



# textiles in the performing arts

## designing costumes for akram khan company

photos: gabriel corceura, bill cooper, richard haughton, jean-louis fernandez and laurent zeigler

by **Kimie Nakano** / edited by **Ruth Little**

**Theatre and film work involves collaboration with an entire creative team. Performance art is neither a fine art installation nor a fashion show. The designer must think both visually and practically to bring his or her ideas to fruition. The set and costume design must be considered in conjunction with lighting, video and/or stage design.**

**T**heatre and film work involves collaboration with an entire creative team. Performance art is neither a fine art installation nor a fashion show. The designer must think both visually and practically to bring his or her ideas to fruition. The designers and the creative team (technicians, dramaturge, and composer) discuss the concept of project with the director at an early stage to consider the visual style of the production and the overall concept underlying its direction. The set and costume design must be considered in conjunction with lighting, video and/or stage design, with the set and costume designer working closely with the lighting designer. In my time working as a costume and set



*Scene from Dust . Akram Khan Company*





*Scene from Dust . Akram Khan Company*



*Kimie Nakano . Costume design for female dancers in  
Dust . Akram Khan Company*

designer with Akram Khan Company, we have experimented with many different techniques to create the perfect stage to correspond to the performance. It is a balance between research and creativity, combined with practicality, for a dancer must move fluidly.

When choosing fabric/material for costumes, the designer needs to consider practical issues, such as whether the material assists or hinders the movement of actors, dancers and singers. Dancers in particular often need to wear strong fabrics which stretch easily. The designer should also plan for the on-going maintenance of the material and its durability under the strenuous demands of daily performance.

Hair, fur, leather, plant-based materials, plastic, paper, and painted fabrics are all very interesting to work with, but the first priority in costume design is to ensure that the material will stand up to the rigours of performance and can be cleaned and maintained throughout the run.

In general, painting fabrics makes them harder and less malleable, while hand-dyeing in hot water softens fabric. Silk print/print is less problematic than painting other kinds of fabric, but it tends to produce a 'flat' texture and appearance.

It is a good idea to have one's own list of fabric suppliers or fabric makers, as well as an extensive file of fabric samples. Designers should also learn as much



*Kimie Nakano . Costume Design for male and female dancers in iTMOi . Akram Khan Company*



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as possible about the composition and manufacturing processes involved in producing fabrics.

It is very useful to know the basic ‘character’ or qualities of each fabric. But new fabrics often blend many different fabrics, and it may be difficult to determine the mix of materials, in which case it's best to ask the fabric supplier to define the composition of the fabric.

The choice of fabric will depend on the overall concept of the piece and on the specific character or other roles, as well as the visual style.

### **costumes for ‘vertical road’**

‘Vertical Road’ takes place in a space between living and dying. In this space the spirit separates itself from the body. The concept and environment are strongly influenced by the poems of Rumi and by the poet's understanding of the human spirit as a part of nature. Akram imagined the dancers as members of a village community and as angels or spirits.

I listened to the score by composer Nitin Sawhney. The music has a strong and complex rhythmic quality, interweaving ethereal East Asian voices and the pulse of a Japanese drum. I researched the physical appearance of angels in different cultures, particularly in Asian and Europe, along with mythological characters, gods and goddesses in both cultures.

When Akram described his idea of sculptures covered in dust, I thought of the Chinese terracotta warriors entombed in earth for centuries. I thought too of the people covered in dust from the collapse of the Twin Towers in 2001.

I watched Akram choreograph a sequence of Sufi

spinning as an act of prayer, ecstasy and meditation, and I developed the idea of a flared skirt for male and female dancers such as those worn by Turkish dervishes. I wanted to combine the aesthetic of a warrior costume with a skirt which would open like a flower when dancing.

