



Giving *Giselle* a twist

Linedancing and a fictitious Irish village feature in a radical new version of *Giselle*.

Naomi Millett talks to the director.

To those familiar with arts on the fringe, the idea of performers in one genre “having a go at everything”, for example actors singing or dancers acting, can be immediately cringe-inducing.

It certainly was at first for Irish director Michael Keegan-Dolan, soon to visit Perth with his radical — and widely acclaimed — new version of *Giselle* by his Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre.

“Yes, it is treacherous territory and I think it is dangerous for anyone to assume that dancers can just stand up and sing or speak well,” says the enthusiastic director (himself a trained dancer and expert in “theatre of the body”) down the line from Ireland during a brief rehearsal break.

“Originally I, and many others, had reservations about blending the genres

and in a sense the concept grew out of my own naivety. If I’d known then what I know now, how hard it was going to be, maybe I wouldn’t have attempted this project,” he says.

Keegan-Dolan’s “twisted” *Giselle* cleverly integrates the spoken word with pure dance, requiring performers to be all-rounders — moving, speaking and even singing with equal skill.

“We endured an exhaustive process to find the right balance and it is wonderful to see people succeeding in an area they are less familiar with. *Giselle* is in great shape now and watching it I guarantee you won’t feel like you are seeing dancers attempting to act, you will be so caught up in the story.”

The director says he had always been intrigued by the *Giselle* plot but felt that the classical romantic ballet setting wasn’t the most appropriate for it. “*Giselle* is dark and complicated and I couldn’t do the story justice, or examine the ideas of humanity within it, unless I moved away from the silent world of dance and incorporated words and music.”

At the time he devised *Giselle*, Keegan-Dolan says he had lost interest in classical dance.

“I felt it was primarily concerned with technical virtuosity and how things look on the surface — you know, all the principals are strikingly beautiful and the plots revolve around love and happy endings. I found that dull, so basically I rejected it,” he says.

“People are far more multidimensional than they first appear and my interest lies in what they might be hiding.”

Updated to the 20th century, Fabulous Beast’s version of *Giselle* is set in Ballyfeeny, a fictitious Irish town inspired by a place where his grandparents lived, and where he now lives. It’s a town where “life is tough and the lace curtains hide everything from lust to violence”.

The sudden arrival of a line-dancing teacher from Bratislava named Albrecht gives the inhabitants a window into a very strange world of glamour and eroticism.

“Some critics might disagree with my choice but I think it translates brilliantly to the new setting,” Keegan-Dolan says. “To me, how things feel is as important as how they look — I think that’s what causes some difficulty with the theatre work I do. People aren’t perhaps used to feeling so much in the arts any more, so when they experience unfamiliar sensations, they close up and think ‘I don’t like this’.

“Some audience members fold their arms and don’t want to know but others are passionate about it and really connect. I find this variation in reactions really fascinating.”

***Giselle* opens on February 28 at 7.30pm at the Perth Convention Exhibition Centre, Pavilion 6.**

