

Chapter 2

Tourism, Touring and Staged Folklore

Daithí Kearney

‘It just made me want to catch the next plane to Dublin.’ⁱ This quote from Clive Barnes, the so-called ‘Butcher of Broadway’, was part of a review he wrote in *The New York Times* about a production by *Siamsa Tíre* (1976) at the Palace Theatre on Broadway. This sentiment affirmed the intention of the artistic director to engage the audience in the richness and humour of Irish life and so delighted the cast. It was oft quoted when I was young, performing with the company. It must also have delighted the tour sponsors, including the Irish government and *Aer Lingus*, since it highlighted the role culture could play in promoting Ireland to international audiences. Indeed, it incentivised Americans and others to travel to Ireland to view the show. The quote was also prophetic. Tourists were already representing a significant proportion of the audience for summer-season productions. The new emphasis on marketing *Siamsa Tíre* to the tourist market, following their tour of America, would diversify the target audience and challenge the core principles of the company.

Today *Siamsa Tíre* is a leading tourist attraction in Tralee, presenting performances six nights a week throughout the summer months. The initial group *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* received considerable funding and support from stakeholders in the tourism sector to establish the company (see Chapter 1). Their performances were promoted among a range of successful initiatives in the Shannon region in the late 1960s, which resulted in a surge of tourism to the area. In his plan for ‘Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture’ (henceforth called the ‘Plan’),ⁱⁱ Pat Ahern acknowledged the potential financial support that tourism could give to the growth of the company. However, he expressed a desire for *Siamsa Tíre* to look beyond tourism by concentrating on developing folk theatre as an art form. This

bid to become an independent cultural institution proved difficult. Financial support from tourism became a lifeline for the company with tourist audiences at a maximum during the summer season of performances.

In this chapter I critically examine how *Siamsa Tíre* attempted to construct a brand identity within a contemporary narrative of national tourism – an Irish identity which was imagined around a rural idyll. I also look at how *Siamsa Tíre* engaged with tourism in its early development. Critical here are the tours of Germany and the United States by *Siamsa Tíre*, tours which gained acclaim for the company internationally and provided media content for advertising. Informed by my own personal experience of performing with *Siamsa Tíre* and by my academic study of the relationship between music and tourism, this chapter also considers the ways in which *Siamsa Tíre* acted as a cultural ambassador for Ireland, while at the same time achieving its goal of preserving and presenting the heritage of County Kerry on the theatre stage.

Music and tourism in Kerry

The economic importance of tourism in Ireland is highlighted by James Deegan and Donal Dineen, who state that 35 per cent of jobs created in the country between 1987 and 1994 were tourist-related, and they note that approximately 137,000 people were officially employed in the tourist industry by 2001.ⁱⁱⁱ Kerry has a long-established reputation as a tourism destination, and Irish traditional music has played an important role in defining the visitor experience. Travel writers of the nineteenth century often highlighted the popularity of the Killarney piper James Gandsey (1769–1857), while the folklorist Breandán Breathnach (1912–85) states that ‘it was very much part of the routine for anyone visiting Killarney to hear Gandsey play as it was to view the lakes’.^{iv} Likewise, the *uilleann* piper Tom McCarthy (1799–1904) became an iconic figure at the seaside town of Ballybunion during the same

period. He performed regularly on the Castle Green for sixty-five years and was immortalised on contemporary postcards.

Since 1968, performances by *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* and *Siamsa Tíre* have become the most popular tourist experiences in Kerry and an important contributor to the local economy. The potential of the company's first production *Fadó Fadó* was recognised early on by the tourism industry.^v Michael Maye, assistant manager of Ivernia, a South Western regional tourism organisation affiliated to *Bord Fáilte* in counties Kerry and Cork at the time, approached Ahern in Tralee to consider presenting *Fadó Fadó* during the summer months as a way of entertaining visitors to the town.^{vi} With promises of financial support, the Mercy Sisters' convent hall was chosen as the first performance space, in part because of its accessibility.^{vii} When the local market was saturated, a brochure carrying the caption 'Discover a Hidden Ireland' was designed, to encourage tourist attendance. The brochure was distributed to tourist accommodations in the Tralee area and led to a growth in audience attendance.^{viii} As cast member Seán Ahern remembered: '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.'^{ix} The repetitive nature of programming during the foundational years led to a feeling of apathy among people in the town and the perception that *Siamsa Tíre* did the same thing all of the time.^x

The economic potential of *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* was recognised by other development bodies in the country. For example, Brendan O'Regan of Shannon Development compared *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* to the Moiseyev Dance Company from Russia and imagined the potential for a similar 'national' company in Ireland (see also Chapter 1). Upon the invitation of O'Regan, the group performed in Ballyvaughan, County Clare, where a holiday development of thatched cottages had been created. It was here that Ahern met the newly appointed arts officer for *Bord Fáilte*, Christopher Fitz-Simon, whose responsibilities

included identifying organisations that should be funded to promote the traditional arts. Both Fitz-Simon and Michael Maye became directors of *Siamsóirí na Ríochta Teoranta* (established on 2 February 1971), thus maintaining a strong connection between the company and tourism agencies. It was agreed that *Bord Fáilte* would support *Siamsa Tíre* as a permanent tourist attraction in Kerry.

The 1960s was a key period for the development of cultural tourism in Ireland, especially with the growth of the American market.^{xi} Given the significant level of emigration from Ireland to the United States, there was huge potential for developing tourism to Ireland among the Irish diaspora, especially among those who sought a romanticised representation of ‘home’. However, the emergence of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland (1968) impacted on visitor numbers to Ireland adversely,^{xii} and greatly affected *Siamsa Tíre*, which relied heavily on American tourism to survive economically.^{xiii} In reaction, the company expanded its marketing campaign to include European visitors. Former board member Ogie Moran^{xiv} noted an increase in the number of continental tourists attending performances in later decades,^{xv} while former manager Catriona Fallon has outlined how tourists from Germany and France in particular contributed to audience numbers.^{xvi} The non-dialogue nature of theatrical productions suited this audience, and programme notes were quickly translated into different European languages.

