



From Tralee to Times Square: Bringing Irish folk theatre to Broadway	
Auteur(s)	Dr Daithí KEARNEY, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland
Titre de la revue	<i>Imaginaires</i> (ISSN 1270-931X)
Numéro	22 (2019) : « How Popular Culture Travels: Cultural Exchanges between Ireland and the United States »
Pages	60-92
Directeur(s) du numéro	Sylvie MIKOWSKI et Yann PHILIPPE
DOI de l'article	10.34929/imaginaires.vi22.6
DOI du numéro	10.34929/imaginaires.vi22

Ce document est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence *Creative Commons* attribution / pas d'utilisation commerciale / pas de modification 4.0 international



Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2019
Bibliothèque Robert de Sorbon, Campus Croix-Rouge
Avenue François-Mauriac, CS 40019, 51726 Reims Cedex
www.univ-reims.fr/epure

From Tralee to Times Square: Bringing Irish folk theatre to Broadway



DR DAITHÍ KEARNEY 
Dundalk Institute of Technology, Ireland

Introduction



America has been a significant (market)place for Irish traditional music throughout the twentieth century to the present. From the early recordings of Michael Coleman and his contemporaries in the 1920s through the emergence of the Clancy Brothers in the 1960s to the leading roles of Michael Flatley and Jean Butler in the 1994 production *Riverdance*, musical developments on both sides of the Atlantic have been interlinked and two-directional.¹ The Irish American audience continues to be an important market for touring Irish performers with significant Irish music festivals in America presenting many leading Irish music groups each year.

In this paper, I focus on a tour by an Irish folk theatre group in the 1970s that entered spaces beyond the normal diasporic spaces but appealed primarily to an Irish American audience in spaces of popular culture. In 1976 a group of amateur musicians, singers and dancers travelled from Co. Kerry in the south west of Ireland to America where, amongst other venues, they performed at the Palace Theatre, Times Square, Broadway. The production by Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, entitled *Siamsa* (pronounced Shee-am-sa), presented aspects of Irish rural life in the early twentieth century through music, song, dance and mime. Through archival research focusing on newspapers in tandem with oral

1. Paul F. Wells and Sally K. Sommers-Smith, "Irish Music and Musicians in the United States: An Introduction", *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 4 (4), 2010, DOI: [10.1017/S1752196310000349](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752196310000349), p. 395-400.

histories developed from the memories of some of those involved in the tour, I provide insights on the cultural distance between Ireland and the USA in the 1970s despite the existence of a large Irish diaspora. In particular I critique the representations of Irishness presented and the degree of acceptability of these to both Irish and American audiences. Furthermore, the reflections of cast members, particularly the children, highlight the differences in popular culture in terms of everyday life experiences and celebrity culture.

A growing body of literature informs a critical reflection of the work of Siamsa Tíre and in particular the 1976 tour to America, and highlights the importance of the company in understanding music, tourism and globalisation in Ireland. There has been an increase in research on Siamsa Tíre in recent years, much of which focuses on dance. Catherine Foley, whose PhD research focused on the dance traditions of North Kerry, included a chapter on Siamsa Tíre in her book on Irish dance traditions.² Sharon Phelan, who also examined traditional dance practices of this area in her PhD, also included Siamsa Tíre in her book, *Dance in Ireland*.³ While Helen Brennan's history of Irish dance makes barely passing reference to Siamsa Tíre,⁴ Mulrooney,⁵ Wulff⁶ and Shapiro's⁷ engagement with the debates surrounding dance in Ireland is much more aware of the role and work of the company and the traditions and contemporary practice from which it draws inspiration. Kearney has examined the company from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, folklore and folklorisation, and tourism.⁸ While much of this work focuses on Siamsa Tíre as an expression of folk or traditional culture, it is worth noting that Diane Theodores, dance critic with the *Irish Times*, interpreted Siamsa Tíre as being at the cutting edge of Irish dance theatre, developing something new.⁹ The process of heritagisation and the development of a thriving tourism sector in the south west of Ireland, through which large audiences were attracted to

2. Catherine Foley, "Irish Traditional Step Dancing in North Kerry: A Contextual and Structural Analysis", unpublished PhD thesis, London, Laban Centre for Movement and Dance at Goldsmith's College. Catherine Foley, *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History*, London, Routledge, 2013.
3. Sharon Phelan, *Dance in Ireland: Steps, Stages and Stories*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2014.
4. Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance*, Dingle, Brandon, 1999.
5. Deirdre Mulrooney, *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History Of Dance And Physical Theatre in Ireland*, Dublin, Liffey, 2006.
6. Helena Wulff, *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland*, vol. 1. Oxford, New York, Bergahn, 2007.
7. Sherry Shapiro (ed.), *Dance in a World of Change: Reflections on Globalization and Cultural Difference*, Leeds, Human Kinetics, 2008.
8. Daithí Kearney, "The evolution of Irish folk theatre", in *Sharing Cultures – Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Intangible Heritage*, Lisbon, Green Lines Institute, 2013a, <https://eprints.dkit.ie/338> (last accessed 8/11/2020); Daithí Kearney, "Revisiting Samhain: Two Directions on a Theme", in Conor Caldwell & Eamon Byers (eds.), *New Crops, Old Fields: Reimagining Irish Folklore*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2006, <https://eprints.dkit.ie/614> (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 99-124; Daithí Kearney, "Reliving Island Life: Staging Stories of the Basket Islands", *Estudios Irlandeses* 12 (2), 2017, DOI: 10.24162/EI2017-7587, p. 73-90.
9. Diane Theodores, "A dance critic in Ireland", *Dance Chronicle*, 19 (2), 1996, DOI: 10.1080/01472529608569241, p. 191-211.

view performances by the company, also place Siamsa Tíre at the forefront of Irish popular culture in Ireland in the 1970s. Furthermore, their performances on Broadway and other large theatres at a time when many ethnic folk dance troupes were also entering these spaces, locate the company in popular culture in America at the same time.¹⁰ The work of Ruth Barton¹¹ and Diane Negra¹² on Irish cinema is also informative, particularly in relation to the similarity of themes and tropes presented and their reception in America. Indeed Barton notes that ‘the rural past has dominated representations of Irish history’¹³ while Negra comments on the types of American audiences that typically consume Irish related commodities.¹⁴ Despite being a theatre company, Siamsa Tíre is largely absent from the discourse on Irish theatre and comparisons with some other theatre companies, such as the Abbey Theatre herein, are of only limited value.

The development of scholarly enquiry into the *Riverdance* phenomenon¹⁵ provides relevant themes and further underlines the importance of critically examining Siamsa Tíre in the context of popular culture, for “Siamsa Tíre can be said to have played an important indirect role in the genesis of *Riverdance*”¹⁶ and, in the 1970s was challenging notions or constructions of Irish identity in music in American popular culture. The study of the 1976 tour by Siamsa Tíre to America can present perspectives on the circulation of culture between Ireland and America and the impact that this had on Irish traditional music, song, dance and theatre.

10. Articles in Chicago newspapers indicated that Mayor Daly, who held a reception for the cast of Siamsa in Chicago, also entertained Mexican and Polish groups and delegates on the same day. See also Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power*, Middletown (CT), Wesleyan U.P., 2002.
11. Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema*, London, Routledge, 2004.
12. Diane Negra (ed.), *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Pop Culture*, Durham, Duke U.P., 2006.
13. R. Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 131.
14. D. Negra, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
15. Anthony McCann and Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, “Riverdance—The Show by John McColgan, Michael Flatley, Mary Morrow; Lord of the Dance by John Reid, Michael Flatley, Bill Tennant, David Mallet, Andy Picheta”, *Ethnomusicology*, 46 (2), 2002, DOI: 10.2307/852800, p. 366-369; Adrian Scahill, “Riverdance: Representing Irish Traditional Music”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 13 (2), 2009, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25660880> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 70-76; Harry White, “Riverdance: Irish Identity and the Musical Artwork”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 13 (2), 2009, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25660879> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 63-69; James Flannery, “The Music of Riverdance”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 13 (2), 2009, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25660878> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 56-63; Frank Hall, “Ceol Traidisiúnta: Traditional Music: Your Mr. Joyce Is a Fine Man, but Have You Seen ‘Riverdance?’”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 1 (3), 1997, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557432> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 134-142; Natasha Casey, “Riverdance: The Importance of Being Irish American”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 6 (4), 2002, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557823> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 9-25.
16. Barra Ó Cinnéide, *Riverdance: The Phenomenon*, Dublin, Blackhall, 2002, p. 51; Bill Whelan, interview with author, Dublin, 9 August 2017; See also H. Wulff, *op. cit.*, 2007, p. 110.

Background and Context

Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, developed from local initiatives in North Kerry in the south west of Ireland during the 1960s. Led by a young priest, Fr Pat Ahern (b.1935) from Moyvane, Co. Kerry, who later became the first Artistic Director of the Company, the group brought together the talents of a community of musicians, singers and dancers to perform shows inspired by folk culture and customs in their native Kerry. Buoyed by subsequent success in Dublin, where observers compared them to the Moysiev Dance Company, they received support in particular from stakeholders in the growing tourism sector and began a series of summer performances in Co. Kerry in 1968, which continue to the present.¹⁷ In 1972, Ahern and architect Patrick O'Sullivan, wrote a document entitled *Plan for the Fostering of Irish Folk Theatre*,¹⁸ which laid out plans for a dedicated theatre building to be located in the town of Tralee, two training centres located in the north and west of the county, and a professional cast, amongst other things. This document led to the foundation of Siamsa Tíre in 1974 and paved the way for the tour to America in September 1976. Echoing the philosophy of Johan Von Herder (1744-1803) espousing the use of local-as-national,¹⁹ Siamsa Tíre presented a local folk culture under the banner of The National Folk Theatre of Ireland.

