

AND...

PRESS CONFERENCE with Akram Khan,
July 17 at 11:00, cour du Cloître Saint-Louis

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- August 28 and 29, 2019, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam (Netherlands)
- September 6 and 7, Theater Rotterdam (Netherlands)
- September 11 to 20, Théâtre de la Ville, Le 13^e Art, Paris
- September 24 and 25, Düsseldorf Festival (Germany)
- October 8 and 9, Stanislavsky Music Theatre,
Dance Inversion Festival, Moscou (Russia)
- November 29 and 30, Grand Théâtre de Provence, Aix-en-Provence
- December 4 to 7, Théâtre de Namur (Belgium)
- December 10 and 11, Central Le Théâtre, La Louvière (Belgium)

OUTWITTING THE DEVIL

"*The devil, by the way, is here purely human.*" Through the founding myths and elementary rituals of mankind, *Outwitting the Devil*, a social and environment-focused epic, explores collective stories and fragments of lost histories. By trying to master the mad dash of time and to tame nature, men seem to compare themselves to the gods in a vain effort to escape death, forgetting their responsibility as "transmitters" in the process. Their quest for immortality is a way to "make light of the Devil." Both victims and accomplices of a world draining resources too unequally distributed, our societies trudge forward halfway between light and darkness, between knowledge and oblivion, between creative strength and destructive power. British choreographer Akram Khan, of Bangladeshi descent, summons to the stage six dancers of diverse age, memory, and history, who become the actors of an essential collective rite. Dance and music deliver a universal message of alarm about the human condition and the draining of the earth's resources, a powerful defence of the need to share.

AKRAM KHAN

Born in London in 1974 to a Bangladeshi family, Akram Khan was 7 when he started learning kathak, a traditional Indian dance. At age 13, he performed in Peter Brook's *Mahâbhârata*. A dancer and choreographer, he founded **Akram Khan Company** with Farooq Chaudhry in 2000, a space for original creations bringing together tradition and contemporary dance. His shows, like the section he created for the Olympic ceremony in London in 2012, are both vital and diverse, thanks to his many collaborations (Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Sylvie Guillem, Nitin Sawhney, Juliette Binoche, Anish Kapoor, etc.). Akram Khan is known and celebrated throughout the world; this is his first time at the Festival d'Avignon.

73rd
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In order to bring you this edition, over 1,700 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tireless and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.

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COUR D'HONNEUR DU PALAIS DES PAPES

INTERVIEW WITH AKRAM KHAN

**Outwitting the Devil: what hides behind this enigmatic title?
What stories inspired you to create this powerful evocation?**

Akram Khan : The devil here is purely human. It's about greed and inequality, about the way we mistreat the environment and waste natural resources, about hunger... When we first started working on this project, the devil also stood for time. We're always trying to find a way to control time, to outwit it, because we feel that we only have so much of it. But to "trick the Devil" would also be, in a way, to trick ourselves. The project is based on several founding stories of our civilisation, of Western culture and the monotheistic tradition. We're working on a fragment from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, which was recently found in Iraq. It's about the domestication of nature and the ascent of mankind to civilisation. It's about destruction, violence, guilt, and already about ecology. It's also the story of an initiation to the human condition and to our own mortality. Like the story of Gilgamesh, *Don Quixote* is the story of two companions. As the first modern novel, it was part of our sources for the show. The same themes of violence, greed, and social madness can be found in it. Another reference is a poem by Persian mystic Rumi: "*The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell, and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth.*" Those notions of fragments, transmission, omission, even oblivion, became a sort of structural logic for our performance. Those are stories we don't necessarily understand all the implications of, and from which we didn't learn much. Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* was also at the origin of our reflections. Beyond the themes of immortality and betrayal, the painting is also about important ideas like community and sharing. The last supper can be seen as a restorative ritual. Coming together to create, not to destroy. It's a collective apprenticeship, a form of resistance to the crumbling down of order, to the explosion of society, to the violence that also serves as backdrop to the show. The choreography will draw from all of that to find the movements, the physical expression that can best represent those concepts.

Ruth Little : The real meaning of all those myths, as emblematic and symbolic as they are, is to show how greed, avarice, and voracity consume others, devour and ravage our world. We pass those stories on without really understanding them, we deliberately choose small fragments and organise them as we see fit, choosing to focus only on what personally interests us in them. We forget what community is, but also that we don't know what it is to remember collectively anymore, what it is to create rituals and perform them together.

There is, in your most recent shows, an urgency to talk about and to the world, through ancient myths and more topical stories. What led to your interest in exploring questions about the environment or society?

Akram Khan : My outlook changed little by little over the course of my career. I used to think that my work was deliberately apolitical. I had this almost romantic idea of it. But I realised that everything in life is political, and it began to manifest itself in my shows. In Akram Khan Company, we feel concerned not only as artists but also as humans, and this need to talk about the world is becoming more and more urgent. We think about the future, about what we're leaving behind for our children, at the state of the world we're leaving them. It's become urgent to talk about those societal problems. We can't separate politics from ecology, either, just like we can't separate human beings from nature. Yet that's exactly what we think we can do, in our attempt to domesticate it. We've created a chasm which stands between nature and society. This separation is an illusion, because they're always intertwined; human nature is also animal and wild, and it's a mistake to cut ourselves off from our environment. That's what myths teach us. From the chaos we call nature is born order. Chaos isn't an accident but a complex structure oscillating between order and disorder. What we see we assume is order, what we can't see we think is chaos. But it's precisely what we can't see we should try to shine a light on today.

Ruth Little : There's always been, on some level, a real environmental conscience in Akram Khan's work. Nature plays a big part in his works, with the relationship to the earth and, by extension, to our ecosystem. Onstage, we're showing a reflection of our relationship to the natural world and of our attempts to control it, even if this wild nature is an integral part of us.

How do you apprehend the multidisciplinary, or rather the interdisciplinary nature of your creative work?

Akram Khan : We also work with people from different backgrounds, with different skills. For this show, we wanted to focus on working with people of varying ages. The idea was to bring together onstage six dancers (including one 52- and one 68-year-old dancers, and four younger ones). I wanted to pick dancers and participants who'd belong to different age groups, for their different experience of time and in time, their respective qualities and energy, their unique stories and memories of the body.

What I also like about working with the company is that moment where, within a single space, we're creating different layers of the work. One of us gets an idea and whispers it in someone else's ear to see if they're receptive to it. It gives that person another idea, which they whisper to the next person, and so on. I think that exchanging thoughts and seeing them unfold little by little is the best way to work. It's often something that happens in a more isolated fashion, but working as a group is a very fertile source of inspiration.

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Interview conducted by Malika Baaziz and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach