

GOING BACK:
CONTEMPORARY IRISH DANCE CHOREOGRAPHERS
AND MODERN IRISH IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Irish step dance has for many years centered on Irish nationalism, and an attempt to preserve Irish tradition and identity. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, dancers who have been trained in the competitive Irish dance tradition have begun to experiment outside of the highly structured confines of this style of Irish dance. Particularly since the premiere of *Riverdance* in 1994, there has been increasing interest in exploring the use of Irish dance outside of the traditional structure. This thesis looks at the work of two such choreographers – New York-based choreographer Darrah Carr and Limerick-based choreographer Colin Dunne - who are actively creating contemporary Irish dance pieces utilizing both Irish dance and contemporary dance vocabulary and choreographic structures. I analyze choreographic works and teaching practices of both choreographers.

I also take a practice-as-research approach to this area of inquiry, including an analysis of my own past works of Irish contemporary choreography, as well as a dance film produced specifically as part of my thesis research and the work that I created for my UH Late Night dance concert, *Identity Crisis*, in Fall 2013.

This thesis argues that the work of Carr and Dunne, as well as my own, reflects the changing nature of postcolonial Ireland and the Irish diaspora, and aims to represent the multi-faceted, hyphenated identities of the choreographers as modern Irish dancers by combining the traditional with the contemporary.

Key terms: Nationalism, Irish identity, diaspora, authenticity

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter One: Introduction to Topic.....	1
Chapter Two: Literature, Media, and Performance Review.....	7
Chapter Three: Historical Background.....	15
Chapter Four: Fieldwork and Methodology.....	20
Chapter Five: Posture.....	42
Chapter Six: Choreographic Structure and Themes.....	53
Chapter Seven: Dance Practice and Instruction.....	62
Chapter Eight: Place.....	67
Chapter Nine: Issues of Authenticity.....	71
Conclusion.....	73
Bibliography.....	75
Appendix A: Glossary.....	79
Appendix B: Interviews.....	82
Darrah Carr, 9/28/12.....	82
Colin Dunne, 6/27/13.....	92
Brigid Gillis, 10/11/13.....	103
Darrah Carr, 10/13/13.....	114
Laura Neese, 10/13/13.....	134
Melissa Padham, 10/14/13.....	143
Niall O’Leary, 10/14/13.....	149
Sean Curran, 10/15/13.....	164

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION TO TOPIC

My interest in Irish dance as a topic of research stems primarily from my experiences as a practitioner and spectator of Irish dance. I began studying Irish dance at thirteen, having seen the dance form in a video of *Riverdance* my grandmother brought back from Ireland and immediately fallen in love with it. I was already a dancer, trained primarily in ballet and jazz. There was something about Irish dance, with the music and rhythms that moved me, and the feeling of connection to my Irish heritage, that appealed to me automatically. Once I began attending community college, and my training focused more on modern dance technique and choreography, I quickly felt a need to reconnect with my Irish heritage and the feeling of belonging the dance and music gave me. My first attempt at incorporating Irish dance into my college dance studies was a piece titled “Ireland, Love of My Heart,” the English translation of one of the songs in was set to, called “*Erin Gra Mo Chroi*.” I choreographed the piece for a student dance concert at Lansing Community College in the spring of 2003. At this point, I did not try to blend Irish dance movement with any other style of movement, instead there was a section of Irish dance choreography bookended by two sections of modern dance choreography. All three sections were choreographed to music by well-known Irish bands The Chieftains, the Corrs, and Cherish the Ladies, and the total theme of the piece was a longing for home, a theme that commonly appears in Irish music and literature.

I continued to study both Irish dance and modern dance throughout college and after, and always found myself wanting to bring the two together in my work. Whenever I went through a period where I was practicing one of more than the other, I felt dissatisfied, as if I needed both in order for my dance practice to feel complete. For the first couple of years, I thought I was the only one who felt this way. Irish dancers I met in my years as an undergraduate dance major at the University of Colorado seemed to have abandoned Irish dance in favor of modern dance, rather than continuing to pursue both. It seemed that Irish dance and modern dance existed separately everywhere but in my body. If I was “only an Irish dancer,” my upper body would start to ache and feel the urge to move after a while. Then I would go take a modern dance class and the movement of my upper body would feel like a breath of fresh air after being inside for too long. Conversely, if I left Irish dance for a

month or two and focused solely on modern, my feet would begin to tap out jig and hornpipe¹ rhythms while I sat at my desk or while waiting for the bus, as if they simply could not help it. Although most people I knew identified as a modern dancer or an Irish dancer, and rarely ever both, as I began to shape my own identity as a dancer, it seemed essential that I be both.

I soon discovered the work of Colin Dunne, a dancer who I admired from his work in *Riverdance*. I learned that he had completed an MA in Contemporary Dance at the University of Limerick in Ireland, and was making choreography outside of the usual Irish dance competition and *Riverdance* type spaces. I was immediately fascinated by the fact that such a high profile dancer was choosing to study outside of Irish dance and have followed his work since. I later found that Jean Butler, the original female lead of *Riverdance* had completed the same MA program in Limerick, and again later while searching online for Irish dance schools in New York discovered Darrah Carr Dance, which advertised the “ModERIN” style combining modern and Irish dance styles. As I continued my training as a dancer and choreographer, I continually returned to these choreographers for inspiration.

The summer after I from graduated college, I spent three months living and working in Dublin, Ireland. Despite the few growing pains I experienced my first week there, such as finding a place to live and finding a job, I was pleasantly surprised at how easily I adjusted to this new place. A large part of the ease of this transition was that it did not really feel new to me at all. Having grown up in an Irish-American family, and having spent the previous years immersed in the Irish dance community in the Denver metro area, the accents were different, but the people and the culture were both familiar. My grandmother, when she visited Ireland for her sixtieth birthday, came back saying that she felt like she was in a country full of members of her family, and I felt very much the same way. I felt more at home in Ireland than I had anywhere in years.

¹ *Hornpipe* – A hard shoe dance. Hornpipe tunes are in 2/4 or 4/4 time.

A large part of that “at home” feeling developed a few weeks after I arrived in Dublin. There was a pub in the City Centre called O'Neill's where there was live traditional² music every Sunday. I began to go to the pub every week for the music. I had grown up listening to traditional Irish music, and as an Irish dancer it was an important part of my training as well. For the first week or two, I just sat and listened, but it began to feel like I was torturing myself, just sitting and listening to these tunes I felt so moved by and not getting up to dance. My whole body felt on edge, my lungs felt constricted, like every part of me was protesting the fact that I was sitting still. I would sit on the edge of my seat, feet tapping to the music, and dancing happening in my head if not in my body, wanting nothing more to get up and let go. Finally, one night, I couldn't take it anymore. I had to dance. The musicians were playing a reel³, so I found an empty space on the floor of the pub and starting dancing all the reel steps I knew, repeating them if necessary until the tune ended. My body relaxed, my lungs unclenched, and my uncertainty melted away. A woman approached me and asked if I knew “the Walls of Limerick.” The name sounded vaguely familiar, I knew it was probably a set I had danced at a *ceili*⁴ or two back home, but I couldn't remember exactly how it went. “If you talk me through it, I can probably do it,” I told her. So we found a few willing American tourists to dance with us, and the woman talked us through the steps as the music played: advance, retire; advance, retire; ladies switch, gents switch; down the floor, and swing around. After dancing it once through, my body remembered all the times it had done this before. We danced through the set until the music ended, laughing and helping the newcomers through what they were supposed to do. When it was over, I realized that I had waited so long to get up and dance that I had to leave before I missed the last train home. I

² The word “traditional” in the context of this thesis refers to Irish music and dance drawn from folk practices in Ireland. Contemporary, then, refers to dance practices which derive from outside of the Irish folk tradition and which are perceived to be newer than traditional music and dance practices.

³ *Reel* - A dance set to a tune of the same name in 4/4 time. A reel is performed as a solo soft shoe dance in competition, and many ceili dances are also reels. A treble reel is a solo hard shoe reel dance.

⁴ *Ceili* - A social gathering involving traditional Irish music and dance. The dances associated with this type of social gathering are called ceili dances.

grabbed the woman's hand and squeezed it, thanked her for dancing with me, then ran out of the pub thinking that if this was all I did for the rest of my life, I would be happy.

I went back the next week, and again it took me a while to get the courage to dance, but finally I did and I felt that feeling of being exactly where I was meant to be. This time, one of the musicians approached me afterwards. He was an older man, an accordion player, and upon hearing my American accent, he asked me where I was from, what I was doing in Ireland, and for how long. Then he asked if I had Irish heritage, and I said I did. "I can see it when you dance," he told me. "You have the rhythm in you." He told me of a traditional session in another pub in town, and asked me to come. "There are more musicians and it's better music," he explained, in contrast to the music that was played at O'Neill's primarily for entertainment and the tourists. I went to the pub at the designated time on Friday of that week, and every Friday after that for the rest of the time that I lived there. It was the highlight of my week. It was mostly the same type of music, but the setting was different. At the session, music was more of a social activity than a performance: musicians all sitting around having a pint while they played. Sometimes I would dance, sometimes it was too crowded in the little upstairs room of the pub and I did not have the space to move. I got to know the musicians, and they began to recognize me, and would ask people to move so that I could dance. Almost always, I was the only one dancing, but it didn't really feel that way. I was dancing with the musicians, and it always felt like a social activity more than anything else.

I often think back on this now and remember the words of that accordion player. He suspected my Irish heritage, not because of how I looked, or how I behaved, but because of how I danced. The sentiment was echoed to me many times in many contexts during my time in Ireland, both during that first trip and subsequent trips - "You seem so Irish."

After my experience in Ireland and developing the connection to the place that I had always felt to the culture, Irish dance became an even more important part of my life. Even more than in the past, it became a way to remain connected to that place and culture, much as it has been for members of the Irish diaspora for years. As I began to consider graduate school, my artistic goal was to reintegrate modern dance more into my work, but leaving Irish dance behind was no longer an option, as it had become so integral to my identity.

Later, as I began my graduate research on Irish dance, I focused first on the tradition of competitive Irish dance in which I was trained. However, the creative work I did at this time inspired me to return to those contemporary Irish dance choreographers whom I admired and felt a bond with, and my research began to shift focus.

I began to wonder how contemporary Irish dance fit into the narrative of Irish dance. The academic conversation on Irish dance has mostly focused on the construction of Irish dance as a national dance form, and other events which happened in response – *Riverdance*, the *sean nos* (or “old style” dance) revival, etc. – but there was not as much conversation about the choreographers who were working outside of these well-known avenues. Many Irish dancers and scholars have looked at the history of Irish dance in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as being influenced by a few major shifts, such as the formation of *An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha*⁵ in 1929, the introduction of the World Championships in 1969, and the popularity of *Riverdance* in 1994. A colleague at the American Conference for Irish Studies in New Orleans in 2012 commented that another shift is happening now. She was referring to the group Prodigig, who, at the time, had just won the dance competition television show *Got to Dance*. Prodigig performs Irish dance footwork combined with sharp upper body movements danced to electronic music (*Got to Dance*). They represent another move towards modernization of Irish dance, much in the way that *Riverdance* did in 1994.

I agree that one such shift in Irish dance is happening right now. However, the increased trend of prominent Irish dancers exploring other dance forms and creating a new, contemporary Irish dance through their work is the shift on which I will focus. In this thesis, I argue that contemporary Irish dance choreography, exemplified by the work of Carr and Dunne, as well as my own, reflects the changing nature of the culture of postcolonial Ireland and the Irish diaspora, and aims to represent the multi-faceted identities of the choreographers as modern Irish dancers by combining the traditional with the contemporary.

⁵ The Irish Dancing Commission, formed in 1929 by the Gaelic League to regulate Irish step dance schools and competitions. The Commission administers exams for teachers (TCRGs) and adjudicators (ADCRGs). Students must be registered with a certified teach in order to participate in An Coimisiun competitions.

In doing so, this work shifts the focus from expressing or creating a homogenous Irish identity to expressing individual identities as they relate to Irishness.

CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE, PERFORMANCE AND MEDIA REVIEW

The research for this thesis falls into four major categories: Historical and Contemporary Contexts for Irish Dance, Darrah Carr and Colin Dunne, Theoretical Viewpoints, and Practice as Research.

Historical and Contemporary Contexts for Irish Dance

In order to situate my research within the context of other contemporary and historical Irish dance practices as a whole, it is necessary to consider the work that has been done on Irish dance in general, and Irish history as it relates to and affects Irish dance practices. The majority of my research in this area focused on competitive Irish dance, particularly An Coimisiun-style Irish dance, due to the fact that both choreographers whose work I am investigating come from this background. This category of research can also be split into three sub-categories: Competitive Irish Dance, *Riverdance* and Globalization, and Irish Culture and History.

Competitive Irish Dance

One of the most comprehensive and significant works written about competitive Irish dance is Frank Hall's *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty*. Hall is an American anthropologist who completed many years of research on the subject of competitive Irish dance in Ireland, primarily in the 1990s. The book discusses the culture of competitive Irish dance, and how it has shaped the dance form. Hall presents several important insights into the symbolism of many aspects of Irish dance. He discusses the ways in which the competitive structure has changed the dance over the years, offering connections between Irish dance competitive culture and Irish culture as a whole. He also provides numerous quotes and insights from interviews with dancers, teachers, adjudicators and members of An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha, offering first-hand accounts of the culture surrounding competitive Irish dance. Hall's work is extremely insightful in the ways that it relates the practices of competitive Irish dance to the ideals of Irish culture, and this work is relevant to competitive Irish dance wherever it is practiced. In particular, his discussion of the significance of the Irish dance posture and concerns over authenticity within the competitive culture are both integral to the study of Irish dance as a competitive practice. However,

because the research was conducted exclusively in Ireland, the subject of competitive dance culture in the Irish diaspora is not addressed.

Other writing by Darrah Carr, Gary Larsen, and Elizabeth Venable discusses the nature of competitive percussive dance in the United States (Carr “Winning Ways”). Larsen's work in particular focuses on the evolution of American clogging, rather than Irish step dancing, but the subject is relevant to the evolution of Irish competitive dance as well. He discusses changes in dance style and music use in clogging competitions, addressing the reasons that these changes have been happening particularly in the last decade or so. Larsen suggests that these changes are happening for a variety of reasons, including the increased access to technology, and the younger dancers' desires for their dance practice to be more mainstream. He also compares clogging with the competition culture of Irish step dancing, noting similarities such as changes in the tempo of the music being used, modernization of steps, and changes in costuming.

As Larsen indicates, the changes that have occurred in Irish step dance are not unique to that form, and occur in many different traditional dance settings. This points to the possibility that the evolution of Irish dance may be due to reasons that are not specific to Irishness or Irish diaspora identity, but rather a symptom of a larger shift in traditional cultures in the United States, and it would seem also in Ireland, due to modernization and globalization.

In her article “Re-imagining Irish dance,” Jean Butler discusses the evolution of competitive Irish dance, citing two major shifts that happened in Irish dance during her lifetime as the cause for these changes. The first is the increased involvement of Americans in the World Championships in Ireland, which resulted in American dancers incorporating the styles of Irish dancers into their steps. The second is the introduction of Irish dance as stage performance in *Riverdance*, which caused a wider interest in Irish dance and, according to Butler, resulted in further homogenization of the dance in the competitive structure. Butler states that there is now a lack of individuality in Irish dance, and suggests that creativity is being stifled due to the success of commercial Irish dance. While this may be true, I believe that there are many other reasons for the decrease in individuality seen in the competitive Irish dance world in the past decade.

Finally, the documentary *Jig*, released in 2011, documents the fortieth World Irish Dance Championships held in Glasgow in 2010. The documentary follows competitors in the US, the UK, Ireland, Russia, and the Netherlands as the dancers prepare for and attend the competition. This film offers recent evidence of the global involvement in competitive Irish dance and how it is practiced in Ireland and abroad. While the implications of globalization are not explicitly discussed, as the film is more a documentation of the practice of preparing for competition, it is notable that nearly all of the dancers or their parents mention whether or not they are Irish in interviews throughout the film. The fact that this topic is brought up consistently throughout the documentary illustrates that competitive Irish dancing, even in its globalized form, is still linked to Irishness and so whether the dancer is Irish or not is in some way relevant.

***Riverdance* and Globalization**

The impact of *Riverdance* on Irish dance and the resulting globalization are frequently discussed topics in Irish dance writings. Catherine Foley's "Perceptions of Irish Step Dance: National, Global, and Local" offers an analysis of how Irish step dance is perceived on national, global, and local levels, particularly in the post-*Riverdance* era. She presents the idea that the perception, and therefore the meaning, of the dance differs on each of these levels. She states that nationally, the dance is seen as an intentional representation of the state and Irish nationalism, globally Irish dance is seen as a representation of "Irishness," but has been theatricalized and presented in a more globalized way through shows like *Riverdance*, and locally, the "marginalized" forms of Irish dance (for example, sean nos dance) have been revived in response to the globalization of the form.

Tara Brabazon and Paul Stock discuss the reasons for the popularity of *Riverdance*, suggesting that the show portrays an antiquated view of Irish people and culture, which appeals to the nostalgic view of Ireland held by many of the descendants of the Irish diaspora. Michael Seaver echoes this sentiment in his "Stepping Into Footprints" article, discussing the idea of Irish dance as a commodity in global culture, and expressing concern that the themes of *Riverdance* reflect an outdated view of Irish culture, supporting a "postcolonial victimhood" (3).

While all three of these articles offer the Irish perspective on the results of the

globalization of Irish dance, which is absolutely essential to understanding the effect of this phenomenon, none of them acknowledge *Riverdance* as a representation of Irish-American culture in addition to Irish culture, and that this had a significant effect on the themes presented within the show. The one article that does address this issue to some extent is the panel from *Close to the Floor: Irish Dance From the Boreen to Broadway* entitled “The Impact of *Riverdance* on Irish Dance” (Moloney et al). Many of the panelists involved, including Jean Butler, Mark Howard, and Donny Golden, are Irish-American dancers and much of their discussion stresses the idea that *Riverdance* did not change things overnight, but was rather an extension of an evolution of Irish dance as stage dance that was already beginning to happen, particularly among Irish-American dancers. *Riverdance* was simply on a bigger scale, and it was presented globally, so Irish dance itself became visible to those outside of Ireland and the diaspora and, perhaps just as significantly, created opportunities for Irish dance performance for many Irish dancers who had not already experienced these changes.

Irish Culture and History

In order to discuss the cultural significance of Irish dance in Ireland and the diaspora, I felt that I must be able to place Irish dance contextually within Irish and Irish-American culture as a whole. Frank McCourt's article “Between Ireland and America” does this in a very broad way. In this paper, McCourt writes about the experience of being an Irish person in America. He relates instances of teaching in New York, being asked by students, “what is Irish?” and not being able to answer the question. In discussing his experiences growing up in Ireland and his experiences as an adult in New York, McCourt explores two major questions which are also integral to the practice of Irish dance in America (and, perhaps, in other countries of the diaspora): what is Irish? And what does it mean to be Irish in America? Neither of the questions is ever really answered, but McCourt does touch on some issues that are important when discussing Irish identity in America, and thus Irish-American identity in Irish dance, both of which are important aspects of the discussion of contemporary Irish dance. These are the ideas that Irish-Americans feel inferior to the Irish in Ireland - that somehow their history and suffering is less important because it occurred outside of the homeland - and that story, place and lyricism are central to Irish identity and culture.

Darrah Carr's article "Ireland is Modern" and Mick Moloney's "Re-imagining Irish Music and Dance" provide similar context in that they discuss what is going on in Ireland in terms of contemporary dance, in Carr's case, and Irish music, in Moloney's. Since dance is influenced by its cultural surroundings, this type of information is essential to understanding the development of contemporary Irish dance.

Helena Wulff's book *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland* provides context for the larger dance world in Ireland, as she looks at the evolution of various types of dance in Ireland, presenting the changes in Irish dance as a reflection of the "crossroads" of Irish society at large: the place where tradition and modernity meet. While the research for the book was all conducted in Ireland, and thus it largely focuses on the Irish identity in Ireland, I believe that many of the concepts addressed (national, or ethnic, identity, tradition vs. modernity, etc) are also relevant in the Irish dance communities of the diaspora. Wulff also discusses at length the ways in which Irish identity is linked to the physical place of Ireland, which is important when discussing Irish dance and Irish diasporic identities.

I also chose to reference a few works on Irish history in order to provide a context for the political state from which the Irish cultural nationalist movement, and the associated competitive style of Irish dance, arose. The two main texts I reference are Alvin Jackson's *Home Rule: An Irish History 1800-2000* and Jason Knirck's *Women of the Dail: Gender, Republicanism and the Anglo-Irish Treaty*. Jackson's book is a thorough account of the Irish Home Rule movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, covering the time periods both before and after Irish independence. Knirck's work deals more specifically with the role of women in Irish republicanism in the early twentieth century. While neither author specifically references Irish dance, they provide insight into the political climate of decolonization and the postcolonial struggles of Ireland related to the fight for Home Rule and republicanism from which the current competitive style of Irish dance emerged.

Darrah Carr and Colin Dunne

The primary focus of this thesis is the work of Darrah Carr and Colin Dunne as contemporary Irish dancers and choreographers. Therefore, the next major area of research concerned their backgrounds and work.

Carr has produced numerous articles on Irish dance, referenced above. In addition to

these articles, I also conducted three interviews with Carr in which we discussed her background, experiences as a competitive Irish dancer, experiences in modern dance training and choreography, and other topics such as creative process, choreographic inspiration, and the reasons for the rise of contemporary Irish dance choreography in the past decade.

Additionally, during my fieldwork in New York City in October of 2013, I observed three rehearsals of Darrah Carr Dance, where I had the chance to witness the company rehearsing two new works and one repertory work, which were performed during their fifteenth season at the Irish Arts Center in New York. During this time, I also conducted interviews with company members Brigid Gillis, Laura Neese, and Melissa Padham, guest artist Niall O'Leary, and guest choreographer Sean Curran.

I also viewed available clips of Carr's choreographic work online, including excerpts from "Dingle Diwali," "RhythMOTION," "ModERIN," "Cuimhne Fado," "Step Dance Suite, and others. Viewing these clips provided an overview of Carr's work, including blended Irish dance and contemporary dance works, as well as more strictly Irish dance choreography. These pieces provide the basis for my analysis of choreographic themes and structures, in addition to my discussions with Carr and her dancers about these topics.

Similarly, my research on Colin Dunne began with reading interviews and articles about Dunne's background and recent works. In *Dance Magazine's* article "Quick Q&A With Colin Dunne," Dunne discusses his solo work *Out of Time*, and the motivation behind the piece – stripping away some of the more homogenous and modernized elements of Irish dance, and focusing on the core rhythms and background, but in a different way through the use of technology other elements. Similarly, in Siobhan Long's article "Finding a Place in the Tradition," Dunne discusses his time in the Contemporary Dance program at the University of Limerick and how that experience shaped him as a dancer, allowing him to explore outside of the usual constructs of Irish dance. Dunne also wrote a chapter for Deirdre Mulrooney's *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland*, which discusses the background of Irish dance and where it is going now, post-*Riverdance*.

My research also consisted of participant-observation fieldwork with Dunne in Limerick, Ireland. I participated in a workshop taught by Dunne and experienced his teaching techniques and how they reflect influence from both Irish and contemporary dance

backgrounds first-hand. I also conducted an interview with him, during which we discussed his teaching practice, the question of how to identify oneself when practicing in two different dance forms, choreographic methods and other traditional artists who Dunne finds inspirational.

Finally, I viewed as many choreographic works of Dunne's as I was able, including “Trading Taps” from *Riverdance*, the entirety of *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*, and clips from “Ode to Socks” and *Out of Time*.

Theoretical Viewpoints

Theoretical viewpoints employed for this thesis are primarily drawn from the work of Michel Foucault and Dwight Conquergood. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* discusses the control of bodies through discipline, which is central to the discussion of dance, particularly in a postcolonial context. While his work does not specifically relate to dance, the concept of the docile body can be applied to dance either through looking at certain types of dance training as an attempt to control the body, or by looking at dance being used by nationalist movements as a means of opposition to the discipline of bodies imposed by colonizers.

In Conquergood's “Rethinking Ethnography,” he discusses, among other topics, the performance of identity and, in particular, the ways in which performance of identity reflects multi-faceted identities. This concept is particularly important to the discussion of dance of diasporic communities, where identities are necessarily multi-faceted.

Other works that I will reference are by Jacques Ranciere on the relationship between aesthetics and politics and John Storey on the cultural functions of myth.

Practice-as-Research

The final portion of the research for this project consists of practice-as-research, or the examination and analysis of my own practice as a contemporary Irish dance choreographer.

The beginnings of this aspect of my research were in the Fall of 2012, with the documentation of the creation of my piece “Variations on St. Patrick's Day.” This included video documentation, notes, and documented conversations with my dancers about the process of creating a contemporary Irish dance piece.

Also part of this aspect of my research is a dance for film I created in Dublin in the

summer of 2013, and a dance piece called “Off the Plate,” created during the Fall of 2013. Both of these works are documented in video and journal format. The documentation of this work allows me to analyze my own experience and practice as a dancer, in order to provide embodied insight into the significance of contemporary Irish dance choreography.

CHAPTER THREE. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Establishing a historical context for contemporary Irish dance practices is particularly important because one of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary Irish dance is the way in which it breaks from previously established Irish dance traditions. This chapter will give an overview of the history of competitive Irish dance as the tradition from which both Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr's work comes, as well as the specific training received by both choreographers in order to better understand the ways in which their work both adheres to and departs from these traditions.

The current structure of competitive Irish dance in both the United States and Ireland can be traced back to the formation of the Gaelic League in Ireland in 1893. The Gaelic League was a nationalist party whose primary goal was to promote Irishness as a separate identity from Englishness (Foley 35). At this time in Irish history, Ireland was in a state of political uncertainty. The first Home Rule Bill, which sought to make Ireland a self-governing entity within the United Kingdom, was introduced in 1886, and had been struck down by the British government. Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish politician who was an important part of the Home Rule movement, died, and in 1893 the second Home Rule Bill was introduced months before the formation of the Gaelic League, and later struck down again. In addition to the difficulties in the Home Rule movement, the continued aftermath of the Great Famine caused Ireland's population to continue its steady decline due to emigration (Jackson 364-365). In the midst of the failing Home Rule movement and the continuing struggle of the Irish as a colonized people, a movement towards cultural nationalism emerged in an attempt to create a more Irish Ireland. Thus, the Gaelic League and other similar organizations were formed to meet this need (Jackson 86). The League sought to accomplish this goal through the promotion and regulation of the Irish language, music, literature, sport, and step dance.

To this end, the League formed An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha in Ireland in 1929 (Foley 36). An Coimisiun was responsible for regulating the instruction of Irish dance, as well as sponsoring and regulating feiseanna, or Irish dance competitions, throughout the country. By creating rules about what dances were allowed in competition, what type of clothes could be worn, and which steps should be taught, An Coimisiun essentially took aspects of traditional dance that already existed, and structured them into what they considered to be the "most Irish" representation of Irish dance. In labeling the dance "Irish dance," they made the statement that

those dances, steps, and styles they chose to include, and those alone, were Irish. There are, of course, other styles of dance, such as sean nos and set dancing, that are just as Irish as the competitive form of step dance. However, I will be using the term “Irish dance” in this thesis to largely refer to the An Coimisiun style of competitive step dancing, as this is how it is most often referenced in that community.

An Coimisiun remains one of the primary institutions in Irish dance today, and continues to hold exams for Irish dance teachers (TCRGs) and adjudicators (ADCRGs), in addition to monitoring and creating rules for competition. There are several other similar Irish step dance institutions that have branched off from An Coimisiun and now have their own structures of dancers, teachers, and competitions (Venable 281). However, this thesis focuses on choreographers who in their time as competitive dancers danced under An Coimisiun. Both Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr were trained at An Coimisiun registered schools. I also received all of my Irish dance training from Coimisiun teachers.

Colin Dunne has been a prominent figure in Irish dance for many years. A member of the diaspora, born to Irish parents in Birmingham, England, he won his first World Championship at the age of nine, and went on to win eight more World titles. Dunne trained at the Comerford School in his early years as an Irish dancer, and later trained with Marion Turley in Coventry. The biography on Dunne's website also states that he “was influenced from an early age by tap dance - Gregory Hynes in particular - which contributed to his often complex approach to rhythm within the structures of traditional Irish music” (“Biography” par. 2).

Dunne assumed the lead male role in *Riverdance* after Michael Flatley's departure in 1995, and contributed a new piece of choreography to the show entitled “Trading Taps” (“Biography” par. 6). He went on to choreograph *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* in 1999 with *Riverdance* co-star Jean Butler. *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* aimed to use Irish dance in a new way by telling a story through the movement. However, it was not very successful commercially. Butler attributed the lack of success of the show to the fact that the story on which it was based, Diarmuid and Grainne, was too dark. Audience members who had been introduced to Irish dance through *Riverdance* wanted something more upbeat (87).

In 2001, Colin Dunne attended the MA program in contemporary dance at the University of Limerick (UL) (“Biography” par. 8). Since his involvement in the program at UL, Dunne has continued on a trajectory of combining traditional Irish dance and contemporary dance, by

performing traditional dance in contemporary contexts. He has worked with Yoshiko Chuma, the former artistic director of the now-defunct Daghda Dance Company based out of Limerick. About Chuma, Dunne says, “She didn't want me in her piece to be 'a contemporary dancer.' She wanted me to be in the piece very much as a dancer, as in, do what you do. Don't feel like you have to do some contemporary dance movement. Do what you do what you” (“In Conversation”). In 2004, he performed in Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre's production *The Bull*, in a role that was seen as a parody of the big Irish dance shows like *Riverdance*. In 2008, he created the solo concert *Out of Time*, which he still performs around the world and will be discussed in detail in later chapters (“Biography” par. 9-11).

Like Colin Dunne, Darrah Carr also participated in the competitive Irish dance circuit as a child. Training and competing from ages 6 to 16 at the Tim O'Hare School in Ohio, she progressed to the World Championship level while also training in and performing ballet (Carr “ModERIN” 69). While attending Wesleyan University, where she says she intended to leave Irish dance and ballet (and consequently, dance as a whole) behind and become an English professor, she discovered modern dance and became a dance major (“ModERIN” 69-70). During her time at Wesleyan, Carr was also inspired to return to her Irish dance practice when she happened upon live Irish music in a cafeteria at the University. After this encounter, she began to perform Irish dance again alongside the modern dance training she received while in college (Personal interview 2011).

Carr went on to receive her MFA in choreography from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and in 1997 formed Darrah Carr Dance, which draws from both the modern dance tradition and the Irish dance tradition to create a technique that Carr calls “ModERIN.” The term “ModERIN” grew from a piece the company performed in 2005 that combined modern dance phrases with references to the Irish 4-hand reel. The piece made these references spatially, in terms of the floor patterns, as well as through the use of the hand holding position used in ceili dances (Carr personal interview 2013). As Carr states:

I think that this idea of kind of fusing things was the modern aspect and the Erin, the Irish aspect, so that fused word was first the title of this piece and then became more broadly the title of this overall style of the company. And it's really a branding and marketing tool. To say that ModERIN is not just this piece, but it

makes sense for the whole body of work or style of this work to be that modern dance and Irish dance reference together (Personal interview 2013).

In this vein, Carr's career has included two notable partnerships. The first is with Niall O'Leary, who is an Irish dancer, dance teacher, adjudicator and musician originally from Dublin, Ireland. O'Leary relates how he and Carr came to begin working together as follows:

I met Darrah in Ireland at a show that I was in myself. It was a show at the headquarters of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri in Monkstown in Dublin. And so Darrah came along to see it. She was researching for her thesis at Wesleyan College called "Irish Dance: Pushing the Boundaries of a Traditional Form". I moved to New York in the summer of 1996, in June, and she moved to New York in August. And so we met up for dinner one night and then we decided, yeah, we should do some stuff together. So we ended up performing together. She taught for my school for a good number of years, and we've been performing together for 17 years. It's amazing.

O'Leary often performs with Carr's company, and she performs with his Irish dance troupe as well. As a prominent member of the traditional Irish dance and music communities, O'Leary's collaborations with Carr have focused primarily on more traditional performances of Irish dance. He states that in the early days of the company, when the members were primarily modern dancers with little or no Irish dance background, he would make comments to Carr about their lack of Irish dance technique, but that in recent years, the membership of the company has shifted to include more trained Irish dancers.

Another significant collaborator in Darrah Carr's career is Sean Curran. Sean Curran is a modern dance choreographer based in New York City. He trained in Irish dance as a child with Josephine Fitzmaurice Moran in Boston, later training in modern and attending Tisch School for the Arts at NYU. He is a former dancer with Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, and currently on the faculty at New York University. He also has his own company, the Sean Curran Company, and has choreographed for Trinity Irish Dance (Curran).

Although he worked with Darrah Carr previously on a Broadway musical adaptation of James Joyce's "The Dead," Sean's first contributions to Darrah Carr Dance were made in 2009, when he staged a piece for the company titled "On the Six." "On the Six" was composed of Irish dance steps set to swing dance music. Curran has since choreographed three other pieces for the

company: the Bessie award-nominated South Asian-inspired “Dingle Diwali” in 2011, “Sé Caoineadh,” a contemporary dance piece exploring the emotions of the Irish lament in 2012, and a new piece for the 2013 season of Darrah Carr Dance, featuring Mediterranean-inspired movement and music. I will address this work further in Chapters Four and Six.

If Niall O’Leary represents the more traditional end of Irish dance performance, Sean Curran's work is decidedly more contemporary. He states that he likes “to make choreographic hybrids, putting two distinctly different things together,” and this, for him, is one of the advantages of working with Darrah Carr's company. Carr's history with both of these dance artists is a good illustration of the diversity of her work, and the ways in which she chooses to draw from a multitude of traditions in order to create ModERIN choreography.

Both Darrah Carr and Colin Dunne's contemporary work are representative of a shift towards the professionalization of Irish dance in the past twenty years. The premiere of *Riverdance* in 1994 is often referenced as a turning point in professional Irish dance performance. As traditional musician Mick Moloney says, with *Riverdance*, “what happened in a sense was an affirmation of an aspect of our traditional culture that at that point was almost ghettoized. Most people in Ireland would have been aware of its existence, but not too aware of its dynamics” (Moloney et. al 83). *Riverdance*, then, is credited with bringing Irish dance to the awareness of the general public. While there was awareness about Irish dance among the Irish in Ireland and the diaspora, competitive dance was still a very closed system. *Riverdance* changed this, not only in those specific communities, but also around the world. As both Jean Butler and Mark Howard have pointed out, Irish dance as performance rather than simply a competitive form had already begun in the United States (Moloney et. al 86, 92). *Riverdance* did, however, increase the visibility and professional possibilities of the dance form. Darrah Carr credits the show with creating an interest in Irish dance performance, which has allowed work like hers to have an audience (Personal interview 2012).

CHAPTER FOUR. FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The research for this thesis is separated into two methodological approaches: ethnographic fieldwork conducted with choreographers Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr, and a practice-as-research approach to my own creative work. My fieldwork research was partially funded by an Arts and Sciences Research Award from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

The first part of the fieldwork was conducted in June 2013 in Limerick, Ireland. I attended the Blas International Summer School of Irish Music and Dance at the University of Limerick from June 24 until June 28. Each day consisted of a morning and afternoon masterclass, lectures given by the University of Limerick faculty or guest artists, a lunchtime concert given by musicians and dancers who were teaching at the summer school and an Irish language class. The first dance workshops were taught by Colin Dunne on June 25.

The morning session on June 25 began with introductions and diagnostic performances to assess our dance ability. We then began with basic movements – treble⁶ hop backs – and focused on the mechanics of the movement. Dunne emphasized softening the knees, releasing tension in the body, and correction of rhythm. We repeated the movements several times as a group, and when Dunne saw or heard something that was off, he stopped and worked directly with individual students to correct their movement. During the afternoon workshop, we combined several of the movements we had been working on into a phrase, which we worked on for the remainder of the afternoon and performed together at the end of the class.

During my participation in the summer school, I took notes about classes in as much detail as I could remember. My documentation included notes about both verbal and physical experiences, the way that the movement felt in my body as I tried to follow directions given, the responses that I observed from other students in the class. I also attempted to make connections between this experience and other Irish dance training I have received. The primary observation that I made during the experience of this class was the difference in focus from what I have experienced in my Irish dance training previously. As I have mentioned, Dunne focused primarily on the mechanics of movement. In particular, he was concerned with relaxation and control without rigidity. As I will discuss more in the Chapter Seven, his approach to rhythm

⁶ *Treble* – A hard shoe movement similar to a “shuffle” in tap dance. It consists of the brushing of the foot forward and back. Sometimes also called “shuffle” or “rally.”

addressed the way the body was moving. At one point he told a student that if she were to release her weight more, it would correct her rhythm. This is a different approach than what is often used in Irish dance, which tends to emphasize listening and correcting based on aural and visual cues, rather than addressing rhythm from a perspective of the physical mechanics of movement, or how the movement feels internally.

I also kept a journal throughout the week at Blas, taking notes about my experiences in the classes with other teachers. While some of these classes were not directly related to the topic of contemporary Irish dance, they were extremely relevant in terms of context. The week included a diverse group of teachers who taught very different styles of Irish dance. Catherine E. Foley taught a traditional set dance called the “Three Sea Captains”, Maire Clerkin taught Irish dance theatre, and Tereza Bernadova taught a workshop in sean nos dance.

Foley and Bernadova's workshops both provide context for types of Irish dance that are considered more “traditional” in contrast to the contemporary explorations discussed in this paper. Foley taught a version of the traditional set from Cork, and emphasized the importance of understanding genealogy in terms of training. In other words, it is important for dancers to know where their teachers trained in order to understand where the style they are learning comes from. This concept reflects the importance of place in Irish dance, which I will discuss further in Chapter Eight.

Bernadova's class was in sean nos dance. While Bernadova's style is more contemporary in that she mixes in aspects of her training in competitive Irish dance, her style of dancing and teaching still aligns with the old style. The posture was less held and upright, with more emphasis on improvisation than the competitive style. Because my Irish dance training occurred in a competitive dance setting, I was not trained to improvise, so this was very challenging. Near the end when Bernadova asked us to try to improvise with the bits of movement we had learned throughout the day, I found it difficult not to return to pre-learned choreography.

Learning these more traditional dance styles was useful for three reasons. First, although I do not propose that dance should be viewed as a linear evolution, forms of Irish dance that are regarded as having a direct link to the past might be seen as predecessors to current mainstream competitive dance, as well the work of the contemporary choreographers discussed in this thesis. Therefore, learning these styles provides a historical connection and a context to assist in

analyzing the relationship between contemporary Irish dance and what might be considered more traditional forms of Irish dance.

Second, as Catherine Foley has mentioned, a resurgence of interest in sean nos dance in particular has occurred as a reaction to the commercialization of Irish dance through *Riverdance* and other similar shows (41). Therefore, sean nos is an important aspect of the current Irish dance climate, and necessary to take into account when discussing how contemporary Irish dance choreography fits into this climate.

Finally, as I will discuss in later chapters, the idea of returning to a tradition that many dancers feel has been hurt rather than helped by the competitive structure came up in many of the interviews I conducted with both choreographers and dancers during this project. Colin Dunne in particular has commented in interviews regarding his solo concert, *Out of Time*, that by placing his current work side-by-side with archival footage of dancers from the 1930's, he was able to find connections between the way that he moves now, with the release and weightiness into the floor, and how dancers moved in the past ("In Conversation"). Therefore, exposure to these forms is important to understand how they relate physically and culturally to contemporary Irish dance.

Maire Clerkin's workshops in Irish dance theatre also informed this research by providing insight into another way of working in Irish dance outside the traditional and competitive structures. Clerkin choreographs, performs, and teaches Irish dance and drama, using the dance form to create narrative theatrical productions. In her workshop at Blas, we worked in three groups and created short pieces of Irish dance theatre using inspiration from one of two provided texts – a poem by Seamus Heaney entitled "Digging," and a traditional song called "Phil the Fluther's Ball." All three groups created very distinct pieces, using a combination of Irish dance vocabulary, other types of movement vocabulary, and in some cases vocal recitation (Fieldnotes, 6/27/13).

Again, this experience is important to the topic of contemporary Irish dance choreography for a few reasons. First, as has already been mentioned, while it is a different approach from those that will be discussed in this thesis, it is also a form of contemporary Irish dance, because Clerkin works outside of the competitive or social dance structures common to traditional Irish dance. She also uses other types of movement vocabulary, and theatrical concepts and structures to create her pieces. Therefore, she is a contemporary of Colin Dunne

and Darrah Carr, and thus contextually important. She is also a colleague of Dunne's, and worked with him and Jean Butler on *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*.

In addition to attending these classes, and taking notes on my participation, I also conducted an interview with Colin Dunne on June 27. I made an audio recording of the half-hour interview and took notes throughout. During the interview, we discussed Dunne's self-identification as a contemporary Irish dancer. While I use the term contemporary Irish dancer or contemporary Irish dance choreography, this is how I have chosen to reference the type of work that draws from outside the Irish dance tradition, but there is currently no standard term for this type of choreography. Therefore, it was important to me to ask Dunne how he identifies himself, in order to understand how he makes sense of the work he creates and represents himself to others. He responded, "I mean it's never a simple answer. I come from traditional Irish dance but I'm working in another way. I wouldn't call myself a contemporary dancer. I might call myself a contemporary practitioner." He later went on to say that "When people see me, they see a traditional dancer, but I'd love it if they just didn't. I'd like it so that their experience is that it's not just only seeing traditional Irish dance. And that has a lot to do with where you place your dance and the context or the concept that you're working with" (Personal interview).

We also discussed the challenges and rewards of working with Irish dance in a contemporary way. Of the challenges, Dunne says:

It was quite lonely. In that I didn't always know what I was doing. Or I didn't even know what I wanted, or I didn't even know what I was looking for sometimes, you know? I knew I'd kind of reached a point with Irish dance that I didn't want to dance it like how I was dancing it anymore. I was excited about and stimulated by contemporary dance and the sort of performances that people were making not just with the language, but just in terms of performing in different ways that weren't about being big and that were much more kind of sedate performances which you as an audience member had to go into rather than just kind of sit back and take. Finding all that in myself and finding that out of the language that was traditional dance, it was confusing and it took a long time and I had pulled myself and it apart so much at some stage that it was just all a mess on the floor and, you know, you over-intellectualize things. So yeah, there were times when I just didn't know what I was doing (Personal interview).

Conversely, when I asked him what the biggest reward of working in contemporary Irish dance is, he said:

I'm much more connected now, I think, to dance, not Irish dance, but to dance and performance than I was when I was in *Riverdance* or around that time. I feel like I have a connection with movement or dance that I had when I was a kid or something, you know? In that way that it feels authentic and physically connected to myself when I'm performing in a way that I haven't been for a while. It's a very quiet best thing. (Personal interview).

The idea of feeling more personally connected to the dance in its contemporary form is one that I will explore more in Chapter Nine. In this, and in statements made by Dunne and others throughout the course of my fieldwork about their connections to the tradition through contemporary practice, there seems to be a statement about the ways in which Irish dance is changing along with Irish identity.

Other topics covered were the ways in which contemporary dance training affects the practice and teaching of traditional dance, Dunne's experiences teaching outside the discipline of Irish dance, choreographic methods, and other dancers and musicians who he admires. He spoke about Irish fiddler Martin Hayes as a role model in the traditional arts because of the fact that Hayes has trained in other types of music, which Dunne feels has made him a better traditional musician. He sees Hayes as someone who has gone outside of the tradition, but somehow seems more connected to it because of those experiences (Personal interview).

I conducted the second part of my fieldwork with Darrah Carr Dance in New York City from October 8-16, 2013. During this time, I attended three company rehearsals for their November 2013 season at the Irish Arts Center and conducted six interviews with dancers and choreographers associated with the company. I took field notes during both rehearsals and the interviews, in addition to making audio recordings of the interviews that I later transcribed.

The first rehearsal I attended was on October 9 at Pearl Studios in Midtown Manhattan. Carr told me beforehand that the company would be working with choreographer Sean Curran on a new piece he was choreographing for them for the November performances. When I arrived at the studio dancers Brigid Gillis and Mary Kate Sheehan were there, warming up, stretching, listening to music and talking to each other about events in their lives while they waited for Carr and the other dancers to arrive. Their conversation soon turned to the pieces they were working

on for the company, and they began to review material together until Carr and the other dancers – Laura Neese, Louise Corrigan, and Caitlin McNeill – arrived (Fieldnotes 10/09/13).

Throughout this rehearsal and others, I was struck by the casual atmosphere. Although the dancers and choreographer were all preparing for rehearsal, warming up, going over dance phrases, and other practices one might expect at any dance rehearsal, there was always chatter about families and boyfriends and life events interspersed throughout the rehearsal. I was reminded of the Irish dance school I trained at in Denver, Colorado, where classes would often pause for socializing. As I will discuss further in Chapter Seven, Frank Hall notes that this type of relaxed atmosphere is typical in Irish dance classes (84).

When Sean Curran arrived, the company continued work on his piece that had been started the previous week. It was a hornpipe set to a piece of music by the band Kila, an Irish band from County Dublin whose music reflects influences from styles other than Irish music. Curran stated later that in his work he likes to create choreographic hybrids. This music selection reflects the presence of hybridity in his work.

The majority of the footwork of the piece came from steps that each of the dancers had choreographed. Curran then used these steps to create the piece of choreography by using different methods – accumulation, canon, changing facings, adding movement in the upper body, etc. The piece was a very collaborative effort, with input coming from both dancers and the choreographer.

During this rehearsal, and in future rehearsals that I observed, the topic of dance vocabulary was intriguing. I noticed that consistently the dancers referred to Irish dance phrases as “steps,” which is how they would be referred to in Irish dance. However, when referring to a phrase of modern dance movement, they would call it a phrase. I found it interesting that this pattern remained true to each tradition, despite the fact that in both situations it could be called a movement phrase.

At one point during the rehearsal, Sheehan referred to a particular movement as a “flap.” Curran turned to me and commented on the terminology, saying that they would have never called it a “flap” when he was studying Irish dance and that the term was too tap dance. He asked whether I would call it a flap, to which I responded that no, in my school it would be called a tip down.

“We also didn’t say any of this ‘*treble*’ business,” he told me.

“I do say ‘treble,’” I admitted. (Fieldnotes 10/9/13).

These differences in terminology reflect the regional differences in Irish dance. While there is some standard terminology, it does differ from school to school occasionally, and often two different schools will use two different words to refer to the exact same movement. The incorporation of tap terminology is indicative of outside influences in Irish dance.

One way in which this rehearsal was different from my experiences as an Irish dancer was the fact that many of the dancers had knowledge of contemporary dance companies outside of the Irish dance world. Competitive Irish dance is generally a closed system, and often in Irish dance schools, students are not particularly aware of what is happening in other parts of the dance world. As Niall O’Leary states, “I find that a lot of the people who are currently involved in going to Irish dance competitions, that’s all they do. They go to class, and they go to competitions and the parents basically save all the money for these trips to the North American Championships or abroad. So even if they had a lot of extra money, they just don’t have time to go see things.” However, likely due to the fact that all of the Darrah Carr dancers are trained in forms other than Irish dance and are active members of the New York dance scene, contemporary choreographers like William Forsythe, whose company was performing at Brooklyn Academy of Music, were topics of conversation during the rehearsal process.

The first interview I conducted while in New York was on October 11 with dancer Brigid Gillis. Gillis asked me to tell her more about my research project so that she would have a context with which to answer my questions. I explained to her that I am interested in contemporary Irish dance choreographers who are working with forms other than Irish dance, and how that changes and affects the form. I also told her that I am particularly trying to find out how these changes affect the relationship between Irish dance and Irish culture both in Ireland and the diaspora. Brigid then immediately began to discuss her background in Irish dance, and how she felt that competitive dance took the cultural connection out of the dance. She stated that it was only once she began working with Carr and returned to Irish dance with a more contemporary perspective that she began to feel the connection to her heritage through Irish dance. This was the second time that the idea of contemporary practice returning Irish dance to the roots of the tradition appeared in my interviews, and so I began to think of it as a possible focus point for this research project. I will discuss this concept more in depth in Chapters Six and Nine.

Gillis then told me more about her dance background, which includes ballet, jazz, tap, and acrobatics. She began studying Irish dance around the fourth grade and competed up to the championship level until high school. In high school, she lost interest in Irish dance due to the focus on competition and began to pursue training in modern dance, which she continued through college.

We also discussed Gillis's college experience at the State University of New York at Brockport, where she received a BFA in Dance. While at SUNY Brockport, she took an Introduction to Irish Dance class, where she met teacher and dancer Eddie Murphy. Gillis continued to dance with Murphy through her time at Brockport, and he choreographed an Irish dance duet for her to perform with him during a faculty concert in her senior year. Gillis said that this was when she began to enjoy Irish dance again, because it was not competition-focused, but was rather focused on the music and movement itself. She credited this experience to allowing her to be open to joining Darrah Carr's company later because it provided her with a positive performance experience in Irish dance, in contrast to her experiences as a competitive Irish dancer.

During the remainder of the interview, we also discussed how Gillis came to be part of Darrah Carr's company, what the experience of creating new works with the company has been like for her, and further insights into her thoughts about how contemporary Irish dance is a reflection of contemporary Irish culture.

After I finished my interview with Gillis, I observed rehearsal at DANY Studios of a section of a new work Darrah Carr choreographed for the company's fifteenth anniversary season. Similar to Sean Curran's piece at the previous rehearsal, this piece was also very collaborative. The dancers generated the majority of the movement and Carr made changes in space, timing, and structure. In contrast, however, the piece was performed barefoot and the vocabulary was primarily drawn from modern dance rather than Irish dance.

In this piece, each of the dancers created two phrases of movement. The first was what Carr referred to as their "greatest hits," or just the type of movement they like to do. The second was based on a part of a poem they interpreted through movement. In the quartet that I observed, which was made up of Gillis, Mary Kate Sheehan, Laura Neese, and another dancer who was not present, none of the dancers chose to include any Irish dance vocabulary in their phrases. Therefore, Carr asked them to insert more Irish dance movement into the phrases, so they had

two versions of each phrase to work with – the original and the “Irish dance version”, which was a combination of Irish dance and the original modern dance phrase. (Fieldnotes 10/11/13).

Once the dancers had generated their phrases, Carr used them to create the piece by combining the phrases in various ways. At times, one dancer would perform one of her phrases as a solo, while other dancers performed a portion of another phrase, or the entire quartet would perform each phrase or portions of the phrases in unison.

In between sections of choreography, Carr inserted what she calls “palate cleansing” phrases. These phrases were moments when the choreography returned to Irish dance vocabulary, generally in unison, in order to give the audience a break from the denser sections of the choreography and allow them to look at something more recognizable as traditional Irish dance before continuing on to the next section of the choreography.

Carr and the dancers worked on one of these palate cleansing phrases during this rehearsal. The dancers tried several options. They first tried a pinwheel⁷, followed by side sevens⁸. The main problem with the side sevens, they found, was that the music was too slow and the simplicity of the movement brought down the energy of the piece too much. The dancers tried several variations, changing speed, directions, and other aspects of the movement. Finally, Sheehan suggested that instead of the sevens, the dancers should switch places on a diagonal, using just one measure to get to their new place, in order to make the movement seem quicker. This was a method her Irish dance school had used in competition ceili dances when she was competing. This suggestion solved the problem, as it created more movement and thus the energy that Carr was looking for. By the end of the rehearsal, the majority of the quartet section was complete (Fieldnotes 10/11/13).

The next rehearsal I attended was on October 13 at DANY Studios. I made plans with both Darrah Carr and Laura Neese to conduct interviews with them on this day as well. I met Carr at the studio before the rehearsal began, and we spoke for about thirty-five minutes. Since I had the chance to observe some rehearsal time before the interview, I asked her whether what I

⁷*Pinwheel* - A common ceili dance formation where four dancers join their right hands in the middle of a circle, dance four bars clockwise, then turn and join left hands and dance four bars counter clockwise.

⁸*Side sevens* - One of the core movements of soft shoe dances. Side sevens begin with a hop on the left foot and six steps to the right, followed by three hop back-2-3's and six steps to the left. Sometimes also called side step or sevens.

had observed was typical of her way of working. She told me that it was different from how she usually works. The piece the company was rehearsing was based more on dancer-generated movement than usual. Because of personal events in her life prior to the beginning of the rehearsal process, Carr allowed a more collaborative process. However, she likes to collaborate with her dancers and allow their voices to be heard in the work on a regular basis. When I asked what she hopes her dancers gain from the experience of working with her, her main concern was that it is a positive experience for them and that they feel valued and that their voices are heard (Personal Interview 2013). Both Brigid Gillis and Laura Neese mentioned this when I interviewed them as well.

During this interview, Carr and I also discussed how she feels her work relates to Irish culture. She stated that through both her family and her husband's family, she feels a strong connection to Ireland and that this is reflected in her work through her choices of music and themes.

In the second half of the interview, conducted after rehearsal concluded, we discussed teaching. Just as with Colin Dunne, I asked Carr how she felt her training in modern and ballet had influenced her teaching of Irish dance, and vice versa. She said that one of the biggest influences on her Irish dance teaching is body awareness. She focuses more on warm-ups and injury prevention because of her experience in other types of dance. Conversely, she said that her modern dance practice has more structure and musicality because of her experience with Irish dancing (Personal interview 2013).

The first half of the rehearsal on October 13 was spent with dancers Caitlin McNeill and Laura Neese rehearsing two sections from the piece "Melange 445" which was originally choreographed in 2003. The first section they rehearsed is called the "Wallflower Waltz" and is performed by three dancers (McNeill, Neese, and Carr in this instance, although the original dancers were different) to Cajun waltz music. The idea is that the three women are waiting for someone to dance with, so the majority of the section takes place with the dancers sitting in chairs. The movement is gestural, and there is nothing that is particularly reminiscent of Irish dance in this section. However, the way that McNeill emphasizes the lift of her foot more sharply than the other two dancers reminds me of the primacy of her Irish dance training. I also noticed that in this section there is a strong connection to the music, which is something that most of the dancers I interviewed cited as being one of the ways their Irish dance training is revealed in their

choreography when they are not using Irish dance movement. “Melange 445” is a good example, as every movement is clearly related to the rhythm of the music.

During the rehearsal, the dancers and Carr worked together to remember the piece, which they had not performed for some time, consulting a video recording when necessary. Although this rehearsal was dedicated to rehearsing previously staged choreography rather than creating new material, there was still a very collaborative feeling amongst the dancers and choreographer.

In another section of “Melange 445” the focus is on rhythm. Two dancers (in this instance, McNeill, and Chris Armstrong who was not present) sit on cubes wearing Irish dance hard shoes⁹ and dance a hard shoe rhythm¹⁰ while sitting, while two more dancers (in this instance, Carr and Neese) create the rhythm visually through both gestural and full bodied movement (Fieldnotes 10/13/13).

At this point in the rehearsal, Laura Neese was released, and I left to interview her. Our discussion covered similar topics as my interview with Brigid Gillis. Neese is from Staten Island, and began her dance training as a child in tap, ballet, jazz, and modern. She was introduced to Irish dance when Niall O'Leary taught at her school. Her early experience with Irish dance was not focused on competition, but rather on group choreography. She began dancing with Darrah Carr in 2011, and was also the dancer who recommended Gillis for the company.

One of the other topics I discussed with Neese was the process of creating new choreography with Darrah Carr. Like Gillis, she described the process as a collaborative one. She also said that sometimes she has difficulty knowing what her place is in the choreographic process. For example, when Carr is working through a choreographic problem, she does not always know whether she should offer her opinion or not. This is something I noticed during the quartet rehearsal, where both Sheehan and Gillis were much more quick to offer suggestions than Neese. Although this difference may be rooted in diversity of personalities and approaches the rehearsal process, I also noted that Sheehan and Gillis have more extensive competitive Irish dance backgrounds than Neese, so they may feel more comfortable collaborating and offering suggestions for Irish dance phrases.

⁹ Hard shoes, also known as jig shoes or heavy shoes, are shoes with a fiberglass heel and tip used to create audible rhythm through footwork. Dances performed in these shoes are known as hard shoe dances.

¹⁰ Rhythms associated with hard shoe dances.

In terms of performing with Darrah Carr Dance, Neese said that she feels the work the company does is more accessible than many other contemporary or modern dance companies. She feels more comfortable inviting her family to a Darrah Carr show than some of her other performances, because Irish dance has a broad appeal that most people seem to enjoy. Similar to Gillis, she expressed that she feels contemporary Irish dance brings Irish dance back to its roots in culture, music, storytelling, and expressing Irishness and that these aspects have diminished in the competitive setting.

When I returned to the rehearsal after interviewing Neese, Louise Corrigan and Chris Armstrong had arrived. They, along with Caitlin McNeill, were working on their “greatest hits” phrases for Carr's new piece. In contrast to the quartet, who exclusively created modern dance movement when given this same exercise, both Corrigan and McNeill created typical Irish dance steps, including little contemporary movement aside from the addition of arm movement. Armstrong was the only dancer who combined both modern and Irish dance movements in his phrase without prompting. This is something I brought up to Carr in the second half of our interview, and she mentioned that McNeill and Corrigan are both primarily trained as Irish dancers, so it makes sense that they would choreograph with Irish dance vocabulary when asked to create a phrase. Both Carr and I did find it interesting, however, that out of all the dancers who have training in Irish dance and other genres, Armstrong was the only one who chose to include both modern and Irish equally in his phrase (Personal interview 2013).

Gillis offered one explanation for the choice to use modern dance vocabulary and no Irish dance vocabulary, saying “first thing that I want to do when I’m interpreting movement is move like a modern dancer. Not many things when I’m reading it make me want to do hop-2-3’s¹¹ or a bunch of twists¹², rocks¹³, and cuts¹⁴.” This highlights the differences in modern dance and Irish dance training. Although modern dancers, particularly in the university setting, often take

¹¹ One of the core movements of soft shoe dances, a hop-2-3 consists of a hop on one foot while bringing the other foot up in the back, then bringing the back foot in front and finishing with three steps.

¹² A movement usually seen in soft shoe dances, but also present in hard shoe. A twist begins with one foot crossed in front of the other, both heels then rotate out and back in while the dancers switches the position of the feet.

¹³ A movement found in both soft and hard shoe dancers where the dancer begins standing on the balls of the feet, with ankles crossed, then rocks from one side to the other.

¹⁴ A movement found in both soft and hard shoe dances where the dancer lifts one foot to the opposite hip while keeping one knee crossed in front of the other.

composition courses and are taught to associate their movement with interpretation of narrative of dramatic concepts, Irish dancers, if they learn composition at all, primarily focus on rhythmic interpretation.

Gillis went on to say that, “It’s challenging to maintain your personal identity but still do Irish. Because Irish, although it’s really expressive...it’s a very codified form, so to be individual within it is a task.” This statement is another possible explanation for the choices of those dancers with both modern and Irish dance training to draw exclusively from modern vocabulary. Irish dance might be seen to express a collective Irish identity, but not individual identities. In Chapters Six and Nine, I will discuss the ways contemporary choreographers use both traditional and contemporary concepts for purposes of individual expression.

Because of the fact that McNeill and Corrigan remained so close to the traditional Irish dance step structure, I will use the term “step” instead of “phrase” for the remainder of the discussion of this rehearsal. After the three dancers finished creating their steps, they each showed their step one at a time. Carr and the other dancers gave comments, and McNeill, after performing her step, commented, “I can add more arms if you want.”

After showing their steps, Carr then asked the dancers to teach the steps to one another. Just as with the quarter, she then worked with the dancers to combine the steps choreographically. While there was still a lot of trial and error involved, the process seems to run a bit more smoothly than it did with the quartet. This may be because of the fact that McNeill and Corrigan created such structurally similar steps that remain within the familiar vocabulary of Irish dance. As a result, there was less concern about making the movement more Irish.

Aside from McNeill’s comment about adding more arms, however, there also did not seem to be any concern about incorporating more modern dance vocabulary into the Irish dance steps. Instead, Carr used contemporary choreographic techniques to alter the structure of the Irish dance steps as a means of transforming them into the ModERIN style. For example, this section of the piece began with McNeill's step as a solo, accumulating to add Corrigan and Armstrong after a few bars, then subtracting them using Corrigan's step. Armstrong's step remained a solo, which highlighted the differences between his phrase and what McNeill and Corrigan created (Fieldnotes 10/13/13). Therefore, Carr was blending Irish dance and modern dance in terms of structure, rather than vocabulary.

While this was the last rehearsal I observed during my time in New York, I conducted three more interviews in the remaining days. The first was on October 14 with Melissa Padham, who has been a member of Darrah Carr Dance since 2006.

Just as with Gillis and Neese, I first asked Padham about her dance background. She was primarily trained as a ballet dancer, but studied Irish dance in a non-competitive setting with Carrie Gleeson. Melissa was also a member Harlem-based dance company Forces of Nature and is currently an MFA student at NYU Tisch School for the Arts.

Speaking with Melissa Padham was very useful because she has worked with Darrah Carr longer than the other dancers I interviewed. She commented that the biggest difference is that in the beginning, Carr's dancers were primarily modern dancers, whereas now she has more dancers with extensive Irish dance training. Because of this increase in dancers' Irish dance training, the work now involves more Irish dance vocabulary.

Padham also brought up the challenge of combining Irish dance and modern dance because of the differences in style. This is a challenge that I witnessed in rehearsals, where there was a tendency on the parts of the dancers to want to separate Irish and modern dance movement, and there had to be a concerted effort to combine the two.

One example Padham gave concerning how Carr approaches this challenge was a piece she performed with the company called "the Ballad of Eileen Pink and James Gray." In this piece, Carr began the process by asking the dancers make a vocabulary list for both ballet and Irish dance. They then identified where the lists overlapped. This exercise formed the basis of the choreography for the piece. 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 two dance forms already overlap and then expand upon this connection.

The next interview I conducted was on the evening of October 14 with Niall O'Leary. O'Leary is a prominent Irish dance teacher in New York who has danced with Darrah Carr for over ten years. Speaking with O'Leary was useful not only because of the fact that he has danced with Carr for so long, but also because of his knowledge of Irish dance and the current climate of the Irish dance world. Much of our conversation centered on the current competitive Irish dance world and where Carr's work fits within the competitive dance culture.

When I asked O’Leary about his thoughts on how contemporary Irish dance fits into the paradigm of Irish dance representing Irish identity, he mentioned that there has been a loss of Irish identity in the dance for quite some time, with the focus of competition being more on athleticism and technique rather than cultural expression. Carr’s work, he said, is about an expansion of Irish dancing, and maybe then an expansion of Irish identity.

Like Padham, O’Leary also mentioned the fact that the training of Carr’s dancers has changed significantly since the company was first formed. Due to the fact that she is now able to work with more trained Irish dancers, she is able to include more Irish vocabulary in her choreography. O’Leary felt that in the early years of the company, when Carr worked primarily with modern dancers, the Irish dance technique was often not up to par because of the dancers’ lack of Irish dance experience. O’Leary attributed the increase in dancers with Irish dance training in Carr’s company to the fact that since *Riverdance* there are more “dancer types” attracted to Irish dance. In other words, Irish dance is more likely to be practiced by dancers who might have otherwise only been attracted to more mainstream dance forms like ballet or modern because it has become more mainstream.

My final interview was conducted by phone with Sean Curran on October 15. Curran has choreographed several pieces for Darrah Carr Dance, beginning with “On the Six” and including the Bessie-nominated piece “Dingle Diwali.” He first met Darrah Carr while choreographing the musical *James Joyce’s The Dead* when a colleague at NYU suggested her as an assistant choreographer. He began working with the company in 2009 with “On the Six,” a reworking of a piece he originally choreographed for Trinity Irish Dance Company.

The majority of my interview with Curran was about his background and choreography. He grew up studying Irish dance, then went to college to study modern dance with the intention of leaving Irish dance behind. He later began to include Irish dance in his choreography, and performed some Irish dance footwork with gestural upper body movement as a member of Bill T. Jones’s company. He said that he likes working with Irish dance because it nourishes nostalgia for his childhood and Irish heritage, and because he likes making “choreographic hybrids.” His goal is often to use an old language in a new way. This is what he does with Carr’s company. Curran uses Irish dance vocabulary with non-Irish music (“On the Six” is danced to swing music, and “Dingle Diwali” uses Indian music).

This was the conclusion of the fieldwork portion of my research for this thesis. The second major methodological approach I used was practice-as-research. By approaching my practice as research, I was able to use my creative work as a means of furthering my understanding of my academic research. Since I have experimented with the combination of Irish dance and other forms of dance for several years, I looked at pieces that I previously choreographed and created two new works for the purpose of this thesis. By creating these new works alongside my fieldwork, I was able to think deeply about my creative process and how it relates to the issues presented in this thesis.

The first of the two pieces created for this thesis is a dance film. The second piece is called "Off the Plate," and was choreographed for a UHM Late Night dance concert I directed in September 2013 titled *Identity Crisis*.

The dance film I am currently in the process of editing was shot in June 2013 in Dublin, Ireland. The concept for this film was to create a work that reflects my relationship to Ireland as a descendant of the Irish diaspora by filming at locations in Dublin with which I feel a strong connection. I began the process while still in Hawaii by making a list of locations where I might want to film. These included the Great Famine Memorial, pubs, Merrion Square, St. Stephen's Green, Phoenix Park, Dublin Bay, O'Connell Street, and the bridges that cross the River Liffey. While in Dublin, I filmed at five of these locations.

I began choreographing while in Hawaii, but I found it very difficult to do so since the primary inspiration for the piece came from the location of Ireland. Because of the importance of place in this choreography, trying to choreograph while in a different geographic location was not productive. I used some of the material I generated improvisationally in Hawaii, such as Irish dance influenced jumps, as well as slower, more gestural movement, but I decided to wait until I was in Ireland to create the majority of the choreography.

The choreography for the film was in two sections. The first was a modern dance section, which began with an arm reaching to the side to convey a sense of longing for place. Full-bodied movement grew from this gesture. The second section consisted of two Irish dance hard reel steps, which I choreographed during one of the traditional sessions in the pub at the University of Limerick during the Blas Summer School. I filmed both sections at all of the locations, with the exception of the Great Famine Memorial, where it felt disrespectful to perform the Irish dance section, and Devitts pub, where I felt it did not make sense to perform the modern dance section.

Fellow UHM graduate student Michelle Johnson assisted in the filming, doing all of the camera work for the film, though I gave her direction on camera angles and framing.

The first location where I filmed was the Great Famine Memorial. This location is significant for me because it is a visual representation of a time in Irish history that is central to the Irish diaspora. Because of the massive waves of emigration during the Famine, many Irish-American families trace their Irish ancestry back to this time. It is therefore an important moment in the collective memory of the Irish diaspora.

As previously mentioned, I did not perform my Irish dance steps at the Memorial because I felt it would be disrespectful to do so. There are two ideas that influenced this choice. The first can be explained by Frank McCourt's discussion of Irish-Americans in the article referenced in Chapter Two. As McCourt states, "The Irish Americans have felt maybe intellectually, or maybe poetically inferior to the 'real Irish'...because they're the ones who have suffered most" (42) While I chose the site of the Great Famine Memorial because of its significance to me as an Irish-American, when I arrived, I felt that my not being "real Irish" could make this choice problematic. I was aware that I could be seen as an American dancing in a place meant to commemorate a traumatic memory in the history of Ireland that was not mine to claim because my national identity is American. This concern caused me to approach performing in this location with utmost respect.

The second reason for my choice not to perform the Irish dance portion of my choreography at the Memorial is because of the association of Irish dance with happiness. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Irish dance is usually perceived as joyful. This does not mean happiness this is the only type of emotion appropriately associated with Irish dance, but due to my desire to remain respectful of a somber location, I wanted to avoid the possibility that passersby might perceive my dancing as ignorant of the gravity of the event depicted at the Memorial

The second location where I filmed was Merrion Square. This location is significant to me, since it is close to the building where I worked when I lived in Dublin and I often spent time in the park. The parks in Dublin feel separate from the urban environment, giving a sense of calm and nature in the middle of the city centre. First, I performed the modern dance section on the grass in the middle of the park, and then I performed the Irish dance section on one of the

pathways amongst the trees. I also came across a small grove of trees on our way out that I liked, and so I filmed a short improvisational section dancing amongst the trees.