It is widely considered that Irish traditional music went through a period of revival from the 1950s to the 1970s.²⁰ The perceived revival was based on a number of factors including the growth of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ), an organisation founded in 1951 to encourage participation in Irish traditional music, song and dance and which established a network of competitions and branches that facilitated teaching.²¹ The growth of cultural tourism in the west of Ireland is also an important factor.²² In many instances, new and often urban contexts for the performance of and participation in Irish traditional music were created that were removed from the rural homesteads of the early twentieth century.²³

17. D. Kearney, *op. cit.*, 2013a. Daithí Kearney, "Siamsa Tíre: The National Folk Theatre of Ireland", in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, Dublin, UCD Press, 2013b, p. 933-934. C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013.
18. Pat Ahern & Patrick O'Sullivan and Partners, Architects, *A Plan for Fostering the Growth of Traditional Irish Folk Culture*, Unpublished, 1972.
19. Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*, Madison, Wisconsin U.P., 1997.
20. Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, *A Short History of Irish Traditional Music*, Dublin, O'Brien, 2017.
21. Edward O. Henry, "Institutions for the promotion of indigenous music: the case for Ireland's Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann", *Ethnomusicology*, 33 (1), 1989, DOI: 10.2307/852170, p. 67-95; Rachel C. Fleming "Resisting cultural standardization: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and the revitalization of traditional music in Ireland", *Journal of Folklore Research*, 41 (2), 2004, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3814592> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 227-257.
22. Geraldine Cotter, *Transforming Tradition: Irish Traditional Music in Ennis, County Clare 1950-1980*, Ennis, Self-published, 2016, p. 122-133; Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, *Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2016, p. 195.
23. Daithí Kearney, "(Re)locating Irish traditional music: Urbanising rural traditions", *Chimera*, 22, 2007, p. 181-196.

It is these rural settings, recognised by Ahern as being in danger of disappearing, that Siamsa Tíre sought to represent on stage. The “revival” arguably placed aspects of Irish traditional music in the realm of popular culture through the development of new performance contexts, the success of Seán Ó Riada’s film soundtrack for *Mise Éire*, and the emergence of fusion bands such as the Horslips.²⁴

In the context of the circulation of popular culture between Ireland and the USA, the American-based Irish group the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem are also significant.²⁵ Motherway asserts: “By adapting the performance practice of the American Folk Movement, the Clancy Brothers presented a form of global conjuncture with Irish politics and international minority rights”.²⁶ The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem had a significant influence on the evolution of Irish traditional music and song in Ireland, and in particular groups such as The Dubliners, who emerged from an urban traditional music scene to achieve chart success. In Tralee, the local community was engaging in new musical forms and showbands were popular.²⁷ As a theatre company doing something new with old traditions, Siamsa Tíre was embarking on a very different cultural mission that was no less connected to a globalised network. Ahern is engaged in glocalisation²⁸ through which he utilises local cultural heritage to respond to global interest in cultural difference. Rather than a rejection of globalising trends, Siamsa Tíre is part of a culture that is increasingly aware of its value in a global world and begins to appreciate what it can contribute to a global world and, in doing so, engages audiences through commercial activity including tourism and touring.

The 1960s was also a key period in the development of cultural tourism in Ireland with increasing numbers of American tourists visiting Ireland.²⁹ Tourism connected Ireland and the USA in a new way, almost reversing the direction of cultural influences caused by emigration. However, while Irish people still emigrated from Ireland to settle in America, tourism was largely one-way from America to Ireland during this period. The production *Siamsa* was developed from shorter productions in

24. Scott Reiss, “Tradition and Imaginary: Irish Traditional Music and the Celtic Phenomenon” in Martin Stokes & Philip Bohlman (eds.), *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*, New York, Scarecrow, 2003, p. 145-170, p. 153.
25. John Glatt, *The Chieftains: The Authorized Biography*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1997, p. 53; Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, *Flowing Tides: History and Memory in an Irish Soundscape*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2016, p. 192.
26. Susan Motherway, *The Globalisation of Irish Traditional Song Performance*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 9.
27. In a national context, “By 1965, showbands dominated the live music scene with hundreds criss-crossing the country to fill engagements in thousands of rural and urban ballrooms”. Noel McLaughlin & Martin McLoone, *Rock and popular music in Ireland: before and after U2*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2012, p. 22.
28. Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity”, *Global Modernities*, 2, 1995, DOI: [10.4135/9781446250563.n2](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446250563.n2), p. 25-45.
29. G. Cotter, *op. cit.*, p. 122-133.

1960s that were developed for stage and television and by 1976 was already an integral part of the local tourism product in Kerry,³⁰ attracting large audiences including Americans who sought a romanticised representation of “home”.

The performances of *Siamsa Tíre* are shaped by both the cultural traditions inherited by the cast and their response to the world of cultural change in which they are living. There is a process of retraditionalisation, outlined by Diarmuid Ó Giolláin as symbolically or practically strengthening “a sense of identity or cultural specificity weakened by the disenchantment of modernity [...] to cater for segments of the market particularly favourable to traditional products”.³¹ In its presentation of Irish folk culture in America during the 1976 tour, *Siamsa Tíre*, operates at the borderline. The company presents an innovative art form that responds to its present with recourse to the past at a critical juncture in Irish history being shaped by globalisation and does so to foreign audiences seeking out Irish culture. As Bhabha notes,

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.³²

Siamsa challenges the decline of Irish rural folk culture in the face of globalisation by bringing it to the global stage in an act of translation and insurgency that, for the cast of the production, is immediately relevant to their everyday lives.

There is a danger in bringing *Siamsa* to America that the audiences and critics will reshape the representation of culture by the company. Reflecting on the experience of the Abbey Theatre in America, John Harrington states:

As in many other cultural, political, and economic matters, America has been a favoured trade partner with Ireland in theatre. For many, the history of transatlantic cultural commerce represents Irish artists

30. Catherine E. Foley, “Cultural Tourism, Meitheal, and Re-presentation of Heritage: Traditional Step Dancing and *Siamsa Tíre*, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland”, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 47, 2015, DOI: [10.5921/yeartradmusi.47.2015.0141](https://doi.org/10.5921/yeartradmusi.47.2015.0141), p. 141-160.
31. Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, “The national and the local – practices of de- and re-traditionalization”, *FF Networks*, 28, 2005, p. 10-13, p. 16-18.
32. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 10.

and America hosts at their mercenary worst: Irish performance standards eroded by the influence of American ‘entertainment’, and American commodification of an artistic heritage.³³

An important aspect of the *Siamsa* production was that it was not developed specifically for an American audience nor changed for performances in America. For example, McCarthy points to the success over the preceding decade of *Fiddler on the Roof*,³⁴ which was also concerned with an ethnic group with explicit references to tradition and change.³⁵ *Siamsa* remains the same as that which was developed and performed in Kerry over the preceding decade and American audiences witnessed the same production as audiences in Ireland. Indeed Nicky McAuliffe told me that it did not matter whether it was Broadway or Abbeydorney, a small rural village in Co. Kerry, they did their thing and probably never realised how truly significant it was.³⁶ There is a desire amongst both the promoters for a sense of authenticity in the product they will present alongside a consciousness of the commodification of culture and the market demand in larger American theatres. In many ways, the promoters’ desires and the subsequent response of audiences and critics may be read through what Aileen Dillane interprets as *ersatz* nostalgia based on the work of Arjun Appadurai.³⁷ What the American audiences for *Siamsa* seek and respond to is “nostalgia without memory”,³⁸ but for the cast, many have immediate experience of the lifestyle and culture that they are performing on stage.

Tours by Irish groups to the USA helped attract some of these tourists to Ireland and are, to some extent, a counterbalance to the influx of American tourists to Ireland. While *Siamsa Tíre* sought to preserve the traditions of their locality, they were doing so by connecting with a global audience and in the context of a broader cultural revival and

33. John P. Harrington, “The Abbey in America: The Real Thing”, in Nicholas Grene & Chris Morash (eds.), *Irish Theatre on Tour*, Dublin, Carysfort, 2005, p. 35-50, p. 35.
34. Joseph Stein, Aleichem Sholem, Jerry Bock & Harnick Sheldon, *Fiddler on the Roof*, Crown, 1964.
35. *Fiddler on the Roof* was revived on Broadway in December 1976, and ran for 176 performances at the Winter Garden Theatre. Mark Slobin & Richard Spottswood, “David Medoff: A Case Study in Interethnic Popular Culture”, *American Music*, 3 (3), 1985, DOI: [10.2307/3051470](https://doi.org/10.2307/3051470), p. 261-276, provide further insights into the negotiation of Jewish identity on the American stage. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett also engages with the representation of Jewish culture in America which provides interesting comparison for this study.
36. Interview, Nicky McAuliffe and Michael O’Shea, Tralee, 16 May 2016.
37. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, Minnesota U.P., 1995. Moving beyond Appadurai’s theorisation of consuming nostalgia in order to experience nostalgia or recover what you never had in the first place, themes of rural life in *Siamsa* appeared to have resonated with audiences from a range of ethnic audiences in urban America. While the media did focus on Irish aspects of the performance, with reference to authenticity, nostalgia and the complexity of competing or unexpected representations of Irishness, they are appreciated and critiqued in relation to ethnic performing groups from other cultures. For a more recent examination of authenticity and representation in Irish traditional music in America see Aileen Dillane, “Nostalgic Songlines and the Performance of Irish Identity”, *Bealoideas: The Journal Of The Folklore Of Ireland Society*, 81, 2013, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24862815> (last accessed 5/11/20), p. 19-36.
38. A. Appadurai, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 30.

commodification of traditional music. The development of Siamsa Tíre is contemporaneous with the development of *Seisiún*³⁹ and *Scoraíocht*⁴⁰ performances by CCÉ, which Ahern, in turn, influenced. Cotter recognises the development of *seisiún* as a “response to a growth in tourism in the region”.⁴¹ Writing about County Clare, she notes “Shannon Airport, Shannon Development 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”.⁴² Brendan O’Regan was a crucial figure in the early success of Siamsa Tíre and North Kerry was located in the same economic region as County Clare, which at that time was developing Bunratty Castle and Folk Park amongst other attractions.⁴³ There is a symbiotic relationship between the growth of Shannon Airport and an increase in visitor numbers and the development of cultural initiatives in the region.⁴⁴ While experiencing success in Ireland, it was also important for the flow of cultural displays to reach audiences in the USA, necessitating the touring of Irish groups to America. Motherway notes that: “From the 1970s onwards, artists based at home addressed a global audience that was supported by the diaspora and enabled by the communications revolution”.⁴⁵ New contexts for Irish traditional music were also developed amongst diasporic communities, particularly in England and America.⁴⁶ Indeed CCÉ embarked on their first tour of the USA in 1972, for which Ahern was the producer, although he did not travel with the group. Dancer Patricia Hanafin also travelled on a subsequent tour to the USA with the organisation, as did Siamsa musicians Nicky and Anne McAulliffe.⁴⁷

