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Item Type	Article
Authors	Foley, Catherine E.
Citation	Research in Dance Education; 21 (3), PP. 312-327
Publisher	Taylor & Francis - Routledge
Download date	2026-04-16 14:59:20
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Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10344/9348">https://hdl.handle.net/10344/9348</a>

**Steps, Style and Sensing the Difference: Transmission and the Re-contextualisation of Molyneaux's Traditional Set Dances within the Irish Traditional Dance Competitive Arena**

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# **Steps, Style and Sensing the Difference: Transmission and the Re-contextualisation of Molyneaux's Traditional Set Dances within the Irish Traditional Dance Competitive Arena**

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the re-contextualisation of particular versions of solo traditional set dances from the region of North Kerry, Ireland, by teachers and step dancers of competitive step dancing for competition. These set dances, namely the Blackbird and Saint Patrick's Day were choreographed by Jeremiah Molyneaux, the last of the itinerant dancing masters of the rural region of North Kerry (circa 1881-1965) (see Foley 2013). The objective of the paper is to enquire into the reasoning behind the appropriation of these dances and how competitive step dance teachers and dancers learned to embody them as representative of a regional step-dance style. The paper proposes a particular model of transmission: a multi-sensory method of transmission where proprioceptive training and somatic sensation is considered in the stylistic embodiment and assessment of these solo set dances; and a theoretical engagement with relevant literature in the field of Irish dance studies to contextualise and historicise the practice for deeper cultural understanding. This model might also be applied to the transmission of other dance practices.

*Keywords:* Irish dancing; competition; transmission; proprioception; somatic sensation

Step dancing in Ireland is multifaceted and is practised within social, competitive, educational and theatrical contexts (Foley 2013). These contexts determine the aesthetic system which prevails within the different step-dance practices and the contexts and manner of transmission for the embodiment of these practices. But when step dances from a particular practice are recontextualised and performed outside the social environment from within which they emerged, what happens to the performance and transmission of these step dances? In this paper, I examine this issue focusing on the recent appropriation of solo

traditional set dances from the region of North Kerry, Ireland, by teachers and students of competitive step dancing for competitive purposes.<sup>i</sup> I enquire into the reasoning behind this appropriation, and I explore how competitive step dance teachers and dancers have learned to embody and perform these regional set dances. I argue one, that there is more to a step dance than the physical “moves” and suggest the use of proprioceptive and multi-sensory methods of transmission where somatic sensation (Sklar 2008) is considered, analysed and embodied for the acquisition of a different style or groove of step dancing; two, that for competition, adjudicators inform themselves of these different styles or grooves of step dancing and apply different aesthetic criteria for adjudicating performers dancing these different styles; and three, that students, teachers and adjudicators might potentially benefit from some engagement with literature in Irish dance studies to provide historical and contextual framing and understanding to their practice. Theoretically, I draw on the work of scholars such as Foley (2001, 2007, 2012, 2013), Hahn (2007), Howes (1991), Morris (2003; 2008), Ness (2008), Sklar (2008) and Stoller (1984). I also utilise ethnographic interviews to support my argument.

### **In the Field: Collecting and Embodying the Molyneaux Step Dances**

In the 1980s, I underwent fieldwork in the rural region of North Kerry, Ireland to collect for preservation the traditional step dances of Jeremiah Molyneaux, known to be the last of the itinerant dancing masters of the region.<sup>ii</sup> Molyneaux (circa 1881-1965; see Foley [1988] 2012, 2013) was the last in a line of itinerant dancing masters in the region who contributed to the development of step dancing as a solo dance genre, and as Molyneaux was the last in this line, the style of step dancing became locally known as the Molyneaux or Munnix style of dancing.<sup>iii</sup> Since Molyneaux had died in 1965, my fieldwork involved collecting step dances from the remaining students of Jeremiah Molyneaux, many of whom were over the age of 60 at the time. My primary methodology in collecting the step dances from these dancers was using my own step-dancing body as a research tool; in other words using performance and my years of performing and teaching Irish step dance as a research tool:

I placed myself as a reflexive performer within the research arena. My dance competence became an ethnochoreological research tool. This concurs with what the anthropologist, Sally Ann Ness states, that for one to fully understand what performing a choreographed movement means, one must have ‘some appreciation of how getting oneself physically

through a choreographed movement can affect a human being, and how it can affect one's own cultural understanding' (Foley 2013, 14)

