

World Irish dancing contest takes big step to US

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A SPECIAL chapter in the history of Irish dancing was written this week when thousands of Irish dancers from all around the globe descended on Philadelphia to compete in the World Irish Dancing Championships.

This is the first year in its 39-year history that the world championships have been held outside of Ireland or the United Kingdom.

The championships are hosted by An Coimisiún le Rincí Gaelacha, the commission established in the 1920s for the purpose of maintaining traditional Irish dancing. It began in a small theatre in Dublin and grew over time. As more dancers qualified at regional and national competitions, the commission sought larger facilities to host the world championships. Belfast and Glasgow have hosted them in recent years.

Sean McDonagh, chairman for the commission, said the decision to move the competition to Philadelphia was based on the availability of facilities, including accommodation options, but also because Americans make up 75 per cent of competitors registered for this year's championships.

Selecting the location for the annual event begins with a bidding process. Dance teachers and commission representatives submit the suggested cities, and then a small commission subcommittee votes.

Mr McDonagh said Philadelphia and Boston were top choices for an American venue, and that local commission representatives had been pushing for the event to come to the US for years.

While American dancers and teachers are generally excited to have the competition come to the US, others are not as happy with the momentous move.

“It's Irish dance. It should stay in Ireland,” says Dearbhla Lennon, a teacher at Scoil Rince Mona Ní Rodaigh in Dundalk, Co Louth. Ms Lennon says moving the championships to the US is “huge”.

“This is the Olympics of what we do,” she says.

Ms Lennon, who has danced in principal roles for both Riverdance and Lord of the Dance, said that her personal opinion does not reflect her view of Americans or the competition so far.

“It's been amazing,” she says. “But I'll go wherever. We'll always travel wherever it is.”

While the location of the competition may change and “trends move with the seasons”, Ms Lennon says Irish dance has stayed “very much the same”.

Mr McDonagh credits the international popularity of shows such as Riverdance and Lord of the Dance with bringing traditional Irish dance to a diverse audience.

Michael Flatley is the primary sponsor for this year's championships. The first American winner of the event, he paid a visit to Philadelphia on Thursday.

During the championships' opening ceremony last Sunday, dancers marched across the main stage at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center carrying flags representative of the 32 countries with commission-registered Irish dance schools.

There are Irish dance teachers located as far away as Tokyo and Mexico City, Mr McDonagh said.

"They are of all races and creeds," he said. "And they're keeping the flag alive."

Mr McDonagh said a commission subcommittee has been charged with "overseas development", an effort to train and prepare individuals to teach traditional Irish dance in countries typically not associated with Irish culture. There is also a group dedicated to expanding Irish dance through Europe.

Commission treasurer Rose Nolan said that moving the event to the US has been both successful and challenging. The organisation had to move all trophies and medals from Ireland, and the commission had to purchase entirely new office equipment in the US.

"Thankfully, everything worked out really well," Ms Nolan said.

Now that the championships have visited European and American soil, dancers and teachers from other continents might wonder where future venues might be. Fiona-Gaye Moore and Nicole Zepcevski, both former world champions from Australia, said they would love to see the championships move to Australia, but they don't expect that to happen soon.

"Having it here is an experiment," Ms Moore said.

In his opening ceremony address, Mr McDonagh stressed the importance of Irish dance as a unifying agent spanning many cultures and continents.

"Whether you are American-born, Australasian, European, Irish or British, all of you have grown up with an awareness of Irishness in us," he said.

"We gather to celebrate our heritage."

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