Akram Khan in *DESH*. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, Lincoln Center)

Scribbler of Tales

Karen Greenspan

Akram Khan has returned to Lincoln Center to tell us a story. In his hour-and-twenty-minute solo piece at the White Light Festival, *DESH*, Khan scribbles and spins the universal tale of conflict between fathers and sons, immigrants and next generation, homeland and new land, tradition and modernity. Mining his own cultural tradition of classical kathak dance from the Indian subcontinent, as well as his thorough facility in contemporary dance for his movement vocabulary, Khan carries us along on his personal, as well as the universal, journey to find one's roots. For Khan that means his relationship to "desh," which means "homeland" in Bengali.

Wearing loose-fitting Bengali pantaloons and a button-down shirt, Khan ascends the stairs to the stage in silence. He carries a lit lantern – searching for his way in the dark. He sets the lantern down by a mound of earth upon which grows a very small plant. The dirt, which Khan touches and then handles, seems to become a part of him as he examines its residue on his hands.

Picking up a massive sledgehammer, Khan begins pounding the mound which represents his father's grave (a device that merely serves the narrative, as Khan's father is very much alive). Repeatedly wielding this heavy implement in huge, audible arcs, Khan fills our eyes and ears with a sense of the Bangladeshi life of hard labor on the land as well as in sweatshops. The loud pounding sound of the hammer bleeds into Jocelyn Pook's extraordinary soundtrack, a collage of soulful compositions for voice and instruments in various languages, as well as street sounds recorded in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. The music's minor key and repetitive harmonic progressions seamlessly connect the dramatic scenes of the narrative.

Khan moves on to confront an old piece of junky machinery that arouses his curiosity. He disappears behind what looks like a giant fan or motor, presumably to tinker with it. He emerges wiping the grease off his hands with an old rag and kneels over his father's grave, bowing his head forward to reveal a face painted with black greasepaint on his bald pate.

Representing his father thus, Khan proudly tells his father's story about how he was a cook who fed his entire village. Khan sensitively draws this character with a monologue spoken in Bengali-accented English, occasionally slipping into pure Bengali. He embodies all of the physical antics of a stooped and worried Bangladeshi immigrant building up his present stature by narrating the accomplishments of his past. The concept of the character and its enactment were pure genius.

Khan frequently passes through a thematic scene where he is connected to a call center that he repeatedly contacts to help him with his malfunctioning voice-messaging system. It is an appropriate metaphor, both in its use of the ubiquitous Indian call centers that are located in the homeland and exist to "aid" the caller, and its use of the issue of a nonfunctioning message system to describe his inability to find his connection with his father and his father's homeland – in short, his roots.

The father's monologue evolves into a dance enacting the labor of farming, planting, harvesting, cutting, prepping, and cooking in order to feed his village. The accompaniment to this dance is a beautifully sung prayer in Hebrew. As I recognized the language with surprise, I thought to myself, it was perhaps an allusion to another group of displaced wanderers. The old man then completes his monologue asking his uninterested son, "Are you even listening?"

Khan then expertly captures the experience of a harrowing street-crossing through traffic in Dhaka. In this mimed scene he ducks, runs in fits and starts, scoots between vehicles, and holds out his arm to stop unruly drivers. He also becomes the street beggars, vendors, stray dogs, an emigrant's son returning to this

strange homeland in search of roots and identity.

He barely emerges with his life from this urban traffic nightmare to enter into a sweetly gentle scene in which he performs a dialogue with his (imagined) little niece using a recorded soundtrack of her lines. Through this interchange, Khan essentially echoes his father, taking on the role of nurturing the Bangladeshi traditions in the younger generation. He finally manages to pry her interest away from Lady Gaga and onto a Bangladeshi fairy tale and he carries the audience along with them through his magical gift of storytelling.

Khan dances, spins, and mimes through an alive and intricate animation designed by Tim Yip (of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* fame) and digital animators Yeast Culture, depicting the bounty and abundance of Bangladesh's natural environment, which generously provides for all her living inhabitants. The childlike wonder of the scenography augments Khan's expressive performance and story weaving. I was enthralled with Khan's choreographed climb, interacting with the animation of a magnificently foliaged tree, to enjoy the sweet bounty of a prized honeycomb under the watchful eye of a coiled serpent. When Khan falls from the tree to confront a giant army tank, I too experienced the ageless fall from innocence out of the Garden of Eden – or the displacement from *desh*.

The dreamlike fairy tale is over. Khan makes his niece promise to learn to speak Bangla (Bangladeshi language). He takes her hand (all mimed with this imaginary little person) and begins to teach her kathak – as if the dance itself was the language.

We see Khan dancing a beautiful kathak solo, his body lit in silhouette. He uses his arms in spiraling movements that, along with his gaze, look as if they were crowding the space around his head. I wondered about this. It became meaningful later when Khan, in a post-performance interview, revealed that growing up in his family's flat there was no personal space (except for the toilet). In a 2003 video recording of his earlier work *Rush*, Khan explained that kathak specifies fixed geometric relationships between body parts. This feature of kathak gave Khan an interesting means for expressing a hallmark of Bangladeshi life.

