

Akram Khan: Explosion in Contemporary Dance **by Naeem Mohaiemen**

As I walked into the Joyce Theater, I felt a thrill of affinity. Modern dance is an art form dominated by white performers, and the audience tends to correspond to this. But on this New York night, there were Asian faces scattered throughout the sold-out show-- waiting to see the dance world's new sensation, British-Bangladeshi virtuoso Akram Khan.

As the stage lights dimmed and the performance began, the pure vocabulary of Khan's fiery, muscular and kinetic performance enveloped the auditorium. Moving at lightning speed and with gorgeous coordination, the five-member dance troupe weaved an intricate story of destruction, rebirth and the still, contemplative moments in between.

"Kaash" (Hindi for "If") is Khan's latest piece, presently on a worldwide tour. In one of the quieter moments, as Khan began to repeat "Ek, Dui, Thin, Char, Paach" in metronomic beats, I had a moment to savor the stillness and appreciate what we were witnessing - a new, global approach to modern dance.

Akram Khan is a red-hot "sensation." In 2001, he was voted "Best British Dancer" for a smaller production which I saw at The Kitchen.

Back then, there was a lot of buzz about the young dancer who had created a synthesis between Kathak and Modern. In the two years since, Khan's star has risen to astonishing heights. His current performance "Kaash" is on a sold-out worldwide tour-- going from Australia to America, and then on to Holland, France, India, and Bangladesh. His future work, which he is still developing, has been booked through 2006. In two years he will return to New York, to reach another career-high by performing at the world-famous Lincoln Center.

Audiences and critics are smitten. The New York Times called him the "Agile Ambassador At Large" whose performances are "among the most talked about in the dance world." The Times of London rhapsodized about his "exquisitely timed expressivity" while the Daily Telegraph wrote, "he makes you shiver with pleasure." At the beginning of his latest tour, The Guardian predicted that this would be "the event of the year." When "Kaash" finally opened, it was earth-shattering-- a "dark star of a dance" that turned the world on its head.

The 29 year-old virtuoso's story is well known in the West. Almost every review contains the sentence "Akram Khan was born in London to Bangladeshi parents". Khan started dancing at Bengali cultural functions when he was only three. At age seven, his mother sent him for training under Sri Pratap Pawar in London. For the next decade, Akram was trained in the extremely demanding Kathak school. Khan's talent shone through very quickly, and things took a dramatic turn.

While still a teenager, he appeared with Ravi Shankar in the stage version of Kipling's "The Jungle Book". Then came Peter Brook's celebrated stage adaptation of "The Mahabharatha." Brooks' show was a key formative experience, and also Khan's first international tour. It was at this point that his parents began to realize that their son was a virtuoso with a rocketing career. "My parents were very nervous after realizing that dance was not just a hobby but a career choice," explained Khan. "Others in our community would have liked to see me become a lawyer."

Rigorously trained in Kathak, Akram Khan came to modern dance late in life. He was twenty one when he enrolled in Northern School of Contemporary Dance. It was a sudden shock to his system, but his infinitely flexible body soon adapted. Speaking of this transition, Khan said, "I can't take ten years of my training away. So in my class I would always move very differently from the other contemporary dancers, because my body is informed with something very different. So both my classical and contemporary dancers were getting rather frustrated, so I decided in a way to investigate this frustration."

Although there were tensions between the Kathak training and Modern dance language, Khan graduated from Northern School with the highest mark ever given for a performing arts degree. As he began to work with avant-garde English choreographer Jonathan Burrows, a more organic approach began to emerge. Instead of confusion and conflict, Khan began to develop an intricate interplay between the two disciplines.

Later, while training with world-renowned Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, this melding became a new art form. Finally, Khan says, "I began to let my body tell me what to do."

As word spread of Khan's creation of a new form, sometimes called "contemporary Kathak," the world quickly took notice. Two giants of the dance world, William Forsythe and Pina Bausch, crowned him the future of modern dance. Artists from all disciplines started lining up to collaborate with the young master. In 2000, Khan formed the Akram Khan Dance Company. Only a year later, on the strength of his first company tour, he was named "Best Young British Dancer."

In 2003 comes Akram Khan's magnum opus, the full-length performance piece "Kaash." This latest piece also features some audacious collaborations. The music was composed by Nitin Sawhney, England's most well-known Asian musician. The set features the work of sculptor Anish Kapoor, the subject of a recent documentary, "The Color of Britain." The collaboration between these three men, representatives of the new generation of British Asians, generated intense excitement even before the show opened. When "Kaash" finally debuted, critics were ecstatic. Reviews compared Khan's work to that of two giants in the field-- Rodrigo Pederneiras and Merce Cunningham. A complex exploration of Physics, Chaos Theory and Indian mythology, "Kaash" left audiences breathless and hungry for more.

