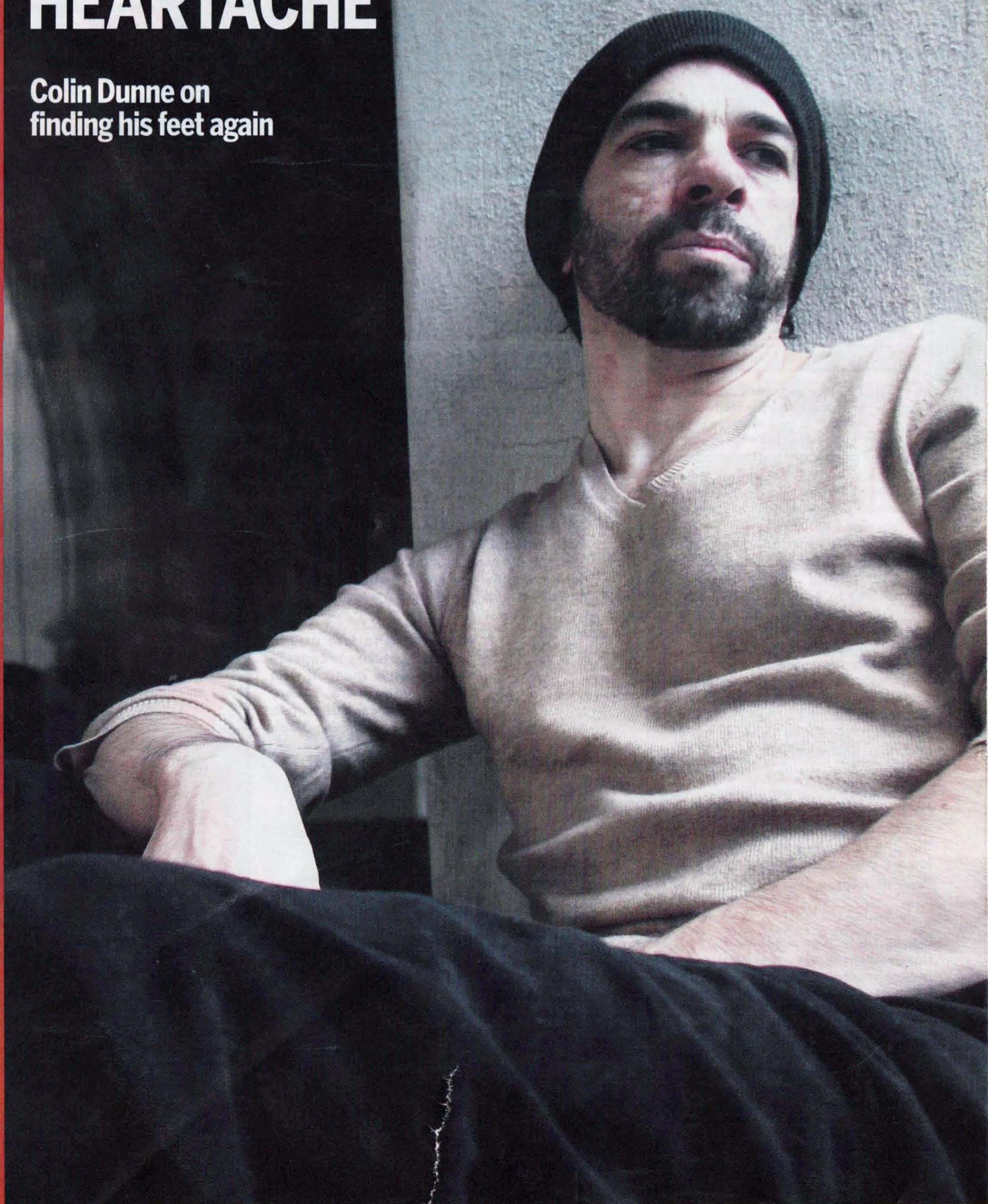


DANCE AWAY THE HEARTACHE

Colin Dunne on
finding his feet again



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INSIDE INDIA & NERIS WINTER FESTIVALS RACHEL ALLEN ARRIVALS EOIN HIGGINS



