

Original Paper

Artistic Style and Cultural Representation of Irish Step Dance - Take *Riverdance* as an Example

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Abstract

In Ireland, Irish step dance has been a national identity for a long time. For many people in the world, Riverdance was their first impression about Irish step dance. It brought a boom and a renaissance of Irish step dance. In the twenty-first century, more than twenty years after the Riverdance boom, have people's perception of Riverdance and Irish culture changed? Thus, this essay explores the experiences of Irish dancing and culture of former Riverdance dancers and audiences in 2021.

Keywords

Artistic Style, Cultural Representation, Irish Step Dance, Riverdance

1. Introduction

Dance is not only an art form but also a means of studying historical, political, and cultural processes (Schechner, 2003). In Ireland, Irish step dance has been a national identity for a long time (Wulff, 2005). Irish step dance plays a significant role in the construction of Irish cultural identity. In April 1994, a seven-minute Irish step dance was performed in the interval of the European Song Contest. This dance, devised to bridge a gap, became such a sensation that it changed the development of Irish step dance in the future. Following the success of the short film, the original Irish step dance version was enriched by the creative team who produced a dance performances, *Riverdance*. Since the 1990s, there has been a popular trend of Irish dancing as *Riverdance* has been performed around the world and people have become interested in exploring and embracing it. It is not only an Irish national treasure (Masero, 2010), but also has brought Irish culture to a nationwide audience through its fast-paced, neo-traditional dance steps and ethereal ballads (Farrell-Wortman, 2010). For many people in the world, *Riverdance* was their first impression about Irish step dance. It brought a boom and a renaissance of Irish step dance.

Because of the modern media campaign, people around the world know Ireland through *Riverdance*. I

want to know if the culture and life of the Irish people are expressed in the work of *Riverdance*, and how those who watch *Riverdance* view it as a representation of Irish culture. In the twenty-first century, more than twenty years after the *Riverdance* boom, have people's perception of *Riverdance* and Irish culture changed? Thus, this essay explores the experiences of Irish dancing and culture of former *Riverdance* dancers and audiences in 2021. Specifically, the research seeks to address three research questions: (1) How do people think about Irish step dance as a representative of Irish culture, Why? (2) How do Irish people think about stage work of *Riverdance*? (3) Non-Irish people's views on *Riverdance*. Based on ethnographic observations and interviews on Irish step dance culture, this essay establishes the social memory of Irish step dance culture and people's national identity with *Riverdance*.

According to Foley (2001) Irish step dance has gone through a long history, it originated in Ireland in 1170. This dance was first seen in celebratory ceremonies such as weddings and ceremonies, and were considered an important part of social gatherings (Masero, 2010). At that time, Irish steps became popular throughout Ireland. The end of the nineteenth century within the context of colonialism, a cultural representation was needed to establish an Irishness that was positive and different from Englishness. Therefore, the Gaelic League, an Irish nationalist party established in 1893, had focus on its Irish culture, particularly the Irish step dance (Foley, 2001). With globalisation came the innovative dance drama *Riverdance* in 1994, which promoted interest in Irish dance and culture, but its emergence sparked a debate about Irishness expression (Wulff, 2009).

In order to examine artistic style and cultural representation of Irish step dance -Take *Riverdance* as an example, I attended to online classes of Irish step dance, one is organized by Miss Smyth and the other one by Horizon Dance Company. Miss Smyth is one of *Riverdance* performers. She runs weekly classes in Irish step dance, twenty people at a time, and more on teaching self-created Irish choreography works. Horizon Dance Company was founded in March 2019 and is headquartered in Bristol, United Kingdom. It has developed a systematic and standardized system of teaching Irish step dance which it uses in its classes. Drill courses that focus on learning and perfecting the core foundations of Irish Dancing. From February to March 2021 – all classes are presently running online because of Covid-19. Weekly classes are online via Zoom for about one hour for ten people. In 2021, Covid-19 pandemic restricts anthropologists from conducting field research. Therefore, social scientists have researched temporary strategies to solve this problem by interviewing influential people via the internet, thus opening up a new era of online fieldwork (Wood, 2020).