This physical way of knowing has also been advocated by scholars such as Novack (1990), Browning (1995), Daniel (1995), Royce (2002), Hahn (2007), Noland and Ness (2008), Sklar (2008) and others. In the field of ethnomusicology, Blacking (1973), Koning (1980) and Rice (1994), for example, have also emphasised the use of performance as a research tool. Thus, in utilising my body and performance as a research tool, I learned to embody the Molyneaux step dances from Molyneaux's surviving students. I also documented the dances – using a mnemonic system and Labanotation, and I video-recorded and interviewed the dancers (Foley [1988] 2012, 2013). Thus, from 1983 – 1985 I visited and learned from these dancers in their homes. In *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* (2013) I state:

I used my own body as a methodological research tool to embody, sense and store their dance knowledge. The Molyneaux step dancers danced in a different way to that in which I had been trained (within the competitive arena). The posture was not held in the same erect posture; although erect it appeared softer. Also, the arms were held loosely by the sides of the body. The gaze of the dancer was not always facing directly forward, sometimes it was looking towards the ground in a forward, low position. This gave a feeling of performing for oneself and not for a formal audience....

In learning the step dances I visually, aurally and kinaesthetically imitated the movements of each dancer.... I was feeling and sensing these rhythmic movement patterns in order to understand how these movements fit the music and also how they fit on my body.... I knew I could never understand it as they understood it, since they had experienced it all their lives, but I could attempt to appreciate what it felt like to dance in this specific way in order to document, analyse and interpret their dance and also to understand more deeply the world that this dance form referenced. (Foley 2013, 93)

I continued

These step dances were performed in a close-to-the-floor style with precision, discipline, neatness and rhythmic timing of the feet in dialogue with the accompanying music. Subtle detail of the feet and the manner in which the feet moved and flowed while dancing, was characteristic of this dance practice. Leading with the ankle in some movements was considered important for stylistic purposes. (Foley 2013, 95)

A particular cultural and dance aesthetic together with a way of thinking about traditional dance, was therefore applied in the performance of these dances. Improvisation was also an important characteristic:

The personality, musicality and identity of the step dancer was embodied in the dance within its practice in North Kerry and each dancer was expected to put something of himself, or herself, into the dance. The Molyneaux step dancers referred to this as ‘style’ or ‘putting style into it’ and they contributed to this sense of style by individually varying or improvising step dances in performance. (Foley 2013, 98)

My fieldwork experience - studying and embodying the dances together with examining the dancers and the cultural milieu out of which they had learned and practised these dances, gave me some access to the world that these dances referenced. The dances therefore were cultural embodiments of a way of life of a rural people at a particular place and time in their history. They also illustrated how these people conceptualised traditional dance and what was valued in its practice.

### **The Re-Contextualisation of Molyneaux Step Dances for Competitive Purposes**

During the 1970s, An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (the Irish Dancing Commission)<sup>iv</sup>, the largest international organisation for Irish competitive step dancing, programmed competitions for traditional solo set dancing. Solo set dances are specific percussive dances choreographed to particular pieces of music of the same name. They are usually in Jig (6/8) or Hornpipe (4/4; 12/8) time<sup>v</sup> and are either in the category of “traditional set dance” or “set dance”; the latter includes a larger selection of set dance choices and are new choreographies by teachers – these are considered by many dancers/teachers/adjudicators to be the most technically difficult and indeed the show-pieces of the Irish step dances. These set dances include Planxty Drury, Kilkenny Races and Rodney’s Glory<sup>vi</sup>. Solo set dances are generally divided into two major parts –Step and Set. The length of the step and set sections depend on the number of bars of each of these sections of the music. The Blackbird, for example, has Step: 7½ bars; and Set: 15 bars. Sets are therefore irregular in structure; irregular from the usual 8-bar step structure of Reels, Jigs, and Hornpipe (see Foley 2013).

The programming of four traditional set dances by An Coimisiún in the 1970s was an endeavour to revive solo traditional set dances since some members of the organisation at that time believed that the transmission and performance of these dances were on the decline.

