

Dancing over Crossed Swords: An Ethnographic Case Study on Competitive Solo Highland Dancing

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ABSTRACT

Highland dancing may be viewed as a form of dance and sport, as part of a competitive structure regulated by boards and associations (predominantly the Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (RSOBHD)), and as a link to romantic notions of Scottish history. The practice is entwined with its country of origin and shaped by its historical and contemporary place within Scotland. Through an ethnographic study undertaken with one Highland dancing class in Glasgow, Scotland, I danced and conversed with the teacher and dancers to explore their experiences and opinions of Highland dancing in relation to the practice (the dance), locality (Scotland), and public perceptions (society). Inductive analysis of observations and interviews revealed a confusion and tension, understood through the dramaturgical tools of Erving Goffman (1990 [1959]). A detailed study of the entwined dance and social "performance(s)" suggested that two "teams" were in existence (Goffman 1990 [1959]). One "team" (the teacher and older dancers) 'honoured' the tradition of the regulated and standardised Highland set dances yet sympathised with the other "team" (the younger dancers), who sought a more creative experience. I explore how the historical and performative nature of Highland dancing, for example, certain narratives, and technique required, shaped the "realities" (Goffman 1990 [1959]) within the class intersecting with notions of 'Scottishness' and the place of Highland within the greater field of dance.

KEYWORDS

Highland dancing; ethnographic; Erving Goffman; regulation; "Scottishness."



Introduction: Highland Dancing: A Multifaceted Practice

Highland dancing may be viewed as both a form of dance and sport, as part of a rigid competitive structure regulated by official boards and associations, and as a link to romantic notions of Scottish history. The practice is closely entwined with its country of origin; Highland dancing is shaped by its place and evolution within Scotland and by historical and contemporary perceptions of "Scottishness." However, the practice is not "geographically defined" (Scott 2005, 422), operating both within Scotland and countries populated by the Scottish diaspora (most notably, United States of America, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand).

Two main governing bodies are in existence. The Royal Scottish Official Board of Highland Dancing (RSOBHD), formed in 1950 (with the Royal title granted in 2019), accepted

Martor 30/2025 - Bodies in Motion: Dance, Movement, Gesture

“by the vast majority of highland [sic] dance associations, competitions, dancers, teachers and adjudicators around the world as the leading, indeed the only truly international, representative body” (RSOBHD website) and the smaller Scottish Official Highland Dancing Association (SOHDA) founded earlier in 1947.¹ They each question the authority and legitimacy of the other (Scott 2005), and persons (dancers, judges and teachers) registered with the RSOBHD are only allowed to perform at events sanctioned by that body (and registration is mandatory in order to perform).² The steps and dances performed in exams and at competitions and championships worldwide are predominantly governed by the RSOBHD which, according to their website, was formed “to lay down quality standards for all areas of Highland Dancing” (RSOBHD n.d.) The standardised and regulated nature of Highland dancing is not only evident through the RSOBHD syllabus performed in class, but in the relationship between this main board and its three teaching partners: UKA Dance (formerly, United Kingdom Alliance), Scottish Dance Teachers’ Alliance (SDTA) and British Association of Teaching of Dancing (BATD) that administer and facilitate the examination, teaching and learning of the repertoire to be performed at RSOBHD sanctioned events. Within the realm of solo competitive Highland dancing, the repertoire is comprised of five key dances: the *Highland Fling*, *Reel (of Tulloch)*, *Seann Triubhas*, *Strathspey* (often combines with the *Reel*) and *Sword Dance*; alongside these are the National dances which include: *Flora MacDonald’s Fancy*, *The Irish Jig*, *The Sailor’s Hornpipe*, *Blue Bonnets*, *Highland Laddie*, *Wilt Thou Go to Barracks Johnnie?* and *Scottish Lilt* among others. The latter are dances that were brought into the repertoire of boards and associations in the 1970’s (Scott 2005).

The history and origins of Highland dancing are uncertain and strongly mythologised. Interrogation reveals “inaccuracies and often, wishful connotations applied to most of the associated stories” (Melin 2018). For example, some stories claim that the dance practice is more than five thousand years old (Scott 2005), and tales of early Highland dancing “relate to clan warfare, celebration, traditional beliefs, and tests of strength, fitness, daring or skill” (Scott 2005, 1). However, Highland dancing as we know it today in its female-dominated competitive format has a largely modern history. Regulation came into being in response to the variations in local styles³ found in dance competitions and Highland Games in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Brewster et al. 2009). Thus, through centering the interests of fairness for dancers, spectators and teachers, and for ease of judging, “the tradition became regulated in terms of organisation, operation and standardisation” (Scott 2005, 3). The RSOBHD “which has since claimed exclusive rights to define dance standards” (Newton 2012, n.p) took an

elite group of dancers (specialists, who were themselves “popular” as world champions or teachers of champions) and agreed with them the acceptable steps and styles, rather than forming an administrative approach towards the systematic collection of tradition (Scott 2005, 3).

Hence, “execution, rather than narration, is the primary aim of the Highland dancer” (Scott 2005, 401). However, despite the rather perfunctory trajectory taken in the mid-twentieth century, a tradition of romantic myth surrounding the origins of the dances promulgates.⁴ Despite the dubiety of some of the supposed origins of dances, the role played by the stories of Highland dancing in giving the practice a sense of history and solidity is a potent one. Thus, members of the Highland dancing community, whether they are dancer, teacher, judge or researcher face the conundrum of supporting, exploring and interrogating a “Scottish” dance practice that is bound up in a paradoxical tandem of tradition and regulation. This contextual understanding shapes the specific focus of this paper: a case study of one small

Highland dancing class, within a private dance school in Glasgow, Scotland. Analysis of the teacher and dancers' experiences and opinions in relation to the practice and its place of locality and origin (Scotland), and wider perceptions outwith the bounded walls of the dance studio, is informed by the dramaturgical tools of sociologist, Erving Goffman (1990 [1959]). Ethnographic data was collected in 2013 as part of a wider PhD study (Whiteside, 2017a).

