



NEW CREATION

INTERVIEW WITH DIMITRIS PAPAIOANNOU

Can you tell us how *New Creation* came to be?

Dimitris Papaioannou: I wanted to try to understand what a son is to his father. And vice versa. I decided to explore the idea of “succession,” with two main questions: “What are the ties between a son and his father?” and “How does the process of succession go in life?” The bull as an archetypal image of hyper-fertile masculinity was a constant visual companion during this research: from the story of the Minotaur and that of Theseus to Pablo Picasso’s paintings of bulls. I am obsessed with the struggle between old and new, and therefore between the son and the father. The Minotaur is a monster, locked up by Minos, King of Crete, but also the queen’s child from an adulterous love. He’s a secret son-in-law, the tension between the life and death instincts, and represents the domination of the Minoan civilisation. He also sits at a historical crossroads and embodies the fight between archaism and modern renewal. It’s Theseus, son of the King of Athens, who will put an end to that domination by murdering the man with a bull’s head. In doing so, Theseus strengthens the symbol of Athenian democracy against tyranny. It’s a fight between generations, a struggle for posterity. We can find similar, unchanging elements in other founding myths, like that of Kronos; this ancient Titan who devoured his children but was killed by one of his sons, Zeus, who’d managed to escape him. A murder which changed the world order.

The story of the gods is a cycle of infanticides and parricides, and tells us about the origins of what we call succession or transmission. To succeed, to kill one’s father, means doing away with old authority, with the old world, to create one’s own authority, one’s own autonomy and rules, in order to rule a world remade in one’s own image. Once total independence has been won, the figure of the father can be rediscovered, with the son revealing in himself principles inherited from his direct ancestors. That’s what the story of Pinocchio says when the father is saved from the belly of the whale, from the depths of the ocean. It’s a passage that makes the son aware, if not of his heredity, at least of his legacy.

With so many ancient and modern images and symbols, the stage seems almost to turn into a Greek island...

I do play with the symbols of the bull and of the woman as fountain, this feminine image from which water spouts, submerging everything around her. Those characters, or rather those symbols, provide a shared frame of reference to almost all of us, linked to Ancient Greece but also to events our societies have gone through more recently. The painter Pablo Picasso used the image of the bull as a symbol of masculine power, and in particular the image of the Minotaur to evoke his sexual power over the young nymphs he “consumed” in abundance and tyrannically. Hyper-masculinity is now made to face its own flaws, and it has been particularly challenged for a few years now. This archaic symbol of the Minotaur is relevant if we want to talk about this extremely modern topic. With the shift our society is currently going through, I wanted to look back on those icons with tenderness before “killing” them, with all the symbolism it implies. Just like I want to look at the figure of the father with tenderness before killing him again. It’s about making the symbols talk to each other, to understand and accept them—as integral parts of ourselves—before doing away with them. A few months ago, my father fell gravely ill, and all of a sudden he seemed aged and weakened to me. I understood it was now up to me to take responsibility, since I was about to succeed him—whether I wanted to or not—when I’d spent my whole life fighting him and running away from him. Now I’m responsible for a family legacy, for what my ancestors passed on to me, what I’ve passed on myself to younger artists... There’s a delicate balance yet to find between the raw character of the past and the fertility of the future. It’s in this context that the story of Theseus fighting the Minotaur, or of Zeus killing his father Kronos to topple the old order, take on their full meaning.

Can you tell us more about how you create images?

Creating illusions with bodies is something I play with in all my shows, which turns the dancers into the puppeteers of their own bodies as well as objects. If I am obsessed with the quest for classical harmony, I always hope to be able to talk about it with the distance of humour. The final form of a show isn't always the result of your initial ambition for it... Although I think laughter is still the most eloquent means of communication, my shows veer more often towards melancholy than comedy. We often talked about Buster Keaton and silent films during the creative process, in order to explore a burlesque aesthetics but also for the way the silhouettes of the characters move in those films. As if they were but a single line in movement, like an animated drawing set against an empty background at times. I see form as primordial, and the bodies as little drawings on the stage, ink or charcoal sketches... That's why in *New Creation*, unlike my previous shows, I've decided to have the bodies of the dancers move in front of a light, bright background against which lines and silhouettes stand out to create meaning.

The dramaturgy of the show doesn't follow a linear narrative, but rather a fragmented, piecemeal one.

For the past few years, I have organised workshops before delving into the creative process, in order to do some preliminary work, to test forms and ideas. Creating a show is a long and always uncertain process, you have to give yourself the time to lose yourself in research, and to let free associations of ideas to emerge. I suggest forms more than I impose them. I prepare sketches before we start rehearsing as a sort of gateway towards other images which will appear as we improvise, to form a constellation of possible options. To take the time of discovery is to pay close attention to the minutest details and to what they may become. In the early days of the work, everything is mixed up, then some ideas manage to extirpate themselves from the chaos of the mind and find their place. I try to stay away from linearity by using references we all share, at least in our Western civilisations. It's a fragmentary mode of communication, which allows each of us to follow our own path of understanding and meaning, a little like in a dream. I'm deliberately trying to train the eye of the spectator to recognise forms and combine them as they see fit to create a story that is at once collective and personal. With our hyper-connected lives, in our world of constant images and information, it may sometimes seem hard to come back to simpler or spontaneous modes of imagination. That's why I try to return to the capacity for wonder of children, by taking the audience on a journey of visual associations, so that they can look at things anew and find wonder again in simple joys. That's the illusion of theatre, the joy of "make believe."

Interview conducted by Moïra Dalant the 14th March 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach