

talk two

December 2008

Lilian Baylis Studio, Sadler's Wells, London

body:language – a series of talks in the Lilian Baylis Studio about dance and live performance presented by invited curators. Dramaturg and writer Guy Cools launched the first series in autumn 2008, asking four choreographers to join him for conversations about their current and past work, showing film clips and quotes selected by Cools during the evening.

'The Bi-temporal Body'

Guy Cools with **Akram Khan**

"The memory is in the body."

(Akram Khan, in *Letters on the Bridge*, a film by Gilles Delmas)

"In my theory of the 'in-between-two-bodies', the body itself is a complex form, consisting of a body-being-present and a body-memory, each of which has another two levels: that of 'calling out' (appel) and that of 'recalling' (rappel)."

(Daniel Sibony, *Le corps et sa danse*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1995)

Guy

Akram and I first met almost 10 years ago. I was introduced to him by Jonathan Burrows, with whom he had done a choreographer/composer course and who had asked him to perform a duet with him for the 50th anniversary of composer Kevin Volans at the South Bank Centre, which was a unique, one-time event.

As a presenter of Arts Centre Vooruit in Gent Belgium, I invited Akram with his kathak work and his first contemporary dance solos. His first full length company piece, *Kaash*, was partially created in residence in Gent. Since *Zero Degrees*, I collaborate with Akram as a dramaturge and in my reflection on his work I am particularly interested in how intercultural issues are mainly a matter of bridging different times, such as the traditional with the contemporary. Again there is one major book that frames my thinking, *Le Corps et sa danse* by the French philosopher Daniel Sibony who defines dance as a movement between 'a body-memory' and a 'body being present'. Hence the bi-temporal body.

Akram, since our artistic collaboration started with *Zero Degrees*, I would like to start our talk with what the series of

duets that you made with Larbi, Sylvie and Juliette, added to your knowledge as a choreographer and performer.

Akram

Until *Zero Degrees*, I had never really explored any partner work. Even though I had done *Kaash* and I'd done *Ma*, somehow with every piece before *Zero Degrees* – even if it was a company of 5 or company of 10 – it would be a solo and 9 dancers. And that was my own problem I would say or my own education... because kathak is a very... solo art form as a lot of the Indian classical dance forms are solo art forms. Even when I related to people it was for a choreographic reason. It was not necessary a physical experience with another body until I worked with Larbi. In a way that was the most important thing that there was a sharing of energy.

Guy

When I was preparing the talk that I had with Larbi last week, I was re-reading a lot of his interviews, and one of the things I remember he was saying was how much collaborating with you liberated the movement that was already in him... like he was referring to the hand movements that he felt, were already very much part of his vocabulary, but that he needed to share it with you in order to find some liberty of how to continue to explore that very personal part of his own vocabulary.

Akram

I'm mean what's interesting is the three kinds of directions of my artistic work:

As you said – there's the classical work – which is the solo dance form which is one thread. Then there is the company work; and then there is the collaboration work. I was thinking of it recently and I think for me the three directions

relate to two people in my life, who had very clear influences on one of those three.

To explain more clearly the first one is my classical work and that relates very much to my father and my father's body – because growing up in front of my father's eyes there was something very classical about him. There was a huge amount of form around him. There were rules, there were regulations. Everything was almost mathematical with my father; he's an accountant, so it doesn't surprise. But there was a very kind of strict relationship with him and that comes from his own personal experience. Because, you know, he grew up in a family where he was the head, he had to run his family because his father lost his job and so on. So there was some kind of authority about him. He built all these walls and rules and they were very precise and so in the way that my father stands... even when he turns his head the whole body turns. And his whole way of expressing himself, of course I was picking this up as a child, so my classical work I relate to him.

