‘They must know me’: Embodied Intertextuality and the Reworking of Local Irish Dance Traditions by Siamsa Tíre

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Abstract: Focusing on elements and motifs in ‘The Blackbird’ set dance performed by Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, and their reoccurrence in subsequent choreography, this article critically considers the continued embodiment of local identity as it transfers from a community of older dancers to professional staged adaptations involving international collaborators and newly composed music. Through an analysis of archival footage and dance steps, I present comparisons with the choreography for ‘The Seville Suite’, first performed in 1992, which juxtaposes traditional Irish and Flamenco dance. I reflect on my own dance practice and seek to translate embodied knowledge that demonstrates the resilience of cultural practices Retraditionalization is evident as artists return to an exploration of the archives and interact with culture bearers to develop the narratives of tradition that have implications for understandings of authenticity.

Keywords: Irish dance, intertextuality, folk theatre, Siamsa Tíre, resilience

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Introduction

Interaction between the local and the global, and the implications of these interactions for tradition, are a recurring feature of scholarship and activity in Irish traditional music. The focus of this article is the role and representation of the local through an embodied and evolving regional dance tradition. This article examines how Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland (previously Siamsóirí na Ríochta), has conserved and developed the North Kerry ‘Munnix’ style of traditional step dancing as a resilient culture. It has continued to embody a local identity through its use of local dance steps from the Munnix tradition as they

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engage with international artists and audiences. The local is informed by the global and the company have sought to develop new artistic expression through dance.

Developed from community activities in the 1960s, Siamsa Tíre is a theatre company that creates productions inspired by Irish rural life, myths and legends, and cultural expressions including Irish traditional music, song and dance (Foley, 2013; Kearney, 2013a, 2013b; Phelan, 2014). Located in Co. Kerry, in the South West of Ireland, performances by the company are popular with tourists to the region, and the company has sporadically toured in Ireland and internationally (Kearney, 2022). The company engages in education and training locally, regularly devising new material and productions, performed mostly by a community cast from the locality. Since the 1980s, it has maintained a small, professional core group of performers, whose remit includes training and development. Aspects of the company's performances include the primacy of Irish traditional music and the singing of choral arrangements of Irish language song. They drew inspiration from and may be compared with international folk dance companies such as the Moiseyev Dance Company of Russia but their style of performance differs as it does not only focus on dance.

Foley (2013) argues that the development of Siamsa Tíre is a response to globalisation, modernisation and urbanisation, but in this article I demonstrate that it also embraces the potential created by these changes, as well as the opportunities for collaboration and use of technology. Developments and productions from the 1980s sought to expand the style and aesthetics of the company without abandoning local cultural references. Choreographer Fergus Ó Conchubhair identifies Siamsa Tíre as 'a repository of local folk culture, presented onstage in music and dance performances' (2017, p. 190). He focuses in on the company's use of the distinctive Munnix style of step dancing that connects the company with its North Kerry location, despite its national title (p. 190). This is particularly evident in an analysis of dance steps and intertextuality, in this case focusing on the steps and motifs of 'The Blackbird' set dance from the Munnix tradition. Through personal reflections on my involvement as a trainee and performer with the company, archival research and my analysis of dance steps, the article critically engages with intertextuality in the work of Siamsa Tíre, the role and representation of the local through an embodied dance tradition, and its contribution to the resilience of local traditions.

Writing in a broader context of dance in Ireland, Aoife McGrath (2012; 2016) has noted the important role of Siamsa Tíre as an influence on creative approaches in contemporary Irish dance practice by other performers. In this article, the focus is on the creative approaches within the Siamsa Tíre repertoire and the reworking of dance steps in the presentation of Irish folk theatre, aiming to reflect and develop aspects of both Foley and McGrath's work. I reflect on the early presentation of the dance as a solo art form prior to collaborations with external choreographers and the development of the dance practice. I seek to use dance practice to translate and communicate artistic performance aesthetics and tacit knowledge in the tradition (McKerrell, 2021). I present an analysis of motifs and elements in 'The Blackbird' and draw comparisons with 'The Seville Suite' before highlighting a reengagement with the source material and community in a process of retraditionalization. According to folklorist Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, this involves 'the creation of new traditions, the re-circulation of dead or moribund cultural traditions, the reorientation of traditional cultural production ot modern contexts or the heightened definition of existing cultural materials' (Ó Giolláin, 2005, p. 16). All aspects are evident in this paper.

Broadway Beginnings

Although the origins of Siamsa Tíre date back to the 1960s, I begin my narrative here in 1976, the year of the first tour of the USA by the company. Newspaper reviews noted that the production did not include the popular song 'Danny Boy' but rather a different, less familiar representation of Irish folk culture, in which all of the songs were in Irish (Kearney, 2019). One of the best received aspects of the 1976 tour was the appearance of two male step dancers, Jerry Nolan (1915–1984) and John McCarthy (1921–1991). Importantly, the steps performed by Nolan and McCarthy were part of a localised tradition, the motifs and style of which I examine in this article. Nolan and McCarthy performed in a dance style associated with the North Kerry dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux (1881-1965), also known as 'Munnix', after whom the tradition is named.[2] Although the tradition of step dancing in North Kerry dates back much further, Molyneaux provides a reference point for the company, some of whose early members knew or were taught by him, including the founding Artistic Director Pat Ahern (*b.*1932).

