

The Business of Dance

By Farooq Chaudhry

'Creativity is just about connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while'.

Steve Jobs

Introduction

This chapter focuses on dance making as business, examining the role of the cultural entrepreneur in the dance world. It reflects on my personal experience as a producer of the contemporary dance company Akram Khan, to argue that business needs not be a dirty word in the arts. Rather than putting forward a normative road map to success, I seek to share my work practices over the past fifteen years to contribute to an understanding of the tricks of the trade in dance management.

It is important to mention that contemporary dance, overall, is a niche performing art, and though practised worldwide like many other niche activities, has a relatively small audience when compared to more mainstream arts like classical ballet or the dance shows found in London's West End and New York's Broadway. By definition its expressions are of today or seen from current perspectives and the creative process is highly experimental and fraught with risk. Over-protection of its inherent experimental nature has resulted in an unhealthy scepticism within the industry whereby contemporary dance framed as a 'business' leads to its core values being

contaminated. This scepticism could be a throwback to a time when arts management lacked a professional framework and was primarily being administered by altruistic individuals who were passionate about the arts yet with little formal training or understanding of the industry needs.

It is reassuring that since the 1990s growing professionalism of arts management and leadership has a larger number of arts organisations becoming business-focussed to strategically advance creativity, growth and sustainability. As McNicholas (2004: 58) put it:

‘A new field is evolving. Arts/culture and business relationships, always somewhat edgy or “something different”, now act as on the edge innovative systems and dynamic complex adaptive relationship systems, offering unique opportunities and powerful economic advantages for businesses and communities in the 21st century’.

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate that only with a dynamic, resilient, confident business framework artists, producers and cultural leaders can optimise creativity and add cultural value to their practices. There are three sections. The first maps out the trajectory of the company’s growth. The second looks at the role of the producer and how it can add value and propel vision to an arts organisation. The final section discusses the need to re-think and go beyond traditional business models in the arts as this proves to be an integral catalyst in the company’s artistic success.

Trajectories: harvesting a dance company

‘I’m not interested in how people move. I’m interested in what makes them move’.

Pina Bausch

Before analysing the nature, practices and learning of our contemporary arts organisation, it is useful to consider how it came into being and what the driving forces were behind its creation. I first met Akram Khan, choreographer and dance artist, in 1999 after retiring from dancing. I had just completed a master's degree in arts management and was working as a trainee manager for a small arts organisation in London. The job was temporary, and I was expected to find my own personal artistic portfolio with which I could continue working with once my contract expired. In the summer of that year I saw a young Akram Khan perform at the South Bank Centre in London. I knew instinctively that I had witnessed something special. His dance language was an intelligent blend of contemporary dance and a north Indian classical dance form called Kathak. This language enthralled me, and I wanted to know more about him and his art. We spoke. There was a good chemistry and in a matter of months we started working together albeit informally. Once the partnership was established, I told Akram that I was confident I could take him somewhere different and new but, equally, he could do the same for me. I needed an artist who could challenge me as much as I could challenge him. That was our first promise to each other and on this basis, we started our journey together.

More often than not, professional projects in the arts world begin as an amateur dream. Funds were very scarce. We worked unbelievably hard and invested any money we earned from one-off performances into starting up a company. My first useful piece of advice to Akram was that he needed to travel abroad and develop a broader international perspective. I managed to secure him a place on a European-funded choreography course in Belgium called the X-group. He came back after six months with an increased artistic appetite. I then asked him what his dream (vision) was. He said he wanted to create a small ensemble work with original production elements and

have the time to explore his ideas deeply. As he was speaking my inbuilt calculator was working out the value of this ambition. It came to around £60,000... money we certainly did not have. But I wanted to do it the way he imagined and the way I believed would work so I had no option but to sell my modest one bed apartment to raise the capital we needed, which I did. It was at this moment that I realised that I was an entrepreneur!

The project (Rush) as I suspected had a big impact and very quickly attracted attention from the global dance community. This in turn brought a large number of performances, which generated revenue. This also started the process of converting talent, ambition, risk and hard work into the three key drivers of any business that wants to stand out from the crowd— these being excellence, innovation and reputation. This naturally brought greater confidence, which was then used as fuel for larger more ambitious projects. Audiences began to like us very quickly and we were deemed successful.

Success and failure in dance

Success in contemporary dance is usually associated with validation through arts awards, sell-out houses, gaining access to the international touring circuit and getting to work with the most gifted creative collaborators. In turn, a ‘successful’ dance company or artist becomes a magnet for world-class dancers, generating further opportunities for collaboration. If success is consistent, the company might be rewarded by its National Arts Council with regular funding over a sustained period of time. In the case of the UK, the company can then become a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO).

However, I try hard to steer away from notions of success and failure. Aside from the dangers of complacency and myth-making, they can be misleading because success can make one feel that they are a lot better than they actually are; while failure can make one feel they are a lot worse than they are. If anything, being comfortable with the prospect of failure can be a more potent force for success as well as an opportunity for introspection as a company. This is because one asks tough questions when one fails and does this much less when one succeeds. Failure is the road to new insights and learning. As the leading American choreographer Twyla Tharp stated, ‘to get the full benefit of failure you have to understand the reasons for it’ (2006:215-217), whether it is failure of skill, of concept, of nerve, of repetition or of denial.

