

First steps to Bollywood stardom...



Shiny dancer Alexi gets down in his 'Little Mermaid'/MC Hammer get-up

Can anyone learn to dance like a Bollywood superstar? Probably not, but we sent **Alexi Duggins** (complete with comedy trousers) to give it a jolly good go

It wasn't meant to be like this. I'm a big fan of the stylish abandon of the dance scenes in Bollywood films. So when given the opportunity to attend a dance class, I decide to pay stylistic tribute by donning a flowing white ensemble. Unfortunately, in attempting to borrow a pair of trousers, I seem to have made an error in asking for 'harem pants'.

So it is that I find myself at a Bollywood Grooves dance class, clad from the waist down in what looks like a 'Little Mermaid' costume that's been reworked by MC Hammer.

'Hi, I'm Minila,' comes the greeting from our instructor, as in turn we introduce ourselves. The majority of the dozen or so attendees are female, with about half having had their curiosity piqued by Indian weddings. The men's reasons are less impressive. 'I've just moved to England and want to meet people,' offers one. 'I lost a bet,' chuckles another. 'I don't normally wear these trousers,' offers another fool. Okay, that was me.

A few quick stretches, and we're into a music-free run-through of a 'bhangra warm-up'. 'Bhangra is a folk dance from Punjab,' Minila explains. 'And Punjabis know how to get down.' They also know how to get up, it transpires, as we begin a series of moves largely involving hopping from one foot to the other. We're instructed to throw our hands into the air in a variety of gestures ranging from a kind of finger-and-thumb 'okay' gesture to 'changing

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the lightbulb'. 'Smile!' Minila keeps urging. Not that she needs to. There's an affecting energy to the steps that leaves most of us grinning. Well, I assume it's the energy that does it. It could be the fact that I spend most of my time looking like an over-protective mother goose hopping around her nest to ward off intruders. Either way, so far, so enjoyable.

Then play is pressed on the stereo, and a tribal drum beat

bursts from the speakers. 'I want lots of energy!' shouts Minila. The class responds by performing the routine at double the pace, and I suddenly realise that I haven't really been paying attention. At one point, we go into a 360-degree spin, and as I confusedly rotate in the opposite direction to the rest of my classmates, I catch one woman's eye. She responds by promptly bursting into laughter.

After a pause for water, we add some more moves to the routine. By the end, I'm just trying not to look too out of place: throwing my arms around wildly, tired feet trampling round with so little precision that they may as well be clad in clown shoes (which, actually, would probably have worked with the trousers).

Then the music stops, and it's all over. I'm bent over, panting. I may never have looked so ridiculous.

And I appear to have run through a sprinkler. But somehow, it's still the most fun form of exercise I've ever done. 'You should come back,' Minila urges, smiling. And, actually, I'm sorely tempted. Although next time I'll wear some different legwear.

Alexi Duggins

Drop-in classes £6-£11, four-week classes £40-£60. For more info, see www.bollywoodgrooves.com.

www.timeout.com/dance

Jive talk Mela's Jay Kumar

Choreographer Jay Kumar runs the company DanceAsia and will be leading a mass Bollywood dancealong at the London Mela on Sunday. See listings.



How did you get the dancing bug?

'I've been dancing from a very young age, but not professionally. I started doing professional stuff about 12 years ago.'

What's your signature style

'Bollywood dance is my speciality – but I bring a more contemporary angle to it, rather than classical.'

What is Bollywood dance, exactly?

'It's an umbrella term really, the dances are all based on music from Bollywood films, so it takes some aspects of classical dance styles like *kathak* and *bharatanatyam*, but it also takes aspects from hip hop, street dance and bhangra.'

Is Bollywood dance gaining popularity?

'I think there's been a surge over the past five or six years. I think the music coming out of Bollywood films is more accepted by young Asians now. Even if second- or third-generation Asians don't understand the language, they're connecting with their culture.'

But it's not just Asians who are taking it up...

'No, I've always had non-Asians come to my classes. I've done weddings where there's an Asian marrying a non-Asian, and I teach the guests a bhangra routine. It's always the non-Asians who are first on the floor.'

What will be going on at the Mela?

'We have a host of different acts, young and old. I'll be leading an interactive Bollywood dance, getting everyone to follow me in some routines.'

What's your top tip for good dancing?

'To be passionate. You can do a really simple step but if you put some passion into it and enjoy it, the person watching will enjoy it too.'

DAVID JEFF