Balancing Time: Seeing the past, present, future and other time in the productions of Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland

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Abstract: *For over five decades, Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland sought to balance a sense of past, present and future in their work as part of an effort to preserve local traditions and remain relevant to contemporary theatre audiences. Although early productions from the 1960s such as Fadó Fadó (1968) focused on the representation of rural Irish life, akin to much of the early twentieth century Irish drama influenced by cultural nationalism, developments from the 1980s in particular sought a greater balance between remembering past practices of intangible cultural heritage and seeking to devise and develop new work that incorporates influences from changes in society and arts practice. Many of the productions utilized a sense of time as a narrative device, inviting audiences back in time or into another realm, as a method to engage a contemporary audience. Reflecting on developments on- and off-stage, in this paper I identify three aspects of time in the work of Siamsa Tíre: the narrative device that invites the audience 'back in time', the representation of the passage of time in mythological stories, and the responsiveness of the company to the time in which it exists.*

Introduction

Siamsa Tíre ['ʃi:əmsə 'ti:rə], the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, developed from community initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s led by Fr Pat Ahern (b.1932), pioneering a theatrical artform that foregrounded Irish traditional music, song and dance.[2] Critically reflecting on the relevance and representation of time in the performances by the company, I focus on six productions, namely *Fadó Fadó* (1968), *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991), *Clann Lir* (1999), *Oisín* (2000), *Samhain* (2001) and *Oileán* (2003), with an emphasis on the presentation of music and dance and the relationship between what was performed on stage and contemporaneous developments in Ireland and the Irish arts scene. Ahern, the founding Artistic Director of Siamsa Tíre, devised the earlier productions with musicians, singers and dancers from the local community. He was succeeded by American director John Sheehan, who had a background in opera and musicals. Sheehan devised *Clann Lir* with a creative team that involved local and external members, drawing on one of the best-known Irish mythological tales rather than local folklore or lived experience for the subject matter. Oliver Hurley, who had been a member of the company since childhood and a founding member of Siamsa Tíre's professional core company in 1985, devised and directed *Oisín*, *Samhain* and *Oileán*. These productions draw on both mythological and folkloric themes. In all of these productions, a sense of time is central to the structure and narrative but their development is also influenced by contemporaneous changes in Irish society and musical practice. These productions were integrated into the repertoire of the

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2 Ahern 2022; Motherway and O'Connell 2022; Kearney 2013.

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company and staged recurringly as part of a summer season of performances, primarily for audiences comprised of tourists to the southwest of Ireland, until 2023.[3]

In this article I demonstrate how Siamsa Tíre represented various aspects of time in its productions, critically considering how the company progressed from early productions focused on rural Irish life to devising new work that incorporates influences from changes in Irish society and arts practice, balancing the remembrance of past intangible cultural heritage and developing new material in response to changes in Irish society. This includes exploring the complex interplay of different temporalities, such as the time represented on stage and the real time of production and consumption, the recurring reference to religious beliefs in an increasingly secular Ireland, and the influence of a growing international commercial market for Irish traditional music. I draw on the work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1901–1991) on rhythmanalysis,[4] highlighting various rhythms inherent in and external to the company and its productions.

Although *Fadó Fadó* was staged from the late 1960s, the focus of this paper is on performances between 1990 and 2005, drawing on my personal experiences as a performer with the company. I performed in each of the productions examined herein and was involved to varying degrees in the devising or musical arrangement, an experience that informs my examination of the productions. My reflections on this period are augmented by detailed notes taken during my appointment as Summer Season Director in 2012 and examination of scores and recordings.[5] In Lefebvrian terms, I was present.[6]

The representation of the rhythms of life in rural Ireland, the staging of the productions in the summertime as part of the rhythms of tourism, and the increase in new productions at a moment when Irish culture was foregrounded on both the national and international stage, reflect a multiplicity of engagement with time. This reflects Stuart Elden's introduction to the work of Lefebvre, where he states: "Rhythm, for Lefebvre, is something inseparable from understandings of time, in particular repetition. It is found in the workings of our towns and cities, in urban live and movement through space […] the analysis of rhythms provides a privileged insight into the question of everyday life."[7] Achieving a balance between an often-romanticized representation of the past and engaging with contemporary arts practice, aesthetics and audiences is a challenge. Carolyn Swift and Christopher Morash have described Siamsa Tíre as "[t]he most traditional and, at the same time, original Irish theatre performance of which music and dance are an integral part",[8] reflecting an inherent conflict between the old and new in the work of Siamsa Tíre.