Our earliest actions began to delineate what then would become our company’s core principles and rules:

- Akram Khan must always start every project with a dream
- As a producer I must take risks and look for opportunities to translate this dream into an actual project
- There is an absolute commitment by us both to quality, excellence, innovation and the need to make ourselves better
- We would learn from everything we do

Another challenge related to managing success and failure is the so-called ‘second work syndrome’. Usually applied to music artists, novelists and film directors who achieve critical acclaim with their first album, book or film, it occurs when the heightened expectation of their second outing bears down on them resulting in under achievement. This is equally so with dance

and our company succumbed to this pressure leading up to the premiere of our second work, Kaash, in France in 2002. We produced work that was underdeveloped. We failed to impress key people in the industry. After a crestfallen week we dusted ourselves off and examined our failure with a fine toothcomb. We reinvested significantly to rework and develop this production. Within six weeks we turned our fortunes around and put ourselves back on track. Those important people saw our work again and they liked it and have supported it ever since.

Parallel to this, another potentially damaging scenario can take place. It is what I call the inability to surf momentum skilfully. When perceived 'success' came quickly, we found ourselves bombarded with a multitude of opportunities. We felt tremendously wanted. The euphoria resulting from this seduction began to cloud our judgment. We were running adrift like a ship at sea without sails or a rudder being pulled in all directions. We were beginning to make wrong decisions and liaise with the wrong people. In the traditional business world, it is the time when companies are most prone to collapse as they are unable to maintain cash flow to support their unexpected quick growth. It is a scenario almost impossible to anticipate. When it happened to us a six-month organisational review with an established consultant helped us refocus and discipline our intentions. As a result, we developed a formal company structure with a strategic business purpose and plan.

Mission and vision

The organisational review we undertook laid the seeds for self-determination. From the process of deciding what we did not want to do we were left with three things we did want to do:

- Artist-to-artist collaborations (e.g.: zero degrees, Sacred Monsters, In-I)
- Ensemble/company work (e.g.: Kaash, Ma, bahok, Vertical Road)
- Classical Kathak solos (e.g.: Polaroid Feet, Ronin, Gnosis)

Developing a company's vision and mission is equally important and constitutes the first step in planning for organisational success in arts management (Rosewall, 2014:46). It took about ten years for the Akram Khan Company to formulate a clear and authentic vision. During our infancy we grew by becoming what emerged from doing what we did not want to do or be. Just like a sculptor taking away clay to reveal the statue within. The more we worked, the clearer our artistic identity became and what we cared most about doing. From this process of distillation, we were able to articulate our vision and mission statements:

Our vision (what we do)

To produce thoughtful, provocative and ambitious dance productions for the international stage by journeying across boundaries to create uncompromising artistic narratives.

Our mission (how we do this and what we hope for)

To take human themes and work with others to take them to new and unexpected places – embracing and collaborating with other cultures and disciplines.

Each production, then, relates to these statements. The dance language used in our work is rooted in Akram Khan's classical Kathak and modern dance training and his fascination with storytelling. The work continually evolves to communicate ideas that are intelligent, courageous

and new, bringing with it international acclaim and recognition as well as artistic and commercial success – a core element of our vision.

Vision in business represents a mental image of your future world and how you see yourself getting there; in other words, a goal or a desired result. While the former suggests a journey, the latter, a destination. In the business of dance, process is as much the unique selling point as the final production. It is usually what differentiates one arts organisation from another. The continuum of vision is a highly dynamic concept that needs careful and creative attention at every point. Vision shapes identity as much as identity shapes vision and if this dynamic interacts at a consistent level over a sustained period of time, it then crystallises into what is normally called a brand.

What is a brand? It is not just a question of a logo. The brand includes a company's style, character and values. The organisation is built on these values, be they artistic, moral or financial. They usually mirror the ethos and personality of the founder(s). Moreover, an organisation is not just a name with a certain number of people on the payroll, but it is essentially the creation of a culture – a way of doing things and viewing the world in a particular fashion. Understanding who you are (your brand) and what you do (your culture) demands self-awareness and the ability to stand outside of yourself and observe yourself objectively. This process of self-reflection then becomes a tool for growth, change and internal accountability.

Once the brand has been defined, the question of how to move away from essentialist cultural views and reductionist classifications arises. Despite Akram Khan and myself being of South Asian origin and our work clearly influenced by Indian classical dance aesthetics, we both

decided from the outset we would not let ourselves be confined by cultural pigeon holing. We both fiercely believed that what we did was more important than who we were and that being labelled as a South Asian dance company would be a limited representation of our artistic vision.

Furthermore, we believed focussing on cultural identity could seriously undermine our ambitions and growth. This was at a time when political correctness around issues of diversity in the arts were controversially splitting opinion. One camp believing it allowed for artistic mediocrity; and the other saying under representation of minority groups did not sit well with the UK's liberal and democratic values. We aligned ourselves with the first group despite the fact amplifying cultural identity was a fast track to funding and grants. We had to make our way on artistic merit and not by shouting from the margins about not being culturally recognised. In recent times a concern with 'diversity in the arts' has shifted away from social and political agendas and is now being championed on creative grounds, what the Arts Council England refers to as the 'Creative Case for Diversity' (ACE, 2018).

