

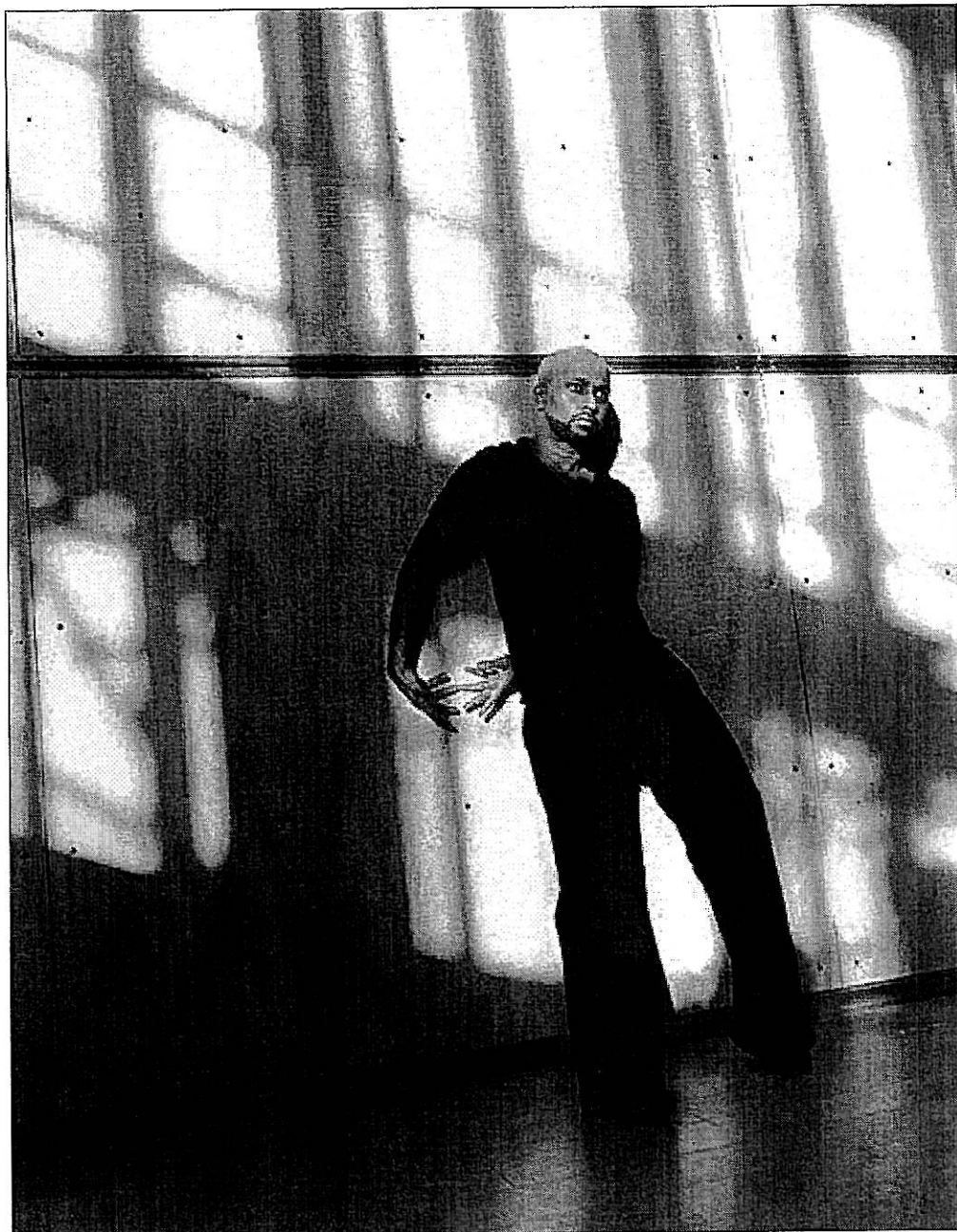
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Akram Khan's body language Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 01/03/2008

Akram Khan has collaborated with the prima ballerina Sylvie Guillem, danced with Antony Gormley sculptures and is now working with the National Ballet of China. The choreographer talks to Tamsin Blanchard

Early December, and a group of dancers are racing around the airy rehearsal studio at the Jerwood Space in south London, playing tag. One touch and they are out and then the chase begins again. Breathless, they shriek and laugh and tear about like children in a playground. Eventually, they run out of energy and collapse; one of the dancers, a tall Chinese man, takes control of the group and leads a more conventional class, teaching a sequence of moves. Then the group splinters away and they each focus on their own stretching and warm-up exercises.



