



ARTS GAZE
BY LUBNA MARIUM

Dancing the Diasporic Fantasy

Tobin Thomas does Bollywood in Toronto, trading in the virtual dreams created by this larger than life Indian film industry. Based in Mumbai, it is India's – and the world's - largest film business in terms of the number of films produced, and also the number of tickets sold each year.

With the success of films such as the Oscar winning movie 'Slumdog Millionaire', Bollywood films and dance have taken the world by storm and have now become a global phenomenon. Much of this is due to the Indian diaspora, but a significant proportion also comes from non-Indians who are fascinated by the exotic qualities inherent in it. Stars like Madonna, Shakira and Britney Spears have incorporated the Bollywood style of dance or music into their songs, videos and stage shows.

Bollywood's virtual world of extravagant costumes, lavish sets, melodrama and romance is a cultural construct devoured the world over by an ever-burgeoning audience. But, as cultural theorist Rey Chow asserts, film reception doesn't end with quietly watching a movie in a dark theatre, rather it is 'a mode of performative, and not merely passive, practice'. This performativity is in the reliving of Bollywood through its dances in a variety of formal and non-formal occasions within South Asia and the diaspora in places as far and wide as USA, UK, Africa, China and Canada, amongst many others.

'Doing Bollywood' is about a plethora of activities such as weddings, dance classes and fitness classes; all of which creates a nostalgic space for those in the Indian diaspora and a web of dreams for the non-Asian participants.

This is so true for Tobin Thomas, a young Canadian choreographer of all 'moves' Bollywood. Tobin's family hails from Kottayam in Kerala which has a vibrant heritage of traditional dances. Tobin grew up watching his two older sisters training in Bharatanatyam with teachers based in Toronto. But, it was only during his undergraduate studies at York University that the Bollywood culture overtook him. South Asian

students have concocted an entire culture of 'performing' Bollywood within the North American campuses, drawing participation from students from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka et al. With his familiarity with dance, Tobin got drawn into these events. Now, with his events company 'Shadow Entertainments', Bollywood is one of his dual full-time careers. The other is within the Calvin Klein enterprises.

For Tobin, Bollywood moves are a fusion of Kathak, Bharatanatyam, hiphop, bhangra, tap and contemporary movements from the world over. Though not formally trained, he has participated in workshops by various trainers from India. He also commutes to the heartland in Bombay and hopes one day to get his 'card' as a choreographer and dancer in Mumbai.

Teaching dance to the wedding parties is an interesting addendum. Recently a wedding party required dances to be taught to the uncle and aunts. The ten older couples turned out to have a mind of their own, and hugely added to the creative process with their own lived memories of the 'golden oldies' from Hindi films.

'Why Bollywood?', I ask him. 'It helps me express myself the best with its diversity of forms', is Tobin's quick response. 'I love to try different things; incorporate different moves. More of the creative element keeps the audience engaged.'

And, yes, it's a lucrative business with gigs on almost every weekend. Some days the company, of almost 30 dancers, needs to split to be able to perform in simultaneous events.

Tobin is all praise for Bangladesh's Tahmina Anwar Anika, who does his Kathak choreography, while doing her BFA in dance at the York University in Toronto. 'She's amazing and has a lot of patience while training other dancers'. Here's to Bollywood and its unifying powers!

Tobin is presently working on a Bollywood production which he hopes to premiere in 2018. The dream is to tour with it in America and globally, maybe.



LIFE'S LYRICS
BY NASHID KAMAL

Shakila Ahmed

She was the best friend of my sister Naeela and the two of them chuckled and cackled all the time in our Purana Paltan house (in Dhaka, Bangladesh), which also happened to be the neighbourhood of Shakila Ahmed alias Torah. When I asked my sister about this nickname, she said that her grandfather had named her from the holy book 'Taurat', it was an unusual name and it befitted a very unique person. Torah's mother Mrs. Showkat Ara Begum was my first teacher in my nursery class in Little Jewel's School where Torah also studied and was a very bright student. She privately learned music from Music College, where Barin Majumdar was the Principal. Her tutor was Mr. Ghulam Ambia, a very well-known folk singer who was very fond of Torah, her voice, her learning ability, diction. Torah had a gap in her learning for four/ five years, when she completed her Senior Cambridge from Green Herald School and intermediate from Holy Cross College, Dhaka, always with flying colors. She joined the department of journalism and mass communication at Dhaka University and obtained a first class first in her bachelors, completing her masters with another first class. In the meantime she had started learning from renowned trainer Ustad Sanjeev Dey.

When I met her after her results, she never discussed music. Shakila, a tall and beautiful young woman, stood out like a model, she was thinking of furthering her painting skills in Paris, or joining Dhaka University as a Lecturer or maybe join in some multinational company. Suddenly in 1991, Torah knocked at my door in London, UK (I was studying there), laden with numerous gifts for my daughters! "Hi, what are you doing here?" She said, "Why didn't you know that I had joined the British Airways?" I was a bit surprised, but that didn't last for long as she explained, "My flight is via Mumbai and I get to train under Bhaijaanie Ustad Dilshad Khan there and stay with the couple" (meaning Ustad Perveen Sultana). Now, I got the point and appreciated her journey, she always carried a small 'surpeti' practicing her complicated taans whenever she could. On this leg, I met her several times and learned about her writing skills too. Soon enough Shakila got married and settled in London. She sang for various programmes and got an opportunity to sing the compositions of the famous musician Hariharan in her compact disc titled 'Nayeebaat' which received nice reviews in Mumbai and

the ghazal 'Tum hara ishq tum hari wa fa kafi hai' became a hit song.

As fate would have it, after a couple of years in London, Shakila found herself moving to Karachi, Pakistan where her husband's family was based.

She was tossed into an unknown sea, where she had to learn to swim on her own. In a private concert, she was introduced by the Bangladeshi born singer Alamgir. Then there was no looking back, Shakila became a household name singing her Bangla songs, classical numbers, Nazrul songs, Bhawaiya and some Urdu ghazals. Her beautiful English, lovely looks, speaking ability, writing ability all combined together destined her towards stardom. She made nine CDs of songs, and some singles as well as mixed albums (all available in YouTube). Her TV shows has been recorded in Mauritius, India, Singapore and many cities of USA, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Every time she came to Bangladesh, she gave solo concerts and recorded some



modern songs and ghazals under the music direction of liberation war singer/trainer Shujeo Shyam. It is titled 'Hridoy Beenaar Tare' and released by Sargam (her first album). She has given vocals for Bernardo Bertolucci's art film, Little Buddha, composed by tabla maestro Ustad Zakir Hussain and Ruichi Sakamoto, the Oscar winning music composer of the 'Last Emperor'. Shakila's journey has continued, she is now settled in Sacramento, USA. She is an embodiment of a successful life, traveling often to far and yonder places for presenting her lilting songs to the audience, recording her freshly self-tuned songs for YouTube and each day coming up with new innovations for her career. Alongside, she is an established artist, selling her paintings in the local art galleries and working hard to start writing again. Lots of climbing to high mountains, always aspiring for the 'Everest'.