THIS IS HOW WE DANCE:

THE IMPACT OF *RIVERDANCE* ON IRISH STEP DANCING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses how the popularity of *Riverdance* correlates to the expansion of Irish dance, and how the administration of the previously sheltered and localized Irish dance community capitalized on sudden global popularity to expand the reach of the art form. This thesis utilizes quantitative data from the World Championships of Irish Dance, along with anecdotal and historic evidence to document the increase in overall participation, as well as spread and expansion of Irish dance across the globe, juxtaposing data from before and after *Riverdance*’s 1994 premiere. Although, due to the limitations of this study, no definitive final statements as to causation can be made regarding the effects of *Riverdance* on the Irish dance world as a whole, through careful observation of patterns in the data collected, reinforced by anecdotal evidence, this thesis finds a correlation between *Riverdance* and the increased participation and increased global reach of Irish dance.
INTRODUCTION

This thesis discusses the topic of how *Riverdance* correlates to the expansion of Irish dance, because I want to find out how the administration of the previously sheltered and localized Irish dance community was able to capitalize on sudden global popularity and expand the reach of their art form, so that I can help others in the Irish dance community understand how this one show has transformed their art form. Furthermore, I hope to provide the arts and cultural sector with an example of how successful utilization of sudden popularity can benefit an entire organization or entire art form. This thesis utilizes quantitative data with anecdotal and historic evidence to document the increase in overall participation, as well as spread and expansion of Irish dance across the globe, juxtaposing data from before and after *Riverdance*'s 1994 premiere.

I believe that this case study is important to the field because it is important to study success. Though everyone involved in the arts in any capacity hopes that their organization will thrive for many years to come, in the arts, cultural and creative sector (especially under current market circumstances), it is all too easy to focus on the negatives and point out what organizations are doing wrong. As such, I am interested in studying what happens when things actually go right. What happens when a particular art form is suddenly thrust into the public eye? What happens to the administrators, teachers, and artists when their art form becomes “the next big thing” overnight? When art forms do encounter breakout popularity, it is important for the patrons and participants of that art to fully capitalize on that success in order to finally reach the kind of audiences and
the kind of enthusiasm that few can only dream about. For this reason, I believe it is imperative to study cases such as the Riverdance phenomenon to understand how one performance, and one show brought the art form into the limelight, and further, how the ensuing, fruitful collaboration between and cooperation among the Irish dancing commission in Ireland, Irish dancing administrators worldwide, Irish dancing teachers, and Irish dancers themselves have continued to build on this success for the past twenty years.

The “Riverdance Phenomenon”, as it is commonly called in the Irish dance world, is an elusive subject. Ask anyone in the Irish dance community about Riverdance, and they will certainly say something about how it “transformed” Irish dance. However, through extensive online research, I have found surprisingly few academic studies of this event. Although part of the literature, I have found the available studies to be dated, short, and/or lacking in supporting research. There are academic papers written, several by Irish scholar Barra O'Cinneide, that mention the relationship between Riverdance and Irish dance as a whole, but do not include quantitative research (O’Cinneide 2002; O’Cinneide 2003). Through online research, I was also able to find a paper written by Elizabeth Venable that addresses the effects of Riverdance through quantitative study. However, this paper only studied quantitative data from 1996-2007, and did not include a comparison between numbers before and after the premiere of Riverdance (Venable 2010). As such, I am confident that this research will add to the literature by providing quantitative, as well as anecdotal evidence of the increasing popularity of Irish dance. My ultimate goal is to provide a quality study to the Irish dance community, as well as provide the arts, cultural, and creative sector with a case study of an art form that was
granted a gift in the form of a worldwide blockbuster performance, and how they were able to retain and expand upon the resulting popularity.

To research this proposed question, I utilized two different methods. First, I analyzed quantitative data to help determine exactly how many people in the Irish dance community have been affected by Riverdance. To do so, I researched the number of competitors and countries they represent from the World Championships of Irish Dance (Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne). I have chosen to focus on the World Championships, because the CLRG’s (Irish acronym for An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha, International governing body of Irish dance) qualifying rules are based on overall global participation. As such, this focus created a stable sample size, which reacts to changes in the number of overall global participants. After collecting this data, I compiled it into charts/tables for easy access and analysis. Finally, I conducted an interview with Kathleen Ryan-Natter. I believe she was an ideal candidate for this interview for the following reasons: Kathleen studied Irish dance in Australia, she then became a dancer in Riverdance on Broadway and lead dancer in the Riverdance’s touring troupe (making her part of the first generation of professional Irish dancers), and she currently teaches Irish dance in the New York City area.

To collect the quantitative data, I analyzed the data available through the CLRG, online Irish dance resources, and the collection of Irish dance archives made available by the Burke School of Irish Dance, which are currently located at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio. Records from the late 1980’s and early 1990’s were collected via photocopies of original programs and newsletters during my research trip to the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland. However, as internet use
became more prolific in the mid-1990s, the CLRG began posting results from the World Championships online, and these records were collected via internet research. I also conducted an interview via email and subsequent follow-up phone calls with Kathleen Ryan-Natter.

I have limited this study to the numeric confines of the CLRG. Although the CLRG is the oldest, most prestigious, and most rigorous governing body of Irish dance, it is not the only one. Across the globe, several other governing bodies as well as unincorporated schools and dancers exist. However, the fact that they are much smaller and have less rigorous standards than CLRG, as well as the fact that Riverdance and its professional dancers all come from CLRG schools, has led me to the decision to limit my study to within the CLRG. Due to this, there is the possibility of underestimating Riverdance’s numeric global impact on the Irish dance community.

I believe that through my research, I have provided evidence that will help the Irish dance community have better insight into Riverdance’s actual impact on the art form. I have discovered that Riverdance was a catalyst for, and factor contributing to, the current popularity of Irish dance. However, I also found that although Riverdance became popular overnight, it took several years for the trend to be visible in the global Irish dance community. As a result, I believe this thesis provides the arts, cultural, and creative sector with a well-researched case study of a successful catalytic performance that transformed an entire art form.
“Tall and straight My mother taught me, This is how we dance. Tall and straight My father taught me, This is how we dance” (“Riverdance”). With its motionless arms, traditional music, and intricate rhythms, and increasingly elaborate costumes, Irish dance has transformed itself from humble beginnings as a nation’s folk dance into a globally recognized, practiced, and appreciated art form.

Although written accounts mention dance in Ireland as early as the Middle Ages, the history of what we know today as “Irish dance” does not start until the 17th century (Brennan 1999). Beginning in the 1600’s, terms now used widely in the Irish dance vernacular, as well as references to specific dance forms, such as reels, jigs, and hornpipes, make their way into the literature. At this stage, dance in Ireland borrowed much from its Scottish and English neighbors, and in these early forms, Irish dance was purely social (Brennan 1999). It was a form of entertainment that slowly solidified itself as part of social traditions, such as weddings, church gatherings, and social gatherings (Brennan 1999). This form of dance, and its implications on the social culture of Ireland, continued for the next three centuries, solidifying in nature and form, but remaining relatively unregulated (Brennan 1999).

