

Powerful reimaginings

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Ismene Brown reviews *Giselle* at the Barbican and *Birdbrain* at Queen Elizabeth Hall

When people scribble in the margins of classic texts centuries on, are these annotations original, argumentative, creative? Or are they just sardonic little comments? This week, London offers not only Matthew Bourne's rewrite of *La Sylphide* at Sadler's Wells but even newer thoughts on *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*.



Giselle by The Fabulous Beast Arts Theatre

These last two derivations are less recognisable than Bourne's – they both use their own contemporary music – but they make stimulating and powerfully intelligent experiences. Ireland's Michael Keegan-Dolan, at the Barbican, chillingly reinterprets *Giselle* led by its drama; Australia's Garry Stewart takes a vividly inventive all-dance view of *Swan Lake* in *Birdbrain*.

Keegan-Dolan recasts *Giselle*, for his Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre, as a cross between an Irish bog play and an OTT gangster cabaret, riddled with savage sadness at the perils of rural isolation.

His cast is almost all male, so there is much sexually provocative cross-dressing and role-playing, and *Giselle* is not the flower of the community but the dogsbody.

Hilarion, that subsidiary lurker in the ballet, is her brain-damaged, incestuous half-brother, her jailer. The sex-tourism side of Albrecht, the ballet's playboy hero, is amusingly pointed; he's a flamboyant bisexual cowboy from Bratislava who starts a line-dancing craze among these exploitable half-wits.

Keegan-Dolan's sharp text and big performances from the hammy Simon Rice as the nymphomaniac village nurse, Daphne Strothmann as the helpless Giselle, and, above all, Michael M Dolan's as a truly tragic Hilarion turn this tortured amplification into a convincing new entity.

The climactic forest of nooses where the Wilis live is disturbingly perceptive. Yes, you think, that is how desperate girls would kill themselves, swinging away from this terrible land, and in the moonlight the dancing, teasing ropes have a heartwrenching visual poetry.

Australia Dance Theatre's Birdbrain is less interested in the dramatic subtexts of Swan Lake than in the dance that can be snagged onto its elements. So, elliptically, the dancers all wear labelled white T-shirts, and let you make associations. "Corps" and "swan" are helpful. Two men called "fried" and "siege" make comic sense before they join up in a blistering breakdance into "siegfried".

Best of all is a brilliantly oblique scene for Odette and Siegfried's drowning – three people called "lake" swirling on the floor, and two "lovers" toppling into the arms of catchers labelled "H2O".

The fusion of breakdancing and Forsythe-type modern ballet is exhilaratingly dynamic, but it's the staging that provides expressive life.

Photographs of past ballerinas are projected behind these turbo-charged dancers, enigmatic icons of inviolable beauty. On a looped silent film, Margot Fonteyn takes her curtain call as the Swan Queen, bowing over and over, but cocking her head curiously at the last moment, as if listening to the future.

It is an exceptionally striking moment, and I wish Stewart had ended right there.

- 'Giselle' until Sat; 'Birdbrain' touring to March 25