The 1960s and 1990s reflect Lefebvrian moments, "when existing orthodoxies are open to challenge, when things have the potential to be overturned or radically altered".[9] These two moments of artistic development provide context for understanding Siamsa Tíre's presence in time; the former as part of an international folk music "revival",[10] and the latter dominated by the intensified globalisation and commercialisation of Irish traditional music as epitomised by the success of *Riverdance* (1994).[11] While scholarship including "The Riverdance Effect: Culture Industries and Global Irishness",[12] and "The Riverdance Moment"[13] implicitly echo Lefebvrian ideas, as Wulff and others have demonstrated, the forms of Irish dancing were changing prior to the development of *Riverdance*, which is often critiqued as

3 Kearney 2023.
4 Lefebvre 2004.
5 Siamsa Tíre 2001; 2004.
6 Lefebvre 2004.
7 Elden 2004: viii.
8 Swift and Morash 2014: 482.
9 Elden 2004: x.
10 Williams 2020: 230.
11 Ó Cinnéide 2002.
12 O'Connor 2013.
13 Wulff 2007.

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"an instance of commodification in the global marketplace".[14] This article considers what came before and the resonances that were evident in contemporaneous productions.

An Invitation Back in Time

> I remember, I remember,
> The house where I was born,
> The little window where the sun
> Came peeping in at morn;[15]

Dressed in the style of a farmer in the early twentieth century, an actor emerged from a thatched cottage to the strains of the tune "Fáinne Geal an Lae" ("The Dawning of the Day") on tin whistle. As the lights brightened, he began to recite this verse from English poet, Thomas Hood, which suggest a nostalgic reflection on an idealised past and invite the audience to step back in time with the character. So began the production *Fadó Fadó* by Siamsa Tíre in the 1990s. It is amongst my earliest memories of the company; by then I had auditioned and begun training with the company and would later perform in over a hundred performances of this production as a musician, singer and dancer. For me, a young boy growing up in the town of Tralee, the production created a link to an earlier generation – my grandfather had grown up on a farm in the same area as Ahern.

The production of *Fadó Fadó* that I first saw and later performed in was developed from the earliest performances by the company in the 1960s. Revised several times with elements added and removed, it was always a representation of life in rural Ireland in the early to mid-twentieth century. It was shaped by the memories of those involved in the early productions, none more so than Ahern and his close friend, dancer Liam Tarrant.[16] These memories inspired generations of performers in the southwest of Ireland and their performances entertained international audiences for over fifty years. While the productions reflect a particular place, they also reflect the role of nostalgia in shaping both the cultural product and an understanding of time. As Svetlana Boym states: "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time."[17]

Time provided a narrative structure for *Fadó Fadó*, as the production followed the cycle of the calendar year on a small farm in early twentieth century Ireland. The cast transitioned from the awakening of spring and the young animals, through *Bealtaine* (1 May) and the summer tasks of thatching, before moving indoors for the winter. While much of the production is stylized realism, incorporating song and dance into scenes depicting rural life, it also includes references to the otherworld and superstitions. The presence of supernatural creatures suggesting an alternate realm disrupts the linear, albeit cyclical nature of time; the cycles interrupted by emigration, which disrupts the "joy in the village" motifs typical of twentieth century folk dance ensembles.[18] In contrast with some of these companies, which Ahern has acknowledged as influential in the development of Siamsa Tíre, *Fadó Fadó* and future productions sought to develop greater narrative structure rather than a focus on the exhibition of dance.

