ON THE HEELS OF *RIVERDANCE*: CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH STEP DANCE

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BY

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DEDICATION

For my giving mother, Eileen, who taught me how to teach my children and my students.

For my devoted father, James, who brought me to Ireland to dance.

For my loving husband, David, and our precious children—
Cavan, Eamonn, Ettamoya, Manus Owen, and B. Byrne.

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ABSTRACT

DARRAH CARR

ON THE HEELS OF *RIVERDANCE*: CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESS IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH STEP DANCE

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This qualitative research study analyzes a groundswell of choreographic activity in contemporary Irish step dance in a post-*Riverdance* climate. Through case study methodology, I investigate the choreographic processes of Irish-born choreographer Breandán de Gallaí and first-generation Irish American choreographer Seán Curran. I also conduct practice-led research into my own choreographic process as an American choreographer of Irish descent. Data collection procedures include interviews with artists, participant observation during rehearsals and performances, and analysis of rehearsal journals and videos.

I examine three new works against the historical backdrop of the Gaelic revival's insular nationalism and *Riverdance*'s high-octane multiculturalism—both were revolutionary moments for Irish step dance, but neither satisfy our choreographic concerns. In contrast, we bring Irish step dance choreography to the concert dance stage. Through choreographic processes that embrace improvisation, task-based movement generation, and inspiration from other dance forms, we expand both the aesthetic of Irish step dance and conventional notions of choreography. Our choreographic interventions can be distilled in three words: *expression*, *hybridity*, and *fusion*.

In advocating for practice-led research, this dissertation expands the current discourse on choreographic practice to include Irish step dance. This study contributes to the Irish dance community, to the larger field of Irish Studies, and to the much wider circle of dance scholarship. The issues raised—individual agency, cultural identity, and hybridization—are applicable across many disciplines. By introducing the dance company model to Irish step dance, we encourage practitioners of ballet, modern, and postmodern dance to reevaluate binary definitions of "world dance" and "Western dance."

This dissertation asserts that choreographic process in contemporary Irish step dance is a practice of rewriting history through the body. This is not only a highly political act but also a deeply personal one. The data reveal that active participation in choreographic process moves beyond aesthetics and into identity politics. Having a generative role in rehearsal enables artists to examine what it means for them be an Irish, Irish American, or American Irish step dancer.

Areas for future research include a cross-cultural comparison of Irish and Indian dance and an investigation of Irish step dance pedagogy.

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CHAPTER I

SETTING THE STAGE

I am of Ireland

And of the holy land of Ireland

Good sir I pray of ye

Come dance with me

In Ireland

—"Ich am of Irlaunde" ["I Am of Ireland"], fourteenth century

When perusing the dance listings in the fall of 2011, Irish step dance fans may have been pleasantly surprised to discover that five new productions directed by Irish and Irish American choreographers of international stature were slated for performances in New York City. The groundswell of choreographic activity in Irish step dance included former *Riverdance* principal Breandán de Gallaí's New York premiere of his evening-length show *Noċtú* at the Irish Repertory Theatre that September. The headline of *New York Times* critic Brian Seibert's review described the essence of the work as "tradition stripped down and set to a new tune." Megin Jimenez of *nytheatre.com* noted, "In one unconventional number, tango music works surprisingly well in showcasing the potential for masculine force within the dance, as well as its ability, like tap dance, to tease infinite rhythms out of any beat. Most unique are the pieces danced barefoot." Meanwhile, another former *Riverdance* star, Colin Dunne, gave the New York premiere of his first

full-length solo production, *Out of Time*, at the Baryshnikov Arts Center in October. As described by Carrie Seidman, writing in the *Herald Tribune*, "The again barefoot Dunne runs in a circle around the stage, then hops up and down with his arms swinging as if to break free from every bodily restriction that has been imposed upon him." Additional New York premieres in 2011 included Máire Clerkin's *The Bad Arm: Confessions of a Dodgy Irish Dancer*, which was showcased during the New York International Fringe Festival in August, and *Every Little Step . . . The Rhythm of Hope*, a collaboration by Dance Theatre of Ireland and Soul Steps at Joyce SoHo in November. Meanwhile, my own company, Darrah Carr Dance, premiered *Dingle Diwali*, a work by our guest choreographer Seán Curran that juxtaposes Irish step dance percussion with vocalizations by British Indian singer Sheila Chandra, in November at New York City's Irish Arts Center. Certainly, these are not the only examples of choreographic work related to Irish step dance that have premiered in recent years, but their proximity to each other in both time and place is indicative of a shift in the field of Irish step dance.

In this dissertation, I attribute such new directions in contemporary Irish step dance choreography to what I call a "post-*Riverdance* climate" and analyze their implications not only for Irish step dancers but also for the broader dance community. My research focuses on the choreographic process of three of the choreographers involved in premieres in the fall of 2011: Seán Curran, Breandán de Gallaí, and myself. Each of us has been rooted within the framework of Irish step dance since childhood, yet we allow improvisation, experimentation, and inspiration from other forms of dance and music to push against the boundaries of tradition and to explore the infinite possibilities

that arise when making dances. I regard the three of us as among a growing number of choreographers who are creating new visions of Irish step dance in a post-*Riverdance* climate.

During the past several years, original *Riverdance* female lead dancer Jean Butler has premiered several new solo works in both Dublin and New York City, while Boston-based choreographer Kieran Jordan and Belfast-based dance maker Bridget Madden have each choreographed works that experiment with Irish step dance vocabulary. During the past decade, numerous dancers have retired from touring with *Riverdance*, yet many of them maintain an interest in performance and in exploring new approaches to Irish step dance choreography. A variety of groups founded by former *Riverdance* members, troupes such as Hammerstep (Garrett Coleman and Jason Oremus), Fusion Fighters (Chris Naish), and Prodijig (Alan Kenefick), have brought their unique styles of Irish step dance to new audiences through the deft use of social media, flash mobs, and television appearances on popular shows such as *America's Got Talent* and *Got to Dance*. Also noteworthy are the progressive Irish step dance works of Chicago-based Mark Howard and his Trinity Irish Dance Company, which was founded in 1990.

Background

Riverdance has affected each of the aforementioned Irish step dance choreographers to greater and lesser degrees. Yet it would be virtually impossible to discuss new choreographic work in Irish step dance without acknowledging the backdrop of such a massive commercial phenomenon. Since it leapt onto the world stage over twenty years ago, *Riverdance* has been seen live by over twenty-five million people

throughout forty-six countries and been viewed by a worldwide television audience in excess of two billion people. Although Irish step dance had long been executed in social settings and on competition stages during cultural festivals, it had never before been taken so far from its original participatory context and placed on the global stage as a professional performance. The now iconic line of Irish step dancers pounding out rhythms in perfect unison, as well as the inclusion of other percussive forms such as flamenco and tap, gave *Riverdance* widespread appeal as it toured continuously across four continents.

The remarkable success of *Riverdance* coincided with a period of spectacular growth in the Irish economy, which was dubbed the "Celtic Tiger." *Riverdance* created a professional, multicultural performance context for Irish step dancers at the same time that this economic climate enabled the necessary arts funding for the number of small contemporary dance companies to increase in Ireland. Across the globe, Irish step dance reached beyond its customary home in diasporic communities and became a mainstream dance form that was taught alongside ballet, tap, and jazz in recreational dance studios. Meanwhile, aspiring dancers around the world learned to Irish step dance from *Riverdance* and other videos available on YouTube. Back home in Ireland, the establishment of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick in 1994 by composer and ethnomusicologist Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin gave Irish music and dance a permanent home in academia. With master's programs in Irish traditional dance performance and ethnochoreology directed by Catherine Foley, as well as a master's program in contemporary dance performance directed by Mary Nunan, the

Irish World Academy of Music and Dance provides fertile ground for choreographic experimentation and cross-fertilization. Their recently launched PhD program in arts practice further supports the intersection of dance theory and practice. The establishment of Dance Research Forum Ireland and the National Dance Archive of Ireland promote these aims as well.

Perhaps most important for Irish dancers themselves, *Riverdance* was instrumental in establishing a professional performance context for Irish dance. The *Riverdance* website is rich with statistics such as that over the course of fifteen years, the show has employed some fifteen hundred Irish dancers who otherwise would have faced two choices: retire or open an Irish dance school and train dancers for competition.

The recontextualization of Irish step dance—be it through global performance, mainstream dance studio instruction, the Internet, or academia—has inspired a growing number of choreographers in Ireland and throughout the Irish diaspora to experiment with Irish step dance vocabulary and to present their results in performance contexts that feature professional dancers and ticketed public audiences (rather than in social or competitive contexts that feature recreational dancers or dance students).

I believe that the work of these choreographers is the cultural legacy of *Riverdance*, in that their performances further legitimize Irish step dance as a professional career path. At the same time, their performances raise questions about choreographic process and the preservation of cultural legacy within the broader Irish step dance community, given that each of the new productions is a clear departure from

the image of Irish step dance that was made famous by *Riverdance*—namely, a long line of dancers moving in rhythmic unison.

Prior to *Riverdance*, the process of composing an Irish step dance was dictated by the regulations of the dominant competition circuit. Charged with safeguarding the now three-hundred-year-old traditions of Ireland's traveling dance masters and emboldened by the nationalist fervor that accompanied the Gaelic revival of the 1890s, teachers and adjudicators have monitored the rate of change in Irish step dance choreography over the past one hundred years by rewarding recognizable compositions and disqualifying those that exceeded the boundaries of the art form's codified movement vocabulary. The absorption of new choreography thus happens gradually and practitioners of Irish step dance often perceive their dances as belonging to an unbroken tradition—albeit one that has evolved dramatically over time. Indeed, the very nature of competition ensures, somewhat paradoxically, that a tradition of innovation exists within Irish step dance as competitors incite each other to greater and greater levels of virtuosity. In many ways, the competition circuit set the stage for *Riverdance* by providing a seemingly endless supply of highly trained dancers who literally jumped at the opportunity to perform.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, the work of the choreographers mentioned above exemplifies an approach to Irish step dance choreography that differs from what is typically found in the competition circuit and thus indicates a new direction for the field in a post-*Riverdance* climate. Today, Irish step dance choreographers are creating new works whose difference from *Riverdance*, or from the competitive Irish step dance circuit, can be immediately perceived. Examples of these changes include sustained

choreographed sequences for the arms, the use of the floor as an extension of the dancer's kinesphere, and an exploration of partnering (in an art form that is best known for having its dancers' arms pinned to their sides). My research investigates the choreographic process of several of today's artists and examines how they use the synergies of experimentation and tradition when working with Irish step dance vocabulary.

Research Focus

Choosing from among the wide variety of choreographers mentioned earlier, I determined to examine my own process, as well as the work of Seán Curran and Breandán de Gallaí, for several reasons. At first glance, our choreographic processes are similar in that we are all focused on making work for dance companies or ensembles. Although Aoife McGrath has examined the solo performances of Jean Butler and Colin Dunne in her incisive text *Dance Theatre in Ireland: Revolutionary Moves*, a thorough discussion of a cross-section of new ensemble choreography has yet to be had. Furthermore, Curran, de Gallaí, and I are primarily (though not exclusively) interested in making work for similar venues, namely, concert dance contexts. For the sake of clarity, I define my research area as concert dance and differentiate it from both competitive dance and commercial dance. Within the Irish step dance community, concert dance contexts are typically populated by professional dancers, whereas competitive dance is primarily geared toward dance students. When surveying the Irish step dance landscape, one can describe concert dance as being concerned with the continual creation of new work, as opposed to the perfection of several competitive routines that display specific skill sets. Finally, concert dance is performed before an open, public audience, whereas competitive

dance is performed for a private audience composed of Irish step dance students, parents, and teachers.

In terms of differentiating concert dance from commercial dance in the Irish step dance community, I again assert that concert dance is concerned with the continual creation of new work, whereas commercial dance tours the same finished product for an indefinite amount of time. This can be seen in the case of *Riverdance*'s ongoing twenty-year tour of what is both essentially and intentionally the same production (periodic updates to costumes, set design, and select pieces of choreography notwithstanding). Concert dance often features several pieces from a dance company's repertory in a given evening, whereas commercial Irish step dance typically features one production that is usually several hours long. Finally, concert dance tends to be performed in small and midsize theaters, while commercial dance is typically performed in very large venues (a notable example is *Lord of the Dance*, which was created by Michael Flatley, the original male lead of *Riverdance*, and was geared toward venues such as New York City's Madison Square Garden).

In addition to our shared interest in ensemble choreography and concert dance venues, Curran, de Gallaí, and I all participated in Irish step dance competitions as children. Nevertheless, our ensuing professional careers have been extremely diverse. Likewise, our family backgrounds make for an interesting comparison. De Gallaí is a native Irish speaker and was born and raised in Gweedore, County Donegal, Ireland. Curran is a first-generation Irish American from Boston, Massachusetts. His father was born in County Kerry and raised in Crosshaven, County Cork, and his mother was born

and raised in Ballenegare, County Roscommon. And I am an American of Irish descent who discovered a connection to my heritage through Irish step dance lessons as a child in Toledo, Ohio.

A mixture of personal and professional similarities and differences has obviously shaped who we are as people and as artists—defining our personal worldviews and our individual aesthetics. Laying our three case studies side by side demonstrates the breadth of artistic voices working in Irish step dance today and reveals the ways in which individual choreographers are addressing thorny issues of cultural identity, hybridization of dance forms, and the transmission of dance knowledge, as Irish step dance choreography moves from a strictly regulated competitive scene to a more open and experimental performance context.

Definition of Terms

As indicated by the parameters outlined above, embarking upon any research project is always a process of selection—of inclusion and exclusion. The inevitability of that fact makes clarity of purpose essential. To that end, I wish to further delineate the terms of this dissertation. The focus of my research is Irish step dance, a style that descended from the step dance traditions of traveling dance masters who toured the Irish countryside beginning in the late 1700s. During the Gaelic revival of the 1890s, many (but not all) of these step dance traditions were appropriated by Irish nationalists and were used to construct an Irish cultural identity that was separate and distinct from that of the English colonizer. The carefully crafted Irish cultural identity was then disseminated through widespread competitions and continual waves of emigration. Competitions, in

turn, led to increased virtuosity and, as noted above, ultimately set the stage for commercial productions such as *Riverdance.* The designation *Irish step dance* in this dissertation references the form's deliberate historical role in crafting an Irish cultural identity and distinguishes the form from other styles of dance that were excluded from the Gaelic revivalist project, among them some regional styles of step dance (often referred to as "old style" step dance in contrast to the "competition style" or "modern style" that developed as a result of the revivalist project); *sean-nós* dance (a solo improvisational form); and set dance (a group dance descended from the French "set of quadrilles"). My use of the term *Irish step dance* is also meant to distinguish the form in question from the much broader category of *Irish dances* that also spread through emigration and contributed to the development of tap dance and to the American vaudeville stage. Throughout this dissertation, the term *Irish step dance* refers strictly to the style that was appropriated by Irish nationalists, spread through competitions, and recognized globally as *Riverdance*. The phrase *Irish dance,* however, is used as an umbrella term that can encompass all the styles described above, if not more.

At times, I refer to the choreographic work of the artists featured in this dissertation as "contemporary" Irish step dance. By *contemporary*, I am referring to new Irish step dance choreography that has been performed in concert dance settings during the post-*Riverdance* climate; and I mean contemporaneous, or occurring in a time frame that is closely connected to the present day. I do not mean the style of contemporary dance that combines elements of modern, jazz, lyrical, and ballet and that is frequently seen on popular television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*.

Irish Dance Studies

In the nascent, but flourishing, field of Irish dance studies, critical research has already been carried out in many areas. Helen Brennan's *The Story of Irish Dance*, Helena Wulff's *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland*, and John Cullinane's numerous historiographies document the manner in which religion joined forces with nationalism to ban what was regarded as the foreign and scandalous practice of set dancing (which involved partners holding each other in a tight embrace) and to promote the newly developed form of *céilí* dancing in its place. Martha Robb's *Irish Dancing Costume* discusses the advent of competition in Irish dance as revivalists strove to increase public interest in their cultural activities. Robb details the development of a national Irish dance costume covered with embroidered Celtic knot-work patterns that were meant to allude to Ireland's glorious Celtic past (pre-British occupation). Frank Hall's *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty* examines the changes in Irish dance technique brought about by the competition circuit from an anthropological viewpoint, while J'aime Morrison's "Dancing between Decks: Choreographies of Transition during Irish Migrations to America" and Marion Casey's "Before *Riverdance*: A Brief History of Irish Step Dancing in America" document the spread of Irish dance through successive waves of Irish emigration. These texts provide insight into the numerous ways in which religion, nationalism, and emigration affected the form, function, and context of Irish dance and led to the invention of new traditions.

Catherine Foley's text *Irish Traditional Step Dancing in North Kerry: A Contextual and Structural Analysis* provides a detailed ethnographic account of an

important regional step dance style. Meanwhile, her *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* traces the evolution of step dance from the royal courts of France to the homes of North Kerry to the stage of Siamsa Tire, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland. Foley's research highlights the contributions of individual choreographers to the form and refutes any suggestion that traditional step dances are stagnant or lacking creative input. In a related vein, Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain's research focuses on choreographic processes in competitive Irish step dance and illuminates the avenues for creativity within a bounded system.

Nearly one hundred years after the Gaelic revival, *Riverdance* transformed Irish step dance into a global phenomenon. In *The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities, 1900-2000*, Barbara O'Connor traces the changing sociopolitical impact of Irish step dance from the first Gaelic League céilí in 1897 to the premiere of *Riverdance* in 1994. In many ways, the commercial production of *Riverdance* reversed the previous effects of religion, emigration, and nationalism on Irish dance. In *The Riverdance Phenomenon*, Barra Ó Cinnéide describes how the show's premiere coincided with spectacular growth in the Irish economy. As Ireland asserted its position in the global economy, *Riverdance* became a symbol of its success on the world stage. Critics such as Sonia Humphrey and Cathy Hainer deemed the show "sexy" and noted that it was a far cry from the parochial church hall where céilís were held during the Gaelic revival. *Riverdance*'s theme of returning to the homeland reflected the fact that Ireland's role as an emigrant nation changed as a result of the Celtic Tiger economy. Many young people were able to find work at home and thousands who had left returned to Ireland. In

"Stepping into Footprints: Traditions and the Globalization of Irish Dance," Michael Seaver explores the impact of reverse emigration in Irish dance, while critics too numerous to mention have commented on the influence of *Riverdance.*

Looking beyond Irish step dance, Aoife McGrath and Bernadette Sweeney have examined the dancing body in contemporary Irish theater, while Anna Mackey and Victoria O'Brien have researched the history of Irish ballet. Deirdre Mulrooney's seminal text *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* covers a wide range of dance genres in Ireland and includes writings by choreographers such as Jean Butler, Colin Dunne, and Breandán de Gallaí, which explore the choreographic process in the artists' own words.

A review of the existing literature reveals that important scholarly attention has been paid to regional step dance styles, to Irish step dance competitions, to productions such as *Riverdance* whose choreography does not change from performance to performance, and to Irish contemporary dance theater. Nevertheless, an analysis of the work of several artists whose ensemble choreography is destined for concert dance venues (not necessarily connected to theater productions but, rather, focused on dance for dance's sake) has yet to be conducted. This dissertation addresses the gap and will make an important contribution to the Irish dance community, to the larger field of Irish studies, and to the much wider domain of dance scholarship.

Irish Dance in Academia

Indeed, Irish step dance could use more champions in academia. The art form currently occupies a curious position as simultaneously a "Western dance" form and a

"world dance" form—although it is not heartily embraced by either camp. Foley's *Step Dancing in Ireland*, mentioned earlier, clearly traces the trajectory of Irish step dance from French courts to Irish cottages—at the westernmost edge of Europe. Hence, it is a Western dance form. Nevertheless, Irish step dance is not often recognized as being physically or historically related to ballet, nor is it awarded the same prestige. At the same time, the machinations of the Gaelic revivalists effectively co-opted what could have become Ireland's own classical dance form. As Dáithi Ó Mir writes in the preface to *ModERIN: Contemporary Irish Dance Works; Darrah Carr Dance*, a publication released in the fall of 2013 upon the occasion of my company's fifteenth anniversary, "What was in actuality a classical dance form was renamed as a generic folk practice due to the political exigencies of the Irish cultural revival agenda*:* a classical dance form was purposely reclassified as folk dance" (x).[i] As such, Irish step dance currently languishes in the poorly named "world dance" category alongside practitioners of Bharata natyam, flamenco, Kabuki, and myriad other dance forms that have little in common aside from the fact that they have all been positioned as being "other" from "Ballet, of course, but also Modern, Postmodern, and above all, Choreography," as Marta Elena Savigliano asserts in the anthology *Worlding Dance.* Savigliano interrogates the term *world dance* and asks, "'World dancer,' anyone? Let me rephrase: do any dancers, whether in Dance or out there in the world, identify as a *world dancer*? I haven't located a single one, not yet" (179). Savigliano's essay questions the prevailing assumption in university dance departments, at dance festivals, and at concert dance venues that only forms such as ballet, modern, and postmodern use the gifts of individual choreographers—the

implication being that "world dances" simply spring, fully formed, from a uniform "folk."

Indeed, the history of Irish step dance has a long lineage of individual choreographers far beyond the three artists who compose the bulk of my dissertation research. At the same time, the individual authors of numerous Irish step dances have been lost to time. As a result, there are multiple solo step dances—known as "traditional set dances"—whose choreography and music are "set" and maintained faithfully. Examples of traditional solo set dances include Saint Patrick's Day, the Blackbird, and Garden of Daisies. The umbrella of Irish dance also encompasses a wide variety of group set dances that are descended from the French set of quadrilles. In this instance, the term *set* refers to the group of eight people who participate in these dances, although the choreography itself is also "set," or predetermined. Many regions in Ireland are home to a distinctive set dance, and a given sequence of choreography is often identified by place-name. Examples of group set dances include the Aran Set, the South Galway Set, and the Corofin Plain Set. The close association of geographic place and choreographic sequence gives a sense of collective, rather than individual, authorship to many set dances (there are, of course, exceptions, such as the Sionna Set choreographed by Catherine Foley in 2005).

In the anthology *Worlding Dance*, Susan Leigh Foster describes the efforts that she and her colleagues have undertaken at the University of California, Los Angeles, Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance (UCLA) to erase the divide between "the West and the rest" by reconfiguring their choreography and composition courses. Rather

than reserving the study of choreographic process solely for the domains of ballet, modern, and postmodern dance, the faculty redesigned each of their composition courses to include examples of artists working in a wide variety of dance traditions. Foster describes the shift in pedagogy:

> We are grappling with the various ways that the term "choreography" might be taken to mean in distinctive dance contexts: when and how are the making and doing separate endeavors? How is tradition preserved through innovation? How might the art of making dances become a very different process in contexts where dance is improvised? How do we assess collective as well as individual amendments to a dance? (*Worlding* x)

In this dissertation, I grapple with very similar questions. While the choreographic processes of Curran, de Gallaí, and myself are very distinct—stemming from a diverse mixture of our personal aesthetics and professional experiences—certainly the concept of individual authorship in Irish step dance is nothing new. I envision the umbrella of Irish dances as covering a continuum of individual and collective contributions throughout historical time and geographic place. I believe that choreographic innovation not only preserves tradition but also promotes it, by presenting new Irish step dance choreography within the context of concert dance venues. Along the way, choreographers such as Curran, de Gallaí, and myself are using improvisation as a choreographic tool and weaving our individual voices with collective contributions from the dancers we work with.

I appreciate UCLA's interrogation of the assumption that only ballet, modern, and postmodern dance forms have individual choreographers and support their rejection of the belief that choreography fashioned by collective input cannot be part of a composition course. I am hopeful that curriculum models such as those developed by UCLA or by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, mentioned above, will pave the way so the study of Irish step dance may gain even greater acceptance in academia.

The Irish Dancing Body

Irish studies departments also have a large role to play in furthering Irish dance research. Historically, the spoken, written, or sung word has been highly favored over the dancing body—whether as an Irish cultural export or as a subject for Irish studies. Indeed, a quick overview of Irish cultural exports immediately brings to mind the work of numerous literary giants such as Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney, Frank McCourt, and Colum McCann. Likewise, a perusal of the traditional Irish music archives reveals renowned artists such the Chieftans, Planxty, the Bothy Band, and Christy Moore, while popular music fans could easily cite the work of U2, Sinéad O'Connor, the Cranberries, and One Direction, among others. Meanwhile, Irish stars of film, television, and stage include Colin Farrell, Liam Neeson, and Gabriel Byrne, to name only a few. For a relatively small island nation, Ireland has enjoyed immense cultural recognition. It was not until the advent of *Riverdance*, however, that dance joined the ranks of Irish literature, music, film, and theater as a major cultural export.

Likewise, Irish dance is a relatively recent addition to the curriculum of Irish studies departments—whose course offerings are overwhelmingly drawn from the fields of history, politics, literature, music, and theater. In *Irish Moves*, Mulrooney explains the Irish cultural disconnect from dance:

> Since its independence in 1922, and in the conjuring trick that led up to that moment, Ireland has been, and still is, a country in which literature, poetry, and theatre maintain an absolute hegemony at the expense of non-verbal artforms. Besides the acres of literature itself, there are wall-to-wall critical books on Irish literature. Words, words, words. But not one book on what lies between the words—the physicality, the unsaid. (5)

Mulrooney's phrase "the conjuring trick" is an apt description of the Gaelic revivalist project of the 1890s and its careful construction of an Irish cultural identity that was separate and distinct from that of the English colonizer through a process that simultaneously discarded some traditions, borrowed others, and created even more. Mulrooney describes this system as "inventing Irish bodies" and criticizes the Gaelic revival's focus on competitive Irish step dance at the expense of other forms of Irish dance. "What were we trying to prove with this tightly regulated, quasi-militaristic form?" she questions. "We sidestepped the more holistic form of Irish dance, that is *sean-nós* dance . . . in favor of a sort of body fascism . . . the body controlled, repressed, ignored" (12).

Indeed, the Irish step dancing body, with its arms pinned tightly by its sides and its immobile pelvis, can be read as a visual metaphor for the systematic repression of

sexuality by the Catholic Church and the new Irish state. Mulrooney cites the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935, for example, as an overt attempt to police the body by outlawing dances held in private homes and requiring social gatherings to be held in public halls instead. The year 1935 also marked the beginning of a forty-three-year ban on the importation and sale of contraception in Ireland. Even more egregiously, the silence and shame surrounding sexuality manifested itself in the Magdalene Laundries, where "fallen women" were sent to work and to repent in the biblical image of Mary Magdalene. Ireland's last Magdalene Laundry closed as recently as 1996. Meanwhile, the 2014 discovery of nearly eight hundred infants in an unmarked grave outside a government-sponsored, church-run mother-baby home in Tuam, County Galway, has brought the mistreatment of unwed mothers and their babies to the forefront of national debate amid public outrage.

Against a backdrop of such systematic sexual repression, it is certainly not surprising that "words, words, words" became Ireland's cultural comfort zone, rather than "what lies between the words—the physicality, the unsaid," as Mulrooney puts it (5). While there is ample evidence that the heavy hand of the external forces of nationalism and religion is largely responsible for controlling the "invented Irish body," Declan Kiberd suggests that there is a third strand to consider, namely, the internalized guilt of a people who had lost their mother tongue. In the forward to *Irish Moves*, Kiberd points out that the renowned Irish literary canon is actually written in English—the language of the colonizer:

> The explosion of brilliant writing in English at the end of the nineteenth century was, among other things, a myth of compensation. A people who had hobbled themselves by going dumb in their native language now sought to console themselves by proving that they could write the new language even more eloquently than its official owners. Perhaps the taut arms and controlled waists of the Irish dancer tell us more of our secret cultural history than we wish to know? The worst wounds in any culture are the self-inflicted ones and it may not be fanciful to see in pre-*Riverdance* forms a kind of self-denial or even self-punishment. (qtd. in Mulrooney xiv)

For Kiberd, the Irish step dancer's rigid arms and torso have less to do with enforced chastity and more to do with physical muteness—albeit self-imposed. Words written in English became the weapons of choice—a vehicle for "outwitting the colonizers," as Mulrooney explains—while the dancing body became a contested site that succumbed to denial from within and without (4). Nevertheless, Kiberd posits that the current generation of artists—those working in a post-*Riverdance* climate—may be able to "reconnect our theatre of the word with those experiences buried deep in our bodies" (qtd. in Mulrooney, xiv). In my opinion, *Riverdance* not only popularized Irish step dance by providing a global performance platform but also legitimized the dancing Irish body and galvanized interest in exploring a choreographic language beyond words.

Kiberd's hope for the future of Irish physicality is substantiated throughout Mulrooney's *Irish Moves*. As a collection of essays by and interviews with many of Ireland's key contributors to the dance and physical theater landscape, the anthology

includes firsthand accounts of who the artists are; where they are from; what they are creating; when they began working; and, perhaps most important, why they are involved with dance and physical theater. Throughout this dissertation, in my exploration of choreographic process, I expand the conversation by asking, how? To again echo Mulrooney, how do contemporary artists working with Irish step dance vocabulary make "what lies between the words—the physicality, the unsaid" (5)?

While writers such as Mulrooney and Kiberd have credited *Riverdance* with freeing the Irish step dancing body from the clutches of parochial nationalism and sexual repression, for others, the show is far from liberating. In *Dance Theatre in Ireland*, Aoife McGrath asserts that *Riverdance* introduced a new method of bodily discipline for Irish step dancers as the show strove to create a uniform product for commercial sale. She argues that the dancers' synchronization "advertises their ability to be economically 'in step' with the global market. The chorus line scenes in the show can be read as spectacular displays of corporeal conformity and the subjugation of the body to an external force" (97). Uniformity is critical to maintaining the *Riverdance* brand and enabling producers to clone the show for maximum marketability. During the height of its popularity, there were several *Riverdance* troupes crisscrossing the globe, not to mention numerous spin-off productions.[ii] For McGrath, the "external force" of late capitalism drove *Riverdance* into an "international commercial whirlwind" that exists "far away" from the locus of her research on contemporary dance theater in Ireland (9).

According to McGrath, *Riverdance* may have brought Irish step dance global recognition, but it did so through the labor of the chorus line of dancers, whom she

describes as "a living commodity, trapped in a site that allows for no indeterminacy" (8). Furthermore, despite drawing huge global audiences for Irish step dance, *Riverdance* did not increase the visibility of Irish contemporary dance theater—a form that remains marginalized through "a reverence for the written word to the exclusion of the corporeal" (27).

The second half of McGrath's text covers Irish contemporary dance theater companies and works that span roughly the same twenty-year period as the trajectory of *Riverdance.* Yet the growth that McGrath identifies in Irish contemporary dance theater is attributed to the choreographers' own ingenuity and persistence, as well as to an increase in funding from Ireland's Arts Council to contemporary dance companies during the early 1990s. McGrath writes, "Choreographers in Ireland have, by necessity, always had to be skilled tacticians, constantly finding new ways to move the dancing body towards visibility in an unwelcoming terrain" (27).

In positing choreographers as "skilled tacticians," McGrath calls upon Michel de Certeau's seminal text *The Practice of Everyday Life* and his critical distinction between tactics and strategies. Whereas institutions and power structures implement strategies in order to define and regulate an environment, individuals employ tactics as a means of creative resistance—moments of agency seized within the routines of their daily activities. McGrath relates de Certeau's theories to the actions of Irish contemporary dance theater choreographers and asserts, "This notion of a tactical disruption of the dominant by bodies operating from the margins, the space of the other which allows for their autonomy, has great resonance with the position of the choreographer in Ireland"

(28). For McGrath, the "space of the other" is a space in between theater and dance—a creative space that defies genre divides and embraces hybridity.

While McGrath's framework is Irish contemporary dance theater (including the solo dance theater works of former *Riverdance* leads Jean Butler and Colin Dunne), many parallels can be found in the work of Irish step dance choreographers in a post-*Riverdance* climate. McGrath's differentiation between *Riverdance* and Irish contemporary dance theater echoes my distinction between commercial dance and concert dance. Irish contemporary dance theater choreographers resist the dominance of the Irish literary canon by working in a space in between theater and dance—in between text and corporeality. Meanwhile, Irish step dance choreographers must negotiate the dominance of the Irish commercial phenomenon that is *Riverdance*—an icon so pervasive that the name of the production often supplants the name of the dance form. "Oh, so you do Riverdancing?" is a question that Irish step dance choreographers must answer frequently. We respond by navigating a terrain that exists in between commercial dance and competitive dance—in between Irish step dance vocabulary and choreographic principles drawn from modern and postmodern dance. *Riverdance* may be "far away" from Irish contemporary dance theater. Yet through works that blur genre boundaries, make social and political commentary, welcome hybridity, and address questions of cultural legacy, Irish step dance choreography is moving closer to Irish contemporary dance theater with every step. Dance making in the "space of the other" is enabled by choreographic processes that explore Irish step dance's expressive potential, invite creative contributions from the dancers, and welcome indeterminacy.

Research Overview

My research is ostensibly about the choreographic process of three individual artists. At the same time, however, I cannot ignore the process by which Irish step dance choreography was manipulated to fit the agendas of church and state over the past one hundred years. Before presenting my three case studies—the crux of this dissertation—I will discuss the historical factors that led to the groundswell of choreographic activity that I have observed in Irish step dance today. Chapter 2 provides a historical overview and posits the invention of a chaste, asexual Irish step dancing body as the result of the Gaelic revivalist project, which, in turn, contributed to the systematic repression of the body in favor of the word. In the ensuing century, the burgeoning competition scene became the purview of young dancers—children and teenagers—who accelerated the form's physical virtuosity but ignored its potential for theatricality. Because the competition circuit was the dominant context for the performance of the form, Irish step dance virtually disappeared from public view. Hence, the seismic shock of *Riverdance,* as described in Chapter 3.

Ó Mir explains the global public response to *Riverdance*: "The excitement was in the discovery of a hitherto unknown virtuosic dance form that seemed to have dropped magically onto the stage from out of nowhere" (ix). With its attractive chorus line of young adults in short black dresses and sleek black pants pounding out energetic rhythms, *Riverdance* reversed the public's previous associations of Irish step dance practice with insular nationalism, repressive Catholicism, and mass emigration. Coinciding with the boom of the Celtic Tiger economy, *Riverdance* became a symbol of Ireland's success on

the world stage—both culturally and economically. As Mulrooney remarks, "The 1990s were an eventful decade for Irish bodies. That classic Irish inferiority complex must have exited stage left as the nation reconfigured itself in movement, in the form of *Riverdance*" (18).

This dissertation addresses the transfer of Irish step dance to the stage by analyzing the choreographic process of three artists. In Chapter 4, I discuss my methodology and reflect upon the parallels between conducting qualitative research and creating choreographic work. I explain that in-depth interviews with the choreographers and dancers underpin the entire dissertation, yet additional data collection procedures were tailored to each case study. For example, participant observation played an important role in my investigation of Curran's work, while textual analysis of personally situated writing was critical to my understanding of de Gallaí's choreographic process. Meanwhile, the self-reflexive study of my own choreographic process adhered to the tenants of practice-led research. In Chapter 5, I call upon the work of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, whose theories of hybridity, the third space, and "sly civility" provide a useful alternative framework for recognizing the historical impact of British colonialism on Irish step dance. Meanwhile, Susan Foster's assertion that dance making is a form of theorizing facilitates my analysis of the implications of the emerging shifts among today's practitioners.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 contain case studies of Breandán de Gallaí, Seán Curran, and Darrah Carr Dance and our choreographic processes of making dances that are inspired by Irish step dance vocabulary and compositional methods from modern and postmodern

dance. I discuss choreographic works that convey emotional expression, embrace hybridity, cross genre boundaries, and examine questions of cultural identity. And I amass a mountain of choreographic evidence to counter the claims of critics, such as Tobi Tobias, who question the legitimacy of Irish step dance as a performance art.

In a 2001 review of *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*, Jean Butler and Colin Dunne's first foray into linking Irish step dance with theatrical narrative in a space other than *Riverdance*, Tobias asserts:

> Like other forms of folk—or if you will, ethnic—dance, traditional Irish step dancing doesn't transfer easily to the stage. Its vocabulary, limited and inexpressive, is meant for doing, not viewing. Once step dancing moved out of the realm of social dance within its native community, it flourished largely in competitions—parochial affairs focused on skill, not imagination. This was only natural, since the form doesn't inherently lend itself to the development of narrative and character, the elements on which a persuasive theatrical experience is often built. Today's practitioners and enthusiasts of the genre appear to be undeterred by these realities. (nymag.com)

Tobias's description brings to mind the aforementioned divide between "Western" and "world" dance, whereby ballet, modern, and postmodern forms are given an exalted position, whether onstage as performance or in academia in choreographic research. The three case studies of this dissertation provide an antidote to such bias and offer an assessment of Irish step dance in terms of its own aesthetic principles. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 detail the work of choreographers who are doing, viewing, researching,

choreographing, rehearsing, and performing Irish step dance all while investigating its potential for expression on stage. Such a groundswell of choreographic activity indicates that today's choreographers are indeed "undeterred" and that the transfer of Irish step dance choreography from social and competitive contexts to performance venues is undeniably happening—even in the face of rampant bias.

Chapter 9 concludes the dissertation by predicting increasing visibility for Irish step dance choreography and the continuing expansion of Irish dance studies while also tracing connections to the past. Much as the Gaelic revivalists of the 1890s invented traditions to reshape ideas about the body, today's Irish step dance choreographers are creating their own visions of the Irish step dancing body through works that transcend geographic, historical, and aesthetic boundaries. Choreographic process in Irish step dance is a practice of rewriting history through the body.

CHAPTER II

DANCE MASTERS AND HISTORY MAKERS

Decked in caroline hats and swallow tail coats;

Dance masters who vied for parishes, goats, and collection plates,

In hamlets and villages as dusk encroached

They whirled the blackbird and the feathery reel

And trapped notes beneath their feet

They danced the rabbit and did the dog, the frog, the bump and grind

The soft shoe shuffle for the girl I left behind

They danced . . .

When the piper came to town, they danced, he said

Once, the whole world danced when the piper played

—Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, "They Danced"

"Dance is for doing," declared the curator at the Irish Traditional Music Archive when I asked him, as an undergraduate researcher in the summer of 1995, why there was so little written about the history and origins of Irish dance. I believe he shared my frustration and was simply trying to explain why the subject has been virtually ignored, compared with the amount of study devoted to other aspects of Irish culture. While there has been a welcome spate of publishing in Irish dance studies during the past ten years, it is still difficult to find accurate historical information. There are scant references to dance in ancient or medieval Irish literature and Irish dance has rarely been written about in the

modern era. This chapter surveys the available historical resources and outlines the history of Irish step dance, beginning with its original social form as a rural pastime. Particular attention is paid to the nationalist reinvention of Irish step dance during the Gaelic revival and the spread of the art form through the advent of competition—particularly throughout the Irish diaspora. The broad sociopolitical forces of nationalism, religion, and emigration are shown to have had a profound impact on the form, function, and context of Irish step dance during the past three hundred years.

Traveling Dance Masters

Established historiographies of Irish dance typically take the emergence of the traveling dance master, a figure found in Irish, Scottish, and English literature, as their chronological starting point. The first documented traveling dance masters appeared in the early eighteenth century and were all men. One of the most frequently cited historical references is the travelogue of Arthur Young, an English writer who toured the Irish countryside in 1776. Through Young's writing, the figure of the traveling dance master and the central role of dance in Irish social life emerges:

> Dancing is so universal among them [Irish rural villagers] that there are everywhere itinerant dancing masters to whom the cottars pay sixpence a quarter for teaching their families. Weddings are always celebrated with much dancing and a Sunday rarely passes without a dance; there are very few among them who will not, after a hard day's work, gladly walk seven miles to have a dance. (84)

Dance masters traveled to every village within a given territory of approximately ten square miles, staying for about six weeks at a time and offering lessons in music and

deportment as well as dance. They were responsible for teaching and choreographing new social dances, as well as the solo steps of jigs and reels, for both rural villagers and landed gentry. Their own social standing fell somewhere in between the two classes. In *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, Breandán Breathnach describes the typical traveling dance master as "a somewhat whimsical figure, pretentious in dress and affecting a grandiloquence not sustained by his schooling" (49). Wearing a Caroline hat, swallowtail coat, tight knee breeches, white stockings, and turn pumps with silver buckles, the dance master was considered to be at a station above that of the itinerant piper or fiddler.

Set Dancing

Through contact with the landed gentry, traveling dance masters were first introduced to the set of quadrilles, a dance form brought from France to England in 1815 by soldiers returning from the Napoleonic War. The set of quadrilles became popular in ballrooms because the form was conducive to socializing. Four couples faced each other in a square and executed four, five, or six figures, all of which involved interacting with one or more of the other couples in the square. Irish dance masters maintained this structure but adapted the movements for country dancing. They substituted their own steps for ballroom styles and sped up the tempo to that of a jig or reel, thereby emphasizing the close connection between traditional Irish music and dance. The "set dances," as the set of quadrilles came to be called in Ireland, grew in popularity, not only because they lent themselves to socializing, but also because they were accessible to any level of dancing skill. As Irish dance masters altered the original ballroom steps, it became possible to execute a set dance with walking or sliding steps.[iii] In *A Social*

History of Scottish Dance, George Emmerson reports that French dance master Henri Cellarius decried the changes to the set of quadrilles in 1847 and described set dances as "an opportunity for gossip rather than for dancing, a sort of necessary halting-place between the waltzes and polkas" (147). Indeed, with the introduction of the waltz and polka toward the middle of the nineteenth century, the popularity of the set of quadrilles in English ballrooms waned.

