

CoisCéim Dance Theatre and
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Dodgems

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CoisCéim: Negotiation and Exchange

David Bolger in conversation with Deirdre Mulrooney.

"I feel really rooted in Ireland," declares CoisCéim founder David Bolger, *"I feel very Irish."* That's precisely why we find him here, on *Dodgems'* fabulous multi-cultural fairground playing with all the permutations of our new-found Irish world of difference.

The vast cornucopia of Irish identity and experience has fuelled Bolger's oeuvre since CoisCéim took its first step in 1995. The territory was set out clearly in *Reel Luck* — an investigation of Irish culture which took on everything from De Valera, moving statues, and the Eurovision, to Northern Ireland. The zeitgeist-y subject matter was delivered with what has become his characteristic light but nonetheless éver so slightly subversive touch.

In the meantime, Ireland has experienced 13 years of unimaginable social change. Irish identity is a fecund subject for a dance artist. Despite various nationalistic attempts to pin it down, and colonising attempts to douse it out, it is something that is, and always has been, in motion. This is partly due to what Declan Kiberd, in his book *Inventing Ireland* lauds as:

"the extraordinary capacity of Irish society to assimilate new elements through all its major phases... taking pleasure in the fact that identity is seldom straightforward and given, more often a matter of negotiation and exchange."

This negotiation and exchange — *"Who wants to live in a monotone society?"* muses Bolger — flows in several directions. Today's immigration would have been unimaginable in the 70's and 80's. Eleven years ago in *Ballads*, Bolger's backwards glance to the grim topic of the forced emigration associated with the Great Famine was more customary. However, typical for this show-man's entertainer-aesthetic, even seriously downbeat topics are never delivered without some disarming humour:

"I was thinking there is no humour in Ballads, there can't be — it's about the Irish famine. But we managed to find some somewhere. People's humour is probably the last thing to go — even if it is black humour."

It's a crucial ingredient to CoisCéim's work.

In 1997, when Ireland was still a pasty, homogenous place to live, CoisCéim produced *Back in Town*, inspired by a rare curiosity in those days, black Irish icon Phil Lynott. The backdrop was the 1980's emigration epidemic of Irish 18–35 year-olds to London.

The next year, in *Toupees and Snare Drums*, a hopeless search for love and lust after Lent (when dancing was forbidden by the clergy), written by Gina Moxley pushed his humorous anthropological research even further — onto the stage of our national theatre. Set in 1966, during the kitschy heyday of the showband era, it told the story of a disastrous night at Dizzy Duffy's dancehall, with the spectre of mid 20th century Irish sexual repression embodied in the racy mythological devil in the dancehall. As this body of work emerged, audiences began to realise that deep within our somatic system, social history is indeed written on the body — albeit delivered up as a joke sometimes. It's that body-journey that companies like CoisCéim reflect back at us.

A decade later, Ireland has changed, changed utterly. Rather thrillingly, in *Dodgems* we find ourselves in the belly of a tiger immersed in a Fellini-esque fairground world, mixed up tardis-like with 1950's Ireland. The tide has turned from emigration to immigration (and might be on the turn again). On Bolger's dodgem track we are invited to embrace the consequent newfound Irish plurality — of Polish, Nigerian, Filipino, Chinese, Rwandan, Ethiopian, Greek, French, German, able-bodied, disable-bodied, deaf, dumb, shy, atheist, Muslim in a burka, Catholic in a habit, Circus folk, Palari-speakers, insiders, outsiders, everybody — stretching and re-inventing what it is to be *Irish*. Seizing the opportunity to revel in this rich parade, Bolger invites us to step right up into his metaphorical *Dodgems* world. It's a vibrant fairground to be part of — and one he has been researching in depth for 4 years now, since his first conversation with writer Charlie O'Neill, son of a funfair-owner in Kilkee, County Clare.

Bolger also sees his Dodgem track as:

"A metaphor for the madness that happens to people when they arrive in a country they don't know — the borders that they have to cross, the travelling that they have to do, the human trafficking that goes on. It's dealing with those issues in an elemental way — because Dodgems are so elemental in themselves. They are actually a very simple device — there's a motor, a driving wheel, and a current of electricity that goes from the top of the pole into the car."

