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Burdens and Opportunities of Tradition in Artistic Communities: Listening to Narratives of the Arts in Siamsa Tíre's *Sounds Like Folk* Podcast Series

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Abstract:

Like many venues and arts companies across the world, the Siamsa Tíre Theatre and Arts Centre in Tralee, Co. Kerry, Ireland experienced significant disruption to programming and other activities due to COVID-19 between 2019 and 2022. One of Siamsa Tíre's responses was the development of a podcast series, *Sounds like folk*. In this paper, I critically reflect on the representation and evocation of two communities of artistic practice internal and external to Siamsa Tíre. I highlight recurring themes that include the value of collaboration in arts practice, the sense of duality between tradition and innovation, and references to the Irish language and its role in current artistic endeavour. The podcasts reflect efforts to engage respectively and creatively with folk culture and intangible cultural heritage, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities presented by the material and the pandemic.

Keywords: Folk Theatre, Irish Language, Irish Traditional Music, Podcasts, Siamsa Tíre

1. Introduction

Sounds like folk is a podcast series by Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland featuring guests from the performing company and the wider arts scene in Ireland. The company's Repertory Director, Joanne Barry whose responsibilities normally centre on the preparation of summer season productions and the training of cast, presented the series. The podcasts provided an opportunity to reflect on and discuss matters of importance to Siamsa Tíre and the wider arts community in Ireland. The guests include current and former cast members, associate and other external artists, trainees and former employees. As a podcast series,

it facilitated connection with members of the communities in a virtual space at a time when face-to-face interaction, including live performance, was limited by COVID-19 restrictions.

Siamsa Tíre developed from community initiatives in the 1960s, spearheaded by a local priest, Pat Ahern (Foley 2013; Phelan 2014; Motherway, O’Connell 2022). The introduction to each episode of *Sounds like folk* recalls the origins of the company from within the local community. Despite the appellation “National Folk Theatre”, Siamsa Tíre are a provincial theatre company (Kearney 2021a), and the podcast provides a perspective on the Irish arts scene from a rural, west of Ireland position, mixing local interest with a wider discussion from artists who are part of a wider network. The discussions on *Sounds like folk* are dominated by a desire to understand what Siamsa Tíre is and how it can develop as a relevant folk theatre company. References to places and spaces firmly locate the Siamsa Tíre community in Kerry; older members reflect on the Teach Siamsa in Finuge, a training centre that, along with another similar centre at Carraig in west Kerry, is currently not in use, with great affection, affording it near mythical status; a news story indicating that Siamsa Tíre were to sell the Teach Siamsa in Finuge in the early 2000s was met with a negative reaction by many former members (Kearney 2013).

The format of the podcast is a conversation between Barry with a series of guests about Siamsa Tíre and their understanding and experience of folk culture. The series also aims to “examine the idea of folk theatre and where it stands in today’s world” (Siamsa Tíre 2021). The guests include current and former cast members and professional artists with former or current links to the company. In this paper, I critically examine the narratives, which are co-constructed through conversations in these programmes. The aim of the paper is to critically engage with the themes that emerge through the podcast series, consider the purpose of and audience for the podcast series, and how it sheds light on the workings of the company. I critique the balancing of emic reflections that evoke some of the history and philosophy of the company, and a desire to move forward through collaboration with other artists, and how this may inform an understanding of artistic engagement with themes from folk culture in a theatrical context. I argue that these discussions can inform a wider understanding of folk arts and the desire for artistic innovation in Ireland and internationally.

2. Positionality and Circumstance

It is important to consider the circumstances and context in which the series was developed, as well as my positionality as researcher and the positionality of each of the individuals involved in the podcast. There is recurring reference to COVID-19, described by many guests as an opportunity to pause and reflect, but this was a period of challenges for many involved in the arts and events industries. Those employed in these sectors faced loss of income and restrictions on their ability to engage in their practice. They, along with community arts practitioners, some of whom earned some income from their arts practice, also highlighted the impact on their social lives and wellbeing. Influenced by policies in Ireland that sought to restrict people at times to within 5km of their home, the conversations consider the fact that the “local is global” and this podcast series presented an opportunity to engage a global audience in a conversation from the south west of Ireland.

With the theatre building closed for extended periods due to restrictions related to COVID-19, Siamsa Tíre took time to consider the essence and purpose of the company. This process involved professional facilitators including artists and public relations experts leading to a rebranding with a new logo and an Associate Artists Scheme, established in Autumn 2020 with the aim “to support and engage professional artists across Ireland whose work explores folk artforms and folk culture in different ways” (*ibidem*). The podcast appears to align well

with these other developments and, collectively, there is evidence that these informed new directions in creative practice and development by members of the company. These efforts signify a desire to refute any suggestions that the company is solely focused on tourism (see Foley 2015; Kearney 2022b), not relevant to an Irish audience and insular in its thinking. The parallel approaches of speaking to people within the Siamsa Tíre performing community and with artists with whom Siamsa Tíre may have or seek to collaborate with present two conversations that are both introspective and outward looking.