And then there's the company work which I would say is much more my mother. Because with my mother's body it's more circular, it's more huggable if you like and there's something exactly the opposite of my father, it's very formless, it's very creative. I'm not saying the classical is not but somehow there was this freedom with my mother and also the sense of adapting. You know she was a folk dancer, but she adapted because her father didn't allow her to dance. So you know, she would secretly go and learn classical dance and then when she wasn't allowed to do classical dance she would do pop dance and when she wasn't allowed to do pop dance she would do something else. So she was constantly reinventing herself to survive, to stay connected to the arts in Bangladesh at a time when she was not allowed to and so her body language is much more circular, much softer in a way. That influence comes into my contemporary work. Her body influence comes into my contemporary work.

And the collaborations, I would say is me – so that's the third way. That's a culmination of my father and my mother.

Guy

Again I'm going back to last week's talk in the discussion with Larbi I used amongst others a book that you suggested to me, which is *The Eye of Shiva* – which I remember you suggesting me when preparing for *Kaash*.

What is interesting in that book which is about a comparison between Eastern religion, philosophy and science and Western, is that what the author says and which I agree with is that in Western history the oppositions like female and male have always been put into opposition with each other. While in Eastern thought they are allowed to co-exist on an equal basis.

Akram

Absolutely.

Guy

And even, I think, in the performing arts or even demonstrated physically, how in the kathak you can go from the male to the female character just in the physicalization of your body. The second duet with Sylvie was very different?

"It is the dichotomy of the opposites. One place, which is the classical world, offers you tradition, history. It offers you discipline, something very sacred and spiritual, too. And the other place, the contemporary, offers you a science laboratory. It offers you your voice to be heard. It offers you numerous discoveries and possibilities. To be in a position where you can reach out to both, is the best place to be for me."

(Akram Khan, in: the programme brochure of 'Sacred Monsters')

Akram

Yeah, it was both of us working and exploring not just each other's bodies, which was really another completely different experience to working with Larbi's body but there was something where we were following a parallel journey. Because we were both classically trained – myself in Indian classical and Sylvie in Western ballet. And we were trying to move out of it – but not just move out of it but take our experience of the classical with us.

With Larbi it was a male dancer; a male artist – being in touch with his feminine quality. With Sylvie it was a female dancer – being very strongly attached to a masculine quality because she has this kind of real masculine power that's interesting to me. The fact that she was much taller than me created interesting things and possibly new kind of challenges for me. It was different, because when I was working with Larbi we were embodying each others experiences – with Sylvie and I we didn't necessarily share our material – we created material that would suit both of our bodies, and that we made together – but with Larbi and me it was really a kind of breathe in and breathe out. What I'd breathe out he would breathe in and what he'd breathe out I would breathe in... so I remember for three years before we even made the project I was teaching him kathak – I was sharing with him a lot of my material and then he would share a lot of his material with me.

With Sylvie it wasn't like that because she doesn't recognise herself as a choreographer. She is very clear, she's the performer, the artist who executes the work. So in a way it was working with a different... with a body who is actually very gifted, very sensible, very creative – but it was really creating material on her body – and also together.

Guy

Because I remember you worked with Nicoletta as well as an assistant/understudy and that if you would have to change

doing partner work with Nicoletta and afterwards with Sylvie that was a whole shift.

Akram

... yeah because the body is not simple. I wish it was but it is not. It comes with cultural background, it comes with political background, it comes with historical, religious background...

Each person is unique and so their experiences are unique. We thought of working with Nicoletta because she was one of my dancers and she was a principal dancer in one of the ballet companies in Slovakia. She has a similar body to Sylvie in some respects and she has a classical body, but we had to shift everything. The whole rhythm, the whole energy would change because of Sylvie's background and her own, you know, she has her own identity, her own way of moving. What I realise is actually you bring your past experience with you but you can't bring your past experience and recreate the past experience; you have to create a new experience – because of the meeting of these two bodies.

Even though the common denominator of these three works is my body in duet with another body, my body is changing because of them. It's being forced to change because of them.

Whether I want it to change or not is irrelevant because being in contact with someone who is so different brings another side out of you. So in a way for sure working with Sylvie was different. The second I shifted from Nicoletta to Sylvie I realised that it was different.

Guy

And then Juliette now also challenged you or asked you 'the biggest shift!'... to do a tango with her.