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ON SAFER GROUND

When Michael Flatley pulled out of 'Riverdance', Colin Dunne saved it... only for it to nearly destroy him. After disillusionment with Irish dancing followed by the disastrous 'Dancing on Dangerous Ground', he talks to **Deirdre Mulrooney** about finally getting back into rhythm after a long detour

INTERVIEW

MENTION the name Colin Dunne these days, and the eyes of Mná na hÉireann light up. The handsome former *Riverdance* star is now something of an Irish 'Mr Darcy' by virtue of his stint as a smouldering, straight-talking-but-kind judge on *Celebrity Jigs and Reels*, alongside George Hook and Jean Butler.

It wasn't always so. The Birmingham-born virtuoso's ambitious 1999 show *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* in London's West End had the *Financial Times* alluding to him as the 'bargain-basement Heathcliff type'; and the *Times* comparing him to a "scruffy, sullen, downmarket version of Flamenco darling Joaquin Cortes".

"Those two have really stuck with me," he says, reciting them by heart.

The *London Evening Standard* didn't mince their words either when they referred to Dunne and co-creator Butler as having "the charisma of drowned rats". Ouch.

He has been on quite a rollercoaster-ride since his appearance on *Blue Peter* at the "ridiculous" age of nine when he won his first Irish World Dancing Championship.

From jamming with the Chieftains to the highs of saving the day for *Riverdance* – when he jumped into the shoes of an abdicating Michael Flatley with less than 24 hours notice in 1995 – and walking away from the starring role three years later only to crash into the spectacular 1999 business failure of *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*, it certainly has been eventful.

No wonder Dunne can't wait to wave goodbye to his 30s this May. The last decade has brought him on an intense, transformative journey. As painful as it has all been, he's never regretted it, adding that he has now "lightened up".

But is he happy?

"No," he says jokingly. I would never admit to being happy."

He has, however, shaken off much of the anger that had built up inside him over the years.

"I don't feel anger about my own experiences any more. But I do feel angry when I teach kids and see what they have been asked to do. In a way that is so – not nice – so aggressive, and locked. For a form that was already pretty tight, it's just getting tighter and tighter."

"You would have thought the simplicity of *Riverdance* would have filtered through. Everyone has been taught the same shit. I was subject to it, and subjected others to it."

