

DESH: Memories inherited, borrowed, invented

Créteil, 5 July 2010

Farooq Chaudhry, Akram Khan's producer, calls. Most of my morning has been spent courting various answering machines in Poland (for the rights on an excerpt of Henryk Gorecki's Third Symphony), so I am a tad distracted as the conversation begins, and think it is about our old, cherished plans for reviving *zero degrees*.

Instead, Farooq asks me to collaborate on their new project, to 'co-write' Akram's new piece on Bangladesh — taking me completely by surprise.

Yes! I actually yell into the phone, deafening and startling Farooq. But then, he doesn't know the ways in which Bangladesh has always coloured life. To explore the war that has been an indelible part of my parents' existence; to write raw material for dance; to develop multiple narratives: all this is irresistible.

Paris, 7 July 2010

I look at Akram's statement of intent, notes on Bangladesh and a list of initial keywords. Some connect instantly, others ask me to stand in Akram's shoes and feel the country within his skin. His Bangladesh and mine are inevitably linked and distinct — fraternal twins separated at birth in time-honoured Bollywood tradition.

I write back and ask if we could call the piece *Desb* — which contains an entire world of meaning: nation, region, land and more — instead of *Bangladesh*, the initial working title, because *Desb* contains an idea that almost all of us know and grapple with, whatever our nationalities or roots. Home.

London, 24 September 2010

We meet, Akram, Farooq and I. *Desb* is both holy grail and hair-shirt for Akram. Years ago, he had promised his mother he would make a piece on Bangladesh. Mrs. Anwara Khan has, since Akram's childhood, been the impetus behind his artistic trajectory: channelling his early restlessness into kathak, then watching with pride the growth of her child prodigy into one of the foremost names in dance.

One dream, though, remained unfulfilled — to see her son tell the stories of her country and its people. Akram meant to keep that promise, but other, marvellous projects always came in the way. But now, he has met Tim Yip, the visual artist and designer, someone he's admired for long. Tim agrees to collaborate with Akram, but suggests that he should go back to his roots, explore his parents' homeland.

Akram seems torn between excitement and apprehension. Recent works — the latest in the series of duets, in particular — have been criticised for mining “the old identity issue”. That has hurt. And not only will *Desb* spin around that very axis; it will also require probing his own childhood ambivalence about Bangladesh.

But how, I try to ask gently, can he occlude identity when it — whether kinetic, cultural or linguistic — has fuelled so much of his work? Inevitably, I remember Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui whose skill in and passion for questioning, dissecting, reassembling visible and invisible components of individual and collective identities bring to mind a forensic scientist. Larbi would know better how to reassure Akram than I. Yet Larbi and Akram face different challenges: the dance world in Europe may be more demanding, less effusive than in the UK but we have more room for personal journeys, more licence actually for deviation from the norm.

They are also very different artists and human beings, despite the extraordinary mirroring-act in *zero degrees*. Larbi is an irresistible, soft but troubling, catalyst for doubt, for opposition; the outsider nonpareil. I often think that a few hundred years ago, he would have been burnt at stake for asking the questions that we fear the most. Akram, on the other hand, exudes both serenity and reserve; the ideal South Asian son's respect for order, for conformity despite his straddling the worlds of contemporary and classical; and a need for the blessings of his elders and peers.

Larbi transforms the periphery into the new centre. Akram moves to the centre, and becomes its axis.

Kbulna, 27 November 2010

During our first marathon meeting in Bangladesh, Tim – endlessly sketching figures of Akram in his notepad – said, “Akram, go back to yourself, to your origins: find what is in your body. So much of your self has been shared with others these last years. It is time to find something that is inherently yours. Uncalculated, dreamlike — like a conversation with a river. Or yourself. Each of the six words can take you to that self.”

He was referring to the six words I had suggested as possible leitmotifs for *Desb*: land, river, language, memory, cloth and Noor: the 23-year-old activist killed during the infamous Dhaka Blockade in 1987 by the police. His murder, ironically, triggered a mass movement and accelerated the end of Ershad’s military dictatorship.

Each of us interprets them differently ...

For Michael Hulls, the river is the key element. Even as a metaphor for performance: a river flowing backwards, from its fullness in the sea to the first drop of melted snow in the mountains: or the arc from movement to stillness.

For Jocelyn Pook, the rivers, languages and songs lie in the ritualised music of the working body. The bustle of human activity that never ceases on the streets.