My positionality has challenged me in listening to this podcast and writing this paper. I know the presenter and many of the guests, having trained and performed with some of them. I can relate to some of the stories, which echo my experiences. I auditioned for and attended classes in music, song, dance, and theatre in the training centre in Finuge, before auditioning again for a place in the cast. Through my teenage years, I began performing up to six nights a week throughout the summer and, at times, worked in a full time capacity for the company performing, developing new work and training younger members. Although no longer directly involved with the company, I continue to undertake research that is based on, inspired by or engaged with my experience of Siamsa Tíre and its ongoing development. I represent one of the audiences for this podcast – a member of the extended Siamsa community – but I am also listening critically as an academic, seeking to develop an understanding of the artistic culture being represented by Siamsa Tíre and the podcast series.

Barry's positionality is also important, particularly her relationship with her guests. She is the Repertory Director for the company and, in her conversations she is speaking with her colleagues including her line manager and cast members whom she directs, and artists with whom she has worked previously. In some instances, the personal relationships that Barry has with her guests, some extending back to childhood, add a warmth and richness to the discussion but with a challenge to ensure that the conversation is relatable to a broader audience. This reflects Siobhán McHugh's assertion that "podcasting is fomenting a new, more informal, genre of audio narrative feature centred on a strong relationship between host and listener, with content that is 'talkier' and less crafted" (2016, 65). It also echoes trends towards personal narrative journalism and podcasting that present "subjective approaches to storytelling" and "explore lived, personal experiences" (Lindgren 2016, 23). Aided by her prior relationships with her guests, Barry succeeds in maintaining a flowing conversation with them.

Critically listening across several episodes evidences a richness to the series that may lead to it achieving more than its stated aim to "examine the idea of folk theatre and where it stands in today's world" (Siamsa Tíre 2021). The series draws attention to different contexts for the arts in Ireland that may be divided between professional and participatory and sometimes rural and urban. The format of the podcast conversation allows Barry to articulate her opinions and perspectives, often giving an insight into the current and ever-evolving philosophy of Siamsa Tíre, which is developed by the people who are there at a particular point in time. Informed by Edward Said's (2004) reflections on the public role of writers and intellectuals in a globalised economy, I examine how *Sounds like folk* facilitates intellectual participation and engagement with the public sphere on developments in the arts in Ireland in the context of a locally based theatre company.

3. Podcasting

Podcasts have become a popular media with increasing audiences in recent years. The controversy in 2022 surrounding the Josh Rogan series on Spotify, in which Rogan was accused of

spreading misinformation about COVID-19, not only related to content but highlighted the significant amount of money and number of followers involved and reflects the public attention being paid to the media form (Forde 2022; Lynsky 2022). McHugh (2016) identifies a post-2014 resurgence of podcasting that engages with non-fictional audio storytelling formats, highlighting a growth in the sector and differences with radio as a mode of delivery (see also Berry 2015). Various groups and individuals have embraced podcasting to reach audiences. Artists use podcasts to engage with fans and cultivate a sense of community, building “audience connections by expanding interaction beyond their episodes and into the online spaces” (Wrather 2016, 43). For a theatre company and artistic community, *Sounds like folk* seeks to speak to two distinct yet inextricably linked audiences – those who may have an interest in viewing the theatrical productions and those who are part of the community that created them.

Introducing *Podcasts: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media*, Llinares, Fox and Berry state that podcasting “exemplifies the maxim that ‘the specific is universal’ by creating spaces for niche and cult content that caters for the more idiosyncratic cultures of interest” (2018, 2). This is echoed by John Sullivan who states:

the popular fascination with podcasting stems mainly from the home-grown, grassroots nature of its content. Thanks to independent and amateur podcasters creating new podcast episodes on a continual basis, podcasting has developed a powerful ethos of authenticity. Since the economic and technological barriers to podcast production are low, tens of thousands of podcast shows have mushroomed, covering extremely small ‘niche’ topics. (2018, 39)

Although engaging in the production of these podcasts as part of her employment with Siamsa Tíre, Barry is not a “professional” presenter and there is a “broadcasting from home” vibe communicated through the series. Barry compares the podcast to the tradition of *bothántaíocht* or visiting neighbouring houses for conversation. Despite the niche nature of the podcasts, they provide insights into the zeitgeist, drawing on particular perspectives of the arts in Ireland, and sometimes internationally, during a particular period or set of circumstances shaped by a global pandemic.

The format, structure and approach of *Sounds like folk* is comparable with other podcasts and offers listeners opportunities to hear intimate conversations, sometimes augmented with recordings of music and song, without a fee. In her introduction to a review of the podcast series *Ethnomusicology Today*, Lea Hagmann states:

Podcasts are easy to produce, more affordable than printed books or films, and released in a format that can be easily and rapidly accessed by consumers around the world. In addition, podcasts can be more inclusive than written texts by communicating musical knowledge cross educational, social, and economic boundaries. (2021, 209)

Sounds like folk demonstrates many of the aspects described by Hagmann, although musical examples are not present in every episode. For *Sounds like folk*, each of the episodes is approximately between 40 and 50 minutes in duration and is usually a relaxed conversation structured around questions that are shared with guests in advance. For the most part, this structure does not inhibit the discussion but allows Barry to maintain some consistency in thematic content across the programmes.

