

Kearney, D. 2021. 'Forging The Dance: The Expression of Regionality in Irish Folk Theatre', in Ozlem Dogus Varli (ed) *Timbres of Identity: Ethnomusicological Approaches to Music-Dance and Identity*. Turkey: Association of Ethnomusicology, pp. 39-57.

## Forging the Dance: The Expression of Regionality in Irish Folk Theatre

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Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, operates as a regional theatre company that develops performances through traditional music, song and dance rather than spoken word. From early productions in a local convent hall in the 1950s, performances are now staged in a purpose-built theatre in the town of Tralee, Co. Kerry, the design of which is modelled on an ancient stone structure in the region. Importantly they also established two rural centres in the 1970s which facilitated training and smaller performance opportunities for members of the cast and their importance to some members of the community as a connection with a rural heritage and the development of the company remains. Although the company has performed nationally and internationally throughout its history, its connection to place is reinforced through both physical spaces and the incorporation of local music, and more particularly, dance styles.

In addition to the location of the company in Co. Kerry, the representation of regional themes on stage is an integral part of the Siamsa Tíre productions. The original production, *Siamsa* or *Fadó Fadó*<sup>1</sup> is based on the life experiences of some of the early cast but many aspects of custom and musical repertoire are recognisable beyond the region. *Ding Ding Dederó* (1991), *Tearmann* (2006) and *Moriarty* (2009) focused on local figures - John Moriarty was a local philosopher and the principal character in *Tearmann* is based on a local dancing master. *Ding Dong Dederó* is perhaps the most complex of the productions in terms of understanding a regional stage identity as it both represents the life of North Kerry dancing master and blacksmith Jeremiah Molyneaux, whose dancing style is integral to the company's performances and *raison d'être*, and develops contemporary dance forms that involve and evolve that dance style.

This paper critically considers the relationship between the physical location of Siamsa Tíre and its role as a regional, national and international theatre company, focusing on how selected productions construct and reflect a regional identity and reflect the process of glocalisation and respond to changes in the arts and society. Furthermore, it acknowledges the importance of the company to the local tourist industry and the potential role of tourism in influencing the performance of music and dance.

### Introduction

Siamsa Tíre,<sup>2</sup> the National Folk Theatre of Ireland emerged from a cultural renaissance in Kerry in the south west of Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s that was significantly influenced by the work of a local Roman Catholic priest, Pat Ahern. Assigned to the parish of St John's Church in Tralee, Co Kerry following his ordination in 1957, Ahern was tasked with establishing a choir in the church (Phelan, 2014, p. 133; Kearney, 2017a). Training boys from the local primary school alongside local men, the St John's Gregorian Choir was quickly established along the models of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, incorporating the music of masters such as Palestrina (1525–1594), and developing a training system akin to a cathedral choir. Informed by Ahern's interest and previous experience in drama, the

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<sup>1</sup> The name usually referred to is *Fadó Fadó* meaning long, long ago. The first summer season performance of the production was in 1968.

<sup>2</sup> In the Irish language meaning 'entertainment of the land'.

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success of the choir led to the development of a series of pageants directed by Ahern, beginning with *Masabielle: The Story of Lourdes* in 1958. A party after the Passion play *Golgotha* in 1963 indirectly led to the formation of Siamsóirí na Ríochta,<sup>3</sup> which later became Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland in 1974 (see also, Foley, 2013, p. 206). Although neither professional nor significantly funded by the state, the use of the appellation 'National Folk Theatre' by Siamsa Tíre mirrors international examples, such as state-sponsored professional dance ensembles examined by Anthony Shay (2002). Despite this title, the company remained primarily concerned with the intangible cultural heritage of the local region as expressed through dance, while engaging with a broader national repertoire of traditional music and song. In addition to this local focus, the company also collaborated with international artists and explored the potential for incorporating ideas and influences from other cultures. The zenith of this exploration of international dance styles is arguably *The Seville Suite* (1992), a combination of Irish traditional and Flamenco choreography to music by Irish composer Bill Whelan. The presence of both the local and elements of external influences that seek to entertain both local and global audiences reflects processes of globalisation and glocalisation and may also reflect an increasingly cosmopolitan Ireland.

