

CONFLUENCE

Press Quotes & Features

"It's the small details rather than the big concepts that make it magic"

THE GUARDIAN

"Khan himself is a riveting soloist"

THE TIMES

The Daily Telegraph

The gifted dancer-choreographer and composer bring their Svapnagata festival to a thrilling close with their new collaboration, 'Confluence'. Rating * * * *

By Sarah Crompton

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The choreographer Akram Khan and the musician Nitin Sawhney have, for the past two weeks, been overseeing the Svapnagata festival at Sadler's Wells, a celebration of classical Indian music and dance, and an exploration of the many new directions in which it is heading.

The word means "dreaming" and the eclectic mix of events on offer, made by artists both men admire, has been highly successful. It came to a close with Confluence, which marks their seven years of working together. To describe this as a new work was a bit of a swizz since it consisted mainly of quotations from their previous collaborations on bahok, Kaash and zero degrees. But given the standard of both music and dance on display, to complain seems churlish.

These are performers at the zenith of their powers, truly original creators of dance and sounds that mix all kinds of influences — Sawhney's ensemble includes cello alongside tabla and bansuri flute, Khan's choreography mixes classical Kathak dance with contemporary movement.

The result is work so powerful and idiosyncratic that it sweeps you away.

The evening opens with quick-fire interplay between the two men, arguing about who sits where, and then embarking — in unison — on a story about losing a passport, one of Khan's abiding themes. As it develops, interludes of dance which react to Sawhney's music as if bound inside it, are set alongside sections of sound, where his outstanding band, led by the staggering voice of Nicki Wells, emerge from behind the grey gauze at the back of the set.

There are wonderful moments: a section where Khan leads his dancers in a syncopated sequence of wide-armed movements across the diagonal of the stage to a fierce drum beats; the duet where an implausibly limp-bodied dancer is manoeuvred and manipulated around by her friend; a guitar solo from Sawhney, framed by his giant shadow.

Best of all are the passages when Khan dances alone, stamping his Kathak bells in perfect, conversational response to a complex rhythm pounded out on a box, undulating his hands in motion so quick that they look like moving rope or whirling around the stage, so fast that you feel his shadow, thrown on the wall behind him, can't possibly keep up.

What's magical about the way he moves is the way in which extreme control produces a sensation of absolute, liberated freedom. It is glorious to see.

The Independent

From 'Goodness Gracious Me' to Sadler's Wells, via science and Hindu thought, Nitin Sawhney is a musician who defies classification

By Susie Measure
Sunday, 18 July 2010

Sawhney: 'I'm a musical explorer. I just try to have adventures through music'

Nitin Sawhney has lost me. Despite my best mental efforts, I just can't keep pace with his verbal sprint through several millennia of philosophies this early in the day. The musician has skipped from the Hindu Vedas to Einstein via Kepler and Heisenberg, and all before his first sip of coffee. So I'm surprised when he claims not to understand why people call him "intense". Sensing my bemusement, he plays his trump, or rather, rump, card. It is Sawhney's backside that features at the end of the "Going for an English" restaurant skit that turned Goodness Gracious Me into a hit comedy. "That was mad. That was me burping at the beginning and doing a moony at the end," he laughs. "When people say I take myself seriously, I say, 'Just watch me do a moony'."

Sawhney, of course, did a lot more than just play a cheeky cameo in the satirical send-up of the British love affair with curry. The musician, who has just become an associate artist of Sadler's Wells, was once better known as one half of The Secret Asians, the radio double act with Sanjeev Bhaskar that became Goodness Gracious Me. Sawhney bowed out after making the television pilot. "I was producing someone for Warner Brothers at the time and said, I can't do this and that. I'm a musician. I didn't realise it was going to get so bloody popular!"

Not that he's bitter. For one thing, he hasn't got time. As well as co-starring in Confluence, a dance collaboration with the acclaimed choreographer Akram Khan that opens this week at Sadler's Wells, he is working on a new album, his ninth, for next May, plus the soundtracks for *Midnight's Children*, the first of Salman Rushdie's novels to be adapted for the big screen, and the BBC's autumn nature series, *Human Planet*. Then there's his plan to dramatise a conversation Einstein had with the Bengali philosopher Rabindranath Tagore in Caputh, Germany, in 1930 that to my untutored mind smacks of Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*.

"Einstein and Tagore swapped notes about how physics and Hindu philosophy and music were all related to each other," Sawhney explains in his new Brixton studio. "It touches on everything I'm interested in."

He is clearly very busy with *Midnight's Children*, although such is the secrecy that has been drawn over the project that he cannot divulge any details. "It's going to be amazing. Deepa Mehta is my favourite director; she's brilliant," is all he will say.

I'm keen to dwell on the concepts I can actually comprehend, such as his score for *Human Planet*, which is the BBC's first big post-Attenborough delve into the natural world; anything to stop Sawhney spouting more theoretical physics. However, it's hopeless to think I can steer him away from the topic for long. Sawhney is soon back to his favourite topic. In his mind, physics and music are almost one and the same, such is the overlap between the disciplines.

I can't help thinking that Sawhney is wasted as a musician. Stick him in a classroom, and the T-

CONFLUENCE

shirt-and-jeans-wearing 46-year-old would probably inspire a whole generation of teenagers to become scientists.

It was his interest in theoretical physics, combined with ancient Indian philosophy, that inspired Confluence. "We started talking about where creativity came from and we thought about people like Michelangelo, who said that the statues were already hidden in the marble around you. Or Ravi Shankar, who said the raag exists in the air around you. Or John Coltrane, who talked about improvisation being like a bird that you have to catch in the air," he says.

Although Sawhney's father was a scientist – he worked as a chemical engineer – it was his mother, a dancer, who got him into Hindu philosophy. "My mum once told me there were lots of coincidences with theoretical physics and ancient philosophy. Now I'm into all the maths, too. I'm fascinated by the Large Hadron Collider at Cern and the whole idea of trying to find the God particle."

I'm on safer ground with Sawhney's music and tell him I'm impressed he has collaborated with many major artists such as Sir Paul McCartney and Madonna. But he shakes off the praise. "I'm a musical explorer. I just try to have adventures through music." If this takes him on a world tour of styles and genres, then so be it. He doesn't set out to create "world music". Indeed, he deplores the term.

"It fascinates me that people sometimes listen with their eyes," he says, referring to his project with the Royal Opera House called Entanglement, which divided the critics. "People will look and assume one thing, as opposed to really listening. What I find frustrating is that as soon as someone sees a name like Nitin Sawhney, they will make an assumption."

This explains why he was no fan of the BBC's Asian Network, which he viewed as musical "apartheid". He says: "It's racism. The number of albums that make it in the top 100 that are by Asian artists is totally disproportionate to the demographics of this country. Something needs to change." He is not optimistic. "We seem to be going backwards. It's like this travesty of an election, where basically the whole thing was focused on immigration. Since 9/11 and 7/7 it's been a real opportunity for racists to come out of the woodwork."

Language like that I can understand. But something tells me it is going to take a lot more than some funny Asian satire before Britain fully accepts its multicultural heritage.