The diversity of guests chosen by Barry lead to different perspectives on both Siamsa Tíre and the wider Irish arts scene but there are some overlapping themes. While Siamsa Tíre is part of a wider arts network, the conversations highlight that for some of the Siamsa Tíre members, their awareness of, or engagement with, the arts scene beyond the company is limited, while others have “moved on” from Siamsa Tíre to develop careers in the arts elsewhere. A number

of the conversations discuss ways to develop new work and innovate, often trying to connect this to various understandings of folk culture. It is unsurprising that the impact of COVID-19 on the arts in Ireland is a recurring question. It becomes evident that Siamsa Tíre, like other artists, are active citizens who are seeking to shape the place where they live, responding to the challenges faced by both the company and society.

4. *A Sense of Community*

The programmes begin with audio of reels performed by the company's musicians, with a voiceover by Barry:

Despite current restrictions, the creative impulse to swap our stories and engage with our audiences remains. I hope you enjoy this new way of *bothántaíocht* or gathering together, allowing a window into Siamsa Tíre, which itself was born from a coming together of like-minded people; a place where ideas and stories are celebrated.

The guests on *Sounds like folk* may be viewed as two separate groupings – one reflecting a specifically Siamsa Tíre community and one reflecting a wider arts community, although some reflect an overlap.

A sense of community amongst Siamsa Tíre performers is very evident in the episodes with both current and former cast members. It is useful to contrast the older memories of Anne O'Donnell, Nóirín Lynch and Pierce Heaslip (Barry 2021c), with the more recent reflections of the younger group of Derwin Myers, Helena Brosnan and Jamie Flannery (Barry 2021g). The first cohort reflect the long history of the company and highlight some notable activities, including Pierce Heaslip's reflections on the 1976 tour to the USA that included performances on Broadway (see also Kearney 2019; Kearney 2022b). Through this discourse, the series asserts a link with the past and the history of the company. Heaslip speaks about taking over from his father Liam, or singing the song "Róisín Dubh", which is associated with another cast member, Seán Ahern, articulating the transition across generations. Heaslip and Barry highlight the importance of the 1991 production *Ding Dong Dederó*, performed first for the opening of the new theatre, when a number of former cast members returned to perform with the company. Remembering her early involvement with Siamsa Tíre and the production *Ding Dong Dederó*, Paula Murrphy reflects on the opening of the Siamsa Tíre Theatre and Arts Centre in Tralee in 1991 and what it symbolised for those who had been involved in the beginning (Barry 2021a). Many dignitaries attended the opening, which received national television coverage. Indicating a desire to reconnect with different generations of the company, O'Donnell suggests a need to explore that activity again (Barry 2021c).

Repeating a trope familiar to many in the community cast, members refer to Siamsa Tíre as a family, with all of the difficulties that being part of a family includes. Myers highlighted the amount of time spent together, particularly during the summer, which contributes to a sense of community (Barry 2021g). Similarly, Flannery noted the like-mindedness of everybody coming together and the bond between members, stating "you mightn't see each other for six months" but get back on stage together and connect again (*ibidem*). Myers identifies the theatre as a "safe space" that evokes a sense of "home" when he returns but also values the "seal of approval" from older cast members, something that is repeated by Lynch and Heaslip with specific reference to founding member Seán Ahern. Rob Heaslip points to the importance placed on being a member of the company by his family, notably his grandmother. It is notable that each of the guests, like many others in Siamsa Tíre, have family members who have performed with the company (Barry 2021i). The development of the cast, often through training from a young age

before integrating young performers into productions alongside more established members of the cast, contributes to this sense of community. Some also refer to the experience of touring abroad and how that was both an adventure and something that solidified friendships.

Reflecting on their shared experience, Barry and Murríhy reflect on learning from older cast members. In a few episodes, Barry describes the learning as a process of osmosis, learning from watching the older performers. In conversation with Drummey, Barry reflects on how they “soaked up all this information” as children, saying “we were sort of trained as professional actors but no one said ‘oh you’re being trained now’, we just watched people and learned and [...] looked at all the experts” (Barry 2021j). Murríhy remembers that there was never a direct instruction on how to walk or how to sing, rather the younger members were surrounded by the older generation and “there was a handing down of traditions that happened quite naturally, even on stage” (Barry 2021a). She notes her fortune to be part of the generation that performed alongside some of the founding members. Pierce Heaslip goes further, noting how he watched his father before taking over from his father and then watching his own children join the cast (Barry 2021c). Drummey states: “When you have the foundation that we had and you are learning from the masters and people who are so brilliant at what they do, then you are really getting such a great foundation for being a professional” (Barry 2021j).

