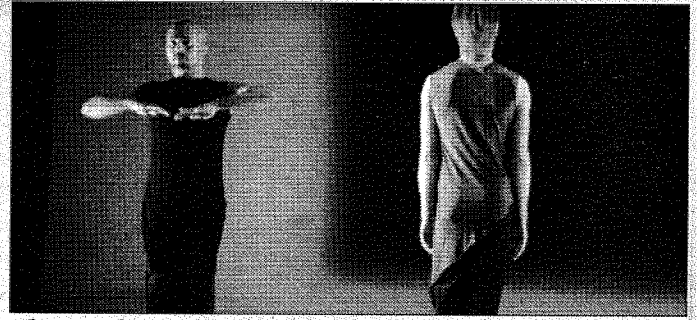


# Dance like a man



Akram Khan at a performance

By Nivek Oger in London

**T**HE Elizabeth Hall auditorium at the National Theatre in London is heaving. Kaash has returned after sell out tours worldwide and is town for one final burst. The wintry chill of December has hardly put off people from coming to see what New York Times called "one of the most talked-about dance performances in the world".

As the lights dim on a bare stage, a balmy atmosphere pervades the air inside the auditorium. Dressed in a black tunic one of the artists stands facing a wall with a framed black hole.

It's abstract to say the least. But what transpires from there on is a breathtaking piece of art in the form of dance.

Forget anything you have seen in the past. This is Kathak married to Ballet in all its grandeur. The protagonist and choreographer, Akram Khan, and his four dancers move spasmodically to the mesmerising tunes of Nitin Sawhney's music. The rhythmic patterns in the dance are often repeated in those 45 minutes. At the end there's a lengthy standing ovation from the predominantly white audience.

So who is this man who had the audacity to take an ancient Indian dance like Kathak and mix it with modern contemporary dances and succeed?

Akram Khan, 29, defies the rules of the traditional dance he learnt as a kid. He grew up in South London. Idolising Michael Jackson, he's inspired by Quentin-Kill Bill-Tarantino. And yes, Satyajit Ray and Arundhati Roy. He detests colourful attire and hardly uses any props on stage.

If all this sounds mystifying it's meant to be. "It's confusion," he says when asked to sum up his dancing. Er, fusion? "No, I hate that word. People call anything fusion these days by adding something contemporary to an Asian dance," he says.

His shining pate and French goatee is hardly a giveaway to his roots. His parents moved to the UK in 1970 from Bangladesh. It was his mother, a performer herself who encouraged him.

"I was pushed into learning Kathak at the age of seven by my mum," he says. His mentor, the renowned Kathak dancer Pratap Pawar, saw a spark and took him under his wing. Some 11 years later, Khan's first solo performance at the Commonwealth Institute

received praise from all quarters.

Soon he was to appear in Ravi Shankar's stage version of Jungle Book and Peter Brook's adaptation of The Mahabharata.

He joined De Mont ford University and decided to focus on performance arts although his parents were unsure about his career move. Eager for more, he enrolled in Northern School of Modern Dance and as its influence on him grew, he began to experiment it with Kathak much to the displeasure of his "Guruji".

He graduated with the highest marks ever in a performance arts degree and in 1999 he won a Jerwood Foundation Choreography Award and followed it up in 2000 by winning Outstanding Newcomer to Dance Award. He formed his own dance company in the same year and since then has never looked back.

But right now he is overwhelmed with the response he has received in his 18-month tour of 20 countries. His feet however remain firmly planted to the ground.

Patiently, he tries to elucidate his 'Kaash'. "Kaash is based on the concept of Lord Shiva. I present three aspects of His powers — creation, preservation and destruction."

Despite his effort to capture the essence of Hindu folklore through "contemporary kathak", Khan is a paradox. He maintains he hardly has Asians attending his shows and seems quite some content with that.

Khan is equally dismissive about Bollywood and is glad to not to fall into that "crap". However, he is looking forward to his trip to India. "I have been to India two years ago and was glad that the audiences there appreciated my work," he says.

In April this year he was appointed Choreographer-in-Residence at The Royal Festival Hall. His next piece, Ma is partly inspired by Arundhati Roy's collected essays The Algebra of Infinite Justice.

As the British press went gaga this week over his last performances at the National Theatre, the ultimate praise may have come the only sari-clad lady in the auditorium sitting in the row ahead. At the end of the show she turned around and told someone she knew, "It has changed since the last time. This was much better." It happened to be his mother.



(From left to right) Karl Alphonso, Tasneem Fatehi, Quasar Thakore Padamsee, Karan Makhija, Neysa Mendis and Toral Shah. Also part of the team but not pictured are Shriparna Mukherjea and Christopher Samuel

## The team behind Thespo

### SCHEDULE

Dec 16 **Dhanda** (Marathi and English)

A violent tale set against the backdrop of the political-crime nexus.

