

A HISTORY OF IRISH BALLET FROM 1927 TO 1963

Abstract of a PhD Thesis by Victoria O'Brien

This thesis presents a detailed study of the five key ballet organisations that operated in Ireland between 1927 and 1963: the Abbey School of Ballet under the directorship of Ninette de Valois (1927-1933); the continuation of the Abbey School of Ballet under the directorship of Cepta Cullen and Muriel Kelly (1933-1958); the Sara Payne School and Company (1936-1945); the Irish Ballet Club under the directorship of Cepta Cullen (1939-1943); and the National Ballet School and Company under the directorship of Patricia Ryan (1952-1963). The study explores the influences, motivations and teaching methods of Ireland's classical dance pioneers, and catalogues the dance training and performances of the five schools and their companies during this period. It also documents and describes a comprehensive chronology of the major Irish ballet works created and performed from 1927 until 1963.

The thesis is made up of eight chapters. Following an introductory chapter and a literature review, the main body of the text is comprised of four chapters that chronologically document each of the ballet schools and their companies. The seventh chapter provides an assessment of the five organisations documented in this study by detailing and examining the impact that each organisation had during its time and also on later ballet movements in Ireland. The final chapter outlines the principal conclusions of the thesis, presents the major contributions of the research and discusses areas that would benefit from further research based on the findings from this work.

This study aims to break significant ground in a research area for which little published information exists. Research on the schools and companies has been pieced together from interviews, ballet programmes, playbills, libretti, scores, memoirs and papers, contemporary press reviews, literary articles and photographs to form a narrative of new knowledge. Perhaps for the first time in published record, an extensive bibliography and a descriptive catalogue of sources pertaining to Irish ballet has now been created through this work.

A heretofore-neglected dimension of Irish artistic life, this thesis aims to provide a greater appreciation of the various roles that ballet has played in the development of Irish cultural activity. It records the rich interaction between the different dance artists and movements and their collaborators across the entire spectrum of Irish artistic endeavour, including Cecil French Salkeld, F. R. Higgins, Mainie Jellet, Patrick Kavanagh, J. F. Larchet, Louis le Brocqy, Elisabeth Maconchy, Donagh MacDonagh, Brinsley MacNamara, Micheál Mac Laimmóir Micheal, Norah McGuinness, A. J. Potters, Lennox Robinson, Michael Bowles, John Ryan, Anne Yeats and W. B. Yeats.

In summary, this study chronicles the activities of the five most important ballet schools and companies during this significant period in the development of Irish ballet and provides an extensive bibliography and description of related sources. It both addresses and remedies the neglect of twentieth century Irish ballet in historiography, and through an improved understanding of classical dance as it has developed and evolved in Ireland, this thesis aims to generate a greater appreciation for ballet as part of Ireland's broader artistic landscape between 1927 and 1963.