(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 awakening
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.