
August 20, 2002

Stepping Off for a Romp in the Park

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Summer in the Square 2002 is one of New York City's most engaging free outdoor festivals. Devoted largely to dance, this pleasantly informal series in Union Square, featured a program of Irish step dancing on Wednesday afternoon that was typical of the imagination of the enterprise. (The festival also features programs devoted to storytelling and young performers.)

The groups on Wednesday were the Niall O'Leary Irish Dance Troupe and Darrah Carr Dance, with some of Mr. O'Leary's impressively accomplished young students. The pieces they performed, most of them choreographed by Mr. O'Leary and Ms. Carr, had charming names like "After Dinner Dance," "Trip to the Cottage" and "Late Supper Dance." The program offered little help in determining which was which. But the intriguing style and intricacy of the dance forms and the irresistibly lilting music to which they were set were really all that mattered.

A quick look suggests that step dancers pop up and down, arms rigidly at their sides, feet flying. But there is surprising variety in the Irish folk style, particularly in the use of the legs and feet, which are as lusciously ornamental as in any ballet brisé and often also provide the momentum for sudden shifts in direction.

Individual dancers wove in and out in teasing sequences, moving on the spot or traveling quickly across the stage. Couples drew close and apart in what could have been an American square dance. In one piece, a call-and-response section featured Mr. O'Leary and a large group of dancers smoothly responding to his cues. Step dancing and modern dance never quite blended, however, in an ambitious group work created by Ms. Carr.

The festival setting is perfect: under a grove of large old trees at the north end of the square, with some sight lines graciously adorned by the park's handsome new plantings.

The festival producers, the 14th Street-Union Square Local Development Corporation and Business Improvement District, even provided a wayward breeze. More important, the dance component of the festival has a knowledgeable curator, Paula Hunter, a choreographer and performer herself.

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