

## DANCE UMBRELLA PRESENTS



### My Dance DNA

## Akram Khan in conversation with Kathryn Hunter

September 2017

**KH:** My Name is Kathryn Hunter and it is my absolute delight to be interviewing tonight choreographer and performer Akram Khan.

As you know Akram is a dancer and a choreographer, you may well be familiar with his work already from the unforgettable opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics, and more recently from his award winning production of the ballet *Giselle* for English National Ballet.

To give you a taste of Akram's choreography we have put together a special compilation of his most recent work...

#### - Compilation of Akram Khan's work -

**KH:** Extraordinary, extraordinary. Akram, shall we go back to the beginning?

**AK:** Let's go back.

**KH:** Can you remember the first dance you ever saw?

**AK:** Yeah... It was, there were several dances that I saw...but the one that stuck with me was my father's younger sister. She's passed away now but she was a natural talent and she would dance in the living room and my mum would dance with her as well and they would come up with these compositions, these choreographies, and then suddenly, what was really horrific, was they would turn to me and say, 'Ok you do it!' So she was actually making it for me. But it was my father's sister that was imprinted on me, her dancing in the living room.

**KH:** And how old were you at the time?

**AK:** Oh I don't know, I think about 3.

**KH:** About 3 years old?

**AK:** Yeah, about 3 or 4.

**KH:** And was this classical dance?

**AK:** No, it was a folk dance, a Bangladeshi folk dance.

**KH:** Do you remember the first piece of choreography you ever remember loving, I mean apart from your aunt?

**AK:** I think it was... um... and we will keep coming back to it – I think it was Michael Jackson.

**KH:** Michael Jackson?

**AK:** Well, I really loved watching *Thriller*.

**KH:** *Thriller*?

**AK:** Yeah – that really blew me away. It was on MTV I think, and we had a - sssh...I'm not going to swear - we had a crap TV and I saw Michael Jackson and it was the first time I had ever seen anything like that in dance. It was on film. It was storytelling, it was music, and it was dance, and it was the reason why I wanted to become a dancer really.

**KH:** And did he break rules at the time? Did you feel he was breaking rules?

**AK:** It's hard to say because I was so young then, so I didn't really know if he was breaking rules or not. Now I would say yes, for sure. I always say that I was always scratching my skin to see if I was white underneath because my heroes - comic books, I grew up with comic books, Marvel books - were usually white. And I stopped scratching after I saw Michael Jackson, because there was a possibility.

**KH:** And is there a moment, this is...might be a kind of weird question for you: when did you feel 'I am a choreographer', as well as a dancer of course, but in that sense of 'this is what I want to do'?

**AK:** This is what I want to do? Yes. There was a moment. I think it's when I came back from working with Peter Brook, experiencing that kind of tour of two years, working with the actors.

**KH:** With them on the *Mahabharata*?

**AK:** On the *Mahabharata* yes.

**KH:** Nine hour epic.

**AK:** And then not getting on with normal life and then stumbling into university, and that's when I saw Pina and DV8 – two films on the audition day and that really cemented it for me. This is really what I want to do. But do I think of myself... when was the moment I thought of myself as a choreographer? I still don't, so don't really know when that moment will hit. More like a director really. Because I'm so interested in narrative - movement, yes - but not choreography in a traditional sense I would say. But it's also my generation, the artists in my generation; they are also blurring the lines between what a choreographer is.

**KH:** Yes, what is the traditional meaning of a choreographer?

**AK:** Um, I think, there is several....

**KH:** I think in Greek it means 'khoreia' and 'graphia' – to dance in a chorus, to write in the space. In contemporary terms what is the definition of a choreographer?

**AK:** The way I was brought up, my teachers would say that choreography, being a choreographer, is putting patterns together to create a kind of a narrative. But I'm interested in the table, as I'm interested in the glass, so I think directors can be choreographers as well. Some directors they shape, they look at patterns, they orchestrate things in space. It's not just about lines or just the narrative.