The opening of a new theatre in 1991 and the production *Ding Dong Dederó* represents the climax of Ahern's leadership of the company a starting point for new productions, although creative development from the early 1980s, particularly following the establishment of a fulltime core company in 1985, inspired some of the material.[19] Devised by Ahern in collaboration with the core company, the production takes inspiration from the North Kerry dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux (1883–1965), better

14 Wulff 2007: 121.
15 Rossetti 1873.
16 Phelan 2014: 142; Kearney 2021a.
17 Boym 2001: xv.
18 Shay 2002.
19 Seavor 2005.

known as Munnix, from whom Ahern himself learned to dance. After an opening dance sequence set in a blacksmith's forge, a character of a Sage or older man sings to the audience "Fadó, fadó, nuair a bhí mé óg" ("Long, long ago when I was young"). As with the earlier production, there is an invitation to the audience to come back in time or engage with a memory. The production again reflects on Irish rural life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but extends the timeline to the present, seeking to represent Molyneaux's legacy. The production presented an opportunity for the company to place an emphasis on a regional dance style, which became the kinaesthetic marker for the company over the subsequent two decades.[20] A central tenet of the production is the concept of tradition and transmission, with the older dancing master handing on his art to a new generation, who will continue to shape and evolve it. The production concludes with the sung lines in the Irish language:

> Roinnimís bhur saibhreas
> Caomhnaimís bhur noidhreacht
> Is bímís choice 'g rince
> Is aoibhinn linn gach céim
> ("Let's share our riches
> Guard our heritage
> Forever dancing
> Cherishing every step")

The extension of an invitation is repeated in the production *Oileán*, a production inspired by the heritage and folklore of the Blasket Islands, a place particularly associated with linguistic heritage.[21] In this instance it is the gesture of dance that creates the invitation, as a single dancer undertakes a journey to another place and time, reflecting Boym's assertion that "[m]odern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values".[22] The show opens with a contemporary and mechanical soundscape with dancers dressed in modern black clothing moving with speed and rigidity across the stage. One dancer is drawn out of the angular movements and eventually finds themselves alone as the gauze rises to reveal an island community from another era. While still incorporating "joy in the village" scenarios that echo the earlier *Fadó Fadó*, the production does not completely ignore the harsher aspects of life. There is an "Irish wake" for a young girl emigrating, reflecting a sense of loss felt when Irish people travelled to the USA, often never to return. As with Lefebvre's reflections, the representation of sacred music and ritual is marked by a slow rhythm, in contrast with the profane music of the dances.[23] During the dance sequence, while the music continues in tempo, the dancers slow during certain sections during which the emigrating girl steps out of the dance, with a brief, recurring suspension of time as she gets her coat, then her suitcase, and finally embraces her mother. The production reaches a climax with the death of a young boy while his father desperately tries to reach the mainland to seek help during a storm. The intensity of the storm, represented by the performance of a fast-paced reel with crashing percussion, contrasts with the near silence of the funeral sequence and the lamentations of the women. It is as if time stops and the death, both in the production and in the lived experience of the islanders, marked a transition. The islanders left the island, many of them settling abroad. The audience return to the present with the return of the black clad dancers but, in the final scene, they are released from the rigid rhythms of the mechanical opening and, revealing an element of island costume previously hidden in their black clothing, become free to dance with the abandon of islanders whose culture can be incorporated into modern life. There is a sense that the past is present as the entire cast sing together, representing a sense of tradition and

20 Foley 2013: 226.
21 Kearney 2017.
22 Boym 2001: 8.
23 Lefebvre 2004: 59.

heritage that extends beyond lived time. As Lefebvre argues with reference to Van Gogh, the artists on stage in Siamsa Tíre create presence and evoke a time for the audience.[24]

"Idir Eatarthu, Idir Dhá Linn" ("Between Worlds, Between Time")

