

Safe Sets: Women, Dance and ‘Communitas’

Barbara O’Connor

INTRODUCTION

The recent success of *Riverdance: The Show* in Britain and the US has given Irish dance a certain cultural cachet beyond its traditional milieu. At home in Ireland it is likely to have the effect, at least temporarily, of an increase in the number of young girls, and perhaps, even some boys, attending step-dancing classes and diligently practising their steps in the hope of becoming future Jean Butlers or Michael Flatleys.¹ The subject of this chapter, however, is the increase in activity in another form of Irish dance - set dance. The revival of set dancing has been ongoing for around fifteen years now and one of its most striking facets is the transference of what was historically a form of rural dance to the city, where it now occupies a place as one of the most popular forms of recreational dance.

At one level the re-emergence of set dancing in the city can be viewed as part of a wider interest in dance as a leisure activity. Other popular forms of recreational dance currently include ballroom, jive and Latin American. At a more specific level, it is only possible to suggest some general reasons for the revival, since there is a dearth of sociological analysis on the topic. This is hardly surprising, since the sociological analysis of dance in Ireland is only just beginning and can be placed in the general context of the marginalisation of dance in Western sociology generally (see Thomas, 1995). However, there has been some welcome and useful comment on the set-dance revival from other sources. For instance, Tubridy (1994) places it as following on, a decade later, the revival of traditional music in the 1960s which, in turn, he places in the context of the folk-music revival generally. In my opinion, the international success and acclaim of traditional Irish music at this time marked the beginning of a reawakening of interest and pride in indigenous cultural forms, and was instrumental in turning round a sense of inferiority which had its origins in a colonised past, and a project of modernity in which national and rural cultural practices respectively were denigrated. It could also be suggested that more recently, membership of the European Union has generated some desire to maintain a distinctive ethnic culture. The last twenty years have also witnessed a substantial growth in internal cultural tourism, so that people from the city come into more contact with set dancing in the country. In some cases this kind of cultural contact may be underpinned by an ideology of rural romanticism where traditional cultural practices such as set dancing are sought as a way of accessing an ‘authentic’ folk culture. I would suggest, too, that changes in migration patterns have led to an increase in internal rural-urban migration resulting in larger numbers of rural people living in the city with a knowledge of, and interest in, set dancing.

In an attempt to address some of the above issues I chose to explore the current popularity of set dancing in terms of the pleasures and meanings associated with the practice itself. The perspective adopted here could be loosely called a critical one in the sense that the experiences of dancing as described by the participants are explored and

then interpreted in the light of the social and cultural environment of the dancers. I set out to explore the pleasures and meanings of set dancing by talking to a number of women who do set dancing as a leisure activity in Dublin city.

Set dancing is a form of social, dancing which has been popular in rural Ireland for at least the last two centuries. It is a group dance, perhaps most akin to American country dancing, for those not familiar with the genre. It has its origins in the cotillons and quadrilles introduced into Ireland in the eighteenth century and has been gradually adapted to local conditions and music to emerge as a much faster and more exciting genre than the eighteenth-century counterpart. The set requires eight people (four couples) and the basic steps used are jigs, reels and hornpipes. The set very often begins with the four couples in a square with two top and two side couples (standard position) and frequently ends in the same position, though there are a number of variations on this. Each set consists of a number of figures or individual dances which vary both within the set and between sets. The number of figures in a set varies between four and six. The dancing involves various movements around the set, so that while one is dancing as a couple it is not the 'closed couple' of ballroom dancing but an open couple dancing very often in relation to, or with, other members of the set (I have included the fifth figure of 'The Lancers' and 'The Caledonian', both frequently danced sets, in the Appendix to give some indication of the kinds of variation in movement involved).

According to Tubridy (1994), set dancing began to decline as a popular form of social dancing in rural areas in the 1920s and 1930s for a multiplicity of reasons; rural migration, clerical hostility, the creation of, and increasing popularity of an alternative 'authentic' canon of Irish dancing before and after national independence in 1922, the suppression of house dancing following the enforcement of the Public Dance Halls Act in 1935, and increased prosperity leading to changing patterns of consumption. It is interesting to note that set dancing, though a popular rural dance form, was to some extent ousted by what was regarded as a more 'authentic' canon of *céilí* dancing during the revival of cultural nationalism prior to political independence in 1922. Set dancing, in the context of an essentialist cultural nationalism, was seen as foreign because of its origins. Tubridy (1994) refers to the way in which even the names of the dances themselves such as 'The Lancers', 'The Victoria' and 'The Caledonian' would have militated against them during this period. According to Brennan (1994), both the Munster dance forms and styles were favoured over others by those members of the Gaelic League involved in the creation of the new canon. In the same context, she notes the response to the performance of four-hand and eight-hand reels at the annual conference of the League in 1901.

Controversy ensued when some observers dismissed the dances as versions of the quadrilles which were classified as alien and thus unsuitable for nationalists. Also excluded as foreign were social dances such as the highland Schottische, the barn dance and the waltz, despite the fact that they were part and parcel of the repertoire of the ordinary people of rural Ireland among whom traditional dance was strongest. (Brennan, 1994, p. 23)

However, despite official efforts to exclude set dancing, there were pockets where it retained, and continues to maintain, its popularity, notably in Clare, West Cork, and Kerry (Tubridy, 1994).