5. *Beyond Siamsa Tíre*

While some members of Siamsa Tíre have performed with the company over several decades, many of those who train with the company leave the area for further studies and employment. Some continue to pursue careers in the arts, which are influenced or informed by their formative experiences with the company. Conversations with opera singer Paula Murríhy, actor and film-maker Sarah Jane Drummey and choreographer Rob Heaslip highlight how their early experiences with Siamsa Tíre supported their career development. Although her participation with Siamsa Tíre was shorter, singer Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh also recognizes the value of her three years of training in the Teach Siamsa in Carraig and summer season performances subsequently (Barry 2021n). She expresses a feeling that, as a child, she “didn’t fit in” at a stage when she was still developing and wanting to explore the traditions without yet having a focus. Each of these guests highlight the impact of the experiences they gained with Siamsa Tíre in their youth, albeit their training was further developed in other contexts. In contrast to the others, Drummey did not undertake formal training but had the confidence, having completed a university degree in languages, to seek work with the belief that her training and experience with Siamsa Tíre was sufficient. Commenting on her decision to pursue a career in acting, Drummey states:

We all started as children. When you start at that age, not only did we get the training for two years and then you go and you audition to get into the main company, and you’re performing four nights a week during the summer season, you’re going away on tour, you are involved in the creation and development of new plays and exciting new dance pieces, and then you see a core ensemble being created and you see that they get to do this all day every day, and for me it was a no brainer, of course I wanted to spend my life doing this. (Barry 2021j)

The idea of establishing a professional ethos is particularly evident in conversations with Drummey and Murríhy. Drummey states:

What we were getting was the discipline, and the level of professionalism that is necessary to do, in any field of work, but especially in our industry, of showing up on time, and rehearsing to death, and getting it right and doing it over and over and over again so that you really get the show that you want. It was invaluable, it really was, and I never underestimate that. (*Ibidem*)

Murrihy similarly points to the professionalism of the company, noting in particular the repetition of shows with different cast members and the need to always be fresh every time.

The way that we performed and that we learned there was a lot of repetition of certain shows [...] we had to also be fresh in ourselves and find new things every time as well and that is something that has stood to me to this day. [...] We learned that from the older members of the company. (Barry 2021a)

As well as the importance and influence of the training and performance experience, all of the guests who had performed in the Siamsa Tíre cast also pointed to the sense of fun that is felt on and off stage. This sense of fun is intergenerational.

The influence of Siamsa Tíre is evident in the subsequent professional artistic output of former members. Murrihy's debut solo album *I Will Walk With My Love* released in 2020 presents "a programme loosely based on folksong, or the idea of it" (Jeal 2020). Rob Heaslip's works such as *Strawboys* (2021) and *Meitheal* (2012) are suggestive of direct links to his experiences of training and performing with Siamsa Tíre. While folklore and "folk" is evident in a number of Heaslip's works, the connection with Siamsa Tíre is most explicit in the use of a song from the production *Oileán* in his work. Embracing the political undertones of the song, but seeking to creatively enquire about what the future might be, Drummey developed a film around the song "Róisín Dubh" (2018) in which she seeks to celebrate the power of storytelling and the artistry of sean nós singing. Drummey recognises the importance of this song in the repertoire and for the community of Siamsa Tíre. The song is also cited and featured in episodes with other guests, notable when Pierce Heaslip reflects on being invited to sing the song after the retirement of Seán Ahern. In a subsequent film, *134* (2019), Drummey involves performers including Anne O'Donnell, Jimmy Smith, Anne McAulliffe and Nicky McAulliffe, with whom she had performed in Siamsa Tíre.

6. *The Burden of Tradition*

The echoes of inherited source material are evident in both productions by Siamsa Tíre, which often include intertextual references to previous productions (Kearney 2022a), and the outputs of former members, whose work, like that of Heaslip and Drummey, contains intertextual references to particular songs. From its inception, Siamsa Tíre has had a close connection to its local area, seeking to draw up and represent the intangible cultural heritage of Kerry. The episode with current Artistic Director, Jonathan Kelliher, presents an informative autobiographical portrait that inextricably connects Kelliher with both the milieu of North Kerry and the company. He details his family background, early training in the Teach Siamsa in Finuge before "graduating" to perform with the company in Tralee and subsequently being offered a full time professional position with the company. With references to music-making in the home, the Listowel Races and going to the bog, Kelliher embodies the lingering culture that inspired founding Artistic Director Pat Ahern to develop the company, probably best exemplified in the production *Fadó Fadó* (1968). Kelliher's older brother and sister were already part of the company but Kelliher himself would dedicate himself to this as a career, particularly in the area of dance. The episode may be read as the constructing a justification for Kelliher's occupation of the role of Artistic Director of the company and also recognises the challenge for Artistic Directors of the company to both develop and continue the mission of Siamsa Tíre.

The sense of tradition as burden is also articulated by Kennedy, who was appointed to the role of General Manager of Siamsa Tíre at the age of twenty-six. She points to the legacy of Martin Whelan, who had been with the company for twenty-six years. While Kelliher attempts

to articulate a respect for his predecessor Ahern but also “move on”, Kennedy explains that she was directed in her thinking by a consideration for what Whelan would do in her situation. However, Kennedy also refers to the institutional knowledge of the company, stating “the whole of Siamsa is based on the intergenerational, and the value placed on people and community” (Barry 2021f). She concludes her conversation with Barry noting that, when Pat Ahern began, he was imagining something that did not exist and now artists are at a point where they must imagine again, but with institutional knowledge behind them.