Establishing trust with audiences

The relationship an arts company establishes with its audiences also relates to how the company presents itself and what its core goals are. Unlike conventional consumer and product/service relationships whereby certainty and clarity are required to trigger a purchase, contemporary dance asks for a different type of transaction. The artist usually has only the faintest hint of what they will create when they embark on their artistic quest. All pre-premiere press and marketing will focus on the artist's inspiration and less so on the outcome of such artistic creation. What is sold to the audience is an element of surprise and mystery and the invitation to dream. The

relationship between artist and audience, therefore, asks for a great deal of loyalty and trust because at times this transaction can be uncomfortable, provocative and disruptive; in other words, designed to throw the audience off balance, sometimes even undermining existing perspectives to create new ones. Colbert (2003:30) sums this up succinctly by stating that ‘high art has a product focus and popular art a market focus’. He expands this further:

‘The fundamental concept in traditional marketing – meeting the needs of the consumer – does not apply in high art. The artistic product does not exist to fulfil a market need. Its *raison d’etre* is independent of the market, which is what makes it a particular marketing challenge. Instead of seeking to meet the consumers’ needs by offering them a product they desire, the arts manager seeks consumers who are attracted to the product’ (Colbert, 2003:31) .

Even with an audience attracted to the product this unusual and complex transaction is exacerbated even further as the audience tends to be the last thing in the artist’s mind when they begin a new project or production. They do not start with the audience; rather, they finish with them. The audience is the final cog in the creative process. The audience can be considered the final collaborator as they complete the artist’s work. This makes the level of risk far greater and treacherous than a conventional brand/consumer relationship, making the need for a robust, resilient and flexible business framework more pertinent. It acts as ballast allowing what is being rooted to move as freely as it can without getting lost or buckling under the stress of uncertainty and the expectations of multiple stakeholders. The business of dance requires a high degree of uninhibited innovative thinking and the artist requires a high degree of protection for them to be courageous with their ideas. As Tharp (2006: 5) puts it:

‘I don’t know what music I will be using. I don’t know what dancers I will be working with. I have no idea what the costumes will look like, or the lighting or who will be performing the music. I have no idea of the length of the piece, although it has to be long enough to fill the second half of a full programme to give the paying audience its money’s worth... My dancers expect me to deliver because my choreography represents their livelihood. The presenters in Los Angeles expect the same because they’ve sold tickets to a lot of people with the promise that they will see something interesting and new from me.....That’s a lot of people, many of whom I have never met, counting on me to be creative...But right now I’m not thinking about this. I’m in a room with the obligation to create a major dance piece’.

Ideas are an arts company’s currency. They motivate and inspire us. Our ideas define who we are as a company and we are judged by whether they are clear, honest, authentic, accessible, interesting or innovative. We stand and fall by our ideas. The most exciting and meticulously crafted ideas can become innovations. They often begin without too many pre-set rules or structures. As they evolve organically and if we listen to them they develop their own unique structures according to their needs. This is as necessary for organisational growth as it is for art making.

The art of collaboration

Of all the performing arts dance is probably the most naturally collaborative. Aside from choreography and dancers, this art form requires music, lighting, costumes, scenery, sound

engineers, technicians, and dramaturgy, among others. This collaborative process is one strategy for ensuring a high level of collective innovation and artistic protection. Following Rixhon (2008: 01) innovation refers to:

‘the successful implementation of creative ideas within a context. Individual or collective creativity is a starting point for innovation; it is necessary but not sufficient. The creative insight must be put into action to make a genuine difference, to introduce a modified business process or to provide an improved product. Creativity may be displayed by individuals, but innovation – the production of the creation – occurs only in an organised environment. Innovation, like many functions, is an organisational process that requires specific tools, methods and leadership’

The process of collaboration involves several steps: curiosity, conversation, connection, commitment, concept, exchange, constraint and innovation. Constraints are part of collaboration as much as uninhibited freedom can be a catalyst for new ideas. The path to greater creativity and hence innovation involves recognising and working with the constraints that are inherent within the art form or area of activity. Obstacles ‘increase the possibilities of perception’ and ‘expand our conceptual scope’ (Lehrer, 2011: no page number). Instead of seeing them as troublesome barriers that may cause us to quit or becoming overly pragmatic, they can, if embraced with an open and engaged mind, foster new thoughts and ideas and allow us to trespass on the boundaries of familiar thought to a better end. In my experience, the biggest constraints have been time, funding, lack of imagination and fear.

Collaboration can be thought of as a very specific process that follows different stages to fulfil its objective. Each artist has their own working methods and spends their formative years refining this as much as their artistic voice. By the time our company had entered its tenth year, our process had transformed from a conventional ten to twelve-week continuous creation period to one that was spread out over eighteen months of work. This would begin with blue sky brainstorming by the core creative team to establish a collective vision rooted in Akram's initial inspiration. With the vision now seeded, each collaborator could go off and develop their individual areas of responsibility remaining in contact with Akram throughout.