Akram

Yeah that was the biggest shift I think – and that was the biggest gain for me also as an artist. You know I'm working with a non-dancer, so I can't take things for granted the way I did with Sylvie and Larbi. With them once we were on stage somehow I could trust that they are going to be ok. With Juliette it's not the case and it's not because of Juliette – it's just the fact that she has no dance experience. She did four months of serious training but it's not the same as doing twenty years of training – ... and so in a way on the stage I have to be the one who is partnering, but I am also her shadow, so I play my own shadow in order to protect her so she can feel... so her dance stands strong at the same time and I realised that very late actually. She kept on saying that you have to apply your... you have to work extra your skills to kind of support my inadequacies or my inexperience of dance.

And so in a way what I did for this process, for this particular project, I abandoned my body, and started with her body I felt that if I had like with Larbi, like with Sylvie – if

I had generated material for my own body for her to learn in four months it's not so easy so I felt let me start with a blank canvas, which was her body. To abandon your own body, which you trust so much, means you're teaching your body something new already.

Yes, it gets shifted by somebody else but to actually let go or consciously say "ok I'm just going to not create material for my own body and see what comes out from hers" was very difficult because you were like a puppet master – trying to make the puppet into a master. She would improvise most of the material and then I would adapt it into my own body which was a very big stepping stone for me. With Sylvie when I lift her although she's taller than me she's light, because there's a way of holding yourself as a dancer that makes you light. And with Juliette – in all due respect – she's wonderful but when I lift her you take her off this far off the ground, and all she wants to do is go to the ground – so I'm kind of taking her up, and she wants to go to the ground because she's afraid of the height. I had a crash course in lifting people.

Guy

I'd like to go back to *Zero Degrees*, as an introduction to the fragments that I selected. You prepared it over a very long period – I think about a full three years. Before you actually started rehearsing you had like regular meetings with Larbi, talking about the ideas but also going to the studio and then trying out some ideas. I was very privileged to witness this. I remember coming into the studio in Gent – and you were trying out like kathak rhythms on all fours at that particular time (which I am very happy that you didn't develop) so originally I think there was an idea to develop a new language – out of this coming together of these two people...

In the end every section of the piece however has a very clear identity that was initiated by either yourself or either by Larbi, as a desire to develop part of their own vocabulary.

So the fragment that I have selected is like two-thirds in the piece. It's the end of your story, which is a story of you going back to India. There's a whole story about identity and borders, but then at the end of the story it becomes also about death because you discover a dead person on that journey.

First you tell the story in kind of Larbi's hand movements, copying literally the hand movements whilst speaking and then you retell the story in your language which is a form of abinaye that you developed for this particular piece.

Maybe we look at the fragment, and then I'd like you to comment on how the abinaye was developed in this particular piece, how much of it is traditional and how much of it is new.

SHOWING FRAGMENT of *Zero Degrees*

Akram

...Well I think what's interesting for me seeing it back again is the sense of questioning. It brought back the memory of why I'm attracted to work with artists who are from different experiences. I mean with Larbi he was a huge fan of gymnastics and he had studied some form of gymnastics but he also came from the pop world; he was very involved with the pop world...

So in a way I was asking myself why we decided to work together, and I think it's because we want change in our own body. And I think working with Larbi, with Sylvie, with Juliette it was very much about that – it was about not just what work we can create but how our bodies will change. First of all it's like in any relation you notice something in the other – in any relationship, whether it's a relationship of a husband and wife, of any couple. First of all you identify something in the other that you see yourself as...

So there's already a sense of humility or empathy because you see yourself in the other person – and I think that's what happened with Larbi and vice-versa. But the other thing you notice which is very important – which projects you to create something together, to explore something together – is the fact that you notice something that they have that you don't have and that's more important actually, if anything. In a way there was something about working with these different artists that I felt would change my body and when I see this section it's very much like that... The root of it is... the traditional language, movement language or gestural language of kathak – but it has been transformed completely through improvisation because of me working with Larbi and the story that I was telling and the situation that I was in. It's a contemporary piece of work not purely a classical piece of work.