Growing up on a farm in north Kerry, Ahern had himself learned to play fiddle and to dance from local exponents (Kearney, 2011). He attended secondary school in the seminary in Killarney, approximately sixty kilometres from his home, and went to St Patrick's College, Maynooth, where he studied for the priesthood from 1950–1957. He later attended University College Cork from 1960–1962, where he studied for a BMus under Professor Aloys Fleischman (1910–1992). Informed by his studies and experiences away from Kerry, in Tralee Ahern was inspired by the performances of cast members at the post-production party who embodied local cultural practices (Foley, 2013; Kearney, 2013; Phelan, 2014). A critical and distinguishing element was the use of a regional dance style taught by Jeremiah Molyneaux or 'Munnix' in North Kerry (Hayes, 2009; Foley, 2012, 2013; Kearney, 2013; Phelan, 2014). Locally, Ahern also became involved in a fledgling national movement, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ), with whom he would engage further on a national level in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In 1964, Ahern produced a group to compete in the *Scoraíocht*<sup>5</sup> competition organised by CCÉ and in 1965 produced a series of television pieces for the national television station incorporating music, song and dance into the representation of rural work practices. Assisted by local tourism figures, these scenes were developed into a full-length stage production in 1968 (see also Foley, 2013; Kearney, 2013; Phelan, 2014).

The show, *Fadó Fadó*, translated as 'long, long ago', represented rural practices on the theatre stage using music, song, dance and mime. All of the songs were in the Irish language but there was little or no spoken word. The inspiration for the production came largely from the memories of Ahern and some other members (See Phelan, 2014, p. 142). The production reflects aspects of romantic cultural

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<sup>3</sup> In the Irish language meaning 'entertainers of the kingdom', a reference to the nickname for Co. Kerry where the company is based.

<sup>4</sup> Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (translated as the association of musicians in Ireland) was founded in 1951 amidst fears for the future of Irish traditional music. It established branches throughout the country and internationally. A county board was established in Kerry in 1959 and Ahern served as President before later becoming involved as a producer on a national level. Ahern featured a number of Kerry dancers in national performances for which he was a producer.

<sup>5</sup> *Scoraíocht* competitions refer to stage presentations of Irish traditional music, song, dance, Irish language, storytelling & recitation. According to CCÉ, 'SCORAÍOCHT is intended for those with a flair for inventive presentation and depends very much on the skill of a producer with knowledge of all principles of stage presentation.'

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nationalism that are not only evident in Ireland but are part of the referencing of a rural idyll in many cultures, which is often reflected in the performances by folk dance ensembles (Shay, 2002). Tes Slominski similarly notes that 'Irish traditional music has long played a role in both delimiting and expanding who and what counts as "Irish" through its production of sound, discourse, and sociability' (2020, p. 10). The 'main tools of identity-building in theatre' identified by Anneli Saro as 'productions in the local languages, presentations of national drama, local themes and settings and the use of artists as representatives of the community' (2009, p. 15) are all reflected in many of the productions by Siamsa Tíre. It is against *Fadó Fadó* that subsequent productions are assessed, providing a founding principal of Irish folk theatre. It is clear that many elements and artistic approaches prevail but are developed, as exemplified in *Ding Ding Dederó* (1991) and *Oileán* (2003). The development and evolution of the Siamsa Tíre company and its artistic outputs reflect changing philosophies of identity, shaped by socio-cultural, political and economic factors and the lived experience of cast members.

The presence of local themes and a regeneration of interest in local culture from the 1960s through to the present is evident in different ways through the productions of Siamsa Tíre. While *Fadó Fadó* is often criticised for presenting an overly happy, sentimental and romanticised vision of Ireland (Kearney, 2013), Siamsa Tíre have also engaged with the darker aspects of Irish culture. In *Ding Dong Dederó*, the song 'Dónal Óg' (young Donal) was included to represent emigration and later incorporated into a production of *San Am Fadó*<sup>6</sup> for the same purpose. In *Clann Lir* (1999), one of the classic tragedies of Irish mythology, the separation of a father from his children, their subsequent struggle against the elements and eventual death is portrayed through dance that brings together the Munnix style with contemporary dance in collaboration with choreographer Mary Nunan (Swift, 1999; Wulff, 2007). In *Oileán*, the death of a child on the Blasket Islands is represented at the climax of the production in a particularly emotive scene, again incorporating the battle between man and the elements in a scene depicting the father's attempts to cross a stormy sea with choreography by Cindy Cummings (Kearney, 2017b). The Blasket Islands are located off the coast of Kerry. The last residents of the Blasket Islands departed in 1953 but aspects of their culture were captured by visiting anthropologists and folklorists as well as local writers who were encouraged to write their own stories. It is these stories that inspire the narrative of *Oileán*, the local further embodied through the use of songs sourced in the region as well as dance steps and melodies that reflect a mix of old and new, created by the company with the score by longtime Siamsa Tíre member and musical director Tom Hanafin.