The fieldwork was based on students who took part in Irish step dance online courses, including thirty students and three experienced Irish step dance teachers. The age range of the participants was ten to forty-six years old and the dance experience was one to twenty-five years. Participants included many types of jobs, for example as freelancers, students, amateur artists, teachers, and doctors. Three of the participants (teachers) are presently training Irish step dance in professional dance institutions and community classes. Among the participants are four former performers of *Riverdance*.

2. Methodology

To answer my research questions, I have used literature review, participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, ethnographic research, video analyses for research:

Participant observation: Ethnographic, relying primarily on participatory observation (Aktinson, 1998). David (2013) also argued that anthropological research is important to participate in the classroom, communicating with those present, feeling the atmosphere of the scene and taking field notes in timeliness. Therefore, I take field notes, record the action and the conversations of the participants after class.

In-depth interviews and focus group interviews: Interviews and recordings were conducted after acquiring ethical approval from the university and obtaining informed consent from all participants. Participants volunteered to participate in group or individual interviews, which were conducted at convenient times on the internet. Due to confidentiality issues, one participant required an individual interview and due to time constraints and availability, five participants were interviewed individually. The remaining twenty-five participants were divided into two groups, and in both groups the participants mostly knew each other, creating a relaxed and safe environment. I have designed semi-structured interview questions with the focuses on artistic style and cultural representation of Irish step dance - Take *Riverdance* as an example.

At the end of the interview, I compiled the notes from the interview and also analysed the results. Thematic analysis was undertaken using the Ethnographic Analyses method, “the goal in is to discover... people are used to organizing their behavior, to make and use objects, to organize space, and to make sense out of their experience” (Spradley, 1980, p. 130). Based on the principles of pragmatic inquiry, multiple analytical processes were conducted (Malterud, 2016). The interviews will focus on how people embody Irish culture with dance and how people think about stage work of *Riverdance* in 2021.

Video analysis: I have collected a number of video materials on *Riverdance* and repeatedly watched the performances, focusing on the dance movements and cultural characteristics of *Riverdance* to provide an intuitive theoretical basis for essay. After talking to the *Riverdance* dancers, I reviewed and compared the step movements in class with the performance and analyzed them in detail.

2.1 Artistry of Step Irish Dance

During the class, I observed that the body posture and steps in Irish step dance were basically upright and straight. The footwork is based on the movement of the lower legs, and the arm movements are simple and mostly straight. Irish step dance uses the strength of the foot joints to step the floor, and one of the teachers said that if the ankles are flexible, Irish step dance is half-way to success. This is why the students focused on feeling the sound of the various parts of the foot hitting the floor and the various rhythmic changes in the music as they dance. One of the students said in class that she practices every day at home after work with Irish music in order to practice her step leg movements and improve her ankle flexibility. During the teaching process, the teacher did not have the upper body movements,

the hands were naturally down. Casey (2007) agreed that Irish step dancer's arms held parallel to the body, the legs and feet provide the only movement. Nowadays, the dancer's upper body will have a limited movement, which is designed by the choreographer to increase the effect of the dance. Royce (2004) believes that changing the original state of being can add creativity to dance artistry, it can include costumes, music and some movement, but cannot leave Irishness. In terms of music, classes used traditional Irish folk music in both the warm-up and dance exercise combinations. One of the interviewees from Ireland said that Irish traditional folk music consisted of bagpipes, fiddle, trumpet and percussion and that listening to Irish folk music was like going back to his homeland. Dance cannot be done without musical accompaniment, as music inspires the dancer to dance. The image of the dancer in a dance is based on the harmony between the visual and auditory senses, and without the music, the dance would lose its vitality. Royce (2004) argues that the artistry of dance includes not only dance movements but also music.

