

## ***GILGAMESH* by Jack Symonds**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

*GILGAMESH* takes inspiration from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; humanity's oldest written epic poem. Emerging from ancient Mesopotamian mythology, it tells of a restless young king who, through experiences of love and loss becomes a better person. His unexpected love for a half -man, half-animal leads him wide-eyed into mysterious realms.

Gilgamesh's story sings to us across millennia, and this brand -new opera uncovers all that remains strikingly relevant: its approach to mortality, sexuality and our relationship with nature. This is the first opera in English based upon this foundational part of civilisation.

### **THE VENUE:**

The work is being staged in the (very large!) Bay 17 at Carriageworks.

### **SET DESCRIPTION:**

The stage space in the large bay is delineated with large, white, square tarket flooring. It is white as throughout the show we use a lot of elements that will pop with the look of the white floor.

There are sliding double doors in the middle of the back wall, which are used for entrances and exits throughout the performance. There is a large lighting rig in the doorway that is used throughout the show as part of the design. There are two other entra nces/exits on either extreme side of the back wall.

When we enter, there is a very large tree lying on its side, diagonally, as if it has just been felled. The main branches have been cut off but it lies in the rough shape of an intact tree. The leaves on the tree have been painted gold.

Its stump is closer to the audience on our left, with the branches extending away from us (upstage) to the right.

Sitting on the tree stump is the performer who plays Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is holding a chainsaw and is covered from the waist up in blood.

The orchestra and Jack Symonds who is conducting the performance are situated on the far right -hand side of the stage.

#### **SET CHANGES:**

- Scene 4 (the forest):
  - Tree branches are spread to shift the landscape.
- Interval:
  - The trunk of the tree is completely removed from the space.
  - The branches are piled up in the upstage (away from us) left-hand corner.
  - The tree stump remains (the same stump that we walked in on Gilgamesh sitting on at the start of the show).
  - There is a large blood smear going from downstage to upstage, diagonally - in the place where the tree previously was. It is intentionally unclear whether this is the blood of Humbaba or the tree.
- Scene 5:
  - Three “people of Uruk” retrieve tree branches from the pile and spread them around the space.
  - There is smoke as Ishtar rages during this scene and brings down the Bull of Heaven. As the smoke clears, it becomes clear that the floor has been covered in detritus (this is a combination of dust, leaves, silver and gold confetti and blood).
- Interlude between scenes 6 and 7:
  - Tree branches get taken away from the space. It is cleared except for the tree stump.
- Scene 8:
  - At the top of the scene, the tree stump is pushed centre stage by Enkidu

#### **THE CHARACTERS:**

- Gilgamesh - Jeremy Kleeman
- Enkidu - Mitchell Riley
- Ishtar - Jane Sheldon
- Shamhat - Jessica O'Donoghue
- The Courtiers - Jane Sheldon, Jessica O'Donoghue, Daniel Szesiong Todd
- Humbaba - Daniel Szesiong Todd
- Scorpions - Jane Sheldon, Jessica O'Donoghue
- Ur-Shanabi - Daniel Szesiong Todd

- Uta Napishti - Jessica O'Donoghue

## THE STORY, COSTUME AND PROPS:

### ACT I

- **Prelude: The wilds outside Uruk.**

Gilgamesh is sitting on the tree stump holding a chainsaw which is idling. He is wearing a silver crown, identifying his status as King. He is a male with medium-length brown hair. It is inferred that he has chopped down the tree on stage. He is covered in blood and wearing just a small loincloth around his waist and a jewelled crown. He is separate from the other action on stage. The show often uses blood as a motif - intentionally ambiguous whether it comes from people or trees. From darkness, Enkidu crawls slowly down the stage's centre, navigating through the trees. He is a male of tall build, with short brown hair. He is part man, part beast, with his top half covered almost entirely in clay. On his bottom half is a pair of pants made from sheep's wool. The other performers are off-stage. Halfway through the interlude when the singers' hum builds, Ishtar enters from the centre of the upstage doors and stands still; observing Enkidu. She is surrounded by bright light. The prelude ends with Enkidu collapsing to the floor centre stage.

