



# COUNTING CAPITAL: THE REAL VALUE OF DANCE IN IRISH SOCIETY

MICHAEL SEAVER

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There is a photo of Fearghus Ó Conchúir in Dublin's Docklands (overleaf). He's in the foreground, standing in scrublands and leaning back into the frame. In the background, giant cranes tower overhead with an office block barely visible in the far distance. Littered on the ground is discarded junk: scrap metal, cast-off clothes and other detritus. The first question the viewer asks is, what is this place? It seems forgotten by society, unseen by the developer's eye. But perhaps it isn't forgotten. Perhaps it is just in limbo before the inevitable encroachment of construction. It contains elements of past activity and yet seems completely invisible to the present activity of cranes and workers. It's an "in-between" place straddling old and new, past and future, previously-developed and newly-developed.

It's also symbolic of Ireland's current social, cultural and economic status. The country is firmly in post-boom-pre-bust times. These words are written in November 2009, in the midst of debate over the most stringent budget in decades. There is widespread fear that increased cuts in public spending will curtail artistic activity, and growing social turmoil due to rising unemployment, negative equity and, most recently, severe flooding in the west and south. The static cranes in the photograph are also stationary in reality, as construction grinds to a halt.

The second question is, what is a dancer doing in this space? The space seems without value to developers (and society), yet is a site of broad aesthetic value to the choreographer? In the past, the clichéd landscape of dance – and particularly dance films – has been the desolate, deserted urban space: the archetypal abandoned factory or loft. Is the metaphoric "in-between" space in the photograph – distant from the day-to-day life – a comfortably familiar space for the dancing body? And, if so, does it perpetuate the notion of dance as a peripheral artform, driven by a shoestring aesthetic?

Among Ó Conchúir's personal artistic strategies is placing himself – the human form – in these sites of transition, like pre-construction sites of Dublin's Dockland's or Beijing's Olympic Stadium.

Although it's a credo not shared verbatim by the entire dance community, issues around the dancing body and site have emerged as clear threads in Irish dance-making. In placing (and sometimes replacing) the dancer's body in real and metaphoric space, the intervening corporeal presence demands attention, questioning not only how we relate to it, but also to its surroundings. Strategies are as diverse as Rebecca Walter's *Walk Don't Run* (a guerrilla performances on a traffic junction), Dance Theatre of Ireland's *Block Party* in public spaces, or Daghdha's *Choreography for Blackboards* in Kilmainham's Great Hall.

But this doesn't mean that the dancing body – and dance – is peripheral to the mainstream. Using French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's thinking of the body and social capital to set Irish dance's sociological coordinates, it is clear that the dancing body in Ireland is firmly placed in the centre of our cultural landscape and that

dancers contribute to social and cultural discourse through the ability to theorise through the moving body.

Examining the cause of the national and global financial crisis reveals a breakdown in the distribution of economic capital. Banks are stifled by bad debts and can no longer loan to borrowers. The cyclical distribution of this economic capital has broken down.

According to Bourdieu, this isn't the only type of capital. Whereas economic capital might be dominant in a capitalist society, there are other forms - cultural, educational, social and symbolic. These are fairly self-explanatory: educational capital comes from academic qualifications, social capital from the strength of interpersonal networks and cultural capital from the ability to play the cultural game (quote from books, understand allusions etc.).

And even if there is a crisis in the distribution of economic capital, other forms of capital remain unaffected, or even strengthened. There is a constant threat to economic capital from those who are relatively poor in economic capital but rich in other forms of capital. Challenging economic dominance, they promote their own particular form of capital as a rival principle of power. Faced with a funding downturn, arts organisations are campaigning for justification primarily using economic arguments, citing the sector's employment figures and tax generation. The arts sector might indeed hold economic capital by its ability to generate revenue, but it also has more important cultural and symbolic capital.

So, when a delegation from the Arts Council met with a Dáil sub-committee on the arts, they invited high profile artists like Brendan Gleeson, Colum McCann and Sebastian Barry to address the star-struck deputies. Their comments show the artists' symbolic capital.