Dec 17 **The Trial** (English)

The play is a stylistic rendition of the complex trial that Joseph K undergoes, not for any crime, but for not daring to "snatch at life with twenty hands".

Dec 18 **Ek Chauthai Aasman** (Hindi)

An original play about the unsaid part of relationships.

Dec 19 **Dinner With Friends** (English)

A dark comic play which takes an honest look at the issues of commitment and fidelity in today's world.

Dec 20 **Naga-Mandala** (English)

A traditional folk play by Girish Karnad exploring the thin line between appearance and reality through dance and dialogue.

Dec 21 **Shatranj Ke Khiladi** (Urdu)

A one-man retelling of Premchand's famous story, drawing remarkable and chilling parallels with our modern day obsessions.

All plays will be shown at the NCPA at 7 pm. For a full schedule for various workshops and lectures happening everyday log on to mid-day.com. For tickets call: 26392688/9821191718



The Taming of

the first time in English and it was the biggest theatrical play of its time. We ran full houses for ever so long. It was the play responsible for many film offers coming my way."

## Act 2, Scene two

Ebrahim Alkazi, who picked the baton when Bobby died, left Theatre Group in the 50s and started his own called Theatre Unit. Actors remember the days as a sort of heady upsurge of the creative arts. Remembers Usha Katrak, mother of Maia Katrak from last year's film Let's Talk, "Alkazi had converted the terrace of his flat on Warden Road into an open air theatre. Husain used to come and sketch while we acted, Mittar Bedi would take photographs. Later, I'm told, Alkazi used the sketches and photographs at an exhibition at the NSD in Delhi," she says.

Different groups, different directors in the city did not seem to really cause a problem. "There was no loyalty as such," says Kersi Katrak, "you just did not refuse a director when he asked you to be part of his/her production."

Of converting flats for the sake of theatre, Quasar Thakore Padamsee, Alyque's son says, "When Pearl and Alyque moved to Bella Terrace, Colaba, they built their living room in such a way that made it convenient for them to stage plays." After all quite a few of the plays such as The Birthday Party had been staged in the Padamsee living room at Kulsum Terrace.

Idiosyncrasies and quirks are remembered with a laugh. Gerson da Cunha, the lead actor in a lot of the plays, is remembered by many as someone who always forgot his lines. Katrak says, "Gerson and I

were notorious for forgetting our lines. Once when we did Six Characters In Search Of An Author, Gerson who was the producer and actor, suddenly walked off the stage and nobody could figure out what had happened. I think he went in to have a look at the script. Unfortunately when he came back he jumped quite a few sections in the play. And the actors who perhaps had only a few lines in the play, never got a chance to say anything at all. That night we ended a lot earlier than usual.

"Another time, in Hamlet, Horatio forgot to come on, because he was sitting in the green room and chatting away with someone. In the meanwhile I forgot my cue and began to do the only thing I could remember — moan — and I think I also said something quite unShakespearean. Thankfully someone found him, held him by the scruff of his neck and shoved him on stage."

## Technicalities

In terms of lights and sounds, Theatre Group, they believe, were responsible for a few firsts and innovations. Like for example, the Spot Light.

Lights till then had been used merely to illuminate the stage so that all the actors could be seen, the gestures, their expressions, their deeds. Deryck Jeffereis was the man behind the 'magic' that was performed on stage. With his technical background, he brought in features that enhanced the performance.

Alyque also says of The Book of Job that Jeffereis's wife, Bee directed, "It was his best play as he was involved in the lights, settings and masks. It was special

as everything was done in the format of stained glass windows, including the painted faces of the actors. They looked like stained glass that had come to life."

Mumbaikars who watched what was probably the group's grandest production, Jesus Christ Superstar, would have probably not forgotten a very realistic enactment of the Crucifixion. Jeffereis worked out a system of nails and brackets so that the soldiers could actually hammer huge nails into Jesus's hands and feet, in front of the whole audience, with blood dripping out.

## Curtains

Soliloquies of Hamlet and the brutality of Miller, the complexities of Ibsen or Tennessee Williams for that matter, are probably now firmly married with memories of that first dream.

It is now 2003, most founding fathers have long departed and the group appears to barely flicker. But still the last flame of idealism and thought seems combustible enough for a possible re-kindling. People like Jeffereis dearly hope for a comeback of sorts.

Members, who turned to other professions to keep the money coming in, have raised a second generation, some of whom share the same vision.

The directors now may be young, there may be fewer large-scale productions and visibility may be zero, but it kicks and fights to stay alive. Thespo, a youth theatre festival for one is a sort of second coming for Theatre Group. It is backed and endorsed by most of Bombay's young talent and with that, who knows, Bombay might just be sitting on the brink of a revival.