“COLLABORATION” - Keynote Address for ISPA Congress at The Times Center, New York
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By Akram Khan

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1974- born in a nursing hospital, south London- aged 0. 1977- learnt my first dance steps from my mother-aged 3. 1981- started my basic training in the Indian classical dance form 'kathak'- aged 7. 1983- watched my first 'hero' make his mark on the world, on my fathers black and white television, I was watching the music video of 'Thriller', Michael Jackson- I was aged 9. 1984- performed in the 'Adventures of Mowgli' which had a stellar cast of some of the great Indian classical dancers of that time- I was 10. 1985- Discovered that my grandfather was one of the great mathematicians in India, and that he had invented a mathematical formula that was actually named after him- I was aged 11. 1986- I started to form a belief that maybe I had some of my grandfather's mathematical gift, and so started to focus on numbers and patterns and even started taking private maths class-aged 12. 1987- had the great honour of performing and touring with Peter Brook's acclaimed theatre production of the Mahabharata- I was just 13. 1988- unfortunately, while on tour, became addicted to MacDonalds, and just junk food in general-aged 14. 1989- became a disciple of my kathak master, Shri Pratap Pawar, and so began training in a way of life that was based on principles such as discipline, perseverance, focus and devotion-aged 15.

1990- returned back to normal life, school, homework, teenage tantrums, curfews, television, working as a waiter in my father's Bangladeshi restaurant, and in result, discovered that I hated normal life and desperately wanted to escape to the world of theatre more than ever, I was aged 16. 1992- took my maths exam and failed with a certificate, only known as 'U', which stands for Unclassified- I was 18. 1993- retook my maths exam and failed again with a grade also classified as 'Unclassified'- I was 19. 1994- after retaking a third and final time, I stopped being in denial, and realised that I had no mathematical gift whatsoever, and so gave up trying to be like my grandfather, and in the same year, I escaped to DeMontfort University, Leicester, studied contemporary dance for 2 years and then transferred to the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, for the final two years. It was during this period of 4 years, that I discovered that my external body was my internal voice-aged 20.

2000- met my closest collaborator, Farooq Chaudhry (who is my producer, friend and work partner) to form the 'Akram Khan Dance Company'. Also in the same year, I had the good fortune of meeting and then collaborating with composer Nitin Sahwney- I was aged. . . well, I think by this point, I would like to stop mentioning my age. . .

2002- collaborated with Anish Kapoor and Nitin Sahwney on a full-length production called 'Kaash'. 2004- collaborated with Hanif Kureishi, on a project called 'Ma'. 2005- collaborated with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Antony Gormley and Nitin Sawhney on a
production entitled 'zero degrees', and in-between creating and performing, actually managing to get married to a South African dancer called Shanell Winlock. 2006- created a duet for Sylvie Guillem and myself called 'Sacred Monsters'. Also in the same year created a short choreography for Kylie Minogue. 2008- decided not to perform in any of my ensemble work anymore, and so in collaboration with the National Ballet of China and my company dancers created 'bahok', and in the same year collaborated with Juliette Binoche, Michael Hulls and Anish Kapoor to create the dance/theatre piece called 'In-I'. 2010- collaborated with a Japanese drummer and 5 other musicians to create the piece 'Gnosis'. Also in the same year collaborated with Nitin Sahwney to create the ensemble work called 'Vertical Road'. 2011- Finally managed to get here to be the keynote speaker at ISPA… ahh… and just to add, that I have been free from junk food, for a whole year now, fully rehabilitated, and now I am glad to reveal that I am totally obsessed only with Japanese cuisine…

Looking back over the last 30 odd years, and particularly, emphasising the last 10 years, I have had the privilege of 'collaborating' with some of the most incredible artists of my time. But I feel, at this moment, it is more important to elaborate and speak about the very notion of 'collaboration', which has played an integral part of my journey as an artist.