"It is not often that we see Hollywood come to Leinster House," (Deputy Olivia Mitchell). "I am thrilled that Mr. Brendan Gleeson, who has acted in more than 60 films, could be with us today. My favourite is *In Bruges*," (Deputy Michael Kitt). "Mr. Gleeson may be interested to know that my favourite film is *The General*...He has done this country proud," (Deputy Michael Ring). "I was in Abu Dhabi last week waiting to get on a plane, and I had a copy of Sebastian Barry's book, *A Long, Long Way*. A fellow traveller ... spoke for 10 to 15 minutes about Sebastian Barry and all our fantastic artists. It reminded me of the tremendous reputation that we have abroad," (Deputy Michael Kitt). "I am delighted to be in the presence of some of my heroes...We are having a lovely afternoon here with some of the luminaries of the arts world and away from the gloom of the recession," (Deputy Mary White).

Individual dancers might not possess the same symbolic capital as Brendan Gleeson or Colum McCann. But, at the present moment of "in-between-ness" and as the country is on the brink of enormous economic, social and cultural change, what capital – economic, cultural or symbolic – does Irish dance hold?

Certainly, economic capital has increased through higher levels of funding in the past number of years through the Arts Council and bodies like Culture Ireland. Many companies now own their own studio, such as Dance Theatre of Ireland at Bloomfields,

Coiscéim in Dublin's city centre and Daghdha in St. John's Church in Limerick City. Other companies have secured residencies in high profile venues, like Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company at the Waterside Theatre in Derry and Myriad Dance in Wexford Opera House. DanceHouse now provides studio space for both established companies and independent artists. These spaces have important symbolic value, not just to wider society who might correlate property with success, but also within the dance community.

"I've gone to classes in dirty cold seedy halls where you can't help feeling dirty, cold and seedy. DanceHouse will ... make people feel better about their profession," said Dance Ireland Chief Executive Paul Johnson in an interview with *The Irish Times* in 2006, adding that it would change the nature of work created for the better.

But companies have also acquired a significant amount of symbolic capital. Dublin Dance Festival (formerly International Dance Festival Ireland) brought one of the twentieth century's most influential artists, Merce Cunningham, to Dublin for its inaugural festival in 2002. The symbolic capital of Cunningham's company performing was important as dance found itself aligned to artistic intelligentsia. Cunningham had cultural capital and could be cross-referenced with other artists like Andy Warhol, John Cage and Bob Rauschenberg. Not only was Cunningham's work articulate in the general aesthetic discourse, but also his name could be thrown into conversations of the highest cultural capital.

Once earned, symbolic capital can be easily redistributed in subtle ways. So, a dancer like Colin Dunne has different symbolic capital as a Riverdance star, a successful MA student and artist-in-residence at the University of Limerick, a solo dance artist funded by the Arts Council, or a featured act at the Dublin Dance Festival. For example, the symbolic capital of performing at Dublin Dance Festival might be perceived as more valuable in acquiring Arts Council funding than being a Riverdance star, but the Riverdance experience might be more valuable than the academic residency for being featured in a Sunday newspaper.

Many Irish dance artists have gained symbolic capital through performances abroad, not just at high profile events like Rex Levitates Dance Company in China or Coiscéim at Jacob's Pillow, but also in Fitzgerald & Stapleton and Niamh Condrón performing at Judson Church or junk ensemble at the Teatromania Festival in Bytom, Poland. There was also a considerable rise in dance's capital, as Cindy Cummings and David Bolger became the first choreographers elected to Aosdána.

The symbolic power of culture has been used by the Irish government and although dance artists have benefited from state support to travel abroad, they have also questioned the relationship between the body politic and artists, and how government might use art as indicator of nationhood. In her dance film *Frozen*, choreographer Mairéad Vaughan places her dancers beside iconic sculptures loaded with nationalistic resonance: Oisín Kelly's *The Children of Lir* in the Garden of Remembrance and Rowan Gillespie's *Famine* on Custom House Quay. Against the inert state-sanctioned commemorations of seminal moments in Irish history, Vaughan's dancers suggest a deeper connection to the past through embodied memories – what Bourdieu calls habitus or embodied history.

Applying Bourdieu's theory to the dancer and society, the relationship is not like subject and object, but rather one of complicity. Not only is culture imprinted upon the body, but it is the central means by which culture is produced and reproduced. In the words of dance theorist Gay Morris, "the body is in the social and the social is in the body." On stage, this cyclical interplay is found in Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre's midlands trilogy, where the body is brutalised by an emotional landscape that is brutalised, in turn, by the individual. This places the body, not as an outsider, but integral to the formation of societies.

