

Irish Arts Center | NYC

On a summer day in 1997, Irish Arts Center Vice Chair (at the time an intern) Pauline Turley rollerbladed up to the organization's century-old 51st Street building, and began struggling with the old door that would swell with humidity in the summer months; it wouldn't budge. A small, 81-year-old woman with flame-red hair spotted her, approached, withdrew a key-ring, opened the door to the boiler room next to the front door, and began merrily climbing over the building's giant boiler to let them in, as though it were nothing. This small moment resonated, for Turley, as a fitting introduction to a woman who had become a legend of IAC—someone who never ceased to casually shatter expectations. Across her 30 years teaching Irish step dance with the organization, from her 60s to her 90s, Josephine McNamara (aka Jo Mac, born Teresa Josephine Mullen) would open the door for hundreds of people who came to IAC looking to learn and deepen their relationship to Irish culture.

Jo Mac, who passed away August 1, 2020 at the age of 104, flourished as a dancer very early in life in Ireland—and again, after a long gap, very late in life in New York, quashing the assumption that one is at any point too old to expand their horizons and make new discoveries. Turley, who ended up becoming one of Jo-Mac's close friends and, in her later years, a caregiver, describes, "I took her class in the late 90s and I was wrecked! I remember her flying, zipping up and down, telling me, 'it's fine, just sit this one out.'" Luckily, she adds, "It was never about teaching people to be a world-champion-best, it was about having fun and experiencing the culture and just participating and having the craic."

At age six, McNamara (then Mullen) began dancing, and at 10, in the mid-1920s, was already performing at Dublin's Theatre Royal with the Ten Tiny Tots—who, as her son Alan recalls her describing, were so intent to dance onstage that they kept returning despite police raids halting their performances because they were too young. After training professionally and becoming versed in everything from Irish step to jazz and swing to waltzes and tango, she joined the Sherman Fischer Professional Dance Company, touring Ireland and England. But her performing life abruptly ended when she moved to New York with her son—to rejoin her husband who'd relocated there years earlier—and ultimately had to navigate the hardships of heartbreak and supporting herself and Alan as a single mother. For two decades, she worked as a server, in an immense city far from her home. It wasn't until 20 years after her move to the United States that she rekindled her passion for dance at IAC, and found her grounding in a community that adored her.

As the Troubles raged in Ireland, and in the immediate wake of Bloody Sunday, Alan, then in his 20s, was connecting with his birth country and its political struggles, immersing himself in Irish Republican clubs—and through them heard about Irish Arts Center. He played bodhrán in sessions with the community of musicians that grew around the burgeoning organization, in what he once described in *The Clare Champion* as IAC's former "hippie era...where nobody could see properly with the smoke." When he found out that other IAC members were seeking a new step dance teacher, McNamara mentioned his mother. Not only would she burst onto the scene as a magnetic, unstoppable force and, as mothers impeccably do, undermine the 'cool' he'd cultivated—she'd also become one of the central members of a vital community.

Says Alan, “The last thing you want when you’re having sessions is your mother watching you, telling you you should have worn a different shirt!” But he could see the transformative effect it had on her. “She was at her happiest being on the stage and dancing or teaching dancing.”

Kathleen Donlon Spiegel, who was involved in IAC’s early years, was in Jo Mac’s first class and became one of her closest friends, recalls, “We were delighted by her. She came by, and she was just a hit right away because she was older of course, and we saw her as a mother figure of sorts. She had such a knack for teaching and would never get annoyed with anybody no matter what they did—or how bad they were at dancing. She was a very gentle soul. Not only was Jo a wonderful teacher and performer, she became a part of my family, attending my children’s birthday parties, school events, weddings, and was often at our apartment for Easter and Thanksgiving dinner (she always returned to Ireland for Christmas).”

While teaching classes, Jo Mac also frequently choreographed and/or performed in events at IAC (including plays like B. Behan’s *The Hostage* and *Richard’s Cork Leg* and Nye Heron’s *Lovechild*, as well as the *Siamsa*). “Nobody wanted to follow her onstage because she always brought the house down,” says Turley. “She would do this medley of tap and Irish step that none of us knew or could do. And she was just a great, great performer.” Then-IAC artistic director and acclaimed playwright and filmmaker Jim Sheridan developed a friendship with McNamara and a fierce artistic appreciation. For his film *The Field*, she served as assistant choreographer, teaching Tom Beringer Irish dance; Sheridan later flew her over to Ireland for the Dublin premiere of *In the Name of the Father*.

