

POISED FOR THE LAST DANCE

His final solo show is all about remembrance, but the vibrant Akram Khan is looking to the future, he tells *Sarah Crompton*

Akram Khan is working in the studio at the BalletBoyz headquarters in Kingston, just outside London. It's February, and a dim light pushes in through the big windows that punctuate the bare brick walls. He is creating a new solo, *Xenos*, that will eventually be performed on a complex and precipitous set, with a steep

ramp and a floor covered in pine cones. What he has to work with here is a loose rope, an upturned box and a piece of tape on the floor. It is the dance equivalent of film's green screen: everything needs to be imagined.

But even in this space, empty except for the musicians playing Vincenzo Lamagna's plangent score – which incorporates an extract from Mozart's *Lacrimosa* – the power and passion of Khan's dancing create a fierce emotional charge. Then, as he turns,

exhausted, at the close, and the music fades away, a tinny computer tune pierces the air. "Kenzo!" exclaims Khan, as a small face appears on the upstairs balcony, pursued by his minder. His three-year-old son is amusing himself with video games while the rehearsal takes place.

The interruption is funny, but also pertinent. Since the birth of his children – he also has a daughter, Sayuri, 5 – Khan's world-view has changed. "I was in a bubble, and it was just about dance. My future and the future of the world didn't really bother me. But I became very politically absorbed when my children were born, because you want to protect their future.

"I suppose it is the inevitability of growing up. I am so involved emotionally and psychologically in the politics of the world now. It has affected me a lot. I think a lot about my children and

the way we are the worst generation. We've really messed up for them. Why do they deserve that?"

Khan's work has always spoken loudly to all generations. With a training that began in the traditional Indian classical dance form of kathak and then extended into contemporary technique, his thoughtful, graceful explorations of

culture and movement have been a pillar of the contemporary dance boom since 2000. His popularity and reach were enhanced by collaborations with the dancer Sylvie Guillem and actress Juliette Binoche, and by his participation in Danny Boyle's Olympics opening ceremony for London 2012. His worldwide reputation is equally strong: when tickets for the premiere of *Xenos* went on sale in Athens, they sold out in 90 minutes.

The piece explores his current concerns by digging deep into the past. Co-

commissioned by 14-18 Now, the organisation that has promoted work to commemorate the anniversary of the First World War, it takes as inspiration the contribution of the 4.5m foreign soldiers, 1.5m of them Indian, who fought in the trenches – and whose sacrifice has been largely forgotten.

Khan and his dramaturg, Ruth Little, dug around in the archives to find out more. “It upset me that I didn’t know about them. We became curious about the things we bury because we want to change history or write history in a different way,” he says. “As one Indian academic said, ‘I thought remembrance was a white thing.’”

In *Xenos* – meaning “stranger” or “foreigner” – this concern is mingled with the legend of Prometheus and his aspiration towards creation, as well as with Khan’s belief that society today is losing its sense of what it means to be human and creating the conditions of distrust and otherness that have always laid the foundations for war.

He has talked before of the casual racism he experienced growing up in Wimbledon, living above his father’s Indian restaurant and being subject to the drunken abuse of diners. Now he is

so established as a choreographer that overt racism doesn’t affect him. Yet it hasn’t always been the case.

“In the first five years of my company, I was constantly made to feel I only got this attention because I was brown. That sense of tokenism was really there. People would say, ‘They’re trying to fill the diversity box.’ That lasted for years – until 2005, when I made *Zero Degrees* with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Then it backed off. Or maybe I grew a thicker skin.

“Dance companies have had racism, but the important thing is that we are trying. There is change happening. The dance world has always seemed to me the least racist world.”

He smiles warmly. He says these things calmly. But a sense of otherness, of exploring what it means to be an outsider, has permeated his work, from his life-enhancing solo *Desh*, exploring his father’s background in Bangladesh, to the devastating *Giselle* he made for English National Ballet in 2016, where

he transformed a tale about a peasant girl and a prince into a haunting picture of migrant workers, callous class structures and exclusion.

Working on *Giselle* (and *Until the Lions* for his company) was revelatory.

Now 43, Khan saw he had reached a turning point. “I realised I was more inspired by other people’s bodies, and having my ideas living through them, and not my own body any more.”

This has made creating *Xenos* a lonely, harsh process, despite a supportive team of collaborators. “I am fighting an inner battle with myself to get up every morning,” he said when he was starting the piece. “I am finding it hard. My body is reminding me every second that it’s vulnerable, and I hate that. It gave me confidence once upon a time. I knew I would get on stage and it would save me. But now it is saying, ‘We can’t do this.’ I don’t like that.”

Khan worked closely with Guillem, who continued to dance long after most people would have stopped. But he feels his battles with his physical self are holding him back from creation. “My energy is spent on trying to push me to be inspired, and that is sapping my energy from being creative.”

It has to be said that whatever he feels is not evident in the finished solo. At its first outing at the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens, *Xenos* packed an astonishing punch, dark but strangely hopeful. With words by the Canadian playwright Jordan Tannahill, it takes its imaginary Indian soldier – whose story is a conflation of real stories – from the shellshocked memory of performing as a dancer for a nawab’s house party to the horror of life laying cables in the trenches. It combines Khan’s background in kathak with his career as a contemporary choreographer.

Xenos feels both personal and universal – a fitting culmination to his life as a solo performer, though he intends to keep dancing and choreographing with others. After the performance, he looks relaxed and happy. “Once I am on stage, all my struggles disappear,” he says. “The sense of an audience, of coming together, of time and attention, really wake you.”

He talks about watching Bollywood

movies with his mother and knowing the dialogue so well, they could improvise lines – about *ET* or *Star Wars* – and make them fit scenes exactly. “We were very precise,” he says. “It was our way of bonding. And it taught me, like kathak, to improvise in a structure.”

This ability to bring together every aspect of his life and thought in performance is part of what has made Khan such an essential cultural figure. His career is branching out: he has presented a documentary on artificial intelligence for Channel 4 and plans to do more; he is also hosting a series on dance for Sky Arts. But his commitment to the stage, to making dance engage with the world around it, remains undiminished. “Hope lies in movement,” he says. “The moment you stop moving, death has won.” ■

Xenos, Sadler’s Wells, London ECI,
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