

DESH - review

Curve, Leicester

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Judith Mackrell

guardian.co.uk, Friday 16 September 2011 17:51 BST

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Miraculous shape-shifting ... Akram Khan in DESH. Photograph: Richard Haughton

DESH is Bengali for homeland, and in [Akram Khan's](#) latest solo the choreographer returns to the world of his Bangladeshi roots, in search of the stories and characters of his past. If that search takes Khan into intimately personal territory, it also inspires him to the most urgent, beautiful and confident work of his career.

Akram Khan

DESH

Curve,

Leicester

Until 17 September

Box office:

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Khan has [narrated aspects of his biography before](#), yet in [DESH](#) he doesn't address the audience directly; his stories seem to be hanging in the air, waiting to be told. They're overheard through recorded conversations and anecdotes, visualised through digital cartoons and through the imagery of DESH's brilliant design team, and they're given physical form through the miraculous shape-shifting eloquence of Khan's own body.

An early scene shows his arrival in Dhaka where a soundtrack of honking, jerking traffic galvanises Khan to a frenetic dance of city life. His racked gestures simultaneously evoke car-dodging pedestrians, brake-slamming drivers, street workers and beggars.

The action jumps to his father's village where Khan assumes the body and voice of an elderly cook brutalised by Pakistani soldiers during the 1971 war. Bent nearly double, the cook and his story conjure both the simplicities and horrors of the Bangladeshi past.

It's a past Khan wants to understand, yet the gap between generations and cultures is brilliantly evoked through recorded conversations between Khan as a lippy London

teenager, and his uncomprehending father, then Khan as a dad himself, trying to share the Bangladeshi fairytales of his childhood with his own very British daughter.

Guilt, comedy, anger and tenderness are vivid here. Towards the close, a slow motion monsoon of silk ribbons descends on the stage, representing everything that stands between Khan and his past. It's a sublime image, evoking the monumental loneliness of his journey backwards, as well its heroism.

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