In the artistic style of the *Riverdance*, I find that *Riverdance* is focused on step dancing, but it also encompasses the history and culture of Ireland. I observed through the video of *RiverDance* performance that performers move their feet neatly and uniformly, conveying through their movements the solemnity of the Irish people and speaking to the sentiments of the Irish nation. At the same time, the choreographer has added some innovations while maintaining the original elements of Irish step dance. A *Riverdance* dancer described step dance as being mainly about wearing special shoes with iron collars on the soles and using flexible steps to strike a variety of rhythms on the wooden floor. We can see the dancers spinning on their toes, aerial strikes, basic dance moves through the performance video, and also the incorporation of the front outside one-and-a-half week jump from figure skating. This multiplicity of elements is due to their similarity to the uprightness of traditional Irish step dance, in other words, they adorn Irish step dance (Masero, 2010). The change in costume in *Riverdance* caught my attention: in traditional Irish step dance the girls wear light skirts and the boys square skirts, in *Riverdance* the performers wear velvet dresses and black slacks, tight vests and dress shirts. One of the *Riverdance* dancers commented that these changes in attire not only made it easier for the dancers to perform the movements better, but also enhanced the visual effect.

I discovered through viewing performances of *Riverdance* that it has a relaxed and free style which expresses the Irish values of freedom-loving people. At the same time, the confident step dance shows the aspirations of the Irish people to build a wonderful homeland. The sound of Irish bagpipes played during the performance adds a new dimension to the expression of Irish culture. In the Performances of *Riverdance*, I observed the sophisticated use of "dance dialogue" (Farrell-Wortman, 2010) in the choreography, which is a significant dance innovation. The contrast between the intricacy of one performer's steps and the progression of the other, which is longer and slower, is a stark contrast in the rhythmic treatment, while the two dance against each other as if they are in a contest of sorts. The richness of the movement language in the dance performance brings the dance to a climax and drives the audience emotionally. According to a participant, the creation of *Riverdance* has bought a new

phase in the development of Irish step dance and has brought the passion of Irish step dance to the people of the world. I think the scene dispatching of the dancers in *Riverdance* is brilliant and the portrayal of the dancers' character is shown through expressions and movements. It was again highly visual and contagious, showing the passion of the Irish people and fully embodying their passion. Thus, the artistic style in *Riverdance* not only maintains the original Irish step style, but also makes some period creations.

2.2 Ethnicity in Irish Step Dance

Irish nationality is not only reflected in Irish step dance, but also in Irish folk music and national costume. In an interview, an Irish university student said that she learns Irish step dance because of her love of Irish step dance as a form of national identity. In the classroom, the teacher, as well as seven students, wore Irish dresses to participate in the class. According to Sauthoff (1939) when culture is used to define an ethnic system, it is an important factor in maintaining the group. Another interviewee said that she learnt Irish step dancing to dance with her daughter, who is 10 years old in primary school, and that she hoped learning to dance would give her daughter an opportunity to learn about Irish culture and increase her awareness of Irish national culture. During the class, the mother and child also talk about the history and culture of the Irish nation in the dance they are learning. Sometimes the father will help to accompany her on the accordion. Coleman (2002) pointed out that In this society, experiential learning is more valued than cognitive learning. Cultural transmission is a necessary way for the survival and continuation of humanity, and it contains the cultural wealth and experience created and accumulated by our ancestors. One of the teacher said in an interview that most people in Ireland learn to dance and almost everyone is learning to step dance. Even the Irish in the diaspora do not forget their cultural identity. Many Irish people get together every weekend to dance their version of this Irish step dance and Irish-style ballroom dancing to the accompaniment of accordions and bagpipes. This reflects the Irish people's identification with Irish step dancing and their love of Irish culture. As a conceptual art form, Irish step dance, combined with other conceptual forms of Irish culture such as traditional dress, traditional music, traditional customs, or traditional festivals, forms a strong unifying force in Irish society.

