

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

theguardian

What large teeth you have! Little Red Riding Hood heads to Manchester
Neck of the Woods, a new play by Turner prizewinner Douglas Gordon based on Perrault's fairytale premieres in Manchester next month. Tim Auld follows the trail of the Big Bad Wolf

Tim Auld



Neck of the Woods. Photograph: Douglas Gordon

“For me, the most important thing is to be as close to the dark as possible, and then, when the lights come up, it should be the same as when you’re a child, when you have a nightmare and then you wake up and you feel safe and then you’re frightened to go back to sleep.” In his gravelly, laconic Glaswegian voice, the Turner-prizewinning artist Douglas Gordon is painting me a picture of a new play about the Big Bad Wolf that he is directing, designing and performing in at this year’s Manchester international festival.

Entitled *Neck of the Woods*, it is a retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood story, and brings together an impressive group of talents: Gordon, the concert pianist and wolf conservationist H el ene Grimaud, Charlotte Rampling and the acclaimed Mexican-born writer and film-maker Veronica Gonzalez Pe a.

Gordon, 48, is known for his unsettling video installations, such as *24 Hour Psycho*, in which he slowed down Hitchcock’s classic so that it lasted a whole day. He also co-directed the left-field, but mesmeric *Zidane, un portrait du 21e si cle*, a 90-minute film that followed the footballer’s every move in real time in a match between Real Madrid and Villarreal in 2005. In another work, *The End of Civilisation*, he set a piano on fire in the Cumbrian hills and filmed it burning.

The catalyst for *Neck of the Woods* was Alex Poots, artistic director of the Manchester international festival, who knew about Grimaud’s wolf conservation centre and remembered that in pride of place on a piano in Gordon’s Berlin studio stood a stuffed wolf. “He said: ‘H el ene

Grimaud, you have to meet her,” says Gordon. “So he got to H  l  ne and that’s how we met. You know our kind of shared fascination with the wolf and the piano. Not a bad start.”

In 1999, having – as you do – been introduced to a real wolf living in a friend’s home in Tallahassee, Florida, Grimaud set up a wolf sanctuary in upper New York state, and is now responsible for a programme that releases the endangered Mexican grey wolf and red wolf back into the wild.

Gordon has not one but three stuffed wolves in his studio: “I have a pair of European wolves fucking each other and another European wolf with its head cut off – that’s the kind of world I live in,” he says. “There are quite a lot of wolves in the outskirts of Berlin, so they have a cull every year. H  l  ne is saving wolves, I just have dead ones.”

Was he worried what Grimaud would make of his stuffed wolves?

“I treat my dead wolves with respect, and it’s probably better that I have them than a lot of other people. I’m not about to get a gun and shoot one,” he says.

I call Grimaud to get her side of the story. “Ideally one would like no individual wolf to be taken,” she says, “but at least he’s honouring them in a certain way, in a Douglas Gordon sort of way.”

It’s the second time Grimaud and Gordon have worked together. The first was in New York in late 2014, on a performance called *Tears Become ... Streams Become ...* They hit it off immediately. “He’s a man who has a huge heart and he has a profound respect for all living creatures, and that’s something that connects us,” says Grimaud.

Gordon is clearly a compelling character, with the ability to charm golden eagles from Scottish mountain tops. Think of him as the Billy Connolly of avant-garde art. When I talk to Rampling, the narrator of the play, and Gonzalez Pe  a, it is obvious that they too have been won over.

Everyone involved with *Neck of the Woods* describes the play as a collaborative project, and when I speak to the various parties three weeks before opening night, it emerges that the script, the music, the design are all in a state of flux. The whole thing will only come together at the very last minute. “It’s going to be a complete surprise,” says Rampling, “it’s going to surprise us too, once we’re on stage. We’re lucky enough to have the stage in Manchester for a week before we start our performances – we’ll actually be creating it then.”

For the story, Gordon asked Gonzalez Pe  a for something “very loosely based on *Little Red Riding Hood*”. Her script will draw on the many different takes on the wolf myth in literature, bringing them together in a collage of narrative, sound, lighting and singing.

