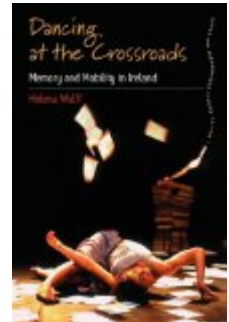


**Helena Wulff.** *Dancing at the Crossroads: Memory and Mobility in Ireland.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 184 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-328-2.



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**Commissioned by** Michael De Nie (University of West Georgia)

*Dancing at the Crossroads* is Helena Wulff's latest book-length study of dance; a previous book focused on ballet dancers. Although the reader may be tempted to associate dance in Ireland only with competitive solo dancing or with *Riverdance*, this volume looks at dances of varying styles: folk dancing, sean-nós dancing, and dance theater. The title of the piece, *Dancing at the Crossroads*, as explained by Wulff in the first chapter, is an allusion to a number of events in Ireland: a phrase used by Eamon de Valera in a political speech; a practice done by Irish people, which may now only exist in folklore; and a practice that was eventually outlawed by the Public Dance Halls Act (1935). All of these events have historical significance, but the phrase, in Wulff's analysis, also becomes a "key metaphor for major aspects of a changing society where tradition and modernity meet, and are being negotiated in many ways in different contexts" (p. 14).

Each chapter discusses a particular dance style or dance event. For example, the first chapter describes a sean-nós competition and the sec-

ond a dance theater production entitled *Ballads*. Subsequent chapters include additional examples of dance theater, a description of the Worlds (competitive solo step dancing), and a discussion of *Riverdance*. However, these descriptions of dance are vehicles for weaving together larger themes. According to Wulff, "Where my analysis is distinctive is in the way it pulls together the existing debates on memory and mobility, tradition and modernity, and relates them to dance and culture in Ireland" (p. 2). The focus, then, is on how the larger themes of memory and mobility are connected through all of these individual styles of dance in Ireland.

Consequently, Wulff does convincing and interesting work in making the argument that all Irish dance is influenced by links to the land and/or notions of Irishness, tradition, authenticity, and collective identity. These concerns, which manifest themselves in various ways through choreography, narrative, and specific movement, are with maintaining Irish tradition--whether through recurring historical references or themes (or re-

mind/educating people of them); through becoming trustees of tradition; or through finding what it means to be Irish, for example, by storytelling, performing dark comedy, or creating community. This task becomes increasingly complicated given issues of immigration, colonization, diasporic communities, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism.

Her research on Irish topics is extensive. Occasionally, the ties seem to drift far from dance, as in her discussions of peat bogs, radio shows, storytelling (the loquaciousness of Irish people), and manmade islands, so that the reader may have to remind him/herself that dance is the overarching point of reference. Often, rather than focusing on individual steps or movement, Wulff's descriptions look at the larger picture--the function of the dance event, the theme or narrative surrounding the dance, or the funding given to particular companies. Because of this choice, each chapter may only dip into a particular element of the dance, which sometimes leaves the reader wanting more details about the movement, dance event, and history of the dance or company, or more quotations from her impressive list of informants. However, given that other scholars have focused on some of these elements, she may not have felt it necessary to do so.[1]

Wulff situates herself as a researcher who does "anthropology of dance" (p. 9). Other scholars may identify her research as dance ethnography or ethnochoreology because of her recognition of the "ability of dance to express certain circumstances about its society" and the "nature of dance as a special means for uncovering social and cultural circumstances" (p. 2). As opposed to some studies of dance, Wulff is interested in what the dance communicates about the culture or how the culture is communicated through the dance, rather than simply providing a description of the dance without any cultural context or describing the culture with a limited discussion of how the dance functions socially and historically. Wulff's

study is interdisciplinary in its use of theory and scholarship from performance studies and Irish studies with links to ethnography of communication, storytelling, musicology, and folklore.

Her methodology includes ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and archival work. She conducted eighty-one formal interviews for this study and attended numerous events, including, but not limited to, dance competitions, festivals, and performances; she also conducted backstage observations as she attended these events over the course of approximately three years. Her list of informants is extremely impressive and varied. She had access to leading scholars, choreographers, critics, dancers, dance administrators, and instructors. She also does not hesitate to interview young dancers at competitions. Although Wulff makes her home in Stockholm, she conducted her research through a method that she discusses in her afterword called yo-yo fieldwork; she flies back and forth to Ireland to conduct interviews and attend events. She does not locate herself, like the "traditional anthropologist," in one location for an extended period of time, but rather travels to relevant locations as events occur. It is encouraging to see someone who does not necessarily identify as from Ireland conducting this type of research as well as a scholar who "take[s] part in the activity they study" (p. 18).

Often in introducing a chapter, Wulff's description of the event or dance style includes a personal narrative. In one chapter, for example, she discloses that she was inadvertently selected to judge a competition that she attended. It was her willingness to share her story, or admit to the researcher's part in and influence on the story, which was of particular interest to me. These moments leaned toward an autoethnographic account and, admittedly, would have given the book a very different approach if Wulff had used them more fully.

For scholars needing a comprehensive list of Irish dance literature and related topics, Wulff's

acknowledgments, first chapter, and bibliography contain a detailed survey of this material, despite the fact that she states: “Scholarly literature in dance in Ireland is surprisingly small and quite focused on historical descriptions of traditional Irish dancing or competitive step dancing” (p. 7). The caveat is that this list, as is appropriate for Wulff’s focus, is primarily, although not exclusively, written about dance in Ireland.[2] The reader, if interested in Irish dance in the United States, may need to look to studies done by Cynthia Sughrue, Kathleen Flanagan, or others and alternate sources for the Irish dance diaspora outside Ireland and the United States.[3]

#### Notes

[1]. For example, see Helen Brennan, *The Story of Irish Dance* (Kerry: Brandon, 1999); John Cullinane, *Further Aspects on the History of Irish Dancing* (Cork City: Ballineaspig, 1994); Frank Hall, “Irish Dancing: Discipline as Art, Sport, and Duty” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1995); Deirdre Mulrooney, *Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2006); as well as many others.

[2]. John Cullinane, *Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing in Ireland, England, New Zealand, North America and Australia* (Cork City: Cullinane, 1999) is one example.

[3]. Cynthia Sughrue, *The O’Shea Dancing School as a Socio-Cultural Medium in a Boston Irish Community* (working papers, Northeastern University, 1985); and Kathleen Flanagan, *Steps in Time: The History of Irish Dance in Chicago* (Madison: Macater Press, forthcoming, 2009).

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