

Dance Matters in Ireland

Contemporary
Dance Performance
and Practice

Edited by
Aoife McGrath and Emma Meehan



Dance Matters in Ireland

“Its fresh approach to contemporary practice in Ireland provides a critical appraisal of the relationship between social, cultural and historical ideas of body and society through an analysis of particular companies, choreographers and specific performance pieces. Drawing on work from dancers and choreographers, as well as academics, this book has potential to bring new evidence and debates to the contemporary performance arena, as well as revealing material that often lies hidden.”

—Dr Ann R. David, *Head of Dance and Reader in Dance Studies,*
University of Roehampton, UK

Aoife McGrath · Emma Meehan
Editors

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Contemporary Dance Performance and Practice

palgrave
macmillan

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Cover illustration: Image by Luca Truffarelli of Liv O'Donoghue in *The 27th Manifesto* (2016) choreographed by Liv O'Donoghue, as part of *Embodied at the GPO* (2016). *Embodied at the GPO* was produced by Dublin Dance Festival and commissioned by An Post's GPO Witness History Public Art Commission

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Introduction

Aoife McGrath and Emma Meehan

This collection of essays addresses the need for critical scholarship about contemporary dance practices in Ireland. The title of the collection, *Dance Matters in Ireland*, encompasses the two main aims of the publication. Firstly, it hopes to function as a timely affirmation that the critical study of dance, choreography, and movement practices, historically neglected in Ireland, does indeed matter, and that it can provide valuable insight, as Susan Leigh Foster affirms, into the ‘relations between body, self, and society’ (Foster 1996, xv). There is an increasing awareness that dance has been chronically under-researched within the field of Irish studies, and this collection contributes to addressing this gap. Recently, there has been an exciting upsurge in the number of dance scholars, based both in Ireland and internationally, whose writing engages with contemporary dance and movement practices in Ireland. Their work is forging and developing a much-needed space for critical thought.

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This book brings these voices together to create a platform for a new wave of critical scholarship about contemporary dance in Ireland.

The second main aim of *Dance Matters* is to highlight current material matters of dance in order to examine what matters for dance scholarship and practice today; questions that we hope are also applicable and useful beyond the 'Irish' context of this study. And so, in addition to taking action to address the lack of critical scholarship about contemporary dance in Ireland, this book also responds with concern to the potential effects of the current precarious economic climate on the development of dance in Ireland. Ireland's adoption of neoliberal policies during the 1990s resulted in a heightened dependency on international markets, and so the fallout of the most recent global economic recession (2008–2009) had a particularly negative effect on its small, open economy. After the rapid and unprecedented expansion of the Irish economy during the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' years (1994–2007), the onset of global recession in 2008 resulted in the collapse of the ruling political party, an alarming drop of 14% in Gross Domestic Product (GDP is often used as a measure of the standard of living in a country), and a rise in unemployment to 14%.¹ The new landscape of austerity that manifested in the wake of this upheaval has placed arts practice in general, and (due to its marginalised position within the arts in Ireland) dance practice in particular, in an increasingly precarious position.

Government funding,² administered through the Irish Arts Council, is the primary source of support for the professional dance infrastructure in Ireland.³ The Arts Council funds a wide variety of dance activities, dance resource organisations, companies and festivals, and also provides funding for individual dance artists and choreographers through schemes such as annual project awards, bursary awards, and dancer-in-residence awards. The 1995 Arts Council *Annual Report* acknowledged that 'dance as an art form has suffered severe neglect in Ireland,'⁴ and although funding for dance has been steadily increasing since a nadir in 1989,⁵ it can still be considered a 'poor relation' in comparison with other performing arts in the context of financial support. A comparison between the funding for dance and theatre is useful in highlighting this: in 2016 Arts Council funding for professional dance (€2,852,658) represented 22.36% of the funding for professional theatre (€12,754,762).⁶ Cuts to Arts Council dance funding in the past have had profound, and sometimes devastating, consequences on the development of the professional contemporary dance landscape (McGrath 2013, 9).

For example, funding cuts during the recessionary years of the 1980s led to the closure of Ireland's leading contemporary dance company, Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre, along with their 10 year outreach programme (including dance programmes for schools, public contemporary dance classes, and guest residencies for visiting, international choreographers). Although the Irish economy has been slowly but steadily recovering since the more recent collapse of 2008, the impending exit of the UK (with which Ireland shares a border) from the European Union, will have as yet unknown repercussions, and so the pervading feeling of insecurity continues. In Ireland, where theatrical dance has a long history of being culturally undervalued, it has therefore become a matter of urgency to create a focus on the importance of dance practice and scholarship in a wider social and cultural context.

