

Riverdance

BARBARA O'CONNOR

This year, 1997 marks the centenary of the first Gaelic League céilí, held in Bloomsbury Hall, London, and which represented one of the early efforts to involve dance in the project of cultural nationalism. From the turn of the century, Irish dance has been shaped in keeping with the cultural and political requirements of the emerging nation-state. The process involved the selection of certain dance repertoires and styles and the omission of others to create an *authentic* national canon, that is to say a generally accepted style of dancing.¹ And then, almost one hundred years later, along came *Riverdance*, marking yet another transformation in Irish dance. This time, however, the dance was not part of a project of cultural nationalism but was shaped in keeping with the requirements of production for an international audience and a global market. And it, too, was highly successful.

Global dancing

More than any other Irish cultural production in the last decade, *Riverdance* has achieved success not only in box office terms, in London, New York, and Sydney, but also in terms

1 see, for example, Helen Brennan, "Reinventing tradition: the boundaries of Irish dance", in *History Ireland*, Summer 1994

of media publicity and critical acclaim. It has already been woven into popular culture. Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, the original lead dancers, have achieved celebrity status and have appeared on the top-rating television chat shows as well as in the social columns of the national and international press. The show has been the subject of television documentary (*Downstream from Riverdance*) on the adoption of Irish step dancing by Northern Irish Protestants and an inspiration for television drama (*Dance, Lexi, Dance*). Because of its unprecedented success, *Riverdance* has in the popular imagination come to be regarded as synonymous with *Irish* dance.

In critical terms, *Riverdance* has generally been hailed as a high point of cultural achievement of which Irish people can be proud. It is regarded as the marker of the leap from a repressed and puritanical culture, the province of fanatics and *Gaeilgeoiri* where dancing was regimented and boring, to a neo-liberal one in which dance was transformed into something which was exciting, sexy and exuberant. Indeed, the main critical discourse, almost exclusively journalistic to date and expressed by columnists such as Fintan O'Toole,² has presented *Riverdance* as the confident expression of a culture which can embrace traditional art forms by breaking them apart and reconstructing them in an imaginative and innovative way. Irish cultural expression in this scenario is seen to have now reached the point where it has overcome a sense of post-colonial inferiority and can take its place confidently on the world stage. *Riverdance* is perceived as the liberating moment of Irish dance. However, another form of critical discourse has been largely absent from the discussion of *Riverdance*, a discourse which sees culture as becoming increasingly commodified. Within this scenario, local cultural expression is appropriated by cultural entrepreneurs for the global marketplace and in the process loses its authenticity and value.

2 Fintan O'Toole, 'Unsuitables from a distance: the politics of *Riverdance*', in *Ex Isle of Erin: images of a global Ireland*, Dublin: New Island Books, 1997

From local to global

The success of *Riverdance* raises a number of questions concerning the relationship between the local and the global levels of cultural expression and production. A particular brand of *Irishness* is successfully projected onto the world scene through *Riverdance*. But Irish dance is transformed by going global.

Irish dance is a hybrid form. It is true to say that it has been influenced from abroad from at least the eighteenth century. The origins of set dancing in the *quadrilles* and *cotillons* introduced from Britain and France provide just one example. In addition, some forms of dance attain dominance at a particular time, such as céilí dancing. The popularisation of céilí dancing marginalised, though did not eliminate, older styles of rural solo step dancing and set dancing which continued to be part of a vibrant dance tradition in the west of Ireland. The irony is that while set dancing was frowned upon because of its “foreignness”, it was the traditional form of dance for many parts of the country. Dancing then, like any other cultural form, is continuously evolving, and particular styles of dance both reflect and reproduce the social and cultural environment in which dance events occur.

I would like to suggest, somewhat schematically, that the historical trajectory of Irish step dancing from the beginning of this century has followed the expansion of its geographical range, from local, through national, to global contexts. Each of these moments shaped the forms of dance in distinctive ways; certain repertoires and styles were encouraged or even demanded by different kinds of institutional and performance context. The local rural context was one in which dancing formed an integral part of local entertainment and was performed most often in domestic settings on both everyday occasions such as “rambling” and in more special ritual festivities such as weddings, harvest, St Stephen’s Day. The national context was organised almost exclusively around competition dancing (*feiseanna*) in which cultural organisations like the Gaelic League and later Coimisiún na Rinceí

Gaelacha played a key role in the standardisation of dance styles. They achieved a virtual monopoly of Irish dance regulation and practice, and were responsible for the introduction of the styles which we now regard as rigid and restrictive. This standard national style became the dominant representation of Irish dance, providing us with the visual motifs of young girls in elaborate dancing costumes and ringlets, stepping it out in a stiff and earnest manner. This period has been followed by the *international* style exemplified by *Riverdance* in which the performance has become a commodified form for distribution in the global marketplace.

