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Bombay Dreams marches onto Broadway

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▲ Above: Reef Karim (left) and Pooja Kumar (right) on mobile, but not just friends in FLAVORS

Doctor in three flavors

In real life, juggling his various selves comes easy for Reef Karim

The 47-year-old Reef Karim stands out — literally and figuratively — among the cast of FLAVORS. The very grace of his performance as the goofy, cut-up-a-minute romantic lead Karthik signals “professional” — and that is before you see his CV.

Prepare to be impressed: Karim speaks a host of languages and dialects ranging from Italian, French through Middle Eastern; plays the keyboards and piano well enough to have been part of a band; is a trained professional dancer who can do you swing, salsa, tango, waltz and pretty much everything in between, and has performed with headline artists, including Lionel Richie and Earth Wind and Fire.

He has trained to improvise (with Stephen Brook); in Sesame Street (with Jeff Corwin); and Acting Technique with Robert Caraglio. His film credits include *Body Shots*, *Dancing In September*, *Dinner Bigtown*, *Der Com*, the under-production *Night Of Moments* (where he teams with FLAVORS co-creator Pooja Kumar), *Leaves Canyon* (with Christian Bale, directed by Lisa Cholodenko); and the under-production *Lords Of Dogtown* with Heath Ledger and Rebecca DeMornay with *Thirteen* director Catherine Hardwicke.

He has appeared on television shows ranging from *Days Of Our Lives*, *Shake, Rattle and Roll*, *Pacific Blue*, *Magnum* and *Force Of One*; he also hosts his show *Musae Of Class*, which has now been picked up for a second season on Court TV.

He happens, incidentally, to be a doctor, with residencies in medicine and psychiatry (sub-specialty addiction) to his credit, besides being a qualified relationship therapist. All this, and an actor good enough to steal every scene he appears in, is in FLAVORS.

The multifaceted actor reveals himself in conversation with Managing Editor Prem Panicker.

How did FLAVORS happen?

It's a weird thing — I have played Italians, a half-Argentinian and Sean Young's pseudo-boyfriend in the [television] serial *Force Of One*, a Psychiatrist, pretty much everything except an Indian. My brother Navin is an entertainment attorney with Viacom. He heard about FLAVORS and told me, you always wanted to play an Indian so here's your chance. I sent them a demo tape, and they, Raj and DK [directors Raj Nidimoru and Arshad

DK], thought it was better than anything they had seen till date. They had cast every other role except that of the romantic lead, Karthik; the only issue they had was, they wanted me to be a touch less Americanized than I actually am — tone it down a little bit.

There have been Indian roles going about, though — maybe not many, but enough. So how come you never landed any of those till date?

For one thing, I guess I don't look like the stereotypical cab driver. Seriously, though, I think it is only now that there is this big push, this demand, for Indian guys in television and in film, otherwise it was pretty much the standard stereotype; so I ended up playing Italians and Frenchmen and Greeks and such almost by default.

You've worked with Catherine Hardwicke on *Thirteen*. How did Raj and DK come across, in comparison?

First off, I thought the script was pretty tight. They convinced me to come on board, and that decision was based on their knowledge, the skill sets they seemed to bring to their job. Raj and DK seemed to have a sure knowledge of what they wanted; they allowed you the freedom to work on your role but they also had their own take on what they required, and the competence you look for from a director.

Your acting schedule is seemingly full — yet you also function as a qualified, practicing, doctor. Or do you?

My life is like a triad. The first side is actor, the second is doctor/television personality. I went to medical school, graduated magna cum laude, did my residency at UCLA, did a residency in psychiatry with a sub-specialty in addiction. I am also a relationship therapist. Having these hats, I generally deal with sex, drugs and relationships. I worked with the LA Sheriff's office, dealing with forensic cases, and worked at the Twin Towers, the LA County Jail, assessing prisoners. My job was to determine who was truly psychiatric/psychotic, and who was faking it — profiling, in other words.

One thing led to another, almost. I hosted a show called *Love Line* on MTV — I did the radio version of that show, which again centers on love, sex, relationships. That led to my working as an expert on various shows — CBS, NBC,

Fox, CNN. That in turn led to my getting more calls for forensic work. And then landed this television series, *House Calls*, which caught the imagination; *It's a Girl* did a big feature on it, *Entertainment Weekly* featured it; it's just been picked up for a second season...

What is the show about?

Basically, I go into your home with a couple of amateurs, and the goal is to profile you based on the way you impact on your environment — it's sort of combines psychiatry and profiling.

You skewed your life to a triad, but that is two angles — actor and television specialist. What's the third?

I am a regular doctor. I am part of the clinical faculty at UCLA, plus I see private patients on weekends.

Each element in that triad seems to involve enormous mental and physical strain — so how do you balance the load?

The mental effort is the hardest part, frankly. Take this week, for instance, I shot a VHS show yesterday and that will continue later today. Wednesday, I audition for a couple of television shows here in LA. On Thursday, I am seeing patients all day at UCLA. I also work as music doctor at a new coffee detox center here. On Friday and Saturday I am shooting for *Musae Of Class*. And on Sunday, I see private patients.

