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Straddling Cultures

Sandip Roy • Published on February 2, 2006



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Sheetal Sheth had no plans to be an actress. What she was really good at was basketball but then she says she stopped growing and realized that wouldn't be her career. As for acting, she says she was "terrible" in the first play she did in school. But it made her "intrigued about the process" and she wanted to figure out why it was so hard. She apparently did, because she's now starring in Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World with Albert Brooks and being quoted in The New York Times about it.



Sheth was raised in Bethlehem, Pa., in what she calls an "all-Indian family with traditional values." In fact, her biography makes her look like the over-achieving-model-minority-poster-girl-on-steroids. Straight As. Basketball. Multicultural dance. President of the Hindu Youth Association. Speech and debate teams. National Honors Society. AmeriCorps, where she mentored students in the inner city with burned-out teachers and bad classrooms. And then the prestigious Tisch School of the Arts in New York. "You don't need a lot of sleep," she chuckles.

She says her parents would have probably been more comfortable if she had not put all her eggs into the acting basket and taken a double major instead. (Her father is a chemical engineer.) But once they realized this was not a phase that she would grow out of, they became very supportive.

But as an Indian-American actress, Sheth knew she would have her work cut out for her. At Tisch she didn't have to really focus on her ethnicity. Like everyone else in her class she was doing the classics. But once she graduated, she says, "All of a sudden I became cast as an ethnic type."

And not just any ethnic type. Some people, especially non-Indians, had a fixed idea of what Indians looked like and didn't think she looked typically Indian. "Every race has a spectrum of colors and looks," says Sheth, whose parents both emigrated from Gujarat.

Then there was the eternal name problem, the one that turned Kalpen Modi into Kal Penn. Sheth remembers one of her first meetings with a potential manager. It was a good meeting and everything seemed to be proceeding smoothly when the manager turned to her and said, "Great, we love everything. But which one of your names do you want to change?" When a flabbergasted Sheth asked her what she was talking about, the manager said, "Which one do you want to change? Your first name? Or last name?"

Sheetal Sheth stuck her ground. Her only concession is in her bio she offers a little pronunciation guide for the unfamiliar. Sheetal (rhymes with lethal).

But Sheth was lucky. She came into the acting world at a time when Indian Americans were not only becoming more visible on screen, they were helping their own projects, telling their own stories. Sheth bristles at the notion of an "Indian-American" film, however. She thinks of them as films about American life, just that they have to do with South Asians.

Her first "film about American life" was ABCD. It was fellow actor Aasif Mandvi who suggested she audition for it. At that time Sheth was leading the actor's life in New York—waitressing and bartending. She ended up with the lead in that film. "I was completely thrilled but also nauseous everyday," she admits about working with an experienced cast.

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ABCD opened up the doors to a slew of films, some of which made waves, at least on the festival circuit, while others disappeared without a ripple—Pocketful of Dreams, Wings of Hope, American Chai, Indian Cowboy.

But Sheth agrees the timing was right. "If I had been here 10 years ago I might not have made it," she says. Now directors and writers are casting South Asians in a way they didn't 10 years ago. She says actors like Aasif Mandvi, Sarita Chowdhury, Ferdous Bamji, and Meera Simhan really paved the way for her by sticking it out in an industry where roles for South Asians could easily go to a Salma Hayek. "Aasif was the very first actor I met who looked like me," she says. "I was blown away by him in Sakina's Restaurant." They became friends and have referred each other for roles.

After popping up in practically every film about desi characters in the last few years, Sheth moved to Los Angeles and took the plunge into Hollywood. Some television movies and guest spots on shows like Strong Medicine and Line of Fire followed. In 2004 she got a film role in Dancing in Twilight with Kal Penn and Mimi Rogers.