That the subject matter and community of musical practice (Kenny, 2016) are explicitly and geographically local, impacts on the identity of Siamsa Tíre. The development of the company is underpinned by a plan developed by Ahern and architect Patrick O'Sullivan in 1972, which places an emphasis on both aspects of Irish culture and the location of the theatre, identifying Tralee rather than the capital city, Dublin, for its location, in addition to a number of rural training centres. This was a time of significant change in Ireland, affected by the decision to join the European Economic Community in 1973, which offered both an opportunity and a challenge for the preservation of an Irish identity. As Saro notes, 'when geographical and political borders are made invisible, cultural and mental borders start to play a more significant role in the international differentiation of Europe and in identity-building within local communities' (2009, p. 19). Foley (2013) posits the development of Siamsa Tíre as a response to globalisation, modernisation and urbanisation. Thus, as in examples

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<sup>6</sup> 'In the long ago', a revision of the earlier production.

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provided by Shay (2002), the staging of folk culture creates a context for the idealized representation of ethnic difference. However, it is important to remember that Irish identity and the perceptions and understanding of Irishness have changed over time and processes including colonisation, European integration and globalization lead to a reformulation of Irishness (see Wulff, 2009), replicated in music, dance and theatre. In the context of Siamsa Tíre, Phelan notes that Ahern's view of being Irish 'was neither fixed nor did it reside in the past. It was a "feeling" a "dúchas" a "sense of being ourselves"' (2015, p. 130).

The connection between folklore and nationalism is well documented and, writing about folklore and regionalism in a European context, David Hopkin (2019) states:

Folktales were to be basis for a revived national literature, folk song the basis for a revived national music, and the two would come together in national dramas staged at new national theatres such as The National Theatre of Norway (founded in 1899) or the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (founded in 1904).

Although emerging as a national theatre during 'the Troubles',<sup>7</sup> unlike other examples in the twentieth century, Siamsa Tíre did not develop connections with or reflect militant nationalism. Despite utilising the title of National Folk Theatre of Ireland since 1974, and increasingly NFT in recent years, I argue that the underlying ethos and philosophy of Siamsa Tíre was not bounded by ethnic nationalism nor founded on a desire to solely reflect cultural difference. Ahern himself has indicated the influence of James Fraser (1854–1941) and Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), whose work highlight the shared themes and tropes in folklore across cultures. Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan also highlight the globalization of Irish theatre, whereby the world is conceived as a single place with one broadly shared culture (2012, p. 2). Yet there is also a fundamental belief in the Irishness of Siamsa Tíre. Mirroring other nationalist movements and drawing on an old Irish proverb '*tír gan teanga, tír gan anam*', a country without a language is a country without a soul, Ahern was deeply invested in the Irish language, despite its decline and the fact that many of the performers were not fluent in the language. To this end, he looked to the Gaeltacht as a guide for the proper use of the language and many, including myself, remember him emphasising the correct pronunciation of song lyrics. This relates to the identification of the Gaeltacht as the most Irish of Irish regions (see Valley, 2008; Hopkin, 2019) and betrays the use of 'a particular region as a metonym or an archetype for the national whole' (Hopkin, 2019; see also Shay, 2002).