Commenting on the “rise and rise of traditional music, both as living practice and commercial enterprise, from the volunteerism of *Comhaltas*

39. *Seisiún* refer in this instance to a series of staged performances of Irish traditional music, song and dance, usually taking place during the summer months, by local groups affiliated to the national organisation Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann.
40. *Scoraíocht* was a form of short stage show on a theme that incorporated Irish traditional music, song a dance with a simple theme and reference to aspects of Irish life or local heritage.
41. G. Cotter, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 122-133.
44. Brian Callanan, *Ireland’s Shannon story: leaders, visions, and networks: a case study of local and regional development*, Irish Academic Press, 2000.
45. S. Motherway, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 9.
46. Susan Gedutis, *See You at the Hall: Boston’s Golden Era of Irish Music and Dance*, Boston (MA), Northeastern U.P., 2004; Reg Hall, *Irish Music and Dance in London 1870-1970*, unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Sussex, 1994; Mick Moloney, “Ceol traidisiúnta: Traditional Music: Irish Dance Bands in America”, *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 2 (3), 1998, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20557537> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 127-137; Sean Williams, “Irish Music Revivals Through Generations of Diaspora”, in Caroline Bithell & Juniper Hill (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2014, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.024, p. 598-617.
47. It is worth noting that many more members of Siamsa Tíre would participate in national and international tours with CCÉ in subsequent decades and, at the time of the tour by Siamsa Tíre to America, Labhrás Ó Murchú, Árd Stiurtheoir (Director General) of CCÉ was on the board of Siamsa Tíre.

Ceolóirí Éireann in the early 1950s through to the phenomenal success and influence of traditional music's contemporary derivatives, notably *Riverdance* in the 1990s", Fitzgerald and O'Flynn note "cultural developments in any milieu are linked to the social, economic and political factors that obtain in that period".⁴⁸ Changes in Irish political policy and trade meant Irish society was increasingly influenced by international factors during this period. Ó hAlmhuráin states, "Audacious consumerism, American popular music, and countercultural politics were key vectors of global cultural flows in the 1960s and 1970s".⁴⁹ Ahern's 1972 plan explicitly makes reference to joining the EEC and the challenge presented to the preservation of a distinctive Irish folk culture. The plan and subsequent tour take place at a moment in time when the commodification of Irish culture, and Irish traditional music more particularly, is being realised in a variety of contexts. It is in the 1970s that ensembles or "supergroups" such as The Chieftains, The Bothy Band, Dé Dannan and Planxty became commercially successful. These groups brought their music to and influenced audiences all over the world.⁵⁰ The Chieftains, formed in 1965, did not become full time professionals until 1975, having first toured America in 1972.⁵¹ While The Chieftains made an impact in terms of the soundscape of Irish traditional music in Ireland and internationally through concert performances, the medium of theatre brought *Siamsa Tíre* to a different audience with a broader cultural message. Neither vaudeville nor an instrumental "supergroup", the performances by *Siamsa Tíre* in the USA in the 1970s both challenged and reinforced some stereotypical notions of Irish identity, particularly in the context of music and song, by introducing audiences to less popular and more localised aspects of Irish cultural traditions through the medium of theatre.

Many national and ethnic identities were explicitly presented on the American stage in the 1970s with a focus on dance.⁵² The importance of dance for understanding the circulation of popular culture between Ireland and the USA is highlighted by Moloney who states: "Irish step dancing has, for over a century, been one of the most visible aspects of Irish culture in Ireland and one of the most consciously projected forms of ethnic cultural identity among the Irish in America".⁵³ Contemplating the role of folk dance companies in the promotion of nationalism or national identities, Shay writes: "The value of utilizing folk dance for the representation of an entire nation emanates from the common public view

48. Mark Fitzgerald & John O'Flynn, *Music and identity in Ireland and beyond*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 12.

49. G. Ó hAlmhuráin, *op. cit.*, 2016, p. 189.

50. S. Williams, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 611.

51. John Glatt, *The Chieftains: The Authorized Biography*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 83; Bill Meek, *Paddy Moloney and the Chieftains*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1987.

52. A. Shay, *op. cit.*, 2002.

53. Mick Moloney, Jaime Morrison & Colin Quigley (eds.), *Close to the Floor: Irish Dance from the Boreen to Broadway*, Madison, Wisconsin U.P., 2009, p. 1.

that these dances emerge from some primordial source of the nation's purest and most authentic values, and that folk dances, music, and costumes are timeless and date from some prehistoric period".⁵⁴ The dance forms used by Siamsa Tíre in their performances come from the folk traditions and were used for entertainment in local social contexts. Writing in the 1950s, Walter Terry states:

The bright and prideful dances of Spain, the physically graceful and spiritually profound symbolisms of India's classical dance, the movement poetry of Japan and many other forms of national dance arts have enriched our stages. They are not international forms, such as the classical ballet; not contemporary forms, such as modern dance; not the fruit of individual genius, although the individual may and does contribute to their vocabularies of action. These are ethnic dances created over the centuries or millennia by a race, by a people, and they are best divided into two parts, although the two frequently overlap: folk dances, which are designed primarily for participation, and ethnologic dances, art dances built for performing by the highly gifted in theaters, in temples, in cabarets.⁵⁵

Although Siamsa Tíre presented much more than dance, the local dance traditions of North Kerry are a key component of the company's production. Consideration must also be given to the music and song, as well as the development of simple narratives on stage. In the context of this article, the story of the tour and the memories of the cast also shed light on the circulation of culture between Ireland and the USA during the 1970s.

Constructing the Story

My methodology for this research has involved the collection of oral histories through meetings and interviews with cast members and others involved at the time. These inform the interpretation of archival and newspaper research, aided by the personal archive of director Pat Ahern. Dermot McCarthy, who collaborated with Ahern on the organisation of the tour, also kept materials including a report to the board written immediately preceding the tour.⁵⁶ The presence of *Irish Independent* journalist Desmond Rushe on the tour ensures that there is much extant media coverage in Irish newspaper sources as regular reports were published in the

54. A. Shay, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 6.

55. Walter Terry, *The dance in America*, New York, Harper & Row, 1956, p. 187.

56. Dermot McCarthy, *Siamsa U.S. Tour: Report by Tour Co-Ordinator*, unpublished Report, 10 September 1976.

Irish Independent during the period of the tour, some of which referred to reviews in American newspapers, to which I have also turned. My positionality in the context of this research is important. While not born at the time of the tour, I became part of the company in the early 1990s. Even prior to that, my dance teacher was Patricia Hanafin, the choreographer for the original production; my paternal grandfather came from the same village, Moyvane, as Ahern; I learned from, performed with and was directed by various members of that cast. Their memories are part of a narrative that I heard retold in my youth and which inform a critical reflection of the tour in the context of the circulation and understanding of popular culture between Ireland and the USA in the 1970s.

The study of *Siamsa Tíre* moves beyond traditional scholarly research into Irish traditional music and beyond the paradigms of ethnomusicology to address in part concerns and calls expressed by musicologists Nicholas Cook⁵⁷ and Harry White⁵⁸ who promote a reception history of Irish traditional music to augment the existing scholarship. Cook emphasises the inclusivity of a reception based approach, which underpins part of this research, while I also consider the substance of the work itself. However, moving beyond musicological and ethnomusicological approaches, I also engage with ethnochoreology.⁵⁹ Recognising that “Dance is a big part of what *Siamsa Tíre* does”, Artistic Director Jonathon Kelliher also notes that “dance is not our main thing” with music and song also part of the ethos.⁶⁰ For Kelliher, “showing off the dance, or the song, is secondary to getting into the story”.⁶¹ *Siamsa Tíre* is a theatre company and this research also draws upon theatre studies, particularly the representations of Irishness in Irish theatre and the reception of Irish theatre abroad. My examination of *Siamsa Tíre* in a global rather than Irish context may address a concern raised by White, taking the research beyond the “aggressive strain of internal debate as to the very nature of traditional music itself” and place it in a wider context “so that the cultural reception of traditional music in Ireland might begin to acknowledge its strong correlative status in relation to ethnic projects elsewhere”.⁶² To this end, I critique *Siamsa* in the context of other folk dance and folk theatre companies and critically assess the creative product and reception thereof by international audiences in comparison with similar modes of entertainment from other cultures.

57. Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1998, DOI: 10.1093/actrade/9780192853820.001.0001.

58. Harry White, “The Invention of Ethnicity: Traditional Music and the Modulations of Irish Culture”, *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, p. 373-385.

59. C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 4.

60. Cited in D. Mulrooney, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 247, 254.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 252.

62. H. White, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 282.

Adding an additional layer of understanding, similar to ethnomusicologist Timothy Cooley's examination of festivals,⁶³ I move beyond the content of the staged presentations and the reception as presented in media reports, to examine the frame, considering in particular the actions and experiences of the community that created and performed these presentations. As Mick Moloney concludes in his study of Irish musicians on vaudeville, the life stories of the performers provide valuable insights into both the development of theatre and social history.⁶⁴ While the production represents aspects of Irish folk culture presented to an American audience, the experiences of the cast reflect differences in culture between Ireland and the USA at that point in time. While there is an appreciation of how processes of globalisation and American culture were influencing social and cultural change in Ireland, America is not "the puppeteer of a world system of images", rather "one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes".⁶⁵ Informed by Homi K. Bhabha's critical engagement with the location of culture,⁶⁶ the experiences of the cast are contrasted with the cultural expectations of a diaspora whose imagination of Irishness, with an embedded quest for authenticity, differs to that which is presented in *Siamsa*. As Williams writes, for the diaspora any sense of authenticity in Irishness is a moving target, "coloured by generational interests, needs and priorities".⁶⁷ This paper engages with that understanding and quest through a critique of cultural circulation between Ireland and the US and an examination of the reception of the performance of Irish folk culture.

