

# India *in* New York<sup>®</sup>

A GUIDE TO EVENTS AND ENTERTAINMENT FROM INDIA ABROAD

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# My Big Fat Indian Wedding

**FLAVORS** is the most ambitious  
independent desi film



PARESH GANDHI

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

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 closeup in the offices of Imaginasian, the pan-Asian television network where she's a programming executive. And then there's the other one, the one for which she's most recently famous. It's the sign for *Bombay 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 passers-by ask themselves, 'Hmm, I wonder what that's all about?'

We stand in front of the theater, as *India in New York* photographer Paresch Gandhi 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 unphased 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."

But the sign, and what it conveys, has its limits.

"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 enter-

tainment."

She makes note of a few of her screen influences: Shabana Azmi, Charlize Theron, Meryl Streep and most significantly, Smita Patil.

"I thought she was one of the brilliant actors," she says. "She was so versatile, and so invigorating. She may not be drop dead gorgeous but you can't stop watching her."

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.

"My friends were in college, enjoying, while I was doing this vigorous training," she says.

She ended up doing advertisements for Pepsi and Cadbury's and acted in films including the 3D production *Little Magician* and *Kaadhal Rojave* (Tamil).

*FLAVORS*, directed by Raj Nidimoru and Raj D K, follows four stories, which revolve around the same restaurant.

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

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

The film helped Pooja pick up a Screen Actors Guild Award at the St Louis International Film Festival.

For more information on *FLAVORS*, visit [www.flavorsthemovie.com](http://www.flavorsthemovie.com)

— Arun Venugopal