> He got this air out of the night.
> Strange noises were heard
> By others who followed, bits of a tune
> Coming in on loud weather
> Though nothing like melody.[25]

Séamus Heaney's poem "The Given Note" is based on a folktale about the melody "Port na bPucaí", believed to have been heard by a man living on the Blasket Islands. The tale is represented in *Oileán*, when a fiddle player performs the air on stage as dancers represent the waves below. In several of the productions, there is an interruption in the time-space continuum, not only inviting audiences "back in time", sometimes into another time or realm. There is a suggestion of the *alltar*, another realm that exists simultaneously with the *ceantar*, the place or locality in which physical bodies are present.[26] In *Fadó Fadó*, the co-existence of two realms is represented by a dance to the tune "The King of the Fairies". The thatcher falls asleep atop a ladder while fixing the roof and is surrounded by dancers in straw costumes, reflecting the traditions of the wrenboys. The thatcher sings the song "An Poc ar Buille" ("The Mad Goat"), a song about a man going home who meets a mad goat on his way home from work, jumps on his back and is brought to Daingean Uí Chúis in west Kerry, where they encounter the parish priest who suggests that the goat is the devil. The use of a dreamlike sequence disrupts the sense of time in the production but is suggestive of another realm, as well as hinting at conflict between pagan folk and popular Christian belief systems.[27]

As with *Fadó Fadó*, creatures from another realm interrupt the time-space continuum in a dream sequence, suggesting an otherworldly inspiration for Molyneaux's art, a familiar trope in Irish folklore. For example, at the end of the first act, creatures emerge from the forge's large fire and dance around the young boy. Although performing in a contemporary dance style, they are the muses that gift the steps or abilities to the young boy, who shapes this into a percussive dance style that he will teach later in life. In the second act, he is the teacher, and his students are seen to further innovate, incorporating different dance styles into the sequence "Bímís Ag Rince" ("Let's dance"). In another scene, the boy is viewed away from his community who are reciting 'The Lord's Prayer', as if at mass, while he taps out the rhythms with his feet on the anvil. This imbues the dance with a sense of spirituality.[28] The interconnections between folk culture and Christian practices reflect Ahern's vocation as a Catholic priest and the faith of many of the performers but is contemporaneous with an increasingly secular society with falling church attendances.[29]

Based on one of the most popular Irish myths and legends,[30] *Clann Lir* represents the legend of the Children of Lir primarily through dance and Irish-language song. The audience is introduced to the character of Lir, his wife and four children, whose dance reflects happiness. The mood changes with the death of Lir's wife and his subsequent remarriage. The new wife does not connect in the dance

24 Lefebvre 2004: 24.
25 Heaney 1969.
26 Magan 2020.
27 For more on the representation of supernatural beings, encounters, and occurrences in Irish song and music see Uí Ógáin and Sherlock 2012.
28 Kearney 2021a; 2021b.
29 Inglis 2017.
30 There are four cycles of Irish mythology: the Mythological Cycle concerning the Tuatha Dé Danann; the Ulster Cycle focusing on a warrior group known as the Red Branch Knights that includes the hero Cúchulain; the Fenian Cycle focusing on another warrior group known as the Fianna and their leader Fionn MacCumhaill, father of Oisín; and the Cycle of Kings.

and appears to be jealous of the children. She leads them away before casting a spell on them, turning them into swans. As swans the children return to their broken-hearted father, who transforms his new wife into a dark bird before spending time with his children, communicating through dance. Soon the time comes for them to leave and spend three hundred years in different locations, battling storms and maintaining their unity. At the climax of *Clann Lir*, the characters of the four swans are transformed back into human form, performed by the same child actors whose physical appearance is aged. Ciara Ní Bhroin states that "The transformation of the beautiful swans into ancient human beings, in most versions of the tale, is somehow more horrific than the original enchantment placed upon the children, perhaps because it is a sudden and therefore shocking reminder of the inevitability of old age and death".[31] The transformation takes place at the sounding of a bell. A Christian figure, nominally St Patrick, blesses the children before they die, providing Christian symbolism in a pre-Christian myth. In this way, the story crosses from ancient to modern times and again reflects the interconnection between folklore and religion in twentieth century Ireland.