Writing about several international folk dance companies in the latter half of the twentieth century, Shay notes how they presented essentialist portraits of their respective nation-states (2002, p. 1) and 'accrued valued symbolic and cultural capital for their respective nation-states' (2002, p. 3). Siamsa Tíre fit within this analysis at that time but as Ireland's identity has evolved, the relevance of Siamsa Tíre as a 'National Folk Theatre' can be critiqued. With greater European integration, the role and function of a national theatre has become questioned yet remains prominent (Wilmer, 2009). The concept of a national theatre is a recurring trope and in 2019, an article in the *Irish Times* pointed to debates on how a national theatre should reflect a country's identity (Fisher, 2019). He argues:

national theatre isn't just an organisation that puts on plays. It is also a symbol.  
Put the word "national" in your name and you become a receptacle for a

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Troubles' refers to a period of violent sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998.

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country's values. In what you do, the nation will seek to see the very definition of itself; a definition perhaps vaguely articulated, but intensely felt.

While commentary on Siamsa Tíre in the wake of *Riverdance* (1994) has suggested that if the latter represents a modern, urban Ireland, then Siamsa Tíre reveals its rural past (Seavor, in Wulff 2009, p. 115), critical commentary has sometimes been less kind. While much scholarship has attended to how *Riverdance* may have contributed to a changing perception of Ireland and Irish culture, critic Colm Tóibín (1987) was scathing in his criticism of Siamsa Tíre's performances in the late 1980s. At this time, Siamsa Tíre had toured internationally, winning the European Prize for Folk Art in Germany in 1975 and successfully touring the USA in 1976 with performances in many major theatres including the Palace Theatre on Broadway, mirroring Grene and Lonergan's 2012 recognition of the internationalization of Irish drama since the 1970s. Perhaps partly due to its associations with tourism and a rejection of a romanticised rural identity in favour of one that is modern, urban and globally connected, the relevance of Siamsa Tíre can become questioned (Foley, 2015a). However, rather than dismissing it as a negative, tourism is critical to place identity in parts of Ireland (Kneafsey, 2003), although consideration must be given to the impact of the tourist gaze (see Bruner, 2005). The Irish tours by the company were an effort by then Artistic Director Oliver Hurley to make the company more relevant to Irish audiences:

During my time as Artistic Director from 2000 – 2005, the company embarked on three very successful national tours which for me was an important dimension to my directorship - to bring folk theatre to the Irish theatre-goers on an annual basis, just like Druid or the Abbey theatre companies. We performed in venues from the Town Hall Theatre in Galway, to the Cork Opera House, with exceptional box office sales and outstanding critical and audience reaction. Thus, confirming that folk theatre is not just for the foreign tourist but has a wide appeal to theatre audiences in Ireland and that the delivery of a summer season should not be our only focus (Hurley, 2014).

While most of the company's productions have featured as part of the summer season, which is attended primarily by tourists, *Fadó Fadó* and *Oileán* have become standards that present a romanticised rural idyll. Other productions are more challenging, artistically and thematically, but foreground local stories and identities. It is perhaps, as asserted by geographer David Harvey, that 'the elaboration of place-bound identities have become more rather than less important in a world of diminishing spatial barriers to exchange, movement, and communication' (1993, p. 4).

From its earliest beginnings, Siamsa Tíre is thus influenced by both local and external cultures. Key to understanding the development of the company and its relationship with the local is an unpublished plan by Ahern and O'Sullivan from 1972. The plan is immediately both local and global in its outlook, presenting a plan for training centres and education programmes for the benefit and creation of a local community of practice engaged in folk culture, while acknowledging the potential to engage international audiences. According to the plan:

The rural centre is intended to be a meeting-place for the people of the district and their traditions, a filter- point where the massive talents and folk- wealth of the district is researched and assembled. The centre sifts and processes thus local folk material into forms which are 'marketable' in theatrical terms. (1972, p. 15)

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The importance of the physical centre to the local was also emphasised:

Apart from the on-going work of research and training, it is anticipated that the centre will become a focal point of life and activity in the district, a meeting-place for the local people, where they enjoy and take part in exhibitions of music, dancing, story-telling, yarn-spinning (ibid., p. 22).