The development of *Siamsa Tíre* is contemporaneous with the growth of regional performances for tourists by *CCÉ*.^{xvii} Geraldine Cotter, writing about Clare, outlines how these initiatives exemplified the support amongst cultural organisations in Ireland for the expansion of tourism and, to a greater extent, the growth of the cultural economy in Ireland. The development of Bunratty Castle and Folk Park, among other attractions, is significant in this respect also. With reference to Clare, Cotter notes how ‘Shannon Airport, Shannon Development^{xviii} and key figures such as Brendan O’Regan and Niall Behan were part of a

strategic cultural-economic plan that revamped Irishness for the tourist market, while at the same time raising the profile of Irish traditional music and staged shows locally’.^{xix}

Indeed, there was a symbiotic relationship between the development of Shannon Airport, increased visitor numbers, and the growth of cultural initiatives in the region.^{xx} Early funding for *Siamsa Tíre* included a grant of £50,000 from *Bord Fáilte*, which over three years would contribute towards the building of training centres at Finuge and Carraig,^{xxi} with match funding coming from *Roinn na Gaeltachta* (see also Chapter 1). The monetary contributions that came from tourism and language bodies demonstrate respectively the twin pillars of commerce and heritage that are aligned within *Siamsa Tíre*. The rural locations were purposefully chosen with a desire to be in a small village, in order to connect with local cultures. Replicating the *Seisiún* model (advanced by *CCÉ*), students at the training centres put on short performances for tourists who visited north and west Kerry during the summer months.

While the training centres have significance in the foundational narrative of the company,^{xxii} the need for a principal, purpose-built theatre facility was also identified. The ‘Plan’ presents options for the location of the National Folk Theatre, highlighting the desire for rural centres to feed into this as part of a national framework. Tralee is identified as the most suitable location and there is recognition of a growth in tourism there:

Through the encouragement of Ivernia, the southern regional tourism organisation, who saw in this folk presentation a great potential as a tourist attraction, *Siamsa* emerged in its present form in the summer of 1968. Since then, it has been staged twice weekly in Tralee every summer. In the course of five seasons, some ten thousand overseas visitors, from many parts of the world, have seen this presentation of Irish culture.^{xxiii}

While there is obvious potential – through entertainment – for informing people from all over the world about Irish culture, the report notes the significance also of re-educating local people.^{xxiv} The desired audience for *Siamsa Tíre* was both the local community, whose members could value, sustain and enrich regional culture, and visitors, who could gain a knowledge of and enjoyment from Irish culture, while simultaneously contributing to its sustainability through patronage.

Adam Kaul notes the uneven development of tourism in Ireland and highlights how the development of spaces for performances aimed at a tourist audience can impact on the geography of places and shape local identities.^{xxv} Like the rebuilt Globe Theatre in London,^{xxvi} the *Siamsa Tíre* theatre in Tralee is a significant space that communicates multiple layers of meaning, the building itself being a tangible marker in the landscape.^{xxvii} As Susan H. Motherway shows (see Chapter 1), the design of the theatre was inspired by the architecture of Staigue Fort.^{xxviii} The *Siamsa Tíre* theatre was the first new building to be constructed as part of an emerging tourism infrastructure in Tralee during the 1990s. Its unique image has since been foregrounded in marketing campaigns for tourism in the county. Similar developments near to *Siamsa Tíre* included the Blennerville Windmill, which was restored in 1990; the Ashe Memorial Hall, which was transformed into the Kerry County Museum in 1992; and the Aqua Dome water attraction which was opened in 1994. Thus, *Siamsa Tíre* exists within a tourism ecosystem in which constituent elements combine to create a more complete and fulfilling tourism experience.^{xxix}

The design of the building in the original plan reflected the primary, secondary and complementary services provided by the company. Significant were the ways in which the box office served as an unofficial tourist bureau, as many tourists were attracted to the

building itself. The idea to locate a tourist office in the theatre was mooted in the early 1970s. As the 'Plan' states clearly: 'Such an office is not connected directly with the function and organisation of the theatre, although it could, doubtless, avoid duplication of staff at times ... If provided, the planning of these offices should be such that they operate as a separate entity.'^{xxx} The theatre did share a space with a tourist office for many years, prior to the opening of the new theatre in 1991. The new theatre complex includes spaces for training and visual arts, which is of interest to both tourists and the local community.^{xxx} The theatre also serves as an important artistic space for the region, hosting a variety of visiting artists and local groups throughout the year.

Heritage tourism

As Catherine E. Foley attests, the *Siamsa Tíre* company was placed locally and positioned globally.^{xxxii} That *Siamsa Tíre*, as a national institution, was located in Kerry rather than in Dublin is a notable statement of its identity. One of the reasons identified by Lily Kong for such an interest in heritage is centred on the argument that 'globalization intensifies trends towards localisation'.^{xxxiii} However, as tourists seek out localised heritage, questions relating to authenticity return. Tourism has been a very significant factor in the success and development of *Siamsa Tíre*. In return, *Siamsa Tíre* has played an important role in training young members and has preserved this heritage in local memory. The authors of the 'Plan' make the following statement:

It is proposed to limit consideration of the tourism aspect of the National Folk Theatre building to that proposed for the south-western region although it is recognised that on a wider scale, and embracing rural centres, the implication for tourism is much more far-reaching, if less tangible.^{xxxiv}

The authors acknowledge the expense of the venture but also note comparable expenditure being allocated to similar tourist amenities. However, rather than focusing on income and expenditure, the report argues that ‘the dynamically directed folk theatre would return an unaccountable sum in terms of the revitalisation of the national consciousness’.^{xxxv} Under the heading of tourism, the employment of performers is also addressed. Rather than supporting those with exceptional ability, the report presents a more community-oriented remuneration model to reward and encourage efficient performers, while noting that in economic terms, ‘the permanent employment of trained performers ... cannot be overlooked’.^{xxxvi} The importance of developing a community of practice in Kerry, which could be rewarded financially, is integral to the success of *Siamsa Tíre*.

