

Home Was in My Body

For the internationally acclaimed choreographer Akram Khan, questions of home and identity have been present since an early age. He speaks to Ben Bohm-Duchen about how these themes have become a defining influence on his life's work.



In his performances, Akram Khan negotiates deeply complex subjects with spellbinding beauty, resulting in powerful spectacles that resonate with audiences around the world. Within the narratives that he brings to the stage a recurring and essential theme has been established. Displacement, for Khan, is an experience that is closely tied to ideas of home and identity, and from the moment we sit down he is keen to emphasise the importance of these subjects within his creative process. "It's dominated my work. Everything I've done is about identity. Whether it's identity about you as a boy or a man. Or whether it's your identity as a brown person, or as a Jewish person or a Muslim. It's about sex, gender. I use particular subjects to reflect, to use as a mirror to bounce off and to question that particular agenda: the agenda that I have depending on what angle of identity I'm interested in, whether it's about race, or about country, or about sexuality, or about borders. But it's mostly about xenos."

XENOS, a Greek word meaning "stranger" or "foreigner", is the title of Akram Khan's new performance. It is a concept that not only has vital importance to his work but also utmost relevance in the current political climate. "It is about being a foreigner: a foreigner in your own body, in your home, in the playground, a foreigner among your friends and within your own country, the world that you are in. I think we're all foreigners right now. We are borrowing Earth. We don't own Earth. We share it with other animals and our species destroys them within a few years. Every 20 years some species is near extinction because of us. We are the worst, most evil species." Displacement in Khan's eyes goes far beyond the physical migration of humans; it is a crisis of identity within our society; it is a lack of connection to the natural world and the planet.

So how did the theme of displacement become such an overriding force within his work? Born in 1974 of Bangladeshi heritage, but growing up in Wimbledon, Khan became aware of notions of identity, ethnicity and nationality from an early age. "As I grew

up I felt more and more displaced. As a child I didn't notice it as much, but I knew that we were different. When we were in Bangladesh they treated me differently to the other Bangladeshi children and I wondered whether it was because they didn't see me very often and so were treating me specially... but there was something there. I felt xenos. I felt like a foreigner. And growing up here, working as a waiter in my dad's restaurant in the summers, I felt real xenophobia. In the early to mid-1990s, there was a lot more overt racism in London. Gangs of men coming into the restaurant and throwing bottles over our heads. I was in hospital once, bleeding – it was pretty violent.



These early experiences of racism would inevitably lead to a sense of not belonging, to a sense of being a foreigner in your own home. "Being displaced is something I've been conscious of since I was a child because of racism, because of the incidents. Perhaps some of them are isolated but, a lot of restaurant owners, we used to share stories and we knew it wasn't just us. Displacement became a place where I felt placed, so home was in my body; home was not a place. I constantly felt I was in borrowed space, or that I was not welcome in the space. And that feeling is coming back again."

It is perhaps unsurprising that in the face of hostility, and in some cases trauma and violence, a

sense of home must be both physically and mentally internalised. Khan stresses this point: "This sense of being displaced is very placed for me, and that placement is in my body. And the displacement is what's outside my body. What's inside my body is my home and what's outside is... I think we relate everything through our bodies... we are the centre of the universe. You are the centre, because it's your perception that you're seeing Earth; wherever you travel, you bring your centre with you. And that's how I've always felt." For the countless numbers who are currently leaving everything they know behind as they journey to a new life, this may well be a familiar feeling.

Akram Khan's family migrated to London during the conflict in Bangladesh around the time of independence in 1971. Khan's parents do not talk about their experiences much but he hears certain stories repeated. Understandably, it is hard to talk about such difficult times. "I think they are in denial about being in denial. They're not aware of being in denial but they choose not to speak too much. I tease stuff out... I think they were exposed to some pretty horrific things; they lost a lot of family members. It's the worst of humankind, war. But I get certain stories out. I think when they arrived here they felt saved. My father came in 1971. I think my mum came in 1973. She said that I was "born as a seed in Bangladesh."

