

The evolution of Irish folk theatre

Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, was founded in 1964 and is based in Tralee, Co. Kerry. It is, in many ways, a unique cultural experience, presenting Irish folklore and folk culture through the medium of theatre involving music, song, dance and mime but invariably no dialogue. I began training with the company at the age of nine and have been involved in many roles since, including as a performer and director. In this paper I seek to outline the evolution of Irish folk theatre as exemplified by Siamsa Tíre. As well as engaging with the material presented on stage, I consider the impact of tourism on Irish culture, changing concepts of folk culture in an increasingly urbanized state and the potential of folk theatre to create as well as reflect a community and society. This paper draws selectively on the repertoire of performances devised by Siamsa Tíre over the past half century, highlighting themes and developments that inform an understanding of the art form and changes in Irish society more generally.

1 INTRODUCTION

I was perhaps eight or nine when the teacher at school announced that auditions would be held for Siamsa Tíre on one of the evenings that week. I was intrigued but unaware of the impact this information was to have on my life in the coming years. Like many others who attended the auditions I was brought by my parents and knew little of the company and its history at the time. I, like many of my school friends, had grown up in town though my parents had experienced growing up with a closer connection to rural life and agriculture. I had not witnessed a cow being milked, a sheep being sheared, butter being made or the hay saved. I was a child of modern Ireland where technology and other industries signposted a path that reshaped the fabric of Irish life, for so long dependent on a large agricultural sector.

Irish traditional music, song and dance were imagined as being an integral part of rural life, though many of these pastimes were now developing in urban contexts (Kearney, 2007), not least in Tralee. I had been attending Irish dancing lessons near my home – not necessarily the coolest thing for a young boy to be doing in a pre-Flatley/*Riverdance* era (Ó Cinnéide, 2002). I received basic music tuition in school, supplemented by private piano lessons, learning mostly popular standards and basic repertoire from the Western Art Music canon. I was not part of a choir, nor did I attend the theatre very often but the auditions were an opportunity to further my education in the arts and eventually become part of a unique theatre company. Upon acceptance, I trained at a rural facility in North Kerry, designed like a farm house from a previous era, attending classes one night a week for three years. Each night we learned music, song, dance and mime – the four elements that were understood to make up Irish folk theatre. An element that was not explicitly emphasized but present in the singing class was the Irish language. Despite the perceived importance, Seán Ahern told me “It has always struggled from the beginning. But the songs were in Irish” (interview, 31 August 2012). Very quickly I felt part of a community involving people across a number of generations who shared a desire to perform.

Over the past twenty years I have been involved in or witnessed a number of shows that demonstrate a sense of evolution in the folk theatre idiom. Folk theatre, as understood in this paper, is the presentation of folk culture and a way of life through music, song, dance and mime. Though drama is an element, it is generally without dialogue and the story is told through other devices. There is a strong history of theatre in Ireland. As Pilkington notes: “For many centuries Ireland and things Irish have been viewed as essentially performative: as possessing a core of being that is inherently theatrical” (2010: 2). In the Irish theatrical tradition, *Siamsa Tíre* remains a largely unique example of Irish folk theatre.

2 THE ROOTS OF SIAMSA TÍRE

The idea for the group that became *Siamsa Tíre* evolved from the formation of a Gregorian choir at St Johns Church, Tralee in 1957 following the appointment of a young curate Fr Pat Ahern to the parish. Following the production of the Passion play, *Golgotha* in 1963, which received unprecedented national attention and acclaim, members of the group embarked on producing a small scale production for a local cabaret style competition. The group was called *Siamsa*, meaning merriment, and though they did not win the initial competition, they continued to develop their production and were to be later joined by members of the other groups from that competition. They then became known as *Siamsóirí na Ríochta*, entertainers of the kingdom, borrowing the nickname of the county of Kerry and reinforcing their links with that place.

