



Photo By Anthony Crickmay at his studio in Farm Lane London in 1993.

Darshan Singh Bhuller

Cohan and Me.

An unlikely relationship between an Indian Sikh (secular) immigrant to England and a white Jewish (secular) man from Brooklyn New York.

My personal relationship with Bob started when his company visited my high school in the mid-seventies, on one of London Contemporary Dance Theatre's residencies. Throughout the lecture demonstration and classes that were taught by company members, we noticed a figure in the corner, with permed dark hair, sunglasses, platform shoes and leather jacket. He said very little but left an impression on all of us. I remember thinking who the **** is that? and how do I get to do what they do?

Over those years we were taken to the theatre to see LCDT regularly, and I remember seeing the beautiful duet by Cohan called *Eclipse*, a mystical coming together of two worlds. I was hooked. Also on that program was Robert North's Troy Games, which had a huge impact for a whole generation of male dancers.

I joined the London School of Contemporary Dance in 1977 and was possibly one of the youngest students at that time. I was lucky to have been at the school at that time, with Bob and Jane Dudley in charge. They brought in great teachers such as William Louthar, Noemi Lapsezon, Kazuko Hirabayashi, Juliet Fisher and more. The students were watched during our time at the school and given opportunities as apprentices, some eventually joining the company, without the pressure of an audition. Once in the company, the real work started. You could see Bob would mould his new dancers with such precise ingenuity. I'm not a religious man but taking class became our ritual, feeling that balance, value between mind & body. Muscle memory and repetition was the key throughout his Graham based technique. His dancers practiced and built a unique and almost animalistic quality, style and identity. This enabled his dancers to cope with many different styles within the repertory company. Bob had a wonderful repertory, with rich and diverse works, a combination of international and home-grown choreographers. Bob encouraged every member of the company to choreograph for the yearly in-house workshop. I had no idea that I too could possibly do that.

So after having my first piece of choreography *Beyond The Law* accepted into the rep I was invited by the London Youth Dance Theatre with whom I had danced in my first year at The Place. It was my first external commission and I was feeling pretty proud and cocky. Bob asked if he could come see a rehearsal, I sheepishly agreed, and he insisted travelling with me on the tube down to the East End of London. The group rehearsed just off the Commercial Road at the Tower Hamlets School, a fairly rundown part of London. At this stage I'm no more than a 19-20 years old kid, with a limited verbal vocabulary; on the other hand, Bob is this intellectual cerebral thinker. You couldn't find two more different people together, and I don't think we said much. I was very nervous and as soon as the run-through was finished I quickly dismissed the dancers, but Bob calmly turned to everyone and said "NO...Stop... let's talk about the piece." I could feel the blood drain out of my body. He asked me to talk about the piece and share my vision with the dancers... some how I stumbled and faked my way through an explanation with lots of umm's and arr's and using expressions that I had heard from fellow Choreographers at The Place like "I need the dancers to be more organic and visceral. Organic? What the **** was I talking about! Bob could see I was struggling and he calmly gave his thoughts about the piece and made some good suggestions on how to make the work clearer, a form of editing dance. A common problem with young choreographers is that they produce so much movement diarrhoea, and I was clearly out of my depth. I was one of these kids who slipped through the educational system without having any of the basic communication skills. As a young kid I managed to distract and fool my teachers at school with my dancing and sports, I was thicker than two short planks! My fear was that Bob knew this because he had this magical ability to look through people and find who they are, but at no point did he belittle me. I sensed he knew I lacked the education but he persisted with me and encouraged me to do work that I felt strongly about and make sure that research was part of the process. I was drawn to a more politically edged work. Expressing those ideas as a young choreographer was probably naïve, but over time, and with his help, I was able to build a better understanding on how to tell those complicated narratives through dance and film.

A repeated theme to most of Cohan's work was questioning and examining the human condition, usually with a character who eventually strips away the external world, material wealth, possessions and in the end is left with body and the mythical sensibility of the journey. There were many pieces that I had danced, some pieces were originally choreographed on other bodies, but I was encouraged to make them my own. I felt through dance that I, a skinny brown boy, could be part of this sophisticated art form and discover a complicated world. I felt that Bob and I eventually had some kind of short-hand way of working together, I knew exactly what he wanted. To my surprise and probably everyone in the company, I was invited to collaborate as a choreographer with him in some of his work. I can't say it was that successful, but I was given that opportunity to sit beside him and create.

One of the high points I witnessed in Bob's life was in 1983 when LCDT performed at The Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City. BAM is a large scale theatre in the middle of the borough where he was brought up. It was a triumphant return of the Brooklyn kid, former Martha Graham dancer. After the first night there was a big reception given to honour the company. There were even some British Royal family members thrown into the mix in a room full of the New York City arts community. Bob gave a wonderful speech in which he highlighted the company's diversity. He was ahead of his time in building a multi-racial dance company, a representation of a modern day Britain. During the evening, he came over to the dancers to introduce an old friend and fellow dancer from the Martha Graham Dance company, Bertram Ross. Mr Ross enthusiastically talked to us about our performance, particularly the piece Class based on the technique that Bob had developed from the Martha Graham technique. I turned around to see where Bob was, he had taken a step back from the crowd and I watched his face, lit up with pride. It was such a shame that Martha wasn't able to see Bob's company for herself. I suspect there was a lot of political artistic drama going on. Fast forward to 2006, when I had a similar experience (albeit on a smaller scale) as my dancers from Phoenix Dance Theatre performed at Montclair New Jersey. Bob was there because we had restaged one of his classics, Forest. This time he was watching me....

