

The Great Magician

An interview with Dimitris Papaioannou

by Catherine Somzé



A larger-than-life, half-naked hybrid tentatively moves across the stage, lifting one limb at a time. In one instant, it appears as a centaur; in another, as no less than the entangled bodies of several performers, painstakingly enmeshed as one. Attention effortlessly slides from illusion, to constitutive mechanics, to self-deceit, as one wishes to only *see* the mythical beast.

Greek experimental theater maker Dimitris Papaioannou reinvents stage art as a trick of the mind. His optical illusions are to dance what Georges Méliès' special effects and René Magritte's use of trompe-l'oeil are to cinema and painting. His oeuvre openly invites viewers to put their imagination to work. This is the task of all great magicians who, in order to seduce, turn passive viewers into willing participants.

Papaioannou is now touring with *The Great Tamer*, his first international co-production and the closing installment of a trilogy that started in 2012 with *Primal Matter*, followed by *Still Life* in 2014. For those who mourned the death of modern dance luminaries Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham in 2009, Papaioannou emerged as one of their most talented successors with *Nowhere* — a show that premiered in the same year.

Papaioannou's work falls in line with what experts call 'post-dramatic' theater. His silent plays are plotless, instead illustrating universal themes such as the ambiguity of love and the ineluctability of death. *The Great Tamer* is composed of magnificent tableaux vivants, some of which are reminiscent of iconic art historical works. Papaioannou makes use of techniques formulated in both Western and Asian stage art, combining slapstick and circus influences with Japanese puppet theater and butoh's extremely controlled motions, absurd settings and grotesque imagery.

In his home country, Papaioannou became famous for his work during his stint as Creative Director for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. He became an internet sensation when the central scene of *Nowhere*, featuring a human machine smoothly undressing both a boy and a girl, went viral on social media. Papaioannou talks with ZOO Magazine about *The Great Tamer*, art versus propaganda, and the importance of accepting yourself.





Dimitris Papaioannou
The Great Tamer, 2017
 Photo by Julian Mommert

Catherine Somzé: As we speak, raving reviews are flowing in about *The Great Tamer* in Avignon, where your work is being seen for the first time.

Dimitris Papaioannou: Yes, I am happy that they are good and there are many!

CS: How did *The Great Tamer* come into being?

DP: I had an emotional response to the suicide (or murder, as it is still unclear) of a young boy who had been bullied at school, and whose body was found by a lake buried in muddied ground. The tragic story had a great impact on me, and I felt deeply touched.

CS: That is quite a loaded subject. How did the show develop from that point?

DP: I had two or three images in my head, as well as the concept of archaeology and the idea of things from the past emerging to the surface, bridging past and present. But I didn't know what I was going to do beforehand. I had to rely on my instinct. I just selected people, and then we started to play with objects chosen for their materiality, and slowly, movement by movement, ideas started to emerge. These then became compositions that transformed into scenes. And then, once the story seemed to be there, we filled in the gaps by inventing the missing fragments. During the whole procedure, we had a lot of insecurity about not making sense at all. It was an adventure. This is my preferred way of working now. It is chaotic, but possibilities appear that I never would have thought of on my own.

CS: So, you haven't always worked in such an experimental way?

DP: No, this is only one of the two ways I have worked. The other way, which used to be my favorite, is to control everything from the start. I have an idea, I draw it, I make a comic out of it, like a storyboard, I decide the set design — which is very important for me — and then I select the people. This is how I worked on the ceremonies in Athens, and later for the opening ceremony of the European Games in Baku.

CS: Is this also the way you worked on *Medea* and *Inside*?

DP: Yes, although the Olympics and European Games commissions are something entirely different from my personal research and expression. Let's be clear: these ceremonies might use art but they are not art in and of themselves. These assignments are national propaganda — one has to be positive and optimistic at all times. Part of the job is to erase the malfunctions of history, and this is not how art works. But it does take artistic skill to do these big advertisements for culture. It has been a great exercise to sharpen and test my tools on an enormous scale using incredible technology and thousands of people.

CS: *The Great Tamer*, on the other hand, is very low-tech.

DP: Absolutely. In fact, *The Great Tamer* is one of the lowest tech shows you can find out there. It is inspired by the humblest materials — wood, earth, water and stones. It is inspired by the spirit and simplicity of Arte Povera.