The period of Irish dance operating without regulation ended with Ireland’s Public Dance Halls Act of 1935, which “[…] effectively banned dances in the houses of rural Ireland and put pressure on people to attend only formally organized dances in the
newly built halls, most of which were run by the local clergy and did not find favour with the people who had previously organized their own dances on all kinds of occasions” (Brennan 1999, 10). This legislation was passed for several reasons. The imposed regulations put the dance halls under control of the Catholic Church, enforced admittance fees which went to the Irish government, and insulated Irish culture and dancing from outside influences (Brennan 1999). Corresponding with this piece of legislation was the creation of An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha (Irish Dancing Commission, abbreviated as CLRG) in 1930. Founded as a subsection of the Gaelic League in Ireland, whose mission is simply to promote Irish culture, the CLRG became responsible for registering all Irish dancing teachers and adjudicators worldwide, as well as conducting all competition events (“History of An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013; Cullinane 2003). Formally recognized lists of official teachers, and adjudicators are still published every year in the Liosta Oifigiúil (official list). Following its creation, the Commission began implementing more and more regulations on Irish dancers, teachers, adjudicators, as well as the dances themselves. To become a CLRG-recognized Irish dance instructor (TCRG) or adjudicator (ADCRG), one must pass an official CLRG exam, which measures dancing, teaching, and judging ability to exacting standards. Although teachers choreograph individual dances, the CLRG publishes a book of authorized dance forms. In addition, the CLRG regulates official guidelines for dancer costumes and conduct at competitions (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013; Hall 2008). Despite these seemingly imposing regulations, Irish dance has not only remained a source of pride in Irish culture, but also has grown as a popular art form in Ireland and across the globe.
Irish dance has been present outside of Ireland for centuries. This is largely due to immigrant expansion of the Irish diaspora, primarily to North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013). Due to the fact that the country was founded by immigrants, the United States, in particular, has lent itself to the promotion and expansion of Irish dance. To that point, a 1789 account of a dance master teaching in Philadelphia marks the first record of Irish dance in America (Cullinane 1997; Casey 2006). From this point on, the art form has been quite popular, especially in areas with large Irish/Irish-American populations, and eventually became a way to preserve Irish national pride and aesthetics (Foley 2001; Casey 2006).

In spite of, or perhaps because of the fact that Irish dance had long been present in countries across the globe, when the CLRG began its regulation and preservation of Irish dance, it shortly thereafter expanded its reach and governance over Irish dance to these areas. Beginning in the 1960’s, formal regional sub-organizations of the CLRG were founded in order to bring current teachers together, regulate new teachers and adjudicators, and organize competitions in their respective regions (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013; “IDTANA” 2014; Cullinane 1987; Cullinane 2003). These sub-organizations include: Irish Dance Teacher’s Association of North America, Australian Irish Dancing Association, Traditional Irish Dancing Association of New Zealand, Registered Teachers Mainland Europe, Scottish Regional Council, England - North West Regional Council, England - North East Regional Council, England - South Regional Council, England – Midlands Regional Council, and Irish South African Association (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013). In addition to the current CLRG global councils, registered teachers have begun teaching, promoting, and sharing Irish dance in
other regions of the world outside the traditional Irish diaspora, such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Bourne 2011; Lambert 2012) As Irish dance as a whole continues to gain popularity, these regions continue to grow, and produce globally competitive dancers.

Irish dance has always been a competitive art, with histories of competitions going back to 1898. Competitions, called a feis (feiseanna plural), meaning “festival” in Irish Gaelic, are made up of several components. These include:

- solo dancing - individually choreographed dances performed by a single dancer at a time
- set dancing – rigidly choreographed dances performed by one dancer at a time
- ceili dancing – rigidly choreographed dances performed by a group
- choreographed dancing – specially choreographed dancing for a group of dancers
- dance drama – specially choreographed dancing for a group, following a story line (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013; Hall 2008).

In addition to these different types of dances at competitions, many feiseanna also offer baking, music, and art competitions, as well as social gatherings and Catholic Mass. In the early days of competition, events were held on Sundays. The girls would curl their hair and wear their Sunday-best dresses, and the boys would wear kilts and jackets. The winner’s prize was often a cake (Watters 2014; Hall 2008). As the popularity of Irish dance grew, so did the competitions. Throughout the years, feiseanna have grown in numbers of competitors, length of competition, and have also become both more frequent and more widespread. With the regulation of CLRG, came the possibility for the implementation of competition hierarchy. This hierarchy allowed winners of local competitions to compete against each other in larger, regional competitions, with the
most prestigious being the Oireachtas Rince na h-Éireann (All-Ireland Dancing Championships) ("An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013).

Eventually, this led to the creation of the first Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne (World Irish Dancing Championships) in 1970 ("An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013; Hall 2008). Although Irish dancing was not exceedingly popular outside of Ireland, competitive Irish dance spread across the globe, and several competitive schools in the United States, primarily in areas with large Irish immigrant populations, opened in the late 1950s and 1960s ("An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013). As the quality of Irish dance education improved outside Ireland, dancers began vying to become the first non-European dancer to win the World Championship title. This did not happen until 1975, when American dancer Michael Flatley won the title (Flatley 2006). After Flatley proved the strength of Irish dancers hailing from outside Ireland, the World Championships have become more and more competitive in not only dance ability, but appearance and attitude as well.

In 1994, Ireland hosted the Eurovision song contest. As the interval act, a short seven-minute piece celebrating Irish culture was performed. The act was Riverdance. The brainchild of World Champion Irish dancer Michael Flatley, Riverdance showcased Irish dance as it had never been seen before. By showcasing the mesmerizing rhythms through a straight line of dancers in perfect sync, combined with non-traditional but pleasing arm movement and traditional Irish music and song, Riverdance brought Irish dance into a whole new light (Flatley 2006; O’Cinneide 2002; Masero 2010).

After its explosive introduction at the Eurovision Song Contest, Riverdance was immediately transformed into a full-length production, which premiered to sold-out
crowds in Dublin in 1995 (“Journey” 2014). Soon after, Riverdance premiered in London and New York, and received the same reactions. In response to their newly-found enthusiastic audiences, Riverdance producers began Riverdance’s first international tours, and have not stopped a full 20 years later in 2014. To date, Riverdance has been performed on 6 continents for over 25 million audience members (Riverdance Blog 2014).

“The Riverdance Phenomenon”, as it has come to be called, has been one of the biggest success stories in the modern history of live performance. Working off this success, several other full-length Irish dance performance shows have been created in the twenty years since Riverdance’s inception. Most notably, these include: Lord of the Dance, Feet of Flames, Celtic Tiger, and Heartbeat of Home. Riverdance and its subsequent shows had significant impact in many areas. Through global tours with multiple casts, and long runs on Broadway in New York and Las Vegas, Riverdance effectively created the first generation of professional Irish dancers (as opposed to the historical norm of Irish dance teachers as the only professionals). In addition to creating the need for an entirely new profession, they created astounding economic impact through the millions of audience members, millions of dollars worth of merchandise and video sales, thousands of new Irish dancing students, and the creation of hundreds of jobs. Furthermore, Riverdance sparked interest in Irish dance across the globe, and many Irish dancers cite Riverdance as their introduction to the art form (Carr 2001; Bourne 2011; Lambert 2012; O’Cinneide 2002; O’Cinneide 20013; Foley 2001).

