

<https://www.nytimes.com/>

## Scuff, Patter, Chug, Poke, Swim: Expanding Definitions of Dance

By SIOBHAN BURKE JUNE 6, 2017



From left, Tola Custy, Maeve Gilchrist and Colin Dunne in “Edges of Light,” at Irish Arts Center. Credit James Estrin/The New York Times

Anyone who thinks that Irish dance is a necessarily rigid form, defined by a stiff upper body and dancers moving in militaristic unison, should spend some time watching [Colin Dunne](#). New Yorkers had the chance to do so when the singular Mr. Dunne, who has long moved past his flashier days as a star of “Riverdance,” appeared on the small, no-frills stage of Irish Arts Center last weekend with the fiddler Tola Custy, the harpist Maeve Gilchrist and the piper David Power.

In their collaborative concert, “[Edges of Light](#),” Mr. Dunne’s percussive dancing — performed both in the footwear known as hard shoes and, more adventurously, barefoot — functions as a fourth musician, his feet doing the work of a drummer as they scuff, patter, chug, poke and swipe at the floor. Irish dance, though inherently musical, can have a rote relationship to music, as if obeying rhythmic orders. But Mr. Dunne, who joins his wildly talented colleagues for about half of the numbers in this 70-minute show, is a soulful, integral part of the band.

“Edges of Light,” created last year, brings together traditional time-honored tunes (“We decided to go for the really old ones,” Mr. Dunne said on Thursday) with more contemporary compositions and devices, like the sonic manipulation of his tapping into rippling echoes. The unifying theme, as the title suggests, is dawn, Irish dawn in particular, and the music evokes both the hush and the brilliance of early morning.

In one of the more unusual moments, Mr. Dunne, seated, pulls a foot toward his mouth and whistles a church bell refrain into the microphone on the sole of his shoe. Most of his experiments, though, happen while he’s standing. He ushers in the work with the sound of a whisper or a gust of wind, produced through the swinging action of one foot pawing the air, before moving into more intricate territory.

After his years in the “Riverdance” spotlight, Mr. Dunne took a step back and trained in contemporary dance, making an effort to soften the severity of the Irish form, with its traditionally immobile torso, and to tone down the showmanship. The result is a nimble, slippery ease, entirely his own. As movement ricochets up through his chest, hands, hips and head, nothing is forced. He moves, it seems, because he needs to.