

'We can't just tell one community's stories'

Ahead of his new TV series, Akram Khan tells *Neil Armstrong* about our universal urge to dance and his reservations about the Royal Ballet

There's a saying that dancing is the vertical expression of a horizontal desire, and acclaimed dancer and choreographer Akram Khan does not necessarily disagree. "Sex and dance go together for a reason," he says. "Animals use movement in their courtship rituals to attract a mate. Dancing is the most animalistic human thing. [It] releases a chemical burst of pleasure, an endorphin rush that also happens during orgasm."

The *For Sex* episode of *Why Do We Dance?*, the new Sky Arts five-part documentary series that Khan presents, includes what continuity announcers usually describe as "scenes of an adult nature" and features works that you're unlikely to see on *Strictly* any time soon, including some that are performed naked.

Indeed, Khan's mother won't be seeing it ever. "I haven't told her about the sex episode and I'm not going to," he admits. "She thinks there are just four episodes. She'd be horrified. She'd ban me from the house." He does an impression of her: "He used to be such a lovely, innocent boy..."

However, there is plenty for Mrs Khan to enjoy in the rest of this ambitious series. Each film explores a different motivation to dance – *To Belong*; *To Tell Stories*; *To Touch the Soul*; *To Provoke* and *For Sex*. There are contributions from leading choreographers, performers and critics from all over the world and sumptuously filmed specially staged dance sequences.

"I've loved doing it," Khan says. "What the series shows is the extent of dance's reach. It's global. Everyone dances. People dance at weddings, funerals, parties, in temples, in streets. They dance to revolt, to appease. It's everywhere."

Khan, 44, is a charismatic and engaging presenter and says he would like to do more TV as age inevitably constrains his dancing (although his work as a choreographer goes from strength to strength).

His show *Xenos* – about Indian soldiers in the First World War; one critic said it was "a work of defining greatness" – finishes next year and he says that will be his last full-length solo piece. But there is plenty more to look forward to.

He is speaking to *The Daily Telegraph* in what is supposed to be his lunch break during rehearsals for his new production *Outwitting the Devil*, inspired by the ancient Babylonian poem *Gilgamesh*, which was written



RISCHROER; ALASTAIR MUIR; SKY ITALIA

Dance master: Akram Khan, above, is one of the country's most celebrated performers and choreographers; on stage at the Roundhouse in London earlier this year, right



4,000 years ago. The show premieres in July in Stuttgart and will come to Sadler's Wells next year.

Khan is particularly interested in a passage of the poem in which Gilgamesh enters a cedar forest and cuts down trees, relating it to climate change, an issue which deeply concerns him, the more so as a father to two young children with his wife Yuko Inoue.

"That piece of the story is about mankind destroying nature," he says.

"I like the Jean Cocteau quote 'History is truth that becomes an illusion. Mythology is an illusion that becomes reality'. *Outwitting The Devil* is partly about the fact that we, as a species, have a communal sense of dementia. We have forgotten our past."

Khan was born in Wimbledon in 1974 to Bangladeshi parents for whom the memory of Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence was fresh. The family lived above the restaurant that his father ran. Khan started to dance at the age of just three.

"I was shy with words but I loved to be the centre of attention and I could do that with dancing," he says.

It was a transformational moment for him when he won a school talent competition, busting out some Michael Jackson moves to a Five Star song.

"It was the first moment that people in my class knew my name," he says. "Hey, you're Akram right? You were good! Up until then, I had been a shadow. If I could disappear in school, I would."

His mother had encouraged him to train in Kathak, traditional classical Indian dance, and at the age of 13 he was cast in Peter Brooks' nine-hour production of the Sanskrit epic *The*

Mahabharata and toured the world for two years. He credits this period with shaping the person he is today but it wasn't all art and high culture.

"I was really naughty," he says. "I was a teenager, a rebel. Every moment that I wasn't actually in the theatre, I was annoying the s--- out of my chaperone. Bless her. We're still in touch and every time I see her now, I ask for her forgiveness."

"I was a bloody nightmare. I stole a car. In Australia. A bunch of us – there were several of us who took it in turns to do the same role – we stole one of the actors' cars and went down to the beach."

"In LA, I stole some batteries and a security guard caught me. The police were called but let me off because they could see how scared I was. I was very good at apologising."

Fortunately for him, and us, he was far more interested in dance than delinquency and, after setting up his own company, became one of the country's most celebrated and exciting performers and choreographers, capable of selling out shows all over the world.

He has worked with actress Juliette Binoche, singer Kylie Minogue and

'The Sadler's team have made a home for dance companies from all over the world... You have Indian people there. I don't know how many Indian people go to the Royal Ballet'

dancer Sylvie Guillem. For Tamara Rojo at the English National Ballet, he choreographed a stunning *Giselle* set in a condemned garment factory staffed by migrant workers.

And his fame extends far beyond the dance world thanks to his poignant and moving piece performed at the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics commemorating the victims of the 2005 terrorist bombings in London.

Given his past collaborations, has the Royal Ballet come knocking, I wonder. "No. No, they haven't."

Would he like them to? He hesitates for the first time in our conversation and then chooses his words carefully.

"I don't know how to answer that one. I love working with the English National Ballet. I think the Royal Ballet is..." long pause "...an interesting venue. It's an incredible space and it's got an amazing legacy but I've only worked for the English National Ballet and I really love working with them."

"What Alastair Spalding (the artistic director at Sadler's Wells, which has a close association with the ENB) and the Sadler's team have done is make a home for dance companies from all around the world – Africa, Asia. It's



Leading question: a scene from Khan's new TV series, *Why Do We Dance?*

extraordinary. There's something very special about the audience. You have Indian people there. I don't know how many Indian people go to the Royal Ballet.

"John Berger [the writer and critic] said, 'Never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one'. I stand by that because I feel we need to tell everyone's stories, not just one community's stories."

We finish on a lighter note. He's a renowned workaholic. What does he do to relax?

"This is tragic but once a month my six-year-old daughter takes my phone and films me wearing a wig and costume and miming to one of the characters from Disney. I've played Moana, I've played Elsa from *Frozen*. Even – bloody hell – Barbie, for my sins. I hope it never gets out."

He also adores films. He reels off a list of favourite directors – "Kore-eda, Iñárritu, Cuarón" – all known for producing the sort of chewy works you might expect a serious, well-read, Cocteau-quoting, innovative artist to enjoy. "Oh, and I love the Marvel films," he adds. "All of them. *Thor*, the whole lot. I go to watch them by myself if I have to."

Why Do We Dance? will be made available as an online box set on April 29 and begins airing on Sky Arts on Tuesday April 30 at 9pm