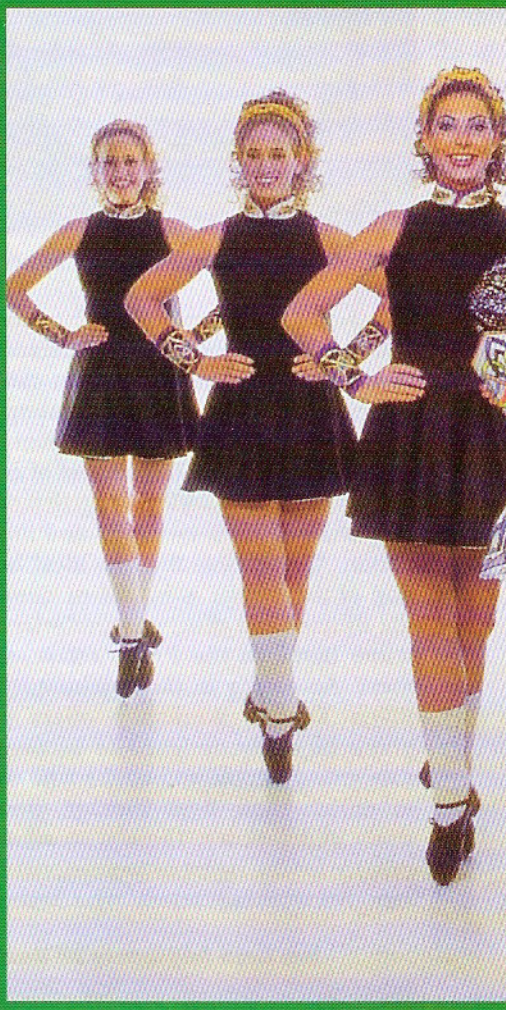
TRINITY



THE FOUNDER, THE SCHOOL AND THE COMPANY

The birthplace of progressive Irish dance

By Elke Oberg

Emerging from the practice room, the children resume the last steps they just practiced as their black, hard-soled dance shoes tap and leap toward their parents waiting in the hallway. "We learned the hornpipe today," some shout enthusiastically, trying to voice-over the rhythmic hubbub echoing through the halls of the Irish-American Heritage Center. "Their feet are always moving," says one of the mothers. These girls and boys keep step-dancing while sitting in school or at the dining table, says another. "They *want* to dance." Some of these students, with support of their parents, will dedicate many hours, days and years to Irish dancing, eventually winning championship medals and performing for audiences around the world. "It's a cult," the mothers agree. A cult that makes a lot of noise!

PHOTO / BILL FREDERKING

Irish dance has conquered audiences around the world with the volume and speed of its steps. The thunder produced by hard-soled shoes and quickly moving feet has been answered with roaring applause, a general revival of Irish folk art, and the expansion of Irish dance schools outside of Ireland.

In 1979, long before the current phenomenon, 17-year-old Mark Howard founded a school that became the birthplace of progressive Irish dance. The Trinity Academy of Irish Dance in Chicago has since grown into the world's largest Irish dance school, and also produced the first Irish dance company. Howard's group and innovative choreography took the initial striking step toward a new artistic level and away from the competitive realm. As an Irish dance school, the Trinity Academy directs its persistent efforts toward growing new generations of respectful, confident and dedicated Irish dancers. And while temporary success stories like *Riverdance* entertain full houses around the world with flashy dance spectacles, the Trinity Irish Dance Company concentrates on the long overdue establishment of Irish dance as a performance art.

Trinity has grown from a one-man dance lesson to a multifaceted organization that teaches, competes, performs, and tours the world. Founder and Artistic Director Mark Howard can look back at 20 years of steady growth and transformation: "It has been an amazing journey. It's been hard, but it's been easy in a way, too." Choosing the name Trinity, instead of using his own, at first allowed Howard to take the backstage position, a place he generally prefers. A champion Irish dancer himself, Howard had worn out his dancing shoes and decided to teach a few neighborhood children the Irish reels and jigs. He had also observed Irish dominance when participating in the world championships in Ireland. While he could not reach the very top himself, Howard was determined to lead his students to gold medals from the Irish Dance Commission on the Emerald Isle.