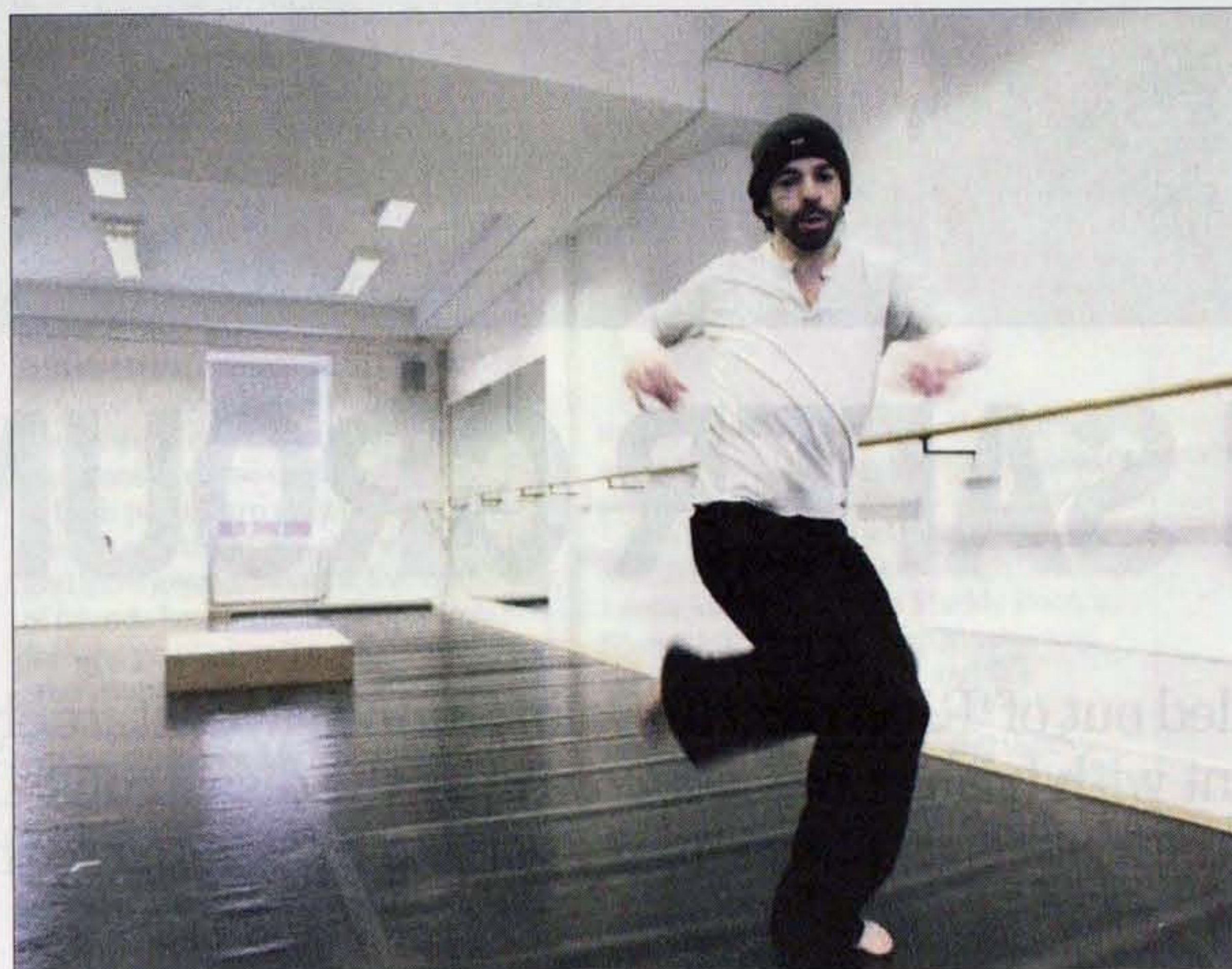
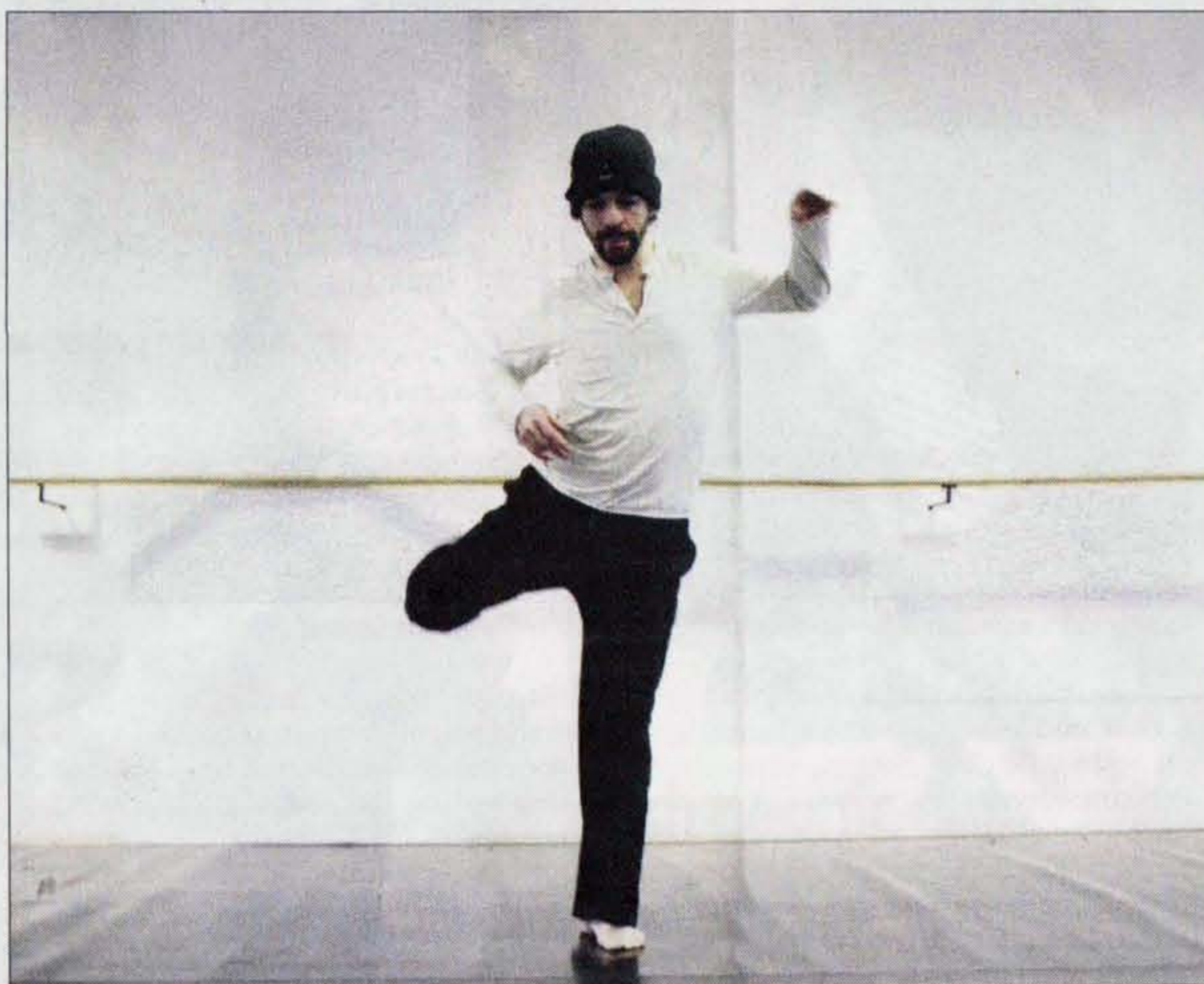
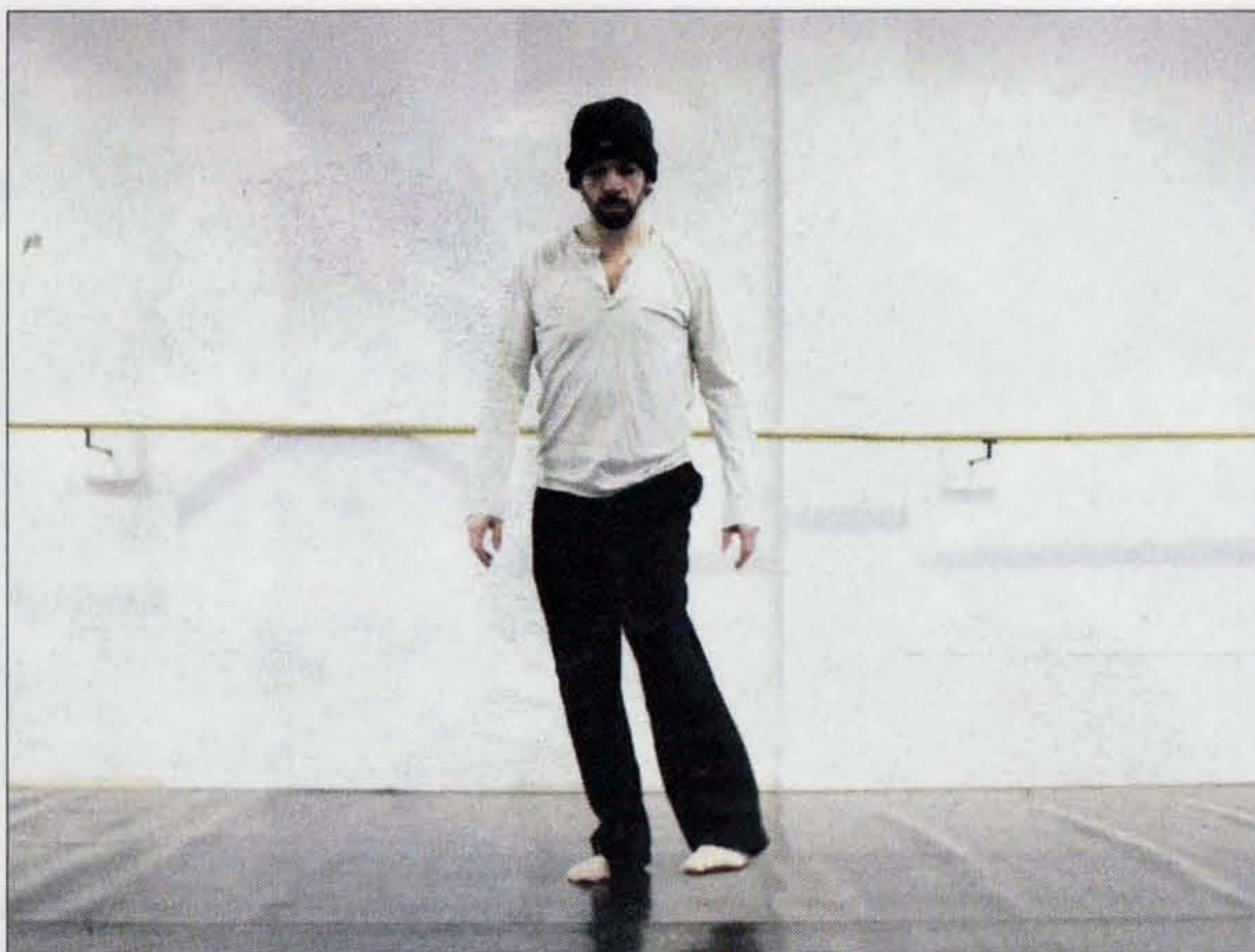
Jumping up off the sofa, he proceeds to demonstrate what he means with a kind of jagged goose-step, commenting "You don't walk like that – you walk with softness in your legs. It's all about rediscovering the simplicity of a more natural form of movement."

