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Fabulous Beast, lavish feast

Reviewed by Brian Lavery

Halfway through the opening show of the 45th Dublin Theatre Festival a character called Fat Mary took to the spotlight and made it clear to any slow learners that this mix of theatre and dance would be unique even by the standards of Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre.

Wearing a pleated skirt, pink cowboy hat and embroidered cowboy boots, the male dancer held a pile of red yarn in wax paper-mincemeat, as she had just visited the butcher, and flaunted the smudge of lipstick on his unshaven cheek, before belting out a ballad about Lough Ree. Soon enough, the butcher himself joined in, along with a half-dozen other male performers in country & western garb, who surrounded the only odd one out: poor Giselle herself (Daphne Strothmann), the ostracised orphan girl in the fictional village of Ballyfeeney.

Obviously, writer and choreographer Michael Keegan-Dolan takes many liberties with the 19th-century Giselle legend in his spectacular new show. But in this retelling, as in the original, Giselle is doomed to enter the afterlife as a *wilis*, a vampire-harpy that walks the earth on moonlit nights seeking vengeance upon men.

Like Keegan-Dolan's memorable 2000 piece, *The Flowerbed*, *Giselle* has clearly defined characters and straightforward dramatic narrative. It also has copious dialogue. In the first half, his performers talk more than they dance. As they hail from Nigeria, Naples and Norwich - for starters - the script unfolds in a slew of different accents. When the actor-dancers do get moving in the first act, they mostly strut about Texas-style because, in this version, Giselle's mysterious suitor is a bisexual from Bratislava who teaches a line-dancing class in a GAA clubhouse.

Fabulous Beast's phenomenal cast, though, could make even a Garth Brooks hoe-down look stunningly sexy. The show's second half abandons such camp kitsch for gothic horror, after Giselle has succumbed to an asthma attack. Dialogue disappears; eerie music (by composer Philip Feeney) sets a deathly tone; trapdoors swing open on stage and thick ropes tumble down from above. Writhing hands thrust up from the crumbling earth of a graveyard.

This is harrowing stuff to make Stephen King jealous. The dancers float ghost-like, suspended on ropes above the stage and cutting arcs through the air. But it felt like the one pure, ecstatic moment when they would all cut loose was somehow restrained, leaving us instead with the sublime image of Giselle before the rising sun, and a stage covered in dirt, flour, feathers and deflated balloons.

After all, it can't be a Fabulous Beast show without leaving a lavish mess behind.

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