

Keynote Speech
for Navadisha International Dance Conference, Birmingham
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By Akram Khan

Let me go back to 16 days ago.

"We are already at the end of our civilisation, as we know it, many of us - including myself - just don't want to face it head on and it is not a question of 'If' it will really happen, but it is a question of 'When' will it happen". This is a summary of several quotes I found in a book I am currently reading titled *Learning to die in the Anthropocene*¹ by Roy Scranton.

This book presents mostly frightening and disheartening realities of the present and the future, but the one thing from the book that stayed with me was about the absolute importance of what we must carry forward into the new world, for the new generations to come, if we are to survive and thrive on the planet we have altered so profoundly. And that one thing Roy talks about, that one thing we must protect and carry forward is our 'culture', is the history and the embodiment of all that we have known and shared about ourselves in our world.

Because 'culture' is not based on scientific reports and military policy but culture is based on, and preserves and provokes old and new ideas, old and new myths, old and new stories and ways of connecting, and even more importantly old and new concepts of time.

But let me go back to 16 years before now, when the Akram Khan Company was created.

It was 2000, a new millennium, the dance world was a very different place. That world, which was full of possibilities, where presenters and promoters took financial risk on unknown artists, or upcoming artists, boldly taking a chance on the road less travelled by; that world, where money was poured into the arts and culture, that world I speak about, and knew, is already dead. And some of us, especially myself, don't want to face it head on, and it is not a question of when it will happen. It has happened, sometime around the end of 2008.

We are in a new reality, a new world, where dance, music, theatre, film and all other art forms are being challenged to shift, to transform, to fight

¹ SCRANTON Roy, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*, City Lights Publishers, 142 p, 2015

for and to reinvent themselves in order to create a new place, to tell the stories of this new world.

Now let me go back to 16 years before 2000, when I was just around 10 years of age.

I remember that period vividly, my early childhood, where I would be scratching the skin on my arms, again and again, scratching, deeper, scratching impatiently, to see what was underneath. Whether it would reveal a different colour, a colour different to the one that I could see, a colour that might possibly be white under this brown skin. I realised later that perhaps I was searching for a colour that was associated with most of the superheroes I grew up seeing and reading about in the West. Batman, Superman, Spider-Man. But then suddenly, one day I stopped scratching.

Why?

Because I saw Michael Jackson on television, experienced Pandit Birju Maharaj in the theatre and heard magical stories about the incredible Krishna from both my mother and my Guru, Shri Pratap Pawar, all in the same period.

As a child I was pretty afraid to use my voice. I felt I was not intelligent enough to speak. Not intelligent enough like the highly academic British Bangladeshi boys I was surrounded by in my community. They all went to Private Schools.

So I chose to keep quiet!

And on the rare occasions when I did speak, it was not my own voice I heard; it was a voice that was imitating all the Smart Bangladeshi boys around me. I was trying to be like them, to think like them, to speak like them.

Some years later I won a talent competition in school. I danced Michael Jackson. I carried his story, his movement and his culture into mine. Of course I learnt the routine, but I didn't do it exactly like Michael Jackson would have done it... I suppose I did it a bit like - if you could imagine - a kathak student who had a bit of Bangladeshi folk dance training and who loved to imitate Charlie Chaplin... Well it is hard to imagine. But it was mine. I knew that day that I was the only one in that school that could do it in a way that no one else could imagine. So that day, the day I won the competition, I vowed that my body would become my voice!

Now, I feel we are at a cross roads, where voice and body have exploded into a million different forms with the ever growing dependency on technology and, as a result, we are becoming disembodied, disconnected from place and culture, discontinuous.

Why is this?

Well, I don't know the answers but if I was to guess then I would say that today, information has been accepted as being more powerful than knowledge. And to me information is just the stream of data and opinions that enter my mind from the outside, through the eyes, through the ears, simply through my five senses. But knowledge comes from within my body, from the inside. Knowledge is information that I have lived and that I continue to inhabit. It is always embodied; it has been tested, explored and accepted as true.

I have always believed that dance within the body has the possibility to communicate profound and mythical stories, in a more ambiguous, mysterious, deeper way than my words could ever achieve.

Why are stories important?

Because stories are a way for me to make sense of the world we inhabit. Stories are the way for the next generation to make sense of the new world that they will inherit.

Just recently, I was watching a documentary for the hundredth time, about a group of important physicists. And a journalist asked one of them 'Why do people make art? This physicist replied 'Maybe it's because the things that are the least important for human survival are the very things that make us human'. So perhaps our search for our identity is actually our search for what makes us human.

We are, as a global society and thanks to technology, for better or for worse, evolving and changing more rapidly than we can ever physically or emotionally keep up with. And I wonder where our bodies belong in this rapidly evolving place. Do we even need our bodies in this new place, in this new time? Do we need dance in this ever-changing landscape of communication?

My answer would be 'yes'.

Let me narrow it now or focus it even further. Do we need South Asian dance in this new world where our many cultures are becoming a global monoculture based on free market economics.

My answer would be again 'yes'.

Now more than ever we need to maintain and sustain the diversity of cultural practice, and carry forward the forms of knowledge contained within different traditions. But now another question arises in my stories.

What is South Asian dance today?

This one, I cannot answer so easily and will not even try to answer it. Because South Asian dance is changing as fast as our world is changing. All I know with absolute conviction is that I have a personal interest in wanting to support Classical Indian dance.

Why?

Because it represents the past, present and future wrapped within the form itself that has taken many years to evolve, from generation to generation. Let me put it this way, if human existence on Earth were a day our approximately five millennia of recorded history would take up the last half hour before midnight. So I look at Classical Indian dance as one day and Contemporary dance as the last half hour of that day, before midnight. I am not saying one is more important than the other. I am just reflecting my own observations based on my personal interest.

I feel strongly that we have to put more effort into supporting and encouraging Classical Indian Dance forms. Because we may lose something so valuable which the classical Indian dance holds. The spiritual, the sacred, that in-between space that separates gods from humans.

I am deeply engaged within the contemporary dance scene but I have always continued to look towards and be inspired by visionaries like Pandit Birju Maharaj, Pandit Durga Lal, Kumudini Lakhia, and Nahid Siddique. These artists are unique and have evolved the classical form from within². But these artists are the generation before me and so I am hoping there will be a new generation of artists that inspires me and many others to move the form forward. But in order to make that possible we have to create more opportunities and infrastructure for these classical forms to co-exist with the contemporary forms.

I am often in dialogue with classical artists, like Malavika Sarukhai, Priyadarshini Govind and Kumudini Lakhia, who all have such a deep love and complete devotion to their classical forms, and the concerns they have about the lack of support and the lack of opportunity. They feel that the younger artists slowly become disheartened to pursue a career in that field. And then some of those younger artists reluctantly move into the contemporary dance world. Simply because there isn't enough opportunity to develop or sustain themselves as classical artists.

Don't get me wrong, there isn't a lack of talent in this new generation - in classical or contemporary - there is so much talent. There just isn't enough access to long-term serious classical training and to the many opportunities needed to make a full-time career as a classical artist today.

² I am referring to artists who have effected and taken specifically Kathak forwards

But as I mentioned earlier, we have to change our thinking, our way of approaching the dance. The way we access the dance. The way we raise money to make the dance. Philanthropy. By the way, where are the South Asian philanthropists who could invest in art? We cannot rely just on the government because technology and economics have swiftly replaced the 'sacred'. It has replaced the human connections we once had and if this is true, then we must try to find the 'sacred' once again in this new world, we have to find the connection that is not just virtual, but real.

Thanks for listening.