**Anita**

Welcome to Making a Scene, an Esplanade podcast about how art gets made. I am Anita Kapoor, your host for this episode. Now before the current age of lockdowns began, you might have seen me on television exploring different corners of the globe and sharing the stories of paradigm-shifting provocateurs from all walks of life. Today, from my home base in Singapore, I'll be talking to Farooq Chaudhry, the co-founder and executive producer of the Akram Khan Company, one of the most innovative dance companies in the world.

Farooq is joining us from his home base in London. That's where he started his professional career as a dancer before building a new relationship to his chosen art form as a producer, who helps to tell stories that bridge diverse cultures and disciplines. Now he doesn't know it yet, but I am beyond thrilled to be able to speak to him. And I will not even try to hide it. Farooq Chaudhry, welcome to our conversation.

**Farooq 1:00**

Good morning Anita. Well, that was– I feel flattered, honestly, to be speaking to you.

**Anita 1:06**

Farooq, you said through your Stories of Hope series – and anyone can read those Stories of Hope on the Akram Khan Company Instagram feed, a personal reflection series which happened through lockdown – that one of your greatest teachers Dave showed you that having answers is much less important than having a voice and asking beautiful questions. So I trust that today we conspire beautiful questions.

**Farooq 1:30**

Thank you Anita, well I'll do my best I mean, I'm… answers are boring, quite frankly, they shut things… As you may have read in the story that Dave told me, answers stop the conversation. So questions keep it alive.

**Anita 1:44**

Perfect. So I have 101 questions to ask you then.

**Farooq 1:48**

Fire away.

**Anita 1:50**

I'm going to begin in the present Farooq, because we can't ever get away from the fact that we're all still living with COVID-19, parts of the world are still living in lockdown. And I want to talk about that with our reflections through the arts as well. Now, I know that Carnival of Shadows was to be the company's 20th anniversary celebrations. And Outwitting the Devil was also being released at around the same time.

For me, these titles both seem foretellers of the future that we were all about to engage with. By March the company had totally swung into action, seamlessly transferred live to digital, working swiftly and very delicately with the audiences, capturing their attention and their feelings. How did this all start to happen for you all?

**Farooq 2:35**

It's interesting, you say that, because actually, it wasn't seamless, you know. Like the rest of the world, there was a panic, initial panic and sense of fear. And this kind of dread that we were going to lose our sense of purpose, not be able to tour and connect with audiences around the world. And the initial kneejerk reaction to this was, god, we’ve just got to put out our back catalogue online. So people can stay, our audiences can stay connected with us, and we can stay connected with them.

But then, on reflection, I think it’s really great, because Akram and Céline Gaubert, who's our communications manager, said look, maybe we should stop for a moment and think about what this means to us because we're also affected by the COVID situation. And maybe what we needed to do was be still and listen to what's happening to us, and then use that as a dynamic or a mechanism to express what we felt about what was going on around us.

So out of this came the Stories of Hope, The Architects of Stillness, the podcast that Akram did, talking to his daughter on Sunday evening telling her stories. So it was also not so much something that we wanted to speak outwards. It was something that we needed to speak inwards and self-reflect. And then I felt it had a greater emotional truth because of this.

**Anita 3:46**

Yes, it felt very instinctive. It felt very self aware as programming. When I started looking at Architects of Stillness, we're talking about, of course, things that were extremely present. Classes and talks and audio and behind the scenes. And then of course, there was a lot of reflection, and it felt like the company and the work that was being produced out of the time that we were all in lockdown, like you were holding space for everyone. And it really felt when I went back and forth, that it was like a masterclass in stillness, in community and emotional depth, in hope and in understanding. Is that how it feels for you now looking back?

**Farooq 4:23**

Well, I'm very grateful you say that Anita. I mean, I truly believe, and all of us at the company believe – and Akram, first and foremost – it has to mean something to us first. We had to be proud of the thing that we create, it has to speak back to us, like I just said. So what it means, let the world decide that. And I think that's also the creation of art. If you start thinking too much about what it means to the world outside and its value, it almost inhibits your capacity to be expansive, to be vulnerable, to allow yourself to almost let go of the control of the situation, and the expression of that project and those activities. So it needs the freedom to be itself. And we need to listen to that.

And so again, Architects of Stillness is about listening to ourselves at that moment of time, when we were feeling insecure, there was a sense of fear, we lost our sense of purpose. And I think like all things which are incredibly personal, you find a great deal of universalism in them. It's the thing about personal stuff is, it may be particular in its details to the person who expresses it. But somehow when you listen to them, they feel familiar, right? And I think that's what we're trying to do through these projects.

**Anita 5:35**

I'm actually gonna go backwards now to your background, and talking about the personal. You were born in Pakistan, raised in London. And you've said that your whole life journey has been about trying to find a bridge between different cultures. Can you share a little bit about what bridging cultures was like for you when you were growing up?

**Farooq 5:55**

Right. The lovely thing about saying is my whole life journey is about bridging cultures — I said that retrospectively, and like all retrospective reflections, you can add poetry, and you can embellish them to kind of make it feel like you knew in a way what was going on.