Writing about Siamsa Tíre in the context of the history of Irish step dance, ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley, who previously conducted fieldwork in the region and who has written extensively on Irish dance traditions and the importance of Molyneaux and his pupils (2012, 2013, 2020), notes how: 'The participation of the older traditional step dancers in the shows provided an "authenticity" to the show while also assisting to validate the work of the National Folk Theatre' (2013, p. 210). As Sean Williams (2014, p. 601) asserts in relation to the Irish diaspora in America but equally important for the still developing folk theatre company at home in Ireland, a connection to idealised 'authentic' channels such as master performers reinforce the perceived value of what is being presented and performed (cf. Blaustein, 2006; Ballantyne, 2008). The sense of recognising the authenticity of the material that Siamsa Tíre was presenting predates the tour itself and is evident in an unpublished plan developed by Ahern (Ahern and O'Sullivan, 1972).

Step dancer Jerry Nolan, a farmer from Dromurhur, Moyvane, a small village in North Kerry, embodied his local culture through his performance of the Munnix step dance tradition (see also, Foley, 2013). He had left school around the age of fourteen to work on his family's farm and though he never formally attended a school of dance, he learned from dancing masters and local step dancers including Jeremiah Molyneaux, Joe Vaughan, Paddy White and Jack Lyons, all important dancers who influenced the development of and dance style presented by Siamsa Tíre. Nolan performed at local house dances, crossroads or platform dances and concerts.[3] Nolan also participated in 'the Wren' each year, a custom on the 26 December where people dressed up and visited houses in the neighbourhood for entertainment (see Gailey, 1969; Granville, 2012), similar to traditions in many other places including Cornwall (Cornish, 2016), Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland (Gunnell, 2007). His dance steps were part of a local North Kerry tradition that he, a farmer, engaged in as a pastime. He was now performing in a professional performance space with Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, in front of a large audience in the USA.

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[2] Archival videos created by Catherine Foley during the early 1980s in the Teach Siamsa, Finuge, featuring some of Molyneaux's pupils, including Nolan and McCarthy, are accessible on the Muckross House Research Library: http://www.muckrosshouseresearchlibrary.ie/Dance-Collection.php

[3] Helena Wulff (2007) develops a discussion around crossroads dancing, including descriptions provided by Ahern. Helen Brennan (2001) provides further examples from around Ireland. Such events mirror 'Parish picnics' in Cape Breton (Melin, 2012) or contexts for Scottish dance (Flett and Flett, 1985; Melin, 2013).

Exiting the stage to rapturous applause in the Palace Theatre, Broadway, Nolan reputedly turned to the people side stage and muttered 'They must know me' (Creedon, 2007). Nolan was used to being applauded by his neighbours when he performed in his local area but thought of this more as a neighbourly response than an appreciation of his artistry. The audience did not know Nolan, nor were they familiar with the Munnix tradition, but Nolan embodied a recognisable engagement with an artform that drew the applause of his audience, something that Nolan was only familiar with in his own community. Beyond the Irish American community in the USA who may have been familiar with or engaged in Irish dancing, Broadway audiences were familiar with tap dance routines in musical theatre. Film stars such as Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly had advanced the artform that owed some of its origins and stylistic development to Irish dance (Knowles, 2002; Hill, 2014). In contrast with their more famous American counterparts, Nolan and McCarthy presented a more understated performance that reflected the traditional dance practices of their native North Kerry. Their steps, dance style and Siamsa Tíre's representation of the local, remains central to the artistic development of the company. Although there are no recordings of his performance, cast members remember his steps and style and, from this, it is deduced that his steps are recognisable in performances today, not only by Siamsa Tíre but an international community of dancers who engage with the Munnix tradition.

Siamsa Tíre – Developing the Dance Tradition

A pupil of the dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux, Ahern drew inspiration from his upbringing on a farm in Moyvane in rural North Kerry. Dancer Liam Tarrant (1921–1974), another pupil of Munnix, was an important collaborator and friend to Ahern, and one of a number of older dancers who contributed to the early development of the company. Ahern also received support from his Bishop, Éamonn Casey, while a younger generation of performers included dancer Patricia Hanafin and musician Anne Sheehy, who were amongst those who taught me. The establishment of training centres in 1974 and 1975, a professional Core Company in 1985 and ongoing developments of productions that often involve a largely amateur community cast all contribute to the development and resilience of a local traditional arts community. I began training with the company in the 1980s, progressing to performing regularly on stage as a musician, singer and dancer through the 1990s and early 2000s, and briefly returning as Season Director in 2012 following a period away from the company. During this time, I had the opportunity to perform with some of the early company including Seán Ahern and Sean O'Mahony, and engage in aspects of training of younger performers. I performed the role of Munnix as a child and teenager in the training centres. I also performed for several years in *Ding Dong Dederó* during the mid-1990s, as well as performing dance pieces such as 'The Seville Suite' and 'Bímís ag Rince'.