That is doctor, television personality, actor. How much does each of these aspects feed off the other?

More than you would imagine, actually. Among other things, I consult on *Thirteen* [director Catherine Hardwicke, has since cast Karim in a supporting role in the *Heath Ledger-Rebecca DeMornay* film *Lords Of Dogtown*], and a whole bunch of other films and television shows where I basically work on character development and breakdown, on how to play characters with addictions, personality disorders; I also teach directors on how to present, direct, such characters.

As a psychiatrist, can you figure out how to break the character down, being an actor yourself helps me better explain how the role can be played. Or again, when I am an

actor, I use my skills as a psychiatrist to break y character down into little nuances. For instance, Karthik, my character in FLAVORS, was written as the romantic lead. A very goofy sort of guy, not the strong kind who also gets some to him. So I constructed him at my own risk, sat with Raj and DK to see if my construct matched their vision, and they liked him that way.

The character, as you played him, is superficially light-hearted, goofy, fun-loving — but there is this undercurrent, this sense that he is using the goofball image as a sort of defense mechanism...

Which is exactly how I played him. I viewed him in layers. At a superficial level, I wrote, he sees humor and a goofy outlook on life. At the second layer, I wrote, he does so in order to mask the feelings of vulnerability associated with being roman-



'It's easy to be the pretty girl up there'

But FLAVORS heroine Pooja Kumar wants to be much more, she tells Arun Venugopal

Pooja Kumar would like it known, most respectfully, that she's not vain. It's an understandable concern. She is an actress, after all, a species with a certain reputation for preening and ego displays. There's also the small matter of her likeness, which is displayed prominently and in extreme close-up in the offices of Imagination, the pan-Asian television network where she's a programming executive. There there's the other one, the one for which she's most recently famous. It's the sign for *Beauty Dreams*, which looms over Broadway, just north of Times Square. There stands Pooja, drenched and smiling, as fountains of water gush about. There's also a big guy behind her, apparently, but really, who's looking at him? If Andrew Lloyd Webber and A R Rahman and Bollywood glamour are the obvious reasons for booking a ticket to the show, Pooja's marquee acts as the secret weapon — the kind of image that is meant to make thousands of passers-by ask themselves, "Wow, I wonder what that's all about?"

She stands outside in front of the theatre, as a photographer snaps away. Some people rush by, oblivious and caught up in their New York moment, while others slow down and gradually make the connection between woman on the sidewalk and the fantasy image in the sign.

"Is that you?" asks one guy.

Pooja nods.

"Nice," he says, giving her a long once-over before walking away.

Pooja is unfazed and stifles a smile.

"I love the fact that people are looking at it and saying, 'Oh my god, low cut, sexy.' I love it."

Of course, even the most self-assured actress has to eventually her most daunting critic: Dad. And that was a moment she won't soon forget.

"He looked at it, contemplated it and said, 'Wow, I can't believe you're in the middle of Times Square,'" she says.

Then he passed, looked at it a little longer and added, as diplomatically as possible, "I didn't realize your body was made up that way."

Pooja laughs at the memory. "It was a nice moment between father and daughter."

But she realizes that the sign, as prominent as it may be, has its limitations. "It's easy to be a pretty girl and be up there," she says, referring to the silver screen. Her new film, FLAVORS, opens July 16 in theaters around the country and in Canada. "The hard part is being truthful and making a difference. Because cinema's not only about entertainment, it's too huge a venue to be just entertainment."

Pooja grew up in St Louis, she trained as a dancer from the age of 2, learning Bharata Natyam and Kathak and spending months on end in Chennai perfecting her skills. Although she had never intended to pursue acting, that career took off inadvertently in 1995, when she won the Miss India USA pageant. Later, she went to India and underwent an intensive program in acting known as Star Track, organized by Amitabh Bachchan and Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited.

In all, she spent a year and a half in India, getting to know the industry and learning the ropes of movie making. It was a fun but rigorous time for her.

"All my friends were in college, enjoying, while I was doing this rigorous training," she says. She did ads for Pepsi and Cadbury's and acted in films including the 3D production *The Little Mermaid* and *Kandahar Express*.

"It's a fun comedy," she says about FLAVORS. "Kids will love it, grandparents will love it. You're not sure where it's going."

She also enjoyed the fact that it was co-directed by two people. "One would say action and one would say cut," she says. "It was definitely an interesting experience, so it gave me double the feedback."

The film helped Pooja pick up a Screen Actors Guild Award at the St Louis International Film Festival. Without her saying so much, it's clear that Pooja has fairly serious plans for the future. She dabbles in the idea of doing a talk show for Imagination, becoming the "Asian Oprah," and taking a cue from well-respected actresses in the film world. Shabana Azmi, Charlene Theron, Meryl Streep and most significantly, Smita Pathi. "I thought she was one of the brilliant actors," she says of Pathi. "She was so versatile, and so intriguing, she may not be drop-dead gorgeous but you can't stop watching her." ■