The trope of the passage of an extended period of time is again to the fore in the production *Oisín*. The narrative draws on the legend of *Tír na nÓg* ("Land of Youth") from the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology. The audience are introduced to the Fianna, Ireland's ancient warrior group led by Fionn MacCumhaill. On a hunting trip. Oisín, the young warrior son of Fionn, encounters a beautiful young woman, Niamh Cinn Óir ("Niamh of the Golden Hair") who invites him to travel with her to the land of eternal youth. Time in *Tír na nÓg* does not match time in Ireland and Oisín spends three-hundred years in his new home. He misses his comrades and wishes to return. When he does, all is changed and, when his touches Irish soil, he is transformed, appearing to the audience as an old man with the use of a mask and wig. This reflects Joseph Campbell's identification of the "crisis of the threshold of the return".[32] In some retellings of the legend, Oisín tells his stories to St Patrick before dying, again revealing a Christianising of the mythology that reflects Irish society's transition from pagan to Christian practices. In the production, the use of a song motif composed by Hurley seeks to evoke the early calls of the Fianna suggest an inheritance of folk culture from generations long since passed.

The 2001 production *Samhain* explores aspects of folklore surrounding the festival of Halloween, an occasion when time is suspended and the boundary between the *alltar* and *ceantar* opened.[33] The production begins in the present, focusing on a group of young adults who experience different aspects of Samhain (Halloween) traditions out of time. Scenes include encounters with fairies, Celtic deities, druids, a witch and the deceased. This veritable mish-mash of Halloween customs reflects the commercialised postmodern festival whose roots remain connected to folklore and traditions of the past. The production represents lingering beliefs in fairies and superstitions in Irish culture,[34] and seeks to engage the audience by demonstrating the relevance of folklore in contemporary life, reflecting Lefebvre's consideration of the impact of ritualisation and rites on the rhythms of everyday life.[35]

The Given Note

> So whether he calls it spirit music
> Or not, I don't care. He took it
> Out of wind off mid-Atlantic.
> Still he maintains, from nowhere.[36]

31 Ní Bhroin 2011: 11.
32 Campbell 1993: 207.
33 Kearney 2016.
34 Ó Giolláin 2001.
35 Lefebvre 2004: 94.
36 Heaney 1996: 34.

The inspiration and source material for these productions reflects the music scene and changing aesthetics in Irish traditional music, drawing on songs and tunes already performed by the community and incorporating music from commercial recordings. The productions selected for this paper reflect the work of different musical directors and while drawing on history, mythology and folklore. Musically, each of these productions provides insights into musical developments in Irish traditional music that are to the fore discourse on the tradition in the 1990s, a period dominated by the dance show *Riverdance* and various spin-off productions, Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin's television series *River of Sound* (1995), and the Crossroads Conference.[37] Although former General Manager of Siamsa Tíre, Martin Whelan (1950–2002) rejected suggestions that Siamsa Tíre should follow the model of production developed by *Riverdance*,[38] the music for productions from the mid-1990s reflect changes in the aesthetics of Irish traditional music, as well as foregrounding new compositions in a traditional idiom. For Lefebvre, creative activity "proceeds from the liberty and individuality that unfurl only in conditions that are external [to them]".[39]