Kathak has very particular dimensions, you know, for instance the boundaries of how far the gestures should go, you know how far the hand is. This is kathak and the second you break it open you straighten it a bit further, it becomes something else... so there are rules in kathak.

Of course it depends on who's the guru and what style it is but that is a classical dancer... that's a classical dancer's body, a really confused one – because it's really breaking away. But underneath it like Maharajee said – Maharajee being my teacher's teacher who is a torch bearer of kathak – when he saw something funnily enough on Youtube apparently, because he wanted to see some of my work – somebody had shown him a YouTube piece – and they said this is a contemporary piece of work and he said 'No – that's kathak – that's a kathak body for sure'. He could identify. And so in a way it's a body but by working with Larbi, by doing this piece of work and by my own experience of adventuring into contemporary vocabulary the abinaya is not in the framework of a kathak repertoire somehow – or the ideologies or the system of kathak and so in a way it's very distorted. And actually when I see it from this angle –

hopefully you don't see it from this angle – but when I see it from this angle it looks like Francis Bacon because the head is really demented and it's really interesting watching it from here and I suppose that's what the body is for me – it's like Francis Bacon – it's a kind of a blur of many different things in the space of one body... and that's what reflects that scene for me.

Guy

From an early stage in your career, you've been kind of publically and very consciously rejecting the notion that your work is about fusion.

Akram

Yeah...

Guy

... but you've been talking a lot about this confusion – on the level of the body like...

Akram

... and the question is why?

Guy

Yes...

Akram

I think because somehow 'fusion' feels too much a sense of perfection. It's a perfect thing somehow where two things fuse together to create something that becomes one. It's too much a fantasy for me. With the body, I find it much more complex. The word fusion feels trivial. I was studying for some years kathak and then when I went to university to get away from my community and my parents, my mother said I had to get a degree and so... the contemporary dance... when that started to infiltrate into my body, my body started bringing up questions not consciously, but through the body unconsciously when the body reacts I didn't notice it necessarily but my teachers would notice it... so my kathak guru would say that's not kathak anymore, or there's something, a different energy in your body or you have a different way of thinking. You are re-routing energy through a different way and the same thing would be with my Graham teacher or my release teacher. And so in a way the sense of chaos in the body or the confusion seemed a word that was much more relevant to the state I was in then and the state I am in, even more now...

And, to remain in that seems important for me. Because I have a sense of real clarity in my kathak. When I'm doing kathak I am at home. I was asked this question yesterday – where do you feel more at home in your body? – and it's when I'm doing kathak... and you know it's wearing the costume, it's eating... and I have to eat bann because I have to feel like I have to go to India again. It is like a whole ritual because I feel so separated from it most of the year. And so in a way there is a sense of an ideology of the purity for me of kathak and the classical dance form.

That's why I do the contemporary work – because it's... that's where I, well what do you call it, when you de-stabilize somehow. Most of my life, except the kathak part of my life, has been de-stabilized somehow and so in a way that confusion best describes where I am in my body.

Guy

But also fusion seems to be about blending and eliminating the differences. It's different from confusion. I mean 'con' is also 'two' no? So it's like 'fusion' to a kind of higher degree, where you keep the differences.

Akram

Yeah – absolutely.

Guy

And then it goes from one to the other in the way that you go from the male to the female energy in this as well...

*"I met them first in a land where borders
get blurred; where day rises before night's end
and water morphs into high, brumal walls.*

*A warrior and a monk, two beings –
flanked by shadows that grow and roam at will –
cross-legged in thought, carving with four hands
arabesques on force, loss, fear (...)"*

(Kathika Nair, *Zero Degrees: Between Boundaries*
From the Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets,
Jeet Thayil (ed.), Bloodaxe Books, Northumberland, 2008, p.
315)

Guy

To finish with *Zero Degrees*, I brought up a quote from basically the beginning of a poem that was written about the piece by the Indian poet Karthika Nair and that's just been published in an anthology of contemporary Indian poets. It's a, beautiful poem in a very classical form, especially in the way that, she describes the relationship between the two of you. She calls you a warrior and him a monk. Are you happy with that?

