

AKRAM KHAN

by Lorna Sanders

When writing of Akram Khan critics use superlatives. He refers to his career as a “roller-coaster ride”. View a video clip of his work at <http://londondance.com/articles/features/video-box/>. The following comments indicate what you will see there. Khan has: a “dazzling mixture of macho foot speed and honeyed muscular tone”¹, a “lyrically generous upper body ... commanding, graceful and charismatic, [and] a blistering percussive attack”².

Akram Khan, of Bangladesh heritage, was born in London in 1974. His mother’s interest in dance was key. She introduced him to Bengali folk dancing and when he was seven took him to the celebrated kathak teacher, Sri Pratap Pawar. Theatre and drama were also influential. His first professional role, touring in *The Adventures of Mowgli*, came when he was ten. As a teenager he spent two years in Peter Brook’s play, *The Mahabharata*. Khan’s A levels included Bengali and (significantly) mathematics. He also continued his dance studies as Pawar’s disciple, being formally presented by him in his first solo recital at 18.³ The guru-disciple relationship is special. Ravi Shankar explains; the student learns “all the process of life which relates to the art form also”.⁴ Khan admires Pawar’s “masculine yet graceful style”⁵ and clearly embodies this ideal.

Kathak is the classical dance form of northern India and Pakistan. Originally a Hindu temple ritual, it was “adopted by the Muslim rulers and became a sophisticated court dance ... [noted for] fast pirouettes, complicated variations and changing tempi”.⁶ The relationship between music and dance is fundamental. Footwork (emphasised by ankle bells) derives from the same rhythms and rules as the time cycles for the accompaniment. In performance the dancer and drummer improvise a dialogue. The focus on Nritta (abstract) elements is augmented with iconographic poses associated with the Hindu Gods. Khan states kathak has a “geometric ... mathematical precision”.⁷

Khan’s mother encouraged him towards a dance degree and in 1994 he went to De Montfort University. It was his first experience of ballet and contemporary dance. Actually his mother had taken him to the ballet as a small child but, having also been to the film *Gandhi*, he “fell asleep in the comfortable seats”. His first contemporary class at De Montfort left him perplexed so he watched a video of DV8’s *Strange Fish*; “I was shocked – but in a positive way. I thought it fascinating”. After two years he went to the Northern School of Contemporary Dance and graduated with the highest marks ever awarded.

In 1995 he choreographed the solo *Loose in Flight* (1995) experimenting with “loosening the bolts” of kathak’s rules.⁸ Descriptions

highlight the dual attractions of Khan's powerful stage presence and emerging style. For example: "he is extraordinarily present in performance ... his ... arms define distances like Blake's drawing of God measuring the universe"⁹, "tension exploding into ... liquid eloquence ... balanced by ... cool aplomb"¹⁰. The movement, initiated by various joints, was embellished with small flicks of the head and athletic Eurocrash-style rolls. A programme note states; "kathak [is] the structural base, he continuously breaks out into lyrical passages of contemporary action. The river is crossed back and forth"¹¹. The final metaphor hints at two separate strands. Khan explains now that he was trying tested models and needed a choreographic process that opened up the possibilities for a more distinctive creativity of his own. He found this in 1999 working with Jonathan Burrows on *Duet*. This gave insight into "how much deeper you can cut below the surface, then you realise where you'd like to explore further".

That same year Khan made *Fix* with a Jerwood Choreography Award using a "myriad of ideas"¹²; Whirling Devishes and the connections to kathak spins, ideas of continuous energy and spatial restriction, how energy flows outwards from the core and can rebound back. Burrows helped with advice. Hints of body popping and robotics from break dancing occur in the disruptions of flow (as a child Khan admired Michael Jackson). Key interests are evident; improvising from a kathak base, providing a highly theatrical product, and working collaboratively. Sawhney's music echoes with temple/cathedral, medieval, ritualistic and contemporary qualities. Michael Hulls' overlapping oblongs illuminate the floor; sharp edges dissipating. Movement is complex: an arm sticks out dislocated, resistant to jerky pulls; Khan, Marcel Marceau-like, inches past his own elbow joint. Gestures fail to hold and flash in serpentine trajectories; dance is in hyper-speed but with no loss of clarity. On exit Khan plucks a near-invisible string and a puff of talc leaves an ambient trace behind. The dance is both fixed and transient simultaneously. An abstract approach is indicated; Khan stated "they [the audience] are free ... to have a view on it, whatever it may be"¹³.