Currently the four main types of venue for set dancing in Dublin city are (a) weekly set-dance classes, which usually run for about two hours, (b) *céilís*, i.e. dances where set dancing is the main form of dancing and which are also held at regular intervals, (c) weekend workshops held in a variety of venues often outside the city (sometimes as far away as Tory Island off the Donegal coast), where participants attend classes during the day followed by a night-time *céilí*, (d) a small number of city pubs which usually have dancing one night in the week. Some people attend classes only or *céilís* only, others combine all four. It is possible, therefore, to dance every night of the week if one so desires.

The socio-demographic profile of set dancers awaits further investigation since the sociological analysis of dance is still at an embryonic stage. From my own observations of the people who attend one particular class, there appears to be a range of groups which include people in their forties, fifties and even sixties who would have done set dancing as children in rural Ireland and are happy to have the opportunity for continuing their enjoyment: these might be married couples or married or single women. There are also single and separated men who go for the social outing or with the hope of meeting a partner, and the dancing itself is of secondary importance. There are also a considerable number of women in their thirties and forties who come alone or with a female friend or friends. While this profile would need much more elaboration and systematic verification, what is clear is that there are variations in purpose among the participants and that the meanings and pleasures are likely to vary from group to group. For some the social outing and associated conviviality appears to be the most important element, for others the chance to meet a partner for a relationship is foremost, while for some the pleasures of dancing itself are primary.

In terms of age there is a range from twenties to sixties but it appears to be particularly popular among the over-thirties and amongst women. In accounting for the predominance of women doing set dancing two factors must be taken into account. One is the higher demographic ratio of women to men in Dublin city and the other is the historically greater interest in, and experience of, dancing by women. The gender ratios vary between class venues and between dance contexts generally, with a greater gender balance at *céilís* than at classes.

The following discussion is based on data from talking to ten women who attend or attended class in Dublin city centre on a regular basis. The data consists of transcripts from semi-structured individual interviews with five women and one group discussion with five women. It is also informed by participant observation, since I thoroughly enjoy set dancing and have been attending a class on a weekly basis for approximately four years. I also occasionally attend some *céilís* and weekend workshops. Some of the women to whom I spoke were learners and were attending classes only, while others also went to *céilís* and attended workshops, again, with varying frequency. These are women

in their thirties and forties, professional women working in the service sector, some single, some with partners, some with children, others without. Generally speaking, the activity of dancing itself was very enjoyable for these women, as evidenced from the sheer enthusiasm and pleasure in talking about dancing. Set dancing was a new activity for all of them, though some would have had experience of learning step dancing as children. The discussion focuses on some of the main themes which emerged during the course of the interviews and group discussion.²

It is necessary at this stage to emphasise the exploratory nature of the findings presented here, since they are part of ongoing research where the main issues addressed will be developed in a more systematic way. However, despite the limitations of scale, it is hoped that the discussion will help to broaden the debates on women and dance, particularly since so much of the recent dance scholarship in the sociology/cultural studies area has been associated with 'youth culture'.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'COMMUNITAS'

Leisure activities such as set dancing are increasingly playing a role in the construction of community. In an era of late modernity or postmodernity, the 'traditional' communities based on the social interconnection of people living within a particular local boundary are on the decline. No longer, the arguments go, is out sense of affective identity based on the street or the parish, or indeed on other kinds of social formations such as social class, because of the changes which late capitalist development have wrought on our sense of time and space (see Giddens, 1991; Lash and Urry, 1994; Urry, 1995). In contrast to the ascriptive quality of 'traditional' community, we now exercise relative choice in selecting the kinds of communities with which we would like to be involved. This new way of inventing community is not a one-off activity but is rather one in which we are frequently involved (see Lash and Urry, 1994). Urry (1995) takes up this theme and explores some of the constituent elements in these new kinds of community or 'new sociations' which he claims:

are not like those of traditional communities since they are joined out of choice and people are free to leave. People remain members in part because of the emotional satisfaction that they derive from common goals or experiences. Membership is from choice and many people will indeed enter and exit from such sociations with considerable rapidity. They provide important sites whereby new kinds of social identity can be experimented with. They can empower people, they provide safe social spaces for identity-testing, and they may provide a context for the learning of new skills. (Urry, 1995, pp. 220-1)

Examples of this kind of 'new sociation' would be environmental groups, women's groups, campaign groups, and leisure groups such as birdwatchers, choral groups and vintage-car enthusiasts. Urry draws on Gorz (1985) to make the point that the leisure activities are not merely passive and individualistic but depend upon 'communication, giving, creating and aesthetic enjoyment, the production and reproduction of life,

tenderness, the realisation of physical, sensuous and intellectual capacities, the creation of non-commodity use-values' (quoted in Urry, 1995, p. 221).

The discussions on set dancing clearly indicated the quest for, and invention of, community. Indeed, one of most striking features of the discussions was the way in which both the ambience and the activity of dancing itself were seen to generate feelings of friendliness, inclusiveness and warmth which in turn provided a space in which women were empowered to communicate, learn new skills, experiment with social identity and express themselves in an aesthetically and sensually pleasing way.

One of the main ways in which this sense of community was achieved was through the breaking-down of hierarchical structures which form part of everyday life, the abolition of difference and the creation of a sense of 'communion'. Turner's (1974) concept of 'communitas' is useful in this context since it refers to ritual behaviour which generates a sense of togetherness, of unity and abolishes difference and distance. 'Communitas' involves rituals 'in which egalitarian and co-operative behaviour is characteristic, and in which secular distinctions of rank, office, and status are temporarily in abeyance or regarded as irrelevant' (Turner, 1974, p. 238).