As in the early days of Irish dance, modern feiseanna still offer the same dance competitions, baking, music, and art competitions, and social opportunities. However, as
Irish dance has grown and become a part of global culture, the modern *feis* has changed as well. Gone are the days of kilts, pin-curl hair, and simple rhythm, and here to stay are wigs, rhinestones, and intricate, athletic dancing. Competitive Irish dancers are grouped by skill level, age, and gender. The first level of competition is “Beginner”, and is for those with no previous experience. A dancer must win first place to move into the next level. This process repeats itself several more times until the dancer enters the final and most prestigious “Championship” or “Open Championship” level. The vast majority of dancers on the national and international stage are open champions (with few exceptions for very young dancers). Dancers begin competition as young as five or six, but are not allowed to compete at the World Championships until age 10. The oldest age group is called Senior Ladies/Senior Men, and is currently for 21 years old and older. Throughout the years, the CLRG has increased the number of distinct age groups at the World Championships in response to increased participation. There is not an upper age limit in competitive dancing, but most dancers retire from competition, or become professionals after a couple years in the Senior category. Dancers in this level perform two dances for judges, and the top percentage (based on number of dancers) will be asked to perform a third and final dance. Scores are added for each individual dance to determine the ranking of the dancers, which decides the winners (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013; Bourne 2011; “Strictly Irish Dancing” 2011; Feinberg 2012).

In addition to the dancing itself, the world of competitive Irish dance has grown into a global network of social interaction centered on common love of the art. Although many dancers enjoy competitive dance, dancers may choose to attend as many competitions as they wish. However, frequent competition results in frequent interaction
with Irish dancers from other schools, and this can result in interaction with Irish dancers from different states, regions, and countries. Throughout its development, Irish dance has remained a largely social art form, and many dancers say that the friendships made across the globe through Irish dance is one of the best things about the art form (Bourne 2011; Lambert 2012; Feinberg 2012; “Strictly Irish Dancing” 2011). As Irish dance continues to grow and expand, it is a beautiful thing to see the social network of peers grow as well.

Despite its name and origins, Irish dance is in the process of transforming into a global art form. By adding classes and opening schools across the globe, especially outside the Irish diaspora, combined with increased exposure from performance show tours, Irish dance has grown to include participants from diverse background and culture (Bourne 2011). In Sue Bourne’s documentary film *Jig*, interviews are conducted with a *ceili* dancing team from Russia, and a Sri Lankan solo dancer residing in the Netherlands (Bourne 2011). Despite their lack of Irish heritage, these dancers are fully immersed and successful in the art, stating that the only thing one is judged on in Irish dance ability on the stage, not where one comes from (Bourne 2011).

Although Irish dance has seamlessly adapted and welcomed diversity, the effect of the global spread of Irish dance has certainly influenced the art form. Notably, this effect can be seen through trends in Irish dance costuming. Original Irish dance costumes were little more than the dancer’s Sunday best (Brennan 1999). Over time, these dresses evolved to include elaborate embroidered Celtic knot work, hand-crocheted collars, and brooch pins for ladies, and kilts with jackets for men (Fig. 1). It was then that *Riverdance* exploded onto the scene. With it, came some of the most influential style changes in Irish dance. The female *Riverdance* cast was costumed in dresses that, though with the
traditional long-sleeves, featured soft and moveable skirts, and the male dancers wore pants (Fig. 2) (“Interview With Riverdance Costume Designer Joan Bergin” 2009). Shortly thereafter, more and more dressmakers began choosing soft fabrics or tulle for skirts, and men began wearing pants with shirts, ties, and vests. Presently, Irish dance fashion has settled into an elegant mixture of tradition and modernity. Championship female costumes typically feature short dresses with soft skirts and long sleeves (Fig. 3), and male dancers wear embroidered vests with pants, shirts, and ties. Although bright colors and sequins are used, a modern take on traditional knot work is frequently featured (Watters 2014). Additionally, and perhaps most notably, Irish dancers are, more and more, choosing to incorporate their diversity into their costumes (Fig. 4). As Irish dance continues to grow, the results will be immediately visible, as the costuming aspect of Irish dance will evolve alongside, as it always has.

By understanding the history of Irish dance and Riverdance, as well as the current state and future trajectories of the art form, I aim to study the correlation between Riverdance’s explosive popularity and the global spread of Irish dance. I believe that collecting data from the Liosta Oifigiúil and CLRG World Championship archives, and comparing these records pre- and post-Riverdance, will help me show the correlation between the two. Although due to my current time and budget constraints, I did not have the ability to prove causation, these findings, combined with anecdotal evidence from Irish dancing’s rich history show the relationship between the success of Riverdance and the growing worldwide popularity of Irish dance.
Figure 1.


Figure 2.


Figure 3.

Championship Irish Dance Costume. 2013.

"Celtic Star Photos." *Celtic Star* (blog),
Figure 4.

Rear view of costume belonging to Australian Irish Dancer and World Champion Ceili Moore. 2013.

"Celtic Star Photos." *Celtic Star* (blog),
RESEARCH METHODS

In the world of Irish dance, there exits a cliché about Riverdance. When asking any Irish dancer, Irish dance teacher, or watching any Irish dance documentary, one will almost certainly hear about the impact of Riverdance on the art form with a statement along the lines of: “Riverdance changed the whole world of Irish dance as we knew it” (Ryan-Natter 2014), and “the touring shows are to be thanked for bringing Irish dancing to the world stage” (“Strictly Irish Dancing” 2011). However, most casual acknowledgement as well as scholarly work on the impact of Riverdance is purely anecdotal, albeit prevalent and widespread. To provide more concrete, quantitative insight into this phenomenon, I took a two-pronged approach, focusing on the incorporation and analysis of large amounts of raw data and also including my own anecdotal evidence collected via interview to show both the growth and global spread of the art after the premiere of Riverdance.

With regards to the numeric data, I chose to focus on the data regarding dancers who competed in the solo dancing competitions at the World Championships of Irish Dance (Oireachtas Rince na Cruinne). Beginning in 1970, the CLRG has annually hosted the World Championships, with the exception of 2001, when the Championships were cancelled due to an outbreak of foot and mouth disease (Carr 2001). I believe that focusing on this data creates a good sample size of Irish dancers in the given year, by both number and global location, due to CLRG guidelines for competing in the World Championships. To compete in the World Championships, an Irish dancer must dance for
a teacher who is registered with the CLRG, must compete in their regional qualifying championship competition, and may only compete in one solo competition group per year. These qualifying rules, aided by the fact that all World Championship competitions are sorted by age and gender, create a comparable sample size of Irish dancers, for every year studied entirely based on the number of participating eligible competitors in the world. As dancers are only permitted to compete in one solo championship at each World’s, using this sample size also eliminates the possibility of redundancy among dancers and number of dancers studied.