The second stage is to 'cast' the dancers and musicians according to the needs of the project. This is followed by a month of 'play' in a rehearsal studio. Play with no thought about an outcome is a highly effective creative tool to source new ideas in the most unlikely places. It functions as a doorway to new thinking and new content through combinations free from the logical mind. Collaborators would then be invited into the tail end of the play period after which the company would take a break to reflect and absorb what happened. A few months later everyone would reconvene and begin the process of generating content and laying down a structure. The company would then take another short reflection break and spend the final few weeks on stage refining and editing structure and material until it was ready for the world premiere. The transference to an extended period on stage ensures that scaling up from the studio has sufficient time to adjust and find its own internal logic.

In short, my recommendations for successful collaboration in the arts involve:

- Be prepared to 'kill your sacred cows'
- Balance selfishness and selflessness

- Enjoy the risk that is inherent in the process
- Don't try to over control the process to make it efficient. It's creative so there is no linear approach
- Be prepared to make it up as you go along
- Choose the right people and not the best people
- Know the difference between doing it right and doing the right thing
- Enjoy being lost and the change that will come from it
- Act, don't think
- If you think, do it like a pioneer
- Discover the meaning and don't start with it
- Give more than you take
- Avoid saying 'it is mine'

This could be called our dance company's manufacturing process through which we create the optimum conditions for our dance creations. It affords us the choice as to when we could put up and take down the 'scaffolding' through which we could build our artistic product. If managed poorly and by giving way to over pragmatism and compromise the scaffolding would remain, diluting the theatrical experience and demonstrating how the work was made rather than what it is seeking to convey.

This optimum process is very expensive. Our early productions cost between £150,000 to £250,000 to produce. This upgraded process took our costs up to £500,000-£600,000. Yet, this raising of the artistic bar resulted in us being invited to create for the London Olympics 2012 and

added considerable reputational value. It proved to be an investment in our intangible values and showed how important the role of the producer was in such process.

The rise of the dance producer

'You can't cross the sea merely by standing at the water. I have to become my own version of an optimist. If I can't make it through one door, I'll go through another door – or I'll make a door'

Rabindranath Tagore

In many aspects, a dance producer is a lot like conventional business entrepreneurs. They thrive from taking risks, live from their passions, love problem solving and are inherently creative learning machines. They cannot be shackled to a desk. They tend to be individualists, rule-breakers and non-conformist. Producers drive growth and ambition. Managers bring stability and protection. Producers are difficult to define and therefore many studies are of individuals or a mindset as opposed to a particular skillset that one acquires through training or education. Often what they do and who they are is ingrained in their identity. Therefore, to understand what kind of dance producer I am, it would be useful for the reader to know where I have come from.

In 2011 I was invited to speak about my role as a producer for the Akram Khan Company at an arts conference in Palestine. After listening to my presentation, an Austrian journalist described me as a curious mix of a businessman, artist, philosopher and street kid. I am a Pakistani immigrant who arrived with my family to the United Kingdom in 1963. In the next twenty years, firmly rooted in a working class background, a range of experiences would leave a mark in my life: I was the top of my class at primary school and also, being the leader of a local council

estate criminal gang, I was put into care in 1974 after my parents divorced; I was incarcerated in juvenile delinquent centres for two short spells; and then found a way out of my early life troubles by being placed into a ‘therapeutic’ community called Peper Harow. The philosophy of the school was that by having access to regular psychotherapy and an enriched creative environment, emotionally damaged boys could restore their self-esteem and create new identities forged in self-awareness and hope. On leaving Peper Harow in 1981 I studied English Literature in the School of African and Asian studies at Sussex University. On taking my very first contemporary dance class, without hesitation I quit university to train as a professional dancer. I graduated in 1986 and enjoyed a virtually non-stop professional dance career until 1998. I then went back to university to study MA Arts Management at City University in London. In 1999 I met the British choreographer and dancer Akram Khan and we founded the Akram Khan Company in October 2000. I am still working with the company today.

In the past fifteen years, dance productions have become more sophisticated with higher production values. This is as much to do with advances in theatre technology as increased support from national funding agencies. Consequently, artistic directors have become more demanding to the point that the traditional responsibilities of general manager or executive director are no longer adequate to meet raised expectations. In addition, an expanded market through globalisation meant access to a wider pool of resources and opportunities. A void was appearing within dance organisations that needed a new mindset that could meet these new challenges and exploit new opportunities. With this came the rise of the dance producer.

In the case of the Akram Khan Company the dance producer role has been instrumental in driving its growth and ambitions in service of the vision. It emerged as a new force in contemporary

dance. Considering entrepreneurship, there is little that separates a business entrepreneur from a cultural entrepreneur aside from the market context in which they work and the outcomes they seek. Both will seek to increase market presence and maximise customer experience by the quality of their product. While one may define value or reward by increased share price; the other, by generating high quality intellectual property. They are both powerful and dynamic enterprising forces for introducing new ideas and for transforming old ones. Bridstock (2013:126, following Duening) lists some of the attributes of successful arts entrepreneurship which can be found in the business literature:

- The opportunity recognising mind
- The designing mind
- The risk managing mind
- The resilient mind
- The effectuating Mind

However, there is no formula to be a successful producer. Having worked on both sides of the stage, my understanding and experiences are the elements that play a big part in my judgment and decision-making. It is a highly individualistic role and requires as much instinct as intellect, since often a producer is dealing with intangible invisible forces as tangible ones.