It is widely considered that Irish traditional music went through a period of revival from the 1950s to the 1970s (Ó hAlmhuráin, 1998). The perceived revival was based on a number of factors including the growth of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ), an organization founded in 1951 to encourage participation in Irish traditional music, song and dance and which established a network of competitions and branches that facilitated teaching. Another factor was the emergence of commercially successful ensembles such as The Chieftains, The Bothy Band and Planxty, all of which arguably followed on from the innovation of Seán Ó Riada. In all of these instances, new and often urban contexts for the performance of and participation in Irish traditional music were created that were removed from the rural homesteads of the early twentieth century. Additionally, new contexts for Irish traditional music were also developed amongst diasporic communities, particularly in England and America (Gedutis, 2004; Hall, 1994; Moloney, 1998).

In the 1960s, another context for the presentation of Irish traditional music, loosely based on the cabaret form, was popular throughout the country. Under the auspices of CCÉ a competition for a form of stage show involving the presentation of Irish music entitled *Scoraíocht* was established. Ahern suggests that CCÉ desire a new dimension to the presentation of Irish traditional music and that dimension should be visual (1969: 10). One of the founding members of *Siamsóirí na Ríochta*, dancer Liam Tarrant, stated: “We believe if we could present Irish music through the presentation of occupations such as flailing, the scythe and a number of others it would be much more interesting” (4 December 1964). An emphasis was thus placed on the potential for a visual presentation involving Irish traditional music and song, further enhanced through the use of characterization.

In 1964, many of the people who would become central to the development of *Siamsa Tíre* were involved in a variety of groups that competed. The following year, many of the group directed by Ahern travelled to Dublin at the request of broadcaster Liam Ó Murchú, to record a series of programs entitled *Aililiú*. A fifth program, a Christmas special entitled *Coinnle na nAingeal* or Christmas Angels was also recorded. For that show, director Pat Ahern set Máire Mac an tSaoi’s poem ‘Coinnle na Nollaig’ to music and based the thirty minute show around the traditional Christmas beliefs and customs in rural Ireland. The combination of religious themes and rural customs is a recurring element of the work of Ahern. Following an overwhelmingly positive response and encouraged by local tourism executives, the group developed an entire stage production in 1968.

The early performances of *Siamsa Tíre* developed from short pieces based on aspects of rural life in Ireland including the milking of the cow and making of butter with the songs ‘Aililiú na Gamhna’ and ‘Amhrán na Cuiginne’. The performances were shaped by the talents and memories of the group and in particular the artistic director, Pat Ahern. Born in 1932, Ahern

grew up on a farm near the village of Moyvane, Co. Kerry. A fiddle player, he also learned to dance in the North Kerry tradition from the dancing master Jeremiah Molyneux (1883–1967), also known as Jerry Munnix. Later he studied for a BMus at University College, Cork, where he was influenced by Professor Aloys Fleischmann (1910–1992), having previously studied music at Maynooth (Fleischmann, 2000). Ahern was also influenced by pioneering Russian dancer and artistic director Igor Moiseyev (1906–2007) who came up with the idea of establishing a theatre of folk art in the 1930s. With a voluntary group of enthusiastic musicians, singers and dancers, Ahern devised the performances based on the rural folk culture of North Kerry. He drew from the rich repertoire of folk songs and dramatized the everyday tasks. These pieces would later come together to form the show *Fadó Fadó* (Long, long ago), a show that ran for over forty years, revised on occasion and rebranded as *San Am Fadó* (In the long ago) in the 1990s.

An integral aspect of *Fadó Fadó* was the ‘fun in the village’ motif, a common denominator for many European folk dance ensembles and an often simplistic and romantic depiction of village life (Shay, 2002: 9). However, Siamsa Tíre went beyond the modes of performance typical of many folk dance companies. Amongst the important aspects of the early productions were the use of a regional dance tradition, the arrangement of traditional songs for SATB choir and the visual presentation of everyday life. Each aspect may be traced to Ahern’s own experiences as a dancer, choral conductor and composer, and farmer.