The focus on local solo step dance style in the performances of the Siamsa Tíre company reflects what Anthony Shay terms 'particularization' in his writings on international folk dance companies (2002, p. 14). In contrast to 'essentialzation', whereby elements are generalized and 'a series of steps, movements, and choreographic stategies' attempt to 'represent an essentialized nation', Siamsa Tíre utilize 'minute and authentic details of movement' (*ibid.*). While Ahern has noted the influence of the Moiseyev Dance Company on the development of Siamsa Tíre, greater comparison may be drawn with LADO in Croatia who were less spectacular and national than the Moiseyev (Shay, 2002; 2016). From the beginnings, the North Kerry step dance tradition was integral to performances by Siamsa

Tíre. Ahern and Foley, the latter working on behalf of Muckross House,[4] recorded many older dancers from North Kerry. Siamsa Tíre community cast member and dancer Michael Murphy was employed by the company in 1983 to undertake further research on the traditional steps of the North Kerry dancers. This provided a crucial resource for future development as Ahern and the company sought to develop dance as a form of expression. Artistic Director and former Dance Master with the company Jonathan Kelliher (2020) notes the importance of recordings of the Munnix pupils in the Siamsa Tíre archives in inspiring the creative practice of the company to the present.

Ahern wished to preserve and pass on the traditions of the area but also engaged in exploring the theatrical use of dance and the potential for learning from other dance forms. In Ahern's 1972 plan for the development of a National Folk Theatre Company there is specific reference to the role of a dance master in the company noting that, in addition to being an accomplished Irish dancer with particular knowledge of old-time step and folk dances, 'a flair for the creative side of dancing is necessary, as part of the work is intended to be that of choreographer, to experiment in recreating and building on the local native dances of the district with a view to their theatrical presentation' (1972, p. 21). In addition to developing local talent, Ahern was proactive in seeking opportunities for external collaboration and valued the contribution of international artists to the development of the company. This echoes Irish poet John Montague, speaking contemporaneously who believed that Irish poets should develop an appreciation of international poets, beyond the English language and advocating for a global-regionalist perspective, concurrently local and international (Frazier, 1972; Kennedy-Andrews, 2008). This, he proposes, is not to advocate for 'a deliberate programme of de-nationalisation' but a belief that 'all true experiments and exchanges only serve to illuminate the self, a rediscovery of the oldest laws of the psyche' (1973, p.219). Former Dance Master and Artistic Director Oliver Hurley notes the involvement of external choreographers and was quoted by dance critic Michael Seavor as stating that 'Father Pat Ahern had a vision for the company more than 20 years ago and believed our style of dancing should be open to other influences' (2005, p. 11).

The establishment of a professional company in the 1980s allowed the company to collaborate with a number of Irish and international dancers and choreographers including Argentinean Roberto D'Amico[5] and Jonathon Burnett from Scotland, leading to the exploration of folk and contemporary dance styles. D'Amico, was already exploring modern dance practice that was influenced by folk traditions. Burnett, a former member of Irish National Ballet who had a special interest in mime,[6] developed *An Mhaigdean Mhara* (1986) with the professional company and led to Siamsa Tíre's first performance at the Dublin Theatre Festival. Works such as *Idir Eatarthu / Between Worlds* (1990) with music composed by Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin, in which members of the company worked with choreographer Anne Courtney, exemplify the development of the dance style, which dance critic Diane Theodores (1996) suggested could lead to a new Irish dance style. As Artistic Director Jonathan Kelliher points out in Deirdre Mulrooney's (2006) volume on dance in Ireland, this was the culmination of a process that included a lot of unseen work, whereby members of the company would work with outside choreographers as collaborators. The continuation of the

[4] Muckross House Research Library, located in Killarney, Co. Kerry, seeks to document the traditions, way of life, and history of the people of Kerry. Traditional Music and Dance Page (muckrosshouseresearchlibrary.ie)
[5] D'Amico came in 1982 prior to the establishment of a professional company (Phelan, 2014).
[6] Burnett's acting skills are highlighted in reviews of his performances with Irish National Ballet (Kennealy, 1983; O'Donoghue, 1984).

process of merging the Munnix style with contemporary dance is evident in *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991) with Courtney, *Clann Lir* (1997) with choreographer Mary Nunan assisted by former *Riverdance* member Rionach Ni Neill (see Swift, 1999), and *Oileán* (2003) with choreographer Cindy Cummings. Process-led projects engaging with the Munnix style of dance also include *rEvolution* and *rEvolution reloaded* (Cronin, 2018).

Recognising the creativity of Siamsa Tíre is critical to understanding their role in the sustainability and resilience of local traditions and their conservation rather than preservation. Ethnomusicologist and folklorist Jeff Todd Titon differentiates between sustainability and resilience noting that 'Resilience refers to a system's capacity to recover and maintain its integrity, identity, and continuity when subjected to forces of disturbance and change' (2020, p. 172). This mirrors his distinction between preservation, which seeks to limit change, and conservation, which acknowledges change but attempts to manage it (Ibid. p. 174). Some of the key forces that have impacted on the North Kerry dance traditions include engagement with competitions beyond the local and the influence of tourism and the demands of the tourist gaze. Foley (2013, 2015c, 2020) has both acknowledged the influence of dancing competitions on local dance practice in North Kerry and the appropriation of regional dance styles in competitive contexts. It is clear that the cultural milieu of the North Kerry dancing master has not been sustained but some of the artistic expressions of this place have developed new life and forms of expression in new contexts. The developments and desire for continuing exploration has been identified by Ahern, placing an emphasis on the balance between the strength of tradition and the excitement of invention (Ó Cinnéide, 2001, p. 51).