We now move to consider the key, albeit limited, literature focused on Highland dancing (relating especially to cultural and social analyses of the practice) before presenting practical details about the case study and exploring Goffman's model of dramaturgy (1990 [1959]). We then move on to the main discussion comprised of three key foci: the nature of the standardised and regulated "reality" of this Highland dancing class; a key social repercussion of this "reality," the existence of two "teams"; and, lastly, a more detailed exploration of the cultural and social forces shaping both this "reality" and the potential for a "different" more creative "reality."



Highland Dancing: An Underexplored Practice

In 1955, the RSOBHD lamented the following situation:

Reliable evidence concerning origins and early development is scarce and scattered; in the general neglect of Scottish culture which has prevailed, until recently, in all four Scottish universities, Highland Dancing has been largely ignored by learned men [sic], and as yet little or no serious research has been done (cited in Newton 2012, n.p.).

Fifty years later, Catriona M. Scott in her PhD thesis titled "The Scottish Highland Dancing Tradition" noted this situation had persisted and within the academy "there are barely enough coherent ethnographic threads to weave a garment of identity, let alone a colorful and vibrant tartan that would better represent the nature of the culture" (Scott 2005, 22). As briefly demonstrated in the introductory section, contemporary and future Highland dancing research has the potential to be rich in themes linked to notions of authenticity and legitimacy.

Literature centred on Highland dancing (as opposed to the other forms of Scottish traditional dancing characterised as such during the twentieth century e.g. Scottish country, *cèilidh*, and step dance (Morrison 2003a)) falls largely into three categories. These are social and cultural analyses (e.g. Ballantyne 2016; 2020; Flett and Flett 1956; Morrison 2003a, 2003b; Newton 2012; Scott 2005); historic instruction manuals (e.g. from the works of MacLennan 1950), Peacock (1805), and Taylor (1929)) and more contemporary syllabi guides and guidance (RSOBHD; Wardrope, 1997); and, lastly, dance science studies (e.g. Tan et al. 2023; Watson et al. 2013). The first of these categories is the most pertinent to this paper and the works are significant for the theme of regulation and standardisation that run as a thread between them. The key impetus for another instruction manual was an "increasing scepticism about the stylised modern form of country and Highland dancing" (Flett and Flett 1996, viii) and Morrison (2003b) pays particular attention to the nature and history of the RSOBHD and the regulated nature of Highland dancing technique and competition context (both Scotland and overseas). Until relatively recently, Scott's (2005) PhD thesis was the only known scholarly source that specifically focuses on Highland dancing within its contemporary cultural and social context through interrogating the development and trajectory of the solo competitive practice, focusing on the "lived experiences" and development of its regulated nature within competition arenas. More recent scholarship

by Ballantyne (2016; 2018; 2020), also derived from PhD research, makes a further key contribution through, again, a focus on Highland dancing as a standardised practice. Her scholarship focuses on the Highland Fling in particular, moving from historical sources (originating from Aberdeenshire) to an ethnography involving dancers and musicians in Scotland (2016; 2020) and the professionalisation of Highland dancing through the dancing masters and establishment of boards and associations (2018).

Widening the scope of focus on cultural and social analyses, much literature touching on contemporary Highland dancing practice centers on the Highland Games, with the majority of studies situating these events within the Scottish diaspora and focusing on themes of authenticity, economics, heritage, imagery, and tartan symbolism (e.g. Chhabra 2001; Chhabra et al. 2003a; Chhabra et al. 2003b; Crane et al. 2004). Interestingly, it is a smaller body of literature that considers the Highland Games in their “home country” (see e.g. Bowness 2020; Brewster et al. 2009; Jarvie 1991) with studies also focused on diaspora participation in Highland Games in Scotland (e.g. Sim and Leith 2013).

This paper thus contributes to a limited but existing body of ethnographic work exploring the theme of regulation and standardisation and uses a particular dramaturgical framework (Goffman 1990 [1959]) to understand its interplay with social interaction within one RSOBHD aligned syllabus Highland dancing class.



The Highland Dancing Case Study

Informed by the particular context (social, cultural, historical) within which the practice is situated, this case study on a Highland dancing class, run by a private dance school in Scotland’s largest city, Glasgow, aimed to understand the “reality” or multiple “realities” (Goffman 1990 [1959]) in existence within the class through understanding the particular social and dance “performances” given by the teacher and dancers. Further attention to the specifics of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, including key criticisms, and how it can be applied to participatory dance scholarship is explored below.

I (a researcher with no prior Highland dancing experience but over a decade’s experience in classical ballet and four years’ experience in Irish step dance) held semi-structured interviews with the class teacher and dancers and danced with, and observed, the class on a weekly basis over a period of circa two months during 2013. This research thus offers a snapshot in time which nevertheless resonates with key scholarly literature discussed above. The limited period of time that I was involved with the class naturally impacted the degree to which I could immerse myself in the setting, however, my previous dance experience meant I had an understanding of the expected and accepted etiquette in the class, which helped me to ease my way into participating and establish trust and rapport with the teacher and other dancers. I had the appropriate dancewear (crucially, not new but worn in), plasters and hair pins to share, if necessary, and ghillies⁵ on my feet. I had good posture, carriage of the arms, and could point my feet and lengthen my legs. As one dancer told me: “You’re good at it for a beginner. You’re able to pick it up.” Thus, I could be viewed as Foster’s (1997) “hired body,” one that was able to use current and previous dance experience even if I could only replicate “movement [and behaviour] as surface gloss” (Jackson 2005, 33). The class I danced with was relatively small, led by the teacher Anne,⁶ and attended by older dancers (aged 18-circa 26: Rose, Kitty and Nicola) and younger dancers (aged between 7 and 14: Lydia, Martha, Hannah and Christie). All dancers were white females and there was a profusion of “Mc” and “Mac” across

the surnames. All of the dancers (bar one) engaged in other forms of dance (ballet, modern and tap), the younger dancers on a weekly basis for each genre with the older dancers engaging in multiple (ballet) classes each week. The Highland dancing class began with the learning and teaching of the easier dances (or rather, shorter and simpler versions of the dances⁷), before the younger girls left and more advanced versions of the dances were the focus.

