

AT SWIM, TWO BOYS

Developed in collaboration with author Jamie O'Neill and quoting lines from his *At Swim, Two Boys* read by the writer himself, this elaborate visual spectacle by Earthfall plumbed the novel's historical context of Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising for projected backdrop, a springboard for the more vital love story played out in muscular exigency by two dancers across a pool of water.

Archive film footage of the insurgents' struggle against the British and the wider vision of Europe at war flickered across a metal wall of dripping liquid, while two musicians maintained a martial beat. But this was all undercurrent, a tragi-heroic glorifying of the romance between 16-year-old swimmers Jim and Doyler, who to melodies that switched between high-flown trumpet solos and crashing rock, fell breathlessly into one another, sliding, twisting and skimming in an ecstatic courtship that routinely soaked the front row.

As the boys, Terry Michael and Cai Tomos were seldom shy of mesmerising, more so as they discarded their work clothes for kilts, then those for trunks, their freedom as they escaped seawards evident in the increasing fluidity of their movements.

Even the frustration engendered at the erratic sketching of the rebellion was forgivable, as it seemed in keeping with the boys' single-minded obsession.

Directors Jim Ennis and Jessica Cohen are to be commended for marrying so many disparate elements together with such polish, grace and tenderness.

Jay Richardson, The Scotsman

AT SWIM, TWO BOYS

Does Earthfall's dance piece capture the essence of Jamie O'Neill's award-winning novel? Not having read the book, I can't say, but going by audience reactions I can vouchsafe one thing – At Swim Two Boys made many of them see dance in a totally different light. Partly because Earthfall's directors, Jessica Cohen and Jim Ennis, took a thoroughly eye-catching, albeit far from easy, path when staging this story of young male love in a time of turmoil and divided loyalties.

The book is set in 1916, against the battlegrounds of the First World War and the Easter Rising: it's only when the lads go swimming that they find a time and a place to be themselves, to resolve differences – one is English, the other Irish – and to forge a relationship. You've guessed it? Yes, Cohen and Ennis locate the choreography in water.

A high wall doubles as a screen (for projected images of troops, landscape, sea swells) and as a waterfall that increasingly deepens the on-stage pool. Plumes of spray soon shoot over into the front rows when Terry Michael and Cai Tomos are in full-on leaping, kicking and tussling mode. Not so much Eurocrash, but Eurosplash: hectic, hurling and rebounding movements that use physical brinkmanship as a metaphor for anger, frustration, despair.

Soaked through – wet kilts must be a misery to dance in – the men power through the sketched-in narrative to really excellent live music. This often shifts mood more effectively than the choreography which, perforce, tends to get water-logged, especially when it comes to catching the growing tenderness between the lads. Maybe some words don't translate into action, despite bold and caring intentions.

Mary Brennan, The Herald

AT SWIM, TWO BOYS

Audiences are soaking up this production from Welsh company, Earthfall - especially those sitting in the first few rows. As they dive and skid through the shallow pool of water on the stage floor, two male dancers send spray in all directions. Earthfall have filleted Jamie O'Neill's historical novel, *At Swim Two Boys*, and created an evocative piece that combines dance, sound and live music with archive footage...projected onto a beautifully illuminated wall of water that forms the backdrop to the young lovers' duets. Minimal extracts from the novel are presented in voice-over, sketching the predicament of the young men: discovering secret love and torn between different, insistent interpretations of Irish patriotism in 1916.

Plaintive trumpet solos enhance their tender eroticism, as they roll and aquaplane in a series of repeated movements that cumulatively create a mood of sensual yearning... The historical references are suggested subtly, until the close, when the wider world exerts its unavoidable force in an arresting final image.

I confess, reader, there were some viewers whose eyes involuntarily contributed yet more water to the proceedings.

Helen Meany, Irish Theatre Magazine

AT SWIM, TWO BOYS

Whilst there is a clear narrative line throughout the production, based on the two main characters in Jamie O'Neill's award winning novel of the same name, and much of the skilful back projection places the action in the context of the Easter Rising in Ireland and the first World War, it is the sheer abstract beauty of the choreography, executed so brilliantly by both performers, so subtly enmeshed with the profound musicality of Roger Mills and Frank Naughton, placed in Gerald Tyler's unique setting with his totally emphatic lighting that overwhelms all our senses in this truly wonderful work of near perfect co-operative art.

The stage is a low pool of about three or four inches of water backed by a steel wall with water constantly flowing down it throughout the action. The two boys sit on top of the wall at an iron ladder leading down into the water. Before the first boy reaches the stage we see that there is a delicate and tender love growing between them. When the first dancer hits the water it ripples out all around him catching the light, the first of many ever-repeating beautiful moments. One can almost believe that directors Jim Ennis and Jessica Cohen have such a great understanding of the situation that they are able to choreograph the waves in the sea.

