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TRANSMUTING [HIS]STORIES IN AKRAM KHAN'S DESH

Karthika Nair

Bangladesh has seldom seemed closer. Yesterday, here in Winterthur, the stories I had grown up with came alive – from another side of the mirror. Grew faces and names and quirks of character. Became immediate, intimate.

40 years of histories. That's what photographer Shahidul Alam brought us from Dhaka.

Big History, like Arundhati Roy once wrote, clomps around in hob-nailed boots: full of Big Moments that will reappear in textbooks. The dismembered, blood-soaked heads found in Raibazar in spring 1971; crowds in tidal wave at Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's revolution speech; serpentine queues at a long-awaited election.

Little history – barefooted, barely clothed – plays hide-and-seek. A niece learns kathak while curfew and arrest warrants rage in the streets of Dhaka. A blind boy beams into the camera as floodwaters rise behind him and his friends, pots and pans dipping and whirling. Ship-breakers sing, busily extracting a fortune from dying empires of rust. I wish my parents could have seen this.

Cartography

British-Bangladeshi dancer-choreographer Akram Khan's solo *DESH* is located at that cusp between Big History and Little History, at that intersection where the political becomes the personal, and where, more specifically, geography becomes history. In other words, if *DESH* were a story, it would be one that began not with the time-honoured words *Once upon a time*, but with a place – in fact, it with

two places. The first, the one that leaps to the eye, is the country Bangladesh, land of Akram's ancestors; the land his parents had left just after their marriage in order to build a better life for their unborn children; the land he had never really lived in, merely visited, yet been surrounded by all through life.

The second is a place some of us inherit, whether we like it or not: there it is, as seemingly solid and real as the ground beneath our feet or a tattoo or leaden shoes. Some of us borrow the idea from others, which we then polish or embellish; we may soften its corners, carve it a bit. And some of us will do everything to avoid this juggernaut, believing that sanity and safety lie in flight. Salman Rushdie famously said in an essay – on the film *The Wizard of Oz* and Dorothy's magic shoes, later featured in his 2002 collection *Step Across this Line* – that it was the place we needed to confront, perhaps to escape, or slay, in order to become fully ourselves. *Desh*. Home/land.

Actually, *one* of the definitions of the word « *desh* », which – as those who speak Hindi, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Bengali or many of the languages of the Indian subcontinent would know – is a very elastic term that can mean earth, or land, or nation, or region, or, yes, homeland. And the last one is the meaning Akram Khan chose when I suggested *Desh* to him as the title of his new piece.

I suggested *DESH* – which contains an entire world of meaning – instead of *Bangladesh*, the initial working title, because it contained an idea that almost all of us know and grapple with, whatever our nationalities or roots. Home.

The source

But in concrete, prosaic terms, it all began long ago with a promise, one made by a son to his mother. Years ago, early in his career, Akram Khan promised his mother he would make a piece on the country of her birth, Bangladesh. Mrs. Anwara Khan had been the

first person to see her son's remarkable potential for movement, as a child, and to channel it into kathak, one of the classical dance forms of North India.

She has watched with pride as Akram grew from a child prodigy – working under the guidance of great names like sitar exponent Pandit Ravi Shankar, Kathak maestro Pratap Pawan and theatre director Peter Brooks – to one of the foremost names in the world of contemporary dance, an artist whose stunningly original dance language wins both critical and popular acclaim in cities as distant and different as Sydney and Ottawa, Taipei and Sao Paulo.

Akram kept intending to keep his promise, to make the piece on Bangladesh, but life kept happening. Exciting projects kept happening. Duets with Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (*Zero Degrees*), Sylvie Guillem (*Sacred Monsters*), Juliette Binoche (*In-I*) or ensemble work (*Kaash, Ma, Bahok...*) and his own Kathak performances (*Polaroid Feet, Third Catalogue*)... Years passed.

Then one day, Akram met someone he greatly admired and had wanted to work with since long. Visual artist Tim Yip, whom we tend to know better as the Oscar-winning art & costume designer of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Tim agreed to collaborate with Akram on his next work, and suggested that it could be an exploration of his parents' roots. Bangladesh. It was time to keep a promise.

