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# Ballet Nacional de España, Coliseum, London

## Akram Khan, Sadler's Wells, London

Spain's government-sponsored dance company purveys glossy flamenco-lite, while another national dancer shows how it can be done

REVIEWED BY [JENNY GILBERT](#) | SUNDAY 02 MAY 2010

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Given the number of Spanish-born ballet stars scattered around the world it's curious that Spain should lack a flagship classical company of its own.

Ballet Nacional de España, currently at the Coliseum, is definitely national, nationalistic even, but it's not what we know as ballet. Founded in the late Seventies after the death of General Franco, it has merged elements of flamenco with zarzuela (Spain's musical-

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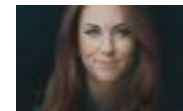
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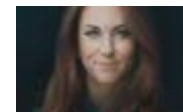
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theatre style) and regional dances such as the bolero, cachucha and seguidillas Manchegas (the seductive dance from where the cheese originates) to create something that, if nothing else, is thoroughly Made in Spain. Clearly the process hasn't been plain sailing - company directors have come and gone with despairing rapidity - but the result, on this showing at least, is confident and glossy, if ever so slightly vacuous: just the sort of theatre that governments like.

Where flamenco shows usually strive for intimacy and spontaneity, Ballet Nacional is smartly drilled and conceived on a huge canvas: think Riverdance with ruffles. The costumes, always striking, sometimes out-dazzle the dancing. In Dualia, by fashionable choreographic duo Carlos Rodriguez and Angel Rojas, a tight posse of men swirls black silk capes to give a glorious fleeting impression of blown peonies, while the women's flesh-coloured frilled dresses, tight to the thigh, have an opulent sexiness that's almost overwhelming when multiplied by a dozen bodies. Movement-wise, the touristic clichés also arrive en masse: alternate hitched shoulders (check), bull's horn poses (check), couples frozen in amorous clinches (check), and ferocious unisons of castanets. It's all buffed to a high shine and immaculately danced, but it feels like a reproduction, not an original - sketches of Spain intended for global consumption.

The second half of the Coliseum show is dominated by La Leyenda, a blowsy tribute by the company's current director Jose Antonio to the legendary flamenco dancer Carmen Amaya, represented by two women, one in trousers, one in a dress. It's a sprawling work, with sections that seem to belong to another show. Perhaps if the details of Amaya's life were as familiar in Britain as they are in Spain, the high-kicking character in a sparkly jumper might make more sense. As in the first half, glib taped music casts a pall, although it's only when a gaggle

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of singers and guitarists wander on that you realise the extent of what you've been missing. The highlight, though, is the dance-off between Cristina Gomez's womanly version of Amaya, and that of manly Elena Algado, possessor of the shapeliest bottom ever to sport the flamenco male's traditional high-waist trows. Then, and only then, do we get a glimpse of the off-the-leash furies of which flamenco is capable.

With its stamped rhythms, coiling hands and melismatic vocals, the Spanish form shares many features with the kathak of northern India (a result of the gypsies' peregrinations before they settled in Spain), and like the best modern flamenco, kathak too has been flirting with other cultures.

Akram Khan – London born and trained first in kathak and then British contemporary dance – is well placed to broker such liaisons. Neither an out-and-out moderniser nor a dogged purist, he manages to keep a beautifully articulate foot in both camps.

His latest work, Gnosis, (ancient Greek for spiritual knowledge) takes a narrative snippet from the Indian epic, the Mahabharata, and infuses it with sounds and images from east and west. Musically (and here every dot and squeak of it is vibrantly live and present) he invites Japanese taiko drum and cello into the sacred kathak line-up of tabla, voice and sarod. The movement, meanwhile, seems to have surrendered constraints of any kind to achieve a state of pure expressiveness.

The scrap of story concerns a queen who, on learning that her husband the king has lost his sight, determines to live the remainder of her life blindfolded, in an act of empathy. She later dies in a fire, partly as a result of having lost control of her warring sons.

Khan's piece builds imaginatively on images of blindness, exploiting the extreme strength and delicacy of his Japanese co-star, Yoshie Sunahata, to suggest a figure grand in spirit but frail in body. A long sequence during which she squats, Kodo drummer-style, and muscularly swings her arms as if beating the life out of someone or something (her own fate, perhaps) is riveting. Still more unforgettable is the closing image of Khan, himself now embodying the queen, being consumed by flames, progressing from shock, through agony, to a kind of blurred surrender, his entire body buffeted by burning winds to a state of nothingness. That this happens without recourse to fiery light effects makes its impact all the more profound.



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A first half of classical kathak, with Khan's feet playing ping-pong with the tabla player's madly complex rhythms and colours, is superlative in every way.

*Ballet Nacional de Espana: today (0871 911 0200). Akram Khan: Birmingham Town Hall (0121-780 3333) 7 & 8 May*

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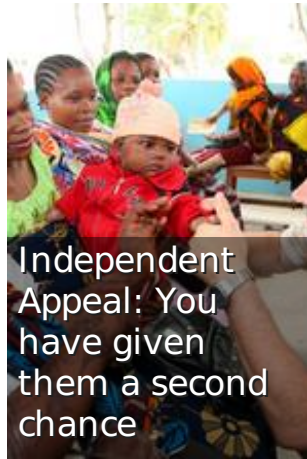
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