Bearing in mind the potential influence of tourism on local cultures and the desire of Ahern in the ‘Plan’ to educate, it is worth noting the endeavour does not go without criticism. As Chris Goertzen and Maria Azzi argue with reference to tourism and tango: ‘Much of the modern support of the tango in its birthplace comes from outsiders, especially tourists, whose images of the tango must therefore be accommodated.’^{xxxvii} While there has been a resurgence of interest in Ireland in Irish traditional music and Irish dancing, the audiences for performances by *Siamsa Tíre* are dominated by tourists. Although many of the cast are simultaneously involved in other expressions of Irish folk culture, the apparent appropriation of cultural heritage for a tourist market raises questions surrounding the authenticity of the product. As Stephen Williams notes:

Issues of authenticity and commodification reflect concerns over the manner in which indigenous cultures are used to promote and sustain international tourism ... This is not to argue that tourist interests in culture are automatically

detrimental as there is plenty of evidence to show how cultural places, artefacts and performances have been sustained through the interest and support of the visitors.^{xxxviii}

The success of the summer season at *Siamsa Tíre* has ensured the viability of the theatre. It has also supported the training of cast members and the development of new repertoire. Foley notes the importance of cultural tourism for the economic survival of the organisation. She also acknowledges the financial support offered to fund professional performers and to sustain a community of cast members who are ‘trained with the aesthetic idiom of *Siamsa Tíre*’.^{xxxix}

Heritage tourism involves the ideological framing of cultural history. As such it should not be reduced to a set of commercial transactions.^{xl} As Foley states: ‘Although the summer tourist season is the main source of income for the theatre, *Siamsa Tíre* also works on developing other theatrical work, not necessarily for tourists, to satisfy the artistic sensibilities of its professional members.’ It is critical that the balance between valuing and preserving the region’s cultural heritage, researching and educating local people and satisfying audience expectations is maintained.

The recognition of *Siamsa Tíre* as a tourist enterprise raises further questions about authenticity and integrity. It also raises questions about Irish culture and identity.^{xli} The popularity of *Siamsa Tíre* with national audiences was affirmed when the company performed in Dublin (1969), as well as Cork (1970 and 1971) and Galway (1971) (see Chapter 1). The company frequently participated in the Cork International Choral Festival (1965, 1966, 1974, 1982, 1987 and 1992–4), reflecting its engagement with other cultural organisations in Ireland. Although *Siamsa Tíre* was recognised nationally for its innovative approach to traditional practice, it also attracted some critical attention. A notable and

extreme example of this was a review by the acclaimed Wexford author Colm Tóibín (b. 1955) in a Sunday newspaper, which concluded:

Siamsa is a major embarrassment. The fact that it tours the world is all right, as filling foreigners full of blarney is an occupation that *Siamsa* seemed unusually well-equipped for, but putting this sort of rubbish on in Ireland represents some sort of outrage.^{xlii}

It is true that the production represented ‘Irish customs and peasant culture as a serious tradition full of happiness, arts and crafts’, without the negative aspects of landlords, emigration and poverty.^{xliii} Tóibín’s comment ‘This is Ireland sanitised for tourists’ echoes a similar view espoused by Williams: ‘Sanitized, simplified and staged representations of places, histories, cultures and societies match the superficiality of the tourist gaze and meet tourist demands for entertaining and digestible experiences, yet they provide only partial representations of reality.’^{xliv} However, it is arguable that Tóibín failed to recognise the principles underlying *Siamsa Tíre*, as the material presented by the company was less familiar to a contemporary urban audience such as Dublin.

Tóibín’s negative evaluation of *Siamsa Tíre* highlights the ideological power of a theatrical troupe to portray a distinctive reading of Irish culture, a portrayal which is supported by the Irish state. As Catherine Palmer and Jacqueline Tivers state:

The traditional understanding of heritage is that it refers to stories about the past drawn from the events, activities, places, objects, landscapes, people and ideas venerated and reproduced over time as an inheritance for future generations. To speak of heritage is, therefore, to speak of a relationship that brings the past into

the present. However, this is a socially constructed relationship because it is based upon the concerns of those individuals and groups that choose how the past should be used in the present.^{xlv}

In many instances, the performance of culture is considerably different from the lived experience of everyday life. Perceiving a disconnect between performances of Irish traditional music for tourists and those presented in more traditional contexts, Caoimhín Mac Aoidh has described cultural displays for tourists as something of a Frankenstein-like nightmare for many musicians in the tradition.^{xlvi} However, Anthony Shay contends (see Chapter 12) that *Siamsa Tíre* has its own authenticity, with the company representing its own unique reading of time and place. This view is reiterated by Helena Wulff in her comparative examination of Irish competitive dancing and *Riverdance*:

No life form, cultural expression or artefact is more authentic than any other, just produced at different points in time in different contexts than the very first form and expression. In my view, *Riverdance* is as authentic as traditional formal competitive Irish dancing, that is for what it is, namely a commercial dance show. *Riverdance* is culturally meaningful and real to those who participate in it and to its audience.^{xlvii}

Negative commentators have tended to focus entirely on the product, to the exclusion of the underlying principle. In doing so they serve to undervalue the scope of *Siamsa Tíre*'s activities. This range of activities includes cultural preservation, artistic development, knowledge transfer and economic benefit. Thus, I agree with Palmer and Tivers when they foreground the role of heritage creation in the context of tourism rather than engaging in a

debate about what is and what is not ‘authentic heritage’.^{xlvi} The development of *Siamsa Tíre* from a community which is immersed in and knowledgeable of its own traditions gives the company a sense of its own integrity. This sense is even recognised by the most ardent critics of *Siamsa Tíre*. As Foley argues, there is an authenticity of content which is integrated into relevant productions. This cannot be criticised.^{xlix}

