How Choreography Integrate Interculturalism—“Cultural Identity in Dance Choreography Based on Akam Khan’s Works”

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Abstract

Cultural identity is a personal feature and a feature of a certain group consisted of people who have the same cultural identity or educational background. As an intercultural communication media, dance can express specific information about cultural identity. Dance explores the movement of the body. Dancers communicate with viewers through bodies. Dance can convey some abstract ideas to the viewers. Dance is not merely a communicative movement of the body, and it is associated with the social and objective world. This essay aims to explore the way choreography integrate interculturalism using Akram Khan’s dance creations as examples. I will focus on exemplifying the manifestations of his new interculturalism in his choreography. To be specific, I will investigate how cultural identity can be integrated into choreography based on Khan’s dance works. Khan’s work Zero Degrees (2005), Desh (2011), and XENOS (2018) will be analyzed in the following sections. By respecting other cultures and sharing ideas, the problems caused by cultural differences can be mitigated.

Keywords

Interculturalism, Choreography, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

As the globalization and internationalization develop in depth, multiculturalism faces an increasing number of criticisms and the opponents hold the belief that it leads to a divided and separate society rather than an inclusive society (Nagle, 2009). Then interculturalism was put forward by Martha Nussbaum (1997, p. 134) in response to these opposing opinions. Masedi Godfrey Manenye (2014) pointed out that dance can act as the carrier of interculturalism. While people can neglect some information in face-to-face communication, dance can clearly express it (Lengel, 2005, pp. 47-60).

Dance can act as the communication media in expressing cultural identity. According to Moha Ennaji (2005, p. 19), cultural identity can be described as an individual’s sense of identity that he belongs to a certain social group. In addition, dance can convey abstract ideas which are difficult to explain in verbal communication (Wanyama, 2008).

2. Modern choreography is undergoing some transformations under the influence of interculturalism

Royona Mitra (2015), in her book Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism, points out that the
interculturalism of contemporary arts facilitates the wide spread of dance works and choreographic thinking, which contributes to innovative aesthetics and extends the discipline boundary of dance research. Choreographers in the 21st century use innovative dance skills and methods to fulfill important targets. They take advantage of the body movements, combined with the modern technology to evoke audience’s thoughts on history and today’s social issues (Mitra, 2015).

2.1 Akram Khan is a renowned choreographer and dancer

Akram Khan is a famous for his unique aesthetics that integrate interculturalism into dance choreography. Classical western dance forms such as ballet highlight the rules of body movements. Dancers pay great attention to the unified body language, so normally they have identical body movements. Under the influence of Kathak, Khan’s dance performance features fluid hand gestures and body movements. His works have a strong sense of rhythm. He explained the intercultural integration in his creations that he seems to negotiate two separate dance souls: one is derived from contemporary dance—full of structure and strict logical control of his footwork, and one is derived from Indian kathak dance—allowing to his body to extend freely. Therefore, he believes that it is necessary to bring the two into coexistence (Mitra, 2015). Khan’s contemporary dance is mainly inspired by the mixed dance style derived from the ancient Indian dance Kathak and modern dance that Akram Khan learned when he was young, which brings new vitality to intercultural and cross-field dance expression. His complex cultural identity can also be seen in his dance works.

2.2 Khan’s unique aesthetic is featured by his unique brand of kathak-inflected contemporary dance.

Integrating the central elements of Kathak into contemporary dance shows that Khan never forgets his inherited roots and tries to balance Eastern and Western cultures, modern and traditional cultures. The solo work of Akram Khan, XENOS (2018), was created for the 100th anniversary of the armistice of the first World War. In the work, the dancer took on the perspective of an Indian soldier in the war to commemorate the ‘strangers’ who died in a foreign land for world peace a hundred years ago. The themes of war, homeland, humanity and peace expressed in the works, as well as the artistic creation technique of combining tradition with modernity, nation with the world, are also worth to be further interrogated. Kathak dance puts an emphasis on rhythmic foot movements and dancers usually wear bells on their feet to enhance the rhythm of the music (Miettinen, 2010). In XENOS, a large string of ankle bells were attached to the dancer's feet during the performance. When the soles of the feet hit the ground, the bells would make a clear sound. Together with the percussion of the drummer in different rhythm patterns, they would bring the audience a dynamic sense of rhythm. It is worth mentioning that the ankle bells in XENOS have a deeper spiritual meaning. The foot bells are representatives of shackles. The position the bells are worn and the sound of them are similar to the shackles worn by prisoners. Khan uses the bells to express his inner voice -- strangers are always alone and in chains, no matter where they are. Tens of thousands of Indian soldiers who gave their lives for peace in the World War I died abroad, and those who survived also became homeless. Therefore, bells become the props for the materialized expression of the spiritual shackles.