Next, I danced at Devitts Pub. This is the pub referenced in Chapter One, where I attended, and often danced at, weekly traditional music sessions when I lived in Dublin. I felt connected to the music and the musicians and it provided me with a way in to the culture of the pub. As I will discuss in Chapter Eight, the location of the pub holds significance for the Irish diaspora, as pubs were, and remain, often a place where Irish immigrants gathered to play music and socialize with one another in the new country.

My reasoning for choosing not to dance the modern dance section of my choreography at the pub was less influenced by concern for spectator perception. While the other locations I chose had no pre-determined dance practice associated with them, I chose the location of the pub specifically because of the traditional dance and music practices connected with it. Therefore, although the other locations required a creation of a link between movement and place, there is already such a link determined between Irish dance and the pub prior to my choice to dance there.

Filming at the pub was a particularly interesting experience because this location provided the most immediate audience. Since it was the afternoon, the pub was not very full, but there were a few men sitting at the bar, and several people in other parts of the pub as well. At first, I just danced in my tennis shoes, not wanting to make too much noise and disturb the patrons, so the men at the bar and the bartenders were the only ones who noticed. Their voices can be heard in the footage, cheering me on. Several of them began talking to me, complimenting me on my dancing, and asking me questions about where I am from. One of them commented that my dancing was great but would be even better with the proper shoes. I told him that I had the shoes with me but that I did not want to put them on because I was afraid of being too loud and disturbing the other patrons of the pub. He and a few others at the bar encouraged me to put on the shoes.

“I’m the handyman here,” one of them commented. “So if you scuff up the floor, I can fix it!” (Fieldnotes 07/01/13)

So, at their prompting, I put on my dance shoes, and Johnson filmed me dancing a few more steps. The noise created by the shoes caught the attention of other customers in the pub,

and a man came up front from the back with his young son to see the dancing, and allow the son to get a closer look at my shoes.

After we were done filming, I stayed at the pub for one drink with the men at the bar who watched me dance. I talked with them about dance, where I had trained, where I was from, and asked them about themselves. This experience exemplified what I enjoy about dancing in pubs, which is the ability to connect with others and the fact that the pub is a social and cultural center for many of the traditional Irish arts.

The next location I chose to film at was Phoenix Park, one of the largest walled parks in Europe. When I lived in Dublin, I lived close by the park, though I did not realize it until maybe a month or two into my stay. One day, I went for a walk, and I found the park by accident. I liked how serene it felt, so I often came back when I wanted to relax, think, or write. It was not until later that I discovered which park it was. I chose Phoenix Park because of my personal history with the location.

I danced at two different locations at the park. The first was the Wellington Monument, which is one of the most recognizable features of the park. The monument commemorates the victories of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, an Irishman known for his military success in the Battle of Waterloo and others. The obelisk stands over 200 feet tall (“The Wellington Testimonial” 835). I chose this part of the park because it is so distinct and because I wanted to not use only green scenery to avoid stereotypes that are often associated with Ireland.

The monument was a challenge to dance on because of the fact that sides are sloped and it is difficult to keep balance when doing anything other than walking on them. Because of this, I felt my movement was much more limited as I was not comfortable jumping or traveling. Therefore, I limited much of my movement to stationary, gestural movement. I then moved up to the top of the monument where the surface was flatter in order to perform the Irish dance sections.

The following day, I filmed at a suburb on Dublin Bay called Dún Laoghaire. I knew that I wanted to include a location on Dublin Bay because it was one of my favorite places when I was living in Ireland. The ocean is also significant in terms of the Irish diaspora, since crossing the ocean is a symbol of leaving the island. I chose Dún Laoghaire in particular because it was the first town where I encountered Dublin Bay.

While in Dún Laoghaire, I filmed in three locations by the Bay. I began next to a grassy area by a park. I danced a similar modern phrase to what I had performed earlier, although the quality of my movement felt different than it had the previous day. Although I included the same phrases, which included reaching gestures and jumps, the way I performed this movement was sharper and more direct than it had been the previous day. Johnson agreed that the quality of my dancing was different from the previous day (Fieldnotes 07/02/2013). After filming the modern dance phrase, I performed the Irish dance steps, then moved to a location closer to the water.

The final film location was the lighthouse further out in the Bay. The lighthouse was an important location to me because my sisters and I walked out to it on the Fourth of July when they visited me in Dublin. Therefore, it holds significance in terms of thinking about myself as an Irish-American in Ireland. It is a location that I associate with Ireland, because of its physical location and the surrounding landscape of the Bay, but also a location that in my memory is linked with the celebration of an American holiday.

On the way out to the lighthouse, it began to rain. I only did one take because of the rain, so the only take was of one modern dance phrase. There was an Irish flag near the lighthouse, so I asked Johnson to begin the shot on the flag, and then pan down to me dancing below. The flag is an important national symbol, so I wanted include it as a symbol of the connection between myself, the place, and national or ethnic Irish identity. This was the final shot we filmed.

Throughout the process of filming, I kept a journal about the experience. Although I chose all of the locations because of my personal connection to them, and choreographed the movement to reflect the sense of longing that I often feel for these places in Dublin, while I was performing, I felt more connected to some places than others. In particular, I felt most inspired and connected to the location when I was at the Great Famine Memorial and Devitts Pub. This is likely because these are the two locations I had in mind when I first conceived the idea for the film, and so the movement is most strongly linked to them. They are also the locations that most correspond to how I understand Irishness as a member of the diaspora.

As I began the process of editing the film, I found it difficult to synthesize the footage from the different locations in the way I originally envisioned. Although I planned to use both modern dance and Irish dance movement, I found it difficult to combine the footage of the two separate types of movement. The challenge remains to edit them in such a way that they appear related despite the differences in style and, often, differences in location. This is a problem that I

am still working with and I think the solution lies in matching the rhythm of the editing to the rhythm of the movement.

The second part of the practice-as-research portion of this project was a dance created in Honolulu during August and September 2013 as a part of the dance concert *Identity Crisis*. My concept for the production was a “student directed, choreographed, and performed dance concert with pieces addressing the theme of place and identity, or multi-faceted identities” (Holt “Identity Crisis Proposal”). The aim was to provide students with an opportunity to create dance pieces that would allow them express their diverse identities. “Off the Plate” was one of my two choreographic contributions to the concert. The other was a contemporary modern dance solo.

The movement for “Off the Plate” was primarily based on modern dance vocabulary because the dancers with whom I worked were not trained in Irish dance. Therefore, I chose to work with modern dance vocabulary along with Irish music and Irish dance structures. The concept for the piece was based on the way the use of space has changed in Irish dance as the stages for competitive dance and performances have gotten larger. Although in the past it was considered a sign of a skilled dancer to be able to dance in a small space, now dancers are expected to travel and fill the large stage areas at competition and performance venues. The piece explored the ways in which this change in the use of space changes movement by asking the dancers to perform the same phrase first in a small space and then alter it to take up more space. The title was a reference to the saying that a skilled dancer could dance on a plate.

I kept a journal detailing the process of creating “Off the Plate” as well as my reactions to the piece as it came together. The choreographic process was difficult in the beginning because I was not able to use Irish dance vocabulary the way that I might have preferred. However, as the process progressed, I found that what felt like a limitation offered me the opportunity to explore different aspects of Irish dance and music than I might have otherwise. For example, I wanted to include references to Irish dance vocabulary. I did so by altering movements such as leap-2-3's¹⁵ and twists, so that they referenced Irish dance vocabulary in a way that was more accessible for dancers with no Irish dance experience. I also included a treble reel step that was not altered, requiring substantial rehearsal time.

¹⁵ Usually a soft shoe movement, although sometimes incorporated in hard shoe dances, a leap-2-3 begins with the dancer leaping into the air with one leg extended to the front and the other bent at the knee, with the lower leg held close to the body. The dancer lands first on the straight leg and then the bent.

Another challenge I discovered was the different ways I count music when working in Irish dance from other forms of dance. In my Irish dance training, I was taught to count bars of music rather than the beats. While learning a step, I also learned by singing the steps to the tune of the music rather than learning counts. Because I was not working with Irish dancers, I tried to count the way I might in ballet, jazz, or modern dance, but I found it difficult sometimes to count the music this way. Ultimately, I sang the steps the way I might with an Irish dance step. In some cases this approach worked, but in others the dancers sometimes had difficulty understanding the relationship of the movement to the music.

Despite the challenges, creating “Off the Plate” provided me with an opportunity to explore Irish dance and music in a way that I may not have had I choreographed a more traditionally Irish piece. I was able to explore the music through a variety of tempos and qualities of movement, and by accenting various parts of the tune with different parts of the body. The experience of making this piece also required me to think in depth about the structures I was working with both musically and in terms of movement so that I could explain them to the non-Irish dancers. This is perhaps one of the roots of comments made by other dancers and choreographers throughout my fieldwork: working in a contemporary Irish dance setting strengthens the relationship to the tradition rather than weakening it. This is an idea that continually presented itself, and it is one that I will explore throughout the course of this thesis. (Fieldnotes 09/01/13-09/27/13)

CHAPTER FIVE. POSTURE

One of the most recognizable aspects of Irish step dance technique is the posture. While the dancer often performs fast, intricate, and difficult footwork in the lower body, the upper body remains rigid, with the arms never leaving the sides. This posture remains most common in the competitive form of Irish dance. While the theatrical and social versions of the dance tend to be a bit more lenient – allowing the use of the arms, for example – the posture still remains upright with very little movement in the upper part of the body. One of the ways in which Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr integrate contemporary dance practice into their work is by disrupting the usual use of the torso, allowing the upper body to react to the movement of the lower body and integrating full-bodied movement vocabulary into their choreography.

Anthropologist Frank Hall notes that the still torso in Irish dance is often a source of questions for spectators and Irish dancers alike, who wonder where this practice came from and why (13-14). The posture appears paradoxical in nature to the fast footwork that also characterizes the dance form. This chapter will explore the ways in which the posture of Irish dance has historically acted both as an embodiment of the discipline and control of bodies, and a reaction to colonization. Additionally, it will address the changes in posture in contemporary Irish dance, and how these changes relate to the postcolonial, diasporic nature of modern Irish identity.

If you ask an Irish dancer where the strict and still upper body of their dance form originated, it is likely that you will get an explanation in the form of a story. The most common story is that the Irish were not allowed to practice their dances during the time of British rule in Ireland, so they would dance from the hips down only so that passing soldiers would not be able to see them dancing through the window. Other similar explanations have been that the dancing restriction came from the church, and the passing authority figure was the priest. Yet another explanation is that girls had to hold their dresses down when dancing outside in the wind (Hall 16). I recall my grandmother telling me once that the arms were not used to avoid the appearance of flirting with members of the opposite sex while dancing.

As Hall notes, these stories, while in some ways plausible, are also much more likely to be mythic explanations than actual reasons for the rigid upper body (15). For example, the most common explanation that the still upper body was meant to fool authority figures passing by is

clearly flawed in that even without the use of the arms or torso, it would still be clear that movement was happening below because of its unavoidable effect on the upper body. However, it should be noted that “these stories attempt to account for the posture in terms of social relations of authority, subordination and, in some cases, resistance. Like myths, these stories and explanations, if unsatisfactory in themselves, contain themes that resonate with historical and contemporary concerns with authority, control, and the morality of expressive body movement” (Hall 16). Furthermore, as John Storey notes, “Myths are stories we tell ourselves as a culture in order to banish contradictions and make the world understandable; they attempt to put us at peace with ourselves and our existence” (78). The stories about the Irish dance posture exist to help understand what is seen as unnatural: the dancing lower body and the “non-dancing”, or still, upper body that exist on the same body. Therefore, the stories surrounding the posture are in some ways equally important to the posture itself, as they provide insight into the political climate from which this style of movement was born and draw attention to the Irish concern with subordination and oppression in both current and past times.

Prior to the codification of Irish dance, as described in Chapter Three, there were many regional variations in the style of Irish dance, but throughout the years, the Gaelic League, and later An Coimisiun, chose which of these variations were the most acceptable, and these became the most standardized. At some point, it seems likely that the strictly regimented upper body seen in Irish dance today was not the norm everywhere, as there is documentation of the Cork style of dance which used the hands on the hips, and even today in sean nos dance the arms are allowed to move freely even if the torso remains upright (Hall 18). Mary Friel’s work on social dance in Southeast Ireland in the nineteenth century also notes the use of hands on the hips in some areas (39-40). So, it would seem that the Gaelic League and An Coimisiun chose to enforce a more extreme stillness in the upper body than was common in some parts of Ireland.

Despite the various regional variations, the upright posture and nonuse of arms were chosen to be part of the “look” of Irish dance by the Gaelic League and An Coimisiun. By looking at Irish dance through the lens of poststructuralism, we can see the posture of the dance as the signifier, “Irish dance” as the signified, and “Irishness” as the sign. The reason for the choice of the rigid posture as a signifier of Irishness, and other stylistic choices made throughout the codification process of the last century, is not known. The practice of Irish dance from the time of the Gaelic League until the present has primarily occurred in the context of competition, so

many stylistic aspects have emerged simply due to the competitive process: those who win competition are considered the best, and they are copied by other dancers, so the winning dancers' stylistic choices eventually become the norm for the whole dance community (Hall 17). Particularly in the early years of competition, prior to the formation of An Coimisiun, this process was fairly arbitrary as adjudicators could be anyone and may have had little to no familiarity with Irish dance at all (Moloney et al, "Changes in Irish Dance" 108). Therefore, part of what became accepted as Irish dance had much to do with the personal preferences of adjudicators and similarly arbitrary factors. While An Coimisiun later excluded certain dances because they were believed to have roots outside of Ireland, and thus not Irish enough, there does not seem to be evidence that the reasoning for stylistic choices was similar.

However, despite the fact that there is no record of specific political reasons for the choice of the rigid posture and exclusion of the arms, the fact that the choice was made as part of the push for nationalism in nineteenth and twentieth century colonial and post-colonial Ireland suggests that it was indeed a reflection of the political ideals of the time. As Jacques Ranciere argues, "there is an intrinsic knot between aesthetic practices and politics" (qtd. in Caspao 124). Consequently, all choices made in regards to Irish dance as a physical representation of Irishness are intrinsically and unavoidably political in nature.

There are several ways in which the significance of the upper body as a signifier for Irishness in this context can be addressed. The first is by looking at in terms of discipline. Michel Foucault suggests that discipline through the control of how the body moves produces subjected, docile bodies that can then be controlled by those in power (138). The strict control of the upper body in Irish dance can certainly be seen as a means of controlling the body, and so the choice to include this style of dance rather than the more relaxed forms that existed previously may be considered a means of those in power attempting to control the population and cause them to portray an image of themselves that was docile and well-mannered.

However, a paradox exists in this reading of the Irish dance in two ways. The first is that this regimented look was not created by those who were in power at the time, meaning the British who still had control of Ireland when the Gaelic League was formed in 1893, but rather by members of the oppressed and colonized class: the Irish themselves. As previously noted, the still upper body had been a practice in Irish dance for years, and was only codified when the Gaelic League began using dance as to define Irishness as distinct from Britishness (Foley 34).

Therefore, the imposition of control on the Irish body was chosen as part of a rebellion against the hegemony, rather than as a way to oppress the colonized as one might expect.

It is significant that Foucault's description of a soldier in *Discipline and Punishment* is not dissimilar to the description of the posture of an Irish dancer:

To begin with, the soldier was someone who could be recognized from afar; he bore certain signs: the natural signs of his strength and courage, the marks, too, of his pride. His body was the blazon of his strength and valour... 'holding their heads high and erect; to standing upright without bending the back...throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulder' (135).

Given that the formation of the Gaelic League was a precursor to the war for independence fought by the Irish in the following decades, it is significant that the way they chose to present Irish identity was by using a posture that so closely resembles that of a soldier. As historian Jason Knirck notes, Ireland at this time sought to establish an Irish identity in direct contrast to English identity, and also in direct contrast to the England's negative view of the Irish (40-41). Therefore, in using Irish dance as a representation of Irish identity, the soldier-like control over the upper body represented an Ireland that was strong, civilized, and proud. In other words, a direct contrast to the weak, backwards, uncivilized nation England thought them to be.

Once again, however, the Irish dancer as soldier is something of a contradiction. At this time, dance was seen as the feminine representation of Irishness, while the masculine was represented by Irish sports such as hurling and Gaelic football, and soldiers were exclusively male. It is strange that the feminine representation of Irishness included a posture that is so linked with masculinity. This may be explained in part by the fact that during the rise of nationalism, Ireland was commonly represented in literature as a woman, and the Irish men were her sons who sacrificed themselves for her freedom (Knirck 34-35). Therefore, even though women were not soldiers physically fighting the fight for independence, they remained an important part of nationalism.

The other major paradox of the Irish dance posture is the way in which it is juxtaposed with the liveliness of the lower body. This juxtaposition is brought to the forefront in the posture myths discussed previously. In particular, the stories of hiding the dancing feet from the oppressors by using a non-dancing upper body both acknowledge the control being imposed on the body by outside forces and reject the control by continuing the movement in the lower half of

the body. In this way, the erect posture can be read as a response to colonization and oppression. As the stories suggest, the Irish present themselves to the colonizers (and later the church) as complying with the regulations imposed upon their bodies, but in reality, they continue to express themselves in the way they see fit through the dancing lower body. Thus the Irish dancing body is a binary in and of itself – embodying both subordination and insubordination at once. The still upper body can be seen as an imposition of discipline and control on the docile body, but that control exists to allow for the freedom of the lower body. The appearance of subordination exists only to allow rebellion to flourish.

If, then, the juxtaposition of control and insubordination in the body of the Irish dancer emerged as a response to the political climate of pre-revolution Ireland, one wonders why the rigid body remained and, indeed, continued to become more prominent after the emergence of the Irish Free State in 1922 (Jackson 369). The persistence of this posture can largely be attributed to the continued push for Irish nationalism by what was now the Irish government. When An Coimisiun was formed in 1929, nationalists were still responding to the Anglicization of Ireland that had occurred under British rule (Foley 34-35). Their aim was to return Ireland to a pre-colonized Englishness, and so those values which had been adopted during the cultural nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century continued to be promoted in order to further support an Irish identity that was distinct and opposite from Englishness. Therefore, the political goals of postcolonial Ireland remained much the same as they had been for several decades. The difference was that the rebels were now those in power, and so the meaning shifted.

The source of oppression in this time period also shifted. Part of the anti-English identity included a strong correlation between Irishness and Catholicism. The English were Protestant, and the Irish were Catholic. Because of this association, the Catholic Church was extremely influential in Ireland for many years (“Eamon de Valera” par 5). Consequently, as illustrated in the myths where the authority figure is the priest, the Church represented another source of oppression.

While this rigid upper body and contrasting dynamic footwork remains a unique feature of Irish dance, in the past two decades, there has been a shift in the Irish dance world towards allowing the use of the upper body in performance. As previously noted, competitive dancers must still adhere strictly to the “no arms” rule, but this is not the case for professional dancers. While the torso still tends to remain quite still, shows like *Riverdance*, *Lord of the Dance*, and

their descendants have reintroduced the use of the arms and a more relaxed upper body into the dance. Just as the still upper body emerged as a reflection of the political climate of nineteenth century Ireland, the current move towards integrating the upper body, in a way that is admittedly still quite limited, is a reflection of modern Irish identity, which is largely a product of postcolonial Ireland and the experience of the millions of members of the Irish diaspora throughout the world.

This change in Irish dance coincided with major changes in the Irish economy in the late twentieth century (Seaver 4-15; Foley 38). Beginning in the late 1980s, Ireland experienced an economic boom and consequently, became more a part of modern Europe than in previous years. It makes sense that these changes would be reflected in Irish dance. The shift towards the inclusion of outside cultural influences can be seen in the presence of non-Irish dance forms in *Riverdance*, for example. Additionally, Trinity Dance Company founder Mark Howard says, “we were always headed that way in America,” referencing the shift towards hybridity and modernization in Irish dance (Moloney et al, “Impact of *Riverdance*” 92). Howard and others maintain that the Irish diaspora in America produced dancers who were already moving towards a contemporary approach to Irish dance, even before the same shift began to happen in Ireland. The difference in the 1990s, then, was the shift in Ireland that made more contemporary Irish dance works more acceptable.

After the success of *Riverdance*, as Darrah Carr noted to me, there were and remain several other shows which followed the same basic formula as that production. Carr, along with others, became more interested in what else could be done with Irish dance, rather than revisiting the performance model established by *Riverdance* (Personal interview 2012). The question of what else can be done, creatively, with Irish dance is one that inspires the work of current contemporary Irish dance choreographers like Colin Dunne, Darrah Carr, and others.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will look at how Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr's work approaches the use of the torso and full-bodied movement in their contemporary Irish dance choreography, and how this relates the previously established ideas about posture in Irish dance.

One of Colin Dunne's earliest Irish dance pieces, “Trading Taps,” was added to *Riverdance* after Michael Flatley left the show in 1995. The piece features three Irish dancers and two tap dancers, depicting life of Irish immigrants in the “New World” of America and their interaction with African-Americans. In the piece, the Irish dancers retain their upright posture for

the most part, but as they increase their interaction with the tap dancers, they allow their arms to be loose and react to the movements of their bodies (Dunne “Trading Taps”). This choreographic choice reflects the influence of immigration on Irish identity. Due to the massive waves of emigration from Ireland during and following the Great Famine, there are over sixty million people worldwide who claim Irish heritage (Wulff 33). Therefore, depicting a scene where Irish dancers' physicality is directly influenced by African-American tap dancers reflects the nature of Irish diasporic identity, which has been inevitably influenced by the countries where Irish immigrants settled.

In 1999, Dunne created *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* with Jean Butler, the original female lead dancer of *Riverdance*. *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* brought attention to the rigid upper body of the Irish dance posture by including a scene where dancers literally have their arms tied to their sides. Within the context of the story, the dancers portray members of an army who have been drugged and tied-up. When they wake, they stumble around and dance, seemingly alarmed that they cannot move their upper bodies. As the piece ends, the dancers break free from the restraints, and are able to move their arms and upper bodies. At this point in Irish history, the Celtic Tiger economic boom was in full swing, Ireland, while still primarily Catholic, was no longer so staunchly controlled by the Church, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland had calmed with the IRA declaring a cease fire in 1998 (Jackson 378). This portrayal of the forceful breaking free in the upper body then is significant in terms of how Irish dance represents Irish political issues. At the same time that Irish dancers were in the midst of “breaking free” from the tradition of the previous century, the country itself was doing the same.

It is also significant that both “Trading Taps” and this scene of *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* directly reference the apparent strangeness of the still upper body. In “Trading Taps,” the piece begins with a narrator stating, “Tall and straight, my father taught me, this is how we dance” and the tap dancers parody the Irish dancers by facetiously imitating their posture (Dunne “Trading Taps”). This choice and the choice to draw attention to the stillness of the upper body through the use of literal physical constraints in *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* claims the posture of Irish dance as unusual much in the same way as the posture myths. While the myths aim to explain the strangeness of the posture, these pieces draw attention to it and then change it through the use of the upper body in the choreography.

Shortly after *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* closed, Dunne began the MA program in contemporary dance at the University of Limerick (UL). “At that time, I was bored with myself, and frustrated with the performance models that were available, in terms of big productions,” he has said. “I just wanted to spend time investigating what more was there in it, and what more was in me” (qtd. in Long par 13). Since his involvement in the program at UL, Dunne has continued on a trajectory of, among other things, exploring the use of his upper body. An improvisational solo called “Ode to Socks,” performed by Dunne in 2006 as part of Dagdha Dance Company's *Gravity and Grace* concert demonstrates this development. Throughout the piece, Dunne performs footwork (barefoot) that draws on Irish dance vocabulary – clicks¹⁶, points¹⁷, trebles, side sevens and others. The major difference from what is traditionally seen in Irish dance is that he allows the movements to affect his upper body. Although he still retains an upright posture for the most part, he allows his arms, pelvis, shoulders, and head to move in response to the motion of his legs and feet. He moves loosely and freely, rather than holding posture still as in the competitive style.

Colin's current solo work entitled *Out of Time*, which he first performed in 2008 and includes Irish dance movement, contemporary movement, and media, also includes a similar use of the upper body. He remains mostly upright, but again, allows his upper body to be looser, and react to the movement of his lower body. Some of these reactions also result in spiraling of the spine and other types of movement that differ from competitive Irish dance. Dunne says about the show:

Even though *Out of Time* has a contemporary aesthetic, the idea of ‘going back’ was really driving it. I projected archival film footage of sean nos dancers (old-style Irish dancers) from the 1930s through the ‘70s. The way they moved was weightier than what we see in Irish dance today; they had that release in the joints, particularly through the pelvis, with impulses up through the chest and arms, moving very naturally. And I’ve found a connection between what I’m doing now and what they were doing (“Quick Q&A” 15).

¹⁶ A hard shoe movement where the dancer jumps and allows the heels of the hard shoe to connect, producing a “click” sound. There are various versions of the click (front clicks, and back clicks) differentiated primarily by where the feet are placed in space during the click.

¹⁷ A movement where the dancer places a point foot on the floor in front of their body.

This description of Dunne's current work illuminates a current theme in the post-*Riverdance* era of Irish dance. There has been a revival of sean nos dance in recent years, and the number of choreographers who, like Dunne, have started experimenting with the upper body and other elements of Irish dance is constantly increasing. In a way, this is a response to the regulation and control that has been imposed on the Irish dancing body by An Coimisiun since the late 1920s. As Dunne notes, he is "going back" to the way the body moved before the process of competition and regulation homogenized the dance form into what it is today. Therefore, although Dunne's work is largely informed by contemporary training and aesthetics, there is a clear link to the past, not only through the traditional footwork, but in the similarities in the upper body as well.

The use of the upper body in Darrah Carr's work varies greatly. In many of the more traditional Irish pieces, such as those the company performs while on tour with the Andy Cooney Band, or the duets that Carr performs with Niall O'Leary, the posture remains similar to what is seen in competition dance or *Riverdance*. Occasionally, there may be more elaborate arms, but rarely anything that would be considered completely outside of the realm of traditional Irish dance. In some of Carr's more traditional duets with O'Leary, however, like those seen in *Christmas Celtic Sojourn*, performed in Boston in 2007, she changes the posture more, twisting her hips, and bending at the waist, allowing the torso to move forward.

In the ModERIN pieces, the use of the upper body can vary greatly from arm movements performed with Irish dance footwork, to full bodied movement that does or does not reference Irish dance vocabulary. For example, the piece "ModERIN", from which the style draws its name, includes full-bodied, modern dance movement that involves partnering, and full use of the arms and torso. The piece references Irish dance spatially through the use of the 4-hand reel floor patterns, and physically by referencing the hand holding position typically seen in ceili dances. Also present is more recognizable Irish dance vocabulary of 1-2-3's, where the upper body returns to the usual upright posture (Carr "ModERIN").

In the two Darrah Carr Dance pieces I observed in my fieldwork, the use of the torso was varied. In Curran's piece, much of the work done during rehearsal was on the addition of upper body movement to the Irish dance footwork. For example, Curran instructed the dancers to create angular shapes with their arms and engage their torsos in lateral flexion while dancing portions of the hornpipe steps they created, or to allow their arms to flow upwards, creating soft shapes

with the arms in contrast to the sharpness of the lower body. This is an example of how Curran creates what he calls “choreographic hybrids” (Fieldnotes 10/09/14).

In Carr’s choreography, because the quartet dancers relied exclusively on modern dance vocabulary in their phrases, the torso was already a part of the work from the beginning of the movement generation process. As noted in Chapter Four, in both the quartet rehearsal and the trio rehearsal, there was not much focus on making any of the dancing “more modern,” but rather on making the dancing “more Irish.” McNeill’s comment about adding more arms to her step is the one example of a concern being voiced about contemporizing the Irish dance choreography, and it is notable that this contemporization focused on the incorporation of upper body movement.

In my own work, the use of the torso is often still very limited, although it is expanding. In my most recent piece, “Off the Plate”, since the majority of the movement vocabulary was modern dance-based with some Irish dance influences, much of the movement was full-bodied and included spiraling of the spine, floorwork, use of arm movement, and other various uses of the upper body. However, when I incorporated vocabulary that was more traditionally Irish, a treble reel step, I found that my dancers and I immediately returned to the strict, regimented torso. However, I consciously strove for this to not be the case, encouraging them to allow their upper bodies to be loose and react to the movement of their lower bodies, just as they would in other styles of movement.

The incorporation of movement in the torso and arms draws attention to the fact that a still upper body is an identifiable factor of Irish dance. By simply adding arm movement to Irish dance footwork, the dance becomes something different.

When discussing the challenges of working in the ModERIN style, dancer Brigid Gillis expressed the difficulty of using more traditional Irish dance vocabulary without reverting into the typical upper body stance:

When we’re actually trying to not just fit pieces of Irish in but to really integrate them both, it’s just really hard to remember that I’m a modern dancer and not go straight into that Irish, you know, arms by your side and...’cause you can’t be loosey goosey when you’re Irish dancing. You have to be completely relaxed, but tense the whole time...I don’t even look like I know how to dance half the time

when we're learning this stuff. It's just really challenging mixing the two worlds and having it look nice.

This challenge of “mixing the two worlds” as Gillis describes it speaks to the ways in which the contemporary and the traditional are often still seen as separate entities. However, both Carr's and Dunne's works incorporate aspects of both approaches to dance in their use of the upper body and its relationship to the lower body. In terms of the link between the aesthetics of Irish dance posture and political issues in Ireland and the diaspora, the use of the torso in these dances suggest a departure from concerns of discipline and rebellion, and a shift towards embodiment of independence and individual identity.

CHAPTER SIX. CHOREOGRAPHIC STRUCTURES AND THEMES

As noted in Chapter Three, Irish step dance in its current, most widely recognized, incarnation is largely a product of the cultural nationalism movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because of the link to nationalism and the mission of asserting Irish identity in the wake of colonization and the suppression of Irish culture through bans on dance, the Irish language, and other cultural practices, Irish dance has primarily been used to express issues related to Irish culture and identity. While Irish dance often does not have a narrative usage, as it is mostly focused on the relationship to the music, the purpose of the dance form, particularly since the process of codification began in 1893, is to present a physical representation of Irishness. Therefore, even competitive and social dances inevitably become linked to Irish identity. When competitive dances do have a narrative element, as in the dance dramas performed at some competitions, these narratives often focus on issues related to Irish emigration and homesickness (Wulff 23-24).

Structurally, competitive Irish dance is linked very closely to the music to which it is performed. Solo dances follow the eight bar structure exclusively, repeating everything on the right and left foot in order to parallel the music. The traditional set dances in solo step dancing, such as “St. Patrick's Day” or “The Blackbird”, are performed to specific tunes by the same name. Social dances share a similar relationship with the music.

One way in which contemporary Irish dance choreographers explore their relationship with traditional Irish dance is through the use of Irish themes and Irish dance structures. Darragh Carr stated that, “Personally, I think that Irish dance really benefits modern dance choreography. The structures of Irish dance are really beneficial” (Personal interview 2012). In her work, Carr often makes use of the spatial structures of Irish dance, utilizing common floor patterns and spatial relationships found in both Irish solo dances and social dances. Dunne's work frequently utilizes rhythmic structures of Irish dance, both adhering to and manipulating common rhythms found in jigs and hornpipes. Both Carr and Dunne make use of these structures, and traditionally Irish themes, while also moving away from them and manipulating them in new ways. This practice is the essence of contemporary Irish dance choreography, which takes aspects of

traditional Irish dance and changes it by moving it into a new setting, or altering the structure altogether.

This type of choreography, then, is an example of Dwight Conquergood's theory of hyphenated, or blended, identities. Conquergood posits that identity is always mixed and multi-faceted, and thus “the idea of the person shifts from that of a fixed, autonomous self to a polysemic site of articulation for multiple identities and voices” (195). The choreographic structures and themes employed by Dunne and Carr embody the hyphenated identities of the members of the Irish diaspora (who may be, for example, both Irish and American), reflecting the effects of globalization, colonization, and emigration on modern Irish identity.

In terms of narrative themes, contemporary Irish dance performance often focuses on subjects related to Irish identity. For example, the big shows like *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* focus on stories from Irish mythology, and themes from Irish history. Both Darrah Carr and Colin Dunne often focus solely on experimentation with the rhythms and movement conventions of Irish dance, such as in Carr's “RhythMOTION” or “ModERIN,” and Dunne's “Ode to Socks.” All three of these pieces are primarily abstract, based in Irish dance music and movement, but with variations on Irish dance conventions, such as use of the upper body, incorporation of modern dance movement, exploration of creating rhythm in parts of the body other than the feet, and the removal of the shoes. These works, then, are contemporary in their breaking away from Irish dance conventions, but they also adhere somewhat to the traditional focus on rhythm and music. By doing so, they retain, at least on some level, the traditional link to Irish identity.

When these choreographers create works that are more directly centered on themes aiming to convey a particular emotion or concept, they frequently draw from themes related to Irish identity. Dunne's website describes his currently touring solo work, *Out of Time*, as “both an unsentimental homage to Irish step dance, and a bold investigation of Dunne's personal and artistic relationship with a tradition that has shaped his life” (“*Out of Time*” par. 3). Dunne himself says that during the creation of *Out of Time*, he was experimenting with multiple ideas, including the use of sound technology, the use of text, and the “deconstruction” of Irish dance movement. He then felt that this way of working needed a context, and so he brought in archival footage of older Irish dancers in order to provide this context. The task then became, he says, to

answer the question, “what is this connection of what I’m doing now to this much older way of working?” (Personal interview). Therefore, although this piece does not directly engage with themes typically seen in Irish dance or other Irish art forms, such as immigration, homesickness, or Irish political issues, the focus on the Irish step dance tradition necessarily draws the focus back to Irish identity.

