

DANCING AT THE CROSSROADS: A CELEBRATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AND ANGLO-CELTIC DANCE IN THE NEW WORLD

FIRST TABLEAU: *The country crossroads, on a midsummer afternoon*

In blackness, we hear the voice of the legendary piper Séamus Ennis, invoking the knowledge required to learn and understand “Irish traditional folk music and folk lore.” As the lights come up, we find we are at a country crossroads: three roads meeting at a single tree. It is a bright, hot, green and growing midsummer. A lone walker enters humming, then sings **John Barleycorn**, an ancient death-and-rebirth ballad which actually recounts the process for making beer, and is joined briefly by the Freestyler & Sean Nos Singer, who share a jug. The Dance Master enters and strolls up the lane toward the Crossroads, while we hear the “slow air” **The Blackbird**, a tune with associations to Scotland’s Bonnie Prince Charlie.

The Dance Master, seeing no sign of tardy students, steps through the complex figures of the *Blackbird* set-dance, which might have been danced on a barrel head or half-door. By the end, the Dance Master has been joined by the Hard Shoe Dancer, and by others coming from near or distant villages, including a dashing, mysterious young man on a bicycle. The musicians segue to a set of polkas from County Kerry, as the company members join in for the **Ballyjourney Reels Set**.

The dancers sit for a breather, while the Hard Shoe Dancer sings, unaccompanied, a funny song called **The Devil & Bailiff McGlynn**, in which Satan himself promenades through the countryside, while the bill-collecting “bailiff” tries to persuade the Old Gentleman to take various individuals down to hell, though ultimately this strategy backfires. *Bailiff McGlynn* segues into a piece of “mouth music” called **The Fair at Bellaghey**, and in turn to a trio slip-jig, featuring the Dance Master, the Hard Shoe Dancer, and the Creole Girl. At the end of the dances, the boy on the bicycle slips away, and abandons the Village Girl; she is left alone, to sing the magical English tale of **Reynardine**: about an encounter with a stranger who may be a fox, a man, or even a sorcerous version of both—and who, lurking, seduces her away at scene’s end. *Blackout*.

SECOND TABLEAU: *A Mississippi juke joint or Connacht shebeen, on an autumn evening*

We begin in darkness, as we hear the beautiful language of Northern Irish poet Ciarán Carson, in his description of searching for a near-abandoned country pub in County Clare, and of what he finds there. As the voice-over continues, the lights come up on the pub’s interior, discovering to us a community of friends and neighbors, celebrating the harvest on an autumn evening. We hear the *Sean Nos* (“old-style”) Singer render the Irish-language revolutionary tale of the 16th century pirate queen Grace O’Malley (**Oro Sé Do Bheatha’ Bhaile**; “You are welcome home”); the Creole Girl “winds” his hand as he sings and the chorus joins in. At song’s end, a lone fiddler jumps into **Sophie’s Dancing Feet**, joined first by the musicians and then soloists, as the Hard-Shoe Dancer, the Dance Master, and the Freestyler try their hands (or, “feet”) at the tune.

The celebration of community continues with the solo English song **The Fox Hunt**, which plays on the ancient contest of the subversive Reynard (*Renard*—the “fox” in French) and the lord’s pursuing hounds.

A bit of the folk process yields an additional closing verse, in which *Renard* leads the hounds through a prickly hedge, thereby losing his “brush” but saving his life. The company cheers his escape, and the celebration climaxes in the high-energy group dance of the ***Ballyjourney Jig Set***. But at the dance’s end, an abrupt blackout and extended transition signal a shift of mood and season. *Blackout*

INTERMISSION

THIRD TABLEAU: *A Delta or Donegal crossroads, at a midwinter midnight*

In the blackout, a poem of the season’s changing leads us into the cold, stillness, and darkness of the crossroads on a midwinter midnight—a “thin place” in which the boundary between this world and the next, between the natural and supernatural, between Order and Chaos, is thinnest of all. A lone Bluesman enters, finding his way to the Crossroads at midnight: the place where, in Africa, the Caribbean, the West of Ireland, and the Deep South, certain Bargains could be made. Like the “Soldier” in Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du Soldat*, or Faust with Mephistopheles, this Bluesman hopes for a bargain—of musical skills in exchange for his soul. He sings Robert Johnson’s ***Crossroads Blues***, as two unseen “familiar” contend for his soul.