Disseminating identity

In addition to attracting audiences to its productions in Tralee, *Siamsa Tíre* has responded to a growing interest abroad and embarked on a number of international tours. Motherway (see Chapter 1) has already provided a concise overview of these tours. During the 1970s, it is noteworthy that other Irish organisations were actively engaged in musical dissemination. For example, The Chieftains were already engaged as musical ambassadors for Ireland following their major tour of North America. About the same time, *CCÉ* followed suit, by expanding its network of cultural associations and by engaging with the large Irish diaspora there.^l Britain was also receptive to *Siamsa Tíre*, starting with a trip to London in 1973. Extensive tours were undertaken in 1981 (to Stevenage, Manchester, Ilford, London, Leicester and Liverpool) and 1984 (to London, Coventry and Manchester), with performances held in prestigious venues such as the Wembley Conference Centre (1980), the Watermans Arts Centre (1987) and the Manchester Trade Hall (1991, 1996). It is interesting that the ‘Troubles’ had an impact on some of the trips to England, with one particular performance being abandoned due to a bomb scare connected with the activities of the IRA.

As Motherway also notes (see Chapter 1), the company embarked on a successful tour of the United States in 1976 by performing in prestigious venues to packed audiences.^{li} And as Mick Moloney and Motherway confirm (see Chapter 10), the tour received extensive press coverage in both Ireland and America. In 1982, *Siamsa Tíre* travelled again to the United

States. However, this tour was less successful since the group performed in less prestigious venues and attracted smaller audiences. Many of the venues were organised in connection with colleges or universities such as Alverno College, Fordham University, Northern Illinois University, and the University of Massachusetts. Although *Siamsa Tíre* returned to the United States in 1989, the company failed, in contrast to *CCÉ*, to develop a consistent schedule or an established network there.

Siamsa Tíre also travelled to continental Europe on several occasions, starting with a trip to Bavaria in 1971. There were further tours of Germany (1978, 1979, 1989), France (1979) and Belgium (1989). In these countries, *Siamsa Tíre* was especially recognised for its attempt at preserving local traditions and at presenting these to modern audiences, and the company attracted the attention of groups especially interested in cultural revival. For example, *Siamsa Tíre* emerged at the same time as international organisations such as *Festival Interceltique de Lorient* in Brittany and the Pan-Celtic Festival in Ireland, *Siamsa Tíre* providing a cogent model for cultural and linguistic revival in the Celtic nations of Europe. *Siamsa Tíre* was itself influenced by its interaction with other musical cultures and performance styles. This included Ahern, who travelled to Bulgaria (1996) to conduct fieldwork in educational institutions and to examine alternative strategies for preserving and representing folk cultures.^{lii}

Ahern's ecclesiastical connections also created opportunities for performances. In 1978, *Siamsa Tíre* sang the communion hymn at a mass to celebrate the fourth centenary of the Irish College in Paris. This was followed by a performance in the *Amphithéâtre Richelieu* as part of a *soirée irlandaise*. The event featured other Irish artists including Frank Patterson and his wife Eily O'Grady.^{liii} Memorably, the company performed in 1979 for Pope John Paul II (s. 1978–2005) at a mass in Limerick to celebrate his visit to Ireland, and in 1981 for the same pope at his residence at *Castel Gandolfo* (outside Rome).

Siamsa Tíre was also involved in diplomatic activities. These included a performance in the Rijksmuseum in 1986 in front of Queen Beatrix during a state visit by President Hillery (s. 1976–90) to Amsterdam. The company travelled to Hungary to perform at a special Irish feature called ‘The Dublin Days’ at the Budapest Spring Festival (1994), and represented Ireland at the World Expositions that were held in Brisbane (1988), Seville (1992) and Hannover (2000). In these contexts, *Siamsa Tíre* was recognised as an ambassador for Ireland, its form of presentation reinforcing a particular construction of Irishness in the global sphere. The Spanish performances were particularly noteworthy because of their association with *The Seville Suite* (1992), an orchestral composition by Bill Whelan which celebrated Irish–Spanish connections. This involvement with Whelan led some commentators to identify *Siamsa Tíre* as a foundational influence upon *Riverdance* (1994). Noteworthy here is that the same commentators identified *Siamsa Tíre* with a rural past and *Riverdance* with an urban present.^{liv}

The representation of Ireland and Irish culture abroad by *Siamsa Tíre* did not go without criticism. In 1988 the company toured Australia, performing in Perth, Adelaide, Warrnambool, Ballarat, Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane and Gosford.^{lv} In contrast to the positive reviews of previous tours in the American press, the performances on this tour were not universally lauded by the local media. Recalling the acerbic invective against the company by Colm Tóibín, it was clear that *Siamsa Tíre* represented for contemporary Australians an outmoded and over-romanticised portrayal of rural Ireland. Although this sentimental version of a rural idyll chimed well with the image of Ireland fostered by Irish tourism, *Siamsa Tíre* was by then increasingly being seen as a tourist product.

The logistics of travelling overseas for an amateur community company was one of the greatest challenges it faced. Many cast members had to secure time away from work. Some used up their annual leave while others, such as Seán Ahern, had to hire a farm

manager.^{lvi} While *Siamsa Tíre* has successfully engaged in one-off tours, it never developed a strategic plan for touring, partly due to its inability to secure employment for its members on a professional basis. However, it identified the potential for Irish groups to promote Irish culture abroad, to engage international audiences, and to be part of diplomatic engagements. *Siamsa Tíre* also demonstrated an ability to adapt to the contexts in which it was required to perform. In some instances, it occupied the same spaces as folk-dance companies. In other instances, *Siamsa Tíre* provided an alternative form of entertainment in contrast to bands and other ensembles. Each of its tours developed new audiences for Irish culture, enhanced the image of Ireland as a travel destination, and transmitted a knowledge of Irish cultural heritage.