For me, they all flow into each other in this land of sudden transformation. Land that is constantly losing and gaining form, remapped by water and wind; memory, which is fluid and shapeless and impossible to revisit in quite the same way ...

Dhanmondi (Dhaka), 28 November 2010

Today, Bangladesh just strides over, grabs our hands and introduces itself as a highly political, resilient, outspoken country. One that had fought a very bloody war for freedom, and, since then, repeatedly battled autocracy each time the army took over. Battled with every weapon available till democracy was restored. Oh, and lest we get too wide-eyed, it tells us, corruption is still rampant, the army lurks in the side-lines, fundamentalism has raised its head. The struggles continue.

The photographer Shahidul Alam takes us through the history of the country, sparing no gruesome detail of oppression but no act of resistance either. The team is stunned into near-total silence. As we walk out, Farooq says, 'We cannot avoid political issues in *Desh*: that would mean denying this country its heartbeat.'

London, 17 February 2010

We have completed 17 days of workshops with Akram, Ruth Little, PolarBear (the performance poet), Jocelyn and an acting team. There has been writing, exchanging, watching, learning and rewriting. While these are early days, it is exciting to see some glimpses of *Desh* within. All this is raw material: a loom on which Akram can start weaving his beautiful movement.

There are a dozen stories written as scenes, some of which will be completely “unstageable”, like an extended sequence in a restaurant. This particular tableau is the first to be scrapped but it teaches us valuable lessons, on the difficulty of dancing and speaking simultaneously, on the difference between the effects of written and spoken text — and how vital it is to ensure spatial conviction to invisible characters. Akram tries staging those scenes with these trained actors: first moving among them to map his trajectory on stage; then trying the same sequence while they speak their parts from the side-lines. It soon becomes obvious that locating individual *disembodied* voices would be distracting and difficult when only one performer moved on stage.

So, most of the scenes must become dialogues, and Akram’s physical position vis à vis the invisible voice must be clearly established — only once do we have three voices ‘present’ on stage, and they are consecutive, not simultaneous.

New Delhi, 10 April 2011

It is molten in Delhi. Everything looks deliquescent. Furniture, buildings, birds. I expect birds to fall out of the sky as viscous blobs.

I am working on language as leitmotif in this segment. We need to capture the sense of futility felt by grandparents and parents at their children's rejection of the things that they had fought for: Bangla, for one.

I suggest the incentive approach, complete with an invented fable. So the sequence begins with Akram trying to defuse his fictional niece Eeshita's irritation at being pressed to speak Bangla by telling her a story set in the Sundarbans. As he narrates it, Akram will switch into *abhinaya*, the classical gestural language. The audience will never know the real end of the tale. Because when Akram reaches the point where tiger is about to pounce, he stops abruptly. When prodded to continue, he tells the little girl that the rest can only be found in the magic kingdom of stories where she cannot go because the password is in Bangla, which she needs to learn...

Leicester, 8 August, 2011

DESH – yes, with the word now capitalised – will premiere next week at the Curve in Leicester.

It is composed of five of the stories we had imagined and wrote — both together and alone, Akram and I. Later, PolarBear and I edited them, and added one more story as the skein that weaves in and out of the others. Akram then took the stories as clay, shaped and sculpted them for dance, for stage; with the design team, he undertook the process of making it much more than the sum of its parts.

What has changed most between the beginning and end of the production period is the emotional hub of the piece: *DESH* began as an ode by a choreographer to his mother's motherland. The breakthrough came with Akram's realisation that his relationship with Bangladesh probably mirrors the one he had with his father, especially the one their *younger* selves had shared: one of unspoken love overshadowed by much mutual misunderstanding and tension, emotions familiar in many families, especially in immigrant families, with a first generation that tries to cling on to the heritage and identity of origin while trying to settle in the host country, and a second generation that tries just as desperately to assimilate into this country, the one they were born in.

So, almost all the stories featuring the mother have been reworked around the father, and the paternal identity conflated with that of the 'original' homeland. Once this switch is made, the piece finds its backbone, the dramatic tension that could engage the viewer and render the specific (Bangladesh) universal yet personal (the parent-child bond) to anyone, whatever their background. Akram brilliantly channels the very human helplessness before the passage of time, and inverts the initial premise of the piece: place has become time.