But the truth of the matter is, is that when I arrived with my family in London, in the ’60s, we were not wanted. And I spent the early part of my life trying to navigate and negotiate these people who did not want us, who made us feel marginalised, who didn't allow us to have voices, and also in some ways made us feel ugly about being ourselves.

**Anita**

Yes.

**Farooq**

And that was an incredibly difficult and traumatic experience growing up and had a very negative impact on my family life.

And I don't really know why, and I will never know, there's something in me that feels, I just can't live like this, I've got to find a way to connect with these people who are not prepared to understand me and accept me. And perhaps this dynamic is the thing that has been my psyche for my whole life. In my work, in my relationships. And so this bridging of cultures is a way for me to cross over, discover something new, connect with people. But also with the idea that I also can go back, I'm not remaining on the other side of a bridge. And that's the beauty of a bridge.

So this, yeah, this was a very difficult experience. And though my parents had no passion, if I'm going to be totally honest, my parents were complete philistines when it came to the arts. And strange that both myself and my sister ended up falling in love with dance, and the arts and, and I guess that was also a way to find a voice to connect with our souls, to create a sense of worthiness, and perhaps also make ourselves feel beautiful. Because as you connect with the arts, you connect with beauty and it expands your soul. And it makes you feel beautiful.

It's funny, I was reflecting on why I fell in love with dance. What was it particular about dance that made me want to do this thing? Because it's not easy. I came into it quite late. And two things, I think. First thing, it's being a non-verbal art form. It also allowed diversity, greater diversity, people I was dancing with, Asian people, Black people, white people, Latin Americans, it seemed to kind of be borderless in that way. And I think that's why I love it so much as an art form. I think it's great for global values, so to speak, but also something deeper than this, something physical. Because I do think dance is a form of physical intelligence. It speaks through the body.

And I remember when I was dancing this, what we're trying to do when you dance is you're trying to find this, this central sense of harmony in the body, but you do this because you're reaching out in different directions. Your one arm is going right, one arm is going left, the head is trying to touch the sky, the feet are going down to the earth. So you're working in this kind of opposing forces all the time and trying to find harmony in this. And perhaps unconsciously through dance, that's what I was doing. That's what I was doing in my life. And I was actually able to resolve those through my body.

**Anita 8:59**

Oh, wow. As you're talking, I felt myself sort of wanting to move in all kinds of different directions, sitting here. You know, this is, this is something that people don't actually know, and I was waiting for this podcast to tell you about it. When I was a little girl, I was dying to be a dancer. I went to one ballet class, they made me do the splits, and that was it. I was like, forget this. But I participated so much in that. And I remember in my teenage years, the freedom to actually just create whatever reality I wanted to create in that moment, or just to be completely at one with my body, which was such a beautiful thing and the way that you've just spoken I can, I’m literally putting my arms out right now.

**Farooq 9:40**

I truly believe if the world danced we’d be in such a happier place. Honestly. But also I think there's another feeling about dance. And I feel that you'll find that in lots of artistic practices, that it's one of those areas where you can simultaneously lose yourself and find yourself at the same time. And there are very few human expressions that allow you to do this. We're always going in one direction. We're always going towards an objective, to a goal, to a purpose.

But actually, that's a con. And we also con ourselves with this understanding that somehow we're in control of this direction. And we're not, really. And I turned 60 last weekend, and one thing I realised is I just don't have the answers anymore, and I’ve never really been in control. And that's okay.

**Anita**

How incredibly freeing.

**Farooq**

It is. It's liberating, honestly. I really felt a lot lighter since last Saturday, honestly.

**Anita**

And I think that's infinity, isn't it? The losing and the finding and the losing and the finding, it's beautiful.

**Farooq:**

Got to be. Beautiful. Yeah.

**Anita 10:35**

Now, you mentioned earlier that you came to dance much later. You became a dancer when you were 21. Is that correct?

**Farooq**

Correct. Yeah.

**Anita**

What was that feeling like coming into it a little bit older and not having sort of come into it when everybody else or when you “should have”?

**Farooq 10:52**

It wasn't easy, but I fell in love with dance when I went to Sadler's Wells when I was 17. I used to go clubbing quite a lot as a teenager. And then two big films came along, Fame and Saturday Night Fever.

**Anita**

Oh, the best!

**Farooq**

The best! And when John Travolta was strutting down there, and you know being that… I wanted to be John Travolta, honestly, I wanted that, that sense of worthiness, expansion, feeling beautiful. Honestly, it really attracted me.

But then I saw contemporary dance for the first time at Sadler's Wells when I was 17 years old. And that was it. It was like an epiphany, you know, this black dancer came on stage, his name was Namron. And I'd never seen a male be so poetic, so athletic, so sensitive, and speak through the body like that. And I was instantly compelled to want to do it.

Unfortunately, where I went to school, there was no access to any contemporary dance or even ballet classes at the time. And it wasn't until I got to university when I was 21, to do an English degree at Sussex University, that I took my first dance class. And literally as I walked out, I went to the dean of the university and I said, “You know what, I want to leave, I want to be a dancer.” And he looked bemused. And he says, “Well, why didn't you think about this before you came to study English?” And I said, “Because I only did it an hour ago.”