To collect this data, I researched the number of dancers competing in each solo group at every World Championship from 1988-2014, excluding 1991 and 2001. Records for the year 1991 were not available for study, and the World Championships was not held in 2001 (Carr 2001). Records were collected through online research as well as a trip to the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio. According to information found on several Irish dancing online message boards, the CLRG had a fire in their office, which destroyed most of the records from before 1996 (“Main Irish Dancing Message Board” 2014). Accordingly, the only surviving copies of records from this time are the private property of dancers and teachers who personally attended the events. However, Theresa Burke of the Burke School of Irish Dance in Cleveland, donated her personal collection of these records to the WRHS, effectively making it one of the only holdings of this particular collection available to the public. Depending on what information was available, I collected data from World Championships programs, which list each competitor, and/or lists of the results of the World Championship, which list the winning competitors and awards received. In addition to the name of the
competitor, both of these documents also list the dancer’s Irish dance school and country they are representing. To determine the number of total competitors from the results list, I used two CLRG awards formulas (Fig. 5; Fig. 6).

In every World Championship competition, all of the dancers in the competition dance the first two rounds (one in hard shoes, and one in soft shoes). After these rounds, the dancers are ranked. Then, a percentage of the top dancers are chosen to perform a third solo round for the judges. The percentage of dancers chosen, or “recalled” to dance in the third round is determined by the number of competitors in the competition as a whole. As such, I was able to use the “recall” formula in conjunction with the Awards formula to determine the total number of dancers participating in each competition, eliminating most discrepancy when determining number of actual dancers in competitions with dancers in excess of 30. I believe the combination of these two formulas allowed me to accurately determine the number of competitors (± 5), even when the actual number was not listed in materials available to me.

I calculated the number of competitors in each World Championship solo competition for each year studied. Then, I calculated the total number of participating solo dancers from each year. I then compared this total number of Irish dancers from each year to determine the total change in participation, with extra focus on the years around the premiere of Riverdance. An increasing number over the years signifies increase in participation in Irish dance.

In addition to listing the number of competitors in each competition, programs and results list the name, dance school, region, and country of each dancer. In order to track the growth and spread of Irish dance outside of Ireland, I sorted every dancer in
each competition into three groups: Ireland (including Northern Ireland), Great Britain, and Rest of World. I chose these regions for their significance in Irish Dance. I grouped Ireland and Northern Ireland together for this calculation, because Ireland is the birthplace and epicenter of Irish dance. I created a separate category for Great Britain (Scotland, England, and Wales), as the island has had close, long-lasting ties to Ireland and Irish dance for many years, which not only pre-date *Riverdance*, but also the World Championships themselves (“The Great Britain Championships” 2014). After sorting, I determined the percentage of dancers for each competition in each of these three locations. Then, using the percentages from each solo competition, I calculated the average percentage from each region for each year. This method allowed me to compare the global participation of Irish dancers at the World Championships across the years, despite increasing total numbers of participants in the World Championships. An increasing percentage in the Rest of World category over the years would signal an increase in global reach of Irish dance, as more globally widespread dancers become eligible to compete in the World Championships.

In addition to studying the number of dancers, I also gathered information on registered teachers and/or Irish dance schools run by registered teachers. CLRG Irish dance teachers must pass a rigorous multi-day test before they become eligible to teach, thus providing concrete data about number and location of Irish dance teachers. Although there are teachers who are not registered, only students of CLRG registered teachers are eligible to compete in any CLRG competition, including the World Championships. I was able to collect data from the 1999 *Liosta Oifigiúil* of registered teachers, available at the WRHS, as well as the lists of registered schools as of 2014, available on the CLRG
website. Both of these resources list the teacher and school by location, allowing for an additional way to track participation, not just among current competing dancers.

I believe my quantitative data presents a strong argument for increased participation and increased global spread of Irish dance since the premiere of Riverdance. To support these findings, I supplemented my research with an interview. I chose to interview Kathleen Ryan-Natter due to her intense, long-lasting involvement in Irish dance. Kathleen was a dancer, competitor, Riverdance cast member, and is currently a CLRG certified teacher. She studied Irish dance in Brisbane, and competed representing Australia in national and international championships (including the World Championships). In 1997, she was chosen to be a member of the permanent Riverdance troupe on Broadway in New York. Then, she transferred to the role of lead female dancer in a touring Riverdance troupe until 2005. Currently, she owns her own Irish dancing school, the Ryan Academy of Irish Dance, and teaches in the New York City area. As such, Kathleen is considered by most to be an expert on Irish dance and especially on Riverdance. Additionally, as a teacher, she is privy to her students’ experiences and motivations in the world of Irish dance. She has the unique perspective of understanding why new beginning Irish dancers choose to study the art form, as well as why older and elite dancers choose to continue their training. Kathleen represents multiple different aspects of the Irish dance world and her experiences shed light on the world of Irish dance before, during, and after the premiere of Riverdance.

Using these methods, I was able to collect a large amount of relevant data pertaining to participation in Irish dance from 1988-2014. Further analysis of this data
shows the increase in participation and global spread of Irish dance since *Riverdance*
premiere.
### Chart: Official CLRG Awards Formula

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Competitors</th>
<th>Number of Awards Given</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>9-11</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>12-15</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>16-20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>26-30</td>
<td>8</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*For every 10 or part of 10 dancers in excess of 30, one additional prize is awarded.*

---

**Figure 5.**

Chart of CLRG formula for determining number of awards per competition. 2014.


CHART: OFFICIAL CLRG RECALL FORMULA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Dancers in Competition</th>
<th>Number of Dancers Recalled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 50</td>
<td>1/2 of the dancers competing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 50</td>
<td>1/3 of the dancers competing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.

Chart of CLRG formula for determining number of dancers recalled to the final round.

2014.


CHAPTER 1: AN INCREASE IN THE TOTAL NUMBER OF IRISH DANCE PARTICIPANTS

As previously outlined, I chose to take a predominantly qualitative approach to determining the increase in participation in Irish dance since the premiere of *Riverdance* in 1994. I believe a numeric analysis will help provide concrete support for the widely-held notion of *Riverdance*’s catalytic effect on Irish dance.

First, I chose to study the change in total participation in Irish dance, without taking into effect changes in global participation. I gathered data from each solo competition from the World Championships of Irish Dancing from 1988-2014, excluding 1991 and 2001, and compared total number of participants from each year.

Overall, I found that from 1988 to 2014, there was a 68% increase in the number of Irish dance participants at the World Championships, and notably, 65% of this increase occurred between the premiere of *Riverdance* and 2014 (Fig. 7). The total participation increased from 770 dancers in 1988 to 2420 dancers in 2014. Although this increase was not completely steady from year to year, the overall trend of this data, as well as linear trend-lines and trajectories (Fig. 7) show with absolute certainty that participation in the World Championships of Irish dance has increased between the years 1988 and 2014.

