

James Son of James

Teachers' notes for GCSE, A Level & BTEC dance/drama students

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1. THE PRODUCTION

Director	Michael Keegan-Dolan
Composer	Philip Feeney
Lighting Design	Adam Silverman
Design	Merle Hensel
Sound Design	Alexis Nealon

Performers

<i>James Son of James</i>	Emmanuel Obeya
<i>The Politician</i>	Michael Dolan
<i>The Politician's Wife</i>	Daphne Strothmann
<i>The Politician's Son</i>	Khamlane Halsackda
<i>The Doctor</i>	Angelo Smimmo
<i>The Merchant</i>	Neil Paris
<i>The Merchant's Daughter</i>	Rachel Poirier
<i>The Policeman</i>	Vladislav Soltys
<i>The Policeman's Wife</i>	Lorena Randi
<i>The Farmer</i>	Milos Galko
<i>The Woman From The East</i>	Clodhna Hoey

2. ABOUT MICHAEL KEEGAN-DOLAN

Michael Keegan-Dolan, choreographer, writer and Artistic Director of his own company, Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre, has been variously described as an anarchic choreographer and the saviour of the modern dance scene in Ireland. His work is regarded as 'dark and dangerous', 'bold and bullish', 'ruthlessly comic', and 'savagely brilliant'. He has been referred to as one of the most talented choreographers ever to emerge from Ireland.

“Keegan-Dolan has energy, a beady eye, a flaring sense of the ridiculous and a no less bright, if despairing honesty.” Clement Crisp, The Financial Times

“Draw a line from Samuel Beckett to Quentin Tarantino and somewhere along it you’ll find Michael Keegan-Dolan.” Luke Jennings, The Observer

How does he feel about all this high praise? Does he feel it puts a pressure on him to ‘deliver’, to create more and more dazzling and adventurous works?

“I read all the reviews and then I just get on with it. I also sit in the audience every night and observe and listen and see what I can learn. You can easily see a cycle in the relationship journalists or critics have with artists, with anyone they write about. It goes up and then of course it has to come down. Not pleasant but an absolutely normal mechanism, (if mechanism is the right word.) ‘James Son of James’, is in a sense about this very human response! Because of the pressure one could feel it is necessary to do more and bigger productions; I have chosen to go in the opposite direction, smaller and less is the future for me.”

Early experiences

So how did a young boy, the youngest in a large Irish family, none of whom showed any passion for dance, end up directing his own dance company?

Michael Keegan-Dolan first became interested in dance at the age of 6 or 7, when his mother took the family to see a Christmas pantomime every year. Though he didn’t take a dance class until he was in his late teens, he remained *“bewitched by the magic of the theatre...”* and at the age of 18 moved to London to train at the Central School of Ballet. Of his time there he says, *“I started dancing late and was very stiff and uncoordinated, and very angry about it. But also very creative. I was choreographing from day one there; always theatrical pieces with characters coming in.”*

Following his graduation he worked in theatre as a choreographer for directors on large-scale productions at venues like the Royal Opera House and the National Theatre. Perhaps it was this early experience of dance versus theatre direction, the sense of *“...this separation between the mental and the physical...”* that worried him and so steered him towards creating work that is utterly connected at its centre. He says, *“In the theatre the choreographer is often brought in as a kind of entertainer, to do the body bit, while the serious stuff is kept for the director. With Fabulous Beast I’m trying to break that down by finding a really honest and clear marriage between dance and theatre.”*

Founding his own company

Michael returned to Ireland in 1997 and was invited to take up a commission from the Institute for Choreography and Dance in Cork, to create a piece of work. He founded Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre and started creating. Why the name Fabulous Beast for his company? *“The inspiration for the name came from a book I was reading at the time the company was founded...It was a book on mythical creatures entitled Fabulous Beasts!”*

Since that time, Michael Keegan-Dolan has written, directed, choreographed and co-produced six productions for his Irish Midlands-based company. These were: *Sunday Lunch*, *Fragile*, *The Flowerbed*, *The Christmas Show*, *Giselle* and *The Bull*. *James Son of James* is his seventh work for the company.

