

Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin

- Karen Fricker
- The Guardian,
- Friday October 3 2003

Michael Keegan-Dolan's new work, co-produced by Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre and the Dublin Theatre festival, owes its title and its basic plotline to Théophile Gautier's classic romantic ballet. But everything else about the work is brazenly and triumphantly new: Philip Feeney's electronic score, the almost all male casting, the stripped-back precision of Sophie Charalambous and Adam Silverman's designs, the renovation of storytelling through a layering of spoken dialogue and movement. All these combine to create a work of narrative originality and technical achievement that challenges and extends the definitions of all the words with which it is necessary to describe it: "Irish", "dance" and "theatre."

This Giselle is set in Ballyfeeney, a fictional town in the Irish midlands, and is a clear comment on the oppressive and inbred nature of Irish rural life. Hilarion, Giselle's spurned suitor in the original, becomes her mentally disturbed brother. But the look of the production is more American wild west than Hibernia: a bearded sage drawlingly narrates the action, a skeletal steer's head glowers over the proceedings and the town's favoured pastime is line dancing, taught by a mysterious visiting Bratislavan, Albrecht. He becomes the lover who first betrays Giselle (here, by philandering with men) and then proves his devotion after her death.

The production does not even sound Irish: the cast speak in a mixture of global accents, a gesture that opens up the piece's commentary to cultures beyond Ireland. And while the cast don't look like traditional dancers, all are charismatic, and they continually reveal surprising new talents. Halfway through the story, they gather and sing a ballad about the beauty of the bogland. Rather than stopping things short, the song ironically comments on and advances the action. Keegan-Dolan rarely sets a narrative foot wrong.

All builds towards the final glorious dance in the graveyard: trap doors bang open and the chorus of dead women (all male) emerge to swing from ropes dropped from the flies. Milos Galko and Daphne Strothmann dance the tragic pas de deux. The closing image - Giselle bouncing joyfully on a mattress as the chorus climb towards heaven - is impossibly beautiful.