

# PIONEER OF FOLK THEATRE, PAT AHERN OF NORTH KERRY

An appreciation by Daithí Kearney, Dundalk Institute of Technology.



Pat Ahern is a fiddle player who epitomises the mantra ‘think global act local’. Throughout his life he has contributed to the sense of community at the level of parish and, through extraordinary creativity and leadership has inspired members of those communities to success on the world stage from the Abbey Theatre to Broadway. A student of the North Kerry dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux, Ahern also became an accomplished fiddle

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player, influenced by both local musicians and recordings of Michael Coleman, whose fiddle he was bequeathed. His work with Siamsa Tíre, particularly in the exploration and development of Irish dance with contemporary influences, has been identified by many as the inspiration for *Riverdance* and the celebration of Irish culture on the world stage. As Siamsa reaches fifty years, it is timely to examine the incredible legacy of this man.

Born in 1932, Pat Ahern grew up on a farm near the village of Moyvane, Co. Kerry. A fiddle player, his early influences include fiddle player Barney Enright, a cousin from Moyvane village and his mother, fiddle player Margaret Walsh from Sallow Glen, Tarbert. His brother Seán is a notable singer and uilleann piper and together they were recorded by Ciarán MacMathúna at their house in the early sixties.

Ahern attended Maynooth in the early 1950’s and went to Tralee in 1957 following his ordination where Dean Reidy was in need of somebody to set up new choir for St. John’s Church. While still attending to duties in Tralee, Ahern completed a BMus at University College Cork from 1960–1962 under Professor Fleischmann, bringing his choir from Tralee to Cork where he conducted them as part of his final examinations. Over half a century later that choir continues to perform at mass in Tralee each week!

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Ahern was also very involved in the early initiatives of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann in Kerry. One of the activities that proved very popular was the Scoraíocht competition. 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 Liam Ó Murchú, to record a series of programmes entitled *Aililiú*. At this time the group called themselves *Siamsóirí na Ríochta* and, following an overwhelming positive response, developed an entire stage production in 1968.

That was the same year Ahern was transferred to Dublin to work at the Communications Centre in Booterstown. While in Dublin, he became more involved with Comhaltas at a national level. He produced the first *Fleadh Nua* and Comhaltas’ first concert tour to North America in 1972. While in Dublin, Ahern was also invited to act as musical director for a number of shows at the Abbey and Peacock Theatres. He invited a number of traditional musicians from around Dublin including Tony Smith (Antóin MacGabhann), Mick O’Brien, Mary Bergin and Antoinette McKenna. For the production of *Séadna*, Ahern brought a number of dancers from Siamsa to perform with the Abbey company.

In 1972 Ahern returned to Kerry at the request of Bishop Casey and was released from diocesan duties to dedicate time to developing Siamsa Tíre. A report entitled ‘Plan for Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture’ was published in 1972 that laid out

plans for the development of Irish culture, based on the model of Siamsa and which 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.

A professional performing company was formed in 1985 and a purpose built theatre and arts centre was opened in Tralee in 1991. The company also has two training centres and performance venues in Finuge, between Tralee and Listowel, and Carraig, in west Kerry.

The Siamsa Tíre mission is to reflect Ireland’s great wealth of music, dance and folklore on stage, through vibrant, colourful theatrical entertainment and to continue creating new folk theatre presentations, drawing on Irish traditions and a rich cultural reservoir. Siamsa Tíre have performed all over the world. The early performances that became the production *Fadó Fadó* was revived in 2014.

Focusing on the rich cultural traditions of his native Kerry, Ahern pioneered folk theatre in Ireland and, in the words of another fiddle player and friend, Nicholas McAulliffe, he put the hidden Ireland on stage.