

# BOLLYWOOD PRINCESS

Last year **SHILPA SHETTY** was the focus of global controversy as a contestant on *Celebrity Big Brother*. But, speaking exclusively to us, the Bollywood superstar says she has no regrets...

WORDS BY DAN SAVERY PICTURES BY GETTY, REX

Shilpa Shetty became a household name in the UK last year for all the wrong reasons. Already a well-known Bollywood actress in India, Shilpa hit the headlines during *Celebrity Big Brother*, after becoming the alleged target of racist bullying by three of her fellow housemates.

Trouble in the house escalated when Jade Goody, Jo O'Meara and Danielle Lloyd mocked Shilpa's Indian accent and called her names behind her back.

Outside the house these events spiralled out of control when angry protestors marched in Bihar, India, while Gordon Brown was on a goodwill visit. Eventually, Carphone Warehouse withdrew their sponsorship from the show, Channel 4 received a record 40,000 complaints and its bosses had to make a series of high-profile apologies.

In the end, Shilpa won the contest, winning 63 per cent of the public vote.

Speaking exclusively to *Flybe Uncovered* from an airport lounge in Germany, Shilpa remains philosophical about the whole experience. "I believe that whatever happened at that point in time happened for the best and for a reason," she says. "I have no regrets whatsoever. There's been a lot to learn from my experience. I knew I was a strong person, but I didn't realise I was *that* strong, *that*

resilient and that I could be so calm."

For better or worse, the reality show catapulted Shilpa into the media spotlight. After her win she met Tony Blair, the Queen, and was even offered a role in *EastEnders* (she turned it down). She also appeared on the cover of the first issue of *OK!* magazine in India, although some newspapers accused her of riding the 'racism wave' to make money.

But Shilpa was already a star in her own right. At 32, she is a Bollywood veteran and has starred in nearly 50 films, landing her first leading role in 1994. She recently starred in *Life In A... Metro*, the first Indian film to

**NO REGRETS: SHILPA WAVES TO THE CROWDS AFTER WINNING *CELEBRITY BIG BROTHER* LAST YEAR**



receive a premiere in Leicester Square, and spent most of the winter touring the UK with *Miss Bollywood*, a stage show set in London in the run-up to the 2012 Olympics.

So how does the stage compare to film? "Theatre is very, very different from film," she says. "It's very challenging. Being on stage is practically like doing a movie from beginning to end. It is extremely exciting, because sometimes you get things wrong. We're all human beings, and you try to make it perfect every time, but you can't."

In recent years Bollywood has boomed in Britain. The UK has the largest audience for Indian cinema outside India, and in 2007 the prestigious International Indian Film Academy Awards – which attract a global audience of 500 million people in 110 countries – were held in exotic Yorkshire!

Shilpa is not surprised at Bollywood's success here. "Firstly, there are a lot of Asians here. Bollywood is doing well because it is not just about song >



and dance any more. It's about cultural realities, and audiences are more open to entertainment in any form and any language."

Despite her experience in the *Big Brother* house, it hasn't put her off the UK. She is particularly fond of Birmingham, Manchester and London, and loves going shopping on Carnaby Street. "The British people are very warm and extremely nice to me, which gives me a reason to come back," she says. "London is a real hub for all the different cultures coming together; it has become a melting pot."

Shilpa thinks the fact that many organisations are encouraging greater cross-cultural interaction in the UK bodes well for the future, but believes it is important for

"AS LONG AS YOU RESPECT WHERE YOU COME FROM, WHERE YOU ARE AND WHO OTHERS ARE, THEN THERE'S NO CULTURE CLASH"

people to keep their cultural roots. "Whether you are based in London, Germany or wherever, as long as you respect where you come from, where you are and who others are, then there's no culture clash," she says. "After all, variety is the spice of life."

There is no doubt that Shilpa is proud of her Indian heritage. She was born in Tamil Nadu in 1975 and now lives in Mumbai. She is the eldest daughter of Surendra and Sunanda Shetty, both manufacturers, and has a younger sister, Shamita, also a Bollywood actress. Shilpa's native language is Tulu, although she can speak ten other languages, including English, Hindi, Gujarati and French.

