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Emerging Dance Scholarship in Ireland

AOIFE MCGRATH

Irish-based dance practice has a long history of being culturally undervalued, underfunded and marginalized, with the 1995 annual Arts Council report stating a 'recognition of the fact that dance as an art form has suffered severe neglect in Ireland'.[1] Yet despite this neglect, Ireland has a rich and varied dance history and a vibrant contemporary dance scene, and dance research is emerging as an exciting new field of scholarship. The visibility of theatre dance in the cultural landscape of Ireland improved significantly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2003 dance was finally included as a named art form in the Irish government's Arts Act,[2] and the same year saw the founding of Dance Research Forum Ireland, a society formed to promote critical reflection and discussion about all forms of dance in Ireland. Another important development for dance scholarship was the announcement in January 2010 of Arts Council funding for the establishment of a national dance archive to be housed in the Glucksmann Library of the University of Limerick.

Although arguably still in its infancy, scholarship about dance in Ireland has already produced some noteworthy publications, emanating from both the traditional dance world and contemporary dance practice. Scholarship concerning the traditional forms has been carried out from predominantly anthropological, ethnological and sociological perspectives. Important examples include Helen Brennan's work, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle: Brandon, 1999), which provides a sociological analysis of the history of traditional step dancing and social dancing in Ireland, traced from the murky records of dance in the Middle Ages to the commercial success of the Irish step dance extravaganza *Riverdance* (1994). Following the thread of the commercial aspect of step dance, Barbara O'Connor conducts a sociological analysis of the use of traditional dance in the Irish tourism industry in '"Come Dance with Me in Irelande": Dance Performance in Tourist Settings',[3] and performance scholar Aoife Monks discusses the collapsing of ethnic difference and the attempted creation of a generalized global identity in her pamphlet *Comely Maidens and Celtic Tigers: "Riverdance" and Global Performance*.[4] Looking at the movement of the traditional Irish dancing body through the lens of anthropology, Frank Hall's *Competitive Irish Dance: Art, Sport, Duty* (Madison: Macater Press, 2008) focuses solely on the competitive step dance form, analysing its distinct 'body language' and considering step dancing as a form of national expression. Helena Wulff also presents an anthropological study in her book, *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007), which conducts an ethnographic analysis

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of mainly traditional Irish dance, but also of some dance theatre, focusing on questions of 'Irishness', Irish national identity and cultural memory.[5]

Until very recently, the documentation of dance practice in Ireland beyond the world of traditional dance can only be described as haphazard (at best). Perhaps it was the realization amongst dance scholars and dance practitioners of the pressing need to capture some trace of current choreographic practice in print that has led to the majority of recent publications on contemporary dance being primarily edited collections of interviews with dancers and choreographers, or essays written by choreographers about their own practice. An important example of this type of publication is Diana Theodores's edited collection, *Dancing on the Edge of Europe: Irish Choreographers in Conversation* (Cork: Institute for Choreography and Dance, 2003), which includes interviews with nineteen leading choreographers working in Ireland. A further valuable contribution in this style are the two volumes of the Choreographic Encounters series (2003 and 2004) edited by Mary Brady, which also contain some articles that critically analyse Irish dance practice.[6] Speaking of choreographic research in Ireland in her foreword to the first volume, Brady acknowledges that a 'convergence of scholarly writing, journalism, and the work of dance artists, has only recently begun to delineate a recognizable terrain'.[7]

The emergence of this terrain in Ireland poses a new set of questions for theatre, dance and performance scholars. In a society in which postcolonial formations of an 'Irish' body have led to the oppression of corporealities that do not fit hegemonic norms, instances of performative bodily expression that reflect, resist or deviate from these norms present important sites for investigation.[8] Elizabeth Grosz proposes that 'a history of bodies is yet to be written, but it would involve looking at the mutual relations between bodily inscription and lived experience'.[9] Further interrogations of the dancing body could help in providing just such a corporeal history in Ireland, as the inherent 'doubleness' of the performing dancing body – being at once both the objective, choreographed (inscribed) body and the subjective, sensing (experiential) body – lends it the ability to simultaneously articulate both somatic and cultural identities.

NOTES

1 An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council, *Annual Report 1995*, p. 61. This report is available online at www.artscouncil.ie/Publications/An_Chomhairle_Eala%C3%ADon_1995.pdf., accessed 3 January 2010.

2 The 2003 Arts Act changed the 1951 and 1973 definition of 'the arts' to include dance. The original definition defined the expression 'the arts' as including 'painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the drama, literature, design in industry and the fine arts and applied arts generally'. The Arts Acts can be accessed online at www.irishstatutebook.ie, accessed 7 March 2009.

3 Barbara O'Connor, '"Come Dance with Me in Irelande": Dance Performance in Tourist Settings', in Barbara O'Connor and Michael Cronin, eds, *Irish Tourism: Image, Culture and Identity* (Buffalo, NY: Channel View Publications, 2003), pp. 122–38.

4 Aoife Monks, *Comely Maidens and Celtic Tigers: "Riverdance" and Global Performance*, Goldsmiths Performance Research Pamphlets, No. 1 (London: Goldsmiths University of London, 2007).

5 Wulff's project of discussing how 'Irishness' is expressed through indigenous dance forms operates from an essentialist basis that is at odds with most current performance studies and dance-studies practice, yet the information gained from her interviews with over a hundred interlocutors from various dance sectors in Ireland presents some important primary research material.

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6 Mary Brady, ed., *Choreographic Encounters: Vol. I* (Cork: Institute for Choreography and Dance, 2003); *idem*, ed., *Choreographic Encounters: Vol. II* (Cork: Institute for Choreography and Dance, 2005). Deirdre Mulrooney's book *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2006), also falls into this category of publication, presenting mostly edited interview material with Irish choreographers and physical theatre practitioners rather than a critical history.

7 Mary Brady, 'Foreword', in *idem*, *Choreographic Encounters: Vol. I*, p. 10.

8 For a discussion of how both a postcolonial focus on mastering the language of the colonizer and the repression of the body by church and state authorities have effected corporeal expression within a theatrical context in Ireland, see the Introduction and chap. 1 of Bernadette Sweeney's *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 1–7, 8–49.

9 Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 232.

AOIFE MCGRATH (apmcgrat@tcd.ie) *has just completed her doctoral thesis, 'Choreographing Ireland: Resistive Bodies and Socially Engaged Dance Theatre' (Trinity College Dublin, 2011). She lectures in performing, contemporary Irish theatre and advanced theatre making (dance theatre) at TCD and is also a dancer, choreographer and dance critic. She won the Irish Society of Theatre Research's inaugural New Scholar's Prize (2011) and has recently published an article on the work of Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre: 'Choreographing the Unanticipated: Death, Hope and Verticality in Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre's* Giselle *and* The Rite of Spring', Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21, 2 (May 2011), pp. 154–70. She is currently working on a book project based on her doctoral thesis.*

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