From Ballymac to Broadway

Siamsóirí na Ríochta were a theatre group formed in Kerry in the mid-1960s. They performed regularly in Tralee and also on occasion in Dublin, where they performed in the Peacock and Abbey Theatre, through which they came to the attention of a number of important supporters. Performing in Dublin provided them with experiences beyond the local and highlighted their potential to engage audiences outside of Kerry. It also brought the amateur cast into a professional world of theatre. Dancer Jimmy Smith, at the time a barber in Tralee, remembers travelling to Dublin for six weeks and "rehearsing like a professional company".⁶⁸ Similarly, singer Mary Deady wrote at the time, "We enjoyed meeting

63. Timothy J. Cooley, "Folk Festival as Modern Ritual in the Polish Tatra Mountains", *The World of Music*, 41 (3), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41699291> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 31-55.

64. Mick Moloney, *Irish Music on the American Stage*, Cork, University College, 1993.

65. A. Appadurai, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 31.

66. H. K. Bhabha, *op. cit.*, 1994.

67. S. Williams, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 598.

68. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

people like Martin Dempsey and Máire Ní Néill. It was quite an experience to work with professionals. The Siamsóirí provided the singing and dancing. We mimed the scenes while the Abbey actors played the speaking roles”.⁶⁹ As well as encountering professional performers, the group also gained the attention of audiences, which contained stakeholders who had interests in supporting the development of the company. With the support of his Bishop, Éamonn Casey, Pat Ahern developed a plan for the development of a national folk theatre. One of the results of this was the founding of a National Folk Theatre Company, Siamsa Tíre, in 1974. Shortly afterwards they toured Germany where they received the European Folk Art Award in 1975.⁷⁰

As a National Folk Theatre, the next step was for Siamsa Tíre to perform more on international stages. Upon hearing about an invitation extended from the American Revolution Bi-centennial Administration to the Irish Government to select Irish groups to participate in the anniversary, Siamsa Tíre made an approach to the Cultural Relations Committee of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs in the autumn of 1975. Mr Con Howard, Secretary of the Committee, advised Fr Dermod McCarthy that an application for funding would be enhanced if accompanied by a schedule of proposed dates and venues for performances. Both Pat Ahern and Dermod McCarthy sought out theatrical promoters in the USA and, on the advice of the Assistant Director of the International Theatre Institute of the United States, chose the Brannigan-Eisler Performing Arts International.

Tour co-coordinator Dermod McCarthy met with Messrs Brannigan and Eisler in New York and organised for them to see the RADHARC film *Bímís ag Rince*,⁷¹ which documented the building of Teach Siamsa in Finuge and the founding of the National Folk Theatre. While they agreed to take on the production upon seeing the documentary and meeting McCarthy, they first wished to come to Ireland to experience and witness what Siamsa Tíre was. During that trip, they had the opportunity to attend a performance of the production and were also brought to see the training centres at Finuge and Carraig,⁷² putting the production in the context of a larger cultural movement.

By 1976 the cast of *Siamsa* was well established and consistent. They were drawn from a relatively small geographical spread and a number of

69. Máire Ní Dhaoda, “Leathanach na nÓg”, *Treoir*, 2 (3), 1970, p. 4.

70. C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 206.

71. Radharc, Documentary, *Bímís ag Rince – Siamsa Tíre*, first broadcast on RTÉ, 30/03/1975.

72. As part of the 1972 plan for the development of folk theatre, Ahern proposed a number of training centres modelled on traditional farm houses in the region. The first of these was opened in 1974 in Finuge, a small village in north Kerry between the towns of Tralee and Listowel. The second, opened a short time later, was located in the townland of Carraig in the west Kerry Gaeltacht, an area where the Irish language is the primary language.

the cast were related to each other. Many of them had experience of performing beyond the company but they remained amateurs with a variety of professions outside of music and performance. For some, like Mike Shea and Jimmy Smith, they were leaving wives at home with young children. Seán Ahern had to organise his farm: “People thought I was mad but I got a farm manager in and he managed the cows and things for me. And my father was alive at that time”.⁷³ While performing in the evenings in Tralee was manageable, travelling to America for a month would prove to be a greater challenge. However, it is the presence of this particular community cast that adds to the sense of authenticity of Siamsa Tíre.

One of the biggest challenges facing the company was the ability to sell to American audiences. McCarthy remembers the feeling that at that time Irish people in America were not renowned for attending the theatre.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Irish themed performances were not unknown and *The Plough and the Stars* was produced by the Abbey Theatre at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1976 while the Chieftains also performed at Carnegie Hall in 1976. The nature of the American tour by Siamsa Tíre required promotion and entrepreneurship including the creation of promotional material and album.⁷⁵ It also required significant support from other stakeholders. In his report to the board of Siamsa Tíre ahead of the tour, 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.⁷⁶

McCarthy’s report highlights the importance of planning for a future beyond the tour but also highlights the infancy of Siamsa Tíre as a company in a professional arts context. A series of photographs were taken in the Ash Theatre on 16 January 1976 and journalist Frank Delaney wrote a text for a brochure. Delaney waived his fee and Brian Fox of Bord Fáilte provided financial support for the design costs of the brochure, designed by Willie Van Veizen. Four major Irish companies – Shannon Development, Aer Lingus, the Irish Tourist Board in North America, and Irish Distillers – agreed to take full page advertisements in the book. The LP, *SIAMSA*, was recorded at Teach Siamsa, Finuge from the 7-9 May 1976 and subsequently released on the REX label, a subsidiary of the Decca Corporation.

73. Interview, Listowel, 17 May 2016.

74. Interview, Dublin, 22 April 2016.

75. *Siamsa* Cast Recording. Rex Records LP#SPR-1016.

76. D. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, 1976, p. 2.

It was voted ‘Record of the Week’ on RTÉ during the week commencing 30 August 1976 and was circulated in the USA as part of the promotion for the tour. Cast member Catherine Spangler remembers that the company sold out of LPs during the American tour and more had to be pressed in America.⁷⁷

A number of events helped increase the profile of the tour at home. The American Ambassador, Walter Curley, and Cultural Officer Joseph Keane, held a reception at the US Embassy in Dublin on 27 July 1976 where details of the tour were publically announced and the LP and brochure launched. The reception was featured in both Irish and American newspapers. *Irish Independent* journalist Desmond Rushe joined the tour, his expenses covered as part of the tour’s budget. Throughout the tour he wrote regular articles for publication in Ireland. The articles helped develop a sense of excitement about the tour in Tralee at a time when access to telephones was limited and letters took some days to reach their destination.

Despite all of the planning and efforts of all involved, there were further challenges for Siamsa Tíre. At one point, McCarthy received a message from America indicating that the tour was to be cancelled due to poor advance ticket sales. McCarthy and Ahern both engaged directly in promoting the tour, in part by travelling to America and performing in a number of spaces where they met with the diaspora. Furthermore, the Minister for the Gaeltacht Tom O’Donnell was pivotal in securing funding for the tour when difficulties arose. In America, Siamsa Tíre successfully attracted an audience of diverse ethnic backgrounds and did not depend on the Irish diaspora, which was crucial to the tour’s success. The challenge of engaging with the Irish diaspora was not helped by the divided nature of this community and the complexity of Irish American identities and politics. The Irish diaspora in America consists of different generations whose memories, real or inherited, differed. As Rushe wrote in the *Irish Independent*:

Compared with the Italians, the Poles, the Germans and others, the lack of ethnic identity on the part of the Irish is incredible. Everywhere one goes – or almost everywhere – one hears of divisions, of jealousies, of rival organisations scoring off one another and of individuals more interested in boosting their egos or feathering their nests than in giving practical expression to their alleged interest in Ireland.⁷⁸

77. Interview, Tralee, 27 January 2017.

78. Des Rushe, ‘Incredible Lack of Ethnic Identity’, *Irish Independent*, 28 September 1976.

Rushe highlights divisions amongst an Irish diaspora in America that may not have been visible to people in Ireland but are crucial to understanding the circulation of culture between the two countries and the reception of Siamsa Tíre in the US.

To assist the promotion of the tour in the US, Siamsa Tíre enlisted the services of American based publicist Daniel Langan. He arranged a number of opportunities in the various cities the cast performed in. He remembers:

The tour began in Chicago where an appearance by three cast members on the highly regarded Studs Terkel program carried by the National Public Radio network brought Siamsa to the attention of listeners throughout the nation and more importantly to the cities the troupe would visit. It also had immediate results with people from Milwaukee Wisconsin and the Twin Cities of Minnesota (Minneapolis and St. Paul) who went to Chicago to attend performances.⁷⁹

With all of this effort behind the scenes to get the company to America and sell tickets for the performances, the focus turned to the show itself.

On Stage – Dance, Song, Music and Mime

The initial material for the performances was developed from memories of the founding artistic director, Pat Ahern, which involved various tasks and social aspects common in rural north Kerry in the early twentieth century. A fiddle player himself with a strong interest in the Irish song tradition, Ahern combined music, song and dance with theatricalised representations of Irish rural life. The programme informs us that the production follows the cycle of the year and there is a timelessness that suggests the everyday nature of many of the activities including feeding the animals and making the butter. There is an education value for those not familiar with Irish life and the folkways and customs of a generation who are now entering old age. The show included various scenes that represented the activities of Irish rural life in the early twentieth century. Characters endeavour to milk a cow and make butter in a churn, dance with daisy trains and in imitation of chickens. The traditions of Christmas such as the lighting of the Christmas candle and the wren boys featured. It is from the memories of people such as Pat Ahern that scenes and dances

79. Personal correspondence, 23 June 2016.

using flails, recalling the visit of the shoemaker and the skills of thatching and making rope were initially developed. In this production, these activities are seamlessly interwoven as vignettes in a continuously moving performance that included music, song, dance, mime and comedy.

