

**THE RITE OF SPRING** choreographed by David Bolger  
CoisCeim Dance Theatre  
On tour; reviewed OPENING NIGHT at Project Arts  
Centre, Dublin, by Jools Gilson-Ellis

Eleven dancers in an Irish contemporary dance production, is almost as extraordinary as the music (and ballet) that once caused riots. David Bolger's *Rite of Spring* at The Project in January, flung the sheer exuberant intensity of Stravinsky's score out into the cultural air of Dublin and beyond. His version has a cheekiness we've come to expect from Bolger, but in the end it seemed to me to compromise rather than re-work the original, even as the dancing delighted us: I loved it, but it didn't work.

Bolger's dancers strut the stage with machismo and a cornucopia of femininities. Stravinsky's wrenching harmonics seem to force the sudden synchronicity of all the dancers. This is thrilling. Here Bolger's choreography has a rhythmic angularity, elbows thrusting skywards. The work is best at these times when the dancing meets the violence of the music head-on. Bolger's re-working of the original narrative of *The Rite of Spring*, updates and domesticates it. The male lead is ironing his shirt at the opening, puncturing the epic from the outset. The choreography whilst thrilling in its percussive following of the Stravinsky score, veers much more towards *West Side Story* than Dionysiac abandon. The humour is infectious, as gals and lads prepare for a night on the town. This is vintage Bolger - blokes being blokey, knocking back the drink, girls faffing over frocks. Whilst this is delicious, it only meets the Stravinsky with a side-glance. The heft and weight of this great score is too much for frivolity. There is great fear in this music. Bolger's interpretation is brilliantly irreverent, but it has trouble

melding such naughty tactics with the unmitigated violence of the sound. The male dancers sometimes gave yobbishness a threatening edge in their stomping approaches, retreats and tussles. The female dancers, cast as they were as ingénues, were less believable in their aggression. The work needs an uncompromising intensity. When the girls in their blond waist-length wigs gang-up on the female lead (Mariam Ribón), it would all have been a lot more chilling, if this violence were sacrificial. I didn't believe them. When Pina Bausch began to make her *Rite of Spring* she asked her dancers "how would it be to dance knowing you have to die?" Such a question is unasked in Bolger's version, because the Chosen One is sacrificed not to the God of Spring, but to domestic toil. The final image of the female lead ironing a man's shirt undoes the Rite of its Slavonic ritual and seals it instead in suburbia. I understand the image is supposed to parallel the sacrifice of a virgin to the God of Spring, with the sacrifice of girlish pleasure to domestic toil - but the joke just doesn't have any mileage. It's cute, but that's it. The work needed more emotional depth. This was particularly true of the female lead (Ribón), who is a beautiful dancer, but doesn't have the emotional range to compel an audience to believe in her passion or her despair. In contrast to this are extraordinary images of the male lead suspended from his belly in mid-space. The ache of pièta that this gives us, suggests that *he* rather than *she* is for sacrifice. This body arches painfully backwards, like the best of hysterics, or (seeing as this is a man) Christ. Such moments capture a different intent than Bolger's habitual one - they suggest a darker foray into consciousness than this *Rite* allows.

Paul Keoghan's set design is a vast bronze cell - walls of metal hemming in hysteria. At the outset these twenty foot walls reflect moving bodies - scarlets and flesh, but by the end they are smeared with body marks and sweat. Keoghan lights it with sensitivity and violence. Joan O'Clery's costume design is a visual delight. We meet female creatures first with their manes atop them, tossing hair into the music. Later they parade onto the stage like art nouveau lamps, with little black bobs. At another, they vamp

it around their men in scarlet and heels. Gorgeous as this is, I did start to feel that given a choice I'd prefer more welly than wigs.

Perhaps marketing this production as radical is pushing it, but it was a pleasure to see nonetheless. Visually fabulous, critically dodgy, it's a cheerful Spring for Irish contemporary dance, to have a work amongst us that has such sheer ambition and sass.

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