

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- September 28-30, 2017, Séoul Performing Arts Festival
- October 5-8, Culturescapes Greece 2017, Basel
- November 8-10, Dansens Hus Stockholm
- du 16 au 19 novembre, National Performing Arts Center, Taipei
- les 2 et 3 mars 2018, Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbonne
- les 9 et 10 mars, Rivoli - Teatro Municipal do Porto
- du 20 au 23 mars, Théâtre de la Ville/La Villette-Paris
- le 29 mars, Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg

THE GREAT TAMER

History is often made of floors and ceilings, and in *The Great Tamer*, Dimitris Papaioannou doesn't hesitate to challenge his eleven performers to find their balance and projection points on an inflated stage constantly going through a process of deconstruction, swelling up, absorption, and even rejection. Starting from this metaphor of man in a position of research, the show becomes a sensorial and primitive epic. "The point is to dig and bury, then reveal. We're talking about identity, about the past, about legacy and interiority." Revealing the small tragedies and great absurdities of our modern lives, bringing together well-known and ambiguous figures from the world of the circus – the clown, the acrobat – the work of the Greek choreographer is at once melancholic and funny, and plays on theatrical conventions with the audience, in all simplicity. Between levity and tragedy, within a plastic world that pays homage to some of the greatest European painters—Botticelli, Raphael, El Greco, Rembrandt, Magritte, Kounellis – Dimitris Papaioannou sets the bar high and asks all of us to "exhaust our lives" and to give everything we can before leaving this world. This quest for grace and beauty is neither relaxing nor contemplative.

DIMITRIS PAPAIOANNOU

With a training in fine arts, Dimitris Papaioannou came to creation through drawing. After receiving recognition early as a painter and comics illustrator, he turned to the performing arts as a director, choreographer, performer, and set, costume, and lighting designer. The first artistic cycle of his work revolved around the Edafos Dance Theatre group, with whom he worked for 17 years, until 2002. The creation of the opening ceremony of the 2004 Olympics in Athens brought him international fame. Since 1986, his personal work has been a hybrid research in experimental dance, a mix of physical theatre, art of movement, and performance with which he questions creation, identity, and the legacy of Western cultural memory. His last shows, *Primal Matter* (2012) and *Still Life* (2014), are representative of that intimate quest of a man revealing his fears and questioning his environment and his destiny. Dimitris Papaioannou will be presenting his work at the Festival d'Avignon for the first time.

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INTERVIEW WITH DIMITRIS PAPAIOANNOU

Your plays often find their original inspiration in the exploration of a space and its scenography, of matter. What are the matters and images that inspired this new show?

Dimitris Papaioannou: *The Great Tamer* explores an archaeological theme: the idea is to bury metaphorical acts we will then dig out and reveal, in order to speak of identity, of the past, of legacy, and of our subconscious inner life. To dig is to give yourself the opportunity of discovering the treasure buried inside you, to stumble upon your cultural legacy by chance. This excavation project was originally inspired by a news item I came across: the story of a young boy who killed himself after being bullied by his classmates, and whose body was found half-buried in muddy ground. Traditional and social media had talked a lot about his story at the time. His death became an emotional catalyst for this work. It became a metaphor for creation: to create life, imitate it, and then destroy it. Which is why the eleven performers of the show move around a theatre stage that has been somewhat deconstructed and left unstable. The ground itself becomes more and more deconstructed as the show unfolds by the dancers themselves, they dig it up and discover objects and stories buried there. What *The Great Tamer* evokes is a departure for a fundamental quest, to explore the unknown. The idea is to uproot yourself out of your origins to explore, walk, to look for balance in the path you're following—between levity and tragedy, to manage in the end to “exhaust your life,” to give everything you can give before leaving this world. The quest for beauty and grace is therefore neither relaxing nor contemplative. This show is also about the way we treat our idols, our ideal representations of mankind, like Christ and the symbols associated with him, the crucifixion, the passion, and the feeling of infinite guilt that it leads to. Man is always searching for truth and clarity, but once he's found them, he darkens and destroys them, before starting out on that same quest again, guided by this thirst for rediscovery or new beginning. This quest is infinite, like Sisyphus with his rock. I'm not a pessimist, but sometimes it's melancholy that triumphs at the end of some of my shows, and sometimes it's hope.

Your shows bring together different registers: from the dream to the Greek tragedy, but also the absurd...

I play with distortions of time and of the human body, which allows me to open a window onto a dreamlike world. The atmospheres and situations in my shows are close to those of our dreams. Here, the traditional figures of the circus are evoked—the acrobat, the clown maybe—and put through the filter of dream, the scenes are infused with a dreamlike distance, to the point that we can question the layers of reality through the dream. The show is built like a slow initiatory journey, with a non-linear structure, during which the characters who haunt the show go on a quest for the beauty and grace of the world. This journey follows the trail of those elements that are essential to our lives: nature, creativity, inspiration, the origins of dance and of beauty. The audience become witnesses to the waking dream of a Beckettian-looking character who fantasises about humanity. The border between dream and reality becomes

so thin that the shift from the dream to the nightmare is almost imperceptible. The surrealist references scattered throughout the play guide us on an artistic and visual journey that defies borders and temporality: from El Greco to Magritte, by way of Raphael, Botticelli, and Rembrandt. The dancers always keep in mind the presence of the audience and play with the memory of theatre and its conventions. We try to create communication and a sense of community, like a clown does. The illusion is created right in front of the audience, so that they are aware of the distance but can decide to believe it anyway. It's their responsibility to choose to believe the illusion and to come with us on this imaginary journey we're proposing. Only then can a feeling of pleasure arise, be it caused by melancholy, pain, or joy, a pleasure that can be difficult but that is shared by the performers and the audience.

Are your shows therefore a celebration of art, even of art history, as well as of everyday history?

I've understood after years of work that my approach to images and situations is influenced by my cultural heritage as a Greek, by a harmony and emotional balance inherited from the ancient Greeks. I carry within me the visual memory of broken statues, of bas-reliefs, of white marble columns, of the nakedness of the gods of Olympus. I've spent a lot of time this past couple years thinking about this conscious and unconscious memory of my culture and of Greek identity that I carry within me and “transmit” through my work. This legacy is important, but it is usually instinctive, it has much to do with my training as a painter and my way of understanding my environment through constructed and deconstructed images. Byzantine imagery recently resurfaced in the media with the refugees coming to Greece, carrying on their backs gold or silver survival blankets, tragic images that grabbed people's attention, from a social point of view at first, but also visually, by reminding us of the golden icons of Byzantine mosaics that you'll find in churches throughout Greece. Those situations and images cause deep feelings and force us to confront the ambiguity between the awfulness of the situation and the beauty of collective memory. This situation of unbalance, of displacement, and of pleasure, is something that's enjoyable in theatre, when arises a moment of precariousness where you're not sure what you're looking at, that moment where you touch the border between reality and imagination. Facing one's fears and unease can bring pleasure. The mutilated figure of Greek statues, juxtaposed with the mutilated bodies of beggars on the street, places us in a dilemma, between disgust and pleasure before monstrosity and beauty. My work is based on an exploration of these feelings of balance and imbalance, of illusion and reality through the manipulation of light, raw and ordinary materials, temporality, and the body. Poetry resides in insignificant and trivial things, like watching a child play with a rock or a twig. My job is to invent surprise and imagination from the most insignificant things, precisely because we are so used to them. It awakens archetypes from our collective memory, shared images the artist can awaken and reuse. I like to work on the distortion of images as well, on the hallucinatory effect it can create for the audience.

— Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach.