

'Indian women are not all the same. We have to tell that story'

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Qurrat Kadwani has to check her bag when she flies just because of the potato peeler. Obviously she might use it as a weapon. All of the props for her solo play, including the peeler, could fit in a carry-on bag: The headscarf that doubles as a sarong, the apron, the enormous, chunky hoop earrings, the trophies, the baseball cap.

There's really not much. It all sits on a table on stage and gets traded in and out as she rotates through them for her changing ensemble. She plays 13 characters in total. Only one is male — her father.

That's the set for her barebones show, *They Call Me Q*: A black theater, a table and chair, and her things. But that works out because Kadwani's huge, dynamic voice fills the space.

At Hunter College's Lang Hall on Manhattan's Upper East Side, she managed to fully draw in me and my friend, both of us having arrived a little skeptical of how good an hour-long performance of a lone Indian chick acting out her mom could be.

I do that daily. What's the big deal?

But no. She totally blew it away. She mimicked a few people in her life over 60 minutes, somehow making utterly irrelevant the fact that she was in the same white ribbed tank top and black leggings the entire time, and she actually accomplished the task of making me think.

She handed the audience issues of gender, global privilege, brown minority identity in America, family, and more.

And she even avoided bringing in the desire, pressure, or need to get married.

"I'm not going to have a play where I talk about romance," says Kadwani. "This play doesn't have a romantic aspect to it. It doesn't have a marriage at the end. There isn't a Bollywood song and dance. You know, we don't need to have those elements when we portray our culture. And I feel more often than not, it's always there."

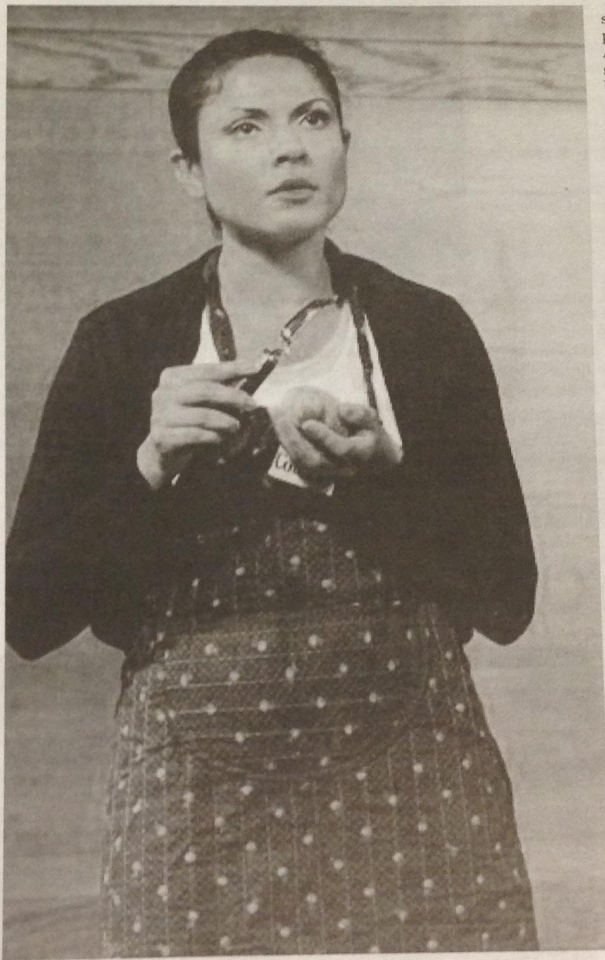
As an Indian American, Kadwani is cautious and critical of what she puts forth on stage. Not that that doesn't go for all playwrights. For her, though, it needs to be more than mere entertainment; there needs to be a message.

She has felt strongly about this since she took a political theater class in college and learned about Bertolt Brecht. She recalls coming to understand how, throughout history, theater has been a means of dispelling information, telling stories about what was happening in society, and even pushing people to take action for change.

They Call Me Q does the job of showing a side of life as an Indian that Kadwani feels is rarely represented. It includes scenes of getting bullied at public school in the Bronx and staying out late dancing at a New York nightclub at 16 years old, where Q's friend Beenie tells her what it feels like to take Extacy.

Beenie commits suicide as a teenager, giving young Q her first exposure to death.

These themes are starkly different from what Kadwani says are limited popular references about Indian culture: The Taj Mahal, *Shundog Millionaire*, poverty in India... She wanted to break this down and provide a wider scope.



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"That's what's holding us back," she says. "We have to, in the arts anyway, move past, elevate ourselves, transcend beyond the things that we think the general public wants to see of us. And show the true story of who we are. And show that Indian women are not all the same. Just get out of the stereotype. They might not have the perspective that you think they have. And they have different accents, different upbringings. And once we tell that true story, that's when we can enter the mainstream."

Kadwani feels this process of entering the mainstream is

something that has far from been accomplished for Indian and South Asian Americans in general, despite how she has seen it improve in the years since she has been working as an actress.

She graduated from SUNY Geneseo in 2002, where she was a theater major and finished her course requirements in three years, and started looking auditioning and looking for work shortly after.

Ten years ago, she said, it was extremely difficult to find roles as an Indian girl. But she just kept going, taking what she could get, and paying the bills with side gigs.

"You can't wait for someone to book you in something big," she says. So it was four years ago when she started working on *They Call Me Q*. She had been inspired by the solo play format, specifically one called *Surface Transit* and also *Bridge & Tunnel*.

"Meryl Streep is legit — you can watch her for like 90 hours," says Kadwani. "And in high school I saw a solo play, and I just loved it so much, and I love this performer. Sarah Jones. She's a tall black lady, but she can literally play any character with any accent. She played this Russian woman with a biracial daughter, and she was putting braids in her hair and it was just insane. I couldn't believe it."

That's kind of how it felt watching Kadwani herself at Lang Hall. It's interesting to hear her say she didn't think she had a story to tell, or that she wouldn't be funny or compelling, or that no one would care for her writing.

Her transformation from her teenage self to her friends or classmates of different ethnicities and both of her parents not only strikes a chord with how we process the colorful characters and distinct personalities in our own lives, but it's incredible how believably and seamlessly she becomes each one. And that itself is a statement.

She shares a story of being in a college theater meeting for a discussion of the following year's programming, and the work of an ethnic playwright came up.

"Everybody was like, 'We can't play that because we're not that race,' and I was like, 'And yet you expect me to play (white) British or southern; you expect me to play any role, so it's okay for me to play all these roles but God forbid you play that! It didn't go over very well with everybody,'" Kadwani recalls, laughing about her classic Q assertiveness over such issues.

"I just try to push the envelope a little, whether with gender or race, to try to get people to rethink their notions of what they should be seeing and their limitations."

That's exactly what her play does. She needs nothing more than her voice and her body to become people from unexpected places with their own mindsets. The rest is in the details — potato peeler included.