For Ahern, while the intricacies of expression may differ, folk culture is something that is shared across all peoples. In plans for a theatre, the authors write: 'The purpose of the theatre is also to be an inlet for other folk cultures, an international centre where the folk cultures of other nations are exhibited on an exchange basis. This contact with others is an important influence in the enhancement and enrichment of the home product. It reinforces the cultural "re-education" of our own people.' Audience reactions, notably those during the 1976 tour of North America, reveal a familiarity with the themes of the company and an appreciation of particularization, regardless of the ethnic background of the audience (Kearney, 2018). Both aspects of social anthropologist Anthony Cohen's (1985) central ideas on the notion of community are evident as Siamsa engage with the aspects of aggregation and relation. While a professional 'core company' has existed since 1985, the majority of performers are part of a 'community cast'. Through touring and engaging with artists from outside the company, including international artists, Siamsa Tíre have developed a greater sense of local identity and its place in a global sphere. Cohen asserts that 'people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries: when they encounter other cultures, or when they become aware of other ways of doing things, or merely of contradictions to their own culture' (1985, p. 69).

Reflective of what Shay terms 'particularization' (2002, p. 14), the local solo step dance style is fundamental to the performances of the company and is heavily influenced by the North Kerry tradition of dancing masters and Jeremiah Molyneaux in particular (see Foley, 2013; Phelan, 2014; Wulff, 2009). Indeed, Ahern himself was a pupil of Molyneaux. A critical aspect of the work of Siamsa Tíre was the employment of community cast member and dancer Michael Murphy in 1983 to undertake research on the traditional steps of the North Kerry dancers, providing an important resource for future development. Despite this local seed, the company explored the potential for international collaboration in dance (Phelan, 2014). Ahern and the company sought to develop dance as a form of expression and the evolving style and engagement with folk dance was inspired in part by Russian choreographer Igor Moiseyev (1906–2007). From the 1980s, the company worked with a number of Irish and international dancers and choreographers that connected folk and contemporary dance. This is particularly evident in works such as *Between Worlds* (1991), the second act of *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991) and *Clann Lir* (1997). However, Siamsa Tíre also collaborated with international artists, perhaps best reflected in the *Seville Suite* (1992), when they worked with Flamenco dancer Maria Pages to choreograph the music of Bill Whelan. As Claude Levi-Strauss stated, 'Every culture must liberate its creative potential by finding the correct equilibrium between isolation and contact with others' (in: Eriksen 2001 [1995], p. 294).

Song is also integral to the company's performances and Ahern drew on his knowledge of Western Art Music to inform his arrangement of traditional Irish song for SATB. An Irish traditional fiddle player, Ahern grew up in a musical milieu of local culture before studying classical violin and piano at university. External influences on the musical style are less evident. Despite the huge commercial success of *Riverdance* in the 1990s, there is a resistance to developing a modern production (Ó Cinnéide, 2001) but subsequent to Ahern's involvement with Siamsa Tíre some of the productions, such as *Turas* (2013), demonstrate the influence of large scale international dance productions that

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foreground Irish dance such as *Riverdance* (1995) and *Lord of the Dance* (1996). Nevertheless, kinaesthetic markers and intertextual referencing such as footage of old dancers, the use of the half door, and the inclusion of the Blackbird set dance are included. Thus the artistic routes of the company are always circling and returning to the roots but constantly seeking to evolve an identity that is relevant locally and globally, engaging in innovative artistic practice and attracting overseas tourists seeking to experience a representation of the culture of the south west of Ireland. Herein, three productions are critically considered, *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991), *Tearmann* (2006) and *Moriarty* (2009).

### *Ding Dong Dederó*

While the company embarked on a number of international tours from the 1970s onwards, it remained local, inhabiting local performances spaces in Tralee and other small towns in Kerry, constructing training centres in rural areas in 1974 and 1975, and ultimately realising a purpose built theatre and arts centre that was opened in Tralee in 1991. The opening of the theatre coincided with the premiere of a new production, *Ding Dong Dederó*, itself a celebration of local dance traditions that were combined with contemporary dance movements in what dance critic Diane Theodores suggested could transform into 'a major theatre/dance company of Ireland'. In his dissertation on contemporary dance, Fergus Ó Conchubhair writes: 'As home of the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, Siamsa Tíre is a repository of local folk culture, presented onstage in music and dance performances. Through its distinctive Munnix style of step-dancing, the company is strongly identified with its North Kerry location, despite its national title' (2017, p. 190).