Data gathered from the ethnographic methods was analysed through grounded coding (Moghaddam 2006) and, as mentioned, framed and interpreted using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework, which is principally concerned with "face-to-face interaction" (Smith 2006, 1), allowing the researcher to examine micro socialisation in a world that is not easily accessed. Goffman's most basic question is: How does social reality sustain itself? Goffman (1990 [1959]) defines reality as "the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude [sic] disruption" (246). As explained, the nature of the "reality" or "realities" within this Highland dancing class is the primary focus of the paper.

Previous publications have explored the specific applicability of Goffman's model of dramaturgy to dance scholarship (Whiteside and Kelly, 2016; Whiteside 2017a; 2017b) with the latter works detailing a particular framework summarised here. Firstly, Goffman's focus on bounded social establishments aligns with case study research and the often distinct and sometimes "protected" spaces of settings where dance activity takes place (e.g. primary school hall; dance studio; night club). Social establishments are defined as "any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place" (Goffman 1990 [1959], 231). This characterisation mirrors the operation of dance activities and practices that take place behind closed doors; private dance schools could be described as closed "systemic programs of instruction" (Foster 1997, 238).

Secondly, Goffman's dramaturgical model draws on the language of the theatre in its focus on social performance, defined as a period of social interaction that occurs in front of and shapes the impressions of a single observer or group of observers. Notions of "performance" as being both "pre-established pattern[s] of action" (Goffman 1990 [1959], 27) reflect, for example, the established format of the Highland dancing class (barre warm up, teaching of certain dances, cool down) and the type that are "theatrical ... contextual ... non-verbal, [and] presumably unintentional" (Goffman 1990 [1959], 16), for example the quiet chat between dancers waiting to move into the centre. Thus, the dramaturgical concept of "performance" is extended, shaped by dance experiences that are both choreographed and ephemeral. "Front stage" (Goffman 1990 [1959]) constitutes the primary performance space (for example, a dance studio), inhabited by both performers and those they are performing to (in this context, teacher and dancers interchangeably) and "backstage" is a space reserved for performers (dancers) only (for example, a changing room). Across these spaces, "[m]acro choreographed performance[s] (the dancing) merge with micro individual performances" (Whiteside 2013, 53), providing a setting rich for ethnographic exploration.

However, the very focus of Goffman's dramaturgical model on social interaction and impression management is also its limitation. Macro criticisms relating to Goffmanian tradition emphasise a) the focus on micro interaction to the detriment and exclusion of the greater cultural, historical and social context, b) the lack of concern in instigating change within everyday working life, and c) an overriding concern with the negative emotions that govern everyday encounters (Psathas 1980). I focus on the first of these as being the greatest shaping force on this research.

Clark and Mangham (2004) cite Wilshire's (1982) argument that Goffman's theory focuses too exclusively on role playing. Existence comes alive only in the "fluid transient 'encounter'"



(Gouldner 1972, 379); a sentiment that could also read as an analogy of dance spectatorship. In other words, “the dramaturgical approach ignores the macrocosm within which its micro-level concerns are imbedded” (Williams 2001, 350), arguably supporting an insular research approach. For example, I did not seek to understand the social class and backgrounds of the dancers (or how they may have self-defined them) through questions around types of schooling, parents’ occupation, or other extracurricular activities undertaken (all potential markers of class); details that may have enriched the ethnographic data collected and led to additional understanding. However, this study is contextualised through introducing the practice and history of Highland dancing, a review of the relevant literature and, later on, moves outside of this dance studio to explore the potential for a “different,” more creative “reality.”

The class experience of Highland dancing is a world within a world. To reiterate, the national and international Highland dance community is characterised by external competitions and championships for the dancers, and by association and board meetings for the teachers. It is at the “local” level, within the individual Highland dancing classes, that adherence to, and belief in, the codification of the dance form is reinforced through a focus on syllabus (the primary purpose of the case study class). I wanted to understand how the nature of Highland dancing (regulated, romanticised, “Scottish”) as discussed and portrayed in the literature and through boards and associations shaped the social and dance “performances” given within the class. Therefore, the discussion below explores the following questions: What “reality” or “realities” were apparent within the class? How did the teacher and dancers in the class support or disrupt through their social and dance “performances?” Here, core themes of standardisation, creativity, motivation, and physicality come to the fore.

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A Standardised and Regulated “Reality” within the Highland Dancing Class

Anne (teacher) asked Rose (dancer) what steps she was doing for the *Sword Dance*. Rose ran over to check her notebook for the steps. Christie showed me her little green notebook where she had written the steps that she needs to do for each of the dances – her favourite is *Flora Macdonald’s Fancy* (observation session).