Thus, four traditional set dances were selected by An Coimisiún to be performed by dancers in competition and by aspiring teachers in their teachers' examinations<sup>vii</sup>. These set dances included The Blackbird, St. Patrick's Day, The Garden of Daisies and the Job of Journeywork. A particular version of each of these four traditional set dances was selected, prescribed and institutionalised, omitting other versions of these solo set dances, and indeed other set dances practised in different areas of Ireland and its diaspora. These solo set dances were workshopped by particular teachers registered with An Coimisiún in specific locations in order for teachers to learn them to further transmit to their students, who in turn danced them in competition. Step dancers, teachers and adjudicators thus came to understand traditional solo set dancing within this limited, prescribed and institutionalised way. As I argued elsewhere (2007, [1988] 2012, 2013), these four set dances were presented as 'frozen in time' and indeed the notion of "tradition" was by extension perceived as frozen in time. I can recall one specific teacher saying

You cannot change or tamper with tradition. To do so is to disrespect the past and the dancing masters. (Anonymous circa 1985)

However, within traditional step dancing practice in North Kerry, there were different versions of solo set dances, and as mentioned above, individual step dancers varied and improvised dances in performance thus representing a practice that was dynamic and creative and not one that was overly prescribed or institutionalised. They were not "frozen in time" (Foley 2007).

In 2012, An Coimisiún changed the ruling on the traditional solo set dances in competition and allowed for different regional versions of the four traditional set dances to be performed. In addition, another three solo traditional set dances were added to the list of traditional set dances namely Jockey to the Fair, the King of the Fairies, and the Three Sea Captains. Since different versions of the set dances were now permissible in competition, one particular popular version of two of Molyneaux's solo set dances – the Blackbird and St. Patrick's Day, came to be introduced into the competitive arena of An Coimisiún (see Foley 2015b for performances of these solo set dances). This introduction was initiated by one teacher at one competition - the Mini Munsters held in Limerick in 2012.

The teacher, also a tutor at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, had witnessed students on the MA Irish Traditional Dance Performance programme perform repertoire by Molyneaux prior to the rule change by An

Coimisiún in 2012. As founding course director of the MA programme in 1999 (until 2014), I generally extended students understanding of repertoire and style in Irish traditional dance by encouraging them to embody regional or other individual dance styles, taught to them by exponents of this style; exponents of the Molyneaux style – including myself, were included in the tutors who taught at the Academy (see Foley 2012b). It was, therefore, of interest when a tutor of competitive step dancing at the Academy taught his daughter one of Molyneaux’s popular Blackbirds from North Kerry for competition within the organisation, An Coimisiún. She won the competition and thereafter Molyneaux’s material was in demand by teachers and dancers within An Coimisiún for competition.

Workshops in Ireland and abroad on the popular versions of Molyneaux’s Blackbird and St Patrick’s Day set dances followed. Indeed, I was invited to teach a workshop on Molyneaux’s Blackbird at the University of Limerick for a seminar entitled - *Head to Toe, Body, Heart & Soul*: a seminar examining the psychological, physiological and knowledge required in modern Irish Dancing. The seminar was organised by the Marie Duffy Foundation in association with the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, from 5th – 7th July 2013. On reflection, it is of interest to examine how I taught one of Molyneaux’s Blackbirds at this workshop and how the seminar delegates learned this choreographic material from me.

### **A Reflective Auto-ethnographic Account of Transmitting a Molyneaux Blackbird Set Dance**

The workshop I was leading on a Molyneaux Blackbird set dance was the practical dimension of a session on “Traditional Set Dance Workshop – Part 1” which also included a discussion on “What is Traditional Style? Recent Decisions regarding what is and is not allowed [by An Coimisiún]; and awareness of regional Variations”. The discussion and workshop were both scheduled from 10:50-12:00 on Saturday 6th July; the practical workshop would take place after the discussion.

The discussion led by senior Irish dance teachers within An Coimisiún was gauged towards competition, informing teachers and aspiring teachers of accurate and inaccurate ways of performing certain traditional movements such as “rocks”. “clicks” and “drums” (see Foley [1988] 2012). This was done in a didactic manner as in “dos” and don’ts”. The workshop led by me, and which followed the discussion, had little time for a deep immersion of a different step-dance style; we had 40 minutes. Neither was there time to discuss regional

variations (see above), as experienced by me in the field in North Kerry in the 1980s and as documented and examined by me in my doctoral research and later publication (see Foley [1988] 2012; 2007)

My process of teaching the Blackbird commenced with a short introduction to Molyneaux and the socio-historical background to his dance style in North Kerry including contexts of performance and transmission. I was aware of time limitations and the delegates' desire to physically learn a Molyneaux Blackbird set dance as an example of a regional style of step dancing, so after the short introduction, I danced the whole Blackbird set dance through to the accompaniment of recorded music of the Blackbird. I danced facing the class to give them an idea of the general style of the dance. Once completed, I turned off the recorded music and I turned my back to the class; this was how I was taught Irish dancing by my teacher, Peggy MacTeggart, and as others have also been taught. Turning my back to the class allowed them to follow more easily my movements as the right and left sides of our bodies were synchronised. Also, I did not use a mirror as I did not want the dancers to overly rely on the mirror and the visual sense. Rather, I wanted to encourage a combination of the visual, aural, and kinaesthetic senses, that is, a multi-sensory method of transmission.