*Ding Dong Dederó* opens with the sound of a blacksmith's hammer hitting the anvil. The scene, set in a blacksmith's forge, reveals a community who respond to the sounds of their environment through dance. A sage sings a prophecy of a young boy born to the blacksmith. At the end of Act One, the boy traces the shapes in the forge and dances on the anvil. Spirits emerge from the fire in a dance sequence that suggests an otherworldly aspect to the dance. In the second half, the dance master teaches the young pupils who themselves go on to develop the dance form, replicating the story of Siamsa Tíre itself.

The central character of the production is Jeremiah Molyneaux or Jerry Munnix, viewed as the last of the travelling dance masters of North Kerry (see also Phelan, 2014, p. 149–152). The dance style of this community was collected by Siamsa Tíre and Muckcross House<sup>8</sup> and forms an archive from which the company can draw material and inspiration. The story of Munnix was, for a period of time, also central to the summer performances by children training for the company in training centres, located in Finuge and Carraig.<sup>9</sup> In his book on *Riverdance*, Barra Ó Cinnéide reflects on the importance of Siamsa Tíre as a precursor to the global phenomenon and refers to the production of *Ding Dong Dederó* stating: '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, p. 50). The enormity of the cast reflected the desire to include the local community that was Siamsa Tíre, from original members to new members, reinforcing the sense of local connectivity and regional

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Foley was employed as a collector by Muckcross House and worked closely with Fr Pat Ahern to video the older dancers in North Kerry, later completing a PhD on the dance traditions of North Kerry and producing a book and DVD published locally by the North Kerry Literary Trust (Foley, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> I performed the role of Munnix for three years in Finuge and a year in Carraig, continuing to perform in these venues after I had graduated to the cast in Tralee, where my first 'senior' performance was in *Ding Dong Dederó*.

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importance. Phelan interprets the conclusion of the production as a promise to the audience 'that although Jeremiah Molyneaux and his pupils had died, Siamsa Tíre would continue to preserve and develop his unique repertoire and style' (2014, p. 151).

The building in which *Ding Dong Dederó* premiered is also significant for its architecture. Located in the town park, within walking distance of the town centre but with the Sliabh Mish Mountains in the background, the building is modelled on Staigue Ringfort in South Kerry. The building benefitted from local fundraising and government support and is a prominent structure in the townscape of Tralee in the present. It also serves the local community beyond the activities of the resident folk theatre company, hosting performances by local musical and theatre groups, schools and touring performers.

The significance of Munnix is continuously reasserted. His grave was unmarked following his death in 1965 but a ceremony on 17 June 1973 involved the unveiling of headstone and graveside oration. A new sculpture by local sculptor Billy Leen was unveiled on 17 June 2018, depicting a pair of dancing shoes and the inscription '*Bímís ag Rince*' (Let us be dancing) (Fig. 1). In the 1970s and 1980s, an annual Jerry Munnix Commemoration Night was held in the Teach Siamsa Finuge and an honorary cup named for another dancer, Liam Tarrant, was presented to 'the dancer deemed to have done most to keep the Munnix tradition alive during the past 12 months' (Kerryman, 1988), usually a surviving pupil. In 2016, the production *Anam* presented four step dance styles, namely, the North Kerry Munnix, Appalachian Flatfoot, Ottawa Valley and, modern Irish which is reflective of competitive Irish dancing. Foley (2020) has also written on the recontextualization, institutionalisation and popularisation of the Munnix style and implications for the tradition. Further national recognition in 2020 was the inclusion of Siamsa Tíre Artistic Director Jonathan Kelliher as one of the Trad Ireland / Traid Éireann 20/20 Visionaries, for his project on Jeremiah Molyneaux to develop a performance-based live-streamed video about the source of inspiration which has made an impact on him during his musical journey (<https://www.trad-ireland.com/projects>).



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Figure 1 Grave of Jeremiah Molyneux, Gale Cemetery. Source: Author, 27 June 2018.