Watching his dancers on stage, the intensity with which they move is very clear. Often it looks as if their characters are discovering those steps for the very first time. Where does this intensity and tension stem from? From Michael? From the performers? From their characters? Michael thinks some of this originates from him and his own physicality, *"I'm personally very 'tied up' physically and not good with touching and being too close to people. That creates all sorts of tensions in the body."*

The creative process

His creative process can take a long time, starting with an initial idea, storyline or image.... *"Many images come and go. Some stay with you for years and refuse to go away. These are images you have to take seriously....which are trying to tell you something..."*. This image sows the seed for a story many, many months before the rehearsal period begins. *"It takes me months,"* he says. *"I'd just get this idea of a guy sitting in a bath covered in flour, or a woman being covered by a bucket of red paint....or a section of dialogue. It would come from nowhere but I would just write it all down."*

His primary instinct is story telling. *"It's just part of me. Language is functional. It all has to be functional for movement to be functional – it has to create character, it has to create feeling, it has to lend itself to some other bigger thing, it can't be purely movement."*

On being asked about his main influences when creating a piece, he says, *"I work to have no influences and I focus on the creative process that drives the initial idea through to completion. I don't look outwardly for my inspiration."*

His audience

So how does Michael feel about the work he makes in terms of the relationship it has with his audience?

Michael can often be found in the midst of his audience, centre front in the auditorium, watching his work alongside them. He watches his audience, taking in their *"boredom, aggression, rejection..."*. He says other people's judgements on his work serve to energise him. Bad reviews don't seem to bother him too much, in fact if anything, they spur him onto make his next work.

He wishes to *"...connect with the audience. But when I first started making pieces, it really wasn't cool to do anything that was in any way clear or had a narrative: it was considered really naff. Everything had to be weird and incomprehensible. If it was clear, it was considered crap. For a long time I was afraid of being direct."*

His success

As well as building a faithful audience over the years, Michael has also won numerous coveted awards throughout his career so far. One of his works, *Giselle*, was nominated for an Olivier award. Another of his pieces *The Bull*, has been nominated for best choreography in the 2007 National Dance Awards.

3. JAMES SON OF JAMES – about the creation of the piece

The piece tells the story of James, a traveller arriving back home just in time for his father's burial. After saving the life of a young local girl trying to drown herself, he becomes a hero in the community. His various good deeds help the lives of many...but also lead to bitter jealousies, and ultimately the townsfolk turn on him. It's a story of trust and mistrust, of good turning to bad.

The beginning

So how did Michael begin to make this piece and how long did it take? As with all of Michael Keegan-Dolan's work, *James Son of James* is narrative. A story is often the stimulus for his inspiration, "*The starting point is always a story that I would like to tell, or an image or collection of images that provoke the idea of a story that I would like to tell.*" What image was his starting point for this work? "*The wall. Especially the wall falling! And an execution....*".

Before the main rehearsal period in Ireland, the company undertook 3 weeks of research and development with Michael. These initial weeks were a chance for Michael to introduce his thoughts & ideas for the piece to his dancers, most of who have been working together with Michael for several years.

The rehearsal period

The main creative process lasts for 6 weeks, and takes place in an isolated studio in rural Ireland. The surrounding landscape is windswept, bleak and yet beautiful. Neil Paris, one of the performers in *James Son of James*, explains further: "*Shawbrook, the place where we rehearse, is residential and quite isolated. Our meals are provided and it allows us to focus completely on the work and it also helps to establish a strong bond amongst the company. The studio is literally around the corner from the dorm so there is no difficult commute to work in the morning and you can crash out at lunchtime if you need to. However the nearest town is 40 minutes away so the weekly weekend trip into Mullingar for coffee and cake on Saturday afternoon has become a bit of a ritual for some of us!*"

The concept of working and also living with your colleagues may sound a little intense. "*Some of us do have to sleep in a dormitory, which can be difficult at times...*" However, one of the benefits of working in the countryside, is that there is plenty of open space in which to escape from time to time, as Neil says, "*The farm has a lot of land planted with young trees and there are plenty of places where I can get away from the pressures of rehearsals and my colleagues, if*

necessary. There is also a lot of open outdoor space which we can use for rehearsal if necessary, for example when we created 'The Bull' we needed several tons of peat to practice in..."

Working with collaborators

In his works the dancers inhabit strange and beautiful landscapes created by the sets and the score. His long-term collaboration with composer Philip Feeney has been a fruitful one – they have worked on more than 10 of Michael's pieces together. How does this collaboration work practically though? Does Michael give Philip an image, his story outline to get to work on? Or does Philip spend time in the studio with Michael and the dancers, composing alongside the devising of the movement and emerging characters?