The North Kerry style of step dance, adapted and stylized for presentation in a folk theatre context, owes much to the tradition of the dancing masters that travelled through the region in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. An early example is Múirín or Mooreen (1822–1878), “the earliest known dancing master in the oral history of North Kerry” (Foley, 2012: 31). Cullinane states: “In all his travels, Mooreen preserved and restored and indeed imposed on this area, what has come to be known as ‘the Kerry style of dancing’, a distinct and separate style unknown in the Dublin of that period” (1994: 30). Nedín Batt Walsh (b. c.1835) succeeded Múirín and in turn taught Molyneux, whose style was the predominant form until the increased institutionalization of dance through competitions organized by various groups in the latter half of the twentieth century. A number of exponents of this style of dance were recorded in the 1970s and 1980s by both Siamsa Tíre and Catherine Foley (Foley, 2012). This form of dance, though adapted, stylized and developed through collaboration with dancers from other styles, became one of the cornerstones of presentation by the Siamsa Tíre Company. Significantly the dance style did not conform to the “traditional canons of correctness” (the rigid upper body, the dress code, the hair styles) identified by Moloney (2009) in institutionalized competitive dance. Indeed, Brennan (1999: 155) notes Siamsa Tíre as the exception to the rule that “Irish dancing on stage had largely come to mean a stiff-backed performance by a troupe of young dancers wearing the regulation dance dresses rigid with embroidery”. In many ways, the style of dance in North Kerry provided flexibility for choreographers to explore and develop movement further (Wulff, 2007).

An important element of the Siamsa Tíre performances is the use of choral singing and the role of the St John’s Church Choir in facilitating the education of young men in the town must be noted. At a time of very high church attendance, the sense of community was reinforced through religious practice. Under Ahern’s tutelage, very high standards were achieved, initially with an all-male choir. Indeed for his final examination for his BMus, Ahern conducted the Tralee choir in the Aula Maxima at UCC. Like his contemporary Seán Ó Riada who achieved fame for his arrangement of traditional song airs for the soundtrack to the 1959 film *Mise Éire*, Ahern was trained in the European school under Fleischmann. Although Ahern’s treatment of the music is quite different to Ó Riada, they share an awareness of milieu and an appreciation for the importance of the language and the role of words.

The early performances of *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* involved music, song and dance that was part of a living tradition and were initially presented in the style of a cabaret, as was popular at the time. Gradually, the performances developed with the expressed desire to tell a story. In contrast with many folk dance troupes, who may also incorporate song and characterization into their performances, Siamsa Tíre developed a powerful dramatic element. According to current Artistic Director Jonathon Kelliher, “We use our music, songs and dance to really tell a story. For us, showing off the dance, or the song, is secondary to getting into the story” (in Mulrooney, 2003: 252). After nearly half a century, the development of Siamsa Tíre is itself a story worth telling.

3 FADÓ FADÓ

I remember, aged about twelve, standing by the life-size façade of the old thatched cottage about an hour before the curtain would be raised. I did not have a full rehearsal with the rest of the cast. I had learned the various scenes, songs and dances in my classes but now I had ‘graduated’ to the stage alongside cast members I knew only from photographs and stories. The experience lay between a participatory folk dance experience and a fully professional theatrical experience. I was guided by some of the older, more experienced members such as Jimmy Smith and Seanie Mahoney – they had been there since the start in 1968. In later years I would assume their role, though much younger than they had been when encouraging me. In fifteen years I performed almost every variant of every male role in *Fadó Fadó / San Am Fadó* and always felt comfortable. My character was ‘myself’, a young man in his community.

The show included various scenes that represented the activities of Irish rural life in the early twentieth century. I remember pretending to milk a cow, make butter in a churn, mend shoes, and cut turf in the bog. We would dance with daisy trains and in imitation of chickens. The traditions of Christmas such as the lighting of the candle and the wren boys featured, as did somber reenactments of emigration scenes. I mastered the use of the flail (used for threshing to separate grains from their husks) and the making of the súgán or straw rope – skills few of my peers even knew existed. The show was escapism, as much for me as for the audience.

The cottage was a central symbol in *Fadó Fadó* and for *Siamsa Tíre* more generally. The window had been salvaged from the old Ahern home, adding to both the sense of authenticity and connection with the past that was being represented. The presence of the thatched cottage also complimented the popular tourist images of Ireland used for much of the twentieth century. When former child performer and later Artistic Director Oliver Hurley compared seeing the cottage on stage to experiencing Disneyland (interview, 7 August 2012), he was betraying a sense of separation that he, like I, experienced. For the original cast, the depth of meaning inherent in the show was greater, a point that was emphasized to me when speaking with founder members following the decision to drop *San Am Fadó* from the Summer Season repertoire in 2010.

