



BOLLYWOOD AXION

CONQUERING THE DANCE FLOOR: TWO LEFT FEET CAN STILL GET IT RIGHT

There are few places with more potential for embarrassment than the dance floor. As a teenager, avoiding humiliation is of the utmost importance and being a desi teen complicates matters even more. Dance is integral to South Asian culture. No Bollywood movie is complete without multiple well-choreographed numbers. At weddings, even the quiet aunts do bhangra with expertise. What, then, is required to rid awkward teens of their two left feet? Only a brief burst of courage to join today's variety of dance classes. Pursuing any of the wide range of dance styles offered around the country is a surefire way to change the dance floor from foe to friend.

BY RICHA GULATI

Washington, DC metro area based Ranjana Bhansali has danced kathak since her childhood days in India. Even motherhood has not stopped Bhansali who includes her two teenage sons in her dance compositions. Inheriting their mother's passion and talent for dance, brothers Aman and Naman Bhansali were quick learners. The two boys used to join their mother mimicking the Bollywood moves they saw on TV and started choreographing their own dance scores from the tender age of 10. In 2003, the Bhansali family formed a dance troupe, DC Dhamaka, which has accumulated an impressive amount of national awards in just three

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years. Bhansali is repeatedly asked to teach classes by those who see her troupe's performances. Today, she and her sons, now 16 and 14, still perform as well as teach 50 students of all ages in the basement of their home in Herndon, VA.

Surprisingly, a majority of DC Dhama students are teenage boys. While girls are likely to study dance if their mothers danced in their own childhood, it is no secret that the thought of dancing instills fear into the hearts of most boys. Nevertheless, Aman says school is a popular venue for his troupe to introduce fellow students to his dance style. He performs regularly at school talent shows and cultural events where his high-energy Bollywood moves continually woo new members to the group.

"This year we even had non-Indian guys ask to participate in our group's performance at school," Aman says. "By now, everyone has seen at least some part of a Bollywood movie and has an idea of what the dances are like. But once they see it live, and realize how fun it can be, they want to learn the dance and be part of the group right away." As the South Asian culture permeates through the mainstream America this year, the Bollywood dance fever is at an all-time high and Aman and Naman are successfully riding the wave.

For some teens, the pursuit of Indian dance styles, however, is only one

part of a larger quest to preserve tradition and heritage. Neha Srivastava of Houston has been studying the Lucknow gharana style of kathak for the past several years. Srivastava, who enjoys performing at various cultural events, says it is important to continue to learn a dance tradition that keeps her linked to her heritage. Although she has not yet studied dance in India, she looks forward to traveling to North India to study kathak when she is older.

Rupa Dandekar, a Northern Virginia based dance teacher finds that many teens like Srivastava study dance as a way to connect to their South Asian heritage. Having studied kathak and Indian folk dance since she was two and a half years old under Guru Mahesh Singh, Dandekar gives private lessons to local teens. She says studying dance is physically, mentally, and culturally rewarding.

"Students of dance are introduced to Indian classical music and learn all aspects of it, including different instruments, ragas, and taal (rhythm). They also learn ancient Indian mythology and different Sanskrit slokas," explains Dandekar. Kathak, she adds, is also versatile. "Kathak dancers



The high-energy Bollywood moves of Aman and Naman Bhansali continue to woo new members to their troupe DC Dhama

can adapt to any type of dancing, like hip-hop, jazz and flamenco." Many teens eventually find that a background in traditional dance styles, with its emphasis on discipline and rhythm, is a solid foundation for learning other modern dance styles.

Even though many teens choose to pursue traditional dance styles, which are part of their heritage, they also look for contemporary western styles and other ethnic forms of dances. Larger studios like the DC Dance Collective in Washington, DC, offer diverse classes that encourage students to study a variety of dance forms ranging from traditional ballet and tap dance to ethnic styles like African and Indian. Such studios not only expose teens from different cultures to dance but also help them build basic dance skills.

"Building solid skills in rhythm and coordination as a young teen means that you can pursue different types of dance all throughout life," says flamenco dancer and teacher Genevieve "La Genoveva" Guinn, who has choreographed and performed fusion flamenco and classical Indian dance after studying and performing flamenco in Madrid for several years. "That's exciting because a student never gets bored since there is always something new and unexpected to explore."

Teens are indeed likely – once they are exposed to dance – to explore different styles with their friends and work on innovative fusion compositions. They are often playful and perform dances that explore the relationship between various styles. Largely due to them, fusion dancing has become quite popular over the last 10 years. A growing trend of fusion flamenco and classical Indian dance is sweeping across the nation with performances popping up in various theaters. Flamenco dancer La Conja and kathak artist Rajika Puri have performed their groundbreaking Flamenco-Natyam production at many

Ranjana Bhansali started DC Dhama in 2003. Since then her students have won many dance competitions.



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prestigious venues nationwide.

For many South Asian teens, fusion dance presents a unique opportunity to explore the twin heritages that they have: Western and South Asian. Whereas a generation ago flamenco was rarely mixed with kathak and western styles of dancing did not usually find common grounds with Bollywood dancing, many of these dance styles are now inspiring moves from one another.

One clear example of the fusion dance phenomenon is the bhangra and Bollywood dance craze. Bhangra, with roots in Punjabi folk songs accompanied by the booming rhythms of dholak, has evolved from its shoulder shaking past to new high-energy moves and innovative choreography. It has leapt out of the South Asian scene and even mixed with hip-hop, a not so surprising union between two styles that share infectious beats.

Bollywood dance styles, too, are incorporating more high-impact moves that require more complex dance techniques than ever before. Many college students like in Stanford regularly perform Bollywood style dancing in various festivals.

Pooja Narang, founder of New York City's Bollywood Axion studio, knows all about the transformation of bhangra and Bollywood dancing that is attracting teens to her classes in droves. According to Pooja, learning to dance bhangra and Bollywood style requires strength and prac-

tice to master new energetic moves.

"Students come to class wanting to learn to dance for a party or a wedding," she says, "but it's a real physical workout to learn to dance."

The well choreographed bhangra sequences in Bollywood movies that inspire many teens also require dedication in order to master complex moves. For this reason, students that attend Narang's classes must sign up for a minimum of 10 classes in order to register, as there is a waitlist. The reward for diligent study, however, is the chance for teens to learn a dance based on their heritage that often incorporates modern elements of pop and hip-hop. For traditionalists like Dandekar, however, there is no need to modernize the traditional kathak dance in order to make it appeal to the teens of today. She finds that enough students are happy to learn the dance as it was taught to her. "I want kathak to be popular," she says. Her wish holds true since traditional Indi-

LINDA A. CICERO / STANFORD NEWS SERVICE



Stanford Hindi Film Dance group showing off their grand finale at the sixth annual An Art Affair in White Plaza, a hub of Stanford University

Rupa Dandekar finds that many students are happy to learn the traditional kathak dance.



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an dance classes continue to flourish across the country. After all, as she notes, "any pure form of art will live through time and always be appreciated."

Whether teens choose to pay homage to their roots and study classical South Asian dance, or explore other western or ethnic styles, one trend is clear: learning to dance has given many teens the chance to gain confidence and participate in a variety of dance venues. The faces of the teens that choose to pursue dance have evolved, too. Narang finds that many of her classes are filled with men who want to learn to dance, in addition to many non-South Asians who, after being exposed to Indian culture, join her classes too. With diverse teens pursuing a variety of styles, the hard part may only be getting started because with today's dance, there is a class suitable for nearly every teen. ■

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