And you can imagine, you can imagine, because I didn't have an easy life. And there was all these voices around me saying, “Are you crazy? You've worked so hard, you've got your O-levels, A-levels, you've got yourself to university, you've rebuilt your life out of a very difficult beginning. Why do you want to go and do this crazy thing?” But there was a voice, something inside of me was speaking loudly. And that was the moment where I knew the difference between things I want and things I need. And I needed dance.

**Anita 12:31**

Oh, my gosh, I'm just going to let that settle in to all of our listeners. Beautiful, really, really beautiful.

But then you completed a master's degree in arts management, and you were a dance manager for a while. So what happened? I mean, why did you make that move?

**Farooq 12:48**

I mean, I was fortunate enough to have 15 years of a professional dance career after I graduated from the London Contemporary Dance School. And because I came into it late, I think, I worked in many different forms in opera, musical theatre, in some really great contemporary dance companies. I even was a backing dancer for a very famous pop group for a year around the world.

**Anita**

Are you allowed to say who?

**Farooq**

Erasure.

**Anita**

No! Oh my god! Oh, that’s amazing.

**Farooq 13:15**

I know, I know. It was amazing. But you know, it was the most incredible experience. I was flying around the world first class, staying in these incredible hotels, these aftershow parties, but I was so– after six months, I felt so impoverished. I missed going to class, I missed being in the studio, because I was just on stage for a year dancing these various numbers.

So it also made me really aware of how important dance is to me as something that has great value, you know, personal value. But anyway, so you get to that point at 38. I had two injuries in my knees and I felt like I had actually squeezed as much juice out of my lemon as I could.

And that was it. No more dancing for me. And then I kind of explored my options and a couple of dancers I knew, who’d - former dancers - went on to study a master's degree at City University in London. So right, okay, I'll go into that because that way, I still stay connected. I didn't feel like I was stopping, I needed to keep going. And doing the master's degree was a way of keeping going.

**Anita 14:09**

So 15 years of dancing, new explorations, lots of new options. And then you met dance and choreographer Akram Khan. That was in what? 1999?

**Farooq**

Yes, yeah, yeah.

**Anita**

So both of you launched the Akram Khan Company just one year later. And that's when you started calling yourself a producer rather than administrator or manager. When you actually began working with him. And it seems that your priorities at that point then shifted on to the production itself, rather than managing the people and the organisation around it. How did this transition actually happen?

**Farooq 14:45**

Well, let me go back a few years, just at the very beginning of that first meeting with Akram. Because at that point, I was a trainee arts manager in an organisation in London, learning the ropes. I have to say I wasn't particularly excited by the training I was getting, not particularly because of the people who were training me, but I just felt like there's got to be more to dance than just learning a bunch of skills, you know. And because I was instinctively creative, I felt I needed to kind of release that more in my work. And I felt like I was being a facilitator for artists, getting the dates, getting the money, doing funding applications. And I could do it quite well, but it didn't really excite me.

And then I saw Akram on stage, at Southbank. And my world changed. You know, I mean, it was like I’d never seen, again, it was a bit like seeing Namron in 1977 on stage. I saw a new view of the world, I saw a new version of dance, a new pathway into the future. But I also saw an incredibly gifted individual with a voice, with really a voice.

So we had a couple of conversations, and invited me to see some performances. But I don't think I really got to know Akram until I saw him do a performance of a very early work called Loose in Flight, which was in Newcastle in February 2000. And I cried. I literally cried, I was so moved. I think when you're really moved, you can't speak, nothing comes out apart from pure emotion. And then I knew that I had to work with him because I was going to change with him. I wasn't just going to change him. And I think that's why our relationship has been so dynamic over the years.

So okay, so then I start working with him, we start to set up a company, we start to think about what are we going to do, where we want to go. And honestly, Anita, we hadn't got a clue. We were so naive. All we knew is what we didn't want to do.

**Anita 16:30**

The best creativity comes from naiveté.

**Farooq**

It does! And actually by- the fact is that often by the things you don't want to do, it's like a piece of clay. We, you throw it out there, you take the bits off you don't need and it kind of reveals the statue. So in a way, our vision was formed like this, I was kind of… I didn't even call myself anything, in the beginning. I was like a manager or an agent, a friend, a mentor, a collaborator, whatever you want to call it.

**Anita**

Former backup dancer for Erasure...

**Farooq**

Yes! I have had many identities in my life. And that's the beauty of life. But then it really the moment it occurred to me that I was a producer was about five years in. And that was because someone who was kind of coaching me at the time says to me, “You know what, while you're sitting at the desk doing all that stuff for Akram, work permits and everything, you're losing the company money.”

And I kind of stepped back from it and I thought “Oh my god, you know what, I have to get there. I have to explore the world, I have to network, look for new opportunities.” Not just financial opportunities, but creative partnerships, collaborations. People we could work with.

And then that moment, I think, “Is this what you call a producer?” Because it actually hadn't been used in dance at that point. It'd been used in music. It'd been used in theatre. It was used in the film industry, but it hadn't been used in dance. And that was the moment, I think it was about 2005, 4, when I started calling myself a producer.