This book shares a range of research that covers a diversity of contemporary dance practice, both Ireland-based, and work connected with Ireland produced internationally. These practices respond to current sociocultural conditions in Ireland, highlighting issues such as the impact of the recession, recent cultural traumas and scandals, and a return to the sensorial body. They also offer reflections on previously under-represented areas in scholarship such as affect and spirituality. In calling attention to the corporeal concerns addressed by contemporary dance practice, this book contributes an attempt to 'ward off the constant threat of disembodiment that neoliberalism portends' (Melissa Blanco-Borelli 2016, 88). The collection is in conversation with, and builds upon, previous dance publications written from ethnographic, anthropological, biographical and documentary perspectives, which have helped to forge and develop a space for critical thought on contemporary dance in Ireland.⁷ It can also be placed within a developing range of books on contemporary performance in Irish theatre and performance studies scholarship.⁸ In dialogue with these works, *Dance Matters* answers an urgent call for a critical volume that will contribute to, and galvanise, the rapidly developing field of dance scholarship in Ireland.

Although this book provides studies of contemporary dance practices located in, or connected with, Ireland, it is important to note that it does not argue that any essential 'Irishness' is to be found in these practices. The chapters highlight the importance of reflecting on the influence of regional conditions on Irish practitioners, while simultaneously addressing current and historical precedents for the exploration of global influences on contemporary dance in Ireland. In this

way, the collection connects with a growing number of international dance publications that, although focused on practices and practitioners rooted in specific origins and locations, are simultaneously connected to global developments in dance practice and scholarship. Examples include *Nordic Dance Spaces: Practicing and Imagining a Region* (2016) edited by Karen Vedel and Petri Hoppu, *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism* (2014) by Parthana Purkayastha, and Cristina F. Rosa's *Brazilian Bodies and Choreographies of Identification: Swing Nation* (2015). Rosa notes the importance of entry into dance discourse for cultures outside the usual, Euro-American locations where "critical dance studies" research and projects are being funded and tested out,⁹ and highlights the relevance of developing a localised account within globalised discussions (Rosa 2015, 4). Although located within Europe, Ireland has faced social and economic limitations in relation to dance as an art form and scholarly discipline. We argue here for the importance of giving space to articulate the knowledge contained in Irish contemporary dance practice, as a means to participate in wider, international debates. Connections between the local and the global in this collection are sometimes manifested physically in international influences and collaborations, or at other times they materialise theoretically in the discourses that practitioners and scholars engage with. As Jenn Joy and André Lepecki suggest, our planet is currently undergoing a condition of 'hypermobilization', 'primarily fuelled by well-tested colonialist and capitalist policies and dynamics', which 'demands the creation of a political phenomenology of heterogeneities—a theory that acknowledges the reality of the irregular, the proliferation of dynamic eccentricities, and thus challenges the very notion of centre upon which the colonial and postcolonial melancholic and neoliberal kineticism gain their organisational and hegemonic forces' (Joy and Lepecki 2009, 13). Contemporary dance practice in Ireland, a small island on the edge of Europe has by necessity always operated through a global interconnectedness and embracement of heterogeneities that challenge any attempt to define the dance practice happening here as 'Irish' in any essentialist or 'centred' capacity. The 'reality of the irregular' has arguably always been the experience of dance practitioners and scholars in Ireland, positioned, as they often are, in a space peripheral to the hegemonic structures of cultural governance and education. These structures, slow to realise the importance of kinaesthetic knowledge, also have a long history of oppressing corporealities (particularly

those of the feminine and the ‘foreign’) that do not fit nationalist and church ideas of the idealised ‘Irish’ body imagined into being during postcolonial struggles for independence at the turn of the twentieth century.⁹ Additionally, the recent social, political and economic upheavals and collapses in Ireland have brought the hollowness of any stable ‘notion of centre’ into sharp focus.

While acknowledging that it is not possible to represent all dance performance and scholarship currently being practiced in Ireland in one edited volume, we have nevertheless attempted to provide as broad a range of perspectives as possible on current cutting edge and experimental contemporary dance practices, focusing especially on those which connect with the wider, international field. Secondly, we have included chapters that link current developments with dance heritages in Ireland, therefore inviting reflections both on how contemporary productions and practices connect with, and reveal, historical issues, and how past productions continue to impact on contemporary approaches. Finally, the chapters included offer a variety of research methodologies and theoretical frameworks, including practice-based research, feminist perspectives, sociocultural analysis, and contemporary philosophy.

