



Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre performs *The Rite of Spring* and *Petrushka*. Picture: Ros Kavanagh *Source: Supplied*

IT'S a breezeless 33C and the seaside town of Galway on Ireland's west coast is in a kind of meteorological shock. The annual arts festival is in full swing and everywhere you look, people are bare-armed, bare-legged and sporting shiny pink faces and beatific, vitamin D-overdose smiles.

Michael Keegan-Dolan is not one of them. The director of Ireland's acclaimed Fabulous Beast dance company is nursing a cold, and with two children under four with him - his wife, Rachel Poirier, is a dancer - and a week's back-to-back performances behind him and more to go, he is clearly tired. Very tired.

I'd read he is a combative interviewee - feisty, fierce about his art - but the night before, I watched incognito as the choreographer spent time with his troupe post-performance in the festival's riverside bar. He has an infectious smile and laugh, an ease and fluidity of movement and exudes a palpable, childlike excitement as he tells his people that "it's not just rumour any more": they have just been nominated for two Bessies, New York's premier dance awards.

Keegan-Dolan's latest offering, soon to wing its way to the Brisbane and Melbourne arts festivals - is a re-imagining of his acclaimed 2009, Olivier Award-nominated version of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* with the English National Opera. It and a new *Petrushka* were commissioned by London's Sadler's Wells to headline a program of three new works titled *A String of Rites* created to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the performance of Vaslav Nijinsky and Igor Stravinsky's groundbreaking 1913 masterpiece.

Keegan-Dolan's Rites is dark, confronting and intensely, unexpectedly memorable. There are moments when this physically disparate group of dancers - tall, short, slender, muscular, black, white - are so clearly attuned and intimate with the marriage between his choreography and Stravinsky's complex, polyrhythmic patterns that they seem to become music incarnate.

The Rite of Spring is, of course, the story of pagan ritual, of ancestry and youth and the creative force implicit in the change of seasons. Traditionally, it climaxes in the choice of a young woman as sacrificial victim to dance herself to death. Scores of choreographers have applied their minds to Stravinsky's original vision, set in pagan Russia, although it is invariably Kenneth MacMillan, Leonide Massine and Pina Bausch who are elevated into the pantheon of greats and used for comparison. Keegan-Dolan has created a work as original, infusing Rite with the spirit of Ireland's patriarchal past and the menace of male pack behaviour, but shaping a denouement that is unexpected and modern. The ballet has received generally glowing reviews, from The Times describing it as "exhilarating as it is harrowing" to the Financial Times placing it in the trio of historic greats.

Sitting outside in the brilliant sunshine, eyes crinkled against the glare, Keegan-Dolan admits he wondered why anyone would take on Stravinsky. "Rite is so complicated, so complex. I do question a lot why one would do these pieces now. Sometimes I sit in the auditorium and the complexity of scores and density of the music for the whole evening and you think, 'Well, it's just not going to sell tickets'," he says, smiling.

He says he felt overwhelmed at times by the desire to unleash his vision, but Stravinsky's music does not allow it: "In Petrushka, it is releasing and releasing and releasing but the score closes down in the end. Same with Rite, it starts to recede at the end ... it doesn't have the big ... " he says, opening his arms and hands wide and then drawing them to a sudden, dramatic snapped-fingers close. "I have to control it. I have to submit to Stravinsky, and I am happy to. But sometimes it is frustrating," he adds with a flicker of embarrassment.

In fact, it has taken scores of performances across Europe for Keegan-Dolan to be happy (or at least as content as any self-critical artist can be) with the work, and he admits he is still tweaking, changing, adjusting. The choreographer is known for sitting with the audience during performances to tune into their responses and last night was no exception.

"You really only can see if it's working with people watching ... when I sit next to someone, I start seeing it as they would, it's weird I can feel their energy."

The dancers for this Rite, he says, have taken time to adjust to the difficulty of the music because of the tension between "feeling and engaging" with what they are hearing and moving with and counting out the complex beats.

"It took a lot of work and when we opened in London and then took it to Germany, the work was struggling because as soon as they stopped counting and tried to enter into the truth of the feeling, they got it wrong. Now they have embodied the counts and they are just starting to feel the beats ... Galway is getting it at its best, and Australia will too."