Spectacle and medley

The evolutionary path from local, through national, to international dance performance contexts, and back, has been characterised by an increasing emphasis on visual impact and on spectacle. Visual interest is achieved through variety, which usually entails a combination of performance elements. *Riverdance* is a full theatrical production including music, song, and dance performances as well as a narrative thread. This kind of eclecticism in Irish dance did not begin with *Riverdance*, and its origins might well be traced to 1970 when the World Championships in Irish Dancing included for the first time competitions for choreography. As Brendan Breathnach observed, "footwork for its own sake was giving way to movement and colour which, with music, decor and dress, combined in a dance drama to present and illustrate some motif of Irish significance: an historical event, a social custom or story",³ And it is worth noting that, at the time of writing, the dance drama was the most popular event at the championships. Neither is it a coincidence, in my view, that the World Championships themselves had been initiated just one year earlier in 1969, establishing the link between international influences and more spectacular dance forms.

3 Breandan Breathnach, *Dancing in Ireland*, Miltown Malbay, Co Clare: Dal gCais Publications, 1983

Riverdance started life as pure spectacle in its initial incarnation as the seven minute interval performance for the Eurovision song contest of 1994. Eurovision is one of a few annual live television events with a massive viewership (allegedly, in this instance, three hundred millions). It was created with spectacle and an international audience in mind. The show's producer, Moya Doherty, set out to achieve maximum visual impact in her initial conceptualisation of the project. In a memo which included, inter alia, the shape of the piece she envisaged, she wrote:

We begin with a lonely band of musicians on a big empty stage, enter the pageantry up the centre of the auditorium, a hundred marching Bodhran players ... all this with a chorus of Irish voices ... From a point of darkness ... enter row upon row of hard-shoe Irish dancers and they pound their way downstage towards audience and camera. They stream apart to the dramatic entrance of the star dancers who perform their energetic routine. Gradually the tempo increases, bringing all the ingredients together in an exhilarating climax.⁴

The winning formula of the Eurovision performance was followed through into *Riverdance* the show, in terms of the scale of production. The provision of a wide stage meant that the dancers had much more space at their disposal than they would have had in other more traditional performance situations. Compare it for instance to local performance spaces in domestic kitchens where the confined nature of the space placed emphasis on the vertical floor tapping and where dancing in place came to be valorised. In competitive step dancing the stage allowed for, indeed demanded, more horizontal movements as the adjudicators award marks for the use made of the stage space by competitors. The dance

4 quoted in Sam Smyth, *Riverdance: the story*, London: Andre Deutsch, 1996, p 24

style demanded by *Riverdance* is one which requires filling the stage with maximum visual impact. And within the global performance context, the dance styles and repertoires must also traverse a fine line between familiarity and exoticism. The exoticism is provided by what is regarded as distinctly Irish and different, and the familiarity by dance styles and techniques which have already become internationally disseminated by the mass media of film and television, especially those of Hollywood musicals. The horizontal movements of Michael Flatley across the stage, with his frequent use of high leaps and jumps, are dramatic, extravagant, expansive. One might like to think that he is mimicking the rural solo and duet dances of the eighteenth century which, according to the available evidence, were also characterised by leaps, jumps and high-stepping. It seems more likely, though, that his stepping style is influenced by those which have already been visually popularised, such as tap, Flamenco, modern dance, and ballet.

In choreographic terms, then, *Riverdance* borrows much from the style of popular American stage and film musicals of the 1920s to 1950s, and it seems only fitting that the venue for the New York version of the show was Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan, the home of the American theatrical dance and musical productions. This is evident in the sheer size of the cast. The serried rows of dancers fill the stage, providing what has been termed a "feeling of abundance". As Robert Ballagh comments, "*Riverdance* wouldn't work with six dancers no matter how brilliant they were. What makes it work is the scale of the spectacle".⁵ Not only is the large number of dancers providing visual interest, but it also generates the emotional charge of the mass impact of dancing feet.

The elements of traditional Irish dance which remain least changed are the vertical movements of dancers. These include the rigid upper body stance, the straight arm position, and

5 quoted in Smyth, *op cit.*, p 107

aspects of the stepping technique. But these traditional postures and steps are being continually contrasted with the freer horizontal movements of other types of modern dance. The dancers' use of space, therefore, highlights the contrast between the more expansive horizontal movements (associated with non-Irish dance) and the vertical movements (associated with Irish dance). The exotic nature of *Riverdance* is partly explained by this contrast in styles.

Of crucial importance in the creation of visual interest and excitement is costume. Here again we can see a gradual process of increased visualisation ranging from the ordinary clothes worn by traditional rural set dancers to the introduction of special costumes for competitive step dancers from the early part of the century, with an ever increasing emphasis on decoration and embellishment (particularly in girls' costumes). Breathnach's remarks are instructive in relation to the meanings of the dress codes of competitive step-dancing: "the costumes display an Irishness which eludes any association with a particular locality or period".⁶ Not only do the costumes in question signify an abstract and anodyne Irishness, but they also have the effect of hiding the body by attracting the eye to the interlaced Celtic motifs, tara brooches, lace collars and medals on the dancer's costumes.

