



LIFE LAID BARE

Jane Cornwell meets Dimitris Papaioannou, whose show *The Great Tamer* has been hailed as a work of genius

Midway through *The Great Tamer*, a dreamlike piece of what might be contemporary dance, performance art, or a series of moving frescoes, an astronaut bobs across a lunar landscape, stopping now and then to dig in the ground, the breathing inside their space helmet loud, solitary. A capacity audience at London's Sadler's Wells continues craning forward, as mesmerised by this sequence as by those preceding it, by images that conjure cosmos and chaos, epochs and archetypes. By the cycle of life: birth, rebirth, back to the earth, via the great tamer that is death.

"I see us on a journey in which we struggle to understand how to use everything in our span of life," says Dimitris Papaioannou, 54, the show's director and visionary (choreographer, he'll tell me later, is a title he dislikes), charming and moustachioed, in a hotel lobby near Sadler's Wells. "The characters that haunt this show are on a quest for the beauty and grace of the world. The audience is a witness to a fantasy about humanity."

Trained in fine arts, receiving early recognition as a painter and illustrator before steering the critically acclaimed Edafos Dance Theatre for 17 years until 2002, Papaioannou garnered international renown through his creative direction of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Athens 2004 Olympics (variously featuring Bjork, a plunge pool and a supporting cast of dancers dressed as Greek gods and mythic beasts). He would prefer not to talk about that, which is fair enough. There has been much dazzling work since then.

Inside (2011) was a large-scale installation at Palace Theatre in central Athens in which 30 performers used a combination of movements to document our daily return home. *Still Life* (2014) was a meditation on the myth of Sisyphus, who was compelled to push a huge rock up a mountain only to have it roll down again, forcing him to start over; it was a smash hit at the 2017 Sydney Festival. Last year Papaioannou created *Since She*, a full-length work for Germany's Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, the first (anti) choreographer to do so since Bausch's death in 2009.

The Great Tamer is a wordless spectacle that

draws on Greek mythology to ask questions about creation, identity and Western cultural memory in ways that are moving, occasionally macabre, sometimes playful and ultimately pulsing with hope.

"The border between dream and reality in this show is so thin that the shift from dream to nightmare is almost imperceptible," Papaioannou says of an intense, 100-minute work (no interval) that has won standing ovations across Europe and seen him hailed as a genius.

"Undoubtedly magnificent proof of the enormous visual talent of one of the best creators of the Mediterranean vanguard," declared Spain's *El Mundo* newspaper. "We dreamt about it,"

said *Le Monde* of France. "Papaioannou made it happen."

The Great Tamer begins as it means to go on: slowly. On a movable stage covered in large black tiles that act as shields, pile up into hills or lift to reveal tunnels and other hiding places, a 10-strong cast of men with moustaches and women with flowing hair ("An old-fashioned gender division and my way of dealing with anima and animus") move with careful deliberation to the strains of Johann Strauss II's *The Blue Danube*, itself delayed and fragmented to ghostly effect.

Everywhere, meaning is up for grabs. A naked male body lies under a sheet that is blown

off, over and again, by the draught from a falling tile. The human story, Papaioannou seems to be saying, is a process of covering and uncovering. History doesn't erase: digging unearths body parts — arms, legs, naked torsos — and a dried-up skeleton. A tumbling skull recalls Hamlet and Shakespeare. A pair of workboots, spotlighted like an offering, are connected to the ground by gnarly, primordial roots — an image fashioned in tribute to Greek-Italian artist Jannis Kounellis, whose creative use of "poor" materials including stone and sackcloth made him a key figure of the postwar arte povera movement.

Truth, identity and legacy are sought out, usually discovered by chance, then compulsively destroyed. This is what we do, says Papaioannou with a shrug. "Then we start all over again, guided by our thirst for rediscovery and new beginnings. The quest is infinite, like Sisyphus with his rock."

To illustrate humankind's circuitous sojourn, Papaioannou offers us tableaux inspired by Greek classics: Narcissus, in love with his reflection; Hecate, goddess of magic and necromancy: bare-breasted, body-painted, pagan; Demeter, appearing after a flurry of arrows magically transforms the stage into a wheat field; Persephone, queen of the underworld, whose ability to cross between above and below ("into our archaic subconscious") is at the crux of the show.

"My approach is influenced by a harmony and balance inherited from the ancient Greeks," says Papaioannou, for whom this memory — with its attendant notion of sacred and profane — is in the Greek DNA. Indeed, in his home city of Athens, gradually recovering from years of crippling austerity, there's an archeological dimension to digging new foundations, as treasures are often unearthed in the process: pieces of pots, the broken columns of a temple, a naked marble god missing a limb.

The fragmentary nature of our lives is another theme. Dismembered limbs crawl across the stage, combining to form curious hybrids — a man is reborn as an ancient sculpture; a single walking body is formed out of five bodies — using tricks so endearingly obvious, we are forced back on our imaginations.

"The journey of trying to understand your-



A scene from *The Great Tamer*, left; above, a tableau that references Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*