I was also there to witness for one of the most intense and emotional times, in particular the demise of Robin Howard. Bob & Janet "Mop" Eager were devastated by the behaviour of The Place board, by the way they felt ambushed, by taking down Robin as chair of the board. It was not much longer after these events that Robin sadly passed away. It was probably a turning point for Bob and the organisation. During the late 80s, several attempts were made to find a replacement for Bob as artistic director, unfortunately all those attempts failed. Bob was always drawn back with a sense of loyalty to the organisation. In the end it was a painful period, financial decisions were made by the Arts Council and the Board had to take difficult decisions to protect the school and the Theatre; a new scale down company was to replace LCDT, a transfer of power was put in motion at The Place, and almost a liquidation of Robin and Bob's work and culture was diminished to history. In retrospect it was a natural order within the artistic environment, a constant need to find new ways of expression, things move on and rightly so. A large scale contemporary dance company had outlived its time, smaller independent choreographer-lead companies were investing more cutting edge and relevant work of its period. Bob begrudgingly accepted this, and thus began his 'exile' in France.

After the company had closed down in 1994 and I had retired from dancing by 1997, Bob and I stayed in touch and became friends. We would talk regularly, discuss, reminisce and argue our different views. Eventually I thought I would make a documentary film on him - with no budget, all self-financed and shot on a domestic camcorder. The film was eventually premiered 2002 in central London for an invited audience and former company members. The whole process was an amazing experience for myself and my wife Sallie, who produced the film. We traveled down to Bob's beautiful home in the south of France, we saw how he lived like a bohemian artist. Over the next 3 days we interviewed him, he talked about his life, his work. During the interview he made two profound statements that have stayed with me: one concerning his experience during the second world war as a combat soldier "war was not logical"; the other was concerning teaching "teach only what you know, don't teach what you don't know, teach with as much love and care as you can, teach everything you know, don't hold something back because it gives you a little power".

One of my regrets came many years later in 2006 after stepping down as director of Phoenix DT. Bob and I decided to collaborate and choreograph a duet for myself and the wonderful dancer Kate Coyne. The theme was to be loosely based on Siddhartha the Buddha. We had actually achieved 30 minutes of material during our two weeks of working together but in the end, we decided not to pursue the idea due to financial constraints; also, my ankles had their last dance. Thankfully, the material still exists in some storage box.

In 2013 my wife and I moved to New York, not necessarily as a career move but to be close to our ever growing family. The very next year Bob and I were both invited to present works for the Graham 2 company in NYC. Bob's piece was the duet from *Forest*. It was satisfying to witness the Graham organisation honour and celebrate his contribution to Martha's work and beyond. He spoke that evening and as was his way, with very few carefully chosen words, he described how the process worked in the studio with Martha. For me, it sounded so familiar, seeing how Bob was passing on his lineage, and how our generation prospered from it.

Over the many years we would talk and debate many political issues, but it's the news in the background at the moment that would be most disturbing to him: the attack on the Capital by Trump's supporters. It reminds me of a conversation back in 2014 when I had invited him to a rehearsal of my full-length work *Rites of War* that I had directed for Lindsey Butcher's company, Gravity & Levity. The piece was inspired by some of the events during the first world war. After watching the work, he talked to the dancers about some of his experiences during WW2. One of his points was an interesting fact: during Hitler's systematic takeover of the German political system, it only took 37% of the population to take control, a horrific statistic. I have always been inspired by his instruction to be mindful of the bigger picture, whatever darkly inspired work that I was making, he would say that there must be a light at the end. I think this was Bob's mission.

Over the many years of Bob's life in the UK, I think it is important to remember his key collaborators: Robin Howard, Janet "Mop" Eager, John B Read, Antony Crickmay, Barry Guy, Norberto Chiesa, Barrington Pheloung and much loved rehearsal director Moshe Romano, the main collaborators who contributed to his work were his dancers - who he trained, mentored and loved....

I was fortunate, and I wasn't the only one to have been taken under his wing. At no point was it mentioned that he was going to mentor me, it was just what he did, an unspoken unconditional bond, no written contract, always there to talk, support, critique the work, discuss ideas but most importantly was happy to see my family grow. He has known both my wife, Sallie, and me from our late teens to becoming grandparents.

A week before his passing, Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, informed me that she had asked Bob for some work that he just produced in England. Bob was happy and excited that Janet was planning to take the work into their repertory. And therefore, a full circle is completed, whereby his last work will be presented by the company he once danced for.

Bob remained active right to the very end, in his twilight years, he was invited to make new work, re-stage some of his great works from his past, teach, coach, mentor, head choreographic courses, lecture on lighting techniques, books, films and was bestowed with honours and awards. The end was just an existential idea to Bob. "There is no end, Darshan" as he would drone in his Brooklyn accent, "once we leave these vessels we all go back into the earth and are recycled, just like your ancestors in India".... at which point we would both share a smile with each other.

Robert Cohan Another Place

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/7427473/video/448167490>



Photo By Anthony Crickmay at his studio in Quarrendon Street London 1981



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