

Bollywood dances into the spotlight

'Best of the Best' attempts to translate a rich tradition of the South Asian diaspora for the American mainstream

BY ALISHA HARIDASANI GUPTA

For "Best of the Best," a film that explores the cutthroat world of South Asian intercollegiate dance competitions, casting the lead was a formidable task: Was there a dancer who could act or an actor who could dance?

The producers went with the actress Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, who told the film's director, Lena Khan, during casting that she didn't like to sweat — as in the inevitable physiological outcome of cardiovascular exercise — and that she categorically did not dance.

The film, which began streaming on Netflix last month, was produced by the comedian Hasan Minhaj. It is one of the first movies to try to translate Bollywood's rich tradition of dance and musicality into a format that might appeal to the American mainstream, and it does it with an entirely South Asian cast.

Beyond expanding the canon of college and dance films, it is also comparable to a less obvious franchise, "The Fast and the Furious," which has shined a light on the subculture of underground racing, said Minhaj, a "Daily Show" alum who hosted his own political satire show, "Patriot Act," and whose podcast and YouTube show have over two million subscribers.

Bollywood collegiate dance, Minhaj added, is another such world "that a lot of people here in America have never heard of," and yet, for the South Asian diaspora, is "a seminal piece of the collegiate experience."

The stakes for representing that world onscreen were high. And for Ramakrishnan, it is a role that almost broke her.

"There was a point where my body couldn't keep up," Ramakrishnan, 24, said while stirring a matcha latte at a hotel in Lower Manhattan, describing months of intense training. But putting in that work was worth it, she said, for a film "that should have been made yesterday."

"Best of the Best" is Ramakrishnan's first lead role in a film. She is otherwise widely known as Devi Vishwakumar, the emotional, chaotic, sex-starved high schooler in Mindy Kaling's popular Netflix series "Never Have I Ever." Ramakrishnan was 17 when she took on that role, and, beyond its four-season run, which ended in 2023, she has had a series of smaller roles, including in the films "Freakier Friday" and "Turning Red."

Instead of placing a love story at the center of this dance film, as was the case in "Step Up" and "Save the Last Dance," Khan and Minhaj focused on the bond between Ramakrishnan's character, Maya, and her childhood best friend, Anjali (Priyanka Kedia), both freshmen at the University of California, Los Angeles. The girls sign up for the Bollywood dance team together hoping it will help them secure a place in the college's social scene. Instead, the rigor of the competition ends up testing their bond. With dance so central to the plot, Khan, an Emmy-nominated director, was concerned about Ramakrishnan's lack of experience. She remembered calling Ramakrishnan twice to ask if she was fully committed to go from "zero percent athlete" to "Channing Tatum in three months."

"And she was like, 'I'm in,'" Khan said.

'NEW AMERICAN ART FORM'

Describing the significance of dance in Indian cinema, of which Bollywood is one sector, and across South Asian cultures writ large, is like describing water to a fish; the two are inseparable. The dancing is theatrical and elaborate, woven into the broader storytelling. It serves as a pillar of Indian cinema, the world's most voluminous movie industry, which churns out over a thousand films a year for an audience of over a billion people.

Most Americans have glimpsed only slices of this world, including at the Oscars in 2023, when the stars of "RRR," a blockbuster film from Tollywood, the regional film industry of southern India, performed a dance.

And yet, while K-pop, Latin American music and European cinema have infiltrated the U.S. mainstream, Bollywood and other South Asian exports remain somewhat niche.

To Minhaj, that has felt like a missed opportunity. "Best of the Best" springs from his own college experience with the Bollywood dance teams at the University of California, Davis. Through that community, he met his wife, Beena Patel, who was then the president of the university's South Asian student association and who now works in health care.

He was mesmerized by a world that belonged exclusively to the South Asian diaspora, itself a mosaic of multiple countries and hundreds of languages.

Collegiate dance brought all of that together under the shared language of movement and was, at the same time, "uniquely American," he said, where traditional South Asian and Western dance styles merged to "create a whole new American art form."