A review in the *Theatre Journal* by Edward Pixley (1980) provides an informed insight into these early productions. Though the cast was amateur, they were perceived to perform at a professional standard. Pixley states:

“Although songs and dances were the most distinguishable units of the production, it was neither concert nor dance theatre. The performance impact came through the theatrical presentation. The dramatic vignettes were of necessity simple, since most of the audience has difficulty with the Irish language. But the presentation drew the audience into a friendly conflict between husband and wife or a teasing courtship no less than into the work songs themselves, where the performance of a task became infectiously appealing as the actual work which had inspired the song was done on the stage (sharpening the scythe, flailing the grain, cobbling the shoe). Commonplace activity inspired the imagination of the folk artist, whose art, in turn, transformed the commonplace into something inspiring” (1980: 121-122).

In his review, Pixley implicitly refers to three important aspects of the *Siamsa Tíre* company and the production *Fadó Fadó*. The first concerns education in two contexts: the role of theatre as education for an audience and the role of the company in training members in the cultural traditions of their homeplace. The second relates to the role of tourists and tourism in the production of cultural heritage. The third considers the recognition for creative, aesthetic and artistic qualities in the productions. Each is central to understanding the evolution of Irish folk theatre.

4 A HOME FOR DEVELOPMENT

The first show in which I performed with *Siamsa Tíre* in Tralee was *Ding Dong Dederó: Forging the Dance*. As part of the opening scene I stood atop the set, an impressive and very large structure representing an old forge complete with working bellows. The show depicted the life of Jerry Munnix, the dancing master, reflecting how the young boy may have taken

inspiration from the sounds and shapes around him, through to the fair scene where he demonstrated his skills, to the dancing class where he taught local school children, to the evolution of the dance as taken on by the next generation – a reflection on the company themselves. The show impressed on me the history of the dance, the potential for the theatrical representation of folk history, and the possibilities to explore the development of choreography using existing traditions as a starting point.

Ding Dong Dederó provides a belated foundation myth for the cultural heritage of North Kerry and the Siamsa Tíre Company itself. The production was the climax of the Ahern era for the company – signaling the beginning of the end of his involvement. Significantly the premiere of *Ding Dong Dederó* marked the opening of a new, purpose built theatre. Ó Cinnéide notes: “There was a cast of 90 between the ages of 10 and 70. Twelve were from the original production of 1968. Many came out of retirement to be part of this historic event” (2002: 50). Speaking of the excitement and energy at the time, Seán Ahern reflected: “It was all go. My brother was a hard taskmaster; he kept us on our toes” (31 July 2012).

The building of the new theatre in Tralee and production of *Ding Dong Dederó* was the climax of a twenty year process. Ahern had returned to Kerry in 1972 at the request of Bishop Casey and was released from diocesan duties to dedicate time to developing Siamsa Tíre. Bishop Casey was also president of the Kerry County Board of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and was very supportive of groups involved in music and heritage. A report was published in 1972 that laid out plans for the development of Irish culture, informed by the experiences with and practices of *Siamsóirí na Ríochta*. The report also proposed a purpose built theatre for Tralee, subsequently designed by Ahern and architect Paddy O’Sullivan. 1974 saw the formal founding of Siamsa Tíre Teoranta with a board of directors installed to supervise the implementation of the 1972 report. Ahern was appointed the first Artistic Director, a position he held until his retirement in 1998.

The theatre buildings used by Siamsa Tíre reflect the evolution of the company. Starting out in a convent hall, Siamsa Tíre performed on a number of stages in the town before realizing their own ‘home’. Modeled on Staigue Fort, an Iron Age ringfort in South Kerry, it was planned that the exterior of the building would reflect the nature of what was performed on stage. Thus Siamsa Tíre were linking the tangible and intangible heritage of Co. Kerry. The development of a state-of-the-art facility also impacted on the identity of the company. As Bohlman notes, the stage not only becomes a construct of separation between the audience and a folk culture, it is “a signifier of the complexity of folk music in the modern world” (1988: 126). However, though the Siamsa Tíre productions achieve standards akin to professional companies, it is worth noting that many of the cast continue to be involved in participatory folk culture such as pub sessions and céilithe.

