

## Celebrating Farah Khan

The acclaimed Bollywood choreographer turned director lifts the lid on the world's movie capital.



With the London Film Festival in full swing, the number of contemporary thriving female film directors can be counted on one hand. With the likes of *Nancy Meyers* (What Women Want, Something's Gotta Give), *Jane Campion* (The Piano) and *Sofia Coppola* (Lost in Translation) lighting the beacon for Hollywood, Bollywood has its own contender.

**Farah Khan** is a name synonymous with some of the most recognised choreographed dance sequences in Bollywood's box office hits. She's colluded with the biggest and best stars in the industry and cheekily remarks that if she hasn't worked with them, it's because she hasn't wanted to.

Apart from giving birth to triplets (one son and two daughters) in Mumbai this February, things have been on a high for the choreographer who recently turned her hand to directing as she entered her fourth decade. Her second film *Om Shanti Om* was the highest grossing Bollywood film of 2007 and included a roll-call of around 42 of the industries cream of actors past and present. With a production budget of six million dollars, the film went on to become the biggest grossing Bollywood film ever, raking in \$45 million world-wide.

Farah was in town this week at London's exclusive Mayfair Hotel to reveal her experience of working within the Indian film industry. Luminaries and contemporaries such as our own home-grown female directors *Meera Syal* and *Gurinder Chadha* paid homage to the director who is keeping the essence of Bollywood films alive.

Film and TV producer *Parminder Vir OBE*, who created the Mayfair Media Club which hosted the event said:

"The opportunities in the emerging markets for film-making are becoming more important. Nowadays, around sixty per cent of the revenue comes from production outside of America. Additionally, countries such as China and India have strong local markets. Forty-five per cent of cinema goers are from home.



“Bollywood is impacting on Hollywood to such an extent that major players such as 20th Century Fox Film studios, Warner and Sony Pictures are all setting base in India, taking the full plunge with investments. ”



Despite being hailed as one of Bollywood’s most talented directors, Farah claims she has had no formal training in direction or choreography. Both her films *Main Hoon Na* and *Om Shanti Om* have included one of the industries biggest stars *Shah Rukh Khan* who she also regards as one of her best buddies. *Shah Rukh* who is considered to be Bollywood’s answer to *Tom Cruise*, produced

and starred in Farah’s debut film. She talks with affection of the superstar, “ What can I say about *Shah Rukh Khan*? He is sweet, he is cute and we go back along way. I knew him before he got famous and his encouragement in my directorial debut was testimony to our friendship.”

Her foray into direction came about after several years choreographing, accumulating over 100 song and dance sequences. She says, “ I think I got to the point as a choreographer where I was shouting at the directors and telling them how they should have shot a certain scene.”

Her interest into film-making extends to her childhood where her passion was born.

“My father was a film –maker in the late fifties and sixties. He would make B-grade Indian re-makes of classics such as *Robin Hood* or *Samson and Delilah*. Of course, *Samson* would be singing and dancing in his version.

“It was riches to rags story as my dad went bankrupt and subsequently my parents divorced. So, my brother and I grew up poor. We used to escape to the movie theatre and in my films now I try to embody that element of escapism. I think that’s why my audience is appreciated by children as well as adults.”

Her career as a choreographer spans the best part of a decade. Her international credits include *Mira Nair’s Monsoon Wedding* and *Vanity Fair*. She also choreographed Latin pop-star *Shakira’s* performance at the MTV Music Awards in 2006. As well as winning the Filmfare Choreography Awards five times, she was nominated for a 2004 Tony Award as ‘Best Choreographer’ for the *Andrew Lloyd-Webber* musical *Bombay Dreams*. Working on a stage production was a great learning curve.

“All the cinematic tools went out the window. The musical inspired the story line for *Om Shanti Om* which centres on a slum-boy trying to break into the Bollywood Film industry.” Clearly Farah is not immune to the prolific nature of the industry where story-lines and plots are often copied from successful Western films!

Her own career began in the 80's whilst she was at college in Mumbai. She had a flair for dancing and formed a group with four boys and would regularly perform at events.

“Seeing *Michael Jackson in Thriller* was a real turning-point for me. It created a real impression. My break came when I was assisting on a film by the director *Mansoor Khan*. This was followed by veteran choreographer *Saroj Khan*



walking out of the set leaving the project falling into Farah's lap. She says, “ I saw my chance to get my foot in the door and grabbed it.”

Eight years later, after getting into a rut of doing song after song routines, Farah decided the time was ripe. Her first film (*Main Hoon Na*) resulted in her being the first female to be nominated for the *FilmFare* Best Director Award and was an overall commercial success. The film showed her allure to the 70's genre but at the same-time was in tune with the millennium.

In an industry which has a tradition of nepotism, Farah feels the secret of her continued accomplishments, is due to her lack of formal training.

“It helped that I didn't know the rules, so I broke them. Plus my passion for movies gave me inspiration. I used to be a fan of Gene Kelly musicals...for me, it's not always a case of knowing the right steps but having an eye for detail.

“For me, the seventies was the most glamorous time in Bollywood and that's what I wanted to show in my last film. *Om Shanti Om* had the key ingredients of that era, the big stars, the lavish sets and glamorous costumes.

“That's the great thing about Bollywood, anything goes. Its unabashed cheesiness and over the top. You can dance in the streets and cry openly and the musical *Bombay Dreams* epitomised that. It's why it did so well. And it shows what's different about the Bollywood film industry.”

Currently, Farah is writing her third script in between juggling motherhood and TV projects. As well as continuing with film-making, she's keen to start her own production house. A self-proclaimed TV junkie, she would love to host an *Oprah* style chat show. Whilst she jokes about the 'casting couch' myth, she professes to not having suffered any discrimination in an industry where ninety-three per cent of the directors are male.

“As long as you are delivering the goods, it's not an issue. Plus I don't like to be put into a category. On that note, men directors tend to be bitchier, whereas we are more organised and take better care of our units and staff!”



The lure of Hollywood holds little appeal to Farah who jokes that unless *Steven Spielberg* comes knocking on her door, then the whole industry will be ready. Despite the country having an independent film industry which tends to address more important issues such as social change e.g. *Mira Nair's Salaam Bombay*, what does Farah see as the future of Bollywood's film-making?

“Speaking for the majority, I don't think the content of our film production will change radically. Most film-goers in India are working-class and for them, the glamour, song and dance entertainment format is what they have paid for. It's their staple diet and when they spend money on a ticket they want to escape the reality of their lives for a few hours. “Despite the presence of the American studios emerging in India, I think the industry will have to become more vigilant as regards to issues of plagiarism. But I think it will be difficult for foreign film-makers to change the mind set of our cinema-goers.”

Looking every inch as glamorous as one of her Bollywood stars, Farah Khan can proudly add scriptwriting, choreographer, casting agent, producer and director to her credit. Whilst she encourages emerging talent to 'think out of the box' clearly her tried and tested format works for her and on that cue the director takes her cut.

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