Fix was programmed with traditional kathak which Khan now keeps separate. He explains: "I have to close off from the contemporary for a time and become an 'Indian' again, I have to think like a kathak dancer, the aesthetic has to be transferred and a mental adjustment made". This indicates an intense preparation period, living the part; an actor preparing a role. Khan is a perfectionist (befitting a classical dancer). In *Polaroid Feet* (2000), a traditional kathak evening, "he achieves ... precise physical detail preserved within a blur of speed ... Khan's upper body ... [is] the key to his uniqueness. His torso has a strength and elasticity that allow him to arch, dip and spiral with extravagant grace"¹⁴.

A Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship took Khan to Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's P.A.R.T.S school in Brussels to participate in the X

group project. He states; I was able to “investigate my interests on other peoples’ bodies more. This was different from doing it the way I was taught, it could be a real experimentation to find my own way”. The material for *Rush* (2000) was created there. When dancing at speed Khan felt the adrenaline response from the audience. He wanted to explore this phenomenon so he took the idea of parachute jumpers (the term paragliders mistakenly got into the advertising leaflets) who take the risk while spectators enjoy the adrenaline rush vicariously. He approached the choreography by posing himself a series of questions about the five senses; “what happens to them when adrenaline is high? Is the sense awake or asleep? Is it conscious or not? Is it awake but you are not conscious of it?”

Rush was the first piece for his own company. Kathak uses solo performance so this trio was significant. Some critics said they could not take their eyes from him but the “question of whether Khan can transfer his skills to other bodies is part-answered by *Rush* ... at first, you watch only him, then the structure takes over”.¹⁵ Such comments continue and Khan admits to finding this frustrating. Other choreographers with idiosyncratic styles (Wayne McGregor and Russell Maliphant for example) have been similarly received, as if uniqueness needed justification by exact duplication.

In 2000 Khan received a Time Out Live award and was voted Outstanding Newcomer by the Critics’ Circle for his “unique style”¹⁶. Critics came up with the term Contemporary Kathak and Khan uses this; “for clarity you should provide a reference point for the audience – but I’m not deep enough into the work yet to know what to call it”. His interests lie in investigating the language of movement. He traces the antecedents of this; an alien style, contemporary dance, was imposed which led to confusion in the muscles. Jonathan Burrows helped to clarify his thinking, having pointed to the mixing of information in the body. So is it a new language? “For me it is,” Khan replies. He dislikes the term fusion (“it implies lack of force, deliberation and depth”). His style “was not an intellectual decision, it was organic” due to the subconscious mixing of the learning processes of kathak and contemporary.

Khan explains that “teaching is an important part of learning”. Pawar advised him to teach beginners, it allows a re-examination of your beliefs. For the past four years Khan has taken a group of 6-7 year olds for kathak on Sundays, an advanced student taking over when he cannot be there. Khan also engages with professionals, for example teaching workshops. Explaining to others helps with clarification. He notes; “fast isn’t fast enough, it is all relative, speed is a technique of itself and people have a natural tempo – push them past that boundary and they can’t control it. Fast and fluid is my aim”.

Related Rocks (2001) continued Khan’s interest in making group pieces. Kathak concepts and abstract interests are key; beginning and

ending with a lone dancer, the group moved to the sound of Lindberg's voice. "Tersely angled gestures ... sliced ... through the clipped cadences ... by the time the first note sounded we were ... primed to read the dancing less as an emotional response to the music than as a powerful rhythmic argument with it".¹⁷ Khan typically explores non-narrative structures and formal qualities. However critics detected a new element: "flashes of mutual acknowledgement among the performers".¹⁸

In 2001 Khan was invited to be Choreographer in Residence at the Royal Festival Hall. He also acted in Peter Brook's film *Hamlet* and undertook a 14 months overseas and UK tour. Khan is grateful for the support he gets from the UK and Europe, for example the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris and Vooruit in Ghent. "They are not looking for work out of the multicultural box, they see my work as contemporary and of the moment – they fly over to see it before they programme it so you know it is because they appreciate it". It is important not to be pigeon-holed, he resists the need to conform to other people's agendas. A unique viewpoint is vital. He does not like work that is a "copy of a copy of a copy – there has to be something that is YOU, that is honest".

