

Bollywood: the new salsa?

Inspired by the glorious Merchants of Bollywood, Donald Huterer tried his hands (and feet) at a craze that's been dubbed the new salsa



The woman facing the mirror beside me is dolled up like a princess, all red and gold and a tumble of highlighted hair. Behind her a dozen nimble young dancers patiently work their way through the basics of a Bollywood-style dance routine. If they're bored it's my fault. I'm the pale-skinned, stiff-bodied cultural interloper sent to Honey Kalaria's cramped little studio in North London where I'm to be photographed while experiencing, first-hand, the rudiments of one of the world's most hybrid dance forms.

Bollywood's global appeal may be greater than ever, and the deliriously glitzy, contagiously beat-fuelled dance scenes splashed across cinema screens have triggered much of its success. But there's a thriving, live side to all the motion, too, and that's why I'm playing the fool in the presence of Kalaria and her dancers. *The Merchants of Bollywood* has been seen by more than two million people worldwide since its Sydney premiere in 2005. This big-budget blockbuster returns to the UK this month at the Peacock Theatre in London.

Kalaria, meanwhile, is taking advantage of the Bollywood dance courses so widely available in Britain by spearheading the Bollywood Dance Championships 2010. This *X Factor*-type talent contest will culminate in a finale in July at the O2 arena that might just launch a new superstar.

It's not going to be yours truly. Show me how to strike a pose and I can just about do it. But any attempt to turn my skinny frame into the next Shahrukh Khan or Shahid Kapur is doomed to failure. Dressed by Kalaria in a bright blue two-piece costume trimmed with orange, a jaunty sash tied round my waist, I either look dashing or clownish. I think I know which it is.

Kalaria is the head of Honey's Dance Academy, a school and entertainment agency with more than a dozen branches spread across London that serve an estimated 1,800 students a week. For the past 13 years Bollywood dance has been her bread and butter, and her mission. She recites a string of benefits that it can produce: stress reduction, keep fit, confidence-boosting. "It's fun to do, and it can bring a lot of people from different cultures together."

The moves Kalaria has devised for me are almost painfully simple: backstep first to one side then the other, arms extending gracefully in the opposite direction. Have I always been this uncoordinated? Next I plunge down onto my haunches with legs spread, arms crossed and fingers splayed like taut petals. "Keep smiling," Kalaria sings out. That I can do. Also the woof-woof, her nickname for the classical Indian *mudra*, or hand gesture, in which thumb, middle and index

fingers meet and the remaining digits fan above them; it resembles a dog, hence the name, and does the trick when teaching kids.

Bollywood is a dance of mongrel impurities, a mash-up of proper Indian classicism and folk steps that freely amalgamates the hops, flicking wrists and shoulder shimmies of bhangra alongside a host of contemporary styles, from jazz, disco and street dance to Arabic and Latin American grooves. "As an outgrowth of the Hindi film industry it's pop and commercial," says Reena Tailor-Panchal, the head of the Birmingham-based Bollywood Dreams Dance, "so nothing about it is set in stone. There's no right or wrong way of doing it."

Minila Shah runs the rival London company Bollywood Grooves. Like many of her colleagues around the country, she maintains a core team of professional dancers who perform at product launches, corporate events, charity balls and hen nights as well as teach. "There's a big demand now for Bollywood," Shah says, citing the mass appeal of *Slumdog Millionaire* as one of the strongest reasons. As Tailor-Panchal observes:

"It's become fashionable the way salsa was ten years ago."

Shah was responsible for the stylish routine, set to the composer A. R. Rahman's *Slumdog* hit *Jai Ho*, that helped Hayley Tamaddon to win the *Dancing on Ice* crown this year. I attended one of her drop-in sessions at Pineapple studios in Covent Garden for 15 people whose experience ran a gamut from regulars to absolute beginners like me.

The majority of students in Shah's class were women and, interestingly, most were not Asian. This may be due to the London location. In the Midlands it's different.

Bollywood's often gaudy charms have engendered healthy fan bases in key cities such as Sydney and New York and, less expectedly, in Russia, Poland and other Eastern European nations. Such cross-cultural consumerism is increasingly evident in the UK, where there are more consumers of Bollywood films than anywhere outside India.

"Bollywood dance in Britain has never been more popular," says Sâmir Bhamra, the creative director of a Leicester-based, Bollywood-style dance and theatre organisation called Phizzical Productions. "So many schools are teaching it in all its marketable forms: Bollywood aerobics, Bollyfat classes, Bollywood for the elderly, Bollymums and so on. For me it isn't a dance form but a time capsule of Seventies kitsch that's catering to youngsters brought up in Asian families who watch the films." He blames the schools for the general lack of polish. "They teach mechanical movements to a song rather than technique."

The Merchants of Bollywood, with a cast of some 40 dancers, is a lavish tribute to a gargantuan entertainment industry and one of the families that helped to shape it. The director and writer Toby Gough calls the production "a big, fun and glamorous dance show overflowing with feel-good, happy-ending positivity". Such hyperbole is understandable once you learn that the cast in this £2 million extravaganza is said to use 1,200 costumes and 2,000 pieces of glittering jewellery. Their dancing is driven by a score by the songwriting team of Salim-Sulaiman and contains tracks from films such as *Lagaan*, *Devdas*, *Musafir* and *Dhoom*.

Gough's script is based on a real-life conflict between the members of a dynasty that has for generations been prominent in Hindi cinema. The choreographer Hiralal Merchant was a founding father of classic Bollywood dance. His granddaughter Vaibhavi Merchant choreographed *The Merchants of Bollywood*. She also devises dances for about 40 of the 800 or so films that roll off the Bollywood assembly line annually. Such Herculean efforts have earned her, at 35, the title "princess of romance". The irony is that the elder Merchant was initially dead set against Vaibhavi following in his footsteps.

"He never wanted a daughter of the house to get into films," explains Vaibhavi's sibling, Shruti Merchant.

As the assistant choreographer of *Merchants*, it's her job to keep the show in shape. Shruti attributes her grandfather's attitude to customs that are still practised in remote areas of India. "Girls didn't go out and work. They certainly wouldn't go into an industry where they might be dancing among 400 to 500 men. My sister thought differently. She also wanted to use traditional dance in a contemporary way, mixing it with many other forms.

"Bollywood has moved on since the days of wearing a sari and running from one tree to another," Shruti continues. "Our musicals are running parallel with what Hollywood produces. A lot of intelligent film-makers have come into our space from other places, looking to India and the techniques we've developed." There is, she says, tremendous cultural material that's still untapped. "India has 28 different states, each with its own traditional dance forms and folk music. So there's a lot more out there than what Bollywood has projected."

So what, in Shruti's opinion, constitutes a good Bollywood routine? "There's no fixed formula," she says. "A song needs to flow from the script. It needs to have good music that motivates the choreographer. Perfect sound, perfect movement." But, she adds, the best talents in the business don't limit themselves to the dance routine.

"My sister trained me to look into everything — the set, props and costumes, the background dancers, how you want to shoot a sequence and what you want to introduce into the film."

Hiring leading actors who've had proper dance training is also paramount. "A lot of choreographers today struggle with people who don't know how to move at all. But, again, it's about more than having great artists doing great steps."

Merchants of Bollywood is at the Peacock Theatre (0844 4124322, sadlerswells.com), May 18-June 5. Honey Kalaria has a masterclass on Sun at the St Giles Hotel, London. The Bollywood Dance Championships 2010 (020-8590 8050 or www.honeysdanceacademy.com) talent heats are May 21 and 23 at City Pavilion, Romford, and the grand finale is at the O2, London, on July 30

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