



Irish dancer Shawn Silver is circled by Alex Windsor, Jennifer Crowe, Catherine Ducey and Colleen Dunn-Pickard.

Paul Daly/The Independent

Whirling dervish

By Mandy Cook
The Independent

It's all in the shoes. Oversized tap shoes, known as hornpipes, are laced about Irish dancing dynamo Shawn Silver's ankles with black ribbon, chunky silver buckles flashing in the sunlight streaming through iDance Studio's window overlooking the Waterford Valley in St. John's.

Silver, the face and toe-tapping feet behind the province's only dedicated Irish dance company, is jumping straight up as if on springs (and not the fiberglass tips which support his weight while standing on his toes), clicking his heels and tapping out a furious beat.

The well-worn hardwood is evidence to the untold number of happy feet and animated dance steps that have played out here. About 140 lovers of the traditional Irish step-dancing technique — hugely popularized by the Dublin-based *Riverdance* and *Lord of the Dance* that broke out in the mid-'90s — come to have fun and learn the rapid leg movements from Silver. But the dance instructor reveals he has a vision that goes far and beyond the recreational.

Ever since the ex-Bay Street stockbroker left a 15-year-career in economics behind in the late 1990s, Silver has followed what he says is his "calling" in life. Dancing Irish jigs and reels ever since he learned them from his grandfather — a

Local Irish dancing instructor high-kicks province's Celtic profile

familial talent documented by CBC's *Land and Sea* and to be broadcast on Oct. 27 — Silver has been diligently developing and fostering what he says is "a hotbed" of talent in this province.

"We have the strongest Celtic culture outside Ireland itself," he says, sitting on the floor of his studio. "We thought it was smart to add to an already very rich culture of talent and music and art and add to that an element of something that's

become very popular."

Silver wants to use Newfoundland's unique position as an Irish outpost and turn it into a destination location for Irish dancing talent — one of the few places in the world where dancers and enthusiasts can come to train, teach and "breed champions."

Step-dancing is first and foremost a competitive sport, he says, and there are only about 2,000 instructors worldwide. It is an extremely rigorous form of dancing, and unlike other modern forms, is closed to interpretation or improvisation. Its strict standards are upheld by an Irish dancing committee to ensure ancient techniques are not deviated from in any way.

In order to be permitted to teach others, Silver travelled to Dublin to train with the entire cast of *Riverdance*. It is from this connection he has been able to regularly bring title-holding and award-winning Irish dancing stars to Newfoundland, one of which, Don McCarron, will be coming to work with Silver's dancers in October.

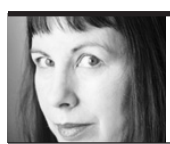
"Don McCarron has been the *Riverdance* lead dancer since the age of 17," he says. "Boys and girls who are 13, 14, know that if you're a good Irish dancer, the door is wide open to you. It's not just a trend ... for young people, emerging artists, it provides opportunities to perform, to teach, to enter competition

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Lotus of the west

Meditation is not to escape from society, but to come back to ourselves and see what is going on. Once there is seeing, there must be acting.

— Thich Nhat Hanh



SUSAN RENDELL
Screed and coke

I've always been intrigued by Meranda Squires, caught every now and then by a passing reference to the closest thing St. John's has to a resident guru. "She ran away to India at 20, spent 17 years in an ashram." "If Meranda were a guy, I'd marry her (one of Squires' female devotees)." "She may be spiritual, but she's completely practical." "Meranda's the real thing."

Squires, daughter of Newfoundland artist Gerry Squires, created and operates The Lotus Centre in St. John's, which offers yoga, meditation, chanting, Thai

massage, cleansing diets and "enlightenment intensive" retreats to people seeking a spiritual solution to problems ranging from stress to broken relationships to serious trauma. She's not the only game of that kind in town, but she is one of its few pro players.

In the New Age spiritual culture, Squires is in a different league than many of her counterparts; "the people who run around collecting certificates," as her partner Ian Goudie calls them. These flimsy documents from short courses in trendy, Astroturf paths to the Divine

attract 21st century spiritual consumers, who like to graze and are usually looking for a quick fix.

They won't find it at 52 Prescott St. There are no posters of angels or rainbows, no resin fairies, no Buddha statue holding an incense cone in one chubby hand. And definitely no "certificates," although Squires is a certified teacher of advanced studies in sciences, vedant philosophy and meditation — and also a soma yoga instructor, a Thai-yoga body-work practitioner, and a counsellor ("mind clearer").

When I step inside the tall house with the unlocked front door, I feel awkward, as if I've walked into a private residence by mistake. (Squires does live here, as it turns out.) In the front room, her sister (artist Esther Squires) bends over a child

asleep in a stroller; straight ahead, past a potted palm, is a staircase lined with her father's artwork (the centre doubles as The Gerald Squires Fine Art gallery).