Kaash (2002) was Khan's first full-length work. Starting points included the "symbolism of traditional Indian Gods [as] representations of rhythmical patterns and specific movement qualities".¹⁹ There are no overt references (a focus on rhythm and dynamic qualities is indicated) but Shiva's cyclical creation-destruction aspect is inherent. The choreographic structure "adopts the cinematic idea of flashback where the end is seen at the beginning and then unravels to reveal how it arrived at its conclusion".²⁰ Thus a meditative middle section is sandwiched between two energetic eruptions in which the "dance pattern splinters and coheres ... [the dancers] following different time cycles."²¹ Sawhney mentions the influence of multiple universes in Western physics; "a multiverse".²²

Khan's reputation allowed an ambitious collaboration. Kapoor explains: "collage in any art form is of no interest. The idea that two entities independent of each other can come together somewhere in the middle ... is not something I believe in ... what I see in Akram is the possibility of coming out of that tradition and inventing something completely different".²³ Kapoor provided a void, "a dense black square painted on gauze that vibrates like a hungry hole, poised to suck in any passing matter".²⁴ The piece again opens with a lone dancer. He gazes into the blackness and a woman enters and whispers to him. (Hints of Parvati and Shiva perhaps?) A cataclysm of cosmic proportions ensues. The dancers form war-like columns from which they break out, arms slicing with an energy that would split atoms.

Music is significant and Khan approaches it differently for each piece, "though you can't avoid there being a signature. I want to argue with the music, go within it and without it, to speak to it rather than merely

go with it.” This implies a predilection for complexity and he speaks of the significance of contrasts, the use of simplicity or clarity in the body controlling the chaotic, complex energy of kathak for example. “Can you translate something simple into complexity and what happens to it then? And vice versa – intriguing”. Khan used to provide his dancers with material but now gives them tasks. For *Kaash* the dancers improvised with the rhythmic forms and qualities of Khan’s kathak performance earlier that year at The Purcell Room. His role, although more directorial now, is to find “a single vision”. He acknowledges it has been difficult to find suitable dancers. He explains: “for the time being I wouldn’t use kathak dancers simply because I feel that classical dancers have a boundary ... it took a lot of training ... to be able to move past that ... at this present time I don’t have that amount of time to train”.²⁵

His current piece for the Ballet Boyz is based on the format of a playful question and answer session between himself and them (the idea coming from an interview in Monaco which included a quick fire session with no thinking time). He gave them a kathak class and asked them to improvise in order to find comfortable material. Khan sums up: “so you ask questions and expect certain answers – but then you don’t get the question you thought you wanted or the answer you expected. Indeed there are questions with no answers”. This will be his last commission for a while as he wants to invest more time in his own work. In April he was made an Associate Artist at the Royal Festival Hall, the first time this status has been afforded to a non-musician. He also plans a bigger company of seven dancers and already has a title for the next piece: *ma* (mother, mother earth, nature). This one is about human relationships because different starting points lead to different aspects of movement. “I’ve just touched the skin, I can still go deeper”.

¹ Brown, *A star touched by his god*, Nov 27, 2002, www.telegraph.co.uk

² Craine, *Akram Khan, Purcell Room*, *The Times*, Apr 11, 2011, p21

³ Willis, *Akram Khan*, *Dancing Times*, Mar 2001

⁴ Bragg, *South Bank Show*, ITV, Oct 2002

⁵ Khan, *Fix*, in Spring Re-Loaded Series 6, The Video Place, 2000

⁶ Massey, *Asian Dance*, in *Dancing Times*, Jul 1990, pV

⁷ Bragg, *South Bank Show*, ITV, Oct 2002

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Parry, *First Class Air Male*, *The Observer*, May 6, 2001

¹⁰ Hale, *Akram Khan*, QEH, Oct 2002, www.ballet.co.uk

¹¹ leaflet for performance at University of Surrey, Nov 15, 2000

¹² Khan, *Fix*, in Spring Re-Loaded Series 6. The Video Place, 2000

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Mackrell, *The dazzling Akram Khan*, *The Guardian*, Apr 10, 2001

¹⁵ Parry. *He flies through the air with the greatest of ease*, *The Observer*, Oct 29, 2000

¹⁶ *Critics’ Circle Dance Awards 2000*, www.sherringtons.co.uk

¹⁷ Mackrell, *Related Rocks*, Dec 11, 2001, www.guardian.co.uk

¹⁸ Hale, *Akram Khan*, QEH, Oct 2002, www.ballet.co.uk

¹⁹ *Akram Khan Extended Information*, www.dance4.co.uk, The elephant headed Ganesha was associated with swinging actions and three beats for example, while the destroyer Shiva has seven beats and highly vigorous qualities.

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Parry, *Let's get physics*, May 19, 2002, www.observer.co.uk

²² *Art Works*, ITV, Jun 9, 2002

²³ Frater, *Triple-strength alliance*, Evening Standard, May 1, 2002, p49

²⁴ Mackrell, *Kaash*, May 13, 2002, www.guardian.co.uk

²⁵ Khan, in interview with Victoria Innes, www.londondance.com