We see the relationship grows and the dependency they share strengthen. This emotional drawing of their two hearts together is reflected in the complete physical dependency and total trust that the two dancers must have for each other, as so much of the complex movement calls for strong and reliable mutual support. With the most profound projection of the human spirit Terry Michael and Cai Thomas love and live in dance as many of us might love and live through life.

But these are two vigorous young men bursting with joy and life and this they show, creating tremendous excitement in fast moving dance work, at all times enhancing the emotion with the glitter and song of the swirling water often adding a muted trumpet and lyrical guitar. As well as excelling in dance and movement, the two boys are excellent actors they control their feelings, making us aware of their passion without fully embracing it.

They go into the sea to swim and even more imaginative, exhilarating and profoundly moving pictures overwhelm our senses. The colour of the back projection intensifies, the strength of their need and dependency deepens. The war imposes; the hurt and the beauty dig deeply into us. Like a many layered universal drama the production is a wide embracing allegory but its greatest achievement is its aesthetic and its Da Vinciesque beauty.

Since its inception in 1989 Earthfall has won many awards, made some bold experiments and continues to explore dance theatre in ways that will continue to captivate and surprise us.

Michael Kelligan, Theatre in Wales website

At Swim Two Boys

Based on Jamie O'Neill's award-winning novel, this dance version of the relationship between two teenage boys at the time of the Easter Rising in Ireland is a powerful piece of theatre which embraces movement, music and visual imagery.

All three of these elements are symbolised by the wall of water which drips constantly, gradually filling the shallow trough of a stage in which the dancers meet and fulfil their destiny. Its steady sound is both harmonising and disturbing as the story progresses.

Physically well-matched in stature and looks, Terry Michael and Cai Tomos are like two sides of the same being. Their early movements are synchronised, slow and measured. They disport themselves in concert, with bodies leaning in to one another, regular and repeated motifs mirroring aspects of each other.

Stills and old film sequences are projected on to the backdrop, as well as shots of the dancers in other settings, placing them within the wider context of a conflict into which they are inevitably drawn, as they wrestle in a semi-playful rivalry that foreshadows their fate as victims of political events. The image of a gunman intrudes in the idyll and Roger Mills' music changes from the carefree and lyrical to insistent drumbeat and military march, while recorded voices express the divisions of the era.

Separated from the other, each dancer expresses angular and anguished movements.

Together again in the sea, there is drama before sunset shots of their bodies are reflected in the water, beautiful but blood red. A stunning concept all round.

Pru Farrier, The Stage

At Swim Two Boys ****

At Swim Two Boys seems to me a major piece of dance-theatre that managed to engage, excite and exhilarate almost to the point of emotional exhaustion.

It's based on the award-winning novel by Jamie O'Neill (a long-term friend of Earthfall directors Jim Ennis and Jessica Cohen), the story of two teenage boys who fall in love in Ireland at the time of the Great War and the Easter Rising and who seem closest when they are swimming in the sea – hence the set (designed by Gerald Tyler, usually involved with the company as a performer), an area of water with a wall that is like a constant waterfall, within which Terry Michael and Cai Tomos perform fully clothed, in kilts and in trunks.

Earthfall's strengths usually lie in the company's quirkiness, its wit, its mix of dance forms, its range of performing styles, but here it is an intense duet that gains from the discipline – all that you can say is that it fits with the company's policy of surprise.

As with all Earthfall shows, this is obviously no ordinary performance – there is, as ever, live music accompaniment from Roger Mills and Frank Naughton, muted trumpet and electric guitar creating a lyrical soundscape, and a backdrop of film that merges archive footage and film of the two boys. In its more energetic moments, it is (dare one say it) reminiscent of Gododdin-period Brith Gof, all muscular physicality, but in its overall wordless eloquence it is unlike anything else you will have seen, I suspect, at times almost agonising slow motion action, at others synchronised rigour.

What you also usually get from Earthfall is content: the shows are about something, often something serious. At Swim Two Boys is clearly an allegory of love and peace, of gracefulness and tenderness, that is played out against a bloody war and a national revolution, the sea acting as a kind of safety zone immune to the conflict and bloodshed.

"I don't hate the English and I don't know if I love the Irish, but I love him and he is my country," says one boy, expressing the passion that overrides patriotism.

But I suspect the story may be about more and I'm not convinced I found it in this very moving production, where the personal relationship between the boys – never explicit or overtly intimate – made the flickering images of soldiers and insurrection seem irrelevant.

It is, nevertheless, a deeply affecting piece, one that manages to combine sensitivity and physicality, and one where so many aspects of the production work together – the set, the mournful horn, the lighting, the choreography, the silent exchanges between the boys, the sheer art in the dancework.

One last point: you may well cry but you will also get wet if you sit near the front. Come prepared to be moved and soaked. **David Adams, Western Mail**