**KH:** So, um, you've mentioned Michael Jackson as a big childhood influence. So is that to do with him again bringing components together? Of dance, music, story?

**AK:** It's funny because it wasn't really the choreography that struck me, it was his magnetism. I saw *Thriller* but I also saw him on stage, not live, well not directly but on TV, and it was just, it was just infectious. It was amazing, how he could kind of create this sense of magnetism and pull people in, he just had it in him and it's not something you can learn. He just had it, and all I wanted to be was him. I think you go through that with people you are really inspired by when you are a child.

**KH:** And do you remember the concert he did where - I can't remember which one it was - basically he made the audience wait for about an hour, if not two, and then finally the stage rose and he came up and stood absolutely still for 10 min and then he went ... or something. But I think...

**AK:** It takes a lot of skill to be still. It really does and to hold people, to move people by that stillness.

**KH:** You were talking to me earlier about the quality of stillness and I think in relation to the movie *Moonlight*?

**AK:** Yes.

**KH:** That somehow the tempo of that...

**AK:** Yes, this wonderful film *Moonlight*, it really moved me immensely, even though the film was very slow and very minimal things happening but great things were happening. Big things, epic things were happening in me, as an observer. I'm a big fan of Satyajit Ray, his films were very, very slow and influential for sure.

**KH:** That tempo that we are adverse to in our modern era a bit. Talking of time – the first time I saw you, you were in *Sacred Monsters*, a collaboration with Sylvie Guillem, where you talked about your respective classical training backgrounds. And then you, and in particular Akram, spoke about the challenge of performing the God Krishna in the Kathak dance, and so this takes me to your second huge influence in your life?

**AK:** This great master, this great legend, living legend called Pandit Birju Maharaj. I am a disciple of my Guru Sri Pratap Pawar, who is a disciple of this legendary master. And I saw him perform, I don't know how old he was, I was a child but he was around between 55 and 60 maybe? and I was already put-off when my mum said 'Oh he is 55...'

**KH:** Right...

**AK:** I was like 'Oh it's going to be...'. I was young, a child then. And I went to see him, and I don't know, I was expecting lots of turns, lots of physical, but he just did one step, and the sound of it was so pure and so epic, and he hardly turned very much. He would just take one turn. But what was really... again it was a bit like Michael Jackson, he's an artist who creates a world around him, with nothing, except his dance and his body. And that for me was... you know, I work a lot more with technology, and technology plays a huge part in our lives, but for a person to do that - to create a world without CGI or any form of tricks - it was pure craft and skill and artistry. Again, that was another artist I wanted to become, to a point where I started eating paan - which is a leaf which has this stuff in it and you eat it and chew it - because he was doing it in an interview...

Yeah, I would talk like this, eating the pan, chewing it. Again, I was completely in awe of him, and how could I become like him?

**KH:** We have a little clip

**- Footage of Pandit Birju Maharaj -**

**KH:** So shall we immediately show a very special clip, never before seen, of Akram at 17 years old?

**AK:** Yes, it's really bad guys, I have to say.

**KH:** We have been having arguments about this, its spectacular, so here we go.

**AK:** It's really bad. It was never shown for a reason...

**- Footage of Akram Khan dancing at 17 years old -**

**KH:** I don't know about everybody here, but personally I'm in love with that piece of work. The thing that kind of screams out is freedom in discipline.

**AK:** My Guru played an important part in that, he really allowed me to take command of the stage from a very young age. He was great in that way, where he would suddenly shove you on stage at the age of 12 or 13 and say 'Go on, you conduct the musicians, you tell the audience what you're about to do, you story tell', and that kind of gave this confidence. And he said, 'You know half the learning is in the studio and the other half is on stage.' So he got me on stage very early trying to gain confidence in how to conduct the musicians as a Kathak dancer, and how to communicate to the audience while you are on the mic, how to tell the story both verbally and also physically.

