

Akram Khan's *XENOS* Choreographic Forum Monday 18th June 2018

“There’s an African proverb that goes like this: until the lions have their say, the hunters will always tell the story. It is the victors who write history.”

Wiegand, 2018

Having been unable to attend the London performances of *XENOS* by Akram Khan, I was tentative about attending the Choreographic Forum event for fear of not understanding references or missing significant links. However, I should not have feared, for the work was only the spark for a conversation of greater magnitude, exploring the eradication of certain figures from Britain’s collective history, how we commemorate significant historical events and Britain’s diversifying past. The discussion began with a discussion regarding recent WW1 commemorations and the discourse regarding historical remembering in the present, followed by an analysis of Khan’s work, drawing out key details and elements, which help to illuminate the conversation concerning historical remembering and commemoration in Britain.

To open, Dr. Emma Hanna, of the School of History at the University of Kent, presented her experiences from consulting on activities held to commemorate the WW1 centenary. There was an emphasis here on perceptions; how we perceive past events that we were not a part of but can gather fragments of information and evidence to try and develop some sense of the experience. It is our perceptions of events, such as war, that lead us to commemorate, to remember. However, our perceptions will largely be influenced by what is communicated about events, what is shared and discussed and remembered about WW1 will inevitably mold the collective perception of who was involved, what happened and why.

When thinking about commemoration, Dr. Hanna explained her analysis of events to mark the WW1 centenary, highlighting the 5 P’s of commemorative activities: participatory, performative, problematic, profitable and political. It is extremely important, Dr. Hanna notes, that these events should involve people and that through the ‘doing’ of remembering and honouring, there is a sense of co-production and ownership of these activities by the public. Commemorations are often described as celebrations or tributes with an emphasis on memory and remembrance, where individuals or collective groups put in time and effort in order to remember. However, who ‘owns’ the memories being consistently recalled and commemorated?

There is a sense, especially linked to World Wars, that certain memories and histories are publically owned. Public events are held in order to ‘keep memories alive’ and a sense of community is developed through communal events to mark

dates, events and people from history. Within this public sphere of remembrance is also the binary of national vs. local, with potentially frictional correlations concerning how commemorations should be carried out, or what should (or is) remembered. Some commemorations involve an attempt at creating an embodied experience of the event being commemorated, such as wearing the clothing of a certain era, acting out particular events or immersing oneself in the lifestyle of a particular time. Rather than being seen as reenactment or 'dressing up' Dr. Hanna describes this process as 're-experiencing' a time or event. However, one may ask to what extent can we really experience events of the past, due to dramatic changes in context from the past to the present, including time, technology, politics, climate, threats and geography. Additionally, what is the impact of this 're-experiencing' on both the participant and the memory from the past? Is the event being re-experienced changed or altered due to the way it has been perceived in the future?

What is evident from these activities of commemoration is that there is a need or a want to remember and to 'do' something beyond the mental process of remembering. Time and effort is put in to the act of commemorating through various events and activities, and many are eager to be involved, whether due to wanting to contribute to collective memory or remember individuals from the past. But again, how close can we really feel to a historic event? As the years pass, how does the historical event change in our perception due to our furthering distance from it?

While these questions still echoed in my mind, the second speaker for the event, Dr Royona Mitra, started her presentation regarding *XENOS*. Discussing the context for the work, Dr. Mitra highlighted how it is whiteness that prevails in the WW1 centenary celebrations and *XENOS* is an attempt to address the "state sponsored amnesia" concerning non-white soldiers from WW1. This work begs the questions, who are commemorated and who are not? And, more significantly, why? The work draws upon histories that are not the sole focus or the default of traditional WW1 commemorations, bringing these histories in to the present moments and highlighting the notion of the 'other'. Through this, we are implicated in our responsibility to ask what can be done to make amends.