Other episodes provide a similar thread that indicate some of the challenges faced by the company members who may feel inhibited by an understanding of “folk” and “tradition”. Reflecting on current discourse on and trends in music, singer and broadcaster Ruth Smith highlights the blurring of what “folk music” is (Barry 2021b). In the context of dance, Barry describes choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan’s work as contemporary folk culture with Keegan-Dolan suggesting that we can be overly concerned with what is “new” and forget things that are “good” from the past (Barry 2021e). Conor Mitchell speaks about a particular Belfast context and his experience growing up where there was a sense of erasure of the traditional arts amongst some communities (Barry 2022). In conversation with theatre maker Philip McMahon, Barry reflects on her own position stating: “there’s other things we want to say within that folk idiom, you know, and sometimes there is a resistance to that” (2021d). It perhaps underlines the fact that the diversity of work undertaken by Siamsa Tíre has not always been appreciated but it also relates to the sense of tradition that Kelliher articulates almost like a burden. While asserting a respect for those who came before and the work that they did, Kelliher underlines the need for artistic development and refers to activities that the professional company engage in that might not, in itself make the stage, but inform the creative processes. Lynch suggests that reverence for the past and the opinions for older ideas is too strong but notes the regular turnover within the cast (Barry 2021c). In the same episode, O’Donnell refers to comments made by Philip King, a broadcaster based in West Kerry, who described Siamsa Tíre as a car driving forward but always looking in the rear view mirror. Across a number of episodes, guests discuss how engaging with the past informs development.

Siamsa Tíre’s history has shaped its identity and influences the development and reception of the company. It has become a tradition, with all of the need to engage in a discussion around change and development. Saying, “There’s such a story behind you”, Kelliher emphasizes the respect that he has for the people that came before him and what they have achieved but, emphasizing a “but” he states:

You can’t live in that shadow, that’s the other side of it. You just can’t. You have to move on, you have to move forward with what we all believe in, what you believe in yourself, and what the current members believe in; that’s so, so important. But you still have to keep that spirit and that ethos that started the whole thing, back in the 60s, that has to be in your mind and in your heart and you have to bring that with you. You always have to be respectful of what was given to you [...] You have the responsibility of ensuring that what you have been given is passed on to the next generation. (Barry 2021h)

It is critical to understand, therefore, what Siamsa Tíre is and what Kelliher and his colleagues have inherited. It is more than a repertoire of music, song and dance. It is an approach to presenting this material on stage, innovating using traditional sources and engaging with other artists. There is a “professionalism”, whereby cast members who are not full time performers conduct themselves in a professional manner in the context of the theatre. Attitudes to rehearsals, pre-show preparations, awareness of health and safety, engagement in technical aspects including sound and lighting, and respect for fellow cast members are all part of an

enculturation process. In contrast with many other theatre companies, there is a regular return to source, be it performances of *Fadó Fadó*, a version of the first production devised in the 1960s, or engagement with recordings of the North Kerry dancers such as Jack Lyons and other pupils of the dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux.

Emphasising the importance of the Munnix dance tradition for the company, speaking with Kelliher, Barry states, “down through the years, whether you know it or not, you have become the go-to guy for Munnix” (*ibidem*). She refers to the *From the Sources* (2020) video made by Kelliher for TradIreland, supported by the Arts Council of Ireland, in which Kelliher places himself centre in a narrative about Molyneaux and integrates his own dance teacher, Jimmy Hickey as a gatekeeper. Hickey was not previously prominent in the development of Siamsa Tíre but the role of other dancers is neglected as Hickey is foregrounded. Referring to a weight on his shoulders and constructing a narrative of legitimate inheritance, Kelliher himself makes the statement:

When Pat Ahern, our founding director was retiring, he called me into the office one day in or around that time like that and [...] he says now that I’m retiring, he says, the north Kerry dance style, he says, is now in your hands. (*Ibidem*)

Two things are notable. Kelliher asserts that he had not previously shared this story but it also underlines the respect for and authority that Ahern had.

The Munnix dance tradition has been integral to the company’s development. Perhaps attempting to underline the “uniqueness” of Siamsa Tíre, Barry makes the statement: “You know that his type of dancing is unique to Siamsa, so there is nobody else in the country that’s doing that type, or anywhere else in the world that’s doing that style of dance” (2021e). While this is setting a particular narrative for Siamsa Tíre, it ignores the significant increase in interest in local styles of dance, particularly over the past decade. It does not recognise the significant research and activities of Dr Catherine Foley at the University of Limerick, preceded by fieldwork that paralleled the development of Siamsa Tíre. Significant is Foley’s (2020) research highlighting the popularity of the Munnix Blackbird in competitive contexts over the past decade. Indeed, the global popularity is evident in the contrary narrative presented by Siamsa Tíre in relation to the online dance workshops facilitated by Kelliher. Other influential teachers include Patrick O’Dea, whose influence on dancers in the USA is evident in *From the Floor* (2019), articulated by dancer Jackie O’Reilly (2020) in her paper at ICTM Ireland 2020. The influence of the Munnix style on Irish dance in the USA is also indicated in the recent television documentary *Steps of Freedom* (2021), in which Kelliher and Hickey feature (Magan 2021). Thus, the unresolved duality of Siamsa Tíre, wishing to simultaneously maintain its uniqueness while connecting with a wider artistic network is evident in the podcast series. The choices, exclusions, and emphases, reflect Said’s (2004) critique of newspapers and news media such as CNN and *The New York Times*, whereby prepackaged information dominates and “the media, advertising, official declarations, and ideological political argument designed to persuade or to lull into submission, not to stimulate thought and engage the intellect” (Said 2004, 73).

