Abstract

Irish dancing, along with other aspects of Irish culture and tradition, reaches around the globe to the other end of the earth, Australia. Irish immigrants have had a presence in Australia from the earliest days of settlement. St Patrick’s Day parades have been staged in Sydney since 1810, Irish pubs abound, and Irish music and dance are enjoyed by both those within, and outside of, the Irish community. This paper explores issues of cultural identity construction within the context of competitive Irish dancing. The historical narrative established by Cullinane (2006) in his work Aspects of 170 Years of Irish Dancing in Australia, describes the Australian Irish dance scene but does not explore the entrance of Irish dancing into general public consciousness following the Eurovision Song Contest performance of ‘Riverdance’ in 1994. In this paper, the popularisation of Irish dancing due to media exposure following the ‘Riverdance’ phenomenon is interrogated, demonstrating the existence of two distinct groups amongst Irish dancing participants in Sydney. For participants whose families had emigrated from Ireland, Irish dancing provides an affective connection to their cultural heritage. Yet these participants may, along with the desire to establish such a connection, simultaneously share characteristics with the second group: those who lack familial connections with Ireland, but who took up Irish dancing as part of a wave of popular attraction to all aspects of Irish culture, considering it as representative of camaraderie and a good time. In exploring this phenomenon, I draw on theories concerning issues of ethnic identity, cultural adoration and temporary cultural affiliation, to further the discourse surrounding ethnic identity construction through traditional dance practices.

Jeanette Mollenhauer has had a lifelong interest in traditional dance forms. She is a recreational folk dance teacher, and is the current president of Folk Dance Australia. Both of her daughters danced competitively in Irish dancing at State and National Championships, and Jeanette has assisted with beginner classes, team classes and concerts at the Maher School of Irish Dance in western Sydney since 1994. In 2013, Jeanette commenced doctoral studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and will be researching traditional dance practices amongst immigrant groups, including the Irish, in