



Waterfront Hall for An Comhdháil

What is Open Platform, CLRG, and An Comhdháil? Is there more than one real WORLDS? John Egan of www.feispix.com explains Irish dancing from its inception to current day!

In olden days it was the Irish dancing master who first saw the opportunity to earn a modest livelihood by teaching the Irish dancing to peasant and aristocrat children alike. After all, there seemed to be an inexhaustible queue of parents who wanted their children to learn the finer steps of traditional Irish dancing. It is arguable whether there have been profound changes since then in spite of the wigs, the make-up, the

outrageously expensive costumes and the consummate athleticism required for polished new approaches to traditional steps. But one thing is for certain and that is the change from the old-fashioned dandified dance master who was happy to rest his head overnight in a host farmer's hay barn, to the present Irish dance school with a single male or female teacher, or the multiple teacher school that one can access in most towns and cities of Ireland and the UK today.

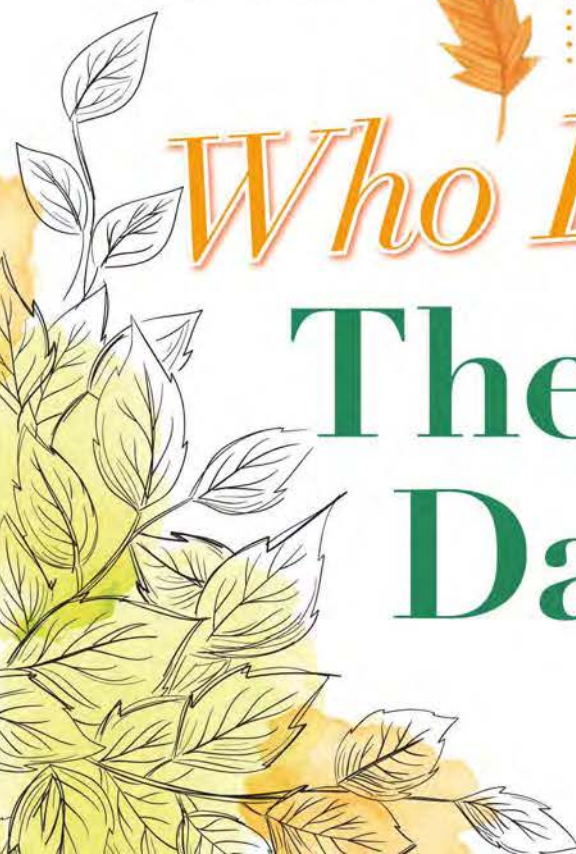
Dance has been a significant part of Irish culture from ancient times. Researching its history in the early centuries of the first millennium is difficult because of

the destruction by Viking invaders in the eighth century of books containing written evidence of cultural and social history. There is evidence, however, that dance and music remained an unbroken popular entertainment in Ireland over the centuries and it continues to be so to this very day. There are many references in the literature throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries of dancing at crossroads during the summer months and in kitchens and barns during winter.

In those earlier centuries there were no schools, colleges or academies of traditional Irish dance to embed a knowledge of its intricate steps in

Who Runs

The Global Dance World?



successive generations of dancers. I guess it would be fair to say that the knowledge was successfully passed on by a process of learning by osmosis. That is, until the appearance of the dancing masters in the mid-18th century. These male peripatetic dance teachers taught jigs and reels for the modest fee of sixpence to the peasants of the villages and small towns that they visited. The more mannerly and flamboyantly dressed dance master was fortunate to be invited into the large homes of the well-off to teach their children, and accordingly his wage was more generous. In the early 20th century dance masters were gradually replaced by dance schools. These schools saw the emergence of female teachers, and the rest, as they say, is history.

An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (CLRG)

As the 20th century progressed the desire to improve the development of organising, teaching, practising and competing in Irish dancing led to the setting up by Conradh na Gaeilge (Gaelic League) of An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha (CLRG), a body which temporarily unified the various interests in Irish dancing under a Dublin-based central administration whose regulatory tentacles extended all over the world, with the aim of improving standards. The CLRG has the biggest membership of Irish dance teachers worldwide. What followed is that the CLRG, with government support, took a cultural mish-mash by the scruff of the neck, gave it a focus, and sent it on its way into a brave new world that the nation and people of Irish descent, worldwide, could take pride in.

