The following is an excerpt from Mariah G. Steele’s Masters Thesis from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University entitled:

*Performing Past, Present and Possibilities in Irish Modern Dance Theatre’s “Fall and Recover:” A Case for Using Dance in Peacebuilding.*

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PERFORMING PAST, PRESENT AND POSSIBILITIES IN IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE’S FALL AND RECOVER
A CASE FOR USING DANCE IN PEACEBUILDING

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis
Submitted by Mariah Steele
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PROLOGUE:

BACKGROUND NARRATIVE OF THE CASE STUDY:
IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE’S FALL AND RECOVER

The dancers come back out one by one with a mysterious music playing. Half-lying, half-sitting, they trace their bodies with a thick line of salt, poured from a container the audience can never quite see. When the outline is finished, each performer calmly stands up and walks off stage, slowly but matter-of-factly, leaving an ocean of figures across the floor, shining eerily blue in the dawn-colored stage lights. Each figure is different, an imprint of what was just a moment before.

“You see in the piece when we use that salt at the end, something always comes to my head whenever I finish. The moment I draw it and get up, in my head, I look at it and I go, ‘That’s my past -- goodbye.’ And I walk away. I always look forward to that salt part, because it’s like that’s my past there -- gone. Because at the end of the day it will be swept away.”

So says Solomon¹, a performer in Fall and Recover, the dance described above. He is also a former asylum seeker to Ireland. He and eleven other asylum seekers, refugees and torture survivors of different ages, nationalities, religions and backgrounds, as well as two professional dancers, make up the cast of this piece of art. Fall and Recover

¹ Throughout this thesis, some names have been changed to protect people’s identities; in particular, several of the survivors prefer not to be named because it could cause repercussions in their countries of origin. When choosing pseudonyms, I have used traditional Irish names to emphasize and celebrate that most of them now have Irish passports and think of Ireland as home. Others I refer to using their relationship to the group rather than a name, such as ‘the former General Manager.’ Some have stage names that they use consistently and which I use herein. Others who chose to have their real names used are represented as such, including John Scott. Still, I have not attached anyone’s names – real or imagined – to their countries of origin. Suffice it to say that members of Fall and Recover over the years and the different casts have come from: Angola, Cameroon, Congo, Eritrea, Guinea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Romania, Sudan, Togo, and Uganda. All omissions and inclusions are to respect people’s choices and identities.
simultaneously helped its performers to heal and to share their stories with audience members, hoping to inspire social change.

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In June 2003, John Scott, choreographer and artistic director of the Dublin-based Irish Modern Dance Theatre (IMDT), received an email from SPIRASI, a non-profit organization aiding asylum seekers and refugees, asking if he would teach four dance workshops to members of their Centre for Care of Survivors of Torture (CCST). John remembers that, “At that time, I didn’t even know that people who had undergone torture existed in Ireland, and I was unaware of immigration or asylum issues.” A group of survivors had experienced two years of counseling at CCST, and it was time for them to move on to allow CCST to take on new clients. As one of CCST’s social workers told me, “Our goal is to steer them toward normality. When they first come to [SPIRASI], it’s like a womb, a safe place for them, but you can’t always stay in your safe place, you have to move out into the world.”

So the social workers asked the refugees what kind of activity CCST could plan to help them with this transition. The consensus was that dance classes might help because so many of the survivors were from Africa. As Bridget, one of the African performers, relates, “Singing and dancing – it’s part of our tradition – even if somebody’s dead, we sing and we dance, maybe it’s a way of consoling ourselves; singing and dancing is the way we enjoy ourselves.” If individuals ever needed to return for counseling, CCST’s doors were always open.
But none of them ever felt the need to return for counseling: “The dance healed us,” describe Bridget, Solomon and Kiribu.

John has absolutely no background in therapy; he is a dance artist through and through and becomes extremely excited when talking about Merce Cunningham and Meredith Monk, two of the most abstract choreographers in modern dance history. The Living Theater and its founders, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, with whom he toured for a winter in his early twenties, are also “huge influences” for John. His work and his dance interests are non-representational, non-linear and certainly non-narrative; he cringes at the word. The only therapeutic advice John received from CCST upon his first workshop was not to inquire about the participants’ pasts because it could induce traumatic flashbacks.