Akram

To a certain extent I am – but I think there are both in both of us. I think that a warrior is only a warrior when he has the monk in him and vice-versa. There is a warrior in the monk as we are human beings. But for the piece I think it's a really nice way to describe the two characters.

Guy

I would like to go now to the group work. I've only been involved in the creative process of the last one, *bahok*, but I've seen the other ones several times even during the rehearsal process and it seems to me that there has also been a big shift there: whereas in earlier pieces – like *Kaash* for instance – it felt like a lot of the material was still developed on your own body and passed on to the dancers. While in *bahok* you really use as the building stones the dancers' own movement vocabulary, the differences again in their stories. Is that true?

Akram

Absolutely. I mean – I think with *bahok* it was very much about putting my body aside in a way and using only a part of my body which is the kathak eye, so in a way to find kathak within non-kathak dancers. Whereas with *Kaash* it was very much about using the kathak material of my own body. So *bahok* was very much about identifying certain things that I learned in kathak. Of course it's not as clear as that, but it's like discovering certain precisions of hand gestures. It was very much about exploring their body and each one was very different from me. It was like a circus of different experiences

Guy

What you say now reminds me also of an interview that you gave I think it was during the period of *Zero Degrees*, and I think it was in the Independent, there was a special issue on the body where they interviewed yourself and Antony Gormley and you said something about it's very different the experience inside from seeing it, and that you need to see it on other bodies also to develop an understanding of it.

Akram

The other day I was talking to the Artistic Director of the National Portrait Gallery. We were talking about the portrait that Darvish Fakhr did of me, in fact it is a series of portraits of me in nine different emotions and what was interesting was, we were talking about the painting and how the painting doesn't change. You know, when you come and see a painting, whereas live performances change, and he said 'no – that's not true' and I agree with him actually now, thinking back. Because he said a painting does change because when you first see a painting you've taken it in. But then you go away and when you come back you see the painting in a different way, so in a way you're transforming the painting because you've gained a whole different experience and it's like the Indian time-cycle which is in a circle, but the circle is not like this but it's in a spiral effect. So the one is here but you come back to one again in a different place.

So in a way it's the same thing with looking at another person's body. The experience of looking at somebody else's body is extremely important because it changes your own body, so that was a big shift from being in it and not being in it. I mean when I was in, it was very from the inside out and with *bahok* it was very much from the outside trying to go in to other people's bodies. And then it comes back into your own body somehow, so this transition was a big stepping stone for me – where, yeah you're right, my body was not present in the creative part of the vocabulary.

Guy

The experience that you describe of paintings – I just had a similar one this week when I went to see the Rothko exhibition, you even don't have to go away, even while you are there, it changes because of how your eye adapts to the space, to the light changes, and the painting starts to be alive. With your painting, because the way it's framed and

put together and the size of it, when you go away from it, the black and white, the alteration of black and white talks to you. And then if you go close to it you see the details and every portrait in a singular way. This kind of playing with perspective that also happens in live performance – it's the energy of the spectators, it's the focus and the attention of the spectators that makes the work alive.

Akram

I saw a documentary recently. I'm a big fan of James Turrell – who plays a lot with the concept of light. He's built somewhere in America, in the desert, a volcano, he's built an entire underground system and it's the most incredible piece of work. It's still a work in progress but it's revolutionary and fantastic. And for him it's about the internal experience and also how we can manipulate the internal experience from what you see. And so he plays with the light of the sky, in such an amazing way – like there's this amazing tunnel that you have to go through and at the end there's this hole. And so as you're walking towards it you realise the closer you get that actually it's not a hole, it's an eye, and the eye is up here. And it's such a long way away that in the first part of the day the light is a certain colour because as it's coming from the sky through the hole and it lights the room in a certain way and as you arrive the light has changed your perception so in a way this experience – your internal experience – is changing and it's a lot about observing and how you perceive. Who says the sky is up and the ground is down? It's the way we have created it around us – a sense of logic through education, through whatever, through the majority if you like – and so in a way it was very important for me coming back to *bahok* to step out, because then I started seeing my own way of creating. I started to understand my own body when I see processes of other people struggling with their own bodies. That was a big shift for me in *bahok*. Because when I'm creating on my own body it's so close and in a way that's why people like Shanell, my wife or Farooq Chaudry, my producer or yourself, who come in as an outside eye. I was also able to pull out – to see in a way that I could not see by being on the inside.