In its first register of those qualified to teach, the CLRG listed just 32 teachers and 27 adjudicators, all of whom were from Ireland. Clear improvements followed such as the development of teacher and adjudicator certification in 1943 leading to raised dancing standards. Today there are more than 1800 on the CLRG's register who are qualified to teach and these are based not just in Ireland but around the world in countries such as England, Wales, Scotland, Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany,

Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Kenya, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, Israel, Japan, China and in many other Asian countries. The majority of these teachers have dance schools and are actively teaching dancers in those countries. As an estimate however, of the number of Irish dance schools worldwide, this figure may just be the tip of a hidden iceberg. I feel sure that there is no definitive figure of the number of Irish dance schools in Ireland let alone in countries around the world wherever the green is or isn't worn. Some of the over-arching regulatory dance bodies keep registers but there are many independent schools who

This led to what can only be described as a split that resulted in the creation in 1969–1970 of an alternative over-arching Irish dance body which titled itself An Comhdháil na Múinteoirí le Rincí Gaelacha (Congress of Irish Dance Teachers) otherwise known as An Comhdháil. Within Ireland, a sizeable chunk of those registered with An Coimisiún switched their allegiance to the new body and their dance school pupils compete under this new organisation.

Open Platform Organisations

There have always been 'independent'-minded schools that are wary of



shy away from regulation both at home and in all parts of the diaspora.

An Comhdháil na Múinteoirí le Rincí Gaelacha

The CLRG is quite rightly proud of its history as the body that set in motion a scientific approach to the protection, development and nourishment of traditional Irish dancing. But in its early decades there were organisational and political teething problems about perceived inconsistencies in its representation of the different interests.

being mandated by the requirements of hierarchical governing bodies. They prefer a looser 'open platform' approach of affiliation and association under broad mission statements, whilst recognising the need for rules around competitions and dance syllabi. Essentially, if a teacher is affiliated with an open platform organisation, they are willing to let their dancers compete within their organisation as well as others. Whereas the CLRG, for instance, will not allow their member dance schools to compete at any other

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organisation's competitions.

To add some complexity to the open platform world, An Comhdháil recently determined their future in North America rests with operating open platform within that continent which will allow them to grow the organisation more quickly and offer their member schools an opportunity to compete more often. Up until the past several years, North America was primarily tied to the CLRG but in recently organisations such as An Comhdháil and CRN, for example, have moved into North America with member schools.

A major difficulty in creating a global database of open platform dance schools is the desire of many to remain independent and unregistered and to dip in and out of competitions in the open platform world. Some of the more well-known organisations which operate open platform include:

- Cumann Rince Dea Mheasa (CRDM)
- Cumann Rince Gaelacha (CRG)
- Cumann Rince Náisiúnta (CRN)
- Celtic Association of Irish Dancing (CAID)
- World Association of Irish Dancing (WIDA)

Céad Míle Fáilte Association (CMFA) – this association may now have coalesced into CRDM.

It is interesting that most of the above have become big players by establishing their own All Ireland and World Championships. And what dance school can resist going for glory? There is surely a cachet in having a world title in Irish dancing irrespective of the organising body.

In the boxing world, for example, does it matter if your title is WBA, WBC, WBO, IBF or FIGHTNEWS.com? Interestingly, criticisms are made by members of different dance organisations about the legitimacy of 'rival' world championships titles.

An Comhdháil along with the open platform organisations are growing and have become more strategic about



how to expand their reach.

It is clear that the future of these organisations rests in penetrating the North American market where the greatest percentage of Irish dancers exist. That being

said, the CLRG remains the largest and most global organisation on the planet, and continues to expand within North America and other continents too. As the saying goes, "competition breeds excellence."