The wolf has not had a good press in literature. For Aesop, writing 600 years before the birth of Christ, it is a creature without virtue. It is insatiable. It is deceitful and selfish. It eats children. Biblical scribes concurred. In *Genesis* we hear that Benjamin, Joseph’s youngest brother, “shall

ravin as a wolf” and Jesus ran with the image in his teachings: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

Such negative portrayals were not, of course, without justification. If the Bible frequently plays on the image of a devilish wolf preying on God’s faithful flock, it is because the loss of livestock to wolves was a daily reality for shepherds. It is unfortunate for real wolves that the image stuck and became deeply embedded in the western psyche: the wolf as devourer of Christians, the quintessence of mankind’s basest carnal desires. Why not hunt such a creature to extinction?

On the odd occasion when a story portrayed a wolf in a positive light, it was quickly stamped on. In Augustine’s hands the tender tale of the she-wolf who rescued Romulus and Remus from the Tiber and suckled them becomes a story to justify the fall of Rome, which he believed had become lustful and corrupt. The she-wolf, he says, was actually a whore (lupa meaning both wolf and prostitute) – what hope, he argues, for a city founded by an infant who first supped at the breasts of such a woman?

Not all cultures have enshrined the wolf as a symbol of man’s evil and inner darkness. American Indian tribes such as the Quileute and Kwakiutl believe their ancestors were wolves transformed into men and revere the wolf for its courage, loyalty and brilliance as a hunter. In early Turkic and Mongolian cultures the wolf was seen as a symbol of good fortune, in Japan it was worshipped as a protector and bringer of fertility. In Chechnya the wolf is a symbol of national pride, a nurturing mother.

But in western culture the rapacious reputation has conquered all others. And so the wolf, and its humanoid incarnation the werewolf, has stalked its miscreant way through legend and literature, from the tales of Perrault, the brothers Grimm, De La Fontaine and Hans Christian Andersen, through Dracula, Tolkien, CS Lewis and Prokofiev. When film came along it took up the baton and countless werewolf ripper movies have been inspired by Guy Endore’s 1933 cult novel *The Werewolf of Paris*.

For all this negativity, the last century has seen a change in attitude to the wolf. Kipling casts the wolves in a benign role in *The Jungle Book*, as the saviours of Mowgli. JK Rowling offers a sympathetic portrait of a man fighting his inner werewolf in the character of Remus Lupin in her *Harry Potter* novels, while Stephenie Meyer’s tribe of shape-changing werewolves are warriors against the forces of evil in her *Twilight* novels. And of course there is the short story by Angela Carter, “*The Company of Wolves*”, which subverts traditional sexual attitudes to Little Red Riding Hood and ends with the girl stripping off to take her pleasure with the beast.

It is against this backdrop that Gonzalez Peña, in conversation with Gordon, has woven her script, bringing in references to Freud and the little-known but influential early 20th-century American writer Sherwood Anderson. I ask her whether, with a mind to Grimaud’s conservation activities, the play will try to right the malign image of the wolf. No, she says, it’s not going to be a polemical piece. Grimaud acknowledges that a didactic approach would not work artistically: “In the beginning, I suppose a part of me thought, ‘Great, we’re doing a piece about the ecology and the behaviour of wolves. We are rectifying the story and telling the facts,’ and, of course, it couldn’t be that.”

For Gordon, it's not about real wolves at all. "It is more to do with the metaphor of the wolf. There is the history of the she-wolf, but mostly wolves represent a bad man. One of the things I wanted to explore with this project in Manchester was that there is badness, there are bad reputations and they're not without any foundations. I think men are worse than wolves, for sure."

And is Douglas worse than a wolf? How much is Neck of the Woods a conversation with himself? "It's a self-portrait, it's all about the darkness."

Is it also a reflection on his relationships with women and his own children (he has a son in America and a daughter in Berlin and lives with his partner, the opera singer Ruth Rosenfeld)? He laughs with mock outrage. "I think you've gone a wee bit too far. Who told you about my relationships with women? Probably I did, actually. You're not wrong, you're not wrong."

I quote him a line one of the male characters speaks in Patrick Marber's play Closer: "If you women could see one minute of our Home Movies – the shit that slops through our minds every day – you'd string us up by the balls, you really would." Gordon replies: "I think that if you know you're a man, you know what other men are like. And that makes you fearful. If you are a man, you know what other men are thinking all the time. I am one of the most gentlemanly men you could ever meet, and even I think nasty things."

"I don't want to give out a spoiler, but the last acting role that I had I played a paedophile truck driver. This is even worse than that."

- Neck of the Woods runs at HOME, 2 Tony Wilson Place, First Street, Manchester, as part of the Manchester international festival, 10-18 July.