Out of Time also draws attention to the question of tradition and the place of tradition in contemporary Irish society. At one point, while dancing a simple hornpipe step barefoot to a hornpipe rhythm, Dunne comically asks, “What the hell is a hornpipe?” (Dunne “Panorama 2011”). He repeats the question several times, interspersed with the dictionary definition (“A lively jig-like dance usually performed by one person and traditionally a favorite of sailors”) and a statement that might be heard at a feis or in a dance class (“Everyone up on the floor for their hornpipes now, please. Thank you!”) Moments such as this, as well as those moments where videos of dancers from the 1930’s are projected while Dunne matches the rhythms they can be seen creating with his own footwork pose the question: What is this thing we call Irish dance? What was it then? What is it now? And is the then and the now of Irish dancing related? If we accept the concept that Irish dance is related to Irish identity, the question then also becomes, what did it mean to be Irish in the past? What does it mean to be Irish now? And are those identities related?

Similarly, Carr stated that her work is largely music-driven (Personal interview 2012). She frequently draws from Irish music for inspiration and so often the resulting work portrays essentially Irish themes. For example, the 2002 piece “Passage,” based on the “traditional Irish song cycle of sad songs, happy songs, and sleep songs provides a framework through which to explore two of Ireland's dying oral traditions--keening to mourn the dead and making mouth music for dancing when instruments were scarce” (“Repertory” par. 16). One of the company's most recent works, “Sé Caoineadh” is based on the tradition of the Irish lament (“Repertory” par. 3). Although guest choreographer Sean Curran, rather than Carr herself, choreographed the piece, it is representative of the type of work she aims to present through her company.

Despite the remaining prominence of Irish themes in the work of contemporary Irish dance choreographers, there is some departure from this tradition. A good example of this is Darrah Carr Company's recent piece “Dingle Diwali.” Carr describes the piece as “a piece of

Irish dance percussion with Indian vocalization by a British Indian singer, Sheila Chandra” (Personal interview 2012). While, as in previous works discussed, this piece is mainly abstract, the combination of Irish dance movement with Indian music and costuming causes the piece to appear less strongly linked to Irishness and Irish themes. The piece also reflects the influence of globalization, by not only pushing the boundaries of Irish dance within the confines of Irish-American identity, but also including influence by another culture outside of Ireland or Irish America.

The two new pieces created for Darrah Carr Dance's current 2013 season demonstrate themes and structures that reflect this hybridity. Carr's new piece is danced to a reel, and so the music is recognizable as Irish. One of the primary inspirations for the piece is also a poem by an Irish author, Gearoid MacLochlainn, entitled “They Danced.” Structurally, the piece sometimes adheres to the traditional eight-bar structure, and at other times it does not. In terms of movement vocabulary, there are moments where the vocabulary is strictly and recognizably Irish dance, there are moments where the vocabulary is strictly based on modern dance, and there are moments when the two come together (Fieldnotes 10/11/13, 10/13/13). The piece, then, is an example of a hybrid in almost every aspect: theme, structure, and movement vocabulary.

The new work created by Sean Curran for the concert is a similarly strong example of hybridity. The music, while created by an Irish band and adhering to the traditional hornpipe musical structure, uses instrumentation that gives the tune a sound that is not solely Irish. Curran uses movement that reflects the sound of the music, integrating the dancer created steps, which use Irish dance vocabulary almost exclusively, with upper body movement that reflects the style of the music. Structurally, the choreography began by working with the eight-bar structure of the step, but as it was manipulated with choreographic tools such as repetition and fragmentation, this structure changed (Fieldnotes 10/09/13). Again, this piece represents a blended form, clearly drawing from various traditions at the same time.

I explore similar structures and themes in my contemporary Irish dance choreography. As previously mentioned, my first piece in this blended style, “Ireland, Love of My Heart,” choreographed in 2002, featured a section of Irish dance choreography bookended by two sections of modern choreography and the use of music by well known Irish artists. The dance reflected a common theme of the arts in the Irish diaspora: a longing for home. Therefore, I

employed two techniques often used by Irish contemporary choreographers today: the inclusion of Irish dance movement in a piece that is primarily considered modern dance, as well as purely modern dance movement performed to Irish music with dramatic themes related to the Irish experience. In this way, the choreographic structure of the piece expressed Irishness by relating modern dance movement with Irish dance movement and music. The hybridity of this approach reflects the hybridity of contemporary Irish diasporic identity by utilizing both traditional and contemporary dance forms to express Irish identity.

After my initial venture into contemporary Irish dance choreography, I did not attempt another piece incorporating Irish dance for about four years. After transferring to the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU), I returned to Irish dance classes regularly at the Martin Percival School of Irish Dance. In 2007, the final year of my dance degree at CU, I decided to choreograph another piece using modern and Irish dance vocabulary. This time, I wanted to see if I could actually blend the two styles, rather than keeping them separate within the same piece. The choreography still included primarily modern dance vocabulary, but also used Irish dance vocabulary in the footwork and the dance was performed to Irish music. Unlike “Ireland, Love of My Heart,” however, the narrative theme of the work was not related to Irishness. The piece, entitled “Try, Try Again” was about the struggle between inner desires and physical ability after an injury. Therefore, the piece was different from my previous work in that it blended styles, and the emotional theme did not relate to Irish dance, culture, or identity in any way. Structurally, there was also no recognizable link to Irish dance, as I did not incorporate the traditional eight-bar structure in the movement at any time. In this piece, Irish dance vocabulary and music were only one aspect of a choreographic exploration of struggle that had more to do with personal experience and identity than a national or ethnic self.

This hybridization of identity through dance can also be seen in the way contemporary Irish dance choreographers approach choreography. As Carr states:

I think that ModERIN, to me anyways, is very freeing. You know, I can pull from Irish and I can pull from modern. Whereas, I think I would feel much more restricted if I was only working in Irish dance. Never moving my arms and never changing levels and never partnering. Conversely, personally I think that Irish dance really benefits modern dance choreography. Like the structures of Irish

dance are beneficial. And I think so much of what I see in modern dance is...it doesn't have a rhythmic base and it doesn't have...a structure on it. It can be very amorphous. But for me personally, I like things to have more of a structure on them. So Irish dance is very useful in that regard. (Personal interview 2012)

In terms of choreographic approach, then, Carr draws equally from both sides of her training, and sees the two not as mutually exclusive, as one might think of the binary modern/traditional, but rather as possessing traits that inform and enhance one another.

Similarly, in discussing his approach to choreographing *Out of Time*, Dunne said, “The challenging thing here for instance is playing with being kind of very low key, you know, but then that not becoming some kind of mush where you're kind of doing nothing. So finding all those different qualities that you can play with...but still being really clear about what it is that you're doing” (“In Conversation”). As mentioned in Chapter Three, Dunne also refers to his work with Yoshiko Chuma as an instance where he was not meant to be in her work as “a contemporary dancer,” but rather as an Irish dancer in a contemporary work. Although the approach is slightly different, Dunne's way of working is similar to Carr's in that he is attempting to draw from both sides of his training in by aiming to use the vocabulary of Irish dance, and alter the context or performance quality. Therefore, the choreographic approaches of both of these choreographers, much like the themes of their choreography, represent a desire to express two identities together.

The use of improvisation as a choreographic tool is another way in which both Carr and Dunne differ from the competitive Irish dance tradition from which they come. Although, as previously mentioned, sean nos dance is based on improvisation, competitive dancers are generally not accustomed to improvising. As Dunne states, “Improvisation isn't really taught as a practice. You're not taught, really, to improvise, necessarily, because you work very much within those structures” (“In Conversation”). Because of the focus on competition, this style of Irish dance is most focused on learning and perfecting steps, which does not leave much room for improvisation.

In contrast to the competitive mindset, both Dunne and Carr use improvisation either as a means of generating material for choreography, or as a performative structure. As previously mentioned, Dunne's 2006 “Ode to Socks” was a barefoot improvisational performance based on

typical Irish dance movements. At the time I interviewed Dunne, he was rehearsing for a performance with the Irish Chamber Orchestra. About the piece with the orchestra, he said: “I’ll be largely improvising because I just can’t bring myself to set steps in shoes anymore. So I prefer to improvise in the way that a percussionist would, but just know what I’m improvising around and what am I improvising with and to know the music really well so that I can happily improvise.”

Carr also uses improvisation as a means of generating material for choreography: “I’m interested in my dancers generating material. We’ll use a structured improv to chosen music or to a chosen concept, and seeing what’s generated from that and then playing with that material, teaching to each other, trying different parts together, generating through a body of shared vocabulary” (Personal interview 2012). This approach also emphasizes Carr’s desire to allow her dancers’ voices to be heard through the choreographic process.

During the creation of “Off the Plate,” I used improvisation early in the rehearsal process as a means of exploring movement possibilities. Due to the fact that I was working with dancers who had no experience in Irish dance, I wanted to see what type of movement they would generate in response to various pieces of Irish music. The results of those early rehearsals were the basis for much of the movement in the piece.

The use of improvisation in contemporary Irish dance is another example of combining the traditional with the contemporary. In many ways, the use of improvisation harkens back to the “old style,” as can be seen currently in sean nos dance practices. Particularly the way in which Dunne talks about improvising as a percussionist would is reminiscent of the improvisational practices of old style dancers. However, the use of improvisation as a means of generating material for contemporary Irish dance choreography as seen in Carr’s work, as well as the use of structured, non-percussive improvisation on stage as seen in “Ode to Socks,” reflects a contemporary sensibility. Therefore, the use of improvisation demonstrates hybridity in the way in which these artists are work, establishing a hybridization of traditional and contemporary practice.

The influence of emigration and diaspora has had a huge impact on the development of themes and choreographic practices in Irish dance. As Paul Gilroy states, “diaspora identity is focused less on the equalizing, proto-democratic force of common territory and more on the

social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration defined by a strong sense of the dangers involved in forgetting the location of origin and the process of dispersal” (qtd. in Barker 263). Looking at the Irish diaspora through this lens, the primary concern of the practice of Irish arts in the diaspora has been remembrance and the retention of cultural identity in a new place. The shift of focus of contemporary Irish dancers from solely Irish-themed work signals a change of focus, at least within this sector of Irish dance.

The reason for this change in terms of thematic elements within contemporary Irish dance may be attributed to multiple factors. As previously noted, the dance tradition as it exists today was constructed as a response to colonization in Ireland. Essentially, Irish dance was used as a method of constructing and asserting Irish identity in opposition to oppression from Britain and in support of the fight for an independent Ireland. The practices of contemporary Irish dance choreographers who are moving away from this construction represent a change in the function of Irish dance. In postcolonial times, the need to assert cultural identity no longer exists in quite the same way, and so there is more freedom to move beyond the boundaries established in response to colonization.

In April 2013, after presenting at the American Conference for Irish Studies International Meeting in Chicago, I was asked whether I, and other contemporary Irish dance choreographers like myself, feel a responsibility to uphold and authentically represent the Irish dance tradition from which we come. I surprised myself when I said no. “I think the question isn’t how can we authentically represent Irish dance,” I said. “It’s a question of how we can authentically represent ourselves.” This is not a statement I had ever articulated to myself or anyone else before, but in it, I felt that I revealed a truth about my approach to my dance practice, and perhaps a way to think about the dance practices of other contemporary Irish dance choreographers. If dancers feel restricted by Irish dance traditions, for example, why do they not simply abandon them and transition completely into another form of dance? As I expressed at the conference, abandoning Irish dance practice completely would be to leave out a part of myself, and so, in order to create work that feels authentic and whole, I have to include both Irish dance and other dance techniques. While this is not a question that I have directly asked either of the other choreographers on whom this paper is focused, I see a similar concept in their work. As previously noted, Darrah Carr told me the story of how she stopped practicing Irish dance when

she went to college, and the moment that caused her to begin again. One day, during lunch in a cafeteria on campus, she heard live Irish music being played. As Carr relates, she immediately went in search of the music, and when she found the musicians playing a lunchtime concert, she sat and listened. “I just started crying,” she told me. “I hadn't realized how much I missed it” (Personal interview 2011). This story also exemplifies the feeling of incompleteness that comes from abandoning Irish dance altogether. Colin Dunne’s statement that he, “just wanted to spend time investigating what more was in the dance and what more was in me” also suggests the desire to find a way to express more beyond the traditional conventions of Irish dance, but without leaving it behind completely (qtd. in Long par 13).

This concept is exemplary of the way that contemporary Irish diasporic identity is represented through contemporary Irish dance. As evidenced by the sentiments expressed in these stories and quotes, these members of the Irish diaspora feel a need to draw from multiple points in order to fully express their identities. This is reflected in the thematic elements discussed previously. As shown, the themes explored by these choreographers neither remain completely true to the tradition of expressing Irish themes and movement specifically, nor do they completely abandon this tradition. Instead, they choose to work somewhere in between, both exploring the tradition by remaining thematically linked to Irish dance practices with some departures from the conventions, and moving away from this tradition by creating pieces that use Irish dance vocabulary to express non-Irish themes. Therefore, these themes represent the desire to retain the cultural identity of heritage, while reflecting the hybridity of a diasporic identity through dance.

CHAPTER SEVEN. DANCE PRACTICE AND INSTRUCTION

In addition to choreographic themes and structures, as well as the particular use of the body, another way in which Irish dance typically communicates information about Irish identity and cultural values is through the practices of the dance class. As Hall notes, “In the Irish cultural setting, expressive form is highly valued...everyone is encouraged to have something to contribute to an evening’s performance” (90). In this and other ways, the Irish dance class is a “process of physical, moral, social, and aesthetic education” (90). In this chapter, I will look at the education that students and dancers receive through the class and rehearsal processes with Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr. Since Dunne primarily creates solo work, and I did not have the opportunity to observe his rehearsal process, I will focus specifically on his classes. I will also draw from my own teaching experiences in Irish dance.

While it is clear that both Dunne and Carr have allowed their training in both Irish dance and contemporary dance to inform their choreographic work in various ways, these influences may be less obvious in how they approach teaching. Both teach or have taught contemporary dance forms and Irish dance. I am interested, then, in how teaching practices are influenced by training in another dance form.

Before looking at the dance teaching practices of contemporary Irish dance, it is necessary to establish the tradition from which these practitioners base their work. In the An Coimisiun structure, students attend schools which must have at least one certified teacher associated with them. Most often, students study in an Irish dance school, although particularly with the increased popularity of Irish dance in the past two decades, it has become more common for mainstream dance studios to offer Irish dance classes. However, currently the majority of students, especially students who participate in competition, attend an Irish dance school run by a teacher who has been certified by An Coimisiun.

Due to the focus on competition, Irish dance classes in North America, Ireland, and the UK are often structured according to which level a dancer competes in rather than by student age. In the US, these levels are Beginner, Advanced Beginner, Novice, Prizewinner, Preliminary Champion, and Open Champion. As such, although many students may be of similar ages, it is not unusual to have a wide range of age and abilities within the same class. Because of this,

students often work together and help teach one another. For example, a student who has recently moved up from the Advanced Beginner level to the Novice level would share a class with students who may have been in the Novice level for several months or a year. In this case, it would not be unusual for those students who have been in the class longer to help teach students new steps. Therefore, the environment is often collaborative in terms of the learning process. In terms of the atmosphere, as Hall notes, in a typical Irish dance class students are expected to be focused and work hard, but, “the atmosphere is also relaxed and social” (84). The structure of a typical Irish dance class focuses first on light shoe dances, then on hard shoe dances. Sometimes a warm-up and drills are included at the beginning, depending on the level and length of the class.

In contrast to the An Coimisiun structure, contemporary Irish dance teachers are not required to adhere to any particular standard. Although Dunne is certified with An Coimisiun, since he is not specifically teaching students for competition, a lack of certification would not matter in the way it does for the typical Irish dance school. Therefore, there is more freedom for teachers to create their own class structure and direct their teaching towards issues that they think are important, rather than which techniques will help students win in competition.

Dunne's website describes his classes as follows: “Classes in traditional dance have a strong focus on musicality, finding a sense of flow in movement and rhythm, and an emphasis on losing tension in the upper body. Recently Colin has also begun teaching a separate release based class which forms the basis of his ongoing creative work” (“Masterclasses” par. 3). Dunne's classes have a slightly different focus than the typical Irish dance class. With the exception of musicality, the other descriptive words in this explanation of Dunne's traditional dance classes are not words that one would typically here in the description of an Irish dance class. Finding a “sense of flow” and the emphasis on the loss of tension are likely a result of Dunne's training in contemporary dance. It is also unique that Dunne offers classes in release technique as the majority of Irish dance teachers do not teach other forms of movement.

When I took Dunne's masterclass at Blas, I was very aware of the difference in the focus of his teaching from that which I am accustomed. As mentioned in the fieldwork chapter, Dunne's primary concern was helping students to soften their knees, release tension in the body, and have accurate rhythm. In particular, I was struck by a correction he gave me at one point

when my rhythm was off on a step. He told me that softening my knees would fix my rhythm, which it did. This connection between the release of tension and rhythmic accuracy was really interesting to me, as these are two aspects of my training that have always remained separate. This approach represents an integration of contemporary dance's focus on somatics and efficiency of movement, with the importance of rhythm in Irish dance training.

When asked how, and whether, training in contemporary dance has influenced the way he teaches Irish dance, Dunne states that some of the way he teaches stems from his work in the Contemporary Dance MA at the University of Limerick:

Doing the MA in Contemporary Dance, which is a completely almost shocking experience for me to come from Irish dance, where it's a little more taught from the outside. And it's all a series of directions. Then, just learning this movement in contemporary dance, and also working in areas of somatics and body-mind centering and really, you know, I didn't know where my kidneys were, do you know what I mean, before the course. So really kind of going through that process... And you know, part of the time when I was kind of doing it, I was like, God, this is really boring. How is this relevant? But it all just kind of stayed in (Personal interview).

He also states that his teaching changed when, around the same time, he began teaching in locations outside of Ireland and the diaspora, after Irish dance became more popular worldwide:

I felt quite strongly that, you know, a lot of these people were learning from videos and they were just assuming the stance. They had no sense of the rhythm. And then other people were going out there and teaching, oh, you know, to make it fun for them. Let's learn the Riverdance! And kind of give them the steps with no sense of timing...I suppose I just had the holistic tools to be able to say, I mean, I would say myself, Jesus, I don't know that I've ever taught a shuffle hop back from scratch. So, why is that out of time (Personal interview)?

Therefore, the combination of studying contemporary dance, and beginning to teach Irish dance outside of its usual cultural setting, have primarily contributed to Colin's approach to teaching.

Finally, Darrah Carr's teaching approach is unique in that she has offered classes specifically in her blended style of Irish and modern dance, which she calls ModERIN. Although

the classes are not currently taught, Carr plans to offer them again in the future (Personal interview 2013). The description of the class on the New York City-based Irish Arts Center website, states, “Following a contemporary dance warm-up, students will learn to incorporate modern dance principles, such as arm gestures, torso articulation, and level changes, within a solid base of Irish dance footwork” (“ModERIN Dance Classes” par. 4). Carr intentionally teaches classes that draw from both contemporary and traditional places, and advertises them as such, which is also very unusual in the genre of Irish dance. The purpose of the ModERIN classes, Carr says, is to focus primarily on performance, integrating Irish dance footwork with the use of the upper body, “always with an eye towards choreography, not competition” (Personal Interview 2013). In this way, she differentiates these classes from a typical Irish dance class, not only because of the inclusion of modern elements, but also because of the ultimate goal for dancers to learn choreography and performance skill, and not to compete. This difference is extremely important because the primary focus of most Irish dance schools is competition, and it is rare to find students who remain in the dance form and do not compete.

Darrah Carr also offers specific Irish dance classes that are not stylistically blended. She states that these classes, though focused more specifically on Irish dance technique, are also influenced by her training in other dance forms, and university dance programs:

Even in sort of the pure Irish dance lessons, we also did a good warm-up. It was focused more on feet and legs and ankles. That was a really important part and a cool down stretch. And I think just also figuring out how to teach, just being aware of pedagogy that students learn in different ways...you know, trying to learn it through the rhythm, trying to use imagery, trying to think about students that learn in different ways and not just have it be rote, strict imitation (Personal interview 2013).

With my own experience as a teacher, it is difficult to say how my teaching would be different if I did not have the influence of ballet, modern, and other dance forms, because I trained in these genres before I began my Irish dance training. However, I have noticed significant differences in the way that I approach teaching Irish dance from teaching methods of my teachers.

As has been referenced already, in general, there is often very little focus in Irish dance classes on body awareness or teaching the mechanics of movement. The focus tends to lie more on what needs to happen – turn out, still upper body, etc. - rather than the most efficient way to make these things happen. This is the primary way in which I differ in my approach. I have made a concerted effort as a teacher to think about body awareness, and attempt to teach my students how to think about their movement in terms of initiation and efficiency. I have drawn from methods I have learned in other dance classes, in particular floor barre and yoga. I also focus on teaching students to relax their upper bodies, to avoid tension.

In terms of class structure and atmosphere, I tend to keep the structure that I am used to in an Irish dance class. I always begin with a warm-up, then soft shoe drills, soft shoe steps, hard shoe drills, and hard shoe steps. I also try to create an atmosphere that is “social and relaxed” as Hall describes.

Much in the same way that the incorporation of traditional and contemporary themes and structures exemplifies the hybridization of modern Irish identity, the practices in the contemporary Irish dance classroom also incorporate a combination of the traditional and the contemporary. If then, as Hall posits, the Irish dance classroom is a site of both social and aesthetic education, Dunne and Carr both provide an education which values hybridity and the exploration of tradition in a new and changing way.

CHAPTER EIGHT. PLACE

A major aspect of the development of contemporary Irish dance concerns the place choreographers develop and position their work, both in terms of geographic location and in terms of where their dances are practiced and performed. As previously mentioned, both Darrah Carr and Colin Dunne are descendants of the Irish diaspora, born, raised, and trained outside of Ireland. As suggested in Chapter Six, it is likely that their place as people of Irish heritage outside of Ireland is reflected in the hybridity of their choreography and dance practices.

Mark Howard, the founder of Trinity Irish Dance in Chicago, references the importance of place in the development of Irish dance in the United States in particular, saying:

I think it only could have happened here, because you take the traditional steps and you put them with *my* company, in this urban setting of Chicago, and all the stimuli – everything from MTV and all the dance companies we see – we stood backing a different tradition, carving a new tradition, if you will, and that's what this progressive Irish dance thing is...There is a dance structure in the United States, there are non-profit dance companies, and it's been going on for a long time. So I just think that we were plugged into that, and that would influence things and one thing led to another (Moloney et al, “Impact of *Riverdance*” 93).

Although, as previously mentioned, *Riverdance* is widely recognized as a turning point that brought Irish dance to a global stage and created an atmosphere that allowed the dance form to be viewed as a performing art rather than just a competitive skill, Howard's comments suggest the view that Irish dance in the United States was heading in that direction before *Riverdance* specifically because of the geographic location and the exposure that dancers had to other influences. He also mentions the fact that the two original lead dancers of *Riverdance*, Jean Butler and Michael Flatley, were both Irish-American and that *Riverdance* “couldn't have happened unless Jean and Michael were from [the United States]” because the creation of the show depended on the participation of dancers who had the exposure to Irish dance as performance and outside influences that Irish-Americans presumably had (Moloney et al, “Impact of *Riverdance*” 93).

As previously noted, the notion of hyphenated identities is particularly relevant to members of the Irish diaspora because their identities are often seen as necessarily fractured or hybrid, both Irish and something else, be it American, British, or Australian. In Frank McCourt's "Between Ireland and America," the author details his feelings of confusion on being an Irishman in America. "I needed to feel comfortable somewhere," he says, "because I didn't know for a long time where I belonged" (43). This is the essential tension of the hyphenated identity – the feeling of belonging to more than one category, which can lead to confusion about where to place yourself. The practice of hybridity in contemporary Irish dance in some ways seeks to reconcile this tension of place, by merging the aspects of identity into one.

In my interview with him, Sean Curran referenced the influence of the history of Irish immigrants to the United States on his choreography. Of "On the Six," which combines Irish dance vocabulary with swing dance music, he said:

It was also a bit nostalgic because, you know, in the 40's and 50's is when our parents and grandparents were coming to this country and that mated with the kind of dancing that they do. I fantasize that's what they were doing at ceilis. Not just the Siege of Ennis, but dancing to Benny Goodman or something like that. So we dedicated it to our parents and grandparents who had immigrated.

This piece, then, references hybridity as an occurrence that is specifically related to immigration and the changes that might have happened when the Irish came from Ireland to the United States, and other places.

My concerns about dancing as an Irish-American at the Great Famine Memorial, as discussed in Chapter Four, highlight the significance of place for members of the Irish diaspora in a different way. While in the United States, I experience little anxiety about identifying myself as Irish or Irish-American, but when I place myself in Ireland, concerns about the perceived authenticity of these claims arise. In this instance, then, my choreographic choices were directly influenced by place. In this geographic context, Irish dance also becomes a means of asserting my identity by performing Irishness through dance.

Conversely, when discussing the connection between Irish dance and Irish identity, Niall O'Leary stated, "You know, it's not called Irish dancing in Ireland. It's called dancing. My whole experience living in Ireland was all Irish" (Personal interview). I do not mean to suggest that the

Irish in Ireland are homogenous or lack multi-faceted identities, and O’Leary went on to point out later that Ireland is not a monocultural society, having experienced immigration from other parts of the world in recent years in particular. It is also worth noting that there is, of course, contemporary Irish dance work being done in Ireland that blends traditional and contemporary styles as well. The issue of multi-faceted identity and the blending of Irish dance with other types of dance reflect changes in Irish identity both in the diaspora and in Ireland.

In addition to the geographic location of where dances are created, the question of place also comes into play in terms of where contemporary Irish dance is performed and practiced. Dunne comments that, “I think the best place for [step dancing] is in the pub. Putting it into the theatre and performance is a tricky thing, like lots of forms of dance” (Personal interview). This comment is particularly interesting to me because of my experiences dancing in the pub in Dublin. Although I enjoy performing and choreographing Irish dance, since my first experiences dancing at pubs in Ireland, I have always felt most at home and happy dancing in those situations. Dunne's comment brings to light this location of dancing as being a place where Irish dance is most “at home” because of its history as a social dance practice.

Brigid Gillis also brought up the similarities between her performance experiences with Darrah Carr's company and Irish social dance practices:

It's much more communal what we do, and how we relate as a group is much more reminiscent of social dance rather than competing. And when we perform, we're usually all on stage together, just banging it out, yelling and hooting and hollering, because that's what Irish dance is. And then, people in the audience interact with us and they'll clap with us, and that's completely true to how it is in Ireland when people have sessions and stuff.

Interestingly, when competitive Irish dance schools do perform, usually during the St. Patrick's Day season, these performances often take place at the pub. So although Gillis's comment establishes competition and social dance as two separate entities, dancing at a session and performance in the context of competitive dance schools, are often located in the same space.

The location of the pub is also important in the modern development of traditional Irish music. As musician Mick Moloney notes, “For every serious Irish traditional musician, the group musical 'session' is a home base – a kind of regenerating chamber to which one returns for

grounding and inspiration” (126). Although the same claim is not usually made for Irish dance, because of its link to traditional music and its history as a social dance form, the pub might be considered an informal home for traditional dance. As noted in Chapter Three, during the week I spent at Blas, every evening was spent in the pub where both the musicians and the dancers socialized and performed regularly (Fieldnotes 6/24/13-6/28/13). This importance of pub sessions as both a social activity and informal training cannot be overstated.

Because of the history as a social and competitive dance form, as Dunne notes, moving Irish dance to a performance context has necessitated some changes. In this way, the change in place in terms of performance location has influenced contemporary Irish dance much in the same way as geographic location. Choreographers like Colin Dunne and Darrah Carr are both trained in choreographic methods based in concert dance forms, rather than social or competitive forms. The translation of Irish dance to the stage, then, automatically places it in a contemporary context. Dunne, for example, talks a lot about his work having more to do with changing the context in which the tradition is placed rather than actually changing the dance vocabulary that he is working with (Personal interview). The implication then, is that the place inherently changes the tradition. The placement of traditional dance into a theatrical context, which in part arises from the practice of Irish dance in the places of the diaspora, again becomes a way of merging tradition and contemporary dance practices.

CHAPTER NINE. ISSUES OF AUTHENTICITY

Throughout my fieldwork, the issue of authenticity, or as it was more often framed “tradition,” came up multiple times. In contrast to competitive dance, where the inclusion of new steps from outside dance forms is often met with skepticism and accusations of being outside of the accepted tradition, contemporary Irish dance choreographers intentionally work outside of the accepted tradition and structure of competitive dance. Both Dunne and Carr come from the competitive dance system, having trained with An Coimisiun teachers and competed up to the World Championship level. Both choreographers now work in intentionally blended forms, regularly drawing from movement vocabulary and choreographic structures both within and outside of the Irish dance tradition. However, rather than resulting in concerns about inauthenticity similar to those found in competitive Irish dance, these dancers suggest that contemporary use of Irish dance is in fact expressing Irish identity more authentically than the competitive form.

This claim of a more authentic Irish dance practice comes down to a few different points. The first is the way in which contemporary Irish dance shifts the focus away from competition. As dancer Brigid Gillis states:

In what I knew as traditional Irish, the competitions got so far away from the traditional aspect of it and it wasn't until I moved into a more contemporary approach to it that...the integrity of it was still intact. So dancing with Darrah is actually the first time in a long time that I've felt this, really, connection to my heritage through the dance. 'Cause really before it was more competition focused.

Dancer Laura Neese echoed this sentiment, saying that Darrah's style of contemporary fusion was more rooted in Irish culture, music, and stories, while competitive dance has become more focused on technique and athleticism, thus losing the cultural connection. O'Leary also stated that the competitive world often lacks the cultural aspect because of not only the focus on technique and form, but also because of the previously referenced increase in involvement of dancers who have no cultural connection to Ireland and do not display any interest in creating one. Therefore, although Carr is blending Irish dance with other dance forms, and thus making dance that some within the competitive Irish dance world may see as inauthentic, her dancers

feel they are performing dance that has a closer relationship with their cultural heritage, because the focus is on expressing the tradition rather than technique. Carr does draw from a number of cultural sources, such as Irish poetry, Irish music, and traditional practices such as keening, and so the association with Irish identity goes beyond the dance vocabulary itself (Personal interview 2013).

Similarly, Colin Dunne, when discussing his relationship to traditional dance states that:

It was a slow process of letting go of [concerns about staying true to the tradition]. And I just maybe see it now a little more in terms of what it is. So it's movement. Some of it is sound related. It's stepping and earthy and it's gestural, and it's a moving body. And so they're the things you're working with and you construct with that. You construct sound, you compose movement. And I'm not concerned whether that's traditional anymore. My concern is more that it feels authentic to me and that I feel connected to it. But in a funny kind of a way then, a little bit like [fiddler] Martin [Hays], perhaps, because I'm connecting with it at a deeper level, I think it has something that is deeply rooted to the tradition (Personal interview).

Again, there is an idea here that by leaving behind the traditional structure, the dance does not become less traditional, but rather that it becomes more traditional. In a sense, what these dancers are saying is similar to what is sometimes expressed by saying that sean nos is more authentic than competitive dance. However, here there is a difference, particularly with Dunne's comments, in that he is not making a statement about the authentic Irishness of his dancing. He is not saying that his work "deeply rooted to the tradition" because it is untainted by globalization or colonization or the construction of the Gaelic League, but rather simply because it is more authentic to him.

In this there is something that is interesting about the notion of the authentic self and Irishness. In a way perhaps this is linked to Judith Butler's discussion of the self in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. She says that, "the 'I' can tell neither the story of its own emergence nor the conditions of its own possibility without bearing witness to the state of affairs to which one could not have been present, which are prior to one's own emergence as a subject..." (37). By

remaining connected to the tradition of Irish dance through movement vocabulary, music, and sometimes choreographic structures, both Dunne and Carr establish a connection to the identity associated with this tradition. However, by stating that a dance which is more authentic to himself is then more deeply rooted to the tradition, Dunne brings the focus of the tradition to individual identity moreso than an assumed shared Irish identity. In this way he avoids asserting Irish identity as a homogenous entity and suggests the possibility for a multiplicity of identities within Irishness. This possibility is also supported in Carr's work, which draws from many places, and intentionally seeks to allow the voices of the dancers to be heard. Finally, it can be seen in my choreography, particularly a work such as "Try, Try Again" which incorporates Irish dance and music into a narrative drawn from my own personal experience, positioning Irishness as one of many parts of my identity.

Conclusion

While in the early twentieth century, the Gaelic League and An Coimisiun sought to use dance as a means of establishing Irishness as a common, shared identity, contemporary Irish dance seeks to negotiate this identity within a world in which the Irish diaspora and the modernization of Ireland have made old notions of authentic Irish identity difficult for modern Irish people to relate to. Although I entered into this project suspecting that the hyphenated identities of modern Irish culture were at the heart of the emergence of contemporary Irish dance, the idea that contemporary dance might be considered "more authentic" was an unexpected but important discovery. This concept, which again emerged several times throughout the fieldwork process, speaks to the importance of individual identity as the cornerstone of modern Irish identity. Although community and shared culture are certainly important in the formation of identity, the shift away from cultural practices constructed by organizations to define what "Irishness" is seems indicative of the reformation of postcolonial Irish identity. While the structure of Irish dance, and other cultural practices in Ireland such as music or Gaelic sports, were established as a reaction to colonization and as a means of reclaiming a sense of national identity, contemporary Irish dance refocuses this goal and works towards establishing an identity that is concerned only with authenticity of culture and self, rather than establishing identity that is specifically a reaction to colonial powers.

As Niall O'Leary says: "It's just another way of saying that Irish dancing is not about Irish identity necessarily. I suppose maybe you could say it's about being Irish in a broader context, you know? And the whole idea of a monocultural society such as existed in Ireland when I was growing up, is very hard to find anymore" (Personal interview). Contemporary Irish dance, then, reflects Irishness as an identity that has been changed and influenced by diaspora and globalization. As a result, it is an identity that is hybrid and multi-faceted, rather than homogenous.

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APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY

Some Irish dance terminology varies by school. The names used here are those I learned as a student at the Martin Percival School of Irish Dance in Denver, Colorado. In some cases, I have noted alternative terminology, but there are undoubtedly others I have missed or do not know about.

An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha – The Irish Dancing Commission, formed in 1929 by the Gaelic League to regulate Irish step dance schools and competitions. The Commission administers exams for teachers (TCRGs) and adjudicators (ADCRGs). Students must be registered with a certified teach in order to participate in An Coimisiun competitions.

