

# Irish Dance's Lessons for Life

Keira Martin used to 'get in trouble' for using her arms in Irish dancing so brought her steps to 'a lot of black dance companie'.



**T**he one-woman show set to spark debate of ethnicity and heritage at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival this year, writes Fiona O'Brien

Keira Martin had the typical childhood of anyone growing up in a 1970s community in the UK; attending Mass, learning Irish dancing, competing in feiseanna, and the obligatory summer holidays across the Irish Sea.

But for this dance artist her links to Ireland and its culture are both far-removed yet more credible than most.

"My dad is an Irish musician and we would go to Ireland with him three times a year touring and following the sessions. He used to play with the Chieftans," she says.

"But we're not even Irish. I think Dad is maybe what would be seen as third generation Irish, so through a great, great granny or something, but we were just completely immersed in Irish culture growing up.

"It's a bit bizarre. So they won't give me a passport, but they'd probably invite me over to sing and dance and I'd be accepted that way."

Keira, grew up in a mining town in Barnsley and has created a show based on the questions she so often asked, and was asked, growing up.

"It's a story and the journey of a woman. It is based on me and stemmed from lots of questions I got asked as a kid at school. I'd go to Mass but because I didn't get confirmed I wasn't really a fully-fledged Catholic so I got isolated that way.

"Then I'd go to the feis and stand by the side of the stage, and it was just 'bitchville', let me put it that way. People would ask about my name and why I was competing. The bullying I got was unbelievable and I never really had the answers...and I'd get 'why have you

got that funny hair?"

The subject of Keira's hair throws up a completely different question of her maternal heritage.

"No one can trace it, but we've all got this crazy afro hair, but there is no one in our immediate family of that heritage. There was a rumour about a Jamaican milkman and that being where my mum came from though."

Keira's tongue-in-cheek humour asks are we really different because of our bloodlines or the culture in which we choose to immerse ourselves.

## Reggae

"There is an obsession with Jamaica in my family. My mum is really passionate about reggae. So Irish music and reggae were played alongside in my household on vinyl, it was just normal for me."

"I'm probably the most unpatriotic English person on the planet. When people ask me where I'm from I say Yorkshire. I never say England because, to me, it doesn't really have a heart.

"I knew I always wanted to dance, and I knew it wouldn't just be Irish dancing because the competitions wouldn't be enough.

"I went to rubbish ballet, tap and modern for a pound at the local YMCA, and it were just easy childcare for my mum at the time and I fell in love with the stage. I loved the freedom of other kind of dance, because Irish dancing is very restrictive.

"It's so restrictive yet the music is so free, which to me is a bit of a contradiction. I'd get in trouble in Irish dancing for going round like a bull in a china shop with my arms waving around a lot. But I'd be like, 'the music just makes me want to go mental' It's like rave music when it gets going.

"Nowadays it's moved on a bit,

there's loads of fusions, but (not) back at that time."

She started dancing in earnest with Alison Thornton Clark, who set up a youth company in Barnsley in Keira's early teens.

After her first experience with contemporary dance Keira fell in love with the ability to tell a story with her body and thought 'this is it'.

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"After that I left school at 16 and went straight to The Northern School of Contemporary Dance (Leeds) which was really young, and the rest was history but the Irish stuff has never left me.

"It's in your bones and your blood like that. It influences everything I do even if I'm not conscious of it, because it's just in your rhythm but as I grew up I had a lot of connection with Caribbean dance and as my career progressed I got jobs with a lot of black dance companies.

"I was accepted even though I'm not black. "Africa and Ireland have so many parallels. In rhythm, in culture and in the heart of what that culture is.

"The show is just a debate really, I feel like I'm opening up a conversation. People come to my show and say 'oh I knew you were Jamaican', but I'm not. That's the point. The point is that you can say that you're from anywhere you want to be and the reason I am accepted by Jamaicans is because of my hair, and the way I can dance and I understand the culture."

"And because I sing Irish songs and my feet tell stories I'm accepted that way even though I'm a complete mismatch."

Brexit has made her show more relevant to her audience than ever before.

"I find it so interesting at this time in the world because the point is it doesn't matter where you are from, we are all from the same place called planet Earth."

## Brexit

"I did a show the day after the Brexit vote and it were really interesting. The director of the festival was like 'my God, we couldn't have picked a better piece for the timing without knowing it was going to happen', and we didn't know it was going to happen obviously'. But woaah, it was poignant with what people were saying afterwards, I look forward to that conversation.

"The more debates I have about it the more I understand it myself. I hope it does resonate with other people. People have said it has made them think about their journey."

"I suppose its familiarity and I'm saying 'it's ok, we're from everywhere, why do people need to put you in a box anyway'. Why can't you just be from planet earth full stop? Everybody's obsessed."

Keira says that although the show is autobiographical, and her story, she really credits director Charlotte Vincent, of Vincent

Dance Theatre, for reigning in her off-the-cuff nature.

"Her and James Martin, a folk musician, really helped me. It's hard, I find the more I rehearse the worse it is. Because it's me and it's mine, and if it's a bit raw I feel it's a truer performance."

"It's a bit of an emotional rollercoaster so I find if it's over rehearsed I lose that intention of what it's about. Charlotte was really good in curbing me in my ad-libbing because I think I'm a bit of a clown and a stand-up comedian and I'm not!

"So if there are no boundaries I ad-lib and that's not a good thing as you start to move away from the story. It looks quite free but I'm really strict in my time. Everything is timed to a tee to the littlest thing."

And the show itself is a mixture of dialogue, song and dance, with plenty of Keira's humour thrown in for good measure.

It starts off quite comical. I'm a character that is quite obscene and silly but once I reel the audience in I take you on a darker path.

"My story as a woman ties it together. I explore life really, having a child, being a mother, the bravado you've got to have being a woman in south Yorkshire, that you've got to be hard like the lads and not cry."

"I sing and tell stories. There is lots of text. I speak about my Irish dancing experience and the questions that were asked of me as a kid about where I come from. I don't really answer them I just put them out there."

"I talk about the legacy of women that I come from; strong, hard working women. A lot of it is what growing up in a working class community means for me now."

And Keira's childhood inevitably meant that she quite often runs into people from yesteryear during her adult career.

"I remember when I was in-

Involved with Fidget Feet Dance Theatre in Ireland they got some musicians to come in and play live for The Second Coming show.

## Comhaltas

"I asked who they were, and when they replied that it was Damian O'Kane, Mike McGoldrick and John Joe Kelly and I was like 'no way, I ain't seen them since I was about 11.' Because of being from England the company couldn't believe that I knew them."

"But if you've an Irish connection in the UK, we all knew each other from the Irish centre in Manchester and the Comhaltas and that's where we learnt our music."

"I've asked my dad why he picked up a tin whistle when he was 17, and he doesn't know. He just did and that was it."

"He's never looked back. I remember the first time I went to Ireland as a kid I was heartbroken to leave and I didn't understand why, so I'm always really interested in being connected to land which interests me in terms of heritage too."

"My parents are quite highly regarded in the folk scene, we grew up with Kate Rusby and mum is an Irish singer."

"All that time on the road in Ireland seemed quite boring at the time, but now reflecting on it I really am grateful for the experience."

"It's great that I'm quite connected to some famous people in the music industry just from my childhood which is lovely. And it all comes back around."

Indeed it does.

• Here Comes Trouble plays at Dance Bass at Dance Base (Venue 22) from 22-27 August. Visit [www.tickets.edfringe.com](http://www.tickets.edfringe.com) for more information.



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