

Multiculturalism in Contemporary British Choreography: Celebration or Critique?

Abstract:

In a climate riven by national insecurities, anti-immigration movements and (in the UK) competing visions of a post-Brexit future, this paper examines the contentious space that multiculturalism has inhabited in 21st century choreography. It will examine two acclaimed contemporary dance pieces by Akram Khan and Lloyd Newson to examine the starkly differing perspectives which characterise current discourses on multiculturalism in the UK. As Falcous and Silk remark (2010, 168), multiculturalism has been seen (variously) as a solution to the problem of national unity and inclusivity, and as an impediment to an integrated and harmonious society.

Khan's and Newson's works provide aesthetic reflections of this conflicted discourse. *Abide with Me*, Akram Khan's contribution to the Opening Ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games, was part of a global media spectacle which asserted the UK's post-imperial and multicultural profile. By contrast, Lloyd Newson's contemporaneous theatre work *Can We talk about this?* (2011/12) was highly critical of current British approaches to multiculturalism, particularly prevailing attitudes to Islam and Islamism.

The two choreographies will be illuminated and assessed using a theoretical framework that draws on political thought (Delanty, Malik, Heywood) as well as dance studies (Mitra, Prickett, Balme). Both works share commonalities in manifesting the entanglement of dance with British politics, and offer contributions to national (and, by extension, broader international) debates around tolerance, culture and diasporic identities. Taken together, they reveal Britain's ambiguous attitude to multiculturalism and, indeed, to nationalism.

Biography:

Alexandra Kolb is Associate Professor (formerly Reader) in Dance at Middlesex University, London. Following her doctorate at Cambridge University, she held positions as chair of Dance Studies at Otago University in New Zealand and head of Academic Studies at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds. She is the author of *Performing Femininity: Dance and Literature in German Modernism* (2009), editor of *Dance and Politics* (2011), and contributor to a wide range of international dance and arts journals. She is a recent recipient of the Gertrude Lippincott Award for the best English-language article in dance studies (2014), a British Academy/Leverhulme Grant (2015), and a Harry Ransom Fellowship at the University of Texas at Austin (2013). She is on the board of directors of the SDHS, the executive committee of the SDR, and is Reviews Editor of *Dance Research*.