

Re-Visioning the Rite: An Exploration of the Expressive Possibilities of Irish Dance

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Abstract

This paper addresses the creation of an Irish dance interpretation of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring". The work represents a major requirement of an Arts Practice PhD that the practitioner/researcher is undertaking. His company's work (Ériu Dance Company) is a reaction to the commercial show and competition culture genres and draws on the more exploratory model of contemporary dance and physical theatre.

The choreographic process is multi-layered and includes but is not limited to the following tiers: the generation of novel movement approaches and vocabulary through a personal improvisational method which draws from the choreographer's habitus; developing a company signature; authoring motifs as well as move exhaustive sequences; and transmission.

The transmission, workshop and performance stages provide rich insights, and it is in this area that the research flourishes. Nurturing a positive, collective engagement with the ensemble is key. Company work begins as the interior depths of the Irish dance performer are probed, questioning where the impulse of the movement is located and allowing for alternative channels to open, seeing how the expression breathes in other areas and in other ways. Deep emotional structures are encouraged to surface in evocative movement patterns. There is an emphasis on a more visceral, brutish aesthetic, harnessing the individual gestural signatures of the dancers and encouraging higher level emotions to surface. Themes which appear in the work include: mob mentality; alpha-; beta-; vulnerability; victimism; homoeroticism; and persecution.

The opportunities and challenges presented by the making of Irish dance work that challenges the boundaries of the traditional aesthetic are discussed with reference to how the physicality of the dance manifests itself, the reaction of the dancers and its acceptance in the wider Irish/General dance community.

Introduction

This paper addresses the creation and performance of an Irish step dance interpretation of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. The work represents a major requirement of a structured Arts Practice PhD that the practitioner/researcher completed in September 2013, the first of its kind in the Republic of Ireland.

The thesis (de Gallaí 2013) explores potential expressive possibilities in dance choreography and performance with Irish step dance as its point of departure. The core data for this exploration derives from two newly choreographed ensemble works, *Noctú* and *Rite of Spring*.

This paper begins by introducing Irish step dance and the typical performance opportunities the dancers tend to engage in, namely competition culture and commercial spectacle shows. Arts Practice PhD research is then introduced presenting the debate around this approach to scholarship, and making a case for its suitability for this particular investigation.

The company (*Ériu Dance Company*) is subsequently introduced, the factors that influenced the casting of *Rite of Spring* discussed, and a short paragraph provided to describe the performance event.

This is followed by a discussion about the choreographic process, the significance and importance of the music, and finally the challenges associated with setting this boundary-pushing work on the company of dancers.

The choreographic work is then unpacked highlighting how the physicality of the dance idiom altered with its new emphasis on new emotions layers, the essence of this new work, which tend not to be central to Irish step dance presentations. Creative choices in terms of central themes and design are also presented.

The opportunities and challenges associated with navigating a new performance context for this traditional art form are then discussed, as the work confronts this new performance platform it now inhabits.

The paper concludes with the voices of some of the dancers. The process and performance of this work had a transformative effect on many involved and there thoughts on this resound in this section.

Irish Dance Performance Contexts

Although many Irish step dancers may dance for their own enjoyment, and there exists many social, cultural and political opportunities where Irish step dance can and will be performed, my own focus is on those contexts I mostly experienced myself. These contexts are consistent with the experience of many of my dancing friends and colleagues who spent some time as professional Irish step dancers.

Most dancers are introduced to Irish dance through extra-curricular classes. In my own case *An Coimisiún* is the umbrella organization, whose objectives are to preserve and promote Irish dancing with a secondary aim to promote the Irish language. One of their main activities is to run *feiseanna* (singular *feis*), or competitions. These days, many of the more accomplished dancers aspire to joining the professional touring companies, but returning to a vocational engagement with the dance form through teaching, adjudicating and examining is often a common goal (see de Gallai 2013 for more detail on this).

Arts Practice PhDs

There has been a healthy and spirited debate around the area of practice-based research (practice as research/arts-practice research/practice-led research) since the early 1990s, driven initially by the discipline of Art and Design and subsequently in Performance scholarship. Some academies are reluctant to recognise the “doctorateness” (Ó Conchubhair 2005) of this relatively recent form of research, but reluctance on the part of universities to engage with change has always been common and has occurred regularly

over the last few centuries. Many “knowledges” once at the margins of academic legitimacy are now well established within the institution and the struggles for acceptance long forgotten (Wilson 2005). Even the notion of many PhD programmes in Irish Universities being “structured” and “taught” is oxymoronic if considered in PhD terms.

