

# Akram Khan's DESH review: Solo dance brings homeland to life

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## DESH Queensland Performing Arts Centre, September 6 ★★★★★

How great it is to have a dance work open a major arts festival – as Akram Khan's *DESH* did for the Brisbane Festival at the weekend. That said, *DESH* is a solo dance piece of exceptional breadth in its theatrical power and embrace of other artforms.

Dancer-choreographer Akram Khan has appeared in Sydney many times but never in a work of such depth. This is both a personal and global piece exploring issues like home and family, identity and fantasy, affection and resistance. It has a searing impact.

Desh means homeland in Bengali. Khan has divided his life between Bangladesh and Britain, so he draws on his own experience for much of his material.

We see him as a man at the most basic task of human labour, breaking rocks with a heavy hammer; dodging traffic literally and metaphorically as he fends off the vicissitudes of life; storytelling to a young girl, bringing her to life in our imaginations as well as playing a role in one of his stories.

Drawing a face on his bald head and bending it forward, he adds a character of "a small man", who is both visually and emotionally engaging. Long after perspiration has washed off the "face", Khan dips his head in a sequence and you can tell the audience knows instantly who he is referring to.

Khan's fast, light dancing drives the piece in sweeps of manic action across the stage in which his body appears to be pushed and pulled by outside forces. In contrast, he can be still, with just his



Akram Khan in *DESH*. Photo: Richard Haughton

curving arms and hands in storytelling mode. Always his body language is eloquent, even when he is using words as well.

Visual artist Tim Yip's designs are striking, enhanced by Michael Hulls' lighting. Jocelyn Pook's music adds colour and piquancy.

*DESH* covers so much ground in thought-provoking ways that it could have been unwieldy. But Khan's individual movement style – barefoot contemporary with references to kathak and folk dance – holds it and its component parts together.

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