Understanding the steps as both embodied practice (see also Foley, 2013) and embodied texts, I draw on concepts of intertextuality to explore their recurrence in performances by the company. Credited as coining the term intertextuality (see Alfaro, 1996; d'Angelo, 2009), Julia Kristeva argues that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986, p. 37). Writing about gender, dance artist and educator Bryant Henderson believes 'intertextuality is foundational to the dance experience', and 'participants in dance discourses have continuous access to their past, emerging, and future sociocultural interactions and experiences (i.e., texts)' (2019, p. 1). Focusing in on 'retro' as one strategy of intertextuality, which d'Angelo (2009) identifies as being related to nostalgia, Stuart Sim refers to the 'reappropriation and recontextualization of older forms and styles' (2005, p. 297). Siamsa Tíre return to utilise archival sources, reforming and re-embodying the steps of the 'Munnix tradition' to create, sustain and develop their dance style and sense of local identity. Their approach pre-empts similar activities by others. In an article proposing that there is a paradigm shift in Irish dance in the wake of *Riverdance* that gives greater attention to the body and expands beyond the codes of competition and cultural nationalism that dominated much of the twentieth century, Frank Hall proposes understanding 'the moving body as expression' (1997, p. 134). In presenting a local or regional dance style, the dancers are expressing their tradition and place in a way that does not always conform to established practice but nevertheless strives for a sense of authenticity. While Hall posits that innovation 'may be seen as a challenge to traditional authority, to tradition itself', he argues with reference to competition contexts that 'the issue of authenticity is built into the mode of practice and understanding of change' (p. 138).

Choreographer Deborah Carr (2017) also acknowledges processes of glocalization in Irish dance, citing the example of the impact of *Riverdance* on local Irish step dancing schools internationally; and in this article, the recognition of interconnection between local and global is critical. The importance of Irish dance is further emphasised by anthropologist Helena

Wulff who describes dance as the 'embodiment of values linked to Irish national identity, mobility, dance competitions and global touring' (2005, p. 46). Wulff argues that all Irish dance is influenced by links to the land and the conceptualisation of Irishness, tradition, authenticity, and collective identity. As Siamsa Tíre assumes a national identity and status, engages with other cultures and performs internationally, their dance steps are an important connection with its roots, community and regional traditions at home.

Meeting the Blackbird

Video 1: The Blackbird Set Dance

[Video available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljiKjjpVlnQ]

A version of 'The Blackbird' set dance in the style of Munnix has become an important part of the Siamsa Tíre repertoire.[7] It is critical to understanding the embodiment of local culture and Foley states that 'this "Blackbird" set dance, choreographed by Molyneaux, continues to be an important kinaesthetic identity marker of Siamsa Tíre' (2013, p. 226). A staged narrative for the development of the 'Munnix Blackbird' is provided in the first act of *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991). The main stage represents Jeremiah's father's forge, in which dance takes place. The opening scene presents an expression of primitive dance, which is gradually developed or evolved through the entire production. The young Munnix experiences dance through the play of other children and in the visit of a travelling dancing master[8] who teaches the boy a hornpipe step while lilting the tune of 'The Blackbird'. The boy is inspired by the shapes of the tools in his father's forge, the dances of a group of travellers who visit the forge and a fiddle player who stops to play. There is a suggestion of a spiritual source for the dance – both Christian and pagan – as the young boy dances to the prayers and chants of the community attending mass and encounters spirits from the fire in a dream-like sequence. Gradually the steps that I perform in Video 1 become complete and the boy becomes a man. In the second act, the older figure of Munnix passes on these steps to a new generation who, in turn, continue to develop the dance.

A representation in words of the beginning of 'The Blackbird' step that I learned from my dancing teacher Patricia Hanafin reads:

Tip and tip batter jump bang bang
Jump out, jump batter hop kick out
Jump heel step toe bang kick up
Jump heel help click down

These words and phrases are descriptive mnemonic devices that do not provide adequate description to reproduce the dance step, that I perform in Video 1 (see also, Jones, 2021). They may be understood and translated or embodied by former students of Hanafin, who include members of Siamsa Tíre who trained in the Teach Siamsa in Finuge from 1974 to the

[7] Describing it as a tune 'found all over Ireland with the same title and the same melodic structure' (1990, p 43), James Cowdery provides an analysis of 'The Blackbird' tune hoping to 'understand some of the basic patterns of the melodic tradition of Ireland' (1990, p. 77).

[8] It is worth noting that this narrative of the dance is extended backwards historically in the production *Tearmann*, which is inspired in part by the story of Moreen, an earlier dancing master (Foley, 2015a; Kearney, 2021). *Tearmann* also has a scene, set in the workhouse, where the dancing master passes on his steps to a younger character (see also, Phelan, 2014).