But Albert Brooks was in a little bit of a different league. Not only is he a legendary comic actor, the role of Maya was the female lead. And the film was being shot in India. When she first heard about it, Sheth was wary. She remembers thinking, "Oh great! I hope it's sensitive." Though she had grown up in the United States, she has strong connections with India and had studied Jainism in Ahmedabad. "I am very protective of India," she says. "I hoped they would treat it with respect." At the same time she knew she really wanted the role. "I don't know anyone else from America more connected to India who could do that role," she says frankly.

When she met Brooks, she says she was struck by his sincerity. "He asked me 20,000 questions about the culture, women, and people," she recalls. That was when she decided she really wanted to work with him. When, after numerous auditions, she won the part, she couldn't believe it until she had her ticket and passport in hand. The film involved a six-week shoot in India.

"It was crazy," she laughs. Unlike most Bollywood films, Looking for Comedy is not dubbed. Shooting on the streets of Delhi was an adventure. Albert Brooks is not a household name in India. "But as soon as you see a group of white people with a bunch of big cameras, everyone is curious," says Sheth.

Her role of Maya was a challenge. She worked hard to make her authentically Indian, not Indian American. At the same time, she was determined it would not turn into another Apu. Maya is an educated, even over-educated, slightly earnest woman Brooks hires as his assistant when he is sent to India by the State Department to look for comedy. Maya is modern, cosmopolitan. She has an Iranian boyfriend. "It was important to get a certain body language," says Sheth. Brooks was very specific about what he wanted but also open to everything she brought to the table. And Sheth is very happy with how Maya turned out. "The big asset for Maya is her positivity and thirst for knowledge," she says. "I see a lot of people like her in India. I see how hard they work and I see the light in their eyes."

Maya is certainly cut from a different cloth than images of Indian women popular in the West—suffering, downtrodden, caught in a maelstrom of dowry death and gang rapes. She is smart, educated, and eager to make something of herself and make the most of her opportunity. And Sheth liked the unexpected touch of giving her an Iranian boyfriend. "People don't realize that it's a very diverse place," she says.



The subject matter of the film, looking for comedy in the Muslim world, as a way to perhaps defuse international tensions (and write a 500-page government report) is getting attention because of its ripped-from-the-headlines topicality. It tries to bust several stereotypes. When Brooks flies to India, he is crammed into economy class while Indians are all over the first and business class. At his Delhi office, with its old bone-shaking elevators, rooms are filled with operators who pick up the phone and say, "Toys R Us, how can I help you?" or "This is the White House, how may I direct your call?"

The hangdog Brooks gamely makes himself the butt of the jokes in his film turning the notion of the "ugly American" into the "clueless American." Though for obvious reasons, Brooks wasn't allowed to film in Saudi Arabia, and the film makes much of India's 120 million Muslims, it's never quite clear when Brooks fills an auditorium in New Delhi how he knows which of his audience members are Muslim. In the end it becomes one more culture-clash comedy, more about looking for comedy in India (with a side trip to Pakistan) rather than the "Muslim world" with Brooks as a rather bumbling "Henry Kissinger of Comedy."

Some critics have in fact contended that an overdose of cultural sensitivity means little humor arises from the non-American side of the cast. Though Brooks finds "shit" jokes and Halloween jokes don't play well in India,

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it's not clear what makes Indians laugh. They mostly look at him dumbfounded as he tells long jokes about German farmers raising turnips. And everyone, including Maya, constantly misses irony. If Maya has a character arc, it is when she finally figures out when Brooks, in his deadpan manner, is actually joking.

But Sheth is glad that Brooks didn't go all out to make fun of India. "Albert would ask me everyday, 'Is this okay?'" she says. "India is very much a character in the movie and very present," she adds. "I am glad they didn't just stay in their fancy hotels and got out to experience it."

As for herself, she says she just wants to play roles into which she can "dig her teeth." And though she loves to skydive and bungee jump, Sheth believes in keeping herself grounded and counting her blessings. "My parents left their whole life behind to give their family a new chance," she says. "I won the lottery by being born in America."

Sandip Roy-Chowdhury is on the editorial board of India Currents and host of UpFront, a newsmagazine show on KALW 91.7 produced by New California Media.

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