In 1984, the school won the world championship silver, and three years later took home the first gold medal ever won by a non-Irish team. Suddenly the Irish dance world was asking about the man behind the Trinity dancers. And Howard had to step into the spotlight, presenting his school on talk shows such as "The Tonight Show." The success also led to the dancers' appearance in the movie "Backdraft," an expansion of the school and a growing demand for Trinity performances in Chicago and beyond. During these years, Trinity dancers introduced Irish dance to a general audience. The dance form finally stepped out of the tightly-closed competition venues, where thoroughbred dancers presented ancient dance routines to a handful of adjudicators. Howard himself had always enjoyed the performing side more, which to this point "just didn't exist." Dancing in front of a larger, less critical audience would allow the dancers to truly appreciate the art form. Irish dance "has got to be a reaction to music or a celebration of life," Howard reasons, contagious enthusiasm carrying his words. "That's what dance is. It can't be for winning trophies. So I gradually pulled it, pulled it, pulled it away."

The pulling and pushing translated into artistic experimentation and growth. In 1990, Howard launched the nonprofit Trinity Irish Dance Company, a professional dance group with about 25 dancers, encouraging older, outstanding school members to expand their skills beyond the competitive

repertoire and also creating an outlet for his more daring choreography. "Competition is how we got a name big enough to say to the world: we can do it better than anybody the straight way," says Howard, and the success gave "us permission or license to play with it." Any art form needs to breathe and move forward. Irish step dancing had previously delivered other dance forms such as tap, square and clog dancing. "So why not still continue to morph," Howard convinced himself and others while promoting his dream to change Irish dance into a performance art form and to gain for it the same integrity as classical or modern ballet.

As Howard says himself, dreams do come true. Members of the Chicago dance and art community "took us under their wing." The City of Chicago regularly provided support, and other artists joined Howard for collaborative projects. The company worked with the Chicago Dance Coalition, the Ruth Page Series, the Human Rhythm Project, Hubbard Street Dance, Columbia College and Xsight! Performance Group. Trinity's powerful finale piece at the Dance Chicago opening night in 1997 strengthened an already strong connection with Chicago's critical dance audience. In July 1998, the Trinity Irish Dance Company performed at the Joyce Theater in New York City, one of the most prestigious dance venues in the world. The highly-acclaimed show, part of a 38-city tour throughout the United States, brought Trinity even closer to recognition as a serious member of the American dance community.

The company is now listed in program books along with the likes of Alvin Ailey and Twyla Tharp, not as part of just another Celtic series. The high-profile International Management Group, the company's agency since mid-1997, keeps the Trinity dancers stepping and selling out around the world. The tour schedule for 1999 includes stops in Chile, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Taiwan and England, as well as six performances on various stages in Chicago. Some day soon, the group hopes to take over audiences in Ireland. Other future projects involve joint performances with the Kodo Drummers and the Boston Pops, appearances in films, and advertising engagements with companies such as Pepsi, McDonald's and Dr. Pepper.

The Trinity company's fast climb to the top is often linked to the commercial success and world-wide exposure of shows like *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance*. But lately, critics are willing to set the record straight: The Trinity dancers came first! Certainly, the suddenly discovered obsession with Irish step-dancing has helped promote the Chicago group. And, says Howard, "the more ridiculous [these shows] got, the better we looked." In general, he has handled the questions about Michael Flatley and *Riverdance* in a rather quiet, diplomatic way. He could have made headlines telling them all that most of the "new, unique" choreography in *Riverdance* was taken from Howard's Trinity repertoire. "Some of the [copied choreography] was really literal," says Sheila Ryan, founding member of the company. "It was disheartening, because *we* never really got credit for that. And people thought that we were backwashing. We said: Wait a minute! We made this up. We were the first ones ever dancing without the traditional music, and doing theater pieces with Irish dancing." With a constantly evolving repertoire, Trinity is now stealing the show. "Anything that's moving forward in Irish dancing is happening in the Trinity Irish Dance Company," Ryan adds. And Howard feels more confident to articulate his claim of starting and also leading the way in creating an art form called progressive Irish dance.