- **Scene 1: Ishtar's Temple.**

Gilgamesh is still sitting on the stump with his chainsaw. Enkidu is still on the floor centre stage. Ishtar bursts onto the stage. She is a female with long brown hair, but in this instance it is covered by a rhinestone wig. She is wearing a very beautiful and extravagant lilac garment with an exaggerated collar. She is wearing thigh-high-heeled boots and a rhinestoned wig. She observes the tree in the space that looks as if it has recently been lopped and cut to pieces. As she moves around the space, she inspects the pieces of tree with concern, occasionally picking up branches. Shamhat enters when called on by Ishtar. She follows Ishtar's lead around the space. Shamhat is wearing high-heeled black boots, an oversized black trenchcoat and a blonde ponytail wig. Gilgamesh becomes visible to the pair when Ishtar says his name. Enkidu begins to move when Ishtar says his name. He crawls around on the tree stump mid-stage. At the end of the scene, Gilgamesh exits with his chainsaw.

- **Scene 2: The wilds outside Uruk.**

Enkidu is alone among the branches of the trees, moving around them. We observe him in his

natural habitat. Shamhat becomes apparent from the far upstage edge of the trees as she calls to him. Shamhat and Enkidu circle one another with the trees between them for a while. When Shamhat introduces herself by name, she opens her coat to reveal she is wearing a red sequined jumpsuit. Shamhat lures Enkidu to the edge of the tree where she reveals a silver wash bowl and a few towels. Shamhat washes Enkidu with the water and removes his wool pants, revealing a more human form. This moment is climactic and erotic. When Enkidu tries to run back to his herd, he discovers his forelegs no longer work; he is becoming more human. Shamhat introduces Enkidu to some more human pleasures: bread (a large round white bread loaf), wine (contained in a camel-coloured wine bladder), clothing (a simple white loin cloth) and a mirror (a reflective silver tray). The scene concludes with Enkidu and Shamhat chasing and playing with one another while exiting stage, declaring their romance will continue for another 6 days and 7 nights.

- **Scene 3: The Palace Sublime.**

Gilgamesh is revealed at the very back of the stage in full silver royal regalia. He is surrounded by two of his courtiers (Jane and Daniel) who are showering him with silver confetti that they pull from shoulder bags - throughout the scene, the confetti is left all over the floor creating detritus. All substances that end up on the floor throughout the piece are deliberately not cleaned up. All three are wearing long, shimmery silver skirts. Gilgamesh's skirt is bigger and more flashy than the other two. They are carrying handheld fans. There is a procession of fanfare and adoration. Shamhat and Enkidu appear and observe this from a distance. Shamhat takes Enkidu in private to explain the way the people of Uruk serve The King. The courtiers begin displaying themselves to Gilgamesh in an increasingly sexual manner. Enkidu, disgusted, loudly declares that he will not hail Gilgamesh. This stops everyone in their tracks and they look at him. One courtier advances at Enkidu. There is a physical tussle between the two. They both get away from one another. Enkidu and Gilgamesh come face to face. They are both visibly affected by this - a suggestion of a romantic connection. Gilgamesh wants to fight Enkidu himself. They do, but unexpectedly Gilgamesh cannot get the upper hand and they become locked in a position in which neither seems able to dominate the other. An erotic tension is established. The fight ends when they are both on the floor as they call it a draw. The King demands the courtiers leave. They do. Shamhat leaves too. Alone, Gilgamesh softens slightly to Enkidu as he questions Enkidu. Enkidu is physically tentative and receives Gilgamesh's gestures (hand shakes etc) very gingerly. Gilgamesh makes a clear gesture of showing Enkidu his crown when he says "the Gods will protect us" - akin to a toast. The courtiers return and shower both Enkidu and

Gilgamesh with confetti as they proceed off -stage, going off together to the Forest of Cedar. They exit through the centre doors.

The courtiers and Shamhat move three of the large tree branches to new positions scattered throughout the space.

