

A comparison of  
japan's butoh dance  
and ireland's  
riverdance essay  
sample



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Dance has been a part of humanity since time immemorial. Ever since the dawn of human civilization, dance has been a part of our lives such as ceremonies, rituals, celebrations and entertainment. Dances are mostly used in the retelling of folklores and myths. Before there were written languages, dance is used to pass stories from generation to generation. Briefly speaking, dance is a mirror of life. It mirrors our very own existence and, as Maboungou (1998) contends, "...is not just a story but rather explains the various instruments and landscapes within the dancer".

In light of these definitions of dance, this paper aims to study two exceptional contemporary dances from two different cultures —Japan's *Butoh* dance and Ireland's *Riverdance* . We will look at how these two contemporary dances mimic the cultures from where it came from. We will analyze the movements distinct in each dance. To conclude, we will analyze the similarities and differences of these two dances.

### *Butoh Dance of Japan*

Butoh is a contemporary dance form that originated in Japan after World War II. Drawing on sources from the west and his native Japan, Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986) created a revolutionary intercultural art form, often in collaboration with Ohno Kazuo (b. 1906), another dancer. Typically performed in white makeup, with shaved heads, ragged costumes, and slow movements and crouching postures, butoh portrays dark emotions — suffering, fear, rage — often by employing violence, shocking actions and mask-like facial expressions that transform instantly from one extreme of emotion to another. Western critics often trace its nightmarish images to

Hiroshima and Nagasaki — perhaps an overly simplistic connection; but there is no doubt that butoh was born from the psychic chaos that characterized Japan at the end of the war. Its negativity, conveyed by stark images and the performers' deep concentration, reflects Hijikata's description of butoh as “ the dance of darkness.”

When butoh arrived in the West in the 1980s, it stunned audiences accustomed to the formalistic, emotionally subdued style of Western modern dance, and was immediately recognized as a new contemporary art form. Rejecting the existing dance styles of the West and those of his native Japan, and equally uninterested in ordinary movement, Hijikata attempted to create a dance of ritualistic quality that would transform the human body and mind. He developed and formalized butoh while drawing on sources from French literature, Western experimental art and theater, and Japanese folklore reinventing the sacred in a contemporary art form by combining sources from both the West and Japan.

In his recent film, *Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis*, Michael Blackwood (1990) explains that in an attempt to liberate the Japanese body from decades of imprisonment by Western cultural influence and centuries of tradition, Hijikata rejected both Western and Japanese ideas of dance. He even spurned the Western emphasis on individuality. Hijikata wanted to restore what he considered to be the original Japanese body that had been robbed in the process of socialization, modernization, and Westernization (Blackwood).

Because of this motivation, Hijikata's dance of " Jumps without jumping, turns without turning" began to emerge. On a physical level it produced a body that was passive but simultaneously powerful, and a style that emphasized the presence of the dancers rather than communicating meaning or demonstrating expertise.

Hijikata's first butoh piece, *Kinjiki* , depicted a sado-masochistic homoerotic act. Hijikata, as Man, had shaved his head, painted black grease on his face and upper body, and wore gray bell-bottom trousers. Ohno Yoshito, Ohno Kazuo's teenage son, portrayed a boy, wearing only a black scarf around his neck and lemon-colored shorts. Both were barefoot.

In the dance, Boy appears stage right. Man, holding a chicken, enters the stage and runs in a circle. Feeling Man's presence, Boy stiffens, looks at his hands with an anguished expression, and slaps himself as if he knows something bad is going to happen. He walks to a narrow illuminated area at stage center, near where Man is waiting in the darkness. They face each other, breathing hard. Man thrusts his chicken into the light. The white wings flutter stunningly. Boy accepts the chicken. He turns his head as if to ask what the chicken means and then returns to stage right, holding it to his chest. He places the chicken between his thighs and slowly sinks into a squat, squeezing it to death while Man watches from the darkness behind. The chicken symbolizes the sexual and the sacred, the phallic and the sacrificial. Boy stands in shock. The audience, which contained many young female students, was already outraged. When they saw the chicken lying limply at Boy's feet, they gasped. Blackout.

In the second half, the dancers perform in total darkness. The audience hears sounds of lips in wet contact, breathing, and sexual moaning. The two men roll around on top of one another. Man shouts " Je t'aime!" a couple of times. Boy runs and Man chases him. Toward the end of Kinjiki, a bluesy harmonica is played by Yasuda Shugo, and the stage brightens slightly. Boy walks away, dragging his feet and holding the chicken in his arms.

In this piece everyday movement such as running was made bizarre by the dancer's rigid legs running with only his heels touching the floor, giving the work a highly unusual atmosphere, although one could discern some gestures reminiscent of jazz and modern dance. All the poses and movements appear crude and stiff, with a great deal of muscular tension, suggesting a vast potential energy contained in the stillness. The dance's stillness and quality of inner power will later become the central characteristic of all butoh movement.

Although it lasted only ten minutes, Kinjiki had a terrific impact on the audience that saw it and on the Japanese world in general. The shock was so intense that one of the female students watching the performance suffered a nosebleed. While most of the spectators considered it scandalous, others found it fresh and compelling.

Conceptually and aesthetically, Butoh is based on the body — more specifically, on the Japanese physique, which for hundreds of years has been genetically shaped by lifestyle and livelihood. This is not to suggest the Butoh is the only Japanese dance that has been influenced by the traditional body, but that it was born out of an exploration of the many possibilities

contained within this body. The characteristic body comes from the great homogeneity in the lifestyle and diet of the Japanese people, and from the fact that over the centuries there was less diversity in that society, especially in comparison to the United States. The Japanese have long felt that this characteristic body was a body type unsuitable for classical ballet or Western modern dance (Laage).