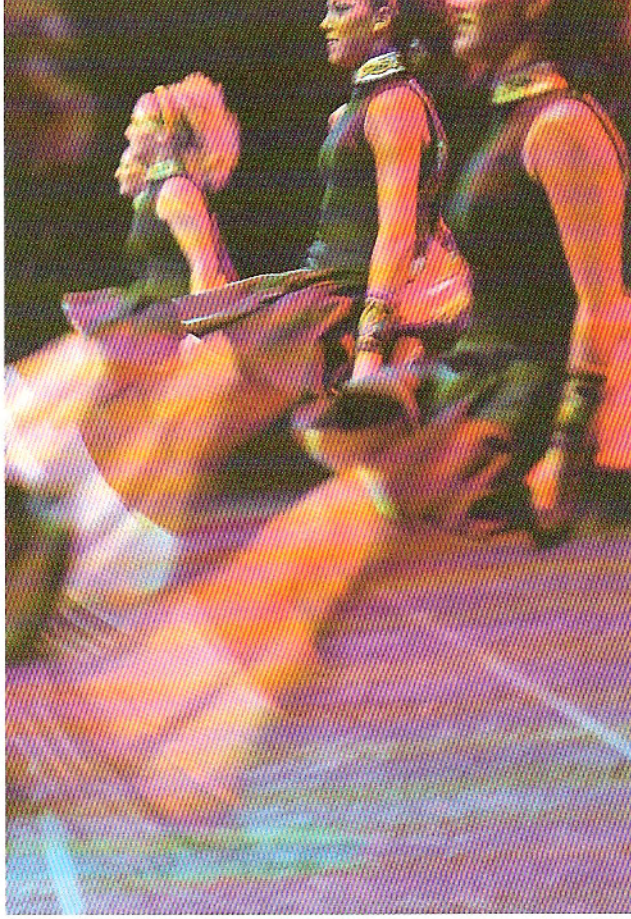


PHOTO / CAROLYN OTTO

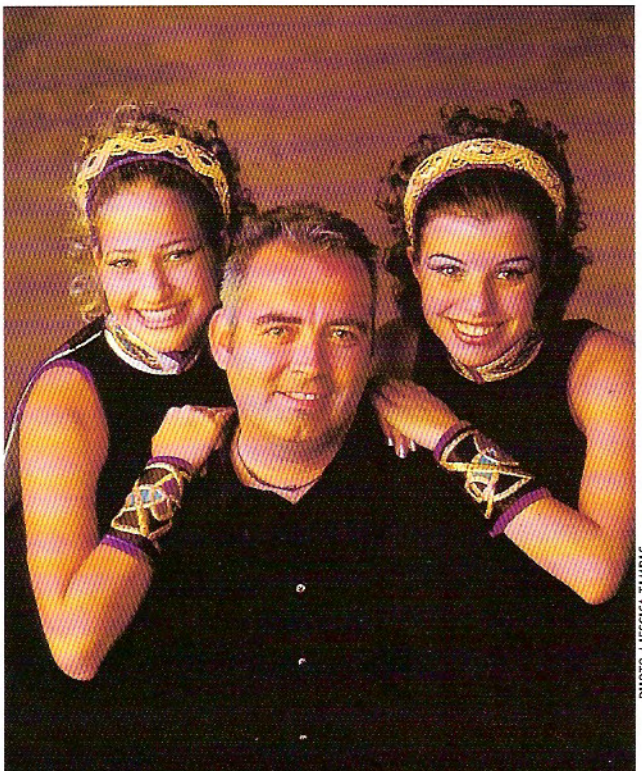


PHOTO / JESSICA TAMPAS

Artisitic director Mark Howard with company members Patti Mahon and Samantha Morreale.