The journey

« We must seem *such* an oddball contingent! Immigration took time to process all these nationalities and functions: Akram Khan, choreographer, with British and Bangladeshi passports; Farooq Chaudhry, producer, British of Pakistani descent; Tim Yip, set and costume designer from China (but British Overseas); Michael Hulls, lighting designer, and Jocelyn Pook, composer, both British; Irene Lu,

assistant to set designer, American; Ruth Little, dramaturge, Australian; JiaXuan Hon, tour manager, Malaysian... »

Work on DESH began – quite literally – with a journey. The entire creative team met for the first time in Bangladesh, and then travelled together to discover various facets of the country across the next ten days. Dhaka, the relentless metropolis; the villages, the countryside, the colours of the sky reflected in Modhumoti river at Gopalganj, potters near Jessore, the streets – once bloodstained – of Khulna; the docks with their ship-building and breaking industries; the activism of organisations like photographer Shahidul Alam's DRIK which strive to keep political memory alive – ensuring visibility not just for a national discourse, but also for often-ignored movements like the struggles of minorities in Chittagong Hill Tracts; the weavers' and dyers' stronghold that was this land – once the largest repository of natural dyes in the world, boasting of a trove of refined organic techniques; a burgeoning artistic landscape; and the network of NGOS, units that try to support the most fragile segments of society.

From the time we had started discussing the idea of this piece, Akram and I had both been clear we wished to weave in the many singularities of Bangladesh but neither to underplay nor over-emphasize the harsh realities of poverty, pollution, extreme physical – indeed, natural – dangers faced by the nation and its people, often reduced to clichés by international media. These characteristics were as representative of the country as the spirit of resilience and engagement of its people, its significant natural resources or the richness of its craft heritage.

The time spent in Bangladesh also resolved the one aspect opinion had been less unanimous about initially: the importance of the political history of the country. Having spent a good part of my childhood near the Indo-Bangladeshi border, and thanks to a father who had served in the Indian army for two decades, I had always felt the political and societal metamorphosis of Bangladesh through the last sixty years – an intrinsic part of the country's ethos – needed to appear in one way or another in any evocation of its identity.

But this was to be expected: while we connected instantly with each other's vision of what the piece would be, and could be, some ideas were born from our very own sensibilities and personal baggage. Some ideas required me to stand in Akram's shoes and feel the country within his skin; others required him to extend his own immediate association with the country to include mine. Akram's Bangladesh and mine were inevitably linked and distinct – like fraternal twins separated at birth in time-honoured popular Hindi movie tradition!

The crucial question was how these multifarious elements could be staged without becoming either didactic or moralistic – because the goal was not a National Geographic-like travelogue on Bangladesh. And the experiences we had in Bangladesh, coming face to face with people's perception of themselves and their self-awareness, helped the entire creative team realise, as producer Farooq Chaudhry put it, that « to avoid political issues in DESH would be to deny this country its heartbeat. »

The process

« During our first marathon meeting, Tim – endlessly sketching figures of Akram in his notepad – said, « Akram, go back to yourself, to your origins: find what is in your body. So much of your self has been shared with others these last years. It is time to find something that is inherently yours. Uncalculated, dreamlike – like a conversation with a river. Or yourself. Each of the six words can take you to that self. »

He was referring to the six words I had suggested as possible leitmotifs for *Desh*: land, river, language, memory, cloth and Noor. Noor, the young man killed by Ershad's security forces, also light in Urdu. Each of us interprets them differently ... »

All this, though, had to be done with the constant, clear knowledge that DESH would be a dance piece, not a film, not a documentary and not a play either. Movement had to be the primary language, text and story were to be conveyed as much as possible through the body and its interactions with music, sets and images. Our concerted effort was to make the piece as fluid and multicoloured as the river that was one of the six themes listed above as the basic elements of the piece, and which would be built into the stories which were conceptualised as independent but inter-connectable modules – much like a Lego set. Akram could choose the ones that appealed most to him, and so could each of the creative team.

Ruth Little, the dramaturge, who constantly and gently encourages Akram – throughout their collaboration which began with *Gnosis* (2010) – to let his body drive the narrative in his work, felt DESH might be a journey through memory: where language subsides and silence can step in.

For lighting designer, Michael Hulls, the river was the key element; and on watching DESH, one sees just how much that element is omnipresent in his contribution: even that early scene of the streets of Dhaka is lit exactly as though the streets with traffic, people, bottlenecks, beggars – delta, detritus, riparian passengers – are rivers of light and shadow.

For Jocelyn Pook, the composer, the real language (and songs) of the country lay in the ritualised music of the working body: some of the most arresting and affecting segments of her score for the piece include on-site recordings made during trips to dockyards and streets, markets and riverbanks – a « soundscape » by metalworkers, flower-sellers, hawkers, singing children.