In this sense, a producer can be described:

‘Like a quiet magician who makes the near impossible possible, gathering resources in such lean times, never losing integrity and making it look deceptively simple when it isn’t, it isn’t at all’

Karthika Nair (personal correspondence, 2013) – co-founder and former producer
of Eastman in Flanders

‘One of the producer’s greatest tasks was to conjure up the circumstances by which
artists can create their best work’

Glen Berger (2013:9) – Song of Spiderman: The Inside Story of the Most
Controversial Musical in Broadway History

It is interesting to see how both quotations refer to magic and conjuring as key elements in the
producer role. Magic aside, my daily work as a producer comprises:

- Being involved in the conception of our projects
- Helping source and assemble creative teams
- Managing communications lines between creative teams
- Being the chief negotiator with all stakeholders
- Scouting for future projects
- Finding the right investors for our work
- Finding the right distributors for our work
- Finding the right platforms for performance
- Protecting integrity of artistic vision/priorities
- Being an architect of ideas that further artistic and company growth

Currently there are many manifestations of the producer role, ranging from a brilliant production manager, a forward-thinking efficient administrator, to an out-of-the-box thinking entrepreneur. When I first adopted the title in 2004, which was a time when such role was virtually unheard of in contemporary dance, I likened it to the type of producer found in filmmaking and traditional theatre. These producers spend a majority of their time interfacing between the creative process and the resources that help shape the project vision. Quite simply, as a producer one divides attention between the art and the money.

Having to work with a range of stakeholders, producers need to be fluent in many languages so that things do not get lost in ‘translation’. For instance, the agenda of a funder who may face the higher authorities that allocate their budgets will be too far away from the choreographer facing his or her creative team. Yet they need each other, and it is the producer’s task to ensure that their needs are understood. The fact that a producer has to listen to as much as they have to talk offers them a doorway to never ending learning.

Our business is dance making. Etymologically, the term business refers to ‘the state of being busy’, although earlier meanings in old English defined the word as ‘anxiety’ and later on, a difference was made between busyness and having a ‘business’ to attend to (Cresswell, 2010:65). With this logic, (dance) business can be associated with industry as it involves an exchange of services and skills to the mutual benefit of the parts involved.

A good producer, thus, is also the master of such exchange. From my experience, it is the process and not the outcome the most stimulating aspect of the job; in other words, the skill of solving a puzzle not just with a solution but also with another more audacious question. Producers can be

as visionary as artists with similar amounts of fearlessness, craziness and passion. In a more connected and globalized world, new partnership opportunities emerge but with them, the complexities of working cross borders. At the same time, in recent years there has been greater emphasis from national governments on the value of the cultural and creative communities as important contributors to GDP and economic growth. Both the producer and the arts company need to adapt to these ever-changing times and a good strategy, in our case, has been developing an innovative business model.

Beyond traditional business models

'By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the most bitter'.

Confucious

Although strategies are important in the business world, we did not have one. We made it up as we went along, particularly in the early years. Even with our burgeoning business model we were still a micro economy, and micro economies tend to be more tactical than strategic. The fact that we were relatively small meant that we could be agile and grow fast, unlike large companies. Akram Khan Company operates as a 'bamboo business', a metaphor that suggests strength, flexibility, prolific growth and space down its centre for new ideas.

Strategy in most cases was applied retrospectively to show that we knew what we were doing even though this was not always the case. It allowed us to conveniently forget mistakes, luck, poor judgment, the bad decisions that went well and the good decisions that went bad. It joined

all the good dots and turned a blind eye to the bad ones, leaving behind legacies of incompetence, lousy judgment and abject failure. At the heart of growth there is both vulnerability and strength, the feeling of being exposed, but also the unique opportunity to stretch and grow in novel and unpredictable ways (Sheehy, 2006).

Difficulties render an arts organisation stronger. As we started with a spirit of enterprise it was important that our artistic growth was underpinned by a robust and clear sense of business discipline. We were not seeking only to protect, conserve and consolidate our company's value, but rather, the capacity to respond to change was a necessary skill. Embracing change proved crucial to develop our organisational confidence, reminding us that business models change every time a crisis hits. In recent years, the Arts Council England has shifted their emphasis of their funding rhetoric to that of 'investment' as opposed to subsidy. A study was commissioned to develop good practice business planning in the arts and cultural sector. The key emphasis of this study was how to prepare and write a business plan to both mitigate risk and encourage a clear vision for growth.