"We have tried both. Having Philip in the studio for an extended period was a luxury the company could not afford until very recently. I have not decided if it actually creates better work having Philip around the whole time but it is far more practical and much less stressful for me. It allows for far greater ambition, musically. I always write a treatment, it is almost a script. I send this out to everyone involved months before we start and regularly send out re-drafts."

Where does the set fit in with the rehearsal process? Is it the first thing to be created? Or do the performers inhabit the set at a later stage in rehearsals? For *James Son of James*, he went to his designer, Merle Hensel with a strong image, *"I was very clear it had to be a light design – not brown like 'Giselle' and 'The Bull'. She came up with birch, which is perfect."*

The company is not able to rehearse with the set until production week on a big stage. Michael overcomes this problem by bringing in pictures and images to hang in their rehearsal studio in County Longford. *"In this case it was photographs of the model of the set and the technical drawings. We also had a sample of the floor about 4m square. All of the characters costume drawings were stuck on the wall and a list of the scenes, whose order and number constantly changed."*

Michael is clear about the movement being influenced directly by the set, the visual landscape he creates around his dancers. *"The landscape is always first and the movement is a response to that."*

Developing characters

The characters in Michael's work are often larger than life, sometimes comic, intense.....and always totally believable. How does he work to create such clear characters that we can believe in and identify with? *"When I work to develop how a character might move, dance or talk, I look at the physical structure, the appearance of that character first. For example, is he tall, small, heavy or light? Does he move sharply or roll from one gesture to the next? How much tension does he hold in his muscles while resting? What is his or her natural tempo, what is his rhythm? How does he breathe?"*

How does Michael approach these questions with his collaborators & performers? Neil Paris who plays Tommy Fallon (The Merchant) in *James Son of James*, finds this concept of 'creating' a character a little problematic...*"As a performer with Fabulous Beast, I am really exploring and revealing aspects of myself rather than creating another person."* Neil emphasises the importance of not imposing the character onto the body but allowing the character to emerge and develop through the rehearsal period.

Much of the creative process centres around improvisations in character, as Neil explains, *"Basically, MKD (Michael) gives us a script or treatment which will give us some words, actions and situations and we start from there. I learn about my characters actions, verbal and physical range through the interactions that take place with other characters in improvisations. The improvisations are set and guided by MKD. As discoveries are made which seem to fit the story and the idea of the character we will retain these and edit out those, which no longer seem appropriate. These discoveries can occur late in the process and continue into performances..."*

"As a company we spend time playing games which help to develop rhythm, complicity, spontaneity, improvisation all of which feed into my way of approaching character development. We study voice techniques to help us in our explorations. Often I learn about my character through improvisations which are not specifically for my character or included in the script. As an example in 'James Son of James' I learnt something new about my character Tommy Fallon during an improvisation where Matty and Andrea had to choose a washing machine. The main focus of the improvisation was to explore their relationship.....but I was able to explore a bit of Tommy at the same time."

Often Michael will ask his company to find a way of expressing an aspect of their character or the situation they find themselves in, just vocally or just physically. At the beginning of the creative period, and sometimes later on in the devising process, Michael will 'hot-seat' the characters, asking performers to explore different characters in the piece during a task or improvisation.

So how do the performers keep their characters 'fresh'...how do they maintain an audience's belief in them, night after night? For Neil the key to this question is to keep it simple, *"paying attention to the actions of my character, rather than his psychology or personal 'history'..."* and staying open, *"...not getting attached to aspects of your character or their actions too soon. Exploring freely all elements and possibilities. I try to find what is 'right', 'truthful' and 'authentic' for both the character and the story and for myself as the performer on the stage."*

The ending

James, the central character is in the end entirely misunderstood. Did Michael always know that the piece would end in this way, or did this rather shocking conclusion emerge over the devising and rehearsal period? *"I always knew that it had to end like this. I have made it as tame (non-violent) and anti-melodramatic as I could! I tried to get out of this ending many times but it was unavoidable."*

4. POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Michael Keegan-Dolan's work often challenges the audience.... *"I want to connect with them."* So how did it feel for you to be in the audience for this piece? What was the atmosphere like? Did you feel connected with the action on stage? With the themes of the piece? With any of the characters in particular? Take some time to discuss this with a partner and feedback to the group.

Michael's work is a collaboration of many art forms.
How many different art forms could you list from the show?

James Son of James has many themes. What do you think they are?
How would you describe the piece in 3 words?