In rural Ireland, by contrast, interest in set dances increased. Set dancing reached its height of popularity in the 1880s and remained a favorite country pastime until the 1920s. Many localities developed a distinctive set of figures and style of execution. Specific sequences of choreography were often identified by place-name—the Aran Set, the South Galway Set, and the Corofin Plain Set, for example. Dances were held outside at a crossroads in good weather and in barns or kitchens during the winter months. What furniture there was would be cleared away and friends and neighbors would crowd in for a "house party" or "country house dance" that usually lasted all night long.

Men danced in their work boots. The thick soles were reinforced with nails, providing the dancers with an excellent opportunity to create rhythmical variations on the shuffling and sliding steps of the set dance. Women danced barefoot, as it was considered unladylike for them to perform the heavy steps expected from the men. In his collection of essays on Irish culture, J. M. Synge quotes from a verse of an old song: "And now we'll dance to jigs and reels, nailed boots chasing girls' naked heels" (22).

Step Dancing

The development of men's rhythmic footwork, or "battering," in social dance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the result of several factors. Traveling dance masters taught rhythmic solo steps that could be inserted improvisationally into the set by an advanced dancer. In addition, it was more common for homes to be built with flagstone or wood floors (rather than mud) after the eighteenth century, thus providing a resounding surface that accentuated the sound of hobnailed boots.

The sound of the battering was reinforced whenever possible. In "Single Time," Chris Brady notes, "Frequently, during the building [of a cottage] a special flag-stone was laid next to the hearth for step-dancing upon. This 'hearth-flag' would be laid over a hole in which there was a large old cooking pot. This emphasized the sound of the stepping. In cottages with compressed-mud floors, the half door would often be taken off its hinges in order for a solo step dance to be performed. Dancers also battered on kitchen tables, sometimes amid silverware, in order that the jingle and clatter of spoons add to the rhythm.

Establishing a rhythmic connection between one's feet and the music was the most important objective for the step dancer. Often displays were improvisational. In an interview with Seosamh O'Broin for *Fidileiri* magazine, musician Kevin McHugh recalls seeing his father dance and relates that "he'd do his own old style type of dance using the heels and hands and making up bits as he went along I suppose, but he always kept in good time to the music" (4). At other times, good solo dancers would show off intricate

dances invented by traveling dance masters, whose reputation rested on their ability to create new steps.

The ideal solo dancer, according to Irish dance masters, was one who kept the torso rigid and moved only from the hips down, leaving the arms extended straight at the sides. Restraining the upper body focused the attention on the rapid execution of intricate footwork. Indeed, the limited area in which the solo dancer was expected to perform called for this type of control. The good dancer was expected "to dance on eggs without breaking them and hold a pan of water on his head without spilling a drop. The good dancer dances underneath himself, trapping each note of music on the floor" (Breathnach 53). Although the popularity of country house dances waned during the 1920s with the advent of radio and the automobile, the tradition of traveling dance masters lasted well into the twentieth century. The last great traveling dance master, Jerry Molyneaux, died in 1965.

Emigration

The importance and frequency of large community gatherings declined sharply during and after the Great Potato Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. In his 1852 text *Irish Popular Superstitions*, Sir William Wilde, renowned physician and father of playwright Oscar Wilde, lamented the disappearance of many traditional Irish customs and reported, "The festivals are unobserved and the rustic festivities neglected or forgotten. . . . The peasants' balls and routs do not often take place when starvation and pestilence stalk over a country (40).

Although the worst years of the famine were between 1845 and 1852, mass starvation started a trend of Irish emigration, the impact of which is still felt today. During the period of the Great Famine, more than 2.5 million Irish emigrated, most of them to the United States. According to Kermy Miller and Paul Wagner in *Out of Ireland*, in just ten years, almost 30 percent of Ireland's population had left the island, while an additional one million people had perished from hunger and disease (38). Synge's account of an interview with an elderly Irish man from Connemara reveals the effects of continued emigration on Irish culture:

> No, this while back you'll never see a piper coming this way at all, though in the old times it's many a piper would be moving around through those houses for a whole quarter together, playing his pipes and drinking poteen and the people dancing round him; but now there is not dancing or singing in this place at all, and most of the young people is growing up and moving to America. (119)

Eighty percent of Irish immigrants to the United States were from rural areas in Ireland; however, only 6 percent of them settled in rural areas upon arrival (Edwards 382). The result was an overcrowding of Irish immigrants in cities like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, which was met with rampant anti-Irish sentiment. In *Out of Ireland*, Miller and Wagner attribute discriminatory practices to the fact that many native-born Americans prided themselves on their British ancestry and their Protestant faith. Thus, discrimination had both an ethnic and a religious basis. They write, "Irish poverty was a sign of laziness and immorality, of ignorance and superstition—traits they considered inseparable from Irishness and Catholicism" (54). According to Miller and

Wagner, many Americans looked disdainfully at the drinking habits of some Irish immigrants, and newspapers commonly depicted Irish people as "violent and drunken, even as subhuman—more akin to apes than to native-born Americans" (54). Many employers refused to hire Irish Catholics, posting signs that read, "No Irish need apply." Those who did hire Irish immigrants used them as a source of cheap labor.

By the end of the nineteenth century, discrimination had produced tightly knit, fiercely loyal Irish communities within America's larger cities. Many viewed Irish emigration as involuntary, caused by British rulers and landlords who had done little to relieve the famine. Both Irish immigrants and Americans of Irish descent joined Irish American nationalist organizations in support of the growing movement for home rule in Ireland. Miller and Wagner note, "They hoped that the creation of a free and prosperous Ireland would help raise their own social status in the United States" (110).

Nationalism

At the same time, political reforms in Ireland, such as the repeal of draconian Penal Laws, increased the desire for a politically and culturally independent Ireland, which ultimately provided the foundation for the Gaelic revival at the turn of the century. Revivalists were driven by a desire to create an Irish cultural identity that was separate and distinct from that of the English colonizer. The revivalists organized formally in 1893 with the founding of Conradh na Gaeilge, or the Gaelic League. Although the Gaelic revival was primarily a language movement, it manipulated Irish dance to fit its political agenda. The first overt effort to engage with Irish dance was made by the London branch of the league. Inspired by Scottish immigrants who organized their own dance evenings

(and hoping that the addition of a social element would increase attendance at their language meetings), the league sponsored their first Irish social-dance evening on October 30, 1897, in London's Bloomsbury Hall. The group appropriated the Irish word *céilí* (which originally referred to the practice of gathering in a neighbor's house for an informal evening of talk, song, and dance) and used it to name their organized social-dance event.

The first céilí included the most popular dances of the time: set dances, waltzes, and polkas. Members of the league soon became concerned, however, that these dances were "non-native" and therefore not befitting the nationalist cause. Set dances were particularly egregious given that they had originated in France and then traveled to England, and ultimately to Ireland. Although set dances had long been absorbed into the fabric of rural Irish life, the form was nevertheless banned from future league events. Searching for a suitable replacement, the league turned to a London-based dance master, Patrick D. Reidy, who was originally from County Kerry, Ireland. Reidy taught the group a "long dance" that he called the Kerry Reel. Excited by the discovery of this "native" dance, the London branch of the league organized a collecting trip to Ireland. The expedition included Art O'Brien, who went on to coauthor (with J. G. O'Keefe) *A Handbook of Irish Dances with an Essay on Their Origin and History*, issued by the league.

In his article "Dance and the Politics of Orality: A Study of the Irish *Scoil Rince*" Moe Meyer describes the league's decisions as "a nationalist cleansing of the art of dance" and notes that their collecting trip led to "a proliferation of ensemble forms (many

problematically borrowing inspiration from outside of Ireland)" (31). Although the exact origin of the ensemble forms (also known as "figure dances" because of their elaborate spatial designs) is uncertain, they most likely evolved from a mixture of country dances, round dances, and processional dances, performed throughout the British Isles. The league's dance masters adopted, adapted, and ultimately canonized them through books such as the *Handbook of Irish Dances*, mentioned earlier, and the 1939 *Ár Rinncioe Foirne*, or *Thirty Popular Figure Dances*, compiled and published by An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, or the Irish Dancing Commission (an oversight body founded in 1929). The latter is essentially a dance manual with detailed instructions and clarifying diagrams that ensure uniformity of execution. To this day, in order to be a certified Irish dance instructor with the Irish Dancing Commission, prospective teachers must pass a stringent exam with a written section that covers the information in the manual. In promoting uniformity, the revivalists ensured proper transmission and dissemination of the cannon.

The figure dances became so popular at the league's céilí evenings that they became known as céilí dances. By creating a canon that crowned thirty céilí dances, while banning all set dances, the league created their own narrative of the Irish past in hopes of securing a better Irish future. The new canon exemplifies Eric Hobsbawm's definition of invented tradition:

> A set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules . . . which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past. (1)

The league's enthusiasm for researching the past via collecting trips was also an attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past, one that predated English colonization. Set dancing's clear trajectory from France to England to Ireland disqualified it from inclusion in the canon and deemed it an inauthentic tradition. Meanwhile, the murkier origins of figure dances enabled them to be re-presented as céilí dances. With names that referenced towns in Ireland (such as the Glencar Reel or the Bridge of Athlone) or alluded to Ireland's Celtic past (such as the Fairy Reel or the Harvest Time Jig), céilí dances had a claim on authenticity—whether historically accurate or not. As Bernadette Sweeney writes in *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre*, "The striving for authenticity within one's own culture is an exercise in nationalism that becomes inscribed on the body. Gender roles, reproduction, social ritual and language all become agents of authenticity as the nation seeks to define and safeguard itself" (11). In defining an Irish cultural identity that was separate from the English colonizer, the league also wanted to protect its new image from the negative stereotypes that had historically been used as a tool of oppression. Indeed, the league opted to have céilí dance "inscribed on the body" because they didn't approve of the way that set dance had typically been embodied.

In *The Creative Migrant*, Patrick O'Sullivan cites Irish dance historian John Cullinane's statement that "the sets were performed without any prescribed footwork and with a degree of frivolity and excessive enjoyment which led the league to fear that this might reflect badly on the Irish. They were extremely conscious of the rowdy image of the Irish created by some other Irish events held in London" (Cullinane qtd. in O'Sullivan 197). Such negative stereotypes of the Irish had deep roots that stretched through

centuries of English colonization. In *Step Dancing in Ireland,* Catherine Foley cites an assertion by Declan Kiberd:

> From the sixteenth century, when Edmund Spencer walked the plantations of Munster, the English have presented themselves to the world as controlled, refined, and rooted; and so it suited them to find the Irish hot-headed, rude, and nomadic, the perfect foil to set off their own virtues. (Kiberd qtd. in Foley 142)

To counter such negative images, the league made a number of deliberate choreographic choices when crafting the canon. As discussed previously, a wide range of Irish dances had historically included percussive steps (either choreographed or improvised) whereby rhythms were made with men's hobnailed work boots. The league, however, mandated that all group dances were to be performed in the soft-shoe style, thereby eliminating percussion and effectively silencing the dancers. Not only was the aural, rhythmic component of the dance extinguished, but the individual dancer's voice was also silenced. Opportunities for improvisation, spontaneous choice making, and personalized self-expression were replaced by codified footwork and prescribed group spatial patterns.

Members of the league borrowed from ensemble dance forms that were popular at Scottish events. Writing in *Toss the Feathers: Irish Set Dancing*, set dancer Pat Murphy notes, "It is a bit ironic that the first public *céilí* was held in London's Bloomsbury Hall in 1897, organized by Fionán MacColum, the Scottish secretary of the Gaelic League in London" (32). Murphy remarks that the main difference between Scottish and Irish execution of otherwise similar dances was "in the style of dancing, with the Irish eliminating the hand movements and toe pointing parts as effeminate" (32). Thus, it

appears that the league strove to create a style of dance that was neither "effeminate" nor "rowdy." Indeed, an Irish step dancer's percussive feet and still arms could certainly be perceived as a balance of powerful masculinity and quiet restraint.

This carefully crafted style of Irish step dancing became associated with a high moral character. In *Step Dancing in Ireland*, Foley quotes the 1934 annual report of the Irish Dancing Commission:

> We will teach Irish dancing because it is part of the Gaelic Revival plan: we will use Irish dancing as a means towards instilling the Gaelic idea into our people: co-operation and mutual dependence are essentials of Irish dance, and self and selfishness have no place in the Gaelic nation. (155)

Character building thus became part of nation building. Dance—and the silencing of dancers through enforced uniformity—became a way to discipline the body and to instill societal beliefs and behavioral norms.

Religion

During the Gaelic revival, religion joined forces with nationalism to promote the newly invented céilí dances and to condemn the practice of all-night dances where set dances reigned. Set dancing was particularly troubling to the Catholic Church because the form called for partners to embrace each other in a European-style waltz hold or, worse, to spin with their torsos pressed together and their arms circled around each other's waists. In his article "Dancing, Depravity, and All That Jazz: The Public Dance Halls Act of 1935," Jim Smyth cites a letter penned in the 1920s by Cardinal McRory that declares, "All-night dances are objectionable on many grounds and in country districts and small

towns are fruitful source of scandal and ruin, spiritual and temporal. To how many poor innocent young girls have they not been an occasion of irreparable disgrace and lifelong sorrow" (McRory qtd. in Smyth 54).

Céilí dances, on the other hand, call for a demure holding of hands as the only point of bodily contact between dancers. Meanwhile, the torso is held straight, the pelvis is kept in check, and any sexualized movements are effectively repressed. Nevertheless, the highly gendered language in *Thirty Popular Figure Dances* differentiates roles for "gents" and "ladies" and organizes couples within the ensemble as one male and one female. In *Step Dancing in Ireland,* Foley discusses how this arrangement promotes a heteronormative culture and writes, "Indeed, heteronormativity was considered to be integral to the construction of the nation and the importance of family units was seen as central" (150). In an effort to instill proper values and to reinforce behavioral norms, the Catholic Church presented céilí dances as the epitome of appropriate social interaction and high moral conduct.

In their writings and sermons, clergy referred to céilí dances as "Irish dances" and excluded set dances from this category, thereby furthering the league's goal of convincing parishioners that set dances were a foreign and unsuitable pastime. Smyth cites a pastoral letter written by Cardinal Logue in 1924 that gives his opinion of Irish dances: "They may not be the fashion in London and Paris, but they should be the fashion in Ireland. Irish dances do not make degenerates" (Logue qtd. in Smyth 51).

As the dominant local authority, the clergy wielded considerable influence over their parishioners' behavior. Personal memoirs and oral histories are rife with stories of

local priests breaking up dance gatherings, condemning dancing from the pulpit, or withholding references for defiant parishioners. In *The Story of Irish Dance*, Helen Brennan quotes a 1912 memoir:

> The heart and spirit gave way in a sort of terrorism before the priest. In his day of dominance, he did much to make Irish local life a dreary desert. He waged war on the favorite cross-roads dances—with exceptions here and there—and on other gatherings where young men and women congregated in the company of their older relations and friends. (123)

The combined efforts of nationalists and clergy to influence moral codes culminated in the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935. The act required local dance halls to obtain a license, mandated that dances end at a reasonable hour, and ensured that the halls were kept clean. In an interview for *Dal gCais*, a journal documenting the folk life of County Clare, Junior Crehan reported, "The act banned house dances and anyone holding such a dance after this was brought to court and fined. The clergy started to build the parochial halls to which all were expected to go and the government collected twenty-five percent of the ticket tax" (75). Through this restrictive act of dance censorship and by policing personal behavior, Irish authorities replicated the dominating practices of the English oppressor. In *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre,* Bernadette Sweeney describes the phenomenon:

> This was reflected in the legislation of the new Irish Free State, which embraced a restrictive Catholic ethos as an agent of enshrining tradition. The civilizing of the body was undertaken by the newly postcolonial, as the young nation worked to

> recreate itself in the same image and likeness of the colonizer—in the image of its maker. (12)

With the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, many members of the league believed that it was the responsibility of the new nation-state to take up the cause of the mother tongue. As a result, the league saw an 85 percent drop in its membership. Interest in Irish step dance continued to grow, however, as evidenced by the founding of the Irish Dancing Commission, in 1929.

Competition

In *Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing*, Cullinane records the original goals of the Irish Dancing Commission:

> Do everything necessary to promote Irish dancing, both céilí and step dancing. Exercise control on Irish dancing and those connected with it, teachers, adjudicators, and organizers of competitions. Draw up all rules necessary for those purposes and enforce the implementation of those rules. (1)

To accord with the Irish Dancing Commission's original mission, solo Irish step dances and the newly invented group céilí dances were included in competitions. Set dancing, however, was not included in the preceding categorization of "Irish dancing," hence the belief fostered by the league that set dances were foreign still prevailed. The commission's preoccupation with rules and its goal to exercise control over Irish dancing indicates that céilí and solo step dancing had moved from an informal, social context to a formalized and competitive environment, closely governed by a centralized authority.

The seeds for this shift in context had been planted by the league during the Gaelic revival. Several years after the first céilí was held in Bloomsbury Hall, the league appropriated another ancient Irish term, *feis*. Historically, a feis was a gathering of Irish chieftains to review and enact laws. The meetings were followed by a great feast in addition to competitions in music and dancing. The feis, as reinstated by the league, however, separated the political from the social references of the term in favor of focusing on Irish language, music, song, and dance. The first feis, held in Macroom, County Cork, in 1900, promoted competitions in those areas. Members of the league, searching for an identifiable national costume, adopted the Scottish kilt and wore it to the feis. While at first the kilt was worn only during competitions in music and language, it eventually became the universally standardized male Irish dancing costume.

Furthermore, the social nature of the Irish dance school, coupled with the motivating factor of its competitive circuit, led to a proliferation of both schools and competitions. In "Dance and the Politics of Orality," Meyer describes the teachers who were supported by the nascent Irish Dancing Commission as being the inheritors of Ireland's historic traveling dance master tradition. Thus, this period witnessed a resurgence of the percussive aspects of Irish step dance facilitated by an "aesthetic revolution" caused by "the development of an acoustic apparatus . . . much more complex and sophisticated than had previously existed" (32). Specific shoes for solo hard-shoe Irish step dancing replaced the traditional hobnailed work boot. Meyer describes the shoe as "an oxford with a plastic addition to the toe and an enlarged heel that permits the dancer to manipulate the acoustic shape of the dance by battering out rhythms" (32). In

ensuing competitions, hard-shoe Irish step dance took its rightful place alongside the soft-shoe style.

Irish step dance is transmitted orally with the help of descriptive phrases, numbers, and nonsense syllables that are meant to mimic the rhythm of the feet. There is no written notation system. According to Meyer, Irish step dance teachers were charged with "maintaining an oral poetry of movement" (32). He notes, "As the language revival died out, leaving only the dance programs intact, dance inherited (almost whimsically), the role that the sung/spoken oral poetry formerly had" (32).

The link between dancing and oral poetry is seen not only in the role of Irish step dance teachers as transmitters of cultural knowledge but also in their function as choreographers. As Foley explains in *Step Dancing in Ireland*, "Good steps were regarded as being similar to poetry in their craftsmanship, mapping the acoustic space through visual and sonic interpretations of the music" (104). Describing the style of the Jerry Molyneaux (1882-1965), Ireland's last surviving dance master, Foley notes, "Some of the Molyneaux step dancers used to say that when Molyneaux danced, it was as if he was writing with his feet" (104).

Meyer, too, highlights the similarity between the composition of Irish step dance and that of European oral poetry, seeing in both a mutual reliance on formulas and metric patterns. He explains, "The 'formula' in Irish dance consists of two motives . . . when a dancer composes a step s/he knows from the beginning that certain motives are appropriate for the meter s/he is working in" (33). The formulaic process of composition allows changes in Irish step dance vocabulary to occur incrementally. This ensures that

the body of Irish step dance remains stable (and stability is critical to the dance's role as a repository for oral culture). Meyer extrapolates his theory of Irish step dance and orality by citing it as the reason why Irish step dancers do not use their arms. He notes Irish dance's inextricable relationship with Irish music and believes that dance does not exist as "a separate art"; rather,

> the dancer's body is conceptualized as the percussion section of the traditional music ensemble (which explains why in Irish dance there is no movement above the waist). In the transition from voice to musical instruments (and dancers' feet), the language remains while the speech is put under erasure. (36)

A renewed focus on rhythmic footwork coupled with the constraints of the rules of competition reinforced the rigid verticality of the Irish step dancer's arms and torso as the aesthetic was carried throughout the diaspora via successive waves of emigration.

Diaspora

Throughout the twentieth century, Irish step dance competitions, or *feiseanna*, spread throughout North America, Australia, and the United Kingdom as immigrants sought to maintain a cultural connection to their homeland.[iv] These events became especially popular in the United States, where up to five thousand people attended competitions held at New York's Iona College from the 1930s to the 1960s (O'Sullivan 199). Such proliferation reinforced the necessity of an organizing body such as the Irish Dancing Commission.

Early competition guidelines display an extreme commitment to the nationalist cause. In *Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing*, Cullinane quotes the secretary of the

Irish Dancing Commission, Seamus MacConuladh, as stating that "dancers were not allowed to compete unless all items worn were of Irish manufacture. Adjudicators, teachers, and dancers were not permitted to attend dances other than Irish dances. Up to the 1950s, they could not teach or take part in competitions of dancing except Irish dancing" (2).

While such extremely nationalistic rules no longer apply, the rigidity of the arms that was popularized through competition still persists. In my physical practice of learning to Irish dance in the 1980s, I was taught to clutch a coin in the palm of each hand, as a way to keep my hands clenched tightly into fists. At other times, I was instructed to clasp my hands behind my back, to prevent my arms from swinging out to the sides. Occasionally, my fellow competitors would use Velcro to attach the sleeves of their costumes to the bodice of their dresses in order to avoid having points deducted in competition for moving their arms. In my opinion, the rigidity of the arms in Irish dance has less to do with the dance master's focus on footwork than with the dancer's interpretation of that choreography in competition. Speaking from physical experience, it is very difficult to hold one's upper body still while one's feet are moving so rapidly (I often compare it to sprinting without using one's arms). When Irish dance is practiced as a competitive sport, keeping one's arms still is a physical challenge that is rewarded.

Indeed, in competitions, the dancers' interpretation of choreography is heavily influenced by the adjudicator's interpretation of their dancing. In his article "Posture in Irish Dancing," Hall remarks, "It is easier for an adjudicator to look for (and to eliminate competitors from) an ideal of 'straight and still,' i.e., erect and non-moving, than from an

ideal of 'loose'—a concept which admits a much wider range of interpretation" (257). Given the very nature of competition itself, Irish step dance has evolved during the past one hundred years to include numerous physical challenges, above and beyond keeping one's arms still. As a result, there has been a dramatic increase in the level of skill and virtuosity among today's competitive Irish step dancers.

The crown jewel in the competitive circuit is the Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne, or World Irish Dancing Championships, which were established in 1970 and catapulted the Irish Dancing Commission into a global governing body. Today, the event draws some 4,500 top competitors and an entourage of teachers (nearly half of whom hail from countries outside the Republic of Ireland); adjudicators; supporters; and vendors selling costumes, wigs, dance shoes, and other merchandise.

Major competitions propel dancers to new levels of technical proficiency while simultaneously establishing uniform standards of execution. Foley describes contemporary Irish step dance as having

> a noticeable homogeneity and virtuosity in kinetic vocabulary—traditional and innovative. Some of these innovative movements were introduced by teachers and their experienced and successful competitive pupils, who either rhythmically, spatially or kinetically developed step dance material, or having seen movements they liked in other dance forms, such as ballet or musicals on television, subtly adapted these movements into steps; if successful in competition, these movements subsequently became part of the step dance vocabulary. (*Step* 178)

It is noteworthy that only innovations that are "successful in competition" will be assimilated into Irish step dance vocabulary. In this way, adjudicators can control and safeguard the boundaries of the art form. As Meyer explains, "Should a performer be too innovative s/he is not given a winning place. . . . Innovation which is non-threatening, which advances style on the level of the motive, and then only incrementally, may be awarded" (35). Once a new movement is awarded, however, it will quickly be replicated by other Irish step dancing schools and become absorbed into the vocabulary.

Given such tight choreographic constraints, Irish step dancers do not stray from their prepared routines during competition. A close relationship between music and dance is imperative—particularly in the final round of competition when the dancer performs a solo set dance (no connection to the aforementioned group dance that is descended from the French set of quadrilles) to a specific tune. Nevertheless, dancers are neither expected nor encouraged to improvise to the music.

During the competition, music is typically played live. Because of the cost of hiring live musicians, however, many Irish step dance teachers rely upon recorded music for their lessons. While this is a practical solution, it is also unfortunate, because it does not provide students with many opportunities to become comfortable working with live musicians. As a result, encounters between musicians and competitive Irish step dancers can lead to the type of situation described by musician Ciaran Carson:

> We played reel after reel without eliciting any sign of recognition. When asked if they had any idea what the reel was called, the children told us that it was the "Beginner Reel." . . . We found out later that they had one other reel in their

> repertoire; this was called "The Advanced Reel." Anyway, we played the reel; the team danced away, stony-faced, as if programmed. . . . Perhaps the saddest part of the whole exercise was that the children could not even lilt a few bars of the tunes to which they danced so rigidly; all music, all sense of joy, had been drummed out of them. (36)

Although Carson's criticism of young dancers may be harsh, given the circumstances of their training, it does provide insight into a musician's opinion of the current state of competitive Irish step dance. Another common complaint among musicians is that dancers' desire to impress adjudicators leads them to request that the music be played very slowly, at times at such a reduced pace that the original sound of the tune is distorted. Nevertheless, from the dancers' point of view, the slower the tune, the more opportunity they have to squeeze intricate material into their routine.

During the late 1980s, the use of metronomes to set standardized tempos at which particular tunes are to be played became common practice at competitions. While this prevented further distortion of the tunes, it did not satisfy all critics of competition. In 1981, the well-known set dance instructor Joe O'Donovan (1918-2008) wrote:

> Choreography appears to be the preoccupation of the dancing teachers who vie with each other to see which of them can introduce the greatest number of intricate convolutions together with the greatest amount of noise. . . . The choreographed inventions are only transient for they are created for a particular occasion and then forgotten. The time and effort spent on these creations would be better used to teach and practice the older dances.

O'Donovan identifies a shift in contemporary Irish step dance choreography toward intricate syncopation and away from earlier styles of composition such as that of the late dance master Molyneaux. For example, in *Step Dancing in Ireland*, Foley describes his compositional technique as "generally one foot sound to each note of the music. Step dancers therefore 'stepped' the music" (97). Foley explains that Molyneaux's overarching goal was to express rhythmically, aurally, and visually the tune that went along with the dance (97).

Older styles of step dance are often described as being "close to the floor," whereas today's competitive Irish step dancers are concerned with traveling deftly throughout the space, attaining impressive height on their jumps and leaps, and perfecting multiple turns. This shift is in part the result of the larger stages that are currently used for competition. For example, it is not uncommon for the main hall at the World Irish Dancing Championships to seat fifteen hundred spectators. More important, however, the shift is fueled by the nature of competition itself and its insatiable demand for ever-increasing virtuosity.

In the case of Irish step dance, the emphasis on competition has isolated the form from other aspects of Irish culture. Whereas early feiseanna, such as the first feis in Macroom, included competitions in multiple artistic disciplines, the focus of today's feiseanna is solely on dancing. O'Sullivan cites Cullinane's explanation that "the outdoor *feis*, catering for all aspects of the culture and for the family as a unit, has almost been completely replaced by the indoor dancing-competitions-only type of event" (210).

O'Sullivan also recognizes a shift in the gender and age of today's competitive Irish step dancers. Historically, traveling dance masters were all men, given the traditional expectation that a woman's place was in the domestic sphere. And dance students were typically young adults. Today, however, the majority of Irish step dance teachers are women and their students tend to be young and overwhelmingly female. The emphasis on youth is partially a result of the need to feed competition's demand for increased virtuosity with younger and younger bodies. Yet O'Sullivan also attributes the shift in demographics to the waves of emigration that spread Irish step dance competitions throughout the Irish diaspora. As he puts it, "What was an activity of mature men has become, primarily, an activity of young girls. This is, perhaps, a good example of a pattern noticed in the study of other migrant groups: migration displaces into the home, and onto women, problems of cultural continuity" (56).

Throughout the twentieth century, the desire for cultural continuity led many Irish immigrants to enroll their children in Irish step dance lessons as a means of establishing ties to a homeland that their children may have never seen (today, over half the registered Irish step dance teachers reside outside the Republic of Ireland). The American girl in her Irish dancing costume thus embodies a nationalist ideology. Not only does the child become a symbol of cultural continuity, but she also symbolizes the possibility of success within that tradition. In *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosophical Consideration of the Dance*, Francis Sparshott confirms that the pressure placed on young girls to perform well is very real:

> The destinies of little girls are important because of a curious relationship that has become institutionalized between daughters and mothers. . . . Behind many a young woman dancer stand an ambitious mother, commanding her daughter, "Always to come first and to be superior to others." . . . The idea seems to be to make the girl put on a fancy costume and do something conspicuous for which one can get a trophy. (324)

Sparshott's recognition that a desire to win is the motivating factor in a young dancer's decision to compete aligns with Foley's assessment that many young Irish step dancers are inspired solely by competition itself. Foley writes:

> Although the names *feis* and *Oireachtas* may conjure up images of perceived glorious times past in Gaelic Ireland, this history is not known to the general step dance population who come to the *feis* or *Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne* to dance and to compete, and who, for the most part, have little knowledge or interest in its history. It is the dancing and the belonging through the act of dancing that matter. (*Step* 193)

While today's Irish step dancers may indeed view themselves as athletes engaged in competitive sport, rather than torchbearers of tradition, I would argue that a tradition of innovation is fostered through competition. This has perhaps intensified the evolutionary changes that naturally occur as dance steps pass from generation to generation and has made it difficult to preserve the older styles of step dance. Nevertheless, a tradition of innovation enables Irish step dance to remain a living tradition that is highly meaningful to its practitioners.

Furthermore, upon closer examination, one finds many examples of invented tradition placed throughout the competitive context. The fact that competitions and award ceremonies are announced in both Irish and English during the World Irish Dancing Championships, for example, recalls the Gaelic revival's literature and language movement. Irish step dance costumes, especially for women, are a further demonstration of competition's roots in the Gaelic revival.

Costume

In an effort to connect with a suitable historical past, revivalists were drawn to several archaeological discoveries dating from Ireland's Celtic period—before English occupation. Artifacts included the Cross of Cong, the Ardagh Chalice, the Tara Brooch, and the Book of Kells. The twisting, whirling, overlapping lines of Celtic interface common to each of these objects can best be seen in the illuminations of the Gospels in the Book of Kells. Throughout the twentieth century, female Irish step dancers wore dresses embroidered with designs taken directly from the Book of Kells. They also wore fastened to their left shoulder a copy of the Tara Brooch, which served to keep a small shawl in place (the shawl being a reference to traditional women's wear—a shield against rainy Irish weather). Today, competition dresses have moved away from Celtic designs in order to incorporate bold, geometric patterns and decorative items such as glitter, feathers, and sequins.[v] Top competitors can spend over fifteen hundred dollars on a new costume.

Today, female dancers also wear curly wigs in competition. Wigs have replaced the custom of styling one's own hair with curlers overnight, as I did when competing in

the 1980s.[vi] Dancers find the wigs convenient, but critics are quick to draw parallels between dancers and beauty pageant contestants, citing the ornate costumes, wigs, and fake tan that are prevalent in the Irish step dance competition circuit. In *Step Dancing in Ireland*, Foley attributes these fashions to "the mentality of Celtic Tiger Ireland, when Ireland was experiencing economic prosperity. It reflects what Tom Inglis refers to as a cultural shift from self-denial to self-indulgence" (186). Foley acknowledges that dancers are assessed on their technique and performance during competition. Even so, appearance is important and competitors are aware of current dress codes and fashion trends (*Step* 185). Overall, the desire to fit into standards of adjudication is a powerful motivating factor for today's dancers.

The postural rigidity that was initiated during the Gaelic revival has been carried throughout the world via waves of emigration and the ranks of competition. It is the danced embodiment of cultural values that have stood the test of time. During the past three hundred years, the social form of set dancing was rejected in favor of the invented style of céilí dancing—a child born of nationalist fervor and moral purity. The advent of competition introduced unparalleled virtuosity into Irish step dance. Competition, in turn, set the stage for *Riverdance* by generating a seemingly endless supply of highly trained dancers who had never before had a public performance outlet where they could share their art. Chapter 3 examines the leap that Irish step dance made from the competition stage to the commercial stage one hundred years after the Gaelic revival in the form of *Riverdance.*

CHAPTER III

RIVERDANCE—HEARTBEAT OF THE WORLD

heel against floor and wave upon shore

heartbeat of the world

—*Riverdance* souvenir program note

A row of three male Irish step dancers in crisp white oxfords, suspenders, and fitted black pants barrel across the stage to playfully confront a pair of male tap dancers who are dressed more casually, in black T-shirts and baggy black trousers. The different costumes emphasize the dancers' contrasting styles: the Irish step dancers maintain a rigid, vertical stance, with their arms held tightly by their sides, while the tap dancers display a more relaxed posture, with their arms swinging out in response to their fast-flying feet. So begins a scene from *Riverdance* known as "Trading Taps." It's a crowd-pleaser complete with highly virtuosic exchanges of footwork, as well as backflips and splits. Originally choreographed by Irish step dancer Colin Dunne and tap dancer Tarik Winston in 1995, the scene alludes to the Irish influence on the development of American tap dance and the blending of Irish and African American cultures in major urban areas. As the dancers up the ante with increasingly complex footwork, a narrator's voice is heard saying, "Tall and straight my mother taught me, this is how we dance. Tall and straight my father taught me, this is how we dance. Battering feet on the city street. In pools of light on street corners." The audience laughs as the theme of "tall and straight"

becomes a parody. The tap dancers pin their arms to their sides, raise their shoulders to their ears, and pucker their lips, imitating the Irish step dancers. Conversely, the Irish step dancers poke fun at the tappers by wildly flinging their arms about.

Several scenes in *Riverdance* feature a similar contrast between flamenco and Irish step dance (though without the parody). Reflecting upon such comparisons of percussive forms from a choreographic standpoint, I am cognizant of the lingering ramifications of the Gaelic revival, which led Irish step dancers to thoroughly disavow arm movements even though other rhythmic styles do not. It is insufficient to attribute Irish step dance's lack of arm movements to its overarching focus on footwork. Certainly, tap and flamenco are similarly focused on footwork, yet the arms are not restricted. Furthermore, Irish step dance is not entirely percussive. Its soft-shoe style is aerial, graceful, and also devoid of arm movements (even though it is akin to ballet and Scottish Highland dance—forms where arm movements are choreographed). Indeed, observing tap dance and Irish step dance side by side brings the impact of the Gaelic revival on establishing a "tall and straight" aesthetic for Irish step dance fully into the spotlight.

Of the many poetic lines that are sprinkled throughout the official *Riverdance* souvenir program, the description "heel against floor and wave upon shore; heartbeat of the world" captures the show's message most succinctly. Serving primarily as a showcase for percussive Irish step dance, *Riverdance* nevertheless features both tap dance and flamenco, thereby capitalizing upon the widespread appeal of rhythmic dance—a genre that is alluded to in the phrase "heel against floor." The diverse dancers in *Riverdance* wind their way through a loose narrative of emigration, visualized as a "wave upon the

shore." As described in the *Riverdance* souvenir program, through the meeting of disparate dance styles they find that "the totality of human experience and expression is greater even than the sum of its many diverse parts." Emigration is further contextualized as an experience that gives birth to new dance styles and, ultimately, to a renewed sense of community.

In the context of *Riverdance*, the "heartbeat of the world" is understood to be both the powerful force of rhythm and the creative energy that is sparked by the intermingling of different cultures. In this way, *Riverdance* manages to be both distinctly Irish and overwhelmingly inclusive at the same time. With a loose narrative that is rooted in Irish music, song, and dance, the show epitomizes Irish cultural pride both at home and among the seventy million members of global Irish diaspora. At the same time, *Riverdance* intermingles not only flamenco and tap but also Russian folk dance, a gospel choir, and a jazz musician. *Riverdance* is a variety show, with something for everyone. The universal appeal of rhythm and the heartwarming concept of creating community through cultural expression thread the disparate acts together. *Riverdance* is both an embodiment of Irish nationalism and a celebration of global multiculturalism.

This delicate, yet extremely well-crafted, simultaneity accounts for *Riverdance*'s astonishing global popularity. Since its inception in 1995, the show has traveled over 600,000 miles (or to the moon and back)! *Riverdance* has been seen by over twenty-five million people in 450 venues throughout forty countries and across four continents. Furthermore, it has played to a television audience of nearly two billion people. Having wrapped up a three-year farewell tour of North America in 2010 (during which time the

show returned to every city that it had previously played), *Riverdance* producers have since brought the show to new markets in China, South Africa, and Argentina, among other countries. Such performance statistics are even more staggering in light of the fact that the show began modestly—as a brief, "one-off" interval act during the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest.

Interval Act

Riverdance's phenomenal commercial success surprised even coproducer Moya Doherty. In a 1997 interview with Hainer for *USA Today*, Doherty describes the phenomenon: "It started out like a stone that rolled along gathering Irish moss. Now, it's a boulder that gathers up everything in its way." As a producer for Raidió Teilifis Éireann, or RTÉ, Ireland's national television station, Doherty was hired to oversee the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest and its live broadcast from Dublin's Point Theatre alongside the River Liffey. Searching for an interval act that would link the two sections of the contest, namely, the performance of song entries and their adjudication, Doherty turned to Irish step dance. In a profile by Eileen Battersby for *The Irish Times*, the producer explains her vision: "I wanted Irish dance to feature in the Eurovision show. We were following over twenty songs and I did not want another singer."

In *Riverdance: The Phenomenon*, Barra Ó Cinnéide cites a memorandum that Doherty wrote to Liam Miller, RTÉ's director of programs, wherein she outlined her plans to channel the allure of rhythm:

> From a point of darkness . . . enter row upon row of hard-shoe Irish dancers and they pound their way downstage towards audience and camera. They stream apart

> to the dramatic entrance of the star dancers who perform their energetic routine. Gradually, the tempo increases, bringing all the ingredients together in an exhilarating climax. (Doherty qtd. in Ó Cinnéide 70)

Doherty's background in television likely contributed to her vision of an Irish step dance interval act. For maximum visual and aural impact, she filled the stage with relentless rows of hard-shoe dancers confidently approaching the television and live audiences head on. Although frequently manifest in Broadway chorus lines, such bold use of rhythmic unison movement was a novel choreographic concept for Irish step dance. Before *Riverdance*, ensemble dances were typically executed in the soft-shoe, or nonpercussive, style of Irish step dance and featured interlacing figure patterns, as opposed to unison movement directed toward an audience—let alone a television camera. Hard-shoe dancing was primarily reserved for solo displays of virtuosic skill during competition.

Doherty deftly combined the choreographic device of rhythmic unison movement with the attraction of virtuosic solos when planning the interval act for the Eurovision song contest. In doing so, she turned to two Irish American dancers, Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, who were well known in the competitive Irish step dance circuit and had experience performing as soloists alongside traditional Irish music bands such as the Chieftains and Green Fields of America. In such contexts, solo step dancers are typically special highlights of the program—appreciated for their virtuosity—but given only periodic appearances in what are primarily traditional Irish music concerts.

Riverdance opened a world of choreographic possibility for Butler and Flatley because it shifted the focus from the band to the dancers. As a highly produced dance

extravaganza, *Riverdance* featured a musical score that was created especially for the show—as opposed to faithful renditions of traditional Irish tunes. The production also incorporated large-scale set designs, sleek voiceovers, and multiple costume changes—not to mention the now infamous chorus line of hard-hitting step dancers.

The anthology *Close to the Floor: Irish Dance from the Boreen to Broadway*, edited by Mick Moloney, J'aime Morrison, and Colin Quigley, contains excerpts from a panel discussion titled "The Impact of *Riverdance* on Irish Dance," which was held at New York University's Glucksman Ireland House as part of a larger conference on percussive dance, also titled *Close to the Floor*, that marked *Riverdance*'s tenth anniversary in 2005. Therein Butler describes the experience of working with *Riverdance* composer Bill Whelan:

> It was an opportunity to work directly with a musician, which I'd never done before . . . so it was a great time of experimenting and it was incredibly rewarding to be able to say, "You know what, I just want that a little bit slower, because that means I can jump higher, or the leg is going to go higher, or I can actually put weight in this turn instead of just flicking it around really quickly." (qtd. in Moloney, Morrsion, Quigley 100)

Whelan has been celebrated for pushing the boundaries of Irish music conventions in his composition for the Eurovision interval act by contrasting the lilting 9/8 Irish rhythms found in Butler's opening slip jig solo with more driving Bulgarian rhythms in alternating 6/8 and 4/4 bars as the piece approaches its climax.[vii]

Whelan's composition also included a thunderous call-and-response section featuring Flatley and several drummers. Having set a Guinness World Record for tapping an astonishing thirty-five beats a second, Flatley was known as a remarkable virtuoso. Yet he also performed his own style of dance that incorporated elements of Irish step, flamenco, and tap dance in his appearances with the Chieftains, Green Fields of America, and other bands. Ó Cinnéide explains that Flatley rejected the Gaelic revival's disavowal of arm movements in Irish step dance and comments that "he was uncomfortable with having his hands pinned continually by his sides and he recalled that the Irish dancers he remembered from his childhood visits to Sligo had moved their arms about freely" (96).

