

Desh – review

Curve theatre, Leicester



Luke Jennings

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Akram Khan in his 'masterpiece', *Desh*. Photograph: Richard Haughton

In the opening moments of *Desh* (homeland), [Akram Khan](#) walks on to the stage in shirt and dhoti trousers. His tread is weary and he is holding a lamp, as if clocking on for some grim night shift. Taking a sledgehammer, he delivers blow after crashing blow to a raised iron plate. Its function is unclear but it might be a manhole cover, the point of entry to some dark subterranean. Eventually Khan lowers the hammer, defeated. What lies below remains inaccessible, enigmatic.

Desh is a quest. Brought up with tales of Bangladesh – monsoon floods, rising tides, crocodiles nosing through the mangrove swamps – Khan looked around him and saw Wimbledon Park. His father's tales of unremitting labour and contested land fell on ears better attuned to the music of Michael Jackson. Khan has explored this cultural interzone before, sifting its misunderstandings and highlighting its exhilarating new forms in works such as *Zero Degrees* (2005). There was a period, post-*Zero*, in which he seemed to be listening to too many outside voices. Collaborations with Sylvie Guillem and Juliette Binoche were disappointingly slight, and *Bahok* (2008), about a group of passengers caught in a loop of cancelled flights and cross-cultural barriers, looked schematic and calculating, despite the brilliance of its choreography.

In the last couple of years, however, Khan appears to have turned away from an increasingly arid postmodernism and trusted to his own instincts. *Gnosis* (2009) was an exquisite display of craft, *Vertical Road* (2010) awe-inspiring in its imaginative reach, and *Desh* is a masterpiece, the best thing that he has ever done. A one-man show about a country in which you are never alone sounds like a paradox, but Khan peoples his stage with a host of alter egos. Himself as a child, caught up with magic tales of "home". His daughter, decades later, demanding the same not-quite-understood stories. His proud, unbending, uncomprehending father.

On the streets of Bangladesh, Khan is the contemporary everyman, punched out by noise and traffic, taut-wired with stress, pitched by forces beyond reason into writhing convolutions and unwilling spasms. We see him wrestling with a hellish machine supported by rickety scaffolding that is at once clanky air-con, faulty phone connection

and psychic black hole. "Is that tech support?" he yells despairingly, as the feeble illumination flickers around him.

In his collaborators, Khan has chosen with precision. Michael Hulls's lighting is an essay in atmosphere, cutting from dingy parchment-brown interiors to the wet blue-greys of the monsoon and the street. Jocelyn Pook overlays the action with a musical score which surprises at every turn, mixing found material from field trips in Bangladesh with lyrical chants and hymns. And the sets by Tim Yip, the art director of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, are eye-wideningly beautiful. A magical video projection passage sees the tidal reaches of the Ganges brought to shimmering, sun-drenched life, as Khan climbs a tree to raid a bees' nest for the honey.

The best comes at the end, with Yip's realisation of the monsoon as a sculptured space in which Khan can physically lose himself before climbing the rain to an imagined dimension in which the cycles of fate and the weather (which in Bangladesh are effectively the same thing) are revealed to him. Wandering among the shining pulleys and cables, he seems to resolve the opposing forces within himself.

But we don't get off that easily, and nor does Khan. From this godly realm, which seems to owe as much to the court masques of Inigo Jones as to the mythology of Bengal, we are returned to the dingy interzone where the air-con is roaring with hurricane force and an increasingly desperate Khan is still trying to connect to tech support. By now, however, he's wearing his father's shirt.

Desh is at Sadler's Wells, London, 4-8 October