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Initially a showcase for Indian classical music, since 2017 the [Darbar festival](#) has invited [Akram Khan](#) to extend its programme into Indian dance (accompanied, rightly enough, by live music). This year, Khan's company also organised a training week for classical dancers leading up to the festival, and the first two public events - studio demonstrations rather than pieces in their own right - both rounded off this programme and framed the performances on the main stage.

Both were eye-opening. [Aditi Mangaldas](#), now 59, draws on her deep experience of kathak dance in a performance-lecture on words in kathak (the term itself comes from the word for "story"). She shows how the dancing body can bring a story to life, how words are at play in the mind of the performer, and how rhythm - traditionally learned through a system of vocal syllables - can tell its own tales through footwork, accent and gesture. Most striking, though, is her exposure of how the classical tradition often requires a female character, pursued by an ardent male, to enact the transformation of a resistant "no" into a coy or flirtatious "yes". In refusing to perform such fantasies of consent, Mangaldas shows that it is perfectly possible to break classical convention while holding on to classical principles.

Considerably older than Mangaldas, [Nahid Siddiqui](#) demonstrates that age can reveal what youth may mask. Barely moving at all at first, she nevertheless holds the stage captive with her strange combination of lightness and gravity. In a series of structured improvisations, she draws our attention to the subtleties of kathak style: to melody rather than rhythm, for example, or the way that time can be marked by the flick of a fingertip. It's like watching stars at night: no longer able to illuminate kathak with the fierce sunshine of youth, Siddiqui shows us instead the finer points of its constellations.





📷 The dancing body can bring stories to life ... Darbar festival. Photograph: Rehmat Rayatt

The following evening, though, is ablaze with the vigour of youth. Choreographer [Mavin Khoo](#) worked with young men from Malaysia's [Temple of Fine Arts](#) to create a bharatanatyam dance based on three scenes from the [Ramayana](#) epic. The result is explosive. Bharatanatyam is already a high-impact style, with percussive footwork and - in marked contrast to kathak's spirals - radiant lines that shoot through the limbs and fingers like starbursts. Khoo exploits the prowess and stamina of his performers: all are outstanding (a couple astonishing). By the end of this high-energy 50-minute work, none have lost the exactitude of their execution.

The choreography lifts the work above technical display: inventive, evocative and, crucially, with a flair for group work. The dominance of the solo in classical Indian dance means it often treats groups as essentially ordered assemblages of individual units. Here, the ensemble becomes a far more malleable entity, variously evoking a forest, motion-trail afterimages, or the composite, convulsive body of the many-headed demon Ravana. In his distinctive way, Khoo, too, simultaneously breaks and follows the rules.

The final piece of the festival feels temperate by comparison. [Madhavi Mudgal](#)'s all-female ensemble emphasises the decorousness of the odissi style: hips, shoulders and head inclined in constant [contrapposto](#), arms and spine gracefully curved. Some moments tighten their grip - a linked line of dancers swivelling like clockwork cogs, or bodies swaying like pliant sculptures - but this is a largely undemanding if undeniably lovely work, without the heat or the light that has preceded it.

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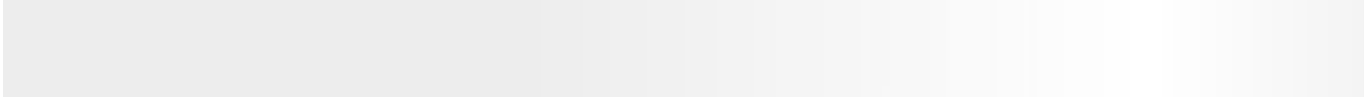
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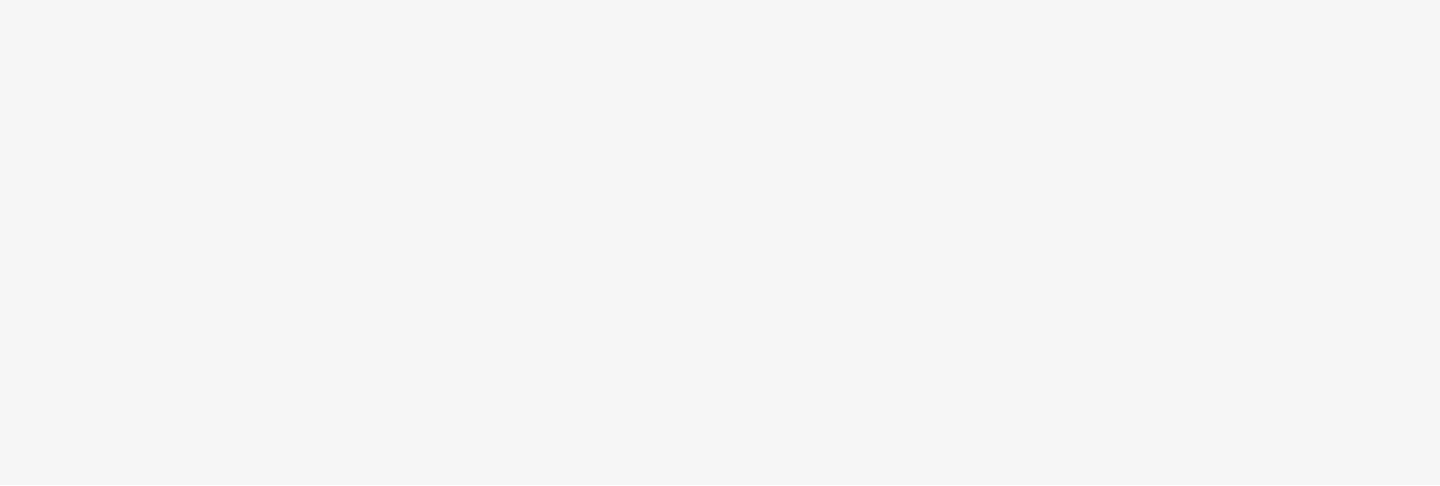
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