

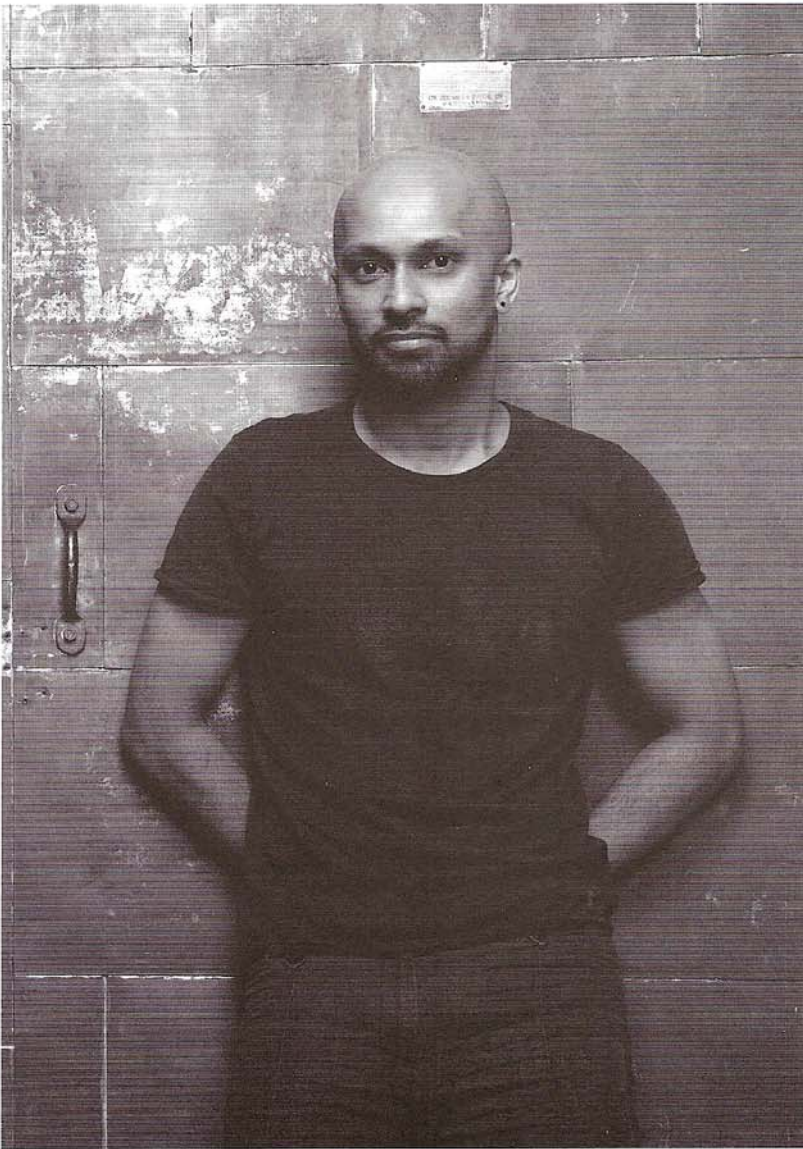
Akram Khan



**MALCOLM ROCK meets two artists
bent on swapping skills**

Juliette Binoche

Shiatsu massage united the Kathak performer with the Oscar-winning actress, but it was the courage to let go of their egos that has permitted them to work together. When Akram Khan met Juliet Binoche in 2006 via her masseuse, Khan envisioned a collaboration in which he would act while Binoche – star of *Chocolat* and *The English Patient* – would dance. The inside-out idea seemed simple enough, at least on paper...



Akram Khan. Photo: Marianne Rosenstiehl

In-I (as the project came to be known) has already proven irresistible for celebrity-hungry media and will appeal to audiences starved of something out of the ordinary. Backstage at the National Theatre, where *In-I* will premiere in September, the unlikely pair reveal that the creative process has been more challenging than anticipated.

"We needed to find out if we had a connection," explains Binoche. "We didn't know what we wanted to create; all we knew was that we wanted to create something."

Before rehearsals, Khan put Binoche through a filmed audition during which he recorded her expressions and reactions in a bid to gauge whether "there was something he could work with". When it became obvious that there was, Khan proceeded to guide Binoche through a series of improvisations using steps made famous in his previous projects, *zero degrees* and *Sacred Monsters*. This, according to Binoche, led to the first quandary.

