

# Dancing in the SOUTH east

## Creative Dancers Win Choreography Award

Irish dance, despite its popular appeal, is not known for its creative expression. However, dancers from the Courtney McMahon School of Irish Dance in Bexleyheath, Kent challenged that view in a regional heat of Dance for Life, an annual showcase of youth dance run by the British Red Cross.

Dance groups were challenged to develop and perform a movement piece that demonstrates some aspect of the work of the Red Cross. In contrast to the largely upbeat nature of the global Irish hits, such as Riverdance and Lord of the Dance, the performance piece choreographed for this competition used the percussive elements of Irish dance to convey an air of evil and foreboding. The recruitment, training and indoctrination of children to become child soldiers; to be used by violent militias in conflicts all over the world, was the subject of the Courtney McMahon performance piece.

Not only was the Courtney McMahon group declared the overall winner of the heat, they also took first place in the key categories of 'Best Concept' and 'Best Entertainment', taking them through to the final.

Hannah Rosalie, Senior Fund Raiser for the Red Cross in Sussex was intrigued to see how an Irish dance group would deal with the choreographic challenge, as it is the first time that Irish dancers had taken part in Dance for Life. The usual entrants are contemporary dance groups, street dancers, musical theatre groups and classically trained dancers. Hannah was thrilled with how the young dancers, aged between 12 and 16 years of age, described a difficult area of Red Cross activity.

A capacity audience of 400 filled the main auditorium of the E.M. Forster theatre in Tonbridge, for the final, delighting them in a varied programme of diverse dance styles. The eight young Irish dancers, aged 12 to 16, that took part in the final were thrilled to win the top prize for choreography through their valued learning experience about the humanitarian work of the Red Cross, particularly in support of displaced children.

The following day, there was a change in mood as dancers performed a more exuberant display of dance at the Tunbridge Wells Mela, a festival that celebrates cultural diversity through music and dance. Sandwiched between Bhangra and Latin music, dancers staged an energetic display of Celtic rhythms for a crowd of 4,000 spectators.

The Courtney McMahon School of Irish Dance is based at Townley Grammar School for Girls.

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