



Giselle

With: Michael M. Dolan, Milos Galko, Bill Lengfelder, Christopher K. Morgan, Emmanuel Obeya, Neil Paris, Simon Rice, Angelo Smimmo, Benito Vladislav Soltys, Daphne Strothmann.

By [FRANK RIZZO](#)

Sometimes the world is just too heavy to be *en pointe*. Michael Keegan-Dolan and his young Fabulous Beast Dance Theater from Ireland take the outline of Theophile Gautier's classic romantic story ballet and shove it onto a stage filled with aggression, violence and testosterone. In the process, the writer-director-choreographer creates a bold and original dance-theater piece. Its visual imagery is shocking and haunting, its music alternately terrorizing and soaring. This is one tough "Giselle."

The piece bowed last fall at the Dublin Theater Festival and now makes its first foray outside Ireland at New Haven, Conn.'s Intl. Festival of Arts & Ideas. This raw, raunchy and expletive-filled work should attract a hip, young, crossover arts crowd that likes its classics with a twist.

Set in a fictional town in the Irish midlands, the production features a contingent of multi-accented and -ethnic characters that could just as well be living in the American West. Cowboy hats, boots and line-dancing are prominently featured. This is a town without pity, especially for poor Giselle, whom we first see scrubbing the floor of the stage as the other characters arrive. They throw dirt on the ground to keep her on her knees.

Giselle's emotionally -- and physically -- removed father narrates from atop a telephone pole decorated with a parched steer skull. In Keegan-Dolan's version of the mid-19th-century tale, the slumming Prince Albrecht now is a bisexual line-dance teacher. Giselle's unrequited suitor Hilarion becomes her mentally handicapped and homicidal brother (an ax looms upstage, 'nuff said). Albrecht is exposed as a betrayer not with another maiden but with a man.

Keegan-Dolan dramatizes the story with a wide vocabulary of theatrical tricks, never allowing the work to be just "about" dancing, drama, images or music. There is no dialogue in the traditional sense, but there is spoken text (at various levels of projection and audibility).

Philip Feeney's anxious electronic music is unrelenting and unnerving, but there are also moments for melodic escape -- the sudden introduction of a folk ballad is as startling as a scream.

Sophie Charalambous has designed an open setting -- imaginatively lit by Adam Silverman -- that welcomes as many striking images and moves as Keegan-Dolan & Co. can produce. Chief among these are two *pas de deux* of grand romance and regret.

The sole woman among the cast of 10 is Daphne Strothmann, who plays Giselle with aching tenderness. The men play a series of brutes and cads, or other women of equally mean intent. Milos Galko charismatically plays Albrecht as a tall, dashing stranger who casually uses others for his pleasure. (Galko also choreographs his own amazing line-dance steps.) Michael M. Dolan is mesmerizing as Giselle's disturbed brother, who sees his life reduced to animal level. Neil Paris plays the weak-willed butcher's son. Simon Rice gives himself entirely over as Nurse Betty, an angel of no mercy but a healthy libido. Angelo Smimmo's countertenor voice gives the proceedings an otherworldly dimension.

Like the original, the story ends in a graveyard, with the now-dead Giselle among a crowd of female ghosts seeking their revenge on men. Here, Keegan-Dolan presents a series of stunning images: the dead emerging from their trap-door graves in clouds of white dust, descending ropes from the rafters that turn into nooses and then again into swings, and a final, triumphant image of forgiveness that floods the darkened stage with light, lifting the heart and taking the breath away.

Sets and costumes, Sophie Charalambous; music, Philip Feeney; lighting, Adam Silverman; sound, Paul Bull; line-dance choreography, Milos Galko; stage manager, Claire Burkitt. Opened, June 22, 2004. Reviewed June 23. Running time: 1 HOUR, 15 MIN.

Posted: Thurs., Jun. 24, 2004, 4:57pm PT