- **Scene 4: The Forest of Cedar.**

Enkidu and Gilgamesh enter the forest, which feels vastly different to the landscape of the previous scene. Lights are low and everything feels quite tranquil. Enkidu scans the forest in a familiar way, articulating what he notices about his natural habitat. Throughout the scene, the looming presence of Humbaba is felt. Gilgamesh and Enkidu often hear him and look around, unable to see him. Enkidu takes off his loincloth and Gilgamesh takes off his silver skirt and crown. They decide to go to sleep: Gilgamesh against the tree trunk and Enkidu in the open space. Gilgamesh begins having a nightmare. Enkidu wakes him up and calms him down. They go to sleep again. Gilgamesh has a second nightmare, this time becoming increasingly physical, Enkidu has to restrain him to wake him up. Gilgamesh explains the violent visions he has having in his dream to Enkidu. As this explanation happens, the two end up in very close proximity and it is very apparent that the tension is romantic. Enkidu reveals a silver wash bowl and begins to sponge Gilgamesh to soothe him. This escalates into a moment that suggests consummation. After this, as the two prepare to go back to sleep, it is clear that Humbaba is a very close threat. They hide. Humbaba is revealed from the doors in bright light and smoke. He is wearing woolen pants, a balaclava and an elaborate, beautiful gold rhinestone headpiece. He announces himself and a physical fight breaks out between the three. Struggling to get the upper hand, Gilgamesh prays to Shamash the God of Sunlight, who rouses the 13 winds and sends down an inferno of sunlight, totally blinding and disorienting Humbaba. To represent this, an incredibly bright light shines through the doors on the audience. Seeing their chance, Gilgamesh and Enkidu seize Humbaba from behind and hold him down over the tree trunk on centre stage. Gilgamesh picks up a long sharp stick and delivers the blow that kills Humbaba. Initially in shock about his action, he quickly begins to regale in his new sense of power. Gilgamesh and Enkidu celebrate callously by covering themselves with the blood of Humbaba. Enkidu takes off Humbaba's headpiece and places it on his own head; a trophy. Lights black out indicating the end of Act One.

## **ACT II**

- **Scene 5: Uruk.**

During the interval, the tree trunk is taken away, and four of the branches are placed in a pile on

the upstage left side of the stage. Only the stump remains in the space. The mess of confetti, clay and blood is left on the floor. There is a notably large blood smear trailing from Humbaba's death position, trailing about 3 metres long. The lights snap on to reveal this new version of the landscape. Ishtar is sitting next to the blood smear. Her large coat has been removed, but she is still wearing her wig, boots and leotard. The lighting is highly contrasted and makes both Ishtar and the blood pop out significantly. As Ishtar sings to seduce Gilgamesh, she covers herself with the blood from the smear, resulting in a very messed up-looking version of her character. At a point during the action, her silver wig is removed and Jane's natural hair is revealed (long and brown). The doors open and a very similar royal procession to scene 3 occurs with Gilgamesh and two courtiers (Daniel and Jess) except this time they are dressed in gold, and the confetti is gold. Enkidu joins too. He is on Gilgamesh's arm wearing an elaborate gold skirt and Humbaba's headpiece. It is clear that Uruk's wealth has increased significantly after conquering the forest. Gilgamesh is initially unaware of Ishtar's presence but eventually becomes aware of it as her song grows louder. Gilgamesh sends his courtiers away and begins something of a game of cat and mouse with Ishtar. She continues to seduce him by dancing on and with the blood. Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar's advances, causing a great wave of rage from her. She stands and grabs a branch from the pile. Smoke is coming from it. As Ishtar's rage mounts, she wields the branch like a weapon and the lighting goes red, then strobes. There is haze. The other four singers (as generalised "people of Uruk") enter the space through the haze and grab the various branches from around the space, scatter them, and collapse in exhaustion. The feeling this section conjures is akin to a panic attack. This moment represents Ishtar conjuring the Bull of Heaven, only for Enkidu and Gilgamesh to destroy it and escape. Ishtar is full of vengeful rage and exits the scene claiming "the Gods shall respond how they will".

- **Scene 6: The ruins of the Palace Sublime.**

Enkidu and Gilgamesh enter, Enkidu is carrying a wooden carved sculpture of two figures in an embrace - it resembles the two of them. He places it on the tree stump. All singers exit the space except Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who remove their skirts and lay down to go to sleep. The lights are brighter however the haze and chaos lingers around the space. Waterphone noises in this scene represent messages delivered by the Gods, who are in assembly and deciding on the fate of Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Enkidu wakes up and can hear these messages. He relays what they say in a panic. He travels around the space listening to them, increasingly affected. Gilgamesh sleeps soundly, until he wakes at the height of Enkidu's flurry - when Enkidu starts directing his bodily rage at the sculpture. Gilgamesh prays to Shamash for protection, however,

he is unsuccessful. Enkidu reveals a silver bowl and pulls clay from it, covering himself and returning to something resembling his appearance in the prelude. He crawls slowly centre stage, as if disintegrating. He is followed by an incredibly distressed Gilgamesh. Enkidu flops over and dies in Gilgamesh's arms while trying to write "En..ki..du" on his chest in clay. Gilgamesh spends an extended moment with Enkidu's lifeless body before laying it down carefully, grabbing his crown and running off stage as the Gods clamber above. There is a gentle proceeding musical interlude in which Enkidu stands up, gets the sculpture, and leaves the space. Enkidu returns in the following two scenes covered in clay, as a ghost. He doesn't sing again in the piece.

