers, to develop Irish step dance further as a theatrical dance form and to acknowledge the whole dancing body, as opposed to what Dunne considered Irish step dance to be at the time: “a dance form from the waist down” (Colin Dunne, *ibid*).

With the hope of developing as an overall and individual dancer, using and being aware of the whole body as opposed to the feet, Colin Dunne immersed himself in classes in yoga, pilates, elementary ballet classes, jazz classes, martial arts, and in 2002 completed an MA in contemporary dance at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance. Dunne was not the only Irish step dancer to extend his Irish step-dance experience into other dance genre. Jean Butler, lead female dancer with Riverdance, also completed an MA in contemporary dance at the Academy. Also, in 1988, Breandán de Gallaí,

another lead dancer with Riverdance, joined the Gus Giordano's Dance Academy in the US where he studied Ballet, Jazz, Modern and Tap. He subsequently choreographed *Balor*, an emotion driven story interpreted through the fusion of ballet, Irish percussive step dance, and martial arts. In 2009 he completed an MA in Ethnochoreology at the Irish World Academy of Music and dance where he choreographed another Irish dance work, *Firebird*, to the music of Stravinsky's *Firebird*, for the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance students; Breandan is currently enrolled at the Academy doing a PhD in Arts Practice Research. Maire Clerkin, Irish step dancer and choreographer, established The Hairy Marys (renamed Clerkinworks in the 1990s, and later Kick) in London to develop Irish dance theatrically; and Liam Harney well known Irish step dance teacher and performer in America was also a company member of the New York City Ballet. So, generally speaking, from the 1980s, we see individual step dancers taking steps to extend both themselves as dancers and the boundaries of Irish step dance. But, why was this?

Historically, prior to Riverdance, the only realistic option for many trained competitive Irish step dancers, was teaching, and very few continued to perform since a career in step dance performance was not a realistic option. However, with the advent of Riverdance step dancers continued to perform longer and for Riverdancers and dancers in the other stage shows, they were now also professional dancers who worked within a theatrical context. But did Riverdance create another void? At the end of a paper I published in *Dance Research Journal* (2001), I asked the question "And what is the future for the Riverdancers after Riverdance? Do we see the establishment of small Irish step dance companies or free-lance individual Irish step dance performers?" (Foley, 2001: p. 43), Or, indeed, do we see a return to 'tradition' as in looking at traditional dance practices outside the organisational structures of the Irish competitive step dance context. For some Riverdancers today, this is a question that they are asking themselves. Where does an Irish step dancer go after Riverdance? With the establishment of the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme at the Irish World Academy in 1999, this programme offers another choice for Riverdancers and others who wish to develop further as performers of step dance and to avail of the academic, choreographic, performance, and interdisciplinary opportunities offered at the Academy.

Colin Dunne wished to explore ways of extending as a dancer by acquiring different knowledge, dance vocabulary and tools through other types of movement classes. In attempting to do this, Colin Dunne aspired to constructing a way of moving as a dancer that would allow him to express something through his body about himself, about the individual Colin Dunne. Within the competitive context and also within the stage shows, Colin stated that much of the dance material was created onto his body, was inscribed, and this left him with the creative urge to choreograph work from the inside-out,

as opposed to from the outside-in. Indeed, for Colin Dunne, he wished to rid himself of the label 'Irish dancer', and to be simply a dancer. This involved not only negotiating the aesthetic boundaries within Irish competitive step-dance practice but also questions relating to his own identity as an Irish step dancer born and raised in Britain. The next section briefly looks at one choreographic piece by Colin Dunne in which this negotiation process may be seen.

In *Piano 1*, a solo choreographic piece choreographed by Colin Dunne, for Colin Dunne, and to the piano music of Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, composer, pianist and Director of the Irish Word Academy of Music and Dance, we can see the aesthetic of Irish competitive step dance being loosened to allow for a play with issues of space, dynamics, and the dance's relationship with the accompanying music. The piece commences with an a cappella percussive section with much dynamic play. The section continues while the piano enters with an Irish slow air; the feet create their own music against the slow air; there is no effort to be on time with the music, the music provides the soundscape for the virtuosic solo. When the piano section eventually leads us into a 6/8 time jig rhythm the dance continues but in lieu of doing simply jig steps to the jig music, Colin Dunne performs in a tap-like, virtuosic manner; not performing actual full 8-bar steps, not repeating movements with the left leg; not holding his carriage totally erect; not holding his hands still to his sides; but moving in a seemingly natural way, allowing his body to move with him as his feet percussively beat out his selected taps, glides and leaps, and allowing himself, to listen to the music differently: differently from the way he had been trained as a competitive Irish step dancer.

Choreographically, *Piano One* hinges on the relationship of the percussive foot movements to finger movements on the piano. In the first section of the Jig, Colin selects the spatial relationship of the fingering of the tune on the piano as a way of directing his body and foot movements spatially; in effect, the fingering provides the road map for the feet. For Colin, this worked choreographically and although his training in Irish step dance is still very much visible, also noticeable are his attempts at re-interpreting aspects of the Irish step-dance aesthetic through his play with structure, body and spatial attitude, movement dynamics, and dance and music inter-relationships.

In relation to his choreographic work and his attempts at negotiating the boundaries of Irish step-dance performance practice, Colin Dunne states, "the process in those pieces has changed hugely for myself - in terms of how I think about use of space or use of music - use of my body - use of rhythm - but I think, at the end of the day, once those pieces are finally presented, it still... looks like Irish dance" (Colin Dunne, interview with Catherine Foley, 2003).

Works Cited

Barnes, J.A., (1980) "Kinships Studies: Some Impressions on the Current State of Play". *Man*, 15:2, pp. 293-303.

Dunne, Colin (July 2002), *Piano One*, Performed at the University Concert Hall, University of Limerick, Ireland.

Foley, Catherine (2001) "Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global and Local". In *Dance Research Journal: Congress on Research, Dance*, 33/1. New York. US. pp. 34 - 45.

Foley, Catherine (2001 and 2003) audio and audio-visual recordings of interviews with Colin Dunne.

End Notes:

ⁱ This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 23rd Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Ethnochoreology in Monghidoro (Bologna), Italy, July 2004.