2000s. Their usefulness in the context of this article is to provide a basic means of comparing and contrasting the use of dance steps and the embodiment of local culture, even when that culture is changed or presented in another context. The elements of the steps and their textual representation do not reflect the totality of the dance style. As dancer Paddy White noted on a video made for archival purposes by Ahern, 'you'll show a person a step, and you'll show it t'em the real way, but it can be danced a different way to put style into it […] to put style into it is a different thing than to learn a step'.[9] This reflects the 'embodied, unspoken knowledge' defined by McKerrell as 'tacit knowledge' (2021, p. 7), similar to his examination of motivic content in traditional Scottish bagpiping (2005, 2009). Key aspects of my performance include the twist or swivel on the heel, the arch of the raised leg which does not extend high into the air, and the grounded nature of the 'drum'. It is a relaxed, close-to-the-floor style of dance that does not require a large space, echoing the adage, 'he could dance on a sixpence', or the practice of step dancing on a half-door laid out on an uneven floor.

The elements and motifs present in this version of 'The Blackbird' are evident in other steps and it is important to note that Foley and others collected a variety of versions of the step in North Kerry. In Video 2, I preform steps I learned from archive recordings of John McCarthy and John Joe O'Donnell. When working for the company in 2012, I spent time going through the videos and facilitated some workshops for members of the cast, including teaching a step that I had not previously learned, a hornpipe performed by McCarthy. This step included a number of similarities with 'The Blackbird' step (see Table 1), notably the bang motif (tip and tip batter jump bang) at the beginning. There is an exact match of motifs in bar 4 (jump heel heel click down) and more subtle similarities to the end, with McCarthy's step ending in a complicated flourish.

Video 2: Hornpipe Steps from John McCarthy and John Joe O'Donnell

[Video available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY9SR-ORzeo]

Blackbird Step A	McCarthy Hornpipe Step
Tip and tip batter jump bang, bang Jump out jump batter hop kick out Jump heel step toe bang kick up, Jump heel, heel click down Tip batter hop back two three Step bang, kick and toe heel bang Kick out heel, one two and tip batter hop back.	Tip and tip batter and bang toe bang kick and heel Hop out jump batter hop kick out and jump heel heel click down Tip and tip batter hop back, tip and tip batter hop batter hop kick hop Tip and drum toe step heel heel click down batter hop back.

Table 1 Comparison of notation of the Blackbird and McCarthy Hornpipe

[9] I studied this tape in July 2012 in preparation for a number of pre-performance workshops with cast members at a time when I was working for Siamsa Tíre monitoring performances for the summer season, undertaking research and developing projects. The archive recording was made in the 1970s in the Teach Siamsa in Finuge. White began learning from Munnix in 1914 and is one highly valued by Ahern as the development of the company.

For this research, I also engaged with the archival recordings created by Catherine Foley housed at Muckross House in Killarney and Foley's own video resources that she has made available online (2015b). A step by John Joe O'Donnell that exhibits similarity with the second step of 'The Blackbird'. Again, the opening motif is the same, the 'heel, heel click down' motif recurs and the double drum is evident in both steps as is a motif that features the leg swung forward. The leg swing allows for a rotation of the heel in the air, reflecting the swivel of the heel on the ground. Thus, the interpretation of the steps and motifs and their embodiment requires a sense of style. By not only watching but embodying the dance steps, it is evident that the codes or language of the dance are shared across generations.

Blackbird Step B	O'Donnell Hornpipe Step
Tip and tip and drum, toe step heel step one two swing out swing in Tip and tip two three, jump two three jump heel heel click down and Tip and drum and drum batter hop rock two down batter hop rock two Step bang, kick out heel, jump and drum bang Tip batter hop back, tip and tip toe step heel step one two Kick hop heel heel click down batter hop toe bang, toe bang Tip and drum and drum one two swing out swing back kick hop heel heel click down Tip and drum batter hop back	Tip and tip and drum toe step heel step one two tip out tip back kick out Jump two three jump bang tip hop heel heel click down and tip and drum and drum batter hop back Tip and drum tip out heel, tip and drum step batter hop and tip and tip batter hop back.

Table 2 Comparison of steps and motifs.

Notable elements of these steps include the particular drum pattern, which differs from other styles, an element that was emphasised by Hanafin, Ahern and Kelliher when I was learning the style. The use of single 'tips' rather than 'batters' or 'doubles'/'trebles' is also noteworthy. My terminology, not unlike the Scottish tradition of mouth music or puirt à beul (Sparling, 2014), provides a mnemonic device that I derive principally from Patricia Hanafin. It is not a formal code but rather an instinctive learned language based on my enculturation in the tradition. It is likely understandable to varying degrees to other dancers, particularly those who share the experiencing of learning from Hanafin. In addition to embodying the knowledge through dance, the code provides a means of comparison, albeit limited, for further developments of the style, steps and motifs.

Beyond Local: A Blackbird in Seville

Commissioned by the Irish government Bill Whelan composed 'The Seville Suite' (1992) for EXPO'92. For the performance, which featured a number of high profile Irish traditional musicians from various backgrounds, one movement featured Irish and Flamenco dancing. Although several members of the company including Ahern were involved in its development, for the performance of 'The Seville Suite' at EXPO'92, dancer Michael Murphy was the sole performer from Siamsa Tíre. In Seville, Murphy danced opposite Flamenco dancer María Pagés but prior to the performance in Seville, the dance was premiered in the National Concert Hall in Dublin with the Flamenco part performed by Tara

Little. Little joined Siamsa Tíre at the age of eight and was a member of the first professional company in 1985. She moved to Dublin in the 1990s and later joined the Riverdance team with whom she was Dance Captain and a choreographer with *Riverdance The Show* (1995).