**KH:** So how do you conduct the musicians while you are dancing?

**AK:** Well, you have to know, you have to study music first. I mean before I learnt dancing my Guru teacher said, 'Go and study singing', so I went to my singing class, and the singing teacher said 'Sing Sa' so I sang, and the teacher said 'You will never be a singer, get out'. And so I left and he said go to the next room, and in the next room on the opposite side there was another class and it was percussion, tabla. So he accepted me in and so I started learning tabla, so I learned the mathematics, patterns, rhythm. And melody I slowly learnt much later through Guruji, because he really has a huge knowledge of music. So yes, in order to conduct the musicians you need to know the music pretty well, or you will be conducted.

**KH:** So as you dance, are they leading or are they are following you?

**AK:** Yes – sometimes if you have very extraordinary, reputable musicians they will make it difficult for you, and that's really exciting if you have the confidence to be challenged by them. That leads to improvisation, rhythmical improvisation, it's a bit like jazz improv. There is a structure and within that structure are certain hidden or given rules, but you can create, on the spur of the moment so long as you stay within the boundaries.

**KH:** So it involves a very close knowledge of the music?

**AK:** Yes, and also how you behave on stage. How you – if they are very senior - how you show humility, and yet you are leading them but you have to show humility – there these unspoken rules that you learn by watching. Because the way I learned from my

teachers, my Guruji teacher never spoke to me a lot, he speaks to me outside the class, philosophically, about life, about different things, but he said ‘Watch – that’s your direct form of learning, I am not going to talk to you about how we do it, you watch how we do it.’

**KH:** And would you say that that being your first contact with dance, that that has somehow stayed with you - because that’s what I observed when I watched your master - that inner quality, that he carries, have you taken that with you into the contemporary world?

**AK:** Yes very much so – I think people leave imprints in you, you know. When they hit a nerve or hit something in you, so I took Michael Jackson with me as well into my new world. I took a lot of artists...

**KH:** You took Michael Jackson everywhere.

**AK:** The thing is your body doesn’t lie. Your body is pretty truthful, so when things sculpt you, it stays with you somehow.

**KH:** But there is a connection between Michael Jackson and the fixed Kathak points?

**AK:** Maybe in the way that I do it which is blasphemous probably, but you can’t get it out of your body.

**KH:** So you took Michael Jackson with you to one of your first collaboration with another choreographer.

**AK:** Yes, with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui.

It was my first collaboration with a choreographer; I had collaborated several times before with other artists.

But with him we created *Zero Degrees*. It was a very sacred moment for me, working with Larbi – I found a very close companion, a brother, there was a very deep love that we have for each other, and we were hugely influenced and inspired, both of us, by popular culture. We were talking about Michael Jackson, he was a fan of Michael Jackson, so many different things, The Matrix, Matrix had just come out I think, or just before that. We were talking about that and many other artists that influenced us. That had an impact, of course, on *Zero Degrees*.

**KH:** And the magic I think of the artistry in you, and of you and him together is what, it... it touches you and then you remix it in a completely original way.

We have a clip to show you from *Zero Degrees*.

