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KOREAN TIMES

EUN-ME AHN
DRAGONS

安銀美千禧之龍

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Dragons

Eun-Me Ahn arrives to the UK with the dancers of her company and very special guests! After a series of mind-blowing shows that depicted all Korean generations, from grandmothers to teenagers, she invites five young dancers from five Asian countries.

All are around 2000 and each unveil their hopes, their dances, contemporary and traditional. Because in Asia, if youth is ultraconnected, it remains attached to its cultural background, including Dragons !

They are feared in Europe? In Asia, they bring lightness, joy and optimism. So, the tone is set for a captivating, burlesque and sometimes weightless performance, like a kaleidoscope of shapes, colors and rhythms, in the extravagant style that is the trademark of the enfant terrible of Korean dance. Eun-Me Ahn, her company and their guests move through a criss-crossing of presences and holographic projections fruit of a creative storm.

In conclusion : In Asia, “Z generation” tackles future with energy and freshness.
A source of inspiration.

Introduction note

It is a fantastic pleasure to be back in London and for the first time at the Barbican to present Dragons as part of the Korea-UK season. This work is very special to me, and I am delighted to have the opportunity to share it with British audiences.

This project started in 2018 when I was an Associate Artist of the Théâtre de la Ville – Paris. The programme had a focus on people born at the start of the new millennium and the theatre asked me to make a piece about young dancers. I had worked with teenagers in the past and started investigating ideas in Korea, but it was difficult to find a new and interesting angle. Then my company was invited to perform at the Indonesian Dance Festival in Jakarta, during which there was a pre-opening evening where dance schools and young choreographers presented their work. Among the performances, I was amazed with the freshness, the pureness and honesty of the dancers. After the show, the idea for this new piece was clear to me: to invite young dancers from all over Asia to make a piece together.

But like everybody on the planet, the outbreak of the pandemic had us change our plans. We discussed what to do: cancel the whole project or keep going? We decided to go on, no matter what. Creating this piece has without doubt been the most challenging of my career, rehearsing through video calls, each performer locked down in their respective country. It forced me to do things I had never done before, to use technologies I had never used before. And in the end, using the energy of all, from Seoul to Taiwan, Tokyo to Jogjakarta and Kuala Lumpur, we created something beautiful, supporting each other and sharing with one another.

In a way, Dragons was a ‘pandemic miracle’ as it would have been a completely different work otherwise. Even though a few years have passed, its message remains true in the hard times and world we are currently living in: ‘Never give up. We can overcome anything, but not alone. We can only do it together.’

Eun Me-Ahn
Artistic Director of Eun Me-Ahn Company



Eun-Me Ahn

A leading artist in the Korean performing arts scene, Eun-Me Ahn was born in 1963. Interested in traditional dance and shamanistic practices, she studied contemporary dance at Ehwa Womans University in Seoul. She founded Eun-Me Ahn Company in 1988 before moving to New York in 1991 to study at the Tisch School of the Arts. In 2001 she returned to Korea as director of Daegu City Dance Company, with 45 dancers, where she created some major works such as *The Little Match Girl* and *Skypepper*. She continued her choreographic and performance practice revisiting classics from her country (*Princess Bari*, *Chunyang*) or investigating social issues, working with non-professional older people (*Dancing Grandmothers*, *Dancing Teenteen*, *Dancing Middle-Aged Men*) and people with disabilities (with *Ahnsim Dance* and *Daeshim Dance*). With over 150 pieces in her repertoire, Eun-Me Ahn has been developing a unique language, with positive energy and colours as her trademark. She has achieved international recognition with emblematic productions such as *Symphoca Princess Bari*, *Let Me Change Your Name*, *Dancing Grandmothers* or *North Korea Dance* that have been presented on the most prestigious stages around the world.

New ways of dancing — an interview with Eun-Me Ahn

Before 2000, when the West seemed to recognise the economic powers of Asia – including South Korea – ‘tiger states’ or ‘dragon states’ (economies) were regarded with a mix of admiration and fear. Western legends give us a negative perception of the dragon, but in Asia this is quite different, isn’t it?