With each choreography, Howard explores new ways of incorporating other means of expression and different dance forms, African and modern the most influential. His most recent work-in-progress, *The Mollies*, tells the dramatic story of immigrant Irish miners called Molly Maguires in the 1890s Pennsylvania labor conflicts. The piece, co-choreographed by Brian Jeffery, forcefully combines traditional hard-shoe dancing with techniques of modern dance theater. A female ensemble, wearing smeared clothes and miner's lights, convincingly personifies the angry male characters. The pushing and shoving throughout the fighting scenes is amplified by forceful, relentless tapping. The dancers transform into tough, fist-clenching guys. Driven by the furious

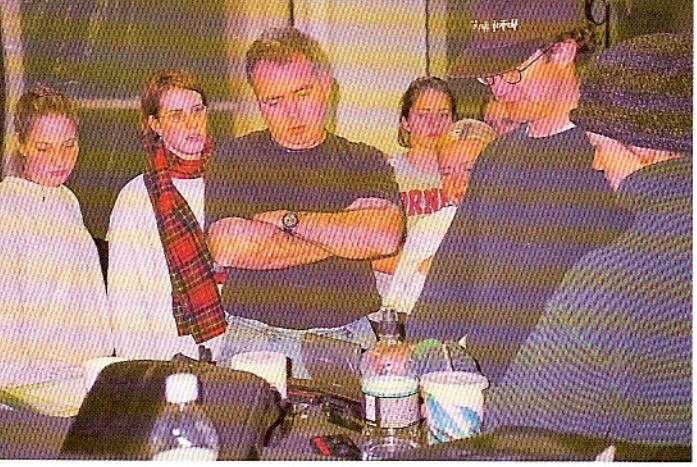


PHOTO / ELKE OBERG

Left: **Legs in flight. The Trinity Irish Dance Company during a December 1998 performance at the Auditorium Theater.** ***Above:*** **Mark Howard and company members study the video taping of a finalized section of "The Mollies" with guest choreographers Ashley Roland and Jamey Hampton.**

recital carrying the music, they drag each other across the stage, simulate fist punches and smear their noses. Progressive Irish dance a la Trinity tells a powerful story. Howard and the dancers have changed Irish dance to an expressive level that will continually enlighten audiences but also encourage coming generations to take yet another step beyond the boundaries.

As the artistic director, Howard now spends most of his time choreographing for, rehearsing, touring with and promoting the dance company. But while the attention has shifted, his original "love affair," the Trinity Academy, is writing its own success story. Today, the Trinity Academy holds 17 world champion titles in solo and group dancing. About 1200 students from preschool to adult age are currently studying Irish dance with Trinity teachers at Chicagoland, Milwaukee and Madison locations. Amy Campbell, the school's assistant director, has seen many of them grow up and some create their own legend through Irish dancing. "It's fun to teach these children ... and the kids want to be here. They look forward to coming here."

Irish dancers can train to participate in solo and group competitions. Various annual competitive events, called *feisianna*—or singular *feis* [fesh]—gather the best dancers of various age groups in certain regions, states or the world to show their highly involved steps, hops and leaps in front of certified adjudicators. Reels and jigs are danced in soft, tight leather shoes similar to ballet slippers; hornpipes, treble-jigs, and percussive step dances in hard-soled shoes. Female dancers, their hair fixed in bouncing, small curls, wear colorful wool or velvet dresses, embroidered with elaborate Gaelic designs. These continuous, interlocking lines, obtained from the Book of Kells, symbolize mankind's eternity. The male dancer can dress in a kilt or regular pants. All traditional, "by-the-book" choreography is performed to Gaelic folk music. The dancers' upper bodies are kept in a rigid, still position, with the arms held straight down at the sides, as their strong feet move with unthinkable speed and energy. While solo set dances and team (figure) competitions like the *ceili* follow prescribed step patterns and require this exact posture, the choreography and dance drama categories, both danced in larger groups, allow more free form and body movement experimentation.

Winning a medal at a state or world *feis* might be the dream of many young Irish dancers, but only the very disciplined, most devoted students will reach championship levels. If children show talent "they need to make a hard-core decision" whether to dedicate their entire free-time to Irish dancing, says Campbell. Championship-level dancers spend at least two afternoons practicing solo routines and another two with their teams. Many of them juggle dancing and school with other activities and responsibilities. Parents need to drive them to practice, buy costumes and dance shoes, curl hair, applaud, comfort and travel to competitions all over the country. Still, the students keep coming, and the coaches at the Trinity Academy continue to shape one medal-winning generation after another.