Undoubtedly, most, if not all types of dancing, create some level of 'communitas'. For example, McRobbie notes the sense of universal communion which is a feature of 'raves', a type of social dancing which in some respects is very different from set dancing. She observes how in a 'rave', 'the atmosphere is one of unity, of dissolving difference in the peace and harmony haze of the drug Ecstasy' (McRobbie, 1993, p. 418). However, I would suggest that while there are similarities in the way in which 'communitas' is constructed (these might include the music which has a specific resonance with the dancers and is 'deeply felt'. the pleasures of bodily movement in dance, and the sense of being in unison with a group of like-minded people), there are also differences. An obvious one is the absence of a drug culture in set dancing. Verbal and other forms of communication, particularly the sense of touch, are important aspects of set dancing (see discussion below), but are not present in rave.

The sense of 'communitas' in set dancing is expressed in a number of ways, the friendliness of the people, the ease of communication, etiquette and conventions surrounding the dance and the form and content of the dances themselves. For example, Mary,³ in response to a question on the reasons why she likes set dancing, talks about the importance of *craic*, which can be loosely equated with fun, but it implies a conviviality and a sense of exuberance most often associated with music, lively conversation/banter and pub culture. She acknowledges that in order to have the *craic* one needs to be in the company of the right kind of people:

I think the music and the dancing, that's one thing but I don't think that's the prime reason .. motive .. I think the primary motive is just the 'craic' that goes on ... ok .. the music and the dancing .. that's a likeable element .. but I think there has to be more than that .. I think it's just the whole scene around you and they are all people that are similar really to your own.⁴

The idea of 'communitas', that the community consists of people who may come from different social backgrounds but who are rendered equal by the nature of the set-dancing encounter, is taken up by Margaret:

meeting people from various backgrounds .. people in set dancing .. it's totally irrelevant what somebody's economic or social background is .. you're in there together .. very rarely do people actually end up discussing issues or debating things, your mind is not important .. it's very much yourself and you're taken as a person rather than as a just kind what your c.v. says .. you could be mixing with brain surgeons or you could be mixing with absolutely anybody .. from any kind of a background, and you'll never know and it's not important .. and people can form friendships and relationships based on their enjoyment of the music and dance which I think is fantastic .. it's a classless sort of activity really.

Margaret is well aware of the limitations of such contact but sees it as positive nonetheless: '[it's a] very superficial conversation .. but people grow bonds through that'.

The women were not unaware, though, of the negative aspects of this 'instant community' in the form of restraints on their behaviour such as the difficulty of refusing a dance because, as Kate indicated: 'you're likely to meet this person in a week's time or in a month's time at another *céilí* .. it just makes life awkward'. But, again, the positive aspect of community is reinforced by the fact that she feels free to ask someone to dance because you are bound to meet someone you know '*you will most definitely bump into somebody*'.

Another inflection of community was expressed in the sense of belonging and warmth felt in the presence of the other dancers. Helen speaks of the friendliness, the opportunity for talking and the ease of communication:

it doesn't matter who you are, everybody talks to each other, you know people by name, you don't have to know what they do, they're just nice to one another .. if you go to a disco, for a start, you can't talk to anyone at a disco.

Emma, like Helen, is attracted by the friendliness and the mix of people:

they're very friendly, old and young .. and there is a mix .. there's a good mix and everyone is so friendly .. might know their first name but I wouldn't know their second name, what their surnames are .. or where they're from or anything else .. but everyone seems to get on well.

Nuala, contrasting her experiences of dancing in two different cities, claims that the fact of knowing more people enhances the possibility for fun:

maybe again, it was a long-term thing, when we started off in Galway we didn't know that many people either, then we got to know them all and it was really good

fun .. 'cos they knew you and you knew them and whereas here I find I don't know as many .. and I go to a *céilí* maybe .. I know a few faces .. you wouldn't have the same feeling about it.

Noteworthy in the above extracts is the importance attached to friendliness, openness and inclusivity which generate a sense of belonging and security and the simultaneous acknowledgement that it doesn't have the constraints of a 'regular' community. It is sufficient to know people superficially, in fact, that is the attraction - the creation of an ephemeral and instant community which is based on voluntary association and personal choice.

The strong presence of 'communitas' is dependent not only on the friendliness and openness of the people who go, but also on the specific nature of the dances themselves. There was general acknowledgement that the form and content play an important role in the enjoyment of the dances. In response to a question on the appeal of dancing in a group formation Kate refers to a number of interlinked activities. She starts out by talking of the enjoyment of collaborative effort and production: 'I suppose it's probably that you're working as part of a team in producing this dance, in producing each figure of it.' She then continues on to talk about the opportunity for communication which is inbuilt into the dance:

you *are* communicating with people that you are dancing with, so, as I say, it may not be verbal all the time because it's not easy, but it might be a nod or a wink .. there are some dances where that particular movement is part of the figure .. for example in 'The Corofin Plain Set' .. turn to the opposite couple .. and coming back the second time you nod to the person opposite you .. so there is that kind of communication there.

She then mentions the opportunity for gradual and easy acquaintanceship, if so desired:

then again, you dance with each person you are meeting, seven new people *if you want it to be like that* [my emphasis] .. you may not ever talk to them but you'll recognise them and you'll meet them the next time and you'll dance with them and eventually they might make conversation or you might get to know them .. and I think that is very enjoyable .. the other thing is that when you go set dancing you might not dance with the same person all night, you probably wouldn't .. you might dance with lots of different people, you might be in lots of different circles, because it's open.

