

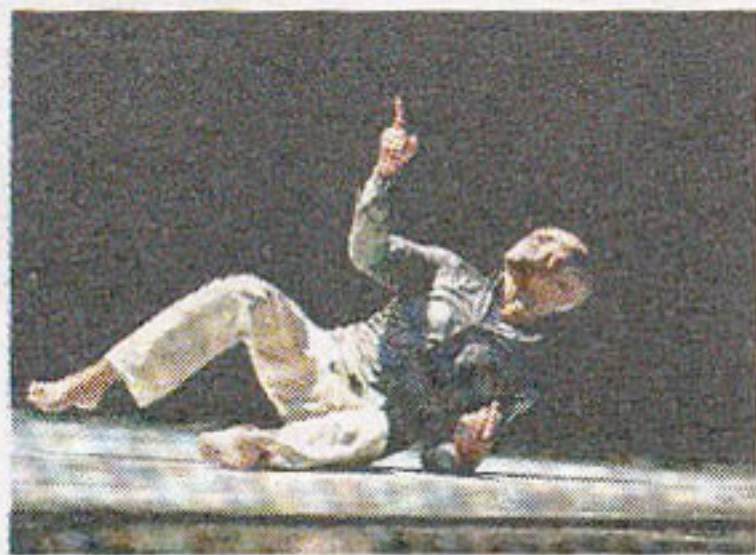
## Reviews

Arts &amp; Books

## DANCE

Desh

Sadler's Wells, London



**Vivid body language: Akram Khan in 'Desh'** RICHARD HAUGHTON

In *Desh*, his impressive new work, Akram Khan is a solo dancer on a busy stage. He evokes and reacts to multiple characters, dashes through dangerous traffic or gets lost in a forest. His dancing is mercurial, his characters superbly realised. With *Desh*, Khan returns to the theme of identity, a major strand in his work, with new depth and immediacy.

It's named for Bangladesh, Khan's own country of origin, which he presents as both a homeland and a foreign place to him. In an early scene, he ducks and dives between speeding bars of light, bewildered by street sounds.

Bending his shaved head forwards, he has a different face painted on it. Huddling into himself, he dances as a different person – a man who cooks for his village, who tries to understand Bangladesh's political changes from within. The physical

transformation is brilliant. Khan uses his own body as if it were a puppet, conjuring a funny, sad cook.

Around him, there are other transformations. Tim Yip, the Oscar-winning designer of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, surrounds him with video imagery, painted forests growing up in front of him.

Playing himself, he calls a mobile-phone helpline, a voice performance by Eesha Desai. The voice keeps shifting, its accent turning American, suddenly sounding older. When Khan calls again, from Bangladesh, the adviser admits he is 12 years old. Khan's character goes from technology rage to concern.

In the past, speech has been a weakness in Khan's contemporary work, with too much lightweight philosophising. This time it's grounded in character, in clashes of personality. The heart of the work is London-born Khan's relationship with his Bangladeshi-born father. The young Khan expresses teenage rebellion by switching accents or adopting Michael Jackson moves. Khan, in his turn, is floored when his young niece suggests the goddess of a folk tale is Lady Gaga.

Khan's body language makes these relationships vividly real. When he evokes political protest in Bangladesh, it keeps this human scale. The same tale of atrocity terrifies the London niece and is part of the Bangladesh father's identity. When Khan dances that story, the tragedy becomes fiercer when we realise the victim was his sweet, sad cook. *Desh* piles up layers of meaning, the world changing as people try to make sense of it.

ZOË ANDERSON