Furthermore, during the pre-*Riverdance* years included in this study (1988 to 1993), participation held relatively steady, with a total variance of less than 90 persons during this period. The 1994 World Championships were held in early April, before the premiere of *Riverdance* in late April, therefore making the 1994 World Championships
unaffected by the premiere of the show. However, 1994 also marked the 25th anniversary of the World Championships, and as such, I found there was increased participation at this particular Championships, including a commemorative film by Irish dance teacher Olive Hurley (Hurley 1994). However, from 1994 to 1996, which accounts for the first tour of Riverdance in 1995, there was approximately a 25% increase in participation at the World Championships of Irish dance (“Journey” 2014; Fig. 7).

Additionally, before Riverdance, there had never been a World Championship solo competition with more than 100 dancers competing. However, for the first time in 1995, the Girls 14-15, Girls 12-13, and Girls 9-11 categories each had more than 100 dancers competing. This marked a huge increase in the number of dancers, especially among the younger age groups. It is likely that this increase is the result of new dancers starting Irish dance as well as current dancers increasing their training in order to qualify for the World Championships. I believe that this happened as a direct result of seeing, being inspired by, and otherwise exposed to Riverdance.

In the years before Riverdance, there were 15 separate solo competitions at the World Championships, accounting for age and gender. From 1988 to 1995, there were 6 boys’ competitions, and nine girls’ competitions - as there tend to be fewer male dancers, several age groups in the boys’ competitions were combined. At this time, the oldest competition groups were listed as “Men Over 19” and “Ladies Over 19” (though there was no upper limit to the age of a participating dancer). However, in response to the increasing number of participants and the correspondingly larger competition groups, for the 1996 World Championships, the CLRG created two new additional competitions, “Men Over 21” and “Ladies Over 21”, re-naming the former “Over 19” categories to
“Men 19-21” and “Ladies 19-21”. This increase in number of categories was a direct result of the unprecedented increases in number of dancers since the years directly following the premiere of *Riverdance*, and the corresponding increases in competition size. This process of creating new age groups occurred again in the 2002 World Championships with the creation of five new categories (created by dividing merged age categories), then in 2011, with the creation of one new category, and again in 2014, with the creation of another new category. The fact that the CLRG has seen and acted on the need for a greater number of competition categories is directly related to the increase in number of Irish dancers. Moreover, these additions correlate directly to continuous growth in participation in the years following the premiere of *Riverdance*.

Upon review of the line graph (Fig. 7) created from the data charts of compiled raw data (Fig. 7), several outlier years with unprecedented increases, decreases, and stagnations in number of participants can be shown to correlate with events which occurred in the Irish dance world at that time. As there was no data for 2001, due to the cancellation of the World Championships, a large increase in number of participants was seen between 2000 and 2002 (from 1268 to 1652 participants). A likely explanation for this is that the CLRG allowed all dancers who were qualified for the 2001 World Championships to automatically qualify to participate in the 2002 World Championships, since 2001 Championships were cancelled due to unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances (Carr 2001). As there was an increased number of qualifying dancers, the number of actual participants was correspondingly higher. The next large outlying jump occurs between 2003 and 2004 with an increase of 254 participants. There is not enough information to accurately make a connection between this sudden increase and any
significant events in Irish dancing history. The final large outlying jump occurs between 2008 and 2009, with an increase of 366 participants. A possible explanation for this increase is the fact that in 2009, the World Championships were held in Philadelphia, making them the first ever World’s to be held outside Ireland or the United Kingdom. It is possible that many qualifying dancers from the Western Hemisphere who could not afford overseas travel expenses could afford travel to Philadelphia for the 2009 World Championships, leading to increased number of participating dancers. Additionally, when analyzing this data, I observed a period of little growth from 2009-2012. I believe this stagnant interval could have been a result of the economic crisis. Although centered on the US housing market crash, the Great Recession had global impacts (Encyclopedia Britannica Online 2009). As there are costs, such as lessons, shoes, costumes, and travel expenses involved in participating in Irish dance, especially at the international level, the recession certainly could have caused stagnation in spending on extracurricular activities, such as Irish dance, reflected here in the lack of increased participation during those years.

In addition to this numeric analysis, I spoke with Kathleen Ryan-Natter about her experiences with participation in Irish dance. As a dancer in the early 1990s, Kathleen witnessed firsthand much of the increased participation. Before Riverdance, “[Irish dancing] was not popular at all […] not everyone knew what it was, and it was often mistaken for highland (Scottish) dancing” (Ryan-Natter 2014). However, as soon as Riverdance became popular, “teachers and students started seeking [Kathleen] out to ask about it, asking if [she] would demonstrate, and if [she] wanted to join someday” (Ryan-Natter 2014). Even now, 20 years after the premiere of Riverdance, the show still has an
effect on potential and new Irish dancers. As an Irish dance teacher, Kathleen states that “Riverdance has played a definite role in making it a more available and mainstream form of dance” and that many beginning students start dancing because they “[saw Riverdance and want[ed] to try it” (Ryan-Natter 2014).

In addition to inspiring new generations of Irish dancers, the advent of Riverdance also allowed current Irish dancers already involved with the art to make a career of Irish dancing, and continue their participation in the art long after retiring from competition. Before Riverdance, the only profession in Irish dance involving dancing was teaching, but after Riverdance, dancers had the option (if selected) to become professional Irish dancers. This allowed dancers, like Kathleen, to transition their love of Irish dance into a profession.

This evidence, including analysis of data collected from the CLRG records as well as evidence from my interview with Kathleen shows that the premiere of Riverdance correlates with the recent expansion in number of participants in the World Championships of Irish dance.
GRAPH: TOTAL NUMBER OF DANCERS IN ALL SOLO CHAMPIONSHIPS AT THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS 1988-2014

(A collection of Data used to create this graph can be found in APPENDIX B)

Figure 7.

Graph of Total Number of Participants in solo competitions at the World Championships of Irish Dance 1988-2014.
CHAPTER 2: AN INCREASE IN THE GLOBAL SPREAD AND GLOBAL PARTICIPATION IN IRISH DANCE

Before *Riverdance*, friends, family, and/or Irish heritage brought most Irish dancers, including Kathleen, to the art form. Although by the time the first World Championships of Irish dance was held in 1970, Irish dance had existed as an art form and was taught in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Irish dance schools were hard to find and the vast majority existed only in cities with large Irish immigrant populations. However, after *Riverdance*, the global reach of television broadcasts, video recordings, and international tour schedules allowed Irish dance to be seen by a global audience for the first time. As the CLRG itself states: Irish dance was “catapulted onto the international stage by shows such as *Riverdance* and *Michael Flatley’s Lord of the Dance* (*An Coimisun Le Rinci Gaelacha*” 2013).

To compare involvement and global participation in Irish dance before and after *Riverdance*, I compared the average percentage of Irish dancers in competition, from three different regions (Ireland, Great Britain, and Rest of World), who competed in the World Championships from 1988 to 2014.