Born in Dublin in 1969, at 18 Keegan-Dolan left Ireland to study dance in London. He says he was as stiff as a board and insists in the three years he trained in the British capital, nothing worked for him. He credits his present physicality to the influence of an Australian yogi, Shandor Remete.

"I had learned to dance for years from various individuals. I had started late and nothing worked for me. Then, when I was 30, I met one of Shandor's students in London. He was more of a Japanese swordsman but he introduced me to these esoteric practices and I discovered that the rules of engagement from these practices unlocked the whole dance thing for me. That is an abridged version of about 10 years of looking and about 10 or 11 years practising. I don't really talk about this much, I don't like to draw attention to it. Maybe, because you are Australian I can start to talk about it," he says.

Much of his and Fabulous Beast's creative and new work has been fashioned and rehearsed in Ireland, until recently in a remote farmhouse studio in Longford. Keegan-Dolan is not keen on traditional auditions and has found many of his finest dancers while running workshops and finding creative spirits who, in a way, also find him. He calls it "putting out the call, beating the drum". "It's a combination of knowing people and people hearing how I work, word of mouth," he says. "Focus is not just about how good the work is but the process, too. I don't like going to see work that is about humanity and knowing that an artistic director has made it by terrorising everyone to fulfil his own needs. That to me is a lie."

Talking about his choreographic process, Keegan-Dolan describes what sounds like a gentle fox hunt, with him sniffing out the dancer who is most in tune, "in the mood" each day and allowing them to move and create with him close by shaping and reshaping. He insists his dancers are much more dextrous than he is and that he relies and leans on them to remember and repeat movements, allowing the work to evolve.

The company is now nomadic, he says slightly wistfully, apparently having outgrown its farmhouse hosts and home. Petrushka, he says, was made in Serbia, Rites during a freezing winter in the space in Galway where they performed the previous night.

"Maybe a wonderful, philanthropic Australian has a studio for us, maybe somewhere in Wollongong," he says, pronouncing the word with an Irish lilt. The Nigerian musician Fela Kuti's legendary Shrine, where musicians and dancers gathered together to live, work and play, is a model he is enthused by, but says he'd insist on serious artistic credentials for membership: "A love of the art, the form ... be cool to be a member, that's my ambition!"

He is looking forward to the tour to Australia, where he has good friends and creative colleagues - the Limerick-born Noel Staunton, artistic director of the Brisbane Festival, and Sydney Dance Company's Rafael Bonachela - and he laughs wholeheartedly at the contrasts between his troupe's working life, dancing and rehearsing in freezing Irish winters "in their coats and hats", and that of their Sydney Dance Company colleagues, who nip off "to the beach in their lunchtime".

Sydney dancers all look like models, he teases, adding quickly that he loves coming back to Galway where the body-beautiful culture hasn't bitten: "All these body shapes and all these body sizes and nobody really cares how they look. I love that about Ireland, you know, it's great."

Ireland, clearly, is etched deeply into his heart and, ideally, the company's new home would be here, he says. He and his little family now live in a vernacular cottage in the country, a house left to him by his parents - and which his forebears lived in during the great famine.

Ancestry is a powerful force, common to humanity and the coagulant that binds us all together, but Keegan-Dolan is adamant it cannot be allowed to be a paralysing force.

The impact of a collision between past, present and future exploded for him indelibly in Australia watching the Sydney Theatre Company's *The Secret River*: "At the end, when the actors who played the white and the black guy take you into the future and the Aboriginal guy's just sitting there and the white guy who says 'Can I help you?' gets angry and says 'Don't you want my help?' and the Aboriginal guy just says, 'This is my place', I swear to God, I could still cry now. I cannot explain it. It was how he said it, what came before, where I was, because I'm Irish, because we have problems of our own," he says.

"I was f . . ked for about an hour. I just had this very deep connection and I realised the power of theatre at that moment. It gave meaning to my life. From all the poverty I have had, from all the annihilation I have had in the papers, all the self-doubt. I thought it is all good because if I can make a piece that has that one moment, one of those moments - man, I could die a happy man!"

The Rite of Spring is at Brisbane Festival from September 25 to 29 and Melbourne Festival (Comedy Theatre) from October 11 to 14.

- See more at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/do-the-rite-thing/story-fn9n8gph-1226722853592#sthash.0Ux2aGuD.dpuf>