The podcast with the Siamsa Tíre Academy Students (Barry 2021m) provides an interesting contrast to the episode with Kelliher (Barry 2021h). It demonstrates a sound purpose but the prepared answers of the young guests undermine the efforts to demonstrate the awareness of the academy students of the greater whole or philosophy behind the company. Too often, the young people revert to referencing the learning of music, song and dance and Barry has to interject to note the significance of the company. Having clearly done their homework, the young guests do articulate some aspects of the history, largely echoing the material on the website related without demonstrating a fuller understanding. In addition to the company itself,

Barry asks questions related to the dancing master Jeremiah Molyneaux, whose biography is used as the basis for a foundation myth for the company in the production *Ding Dong Dederó* (Kearney 2021a; 2021b). A well-prepared answer demonstrates knowledge but an interjection from another student noting that Molyneaux taught her grandfather is perhaps more informative, demonstrating the connection between cast members and the intangible cultural heritage developed by Siamsa Tíre. They are also aware that he is buried near where they go to school. Two of the girls note that their mother and uncle were “in Siamsa”, highlighting the strong familial links across generations of cast. Barry notes her own role in transmission, which has also extended to online workshops in Irish song during the pandemic period, stating “I definitely feel the weight of sort of having to hand on [...] what I’ve learned or what I know” (2021d).

7. *Reaching Out and Collaboration*

While Siamsa Tíre has a large repertory company, since the 1980s it has embraced opportunities for collaboration and worked with many other artists and creatives (McGrath 2016). Noting the initial role of Pat Ahern in developing the company, Drummey notes the importance of collaboration across the arts stating:

It’s such a collaborative industry, you can’t do it all yourself, you need other brilliant minds and other energies and spirits and personalities, and that’s the thing that we just have in our blood thanks to Siamsa. (Barry 2021j)

Beginning with Roberto D’Amico in the 1980s, there have been many choreographers, represented in the podcast series by Cindy Cummings. O’Donnell notes the influence of Anne Courtney, choreographer for *Ding Dong Dederó*, who opened her mind to the potential of contemporary dance (Barry 2021c). From the same period, Lynch points to *Idir Eatarthu* (1989), also a collaboration with Courtney involving the music of Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin and, echoing the writing of dance critic Diane Theodores who suggested that this represented a potential path towards a new Irish dance form, noted that it demonstrated the creative potential being explored by Siamsa Tíre.

The 1990s were an important decade in the context of developing artistic practice and debate in the traditional arts. Dominated by *Riverdance* (1994) (Ó Cinnéide 2002; Scahill 2009), *River of Sound* (1995) and the Crossroads Conference on tradition and innovation in Irish traditional music (Hamilton 1999; Vallely, Hamilton, Vallely, *et al.* 1999), Siamsa Tíre’s output included choreography for Bill Whelan’s *The Seville Suite* (1992) in collaboration with Flamenco dancer, Maria Pages in 1992 (Kearney 2022a). Choreographer Caimin Collins was appointed Associate Artistic Director of Siamsa Tíre in 1995, and led the devising of two large-scale productions: *Immram* (1996) and *Eachtra* (1997). Following the retirement of Ahern in 1997, American John Sheehan was appointed Artistic Director. Sheehan recognised the company’s strength in dance and sought to develop the theatrical potential (Walsh 1997). Later, core company members undertook postgraduate studies in contemporary dance at the University of Limerick. Through its engagement with a number of dance-theatre specialists, *Sounds like folk* reinforces a sense of primacy of the dance but also points to other aspects of the company. Productions and developments that demonstrate a strengthening of other strands include the involvement of composers including Eoin McQuinn and Conor Mitchell (see Barry 2022), the development of a National Folk Theatre choir and a collaboration with local musicians to facilitate the establishment of a large Irish traditional music ensemble or Trad Orchestra.

Many of the company’s productions involve a collaborative effort. Kennedy’s description of the creative team behind the production *Oileán* (2003) highlights the various external contributors to the development process. The production was directed by former Artistic

Director Oliver Hurley, who had trained with and joined the company as a child. The production was devised by the Core Company, all of whom had been members of the company since childhood, and the score was composed and arranged by Siamsa Tíre Musical Director Tom Hanafin. This local team is augmented by the involvement of American-born choreographer Cindy Cummings, who built a strong relationship with the cast over a number of projects. Returning to a sense of community, Kennedy celebrates the presence of young children alongside longstanding cast member Seán Ahern in the cast.