### ***Tearmann***

Although not from the area, ethnochoreologist Catherine Foley has undertaken extensive research on the dance traditions of North Kerry, which unearthed information on a number of figures including

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Múirín. While she acknowledges that the company had considered producing a show around the theme of the Famine<sup>10</sup> for a number of years, in her article on *Tearmann*, Foley highlights her role in the development of the production, stating '[k]nowledge of the death certificate, and the information supplied with it, gave impetus to Siamsa Tíre to produce the show' (2015, p. 143). According to Foley:

In North Kerry, Múirín was a well known itinerant dancing master who travelled around the south of Ireland and North Kerry with a fiddler named Buckley Shanahan to teach the fashionable dances of the day – country dances, quadrilles, and step dancing. It is believed that step dancing emerged with the itinerant dancing masters in Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century [...] Múirín was born in 1823 and died in Listowel, Kerry, on 27th March, 1878. On his death certificate, it states that he died when in a coma from exposure in Listowel Workhouse in North Kerry.

As with the choreographers that Siamsa Tíre had worked with previously, Foley represents an outside figure who contributes to local knowledge and artistic development. In *Tearmann* (translated as refuge), which ran seasonally from 2006–2009, despite the jollity of dance, the concept is overtly dark and gloomy, focusing on one of the darkest periods in modern Irish history. In the Famine Scene, dancers are seen trying to pull potatoes from the ground with the soundtrack echoing the hymn 'Deus Meus' played in canon on the piano with percussive beats intensifying and a lonesome whistle wailing. The sense of transition from freedom, as captured in the dance, to entrapment, where the dancers become more percussive and regimented before becoming trapped by the set itself, creates a sense of imprisonment (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gO4iTIYIxns&feature=youtu.be&t=1s>). The misery of the workhouse serves as a backdrop for the transmission of tradition (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjr42Iz0lrg>). The stage is full of disorder and rebellion, children against adults, a cacophony of percussive sounds and screams, in contrast with the desired order of the steps and although the young boy initially rejects the attempts of the dancing master to almost 'beat it into him', it is the innocent of youth that brings an end to the violence.

*Tearmann* involved a script writer from outside the company, Michael Harding, while Cindy Cummings who had previously worked on a number of projects with the company is credited with choreography. The choreographic process in many of the Siamsa Tíre productions requires the principal choreographer to work closely with members of the cast to incorporate the style of dance that they embody. In relation to the choreography, Phelan notes: 'While Kelliher developed the North Kerry style further in the show, using higher levels and a faster dynamic, he also strove to remain true to the basic techniques and style of the movement' (2014, p. 155). Evidence of this progression in Kelliher's own artistry may be seen in a subsequent production *Anam* (2017), contrasting the North Kerry style with competitive Irish dancing and north American step dance traditions.

While the work of Foley (2015b) and the commentary of Artistic Director Jonathan Kelliher focus on addressing tourism, the theme of the Great Famine and the centrality of dance, it is the location of the production that is integral to this paper. Foley notes that Listowel Workhouse, located approximately 30 kilometres from Tralee in the heart of North Kerry, provided the theatrical setting for the narrative. However, the sense of local identity and regionality is also embodied through the incorporation of elements of the Munnix style of dance. The international resonances are noted by Phelan whose

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<sup>10</sup> Many scholars point to the misuse of the term Famine in relation to the period in Ireland in the latter half of the 1840s, noting the Irish name An Gorta Mhór and the alternative translation as 'the great hunger'.

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interview with Kelliher revealed that he related aspects of the story to refugee camps and work houses in other countries (2014, p. 155). Kelliher demonstrates an awareness of glocalisation, in which the local treatment of a theme has resonance and relevance for audiences beyond the local (Robertson, 1995). Like Ahern's philosophy on folk culture, Kelliher demonstrates the global relevance of thematic material. Despite the significance of the Great Hunger, it has challenged artists and there is a comparable lack of painting, writing or theatrical work on the theme. Foley argues that '*Tearmann* provided a site where tourists – international and domestic, had the opportunity to learn about or to re-visit and re-examine this dark period of Irish history through theatrical performance' (2014, p. 135).

## *Moriarty*

For *Moriarty* (2009), Siamsa Tíre continued their collaboration with writer Michael Harding, who also took on the lead role in this production. North Kerry writer and philosopher, John Moriarty was from the same village and was a close friend of Pat Ahern. He was a strong supporter of the vision for Siamsa Tíre and wrote about the importance of folk culture.