The work itself focuses on the concept of a 'stranger' with Xenos being translated from Greek to mean 'foreigner'. The introduction of the concept of 'other', from the outset, emphasises the experience of Indian soldiers during WW1, recruited to support the allies in their fight, but treated as different from the white British soldier. As Reni Eddo-Lodge explains, the highest-ranking Indian soldier, or 'sepoy' was "still lower in the army hierarchy than the lowest-ranking white British soldier" (2018, 11). Dr. Mitra continued on to highlight how the dance work was a critiquing of the erasure of those deemed 'other' from history. In addition, the work in itself could be seen as a form of rewriting these forgotten bodies back in to history and bringing their stories to the forefront of our collective memory, as well as a form of opposition against unfair power relations that dominate the

shared remembrance of historical figures and events.

A feature of the work that was highlighted by Dr. Mitra was the inclusion of Kathak features and traditions found in classical Indian dance forms, which may exclude some from understanding all aspects of the work. For example, some audience members might not understand the use of spoken word, as it is not in their mother tongue: English. However, these can be viewed as an “unapologetic slap in the face of colonialism” and by including these features, other people are potentially being made ‘other’, reversing the gaze of years of the dominating and oppressive narrative of white nationalist ideology.

Praise for the work itself was abundant, with many in the discussion expressing their admiration of the movement and its significance. Another aspect that was highlighted was the guru and disciple relationship displayed through the interactions between the dancer and the musician. The use of Abhinaya, a pure form of acting out songs through codified gestures from Kathak, was discussed. Khan himself had explained how he worked with dramaturg Ruth Little and writer Jordan Tannahill and yet strived to remove as much text from the work as possible as in “Asian culture, our meanings are in our actions not our words.” (Wiegand, 2018). Links were also drawn between the plight of the soldier and feminist points concerning young Indian female brides.

After Dr. Mitra’s analysis of the work, the discussion was opened up to the audience. Some topics that were discussed concerned how images of commemorations or, based on Miranda Joseph’s musings, romanticised community images move quicker than words. There seems to be a feeling of necessity when it comes to commemoration, due to the sacrifice of those who died, which has enabled us to live. Nevertheless, this still does not clarify whom makes decisions concerning who is commemorated or why this is? There are many commemorations of war and historical events and yet there is so much that is not remembered and not honoured.

Additionally, discussion focused on the practical nation of commemoration and how we actually ‘do’ the commemorating. In some ways some events can be seen as theatrical, although, it was expressed, that some people may want to avoid these approaches as they may be deemed as ‘hammy’. This emphasises a potential desire for truthfulness and to be exact and authentic in your remembering. However, when engaging with art as a mode for creating a commemorative event there is potential for interpretation and creativity in how people remember. Perhaps it is good to remember through a creative lens, acknowledging the distance between now and the event being commemorated, as it is impossible to be exactly and authentically recreate the event.

What struck me about this conversation was how significantly many of the points made during this Choreographic Forum reflected or referenced the plethora of discussions from the Dance in the Age of Forgetfulness conference. These are

significant discussions regarding the power relations involved in remembering, Britain's race relations, how we remember and dance's role in all of this. At the time of writing this report I had started to read Reni Eddo-Lodge's book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. This book, coupled with the process of reflecting back on this Choreographic Forum event, highlighted how little I know about race relations in Britain. I have accepted the history I was taught about and inherited, without asking any questions of what else there might be, accepting that this is what has been remembered. However, not only is there a collective British memory that only remembers some features of history, there must be a collective forgetting also, the structure of which needs to be critiqued. Who decides what children learn about in History curriculums? Whose historical stories are portrayed through TV and film? What books are published and buy who and what about? These questions need to be asked and effort made in order to rewrite people back in to history who should be remembered, as Khan has done through *XENOS*.

"Faced with a collective forgetting, we must fight to remember" (Eddo-Lodge, 2018, 55)

Report by Kathryn Stamp

Eddo-Lodge, R. (2018) *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Joseph, M. (2002) *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press

Wiegand, C. (2018) *'I'm fighting time': Akram Khan on his last full solo, XENOS – in pictures*. [online] London: *The Guardian*. Accessed: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/mar/29/akram-khan-XENOS-in-pictures>