The wooden floor of the large practice hall at the Irish-American Heritage Center in Chicago needs to absorb the rigorous beating produced by more than 50 pairs of feet in white socks and hard-soled, black shoes. For five hours, Amy Campbell seems to be able to ignore the roaring noise and to concentrate on the speedy, complicated step patterns that rows of students present to her. Some are tightly holding a stick with both hands behind their back, forcing the arms to stay straight and close to the body. Older students help the younger ones, repeating certain steps over and over for them to grasp the rhythm and style. This large group combines dancers of all levels, some more ambitious than others. Some are going to stay and practice with dedication, while others will dance for only a few months or without the desire to reach the top.

"We pride ourselves that we have different levels for the kids to dance at," says Campbell, referring to a dancer-friendly program that allows children to select their own time commitment and to practice for performances, competitions, both or just for fun. "There is something in it for everyone," says Sarah Wippman, parent of three younger Trinity students. She finds Irish dancing to be the perfect "positive, structured activity" for her active children. "The kids love it." On the other hand, teaching different skill and interest level dancers within one class appears to be an increasingly difficult situation for the coaches, says Campbell. Adding more competent teaching staff, most of them Trinity students and still active dancers, should help to solve that problem in the near future.

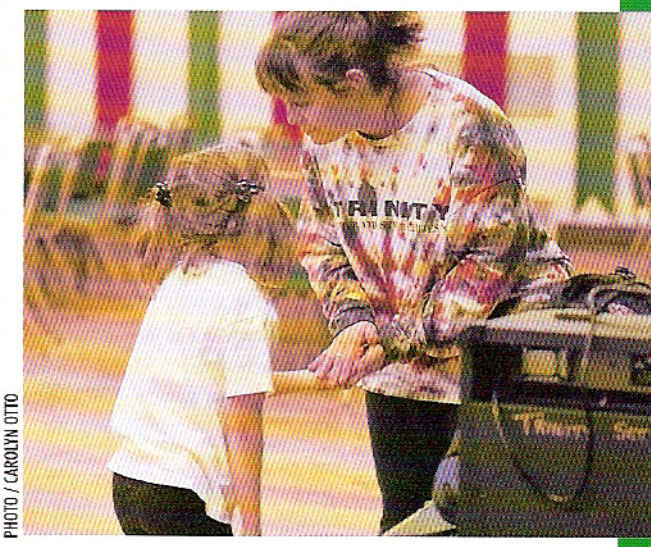


PHOTO / CAROLYN OTTO

Coach Amy Campbell encourages young Trinity dancers to practice the difficult step patterns and to gain confidence for competitions.

Two floors down, an especially successful Trinity dancer is now in charge of her own class and students. Katie Hughes, a high school junior, has been an academy student for 11 years, repeatedly competing for medals at the world championship in Ireland. In 1994, Hughes substituted for an injured girl in the

PHOTO / ELKE OBERG

Irish, African and Indian dancers rehearsing Danny Hind's choreography "UMOJA!" This work premiered in 1995 during a Trinity performance at the Skyline Stage and celebrates the connection between folk dancers from around the world.

world ceili competitions. When the team received the world champion awards, she stepped down from the podium and gave her gold medal to the hurt teammate. An almost identical team won Hughes' second gold medal at the World Championship in 1998. "We all knew that we could do it, we all wanted to work for it ... [winning the worlds again] with seven of my best friends was the best thing I've ever done."

Hughes currently practices solo and with her team for another ticket to the Emerald Isle, mastering an exhausting schedule with school, homework and teaching twice a week. Some day, she would like to dance with the company. Her smile gets even bigger with each memory and future project she talks about. Trinity is her life. Aside from Irish dancing, the school "has taught me how to work with other people, and how to go out for my dreams ... and it is the greatest feeling in the world when you reach the goals you set for yourself." Trinity dancers grow up with pride and confidence in themselves and their teammates—values Hughes will now pass on to the next generation.