Indeed, for us the dragon embodies a sacred and spiritual energy. They are composite animals, created by a higher will, and therefore almost multicultural creatures. Dragons embody power, longevity and protection. Previously, their symbolic power was reserved for kings but today we are free to imagine them however we want. The title of our production wants to explain that we have the power to decide for ourselves our lives and our futures.

The idea that we can control our destiny embodies perfectly the spirit of this work. Dragons was born in the midst of Covid-19 and, due to the pandemic, the young dancers you selected from five different Asian countries were unable to join you in Seoul for the performance. They are instead present in the form of holographic projections, while the permanent dancers of your company dance live.

To choose these young people, all born in 2000, me and the dancers in my company went to Indonesia, Thailand and Japan. We wanted to understand how they live and see the world: how are their studies going; how do they watch a show? Then the pandemic happened. We had to cancel our trips to Vietnam and Taiwan and continued working with video for the auditions as well as for the creation.

These performers are of Generation Z for whom the internet and the smartphone are very normal. Yet creating choreography is an old concept which relies on presence. Suddenly you had to rely on the small screen. Dragons is deeply influenced by the pandemic.

This generation was suddenly confined by lockdown just as they became adults.

They live in great instability but are open to a lot of things. Dragons opened me up to other ways of thinking about stage presence, whereas before I was not interested in technology. We have learned and invented a lot. For example, it is not easy to create a dance in front of a webcam when right and left are reversed so, to make things more intuitive, we all danced with a glove on our right hand!

Did you consider after the pandemic having the young dancers join you live and on stage?

I think we’ll do a new piece with them instead. When they have finished their university studies and are fully free and older, we want to find them and maybe work on the possibility of overcoming the memories of the pandemic, which is quite dark for them. It will be interesting to keep Dragons in the repertoire as it is, as a testimony to the particular conditions of its creation.

With its inherent vitality and optimism, Dragons is exactly what audiences need to see right now!

This is exactly what we told each other when we had finished the work. These young dancers come from very different religions, political situations and economic conditions, but all of them have traditional dance practice. Each created a gesture and transmitted it to the others, which formed a universal language nourished by their respective cultures. Because only together can we overcome the current challenges!

Interview by Thomas Hahn for the Théâtre de la Ville – Paris programme, used by kind permission

Creative team and credits

Choreographer and Artistic Director Eun-Me Ahn

Music Young-Gyu Jang

Costume and Set Designer Eun-Me Ahn

Lighting Designer Jinyoung Jang

Video Designer Taeseok Lee

Motion Designers Taeseok Lee and Minjeong Lee (Addnine)

Creation Technical Director Jimyung Kim

Performers

On stage: Eun-Me Ahn, Hyekyoung Kim, Jeeyeun Kim, Haejin Yun, Gaon Han, Sunjae Jo, Uiyoung Jung Deokyeong Kim, Yongsik Moon

On screen: Nur Syahidah Binti Hazmi (Malaysia), Akari Takahashi (Japan), Jiwan Jung (South Korea), Siko Setyanto, Dwi Nusa Aji Winarno (Indonésie), Guan Ting Zhou (Taiwan)

Technical Crew Thomas Boudic, Haesung Lee, Marc Perez, Alexandre Pluchino

Production: Eun-Me Ahn Company, Gadja Productions

Coproduction: Yeongdeungpo Cultural Foundation (Korea), Busan Cultural Center (Korea), Théâtre de la Ville – Paris (France), Biennale de la Danse de Lyon (France), Festspielhaus St. Pölten (Austria), Les Théâtres de la Ville de Luxembourg (Luxembourg), Les Halles de Schaerbeek (Belgium), National Kaohsiung Center for the Arts – Weiwuying (Taiwan)

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On tour with the support of Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Korean Foundation for International Cultural Exchange, Korean Cultural Centre UK and KAMS – Center Stage Korea

In association with the Barbican

Running time: 75 minutes. There is no interval

Age guidance: 8+ (contains strobe lighting and sudden light changes)

Performed in Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Malaysian and Indonesian with English surtitles

Photos by Sukmu Yun