After he wraps up this global tour, Khan will go back into the studio to begin work on his next piece, "Ma." The world will watch with bated breath to see what he comes up with next. I caught up with Akram Khan recently while he was in Chicago. I had seen his performance at the Joyce in New York, and had spoken to him backstage. Although his Manager warned of a brutal touring schedule, Akram insisted that she make time on his schedule for this interview. In soft-spoken Bengali, he explained to me, "It's for the newspaper in Dhaka, na? That's important, I want to make it happen."

Naeem: Tell me a little bit about your background. When did your parents come over to England?

Well, my parents are from Bangladesh. From Dhaka, but originally they were from Alkichor in Nawabganj. Eventually, just before 1970, they moved to London for further education. I think my mother was going to do a Masters here. And my father was doing a Business degree. They came over and eventually my father was working and he went into developing a restaurant-- the business side of the restaurant.

My mother was always fascinated by the Arts, so she continued bringing the community together through performances. Particularly with the Bangladesh Centre in London. They encouraged me to dance, and that's how I got into it. I was always involved in cultural Bangladeshi events, from my childhood. My mother was always organizing a lot of events and choreographing a lot of the work

N: Is your mother a performer as well?

Yes, she is. More as a hobby. More as a love, rather than a career. She's actually head of languages in a school. She's been there for many years. She's also an Advisory teacher. So she has many roles, and is really busy with the teaching side. Now that she's older, she doesn't really teach dance, but in the early days she was really involved. She eventually opened a school called the Bengali School of Fine Arts.

N: I've noticed that you oppose the use of "fusion" to describe your work. Can you tell me more about this?

I think it's very easy to be labeled "new". This happens with artists in the Asian community, more so in dance. What they do is-- they bring in Indian dance in the context of a show, and bring some element of contemporariness, and call it "fusion". That was the "in thing" in away. So, I started to find the word "fusion" very superficial because people were making work that I didn't believe in. I don't like the word "fusion" so much, because I think it's used in a wrong way, and it doesn't cut deep enough. I like to call my work "confusion".

N: This year, you have a very polycultural dance group-- two South Africans, a Malaysian Chinese and a Spanish dancer. How did it come together?

I asked them to work with me because of what they have to offer, not because of where they're from. I'd seen them perform at different places. I don't like to audition so much, I think at audition people don't come out so much, or you miss certain things. It's under pressure, but not the right pressure-- it's not performance pressure. I'd seen these dancers perform in other people's work. If I really like them, I invite them to work with me a little bit, do a rehearsal, or play a little studio. If they like it, and I like it, then we move forward from there.

N: How was working with Ravi Shankar in "Jungle Book" and Peter Brooks in "Mahabharatha"?

Working with Panditji was great. He was very encouraging and supportive. With Peter Brooks, that was a great experience.

Particularly I learnt a lot subconsciously - of his style, approach and aesthetic. And the concept of simplicity and complexity together.

Also, we were touring. So I got to see the world, see what it felt like to tour. I was also in "Hamlet" recently. But I played a small role there because I can't give my time up as freely any more.

N: Could you talk about the science behind "Kaash"?

For me, mythology is a fascinating subject. When I worked with Anish and Nitin Sawhney, we all discovered that there are strong connections between mythology and science. A lot of scientists and physicists are using mythology as a base for inspiration and discovery-- for discovering things they haven't discovered in their own work.

David Deutsch, who's a leading physicist from America, has created a theory based on the story of Shiva. Oppenheimer quoted from the Bhagavad Gita on live radio, after the first nuclear test. "Oh what have I created, the creator and destroyer of the world."

N: How did that come into your work?

I have always been very interested in what is real and illusion. I used some connection through mathematics, because math is a universal language. The numbers - one and zero. I wanted to compare that because in North Indian and South Indian music and dance, math plays an integral part. It's a system that I wanted to express, because I felt Indian dance is so physical yet there is something that is so mathematical and scientific about it-- that's why I started to play with numbers on stage.

In Indian dance, the math comes from the music. In contemporary dance, the geometric and geographic structures in relation to the body and space is where the math comes in.

N: How was it when you visited and performed in Bangladesh?

I have been there a few times, always to perform. The last time was two years ago. It's great when I go. I don't know the country well enough. I haven't had time to explore. For me, I go because of the people. I have a real connection with Bangladeshis, my community. I have a real connection because of the language and the warmth and the love. That's why I like to go there.

Whenever I go there, we get so involved in meeting people-- relatives, etc-- that we never get to actually see the country. That's one of the things I feel disappointed with, that I never got to explore Bangladesh.

Right now we're booked up until 2006, so it's really crazy. They keep us on a tight schedule. Which is a pity, especially in Bangladesh. I like to socialize and interact with people, to learn more about them. It will have to be on a future trip, outside work.