For 'The Seville Suite', Ahern and members of the professional company worked with Pagés to choreograph Whelan's music. The choreographic process draws comparison with Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin's use of the term 'reworking', as he describes when discussing Irish traditional music in the early 1980s:

> 'The process of reworking is the important thing. It is the evolution of such a process which creates new music out of the old. Such great sections of the material on which traditional music in Ireland is built have come from outside the culture that any search for the centre of the music must lead to the reworking process itself, not to its products. This process is the creative centre of any music culture. It creates its own gravitational force which maintains the unity of the system around it. Moving through history, it discards elements and acquires new ones according to its need and circumstances' (1981, p. 83).

What is notable in Ó Suilleabháin's writing and in his creative output, and which is evident also in the work of Siamsa Tíre, is the influence from outside of the local culture while retaining and maintaining traditional elements. The use of Irish traditional music in compositions by a number of artists including Ó Suilleabháin is critically examined by composer Dave Flynn (2010) through an analysis of scores. In my research, in addition to historical and ethnographic research, I seek to develop a physical way of knowing to understand the embodiment of local identity and its expression in the work of Siamsa Tíre through engagement with the steps (see also Foley, 2013, 2020; Melin, 2012). I consider the step dances as a text and outline and perform examples of intertextuality to highlight the resilience of local traditions.

Video 3: Steps from 'The Seville Suite'

[Video available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlRVfHMIfaI]

Down batter down batter bang bang bang Down batter down batter jump bang bang Out one two step batter hop back Tip and drum and drum and drum Batter jump batter jump batter hop back Batter jump heel, jump and drum Bang jump jump and skip Tip hop and drum batter hop back Batter jump batter jump Toe step heel step swing out swing back Tip and tip and drum, and tip and drum Toe heel heel click down, tip and drum Jump jump and skip tip hop and drum and drum batter hop back	Batter jump batter jump batter hop back two three Batter jump batter jump batter hop back two three Batter jump, tip jump drum, tow heel heel click down Toe bang kick down hop back two three four Down batter down batter bang bang bang Jump out jump batter hop kick out Jump heel step toe bang kick down Jump tip hop and drum Batter jump batter jump Toe step heel step swing out swing in Tip and tip and drum, and tip and drum Toe heel heel click down, tip and drum

Jump two three step bang jump toe heel bang kick and heel hop back	Down batter down batter bang bang bang Jump out jump batter hop kick out Jump heel step toe bang kick down Jump tip hop and drum

Table 3 Comparison between Munnix Blackbird and Seville Suite steps.

A reworking of the first step of the 'Munnix Blackbird' is evident throughout the sequence of steps. The first motif is evocative of the double bang at the start of 'The Blackbird'. The drum in the second step is danced behind rather than in front, similar to bar seven/eight of the second Blackbird step. The third step is very similar in motion to the beginning of the second Blackbird step and incorporates the 'heel heel click down' motif at the end. The similarity increases on the repeat of the step as the opening batters change to 'batter jump and drum'. The end of the seventh step mirrors the flourish at the end of McCarthy's hornpipe step, as does the finale, as danced in Video 3. Although the fourth step is a travel step and allows the Irish dancer to move closer to the Flamenco dancer, throughout the dance, the dancers perform independently with the exception of one turn by the Flamenco dancer beneath the outstretched arm of the Irish dancer.

The core elements of the style, the arched leg out, the drum with toes to the floor, the swivel on the heel are all evident. Despite having received acclaim for innovations in dance that brought together regional step dance and contemporary dance, the Siamsa Tíre element of 'The Seville Suite' was a very conservative presentation of step dance that borrowed heavily from the steps of the North Kerry dancers. The steps danced in jig time are quicker and more rapid, moving from the more relaxed Munnix style of dance towards the rapid percussiveness of the Flamenco style, without altering the motifs or elements within the steps and adhering tightly to the rhythms in the music.

The choreographic process employed by Ahern mirrors Foley's description of Molyneaux's approach, seeking to express rhythmically, aurally, and visually the tune that went along with the dance (2013, p. 97).[10] Ahern's own experience of learning dance from Molyneaux, combined with the research conducted by Murphy and other members of the Professional Company at Siamsa Tíre at the time including then Dance Master Oliver Hurley ensured a link with older traditions while responding to the innovative aspects of Whelan's music. The process mirrors in dance the musical reworking of the traditional hornpipe 'The Plains of Boyle' in Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin's contemporaneous composition *Woodbrooke* (1992) and it is notable that Siamsa Tíre worked with Ó Suilleabháin and choreographer Mary Nunan for *Between Worlds* (1991), which featured alongside Whelan's work at the NCH prior to performances in Seville. Writing about authenticity in Irish traditional music, Mary Trachsel quotes Ó Súilleabháin, referring to his use of 'reworking' and commenting: 'Within this reworking process, Ó Súilleabháin emphasizes the epistemic function of music—its capacity for discovery—as it transforms rather than merely translates the experience of being Irish' (1995, p. 45). The Siamsa Tíre dancers were engaged in the interpretation of tradition. They benefitted from the archival footage of the North Kerry dancers created by Ahern and Foley, which they watched and learned steps from, and added to this. Simultaneously, they were

[10] Similar approaches to choreographing step dancing in other traditions are outlined in Melin (2013) and Ballantyne (2019).

developing their artistry through workshops in different disciplines and genres of dance and engagement with other international cultures.