I looked for organic textured fabric. I chose Asian silk woven with vertical lines which had the texture of living plants. I painted and dyed these costumes to make them appear old and elegant. The colours were all derived from different colours of earth and sand. The dancers came from various countries, so I chose the colours of earth in these countries. And the fabrics were painted with dry paint to produce a fragile layer of ‘dust’ on off-white textured silk. One of the central characters wore a dark-brown patched and dyed costume, to set him apart as an outsider, a traveller who is not yet part of the spiritual world.

The cut of the cloth blends European and Asian design styles, but we discovered that a long skirt was cumbersome for the dancers. One dancer pinned up the skirt during rehearsals and this reminded me of Greek or Roman sculpture, so I decided at this point to make the costumes drape in the front, with looser folds of cloth. The final image combines aspects of both an Asian warrior and a Greek goddess. To me, this references the Greek god Apollo, who dons the costume of a warrior in his role as god of war. I'm happy with this image, as it expresses the ambiguity and duality that characterises the work as a whole.

### **costumes for ‘gnosis’**

Akram's costume and the costume of Gandhari in

'Gnosis' shared some similarities in style with the 'Vertical Road' costumes – in this case they were influenced by Indian cultural traditions, as the piece draws on a story from the *Mahabharata*.

I used Asian silk with vertical lines – a finely textured and elegant fabric with a grey to black colour gradation like a Chinese ink-painted dress. The cut and style express elements of both Eastern and Western cultures.

### **costumes for 'iTMOi' (in the mind of igor)**

This piece was created in response to Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'. Stravinsky's music was inspired in part by the natural world and by traditional ritual and ceremony.

My early research was about Stravinsky's life and the costume/fashion history of his period, as well as the periods before and after his life. Stravinsky met fashion designer Coco Chanel and so I researched her life and aesthetic too. Just as the Rite was a revolutionary departure from classical traditions of the time (early 20th century), so Coco Chanel's clothing design produced a revolution in the history of costume.

We also wanted to show that during the First World War fashions changed dramatically in large part due to the need to economise on resource use. At the same time women's wear, in particular, was becoming more practical – corsets, crinoline and bustles disappeared along with large and showy hats. As the central character of 'iTMOi' lives in the past, however, I decided to use an exaggeratedly large crinoline for her costume, along with a corset and an enormous hat. These items became symbolic of her power.

I researched and drew on characters from other ballets for which Stravinsky composed the score, including a bride, a marionette puppet-girl, animals, birds, and insects, and from the 'Rite of Spring' itself, the figure of the girl who is chosen for sacrifice, the priest and the idea of an ancient, primitive ritual.

The fabric I chose has a natural, organic quality and texture, referring to the idea of a mythological realm and the wildness at the heart of the story. The dancers have some of the characteristics of flowers, plants, trees, birds and animals. I experimented with the creation of different kinds of highly textured fabric, but some of these weren't resilient enough to endure a long international tour.

I worked with colours drawn from the natural environment and produced these by hand-dyeing all the material. I therefore worked mainly with cotton, silk, linen, wool and velvet, which are relatively easy to dye. But I also used polyester to create the more textured fabric, as it holds its form more consistently.

For the image on the poster, I used a large black feather on one of the dancers playing a sinful priest, and body painting on another performer which looked like the branches of a tree. Actual branches emerged from the crinoline of this character. This image became a starting point for the creation of 'iTMOi'.

In three preparatory workshops for the piece, we experimented and played with as many materials as possible. I was interested in the idea of using lengths of rope to represent both hair and tree roots. But this did not work in the way we had hoped, so we created a special rope costume – a harness and body-covering which seemed to be made of tree roots. This harness was then used for the climactic scene of sacrifice, in which the dancer playing the priest is flung in the air by the other dancers holding the ends of long ropes, and then falls again and again to the ground.

I made two crinolines with different fabrics in 'iTMOi'. The crinoline of one of the dancers was made with deep claret velvet. We made a calico prototype but this had a completely different weight and movement. It is always best to make prototypes using the actual fabric intended for the final costume. All fabrics are different in weave, weight and composition, and so will affect the shape and movement of a costume even when the cut is identical.