I found that in the years before *Riverdance*, on average, 60% of all World Championship competitors were from Ireland. An additional 24% hailed from Great Britain, and only 16% of all participants were from any other country in the world.
However, by the 2014 World Championships, on average, 41% of all dancers came from overseas. During this year, 24% came from Great Britain, and 35% from Ireland.

When looking at the graph representing this data (Fig. 8), one can see that the percentages of global Irish dancers did not increase at a consistent rate. After the initial spike in international participants right after *Riverdance*, there is a large variance of high and low percentages that are not explainable with the data currently available to me. However, it is important to note that despite these discrepancies, the overall trend is a decreasing percentage of participants in the World Championships hail from Ireland, and the percentage of participants from the rest of the world is increasing. Additionally, overall changing trends in global participation in Irish dance did not occur right after *Riverdance*’s premiere. This is due to the fact that increasing the availability of Irish dance classes in overseas locations could not happen quickly, and it would take years for the effects of *Riverdance* on global participation to be seen in the data. In fact, the largest increase in percentage of ‘rest of the world’ participants occurred a full 10 years after the premiere of *Riverdance*, between 2004 and 2005, increasing from 25% to 38%.

Increases in the availability of Irish dance schools, especially outside Ireland and Great Britain, were noted with a review of the *Liosta Oifigiúil* from 1999 and through the current global school contact information, available through the CLRG website (“Burke School of Irish Dance Records 1960-2002” 2003; “An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013). In 1999, a full five years after the premiere of *Riverdance*, there were registered CLRG-certified Irish dancing teachers only in Ireland, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (and only in 32 out of the 50 states). However, by 2014, not only had the number of total certified Irish dance teachers increased, but there
were classes with certified teachers offered throughout mainland Europe and Russia, to South Africa, to Japan and China, and to Mexico and South America (“An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha” 2013).

Enthusiasm for Riverdance and the other subsequent live Irish dancing shows created in its wake has not only created widespread interest and demand for the art, but has also inspired changes in Irish dance in response to increased global participation. According to Kathleen, the energetic style of Irish dance introduced in Riverdance has led to a “fit, athletic, aggressive, strong” dance style in 2014, with an ever-increasingly high standard in competition (Ryan-Natter 2014). Additionally, as Riverdance broke the mold of traditional Irish dance by including and fusing other forms of dance, such as Spanish flamenco and tap dance, into its program, there is a lot of creative interest in Irish dance/other global folk dance fusion. An experimentation of this fusion, with Irish dance, jazz, flamenco, and ballroom dance, can be seen in the newest Riverdance-like show, Heartbeat of Home, which premiered in 2013 (“Heartbeat of Home” 2014).

The evidence collected from the CLRG archived results presents a correlation between the premiere of Riverdance and several important factors in the globalization of Irish dance. These factors include: increased global participation in the World Championships of Irish Dance, increased global availability of Irish dancing classes, and the globalization of the style of modern Irish dance and the inception of Irish dance fusion.
Graph: Average Percentage of World Championship Dancers Per Year from Three Different Regions 1988-2014

(A collection of data used to create this graph can be found in Appendix B)

Figure 8.

Graph of the Average Percentage of World Championship Participants from Three Different Regions from 1988-2014.

Data compiled to create this graph was taken from the following sources:
NOTES AND LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted with the hopes of showing the connection between *Riverdance* and the spread and increase in participation in Irish dance. Although correlation is shown, causation cannot be proved at this time due to constraints on the data available.

Due to several minor inconsistencies in the data such as: dancers listed in the World Championships program who did not actually dance, dancers disqualified from competition for any reason, and the possibility of computational errors, mainly due to disqualifications and tying scores, when calculating number of dances using the CLRG awards formulas, there is a possibility that the actual total numbers of dancers for a given competition is incorrect by ±5. However, given the scope and overall trajectory of the data, this does not affect my overall conclusions about the increasing trends of overall participation and globalization of Irish dance.

The CLRG is not the only Irish dancing organization in the world. However, it is the largest, the oldest, was created by a sanction from the Irish government, and is regarded by many as the most prestigious Irish dancing organization. Additionally, the original cast of *Riverdance* lead dancers, Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, were both World Champions through the CLRG competitions. However, due to the fact that there are other Irish dancing groups, as well as unaffiliated Irish dancers and teachers, it is probable this study underestimates the total impact of *Riverdance* on number of Irish dancers for any given year.
Not every CLRG dancer qualifies for the World Championships, and some dancers choose not to compete at all. Although I believe I have created a stable sample size based on the number of total Irish dancers, due to time, budget, and feasibility constraints, I was not able to determine the actual number of CLRG dancers for any given year.

It is possible that due to individual dancers’ personal situations, that the percentage of dancers from a given region or country is biased in favor of the location of the World Championships, especially with regards to dancers outside Ireland and the Great Britain. There have only been two World Championships held outside Great Britain/Ireland: Philadelphia in 2009, and Boston in 2013. As such, considering the cost of travel and accommodations, I believe that there is a slight increase in the number of dancers from the World Championships’ host country each year. This slight bias can be observed in the graph charting percentages of participants from three different regions (Fig. 7).
CONCLUSIONS

Although, due to the limitations of this study, no definitive final statements as to causation can be made at this time regarding the effects of Riverdance on the Irish dance world as a whole, when considering the evidence presented here, there is certainly a correlation between Riverdance and the increased participation and increased global reach of Irish dance. This correlation can be seen by observing patterns in the data. Before Riverdance’s premiere, there was a definitive, unchanging majority of Irish participants, few participants from outside Ireland and Great Britain, and little to no growth in overall participation. However, there is a dramatic increase in both overall participation and percentage of world-wide participation in the 2-3 years directly following the 1994 premiere of Riverdance. After Riverdance’s inception, both global participation and overall number of participants has been on a trajectory of growth through the final year of this study (2014).

With deep exploration into the numeric connections between Riverdance and the world of Irish dance, it seems remarkable that the creation of a ten-minute interval act changed the trajectories of an entire art form. A correlation of this proposed magnitude, between a performance and widespread global participation, has never been seen before or since Riverdance, thus giving legitimacy to the term “Riverdance Phenomenon”. However, the single performance of Riverdance at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994 itself did not singlehandedly change the entire Irish dancing community. Much of this success, especially in later years, lies in the manner in which the Irish dancing
commission (CLRG), Irish dancing administrators worldwide, and the Irish dancing community as a whole embraced and built upon the success of *Riverdance*. This can be seen through the continuous worldwide tours of *Riverdance*, the introduction of new performance shows, and cultivation of individual dancers by Irish dancing teachers and the CLRG, which result in steadily increasing numbers of participants at the World Championships of Irish dance.

Irish dance has become more than a folk-art. It is serious performance, art, and athletic sport. Participation (both through dancing and watching performances) brings joy to millions all over the world. Through the research conducted in this study, a definitive correlation is shown between the expansion of Irish dance from folk-art to global art and the premiere of *Riverdance*, and brings to light the way in which a single show influenced an entire art form.
OLIVIA: Tell me about how you first got into Irish dance…?