A dance syllabus denotes the content that must be taught and the requirement to perform that content in a specific way. However, where Highland dancing differs to the syllabi of other dance forms is in the repetition and presentation of the same relatively small series of Highland and National dances, and through a particular framework featuring different associations working in conjunction with Highland governing bodies, predominantly the RSOBHD. This approach contrasts with the wider facilitation and promotion of developing movement vocabulary of other genres including ballet through, for example, evolving exercises within a graded syllabus as set by the UK-based Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and Irish step dancing through the embedment by An Coimisiún Le Rincí Gaelacha (the leading governing body of Irish step dance) of open dances and, significantly, original choreography by teachers and dancers within competitions and championships.

Kitty (dancer) explained the nature of the dances taught in class:

Dances are always set by the SOBHD [sic]. You do what you’re told. It’s always set in Highland. You’ve got your alternative steps when you get higher up and you do funny wee tricks in the middle but that’s about it to be honest.

During the classes observed, the dances that were rehearsed each week were the requisite Highland dances and National dances. Lydia (dancer) confided that she wanted “more modern stuff. Not just the same dances every single week.” Anne (teacher) explained the extent of the repertoire taught,

You get the odd dance, you get like tribute dances. There was a very famous Highland dancer, his name is J.L. McKenzie.⁸ And when he passed away there was a dance called *Tribute to J.L. McKenzie*.⁹ So, you get new dances like that coming out now and again but the actual, well we have our Highland dances... which have been going forever and then as I say the National dances, we haven't had any new dances for all these years [since the 1970s]. There has not been a lot of changes in Highland at all.

A link can be made here between the finite repertoire and the need to aim to perfect performance of this finite repertoire. Rose (dancer) explained that

Highland has got to be so exact. It's like your knee's got to be flat and your legs straight out to the side, it can't be a bit forward, you've got to have the steps just right plus you've got to be trying to get up your elevation and wow, the satisfaction when you're able to think, “yes, I managed to do eight extended high cuts in a row without holding onto the *barre*.”

Kitty (dancer) elaborated further on the necessary physicality, noting that Highland dancers have all

got amazing, toned legs, flat tummy.... You never see a good fat Highland dancer – there is no such thing. But you never see a good fat ballet dancer either.

The idea that Highland dancing and ballet are comparable, based on shared notions of physicality and technique (which also speaks to the very “construction” of Highland dancing in its history (see Newton 2012, Melin 2018), emerged as a recurring theme in the data. The relationship between traditionally authoritative ballet pedagogy, the aesthetic and technique of the practice, and its injuries, has been extensively researched in sociology of dance and dance science literature (see e.g. Wainwright et al. 2005) and all of the dancers I spoke to recounted, with varying emotions (pride or unhappiness), the ongoing nature of injuries sustained and tiredness experienced:

Halfway through, the window was opened in the far corner letting the January chill in. Kitty leant out of it in between dances before coming over and exclaiming with a hint of satisfaction, “I'm deid¹⁰ at the end of class. Completely deid” (Observation session).

I deck it¹¹ or have really sore muscles by the end of class. You have to go up on your toes all the time and your muscles get strained... *Highland Laddie* is painful (Lydia, dancer).

Interestingly, all of the dancers that I spoke to explained that they primarily defined Highland dancing in terms of its physicality and difficulty (as opposed to its “Scottishness” for example), derived from regulation and standardisation, and that this was the primary motivator for continued engagement. Lydia (dancer), described Highland dancing as a “very strong, energetic, fast type of dancing.” “I think it's great that what I do is coming through as Scottish. But my key motivation would also be the exercise” (Kitty, dancer).

Similarly, to a finding unearthed by Scott (2005), the older dancers were motivated by the competitive aspect of the practice: “I like competition. I just like the ‘Can I win?’ aspect....

I love to be able to go home with the trophy or any medals” (Rose, dancer). Scott (2005) highlights “the apparent lack of artistic expression within the [set] dances” (395) arguing that “competitive performance communicates little other than physical excellence to the audience” (395). Certainly, within the field notes from observations made, incidents of feedback relating to artistry were isolated and limited to the National dances (“you can put a bit of character in here” was an isolated (and telling) comment from the teacher, Anne, offered with reference to the *Hornpipe* rehearsed during one class). Scott (2005) also noted that Scottish Highland dancers were more likely to smile in Highland choreography events, as the pressure to conform and perform in a specific manner was lessened (this in contrast to American and Canadian Highland dancers, who have, according to Scott, a tendency to smile during both types of performances (original choreography and set dances)). It is also worth noting that within Scotland, dancers are actually coached *not* to smile at the traditional competitions and championships (Scott 2005) and Rose (dancer) shared with me that she found it strange not to smile at these events (identifying as a naturally smiley person).

Lastly, it can be inferred that a connection exists between the monetary “cost” of an activity (Highland dancing) and its perceived “value,” relating to, for example, the experience provided by the teacher and the cost of a competition outfit. Kitty (dancer) speaks to the former:

Anne is a really, really good teacher. Definitely. I went to one in a church hall with my friend, it cost £2.50 to go, and it was just a bit rubbish if I’m honest. [The teacher] couldn’t even pronounce the words right.... That really bothered me. The quality (Kitty, dancer).

Rose (dancer) explained the significant (to her) cost implication of being part of a culture with mandatory requirements, with economics a form of control that aligns with a regulated reality: “[O]nce you reach a certain age or a certain level, you’re expected to have either a waistcoat or a jacket, kilt, and socks to match the kilt. And you’re not allowed to dance if you don’t have that.”

[Y]ou’re talking £80/90 for the skirt and £20 for the shirt and another 40 quid for the waistcoat and it’s just like “aaargh”... It’s all handmade, the socks, the kilt and the waistcoat that was made to fit, was £510... (Rose, dancer).

I don’t do the *Hornpipe* because I don’t have the outfit.... The hat’s like 50 quid, and then you’ve got to get the shirt and the trousers, and I’m like “I will wear that maybe twice a year” (Rose, dancer).