According to many of the handbooks and manuals issued by various colleges and institutions, governments and publishing houses (Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 1997; Dinham and Scott 2001; Phillips and Pugh 1987), criterion in relation to the “doctorateness” (*philosophiae doctor*, meaning “teacher of philosophy”) of a research PhD include:

- Purposive – identification of issue or problem worthy and capable of investigation
- Inquisitive – seeking to acquire new knowledge
- Informed – conducted from an awareness of previous related research
- Methodical – planned and carried out in a disciplined manner
- Communicable – generating and reporting results which are testable and accessible by others. (Ó Briain 2005)

Artists often work in the cognitive idiom as much as they do in the expressive. Many research methods akin to those of the academic institution (exploring ideas, gathering preparatory information, sourcing music scores, referencing historical information) are utilized throughout the artistic process. It could be argued that the above-mentioned criterion applies equally to the arts practitioner as much as it does to the traditional PhD student, but seeking acceptance for new scholarly approaches and PhD-worthiness, as mentioned above, is not without its challenges and obstacles.

The tension begins as the artist passes through the doors of the university. The academic tradition, having become detached from the concept of bodily activity, reintroduces it with trepidation, the formal demands of the university at variance with the artist’s approach to art making as research. Candlin (2000) draws attention to the anxiety which is also experienced within higher education authorities when expressions such as “the need to clarify the use of new doctoral titles and to protect the significance of the PhD/DPhil” are published. (*Survey of Awards in Eleven Universities*, HEQC, 1997, p.5). Candlin explains that statements such as these imply that validating practice-based PhD could undermine or threaten the more “obviously valid doctorates”. Doubt over “the capacity of images to function as research” could be read into the report *Practice-Based Doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts and Design* (UKCGE) (Candlin 2000, pp. 1-2).

My PhD Approach

According to Frayling et al.

[T]he practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice. An original/creative piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. (Frayling et al., 1997)

It goes on to say that a “substantial contextualization” of the creative contribution accompanies the artefact(s) which is a “critical appraisal” that clarifies the originality and location of the work in addition to furnishing grounds with which to assess the presentation.

The particular structured Arts Practice PhD programme that I have just completed has as part of its requirements, two major performance presentations as well as a 40,000-word text. My second performance presentation was a new choreographic interpretation of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*.

Ériu Dance Company

For the purposes of creating the performance requirements of the PhD Arts Practice, I created *Ériu Dance Company* in 2010, initially for the first performance presentation *Noctú* (première 10th Sept 2010), and subsequently for *Rite of Spring* (première 10th Aug 2012). I expected that many of the dancers that I auditioned, trained and worked closely with in my capacity as Dance Director of *Riverdance*, who happened to be without work in the summer of 2010, would join the company but this was not the case. The making of the production *Noctú* (see de Gallai 2013a & 2013b) was to be shot for a six part series and broadcast on RTÉ¹, and due to there being a sense that it might be a reality television show format, only one full-time professional dancer, who normally worked for *Riverdance*, attended the auditions. (The television series had in fact a fly-on-the-wall format with no public intervention in terms of voting dancers off the show). Those who did attend the auditions and who I chose for the company were very young, many of them having only turned 18, and almost all had not yet finished college.



When it came to casting for *Rite of Spring*, the bulk of the company was made up of the original dancers (those who had performed in *Noctú*) with a few new dancers who I either approached, or who approached me requesting to be included. Due to the heavy nature of the subject matter as well as my desires in terms of choreographic process, I did not include all the interested original company members as I did not feel would suit this particular production. Although *Noctú* had been a departure from all our understandings of what an Irish dance show is 'claimed' to be, *Rite of Spring* was certainly going to push those boundaries even further in terms of dance vocabulary, process and context.

