

Dance
Desh
Curve, Leicester
★★★★☆

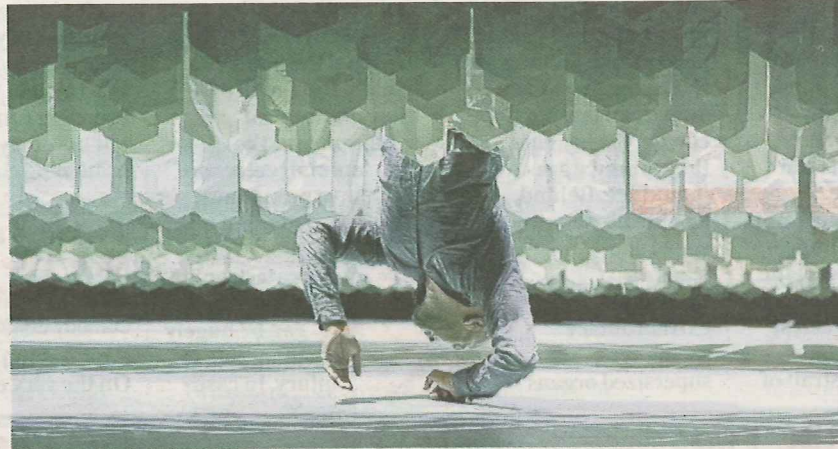
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The theme of home and identity is at the core of most of Akram Khan's work, but never more so than in his latest production. *Desh*, which means homeland in Bengali, is inspired by Khan's exploration of his cultural and geographical roots. It is the result of a year that the London-born choreographer spent researching in the UK and Bangladesh, the land of his origin.

If I told you that this is an 80-minute dance solo your heart might sink at the prospect of such limited horizons. But fear not, for this epic creation, given its world premiere at the Curve, is a one-man show of total theatrical conception and thematic fascination. Delivered in strands of storytelling, anecdotes and impressions, it sets out, as Khan himself says, to "address the tragedy and comedy of lives in Bangladesh". Yet it feels more personal than any of his other productions.

The world of *Desh* is a place of hard physical labour, where the only defence against the heat is a clapped-out air conditioning unit, which later becomes



RICHARD HAUGHTON

Akram Khan's choreography is marked by an equality of power and fluidity

a symbol of our technological civilisation. The busy streets of Dhaka are a frenetic burble of rampaging traffic. You can actually feel the stress in Khan's hypersensitive dancing, each limb alert to the next imminent danger, each phrase fraught with haste and overstimulation. His recorded dialogue with an IT call centre evokes the frustrating experience of trying to get

technical support from foreign lands. And when he tells a Bangladeshi fairytale to a girl in England, the magic of childhood that he recalls — matched by charming digital animations — envelops you in its universal fantasy. Khan also plays an elderly cook in his father's village, a man who suffered the horror and brutality of war during Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, and

confronts his own disapproving father, a man for whom the generation gap is not only about age but also about cultural taste and artistic expression.

Lurking beneath Khan's journey to self-discovery is an elemental terror born of the knowledge that Bangladesh would be one of the first countries to disappear when rising sea levels reach crisis point. So, not only is his heritage fragile but so, too, is the very earth that bred it. This is the point when Tim Yip's breathtaking designs come into their own: using thousands of silk-like strips hanging from gigantic frames he creates a monsoon of apocalyptic proportions.

Khan's choreography is marked by an equality of power and fluidity, while as a performer he is as mesmerising in stillness as he is in full flow. Jocelyn Pook's recorded score is haunting and magical, excited and angry, while Michael Hull's fine lighting sets the seal on this most extraordinary of collaborations.

Debra Craine
Desh is sponsored by Colas. At Sadler's Wells, London ECI, Oct 4-8

Theatre
We Are Three Sisters
Dean Clough,
Halifax
★★★★☆

For this Northern Broadsides touring production Blake Morrison has written a fantasia on a theme by Chekhov, rather as a composer will create a piece that draws on another composer's music. In this case the theme is the famously frustrated existence of Olga, Masha and Irina Prozorov, sisters exiled from culture and excitement in a remote provincial town. What Morrison cunningly does is to blend their experience with that of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, tied to the parsonage in Haworth.

The parallels between the two

threesomes are striking. Both sets of sisters have a ne'er-do-well brother who gambles and is besotted with a socially ambitious woman. The personalities of the individual sisters also curiously resemble their foreign counterparts, with Charlotte a kind of quasi-mother, Emily brooding on her private thoughts, Anne sweetly naive.

Obviously the Haworth reality has to be wrenched to fit the Chekhov, and sometimes the strain is glaring. The local doctor must be made a frequent caller so as to keep telling Anne how he dotes upon her. The Natasha figure recklessly loved by brother Branwell is

most improbably brought to live in the parsonage. But while some of Morrison's inventions grate on credibility, for anyone familiar with events in Chekhov's play there is tremendous fun recognising the echoes as they flick past — the unsuitable birthday present, the pedantic teacher, the visiting curate who fascinates the sisters with his philosophising. An excellent moment comes when all three turn their heads towards him.

Jessica Worrall's set captures the sense of fiery energy in the midst of shadows, with black gravestones pressing in on one side and the

bright-lit writing-table at the centre. Barrie Rutter's fine production — he also plays the pedant — brings out excellent performances. Marc Parry's lovesick curate is as dashing in his darting approaches as in his contrived charm. Catherine Kinsella, Sophia di Martino and Rebecca Hutchinson convey a powerful sense of sisterhood, with Di Martino outstanding as an Emily whose precise intensity almost persuades me to take a look at *Wuthering Heights*.

Jeremy Kingston
The Lowry, Salford, tonight to Sat; then touring until Nov 26