

Odyssey to a land of magic, mayhem and monsoons

DANCE

DESH

SADLER'S WELLS

DESH is as transporting a piece of dance as I have ever seen. The first full-length solo contemporary work by Akram Khan – though created with 24-carat collaborators – it is also his best show yet: poignant, thrilling, magical, moving and, throughout its perfectly judged 80 minutes, utterly transfixing.

It is essentially a journey. Khan was born in London, of Bangladeshi descent, and *DESH* (Bengali for “homeland”) is his attempt to understand his parents’ country and thereby make sense of himself.

Although based on a handful of tableaux created by Khan and poet Karthika Nair, the added conceit is that his father has died, and that the entire show is in some ways the dialogue he’d like to have had with him had he not been too young and foolish to listen.

In real life, Khan Senior is very much alive, yet the piece duly begins with Akram paying a forlorn, candlelit pilgrimage to what we have to assume is his father’s grave. Soon, however, as the ever-brilliant Michael Hulls’s oblong of light expands around him, he – shockingly, disorientatingly – starts pounding the earth with a sledgehammer. In sadness and frustration? Surely. But also, perhaps, as if trying to gouge his way back to his father’s temporal and geographical past.

Moments later, in one of the piece’s many smooth-as-ghee dissolves between scenes, Khan is indeed on the grimy streets of urban Bangladesh, dodging invisible people and traffic, his body corkscrewing in astonishing flurries of part-Kathak, part-Western-contemporary dance. You marvel at the vividness of the vignette, at the urgency and precision of Khan’s movement (the man is 37

years old, for heaven’s sake), at his transformation of the body-language of everyday survival into physical poetry. And yet there are so many more delights to come.

Before long, Khan is some poor fellow, toying with a huge, richly symbolic engine and smudging grease on his bald pate. Bending forward, however, he reveals that he has in fact painted a face – his father’s? – on his head, which he dazzlingly manipulates as if it’s a ball of stone detached from his body. This “small man’s” cares appear too weighty for his narrow shoulders.

There are also powerful references to Bangladesh’s violent history, a comic but well-judged call-centre thread, and the beautiful climax in which Khan loses himself in a monsoon of ribbons, a scintillating depiction of the country’s love-hate relationship with water.

The section that had me open-mouthed in wonder, though, begins with Khan, in his birthplace of Wimbledon Park, telling his niece an evocative fable that his father once told him – and to do her shoes up too. Suddenly, magically, the laces are transformed into a rope, then a boat, then the very land of elephants and honey bees that he was describing. (Take a bow, “new-orientalist” designer Tim Yip and digital animators Yeast Culture.)

As Khan climbs up (and up, and up) and spirals in the Bangladeshi treetops to Joscelyn Pook’s beguiling score, his yearning for his ancestral home finds a perfect expression, while you feel like a child marvelling, wide-eyed, at their first ever fairy tale. Here, as throughout, my companion was identically enthralled. And so – either in this short run, or the inevitable next – will you be.

Until Saturday. Tickets: 0844 412 4300

CRATING ★★★★★

Mark Monahan