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Book Reviews

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767716000139 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism

by Royona Mitra. 2015. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, xvii + 197 pp., 16 illustrations, notes, references, Index. $90 cloth. ISBN 978-1-137-39365-4
doi:10.1017/S0149767716000139

Royona Mitra's study of a singularly talented artist, Akram Khan, a British-Bangladeshi dancer/choreographer, is timely and useful. Khan's meteoric rise to prominence (from 1999 to the present) deserves scholarly attention. *Akram Khan* is a landmark book in dance, theater, and performance studies as well as for diaspora scholars engaging with the expressive arts. Mitra provocatively takes on commonplace descriptions of Khan's choreography, such as "contemporary kathak" and argues persuasively why they are limiting, even misleading. Rather, Mitra presents a theoretical rubric drawn from interculturalism (with particular valences for Khan's choreography) as a suitable lens through which to discuss Khan's creative solo and collaborative works with global visual artists and musicians.

Mitra's overall argument is original and persuasive, namely, that Khan's innovative (even avant-garde) creative works are understood best via "a new interculturalism" that is both aesthetic and political as embodied in Khan's experience of a synergy of multiple movements and cultures with roots in kathak, a classical style from Northern India, that Khan studied from the age of seven at London's National Academy of Indian Dance under guru Sri Pratap Pawar. Later, along with kathak, Khan imbibed modern and contemporary dance, including Graham, Cunningham, Alexander, as well as Physical Theater. These styles were mediated by Khan's Bangladeshi heritage and his years of growing up in Britain.

Khan's intercultural creativity is "new," argues Mitra, since it draws upon the lexicon of *abhinaya* (gesture language) used in Indian classical dance styles along with *rasa* (translated as "emotion"). Khan "layers" these profoundly South Asian concepts onto his unique contemporary dance that is stunning in performance both for its technical rigor as well as for its affect. Indeed, as Mitra remarks, "Khan's aesthetic is fundamentally entwined with his diasporic identity-politics" as a person of Bangladeshi origin who is a Muslim although he does not embrace a narrow interpretation of identity politics. Similarly, he rejects the simplistic label of "contemporary kathak" to describe his work; rather, he embraces, somewhat provocatively, his body's training in multiple movement vocabularies as "confusion."

Kathak, with its Hindu and Muslim heritages, embraces a kind of hybridity that also infuses Khan's creativity. Rather than "contemporising kathak, [he] is in fact transforming" remarks Mitra, "the landscape of British and global contemporary dance through his own embodied approach to new interculturalism" (10). The latter mediates Khan's embodied knowledge of *abinaya* and *rasa* along with other movement idioms, not to mention his incorporation of visual arts, sculpture, and other allied arts into his choreography. Mitra interprets this interculturalism as "represent(ing) a conceptual, processual, embodied lived condition driven by one's own multiple affiliations to cultures, nations, and faiths" (15). As Mitra comments, at times Khan's movement language emerges "at the interstices between kathak and the eclectic idioms of contemporary dance, theatre, music, visual arts, literature, digital arts and film" (xiv).

Mitra's analysis of Khan's evolving art is contextualized usefully within changing attitudes to the arts under British political parties in power, such as the Labour Party's policies on multiculturalism and immigration that fueled creative work by British artists (or their parents) with allegiances to varying places of origin and differing movement and musical traditions, such as Khan's initial training in classical kathak along with his "syncretic aesthetic" (16). Khan's creative work is particularly unique in the way he negotiates his South Asianness with his Britishness. Fortunately, he grew up under the Labour government that encouraged "rebranding Britishness," encouraging "multicultural policies" that recognized the cultural diversity of Britain's nonwhite populations from the former empire (16).

Mitra recognizes Khan's commitment to classical kathak with its intricate, mathematical

rhythmic structures and stunning *chakars* (circular movements) as well as his skill in situating his art in the present and responding to contemporary British society. Mitra notes that in his *Poloroid Feet* Khan "demystified his art and dismantled his audience's Orientalist notions about his South Asianness" (xiii).

Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism appears in the Palgrave series New World Choreographies that aims to discuss "choreography in the global context of the twenty-first century [when] performance practices are often fluid, mediated, interdisciplinary, collaborative and interactive" (ix). Mitra's book explores Khan's work along the axes of interdisciplinarity and collaboration. *Akram Khan* includes six chapters, an introduction and a conclusion along with a useful appendix listing performances by the Akram Khan Company from 1999 to 2014. Mitra's nuanced introduction opens with Khan's choreography entitled *Abide with Me* for the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympics that commingled profound emotional affect created by "a montage of photographs" of the victims of the London underground (tube) bombings on July 7, 2005, the day after London won its bid to host the 2012 Olympics. Mitra vividly describes Khan's evocation of those fifty-two deaths, moving to the image of "a vibrant and yellow sun, signaling the promise of a brighter future" juxtaposed with the peaceful lyrics of "Abide with Me" in the context of rampant Islamophobia. The movement and music are interwoven with a startling presence of a small boy who suddenly embraces Khan on stage. Mitra analyzes the boy "as Khan's artistic and intellectual response" to Peter Brook's controversial presentation of the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata* in which Khan himself played when he was thirteen years old.