**Anita 17:53**

Incredible. And then you sold your apartment to fund Akram’s first project.

**Farooq**

Yeah.

**Anita**

So that's a huge one. anybody listening to just that line, it's already sort of… *ding ding ding!* But what was it about the joint vision for the work and the company that gave you so much faith?

**Farooq 18:09**

Well, you know, I sold my apartment at the very beginning when Akram told me about the first work he wanted to do. And it's because we believed in something and we were prepared to take risks for it. And I think that is also in the DNA of a producer. A producer and an artist take risks together. They have a creative view of the world, they have a need to develop a craft and a voice. And I think sometimes you've just got to do what it takes to make it happen.

And you know, the arts is not easy. Now, if you're a young artist with potential, you can spend years struggling, picking up scraps of money here and there, and your confidence gets sapped. And I thought it was really important when we were so fearless and naive. And we need to fuel it with risk, with this capacity to take risks. And that was why I sold the flat and put the money in the first production. I honestly didn't feel it was going to be a waste of money. And I didn't even feel it was a risk. I just felt it was the right thing to do.

**Anita**

And I think that's above risk. That is just going with that beautiful flow, and knowing that it's going to lead somewhere, but you haven't a clue where it's going to go. But this feels right.

**Farooq**

Absolutely. And also on top of that, you’re kind of looking forward to getting there, even though you don't know where it is, you know?

**Anita 19:19**

Absolutely. So let me ask you a little bit about also your background, as a performer and a dancer, and how that actually influences the way that you work with artists, as a producer. And also how does it influence, and is it different to the way that you might work with sponsors and other partners?

**Farooq 19:35**

Yeah, I mean, completely, you know, because being a former dancer, and in a way I consider myself an artist as well, having a creative view of the world. I think that adds a great deal of value to any process, you know, because a producer’s also a collaborator, they're not just you know, like a service provider. And all great artistic journeys are collaborative with everyone.

Even, I'm beginning to actually now think that we, we don't have employees in the office, we have collaborators. And then once we see people with this mindset, and with this perspective, there's so much more that comes out of people, there's so much more to offer. So yeah, definitely.

Particularly in the early years, the first 10 years working with Akram, we were like having 40 conversations a day on the phone, about a new piece of work. And it would be anything it would be like, I'd watch a Quentin Tarantino film and I saw the way it was lit, or the way that music was used and absurd situations, or Akram had read a book, or listened to a piece of music, and he just needed to share it with me. And this, this kind of playful type of conversation is so important in terms of shaping an idea.

I don't think ideas grow out of logic, they kind of grow out of chaos, and in a way then you need to create the space for the chaos to be a beautiful space, you know, a place where you can ask those beautiful questions.

**Anita 20:51**

Absolutely. And I think when we're not so conscious of it, we do create the space. The moment that we become conscious of it, that's when we're using logic and the head, and then we start to actually diminish the space.

**Farooq 21:00**

So true. Because you know, I don’t think we human beings like this feeling of being out of control. Because when we're out of control, we get in touch with our sense of fear, our contradictions, our doubts, and we connect with our flaws. But the truth, in my opinion, is those are the things that really make us who we are. They make us authentic, they make us complete, they don't make us less.

**Anita 21:23**

Absolutely. You were also the creative producer for English National Ballet from 2013 to 2017. And you've also been the international creative producer for China's national dance icon, Yang Liping. And that's been since January 2016. How did these roles actually come about? And how has that experience then affected and evolved you and added to the kaleidoscope of nuances and feelings and ideas?

**Farooq 21:48**

Having worked with Akram when I first worked with ENB back in 2013, I had already at that point been working with Akram for 13 years. And I've also got a voice, and I've got a craft that I need to develop. And I think I continued working with Akram, but I needed to challenge myself in different ways. And working with Akram was like working in a speedboat. You know, like you could be very agile and move quickly.

And then Tamara Rojo then became the artistic director of ENB with an unbelievably beautiful, bold, audacious vision of how she could transform the company. And I’d met her like five years prior to this on a leadership course. And I knew she was the real deal. She meant what she said, and she was going to make it happen. So I really love people like this. The ones who are prepared to stick their necks above the parapet, take huge risks. So she spoke to me about building a new team around the company and being part of a vision. And that really excited me.

But in addition to that, I was going to work with a supertanker now, not just a speedboat, you know. You've got a large organisation that moves slower sometimes in time and how do you keep it agile? How do you keep it responsive? How do you allow it to listen to itself and allow itself to grow rather than, like institutions, they’re so kind of hamstrung by their protocols and their rules. And that was a very exciting first few years, you know, and I was also able to marry my interests because I kind of introduced… Tamara really wanted Akram to work for ENB. So I made the introduction, I got that conversation moving. I started to talk about the company doing more international touring. In fact, we brought Le Corsaire to Singapore, I think in 2016.

But also just began to open up the world. I mean, I didn't do it, Tamara had that vision as well. But it was exciting to work with someone who saw the world and had the same energy and values as myself. So it was extremely rewarding. And I learned, I began to exercise my producer muscles in a completely different way.