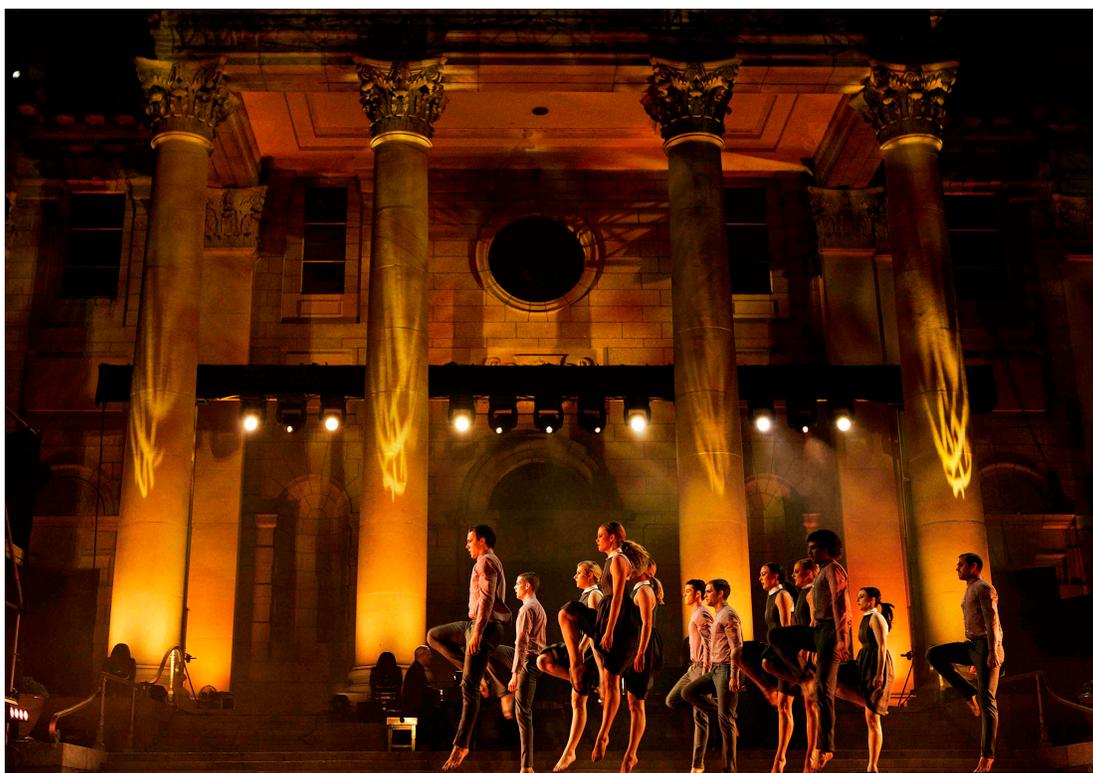
Rite of Spring Première

To date *Rite of Spring* has only had one performance, albeit one which was attended by a 14,000 strong outdoor audience. It was premièred at the opening of the *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*² Fringe Festival on August 10th 2012, and to date has not been repeated. At the time of completion of this paper, *Rite of Spring* had been shortlisted for the coveted Allianz Business to Arts³ award.

Apart from a mention in the Irish Times:

... *Rite of Spring*, by *Ériu Dance Company* ... staged in the grounds of Cavan Cathedral left thousands spellbound. (Irish Times, 11th August 2012)

... and a review (as well as some correspondence) by a dance critic and historian (Ballet) Anna Mackey, *Rite of Spring* was not properly evaluated by a published arts critic.



The Process

Creating the Choreography

When I dance in an unengaged way in the studio, I like not to scrutinize my movements. I don't want to think with my mind about what to do next or judge what I have just done. When I manage to disengage, it is as if the music wafts through the air like the wavy lines common in childish comics, visible and representing the undulations of sonic or musical motifs, with the ability to act to physically lift me to create movement, almost like a marionette, without my intentional or cognitive input. When the moment is right, the dance makes itself - I'm just the vessel. (Author's Journal, 14th December 2009)

In the Outline of *A Theory of Practice* (1977) Bourdieu defined habitus as:

... systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules (Bourdieu 1977, p.72)

17 years of competition culture, 9 years in the commercial *Riverdance* world and a soupçon of other dance disciplines, such as modern, classical, jazz, Latin and various folk dance styles make up the complement of dance knowledge in my habitus.

Now that I am older I am less attached to the strict canons (well placed and crossed feet; erect posture; etc.) of the Irish step dance tradition and do not wish to be impeded by them. According to the Irish step dance stylistic code, these are the canons that make a good Irish dancer (see de Gallai 2007; Foley 1988; Hall 1996). But my own new revisions to me are satisfying aesthetically, and I include them in my work.

Cameron-Dalman states that in western culture the image of the dancer is

... of agelessness, of continually having a brilliant technique and youthful agility. Therefore, after about the age of thirty-five, the dancer has to confront not only the natural thresholds of age but also the social pressures of our culture, in particular the pressures within the dance culture. (Cameron-Dalman 1996, p.33)

Schwaiger's discussions with aging dancers reveals that with the reduction of physical capacity comes a new and important set of qualities which are valued more highly than technical ability and virtuosity, such as

... a more integrated physical-emotional-spiritual approach to dancing ... and an ability to focus on performance and audience ... (Schwaiger 2005a, p.111)

This becomes more prominent with age, resulting in emotional maturity and increased self-confidence. This consequence of aging has also influenced my choreography and I wished this to be a point of departure in the *Rite of Spring*, rather than the Irish step dance

community's emphasis on virtuosity, which tends to be where the meaning of the form is focused in younger dancers.