The thatched cottage was a central symbol in *Siamsa* and for Siamsa Tíre more generally and a thatched cottage was the main component of the set. It was modelled on the typical thatched cottage that would have been a familiar sight in the Irish landscape in the nineteenth century and features in iconic art from the early twentieth century by artists such as Paul Henry. As geographer Catherine Nash notes, “the isolated rural cottage represented the realization, both in the physical fabric of the landscape and in the moral and spiritual domain, of the ideal form of Irish society. Its depiction in Irish landscape painting participated in the construction of Irish identity and the gender identities on which it relied. Representation of landscape in early twentieth-century Ireland was coded with meaning”.⁸⁰ There are semblances of “the myth of the West”, a representation of a rural Ireland promoted by writers such as Yeats and Synge and found in the art of Paul Henry, later evoked in films such as Robert O’Flathery’s *Man of Aran* (1934).⁸¹ In America, Williams recognises that the stone cottage, the weeping mother and the sweet cailín were simulacra of generic and idealised rural, nineteenth century European settings.⁸² In her examination of Irish harping in the mid-twentieth century, Helen Lawlor also notes the evocation and depiction of an Irish whitewashed context in the images for Mary O’Hara’s early recordings from the 1950s, which were popular in both Ireland and America.⁸³ Audiences experienced life both inside and outside of the cottage in *Siamsa*. While the first half portrayed numerous farm tasks, including milking cows and making butter, the second half focused on pastimes and entertainment as the cast gathered around the open fire.

Echoing the romanticised imagery of the cottage and the romanticisation of rural work is the sense of continuous fun and laughter in the community being represented. “The fun in the village motif is a common denominator for many of the choreographies of state folk ensembles, and even more so among amateur companies. [...] This simplistic and romantic depiction of village life where even work is a game – a hangover from nineteenth-century images of peasants – stands in stark contrast to the grim reality of village life in Eastern Europe and the Middle East”.⁸⁴

80. Catherine Nash, “Remapping and renaming: new cartographies of identity, gender and landscape in Ireland”, *Feminist Review*, 44, 1993, DOI: [10.2307/1395194](https://doi.org/10.2307/1395194), p. 39-57.

81. Patrick J. Duffy, “Writing Ireland” in Brian Graham, *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 64-84. p. 67.

82. William Williams, *Twas Only an Irishman’s Dream: The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800-1920*, Urbana, Illinois U.P., 1996, p. 116.

83. Helen Lawlor, *Irish Harping, 1900-2010*, Dublin, Four Courts, 2012, p. 152.

84. A. Shay, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 9

Although Siamsa Tíre may be understood as more than a dance company,⁸⁵ the desire of the company to engage with the theatre as a form did not mean that they developed complex plots, narratives or characterisations as was the case in other Irish drama and, to a certain extent, this is one of the attractions of the company for audiences. Writing in relation to a 1988 tour to New York by the Abbey Theatre with Tom McIntyre's *The Great Hunger*, Harrington notes that "American audiences demanded uplifting versions on stage of the land of their increasingly distant ancestry."⁸⁶ It was this sense of happiness and positivity that roused audiences to their feet, but could also draw negative comments from the critics.

The professionalism of the touring company was important in gaining a positive reaction from audiences and critics.⁸⁷ Despite being an amateur cast, dancer Jimmy Smith recalls:

We were very well rehearsed and we knew exactly what we were doing. And we had to make it look as if it was our first time doing it [...] We had a great thing on stage that we'd create our own entertainment within the show on stage. So everything was new to us [...] we'd always find something to smile about naturally without making it false [...] it was never an act.⁸⁸

It was the gradual filtering of material by friends under the direction of Pat Ahern that helped refine the production. Ahern states: "So much of what happened was spontaneous; it was latent within them, they were not trained actors in a formal sense."⁸⁹ Trained professionally or otherwise, the cast of Siamsa Tíre had inherited rich traditions and cultural heritage and they were proud to present these, on and off stage under the guidance of Ahern.

One of the best received aspects of the show was the appearance of two older north Kerry dancers. Seán Ahern remembers "They enjoyed Jerry Nolan and John McCarthy. They were mad for those two people... They had a devil may care attitude when they went out on stage. They

85. C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 200.

86. J. Harrington, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 46.

87. A number of the cast had experience of performing beyond the company. Seán Ahern was renowned for his performances with the Brosna Céilí Band, which also featured musicians Nicky and Anne McAulliffe. Patricia Hanafin had previously toured to America with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, as had the McAulliffes. Another member, Aidan O'Carroll, was late departing for the American tour with Siamsa Tíre as he was completing his final examinations in music at University College Cork; he received news of his first class honours results while in America. O'Carroll was also part of a group, Macalla, with his sister Margaret, and fellow cast members Mary Deady and Michael O'Shea. While in America, they were offered an opportunity to record and remain in the US for an extended period. Due to various circumstances and family commitments in Ireland, this did not happen, although a recording was made.

88. Interview, Jimmy Smith, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

89. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

didn't give a damn."⁹⁰ This attitude also gave a sense of spontaneity⁹¹ and Foley notes how: "The participation of the older traditional step dancers in the shows provided an 'authenticity' to the show while also assisting to validate the work of the National Folk Theatre."⁹² Foley also notes that "it elevated the status of these step dancers within their respective communities and brought the younger generation of actors in contact with them, bridging the gap between these different generations."⁹³ The sense of recognising the authenticity of the material that Siamsa Tíre was presenting predates the tour itself and is inherent in Ahern's 1972 plan. Interrogating the concept of authenticity in an urban American setting, Dillane explores "competing notions of Irishness"⁹⁴ as imagined and realised through musical encounters stating:

what constitutes the Irishness of a sound structure seems to have more to do with who is performing and receiving the music and their particular identification with it, and what they say about it, and less to do with form and content itself.⁹⁵

As Williams asserts in relation to the Irish diaspora in America⁹⁶ but equally important for the still developing folk theatre company at home in Ireland, a connection to idealised "authentic" channels such as master performers reinforces the perceived value of what is being presented and performed.

The stories from cast members, particularly relating to McCarthy and Nolan, highlight the existence of a first person authenticity in which the artists "speak the truth of their own situation", simultaneous with third person authenticity in which "they speak the truth of their own culture, thereby representing (present) others."⁹⁷ Like Seán Ahern, Jerry Nolan (1915-1984) was a farmer from Dromurhur, Moyvane, a small village in North Kerry. He left school around the age of fourteen to work on the farm and though he never formally attended a school of dance, he learned from dancing masters and local step dancers including Jeremiah Molyneaux, Joe Vaughan, Paddy White and Jack Lyons, all important dancers in the narrative of Siamsa Tíre. Nolan performed at local house dances, crossroads or platform dances⁹⁸ and concerts, as well as participated in the Wren⁹⁹ each year.

90. Interview, Listowel, 17 May 2016.

91. Ahern in C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 209-210.

92. C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 210.

93. *Ibid.*

94. A. Dillane, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 23.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

96. S. Williams, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 601.

97. Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication", *Popular Music*, 21 (1), 2002, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/853683> (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 209-223, p. 209.

98. Crossroads or platform dances.

99. The Day of the Wren on St. Stephen's Day, see C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 114.

John McCarthy (1921-1991) from Clashmealcon, Causeway, had spent some time in London and America before returning to Ireland to farm in Miltown and retiring to Listowel and Lisselton. A pupil of the North Kerry dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux, Foley notes, “as was the custom with these dance masters, the school was held for the duration of six weeks in the locality.”¹⁰⁰ Foley also adds, “John attended two further dancing schools in the locality. One was again taught by Molyneaux, his second dance course in the area, and the second was taught by Molyneaux’s pupil, Liam Ó Duinín.”¹⁰¹ At home, John danced at crossroads and platform dances in the locality or in farmers’ houses after a day’s threshing. During his time in America during the 1960s, John “attended the Irish clubs in New York and performed some of his traditional step dances there”.¹⁰² John’s obituary in *The Kerryman*¹⁰³ recalls “Both he and the late Jerry Nolan of Listowel performed with Siamsa before 1,200 people in the Palace Theatre in Broadway during a US tour in 1976. John and Jerry put on such a dazzling performance that the audience stood and cheered and clapped them on a night they looked back on with awe and delight.”¹⁰⁴

The other two principal dancers were Patricia Hanafin and Jimmy Smith who learned from Irene Gould who, in turn, learned from Phil Cahill who learned from Molyneaux. There is a sense of tradition whereby a style is passed from one generation to the next. Pat Ahern himself learned from Molyneaux, as did McCarthy and Nolan, but neither Patricia nor Jimmy met Molyneaux. Many of the other cast members such as Catherine Hurley, Catherine Spangler and Aidan O’Carroll learned their dancing from Patricia,¹⁰⁵ who is listed as the choreographer for the production.¹⁰⁶ Collectively these step dancers, joined by the rest of the cast for larger dance numbers, represented a local tradition that could engage an audience beyond its typical milieu as it transformed as a cultural form that changed through the twentieth century from a “substantially amateur and voluntary leisure activity to a professional and commercial enterprise”.¹⁰⁷ Challenging what American audiences might expect, the programme for the American tour states: “the dances in SIAMSA may come as something of a surprise to people who expect traditional Irish dances to be ordered and staid, sedate and predictable. The rigidity is something which has been imposed in more recent generations of Irish dancing schools and is fine for

100. C. Foley, *op. cit.*, 2012, p. 238.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

103. *The Kerryman*, 28 June 1991.

104. John died after performing as the dancing master in the opening run of *Ding Dong Dederó* during the first season at the new Siamsa Tíre Theatre and Arts Centre in Tralee.

105. Interview with Patricia Nolan, Tralee, 28 June 2016; Aidan O’Carroll, Tralee, 29 June 2016; Catherine Spangler, Tralee, 27 January 2017.