Essentially, to remain an ambitious enterprise we needed a flexible and very responsive business structure. Many organisations in the arts funding sector tend to use a one-size-fits-all model, which is usually in the case of the UK a limited company with charitable status (not for profit). It allows organisations to access funds from trusts and foundations, be tax exempt and ensure charitable aims are prioritised over commerciality. However, they come with a high degree of accountability and can inhibit a more ambitious mindset. In 2003 after a six-month organisational review with an experienced consultant it was concluded that a charity structure would best serve our company's artistic aspirations. Despite, this very sensible recommendation

as an entrepreneur it did not feel right so I rejected this direction. As an alternative I chose a for-profit structure which was a company limited by guarantee (Akram Khan Company). At the time it was an uncomfortable decision for some board members, but I assured them it was the ideal way forward towards sustainability, independence and most importantly, artistic excellence. As profits increased I decided to set up a charity (AKCT) to which we could gift aid some of the profits to support and fund the work of the dancers with whom we worked.

We resisted the urge to adopt the traditional business model used by many established dance companies whereby dancers are employed on a full-time basis. We wanted the artistic flexibility to cast our projects rather than our productions being determined by the number of dancers on the payroll. We believed it could limit ambition and place enormous pressure on operational efficiency. It also brought with it the danger of the vision serving the organisation rather than the organisation serving the vision. Hence it was important that the business plan functioned as a tool to use in planning our future activities and operations, as ‘the story of the future that your organisation wishes to create; a route map but not a straitjacket’ (Langley and Royce, 2015:7).

In 2006, as our reputational value started to gain traction, we were receiving more commercial opportunities. Such as Akram to co-direct and create a duet with the Oscar winning French film actress Juliette Binoche (In-I). These projects garnered more popular interest as well as high-level sponsorship (Hermes Foundation and SG Private Banking). This resulted in an increased volume of performances with higher performance fee guarantees. Despite Akram Khan Company being a for-profit structure, it was receiving public monies from the Arts Council England and, therefore, we felt high levels of revenue could be a conflict of interests, so a new company limited by shares was formed: Khan Chaudhry Productions (KCP), of which Akram Khan and myself were shareholders. We would, however, employ the Akram Khan Company’s

(AKC) operational structure to produce and manage this project, therefore generating further revenue for the company. KCP also gift aided some of its profits to AKCT to support younger artists. AKC would do the experimental *avant-garde* work, KCP would respond to commercial opportunities that helped to strengthen the company brand, and AKCT would support a new generation of artists.

Though legally independent, this ecology of three business structures is set up to support and serve each other's interests without getting the money mixed up in one pot. It is virtually the same talent pool maximising its value and assets without stepping on different agendas and confusing things. The original idea for this model first came to me when sitting in an airport lounge on tour. I scribbled it down (fig.1) and then articulated it more clearly in a formal diagram (fig.2).

