

Co Armagh Irish dancing teacher Annette Collins on how she's kept the world dancing via Zoom

David Roy catches up with Lurgan dance teacher Annette Collins to find out how she's been putting solo step dancing enthusiasts through their paces during lockdown thanks to the wonder of Zoom

DAVID ROY - 30 May, 2020

Annette Collins enjoys the sun at her Lurgan home as her Irish dancing classes go online.

Picture by Hugh Russell



Annette shows off her skills in the garden. Picture by Hugh Russell

"THIS has really gone better than I was expecting" admits Irish dancing teacher Annette Collins of how she's managed to keep on sharing her dance expertise via online means during lockdown.

Having become a self-employed dance and music teacher back in 2017, former administrator Annette (55) from Lurgan is one of the many people in our creative and performing arts sector whose livelihood has been severely impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Co Armagh woman teaches piano, traditional set dancing and solo step dancing. She has a particular passion for the latter, a percussive discipline related to sean nós dancing where choreographed steps are danced close to the floor, making it ideal for dancers of all ages – indeed, her eldest pupil is in her 90s.

When Annette's regular "Step with Annette" classes were cancelled when lockdown began back in March, she decided to try something completely new by setting up weekly solo step dancing classes conducted via Zoom: thus, "Zoom with Annette" was born.

"A couple of people had actually asked me about doing it before, but I just didn't have the time to try and figure out the technology involved," she tells me of her usual busy schedule, which involves teaching weekly classes at Lurgan's Town Hall, Belfast's Skainos Centre and at the Camphill Community for adults with learning difficulties in Seapatrick, work with a Parkinson's Group as well as occasional weekend workshops and open floor events.

"So this [lockdown] kind of gave me the time to explore it and get through the learning curve."

Annette soon put together a 30 minute introductory solo step dancing tutorial video and uploaded it to YouTube. Although the video was free, she included a Paypal link for voluntary donations – it promptly generated £200.

"I was shocked," admits Annette. "That probably spurred me on to set up the Zoom classes."

However, it's one thing to teach jigs, reels, hornpipes and slip-jigs on a face-to-face basis in a space designed for such encounters – taking things online from home while attempting to keep her faithful dog Buddy from joining in added a few unfamiliar steps to the process, as Annette soon discovered.

"I had many dry runs and people from my dance classes and the dance scene were very helpful with that," she explains.

"Probably the hardest thing was just finding a suitable space, but luckily enough the house has wooden floors and I took down a wall last year so that the whole ground floor is open plan. So I was able to rearrange the furniture and now I have almost a little dance studio which I leave set up."

"Lighting and audio was a bit difficult, because while Zoom is fine for just chatting, suddenly I needed to talk and play music too."



Happily, with a little help from fellow dance teachers in Scotland and America, she was soon ready to put students through their paces three evenings a week across four different levels of competence, complete with 'homework' videos for them to study between lessons.

"The advice was great and people were really open to helping," she enthuses of the help she received in order to get her 40 minute classes up and running on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights.

Annette has got to grips with new technology to keep her dance classes going during lockdown. Picture by Hugh Russell

"There was a real feeling of camaraderie and pulling together."

However, it seems that teaching to an empty room has taken some getting used to.

"You learn by watching from behind, so I'm just teaching away to a white wall like I'm a mad woman," chuckles Annette, who does make a point of also chatting to her students face-to-face from at the beginning and end of each lesson, while also asking for plenty of thumbs up or down feedback along the way.

The classes have been hugely successful, helping Annette to reach an international audience. Her Zoom With Annette classes have attracted 41 dance enthusiasts from around Ireland and beyond, including participants from Oxford, Manchester, London, Paris, Brittany, Hamburg, Brussels, Belgrade, Madrid, Ukraine and both US coasts. In fact, she recently had to turn some prospective students away – a big change from the more selective appeal of her classes in Lurgan.

"Attendance has been good, but not great," says Annette of the latter, for which she specifically chose Lurgan Town Hall as a 'neutral' venue from which to share her love of step dancing.

"I picked it because it's central and I really was hoping that it might be cross-community, but I don't think that has happened really."

Annette describes solo step dancing as a "minority sport" even in Ireland. Despite having developed a love of set dancing back in the 1990s before she moved overseas for many years, Annette did not discover solo step until she returned to Ireland in 2006 and decided to attend a beginner's class.

She was hooked straight away and began taking weekly classes with BelfastTrad to hone her abilities before striking out in a search for different dances and new teachers.

"I think a big part of it's appeal was the rhythmic and percussive qualities," explains Annette, who holds a BA in music from the University of Ulster and has mastered the bassoon, piano and concertina.

"I also like to be active, so it was hitting everything that I like to do. Suddenly I was dancing to my favourite music, and I liked the challenge of it too: they're not natural movements, you have to learn to do them.

"Plus, it's a really happy environment. If you go to a solo step workshop, you don't get people who are fed up with life – you're meeting people who want to meet other people and try new things. I would look

around to find any weekend festival that had step dancing workshops and I might go for the afternoon or stay overnight. I was just soaking up as much as I could."

As a teacher, Annette's enthusiasm for solo step dancing is infectious, making her Zoom classes a relaxed, fun way for folks to give this 'minority sport' a try for the first time or stop themselves getting rusty while regular classes and workshops are unavailable.

Since we're all being advised to look after our physical and mental wellbeing during the ongoing lockdown, Zoom With Annette could be ideal for ticking both of these crucial boxes, as she explains:

"I push this in all my classes and advertising, that the research is there: dancing is one of the best forms of activities because it keeps the mind alert and the body active," Annette enthuses.

With luck, lockdown measures will begin to ease over the coming months and the Lurgan woman can get back to teaching her regular Step With Annette classes. However, it seems that might not mean the end of Zoom With Annette – especially when it comes to her newly acquired foreign students.

"I can see this taking off," Annette enthuses of her online activities.

"I can see me still doing a little international class for those who want it."

See [FB.com/stepwithannette](https://www.facebook.com/stepwithannette) for information on “Zoom with Annette” classes and how to sign up