KATHLEEN: My sister, Rowena was already Irish dancing when I was born. Apparently she saw a girl dancing at school during recess, and asked her what she was doing. A girl was offering Irish lessons after school (in Sydney, Australia), and so Rowena joined. The girl saw Rowena’s potential and recommended she attend a competitive studio to further her dancing. My family moved to Brisbane (before I was born), and Rowena continued dancing with Charmaine Chase, so [Charmaine] has known me since I was born. I started following Rowena around as soon as I could walk, trying to dance like her. Char let me start classes at 3 years old, my first competition was around 5 years old and my first Championship was at 6 years old. My brother, Justin also danced with us. Charmaine is still like family and calls my baby, Seamus, her Grandson! We also have Irish heritage, so we were all happy to have that connection, and to have something in common as a family.

O: What was it like being an Irish dancer in Australia, far from Ireland and the rest of the Irish dance world?

K: I didn’t know any different, so it wasn’t like I felt left out … but I didn’t get to attend a World Championship until I was 17. We couldn’t afford the international travel frequently. That said, Australian Irish dancers around the country also
didn’t get to attend very regularly. I’m not sure if it’s that travel was more expensive back then (now we have internet specials and frequent flyer points), or if *Riverdance* inspired such an interest, that dancers felt more driven to improve and compete internationally.

**O:** What was it like being an Irish dancer before *Riverdance*? Was it popular? Did your friends know what it was exactly that you did?

**K:** It was not popular at all when I was in primary school (Grades 1 – 7). What I mean by not popular, is that not everyone knew what it was, and it was often mistaken for highland (Scottish) dancing. That said, I used to win the talent competition every year with my Irish dancing!! So, I guess it was “popular” in that sense?! High school (Grades 8 – 12) was the same, even when *Riverdance* first started. It was obviously recognized immediately by the Irish Dance community, but once *Riverdance* had been aired on TV, teachers and students started seeking me out to ask about it, asking if I would demonstrate, and if I wanted to join someday.

**O:** Do you think there are there any differences between Irish dancers from Australia vs. Ireland vs. USA? If so, what?

**K:** When I was dancing competitively, I think there was a difference in standard for a couple of reasons. Australia is so far away, it was difficult to keep up with current choreography trends, so we seemed outdated and simplified (except for my teacher’s choreography – she’s always been exceptionally ahead of her time!). And, with the smaller population, there wasn’t a large demand for Feis’, so we were lucky to have about 7 a year, including Championships (like the State and
the Australian … They are the equivalent of the [Regional] Oireachtas and the Nationals. In Ireland and America, depending on where you live, there is almost one per weekend to choose from. However, since Riverdance and the internet, Australia has really caught up with the latest moves, trends and standards that are seen overseas. They even had a World Champion this year (2014) – Ceili Moore!

O: When did you first hear about/see Riverdance?

K: I saw it in 1994 when it was just the intermission number for the Eurovision Song Contest. I was immediately inspired by Jean Butler and only dreamed I could one day be on stage, performing like her.

O: How did you decide to become involved in Riverdance?

K: My mother and dancing teacher insisted I finish high school before auditioning for the show. In my senior year of high school, my dancing teacher became the choreographer for Gaelforce Dance. At that time it was just doing weekend shows at RSL’s in Sydney. (RSL stands for Returned and Services League … I don’t know how to summarize it. It’s a support organization for people who have served or are serving in the Australian Defense Force. The best way I can describe it, is similar to a casino. Pokie (slot) machines, keno, buffet style food, bar.) Once I graduated in November, 1997 I immediately joined Gaelforce and thoroughly enjoyed performing! In 1998 the show started touring Australia, and when it was about to start touring internationally in 1999, I decided to audition for Riverdance instead. I had a professional video shoot to send them my audition, and used to call their office every week to see if they had any openings (I didn’t want them to forget about me!). Of course they needed to see me live before they could offer a
contract, so they asked when I would be on “this side of the globe”. I had planned to attend the North American Nationals that year, so they invited me to attend a Flying Squad Workshop in Toronto shortly after. I couldn’t afford both trips, or to stay for that length of time, so I chose the Riverdance Flying Squad Workshop instead of Nationals. My Godmother paid for my flight, and I flew by myself to the audition. It was the best, and most excruciating experience I had ever had!!! Before the Workshop, I made sure to go sightseeing, “in case I don’t make it, it won’t be a wasted trip” was what I told myself! Thankfully they told me they’d be happy to have me, it was just a matter of waiting for an opening. I came home and found a job waitressing until I found out they were offering me a contract for Riverdance on Broadway, commencing rehearsals in Dublin in January 2000.

O: How, if at all, did your perceptions about Irish dance change during your tenure as a Riverdance performer?

K: The main perception that changed, was that dancers from all different schools around the globe were united as one, without competition. It offered a different kind of adrenaline, and enjoyable one from performing to thousands instead of being judged.

O: How did you decide to make the transition from performer to teacher, and open your own school?

K: From the time my niece, Jessica was born, I always knew I wanted to have a family. That was in December of 1997. I met my husband, Bryan May 29th 2001. I had just been to Australia to celebrate my 21st birthday, and upon returning, found out that they were closing the Broadway show. It felt like my whole world
was ending. The whole cast was devastated as our dream life was coming to an end. Then I received a phone call from the Dublin office, to let me know they would like me to join the Lagan Company and be trained as Understudy. I would have screamed except I couldn’t get my breath! At the last show I was a mixture of ecstatically happy (to start training) and completely devastated (to leave Broadway and my best friends).

Bryan was able to get a job with the merchandise department, and we were therefore able to travel together. I felt extraordinarily lucky because only four female dancers were kept from the entire female troupe (2/3 understudies, the dance captain, and me). Cue the nastiness from the 3rd understudy – yikes! I also received some cold shoulders joining the Lagan, because there were other dancers who had hoped they’d be next in line. In 2002, Dublin announced they were going to hold reviews of the understudies to reduce them to their normal – three boys and three girls. A friend told me I should be safe because trainees don’t receive additional wages, so they could have four understudies for the price of three.

The day before my first lead (when the Dublin office were in San Diego to do the reviews), we booked my Mum a last minute flight so she wouldn’t miss it. That night, the boyfriend of one of the understudies stomped on my foot and broke my toe. I still danced through the pain the next day, then needed time off to heal. There was a very negative energy in the troupe once the outcome of the reviews had been delivered. I was ostracized again because I had remained in my position of trainee.
At the end of the first tour in 2003 we were told the Lagan would be closing, but contracts would be offered to join the Boyne. They were unable to change wages/conditions, etc. in the contract without changing the company name. Their plan was to reduce size and costs so they could book smaller venues and afford to continue touring. They offered the 3 male and female understudies to be equal leads in equal rotation, so they wouldn’t have to pay one male and female an extraordinary sum with amazing benefits. In trying to negotiate, we were told that if all the dancers broke their legs tomorrow, the show would still go on. We had tried to stay strong in the hopes of a better contract, but eventually most of us signed. I personally didn’t want to be forced apart from Bryan without an American Visa or employment. The Boyne opened in September 2003 and worked as they planned. A smaller show, with dancers, also singing, also drumming – we still looked like we had a larger cast, when in fact it was people multi-tasking. They had also downsized the stage, so we were able to go to smaller cities with smaller venues. Their next step was starting to introduce split weeks. Usually we would travel on a Monday, then perform 8 shows between Tuesday and Sunday. Now they were travelling Monday, one show Tuesday, two shows Wednesday, travel Thursday, one show Friday, two shows Saturday, two shows Sunday. As much as it may sound exciting, it was exhausting. By 2005 the novelty had worn off, and I was very much wanting to start a family. Bryan left tour first to establish a job in New York. They announced we were doing Radio City in March for their 10-year anniversary. After that I felt like I was done. I had danced on Broadway, I had danced lead, and I had danced lead in Radio City … I
didn’t feel like I needed to stay on tour and wanted to join Bryan and start our new life. It was the best decision I ever made, and the timing was obviously right since I’ve never regretted the timing.