What was really nice is when I left, one of my proudest achievements, both as a professional and personally, was be able to secure Pina Bausch’s Rite of Spring for English National Ballet back in 2017, I think. You know, I spent a year speaking to the Pina Bausch Foundation. And that was the first time they ever allowed a company outside of the Paris Opera to have that work licensed to the English National Ballet. And it was a huge sense of achievement, because it's a work I love so much.

And then from there, for your second question about Yang Liping. This is a more interesting journey. Now this is where I almost start reinventing myself. Because I got a phone call from Alistair Spalding from Sadler's Wells, who's the artistic director of Sadler’s Wells, telling me that Yang Liping was developing a new work. And she wanted to think about how this work could be toured or seen in the international dance market.

So I took a trip out to Kunming, where Yang Liping lives and works and went into studio. She was making this amazing thing, work called Under Siege, which was retelling this 2000-year-old story of the transference of two dynasties. And everything was on an epic scale. And there was this whole world that I kind of didn't really understand but I was completely fascinated by. And I think that's also part of who I am. When I go into situations where I feel a little bit frightened and lost, I think maybe I'm in the right place here, because I'm going to learn something.

And so we had this really fascinating conversation, I started watching rehearsals, and I was, had to be very careful, because I can't go in there thinking I know best. This is the danger when you've done so much and you worked with great artists, like Akram. You have a whole amount of knowledge, you know, history of knowledge and wisdom and experience. But most important thing for me was to kind of see the world through the eyes of Yang Liping, and try to understand what she wanted to do with the work.

So we talked for a long time. And I was very committed, she was a little bit surprised by my level of commitment. She goes, “Why do you care so much?” And I said, because the work is the most important thing. And I said, to be honest, I'm not here to serve you. I'm here to serve the work. And I think we are all servants of the work and the vision of the work.

And so I worked with her for about a year together and the creative team, and I brought in some lighting people from Europe, and just kind of slightly tweaked it. Because you know, not everyone's got like football field theatres like China right, around the world. And so we had to kind of scale it down and make it tourable. And also kind of a little bit more, leave some space for it to be decoded by Western audiences.

**Anita 26:05**

As I listen to you, I see this enlightened and expansive vision and all the experiments and the learning. And then of course, the humility and empathy, about being able to see it through other people's eyes. And that felt like the next stage of your evolution and development.

But you've also said that one of your biggest roles as a producer is in the final stage of creation as an editor. So how do you take all of this expansiveness and edit it down or edit it in a way that still feels that we get the essence?

**Farooq 26:41**

For many years… I mean, I will not be a producer, if I cannot sit in the studio through critical moments of the process, and particularly in the last part of the process, when the work is beginning to find itself, beginning to shape itself into according to what its objectives and meaning– the meaning of itself. So that would be the moment where you're looking at the details. And you're mostly at that point is you're taking things away, you're not adding.

And I had a conversation with Akram and I said to him last week, I said, “You know, I think your great gift is not your capacity to create, but your capacity to destroy.” And so what we're really doing at that stage in the editing, is you're destroying things, you're taking away the stuff that has no relevance. As beautiful as they may be in terms of being moments or, or the amount of time or money was spent on making them. They just don't add any motional truth to the work.

**Anita**

This is non-attachment.

**Farooq**

Yeah, I mean, it's, I don't know, maybe it's a deep form of attachment. I don't really know.

**Anita**

I think it's non-attachment, because the guts to destroy what you've created, therefore, you are not attached to it. And we could interpret that as perfectionism but…

**Farooq 27:46**

I guess so. I mean, the thing is, like all creative processes you create too much. When people start enjoying the expression of saying something creatively, it becomes unbridled, it just, everything comes out, and you have a lot of stuff. But when you're trying to tell a story, you're trying to explore an idea, to keep it pure and to keep it powerful, it has to find a simplicity. And it's not the kind of simplicity which is the reverse of complexity, it’s the kind of simplicity you have to earn, you have to work for.

And it takes a lot of courage and a lot of conviction to kind of strip away things that are not necessary at that given moment of time when you're putting this work on stage. And that's why that editing, that is the critical stage of any process. I actually really enjoy that moment most. It's like, you're coming towards the top of the mountain. And the fun part is not getting to the top of the mountain, the fun part is knowing you will, and you've got the courage to get there.

**Anita 28:45**

Yes. But we also must come down the mountain. And that leads me to my next question, which is, you've used the word investment instead of subsidy with regards to financial support from Arts Council England, and said that this is the first step towards becoming economically viable and entrepreneurial. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what you mean by that, and how you arrived at this way of thinking?

**Farooq 29:06**

I think for a long time, I was reading a lot of early Arts Council documents and stuff. They, you know what kind of language they use, and I understand why they do this, because it has to reach out to the government and there's arguments to the government about why they should support the arts.

But what really troubled me was this idea that it was a handout. And it was underwriting loss. And I have an entrepreneurial spirit, as you've probably picked up by now. And anything which clips the wings, and doesn't allow you to fly and take risks, it felt that language wasn't appropriate.