When founding the Trinity school, Mark Howard introduced and has since incited a "different philosophy about competition." Students should appreciate the beauty and history of the art form, develop strong but modest personalities. "These girls are able to win and lose graciously," says Gloria Moyer, school board member and mother of two teenage dancers. And they are genuinely happy for the success of their teammates. "That can't be a bad thing to take through life." Teamwork takes first place, individual success second. Even gold-medal winners "never get big-headed," says Moyer. They are first to walk up to kids who didn't make the second round trying to comfort and encourage them. In general, the school teaches all students to dance beautifully while "respecting the competition, respecting each other, and respecting the art form," says Amy Campbell. "It's not about winning the medals ... it's about going out there and doing the piece they learned from start to finish ... to impress the audience and enjoy performing it."

This no-pressure, no-scare atmosphere has enabled Trinity teams and soloists to win countless medals in regional and state *feisianna,* and also to beat the Irish competition at world championships on home ground. The Trinity coaches have always acted as guiding personas in their students' lives, encouraging them to simply try their very best in every competition or performance situation. Many female dancers grow up to be straight-A students, learn how to balance their time, and at the

A short history of Irish dance

Most of the 150 set and *ceili* dances currently recorded were first choreographed and taught to the Irish people during the 18th century. Irish dance masters traveled the country, instructed the common villagers, and also created their own repertoire of new dance steps and set dances. The teachers derived many of their steps and patterns from popular French dances like the *Quadrille,* but also relied on dance steps of the ancient Celtic/Gaelic culture that had originated in the 3rd century AD. These Irish dances were faster and also included side steps. Continuous English rule in Ireland caused the loss and destruction of many recorded Celtic dance traditions.

On the other hand, Irish culture counteracted assimilation, suppression acts like the Penal Laws in the late 16th century and penalties. A secret culture united the Irish against their oppressors. The story goes that the upright, stiff position of the upper body in Irish dance allowed the people to secretly dance in their houses. When the priest walked by, he couldn't see their fast-moving feet.

After centuries of English control, Irish dance, and Irish culture in general, enjoyed a modern revival with the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. The Irish Dancing Commission, established in 1929, began to standardize rules for teaching Irish dance and judging competitions. The 20th century has seen increasingly more female dancers, the introduction of solo dancing categories, and the evolution of costumes, locations and dance techniques. Irish dancers were once judged by their ability to perform in a small space like the top of a barrel. With the introduction of larger venues, dancers were now allowed to move, glide and jump across the stages.

The dance form also spread to new geographic locations. Irish immigrants have taken their traditions and art to America, Asia and Australia. Today, many world champions grow up and groom their skills in a constantly expanding Irish-American dance community.

same time gain a high level of self-confidence especially important for young women in our time. "They can make so much noise," says Howard. "They know where the button is and they know when to push it."

Trinity school dance groups have been making lots of noise on stages in Chicago and all across the United States. It all began with St. Patrick's Day appearances and shows at the Irish Fest in Milwaukee. Now the dancers are regularly invited to perform on national TV. In 1997, the best high-school dancers were chosen to form the Varsity Performing Group, now performing at the smaller venues which used to book the Trinity Irish Dance Company. A folk festival in Belgium twice invited the Trinity dancers. Students feeling less comfortable dancing at the competitive level can direct their ambitions toward this type of stage experience.

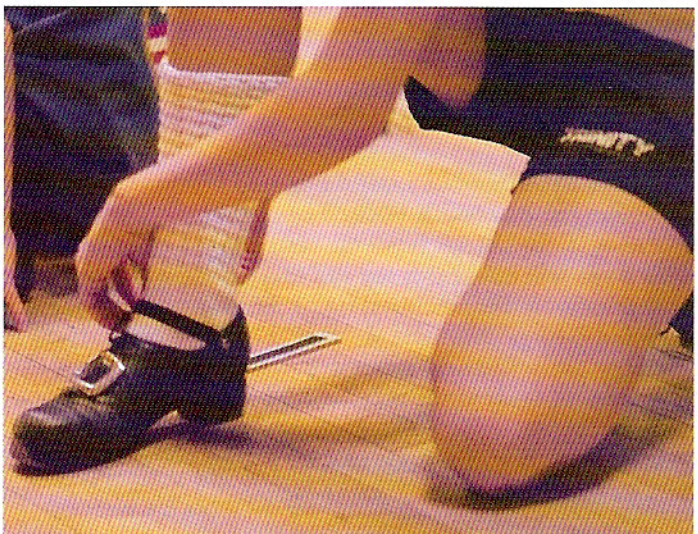
Many dancers enjoy both the entertaining and competing exposure. Annual regional competitions, like the Midwest *Oireachtas* [oh-róck-tas], have counted record attendance in recent years. In 1998, three large rooms at the Rosemont Convention Center in Chicago could hardly contain the masses of dancers, parents and spectators. While the dancers on stage concentrate on counting their way through the music and every step of their routine, the next group of girls and boys pushes its way through others resting on the floor. The noise in the room almost swallows the music and tapping sounds. Vocal hugs, applause, girls exchanging the latest boyfriend stories, a last word of advice from coaches and parents, the buzz of excitement. The adjudicators repeatedly—and ineffectively—ask for quiet in the room. Dad keeps his fingers crossed during six-year-old junior's first ever *Oireachtas* presentation. Mothers unravel colorful plastic curlers and refresh their daughters' make-up. The dress needs to be fixed, the shoe broke, the musicians were playing too fast. Tears and laughter, worry and joy. But most of all, a big, busy family festivity!