"Akram thought he had to propose something: some choreography that would interest me. I told him that I was enjoying it, but maybe we could, instead, start with nothing, because I really knew nothing."

And so Juliet spent her first days in the studio

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playing with basic movements and words in order to overcome self-consciousness. Her improvisations with Khan led quickly to conversations about the nature of visibility.

"For me, just bending is difficult, and Akram has been so patient in helping me let go of my body. He feels more at ease with the invisible, but I need the visible."

Akram has an explanation: "Juliet has an openness about her, a generosity. The very first time we spoke I felt engaged with her. We bond when we see ourselves in another person – the 'I' within the other – and that's what happened between Juliet and myself."

It was here that the title was conceived. *In-I* started as *Inside-I*, which was later abbreviated by designer Anish Kapoor (a Turner Prize-winning artist in his own right). To date, rehearsals have echoed the themes of *Sacred Monsters*, in which inner desires and aspirations remain hidden due to fear and expectation.

Amusingly, Binoche and Khan betray their own reservations through self-effacing banter (one almost suspects they are quietly embarrassed at flirting with techniques others spend their lives perfecting). Khan, for example, responds with sceptical mumblings when Binoche advocates his acting talent.

"Really," she insists, "I think you want it so much, and you have to desire it in order to break through. Like dancing – if you don't have a strong desire how can you do it?"

Binoche is similarly flushed when Khan returns the compliment: "Juliet's movement language comes from herself, not from the knowledge of people saying 'this is how it's done, this is your training, this is how you're meant to move'. The less knowledge you have, the more of a blessing it can be. Knowledge can get in the way."

"Ah," snorts Binoche, "but it takes courage to train this bag of potatoes."

Courage, it seems, is key to the coupling. Khan, says Binoche, was brave to agree to her suggestion that he spend two days training with one of the world's leading acting coaches, Susan Batson. But he was perhaps even braver to temporarily abandon Sadler's Wells – where he is resident artist and has a captive audience – in favour of the Lyttelton auditorium.

"Nicholas Hytner approached me four years ago," recalls Khan. "He said that if I ever wanted to do

something with the National he would be open to a proposal. I thought this project with Juliet was the ideal choice, and [Sadler's Wells artistic director] Alistair Spalding was not offended.

"Juliet has given me the permission to be brave by demonstrating her own courage. To be honest, at the beginning I was waiting for her to turn back, especially from the movement. It's easy to challenge yourself within your own field because it's something you've been doing since you were a child. But to cross over – that's when people have expectations. I'm surprised we still turn up and go through the painful warm-ups; it means there's still hope and drive."

Khan maintains that his string of unexpected collaborations (the most recent, *Bahok*, was with the National Ballet of China) are not about pioneering new forms.

"The goal is to explore together; to learn and to share. I would never be arrogant enough to think I could pioneer a new form. Besides, when you pioneer a new form it becomes your prison. You become known as the one who did that."

Binoche seconds him: "It's jumping into the new. It might not be the new form of whatever, but it's going towards the new."

Binoche says she hopes audiences will focus less on her celebrity and use the experience to grow and transform: "I want people who see *In-I* to take something for themselves, not from me. It's about seeing something else, experiencing something better, something transformative. When I choose a film it has to be about something beyond myself, otherwise it's of no interest. It should be about people finding the 'I' in themselves."

Together, Binoche and Khan have reconciled egotism with humility.

"The ego," says Binoche, "is necessary for achieving anything; it's the table you stand on in order to reach something. But when you become too content with what you can do, and you feel like you're incapable of something new, that's when you have to let go of the ego."

Khan agrees, and argues that working with Binoche has allowed him to experience another creative perspective: "It's about understanding your own form by going into the other. I sometimes think I'm learning more about dance from Juliet than I would if I was working with a trained dancer. With her, my skills have to adjust to an unfamiliar world. All I know is that the body is consistent, and I can only learn how my body really reacts by throwing it into an unusual situation."

"We have creative, spiritual and emotional experiences," concludes Binoche. "But they have to go through the body, and the body is what proves our existence."

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Juliette Binoche. Photo: Marianne Rosenstiehl

'In-I' premieres at the National Theatre, London, on 18 September before touring internationally.