



HARNEY DANCE TEAM TAKES FIRST AT FINALS



Courtesy of Brian Burns & The Walpole Times

Take a groundbreaking blend of traditional Irish step and modern jazz dancing, blend in some acting skills and top off with a touch of Irish mysticism.

The result? "Inishaneil," a dance drama performed by students from The Harney Dance Academy in Walpole that wowed audiences and judges alike at the North American Irish Dance Championships in Memphis earlier this month.

The team, which was directed and choreographed by Walpole native Liam Harney, placed first in the competition's dance drama category, receiving high marks from all seven judges who graded their performance.

The team was also treated to a standing ovation from the Memphis crowd, and upon leaving the stage was immediately asked to take part in the competition's closing ceremonies.

With that first place showing under their belts, the team is now eyeing the world championships in Europe next April.

But due to the way the competition calendar is structured, their next stop will be at the New England regional competition this fall.

Interestingly enough, it's the team's placements at the regionals that determines whether or not they go onto the worlds.

But after the team received such overwhelming acclaim at the North American finals, a trip to

Europe next spring seems all but inevitable.

It's not a bad start for the first ever dance drama team to come out of the Harney Academy, which is based in Walpole center.

The team, which consists of 20 young dancers of varying ages from Walpole and surrounding towns, has been working on the piece for about a year now.

A former Presidential Scholar for the Arts, Harney is one of the world's premier Irish step dancers, having won two first place world championships as a solo dancer.

Though Harney specializes in Irish dancing, he's been schooled in all styles of dance (ballet, tap, jazz, etc.) and has always been interested in finding ways to blend different dance elements together.

Creating a dance drama was something that was always on his back burner, he said. And when it came time to put together his first piece, he knew that he wanted to include elements of acting and jazz along with Irish step.

The dancers that he chose for the performance had all been successful as individuals and are highly committed to dancing, he said.

He explained that all of the dancers had previously taken jazz and acting classes at the academy. So when it came time to interweave those elements into the performance, it helped that no one was learning the moves for the first time.

Adapted from an Irish fairy tale, Inishaneil tells the story of a fairy king and queen who want to marry off their daughter in order to continue the royal line. To find the princess a fitting mate, they bring the three finest suitors in the land before her.

The princess decides that she will choose the suitor who is the

best dancer, so all three of them compete to win her hand. True to her word, she picks the best of the three.

But the story does not end there, however. The mother of one of the rejected suitors becomes angry with the princess for spurning her son and puts a curse on the best dancer, turning him into an old man.

The princess is then asked to choose between the three suitors for a second time. Despite his wizened appearance, she once again chooses the best dancer.

In doing so, the princess unwittingly breaks the mother's curse, and the future prince turns back into his former self. They all live happily ever after.

Since the entire story unfolds in the mystical world of fairies, Harney worked closely with costume and makeup designer Maryann Hatem to create a unique look for the performance.

Hatem did an excellent job of translating his ideas into reality, he said.

Because fairies live in the woods and tend to blend in with their surroundings, he wanted the costumes to have a strong connection with nature. The colors that Hatem used (blue, green, red and gray) were meant to represent the elements of nature.

Hatem also used similar designs for each dancer's mouth and eye makeup, so that they would all look like members of the same unique tribe.

Despite the elaborate costumes and makeup, the only stage prop the dancers employed was a parachute, which they used to conceal themselves from the audience prior to the start of the performance.

Harney said that he is ex-



tremely proud of how the production came out. "What we set out to do, we did."

Now that he's completed his first piece, he's interested to explore what else he can do with the genre, he said.

Harney will also be including the drama in performances of Celticfusion—a new professional show that he choreographed and stars in.

Many of the dancers that appeared in the drama are also a part of his professional team, he said.

The Harney Dance Academy offers dancing classes for all ages, from tiny tots (ages 3 and 4) in the Moms & Me program, all the way up to adults.

Instruction is both competitive and non-competitive.

For more information, call 508-668-3479.

CONGRATULATIONS TEAM!!!

