

# SHOWCASING BOLLYWOOD SONG-'N-DANCE

By Parveen Chopra

Following Broadway musicals, Bollywood musical revue is now an established genre. Of course, such productions are still a few and far between. Kingdom of Dreams in Gurgaon, India is one permanent venue where Zangoora has been running for years and shows like Taj Express are developed in India to tour the world.



Produced, directed and choreographed by the sisters Vaibhavi & Shruti Merchant, Taj Express is now on a countrywide tour of America.

We caught a show on February 11 at Stony Brook University's Staller Center for the Arts. The 1,000-seat auditorium was filled to the gills, with no more than 15-20% Indian faces. The man sitting next to me, who happened to be theatre critic for Newsday, said the leading Long Island paper ran a big story on the show and that created a buzz. When I found him reading the story line in the program hand-out, I proffered, "Don't bother, brother. It is going to be all song and dance and only a thin storyline." "All the same, it helps," he replied.

Actually the narration and dialogues of Taj

Express are in English, but most songs were in Hindi (a couple in Tamil and Punjabi) and my Newsday friend would not have understood the lyrics. Subtitles would have helped, but that is for screened movies not a 'live movie' as the show promises, stretching the truth a bit. Yet, he observed during the intermission, "The music and dance are very good, and the costumes fabulous." So no regrets.

Now, first for the thin storyline. The show begins with the rookie composer, Shankar (played by Mikhail Sen) – a wannabe A.R. Rahman – leading a musical tour of his studio and creative world, taking us page by page through the script that comes alive as he's reading it. His film, 'Taj Express', is the story of Kareena Kaboom (played by Tanvi Patil), a reigning Bollywood star, and Arjun (Hiten Shah), a street hero who rescues kids by offering them training in dance. Kareena desperately needs to flee the celebrity pressures of an arranged-for-publicity relationship. Her chance meeting with Arjun gives her a means of escape – only if they elude a villain named Shakaal, an underground mafia kingpin. Arjun turns out to be a prince from a royal Rajasthan family in a happy ending.

The lead couple, inevitably, fall in love as they travel on the Taj Express train. The train ride comes as a handy plotline to showcase India's diverse culture, colors, and costumes. Indeed, just before the intermission in the two-hour show, the narrator announces that we are leaving Bollywood behind. Yes, we visit places from Varanasi to Kanyakumari.

So locale-wise, the lead couple do leave Mumbai, but Bollywood never leaves the action. Dancing resumes to popular songs – some recent ones like the current party favorite 'Kala Chashma' and some a little old like 'Ram chahey Leela chahey'. I found the enactment of Deva o Deva dedicated to Ganapati the most energetic, and the music pulsating. But once or twice I felt the songs were piled one upon the other without adequate prologue.

The show also boasts a live orchestra, a first for a Bollywood musical touring America. Showing off their talent, in a jugalbandi, the flautist Avadhoot Phadke and percus-

A review of Taj Express currently touring America.