The feeling of achievement in co-operative effort mentioned by Kate is also addressed by Eileen:

I actually like the feeling of achievement that you get .. from being with somebody who can dance .. it's like an achievement, you've done something well .. there has been a contact with somebody you've done it as a unit .. it's not just yourself and not

even in a couple .. there is also a solidarity in the set .. that you'll ... help each other out .. a feeling of accomplishment.

Anne likes the excitement generated by being part of the group:

the group idea, dance formation with others, for instance now, in the old days we used to be in pairs, 'cor-beirte', two people .. it was a beautiful, graceful dance .. not as exciting as dancing with others in a set .. with all of eight people moving in and out.

Helen associates one of the joys of dancing with her knowledge of the people in the set, equal levels of competence and a familiarity with their dancing styles: 'you might get into a set where you know everybody .. you know the way they dance .. you know the way they move and you get such a buzz .. eight people in the set at the same level .. to me it's fantastic'.

All of the above points to the importance of the 'group' nature of the dance in creating a particular kind of engagement with other dancers. It is very much a physical as well as emotional engagement being based on touch, eye-contact, talk, moving in time with other dancers, and so on.

A number of anthropologists and dance historians have pointed to the important role which group dancing plays in generating community solidarity (see, for example, Boas, 1972; Radcliffe-Brown, 1964; Rust, 1969; Lange, 1975). Dance as metaphor for the social body (see Douglas, 1976) was apparent when I enquired about favourite dances. The 'Clare Lancers' was mentioned a number of times and specifically that part of the fifth figure of the dance, the line up, side step, advance and retire (see Appendix), in which dancing within one's own set of eight people is transformed by joining hands with members of the adjoining set - the choreography resulting in one continuous line of dancers along the length of the hall. Kate says of the 'Lancers': 'to look at it from a balcony, for example in Seapoint in Salthill, the international weekend, it's just amazing, you just see a sea of people and they are moving together .. it's just unreal and it's very nice'. Nuala also mentions the attractions of the line up: 'I love the line up, the military line up and I love that ... it's just so neat and it looks lovely .. opportunity to look at it from a balcony .. it looks lovely ... it's so uniform.' Margaret refers specifically to the way in which it creates a feeling of community:

I love the Clare Lancers because ... for me it is an extremely elegant set and I think some of the movements are almost like ballet actually, where the lines separate and dance across the room .. it's very stylish and elegant and at the end when people hold hands together the whole hall can hold hands at the same time .. so you get a great feeling of community from that one.

WOMEN, PUBLIC SPACE AND DANCE

The substantial literature on the gendering of public space highlights the ways in which public space came to be appropriated by men and consequently considered out of bounds for women. From the mid-nineteenth century on the department store became a safe haven for women in the city - a place to be, feel comfortable and enjoy themselves. Not much has changed since then. There are still relatively few public places where women can go unaccompanied and feel a sense of ease and security. Dance venues are potentially one of those spaces. As Thomas observes, '[D]ance has provided women with at least the possibility of self-expression in public spaces in a culture where women traditionally have been confined to the private sphere' (Thomas, 1993, p. 81). However, not all dance venues are perceived as being equally safe, as indicated by the discussion below. The women to whom I spoke discriminated between the feelings of security they experienced at set dancing and their relative vulnerability at other venues, notably disco and line dancing. I think it is also interesting to note that the topic of 'feeling safe' emerged spontaneously during the discussions. As indicated below, these feelings were generated by the general ambience, the conventions and rules surrounding dancing, and the content of the dances themselves.

Both Mary and Margaret touch on some of the sexual elements involved and the freedom to express themselves in a sexual way, however limited, with impunity. Mary talks of the freedom to flirt in a safe environment:

half the fun in a set is the winking and the nodding and the messin' that goes on which is *total* flirtation .. that's half the fun of it .. but it's all very safe .. you know that there is not going to be someone at the door waiting for you ... it's very false in a way but it's very safe and it's fun.

I find this statement particularly interesting because it seems to express the way in which flirting in 'normal' circumstances may be enjoyable but is circumscribed because it could be misinterpreted and have undesirable consequences. This is a classic example of the control over women's behaviour in public space. Margaret mentions the opportunity for physical closeness which is not risky because it is part of the content of the dance itself:

you have the physical contact of being with somebody, holding another person .. a lot of people who don't have physical contact .. it's the only time that they get a chance to 'get a hault' of somebody (*laughs*) .. it's funny because I've spoken to some people who've tried line dancing ... but a lot of them would say 'No, I don't think it will take off because the physical contact is missing' .. it's a kind of safe way of still having some physical intimacy without .. the kind of, you know, attachment or whatever.

Here, again, we can note an explicit expression of the ways in which set dancing provides an opportunity for behaviour which might be risky in other circumstances but is made safe because of the context in which it takes place. It is also very tempting but highly speculative at this stage to suggest that this quest for intimacy without responsibility, or at least, over which one has some control, is part of the postmodern sensibility, and that

set dancing within this framework is a form of sexual 'grazing' in which women can now participate.

In addition to the sexual elements discussed above, knowledge of, and adherence to, the conventions is seen to give women more control over interaction with anyone person. Mary comments: 'it's totally a non-threatening type of interaction ... I think the fact that you can walk away easily .. the time-limit is almost defined for every interaction .. and ... everybody knows the rules.'