Today, there are roughly 100 competitive collegiate South Asian dance troupes across the United States, making it widespread enough that just about every American college-educated South Asian is familiar with it.

In 2020, after "Patriot Act" was canceled, Minhaj began working on the film concept with his "Patriot Act" co-creator, Prashanth Venkataramanujam. During the Covid lockdown, Venkataramanujam moved in with Minhaj to write the script. At the time, there were already about a half a dozen of these types of scripts floating around Hollywood, like "Untold Bollywood Dance" script, Minhaj recalled, adding, "Everybody knew there was a thing here."

Still, it took them years to persuade a studio to produce the project. In 2021, a streaming service agreed to back it but then dropped it in 2023, Minhaj said, for being too small in scope. Minhaj and his team asked for the script back so that they could keep shopping it around because "we were just going to take no for an answer," he said.

Netflix swept up the script in 2024, and then, Minhaj said, it was finally time to search for the "talent that could meet that moment."

'BURST THROUGH THAT CEILING'

When Ramakrishnan received the video of the dance sequence she was supposed to perform at her audition last year, she was shocked by its complexity.

She tapped her childhood best friend, Varsha Vijayraj, who trained in the traditional Indian dance of Bharatanatyam, to help her learn the routine.



Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, 24, took about six hours of dance lessons a day six days a week, for four months for her role in "Best of the Best." Above, Ramakrishnan as Maya in the film. Left, Ramakrishnan and Hasan Minhaj, who produced the movie and plays a professor.

During rehearsals, though, Vijayraj "was dying of laughter," she was crying, Ramakrishnan said, adding, "She's like: 'You just look so sad. Why do your hands do that?'"

Once cast, Ramakrishnan started dance boot camp in California and New Jersey, which involved six hours of lessons a day, six days a week, for four months. She learned a variety of styles, from classical Indian to modern Bollywood modes. At the same time, she was finishing her last semester at York University in Toronto, where she graduated last fall with a degree in human rights and equity studies.

Juggling all of it "was a lot," Ramakrishnan said.

She also had to unlearn certain acting crutches — like body language and facial expressions that were more common for her role as the high schooler Devi — for this more mature role, Khan said.

"There is a difference between acting for TV and acting for cinema, and we had to work on those muscles," Khan said. "I would tell her, 'You know that people think it's cute when you do that, so you need to break that.'"

Ramakrishnan and her brother grew up in Massasauga, near Toronto, in the kind of multigenerational home where the family would often gather around the TV to play video games together. When she landed the role of Devi, by submitting an audition tape online and beating out 15,000 other contenders, it was such an unexpected pivot for her life (she was then applying to college to study animation) that around the time "Never Have I Ever" was released, Ramakrishnan described herself in interviews as someone who had won the lottery.

She arrived in Hollywood at a time when the industry was evolving. "Never Have I Ever" became one of the first shows with a predominantly South Asian cast and crew to resonate with a wide audience. Each new season quickly climbed Netflix's global charts, and she was swarmed by Gen Z fans for selfies.

Almost overnight, she became the face of a generation of South Asian performers who are increasingly unshored by Hollywood clichés, Minhaj said. "Those opportunities of like infinite

possibility, of who I could be, of there being no ceiling for me?" Minhaj said. That wasn't something South Asian artists of previous generations experienced, he added, and Ramakrishnan "just burst through that ceiling."

Now, Ramakrishnan is interested in "a true genre switch," seeking a role in an action, fantasy or psychological thriller film.

She also wants a new tattoo to add to her collection (she has a tattoo of a heart on her inner arm to represent Devi's — and her own — tendency to feel a heart on her sleeve; her dog, Melody, on her leg; and a few video-game-related ones on her hip).

Her next one will be a single angel wing on her right shoulder, with the tips tinged.

"Because I actually really like the story of Icarus," she said, citing an anonymous poem that begins with the line "Never regret thy fall, O Icarus." The greater tragedy, the poem goes on, "is never to feel the burning light."

"I never want to live with regret," Ramakrishnan said, "and I want to feel the warmth of the sun."