Riverdance moved right away from this style. The costumes of the principal dancers are very definitely showbiz: materials which shine, encrusted and glitzy; note the off the shoulder dresses for Jean Butler and the satin open-necked shirts for Michael Flatley with decorated cummerbund. Yet the female dance troupe's costumes are stark in their simplicity. The materials are also "soft, flowing, revealing the contours of the body", according to the costume designer Jen Kelly. Both the use of soft materials and the simplicity of design emphasise the contours of the body. The same simplicity is a feature of the male dancers' costumes; black trousers and shirts in some sequences, or short-sleeved tee-shirts which

6 Breathnach, *op cit*, p 49

reveal their biceps. While it is worth noting that the costumes tend to sexualise both male and female bodies by subjecting them to the gaze, the female bodies are also additionally sexualised by the use of the age old convention of shorter than regulation dresses which expose their legs.

One of the most striking characteristics of *Riverdance* is the fast pace of the dance which generates a sense of excitement and energy, and points to the virtuosity and skill of individual performances. There is of course a dialectical relationship between the speed of the music and the dance. It is worth noting that Irish traditional music (apart from slow airs) was called Irish *dance* music and was traditionally played for the dancers, so that the tempo of the dance were in accord. During the competitive era, there was a gradual separating out of dance music from dance because of two developments. The introduction of a highly ornate dance style meant that the music for dancers was played much more slowly than the normal tempo and, with the introduction of mass media, musicians became performers in their own right. *Riverdance* seems to have taken the relationship full circle, from a situation in which musicians played for dancers, through an era in which musicians played primarily as individual and virtuoso performers, to a situation where musicians and dancers are again connecting but where the dancing is at a much faster pace than in either local or national competitive performance situations.

The orchestra's presence on stage provides the visual link between dancers and musicians. The musical and dance performances are also intertwined as in the scene (in the New York show) where the fiddle player, Eileen Ivers, walks on stage and plays a tune on a bright blue fiddle, or in the *Trading Taps* scene in the same show where both Ivers and the jazz musician play for, and to, the rival gangs in the street scene. The intertwining is also highlighted in sequences where initial solo or troupe stepping without musical accompaniment is followed by the musical instrumentals echoing the rhythm of the dancers' feet and vice versa.

The speed of the dance performance is conveyed to the

audience primarily through sound and a number of techniques are used to highlight it. One is the frequent use of routines which start out with a slow beat and, gradually, the tempo increases to arrive at a high speed crescendo or climax. The synchronised and insistent sound of the full troupe battering out a hard shoe dance is undoubtedly one of the highlights of the show. Because of the importance of rhythmic sound, the emphasis has to be on footwork which maximises sound and which consequently allows for little variation in stepping technique or style. So at the same time as the dancers (Flatley and the male dancers especially) use an eclectic mix of dance styles, their "Irish" style does not utilise the possible range of steps and repertoire that are common in less spectacular and more traditional performance settings.

But the *pièce de résistance* in the fusion of music and dance, of sight and sound, springs from the use of radio microphones in the insteps of the principal dancers' shoes. The rationale for this dramatic amplification effect is explained by the sound designer Michael O'Gorman: "a natural sound works best with traditional music, that it needs to sound as if the musicians are playing right in front of you without amplification, unlike a rock concert where the reverb is part of the occasion". This *technologising* of the body effectively turns the body itself into a musical instrument.

Globalisation and hybridity

In this chapter, I have suggested that the dominant performance styles, and the meanings and pleasures of dance, have changed and evolved in response to the changes from a local, to a national, to an international context. Within this framework, *Riverdance* can be seen as a marker of a transformation of Irish dance into a form which is suitable for global consumption: a form which places maximum emphasis on spectacle and which reflects the primacy of the visualisation of cultural production in contemporary society.

The projection of an Irish cultural product, such as *River-*

dance, onto the world scene required that it underwent a major transformation. It had of course to take the form of a commodity. It was not simply a matter of Irish dancing losing its popular roots and being commercialised. Irish dancing could assume the status of a global commodity only by mixing with other cultural forms, by becoming a *hybrid*. But the melange of cultural forms is not left to chance:

... we can construct a continuum of hybridities: on one end, an assimilationist hybridity that leans over towards the centre, adopts and mimics the hegemony, and, at the other end, a destabilizing hybridity that blurs the canon, reverse the current, subverts the centre. Hybridities, then, may be differentiated according to the components of the melange.⁷

The previous analysis suggests that the Irishness of *Riverdance* does not blur, reverse or subvert the centre by becoming hybrid. It has become a global commodity by adopting the cultural frame of the centre.

But such a hybrid form does not leave untouched the cultural forms on which it feeds. *Riverdance* has generally been hailed as one of the signs of a national culture reaching maturity: sufficiently self-confident about our traditional culture to successfully take our place on the global cultural stage. The trajectory from the local to the global has had the effect, in some respects at least, of closing down possibilities for Irish dance. The globalisation of cultural production places increasing emphasis on visualisation and spectacle. Those aspects of Irish dance which do not easily fit this framework are evacuated, while those aspects which enhance the creation of spectacle are pursued.

7 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Globalization as hybridization", in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (eds), *Global modernities*, London: Sage, 1995, pp 56-7