For his Eurovision solo, Flatley devised a dramatic entrance that fully engaged all his limbs. Barreling across the stage with a series of rapid-fire steps and sharp, high kicks, Flatley answered the call-and-response of the drums with complex, syncopated footwork. Most notable, however, were his outstretched arms as they spliced through the space and complimented the movements of this legs. His billowing, bright-blue shirt accentuated his arm gestures and declared a bold new vision of freedom for the Irish step dancer's arms and torso.

Halfway through the Eurovision Song Contest on April 30, 1994, the *Riverdance* interval act was broadcast to an estimated television audience of 300 million viewers across Europe. Butler, Flatley, and their chorus of hard-hitting Irish step dancers left the multinational crowd of three thousand at the Point Theatre on their feet. Doherty and her team soon began plans to expand the interval act into an evening-length production. *Riverdance: The Show* opened in Dublin in February 1995.

Emerald Globe

The expansion of *Riverdance* to a full-length show was undertaken with the global market in mind. From the very beginning, Doherty intended to create a show that presented a bold image of contemporary Ireland, but that was also relatable enough to reach a worldwide audience. Ó Cinnéide describes her vision of the full-length show:

> Pulled out of our past and cemented in our present. . . . I didn't want to put on a small show. . . . I wanted to invest in something that had a future. I wanted it to be confident, to have skill, to have scale, and to have boldness. Now, I want to carry that out into the world market. (84)

Doherty's twin goals of presenting a fresh vision of contemporary Ireland that also had mass appeal led her to package the show for easy consumption, with Russian, Spanish, and American elements introduced to satisfy markets beyond Ireland. A further consideration was the producers' concern that the form of Irish step dance was too limited to sustain an evening-length production by itself. In *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre*, Sweeney cites a particularly telling quote from the *Riverdance* website:

> The problem is that it is difficult to create and maintain a lively choreographic form out of Irish step dancing, which has a limited vocabulary, rigid arms, a stiff upper-body and an overall tendency towards exuberance rather than emotion. It is something like an Irish stew—awfully good in itself but as a constant diet it could get monotonous, which is why it was so smart to introduce into the mix Spanish Flamenco and American tap dance, two dance forms with which the Irish steps have much in common, even to the extent of actual historical links. (135)

A number of critics agreed with the producers' assessment of Irish step dance's choreographic limitations and found fault even with the few unadulterated Irish step dance scenes in the full-length show. In a column for *New York* magazine, dance critic Tobi Tobias revealed her bias against staged folk dancing, writing,

> Irish step dancing doesn't transfer easily to the stage. Its vocabulary, limited and inexpressive, is meant for doing, not viewing. . . . The form doesn't inherently lend itself to the development of narrative and character, the elements on which a persuasive theatrical experience is often built. (nymag.com)

In London's *Sunday Times*, David Dougill echoed Tobias's opinion: "As thrilling as the big showpiece numbers are, the dance vocabulary is very repetitious" (21).

Rather than continuing with the creative experiments that led to the celebrated interval act of the Eurovision Song Contest—such as Doherty's use of rhythmic unison movement, Flatley's exploration of arm movements, and Butler's close collaboration with the composer—the producers believed that the form of Irish step dance was limited and opted to stage a variety show with a loose narrative in order to appeal to a mass audience.

The first half of *Riverdance* represents the roots of Ireland's Celtic heritage and links the origins of Irish step dance with natural elements such as the sun, thunder, fire, water, and earth. The second half of the show begins with a focus on Irish emigration that spreads into a general theme of worldwide dislocation and the important role that dance plays in maintaining cultural identity. Part 2 mixes a variety of cultural dance forms, including tap, flamenco, and Russian folk dance. The show's finale is titled "*Riverdance*

International" and depicts a return to Ireland by the children of the diaspora. As the *Riverdance souvenir* program claims, "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" (2).

During the performance, the program notes are supplemented with narrated poetic language that is at times projected onto large backdrops. Phrases such as "Fire—comfort or fear; enemy or friend" and "Before books, before writing—dance" exercise a vague poetic license that allows the viewer to read a variety of meanings into the show and ensures broad appeal. In addition to a variety of dance styles, *Riverdance*'s multidisciplinary cast of eighty includes a traditional Irish music ensemble, a choir of Irish singers, a jazz musician, and a gospel choir. Through a synthesis of dance, music, song, and poetry (both spoken and written), *Riverdance* employs diverse tactics in order to reach as broad an audience as possible.

The visual appeal of *Riverdance*'s set design also resonates with audiences—especially in cases where there is a language barrier. Ó Cinnéide notes that after the show toured throughout Europe and in the major English-speaking countries, the producers wanted to test the Asian market. *Riverdance* played to a Japanese audience of approximately seventy thousand in Tokyo and Osaka in March 1999. Ó Cinnéide cites set designer Robert Ballagh's remarks regarding the show's favorable reception in Japan:

> Some of the imagery seemed to work very well. Anyone who has seen *Riverdance* knows that there are images of rising suns. There is also a golden paneled image that is a traditional Japanese look. It wasn't designed specifically with the Japanese shows in mind, but they integrated very well. (90)

Ballagh's example may well be chalked up to serendipity, but it is also further evidence that *Riverdance* deliberately presents itself as both distinctly Irish and completely universal. In this way, *Riverdance* targets multiple audiences—the native Irish, the seventy million members of the worldwide Irish diaspora, and the enormous global audience that is drawn to the appeal of rhythmic unison movement. Indeed, given Ireland's diminutive size and relatively small population, producers were forced to look outside Ireland for ticket buyers if they wanted the show to have longevity.[viii] In *Dancing at the Crossroads*, Helena Wulff notes:

> *Riverdance* permeated Ireland for many years . . . from sound bites in pubs and sight bites of dancing . . . on television, to debate in culture pages in the newspapers. The show was all over the island, yet . . . very little in the form of live performance since virtually all of the shows took place on foreign tours. (121)

The choreographic device of rhythmic unison movement was perhaps the most critical factor in *Riverdance*'s extraordinary commercial success. The show capitalized upon what Doherty referred to as the elemental language of rhythm and the visceral impact that it has on the viewer. In a column penned for the *Riverdance* souvenir program, critic Fintan O'Toole described the audience's reaction:

> When *Riverdance* first opened in Dublin, you could hear, even above the pounding feet and the swirling music, the audience gasping for breath. And then an explosion of shouts and whoops as all that air burst out again in a wave of wonderment. It was, of course, the sheer force and energy of the dancing and the rapture of the music, the fantastic sight of so many bodies in motion. But there

> was something else as well, some long-submerged emotion breaking the surface and gulping in the oxygen. (3)

O'Toole pinpoints *Riverdance*'s unique ability to be simultaneously Irish and universal. The clever use of rhythmic unison movement inspired a powerful visceral reaction in the audience. Indeed, the first performance of the evening-length production of *Riverdance* was met with a standing ovation that lasted for almost thirty minutes (Wulff 111). Yet *Riverdance* also struck a deeper chord that was emblematic of a particular sociopolitical moment in Irish history.

Meaning Making

Riverdance's famous percussive chorus line, featuring youthful dancers in short black dresses and sleek black pants, reversed the public's previous associations of Irish step dance practice with inward-looking nationalism, oppressive Catholicism, and widespread emigration. Indeed, *Riverdance* was not born in a vacuum. It was part of an Irish renaissance that began with the export of traditional music in the seventies and accelerated when Ireland joined the European Economic Community in 1973. That alliance, coupled with low corporate tax rates, nurtured more than a decade of unparalleled economic growth from the mid-nineties to 2007. In 1994, the very same year of the fateful Eurovision Song Contest, economists created the term "Celtic Tiger" to describe Ireland's robust economy.[ix] The commercial success that *Riverdance* achieved during this time period became a fitting symbol of Ireland's ascendance to the world stage both culturally and economically. In "Stepping into Footprints: Tradition and the Globalization of Irish Dance," Michael Seaver notes, "If the phrase 'Celtic Tiger' helped

to define the newfound confidence, then *Riverdance* embodied it“ (7). Bold choreographic choices—such as Flatley’s innovative arm gestures and Doherty’s relentless rows of hard-shoe step dancers approaching the audience head on—projected a fresh, vital image of Ireland’s young and upcoming generation on the brink of the twenty-first century.

Riverdance’s theme of returning to the homeland reflected the fact that Ireland’s historical role as an emigrant nation changed during the nineties. Thanks to Ireland’s robust economy, many young people were able to find work at home, while thousands who had left Ireland during the eighties returned. In addition, Ireland experienced an influx of immigrants from other countries. In *Culture and Customs of Ireland*, Margaret Scanlan reports, “The 1990s saw real demographic change; in 1996, only 26,100 Irish residents claimed birth outside Ireland. . . . By 2001, the Republic had nearly 97,200 such residents, mostly immigrants from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa” (9).

Ireland’s increasingly diverse population and its emergence as a leading European economy are themes that are reflected within *Riverdance*’s narrative and are also projected by its success. In *Competitive Irish Dance*, Hall explains:

> The theatrical argument of *Riverdance* is that Irish dancing need not be so narrowly defined, and that it takes its place on a world stage as much through similarities and borrowings as it does through differences and distinctions. In that sense, it is a timely message particularly in Europe where the construction of political unity in cultural diversity was and is a current and potent theme. (126)

Writing in the *Riverdance: The Show; Official Programme,* Irish composer Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin echoes Hall's assertion that the show's message was timely. He remarks, "I think it significant that *Riverdance* found its premiere on Eurovision before a vast European audience. Here was music not just for a new Ireland, but for a new, emerging Europe" (12). Indeed, Whelan's unconventional score, with its mixture of traditional Irish rhythms and Eastern European time signatures signified a new era of European interculturalism.

Ireland's embrace of Europe and its heightened visibility in both the economic and the cultural arenas signaled a reconceptualization of the insular national identity that had been fostered during the Gaelic revival. As John Ardagh writes in *Ireland and the Irish: Portrait of a Changing Society,* the global success of *Riverdance* suggests that "patriotism is taking new forms—with less looking backwards and more looking . . . to a new outside world, a new future. For many of [the Irish], this future is spelt Europe" (9).[x] Ardagh further asserts that the popularity of *Riverdance* indicates that Ireland is no longer simply absorbing dominant Anglo-American culture. He asserts, "Of course, Anglo-American pressures remain great, but the Irish now have more faith that they are not merely passive consumers of this fodder, but can also contribute their own culture on the world stage" (11). Reviews of the show helped to create the perception of Ireland as a global cultural contributor with headlines ranging from "Now It's an Emerald Globe," by Nadine Meisner; to "A Spectacle to Touch All Hearts and All Shores," by John Brophy; to "*Riverdance* Show Set to Sweep the World," by Declan Hassett, which all appeared during the week of the show's premiere in February 1995 in *The Irish Times, The Irish*

Press, and *The Cork Examiner*, respectively. Interestingly, the critics' headlines predicted world domination during the very first week of *Riverdance*'s premiere performances—a further indication of the heightened Irish confidence that was felt during this sociopolitical moment.

Critics are also responsible for promoting the perception that *Riverdance* reversed the effect of religion on the form of Irish step dance. Whereas during the 1920s, the Catholic Church attempted to make Irish step dance a symbol of moral purity, many reviews claim that *Riverdance* has made Irish step dancing "sexy." In an article written for *Irish America* magazine, Emer Mullins describes the performance as a "haunting, evocative, sensual mating ritual beaten out on a wooden stage by hard-shoe tap dancers." Lisa Hand, of *The Sunday Independent*, points to Flatley and Butler's duet where the pair embrace in a tight spin as the dance move that "took Irish jigs and reels out of the parish hall and on to the international stage."

As critics strove to make sense of the overnight sensation, they reinvented the significance of the event by writing and talking about it. During the mid-nineties, both the cultural sensation of *Riverdance* and economic phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger were omnipresent and their confluence was impossible to ignore. Given that the vast majority of *Riverdance*'s global audience was unfamiliar with Irish step dance, the critical voice became the voice of authority—one that produced knowledge of the form and explained the manner in which *Riverdance* upended the previous influences of emigration, nationalism, and religion on Irish step dance.

Nevertheless, not everyone interpreted *Riverdance* in the same way. Indeed, there were dissenting opinions and vociferous objections to the show. The complaints ranged from the petty (that Flatley never thanked his teachers) to the baffled (that the inclusion of the Russian folk dancers was a stretch). Critic Sonia Humphrey, writing in *The Australian* asks, "What on earth are the Russian dance troupe doing there, charming and talented as they are? And do we really need such very frequent appearances from the Flamenco dancer, able and vivacious as she is, to pay adequate tribute to the Celts' Galician origins?"

Some resented the fact that Butler and Flatley were Irish Americans, while others believed that *Riverdance*'s bold statement could have been made only *because* the stars were Irish American. During the panel mentioned earlier, which resulted in the anthology *Close to the Floor*, Irish step dance instructor Niall O'Leary—who was born in Dublin, but has been based in New York City for the past twenty years—remarked, "There was a certain amount of begrudgery in Ireland about the fact that there were Americans claiming the lead in *Riverdance*" (Moloney et al. 85). During the very same panel, however, in an allusion to the work of early Broadway stars such as the Irish American George M. Cohan, Mark Howard, the artistic director of Chicago's Trinity Irish Dance Company, countered, "The idea of Irish stage dance didn't get invented for five minutes at Eurovision. This is very much an Irish American thing . . . so, when you say that people in Ireland are not always happy that Jean and Michael were from America—it couldn't have happened unless Jean and Michael were from there" (93).

Other critics appreciated the show but believed that the wild reaction was overblown. Wulff quotes critic Seona MacReamoinn of Ireland's *Sunday Tribune* as saying, "I don't think it was as radical and revolutionary as many people claimed in the beginning. People just went hysterical! I kept thinking, 'Have these people ever watched television?'" (116). When MacReamoinn published a critical article about the show, she received many negative responses and exclaimed, "It was as if I had been disloyal to Ireland!" (116). Such vitriolic reaction to critical appraisals of the work is a further indication of the massive hold that *Riverdance* had on the Irish public imagination. Nevertheless, popular claims that *Riverdance* reflected an increasingly diverse Ireland and that it celebrated the Celtic Tiger were gradually undercut by the realities of racism and economic inequity that surfaced in real life.

Meanwhile, other critics appreciated the original Eurovision Song Contest interval act but were disappointed by the evening-length production. As Seaver explains:

> The self-confidence of the seven-minute original disappeared in the expanded evening-length show as a narrative was introduced that depicted Irish people leaving a land ravaged with famine to find prosperity in the United States. This post-colonial victimhood, absent in the original, was at odds with a forward-thinking "Celtic Tiger" Ireland, and people were sensitive to non-contemporaneous depictions of the country. (9)

Despite his glowing review of the audience's initial reaction to *Riverdance* as printed in the show's souvenir program, O'Toole found the dramatic coherence of the full length show to be weak and he balked at the commercialization of the form. In "More Broadway

Than Bunratty," an article for *The Irish Times* on the occasion of the show's tenth anniversary, O'Toole notes, "*Riverdance* has as much to do with industry as with art. . . . If what we wanted . . . was a souped-up version of traditional culture which would protect us from corporate marketing and globalization, the show isn't just a failure, it's a betrayal."

The ramrod-straight line of Irish step dancers moving in precise rhythmic unison was a critical part of the Eurovision interval act. Given the producers' shift toward a variety show inclusive of a wide range of dance, music, and song styles, however, the unison line of percussive Irish step dancers appears just twice in the evening-length show—for a total of approximately five minutes over the course of two hours. I am not suggesting that the infamous line should appear more often in the course of the production, as that would likely undermine its choreographic power. But the producers missed an opportunity to continue to experiment within the form of Irish step dance, before dismissing it as analogous to Irish stew and looking to other dance forms—such as tap, flamenco, or Russian folk dance—to flesh out the evening-length production.

Marketing

The brief, but memorable, segment of rhythmic unison choreography has become synonymous with *Riverdance* in the minds of the general public largely through the show's televised marketing campaign. As Wulff explains, "The effect of this long line was clearly crucial for the success of the show. . . . It could be packaged into easily recognizable sound and sight bites and played time after time on television and radio" (113). That the long line of Irish dancers has been imitated and parodied in numerous

commercials and late-night comedy shows only serves to make it more recognizable. "Riverdancing" has entered our lexicon as a coined term that has become so synonymous with *Irish dancing* that it has actually surpassed it in common usage—much in the way of *Kleenex* and *tissue*. I am frequently asked whether I teach "Riverdancing."

Given Doherty's background as an RTÉ producer, it is not surprising that the show mounted an extensive televised marketing campaign. Doherty sold a *Riverdance* video early on because she realized that many potential ticket buyers would be unfamiliar with Irish step dance. Before *Riverdance* tickets go on sale in a new city, a televised version of the show inevitably plays on the local PBS station, raising interest even in cities without large Irish enclaves. In addition to televised marketing, *Riverdance* has used sponsorship deals with prominent Irish companies, such as Allied Irish Bank and Dairygold foods, to keep itself in the public eye. Further commodification of the show is evidenced by an array of souvenir products such as DVDs, CDs, posters, and T-shirts and, most recently, by a *Riverdance* iPhone app.

Impelled by growing consumer demand, the show began to clone itself in 1996. Flatley's abrupt departure from the show over a contract dispute the previous fall enabled producers to develop a generic brand in the place of what had originally been a star vehicle. Originally, Flatley and Butler were featured prominently in the advertising for *Riverdance: The Show*'s 1995 premiere in Dublin. As Ó Cinnéide explains, the marketing materials were revised once the show began to tour internationally:

> In America, the "product" was comparatively unknown. Therefore, there was no pre-existing association among consumers. This has resulted in marketing efforts

> to create a generic product, i.e., the capacity to clone products that will satisfy the needs and want of all consumers. The program and advertising displays for Britain and America again show two dancing figures; they have now lost their distinctive features, being purposely blurred, thus allowing any couple to replace Butler and Flatley and thereby creating a generic product. (149)

After Flatley's departure, Colin Dunne, a championship dancer from Birmingham, replaced him. When Butler left the show in 1997, Dubliner Eileen Martin stepped into her role. By that time, there were three *Riverdance* troupes simultaneously crisscrossing the globe, in addition to a "Flying Squad" reserved for promotional events. The troupes are not first, second, or third casts, however. All are supposed to be equally proficient. As Wulff explains, "Dance coordinators see to it that they are keeping up the standard, as well as the uniformity of execution. Although there are many different styles, not least regional, in Irish dancing, *Riverdance* is supposed to look the same" (112).

Uniformity

Riverdance is also supposed to sound the same at every performance and technology is employed to ensure uniformity of sound and the visual impression of perfect coordination. Prerecorded backing tracks are used for the ensemble numbers and soloists wear small microphones in their shoes. Considering the pressure of performing nightly for sold-out crowds in very large theaters, where audience members not only have paid for expensive tickets but also likely bring extraordinarily high expectations because of the hype surrounding the show, it is not surprising that backing tracks are used to ensure sonic uniformity.

Nevertheless, the use of backing tracks seriously compromises both the premise and the promise of "live" performance. In her article "'Sound-Dance;' Mapping the Acoustic Spaces of Irish Dance," J'aime Morrison critiques *Riverdance's* use of backing tracks. She points to a review by *New York Times* critic John Rockwell that proclaims, "Bodies somewhat optional," and she goes on to pose a number of questions:

> In the push for greater volume and consistency of sound, do we lose something else? As Irish dance migrates from door, to floor, to ship, street corner, vaudeville house, Radio City and the world stage how does the texture of the sound change? How does this change our hearing? Will we still be able to sense the "distant music," the historical echoes and cadences that shape a tradition? What's happened when a dance show that began as an explosion of movement and sound comes to be viewed as a disembodied experience? (65)

Morrison's queries, especially the trajectory that she traces of Irish step dance's migration from a social context to the world stage, allude to an overarching concern that globalization will lead to homogenization and loss of individualized local practice. In the *Irish Times*, O'Toole asks, "Did *Riverdance* suck energy from the older, subtler, more local world of traditional Irish music? Undoubtedly" ("More"). *Riverdance*'s use of dance coordinators and backing tracks to ensure uniformity of sight and sound indicate that the needs of large-scale productions do indeed homogenize regional styles, not to mention the local practice of improvising dance performance to live music.

Globalization

Other scholars, however, have found that globalization has brought welcome attention to local practice. In "Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global, and Local," Catherine Foley asserts that in reaction to the global representation of Irish step dance in *Riverdance*, the local step dance practices in rural Ireland are also in moderate demand for concerts, workshops, and television programs. "This current popularity results from . . . the perception of them as bearers of an older system of values and sentiments, custodians of a rural, more integrated, and autonomous way of life," Foley writes. "They and their dances can be located within the framework of the familiar, as opposed to the unfamiliarity of the global; in effect, they provide the *illusion* of stability" (41).

Seaver views the global and the local as mutually beneficial and cites Roland Robertson's term "glocalization," a word that combines *global* and *localization*, to explain their engagement with each other. He writes, "Debunking the common assumption of the global overriding the local, the theory of glocalization proposes that the local, or periphery, absorbs ideas from the global, or center. Also there is a flow of ideas and practices from the periphery to the center" (10). *Riverdance*'s relationship to the local Irish step dancing school is a clear example of glocalization. Local Irish step dancing schools train dancers for competition and *Riverdance*'s casting agents often handpick competitive champions for a spot in the show. Meanwhile, *Riverdance*'s success has caused a boom in enrollment in local step Irish dancing schools. In "Before *Riverdance*: A Brief History of Irish Step Dancing in America," Marion Casey cites the case of Long

Island's Petri School of Irish Dance. According to Casey, sisters Lisa and Karen Petri opened their doors in 1991 (pre-*Riverdance*) with just four students. Seven years later, after riding the wave of *Riverdance*, they had 250 students (423).

The local Irish step dancing school has also gone global, as evidenced in the rise of increasingly diverse student populations and in the emergence of Irish step dancing schools in numerous worldwide locations. In Casey's article, Lisa Petri describes the ethnic makeup of her current student body: "The kids we have now are not just Irish. We have Asian, Hispanic, and Italian kids. Even the kids who have Irish names do not have Irish-born parents and the majority of their parents never danced. Most of these kids saw *Riverdance* . . . and this piqued their interest" (423).

Meanwhile, Angelika Masero documents the recent emergence of Irish step dancing schools across the globe in her 2010 thesis, *The Changes in Irish Dance since* Riverdance. Masero notes that in the wake of *Riverdance*,

> even countries unaffected by the Irish diaspora and without a strong Irish ancestry started opening Irish dance schools. China, Mexico, Argentina, Norway, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, and Russia all have Irish dance schools certified with *An Coimisiún* [the Irish Dancing Commission] (14).

Masero also cites the specific case of Japanese dancer Taka Hayashi, who, upon seeing *Riverdance* at the age of twenty-eight in his hometown of Tokyo, promptly quit his information technology job, withdrew $100,000 in savings, and emigrated to Ireland in order to learn how to Irish step dance. "Despite being told he was too old, he practiced

eight hours a day, and two years later earned a spot in the *Riverdance* troupe at the 2003 Special World Olympics," Masero reports. "Now, he and his wife run the Irish Dance Academy in Tokyo" (15).

Education

Riverdance has also led to the teaching of Irish step dance in mainstream ballet, tap, and jazz studios. Today, it is not uncommon to find "Irish" classes as a genre of dance offered alongside hip-hop or flamenco. In 2009, I wrote an article for *Dance Studio Life* magazine titled "Fired Up for Irish Dance: Post-*Riverdance* This Fleet-Footed Dancing Goes Mainstream." Many of the teachers whom I interviewed during my research were eager to point out that Irish step dance training offered numerous benefits for other styles of dance, as well. As Christine Morrison, instructor at DNE School of Dance in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, explained in an interview with me, "In Irish dance, we concentrate on listening to the timing of the music so much that it really helps with tap dance training. . . . Also, because we spend so much time on our toes in Irish dance, it really benefits the girls who are going into ballet class."

In addition to infiltrating the curriculum of mainstream dance studios, Irish step dance was ushered into higher education in 1994 with the founding of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, which offers both bachelor's and master's programs in Irish dance (see Chapter 1). Irish Studies programs in American universities have also demonstrated a nascent interest in Irish step dance, as evidenced by the launch of my own Irish step dance course at Hofstra University in 2009

and by several guest lecturer invitations I've received from Manhattanville College, Lehman College, and New York University, among others.

For Hofstra University's Irish Studies program, I developed a course, Irish Steps and Studies, that is cross-listed for both dance and Irish Studies credit. As its name suggests, the course combines theory and practice. We spend half our time in the studio learning a range of Irish dance styles, including sean-nós, céilí, set dance, and solo forms. An equal amount of attention is given to discussions of the social history of Irish dance and to reading and writing about Irish dance.

Meanwhile, contemporary dance in Ireland flourished during the mid-nineties and later, seen in the founding of the Dublin Fringe Festival in 1995 and the Dublin International Dance Festival in 2001. Several of the major contemporary dance companies, including Dance Theatre of Ireland and Cos Ceim, opened new dance studios during this period. These developments are not necessarily linked to *Riverdance*—they are primarily the result of increased government arts funding connected with the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger. Nevertheless, *Riverdance* undoubtedly raised the profile of dance in Ireland and presumably built a larger audience for dance in general.

Riverdance not only raised the visibility of dance within Ireland; it also established the model of an Irish step dancer as a professional performer (as opposed to an amateur competitor or a professional teacher). To date, over fifteen hundred Irish step dancers have been employed by *Riverdance.* As these dancers negotiate the demands of touring and the inevitability of injury, new knowledge of the Irish step dancing body and

its particular demands has emerged. As Darrah Carr Dance company member and former Riverdance performer Timothy Kochka explained in an interview with me:

> This generation of Riverdance teachers—dancers who left the show and went on to teach—are much more open-minded about how they run their schools. In *Riverdance*, we had an official warm-up before every show. We had a physiotherapist educating us on injury prevention and conditioning for Irish step dancing. And just being around the Russian ballet dancers and the flamenco dancers gave us an opportunity to learn. Before, dance class was just—throw your shoes on and come do your routine. Now, Irish dancing is so much healthier. Teachers offer Pilates and conditioning. The form has gotten so athletic today that it would be impossible to sustain if not for that conditioning. (24 Aug. 2014)

Kochka's comments reflect the inevitable evolution of the form caused by the nature of competition. Yet he describes how that virtuosic advancement is being matched and informed by knowledge from the performance sector infiltrating the competition world. Issues of body maintenance and injury prevention mark yet another inroad for Irish step dance and academia. As of this writing, former *Riverdance* performer Edel Quinn is a program leader of the Master's in Dance Science program at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. Two of my company members have recently completed their master's degrees there and are publishing research that they conducted specifically with and for Irish step dancers.

As Irish step dance moves into a wide variety of arenas—including global performance, higher education, and dance science, many research questions arise. What

does the future hold for Riverdancers after *Riverdance*? How do dancers negotiate the interplay of the global and the local within Irish step dance? What additional possibilities exist for dance making within the realm of Irish step dance? How do dancers themselves feel about the impact of *Riverdance* on the form, function, and context of Irish step dance?

While there are undeniably strong and diverse opinions regarding *Riverdance* among dancers, choreographers, scholars, and critics, the weight of its impact is undeniable. Since its inception over twenty years ago, *Riverdance* has seemingly had a Midas touch. The show has garnered millions of fans around the world and has inspired thousands of students from diverse cultural backgrounds to learn the once insular art of Irish step dance. It has dramatically altered the public perception of Irish step dance and has spawned a lucrative industry for professional Irish step dancers. Throughout its global journey, *Riverdance* has inspired both euphoric celebration and intense debate both within and outside the Irish step dance community. The enormous amount of interest and discourse that *Riverdance* has generated brings to mind the comments of *Irish Independent* columnist Jim Gallagher. In an article describing the Eurovision Song Contest, the birthplace of *Riverdance*, Gallagher wrote, "It's perhaps the most celebrated carnival of kitsch of them all, Eurovision. Like it or loathe it, it is virtually impossible to ignore it" (qtd. in Ó Cinnéide 58). Indeed, the very same could be said for *Riverdance.*

CHAPTER IV

A METHODOLOGY OF MAKING

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,

Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we know the dancer from the dance?

—William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children"

So read the final lines of Irish poet William Butler Yeats's 1928 masterpiece "Among School Children." As a dancer and choreographer, I appreciate the lyricism of the lines. As a qualitative researcher, I find them instructive. Yeats's train of thought is analogous to the process of qualitative inquiry. He observes a phenomenon in a real-world setting, "O chestnut-tree"; describes it in rich detail as "great-rooted blossomer"; and frames a line of questioning that allows for multiple interpretations by asking, "Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" In the next line, Yeats alludes to a social setting wherein a body is "swayed to music" and a "brightening glance" is perhaps directed toward another. Finally, by asking, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Yeats invites the reader to question *how* art is experienced and *how* meaning is constructed among art maker, art object, and the audience—the proverbial "we" in his concluding question. Thus, in Yeats's few lyrical lines, one finds the underpinnings of qualitative research design: the observation of a phenomenon in a real-world, or social,

setting; the gathering of rich descriptive detail; and the development of a line of questioning that allows for multiple interpretations.

Qualitative Research Design

I entered my research as a choreographer. The emphasis on inductive thinking, the primacy of individual experience, and the need for careful observation—all crucial components of qualitative research design—were already familiar to me from my choreographic process. There are many parallels between conducting qualitative inquiry and creating choreography. In rehearsal, I strive to establish a line of inquiry via compositional tasks that engender multiple interpretations from the dancers and allow the themes of the dance to unfold as I pay close attention to the emergent details. I regard choreographic process as the embodiment of qualitative research design. And I believe that choreographic process enables one to theorize from practice.

These views led me to embark on a qualitative research study about choreographic process in Irish step dance. This dissertation features case studies of three choreographers who are committed to working primarily, though not exclusively, with Irish step dance vocabulary. My qualitative research study follows case study methodology with the goal of conducting a deep investigation of the choreographic processes of Irish-born choreographer Breandán de Gallaí and first-generation Irish American choreographer Seán Curran. The third case study involves a self-reflexive look at my own choreographic process as an American choreographer of Irish descent. The choreographers were selected based upon their self-identified interest in experimenting with Irish step dance vocabulary, as well as their differing approaches to the form. Curran

works primarily within the contemporary dance genre, de Gallaí is mainly rooted in Irish step dance techniques, and my own focus is on the fusion of contemporary and Irish step dance vocabularies.

As choreographers, the three of us are similar, however, in that we each create dances for and with ensembles.[xi] As Yeats's poem reminds us, we cannot separate the dancer from the dance. Indeed, the creative contributions of the dancers whom we work with are completely intertwined with our choreographic processes. Their bodies are the repositories for our repertory works. Thus, the dancers' insights as research participants constitute much of the rich and varied interview data in this study.

While in-depth interviews with the choreographers and dancers underpin the entire dissertation, additional data collection procedures were tailored to each case study. For example, participant observation played an important role in my investigation of Curran's work, while textual analysis of personally situated writing was critical to my understanding of de Gallaí's choreographic process. Meanwhile, the self-reflexive study of my own choreographic process adhered to the tenants of practice-led research.

According to Hazel Smith and Roger Dean, practice-led research asserts that creative work is in itself a form of research (5-25). Furthermore, the practice of creating art leads to specific insights that can be generalized and written up as research. Practice-led research provided the rationale for including my own choreographic process as a valid case study in this dissertation. And it enabled me to theorize from the very personal to the broadly general while simultaneously bridging the troubling binary of theory and practice. I examined my own choreographic process through two distinct rehearsal periods, one with

my professional company, Darrah Carr Dance, and the other with my former students at Hofstra University. These rehearsals led to the creation of two new repertory works and provided me with rich opportunities to document, reflect upon, and theorize from my own choreographic process.

The case studies of Curran and de Gallaí also involved practice-led research in different ways. Since 2009, Curran has created two new works on Darrah Carr Dance and restaged three others. In Darrah Carr Dance's rehearsal periods with Curran, the creative act of choreography itself was the research. We explored choreographic process in Irish step dance experientially by making a new dance. To paraphrase Yeats's famous lines, one cannot separate the research from the dance. Although I was not in the self-reflexive role of choreographer during Curran's rehearsals, I was deeply immersed in the choreographic process as a participant observer.

Meanwhile, de Gallaí completed a PhD in arts practice through the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick in 2013. His creation of two new works was the research that he developed into a theoretical framework for a self-reflexive examination of his own choreographic process. De Gallaí's arts practice research provided rich data and a third in-depth case study for my investigation of choreographic process in Irish step dance.

Research Procedures

My research began in the fall of 2011 when I attended the New York premiere of de Gallaí's *Noċtú*, the first of two choreographic works that constituted his arts practice doctoral research. The subsequent publication of de Gallaí's dissertation, *Imeall-Siúl: A Choreographic Exploration of Expressive Possibilities in Irish Step Dancing*, provided a wealth of personal reflections that explored de Gallaí's choreographic process in his own words. In addition to de Gallaí's extensive dissertation, raw data included de Gallaí's analysis of interviews that he gave to other sources, performance photographs, performance footage, and a six-part Irish television series, *Dance Off*, which traced the development of *Noċtú* from early rehearsals through the premiere. Interviews with de Gallaí were conducted throughout 2014. Additional data included notes from my attendance at presentations and performances that de Gallaí gave during Dance Research Forum Ireland conferences in 2006, 2014, and 2016.

Also during the fall of 2011, I documented the choreographic process employed by Curran as he set a new work for Darrah Carr Dance for our annual season at New York City's Irish Arts Center. The work, *Dingle Diwali,* juxtaposes Irish dance percussion with vocalizations by British Indian singer Sheila Chandra. We premiered the piece in November 2011. Research continued into the fall of 2014 as we went on to premiere works by Curran for each of our annual seasons at the Irish Arts Center. Being a participant observer in Curran's choreographic process enabled me to collect raw data, which included field notes taken during rehearsal, rehearsal footage, performance footage, performance photos, and interviews with the dancers. Interviews with Curran

himself took place in the spring of 2012. Interviews with the dancers occurred between 2011 and 2014. Added to the data were previous interviews that I conducted with Curran in 2005 and a prior rehearsal process that Darrah Carr Dance had with Curran in 2009. Further data were in the form of an extensive interview that Curran gave as part of an oral history project at New York University's Ireland House in the spring of 2011.

In addition, I examined my own choreographic process during two distinct rehearsal periods. The first set of rehearsals began in the fall of 2012 when I set a new work on dance majors at Hofstra University who were enrolled in my Dance Styles course. The project culminated with a performance during the Fall Faculty Dance Concert in December 2012. Raw data included field notes taken during rehearsal, journal entries that the dancers kept throughout the rehearsal process, rehearsal footage, performance footage, and performance photos. Interviews with the dancers took place in the spring of 2013.

The second set of rehearsals commenced in the spring of 2013 when I created a new work for Darrah Carr Dance in commemoration of our fifteenth-anniversary season. We premiered the new work, *They Danced*, at the Irish Arts Center in November 2013. Raw data included my choreographer's journal, extensive self-reflexive writing, journal entries that the dancers kept throughout the rehearsal process, rehearsal footage, performance footage, and performance photos. Interviews with the dancers took place between 2013 and 2014. Additional data included a number of articles that I have written about various aspects of Irish step dance as well as interviews that I have given to a wide range of media outlets, among them radio, newspapers, and magazines, and an in-depth

interview that I gave as part of an oral history project at New York University's Ireland House in the spring of 2011.

My oral history interview was conducted by Virginia Harris, who had previously interviewed me in 2008 for a research paper on American innovations in Irish dance that she completed as a master's student in the Irish Studies program at New York University. More recently, graduate student Kathryn Holt observed Darrah Carr Dance during our fall 2013 rehearsal period. She also interviewed me, my company members, and my collaborators for her master's thesis, *Going Back: Contemporary Irish Dance Choreographers and Modern Irish Identity*, which was submitted to the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 2014. At the time of this writing, I had recently been interviewed by Eimear Kelly, a doctoral student at Queen Mary University in London. Kelly is writing her dissertation on the topic of contemporary Irish dance with a focus on practice-led research. She observed Darrah Carr Dance rehearsal and took a private lesson with me in our ModERIN style in May 2017.

My receiving inquiries to be a participant in other researchers' case studies substantiates my observation that Irish step dance choreography is embracing new directions in a post-*Riverdance* climate. I believe that continued interest from researchers about my choreographic work is indicative of a shift in the field of Irish step dance. Transcripts of the interviews that I have given also provide interesting data for my own self-reflexive research. Again, as Yeats notes, we cannot separate the dancer from the dance. In my own case study, I cannot separate the researcher from the research. Since I am unable to objectively interview myself, the transcripts of interviews that I have given

about my choreographic process serve instead as a rich and layered data set for analysis. Previous interview data enables me to understand how my own perceptions of my work have evolved. Further, it is fascinating to read the interviews that my company members have given to other researchers about Darrah Carr Dance's rehearsal process. Pairing these interview data with transcripts of the interviews that I myself have conducted with my company members offers a multifaceted look at our choreographic process.

Ethical Issues

At the same time, I must acknowledge the ethical issues that arise from the fact that I am examining the work of many close colleagues, including dancers within my own company—who are all good friends of mine—and my students. I have long-standing professional associations with my fellow choreographers. I first worked with Curran in 1999 when I assisted him on the choreography for the Broadway musical *James Joyce's "The Dead."* Meanwhile, I first met de Gallaí in 2006 when we both presented papers at the Dance Research Forum Ireland conference. Given the close nature of my relationships and professional associations, I took careful steps to protect the participants and to avoid coercion. The Institutional Review Board approved my research plan under two separate applications—one that addressed the professional artists in the study and another that addressed the students. I made clear to my research participants, both verbally and in written consent forms, that participation in the study was purely voluntary. I assured them that all dancers would be cast in the choreographic works under investigation regardless of whether or not they chose to take part in the research study. All participants reserved the right to review their interview transcripts, as well as any

photographs or video footage, and to redact any of the information therein. Moreover, the participants had the choice to remain anonymous. Privacy was further ensured by the fact that interviews were conducted in a private location agreed upon between the researcher and the participant.

The assurance of privacy was of particular importance in my research because I was granted access to rehearsals—which occur in what is usually considered to be a safe place to experiment out of view of the public eye and well before a new work is revealed to critics or to the general public. Another consideration in terms of what I could or could not disclose about a given choreographer's creative process in my dissertation were intellectual property rights. The question of intellectual property rights is relatively new in the Irish step dance community. Indeed, it was virtually nonexistent before the advent of *Riverdance* and Flatley's infamous contract disputes over choreographic copyright issues (during which time he quit the show and ultimately went on to amass a net worth of $350 million as the sole creator of *Lord of the Dance*). While my research involved projects with substantially smaller budgets, Flatley's example is a reminder that a cultural dance form, such as Irish step dance, does not simply belong to the proverbial "people." Rather, it may involve choreography that is created and owned by an individual choreographer who wants aspects of the piece to be kept private.

Researcher Bias

A second ethical concern that permeated the research design is the fact that I have an admittedly strong bias toward styles of Irish step dance that I consider to be innovative, which do not include the image of Irish dance that was made famous by

Riverdance, namely, a long line of dancers moving in precise, rhythmic unison. While this bias undoubtedly influenced my choice of case studies for this dissertation, I needed to be mindful that it did not cloud my analysis of the data. While contemplating this important distinction, I found a particularly forthright and useful example of research design in Rebecca Norwood's doctoral dissertation, *Knowing in Motion, "Rightness," and the Emergence of a Choreographic Epistemology*. Norwood explains that she began with a central belief:

> I initiated this study with the "basic conviction" that there is a distinct epistemological process inherent in choreographic practices and that it can be observed, studied and analyzed. This conviction originated in my own experiences as a choreographer and in my years of study in dance. (10)

Being mindful of her "basic conviction" enables Norwood to acknowledge her biases about dance making at the beginning of her research process. Her basic conviction shapes the criteria that she establishes for inviting participants to be part of her study. At the same time, however, Norwood is quick to point out that acknowledging her belief that there is a "distinct epistemological process inherent in choreographic practices" is not the same as theorizing about it. Indeed, the emergence of "rightness" as a theme occurs only after Norwood gathers her data. She explains, "That 'rightness' emerged from the data rather than being imposed on the data implies that I allowed the study to speak for itself in the same way that choreographers learn to allow dances to speak for themselves" (4).