"I've spent a lot of the last 10 years trying to undo the virtuosity of the solo dance tradition," he says.

This passion for his chosen career was what prompted his 1998 departure from the cash-cow that is *Riverdance*.

"If I had been lazy I just would have stayed there. Great show, great money, great life – travelling around the world staying in the Hilton. The show was going to Broadway in a year's time. But I just got sick of dancing the same thing every night."

"I always compare being in *Riverdance* to being in a boyband, or being in a soap, where you just do what you do, and give up a big part of yourself. You try and use it to your



'I always compare being in *Riverdance* to being in a boyband where you just do what you do, and give up a big part of yourself... it just became too impersonal for me'

advantage, and decide when to get out of it and to use the advantage the best you can. It just became too impersonal for me, too much like clocking in and clocking out.

"When you go into any big machine you end up giving a big part of yourself. I felt at that stage that I had lost a part of my relationship with dance and my curiosity about it. I wanted to reclaim that."

He set out to do this with the ill-fated *Dancing on Dangerous Ground*. But it was to take much longer, perhaps until his imminent low-key solo show *Out of Time* at Glor in Ennis, to be within reach of that lofty goal.

"Back in 1999 nobody entertained the fact that *Dancing on Dangerous Ground* could fail, because it was the era of the Irish dance show," he says.