**- Footage of *Zero Degree* by Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui -**

- AK:** That was really fun to do, I really enjoyed working with Sidi Larbi, and then with Antony Gormley's sculptures, these bodies that were one copy of me and one copy of him. And Nitin Sawhney was the composer, an extraordinary composer. It was a really beautiful experience that I had, working with all three of those artists.
- KH:** And how did it come about, the sense that this is a language?
- AK:** Well it was, Larbi asked me to, this is very early days. We were not in the studio a lot, we just went to see films and going shopping, we spent a lot of shopping talking about clothes we like, what trainers we like, we used that as part of the research period of getting to know each other. And then we felt guilty. And so towards the last week we turned up at the studio and he said, 'Well why don't you tell me a story that you have never told anybody, or that not many people know about?', and so I said 'Yes ok. I did have this experience I will tell you, and then he said 'No let me film you,' and so he filmed me. It's two hours long! We took 20 min of it, 5 min, 5min, 5 min and then the last 5 min, so it became the spine of the show. It was two hours long, and I think half of the stuff I made up because I couldn't remember all of it, so I filled it in with my imagination. But I think the bits we kept were the most truthful bits. There was a point where Larbi said, 'Well, this is your story, how does it become my story?'. He proposed this idea of both of us relearning it. So he didn't make it easy for me. We used the original film and learned it with all the ... and the umms... and erg... and I realised how much of a nightmare I am looking at myself with every little gesture, "and what I remember was that there were these guards there, that looked very, very powerful". And every bit became a composition, so we had to score it "and what I remember was that there were these guards there,...", "and what I remember is that there were these guards there...." And we had to say it exactly the same. And so each line, it took me a week to learn. He is really quick, really quick.
- KH:** So it took you...
- AK:** It took me to learn myself, a week, and it took him literally an hour. And he was really frustrated, and that was the only tension. He was like, 'You are so slow', but he is a great imitator, I mean he just picks up things, like he can play the piano, he just watches once and he can suddenly play it. So he is one of those artists.
- KH:** It has defined a lot of your work hasn't it Akram? To collaborate and be a leader and to find the balance between, leading and allowing a big team to collaborate.
- AK:** Yes, I really love to work with artists I can learn from. I do believe there is a point where you have to lead, but really in the early part of the process even close to the middle end, I try and work very openly with the other artists and collaborators because I want them to have ownership.
- KH:** So the journey with the great extraordinary piece which is, I think everybody would agree, a classic already, it's a classic – *DESH* - you first solo piece?

**AK:** Contemporary solo piece.... first full length solo piece.

**KH:** But involved many collaborators.

**AK:** Yes a lot. I felt very alone. So the more people I could involve, the more safe I felt. One mistake I made was when I worked with Tim Yip - who's this amazing scenographer - I said to him, 'Listen, Look I am alone so can we make it very intimate and small so I don't have to cover much space, I want it to be quite...' He said 'Sure, sure, sure' and then he came back and he had created this humongous set, he did exactly the opposite thing I had asked for. I felt so intimidated by the set. It was huge. It was operatic. And I said 'Why, um, maybe there was a loss in translation, he is from China and I don't know?' And he said 'No, no, I need you to feel lost, I need you to feel lost the way the story is when you go to Bangladesh.' So in a sense, it was a great learning curve for me in *DESH*.

**KH:** That's fantastic. So as the creator you allowed a collaborator to guide you and change you in that way...

**AK:** Do you know why though?

**KH:** Yes, tell me.

**AK:** Well, because we always, we have such a danger, and I still do and we still do it, of doing the thing that you know, and when it becomes easy it means you have gone down that road. And sometimes there is a particular collaborator who will just force you into another area, and you will rediscover yourself in a new way, and I think that's so important. That as artists we at least try to arrive in a place that you don't know the rules, where you haven't been to, and I think there are many artists that I've worked with that have done that for me, and with me and I think that is a gift.

**KH:** I think that is what you are always looking for.  
Can we see a clip from *DESH* please?

**- Footage of *DESH* by Akram Khan -**

**KH:** I have to ask you this Akram – how did it happen? How did the mask appear?

**AK:** It was actually because I felt so alone making the solo I invited friends of mine who were choreographers to come into the studio with me. So Larbi came in or I went to see him, and we would just hang out and spend a week together. And there was one wonderful choreographer called Damien Jalet and so we were in a studio together and I was interested in a character that a friend of mine had spoken about, a political activist she had spoken about. And this character was a real person who was shot by the Bangladeshi army when they were protesting in Bangladesh. He had written on, painted on his body you know 'Free democracy, we want democracy, Down with autocracy,' and I was fascinated by painting on the body. I was improvising while Damien was looking and he said, 'You know part of your head looks like a nose, this

bone looks like a nose, it really looks like a face.’ And I said, ‘Oh what if I painted like a face on my head?’ We did it, we were filming it, and it was just a character that came to life. We didn’t know which character it would be – it ended up becoming my father - but it was purely several ideas coming together with Damien Jalet and that was, yeah, that became my father.