When the stooped father (Khan's bald head again) interrupts his dance practice asking him to perform a chore, we are privy to a classic father/adolescent son conflict. The son's anger and verbal protests lead him to furiously uproot the fragile plant at the gravesite.

In the following scene this angry adolescent finds his voice, self-respect, and Bangladeshi identity through political activism. Khan dances and interacts with the brilliant scenography of animated masses marching in united protest to a stirring song in remembrance of the Bangladeshi prodemocracy hero Noor Hossain, who was shot and killed in an anti-autocracy rally that turned violent in 1987.

The protest scene transforms into a moving dance solo that ends with a phenomenal spinning sequence until he seems to be knocked down. While on his back, he grabs and examines the soles of his feet. Then he attempts to stand on them. This idea of being able to stand on one's own feet is significant both for the young man coming of age as well as for the young, independent nation of Bangladesh.

The current issues of Bangladesh's responsibilities to and treatment of its young is broached with a larger-than-life set – a giant white chair, the size of an edifice, placed side by side with a tiny white chair, that looks like a piece of child's furniture. The chairs function as sculptural symbols. Khan moves the small chair underneath the larger version as if for shelter or protection to correct this societal ill, where the innocence of childhood is sacrificed by condoning child labor, frequently in unsafe conditions. The message is underscored with another phone call to the call center about his voicemail retrieval problems, but he learns that the voice on the other end of the line belongs to a twelve-year-old.

Khan and his niece discuss another family story. This time it is a nightmarish tale that has frightened her into running off to hide from its menace, the mean soldier. Khan's father originally relayed this recollection from the horrors of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The humble cook was approached by a soldier saying that such a small man as himself would be perfect for the job of cleaning the engines of the fighting planes.

When the war for independence broke out, the soldier took the cook's knife from him and torturously shaved off the soles of his feet. Then he commanded the cook to stand on his own two feet. Khan revisits the movement motif of rolling on his back painfully clutching the soles of his feet, until he and we experience redemption as a stage full of descending white cloth streamers envelop him as he is able to stand erect.

Khan moves through the exquisitely lit streamers (thanks to Michael Hulls's lighting design) and they dance and swirl around him. The streamers begin to ascend back upward, revealing Khan, suspended spinning upside-down from a harness. One of kathak's salient features is its spinning turns. Khan takes this element of kathak, explores it, and magnifies it exponentially, both on his own body as well as through his use of the kinetic set.

The scaffold from which the streamers hang descends to the ground and Khan climbs out of his harness and finds his way to the mound of earth. He digs wildly and finally unearths his father's old tunic. He shakes it out and puts it on. The soundtrack plays a message coming in through his voicemail, which now has a clear connection saying, "It is your father calling from Bangladesh. I can get back my land. I miss you very much. Please come to Bangladesh."

Throughout Khan's performance of *DESH* I felt the childlike wonder of being immersed in a fairy tale, barely aware of the means by which it was told. I was in the hands of a masterful storyteller who used his own eloquent skills as well as those of his collaborative partners to hold his audience's rapt attention as he moved the story along its course. Occasionally, I consciously withdrew to analyze the experience and marveled at how many different skills Khan employed with seeming ease and how imperceptibly he moved from one to another – all to serve the story.

And here it is singularly apparent how Khan's kathak training has informed his artistic and dance sensibilities and possibilities. According to Dr. Sunil Kothari, an internationally acknowledged authority on Indian classical dance, "Kathak means one who tells a story. An ideal kathak is one who can sing, dance, enact mime, knows music, can play percussion instruments, has an admirable command over several aspects which go into making of a dance performance. In short, he is a versatile storyteller." Akram Khan is all that and more. He is not bound by any one form or style of movement. He uses whatever is needed to communicate the choreographic message or intent with total authenticity. In addition, his dancing is very physical, organic, dynamically varied and interesting, and sometimes humorous.

Born in London in 1974, of Bangladeshi descent, Akram Khan began dancing at age three, when his mother introduced him to Bengali folk dancing. When he was seven, his mother enrolled him and his sister to study with the famous kathak master Pratap Pawar. Khan was eventually accepted and trained as Pawar's disciple.

Kathak is one of the eight classical Indian dance forms. It began as a Hindu temple ritual and later assimilated Persian and Arabic influences from the Muslim Mughal court, where the emphasis moved from narrative dance to a sophisticated, abstract art dance. Today's kathak is a hybrid of both influences – noted for its vertical stance, spinning pirouettes, complex footwork used to create audible complicated rhythmic percussion, arm movements with symbolic hand gestures (mudras), spontaneous improvisation, intimate rapport with the accompanying percussionist, and lightening speed contrasting with sharp stillness.

(Photo: Stephanie Berger, LC)

Until the 1930s, kathak was performed exclusively by men. From the time of the Mughal Empire in northern India in the fourteenth century, the dance style has been passed down from guru to pupil through a male hereditary lineage system. During the 1930s and 1940s it became acceptable for Brahmin women to study and perform kathak dancing as part of the nationalist movement of reclaiming Indian heritage on the path toward independence from British colonial rule. After independence the state assumed the task of protecting, preserving, and promoting India's cultural heritage, which includes its classical dance forms.

