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The language of dance



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The language of dance

By Gayle Cook,
Press Officer



Jenn Hogan literally can't stop moving – she loves to be on the go all the time. So it's perhaps not surprising that she spends her spare time running, and performing with, her own Irish dance company.

Jenn, a part-time receptionist / secretary with the School of Modern Languages, originally arrived in St Andrews six years ago as a student, bringing with her a life-long passion for Irish dancing. Not

content with having degree studies to get on with, Jenn set about organising Irish dancing classes as part of the Students' Association's Dance Society in her second year. It didn't take long before fellow students caught the Irish bug – from a standing start of eleven students in her very first class, Jenn found herself regularly teaching classes of forty-five (the Irish dancing class is the biggest every year), and thereafter she continued teaching once

a week throughout her degree studies. Indeed, as Jenn put it, "It was a positive, wonderful experience – I'd say dance got me through university."

After graduating in the summer of 2005, Jenn joined the sales and marketing department of the St Andrews Bay, and it was during her time there that she was swept away by a performance from the UK's leading Irish dance company Celtic Feet. Inspired by the show and wishing to take her dancing and teaching experience a step further, Jenn decided to take the plunge and set up her own independent dance company. In December of that year, the Siamsoir Celtic Dance Company (Siamsoir is Gaelic for 'The Entertainer') was born. Taking on the most talented Irish dancers from the Dance Society, Jenn established a group of twelve, all female students of the University, and some of world-class competition standard. "They are all really talented girls with the 'X-factor' when it comes to performing," she said.



Left-right:
Naho Nakashima,
Ariel Faulkner,
Jenn Hogan,
Hannah Best,
Emilie Gay and
Laura Walters.

The company is available for hire to dance at balls, corporate, charity or private events, and even team-building workshops, and indeed has recently performed at a number of University and local events. This month, on St Patrick's Day (17 March) the group will perform in and around the pubs of St Andrews and in May they will perform an original show written and choreographed by Jenn. *The Battle for Eire* is a unique fusion of Irish and contemporary dance, which will transport you back to a time full of magic, intrigue and revenge. Described as 'a full length dark tale of ancient magic and mystery', the show is based on traditional Irish folklore and will feature Jenn's troupe dancing to original music performed live by the University's Celtic band, Shy Bairn. Though Jenn is responsible for the full creative direction of the company, it is very much a team effort with the multi-talented dancers being involved with the design and making of costumes, all unique and elaborate affairs.

"What we are doing is like what Michael Flatley does with his Lord of the Dance shows, but on a much smaller scale. We use theatrical storylines and modern interpretations of traditional Irish dancing," she explained.

Jenn describes her method of Irish dance as 'traditional, with all the jigs and reels, but with a contemporary twist', but when asked if she'd like to work in shows as big as Flatley's, she wasn't so sure.

"What we do is very fulfilling and very real – we socialise afterwards with the audience and have the opportunity to get to meet the people we dance for. I don't think his dancers can say the same! But no-one can dispute what Michael Flatley has done for the profile of Irish dancing," she said.

Originally from Paisley, Jenn (23) danced her way through childhood, regularly performing ballet and tap before feeling the urge to take up Irish dancing as an eleven year old - and once she started, she couldn't stop. With most of the family in Ireland it's in her blood - Jenn



spent many a happy summer holiday there with relations on both sides as a child. Indeed, her Dad always wanted her to learn traditional Irish dancing, but it wasn't until later that Jenn learned that most of her Irish family were keen dancers.

"I've tried most types of dancing, but there is something about Irish dancing that I love – it has a special spark and it isn't like anything else I've ever done. On a performance level, it is something of a novelty, and though the movement is fast and looks complicated, it's actually quite easy to do once you've mastered the main steps," Jenn said.

Siamsoir corners something of a niche in the market in St Andrews and Jenn is unaware of any Irish dance companies in the surrounding areas. Though Irish dancing is hugely popular on the competitive market, it remains relatively underground in non-competitive circles. Though Jenn would love to expand Siamsoir further, there are the inevitable problems with funding and the fact that every year she loses a valuable dancer when they graduate and leave St Andrews.

Though she remains in town, no-one could describe her as resting on her laurels since graduating – Jenn technically has three jobs; working day-time at the University and at Pagan Osborne during the weekend, while committing her evenings to teaching

dance (she spends around five hours dancing and four hours working on routines a week). As if that wasn't enough, she is also taking a module in Film Studies AND this year started up a student cheerleading society, of which she is its founding president.

As to the future, the world is her oyster – Jenn and boyfriend Malcolm (who will graduate from St Andrews this summer) will take off for a year travelling, initially starting off in the US, where Irish dancing is huge and could potentially offer some new opportunities. Though Jenn has yet to decide whether Siamsoir too should take a year off, she will be taking her love of Irish dancing with her wherever she goes.

"Wherever I am in the world, I feel that Siamsoir will exist in some form. I may start it up again and I know my dancers are all hopeful of this," she said. She would never say never about returning to St Andrews too, "I've had a brilliant six years here and done most of my growing up here, so I would never close the door completely."

Jenn's dance company Siamsoir are available for hire at corporate, private or charity events. Jenn's show, *Battle for Eire* will premiere in St Andrews on 5 and 6 May 2007. For further information visit: www.siamsoir.co.uk