

(KQED sonic ID)

(Slow, Bhangra-influenced hip-hop beat with flute and sitar)

Hey I'm Amit. Today,

we're here in Fremont

and we're going to be exploring Bollywood

and South Asian dance

right here in the Bay Area.

Let's go.

(Propulsive sitar with dramatic urban beats.)

[Mona] Bollywood dance,

the freedom to create

there's no boundary, but

we have to use our voice.

[Amit] Bollywood dance

is constantly evolving.

It's okay to be you.

It's about self-discovery.

(upbeat music)

(Up-tempo, iconic Bollywood dance song)

Fremont is in the heart of Silicon Valley.

A lot of the people here, my parents included,

work in tech.

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh,  
different groups ended up coming here  
for the American dream.

There's so many different  
ways that everyone goes  
about navigating how they  
incorporate their own culture  
within a brand new culture.

(Up-tempo, iconic Bollywood dance song)

And then you'll have the next generation  
who is going to change the game entirely.

(Propulsive sitar with dramatic urban beats.)

[Mona] The minute I came to Fremont,  
it seemed like this is home.

I was born and raised in Mumbai.

We still call it Bombay,  
the heart of Bollywood.

I have been around in the  
Bay doing this since 2003.

(Propulsive sitar with dramatic hip-hop beats)

Bollywood dance, the freedom to move  
is so vast.

There's this classic  
movie called Umrao Jaan.

And the primary style of  
choreography is kathak,  
an Indian classical dance form.

In that same decade  
there was this movie called Disco Dancer.

♪ I am a disco dancer ♪

[Mona] That is also Bollywood dance.

The movie Tezaab, that choreography,  
it had influences of jazz  
with a quintessential Bollywood moves.

There are no boundaries.

(Bollywood music)

[Amit] I grew up  
watching Bollywood movies  
as an escape, also as a way  
to connect to our roots.

(dramatic love song with  
Bollywood's light Sufi influences)

My first exposure to dance  
was all of our moms forcing us to dance

Garba Raas performances.

Then my parents, they signed me up  
for Bollywood dance classes with Mona.

[Mona] I met Amit

and he was the shyest, cutest little kid.

He would never make eye contact with me.

[Amit] I had like two left feet.

I was always in the back corner.

But over time I'm getting less critique,

I think I'm getting a little better.

(Upbeat uptempo energetic Bollywood dance rhythm)

Eventually, I ended up

joining the company troop.

Every show we would work with

different choreographers.

There was something for the community,

but also for us.

Mona really shaped a

generation of dancers.

(Pensive dulcimer over sitar drone and chimes)

Dancing in a Bollywood company

was our way to live out

our movie fantasies.

But as a kid watching Bollywood,

I didn't necessarily question Bollywood

being so heteronormative.

All those traditional gender roles

and expectations of a male dancer

that I would also be placed in.

I didn't necessarily resonate with that.

(Pensive dulcimer over sitar drone and chimes)

One of my biggest awakenings

as an artist and dancer,

I joined a contemporary company.

I love this movement

that allowed me to feel

and express so many layers.

(South Asian-influenced jazzy song)

I didn't feel like I

had to alter who I was.

I belonged.

Eventually, I started my own thing.

(Mix of traditional Indian instruments & electronic music)

I taught my first Bollywood

heels class in 2016.

I didn't intend for that

to be my coming out,

but I felt so empowered.

I just intended to create a space where

any queer person that wants to come

can explore this kind of

movement without judgment.

And also tie that in with culture

because in our South Asian

community that never existed.

Now from here your other

hand is going to be swaying

at the wrist.

In India, it's a very

collectivist culture, right?

It's all about "we as a community"

rather than "I as an individual."

One, two, three.

I make my classes about self-discovery.

Seven.

I try to make it a point,

if the choreography doesn't resonate,

if it's too feminine,

too masculine, change it.

It's always about finding your own voice.

(Strings with dramatic sitar in Indian-electronic fusion)

When I finally came out, it was very hard

for everyone to deal with.

(clattering)

During COVID times it's

nice to use this time wisely

to really just connect with my family,

and we're all coming to

terms with it differently.

I'm just very blessed that

they are such a huge part

of who I am.

(Fusion of synths, sitar and other Indian instrumentation.)

[Mona] Amit, I believe that

he is very, very courageous.

He's liberated himself in so many ways.

And I've had that privilege

of seeing that journey.

He's becoming such an icon

and such an inspiration

to so many other South Asian kids.

(Hard-hitting Bhangra, hip-hop beat)

[Amit] I found out my purpose and my why

and as long as that's there,

I'm gonna keep teaching

dance all across the globe,

spreading my philosophy on

embracing your identity.