**Akram Khan's unique style is a mixture of traditional Indian kathak and more contemporary forms of dance
Watch a clip from Bahok**

When Akram Khan arrives at 11am, he gathers his company around him. There are nine dancers - five from his company and four from the National Ballet of China - who are a variety of nationalities including Chinese, Korean, Indian, South African and Spanish. It is a mix Khan - having grown up the son of a Bangladeshi restaurant owner in Balham, south London - feels quite at home with, a reflection of his own multicultural background. 'On my street you had a Nigerian person to the right, a Chinese person down the road, someone else from Mauritius - and their children and I used to go to school together. There are so many different cultures in this country that have melted into a new culture, a global culture.'

According to Alistair Spalding, the artistic director at Sadler's Wells, which is co-producing Khan's latest work Bahok (the show makes its UK premiere in Liverpool this week), it is his background that makes Khan such a unique and special artist. 'It is one of the reasons I admire what he does,' Spalding says. 'It's not a deliberate effort to be

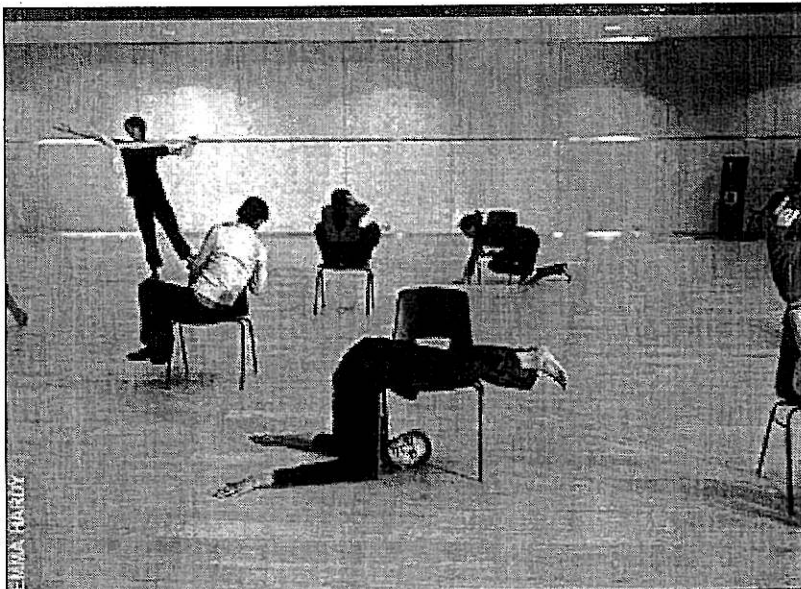
inclusive and multi-racial; he does it subconsciously. That's why he makes interesting work, because he has this kind of experience in him that he needs to express.'

Even if you are not a dance fan you may already be familiar with Khan's work. He choreographed four songs for Kylie Minogue's comeback Showgirl tour in 2005, and appeared as a huge projection behind the singer as she performed. The songs were set in an Indian temple scenario, inspired by a trip Minogue made to Sri Lanka. 'It's nice that through collaborations with someone like Minogue, people can see a little bit of my work even if it's in a different context,' Khan says.

Dressed in slouchy black jersey trousers, Khan is a compact, intense figure, but on stage he is an extraordinary and powerful performer. Since establishing his company in 2000, Khan and his producer Farooq Chaudhry have set up some brilliant collaborations with other artists, musicians and dancers. It is all part of Khan's rich melting pot. In 2005 he created Zero Degrees along with the Flemish-Moroccan dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the sculptor Antony Gormley and the composer and long-term collaborator Nitin Sawhney.

The piece, which will be laid to rest after it is performed for the last time in New York this April, has been touring for the past three years. Gormley cast the two dancers and created dummies of them (Khan now has one of them at home), which were used on stage to help tell a true story about a train journey Khan took in Calcutta with a dead person in the carriage.