Guy

In *bahok* you worked with a group of dancers with very, very different backgrounds. There was the collaboration with the National Ballet of China. There was like a month of research in the summer, like a couple of months before the actual rehearsal process?

Akram

Yeah.

Guy

And you decided to really bring this group together exploring more theatrical devices.

Akram

Yeah. It was a tough call because we didn't know, you know, umm, apart from Shanell and maybe Andre, the Slovakian

who's quite natural at the theatrical aspect. The ballet dancers hadn't, even though their narrative is in their characters, whereas playing yourself is a different kind of theatre.

Which is interesting for me as a performer that in *Zero Degrees* I'm playing myself, in *Sacred Monsters* I'm playing myself but in *in-i* – I'm playing myself but I'm actually playing two characters who are very far away from the present. They are the child - when I was a child at 10 and the priest who I am not.

It was the same with *bahok* where you had a few people who were used to playing themselves but the others don't play themselves on stage, so in a way we had to undo that.

In the beginning, on the first day, I remember arriving late and I keep on saying this – it was amazing because the National Ballet of China dancers were in one corner and I think Kim Young, the Korean dancer, Shanell, Lali and Sadju who's the Indian dancer who studied martial arts, were in another corner and Chia-Ying, who is Taiwanese was still in another corner. I came in late purposefully, because I wanted to see what would happen without my injection, without them having a reason to come together and I was hoping that they would all be speaking to each other but nobody was talking to anybody...

The Chinese dancers were in the corner talking to themselves, my dancers were talking to themselves, and so in a way, they had created walls – because of culture, because of religion and because of the body, because the body has had a different education, physical education. It was very difficult when we had to decide what class would we give every morning, because the contemporary dancers weren't sure whether they wanted us to do ballet; and the ballet dancers weren't sure whether they wanted to do contemporary. Once I came in I immediately decided that actually we're going to start not from moving but from the most primitive, primal – not primitive – the most primal thing which is to tell a story – be the narrator and tell a story: so each one of them... I asked them to tell me a bit about themselves. We chose as themes home, a dream, a nightmare...

Guy

There's a beautiful documentary made about the making of it by the French filmmaker, Gilles Delmas. Shall we look at the first 10 minutes, which shows the auditions that you did in China in Spring, and then the first research period in London in summer last year.

Can we bring in the other video?

SHOWING ANOTHER VIDEO FRAGMENT

Guy

Is it necessary for work to be autobiographical?

Akram

No, it's not necessary at all. I think it's maybe necessary for me at this moment – but I'm thinking that the next few projects that I want to do shouldn't be autobiographical. In a way what's interesting with *in-i*, it is autobiographical to a certain extent. But then it was my first exploration of putting myself in those situations such as the Priest and the Boy. I want to go in that direction where it's not just autobiographical, but I think it's about also finding... if I work with something that is not autobiographical, you still have to find something of yourself within that character that you're playing or that piece.

Guy

Because I do think that work of art needs to have an autobiographical element. The fact that you start from their story and not your story means they own it – and it kind of gets charged emotionally and energetically...

Akram

I think you are absolutely right...

Guy

... so that it reaches out more to an audience. Then there's the whole work of transformation – to find a form that can be very close to it or much more distant from it, depending on the kind of work you want to create.

Akram

But as I said if I do *Oedipus* or *Hamlet*, or something like that – it would not be an autobiographical thing but I absolutely agree that you have to find something that is in your own life that relates to that story in order for it to remain, for it to feel real or to be, as you said, emotionally charged.

Guy

Yeah... We've been discussing a lot of the kind of personal, physical and somatic experiences of your own body in creating work and exchanging with other artists.

