

BACKSTAGE

THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEKLY

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The South Asians Are Coming... In Fact, They're Already Here

By Simi Horwitz

Whether South Asian theatre artists are truly joyous about "Bombay Dreams" or just reluctant to voice criticism is arguable. Regardless, all the South Asian artists *Back Stage* talked with insist that "Bombay Dreams"—a British import produced by Andrew Lloyd Webber, among others—is a major step in the right direction. Admittedly, in this work comic stereotypes are confirmed (and how!), but East Indians have also been acknowledged on Broadway. They're no longer invisible—quite the contrary.

"Bombay Dreams" is a megamusical that not so gently parodies the world of musical films made in "Bollywood," complete with family melodrama, class war, evil businessmen, corrupt moviemakers, and a wild dance sequence in a fountain (a staple of East Indian films) that spews forth geysers of water, rendering the performers sopping wet.

One thing is certain: A South Asian presence is not new on the Off-Broadway scene. Last summer, "Indian Ink" by Tom Stoppard (no less) was produced Off-Off-Broadway by AlterEgo Productions, and over the past few years, South Asian theatre companies have been an integral part of the burgeoning ethnic theatre movement. There are Rasa Theater, Desipina Productions, and SALAAM Theatre. Each one has its own flavor; nonetheless, they are unified in their determination to give South Asian theatre artists (writers, directors, and actors) creative outlets that they might not otherwise have. They are combating invisibility and stereotypes—sometimes by, paradoxically enough, embracing or "owning" those self-same stereotypes.

And nothing has contributed more pointedly to these new voices in theatre than the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, leading to a concomitant need on the part of South Asians to tell their stories and an interest on the part of many Americans to hear them. Clearly, South Asians are not Arabs, although they're often mistaken for them and a fair number are, indeed, Muslims.

"It's ironic that 9-11 gave us the opportunity to tell our stories that few would have listened to before," says Rajendra Ramoon Maharaj, a co-founder of Rasa Theater. "Out of the tragedy came hope. And I do believe that art is healing."

Like many other ethnic theatres,

Rasa—meaning "juice of life"—will be producing Western classics and South Asian works. Rasa, making its debut last February, has mounted two one-acters: "Abortion," written by the young Eugene O'Neill but with a South Asian flavor and cast, and "The End of



Geeta Citygirl, founder of SALAAM.

the Apurnas," a dark comedy by an emerging Indian-American playwright, Sarovar Banka.

Desipina, a theatre company that brings together South Asians and Filipinos, has dual missions. "We are attempting to build two sets of bridges," explains playwright Rehana Mirza, Desipina's co-founder. "Asian-American theatre groups, who should be including South Asian theatre artists in their companies, are not. South Asia is part of Asia. In Asian-American theatre companies, Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos are represented, but rarely anyone from East India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, for example. Our first goal is to bridge the gap between Asian-Americans and South Asian-Americans. Our second goal is to bridge the gap between South Asians and Americans."

Desipina's productions, performed Off-Off-Broadway at HERE and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, try to reflect many aspects of the South Asian experience. "We have had actors born in India and raised in Trinidad as well as the American-born Pakistani, for example," says Desipina co-founder Rohi Mirza Pandya. "The South Asian diaspora is very large. All the plays we've produced are specific to their culture, yet we have found that audiences, from many other cultures, are stunned by how much they relate to them. There are universal themes."

Still, stereotypes linger, not least

the image of the South Asian as counterman. In an effort to debunk that stereotype—"turn it on its head," to quote Pandya—the company just completed its run of "7 Eleven Franchised," seven 11-minute plays set in convenience stores.

"By showing many different kinds of stories and people and situations in those convenience stores, we are pointing to the absurdity of the stereotype," says Pandya. "At the same time we are acknowledging the stereotype, fleshing it out, and showing the humanity behind it."

"7 Eleven Franchised" covered such subjects as power struggles, romance, and marital woes along with more culturally charged topics, like the conflicts between African-American shoppers and the newly arrived East Indians who own the shops.

Battling From Within and Without

And then there's the South Asian League of Artists in America (SALAAM), whose mission is to produce works "where race and ethnicity are incidental." So asserts Geeta Citygirl—yes, that is the name she has adopted—who founded the company. "Although we emphasize the works of South Asians, we also produce works by members of other groups but cast South Asians in those roles where ethnicity is not specific or relevant to the story." Citygirl points out that her co-artistic directors are an African-American, a Dominican, and a Finn, in addition to herself, an American-born East Indian.

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Backlot Buzz Update

Director Paul Weitz (*About a Boy*, *American Pie*) brings the comedy *Synergy* to New York for a week's shoot beginning May 17. Dennis Quaid, Topher Grace, and Scarlett Johansson headline. The project, which has been lensing in California for the past three months, concerns a 50-year-old businessman and his 26-year-old boss. The film will be distributed by Universal. Principals: Casting done out of Los Angeles by Joseph Middleton. Background: Grant Wilfley Casting (60 Madison Ave., Rm. 1027, NYC 10010).

—Mark Dundas Wood

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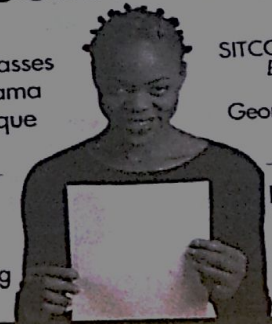
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