My process of transmitting the Blackbird included dividing the set dance into its two primary sections: Step and Set. Taking the step part of the set dance first, I broke the dance down into small units of elements, cells, motifs and phrases (See Foley [1988] 2012). I sang the melodic and rhythmical structure of the tune to my own movement/s using mnemonic and specific stepping vocabulary to accompany my movements. I corporeally and sonically taught each movement – endeavouring to illustrate the interrelationship between music, rhythm and dance and the aesthetic embodied in it. I instructed the class, for example, to dance the selected movement phrases neatly, close to the floor, and to sense their body's connection to the floor; to sonically represent and sense how the rhythmic percussive movements sounded on the floor; to observe and feel the different textures and dynamics of each movement; to stylistically not bring their leg gestures up at the back - as is usual within competitive Irish step dancing; and to observe my loose but upright posture, and my arms held loosely by the sides of my body. I also informed the class that the dance was performed within a prescribed confined area of four-square feet, representing a close intimate space, unlike the formal and large staged platforms for An Coimisiún competitions. This notion of intimacy reinforced the sociality of its practice within its rural house-dance contextual setting (Foley 2012; 2013; 2015). In effect, I was proposing a multi-sensory method of transmission by drawing the

dancers' attention to somatic sensation and sensory awareness. This was supported and enhanced by historicising and contextualising the practice.

In teaching this workshop, I was aware that some of these delegates were already qualified Irish step dance teachers and adjudicators with An Coimisiún; others were aspiring teachers and adjudicators. They came from Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Scotland, Serbia, Spain, and the USA. In total there were 131 delegates registered at the seminar. These delegates participated to extend their knowledge – cognitively and corporeally, for teaching Irish step dancing for competition. The seminar focused on issues such as the psychological and physical preparation for competition, the benefits of good nutrition for dancers, working with children in a safe environment, preparation for aspiring teachers/adjudicators for the qualifying examinations with An Coimisiún, injury prevention, information around changes to the primary dance book for teachers and adjudicators of Irish dancing – *Ár Rincí Fóirne: Thirty Popular Figure Dances*, the history of Irish dancing, and business and legal affairs for the Irish dance school.

In my dance workshop all delegates attempted to learn the Blackbird corporeally by following and imitating my movements, particularly my foot movements. Coming to the end of the class, and taking advantage of available technology, most of them asked if they could use their mobile phones to video-record my dancing of the set dance. These teachers were interested in getting the correct sequence of movements so that they could continue to practice it when they returned to their homes and could further transmit it to their own students. I gave permission for them to record me dancing as I was aware that the recording might assist in reinforcing what had been learned in the class. I noticed, however, that they still danced in their trained competitive style of dancing with its technical and aesthetic demands; the nuance and style or groove of the Molyneaux practice of North Kerry was largely missing. Indeed, to deeply embody this style of dancing, more time would have had to be devoted to it, than what was allowed at the workshop. Indeed, deeper immersion over a longer period of time would undoubtedly have assisted in enhancing the study, analysis, and embodiment of this Blackbird set dance (see below). As Sklar states

until we attend to kinetic dynamics, the way vitality affects are organized in specific movement systems and gestures, we lack a crucial dimension in understanding the cultural construction of embodiment. (2008, 96)

So, when a traditional dance, such as Molyneaux's Blackbird, is re-contextualised, institutionalised and popularised for competitive purposes, what happens to it when it is performed by dancers who have spent years training and embodying a different dance aesthetic?

### **Product, Process, and Perceptions within An Coimisiún**

Irish competitive step dancers have trained for years within competition-oriented schools. They have competed frequently at regulated competitive events – *feiseanna* and *oireachtais* (see Foley 2013), and have gradually acquired a constructed, trained and institutionalized Irish dancing body. They have, thus, acquired a particular community habitus (Foley 2013) which embodies and expresses concepts such as uprightness, control, discipline, and virtuosity. The dance historian, Geraldine Morris states that ballet dancers are “balletically constructed individuals, with all that this involves physically, culturally and socially” (Morris 2003, 21). I would argue that the same applies to experienced Irish competitive step dancers who have trained for a long enough time to master the practice. Indeed, the anthropologist, Sally Anne Ness, speaks of symbolic processes which are essential to the learning of a dance form. She equates movement symbols to “action vocabulary” and states that

Performers embody these symbols as they study and gain expertise in that tradition. In the mastery of the technique, dancers learn to “come to terms” within their bodies so as to perform the form's action vocabulary articulately and consistently (Ness 2008, 11).

