

*Pulse caught up with Akram Khan after his Olympic opening ceremony success. In a reflective mood, Khan muses upon the creation of his semi-autobiographical solo *DESH* and what it taught him about himself*

Akram Khan Creativity From Chaos

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Commandingly grounded as he is in performance, Akram Khan also moves like quicksilver on stage. To no little extent this parallels what happens in the acclaimed British-Bangladeshi dancer-choreographer's offstage life, at least when it comes to his accessibility. So in demand is Khan that trying to pin down a time to meet and talk or, barring that, contact him via email can prove daunting to arrange and actually achieve. Still, once he's with you he really is with you – enquiring and engaged, quick of mind and articulate of speech especially when considering the content and implications of his art.

And of course there's always plenty to say, especially given that the past couple of years have seen Khan in flurries of creativity and even crisis. The former is a state that seems set to continue at least for the next fair while.

Khan has in truth been consistently busy since the mid-noughties. Alongside a trio of high-

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profile but, to my mind, diminishingly artistically successful duets (the superbly-realised *zero degrees* with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui in 2005, the intriguing glorified workshop *Sacred Monsters* with Sylvie Guillem the following year and, most problematically, *In-I* with Juliette Binoche in 2008) Khan crafted the ensemble dances *bahok* (also 2008) and *Vertical Road* (2010). Then, in 2011, came *DESH*, an epic autobiographical solo that many greeted as one of Khan's finest works to date. Featuring stunning designs by Tim 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' Yip and an enormously evocative score from Jocelyn Pook, the piece was anchored by its chief creator's consummate dancing and presence – a combination that helped Khan bag a well-deserved gong as male dancer of the year from the UK Dance Critics' Circle in January 2013.

Trouble was literally afoot, however, when Khan tore his Achilles' tendon in rehearsal only a few months after the premiere. "My ego is attached

to my body," Khan says, remembering this event, "but suddenly that ego is stripped." Although the injury kept him physically inactive for much of the next half-year, it didn't stop him from working with director Danny Boyle on a short but powerful section of the latter's much-heralded London 2012 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony.

Then, in the wake of these two challenges, two more arose. In 2012 Khan secured an assignment as choreographer of the feature film *Desert Dancer* and, no less significantly, a commission from Sadler's Wells, the London producing/presenting empire where he's one of a portfolio of top-flight associate artists. ("The jewel in the crown," according to artistic director Alistair Spalding.)

The film, which marks both Khan's first crack at devising dance for the big screen and the debut of director Richard Raymond, stars actors Freida (Slumdog Millionaire) Pinto, Reece Ritchie and Tom Cullen with the premiere scheduled for late 2013. Set in Iran, where dance is illegal and punishable by imprisonment, *Desert Dancer* was inspired by the true story of Afshin Ghaffarian, a young man who risks everything to fight for his dreams. The lead character teaches himself how to dance by watching music videos – everything from Michael Jackson and Bob Fosse to Pina Bausch, Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Afshin's politically-charged tale plays out against the 2009 protests, when the passion and defiance of a young generation lit the flame of revolution still sweeping the Middle East and North Africa.

Khan was excited yet pragmatic about the shoot, most of which occurred last autumn in Morocco, London and Paris. "My choreography [for the film] is very passionate, raw and primal. I couldn't make it too sophisticated because you wouldn't believe it." The reason being? "Actors don't look like dancers," replies Khan. The biggest surprise for him was Pinto, whom he dubs "stunning. Her dream was to be a dancer." But, as he reflects, it takes a long time to become one. "Working with Juliette [Binoche, on *In-1*], we never arrived where I wanted. I gave into it rather than holding onto her version of what it could be." Which means, as Khan explains, "We played music and I watched her dance. I told her, 'I can find the dance in you...'"

Finding the dance inside himself is just what Khan did in *DESH*, a piece that took him back in spectacular yet personal fashion to his confused roots as a contemporary kathak performer. Khan spoke insightfully about this confusion with the Belgian writer and dramaturge Guy Cools at Sadler's Wells in 2008 (a public conversation which the venue has recently published as part of a series of small books called *body: language*). Fusion, he said, "is a perfect thing, where two things fuse together to create something that becomes one. It is too much of a fantasy for me. ...The sense of chaos in the body, or the confusion, seemed a word that was much more relevant to the state I was in then, and the state I am in, even more now... . To remain in that seems important to me."

Little wonder, then, that Khan regards *DESH* as continually self-edifying. In doing it, he says, "I'm learning a lot about myself. It's one thing to be giving it to audience. The more I do it now I try to understand what I'm trying to say. It's also teaching me a lot about my father and dealing with my history with him rather than going through psychotherapy." Fascinatingly, in *body:*

language Khan identifies his mother – and her soft, huggably circular form – as a key influence on his contemporary work whereas it is the body language of his father, formerly an accountant, that he associates with his classical work: all mathematical rules and authoritative regulations.

It's interesting, too, to read this in light of the fact that the younger Khan will have become a father himself for the first time this year. 'I want a daddy's girl,' he said, beaming when asked last autumn if he knew yet the child's gender, "and I want her to be a scientist. Of course I'm happy if I have a son too."

There was a (male) child, too, in the Olympics piece along with fifty dancers and Khan himself. He estimates that the stadium (which held approximately 80,000 people, not to mention the billion or so who watched the event on television) was 250 times the size of Sadler's Wells' stage. Commenting on the scale, Khan remarks: "The first time I saw it I was in awe. You'd have to run at full speed for a minute and a half at least to get to the other side." This transformed utterly and strategically what he and the cast did. "It was so exaggerated it was operatic. There was no subtlety because physically and emotionally we had to push everything. We'd been precision freaks but had to expand. It was really fifty dancers becoming me. If they didn't it would be a kind of chaos without clarity."

You might expect that after such a massive venture Khan would find tackling Igor Stravinsky less daunting, but don't bet on it. His eponymous company's first appearance on stage in the UK in 2013 will be with its new production *iTMOi* (in the mind of Igor) – inspired by the Russian-born composer and commemorating the centenary of his sensational and seminal work, *The Rite of Spring*. Part of a Stravinsky-led trilogy of works entitled *A String of Rites*, *iTMOi* will be performed at Sadler's Wells exactly 100 years after the original work was premiered in Paris. Khan will have worked with three different composers (Ben Frost, Jocelyn Pook and Nitin Sawhney) on an original score. The production will also feature a cast of eleven international dancers, although the choreographer will not be one of them.

iTMOi, Khan avows, will explore the human condition (death, birth and, as he tellingly hints, the future of a child rather than a specifically female sacrifice) and "the way in which Stravinsky transformed his work by evoking certain types of emotion through repeated patterns, but still rooted in the concept of someone dancing to the point of death." Dealing with Stravinsky's music, Khan continues, was "a great privilege and terrifying at the same time. How do I avoid trying to make a piece already done so brilliantly by Nijinsky and, later, Pina Bausch?" One of his solutions was to base his dance round what he could draw from Stravinsky's life and concepts, including the idea of sound as a rupturing instigator of memory and feeling. "How do I rupture the process in the usual way I work," Khan says he asked himself, "and then how do I put it together again?" The results may well prove to be rapturous, ritualistic and uncomfortably rough but, in his own defence Khan adds, "Stravinsky was all about uncomfortability. His music can create a sense of chaos but deep down there's a logic. I feel like I know him now."

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