

## Sean Nos Step Dancing - It's a Living Tradition

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"They used to say, 'A good dancer could dance on a silver tray, and a really excellent dancer could dance on a sixpence.' Now, any modern Irish dancer would fill the whole stage."

But, why compare the two? After all, says Patrick O'Dea, they are two entirely different dances - one, a traditional "old style" of step dancing, and the second, a newer and less traditional outgrowth or variation.

O'Dea dances and teaches the old style, known as sean nos Irish step dancing. He visited Boston in July to teach workshop around the city and give a performance at City Hall Plaza. His visit was part of a seven-week teaching trip with stays in New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Minneapolis, Toronto and Cape Breton.

At 20 years of age, O'Dea seems like a person from the past - and not just because of his dancing. To teach, he wears a cotton grandfather shirt, dark trousers and black wing-tipped shoes with a few rows of nails hammered into the soles. To perform, he wears a tie, even on the hottest day of the year. He carries his music tapes and small tape recorder in a large black briefcase. His London accent reveals intelligence and a gentle spirit, and his gracious blue eyes show curiosity and warmth.

Then when he dances...his movements recall a time when dancing was done by itinerant dance masters at the crossroads of villages or the hearth of country homes. His feet batter in loose shuffles, hops, rocks and drums - complicated and percussive - but graceful, effortless and understated. His body stays relaxed and straight, and his arms swing slightly at his sides. He dances in a three by four foot space, not quite the size of a silver tray, but close enough. He looks like a mirror image of Joe O'Donovan - his now 80-year-old teacher from Cork who is one of the of the last sean nos dancers in the Munster style.

Born in Quilty, Co. Clare, O'Dea and his family moved to Enfield, just north of London, when he was two years old. O'Dea quickly became a dancing prodigy at the age of five. In Camden Town, in 1983, O'Dea's mother planned to attend a set dancing workshop given by O'Donovan and his wife Siobhan. "My sister was out, and my brother and father were at work," says O'Dea, "so I had to go along." Act the workshop, the dancers were short one person, so O'Dea filled in, and loved it.

It always came easily, he says, admitting that he never had to practice. He loved the exhilarating and rewarding feeling of learning new steps. Over the years, he continued to learn, both from Joe and Siobhan O'Donovan and Mick and Breda O'Donovan (Joe's brother who married Siobhan's sister).

Now, O'Dea carries hundreds of steps and sets in his head, and like his teachers, he also knows the history behind the dances. "To Joe, the history was very important," he says, noting that O'Donovan would teach the steps and explain their history at the same time.

For example, the solo set dance "Rodney's Glory," O'Dea explains, comes from an Irish language poem written by Eoghan Rua o Suilleabhain in the mid-18th century. o Suilleabhain was a Co. Kerry native who spent time abroad in the British Navy. "Rodney's Glory," (which is the title for a piece of music and a particular dance), was written for an Admiral Rodney on o Suilleabhain's ship. The structure and verses of the poem correspond to the sections of music and dance. Another traditional set dance called "The Blackbird" came from an 11th or 12th century Irish poem. The music and the steps were composed later, around 1750, says O'Dea, making "The Blackbird" the oldest known solo set dance. "I learned 'The Blackbird' from Joe when I was 10," says O'Dea. "Joe learned it when he was 10, from Stephen Comerford, who couldn't dance anymore and had to teach it by tapping his fingers on his knee. Comerford learned it when he was 10, and at that time, it was already at least 100 years old.

"It's passing on a tradition," O'Dea says. You're passing on something to another generation. It's a living tradition. It stretches from the past right into the future.

"Today, it's only dancing," O'Dea continues. He observes that "modern" Irish dancers, as he calls them, don't know the dates and history behind their music or their steps. "It's not tied in anymore with the music, poetry and song."

What happened to cause this change? "The years between 1780 to 1820 were a golden age for step dancing," says O'Dea. But the Famine years that followed caused a decline in dancing in Ireland. In 1893, the Gaelic League formed to cultivate the Gaelic language and promote Irish culture. It held the first Irish dancing competition or feis in West Cork in 1899. By the 1920s, feisanna were held throughout the country.

At this time, the Gaelic League saw a need for a central controlling body for dance schools and competitions. It set up The Irish Dancing Commission in 1931. An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha, as it is called in Irish, aimed to promote and preserve Irish dancing while also establishing guidelines and rules for teachers, adjudicators, dance schools and competitions.

"An Coimisiun wanted to preserve the steps," says O'Dea, "but it actually made them totally unrecognizable. Then it regulated classes and competitions, requiring teachers and adjudicators to become certified [with the yearly T.C.R.G. and A.D.C.R.G. exams]. As a result, many teachers left Irish dancing, and others were banned for not holding official certifications."

In the mid-20th century, Irish dancing became more popular, not only in Ireland, but also in Britain, the U.S. and Canada. And then, says O'Dea, "the whole style began to change, with influences from tap and ballet." In O'Dea's experience, before he ever met O'Donovan, he took modern Irish dancing lessons for a year with a teacher who also taught ballet.

Ballet movements have brought high leaps, kicks and jumps into modern Irish dancing. Previously, there were only a few movements that required lifting the legs to a high level. "High cuts and other steps that raised the feet off the floor were strictly ladies' movements," O'Dea explains. In old style dancing, women danced only light or soft shoe dances like the slip jig, single jig and single reel.

Men danced in heavy shoes, doing double jigs, double reels, hornpipes and set dances. When these "hard shoe" dances became more complicated, the dancers needed slower music. "By trying to fit in more steps and beats," O'Dea explains, "they had to stretch the music. Dancing became syncopated, not synchronized. When it was synchronized, the dancer and musician could complement each other. A good dancer used to know his tunes as well as the musician, and he would pick his steps based on the tune the musician was playing."

Today, few Irish dancers can identify tunes. The steps they perform are planned ahead of time, and any jig, reel, hornpipe or slip jig - as long as it is played at the right tempo - will do.

Finally, there is the issue of dancing on a silver tray as opposed to moving all the way across the floor. In his book *Folk Music & Dances of Ireland*, Brendan Breathnach writes: "The good dancer danced, as it were underneath himself, trapping each note of music on the floor, and the use of the half-door and table for solo performances indicates the limited area in which he was expected to perform." At his workshop at Boston College, O'Dea looks back at the huge wooden floor behind him. "This would hardly be enough room for Michael Flatley," he says.

The sean nos style can be defined by technical movements, execution of steps, speed of music required, size of space required, and more. But when he describes his own dancing style, O'Dea simplifies things. "It's something natural," he says. "You see Michael Flatley dance, and he loses 10 pounds at every performance. That's not a natural thing. Modern dancers are almost like athletes, and once you reach 40 or 45 years of age, you can't do it anymore. Dance is meant to be for all ages.

"And with set dancing," he continues, "you see people dancing so hard they're changing their shirts three or four times a night. Old men used to do three sets in a row and never even take their jackets off, and yet never break into a sweat.

"Just as music is a human thing, dance is a human thing."