So when I was speaking to the Arts Council, in the early days, I said, “Look, but you're investing in us because you see something that we have, that will add value to your mission and your vision of a creative society, right? And so you're taking a risk. You're not just giving us money to underwrite loss.” You know, and it was really important that this language changes. And I think language needs to evolve as we evolve.

I think it's really important that people recognise that funding institutions, co-producers, sponsors, that they are working, not in a transactional way, that we are all invested in this thing, this thing that we care about, right? And therefore, if we changed our mindset, we may change the way that we look at work and the way we support work, and understand that we can change the systems that we use to allow artists and their work to evolve and move forwards.

Another thing that I often say is that there's always a disconnect between the audience and the artists, right? Artists makes, the audience, audience buy the ticket, they sit down, but the audience are the final collaborator. They complete the creative process. And if we spoke to audiences with that understanding and that message, they have a much greater value than buying a ticket and sit down and have a really wonderful experience.

Because it's about creating a sense of belonging. That's what art and culture does. It brings us together. And that's why we've suffered so much by not having it available to us over the last six months. Brings us together, it connects us. And it creates that sense of belonging and a sense that we have a common narrative somehow.

**Anita 31:13**

I think another aspect of sort of completing that creative process is how you work to explore intercultural and interdisciplinary storytelling. I think that's been very, very integral to your work as a producer.

So I want to talk a little bit about that, because the Akram Khan Company draws on classical Kathak and contemporary movement, as well as many diverse cultural references and dance genres. And it also features more mature dancers than many typically seen on most contemporary dance stages, which I'm so thankful for. And you're also often collaborating with artists from other disciplines.

So I want to just go back to the beginning of when this all started to happen and evolve. What was the London dance and arts scene like in 2000, when the company started presenting this kind of work?

**Farooq 31:59**

Yeah, it's really interesting because when I first met Akram, he said to me that he started off as an Indian classical Kathak dancer. Then he learned contemporary dance as a teenager, and his body got confused. As you do, you know, if you're learning different things, you have all this information, and it kind of all knocks it out of touch and you're having to deal with something new.

And he said, rather than try to kind of logically manage that, he let it make its own decisions. He let his body organically work its way through this confusion. And in a way that was already set up in him. So actually, in effect, Akram was collaborating with himself from the very beginning, with these two languages.

And again, going back to this idea of the building bridges between different things, I thought this was a natural instinct in both of us to kind of reach out and learn from places that are unfamiliar, from disciplines that we don't know. Because in a way, by stepping away from what you know, you begin to understand what you know even more. And this started to happen, and it seemed to enrich our thinking so much more.

And this idea that dance always has to be young. I mean, recent years, we have older artists, it almost feels more natural to do that. Just take a slice of society with young people, old people, diverse people from everywhere, onto stage, and make it really look like you're looking at a little piece of the world.

**Anita 33:14**

Looking back on 2000 and where we are today, and some of the things that have come to pass in the last six months, this feels so futuristic, because I think we've all begun to ache, from the lack of this very thing, the reaching out to the unfamiliar places and learning and evolving and wanting to be connected to it.

There's that and then on the other side, we have this creeping back, or rather storming back into a monoculturalism. These two polarities, you know, where we're lacking, it seems, this emotional intelligence towards understanding one another. Dignity and respect and interculturalism. I just want – you touched on it earlier when we talked about your childhood – when Black Lives Matter started to unfold and gain that traction, and march forward, what were you feeling? What were you thinking? And let's link that back to the work that the company does.

**Farooq 34:05**

Yeah. Well, look, I'm going to step back again, before I look at the Black Lives Matter question. Because I think the time that Akram and I arrived, there was also the kind of the advent of globalism, right? In the beginning of 2000 people were moving around the world and bouncing off each other and having these beautiful collisions and sometimes not so beautiful collisions.

**Anita**

Yes, it was a beautiful scene, wasn't it?

**Farooq**

It was beautiful, and everyone was hungry to learn from each other. We could eat different foods, we could wear different type of clothings, we could see different places, we could get new perspectives and ideas. And it was an incredible sense of excitement around this.

And then what happened, I feel like two or three years ago, people started to panic like we do, because we're naturally fearful, human beings. And we all start to ask ourselves a question. Now who are we? Where do we belong? Because now we almost became homogenised by being global.

And so there was this kind of reaction to this, my theory is that we started to become very nationalistic. Started to protect our own personal sense of identity. And this was a kind of counter-reaction to that kind of very dynamic and energetic sense of global energy that was created at the beginning of the millennium.

And now coming to the whole Black Lives Matter issue. Thing about this is, this has been going on for a very long time.

**Anita**

This is not new.

**Farooq**

This is not new. And I think the moment that we were able to stop and actually really look at this thing in the face and feel uncomfortable about the realities of what this means, because what this really means is a whole bunch of people, Black, Asian, people of colour, ethnically diverse, have had silent voices for way too long. They'd been sitting on the margins, they'd been invisible.