Prior to the development of the theatre, two training centers had been constructed and established – one in Finuge, a small village in rural North Kerry where I myself received my initial training; and one in Carraig, a small village in the West Kerry Gaeltacht where the Irish language is still the spoken language of the local people. Both centers were modeled on the type of Irish farmhouse common in rural Ireland in the early twentieth century complete with thatched roof, flagged stone floors and large open fire. For reasons of maintenance costs, the thatch has been replaced in recent years by slate and for reasons of health and safety the old stone flagged floors have been covered with timber and vinyl sheets reflecting the need to survive in a modern world. While these centers acted as the principal spaces for training new members, who typically auditioned to join as I did between the ages of seven and twelve, recent developments have led to the centralization of all classes to the main theatre in Tralee.

In contrast with the theatre in Tralee, Ahern envisaged the *tithe Siamsa* as spaces in which people who entered “should in some way have the feeling of the traditions which they were portraying and enjoying and exchanging” (30 March 1975). In recent years the centers are used less frequently but their importance is underlined by the reaction to proposals to sell the building in Finuge (Nolan, 2008). The buildings have become an important site of memory, imbued with layers of meaning. The flagstones that surround the fire in Finuge were donated by the founding members, the center one by Ahern himself, and beneath each was placed a piece of paper, symbolic of the sense of tradition that they were attempting to impart.

With the building of the theatre in 1991, many local people did not differentiate between the groups that used it – be they Siamsa Tíre or other local dramatic groups or indeed visiting

companies. While traditionally Siamsa Tíre drew membership from rural communities in North and West Kerry, as well as West Limerick, a significant proportion of the membership has always been drawn from the town of Tralee, the administrative capital and largest town in the county. The company has always been dependent on its community cast, who earn some financial reward but whose effort is recognized as largely voluntary. Since the 1990s, membership of the company has extended beyond its traditional training network and they have actively sought out the involvement of ‘outsiders’. In the minds of some, including former Artistic Director Oliver Hurley who initiated the process of inviting performers to join the community cast, this has impacted on the sense of community and tradition (interview, 7 August 2012). It has also diluted the sense of a unique identity created by Siamsa Tíre and blurred the boundaries between it and other amateur dramatic and musical groups in the town.

While many local people went to see performances by Siamsa Tíre in the early years, gradually over time it became more of a tourist attraction. Some went to see family members perform. As Seán Ahern states: “In the beginning everybody in Tralee came to see us but not anymore. We’re not valued even though we contribute to the tourist season” (interview, 31 July 2012). The recurrence of the shows over the years may have led to a feeling of apathy amongst both cast and people in the town and the attitude that Siamsa Tíre did the same thing all of the time. However, Siamsa Tíre regularly develops new material and the show remained popular amongst audiences. Older cast members, most of whom no longer perform in the shows, feel strongly that *San Am Fadó* should not have been dropped from the summer season program. Officially it remains part of the repertoire and may return to the stage at various times.

5 DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION

Siamsaóirí na Ríochta was slow to develop their repertoire, due in part to the considerable time pressures the process entailed and the mainly voluntary contribution of those involved. The productions performed by Siamsa Tíre are devised theatre, a process that requires much time and engagement. As Oddey notes: “Devising is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing, and re-shaping individuals’ contradictory experiences of the world [...] The process of devising is about the fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture, and the world we inhabit” (1994: 1). The use of this process has implications for the nature of what is presented and the sense of ownership experienced by the cast. As a number of members of Siamsa Tíre pointed out, it is difficult to work full-time in employment outside of the theatre, get a very short break, and then attempt to engage with the work of the company. Nonetheless, involvement in the creative process reinforces a sense of ownership, pride and belonging, strengthening the community aspect of the company.

Former Artistic Director and original ‘core group’ member Oliver Hurley identified the establishment of a professional company in 1985 as a milestone for Siamsa Tíre, bringing it to another level in terms of artistic endeavor (interview, 7 August 2012). He believes that the establishment of the core group provided those involved with scope to experiment at a time when there was no other company like it in Ireland. Until that time the activities were largely limited to the summer season performances, largely geared at tourists, and occasional tours, all of which were dependent on volunteerism. The core group has traditionally been small in number and, as well as developing new repertoire for the wider company, has engaged in research, teaching and touring.