But when John walked into the room, he was immediately “inspired:” by the way they moved, their dignity and who they were as human beings. As an Anglo-Irish (meaning that full-blooded Irish people often regard him as less than fully Irish) and as a gay man, John had always felt like an outsider. These people were outsiders too, and he immediately connected to them: “They felt like family.” But John’s artistic level of interest went even deeper: from the first moment until today (winter 2011), he is constantly “stimulated and thrilled by the way they move.” Their bodies and movement gave him a whole new aesthetic to work with as a choreographer and greatly expanded his “poetic universe.”

The survivors were equally taken with John and his way of moving. Modern dance was a completely new experience for them and not what they were expecting – but
they were intrigued. Thus it happened that four workshops turned into many months of workshops on every second Tuesday night. John began to have ideas for making a full dance with the survivors. His ideas coincided with SPIRASI’s plans for a large fundraiser for June 26, 2004, the UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, where the dance would first be performed at Dublin’s Project Arts Center, a public theater. A grant from the Arts Council of Ireland in May 2004 allowed John’s plans to move forward, the dancers to be paid (via per diems since they could not legally earn a salary), the professional dancers to be hired and *Fall and Recover* to be created. The former strategic development director remembers that, from SPIRASI’s perspective, the goal of performing *Fall and Recover* at the fundraiser was “to create media and public awareness [about SPIRASI and the needs of asylum seekers] but to do it in a way that was positive – it’s always easy to raise money if it’s positive. Negative things have a shock factor, but if it’s positive, people find it far easier to get on board.” Indeed, *Fall and Recover* has never been so-called victim art; rather from its inception, the dance has been a celebration of life and survival, a testament that the people involved have fallen – and recovered.

So John took particularly communicative movement phrases and improvisational activities that had been developed in the workshops and strung them together into a dance. Because of varying schedules, the full cast rehearsed for the first time all together the night before the show, but their performance blew people away, John included. Those involved remember that the audience was in tears. As Philip Connaughton, one of the professional dancers involved since the spring of 2004, says: “The fact is you are working with a load of torture survivors, which is not a normal situation. And they’re
putting their heart and soul into it, and you’re creating an emotional environment where movement is being made with an emotional energy behind it. And so of course that’s heart wrenching, because they’ve got a lot of stuff that they need to get out and it’s coming out. And just the fact that they are learning to trust again, and they’re stepping out – that is a release of energy that could make a thousand people cry, it’s incredibly beautiful.” Asked how John made this release of energy possible, Philip continues, “It just happens by itself, you don’t need to [force things]. John really did honestly just make a piece, that’s all. He was just trying to make something beautiful and create beauty in them, and it’s wonderful how beautiful they become.”

After the initial performance, John continued working with the group to develop *Fall and Recover* into an evening-length dance. In 2005 and 2006, they performed several times, including a run at Dublin’s Project Arts Centre and many tours to other Irish cities. Often in preparing for performances, rehearsals were scheduled for every day of the week. In 2005, John created *The White Piece*, a new dance with three of the torture survivors and ten professional dancers, which was inspired by one of the survivor’s experiences as an asylum seeker in Ireland. *The White Piece* subsequently toured to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2006), Paris, France (2007) and Ramallah, Bethlehem and Haifa, in Israel and Palestine (2009). Although *Fall and Recover* itself remained dormant until it was re-commissioned for the 2009 Dublin Dance Festival, (an internationally renowned festival with companies from all over the world), John was continually working with the survivors whose movement quality and artistic expression he found particularly inspiring. Indeed, he integrated survivors into all of his works, including *In This Moment* (2010), *Rhythmic Space* (2007), *Close-Ups* (2006), and *Like*
S Silver (2004), among others. The 2009 rendition of Fall and Recover garnered an invitation from La Mama Theater for a three-week New York City season in March 2011, which was sponsored by Imagine Ireland. Over time, some of the original cast members have moved on and other survivors from SPIRASI and elsewhere have joined. Today, about five of the original Fall and Recover cast members are full members of the professional company, working with John and any international choreographers who come to set dances on IMDT.