CS: Do you see yourself as a choreographer?

DP: Out of respect for master choreographers who know the craft very well — such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and William Forsythe — it would be a little bit ridiculous to call myself a choreographer. They know the job very well, whereas my knowledge of Western dance traditions is very limited. But on the other hand, dance is more than what we are accustomed to in Western countries.

CS: And you were trained as a visual artist?

DP: No, not as a visual artist — as a traditional painter. The old-fashioned kind — working from real life with oil on canvas. I made a living from it, and when you are trained like that, you start to see things in a different way — you see shapes and colors in an entirely different non psychological. And once you see as a painter, it never goes away.

CS: What does it mean to choreograph as a painter?

DP: My work is very comparable to the procedure of painting. I understand the relationship of a figure to its background — how light interacts with skin colors and objects, and how these textures work together. I look to these relationships to tell stories and to understand how stories appears on stage. Something that has intense energy for me doesn't necessarily translate visually on stage. Specific methods are required in order to achieve a desired effect, and both of these do not always coincide. So I am not talking about references or aestheticism — I'm talking about composing images in motion — live, using shapes, shadows and colors.

CS: So the end result feels effortless although it is highly constructed?

DP: I like it when things appear as simple imagination tricks, no matter how complicated they are to achieve. Often people think it is easy to do what we do on stage, but performers know how difficult it is. It requires intensive rehearsal and production perfection, for which I have an obsession. As my favorite poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī has put it: "When you brush a form clean, it becomes what it truly is."

CS: You are a craftsman.

DP: I believe there is something purifying in the result when there is a lot of craftsmanship involved, and I learned that from painting. The more hours you dedicate, the more your spirit becomes embedded in the painting, no matter your level of talent. Something purifies the work.

CS: You sometime mention that the performers are your tools. Can you expand on this?

DP: Not simply as bodies, but as characters, personalities and co-creators in the journey of fantasy and experimentation that we embark on in the creation of each play. So, I do not only need talented, but also creative people who are capable of having human relationships with the other members of the group. Relationships of support, tolerance and possibly love.

CS: Why did you choose to not perform in *The Great Tamer*, even though you did in the first



Dimitris Papaioannou
The Great Tamer, 2017
Photo by Julian Mommert



Dimitris Papaioannou
The Great Tamer, 2017
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two parts of the trilogy?

DP: I was actually planning to. I had even designed scenes for myself, such as the one involving the breaking of plaster, but soon enough I realized that in order to achieve the visual language I was aiming for, I had to step out of it. The ten performers, including four new ones, needed my full attention from outside, and video registrations weren't enough. I had to keep the overview at all times. Besides, I am too old. In *Primal Matter* I was quite literally killing myself. [Laughs.]

CS: All the male performers look a lot like you, though.

DP: The one who took my part looks a bit like me indeed but, to be fair to the man, he is a much better version of me! [Laughs.]

CS: Male performers in *The Great Tamer* look identical. They seem to be many faces of one single character.

DP: The man with the moustache, the dark suit and the very conservative shoes — which is nothing like I am in real life — is a persona I created in Greece many years ago. He is a character inspired by René Magritte and Jacques Tati. He is a loner on Earth, a little bit awkward and sensual, with a big question mark above his head. He experiences the show for us. In *Primal Matter*, I would check the tickets and then I would do the show. In *Still Life*, I would wait on stage for the audience to come in, looking at the sky as if dreaming. And of course, being a painter, I select the people and I design the looks, the moustache, the hair color. It is very important for me to be able to create the stage personalities as I imagine them.

CS: So, these men are your brushes.

DP: They are more like my colors. They are part of my compositions. They turn forms into scenes that together make up the show.

CS: You mention Magritte and Tati, but there are many more references to the history of art and cinema in your work.

DP: I never go for the references though, except in *The Great Tamer*, in the case of the *Anatomy Lesson* by Rembrandt. I went for it on purpose because it was very useful for me to tell the story of bullying, or to use as a metaphor for how we take a graceful being, dissect it and then devour it — and how that in itself is a common story in the human race.

CS: And why is that?