A dancer needs his or her costumes to fit perfectly, to feel, if possible, like it is a second skin. They therefore need to spend as much time as possible wearing the costume in rehearsal and testing for its capacities and vulnerabilities. I was interested in the 'bone' framework of the crinoline and thought of it as being like animal bones. I also felt the crinoline produced a movement which had something insect-like about it. I chose a fabric which stretches slightly.

For the flamboyant hat I wanted an effect like the skeletons of leaves, so I chose a see-through set fabric rather than a costume fabric. When lit from above, the hat produced a tracery of shadow like the shadows of leaves under street lights, and I liked this effect very much. We wanted to use glossy bull's horns for a half-



*Scene from iTMOi  
Akram Khan Company*



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Akram Khan Company

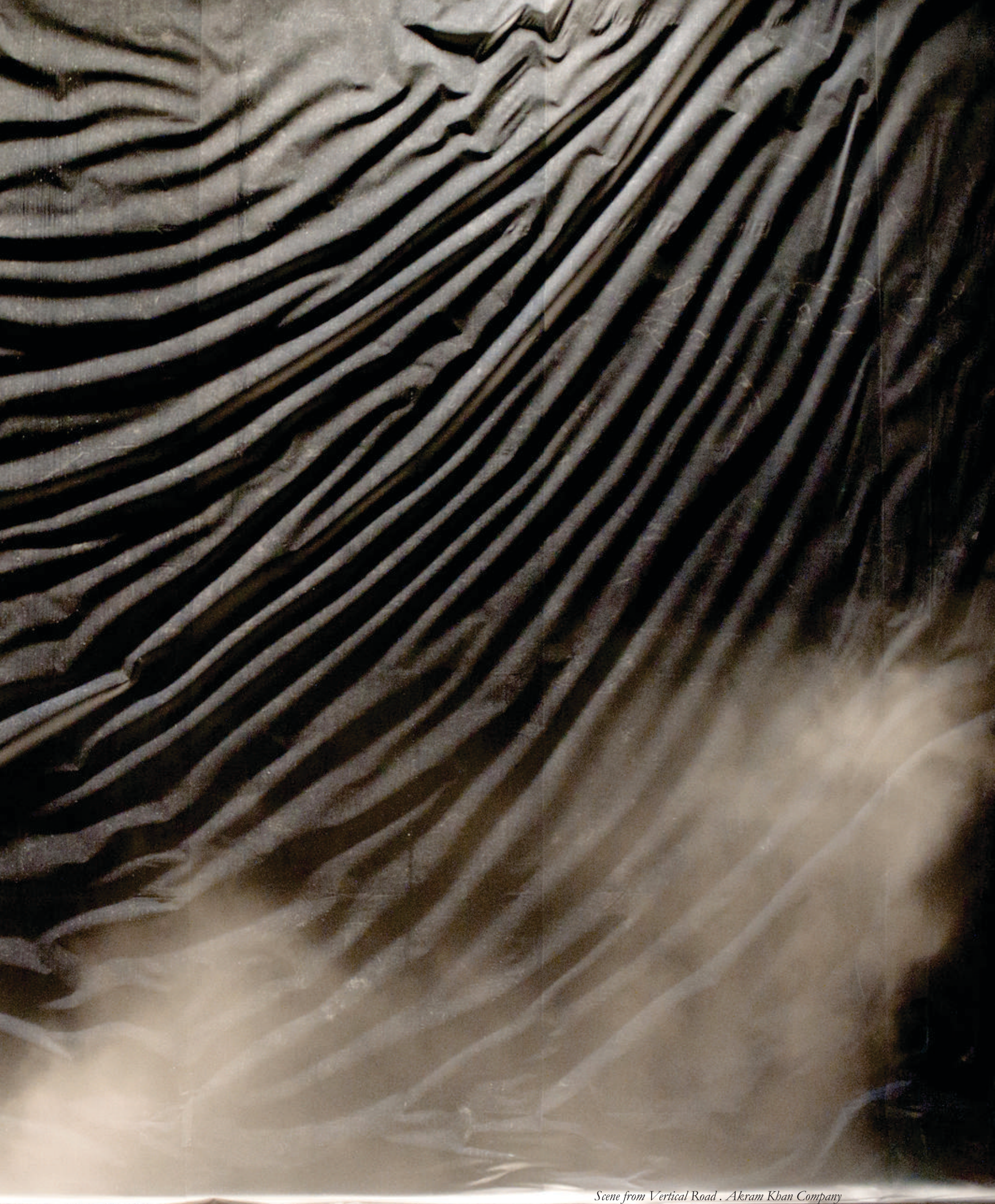






*Scene from Dust . Akram Khan Company*





*Scene from Vertical Road . Akram Khan Company*

human/half-animal character who signals the rising of the raw and primitive world. The black horns weren't visible against the darkness of the background and so we chose dark grey horns.

The dancers fling handfuls of white powder in both 'Vertical Road' and 'iTMOi': in 'Vertical Road', the powder is also released from their costumes at the opening of the piece, as though they were ancient sculptures covered in earth and dust. In 'iTMOi', the central character 'marks' a young woman for sacrifice by casting white powder on her head and face. The powder needs to be tested to ensure that it is easy to remove from costumes and floor and that it doesn't cause problems for the dancers by inhaling or slipping on it.

'iTMOi' was created through a lengthy process and numerous workshops – the work was very abstract and continued to evolve throughout the rehearsals.

### **costume for 'dust'**

In 2014, the English National Ballet composed four short pieces on the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War. The event was called 'Lest We Forget', and Akram created a piece called 'Dust' for the production.

Initially I read and did visual research on the First World War at museums, using archival film material and images of historical costumes and fabrics.

