

The Scene At . . . Bollywood Dance Classes

Exotic melodies played on the dhime drum, madal, and tabla echo from the high school cafeteria, signaling the start of Bollywood Dance class.

Instructor Bhim Dahal leads a diverse group - Anglo and Indian, junior high and high school students, twenty-somethings, thirty-somethings, and forty somethings, women who work inside the home, and women who work outside in the world. Some are in traditional dress; others wear tee shirts and sweatpants. All are moving as he guides them through a graceful warm-up that limbers and loosens every body part. In time to the music, they kick, jump and bounce, lift arms up, down, back and forward, roll shoulders and swivel knees.

And then the real work begins.

A native of Nepal, Dahal is classically trained in traditional Nepalese folk, Buddhist and Indian dance.

He's been dancing since he was four, and in addition to teaching for the Park Authority, the Nepali

School, Durga Temple and other organizations, he's presented programs on Himalayan dance at the Smithsonian Institution and various international cultural venues. The Nepal Dance School, which he runs with his wife, Cordula, is part of CAPS 2007-2008, sponsored by the Arts Council of Fairfax.

Dahal also spent seven years in Bollywood - or Hollywood East, the center of India's thriving film industry. Bollywood's biggest hits are elaborately costumed musical extravaganzas featuring the group dances that are central to the Indian social scene. Working with those productions, Dahal developed his own original Bollywood style, melding North Indian classical Kathak, Buddhist Manjushree and Nepali folk dance with popular dance moves from the West.

Graceful hand and wrist motions, reminiscent of the hula with an Asian touch, are separated by sequences of sharp claps,

hand against hand or hand against thigh, and coordinated with skips, slides, light-footed hops and sprightly chorus line kicks. The snappy look shifts back and forth from rock to hip-hop to aerobic

exercise to Indian traditional and Nepalese classic, then back again.

The result is poetry in motion.

For his Park Authority classes, Dahal

borrowes the top tunes from Bollywood blockbusters and adds his own choreography, matching the tale told by the movements to the story line of the lyrics. Like the electric slide that's seen at wedding receptions across the U.S., it's solo dancing, without partners or hand holding, everyone moving together in line or in a circle. The dance flows in 16-beat cycles, and when he's creating, Dahal has 700 to 800 steps of ancient Asian dance positions and poses to choose from.

Each class series focuses on a single dance number, and this class is learning a seven-minute Dahal original. It's not as daunting as it sounds.

The instructor, who models every step at the front of the group, is the epitome of patience, his soft-spoken directions always punctuated by an encouraging smile and compliments on a move performed cor-

rectly. And it is so obviously a grand time. Young and old, beginner and experienced, the women never stop smiling, and a few enthusiastically sing along, the native English speakers phonetically pronouncing the words in a language they don't speak. Heart rates are boosted and stay high, so after particularly energetic sequences, Dahal calls for a water break, but the women barely finish sipping before they are ready to start dancing again.

Obviously, they're tired, and just as obviously, they don't want to stop. "Want to try from beginning again?" Dahal asks. "Yes!" comes the enthusiastic reply, in chorus.

After the repeat, the teacher of English as a second language pleads, "One more time. I just need to reinforce."

Another round, and Dahal inquires, "Again?"

"Yes!" is the group's emphatic answer.

"It's becoming very good," the instructor notes as they finish. To requests for a very last run through, he gently shakes his head no and points to the clock before moving on to the traditional namaskar, or

greeting and invocation to God, that opens and closes every session.

A quick survey elicits reasons for taking the class that are as diverse as the students. Some come for the workout, some come for the fun, some come to learn about another culture and some come to reconnect with their own. "My two boys just love it," explained a mother originally from India, who dances with her children in another of Dahal's Bollywood classes, this one with almost as many men as women. "It's part of Indian culture, and so it's a way to keep us in touch with our heritage."

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For dates, times and locations for Bollywood dance classes, see the listings in Parktakes' Dance section. ★

Values in action:
Fostering Diversity