Then there is his ongoing collaboration with the French ballerina Sylvie Guillem. Their astonishing duet, Sacred Monsters, opened in 2006 and sells out wherever it tours. 'Every time we perform, it evolves and becomes more extreme. You add layers,' he says. They began their work together with a series of interviews, which Khan filmed. 'It was about how we felt about the stage and how the audience perceived the shift we both did from the classical to the contemporary.' Incredibly, he says that even if they haven't performed together for three months, they will rehearse for just one day before the next performance: 'The body can remember; it has its own memory bank.'



Rehearsals for the production Bahok take place at the Jerwood Space in London, December 2007

From the age of seven, Khan, now 33, was learning traditional Indian kathak dancing. His mother, Anwara, took Khan and his sister, Murshida, to the Indian Institute in West Kensington to learn. 'She pushed me in my dancing. I didn't want to go. It happened on the same bloody day - Thursday I remember very clearly - that Knight Rider was on and I didn't want to miss it. I would be so miserable at class until a few years later when I grew up a bit and started to enjoy it.' By the time he was 14, Khan was on stage and touring the world in Sir Peter Brook's production of The Mahabharata.

Kathak is a 500-year-old dance form steeped in tradition, complex rhythms and story-telling. It now forms the basis of everything Khan does, fused with a whole variety of

other influences. 'I use my kathak without realising. I see things with a kathak eye. I do it every day. I put my bells [which are part of the kathak costume and tied around the ankles] on every morning for an hour or so. It is the centre of everything for me. When I wear my costume I feel Indian. When I'm in rehearsal, I'm wearing my jogging bottoms and my torn T-shirt and it just doesn't feel right. I don't know what it means to feel Indian, but I know something changes in me when I wear the kathak costume.'

His parents moved to the UK in 1972 and at home, Khan grew up learning Bengali because his mother, a teacher, knew he would learn English at school. He was sent to the local comprehensive while his sister took the more traditional, academic route of being schooled privately. 'In my community, everyone went to a private school. I was very isolated because everyone else was academic and I was just into Michael Jackson. I used to learn all the choreography. I would spend two hours every day going over Thriller, watching that video. Technically, Jackson's not the most amazing dancer, but he had this charisma - he would stand on stage and a million people would watch him. He could hold an audience. That's a technique you can't obtain, it's just in you.'

His mother bought him a red leather jacket, like the one Jackson wore in the Thriller video, from America when he was about 13 and it became his pride and joy. 'I still have it. I looked such a fool, but for me it was like I was the superstar. That jacket completely transformed me; I was so confident in it. I would sleep in that jacket, I would have breakfast in that jacket, I would live in that jacket. When I put it on, I felt there was a possibility that one day I could do the things that Jackson could do. It gave me hope.'

Needless to say, Khan was a bit of a star at the local community disco - he could moonwalk! 'Dance was what I lived for. I enjoyed the fact that I had found something that meant I could express myself. I was a very quiet child, afraid to speak in case I said something people would laugh at. The only time I felt I could be intelligent was through my body. I felt that my body was always more intelligent than my brain. I still feel the body is more intelligent than the head sometimes.'

Khan's was a vibrant home life. The family would stay up late, partly because his father finished work after midnight. 'He would come home from work at 1 or 2am and turn on a Hindi film, and I would stay up and watch it till four in the morning.' The family would socialise together in the living-room, his mother playing Tom Jones records on one side and his father turning up his Hindi film on the other.

'My sister would be studying. I think for her the way out of this little living-room - because we were all preoccupied with sound and noise and imagery - was her books.' Although she was also a talented dancer, she gave it up to concentrate on maths. 'She was a maths fanatic. My grandfather was a very big mathematician. She didn't want anything to do with the art world and pushed it away completely.'

The two remain close and he has a strong relationship with his one-year-old nephew, Ali (named after Muhammad Ali, another of Khan's heroes). Last summer when Khan married a dancer from his company, Shanelle Winlock, his sister choreographed a 15-minute Bollywood number for the London leg of the wedding, a no-expenses-spared extravaganza for 800 guests at Alexandra Palace in north London. 'That day my cheeks hurt so much from smiling,' he says.