A natural storyteller, Bolger has absorbed theatrical craft from theatre artists with whom he has collaborated, the likes of Tony award-winning director Garry Hynes (on the Synge Cycle and JB Keane plays), Conall Morrison and Cameron Macintosh. His first professional performance was in the vaudeville world in *HMS Pinafore*. One of his own earliest choreographies, *Silent Scream*, was based on supreme entertainer Charlie Chaplin. In keeping with this show-biz background, his physical storytelling has always had one end in mind — to connect with an audience, to entertain, to get the message across in an uncluttered, direct way. The esoteric and obtuse is not for him. *"I want to tell human stories,"* he says, unequivocally.

The *Dodgems* world he has created *"is an exotic and alluring dark world. There is also something light. It's a real contrast. It's a real space of opposites really. No-one is who they say they are at all. Which is quite nice. You believe it because you want to be taken on a journey. You bought your ticket, you get immersed in a world, and taken on a journey that will entertain you for a while."*

It's a carnivalesque world in which anything can happen. Even nuns can become exotic *"amazing, helping on the dodgems, or part of our darker Magdalen Laundries history."* Ambiguity allows taboos and dream-like associations to merge, float, and disperse again. Just as *Irish* does not lend itself to being pinned down, neither does the exact meaning of Bolger's physical, but accessible idiom.

"It's not a linear story. It's not like a play with a beginning, middle, and end. It's a story that plays with your mind a little bit. Which the fairground does, because it turns you upside down."

Open to interpretation, as it plunges us back into our childhood experiences of funfairs, dodging, colliding, and teenage flirtations perhaps, *Dodgems* invites personal reaction. Bring your inner child out to play. The ambiguity inherent in multi-layered dance theatre *"plays with another part of your brain, that you mightn't be used to using. There is a real intellect in dance."*

But on this island of verbose storytellers, how did Bolger arrive at this physical idiom? In a country whose dance role-models were mostly lost to history, Bolger drew his inspiration from everywhere — the world around him. Firstly, there was the childhood world of circus:

"Originally I just wanted to run away with the circus. When I was quite young I was fascinated with performance and the make-believe world that kids have, which is a great play world. Luckily, I had visiting circus troupes near me. I became fascinated by circus, terrified of clowns, and absolutely besotted by trapeze artists and the way they moved. I thought Wow — these people are flying!"

The exotic repertoire and life-story of his German next-door neighbour Agnes Bernelle, war-time refugee cabaret artist and actress, opened up all kinds of doors into unknown worlds to the young artist. *"All her cabaret, the Kurt Weill songs made a huge impression on me as a child. We weren't singing Puppet on a String, we were singing Mack the Knife, and The Port of Amsterdam. That was a really rich world."*

Unsurprisingly, excited by the salvage of 1940's modern dance connections between Ireland and Germany, in the form of Erina Brady's Mary Wigman-inspired Irish School of Dance Art, and Dublin performances of anti-war masterpiece *The Green Table* by the seminal Ballets Jooss, CoisCéim presented a season of events celebrating this little-known connection in 2006 entitled *Threads*. Still today Bolger finds: *"a connection with people coming to Ireland from different countries — what I can learn from them, and they can learn from me. If we block them out, we're not going to learn those lessons."*

The ultimate destination for this negotiation and exchange, invention, and reinvention is of course the spectator: *"We absolutely want it to connect ... I've always wanted to communicate with people in dance. I keep thinking of the Dodgem blade connecting — no wonder I'm doing a piece on a Dodgem track — about 2 plates coming together to make something go."*

No wonder we are here with CoisCéim in a mechanically-propelled fairground of humanity in all its delicious guises, abilities, disabilities, connecting, colliding, dealing with the whiplash — living. Buckle up and enjoy the ride.

Deirdre Mulrooney is the author of Irish Moves, an illustrated history of dance and physical theatre in Ireland, published by the Liffey Press. www.theliffeypress.ie.