

Opinion

No wigs please

My nine-year-old daughter has a lovely head of glossy brown hair; why would she need to wear a wig?

But Amy and her team mates were the only ones showing off their natural locks: every other girl performed underneath a crown of perfectly coiled synthetic ringlets that jiggled up-and-down almost in rhythm to the fiddler's tune.

This was the annual Mid-Atlantic Oireachtas (Irish for gathering) championships held in Pennsylvania, and that last weekend in November was our first foray into the closed world of competitive Irish dancing.

8am on Saturday, the ballrooms of Philadelphia's Marriott Hotel filled with hundreds of young dancers and their 'Feis' mums (pronounced 'fesh', meaning festival in Irish) armed with hefty vanity cases.

The tap-tapping of hard shoes on wooden floors soon resonated through the vast dressing-room area, and those not feverishly practicing were being groomed: careful applications of stage make-up onto poised faces; stray ringlets teased into shape; 'sock glue' rolled onto fake-tanned legs to prevent sock slippage; tweaking of sparkly tiaras and zipping up of neon costumes encrusted with Swarovski crystals.



"In the real world 'conforming to expectations' means you wouldn't wear a wig, but in the competitive world of Irish dancing it means you would," said Niall O'Leary, former World Irish Dance Champion.

explained while stitching the cuffs of one of our team's modest burgundy and gold appliquéd dresses. Although, the chances of her daughter Rosemary, 18, doing so "are nearly impossible because at her level, it's just so technical". She is quietly optimistic that her son William, 16, already a 'national qualifier', might.



Helen Hickey

Helen Hickey is a British expat who has recently moved from the jungles of Kuala Lumpur to another of the concrete variety, New York City. She writes to escape her four young children and secure what little remains of her sanity.

Gulp.

What were we getting into when we signed Amy up for Irish dance classes in Kuala Lumpur two-years-ago? But watching Irish dancers perform to a live folk band is an incredibly uplifting experience. And performing is what Amy does: she takes an impish delight in spontaneously breaking into a slip jig or reel—transfixing onlookers with rapid movements of her feet and legs, seemingly detached from her fixed upper body—be it at the bus stop, school playground or during homework time...

"Absolutely everyone here [Oireachtas] is chomping, I mean, you know...trying really hard to place high enough to qualify for the World Irish Dancing Championships," Texan mum Linda Cooper

To win at the annual World's championships (heading for Belfast, April 2012), is a serious achievement. And it's the prestige that accompanies the title; the prize money barely covers the cost of a solo dress ranging from \$1,500 to \$5000.

Amy's Irish dance teacher Niall O'Leary, who started dancing long before he could tie his own laces, won the World Championships in 1989. His mother, a dancer herself, blessed his career by hooking him up with Kevin Massey, former coach to Michael Flatley, famous for catapulting Irish dancing onto the worldwide stage through Riverdance.

O'Leary headed to NYC 15-years-ago to pursue his "two passions in life—Irish dancing and architecture". The exuberant and often outspoken character (when his thick Southside Dublin accent can be understood), has made a quite name for himself in Manhattan through the Niall O'Leary School of Irish Dance formed in 1996, his own architecture company and as president of the Irish Business Organisation of New York.



Niall O'Leary's under 12s four hand reel (Amy first on left), the only Oireachtas team to go wig-less! Although they could have picked one up from several wig stands at the event carrying signs like: "all wigs come in 28 colours" and names such as 'Colleen'(\$80), a Sinead or a Grainne (\$126)

As his four-hand céili team dancers stopped practice for lunch, I asked O'Leary why he was bucking the wig wearing trend that has prevailed over the past two decades?

"You don't need to wear wigs, everyone on the team has lovely hair. Other people of other teams probably have lovely hair too, but they feel they have to wear wigs or go for a certain look, or because it is more convenient." No curlers, no hassle.

The love affair with ringlets is historical: only a few decades ago children in Ireland went to dance classes directly after church still wearing their Sunday best, and for girls, curls formed from a night spent with damp hair in rag curlers.

Some say the bouncy wig-ringlets give the impression dancers are lifting higher off the floor than they actually are. But it's the footwork the

judges are interested in, not the hair, nor for that matter the dancers' appearance; one judge once told O'Leary (who occasionally judges competitions himself) that she had given "plenty of ugly girls" first place!

Winners are those "with the best technique and style, who get all their moves right on the day", O'Leary remarked.

"It is sad some girls only wear wigs because they feel they have to to look normal, and what looks normal at an Irish dancing competition is not necessarily what the general public see as normal." Indeed, the beauty-pageant styled presentation of dancers and costs associated with the ornate costumes often leads to negative publicity; something the Oireachtas committee were keen to avoid by banning press attendance this year.

O'Leary has just heard of "a big name school in Ireland that recently decided to drop the wigs". He firmly believes more will follow, "but it will happen gradually, and in a good way".

And for Amy, the "dancer from Malaysia", as O'Leary takes great pride in mentioning at every gig she attends, she'll find a set of foam curlers and hairspray in her Christmas stocking, but most definitely not a wig.