Collaborations have often pushed the artistic and aesthetic boundaries of the source material. In conversation with Rob Heaslip, Barry notes that Siamsa Tíre does not “stick to” Irish dance and the cast have had a lot of opportunities to work with other choreographers, such as with Cindy Cummings for *Oileán* (Barry 2021i). Heaslip and Barry discuss Cummings’ approach and the creative possibilities that this brings. These collaborations require a coming-together of approaches and understanding. In a separate episode, Cummings describes *Oileán* as a learning process, trying to understand how to connect and communicate creative ideas (Barry 2021i). Describing the process as “speaking completely different languages” (Barry 2021i) in relation to elements and steps, stating that the language around Irish dance was completely different to contemporary dance. Recognising a musicality to the dance, with Cummings noting that “You sing the steps”, Barry notes that Cummings challenged the Irish dancers who focused primarily on their feet and legs to think about their entire body.

Cummings also refers to *rEvolution* (2005) and *rEvolution Reloaded* (2005), which she identifies as important projects between *Oileán* and *Tearmann* (2006). Barry describes them as experimental projects that strengthened the relationship between the Siamsa Tíre company and Cummings, as well as with visual artist Andrew Duggan. Barry and Cummings reflect on experiments with other art forms beyond dance, engaging with visual arts and sound, describing an emphasis on conceptualising the process including interviews with cast members. Part of this was an effort to understand “folk”, a theme that recurs with Heaslip.

Demonstrating the wider connections that Siamsa Tíre have developed and a desire to move beyond conservative spaces for the performance of folk culture by Siamsa Tíre, the story behind Barry’s connectivity to McMahon is informative. Referring again to a sense that “Folk theatre is for the tourists”, the discussion with McMahon refers to performances at WERK – a performance art event in a nightclub in Dublin (Barry 2021d). This project removed Siamsa Tíre from its rural, west of Ireland location and placed it in an urban cosmopolitan event. Director of the event, McMahon states:

We were kinda interested in a mash-up of performance [...] in loads of ways we are kind of doing the same thing [...] investigating Irish culture and unpacking it for ourselves [...] paying reverence to traditions that you guys are riffing off as well. Moving beyond the manifestation – wigs, dance music, glitter – and finding the philosophy and thinking behind it. (*Ibidem*)

The conversation with McMahon highlights the urban-rural or, more explicitly, Dublin-Rest of Ireland divide that exists. Siamsa Tíre’s active engagement with urban, primarily Dublin-based artists turns on its head the sense that “it is still relatively common to find rural musics presented as the authentic material for study and urban musics as no more than bastardised imitations that threaten to supplant the latter” (Stock 2008). It is through engagement with urban-based developments that Siamsa Tíre seek to develop a more authentic response to contemporary folk culture. Simultaneously, it is informative to hear choreographers such as Cummings and Keegan-Dolan speak about leaving the city, for Kilkenny and west Kerry respectively. Linked to a conversation around the use of the Irish language, Barry recognises the changing geography of the arts in Ireland and the challenges working in provincial theatres.

8. Language

Although the Irish language is prominent in the 1972 plan for the development of Siamsa Tíre (Ahern, O’Sullivan 1972), many of those involved in the company are not fluent and its presence is largely in the song repertoire performed by the company. Discussions on the Irish language are central to podcasts involving conversations with Nic Amhlaoibh, Rob Heaslip and Kennedy, and it is referenced in several others. Smith suggests a current folk revival that includes renewed interest in the Irish language and the discussions on language often parallel those on tradition and innovation (Barry 2021b).

Echoing the weight attached to passing on the tradition that exists in Siamsa Tíre, Nic Amhlaoibh notes a pressure to preserve the language, reflecting on comments when she was young that she was part of the last generation who would grow up with the Irish language. This impacted on her engagement with song as she was “terrified to touch them, terrified of getting a word wrong” (Barry 2021n). She proclaims her “great respect” (*ibidem*) for what has come before which she believes is evident in her work but emphasises that it is important to her to have “a creative outlet and that I can grow and develop as an artist” (*ibidem*). Referring to the conceptualisation of a duality in terms of tradition and creativity, Nic Amhlaoibh believes it does not have to be one or the other. She emphasises the importance of continuing to create “in the language rather than constantly looking back and archiving it and treating it as an artefact; you have to move forward and bring it with you” (*ibidem*). Her project *Aeons* (2018) with Pádraig Rynne opened up creative possibilities to her that she consciously does not explore when performing the *sean nós* traditions: “there are lines that I choose not to cross when I perform traditional song but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to try it out in other ways”.