Dunne and Butler had enormous financial backing from the likes of Britain's best-known pop promoter Harvey Goldsmith.

"It was the '90s, it was a bit naïve in ways – we had the big moneymen, we had Harvey Goldsmith who wanted to produce it, saying 'we have your two star names' and all this baloney. Nobody entertained the fact that it could fail because of that era, and the era of the Irish dance show. But it was backed up by a genuine creative desire."

Even Radio City Music Hall in New York was a key investor in their endeavour to tell the Diarmud and Grainne story through Irish dancing. It may have been the heyday of the Celtic Tiger, when everything seemed possible, but the show nose-dived.

"I'll be the first to put my hand up and say that it wasn't ready to go on the West End," says Dunne.

"We got slated personally and artistically by the critics. It was horrible. And it just didn't sell. I lost a good deal of my own money. It survived for six months."

"You lose face in the showbiz community, because it was in the West End. For me, it was the first time I had ever experienced failure on such a level. Particularly anything to do with dance. Because I knew what it was, there had always been success with it – reasonable to extreme success. And here you were just flat on your arse."

"We re-worked the show and brought it to Radio City for a week, borrowing more money to do that."

Although it garnered great reviews from key New York dance critics, and sold out for six shows – 30,000 people in a week – it was

too late. Without a tour booked, they were forced into receivership.

"That feeling of owing people money was horrific, particularly the small people, like the make-up lady in London who is owed £2,000 as opposed to the big investors who are owed 60 grand," Dunne says.

All those years of growing up, from the age of three, in the weird and wonderful world of competitive Irish dancing, came crashing in on him. Being surrounded by ringleted girls with arms sewn onto the bodice of their dancing costumes to prevent them from flailing about involuntarily is bound to have its repercussions.

As is having a misguided teacher place a superficial pad on his young shoulder to even-out an apparent imperfection due to a particularly intricate piece of footwork, instead of working it through from the inside-out. Then of course there was the inevitable fall-out of grotesque child competitiveness to deal with.

"The first defining moment in my life was when I won the world championship at the ridiculous age of nine," Dunne says.

"Then the second defining moment was when I came second at the age of 10 because, whatever way I processed that, I thought 'I really like winning, and I really don't like not winning'.

"When I won there was a big fuss, and when I didn't, there wasn't. To get a fuss, you had to win so from the age of 10 to 22 it was all geared towards winning. However, at another level I liked it. I got a real sense of pleasure in connecting movement to music."

In failure lies opportunity and in 2000 the time had come for Dunne to exorcise the ingrained competitiveness and recover the simple pleasure principle of his dance practice – and of himself.

First, he spun out and lost himself in the anonymity of New York for a while. One month turned into a year-and-a-half of soul-searching. The first six months were a bit of a blur.

"You go through that period where you just feel sorry for yourself. You drink. But it was also a period in which I thought 'I have no idea what to do next'. I'm not going to go back to *Riverdance*. I'm not going to go and make another Irish dance show, because I just poured my heart into that one. Is that it? Do I have to go back to accountancy now [Dunne is a qualified chartered accountant with an economics degree from Warwick University]? Could I teach? You can dust yourself down, and move on, but move on where?"

In Dunne's case, it's impossible to separate the dancer from the dance. For the first time, he started going to modern dance shows, and taking "all kinds of classes to get me moving again" – everything from jazz-dance, taekwondo, t'ai chi, pilates and yoga to modern dance class.

Serendipitously then, he met the open-minded Mary Nunan, who invited the disillusioned dancer to take her new MA in contemporary dance at the University of Limerick.

In 2002, mid-way through this tough, transformative journey, I met a very frustrated yet determined Dunne in the rehearsal studio of Radio City Music Hall, New York, getting back into the groove of 'Trading Taps' – a humorous and hugely popular dance-off he choreographed for *Riverdance* in 1995, between Irish hard-shoe dancers and African American tap dancers led by funky tap star Tariq Winston. That night they had the entire auditorium bounding spontaneously to their feet in standing ovation.