The tourist gaze

Of all the international performances by *Siamsa Tíre*, its tour of the United States (1976) proved the most significant. As Motherway shows (see Chapter 1), the tour was supported by *Aer Lingus* and *Bord Fáilte* in an attempt to promote Ireland as a tourist destination. The company's role as a cultural ambassador called for an increased level of professionalism in its management of publicity. In his unpublished report to the board of *Siamsa Tíre*, the tour director Dermot McCarthy wrote:

From the very outset, I felt it of paramount importance that we provide new publicity material on *SIAMSA*. In particular, I felt that we needed a colour souvenir brochure on the performers and the production, and an LP record of the music and songs in the show. Apart from being essential in the work of promotion for the American tour both of these would be long-term on-going assets for the Company.^{lvii}

Indeed, McCarthy's report highlights the importance of branding *Siamsa Tíre* as a company in a professional arts context and the need for it to plan strategically for a future beyond touring.^{lviii} The promotional material required significant support from stakeholders. Paddy Tutty of the photographic section of *Bord Fáilte* helped to organise a photo call with the entire cast, and Frank Delaney, a journalist affiliated with the national broadcasting service *RTÉ*, volunteered to write the text for the brochure. Brian Fox of *Bord Fáilte* then provided funds for the design of the brochure by Willy van Velzen, while advertising within the brochure provided *Siamsa Tíre* with additional funding.

The tourist gaze, which impacts on both the construction and interpretation of symbols related to place and identity, is evident in the press material for this tour.^{lix} As Barbara O'Connor and Michael Cronin note: 'Tourist imagery has been instrumental in constructing Ireland and the Irish people as other to the modern industrial metropolitan centres.'^{lx} Focusing particularly on heritage tourism in relation to the 'big houses' of Ireland, Nuala Johnson says that heritage tourism 'poses questions about authenticity and about the representation of geographical and historical knowledge'.^{lxi} In his study of tourism and music, Kaul notes the role of romanticism in the marketing of Ireland in the context of tourism,^{lxii} while Roy Foster suggests that there is an inseparable link between Irish music and the marketing of Irishness.^{lxiii} Indeed, Anthony Foley and John Fahy highlight the importance of people and place in the development of an Irish tourism brand.^{lxiv} In the relevant brochure, images of 'real life', such as the image of a company member (Patricia Hanafin) teaching children, are juxtaposed with images of the staged production, creating a connection between the lived and staged experience. The text also conjures up rural images and refers to artistic culture.

Leaning on stereotypes, and with an emphasis on the west of Ireland, the brochure contains an advertisement with the caption ‘Come to the west of Ireland where a stranger is simply a friend you haven’t yet met’. In this way it attempts to sell the west of Ireland as ‘unique in the world’, with friendly people, breath-taking scenery, and a relaxed lifestyle. The *Aer Lingus* advertisement includes images of traditional musicians with images of nature. A reference to angling points to the significance of fishing for the hospitality sector. The text concludes: ‘All things considered, is it so remarkable that the Irish also run a rather enjoyable airline?’ An advertisement sponsored by *Bord Fáilte* is captioned ‘Discover the Magic that is Ireland’, with Blarney Castle in County Cork featured in the main image. The accompanying text speaks of Ireland as a magical place, with reference to scenery, hospitality, literature and architecture. The text concludes with ‘part of the magic of Ireland is *Siamsa Tíre*, and *Bord Fáilte* is happy to be associated with their American tour’. The back page features an advertisement for Irish whiskey, with a number of brands represented.

The educational philosophy of *Siamsa Tíre* is also mentioned in the text. The description emphasises the portrayal of rural life and the use of the Irish language, the latter an aspect that took some audiences by surprise.^{lxv} In the brochure, Delaney writes about the dance culture the company seeks to preserve, making reference to dancers Jerry Nolan and John McCarthy, the oldest members of the cast. In this way, the author emphasises implicitly the authentic character of performance practice.^{lxvi} There is a section on Irish traditional music, making particular reference to the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792 and to the contemporary composer Seán Ó Riada and The Chieftains music ensemble. Irish traditional instruments are also featured. These include the Irish harp, the *uilleann* pipes, the *bodhrán* and the bones. Like a typical theatre programme, the brochure features images and biographies of the main performers, giving notable credit to Ahern for developing the concept and the company. Referencing the ‘Plan’, the publication notes the setting-up of

training centres and the employment of specialist teachers. In this context, Patricia Hanafin, Jimmy Smith, and Nicholas and Anne McAuliffe are specifically named.^{lxvii}

The publication includes a quote from Ahern that continues to be used on the *Siamsa Tíre* website: ‘There is a sense in which we do not own our culture, we are only trustees. The treasure is only on loan, and we must take it, refurbish it in the light of our experience and hand it on.’ This ethos is reflected in the actions of the cast who made themselves available after performances to meet audiences, answer questions and give demonstrations. In this way, *Siamsa Tíre* is represented as a model of the innate friendliness of the Irish, a model that was espoused by tourist initiatives to attract visitors. A sense of community and friendship was nurtured as a core value at *Siamsa Tíre*. Indeed, the company often referred to its members as a ‘family’. This ethos was extended to visitors, where the theatre housing *Siamsa Tíre* was itself represented as a home to which people were welcomed. The *céad míle fáilte* (‘one hundred thousand welcomes’) offered by *Siamsa Tíre* was part of a larger promotional brand espoused by Irish tourism.^{lxviii} This spirit was epitomised by former CEO Martin Whelan, whose warm personality and personal affability ensured that visitors were welcomed (see Plate 2.1). Former board member Ogie Moran remembered how ‘Everybody was welcome, everybody was a VIP. I would bring people in and whether they were low or high profile they got the *céad míle fáilte* from Martin’.^{lxix}

As noted by Williams, the contact between visitor and host has a significant impact on tourism.^{lxx} Moran also commended Whelan for his passion for the *Siamsa Tíre* project and his pride in north Kerry. Whelan dedicated himself to the company and carried out his role with spirit and enthusiasm. Moran hailed Whelan and Ahern as a great ‘double act’, stating that Whelan provided a foil for Ahern by focusing on the business side of the company while Ahern focused on the artistic aspects. Whelan not only engaged with tourism stakeholders, he also managed tours by the company in Ireland and abroad. In addition, he administered the

training centres and oversaw the development of complementary activities such as a gift shop and an arts space. Furthermore, he was a principal actor in fundraising endeavours for the new theatre, developing innovative campaigns (such as the ‘Be a Brick and Buy a Seat Scheme’ initiative) to ensure financial solvency and encourage monetary donations.

