



Dancers from Surati for Performing Arts, a dance and music school and management agency that represents local Indian performers, will perform Wednesday night at Rutgers-Newark.

Artistry of India

Rutgers program mixes classical and Bollywood styles

DANCE

Bharata Natyam to Bollywood: a Tapestry of Indian Dance

Where: Bradley Hall Theater, Rutgers University, 110 Warren St., third floor, Newark

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

How much: Free. Call (973) 353-1871, ext. 11, or visit www.ethnicity.rutgers.edu.

BY ROBERT JOHNSON
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Despite the title of her program to be seen at Rutgers-Newark on Wednesday, "Bharata Natyam to Bollywood: a Tapestry of Indian Dance," Indian dancer-choreographer Rimli Roy requires coaxing to talk about Bollywood dance, a hybrid form that has become popular thanks to its visibility in the burgeoning Indian film industry.

"It's not that I'm biased. You have to be very physically fit to be able to do that," she says with grudging admiration. "It's a great workout." She allows that "It's great fun to watch it."

But Roy makes her true feelings clear, dismissing Bollywood's pretensions when she says, "I wouldn't call it art. It can only be art when you can delve deeply into it." So what's the Hindi word for "schlock"?

As in the United States, the Indian arts scene is sharply divided into commercial and nonprofit sectors. Unlike the United States, India has a dance tradition that is literally centuries old, embracing several highly refined, classical styles and myriad folk dances. More than entertainment, these traditional dances are linked with ancient religious practices and beliefs and deeply ingrained in the culture.

Some Indian films represent this classical tradition. Roy heaps praise on "Devdas," the recent hit film with choreography by Kathak maestro Birju Maharaj, starring dancer Madhuri Dixit. ("She's a great actress as well as an amazing dancer. I've never seen someone better than her on screen," Roy says). But most "Bollywood

dance" is something else.

The typical Bollywood dance, performed by tightly synchronized groups, suggests a simplified blend of Western jazz, salsa and hip-hop steps overlaid with a smattering of traditional, Indian gestures. Roy equates it with aerobics, and she says it doesn't represent Indian culture.

Roy, originally from Calcutta and now based in Jersey City, has studied classical Bharata Natyam, Odissi and Manipuri dance, though now she performs only the last two styles.

Ironically, her father, the composer and percussionist Sumit Roy, experimented with various kinds of musical fusion, becoming known as "the Calypso King" of India. Her brother and sister-in-law both work in the Indian film industry.

Rimli Roy came to New Jersey in 1999 and immediately began teaching and performing. In 2002, she founded Surati, (www.suratiinc.com) a dance and music school and management agency that represents local Indian performers. Surati offers classes in Bollywood dance, and clients often request this kind of performance for weddings and corporate events. Roy is glad to supply that demand, yet she feels gratified whenever she can lead one of her students back to the classics.

The event at Rutgers' Newark campus, presented by the Institute on Ethnicity, Culture and the Modern Experience, will feature both classical and Bollywood dances performed by senior students and professionals.

Far from shunning modern improvements, the program will include "Kali," a dance number pulsing with disco lights and inundated with artificial fog. Roy will work the crowd herself, playing the manjira hand-cymbals as she performs in "Pung Cholom," a traditional, Manipuri dance accompanied by live drumming. The opening Odissi number, "Mangala Charan," will invoke the blessings of the gods.

"It is definitely very successful and it's making a lot of money," Roy says of Bollywood. "I want to see more art out there, that's what I mean."