Like Norwood, I have been involved with choreographic practice, specifically in the discipline of Irish step dance, for many years. I have a basic conviction that there is

something "innovative," "new," or "different" happening in the work of Irish step dance choreographers in what I refer to as a post-*Riverdance* climate. To prevent my basic conviction from becoming a premature theory, however, I strive to emulate Norwood's entry into the rehearsal process. She describes her mindset: "Rather than beginning with an existing theory which the empirical data would then prove or disprove, I entered the investigation with little more than the question, 'What's happening here?'" (12). Merely asking, "What's happening here?" is a refreshingly simple way to avoid asking leading questions during the interview process.

Interviews

Indeed, within moments of commencing my first interview, I recognized the importance of avoiding leading questions. I began my conversation with Darrah Carr Dance company member Laura Neese by asking her, "How do you define *innovation* in Irish step dance?" She replied, "I think the word *innovation* is overused and overrated" (16 Oct. 2011). In retrospect, I realized that I had assumed that Neese valued the idea of innovation in Irish step dance and defined it the same way that I do—especially because she is a dancer in my company, a company that defines itself in our mission statement and through our marketing materials as an innovative Irish step dance company.

Sharan Merriam's text *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* and Herbert and Irene Rubins's handbook, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, provided useful interview strategies for keeping researcher bias in check and encouraging participants to speak about their own experience. At the onset of each interview, I clarified terms such as *Irish step dance* and *concert dance* for the

participants so that my research topic was clearly understood. I did not, however, reveal my position or my own opinions so as not to influence my participants' responses. I proceeded to ask open-ended questions that did not mention the word *innovation* or the phrase "post-*Riverdance* climate." As evidenced by my early interview experience with Neese, asking a leading question such as "How do you define *innovation* in Irish step dance?" immediately narrows the response. It is a line of questioning akin to the deductive reasoning of quantitative research, whereby I begin with a hypothesis that Irish step dance is innovative and I look to my participants to prove that theory. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, encourage a wide range of responses. This is crucial for the inductive reasoning process of qualitative research, through which the theory emerges from the data. I asked my participants to describe their experience of choreographic process with open-ended questions such as "How do you learn phrase material in rehearsals?" or "What adjectives do you use to describe the choreography?" The dancers' observations provided a rich data set to pair with my own experience as a participant observer in rehearsal.

Participant Observation

My observation of choreographic process fell into the category of what ethnographer James Spradley describes as "complete participation" in his text *Participant Observation* (61). For Spradley, the highest level of involvement for researchers occurs when they study situations that they usually participate in. In my observing Curran's rehearsals, my level of involvement was very high, given that he was setting work on dancers within my own company. Furthermore, I fully participated in learning material in

rehearsal and in performing the finished piece. In my observing my own rehearsals, my level of involvement was even higher because I often generated the phrase material and I also observed the dancers working with that phrase material in rehearsal.

By actively participating in rehearsal and performance, I engaged in what Ann Cooper Albright describes as "physical thinking" in her essay "Tracing the Past: Writing History through the Body" (101). Albright describes her process of researching modern dance forerunner Loie Fuller by reconstructing Fuller's dances as a strategy that "mobilizes the body within the process of research and writing" and states that such research "challenges the traditional separations between academic scholarship and artistic creation . . . in short between dancing and writing" (102). Physical thinking produces an embodied knowledge that reveals another dimension of my understanding of choreographic process in Irish step dance. The physical experience of learning and performing Curran's work, or generating and performing my own choreography, adds yet another layer of data and provides a vivid experience for me to translate to the page.

To that end, I am ever mindful of Susan Foster's charge to "transpose the moved in the direction of the written" as she describes in her essay "Choreographing History" (9). In order to bridge the gap between dancing and writing, Foster asserts, in "describing bodies' movements, the writing itself must move. It must put into play figures of speech and forms of phrase and sentence construction that evoke the texture and timing of bodies in motion" (9). My having had a physical experience of both Curran's and my own choreography will hopefully enable me to describe it more vividly for the reader in the coming pages. Although I was not a participant in de Gallaí's rehearsals, his embrace of

personally situated writing for his own dissertation provided a rich description of his choreographic process for me to draw upon.[xii] The challenges and aspirations that de Gallaí describes resonated deeply with me, given my own experience in the studio and on the stage.

Furthermore, it is my aspiration that this dissertation's liberal use of personally situated writing will resonate with a broad readership. Anne Brewster champions the practice-led researcher's ability to use a personal writing style to illuminate his or her own experience and to broaden the audience for that researcher's scholarship. She urges researchers to address the general public and not just an insular community of scholars (127). In my own self-reflexive writing, I aim to speak clearly and to eschew the inscrutable language of some scholarship that I have encountered in the past. One of my overarching goals, not only for the dissertation at hand, but also for my career as a whole, is to build a larger audience for dance performance and dance writing. At the same time, however, I must not become so involved in participation that I neglect observation. Spradley offers a useful method to test one's own attention to detail. He suggests that researchers ask themselves the interview questions and generate responses based upon their field notes or, when necessary, upon new observations (123). The iterative process of observation, questioning what I have seen, and then looking again was very useful for me to employ, especially as I observed rehearsal processes that I am very familiar with—my own and that of my company members at work with Curran.

I used a two-step process when recording my observations. I found that most of what I recorded during rehearsals were the verbal shorthand, the nicknames, and the

descriptive phrases that the dancers and choreographers coined as the dance emerged. When reviewing my field notes after rehearsals, however, I found that I needed to expand upon verbal labels that we used, such as "Grand Cannon," and "the Melissa" (although if I mentioned those terms to the dancers, they would need no further explanation—they would know exactly which sections of the piece I was referring to). Hence, my researcher's journal became a further expansion of taking notes in the field.

Coding

Given the primacy of interviews in case study methodology, one of the most important forms of data analysis for my research process was transcribing the interviews. Each time that I rewound the videotape to double-check a word, I relived the interview experience and became better acquainted with the data. The videotape also recorded critical visual data; the research participants often gestured with their hands, arms, or head to illustrate a particular dance move or to emphasize a point.

Once the transcription was complete, I began the coding process. Ultimately, I found that it was easiest to digest the data by marking several cycles of coding all on the same transcript, as it enabled me to see multiple layers and connections on a single page. I experimented with a variety of coding methods when reviewing my early interviews. Eventually, I struck upon a system whereby I would read the entire transcript several times through, underlining the meaty passages in red. I then began my first cycle with line-by-line process coding. As attested in Johnny Saldaña's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, process coding uses gerunds (-*ing* words) exclusively to connote action in the data (Charmaz qtd. in Saldaña 77). Highlighting action in the data

was particularly important for understanding choreographic process, a highly physical endeavor. Furthermore, combing through the data line by line gave me a detailed picture of what the research participants were actually saying, dispelling any lingering, preconceived notions of what I wanted or expected them to say. I notated the line-by-line process coding in the margin on the right side of the page. Meanwhile, I reserved the left margin for a second round of first-cycle coding, in which I used in vivo coding.

This time, I pulled out the research participants' own words and recorded them within quotation marks. In vivo coding is particularly appropriate for studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice (Saldaña 74). Given that choreographic process is such a highly personal endeavor, it was imperative that I highlight the research participants' own words in my analysis. Furthermore, both Curran and de Gallaí are highly articulate and I felt that they were far better able to describe their own choreographic process than anyone else.

Having combed through my transcript in several ways, I moved on to second-cycle coding. For this stage, I chose to work with pattern coding, which enabled me to begin to see emergent themes and commonalities. I recorded the pattern codes in all-capital letters, drew a box around them, and placed them in the left margin. I found pattern coding to be a very useful way to begin to synthesize and summarize my data. In Curran's case, where my process coding recorded "traveling to Ireland to visit family" and my in vivo coding noted "longing for the old country," my pattern coding condensed both these codes into a single phrase, "IRISH RELATIVES."

Throughout the entire coding process, I simultaneously kept memos on separate sheets of paper. Whenever I began to ruminate about the data on the actual transcript itself, I forced myself to stop and to record my thoughts more fully in a memo. According to Kathy Charmaz, memos are freewheeling and all-encompassing. They capture ideas in the moment of realization. At the same time, memos clearly point the direction forward. While memo writing, I often came up with additional questions as well as issues that needed further clarification. I recorded these on yet another sheet of paper and saved this list for my follow-up interviews. I subjected the transcripts of my follow-up interviews to the same cycles of coding and memo writing outlined above. Memo writing enabled me to record the exciting aha moments and gave me a place to hint at the emergent themes. More coherent categories began to emerge through the cyclical process of reviewing and comparing my transcripts, pattern coding, and memos.

The next step was to map my ideas in order to visualize the categories more clearly. I experimented with Adele Clarke's messy situational map, through which the researcher brainstorms all the elements of concern to the research. I found this to be overwhelming. I had already begun to think categorically thanks to my pattern coding, so brainstorming every possibility on a messy map felt counterproductive. I jumped ahead to Clarke's model of an ordered situational map, where ideas are organized into columns with categorical subheadings (90). I found that it was useful to color-code my categories and I also realized that some categories could be combined, whereas others could be expanded. For example, categories such as "Dance Companies" and "Family" compose what Howard Becker refers to as "social worlds" or "meaning-making social groups"

(Becker qtd. in Clarke 109). Thus, when it came time for the next step in Clarke's model, relational analysis using situational maps, I decided to use a hybrid of situational and social worlds maps.

Placing each choreographer in the center of his or her own map (in keeping with Clarke's social worlds model), I surrounded these artists with clusters of categories—some categories representing social worlds and some representing situational elements. I circled each category in a different color and then drew lines between the various categories to symbolize connections between them (in keeping with Clarke's situational model). Relational analysis enabled me to combine and eliminate categories until thematic concepts began to emerge.

These thematic concepts became the building blocks of my theories regarding choreographic process in Irish step dance. Choreographic process in Irish step dance is an undertheorized area, but postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha and dance scholar Susan Foster offer fruitful alternative frameworks for understanding the historical impact of British colonialism on Irish step dance and the emerging shifts among today's Irish step dance practitioners. Chapter 5 explores the theories of Bhabha and Foster in relationship to the choreographic processes of Curran, de Gallaí, and myself.

CHAPTER V

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The act of theorizing comes out of a struggle with a certain description of certain conditions, a description that you inherit, and out of the feeling that you have to propose another construction of those conditions in order to be able to envisage 'emergent' moments of social identification or cultural enunciation.

—Homi K. Bhabha, *Artforum*

To date, most theories about choreographic process in Irish step dance have attempted to address the question, Why don't Irish step dancers use their arms? A rigidly held torso above fast-flying feet is not only one of Irish step dance's most salient features but also one of its greatest curiosities. There is no consensus among practitioners on the reason why half of the Irish step dancer's body is held in check. In a 1997 interview with Jann Parry for *Dance Magazine,* Colin Dunne, then the male lead in *Riverdance,* offered a few of the more popular explanations that are frequently bandied about within the Irish step dance community: "One theory is that the Catholic Church forbade any form of sensual expression. . . . Another is that Irish didn't want their English oppressors to know that they were having a good time, so they kept their faces glum and their upper bodies still." Dunne then added, "Or, perhaps it was because the dancing took place in confined spaces like small bars, and you couldn't move your arms without spilling someone's drink" (70).

Such theories are examples of what folklorist Donna Wyckoff-Wheeler calls "contemporary legends." She elaborates on the term in "Why a Legend? Contemporary Legends as Community Ritual":

> Contemporary legends—those generally anonymous, apocryphal, narratable, linguistic-based rumor-stories that report on ostensibly true and relatively current events often circulate within a community as part of an unconscious, creative, collective response to some community concern, even as they symbolically encode the social ambiguities that underlie that concern. (2)

During my thirty-five years of involvement with Irish step dance as a competitor, choreographer, and researcher, I have frequently heard such inherited "rumor-stories" stated as fact at Irish step dance competitions, performance talkbacks, and scholarly panels. They fail to provide sufficient explanation of why Irish step dancers keep their arms still, and the stories' repeated circulation is a disservice to the study of choreographic process in Irish step dance. Such rumor-stories simplistically encode the Irish step dancing body as both devoutly Catholic and anti-British while forcing practitioners into a space of negation—where they are not allowed to move half the body because of the oppressive forces of church and state. More nuanced theories of choreographic process in Irish step dance are warranted that acknowledge the agency of practitioners and reveal choreography as an act of generation rather than of negation.

To unpack the inherited narratives of the Irish step dance community, I turn to postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, whose theories of hybridity, the third space, and sly civility are a useful alternative framework for understanding the historical effect of

British colonialism on Irish step dance and for examining the new directions observed among practitioners in a post-*Riverdance* climate.[xiii] Bhabha's embrace of praxis links his ideas to those of scholar Susan Foster, who argues that dance making is a form of theorizing and that choreography is a cultural text that can be read. Foster champions collaborative choreographic processes and provides a lens through which to examine the generative rehearsal methods of Curran, de Gallaí, and myself in order reveal new readings of Irish step dance for both practitioners and audiences. This chapter contains an example of each artist's embodied response to the theoretical questions that drive our choreographic processes—each of which will be more fully explored in our individual case studies.

Homi K. Bhabha and Praxis

Bhabha rejects essentialist notions of cultural assimilation and focuses attention on the interplay of colonizer and colonized. Acknowledging the agency of the marginalized, even in the face of oppression, Bhabha examines the borderlines of cultural clashes as sites of complex negotiations that result in new and hybrid cultural enunciations. For Bhabha, hybridity is not a simple fusion of cultural concepts without the recognition of colonial power dynamics. Rather, hybridity emerges in what Bhabha refers to in his seminal text, *The Location of Culture*, as "a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences" (218). According to Bhabha, marginalized groups employ a number of strategies—one of these being "sly civility"—when negotiating at the borderlines.

A closer reading of Dunne's rumor-story about the Irish outwitting their British oppressors by keeping their faces glum and their upper bodies still reveals a subtle, but deeply meaningful, form of resistance that demonstrates Bhabha's concept of sly civility. In a "collective, creative response" to centuries of colonization, the Irish step dance community has set forth a narrative that empowers them within the historical framework of British authority. This is not an overt act of rebellion—indeed, keeping one's arms down by one's sides is literally the opposite of taking up arms—yet it reveals a cunning and covert method of maintaining an Irish social space and defining an Irish step dance style that escapes British surveillance (a companion rumor-story to Dunne's is that the British forbade their Irish subjects from dancing at all; the Irish therefore danced only from the waist down, so as not to be seen dancing by British soldiers as the latter patrolled Irish neighborhoods).

Bhabha draws the term *sly civility* from a sermon delivered by British missionary Archdeacon Potts in 1818 that describes Potts's experience in colonial India. Potts bemoans the native penchant for undermining colonial authority by reinterpreting biblical symbols on their own terms:

> If you urge them with their gross and unworthy perceptions of the nature and the will of God, or the monstrous follies of their fabulous theology, they will turn it off with a *sly civility* perhaps, or with a popular and careless proverb. You may be told that "heaven is a wide place, and has a thousand gates"; and that their religion is the one by which they hope to enter (qtd. in Bhabha, *Location* 141; original emphasis).

For Bhabha, the continual translation and reinscription of established symbols of imperial power indicates that colonization is neither a process of total assimilation nor the maintenance of enforced separation. Rather, the colonizer and the colonized collide in the third space and struggle for signification.

Applying Bhabha's theories to Irish dance history brings to light that the transformation of continental European royal court dances into Irish set dances is another example of the destabilization of an established symbol of colonial rule. Under the watchful eye of royal dancing masters, the continental European sets of quadrilles reinforced the hierarchy of the court and enabled courtiers to demonstrate their respect for imperial power. Via Irish traveling dance masters, however, central authority gave way to local reinscription as dancers spun 'round the house, rather than down the ballroom aisle. Speeding up the tempo to match that of jigs and reels and inserting percussive footwork for men wearing work boots, Irish set dancing took a hybrid form that celebrated local communities, rather than foreign imperial power. That each locality articulated its own version of a set dance reinforces Bhabha's assertion that hybridity leads to multivalent, rather than essentialist, cultural enunciations.

While Bhabha's theories facilitate a more nuanced interpretation of the historical and inherited rumor-stories of the Irish step dance community, they also illuminate the emerging cultural enunciations of today's practitioners—particularly in the three case studies of this dissertation. Bhabha is an especially appealing theorist to bring to questions of choreographic process in Irish step dance because he frequently engages with artistic works to explain his concepts, as in *The Location of Culture*, throughout

which he interweaves examples from visual artists such as Renée Green and writers such as Toni Morrison. In an interview for *Artforum* magazine, Bhabha remarks that artists prefigure conceptual issues for him. As he says, "One can say with some force that theory has no priority over experience and that experience has no authority over theory. Their relationship is translated" (82). In granting equal authority to theory and experience, Bhabha's writings resonate deeply with the practice-led research methodology of this dissertation and its embrace of praxis.

Bhabha advocates for performative structures of text that allow the experiences of marginalized voices to emerge and negotiate for agency. For him, the intersection of theory and experience in writing is politically productive—it is a way "to think through and beyond theory" (*Location* 260). Recognition of the intersection of theory and experience within practice-based research methodology, then, reveals that dance making is also politically productive—it is a creative act that bestows agency upon its practitioners. Furthermore, dance making is not only a way of *moving* through and beyond theory into experience but also a means of generating theory based upon experience. This thesis is explored in "Choreographing History," Foster's introduction to the anthology of the same name. For Foster, dance making is a form of theorizing; like Bhabha, she advocates for alternative forms of scholarly writing that intertwine experience with theory to, in her words, "transpose the moved in the direction of the written" (9). Foster urges scholars to use expressions and sentence constructions that evoke the lived experiences of bodies in motion.

Susan Foster and Bodily Writing

Foster has long argued that the body both writes and is written upon. She defines dance as a text, or a "bodily writing," that produces meaning and can be read, and she describes the process of interpreting choreography, which she sees as a cultural text, as "reading dancing." In her groundbreaking *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, she eschews the long-held notion of dance as a natural, instinctive activity. Such an assumption relegates dance to an ephemeral position, prevents rigorous analysis of choreographic process, and disregards dance's role as a cultural signifier. She argues instead that choreography is a system of codes and structures whose meaning can be read by the viewer.

Foster grounds her use of the terms "reading dancing" and "bodily writing" in the work of literary and cultural theorists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White. The product of one of the first scholars to apply poststructuralist theory to dance research, Foster's pioneering early work expanded the discourse for dance by putting it into conversations with other academic disciplines. She thus paved the way for applying Bhabha's ideas to the three case studies of this dissertation.

Bhabha's work in postcolonial theory owes much to poststructuralism. Discussing the cultural innovations that the colonized produce in the face of oppression, Bhabha, a self-described "text-based scholar," noted in an interview with the *University of Chicago Chronicle*, "Literature is the most sensitive record of these small, but enormously significant, acts of cultural survival." Embracing Foster's assertion that dance is a text that can be read, I would argue that choreography is an equally important reflection of

cultural enunciation under colonial duress. As discussed earlier, historic examples include the hybrid form of Irish set dancing and the rumor-stories of why Irish step dancers don't move their arms. Many of today's Irish step dance choreographers—particularly those in the three case studies of this dissertation—are likewise engaged in continual negotiation from the margins.

Linking the ideas of Bhabha and Foster, I conceptualize choreographic process in contemporary Irish step dance as a third space where new and hybrid cultural enunciations emerge in a post-*Riverdance* climate. As a cultural text, emergent Irish step dance choreography reveals new readings of Irish and Irish American identity for both individual practitioners and audiences while simultaneously expanding both the aesthetic of Irish dance and conventional notions of choreography.

The hybrid choreographic works of Curran, de Gallaí, and myself are not simplistic fusions of different dance vocabularies. Rather, they are complex negotiations from the margins of the vast commercialization of Irish step dance and the equally dominant competition scene that feeds the commercial productions. Issues surrounding our struggle for signification as Irish step dance choreographers include access to funding, increased visibility, and audience expectations of an Irish step dance vocabulary known worldwide by the misnomer *Riverdancing.* Through experimental choreographic processes, we destabilize the established signs of the Irish step dancing body—be they a rigidly held torso, arms held down by the sides, or the unison line of *Riverdance.*

Operating on the periphery of the dominant competition and commercial scenes, many of today's Irish step dance choreographers are driven by the awareness that the

inherited historical narratives and rumor-stories of our field don't accurately reflect our artistic visions or our personal identifications with Irish step dance. After nearly one hundred years of the postcolonial period and twenty years post-*Riverdance*, neither the essentialist nationalism of the Gaelic revival nor the simplistic multiculturalism of *Riverdance* satisfy our artistic concerns, despite their hegemony in the Irish step dance field.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha interrogates the use of the term *post*—be it in *postmodernity*, *postcoloniality*, or *postfeminism*—and explains that the significance of *post* does not lie in its ability to imply a sequential chronology. Rather, the term becomes powerful when it draws attention to the limits of the "grand narratives" and reveals that those limits are also the "enunciative boundaries" of marginalized groups, among them women, minorities, and members of the gay and lesbian community (6).

Likewise, for me, the term "post-*Riverdance* climate" does not suggest that all current Irish step dance choreography is a direct outgrowth of that particular production. Indeed, artists like Curran and myself were making work before *Riverdance* premiered. Rather, the phrase "post-*Riverdance* climate" shines a light on the marginalized Irish step dance stories—those waiting in the wings, so to speak. Against *Riverdance*'s "grand narrative" of precolonial Ireland, emigration, and happy homecoming to a diverse, multicultural nation, there are other choreographic voices vying for the spotlight and revealing counternarratives.

During the height of the *Riverdance* craze in 1997, Curran received a commission from Celebrate Brooklyn to "specifically make something Irish." In the ensuing dance,

Folk Dance for the Future (Traditional Methods/Postmodern Techniques), Curran was not only "lovingly poking fun at Irish dance" but also making a political statement by challenging the heteronormative world of Irish competitive and commercial dance and its customary casting of male-female partners. Curran instead cast "three couples—as we jokingly said in our rehearsals, 'the homo, the hetero, and the lesbo,' or two men, two women, and a man and a woman" (personal communication). During the same year, I deliberately cast an all-female company to premiere *Shannon: A Celtic Ballet,* for my first New York City season of contemporary Irish step dance choreography. Having been a freelance dancer for several years, I was disillusioned by the disproportionately high number of opportunities for male dancers and choreographers at the expense of openings for women. Even though they outnumber men in the dance field, women remain in the minority when it comes to casting opportunities and choreographic commissions. Meanwhile, de Gallaí's 2010 production of *Noċtú* (*noċtú* translates from the Irish language as "to bare all" or "to reveal all") revealed the personal narratives of his cast of championship-level competitive Irish step dancers. Such dancers are the economic engine of the "grand narrative" of *Riverdance*, yet they are creatively and economically disenfranchised compared with the producers of the show, who are not dancers. As de Gallaí says, "What if we gave the keys to the kingdom back to the dancers?" (personal communication).

Active participation in the choreographic process, particularly through rehearsals that are as collaborative as those that I observed and participated in while researching the three case studies of this dissertation, restores agency to Irish step dancers and affirms

their "right to signify from the margins," as Bhabha puts it in *The Location of Culture.* De Gallaí's *Noċtú* cast wrote their own personal narratives, for example, while Curran and I frequently use improvisational structures with the dancers during rehearsals as a means of generating raw material.

Foster calls for an acknowledgment of collaborative choreographic processes and rejects the traditional promotion of the sole genius of the individual choreographer. In "Choreographing History," she describes the rehearsal process:

> During this playful probing of physical and semantic potential, choreographers and dancers' bodies create new images, relationships, concepts, and reflections. Here, bodies are cast into a discursive framework where they can respond in kind to the moved queries initiated in the process of formulating a dance. (15)

Foster's assertion that the answers to our questions can be found in our moving bodies reinforces the pursuit of praxis and the belief that dance making is a form of theorizing. Among the "moved queries" that drive the choreographic processes of the three case studies of this dissertation are, What if we expanded Irish step dance vocabulary by using the arms, the torso, and the floor as extensions of the dancer's kinesphere? How can we convey emotional resonance through Irish step dance? How can we engage in transcultural choreographic encounters? How can we apply postmodern compositional techniques to Irish step dance choreography? How can we harness the virtuosity of competition within new performance contexts? How can we move in ways other than imitating *Riverdance* within a world of audience expectation of *Riverdance*'s making?

As Foster describes, answering choreographic questions within the discursive framework of rehearsal leads to "new images, relationships, concepts, and reflections"—evidence that dance making is a creative and productive act. In the case of Irish step dance choreography, this assertion moves the practitioner into a space of generation rather than negation. A space where not moving one's arms is read as an aesthetic choice rather than the decree of the Catholic Church. A space where eschewing a line of percussive dancers moving in unison is read as a statement of artistic freedom from box office pressures.

Moved inquiries lead to new readings of Irish step dance that operate on several levels. For the audience, new interpretations broaden the Irish dance aesthetic and expand conventional expectations of choreography for the concert dance stage. For practitioners actively engaged in choreographic processes, there is a deeply personal and individual impact as well. As Foster explains, "[Bodies] sustain a 'conversation' throughout the rehearsal process, and sometimes in performance, that imaginatively invents and then lucidly enunciates their specific corporeal identities" (*Choreographing* 15). Foster denotes the specificity of the individual bodies engaged in the rehearsal process and acknowledges their agency, their capacity to imagine, invent, and enunciate their own identities through movement (an example of the previous assertion that dance making is not only a way of moving through and beyond theory into experience but also a way of generating theory based upon experience). The ensuing data chapters on choreographic process in Irish step dance affirm Foster's description. For the artists whom I researched, the results of active participation in choreographic processes move beyond aesthetics and

into identity politics. Having a generative role in rehearsal enables them to examine, refashion, or assert what it means for them be an Irish, Irish American, or American Irish step dancer.

Foster bemoans the fact that traditional scholarship often fails to allow the body such agency. She calls upon scholars to "approach the body's involvement in any activity with an assumption of potential agency to participate in or resist whatever forms of cultural production are underway" (*Choreographing* 15). Her portrayal of cultural production as imbued with bodily agency and potential resistance recalls Bhabha's concept of sly civility as a strategy of negotiation in the struggle for signification. The three case studies of this dissertation reveal how Irish step dance practitioners embody Bhabha's metaphor of the third space through choreographic processes that signify from the margins of a post-*Riverdance* climate. Rejecting the "grand narratives" of *Riverdance* and the historical rumor-stories of the Gaelic revival, today's Irish step dance choreographers rewrite history and project possibility through the body.

Postlude

Colin Dunne has his back to the audience. He has taken off his hard shoes and is step dancing barefoot, having a personal conversation with dance masters from long ago, whose grainy, black-and-white images flicker across a giant backdrop like ghosts. Traces of the past movement emerge as Dunne embodies the archival footage and makes it his own. It is October 2011 and I am at the Baryshnikov Arts Center for the New York premiere of Dunne's first full-length solo production, *Out of Time.* Watching Dunne coax the past into the present, I realize that offstage, too, Dunne has been reinterpreting the

work of Ireland's traveling dance masters. Since leaving *Riverdance* in 1998, he has taught workshops across the globe, from Beijing to Moscow to Quebec City. *Out of Time* is a personal investigation of the history of an art form that has become a global sensation.

By bringing the archive onto the stage, Dunne is engaged in a process of what Ann Cooper Albright describes as "using my body both as a point of departure and as a moving vehicle, a method of transportation into history" (102). In "Tracing the Past: Writing History through the Body," Albright asks, "How do we trace the past? Reconfigure what is lost? Perhaps we should lose the noun, which renders us nostalgic, maybe even melancholic at the extreme. Replace our ambition to find out what happened with a curiosity about how it came to be that it was happening" (102).

Throughout the first few chapters of this dissertation, I have been driven by "a curiosity about how it came to be" that Irish step dancers move the way they do. Recognizing that contemporary legends contain traces of the past, I sought to uncover *how* political and social forces such as nationalism and religion influenced the "tall and straight" aesthetic of Irish step dance. My aim was to reveal the complex relationship between Irish step dance and its social-historical context. As Alexandra Carter writes in the *Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, "Dance does not simply 'reflect' the value systems, customs and habits of a society, but actively constructs them. It produces as well as re-produces; speaks about society, and to it" (193).

Along the way, I've come to the broad conclusion that qualitative research, historiography, and choreographic practice share a similar process of inclusion/exclusion.

The resulting theories, historical narratives, or dances are inevitably influenced by the personal bias of the researcher, historian, or choreographer—oftentimes one and the same person. The three case studies of this dissertation carry forward the idea that choreographic practice in Irish dance is a practice of rewriting history through the body. Much as the Gaelic League's dance masters invented traditions to reshape ideas about the body, today's Irish dance choreographers are creating their own visions of the Irish dancing body. I recall the final scene from *Out of Time*, where Dunne runs barefoot, leaping wildly and swinging his arms freely, and I think of another great Irish artist, Oscar Wilde, who said, "The only duty we have to history is to re-write it."

CHAPTER VI

BREANDÁN DE GALLAÍ

To present the Irish dancing body as a celebration of what was unlocked in 1994 when Riverdance altered the public's perception of Irish dance; to create the next generation of Irish dance á la "us"; to tell our story—the story of us . . .

—Breandán de Gallaí, journal entry, February 2012

The ominous strains of "Infernal Dance" from Igor Stravinsky's *The Firebird* filled the intimate theater, coupled with the unexpected, yet equally angst-ridden, sound of a swarm of Irish step dancers darting in every direction across the stage. Their hard-shoe rhythms ricocheted off the exposed-brick wall and their facial expressions matched their frenzied pace. Bit by bit, the dancers coalesced into a menacing cluster only to splinter and then regroup in edgy, asymmetrical patterns. Throughout their shifting spatial orientations, the dancers maintained an unrelenting percussive score that highlighted the complexity of Stravinsky's music. Their footwork was punctuated with sharp gestures: an arm flung desperately to the side, the head tilted and held anxiously askew, the torso dropped into a high and despondent curve, and the leg kicked with an angry flexed foot.

It was September 2011 and I was sitting in front row of the Irish Repertory Theatre in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, mesmerized by the Ériu Dance Company and their production of *Noċtú.* I was thrilled by the prickly emotions displayed and I

admired choreographer Breandán de Gallaí's artful use of unison movement and spatial design. By eschewing *Riverdance*'s straight rhythmic line in favor of an unpredictable, pulsating mass, de Gallaí was playing with the audience's sense of frontal orientation and, even more consequently, with our expectations of Irish step dance.

Stravinsky's *The Firebird* premiered during the 1910 season of Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russes. Known as a breakout ballet for Stravinsky, the work cemented his relationship with Diaghilev and laid the groundwork not only for *Petrushka* in 1911 but also for his seminal *The Rite of Spring* in 1913. Likewise, *Noċtú* catapulted de Gallaí's company onto the concert dance stage and inspired de Gallaí to create an Irish dance ballet set to *The Rite of Spring* for the 2013 centenary. Hailed as a "ballet in the true sense of the word: a blend of dance, drama, music, and décor" by critic Anna Mackey, *Rite of Spring* furthered the mission that de Gallaí had established with *Noċtú*—to explore the expressive possibilities of Irish step dance beyond technique (Mackey qtd. in de Gallaí 188).[xiv]

At the New York premiere of *Noċtú*, it was exciting to witness a choreographer match the nuanced complexity of Stravinsky's music with the virtuosic power of Irish step dance. At the same time, the emotional resonance was palpable. The *Noċtú* premiere was my first opportunity to see de Gallaí's choreographic work performed live, although I had long been aware of his stellar reputation in the Irish step dance community.

Observing *Noċtú* confirmed my belief that de Gallaí is part of a groundswell of choreographic activity in a post-*Riverdance* climate. I immediately perceived his liberal use of the arms and torso and his embrace of facial expression, as well as his novel

musical selections and unusual spatial patterns, as examples of de Gallaí's disruption of the conventional presentation of the Irish step dancing body. In this case study, I explore the choreographic process that led de Gallaí to these interventions. Further, I examine his position as a former *Riverdance* star turned experimental choreographer. Drawing upon Bhabha's theory of the third space, I conceptualize de Gallaí's choreographic process as a reorientation of the power dynamics of the commercial Irish step dance industry. Through active participation in the choreographic process, de Gallaí and his dancers assert their right to signify from the margins and, as noted in his journal, "to tell our story—the story of us" (de Gallaí X).

By adopting a dance company model, rather than opening an Irish step dance school or starting a commercial production, de Gallaí challenges the institutional bias of Western dance versus world dance (see Chapter 1). In creating an "Irish dance ballet," de Gallaí is confronting the privileged art form of imperial power through a choreographic process that enunciates from the borderline of concert dance and Irish step dance.

Throughout this case study, I am mindful of Foster's assertion that active participation in the choreographic process imbues dancers with the agency to imagine, invent, and articulate their own identities through the body (*Choreographing* 15). My interview data reveals that de Gallaí's choreographic process offers freedom and liberation for the Irish step dancing body. Furthermore, the premise of *Noċtú*—the word translates from the Irish language as "to bare all" or "to reveal all"—is that the dancer's personal stories are shared; such stories include those of a main character who questions his sexuality and of a central pair who are in the midst of a budding romance.

Considering the Catholic Church's long repudiation of the dancing body in Ireland (see Chapter 2), de Gallaí's choreographic process rewrites the repressive history of the Irish step dancing body and moves his dancers from a space of negation to one of generation. For individual company members, engaging in de Gallaí's choreographic process is not only a sociopolitical rewriting but also a deeply personal reevaluation of their identities as dancers.

Biographical Background

De Gallaí's own identity as a dancer was formed early in life. A native Irish speaker hailing from Gweedore, County Donegal, he was an elite competitive Irish step dancer throughout his childhood and during his years as a physics student at Dublin City University. In 1994, he was chosen as one of just twenty-four dancers for the initial performance of *Riverdance* for the Eurovision Song Contest. He went on to join the full production and toured the world for nine years—seven of which as lead male dancer.

In 2003, de Gallaí left *Riverdance* to develop plans for a show titled *Balor* with composer Joe Csibi—with whom he had worked closely during his tenure at *Riverdance.* The pair envisioned a new model for an Irish dance show. Rather than create another variety-style revue—which they considered *Riverdance* and its imitators to be—they intended to develop a cohesive narrative that was theatrical and dramatic. The story line was inspired by specific characters in Celtic mythology but dealt with universal themes of greed, envy, lust, and power.

De Gallaí presented excerpts of the work on video during a lecture that I attended at the 2006 Dance Research Forum Ireland Conference at the University of Limerick. In a

foreshadowing of his take on *The Rite of Spring*, de Gallaí described *Balor* as a move toward a contemporary Irish dance ballet and noted that the cast included both Irish step dancers and contemporary ballet dancers. Unlike what occurs in *Riverdance*, however, where different genres of dance are placed side by side as distinct elements in a revue, de Gallaí conceptualized the different styles of dance as being representative of specific characters in the narrative. In one climatic scene, de Gallaí juxtaposed his hard-shoe steps with the fleet footwork of a ballet dancer in a highly textured, contrapuntal duet.

During the lecture, de Gallaí explained that *Balor* required the Irish step dancers in the cast to conceive of themselves not only as Irish step dancers but also as multifaceted dancers and actors—an indication that his choreographic process leads to a reevaluation of artistic identity. Their interpretive skills were pushed further by Csibi's sweeping score, which moved beyond the confines of Irish traditional music. In a statement that reveals de Gallaí's interest in using novel musical selections for Irish step dance, he explains, "We were Irish, and what we hoped to create would certainly have an Irish stamp on it, but we did not feel the need to pull at the heartstrings. . . . Pipes, low whistles, and fiddles were not replaced, but moved sideways for bassoon, music box, glockenspiel, marimbas" (de Gallaí 119). De Gallaí and Csibi believed that *Balor* would resonate with the cosmopolitan, globalized Irish audience of the Celtic Tiger economy. Unfortunately, they could not convince investors and promoters to take a chance on a show that broke from the *Riverdance* model. As de Gallaí put it, "The response was that it was not very 'Riverdancey,' so how do we sell it? It needs to be different from *Riverdance*, but it needs to be the same as *Riverdance*" (personal communication). I

surmise that this presented the pair with a curious Catch-22—how does one simultaneously imitate and yet deviate from the accepted, and dominant, commercial template?

Not willing to sacrifice the operatic scale of *Balor* for what was possible on a shoestring budget, de Gallaí realized that if a production were to succeed in breaking the *Riverdance* mold, it would have to be designed for smaller concert dance venues, rather than large commercial platforms. De Gallaí's dawning logistical realization was coupled with an increasing desire to explore his own choreographic voice. He found a creative home at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick, where he was artist in residence in 2008-09 and where he completed a master's degree in ethnochoreology in 2009. He then immersed himself in the University of Limerick's arts practice PhD program, earning his doctorate in 2013.

Given de Gallaí's biographical timeline, his abandonment of a commercial model for *Balor*, coupled with his simultaneous pursuit of arts practice research, marks a turning point at which he began to negotiate from the margins by inserting Irish step dance choreography into the concert dance conversation. The creation of *Noċtú* and *Rite of Spring* constituted de Gallaí's arts practice research. Likewise, those choreographic works, along with the extensive autoethnographic dissertation that de Gallaí authored, compose the bulk of my raw data for this case study.

Arts Practice Research

De Gallaí's dissertation is titled *Imeall-Siúl: A Choreographic Exploration of Expressive Possibilities in Irish Step Dance*. *Imeall-siúl* translates from the Irish language

as “edge-walking.” The phrase aptly captures de Gallaí’s artistic balancing act as he enunciates from the borderline of Western versus world dance and creates Irish step dance choreography for concert dance platforms. His multilayered dissertation explores his choreographic process through many voices, among them the dancers in his company; close colleagues whom he interviewed about his work; critics who reviewed the premieres; his own author’s journal; and descriptions of his choreographic process that he wrote for grant applications, press releases, and program notes. In addition to mining de Gallaí’s dissertation for insights into his choreographic process, I interviewed him four times—both in person and via Skype—between July and November of 2014. As described above, I attended the New York premiere of *Noċtú* in September 2011. I also attended an excerpted performance of *Lïnger*, a more recent work by de Gallaí, in July 2016 at the Dance Research Forum Ireland Conference at New York University. Throughout my research process, I analyzed a wide range of videos of *Balor*, *Noċtú*, *Rite of Spring*, and *Lïnger*. And I studied numerous pictures of de Gallaí’s work that were taken by photographer Declan English.

Although I was not a participant observer in de Gallaí’s rehearsal process, I had the opportunity to learn excerpts of his choreography from *Noċtú*—specifically, *Firebird* and its companion piece, *Underworld*—when he taught a master class for my students in the dance and Irish studies departments at Hofstra University in February 2015. The insight gleaned from the embodied experience of his work was a driving factor in my choice to focus on *Firebird/Underworld* specifically in this case study.

Furthermore, I decided to emphasize *Noċtú* overall in this case study because the process of casting, developing, and rehearsing the production was documented in a six-part television series, *Dance Off*, that was broadcast on Ireland's national public service broadcaster, RTÉ, in 2011. *Dance Off* was a window into de Gallaí's rehearsals that led to a deeper understanding of his choreographic process than performance footage alone could provide.

From de Gallaí's point of view, the *Dance Off* series provided a critical funding boost that enabled him to create and present *Noċtú* as an evening-length production on a concert dance stage. Following the disappointment of being unable to secure commercial funding for *Balor*, the daunting logistics of dance making were a grave concern for de Gallaí. Shortly before he accepted the artist in residence position at the University of Limerick, de Gallaí had returned to *Riverdance* as dance director, a position that he held from 2007 to 2013. While the university provided a supportive environment for creative exploration, de Gallaí's position as dance director for *Riverdance* resulted in little artistic satisfaction. In our interviews, de Gallaí described his role as being "at arm's length" and noted that he was not given the scope to do what he wanted to do. Rather, his function was primarily to give notes to the dancers.[xv]

De Gallaí became increasingly frustrated with the power dynamics of the commercial industry, in which producers had final say over creative decisions—even though they were not Irish step dancers themselves and therefore did not necessarily understand, or value, the viewpoint of the performers. In his dissertation, de Gallaí explains:

> My ongoing observation was that the Irish step dancer was being reduced to *dramatis personae* in some "other's" narrative of the world we inhabit. It seemed to me that we were often misunderstood. For example, producers within the commercial arena would often see us as naïve, convent and Christian Brother educated "children" with simple, unsophisticated concerns. To me, as they observed us, the culture-bearers, it seemed that this "other's" focus fell on our surface and its adornments, with no urge to penetrate deeper. Their skewed judgments about us seemed to be based on what they wanted to believe to be true rather than how we viewed ourselves. (35)

Stripped of the power to make artistic choices, the culture bearer is marginalized within the commercial industry and perceived superficially, if not erroneously, by those in control.

The power that producers hold over performers is further exacerbated by the prospect of great financial gain in the commercial sector for spin-off productions that emulate *Riverdance*'s successful show model (see Chapter 3). As de Gallaí learned through his struggles to find funding for *Balor*, attempts at nonconformity in the commercial sector have no power without the backing of venture capitalists and the blessing of producers. And so the *Riverdance* model becomes dominant and self-perpetuating.