In the world of Irish competitive step dancing, those dancers who have mastered the Irish step dance form, have also “come to terms” within their bodies. They acquire particular understandings of their bodies through years of training and this institutionalised deep tissue training becomes embodied or “inscribed” into their bodies, once, as Ness suggests “the body's connective tissues themselves bear the evidence of that practice” (Ness 2008, 12). After years of training, Irish competitive step dancers bear the “evidence” of their practice – physically, culturally and socially, and they learn to exercise a particular way of seeing and assessing dance that is culturally constituted. According to Charles Keil (1985)

The presence of style indicates a strong community and intense sociability that has been given shape through time and control over collective feelings so powerful that any expressive innovator in the community will necessarily put his content into that shaping continuum and no other. (Keil 1985, 122)

I would similarly argue that when dances with different stylistic features are introduced to an existing style community, unless it is consciously taught differently, it will also fit into the style or shaping continuum of the existing style. I would therefore suggest that this is what I experienced in my workshop on the Blackbird, discussed above. Within the world of Irish competitive step dancing, very few dancers, teachers or adjudicators are aware of the Molyneaux style of dancing, its associations with North Kerry, and the line of itinerant dancing masters from the region. Therefore, when Molyneaux's Blackbird and St. Patrick's Day set dances were danced in An Coimisiún competitions, most of the dancers performed the Molyneaux material as they would any other step dance – that is in the style of step dancing that has been constructed, practiced and recognised by An Coimisiún as the current style of competitive Irish step dancing. This competitive style is termed *feis* style by dancers.

Concerning the performance and stylistic aesthetic of the Molyneaux Blackbird and St. Patrick's Day as danced in competition, one step dance teacher and adjudicator with An Coimisiún stated:

Molyneaux's Blackbird and St Patrick's Day are... known as the difficult traditional sets...Dancers, however, are laying it into the floor; it is over danced. The music is also being sacrificed and they are losing its musicality and the rhythm of the dance  
(Anonymous 2016)

According to another teacher and adjudicator:

They are on time but in a feis way. They are too sharp with it; the legs are brought up too high at the back; the dynamic of soft and strong is no longer there – they are pushing hard into the floor for competitive purposes; leg gestures are raised too high. Some movements like the box are not done accurately. (Anonymous 2016)

Although particular sequences of movements of the Molyneaux solo set dances are performed as they may have been within the living rural practice, the manner and style of their performance, are not executed in a similar way. This resonates with the words of the Japanese teacher, Tachibana Hiroyo (“Soke”) who states

Dance is not dance without presence – emotion, heart....Successfully executed dance steps in the correct form and order does not necessarily produce good dance (in Hahn 2007, 142)

Thus, “good dance” within the context of the Molyneaux tradition, may not be considered “good dance” within the context of An Coimisiún competitions, and vice versa.

According to another teacher within An Coimisiún, it is not surprising that dancers have not embodied the stylistic characteristics of the Molyneaux material since some world champion competitive step dancers, who have no knowledge of the Molyneaux tradition, are teaching and workshopping the Molyneaux sets to competitive step dancers in different parts of the world. He stated:

Many of the teachers and adjudicators do not know the Molyneaux style of dancing and although it is great to see these sets being danced in competition, the style is not taken seriously. They’re not doing it right. They don’t have the style. Some of them are doing it in a very technical way. The flow of it is gone. Dancers are finding it difficult to learn and so are teachers. They expect to learn it quickly, but you have to spend time getting the style. (Anonymous 2016)

Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, ethnochoreologist and dance teacher further states

The Molyneaux set dances, in particular Saint Patrick’s Day and the Blackbird are now part of the repertoire performed by CLRG dancers at competitions throughout the world. Elements of Molyneaux are also included in a version of the Jockey to the Fair introduced recently to the Feis scene. While dancers are executing the steps in terms of material, many champion dancers are unaware that the Feis style is far removed from the close to the floor style associated with the dancers in North Kerry. The over crossing, verticality and strict posture which are features of many competitive dance performances do not compliment the relaxed style of original exponents of these Kerry dances. Thus, while the globalisation of the dances has greatly enhanced the Feis repertoire and exposed the style and steps to dancers worldwide, it does deviate considerably from the relaxed musical dance style embodied by Molyneaux and his contemporaries. It should perhaps be deemed *Now Molyneaux* rather than *Not Molyneaux*. (Ní Bhriain 2017)