Michael works intensively with all of his performers, guiding their characters' improvisations. *"How do they give their bodies away? How do they breathe?"* It is interesting to note that breath plays a role in this piece. Can you remember how? The subject of breathing is found in some of his other works too. For example his *Giselle* doesn't have a weak heart as the original story goes....in Michael's version she is asthmatic.

Some other ideas for teachers to lead a group discussion:

- Taking the piece as a whole, discuss how it made you feel as you watched it.
- What feelings did you take away from the performance with you?
- Did you relate to any section in particular?
- Why? How did it feel relevant to you/your life?
- As a group discuss the piece and your responses to it.

Using these discussions as a starting point for ideas, write a short review of *James Son of James* in 150 words.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR CREATIVE MOVEMENT TASKS

Solo work- balancing & falling

Using the opening construction section of the piece as a theme, discuss the different ways the performers moved around the stage using the planks of wood and chairs - balancing, falling, rocking, sliding. Working in a space, make 3 of your own movements based on this section - eg. 1 balance, 1 fall, 1 sliding movement. You can take a movement directly from the piece, or devise your own, based on what you remember of this section.

Put these 3 movements in an order that you can repeat.

Develop these solos in a number of ways:

- Take your movement travelling around the space. Start in one part of the room and end in a different place by seeing how your solo can travel. Use connecting movements to help you, such as rolling (perhaps after a fall), or jumping (perhaps after a balance).
- Explore use of different levels, making each of your 3 movements happen on a different level – low, middle and high.
- Experiment with speed – can your balance happen in slow motion? Can your fall be very fast and dynamic?
- Join up with 4 other dancers and dance your solos simultaneously. Start facing any direction and see if any natural connections occur when you work together. Can one dancer's fall trigger another dancer's balance? Eye contact between each other is useful here. It may help to make this a choreographic exercise, with 4 or 5 dancers working for 1 choreographer who makes the suggestions and decisions.
- With a partner try dancing your solos in a very confined space without making any contact at all. Find ways of avoiding each other whilst dancing your solos in the same tiny space. How does this alter the movement?

Solo work - doing good things

Let's discuss James (Son of James, around whom this story revolves). How many good things did he do when he returned home? Can you give some examples? Decide on 3 good deeds you could do for people or a person you know. Can you show these things physically without being verbal? Join these 3 movements into a short phrase by linking them up, so you now have a short sequence.

Develop these solos by:

- Exploring the size of the movements. Try making one version where you dance them in a tiny way, perhaps using gestures and staying in one spot. Then try making a different version where your movements are HUGE and you travel across space. Join these 2 versions to your original sequence.
- Adding text. As you dance your extended sequence, talk your way through it too – develop an accompanying monologue that tells your audience what each movement represents and for whom you want to do this good deed. Perhaps you could speak normally when you dance the original

version, whisper when you dance the tiny version, and shout when you dance the huge version. Or mix it up....

Duet work - drowning & rescuing

Use the drowning & rescuing duet between Simone (The Merchant's Daughter) and James (Son of James) as a starting point for some inspiration. Discuss their situation. What has just happened when they begin to dance with each other? Can you describe some of the movements they perform?

Working with a partner, 1 dancer is Simone - limp, heavy, unyielding. The other dancer is James – trying to grasp partner's body & limbs, moving them away from a particular spot (the river).

Explore this idea for a while as a game. Maybe swap over so that each dancer gets the chance to be both James & Simone. Once you have played around with this idea, agree on some of the movements that work well and that you both think portray the situation between James & Simone. Set these movements in an order to create a duet. Share with the rest of the group.

Development:

Try devising a 'part 2' for this sequence - Simone comes to and starts to try to evade James' grasp. So now 1 dancer is Simone - trying to escape and return to the river, the other dancer is James trying to block her pathways. Again, discuss this part of the piece. How did the dancers' dynamics change when Simone started to try and evade James' grasp?

Duet work - 'I'm going for a walk'

Using the playful duet between Simone (The Merchant's Daughter) and Simon (The Politician's Son) as your starting point, discuss how they danced with each other. Where did Simone want to go? How did Simon stop her? Using this as your inspiration, working with a partner find 4 different movements – a counter balance, 2 hold & escape movements, and a small lift.

Explore your counter balances by linking with different parts of the body. Think creatively, don't just use your hands! Experiment with your 'hold & escape' movements – let the impetus of the escape direct your next movement. You escape from your partner's grasp of your left knee. How do you escape? Where does the force of your escape lead your body? Follow this through...