The collection traces new choreographic work, innovations, and current trends, such as somatics in performance, choreographic process and the dancer’s voice, interdisciplinarity, intermediality, spirituality, affect, and new training methods and pedagogical paradigms. Discussions of contemporary dance training and pedagogy are important strands of dance scholarship to include in an Irish context due to the particular development—or rather lack of development—of dance training in Ireland. There continues to be no full-time professional dance training available on the island, and so dancers must travel to other countries and continents for training; some embarking on a career abroad, others returning home with their new skills, perspectives, and networks of international connections. This characteristic of the Irish contemporary dance landscape has profoundly influenced its evolution, and two recent Arts Council research and policy papers about dance education in Ireland (McGrath, O’Brien and Purnell (2013), and Roche (2016)) respond to the increased interest in, and topicality of, the subject. Dance scholarship in Ireland has also been shaped by its lack of infrastructural support. Dance continues to be an optional strand of the physical education programme at primary and post-primary school levels, and there is currently

only one third-level institution on the island that offers dedicated dance degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.¹⁰

Due to this lack of infrastructure in dance education, dance scholars in Ireland have often professionally trained as dancers abroad and/or studied for research degrees in related disciplines. Many are currently working in other countries, or if located in Ireland, are working in drama departments, geography departments, language departments, and any other academic departments willing to support dance research. This has necessarily infused 'homegrown' dance scholarship in Ireland with interdisciplinary influences from the outset. Interdisciplinarity has also become a scholarly concern internationally in recent years, as questions are raised about the sustainability of knowledge production that focuses primarily on disciplinary fields, rather than on tackling issues from across disciplines, and beyond the academy, to address larger social questions.¹¹ Ramsay Burt, arguing for the necessity of employing both 'interdisciplinary and medium-specific methodologies within dance scholarship' proposes that 'dance scholars need to develop ways of analyzing the specificity of choreographed movement that are informed by methods of investigating the social particularity of the kind of public that the movement itself seeks to address' (Burt 2009, 20). *Dance Matters* reflects this need, with authors drawing on discourse from several different academic disciplines (such as cultural studies, politics, geography, performance studies, theatre studies, film studies and contemporary philosophy) in addition to dance studies. Authors also address social particularities through highlighting their positioning in the performing arts industry, and in social, political and cultural contexts, questioning what constitutes movement in work that moves between dance, theatre, film, photography, traditional crafts, and literature.

The book is presented in two sections: the first focuses primarily on the critical and historical analyses of some seminal contemporary dance works, and the second foregrounds the voices of practitioners critically reflecting on their own creative or pedagogical practice. There is a dialogue between practice and theory in both sections, as all of the authors in this collection are practitioner-scholars. However, the use of this structure allows us to highlight how the different focus in the two sections creates distinct modalities of writing. In the first section, the authors are primarily analysing the work of other artists, rather than their own, while often referring to their positioning within it/in relation to it. The works discussed are ordered chronologically, providing a historical grounding

for the book. In the second section, the creative practice guides the mode of writing, offering insights into working processes, as well as analyses of finished works, from the perspective of the choreographer. Across both sections, the knowledge gained through dance performance and choreography is given voice, allowing the gaps in research that have sidelined dance and practice-based research until very recently in Ireland to be recognised. The role of the researcher's subjectivity in dance scholarship is also addressed, as authors position themselves within relevant discourses to indicate their impact on the performance and research outcomes.

SECTION I: CRITICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The chapters in this section are arranged chronologically to locate the work in a historical context, and to highlight shared issues across periods of time. However, it is clear that contemporary dance in Ireland does not have a simple, linear, developmental trajectory. The chapters reveal shifts and disjunctures in practices, as the artists discussed engage variously in company or independent-artist structures, test a variety of disciplinary-crossing methods, or draw inspiration from diverse sources. Ireland's literary heritage, and its impact on the relationship between body and language in the Irish performance landscape, is a recurring topic across several chapters. There is also an attempt to understand a current performance vocabulary that takes into account not only regional issues, but also the impact of a globalised society. The works discussed in this section account for the idea that the 'Irishness' of dance practices is ultimately unstable and porous, particularly in an era of 'accelerated circulation of passengers and goods' (Augé 1995, 24–28). Due to the resulting movement of people, ideas and approaches, collaboration across cultures and disciplines becomes key to the artists' work discussed. The idea of the 'instability' of dance cultures is also pertinent in terms of examining the precarious position of the dance artist in these chapters, both in relation to their financial situation, and their placement outside of dominant discourses. This 'outside' placement arguably strengthens dance artists' ability to critique social and cultural issues in their work. The exploration of falling and balance in Cindy Cummings work, as described by Finola Cronin, captures this position of the production of 'dangerous' counter-discourses by artists 'on the edge' and