'The Seville Suite' received critical acclaim. Kate Robinson's review of the Irish Pavilion in 1992 includes particular reference to the performance:

> 'A brilliant piece of choreography celebrated the intertwining of Spanish and Irish culture. Father Pat Aherne [sic] of Siamsa created an ensemble in which Flamenco dancing meshed with the Irish hornpipe, emphasising both the similarities and the differences between the two styles'.

'The Seville Suite' subsequently became part of the Siamsa Tíre repertoire and featured in the Christmas Show 1994 and subsequently in the production *Sean agus Nua* in the late 1990s. In later performances, three male Irish dancers danced with three female Flamenco dancers, who were all trained members of the Siamsa Tíre cast. The six dancers took physically more space on a stage but the dancers each occupied only a small space; the travel step allowed greater movement across larger stages but the dance could be performed effectively in a small space, a reflection of the dance styles' origins.

An important note is that 'The Seville Suite' does not reflect the development of a hybrid or mongrel cultural practice. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha points to the potential offered by intercultural experiences but unlike some of Bhabha's work on hybridity, and studies that consider mongrelisation in Irish traditional music (Noone, 2016; Dillane and Noone, 2016; Morgenstern, 2019), 'The Seville Suite' presents the juxtaposition of two dance styles. The path is not towards cultural homogeneity but rather the appreciation of difference as evidenced in dance traditions. Reflecting Claude Levi-Strauss who stated: 'Every culture must liberate its creative potential by finding the correct equilibrium between isolation and contact with others' (in: Eriksen 2001 [1995], p. 294), Siamsa Tíre found new opportunities in these international collaborations. Nevertheless, the dance steps remain very evident and a physical exploration and performance of the Irish dance steps exemplifies this.

Contested Narratives, Intertextuality and Ongoing Resilience

Some have pointed to Siamsa Tíre and 'The Seville Suite' as the roots of *Riverdance* (Ó Cinnéide, 2001; Walsh, 2021), but a more nuanced understanding of change and evolution in Irish traditional music is required. My study of dance and the Siamsa Tíre company is informed and influenced by scholarship on *Riverdance* that often omits a consideration of innovation in Irish dancing prior to the 1994 production for the Eurovision Song Contest. Too often Siamsa Tíre is viewed through too narrow a lens if at all (Seavor, 2005), although recent scholarship has given greater recognition to the innovative practices (Wulff, 2007; Moloney et al, 2009; McGrath, 2016). Noting many influences, Whelan himself acknowledges that he did not encounter Siamsa Tíre prior to working on 'The Seville Suite' (interview with Kearney, 2018) and had already been exploring influences and rhythms from other musical traditions on a variety of projects but he did identify 'The Seville Suite' as a precursor to *Riverdance* (*Sé mo Laoch*, 2020). More importantly, although not always recognised as such (Seavor, 2005), Siamsa Tíre are part of a traditional music, song and dance community that is developing and evolving its artforms, including incorporating elements from other traditions.

The global success of productions such as *Riverdance* – identified as postmodern by Frank Hall (1997) and Adrian Scahill (2009) – has led to a disconnection between the dance and the nation but this globalisation of the dance has also led to localisation and a desire for local

traditions. Foley has highlighted the resurgence of interest in the traditional Blackbird steps, their presence in competition, and the fact that she collected different versions of 'The Blackbird' from older dancers in North Kerry in the 1980s (Foley, 2020). The importance placed upon set dances such as 'The Blackbird' in the tradition (Cowdery, 1990; Ní Bhriain and McCabe, 2018; Kelliher, 2020) and the resurgence of popularity of 'The Blackbird' in competitive contexts (Foley, 2020) suggest that these steps bestow status on the performer. Rather than 'suck the energy' from local dance styles (O'Toole, 2005), Foley asserts that a demand remained for local step dance practices in Ireland:

> This current popularity results from . . . the perception of them as bearers of an older system of values and sentiments, custodians of a rural, more integrated, and autonomous way of life […] They and their dances can be located within the framework of the familiar, as opposed to the unfamiliarity of the global; in effect, they provide the illusion of stability (2020, p. 41).

This returns to the familiarity implicit in the intertextuality of Siamsa Tíre's creative endeavours in the area of dance. In her historical overview of Irish traditional music, Helen O'Shea relates the development of folk music revivals to an expression of nostalgic longings for the past in response to a rapidly modernising society, stating:

> 'Yearnings for symbols of an imagined past are driven by the estrangement and alienation symptomatic of modernity and central to the homogenizing requirements of the modern nation-state in the face of ethnic and cultural diversity'. (O'Shea 2008, p. 2)

Ó Giolláin (2005) similarly points to the homogenizing forces of romantic nationalism but highlights the reassertion of the local and the regional. As Irish dance has developed as a national form with global popularity, The Blackbird steps provide a link to local traditions but many of the creative projects, such as 'The Seville Suite', seek to engage with cultural diversity. Indeed, the second act of *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991), reproduced in part for *Sean agus Nua* (1998), represents the handing on of tradition from the dancing master to a new generation who continue to 'forge the dance' and explore the creative potential through choreography.

