

## *MáM*

By Teac Damsa

Choreographed and Directed by Michael Keegan-Dolan

The Quick Center for the Performing Arts

Fairfield University

Fairfield, Connecticut

November 17, 2023

Reviewed by Sean F. Edgecomb

In November 2023, Michael Keegan-Dolan and his contemporary dance troupe, Teac Damsa (established in 2016), completed a residence at Fairfield University's Quick Center, culminating in the American premiere of *MáM*. An Irish word that may be best understood as a mountain pass that simultaneously separates and connects the villages of Ireland's craggy west, *MáM* (rhymes with yam), was an explosive, choreographic exploration of queerness *as* the in-between: between villages, between the Continent, Ireland and the United States, between innocence and experience, and perhaps most dramatically, between life and death. In fact, the company website describes *MáM* as "a meeting place between soloist and ensemble, classical and traditional, the local and universal." This notion of the in-between was further highlighted by the selected font for the show title, two uppercase *M*'s representing mountains surrounding the lowercase "a" with the fada, standing symbolically for the geographic pass.

Keegan-Dolan rose to fame as director of Fabulous Beasts Dance Theatre (1997-2015), where he developed an eclectic, signature style that combines ballet and contemporary, improvisational dance from a variety of global traditions. Keegan-Dolan's work often explores humanity through a folkloric lens, navigating the sometimes humorous, sometimes terrifying, and often magical and historically rooted identity of Ireland, between Irish people and the Irish diaspora, though disseminated with an intercultural intent.

In fact, I first encountered a performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* re-envisioned by Fabulous Beasts in Brisbane, Australia in 2013, and I was blown away by Keegan-Dolan's distinct and vibrant aesthetic (sexually convulsing dancers sporting hare masks and a flurry of cross-dressing). In 2019, I attended Teac Damsa's adaptation of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (*Loch na hEala*) at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM). This production liberally transformed the nineteenth century ballet into a sleek, contemporary takedown of child abuse in Ireland's Roman Catholic diocese mixed with the Irish myth, "The Children of Lir," which sees children doomed to transform into swans between sunrise and sunset. Keegan-Dolan's commitment to exploring the in-between of these canonical works, contemporary adaptations, and forms and genres only heightened my reading of this work as queer.

Already a fan of Keegan-Dolan, you can imagine my delight when I learned that Teac Damsa would present the American premiere of *MáM* at Fairfield University, where I joined the faculty just a month earlier. As part of Fairfield's Quick Center Artist-in-Residence program, Keegan-Dolan generously agreed to engage with our undergraduate students, including my Performance Histories class. To say that Keegan-Dolan is charismatic is a wild understatement, and admittedly I was less than measured in hiding my deep admiration for his vision. When I mentioned my queer interpretation of his work, Keegan-Dolan was delighted. While admittedly he is not gay, and is partnered with company dancer Rachel Poirier, he related that his experience growing up as a dancer had always rendered him as queer, caught between the masculine expectations embedded in Irish class culture and his desire to become a performing artist. He reflected that it was this nuanced feeling of ambivalence that led to his visionary work as a director/choreographer.

*MáM* reads as queer from its opening tableau: a young girl in a white dress (Mille Lang), lays on a worn, wooden table in an incense filled auditorium, as a goat-masked performer (Cormac Begley), pumps the bellows of a bass concertina, without sound. The instrument inhales and exhales, as the girl rises. As the goat-headed performer (a fertility symbol in Pagan Ireland) removes his mask and transforms into human form, one side of a curtain rod falls (brilliantly designed by Sabine Dargent), and the large black curtain that has backed the performers is dramatically pulled by gravity into a heap at the stage right corner of the proscenium—physically embodying the notion of queer as off-kilter. From behind the heavy drape a cast of twelve dancers are revealed, dressed in black, layered costumes (envisioned by Hyemi Shin) reminiscent of James Joyce’s characters attending a funeral, but in papery, black, faceless masks that intend to haunt if not terrify.

As the performance unfolds, first to Gaelic rhythms and eventually the addition of more global sounds (provided by *stargaze*, an orchestral collective made up of musicians from around the world whose branded title also plays with the space between letters), another curtain slides off a second pole to reveal the band. Downstage, the dancers blend a variety of styles and movements, embodying moments of love and hate, kinship and tribalism, grief, insanity, profound sadness, silliness, and joy. Over the course of an hour, the dancers slowly lose their masks and then black clothing, revealing mostly white undergarments that cling to the lithe bodies, transparent with sweat. The show’s queerness is grounded in its multivalent and often amorphous story-telling, meandering like a path through the wilds of the Western Irish countryside where Keegan-Dolan lives and Teac Damsa works. This metamorphic structure allows the audience to build different and even simultaneous understandings of the narrative that bridges the transient space between the performers and the audience.

Throughout this choreographed choose-your-own adventure, the young girl remains at the center, mostly as observer and occasionally as participant. At the conclusion of the performance, the notion of queer in-betweenness is both dramaturgically and physically actualized. As the orchestra and dancers reach a symbiotic and harmonious climax and the stage fills with smoke, a third curtain drops (the number three is a sacred symbol relevant to both Irish paganism and Christianity), revealing a wall of light and huge fans. As the young girl is lifted into a silhouette of blinding light, the fans engage with great force pushing the smoke into the auditorium, creating a jaw-dropping illusion to make the audience feel as if they are passing through *MáM*, the between space of the symbolic mountain pass.

As with many queer works, the impact of *MáM* is driven by affective and individual audience interpretations of a narrative that remains intentionally ambiguous. Is the young girl dead as we follow her journey through Purgatory and eventually her entrance into the afterlife? Is she the Angel of Death? Is she the embodied zeitgeist of a particular people, place and space? Is this a story of salvation, resurrection, or the existential? All these interpretations and more circle through and beyond the performance as Keegan-Dolan's queer staging that delivers limitless possibility, celebrating the nuanced space of the in-between rather relying on the certain.

Singular and/or monolithic understandings of culture, whether local, regional, or national often lead to an impasse, where different ideas are feared and even villainized as the Other. In *MáM*, Keegan-Dolan and Teac Damsa present a transient performance, grounded in Irish folk culture, that invites the audience to consider how our humanity surpasses the notion of boundaries—whether geographic, political, or identity-driven—where the queer in-between space is presented not only as a site for passage, but also a site of intersection, potentiality, and empathy.

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