This notion of ‘steps’ and material sees the set dances as “objects”. According to Zukerkandl (1958), this view tends to "reach through the sensation to an object" (Zukerkandl in Stoller 1984, 560) when we perceive things, instead of heeding the way the sensations present themselves to consciousness, or attending to the differences between sensations in different modalities (see also Howes 1991)

Within the world of Irish competitive step dancing, competition is a primary context for performance. Teachers teach and students learn dance material specific for competition; according to some teachers there is little time outside of the demanding commitments of competition for aspiring world champion dancers to study other styles of step dancing. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that Irish step dancers within the competitive arena of An Coimisiún dance the Molyneaux step dances within their trained competitive style of dancing, appearing to pay little heed to the regional stylistic characteristics or aesthetic values inherent within its practice. This, however, is not due to their inability to do so, but because they have not been taught to stylistically dance differently from their trained competitive style of dancing. In the classroom, time is not given to training dancers in executing different stylistic features of regional step dancing styles. Within the programme structures of step dancing competitions, recognition and performance of diverse regional step dance styles is not a requirement.

From my research into traditional step dancing in North Kerry in the 1980s, individual dancers of the Molyneaux style improvised and varied step dances and set dances according to the music, the musician, the context, or how they as dancers actually felt on a particular occasion (Foley 2007, 2013). Within competitive culture, step dancers are not expected to individually improvise or vary step dances and, therefore, although An Coimisiún allows for different regional versions of traditional solo set dances to be performed in competition, an examination of the performance of Molyneaux's set dances in competition, indicates that its unique style of performance and the aesthetic values and characteristics of its practice, are not considered. Step dancers continue to dance within their trained competitive manner and community *habitus* (Foley 2013). Indeed, since most of the teachers, adjudicators and competitive step dancers do not know who Molyneaux was or where he came from, some see the style as “a new style of Irish dancing”. Also, some adjudicators have informed me that they feel uncomfortable adjudicating the Molyneaux set dances as they are aware of their lack of knowledge of its aesthetic practice.

Jeremiah Molyneaux, when alive, never joined An Coimisiún but continued to teach step dancing independently in North Kerry (see Foley 2013). Therefore, although it may be flattering to Molyneaux and his choreographic competence that his dances are now being performed in many different parts of the world – through competition culture, one might ask: Are his dances and their aesthetic values being “taken seriously”, as one teacher stated above? Or, are they simply, as another dance teacher commented, additional set-dance material for an organisation that promotes competition but who have not formally or

systematically collected solo traditional step or set dances? This gives rise to questions relating to power and responsibility. Should An Coimisiún take regional styles of step dancing more seriously? And if so, what would that mean?

### **Somatic Sensation, Vitality Profiles, and Multisensory Methods of Transmission**

According to Deidre Sklar (2008) somatic sensation encompasses “all proprioceptive awareness, including for example, touch, movement, balance, pressure, tension, and temperature” (Sklar 2008, 104). Moving from Howes “sensory profiles”, Sklar suggests that we attend to “vitality profiles’ which she defines as

The dynamic factors of rhythm, speed, and duration; force; degree of muscular tension or relaxation; and degree of giving in to or resisting gravity (weightiness and lightness) encode cultural dispositions as much as the shapes and spatial patterns of movement do. (2008, 96).

She argues that

sensory and vitality profiles are central not only to the cultural organization of movement but also to cultural organization of thinking itself. (Sklar 2008, 98)

Cynthia Cohen Bull (1997) has contended that certain senses are given prominence within particular places or cultures. She has therefore advocated for scholars to investigate what she calls “sensory profiles”. But how are these sensory profiles made manifest within particular dance practices and their systems of transmission?

In “Sense, Meaning and Perception in Three Dance Culture”, Bull (1997) looks at sensory profiles within the dance fields of ballet, contact improvisation and Ghanaian dance. She argues that “Ballet practice and performance hone visual sensibility” (1997, 282); that “Contact improvisation offers an almost opposite set of experiences but rather than being objectified as viewed from the outside, the body ideally becomes the subject of experience from the inside...[and] seeks to create a sensitivity to touch and to inner sensation” (1997, 283); and that Ghanaian dance places “the emphasis of their movement...in rhythmic, dynamic action rather than on achievement of a shape or line as in ballet” (1997, 280-291). Bull (1997) and Sklar (2008) argue for scholars to examine sensory and vitality profiles to enhance understandings of cultural constructions of embodiment.