106. Dan Dietz, *The Complete Book of 1940s Broadway Musicals*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 326.

107. Barbara O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities, 1900–2000*, Cork, Cork U.P., 2013, p. 125.

the teaching of the disciplines. But the truly traditional dances, the ethnic ones, are full of freedom and lively expression.”¹⁰⁸ This freedom of expression is evident nearly two decades later in *Riverdance*, when Irish dance became one of the most successful cultural expressions of Irishness in a global context and featured Irish-American dancers in the lead roles.¹⁰⁹

Singing was also a key element of the production. Mary Deady and Seán Ahern were viewed as stars, fulfilling the roles of solo singers as soprano and tenor respectively, combining the traditional *sean-nós* tradition with the bel canto style more common in popular culture.¹¹⁰ Liam Heaslip and Sean O’Mahony are also listed as solo singers but, as with the dancing, many more also perform as singers. Mary Deady is an accomplished soprano and was a familiar character to an American audience who may have been familiar with the stereotypical Irish singing cailín as epitomised by Mary O’Hara and utilised in the Irish Tourist Board campaigns of the 1950s.¹¹¹ The overlap between some of the vocal repertoire sung in the *Siamsa Tíre* production and that of O’Hara’s early Irish language offerings including “Aililiú Na Gamnha” and “Dilín O Deamhas” from *Songs of Erin* (1957) and «Lúbín Ó Lúth» from *Mary O’Hara’s Ireland* (1973). However, there is no reference to O’Hara at any point in either the press or in the reflections of the cast and despite O’Hara’s success, it would appear that audiences for and critics of *Siamsa* were not familiar with this repertoire or did not make reference to it.

In contrast to Deady, Seán Ahern (and Liam Heaslip) represent a figure who sits between the Irish tenor, epitomised by John McCormack and Frank Patterson, and the *sean nós* singer, perhaps best epitomised in an American context by Joe Heaney. Williams and Ó Laoire state:

The Irish tenor, as both man and image, enjoyed considerable popularity in literary works, media, and professional work as a performer, all of which represent commercial success through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The traditional rural singer, on the other hand, has been much less visible in literature, the international media industry, or on the professional stage.¹¹²

The solo singers in *Siamsa* reflect a Munster style of singing in the Irish language.¹¹³ Williams and Ó Laoire’s deconstruction of the relationship between song, identity and culture highlights other critical issues

108. SIAMSA, Souvenir programme, *Siamsa Tíre*, 1976.

109. B. Ó Cinnéide, *op. cit.*, 2002.

110. Sean Williams & Lillis Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song-Man*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2011, DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195321180.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195321180.001.0001), p. 147.

111. H. Lawlor, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 46.

112. S. Williams & L. Ó Laoire, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 140.

113. For more see Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, Portlaoise, Dolmen, 1982; Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, New York, Taylor & Francis, 2009.

relating to gender identities, authenticity, marketing and consumption of Irish song traditions.

It is important to also note that some of the song repertoire presented by Siamsa Tíre was arranged for SATB choir, a novel and very different approach at a time when the Irish song traditions were considered in terms of solo singing and ballad groups. In considering the “revival” of Irish traditional music, Scott Reiss notes the impact of an international folk revival on the popularity of Irish traditional music, including the concept of singing Irish songs in harmony.¹¹⁴ With roots in local church choir activities, many of the cast were engaged in harmony singing in different contexts and this was further developed by Ahern who arranged choral arrangements of Irish songs for the company. The cast would also perform these choral arrangements at parties and other functions.

The use of Irish traditional dance music and airs was another aspect of the shows. The musicians for the tour were part of a community of musicians in north Kerry and west Limerick who were engaged in music-making on a regular basis in public houses, for céilís (social dances), on radio and at festivals and competitions. Unlike other concert-like settings for the performance of Irish traditional music, song and dance, the musicians were viewed as part of the cast and appeared on stage with the actors, singers and dancers. The musicians were part of the community, both in terms of the onstage narrative and off stage recreation and there was some doubling of roles. It is worth noting that, owing to the strength of union rules in American theatres, orchestras would still be hired for performances but would sit quietly in the pit playing cards.¹¹⁵ The production featured the uilleann pipes, tin whistle, harp, fiddle, button accordion, bodhrán and bones and the souvenir programme contained descriptions and information on some of these instruments.

Siamsa had a very simple narrative and relied more on the music, song and dance as entertainment rather than plot. Humour is a very important aspect of the Siamsa Tíre production and Seán Ahern notes how some of the material, particularly the comic material, came about through improvisation on the stage. Pat Ahern also reflects on the importance of humour to engage audiences and recounts how audiences from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds reacted to humorous incidents on stage, often involving comedian Seán O’Mahony. He remembers “Laughter was Seánie’s great gift and everybody identified with it.”¹¹⁶ Like so many other aspects of the tour, Seánie’s ability to generate laughter was not confined to the stage and he is an integral character in the story

114. Scott Reiss, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

115. Interview with Pierce & Liam Heaslip, Tralee, 29 June 2016.

116. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

of the tour. It would appear that the sense of humour was not lost on audiences or indeed the stage hands who enjoyed the performances.¹¹⁷ The use of mime and gesture helped communicate with the audience unfamiliar with the Irish language and internationalised the folk theatre form.

Reaction and Reception

The 1976 tour of America brought the company to the stages of very significant theatres and included sold out performances in the Palace Theatre on Broadway. Newspaper research and interviews with people involved at the time highlight how the production presented by the company challenged American perceptions of Irish traditional music, song and dance at the time. By bringing these traditions onto the American theatre stage, in contrast with the smaller concert venues used by other groups, Siamsa Tíre introduced many aspects of the traditions to new audiences. These audiences included members of the Irish diaspora in America but, at a time when numerous ethnic performing groups were touring America,¹¹⁸ also included people of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The success of the tour lies largely in its reception on Broadway. At a time when the Chieftains were performing for a single night at Carnegie Hall, Siamsa Tíre sold out a full week at the Palace. Rushe in the *Irish Independent* wrote:

Siamsa has conquered Broadway, the most challenging theatrical testing ground in America, if not in the world. The Irish folk group opened at the 1,800-seat Palace Theatre on Monday night to a full and receptive audience. It was given a standing ovation at the end and now it has been given the warmest of endorsements by that most influential of critics, Clive Barnes of the *New York Times*.¹¹⁹

The significance of the Barnes review is not lost on the cast and they remember the night that it was read out at an after party. The quote itself was used for many years afterwards in the publicity for the performances in Tralee and elsewhere.

It wasn't just the critics that responded favourably. Dancer Jimmy Smith remembers: "You'd come out of the theatres at night and they'd be looking for your autograph."¹²⁰ For Seán Ahern, seeing the queues of people

117. Interview, Pat Ahern, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

118. See A. Shay, *op. cit.*, 2002.

119. 30 September 1976.

120. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

looking for tickets stretching around the block at the Palace Theatre was the highlight of the tour for many of the cast.¹²¹ Reflecting on audiences drawn from a wide variety of backgrounds and ethnicities, McCarthy remembers that “each scene brought about a murmuration throughout the audience as the older generation recognised and then explained to younger companions that this was how it was when they were young.”¹²² For Ahern, this is the universality of folk culture that he believes is the most important element and motivation for preserving and presenting the folk. It also reflects Appadurai’s concept of “nostalgia without memory” as audience relate to an idealised rural past that is not limited to a particular national identity.¹²³

From a musicologist’s perspective, one of the interesting aspects of the reception is the contrast with other forms of entertainment identified as Irish at that time in America. Dermod McCarthy told me:

They didn’t know what to expect. Some people wanted Danny Boy and thought that was what they were coming to see. But then it dawned on them that this was a different product. This was the real tradition and not the stage Irish that they had become accustomed to.¹²⁴

The representation of Irishness in the US through music was not new. Williams notes the popularity of Moore’s *Melodies* and minstrel shows and vaudeville during the nineteenth century and their role in the representation of Irishness, which ranged from nostalgia to caricature.¹²⁵ In other contexts, the music of Irish-born composer Charles Villiers Stanford was positioned alongside other “nationalistic” composers such as Grieg and *Dvořák*.¹²⁶ As O’Connor notes, by the end of the nineteenth century, Irish-American audiences were turning to Tin Pan Alley whose “songsmiths churned out thousands of ‘Oirish’¹²⁷ numbers from the quaint to the downright sentimental”.¹²⁸ As she goes on to note, “a song like ‘I’ll Take You Home Again Kathleen’ or ‘Irish Eyes’, written in America by songwriters with no access to or knowledge of Irish music, came to represent

121. Interview, 17 May 2016.

122. Interview, Dublin, 22 April 2016.

123. A. Appadurai, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 30.

124. Interview, Dublin, 22 April 2016.

125. S. Williams, *op. cit.*, 2014, p. 609.

126. Adèle Commins, “Watchmen on the Walls of Music Across the Atlantic: Reception of Charles Villiers Stanford and his Music in the American Press”, in same issue ([DOI: 10.34929/imaginaires.vi22.5](https://doi.org/10.34929/imaginaires.vi22.5)).

127. A comic derivative of the word “Irish” that is often applied in a pejorative sense. See also Aileen Dillane, “Nostalgic Songlines and the Performance of Irish Identity”, *Bealoideas: The Journal Of The Folklore Of Ireland Society*, 81, 2013, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24862815> (last accessed 5/11/2020), p. 19-36; Fintan Vallely, “The Apollos of shamrockery: Traditional musics in the modern age”, in M. Stokes & P. V. Bohlman (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 201.