And in a way – and I love the arts – but I also think we've been complicit in this in a way. Because I know that the programming of many theatres and festivals around the world, have been very diverse. So they present these incredibly diverse, liberal, very democratic views of the world in terms of what they put on, museums, and so on and so forth. But the truth is, institutionally, the system has not changed. And so this thing is that we will not be a better society if we do not tap into the full range of talent, voice, perspective, potential that exists in all of us.

And again, the danger is, and this is where we have to be really, really careful. It's like once someone has power, because this is about power as well, right? The tendency is to shape people in the image of the dominant power, right? That's what happens. So you think you're being altruistic, but actually what you're really doing is trying to create people in your own image.

And this is what we have to avoid, and hopefully, in this situation, stop and seriously think about this, because I'm on a couple of racial equality task forces in London on two large cultural institutions. And it's about allyship, autonomy, allowing those differences to have value of their own. The ideas of excellence and quality are not determined by the people in power. And also most importantly, it's about people having opportunities to succeed and fail on their own terms.

**Anita**

Yes, without it being massaged one way or another, really.

**Farooq**

Absolutely.

**Anita 37:10**

It’s what you said earlier about just letting things happen naturally. And I think so much of the way the world has worked is that the moment that things are starting to burgeon, there is this decision to sort of squash it, and tame it.

And I think with Black Lives Matter, what has happened is that there was no squashing and there was no taming. It burgeoned, and it just came out. And it's caused all of us to begin to think about polarity, to begin to think about what are we making? In what image are we making? It doesn't, the arts cannot escape this.

**Farooq 37:45**

No. And look, we cannot escape it. And also, we have the power to do good with this as well, because, you know, we’re, as you know, the arts are quite porous, it’s quite borderless. And so, you know, organisations, people in leadership have to really understand what they can really do. They need to ask themselves, are they doing enough? What can be done? And that means they have to make themselves, which leaders don't like to do, they have to make themselves vulnerable. And that's not easy.

**Anita**

No, it isn't.

**Farooq**

And I think the world has become very vulnerable, very fragile right now. And that's not weakness. This is a moment to press the reset button, and do things differently and be courageous and accept that we're going to need patience and consistency to really bring about change. We can't do tokenistic quick fix stuff, because it, as we know, we've done it too often and it doesn't work.

**Anita 38:33**

I like what you said about vulnerability. I would add to that that vulnerability is really expansion. It's not contraction, which is I think… fragility is a little bit more contraction.

**Farooq**

Right, that's a very good point. I like the way you've put that Anita. Yeah, absolutely.

**Anita 38:47**

Now, I know that the Akram Khan company, you work with dancers from different cultural and artistic traditions, you're attracted to artists who try to negotiate two different worlds. Has everything that has happened, the polarities that have happened, of race, or the dynamics in that, has that changed how the company now operates? Or has it evolved the art?

**Farooq 39:11**

Yeah, yeah, I think it will, I don't know how yet. And I think like all these things, they're often subconscious and unconscious. And I think that's how art works, it begins to feed itself into your psyche, of the organisation and culture. And I'm sure in the next few years, you'll see quite some differences in the way that we think about ourselves and the way we engage. And also the kind of collaborations that we take on.

This is a very difficult moment Anita, we're coming up to our 20 years anniversary in October. And now we're sitting on 20 years of history, 20 years of legacy, 20 years of memory, 20 years of wisdom. And this is scary for me, because, you know, there's the fear that you don't want to lose this.

But to move forward, to take on these new challenges, we're going to have to destroy some of this, we're going to have to give it up, we're going to have to sacrifice. And, and we have power and influence now. We're in a position where we cannot be careless, or frivolous, or even vain with that stuff. Because that's only going to stop our evolution, it's only going to shut the doors and put up the walls and break those bridges that allow us to continually evolve and to grow.

So in answer to your question, I think things will come through and I already can pick it up in some of the conversations we're having. But it will take a few years before they really start to reveal themselves.

**Anita 40:32**

Absolutely. And you are also living in London, which is decidedly a post-Brexit Britain, right? How much time do we have for this particular question? You know, but I mean, I think that this is just another part of that kaleidoscope of change, you know, because you said a very poignant word just now: vanity. Vanity is ego. You know, and I think that we're all having to come to terms with that, whether as a country as individuals as a company, as artists.

**Farooq 41:01**

Yeah, absolutely. And the thing about being vain, you always want more, it's natural instinct, the ego says, I want twice what I've got. And once I've got twice what I got, I want that again and again and again.

**Anita**

Vanity is also nationalism.

**Farooq**

Yeah, nationalism. Vanity is also an inability to accept oneself for who they really are. It's almost a false construct that you create of yourself. But yeah, I mean, Brexit. Oh, my god, that's all we spoke about in London for three years. And now all we spoke about this year is COVID. I wonder what we're going to be speaking about next year. I hope it's something more positive and more forward thinking.

And I really hope that we, I mean, I'm an idealistic kind of person and maybe a little bit romantic. But I hope that we come out a little bit kinder, more empathetic, more appreciative of the beauty of difference that we have in our world, and how that makes us so unique as human beings, you know. That we don't have to be the same. We don't have to hold on to everything. And growth is also sacrifice, you know.