The Context

The Republic of Ireland is a small country of 4.58 million people (O’Brien), with another 1.8 million in Northern Ireland, on an island the geographic size of the state of Maine. Historically, Ireland has been a country of net emigration; significant numbers of immigrants to the country – both economic and refugee – did not begin to come until the early 1990s when the Irish economy improved. Thus, in the last twenty years, visible changes have resulted as many ethnicities have come to live in a place that was mostly ethnically homogenous for centuries. As Steven Loyal relates, “Since the foundation of the state, Irishness and citizenship have been correlated with whiteness and Catholicism which implicitly acted as the measure against which difference was constructed” (Loyal 46). Even a majority of immigrants still come from white, predominantly Christian countries: in 2006, only 13 percent of immigrants came from countries outside of Europe (Fahey 29). Thus, as the country has dealt with new understandings of multiculturalism and racism, Irish people have also had to change their national sense of self. Recent

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2 To be specific: 23 percent of immigrants in 2006 were repatriating Irish, 9 percent came from the UK, 11 percent from the original EU member states, 43 percent from the new EU member states as of 2004 (i.e. Eastern Europe), 1 percent from the USA and 13 percent from “the rest of the world” (Fahey 29).
articles in the *Irish Times* about the results of the 2011 census reveal that people are still adjusting to the fact that Ireland has become a country of immigration rather than emigration. One article reads, “Central Statistics Office officials said they may have underestimated the high level of net inward migration and overestimated emigration rates in recent research” (Smyth 7/1/11). The number of asylum applications has also increased in recent years: “In 1992, Ireland received only 39 applications for asylum. By 1996, this figure had risen to 1,179, then to 10,325 in 2001 and peaking at 11,634 in 2002. By 2003 it began to fall, reaching 7,900 at the end of that year and falling farther to 4,323 by the end of 2005” (Loyal 37). Putting these numbers in perspective, that means “between 1995 and 2000, asylum seekers constituted less than 10 percent of all immigrants who entered Ireland” (Loyal 39). Nigeria, Romania, Somali, Sudan and Iran produced the most asylum seekers in Ireland in 2005 (Loyal 37).

The Irish modern dance scene is small, interconnected and looks equally to Europe and the United States for influence and inspiration. The Arts Council, which receives funding from the government but is an independent body, funds more than 50 percent of the operating costs of the handful of dance companies like IMDT that have a formal structure. Many dancers work as independent choreographers or performers, and the few formalized companies find the remainder of their funding from other organizations such as Culture Ireland, or private donations. Thus, the funding structure of Irish dance lies somewhere in between the American model, (based mostly on private donations from individuals and foundations), and European models such as those of France and Germany, (which are almost entirely government funded). Although other Irish choreographers have done projects with ‘non-traditional dancers,’ and the theater
scene in Ireland embraces a fair amount of multi-cultural work, “it is the sustainedness of what John is doing that is definitely [new]” and different in the Irish arts world, according to a former IMDT board member. She continues, “[John’s work] began to be a comment in a very direct way on what was happening to people who are [seeking asylum] in Ireland. With that direct connection, I feel that was a new thing happening within dance. That’s not to say that those kinds of things haven’t happened before, but let’s say that the continuity of that - not just with *Fall and Recover* but subsequent to that with other works, where arguably the performers are now integrated, and it’s not an issue about looking at them as a separate sort of an entity – and I think that’s something that’s very different that hasn’t happened here before.”

