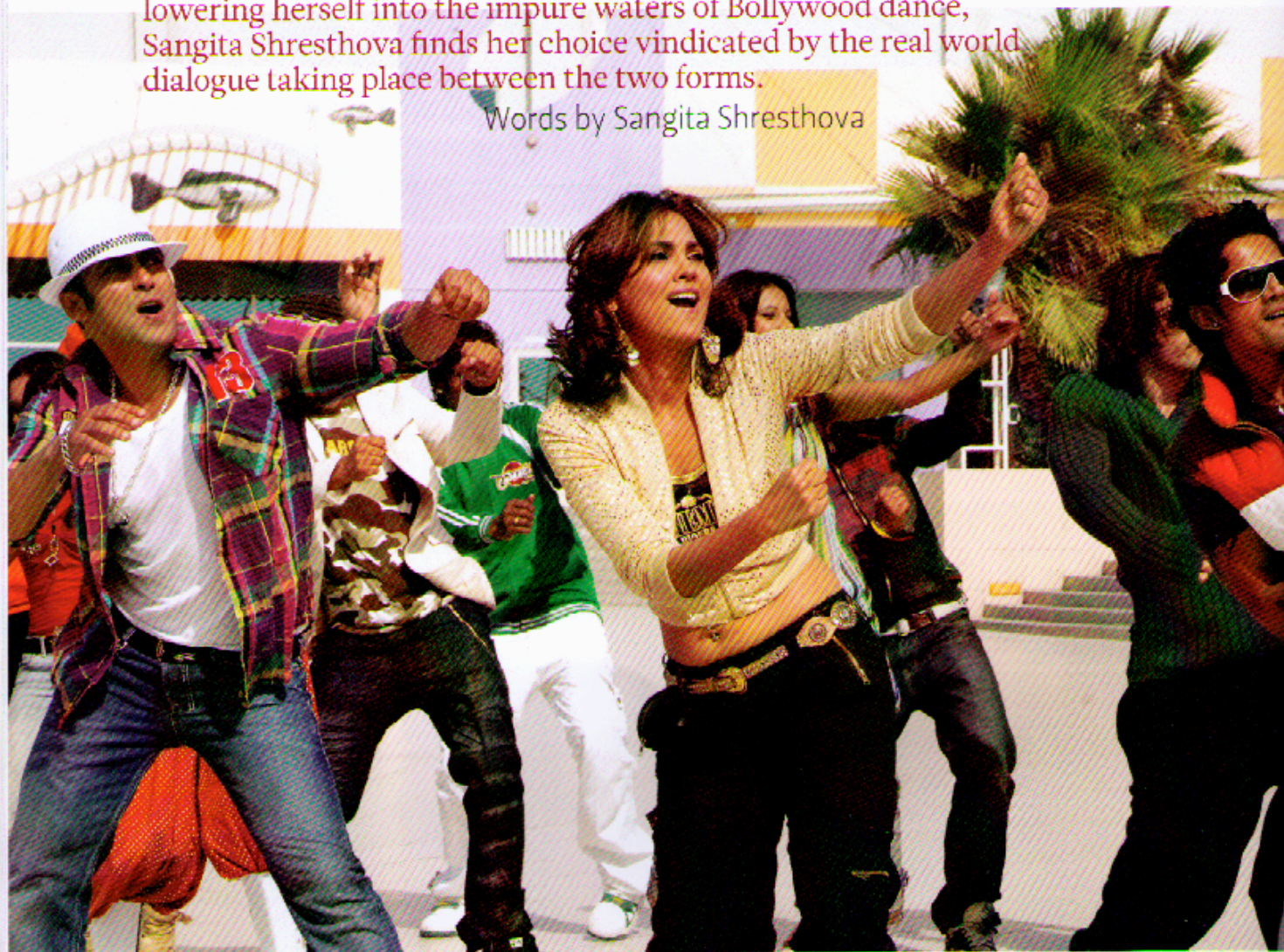


Between and Bollywood bharatanatyam

Often the butt of jokes by her bharatanatyam colleagues for lowering herself into the impure waters of Bollywood dance, Sangita Shresthova finds her choice vindicated by the real world dialogue taking place between the two forms.

Words by Sangita Shresthova



Hindi film Parthier / Photo: Courtesy Eros International

As I run towards the studio, chanting sounds fill the early evening air. I am late again. I change into my dance sari, and hurriedly check that my pleats allow for a full aramandhi. Cautiously, I pull back the sliding door and step into a room filled with dance students stamping in unison to the driving commands of their bharatanatyam teacher, Viji Prakash. I settle into a position in the back of the room and prepare to join the class. Viji -auntie, as she is deferentially called by her students, looks at me with a teasing smile. "Miss Bollywood is here," she exclaims. Several students snigger. "No, seriously, she is writing her PhD on Bollywood," Viji -auntie explains. I am angry at myself for feeling embarrassed by this superficial, playful exchange. "You should show us some Bollywood some day," another student comments

teasingly. "Well, Bollywood dance does actually have a very interesting history..." I begin to justify myself. Viji-auntie laughs as she moves her hips side to side looking to the side seductively. The class convulses in a burst of

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laughter. I have been here before.

So, why would a bharatanatyam dancer take Bollywood seriously and even (gasp) admit to enjoying



Photo by Marco Casselli and courtesy of Dorkypark



Photo by Jit Dandi and Courtesy of Bollynatyazm

it? Looking back over the years, I now realise that my affinity towards so-called Bollywood dance cuts past its spectacular, sexy and glamorous veneer.