Increasingly, Irish choreographers are placing the dancing body outside the proscenium or black box. Even when in the theatre, stripped-back theatricality predominates, like in works by Irish Modern Dance Theatre, and the conventions of the performing space are addressed, such as in Ciotóg's *How Did We Get Here?* or in dances by Rex Levitates. Sometimes, dancers are placed directly onsite, like Fluxusdance's *The Divine Normal* in the GAA Museum or Legitimate Bodies' *Hanging in There* on the steps of Stormont.

Bourdieu's theories on the body also find resonance in Irish dance practice. In addition to advocating a complicit relationship between dancer and society, he also rejects the Cartesian duality of body and mind. Rather the body is the primary site for cultural production and social differentiation. Arguing the existence of a bodily intelligence that lies outside the realm of conscious reason, he writes: "there is a way of understanding which is altogether particular, and often forgotten in theories of intelligence; that which consists of understanding with one's body."

This is obvious in its application to much of Irish dance-making, which is generally a highly collaborative practice. Dancers contribute to the creation of the dance and movement, finding solutions to choreographic problems during rehearsals. There are different levels of engagement, with some choreographers like Michael Kliën distinguishing between choreography and dance: he creates the choreography but the performers create the dance. This kind of engagement not only shapes the choreography, but also the corporeal identities within the performance.

But it also goes further. This dancing body also generates ideas. The group involved in the Genesis Project Dublin, who follow the principles of Deborah Hay's daily practice best exemplify the ability of the body to theorise, rather than the mind. Here the theorising is done by the body, the theory not consciously developed, but embodied through the daily practice.

According to dance writer Gay Morris, this makes it possible to see the social "not only in who sponsors the dance or views it, or what kinds of narrative themes dance embraces, or how dance might serve a broader social function, but to see the social as imbedded in the practice of dance, in the dancers' comportment and the steps they do, how the dance movement is assembled and how the dancers are arranged on the stage, in how dancers are trained and developed."

Far from being on the periphery of Irish culture, the dancing body is at its very centre. By opening the dialogue between society and dancer, Irish choreographers have moved the body from the metaphoric scrublands. It is a confident position, borne of the increased cultural, societal and symbolic capital. And ultimately, it hasn't just been a self-serving sop to the mainstream, but recognition in the ability of dance to enter dialogue with all levels of society.

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**Coiscéim Dance Theatre:** [www.coisceim.com](http://www.coisceim.com)

**Ciotóg:** [www.ciotog.ie](http://www.ciotog.ie)

**Culture Ireland:** [www.cultureireland.ie](http://www.cultureireland.ie)

**Colin Dunne:** [www.colindunne.com](http://www.colindunne.com)

**Daghdha Dance Company:** [www.daghdha.ie](http://www.daghdha.ie)

**Dance Ireland:** [www.danceireland.ie](http://www.danceireland.ie)

**Dance Theatre of Ireland:** [www.dancetheatreireland.com](http://www.dancetheatreireland.com)

**Dublin Dance Festival:** [www.dublindancefestival.ie](http://www.dublindancefestival.ie)

**Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company:** [www.echoecho dance.com](http://www.echoecho dance.com)

**Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre Company:** [www.fabulousbeast.net](http://www.fabulousbeast.net)

**Fearghus Ó Conchúir:** [www.bodiesandbuildings.blogspot.com](http://www.bodiesandbuildings.blogspot.com)

**Fitzgerald & Stapleton:** [www.fitzgeraldandstapleton.blogspot.com](http://www.fitzgeraldandstapleton.blogspot.com)

**Fluxusdance:** [www.fluxusdance.ie](http://www.fluxusdance.ie)

**Irish Modern Dance Theatre:** [www.irishmodern dance theatre.com](http://www.irishmodern dance theatre.com)

**Junk Ensemble:** [www.junkensemble.com](http://www.junkensemble.com)

**Mairéad Vaughan:** [www.shakramdance.com](http://www.shakramdance.com)

**Myriad Dance:** [www.myriaddance.com](http://www.myriaddance.com)

**Niamh Condron:** [www.this torsion.com](http://www.this torsion.com)

**Rex Levitates Dance Company:** [www.rexlevitates.com](http://www.rexlevitates.com)

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Photograph: Jonathan Mitchell