Ó Cinnéide notes that the formation of the core company allowed for “stretching the performance capacity of the company in new directions” (2002: 49). Though some people critique the capacity for change in traditions, Moloney notes: “The capacity to innovate and recreate, to experiment and collaborate is seen by general audiences, cultural custodians, and participants alike as an index of the strength of the traditional culture” (2009: 8). Reflecting on her own work fusing Irish and modern dance, Carr (2009) notes the cyclical nature of the process, returning to the tradition for inspiration. In this context, it is worth noting the concerns of former manager Martin Whelan (1949-2002) to place the development of Irish dance in “responsible” hands (Vallely, 1995), which suggests a role for Siamsa Tíre as caretakers of or gatekeepers to the tradition.

Increasingly since the formation of the professional company, Siamsa Tíre has engaged in collaboration with a wide variety of groups and artists from an eclectic range of genres. An early experiment involved Jonathon Burnett, a former soloist with Irish National Ballet for a Christmas Show in 1986. Mulrooney states: “Since then, Siamsa Tíre has continued to collaborate with contemporary choreographers like John Scott and Cindy Cummings, stretching the limits of the dance form” (2006: 227). The professional company regularly collaborate and perform with other artists and other artforms. Dance critic Diane Theodores noted:

“For years Siamsa Tíre, under the artistic direction of Father Patrick Ahern, have gathered, preserved and performed dance and song from the environs of North Kerry [...] The Arts Council funded project "Between Two Worlds" (Idir Eatarthu) with choreography by Anne Courtney and music by Michael O'Suilleabhain [...] examines the relationship between the traditional and the contemporary [...] The dance exposes some scintillating possibilities for a new ethnically relevant theatre dance” (9 September 1990 cited in Theodores, 1996).

Jonathon Kelliher, current Artistic Director of the company, noted the development of a dance style through collaboration with contemporary dance choreographers over a long period of time. Writing about *Ding Dong Dederó*, choreographed by Anne Courtenay in 1991, Kelliher states:

“That didn’t just come out of nowhere. For ten years prior to that we were bringing contemporary choreographers in – stuff that would have never been in the public because it was just our own development – to see where we could go with it. We might get ten contemporary choreographers in, but only one might work. From the other nine, though, you are going to learn something. It’s not just the Anne Courtneys, or the Cindy Cummings, or the Mary Nunans, it is ten or fifteen years of work we have been doing before them, getting there” (in Mulrooney, 2003: 251).

One of the most influential impacts of experimentation in Siamsa Tíre on the performance and perception of Irish traditional music and dance was the development of the Seville Suite for EXPO '92. With music written by Bill Whelan and incorporating choreography by flamenco dancer Maria Pages, the Seville Suite is identifiable as the precursor of *Riverdance* (Ó Cinnéide, 2002). Ó Cinnéide states: “Siamsa Tíre can be said to have played an important indirect role in the genesis of “Riverdance” and it is interesting to discover that the commercial success of the latter has, in turn, contributed to growth in the activities of cultural organizations like Siamsa” (2002: 51). This echoes Bohlman’s comments on folk music, suggesting commodification “has secured new audiences and new social contexts for folk music in the modern world” (1988: 132). The modern world is conventionally represented as urban and Michael Seavor suggests that if *Riverdance* represents urban Ireland, Siamsa Tíre represents rural Ireland (in Wulff, 2007: 115). Though Siamsa Tíre exists in a global marketplace, needing to ‘sell to survive’, it is the custodian of a rich cultural heritage, not only of the local region but now of the company itself.

6 A WORLD STAGE

For years the posters read “Absolutely superb... it made me want to catch the next plane to Dublin”. The statement was taken from a review of Siamsa Tíre on Broadway by the renowned and feared critic Clive Barnes during their 1976 tour. Each night we performed to tourists from all over the world, a significant proportion from America and Germany but increasingly diverse through the 1990s. The 1976 tour was legendary in the company and I was thrilled when presented with the opportunity to travel to Washington D.C. with the company in 1999.