The memory of conflict, violence and displacement is passed down through generations in curious ways. For Khan, storytelling, fables, folk songs and myths are an essential means of handing down memories, a consistent and recurring trope within his work. Indeed, in DESH, Khan plays on this dynamic very directly as he acts out conversations between himself and his father, comically relaying the tensions and misunderstandings between generations. "My father and mother have been through a very intense conflict in Bangladesh, the independence of Bangladesh, and then I was born three years after. Somehow they never really allowed that experience to filter through to us. And if it did filter through, it was through



Akram Khan's performances. Photographs by Richard Haughton

narrative, through myths. And I think myths are important, because the myth of being displaced is somehow a continuous myth through history. From the Jewish people having to be displaced, to the Hindus and Muslims in India when it was partitioned, to Syria right now. All over the world, it's continuous. Of course there are peaks, like the Second World War or right now."

When asked what it is that makes this a particularly significant period for myths, Khan points to our relationship to the past. "I think we're in a very specific time. And it's happened before, just before the Second World War. What's happening is the old myths, the religious myths perhaps, or even capitalist myths, haven't died yet. The other problem is the new myths haven't been born yet. So we're in between; we're in no man's land. Because we can't create new myths until we destroy the old myths. Until we let go of the old myths." For Khan, religion has traditionally provided myth and narrative. "Judaism, Islam, Christianity – for me these are myths; they're not literal. If you take them literally, for me that's where there is a problem. They are teaching

metaphorically; they are examples of mistakes we've made, successes, which reveal human nature: jealousy, love, hate. The problem is when you take it literally, that's when it becomes something fundamentalist."

So myths, understandably more powerful when perceived from a viewpoint where they have relevance to one's own life, have to take new forms. Khan explains: "I'm fascinated by how mythology relates to me today. Myth has to evolve or be recreated. The underlying thing about myth should stay but we have to develop it so it relates to ourselves, otherwise it means nothing."

Khan was trained in the classical Indian dance form of kathak, which still informs much of his style and performances today. Kathak is primarily a storytelling dance form; in fact, the word itself translates as "story" from its ancient derivations. It is a manner of storytelling that Khan intelligently choreographs to create a poetic narrative that interweaves personal experience, myths and references to both historical and contemporary events in a way that audiences can immediately understand and relate to.



Image by Tim Yip

DESH was clearly a sincere and deeply personal undertaking. Was it a journey of self-discovery for Khan? "The intention was purely to tell a story. But in that wanting to tell a story there's obviously a part that is rooted in wanting to come to terms with my own questions about identity. What contemporary dance does is announce the questions more poetically at a certain angle. It's not about getting answers, but by asking something repetitively an answer evolves out of that repetition. And maybe that is the answer: that there are not answers. But there is only the question; there is only the will to want to find out; there is only the curiosity. The act of curiosity means there is a movement there. Stillness is death, or absolute stillness is death. The desire to tell stories means, in a sense, that I want those narratives from my childhood to live on." For Khan, memory can – and should – be thought of in terms of narratives, myths, stories. "Memory is always fragments; it's never linear. My grandmother's, your grandmother's memories are always fragments. What we do as individual human beings is we reshape the narratives using those little fragments and then we fill it in, or we put it in this order, because we can't really remember. And with time, things start to disappear so we fill in more using our imaginations... There's something to do with the whispers of my parents mixed in with the whispers of me that ended up being DESH. It's a combination of making stuff up with some of the facts. Those facts aren't really facts; they are someone else's perspective of those facts... When you experience something very traumatic, what happens the next moment, when you have recollected, you are already... making a perspective, perception, view of it."