Moving from the Margins

Analyzing the written and interview data, I perceive that a desire to liberate the culture bearer from conformity and to create space for experimentation, together with a

growing frustration at the misrepresentation and exploitation of dancers in the commercial sector, was the genesis of *Noċtú*. Rather than have Irish step dancers serve as dramatis personae in a producer's vision, de Gallaí wanted to create an opportunity for them to tell their own stories through individualized choreography, character development, and personal narratives delivered through spoken text. As he mused in his author's journal, quoted in his dissertation, "Who holds the keys to the Irish dance Kingdom? I don't think it is the actual individual dancer. . . . I wonder, what if the keys were handed back, what would happen?" (56)

De Gallaí explored these questions during an incubation period at the University of Limerick and through a choreographic process that allowed for indeterminacy by revealing multiple interpretations of what it means to be an Irish step dancer. These new readings are consequential not only for the audience, but also for the dancers themselves—they have both sociopolitical and personal impact.

As a rejoinder to the superficial focus and misconstrued assumptions of producers, *Noċtú* reveals previously untold narratives of Irish step dance from the perspective of the dancers. The show focuses on three main characters, each of whom experiences his or her own form of marginalization. Aisling is relentlessly mocked for being less talented, although more passionate about dance, than are her classmates. Patrick faces an onslaught of homophobic slurs from his peers because he chooses to dance. And Oisín silently wrestles with his sexuality as he finds himself attracted to Patrick. Eventually, the three main characters form a bond among themselves in a celebration of their uniqueness and individuality.

According to *Noċtú* program notes, the production is a series of vignettes intended for the audience "to see behind the scenes and get under the skin of those who negotiate the politics, the struggles, the highs and lows, the joy and the pain of being . . . an Irish dancer" (2). All told, the performance is a rejection of the grand narrative of *Riverdance* in favor of a multiplicity of viewpoints. In *Noċtú*, de Gallaí not only explores his own choreographic vision but also creates a platform for his company members to voice their personal stories following years of marginalization by the dominant commercial sector.

My analysis of de Gallaí's choreographic process reveals that such agency was granted to his company not only on stage but also in the studio. By assuming generative roles in the creative process through writing their own narratives, the dancers asserted their right to signify from the margins and ultimately rendered new and hybrid cultural enunciations of Irish step dance. In both process and performance, *Noċtú* embodies Bhabha's metaphor of a third space by granting agency to the marginalized and destabilizing the established signs of the Irish step dancing body.

Choreographic Process

Despite this emphasis, before engaging with dancers in rehearsal, de Gallaí began the choreographic process for *Noċtú* by improvising alone in the studio. De Gallaí values improvisation as "a portal to the honest self . . . un-censored, un-sanitized," and he has relied upon its integrity since his days as an elite competition dancer (*Imeall-Siúl* 45). Unlike the majority of Irish step dance students who learn and repeat their teachers' repertory by rote (see Chapter 2), de Gallaí earned a place at the highest ranks of competition, where dancers are often more accustomed to improvising in order to

generate unique material for their routines that would be noticed by the adjudicators. In his author's journal, de Gallaí reminisces about the creativity that flourished within and because of the strict boundaries of competition. His interest in choreographic innovation can be traced back to his years as a high-ranking competitive Irish step dancer, and his familiarity with improvisation made him well equipped to negotiate from the margins.

At the same time, however, his creation of *Noċtú* was a break from his background in competition. As de Gallaí explains in his dissertation, his choreographic concern moved from "a strong emphasis on virtuosity found in the Irish step dance tradition to a focus on the affective, with this impulse generating a more visceral aesthetic" (1). To enable this shift from technique to expression, de Gallaí began improvising to a much wider range of music—hence the introduction of Stravinsky, along with the vast assortment of musical selections featured in *Noċtú*, from Bjork to traditional hornpipes to original compositions by Csibi, to name just a few examples. In his author's journal, de Gallaí both questions and explains his diverse musical choices. He writes:

> What is my fascination with using music other than Irish traditional music in my process of making work? And, why so much Stravinsky? . . . I claim that my choices lend themselves better to the movement system that is emanating from my Irish dancing body . . . that when I improvise to regular Irish music, what emerges from my habitus is normal Irish dance vocabulary, but when I consider other musical choices, novel ideas surface. (84)

The first step in destabilizing the established signs of the Irish step dancing body, then, is to disrupt one's habitual movement patterns. Untethering Irish dance from Irish music—elements of a time-honored union—encourages new cultural enunciations to emerge. It is at this point in the choreographic process that de Gallaí begins to confront the art forms of imperial power, by juxtaposing Irish step dance vocabulary with music ordinarily reserved for the rarefied form of classical ballet.

Surfacing an Impulse

De Gallaí describes his process as the surfacing of an impulse and credits improvisation with enabling it. Allowing an impetus to rise in the body is a powerful antidote to the typical restrictions that an Irish step dancer encounters and indicates the freedom and liberation that de Gallaí's work brings to the Irish step dancing body. During our interviews, de Gallaí explained, "There is an in-built stopper because of Irish dance training. This stopper in the center allows an impulse to go down into the feet, but not up into the body. I wanted to remove the stopper . . . to allow impulse to surface in the body, undulate through the torso, and finish in the arms" (15 Oct. 2014).

De Gallaí's awareness of the "in-built stopper" was heightened when he was eighteen years old and spent a year training in ballet, modern, tap, and jazz at Gus Giordono Dance in Chicago. In his modern dance lessons, de Gallaí was particularly taken by Doris Humphrey's concepts of fall and recovery and by the use of the body's weight and the pull of gravity in the execution of movement. He began to explore falling behind the music and making up time later by seeing how long he could hold a jump in the air. In our interviews, he recalled, "Going across the floor in that studio in Chicago, I

realized that something felt right and that it was not Irish dancing. I was hanging in the air and loving it. Landing out of time—falling and recovering. I realized that who I am as a dancing body is an Irish dancer, but I'm not limited to that" (15 Oct. 2014). De Gallaí's exploration of other dance forms and his ensuing realization that he is not limited to Irish step dancing, foreshadows the choreographic process he develops with his dancers—one that enables them to reevaluate and expand their own identities as dancers.

After a year in Chicago, de Gallaí returned to his Irish dancing school in Dublin and found that he was having a hard time landing on the beat—that is, having difficulty with a cardinal rule of Irish step dance. And so he replaced the in-built stopper in order to compete successfully. Several years later, when Michael Flatley took the stage as the original male lead in *Riverdance* and held his arms in second or high-fifth position, de Gallaí thought, "I know what he's doing with the arms—he's freeing the stopper!" (personal communication).

Looking back on his experience in Chicago, de Gallaí recognizes that he was in a state of flow, as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. De Gallaí was completely absorbed in an activity that used his creative skill and through which his actions and his awareness became merged (de Gallaí 49). When improvising alone in the studio, he strives to reach that state of flow in order to channel impulses that he may not ordinarily be conscious of. He describes this process in his author's journal:

> Improvisation facilitates this unleashing. . . . It is a way of developing new approaches to the Irish step dance aesthetic, allowing the material to emerge from deep within. "Impulsing" the forgotten, ignored, unknown and letting that float to

> the surface—disengaging the mind—letting the body think for itself—allowing it to tell its story, disconnecting the inner critic determined to edit/censor and interfere with the entire self's desire to tell its own story. (48)

Given that de Gallaí spent years under the watchful gaze of competition judges, the opportunity to tune out the inner critic and stop adjudicating his own movement choices must be both powerful and productive. By allowing the body to move freely in a state of flow, de Gallaí grants agency to all the impulses that have been stopped—either by competition rules or by self-imposed criticism—in the Irish step dancing body.

De Gallaí's use of the term *unleashing* conveys the sense of freedom and possibility that improvisation brings. In his dissertation, De Gallaí includes a copy of an application for an artist's residency—one that eventually led to his creation of *Rite of Spring*—in which he describes his choreographic process: "The hope is that the human in the dancer is unleashed, allowing those impulses to activate the dancing body on surfaces with expressive gestures rarely found in present-day Irish step dance" (113). For de Gallaí, improvisation not only is a means to access a new physicality but also unleashes the emotionality of a dancer and enables an exploration of his or her humanity by giving voice to the dancer's individual narratives. Each impulse is a story with its own agency.

The act of unleashing is fulfilled by removing limitations—whether by silencing the inner critic or by ignoring the traditional boundaries of what constitutes Irish step dance vocabulary. When de Gallaí began his arts practice research, he was curious to test the boundaries of the form and to ascertain the point at which experimental choreography would no longer be considered to be Irish step dance. He soon realized, however, that

definitions of genres no longer mattered to him. In his dissertation, he explains, "On one hand, as a tradition holder, I am keenly aware of the importance many of the community place in maintaining a respect and loyalty for our dance tradition, yet all the time I am also being pulled towards this need to dance my own unique identity" (6). Clearly, the epiphany he had as a young student in Chicago, that his identity was not limited to being an Irish dancer, was now manifest in his choreographic process.

Multiple Movement Vocabularies

De Gallaí refers to his movement reservoir as his "habitus" and recognizes the lasting influence of his time spent in Chicago studying classical ballet and modern dance along with his subsequent exposure to flamenco (through its inclusion in *Riverdance*) and tango (through his personal interest in social dance). He elaborates:

> The predominant source from which I draw my movement material is Irish step dance, but I wish not to be impeded by the strict canons of that tradition. I am now older and feel less attached to some of those aesthetic rules. I have many dance genres colonizing my body, all with varying degrees of proficiency, not to mention the myriad life experiences which heavily influence how I move and how I critically engage with poetic movement. (de Gallaí 45)

The use of the term *colonizing* by de Gallaí is thought provoking, given that he confronts the art form of imperial power through the creation of Irish dance ballet. The acknowledgment that multiple movement vocabularies exist within his own body indicates that de Gallaí's choreographic interventions take place not only at the borderline of Western dance versus world dance but also at the personal corporeal delineations of

his own danced identity. Through age and experience, de Gallaí has removed any limitations on the wide range of impulses that he touches through improvisation. In doing so, he embraces the border where movement genres collide as they surface during his improvisations. He is less interested in proper technique than in a given movement's ability to speak eloquently. That such a mixture of impulses might be considered a "mishmash" does not concern him.

At the same time, however, de Gallaí insists that it would be a mistake to characterize his choreographic process as fusion. "No one style exists with the baseline Irish step dance in any one number," he explains (173). Unlike Seán Curran and myself (see Chapters 7 and 8), de Gallaí is not concerned with fusing different forms together. Rather, he is focused on unleashing the emotional potential of Irish step dance and on allowing its physicality to undulate through the arms and the torso. His choreographic process can be read as a third space, where emotional resonance and an expanded movement lexicon lead to the generation of multivalent readings of Irish step dance, rather than the negation of choreographic possibility through the adherence to traditional boundaries and limitations. As he unleashes possibility within the Irish step dancing body, he is rewriting the dance form's repressive history of Catholic corporeal denial. Indeed, de Gallaí's choreographic process is about granting permission—to himself, to his dancers, and to the form of Irish step dancing—to signify from the margins of both the commercial and concert dance worlds.

For de Gallaí, improvising freely from his habitus is often done in solitude. When generating material for *Noċtú*, he covered the studio windows to protect his privacy. He

strove to exhaust his body and to empty his mind to achieve a state of flow and to drown out the doubting inner voices—which he describes as "chattering monkeys" (49).

De Gallaí videotaped each of his improvisation sessions and was often pleasantly surprised to find that the most useful material was generated during his first or second engagement with a given piece of music. The inner critic was held at bay until it was time to review the videos and to select which phrases would be developed and taught to the dancers and which phrases would be discarded.

Choreographic Signature

Solo improvisations revealed a number of impulses that de Gallaí chose to use initially in his choreography for *Firebird.* He later developed these impulses even further in the companion piece, *Underworld*—which serves as *Noċtú*'s finale and features music by Csibi. De Gallaí's unconventional choices included parallel stance, bent knees, heaviness in the body, dropped heels, flexed feet, intimidating gaze, and specific arm movements such as clapping. While watching the premiere of *Noċtú* at the Irish Repertory Theatre, I perceived these choreographic interventions as examples of de Gallaí's disruption of the established signs of the Irish step dancing body. Indeed, many members of his company cite these motifs as de Gallaí's choreographic signature, given their manifestation as immediately recognizable deviations from the "tall and straight" aesthetic espoused in *Riverdance* (see Chapter 3). De Gallaí describes his stylistic choices: "Knees were to be bent; hands on thighs, halfway between knees and hips; fingers together and facing in; spine 45 degrees from the normal and straight; buttocks sticking out; feet in parallel and flat on the floor" (154).

According to de Gallaí, the dancers' parallel stance gave the impression that they had cloven hooves. The animalistic look and feel was further supported by de Gallaí's decision to use a swarm, or flock, as the spatial design to present unison movement—rather than to employ the straight uniform line made famous by *Riverdance.* Having had the opportunity to learn an excerpt of the choreography when de Gallaí taught a master class to my students at Hofstra University, I can attest to experiencing the feeling of being part of a herd. This was reinforced through the unconventional posture as well as the use of flocking as a choreographic device.

Because de Gallaí's stylistic choices emerged directly from his own solo improvisations, he carefully considered how to best transmit the choreographic material to his company members. Realizing that the movement vocabulary would likely be at variance with the dancers' expectations of Irish step dance choreography, de Gallaí decided to teach them the material for *Firebird* first during the rehearsal process. "I believed that the longer it was in the dancers' systems, the more likely a positive phenomenological engagement with the piece would occur, thus achieving my choreographic aim," de Gallaí writes (150).

Years of training in the "tall and straight" aesthetic of Irish step dance proved difficult to undo. As de Gallaí expected, his stylistic choices for *Firebird* challenged the dancers and pushed them out of their comfort zone. Dancer Orlagh Carty recalls her reaction:

> I thought it was weird. I couldn't get it at all. I didn't get the whole animalistic style, especially the feet parallel and using your core. It was almost

> uncomfortable. I was used to head to waist straight! I had never done any other style of dance, so I never used my upper body. (qtd. in de Gallaí 150)

The transmission of material was particularly challenging because, like Carty, the majority of company members had studied only Irish step dance—they had little or no experience with other dance forms. De Gallaí's own habitus, on the other hand, was informed by his training in ballet and modern dance as well as exposure to flamenco, tango, and other social-dance forms. In a realization that I have also experienced through my own work (see Chapter 8), de Gallaí recognized that some of his movement choices may have been easier for contemporary dancers to execute, in contrast with Irish step dancers. Nevertheless, the experience of working with contemporary dancers during the creation of *Balor* made him realize that contemporary dancers did not have the style or the gait of Irish step dancers—which was a defining characteristic that he wanted to maintain. De Gallaí explains, "If I make dance work as an Irish dancer (which I claim I am), the work must be made on Irish dancers" (157).

In time, his company's members acclimatized to the choreography's challenges, and simultaneously felt proud of the fact that the vocabulary was rooted in Irish step dance—an expert practice. As dancer Aislinn Ryan related:

> I love how Breandán has really held on to Irish, you know the Irish dancing element of *Noċtú.* I mean I know that no other dancer, no contemporary dancer could come in and learn what we do. You just can't. . . . You've got to be one of us who've done it our whole lives. (qtd. in de Gallaí 157)

Throughout the creative process, de Gallaí carefully nurtured a sense of belonging among the group based on their shared experiences as Irish step dancers. Although nearly all the movement vocabulary was authored by de Gallaí, the dancers were involved in scripting parts of the performance. During rehearsals, de Gallaí encouraged the dancers to speak freely about their emotional attachment to Irish step dancing and to share any difficulties that they had faced during their years of involvement with the art form. The dancers wrote their own narratives, reenacted them during rehearsal, and discovered that they had many challenges in common. This aspect of de Gallaí's choreographic process is evidence of his reorientation of the power dynamic of the commercial industry. Active participation in the choreographic process restores agency to Irish step dancers and affirms their right to signify from the margins. Indeed, the rehearsal scripts became the basis of the characters found in the finished production of *Noċtú.*

De Gallaí's use of narrative also connects Irish step dance choreography to emotional expression. This not only fulfills one of de Gallaí's primary objectives but also reflects the overarching contribution that he is making in revealing new readings of the Irish step dancing body for both practitioners and audience. Furthermore, the reenactment of personal memories served to bond the group together through a mutual understanding of shared experiences.

Living the Process

Trusting relationships were fostered outside the studio as well. De Gallaí comments that "'living' the process . . . became modus operandi for Ériu Dance Company. The company became a family: rehearsing together, living, eating, sleeping

together and supporting each other" (159). While such close living quarters were unavoidable because of financial constraints (de Gallaí's funding for *Noċtú* covered only a three-week rehearsal period), the dancers' proximity to each other wound up having a critical impact on the creative process.

De Gallaí found that the close interpersonal relationships among the dancers fostered a supportive rehearsal environment where participants felt comfortable experimenting. This is connected to the sense of permission that de Gallaí grants to himself, to his dancers, and to the art form by unleashing the full potential of the Irish step dancing body. Encouraging the dancers to exercise their emotions also led to a more accurate transmission of kinesthetic material. In other words, the dancers began to feel the choreographic impulse in the way that de Gallaí had experienced it. Many of the dancers drew stark comparisons between being part of the choreographic journey for *Noċtú* and being a "gigging dancer" for commercial productions. De Gallaí explains:

> In their opinion, there is also a social culture rampant in the commercial shows that can be toxic. Competitiveness is encouraged and positions of responsibility and principal roles are enviously solicited or held on to. Also, the importance of their personal, unique contributions owing to their distinctiveness is valuable to them and how they feel being part of *Noċtú.* So, although they are *Noċtú* ensemble dancers, they are not just a body to make up a long line of dancers dancing in unison. (176)

De Gallaí's critique of the disenfranchisement of dancers in commercial Irish dance productions is perhaps best embodied by his use of a swarm of dancers rather than a

straight unison line. The swarm does not distinguish between lead dancers and ensemble dancers. It does not have a sense of hierarchy, let alone a sense of front and center. There is a parallel between de Gallaí's rehearsal process, wherein dancers were asked to script their own narratives, and the swarm, which is also egalitarian and inclusive.

I find further evidence of de Gallaí's reversal of the hierarchy common to commercial productions in the interview data compiled in his dissertation. De Gallaí's company members report that they greatly appreciate that his management style was informed by his own past as a performer. They found that he was heavily invested in the good of the overall production, rather than the financial bottom line. And they appreciated taking corrections and direction from someone who was an Irish step dancer himself. Furthermore, the emotional content of the choreography demanded that the dancers be fully engaged in each performance of *Noċtú*, rather than going on autopilot, as some tended to do while performing in commercial productions. Company member Kienan Melino describes the process:

> You never let your mind wander. . . . In other shows you are spotting people in the audience, thinking of what you are doing afterwards. It becomes autopilot. With Breandán's stuff you don't get to do that. . . . You kind of involved yourself so much you forgot about the whole world. You felt you owed it to the dance. . . . You focused on the intensity and energy. . . and maybe even anger . . . the dark with light . . . in tune and in touch. . . . If it had to be delicate you did that. You had to be in that frame of mind. (qtd. in de Gallaí 177)

The feeling of owing something to the dance accords with a sense of responsibility and ownership that the dancers felt over the material. I surmise that this is spurred by the fact that they were allowed to generate ideas and were encouraged to give feedback during the process. De Gallaí describes the relationship between choreographer and dancer in his company as a two-way street and indicates that the creative process of making *Noċtú* bestowed a sense of agency upon the participants.

Celtic Cubs

By giving the keys of the Irish dance kingdom back to the dancers, de Gallaí opened a space through his choreographic process for dancers to enunciate from the margins of the vast commercialization of Irish step dance. At the same time, he acknowledges that the empowerment of the *Noċtú* cast was also enabled by the fact that the dancers came of age in a post-*Riverdance* climate. They were both resistant to and indebted to *Riverdance.* Describing the generation gap between himself and his dancers, he explains:

> The *Noċtú* cast come from a different socio-economic Ireland with less of a post-colonial mindset. They would have been described as "Celtic Cubs," the children of a more prosperous "Celtic Tiger" Ireland. In comparison to my *Riverdance* colleagues and I, they are more confident, more worldly and street-wise, certainly in comparison to us at their age. To them, *Riverdance* had always existed. They were born into a world where Irish dance was a profession, which contrasted greatly with me and the Irish step dancers who came before me. I could hardly believe I was making a living at something which would have previously been

known as a hobby. These young *Noċtú* dancers are more willing and more able to assimilate the new corporeal information. (158)

As a performer, de Gallaí acknowledges the legacy of *Riverdance* in creating a professional industry for Irish step dancers. At the same time, as a choreographer, he explores his dancers' eagerness to not be defined by that legacy alone. By incorporating personal narratives that reveal the emotional resonance of Irish step dance, de Gallaí critiques the homogeneity of the commercial industry and offers a multivalent perspective on the art form and its practitioners. In a review of *Noċtú*, Sarah Lucie points to what I believe is an expansive sense of possibility unleashed. She writes, "The show introduces what Irish dancing has turned into in order to then demonstrate all that it can be" (Lucie qtd. in de Gallaí 275).

The willingness of the Celtic Cub generation to try new things facilitated de Gallaí's choreographic process—especially when the dancers were asked to generate their own material. For example, the opening of *Underworld* features a series of eight different bodily positions, with each distinct sequence conceived by an individual dancer. De Gallaí wanted the sequences to be meaningful for the dancers and encouraged discussions during rehearsal about what the poses could be. Some company members devised their own personal narratives for the choreography. Peta Anderson elucidates her method: "I imagined I saw something far away whilst bending down. Then, I straightened my knees, my hand shading my eyes looking into the distance. I would point at someone. Followed by picturing myself as a broken music-box ballerina" (Anderson qtd. in de Gallaí 154).

Anderson's use of imagery imbued her gestures with meaning and enabled her to execute them with the emotional resonance that de Gallaí wanted to convey. Throughout the choreographic process, company members noticed that de Gallaí was less interested in technique and virtuosity than with narrative and emotional expression. In a statement that recalls de Gallaí's expanded expectations for his dancers in *Balor*, dancer Joey Comerford, highlighting the *Noċtú* cast's interpretative responsibilities, noted, "It's a matter of being able to perform the meaning of the choreography for him" (qtd. in de Gallaí 166). The process of creating their own series of bodily positions enabled the dancers to free their in-built stoppers and to allow their movement impulses to surface in the body and undulate throughout the arms and torso. Company members appreciated the novelty of the choreographic process and recognized its distinctive results. For Aislin Ryan, one element of the choreography for *Noċtú* was particularly impressive: "I think steps-wise it is a whole body experience, unlike normal dancing with just the feet, which is also true of even *Riverdance*. They throw some arm movements in, but it's more mechanical. There is a fluidity about it. It's fluid, the whole body" (qtd. in de Gallaí 162).

While both *Riverdance* and *Underworld* incorporate arm movements, a distinction between the two productions is evident in the rehearsal process. Often, the repertory of a commercial production is set and taught to the dancer to replicate. In *Underworld*, by contrast, the gestural language is imbued with meaning and agency through the dancers' personal creative contributions. Each dancer generates his or her own series of positions that engage the whole body, rather than negating his or her individuality to fit into a unison line. Indeed, as de Gallaí summarized his vision for the opening section of

Underworld, "Ultimately, the most important things to me were that no two dancers looked alike at any one time . . . and that there was a sense of randomness in each statuesque pose, giving each 'picture' a richness which could be interpreted in any way the observer chose" (154).

Through actively encouraging the dancers' involvement in the rehearsal process, de Gallaí ensured that their movements would carry meaning, both for themselves as individual artists and for the audience as interpreters of the overall production. By giving voice to the marginalized—be it Aisling, mocked for being less talented; Patrick, facing homophobic slurs; or Oisín, wrestling with his sexuality—*Noċtú* conveys a range of emotions and allows for multivalent, rather than essentialist, readings of what it means to be an Irish step dancer.

"The Triumvirate"

De Gallaí weaves expressions of individuality throughout the arc of the narrative and in its choreographic embodiment. In a scene titled "The Triumvirate," which precedes *Firebird/Underworld*, the three main characters form a bond between them as they move from intimate solos filled with longing into a playful, whimsical trio. I read the scene as a critical rewriting of Irish step dance's repressed corporeal history, which promoted heteronormativity under the watchful eye of the parish priest (see Chapter 2). In contrast, by shifting fluidly between solos, duets that call for repeatedly changing partners, and a culminating trio, the dancers reveal a love triangle in which Oisín is enamored of Patrick, who, in turn, has just become aware of his romantic attraction to Aisling. In this scene, as throughout the entire production, the dancers are wearing only

their underwear. The premise of *Noċtú*—the word means "to reveal all" or "to bare all"—is shown literally, but it is also meant symbolically. In keeping with his desire to unleash the human in the dancer, de Gallaí is enabling inner emotions to be conveyed through Irish step dance.

I find the dancers' revealing costumes and sensual movements to be empowering rather than objectifying. The scene does not hinge upon the audience's attraction to the dancing body. Rather, it revolves around the dancers' exploration of their mutual attractions to each other. This is a vastly different reading from that of the objectification of female dancers as seen in commercial productions such as Michael Flatley's *Lord of the Dance*, which he produced, directed, and starred in after leaving *Riverdance* over a contract dispute. In a scene known as the "Breakout" or, in later productions, as the "Strip Jig," Flatley's ensemble of female dancers throw off their short dresses to reveal jogging bras and briefs as they charge at the audience in a unison line often to the accompaniment of hoots and hollers from the viewers.

In yet another example of de Gallaí's reorientation of the power dynamic of commercial productions, "The Triumvirate" critiques the heteronormativity of commercial Irish dance productions and focuses on the dancers' self-expression rather than the audience's sexual gratification. As the dancers come together in a final trio, there is a subtext, as de Gallaí outlines: "We may not be like the rest and we may not be like each other, but we're all different together" (148). The scene champions the disenfranchised characters as they broker a new space of belonging—not through conformity, but through a celebration of individuality.

As "The Triumvirate" unfolds into *Firebird/Underworld*, de Gallaí opens the theme of individuality to encompass the full cast and, more broadly, to offer further readings of Irish step dance. He notes:

> I have attempted to establish that carving out one's own path in life is desirable and that everyone striving to be different together is virtuous. My intention for *Firebird* was to realize this in dance form. It is not a rejection of Irish dance, or to pretend that we are something other than Irish dancers, but that we can dance our dance to our own tune. (149)

As the dancers strike their own full-bodied positions at the start of *Underworld*, they give physical manifestation to the idea of embracing difference together. Through choreography, such as parallel feet, bent torsos, and arm gestures, that destabilizes established signs of the Irish step dancing body, de Gallaí gives the keys to the Irish dance kingdom back to the dancers and carves out a space where they have agency to dance their own dance.

In addition to subverting expectations of Irish step dance through the use of arm and torso movements, as well as parallel position, de Gallaí's spatial design of a swarm embodies the theme of individuality. Dancer Gyula Glaser offers her perspective:

> *Riverdance/Lord of the Dance* were successful because there were lines—the "Wow—look at them in one line" factor. Here [*Noċtú*] the show is all about individuals, the diversity of the world. You don't have to have these strict formations that the other shows have. It's all about being a mass of people and within that mass there are different people. (qtd. in de Gallaí 177)

By eschewing the established formulas of Irish step dance choreography, de Gallaí not only reveals a powerful physical manifestation of agency but also facilitates new readings of Irish step dance and its practitioners.

Rewriting Identity

Indeed, participating in the creation and premiere of *Noċtú* spurred many company members to rethink the parameters of their art form and their identity as Irish step dancers. I read the transformation of the three central disenfranchised characters in *Noċtú* as a microcosm of the personal and choreographic journeys of many Irish step dancers in a post-*Riverdance* climate. De Gallaí's exploration of the expressive possibilities of Irish step dance and his preference for emotional resonance over virtuosic technique were strong motivators for some company members to reconsider their engagement with Irish step dance and to rewrite their personal histories with the form. For dancer Ciarán Connolly, "It changed the way I look and feel about dance/Irish dance. In Irish dance you are told to dance dance dance but never to feel what you are dancing, which to me is so important. . . . If you don't feel what you are doing, then how can the audience feel what you are trying to get across to them?" (qtd. in de Gallaí 202). Being given permission to express their emotions and to communicate a narrative to the audience propelled some company members to think of themselves as artists, rather than competitors or athletes. Even those who had spent years touring with commercial productions experienced a change in how they viewed themselves as performers. Company members noted that they had previously felt apologetic for being Irish step

dancers, instead of classical ballet or modern dancers, which people often assumed they were upon hearing that they danced professionally.

The assumption that an Irish step dancer would not be regarded as a professional dancer reveals the marginalization that those working in styles other than ballet and modern dance often face when trying to find a place in the performance world. As Irish step dance choreography moves from commercial stages to concert dance venues, performers encounter prejudicial binaries of high versus low art, art versus entertainment, or Western dance versus world dance. As a result, Irish step dancers often crave a sense of legitimacy. For some company members, actively participating in the creation of *Noċtú* and its premiere in a concert dance venue provided validation, as it did for Katrina O'Donnell:

> This definitely has showed me that we can be more than just Irish dancers. We can be performers. I think Irish dancers were never really seen as performers to a high standard like say ballet or contemporary and I think this proves that we can do that and we can take it very seriously as well . . . so definitely we can move forward and we aren't limited to Irish dancing. We can do more than that. I don't know what our limit is yet. (qtd. in de Gallaí 182)

On the one hand, O'Donnell's perspective reinforces the entrenched binary of high versus low art. But on the other, her words allude to a sense of freedom and limitless possibility that the groundswell of choreographic activity in a post-*Riverdance* climate offers to Irish step dancers. Furthermore, de Gallaí's embrace of a dance company model, rather than

one of an Irish dancing school or a commercial production, enables access to the concert dance world, which itself is predicated on the dance company model.

In de Gallaí's dissertation, his company members reported that they did not want to be pigeonholed as Irish step dancers. Instead of viewing the shift in context to a concert dance venue as revealing a perceived lack in their abilities, they welcomed the opportunity to redefine themselves more broadly. Such confidence is both a reflection of their birthright as Celtic Cubs, as well as a commendation of de Gallaí's inclusive, permissive, and expansive choreographic process. Comerford, for example, appreciated the opportunity to take part in the novel choreographic process for *Noċtú*, because "it takes us out of the Irish dancer status and moves us closer to a dancer that does Irish as such" (de Gallaí 160). During *Noċtú*'s run at the Irish Repertory Theater in Manhattan, several dancers regularly took classes at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, revealing a newfound interest in studying other forms of dance.

Throughout the making of both *Noċtú* and *Rite of Spring*, as company members grappled with their identity as dancers, the question arose of whether or not de Gallaí's choreography could still be considered Irish step dance. Opinions varied and were shaped largely by whether the respondent had grown up in Ireland or in the Irish diaspora. For company members who hailed from Scotland or New Zealand, for example, participating in Irish step dance lessons as children had provided an important connection to their heritage. One such dancer, Aislinn Ryan, remarks:

> As a youngster growing up in New Zealand, Irish dancing was a direct link to my Irish heritage and traditional Irish dance was imparted upon me within the greater

> cultural context of music, poetry and social gatherings. The cultural element of Irish dance is still very important to me and it always will be. (qtd. in de Gallaí 205)

For dancers from the diaspora, there is often a strong desire to retain a sense of Irish identity in the face of choreographic experimentation. This phenomenon will be further explored in the case studies of Seán Curran, a first-generation Irish American choreographer (see Chapter 7) and myself, an American of Irish descent (see Chapter 8).

For de Gallaí himself, however, even before he began to develop his own choreographic signature, being an Irish step dancer was not tied to his identity as an Irish person. "For me, as I Irish step dance, I am simply expressing myself," he explains (205). Thus, an underlying desire for expression motivates De Gallaí's entire dance practice, in addition to serving as the catalyst for the creation of *Noċtú* and *Rite of Spring* specifically.

Throughout his choreographic process, de Gallaí challenges the boundaries of both commercial dance and concert dance and also carefully considers the limits of transmission between his own habitus and his dancers' embodiment of his authored material. The title of his self-reflexive dissertation, with its phrase *imeall-siúl,* or edge-walking, is meant to recall a line by poet Seamus Heaney that "you are neither here nor there." Indeed, de Gallaí is less concerned with defining what Irish step dance is than with giving its practitioners the freedom to explore its expressive potential. As company member Kienan Melino said of *Noċtú*, "It was Irish dance, but it wasn't Irish dance. It was liberating" (qtd. in de Gallaí 175).

CHAPTER VII

SEÁN CURRAN

I want to speak an old language in a new way with a contemporary accent.

—Seán Curran, personal communication

In early March 2012, while he was in Boston to teach a master class, Seán Curran went home to visit to his parents. His mother and his father had emigrated separately from Ireland in the 1950s. They met in night school, married, and raised four children in suburban Belmont. During the course of conversation that day, his now late father mentioned the tradition of traveling Irish dancing masters, itinerant figures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland who would travel from village to village and teach dances in exchange for room and board. In an interview a few weeks later, Curran related the conversation to me, remembering, "I said to my father, 'Had I been alive 150 years ago in Ireland, that probably would have been my job!' We had a laugh about it. He said that as a little boy growing up in Cork, he had a vague memory of those people."[xvi]

We were sitting in the living room of Curran's East Village apartment in New York City next to two unzipped suitcases and surrounded by posters, pictures, and memorabilia from a career that has taken Curran literally around the world. The Seán Curran Company had performed the previous evening in Connecticut and they were leaving the next day for a brief trip to Ohio, to be followed by a month-long tour of

Central Asia. The image of Curran as a traveling Irish dancing master seemed entirely fitting.

Had Curran been living in Ireland 150 years ago, he would likely have taught a form of dance known as set dancing. Based on the French set of quadrilles, set dancing is both a descendant of European royal court dances and the grandparent of the American square dance (see Chapter 2). The Irish dancing master's manipulation of the form in the 1800s—whereby the tempo was sped up to match that of jigs and reels and percussive footwork was inserted—can be read as an example of Homi Bhabha's concept of sly civility under colonial duress (see Chapter 5).

Today, set dancing features four couples in a square who move through predetermined figure dance patterns, known by names such as Round the House, Advance and Retire, and Ladies Chain. Set dancing is social in function—it is meant to be fun and flirtatious. The form also encourages improvisational percussive footwork as one moves through the predetermined figure dance patterns. Thus, it enables participants to have individual authorship while belonging to a community of dancers as they make their own rhythmic choices within the confines of the established spatial design.

As a participant observer in Curran's choreographic process, I conceptualize him as a present-day traveling dance master who carries forward set dancing's framework of individuality within community. By embracing an atmosphere of experimentation and encouraging dancers to generate material through improvisation and task-based assignments, Curran allows for individual agency within a community of Irish step dancers—who are bonded, yet not bounded, by their shared tradition.

Since 2009, Curran has either choreographed or restaged five works for my company, Darrah Carr Dance.[xvii] Our successive collaborations, as well as the influence of Irish step dance, music, and culture that can be found in the work that Curran makes for his own company, are part of a groundswell of choreographic experimentation in a post-*Riverdance* climate. This case study begins with an overview of Curran's career, containing biographical details that are drawn from interview data. I then examine Curran's choreographic process based upon my experience as a participant observer in the 2011 creation of *Dingle Diwali* for Darrah Carr Dance.[xviii]

Curran envisioned a hybrid work in which our Irish step dance rhythms would be juxtaposed with the vocalizations of British Indian singer Sheila Chandra. The moved queries that Curran posed during the creation of *Dingle Diwali* included, What if we untether Irish step dance from Irish music? How can Irish step dance footwork respond to the rhythms of Indian tabla players? How can the spatial patterns of Irish step dance respond to Chandra's vocalizations? and What do these juxtapositions reveal about both the audible and visible complexities of rhythm?

The process of finding physical answers to Curran's choreographic questions creates new and hybrid cultural enunciations. Such hybridization expands the aesthetic of Irish step dance and challenges conventional notions of Irish step choreography by privileging experimental processes over the maintenance of traditional forms. The framework for hybridization to emerge in Curran's choreographic process is a comingling of individuality and community—itself an amalgamation—that is shared by the form of set dancing.

Beyond how it occurs in the specific process of making *Dingle Diwali*, hybridization is an overarching theme in Curran's career as well. His practice of hybridity is rooted in his identity as a first-generation Irish American and is sustained through his frequent travels. Curran reinscribes the role of the traveling Irish dancing master in the diaspora. His is not the singular journey of the Irish immigrant carrying step dance traditions to a new homeland. Instead, through touring, commissions, and residencies, Curran reintroduces the idea of continuous travel to the Irish step dancing body. He carries his Irish step dance roots throughout the journey of his choreographic career and pairs the tradition with influences that he encounters along the way. In doing so, he rewrites the history of the immigrant Irish step dancing body through the choreographic process of hybridization.

Biographical Background

Curran's childhood was filled with a strong sense of belonging to Boston's tight-knit Irish community. His enrollment in Irish step dance lessons represented a connection to the homeland that his parents had left behind. In an echo of the experience of the Ériu Dance Company members who grew up in Scotland and New Zealand (see Chapter 6), participation in Irish step dance lessons as a first-generation Irish American was core to Curran's identity. "Ireland was so important to my parents. It was so much a part of our identity. We were Irish and we were democrats," Curran recalls. "My parents went to Irish dances, they belonged to Irish groups, and they loved going to feiseanna [Irish step dance competitions] because it was social and they were hanging out with other Irish adults. It was a whole culture—a whole world" (13 Feb. 2012).

Both of Curran's parents were officers in Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, or the Society of the Musicians of Ireland, and his father hosted an Irish radio program for thirty years. Irish music filled the home and Curran recalls the special treat of being allowed to buy a record when he went shopping with his mother. It is certainly not surprising to hear him emphasize the role of music in his choreographic process. He says, "I'll always be music driven first and foremost. I don't think that I could make a dance in silence" (13 Feb. 2012).

Curran and his sister performed in a troupe assembled by his Irish step dance teacher, Mrs. Josephine Moran, who had "show biz in her head and in her heart." Moran organized her students into a performing troupe and traveled with them to New York City several times to perform on the nationally televised *Ted Mack Amateur Hour*. "We stayed at the New Yorker Hotel," Curran recalls. "And the performance bug struck!" Curran and his sister practiced their routines together at home. "We'd push back the little throw rug and my mother would set a timer that you'd use to bake a cake and we had to dance until the timer ran out. I thought it was about getting better, but it goes back to her idea, that if they practice, they'll be tired and they'll go to sleep!" he quips (13 Feb. 2012).

The occasional nostalgia with which Curran speaks of his Irish step dance background resonates with a story he told me about the days when his mother would receive a letter from Ireland:

> She wouldn't read it until she could sit down with a cup of tea and a cigarette. It would be on that onion paper and it would have a European stamp. She had a zippered folder case and the letters went in there and she'd read them over and

over again. And her sister Peggy would read them. She loved those letters. So I had an idea of longing for home and for the old country. (13 Feb. 2012)

Indeed, Curran's parents would say they were "going home" when the family traveled back to Ireland to visit their relatives each summer. As a child, the phrase *going home* confused Curran, because his own home was in the suburbs of Boston, not Ireland.

Looking back, Curran remembers Irish step dance as highly enjoyable: "It was one of the great joys of my childhood. I got such pleasure from it. It was fun to practice, it was fun to compete in, and, mostly, it was fun to perform" (13 Feb. 2012). It was when he enrolled at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts as a dance major that Curran discovered modern dance and, along with it, a new kind of choreographic process. He recalls, "There was something about the fact that people were making it up new every day and that they had a kind of authorship that you don't have in traditional Irish dance. In traditional Irish dance, it's handed down—you're doing the steps that you were taught" (31 Mar. 2012). Among the choreographic lessons he learned, Curran cites, "accumulation with facing changes" and "the idea that A can do B and B can do A. Everybody's equal" (31 Mar. 2012).

Curran met Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane while he was a student at Tisch. He joined their company, the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, soon after graduation and remained a member from 1984 to 1994. During an audience talkback in November 2013 as part of Darrah Carr Dance's fifteenth-anniversary season at the Irish Arts Center in midtown Manhattan, Curran depicted his years spent as a dancer for Jones and Zane as a fruitful time:

> It was the greatest choreographic composition class that you could imagine. . . . A lot of the work was task based. Make up a phrase. And now, make it go backwards. Now, do it in slow motion. Now, do it like you are inside out . . . like you are on the moon . . . like you are filled with ocean water and it's 1800 . . . all these big ideas about generating and making movement. And then, manipulating that movement. Do it as a duet. Now do it on the floor. . . . These were very rigorous postmodern ideas about making and doing. (23 Nov. 2013)

In their highly collaborative method of making work, Jones and Zane valued the contributions of each dancer and reinforced the lessons that Curran had learned at Tisch regarding individual authorship and equality in the rehearsal room.

While Curran was absorbing postmodern choreographic methods, the lessons of his childhood remained. He notes, "The Irish step dancing of my childhood has given me two great gifts: a speed—I used to be very good at petit allegro in ballet class—and a musicality" (13 Feb. 2012). In 1985, Curran won a New York Dance and Performance Award, or "Bessie," for a solo in Jones and Zane's dance *Secret Pastures*. The solo, in which Curran combined Irish step dance footwork with arm gestures that were choreographed by Jones, can be read as an early example of hybridity in his career. After Curran left the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, his Irish step dance background garnered him a job in the Off-Broadway percussive show *Stomp!*.