Standing at the door of the Oval Office in The White House we knew we were important. Only a few nights previously we had opened in Forde’s Theatre where President Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated. The following night many of us would play in an informal pub session in Nanny O’Brien’s, an Irish pub in D.C. run by an emigrant from Tralee who had once auditioned for Siamsa Tíre. It highlighted the duality of the company; the performers engaged in both professional demonstrative and voluntary participatory contexts. The following year many of us would perform at EXPO 2000 in Hannover, Germany. The importance of not only being Irish but of representing and presenting our countries cultural heritage to audiences around the world, many of whom had little or no connection to Ireland yet enjoyed what they saw and heard, reinforced our sense of pride and value in what we did.

Siamsa Tíre have performed all over the world and participated in the World Expos at Brisbane, Australia '88, Seville, Spain '92 and Hannover, Germany 2000. These spaces of consumption replicate the tourist experience at home. As O'Connor and Cronin notes: "the site of tourism consumption may not always coincide with the site of tourism production" (2003: 10). As well as reaching out to new audiences and promoting Ireland and Irish cultural heritage abroad, touring serves another function. Many of the cast note the importance of touring, both in Ireland and abroad. In the words of Seán Ahern: "There was a great sense of knitting the company together" (interview 31 July 2012). Many interviews referred to short Irish tours during which they would spend significant amounts of time together as nurturing a sense of belonging and friendship that subsequently contributed to their willingness to be involved and contribute to the company. That the company does not tour regularly now owes much to economic pressures on a small, regional and largely voluntary company.

The performances in Washington D.C. and Hannover abandoned the full length narrative and reverted to the cabaret style series of vignettes, songs and dances from various productions in the Siamsa Tíre repertoire. Entitled *Sean agus Nua* (The old and the new), the performances mixed myth with folk customs. Tales of mythical battles between Gods were juxtaposed with pagan rituals around the bonfire. Innovative dance routines such as the Bodhrán Dance and the Seville Suite and choral arrangements by Ahern of traditional songs such as Róisín Dubh highlighted the evolution of the company.

Although Siamsa Tíre combines the performance of stories using music, song and dance, it is often the dance that receives most attention. O'Connor (2003: 122) notes that dance has been central to both tourist imagery and practice, regarded as "a traditional and unique expression of the host culture". Cronin and O'Connor notes: "The spectacular success of shows like *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* have made dance into a critical component not just of the selling of Ireland to tourist markets but of the tourism experience itself. Indeed, in the energy, vitality and inventiveness of the dancing presented in these shows, there is seen to be an image of a new Ireland which has effected an attractive synthesis between tradition and innovation" (2003: 9). Cronin and O'Connor contrast the representation of Ireland "as a progressive, modern economy" with "the image of a lackadaisical pre-modern culture, inhabited mainly by old men and (rusting) bicycles" (2003: 3), noting how images of the pre-modern world attracted the post-modern audience.

While elements of *Fadó Fadó* may be critiqued as overly romanticized, it presented an opportunity for escapism, often a quest often central to the tourist experience. The popularity of the show amongst tourists raises questions regarding the influence of the tourist gaze. Writing about performances by Maasai tribes, Bruner states:

"Cultural tourism recreates in performance idealized colonial images and other representations of the past, the pastoral, the original, and the unpolluted [...] The performances manipulate the past to serve the expectations of the tourists and to perform their master narratives about their destinations, stories already in place before they begin their sojourns" (2005: 76).

Fadó Fadó reflected typical, idealized tourism imagery used in the official promotion of Ireland for much of the twentieth century. The potential negative impact of tourism on artistic endeavor is noted in Irish newspapers as far back as 1963 (Quinn 2003: 68) but the importance of tourists in sustaining something a local market cannot or do not is noteworthy (Kneafsey 2003; Quinn, 2003). Returning to O'Connor and Cronin: "Either tourism is seen as a 'Good Thing' which brings in money, creates jobs and facilitates regional development or it is seen as intrusive, exploitative and uniquely destructive in its commodification of peoples and their cultures" (2003: 3).

While in the past North Americans were the biggest audience, increasingly Europeans are more significant in terms of numbers. According to General Manager Catriona Fallon, "Germans are and have been the largest audience. They are followed by the French and the North Americans. Irish audiences fluctuate depending on whether we have produced a new show or not" (personal communication, 14 May 2012). The role of *The Gathering*, an initiative by the Irish government celebrating Irish culture, history and genealogy aiming to mobilise the Irish diaspora to return to Ireland during 2013 may affect the balance once again.

