





ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT Ruth Little, Mavin Khoo and Akram Khan



My concern is that if we're not accountable for our actions and instead technology becomes accountable then we replace the human side of us: all the haptic, sensing, and sensitive parts. That's partly what I want to explore through dance, it brings you back in touch with yourself, with your body and the five senses. The other alarming thing is that the advancement of technology is so quick that most of us are not able to catch up, so we can't understand it and if we can't understand it, we can't question it. Every time we do arrive, it's moved on."

Just as the ways technology mediates our lives are complex, so too are its effects on the body. Bodies, Khan thinks, have also become strangers to us.

"Dance has the power of suggesting metaphor: it reaches out to our metaphorical sense and approach. Words tell you this is right and this is wrong. In its ambiguity, dance is able to question what's right and what's wrong.

Through dance, you can enter a narrative in a different way, through energy, gesture, and physical emotion. In a world in which we are encouraged to feel distant from the body, dance helps us remember the body and celebrate the body and the way that bodies interact with other bodies. Through the interaction between dancers but also the audience members' close proximity to one another, it reminds us that we are social creatures.

*Xenos* is about an Indian soldier who dies fighting for the British Army in the First World War. It is about his sense of feeling alone – feeling like a stranger – in this dangerous circumstance in which xenophobia was popular amongst particular people and acceptable to most."

The title, *Xenos*, is most commonly translated as 'stranger' but when you look a little deeper, you can see that the word has been used to describe things we might conceive of as opposites: simultaneously 'stranger' and 'guest'. This seems to speak to Khan's concerns with hospitality and hostility. He goes on:

"If we conceive of ignorance and fear and greed for power as symptoms of war then what is really scary is that the same symptoms we see arising now – hatred of refugees, the so-called Muslim ban, the Home Office's deportation policies – were also arising before the first world war. But we share the earth with these people whom we are so quick to make into strangers and so this sense of nationality, nation states and borders becomes all about power and greed. The piece was initiated by bearing witness to the ways in which the wealthy world dealt with the mass migration of Syrians. Looking on, I thought: when we don't recognise ourselves in others,

humanity is lost. The irony is that in the end, it's not about wealth: the earth has the flu and will get rid of the virus that we are. We can choose while we're here to lean into our capacity for greed, harm, and hatred or into our capacity for kindness, grace, and empathy."

When we spoke Khan called the 20th-century, 'the most violent century in human history' but our conversation hasn't inspired hope in my heart and I worry about this one. I recall listening to American cultural critic Ta-Nehisi Coates refuting Martin Luther King Jr.'s claims that 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice' and I wonder how Khan feels:

"We must have hope. Hope comes hand in hand with trauma. It is part of being human. When there's negative power, like now, hope is most needed and we do often rise to the occasion."

The purpose of the piece is to create art, of course, but also to allow people to reflect that in times of great adversity and great destruction and hatred and anger and rage, we have the power to resist and resistance is a form of hope. ●

*Xenos* is on at Sadler's Wells London from 29 May – 6 June 2018. Other UK dates include Edinburgh International Festival, 16 – 18 August and Curve Leicester, 21 – 22 September.

remains either out of reach or algorithmically mediated?

"The question of freedom is a particularly prescient one because of the omnipresence of technology. In a sense we are currently grappling with the question of whether technology allows us to be free or takes from us our sense of freedom," he says. "Technology raises so many ethical concerns and questions: who controls our access to technology? What kind of surveillance do we agree to when we 'agree' to particular terms and conditions? And how do we regulate it let alone comprehend it if it moves at such a pace?"

*Xenos* – which will mark Khan's last performances as a dancer in a full-length production – explores the story of a soldier: one of over 4 million men of colour mobilised by the British and American armies during the First World War. Recruited from India, these soldiers, known as Sepoys, fought and died in Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. When the war was finished, their stories were interred. Inaccessible government archives meant that the soldiers became *Xenoi* even unto themselves. As Khan sees it, just as history books communicate stories of authority implicitly or explicitly designed to obfuscate those told by or about the marginalised, many contemporary uses of technology also contribute to authority rather than undermine it. The recent and unanimous verdict of Russian interference in the 2016 US election and the on-going investigation into Cambridge Analytica seem to confirm Khan's stance.

There's a lecture by French theorist Michel Foucault (1976) in which he discusses uncovering or 'disinterring' stories that have been hidden, silenced, or marginalised, much like the way the stories of the sepoy were hidden away in government archives. In the lecture, he considers whether or not unveiling these stories might be a way of giving them autonomous life, a life of their own outside of the regimes that silenced them. I wonder if he sees *Xenos* as an uncovering:

"Of course – capitalism is a constellation of empires whose archives are formed only by those with power. Stories that have been hidden or omitted on the basis of race, class, or gender must be told. The other side of history must be told.

It was important for me to consult the archives because they're locations of status, they're considered history, and people read this history and are told it is the whole truth, when in fact only part of it is true. By omitting the full spectrum – for example, 4,000,000 people who fought for the British were *Xenos*. I want to begin to piece together what happened, and this is part of that telling.