After a decade of performing for others, Curran realized that he wanted to make dances himself. He reports, "I never wanted to have a company but I realized that to have a common language, you need a group of dancers who can finish your choreographic

sentences for you. So I became a choreographer" (31 Mar. 2012). Upon founding the Seán Curran Company in 1997, Curran developed his own choreographic process by combining "postmodern build-a-phrase techniques" with his interest in collage and an intense musicality honed from years of Irish step dancing. In their combining the disparate compositional hallmarks of Irish step dance and postmodern forms—or a reliance on musicality with a focus on phrase manipulation—both Curran's choreographic method and the dances that emerge from it can be read as hybrid.

Curran refers to himself a "collage artist." As a longtime member of Jones and Zane's company, Curran was undoubtedly influenced by their postmodern techniques of collage and splicing, yet his interest in collage stretches back to childhood: "*Life* magazine would come on Wednesdays. I would kneel at the coffee table and go through it. I loved it. After a few weeks, my mother would say, 'You can have it now.' I would cut it up and make collages" (13 Feb. 2012).

To be clear, the Seán Curran Company is a modern dance company, not an Irish step dance ensemble. Nevertheless, the influence of Irish dance, music, and culture can be felt in a number of his works. In summarizing his choreographic process, Curran states, "It always boils down to a hybridization of two disparate elements put together to make something new. So, innovation for me oftentimes is hybridization" (31 Mar. 2012).

Curran explores hybridization through an open-ended method of trial and error in the studio. "In my heart of hearts," he declares, "I'm an experimentalist. I'm interested in doing experiments and seeing what we come up with. I'm very interested in process. Not just the doing of it, but also the making of it. It's an investigation" (31 Mar. 2012). His

experiments are spurred by a deep interest in movement invention. He builds phrases through improvisation and challenges himself "to think of the most impossible thing that you could never do and then to try that" (31 Mar. 2012). His phrases give the dancers a common jumping-off point, but Curran also directs experiments by giving the dancers assignments:

> Now that I'm an older choreographer and I've been doing this a long time, I'm more interested in collaborating with my dancers—making and finding movement with them. I love giving assignments—improvisation, task work, creative problem solving—and seeing what comes up. The dancers will generate material and I'll be surprised by things in it and that will get me to the next point in terms of how to manipulate it. I don't go back with the surprise. I go forward. (31 Mar. 2012)

Whether it's pursued through phrase building or assignment giving, Curran's search for surprise in his choreographic process is closely related to his interest in innovation. "There is something about being fresh, contemporary, new, or modern that is interesting to me," he asserts. "Always with a nod to the past—we are standing on the shoulders of our ancestors" (31 Mar. 2012). His simultaneous embrace of both the old and the new reveals a penchant for combining disparate sources and indicates that Curran views hybridization as a form of innovation in his choreographic process.

Revisiting Irish Step Dance

During the height of the *Riverdance* craze in 1997, Curran received a commission from Celebrate Brooklyn to "specifically make something Irish." The ensuing dance, *Folk Dance for the Future (Traditional Methods/Postmodern Techniques)*, was an instant

hit. In it, Curran was not only "lovingly poking fun at Irish dance" but also making a political statement by challenging the heteronormative world of traditional Irish social dances with customary male-female partners. In *Folk Dance for the Future*, Curran cast "three couples, as we jokingly said, 'the homo, the hetero, and the lesbo,' or two men, two women, and a man and a woman" (13 Feb. 2012). The title of the work itself points to Curran's hybrid choreographic process, while the Celebrate Brooklyn commission to explore Irish step dance indicates how faithfully Curran has carried the form along his choreographic journey.

Following the success of *Folk Dance for the Future*, Curran was hired to choreograph his first Broadway musical, *James Joyce's "The Dead"* in 2000. Embodying his role as a traveling Irish dance master, Curran's choreography was inspired by Irish set and céilí dances in keeping with the Christmas party setting of Joyce's 1914 short story.

Additional opportunities to revisit the Irish step dancing of his childhood arose while Curran was creating new work for Chicago's Trinity Irish Dance Company first in 2000 and then again in 2001 and 2004. On the first day of rehearsal, the question of individual authorship resurfaced. As Curran recalls:

> I said to the dancers, "I want you to make up the weirdest reel step that you can think of—use your favorite steps, but put them together in an odd or interesting way." The Trinity dancers said, "What? We usually get taught the steps; we don't make them up." And I said, "Well, now you're making them up!" (13 Feb. 2012)

Throughout the piece, which was titled *Curran Event*, the dancers replicated their Irish step dance footwork with hand gestures that created unusual juxtapositions. For example,

as a dancer flicks her foot rapidly, dangling it low and in front of herself, she simultaneously wiggles her outstretched hand. Or as a dancer executes a "scissors" jump, with both legs splayed straight out to the sides, she swings her arms high above her head in a V shape at the same time. Using music by the Irish band Kila that had an "Irish-meets-reggae feel," Curran created yet another "strange hybrid."

Working with Trinity Irish Dance Company gave Curran a glimpse into the evolution of Irish step dance technique, brought about by the rigors of the competitive circuit (see Chapter 2), that had occurred since he was a child. "The Trinity dancers were like racehorses or thoroughbreds or Olympians. They were stretching, doing yoga, doing calisthenics, and they rehearsed in sneakers," he marvels, continuing:

> When I was a kid, you showed up, you put on your patent leather tap shoes, and you just went out there and started dancing. And the moms were smoking and the teacher was smoking. The idea of "Irish dancer as athlete" was a revelation to me. So I wanted to push that, to push the virtuosity. (13 Feb. 2012)

Thus, an interest in virtuosity, along with intense musicality, are both part of the Irish step dance ingredients in Curran's choreographic process.

In a complex hybridization that questions the definitions of tradition and innovation, Curran brought the traditional Irish step dance vocabulary of his childhood and his innovative postmodern choreographic approach to Irish step dancers who had innovative steps designed for Irish step dance competition yet little sense of individual authorship in their practice of traditional Irish step dance. The dancers' virtuosity fed Curran's hybrid choreographic process. Meanwhile, his postmodern compositional

methods exposed the dancers to new ways of generating movement independently. A new hybrid work and a new hybrid way of working emerged from the process. In this way, Curran expanded both the aesthetic of Irish step dance and conventional notions of choreography. As for the result, Curran notes:

> The performances dazzle and delight and entertain me. Going to see a Trinity show where I have a piece of mine on the program—I just live vicariously through them. Part of me wishes that I could be up there doing the steps of my childhood. It's like a language that I don't speak anymore, but I recognize. It's like an old friend. (13 Feb. 2012)

Although working with Trinity Irish Dance Company and, more recently, with Darrah Carr Dance, may be Curran's most obvious choreographic encounters with Irish step dance as part of his professional career as a choreographer, a close look at his work reveals that "like an old friend," Irish step dance has never left his side. And, like many friendships, theirs is a complex relationship. On the one hand, Curran speaks of watching Irish step dance performances with "a bit of longing." And, regarding Irish step dance competitions, he admits, "Sometimes I think, what if I was Irish dancing today; how far could I have gone? I'm an ambitious guy." On the other hand, he is strongly averse to being pigeonholed as an Irish step dancer. When a critic first wrote about his "Irish voice," Curran was wary. He questioned, "Do I have an 'Irish voice'? I just thought that it was part of the whole mix. Irish dance has been a big part of my identity, but I didn't want it to be the only thing. I wanted to say, 'But wait, I do other stuff.' It's the label thing that made me want to resist as an artist" (31 Mar 2012).

Curran's interest in hybridization enables him to avoid essentialist labels without eschewing his Irish step dance roots. His extensive travels and frequent collaborations with other companies expose him to many sources of inspiration that feed his interest in hybridization. In addition to directing his own company, Curran is chair of dance at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and frequently accepts commissions from colleges, opera companies, and other dance companies. Thus, he is constantly being exposed to new dancers and to fresh creative opportunities. Curran describes himself as a "choreographic magpie" and notes, "I like to take from other sources and put it into my own eccentric mix. I never copy, but I'll see something that's interesting and I'll appropriate it" (31 Mar. 2012). He frequently attends dance performances, watches DVDs, looks at photographs, and makes sure "to have my antennae out in the real world."

At the time of our interview in March 2012, Curran was poised to leave for a month-long tour of Central Asia. Given the prevalence of cultural dance forms in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Curran's company was chosen to go there because of his background in Irish step dance. "I'm taking three pieces that have nothing to do with Irish dancing, but I feel that all dance is folk dance. We're just handing it down," he explains. "When making *Folk Dance for the Future (Traditional Methods/Postmodern Techniques)* I thought, 'Who are your folks? How will we folk dance in the future? How does folk dance evolve and change and get passed down?'" (13 Feb. 2012).

Recalling Susan Foster's assertion that dance making is a form of theorizing (see Chapter 5), then considering that the form of set dancing can frame an answer to Curran's question "How does folk dance evolve and change and get passed down?" I argue that it evolves through individual moments of innovation when dancers are granted agency to participate in the choreographic process. In "Choreographing History," Foster surmises, "Dance, perhaps more than any other body-centered endeavor, cultivates a body that initiates as well as responds" (15). Set dancing imbues its participants with agency as they simultaneously initiate individual rhythmic improvisations and respond to their dance partners in the square. Whether these innovations are fleeting improvisations or become cemented as set choreography is up to the traveling dance masters of the past, present, and future—those who are charged with "passing it down" as Curran does. Throughout the choreographic process of *Dingle Diwali*, the comingling of individual and community becomes a generative framework for a hybrid choreographic work to emerge.

The Rehearsal Studio

August

It's an oppressively muggy evening in mid-August 2011 as members of Darrah Carr Dance (DCD) make their way toward DANY Studios in midtown Manhattan. A few are rushing from day jobs, several are navigating transportation delays, while still others are debating whether or not to open the giant studio windows only to deal with the noise of rush hour traffic crawling along Eighth Avenue. Twenty minutes later, Seán Curran arrives, wearing his signature crocodile-skin boots, a sharp black blazer, and a wide smile

underneath his distinctive moustache. The energy in the room immediately lifts and the stifling heat and commuting fatigue dissipate as hugs and warm greetings are exchanged.

The rehearsal marks the start of Curran's second choreographic process with DCD. His childhood background in Irish step dance, combined with his extensive modern dance career and postmodern choreographic sensibilities, makes him a natural collaborator for our company and the dancers are delighted to see him. "His personality is so vibrant," notes DCD company member Laura Neese. "He keeps you excited about the process—you can't be unhappy in a Seán rehearsal!"[xix]

Curran uses humor in the rehearsal process in order to relax people and to break the ice when working with new dancers. "For me, work and play is the same thing. I want rehearsals to be fun. I want the making and building and finding of movement to be fun," Curran asserts. "It's hard work, we're sweating, we're toiling, but the idea of work as play and play as work is important to me" (31 Mar. 2012).

Curran's insistence on treating work as play and play as work is a great motivator for the dancers with whom he works. As DCD dancer Melissa Padham-Maass (whom Curran has dubbed "DJ Melissey Snickerdoodles" for the night) puts it, "Seán has a such a big personality. He makes you want to work hard. He is fun and funny, fair and respectful. You feel comfortable in the rehearsal room" (9 June 2014).

By establishing a welcoming environment from the very beginning of the rehearsal process, Curran not only establishes a sense of community but also encourages the dancers to feel comfortable improvising and generating their individual material freely. "Dancers are perfectionists for the most part," explains Padham-Maass. "We are

constantly evaluating and being critical of our choices" (9 June 2014). Similar to the familial environment that Breandán de Gallaí created during the development of *Noċtú* (see Chapter 6), a lighthearted atmosphere is encouraged by Curran as a way to ease the dancers' self-imposed pressure.

How to effectively structure improvisation exercises is a particularly important consideration for Curran when he rehearses with a company like DCD, whose dancers have a wide range of backgrounds and diverse strengths in areas spanning from Irish step dance to ballet to modern to tap—not unlike Curran himself. Several of the dancers have competed at elite levels and, like Breandán de Gallaí (see Chapter 6), have experience improvising Irish step dance material as a means of generating innovative routines for competition. Others in the company, however, learned to Irish step dance by rote. While some DCD dancers have experience generating material in ballet or modern dance genres, improvisation in Irish step dance often feels like a fun, but challenging, oxymoron. In the words of DCD company member Caitlin McNeill:

> Self-generating material sometimes makes me nervous. It takes me a long time to come up with something that I really like. In the back of my mind, I always think, "This phrase could make it into the actual performance." So, I put pressure on myself. With Irish dance classes, it was always, "Here's the step." The steps were always shown to you by an expert. You were taught. You were there to learn it passively—not so actively. There was less pressure in Irish dance class because you were not responsible for it. Now, in rehearsal, you are put in position where you are the expert and

you are charge of the material. I do like the creative freedom of that, though. (17 June 2014)

McNeill's feelings regarding improvisation in Irish step dance and the distinction that she draws between Irish dance class and Irish dance rehearsal echo the experience Curran had when working with the Trinity Irish Dance Company. In DCD rehearsals, Curran's "postmodern build-a-phrase techniques" once again meet the Irish step dance technique of his childhood and a unique hybridization ensues. To get the creative process going, however, Curran and the dancers meet first on the common ground of shared musicality—a result of the Irish step dance training that everyone in the company has undergone.

Padham-Maass fiddles with the speakers as the dancers simultaneously stretch and chat with Curran. Suddenly—*bam*—the intricate and strident vocalizations of British Indian pop singer Sheila Chandra fill the studio. Curran animatedly explains the music and shares his concept for the choreography with the company. Chandra's album is called *Weaving My Ancestor's Voices* and includes a series of tracks titled "Speaking in Tongues." Throughout the series, Chandra explores a vocal style practiced by Indian tabla players using *bols*, or syllables, whereby the rhythm of the drums is sung phonetically. In theory, this is not unlike the Irish tradition of *porta beil*, or mouth music, which was often used to vocalize music for dancing when instruments were scarce. In practice, however, Chandra's intricate rhythms are nowhere near the measured 6/8 or 4/4 time signatures of Irish jigs and reels, nor do they follow the standard AABB pattern of Irish music. Undaunted, Curran issues the challenge—Irish feet meet Indian rhythms!

We keep the music turned up high to match the energy in the room and to spur our creative impulses. Curran's assignment to the dancers is straightforward: generate a sixteen-bar step in the Irish soft-shoe, or nonpercussive, style that travels on the diagonal. Then, embellish the footwork of the step with arm movements. Comingling individuality and community, we improvise alone yet en masse, which bolsters our confidence. Curran watches intently, humming along to the music and drumming his fingers on a metal folding chair. He encourages the dancers by calling out enthusiastically, "Yes! I like that! Where can you go from there? Show me that again!"[xx]

After thirty minutes, it's time for "show-and-tell." Several of the dancers feel reluctant to demonstrate phrases that do not feel quite right yet, but Curran cajoles them and their efforts receive hearty applause from the group. Each demonstration is met with Curran's thoughtful suggestions and the dancers regroup to fine-tune their phrases. After a revised round of show-and-tell, we videotape the phrases in order to upload them to a private YouTube page. The link will be available to review on the long commute home—whether by subway to Brooklyn, train to Long Island, bus to New Jersey, ferry to Staten Island, or car to the Hudson Valley. We hug good-bye and by all means of transportation disperse into the sweltering August night.

September

By mid-September, we have embodied our phrases to the point where they have become associated with each individual. They are our "name phrases." We have "the Nick," "the Melissa," "the Darrah," "the Louise," and so on. Certain movements within our individual phrases have also been given their own reference names—such as

"Timmy's whimsical jump"—a gravity-defying flicker and flutter of the feet. As noted in his experience of working with Trinity Irish Dance Company, Curran is clearly excited by the DCD dancers' virtuosity and by the increasing complexity of Irish step dance vocabulary in recent years. Displays of virtuosity are incorporated into Curran's hybrid mix. As Padham-Maass notes, "Seán enjoys working with Irish dancers because it brings back his childhood. But he also likes the challenge and he is inspired by the difficulty behind the technique" (9 June 2014).

In the weeks since our first rehearsal, we have been busy teaching our phrases to each other. And, in doing so, we have embodied them even more fully as we understand and refine our individual phrases through the process of teaching them to the group. Revealing the impact of individual authorship on the choreographic process, company member Neese remarks, "People develop a sense of ownership about their phrases. It's really nice to have that sense of ownership and to be part of a dance where you know that you contributed to it. You feel more invested in it" (10 June 2014).

Our individual phrases have the added benefit of feeling comfortable to us. As Padham-Maass asserts, "Self-generated material is always what looks best on the dancers—it's custom made" (9 June 2014). Meanwhile, DCD company member Mary Kate Sheehan notes, "When we make up a step and then teach it to each other, it's really interesting to see what everyone comes up with. The steps always seem to match everyone's personality and style" (10 June 2014). The process of having dancers generate their own phrases based upon a specific task or assignment recalls the lessons about generating, making, and manipulating movement through trial and error that Curran

learned from his modern dance training as an undergraduate at Tisch and as a dancer with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company.

In DCD's rehearsals, the process of teaching each other our individual phrases results in an exponential growth in the number of phrases that we have in common and ensures that there is a wealth of diverse material for Curran to play with and to shape into the skeleton of the piece. The next step in Curran's choreographic process is to organize the material within spatial designs inspired in part by Irish céilí, or social, dances. To begin, he gives us several locomotor patterns and adapts them to fit Chandra's fast tempos and complex, irregular rhythms. He marries céilí dance handholds with a modern dance accumulation whereby the dancers enter the space and add on to the group at surprising times. From there, Curran splices, fuses, and arranges our name phrases in the space. McNeill describes the process:

> Seán loves the spatial patterns involved in Irish dance. He'll alter those figures though and make them even more visually attractive. He plays with the space in a very intricate, complicated, and visually pleasing way. And he adds arms and fast footwork to make the dance even more visually pleasing. (17 June 2014)

Curran's deft use of space has brought him critical acclaim throughout his career. In our interviews, he expresses admiration for formalist choreographers like George Balanchine. Indeed, both Curran's intense musicality and his attention to line and shape recall aesthetic qualities that Balanchine is known for (Balanchine 190). Writing in *Dance Magazine,* Alice Naude heralds Curran as "a master of form," while Valerie Gladstone

proclaims, “Curran approaches dance making with the sharp intelligence of a conceptualist,” in *The Boston Globe.* Curran’s spatial sensibility appeals to audience members as well. “Adults and children alike respond to the meticulously structured and contagiously high-spirited dances Curran showed at the New Victory,” reports Deborah Jowitt in *The Village Voice.* According to Padham-Maass:

> Seán is very visually organized. He creates interesting effects with spatial changes and by linking formations and figures on stage. An audience likes to see things that they recognize—like lines and spatial formations that are spread across the stage. Individual dance moves can get lost on people when looking at the big picture. (9 June 2014)

Curran manipulates the space and our name phrases in several ways. Some of the formations that he chooses—such as pinwheels, large circles, and several dancers traveling under arches made by the raised arms of other dancers—reference Irish céilí dance directly. We play with one particularly complicated knotlike formation dubbed the “Monkey’s Puzzle,” which DCD company member Timothy Kochka (who is also a certified Irish dance instructor) helps us untangle and then reassemble.

Other spatial formations, however, are discovered by happy accident. When contemplating a tricky transitional moment that follows the Monkey’s Puzzle, Curran notices, “Oh! We can weave right here. . . . It’s unbeweavable!” The dancers laugh and Curran gives them a gliding locomotor pattern to use as a transitional step while singing, “Slide, slide, slippety slide, forget about your worries, leave your cares behind . . .”

Curran appreciates being surprised in rehearsal and he is equally interested in surprising the audience. He strives to achieve "visual wit" in his work with clever images and movements. "I want to tickle the eye," Curran announces. "What does *tickle* mean?—to delight, to provoke, to titillate in a unique way. I want the audience to think, 'How did they do that?'" For Curran, visual wit is tied to verbal wit, which he relates to his Irish heritage as yet another aspect of his cultural roots that he carries with him along his choreographic journey. "Wit—that's very Irish. The Irish are known for their use of language, for storytelling, and certainly for joke telling," he explains. "Especially my dad—he loved a good joke. I think that there was a bit of the entertainer in him and the gift of the gab, too. He enjoyed being funny and I think I get that from him" (13 Feb. 2012).

Curran employs several tried-and-true choreographic strategies for achieving visual wit. As he explains to the dancers, "Something I do a lot is repeating material with different facings and changing genders or roles. It teases the eye and bookends a piece." This choreographic device is evident in a section of the dance that we nickname "the Grand Cannon." Curran creates a quartet for two women and two men by weaving snippets of our name phrases through patterns that are driven by central diagonals. While the thread of our name phrases persists, the movements eventually become disguised as Curran assigns different starting points to each dancer and flips the facings and the roles.

Curran evaluates and adjusts the spatial patterns through trial and error. Revealing his interest in surprise and his belief in serendipity, he comments:

> That's not what I thought it was going to be. But I think that it's better! The roundabout pattern is more interesting here because it is unexpected, whereas the other pattern was more just like a big X. And here, the unison moment is really satisfying despite the different facings.

Feeling satisfied overall by the first section of the dance, after approximately six weeks of rehearsal, Curran decides to move on to the second section, which will feature the Irish hard-shoe, or percussive, style.

Curran envisions the two sections of the dance as companion pieces, but each with a distinct focus. The first section of the dance is set to Chandra's "The Struggle (Slagverkx Mix)," a wide-ranging, highly textured song that features Chandra's voice layered over a number of percussive instruments, among them chimes, cymbals, and shakers. Curran's use of intricate spatial patterns matches the sweep and detail of the music. The second section of the dance, however, features several selections of Chandra's "Speaking in Tongues." With her voice the only instrument, these pieces feel simultaneously sparse yet complex. Curran hones in on the hard-shoe style for this section and probes the rhythmic relationship between voice and feet.

October

By October we are deeply engaged with the hard-shoe section. It's a painstaking process that involves listening to very short segments of Chandra's rhythms and responding with percussive footwork sequences that imitate, juxtapose, or syncopate. At times, we resort to slowing the music down on Padham-Maass's laptop. We follow the

computerized line graph in the GarageBand computer program in order to decipher where Chandra's rhythms are going next. Kochka relates how this works:

> It's like taking a microscope to that music. We have to find the miniscule place with the accent. So, she's not just singing "da da da da." It's actually "da DA da da." There's an accent on her second "da." Then, it's about trying a million different ways to make our dancing fit. And that's just to fill in that .5 seconds of choreography before moving on to the next "da da da da." (24 Aug. 2014)

To differentiate one set of "da da da das" from another, Curran and the company develop phonetic nicknames for the various sections of the music. "The ugaga's," for example, become a landmark place about halfway through the music. This type of shorthand is critical because it enables us to move in and out of various sections of the piece while negotiating the complex rhythms. As Neese puts it, "The footwork is like a text that we take and mix up. Then, we refine it so that we can pronounce it" (10 June 2014).

Curran usually begins these rehearsals by asking the dancers to review all the rhythm phrases in order to "get them in my eyes." Then he begins to arrange the phrases in time and space. One of the most challenging aspects is to make the percussive footwork sequences travel fluidly across the space (usually complex Irish step dance rhythms are laid down in one spot). Curran frequently asks the dancers, "Can that rhythm move forward? Can it move backward?" In this way, his hybrid choreographic process presents an opportunity to push the virtuosity of Irish step dance even further—by applying a postmodern manipulation of a rhythmic phrase through space. At times, he'll add locomotor phrases or turns to assist with fluidity as the dancers strive to make their

rhythmic footwork travel seamlessly. Throughout the process, Curran remains open to the unknown. A dancer asks, "How many sets of that rhythm do you want?" He replies, "I don't know yet, but I'll tell you when I know." Then, he quips, "OK, let's take it again from the dreaded 'ugaga's.'" Padham-Maass elaborates on Curran's process:

> Sean likes to pull the movement from his dancers. He is a really good organizer—he has an eye for coordinating bodies in time and space. He might not always know what the movement is, but he knows what it should be—what it should look like. He's really good at orchestrating and putting together the whole vision. (9 June 2014)

Arriving at the overall vision happens through trial and error. Although Curran's work is driven by the music and incorporates many formalist structures, he remains open to serendipity, to surprise, and to suggestions from the dancers. Curran is not afraid to abandon an idea that is not working and to try something else. He believes strongly that "a dance studio is a kind of sacred space. It's also a laboratory where we're doing experiments—making and finding—finding and doing" (31 Mar. 2012).

November

Our annual New York City season at the Irish Arts Center is slated for November 11-13, 2011. We are planning to premiere Curran's new work, and as the date creeps closer, we switch to cleaning mode during rehearsal. Curran begins to coach the dancers on performance quality through the use of imagery. He tells us, "Come onstage like the wind. . . . No, come onstage like you are getting shot out of a cannon!" And he clarifies certain steps with humorous images like "It's not just about clicking your heels

together.[xxi] Imagine if a cabriole and an *assemblé* had a baby!" During the final rehearsals, Curran embellishes certain phrases with carefully placed arm movements and makes other small, but important, adjustments. For example, as Sheehan and Kochka enter for their percussive duet, Curran asks, "Can we do a diagonal here and look at each other on the entrance? I want to add not humor but wit!"

Perhaps because of the many years that he himself spent as a dancer, Curran takes plenty of time to fix any problems that the company is having with the material. It is not uncommon to hear him make a change and then say to the dancers, "That would help you out, right? I've got your back!" As Sheehan comments, "Seán is very in tune with what the dance is like for the dancers. It's not just him as the choreographer in the front of the room. He is very collaborative in the studio. And he has very good intuition. If something is awkward for the dancers, he can tell and he will adjust it" (10 June 2017).

Just as the *Noċtú* cast appreciated receiving corrections from a director who was also an Irish step dancer (see chapter 6), so, too, do the members of DCD appreciate that Curran gives corrections in a friendly, funny, and encouraging manner. McNeill notes:

> He'll tell you if something is wrong, but he won't judge you. He just makes a joke and keeps going. Seán is there to help you. He wants you to come alive onstage. His personality is infectious and he facilitates that in his dancers, too. He makes it easy for you to come alive onstage and to share your love of dance with the audience. Seán really loves to engage the audience. (17 June 2014)

Opening Night

Curran's engagement of the audience proves to be successful: the premiere of *Dingle Diwali* is a hit. The title (conceived after a spirited brainstorming session during rehearsal) encapsulates the hybrid ethos of the piece. Dingle, one of the most ruggedly beautiful peninsulas in Ireland, meets Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights that falls between mid-October and mid-November every year. As Sheehan explains, "The piece fuses two styles—Indian singing and Irish dancing. There is a relationship between her songs and our feet. It shows a parallel that isn't necessarily thought of every day" (24 Aug. 2014).

The work's unique hybridity garners a New York Dance and Performance Award ("Bessie") nomination. The official citation reads, "Outstanding Production (of a work that stretches the boundaries of a traditional or culturally specific form): *Dingle Diwali* by the Darrah Carr Dance company with guest choreographer Seán Curran." To this day, *Dingle Diwali* remains one of DCD's most sought-after and popular repertory works. Kochka believes that the work's appeal lies in its two divergent sections:

> The first section is all about spatial patterning. The soft-shoe section creates visual rhythms that the audience is watching. Meanwhile, the second section is about actual rhythm that you can hear. It's all about time and rhythm. And nobody in the audience expected to see those rhythms paired with Indian music. No one saw that coming. People loved it because we opened up a new vocabulary and invented new Irish dance steps. (24 Aug. 2014)

Finale

To extrapolate further, beyond the specific choreographic process for *Dingle Diwali*, one can imagine the trajectory of Curran's career as one long set dance. Doing so reveals a glimpse of how he has used the synergies of innovation and tradition in the dance form that he has inherited. The social context of set dance—the fun, the humor, and the wit—remains the same and facilitates a sense of community that simultaneously embraces individual authorship. Dancing Round the House also carries special resonance given Curran's fond recollections of a childhood home full of Irish music and dance. The pattern of Advance and Retire, on the other hand, suitably captures the complex relationship that Curran has with his Irish step dance background now that he is a mature artist. At times, he advances toward it with nostalgia, longing, and appreciation, and at other times, he retires away from it—wary of being pigeonholed. As for the heteronormative Ladies Chain (whereby ladies get to dance, and presumably flirt, with the opposite gent), Curran replaced it with *Folk Dance for the Future (Traditional Methods/Postmodern Techniques)*, a dance inclusive of gay and lesbian sexual orientation.

Thus, Curran's set dance becomes a hybrid—a mix of the old and the new, set into motion by his own personal story. As his choreographic process reveals, Curran is physically at home in several worlds. He is a first-generation Irish American postmodern traveling dance master. Throughout his career, he has revealed multiple expressions of Irish step dance within his own body and within his body of work. He has carried Irish step dance throughout his choreographic journey and has paired it with a wide variety of

influences to create new and hybrid forms that expand both the aesthetic of Irish step dance and conventional notions of choreography. In doing so, Curran has facilitated the migration of Irish step dance practice and postmodern choreographic process across borders—both geographic and stylistic. As Curran says, he speaks an old language (the Irish step dance of his childhood) in a new way (on account of his experimental postmodern choreographic approach) with a contemporary accent (his own personal voice).

CHAPTER VIII

DARRAH CARR DANCE AND MODERIN

> *I source from two genres—contemporary modern dance and traditional Irish step. I feel two pulls, one toward tradition and another toward innovation, and seek to create dance in the space between. Dance in Ireland traditionally happened at a crossroads—a reminder to respect the road that led me to a place of intersecting genres while simultaneously remaining curious about the path that lies ahead.*
>
> —Darrah Carr, artist statement

I enter my research as a choreographer and as a participant observer. My dual roles serve me well when examining the work of Seán Curran and Breandán de Gallaí. Not only am I a participant observer in Curran's choreographic process, but the challenges and aspirations that de Gallaí describes also resonate deeply with me, given my own experience in the studio and on the stage. Nowhere are my dual roles more pertinent, however, than in this chapter, where I research my own choreographic process. In these pages, I focus on the creation of *They Danced*, a work that premiered at New York City's Irish Arts Center during Darrah Carr Dance's fifteenth-anniversary season in the fall of 2013. Raw data includes my choreographer's journal, extensive self-reflexive writing, interviews that I've given to other researchers about my choreographic process, and photos and videos from rehearsals and performances of *They Danced.* I also draw heavily from interviews with my company's members and journals that I asked them to keep throughout the rehearsal process. The first half of the chapter is an excerpt from my

artist statement, titled "ModERIN: Dancing in the Space Between." I wrote this during the rehearsal period for *They Danced* and it was included in a retrospective artist's catalog titled *ModERIN: Contemporary Irish Dance Works; Darrah Carr Dance*, edited by Dáithi Ó Mir and published by Macater Press in commemoration of Darrah Carr Dance's fifteenth-anniversary season. My artist statement provides broad context for my choreographic process and outlines my overarching aesthetic interests through self-reflexive writing. I also provide a brief company history that demonstrates how Darrah Carr Dance came to be involved in the current groundswell of choreographic activity in a post-*Riverdance* climate.

My artist statement recalls Homi Bhabha's argument that the significance of the term *post* does not lie in its ability to imply a sequential chronology; rather, the term becomes powerful when it draws attention to the limits of "grand narratives" and reveals that those limits are also the "enunciative boundaries" of marginalized groups (see Chapter 5). Indeed, as evidenced by the publication of my artist statement during my company's fifteenth-anniversary season in 2013, I was already making work during the height of *Riverdance*'s popularity in the mid-nineties. Therefore, the term "post-*Riverdance* climate" does not imply chronology in the case of Darrah Carr Dance.

Nevertheless, in my early choreographic work, I was especially interested in creating a counternarrative to what I perceived as the limits of *Riverdance*'s simplistic multiculturalism—in which Irish step dancers, Russian folk dancers, flamenco dancers, and tap dancers are presented as performers in a variety show in side-by-side vignettes (see Chapter 3). In developing my own artistic voice, I drew from my diverse training in

Irish step dance, ballet, and modern dance and sought to blend the disparate styles together in order to find a unique choreographic signature. My artist statement describes the fused term *ModERIN* as encapsulating my embrace of modern dance plus my Irish American identity—evidenced by the reference to Ireland as ERIN. The fusion of two words, modern and Erin, symbolizes the fusion of dance styles—traditional Irish step and contemporary modern dance—that is at the heart of my choreographic process.

Early in my career, I posed the moved queries, "What happens when different dance forms collide—as opposed to sitting uncritically side by side?" and "How can we move in ways other than imitating *Riverdance* within a world of audience expectation of *Riverdance*'s making?" I found myself negotiating from the margins of the dominant commercial and competitive Irish step dance worlds. My artist statement details the issues surrounding Darrah Carr Dance's struggle for signification—including funding and audience building—and explains that the development of ModERIN is not only personal and aesthetic but also practical and economic.

The second half of the chapter focuses specifically on the making of *They Danced.* The voices of my company members are prevalent here, given their substantial creative contributions to my choreographic process. Furthermore, they are the interpreters not only of *They Danced*, but of all our repertory works. The inclusion of my dancers' voices raises a double methodological point. Our choreographic process is inherently collaborative because I draw from the diverse backgrounds of dancers who have multifaceted training in order to create our uniquely fused aesthetic. Because this case study focuses on practice-led research given the self-reflexive study of my collaborative

choreographic process, then it is imperative that my dancers' voices are foregrounded. Their rehearsal journals and interview data reveal that, much as the term *ModERIN* encompasses both my overarching choreographic aesthetic and my personal ethnic identity, so the dancers' active participation in our choreographic process enables them to embrace their multifaceted dance training while simultaneously engaging with their identity politics.

Recalling the insular nationalism of the Gaelic revival—which led the Irish Dancing Commission to enact strict rules that dancers could not attend, teach at, or take part in events other than those associated with Irish dancing (see Chapter 2)—I argue that Darrah Carr Dance's choreographic process rewrites the parochial history of the Irish step dancing body. Being part of our company enables dancers to return to the Irish step dancing of their childhoods with knowledge of additional movement systems and choreographic methods that are valued and embraced within our fusion methodology. Darrah Carr Dance's choreographic process reflects the blended identity of diasporic artists who are several generations removed from, but still devotedly attached to, the idea of Ireland and the practice of Irish step dancing. Having a generative role in the rehearsal process enables company members to examine, refashion, or assert what it means for them to be Irish American or American Irish step dancers. At the same time, these explorations produce new fusion works that expand the aesthetic of Irish step dance as well as conventional notions of choreography.

Artist Statement—ModERIN: Dancing in the Space Between[xxii]

Chasing a Rainbow

A chipped gray coffee mug sat on the corner of my childhood desk. It was stuffed with colored pencils and fat erasers and ringed with images of colorful pointe shoes. Emblazoned in curlicue script around the mug's edges was Ted Shawn's well-known quote, "Dance is the only art form in which we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made." Although it would be many years before my college modern dance courses revealed to me who Ted Shawn and his pioneering modern dance colleagues actually were, his quote resonated with me even as a very young dancer.

The utter reliance on one's own body—that simultaneous blessing and curse that is known to every dancer—drove me through endless hours of Irish step dance practices and ballet company rehearsals and instilled in me the restless pursuit of constantly bettering one's own technique and artistry. Shawn's quote not only fostered a sense of physical resilience, but it also encouraged my imagination. For me, following hours of physical preparation, the allure of choreography and, ultimately, of performance, was that the artist determined the overall vision. In other words, whatever the choreographer envisioned could come true onstage. A performance was a marvelous fairy tale, where, as a choreographer, one could choose one's own ending.

As a child, I'd sit for hours, colored pencils in hand, sketching spatial patterns and staging scenarios for backyard productions with my best friend from the neighborhood. It's a habit that persists today. My choreographic process begins with a blank page and a mind cluttered with ideas—culled from hours of listening to music. I find deep

satisfaction in dreaming about choreographic images, jotting them down in an oversize notebook, and then trying them out with dancers in the studio. We experiment with the ideas until we find that elusive juncture where "it works." Pursuing that magical moment when the image comes to life is a bit like chasing a rainbow. But, like the title of the beloved children's story, it's *A Rainbow of My Very Own*.

From age six to sixteen, I trained in both competitive Irish step dance and classical ballet. Tim O'Hare was my Irish step dance teacher. He was a modern-day traveling dance master who drove between Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Akron, and Chicago, in order to visit each of his satellite schools every week. We lived in Toledo, Ohio. My family is a mix of New York and Boston Irish America transplanted to the Midwest on account of my father's work. My three sisters and I all took Irish step dance lessons. We performed on St. Patrick's Day and during my parents' parties. My parents, in turn, dutifully drove us to competitions, or *feiseanna*, on the weekends and brought us on yearly trips to Ireland in order to compete in the World Irish Dancing Championships. My father always assured me, "Irish dancing is the excuse and not the reason to make this trip."

Nevertheless, I grew weary of the competitive circuit, the pressure, the monotony of practicing the same steps, and the seemingly arbitrary nature of the judging. Upon entering Wesleyan University, I vowed to leave both the Irish step dance and ballet worlds behind in favor of becoming an English professor. Fortunately, I immediately met the late Cynthia Novack, a highly respected professor, dance ethnographer, and improviser, who encouraged me to audit her Intro to Modern Dance course.

On the first day of class, she instructed us to lie down on the floor and get ourselves across the room by any means possible. Standing by the door in my pink ballet tights and slippers, I was shocked. Given my rigorous Irish step dance and classical ballet training, I had rarely moved my torso from its vertical axis, let alone rolled across the floor! Cynthia Novack's class, and the ensuing dance major that followed, opened up a world of expressive possibility for me as a dancer and choreographer. My modern dance teachers celebrated freedom and individuality, they allowed for articulate arms and torsos, and they introduced me to the concepts of level changes and non-gender-specific partnering. I learned to work with gravity and to surrender to the pull of the floor. I played with experimental music, explored narrative text, and sometimes abandoned music all together. Overall, I realized that in modern dance, bucking tradition was the traditional way of doing things.

For several years after college, I worked as a freelance performer for a number of New York City-based dance artists, including Maureen Fleming, Alice Klugherz, David Parker, and Torque Dance Collective. I often found my mind wandering during rehearsals, however, as I envisioned alternative choreographic options for the sequences that we were working on. Eventually, I enrolled at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in order to pursue an MFA in choreography.

Developing ModERIN

As my interest in choreography evolved from a childhood fantasy to a deliberate career path, Shawn's quote and the primacy that it places on a dancer's individuality—"we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made"—took on a deeper meaning. As a young

choreographer, I wrestled with the universal question "What does my individual voice sound like and look like?" For me, the answer was kaleidoscopic. As a woman, I wanted to promote the artistry of other women. So, Darrah Carr Dance began as an all-female company. As an Irish American, I wanted to honor the steps and music of my heritage. Therefore, my work attempted to combine the emotional resonance of the past with the physical urgency of the present. As a dancer, I wanted to draw upon my broad training in ballet, Irish step, and modern dance. Thus, I had no desire to compartmentalize these styles in order to keep them pure or unadulterated.

Coining the term *ModERIN* to describe my choreographic style signifies my embrace of modern dance plus my Irish American sensibility—evidenced by referring to Ireland as ERIN. The fusion of two words—*modern* and *Erin*—symbolizes the creative fusion of two dance disciplines as seen in the work of Darrah Carr Dance. ModERIN pinpoints my interest in drawing upon the tradition of American modern dance and the tradition of Irish step dance in order to create a blended style of contemporary dance choreography. By American modern dance, I am not referring to a specific technique, such as Graham or Horton. Rather, I am referring to the more general choreographic principles through which the early modern dance pioneers broke away from classical ballet—methods such as floor work and moving the torso off of its vertical axis. Irish step dance shares the vertical alignment of classical ballet. Allowing an Irish step dancer's torso to bend and encouraging them to change levels by going down to the floor leads to many new choreographic possibilities when working with Irish step dance vocabulary.

ModERIN enables me to embrace both the modern and the Irish sides of my training and to reconcile these two very different dance techniques within my own body, while also presenting them as equals within a greater body of work. The structure of Irish step dance—revealed in its percussive rhythms, its spatial patterns, and its traditional music cycles—provides a wonderful template for modern dance choreography. Modern dance, in turn, frees the torso from the rigidity of Irish step dance and frees the body to work with gravity, to engage in counterbalance and non-gender-specific partnering, and to use the floor as an extension of one's kinesphere. ModERIN is not just a descriptive term for two styles sharing the same stage side by side. Rather, it is a choreographic principle, a tightly woven marriage of modern dance freedom and Irish step dance structure.

Mining the Percussive Possibilities

While the concept of ModERIN urges me to engage modern dance and Irish step dance simultaneously, I admit that I pay special attention to the rhythmic aspects of Irish step dance. Often, an Irish step dancer is thought of as a percussive member of the music ensemble, making audible rhythms using only their legs, and not their arms. The choreographic emphasis is frequently placed on the sound produced by one's feet, rather than on one's upper body movement or on the overall spatial design. Rather than privileging audible sound over visual spatial design, however, my own choreographic interest lies in treating music and movement, or rhythm and motion, as equal partners. I'm interested creating sound and movement scores simultaneously by developing

rhythms that propel a dancer's motion through space. Conversely, the motion that a dancer follows can then instigate further development of the rhythm.