I have many dance genres colonizing my body, all with varying degrees of proficiency, not to mention the myriad life experiences which heavily influence how I move and how I critically engage with poetic movement.

If I approach my dance in a reflexive manner my point of departure must be to allow the 'truth' to surface – refusing to edit too soon – preventing the willful ego, so politically motivated, to interfere with what may emerge. At least I can argue that it is real – not cleverly thought through – monitoring the world around me to satisfy the 'O'ther, but being genuinely innovative – giving mankind a sneaky look at the world through my lens – sharpening their focus and revealing the innate art in everything around in terms of my perception.

I want to create my dance out of the Subject – at the pre-reflective self-conscious state, reflecting and making critical aesthetic choices at a later stage.

(Author's autoethnography 14th December 2009)

To access the fountain of my creativity, I believe that it is important to allow the work to surface in an unaffected, unblemished fashion. Improvisation has proven to be a useful studio technique as I have found that it acts to access a portal to the honest self – so although all of what we know has been presented to us throughout our lives and experienced by us with our bodies, it is our integration of all of this, coupled with our genetics that makes us unique. Accessing this in an un-censored, un-sanitized fashion and creating a piece of work informed by those elements is therefore in my opinion distinctive and innovative (for a more detailed discussion see de Gallaí 2011).

The material that I consider to be interesting seems to emanate from my habitus – a surfacing of deep structures – habits, schema, dispositions, sensibilities – the culmination of all my physical, genetic, emotional histories, that have mingled, mixed and fused. These ideas surface in the shape of gestures, rhythms, physical interpretations of music, and blend with my aesthetic thrust to make up my final set of choreographic choices (see de Gallaí 2010 for more on this). Wulff states that

To the many uses of the concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1977) belongs the insight that the practice of dancing reveals dispositions, i.e. perceptions and actions that are being inscribed in a dancer's body. (Wulff 2007)

As an improviser I want to unleash the unknown – allow my body/bones to let the traditional aesthetic evolve ... to be "taken by surprise" (Foster 2003, p.4) ... to be "A body with a mind of its own" (Zaporah 2003, p.21)

Music communicates directly with the body – to stimulate the nerves and the muscles to move how they please ...

To leave my conscious mind outside the room

With my mental attention elsewhere – my body does its own thing

An exploration of real life surfaces – issues are grappled with – meaningful content created “... unearthing the subterranean geographies of the self ... turning over the wet rock to reveal its mossy underside” (Gere 2003, p.xiv) ‘Impulsing’ the forgotten, ignored, unknown and letting float that to the surface – disengaging the mind – letting the body think for itself – allowing it to tell its story, disconnecting the inner critic determined to edit/censor and interfere with the entire self’s desire to tell its own story ...

(Excerpts from Author’s Journal, 14th December 2009)

Although I may not be aware of the precise detail of my movements in my studio setup, I certainly have a sense of ownership, a kinaesthetic sense that I am responsible for the movements. I have an experiential sense of agency, or a pre-reflective sense that the movements are my own, or in other words, that I am the author of the movements (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 pp. 160-161). Even though I feel as I reflect in autoethnographic journaling that I am “lost in the movements”, my experience is that I am in control of my action.

My job as choreographic actor is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the performance of making work and bringing it to completion. The score can be created and recorded in many different and diverse ways – from notation to video records – but none will be as pure as the ideal of carrying the work inscribed and encoded on my body, the real task then being its communication to the performer, the deep intrinsic meaning of the gestures and moves. This choreography is a tacit activity for me – it would have been unleashed from my corporeal knowledge. Transmitting this is the challenge. In fact, it is not so much the transmission rather than the ignition of the intention of the work within the actors themselves.

Ryszard Cieslak, in his explanation of his understanding of the ‘score’ to Richard Schechner in 1970, illuminated the significance of the score for me and how the actor brings it to life –

The score is like the glass inside which a candle is burning. The glass is solid, it is there, you can depend on it. It contains and guides the flame. But it is not the flame. The flame is my inner process each night. The flame is what illuminates the score, what the spectator see through the score (Schechner 2003, p. 47).

