

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

EVERYDAY



Pooja Kumar in "Flavors."

“Emerging” St. Louis actors on roads to success

BY JOE WILLIAMS
Post-Dispatch Film Critic

CAN YOU MAKE IT in the movies from St. Louis? Stars from Vincent Price and Betty Grable to Kevin Kline and Marsha Mason would answer yes. The latter two actors were feted at last year's St. Louis International Film Festival. But this year's recipients of the Emerging Actor Award from the Screen Actors Guild know that fame is a game in which St. Louisans always are on the visiting team.

Notwithstanding the occasional run-and-gun feature that is filmed here (such as "Amphetamine," screening tonight at 11:30 at the Tivoli), the cardinal advice for aspiring movie actors is, "Get outta town." For Evan Peters and Pooja Kumar, the road to renown went in opposite directions. At 15, Peters followed the timeworn path from the heartland to Hollywood, where he quickly won the title role in the film "Clipping Adam," which screens at 7 p.m. Saturday at the Tivoli.

Kumar took a more roundabout route. She traveled east — all the way to her ancestral home in India, where she became a fashion model, a TV personality and finally a film actress. After tasting success in Asia, she returned to the States, where she landed a plum part in "Flavors," an indie feature that will screen at 7 p.m. Nov. 20 and 5:45 p.m. Nov. 23 at the Tivoli. Their respective paths will converge at the fest, where they will be honored with the SAG award along with fellow hometown Sarah Clarke, of the TV series "24."

Peters, now 16, grew up in Manchester. A couple of years ago, his family moved to the aptly named Grand Blanc, Mich., where he found himself bored and friendless. On a lark, he entered a talent competition, where he was spotted by a photographer with Hollywood contacts. The shutterbug said, in effect, California is the place you ought to be. So bidding adieu to Dad, Evan and his mother loaded up the truck, and they moved to ... Burbank.

Peters says that his career accelerated faster than he

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Actors

Two St. Louis actors are honored

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could have hoped. His second audition was for the lead in "Clipping Adam," a modestly budgeted film about an adolescent who refuses to cut his hair after the car-accident death of his mother and sister. After a few rounds of callbacks, Peters found himself starring in the film, alongside Oscar winner Louise Fletcher, indie stalwart Chris Eigeman and erstwhile Hercules Kevin Sorbo.

Now he is working on a film called "Sleepover," in which he co-stars with young actresses Alexa Vega ("Spy Kids") and Mika Boorem ("Hearts in Atlantis"). "I get to hang out all day with beautiful, talented 15-year-old girls," he says. "I'm going insane."

Peters has made commercials for PlayStation, Progressive Insurance and Moviefone (a per-

formance he describes as "annoying"), and he will have a recurring role in the Disney Channel series "Phil of the Future." Although he's learned that the early-rising life of an actor "is not all sunglasses and autographs," he's not complaining. "You hear all these stories about Hollywood, but so far I haven't seen any downside — except that it's not St. Louis."

Few places are less like St. Louis than India. That's where Pooja Kumar moved after studying political science and finance at Washington University. Fortified with the crown of Miss India USA, a pageant for American women of Indian descent, Kumar landed an on-air job with V Channel, the South Asian equivalent of MTV. (She reports that the hip kids in India these days are heavy into the dance sounds of Talvin Singh and Punjabi MC.) She co-starred in "Kaadhal Rojave," a film in the Tamil language, which she does not speak, and "The Little Magician," a successful 3-D kid film in Hindi, which, she says, requires a different set of muscles than her Parkway West-flat-tened English.

Kumar, 26, moved to New York and was cast in "Flavors," a comedic slice of life about upwardly mobile Indian-Americans converging on a wedding. Kumar is happy that the film presents a side of Indian-American life with which the mainstream may not be familiar. "It's not a story about immigrant struggle," she says.

Her own struggle has been to gain a foothold in a fiercely competitive industry where there are so few Indian-American role models. Although she plays a Pakistani American in the upcoming film "Night of Henna," she looks forward to the day when she'll be cast in race-blind parts. She boasts that she got to do a shoulder-shimmy with James Earl Jones in a recent Verizon commercial.

Kumar, who has a raucous, ready laugh, says she's too passionate about acting to be dragged down by the rejections that are an inevitable part of the business. "Sometimes you're just not what they're looking for," she says. "That says more about them than it does about you."

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