Ceili – A social gathering involving traditional music and dance. The group dances performed at competition, which come from the social dances, are also called ceili dances.

Click - A hard shoe movement where the dancer jumps and allows the heels of the hard shoe to connect, producing a “click” sound. There are various versions of the click (front clicks, and back clicks) differentiated primarily by where the feet are placed in space during the click.

Cut - A movement found in both soft and hard shoe dances where the dancer lifts one foot to the opposite hip while keeping one knee crossed in front of the other.

Feis – The Irish word for festival, it is the term used for Irish dance competitions. The plural is feiseanna.

Hard shoes - Hard shoes, also known as jig shoes or heavy shoes, are shoes with a fiberglass heel and tip used to create audible rhythm through footwork. Dances performed in these shoes are known as hard shoe dances.

Hop-2-3 - One of the core movements of soft shoe dances, a hop-2-3 consists of a hop on one foot while bringing the other foot up in the back, then bringing the back foot in front and finishing with three steps.

Hornpipe – A hard shoe dance. Hornpipe tunes are in 2/4 or 4/4 time.

Leap-2-3 - Usually a soft shoe movement, although sometimes incorporated in hard shoe dances, a leap-2-3 begins with the dancer leaping into the air with one leg extended to the front and the other bent at the knee, with the lower leg held close to the body. The dancer lands first on the straight leg and then the bent.

Oireachtas – Annual regional championships in Irish dance where dancers can qualify to attend the World Championships.

Pinwheel - A common ceili dance formation where four dancers join their right hands in the middle of a circle, dance four bars clockwise, then turn and join left hands and dance four bars counter clockwise.

Point - A movement where the dancer places a point foot on the floor in front of their body.

Reel – A dance set to a tune of the same name in 4/4 time. A reel is performed as a solo soft shoe dance in competition, and many ceili dances are also reels. A treble reel is a solo hard shoe reel dance.

Rock - A movement found in both soft and hard shoe dancers where the dancer begins standing on the balls of the feet, with ankles crossed, then rocks from one side to the other.

Sean nos – Literally meaning “old style,” sean nos refers to the old traditional style of singing and dancing in Ireland. Sean nos dance is a more improvisational and, generally more informal, style of dance than the competition step dance style.

Set dancing – A traditional form of social dance in Ireland. The term “set dance” is also used to refer to a solo dance performed in competition that is comprised of a step and a set, rather than the usual two to three steps.

Side sevens - One of the core movements of soft shoe dances. Side sevens begin with a hop on the left foot and six steps to the right, followed by three hop back-2-3's and six steps to the left. Sometimes also called side step or sevens.

Twist - A movement usually seen in soft shoe dances, but also present in hard shoe. A twist begins with one foot crossed in front of the other, both heels then rotate out and back in while the dancers switches the position of the feet.

Treble – A hard shoe movement similar to a “shuffle” in tap dance. It consists of the brushing of the foot forward and back. Sometimes also called “shuffle” or “rally.”

Appendix B: Interview Transcripts

These transcripts represent portions of the interviews conducted for this thesis.

Darrah Carr

9/28/12

Phone interview

KH: I was just curious about what your company is working on right now, if you have any new works in progress or anything like that.

DC: At the moment we are very excited because we have been nominated for a Bessie award, which is really great, for a piece that we premiered last year with our guest choreographer Sean Curran called "Dingle Diwali." And it was a piece of Irish dance percussion with Indian vocalization by a British Indian singer Sheila Chandra. So we're literally preparing that, re-preparing that, because we're gonna be filming this coming Monday, filming our rehearsal as part of the Bessie award ceremony, like, pre-show publicity. Our most recent thing is that we're, you know, re-hashing our piece from last year for the purpose of this video filming on Sunday. And then we're going to be having our annual season at the Irish Arts Center in mid-November and this year we're working again with guest choreographer Sean Curran, really on a piece that does...the movement for this particular piece is very contemporary, modern dance based. The music is based on the tradition of the Irish lament. So the music is truly Irish, but it's very slow, mournful, and the movement itself does not have Irish references in it, it's more purely contemporary. Often times we try to really fuse the two together in the vocabulary of the piece itself. This is kind of a departure for us in that way in that it's really, truly contemporary movement with Irish music. Yeah, so we're getting ready for that and then we'll be doing a couple of other repertory pieces on that concert in November as well. So that's what we're doing at the moment and we'll go on a Christmas tour with the Andy Cooney Band during the month of December and then we're going to be getting ready for several percussive concerts in January and also at Ailey. And then we'll have the St Patrick's Day season and we'll be all crazy.

KH: So, I also wanted to ask you a little bit about your choreographic process. It sounds like you do a lot of a different things, so I'm guessing it's probably different depending on what you're doing, but if you could just talk a little bit about how you shape your pieces and the process of doing that.

DC: I think it's largely music driven. So in other words, I find a piece of music that's inspiring to me, and that evokes certain images or a certain mood. The work is not narrative in any sense, but I like to have an emotional resonance within the piece, or perhaps like a slightly implied narrative, you know? A duet for example, maybe has a romantic feel to it or a tense feel. Like sort of a relationship implied, but never literally. So I think the music in that way can be very evocative, have an emotional resonance. I'd say first and foremost it would be music driven and that music inspires a new piece, and kind of gives an overall image or idea or concept to the piece.

The other part of the process, however, is much more technical from a physical vocabulary exploration, whereby, looking at Irish dance movements and exploring how they can be done in a range of ways. So, for example, with a different part of the body, or with a level change, or with a different kind of a partnering hold or a partnering weight sharing. And then of course from there pulling from very typical modern dance compositional principles, so theme and variation, retrograde, or, you know, from there it spills out once you have your base vocabulary established.

And I think also, more and more too, I'm interested in my dancers generating material. If they have like a structured improv to chosen music or to a chosen concept, and seeing what's generated from that and then playing with that material, teaching to each other, trying different parts together, generating through a body of shared vocabulary. Fortunately, though, my dancers have Irish dance training as well as, they all have a different kind of something else, you know? One of my dancers is heavily trained in Tae Kwan Do, another one is currently in the Graham 2

Company, and another has a very strong ballet background. So it's important to me that within my dancers' bodies themselves they have sort of two styles already, so we can then explore choreographically in rehearsal, with them generating movement as well.

And then, I think, it's not really about process, but I think when it comes thinking about an overall sort of process of putting together an evening of work, you know, a concert, I try to think of then, they have to be varied, contrasting. And I also want to include some sort of more pure Irish dance elements within the evening, as kind of a springboard for jumping off to the more fused kind of styles.

KH: What do you think are some challenges that you've had in using a "traditional" dance style in a more contemporary way, if any?

DC: I think the challenge would be figuring out who our audience is. You know, you can look at it two ways, the positive spin on that is saying, well, we build an audience by pulling from two communities, you know? An Irish dance community and a contemporary or modern dance community. And that's certainly the goal. And our hope is that truly does happen sometimes. On the other hand, though, the more challenging part of that issue is that we don't fit in in any particular community. We're sort of too accessible for really like downtown avant garde experimental contemporary dance. Although, within the Irish dance community, I think we'd be seen as being hyper experimental. So it's funny because within the contemporary community, I think we'd be seen as being very folky. You know, traditional, accessible, or whatever. I think it's all just people's perception. At the end of the day, I feel very dedicated to this particular way of working. I've been doing it for so long, really since my choreographic voice has been developing, so all those perceptions I think ultimately, on a fundamental level, don't matter. But in terms of the question, the challenge is, you know...trying to write a press release. Like, how do we write it? We have to do two different ones, you know? One for the more Irish publicity and one for the more mainstream press that highlights different aspects of the work. Because on a practical level...I think even when we do showcases for the downtown dance...we often will

come out with very upbeat Irish music, you know? The program will be much more angst-ridden or dark to round out, if you can imagine what I mean in terms of a downtown showcase type. Jumping out of the woodwork leaping and jumping all buoyant, you know, not quite in the vein of the rest of the work. And then vice versa, when we do the New York Irish Dance Festival and we're rolling around on the ground, we don't have shoes on, and we don't have regular Irish dance competitive costumes on. So you know, even figuring out where we fit in and really trying to build a bridge between those two worlds and fit in both places. And we certainly do perform in both types of environments.

And I think another challenge is within the Irish dance community, sort of fixing the perception that I don't have an Irish dance school. You know, we're not preparing for competition, we're not involved in the feis scene, my dancers are not training for competition. Granted, many of them did extremely well in competition and went through that system. I mean, I think it's great, it turns out incredibly technically gifted dancers. But that's not what we do. But because there are not many companies, like Irish dance companies, that have repertory works that do annual seasons, and that are not involved in competition, I think people, sort of the general public have a hard time grasping...you know, if they want to hire us, I always have to explain we don't have very competitive costumes and we're not going to do that style of dance. So that's just another challenge and that's just because that's the way the Irish dance community, historically has been constructed around competition.

And then also just in terms of the work. I think trying to put two things together is often times, the experiments don't work. And often times you just move on and you think, well that was an idea and that didn't work, what else can we try? It's not like we...I mean, I'm dedicated to this way of working, but I try not to have the illusion that it's always, that the experiment is always fantastic. That's certainly not the case either. Those are the challenges of fusing things, and then of course there's always the other challenges of just dance company stuff in general. How to build an audience, how to keep an audience engaged, how to find funding sources, how to juggle dancers' schedules when they're doing other dance for other companies or working other jobs.

But that's typical to any dance organization. So those are challenges on a broader scale, and we certainly face those as well.

KH: Jumping off what you said about not being a competition school and having to explain yourself more in the Irish dance world, do you feel then like you've had to kind of justify yourself in a way? Or prove that you have the experience without being in that paradigm?

DC: I think yes and no. On the one hand, I think that the very nature of the competitive Irish dance world, the fact that you cannot participate without the TCRG, and that there would be no reason to participate rather than training for the competition, so it's kind of like if you're not in that world, then you're not in that world. So I think that most of what I focus on doing with the company is performing in both, I guess, sort of general dance performance spaces and then also, say, Irish festivals, for example, which are primarily Irish music festivals and they would also have invited a local Irish dance school to perform, you know, that kind of a thing. And then also certainly for St. Patrick's Day season and for Celtic Christmas and for parties and receptions and that whole aspect of things.

So as far as validating, I mean, I think doing the TCRG is validating for the competitive Irish dance world absolutely, but I don't whether it's...since the classes that we offer are in our blended style, I think that people that are interested in that would come to us for that. They certainly wouldn't come to us for competitive training. It almost becomes like a non-issue, if that makes sense. We're not trying to be within that world, so whether we're valid or not for that world is sort of...it doesn't really matter I don't think. I think also, there is a certain amount of longevity. Like just being around for a while lends a certain amount of validity or credibility dance-wise. And I think also in today's Irish dance landscape, there are a lot of people working in different ways in Irish dance, so that it's more common I think today then, say, ten years ago. Like people, say, fusing tap and Irish or doing Irish dance flash mobs or that sort of thing. So that there are so many more performance outlets for Irish dance, so therefore that kind of, it's not really competition or *Riverdance* or nothing. I don't think that's really the paradigm anymore.

KH: Who are some other choreographers you consider your contemporaries in working in modern and Irish dance, who you maybe like or admire?

DC: We've been working with Sean Curran on several projects and he's wonderful. You know, he comes from an Irish dance background, and has a modern dance company, the Sean Curran Company. And then he's done like that hybrid for Trinity Irish Dance Company in Chicago. He's someone certainly working in a modern Irish vein who I infinitely admire. Trinity Irish Dance Company has worked with a range of styles for a long time, they are very inspirational. I think there recently have been some shows, for example, Brendan de Gaille's *Noctu*, where he's experimenting with Irish dance vocabulary. Colin Dunne's *Out of Time*. Which, to think back, I don't that I would call that sort of a fusion of modern and Irish dance, it's another way of using Irish dance. It's sort of more solo personal story, exploration. But it definitely gives another aspect of different ways people are using Irish dance, that's certainly an example.

Dance Theatre of Ireland recently did a performance where they incorporated Irish dance with some contemporary dancers. They're primarily a contemporary company, but they reached out and also did Irish dance with like African percussion. I think a group like Hammerstep, they're interested in blending Irish dance with hip hop and Irish dance with tap, that's absolutely another expression. You know, another new way of looking at the art form. Several years ago, James Divine was blending Irish dance and tap. I think he was a solo dancer, but he had a host of musicians onstage. So there are many. You know, I think a lot is happening in the Irish dance world and it's really exciting where you're looking at the form saying, well, what else can we do with this? We want to have a performance aspect to it, how else can it be used? And whether that's working with modern dance or with tap or with simply more theatrical presentations, like *Out of Time*. You know, using narrative and text and improvisation onstage and archival as he does. So, using multimedia. There's a lot going on among those who I consider my peers.

KH: What do you think is the reason for this increase in dancers working this way in the past decade or so?

DC: A number of things. I mean, I think, certainly *Riverdance* putting Irish dance really on the map, globally, and creating a professional industry for Irish dance. I think before *Riverdance*, basically, you competed and then you either quit and went to college or you opened an Irish dance school. And the shows were limited to St. Patrick's Day, parties, weddings, you know, that kind of thing. I think *Riverdance* created for the first time a broad, enormous professional performance context for Irish dance. And it was such a phenomenal success, I think largely because of the rhythm and the use of movement has really kind of a very broad appeal beyond the Irishness of the show. Or the question of whether one has to be Irish to enjoy *Riverdance*, you know, it has been enjoyed literally around the world. And I think largely it's the rhythm people are attracted to and the movement. And I think it's only natural that for a long time, there were a lot of *Riverdance* spin offs, and that are still going and still touring. And certainly *Riverdance* itself is still touring. I think at a certain point though, people start saying, okay, well, we don't want to sort of spin off or imitate *Riverdance* all the time, what else can we do with this art form? And I think people realized that it could be a professional performance form and if that's the case, then, there have to be other ideas, not just all these spin offs. Although it was a very successful production, we don't need to keep seeing a copy. What else can we do with it? Where else can it go? So I think it's really a very natural progression. It makes a lot of sense. Plus you have all these incredibly talented technically trained dancers from the competitive circuit that went into the shows and have come out and are still eager to perform and explore what else can be done with the art form.

KH: Do you ever feel kind of restricted by the ModERIN title? Like, do you ever feel like you would like to create something that's just modern without that link?

DC: Good question. Not at this point. I think that I'm still so focused on building the name brand aspect and being associated with that idea and presenting that idea fully in the work that no, I

don't at this point. I mean, sure, I think down the road maybe, you know? I can certainly do other, you know, create a purely modern dance piece to non-Irish music at any time. There's no one saying to me that I can't other than myself. So it's kind of like...it's my own self restriction, it's a self-imposed restriction. I think for the time being anyway, it's been a very positive title and name and trademark for building my company. And for helping to explain and understand what it is that we do. So I think at this point, the benefits of, you know, trying to be faithful to that moniker far outweigh any artistic restriction. Though certainly if I start to feel artistically restricted, then it's totally up to me to recognize that I feel that way. The dancers I work with as well, I assume enjoy working in this vein. I hope they do. You know, I think if I wanted to go and explore, you know, do like a hip hop piece for example, then I'd have to work with other dancers. But I also don't have hip hop training, so I'd have to go...you know, it would be an entirely new sort of rebirth and I don't see that as really happening. I really like working in this vein.

The reason I started this is I felt very much like it was a reconciliation of the two aspects of my training. That just made sense for me, and it made sense to me, well why do we have this...I mean, I actually felt...I think that MODERIN, to me anyways, is very freeing. You know, I can pull from Irish and I can pull from modern. Or like with Sean's piece, we can do a truly modern dance piece to Irish music. Or a percussive piece to Indian music. Whereas, I think I would feel much more restricted if I was only working in Irish dance. Never moving my arms and, you know, never changing levels and never partnering. I think, that's...conversely, personally I think that Irish dance really benefits modern dance choreography. Like the structures of Irish dance are beneficial. And I think so much of what I see in modern dance is way too long and it doesn't have a rhythmic base and it doesn't have sort of a structure on it. It can be very amorphous. You know, which certainly can be an aesthetic choice, of course. But for me personally, I like things to have more of a structure on them. So Irish dance is very useful in that regard. So actually, I find it...I see it as being very open and broad. I don't think, at this point anyway, it would make sense for me to go pursue a new form myself. That's not to say that I couldn't collaborate with a flamenco dancer or a tap dancer or, you know, a style that I'm not trained in, certainly. But that

would really be a collaboration then, you know. Two choreographers working together. It wouldn't be like my own choreography.

KH: I think I just have really one more question. I believe when you talked before...was your MFA, did you do this sort of ModERIN fusion type stuff for that?

DC: I think it was my undergrad, I was interested in exploring, like I first started exploring things was when I did an undergrad thesis that was, that was written and then also performative. And at that point, I did. I was trying to do...I wouldn't have called it ModERIN at the time though. That moniker came much later. I did an Irish dance piece and I had an improvisational aspect where I was blindfolded, kind of like authentic movement. And looking back on it now, I can see sort of the roots of what I'm currently doing.

And in my MFA I think I probably explored that more. That idea. Like, reconciling two aspects of my training was in my MFA work. But, in my MFA program, I was working primarily with modern trained dancers. Actually, almost exclusively with modern trained dancers. And I did that, and I was really much more focused on sort of the modern dance. But those were much more like, contemporary movement or modern movement to Irish music. And then maybe in the last like 5ish years, I switched gears and I started working today in the company with people whose primary training...maybe not primary, but people who are all trained in Irish dance to some degree. And there's a range of that. I mean, I have like literally world champions competitive dancers in my company as well as those who started dance and drifted away from it and went into ballet and modern exclusively and then came back to it through the company. But, that being said, everyone at least, you know, can do hard shoe. And that was the issue with the modern dancers I worked with 'cause they had no tap and they had no rhythmic training, so it was very difficult to give them rhythmic training. Really difficult. So, what's been refreshing about working the other direction is that I have these really rhythmic dancers who also have other kinds of aspects I can all mix up in there, you know? Some modern, some ballet, some jazz, you know there's all differing degrees of all of the different things. It's much easier, because

I think that's more of a common ground to work from. And I think it's much easier to loosen up Irish dancers than it is to give modern dancers rhythm. Very, very generally. But in my experience that seems to be the case.

Colin Dunne

6/27/13

University of Limerick, Ireland

KH: How would you identify yourself as a dancer? Like, if someone asked you what type of dancer you are, what would you say?

CD: I mean what I normally say is that I come from traditional Irish dance, um...I don't have a, I mean it's never a simple answer. I come from traditional Irish dance but I'm working in another way. I wouldn't call myself a contemporary dancer. I might call myself a contemporary practitioner.

KH: Okay, yeah.

CD: Very rarely I'd call myself a traditional dancer if I just want to make it a short answer, you know? I suppose technically you could say I'm a traditional dancer who's, yeah, who is working in a different way in the way that Martin Hayes is a traditional musician but his music is really deeply traditional, and yet, it's really informed by lots of other things that I believe make it more...actually more traditional. More authentic to him, you know? I suppose definitely what I'm not and haven't been looking for is a kind of a fusion. I hate that word. Of traditional dance with a contemporary dance vocabulary. So it's not about contemporary dance vocabulary. My interest is not so much in vocabulary, I suppose, a lot of my interest is in the context in which you place your dance and yourself. And this sort of maybe collaborations that you work on and...or the concepts or the ideas that you're working with. But I would still really use a lot of the traditional dance vocabulary to see those ideas through.

KH: So jumping off what you just said about Martin Hayes about his work being more traditional or more authentic because he's drawing from other places, do you feel that way about yourself and what you do?

CD: Well, I suppose...I mean what I find with Martin's music is that even though it's deeply traditional and he's deeply rooted in that tradition, I'm not sure why, but when I hear it, I don't hear it as traditional music. I just hear it as really beautiful, amazing music. 'Cause sometimes I hear traditional music and it just makes me kind of back off a little bit, you know? Since Martin's music is so personal to him, and just so experiential...I experience it as something else other than traditional music and yet it is deeply traditional, do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

CD: But I think the reason why his music is deeply traditional is because he's...he's played a lot of other kinds of music and brought that in but not in a way that's kind of slapped together. So, it's not mixing jazz with Irish dance, or mixing other kind of instruments with his music. I don't know, I think it just made him a better player. I think those other techniques that he's learned have made him more personally deeply rooted to his tradition. Do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

CD: So it's a deeply personal thing rather than...it's not like, yeah I'm gonna take a bit of traditional music and add and add and add, you know? In some ways, as someone who comes from the traditional world, he'd be a little bit of a role model for me in terms of...so I'm obviously based in traditional dance. When people see me, they see a traditional dancer, but I'd love it if they just didn't. If their only experience of it was that it wasn't just...I'd like it so that their experience is that it's not just only seeing traditional Irish dance. Do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah.

CD: And that has a lot to with where you place your dance and the context or the concept that you're working with. So I'm kind of going around in circles a little bit.

KH: That's fine.

CD: In a way...to a large extent I've let go of my own need to satisfy kind of maybe the other voices of what I think, the other voices in my head that might be saying, "Well, that's not traditional. Or this is traditional, that's not traditional." And that's maybe just because I'm 45. It was a slow process of letting go of that. And that I just maybe see it now a little more in terms of what it is. So it's movement. Some of it is sound related. It's stepping and earthy and it's gestural, and it's a moving body. And so they're the things you're working with and you construct with that. You construct sound, you compose movement. And I'm not concerned whether that's traditional anymore. My concern is more that it feels authentic to me and that I feel connected to it. But in a funny kind of a way then, a little bit like Martin, perhaps, because I'm connecting with at a deeper level, I think it has something that is deeply rooted to the tradition. Not in a really obvious way, but maybe, you know, in *Out of Time*, people comment about the way that I'm moving now is quite related to the archival footage of people in the '30's. But people in the competitive world would say that what I'm doing is not traditional Irish dance at all.

KH: Right.

CD: But then, they have a pretty narrow view of what it is anyway, so...

KH: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So, I had read an interview where you said that the idea of "going back" was really driving the creation of *Out of Time*. Is that something that you just sort of found during the process, or...?

CD: Going back...?

KH: Like that link between...the link between yourself and like the old dancers.

CD: Ok. Yeah, I mean I think I was working with different kind of, I was working in different areas. So I was working with sound technology from about 2004. Working with microphones and working with software programs that can layer those sounds and kind of, you know, use delays and shifts of pitch and build sound scores really. And then I was working with movement in very, that again was coming from the traditional dance vocabulary but had a different physical

quality. It was much more released, less held. I suppose a bit deconstructed in some kind of way. I was also working with text. And when I decided that I was, when I started thinking about making a show, I felt that that stuff with sound and movement needed a context and the context would be placing that within the same space with archival footage. So, let's reflect where I am at now with the old and see how they connect. In a way that was the task of *Out of Time* was to see how, you know, where I was at then. You know, having done the MA in Contemporary Dance and working in this different way, and kind of, you know, I think it's really the films in that show that give the show its whole, I suppose, they're the protagonist in a way. They give it the dramaturgy. That was the puzzle we had to solve: what is this connection of what I'm doing now to this kind of much older way of working?

KH: I sort of have an idea of this since I took your class, but how do you think your experience with training in contemporary dance has influenced the way that you teach traditional dance?

CD: How do you think it has?

KH: I think compared to most of my experiences with Irish dance teachers, you seem to have a much more holistic approach, looking at, like, how you do something, like saying, your rhythm is off because you need to do this in your body, you know?

CD: Right.

KH: I mean, that is main thing that I saw.

CD: Yeah, that was definitely part of it was doing the MA in Contemporary Dance, which is a completely almost shocking experience for me to come from Irish dance, where they're, it's more saying, yes, it's a little more taught from the outside. And it's all a series of directions. Then, just learning this movement in contemporary dance, and also working in areas of somatics and body-mind centering and really, you know, I didn't know where my kidneys were, do you know what I mean, before the course. So really kind of going through that process, and I don't know exactly how. And you know, part of the time when I was kind of doing it, I was like, God, this is really boring. How is this relevant? But it all just kind of stayed in.

But then I think, also part of it was around the same time I started teaching in Europe, Germany, Moscow and different places where Irish dance had just started. So there, you're teaching people from the very beginning and I felt quite strongly that a lot of these people were learning from videos and they were just assuming the stance. They had no sense of the rhythm. And then other people were going out there and teaching, oh, you know, to make it fun for them. Let's learn the Riverdance! And kind of give them the steps with no sense of timing. So I was like, God, you know? So then I began teaching it from a more, I don't know, but...holistic. I suppose I just had the holistic tools to be able to say, I mean, I would say myself, Jesus, I've never, I don't know that I've ever taught a shuffle hop back from scratch. So, why is that out of time? And actually, this is what I do, so, yeah, so it was quite a long, you know, over a period of 2 or 3 years, I was noticing that my teaching was really changing, or, I was having to become more articulate, or I was trying to find the vocabulary in order to make people understand what it was. And I was also trying to find the vocabulary and the mechanics of it so I could understand it in a way, you know? I never really thought about it, you know? Because if someone's out of time, you say, "you're out of time! Listen!" Well, actually, you know, there's a way to fix it. And there's a way I think listening can be taught. You can teach people to listen. Yeah, it was a mixture of both of those things, I think. And also, you know, having to do the MA and be a student and learn and realize how slow my body was to pick up, just really trying to be clear with information. Useful, helpful, positive information to people, instructions rather than just like, aaahhh!

You know, but I think people, you know, sometimes people ask me, oh, you teach a very traditional style of Irish dance. Or, is this a traditional style of dance? Or is it like a contemporary kind of style of Irish dance? It's like, it's just dance. I think I teach it musically. Traditional or contemporary doesn't really come into it, I'm just teaching the technique.

KH: Ok. And do you teach contemporary classes now as well?

CD: I do teach on the contemporary dance course here. I don't teach contemporary dance.

KH: Right.

CD: I mean, I teach...what do I teach? I suppose I teach...the workshops that I normally teach are in rhythm and phrasing and timing and the musical body. So it's just kind of shining a light on how even working conceptually from rhythm, rather than maybe just working only from space, or working entirely on the body parts, which tends to be a lot of the focus in contemporary dance. You know, the body and that somatic kind of approach to movement. So, this is just like, ok, we can also work from a rhythmical viewpoint. So, even the stuff, I mean, the class that I would teach would be very much based on the sort of movement that I do but without shoes. So it's very kind of weighty and released and quick and slow. Just also, getting to move a little bit. You know, to consider how they move through their feet and take their weight in their feet and shift their weight. So it'd be those principles really that I'd be teaching.

KH: Ok. Yeah. But you pretty much only do that here? You don't do masterclasses elsewhere really?

CD: No, I have, I have taught at Centre National de la Danse in Paris on their teaching training course. In France, you have to do a teacher training course to become any kind of dance teacher, so...it would largely be jazz, ballet, contemporary dancers who are doing their teachers requirement.

KH: How do you feel your work has been received by audiences?

CD: It's largely positive.

KH: Yeah?

CD: I mean, if we're talking about *Out of Time*, yeah, I mean I think, but even with *Out of Time*, I think people, people are maybe surprised by it and it maybe takes them somewhere they didn't expect to go and if they're open to it then they're able to go there, you know? I mean generally, yeah, generally audiences respond really well. I mean, you get a few comments that were, but again most of those comments would be from people in competitive Irish dance who just don't really go to the theatre and they don't really have experience at seeing anything other than the norm so, you know?

KH: Yeah. Um, so you mentioned...

CD: And it's difficult for me to talk about what the audience response is other than, yeah, it's good. You know, if I use any examples of people who thought it was better than good or people who thought it wasn't good then it's just, I don't know, you need to ask them.

KH: Yeah.

CD: Do you know what I mean?

KH: Yeah, I know, I know.

CD: I just do it and leave.

KH: Yeah.

CD: And as long as there's a general warm reception at the end then I'm kind of happy.

KH: Yeah, no, that's fair. I guess...yeah. So, who are maybe some other dance artists who you admire or find inspirational? Or just enjoy?

CD: There are lots of people who I kind of have a dialogue with. And I don't always get to see their work. Um, I mean I have an ongoing, I guess, dialogue and conversation with Jean Butler just because we both did, she did the MA as well and she's working in a very different way to me, but, you know, it's also in a similar kind of way, which is. I mean, Jean's work is probably more removed from traditional Irish dance than mine is.

Yeah, it's weird, you know, my taste in dance kind of changed as I kind of got older. I mean, I used to be in so awe of flamenco dance just because it was so related to what we did percussively and yet they just have this other vocabulary to their bodies which they could use, which I just saw as being so sensual and kind of, you know, exotic. When I see flamenco dance performance now, I just don't, I just see flamenco dance. It's rare to kind of see a flamenco artist working with flamenco dance whereby it becomes an experience of something else, do you know what I mean? But there is, I worked with a flamenco dancer last year who's quite young. I mean, she's

in her 20's. I don't know how or why but when I see her performances, and she is a flamenco dancer, I don't just experience it as flamenco. I see her relationship to it, and I see her having a conversation with it. And it's not always as it seems, and it's slightly pulled apart and quirky and a little bit eccentric, and there's just something else there that it's like, wow, what is she actually doing with this? You know?

I mean, you know, I like big scale work, and you know, big scale work and small scale. It's piece by piece really. I mean, I know Larbi and it's just beautiful, high aesthetic and everything's just beautiful and amazing, you know? You know, it's piece by piece. You respond to a piece of work rather than getting hooked on one artist I think.

KH: Right. Can you tell me a little bit about the Irish Chamber Orchestra piece that you're working on? Maybe like what the process has been?

CD: Yeah, they commissioned a composer, Linda Buckley, to write a 15 minute piece for the orchestra and myself and because I work a little bit with electronics, so does Linda in her work so that's why they kind of commissioned me. There were various conversations between myself and Linda and a few drafts of the piece and some feedback from her and you know, I'd, up until last week I'd only been hearing the piece in a kind of an electric kind of midi version with synthetic string, so...it wasn't...I don't play music either. But I also need something, I need to construct what I'm gonna do. And I would love if she could write a part, write what I'm gonna do so I don't have to make it myself. But last week we had a read through of the piece with just 5 of the 16 musicians just to get a feel of it live. So, that's the version that I'm working to now. I mean, it's a challenging piece of music. It's not Irish in any way. It's not lyrical in any way. It's quite dense. It's rhythmic, but there's lots of rhythmical things all happening at the same time, so it's just a matter of picking and choosing my root, and again, my connection to it. Seeing the parts are challenging to find. You know, I could dance all the way through it, that'd be fine, but what for? So again, trying to, I suppose, work a little bit conceptually with it. So that it just doesn't become about steps and a kind of a virtuosic thing. That will be there, but what else? What's the connection to it? But I'm finding it really challenging at the moment.

KH: Yeah. So would you say that you're, you, as a choreographer you primarily work musically? That's where your starting point usually is?

CD: No, I mean *Out of Time* I've worked very little with, I mean there was very little music in *Out of Time* until the end of the show.

KH: Yeah, I guess I should say maybe rhythmically?

CD: Yeah. I mean, musically from a rhythmical point of view. It depends, if I'm working in shoes, I mean, even in the piece with the orchestra I'll be largely improvising because I just can't bring myself to set steps in shoes anymore. 'Cause it's like, you know, would I heel with my right foot and then the left foot and then, kind of, you know. So I prefer to improvise in the way that a percussionist would, but just know what I'm improvising around and in each section, what am I improvising with and to know the music really well so that I can happily improvise. I do find sometimes that there's a conflict between what the physical response might be and what the sonic response might be. So, when you're working to music, and the physical response is kind of you know, quite spacious or something, or backwards and forwards or kind of, you know, this kind of thing. And yet the sound that that creates 'cause you've got shoes on whilst that's happening is not really the kind of thing you want to be hearing. So it's kind of...those two things can often be in conflict for me.

KH: Do you think you'll do any choreography for ensembles, or are you gonna stick mostly to solo work?

CD: I mean, I would never say no. You know I did, I had a couple of research bursaries in 2003, 2004 to start working with other Irish dancers and to share the way that I was working. And I let that go to kind of really focus on the solo work. I'm not really at home choreographing ensembles. I also really don't have any ideas for how I would work with a group of Irish dancers. When I see groups of Irish dancers choreographed, I don't really find it interesting, but I don't have anything interesting to choreograph for them either, do you know what I mean? (laughs)

KH: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah.

CD: I'm less and less interested in seeing, you know, even some group pieces which are quite formal, you know, using things in canon and all those other choreographic methods, I feel it kind of takes a little bit of the heart of the actual dance then. And then unison seems to be, we all know that, and probably a little bit tired of it, and...or even kind of using spatial choreographic methods with Irish dance, I don't know, it somehow just puts it in a weird zone for me. I think step dance is a solo thing. I mean, that's where it's naturally at sort of it's best. Where it's at home, you know? I think the best place for it is in the pub. Do you know?

KH: Yeah, absolutely.

CD: Putting it into theatre and performance is a tricky thing, like lots of forms of dance.

KH: What do you think has been, if anything, the biggest challenge for you in working in a different way?

CD: It was quite lonely.

KH: Yeah.

CD: In that I didn't always know what I was doing. Or I didn't even know what I wanted, or I didn't even know what I was looking for sometimes, you know? I knew I'd kind of reached a point with Irish dance that I didn't want to dance it like how I was dancing it anymore. I was excited about and stimulated by, I suppose contemporary dance and sort of performances that people were making not just with the language, but just in terms of performing in different ways that weren't like about being big and that were much more kind of sedate kind of performances which you as an audience member had to go into rather than just kind of sit back and take. Finding all that in myself and finding that out of the language that was traditional dance. It was all very, it was just, it was confusing and it took a long time and I had pulled myself and it apart so much at some stage that it was just, it was all on a mess on the floor and, you know, you just think, I mean, you know, you overintellectualize things. So yeah, there were times when I just didn't know what I was doing.

KH: On the flipside of that, what do you think is the biggest reward?

CD: Of what?

KH: Of working in the way that you're working, I guess?

CD: I'm much more connected now, I think to dance, not Irish dance, but to dance and performance, than I was when I was in say *Riverdance* or around that time. I feel like I have a connection with movement or dance that I had when I was a kid or something, you know? In that way that it feels authentic and kind of, yeah, physically connected to myself when I'm kind of performing in a way that I haven't been for a while, you know? So it's a...it's a very quiet best thing.