Akram and I were struck by photographs of soldiers climbing and crawling out of and into trenches, and also by images of thousands of women in overalls working in munitions factories. During the First World War, women took on many of the tasks performed by men in peacetime, and some found new strength and independence as a result. At the same time, they suffered the constant uncertainty of having husbands, fathers, sons and brothers away at war.

I was interested in the fashions of the period, and in the rise of the suffragette movement which, in Britain, led directly to women being given the vote for the first time immediately after the First World War. Just as Coco Chanel changed fashion history, so did the War, and working women changed the perception of women and their dress codes in the West.

I was also fascinated to see the contrast between images of women in overalls working heavy machinery and the feminine ideal which remained dominant at





*Scene from TOROBAKA . Akram Khan Company*

home. Women would wear aprons, trousers and hair caps in the factories but they would immediately return to skirts and dresses after work. And I was struck by the irony of women making munitions which would be used to kill others, and perhaps even their own loved ones. I was very interested in these ironies and contradictions in the image and experience of the women of the time.

I was keen to use real bandages on women's bodies – to represent both their binding up of their emotions and also their own injuries in war – and I added to these long aprons which look like Samurai or Roman warrior costumes, or panel skirts paired with jodhpurs.

The men/soldiers were naked from the waist up, as I wanted to show their vulnerability and for their skin to shine with their sweat under the lights. They wore khaki trousers cut like those actually worn during the First World War, and also wore bandages or puttees around the ankle.

The fabric was that of First World War clothing: linen, cotton and cotton bandages. These bandages stretch well but are thick, so we had to wrap these carefully to ensure a good, secure fit which also created strong body line.

The colours used throughout were muddy and earthy, to give the feeling that both men and women are participants in, and victims of, war. The upper part of the women's costumes was lighter than the bottom: it was closer to khaki or skin colour, while the lower part was darker and earthier. These gradations were created by hand dyeing. The skirt panels were cut so that when the dancers spin it looks like the spinning propeller of a plane. When they turn, their jodhpurs become visible.