Within this Highland dancing class, a standardised and regulated “reality,” characterised by a particular structure and set content in preparation for various assessment modes (i.e. exams and competitions), was discerned. Doing the dancing and feeling the exact and powerful nature of the movement sensation gave me a greater appreciation of its aesthetics and physicality. I felt brave and powerful. The rigid posture necessary, the straight legs, upright arms, splayed fingers resembling “antlers,” and extreme turnout all served to give me a feeling of invincibility when (the easier) dances and sequences felt like they were being “hit.” Noting the patterns and trends in social interaction (explored in the next section) helped me understand a certain protectiveness on the part of Anne, the teacher, and the older dancers.

Returning to Goffman (1990 [1959]), projection of the “reality” aimed for is fostered through “impression management”—that is, the means by which an individual(s) aims to influence the perceptions of others (Whiteside and Kelly 2016). How this “reality” is portrayed is dependent on the assumptions and expectations characterising the social

situation and individual roles (e.g. teacher) inhabited within them. The next section focuses on the way that a standardised and regulated “reality” within the class created two opposing “teams” (Goffman 1990 [1959]): the teacher and older dancers who supported, fostered and protected the regulated nature of the practice, and the younger girls in the class, who rebelled against it.



Two “Teams” within the Highland Dancing Class

The Goffmanian concept of “teams” is pivotal in understanding the dominant pattern of social interactions that existed within the class. Goffman (1990 [1959]) explains that the most basic need for “teams” derives from the argument that “successful performances are usually staged not by individuals but by teams who share both risk and discreditable information” (74). This concept can be extended to apply to a dance “performance.” Consider the need for a line of Irish step dancers performing in *Lord of the Dance* to have their legs at the same prescribed height, or the dancers taking on the role of the cygnets in a classical version of *Swan Lake* to remain equidistant from one another.

The necessary repeated focus on set dances through correct technique (the standardised and regulated “reality”) promoted within the class by Anne, the teacher, and supported by the older dancers seemed to result in rebellious behaviour (potentially exacerbated by their younger age) being repeatedly exhibited by the younger girls in the class.

Lydia seemed bored again, messed about with Hannah [another of the younger dancers] during *Highland Fling*. They left the floor during the dance and Anne crossly called them back. Other incidents included the constant taking on and off of ghillies and doing steps from other types of dance (e.g. jazz) in between dances (observation session).

The constant stream of micro incidents, as recounted above, initiated on a weekly basis by the younger dancers were a feature of the social experience of the class. During one memorable session, Anne revealed and laid bare the constant undercurrent of tension through creating a “scene” (Goffman, 1990 [1959]) more forceful than any generated by her young learners:

During *Highland Fling* when everyone was up dancing, Anne suddenly stopped the music. “This just *isn’t* good enough (her emphasis). Am I going to have to go ballistic like I did just before the exams?” Her voice was raised; she was furious.

As the key figure of authority, Anne was responsible for promoting a “reality” that valued discipline and hard work as necessitated by the exacting nature of Highland dancing. In pursuing her key strategy to achieve this, the giving of feedback, she tended to segregate the younger dancers from the older ones and in doing so aligned herself with a particular “team” (Goffman 1990 [1959]). The majority of Anne’s feedback was directed to the younger dancers and was negative in its nature.

“Second position needs to be right out to the side here. I should not be seeing it in front.”

“You’re rushing it, Lydia. That’s why you are not doing it properly. I want you to do it properly.”

“Your right foot was horrendous Hannah.”

In contrast to the rebellion of the younger girls, the older dancers in the class—Rose, Kitty, and Nicola—actively supported and welcomed Anne’s approach:

It’s a bit sad, because like, there are times when Anne gets frustrated but she needs to sometimes because we’re not working hard enough... I love Anne. She’s a really, really good teacher... She’s not afraid to shout at me, even though she’s known me for so long. The little ones are just lazy sometimes, I think. They just forget that Anne’s put a lot of work into this—when she tells me or Rose to do something, we’ll do it (Kitty, dancer).

Longstanding “dramaturgical loyalty” within the team comprised of Anne and the older dancers was evidence of how “team-mates and their colleagues [can] form a complete social community which offers each performer a place and a source of moral support regardless of whether or not he [sic] is successful in maintaining his front before the audience” (Goffman 1990 [1959], 209). Anne faced a weekly struggle to motivate and inspire the younger girls to *want* to strive for the “ideal” Highland dancing performance, and the older dancers supported her both “front stage” and “backstage” (Goffman, 1990 [1959]); i.e. within the studio as well as the more hidden spaces of changing room and during the semi-structured interviews held. However, despite her disciplinarian approach in the “front stage” space of the studio, Anne expressed “backstage” her sympathy with the younger girls’ frustration, recognising the potential consequences of the strict regulation of Highland dancing. In our interview, she explained:

I do think that children get bored, there’s no doubt, and I think that we probably could do with some new steps, new dances from time to time.... I would say we’re probably really stuck. When I think about that actually, that’s quite dreadful. I think we are really stuck (Anne, teacher).

While Anne seemed to maintain two apparently contradictory perspectives concerning the practice of Highland dancing (promoting and thus perpetuating the rigidity of the practice, while concerned over this very element), her actions can readily be understood in Goffmanian terms. As Goffman explains:

a performer may be taken in by his [sic] own act, convinced at the moment that the impression of reality which he fosters is the one and only reality. In such cases the performer comes to be his own audience; he comes to be performer and observer of the same show... (Goffman 1990 [1959], 86).

