

# Star on the Rise: Pooja Kumar

Interview By: Fakiha Khan

It is difficult not to be impressed by the combination of brains, beauty, and personality that eludes so many. But, Pooja Kumar has all three, which are enhanced by her sense of humor and her ability to not take things too seriously and won critical acclaim... The fact that Pooja has a great attitude about life and her work makes it all the easier for us to root for her success.

Born and raised in St. Louis, MO Pooja has always been drawn to dance, art, and the stage. In fact, she gave her first dance performance at the truly tender age of 2 (yes, 2!) when she performed "Madhuban Me Radhika." Since then, Pooja has worked consistently on perfecting her dancing skills, traveling to India every summer to learn from a different master in the Kuchipudi, Kathak, and Bharatnatyam styles. She has had the fortune, in fact, of studying Kathak with Birju Maharaj and Bharatnatyam with Adiyar Laxman.

As early as fifth grade, Pooja recalls, she was also drawn towards acting. In fact, at that age, Pooja demanded to be cast as Petruccio in "Taming of the Shrew" because it was the bigger part. Although her teachers tried to explain that Petruccio was the male lead, Pooja would not be dissuaded. She ended up snagging the role, and her fifth grade production of the play made the cover of the local newspaper. With that experience, Pooja explains, she knew that acting was her life. She continued to act in musicals and plays. But, she jokes, "I never really thought of it seriously as a career. Actually, I thought I'd be a lawyer because I was always arguing with my dad!"

Life, it seems, had other plans. Instead of law school, Pooja entered and won the Miss India U.S.A. pageant. As the offers started pouring in, she realized that she could actually make a career of her lifelong passion - acting. At the same time, Pooja was accepted as one of the top 10 finalists in the Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited competition. That opportunity took Pooja to India, where she spent a year and a half, participating in the competition, working as a Channel V v-jay and a spokesperson in a national ad campaign, as well as acting in the Tamil film "Kadhal Rojave." Since her return

to America, Pooja has seen success in a number of roles, including leads in "Flavors," "Night of Henna," and "Chota Jadugar," a number of ad campaigns, and, most recently, hosting a show on ImaginAsian TV. She has also studied at the prestigious American Academy of Dramatic Arts and won acclaim for critical acclaim for her performances, including a Screen Actors Guild Emerging Artist Award for her work in "Flavors."

India, Pooja candidly admits, "was a huge thing because living in India and visiting India are two very different things." Although it was a trying and difficult experience, she is grateful for the opportunities it presented, including the chance to train with Roshan Taneja at the Pune Film Institute and polish up on her Hindi (and lose her American accent). According to Pooja, "there is so much talent in India. But, I went with the mentality that I would go and do my best. So, I didn't put pressure on myself to accomplish certain things." Perhaps this attitude of taking the experience as a learning one helped Pooja deal with the adjustment to living in India. The fact that her mother and grandmother would make

regular visits, she explains with gratitude, also made the transition a little smoother. Of course, Pooja also admits, "it was very tough for me to compete with people from India... it's so easy to become negative, to think I'm not working with the best director or compare yourself to the other girls." At the same time, Pooja had to acquaint herself with Bollywood's different mode of operation and to alleviate the misconceptions people had about her as an American. Nonetheless, Pooja says emphatically, the experience "made me a stronger person and a better person. When you have to prove yourself to other people... you start learning about yourself, which is one of the best things you can do!"

Although Pooja's Indian adventure was a positive one, she says, she simply was not interested in pursuing the Bollywood route. "My goal was basically to get the training and return to North America to work."

**"...I thought I'd be a lawyer because I was always arguing with my dad!"**

- **Name:**
- Pooja Kumar
- **Hometown:**
- St. Louis, Missouri
- **Favorite item of clothing:**
- My Sweatshirts!
- **Typical Saturday Night:**
- Watching multiple movies
- **Secret to your confidence:**
- My Family
- **Biggest misconception people have about you:**
- I take everything lightly, but everything affects me deeply.
- **Little known fact about you:**
- On the 6th of every month I donate something in honor of my late mother.



## ENTERTAINMENT!

According to Pooja, South Asians are sorely underrepresented in mainstream American media, and "I felt I could make more of an impact here than in Bombay." But, what of the difficulties of being a minority actor in Hollywood? Amused, Pooja answers, "of course, it's difficult." But, with a great agent and management team who sends her out on auditions for the best roles, Pooja feels blessed at the opportunity to prove herself as a performer. "Do I always get them? No. But, I always think, even if I don't get this role, I'm impressing a casting director for the next role." And, that, Pooja explains, helps her to put the audition process in perspective. Instead of getting upset by the rejection inherent in life as an actor, Pooja says, "I actually have fun with auditions because I get to come up with new characters and new scenarios."

As she perfects her skill as an actor, Pooja also expresses her funny side as one of the hosts of the "Movies for the ImaginAsian" on ImaginAsian TV. There, she has the chance to introduce various Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and other Asian films with skits that she and her co-host write and present together. Having fun with the creative aspect of her work at ImaginAsian, Pooja also has started working on a short film with her partner, which will go into production in the next few months. "I'm all for people writing their own roles, producing, directing, or doing shorts," which Pooja explains is a great way for more South Asian actors and characters to appear in mainstream media. "We have so many experiences to share," Pooja reflects, so why not share them?

Expanding upon her creativity and working on her art, Pooja is making her own way, with the full support of her family. According to Pooja, "I'm passionate about acting... and you have to love what you do." That love and passion is what drives Pooja. With a refreshing combination of talent, ambition, intelligence, beauty, and, most importantly, perspective, Pooja is on her way to claim a star of fame for herself.

photography by Gautam Rajyadaksha