Many parents and children will stay at a nearby hotel and follow the all-day events for three days of competition. Even though the schedule is tiring and sometimes a little crazy, the *feis* brings people together. And while the coach lives for that big hug and the tears of joy when students step down from the medal podium, the parents simply enjoy watching the children giving their best. These mothers and fathers have invested as much time and effort in their kids' dance career as the brave little boys and girls on that stage leaping high and tapping fast to impress the jury members.

At Trinity, parents' involvement in the organization of classes, competitions, parties and fundraising events is welcome, expected and needed. Gloria Moyer calls Trinity "one big family," and most parents will happily agree. Parents can find a big group of friends through Trinity activities and competitions, but also get closer and become better friends to their children. The success and growth of the whole Trinity organization would be impossible without the help and dedication of its families. In order to coordinate and organize events like shoe and dress resales, Christmas parties, parent luncheons, raffles and workshops with famous Irish dancers in Chicago or Ireland, the school created the Trinity Booster Club, a fairly new, separate nonprofit organization. The club directs its efforts toward all Trinity students, not just the top dancers. "The Academy is a wonderful school, but the Booster Club makes it better," says Booster Club Executive Director Erin Murray Butler. "All of our parents participate in some way or another, every family helps to raise money for the Booster Club," choosing the level of commitment they can afford. Butler spends most of her day listening to parent suggestions and attending to their many questions and concerns. "The amount of energy and effort that's put forth by such a large number of people is astonishing."

This energy seems to radiate from every person involved in the Trinity organization. And it will continue to find new outlets and activate coming generations of children and parents. While proudly presenting past accomplishments, the Trinity organization as a whole wants to excel through new challenges. Sold out performances around the world and 17 world championships is "a lot to top," says Campbell. Overall, the schools aims to keep more students over longer periods of time and to train good dancers at all levels. If more dancers advance to championship form, Trinity will be able to expand its staff and offer more specialized classes.

A few of the very best will certainly audition for the opportunity to dance, tour and improve with the Trinity Irish Dance Company. With room to evolve and experiment, the company's future seems almost predictable. While Howard fears that Irish dance and dance in general will employ the commercial model of *Riverdance,* he plans to maintain the concept of a nonprofit fine arts company. *Riverdance* and its similar followers have blinded audiences around the world with flashy, Vegas-like, commercial spectacles, he says. The sense of "Celticness," which Howard worked hard to preserve in a progressive Irish dance form, has been consumed by mundane light shows, tacky, tight costumes and futuristic stage sets. But after the quick money sensation, the shows will most likely drive into a creative dead end. Howard predicts that not only will Trinity prevail and grow, the present company dancers will also create their own vehicle to push and move Irish dance to new artistic levels.

Trinity—as a school and a dance company—has already made a rich, commendable contribution to Irish dance and to the art world in general. The organization's philosophy and integrity carry a strong and important creative statement. And Mark Howard, along with all Trinity coaches, dancers and parents, will continue to spread the message: "We have faith in what we do. We treat each other well. We treat other people well. It may not be the most lucrative, but an incredibly satisfying path." Surely a path worth stepping on, not just for Irish dancers! E

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