Here, at this junction, I speak for myself and on behalf of my producer, whom together, I feel, we hold a principle that embraces the notion of 'We' and not 'I'. We live in a world that is changing so fast that even 'We', my generation (which I call 'the generation of technology') cannot even keep up with the ever changing 'Apple' phenomenon. Just in the space of a decade we have had iMacs, iPods, iPhones and now, even iPads. If you notice the common denominator: 'I'. Probably, it would be fair to say, that 'I' is the newer model of 'We'. For me, 'I' represents the artist, but the artist of the past. However, when Farooq and I first came together, we felt, that 'I' was not the direction we wanted to go in, so instead, we embraced the notion of 'We'.

To us, 'We' in a collaborative sense means a sort of a neutral place, where no 'ONE' person leads, where no map is preconceived, in order to take a journey together. . . Farooq and I embraced the belief that, in order for us to grow, to learn, to discover, we had to break limits, we had to break fixed patterns, to break set rituals that were given or passed down, and so we quickly realised that to cross any boundaries was another means or excuse for learning and discovering. For us, being a bit unsure, unfamiliar, unsettled, slightly vulnerable, in the unknown, seemed and still seems to be the right conditions for us to be creative.

In reflection, what I learnt from collaborating with many of the artists I have mentioned earlier, was simply that the ideal conditions for any living creature always includes a sense of collaboration and a sense of struggle. For instance, in a forest, trees compete in order to get more sunlight, to grow bigger, and so you end up with tall trees, short trees, and every other kind of tree, and this amazing ability to survive together, is what makes them so alive and versatile, and after 38 hundred million years of earth history, I am sure we can agree, that life is made up of infinite number of these intertwining roots, or pathways that points towards one theory- the theory being that, in the end, we all feed off each other. We all bounce energy and creativity off each other.
What motivates me to collaborate? Human stories being shared with each other, human interaction, human ability to push each other to imagine beyond what we think we can imagine. What motivates me? The sense that in order to communicate with each other, to embrace and challenge each other, we have to constantly be in the present. . . What motivates me? Well, maybe to constantly repeat this question to myself until I run out of words to explain what actually motivates me! Because then there is just 'us', or 'we' left behind, a collection of artists, of different disciplines, different languages, different cultures, different education, but we are all in the same room, in silence, and all our passionate gestures and fierce negotiations, have come to a standstill, and with it, a sense that we all want a single 'truth', that this journey together has to end up giving birth to our creation. . . that somehow, we as individuals, are like small jigsaw pieces, but together, we form a single, but powerful and larger fuller picture.

But also allow me to confess, that every picture has hidden behind it, another picture. And that hidden side reveals the cracks, the scars, the struggles, the debates, that will continue to remain silent and loyal, as long as we feel, collectively, that the picture or vision is actually worth struggling for.

As an example, one of my most challenging collaborations was to create a work, with an astounding actress and close friend, Juliette Binoche. From the beginning, we had not clarified who would lead, who would have the final say. . . but here lies a danger. When two artists are collaborating together, and what they bring together to the table is not open or clear from the beginning, then it has the danger of becoming confused, or simply, it has the danger of collapsing. This was one of the first collaborations I had experienced within the 10 years, where we had both come to the table, with a number of desires and expectations that were not expressed transparently at the beginning of the process. It was only close to the end that we discovered, what we actually wanted for ourselves, out of this process, and that 'want', was comprised of actually two separate pictures, and not one. I suppose this happened for various reasons, but some of which were to do with 'fear'. We were both frightened to lead each other, and at the same time, frightened to be lead by the other.

So the thing that begs questioning is: 'what' and 'where' are our boundaries within a collaborative setting? And how much of our individual boundaries are we willing to sacrifice, to let go off? Strangely enough, Juliette and I eventually discovered that the boundaries that we were not willing to share, or to give up to each other, were the very ones that should have been split open at the start in order for the project to feel fully explored, to feel deeply committed to, to even feel a sense of vulnerable hope.