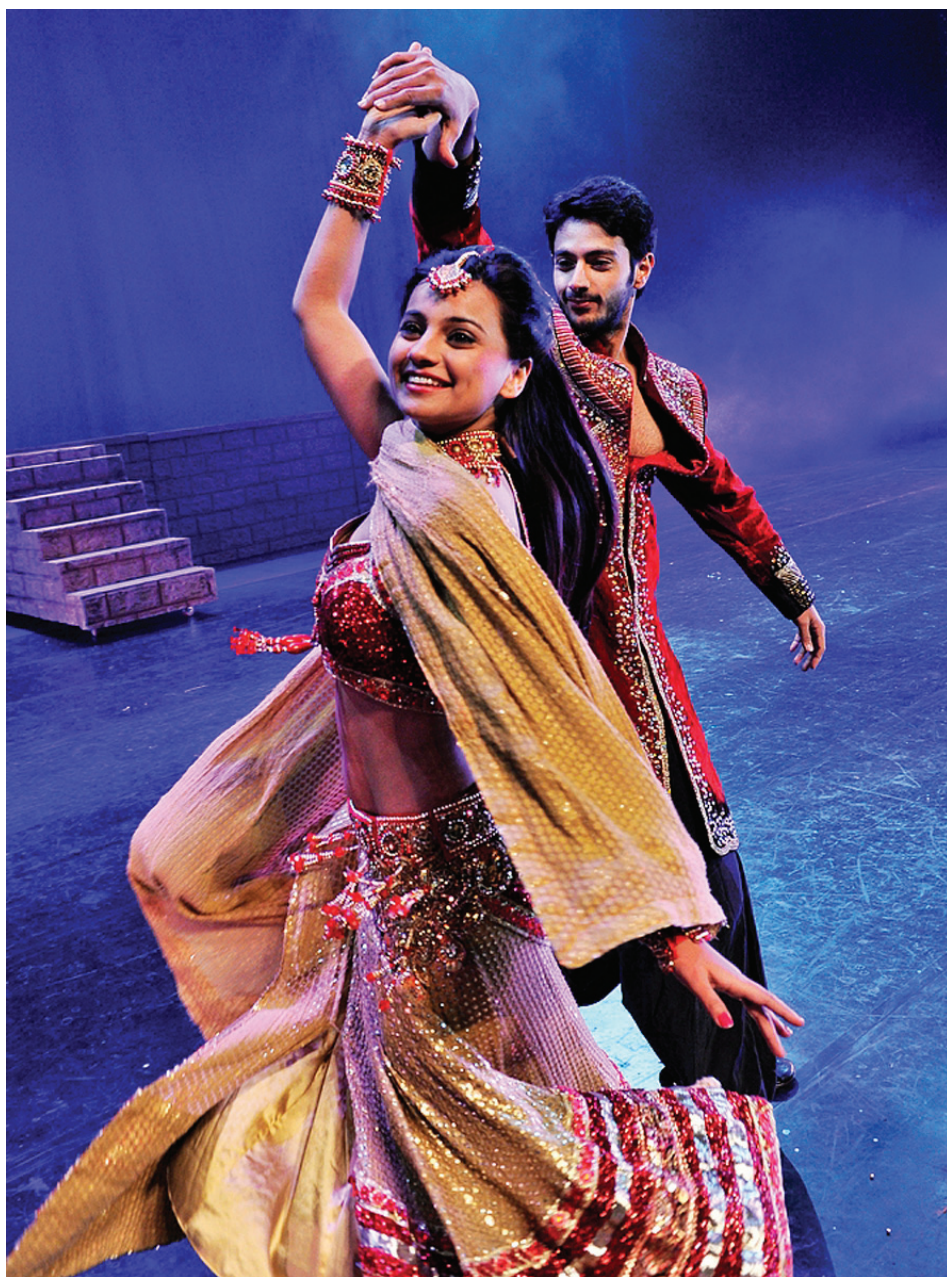


sionist Anish Kale drew applause. The guitarist Chandan Raina also provided comic relief in his tiffs with the music director Shankar. He also teaches yoga on the fly. Talking of humor, a couple of dialogues had the audience in splits, like this one: Forced by the boorish film director to create music for a fight scene, Shankar blurts out, "I will create music more vicious than the Hillary Clinton-Donald Trump presidential election."

Shankar's side story is a tribute to the in-

ternational success of Oscar winning composer A.R. Rahman, and the show starts with 'Jai Ho', familiar to western audiences because of Slumdog Millionaire. "If Rahman can be the Mozart of Madras, why can't I be the Beethoven of Bollywood," Shankar dreams.

For music Salim-Sulaiman are credited as composers. The script is credited to Toby Gough, who also wrote the earlier production, The Merchants of Bollywood, by the same group.



To learn more about Taj Express, please visit: <http://www.tajexpressthemusical.com/bollywoodmusical/index.html>

For Tickets for the US Tour, please visit: <http://www.cami.com/?webid=2486>