"I had a very happy and normal childhood," says Shilpa. "I came from a middle-class family, my parents were both working, and when we were children we were always encouraged to work and do good deeds. And we were taught what is right and what is wrong, but the decision was left up to us. I think that's what helped us become stronger people."

Perhaps her family taught her the importance of laughter, too – throughout the interview Shilpa frequently bursts into giggles. >

## BOLLYWOOD STYLE IN BIRMINGHAM



If there is one British city that has taken Bollywood to its bosom, it's Birmingham. Here, Bollywood is not just the latest dance craze, but a fun form of entertainment that keeps on growing...

For those looking to get a piece of the action, learning to dance like a Bollywood actor or actress is now easier than ever. Reena Taylor's Bollywood Dreams Dance Academy in Birmingham started with one class on a Saturday afternoon in 2002. It now trains more than 200 students in Birmingham, and boasts 16 classes a week all over the West Midlands.

"It's very fashionable at the moment," says Reena. "Because the movies are so popular here, obviously it's reflected on the dance floors, and every year we're getting bigger and bigger. The age of our students ranges from age three all the way to 65!"

For more details, contact **Bollywood Dreams Dance: 0845 226 8210** or see [www.bollywooddreamsdance.com](http://www.bollywooddreamsdance.com)

Birmingham is famous for its Indian restaurants, and now it has a Bollywood theme bar and restaurant, Peppers. Call **0121 633 4411**; [www.peppers-uk.com](http://www.peppers-uk.com)



ABOVE: SHILPA PERFORMING IN SHEFFIELD LAST YEAR  
BELOW: WINNING A SPECIAL AWARD AT THE BOLLYWOOD OSCARS



"Laughing is for free and you don't have to pay taxes on it," she says. "I think when you are happy and smiling you can increase your positive energy."

But Shilpa does have a serious side and certainly hasn't forgotten her roots. Last year she launched the Shilpa Shetty Foundation, which raises awareness of the AIDS virus in Mumbai. "I think it is important to know your social responsibilities. India is affected quite badly by this virus, so I took up the cause of HIV and AIDS in my country. Everywhere I go >

## THE LOW-DOWN ON BOLLYWOOD

- Bollywood is the largest film industry in the world, producing more than 1,000 films a year.
- Though Bollywood's annual revenue is only \$1.3bn (compared to Hollywood's \$57bn), last year 3.6bn tickets were sold to Bollywood films, while Hollywood sold just 2.6bn.
- The name 'Bollywood' is a combination of the first letter of the top studio centre Bombay (now Mumbai) and Hollywood.
- The first full-length Indian film was *Raja Harishchandra*, made in 1913.
- Bollywood film music is called 'filmi', after a Hindi word that means 'of films'.
- The most expensive Bollywood film ever will be the epic *Mahabharata*, which is being made this year with estimated costs of up to a jaw-dropping \$30m.
- Introduced in 1954, the Filmfare Awards is the most prominent film event given for Hindi films and is sometimes referred to as the 'Indian Oscars'.
- The term 'Bollywood' is often incorrectly used to refer to the whole of Indian cinema, but it is only a part of India's film industry.
- The UK has the largest audience for Indian cinema outside India. In 2005, a record 74 Indian films were released in the UK, compared to 61 home-grown productions.

I try to talk about it and make people aware that it is important to be more educated on the topic. And this means more empathy than apathy."

Although it is often called an emerging market, India is still one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2006, UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) estimated that 5.7 million people in India were living with HIV. However, Shilpa denies that the spread of the disease has anything to do with the country's caste system, which dictates a person's occupation and living conditions. "I don't really think that is a problem any more," she says. "The younger generation is far more educated and more aware than the previous generation. We are growing more accepting, which is a very good thing."