Margaret contrasts the formal conventions surrounding set dancing with the less clear and hence, more risky, behaviour at disco dancing:

and another nice thing is that in a set dance it's organised in a sense that you know when you can leave the person .. if you are dancing with somebody that you don't like, officially at the end of four figures or whatever, that's it .. you can go and say 'thank you very much', .. whereas in a disco situation if you're dancing with someone you don't want to be with, it can go on for ever ... you're not sure when the point will come when you can leave him.

Anne, a married woman who goes to set-dance classes on her own, comments on the safety of going to the classes as opposed to a night-club: 'you couldn't really go to 'a night-club by yourself or with another woman friend .. and it's a place to go, and be, and dance .. it's kind of safe'. Kate points to the differences between the disco and the set-dance atmosphere:

I *hated* going to a disco, low lights, loud music, darkness or almost darkness, you couldn't see people, you couldn't have a decent conversation with them and I never really enjoyed that. I preferred set dancing from the point of view that you get a mixture of all ages there, it's much more sociable in that you can talk to somebody and you're not blasted out by the live music .. it's usually a nice, bright, airy and roomy atmosphere.

The women also spoke favourably of set dancing in contrast to disco or line dancing in terms of the 'presentation of self', particularly image and dress. These, being significant markers of sexual attractiveness and availability, are usually subject to strict control. Margaret claims that:

they [people at the disco] were also very conscious of how they look and their image .. set dancing you just don't have time and at the end of an afternoon or an evening set dancing most people look horrendous anyway (*laughs*) and it's a great leveller .. people sort of laugh at themselves and at other people .. 'look at the state of me here!' .. so it's a great way of .. how would I describe it? .. it tears away the superficiality of most dancing ... when you stink to high heaven, well, there's no problem there .. you're accepted completely.

Orla refers to the fact that neither looks nor age, the two most salient features which men generally take into account when asking women to dance, are important in the set-dance scene:

you're rated on your dancing ability, not your age or your looks .. and I think if someone's an excellent dancer and she's sixty, she'll get asked .. certainly more down around the country .. if you're a good dancer, you're up for every set regardless of what you look like .. I mean it's not a glamour sport .. sweatin' .. a big red face.

Nuala thinks that set dancing is safer and more fun than disco because of the less disturbing nature of the male 'gaze', while simultaneously acknowledging that male surveillance does exist to some extent in set dancing:

you can have great fun, you're under no pressure ... whereas if you go to a disco you're certainly under pressure the moment you come in the door because of the context of where you're in .. you're on show, you're prey, literally, from the opposite sex .. you are being eyed up .. obviously it goes on in set dancing but not to the same extent .. at the end you can say, 'Thank you very much and goodbye' ... you certainly feel safer.

One of Eileen's criticisms of line dancing is that one is the object of both the 'gaze' and of personal remarks:

and also it seems to me that there are people on the fringes of line dancing they are just there to leer .. in 'Break for the Border' you're in this pit .. and then there's all these people up here and .. I spent a bit of time up there just listenin' to what people were sayin' .. an awful lot of 'pass remarking' going on about the people down there .. people's attributes .. whereas I find that .. set dancing people will get up and do it.

Personal identity construction is also referred to in terms of an opposition between a forced and contrived behaviour and behaving in a more 'normal' way. Nuala, in contrasting disco with set dancing, claims that there is:

less posing in set dancing than in disco .. the crowd is much nicer .. people are friendlier .. there's less posing ... and I find that I am that way myself then as a result of it .. I mean I'll go in there and I will behave as I normally behave .. whereas if I was at a night-club I would certainly behave more coy or .. than I would be in set dancing.

Margaret distinguishes between the kinds of people who do set dancing and those who do disco:

I would have been a great disco-goer as well .. but what I do notice is a difference .. one very obvious difference I noticed was the time I did the weekend workshop in Galway I spent all day doing the set dancing, morning and afternoon, and in the

evening I went to a disco and I could really see the contrast, because the morning session was full of people smiling, giggling, screaming, crying out with excitement and then in the evening I was kind of plunged into this room .. this dark room with people .. with serious expressions on their faces not wanting to be seen to perspire or anything .. I thought it is extremely anti-social .. in fact people were more dancing with themselves than with anybody else.

Frank's (1991) distinction between the 'communicative body' and the 'mirroring body' might approximate Margaret's distinction between the two dance genres. In an attempt to arrive at an analytic model of the body Frank suggests four ideal types of body usage. The two which are pertinent to the discussion here are the 'communicative body' and the 'mirroring body'. Dancing he sees as one model of the 'communicative body'. The medium of activity for the 'mirroring body' is consumption. Frank arrives at his typology of body types by examining the various ways in which bodies deal with four tasks or dimensions of activity; control, desire, relation to others and self-relatedness. It is the 'relation to others' which is of most interest to me in the current context. The 'other-relatedness' for the 'communicative body' is a 'dyadic relation with others who join in the dance and it implies an associatedness which goes beyond one's own body and extends to the body of the other(s)' (Frank, 1991, p. 80). The 'other-relatedness' of the 'mirroring body', on the other hand, is 'open to the exterior world but monadic in its appropriation of that world' (Frank, 1991, p. 61). Frank is careful to stress the 'ideal' nature of his typology, and is aware that dance does not always attain this ideal. It seems to me that when Margaret talks of the disco dancers 'more dancing with themselves' she is describing the narcissism of the consuming 'mirroring body' in contrast to the 'associatedness' of the 'communicative body' in set dancing. The distinctions made by Frank between dyadic and monadic relatedness may also have more general use as a continuum along which to mark various genres and performance contexts in contemporary recreational dance.

