

f o r d

World-class review of ballet and dance.

A Hero's Journey

Performance

Call Me Dancer, a film directed by Pip Gilmore and Leslie Shampaine

Words

Karen Greenspan

Some stories take hold of you and just will not let go. The film “Call Me Dancer” tells such a story—the true-life story of Manish Chauhan, a Mumbai street dancer, who nurtures the dream of becoming a ballet professional against daunting odds. This tale of hope, struggle, setbacks, triumph, and transformation is every dancer’s journey—but more universally, it is a classic hero’s journey.



Call Me Dancer, a film directed by Pip Gilmore and Leslie Shampaine

Co-directed by seasoned documentarian Pip Gilmore and former ballet dancer turned filmmaker Leslie Shampaine, the film brings an insider's sensitivity and perspective to the storytelling, camera work, and scene composition. The action pulses with a score by award-winning film composers Nainita Desai and Nina Humphreys as well as two songs by singer-songwriter and executive producer Jay Sean. Amazingly, this talented international team produced an 84-minute documentary that moves with the drama and pacing of a feature film. Shampaine credits editor Jennifer Beman for her disciplined skill of cutting reams of footage. (They followed Manish for five years.)

The opening scenes show Manish practicing his break dance moves on hard floors in drab, inner city corridors—spinning on his head, doing back flips, and hopping on one arm while upside down. Manish's voice narrates this scene recounting how he once saw a back flip in a Bollywood film. After methodically analyzing the mechanics of it, he trained himself to perform the stunt. Thus began his desire to dance. But Manish comes from a family of little means—his father is a taxi driver, his mother sews piecework. They expect Manish to complete his college education and follow a traditional career path that will help provide for them in their old age.

When Manish secretly seeks training at a Mumbai dance academy and walks into a ballet class, he meets Yehuda Maor, a curmudgeonly 70-year-old Israeli teacher and former principal dancer with the Bat-Dor Dance Company. Yehuda has aged out of employment in Israel, but he is offered employment in India, despite his grumpy disposition, because of the south Asian cultural respect for the wisdom of the guru. Camera shots quickly alternate between Manish and Yehuda, each describing their initial assessments of the other.



Call Me Dancer, a film directed by Pip Gilmore and Leslie Shampaine

Filmed in India, Israel, and the United States, *Call Me Dancer* is not confined to dance scenes in the studio or onstage. The camera travels to evocative locations that would satisfy anyone's far-flung wanderlust. Early in the film, Manish and his family take a two-day bus ride to their family village in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh in the Himalayas. The camera opens onto Buddhist prayer flags fluttering against pine needles. Panning down to

a celebratory gathering, the camera settles on people playing musical instruments and slides over to the large group of celebrants moving together in a traditional circle dance. The camera closes in on their happy faces, then their dancing feet, and finally pulls away offering a view of the colorfully garbed swirl of festivity. The menfolk sit off to the side plotting traditional prospects for Manish's earning future. But Manish slips away for an endearing one-on-one with grandma and shows her a video of his ballet dancing on his mobile. From the close-up of her impassive expression, she clearly does not know what to make of it. Nonetheless, she encourages Manish to follow his dreams.

Yehuda recognizes Manish's dedication and passion for dance and begins to mentor him. Gradually, they actualize the Indian tradition of *guru-shishya parampara*—the passing of knowledge directly from guru to disciple. The plot takes a turn when Yehudah admits that his mentee has outgrown what he can teach and looks for opportunities for Manish to train abroad. He also makes the assessment that Manish has started late in life for a ballet career and should adjust his sights to contemporary companies for employment. Yehuda swings into action contacting colleagues at The Kibbutz Dance Company in Israel. In the new environment, Manish's eyes are opened and he quickly appraises the situation saying, "There are no [ballet] princes here. But I like it and I want to learn it!"



Call Me Dancer, a film directed by Pip Gilmore and Leslie Shampaine

Manish heads home to India to star in a dance film *Yeh Ballet*, a fictionalized story of himself. From there, the plotline takes us on a roller coaster ride of emotions. The glitzy, Bollywood-style movie pays well and affords our hero the ability to ease his parents' financial burdens. He then suffers a painful injury requiring surgery and a lengthy recovery. Just as Manish re-enters the dance world, Covid strikes and Mumbai streets turn deadly silent. Undeterred, he moves in with Yehuda to help his elderly teacher weather the pandemic. The screen subdivides into the multiple boxes of a Zoom ballet class thanks to Manish assisting his guru with the technical challenges of teaching dance online.

Mid-pandemic, another one of Yehuda's connections—Igal Perry (ballet teacher, choreographer, and founder of Peridance Center and Company in New York City)—offers Manish a scholarship. A series of scenes follows that visually archives how New York dancers (and dancers everywhere) persevered to re-open the industry: taking barre together outdoors, temperature checks at the front desk before admittance into studios,

masking up for class and rehearsals. As venues are set to reopen and auditions are called, Manish is selected to perform a solo at the Kennedy Center—and we watch him take the stage and dance!

What the film is missing is an acknowledgement of the rich and thriving classical and folk Indian dance culture, which is more easily accessed than training in western dance forms. Nonetheless, *Call Me Dancer* is not just for dancers. The film resonates for anyone who has nurtured a dream into reality with passion, grit, and humble respect for our interdependence with others. You see, Manish and Yehuda transform *each other's* lives. This small-budget film opened the 2023 Dance on Camera Festival at Lincoln Center with acclaim and just completed its New York run. It heads off to film festivals and various cities where one can catch it and be reminded that every dancer is a hero.

Karen Greenspan

Karen Greenspan is a New York City-based dance journalist and frequent contributor to *Natural History Magazine*, *Dance Tabs*, *Ballet Review*, and *Tricycle* among other publications. She is also the author of *Footfalls from the Land of Happiness: A Journey into the Dances of Bhutan*, published in 2019.