In other words, when teaching the class, to achieve the best teacher “performance” possible, Anne perhaps needed to believe, consciously or unconsciously, in this regulated “reality” in order to facilitate and promote this state. Anne did not reveal her concerns about the evolution and appeal of Highland dancing to the younger generation in her class, so-called “destructive information” that would “discredit, disrupt, or make useless the [reality] that the performance fosters” (Goffman 1990 [1959], 141). Interestingly, I did not observe either Anne or the older dancers expressing a concern with the potential “stuck” nature of Highland dancing in front of the younger girls or to *each other* (at least in front of me), but the same concerns over the limited and fixed content of the Highland dancing syllabus were also expressed by the older dancers, “backstage,” even while they, too, continued to support it “front stage.”

I mean it has definitely gone downhill, not many people do it, I mean it’s more popular in places like Canada. I think if it was to become more popular then maybe they’d have to have a modern twist on it... I think it would have to change in order to become more popular (Kitty, dancer).

This mention of Canada, a site of the Scottish diaspora, as being a more popular locale for Highland dancing over its country of origin will be returned to. However, within this Highland dancing class, the teacher and older dancers sought to maintain and protect the precision and physicality of the practice in the face of rebellion from the younger dancers, yet they shared, outwith the classes, certain sympathies and concerns with respect to the future of the practice. In each case, the same “reality” was largely supported “front stage,” during observations, and contradicted “backstage,” during interviews.

This dramaturgical model may not allow for a truly “sincere” performance (in recognising that, all the time, individual “performers” and collective “teams” are striving to make a particular impression), yet Goffman does not seek to demonstrate how we “regularly act falsely” but rather, how “in many of our interactions we do not feel what we are conveying is real” (Raffel 2013, 177). This approach helps us to understand the place and importance of discrepant sentiments that are only shared “backstage” by Anne and the older dancers. A dramaturgical approach does not seek to uncover a true “reality” but to uncover, and understand, the multiple, simultaneously existing “discrepant realities” that are in existence, and that, together, build up a more complete picture of the everyday interactions within a particular setting, in this case, a Highland dancing class. For the teacher and the older dancers, the distinctive “difference” of Highland Dancing practice—its rigid content and the sheer physical challenge presented by the dances—was perceived as “sameness” by the younger members of the class inspiring discord and resistance. This key finding, and the potential for a more creative “reality,” set within a greater context problematised by notions of authenticity and legitimacy are explored below.



Potential for a Creative “Reality” within the Highland Dancing Class

From a content and vocabulary standpoint, there is enormous potential for original choreography to be produced and performed within the stylistic context of Highland dancing but existing opportunities continue to be limited and isolated. Examples of amateur and professional Highland dance companies or groups that perform choreographed dances in a “Highland” style can be found; they include Flings & Things in Scotland, Highland Echoes in South California, the Highland Dance Company of New Zealand, and the Schiehallion Dancers and Change of Step (both based in Canada). Championship-level dancers affiliated with the RSOBHD can apply to be a part of the original Highland dancing displays held as part of the world famous annual Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Annual events and competitions promoting choreography do take place in Scotland (for example, the annual competition held by the Forfar Highland Dancing Association incorporates a choreography event), but these are relatively small in scale and not comparable in terms of the attention, focus, and support associated with the competitive set dances. Some Highland dancing schools offer performance classes alongside the syllabus classes (for example, Sinclair School of Highland Dancing in Aberdeen) and/or the opportunity to perform original choreography at displays and shows. Outwith the sphere of private dance schools and associated exams, competitions, and championships, but located within Scotland is the Traditional Dance Forum of Scotland (TDFS). A founding member of arts charity, Traditional Arts Culture Scotland (TRACS), TDFS supports the development, diversity, and exchange of Scotland’s traditional dances, including Highland dancing through various initiatives including the annual Pomegranates Festival. In addition, social media, in particular Instagram and TikTok, has been increasingly harnessed

(often by younger dancers) as a means to share steps, sequences, choreography, and short performances, generating conversations and shaping the evolution of the practice. However, there is certainly currently no counterpart in the Highland dance world to the profusion of the hugely successful and commercial touring Irish performance dance shows catalysed by the 1994 Eurovision performance of *Riverdance*.¹²

Notwithstanding her careful adherence to and promotion of the prescribed syllabus, Anne (teacher) recognised the creative and social potential of using Highland steps in innovative ways, and chose to present original choreography at each of the annual shows held by the dance school:

I know teachers who do just put children on to do a *Fling* or a *Swords* or a *Seann Triubhas* but I've always just thought that when it came to the displays, it's boring, you've got to do something different. You know, a couple of years ago, when we did the show we did a fabulous number, but we did the hornpipe steps and that went down so well...

Indeed, understanding the popularity of working on newly choreographed "Highland" dancing, I observed, within class, Anne using the possibility of starting work on the school show as a means of incentivising the younger children to work harder at the set dances. ("Soothing and sanctioning," Goffman 1990 [1959], are the key strategies available to correct a discrepant or challenging "performance." If the latter was exemplified by the constant giving of negative feedback in the class, then the former can be seen as a small act of bribery or reward).

Rose (dancer) explains the appeal of learning and dancing original Highland choreography:

[Y]ou can do really fun things with [Highland]. A couple of shows ago we did a song by the Red Hot Chili Pipers.¹³ ...[Y]ou use the steps but make it creative. But you can still keep it really traditional or make it fun.

Significantly, the final sentiment in the quotation above sets standardised content and engaging choreography as polar opposites.

It may be that the desire to preserve Highland dance as a highly regulated practice was linked to the notion, expressed by some members of the class, that Highland is misunderstood within the greater field of dance and in public perception. There existed a concern that Highland dancing compared unfavourably to other dance forms: the practice is not understood in the same way as other codified dance forms (such as ballet and Irish) that share its focus on technique and physical ability.

