

# English National Ballet's transformed 'Giselle' is crossing the pond for a timely U.S. exclusive at the Harris



English National Ballet in Akram Khan's "Giselle." (Laurent Liotard photo)



[Lauren Warnecke](#) Chicago Tribune

Few productions at the Harris Theater have been more highly anticipated than the North American premiere of English National Ballet's "Giselle." Running

Feb. 28-Mar. 2, the tour of this first full-length ballet created by acclaimed choreographer Akram Khan marks the London-based company's first trip across the Atlantic in three decades.

In her first full season curating programming at the Harris, CEO Patricia Barretto essentially booked the production sight unseen, having only seen clips of Khan's "Giselle" online before securing an exclusive engagement here in Chicago.

"For me, it's about bringing fresh new perspectives and fresh new companies that this city has not had the opportunity to see before," Barretto said in an interview.

"I'm incredibly proud to be able to have been presented with the opportunity to make this happen at the Harris," said Barretto, adding that the tour, which includes bringing 95 artists and support staff to Chicago, couldn't have happened without engagement presenting sponsors Caryn and King Harris, who share the theater's name and continue to be huge supporters of dance at the venue. "It's a monumental work in terms of what this means for dance," she said.

It's not just the size and scale of this "Giselle" which make it significant. Khan, a contemporary choreographer who blends modern dance and kathak, a form of classical Indian dance, worked with English National Ballet's dancers through a purely collaborative process which combined ballet vocabulary with Khan's signature style. The goal was to make a work that was a true fusion of forms, one which couldn't have been created anywhere, or by anyone else.

Khan's "Giselle" is aligned with the mission of ENB under artistic director Tamara Rojo, a former principle with the Royal Ballet who continues to dance with her company. "A very important part of my vision for English National Ballet is that we should present the classical repertoire in a way that continues to mean something and continues to move the audiences," said Rojo in a

phone interview. “We shouldn’t be scared of asking questions of our traditions, challenging our traditions and challenging our heritage. This can only be done from a place of understanding and respect, but we are making sure that [ballet] isn’t frozen in time,” she said.

Both Khan and Rojo were committed to transforming this classic work by moving it into a recognizable time and place, without losing the heart of what people love about the ballet. In a phone interview, Khan also said he wanted his “Giselle” to pay homage to the original, creating a work that classical and contemporary dance audiences can both enjoy.

“How do I convince someone who loves the classical form that ‘classical’ is not about being in a specific time, but it’s about timelessness?” he said. To start, he and dramaturg Ruth Little extracted themes from the 1841 ballet, originally choreographed by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot. “Giselle,” at its core, is about “love, betrayal and forgiveness,” he said. “This is in every aspect of somebody’s journey. So, it’s a universal trilogy, if you like.”

There are three fundamental changes, however, which make this “Giselle” unlike any we’ve ever seen.

The first is a change in the locale. Khan abandons “Giselle’s” idyllic German countryside and a group of peasant farmers including the maiden Giselle, who falls in love with Prince Albrecht, an aristocrat who is part of the fiefdom’s ruling family. Khan locates his ballet among a community of migrant garment workers, basing the class structures germane to “Giselle” on surfacing xenophobia in conjunction with mass migration into Europe. He settled on garment workers specifically, inspired by the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh, the home country of Khan’s parents. A preventable structural failure killed more than 1,100 people, considered the deadliest garment factory disaster in history.

Barretto, whose roots are in India, was first drawn to “Giselle” because of how it focused on such an important event in the lives of anyone with family in developing nations. “It seemed like the right thing to do for the Western world to pay attention to this,” she said, “to take [‘Giselle’], that is so woven into the fabric of Western culture, and twist it in a way that sheds light on something so important.”

A major set piece in the ballet’s first act is a massive wall, created by Academy-Award winning set and costume designer Tim Yip. The wall represents capitalism, and the idea that if we work hard, or climb the wall, that success and prosperity are waiting on the other side – what we call the “American dream.”

There are obvious parallels between our current debate about a wall and pervasive xenophobia surrounding migration in Europe which inspired this wall in “Giselle.” Leading up to the ballet’s premiere in 2016, Khan couldn’t have known that by the time “Giselle” made its premiere in the Western hemisphere, a wall would be such a divisive topic on this side of the Atlantic. “But the wall is also Trump,” he said of Yip’s set, noticing how the ballet inadvertently shines a lens on the polarizing political discourse around literal and figurative walls in this country too.

Khan then recruited composer Vincenzo Lamagna to create a new adaptation of the conventional Adolphe [Adams](#) score; though it doesn’t sound much like the original, Khan says that “someone who really knows ‘Giselle’s’ music, every note and every bar, will recognize [it] most of the way through.” Lamagna layered Adams’ themes with soundscapes, Khan said, and these themes are sometimes rearranged, or played with different instrumentation. Each performance will be played live by the Chicago Philharmonic, conducted by English National Ballet music director Gavin Sutherland, who orchestrated the score.

A final significant change concerns the title role of “Giselle,” who in the original is a coy, fragile woman who goes mad and dies of a broken heart, then spares the person who betrayed her.

“I could not relate to the original ‘Giselle,’” said Khan. “It is beautiful, but at the same time, it’s holding women in their ‘rightful place.’ I wanted to be able to relate to this woman,” he said, noting that strong female figures in his life – his mother, wife and daughter – were in mind when he created the role.

As were Rojo and Alina Cojocaru, the two ballerinas who originated the role. Cojocaru performs the lead role on opening night; Rojo will dance Giselle in Saturday’s matinee. As someone who’s danced “Giselle” throughout her career and presented a traditional version on the same season as Khan’s, Rojo said the creation of a new “Giselle” has deepened her relationship with the ballet. “Because we have done so much work in analyzing the true essence of what “Giselle” was, in analyzing every texture, every bit of the choreography, and every character, we felt better than ever going back to the traditional because we knew it better, and because we’d challenged it.”

The amount of time and attention Rojo and ENB gave to this process is what drew Khan to say “yes” to the project. Barretto, too, said Rojo’s leadership was a motivating factor in pushing to bring ENB to the Harris.

“She’s fierce, she’s open, she’s generous, she’s committed, she’s passionate and she’s daring,” said Khan, “and she changed the rules of how ballet companies make work.”

*English National Ballet presents “Giselle” Feb. 28 through Mar. 2 at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph Drive. Tickets are \$35-\$145 at 312-334-7777 and [www.harristheaterchicago.org](http://www.harristheaterchicago.org).*

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