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‘Call Me Dancer’ Traces an Artist’s Path to Joy Via Improbable and, in the End, Heartening Byways

A buoyant film bolstered by important things to say about art and its potential for providing commonality of purpose.



Manish Chauhan in 'Call Me Dancer.' Sonam Dekar



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“The arts,” a student of mine recently wrote in a paper, “unite us in collective belief and action.” My response as a been-there, done-that professor of art was to pooh-pooh his naïveté. Art as a uniter, huh? Ask those artists working under the auspices of the Mayan Empire, the Russian Revolution, or National Socialism just how far unity of purpose took them when they stepped on the wrong toes.

Those who didn't "unify" were crushed in spirit when not crushed in body. Best to shelve such Pollyanna-like sentiments before disillusion sets in. Grade submitted — job done.

And then along came "Call Me Dancer," the debut feature by a former ballet dancer and current TV documentarian, Leslie Shampaine. "This is a film about a dancer, by a dancer," Ms. Shampaine recently told *Variety*, "even when the stakes are high and the chance of succeeding small — whatever the outcome, it is about the joy of going there and aiming for it."

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All of which is true, but the circuitous route by which the subject of the film, Manesh Chauhan, strives to achieve that joy involves some improbable and, in the end, heartening byways. Because, don't you know it, art can unite us in collective belief and action.

Filmed over the span of five years, "Call Me Dancer" follows the scion of a family of taxi drivers at Mumbai, India, Mr. Chauhan, on his journey as an artist. "When I was young," he tells us at the beginning of the film, "I was never interested in dancing. I was like, dance is for girls."

That was until he saw a Bollywood musical in which the hero of the film does a backflip, "Aflatoon" (1997). Mr. Chauhan was transfixed. He set out, with no little determination, to do the same. When we see him practice and perform in what look to be abandoned city plazas, Mr. Chauhan has already mastered an acrobatic variation of breakdancing.

Mr. Chauhan felt emboldened enough to audition for a popular television series, “Dance India Dance,” in which one of the celebrity judges pegged him as a “fire performer.” A fine commendation, but what stayed with Mr. Chauhan was a question posed by a fellow participant: At which dance institute had he trained?

Mr. Chauhan comes from a family of modest means. A fancy education — in the arts, of all things — is beyond their means. All the same, Mr. Chauhan was recommended to Danceworx, an enterprise whose motto is “Real. Professional. International . . . Always.” A scholarship was provided. Mom and dad continued to harbor doubts.

It was at Danceworx that Mr. Chauhan came under the tutelage of a ballet teacher from Israel, Yehuda Ma’or, who had also taught at San Francisco and New York. What brought the former principal dancer of Tel Aviv’s Bat-Dor Dance Company, Mr. Ma’or, to Mumbai? A job. “At the end of the day, India is the only place that will give a 75 years old teacher a position.”

After a bout of culture shock — the heat, the chaos, the traffic — Mr. Ma’or wanted out of India, like *now*. Founding director of Danceworx, Ashley Lobo, asked Mr. Ma’or for one more week and that week made the difference: this product of the *kibbutzim*, with his gruff demeanor and adamant calls for

artistic excellence, has been the prime component of the school's ballet program for six years and counting.

Mr. Ma'or's efforts have been crucial to young men of, respectively, scarifying diligence and natural born gifts, including Mr. Chauhan and Amiruddin Shah. The latter's talent landed him, through the offices of Mr. Ma'or, an all-expenses paid scholarship to the prestigious Royal Ballet School at London.

Yet then, Mr. Shah is almost a good decade younger than Mr. Chauhan. In the world of dance, that age differential is crucial. When Mr. Shah heads off to London, the Royal Ballet School puts a stop to Ms. Champagne's camera. Yet Mr. Chauhan and Mr. Ma'or still have a story to tell.

And it is a good story, with adventures that take Mr. Chauhan to Israel, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Bollywood, wherein he would star in "Yeh Ballet" (2020) as a fictionalized version of himself. That gig placed him in a moral quandary: should he squander his integrity as a dancer for a chance at showbiz and the sizable checks that could help his debt-ridden family? The grateful tears of his mother put paid to that dilemma.

What, you wonder, was Mr. Ma'or's response to Julian Sands's portrayal of him in "Yeh Ballet"? Bemusement, probably, but, then, he's got bigger fish to fry at Danceworx with its abundance of talent. In the meantime, Mr. Chauhan is living his dream with all the bumps, obstacles, and rewards that entails.

As for Ms. Champagne, she's brought us a buoyant film bolstered by important things to say about art and its

potential for providing commonality of purpose. At this perilous historical moment, “Call Me Dancer” comes as a gift.

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