'IT'S ALL ABOUT BALANCE'

I find Squires on the second level of the three-storey house. Smooth dark skin stretches over cheekbones you could cut yourself on; the thick black-turning-grey hair has more life in it than most people I know. She is slight and sturdy, and both loose and taut. ("It's all about balance," she will tell me later.) But the hazel eyes are her most prominent feature: "intelligent stones," I think. I wonder if my own eyes could ever carry such power; perhaps if I had spent hours meditating every day from age 15, like the 44-year-old Squires.

Squires grew up in a lighthouse in Ferryland, the child of two artists. "I feel that my childhood had a very strong influence on the direction of my life," she says. "A lot of space, and ... no trip-laying or expectations or anything. I was able to check within my own being what were my creative natural talents, my aspirations, and just follow them."

When she was 20, those talents and aspirations led Squires to an international meditation centre in the Himalayas. "It's in the mountains, so there's only one road going up the highest mountain there ... My main training there was speaking, communication. Basically, our internal work was to articulate what was going on in the inside, and find words for it so we

See "Creating," page 24



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Free advice

Three simple rules to follow while on the campaign trail



SEAN PANTING
State of the art

I promised myself I wasn't going to do it. No sir, this week I was not going write about the election. But how can I resist? The sights, the sounds, the smells of election '07 are all around us, smacking us in the face at every turn.

As someone who comes from a performance background, I am constantly astounded by the poor grasp most candidates have on the showbiz aspect of electioneering.

You'd think with all that money and all those handlers with all that experience, the poor candidates would have it together for their TV, radio, print and door-to-door appearances. Big issues and party platforms and so forth may be the nuts and bolts of a campaign but, like it or not, elections are ultimately won and lost on how well you speak, how good you look and how badly the competition screws up.

So for all you would-be MHAs out there, I thought I'd pass along a little free PR advice.

STOP TALKING

While this is excellent advice for most people most of the time, it's especially useful to remember if you happen to be going door to door in search of votes. Hey, I know you have things to say. That's one of the things that drew you to politics in the first place. But once you've said your bit, for the love of God stop talking already.

When you show up on my doorstep, do yourself a favour and resist the temptation to make awkward small talk. It's not some kind of blind date we set up on the Internet. We both know why you're there and what you want. Just hand me the pamphlet and make your pitch — quickly. If I don't like what I'm hearing, saying more of it isn't helping your cause. If I do like what I'm hearing, shutting up before you say something I don't want to hear ensures you leave a positive impression. It's just that simple.

TAKE A GOOD HARD LOOK AT YOUR POSTERS

There's not much you can do about party colours. If you're running for the NDP and orange makes you look sallow, you're going to have to live with that for now and maybe run for the PC nomination next time — you do look lovely in blue. The one very important thing you do have control over, however, is your photo.

I know your campaign manager told you to smile for the poster. People like people who smile, he said — which is true, within certain limits. But maybe that's a facial expression that doesn't come naturally to you. There's no shame in that. It may make you look pained or nauseous or, worse still, creepy. Try and get a completely honest, objective opinion on your photo from, say, a class full of junior high students. You can be guaranteed they will be forthright with you about any problems they find.

If you discover that you're just not a smiler, you may want to opt for a statesman-like look of quiet dignity. Sure, you may appear cold and haughty to some, but as a voter let me tell ya — I'll take cold and haughty over creepy any day.

NO DANCING

At some point during the campaign, you will be invited to speak at a luncheon, or a dinner, or a community meeting. And at some point during that event, music — live or otherwise — will play. You may be obligated to politely clap your hands to the music or, God help us all, dance.

Avoid dancing. I cannot stress that enough. I don't care if you danced the lead in *Swan Lake*, busting a move at a political rally under the unforgiving glare of the TV lights will make you look fat, sweaty and ridiculous. Is it the kind of gaff that will lose you an election? Probably not. But it is going to make you look like a dork, and believe me, you don't need that. If you must dance, make sure it's a waltz. Waltzing is classy. Dances to be avoided at all costs include the macarena, the boot scoot 'n' boogie and *obviously* the bird dance.

And there you have it — three simple things you can do that just might make the difference for you. Or at least minimize the abject humiliation in what will, for many, be a humiliating election run indeed.

Sean Panting is a writer, actor and musician living in St. John's. His column returns Oct. 12.

TOWN HALL



Jeff Baggs speaks at a meeting at the LSPU Hall in St. John's to discuss the capital city's future performance space development. There has been ongoing debate in recent months whether businessman Paul Madden's proposed 500-seat Capitol Theatre will compete with or complement the 200-seat Resource Centre for the Arts theatre.
Nichols Langor/The Independent

Exploits Riverdance

From page 21

and ultimately to join some of the most fabulous shows touring the planet right now."