<<Place Plate 2.1 about here>>

Plate 2.1: Martin Whelan (CEO), *Siamsa Tíre* and playwright John B. Keane

Source: © *Siamsa Tíre* Archive

As Motherway shows (see Chapter 1), the board members of *Siamsa Tíre* included representatives from stakeholders, including tourist and language bodies. This ensured that the company would be included in broader initiatives associated with tourism. Moran, who represented Shannon Development, guaranteed that *Siamsa Tíre* was featured in its itinerary of tours. In this way, *Siamsa Tíre* became a principal destination in the Ring of Kerry circuit, among other local tours. Like the medieval banquet at Bunratty Castle, *Siamsa Tíre* also offered evening entertainment. Travel writers were encouraged to visit the theatre and view performances.^{lxxi} Séamus Mac Gearailt, who represented *Roinn na Gaeltachta* on the company’s board,^{lxxii} maintained that the Irish language remained a central concern of the *Siamsa Tíre* ethos. While he recognised the *Tithe Siamsa* (training centres) as vital spaces for the training of cast members in the expressive culture of Kerry, he also understood that the audiences for *Siamsa Tíre* productions were drawn largely from visiting tourists.

Concluding remarks

In his book *Invoking Ireland*, the philosopher John Moriarty develops an analogy based on the two tribes of ancient Ireland, the Formorians and the Tuatha Dé Danann.^{lxxiii} Moriarty saw the Tuatha Dé Danann as a tribe shaped by nature and the Formorians as a tribe that attempted to shape nature. Drawing on this analogy, we might also suggest that *Siamsa Tíre* formed by Ahern was shaped by nature – the nature of its members and the nature of the traditions upon which they drew. Their activities were focused on the local and the rural. Indeed, the building and opening of the *Tithe Siamsa* in Finuge and Carraig provide examples of local communities engaged in the celebration and preservation of local heritage. Like the Formorians, we might now fear that *Siamsa Tíre* drifts away from its original purpose and attempts to shape nature to cater to the economic imperatives of tourist expectations. Such a transformation might result in the loss of credibility and value. Nevertheless, if, as Zuelow suggests, tourism plays a significant part in making Ireland Irish,^{lxxiv} then *Siamsa Tíre* has contributed to the imagination of Irish folk culture, as well as sustaining and developing the traditions from which it drew inspiration.

The story of *Siamsa Tíre* is now long and complex and tourists are among the characters in this story. As Edward Bruner notes: ‘Performances for tourists have local histories, change over time, and are constructed specifically to be marketed and sold to an audience.’^{lxxv} The stories surrounding the origins of and the tours by *Siamsa Tíre* pervaded my early experiences in the company. These stories inspired me and other generations to learn, perform and perpetuate the style of folk theatre that was developed by Ahern. The involvement of McCarthy and Whelan provided a foil for the artistry of Ahern, by identifying opportunities for commercialising and sustaining the young company. Ahern’s authorial voice straddles the tourist gaze and is evident not only in the productions and the ‘Plan’, but also in the publicity materials – especially those that are related to the ground-breaking tour of the United States (1976). Today, these voices remain entangled on the company’s website,

where a quote from Ahern is juxtaposed against a quote from TripAdvisor, the artist's vision now set against the tourist gaze. This demonstrates the company's continued attempts to remain true to its original purpose while satisfying audience expectation.

Chapter 2

- i Review of Siamsa Tíre by Clive Barnes, *The New York Times*, 29 September 1976.
- ii Pat Ahern and Patrick O'Sullivan, 'A Plan for Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture', unpublished report (Tralee: Siamsa Tíre, 1972).
- iii James Deegan and Donal A. Dineen, *Tourism Policy and Performance: The Irish experience* (London: International Thomson Business Press, 1997).
- iv Breandán Breathnach, *Ceol Rince na hÉireann III* (Dublin: An Gúm, 1985), p. 6. Fiddle player Patrick O'Grady is reputed to have played for Queen Victoria on her visit to Killarney in 1861. See also Dan Herlihy, *Sliabh Luachra Music Masters*, vol. 2 (Killarney: Herlihy, 2007).
- v Siamsa was the name given to the stage production that was later titled *Fadó Fadó*. Siamsa is the most common name to which the company is referred.
- vi See also Sharon A. Phelan, *Dance in Ireland: Steps, stages and stories* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).
- vii While waiting for financial support to come from the tourism authority, some funding for the initiative was raised by the Tralee businessman Tom White.
- viii The concept of a 'hidden Ireland' was previously utilised by Daniel Corkery in his influential study of Irish poetry and culture in eighteenth-century Munster. Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A study of Gaelic Munster in the eighteenth century* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1924). The concept has particular relevance for Ahern's vision of culture and language in the context of Siamsa Tíre. Today, the notion is used in Irish tourism to refer to luxury boutique hotels and country house hotels; and most recently the concept is evoked in the Ireland's Hidden Heartlands initiative developed by Fáilte Ireland (2018).
- ix Interview by Daithí Kearney with Seán Ahern, 31 July 2012.
- x Hughes notes the dominance of musicals in the West End, for which tourists comprise a significant audience share with the result that may 'inhibit the stimulation and survival of a more diverse, adventurous and innovative theatrical scene and of creative artistic talent'. Howard L. Hughes, 'Theatre in London and the Inter-relationship with Tourism', *Tourism Management*, vol. 19, no. 5, 1998, p. 445. See also, Greg Richards (ed.), *Cultural Tourism in Europe* (Wallingford: Cab International, 1996). And, Michael Quine, 'Theatre Audiences in Britain: A continuing research programme', *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*, vol. 23, 1993, pp. 225–39.
- xi See also Geraldine Cotter, *Transforming Tradition: Institutional and social teaching, learning and performing of Irish traditional music in Ennis, County Clare 1961–1980* (Clare: Geraldine Cotter, 2013).
- xii The Troubles refer to the violent sectarian conflict from about 1968 to 1998 in Northern Ireland between unionists (loyalists), who desired the province to remain part of the United Kingdom, and nationalists (republicans), who wanted Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland.
- xiii Interview by Daithí Kearney with Pat Ahern, 18 May 2013.
- xiv Ogie Moran was involved with Siamsa Tíre from the late 1970s, through his employment with Shannon Development as the organisation sought to develop tourism in the region. Moran later represented Shannon Development on the board of the company (2003–16).
- xv Interview by Daithí Kearney with Ogie Moran, 30 January 2019.