With the worldwide popularity of *Riverdance*, Irish culture and the Irish nation is becoming famous the world. It is clear that Irish step dance has not only strengthened national cohesion but has also become a national icon of Irish culture. One of *Riverdance* dancer said that if there was no *Riverdance* then Irish step dance would not be famous. Murray (1997) claims that Irish national identity is constructed through stage performance. *Riverdance* is playing a very important role in the construction of Irish cultural identity, and the choreographers are trying to find ways to construct and represent Irish cultural identity in Irish folk memory and art. During class discussions, there was a general excitement about *Riverdance*, and those who had seen the show commented that it had a distinctly Irish national character, not just in the dance, music, props and sets, but also in the plot setting. Although the plot reflects the tragic experiences of Irish emigrants leaving their homeland, the vibrant dance and music

are filled with unyielding optimism, a love of nature and life, and the Irish national soul of warmth, simplicity and optimism. *Riverdance* is a key cultural symbol of Irish culture (Farrell-Wortman, 2010) and one mother said that she and her daughter loved *Riverdance* and that they would watch it at home, not only because of its rich Irish culture, but also as a special way of transmitting their culture.

In its two shows and thirteen performances, *Riverdance* is like a history book, reflecting on a society that has progressed. From the aspirations of Irish ancestors who danced with the sun to the world and Ireland, to the aspirations of the children of immigrants to their Irish homeland, the story of social and historical development is told in a visual way. One of the *Riverdancers* believes that *Riverdance*, as a cabaret about the struggle of Irish ancestors against nature and the struggles of war, famine and rebuilding, is a great piece of work that every Irishman has to watch. As an elegant form of artistic expression, dance expresses a silent emotion and is not limited by any conditions. The art of dance provides a clearer and more intuitive understanding of the spirit of peoples and folk customs around the world (Foley, 2001).

Riverdance, an Irish step dance drama, It provides an exploration of the world of human spirituality and draws on the ideas of the Irish people at different times in their history, showing the richness of Irish culture, it also teaches us that dance is a vibrant reproduction and sublimation of social life. One interviewee said it was about posture and soul on the feet, not only in the appreciation of body language but also in the profound and more spiritual connotations. Since national identity is a perpetually changing, and constructed process, a single paradigm Irish nationalist consensus no longer functions, hence the birth of *Riverdance* as a twenty-first century Irish nationalist culture.

3. Conclusion

Irish step dance is a vehicle for Irish culture and a medium for maintaining Irish cultural heritage with Irish immigrants and their children in their homeland. Zenker (2013) agreed that besides the Irish language, Irish dancing forms part of a distinctive “Irish culture”. Foley (2001) also believed that Irish step dance was a symbolic embodiment of cultural nationalism. However, the emergence of *Riverdance* has raised concerns about the global heritage of Irish step dance and has also raised questions about whether it is representative of Irish culture. So with these questions I attended two different Irish step dance classes for fieldwork, observing and recording in class and interviewing classmates and teachers after class and I used ethnographic research in my field notes. During Irish step dance classes I felt the love for Irish step dancing in the Irish step class and discussed the national identity of the *Riverdance* with the participants. Because of COVID-19 in 2021, classes and interviews were made through the internet, which was a regret for this fieldwork.

This essay states the social memory of Irish step dance culture and people’s national identity with *Riverdance* through the classroom movements and the artistry of step dance. It is an undeniable cultural product of Ireland, both at the time of its production and today (Farrell-Wortman, 2010). A dance performance that has gone global because of a group of Irish people who love it, *Riverdance* has

managed to break through the barriers of cultural convergence brought about by demonstration globalization come awake in the Irish nation and create a powerful wind of Irish step dance around the world. A folk dance will bind people together and give those a new lease of life. These cases of the Irish dancing body provide a vital piece to the understanding of dance more generally, as abstract dance and movements communicate stories about their societies and culture (Wulff, 2003). It is fair to say that *Riverdance* is not only a world dance treasure but also a source of pride for the Irish nation and a shining example of folk art for the rest of the world in 2021.

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