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Silent warriors reborn

JUDITH FLANDERS

Akram Khan Company

UNTIL THE LIONS

The Roundhouse until January 24, then on tour

In the beginning, Genesis tells us, “God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep”. Entering the Roundhouse, where a vast fissured tree-trunk looms out of a haze to form the stage for Akram Khan’s new three-dancer retelling of a story from the Mahabharata, it feels like day and night have only just been separated.

Khan has taken his audiences on autobiographical journeys before, especially in *DESH*, an exploration of his Bangladeshi heritage. These narratives have, of necessity, been dominated by questions of masculinity. Yet Khan, trained in kathak, the north Indian classical dance form, continues to show himself a performer of startling ambiguity, and with this show, he gives femininity top billing, as it condenses a thread from Karthika Nair’s *Until the Lions*, a poem cycle that re-narrates the stories of the Mahabharata from the point of view of the unspeaking and unvoiced – the women.

Here the warrior prince Bhishma, pledged to a life of celibacy, kidnaps Amba on the day of her betrothal, in order to give her to his brother as a wife. His brother, however, spurns her because she loves another; the man she loves also rejects her, since the fact of her abduction has left her tied. In this limbo of unclaimed-ness, Amba lives out a life of penitence, until Shiva promises she will have justice in her next life. She sets herself on fire and

is reborn as a female warrior. On the battlefield, Bhishma recognizes her and he accepts death, which is transmitted by Shikhandi, a warrior/spirit animated by Amba: they are two bodies, two minds, but one soul.

While *Until the Lions* does not, perhaps, always succeed at the more straightforward level of story-telling, this incandescent production transcends narrative in depicting with emotional clarity a world of core values – a world where love, loyalty, betrayal and regret play out starkly. Here there are no easy answers. Good people do bad things with pure intent; and for it, they are punished, they sorrow and they die. Good actions can deserve retribution: it’s the way of the world.

Nair’s cycle takes its title from Chinua Achebe’s rephrasing of an African proverb: “Until the lions have their own historians, history will always glorify the hunter”. She is, however, too thoughtful a writer to make her retelling simply that of the voices of the victims, or a binary division of good vs evil, great vs lesser.

These stories and the ideas behind them have long been gestating in Khan’s work. As a teenager, Khan toured for two years in Peter Brook’s famous production of the Mahabharata. His own *Gnosis* in 2009 was based on one of the epic’s characters. And later this year, Khan will make his first foray into the classical dance world with a production of *Giselle*, another story that attempts to disentangle love and betrayal from (in)justice and vengeance.

To create a framework for these ideas, Khan’s designer, Tim Yip (the art director for the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, as well as for Khan’s *DESH*), and his long-time collaborator the lighting designer Michael Hulls have built a fortress of light in the Roundhouse, in which Khan (Bhishma), Chi-



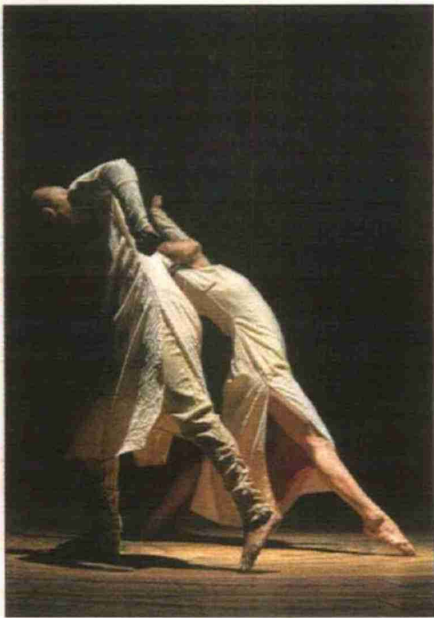
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en-Ying Chien (Amba) and Christine Joy Ritter (Shikhandi) dance out their psychodrama.

In one interview, Khan referred to Chien-Ying Chien as a “dancer-creature”, and he is entirely correct: such are her metamorphoses that she sometimes seems barely human. A tiny (even by dance standards) waif, she performs delicate, birdlike, filigreed flickering movements that can transform themselves in a heartbeat into great waves of racking, anguished grandeur. In the vast spaces of the Roundhouse a figure as small as she should be lost, but instead her charisma and astonishing fluid virtuosity create a sucking vortex of intensity, the focus of all attention. And she is ably matched by Christine Joy Ritter, gorgeously grotesque as she belly-crawls across the stage, hips splayed, head up and sniffing the air, as alert as an attack dog.

Khan himself is unusually recessive, generously handing not merely the best choreography to the magnificent Chien, but also the emotional heart of the evening to her Amba, as he, and Nair, rewrite a national epic to give heroic stature to the previously silent.



Akram Khan and Chien-Ying Chien