

Close to the Floor: Irish Dance from the Boreen to Broadway. Mick Moloney, J'aime Morrison and Colin Quigley, eds. 2009. Madison: Macater Press. 155pp.

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You could be forgiven for thinking that *Close to the Floor: Irish Dance from the Boreen to Broadway* was a reprint or new edition of Colin Quigley's seminal work on vernacular dance in Newfoundland since the two books have the same title and Quigley is an editor of the latter. However, aside from his work as editor and his chapter contribution on percussive dance forms in Canada, this edited anthology is quite distinct from its moniker. *Close to the Floor* was derived from a 2005 conference of the same name, held at Glucksman Ireland House at New York University. The editors expanded the phrase "close to the floor," often used to designate the prized quality of lightness and neatness in a step dancer, to mean "the notion of cultural rootedness embedded in tradition.... Dynamic interplay between the old and the new, the inherited and the imported, the familiar and the arcane" (vii). Such were the emergent themes of the conference, and the book accordingly takes up and develops these themes.

Close to the Floor is part of Macater Press's inaugural series on Irish Dance Studies (<http://macaterpress.com/about.html>). There was an increase in academic studies about Irish dance after the 1994 explosion of *Riverdance* on the world stage, and it is refreshing to see

Macater take dance studies, particularly Irish dance studies, as a serious genre for academic publication and dissemination. With contributions by noted dance scholars and practitioners from both sides of the Atlantic, *Close to the Floor* joins monographs by dance colleagues Frank Hall, Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, and Kathleen Flanagan.

As a conference proceedings, this book draws from presentations, panel transcripts and roundtables, and there is a deliberate mix of the academic and the personal. Because the conference was held shortly after the tenth anniversary of *Riverdance*, the book's introduction gives a succinct overview of the impact of *Riverdance* as the framework for the articles that follow. It contextualizes the *Riverdance* phenomenon through a discussion of the costumes, sexualization, and corporeality of the dance, as well as a discussion of the show's impact on how Irish dance was viewed the world over.

With this groundwork laid, the rest of the book is divided into two sections: the first is entitled "Percussive Gestures: Redefining Traditional Irish Dance"; the second is called, more ambiguously, "Investigations." "Percussive Gestures" is conventional in that it features academic articles by Orfhlaith Ní Bhriain, Gary Larsen, Colin Quigley, Catherine E. Foley, J'aime Morrison, and Darrah Carr, exploring the multiplicities of meaning inherent in Irish step-dancing as well as analogous forms such as American clogging and step-dancing in Canada. Moreover, the chapters specifically devoted to Irish step-dancing challenge conventional wisdom about just what Irish step-dancing

is. Yes, *Riverdance* is the best-known style worldwide, but we also see the incorporation of such important Irish dance styles such as *sean-nós* (literally, “old style”), ceili dance and set dance. Nor do the authors ignore the critical link between dance and music, their attention ranging from an examination of how dancers and musicians negotiate during performance and competition, to an exploration of how a dancer experiences the corporeality of sound creation through the movement of percussive dance. Moving more broadly to understanding social and cultural contexts, the reader is further treated to explorations of dancer identity and motivation alongside details about how particular dance styles developed and continue to evolve into the future.

The second section does indeed “investigate,” mainly issues surrounding Irish dance, through personal accounts from renowned Irish dancers such as Donny Golden and Jean Butler (the original female lead in *Riverdance*) and well-established Irish dance teachers such as Kathleen Barnard and Peter Smith. This section features transcripts from three roundtable discussions entitled “The Impact of *Riverdance* on Irish Dance,” “Changes in Irish Dance in New York over the Past Half-Century,” and “The Irish Body: New Directions in Irish Dance.” These discussions make for compelling reading as they present the perspectives of the tradition bearers, the teachers, the competitors; the transcripts both complement the academic discussions of the first section and give voice to those who are the creative and pedagogical forces in the field.

As an edited collection of essays, *Close to the Floor* is a satisfying read for anyone with a penchant for ethnographic approaches to the cultural complexities of Irish dance. Clear and engaging writing makes the articles a pleasure to read. It will undoubtedly be of interest to a wide audience in Dance Studies, Folklore, Irish Studies and Cultural Studies. It is a fine addition to the Macater Irish Dance Series and certainly a welcome forerunner to the development of studies in Irish Dance.