Tim Yip chose to use cloth, to focus on fabric, and the ways in which it was reflective of river and memory and light, all at once. For me, they all flowed into each other, much like currents in a river. Land that, in Bangladesh, is constantly losing and gaining form, remapped by water and wind; a river that carries the memory of six languages

and changes genders with borders; memory which is fluid and shapeless, impossible to revisit in quite the same way, and woven with variegated threads and colours ...

For Akram, interestingly enough, Noor Hossain was the first clear strand in the piece. Noor Hossain was a 23-year-old activist killed during the infamous Dhaka Blockade in 1987. Out of the tens of thousands of people in the streets that day, he stood out because he had painted *free democracy* on his back, and *down with tyranny* on his chest – in Bangla, of course. The police shot him dead for that. His murder, ironically, triggered a mass movement and accelerated the end of Ershad's military dictatorship. Akram was fascinated by this story, the first we discussed (for, serendipitously, I had discovered this 'footnote' in Bangladesh's history just a few weeks before being invited to write DESH). For a choreographer, this historical instance of the body being used as banner and target, both at once, of the body being a veritable medium of protest, resonated deeply. The other link came from a small detail Mariam Begum, Noor Hossain's mother, revealed during an interview in a Bangladeshi newspaper: the name of Noor's best friend, the young man who had painted those memorable – and, for Noor, deadly – words on the martyr's chest and back. Akram Khan. Life has a strange way of reaching out, across time and space.

Noor's story was the first I wrote for DESH. I had imagined his final meeting with his mother (inspired by an incident Mariam Begum mentioned in the aforementioned interview), and written a monologue, a summary of which is reproduced below:

« No, Amma, I am not being reckless. There will be thousands of us on the streets today. We need to act. How long can things go on this way?

It's not just for the politicians, the professors. It's up to me, too. All we are asking is fresh, fair elections and a neutral, caretaker government. Military rule was not meant to last.

It isn't enough that your brothers fought for this country sixteen years ago; we have to do it again today.

Don't say that, Amma. It does matter.

We live in fear everyday. Everyday you wonder whether Abba will reach home. Everyday you wake up scared of arrests.

It shouldn't be that way, Amma.

Fear should not be the language you speak. Not in your land, the land you helped build.

Look around, Amma. It is a time for beginnings. Look: around us earth rises again, green and ripe and firm.

The Buriganga becomes younger; all the rivers return, tame – the monsoon is over. Even the flowers dare to bloom. It is autumn, Amma. In our country, autumn belongs to the youth.

We will win. If not tomorrow, soon.

Now, go home before the protests begin. Allah Hafiz. »

Nowhere in the piece do these actual words appear: yet the sequence is located at the heart of DESH where the thorny adolescent Akram, after being unforgivably obnoxious to his 'cook father' (whose role he also plays), transforms into a rebel *with* a cause, a young blue-collared activist who fights the tyranny of his own government and pays for his actions with his life. The segment is, to me, one of the most cogent examples of story, *text* being completely transmuted into other media – protest songs and slogans from the 1987 Dhaka blockade, a giant animated projection of a crowd of fiery protesters holding banners, and Akram's own hybrid movement – that are more immediate and fluid than words, and locate with great accuracy the dramatic pulse of the scene. The segueing of identities – the push-and-pull of forces between lippy teenager and resolute, young worker – is embodied with urgent power by Akram's body, seesawing between the breaking, popping movement of the former,

and the kathak-driven spins and footwork as well as the folkdance-inspired relaxed, springy hops and half-spirals with the arms.

Not every story found its place, of course. Initially, we imagined and wrote constantly – both together and alone, Akram and I; later, performance poet PolarBear and I edited them, and added one more story, a recurrent thread; Akram, in the next stage, took the stories as raw material, clay, so to say, shaped and moulded them for dance, for stage; he undertook – with the design team – the alchemical process of making it more, much more, than the sum of its parts. And in the final phase of production, he invited me back to sharpen and whittle them.

