



The Story of The Bull

'Gratuitous male nudity and crude language!' bemoaned one. 'Unnecessary flotsam', pronounced another more literary-minded detractor; 'Load of Bull', opined another of Fabulous Beast's *The Bull* when it emerged into the world at the 2005 Dublin Theatre Festival.

Michael Keegan-Dolan's subversive send-up of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland hit out – rather successfully – at Irish society's funny bone. *The Bull's* nudity, bad language, fighting, fornicating, and side-swipes at Accident and Emergency ('deeply offensive to nurses!' decried one of many callers to the Joe Duffy radio show), planning permission, plasterers and crass Irish Dance Shows, among other Irish behemoths – disturbed many.

Rarely since the 1907 *Playboy of the Western World* riots at the utterance of the word 'shift' (an old-fashioned term for ladies' underwear), has Irish theatre had such a splendid display of controversy. Though a highly physical production in which every move is rigorously choreographed, those expecting a dance show were dismayed by the apparent lack of dancing ('They were trying to act when they should have been dancing'). Equally, the text-oriented lambasted the script ('inarticulate'), though in the action-packed Tarantino-esque world Keegan-Dolan creates there is no time for iambic pentameter if you want to stay alive.



Some intellectuals dismissed the whole enterprise as 'sound and fury, signifying nothing'.

But *The Bull* inspired some, including Ireland's top cultural commentator Fintan O'Toole, to deem it 'the first great piece of theatre about the new hyped-up 21st-century Ireland'. It also sold out. One caller defended it as 'the most amazing performance I ever saw'. No one was indifferent. Rather deliciously, *The Bull* controversy played out in the Irish Times letters pages for days. Curiously, the last time performance provoked such a reaction (and, that time, a court case), was over another choreographer – Jerome Bel – and his eponymous production featuring nudity, urination and, um, some walking, during the first International Dance Festival Ireland in 2002.

Make way Brinsley Sheridan, Wilde, Friel, and the entire writerly landscape of Irish theatre, for a shocking, visceral new genre is here breaking through. OK, the violence and bad language we have seen already from brat-pack playwrights like Martin McDonagh and Mark O'Rowe. The barbaric killer instinct and gothic peat-moss drenched midland fantasia is shared with Marina Carr. But Keegan-Dolan has something they haven't got – sheer Artaudian corporeality, the body-knowledge of a choreographer, and, through it, a real shot at bringing Irish theatre to its senses.



Sidestepping the intellect (our national comfort zone), the percussive talents of Colin Dunne and Robbie Harris are employed to unleash the dormant energies of *An Táin Bó Cúailnge*, an ancient Irish text as mythic and universal a tale of greed and human nature as India's *Mahabharata*. Through these vibrations Fabulous Beast leads us, a little unwittingly, to the intersection of the *Táin's* warp-spasm world and present-day, mixed up, prosperous, newly multicultural Ireland.

In keeping with Bertolt Brecht's dictum 'theatre is theft', Keegan-Dolan borrows from many different theatrical forms to recount his *Táin*. An eclectic mixum gatherum production, its new idiom is promiscuous in its embrace of other art forms: from contemporary dance to visual and installation art, kabuki, martial arts, film, music, opera, and – even – Irish dancing. It's the kind of total theatre we have been slowly slowly inching towards in Irish theatre since playwright Tom MacIntyre's mid-1980s plays at the Peacock Theatre (most notably his adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's great anti-pastoral poem, *The Great Hunger*). Against the background of traditional Irish theatre where the word, and its head-energy rules supreme, this is new *gesamtkunstwerk* – 'total theatre' – as coined by Wagner, and briefly championed in the Abbey theatre by W B Yeats in the early part of the 20th century.

In an Ireland where the silenced/suppressed body has toppled the church from its unquestioned pedestal, it is interesting that this new pulse is coming, not from a writer, but from the dance world. In one particularly hilarious (and salient) subplot, Colin Dunne is Fergus, lead dancer of tacky Irish dance show *Celtic Bitch*, and lover of the monstrous Maeve (played by Ireland's edgiest actress, Olwen Fouéré). Pre-dating imported Victorian ideals of femininity, Maeve displays the no-nonsense

sexuality you'd expect of a Sile-na-gig. But there is more than meets the eye to lead dancer Fergus, who is ordered by Maeve to (among other things) 'stick to the prancing around and leave the serious stuff to us'.

'That's really the attitude to choreographers', asserts the show's creator, Michael Keegan-Dolan of Maeve's put-down to Fergus. However, by prioritising the body in a writerly landscape, Keegan-Dolan is espousing the opposite: 'I think a choreographer is a higher state of existence than a director'. Could Fergus, whose role has grown in the bite⁰⁷ version into that of the quasi-narrator, perhaps be an alter ego for the show's creator himself?

After his lauded 2003 festival hit *Giselle*, which was more unequivocally situated in the world of dance, Keegan-Dolan expresses delight at the breadth of audience *The Bull* attracted during its Dublin run – from taxi-drivers to construction workers. 'If I could get the head and the body harmonised, we could create a style of performer', he asserts, sounding like someone who is on a quest. 'That's really exciting. Creating an idiom that I can work with, people could come and have a really exciting experience at the theatre and want to come back'.

Keegan-Dolan's provocative work may be mischievous, cheeky and sometimes fuelled by scatological little boy humour but it springs out of the quiet, meditative space created by his yoga. 'Anything I know about theatre and dance now that is of any quality, I have learned through my yoga practice' he asserts. Echoing this ethos, Olwen Fouéré regards her theatre work as 'a spiritual practice, albeit a strange one', and the theatre she likes to work in as a 'bawdy monastery'.