Winlock is mixed race, a Christian from South Africa, so they had a separate ceremony there, too. Khan proposed to her after they had been dating for three weeks but she said no, and then asked him to marry her exactly three years later. 'It has not changed our working relationship. In work I'm boss; at home she's boss,' he laughs. 'She is very professional. I don't turn off, that's my problem. I'm obsessive. I wish I could work 24/7 in a studio. I wish I could sleep, eat, drink and work in the studio all the time.'



Akram Khan performs with the French ballerina Sylvie Guillem in Sacred Monsters

Akram Khan's latest work, Bahok, is the first group piece he is choreographing without performing in it himself. He revels in the different nationalities and backgrounds of his dancers and loves the diversity of working with one dancer who is trained in martial arts, another who is a contemporary dancer and the four dancers on loan from the National Ballet of China with their strict discipline in classical ballet.

Bahok means 'carrier' in Bengali, and the piece is all about identity and where or what you consider home to be. It is set in an airport departure lounge. 'These nine people are searching for home,' Khan says. 'Some of them are running away from home, some of them are trying to find their home, some of them don't want to remember their home, and so they create this paranoia that they don't know where they are from.'

For Khan himself, home is his body. 'It is the only thing I carry with me, the only thing I know that I am familiar with when I am in a different culture, or a different language. The only reference I have to home is my body and if you talk about my parents' home and roots, then my only communication is through a machine [his mobile phone]. When I asked the dancers, how do you connect to home, a lot of them pulled out their mobiles and said, "See these numbers? This machine is my home." That was interesting to me, that we rely on machines so much.'

As a choreographer, Khan has a unique way of working. He begins, not with movement, steps or even music, but by talking. For Bahok, he talked to each of the dancers and found out their personal stories. These form the basis for improvisation out of which comes the finished work. 'It's mostly their stories. I just distort some of the truth to keep it interesting. We improvise a lot of scenarios. I leave the room and come back and two hours later they are still and wondering where do we go from here, and that's when interesting things start to happen, when they just let their bodies go.'

Even at this morning's rehearsal, the session begins with Khan settling down on the floor to talk to the dancers. And it is not just an exchange of pleasantries. Within minutes, they are discussing how scarves have different meanings for different cultures. They talk about temples, about a sari-clad woman Khan talked to in Tesco (he wanted to know what she was dressed up for) and about when he was at school and the kids all ate pork and wanted to know why he didn't. It is all part of the process he has to go through to create a work and to communicate his ideas that touch on religion, politics, life.

Eventually each of the dancers goes off to work on their own improvisations. Khan focuses on two dancers, moving about like spiders. I watch his hands move across the floor, and for a moment, it is as though they really are all spiders.

For Khan it is the exchange of ideas that motivates him. While he has collaborated with such diverse artists as Antony Gormley, the sculptor Anish Kapoor (they have another collaboration in the pipeline for later in the year), the author Hanif Kureishi (one of the features of Khan's work is his use of text and speech, and he worked with Kureishi for the 2004 production of *Ma*), Sylvie Guillem and Kylie Minogue, perhaps the most unusual yet is to come this summer when he opens a two-man show at the National Theatre with the French film star Juliette Binoche. Intriguingly, he is learning to play the guitar for it.

When *Bahok* opens in Liverpool this week, with a wonderful Chinese-tinged score by Nitin Sawhney, Khan will be in New Zealand performing *Sacred Monsters* with Guillem. He was at the Beijing world premiere in January, but he is in such demand, he is having to work out ways of being in two places at once. It is a brave step, but an inevitable one if his company is to progress further on the world stage and do all the things he wants it to.

'This piece is really going to establish him as a choreographer as well as an artist creator,' Alistair Spalding says. 'You never really can tell in the other pieces because you get carried away by his performance quality, but this shows he can also bring it out in other people. I think he is unique in that sense.' And for Akram Khan, you get the feeling that this is just the beginning.

- '*Bahok*' is at the Liverpool Playhouse as part of LEAP 08 Festival and Liverpool European Capital of Culture 2008, March 7-8 (0151-709 4776; everymanplayhouse.com) before touring nationwide (akramkhancompany.net)