Silver talks as fast as he taps. It's easy to see how someone of his intense, positive energy could not only build a "centre of excellence for Celtic dance and culture" but could also draw the globe's Irish dancing superstars to these shores. In particular, he's got his razor-sharp focus trained on central Newfoundland.

Exploits Riverdance is a spin-off centre of iDance in Grand Falls-Windsor. Drawing on 150 dance students there, Silver and his troupe have performed at numerous festivals, including the Salmon Festival and the Flying Boat Festival this summer.

Envisioning the province as his entire base, Silver says it was only natural to stage his dance centre in the middle of the island. It is there, he says, a meeting of Irish dancers, artists and Celtic cultural figures will take place next summer, establishing Newfoundland as a centre of Irish learning — similar to and on par with other Celtic institutes such as those found in Boston, San Francisco and New York.

"We'll be working with these major influences, so we can build our profile and develop our skills, and now we're going to offer people from around the world to come and train with us," he says. "You'll see people from Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden. In turn, this creates employment and economic development."

With funding provided by ACOA and the provincial government, Silver will bring members of *Riverdance* to Grand Falls-Windsor to nurture this province's young hopefuls. Competitive dancers from Australia, the United States and Canada will also converge at the centre. Next month he will travel to Boston on his fifth trade mission to meet with other instructors and dancers.

Amidst Silver's business-savvy seriousness courses a palpable sense of joy. He is doing exactly what he wants to be doing with his life, and it shows. His immaculately crafted strategy to bring and train the highest calibre of Celtic talent in the world to Newfoundland is conveyed with just as much enthusiasm as his demonstration of the official step-dancing Barbie doll on his shelf, shamrock-printed dress and all.

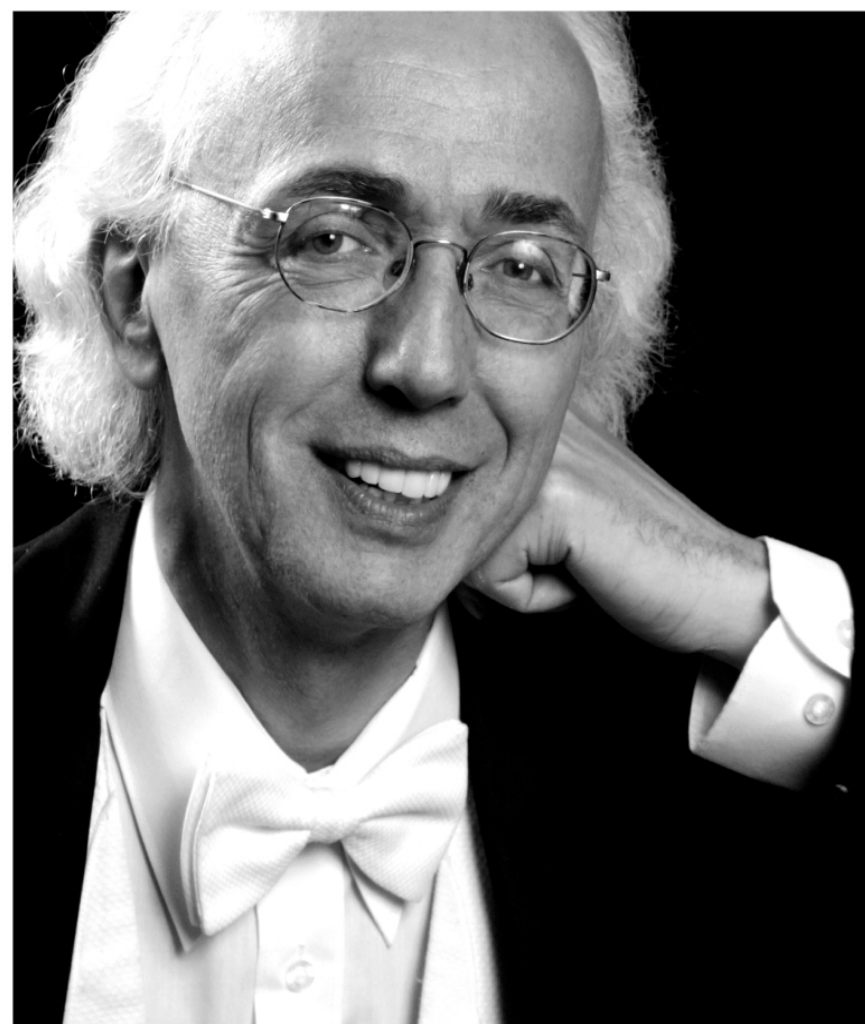
"This is way beyond Uncle Jimmy dancing with the rubber boot on his head," he says, with a twinkle in his eye.

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