

Subscriber Only Stage Review

What We Hold review: Five stars for Jean Butler's astonishing dance work

Dublin Theatre Festival 2022: The dance star's fine intergenerational ensemble delivers a visual, aural archive of Irish step dance

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Jack Porter, Maren Shank, Fionn O'Sullivan McCarthy, Jean Butler, Marion Cronin and Kristyn Fontanella in *What We Hold*. Photograph: Ste Murray

Seona Mac Reamoinn

What We Hold

City Assembly Rooms

★★★★★

In an upper room of this 18th-century former public art gallery, and midway through this promenade dance, Jean Butler and a younger self perch on either end of a long, narrow raised wooden table. The younger dancer, in hard shoes and a jacket weighed down with medals, rises and walks along the table to meet her future self, now barefoot, wearing loose trousers and sleeveless shirt. Butler then takes solo to this improvised catwalk, performing with her hallmark grace and precision, magnetic sleek footwork, all directed from an internal rhythm and memory. A mesmerising image.

In *What We Hold*, Butler has created an astonishing dance work, a visual, aural, almost poetic performative archive of Irish step dance. Ryan C Seaton's immersive soundscape overlays the mix of traditional and classical music with audio memories of early dance classes – “climbing staircases and hardwood floors”. We too take the stairs, pausing in rooms for exhibitions of the tradition, competitive and contemporary. A young male dancer in gym shorts displays all the athleticism and passion of a hurling warrior honing his skill, his muscular legs relentlessly practising ankle turns, frenetic footwork, stamping and gathering speed like a colt ready to break free.

In the hexagonal room at the top of the house, Butler's fine intergenerational ensemble shows us more. Tom Cashin, Marion Cronin, Kristyn Fontanella, Fionn O'Sullivan McCarthy, Jack Porter and Maren Shanks are exhilarating as they enact the physical memory of process, ritual, experiment and social history. Its all there: the sean-nós tradition of loose-limbed and deftly controlled hard-shoe dance and the heel-toe-toe rhythms.

Finally, the liberating joy of communal music and dance soars as they draw on the patterns and lineage of céilí and set dancing. There is even a nod to the continental quadrilles adapted by the travelling dancing masters of centuries past, all living on, in what they hold.
