

artsfirst night

**Dance**  
**Desh**  
Curve, Leicester  
★★★★★

The theme of home and identity is at the core of most of Akram Khan's work, but never more so than in his latest production, *Desh*, which means homeland in Bengali, is inspired by Khan's exploration of his cultural and geographical roots. It is the result of a year that the London-born choreographer spent researching in the UK and Bangladesh, the land of his origin.

If I told you that this is an 80-minute dance solo your heart might sink at the prospect of such limited horizons. But fear not, for this epic creation, given its world premiere at the Curve, is a one-man show of total theatrical conception and thematic fascination. Delivered in strands of storytelling, anecdotes and impressions, it sets out, as Khan himself says, to "address the tragedy and comedy of lives in Bangladesh". Yet it feels more personal than any of his other productions. The world of *Desh* is a place of hard physical labour, where the only defence against the heat is a clapped-out air conditioning unit, which later becomes



RICHARD HADENON

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a symbol of our technological civilisation. The busy streets of Dhaka are a frenetic burble of rampaging traffic. You can actually feel the stress in Khan's hypersensitive dancing, each limb alert to the next imminent danger, each phrase fraught with haste and overstimulation. His recorded dialogue with an IT call centre evokes the frustrating experience of trying to get

technical support from foreign lands. And when he tells a Bangladeshi fairy tale to a girl in England, the magic of childhood that he recalls — matched by charming digital animations — envelops you in its universal fantasy. Khan also plays an elderly cook in his father's village, a man who suffered the horror and brutality of war during Bangladesh's liberation in 1971, and

confronts his own disapproving father, a man for whom the generation gap is not only about age but also about cultural taste and artistic expression. Lurking beneath Khan's journey to self-discovery is an elemental terror born of the knowledge that Bangladesh would be one of the first countries to disappear when rising sea levels reach crisis point. So, not only is his heritage fragile but so, too, is the very earth that bred it. This is the point when Tim Yip's breathtaking designs come into their own: using thousands of silk-like strips hanging from gigantic frames he creates a monsoon of apocalyptic proportions.

Khan's choreography is marked by an equality of power and fluidity, while as a performer he is as mesmerising in stillness as he is in full flow. Jocelyn Pook's recorded score is haunting and magical, excited and angry, while Michael Hull's fine lighting sets the seal on this most extraordinary of collaborations.

**Debra Crane**  
*Desh* is sponsored by Colas. At Sadler's Wells, London EC1, Oct 4-8

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