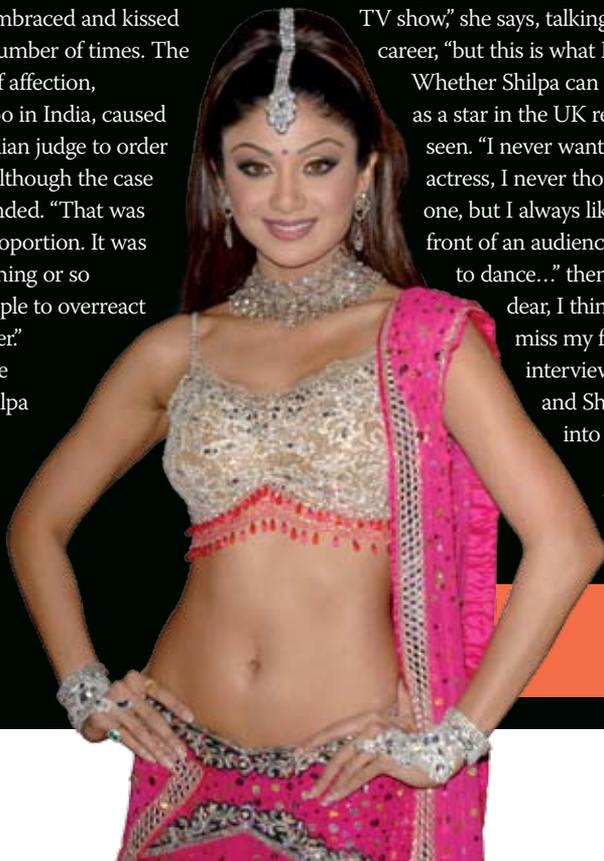
But attitudes take a long time to change and, for some reason, Shilpa seems to attract controversy. Appearing at an AIDS awareness event last April, Hollywood heartthrob Richard Gere embraced and kissed Shilpa's face a number of times. The public display of affection, considered taboo in India, caused an outraged Indian judge to order Shilpa's arrest, although the case was later suspended. "That was blown out of proportion. It was not such a big thing or so obscene for people to overreact in such a manner."

Despite all the controversy, Shilpa has managed to keep some dignity. In fact, last year the Bollywood star received an honorary doctorate from Leeds



PRETTY WOMAN: RICHARD GERE KISSES SHILPA AT AN AIDS BENEFIT IN INDIA

"SOME PEOPLE HAVE ONLY SEEN ME ON A REALITY TV SHOW. BUT THIS IS WHAT I REALLY DO"



Metropolitan University and won the Rajiv Gandhi National Quality Award, an accolade usually reserved for ex-prime ministers. "For someone my age to be bestowed with such an honour was quite humbling," she says. "It was really amazing that they thought I was worthy of such an award."

Next on Shilpa's agenda is to shoot her first Bollywood film since appearing on *Celebrity Big Brother*. She is also writing a cookery book, *Soul Curry*, and is also rumoured to be starring alongside Keanu Reeves in a new adaptation of *Hanuman*, a film about the Hindu god. On top of that, she is promoting her new DVD, *Shilpa's Yoga*, made by her own production company, S2 Global Production. She has also

launch her own fragrance, S2, and is even planning to open a restaurant in the UK. With so many new ventures, it seems as if she is frantically trying to forget *Celebrity Big Brother*.

"Some people have only seen me on a reality TV show," she says, talking about her acting career, "but this is what I really do."

Whether Shilpa can establish herself as a star in the UK remains to be seen. "I never wanted to be an actress, I never thought I could be one, but I always liked to perform in front of an audience, I always liked to dance..." then she pauses. "Oh dear, I think I'm going to miss my flight." The interview ends abruptly and Shilpa rushes off into the distance.

In case you're worried, she made the flight.

## WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT SHILPA



"No, I'm not a racist, but I accept I made racist comments. I don't see people for the colour that they are, or where they come from ... It's my own fault for not knowing enough about other people's cultures." *Jade Goody, after Celebrity Big Brother*

"I want Britain to be seen as a country of fairness and tolerance. Anything detracting from this I condemn." *Gordon Brown, commenting on the alleged racism*

"I believe no one can insult you without your permission. Shilpa Shetty has paid the price for trying to desperately seek the approval of the West." *Bollywood film-maker Mahesh Bhatt*

"Shilpa Shetty is a courageous and wonderful woman who deserves high praise and support for her singular leadership against HIV/AIDS. I assure you, I have utmost respect for her, and she knows this. Of course, I've felt terrible that she should carry a burden that is no fault of hers." *Richard Gere, after his infamous kiss with Shilpa*

**Shilpa's Yoga is out now on DVD and is available from all good retailers**