While growing up in the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu, my introduction to Hindi cinema was at my cousin's video rental store where I'd watch the Hindi movies playing on the VCR. The plots slipped by me, but the dances etched themselves in my memory. As the product of a Czech/Nepali mixed marriage, my childhood was shaped by a, sometimes painful, cultural negotiation. I was regularly reminded of my outsider status in both societies. Hindi films, with their remorseless blending of movement sources and costume-styles, provided a messy, yet appealing, reflection of my own scattered cultural identity.

Back at my cousin's store, I watched dance scenes and tried to remember how the dancers moved: the steps, the hand gestures, and facial expressions. At home, when no one was there, I'd rearrange the furniture and try out the moves. Years later, I attended my first dance class. Today, dance is an inseparable part of my life.

My desire to dance led me to bharatanatyam. I needed structure, complexity, and, perhaps, even discipline. Notions of purity arose during the final phases of the arangetram preparations. No meat, it pollutes the body. Alcohol was discouraged, it dulls the mind. But it was really the restrictions placed upon my interpretation of bharatanatyam that were the biggest challenge. "Don't wave your fingers like this, move them gently," my teacher would insist.

The precise movements enticed and strained me. I obeyed and looked towards the improvisational liberation that would emerge through mastery of this form. In retrospect, my relationship to bharatanatyam grew out of my teacher's approach to imparting this art, as an authentic and unchanging dance form. Since then, I have met and studied under teachers whose understanding of creativity in classical dance reaches far beyond the confines of the orthodox. It was, however, this confinement that informed my relationship to bharatanatyam, and ultimately contributed to my return to Hindi film song and dance sequences.

I remember the precise moment when I fell head first into the world of Bollywood dance. Arriving back

home, late and exhausted, in Brussels after a lengthy classical dance session, I popped in a CD of Bollywood hits. What followed was a moment of ultimate release. The diverse influences in the song released the tensions of the evening. The music allowed me to move, not as I had been trained, but as I was. It was okay to borrow a classical hand gesture and then free my hips to shake and shimmy as they wanted. I collapsed onto the floor with the realisation that Bollywood dance was going to play a complex role in my life.

Strictly speaking, Bollywood dance has emerged from the dances in Hindi films. But it was the exponential post-1990 growth of Bollywood cinema that brought Bollywood dances into the spotlight. Classes sprouted in London, Sydney and New York. Students clamoured to enrol. Today, Bollywood dance exists as an established, though contested, movement category. Increasingly it is perceived, by outsiders in particular, as Indian dance. Those trained in the Indian classical dances are appalled. *Slumdog Millionaire* with its rolling credits dance sequence has aided this process. Responding to this trend, and other market pressures, dances in Bollywood films now actively covet new audiences through technical innovation sprinkled with a seamless and world-travelled sheen.

Despite this attention, my main interest is in the

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pre-1990s, less polished, aging dance performances where the cultural mixing is most apparent. In the 1950s, the dream sequence in *Awaara*, choreographed by Madame Simkie (a key dancer in Uday Shankar's troupe) draws on Indian classical and folk traditions even as it reminds us of Busby Berkeley's Hollywood choreography. The dance-off between classically-trained Vyjanthimala, Helen, the femme fatale queen of Hindi cinema, and heart-throb Shammi Kapoor in *Prince* caricatures Hindi cinema's understanding of Indian and foreign movement in the 1960s. Through Meena Kumari's performance in *Pakeezah*,



Photo by Nadya Direkova and courtesy of Bollywoodnityam

we encounter the 1970s version of the romanticised courtesan. Reflecting the social change of 1980s India, Mithun Chakravorty's garish dancing in *Disco Dancer* gave voice to a frustrated generation. In 1997, audiences sat up as lean, uniform jazz-dance trained dancers took centre stage in *Dil To Pagal Hai*, ushering in a new age for dances in Hindi films. Through the decades, dances in Hindi films became an imperfect, but fascinating, prismatic lens to India's perspectives on itself and the world, filled with hybrid possibilities.

Today, I have a dialogue with both bharatanatyam and Bollywood dance. On some days, I believe a direct comparison between the two forms is impossible. Bollywood titillates and entertains. It is the language of parties and seduction. Bharatanatyam aspires to appeal to our higher sensibilities. Sometimes, however, I can see how these disparate styles collide

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in unexpected, and yet illuminating, ways. These moments of collision define my current work. That said, here's a little preview of two topics that currently occupy my thoughts.

Dance has long been linked to identity among India's diaspora. For some during the twentieth century, bharatanatyam occupied this space. Bharatanatyam teachers imparted cultural heritage

to second generation students. To some extent, Bollywood films and dance today assume a similar, albeit more porous, role. Dances set to Bollywood songs now represent India in international settings like the Commonwealth Games. While defining Bollywood as representative of India undoubtedly opens a Pandora's box of questions, I am more interested in the implications of this trend on Hindi film dance. Often I see choreographers outside India adding Indian classical dance and costumes to their Bollywood dance sequences. I have even heard arguments for pro-Indian content censorship in Bollywood dance performances.

From a different perspective, Bollywood dance and bharatanatyam also converse through seduction and desire. Bollywood dance is clearly about physical sensuality. Bharatanatyam touches upon a yearning for the divine. From one perspective they occupy different positions, but from the dancer's experience, the danced desire may in fact, at times, be less distant than expected. When a heroine lowers her eyelids in mock humility under the yearning gaze of her lover in a romantic dance sequence, is her expression of seduction really so different from a bharatanatyam dancer's experience of Radha's playful exchange with Krishna?

Embracing both Bollywood and bharatanatyam, I can finally openly claim my in-between identity as a dancer and person. Between the wrist whirls and chest undulations and the precise gestures and profound spirituality, my explorations of Bollywoodnityam promise to raise more questions and, perhaps, even some answers.