However, once we had addressed this problem, we decided to recreate a new relationship between the both of us. So we ended up starting again and created new boundaries, and revealed old one, and by doing that, we finally moved forwards.

This particular process between Juliette and I was extremely valuable towards my understanding of 'collaboration'. I discovered that my 'values' had to be put on the table early enough, equally as the other collaborators because if we are not aware of each other's individual expectations or our initial intentions, then together, they could form a dangerous, unstable result. For example- lets use a practical one- we all know that
when we are ill and we go to the pharmacist, the first things they want to know are 'What are we taking?' 'Why is this?' It's because they are concerned with the potential interaction of particular compounds. (Because sometimes, the synergy between two things can be more lethal than the separate individual parts.)

So what are my 'values' in a collaborative sense? I would like think that they are to do with revealing and understanding relationships, understanding the power of bridges between people from different cultures, different countries, different value systems. For me, relationships have two profound factors. Firstly, the understanding of the other: What inspires them? What drives them? What makes them turn into children? What makes them frightened, excited, sad, vulnerable etc. . . ? Secondly, the more important factor, what do I give to this relationship that takes them somewhere they would not be able to, if I were not in the equation, and vice-versa.

Reflecting back on a more recent project I made, called 'Vertical Road', which I had embarked full steam ahead, right from the word 'go'. Somewhere through that creation, probably mid-way, I discovered that I had come 'head-to-head' with all my collaborators involved, to a point of real frustration and there was a huge break down in communication, almost to the point of giving up on the project. And at that moment, thanks to my dramaturge Ruth Little, who masterfully intervened and coolly told me-which I must say was quite brave of her, especially at a time where the whole team was full of pent-up frustration and anger- to back off, to reflect, to empty myself in order to be still, to reflect again, in order to then move forward.

To empty myself? To be still? To move forward? What did all this mean? Was I too 'full' before I started, so as not to allow anyone else to have space to contribute to this process? And when I asked her with aggressive intent what she meant by me emptying myself, she explained that none of us were on the same page to start with, that from the very beginning we had come with lots of prepared knowledge, old desires and unspoken expectations. This may have been the cause that was preventing us to move forward as a team. And again I asked her to clarify further what she meant, and she told me that not too long ago, she read an article in a nature magazine, that explained that about one tonne of dust from broken rocks of meteorites, falls into Earth's atmosphere every hour, and that we are not even aware of it because we are constantly in motion. But if, for example, we stood 'still' long enough, then eventually, we would all be covered in the same dust, like those Chinese terracotta warriors, over time, all covered in earth and dust, and yet through further study, the historians discovered that every one of those terracotta warriors were from the same dynasty, and yet, when one looked even more closely, one discovered, that each one of those clay warriors still retained their individual characteristics about them, and that every one of them 'collectively', formed a single giant army. . . and so together, 'collectively', they formed a single epic picture.

And I suppose this is what I would like to share with you, that the basic principle of retaining one's individuality and yet at the same time, being able to form and then serve a singular, collective vision, is where both Farooq and I are aiming towards in all of our collaborative journeys. . . I mean, we don't always get it right, but we don't always get it wrong either!
A few years back, I had the good fortune of spending sometime with the theatre director Simon McBurney from Theatre de Complicite. We spent several sessions in a studio, and what I realised about him, was how much he 'listened' to things around him, and I suppose what he discovered about me was how much I 'observed' things around me. This was another revealing moment for me, as how each artist absorbs and assimilates information very differently, depending on their respective artform. And so the art of collaborating has many layers to it, meaning... it is hugely complex! The sense of listening, of observing, of feeling, of reflecting, of reacting, negotiating, even sacrificing, they all play a huge factor towards realising a collective, singular vision.