The other ‘new’ aspect that John brought to the arts community, was that, in the board member’s words, he “really became a champion for these people as well.” John’s involvement with the survivors did not end in the dance studio or on-stage; instead he ended up working with many of them to fight their deportation orders and to gain Irish citizenship. This kind of involvement began in Fall 2004 when one of the performers – Rory – received a deportation order a few weeks before a performance. John was determined not to let Rory be deported. He collaborated with Residents Against Racism, a citizen group that works with asylum seekers, and immigration lawyers to delay the order by finding inconsistencies in the deportation letter that could be fought in the legal system. (For example, in Rory’s case, the letter had been dated in June but he received it in November.) Meanwhile, John wrote his friends and IMDT’s mailing list urging people to write letters, make phone calls or help in any way possible. He rallied important people he knew in the community to write letters to the Minister of Justice explaining how much
Rory was adding to the Irish community by participating in IMDT and other volunteer endeavors. Journalists with whom John had developed relationships over his years as an artist wrote feature stories about Rory’s situation and contributions to society. John wrote and presented affidavits at court. Lo and behold, on the day Rory was due to be deported at 4:00 pm, he received an Injunction from the High Court at 1:00 pm.\(^3\) After that, whenever any of the cast members faced deportation problems, they would come to John. John would do whatever he could to help, sometimes even going to the Immigration Offices with them and standing by their side to make sure they were not whisked away onto an airplane. Philip recalls, “He would not sleep if there were problems – court cases or problems with people being deported. He was there 24 hours, and, virtually, he’s helped everyone. I don’t know how many people he has helped.” In eight years, only one of the performers has been deported. (Although another chose to return home.)

Today, the group considers itself “a family,” with John as “the father” and Kiribu, a natural leader from day one, as “the mother.” Each Christmas, everyone gathers at John’s apartment bringing a dish from his or her homeland. Many other social gatherings take place during the year. Bridget, one of the original cast members, named John the godfather of her first child born in Ireland, and he has been best man at the weddings of other cast members. As Bridget says, “I don’t know how to thank John – thank you John, thank you John.”

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\(^3\) Eventually, in 2007, Rory was granted a status called Humanitarian Leave to Remain, and he will be able to apply for citizenship in 2012.
Description of the Dance

All of these profound relationships are apparent in *Fall and Recover* right next to the horrors the performers faced in their previous lives. This contrast adds to the distinct feeling that the dance, in the final analysis, is uplifting – a thanksgiving and a celebration of life. The dance begins as Kiribu and Sheila take two seats at the front-right side of the stage, which has no curtains whatsoever, just the rafters of the room marking boundaries. Kiribu talks in her native language while Sheila copies any natural gestures that Kiribu makes. Soon, other cast members enter and draw pictures of their homelands – a house here, a flower there - with magic markers, whose scent can be smelled from the audience, on huge sheets of white paper that cover the floor completely. Still others come out and jump or run like airplanes, accompanied by Kiribu’s voice.

Then all of a sudden, the cast rips up the paper, throwing it in the air, both gleefully and determinedly, as the cascade of unkempt origami rains down on the performers only to be collected and carried off. The dance progresses as a series of scenes that are not obviously connected. In one scene, the performers, dressed all in white, line up shoulder-touching-shoulder. They start talking, each one in his or her own language – John calls it a “passport,” wherein they introduce themselves – as they slowly shuffle such that the line rotates around its axis, carving a pin-wheel in the stage space. The line then moves to the back wall, and everyone slides to the floor at the same time, except for Sheila who remains standing in a pool of fading light as her fingers palpably investigate the air in front of her face.

Another scene starts with Nuala against the back wall, framed by a rectangle of light. She slides slowly down the wall, a seemingly inevitable descent, until her knees
are at 90 degrees, and then with a movement paradoxically both desperate and graceful, she uses her fingertips to inch her way back up the wall in measured increments. After a few repetitions, she leans side to side against the wall, her arms reaching and her far leg coming off the ground, a perfect sequencing through the vertebra and ribcage creating a seamless arc of torso and movement. When she stops, Sheila runs to her, stomach to stomach, stretching her arms to make an X with Nuala’s arms against the wall. Others follow at a run, making a linear, multi-person hug.

