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Features Category - 1st Place

SET DANCING

All teenagers love discos, right?

Wrong. Some teenagers love discos, but for others, there's limited appeal in standing at the edge of a dancefloor, too socially awkward to venture into the heaving throng and prevented by throbbing bass rhythms from holding any kind of meaningful conversation.

Which may go some way towards explaining why set dancing is taking the youth social scene by storm, as increasing numbers turn to traditional dances and discover the age-old activity anew.

If you need proof of the masses of young people swapping disco music for trad tunes, take a trip to Milltown Malbay in Co Clare at the start of July for the annual Willie Clancy festival. Your chances of actually trying set dancing will be limited by only one thing: Finding a square inch of space among the hundreds crowding the dance floors, both day and night.

What's the attraction?

"It's a social experience; you get to meet new people," says Liam from Co Cork, an 18-year-old student whose love of set dancing began four years ago.

Unlike the individual nature of disco dancing, in a set of eight people all moving in strict formation he explains "you're forced to connect; you have to work together, otherwise you'll collide with somebody else".

The social interaction spans generations, class, gender, and a strong sense of community is evident among set dancers. Others are attracted to the activity as a keep-fit exercise and during upwards of three hours of non-stop dancing are to be found with sweat dripping from their hair and just about everywhere else - a far cry from the self-conscious appearance-checking of your average teenage disco-goer.

While occasions such as Willie Clancy week are the highlights of the set dancing calendar, the learning and socialising begins at home, where céilís and classes are on the agenda of many young people.

With 30 years' experience in learning and teaching set dancing and organising céilís, Larry Creed is delighted to see the upsurge in young people carrying on the tradition.

"Seeing young people dancing, I think, there's a great buzz, being with them," says Cork farmer Larry, who runs céilís every Thursday in the Abbey Hotel in Ballyvourney.

Larry has witnessed health benefits too from the hobby he took up himself as a 16-year-old. "I have seen people coming to céilís who had health problems, or other problems, and they seem to be able to park their problems outside the door, and go in and enjoy themselves, and that is a great source of joy," he says.

Larry's dancing career began under the tutelage of Clondrohid dancing teacher Ted Kelleher, who to this day still passes on the tradition to groups of enthusiastic children and teenagers.

Workshops with the likes of Pat Murphy and Connie Ryan followed, and Larry enjoyed competitive success in groups at Scór and Fleadh Cheoil, with sets including the Sliabh gCua, the ever-popular Sliabh Luachra, Cashel, and Larry's favourites, the Newport and West Kerry sets.

He views the discipline of competitions as a useful starting point, from which dancers can go on to broaden their knowledge of sets and discover the more relaxed atmosphere of the céilí.

"When I started in competitions it was quite serious," he recalls. "Not serious in the sense that you had to win every night you went out, but you had to do it properly."

Now, he says, steps are still precise, parts are danced accurately, but enjoyment levels have increased for young people attending céilís. "Now, you can still do it properly, and have a ball."

Set dancing's future is secure, he believes, judging by the numbers of young people taking up the activity, with competitive dancing beginning at an ever-younger age.

"The big difference at the moment is that there's a lot more youth taking part; they're being taught for set competitions at a very young age. You'd often see it in competition in under-eights category, which is the future of set dancing really."

His own son Shane was bitten by the set dancing bug aged nine, before going on to perform with the show Celtic Steps in Killarney's INEC.

Having taught dancing in Denmark and the length and breadth of Ireland, while organising the long-running Abbey Hotel céilís back at home, Larry appreciates both the wider international appeal of Ireland's dance tradition and the sense of community belonging shared by set dancers young and old.

These delights, for teenager Liam, are only beginning to unfold, and whatever their ages, backgrounds, or level of dancing expertise, when they step out onto the floor he says "everyone's in the same boat, and they're all brought together by their love of dancing".

Judges Citation:

Of the hundreds of essays we trawled through across the four categories the Features winner was easily one of the stand out entries.

The notion/fad of Set Dancing should not bowl us over. It should not excite 30- and 40-something judges who have just ploughed through dozens of essays...but what the winning writer achieved is remarkable.

As the reader is taken on a journey back in time we were transfixed by the beautiful prose, clever intro and perfectly conducted and relevant interviews.

The winner of this year's Features category, by an almost-unanimous decision across all judges I might add, is Caitríona Ní Chonaill from Coláiste Ghobnatan, Baile Mhic Ire.