As with *Tearmann*, there is a darkness to the production. A review in *The Irish Times* states:

Moriarty opens with the lone, solemn wail of the uilleann pipes; a mournful meditation on the human spirit and the singular drift of all life towards death. The austere beauty of the plaintive lament sets just one of the themes in this theatrical tribute to the late philosopher and poet John Moriarty, as a quintet of live musicians make sure to elicit the passion of life in Tom Hanafin's score too (Keating, 2009).

Sara Keating suggests that it is the first half of the production, most overtly in the Siamsa Tíre style of folk theatre incorporating music, song and dance that is most successful. While Moriarty himself drew on a broad world of literature and the great global philosophers, he does so with a local voice. Unlike *Fadó Fadó*, in which the audience experience the life of a community, in *Moriarty* they are faced with the exceptional individual and I disagree with Keating's interpretation that 'The symbolic, almost expressionistic, construction of the piece reaches beyond the individual, however, and Moriarty becomes an everyman; his life an archetype of human nature, as every life might be'. Rather Moriarty is an individual seeking for something, a way of life that is lost or being lost, perhaps reflecting the motivations of the original *Fadó Fadó* production. Writing about the development of the show *Moriarty* (2009), playwright Michael Harding states that Moriarty's vision was to 're-invoke Ireland; to re-awaken a conscience and a consciousness that might really be the ancient soul of Ireland, and that we would do well to recover' (2009).

Where *Ding Dong Dederó* concluded with the celebration of a communal expression of dance that is the legacy of the dancing master, Moriarty concludes with a series of monologues from the later writer, recited by Harding. It is a performance of Moriarty's own words rather than a reinterpretation or development by the community. If Munnix was the seed from which the dance grew and developed, the philosophies of Moriarty have not yet reached maturity of interpretation. It is a different form of tribute to the philosopher whose writings were shaped by his experience of living in Kerry.

## **Conclusion**

In all of its productions, the cast of Siamsa Tíre embody a sense of local identity in their performances, primarily through the Munnix style of dance. They remain located locally in Kerry

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with their principal theatre in the town of Tralee. The first productions by the cast were based on local memory and customs and aspects of local culture remain present throughout most subsequent productions. Kinaesthetic markers such as the use of the Munnix style of dance, sonic markers such as the use of four part SATB arrangements of Irish language song, and the involvement of primarily local artists in the cast reinforce the sense of regionality and community in the cast. This does not exclude performers who become part of the performing company for a period of time or the involvement of collaborating artists including choreographers, writers, set designers and composers.

The buildings constructed by Siamsa Tíre have become important sites of memory, imbued with layers of meaning. The founding members donated flagstones that surround the fire in the Teach Siamsa Finuge and a piece of paper bearing their names was placed beneath each. The original cottage used in the set for *Fadó Fadó* incorporated a window from the Ahern homestead. The building of a new theatre and arts centre in Tralee as the permanent home of the company, far from the capital city of Dublin and with architectural reference to local archaeology, further emphasises the connection with this place.

*Ding Dong Dederó* perhaps best represents the regeneration and regionalisation of theatre in Kerry through its focus on the dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux, its involvement of a large, local community cast, and its co-existence with the opening of a new theatre building that continues to serve theatrical development in the region. For over six decades, the company has contributed to the local tourist industry, the training of young performers, and enriched the local arts scene while also engaging in the representation of Ireland internationally, engaging with artists from other cultures and searching for identity in folk art. This identity, its construction and representation, is continuously evolving.

In contrast with the original productions that, over time, were critiqued as overly focused on satisfying tourists, *Tearmann* and *Moriarty* provide darker representations of less jovial aspects of Irish history and life. Whereas *Tearmann* reflects the turmoil of the potato crop failure, *Moriarty* reflects the inner turmoil of the human mind. They meet the demands of the 1972 document in terms of educating local audiences about local culture. The productions also engage with national issues and national myths. Just as Moriarty incorporated a global philosophical wisdom into his writings, many of which were completed while resident in rural Ireland, Siamsa Tíre has incorporated influences from many different cultures. The input of choreographers from other places beyond the local is important but it is the sustained local presence through performance, the primacy of kinaesthetic markers in their choreography, and the celebration of local themes and stories that contribute to the regeneration of culture in the region.

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