Following Sklar, I would likewise argue that Irish competitive dance teachers might benefit from training in, and engaging with, somatic sensation and cultural constructions of sensory and vitality profiles to assist in the transmission of different dance styles or practices, including the Molyneaux style of step dancing. This training would assist Irish dance teachers in understanding different experiences or ways of embodying and doing Irish dancing; and would contribute to the transmission of different styles or grooves of step dancing.

The use of proprioceptive multisensory modes of transmission has also been argued by other scholars. In her article ‘Performing the (sound)world’, Susan Smith (2009) examines “the possibility of learning through listening” (2009, 615). She states

... it is about the way space is made through sound as well as sight. Like the performances they draw from, the conclusions are incomplete. But they do confirm the importance of imagining - of creating, of engaging with - a world in the doing, shaped by senses other than sight (2009, 615).

Within the field of competitive Irish step dancing, the visual, sonic and kinaesthetic senses are paramount but with the body viewed and assessed from the outside for adjudication purposes. In an earlier work (2013) I state

Step dance competitions are by their very nature, a ‘field of comparison’. Dancers are compared and differentiated by adjudicators, teachers and dancers themselves. Their performance on the day is measured against others, and in accordance with Foucault, the ‘art of punishment’ measures ‘in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of values and abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals. It introduces through this ‘value-giving’ measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved’ (Foley 2013, 191)

Thus within the competitive context, dance performances on stage are measured according to specific criteria – posture, time, step, and execution (see Foley 2010). And although indigenous rural communities - such as those in North Kerry, also measured the traditional dance practices of their localities, different attributes were sought. Dancers, as mentioned above in North Kerry, often danced within intimate community contexts with lowered eyes, emphasising an internalisation or an inner sensation and endeavoured to express individual identities through improvisation and personal and interpersonal variations in their dancing (see Foley 2013, 2015). I therefore argue that different constructions of embodiment are utilised in the two step-dance practices – the *feis* style of An Coimisiún and the Molyneaux

style.

The practice of regional dance styles prompts "...the relation of sensation to emplacement." (Feld and Basso, 11). As we have discussed, different senses are given prominence within particular places or cultures and are made manifest within particular dance practices and their systems of transmission. Thus, utilizing a proprioceptive multisensory perspective, Irish step dancers could be assisted to access and embody a different dance style. For example, they might be exposed to and directed to critically listen to different types of Irish traditional music in order to develop an individual "feel" or relationship with different Irish dance music genre. They might critically engage in discussion and examination of different styles of Irish dancing – using both live and audio-visual performances. They might visually and kinesthetically embody different dance styles by learning from dancers who know and have experience of dancing in this style and be encouraged to practise the nuances of the style to understand concepts such as improvisation and personal and interpersonal variations within a practice. Also, they might be instructed to attempt to sense the textures and dynamics of movements inherent in its practice through a play with rhythmic structures and dance phrases. Thus, from a multisensory perspective, teachers might communicate how the rhythm of a dance is constructed and what force is applied to embody the particular 'feel' and articulation of the rhythm and the gestures utilized to create this rhythm? Also, they might look at ways of holding the body – strong/weak verticality.

The sociologist, Paul Ricoeur (1978) proposed, a 'thinking sensing feeling model' for changing our way of looking at things and perceiving the world. Sklar (2000) recasts the phrase "somatic modes of attention" (Csordas 1993,138) to develop "a method of attending to one's own and others' movement with proprioceptive awareness (2010). My fieldwork in North Kerry during the 1980s allowed me to develop a kinesthetic sense of the Molyneaux step dances (Foley 2013). Through observing, talking, note –taking, learning, embodying, sensing, collecting, recording and analysing the Molyneaux step dances in North Kerry over a substantial period of time (1983-1988), I gained an understanding of the cultural construction of embodiment made manifest in the Molyneaux step dances. It was through the embodiment of the Molyneaux step dances that I was presented with the opportunity to change my way of looking at Irish dancing and perceiving the world from a different perspective. The Molyneaux dance style came to speak to me of North Kerry and placed the dancing in North Kerry (Foley 2013).