3. Cultural identity involves the sense of belonging and alienation, since people will interpret and classify their experiences.

The nature of cultural identity is a social construct. It can be reflected both in the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ (Hall & Morley, 1996). As a second generation immigrant from South Asian, Khan suffered racial discrimination and bullying when he was young (Mitra, 2015). The issue of self and the sense of belonging became focuses in his dance works. This intercultural experience inspired Khan to think about the identity politics of immigrants, and found deep expressions in well received works. Inspired by his homeland Bangladesh, his 2011 solo dance play Desh explored the question of self. Through dance and video, it tells the story of a young man's dreams and memories during his journey from the UK to Bangladesh. Desh means home in Bengali. Desh has been his only autobiography so far. His homeland, Bangladesh, was an inescapable but distant origin. He gained his understanding about Bangladesh in the bedtime stories his mother told him as a child, in the career disagreements he had with his father as a young man and in the estrangement he had with Londoners. Khan weaves his own memories, experiences and legends into a supernatural stage world that explores the fragility of human power in the face of nature. For an hour without an interval, the stage belongs entirely to the choreographer and dancer himself. As the story progresses layer by layer, a young man who grew up in a foreign country comes to a strange hometown, through which he slowly understands his father and reconciliates himself with his father and his identity. Khan also tries to balance
3.1 The theme of dual identities resonates all the way throughout Zero Degrees.

In Zero Degrees (2005), Khan collaborated with the Moroccan-Flemish dancer and choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (Roy, 2005). Their similarly complex cultural identity has a profound impact on the choreography of this dance piece. Following Khan’s storytelling ritual, the dance work presents Khan’s experience when he crossed the border of Bangladesh and India. It is the geographical borderland that makes Khan question his British-Bangladeshi identity. In the opening scene of Zero Degrees, when the train crossed the borderland between Bangladesh and India, Khan experienced a feeling of alienation. He held British passport, so he felt he was no longer a member of Bangladesh where his parents came from. Accordingly, Khan and Cherkaoui designed the doubling process performed by both of them in synchrony to emphasize this ambiguity of identity. However, the frustration brought by lack of legal Bangladeshi identity was temporary. He soon realized the privilege brought by his legal British identity and became fearful of losing his British passport when tons of passports were mishandled by the guard. This ambiguity of identity was thought-provoking. He began to rethink the issues of citizenship, nationalities, exclusion and the sense of belonging and self. The synchronized performance in the opening section manifests the political themes of the doubling of identities.

As far as Cherkaoui is concerned, the interpretation of the title Zero Degrees is that it is the point where one thing becomes another (Norridge, 2010). Khan achieves this by complex mirror reflections, where a complicated set of fluid hand gestures tend to permeate mutually. Symbolic corporeal exchanges are also utilized to promote their storytelling. The dual identity can facilitate a new sense of self since the doubling of identity makes people aware of belonging and not-belonging to their inherited roots.

4. Contraction

To sum up, intercultural communication is an unavoidable trend in the twenty-first century. Choreography has changed greatly under the influence of interculturalism. Cultural identity and dance are correlated. Cultural identity can shape the choreographic way. Akram Khan’s work provides some valuable modern choreographers guidance on how to incorporate cultural identity into their dance. First, his hybrid cultural identity helps him form a unique aesthetic. He uses many elements of kathak in his contemporary dance. He does not fuse the different cultures into one dance piece. He explores an organic confusion of them. Choreographers with mixed cultural identity can be inspired by their cultural backgrounds. The cultural identity can fuel the innovative choreograph. Second, in light of the analysis of Khan’s choreographic works, we can learn that the sense of self and belonging are the major themes of choreography when it comes to cultural identity. Khan offers his insightful opinions on these issues.

References