It was pianist and composer Professor Mícheál Ó Suilleabháin (1950–2018) who recommended Kerry-born saxophonist, percussionist and pianist Eoin McQuinn as musical director for *Clann Lir*. Ó Suilleabháin worked with Siamsa Tíre earlier in the decade, notably in relation to his composition "Idir Eatarthu" ("Between Worlds") and McQuinn had recently completed his MA in Ethnomusicology at the University of Limerick. The piano dominates the score for *Clann Lir*, which incorporates old and new musical material. Performed initially by McQuinn, it has a strong rhythmic role, anchoring the ensemble. The score incorporates versions of mostly traditional tunes or accompaniment to traditional song airs, for which Terrence McQuinn provided new lyrics. Particular melodies feature as recurring leitmotifs. The Ballydesmond Polkas, part of a canon of tunes learned by many young Irish traditional musicians, sound journey sequences. Song airs include "Eamonn a'Chnoic", an 18th century song about an outlaw attributed to Éamonn Ó Riain (d.c.1724), and "Eanach Chúin", an early 19th century composition by the poet Antoine Ó Raifteirí (1779-1835), both of which are often taught to children and have a significant degree of familiarity for Irish audiences. The singers dressed in long robes, evocative of druids or monks, stand in front of eight-foot-high representations of ogham stones, monuments that are marked with an alphabetic script dating from the 4th century AD. The lack of distinction between pagan and Christian eras is important in the context of how Irish folklore becomes imbued with Christian symbolism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but also creates a sense of timelessness for the story.

While music was always integral to productions, it was not until the early 2000s that Siamsa Tíre appointed a full-time Musical Director. Tom Hanafin from Tralee, a long-time performer with the company, filled the role for more than two decades and he composed new material for several productions. Hanafin composed most of the instrumental music for *Oisín*. As with *Clann Lir*, old airs were paired with new lyrics by Muiris Ó Laoire, a lecturer on the BA Folk Theatre programme. An air composed in 1907 by Peadar Ó Dubhda (1881–1971) for the Ulster song "Úr Chnoc Chéin Mhic" Cáinte by Peadar Ó Doirnín (c.1700–1769) is used as a recurring theme. The ensemble comprised button accordions, tin whistle, flute, fiddle and keyboard, as was typical of many Siamsa Tíre productions. In contrast with the largely traditional sounds of the previous productions, the music for *Oisín* also utilized a synthesizer to represent the land of eternal youth, reflecting the instruments increasing presence in commercial recordings of Irish traditional music at that time.

Musically, *Samhain* followed a similar pattern to that established in *Oisín* by incorporating new melodies by Hanafin with tunes from the tradition, expanding the instrumentation to include the double bass.

37 Vallely et al. 1999.
38 Ó Cinnéide 2001: 51.
39 Lefebvre 2004: 43.

Samhain included some hummed SATB vocal harmonies arranged by Listowel native Colm O'Brien, best known as an exponent of ragtime and stride piano. Despite the limited inclusion of song in the production, Noel McAulliffe and Seán Ahern provided exemplary performances of new material in a sean nós style. The approach to composition and sound design in *Oisín* and *Samhain*, which moves beyond the performance of traditional music and song, is again present in *Oileán*. The opening scene of *Oileán* utilised an industrial-like percussive soundscape to signify the present. This is quickly replaced by traditional music, informed by research on the music of west Kerry and the involvement of singer and musician Máire Begley. In addition to incorporating traditional songs and tunes, for *Oileán*, Ó Laoire provided lyrics to airs by Hanafin, which were arranged for SATB choir by O'Brien. This creates a greater balance between the components of music, song, dance and mime or gesture, identified by Ahern as the four pillars of folk theatre.

In the Moment, of its Time

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past[40]

Siamsa Tíre began developing productions based on Irish folklore and mythology in the 1950s, identified as a period of transition,[41] an in-between time "which is altogether determined by things which are no longer and by things which are not yet".[42] Changes in rural lifestyles and developments in Irish traditional music influenced its development. There were fears for the intangible cultural heritage of rural Ireland and greater diversification of the soundscape of Irish traditional music, influenced by pivotal figures including Seán Ó Riada (1931–1972). Like Ó Riada, Ahern expanded the modes of and contexts for presenting Irish traditional music, particularly in the context of theatre.[43] Successive directors continued to develop Ahern's vision and approach but each of the productions reflected contemporaneous developments in terms of music and dance, as well as the influence of external collaborators.