Brigid Gillis

10/11/13

New York, NY

BG: In what I knew as traditional Irish, the competitions got so far away from the traditional aspect of it and it wasn't until I moved into a more contemporary approach to it that was trying to influence the dance in Irish that, like, the integrity of it was still in tact. So dancing with Darrah is actually the first time in a long time that I've felt this, really, connection to my heritage through the dance. 'Cause really before it was more competition focused.

KH: Yeah. I totally see that.

BG: And it had more contemporary feel...

KH: Where did you compete? Where are you from?

BH: I am from Long Island and I competed with the Donny Golden School of Irish Dance. From like 4th grade, I saw *Riverdance* and I was like, yeah, ok I want to do that. So from 4th grade until about 9th grade, I danced and competed and taught at his studio for a while, and then decided to pursue modern dance in college. I kind of drifted away from Irish a bit.

KH: Ok. Yeah. So, did you start doing modern in college, or did you do it before?

BG: I started doing modern in high school. I went to a performing arts high school, so instead of doing gym and art I did theatre and dance, which was awesome. And while I was taking classes, they didn't call it modern dance at first, they were just introducing these movements that, like, they weren't quite as jazzy as I was used to. 'Cause I did ballet, jazz, tap, and acrobatics since I was 3. Then Irish dancing came in 4th grade, then I wanted to pursue dance more so as I was working with them...he had a couple of graduates from high school come in that were now

professional modern dancers. One of them right now is actually with the Taylor Company, and she would come in and set a piece on us, like, just choreograph. And then another mentor of mine, he came in, Paul Monaghan and he just, like, totally gave us a ton of modern. 'Cause he was like, he was in the city, he's been in the city dancing. And all of us were like, what is this? We're not wearing shoes for this piece? You want us to do what? You want me to pretend like I'm ripping my face off? Like, there's gonna be a mattress on stage, like, what? Completely blown away, but I fell in love with it.

KH: And are you in college right now?

BG: No, I graduated SUNY Brockport with my BFA in Dance, and I'm just going back to school now. Taking classes for PT.

KH: Anything else you've trained in?

BG: Not that I've truly trained in. I've taken classes, but nothing that I would say I'm an expert in.

KH: Yeah. When did you start working with Darrah?

BG: November 2012, I believe?

KH: And how did that I come about?

BG: I was taking a workshop and one of Darrah's company members, Laura Neese, she was in the class and she started talking to me. And then we were like, "Oh, you move really nicely." "So do you!" And then we said goodbye and then she showed up at a performance I was doing with another modern dancer up in Central Park. We re-introduced ourselves and afterwards I had to run somewhere and she was talking to the other choreographer that I worked with and she got the

information that Laura did Irish with Darrah Carr, and she said, “Oh, my dancer that you were just talking to does, used to do Irish.” So then Darrah was short a person and Laura was like, “Oh wait, I know this choreographer that has a dancer that does Irish.” So she contacted that choreographer who contacted me and linked me up with Darrah. And then I started working with her and haven’t stopped.

KH: How do you like it?

BG: It’s good. It’s a great atmosphere to work in. It’s very collaborative and very friendly and everyone’s voice is heard, which is really nice. And the movement that we do, I like it. Because it does bring in the Irish, especially when we just do strictly Irish stuff, it’s a lot of fun. It’s something that I haven’t done in a while since I started doing modern. And then when we fuse it together I think it’s really interesting and I like watching it, but it’s very hard. It’s really tough on your body and like your mind to keep up with a lot, especially when Sean sets things on us. ‘Cause he’s thinking like a modern dancer, like really full-bodied and patterning and all this greatness, but then he wants to keep that Irish, so a lot of that stuff is just like madness to try to travel or add arms on top of. So it’s definitely exhausting. But the end product is always awesome. And if I step out of the piece and watch it, I’m like, “Oh, I want to be in that.” But then when I’m in it, you’re like, oh my god, this is crazy.

KH: So, what would you say the biggest challenge is?

BG: The biggest challenge for me personally, I mean Darrah gave us the assignment the other day, we were reading a poem. We had to interpret it. So the first thing that I want to do when I’m interpreting movement is move like a modern dancer. Not many things when I’m reading it make me want to do hop-2-3’s or a bunch of twists, rocks, and cuts. So when I first interpreted it, I moved really large and as full bodied as I could, and went to the ground, and then she said, “Ok, now that you did that, make an Irish version, keeping the integrity of your phrase.” So when I was asked to do that, it wasn’t too terribly hard, ‘cause I thought, well I’m still going to go to the

floor. And when I'm up, instead of doing this big jump with my leg behind me, I'm just gonna do a double swing. Now that looks Irish. But I only inserted maybe like three moments of it. Just where it would fit. The challenge with what we're doing now when we're actually trying to not just fit pieces of Irish in but to really integrate them both, it's just really hard to remember that I'm a modern dancer and not go straight into that Irish, you know, arms by your side and... 'cause you, you can't be loosey goosey when you're Irish dancing. You have to be completely relaxed, but tense the whole time. And ironically enough I graduated feeling very confident in my dancing and these rehearsals really bring me down a couple of notches. 'Cause I'm like, I don't even look like I know how to dance half the time when we're learning this stuff. Because you have to multi-task so much when you're fusing the two together, that sometimes your body doesn't, or your mind doesn't work as quick as your body has to. So it's just really challenging mixing the two worlds and having it look nice.

KH: Yeah. You already talked about this a little bit, but can you talk about the process of making a new work for Darrah's company?

BG: Yeah. I have actually only made a work with her, this is my first experience making work. Because when I came in, my first show was a traditional Irish show. So we did, I mean we did a couple of modern and Irish mixed together, what she calls ModERIN, and it was basically, you know, traditional Irish with just arms on top that looked a bit more referential to like, ballet port de bras arms. So that wasn't too difficult to learn. But in creating this new piece for her dissertation, the process usually goes, she comes in with an idea or what she's working towards, she shares that with us in depth so we're all on the same page, and she'll give us tasks, and what she calls homework. Like she'll give us little journal entries so that we can think about what we're doing. But so far with generating movement, she has us do a lot of improvisation by ourselves. So that she can have our different qualities to influence the work. And I know that that's important to her to have as a choreographer. She likes everyone to feel like they're getting to express their own identities, which I love about her. And then, she says, oh by the way, remember we're an Irish dance company as well! So then she gives you the task of, you know,

bringing that twist 'cause Darrah Carr is ModERIN. So once she does that, we edited where we could, I think, specifically to this piece. With Irish pieces it's probably a lot different. But once you do that, she has you work it so that it makes sense in your body and you usually teach it to all of your friends, she calls everyone in the company, so everyone knows all the work. But it's challenging to maintain your personal identity but still do this Irish. Because Irish, although it's really expressive and you watch certain people and you're like, they're a great Irish dancer, and you watch others and you're like, oh, it's not all there. But it's not like, wow, look at that funky twist that that Irish dancer did. It's a very codified form, so to be individual within it is a task.

KH: Yeah. What do you hope audiences take from your performances?

BG: I would hope that they take what I take before I started doing her more, like ModERIN pieces. When I first started, my first season show was actually last November. So this only gonna be my second large company performance, but I, I enjoyed doing the movement that was introduced to me at first. But when I watched the other pieces, like Sean's piece "Dingle Diwali" that he set on us, I was obsessed and I just wanted to be in it. Like it made me want to dance, as cliché as that sounds. That's the whole point, is trying to get people to feel good and to relate, 'cause a lot of times you'll watch dance and be like, I don't get it. Or that's what people say. They just don't get it. But if you can get people to not only think about the part that they don't get it, but just have some sort of an internal reaction. You don't have to understand it, but if the dance is interesting enough and it strikes a nerve, you're gonna forget that you don't get it and you're just gonna want to know how to do that. So I hope that audiences are just mostly impressed and entertained. Like, taken out of wherever they are for a second and just enjoy it. And Irish dance is really good for that because, with some modern dance, there aren't as many parameters. You could just go out there and like be on the stage and like, that is modern! And a lot of people, like, I'll appreciate that 'cause I'm surrounded in the art. But for outside audiences, they're not gonna want to come to see another modern dance performance if they go to one and they see something completely abstract. But Irish, I always say, is just a crowd pleaser. Always. Absolutely always. So the fact that Darrah is mixing the two together I think is brilliant, because cultural dance is

always in higher demand than just modern by itself. My friends or my family have come to see Darrah's performances, they love the traditional Irish and then when it's fused with something else, it's not so abrupt. They're always like, "oh yeah, I really liked that! I saw the Irish in it," because it's still something that's pleasing to them and tricky and rhythmic so they have a reaction. But it's not so, now we're gonna do modern dance and I'm not gonna wear shoes and I'm gonna flex my feet. I'm gonna do some really weird stuff. It's a nice transition.

KH: So you said at the beginning that you feel almost like this is truer to the tradition. Can you talk a little more about that?

BG: I'm Irish, mostly Irish, and I started dancing because I saw *Riverdance*, but before I did that, my parents really wanted me to Irish dance. My mom really wanted me to. There was an Irish dancer in my class in school and I was like, "no, she's the Irish dancer." But then I went to see it, fell love with the rhythm and the power of it and decided to do it. And *Riverdance* when you see it, although it's talking about different cultures, it really gives you a background, of Irish heritage. So you get this feeling of nationalism and connection to your culture and like, ah, this is beautiful and great! So I started competing and first it was really cute. You know, I started out wearing like a little kilt and a little white shirt, and my mom would curl my hair, which is what they do in Ireland. Just, bare bones, throw on a little pleated skirt and here we go. And then after I started winning in the lower competitions and got up to preliminary, it was that first, whoa, of now you need a solo dress, you can have it made here or overseas. And, you know, you should probably go to this person overseas and it's gonna be about 1800 dollars. Oh my god. I'm the youngest of 7 kids, my parents are going to pay 1800 dollars for a competition dress for me? So they did and it was great, but all of a sudden, although I was now pretty into competition, my head started to twist and was like what does this have to do with Irish culture at all? I was young, so it wasn't this big taxing thing I was thinking about, but I did think, oh this is like a sport. So I related it to my hobby, my sport, what I competed in and I practiced now. Not to go to class and enjoy it. I did, but I went and was constantly told, keep your feet out, keep your arms down, keep your legs closer together, what are you doing? Not in like an abusive way, but it's just a very

competitive way. So I started to fall out of love with Irish dance as I got more competitive. And I would do really well in competitions without have to practice that much, 'cause I was still enjoying it. As soon as I go to open championship, which is the highest level I went to, my first feis, I got third out of like 25 girls. And I was like, yeah baby! And then, the competition within the school got really hard, 'cause other people in my age group were like, well, what was that? You didn't even practice that much. So once that started happening and then those competitive feelings crept in, I just decided that I'd rather just teach the young ones in the school 'cause they still were just completely in love with trying to move and trying to make sense of Irish in their bodies. So that's when I got more into modern. So in that respect, Irish dance I don't think is meant to be competitive in nature, 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 it's form, so then it's not as authentic. And then I guess it's harder for people to relate to their Irish culture in that respect.

Or, on the other side of it, when people see Irish dancing, they're like, oh that's Irish culture. Or if they see me and I say I'm Irish, they're like, oh do you do Irish dance? Do you wear a wig? Do you wear those big dresses? And I'm like, yeah, I used to do that but it's kind of like this skewed idea of what that culture is supposed to be linked to. On the other hand with Darrah, we don't have solo dresses that we wear, we don't even wear wigs, we just wear our own hair. We barely even curl it. If we don't have time to curl, we don't curl our hair. Sometimes we do to look pretty for a performance. But we have really simple dresses that we wear. I know that a couple of them are green in color, so it kind of relates to the Irish colors. But it's much more communal what we do, and how we relate as a group is much more reminiscent of social dance rather than competing. And when we perform, we're usually all on stage together, just like banging it out, yelling and hooting and hollering, because that's what Irish dance is. And then, people in the audience interact with us and they'll clap with us, and that's completely true to how it is in Ireland when people have sessions and stuff. But in competition, everyone gets quiet, three judges sit in front of you, you point your toe and if a girl bangs into you, you keep dancing as if nothing happened and you don't even acknowledge the other dancer. So I think what I'm doing

now is much more fulfilling and true to the form. I sound like I'm completely knocking competitive Irish. I probably wouldn't be dancing for Darrah if I didn't do that to, you know, really work on technique and know what it is. Competition definitely helps you know stylistically what Irish is about, but not, I guess, culturally how it fits in society. It doesn't really teach you that.

KH: So you feel like, sort of the social aspect and connection to other people is a lot what's missing?

BG: Yeah. I'd say so. And I think *Riverdance*, because although they did have traditional Irish steps and that's similar to how it is in competition, they kind of broke that fourth wall between the audience. So you could really feel it. It's an experience. Whereas, competitive's kind of closed off. It's like, there's a goal, and it's not including everyone, it's winning. Or it's making sure that you don't mess up.

KH: Yeah. Did you do any Irish dance between when you quit for modern and when you started dancing with Darrah?

BG: I did in junior year to senior year in college because I had to take a performance arts class or a liberal arts class but it couldn't be within my dance major. But I was like, you know what, I'm gonna take an Irish dance class. And there's this guy Eddie Murphy, I'm so in love with him, he's so great. He teaches at Brockport, and he teaches an Intro to Irish Dance class. So I thought, ok I'll take this. It's not for my dance major, it's totally valid. And I walked in and he was dancing, but he had more of a modern twist to what he was doing. Like when we were learning the steps, his feet weren't even completely out. He wasn't pushing me to over rotate in my knees or anything like that. And I remember I kind of turned my nose up just for a second. I was like, "This isn't Irish! This isn't real Irish!" And then I started working with him and realized that I was really enjoying what he was teaching, 'cause he wasn't putting so much of an emphasis of, like, the nitty gritty technique of it. It was still present, but he was focusing more on the feeling

of it, you know? And he would talk about Irish culture and tell us stories and all that. And after I did like one semester with him, he was absent a couple of times and had me teach the class. And then we just kept playing together and even when I wasn't taking his class, I would go in and just do a couple of steps with him when I had time. And for my senior year, for one of the faculty concerts, he made a duet for him and I to do. And he made my Irish dress. Like, sewed it himself, and it looked traditional. Like had a little doilie around the neck and it was very, very homey. And the two of just danced around and interacted with each other, improved on stage, messed up and laughed, like, and it was great. Then after that, when Darrah came around, or when Laura came around and said, "we need a dancer," I wasn't like, no, I'm not doing Irish. I was like, oh that's interesting. And I mentioned Darrah Carr's name to Eddie Murphy and he was like, "oh yeah, I know that name, it's a good company! She fuses modern and that would be great for you." So, he made me like Irish dance again, which then made me open to the experience of not just coming to the city and trying to be in any modern dance company, but actually using what I have to be in this company that's not only so much fun to be in but also, you know, validating the fact that I'm a professional dancer getting paid for this. And ironically, it's Irish.

KH: If you're practicing just modern or just Irish, how might having both of those things in your body might influence that? Does that make sense? Do you feel that your modern dance style, I guess, has been influenced at all by Irish or vice versa?

BG: I'd say yes. Because before I started dancing with Darrah, in Brockport we would do choreography. For the major. And I was always that dancer that doesn't really like rehearsing all that much or like creating all that much, I just love performing. Like, get me on the stage, I want to know the steps, and I want to make people be like, "yes! That girl can move and I get it!" But when I was asked to choreograph, I was like, alright I could either just mess around and try to do things that I'm seeing, or I can actually just see what happens when I listen to this music. When I actually got serious about choreographing, which was actually kind of late, it was junior, senior year, I made a piece with ten people, and I was like, alright, I'm gonna use this weird Fiona Apple music and the first thing I did was two cuts and this weird jumpy thing to the side. And

then influenced more modern into it. But, the way I wanted to move that made it look so different from the other pieces, 'cause you know how there's a style that exists in a school and everyone is doing that weird arm up in the air and look at it and point your toe? Well, what I did was really different looking, and it was very challenging for my dancers 'cause it was very reminiscent of Irish dance. So it's not all the time when I create that it's that influenced by Irish, but I do know that rhythmically and how aggressive Irish dancing is and like the execution of steps, that part is always in what I do. Even if I do something soft or something full bodied, within that, it never stays there long. There's always something that's a bit sharp, or a bit changing in rhythm or in intent, and it's usually more like Irish dance 'cause if I didn't have that, I might not have those sharp aspects. Or I might be more of a pretty dancer, instead of an aggressive bear wolf as they call me in rehearsal.

KH: (Laughs) Yeah. For sure.

BG: I think people respond to that, and I think that's why I enjoy moving like that.

KH: What about when you're doing just Irish pieces?

BG: When I'm doing just Irish pieces, my brain switches and I'm like, it's much easier for me to, like I said before when I made my modern phrase and I interjected Irish, that was easier for me. Or making a modern dance, because I'm like, I'm a modern dancer, I know how to do this. But when it's Irish, and strictly Irish, I automatically go into the mindset of I stopped competing a while ago, so I'm not that great of an Irish dancer, but if you're a great modern dancer and you have this Irish dance, you should be a freakin' phenomenal Irish dancer, because you have both aspects. You know when to breathe and not hold your breath like maybe people do in competition. But it's a really hard thing to switch in my mind. So moving in a modern way within Irish dance is harder for me. But I think that it comes out of my, when I just know when to breathe in spots and instead of going into total Irish posture and puffing out my chest, I know how to keep my alignment because of my modern dance. So a lot of the fundamentals that I

learned, Bartinieff and all of that, that really influences my Irish dance now and I'm actually a better Irish dancer now than I was when I stopped dancing when I was competing really hard. I might not have my feet out as far as they used to be because I don't have that much rotation and I know that now, but it definitely influences me. But I don't really know if there's much room to keep traditional Irish and be modern, because Irish is not modern. Unless you're trying to fuse the two.

Like the other day in rehearsal with Sean when I was doing my phrase that I made up, it had big arms, it had weird twisty hips and then I went into this big weird funky Irish jump. And he told me, you know, try to keep the arms throughout. And when you're trying to do that, if he wants wacky arms that are softer or more full bodied, your feet moving that fast under you, and trying to be really vertical, it's hard to have all this other stuff going on. But I think because I have modern dance, it's easier for me to at least try and experiment than if you asked just an Irish dancer to be like, now move your arms. They'd be like, "what?" Maybe they'd make a blade, like a blade diagonal or put them on their hips. But knowing that I have that other side, at least makes it doable. More attainable. It's still really difficult, but it helps I guess.

Darrah Carr

10/13/13

New York, NY

KH: Having watched your process a little bit, I guess, how is the process of the piece you're creating right now, is it similar to what, to how you usually work or, differences?

DC: No. Not really. So, you know, and I'm afraid you've caught us at kind of, you've caught me rather at sort of an odd time. So, this piece is virtually a hundred percent dancer generated material, which is not typically how I would work.

KH: Right.

DC: And had I been in a better place over the summer, I would have generated phrases. Then I would have more typically taught and had them then interpret. Typically I would say, the ratio of me generating material that is taught to them and them generating material is historically, it's probably been more like, maybe 50. Or it would be material that I would give them but then they would alter, more typically. And make their own work spliced or fused, or it would be concepts that I come in with that we'd then try to play with. Which you did see for example Friday over and over and over again, with the square. So the concept there was to reference Irish dance spatially, not movement vocabulary wise, but to make Laura's phrase go into a four hand reel kind of pattern. And then to kind of break that with some, we call it cleansing of the palate, like a sorbet. The eye gets a chance to relax, it's not so dense. By having more typical skip 2 3s or side sevens inserted. I've done that many, many times, that would be very typical. But the dancers themselves generating sort of long strings of movement would be less typical to how I've worked in the past. So that's a little different. But it's been really interesting, actually. And I think in some ways too, I don't know, since I've been doing this a long time, it's nice to have some kind of fresh material. And I'm fortunate in the moment the company is comprised of really capable

dancers. They have very, they have sort of a common thread, but they're also very different. So, it's interesting, the first phrases they generated were their individually styled phrases, their own kind of greatest hits. And you know we have sort of difference in the company of some that are very, Irish dance trained and others that were more like modern with some Irish dance training. So it kind of runs the gamut. So 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. So in that range too having the dancers generating material, it's been an interesting process because it's sort of matching the range of the music. Like 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 kind of tricks of the composition tool box, you know, splice it, make it on the floor, all that stuff is really what we've been working on.

KH: Yeah. One thing that I've been thinking about a lot is you know Irish dance, particularly the competitive style, how it's so constructed as a way to represent Irish identity specifically. So I've been thinking a lot about how fusion or contemporary influenced dance, what does that say about modern Irish or Irish American identity? And I don't know if you have any thoughts about your own work and how it relates to your identity as an Irish American?

DC: Well, I think it's rooted very much in my identity as being Irish-American. And the reason that I began Irish dancing was because my family was of Irish heritage. So that was a definite means, and they put me and all my sisters in Irish dancing lessons, as a means of representing our heritage. And then I really took to it and really loved it and really embraced it, and it was always, that was always kind of the rootedness of it. And I think identity wise, that my identity with Ireland, has been deepened also by my husband's family. He's one of ten. My father-in-law came from Donegal and my mother-in-law from Cavan, and they met here in New York and raised their kids in the Bronx. So he's got a huge Irish family. So, you know, whereas mine is more tangentially, more distant generationally. I did the kind of artistic expression of it as a child, competitive Irish dance. Started lessons because it was, oh well, our family has Irish

heritage and began that, but then I really looked at it for a long time as a competitive skill. I really loved it and I loved dancing, generally, you know? Whereas my husband's family has much more immediate connection to Ireland and so, through him, I've sort of come back to these issues of identity and it's been deepened with that more immediate experience. And we've spent a fair amount of time traveling there and meeting his family, many of his family are still there. And many of his siblings have married children of Irish immigrants as well, so there's kind of an extended version of, you know, my brother-in-laws parents are from Ireland, my other sister-in-law's parents are both from Ireland. So there's a lot of people around us that have the immigrant experience. So, yeah and he and I have had different experiences with identity. He literally grew up with parents from Ireland, and I grew up with generations removed but with the artistic interest in it.

And I think so far as the fusion work, for me now the work is really about looking at Irish dance and seeing what else can be done with it, taking it out of the competitive context. And I think there are wonderful things about competition. There's discipline and teamwork, all of those skills. But, I think it's also very limited, you know, why can't we move our arms? And I believe with sean nos styles and earlier forms of Irish dance, non-competitive forms, that they did move their arms. You know? And I have a lot of reservations about some of the expense of all these competitions, the focus on competitive skill sets and not on performance techniques.

So my view has always been in performance Irish dance. How can Irish dance be a performance? And, how can it be a performance, you know, obviously there was the performance, *Riverdance*, the performance to end all performances. But must it really do that? *Riverdance*, in many ways, opening a whole new era of Irish dance, in which people are looking at it more as an art form as opposed to a competitive sport. And that is so much more mainstream now. I think many dancers who are in the major shows experienced the idea of Irish dance as a performing culture, as an art form, and are interested in continuing to explore that. My question is always, the shows are amazing, they opened doors for so many people, they employed 1500 Irish dancers, people in Japan now know what Irish dancing is, you know? I mean, it's incredible what happened. But

my question is always, for many years after *Riverdance* there was always the recycling of that image. And we do that straight line hard shoe line up at the end of many of our shows or at the beginning, or at some point 'cause people love to see that and they assume that's what it is. But that shouldn't be all that there is. So I think my interest now in fusing things really lies with a sense of experimenting with Irish dance and saying, well what else can be done with this vocabulary that is so rich, that does take a lot of technical skill as we've seen in competition. You know, it takes incredible skill. And I mean, the dancers I'm working with today are doing things that I'd never even heard of when I was competing in the 80's. You know, it's crazy. Bicycles were coming in when I was leaving, you know?

So I guess my interest is, what else can be done with this form? Do we always have to recycle this image of *Riverdance* over and over again? And what else can we do? And part of that also lies in my own training growing up. I competed in Irish dance and enjoyed it, and then I also studied ballet and was in a regional semi-professional company in Toledo. And we worked with the big Toledo Symphony and performed at the main theatre in town. So for me it was a very professional undertaking. And so through that, then there was this whole performance aspect that I just adored. I loved it! And I think ultimately the older I got, I enjoyed that more and more than I enjoyed competing. And also I was growing up in Ohio and the competitive scene was pretty small. It kind of came down to me and this other girl from Chicago, back and forth, back and forth. And eventually when I was in high school, I said, I'm just burnt out of this. It's not, who knows, if I had been in a bigger pool: New York or Boston, maybe it would have been more stimulating after a while. But it just got to be very repetitive I thought.

Meanwhile, the performance of ballet was magical. I loved performance. There was something so special about that moment, and you know, 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 a performance venue, which is so different than a competitive skills venue. I mean, you can see in our rehearsals. We have a lot of

fun, I think, in our rehearsals, and they're kind of like, you know, this art form is difficult enough as it is to make a living or to do anything in, so you might as well enjoy the rehearsal process. I was saying to the dancers on Friday, I was like, "Oh my gosh, she probably thinks we're nuts!" What did Laura say? "Darrah Carr Dance, 80% antics, 20% dancing!"

KH: (Laughs)

DC: I think Sean Curran brings that joy into the process. He's really a pleasure to work with in that he makes it fun, and I think rehearsing should be fun. Why are we doing it otherwise? You know, it's hard enough. So, this is all a very roundabout answer to your question. But in other words, it's the whole added idea of loving performance, and then in college discovering this whole modern dance arena and thinking well, this is amazing! Look at all this is, it's so much more free even than ballet! And learning more about choreography and composition and all those concepts about how to make a dance.

So 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 sort of started with my own body and when I was in my master's program really, a bit in college, and more specifically in the master's program, asking those questions of, how do I like to move? I like to do front clicks and I also like to do tour jetes. Can I only do tour jetes on Tuesdays and front clicks on Wednesdays? Why can't I do both of them every day of the week? So that's where it sort of came from. And I think it was less consciously about expressing a particular identity at the time, and more about, well, I guess no, more about expressing my own identity. I guess my own artistic voice. You know, if I just happened to be Irish American but never taken Irish dance lessons, I don't think I would have gone looking for Irish dance as part of my tool box. I would have focused on ballet and modern. But I think the fact that it was part of my background, my physical vocabulary, it was something that I could access and wanted to access and keep as part of an artistic voice.

That being said, I do think if one were to tie my work to a larger picture, I do think that today there is a growing interest in Irish dance as a performance culture. I think there are a lot of choreographers asking similar questions in terms of, what else can be done with Irish dance? Experimenting with the vocabulary, which I think is wonderful, I think it's great, and I think that that in itself may speak to broader questions of just, our world in general how things are much more fused and globalized and, you know, borrowing and mixing and referencing is part of this time. There is a contemporary sensibility about that. Does that make sense?

KH: Yeah.

DC: So I think that way, we do tie in to a larger picture. But I don't think initial choice, it was more about an artistic interest of mine. And then as I went along, sort of coinciding with the *Riverdance* boom, the dancers coming out of that, I've been very fortunate to scoop some of them up and have them join me in that process. In the very beginning, it was very very difficult to find anybody who had Irish dance training and any other kind of training. It was very polarized. And today I'm very fortunate in that the people I'm working with have some of each, if not very extensive of each.

KH: Right. What prompted you to coin the term ModERIN?

DC: ModERIN. Well, it was the name of a piece that we did that was based conceptually, and here's an example of how I would have worked before. So for the ModERIN piece, I had 3 main phrases that I generated and taught to the dancers. The opening of the piece was a concept of a 4-hand reel. You had this pose, the hand-holding pose, and then trying to do partnering work that was more than just Irish dance partnering. This, or this, or this, or this. And partnering work that had a 3-dimensionality to it, like a weaving look. So they went under each other, kind of like a Twister game. Like to get that kind of interlacing Celtic knotwork, to make it more 3-dimensional. I'm often very interested in the Celtic, you know, the spatial designs of figure dance

and set dancing. They're very useful choreographic tools I think for spatial design. So I use them often. I think that sort of 2-dimensionally in a sense, that gives a pattern that dancers move through. But this was an idea to present it 3-dimensionally, like ok you have this tangled, you know, Celtic knot. How can you then start in this hand holding position, do partnering work that lifts people and puts them under each other, or around each other, to make that kind of knotwork 3-dimensional? So that was the opening concept of ModERIN. And then we generated that partnering in rehearsal together as all of us. And then we did some spatial design, 2-dimensional design, with the phrases that I had generated, but they got all broken up and chopped up. So that would have been much more typical of the process than the current piece.

So that was the title of this piece we made, ModERIN. And I think that this idea of kind of fusing things was the modern aspect and the Erin, the Irish aspect, so that fused word was first the title of this piece and then became more broadly the title of like, the, this overall style of the company. And it's really a branding and marketing tool. To say that ModERIN is not just this piece, but it makes sense to actually, for the whole sort of body of work or style of this work to be that modern dance and Irish dance reference together. And I think the word is very useful in that it really encapsulates what we do, what we draw from. It's a good marketing slogan. And I have to confess, and I don't know if you're allowed to quote this, but my husband thought of the word. (Laughs)

KH: Oh! (Laughs)

DC: And he never gets any credit, so that's our little secret.

KH: Ok. I won't tell. (Laughs)

DC: (Laughs) He's always like, "That's so clever, who thought of that?"

KH: (Laughs) That's funny.

DC: Yeah. That was his big brainstorm, and it was a good one.

KH: Cool. What do you hope your dancers take from working with you?

DC: Well, I hope that it's first and foremost a good experience for them, that they feel valued and that they feel their contributions to the process are worthwhile and welcome and that they enjoy the experience of working with me. I try to demonstrate an interest in their lives outside of here and especially now that I'm getting older and they're getting, well they're not getting younger, I guess they're staying the same age. I'm getting older. I try when I can to offer whatever insight or advice from my own experience having gone through the dance world, and to try to serve as kind of a guide or a sounding board for them. I mean, when I first started, the dancers and I were all very, very close friends. We were all 23 together. So they were really good girlfriends of mine. And now that the dancers are still 23 and I am not, and I'm in a different place in my life than many of them are, I still feel very close to them and I would hope that they feel the same. So that kind of on a personal level is important to me, that they feel valued and appreciated. And that I'm looking out for that. On a professional level I hope that it's a good professional experience for them, that it gives them opportunity to perform, opportunity to teach, opportunity to be involved with some of the aspects of running the company, that it opens doors for them. Whenever possible, I refer. People contact me for Irish dancers for this or that, you know, I refer them out to people whenever I can. One of the dancers actually, you won't meet this weekend 'cause he's performing with another choreographer he met through working with us, which I think is great.

I mean, I wish I could keep them all full time in this room with me all day long. But I want this to also be a good networking opportunity for them, you know, an opening door opportunity that they can meet other choreographers or, you know, network to other kinds of work. And I hope, I think, I don't know, I guess you'd have to ask them, I would that, you know, some of them who have had a real wide range of experiences with Irish dance, many of them very positive, but some of them stressful with competition or, that this is a chance for them to kind of revisit their

Irish dancing childhoods in a different kind of way. And that I think that many of them find that really enjoyable and a fun way to still Irish dance, but it's not about the feis. So I think that's part of it certainly there. And I do think, you know, and certainly again you can ask Sean about this, I don't want to speak for him, but I think that's also one of the reasons that he enjoys working with us. His background is in Irish dance. And I think this is kind of a neat way for him to reconnect with that aspect of his training and his childhood and that this is kind of a fun way for him to still play in that vocabulary. 'Cause many of the works that he does don't necessarily reference that. And certainly some of the works that he does with his company do reference his Irish background in dance, but I'd say, you know, the focus is different than the focus in this company which is very deliberately on Irish dance.

One of the things too about them making their own phrases in this piece, I think that's a very good example of their contributions being appreciated. And them working in ways that they feel good moving in. And even in other pieces where it's been more me generating material, I'm not terribly dogmatic. Like, it has to be done this way or the highway. There's always room for them to put their own stamp on things. But I certainly hope it's positive and opens doors and gives them good professional opportunities.

KH: Do you usually work with the same dancers for like a long period of time?

DC: Yeah, typically. You know, I haven't had an audition in a very long time. I'm very fortunate. I started out with a cluster of people from my MFA program, and then I had, no, that's probably not true at all. I started out, sorry, that's a lie. I started out with an audition. And had a group of six dancers. Janet O'Fallon, who's Kara Miller's friend, was one of them. That was in 1998. No, that was, that's another lie! That was in 1997? Yeah. So there were six from that group. We did our first works, "Shannon." So I had an audition at the beginning and got a group of six and then, worked with people from Tisch upon graduating for several years, had another audition in 2004. Worked with that group for two years. And then the current group, Catlin and Chris, I've known since they were kids. I taught Chris. And Catlin was taught by Niall, who you should also talk to,

I should give you his contact. So I've known them since they were little kids. I've known them for a very long time. And the others, it's been a wonderful influx for the last maybe two years or so. Melissa was a referral by a friend and Tim was a referral by a colleague. And I've worked with them for maybe 5 years. And then the newer group have been references from Sean, a reference from Tim, reference from Niall. I'd say yes, at least most everyone for a long time. And fortunately the last few years, people started finding their way here. I haven't had an audition in a very long time. I feel really fortunate about that.

But I think the, the current group is really great. As I said before, there's a range of skill set, which is really interesting to work with. And a large number, which is really wonderful. I feel really blessed to have a large pool. That's one of things about this new piece is that it's for nine people. And you'll see today the trio, you saw the quartet, and Melissa and Tim are missing this week. But that's also really good 'cause it's all these different styles together.

KH: Yeah. What about audience, what do you hope audiences take from your work? And does that change depending on the audience?

