

## To move and be moved – Daniela F. Sieff

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Akram Khan is an English choreographer and dancer, born to Bangladeshi parents who moved to London in the 60s. I have loved his work for years. He is a master story-teller, who offers me a glimpse into worlds that lay beyond my own experience. Often times his work challenges me to open to raw and difficult emotions; yet at the same time his dancing is so visually arresting, sharp, fluid and feeling-full that an internal door opens to something vital and utterly alive.

Last year, I saw a tweet from his company, inviting volunteers to spend a day contributing to the creation of his new work, XENOS. The spec said that volunteers didn't have to be dancers, rather the group would be '...diverse with people of mixed ability, age, shape and ethnicity.'

I had NO idea what the day might involve or how it might unfold. I have never been to a dance class, or watched a rehearsal. But drawing on my courage, I applied. I sensed it might offer a unique opportunity to glimpse (and indeed be a tiny part of) the creative process of somebody whose work

I so deeply appreciate. I also saw it as opportunity to do something new and out of my comfort zone. And finally, I figured it might be an opportunity to inhabit my body in a different way.

The crew who shepherded us through the day were warm and hospitable. They were also full of enthusiasm and belief in their work. After a cup of tea, a safety talk, and signing release forms (it was being filmed), we were taken from the coffee room through onto the stage. Akram was sat on the floor, cross-legged on a shabby orange cushion. He was wearing a navy woollen hat with flaps that came down over his ears. Next to him, seated on equally shabby orange cushion, was dramaturg, Ruth Little. They explained a little about the piece.

'XENOS' is the Greek word for 'stranger', 'foreigner' or 'alien' – and forms the root of the word, 'xenophobia'. The piece will be premiered in 2018, which is the final year of four-year program commemorating the first world war. Akram and Ruth explained that at the centre of the piece is an anonymous soldier, who finds himself alone in enemy territory. However, unlike the images of WW1 soldiers that we grow up with in the UK, this will be an Indian colonial soldier. A million Indian troops served overseas during the first world war, and more than 70,000 were killed. They were 'strangers' – barely acknowledged or commemorated in either Britain or India, and yet they died in a foreign and alien European war.

Interwoven with the experience of this soldier will be elements from the myth of Prometheus. In the world of the Greeks, Prometheus was a Titan (the race who fathered the gods), and in many versions of the story he was credited with having created humankind from clay. Prometheus then championed human life in the face of hostility from the god, Zeus, ultimately stealing fire from the gods to give to mortals. Zeus was so enraged by this that he condemned to Prometheus to eternal punishment: chained alive to a rock, an eagle descended each day and eat Prometheus' liver (which would regenerate each night).

In archetypal terms, one of the key motifs of the Prometheus myth is that of a stranger who is willing to sacrifice himself to preserve human life. A second motif is best expressed by a question: Is the gift of fire (and technology) a blessing or a curse? As Akram and Ruth observed, by WW1 the firepower of man - made weaponry was unlike anything humanity had previously known, and the scale of death unprecedented.

Once the introduction to the piece was complete, Akram invited us to introduce ourselves and to say whether we had any dance experience. Most volunteers were young, and to my horror, studying dance at college. There were a couple of young people who weren't dancers, and a handful of others who were middle-aged, but my initial reaction was 'Oh sh\*t! I'm not at all sure I should be here!' Fortunately, a different inner voice replied: 'The flyer said that we didn't have to be dancers. The company had my details, so they knew I wasn't a dancer. And, apparently it was over-subscribed, thus the fact that they gave me a place means that it really must be OK that I'm here! So trust that, go with it, and enjoy!'

Then Mavin Khoo, dancer/choreographer in his own right, as well as rehearsal director for the Akram Khan company, led us in a warm up. Mavin had enthusiasm, warmth, patience, and an

impish, vital presence. He got us moving by taking the lead. I could easily have felt paralysed at the prospect of moving in the same space as Mavin and all the young dance students (and with Akram and Ruth looking on), but the atmosphere felt utterly non-judgmental and inviting. As a result, I could let go of my self-consciousness, open to the space, and to the other movers. I was also able to inhabit my middle-aged, non-dancer body without comparing myself to others, and with appreciation for all the experiences that my body has allowed me to live (including the one that I was living in that moment).

It was a gift to feel that open acceptance of my body. I was deeply grateful not only for the atmosphere that was being created by Mavin, Akram and the rest of the team, but also for the many years of work that I have done with my shame. Like many in our society, my body had been one of several targets for shame, and although I have felt my relationship with my body slowly changing, on Saturday I discovered how deep that change has been. I had arrived at a place where I no longer relate to my body as a despised 'foreigner' (XENOS), but as an equal, precious, and respected partner in my life.

After a short break, we went into the 'session proper'. There were various sequences of movements which Akram wanted to try out. As far as I could tell the piece is a solo, however, Akram was exploring the possibility that volunteers would play a part in the piece, and he was using us to see how that might work.

Not being a dancer, I've never been in a position where I've needed to remember sequences of movements, and although what we were being asked to do was relatively simple, and although we were led through the movements with patience, there were times when I struggled to 'feel' the movement in my body because I was focusing on trying to remember what came next (or rather on the timing of when the next move was to start).

However, there were a few precious moments when I was able to surrender to the movement and feel it in my body. One was especially powerful. We had our backs to the auditorium, and in front of us the curving wall of the set sloped upwards towards the rear of the stage. The auditorium was dark apart from blue spotlights which were shining towards us (so that an audience would see our backs as silhouettes), and we were to look up slope whilst lifting our hands to shoulder height, as if we were surrendering. Akram invited us to imagine ourselves as a young, exhausted soldier, who'd become separated from our battalion, and was surrendering to enemy troops (and most probably also to death). Out of the speakers reverberated the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*, which seamlessly morphed into something that had a new life of its own.

As I raised my hands, I imagined that it was night-time, and the spot-light shining in my face became the torch of my anonymous foe. My being dissolved into the utter aloneness; the cells of my body were enveloped by a soulful despair. I felt an ebbing away of meaning. Interestingly, I did not feel fear – to feel fear you need hope, and there wasn't any hope left in me. I was resigned to dying thousands of miles away from my family and community, fighting a war that had nothing to do with my people or my homeland in India. I thought of my parents –they would never know what had happened to their son, or where my life had ended.

It was a powerful image to touch. We did this sequence several times; each time I caught a glimpse of this young man's story. Each time, I was aware that his story wasn't coming to me in words, rather it was emerging from the sensations that I was living in my body, as my sinew and bone met music, darkness, and the shadow of the other volunteers. Each time, I moved and was moved to the edge of tears