**Anita 41:59**

I was reading Stories of Hope, which I just absolutely loved, how the company, yourself, you created all of these moments of vulnerability that really kept, I think, everybody, including myself, coming back to the Instagram page, so very clever. But also it was just very authentic and extremely vulnerable.

And one of the stories you talked about wanting to get all of your dance movements correct at once, a very long time ago, and how receiving the gift of advice to work on just one. Choosing to fix only one thing at a time.

And I wanted to talk about that in reference to failure. Because in 2002, Kaash was, in your own words, a disaster, a failure. And accompanying that pain and recognition and acceptance and courage and the real meaning derived from all of that. So can we talk about it a little bit? Because failure isn't something that we make readily available in our learning.

**Farooq 42:59**

Yeah. And the funny thing is, it's where we learn the most, isn't it? That's where we learn. We gain new insights and understanding through our mistakes and our failure. Life's too easy when you keep succeeding, and you just end up being kind of stuck in the same place.

**Anita**

And kind of a bit of a pain in the ass, to be honest.

**Farooq**

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I couldn't agree more. But just to explain that Kaash experience. So this was the second work that Akram had created. It was a collaboration with Anish Kapoor, the great sculptor, and Nitin Sawhney. And it was ambitious. I mean, you know, maybe in retrospect, probably a bit too ambitious for that moment where we were in our career or our trajectory. But we were bold, and we needed to take risks.

So you know, he made the work. And I think the weight of expectation that was on this young, emerging talent was too great for him at the time. And so when the work premiered in France, back in, I think was March 2002, it wasn't ready. It wasn't finished. It was incomplete.

And so many very important festival directors came to see it and said “Nah, not good. Akram is a one hit wonder,” and left. You can imagine the next morning we were like, really, really low, and crestfallen…

**Anita**

Crushed!

**Farooq 44:08**

Crushed is the word, absolutely crushed. And then I kind of stopped and maybe this is my very powerful survival instinct that comes from my early years of growing up in London. Said, “You know what, okay, so we failed, but how did we fail?” We didn't fail because we got the concept wrong. We didn't fail because we didn't have the skill. We didn't fail because we were trying to deny something. We failed because we lost our nerve.

And once we kind of identified the kind of failure that we made, then we said, okay, we go back to the theatre, we've got another six weeks, let's rework this piece. Let's get it right, let's look at… because our anxiety and our nerves and weight of expectation got in the way, and let's put it right. And we did. And then I contacted all these directors and people, said, “Look, you don't often get second chances. But please come back and see this work.”

And when it came back, it was a beautiful work. It ended up being what it should have been. And we learned a great deal about that. About trust. And trying to keep the noise of the outside world away when you're trying to make.

And also, I've learned as well, and this is a new thing I've been saying, is that you don't just move at the speed of reputation, or power or money. You need to move at the speed of trust. And we were not moving at the speed of trust in each other when we were making Kaash. So many lessons came out of that failure and I really think, Anita, it laid the foundation stone for what came after. It was such an important milestone in what we eventually have become.

**Anita 45:33**

What you're saying applies to these six months, as they apply to the last decade in the timeline of this world. Because perhaps these last six months have really been about a moment for us to be a little crushed, and to return to the source of actually being human. And what is that? That is to trust, and to have connection and kindness, inclusivity and love.

**Farooq 45:55**

Absolutely, gosh, that's so true. You know, and I think we conned ourselves with this idea that we were hurtling towards this incredible sense of progress. And we were going to this perfect world. And we were going to achieve it, when actually what we were really probably were doing was hurtling towards the edge of a cliff, and we're going to fall off.

So yeah, no, I think we've been crushed. And actually what was going to restore it, and you've used that word, which I'm so attached to, is the word love. And you find people actually in funding institutions and corporate leaders don't like using this word, you see? It's really funny, they should use it more often.

**Anita**

I think so too. We should send out a little bit of a dictionary of lexicons that should be used when talking about funding in the arts.

**Farooq**

Absolutely.

**Anita**

Starting with love.

**Farooq**

Starting with love.

**Anita 46:41**

I think this was really, we're at that point now where, you know, we're just at the precipice and we must pick ourselves up, and we must retrace some of our steps or make new journeys and new discoveries.

Farooq, it has been a conversation that I will never forget. Thank you so very much for taking the time to speak with me, to speak to all of our listeners who will be listening in to Making A Scene, and for sharing such deep and intimate thoughts and feelings, and for showing us what dance is made of. Which is connection, depth, questions, craft, and most of all, honesty, where I think we can all draw from and go towards, or stand still with.

**Farooq**

Thank you so much Anita, it has been such a pleasure talking to you and I really do love these conversations because they are my moments of reflection too. So you were so graceful, so open and you showed a great deal of love. So thank you, and thank you to all the audiences for giving me this opportunity.

**Anita**

Lots of love back.

**Farooq**

Take care.

Making A Scene is produced by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore's national performing arts centre. Look for more episodes of Making A Scene at esplanade.com/offstage, and on Spotify and SoundCloud. Thanks for listening, and stay tuned for more inspiring conversations with art makers.