Time is a central trope in *Fadó Fadó* but the engagement of the company with folklore and mythology was also a disruption of the rhythms of social and cultural development. The company developed at a time of intense change, when the isolationist policies of earlier Irish governments were being replaced by the outward looking policies of economist T.K. Whitaker.[44] Ireland joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973; this is preceded by Siamsa Tíre's first international tour, to Bavaria in 1971, and precedes a major tour of the USA in 1976 at the same time as other international folk dance groups including the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico. The first contributed to the awarding of the 1974 European Prize for Folk-Art, with an emphasis on groups preserving cultural heritage, while the second was part funded by Fáilte Ireland and contributed to efforts at promoting tourism to Ireland.[45] It is notable that this is also a period identified as the revival of Irish traditional music and The Chieftains were amongst the first ensembles to embark on a full-time professional career in an international commercial music scene.[46] Siamsa Tíre was well-received in the USA but the writing of critics a decade later, notably Colm Tóibín in advance of a tour to Australia in 1988, suggest that the production was of its time and, for critics like Tóibín, represented an outdated portrayal of rural Ireland.[47] Despite the establishment of a small

40 Elliott 1979 [1944]: 13.
41 Kearney 1988.
42 Arendt 1954.
43 Kearney 2022a.
44 Ferriter 2005.
45 Kearney 2022b.
46 Kearney and Commins 2023.
47 Tóibín 1987.

professional company in 1985, which contributed to the development of new repertoire and creative exploration, *Fadó Fadó* remained an ever-present production in annual performances by the company until 2010, before returning again in 2014 as part of the fortieth anniversary season. Anniversaries were a prominent trope in Ireland, which celebrated a state-sponsored Decade of Centenaries (2012–2023) around this time, reflecting an aspect of cyclical time involving commemoration that punctuates everydayness.[48]

Siamsa Tíre established a fulltime professional cast in 1985, creating greater opportunities for collaboration and artistic development. This is an important period for dance in Ireland and, reflecting on her experiences between 1984 and 1992, dance critic Diane Theodores argues that there was a proliferation of dance practice in the country.[49] In 1990, she suggested that Siamsa Tíre was "poised for the possibility of transforming into a major theatre dance company of Ireland". They collaborated with Anne Courtney for choreography to Ó Suilleabháin's "Idir Eatarthu" ("Between Worlds") in 1990, with Theodores stating: "The dance exposes some scintillating possibilities for a new ethnically relevant theatre dance".[50] Although aspiring to create an authentic representation of native culture as experienced in rural Ireland during the early twentieth century, we might draw comparisons with Luke Gibbons' assertion about memory that recognises two registers: "one that is contained and legitimised within the confines of the monument and the museum, and the other having to do with endangered traces of collective memory, as transmitted by popular culture, folklore, ballads, and so on".[51]

Despite an emphasis on tradition, Siamsa Tíre was pioneering a new form of representation that attracted audiences beyond the Irish diaspora. As Lefebvre noted:

> Social times disclose diverse contradictory possibilities: delays and early arrivals, reappearances (repetitions) of an (apparently) rich past, and revolutions that brusquely introduce a new content and sometimes change the form of society […] Occasionally, a long time after the action, one sees the emergence of a novelty.[52]

Siamsa Tíre was a novel development that has an important place in an understanding of developments in Irish theatre, music and dance. The production *Riverdance* (1994) changed the international perception of Irish music and dance later in the decade but the creative developments of Siamsa Tíre contributed to the cultural milieu from which *Riverdance* emerged.[53]

The 1990s was a period of increased commercialisation in Irish traditional music, epitomised by Riverdance and its various spin-off productions. Writing about Irish mythology and literature, Ní Bhroin also states: "this period saw a proliferation of glossy, lavishly illustrated Irish myth and legend collections for children, partly aimed at a tourist market, as well as the growth of a genre of fantasy incorporating Irish mythology".[54] Reflecting increased provision for the study of Irish traditional arts elsewhere in Ireland through this period and enhanced employment opportunities,[55] by the early 2000s the Institute of Technology in Tralee offered a BA degree in Folk Theatre Studies, taught in collaboration with Siamsa Tíre. It offered a pathway for younger cast members to gain qualifications while also attracting talent from further afield who augmented the local cast. Collaboration with contemporary dance choreographers including Mary Nunan and Cindy Cummings demonstrate the desire of the company to develop their artistic practice in line with contemporary activity beyond Irish