Mitra's study undertakes "case studies" of Khan's works via different features of new interculturalism, such as embodied aesthetic, an auto-ethnographic emphasis, embracing in-betweenness (between nations, disciplines, cultures), Khan's privileged mobility as one who travels the globe while maintaining an attachment to London, among other cities (27). Mitra's book is well-researched, citing performance studies scholars, such as Patrice Pavis, Diana Taylor; postcolonial theorists, such as Rustom Bharucha, Rakesh Thakur; and poststructuralist theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes. Mitra admits that her focus is on Khan's "embodied, corporeal, and visual aesthetic" and that she does not go deeply into "the aural realm." Such an analysis of physicality with musicality remains an open field for other scholars with expertise in dance and musicology.

In six chapters, Mitra traces Khan's evolving art. Chapter 1, recounting Khan's biography, provides a context for his exposure to Bengali folk dances and for his fascination with Michael Jackson, without whom, Khan notes, "I don't know if I would have been a dancer. … I remember when I saw *Thriller*, I was terrified. I'd never seen anything so frightening in my life, but it was also incredibly exciting. It had everything—music, storytelling, dance" (34). His mother encouraged Khan's passion for both her native Bangladeshi culture as well as that for Michael Jackson. His parents also supported "intercultural dialogue" when Khan performed as the Boy in Brook's *Mahabharata*. Mitra narrates Khan's response to a film on Pina Bausch—he was amazed to witness that one could be "provocative in the arts" and equally fascinated in seeing the "poetry" in Bausch's expression of "violence" (41). Khan's self-described "confusion" manifested in bringing together the fixed idioms of kathak with "the improvisatory nature of Western contemporary idioms" (43). Khan's visionary producer, Farooq Chaudhry, "a British man of Pakistani heritage," enabled Khan's career successes by forging a "strategic relationship … between art and business" (46).

Chapter 2, "Khan's *Gnosis* (2010)" (meaning 'knowledge from experience' in Greek) evokes a subtle critique of Brook's hubris in undertaking the entire *Mahabharata* epic; Khan zeros in on one small segment with Queen Gandhari and her son Duryodhana. Mitra analyzes Khan's own "insider-outsider relationship" with the ancient Indian epic that enables him to enter the text with a "humility and integrity" missing from Brook's outsider status and interpretation of the epic that "lacks depth and insight" (55). Mitra's discussion of the source text as used by Khan and Brook uses performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's significant critical engagement with "cultural memory … as archival … and as repertoire" (62–63). Khan uses the repertoire notion of memory as

"embodied through non-verbal, gestural, oral, and corporeal means" as opposed to Brook's engagement with the text only as "archival memory."

In chapter 3, Mitra moves back to Khan's student days at university when he created a dance-film, *Loose in Flight* (1999), in collaboration with filmmaker Rachel Davies. The work was situated in London's bare landscape of the Docklands with migrant workers. Mitra discusses this work as "Khan's earliest approach to new interculturalism as an auto-ethnographic enquiry of his own complex, embodied condition" (71). Khan uses the dance-film genre to challenge Orientalist stereotypes of South Asian arts in Britain, even "de-exoticising" narrow concepts of South Asianness. This creative work showcases Khan's body performing in different movement styles by almost dividing his torso from his lower body, playing with the idioms of kathak and contemporary dance so that "the choreography unfolds in a complex and layered manner to reflect Khan's own multilayered training" (82).

Mitra undertakes a comparative analysis between Khan's *Zero Degrees* (2005) and *Desh* (2010), both highly acclaimed works, via Homi Bhabha's theoretical concept of in-betweenness. In *Zero degrees*, Khan collaborates with different ethnic artists such as Moroccan-Flemish dancer and choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, British sculptor Antony Gormley, and British-Asian musician Nitin Sawhney. In-betweenness in *Zero Degrees* is embodied in Khan's memory of a border crossing between Bangladesh and India, raising issues of belonging, exclusion, and citizenship. Challenges between self and other, liminal spaces of identity, and nonbelonging are evoked in the image of a dead man discovered by Khan on the train to Calcutta. Six years after this traumatic experience, Khan created *Desh* (homeland), which he describes as a "therapeutic self-portrait" exploring his tumultuous relationship with his father and his homeland Bangladesh (92). Issues of hybridity and borderland, even within the self, are discussed succinctly in Mitra's analysis of these two powerful works.

The search for a homeland continues in *Bahok* (2008), discussed in Mitra's chapter 5. *Bahok* presents various ethnic migrants and their search for home and belonging evocatively, via mobility and a relocation that may be possible for certain economic classes but may not be universally available to all migrants. Each player in this work carries special stories within himself or herself, cultural memories and national identities, spanning South Korea, South Africa, and China, among other places of origin. They are all "trapped in a transit lounge," expecting their time in that space to be temporary. *Bahok*, a collaboration between the Akram Khan Dance Company and the National Ballet of China, is significant as Khan's "directorial debut," but I do not see why Mitra also describes this 2008 work as "Khan's choreographic debut" (116).