It seems to me that there are two discourses emerging from the discussion so far. One is the clearly visible discourse of relative freedom from the constraints on women in public spaces. The other, perhaps less immediately obvious, is that of the 'natural' interlinked with a rural romanticism. I find Simmel's (1950) work on the metropolis helpful in attempting to understand the latter. In his insightful analysis of the qualitative difference between rural and urban sensibilities, Simmel claimed that urban life demanded an attitude of reserve and insensitivity to feeling because of the multiplicity and diversity of stimuli in the metropolis. He characterised the urban personality as being detached and blasé (Simmel, 1950) ('cool' would probably be the contemporary equivalent expression). If we can take it that rurality implies the opposite traits, such as passionate, involved and 'warm', then set dancing provides just that. In this sense, then, we can claim that it symbolises an ideal rural community; not the traditional community of gossip, mutual obligation and 'rural idiocy' but rather one in which all the negative aspects have been obliterated.

The distinction which Simmel (1950) makes between rural and urban could be neatly overlaid on the distinction which the women make between set dancing and other genres;

the opposition between the superficiality and consciousness of image, and being accepted as you are, which was mentioned by Margaret, between the posing and coy behaviour, and 'normal' behaviour referred to by Nuala, between the darkness and the nice, bright, airy and roomy atmosphere mentioned by Kate (indeed, the darkness of the city has historically been a constant motif in the construction of rural romanticism, for instance see Williams, 1973), and between the dyadic and monadic relations suggested by Margaret.

COUNTRY DANCING IN THE CITY?

The emergence of a romantic rural discourse is further supported by explicit reference to the country. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of the discussions, though not on my list of topics, was the way in which associations were made between set dancing and rural Ireland. However, only some of the women made these spontaneous references. Although further work would be necessary to ascertain the strength of such a discourse, I think it is of some consequence that those parts of Ireland, Clare, Kerry and West Cork, in which set dancing had been continuous, were being constructed as a romanticised 'other', the heartland of 'authentic' community and set dancing. The discussion is clearly reminiscent of Williams's (1973) observations on the representation of the country as the repository of 'organic community' and 'authentic' folk culture.

Margaret's reference to the country was in the context of her talking about her initial introduction to, and motivation to take up, set dancing:

my first experience of set dancing was in Miltown Malbay years ago in 1983 .. I didn't know what set dancing was at the time, I'd never heard of it, seen it or anything .. I remember it was about three o'clock in the morning .. out all night .. we were just on our way back to the caravan and I saw this vision in the street of eight people of various ages and what struck me was there was an old man .. I don't know what age he was, late sixties maybe .. or early seventies, dancing furiously with a young one .. with a loose flowing skirt and hair .. a real Irish colleen .. and the two of them were tearing into this *wild furious* dance ... and I just thought: 'God, it's incredible' .. for me it sort of .. it was some kind of a symbol of the vitality of the Irish spirit, that's the only way I could describe it ... and I've always thought that that's also the Atlantic Ocean itself is the vitality and the passion of Irish people .. and that lashing of the waves against the rock is just what I see in set dancing.

Here we are in no doubt about the romance of the pursuit! I think a number of motifs are linked to produce a discourse of nature, the merging of the wildness of the dance with the wildness of nature to produce an association between the 'natural', the expressive, and the passionate.

The sense of connection with the rural was also expressed by Anne, who explained her preference for a particular kind of dance by her family's origins in that part of the country where it is popular: 'I just love polkas .. really I do .. I would be drawn to it anyway because I come from west Cork .. my father does .. that's how I feel I belong there.'

Eileen also refers to the, authentic set dancing which she has observed down the country and which has acted as an inspiration to her: this was in the context of a discussion of preferences for reel or polka steps, and Eileen spoke of her reasons for preferring the latter:

I love Kerry you know, anything to do with Kerry, I just love .. I have this vision .. I mean the best dancers I ever saw in my life down in Connell's pub in Knocknagree .. and that's my image of them doing polkas down there .. and that's what I want .. they're not actually dancing on the ground, they're dancing on the air .. that's where I want to be.

Later on Eileen is talking about her desire to continue set dancing indefinitely:

I often think it's something I could do for my life .. the granny when I'm still in my zimmer-frame (*general laughter*) .. again to go back to that famous night in Knocknagree, in Danny Connell's .. in the corner of the room .. in the same room with all these people dancing up in the air was a group of what looked like to me .. ninety-year-olds dancing the same dance ... they were doing it at a slower pace and everything but I thought that was wonderful.

Here Eileen is expressing her admiration of those rural communities where a wide range of age groups can socialise together. In our ageist culture women often express regret that they don't have the opportunities to dance which they would have had in their youth and indeed, I think that set dancing provides just such an opportunity and is probably one of the main reasons why it is so popular among women over thirty.

Orla admires what she perceives as a sense of continuity in the country when she is talking about the harmony of dancers who have danced together for years, and feels that this harmony would be unlikely to be achieved in the city:

it's lovely to see couples .. go down the country like you might see a couple .. they're married or whatever, they've danced together for years and they dance exactly the same .. couples in their sixties now who've gone out dancing together every Saturday night for the last twenty years ... I mean you wouldn't have that up in Dublin .. the only time I can watch someone dance .. that is just fantastic to watch.