Others also discuss the role of the Irish language in their work and creativity. Reflecting on his creative processes as a choreographer, Heaslip discusses how he seeks to involve both Irish and Scots Gaelic languages. He describes his work as “finding a way for dance to be the catalyst for people accessing the language without necessarily knowing”, hoping to identify what surrounds the language and engages with it through engaging with through research on customs and rituals (Barry 2021i). Keegan-Dolan describes engaging with the Irish language through working with Liam Ó Maonlaí and other artists around 2009 (Barry 2021e). Now living in west Kerry, he humorously reflects on the challenges of trying to learn the language referring to the existence of two dialects in Corca Dhuibhne – *caighdeán* as learned in school and the *caniúnt* or local accent with its own musicality. Barry refers to poet Ciara Ní É suggesting that the syntax of Irish soul is Irish and we can understand even if we are not fluent. Together they discuss the importance of approaching the emotion of language and emotion of learning the language noting that often the depth of engagement is not there for children.

Kennedy, from Dublin, is now a lecturer in drama, theatre and performance at NUI Galway and formerly General Manager of Siamsa Tíre. Her engagement in theatre was inspired by her interest in the Irish language and the sense of community that existed around the Irish language. Prior to her role in Siamsa Tíre, she was the manager of Taibhdéarc na Gaillimhe, the national Irish language theatre. More recently, she has pioneered Irish language modules in theatre studies at NUI Galway and views presenting the Irish language on stage as a challenge to the canon, reflecting wider social politics and discourse in the arts internationally. Kennedy recognises that there is a need to understand where Irish language programming “fits” in the context of funding and time but argues that there is an audience for work in the Irish language, not limited to an Irish-speaking audience. Kennedy argues that the use of the Irish language in theatre is not a barrier to audiences, noting a need to consider how artists use the language (Barry 2021f). This is

evident in the episode with Murríhy, who highlights the need to have an overview of a language when taking on opera roles. Unlike some of her opera colleagues, Murríhy did not spend a year in Italy or France, although she has lived in Germany. On taking on a role, she goes through the text to develop an understanding of the translation and pronunciation. Murríhy reflects on her exposure to folk music and storytelling through the Irish language informed her approach to preparing for opera roles and communicating, noting the detail and nuance in the Irish language and the attention to this detail in her training in Siamsa Tíre (Barry 2021a).

The discussion on the Irish language is interesting in the context of other aspects of artistic development. While Irish traditional music is often mediated through the Irish language, with *Raidió na Gaeltachta* and *Teilifís na Gaeilge* presenting significant programming throughout their existence, there has been a surge in Irish language film in the past five years. This has been aided in part by the foundation in 2017 of Cine4, a partnership between TG4, Screen Ireland and the BAI, which aims to fund two Irish language films a year. *Fir Bolg* (2016), *Black '47* (2018), *Arracht* (2019) and *Is Olc an Ghaoth* (2020) have received critical acclaim but Colm Bairéad's *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) has achieved unprecedented financial, as well as critical success (Brady 2022). Although *Sounds like folk* does not refer to these films, and the episodes cited predate the cinema release of *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022), the discourse parallels contemporaneous writing and response to Irish language films, suggesting a need for further and broader discussion on the arts in Ireland.

9. Conclusion

A study of the podcast series *Sounds like folk* by Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, presents an opportunity to engage with significant issues related to the arts in Ireland, questions of tradition and innovation, and artistic engagement with the Irish language from a localized perspective. The series presents immensely valuable discussions that locate the work of the company within a wider contemporary arts environment. The discussions demonstrate the different pathways into the arts that exist in Ireland and celebrate the success of local artists who were part of Siamsa Tíre and have developed international careers in the arts. The discussions with external artists provide insights into how they work, which can inform the development of Siamsa Tíre and reinforces a sense of a network of artists to which Siamsa Tíre must belong. The series captures much of the *Zeitgeist* of the arts in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic but develops conversations that are relevant beyond the circumstances of that point in time.

Sounds like folk, reflects two sides of Siamsa Tíre – an artistic company aiming to be at the fore of the arts in Ireland today and a community of performers with a history spanning half a century. While Siamsa Tíre were responding to circumstances that limited or challenged their ability to engage in other forms of work dependent on face-to-face activities, the podcast series demonstrates the potential of utilising an existing model for engaging audiences. The podcasts compliment other developments by the company that embrace a virtual space, including the *TradConnections* series of Irish traditional music concerts that were streamed on the company's Facebook page.

Contributors provided varying perspectives on staging and representing folk culture in terms of place, time, language, and the synergy of native and classical arts disciplines. There is a sense of ownership evident amongst the Siamsa Tíre cast members who articulated their desire for more involvement in the creative development of the company. Conversations with Kelliher and other cast members provide insights into the workings of Siamsa Tíre while episodes with external guests provide a shop window for the work of others but suggest opportunities for the company to pursue. The guests implicitly locate Siamsa Tíre primarily within the world of theatre and dance with an emphasis on innovative creative practice, and less in the world of the traditional arts.

The richness of the podcast series is most evident when listened to as a collection of narratives with shared themes, each reinforcing the messages but drawing on the different perspectives of the guests. *Sounds like folk* demonstrates how the theatre company can engage with, reflect and be relevant to a much wider audience, network and scene than may be initially imagined when thinking of a folk theatre company in the south west of Ireland.

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