Mitra remarks, "If *Bahok* explores the condition of flexibility though evoking global flows of mobility and relocations, iTMOi [an acronym for 'In the Mind of Igor'] places it at the heart of the aestheticisation process though which Khan's new interculturalism queers normativity" (137). Mitra discusses Khan's 2013 work, iTMOi under the rubric of "Queering Normativity" in chapter six. Khan created this work for the centenary celebration of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (which premiered in Paris in 1913). Although critical reception of this work was mixed, Mitra remarks that it is "a departure point for Khan, both in thematic and aesthetic terms," arguing that this work's use of "disjointed imagery," violence, even "grotesque representations, enables Khan to queer normativity whether in issues of sexuality, or aesthetics" (138). Khan's evocation of "androgyny and ambivalent sexualities" becomes another process through which "he can destabilize the centre, by emphasizing the nonnormative position as a British-Bangladeshi artist within white mainstream culture and arts" (138). Mitra quotes David Halperin's delineation of "queer" as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (139). Such queering is part of what Mitra regards as Khan's new interculturalism that "disrupt(s) dominant ideologies" (139). Moreover, Khan's "queering of the contemporary dance field," according to Mitra, "is further enabled by a specific aspect of his kathak training" where male and female dancers can both play masculine and feminine roles (141).

Mitra's concluding chapter returns to Khan's "Rewriting of *Abhinaya* and *Rasa*" as significant pillars of his innovative work; they are analyzed via the concept of "new interculturalism" showcased in Khan's latest

collaboration, a somewhat bold and unlikely one, with the English National Ballet in *Dust* (2014). "Through *Dust*, Khan thus confronts the otherness of ballet through the otherness of his aesthetic of new interculturalism," remarks Mitra: "On the one hand, he manages to stabilize classicist ballet audiences by taking them out of their comfort zones. On the other he simultaneously creates new audiences for ballet by making the art form speak to and of the contemporary milieu" (158). Khan has been appointed associate artist of the company in order to create new works and revive well-known ballets "through his unique lens" (166). Mitra's book ends evocatively, reminding the reader of "the undeniable reality" that Khan's body of work "has irrevocably altered the landscape of global contemporary dance." Further, she asserts, "What is less considered is the emancipation his art can offer to both contemporaneous and future generations of artists" (168). Overall, *Akram Khan* brings to life this pathbreaking dancer-choreographer's creativity though lively discussions of his seminal works as well as through Mitra's original theoretical insights into Khan's "new interculturalism" as resonant for his audiences in Britain and the rest of the world.

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Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance

by Bojana Cvejić. 2015. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 262 pp., 16 illustrations, series preface, acknowledgments, abbreviations, introduction, conclusion, notes, bibliography, index. $95 hardcover.
doi:10.1017/S0149767716000152

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the term "conceptual dance" began to filter throughout the dance world. As a young dancer in New York City during this period, I sensed that this act of naming contributed to defining a certain degree of distance (geographic, historical) and difference (aesthetic, cultural) between the North American and Western European scenes. While employed predominately by curators and presenters (less so by the artists themselves), the invention of conceptual dance has created an enduring aesthetic umbrella. A performative assertion, "conceptual dance" maps choreography along the historically significant yet potentially obscure sightlines of the "contemporary." The contemporary can be interpreted as twofold: a fluid term, affirming that every age experiences its own version of the contemporary, or, alternately, strictly historical, demarcating movements following modernism and situated post-1989, which includes the aesthetic, political effects following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalization. Across this temporally specific lens, questions persist about what factors constitute the aesthetic, political, or philosophical markers of contemporary dance (Alberro 2009, 55; see also Harvey 2003, 2005; Hochmuth, Kruschkova, and Schöllhammer 2006; Meyer 2013). This is where performance theorist, maker, and dramaturg Bojana Cvejić's *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* begins, offering a critical examination of contemporary European choreography at the turn of the twenty-first century, and articulating its philosophical impact through the work of a select group of choreographers deemed pivotal in what has loosely and debatably been designated as "conceptual dance."

Also referred to as "non-dance" or "anti-dance," the "conceptual" choreographic turn has been associated with 1960s conceptual and minimalist art movements' investments in the dematerialization of the art object, implicit self-reflexivity, and a critique of representation. But this assessment proves tricky, as those once deemed "minimalist," the artists most often associated with the movement (such as Jérôme Bel, Xavier Le Roy, La Ribot, and Vera Mantero), are not responsible for instigating the widespread use of this term. Their work spans a broad aesthetic, methodological, and theatrical territory that defies neat placement into a single rubric (see Lepecki 2006). At the risk of reductionism, this "conceptual" turn infers an avid intellectualism, implying a dissolution of dance's physicality, bodily labor, and "performative presence," polarizing thought and action and re-enforcing oppositions between theory and practice (Burt 2004).