48 Lefebvre 2004: 94.
49 Theodores 1996.
50 Theodores 1996.
51 Gibbons 1996: 172.
52 Lefebvre 2004: 14, 15.
53 Ó Cinnéide 2001; Whelan 2022.
54 Ní Bhroin 2011: 8.
55 Foley 2021.

traditional music, song and dance. Writing in a broader context of dance in Ireland, Aoife McGrath has noted the important role of Siamsa Tíre as an influence on creative approaches in contemporary Irish dance practice by other performers.[56] As Kearney states: "By creatively reinterpreting the past, narrative can serve to release new, and hitherto concealed, possibilities of understanding one's history; and by critically scrutinizing the past it can wrest tradition away from the conformism that is always threatening to overpower it".[57] The balance between past, present and future is thus critical to the creative development of the company.

The complexity of memory is further complicated when the linear sense of past, present and future is augmented by the representation of an otherworld. Inviting the audience back in time with the cast and demonstrating how elements of the past remain in the present, through placenames and cultural practices challenges a linear understanding of time. Corresponding with the work of Henri Bergson, memories cannot be confined to the past but exist in the present.[58] In *Oileán*, the often-romanticised representation of island life is presented as an alternative to the intensity of contemporary lifestyles. Christopher Morash and Shaun Richards develop Bergson's theories in their study of space and place in Irish theatre, recognising that "space occupied in the present is also the active site of memories of the past, and anticipations of the future".[59] In all outputs by Siamsa Tíre, including *Oileán*, there is a balance between innovation and tradition, constantly drawing on the past for inspiration while simultaneously drawing on external artistic influences. Jonathon Kelliher, the original lead dancer in *Oileán* who succeeded Oliver Hurley as Artistic Director of the Company has stated:

> As the National Folk Theatre of Ireland our remit is to portray our traditions. We are trying to keep our traditions, but still move them forward into the twenty-first century – without stagnating. We don't want to be like most folk groups in other European countries. We keep our traditional dance as it is. We haven't strayed and gone with the modernization of the Irish dance. We've kept it, and developed it in its own way. Being the National Folk Theatre – folk being the people – we try to tell the stories of the people.[60]

Conclusion

The productions of Siamsa Tíre examined in this article reflect the centrality of time to the company's performances. By inviting the audience back in time, presenting material that represents several centuries of tradition, and performing representations of the intangible cultural heritage of rural Ireland, the company is serving a particular function of preservation. An aspect of this intangible cultural heritage is the belief in another realm or the ability to experience time in different ways. The performance of myths and folktales that relate to otherworldly creatures or the passage of extended periods of time serve particular narrative devices but challenge the audience to appreciate how heritage and traditions remain relevant in the present. In the context of music, the belief that some of this repertoire is inspired or gifted from another time or realm imbues the melodies with an additional value. While the theatre stage presents an opportunity for an unveiling of the past in the present, the representation through music and dance also creates an inversion, drawing on contemporary artistic practice. The representation of time past is performed through the incorporation of traditional songs, as well as the reworking of older dance steps with reference to agricultural and maritime tasks but sometimes to newly composed music with greater incorporation of other dance styles and approaches to song that are out of time. Thus, the past is situated in the present as part of an attempt to protect its memory and practices for

56 McGrath 2012; 2016.
57 Kearney 1988: 272.
58 Bergson 1988.
59 Morash and Richards 2013: 86.
60 Cited in Mulrooney 2003: 53.

the future. Simultaneously, the performances are developed in response to the aesthetic demands of contemporary audiences and changes within the traditional music soundscape.

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