Your work is being presented on all the world stages. In the reception of it, does it also change? I mean it was a topic that came up last week as well, with Larbi. How much he's still surprised by how different the same piece is received in a different country by a different audience.

Can you relate to that? And can you give some examples of your own work? Like for instance I remember you bringing the contemporary work to India...

Akram

Yeah – I think, it's a whole subject in itself to understand why the audience react in the way they do – I remember when we did the *Mahabharata* with Peter Brook – even as a child – I noticed the differences. I remember there was a very

dramatic, a very, very difficult scene with one of the main characters, and his wheel chariot got stuck in the mud and it was a very important moment because he was about to die. When we were playing in Japan, suddenly, the Japanese started to laugh at such a tragic moment and it was fantastic... it was absolutely... we were just completely shocked. And not only that the actor was trying to focus because this was his moment of death and you had all these people laughing. For me it was really a cultural shock because you know it's difficult to say why, because I don't know what it was, but for sure there was a different kind of reaction to particular emotions and how people deal with them.

It's also not just as one mass – they are all individuals. Like one dancer came up to me after *in-i* and said "I don't see you dancing in it – not enough – you know – I miss your dancing blah, blah, blah". I tried to explain well that's not the point of the work and then an actor came and said – "oh it's just wonderful, wonderful to see you acting – I've seen you dance before..." "

So it depends on who's looking individually at the work, but does the work change? Yes – the work changes – but I feel more and more it's not because of the reaction of the audience. In the beginning I think it was, but I think it's sometimes from feedback from people that we trust as artists and feel like that's something we haven't noticed and that's something they really picked up on. And so we include that, evolve and put that into the work somehow.

In Theatre de la Ville in Paris – it's the most prestigious theatre house in the world and so people are always terrified to go and perform there until they get used to it. But the audience are unpredictable you know. They are a hardcore, classical Indian audience, funnily enough, and a hardcore contemporary audience. It is the most difficult audience in the world. We were doing *in-i* – it's the first time where, maybe 5–10 people were screaming and saying this is crap, this is rubbish – and then the rest of the audience went crazy and started being positive and so you had this whole dialogue between them, and we weren't involved. In the end we were the catalyst and suddenly they are having a fight amongst themselves. The more some booed – the more others would start cheering. And it's really down to the individual, each person brings with him his own baggage.

Guy

Maybe it's also a cultural thing – because I can imagine that the French just want a subject to talk about, any kind of subject. You are offering them performances for them to talk about and disagree with.

Akram

Yeah – it's interesting. Talking with Nick Hytner he said the British audience at the National are more content based and the French audience... I'm generalising, but the French

audience are more emotional, they are more into the emotion rather than the content of it. So more than the text of it, they are into the more emotional part of it.

"This slippage between the lived body and its cultural representation, between what I call a somatic identity (the experience of one's physicality) and a cultural one (how one's body – skin, gender, ability, age, etc... – renders meaning in society) is the basis for what I consider some of the most interesting explorations of cultural identity in dance."

(Ann Cooper Albright, *Moving Contexts*, in: *Dance: Distinct language and cross-cultural influences*, Chantal Pontbriand (ed.), Parachute, Montreal – 2001, p. 47)

Guy

Going back to *bahok* – by bringing in all these diversities inside the piece – does that change, how audiences in different places react to it? I mean, the dancers and performers come from all these different places and you kept some of their vocabulary and their own personality very clearly recognisable – also the cultural identity in it...

Akram

This is a difficult one to say because I haven't been on tour with them. I remember in China it was interesting and in London it was interesting – In Paris also but in China the reaction was very, very much of I would say 'this is new' – somehow – this sense of their coming to... it's like a new baby – they are coming to grips with a new baby. Whereas in London and New York even it's not something that's new – it's not like discovering contemporary dance as such – but it's something different it's something about what is the story saying? So the reactions were different but you know I think it's a lot to do with... You know in India and China particularly there's this very interesting revolution of contemporary dance going at the moment and it's still being discovered, I think. There is a strong sense of their cultural identity in the work but for me it was not the fact that, for me, I always feel that we have to be careful with the Green card, you know, saying ok – this is a cultural thing, we'll get attention for it. It has to be deeper than that.