You see when you watch *Britain's Got Talent*,¹⁴ and you've got all these Irish dancers on, ballet dancers on, you never see a Highland dancer on. I don't know if it's because they don't understand how much work goes into, it doesn't look, a lot of the dancing looks easy, but it's not (Kitty, dancer).

For the teacher and older girls in the class, it was the physical challenge of performing this syllabus (rather than the variety of its content) (as explored in an earlier section) that was a particular source of pride when comparing the practice to other forms of dance:

I used to do Highland and tap and ballet and as I got older, I did ballroom and Latin American. But it was always the Highland that I loved. I think it was the challenge... to me it was a much harder discipline than the likes of tap. Not ballet, because ballet to me is on a par with Highland (Anne, teacher).

Emphasis on, and pride in, the technique of Highland dancing (aligning, also, its aesthetics and difficulty with ballet) provided a means of distancing the practice from other types of dance that originate from within Scotland, namely Scottish country dancing and *cèilidh* dancing which is “entirely different—that is fun. That is fun” (Rose, dancer). As Anne (teacher) said:

Don't ever confuse [Highland] with Scottish country dancing—that is the worst. Highland dancers hate being linked to Scottish country dancing because it is worlds and worlds apart. I mean I know I detest it when somebody says to me “Oh, you're a Scottish Country dancer.” “No, I'm not.” There's three steps in Scottish country dancing – *pas de basque*, slip step and skip change and that's it.

It is possible that wider confusion and misunderstanding of the “status” of Highland dancing compared to other forms of Scottish traditional dance (particularly *cèilidh* dancing, which is a stalwart of weddings and balls in Scotland—every child learns to *cèilidh* dance at primary school) shaped a concern that Highland dancing was associated with a certain type of “Scottishness”: one that sees Scotland and the Scottish people mocked through cliché images on the supermarket shortbread tin.

As Anne explained,

I think we're almost ridiculed, you know, the Scot, with the kilt and haggis and things like that. And it's a shame because it's Scottish people, who think “oh look at them up there, wearing their kilts, jumping about like idiots.” And you feel like saying “well, you come and try it.”

There existed both a wish to disassociate Highland dancing from this negative stereotype of Scottish culture, and for the dance form to be respected within Scotland, particularly by people defining as Scottish—for it to inspire pride. Rose (dancer) explained “[P]ersonally, I love the Scottish aspect of it. I like being recognised as ‘Oh, I am a Scottish person.’” Anne (teacher) draws on defining “Scottish” characteristics, similar to “the kilts and haggis” above, in explaining “[Y]ou hear the pipe bands and there's nothing nicer. Particularly when you are out at the Highland Games and kids are dancing to the pipers and things. Definitely, it does, it does make you feel so good to be Scottish.” Kitty (dancer) shared her disappointment that “[friends at school] don't seem to understand why I do it, why I love it so much. I'll talk about it and they're like ‘I don't even know what you're talking about.’ It's quite sad.” This pride and mention of the popularity of Highland dancing *outside* Scotland (speaking to an earlier quote from Kitty) and confusion and misunderstanding *within* Scotland perhaps speaks to the multiple definitions of “Scottishness” in existence (Nadel-Klein 1997). Scottish identity has been more readily explained by physical belonging rather than tribal belonging (Smout 1994) speaking to a complicated relationship with “Scottishness” and Scottish identities within this Highland dancing class. Craig (2003) takes a deterministic view in arguing that Scots disparage their culture through a collective viewpoint which, in a small way, is reflected in Anne's comment above about how the “kilt and haggis” are viewed. Stewart and Duncan (2024) note the importance of birthplace and accent as ready markers of “Scottishness” (in contrast to member of the Scottish diaspora) and these markers were certainly audible within the class.

Ironically, owing to a widespread misunderstanding of Highland dancing (according to Anne and the older dancers) about the difficulty and physicality of the practice, embedded elements speaking to its regulated and standardised “reality” may inadvertently be playing into certain unhelpful Scottish stereotypes. For example, dancers position their fingers to resemble the antlers of stags with the story being that this was “created by a young boy when



he was out hunting deer. He watched a buck dancing around in a field and it was so beautiful that he couldn't bring himself to kill the deer. So, he started to dance" (Rose, dancer). In Goffmanian terms, what is important is not whether or not the story is *true* but that it *exists* and can provide comfort and solidity even if it is not believed. The perception shared by Anne (teacher), below, suggests a certain unwillingness, or perhaps a fear, in instigating change owing to the ways in which Highland dancing derives its identity and status (and the governing bodies their legitimacy) from the practice's history.

I think we're too stuck in our ways. I think we have had this syllabus for so long, everybody strives to perfect what we have. I don't know if we feel we will maybe take away from the history if you like of Highland Dancing and what's gone on before. I think that's maybe what it is (Anne, teacher).

This perception seems prophetic in light of the following opinions shared by Rose (dancer):

I think it would be really strange if they changed it. I wouldn't like it if [the RSOBHD] said "we're changing Highland dancing" because I think the whole idea of it is that it is traditional and if they start changing it then it's kind of lost that I think.

Some ongoing incremental changes and development can be discerned through, for example, the RSOBHD periodically substituting one step for another within the set dances. This information is passed on at formal meetings attended by teachers. However,

it really annoys the girls [other teachers] when that happens. You're dancing a step for years and then all of a sudden, they'll come along and say "no, we don't want it to go out to here, we want it here, we want it right to here." It's daft (Anne, teacher).