DC: Yeah. I think, I think fundamentally accessibility is really important to me. I think that I want to be an ambassador for dance. I want people to come to our dance concerts and enjoy them and feel like they got it. One thing that I hate is going to see work that's really, I think, made for, I don't know who. Made just for the choreographer and the people they're working with. Or no concern seems to be paid to the audience. It's like impenetrable work. You know, my husband will go to something and go, I don't get it. And my students will say, I didn't get that. And half the time, I didn't get it. And you know, I feel like that is very, it's one of the problems in the dance world is it keeps very much making dances for dancers. And I want to get out of that. I think that for the health of the overall field, dance has to be made for everyone. And that there should be a level of concern for the audience. Why are you having a show if you want people to leave feeling frustrated and confused? Just dance in the studio, you know? I think you have to have a responsibility to the audience as an artist whose putting on a production and have people

give their time and their money to come see you. You know, it should be a two way street. And I don't mean make work that is inane or has no depth to it or no intellectual concepts or anything like that. I just think that it's important that there's a responsibility as an artist. We should be letting your audience in on what's going on . And I don't tend to make work that's overtly narrative either. But I hope that the work has an emotional resonance to it. And that people feel they can be let in somehow. It doesn't matter to me if they totally understand what I was thinking at all. But I want them to feel that either, oh, that was beautiful, or that was so sad I thought of this, or that was rousing. You know, there should be some kind of emotional investment and that they should leave feeling that they enjoyed it or have a greater appreciation for dance, or that they want to come back and see more. I think that's critical for the health of the overall field.

I don't make literal narrative work, and, like I said, it's not crucially important that they understand exactly what I'm thinking. All interpretation is great, but they also shouldn't have any idea what I'm thinking. They shouldn't feel like what in the hell is this? This doesn't make any sense at all! I don't like watching that sort of work, that's why I don't make it.

And, you know, it's always very funny, a long time ago, we did more showcases in kind of the downtown dance community and we always came out as this like, shiny happy company. It's really funny, on these bills with really angstful, sort of impenetrable work.

So certainly, I always think about the audience because of the kind of work that I make. Just as sort of general thoughts about the work that I make. I think very specifically about the audience in certain cases. Arts education is very important to me, we do a lot of school shows that are obviously specifically designed to be educational, to provide a historical reference for Irish dance, some context for it, connecting it to other things like tap that the kids may be aware of. So that's certainly designed with the audience in mind. And, similarly, our family programs, same kind of thing. Some audience interaction. We get the kids on stage to learn a jig and Niall's great, he teaches them how to sing mouth music and plays the spoons and accordion and gives them the whole live music experience, and that's really important to me. And I think along the lines of a

general audience, not only is the kind of work, hopefully it's accessible to some extent to the audience, but we also do pre-show conversations with the audience. And then we do post-show conversations, like Q&A's. I think that's all really important. 'Cause it gives people a chance to ask questions of the artist and to understand more.

And it's interesting, 'm teaching a class this semester at Hofstra. A dance production class for the first time. It's been really interesting, and one of the things, you know, we're talking then about fundraising which is always a very awkward topic in class. And I'm saying to students, don't underestimate the kind of mystery and intrigue that you carry around with you as an artist. And that many people that you want to solicit money from, not to be totally crass, but you want to be soliciting money from people who have sort of more stable financial lives than artists do, which means they probably work 9-5 somewhere in a stable environment. And they have no idea what a rehearsal process is like. Or, you know, what you're thinking when you make a piece. And there's real value in that, you know? And you can be proud of that, and part of that, the mission of being an artist is that you have to share with your audience. If you're going to ask people for money, then you have to also let them into your process. Whether that's through Q&A or I tell students, if you're gonna write a donor letter and solicit money from your Aunt Sue, then let her come to your rehearsal and see what you're doing. 'Cause she probably has no idea what you're doing.

So, I think it's really critical and there's a new Irish Arts Center building opening in the next two years and one of the things I've been doing is writing proposals for them on this new building about additional programs we could be doing to engage the community. And I'm really excited about that. Like, having open works-in-progress showings or open rehearsal processes where you can talk to people about the choreographic process. More educational opportunities, more classes. And really, I think what's particularly exciting about this new center that's opening is that I envision this being a space where Irish dance can really blossom as an art form, non-competitively. There's plenty of great competitive schools and they can carry on doing all the feises and training excellent beautiful dancers, but this I think this is exciting, 'cause it could be

like an incubator space for Irish dance as a choreographic undertaking. Certainly Irish dance competitive teachers choreograph their steps. I don't mean to undermine that. But the idea of rather than choreographing a specific routine that the kids practice all year long for the feis, that it's, you're establishing a repertory of material that is performative in nature and that changes constantly. That's interesting to me.

KH: Do you have a sense of who your audience is? Like who comes to your shows?

DC: I think it's a cross of our audience, I think there are definitely people interested in Irish dance that come, and then, interested more generally in dance. So a general a dance audience and then specifically attracting an Irish dance audience, and even an Irish arts audience. We often incorporate live music in the performances. Even if it's just for interludes, and you know, solo interludes. So that attracts, I think, an Irish music audience as well.

KH: Ok. You may not know the answer to this. Do you get a sense that, when you say an Irish dance audience, do you mean like Irish dancers, or like the sort of people who would go to see *Riverdance*?

DC: I think both.

KH: Alright. So as far as teaching goes, do teach classes in the ModERIN style?

DC: We did for a number of years when we had our own studio. I had a studio in Brooklyn that I ran from 2003 until 2010. And we did offer ModERIN lessons there. And then in the last year we offered them at the Irish Arts Center. At the moment we're not offering them, but we intend to pick back up offering them. That ModERIN class, the way I had designed it originally was like a modern dance warm up, sort of a full bodied warm up, and then we would spend, 30 minutes in warm up, 30 minutes in soft shoe, and then 30 minute in hard shoe, or choreography concepts. So typically hour and a half classes, that covered a good warmup. 'Cause I think that's one area in

general that's sort of lacking in Irish dance training. So a good solid warm up, but also, and a lot of students that we had had taken Irish dance already. So the purpose of the warm up was to introduce moving the torso and the arms, and make that feel more organic. Then we focused on both soft shoe and hard shoe, but always with an eye toward choreography, not competition. And then we also, you know, if the students wanted to compete they could do so through Niall's school. He has his TC and his AD, whatever, CRG. You know, the judge's certification. So we shared some students as well. And when that studio was still active, we had our junior troupe, DCWee. And we trained them. They were like a little performance troupe that did family shows with us and matinees and that sort of thing. And my intention too, particularly with the new Irish Arts Center space, is to pick that up again. We're sort of in a lurch period between losing my studio lease, me having very young kids, and then, just my own personal life, and then waiting for the new Irish Arts Center space to open.

KH: Sure. And then did you teach just like, pure, I hate using the word "pure," but like Irish dance classes as well?

DC: Yes. Yeah. And that was all at the studio too. And actually, years before I had the studio. So I first started teaching, when I first moved to New York, I taught for Niall's school. And taught pure Irish dance for Niall's school, the Niall O'Leary School of Irish Dance. And I did that for many years in many different locations from probably 1997 to about, through my own studio lease in 2003, when that opened in January. Those classes included kids, I also had an adult class that was really fun as part of that. And the adult class was really like set dance and ceili dance, and some solo steps. And then when I opened the studio, I started doing the ModERIN classes specifically. And we had the studio for 7 years and then lost our lease. And it was such a disaster with my landlord and it became really untenable and sunk a lot of money into trying to soundproof the studio. You know, she leased to an Irish dance company and then there was all this building that was happening, it was in the Williamsburg area of Brooklyn, the 2nd stop on the L train, the Lorimer Street stop. And there was so much building that was happening that area was just exploding. Around the corner of the studio you could probably count 4 or 5

construction sites. So I feel like she just lost the ability to any quiet. So she began putting very strict noise restrictions in our lease from year to year. So then I tried to put all this soundproofing, insanely expensive soundproofing materials to soundproof the studio, and ultimately it just became untenable and she didn't renew the lease and it's now a yoga studio, nice and quiet. But that was such a disaster that I had no intention of getting into a lease situation again. So we've been renting space hourly, primarily here. This is a much nicer space as you can tell than where we were on Wednesday. Really small and really expensive. This one's big and relatively inexpensive. So, and then we'll see when the new Irish Arts Center opens, shifting more programs there.

KH: So when you were teaching Irish dance or when you do, do you feel like your other dance training influences the way that you teach?

DC: Yeah, definitely. And even in sort of the pure Irish dance lessons, we also did a good warm up. It was focused more on feet and legs and ankles. That was a really important part and a cool down stretch. And I think just also figuring out how to teach, just being aware of pedagogy that students learn in different ways. So not always doing it just by rote, stand behind me and copy me. You know, trying to learn it through the rhythm, trying to use imagery, trying to, you know think about students that learn in different ways and not just have it be rote, strict imitation.

I taught creative movement for quite a number of years in the city. Through a group called Education in Dance. So I would try to incorporate some of those more game-like activities into the Irish dance lesson. You know, making sticky tape pattern on the floor and having them practice their hops and their leaps and their jumps around those, clapping and body percussion devices to help them learn the rhythm to the music. Things like that. So, yeah, definitely I think my other styles have influenced my Irish dance teaching.

KH: And vice versa, well do you teach modern at all?

DC: I have, yeah.

KH: You have?

DC: I have. I taught modern at Hofstra, and in that somewhat, I would say, you know, we did do some repertory phrases from my company work in those classes. I've also set pieces on my students at Hofstra for the faculty concert. And then I've set pieces on other colleges as a guest choreographer, and those pieces are specifically done in the fusion style. That's why I was hired to do those things. So then, yes, that would be like sort of an extension of ModERIN, creating a piece for those faculty concerts. When I taught the modern dance class at Hofstra, though, I didn't do too much of the Irish dance stuff 'cause they wanted a modern dance class. It wasn't really relevant. You know, I would sneak in some of the rep phrases here and there, but the point was not to train Irish dancers there.

Now that being said, I do teach a course at Hofstra that's cross listed in both the Irish Studies program and the dance program that's called Irish Steps and Studies and literally, that class, we talk about the history of Irish dance. We spend half of our time talking about the social history of Irish dance and then half of our time learning different dance styles. It's kind of a quick survey. We do a little bit of sean nos, we do ceili dance, we do set dance, we do some solo steps. We do some ModERIN repertory. And the students are a range, some of them are from the dance department, some of them are from the Irish studies program. They've been a complete range. The first semester I taught it, Ryan, who we were talking about a little bit today, he danced with us for four years, he's like world championship, *Riverdance*, incredible dancer, took the class. And then, on the other end of the spectrum, I had a woman who was in her 60's, returning to school for the first time. So I came home from the first day and I was saying to my husband, "What am I gonna do? I've got this kid from *Riverdance* and this lovely woman who's, like, never danced a step and is like 65 years old!"

KH: Yeah, that's hard.

DC: But, I think it was fun and Ryan was training for the Worlds so we got to see him, he would do all his solos for us, and show the class this incredible competitive style. And then he learned, like he had never done sean nos, he had never done ModERIN repertory, he had never done that much set dancing. So it was a neat kind of, you know, that was the first semester. And then he started work with us as a result, which is wonderful. He's now down at Busch Gardens doing their show. He has stayed down there since, he's living down there currently. So that, and then that class specifically is Irish dance teaching.

KH: Right. Yeah. Who are some other dancers or choreographers who you admire or like?

DC: Definitely Sean Curran. And we at this point have a very lovely sort of longstanding working relationship. I really love the work that he makes for his own company. I love the work he makes for us. I'm a big fan, I've always been a fan, this is sort of not Irish related at all, but I've always been a big fan Doug Verone's work. I think it's really beautiful and really fluid and, um...I really like Robert Battle's work. Particularly when he had Battleworks, before he became director of Ailey. Always really admired his work, I think it's really smart and well constructed choreography. Same with Larry Kegwin's work. They're not Irish dance related at all. Sean would be. But I guess in terms of other choreographers working today. More Irish dance based, I thought Colin Dunne's recent solo piece *Out of Time* was really interesting. I also saw Breandan de Gallai's *Noctu*. I thought that that was interesting, a few years ago. There was this Jean Butler solo, more contemporary-based, but I appreciate and admire that people are working in the contemporary-Irish, Irish-contemporary sort of vein. Yeah. So, several more Irish based. And I admire Trinity Irish Dance. I think for many, many years they've been leading the way in terms of Irish dance as a performance concept. And that I think is really important. And they really pioneered that I think.

KH: Ok. We already talked about this a little bit, but what are your goals for the company in the next few years?

DC: We're definitely really excited about the opening of the new Irish Arts Center building. And, we're going to very much contribute programming to that, to expand. At the moment, they don't have the facility to have a really expanded dance program. They do teach classes, and have some performances, but I'm eager to see the dance aspect of their programming expand. I'm really eager to help them with that. In so far as more classes, as I mentioned early, a little bit more community outreach type of programs. More audience building programs. You know, open rehearsals, and works-in-progress showings, and studio showing. So that's a major thing. And that will also, I think, it's an exciting way to partner with an organization larger than ourselves to have a kind of stability. Which would be really great.

We've also recently signed on with a new agent, which is exciting. Picadilly Arts. So our goal is to also do more touring work here. We just signed on with her this last spring. Yeah, but I think kind of reinvigorating the ModERIN education aspect, the DCWee Junior Troupe aspect, and then expanding to more touring are sort of the immediate goals in the next 3-5 years.

KH: Yeah. Cool. Alright. So after watching this rehearsal today, it was really interesting to me how, Catlin and Louise are the only ones who did straight up Irish dance for their...so, I don't know, I mean, I don't know what my question is about that. I don't know if you have anything that you would like to say about that, but I thought it was interesting how that happened.

DC: Yeah. It is, it is interesting. And I think that, Catlin and Louise, they would be in the more Irish dance end of the spectrum, right? So, what's interesting, like Catlin and Lou would have been trained primarily in Irish dance. So I think it makes sense that their movement voice is more purely Irish dance. Chris was trained in Irish dance but also got a modern dance degree at Hunter. So he 's sort of in the middle of the spectrum. You know, and you didn't see Melissa...I don't have any of her most recent solo material here, but she would had been sort of very ballet trained and modern trained. She went to SUNY Purchase for her BFA, and is now at Tisch getting her MFA. But she did Irish dance as a kid, non-competitively, so she'd be on the other

end of the spectrum with her voice. Laura also, had done ballet, tap, jazz, modern and then some Irish growing up. What's interesting though is the gang that's kind of in the middle, like Tim, and Mary Kate, Alex and Brigid. Alex and Brigid did competitive Irish dance growing up too, but then many other styles, modern, both have modern dance degrees from Montclair and from upstate Brockport. So it makes sense to me that all those people did their phrases the way that they did. What's funny is that Timmy and Mary Kate would have had very extensive competitive experience in Irish dance. Timmy's won the Worlds I think three times, number one in the world, you know? And Mary Kate competed also at a very, very high level. But he sort of now turned and is really pursuing this Graham work. So that could be why he didn't put any of the Irish dance voice into his. And same with Mary Kate, she did the Irish dance thing really intensely. She was a contestant on So You Think You Can Dance in Irish dance. But then is now pursuing more modern dance work in the city. So, you know, but it's interesting, they, when you sort of lay them on the gamut, it's funny, Chris is really the only one that kind of immediately incorporated both into his phrase.

KH: Yeah! Yeah.

DC: And I would have expected more, it didn't surprise me that Lou and Catlin would have gone the more Irish route, Melissa, her phrase has like 5000 turns in it, you know? She went the more ballet, modern route. But then the kind of middle gamut, you know, the middle of the spectrum who have, kind of equal parts of both training, did not. They all went the modern route, which is interesting. And you can ask them about their own feelings about it. You know, why they did or didn't.

So then we went back in and we Irishified Tim's and we Irishified some of the other ones. And I didn't say to them, 'cause I also always want to be very careful of not being comparative. And I also don't want to pigeon hole people. And this is the first time really they generated everything to date. And, you know, I want them to like the phrase and for it to be comfortable for them. So I didn't want to say what they had to do or didn't do. But it was funny how it all turned out. And

then when I pointed it out to the quartet women, they were like, yeah, no we didn't want to put any Irish dance in ours.

KH: (Laughs)

DC: And we were just laughing, it's like, but you're in this company! But again, I think it is a way for them to revisit some of their childhood Irish dance experiences in perhaps a more positive way. I don't know, it's not like they all had bad experiences, but I think just in a non-competitive pressurized way. Yeah, but it is funny. 'Cause they could have had it either way and they all sort of went the modern route.

Laura Neese
New York City, NY
October 13, 2013

KH: What is your dance background?

LN: I started off in a neighborhood studio, I'm from Staten Island, so, tap and ballet, jazz, modern. And then, Niall started teaching, when *Riverdance* was big we all wanted to learn Irish dance, and my mother had wanted me to take Irish dance 'cause she always wanted to and didn't, you know? 'Cause her mother was Irish. So, Niall actually came to, who Darrah knows, and he's my sort of connection to Darrah, 'cause he came to Staten Island and taught at our school. So I learned Irish dance from Niall, and from the woman who ran our studio, Rosemary. But we sort of learned it in not the traditional Irish dance context. Because we learned it in the course of a normal class. It was more like tap in the sense that it was a group piece we were learning, a group hard shoe piece. So I came to it as sort of an outgrowth of tap and I was a real bunhead, I was a ballet dancer. Or I thought I wanted to be, right? At the time. So the idea of being turned out and foot placement over the balls of your toes was really natural to me and really rigid upright stance, was accessible to me. And with the tap training I had some rhythmic sensibility. But the reason I keep saying it was more like tap is because we learned group dances. So one year we learned a group reel, the next year we learned group jigs, hornpipes, etc. We learned gradually rather than learning solos for competitions. That came later for us. So when they told us we had to dance alone, we're like, what do you mean we're competing against each other, you know?

KH: Yeah.

LN: So I had a different introduction to Irish dance than a lot of the people I know now, who have been Irish dancing competitively. 'Cause it was definitely very group oriented, it was all

about the group as opposed to the individual. I didn't know that it was an unusual thing for Irish dance.

KH: Yeah. So did you ever compete?

LN: A little bit. There was a feis on Staten Island for a few years, so we competed there. But since we hadn't had competition our whole lives, we started out pretty low on the pecking order. And we didn't have the costume budget or anything, so we wore plain green velvet dresses with our hair in ponytails and black tights. We didn't have the socks or the beautiful dresses or anything. We did a lot of dancing at fundraisers and charity events. So, local things. It started at the school when *Riverdance* was big, so everybody wanted to see the big group line of everybody dancing. So that's what we learned how to do.

KH: Yeah. That's interesting. How long have you been dancing with Darrah?

LN: Since the year after I graduated university. I studied dance at the University of Buffalo and a little bit in England at the University of Chichester. So about the summer after I graduated I started dancing with Darrah, so 2011. So two years.

KH: Ok. And you met her through Niall?

LN: Right. We had danced at school gigs with Niall. That's how I met her.

KH: Ok. So what do you enjoy about working in a fused style?

LN: I like that there's a lightness about Irish dance that isn't always found in a lot of sort of downtown contemporary dance.

KH: Right.

LN: Which can be, especially like the piece we were just rehearsing. Once we had the canons and the counts right, it's really fun to do because it's really lighthearted and character driven. But the rhythm allows you to be. Because it's so consistent, it allows you to put something else with it, imbue it with something else.

KH: Is there anything you find challenging about it?

LN: For sure. When we're doing very Irish dance based pieces, because my Irish dance background is not as deep as a lot of the other dancers who train primarily in Irish dance, I usually find that a challenge. And anatomically I find it a challenge. My knees are not really built for Irish dance, which I found out last year. The week before the show we were rehearsing and I landed a jump and it was just like...so poor Alex had to learn my part. That's sort of an occupational hazard that would have happened anyway. It wasn't specifically, I think, because of the Irish. But definitely I found the challenge to be being very precise with the rhythmic footwork. Because my training just prior to joining Darrah's company had shifted into much more postmodern, no counts, all images kind of work. So I find it's really been rewarding to exercise different ways of learning movement and ways of moving and exploring movement. Whether it's more rhythmically accurate, as opposed to intentionally accurate. So that's one of the good things, but also can be challenging. And I guess specifically for me, what I would find challenging is sometimes, the very specific sort of ceili patterns when we're working on it. Because I notice I don't have the same background. It takes me a little longer to figure out and understand in a larger context where I am in space in relation to everyone else.

KH: Right.

LN: Especially when you're just figuring out the steps at the same time. That's sort of the challenge of Irish dance in general, so...

KH: Yeah.

LN: That's part of what makes it so unique.

KH: Are you performing in other contexts as well?

LN: Yeah. I work with a small modern company I created with a few friends, colleagues, who I just met in New York actually, last February. So we make dances together collaboratively, and perform them around.

KH: How does that experience compare with working with this company?

LN: Well, because we're all young choreographers, we're all making new work. So every time we go into the studio we're working on something, we're building repertory right now. Coming in with Darrah last year, the first year when one dancer had left. So essentially I was learning all kinds of pre-made repertory through reviewing and restructuring video. So it's different coming into set material as to exploring new material. And also the environment's different because we're all administrators and choreographers and just kind of making it happen as we go for the small group. As opposed to coming in as a dancer for Darrah. So it's a different role.

KH: Can you describe the process of making a new work with Darrah?

LN: Well it's the first time I've actually made a new work with Darrah. Well, I was around for the making of was Sean's previous piece, Dingle. And that was a slightly different scenario. But for Darrah's piece, it's been interesting because she's been asking us to, you saw the other day as we were talking on the Friday rehearsals that we're coming in making phrases. She's given us prompts and we've been able to write and reflect on our responses to answers to questions about our dance background and about our preferences, and about our movement habits and likes and dislikes. And it's been very interesting to work with the group, 'cause we have a lot of very

different movements, you can tell just by the way we walk in, in what we're wearing and how we carry ourselves. So the way we create and watching each other has been really interesting. And to be able to be that modern, post-modern dancer in the context of still working with Darrah has been really interesting. 'Cause that's not something that happens often.

KH: Yeah. That's true. Do you find it difficult at all to mix those two things? To do like the modern, post-modern thing and then be like, Irish!

LN: Oh yeah, well, I mean you saw us on Friday like, "Uh what are we doing?" It took us forever to figure it out. Sometimes it's mindset, and like any rehearsal process, there's always like, feeling comfortable that day, personalities come out, who's more aggressive? Who's more laid back? Let Darrah figure it out. There's always those questions in any sort of rehearsal process. And especially when you're a part of the generation of material. But then there's that fine line between yes you've given a raw stuff, but now, how much do you input your ideas on Darrah's shaping of that raw material stuff? And what's proper for you as a dancer? And sometimes we all have different ideas of what that is. So, I've noticed that a lot in the making of this piece because it is so open ended. So that's an interesting back and forth challenge. 'Cause some days it seems like yes, we definitely should be inputting more. I don't know. So it's a fun adventure. But also sometimes, I feel like maybe we should let Darrah figure it out and not jump down her throat. But that's also, in an interesting way, the whole process has allowed us to be ourselves with each other more as dancers, as individual artists in this process. Because we have more of a voice, rather than who's quickest at translating the video to their body. Which is how it works, and a part of the process of being a dancer.

KH: Can you talk a little bit about the process of working with Sean and creating work with him?

LN: Both pieces have been similar in that we've had raw material steps that came from recordings of Trinity or Trinity Second Company, from rehearsal footage. So they're snippets of pieces that he set on them. So, it's sort of a game of telephone between what their step may have

originally been, what it looked like on the video, how we translated it and then how we adapted it for music, for rhythm or for just how we preferred to do that movement. But both pieces generally, the actual vocabulary came from video that we then played with in spatial patterns. But that's how Dingle happened. And there were some steps that were generated by the dancers for Dingle. By our dancers as well. So it's never been a piece that he just slapped on us directly from another company. But the raw material's been from that, and then we've sort of re-organized it and added we've been able to add more elements of modern dance like movements. So, more arms, more upper body than maybe Trinity would have, or would have wanted to.

KH: Sure. Ok.

LN: Though this new piece has a lot more freedom, I think, in it.

KH: What do you mean by that?

LN: In the sense that there's more, maybe freedom in weight. There are more like tap moments and I think in this piece we generated phrases for it a little bit more than Dingle. But it seems to be the same kind of structure, way of working. For these two pieces, but not for last year's piece. Sean set a contemporary dance piece on us last year, from his company, his work.

KH: So in that case, he pretty much generated all the material for that?

LN: It was his dancers, I think the material originally came from his dancers at the time. And then how we set it up for the Irish Arts Center, it's always kind of like Darrah's been saying, site specific. Because we set it up differently for the space and for the bodies that we had in the space. So we had, in his original work there were these beautiful blinds, with pictures, images of faces on it and the dancers would turn the blinds to make the face disappear and then do their sort of like dedication to that image. And it was a series of solos and duets. So for ours we had, in a way incorporating all the performers, we brought in photos, old photos of family members

who were from Ireland or had some relations, some Irish connection. And we had big, oversized, sepia photos, some were really old, like late 1800's or early 1900's to maybe like 40's, 50's. And so they were all personal connections to the people who were performing around the space. And we were sitting on chairs, or would have been, I would have been sitting on a chair, witnessing the other dancers. So it was the movement from his piece, but it'll always be re-adjusted for the actual bodies.

KH: And as a performer, what do you hope that audiences take from your performances with this company?

LN: From Darrah's performances?

KH: Yeah.

LN: I feel like with Darrah's company it's more specifically, I feel like they're more inviting. I feel that I can invite my family to a Darrah Carr performance and they won't hate me for having them come. You know, because I feel like, any kind of cultural dance seems to have a generally broader appeal. Because there's visual, there's colorful costumes usually, there's rhythmic appeal, familiar music. And Irish dance has a, especially the group hardshoe and the softshoe, has a very light up, escaping the floor quality that resonates with people as something happy? So, for a lot of her work, you're hoping to invite the audience into this world of whatever piece it is. Like, Melange, it's very jubilant and silly. So, you're hoping to make people laugh, you want to invite them to have a good time and enjoy with you. And other dances, it's about, usually, I guess, even the quartet, there are some pieces that are more somber. But it's still about inviting the audience in to a feeling that they can relate to. And I think, definitely the emphasis would be on invite.

KH: Do you feel like changes depending on the audience and context, or is it pretty much always the same?

LN: For Darrah's work?

KH: Yeah.

LN: I think that's general. Every piece I feel like, you're trying to welcome the audience to watch you and to enjoy an experience with you.

KH: Yeah.

LN: Or have an experience with you. Even if it's sort of the party dances. So, the finale dance is, you know, a soft shoe circle and the traditional, almost campy like, this really peppy music and we all have sequin headbands. But that's how we make money in March and people, inevitably always are clapping and loving that dance, no matter how much work you put into the modern dance piece. So, even the more simple, I guess, less experimental pieces are very much about inviting them to feel like...they're almost the biggest doorway to people. Because people might walk in the door because it's this great, happy Irish dance and maybe find something else interesting or maybe not, but they've walked in the door to see dance, you know?

KH: So one thing that I've become really interested in is, you know, when the competitive Irish dance structure was set up, it was very much about cultural nationalism and expressing Irish identity and all of that. So I'm really interested in how fusion and contemporary Irish dance changes that? I don't know if you have any thoughts about that.

LN: Well I think even the very competitive Irish dance world, it's not about being Irish necessarily anymore. I mean, the costumes that I've seen, they're hot pink and neon green, they're not anything about Irish. I feel like it's about athleticism and about competition number one. As opposed to Irishness, you know? I think that maybe even, I wonder if it could be thought of as the more contemporary fusion of Irish dance, maybe that's bringing it back. 'Cause all of Darrah's works, I mean in, I don't...well I guess in general other companies I know of that do, like Trinity

that does Irish but with more of a choreographic structure, and Darrah's work, all of her pieces are rooted in something related to Irish music or culture or a story. And her work is very thought out in that way. Like Melange has the references to traditional dance masters and so I feel like for her work, I feel like for her process, that's very important from the pieces I've experienced so far anyway.

Melissa Padham interview**10/14/14****New York, NY**

KH: Can you tell me a little bit about your dance background?

MP: I started ballet when I was 3 years old in Warwick, New York. And when I was in high school, I studied Irish dance with Carrie Gleeson, who was just teaching it non-competitively at the time at my dance school. She was a world champion in the 70's or something like that, and also a ballet dancer with Hartford Ballet or something like that. She was my ballet teacher and my Irish step dance teacher. So I did Irish maybe twice a week for three years in high school and didn't do much of it after that until I met Darrah. So, after high school I went to SUNY Purchase and I did my BFA where I studied ballet and modern for the most part. Then I graduated in 2005 and I met Darrah Carr in 2006 and I've been dancing with her since, doing Irish and contemporary. Additionally, I dance with an African dance company in Harlem called Forces of Nature. And I've been dancing with them since 2005. I went to London for a year and studied at Laban and did a lot of modern dance and now I'm doing my MFA which is you know ballet and modern.

KH: How did you meet Darrah?

MP: When I was a junior year of my undergrad, I was teaching a ballet class in my hometown, in Warwick, New York, and she walked in asking if she could take my ballet class. And I was like, "Yeah, sure." And she was dating who now is her husband at the time. And she was telling me she had a dance company and it was based in Irish roots and whatnot. And then a couple years later, I was rehearsing with this company Forces of Nature in Harlem, and he was doing a ballet that was based on the Celts and the Moors and he had asked me to do some Irish dance choreography 'cause he had found out after hiring me for the gig that I had an Irish dance

background, or somewhat of an Irish dance background. And one of the other girls in the company, her name was Sophie, she was saying that her friend Cara was dancing for Darrah Carr but was leaving. And she was like, my friend Cara would think this was hysterical that I'm learning Irish dance, she dances with Darrah Carr. And I was like, "I know Darrah Carr! I met her once in Warwick." And she's like, well my friend Cara is leaving her company and you should contact her. And I went and we had tea and I started dancing for her immediately afterwards in May of 2006.

KH: What do you enjoy about working in an Irish dance-contemporary blended style?

MP: What I continually enjoy about it is the intensity of it, in general really. It's extremely rhythmical and challenging and it has a very traditional discipline that's attached to it. And I think that that's not really common in most contemporary dance right now. I think that the physicality of it, the rhythmic aspect of it the challenge that it is. All the time.

KH: What are the challenges of working in this style?

MP: Precision. Precision and speed. Lower leg strength. You know, it's one of those things that you can't really cheat. You can't fluff through it.

KH: Is there anything you find specifically challenging about blending the two styles?

MP: Well, I think that they're very opposite styles, so...I wouldn't call myself an Irish dancer. I don't identify as an Irish dancer. But I still have a really strong appreciation for it and for the rules that kind of are attached to it and then I have also a very broad spectrum of what I consider contemporary dance and the things that that title encompasses. So, it's like, how do you make it contemporary dance and still have it Irish, you know? Without making it just like Irish feet and contemporary arms.

KH: Right. Yeah. Can you describe the process of creating a new work with Darrah?

MP: Well, the first work that we created together was the Ballad of Eileen Pink and James Gray. And that was a process between Darrah and me and Russell at the time, who doesn't dance for the company currently. And it was really interesting because she had all the music already picked out and she had the idea for it of course. But what we started with was like a vocab list, and it's similar to the process that she's doing now. She's kind of reviving it with a new group of people that have a new, better sense of Irish dance knowledge. So we started with a vocab list of ballet terms and Irish terms and we tried to find where they where they met. But, I mean, Darrah in particular is very, she's a bit of a perfectionist and she'll make sure it's right. And I really appreciate that. 'Cause you know that you're gonna go on stage prepared.

KH: How does this experience compare with your other dance experiences? Like being in other companies and things like that?

MP: Well, I don't know if this related to the dance aspect of it, but I never feel that Darrah abuses our time. You know? And I've had a lot of other experiences where you kind of, you could show up for rehearsal or you may not show up for rehearsal and that's kind of like how everyone feels. With Darrah there's just something about it, you tell her you're gonna be there, and you see how much time and effort she puts into the whole process. She's really meticulous, she's really prepared all the time. So she doesn't abuse your time and you don't abuse her time and it's just a very productive rehearsal process.

KH: What do you hope audiences take from the performances?

MP: Well you always hope that it's going to be entertaining, you know? And that it's going to affect them kinetically in a way. And that they're gonna be excited by the movement, but you also want them to look at it and be like, wow, that's really cool how they did that. You know,

like, it's really interesting to see all of these two different things come together the way that they do.

KH: How do you feel the audience response has been over the several years that you've worked with her?

MP: Always pretty positive. I do feel like we have a lot of the same audience, from what I can understand. You know, it's the New York Irish dance audience at the Irish Arts Center. But Darrah also is very known in the modern dance world because of her roots at NYU and her downtown stuff that she's done.

I guess in a way, it's mixed sometimes. I think that there might be some hardcore Irish people that look at it and they're like, "That's not Irish dance." And then of course there could be some downtown people that are like, "Well, that's very happy..." You know, it's just very lively. But you don't see that much of that. Because I think the people that come to the show know what they're coming to see, you know?

KH: So one thing that I've become really interested in as I've been researching and starting to write is the idea of identity as it links to Irish dance, because you know, when it started. Well, not when it started, but when the competitive structure started, it was very much a nationalist effort to say, this is how we're going to represent ourselves as Irish. So I guess I'm curious, I don't know if you have any thoughts about how that idea is, like, has changed when you blend it with something else or in a contemporary setting? I don't know. Did that make sense at all?

MP: Like, do the Irish nationalists identify less because it's contemporary?

KH: No, but in, yeah, well, I mean I guess, like, how do you see, if at all, um, the blending of other forms, how does it change maybe the identity of the dance as it relates to Irishness or not?

MP: I'm not sure I know the answer. Because I'm not really in the Irish competitive, and I myself don't identify that much as an Irish American. You know, my grandmother, great-grandmother was Irish. So I'm not really sure, honestly.

KH: I think of everyone that I've talked to, you've been with Darrah the longest. How much do you think things have changed since you've started working with her?

MP: Actually a lot has changed since I started working with her. The actual company itself has gotten much more Irish. Most of the dancers probably were Irish dancers first, you know? But they also have a really strong contemporary background. So I think Darrah right now is in a really good place because she has a lot of dancers that are strong at both. And it wasn't necessarily like that when I got there. She had some Irish dancers and then she had me, who like kind of did both. But right before I was there she just had modern dancers that she taught them a little bit of Irish dance, you know? And I think that as she realized that she had found her place in the dance world and that she was going to be the Irish modern dance company in New York that did what we do, I think that she realized that her work was more sellable to the Irish dance audience and the Irish American audience. She started recruiting more Irish dancers. And it's not even that she recruited them, it's like everyone just kind of fell in her lap. It's like she's this amazing person that just attracts talent and people that want to work with her. I do think that a lot of that has to do with the fact that she's so respectful of everyone's time, and people in general. So, yeah, I think that the company has gotten stronger dance wise since I got there in both Irish and modern dance. And, you know, the Sean Curran thing has been pretty amazing. Having him recognize the company and wanting to spend time with us and set work on us. Four different works now, you know? Just 'cause he feels like he has this need to do it. And he wants to connect with nationalism and Irishness. He can't do that in his company. Well, he might try sometimes or I think he might be trying to. But it's just not the same. I think he enjoys working with Irish dancers.