xvi Reflecting on audience demographics, former CEO Catriona Fallon noted: 'The one change of the longer term, looking back over twenty years, is that the North

Americans were our biggest audience and have shifted place with the Germans. The Germans have a very strong interest in matters cultural, a strong folk tradition, and are the largest outgoing tourist market in the world.' Personal communication by Daithí Kearney with Catriona Fallon, 14 May 2013.

xvii Pat Ahern was a significant influence on the development of the Scoraiocht concept. Pat Ahern, 'Where is the Scoraiocht Movement Getting to?' *Treoir*, vol. 8, 1968, p. 10.

xviii Shannon Development was set up in 1959, as Shannon Free Airport Development Company Limited, by the Irish government to promote the airport and region. It evolved into an important regional development body for the Shannon region, including Clare, Limerick and the former north Tipperary, as well as north Kerry and west Offaly.

xix Cotter, *Transforming Tradition*, p. 122.

xx Brian Callanan, *Ireland's Shannon Story. Leaders, visions and networks. A case study of local and regional development* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000).

xxi The Tithe Siamsa training centres are a cornerstone of the 'Plan'. For many years, participation in the company involved auditioning and training in these centres. This requirement has been in decline over the past two decades.

xxii There are many stories relating to both centres that are part of the collective memory of Siamsa Tíre. The opening of the Teach Siamsa in Finuge was featured in a *Radharc (Vision)* television documentary, which in turn was used to attract American producers to Ireland and led, in part, to the American tour (1976). Of interest, flagstones in Finuge were donated by some of members of the company and notes were placed beneath them. Dancer Liam Tarrant, a pillar of Siamsóirí na Ríochta, died after dancing at the opening of Teach Siamsa na Carraige. See also Daithí Kearney, 'The Evolution of Irish Folk Theatre', in R. Amoêda, S. Lira and C. Pinheiro (eds), *Sharing Cultures 2013: Proceedings of the 3rd international conference on intangible heritage* (Lisbon: Greenlines Institute, 2013).

xxiii Ahern and O'Sullivan, 'A Plan for Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture', p. 13.

xxiv *Ibid.*, p. 17.

xxv Adam Kaul, *Turning the Tune: Traditional music, tourism, and social change in an Irish village*, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2009).

xxvi Kennedy, D., 1998. Shakespeare and cultural tourism. *Theatre Journal*, 50(2), pp.175-188.

xxvii As Christopher R. Gibson and John Connell note: 'Places of performances have become tourist sites, especially when they are still used for performances (and overtly targeted at tourist audiences) or linked to great eras of the past.' Christopher R. Gibson and John Connell, *Music and Tourism: On the road again*, vol. 19 (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2005), p. 62.

xxviii In the previous venue on Staunton's Row, a tree was growing in the foyer, symbolising tradition.

xxix As Christopher R. Gibson and John Connell note: 'Music tourism cannot exist apart from other elements of tourism; most tourists seek experiences of landscape, all eat and drink, choose particular modes of transport, and shape their experiences and itineraries according to factors – such as financial status and time available – that are apart from the music.' Gibson and Connell, *Music and Tourism*, p. 15.

xxx Ahern and O'Sullivan, 'A Plan for Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture', p. 35.

xxxi In recent years, it has also included exhibitions about the company itself, including 'Ráth agus Rince: Celebrating 25 years of an iconic theatre' (2016).

xxxii Catherine E. Foley, *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and history* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 212.

xxxiii Kong, L., 1999. The invention of heritage: popular music in Singapore. *Asian Studies Review*, 23(1), pp.1-25, p. 2.

xxxiv Ahern and O'Sullivan, 'A Plan for Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture', p. 56.

xxxv Ibid., p. 56.

xxxvi Christopher R. Gibson and John Connell acknowledge the importance of tourism in securing opportunities of employment for musicians, which can lead to sustaining cultures. Gibson and Connell, *Music and Tourism*, pp. 127-9.

xxxvii Chris Goertzen and Maria Susana Azzi, 'Globalization and the Tango', *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 31, 1999, p. 69. Similar comments are made in relation to the impact of tourists on Irish traditional music by commentators such as Gibson and Connell to name a few. Gibson and Connell, *Music and Tourism*, pp. 127-9. Indeed, Stephen Williams notes that 'tourist images tend to become self-perpetuating and self-reinforcing' and 'tourist experiences become increasingly artificial'. Williams, *Tourism Geography*, p. 178.

xxxviii Ibid., p. 160.

xxxix Catherine E. Foley, 'Cultural Tourism, Meitheal, and Re-presentation of Heritage', *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 47, 2015, p. 146.

xl Ibid. See also Nuala Johnson, 'Where Geography and History Meet: Heritage tourism and the big house in Ireland', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 86, no. 3, 1996, pp. 551-66.

xli Writing in a post-Riverdance context, theatre critic Michael Seavor proposes that Riverdance represents an urban Ireland while Siamsa Tíre represents rural Ireland.