Development:

- See if you can incorporate some running and chasing into your duet, as Simone and Simon do. Find a moment in your movement phrase where the Simone dancer escapes from a 'hold' and breaks free into a run around the space. The Simon dancer has to catch up and slow her down.
- Once your phrase of movement has emerged, set a beginning to it. Do you run into the space? Perhaps one of you is already in the space to begin with. How do you find your partner? Are you looking towards each

other or in different directions as you enter the space? Think about the 1st 'scene' of your duet before the dancing begins. How can you tell the story of this moment without words? Think about your focus and how you both enter the space.

- Think about an ending to your duet, where the Simone character makes one final 'escape' and leaves for a walk. In which direction do you leave the space? How does your partner react? What is the final 'scene' of your duet – Simon left in the space? An empty space? Think about what you want to convey to your audience in this final moment...

Group work - Matty (The Farmer) and the apples

Discuss his behaviour as he peels apples. How do you think he is feeling? What do you think makes him so angry? How do we know he feels angry/frustrated? What does he do to show this when he gets up from his stool?

Use this section of the piece as an inspiration to create some solo work. Find a quiet spot and imagine you are Matty peeling his apples. Can you create your own small, quiet movement; something you do every day perhaps, that takes up very little space, to repeat over and over again. Think about your focus, whether you stand or sit, how you feel as you repeat this movement over and over...

Now imagine yourself suddenly very angry or frustrated - think about creating a completely different kind of movement, something big and wild, that uses a lot of space and energy. Dance these 2 movements one after the other and really think about showing a big contrast between the two.

Develop these solos into group work:

- Dance this solo in a 'loop' so it is repeated 3 or 4 times and covers a lot of space. See if you can make it seamless so it looks like one long piece of movement.
- Exaggerate your contrasts between the small, quiet moments and the large, angry moments.
- Now team up with 6 or 7 other dancers. Begin in one small space, all huddled together as you dance your small & quiet movements. Agree a physical signal from one dancer that begins the movement.
- Now agree a different physical signal from another dancer that initiates an 'explosion' as you all break out from the group and dance your large, angry movements.
- Agree a way to return to the group huddle – either taking on one dancer's movements to get back into the group...or all finding different ways, alone or together, to reassemble.
- Explore how this can be repeated, perhaps starting the group huddle in a different space, or rotated to face a different direction.
- How does this group piece end? Back in the group with small, quiet gestures? Or in one final explosion?

Responding to words

Read the following lyrics from (The Merchant's Daughter) Simone's song *Checkout Blues*, which she sings near the beginning of the piece. Let's discuss them.

*Hang on to a little thing
And let it guide the way
Bring it with you to
Another day*

*I've got something
Maybe I should tell you
I'm hanging on here
And I'm really gonna try*

*Things won't get better
Until they get much worse
Am I stronger than the curse?*

Read through the lyrics as a group, perhaps volunteers can read a line each. Discuss some of the key words & phrases and their meanings. Choose one of these words or phrases and discuss how we might respond to it physically. Generate some ideas & discussion as a group.

Working in groups of 2 or 3, ask each group to choose a few lines of lyrics as their stimulus. Allow some creative time for everyone to take their lines of lyrics and respond to them using movement. This response may be very literal, or more abstract with a more experienced group. Encourage them to explore the use of their whole bodies, rather than just 'acting out' the lyrics with their hands. Develop by sharing, then discussing as a group all the different movement possibilities there can be in dancing a single word or a phrase.

6. SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Other websites to visit:

www.fabulousbeasttour.co.uk where these notes can be found, is also full of other interesting information, with full biographies of all the performers and collaborators, plus reviews of the piece.

www.fabulousbeast.net for video footage and information on Michael's previous works.

www.dancetouringpartnership.co.uk supporting the UK tour of *James Son of James*.

www.blog.fabulousbeast.net Michael Keegan-Dolan's blog, with in-depth background information on his pieces, alongside his thoughts on creating work, the human body, developing characters, and much more.....
Some of his stunning past reviews can also be found here.

Some interesting interviews:

In Guardian Unlimited

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,,1423368,00.html>

In Dancing Times

www.dancing-times.co.uk/2008JAN/Michaelsonofjames.pdf

www.eelstheband.com for more information on Mark Olivier Everett and his band The Eels. Six of his songs appear in *James Son of James*.

These teachers' notes have been written by dance education specialist Lucy Moelwyn-Hughes, in consultation with Michael Keegan-Dolan and with supporting information from Neil Paris.

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