

The Quintessential Dance Master Passes

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From the Hob by Paul Keating

MY recent visit to St. Finbarr's Hospital in Cork City was arranged by the O'Donovan family to visit the patriarch of the Cork family that was synonymous with traditional dancing both in the city and throughout Ireland and America. Daniel Joseph, age 89, more commonly known as Joe, was in his final days there. The family kept a daily vigil as his health declined swiftly from the Eastertide when he was hospitalized and unable to attend the Killarney event where TG4 awarded him and his wife Siobhan, their lifetime achievement award as part of their annual Gradam Cheoil awards.

Before leaving his room that Sunday knowing his time with us was short, I bade him goodbye by saying Slan Abhaile (safe home) and saw a huge smile of recognition come over his face which I took as his last expression of the friendship we shared for 24 years.

Three days later, on April 30, 2008, Joe O'Donovan, the dancing master, was gone to his eternal rest a few months shy of his 90th birthday. At least he left this world knowing that his native country had truly recognized how much he had added it to its legacy and heritage as symbolized by the TG4 award.

Driving around Ireland, I had a lot of time to reminisce about Joe and Siobhan O'Donovan and our first meeting in Miltown Malbay back in July of 1984 at the Willie Clancy Summer School.

As a younger — and much fitter — ceili dancer and teacher at the Irish Arts Center, I wanted to learn the country set dances of my parents properly. I had heard that since 1982, there were formal dance classes established at the WCSS organized by Joe O'Donovan, the Cork City native who spent a lifetime gathering sets from all around Ireland along with fostering sean nos (old style) step dancing learned from his own father, who had a dancing school.

I was immediately impressed with his command and control of a large class in the Miltown Community Hall and the sense of banter between him and his wife Siobhan, whose sense of humor took the seriousness out of Joe at times and helped make the classes both productive and enjoyable.

Separated by just a few months in age (Siobhan will be 90 in June), it was clear they were close friends as well as a married couple who had a zest for life. They found a pastime that allowed them to stay young and to meet and make new friends from all over the world.

I learned my lessons well with him and began to teach set dancing at the Irish Arts Center upon my return, the first such class in New York City at that time, but in my mind I felt that more formal instruction would be necessary from a more authoritative voice.

When I returned next year in 1985, I asked Joe and Siobhan if they would consider coming out to America to teach set dancing in cities where I knew there were dancing contingents in place. Since Joe had retired and they were in good health, they were eager to do it.

Ironically we pulled together a network of cities or towns where ceili dances (think figure dances promulgated by the Gaelic League) prevailed, and asked them if they would consider showing students some variations in Irish folk dancing in the country sets as taught by the O'Donovans.

Lo and behold, we were able to create the first tour for a set dancing master in America that lasted almost six weeks in May and June of 1986. So popular were they, it was even easier to put a similar junket together in 1987 in the late summer and fall, including the very first Cape May set dancing weekend at Congress Hall in 1987.

Subsequently there were three more excursions to America teaching set dancing and performing step dancing at festivals and events as far west as the Mississippi River (Missouri and Minneapolis), up and down New England and as far south as Virginia.



The organizational work of Joe O'Donovan put a fast-growing set dancing program in place at the annual Willie Clancy Summer School that sparked the extraordinary setdancing revival of the 1980s in Ireland.

He incorporated the incredibly organized and modern-thinking Brooks Academy wing of the Dublin-based Pipers' Club (Na Píobairí Uilleann), who not only learned the sets but published books and tapes that facilitated the spread of the country sets along with the Clare and Kerry dancers who had the original style that characterized the regional sets to lead classes as well.

Joe laid the foundation for that revival both at Willie Week and throughout Ireland, and inspired many other dancing masters who had different skills and mobility who took advantage at the new-found interest in Irish set dancing as a social and healthy past time.

In America where the country sets had been transmitted in extremely limited fashion and were in danger of dying out all together as the tradition bearers who knew them died out, a more pro-active stance had to be established.

With the availability of a knowledgeable dance historian like Joe and his spirited partner Siobhan, who could take extended journeys over to America, the proper grounding was assured here, and it made it much easier to build on and welcome the likes of Connie Ryan, Mick Mulkerrin, Donncha O'Muinneachain, Timmy McCarthy, Jack Slattery and others who carried it further to the vital state it exists in at present in the U.S.

It was more than serendipity at work when our paths crossed in Miltown Malbay back in 1984 when I was returning to my own dance roots in exploring the country sets that my own parents and their parents danced in Clare.

By engaging with an elderly couple from Cork who were completely devoted to one another, there was much more than the simple transmission of steps and the movements that go with them.

The importance of dance in Irish society bore lessons that Joe and Siobhan taught in a variety of ways, sometimes with even speaking or lifting a foot. While Joe had danced all his life since his father had a dancing school in Cork City after the Civil War along with his brother Mick (who married Siobhan's sister Breda, who was a champion dancer from the school), Siobhan was a late bloomer.

After their three children were reared (Michael, Rory and Maire), she took up step dancing at the age of 54 so she could spend more time traveling around with Joe, who was increasingly in demand for his teaching skills.

Talk about the mature learner, but it was also indicative of the close bond between them that made any reference to one without the other an unnatural utterance.

If the clergy were trying to take sensuality and romance out of Irish dancing, they had their work cut out for them with people like Joe and Siobhan and the feelings they help to generate when they taught their workshops, and afterwards when you spend time in their company in the after hours.

It is those after hours in their company as we went from place to place or homewards that left such an impression upon me and the others who grew fond of them from their American visits.

Joe was definitely an original and a proud Irishman who viewed his life through that prism. One would be tempted to say that his like will not be with us again, but amidst his incredible body of work he inspired a young man with Clare roots who happened upon one of his workshops in London as a small boy.

Padraig O'Dea was so taken with the dancing master that he soaked up all his knowledge and steps and channeled his mentor as he devoted his own life to teaching dancing of sets and sean nos steps. He became so close to Joe and Siobhan that the family asked him to dance at St. Oliver's Cemetery where Joe was laid to rest on May 3 in Cork.

Broken-hearted, the 30-year-old O'Dea danced the Blackbird, one of the old set dances handed down through the generations which he learned from Joe. I can just imagine Joe with a broad smile looking down from above and conspiring with the good Lord to see if there was another "Siobhan" out there to lift Patrick's spirits and make his life complete.

Condolences can be sent to Siobhan O'Donovan at Dunchaoin, Iona Park, Mayfield, Co. Cork, Ireland.