Since the women who spoke so favourably of the country were from the city it could be thought that it would have been easier for them to be involved in a kind of rural romanticism than for people who had their origins in the country and experience of country life. However, this is not necessarily the case, since it is probable that rural women, too, could romanticise rural areas other than the ones in which they were born and reared. I am suggesting this probability because those geographical areas which were singled out for mention - scenic areas of the western seaboard - have a long history of romanticisation both by British colonists in the nineteenth century and subsequently by the culturally dominant classes in the post-independent state (after 1922).

Remarks made by a few of the women who had spoken so highly of set dancing in the country made me realise, though, that there is a disjuncture, if not outright paradox, between the image of set dancing in the country and in the city. These remarks were made in response to a question about their opinion of the kinds of people who do set dancing. This was a much less flattering representation. Margaret, who had spoken earlier about her initial introduction to set dancing in Miltown, answered the question thus:

my first impressions always at any of these workshops is 'Oh, my God, will you look at this lot!' (*laughs*) .. I remember my first workshop in Galway and I looked around the room and there was little old grannies in Aran cardigans .. and they were all practising the steps and I thought 'This is sad .. oh my God' .. all the square people of Ireland, you know .. were kind of gathered together and I just thought 'no, thank you' .. but the minute you get into doing the activity, that changes completely .. I mean it looks from the outside total boredom .. but once you actually get involved in the actual doing of it .. you know .. it changes.

This, in my view, is interesting because firstly, the image has changed, at least the female one, from the real Irish colleen to 'little old grannies in aran cardigans' from a representation which connotes beauty and freedom to one which has connotations of being 'square', drab and out of date. And secondly, there is a perceived tension between the image and the reality of the dancing itself, as if one loves the dancing but would be reluctant to be associated with the stereotype of the people who do it.

Margaret continues on in a similar vein to give even more damning detail of her image of the set-dance community, which includes:

the female national teacher .. men who may be .. conservative .. nowhere else to go .. didn't make it at the discos (*laughs*) ... people who are separated are coming back in to meet people again .. an air of need or loneliness sometimes.

Here again, there is a reluctance to be associated with such a conservative group and the tension emerges between her own self-image and her image of her dance associates:

I look at my friends and we're doing it but we're really not that type .. and yet if they are doing it they are becoming set-dancing types .. but maybe they feel that they don't want to identify themselves with the old image that set dancing is about .. sometimes I go to *céilís* and I'm totally depressed .. I look at a roomful of post-menopausal women, single women .. the blouse is buttoned up around their head .. and the long skirt and the brown tights and I go 'Oh, God, is this going to be me?' and I start panicking.

However, she finally reassures herself by allowing for the fact that different kinds of groups are involved in set dancing:

and then, on other occasions you go and there's a younger set of people or whatever .. or younger at heart .. you don't get that feeling .. but I suppose there's a mix of people doing set dancing .. people who have always done it and it's been a tradition.

Eileen makes a similar observation to Margaret regarding the tensions between her image of the stereotypical people who do set dancing and her own involvement in it:

the first night I went into the Ierne it caused me all sorts of 'God, I'm not going to the Ierne [*tone of mock incredulity*]' (*general laughter*) and even into the Merchant [*pub popular with set dancers*] .. I would never have gone into the Merchant in a fit before last year .. even the bloody mural on the outside of the Merchant, people with skirts on down to here .. you look at the mural .. talk about an ancient stereotype of set dancing ... women in long skirts down to their toes .. and get inside and it's totally different.

Eileen goes on to relate how her teenage daughter thinks that set dancing is 'out of the Ark' and associates it with country people:

sometimes I'd be tryin' to practise my steps at home on the floor [*and her daughter would say*] 'Jesus, she's off again' .. she [*daughter*] was in Mayo last weekend .. thinks it's the ends of the earth .. ten-year-old hairstyles and ten-year-old clothes .. that's her perception of it, you know .. that would have been my perception.

Though it is a question worth raising, it is impossible to assess if the negative stereotypes above are related to the transference of the dance from a rural to an urban location: in other words, a breakdown of the romanticised 'other'. Certainly, some of the images conveyed - those of being dated, conservative, 'square', could be quite easily associated with rurality. However, the country could hardly be seen to have a monopoly of post-menopausal women and lonely men! The above extracts do clearly express, though, a definite reflexivity about personal-identity construction and the final triumph of the enjoyment of the activity of dancing over the negative images associated with it.

CONCLUSIONS

In contemporary society, sociologists claim, there is a tendency for the body to become increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity (for example, see Falk, 1994; Featherstone *et al.*, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Shilling, 1993). There are also, in recent years, the increased efforts of women to liberate their bodies from the controls and constraints of patriarchal institutions and practices. Dancing can be seen as playing an important role in both agendas, For the women to whom I spoke the enjoyment of the activity itself is dependent on the provision of a safe environment, a space in which they can feel free to indulge in this form of bodily expression. Set dancing provides such a space. It does so in at least two ways. It enables them to exercise more control over social interaction with men than in other dance situations, and possibly in most other public circumstances. This relative freedom is achieved through the avoidance of potentially

unpleasant encounters due to the rules and etiquette involved, the relative absence of male surveillance and relative choice in ‘the presentation of self’. Since traditional dance is commonly believed to maintain traditional, i.e. patriarchal gender relations (see Hanna, 1988 and Frank, 1991) it is interesting to note the ways in which it can operate in a contrary direction. One could see this as an instance of the possible ways in which cultural forms can change and be adapted to different meanings and purposes over time and in keeping with the interests of the groups involved.