Or as Grotowski suggests that the score is the “two banks of a river” and the “water flowing between those banks” being the performer’s process (Schechner 2003, p. 47). In many practices “... skills are shared, that is, they are the same in different individuals, nexuses of activity are rooted in, though not for most theorists exclusively in, shared understandings” (Schatzki 2001, p.9). It is in the reaching of this apex that I as author see as the ultimate challenge.

The Music

My point of departure in the studio is music and is central to my process. I feel that the work flourishes when I am in a position to work with scores that appeal to me, which is certainly the case with *Rite of Spring*.

A phenomenological and psychological initiation to the work of Stravinsky, in the best of circumstances, was the catalyst that provided me with a love of this music. My first dalliance with Stravinsky was studying *The Firebird Suite* in secondary school. I did not like the piece at all to begin with, but as our music teacher brought us on a journey of discovery, her passion being infectious coupled with my teenage urge to please her, my engagement with this more raw, atonal, and challenging work altered significantly in a short amount of time. This visceral connection with Stravinsky's *Firebird* led me to *Rite of Spring* and a compulsion to create one – my own – whatever that would be (this is discussed in more detail with references to Lacanian psychoanalysis and phenomenology in de Gallaí 2013).

The Transmission Process

If the dance we engage in is a tradition which may have been invented and capable of being reinvented (Hobsbawm 1983), success in terms of the tradition holders' engagement with this reinvention of the tradition is a function of their positive phenomenological engagement of said reinvention (excerpt de Gallaí 2013)

Finding dancers who believe in the work and who trust the creator is the major hurdle when it comes to new work. Traditions can be steeped in history, and rules difficult to negotiate. This is not just the case for the choreographer. Often the Irish step dancers cannot be seen to turn their backs on the organisation that 'created' them. So although there is a tradition of innovation in Irish step dance, not everyone is permitted to innovate and not all innovation is accepted.

Understanding the challenges associated with interfering with the Irish dance aesthetic, but needing to create a landscape where an Irish step dance *Rite of Spring* could be produced and performed, I felt that a strategic project was required so that the Irish dance community, dancers and audience, could tolerate a bolder work – an initial new work that would pave the way was required. I felt that the project *Noctú* was the right approach to start the questioning of what it was people thought of as suitable Irish dance work. *Noctú* as a project was not be too avant garde whilst still challenging the perception of what Irish step dance could achieve.

During the making of *Noctú*, I was eager to have a company of individuals who were wholeheartedly on the choreographic journey with me, rather than a group of 'gigging' dancers⁴, just learning material to perform as part of a paying job. To that end, I actively involved them in scripting aspects of the show. This was to, in some way, display a nurturing, positive, collective engagement with the ensemble. I began by looking at each of them personally, asking them to talk openly about their emotional engagement with the practice of Irish step dancing, and the challenges they had

experienced. The research and rehearsal period was intimate and we became close very quickly. As a consequence getting the dancers to open up was not difficult.



Subsequently I put the dancers in groups and got them to script and act out ‘situations’ that seemed to matter to them. The outcomes tended to be experiences that were consistent with all our lives. I gathered that the significance of these scripted events was such that these experiences had remained with them and were in some small way responsible for who they had become. This I observed was cathartic for the company to reveal.

The consequence of this is that I created a company of dancers whose notion of professional Irish dance was suddenly different from many other peers in the business. Process and injecting one’s own identity and individuality was now more a part of who they were as dancers, but it also created a level of trust in the creator/choreographer – believing that, although the work was at odds to their understanding of the aesthetic, they believed in me, and in it, and ‘lived’ it on stage. The fact that the choreographic project *Noctú* secured a television series also had much to do with creating an environment where I could be experimental. It seems to me that the national broadcaster’s endorsement situated the project, in no insignificant way, as worthy of interest. It not only covered its costs, ensuring that the production values were more professional, but it added caché to the project. Happenings such as these, which the actual aspiration of the work may have had little to do with securing the deal, position that work so that it is perceived and something valuable and worthy of engagement. This stroke of luck highlights how random factors have as much to do with artistic work persisting as does

‘the work’ itself (see a discussion on chance as a dimension of work-making in de Gallaí 2013a)

The Work / Company Signature

When it came to producing *Rite of Spring*, many of the difficulties associated with creating Irish step dance work that did not reflect the accepted norm, had been engaged with by the company, and both me as director and choreographer, and the dancers went about its creation and presentation with a confidence which did not exist to the same degree for *Noctú*.