In DESH, Khan weaves in stories and events from Bangladesh's violent past, moments that particularly inspired or moved him. There is one scene where a protest is recreated by means of animations moving across a screen, while Khan moves within the images recreating the fervour and passion of the historical event. This protest was inspired by the murder of

Noor Hossain, a Bangladeshi activist, by the Bangladesh police on 10 November 1987 while protesting against the dictator President Hussain Muhammad Ershad near Zero Point in Dhaka. Zero Point was later renamed Noor Hossain Square and the anniversary of his death is officially commemorated each year as Shohid Noor Hossain Day. He is one of the most widely known martyrs from Bangladesh's pro-democracy movement. He wrote "Free Democracy" on his back and "Down with the Dictator" on his chest and led the march. "He was shot by the police. He died, and he became a symbol, a kind of spark, catalyst, to push. That really inspired me when I saw the images."

For Khan, "images are underestimated; the power images have is underestimated," and it is certainly the powerful emotions that images can engender that motivated him and his team during the creation of DESH. Another photograph also inspired this scene, a photograph by Rashid Talukder of a boy leading a protest during the mass uprising in Bangladesh in 1969. "The image was so powerful. It's a group of people marching and there is a little boy at the front, and his body is so small from malnutrition. The power that he has and the innocence that he has, the naivety but also the fearlessness, has led it to become such an iconic image. That's how the little boy came into being, into our project." In DESH, the child takes the form of a vivid animated figure recurring throughout the performance.

"The power of dance is that it's ambiguous, or has the possibility to be ambiguous. It can be literal or ambiguous. It can be poetic and then shift to political without noticing. Words have a way of attaching very strong meanings to them. And it's interesting: our new form of language is visual images. We communicate through them. Images can say a thousand words, in some instances." In DESH, Khan combines this boldness and directness of visual imagery with the suggestive ambiguity of dance as a medium.

In the process of creating DESH, the whole team journeyed to Bangladesh to take inspiration from

the country that features so prominently in the performance. “Jocelyn Pook [who composed the music] recorded everything: traffic noise, ship-building noise, nature, life, the rhythms of Bangladesh. We were recording the smells... through sensory memory. So we recorded everything and put it up on the wall in the studio, and then we started to create. We are surrounded by those images, and some of them were political: the independence of Bangladesh, my mother would talk about this. So all of those images surround us and we somehow submerge ourselves in them.”

DESH begins with Khan smashing a sledgehammer onto a raised metal platform. “The hammering is a symbolic action of going into the past, and going into the future. In the same moment, smashing into history and the past, and smashing into the future. A bit like a hammer-head, with the eyes of a fish going in different directions.” It was inspired by one memorable scene on the trip to Bangladesh. “We saw these kids when we came to a boatyard; Bangladesh is well known for dismantling ships and rebuilding them. So there were hundreds of boys hammering this sheet of metal: thump thump thump. And one little boy was pointing with a ruler where to hit. So there was something about the rhythm of it, the synchronicity of it, smashing – I superimpose it there; I distort what I saw and use for my own means, becoming me trying to break open my father’s coffin in DESH. That physical labour action came out of a real situation but it came out of a different context to what I saw. It was an amazing visual and auditory scene.”

So what role do artists play in the current political climate, where nationality becomes more closely scrutinised every day and the movement of people across the globe has become a source of such significant social and political tension? How important is it for artists to respond to these themes? “I don’t think it’s important; I think it’s a necessity,” Khan asserts. Khan believes that as a society we are edging closer to death, that through climate change or by our own means the planet will ultimately



face destruction. When this happens, he maintains, it is vital that culture and the arts are preserved. “Every achievement we have done is recorded through culture and arts: through myth, through dance, opera, music, art. If that is not preserved they [the kids of the future] will not know where they have come from; they will start from the beginning again and make the same mistakes... And this is ever so important now, because we are being challenged by new forms, a new species, robotics, artificial intelligence... There was a group of codifiers who came to London recently to give a talk and they said every job is going to be replaced by robotics. Except two: artists and clergymen. These are the two things that make us human: faith and a belief system, and art – this is what defines humanity; this is what makes us human.”



Images from Bangladesh by Michel Orier