KH: When you do, because I mean you guys have more like pure Irish dance-y pieces, yeah?

MP: Well, we do. We have Irish dance pieces that are pure Irish dance pieces with some added fancy arms. And those are used in the concerts, in our seasons to open and close the show and do the little intermittent things. They're also used for party gigs, or cruises, or tours with Andy Cooney. So I think the work is really versatile in that way. Because of the need for it, you know, commercially. But then I think that the other fusion work is what she really wants to be making. The statement that she's making through the company.

KH: Do you feel that having other types of training has, how do you feel that effects like, learning and performing Irish dance?

MP: I think that for the super Irish stuff I'm at a disadvantage when it comes to performing it or learning it. Because it's not natural, it's not my body's first vocabulary or language. You know, I know the Darrah Carr dance steps that I need to know. And when I learn new ones, it's really challenging for me, you know, because it is. But I'm definitely at an advantage with Darrah's work in regards to the Irish dancers in the company that don't have any other training. So I think that she also knows what dancers are strongest at what and she plans it accordingly. I think that because I've been dancing since I was 3 years old I have pretty good kinetic sensibility and am able to learn things pretty fast at this point.

Niall O'Leary

10/14/13

New York City, NY

KH: How did you meet Darrah and begin working with her?

NOL: I met Darrah in Ireland at a show that I was in myself. Actually I met her after the show. We met, in fact, at the train station. It was a show at the headquarters of Comhaltas Ceoltoiri in Monkstown in Dublin. It was a summer show that I did for four years. And so Darrah came along to see it. She was researching for her thesis at Wesleyan College called "Irish Dance: Pushing the Boundaries of a Traditional Form." And so we just kept in touch and then I moved to New York in the summer of 1996 in June, and she moved to New York in August. So we met up for dinner one night and then we decided, yeah, we should do some stuff together. So we ended up performing together. She taught for my school for a good number of years we've been performing together for 17 years. It's amazing.

KH: Wow.

NOL: Yeah, crazy. And so I have a professional dance troupe that she performs in, and then I perform in her dance company. A lot of collaboration.

KH: Yeah. So your background is primarily in Irish dance and music?

NOL: Yeah. I've been doing Irish dance since I was 4, playing music since I was 7. I grew up in Ireland and my mother was a dancer before. My father had a big record collection but he wasn't really a practitioner of music or dance, but my mother was. And she was the one who got us into it. I have a sister who's a year older than me, and so we both took music and dance together.

KH: Do you have any experience with other types of dance at all, or no?

NOL: Yeah, since I came to America primarily, I've dabbled in tap and I've done some shows with Darrah where we performed with the Vanaver Caravan doing some clogging and stuff. Stuff like that. And then I've done some modern dance with Darrah, and I've taken workshops in modern dance and ballet and different things, but not any regular basis. I suppose it's informed my core activity, Irish dance, as opposed to me trying to do something else, you know what I mean? I know some people who have moved to New York to learn tap dance, or to learn hip hop to create a new fusion kind of a thing, but in my case, I suppose, all my other dance experience is about enhancing my Irish dance.

KH: Right. How do you feel training in other forms does enhance your Irish dancing?

NOL: Well I think, there's a lot of different way to look at it. I suppose Irish dance is primarily about your two feet on the floor and leaving the floor and coming back to the floor. Whereas other dance forms, they look at the body in a different way obviously. And I think one of the great things about, let's say the University of Limerick program in Ireland, that Colin Dunne and Jean Butler have been involved in is that, basically, within Ireland, it opens the possibility of expanding Irish dancers' minds to other kinds of dancing in an academic way. I suppose I've done that more since I came here than I ever did in Ireland, really.

But like Irish dancing training is very specific and it's done in a way that obviously focuses all your efforts on your legs and your feet. So I think even just watching other people teach other kinds of dancing I find, it's just interesting and it definitely has affected ways, like, I suppose I draw inspiration from many different sources. So it's expanded my horizons in that sense. But I still, for me, it's about bringing it back to relate to what I know and how I can develop that further.

This one guy, you know, told me that he came over to New York, he went into a dance studio and came out seven hours later as a tap dancer. He decided he wanted to take one day to learn how to tap dance. And so, I haven't done that, you know I can fake it like anyone. (laughs)

KH: Yeah. (laughs)

NOL: I know enough to fake it really well.

And I've also delved into sean nos Irish dance, a traditional form of dance that was kind of almost frowned upon as a kind of Irish dancing for people who couldn't dance, when I was growing up. But now it has completely exploded in Ireland and it's been a major social kind of dance. And I suppose it's more accessible, in terms of it's easier to fake it and also the fact that it's on TV. Unlike the Irish dancing competitions, they do allow, and they encourage the competitions to be televised. And the way that the events are run, it's run for an audience. Whereas the way an Irish dancing feis is run, there's so many people in it, it's run just to get it over with, you know?

KH: Yeah. So how does dancing for Darrah's company compare with your other dance experiences?

NOL: Well, there's been two, I would say, distinct phases in Darrah's company. And originally when it started off, the idea behind it was to train proficient modern dancers in Irish dancing. And then, it went through a total role reversal I suppose, in that for a number of years now it's been about training excellent Irish dancers in the art of modern dance. So my answer would have to be in two different parts.

KH: Yeah. That's fair.

NOL: Yeah. So I think, obviously, I learned a lot from watching other people move in terms of modern dance. I consider myself a very fast learner. I think most people who have done any kind of dance get frustrated easily if they're learning something that they can't get. So I think that I learned a lot from watching modern dancers. And so, it was interesting. But I would go up to Darrah afterwards, or maybe I'd call her up the day after, and say, you know, so and so wasn't really lifting their legs, or they need a bit more work. So she knew that I was looking at it from a very narrow focus of Irish dance. I was looking at these people, who were excellent dancers, excellent at modern dance, but I was looking at them in terms of how good an Irish dancer are you? And I don't think that Darrah was focusing as much on that. But I was, you know? So she said to me, I know, I know they weren't, you know, whatever, like, they're ok. So she never disagreed with me, or objected. But you know, there was a lot of times when they were doing, choreography that was fairly involved and my immediate reaction was, they're not lifting their legs. And like, I suppose I was concerned that for an Irish dance audience, that'd be something you'd spot right away, you know? Whereas, somebody who's more about modern dancing, you'd be inclined to overlook that. And you'd be inclined to look at, oh, lovely arm gestures and really nice movement. And I was like, they're not lifting their legs. So it was interesting in that sense. But then I would help people as well. I wouldn't be shy about helping them out, but now the company's totally changed in the last number of years. And there's a number of dancers who I trained myself, actually, as Irish dancers who ended up dancing with Darrah. And in some cases she said to me, you know, do you think so and so would be good? And I was be like, yeah, they definitely would, or would they have time or whatever? So we kind of, some of the dancers, we kind of share them a little bit. And I'll say to Darrah, I need so and so for a show, and she'll say, ok I'll let them leave early. You know, so we kind of share them.

But, I think that most of the people that she now has in the company are excellent at Irish dancing and they're excellent at modern dancing and maybe the modern dancing isn't as out there as it was when it was all modern dancers. There's more Irish dance footwork in it than there used to be in Darrah's choreography. But, I think that all the Irish dancers that she's selected to perform in the company have all been people who have been able to adapt well. And some of

them already had, you know, in a way that Darrah did, some of them already had some ballet training in parallel to their Irish dance training. But some of them didn't. This one girl in particular who was a brilliant Irish dancer who had no training in other kinds of dance, but she's just a brilliant dancer, and she picked it up right away. So I think that whereas before there were people who were in the company who were very good modern dancers, but some of them kind of struggled with the Irish dancing. But nowadays I think if somebody's brilliant at Irish dancing and they don't get the modern dancing kind of quickly, then they won't end up in it. Like before, when it's really good modern dancers, there's no way to tell if they're going to be good at Irish dancing. Whereas, with the Irish dancing, you can kind of tell sooner if they're going to be good. And maybe the modern dance choreography isn't as involved.

So, I think Darrah's lucky that she's a lot of people now who were already well versed in both. Whereas maybe those people weren't available, maybe she couldn't find them or whatever it was years ago. So I suppose it is also a sign of the times that there are more people who are excelling at Irish dancing who have other dance training. And I think there were always people like Darrah who did both, who were good at both. But I think they were more isolated. Whereas now there are more people, because Irish dancing has become more mainstream since *Riverdance*, there are more kind of dancer types attracted to Irish dance. So I think it's a sign of the times. Maybe Darrah couldn't have done what she's done the last six or seven years fourteen years ago. People would be like, no, we're Irish dancers, we're not doing this, do you know? Of course nowadays, people want to do it. And as well, there's been a number of dancers now who are teachers, as well, in Darrah's company, who have finished competing and they want to do something different, something cool.

KH: As far as her audience goes, I'm curious about how she's received in the competitive Irish dance world. Are there many competitive Irish dancers who are aware of her?

NOL: Yeah, I don't know, I find that a lot of the people who are currently involved in going to Irish dance competitions, that's all they do. They go to class, and they go to competitions and the

parents basically save all the money for these trips to the North American Championships or abroad or whatever. So even if they had a lot of extra money, they just don't have time to go see things, you know? But I think in New York City, certainly, both Darrah and I have tried to create a dance audience. And you know, I'll massively promote shows to my students. And a lot of them, not all of them, but a lot of them will go. And there's definitely people who have seen Darrah's show, who like, they'd seen me do Irish dancing before, but they hadn't seen that kind of stuff. They're like, wow that was really cool, you know? And so I think it's very well received and it's always a challenge to try and get people who think one way to expand their mind, but there's been the odd person who's said to me, "well, I find the arms very distracting." But that'd be the very odd person. Most people, I think, have thought it was really cool.

There was one friend of mine, who was in my dance school, she said to me, "why does Darrah move her arms so much?" What am I supposed to say to that, you know? There was one choreography she did actually, we did a project called Unbeaten Path. Have you heard about this?

KH: Not yet.

NOL: There was four dancers involved and a musician. The four dancers were Darrah Carr, myself, Kieran Jordan, a woman from Boston who's a modern dance and Irish choreographer as well, and Ben Power who's a musician and sean nos dancer from Ireland. And then there was Mark Simos, who's a fiddle player. And we did two shows: one in Boston and then we did a show in New York as part of the New York City Irish Dance Festival, which I'm the artistic director of. You've probably heard of it as some point. And s there was one particular piece that was a duet between Mark Simos and Darrah, and she stood beside him, he started playing the fiddle. And she stood there like an Irish dancer, but she started moving her arms. And as the music got faster, she moved her arms more furiously, and by the end of the dance, her arms were all over the place. It was amazing. And like, if her arms were ever gonna come off, this was the moment, you know? And to see it on the pier, where you could see her flying off into the Hudson

River. And it was a total reaction to the Irish dancer just moving their legs, and all she did the whole dance was move her arms. It was really cool actually. So my friend who was like, “why does she move her arms?” would have probably been upset, but...(laughs)

KH: That's interesting.

NOL: You should ask Darrah about that as well. I'd say she was more aware of her arms after it.

KH: Yeah. How could you not be? Cool. So one thing I've become really interested in is the idea of Irish dance as like representative of Irish identity, you know? Like how that was a very specific choice with the Gaelic League and all of that. And the question of how that is changing now, now that we have people like Darrah and Colin who are doing this sort of blending of two different forms?

NOL: Yeah.

KH: What do you think?

NOL: Well, first a disclaimer, it never occurred to me that there was any connection with Irish identity at all.

KH: Well, there is that too.

NOL: 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. So, you know, my whole experience living in Ireland was all Irish.

I think that like, there's two aspects to the potential loss of Irish identity in Irish dancing. One is the fact that since *Riverdance* there's so many non-Irish people doing it. I go to places like

Cancun, Mexico where there's nobody Irish at all. Nobody. There's not one drop of Irish blood amongst the entire dancing group there. And it's all about doing cool dancing and dancing to cool music and challenging themselves to learn what appears to be a more difficult kind of dancing than other kinds of dancing. And so, if I teach some really simple steps, they're like, no, show us something more difficult. And so I think that there's a lot of people who've engaged in Irish dance since *Riverdance* who don't have any appreciation of Irish identity. A lot of people have developed an interest. I've been in Japan this summer and there was some people that went to Ireland after that. So people who started learning Irish dancing have then gone back to Ireland to see a show, or just to visit Ireland. And they love the scenery or whatever, but there's a lot of people all over the world learning Irish dance. All over mainland Europe, places like South Africa. Places where there are very few Irish people, where they don't have this bond with Ireland and they wouldn't be up on the Irish news. If you would ask them what's the latest news in Ireland, they wouldn't know. That's not their interest. Their interest is in the dancing, you know? So I think that there's definitely been a loss in terms of the Gaelic League ideal of the whole Irish cultural experience being all-encompassing. There's been a bit of a loss of that.

And yet, I suppose, the closest thing to the Gaelic League in terms of promoting Irish dancing in this country would be the North American Feis Commission. And in order to run a feis, you cannot, there are rules, there a very strict rules, you cannot just run an Irish dancing competition. You must also have either music and song, or art, or soda bread competition. Let's say there's nobody who can judge a music contest, there's nobody who plays Irish music in Utah or something, you would do art or soda bread. Anybody can do that. I guess you get the recipe on the Internet. So they're trying to, I suppose, bring in other aspects of Irish culture and to make people appreciative of other Irish endeavors, not just the dancing. So, in that sense there's a chance that people will participate. But I also judge music competitions at dancing feiseanna and I've often remarked in dismay at how few people, not only, it's one thing if there's very few people playing the music, but how few people even come in to watch the music competition. They're really not interested. They're outside in the hallway practicing for the feis the following day. And so I think, I'm very fortunate myself that I have people who, maybe it's my own fault,

but I've trained people to like the music as well, and now I teach music to some of my dancing students. And so people who are getting this well rounded Irish experience here in New York. So it's great, but I think generally speaking, like a lot of communities, people don't care enough about the music and they don't have an interest in other Irish things.

And yet there are places like, there's a hotbed of Irish music now in Pearl River which is Rockland County, New York. It's all happened in the last maybe 10, 15 years, where there's a load of musicians who got married and had children and then when their children started getting seven, eight, they were like, "oh, let's start teaching music." And they all started teaching music. And now their children are grown up and they're teaching music. And there's a whole scene of people who are learning music and dancing at the same time. And so, that happens every so often in isolated places, but generally speaking, I think the Irish dancing teachers don't, if you would say the rest of Irish culture is important, you would have to say they don't do enough to promote it. It's very isolated, whereas there's a woman in St. Louis who teaches Irish dancing. She's from Galway originally, she's called Helen Gannon. Have you ever come across her?

KH: No.

NOL: She has a Comhaltas branch. She was the head of the North American Comhaltas for a number of years, she just handed it over to someone else, and she runs a Comhaltas branch called St. Louis Irish Arts. And St. Louis Irish Arts has the most children, or did have anyway, of any Comhaltas branch in the world. And when Helen Gannon moved to America, she married a guy from Galway who was a musician. Right? I don't know if she's a musician herself, I think she might play the harp or something. Yeah, actually, her daughter plays the harp. And she definitely didn't excel at the music, but she wanted to start a music school. And apparently the story goes, she put ads in the paper and listings or whatever and put up fliers. Nobody was interested, right? So, what did she do instead? She started a dancing school. She got her Irish dancing teaching certification at the age of 42 or something. She started an Irish dancing school, everyone was like, yeah, *Riverdance*, Irish dancing. Everyone who joined the dancing school was given a tin

whistle. And that's how she started the music. And that's how she teaches the greatest number of children in the world. So, you know, actually, if every dancing teacher did that, then music would be just as popular. But I don't know, I haven't done that myself. So you say, why haven't I done it? Because I want my people to be dancers! But still, it's great, if they have time to do music, I'm all for that. There's a friend of mine who teaches fiddle and I refer people to him all time, if they kind of show an interest. I wouldn't announce it, but if you show an interest.

But in terms of what Darrah and Colin Dunne are doing, I suppose, I think it's just another way of saying that Irish dancing is not about Irish identity necessarily. I suppose maybe you could say it's about being Irish in a broader context, you know? And the whole idea of a monocultural society such as existed in Ireland when I was growing up, is very hard to find anymore. I'm actually going to a country that I've never been to in June next year, Burma. And I perform a lot with a guy called Mick Moloney and a band called the Green Fields of America. Darrah performs with them regularly as well. And he's invited me to go to Burma. And apparently it's one of the last countries to be developed in Asia. And I think in terms of seeing, like, pure Burma, I think I missed it. But, it's one of the least developed countries in terms of outside influences. And in this past year, I had my first ever visit and I'm gonna go back next year to Cuba. So it's amazing to go to places like that where they're not as worldly-wise you'd say, as America or as Ireland is now. And the fact Cuba is so isolated from the United States particularly, it's kind of very monocultural in a certain way. But they have other people from South America or whatever. But, Ireland now, in certain pockets, certain places you'd find in rural Ireland where there would be just Irish people, but it's hard to find now. And so the idea of Irish identity being linked to just doing Irish things... And so, when people are doing dance forms that involve other kinds of dancing, I think, it's basically in a way giving a heightened experience of Irish dancing. And it's basically saying this dance form can be expanded and can be made better by combining with others. And I suppose that's the eternal question about fusion. Do you end up with something better or something worse? And obviously, good fusion you end up with something better.

KH: Sure. Hopefully.

NOL: When it's done well. And I think anyone involved in any kind of choreography, you have to know, I suppose, where you're coming from. There's a friend of mine who's a black American guy, who goes to Ireland about five times a year. And he says to me, I'm going home. And he's actually more Irish than I am. He has all these Irish apps on his phone, you know? He's African-American, not one drop of Irish blood in him, but he feels really Irish. And he wears all these Irish jerseys and everything. And he says to me, it's not about where you're from, it's about where you're going. And I think he has a point, but in terms of choreography, it's also about where you're from. You have to have a good knowledge base. And I think Darrah is somebody, I'm less familiar with Colin Dunne's recent work, but I'm very familiar with his other work. I went to see his solo show, and I wanted to see him doing more Irish dancing, but that's just me. And I went to see this play he choreographed in Dublin. Anyway, I think that in both the case of Darrah and Colin, they've a good grounding in what they're doing. Whereas I've seen other examples of people who would have less of a background in Irish dancing doing kind of like *Riverdance* choreographies and stuff and some of it has been appalling. And, you know there's people doing things where they don't know anything either. They're doing fusion where they know nothing about either dance form and I'd rather read an old telephone book, a telephone directory, than be watching that. Or I'd rather watch paint dry, or whatever it is you might say.

And I've taught some Irish dance workshops at tap dancing conventions where I've been minding my own business walking along and they say to me, oh come over here, we're rehearsing our *Riverdance* piece, what do you think? And it was the saying people used to say in Ireland about someone who wasn't crossing their feet in Irish dancing that you could drive a bus through their knees. And so I was like, oh it's great. I have to go to dinner, you know? So I think with the advent of the Internet and Youtube and despite the fact that you can't videotape at Irish dance competitions, I think, there's a lot more people more well versed in what good Irish dancing is. And I think that the audience for Irish dancing is definitely more educated than it was before. And there's people who grew up in isolated places where there's a dancing school that don't do

the dancing that well, but they've seen good dancing on *Riverdance* and on TV and on Youtube, so they know what good Irish dancing is. And I think the likelihood of people getting away with doing something where they don't know what they're doing is a lot less likely because people know what they're watching. And I think like there's a lot of bad Irish dancing shows have toured Germany over the years, and I remember watching one TV show in Ireland, where they followed around a couple of different shows and they interviewed members in the audience. And there was one German guy I remember was asked, what do you think of the show? And he was like, "It was good. It wasn't as good as *Riverdance*." And so, here's this guy who knows nothing about Irish dancing, and yet he knew. So I think that it's interesting times we're living in and that the idea of just doing one thing, that's hard. I think Irish dancing is changing. Within what is called Irish dancing, it's changing as well. And I just actually, before I met you today, I finished choreographing a set dance for one of my students, and one of his parts in the piece, he wanted to do a moonwalk. So we put the moonwalk in his set dance. Why not? And he wouldn't be in the first 100 people to do the moonwalk in his set dance. So it's become an Irish dancing move now. So, there's all these moves that years ago you'd say, oh that must be some other kind of dancing, but now they're Irish dancing. So, you know, it's not even called fusion, it's Irish dance. So it's hard to know where it's going in that sense.

And two of the biggest, I think, influences in terms of choreography in Irish in the last again 10, 15 years have been the type of floors people are dancing on and the size of the stage. And I actually was the person who got a motion brought into the Irish Dancing Teachers Association of North America, the North American convention that every feis must have a sprung floor for every stage. And somebody put up their hand in the back and they were like, oh, but that'll cost a lot of money. And people were like, no it's the right thing to do. So that motion passed. And there's been feiseanna that I think they've been fined if they don't have it. You can't stop the feis, people have entered or whatever, but they get fined. That's one thing. And I've had another motion in last year which didn't get anywhere, but it created an interest in the question, to limit the size of the stage. The stage now got so big that people are just running around. At the World Championships last year, the stage was 50 feet wide and I asked them why don't they rope it off?

And they said, why should we? You know? And yet, it's possible for a 10 year old to still dance off the stage, it doesn't matter how big it is, they'll still go off the stage. And so the only limiting factor for stages in the regional championships in this region is the fact that the fire officer insists on a way through the ballroom. And so they're limited by the dimensions of the ballroom. And that's the only reason. So I think the stage size has got too big. And the fact that people are dancing on good floors means the dancing has got so much more energetic. Which is great, it's exciting. But at a certain point, you can't dance forever the way people are dancing now.

KH: Yeah.

NOL: I digressed a little bit there, but it's important.

KH: It's all important I think! I mean, I find it interesting. So would you say then that you think that what Darrah's doing with fusion is just sort of the same thing that's happening anyway, just in a different vein?

NOL: Well, Darrah came up with the term ModERIN and so it's a specific fusion of modern and Irish dance and so, there's a few other people doing that but not the extent that she is. There's people doing it in a less professional way. They do some choreography, but they don't do as many shows or performances. So it's still, I would say, creating its own audience in a sense. But the fact that there are more people who are doing different kinds of dancing means that there's more of a ready-made audience than there would have been when she started. It's always about trying to find those people, you know? And I find in terms of getting an Irish dance gang to go to see a show. You know, people go to see shows they know people are in. It's hard to get people to come to see things. But you just have to market it right. But yeah, the idea of taking Irish dancers and training them in modern dance is probably more appealing to an Irish dance audience than, than the previous idea of getting modern dancers doing Irish dancing.

KH: Yeah. Absolutely. Have you seen a significant change in her work since that shift has happened?

NOL: I suppose so, yeah. Well, a lot of the stuff she's done recently has been collaborations with Sean Curran and stuff. But yeah, I remember there was one piece she did, I think it was called Crockpot Stew, I can't remember. It was some piece she did a few years ago where she said really it was just about the dancing. Whereas like most other pieces back then had a more specific kind of, I suppose you could say more academic motive behind them. So I think like, just like myself, different inspiration for different people. I've seen a development in the work in that I think maybe the fact that a lot of the pieces now, the fact that there's Irish dancers more, she does a lot of pieces to faster music. And a lot less pieces to slower music, you know?

KH: Sure.

NOL: I think there's definitely been a development in terms of you know just the choreography's got more interesting, I suppose. I'm more interested in Irish dancing than modern dancing, so...

KH: So it's more interesting for you.

NOL: Blatant admission, yeah.

KH: That's fair.

NOL: I'll say, one thing that I think has happened in the last few years with Darrah's choreography is that she's doing a lot more shorter pieces. And a lot of the longer pieces have shortened. For the kind of show that we do at the Irish Arts Center, do people get restless after a while? I don't know. I'm not sure. I think in modern dance there's a tradition of doing a piece, like a short piece would be 27 minutes. Whereas in Irish dancing, a long piece would be 2 minutes. So I don't know, maybe it's a reaction to that. Maybe the reality is that because the

dancing has become more high energy and more Irish dance based that you just can't go for 27 minutes, you know? So I don't know. In terms of what has changed, I'd say the music has got faster a little bit and the piece has got shorter. And I suppose the two are related.

Sean Curran

10/15/13

Phone interview, New York, NY

KH: How did you come to start working with Darrah?

SC: Well, I graduated from NYU Tisch School of the Arts in '83 and I'm not sure when Darrah graduated, but I was working on a musical called *James Joyce's The Dead* that I choreographed. It started off Broadway at Playwrights Horizons. When it transferred to Broadway, it's essentially the same production but we expanded it for the new theatre, and there was money in the budget for me to get an assistant. And it was Irish dancing at the turn of the previous century at a Christmas party. Do you know James Joyce's story "The Dead?"

KH: Yeah.

SC: Yeah. So they did things like what I would call a 6-hand reel and highland fling and sort of slip jigs and stuff like that. Sort of *Riverdance*, but they had early 1900's costumes and whatever you do at a party. So I needed somebody who knew Irish dancing and somebody at NYU said, "oh, you know we have this modern dancer in the program who's an Irish dance expert." So I met Darrah and asked her to assist me on Broadway in *The Dead* and that was the jumping off point. And she was a great help to me because after the Broadway version there was the national tour, the Equity tour and then what they call the Lortsd tour, the regional theatre school. So I was busy doing other things and she could just go and teach the choreography to these other casts.

KH: And then when did you start doing choreography for her company?

SC: The first thing I did was something called "On the 6." I couldn't tell you the year, she could, but "On the 6" grew out of a piece I made for Trinity Irish Dance Company called "Jump, Jive,

and Jig” where I tried to take swing dance music and rhythms and put Irish dancing to it. And in that sense, I was interested in getting Irish soft shoe dancing to swing. 'Cause if you swing a tune it's a different feel to just, you know, straight up. And I found it was hard for Irish dancers to make a phrase swing, but we could do swing dancing using the steps. So it's 3 couples, it's a lot of skip-2-3's instead of chasse and a rock step, do you know chasse and a rock step?

KH: Yeah.

SC: Yeah. That sort of chasse and a rock step could be sort of a swing step, but now they were doing skip-2-3's or 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2. It was important to me to sort of speak an old language in a new way. That's always sort of one of my challenges I give myself. Or to speak an old language with a contemporary accent. But it was also a bit nostalgic because, you know, in the 40's and 50's is when our parents and grandparents were coming to this country, parents or grandparents who immigrated, and that mated with the kind of dancing that they do. I fantasize that's what they were doing at ceilis. Not just the Siege of Ennis, but, you know, dancing to Benny Goodman or something like that. So we dedicated it to our parents and grandparents who had immigrated.

KH: Oh, that's interesting. Cool. So what do you like about working with Irish dance and contemporary dance together?

SC: Well, to be honest with you, it brings me back to my childhood in a way 'cause I grew up doing Irish step dancing and I had a teacher named Josephine Fitzmaurice Moran and that's F-I-T-Z-M-A-U-R-I-C-E, her maiden name, and then Moran, M-O-R-A-N, who taught Irish dance in the Boston area. We were doing traditional Irish dancing but she had kind of a showbiz flair. So we performed a lot. There were always recitals and we performed at weddings and St. Patrick's Day parties, ceilis, what have you, lots of feises. And I just loved doing that. I was good at it, my sister and I were a real team of two partners. So it's, you know, kind of a happy memory of my

childhood. There was a point in high school when I ended up teaching for this woman, Saturday mornings, for you know, four hours or something. A class would be an hour long.

There was a point in college when I sort of said, no more Irish dancing. I'm a musical theatre performer, I'm an actor, I'm a singer, you know. Kind of, you know, being young and dumb, I moved on to college and stuff. But the Irish dancing came with me, immediately, my freshman year, my first year of being a modern dance major, the choreographer made a piece and I had to do Irish step dancing in it. And then Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane made a piece called "Secret Pastures" where I did Irish step dancing feet with arms that Bill T. Jones made up gestures. And that was an incredible feat of coordination, 'cause as you know, you have your arms down by your side. And here I was trying to do a gesture sequence with jig steps.

So anyway, to answer the question more directly, it nourishes kind of a nostalgia in me and I feel like we have a common language. But I don't speak it as fluently as these dancers do today because in my day there was no warming, you know, there was just a few basic steps you strung together and you sort of did it for fun and you went to the odd feis. These kids now are like Olympians practically. And what I used to think as, what we call hard steps, there were baby steps and hard steps. And a hard step now is a baby step to the kids doing dancing today. I like it because I like to make choreographic hybrids, putting two distinctly different things together. For Darrah it was the swing music and the Irish steps, in "Dingle Diwali" it was South Asian music and South Asian or Indian gestures and Indian rhythms with Irish steps. I set a piece I did for my company called "Six Laments" which was not Irish dance at all. It was more like adagio dancing to Irish laments looking at love and loss, longing and regret. So that was the one sort of modern thing. Now, as you saw, we're back to this music that could be Mediterranean, sort of folk driven, and back to the use of arms and stuff. I learn something from it every time, so that's what's interesting to me.

KH: How do you feel your Irish dance background has affected your modern dance work at all?

SC: Yes, well I talk about this a lot. And I'm very grateful now 'cause that high school asshole who said no to Irish dance, now I'm an adult and I look back and I see it gave me two great gifts. I'm known as a quick mover and of course when you're doing Irish step dancing you're moving your legs pretty quickly, right? So those quick twitching muscle fibers get developed at an early stage, early on. And it gave me kind of a musicality that I feel like, because when you're responding to Irish music tapping steps, within a jig or a hornpipe or a hard shoe kind of thing, you have to listen to the music and hear it. You dance sort of in the music rather than to the music or with the music. Dancing in the music is something Jerome Robbins used to talk about and it's really interesting to me because it's a different relationship to music. And I'm a music driven guy. I make dances 'cause I love music so much. Also that's sort of the most obvious stuff, but you know, the figure and folk dancing also gave me this interest in space. Where you put bodies in space, what are the points in space, how they move through space. I love George Balanchine because of his architectural use of space. I love Trisha Brown because of her fluid use of space. There's something about the use of space that's still interesting to me as a choreographer. I did folk dancing growing up, and even though I'm a modern dance choreographer, I'm making sort of urban, contemporary folk dances. These are the folks, this is how we dance, this is what we dance about. Culturally I want to be a humanist, make dances about what it's like to be a human being on planet earth, without getting too grandiose. But I think in a way we need to.

KH: So one thing that I've become really interested in, thinking about blending Irish dance with other things, is the idea of Irish dance as sort of a part of Irish culture and a representation of identity and how that changes when you bring other things into it. Do you have any thoughts about that?

SC: Well, I feel that, I end up with hopefully an interesting collage and we've been talking so much about childhood and learning Irish dancing, one of my favorite things to do was to make collages and the story of that, my parents subscribed to *Life* magazine. Do you know what *Life* magazine was?

KH: Yeah.

SC: A weekly magazine, big pictures, photo essays, that kind of a thing. And it would come on a Wednesday or something and I loved Wednesday 'cause I'd literally kneel at the coffee table in the living room and go through Life magazine and look at the pictures. When Life magazine was two or three weeks old, my mother would give me permission to cut out pictures I liked and I would make a collage. So I feel like I'm still making collages, choreographic collages, where I'll take the jig step, put it to some Indian music and there'll be, you know, a hip hop move on the upper body or something like that. So, it's making collages, it's speaking an old language in a new way, it's hybrid, sort of making hybrid forms. But it all comes down to an interest in movement invention, play, and that's sort of an experimental thing too. It's like, well will this go with that? Which experiments, not a scientist mixing chemicals together, but a choreographer saying can I get this, these dances to swing, or can I get this Indian lotus gesture to make sense with, you know, Madame Bonaparte's set piece or whatever. I tend to be sometimes a maximalist and I've been criticized that my work collapses under its own weight. But I think it's because I'm interested in how many ideas can I cram into this thing? Now, over the years I've learned to be a better editor and take ingredients away. But this Irish idea of dance and identity, it is a big part of my identity, it's always in my bio that I was an Irish dancer and that was my way into contemporary dance. It's now one of the main ingredients in whatever I do or make. In terms of being a recipe, it's definitely one of the main ingredients.

KH: What do you think the challenges are of making these hybrids?

SC: Well one, of course, is that it doesn't collapse under its own weight. The other is that I don't want to get too out there experimental because Irish dancing taught me to be many things but one was a good showman. When you put on a show, you dazzle, that virtuosity is interesting but what is virtuosity but taking something difficult to do and making it look easy? So those are some of the, what was the word you used? Not limitations, but challenges.

Now, in addition, the flipside of being a showman, I don't want to be sentimental or coy or too nostalgic, right? I want to make puzzles that people enjoy figuring out. I don't want to play it safe or just do what's expected. And sometimes that happens and I think in the rehearsal you were watching, I was trying to be asymmetrical, and then sometimes, you know, do what's normally expected if it works. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. But I do always want to have my eccentric twist, for lack of a better term, and have my voice come through so that it doesn't look like *Riverdance* or *Lord of the Dance* or Trinity or Sean Curran Company or even Darrah Carr Dance. There's something unique and authentic to it. That's I guess the word to use, the challenges are to be authentic and unique. And, you know, ballet dancers have been doing it for hundreds of years. There's, what 28 steps in ballet and they just string them together in a different way. That can be like a syntax, the idea of syntax in terms of a dance vocabulary. In my syntax, I'm interested in some big dictionary words, these weird hybrids that I keep talking about. Those are sort of the big challenges.

Time is always a challenge. Dancers lives are challenging. I never seem to have everyone I need at a rehearsal. You know, I wish I could just pay them all \$10,000 a week, make sure they were at every rehearsal. That's a big challenge, really, it comes down to dancers and their lives. And the challenge of making a living and being a dancer.