With this newfound signature of using Irish step dance as a vehicle to express emotion, *Rite of Spring* was a project which allowed for this like no other work to my mind. I had longed to choreographically negotiate Stravinsky's epic composition and imagined it as my opus magnum.

In terms of *Rite of Spring* I challenge the notion of posture and verticality in Irish dance – the most visual and globally recognized trademarks of the genre. My own dancing style altered by virtue of its corporeal history, life-experiences and age and I wished to generate a movement system that reflected this. As a result new gestures were added to a dance form, which traditionally almost exclusively utilizes the lower half of the body only. But it is the expressiveness in the movement that is the piece's primary corporeal focus. The dance remained very much in keeping with the evolving company style, and it was emotion, often concealed, strongly experienced and rarely overtly expressed, that was the source of the choreographic signature. Using various techniques from the modern, post-modern and contemporary dance world, the Irish dancer was reconstructed allowing them in some way to understand and embody my work.



I also saw Stravinsky's seminal work as a vehicle to explore the practice of coercion and domination, and how we all can be victims and perpetrators of this. The tone of *Rite of Spring* is dark, sinister and foreboding. This I achieved not only by the music, but various creative approaches such as lighting, costuming, and theatrical devices such as having the dancers engage with activities they are unaccustomed to practicing. The choices in terms of costume design were to be read as homogenous – a uniform with a sense of being foisted upon the community. There were deliberate overtones of the 'Children of the Corn'⁵.



The piece's ultimate objective was to explore ritualistic behaviour within contemporary group dynamics. Those themes appearing in the work included: mob mentality; alpha-; beta-; vulnerability; victimism; homoeroticism; and persecution. Thematically, this area resonated with me and I would later, through the PhD research, realise its autobiographical significance.

I deliberately did not approach the choreography faithfully following the musical titles or ensuring that my narrative arc be in line with the established practice. The choreographic choices and structure were purely a reaction to the music without reference to the specific movements. My only concern was to ensure that Nick (company dancer and principal) be the final 'odd-man-out' ... 'The Chosen One' before the 'Sacrificial Dance' section. Throughout the piece I randomly chose dancers to take the alpha role, leaving much to chance, picking whoever was, in my opinion, well positioned at the time. That is not to say I had no strategy or plan. Each section had a clear resonance for me and I let the music tell me when a new alpha would take charge, or when an alpha lost his/her power.

Similar to de Gallai's ability to get inside the music with steps, he uses broader choreographic devices and patterns to show us the multiple facets of the drama unfolding. Dancers step in and out of line, changing places like children picking teams in school. This theme of chance is later developed in a ballroom dance scene: as the couples swirl around, the odd man (and woman) out is desperately trying to cut in, showing the "musical chairs" randomness and desperation felt by the virgins. (Anna Mackey 2012, Ballet Teacher and Historian, Review of *Rite of Spring*)



Rite of Spring is a non-propositional piece of contemporary Irish dance work. The dance does not necessarily represent a thing or a narrative – only arrays of activities. In the case of the 'Rite' community, activities are those things that one undertakes because all do – the central concern being to endeavour to never initiate or change an activity – *Ná bris nós, na déan nós*⁶ – the very culture that this choreographer wants to reject. These nexuses of shared understanding are expected to be absolute, unvarying – a change of direction, a new way of looking at the activity is to be avoided. What the work highlights is that sometimes someone actually causes there to be a new understanding. Their alpha-ness causes a disturbance. There is dismay and confusion, but as quickly as it happens, the older established practice is forgotten. When individuals change an activity sometimes it was with a sense of defiance other times taking themselves by surprise.

In this production of the Rite we are continuously faced with some faceless and invisible authority. This represents my reading of the 'O'ther. It is as if there is something bigger and greater pressing down on the community and forcing them to fear

... to conform ... but this actually comes from within. With this perpetual rebirth of the Alpha in its many guises (it can be anyone; it might be the same person twice; for a very short moment it was two members sharing the role together), we realise that we ourselves are creating it.

The community represented in the 'Rite' work as a whole and only do what the others do, rarely questioning who causes the newer practice to initiate, forgetting immediately the old. There is often blind faith in the individual who shifts, demonstrating our lack of direction and certainty. As Barnes puts it –

Practices are often cited in order to explain things, including notably their own enactment. It may be said, for example, that something is done because it is traditionally done, or routinely done, or done because it is part of the practice of the collective. The problem of why human beings should enact the practice is thereby completely glossed over. It is as if the cavalry has to charge, twice a week perhaps, simply because it can charge, as if there is something automatic and compelling about the enactment of practices which makes it unnecessary to consider what moves or inspires the human beings involved (Barnes 2001, p.21).