Yet another scene has everyone picking up Nuala, raising her above their heads and walking a ways, before putting her down and picking up Solomon the same way. Short solos intersperse scenes or take place in a performer’s own world while the group does something else. Rory takes great deep, heaving breaths that move his arms and change his face; Eamon writes his name in the air in front of him; Keelin makes fast, frantic circles over her stomach as if trying to keep an internal explosion contained; Sheila’s hands crawl and scratch up and down her arms and legs like contorted red ants in slow motion. More than once, soloists break out into different African call and response songs, and the group starts dancing and responding in traditional African styles. After one of these songs, Eamon drops to his knees, and then lies down on his side. Others join him. Conor has a transcendent jumping solo where he bounds in the air, arms swinging to the side; great eagles or albatrosses might recognize him as one of their own. Others join him as well. Towards the end, each person leans onto the back of a partner, their legs coming off the ground, a moment of complete trust. Then they all move into a big circle, take hands and raise them in the air; shimmering their fingers, the group melts into a mass as we look only at the upraised hands. Afterwards they leave and return with the
salt to outline their bodies, eventually leaving the stage awash in poignant images of the human form.

A Brief Overview of This Thesis

The Introduction delineates an Analytic Framework borrowing from the works of John Paul Lederach, Cynthia Cohen, and Daniel Bar-Tal et al. In Chapter One, I explore how Fall and Recover helped heal the participants by comparing their experience to the sequential trajectory of psychotherapy. Next, in Chapter Two, I look at which of Lederach’s, Cohen’s and Bar-Tal et al’s seventeen peacebuilding capacities were “nourished” (Cohen 51) by this particular dance-healing process. I use research from the field of psychology to flesh out the understanding of each capacity – for instance, what is empathy and how can we develop it? – and to support the idea that any dance project, not just Fall and Recover, could nourish the same capacities for other people. Then we look at the overall strengths and limitations of experiential dance for healing trauma and nourishing the seventeen capacities needed for peacebuilding at the individual level.

Chapter Three considers the experience and individual level change of audience members watching Fall and Recover. Here an inductive approach allows me to observe spectator’s responses, describe and categorize them, and then analyze which of the seventeen capacities and peacebuilding goals the categorized observations best match. We then again look at the strengths and limitations of watching dance for peacebuilding at the individual level.

Finally, the Conclusion addresses overall findings and provides recommendations for the design and implementation of peacebuilding projects using dance.
Why *Fall and Recover*

One may ask: how can a single case study provide enough information to draw conclusions about dance’s contributions to peacebuilding? *Fall and Recover* is unique and important for several reasons. For one, *Fall and Recover* profoundly affected both its participants and many of its audience members; so in one dance, we can look at both the experiential and spectator side of the art form. Furthermore, the entire process of making and performing *Fall and Recover* has, to date, lasted more than eight years. This long timespan has allowed for the leader and the group to work through problems and develop better practices along the way. Thus, what we see today are practices that successfully contributed to individuals’ healing in meaningful ways, as Chapter One will show. The longevity of *Fall and Recover* has also meant that different performers have joined and left the group, expanding the pool of individuals positively affected. A natural control group also appears to exist – according to the performers, their friends from the torture counseling center who did not join the dance project are still depressed – which supports the proposition that the *Fall and Recover* experience, rather than some invisible external variable, helped lead to the participants’ transformations. Unlike some other dance projects, moreover, *Fall and Recover* has been extremely well documented in newspaper articles and videos so that ample data is available for analysis.

Furthermore, the fact that the dance has been performed around the world provides a multiplicity of audience viewpoints. Moreover, the similar reactions that both Irish and international audiences have had to watching the torture survivors perform suggest that *Fall and Recover* successfully communicates across cultures. Such cross-
cultural communication is hard to achieve, but is crucial for any peacebuilding project trying to match its programs to immediate context and culture. Simply put, *Fall and Recover* is an inspiring work of art, and understanding how it works its magic will shed light on how to make other art in the context of peacebuilding that speaks to people across linguistic, cultural and conflict divides. All of which points to why this case study provides a unique vantage point for looking at how dance – on both experiential and performative levels – can contribute to peacebuilding.
Works Cited for Prologue