- **Scene 7: The Desert.**

Gilgamesh appears walking along the back wall to centre, looking dishevelled and covered in a large lion hide. He is wearing a brown loin cloth and has some gold body paint remaining on his skin. His physicality has broken down. The lights are bright. He has been wandering this landscape for a long time, becoming increasingly delirious. It is unclear whether some things he is seeing are mirages or not. He wanders for a long time, until the desert Scorpions appear from either side of the stage (Jessica and Jane). They are guarding the entrance to the Waters of Death. Surprisingly, these Scorpions are dressed like rhinestone cowboys. They are wearing all-black velvet jumpsuits adorned with silver rhinestones. The jumpsuits have cowboy touches such as fringe arms and large belts. They are wearing black high heels, giant black cowboy hats and huge black scorpion claws. They circle Gilgamesh, totally on guard, defensively using their pincers. They act as one. Once they decide to let Gilgamesh through, the back doors open in a momentous way, revealing a brightly lit landscape of bare tree branches. It feels like a portal to the beyond. Gilgamesh enters.

For the following section, Gilgamesh is placed as far upstage as possible in the space. He is crouched in amongst these branches in the doorway, lit by one heavy side light to his left as he sings.

Once he emerges onto the shores of the Waters of Death, he explores the strange shores. This is represented through the use of a blue lighting shift. A mysterious boatman, Ur-Shanabi (Daniel) appears. He is wearing extensive yet humble linen robes in a natural colour. He is wearing a large hat made of straw. He is "rowing a boat". The way this is presented is through the use of a tricked-out mop. The pole of the mop has been replaced with a tree branch. At first a little jarring, we quickly get used to this theatrical device and accept it as rowing. Throughout this scene and scene 8, Ur-Shanabi slowly, meditatively sweeps, the detritus on the floor in a

careful circular pattern. At a point, the Ghost of Enkidu appears, walking the path Ur-Shanabi has created. His gaze is far ahead, unaware of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh spots him and chases him and reaches to him but is unable to touch him. Ur-Shanabi takes pity on Gilgamesh and offers to ferry him to Uta-Napishti's island. They head off along the path.

- **Scene 8: Uta -Napishti's isle.**

Gilgamesh and Ur-Shanabi are slowly walking in circles. The Ghost of Enkidu slowly pushes the tree stump diagonally to centre stage. Uta -Napishti (Jessica) is walking towards the stump from the opposite direction. They are wearing long white robes, bare feet and most notably an incredibly long mane of grey hair which seems to go on forever. This reflects the immortality of the character. Uta-Napishti is carrying the silver wash bowl and places it on the ground as they step up onto the tree stump centre stage. For a long time while Uta-Napishti is singing of their immortal experience, Gilgamesh and The Ghost of Enkidu are circling the stump. Once Uta -Napishti tells Gilgamesh that singing his song may lead to immortality, they get off the stump and give the platform to Gilgamesh. Circling continues, with Uta -Napishti and Ishtar joining the circling observers. Gilgamesh runs out of breath and collapses briefly onto the stump. Everyone circling stops and watches this moment. There is a brief total pause. Silence and stillness. Gilgamesh has failed. Uta-Napishti brings out the wash bowl and commands Gilgamesh to transform; take off his clothes (he does, revealing total nakedness) and wash his hair (he does). Gilgamesh stands on the stump and is handed a mysterious gift, covered in a black cloth. He asks what it is but receives no answer. Uta -Napishti, the Ghost of Enkidu and Ishtar walk away from him and plant themselves in the space's extremities. He takes off the cloth and reveals a small sapling. He is alone, comprehending the meaning of the gift. Gilgamesh dismounts the stump and walks upstage, slowly into the darkness of the back doors. The final notes of the piece are hummed as he walks.

Slow blackout.