I would therefore argue for somatic sensation - "a thinking sensing feeling model", combined with sensory and vitality profiles and proprioceptive multi-sensory methods of

transmission to assist teachers in understanding and transmitting different constructions of embodiment for effective transmission of dance practices outside their own practice of mastery.

In addition, with intensive engagement with the practice of competitive Irish dancing, few teachers, adjudicators or students, if any, read existing literature on Irish dancing including literature on the Molyneaux style of dancing<sup>viii</sup>. Such engagement might assist in historicising and contextualising Irish dancing as well as the different practices that exist in the field of practice for further historical, cultural and aesthetic understanding (Foley 2013). Indeed, *An Coimisiún*, might well consider introducing such study into its examinations for teachers and adjudicators.

As different stylistic forms of step dance are located in place and time, where particular value systems and sensorial profiles are embodied, it might seem reasonable that An Coimisiún and its teachers and adjudicators would assume the responsibility of encouraging the transmission of the Molyneaux set dances in a manner that respects stylistic differences by encouraging a training in proprioception, somatic sensation and awareness and a familiarisation with relevant literature contextualising their dance practice and in particular in this case, the Molyneaux traditional step-dance practice of North Kerry.

## **Conclusion**

Different practices embody particular sensorial and stylistic values which are culturally constructed and inscribed on dancers' bodies. Thus, focusing on aspects of style and training, I have argued in this paper that Irish competitive step dancers, teachers and adjudicators have been challenged by the introduction of dances –the Molyneaux traditional set dances, which embody different sensorial and stylistic values to the *feis* practice in which they have been trained. Thus, when versions of Molyneaux's solo set dances were re-contextualized outside of their original rural context of practice, they were re-shaped by the new context of competition and by an established competitive aesthetic; new meaning was thus ascribed to the dances. The change of context provided a potential opportunity and challenge for teachers and adjudicators to extend their methods of transmitting step dance practices with different stylistic parameters and aesthetic values.

I argued that “a thinking sensing feeling model” focusing on somatic sensation and awareness and sensory and vitality profiles would assist Irish dance teachers in transmitting different constructions of embodiment - both within and outside their own practice of

mastery. A proprioceptive and multi-sensory mode of training over time, I argued, would contribute to dancers' abilities to develop skills in their acquisition of different stylistic and aesthetic value systems within the broader field of step dancing in Ireland. Thus, not only would an emphasis be placed on *what* is being danced but also on *how* it is being danced. I also suggested that teachers, adjudicators and step dancers might also benefit from theoretical engagement with relevant literature in Irish dance studies to enhance their knowledge of the histories and cultures out of which the different dance practices they endeavour to embody and perform have emerged. This proposed model – proprioception, somatic sensation and awareness, and familiarity with relevant literature, might be of benefit to those involved in dance transmission in the Irish dance world, but it might also be applied to the transmission of other dance practices where an aesthetic and stylistic embodiment and understanding is important to a dance's execution.

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i An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ICTM's 29<sup>th</sup> Symposium of the Study Group on Ethnochoreology, Graz, Austria, 2016.

ii See Foley (2012c; 2013; 2014) for a more in-depth discussion and examination of the collecting and fieldwork process and of the itinerant dancing masters of North Kerry and the professional dancing masters of continental Europe.

iii Other itinerant dancing masters in this lineage included Tom Moore or Múirín as he was locally known, and Nedín Batt Walsh (see Foley [1988] 2012, 2013);

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- iv From hereonin I will refer to this organisation as *An Coimisiún*. *An Coimisiún* was established in Ireland in 1930 under the auspices of the Gaelic League, a cultural nationalist movement which was established in 1893 to promote the Irish language and Irish culture (see Foley 2001, [1988] 2012, 2013).
- v See Foley ([1988] 2012).
- vi For a more complete list of solo set dances as taught within *An Coimisiún* [see Foley 2013: 235-236].
- vii In 1943, *An Coimisiún* introduced an official examination for aspiring teachers and adjudicators of Irish step dancing. Success in these examinations certified teachers (TCRG) and adjudicators (ADCRG) to teach and/or adjudicate within the organization (see Foley 2013).
- viii For example, Brennan 1999; Cullinane 2003; Flanagan 2009; Foley 2001, [1988] 2012, 2013, 2015; Hall 2004; King 2018; MacCafferty 2008; Ni Bhriain and McCabe 2018; Wulff 2007.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Research in Dance Education*, 25 June, 2020

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14647893.2020.1776242>