128. N. O’Connor, *op. cit.*, 2001, p. 47.

not only Irish music but also Irishness.”¹²⁹ Some of this repertoire entered popular music contexts in the 1940s and 1950s through recordings by popular artists such as Bing Crosby.¹³⁰ Writing about the 1960s, Williams and Ó Laoire similarly acknowledge that the “Irish American song repertoire had taken on its own hybrid character at that point, perhaps most significantly symbolized by now familiar chestnuts such as ‘Mother Machree’ and ‘Danny Boy’, sentimental songs that were standard party pieces for the east coast Irish-American community, which were consumed by immigrants of all stripes.”¹³¹ Writing about the 1990s in Chicago, Aileen Dillane presents a similar cultural expectation associated with such songs amongst part of the Irish-American community.¹³²

One of the challenges faced by Siamsa Tíre was the difference in understanding the Irishness of songs amongst an American audience. Richard Christiansen of the *Chicago Daily News* wrote “The songs, even though sung in Gaelic, are readily understood thanks to broad mime and props. They are, too, enchantingly different from what most Americans know as Irish music.”¹³³ This echoes an anecdote from Dermot McCarthy who remembers walking in front of two theatre goers in Chicago who, while impressed, were overheard to say “It’s a pity there are no Irish songs, and why does it have to be in Gaelic”. Indeed there were many references to the Siamsa performances as an alternative to “Danny Boy”.¹³⁴ William Gale opened his review in Boston stating “An Irish music and dance show without one *Danny Boy* or ‘Irish leprechaun’ doesn’t seem possible today when commercialized ‘Irish’ music is everywhere but at the Shubert Theater here the National Folk Theatre of Ireland is presenting a charming, lovely and in many ways authentic evening of true Irish music and dance.”¹³⁵ Jim Gallagher of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote “Persons who think Irish music means ‘Danny Boy’, and the other mawkish ditties that pollute the airways on St. Patrick’s Day, are in for a pleasant surprise.”¹³⁶ Similarly Daniel Webster states “The Irish tenor and those patented sentimental songs are not what Irish folk culture is about at all”,¹³⁷ although Gale notes “Perhaps the best parts of the evening are the choir singing of the children

129. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

130. See A. Dillane, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 25.

131. S. Williams & L. Ó Laoire, *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 202.

132. A. Dillane, *op. cit.*, 2013.

133. Richard Christiansen, *Chicago Daily News*, cited in Desmond Rushe “Standing Ovation for Siamsa”, *Irish Independent*, 17 September 1976.

134. Written in 1910 by Englishman Fredrick Weatherly (1848-1929) to the tune “The Londonderry Air”, collected by George Petrie for his 1855 publication, “Danny Boy” is the subject of a number of studies including Anne G. Gilchrist, “A new light upon the Londonderry Air”, in *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*, 1 (3), 1934, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4521039> (last accessed 8/11/2020), p.115-121; Hugh Shields, “New Dates for an Old Song 1766-1803”, *Long room* (Journal of the Library of Trinity College), 18-19, 1979, <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/new-dates-for-old-songs> (last accessed 8/11/2020), p. 34-41.

135. William K. Gale, “A Lovely Night in Ireland”, *The Providence Journal, Massachusetts Edition*, 6 October 1976.

136. Jim Gallagher, “Warmth of Siamsa Needs No Translation”, *Chicago Tribune*.

137. Daniel Webster, “From Ireland: Gentleness”, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, cited in Des Rushe, “Incredible Lack of Ethnic Identity”, *Irish Independent*, 28 September 1976.

and the work of tenor Ahearn. He sings with that lovely and seemingly effortless grace that has made Irish tenors popular around the world”.¹³⁸

Siamsa Tíre were presenting an altogether different form of Irish musical culture directly from rural Ireland that perhaps resonated more with audiences less familiar with Irish culture but for whom memories of a rural way of life lingered. Remembering her experiences and informed by a life lived in America, Mary Deady wrote:

Siamsa at the time was completely unique. Never before had Irish music, mime, song and dance been interwoven and presented as theatre and Irish Americans and general theatre goers came away with a much better sense of what Irish music, song and dance was all about. *Siamsa* gave the audience a much richer and authentic version of our culture and I know that some Irish Americans were so proud of seeing it presented so theatrically, movingly and intelligently. Our tour here in the US, coincided with shows such as the Ballet Folklorico of Mexico and Russian folk theatre groups as well and we were considered to be very much on a par with them.¹³⁹

The construction of a sense of “authenticity” in relation to the *Siamsa* production is evident on both sides of the Atlantic. Writing about the release of the *Siamsa* LP prior to the tour, with simultaneous reference to romanticised aspects of Irish rural life such as frolicking lambs and turf smoke and an acknowledgement of commercial potential and profit, Rushe writes about the company’s authenticity as folk entertainment:

it is important that *Siamsa* gets maximum exposure. And particularly here in Ireland where the marvellously rich cultural heritage it seeks to preserve and promote is under threat from a grossly tatty, false, commercial and insensitive non-culture important from the world’s ad-mass bargain basements.¹⁴⁰

Rushe’s Irish perspectives are echoed by those in the American press. Writing in the *Chicago Daily News*, Dorothy Samachuan states:

Ethnic troupes are frequent visitors to Chicago and we’ve become accustomed to flashy sequined costumes and high-flying terpsichorean derringdo. But *Siamsa* (pronounced Shee-am-sah and meaning merrymaking) doesn’t fit into that mould. *Siamsa* attempts to give us an authentic picture of Irish country life of the past – its customs, its work and its play. In its friendly, unpretentiously charming way,

138. W. Gale, *op. cit.*, 1976.

139. Personal communication, 23 June 2016.

140. “Authentic Folk Entertainment”, *Irish Independent*, 30 July 1976.

Siamsa succeeds well enough to make a native homesick and an outsider want to know more about it.¹⁴¹

Being relevant to both the diaspora and other ethnic groups is a significant element of Siamsa Tíre's success in the US. However, describing Siamsa Tíre as authentic is not unproblematic and there are elements that are undoubtedly innovative and original and aspects of what was being presented belonged to a past that had already been replaced by technological advances in agricultural practices in Ireland. Nevertheless, Samachuan's review is an endorsement of Ahern's efforts to generate an interest in Irish folk culture and also highlights the role of "national" or "ethnic" groups in America in the 1970s, some of whom were judged to be pushing commercial gain through the commodification of culture. O'Flynn relates the idea of authenticity to a number of dialectical relationships in constructions of Irishness and music including "the binary oppositions of commercial/real, traditional/innovative, urban/rural, and Irish/'Irishy'."¹⁴² An extended study of the work of Siamsa Tíre would undoubtedly highlight the existence of both sides of these dichotomies in the productions of the company and the commercial success of the 1976 tour to America is also an important aspect of this story.

For critics accustomed to reviewing groups such as Moysiev and Ballet Folklorico, Siamsa Tíre presented an Irish alternative. Bill Kaufman in *The Boston Globe* commends Ahern "for avoiding the slick format used by similar folk groups, because in Siamsa he has a company whose very simplicity and innocence is not only charming, but also true to the fold values that it celebrates."¹⁴³ Rita Katz Farrell in *Wilmington Sunday News Journal* similarly writes: "There is nothing urbane or sophisticated about the entertainment the National Folk theatre has brought us; rather, it is a pastoral glimpse at a simple and sweet culture where concern for the basic human value is expressed in the most rudimentary style of music and dance...The National Folk theatre provides an evening of enchantment on its own grass-roots terms."¹⁴⁴ Siamsa Tíre's success is potentially due to the role of nostalgia amongst the metropolitan audiences. As Kilroy notes: "Within the metropolitan centres there is always a nostalgia for cultures which are untouched, untainted by the ennui, the busyness, the crowdedness of the centre."¹⁴⁵ For the cast of *Siamsa*, America was also a contrast with home, perhaps epitomised by stories about watching the lanes of traffic which contrasted so much with the quiet country lanes of rural north

141. Dorothy Samachuan, "Siamsa Troupe Trips with Irish Folk Charm", *Chicago Daily News*, 15 September 1976.

142. John O'Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music*, Surrey, Ashgate, 2009, p. 174.

143. Bill Kaufman, "Love for the Motherland Through Irish Eyes", *The Boston Globe*.

144. Rita Katz Farrell, "Irish Dancers Show the Soul of Decency of the Ould Sod", *Wilmington Sunday News Journal*.

145. Thomas Kilroy, "A Generation of Playwrights", in Eamonn Jordan (ed.) *Theatre Stuff: critical essays on contemporary Irish theatre*, Dublin, Carysfort, 2000, p. 6.

Kerry.¹⁴⁶ However, Gale writes, “If I have any criticism of Siamsa, it is that there is too much of a pastoral recreation. We are given the lilt and loveliness of the old Irish countryside, but at times it seems a bit too pristine, too bloodless. Things could not have been all that fine”.¹⁴⁷ *Siamsa* is undoubtedly a romanticised representation of Irish country life and unapologetically so.

While Boris Weinturb focused on how Siamsa was preserving the culture of the Gaeltachts, explaining in his article what the Gaeltacht was,¹⁴⁸ some of the reviews betrayed an ignorance about aspects of Irish culture. For example Bess Winakor of the *Chicago Sun-Times* had difficulty understanding some of the proceedings and described the tin whistle as “a recorder-like instrument”. Not all reviews were entirely positive. While Bess Winakor finds “two acts of Irish music grow monotonous” and going to see Siamsa without a working knowledge of the Irish language, “is like going to an opera without a libretto”.¹⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Di Nardo writes, “Although my Gaelic is a bit rusty, it’s not hard to follow the first act, dawn to bonfire, with love songs, lively dances and ensemble numbers”¹⁵⁰ and Jim Gallagher of the *Chicago Tribune* comments “you don’t even have to be Irish to appreciate it”.¹⁵¹ Thus, despite the significant and continuous emigration from Ireland to America, there is a disjuncture between what Siamsa Tíre presented and what audiences expected in America but also a relevance for audiences who did not share an Irish heritage.

Differences in Everyday Lives

The reviews and oral histories indicate significant differences between the everyday lives of the Irish cast and their American audiences. Although Motherway notes: “The opening up of the Irish economy in the 1960s led to a decade of prosperity [...] mirrored by a rise in consumerism, the return of emigrants, an increase in exposure to outside media, and a rising standard of living”,¹⁵² there are significant cultural divides between Ireland and the USA in the 1970s, highlighted by the recollections of the cast members. Much of what was experienced by the cast on the tour was far removed from what any of them had previously experienced in Ireland.