DP: I consider references another tool to tell stories without words. When you don't speak, you are left with limited means, and one of them is the reference to the common human experience — which is art! Religion passes through art, authority passes through art, war crimes and disasters pass through art. They are crystallized from artists who bear testimony to the history of humanity. So, I never go for the references, but when you are an art lover and you work with the human body, you see the whole history of sculpture and painting unfolding in front of your eyes. Any movement or posture brings up images that have been created by masters in the past. All figures in religious Renaissance paintings

depicting, say, the crucifixion or the resurrection, are dancing! They are stylized in a dancing way. So my mental encyclopedia flips open and references emerge. Sometimes I welcome them because they are useful for bringing up emotions and telling the story, and sometimes I have to hide them because they are misleading — aesthetically as well as narratively.

CS: There is a strong homoerotic dimension to the dancing stylization of the male body in your work.

DP: There is, but I hope my work is not “gay”, I don't like art with a strategy and an agenda — although I know I am good at it. On the other hand, I never hide or forget the point of view from where I see existence, namely from that of a Mediterranean Greek man who also happens to be homosexual. So I never consciously embed homoerotic content in my work. The personal is political, but when the primary goal is political, I feel it diminishes the role of art in society.

CS: But in the past, you have openly touched on homosexual themes in your work as an illustrator and comic book artist.

DP: I have always been openly gay. For a long time I participated in a highly underground scene in Athens, working on editions of a fanzine that was aggressively so. Then, suddenly I became famous with the Olympics, and for a while I was kind of a national hero. The only use I had for this otherwise useless fame was to give one interview after the big success of the Olympics, and for it to be about homosexuality, believing that the only thing I could offer is that maybe some kids, in the countryside outside of Athens, would have an example of someone who accepts who he is so that they don't need to be desperate while growing up.

CS: It must be great to be in a position to offer a positive role model in that way!

DP: I was thinking of the parents as well, because most parents want to shield their children from ridicule, and it was a moment in time when parents loved me. So, knowing the person they admire so much for making the Olympics ceremonies is a gay man might change their fears about homosexuality.

CS: Some commentators have emphasized the self-referentiality of *The Great Tamer*. They also see it as the pinnacle of your career.

DP: It is true that *The Great Tamer*, being the final part of a trilogy, includes discoveries that I made along the journey — but I do not agree it is a retrospective. I understand why people think that, especially when they discover my work and look back at it, but it is actually the other way around. When I was creating *The Great Tamer*, I realized that some of the images I was creating could have been included in previous works. Like the references, they come to me — they are part of my taste. I instinctively choose them, and I can see there is a coherence, and of course I accept it — because it is me. I have to be true to my taste to suggest anything to the audience.

CS: I am sure many of us who have discovered your work through *The Great Tamer* would love to see previous works as well. Are there

Dimitris Papaioannou
Still Life, 2014
Photo by Nysos Vasilopoulos



Dimitris Papaioannou
Nowhere, 2009

Photo by Marilena Stafylidou

**plans for them to be performed again?**

DP: I don't know. We now are extending the tour of *The Great Tamer*, but we are not in the position financially in my country to keep a repertoire alive. It requires money, structures, and support. We are a private, homemade company, and we don't have the means to do that right now. So, now we are concentrating on *The Great Tamer*, and the next project is a collaboration with the Pina Bausch company, that I did not personally form.

CS: So, you are in the process of creating a work for the Tanztheater Wuppertal?

DP: It will premiere in May, and it will be the first full-length piece performed by Pina Bausch's company choreographed by someone else. It will also be my first time working with a different company.

CS: Pina Bausch has been one of your greatest influences — *Nowhere* is dedicated to her.

DP: She died the previous summer while I was creating *Nowhere*, which was a show about theater itself. The central scene featured the theater as an organic machine made out of human bodies. This was the most grasping and emotional moment of the show — only three minutes long in the middle of it. I realized shortly before the premiere that this very scene encapsulated all of the emotions that were created to me by the enormous work of Pina Bausch, so I dedicated it to her. To the memory of her.

CS: So then it must be a great honor! Could you give us hints about what it is going to be?

DP: There are no hints at this point, as it is still a huge question mark for me. It is of course a great honor, but it also brings up agony because it requires stepping into history. So, I can only go into it with an open heart, and with the consciousness that this is both an honor and a dangerous slope!

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Dimitris Papaioannou
Nowhere, 2009
 Photo by Marilena Stafylidou