Challenges associated with Contemporary Irish Dance Choreography

The company work was widely reviewed in terms of the production *Noctú*, predominately in New York. The company signature, I discovered, did not fit the commercial world being more suitable for the more niche contemporary dance platform. Being a traditional indigenous dance form creates challenges in this arena also in terms of understanding and acceptance. *Noctú*, which has been performed over fifty times, was criticized greatly by a couple of New York reviewers who laid out their allegiances (or lack of them) from the opening paragraphs of their evaluation. My own perception was that they felt that step dancing had no place in the contemporary dance world. The remainder of the critics were overwhelmingly positive, most of whom review general Broadway and Off-Broadway theatrical presentations, and this community nominated *Noctú* for two Drama Desk Awards, 'Outstanding Choreography' and 'Unique Theatrical Event'.

Rite of Spring was created with more confidence with the help of an excellent company. It was mature and bold, and as choreographer I was able to aim for more due to journey we all had been on. For the purposes of comparison it would be interesting to see how the reviews would read if *Rite of Spring* played in New York, but to date no opportunity has presented itself.

On analysis, the nature of the critiques the company received in New York highlighted for me the tacit anticipation associated with perception, and how it contrives to create perspectives with little opportunity to be challenged and therefore altered. The contemporary dance critics who viewed and wrote about the work, like all of us, cannot see this artefact in its completeness, not to the same degree as that of the Irish dancer performing the work. This insight exists on a spectrum with, in my opinion, those closest to the work – the choreographer and the performers embodying the work – having its worth and intention in sharp view. Those furthest from the work – the dance critic for example, with no significant point of departure in terms of the dance genre, where it has

come from and where it is going – having a much more blurred view. Residing in this section of the spectrum, claiming to understand this community of tradition holders is risky. Even a member of the community itself would tread carefully when suggesting what might be the expectations of, or appetite for, new work within this group. Some positive remarks, although I was delighted to read them, would have been claims an Irish dance tradition-holder would be reluctant to make. Much of the negative evaluation was not at all consistent with my choreographic or thematic intention.

All of our views are incomplete – and the fragments that reveal themselves to us we integrate to create a more exhaustive view of the object. We will have varying degrees of “perspectival incompleteness”, and can only base our opinion on the amount of completeness that is presented to each of us with our individual histories.

The phenomenologist would say that perceptual experience is embedded in contexts that are pragmatic, social and cultural and that much of the semantic work (the formation of perceptual content) is facilitated by the objects, arrangements, and events that I encounter. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 p.7)

Those with the ear of the New York arts public, for example, might feel strongly about their ability and unique position to critique work, but their knowledge will have limitations, particularly if the work they encounter stems from a tradition they may experience infrequently.

Surely any approach to work-making is fair game in the contemporary arts world and it is how the work impacts, and perhaps persists, is what matters? How the piece lingers as various individuals with different histories intend upon it is what gives it life and vitality, or not. The view which Husserl coined “natural attitude”, that objects are out there waiting to be discovered, is fundamental and deep-rooted not only in our daily pre-theoretical life, but even in those with a foot in the positive sciences, or indeed those mandated to commentate on the world, forgetting that it cannot be claimed that that world they encounter is the same for all. It is

... a tacit belief in the existence of a mind-, experience-, and theory-independent reality. Reality is assumed to be out there, waiting to be discovered and investigated. (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008 p.22)

This understanding that it is what it is, rather than it is what we intend upon it.

Impact on the dancers

One of the most compelling aspects of the dance project was its impact on those who took part in the production. Jack's (company dancer) experience in *Rite of Spring* intrigued me as he wrote about how the lines between the work and real life began to blur for him. Again, this was satisfying for me to hear. I understood as creator that this work might be received as controversial and there was more at stake for me in comparison to the other contributors, but what I was experiencing was so monumental, I wondered if it resonated with the others.