Watching the development of Keegan-Dolan's oeuvre, you do feel you are privy to a wilful, contrary and totally exciting artistic idiom being brought into the world – albeit kicking and screaming. 'The new wine has burst the old bottles', as Strindberg put it of the advent of Naturalism well over a century ago. Strindberg, too, had his detractors.

Deirdre Mulrooney

Deirdre Mulrooney's recent book *Irish Moves*, an illustrated history of dance and physical theatre in Ireland, is published by the Liffey Press.

With thanks to Jane Murphy, 'Joe Duffy Show', RTE Radio One





rainpan 43
all wear bowlers



Mathurin Bolze Company
Tangentés



Emio Greco /
Pieter C. Scholten
Hell



Dakh Centre for
Contemporary Arts
Macbeth – The Prologue



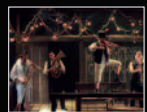
The Bull
Fabulous Beast



National Theatre of
Iceland
Peer Gynt



The Bellboys (Les Grooms)
Les Ballets Grooms



Maly Drama Theatre
of St Petersburg
Platonov
By Anton Chekhov



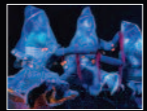
Europe
By David Greig



Amrita Performing Arts
Weyreap's Battle



Pacitti Company
Spill Festival
of Performance



Ratan Thiyam's Chorus
Repertory Theatre of
Manipur
Nine Hills One Valley



Ronnie Burkett Theatre of
Marionettes
10 Days on Earth



The Ninagawa Company
Coriolanus
By William Shakespeare



C.I.C.T/Théâtre des
Bouffes du Nord
Sizwe Banzi is Dead
Directed by Peter Brook



Cheek by Jowl
Three Sisters
By Anton Chekhov



Cheek by Jowl
Cymbeline
By William Shakespeare



Contemporary African
Dance
Moving Africa 3



Lone Twin
Spiral

january-june
dance music theatre
bite07

barbican do something different

The Bull

Fabulous Beast



programme

dance music theatre
bite07

Welcome to bite07

***The Bull* is a bite co-commission and one of 25 Landmark Events taking place during 2007 to celebrate the Barbican's 25th birthday. To make the celebration even more special we have invited Fabulous Beast and its Director Michael Keegan-Dolan to become a Barbican Artistic Associate.**

The Barbican introduced Longford's Fabulous Beast to UK audiences when it presented and co-produced the company's radical reworking of *Giselle* in 2005. The show was nominated for an Olivier Award. In 2006, the company returned to the Barbican with *The Flowerbed*, a bold interpretation of the *Romeo and Juliet* story.

Fabulous Beast's journey from Longford to London reflects bite's approach to commissioning new work and our ongoing commitment to strengthening and supporting artistic relationships. We look forward to new commissions in 2008 and 2009.

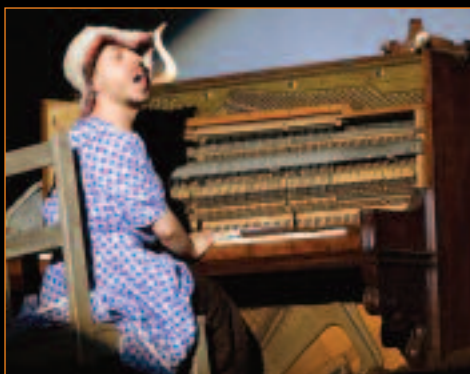
We hope you enjoy tonight's performance.

**Louise Jeffreys
Head of Theatre, Barbican**

The Bull

Directed by Michael Keegan-Dolan

UK Premiere



21 February–3 March

This performance lasts 90 minutes with no interval

Contains nudity and explicit material and language

Co-produced by Fabulous Beast, barbicanbite07 and Dublin Theatre Festival

Originally commissioned by barbicanbite07 and Dublin Theatre Festival

Original production first performed at the O'Reilly Theatre as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival 2005

Fabulous Beast is funded by The Arts Council Ireland and Dublin City Council



Photography by Ros Kavanagh

We would like to remind you that in the foyer we have a range of quality ice creams, chocolate and other confectionery available for purchase this evening.

Please make sure that all digital watch alarms and mobile phones are switched off during the performance. Sitting or standing in any gangway is not permitted.

Smoking is not allowed in the auditorium. No cameras or any other recording equipment may be taken into the auditorium.

The Bull

Director Michael Keegan-Dolan

Performers

Michael Dolan
Colin Dunne
Olwen Fouéré
Milos Galko
Robbie Harris
Emmanuel Obeya
Neil Paris
Gianluca Pezzino
Rachel Poirier
Angelo Smimmo
Vladislav Benito Soltys
Daphne Strothmann

Composer Philip Feeney

Designer Merle Hensel

Wardrobe Supervisor Breege Fahy

Lighting Designer Adam Silverman

Lighting Manager Georgina Hill

Sound Designer Gareth Fry

Percussion Robbie Harris

Script Advisor Thomas Conway

Scenic Artist Sandra Butler

Voice Coach Margaret Pikes (Roy Hart Theatre)

For Fabulous Beast

Manager Andrew McLellan

Production Manager Adrian Acosta

Stage Manager Peter Jordan

Deputy Stage Manager Lucinda Hamlin

Assistant Stage Manager Martha Mamo

Sound Manager Alexis Nealon

Set Constructed by Theatre Production Services, Dublin



book online
www.barbican.org.uk/bite

25

Celebrating
the Barbican's
25th birthday

The Barbican is 25 in 2007 and to help celebrate we have arranged a wide variety of special events and activities.

Visit www.barbican.org.uk/25 for full details of our special birthday events, to find out more about the history of the Barbican or for the chance to win some great prizes over the coming year



The Barbican Centre is provided by the City of London Corporation as part of its contribution to the cultural life of London and the nation.