



NEW RELEASES

Creature

The latest production choreographed by Akram Khan with the English National Ballet, *Creature*, has taken several years to arrive on stage. When it looked like the show might never come to life, director Asif Kapadia was summoned to the theatre to see how he might save *Creature* from falling into obscurity without ever being seen.

The ballet is set in an Arctic research station, with an abstract plot derived from Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Kapadia might have made a documentary about Khan and the production of his latest ballet in his distinctive style à la *Senna* (2010) or *Amy* (2015). Instead he worked with his crew, including cinematographer Daniel Landin and editor Sylvie Landra to create something wholly new. In many ways the style harks back to the silent era, crafting a cinematic narrative out of movement and gesture rather than the spoken word. But in others it is a loud, visceral experience that gestures towards a bold future.

Curious about the reasons for Kapadia's involvement in the project, I sat down with him to probe his reasons for combining the arts of film and dance.

Are you a ballet fan?

I have to be absolutely honest. I have never been to the ballet before. I'm a cinema guy; I love movies. I have bad eyesight, and I struggle being in a theatre. I fidget a lot and my brain struggles with two acts. I love the first half and then I think, 'Why do we need to stop for a sandwich or a drink? I just want to carry on!'

How did you end up working with Akram Khan then?

A producer called Uzma Hasan knew both of us and got in touch with me to ask if I'd be interested in meeting Akram and doing something with his new show, *Creature*. I first met Akram 20 years ago. When I made my first film, *The Warrior* (2001), there was an event at BFI Southbank and we were on a panel together. So we both started out at the same time. Over the years I've received messages from him, and we've crossed paths but we never really met.

I was a bit cynical going along to the English National Ballet's offices, but I just sat on the floor and watched them rehearse. Watching Akram working with his dancers was amazing. I really like how much detail he puts into everything. I kept thinking, 'I'm never gonna see that from the back. How does anyone know what's going on?' I pulled out my phone and started to film them dancing. I focused on Jeffrey Cirio, who I figured was the main character, and I just followed him with this one shot which was 45 minutes long. I was just blown away by the mood and the atmosphere. It seemed cinematic to me, so I suggested we make it into a movie.

What makes Creature different from live theatre recordings?

The building the ENB has in the Isle of Dogs is a massive copy of Sadler's Wells. There's no orchestra pit, so I could walk on to the stage and move around the three-sided set. Where the audience would be, we just had darkness. The company was shocked that I wanted to show that space, but I wanted to work with it. You don't get that effect in a live recording because

it's all shot front-on. I felt it added something to the uncomfortable, authoritarian themes.

The other thing is that we had 10 days with the dancers. We had one week of prep, shot it in 10 days, and then we cut it in three weeks. That was it. And you can't do classic cinematic shots, because the dancers can't keep doing the whole thing again and again. I was told they can do two takes of the whole thing, and to break it down we had to choose the sections carefully. It was about merging the dance process, coming from Akram and the ENB, with the film process coming from me.

What ballet films were you looking at? How did they influence the themes you were trying to centre?

I was looking at *The Red Shoes* (1948), and I was looking at *Pina* (2011). I was also thinking of *Dogville* (2003), movies that play with the form. This project began with a bit of *Frankenstein* and a bit of *Woyzeck*. So I looked at the Herzog film [*Woyzeck*, 1979] and it struck me that the costumes are very similar. I learnt a lot about ballet, but it helped that I was able to come back to movies and stick with what I know.

There's a lot of metaphor in ballet. In a movie I need to know precisely what it is that we're trying to say. Here, it's more about what the audience decides. There's a moment when the dancers point upwards, and I've heard different readings of that. There are people who think it's about colonialism – going to a place and taking everything from it, destroying the local indigenous people. Someone said to me that it reminded them of Harvey Weinstein, having the power to say to someone 'If you come with me I'll make you a star.' I love all those different responses; there's no right way of looking at it.

You made the film during Covid, and there's been a lot of discussion around access to live performance. Was that important to you during production?