I also found the work to have a great effect on me mentally and emotionally. It felt necessary to really get inside the piece and feel the emotions of my 'character' – not only did I use personal experience to try and create an emotional aspect to my performance, but I found that at times the piece itself (be it the relationships between dancers on stage, or the physical intensity of the dancing) made me feel things naturally, including fear, despair, determination, desperation, camaraderie, power and relief. The most notable thing was how effectively we managed to create a sense of being 'creeped out' and how this seemed to linger outside of the piece as well.. It's hard to articulate now, but at times it felt as though the lines between the work and reality were beginning to blur. For example, I remember noticing one day that when walking to the shop during our lunch break, we had all gone in a group but left one person behind (i.e. the 'chosen one') and I wondered to what extent we were subconsciously living out the ideas of the Rite for real. This became intensified during the last week or so leading up to the performance – I remember feeling somehow on edge and I don't think I was the only one who had a sense of dread, even though I was very excited about the performance. It just all seemed very real; at the time I don't think it would have felt outside the realms of possibility that on the night Nick would have literally danced himself to death. Reading this back now it sounds improbable, but I think the fact that I had moved to Dublin specifically for the project which made it somehow removed from 'real life', and that as a group we were spending almost all of our time together and so had quite intense relationships, affected the way everything felt. (Jack Anderson, written reflection, 7th Mar 2013)

Aislinn (company dancer) drew parallels with real life too

The Rite of Spring struck many chords with me. The sacrificial theme was particularly meaningful and one that I felt we could all relate to in some way – while we've never been required to literally dance ourselves to death (not quite anyway!), we have all made significant sacrifices in our lives in order to become professional Irish dancers. This career path has also brought a degree of vulnerability, another major theme in the Rite of Spring. The fact that I could relate to these themes in one way or other made the piece very emotional and I felt much more connected to it than I have with any other production. I think this was true for all the dancers – as the music changed pace, and the loose narrative developed, so too did the energy on stage. By the end of the piece, the emotion on stage was palpable. While the pack gave off a sense of apathy towards the Chosen One, we could all feel Nick's despair during the Sacrificial Dance. That specific moment was a very moving experience – even in rehearsals – and one that we all regularly commented on throughout the rehearsal period and after the performance. (Aislinn Ryan, written reflection)



I put these experiences down to the atmosphere set up in the production of *Noctú* which then carried through to *Rite of Spring*. This coupled with the fact that Ériu Dance Company sought to push the boundaries of the Irish step dance form in a landscape where there could have been no appetite for experimental work. The dancers knew they were chartering new ground and subsequently research found that the work had a profound and transformative affect on them. In the words of principal dancer, ‘The Chosen One’, Nick O’Connell

... it put a stamp on my soul I think, but a beautiful stamp ... I wouldn’t be without the stamp (Interview Nick O’Connell, 2nd Apr 2013)

Conclusion

In an exploration of the untapped expressive potential in Irish step dance, *Rite of Spring* was created and performed. The research was a major requirement of an Arts Practice PhD programme conducted from 2009 until 2013. To create a landscape where perhaps there could be such a bold use of traditional Irish step dance, an initial production, *Noctú* was created, and performed widely including Belfast, Dublin, various towns and cities in Ireland, and culminating in a 5-week residency in New York. *Noctú* was widely reviewed and this data, coupled with other research, revealed that this new exploratory Irish dance work did not fit comfortably in either the commercial performance world (where many Irish dance productions exist), or the contemporary dance platforms. That said *Noctú* was well-received by the general theatre public and critics.

Rite of Spring was subsequently created with a greater confidence on the part of the choreographer and dancers, performing to a large audience at the opening of the largest music festival in Europe, *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann*, which is dedicated to Irish traditional music. Choreographically this *Rite of Spring* questioned the Irish dance aesthetic in terms of the physicality of the dance, process, context, and from a thematic point of view. Verticality was tampered with as well as creating new vocabulary especially for the work. There was less emphasis on virtuosity, a turning of the gaze inward instead, locating the source and impulse of the emotion, opening up channels for this to surface on the body in novel ways. The work explored group dynamics in contemporary society, presenting practices as arrays of activities which are faithfully adhered to, until a significant ‘O’ther, an Alpha, alters that practice.

The choreographic work and performance had a profound affect on both dancers and choreographer, altering their perception of how they understood the future of Irish step dance performance, but also how they saw the world around them.

Rite of Spring can be accessed and viewed from website: www.eriu.co

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Notes

¹ RTÉ – Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Ireland's national radio and television broadcaster

² *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* is a traditional Irish music festival and attracts up to 300,000 visitors to the host town each year, making it the largest music festival in Europe

³ The Allianz Business to Arts Awards recognise businesses, artists and arts organisations that develop creative partnerships, bringing the arts and artists into mutually beneficial relationships across society. <http://www.businessstoarts.ie/awards/>

⁴ Dancers who go from Irish dance show to Irish dance show purely for the work with no other objective such as artistic and personal development or up-skilling.

⁵ Short story by Stephen King (1977) – Movie version released in 1984

⁶ Old Irish saying – “Don’t break a custom, don’t create a custom”

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