It can't just be the effect of bringing together different bodies – there has to be an internal reason for me of why, why that happened. This subject of these different people coming together in a station was because of my own experience of working, of being in Japan where I was in a lift – did I tell you this story?

I was in a lift... and ... well that's where the idea came from because I was in an elevator and I remember getting on and there was this huge world conference happening and I got on the lift, and I was going up, but just before the doors closed a Japanese woman came in and she was wearing this very traditional Japanese outfit and an African gentleman came with a very traditional African outfit. I think there was this American guy with a suit and two Europeans, but it was difficult to say where they were from. So we were in this

tiny lift as most of the buildings and things looked tiny and so there was an awkward silence, and everybody was trying to find a space to look at –... you know it was a tiny lift, so we were all either looking at the ceiling or shoes or... And it was interesting for me that I wanted to ask this Japanese... this kimono dress was phenomenal and I wanted to ask so many questions but there was this fear of... And we were in close proximity and I didn't know what she would think if I would ask her and there would be a language problem and... – lots of walls being created in such a tiny space.

So in the silence we were going up this lift – and the lift gets stuck. The first minute nobody says anything, everybody's very calm, Zen. When we realised that nothing's going to happen then everybody started talking, at the same time and it was interesting in a moment of a crisis everybody comes together regardless of language, culture or how you look. You know I'm trying to explain to the Japanese woman that there's an alarm – 'we can ring the alarm' – and at the same time we're going to ring the alarm – '...but can I just ask you about the colour of your kimono – because I had this question...

And it was just interesting, fascinating that at the moment of crisis suddenly everything... everybody is... because we felt that we were the only people in that lift – of course, a new experience. So everybody will have shared something together. And so in a way that experience, that was always in me and I felt like that it was something that I wanted to explore then, that somehow came back by itself in the company work when we were stuck. And out of being stuck in that certain place, we all realised that we had something in common, that we all wanted to go home or come out of home. And so in a way, you know, there has to be a reason of why I wanted to work with different – these different nationalities – it was not just the fact that there were different nationalities but there was also a personal story that I experienced.

Guy

I propose we look at a fragment of the final result and I've chosen the first really big group section of *bahok*. So the performance starts with a monologue which is the story of one of the dancers. We see the end of her monologue and then we have this very large big group section and what is amazing for me because having seen the performance a lot of times, being part of the creative process – we never talked about, I mean I don't remember you consciously talking to me about it – but the piece does introduce all the individuals and their stories and their movement language. the way that they are connected. And then you have added into it some of your own signature – which is a sense of rhythm and a sense of speed that comes from the kathak – so I think it's very, very rich. Shall we have a look at the last video?

VIDEO SHOWN

Guy

bahok will be back on repertoire next year?

Akram

Yeah – but the only difference, it's not any longer with the National Ballet of China – because we were working with them for a period of a year and a half – so we'll take three new dancers...

Guy

Do you think you will re-work some of it?

Akram

Yeah – for sure – the essence of it will be there, but with three new dancers – one dancer will change the whole work – influence it – even if it's in a subtle way. The structure will be there but you have to put in – it's difficult because, the dancers who will come in, their bodies won't contribute necessarily as much as the original dancers because those dancers bodies contributed, their minds contributed to the work. So in a way this dancer has to find a compromise. Sometimes that's more interesting to find a

kind of imprisonment, if you like, of a structure, and then to find your own freedom within that. Because that's what I've always tried to find in my own work. You know for me kathak became a prison to a certain extent and at a certain stage in my life then I felt, well, how do I continue to find the freedom in it? How do I find Akram within that? Because it's so much about the gurus' knowledge to me and this is right and this is wrong so how do you find... and I think that's what will happen with *bahok* when the new dancers will have to find their own space.

Guy

OK... We've gone a little bit over time...

I would like to thank Akram for being here with me inbetween two engagements in Paris. I'd like to thank you for being an attentive audience. Thank you for being with us.

Akram

Thank you, thank you.