There were about a dozen stories written as scenes, some of which we suspected – even as we were writing them – to be completely « unstageable », like an extended sequence in a restaurant (one of the many fictional pieces spun from partial or inherited memories of childhood), featuring half-a-dozen customers. This particular tableau was one of the first to be scrapped but it taught us valuable lessons, on the difficulty of dancing and speaking simultaneously (one of the reasons why much of the speech in DESH is pre-recorded), and on the difference between the effects of written and spoken text. But the golden insight it imparted was how vital – and complex – it was to ensure spatial conviction to invisible characters. Akram had staged those scenes with trained actors in a studio: first moving amidst them to situate his trajectory on stage; then playing out the same sequence while they spoke their parts from the sidelines. It became quickly apparent to us – to Akram on stage, and those of us watching as viewers – that locating individual *disembodied* voices would be distracting and difficult when only one performer moved on stage. As a result, most scenes in DESH are dialogues, and Akram's physical position vis à vis the invisible voice is always clearly established thanks to the motile sets – only once do we have three voices 'present' on stage, and they are consecutive, not simultaneous.

What changed most between the beginning and end of the production period was the emotional hub of the piece: DESH had begun as an ode by a choreographer to his mother's motherland, so to say, tinted by the hues of his bond with his mother, warm, tender and playful. The liminal breakthrough for staging came with Akram's flash of recognition that his relationship with Bangladesh probably mirrored the one he had with his father, especially the one their *younger* selves had shared: one of unspoken love overshadowed by much mutual incomprehension and tension, emotions familiar in many families and especially in immigrant families, with a first generation that tries fervidly to cling on to the heritage and identity of origin while trying to settle in the host country, and a second generation that tries just as desperately to assimilate into this country, the one they were born in, with the sense of belonging constantly questioned both by its society in general *and* by the kin who brought them here.

Thus, almost all the stories featuring the mother were reworked around the father, and the paternal identity conflated with that of the 'original' homeland. Once this switch was made, the piece veritably found its soul, the dramatic tension that could engage the viewer and render the specific (Bangladesh) universal yet personal (the parent-child bond) to anyone, whatever their nationality or background. Who does not regret the harsh words and impatience directed by our younger selves towards our parents (or any loved one)? Who has not said, « If only I could rewrite the past? » Akram brilliantly channelled the very human helplessness before the passage of time, and inversed the initial premise of the piece: time had become place.

The destination

For that is the essence of DESH. It is a palimpsest of the stories that coloured our selves, at different stages of live – shared primarily through a myriad of non-verbal media, of which, most eloquently, the human body. Yet, it never spells them out: each time we are given

glimpses of the stories that underpin history, both as a word and as a phenomenon, the stories that constitute us; stories, the one attribute that distinguishes us as a species from every other on the planet.

Much has been made by the media of how autobiographical the piece is or not, with some journalists and many viewer-bloggers taking every story for the gospel truth, often referring to the *late* Mr. Khan senior (who is, thankfully, very much part of our planet) or his « war injuries ». The stories of DESH range from personal anecdotes of strangers, inherited memories from kith and kin, invented tales hinging on historical incidents, people or myths, and written specifically to convey a specific *emotional* truth, which was the only verity we were interested in mining.

For this is what Akram Khan does most honestly on stage: he takes himself - and the viewers, hitchhiking alongside - to many lands, real, recollected and imagined. He introduces the viewers to a host of characters - most of whom he embodies - whose stories may be new but whose feelings, whose joys, desires and sorrows, are familiar, close to our own.

In his role as a son mourning the demise of a parent, Khan visits the remembered land of an immigrant father, a father bent double with a lifetime of hard work, of trying to fit into a strange country and provide a future for his children there, all the while aching for the « grass as high as the sky » in his native land.

The same son lingers for a moment in the insolent, brittle city of rebellious teenage dreams, where he turns his back on the father's plans and hopes to seek his own vision of a future; where he rejects his father's notion of homeland to carve out his own composite, perhaps confused, identity in 'his' Britain.

Than Akram, now in the skin of an adult, an uncle, summons the lost, chimerical country of our childhood imaginations. He gently holds out a hand to the fictional niece, promising not to let go, as she steps into that cherished, almost forgotten place where anything is

possible, where magic honeybees light up the sky at night, and demon-tigers and earth goddesses fight human greed to save a forest.

He rediscovers a young nation – Bangladesh – as it struggles between hope and despair; he oscillates between fierce pride in its resilience, despair at its fragility and utter bafflement at its complexity. He steps in to fight the battles of its people: constant battles to protect land and life from the overwhelming forces of nature; repeated battles to defend democracy and the ideals that founded an independent state.

And, as choreographer and dancer, he is true to each of these selves, to each of these stories – for, as dance writer Sanjoy Roy remarked in his review of DESH in *Pulse* (October 2011), the telling of tales is the very essence of *kathak*, his primary artistic expression, the home he does not need to seek: it lies within him.