their potential to express new perspectives. Additionally, some of the chapters also raise questions about a lack of social, financial and infra-structural support that results in restrictions for dance artists accessing a lasting framework for producing their work and finding access to audiences. Although they focus on the work of other performance makers and companies, the authors in this section are all practitioners in their own right, and these backgrounds can be considered to inform their analyses of the dance artist's position in an Irish and global context.

In the first chapter of this section, Emma Meehan examines the work of the Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre (DCDT), the first state-funded contemporary dance company in Ireland, that was in operation from 1979–1989. This chapter explores a research project to revisit and develop sections from *Lunar Parables* (Project Arts Centre/Edinburgh Festival, 1984) choreographed by Sara and Jerry Pearson, with DCDT. The production was interdisciplinary, combining contemporary dance and the literary texts of W.B. Yeats, with traditional Irish music and multimedia projections. However, due to the lack of critical attention to the company's work, this danced heritage could be lost without revisiting the production and its cultural significance. Thirty years after the production, Meehan worked in the studio with the original dancers and company members to revisit sections of this work, and to remember its content and context. The explorations reflect on how past choreographic approaches inform current practices and how the material can also inspire new perspectives, ideas and dance material. Schneider's notions of 'performing remains' informs this project, with an emphasis on traces, ephemera, and embodied archives, linking with the proposition that 'the place of residue is arguably *flesh* in a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment—evidence, across generations, of impact' (Schneider 2011, 100). The project also marked the 25 year anniversary of the closure of DCDT due to funding cuts, and is therefore a relevant moment to consider both dance legacies and futures in the current economic climate.

In the next chapter, Finola Cronin charts the arrival of dance artist Cindy Cummings in Ireland from the United States soon after the closure of DCDT. Cronin highlights collaboration as a mode of work and means of survival by Cummings during the 1990s, and goes on to focus on the project *Triúr Ban* (Three Women), a combination of dance, photography and poetry that reflects on women's role in Ireland at the time. Cummings identified that an ongoing movement practice outside the

creation of ‘product’ was not readily available when she arrived in the country, and so she drew on available creative resources by collaborating in an extended project with established artists working through literature (Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill) and visual art (Amelia Stein). The importance of interdisciplinarity in Cummings’ practice resonates with findings about DCDT’s work in the previous chapter, although Cummings chose not to establish a company, and instead pursued a career as an independent artist who worked with others on specific projects. Cronin’s feminist perspective shows how Cummings works with traditional images of female corporeality to respond to the relationship between woman, body and state in Irish culture.

Roisín O’Gorman’s chapter furthers the discussion of how dance artists tackle Irish social issues in their work, through an examination of a selection of seminal works from the following decade. In her examination of dance theatre works and dance/theatre collaborations, she provides a broader analysis of cultural trauma, and revisits themes of body and language referenced in previous chapters. Rather than seeing language as a stultifying force, O’Gorman figures linguistic meaning as unfixed and mobile, while also noting that bodies are meaning-making or ‘storytelling’ agents. She discusses *The Bull* (2005) by Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre, *The Blue Boy* (2011) by Broken Talkers, and *Laundry* (2011) by Anu Productions, to examine how cultural narratives are embodied and dismantled in performance works. O’Gorman identifies the role of both body and language in showing underlying political narratives, and describes the creation of languages to share untold stories. Issues such as the greed and violence of the Celtic Tiger era, with its rampant capitalism, along with the institutional abuse in the Magdalene laundries and industrial schools, are elements from Irish cultural history that are discussed, showing the ways in which historical and contemporary political material has been brought to light in these works. Her chapter also questions ideas of what constitutes ‘dance’ in an Irish context, as many of the pieces described are not only interdisciplinary in nature, but also emphasise qualities of ‘not moving’ that are pertinent in revealing embodied Irish histories.

Aoife McGrath’s chapter investigates the affective experience and potential impact on the spectator of moments of choice, contradiction and vulnerability in improvised dance performance. Her discussion of *The Work, The Work* (2010, 2013) by Irish dance theatre company Fitzgerald and Stapleton, focuses on the contradictory, simultaneous