The piece is little short of magnificent but there is one note that rings false: the ending. It must not, I feel, close in guilt and recrimination. It must be a moment for reconciliation, a moment true to Akram's soul, however fictitious the stories themselves are. We need to change it, I tell Farooq and Akram urgently. We all agree — 48 hours before the first previews. I rewrite the ending.

London, 3 October 2011

So there we are, PolarBear and I, just after the performance which is magical and moving and sprightly, We are still stunned by it all — Akram's tour de force of a performance and the *completeness* of the oneiric world that had unfolded before our eyes.

Akram's mother and father surround us, shining with pride and emotion. With them, relatives, friends from the Bangladeshi community in London: a happy blur of introductions follows, with questions, comments, reminiscences. They thank us: the veiled, determined lady doctor; the feisty, bejewelled teacher and the men-folk tagging behind, all fresh with their memories, triumphs and sorrows tumbling willy-nilly from the lockers they are placed in. They bless us, they say, for knowing and telling their stories, for bringing their memories to this distant place.

There could be no greater reward, no award more precious. There will be no happier instant.

Paris, 24 December 2012

DESH is in Paris for a 2-week run. And among the outreach events programmed at the Théâtre de la Ville is a documentary that covers the creative process of *DESH* across three countries.

The film is beautifully shot: it captures Akram's explorations and experiments in the studio with quiet intimacy, the furrows of thought traversing his face as he explains his cousin's interrogation of the term "third-world". It captures, as beautifully, the Bangla countryside, the raggedy clothes of the children following Akram's scooter, the fatigue in the labourers' eyes. But none of them have a say: they are mere *objects* of the filmmaker's narrative. During our time in Bangladesh, we met and heard aid workers, orphans, rickshaw drivers, fishermen, craftspeople. Also freedom fighters; world-famous musicians; a Caméra d'Or-winning film director; civil activists; a textile conservator who single-handedly revived the tradition of natural dyes in the country.

None. Of. Them. Exist. Not in this film, anyway. Not for this filmmaker, though he had followed us every step of the journey through Bangladesh. Not even the ones – like Shahidul Alam – whose stories we borrowed and reshaped for *DESH*.

No, in the filmmaker's lenses, Bangladesh consists of a vast, overwhelming – often destructive – nature. And millions of voiceless people who must endure. The feisty, enterprising, resolutely engaged citizenry that has brought back democracy to the nation, time and again, does not exist in his story.

And therein lies the rub. There has been praise from far and wide, rave reviews, and the onset of a spate of awards. Much has been made of how autobiographical the piece is or not, with some reviewers and many viewer-bloggers taking every story for gospel truth, often referring to the *late* Mr. Khan senior (who is, thankfully, very much alive) or his "war injuries".

But little awareness of Akram's greatest accomplishment, the key to *DESH*. That it is the story of all those anonymous bees that Akram has brought centre-stage, to audiences all around the world. That his body, his dancing self, has become the prism that refracts the tales of a multitude.

For this is what Akram Khan does most honestly, powerfully, on stage: he takes himself – and the viewers – to many lands, real, remembered and imagined. He introduces viewers to a host of characters – none of whom he knew earlier, most of whom he now embodies – whose stories may be new but whose feelings, whose desires and sorrows, are familiar, close to our own.

He tries to erase the barrier of Otherness, which is the most common and effective of defence mechanisms we, as humans, use for distance and detachment. From refugees. From racism. From poverty. From ecological disaster. If it's happening to an impossibly Distant Other, it cannot affect us.

Akram bridges that divide. He becomes, turn by turn, a son mourning the demise of a parent; a teenage, rebellious incarnation of the same son; then, stepping in the skin of an adult, he gently holds out a hand to a fictional niece, promising not to let go as she steps into the lost, chimerical land of childhood imagination. He becomes a martyr he never

knew existed who reflects Bangladesh as it struggles between hope and despair. He steps in to fight the battles of its people, battles for democracy, freedom of language, expression and secularism.

This rare act of humility and generosity never gets its due amidst all the acclaim over 'autobiography'. This immense feat of embodiment, the refracting of a country, is forgotten. Bangladesh, which Akram wanted to honour, vanishes again.

But identity isn't a bad word anymore, and I suppose we can all be grateful for that, at least.

Karthika Nair

NB: excerpts of an earlier version of this piece were published in Dance Gazette UK, by MC2 Grenoble, and in the proceedings of a symposium by Paris VIII University.