Quoted in Helena Wulff, *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and mobility in Ireland* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 115. However, Catherine E. Foley notes that critics of Siamsa Tíre argue against its focus on rural life and propose instead on its greater engagement urban audiences. Foley, *Step Dancing in Ireland*, pp. 223-4.

xlvi Review of Siamsa Tíre by Colm Tóibín in the *Sunday Independent*, 11 October 1987.

xlvi Ibid.

xlvi Williams, *Tourism Geography*, p. 179. In a similar fashion and with reference to Mozart nostalgia in Vienna, Andrew Reimer states: 'The past has been sanitised, disinfected and altered to conform to a sentimental view of a culture or a heritage which no longer resides in reality but engages with the images of fancy.' Cited in Gibson and Connell, *Music and Tourism*, p. 167.

xlvi Catherine Palmer and Jacqueline Tivers, *Creating Heritage for Tourism: Current developments in the geographies of leisure and tourism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), p. 1.

xlvi Caoimhín Mac Aoidh, 'Traditional Music as a Sustainable Resource', *Ceol Rince na hÉireann*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1994, p. 36.

xlvi Wulff, *Dancing at the Crossroads*, p. 18.

xlvi Palmer and Tivers, *Creating Heritage for Tourism*, p. 2.

xlvi Foley, *Step Dancing in Ireland*, pp. 221-2.

l The tour was produced by Pat Ahern (though he did not travel). He now attained a high profile in CCÉ, due in part to his successful production of the first three *Fleadhanna Nua* in Dublin (1970-2).

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- li Daithí Kearney, 'From Tralee to Times Square: Bringing Irish folk theatre to Broadway', *Imaginares*, vol. 22, 2019, pp. 60–93.
- lii It is noteworthy that Ahern travelled with the composer Bill Whelan on this trip. Fintan Vallely also accompanied the two artists and presented a paper at the international symposium held at Siamsa Tíre (11 May 2018) on their visit to Bulgaria. The interaction with other music cultures was not confined to Europe. In Canada, Siamsa Tíre performed at the first Indigenous Theater Festival (1980) in Toronto.
- liii Liam Swords, 'Fourth Centenary Celebrations of the Irish College in Paris', *The Furrow*, vol. 29, no. 8, 1978.
- liv See Ciarán Walsh's article for RTÉ Brainstorm <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1130/1181436-riverdance-roots-kerry-folk-dance-siamsa-tire/> [accessed 11 April 2022] and Deirdre Mulrooney, *Irish Moves: An illustrated history of dance and physical theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006), p. 12.
- lv McConville, Séamus. 1988. 'Majella's break to Australia'. *The Kerryman*, Friday October 7, p. 7.
- lvi Interview by Daithí Kearney with Seán Ahern, 17 May 2016.
- lvii Dermot McCarthy, 'Siamsa U.S. Tour', unpublished report (Tralee: 10 September 1976).
- lviii Ibid.
- lix See Stephen Williams and Alan A. Lew, *Tourism Geography: Critical understandings of place, space and experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014 [1998]). See also Johnson, 'Where Geography and History Meet', p. 551–66.
- lx Barbara O'Connor and Michael Cronin (eds), *Tourism in Ireland: A critical analysis* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), p. 76.
- lxi Johnson, 'Where Geography and History Meet', p. 551.
- lxii Kaul, *Turning the Tune*.
- lxiii Foster, R.F., 2008. *Luck and the Irish: a brief history of change from 1970*. Oxford University Press.
- lxiv Anthony Foley and John Fahy, 'Incongruity between Expression and Experience: The role of imagery in supporting the positioning of a tourism destination brand', *Brand Management*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2004, pp. 209–27.
- lxv Daithí Kearney, 'From Tralee to Times Square: Bringing Irish folk theatre to Broadway', *Imaginares*, vol. 22, 2019, pp. 60–93.
- lxvi Catherine E. Foley notes the authenticity that older traditional step dancers provided to the work of the National Folk Theatre and how they assisted in validating it. Foley, *Step Dancing in Ireland*, p. 210.
- lxvii It is worth noting that Bob Brannigan and Chuck Eisler, the producers of the US tour, visited the Teach Siamsa in Finuge prior to the tour and were impressed by that aspect of the company. The company's focus on training is also referenced in the 1974 European Prize for Folk-Art certificate which states 'in recognition of the latter's praiseworthy efforts in preserving and reviving traditional folk-music and folk-dancing and in particular for its wholly admirable work for the promotion of folk theatre in Ireland'.
- lxviii Barbara O'Connor, 'Myths and Mirrors: Tourist images and national identity', in O'Connor and Cronin (eds), *Tourism in Ireland*, p. 76. And Anthony Foley and John Fahy, 'Incongruity between Expression and Experience: The role of imagery in supporting the positioning of a tourism destination brand', *Brand Management*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2004, pp. 209–27.
- lxix Interview by Daithí Kearney with Ogie Moran, 30 January 2019.
- lxx Williams, *Tourism Geography*.

Ixxi Interview by Daithí Kearney with Ogie Moran, 30 January 2019. To facilitate good relations with Siamsa Tíre and tour operators the CEO Martin Whelan developed a

good rapport particularly with bus drivers. As Moran commented, 'he had as much time for a bus driver as the taoiseach'.

Ixxii Séamus Mac Gearailt served on the board from the 1980s until 2006.

Ixxiii John Moriarty, *Invoking Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2005).

Ixxiv Eric Zuelow, *Making Ireland Irish: Tourism and national identity since the Irish civil war* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

Ixxv Edward Bruner, *Cultures on Tour: Ethnographies of travel* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 4.