146. Liam Heaslip remembers Jerry Nolan commenting on the lanes of traffic trying to comprehend the quantity of people and where they were all going. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

147. W. Gale, art. cit., 1976.

148. Boris Weintraub, “Irish Folk Theatre Preserving a Tradition”, *The Washington Standard*, 27 September 1976.

149. Bess Winakor, “Gaelic Musicians, Dancers are Monotonously Merry”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 September 1976, p. 145.

150. Tony Di Nardo “Siamsa is Window on Life in Old Kerry”, *The Washington Post*, 24 September 1976, p. 37.

151. Jim Gallagher, “Warmth of Siamsa Needs No Translation”, *Chicago Tribune*.

152. S. Motherway, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 8.

They experienced a lifestyle and commodities heretofore only familiar through film and television.

The cultural differences between Ireland and the USA at the time are perhaps most evident in the memories of those who were children at the time. For Oliver Hurley it was the smell of coffee, the experience of big theatres and meeting cousins for the first time.¹⁵³ For Pierce Heaslip it was the taste of cheesecake which was an exotic experience on the tour.¹⁵⁴ In terms of food, Catherine Spangler points to corn-on-the-cob and candy corns.¹⁵⁵ There are other novelties also including air conditioning and roller blinds, which they encountered in their hotel rooms, photograph booths and shopping in big supermarkets unlike anything they had encountered in Ireland at that time.

The sense of encountering celebrity culture is also significant. A number of the cast met Mohamed Ali near Central Park on 29 September, the night after he had fought Ken Norton in Madison Square Garden. Ali stopped and spoke to the small group of Irish adults and children, commenting on his 1972 interview with Cathal O’Shannon on the night before his fight against Al ‘Blue’ Lewis in the ring at Croke Park, which became one of RTÉ’s landmark interviews. Pierce remembers that none of the group had a camera with which to capture the moment. Indeed photographs from the tour are limited.

Meeting Ali exemplified how, in America, this group from Ireland were encountering a world of celebrity that was in stark contrast to their own experiences. Indeed, prior to leaving, Liam Heaslip was asked about the trip in a chip shop in Tralee and, when he mentioned that they would be performing in the Palace Theatre, there was a sense of wonder at the achievement. At the Palace, *Siamsa* would follow a successful run by the Oscar Award winning actress Shirley MacLaine, which was released as a live album recorded on 19 August 1976.¹⁵⁶ In 1976 MacLaine received another Academy Award nomination and appeared on television in two major shows, placing her to the forefront of American popular culture.¹⁵⁷ In the dressing room, further links with celebrities were encountered on the walls including a signature on the wall “Yul Brynner was here”. Best known for his role in the film *The King and I*, Brynner performed the role of Ulysses in the production *Home, Sweet Homer*, which ran at

153. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

154. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.

155. Interview, Fenit, 27 January 2017.

156. *Live at the Palace*, Columbia PC34223.

157. Playbill, *Shirley MacLaine* Palace Theatre Broadway, <http://www.playbill.com/production/shirley-maclaine-palace-theatre-vault-0000013063> (last accessed 20/10/2017). Dan Dietz, *The Complete Book of 1940s Broadway Musicals*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, p. 292.

the Palace Theatre until January 1976.¹⁵⁸ Beneath this the inimitable Sean O'Mahony wrote "Sean O'Mahony was too??"¹⁵⁹ Reflecting on the experience, Catherine Spangler stated "We were real stars to be in these dressing rooms".¹⁶⁰

These anecdotes highlight both the cultural divide and the circulation of popular culture between Ireland and America in the 1970s and reflect the audience comments relating to Danny Boy. They are in stark contrast with contemporary Ireland and Motherway's assertion that "by 2001, Ireland featured as one of the most globalized countries in the world in relation to economic activity, travel and tourism, communications and technology".¹⁶¹ In 1976, America remained a distant place that many travelled to from Ireland knowing that they were unlikely to return to see their families again. A number of the touring cast did meet with relatives. Some of the children spent time with relatives and this was also important for their families at home.¹⁶²

Coming Home and Moving On

After nearly five weeks in America, the cast of Siamsa Tíre returned home, despite potential offers to stay longer. They returned to daily life, returning to school and to work. Some of the cast recollect the bus stopping at the end of the road near the village of Moyvane for dancer Jerry Nolan to get off and walk back to his farmhouse. There would be further newspaper articles in the Irish media celebrating their success and a civic reception in Tralee and the memories and stories would be shared by future generations who went on to perform with the production.

Siamsa Tíre travelled to the USA for the first time at a time when there were numerous other "national" or "ethnic" groups also touring there and presenting their national and ethnic music, song and dance. The USA is a "land of opportunity" and Shay notes: "Foreign touring was also a major factor in financing these companies. While the issue of representation of the nation remained the most important factor, the hard currency earned by some of these companies was considerable. Moiseyev, Ballet Folklorico, and Bayanihan in particular had major annual tours that earned sizeable incomes".¹⁶³ Finances were not the motivation behind the Siamsa tour and indeed there was difficulty securing the necessary funding. Before coming

158. Michelangelo Capua, *Yul Brynner: A Biography*, McFarland, 2006, p. 174.

159. Interview, Liam Haeslip, Tralee, 29 June 2016.

160. Interview, Fenit, 27 January 2017.

161. S. Motherway, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 2.

162. Interview, Oliver Hurley, Tralee, 17 May 2016; Catherine Spangler, Fenit, 27 January 2017.

163. A. Shay, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 54.

home, they declined opportunities for an extended run on Broadway and would not return to the US for a further eight years. The success and reception of their performances challenge the belief that authenticity and commercialism are binary opposites.¹⁶⁴

Siamsa Tíre would not enjoy the commercial success later experienced by *Riverdance* but continued to evolve in Kerry, embarking on sporadic international tours. When the company returned to America in the 1980s, they performed in smaller venues, often connected with universities, rather than the major venues of the first tour. To the present, the company remains rooted in North Kerry, inextricably bound to the local traditions while simultaneously seeking to develop and “move forward without stagnating”.¹⁶⁵ Reflecting on the success of the 1976 tour, Seán Ahern says “It spurred it on, to know would we be carried again. We enjoyed it so much we’d have loved to have stayed there. We would have been over and back to America”.¹⁶⁶

In her unpublished history of dance in Ireland, *Irish Times* dance correspondent Carolyn Swift noted that Irish dancing was acclaimed worldwide long before *Riverdance* owing to the success of Siamsa Tíre and the work of Pat Ahern.¹⁶⁷ In 1976, Siamsa Tíre had not yet begun exploring the potential of developing the North Kerry dancing traditions through collaboration with other forms of dance but in the years after the 1976 tour, Siamsa Tíre continued to perform in Ireland and internationally. The reception of their work was both positive and negative as this reception became entwined in a wider debate about how Ireland should and could be represented.

Conclusion

Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, has not received the attention necessary to understand its role in the development of the traditional arts in Ireland and the perception of Irish traditional music, song and dance internationally. The successful 1976 tour to America, during which they wowed audiences and critics, including performances in

164. Timothy Taylor, “Afterword: Gaelic Than Though”, in M. Stokes & P. Bohlman (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 275-284.

165. Jonathon Kelliher, cited in D. Mulrooney, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 252.

166. Interview, Listowel, 17 May 2016.

167. Cited in D. Mulrooney, *op. cit.*, 2006, p. 227. John O’Flynn, *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 39, also notes: “*Riverdance* was certainly not the first of its kind. It did, however, more than any cultural product before it, suggest an explicit link between ethnic and economic ideas of Irish national identity, signalling an era in which Irishness could (unashamedly) be regarded as an exportable form of cultural and economic capital.”

The Palace Theatre on Broadway, is a significant example of this. The challenge of going on tour and the associated promotion, the reaction of the audiences and critics and the stories and memories of the cast reflect a period of change in the circulation of popular culture between Ireland and the USA. It is not only relevant in the context of understanding this circulation in the context of an Irish diaspora in the US but also the reception of Irish culture amongst a broader, ethnically diverse, American society. Influenced by international dance and theatrical groups in a globalising world, Siamsa Tíre were a local response that, only a few years after its foundation, embarked upon this ground-breaking tour. Although a theatre company, they must be understood in the context of both international dance companies and Irish traditional music ensembles of the 1970s that were engaged in the wider “revival” of the traditions, although also during a continuing decline of the Irish language and the industrialisation of rural life in Ireland.

The bi-focal approach examining Siamsa Tíre through a critical consideration of both the oral histories of the Irish performers and the reaction of the American audiences as represented in the media provides two sides of a complicated narrative that enhance understanding of both Irish and American culture at this point in time. The theatre piece and repertoire that it includes is only part of a broader narrative that is reliant on understanding context and provokes questions relating to authenticity. Many of the cast have told me of how they were themselves on stage; many had come from this culture – indeed Seán Ahern and Jerry Nolan were two farmers who had left their cows to bring this culture to their American cousins. By doing so, they brought the culture of North Kerry to a new, international audience and challenged the perceptions and stereotypes that had developed and evolved amongst the diaspora. Furthermore, they brought home with them experiences of American popular culture that had already begun influencing the culture of Kerry by that time.

Siamsa Tíre undoubtedly played a role in the reimagining of Irish identity in America and a re-evaluation of Irish folk culture in Ireland in the 1970s. The evolution of Siamsa Tíre was also shaped by the American experience and the reception they received. When speaking of identity, Cook reminds us that “national identity is by no means the only kind of identity that music helps to construct”.¹⁶⁸ The US tour also impacted on the development of a community of practice in Kerry that survives to the present. The oral histories and lifelong friendships of many of those involved in Siamsa Tíre highlight the bond of solidarity that was created through the act of engaging in and creating performance. Seán Ahern told

168. N. Cook, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 5.

me: “Meeting the gang every night when we went in... We had great auld craic. There was always an auld joke [...].”¹⁶⁹ Reflecting on the 1976 tour to America, Jimmy Smith says, “It changed my life, changed all of our lives.”¹⁷⁰



169. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.
170. Interview, Tralee, 17 May 2016.