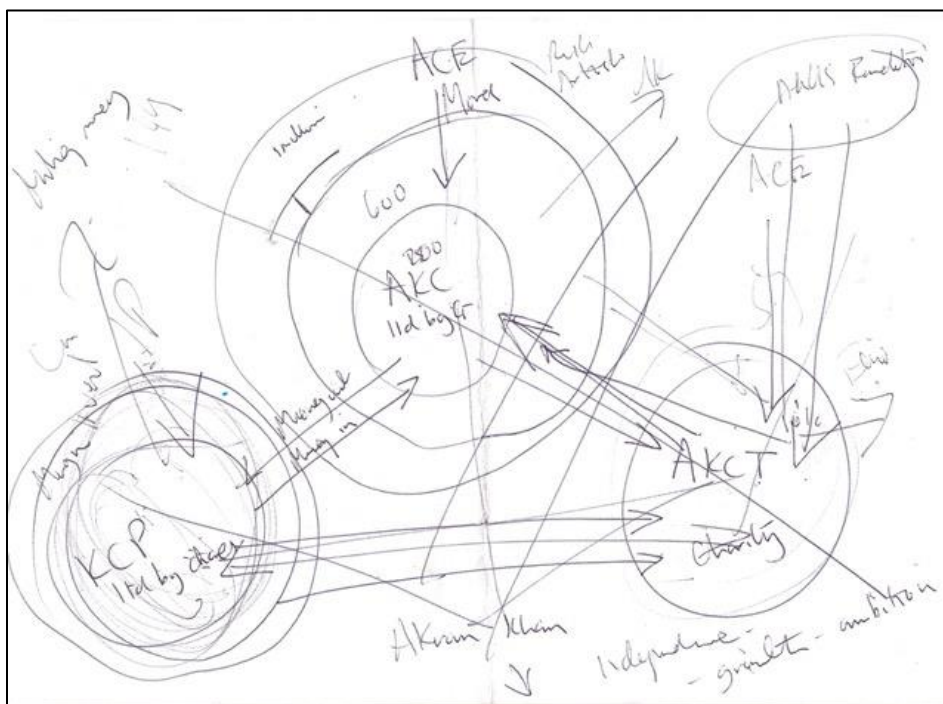


Fig. 1. Ecology of three business structure

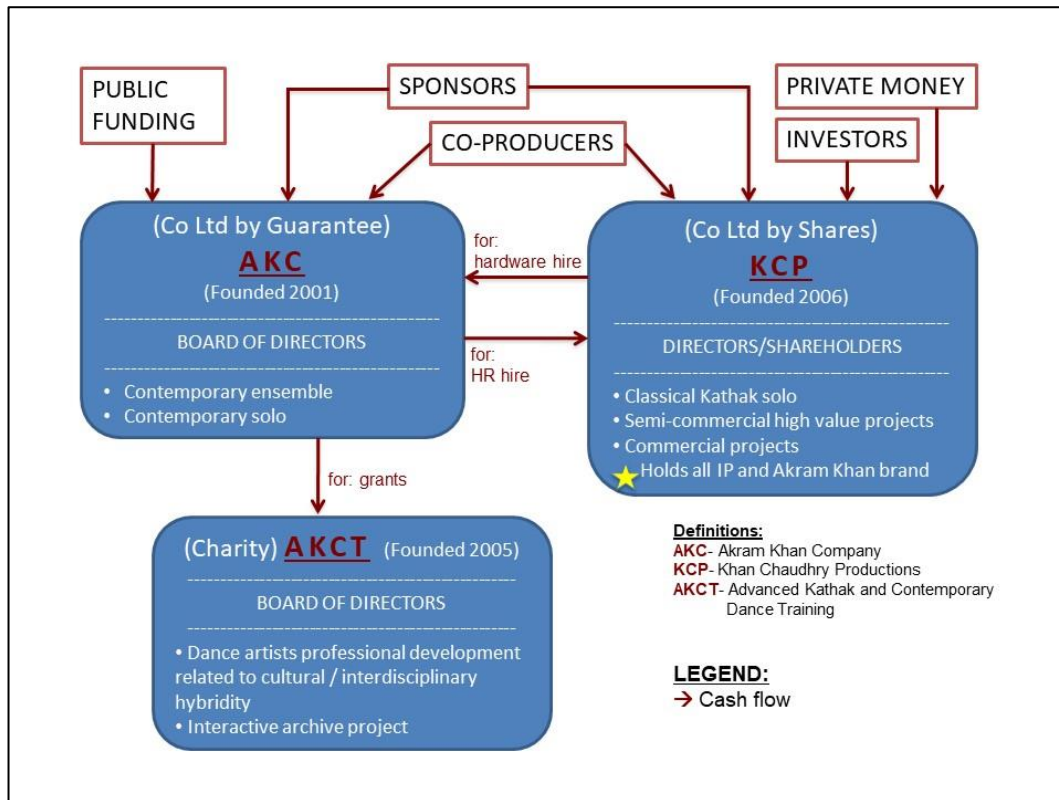


Fig. 2. Formal structure of the three companies (AKC, AKCT, KCP)

	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	Average last 5 years
Akram Khan Company	328,905	696,587	637,376	525,703	717,051	743,438	646,048	1,326,135	1,554,051	935,885	1,913,028	837,608	1,313,341
AKCT	-	-	10,527	31,327	99,625	40,010	246,964	35,774	17,685	68,615	90,518	98,218	62,162
Khan Chaudhry Productions	-	-	-	-	690,987	2,226,560	577,366	349,482	63,320	121,632	245,450	894,500	334,877
Total	328,905	696,587	647,903	557,030	1,507,643	3,010,008	1,470,378	1,711,391	1,635,056	1,126,132	2,248,996	1,830,326	1,710,380
Public funding	40,267	98,235	195,000	184,950	190,038	195,168	200,435	204,817	190,684	225,000	220,322	215,610	211,287
% of AKC turnover	12%	14%	31%	35%	27%	26%	31%	15%	12%	24%	12%	28%	16%
% of total turnover	12%	14%	30%	33%	13%	6%	14%	12%	12%	20%	10%	12%	12%
International income	229,193	444,001	294,565	328,710	1,074,116	2,140,131	1,014,544	1,148,001	1,232,622	776,081	1,774,666	1,249,125	1,236,280
% of total turnover	70%	64%	46%	59%	71%	71%	69%	67%	75%	69%	79%	68%	72%

Fig. 3. Financial footprint of the three companies (AKC, AKCT, KCP) between 2003-2015.

Business models reflect and are closely aligned to the arts company’s organisational priorities. At the same time, priorities need to be translated into specific objectives. In the case of Akram Khan, our priorities – growth, independence, stability and flexibility – have informed the following objectives:

- Continue to make high quality, innovative work
- Establish ourselves as an international brand
- Ensure our work is accessible to as many diverse cultures and audiences as possible
- Develop alternative income streams
- Continue operations with no more than one quarter income dependency on public subsidy
- Expand and create a supportive and flexible structure for artistic and administrative personnel
- Develop professional training opportunities for artists
- Implement modern business practice to support/propel artistic work
- Establish a strong and generous work culture and ethos
- Continue to work with high-profile artists in other genres
- Identify alternative performance opportunities
- Ensure that at least 15% of our work is seen in less privileged markets

Similarly, these priorities and objectives reflect the funding sources and partners with which our organisation works:

- **Public subsidy:** a least favourite source due to the high levels of accountability based on social and political outcomes
- **Earned income:** a favourite source in view of the satisfaction of spending your own hard-earned money with a degree of independence
- **Co-producers:** invest not only in produced works but also in the artist's career. These are usually long-term relationships and often participate in the development of the

production by offering physical resources such as theatres or studios as well as cash. They are excellent feedback providers during the creative process.