Set dancing also provides women with the opportunity for communication and physical contact with people in what they perceive to be an inclusive and friendly environment. In many ways this community could be likened to an idealised rural community which is contrasted favourably with other dance communities. The members of this community are perceived to be warm, natural and engaging as opposed to ‘cool’, coy and blasé. And germane to its attractiveness is its temporary and voluntary nature. It offers the best of both worlds in that this ‘rural space’ in the city provides women with an opportunity for dancing which would not otherwise be available to them and does not demand of them the continuous duties and obligations attached to being members of a rural community based on local residence. Perhaps there is a little irony in the fact that a dance form which is associated with tradition and rurality is a source of pleasure, freedom and individual expression for women in the city in conditions of high modernity.

APPENDIX

THE LANCERS

5th Figure

Reel - 192 bars

Opening Position:	All four couples join hands in front and face anti-clockwise around the circle, gents on the inside.	
A LEAD AROUND	All four couples dance anti-clockwise around until back in original places. During the last two bars each couple changes to the standard position by the gent turning the lady clockwise under both arms.	8 bars
B SWING	All four couples swing in place.	8 bars
C FIGURE	(a) CHAIN & LINE UP: Starting with a right hand to their own partners ladies and gents chain around clockwise and anti-clockwise respectively. Half-way around partners meet each other and swing once. The chain is then continued to bring all dancers back to their original places. They do not form couples again, but line up as follows: LINE UP: On the first occasion the line forms up behind 1 st tops position. As each couple gets into place in the line each lady should be in front of her partner. The line forms in the following order. The leading couple, the couple to the left of the leading couple, the couple to the right of the leading couple, and the couple opposite the leading couple, with each lady in front of her partner.	16 bars

	(b)	<i>SIDE STEP</i> : The line splits. Gents step sideways to the left and ladies sideways to the right, (4 bars). The lines then return in opposite directions, passing through each other to the opposite sides, and turn to face each other, (4 bars).	8 bars
	(c)	<i>ADVANCE & RETIRE</i> : Lines join hands and advance and retire twice.	8 bars
	(d)	<i>DANCE TO PLACE & SWING</i> : Each dancer dances back to their original place in four bars and then couples join up and swing in place for four bars. i.e. dancers at the end of the lines dance towards each other and meet in the centre. In the case of the other two couple the lady and gent that are in their correct places simply dance in place, and their partners dance across to them.	8 bars
D	<i>FIGURE</i>	Repeat C, the line forming behind 2ND TOPS.	40 bars
E	<i>FIGURE</i>	Repeat C, the line forming behind 1ST SIDES.	40 bars
F	<i>FIGURE</i>	Repeat C, the line forming behind 2ND SIDES.	40 bars
G	<i>HOUSE</i>	All four couples dance house around, doubling the last two bars.	8 bars

THE CALEDONIAN

5th Figure Reel - 256 bars

Opening Position: All dancers face to centre, joining hands in a circle.

A	<i>START</i>	(a)	<i>CIRCLE</i> : Advance and retire twice.	8 bars
		(b)	<i>HOME</i> : All four couples dance around at home.	8 bars
B	<i>FIGURE</i>	(a)	<i>HOUSE & HOME</i> : TOP COUPLES dance around the house inside (8 bars), and then dance around at home, (8 bars).	16 bars
		(b)	<i>SLIDE & CHANGE PARTNERS</i> : TOP COUPLES advance and retire once (4 bars); then the couples separate and the gents dances in an anti-clockwise direction around each other to pick up the side ladies to their left (4 bars). The side ladies dance on the spot for the last 4 bars.	8 bars
		(c)	<i>HOUSE & HOME</i> : TOP GENTS and their new partners dance around the house inside (8 bars), starting and finishing at their new partners position, and then dance around at home, (8 bars).	8 bars
		(e)	<i>HOUSE & HOME</i> : TOP GENTS and their new partners repeat (c).	16 bars
		(f)	<i>SLIDE & CHANGE PARTNERS</i> : TOP GENTS and their new partners repeat (b). The gents move one place around again to pick up the side ladies.	8 bars
		(g)	<i>HOUSE & HOME</i> : TOP GENTS and their new partners repeat (c).	16 bars
		(h)	<i>SLIDE & CHANGE PARTNERS</i> : TOP GENTS and their new partners repeat (b). The gents move one place around again to pick up their original partners.	8 bars
		(i)	<i>HOUSE</i> : TOP COUPLES dance around the house.	8 bars
C	<i>MIDDLE</i>	(a)	<i>SLIDE</i> : ALL four couples advance to centre and retire once.	4 bars
		(b)	<i>HOUSE</i> : SIDE COUPLES dance around at home.	4 bars

D	FIGURE	SIDE COUPLES repeat B	104 bars
E	FINISH	(a) SLIDE: All four couples advance to centre and retire once.	4 bars
		(b) HOME: All four couples dance around at home.	4 bars
		(c) HOUSE: All four couples dance house around.	8 bars

Fifth figures of the Lancers and the Caledonian sets reproduced with kind permission from Terry Moylan, *Irish Dances*, 2nd edn (Dublin: Na Píobairí Uilleann, 1985).

NOTES

1. The lead dancers in the first run of *Riverdance: The Show*.
2. The list of topics on which the discussion here is based includes: patterns and frequency of dancing, the pleasures of dancing, favourite dances and music, conventions and behaviours relating to dancing.
3. In the interests of anonymity I have not used real names.
4. In the extracts two dots (..) means a pause, three dots (...) means non-sequential commentary.

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