

Dancing to a Bollywood beat

Actor Pallavi Sharda has a foot in two cultural camps – her homeland Australia, and India where she passes for a local.

But as she tells **Val McFarlane**, she still thinks like an Australian.

Her Instagram profile describes her as a “raging Aussie”, yet she’s also one of Bollywood’s leading ladies. Contradictory? Not for Pallavi Sharda, who’s as at home in Mumbai as she is in Melbourne.

This cultural fluidity does confuse some. “When I speak to Australian people in Bombay all of a sudden my accent gets so strong because I’m dying to speak in it,” Sharda says in her soft Australian accent. “Literally people stop and their jaws open and they’re like (adopts strong Indian accent) ‘What happened to Pallavi madam?’”

Sharda’s ability to switch between her Australian and Indian identities has helped her create a career that goes beyond her childhood dream of appearing in Bollywood films. In India, Sharda (BA(Media&Comm), LLB 2010, DipModLang(Fr) 2011) has enjoyed success in films such as *Besharam* and *Hawaizaada*. Her Australian credits include *Save Your Legs* with Stephen Curry. This year we’ll see her in international productions *Shambhala*, opposite Jonathan Rhys Meyers, and *Lion*, alongside Nicole Kidman, Dev Patel and Rooney Mara.

She is also increasingly taking on the role of cultural ambassador, promoting Indian-Australian relations. She was Queen (to Shane Warne’s King) of Melbourne’s multicultural festival Moomba last year, and was in Melbourne recently to support the Melbourne Renegades in cricket’s Big Bash League.

“It’s such a nice thing because it’s a Melbourne institution and they’re looking at someone of Indian heritage from Melbourne to support the team. That’s something that didn’t happen when I was growing up,” she says.

“If you go overseas, to the UK or America, no one bats an eyelid at a woman in a sari or someone deciding to have a curry night at home. But again, that didn’t

happen when I was growing up. I’ve seen the change in the landscape in Melbourne and I think it’s really exciting.”

Sharda’s parents, academics Dr Hema Sharda and Dr Nalin Kant Sharda, migrated to Perth in the 1980s.

As a young girl, she loved Indian dance and drama, but for a long time was too nervous to even audition for school plays. That changed in Year 12, when she won the role of Ariel in *The Tempest* and choreographed the whole production with a Bollywood dance theme. “I realised my cross-cultural roots were legitimate,” she says.

Her new-found confidence took her to the University of Melbourne, where she fast-tracked her studies, cramming in as many subjects as possible – while also running a course on Indian dance for her fellow students – and devised a plan to get to Bollywood as soon as she could.

“I thought that just in case I decided I really did want to be a lawyer or join the corporate world, I would need to be young enough to be able to do it. So I planned this weird thing that I would finish university, go to Bollywood for three or four years and then come back and either do a PhD or a Masters or join the workforce.”

She might not have returned but the University is still close to her heart. “Melbourne Uni is Melbourne to me. It’s home,” she says. Last year she even did some filming on campus, shooting a scene for *Lion* at a studio at Union House, where she used to teach dance.

Filming in India is quite a different experience. “Once you go to Melbourne Law School it makes you think a certain way ... you want to understand the reason



behind things, and in India working on an Indian film set there is often very little reason behind anything. There is a constant clash between what is reasonable and what is happening,” she says.

And that’s not the only difficulty. “A lot of people don’t realise that I am Australian,” she says. “I don’t feel the need to tom-tom about that; I don’t need to add a point of difference. I’m as Indian as anyone can be. I grew up speaking Hindi, I can speak in Indian-accented English, and my mannerisms can switch seamlessly to Indian mannerisms.

“But it’s actually been a little bit of a drawback because people don’t realise I think like an Australian. I might be fitting into all the cultural nuances but I am a very free, uninhibited, strong Australian woman, working in an industry that is often regressive. So there’s a constant clash of values, and I find that extremely challenging.”

Having grown up in egalitarian Australia, she struggles with India’s focus on caste and class. “In India you have to insert yourself into this hierarchy and even though it’s something that you don’t want to do, if you don’t do it you get walked all over,” she says.

“It’s a constant navigation game, and I still haven’t got it right because I don’t want to lose sense of where I’m from. I don’t want to lose sense of the values that I grew up with because that’s what I would like to inculcate in my children one day.”

While Sharda’s career is increasingly based outside India, she is still a huge fan of the classic Bollywood genre – colourful epics packed with emotion and lavish dance routines.

“A good Bollywood film allows you to escape from the real world and it’s aspirational,” she says. “If you have a country of a billion people, most of whom are living below the poverty line, there is this kind of escapism that occurs through

watching these films and I think that it’s naive to suggest that there’s no value in that. “The music is a very celebratory sound and at every wedding, every Indian function, people know the same tunes and they get up and they dance. I think it’s a really great cohesive force in a community, especially outside of India, which is why Indian film music is so popular amongst diasporic communities.”

However, the days of such films may be numbered. As Indian society changes, so does its creative output. Sharda says the burgeoning middle class want to see the issues they grapple with reflected on screen.

“India is now starting to look at itself and ask some serious questions – what do we stand for, what is our identity? Being an incredibly pluralistic society these are very hard questions.

“It’s a really interesting time to see Bollywood cinema. I’ve seen how fickle it can be in terms of what it means to

An all-singing, all-dancing tradition



High emotion, spontaneous dance routines and a plot that’s got everything but the kitchen sink – the perfect recipe for a classic Bollywood movie, says Luke Devenish, lecturer in screenwriting at the Victorian College of the Arts.

The storytelling formula, based on the *rasa* tradition, aims to inject nine emotional states into each tale to create a masala experience – akin to a spicy meal.

And audiences find it irresistible. The Indian film industry (Bollywood is just that part based in Mumbai, formerly Bombay; other major cities have their own industries) is huge. India produces more movies than Hollywood and in 2013, nearly 2.7 billion cinema tickets were sold across the country.

Indian movies really took off when sound films (“talkies”) rose to prominence in the West in the early 1930s. In particular, Indian filmmakers saw parallels between the Western musical and their own performance tradition – and the all-singing, all-dancing classic Indian movie style was born.

Today, the tone of Indian films is changing to reflect contemporary Indian culture. Movies (although still lengthy by Western standards) are getting shorter, and while music is still a crucial part of the soundtrack, characters are far less likely to suddenly burst into song.

Yet the richness of the stories remains. Devenish says the films still offer great entertainment for Western movie-goers willing to give them a go. “When you watch Indian cinema from a Western point of view you are totally hooked up in the storylines,” he says.

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be good, bad or ugly there – everything changes so quickly. Right now the kind of films that are doing well are more serious, international films, and I think if those get made and get sanctioned in India, the audience will broaden internationally.”

But in the unlikely event that Sharda’s movie career flounders, she could have another career option: barista. Desperate to enjoy the kind of skinny flat white she orders in Melbourne, she admits to giving the Indian baristas at Australian coffee franchises in Mumbai “Pallavi tutorials.”

“I have gone in with a thermometer and actually measured the temperature of the milk before,” she says, laughing. “I had to explain to them that they were burning the coffee beans.

“I said to the barista ‘I’m sorry, this is an Aussie company and I’m Australian ... so I hope you don’t mind, but I’m going to tell you how to do it!’”

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