- **Commissions:** not so artistically satisfying. We do not set the artistic agenda.
- **Sponsors:** usually have a role when company value, reputation and quality are proven. It is a partnership often based on the alignment of values, ideals, brand and reputations. With our current sponsor for instance, the French road construction company Colas, we are bound together by our commitment to diversity and to connect the world through talent.

Dealing with such a range of funding sources can be demanding. It is not necessary for the artistic director, though, to be overly concerned with financial and organisational matters. Some awareness is needed, but many feel hamstrung and inhibited by day-to-day management. When artistic directors lose their artistic focus and energy by being side-tracked with operational burdens, their work almost invariably suffers. Artistic directors have a great deal to lose – they lose their reputations. The producer loses the trust and faith of their spider web of stakeholders. In the slipstream of both lies the success of the arts organisation.

In just over fifteen years Aram Khan Company has established itself as one of the leading contemporary dance companies in the world. A highlight in the company's trajectory was featuring prominently in the opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games in 2012. Our historical narrative in numbers can be summarised as follows:

- 21 productions
- 1560 performances (one performance every 3.5 days continuously for 15 years)

- 398 venues
- 61 countries
- 910,215 audience members (not including the Olympic Games)
- 82% average attendance
- Over 300 jobs created for artistic and administrative personnel
- Average reliance on public subsidy – 12%

Being a non-verbal art form, dance has a fantastic capacity to cross borders and reach other peoples. This explains why dance companies of all scales can tour prolifically. This, in effect, makes them export enterprises. Yet, there is much to consider when working in this business model. Aside from the obvious pressures of global currency fluctuations being an ‘export’ company, we also must be culturally sensitive and diplomatic when we work with different countries. Ignorance and a lack of respect for different business practices can be damaging to international opportunities and partnerships. As human beings we may all want the same things but our processes and drivers for choice and decision-making can vary dramatically. The case of how a large Chinese company chose a contract that had inferior technology from a French company rather than a vastly superior technology offer from an American company has been documented by the Times Magazine a few years ago. When asked about the rationale behind their decision, the Chinese company said, ‘The French spent most of their time listening to us and did not make us eat their food unlike the Americans!’

A final major challenge is that dance as an activity cannot benefit from modern technologies to become cheaper and more efficient. For instance, a composer can download software that allows

him to access hundreds of instruments from all over the globe at the push of a button. Dance still requires real bodies for eight to ten hours a day, in a warm, well-lit dance studio for an average of ten to twelve week's creation. Year on year inflationary pressures raise these costs, placing further pressures on the dance companies and choreographers.

Conclusion

'You can only lose something that you have, but you cannot lose something that you are'.

Eckhart Tolle

In this chapter I have shared some of the lessons learnt as part of my role as an arts producer in a contemporary dance company. I discussed why dance needs to be seen and approached as business and what this means in terms of strategies and tactics, funding sources, working with others, relating to audiences and touring. I also discussed some of the issues and opportunities that lie at the heart of creating, organising and managing an arts organisation operating both locally and internationally in a highly globalised world.

Particularly, dance making/touring in an international context comes with inherent difficulties and challenges that can threaten and impair growth. The first is selling original work to the market before it is made. This is where reputation is of a premium. We also work in a financial model where revenue generation is limited beyond live performance. We only make money when we are on stage. Composers, writers, visual artists can make money 'while they sleep'. As we build up repertoire there is also the danger of being in competition with ourselves in what is essentially a limited market.

Through years of trial and error, risk-taking, embracing change and adopting a creative and flexible approach, an innovative model has emerged in the management of dance business. This is not necessarily a template to be imitated but an insight into a mindset where learned abilities married to innate human qualities such as endurance, perseverance, passion, conviction and the desire to be one's best has allowed our vision to fulfil its potential.

Lauded for consistently producing imaginative and inventive works, Akram Khan Company has received numerous prestigious national and international arts awards. International touring is the company's 'bread and butter' business with a prolific ongoing presence at many of the world's high-profile arts festivals and venues. The company's business model is nowadays studied alongside Cirque Du Soleil (in organisations such as the London Business School) as an example of success in the entertainment industry.

Our first company business plan in 2005 was entitled 'journeys not destinations'. This is a timely reminder that there are still many challenges ahead and questions for the artistic leaders of today and the future. Such as 'what does a win/win look like when negotiating in a highly globalised world at war with increased parochialism? Is it enough to have a single bottom line when success is hinged on so many interlocking factors? Can we have multiple bottom lines – artistic success, financial success, moral success and a happy company? Can leaders access greater power and creativity by being more playful, disruptive, transparent and vulnerable?

Throughout my career I have always let art have the first say in any action I have taken and in this chapter I would like it to have the last word. My teenage daughter recently asked me when

do you know you are in love? After reflecting on it for a minute or two, I answered ‘it is not how you feel about that person when you are with them, it is how you feel about yourself when you are with them. If you contract, you know you are with the wrong person, and if you expand, you know you are with the right person. This I believe is also the purpose of art. It is how we feel about ourselves when we engage in cultural experiences and the purpose of our dance and its business model is to expand so that these experiences are deeper, last longer and when at its very best, remain in our hearts and minds for our lifetime.

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