As with responses to modernisation and globalisation, societal responses to COVID-19 have also been dominated by a sense of nostalgia. This is also evident in the activities of Siamsa Tíre. A 2020 lockdown project by members of Siamsa Tíre focused on 'The Blackbird', and featured contributions by members of the Siamsa Tíre community, including myself. Introducing the video, Kelliher stated that the professional company choreographed the steps in 1990. This contrasts with memories of these steps amongst older members and Foley's (2020) assertion that she collected this and other versions from the older dancers of North Kerry and the memories of dancers from the 1976 tour that Nolan and McCarthy danced these steps.

'The Blackbird' again featured prominently in another 2020 project by Kelliher as part of *20/20 Visionaries*, an initiative by Trad Ireland funded by Culture Ireland. The video included footage of Kelliher and his formative teacher, local dance master Jimmy Hickey who had himself learned from Munnix, dancing another version of 'The Blackbird' that he insisted came directly from Munnix. Hickey states:

> ‘I’d say I learned most or all of Jerry’s steps from Liam. Because Liam had them all, he had, and he improved them as well, he did. Even take “The Blackbird’”. There are several ‘Blackbirds’ out today but the “original Blackbird”’ was the one Jerry taught Liam and Liam taught it to me and that’s the one I taught you. That’s “Jerry Munnix’s Blackbird”. That’s the “real one”’. (Kelliher, 2020).

There is both poetry and mythmaking in Hickey’s story and highlight a sense of tradition that is both handed on and ‘improved’. In the conclusion to her 2013 book, Foley also notes attitudes towards the ‘real’ Kerry tradition (p. 230). It matters little that the step differs from that which is normally presented as ‘The Munnix Blackbird’. It is part of the tradition, shaped and reshaped by the dancer, and resilient in the face of changing performance contexts and aesthetics.

‘The Blackbird’, as a dance, has enormous significance for members of the company across different generations and reappears in different contexts that perhaps more accurately reflect older contexts for dance than the theatrical productions. I and other former members have danced it at Ahern’s house at gatherings. After the formal ceremonies to mark the conferring of an honorary doctorate on Fr Pat Ahern at University College Cork in 2018, past members of the performing company who were present, including myself, danced ‘The Blackbird’ in the Quad. It reflected the sense of community and the embodied celebration of Ahern’s legacy and the traditions of the older dancers. Again, in 2019, when Ahern was honoured by CCÉ at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann,[11] ‘The Blackbird’ was danced as part of an after-dinner performance. The steps reflect the embodiment of tradition and the connection between the performers, sustained in these performances and evolving in the theatrical productions.

Conclusion

The audience sitting in the Palace Theatre, Broadway in the autumn of 1976 did not know Jerry Nolan nor the culture that he represented. His was not an Ireland of ‘Danny Boy’ but rather of milking cows; when the group returned to Kerry after their adventures in the USA, Jerry stepped off the bus and walked up the laneway to resume his duties on the farm. Through his artistry, he had helped introduce the culture of rural north Kerry to new audiences, albeit in a somewhat sanitised portrayal that lacked the muck and rain of reality. He was a symbol of authenticity engaged in an innovative (if romanticised) expression of Irish rural culture on an international stage. He was a link in the tradition of step dancing from the dance masters of previous generations, part of a community that sought to perform their culture to an international audience and inspired a new generation of dancers who sought to continue to develop the choreographic potential of the dance.

There are a number of steps and motivic elements that recur in performances of the dance style utilised by Siamsa Tíre. There is a process of mythmaking around the authenticity and ownership of the dance tradition that includes the reworking of the dance styles, which returns to the archives for inspiration and remains evident in the activities of the community of dancers to the present. When Siamsa Tíre moved beyond the conservative performance of steps and engaged in a different approach that involved collaboration with artists from other dance traditions, exemplified by ‘The Seville Suite’, there is again a sense of getting to know a local culture but from a different perspective, and in the process developing a new

[11] Organised by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, translated as the festival of Irish music, is an annual festival that places emphasis on competitions.

appreciation for the importance and value of these local traditions in a global context. 'The Seville Suite' is an important dance in the repertoire of Siamsa Tíre and development of Irish dance, preceding *Riverdance* and pre-empting further change in Irish dancing. It was part of an ongoing process in Siamsa Tíre since at least the 1980s. As ethnochoreology increasingly engages with Irish dance, it is important the focus is not solely on the post-*Riverdance* reworkings of Irish dance.

Siamsa Tíre continues to return to 'The Blackbird' for artistic and communal expression. The members of the Siamsa Tíre community embody a kinaesthetic marker that can be read, interpreted and reinterpreted, even when merged with other styles. In his poem, *Among School Children*, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1928) asked 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' (Yeats, 2000). Music and dance provide a sonic and embodied link to the historic past and may be summoned to generate a sense of belonging or communicate an identity. The early performances of Siamsa Tíre told the stories and experiences of the people involved and their community. Their traditions were embodied in their dance steps. Today, the steps have achieved a resilience that provides dancers with a marker of identity, sense of tradition and connection to place and continue to be performed. I never knew Jerry, but I know his dance.

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