Such changes, perceived as being made simply for the sake of change, were reported as not favourably received. Certainly, the creative potential of Highland dancing does not benefit and such amendments to the syllabus could be viewed as an assertion of authority. Through championing the regulation of the dance practice and promulgating the set content as "tradition," governing bodies seem to be in the uncomfortable position of being unable to lead a creative (re)evolution of the dance form, for fear of upsetting the very foundations that they created in the last century, and on which basis Highland dancing practice today chiefly derives its legitimacy (see Scott 2005; Ballantyne 2016; 2020 for a detailed narrative and exploration).



Conclusion: Stalemate?

I started this paper through an opening sentence recounting the dominant binary that situates Highland dancing as both a form of dance and a form of sport. The practice may be viewed as the former in numerous ways including the emphasis on a particular aesthetic, the relationship between the movement and the music, and the nature of the key arena for classes: the dance studio. Yet, other more sporting themes also dominate: most notably, the assessment and competitive format that shapes the majority of Highland dancing experiences inside and outside of the studio, inextricably linked to the continual quest to jump higher and extend further. This binary reflects, to some degree, the conflicting desire

for potential creative and actual regulated “realities” in existence. A contribution is made here owing to the continued limited existence of sociocultural analyses of Highland dancing in the literature, the remarkably slow evolution of Highland dancing as a creative practice, and the original focus of the current paper on social interaction within a Highland dance class setting.

Ultimately, use of Goffman’s “sensitising concepts and insightful interactional principles” (Birrell and Donnelly 2004, 50) support an understanding of the “performances” and “realities,” the *experience* and *situation* if you like, within a single Highland dancing class. This study arguably increases our understanding of a practice that is regulated and standardised through its focus on the *how* by which “realities” may be sustained but also challenged. As Clark and Mangham (2004) note: “social reality is a matter of scripts and performances created and sustained by human interaction [mean] changes become possible... social actors can become disenchanted with their lot and seek to change it” (41).

A consistent theme in the above discussion is the sentiment that Highland dancing is “different” and in some sense “needs” to remain so. “I like that all the other classes know us as Highland. I love being thought of as different. Highland dancing is different, unlike any other” (Kitty, dancer). Its multifaceted nature, shaped by a curious history and complex understandings of “Scottishness,” was mirrored within this Highland dancing class through an ongoing quest for legitimacy within the field of dance and within Scotland, primarily by stressing the technical difficulty and physicality of the practice and promoting its tight regulation and the competitive context.

The “team” (Goffman 1990 [1959]) comprised of the teacher and older girls in the class supported this “reality” within the “front stage” studio each week. The set content performed in examinations, competitions, and championships, and the technical challenges of the dancing were seen as the key characteristics of the form and to be celebrated and protected. The younger members of the class were resentful of the highly regulated, standardised, and physical nature of the practice that necessitated an authoritative environment characterised by “performances” (Goffman 1990 [1959]) that were physically repetitive (the steps and dances) and socially repetitive (the continual giving of largely negative feedback). They saw the practice as serious, difficult, and often did not seem to enjoy it. Yet, confusion and uncertainty were apparent within the more authoritative team “backstage”: Anne and the older dancers understood that the very “reality” that they supported might also be contributing to a waning popularity. The very features that they valued so much seemed to militate against retaining the commitment of a younger generation, especially within Scotland itself, without the emotional pull of engaging in a form of “Scottishness” that may be felt by dancers in the diaspora. At the same time, the members of this senior “team” did not share their concerns with one another (again, at least in front of me). In other words, a certain “act” was sponsored, fostered and maintained through “reciprocal dependency” (Goffman 1990 [1959], 88).

The case study, although not generalisable, lends weight to the continued need to interrogate the teaching, learning, and *nature* of Highland dancing practice and demonstrates the usefulness of a Goffmanian dramaturgical lens in uncovering and understanding contradictory “actual” and “potential” “realities” within one small Highland dancing class that reflect, perhaps, a particular and continued situation.



NOTES

1. Other important bodies include The New Zealand Academy of Highland and National Dancing and, in Australia, The Victorian Scottish Union. Significant to this article, both have as a primary aim the desire to regulate and recognise a particular standard of Highland dancing.
2. SOHDA note on their website that dancers not registered with their organisation are welcome to perform at SOHDA events and will not report them to any other governing bodies for doing so. However, RSOBHD may ban dancers registered with themselves if it becomes known that they danced at a non-RSOBHD sanctioned event.
3. See Melin and Schoonover (2020) for explanation of how these local styles developed through the traditions of dancing masters and stage performances.
4. For example, the dance *Seann Triubhas* includes a side-ways movement of the lower leg which supposedly resembles the Highlanders shaking off the dreaded trousers after the Battle of Culloden in 1746 (in which the Hanoverian forces defeated the Jacobite army led by Charles Edward Stuart) when the wearing of kilts were banned (SOHDA website), yet pivotal Highland dancer and author D.G. MacLennan admitted to “inventing” the step in the early twentieth century (Newton 2012).
5. Soft shoes worn by Scottish (Highland and Scottish country) and Irish dancers.
6. Pseudonyms are used in the current study.
7. The levels (primary, beginner, novice, intermediate, premier) of Highland dancing is denoted by the complexity and length of the set dances (including the number of steps within a particular dance).
8. J.L. McKenzie (1905-1992).
9. The dance *A Tribute to J.L. McKenzie* was choreographed by Elspeth G. Strathearn.
10. A Scots word for “dead.”
11. Lydia was explaining here that she had no energy by the end of the class.
12. This contrast (popularity of original choreography) is mirrored in the literature with social and cultural analyses of Irish traditional dance (in all its forms) being comprised of a much larger body of work.
13. Celtic rock band formed in Scotland in 2002 that tour internationally.
14. Part of the global televised Got Talent franchise created by Simon Cowell, with the *Britain's Got Talent* series first premiering in 2007.

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