

Stunning one-man show succeeds at every level

Desh
Akram Khan
Kwai Tsing Theatre
Thursday

Desh is the first full-length solo work by Akram Khan. The celebrated dancer-choreographer has been seen before in Hong Kong in his duos with ballet star Sylvie Guillem and actress Juliette Binoche. *Desh* is far more substantial in terms of both choreography and emotional content and reveals Khan's true stature as an artist.

Khan has drawn on the life of his father, who emigrated to Britain from Bangladesh ("desh" means "homeland" in the Bangla language) and his own experience growing up as the child of immigrants to fashion a powerful show which speaks to people of all ages and cultures. The themes are universal: conflict between generations, the struggle to hand down traditions and the sense of loss when parents are gone and it is too late to know them better.

Combining theatre with dance, Khan interweaves his father's story, the struggle for freedom in Bangladesh and his own attempts to interest his young niece in the traditions of their forebears' homeland. There is

drama, fantasy and humour (including an extremely clever sequence in Khan turns himself into his father by painting a face on the top of his shaven head which he keeps bent forward, creating the illusion of a much shorter man to astonishing effect).

Although Khan is the only live performer, Tim Yip's simple yet brilliant visual design, Jocelyn Pook's evocative music and a soundtrack that conjures up the street life of Bangladesh and the presence of other characters make this seem a much larger-scale production.

The outstanding feature of the work, however, is Khan's dancing. The freedom and expressiveness of movement of contemporary dance are enhanced by footwork of dazzling speed and precision and a superb use of hands that attest to his background in kathak classical Indian dance. At one point he spins around and around the stage so fast that he seems about to take off like a helicopter yet never loses control.

Desh is a multi-layered work that succeeds on every level – aesthetic, emotional and intellectual – and is as profound as it is entertaining. The audience responded to it with a prolonged and fervent standing ovation.
Natasha Rogai