I suppose this is my Covid film, but I don't find that interesting in itself. I care if it's good or if it's bad. But the fact is that the film only exists because the ENB couldn't perform the show because of the lockdowns. If the show had gone ahead as normal, there'd be no movie. I like the restrictions that came from that: I had to create my version of it. The show is very different from the film.

We watched a lot of National Theatre at home with our kids during that time, and they were great. I kept thinking that if all else fails, maybe this film is a version of that. But also it's not. I like to experiment with what movies can be. *The Warrior* was a film in India; it was a British film, but it was not in English and had no British actors. Then with *Senna* I was breaking the rules with docs. I didn't have interviews and talking heads. Again with *Creature* I didn't have a direct reference for what it was going to be.

I guess it's more affordable than going to see the opera or going to see the ballet. It is more accessible, and I think that's interesting. We've made it shorter than a typical show. It's about 20 minutes shorter than the live show. That was a tricky thing, cutting out huge dances and solos. But I wanted it to work as a movie, so it meant changing things to keep a movie audience engaged.

The way opera and ballet is perceived by the Arts Council in terms of funding leads to accusations of 'elitism'. Is Creature for everyone?

I'm an Indian Muslim, Hackney boy who never went to the ballet. Our school didn't take us to places like that. As I've gotten older, I'm like, 'Okay, I should go to the opera. Oh, I should go to the ballet.' So one of the things about

doing this is so that someone like me can try a bit of everything. For me it's about having some sort of visceral feeling about what's the best way to do this as a story. Akram's a Bangladeshi British choreographer; I'm an Indian British director; and then the principal dancers are Asian. You don't get many shows where the principal dancers are not white. That in itself is quite powerful, and I felt it fitted perfectly the themes of the work.

It's a tough time for the arts. I think the Arts Council came in and gave the ENB some money to put on the show and make the film so it could survive. That was the kind of conversation that was happening before I came in. Filmmaking was considered essential while theatre and dance were shut down.

This film is a hard sell. I mean, people were saying, 'Is this what's going to get people back into the cinemas?' But for me it was very clear, and I want people to see this on the big screen. I do think it's a movie. Hopefully we'll get people interested who may have seen something that I've done before, or people who are into dance who don't normally get to see a film about dance, or people who know Akram's work as well as the kind of arthouse, BFI cinemas around the country. It's going to be an interesting meeting of worlds.

Lillian Crawford, bfi.org.uk, 21 February 2023

CREATURE

Director: Asif Kapadia
Choreography and Stage Direction: Akram Khan
©: English National Ballet
Presented by: English National Ballet
Executive Producers for English National Ballet:
Heather Clark Charrington, Daniel Alicandro, Louise Shand Brown
Executive Producer: Asif Kapadia
Producer: Uzma Hasan
Line Producer: Kristyna Sellnerova
1st Assistant Director: Christiaan Faberij de Jonge
Based on the stage production Creature by: Akram Khan
Director of Photography: Daniel Landin
Stills Photography: Moeez Ali, Laurent Liotardo, Andrew Leo
VFX by: The LOC Studios
Editor: Sylvie Landra
Visual and Costume Design: Tim Yip
Hair & Make-up Supervisor: Amelia Carrington-Lee
Music: Vincenzo Lamagna
Music Performed by: English National Ballet Philharmonic
Orchestrations: James Keane
Sound Designer: Stephen Griffiths
Sound Recordist: Don Chudi Nelson
Re-recording Mixer: Tim Cavagin
Filmed in the: English National Ballet Holloway Production Studio, London

Cast

Jeffrey Cirio (*creature*)
Erina Takahashi (*Marie*)
Stina Quagebeur (*doctor*)
Ken Saruhashi (*captain*)
Fabian Reimair (*major*)
Victor Prigent (*Andres*)
Andy Serkis (*with the voice of*)
Alice Bellini, Georgia Bould, Isabelle Brouwers, Ivana Bueno,
Henry Dowden, Carolyn Galvao, Emma Hawes, Anjuli Hudson,
Sarah Kundi, Skyler Martin, Daniel McCormick, Rentaro Nakaaki,
Lucinda Strachan, Francesca Velicu (*army*)
Matthew Astley, Rhys Yeomans (*major's guards*)

UK 2022
88 mins

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