Ancient and modern in dance

Ismene Brown about their very different approaches

By Ismene Brown

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"I NEVER set out to be original or unique," says the unusual-looking man sitting before me. Wayne McGregor is gangly, bald and tall, with pointy Mr Spock ears and a cherubic smile. When he dances he looks like a skeleton fighting its way out of a sausage skin, all bones and jiggling, oddly beautiful.

Cyberchoreographer: Wayne McGregor defies the usual stereotype of the modern dancer

McGregor can't help being thought of as unique and original - he is just drawn that way.

The same could be said of Akram Khan. These two young dancer/choreographers are the most interesting new forces in modern dance, an art that has been looking in need of a shot of modernity for some time. On the face of it, their interests hardly look alike - the internet and Indian dance - but what makes them the buzzwords for innovation is their outlook.

Akram Khan's Indian dance is ancient, yet incredibly new. McGregor's futuristic stagings of dance with computer images are new, yet warm-blooded and lively.

Both men defy the usual stereotype of the modern choreographer as poverty-stricken and blinkered, performing to his peers and funding bureaucrats, watched by a

smattering of friends, students and the occasional brave outsider. Khan's solo recital at the South Bank centre in London last week was sold out, even though he was "only" doing traditional Indian dance, rather than his innovative choreography. Wherever McGregor's company, Random, perform nowadays their tickets too disappear faster than hot cakes. It has been nigh-on impossible to get into their collaborative production with the Royal Ballet at the Linbury Studio Theatre in Covent Garden. The show goes to Aldeburgh for one night on April 29.

Khan, 26, was born to Bangladeshi parents in Balham, south London, where he began lessons in Kathak dance as a child. His mother loves dancing, but as a Muslim in Bengal was not permitted to do it, and she passed her desire on to her son. At nine, he played Mowgli in a Ravi Shankar production of The Jungle Book. At 14, he was the child star of Peter Brook's legendary The Mahabharata, touring the world's finest theatres for 18 months.

"I think Peter Brook mentored me, really," says Khan. "I had a funny relationship with him because I was young and didn't realise his stature. He always wore the same jeans and I'd insult him, but he didn't mind. He showed me that simplicity is a powerful thing in theatre. The way Krishna is shown within the Hindu mythology tends to have loads of ornamentation, but Brook described him as a man, very simply."

With an ornate, mythological dancing style in his body, but a modern European mind, Khan found himself alone among Kathak soloists. Instructed by the top gurus in London and India, he knew he was good, but also that he was odd. "I like to move fast, and Kathak is quite slow. It's a rather circular dance form, not like Bharatanatyam, the

other main classical Indian dance, which is more linear. Kathak is Krishna-based, and Krishna is the centre of love. Bharatanatyam is Shiva-based, and Shiva is the destroyer, more violently physical." What Khan does - it seems to me, watching this mesmerising performer - is insert the sharp sword of Shiva into the flowers of Kathak.

He makes you gasp at the rhythmic brilliance and intricacy of the dance as pure movement, his swift, slapping bare feet and sumptuous arm movements, his command of lightning speed and intense slowness, elaborating momentum itself rather than the specific emotional symbolism of old Kathak.

To be a dancer, though, seemed out of the question at first. "In Bengali families you are an engineer or a doctor, or you are nothing. Funny - now that I've got a degree, nobody says anything about it any more!"

A dance degree is something that Khan shares with McGregor: neither had the traditional British modern-dance training, which may explain their instinct to take their own paths. Khan doesn't claim to know what to call his style - he gropes for "Kathak-fusion, maybe." But whatever it is, theatre bookers aren't too concerned. As newly appointed resident choreographer at the South Bank, his next major event for the autumn will be an experimental collaboration with the composer Magnus Lindberg and the London Sinfonietta.

Khan shows courage in challenging centuries of his culture, declaring himself a hybrid child of two worlds. His Kathak guru still thinks of him as a loss to the tradition, and Khan realises that retaining his ancient roots will always be the grit with which he makes his pearls.

McGregor's innovations are more in the nature of a game played by a man at ease in one

world, not torn between two, like Khan. His dances made with his company Random Dance Company have the reputation for being futuristic or sci-fi.

He is not, as he concedes, a true pioneer - after all Merce Cunningham was using time-and-space concepts 40 years ago and computer-thinking 20 years ago. "People think you work with technology because it's a fashion statement, but it has been as much part of my existence all my life as listening to classical music. I've had a computer since I was about six, and this has always been just an extension of my choreographic palette.

"These technologies change your perceptions about time and space - make your thinking more malleable. In virtual reality there are no walls, no roof, no floor, no edge, no finish point, no gravity, no set speed."

Hence his enthusiasm for creating live performances using simultaneously computer-imaged dancing, manipulated electronically. The ectoplasm of the film makes a fantastical, subverting descant to the warm, live, substantial dancers, particularly when they are doing the same movements.

Amusement governs what he does. A Manchester boy, he was a keen child ballroom dancer (a qualified instructor at 11) and an advanced pianist (grade 8 at 14). Inspired above all by John Travolta, he never saw himself as a conventional dance student, and his early jobs were in the low-glamour area of dance education and "dance development" in east London. But his skinny, idiosyncratic body and extraordinary water-and-bone way of moving made him an instantly eyecatching soloist. Coupled with his expert use of lighting and computer visuals, his work caught the modern imagination: now he is known as the Cyberchoreographer.

His five-year trilogy, Millennarium, Sulphur 16 and Aeon, has become an international smash hit. Random, amazingly, has a near-half-million-pound turnover, of which its Arts Council grant is less than a fifth, he says. He has in eight years assembled a striking portfolio of work alongside Random: choreographed for theatre (Sarah Kane's Cleansed), film (Bent - he told Mick Jagger how to move), opera (ENO's Salome) and musical theatre (A Little Night Music). He teaches at film school, and has become an arts bureaucrat too, sitting on the London Arts Board.

McGregor's next moves look equally high-profile. He has hooked up with Ericsson, the electronics giant, exploring state-of-the-art virtual reality. Last year he put one of his dances in the internet; soon, he says, he could be making dance commercials that pop up on our mobile phone screens, or collaborating "virtually" with choreographers on the other side of the world.

But will I enjoy his dance more through the internet than by seeing it live, I wonder? "No, it will be a different experience entirely," he explains. "I want you to have an experiene specific to the internet's possibilities. You could, for instance, choose to alter the content." In five years, he seems convinced, we'll not only be watching but participating too.

Where Khan goes with his dancing is best experienced face to face with him on stage. For McGregor's future plans to entertain us, you may have to update your computer.

- Random and the Royal Ballet's 'DuoLogue' is at the Linbury Studio Theatre, Covent Garden, tonight and tomorrow (information, 020 7304 4000). Khan and McGregor perform solos in 'First Class Air Male', on May 1-7 (information, 01473 639230).