7 RETURNING

For the production *Oileán*, first performed in 2003, I returned from university to perform as a musician, experiencing the completed show with limited involvement in its development. The music was a mix of old tunes and new compositions composed by Musical Director Tom Hanafin. The show was devised inspired by stories from the Blasket writers including Peig Sayers (1873–1958) and Tomás Ó Criomhthain (1856–1937), whose books are celebrated for their depiction of Irish life at the most westerly point in Europe. The production represented a return to attempts at capturing a particular milieu. The location was once again Kerry. The dancing was wild involving full body movements using choreography by Cindy Cummings that fused the Munnix tradition with contemporary dance. Many of the songs were sourced from West Kerry singer Máire Ní Bheaglaíoch but to this tradition was added a number of new compositions by Hanafin and lyricist Muiris Ó Laoire.

It was not the evocation of island life that was most striking but rather the opening and closing sequences during which cast members dressed in modern black clothing walked hurriedly in angular paths, narrowly avoiding each other and refusing to acknowledge each other's presence. It is a commentary on contemporary life and in stark contrast to the idealized and romanticized setting of the island. Like many of the early performances by the company, *Oileán* centered on the activities of Irish rural life but the importance of representing this life was now put in perspective, framed by the audiences' experiences of a modernized, urbanized twenty-first century world. Kelliher states: "As the National Folk Theatre of Ireland our remit is to portray our traditions. We are trying to keep our traditions, but still move them forward into the twenty-first century – without stagnating. We don't want to be like most folk groups in other European countries. We keep our traditional dance as it is. We haven't strayed and gone with the modernization of the Irish dance. We've kept it, and developed it in its own way. Being the National Folk Theatre – folk being the people – we try to tell the stories of the people" (in Mulrooney, 2003: 53).

In many ways, Kelliher's sentiments echo those of his predecessor, Ahern. In introducing Catherine Foley's study on dance in North Kerry, Ahern states: "Our cultural heritage is about more than ancient objects in museums, dusty manuscripts in libraries, thatched cottages or súgán chairs. Symbols these, landmarks of our culture, but they are not the culture itself. It is *people* that give rise to culture; culture cannot exist without people." (2012: ix). The question of folk remains central. As Hurley states: "It's a constant evolving thing [...] There is a context search for what is folk, ok? It's one of those things that is and was a constant challenge for us [...] To try and identify that is important; to try and portray that is important" (interview, 7 August 2012). Two new productions have been developed for the 2013 Summer Season, reaching in different directions to create two contrasting experiences of Ireland's intangible cultural heritage.

8 CONCLUSIONS

The Siamsa Tíre mission is to reflect Ireland's great wealth of music, dance and folklore on stage, through vibrant, colorful theatrical entertainment and to continue creating new folk theatre presentations, drawing on Irish traditions and a rich cultural reservoir. Very many of the company members that I interviewed compared Siamsa Tíre to a family. Siamsa Tíre is a tight-knit community though over time a divide between the generations has become evident, caused in part by the limited participation of older members in performances and events. However, the *craic* or sense of fun remains an integral aspect of the activities and performances. From the beginning the company has been dependent on largely voluntary participation, though there has been some remuneration, many recognize that the cast operate on a rewards system that is not dominated by financial reward.

From its inception, the company has been artistically innovative, though some periods may be viewed as generating greater output. Despite this, the company is sometimes viewed negatively by critics, in part due to the role of Siamsa Tíre as a tourist attraction. However, Siamsa Tíre represents a unique and innovative intervention in Irish theatre. As Hurley states: "We pioneered it in Ireland and continue to do so" (interview, 7 August 2012). The development of the company – both in terms of community and performances – is challenged

by a continually changing sense of connection, ownership and relevance to the folk culture being presented. Constantly evolving and mindful of its existence as a business as well as a cultural institution, the company is affected by economic pressures.

Siamsa Tíre is aware of its constant evolution, constantly returning to the traditions from which it first drew inspiration and reaching out to the local community to provide talent, resources and material. The Irish language songs and dance steps of the Munnix tradition are interspersed with new tunes and exotic movements with the principal aim of telling a story. The stories of ways of life in Ireland.

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