Colin in 1999, with Jean Butler in rehearsals for 'Dancing on Dangerous Ground'

Now, nearly six years later, I find him on a cold and rainy early January night in Daghdha Dance Company's Limerick rehearsal space. It's the end of a day working on *Out of Time*. Curling up on the couch in his tracksuit, he says, "I was really frustrated. I've lightened up a lot. The last five, six years have been heavy. This show feels like the end of a phase."

A far cry from the glitzy world of

Harvey Goldsmith, in the University of Limerick he got down in the grungy world of poor dance-artists, rolling around the floor discovering the rest of his body from the knees up.

"I do remember in the morning class rolling around the floor. There were six of us in the class. It was winter, it was cold. Sometimes I did think 'what happened to the Ritz Carlton'? That seemed more like a blip. It



'You go through a period where you just feel sorry for yourself. You drink. But it was also a period in which I thought "I have no idea what to do next"'

never seemed like it should be the norm."

Living in the same modest cottage in Killoe, Co Clare, for the last five years and driving a modest, forgettable car, money is not a key motivator for Dunne.

"I assume the fact that I don't have a mansion and three cars means that I don't actually need that, or want that," he shrugs. But what he does get excited about, however, is starting rehearsals for *Out of Time*. Despite all the vicissitudes, he has never deviated from his artistic path.

"I really feel like I've landed in exactly the right place, in this world of questioning, peeling back layers, taking a good look at something, and really getting down to the nitty gritty of it." However, he doesn't loiter on the esoteric level for too long. Despite what could be seen as his high-falutin' first-class MA in contemporary dance from University of Limerick, he embraces the popular wholeheartedly. For him, *Jigs and Reels* is an enjoyable "day out in Dublin".

Dancing at the Depot, his UTV reality show with Birmingham bus drivers, was another breath of fresh air.

His own Irish-diaspora background is equally unpretentious. His mother, an auxiliary nurse from Castleblayney in Monaghan, and his father, a Wexford man who worked for Range Rover, sent him to Irish dancing classes in Birmingham at the age of three, in his opinion "to save on babysitting".

For a while, his dancing became an expression of a prevailing naïve republicanism.

"Growing up in England you had to constantly prove your Irishness," he explains. "I haven't a nationalistic bone in my body any more. So the dance has a completely different resonance for me now because it's not about cultural identity. I'm 40 this year, and I've been doing this since I was three. Thirty-seven years digging around for – dare I say it – some kind of expression."

This expression will manifest itself in *Out of Time*, inspired laterally by his biography. Alongside the clip of himself on *Blue Peter*, he is projecting archival film footage he would have shunned 10 years previously of dancers in the '30s, '40s, and '70s.

He wants the audience to "look at these guys and how they danced, taking ownership in a really simple form. I'm just claiming ownership for myself, in a completely different way, but connecting back to them."

Things do seem to have come full circle for him – and deservedly so. "But I've also been lucky," he says of his recent odyssey into the world of Contemporary Dance.

His artistic growth has been validated by being nominated for a UK Circle critic's award for his performance as tacky Irish dance star 'Fergus' in Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre's *The Story of the Bull* at the Barbican last year.

His character sends up the whole Celtic Tiger world of showbiz Irish dancing. In a very karmic twist now maybe even those cruel London critics will finally have to eat their words.

And with any luck the rest of us will get to see more of him on our television screens.

'Out of Time' premieres in Glor, Ennis (www.glor.ie), on 31 January, running until 2 February and returns for Dublin Dance Festival (17 April - 3 May; www.dancefestivalireland.com). Deirdre Mulrooney is author of *'Irish Moves, an illustrated history of dance and physical theatre in Ireland'* (Liffey Press, €19.95, www.theliffeypress.com)