

# My Melbourne Arts

**Reviewer/Writer based in Melbourne. Keen interest in theatre, cabaret, circus, dance and any other form of performing arts. Also a film, TV, fashion and art enthusiast. Currently studying a Master of Arts and Cultural Management. Lived in Kyoto (04-06) and London (08-10). Enjoy a good boardgame session with a nice glass of gin.**

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## "Bent Bollywood": Bending Gender Through Dance

Combining Indian classical dancing with the camp theatrics of Bollywood through a queer lens, *Bent Bollywood* was a definite must-see show during Midsumma Festival this year. Created and Performed by queer performance artists Raina Peterson and Govind Pillai, the show explored how different sexualities, genders and cultures can co-exist and complement each other.

*Bent Bollywood* began with a nod to traditional dancing and gradually grew in its exploration of queerness within these heavily steeped traditions. "Raina particularly was using lots of gendered mudras (hand gestures) in their spiritual solo opening piece, doing the gesture for female and male repeatedly. They were working with those traditional gestures and dissolving them into dust to almost disestablish the notion of binary genders," Pillai tells me.



The two had initially chosen to begin the performance with their dynamic closing number, however after some deliberation they wisely decided against the idea. In starting the way they did, it allowed the audience to be eased into what was to come and to enjoy the story that was being told without feeling overwhelmed by what they were seeing. "We have been trained to take a very spiritual approach to the dance and the art form, so it was really hard for us once we stood back and looked at the show as a total, to just launch on stage without any spiritual connection with the space and the people in it," he explains. "We realised we didn't want to really tell a story where we just switch on the lights and go 'boom!', so it was later on we decided to begin with some traditional work."

The performance culminates with Asha Bhosle's "Mujhe Rang De" in which the two perform a highly erotic yet romantically fun number. It was intriguing seeing a song that was released almost 20 years ago as a love song between a man and a woman being used in this context. You couldn't help but wonder what Bhosle would say if she knew this is how her music was being presented. "I have a hunch she'd take it positively only because I think she contended with a lot of issues of being a minority as a female singer in an industry that was very patriarchal and very misogynistic," Pillai tells me. "Bollywood is still very very much about the male gaze and I think she had to deal with a lot of things like that. I like to think that she might be proud, that her children have found their own meaning in this."



"The words 'rang de' mean 'colour me' so we looped that track a lot at the end into almost like a trance of those words and Bhosle sings colour me, colour me and then the glitter comes out and there's this idea of colouring me with your personality and vice versa. There's a sharing of each other's self-expression and the references to true colours so we felt it was a really fitting song although our use of it was probably not contemplated in the day that it was written and the era that it was sung in, and that was probably part of the juxtaposition we wanted to create," Pillai says.

While the two are heavily trained in classical dance, this is the first time they've overtly brought in queerness into their performance. "A lot of Bollywood is dancing around trees with an older man and a younger girl where you know she'll get wet and her nipples will show through her sari but but he will stay clothed and it's as if women have no sexual desire.

We wanted to spin that around and say well what if the same music in the same construct was used while playing with gender, and it's a bit of a mind flip for a lot of people who know Bollywood because they watch that scene and go 'hang on', he tells me.

"Particularly in Bollywood there's a lot of male gaze and you know there's always an obligatory wet sari scene which is interesting as it's all about a culture that is fundamentally very sensually driven with the Kama Sutra and sculptures of goddesses in temples all having their breasts out. The men are depicted beautifully and women are depicted beautifully and everyone's naked, so here we have a culture that fundamentally values sensuality, sex and eroticism but its current contemporary version is very patriarchal and so we really wanted to challenge that."

The two shared incredible chemistry and had an extremely strong presence on stage. Even with the large performance space inside the Mechanic's Institute, and with the most minimal of props, they utilised the space in various way that not only allowed them to fill the space, but managed to create an intimacy with the audience, particularly through their consistent eye contact.

Coming out of *Bent Bollywood* it is not surprising that Peterson and Pillai's work has a foundation of emotional and spiritual connection. "We're quite feeling oriented which is something we enjoy. So we think about some of the things we want to say in this world, about the intersections that we face and what's really personal to us. We sat down and chatted about what feelings we wanted to communicate over a glass of wine and that's how *Bent Bollywood* was born," he explains. "We thought we could convey love and respect and how we are really over the patriarchy in dance at the moment particularly in Australia where men come up on stage and the women move to the side.

### About Me



**Myron My**

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We wanted to change that even if it's in a small way and so we began to think about what kind of music could tell that story in an effective way and then what visuals we could use and then what the choreography would be."

The resulting work has left a huge impression on me since seeing it almost a month ago. *Bent Bollywood* not only explored the idea of what being queer is and can be but it did it in such a considered way where even if you don't know anything about Indian dance and culture, the concepts and ideas are clearly established and you can easily recognise that the story being presented is a universal one of being free to express yourself any way you wish.



Peterson and Pillai will be performing at "Art Party" at [Testing Grounds](#) on Friday 2 March and "[Unicorns](#)" at RUBIX Warehouse in Brunswick on Saturday 24 March. Furthermore, the two have secured a residency at [Arts House](#) in May to develop a new work called *Third Gender*. To keep an eye on other future projects by them, make sure to visit their website, [Karma Dance](#), because you will definitely not want to miss out on any of their offerings.

**Photo Credits:** Hayden Golder

Posted by Myron My at [20:59](#)



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