Yet before he finishes the song, jingling bells are heard in the darkness, and he is confronted by the ***Processional*** of a masked Border Morris team—those dancers who, frozen out of mining pits in England and Wales by the cold of the season or a mill-owner’s heart, would color their faces and take to the lanes to dance for drinks and tips. They are led by a Demon Fiddler, and by Èṣù, *Elegua*, “Baron Samedi,” Legba, the Trickster God who came from West Africa, found his way to many places throughout the Caribbean, and up via New Orleans to the Crossroads of the Mississippi Delta. They are dancing familiar from the Courts of Chaos, a little of the Outer Dark. The Bluesman seeks to flee, but is caught-up in their ***Impossible Dance***, buffeted from side to side, until he is finally knocked to the ground.

Yet all is not lost: at this moment nearest despair, he sings the opening verses of Blind Willie Johnson’s titanic sermon, ***John the Revelator***. The band joins in, and all characters are caught up in the shared dance again. At the end, the music and light both unexpectedly fade, and the group dancers evaporate into the darkness, leaving only a single dancer behind, as she hops and skips through the criss-cross figures of the ***Bacca Pipes Jig***. *Blackout*.

FOURTH TABLEAU: *A harbor at a springtime dawn*

In the blackout, we hear gulls, the sound of morning breezes, the slapping of waves, creaking masts, ship’s bells and boatswains’ whistles. It is dawn, early spring, a time of departures and new beginnings. An offstage chorus sings William Billings’s ***Euroclydon***, a prayer for sailors’ safety. And the Chanteyman sings Lead Belly’s remarkable blues re-working of the work-song ***Haul Away Joe***, as a solo dancer flashes into, out of, and through the light all around him. At song’s end, the Chanteyman meets a second chantey man, to sing the duet ***Drake’s Drum***, a recollection of the Devonshire legend that insisted Sir Francis Drake would be recalled from the dead at a time of England’s greatest need (and which many

believe was fulfilled with his return—or reincarnation—as Horatio Lord Nelson); they are joined by a mysterious Freestyle solo dancer who may be the spirit himself.

As the Chanteymen end their duet, the voiceover returns, quoting a passage from the 19th century journalist Lafcadio Hearn, in which he describes the creole dancing he saw on the Mississippi levees. The lights come up, and we see the wharfside, in colors of springtime: a promise of new beginnings, fertility, travel, adventure, and bodily celebration. The dancers enter, and a partnered English Country Dance begins, led by Elizabeth Bennett; as they glide through the elegant figures of ***The Indian Queen***, we are reminded of the court and country dances that English, Spanish, and French colonial settlers brought with them and danced to the accompaniment of Afro-Caribbean fiddlers. The Creole Girl dances in the shadows, neither quite separate from nor quite part of the Dance.

But then suddenly in the distance there is an interruption! To the consternation of the elegant country dancers, a troupe of New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians and “Second Line” celebrants enter up the roads, masked, dancing a Haitian quadrille to the accompaniment of rattling percussion, bobbing umbrellas and kerchiefs, and the strains of the old street-chant chestnut ***Brother John***, sung by the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, Marie Leveau, and accompanied by the “popping and locking” of the break-dancing Freestyler.

In the midst of the confusion and consternation, we suddenly wonder if the meetings and confrontations at the crossroads of our history even *can* be resolved? We have never in all our history been very good at reconciliation; is *that* destined to be our full story? But suddenly one of the percussionists has an inspiration, and picks up the ***Brother John*** groove again; the fiddlers join in, and the band itself finds a musical common ground. The Creole Girl joins with the Freestyler as musicians and dancers partner across the divide for the Appalachian tune “Julie Ann Johnson”—itself a product of the meetings of upland white fiddle players and black riverboat banjoists and dancers—accompanying the contra dance ***The Crossroads Gypsy***. The dancing ends with applause, congratulations, celebration, and embraces.

And then the show breaks the Fourth Wall: the Narrator steps out onstage, and addresses the audience directly, with the final (and only) prose speech, as the house lights gradually come up full:

[Narration] *And that's what it's always been, isn't it? Our history is one of an immigrant nation: people coming here, from elsewhere, legal or illegal, willing or unwilling, fleeing or finding suffering, seeking or sacrificing opportunity. And it's the crossroads meetings, and the myth to which the crossroads gave birth, and the transformations that resulted, that have made us what we are. And, in the end, it's the best part of our hearts and the finest of our aspirations--to create a place, here, in this place, which all can call "home." Please sing with us.*

And the show closes with dancers, players, singers, and audience, together, sharing a song about going home: ***The Mingulay Boat Song***.

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