In my opinion, the production of sound is simply one of a number of ways that percussive dance can be mined for its choreographic possibilities. I enjoy using the rhythmic patterns of Irish step dance as a springboard—analyzing how the sound score is originally produced with one's feet and then rebuilding the phrases, mimicking the same sounds, but using full-bodied modern dance movements. I've often posed the question, "What if we used our arms the way that Irish dancers use their feet?" The answer leads me to explore alternative ways of making rhythm and alternative ways of moving the entire body in order to produce sound.

Translating rhythmic Irish step dance phrases into full-bodied movement leads me time and again to the theme of audible versus visible rhythms. I'm continuously fascinated by questions such as, "Does percussive dance have to be audible? Or, can dance be silent, yet visually rhythmic, if the gestures are sharp, staccato, and perfectly in time? Can one see the rhythm and not just hear it? How is the audience's experience of a visible rhythm different from that of an audible rhythm?"

Stepping in Time

At times, questions of audible versus visible rhythms are best addressed without musical accompaniment—the only sound being the rhythmic score that is produced by the body. At other times, however, music becomes a crucial third element. As mentioned above, listening to music is an important part of my initial research for a new piece.

Music provides the dreaming space where images and ideas for a dance emerge from the shadows.

Not surprisingly, most of the music that I choose is drawn from the Irish tradition. Indeed, Irish music *is* dance music. I cannot imagine sitting completely still while listening to a jig or a reel. These lively tunes provide the ballast for the unabashed virtuosity of my company. At the same time, I am very interested in styles of Irish music that are generally *not* danced to. Over the years, I have choreographed dances set to ballads, slow airs, keening, and sean-nós singing. The challenge when working with these styles of music is the slower tempo that they require. While modern dance certainly provides a wealth of movement vocabulary appropriate for a range of tempos, I am always curious to explore what happens to Irish step dance vocabulary when it is slowed down and deconstructed in the context of different styles of music.

My curiosity has led me to genres of music that are distant cousins of Irish music—tangentially related through patterns of emigration and cross-cultural exchange. Our repertory includes old-time music, French Canadian tunes, bluegrass, and reels from Cape Breton. Farther-flung experiments have included jazz improvisations, taiko drumming, and Afro-Brazilian music.

Using such a broad range of music brings many welcome challenges for me as a choreographer and adds variety to our repertory. I also rely upon the emotional resonance of a wide range of music to inspire the dancers and to speak to the audience. My work is not overtly literal, nor am I particularly interested in generating movement for movement's sake. I strive to evoke a mood, to stir an emotion, or to give a hint of

narrative through the dancers' relationships with each other. Music provides the current that carries these themes to the audience.

Bringing the Image to Life

The breadth of our musical repertory is matched by the wide-ranging technical skills of the dancers in Darrah Carr Dance. It is humbling to reflect upon the diverse talents of the nearly fifty beautiful dancers who have been members of the company since its inception. Shawn's recognition of the individual dancer's contributions to the art form—"we ourselves are the stuff of which it is made"—comes to mind again. Dancers not only bring the choreographic vision to life, but they also inspire, shape, and stretch that vision literally every step of the way. I draw from their strengths and welcome their contributions to the creative process. Today, it is imperative that the dancers I work with are versatile in both Irish step and modern dance. But I've also been fortunate to work with dancers who excel at these forms plus others as diverse as tae kwon do, jazz, ballet, hip-hop, and yoga.

When the company began, I worked with all-female dancers who were primarily trained in modern dance and ballet—not in Irish step dance. Many of these women were colleagues from my master's program at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. As a result, we were all comfortable and familiar with a choreographic process that was based in experimentation, game playing, and structured improvisation. Reflecting on my early company rehearsals brings to mind the communal aspect of Shawn's quote—namely, "we ourselves." That the art of dance is intrinsically linked to the art of group dynamics has been evident in every aspect of my training—from competing with Irish

dance *céilí* teams, to dancing in the corps de ballet, to studying contact improvisation in college. Nowhere was this more apparent, however, than in the camaraderie of my early company. The fact that we were all women facilitated our communal working process, as did the fact that we were peers. We made no distinction between our personal and professional lives as we navigated the dual adventures and heartaches of life in New York City.

My early company members had unique individual movement vocabularies that underlay a shared understanding of choreographic process. This led to extremely creative and playful rehearsals. We experimented with partnering and lifts that were inspired by the interlacing Celtic knot-work that is seen frequently in Irish embroidery, calligraphy, and jewelry. Such intricate patterns make a wonderful template for spatial design, yet they also inspired the twists and turns of our partnering—whereby dancers were lifted effortlessly overhead or slid easily underneath each other. Not only were interlacing floor patterns designated for the dancers' locomotion across the space, but the lifts and holds of the partnering work took the idea of interwoven patterns one step further by creating three-dimensional images, or moving Celtic body knots.

At other times, we relied on the juxtaposition of different movement vocabularies—contrasting full-bodied, barefoot, modern dance phrases performed by the company with percussive Irish step dance duets featuring myself and guest artist Niall O'Leary. After several fruitful years, however, I realized that the simple juxtaposition of barefoot modern dance and hard-shoe Irish step dance was not enough. I yearned for the opportunity to explore the percussive possibilities of Irish step dance more fully and I

realized that it would be extremely difficult to teach my company members the rhythms of Irish step dance—regardless of how highly skilled they were in modern dance and ballet. And so, I began to shift my focus toward working with dancers who were primarily trained in Irish step dance, with additional training in modern dance, ballet, or other forms.

Dancing in a Post-Riverdance Climate

The reorganization of the company was very timely, for it occurred during 2005-06 and coincided with *Riverdance*'s tenth anniversary. Thanks to the phenomenal commercial success of that production, Irish step dance had become a professional performance industry by that time. It was a mainstream dance form—occupying a place alongside ballet, jazz, tap, and hip-hop—and audiences around the globe were familiar with the image of a powerful, unison line of Irish dancers pounding out intricate rhythms.

Employing dancers who were primarily trained in Irish step dance enabled Darrah Carr Dance to benefit from Irish step dance's newfound popularity. Dancers who were either on leave from or retired from touring with the major commercial productions augmented our company's ranks. Dancing in a post-*Riverdance* climate also boosted our concept of ModERIN. Audiences who appreciated *Riverdance* were eager to see what else could be done with Irish step dance vocabulary.

Today, I often include several unadulterated Irish step dances within an evening's ModERIN program. The inclusion of these dances serves as an important reference point for the depth and richness of the Irish step dance tradition that we are drawing from. It gives the company a chance to showcase their impressive Irish step dance skills and to

prove that each dancer is trained in the art form and carries a deep respect for it. Opening a program with an Irish step dance also provides a springboard to our ModERIN works and makes our experiments with modern dance more accessible to the audience.

Dancing at a Crossroads

My reasons for developing ModERIN are not only personal and aesthetic but also practical and economic. It is currently very difficult to sustain a dance company in New York City. Not only is the cost of living extremely high, but there is very little government support for individual artists. By drawing from two traditions, Irish dance and modern dance, Darrah Carr Dance can create a niche market and build a larger, crossover audience. Targeting a broad audience is an important consideration given that dance companies must rely largely on box office revenue and the support of generous individual donors, rather than on government grants. Building a crossover audience through the fusion of forms is a practical strategy to address dance's economic crisis.

I am very grateful for the immense support that we have received from both the Irish and the modern dance communities. For many years, we've danced with a foot in each world. At times, it has been tricky to keep our balance while straddling two distinct dance forms. Drawing from two genres also means being caught between two worlds. Darrah Carr Dance is often perceived as being too traditional for the modern dance world and too experimental for the Irish dance world. There can be bias and misunderstanding on both sides of the equation. Yet I believe that ModERIN is a duet that—like any dance—becomes more seamless, more polished, and more practiced over time. What

once felt like two disparate paths have drawn closer together and now intersect squarely in our work.

Choreographic Process—*They Danced*

Dance and Poetry

The new choreographic work created as my practice-led research for this dissertation draws both its title and its inspiration from a lengthy poem, "They Danced," by Belfast-born poet and activist Gearóid Mac Lochlainn. Dance imagery infuses Mac Lochlainn's poem with energy. Intended to be recited rather than read, the lines bounce along rhythmically as he careens through dozens of references to different places, points, and people in Irish history—and, more specifically, in Irish dance history—albeit in a nonlinear fashion. Slipping in and out of his native tongue, while pointing to political unrest in Northern Ireland, Mac Lochlainn reminds us of the power of performative practices, such as dance and the recitation of poetry, to enable community engagement and reflection during political and cultural crises. The poem reinforces the importance of orality in Irish cultural identity and alludes to Irish dance's nationalist undertones. His frequently repeated refrain, "they danced," is both defiant and triumphant as Mac Lochlainn declares that in the face of occupation and emigration, Irish communities danced.

As an Irish step dance choreographer working in the diaspora, I was drawn to the poem not only for its repeated references to dance throughout Irish history, but also by its acknowledgment that as Irish dance moved through time and place, it was exposed to a wide range of influences, from jitterbug to jazz. Through emigration, the Irish dancing

body became a site for both remembering and reimagining. Mac Lochlainn makes frequent poetic references to emigration. Lines such as "They danced an American wake" and "the grave stone sobs and sighs of exiles they danced" give historical context for crossing geographic borders while simultaneously inspiring a contemporary reinscription of stylistic boundaries between Irish step dance and other forms of dance.

Writing in *Dance and the Lived Body*, Sondra Fraleigh draws a parallel between dance and poetry by stating that dance "is coextensive with the poetry of the world, its sounds, colors, textures, and especially its movements. . . . It [dance] is closer to the immediacy, rhythm, and origination of poetry than it is to linear language" (72). Fraleigh asserts that dance is open to multiple interpretations and that its meaning is completed by the viewer, in that "dance projects the poetry of the body and is not cast in to a void but intends a recipient" (72).

The relationship between dance and poetry in Ireland assumes a heightened significance when one considers percussive Irish step dance's role in the preservation of oral culture as the Gaelic language movement waned following Irish independence. As Moe Meyer suggests, this led to the Irish step dancer's nearly exclusive focus on creating audible rhythms and to the perception that a dancer's rhythmic footwork is a percussive instrument in a traditional music ensemble (see Chapter 2).

My goal in creating *They Danced* was to explore other connections between Irish step dance and oral poetry—beyond their mutual reliance on audible rhythms. As my artist statement reveals, I have an ongoing choreographic interest in the idea of visible rhythms. I returned to that theme again in *They Danced* and decided from the beginning

that the new choreographic work would use the soft-shoe style of Irish step dance, rather than hard-shoe percussion. Moved queries that framed my choreographic process included, How can we interpret the stanzas of *They Danced* visually rather than audibly? How can the emotional resonance of the poem be conveyed by expanding Irish step dance vocabulary to include gestures and partnering? How can we reflect Irish step dance's historic exposure to a wide range of dance forms through fusion choreography?

The decision to begin a new choreographic process with a poem, rather than a specific piece of music, was an exciting departure for me. As noted in my artist statement, listening to music often constitutes my initial choreographic research and enables ideas and images to percolate. Oftentimes, the music I've selected for a new work will become the soundtrack to my life during its creation. I'll listen to it in the car during my commute or have it playing in the background at home. By the time I get into the studio, I'm very familiar with the chosen score.

In this process, however, although I had read and recited Mac Lochlainn's poem a number of times, I had spent considerably less time with the material before entering the studio. This was freeing because I had fewer preconceived ideas and was able to be more spontaneous during our improvisations. Eschewing music, we began the choreographic process by listening to Mac Lochlainn's poem instead. In an interview with *The Asheville Poetry Review*, Mac Lochlainn stresses the value of oral recitation: "Words are meant to be carried on the air, to be externalized vocalized, sung, intoned for the ear of the listener. Text-bound poetry puts limits on understanding" ("Speaking"). In this spirit, we began

rehearsal by taking turns reciting *They Danced*. This established a shared understanding of the overall arc of the poem and its role as a repository for the history of Irish dance.

Poetry Phrases

Eventually, I broke the poem into sections and assigned a different excerpt to each dancer to use as a score for his or her individual improvisations. At times, dancers chose to give a danced interpretation of their section of poem or to move between dance and spoken word. As I reflected in my choreographer's journal, "We are going to embody the poem and bring it to life. We will not literally reenact it but rather let the text serve as inspiration for improvisation."

In rehearsal, we generated choreographic material through a variety of task-based assignments and phrase-manipulation experiments modeled on modern and postmodern compositional methods. Our tasks included reciting individual excerpts of the poem, embodying its imagery, alluding to its micronarratives, and analyzing its rhythmic structure. Dancer Timothy Kochka combined each of these methods in his personal process, which he described in his rehearsal journal:[xxiii]

> I first read the words and tried to think of the "movement" of the word—was it a sharp word, a smooth-sounding word, or did the word feel circular or linear? What is the sound quality of the words when spoken—harsh, soft, long, short, or vibratory? Then, I thought of what the words actually represent—the notion of churning butter or a flying bird. Or, a "bag of bones"—what does that feel like? What does that look like? I tried to use the imagery of the word and also the feeling that the word gave me—so the word "sigh" became the movement of a

> back fall. Then, I looked at words that repeated such as "quaver" and I used that repetition in the movement phrase. (4)

Kochka explained that the process of working and reworking the poem's stanzas in a variety of ways generated a wealth of material. The challenge then became how to devise a sequence in a way that did not feel arbitrary or like a literal reenactment of the poem.

Kochka's stanza alluded to emigration several times. One of the lines read, "They danced bags of bones in shady groves of greatcoat green." Pinpointing the word "coat," Kochka mimed the action of sliding one's arms through a jacket. Later, when putting the improvised material into a set sequence, we made the gesture larger and incorporated a loose torso and locomotor steps through second-position plié. In an interview with me, Kochka remarked, "Putting on a coat means leaving, going somewhere, going away. A traveling idea became a traveling step."[xxiv] In this way, we expanded Irish step dance vocabulary to include a gesture, a balletic plié, and a loose modern dance torso to convey the emotional resonance of the poem. Fusing disparate elements enabled us to navigate a marriage of movement and meaning that felt neither capricious nor verbatim.

Reflecting upon the challenge of interpreting a poem without literally reenacting it, company member Laura Neese found it useful to draw parallels between the function of dance and the language of poetry. In her rehearsal journal, she noted:

> It is good to remember that, like dance, poetic language isn't a direct signifier of any one meaning, but more like a refracting lens bending meaning many ways depending upon how you look at it. Poetic language encourages many "ways-in." With that in mind, it is freeing to focus your creating within a box of "something

> poetry inspired" rather than being told to "make-up a good phrase" with no parameters. (4)

The task of extrapolating movement and meaning from an assigned stanza of a particular poem became for some dancers quite freeing, then, because of the parameters. Each individual improvisation was highly generative. This was compounded by the fact that a total of nine company members were working through the assignment of making what we came to call our "poetry phrases."

After exhausting our exploration of the poem as a score, we began to play with a variety of musical selections by the Scottish band Lau. Composed of Kris Drever (vocals, guitar), Martin Green (accordion, Wurlitzer, keys, electronics), and Aidan O'Rourke (fiddle), the band bridges the seemingly far-flung worlds of acoustic folk tradition and post rock—electronics. Their aesthetic resonates deeply with my own interest in fusing traditional Irish step and contemporary modern dance in our signature style of ModERIN. To maintain focus on the poem rather than the music, at first we simply had a random sampling of Lau tracks playing in the background during rehearsal to provide atmosphere. Nearly halfway through the choreographic process, I assigned a specific track to a particular excerpt of the poem.

Ultimately, the music replaced the poetry stanzas all together, although the emotional resonance of the poem can be felt throughout the work. During our process, several vignettes emerged: a quartet of women, a duet for a man and a woman, and a trio for two women and one man. Each group was introduced during the opening section of

the dance. Then each performed their own featured segment. Finally, the entire cast joined for a rousing finale to the thirty-minute work.

Individually Styled Phrases

In addition to enacting their structured improvisations based upon Mac Lochlainn's poem, the dancers were tasked with generating a phrase that encapsulated their personal movement style and preferences. The only guidelines were a set of questions that I asked them to reflect upon in their journals before they began improvising.[xxv] The prompts encouraged them to describe their personal affinities in movement and to consider their favorite ways of using space, time, and energy. The idea for this open-ended improvisation was sparked by an early interest that I had in using portraiture as a potential methodology for conducting this qualitative research study. Portraiture, as conceptualized by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot and detailed in her text with Jessica Hoffmann Davis, seeks to combine empirical evidence with artistic expression. Building on this, I envisioned that the dancers would generate physical portraits of themselves as movers in what we came to refer to in rehearsal as our "individually styled phrases."

Although I eventually moved away from using portraiture as a research method, it was important to me throughout the choreographic process that the dancers' individuality and personal movement qualities be celebrated. Indeed, considering the phrase "they danced," giving both the poem and the ensuing dance work their titles, I wanted to showcase who "they" were—the unique individuals that make up Darrah Carr Dance.

During the making of *They Danced*, we welcomed researcher Kathryn Holt into our choreographic process. She observed rehearsals and interviewed the company and myself as part of the fieldwork that she conducted for her practice-led research for her master's thesis for the University of Hawaii at Manoa. During an interview, I explained to Holt that since my reorganization of the company in 2005-06, all dancers now share some level of Irish step dance training, but they also have a wide range of movement backgrounds:

> They have a common thread, but they're also very different. . . . Some are very Irish dance trained and others are more modern with some Irish dancing training. So, it kind of runs the gamut. The music for this piece also runs the gamut from being sort of contemporary sounding to more, it's really Scottish, but—you know—Celtic sounding. . . . Having the dancers generating the material, it's been an interesting process because it's sort of matching the range of the music. The range of their palate and the range of the music's palate is interesting, I think, as a conceptual idea. And, they're very capable. They're incredibly capable, so that's been really fun, to have them generate material and then sculpt it, shape it, do all the kinds of tricks of the composition tool box. (13 Oct. 2013)

I'm fortunate to work with dancers who can embody the fused style of ModERIN—from modern dance to Irish step with a range of styles in between. Kochka, for example, is a three-time World Irish Dance champion who performed with *Riverdance*, but also danced with Graham II. Melissa Padham-Maass is highly trained in ballet and modern with degrees from the Conservatory of Dance at Purchase College, New York University's

Tisch School of the Arts, and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. Meanwhile, Neese embraces the postmodern techniques of New York's downtown dance scene but also loves to tap dance.

In an interview with me, Neese voiced her appreciation for the opportunity to generate both the poetry phrase and the individually styled phrase. "It was nice to have a sense of ownership about our phrases. To be part of a dance where you know that you contributed to it—it makes you feel more invested," she explained (24 June 2014). Neese drew a stark contrast between the choreographic process for *They Danced* and her experience learning Irish step dance as a child at her local dance studio in Staten Island. "I learned Irish dance as a set dance that had a pattern of how to do it as a group. It was never about self-generated movement," she recalled. "Studio classes aren't usually very interested in what you feel like doing anyway. You are never asked to generate anything. They are learning and drilling classes" (24 June 2014). Neese's experience recalls the disjuncture between Curran's postmodern choreographic methods and Trinity Irish Dance Company's training (see Chapter 7) and indicates that having the dancers' generate their own material is an intervention that expands conventional notions of Irish step dance choreography.

For members of the company who had not been given the opportunity to improvise in the Irish step dance idiom during their formative years, being asked to generate their own material during rehearsals for *They Danced* led them to call upon their modern dance reservoirs and to eschew Irish step dance all together, despite their hybrid-movement capabilities. During a rehearsal for the women's quartet, for example, I asked

the dancers why they had not incorporated any Irish step dance vocabulary in their own improvisational phrases and they responded that they had not wanted to, because they are modern dancers who tend to disassociate themselves from Irish step dance. We ultimately shared a good laugh about the irony that they nevertheless belong to a publicly described Irish step dance company. In fact, their immediate identification as modern dancers indicates an underlying resistance to aspects of their histories as Irish step dancers such as strict pedagogical approaches, the material aspects of competition culture, and the uniformity of commercial productions. And it reveals their desire to signify from the margins of the dominant commercial and competition worlds.

A further probing of this topic in interviews revealed that the women's quartet also drew from modern dance vocabulary because it felt like a more natural fit for the image-based language of the poem. As Neese explained in an interview with me, "Most of us went the modern route, which is perhaps not unexpected because we were working with visual imagery. Improvising or generating material in a reel or jig is different because it is based on musicality and not on the visual image" (24 June 2014). During her fieldwork, Holt also observed with interest the fact that the dancers had instinctively gravitated toward their modern dance training while improvising. In her thesis, she attributes this to a difference in pedagogy and notes that modern dancers, particularly in higher education, often take composition courses and are trained to link movement to narrative or dramatic ideas. Irish step dancers, on the other hand, if they engage with composition at all, do so in order to generate rhythmic footwork (32). While observing our rehearsals, Holt noticed that company members referred to their Irish dance

vocabulary as “steps” and their modern dance material as “phrases,” indicating a holdover from these two distinct training systems (25).

“Irishify”

Having generated a wealth of movement, the next task in rehearsal was to ask the dancers to “Irishify” their material by inserting Irish dance “steps” into their modern dance “phrases.” While maintaining the dancers’ individual movement preferences was a priority for me, I also wanted to adhere to our choreographic signature of ModERIN. And having worked exhaustively with the poem, I was now interested in exploring much more deliberate connections between the choreographic material and Lau’s music, which itself was a combination of contemporary and traditional motifs. Although I directed the dancers to incorporate recognizable moments of Irish step dance within their phrases, they were free to decide exactly where and how often such insertions would occur.

The process of fusing Irish and modern movement vocabulary was often physically challenging for the dancers. Many of their journal entries reveal shared concerns about the sequence feeling arbitrary, looking awkward, or lacking a sense of flow. Through trial and error we discovered which movement transitions could never be reconciled and which could feel more comfortable with repeated practice. In an interview with me, dancer Mary Kate Sheehan described the fusion process in relationship to previous Darrah Carr Dance repertory that had incorporated two forms more obliquely, commenting:

> Switching back and forth between two forms is physically a lot harder than sprinkling one with the other—like adding arm movements on top of Irish feet or

> doing modern dance in céilí-inspired patterns, where the spatial design is Irishy, but the movements are not. In the quartet we are really jumping back and forth very quickly. It's hard because the forms are so different mentally and they use different muscle groups and different postures. It's easier now because we know it, but originally it felt fragmented and exhausting to go to the ground with full body, loosey-goosey, modern movement and then to tighten up again for Irish traveling steps. This was switch, switch. (17 June 2014)

To my director's eye, the fusion was thrilling to watch. The sequences became full of unexpected surprises and the dancers gamely achieved improbable feats of agility in switching back and forth between disparate movement systems. At the same time, because the sequences were so complex, I realized that we also needed an antidote of simplicity. Therefore, I wove in unison phrases of unadulterated Irish step dance vocabulary that were intended to sweep the space. As I described to Holt, "It's a cleansing of the palate, like a sorbet. The eye gets a chance to relax. It's not so dense."

Splice

Once the dancers had "Irishified" both their poetry phrases and their individually styled phrases, the next challenge in the rehearsal process was to splice their phrases with someone else's. This introduced another level of fusion—especially when working with their individually styled phrases, which were already quite different from each other, given that they highlighted each dancer's personal movement preferences in a company with diverse training. Splicing phrases together also served the practical step of

increasing the amount of shared material within the company, which gave me more options for group choreography.

I gave the dancers two directives. An A phrase and a B phrase could be spliced horizontally, or side by side, as in: A B A B. Or they could be spliced vertically, or top to bottom, as in A/B or B/A. In this instance, one dancer contributed the arm and torso movements from his or her A phrase while the other dancer contributed the footwork from his or her B phrase. Again, through a process of trial and error, we discovered which spliced phrases could coexist well and which felt irreconcilably different. Making adjustments to the phrases was also a collaborative affair. Each pair of dancers demonstrated their spliced phrase for the group in a process we referred to as "show-and-tell." I took notes in my choreographer's journal about which moments were captivating, which were not working well, and ideas on how to adjust the phrases. The entire company was also encouraged to give constructive feedback.

At times, I had the dancers insert moments of touch within their spliced phrases, in order to knit them more closely together. In some cases, small moments of touch evolved into more complex lifts and partnering. We also played with the distance between the dancers when they executed their spliced phrases, as well as choreographer's tools of unison, cannon, and repetition. My choreographer's journal was filled with both spatial maps and music maps. During and after rehearsals, I sketched spatial diagrams with ideas for arranging the dancers in space. And I notated the music in sections of eight-bar counts with notes of where the spliced phrases might fit.

While a number of the spliced phrases were used in the finished work, others were let go in the process of trial and error. In her rehearsal journal, McNeill noted that Neese's (her partner's) piece was the "polar opposite" of her own and that it was "challenging to break down some of the moves that feel so natural to me for someone else" (3). McNeill recounted that they originally tried to vertically splice their phrases with the A/B method—using Neese's arm and torso movements and McNeill's footwork—but that it ultimately felt and looked awkward.

Neese's rehearsal journal echoed McNeill's description of the process. Neese described their disparate phrases: "My phrase was downtown/postmodern rolling on the floor, no counts, no set 'vocabulary,' all visual imagery, whereas Caitlin's was highly musical Irish step dance vocabulary" (3). In an interview with me, Neese reflected on the idea of "rehearsal as research" and noted that the goal was to reconcile "the ideal of your work versus the reality of your work" (24 June 2014). Although the process of trial and error could be time consuming and painstaking, Neese believed it was worth it, even if just one snippet of usable material was discovered.

While Neese was discussing the specific rehearsal research undertaken for *They Danced*, the idea of reconciling one's ideal to one's reality resonates deeply with the self-reflexive analysis of this case study, as well as the practice-led research that both de Gallaí (see Chapter 6) and Holt have similarly undertaken of their own choreographic work. Simultaneously probing one's theory and one's practice through trial and error is the kernel of praxis.

Extrapolating further from Neese and McNeill's experience of attempting to reconcile their disparate phrases reveals several interventions that our fusion methodology contributes to typical Irish step dance practice. As noted in my artist statement, my initial company was composed of my classmates from Tisch; hence we shared a common understanding of modern and postmodern choreographic techniques as a result of our composition courses. Once I reorganized the company in 2005-06; however, the common denominator among the group became shared Irish step dance technique rather than a common compositional background.

Indeed, in Darrah Carr Dance, we each have a very different background with Irish step dance composition. A few of our dancers, like de Gallaí (see Chapter 6), reached the pinnacles of competition and were given the opportunity to improvise within the idiom of Irish step dance. Most dancers, however, like those of Trinity Irish Dance Company (see Chapter 7), were unaccustomed to movement generation in Irish step dance prior to joining Darrah Carr Dance. Still others had experience improvising in a style other than Irish step dance, such as ballet or modern dance.

Our fusion methodology generates new readings of Irish step dance for each of our company members, however, no matter where they fall on the spectrum of previous compositional experience. For some, the application of modern and postmodern compositional techniques to Irish step dance offers new choreographic insights, while for others, it enables them to revisit the Irish step dance vocabulary of their youth and to combine it with their more recent training in other styles. The impact of our fusion methodology is experienced differently by each dancer. Nevertheless, I believe that

together, we are making several contributions to the broader field of Irish step dance, including expanding the aesthetic of Irish step dance and pushing Irish step dance choreography closer to Irish contemporary dance theater through the application of postmodern and modern compositional techniques, as well as our presentation of ModERIN in concert dance venues (see Chapter 1).

Acknowledging our contribution is not to say that we are always successful in our rehearsal research. In my interviews with the dancers regarding our choreographic process, while we did discuss the mysterious rehearsal moments when we realized that something "really works," we also recognized the much more frequent occasions, when we often unanimously decided that something "just doesn't work." It remains difficult to articulate exactly how and by what criteria we determine what does and does not work. As Neese wrote in her rehearsal journal, "What 'works' is in the eye of the creator/beholder" (3).

In our choreographic process, I believe that we all shared the roles of creator and beholder. As creators, the dancers generated material and I trusted their feedback regarding what did or did not feel possible in their bodies. At the same time, as beholder, I balanced their input with my director's eye regarding what did or did not fit into the overall arc of the work that I envisioned. Conversely, as creator, I edited the material according to my choreographer's tool box, I arranged it in space, and I set it to specific places in the music. And as beholders during our show-and-tell periods, the dancers were encouraged to share their input regarding what did or did not "work" from their own observations. Ultimately, however, as artistic director I was responsible for deciding

when we needed to abandon an idea that was "not working" in order to keep making progress. As I explained in an interview with Holt:

> Trying to put two things together, oftentimes the experiments don't work. And oftentimes you just move on and you think, "Well, that was an idea and that didn't work; what else can we try?" I'm dedicated to this way of working, but I try not to have the illusion that the experiment is always fantastic. That's certainly not the case either. There are the challenges of fusing things, and then, of course, there are always the other challenges of just a dance company in general.

In addition to being responsible for making aesthetic decisions regarding the work, as my artist statement indicates, I am also highly conscious of the logistical issues of running a dance company, such as the dancers' time commitment and schedules, the cost of rehearsal space—especially in midtown Manhattan—and the demands of our overall production calendar. At times, the question of whether or not something "works" is decided for us by equally pressing issues of time and money. As my choreographic idol, George Balanchine, was known to say, "The muse must come to me on union time."

Finding Equivalencies

Once we exhausted the experiments with our spliced phrases, it was time to pursue another choreographic method. Through a process that I call "finding equivalencies" between different forms, I explored my interest in fusing elements of disparate styles together in order to make a single, blended movement. This method distinguishes our work from a *Riverdance*-style variety show, in which different styles are presented side by side but remain intact. Furthermore, this process differentiates

fusion from hybridity. Through fusion, we deconstruct distinct dance forms, select specific elements of each, and then recombine them. Fusion results in a single movement that contains stylistic elements from two or more dance forms. While this may also be the result of hybridity, it does not necessarily have to be. In other words, hybrid work may pair two disparate forms without forcing them to merge. This can be seen in the case of *Dingle Diwali* (see Chapter 7), wherein Curran paired Irish step dance rhythms with Indian vocalizations to create a unique hybrid.

Our experiments with fusion through finding equivalencies were very systematic. We made separate lists of movement vocabulary specific to ballet, modern, and Irish step dance. We pursued questions such as, How does one do a turn in ballet? What is an equivalent turn in modern dance? What is an equivalent turn in Irish dance? How can we then take stylistic aspects from each of these distinct turns and recombine them in order to create a different kind of fused turn?

The majority of our finding-equivalencies experiments were done during duet rehearsals with Padham-Maass and Kockha. I relied on the dancers' specialties to assist with this process. Padham-Maass contributed her extensive knowledge of ballet technique, while Kochka, who was dancing with Graham II at the time, used his training in that specific modern dance technique. Early in the process, we realized that modern dance is far too vast an umbrella to discern a list of defining movements. But Graham technique has a codified vocabulary, as ballet and Irish step dance do. Therefore, we could more easily pinpoint stylistic characteristics within that movement system.

As described in my artist statement, my interest in fusing disparate styles into one began long before the choreographic process for *They Danced* and resulted in the both the term and the method of ModERIN. In an interview with Holt, I explained:

> When I started making work, I thought, well, why do I have to keep Irish dancing in one little box and ballet in one little box and modern in one little box? Why can't there be some sort of reconciliation of these different things? Draw from this, and draw from that, and draw from that, and combine things. So, in many ways, I think it started with my own body . . . asking those questions of—how do I like to move? I like to do front clicks and I also like to do tour jetés. Can I only do tour jetés on Tuesdays and front clicks on Wednesdays? Why can't I do both of them every day of the week?

Fortunately, as my interest shifted from reconciling the disparate training systems in my own body to working with other bodies, I found dancers with their own hybrid movement identities who shared my interest in fusion. In an interview that I conducted with Kochka, he explained, "I love ModERIN. It's the perfect blend of my two loves. It's my home in the middle. It's my Venn diagram" (7 Sept. 2014). Meanwhile, Padham-Maass explained that she enjoys approaching the soft-shoe style of Irish step dance as a ballet dancer and finds commonality in the jumps and beats in both disciplines. In a previous choreographic process, where we had also experimented with finding equivalencies, Padham-Maass generated a retrograded tour jeté that finished with what strongly resembled a front click.

During the choreographic process for *They Danced*, we created a number of fused movements that were used in the final piece. These included a sequence that we dubbed

the "Evolution of Timmy," a riff on the famous "Evolution of Man" chart. As we joked during rehearsal, like our primate ancestors depicted in the drawing, Kochka moved gradually from floor work to standing through a fusion of styles. He began on the floor in a strong, expansive modern dance bridge, then collapsed the shape by walking backward and curling into himself. The walking steps transitioned into an Irish dance percussive drum circle with a contracted Graham torso. Kochka turned in place while his heel dug into the floor and slowly straightened his torso to assume a vertical posture that is recognizable as Irish step dance.

After observing Kochka's sequence during one of our show-and-tell periods in rehearsal, company member Alexandra Williamson commented that the ModERIN choreographic signature can be summarized as "Irish dancing bottoms with modern spines." She appreciated the methodology of finding equivalencies and noted that "the movements can't be just placed side by side. They have to be fused together. Otherwise, it just looks like Irish dance." Indeed, what both fusion and hybridity offer are new readings of Irish step dance.

Williamson also flagged a sequence that we had dubbed the "Four-Part Knee Turn" as an especially clear example of fusion. This was a marriage of a conventional four-part turn from Irish step dance—which happens to be very similar to a *chaine* turn in ballet—with the modern dance concept of level change. Kochka and Padham-Maass began the fused sequence by beginning the turn in relevé for step 1. Then, they dropped to the floor and turned on alternating knees for steps 2 and 3. Coming to standing, they finished the turn in relevé on step 4. In an interview with me, Williamson mused, "I'm

sure one day in competition, they'll also be doing turns to the knee. Who is going to be the first to break the rule? Everything is a fusion or will be at some point in time" (17 June 2014). Many of our experiments with finding equivalencies, like those of our spliced phrases, did not make it into the final piece. But we videotaped all the results in order that we could teach the fused movements to the rest of the company at some point. And echoing Williamson's prediction of the continued evolution of the form, I wanted to preserve the work that we had done so that we could draw from it in the future, thereby creating an archive of ModERIN choreographic signatures.

During rehearsals with Kochka and Padham-Maass, we eventually extended the concept of finding equivalencies from turns into jumps, and then into partnering and lifts. We asked questions such as, How does one jump from 1 foot to 2 feet in Irish step dance? In ballet? In Graham technique? And how does one jump from two feet to two feet in each of those styles? How can we recombine characteristics from each of those distinctive jumps to make something fused?

Next, we identified specific jumps within the Irish step dance cannon. For example, a typical Irish step dance leap features one leg straight and one leg bent—as if one is jumping over a hurdle. As Kochka mused in an interview with me, "All partnering should take you somewhere that you can't go on your own. So how could I assist Melissa with that leap? If I lifted her while she is in the leap position, then we could tip the shape, suspend the shape, and bring it higher than it would normally go" (7 Sept. 2014). While conventional partnering in Irish step dance consists of a man leading a woman through predetermined spatial patterns, we called upon the non-gender-specific partnering tenets

of our modern dance training. Thus, Padham-Maass also lifted Kochka. As he stated, "The Irish step dance double hop is a jump that is normally performed to the front. But because she assisted me by lifting me around the corner while I was engaged in the jump, it became circular and was higher and more sustained than it would have been on its own" (7 Sept. 2014).

Finding equivalencies was the last choreographic task that I used during the process of making *They Danced.* The ensuing rehearsals were focused on editing, shaping, and coaxing the material into a cohesive whole that carried the emotional resonance conveyed originally by the poem. Reflecting upon our process of finding equivalencies in her thesis, Holt summarized the results: "This is a good example of one way in which Carr's work addresses the perceived disparity between Irish dance and other dance forms. By looking for similarities in vocabulary, she was able to find ways that the two dance forms already overlap and then expand upon this connection" (37). Through finding equivalencies, we challenged stylistic boundaries by combining Irish step dance vocabulary with upper-body gestures, floor work, and partnering derived from ballet and modern dance. In doing so, we enlarged the aesthetic of Irish step dance and introduced new choreographic methods to the form.

Layers in Theory and Practice

Holt's insights into our choreographic process of making *They Danced* were fascinating to contemplate while I was engaged in my own self-reflexive writing around the creation of *They Danced.* So, too, was it instructive for me to read the transcripts of the interviews that she had conducted with my company members. One of the ethical

issues raised by my research design (see Chapter 4) was the fact that I would be interviewing members of my own company, who may have felt pressured to respond to my questions in ways that I would find pleasing. When being interviewed by Holt, however, the dancers presumably had more freedom to respond candidly.

Recalling Neese's assertion that both dance and poetry are like refracting lenses, which allow many "ways-in," I feel that the same can be said for our choreographic process of fusion, which also refracts, or changes the direction of, the dance form and opens up multiple new readings of Irish step dance. Throughout our process, the choreographic material itself passed through many collaborative stages—from poetry phrases, to individually styled phrases, to Irishifying, to splicing, to finding equivalencies. And the discussion surrounding the making of the work offered many ways-in—from the dancers' voices as recorded in interviews and rehearsal journals, to Holt's fieldwork observations and subsequent conclusions, to my own self-reflexive analysis. Thus, the rich layers of constructing a choreographic work are matched in complexity by the diverse viewpoints engaged in deconstructing it through analysis. Both the artifact and the understanding of its making are highly textured. Likewise, both the dance itself and our perceptions of it are integral to our full understanding of the fusion of theory and practice as seen in practice-led research methodology.

During their interviews with Holt, the dancers reported feeling a sense of community within Darrah Carr Dance and that they enjoyed the lightheartedness of our rehearsals. Similar sentiments were reported in the rehearsal dynamics of de Gallaí (see Chapter 6) and Curran (see Chapter 7). The interview data indicates that positive feelings

around the rehearsal process strongly contribute to an atmosphere of choreographic experimentation that is playful and not self-conscious. This is a particularly important consideration when introducing postmodern choreographic methods to Irish step dancers who may not have had the opportunity to generate their own material before.

To me, an atmosphere of joyful exploration in rehearsal also differentiates Irish step dance performance, which is what Darrah Carr Dance is focused on, from Irish step dance competition, which is what many members of Darrah Carr Dance had participated in as children. I contrasted my own childhood experiences performing with the Toledo Ballet with my experiences competing in Irish step dance for Holt:

> The performance of ballet was magical. I loved performance. There was something so special about that moment and I loved the rehearsal process, preparing for it. And there's a very special kind of team bond that comes from that, which is similar to competitive Irish dance where you have this group that you're working with. It's the same thing in the rehearsal process. And then, you get the joy of sharing it in performance venue, which is so different from a competitive-skills venue. I mean, you can see it in our rehearsals. We have a lot of fun in our rehearsals. . . . This art form is difficult enough as it is to make a living in, or to do anything in, so you might as well enjoy the rehearsal process. I was saying to the dancers on Friday [after Holt had observed our rehearsal], "Oh, my gosh, she must think we're nuts!" What did Laura say? "Darrah Carr Dance, 80 percent antics, 20 percent dancing!"

My childhood preference for ballet performance rather than Irish step dance competition presaged my professional career interest in creating work for concert dance venues. Rather than box up my Irish step dance training alongside the medals, photos, and memorabilia from my competition days, however, I wanted to keep it in my body and allow it to comingle with ballet, modern, and other styles on the concert dance stage.

The sentiment that I have for the Irish step dancing of my childhood is similar to the nostalgia that Curran expresses and the pleasure that he finds in revisiting the form with Darrah Carr Dance, with Trinity Irish Dance Company, or in work for his own company (see Chapter 7). Likewise, the dancers in my company appreciate the opportunity to return to a physical practice that had great symbolic and emotional meaning during their childhood and to use their Irish step dance training in professional performance, rather than competitive contexts.

In some cases, their prior history with Irish step dance competitions had, at times, garnered negative feelings. As Brigid Gillis explained to Holt, "I started to fall out of love with Irish dance as I got more competitive. . . . It's supposed to be this social-dance form, so when you do put that competitive edge and make people buy wigs and wear socks that you have to hold up with sock glue and all of this business, I think it becomes not as true to its form, so then it's not as authentic" (109). Gillis commented to Holt that Darrah Carr Dance's take on Irish step dance felt truer to the tradition—despite our fusion of the vocabulary with other dance forms.

To be accurate, negative feelings about competition are not shared by all our company members, which is perhaps not surprising, given that we have a very wide

spectrum of dance backgrounds. What is common among the dancers, however, is a desire to continue their engagement with the form through choreography and performance.

