A lovely idea lost in a thicket of overblown production’ or a ‘powerful and resonant piece’? Perhaps underlying these divergent responses to Akram Khan’s *ma* (2004) by critics in the UK are limitations to understanding. Contemporary Kathak, the style for which Khan is fêted worldwide, provides difficulties because its complexity is not explicable as *fusion*. Khan’s own rejection of the term as inappropriate to his work can be supported in that it suggests an over-simplistic response. To understand Khan’s embracing of what he calls the *confusion* of having two physical systems overwritten in his body requires a shift in critical and historical perspectives.

A flavour of the movement in *ma* is discernible in this quotation:

Kathak’s... stamping feet, its whirring arms, its speed, mesh seamlessly with modern handsprings, barrel rolls and off-centre lurches to forge a mercurial style.

(Gilbert, 2004, n.p)

It is necessary to situate analysis by contextualising *ma*, recognising that ‘history does not just provide a background to the study of texts, but forms an essential part of textual meaning’ (Loomba, 2005, p. 39). Already expert in Kathak, Khan studied for a degree in dance at De Montfort University and the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. He founded his own company in 2000 with the trio *Rush*. A quintet, *Related Rocks* (2001), followed. The music ‘was based on the destruction and construction of a piano, so I immediately thought of Shiva [*sic*] as the creator and destroyer...we used all the gestures of Shiva...[it was a]
test run for *Kaash*’ (Anon., 2002, p. 4). The starting points for *Kaash* (2002), a full-length work, included the movement qualities traditionally associated with three Hindu gods: Ganesha, symbolised by swinging gestures and three beats; Krishna, playful, darting actions and four beats; and Siva, seven beats and vigorous dynamics (*tandava*). Khan also takes inspiration from film directors and film (Khan, 2004–5, p. 46) and he used a cinematic flashback structure for *Kaash*. Nitin Sawhney, the composer, added notions of parallel universes and Anish Kapoor’s set provided a ‘black square painted on gauze that vibrates like a hungry hole, poised to suck in any passing matter’ (Mackrell, 2002, n.p). The result was an abstract yet allusive piece:

[Kaash] opens with a lone dancer. He gazes into the void and a woman enters and whispers to him. (Hints of Parvati and Siva perhaps?) A cataclysm of cosmic proportions ensues. The dancers form war-like columns from which they break out, arms slicing with an energy that would split atoms.

(Sanders, 2004, p. 8)

During a break in the tour of *Kaash* Khan made further material for this work. The opportunity to revisit its themes of destruction led to his taking a reworked solo from it as one of the starting points for *ma* (Sanders, 2004). Up to this point his work seemed relatively abstract, but a growing interest in exploring more overt narrative through Contemporary Kathak became evident in *A God of Small Tales* (2004). Khan asked the performers to draw on childhood memories to create movement and stated this dance provided a background experience for *ma* (Sanders, 2004).

Khan acknowledges an essay by Arundhati Roy as an inspiration for *ma*. Although not specific, he seems to be referring to *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2002), which explores the social and ecological impacts of the Narmada Valley Project. Roy describes how, with controversial governmental support, a series of dams on one of India’s largest river systems resulted in the destruction of natural woodland, the flooding of farms and the displacement of local populations. Khan’s ‘biggest production to date … [ma] ambitiously integrates dance, text and live music’ (Anon., 2004b, n.p). He had performed Kathak separately until that point. By its inclusion of the classical form, *ma* highlights its own hybridity.

It is difficult to identify the subtle interplay across the genres in Khan’s style using analytical frameworks that treat dances as self-referential