Word of her captivating performances spread well beyond IAC, as did the reach of her artistry, as she found herself in various corners of the arts in New York. She danced with tap legends including Savion Glover and Brenda Bufalino (the latter in the performance *Sole Sisters* at La Mama, described by the Library of Congress, in an article on the history of tap in America, as “an all woman, multi-generational tap dance show...that brought together high-heeled steppers and low-heeled hoofers, the veteran grande dames of tap and younger prima taperinas.”); performed in a Tap Extravaganza at Town Hall with Cab Calloway, the Silver Belles, Nicholas Brothers, Cotton Club Girls, and Charles Coles; traveled to D.C. to perform at Georgetown University at a variety dance performance organized by Mick Moloney; worked with Jacques D’Ambrosia on *Celtic Tale* (performed at Alice Tully Hall and Madison Square Garden); made TV appearances on *Good Morning, America*, *Mid Morning* with Bill Boggs, and Billie Mahoney’s *Dance On*; and had choreography credits for *As the World Turns*, *Another World*, and *Our Times*. Amidst her late-life New York career renaissance, she was honored by the Ethnic Dance Awards 1998; as one of the Top 100 Irish Americans of 1991 by *Irish America* magazine; and at the 4th Annual Young People’s Tap Conference, alongside Howard “Sandman” Sims.

When Jo Mac took a tumble, and began using a walking stick, she stopped instructing, but maintained a closeness with IAC and the people around it (in addition to Turley, Spiegel also took care of McNamara). Upon her move back to County Clare in her late 90s, to be closer to her son, *The Clare Champion* ran a feature on her, in which Golden Globe-winning (and Tony, Emmy, and Grammy-nominated) actor—and another of her IAC friends—Gabriel Byrne offered, “It’s not just as a teacher that I really admire Jo. It’s as a person for her modesty, her gentleness and her curiosity about life. It’s an amazing thing to be still curious about the world at 96 years of age and to be so optimistic about life.”

Even at a nursing home—as certain capacities ultimately waned with dementia—she continued to hold her passion for performance, and to leave a lasting impression on those around her. Says Alan, “All of the nurses and workers were mad about her. She’d wake up at 3 in the morning and she’d start lining them all up at the end of the bed and having them all tapping and dancing and doing reels.”

After she passed away, as Alan sorted through her things, he was struck by how she’d kept programs and fliers from everything she’d ever done onstage. Particularly notable was her old Actors Equity membership card, attached to which was a quote by Ruth Gordon describing the “terror and intention and fate and hope and trust and vanity and security and insecurity and blood curdling courage, which is acting.” Amidst these fragments of her career and life in performance, this sentiment particularly moved Alan: “Being onstage was like taking a breath to her.”

Jo Mac managed to light up so many people’s lives, effortlessly drawing students, IAC staffers, and acclaimed performers alike into the warmth of her orbit, to the extent that she was, explains Turley, “always triple-booked for Thanksgivings.” She adds, “For many people who emigrated and left Ireland behind, Jo was a little touchstone of home. She never lost her thick Dublin accent nor her particularly Irish sense of humour, and most of the dances she would teach were handed down from generation to generation. There was never a beat missed in her steps or in her wit.”

Alan remembers a party piece Jo Mac would do, embodying the character of an elderly woman reminiscing with her husband, and roping in anyone handy to play the opposite role. At the end of each funny memory her character would recall, she’d say in her Dublin accent, “Do you remember Jem,” and the husband character would reply, each time, “Do I remember, will I ever forget!” Alan points out, “this would be a quite fitting epitaph for me ma and the year 2020.”

The legacy Jo Mac left at Irish Arts Center will forever exist in its ideals and help propel the institution forward. Hers is a story of someone whose openness to community—to sharing her incredible talents and infectious passion across three decades—rekindled her own creative life, and sparked a commitment to inspiring so many others.

She is deeply missed, and lovingly remembered.

—*Moze Halperin*