Questions of Identity

During our interviews, many of the dancers noted that a strong connection between Irish step dancing and their Irish heritage was forged during their childhoods. Kochka's maternal family emigrated from Belfast, Northern Ireland, to the United States. In an interview with me, he recalled:

> We played Irish music in the house and we were told about Irish history growing up. My mom encouraged Irish dancing because of the cultural connection. The idea was reinforced that this is my heritage—it's a much deeper connection than just an activity that I did after school. Irish dance is a beautiful art form that also has family history to it. . . . My great-grandfather Healy would sing in Gaelic, play the spoons, and do a step in the kitchen. At family weddings, we do a step about. It's jovial—the song, dance, and music. (24 Aug. 2014)

Gillis also described joyful family gatherings that featured Irish music and dance. She noted, "I'm from a big Irish Catholic family—the youngest of seven kids. We have pipers and fifty cousins at a picnic. We all dance at weddings" (24 Aug. 2014). Neese's heritage is Irish, Italian, and Cherokee. Participating in Irish step dancing with her cousin growing up enabled a strengthened connection to her Irish heritage in particular. "The shamrocks, the green, the romantic idea of Ireland is one of the heritage lineages that seems to have been held on to in my family," Neese remarked in an interview with me. "On St.

Patrick's Day we watch *The Quiet Man* and eat corned beef. Even though I'm skeptical of it, I love the romantic notion of being connected to Ireland" (10 June 2014).

As noted with de Gallaí and members of the Ériu Dance Company, Irish step dance serves as a marker of cultural identity more often for practitioners in the diaspora than for native-born Irish (see Chapter 6). This is supported not only by the viewpoints of the Irish American members of my company but also by the observations of two native Irish dancers whom we have worked with. Our guest artist Niall O'Leary was born and raised in Dublin, Ireland, but has been living in New York City for the past twenty years. In response to an interview question that Holt posed regarding whether Irish dance was representative of Irish identity, he replied, "Well, first a disclaimer: it never occurred to me that there was any connection with Irish identity at all. . . . It never occurred to me years ago. And I grew up doing Irish dancing. And, you know, it's not called Irish dancing in Ireland, it's called dancing" (159). O'Leary's perspective echoes de Gallaí's view that Irish step dancing is a form of self-expression, rather than cultural identity (see Chapter 6).

Former company member Louise Corrigan was born and raised in Kildare, Ireland. She performed with Darrah Carr Dance from 2009 to 2014 while she was living in New York City; she has since returned to Ireland. In an interview with me, she explained that her Irish step dance practice did not become a conscious part of her identity as an Irish person until she was living abroad. "Cultural identity? I suppose it was as a kid without really realizing it—every Irish kid dances at some point—we did a little at school," she recalled. "Obviously, when I moved to New York, I went to music

sessions and I would get up and dance. It's a piece of home when you're living abroad. It's a connection to home and to hanging out with other Irish people" (25 June 2014).

Gathering the danced data and the interview data from the dancers and placing them alongside my own personally situated writing from my artist statement gives me specific insights into the importance of ethnic identity to Irish step dancers in the diaspora. Whereas native Irish choreographer Breandán De Gallaí practices Irish step dance as a means of self-expression rather than as a declaration of ethnic identity, and first-generation Irish American choreographer Seán Curran navigates the pendulum pull of nostalgia—at times resisting being pigeonholed and at other times embracing his Irish heritage—many of the dancers with whom I work (and I myself) were initially drawn to Irish step dance specifically because of its ability to bestow a sense of ethnic identity even though many of us are at least several generations removed from the immigrant experience.

Drawing upon Thomas Sullivan's study of later-generation North American Irish language students whom he believes are actively engaged in the construction and maintenance of their ethnic identity, I contend that Irish step dancers in the diaspora likewise make a deliberate choice to assume an Irish ethnic identity and to construct a narrative of selfhood through cultural practice. Sullivan asserts that ethnicity is performative, and he finds that North American Irish language learners "consciously 'perform' their Irish identities by acting on notions of what they consider or believe to be authentic Irish norms and practices" (431). While I and many of the Irish step dancers with whom I work also consciously "perform" our Irish identities, our participation in the

creative act of making new choreography gives us the agency to expand the possibilities of what "authentic Irish norms and practices" can be.

By returning to our childhood practice of Irish step dance through the choreographic practice of fusion, we make a choice *not* to choose one part of our training over another. Rather, we embrace a blended movement identity and a dual ethnic identity as Irish American or American Irish. Neither our dance nor our identity is singular; both are fused and expansive as we move between several dance cultures both corporeally and choreographically. In this way, Darrah Carr Dance's choreographic process rewrites the insular nationalist history of the Irish step dancing body in order to reflect the blended identity of diasporic artists.

The simultaneous pursuit of Irish step dance and American modern dance in ModERIN has led my company to dance at a crossroads. We source primarily from two genres—contemporary modern dance and traditional Irish step—both equally rich and rewarding. We explore two styles, percussive and barefoot. We feel two pulls, one toward tradition and another toward innovation. And we seek to create dance in the space between.

Through our choreographic process of fusion, we reveal new and multifaceted interpretations of Irish step dance. When Padham-Maass explores the similarities between ballet and Irish step dance and generates a fusion of the two forms, or when Kochka uses his Graham training to draw attention to the beauty of an Irish dance leap by suspending it as a lift, the dancers and I imagine, invent, and enunciate our own identities through movement. We simultaneously embrace and challenge the norms of Irish step

dance, especially as practiced in the dominant contexts of competition or commercial production. The choreographic process of Darrah Carr Dance, then, enables the Irish step dancing body to be a site for both remembering and reimagining.

When one is at a crossroads, the question, Where to next? naturally arises. I answer: Look back before looking forward. That dance in Ireland traditionally happened at a crossroads is a reminder for me to respect the road that led me to a place of intersecting genres, while I simultaneously remain curious about the path that lies ahead.

CHAPTER IX

UPRISING

Dance has always been a site for revolutionary ideas in motion.

—Call for papers, Dance Research Forum Ireland Conference, 2016

On a snowy February evening in 2015, Breandán de Gallaí, Seán Curran, and I strolled through the buzzing hallways of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts (NYU), where Curran is chair of the Department of Dance. Poking our heads into studios, checking out classrooms, and appreciating the newly renovated Jack Crystal Theater, we envisioned hosting the Dance Research Forum Ireland (DRFI) conference at NYU the following summer. As the newly elected chair of DRFI, de Gallaí was interested in bringing the sixth international conference to a location outside Ireland for the first time. Having been actively involved with DRFI since its inception in 2003, I was glad to assume a leading role on the program committee and to shape a conference with themes that were related to my research and that resonated with the broader field of Irish dance in a post-*Riverdance* climate.

Following our initial meeting in the Department of Dance, we partnered with a number of additional programs throughout the university, including the Tisch Initiative for Creative Research, the Tisch Department of Performance Studies, Steinhardt Dance Education, and Glucksman Ireland House. NYU's facilities provided a critical mixture of performance and studio space, which enabled the body to be foregrounded during the conference. This was central to our mission to promote practice-led research and

reflective of the growing number of scholars who are embracing this methodology within the field of Irish dance—among them de Gallaí, Holt, myself, and more recently, Kelly (see Chapter 4). During the June 2016 conference, we programmed formal performances of professional and student works, informal showings, lecture demonstrations, and workshops alongside paper presentations and panels. De Gallaí performed excerpts of his latest work, *Lïnger*, a duet that focuses on issues of masculinity and aging. And Darrah Carr Dance presented excerpts of *They Danced* alongside works by over a dozen choreographers. Meanwhile, Curran taught a master class and reframed his role as a traveling dance master by hosting a conference of international colleagues hailing from Ireland, Brazil, Germany, Palestine, Macedonia, and across the United States.

The conference, titled UpRising, commemorated the hundredth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, an insurrection launched by Irish republicans to establish an independent Irish state. Holding the conference in New York City was an acknowledgment of the important historic role that the diaspora played in securing Irish independence. In a double meaning, the name UpRising can also be applied to the current groundswell of choreographic activity in Irish step dance both in Ireland and abroad—a phenomenon that is at the core of this dissertation. The decision to hold the conference outside Ireland for the first time points to the rise in Irish dance scholarship over the past fifteen years (see Chapter 1) and signals DRFI's interest in contributing to the broader dance field. The support that the conference received from a wide range of departments at NYU also indicates a number of areas for future Irish dance research, among them pedagogy, Irish Studies, and critical theory.

Although the title UpRising was germinated in a specific Irish sociopolitical context, the conference encouraged participants to consider dance more broadly as a site for revolutionary ideas in motion and as a force for positive change. When drafting the call for papers, the program committee discussed themes that resonated with our own research and with our observations of current work in the field of Irish dance. We then reframed these topics so that they could be applied to a wide range of dance forms. Our moved queries included, How are narratives of selfhood and nationhood constructed, questioned, and reconstructed through performative sociopolitical and cultural practices? How does an embodied sense of place resonate in creative practice? In what ways do movement practices encourage the navigation of borders and reinscription of boundaries, be they political, cultural, social, geographic, stylistic, or historical?

Three Revolutions

As both an inspiration for and an outgrowth of the themes of the DRFI conference, this dissertation examines the current choreographic moment for Irish step dance in relationship to one hundred years of Irish independence. More specifically, it analyzes shifts in the field during the twenty years since *Riverdance.* Both the Gaelic revival and *Riverdance* were revolutionary moments for Irish step dance. Revivalists oversaw the invention of the Irish step dance canon in a partnership between fierce nationalism and authoritative Catholicism. That canon was then disseminated through widespread competition and via successive waves of emigration (see Chapter 2). *Riverdance*, on the other hand, repackaged Irish step dance as a sexy, global product and

created a professional performance industry for the form as the booming Celtic Tiger economy lured immigrants back home (see Chapter 3).

As the surge of choreographic activity in a post-*Riverdance* climate indicates, today's Irish step dance choreographers are engaged in a third revolution of our own. Neither the insular nationalism of the Gaelic Revival nor the simplistic multiculturalism of *Riverdance* satisfies our artistic concerns. Through our individual choreographic processes, we challenge the dominance of the competition and commercial sectors, and we present alternative versions of Irish step dance in concert dance contexts.

Spurred by his lengthy tenure with *Riverdance*, de Gallaí strives to reorient the power dynamic of the commercial Irish step dance world by restoring agency to the dancers (see Chapter 6). Through a choreographic process that values individual contributions and enables cast members to write their own narratives, *Noċtú* reveals the dancers' personal stories and reaffirms their right to signify from the margins of the dominant commercial sector.

De Gallaí rebels against the hierarchy of the commercial productions and destabilizes the established signs of the Irish dancing body. He eschews the percussive, unison line made famous by *Riverdance* in favor of a democratic swarm or flock. *Noċtú* replaces the heteronormative lead couple of *Riverdance* with a trio of dancers—two men and a woman—who explore their sexual attraction to each other while enduring homophobic slurs and other forms of ostracization.

De Gallaí's interest in narrative is driven by a desire to express emotion through Irish step dance. He uses improvisation in his choreographic process to free the "built-in

stopper" of the Irish step dancer after years of following competition rules or fitting into a commercial lineup. As de Gallaí allows the improvisational impulse to surface through the torso, into the arms, and up to the face, he rewrites the repressive history of Irish step dance and creates an outlet for emotional expression. *Noċtú* liberates and celebrates the Irish step dancing body, while refraining from the sexual objectification found in some commercial productions.

Curran is also engaged in a process of rewriting Irish step dance history, but through a different choreographic process from that of de Gallaí (see Chapter 7). As a first-generation Irish American, he is a member of a family tree with deep roots in Ireland, and yet his career, as that of a postmodern choreographer, spreads like a rhizome in every direction. Not only does he travel frequently for tours, residencies, and commissions but, as a "collage artist," he is inspired by a wide range of sources as well. Through his travels, and their impact on his creative process, Curran reframes the singular voyage of the Irish immigrant as a global journey of choreographic inspiration.

Curran's creative process merges his affinity for his Irish step dancing childhood with his postmodern sensibility. As a modern-day traveling dance master, he carries his Irish step dancing background along his choreographic journey and pairs it with sources that he meets along the way. In doing so, he enables new and hybrid cultural enunciations to appear on the concert stage and expands the both the aesthetic of Irish step dance and conventional notions of choreography. Through task-based choreographic assignments, *Dingle Diwali* challenges the dancers to untether Irish step dance from Irish music and to explore its percussive nature within the framework of Indian rhythms.

My own work with Darrah Carr Dance overlaps in some ways with that of de Gallaí and Curran, yet it also has a distinct focus (see Chapter 8). Like de Gallaí, I strive for my choreography to carry emotional resonance, but that is not my main area of interest. On the other hand, like Curran, I appreciate hybridity, which feeds my overarching focus on fusion. My choreographic process of ModERIN unleashes the dancers' multifaceted movement backgrounds and enables Irish step and modern dance to fuse into a blended style. Through this process, I refute the two previous rebellions in Irish step dance history from a diasporic perspective. The first intervention took place a hundred years ago when the insular nationalism of the Gaelic revival promulgated the invented traditions of Irish step dance and disparaged other forms. Meanwhile, the second revolution in Irish step dance occurred twenty years ago when *Riverdance* introduced a simplistic multiculturalism as an antidote to Ireland's historically insular nationalism during the global Celtic Tiger moment.

In contrast, my diasporic choreographic process welcomes influences that lie outside the official boundaries of competitive Irish step dance as delineated by the Irish Dancing Commission (see Chapter 2) and strives to fuse disparate dance forms together beyond a variety show presentation as seen in *Riverdance* (see Chapter 3). I do not pursue fusion because I believe that Irish step dance is somehow lacking and that my methodology offers a path to choreographic betterment.[xxvi] Rather, I am interested in reconciling the diverse training systems within my own body and presenting them in a greater body of work. I view the overarching concept and choreographic method of

ModERIN as an exciting expansion of the Irish step dance aesthetic rather than an admission of lack.

At the same time, my choreographic process is informed by the acknowledgment of substantial lack in other critical areas—such as access to funding streams and avenues toward building an avid audience for dance. Hence, my choreographic signature of ModERIN is driven by both aesthetic and logistical issues. Through a fusion of styles, I have found a niche market that attracts a larger audience for dance by appealing to several subsets of viewers.

The distinctive choreographic focuses of this dissertation's three case studies can be distilled into three words—*expression*, *hybridity*, and *fusion*—for de Gallaí, Curran, and myself, respectively. These three interventions in choreographic process for Irish step dance reflect our differing backgrounds both in our dance training and in our personal identities. The competition and commercial worlds have affected de Gallaí most directly. He brings his experience with improvisation as an elite competitive dancer into his rehearsal process. And he consciously creates a communal company environment through the idea of "living the process" in reaction to the hierarchical casting procedures of commercial productions. As a native Irish person, de Gallaí does not associate Irish step dancing with a sense of ethnic identity. For him, dance is a means of self-expression. This, in turn, feeds his choreographic interest in emotional expression.

As a first-generation Irish American, Curran has a relationship to Ireland that is core to his identity. He has a fond nostalgia for the Irish step dance lessons of his childhood and has drawn from Irish step dance's gifts of speed and musicality throughout

his career. After he encountered postmodern choreographic techniques while a student at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and as a performer with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, the concepts of collage and task-based movement generation became central to his choreographic process. Given that the Seán Curran Company is a modern dance company, not an Irish step dance company, Curran's career is rooted more firmly in modern and postmodern concert dance venues than are mine or de Gallaí's. Nevertheless, he enjoys revisiting the Irish step dancing of his childhood at times with his own company, but also through collaborations with Darrah Carr Dance and Trinity Irish Dance Company.

Having also been educated at Tisch, I share Curran's application of task-based movement generation in my choreographic process, although my work is not focused on postmodern collage. Rather, I draw heavily from the general choreographic principles through which the early American modern dance pioneers broke away from classical ballet—employing methods such as floor work and moving the torso off its vertical axis. Applying these concepts to my Irish step dance training results in my fused choreographic process of ModERIN. As an American who is several generations removed from "ERIN," or Ireland, my ethnic identity is also fused. The dual designations *Irish American* or *American Irish* suit me equally well.

Western Dance versus World Dance

Although our backgrounds and artistic focuses are different, de Gallaí, Curran, and I are also similar in a number of ways. We have a shared belief in choreographic process itself and acknowledge that making dances is indeed a process, or an

investigation. This conviction sparked de Gallaí's practice-led dissertation as well as my own. We also believe in rehearsal as research and embrace a dance company model in order that we may have other bodies to improvise with or to conduct task-based assignments with. During rehearsal, we consciously create a warm and supportive environment—through either humor or "living the process"—so that the dancers feel comfortable generating movement and trying out new ideas.

Asking Irish step dancers to contribute material during rehearsal brings a sense of creative authorship that is not often found among the strict regulations of competition or the unison lineup of *Riverdance.* Through our choreographic processes, we open a shared space for making—not for teaching or learning by rote, not for competing or winning, and not even for performing—at least not initially. First, and foremost, we open a shared space for making new choreographic works together as Irish step dancers. Experimentation drives us because the dominant images of *Riverdance* or the Gaelic revival do not satisfy our artistic concerns.

Through our rejection of the commercial and competitive dance worlds, we move Irish step dance onto the concert dance stage and explore future possibilities for the form. In his dissertation, de Gallaí considers the question "What can new Irish dance be?" and draws parallels between his artistic concerns and those of the twentieth-century pioneers of modern and postmodern dance (109). He writes, "I see what I do as comparable to a modern or contemporary dance movement system, not because of the influence of these pioneers, but because it rejects in some way the culture from which it stems." De Gallaí suggests that studying the ruptures of modern and postmodern dance from classical ballet

can provide insight into what the future trajectory might be for Irish step dance as it leaps from a commercial platform to a concert dance stage.

By presenting our Irish step dance companies on concert dance stages, rather than opening Irish step dance schools or starting commercial productions, we are challenging the institutional bias of Western dance versus world dance (see Chapter 1). In creating an "Irish dance ballet," de Gallaí confronts the privileged art form of imperial power through a choreographic process that enunciates from the borderline of concert dance and Irish step dance. Although Curran and I do not have the same postcolonial relationship to Western dance forms that de Gallaí has as a native Irish person, we have also encountered bias toward world dance forms in our diasporic careers. Curran reframes the binary of Western dance versus world dance by conceiving of all dance as folk dance and of a choreographer's role as "just handing it down." As he noted in an interview with me, "Who are your folks? How will we folk dance in the future? How does folk dance evolve and change and get passed down?" (see Chapter 6).

In my own choreographic process, I challenge the binary of Western dance versus world dance through "finding equivalencies" between Irish step dance, ballet, and modern dance (see Chapter 8). By considering Irish step dance in equal relationship to Western dance forms, I assert its right to signify on the concert dance stage. The process of finding equivalencies finds a common denominator among different dance forms and allows me to expand the aesthetic of each form through fusion choreography. Rather than imply that Irish step dance is lacking, I blend dance forms to challenge institutional bias

and to declare that Irish step dance not only is equal to privileged forms of concert dance but also can serve as choreographic inspiration in exploration of such rarified forms.

Through our distinctive processes, the three choreographers in the case studies in this dissertation are introducing the dance company model to Irish step dance—a practice that includes numerous competitive schools and commercial productions, but few professional dance companies. Although task-based movement generation and the dance company model are not new contributions to the broader dance field, these developments are revolutionary for Irish step dance because they challenge the dominant order, question power dynamics, and affirm the right of individual Irish step dancers to contribute creatively to the expansion of the form. Furthermore, the dance company model enables Irish step dance choreography to have access to the concert dance platform—rather than being relegated to loosely themed world dance festivals or ubiquitous St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

By presenting our Irish step dance companies on concert dance stages, de Gallaí, Curran, and I are contributing to the broader dance field by encouraging scholars, choreographers, practitioners, and presenters of ballet, modern, and postmodern dance to question practices of exclusivity and to reevaluate the binary definitions of world dance and Western dance.

Contributions to the Field

In its embrace of praxis, this dissertation advocates for practice-led research—a methodology that still strives for legitimacy throughout academia. Through the inclusion of three case studies of professional choreographers who are engaged with Irish step

dance, a practice that is largely absent from current discourse on choreographic practice, this study makes a contribution to the Irish dance community, to the larger field of Irish studies, and to the much wider circle of dance scholarship. Although this dissertation addresses the culturally specific form of Irish step dance, many of the issues that the artists are grappling with—such as individual agency, cultural identity, and hybridization of forms—are applicable across a wide range of dance disciplines. Therefore, this research may serve as a framework for broader dance scholarship.

A significant contribution of this dissertation is the assertion that rewriting the history of a specific cultural dance form is not only a revolutionary political act but also a deeply personal one. In each of the three case studies of this dissertation, the interview data reveal that active participation in the choreographic process imbues dancers with the agency to imagine and enunciate their own identities through the body. For the artists whom I researched, the results of active participation in choreographic processes move beyond aesthetics and into identity politics. Having a generative role in rehearsal enables them to examine, refashion, and assert what it means for them be an Irish, Irish American, or American Irish step dancer. Dance making becomes theory generating as it pushes dancers to articulate their identities outside the dance studio.

For members of Ériu Dance Company, active participation in de Gallaí's choreographic process led them to reimagine themselves as "dancers that do Irish" rather than remain more narrowly defined as "Irish dancers" (see Chapter 6). Likewise, members of Darrah Carr Dance had the opportunity to revisit the Irish step dancing of their childhood in rehearsals with Curran and myself. Through our choreographic

processes of hybridity and fusion, dancers not only reconciled their Irish step dance backgrounds with their other forms of dance training; they also made the conscious choice to embrace their dual Irish American or American Irish identities. In these instances, choreographic process becomes a form of theorizing as one's embodied experiences lead to conceptual changes. Bodily experience affects one's identity and how one conceptualizes and then presents oneself in the public sphere. In this way, beyond being creative and transformative, dance making is deeply personal and highly political.

Future Research

The questions that are raised by this study can be extended to a number of different research topics far beyond the scope of this dissertation. There are two potential areas of study that interest me most immediately. First, I am very inspired by the plethora of recent scholarship on Indian dance. Indeed, generally speaking, Indian dance and Irish dance have followed a remarkably parallel trajectory during the past century—from British colonization to nationalist reinvention to widespread commercialization to recent experimentation. Janet O'Shea's text *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* traces the effects of British colonization on Bharata natyam and the reinvention of the form on the urban concert stage during the 1930s and 1940s on the eve of Indian independence. O'Shea analyzes the choreographic practice of numerous contemporary artists in the Indian diaspora, including Hari Krishnan and Shobana Jeyasingh, and discusses how they negotiate the pulls of individuality and continuity within their work. Royona Mitra's text *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism* is an in-depth case study of British Asian choreographer Akram Khan and his contemporary

Kathak work. Meanwhile, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora*, an anthology edited by Ketu H. Katrak, demonstrates the diverse range of choreographic visions and concerns being explored today. I believe that a cross-cultural study of Irish and Indian contemporary dance choreographers would prove very fruitful in exploring issues of signification in a postcolonial environment.

Additionally, I am interested in pursuing a case study of dance majors at Hofstra University who were enrolled in my Dance Styles course. I choreographed a new fusion work for them that premiered during the Fall Faculty Dance Concert in December 2012. I documented my choreographic process and compiled raw data field notes taken during rehearsal, journal entries that the dancers kept throughout the rehearsal process, rehearsal footage, performance footage, and performance photos. Interviews with the dancers took place in spring 2013. I had initially planned to include a case study of that choreographic process within this dissertation, but it proved to be beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, I believe that such an analysis would provide valuable insight to the position and function of Irish dance in academia—one of several emergent contexts that I believe will become even more prominent in the future.

Given that the students at Hofstra were not trained in Irish step dance, their encounter with the form in rehearsal could also inform pedagogical approaches for Irish step dance teachers—an area of great interest to me. While this dissertation focuses on the shift of Irish step dance performance from the commercial sector to the concert dance stage in a post-*Riverdance* climate, I have also observed a parallel trajectory, from the commercial sector to the education field. Just as many retired *Riverdance* performers are

joining companies like mine or De Gallaí's in order to continue their artistic pursuits, so are many dancers leaving tour to begin their teaching careers. De Gallaí describes how members of the Ériu Dance Company carry the information they learned during his choreographic process back to their own Irish step dancing schools (see Chapter 6). Similarly, Timothy Kochka describes the ways in which the experience of being a professional Irish step dancer has affected his colleagues when they begin their teaching careers in terms of concerns regarding body maintenance and injury prevention for Irish step dancers (see Chapter 3).

Irish dance pedagogy is also making inroads in academia. Irish step dance currently enjoys the flagship support of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick (see Chapter 1) as well as recent interest from graduate students and faculty at the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance (see Chapter 3). These programs are a powerful response to the negative binary of Western versus world dance as espoused by many dance departments within institutions of higher education (see Chapter 1). In recent years, I've become very interested in developing curriculum for Irish dance in American college and university settings, as evidenced by the Irish Steps and Studies course that I developed for the dance and Irish studies programs at Hofstra University (see Chapter 3). I also advocate for the numerous Irish studies programs, housed at American universities and fed by the vast Irish diaspora, to open their course offerings to include the study of Irish dance—among the more common cultural pursuits of Irish literature, music, drama, and language.

In addition to being a crucial aspect of an Irish studies program, the study of Irish dance can augment the standard dance offerings in higher education. There are many direct correlations between Irish dance and courses such as composition, dance history, anatomy and kinesiology, dance appreciation, intro to dance, and pedagogy for elementary education. Initial probes into these areas were made during the DRFI conference in June 2016, given the widespread support we received from a number of different academic departments at New York University. Irish dance in academia is an area that is filled with great potential and I look forward to the time when the mainstream art form of Irish dance wins its rightful place in higher education.

Ceaseless Choreography

A deliberate focus on Irish step dance choreography and performance, rather than competition or commercial production, is shared by the three choreographers who are highlighted in this dissertation. Since the time of my initial research, each choreographer has continued to create works that push the boundaries of traditional forms. De Gallaí premiered *Lïnger* at the Project Arts Centre, Ireland's premiere contemporary dance venue, in January 2016. The evening-length duet for two male dancers explores the emotional issues of identity, sexuality, and aging. Meanwhile, the Seán Curran Company premiered *Dream'd in a Dream*, a hybrid collaboration with Kyrgyz folk music ensemble Ustatshakirt Plus at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 2015 (Curran was about to leave for Kyrgyzstan when I interviewed him in March 2012—see Chapter 7). And Darrah Carr Dance premiered *Celtic Jazz Tryst*, a collaboration with Tara O'Grady & Her Black Velvet Band at New York City's Irish Arts Center in November 2015. The

work is a fusion of swing dance, tap rhythms, and Irish dance steps set to O'Grady's jaunty sound, which spans Celtic, folk, funk, blues, jazz, and swing. All these recent premieres, as well as the choreographic works that were analyzed in this dissertation, are further evidence of a groundswell of choreographic activity in a post-*Riverdance* climate. Furthermore, each example heralds the emergence of Irish step dance-influenced choreography on the concert dance stage.

This dissertation comprised a deep exploration of choreographic process in Irish step dance. My research focused on three choreographers—de Gallaí, Curran, and myself—who are likewise engaged in continual exploration of the dance form. Each of us has been rooted within the framework of Irish step dance since childhood, yet we allow improvisation, experimentation, and inspiration from other forms of dance and music to push against the boundaries of tradition and to explore the infinite possibilities that arise when making dances. Through our distinctive choreographic processes, we return time and again to our relationship with Irish step dance, and know the dance form for the first time—every time. I view our ceaseless choreographic exploration as a search for surprise. And I regard de Gallaí, Curran, and myself as among a growing number of choreographers who are exploring new contexts for Irish step dance in a post-*Riverdance* climate.

I began my research with the preconceived notion that there was a groundswell of choreographic activity in Irish step dance. My interview data not only confirmed that observation but also revealed the previously unforeseen impact of the engagement with choreographic process on the part of the dancers themselves. My research revealed that

the continual exploration of improvisation and task-based movement generation enables dancers to revisit the Irish step dancing of their childhoods and to know it anew through their bodies. On this note, I will end, rather than start, not only this chapter but also the dissertation, with a fitting epigraph:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

—T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

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APPENDIX A

"They Danced"

THEY DANCED

When the piper came to town, they danced, he said

Once, the whole world danced when the piper played

They danced the petticoat swish under a young May moon

Where the quaker was kissed and the donkey shoed

They danced to the shiver and the Jelly roll

They danced staccato slippety hip hop jig with lazy lilty cuts and clips

They danced on streams of air that shimmered through ducts of blended drones,

The bags and bellows and bumblebee tones

They danced while guills and chanter reed spilled trills

And slid down garrets of slurred legato into the open street

They danced the dry reed octave playing science of Ennis

They danced Dia leat tripletty trap cran pip and nip the scale

They danced the crickleycrack surround sound panasonic system

Of Johnny Doran at the fair

They danced

They danced half-doors off the hinges and smashed the windows,

The German, The Paddywhack, The Six Hand Duke, The Krakoviak

The tumbled salmon leap silk tasseled acrobats

On upturned barrels in the garden of daises

Decked in caroline hats and swallow tail coats;

Dance masters who vied for parishes, goats, and collection plates,

In hamlets and villages as dusk encroached

They whirled the blackbird and the feathery reel

And trapped the notes beneath their feet

They danced the rabbit and did the dog, the frog, the bump and grind,

The soft shoe shuffle for the girl I left behind

They danced

Singing:

Sin amach cos an ghaid agus crap cos an tsúgáin,

Bain cnag as t'altaibh agus searradh

As do ghlúnaibh,

Sios go dti an doras agus suas go dti an cúinne,

Is go mbris' an riabhach do chosa mara deacair

Tú a mhuineadh

They lilted tomes of tunes and rhymes in time and place

While steel cleats of hobnail boots

Knocked comet showers of sparks from flags

And the skulls beneath the clinker stone

Began to shake rattle and roll

Fear na rópai danced till the noose closed in,

Then he danced Maggie Pickens on the head of a pin,

Paced the whip, double battered, drummed and trotted the hay,

Skipped a high caul cap for the orange and the green,

The Caledonian, Paris, Ballycommon, Ballysteen,

And for the rights of man they danced one last quadrille

Then stormed the Bastille and Belfast city hall

They danced

They danced the call and response of phrase and turn

They danced the sword dance with spades, shovels, fiddle bows, hammers and tongs

They danced an American wake

As Kate Sweeny fingered decades of the rosary

Then kissed them all a final fare ye well on the bridge of the last filleadh

They danced the seven step polka and the eight step polkey

They danced the boni moroni watusi bazouki mazurka

On the wind that shook the barley

Shakin' tail feather money maker,

Shake it up baby, how low can you go?

How low can you go-go?

They danced

They danced the munster buttermilk in Maisie Friel's kitchen,

On pipes cut from sticks in the great grandfather's garden

They danced on quavers, demi-semi-quavers, hemi-demi-semi- quavers

And microyones that spilled milk fresh from the lark in the morning

They danced, bags of bones in shady groves of greatcoat green

Through razor stroke blue hues of choppy seas

And the grave stone sobs and sighs of exiles

They danced

They danced floosies, flookies, phonies, fairies,

Flakes, fiddlers, fluters, tinkers, tailors, soldiers, sailors,

Pavees, papists and presbyterian candlestick makers

They danced through boogie woogie Belfast hornpipebomb backstreet

They danced the aces and the deuces, the one-eyed-Jacks

And the Queen of the rushes for the Bard of Armagh

They danced the diddley dee and the do ray mi

Skinnymalink melodeon legs big banana feet

Doo wop showaddy waddy wop bop a loo bop a wop bamboo pow wow

At the Oakey Dokey Karaoke

They danced wacipi on the waves of Tory and the walls of Limerick

While the piper in the meadow softly strayed . . .

They jumped Nyabingi and dozey doe your partner

And swing the pretty lady house, home, sides, slide and gallop

They waltzed a fish in the dish dervish swish tarantella,

Kicked the tin, jumped the broom and the A train

With a jug of punch, pinch of snuff, other stuff

And all that jazz and jive talk

They danced; scrimpers, scivers, duckers and divers and uptight Johnny two timers

They danced;

Lost sheep, rebel priests, geeks, goons,

Prodigal sons, mutts with mange, Sandinista Sallies, Moving Marys and Disco Sues

Who skipped to maloo in Spanish fandango Irish twelve bar blues,

While herons, wrens and water hens spread their plumes

On the chatanooga choo choo G key change

And penny boy hacks of the old Irish times dropped their pens,

Sang a song of sixpence for pockets full of rye,

Blinked and missed it all

They danced

Y yo le canto

Yo le canto a mi Gitano

Yo le canto a mi Mandela, Sisulu, Soweto

Yo le canto a mi Romero

Yo le canto a Victor Jara con la guitarra

Yo le canto a commandante Che Guevara

Yo le canto a Nicaraguita

La flor mas Linda di mi querer

Yo le canto, y cuando yo le canto

Un poquito me esta passando

Yo le canto

A mi Lakota,

Wani waci yelo

They danced,

To age old tunes

Of boom boom operators,

Pulse propagators,

Stocks and regulators,

Aural space negotiators,

Musical agitators

And acoustic instigators,

Tongueing the sound

Down at the crossroads

Where they danced

They danced

While the infantry and military

Were dispatched to stop the dance

But still they danced

They danced

When the piper came to town, they danced, he said,

Once, the whole world danced when the piper played

—Gearóid Mac Lochlainn

APPENDIX B

IRB Letters

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
http://www.twu.edu/irb.html

DATE: July 8, 2016

TO: Ms. Darrah Carr
Dance

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: Extension for Irish Dance: Pushing the Boundaries of a Traditional Form (Protocol #: 16739)

The request for an extension of your IRB approval for the above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU IRB (operating under FWA00000178) and appears to meet our requirements for the protection of individuals' rights.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. If subject recruitment is on-going, a copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

This extension is valid one year from July 8, 2016. Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any unanticipated incidents. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Mary Williford-Shade, Dance
Dr. Rosemary Candelario, Dance
Graduate School

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P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
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DATE: July 28, 2016

TO: Ms. Darrah Carr
Dance

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: Extension for Irish Dance: A Study of Choreographic Process (Protocol #: 17085)

The request for an extension of your IRB approval for the above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU IRB (operating under FWA00000178) and appears to meet our requirements for the protection of individuals' rights.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. If subject recruitment is on-going, a copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

This extension is valid one year from August 22, 2016. Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any unanticipated incidents. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Mary Williford-Shade, Dance
Dr. Rosemary Candelario, Dance
Graduate School

APPENDIX C

Publication Release Letter

Dear Mr. Bruce Meyer

I would like to deposit an excerpt from the following chapter in my dissertation to meet the graduate requirements at Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

MODERIN: DANCING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN

ModERIN: Contemporary Irish Dance Works; Darrah Carr Dance

Edited by Dáithí Ó Mír, Macater Press, 2013, pp. 19-26.

I am contacting you in order to seek permission from Macater Press to include this excerpt in my dissertation. The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest through its UMI® Dissertation Publishing business. I would be grateful if you could return this letter to me with your permission to use the aforementioned excerpt.

Yours sincerely
Darrah Carr
Ph.D. Student
Texas Woman's University

NOTES

[i] The late Dáithi Ó Mir also published under the name Moe Meyer. I use both names throughout this dissertation, corresponding to the name he used for a given publication.

[ii] In October 1996, the Lee and Liffey companies were established so that one could tour the United States while the other toured Europe. According to the *Riverdance* website, there have been multiple companies named after Irish rivers: Liffey, Lee, Lagan, Avoca, Shannon, Boyne, Corrib, Foyle, Moy, Bann, and Barrow.

[iii] The North American square dance is a descendant of post-Napoleonic quadrilles.

[iv] Since the global interest in Irish step dance was sparked by *Riverdance*, competitions today are also found in numerous countries around the world that historically were not destinations for sustained Irish emigration, such as Mexico, Japan, and Poland.

[v] While there is no definitive answer to why Irish step dance costumes have moved away from Celtic designs in recent years, factors at play include the globalization of a dance form that is no longer in strict service to Irish nationalism, as well as the impact of fashion trends on the competition scene.

[vi] According to Cullinane, in an interview with Stacy Baker for *The New York Times*, dancers began wearing their hair in ringlets for competition during the 1960s. Again, there is no singular reason for this trend, yet it is largely influenced by a desire to emulate the conventional, stereotypical image of a curly-haired Irish lass. Also, many dancers describe the effect of "bouncing curls": when one's curls bounce, it gives the impression of reaching great heights in one's jumps.

[vii] According to Earle Hitchner, Whelan's music from the Eurovision interval act was released as a single and dominated the top of Irish charts for eighteen consecutive weeks, selling over 250,000 copies in a country of four million people.

[viii] Ó Cinnéide reports that over 10 percent of the Irish population saw *Riverdance* in the first eight weeks of its initial run.

[ix] The term "Celtic Tiger" alludes to the "East Asian Tigers" of Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore and their own periods of rapid growth during the late eighties and early nineties.

[x] Although the extant literature on Irish step dance does not directly engage with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, it is worthwhile noting the simultaneity of *Riverdance*'s rise and the peace process in Northern Ireland during the 1990s as an area for further research. Likewise, at the time of this writing, the phenomenon of Brexit has led to renewed calls for the reunification of Ireland. What role Irish step dance may play in the coming political conversation remains to be seen.

[xi] For a discussion of contemporary Irish step dance solo work, see McGrath's *Dance Theatre in Ireland.*

[xii] I enjoyed the opportunity of learning an excerpt of de Gallaí's *Noċtú* when he taught a master class for my students at Hofstra University in the spring of 2015.

[xiii] Bhabha's frequent references to postcolonial India resonate with the Irish postcolonial experience and bring to mind several parallels between the trajectories of Indian dance and Irish dance, among them the reinvention of forms such as Irish step dance and Bharata natyam as political tools for nation-building, the commercialization of

Riverdance and Bollywood, and the growing number of contemporary dance artists who are reimagining their inherited Irish or South Asian cultural movement forms. While such comparisons are not the focus of this dissertation, the parallels are worth noting as an area for future study. The influence of early Indian modern dance artists (such as Uday Shankar and Chandralekha), the prominence of contemporary choreographers working throughout the global South Asian diaspora (for example, Ananya Chatterjea, Parijat Desai, Akram Khan, Shobana Jeyasingh, Hari Krishnan, and Anita Ratman), and the plethora of recent scholarship on contemporary South Asian dance (Ketu Katrak, Royona Mitra, Prarthana Purkayastha) are evidence of the vibrant energy of performance and scholarship surrounding contemporary South Asian dance. This is inspirational for the emerging field of contemporary Irish step dance choreography and research.

[xiv] All quotes in this chapter are taken from Breandán de Gallaí's dissertation, *Imeall-Siúl: A Choreographic Exploration of Expressive Possibilities in Irish Step Dancing*, unless otherwise noted. Quotes from the dissertation include excerpts from his own self-reflexive writing, his author's journal, interviews with his dancers, statements from his company members, project applications, and critics' reviews.

[xv] In 2014, I conducted a total of four interviews with de Gallaí on the following dates: July 3, October 15, October 22, and November 19.

[xvi] All quotes from Seán Curran are taken from interviews conducted on February 13 and March 31, 2012, unless otherwise specified.

[xvii] Darrah Carr Dance's repertory includes five works by Seán Curran: *On the Six* (2009), *Dingle Diwali* (2011), *Six Laments* (2012), *Off Kilter* (2013), and *Rakastava* (2014).

[xviii] I observed Curran's choreographic process during the creation of *Dingle Diwali*, and I also participated in rehearsals alongside my company members through the generation of choreographic material. I was double cast in the work's premiere in order that I could both participate and observe throughout the process.

[xix] All quotes from Darrah Carr Dance company members are taken from interviews conducted during the spring and summer of 2014, unless otherwise specified.

[xx] All rehearsal observations made by Curran were recorded during Darrah Carr Dance's rehearsal period from August through November 2011.

[xxi] In Irish step dance, a front click is achieved by striking the heels together in midair directly in front of the body.

[xxii] Excerpted artist statement, "ModERIN: Dancing in the Space Between," originally appeared in *ModERIN: Contemporary Irish Dance Works; Darrah Carr Dance*, edited by Dáithí Ó Mír, Macater Press, 2013, pp. 19-26. Reprinted with permission of Macater Press.

[xxiii] Rehearsal journals were kept by the dancers and myself between August and November 2013. All quotes are taken from rehearsal journals unless otherwise specified.

[xxiv] All quotes from Darrah Carr Dance company members are taken from interviews conducted during the spring and summer of 2014, unless otherwise specified.

[xxv] Prompt questions included, Think back to when you first became interested in dance. What drew you to the art form? Why did you want to dance? What styles of dance did you gravitate toward? What did you like about moving in those styles? Have your preferences for certain styles of dance changed as you've gotten older? Why or why not?

Identify your personal affinities in movement. Which movements feel most comfortable to you? What things do you do easily or first when being asked to improvise or perform? What are your favorite ways of using space? What are your favorite ways of using energy? Would you characterize your favorite movements as more gestural or postural?

[xxvi] During my interview with Eimear Kelly, we discussed the perception of practitioners in the Irish dance field who are against fusion work because they believe that it implies that Irish step dance is lacking in its own right. I refute that belief. Furthermore, I find that Kelly's pursuit of practice-led research and her focus on Irish step dance innovations is further evidence of a groundswell of choreographic activity in a post-*Riverdance* climate.