### *Ireland's Riverdance*

The contemporary production of *Riverdance* arrives in the midst of massive historical revisionism in Ireland; indeed, many Irish historians and cultural critics have refuted the idea of a national identity, or essence, and prefer instead to accentuate differences in Irish political, religious and cultural affiliations. *Riverdance*, however, is situated in a tradition which ultimately seeks to return to, or at least explain, Irish roots.

Often inherent in this assertion of a precolonial, indigenous and continuous Irish culture, however, is the circulation of stereotypical conceptions of "Irishness." From the first moment of the production of *Riverdance*, this notion of a specifically Irish origin, or unique Irish essence, is communicated. The performance begins with a projection of a deep turquoise and green waters of a flowing river onto a large screen located in the background setting the tone for the first act of *Riverdance*. Subtle lighting soon penetrates the set, revealing a swirling mist, presumably Celtic, which smoothly filters out into the audience. The soft melody of a lone Irish whistle gently infiltrates the arena (McColgan).

Suddenly, the background shifts to a painting of the dawn, dramatically illuminating the step-dancers onstage. Traditional Irish instruments, such as the uilleann pipes, the fiddle and the bodhran drums, unite with the whistle. As the music intensifies and the step-dancing begins, the audience is on its feet (McColgan). The performance called *Riverdance* has indeed begun and the Irish have apparently arrived.

What follows is a two-hour production which has been performed globally to sold-out audiences. On the 1998 tour of the United States alone, over two and a half million people purchased over-priced tickets, rarely discounted for children, students or senior citizens. Further, *Riverdance*, claiming to be “merely a contemporary affirmation of an ancient Irish tradition” (Smyth 10) has become a multi-million dollar business through the merchandising of videotapes, cds, books and cassettes. The rather modest roots of this production, however, may be found in a simple seven-minute piece of choreography meant to serve as an interval showpiece in the Eurovision Song Contest, an annual European musical competition, produced in 1994.

*Riverdance*, in its initial seven minutes, may have similarly emerged “out of a public service broadcasting, out of a desire to do something positive” (Smyth), but its subsequent expansion into a two-hour extravaganza which would, the producers claimed, present “the story of the journey Irish people have taken over millennia” and serve as “an allegory for the history of Ireland and its people from the dawn of civilization to the present time” (*Riverdance: A Journey*) would ultimately be the result of public pressure in Ireland for *more*.

The first act of *Riverdance*, in particular, recounts the internal journey of the Irish or pre-historic Celtic people as they confront the elements by harnessing fire and cultivating the land. The narrative voice, encountered from the beginning, frames the entire “ epic journey” and serves to reinforce the picture of a linear Irish history and a unified Irish identity. An elaborate choir gracefully moves onto the stage, draped in cloaks reminiscent of Druidic priests and priestesses throughout the performance. Their faces lit only by the glow of candles, the full moon projected behind them, an intimate and mysterious atmosphere is created and a sense of pre-civilized, pagan exoticism is established. In a piece named “ The Faery Women,” a band of women appears from off-stage. Apparently emerging from their dwelling in the forests or the netherworlds, the dancers gracefully bounce across the stage in intricate footwork, arms rigid by their sides in what has become the traditional soft-shoe version of the Irish step-dance. In the tradition of the revivalists, *Riverdance* extracts this image of bird-girls, or faeries, from the traditional Gaelic *aisling* , or vision poem.

*Riverdance* thus reveals its reliance on the recovery of the apparently timeless Celtic myths and legends which the revivalists recovered. The remainder of the dance and musical pieces in the first act of the performance serves to further proclaim this authentic sense of “ Irishness.”

Act Two of *Riverdance* begins with a number called American Wake, in which the narrator tells of the pains and tragedy that led to the millions of Irish men and women emigrating from Ireland. This narration is followed by a dance number of amazing zeal and joy. The dancers, men and women, engage in an elaborate set of reels, jigs, and Celtic pas de deux interspersed

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with occasional phrases of melancholy singing. But as soon as the melancholia begins to take hold of the mood of the piece, the dancers re-launch into their expertly executed dance steps, and the prevailing tone is one of celebration. In Act Two of *Riverdance*, African-American tap-dancers, after engaging in some friendly competition, dance in unity and harmony with some Irish step-dancers in a demonstration of cultural triumph over mutual sublimation (McColgan).

Ultimately, the performance appeals to contemporary audiences with lilting melodies and quaint folk tales, all the while proclaiming its connection with the ancient Celtic past. Thus, *Riverdance* generally contributes to the process of explaining the culture to the people ( [Riverdance: A Journey](#) ).

### *Conclusion*

These two contemporary dances both serve as symbolisms of their own culture. Ireland's *Riverdance* was produced for the very purpose of introducing their culture internationally. Japan's Butoh dance, although it is not noticeable at first, echoes Japan's modern culture. Both also tell the stories of their respective homelands. *Riverdance* recounts the journey of the Irish people from the Celtic era until modern times. Hijikata's butoh choreographies mirror the very lives of the people of a certain period.

However, their differences lie in their artistic representations. Ireland's *Riverdance* aims to demonstrate the beauty and grandeur of their origins. Japan's Butoh dance, on the other hand, shows beauty in ugliness and darkness.

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