**KH:** It’s Genius. Genius.

**AK:** Although a lot of *DESH* was really inspired - well not inspired but yeah it was kind of inspired, the aesthetic, the way I tell the story physically - was inspired by my childhood watching Charlie Chaplin. His way of telling stories without words was extraordinary, pure genius and still to this day I’m in awe. I still keep watching his films and never stop being in wonderment.

**KH:** There is one I know that you are particularly fond of, which is the boxing room scene in *City Lights*. Perhaps we could have a look at that?

**- Footage of Charles Chaplin’s *City Lights* –**

**KH:** So it’s the playfulness, the structure... tell me what it is that inspired you?

**AK:** It’s so many things, I think it is the playfulness. Sometimes, I don’t do it so much, I’m trying to let myself go a little bit. My daughter keeps saying I take myself too seriously and so she has brought a lot of humour to my life. But watching Charlie Chaplin there’s this humour, but sometimes also there’s this contrast between some of the stuff he is saying. Like in the *Great Dictator* and some of his other films, they are such strong messages politically, and yet he is saying that through humour. I find child-like qualities, something very childlike, about his movement. I mean Charlie Chaplin you know, with a stick and a moustache and the hat and he created this character that was very lovable and also at the same time very tragic, and that touched me, but also the choreography. There is immense timing and structure in that choreography.

**KH:** Well, it’s great, a beginning, middle and end, a structure within a structure. It’s beautiful. So can you tell me Akram what is influencing you right now?

**AK:** I think a lot of film directors have a huge impact, inspiration and influence on me and the way I am thinking. You know one of them being Asghar Farhadi, who created *A Separation*, an Iranian film director. An extraordinary film about relationships, but the simplicity and the complexity, to achieve the simplicity of the real craft of creating such tension between a simple story and how it becomes complex is just extraordinary. There is a director who, well even, it’s not just, there are specific kinds of directors like Iñárritu, *Birdman* extraordinary. You know... *Babel*

**KH:** Yep and there is something, coming back to the word simplicity?

**AK:** All these directors have a philosophy in their approach to work and of course which leads to an artist who created an entire narrative around his art form, which is martial arts. You know, and he created an entire narrative to serve the skill that he had, served the narrative too but he had....

**KH:** Are you talking about Bruce Lee?

**AK:** I'm talking about Bruce Lee

**KH:** We have a little clip.

**- Footage of Bruce Lee -**

**KH:** Fantastic that's so very zen, 'Be water, my friend'. How would you tell your daughter?

**AK:** How to be like water? I don't know if she is interested just yet...

**KH:** She might just say "it's easy dad you just go like this".

**AK:** But she likes to be free, she is not yet in that time of structure, and I think really I was like that. I didn't... I was not so interested in structure and form and my mother was great, she really bribed me to go to dance class. It was military, my teacher was so strict – it was just form. But I can not tell you much I respect and appreciate that fact, which leads to what Bruce Lee says: 'To be formless you have to understand what form is', you can only free yourself when you understand what it means to be imprisoned.

So the structure of Kathak classical dance, of ballet, I never studied in ballet properly, I did classes but I was never training, and the structure, classical form gave you a structure from which you could rebel, and you could dance with in and you could reform, and change it. So that way of thinking was really inspired by Bruce Lee in a sense, but then I started to understand the value of my structure and form.

**KH:** And that's really important to you still this discipline, freedom within discipline?

**AK:** Yes, absolutely.

**KH:** I'm going to force you to, or ask you to commit to a choice now – if you were forced to choose one choreographic moment, one single one, apart from your own work, what would it be?

**AK:** Well it definitely would not be my own work! Hands down it would probably be Pina Bausch's *Rite of Spring*. That had, it's a seminal piece of work, and everything that I'm curious about. It had rigour. It has immense craft. It's about human beings in their most violent state. It's the violent-ness of ceremony, rituals, the violence of

sacrifice, it's asking the fundamental questions of human beings, and we so need to ask those questions today.

**KH:** All too true. Sadly, we are running out of time, so Akram Khan Thank you so much.

**AK:** Thank you.

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