### **costume for 'torobaka', 'the rashomon effect', 'kaash'**

These three productions are all built around black costumes.

Using black costumes on a black set is very challenging, as black costumes can disappear in black space. The costumes will also look very different depending on the direction of the lighting and whether it is coming from above, from the sides, or from in front of the dancers. Both colour and texture will change accordingly.

I performed many tests on many different kinds of

black fabric for these three productions. Eventually I chose polyester and cotton. Hand-dyed pigments are prone to fading; the black dye faded quickly and became grey even when gently hand-washed in cold water. So for 'Kaash', I used only black polyester fabric. There are many different kind of polyester, so maintenance is an issue, and washing and ironing tests must be done in advance of making the costume. In general, polyester is heavier but stronger than fabrics made from natural fibres, and so it tends to be more useful for dance productions involving lengthy touring.

Flamenco dancer Israel Galván wore classical flamenco trousers in 'TOROBAKA'. It was important for Israel that the trousers allowed full movement and also that they fitted well around his shoes. Akram also chose to dance in dark stretch jeans. It took some time to find the right stretch cotton fabric and test it on the dancers' bodies in rehearsal.

The flamenco material in 'TOROBAKA' derives from some of the images and movements of kathak dance. Akram presented himself in the image of a Hindu cow, while Israel took on the qualities of a Spanish fighting bull. The cut of both costumes was similar, but Akram's shirt had a wider, more feminine collar, while Israel's shirt had a straighter, more masculine cut. At the same time, I chose a soft fabric for Israel and cotton of a harder texture for Akram: I wanted to suggest both a masculine and a feminine side to the dancers.

### **costume for 'technê'**

Sylvie Guillem's final public performance consisted of four short works relating to her life and her identity. Akram Khan choreographed one of these pieces, 'technê'.

Akram wanted Sylvie's famously beautiful and long arms and legs to be visible in this piece; to create curved body shapes and a sense of an endless line to her movement. So I designed a simple fitted robe or dress marked with abstract diagonal lines like leaves or branches. The starting point for rehearsals and design was an image of a strong, independent woman – her passion and the intensity of her movement seemed to connect her to a primeval or volcanic centre – a sort of beating heart of the planet.

During the rehearsals, Sylvie communicated a strong sense of herself as a woman connected with the



*Scene from iTMOi . Akram Khan Company*

natural world, with the earth itself. She spoke often of the threat from our activities to the well-being of natural systems, of plants and animals. There is great strength – both physical and moral – beneath her warmth and generosity.

In the choreography for the piece, Akram reveals and extends Sylvie's wild spirit by creating poetic movement qualities of both horse and insect. Sylvie chose the colour green for her costume. I selected a natural olive leaf colour from a Pantone colour chart, and decided on an organic silk and cotton outfit for her final performance. She is closely connected with the strength of the tree that stands at the centre of the space, and she is also like a wild horse. She wears a wig.

I enjoy working with Akram very much and I think together we have created some wonderful projects. We

develop ideas closely together, and there are times when the direction of thought changes, and as a result both the design and fabric/material need to be changed after they've been tested for the specific circumstances of each show. It's a long process but each of the 'experiments' is a valuable source of new knowledge, and so we both continue to learn from each production. 🍷

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Kimie Nakano is a Costume Designer for dance, theatre, opera and film, specialised in both Japanese and European, historical and contemporary costumes. Kimie's designs for dance include productions for Akram Khan, Rambert, Aditi Mangaldas, English National Ballet. Her costumes for 'iTMOi' by Akram Khan were selected by Prague Quadrennial 2015, and the V&A Make/Believe exhibition.

Ruth Little is a dance and theatre dramaturg, a teacher and writer. She lectured in English literature at the University of Sydney, and was literary manager at the Royal Court Theatre, Soho Theatre and Out of Joint, and artistic associate at the Young Vic. Ruth is currently associate director at Cape Farewell, and dramaturg with Akram Khan Company.