Marvellous hybrid kicks like a mule

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Ismene Brown reviews Akram Khan at Sadler's Wells

In Asia, storytelling is a large driving force, in paintings, history and dance. I suppose the exponents of European dance theatre would say the same - except that the former is about the acts and emotions of gods and seekers after great truths, and the latter about the unfascinating little frustrations of modern everyday life, in which one is expected to laugh at mobile-phone malfunction or any use of the word "f***".

Akram Khan is the child of both traditions, with his London contemporary dance upbringing and his superb training in the North Indian classical dance form, Kathak. His recent works have grown increasingly dance-theatrish - not, I think, to their advantage - but in his latest work, zero degrees, he links up with the Flemish-Moroccan

dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, the composer Nitin Sawhney and sculptor Antony Gormley, in a hybrid where Asia and Europe blur, elements bump up against each other untidily, ideas jangle, and sentimentality threatens to overwhelm it in places, but above all one is simply amazed by the dancing.

Zero degrees, to Khan's mind, marks the still centre through which movement passes, the moment of death, transition; the work's spine is a story recounted by the two dancers, of an uncomfortable passage through an Indian border post and the death of a man on the train.

Sawhney's music gently summons up Indian songs and memories, but Gormley, although much travelled in India, drifts far away north in his haunting stage-set. Within ice-white walls are two remarkable, lifelike male figures sculpted in pure white foam. The light (by Mikki Kunttu) is cold and clear. These disconcerting dummies are befriended, mocked and eventually assaulted by the two dancers. The verbal story-telling is sadly so baggy that it almost suffocates the tale's evocative point, but it's saved because the two men recount it in unison, filling it most divertingly with a forest of hand gestures.

What a contrast they make, the warrior and the clown - Khan's muscle-packed, awesomely controlled and grounded physique, and the pale, deceptively weedy-looking Cherkaoui.

Again and again they dance the same moves; sometimes swaying, spinning, fast-heeling, or sometimes more jazzy stepping. You marvel at Cherkaoui's Petrushka pathos, his sudden floppiness or his unpredictable John Cleese silly walks. And you are dazzled by Khan's phenomenal aura, so bewitching, so heartbreakingly tender.

The climax is hugely moving, sentimental and visionary. Cherkaoui cradles a broken

dummy, crooning, while Khan dances a lament almost unbearably descriptive of loving and losing a person. Then, this glorious man disintegrates into shakes and dysfunction, as useless and still as the dummy's - and Cherkaoui picks Khan up, and carries him off, while the musicians softly play into silence. Death may be a transition, but it's ghastly, just the same.

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