

# THE SATURDAY PAPER

PORTRAIT  
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## Brisbane Festival performer Akram Khan brings DESH to life

Dancer and choreographer Akram Khan takes centre stage with a story about his childhood.



SAMUEL WAGAN WATSON

I'm waiting in a cafe in Brisbane's South Bank, an area I usually try to avoid. One hundred metres away is a bridge where my late grandparents interrupted two young policemen on a chilly winter's night back in the 1970s. The officers were trying to toss an elderly and destitute Aboriginal man into the freezing skin of the Brisbane River. There are ghosts in this area, and even in the daytime I try to avoid them.

I know a guy who knows a guy who introduced me to a woman who is the "contact" for a guy who will hopefully help me out.

You see, I need to speak to someone who knows how to move a human body in the artistic sense. When Akram Khan materialises for our somewhat clandestine meeting, I sense instantly that he is a "serious" person – someone whose thoughts I must engage.

"A person is made up of several individuals," he says. "The body is an individual... The mind is an individual."

As Khan speaks, a couple in their golden age stroll through the blossoming Brisbane sunshine, smiling at one another. "Okay," I say. "What can you tell me about the way their

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bodies move?”

Khan wears a slick pair of dark shades. Throughout the meeting, I never see his eyes. But you get the sense in his presence that he is an entity with multifocal capabilities.

“At their age the body speaks back ... but the body is their servant.”

In international contemporary dance Akram Khan has awed audiences and individuals, from Olympic opening ceremonies to Kylie Minogue. He is an articulate and attractive man. Although not a physically imposing being, there is something about his intellect that heightens my nerves. He is smart.

I have several connections with Brisbane’s Indian community and people who have bloodlines to the subcontinent. “He can dance,

man,” says Chayan Sarkar, the Brisbane-based director of indie-film company Bollywood Dreams.

“Akram has the moves.”

For his one-man show at the Brisbane Festival, Khan physically illustrates his story, *DESH*. “My parents fought in the 1971 war of independence in Bangladesh,” he says. “This story is about my childhood.”

Although his sunglasses shield his eyes, the lines in his face drop and I see that he is looking beyond me. His mood becomes sullen. “For my parents to survive through it they survived through their children.”

The Khan family eventually immigrated to South London to escape the scars and continuing political turmoil in their homeland.

“*DESH* is a lot about denial. The performance is very much about my mother but it is also about my father and avoiding my father.”

Although he seems almost gentle, I sense something of an internal struggle within him, something simmering. Khan is commanding and in charge of every moment.

Suddenly we are no longer talking about his father. He is musing on the metaphysical sciences. “I’m really interested in patterns in life ... patterns in nature ... how patterns tell a story.” As he relays this to me, I see a glimpse of the creative flowers that bloom within him, and in his presence, too.

As our time draws to a close, I laugh at how Khan has moved me. I am a writer who neglects a physical faculty in my daily regimen. To write is to be at a desk, but Khan embodies the serious and the creative in his movement. He talks about the fluidity of life. Maybe I need to embrace that fluidity.

I ponder, as we part, how gravity can even contend with this artist, Akram Khan.

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TAGS: Akram Khan

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