For immigrants from the Indian subcontinent to Western countries, learning to perform these classical dance styles is a way of embodying the cultural traditions and morals of the homeland. In this way members of the diaspora communities maintain a connection with their roots despite their experience of displacement. So it is not surprising that Khan's mother introduced her children to this venerated aspect of their culture.

Khan took a respite from dancing when, at fourteen, he auditioned and was chosen to perform with the Royal Shakespeare Company in Peter Brook's eleven-hour epic *Mahabharata*. He toured with the production for two years.

As is customary in the kathak guru-disciple relationship, Pawar formally presented Khan in a full-evening solo recital when Khan was eighteen. As part of this rite of passage, he organized the performance himself, bringing seven musicians from India to accompany the event.

But Khan felt the need to escape from the pressure and expectations of his close-knit community and left town to pursue a dance degree at De Montfort University and then at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance, where he graduated. Khan's first ex-

perience of ballet and modern dance was at university. Khan immediately began experimenting choreographically with merging his dance languages and received subsequent choreography awards. In 2000 he received a scholarship to work with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's P.A.R.T.S. (Performing Arts Research and Training Studio) school in Brussels. For six months he participated in this prestigious platform for young choreographers to cultivate their own movement language. He co-founded the Akram Khan Company in 2000 with his producer, Farooq Chaudhry.

Born in Pakistan and graduated from the London Contemporary Dance School, Chaudhry danced professionally in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, having his own successful dance career. After retiring from dancing he obtained a Master's Degree in Arts Management from City University in London. Chaudhry commented to me regarding his first encounter with Khan in 1999, "I was a trainee dance manager who had this 'beautiful accident' of colliding with a dancer/choreographer who moved in ways I'd never seen before." He approached Khan about working together.

After much heart-to-heart discussion about dreams and priorities, they founded the company based on the understanding that Khan "would dream" and Chaudhry "would take risks." The vision, according to Chaudhry's article "The Business of Dance" which is posted on the company's website, was "to produce thoughtful, provocative, and ambitious dance productions for the international stage by journeying across boundaries to create uncompromising artistic narratives."

This played out in the beginning when Chaudhry asked Khan to specify exactly what he required to create his first ensemble piece for the company. Chaudhry calculated the necessary financial investment to be $100,000 and sold his London flat to provide the initial outlay as an interest-free loan which was repaid by the company after three years.

Chaudhry creates innovative business models to support Khan's creative ambitions and uncompromising artistry – a lesson artists in the United States and elsewhere should study from their playbook. He and Khan first identify organizational priorities: time and space for research, development, and creation of new work; collaboration with successful artists from other disciplines to experiment and grow in new ways; develop Khan's classical kathak solo performance. He then compiles an appropriate financial structure to support the creative work. He prefers to rely on earned money rather than public money as it encourages "grown-up relationships with co-producers and sponsors."

He explained that while most other dance companies in the United Kingdom organize as charities, this business model contradicted everything he believed in, so he decided against it. Chaudhry feels the commonly employed idea of charitable subsidy used to underwrite dance production as a loss is too negative and prohibitive. He frequently says in articles and interviews, "We are not losers we are winners." Therefore funding should be considered as an investment in something of value.

By 2007 Khan and Chaudhry had formed three separate companies:

The Akram Khan Company, the dance ensemble and a laboratory for choreographic exploration, is funded in part by a grant from the Arts Council of England and from touring income.

Khan Chaudhry Productions produces high profile collaborations like *DESH* and *In-I*, a duet with actress Juliette Binoche. Semicommercial in nature, it is funded through high risk/high reward private investment.

The Akram Khan Charity Company exists to promote and produce Kathak as well as develop and assist new talent across the arts by giving study, travel, and production grants. The charity is funded by AKC's abundant touring income.

The three separate business structures support and serve the different agendas of the three companies more flexibly and effective-

ly than a one-size-fits-all model. The London Business School studies their example as a successful business model in the entertainment industry.

When asked about projects in the pipeline, Khan mentioned he is currently working on producing a feature film of *DESH* as well as a production of *Mahabharata*. He still practices and gives performances of traditional kathak, but he keeps that separate from the company's work. He practices every day for a minimum of one-and-a-half hours – like religion.

As I watched Khan perform *DESH*, I became keenly aware of a formidable organization supporting his art. From the list of his high profile artistic collaborators to the large commissions he receives (London 2012 Olympic Games' Opening Ceremony) to his extensive personal touring schedule (which is separate from his company's extensive touring schedule), to his exceptional producer, his website, his funders, his list of artistic grantees – Khan dreams big, aims high, surrounds himself with the best, makes no apologies for it, and in so doing is able to grow and produce the best in himself.

These are ideas which dance in the United States should study, embrace, and inculcate. Akram Khan is a creative and visionary force in the dance world today. We need to bring his credo and work to our shores for longer runs and with greater frequency, to regard the universal tales he so brilliantly scribbles on the stage.

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