Going back to another production, called 'zero degrees', which was based on a four-way collaboration between Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Antony Gormley, Nitin Sawhney and myself. There was one particular moment I would like to share with you because it still stays with me. It was during the final stage of the process, where the distinguished sculptor Antony Gormley suddenly announced after watching one of the final run-throughs, a few nights before the premiere, that maybe 'still', he had not given enough input or influence into the work. Yet, the rest of us knew, that he had been a pivotal factor in the development of 'zero degrees'. He was not only involved in the visual design of the space, but also shared powerful, fascinating opinions about the choreography, the music, the text, the costume, the lighting. There was not a stone unturned by him! He dissected and affected everything! And yet, suddenly at this fragile moment, for all of us, he felt that perhaps he had not filled the space enough, with 'enough' of his ideas.

And I remember turning to him and saying that if the space still looks empty, even after all this choreography, text, music, lighting and scenography that has gone into it, then maybe this last remaining bit of empty space is what 'zero degrees' now needed, because if we filled it up too much, then there would 'be' no space left, for the audience to enter. That for me, was the final part of the collaboration- the 'encounter' and the 'interaction' with the audience, where what we experienced on stage, and what the audience experienced off stage, became a shared experience, for all of us.

'Collaborators' are not always like two ends of a bridge, because sometimes they happen to be 'the accidental bridge' between two ends. What do I mean by that? Well, there are many types of collaborators, and each one collaborates very differently from the other. For example, let’s take Anish Kapoor. He is an artist that I would define as being like the two ends of a bridge. He is predominantly there at the beginning, and he is also there at the end. He plants the seed at the start, and then allows it space to grow without too much interference, and then again returns close to the end to see and to refine the final result. This somewhat reveals to me that he always trusts his first instincts and his initial ideas. Then there are collaborators, like the composer Steve Reich, who collaborates in parallel to you and not directly with you. Almost like driving over a bridge, and then looking over to see another person driving at the same speed, at the same time, in the same direction, but still, on a different bridge to yours. And then there are collaborators like my technical manager, or my rehearsal director, and probably, most of my dancers, that are and form the 'bridge' itself, between the beginning seed and the final picture. But for me, the most fascinating collaborators are
also the ones that happen to 'accidentally' fall into the role of a being a collaborator. They are the ones that by some mysterious fate, or coincidence, become 'the accidental bridge between two ends' of a journey. . . or to put it more simply, they become by default, the 'accidental collaborators'.

Finally, I would like to share an experience with you, an experience that left me feeling that somehow, this mysterious couple in my story, became the accidental bridge between the two ends of my story. . . Or to put it more simply, how this mysterious couple, became my accidental collaborators!

(Editing note: Akram continues to talk about the Taxi story in Sydney which is summarised as below. This summary was taken from an interview on Gulf News. Original interview: [http://gulfnews.com/life-style/people/rhythm-of-life-1.631006](http://gulfnews.com/life-style/people/rhythm-of-life-1.631006))

“I had just finished a performance at the Sydney Opera House and was waiting for a taxi to get back to the hotel. As I was about to get into the taxi, a couple rudely shoved me off. I was too tired to argue after the show. They got in and then turned around to me and asked, "Are you Akram Khan?" They were very apologetic and offered me the taxi. I told them to go.

So I got into the next taxi. Suddenly for the first time, I had this urge to call my father. I am closer to my mother and rarely call my father. As I dialled the number, I kept thinking, 'Why am I calling my dad?' My father answered and he asked, "What's wrong?" I told him I was fine. And then we hung up.

Then the taxi driver asked me in Bengali, "Is your father's name Mosharaf Khan? Was he born in a village called Algichor?" I couldn't believe it. How did this random taxi driver in Australia know my dad's name? Then the taxi driver started to cry. It turned out he and my father were best friends who had lost touch years ago. They had been searching for each other for 30 years.

Was it a coincidence that I got into that taxi? Or is there something bigger than us pulling the strings? That, for me, was a miracle. It was a very special moment where I felt that just maybe, we are all connected."