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Desh, Sadler's Wells, London

By Clement Crisp



Divided self: Akram Khan in 'Desh' at Sadler's Wells

“The divided self” is a convenient label to identify those people who sense an emotional fracture with their ancestry – the result of national upheaval or immigration – a gulf between their present and an “other” unimaginable past. It is the stuff of social liberation and social distress, and in the dance world it has been a source of energy, of inspiration, of strongest emotion, in such varied forms as slave-born Brazilian capoeira and Black American dance. It has latterly brought wonderful developments in British culture with hip-hop and street dance.

For Akram Khan it has meant both studies of “contemporary dance” in London and exploration of Indian forms, through which he has evolved a style of phenomenal elegance and bravura. His latest creation is a solo in which he seeks to know his Bangladeshi ancestry, to understand his own identity and that of his father in the light of that “other” country from which he is sprung. It is a pilgrimage essential for a creator and performer whose art is born of such historic traditions and attitudes.

So Khan’s 80-minute staging, which is an interweaving of memories, of family identities, of conflicts between a former Bangladesh (that of his father) and a present Bangladesh concerned with computers and roaring traffic and the gloss that technology applies to national life. The staging is fluid, is ravishingly designed by Tim Yip (whose final *coup* of a pendant forest of strips of white fabric is a marvel), is provided with a gluey score from Jocelyn Pook, and is

superbly lit by Michael Hulls.

Khan dances gloriously, speaks admirably, establishes an imaginative world of uncanny clarity as he layers his own experience against the more remote Bangladesh of his father's origins.

There is, though, not a little obliqueness about the piece, despite Khan's unfailing verve, with movement curling and coursing through his body, speaking (I venture) in tongues. The production is overextended, at moments obscurely personal, yet sustained by Khan's dramatic honesty and by the emotional force of his dancing.

★★★★☆

Sadler's Wells

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