

Zero Degrees

Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui

Sadler's Wells

Tuesday 16 October 2007

(Les Ballets C. de la B. and Akram Khan Company, with music by Nitin Sawhney and Sculpture by Antony Gormley)

Maybe I'm a dance innocent. I'd heard the name Akram Khan but seen none of his work. By chance, I heard him speak recently at the National Portrait Gallery, and the intelligence and sensitivity which ground him were compelling. When he showed clips of his work, my excitement sent me looking for the first opportunity to experience it in full. And the gods were smiling: my first experience was this, *Zero Degrees*.

If you're reading this, it might be that you're already familiar with the work of Khan or Larbi Cherkaoui. After all, this much-acclaimed piece has been around the world since it was premièred in 2005. But if you don't know it, I have just one word: 'extraordinary'.

This is what contemporary dance should be: worlds opening before you through extreme virtuosity of movement; and the things you thought you knew shaken up and changed forever. Though award-winning, this is not a po-faced performance to be understood in conceptual terms alone. The piece had barely begun before the audience started chuckling – still a guilty pleasure in high culture. The cause? Both dancers were sitting on the edge of the stage, telling an anecdote of Khan's first journey to India. They spoke, hesitated, searched for words and gestured to underline the action – a dance in itself – in perfect time with each other. They are one person. And when they begin to dance, it is face to face, weaving arm and hand movements in and out of each other's bodies. Like that game of 'chopping' your thumb in two with your forefinger, I was sure that they had swapped forearms and hands, the confusion heightened by the different colours of their flashing skin. It was love. Not erotic love but deep love, wanting to be one person. Then came a moment of rupture, the dancers span away from each other, and the theme of separation from the self was born.

Zero Degrees has everything: humour, narrative, speech, song, as well as fear, acrobatics and mime that verges on slapstick, all joined through dance that blends western, Indian and Moroccan influences. Despite the laughter, the genesis of the project was in death. What happens at death, when does that moment occur, what does it mean and what do the two sides of death look like? Khan has said "When do you die? ... This is about that transitional point, the point I call zero degrees." So, as the piece evolves, we can understand the pain and incomprehension of death, the yearning to be whole again, the childish desperation to put back together what has been broken.

What was extraordinary in this piece was the range of movement and the immense control each dancer has over his body. They moved in ways I have not seen the human body achieve before. Larbi Cherkaoui, in particular, is half rag-doll, bending and twisting into knots that drew gasps of admiration (or was it shared pain?) from the audience. Neither dancer shied from being flung on the floor like a broken toy, and there was humour and pathos in the way Khan tried to 'bounce' Cherkaoui back to life, like a baseball.

The sculptor Antony Gormley created life-size casts of the two dancers, and while at first they lay around in the usual rigid Gormley way, they soon became extra performers as the dancers picked them up, moved them, danced with them... They were alter egos, the other side of death. And maybe, for one second, I saw one of them come back to life.

Khan is British from an Indian background, while Cherkaoui is Dutch-Moroccan. The eerie, mournful singing was by long-time Khan collaborator Faheem Mazhar to an eastern-feeling score by composer Nitin Sawhney. But the other musicians were western and played western instruments; and so in the dance we passed from Kathak spinning and hand movements to North African rhythms and footwork. Movements drawn from the stable of western

contemporary dance made an appearance, while tradition was overlaid by disco so that, just for a frisson, the play between the dancers was indeed erotic.

The fact that I list the styles and influences shows how invigoratingly varied the movements were, but it belies the truth of the piece. This is not pick'n'mix but a true fusion. I no sooner caught the scent of another continent than the piece had moved on. Better to be carried off by the wildness, feeling and understanding their awe of death through my sub-conscious alone.

I left the theatre grinning at my good fortune at seeing this work before it is gone forever – these few performances have been billed as the last of a long international tour, and there are no current plans to revive it. But if ever you see *Zero Degrees* listed again – go!

Ends

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