Once I got back to New York, I decided to open a dance school because I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving Irish dancing behind. I knew it would always be a part of my life, and I think that is also why I didn’t miss the show. Watching my dancers go from Beginners who didn’t know a step, and growing into Champions and beautiful performers … It gave me such a sense of pride and accomplishment – it might not have been me on stage performing for an audience of 2,000+ … But the feeling is just as good!

O: As a teacher, why do you think your new students begin taking Irish dance?

K: I think the reasons are different for different students. Some see Riverdance and want to try it. Others have Irish heritage, or parents who did it when they were children, so want their kids to do the same. Riverdance has played a definite role in making it a more available and mainstream form of dance. Many ballet studios look for Irish teachers to expand the classes they offer, which was not common before the show.

O: As a former dancer and now teacher, how do you think the competition in Irish dance has changed over the years?

K: One example is the speeds of the music … When [I was] competing, the music was significantly slower, which allowed good dancers to show a lilt and completely different style in the Slip Jig and Hornpipe compared to the Reel and Jig. Now the style is the same for Reels and Slip Jigs, and the same for Jigs and
Hornpipes. The costumes have also changed. They are much shorter and lighter weight.

O: How do you think Irish dance as a performance art has changed since Riverdance?

K: Before Riverdance, performances consisted of mainly traditional dancing and costumes. Every St. Patrick’s Day we would perform, would be a combination of step-about Reels, Slip Jigs, Treble Reels, etc., and always in our solo costumes. Since the show, teachers are more inspired to try Riverdance style costumes, and also some more exciting performance choreography. Dancing as a team, but not necessarily traditional ceili. There is also an abundance of show music, rather than the traditional music we had always used at competitions. The performance world has completely evolved since Riverdance.

O: How would you describe Irish dancers in 2014?

K: Fit, athletic, aggressive, strong. I feel like it was more about a dancing style when I was competing, rather than survival of the fittest. Like, nice steps danced nicely around the stage, compared to pounding the stage with [a million] beats per second. It’s understandable for the style to evolve. I would just describe the evolution to have moved from dance style to athletic sport.

O: How would you describe diversity in the Irish dance world? (This question was revised during a second phone call with Kathleen, and the following answer is paraphrased per her comments).

K: [It’s definitely increasing. There are more dancers now who do not have Irish heritage, and more schools and teachers all around the globe. There are even Irish dancers as far as Mexico, South America, and China! I’ve also seen a lot of
interest in fusion between Irish dance and other cultural dance forms like traditional Indian dance, Spanish flamenco, and tap dance. I think some of this interest in fusion probably came from some of the acts in Riverdance like “Trading Taps” and “Fire Dance”.]

O: In your own words, how would you describe the effect of Riverdance on the Irish dance world?

K: Riverdance changed the whole world of Irish dance as we knew it. The worldwide recognition of it as an art form/sport, as well as its popularity, not to mention having a performance career in Irish dance, never existed before the show.
APPENDIX B: LIST OF SOURCES USED TO CREATE DATA FOR

GRAPHS (FIGURES 7 & 8)

1. Program: Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne 2004. Found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

2. Program: Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne 1999. Found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

3. Program: Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne 1995. Found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

4. Program: Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne 1996. Found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.

5. Program: Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne 1997. Found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.


7. Program: Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne 2000. Found at the Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, OH.


**Glossary**

**Ard Diploma Coimisiuin le Rinci Gaelacha (abbreviated as ADCRG)** – An adjudicator, officially recognized by the CLRG, who is sanctioned to judge Irish dancing competitions. All adjudicators must first be TCRGs, and must also pass the adjudication exam.

**An Coimisiun le Rinci Gaelacha (abbreviated as CLRG)** – International governing body of Irish dance, commissioned by the Irish government in 1930. Based in Ireland, the CLRG has affiliated sub-organizations across the globe, and oversees dancers, teachers, and competitions around the world.

**Beginner** – A new Irish dancing student. Beginner also refers to the lowest level of Irish dance competition. There is no connection to the dancer’s age.

**Champion** – An Irish dancer who competes at the Championship level. A Champion is eligible to participate in regional and national, and international competitions.

**Feis** – Irish Gaelic term for an arts and culture festival. Within the context of Irish dance, a feis is the term used for a dance competition, which may include art, baking, and/or music competitions as well.

**Feiseanna** – plural of feis.

**Hard Shoes** – Type of Irish dancing shoes. They are akin to tap shoes, but made with fiberglass heels and tips. They also have structure on the tip so that the dancer may stand/dance on the tips of the toes, similar to a ballerina in pointe shoes. They are worn by both men and women for performing intricate rhythmic dances.
**Liosta Oifigiúil** – Irish for “official list”. Within the context of Irish dance, this is the official registry of all CLRG certified teachers and adjudicators worldwide.

**Oireachtas** – Irish Gaelic term meaning “gathering” or “gathering of important people”. Within the context of Irish dance, an Oireachtas is a large regional, national, or international dance competition.

**Oireachtas Rince Na Cruinne** – Irish name for the World Championships of Irish Dance, which is an international competition.

**Oireachtas Rince Na H’Eireann** – Irish name for the All-Ireland Championships, which is an international competition.

**Recall** – An invitation to perform a Set Dance in a championship level competition. All dancers perform the first two rounds, but only a percentage, determined by a CLRG formula, are invited to compete in the final round.

**Senior Man/Senior Lady** – Oldest age group in Irish dancing competitions. The 2014 Senior age groups are *Men 21 and Over* and *Ladies 21 and Over*. There is no upper age limit in Irish dancing competitions.

**Set Dance** – Final of three rounds of competition. This is a dance performed in hard shoes, individually choreographed for the dancer, and performed as a solo.

**Soft Shoes** – Flexible leather shoes worn for soft shoe dances, which are highly athletic, and include a lot of jumping. They are worn by both men and women. However while ladies’ soft shoes are completely soft, men’s soft shoes also include a fiberglass heel for added rhythm.
Teagascóir Choimisiúin le Rinci Gaelacha (abbreviated as TCRG) – An Irish dancing teacher who has passed rigorous teaching qualification, and is certified under the CLRG.
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