

## Giselle

Debra Craine at the Barbican

Start by forgetting everything you know about *Giselle*. Then sit back and let Michael Keegan-Dolan's remarkable staging entice you into the nightmare world of Ballyfeeny, the fictional Irish town where unspeakable horrors stalk our poor heroine.

This *Giselle* is about as far as you can get from the iconic romantic sheen of the great 19th-century ballet. There is no lovely Adam music, no white tulle skirts, no soft whispers of dance. Instead we have an unsettling electronic score by Philip Feeney, men in brown suits and cowboy hats, and line dancing. As unlikely as it sounds, it adds up to a grim and grotesque piece of dance theatre with a disturbing contemporary resonance.

While Keegan-Dolan was attracted to the potency of Théophile Gautier's plot, he didn't feel bound by balletic convention. His *Giselle* makes free use of the spoken word — although pointedly Giselle herself is mute — along with singing, bawdy humour and graphic depictions of the sex act, both gay and straight.

Gay? Oh yes, because in Keegan-Dolan's version (for his Irish-based Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre) Albrecht is a bisexual line-dancing teacher from Bratislava whose act of betrayal is two-timing Giselle with the butcher's son.

Hilarion is similarly recast, here as Giselle's axe-wielding half brother, a man not quite right in the head. Giselle is abused by the latter (intimations of incest are unmistakable) and attracted to the former, whose line-dancing classes offer a brief happiness. Surrounded by violence and cruelty, the object of scorn and suffering from asthma, Giselle is trapped in a miserable life; her death is a release into the spirit world where, empowered by the supernatural sisterhood, she forgives Albrecht, just as Giselle did 150 years ago.

The production fluently blends speech, movement and song in the cause of storytelling. Sophie Charalambous's designs evoke a scarily dysfunctional society with ingenious simplicity.

The choreography, a blend of styles, is funny, sexy, sad. Act II, where movement takes over completely, is the production's finest hour, creepy yet ultimately moving. The ghostly Wilis are harnessed into ropes and fly over the stage with a vibrant menace. The final embrace for Giselle and Albrecht is a slow, sensual, rolling duet in the macabre graveyard. The ending is a knockout, one aching strain of Adam's tender music providing a heartbreaking reminder that Giselle's tragedy is for all time.

Giselle is the only woman in an international cast of superb dance actors. Daphne Strothmann is haunting as the victimised heroine; Michael M. Dolan is terrifying as Hilarion; Milos Galko not only gives Albrecht a predatory sex appeal, he also contributes the wonderful line-dancing choreography. Angelo Smimmo's countertenor offers beautiful sounds, while Simon Rice, in a brilliant display of dramatic gender swapping, is marvellous as the sexually rapacious Nurse Mary.