

MANTRA

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Beneath the Banyan Tree – An Inside Look at a Production in the Making
By Hamel Vyas

Qurrat Kadwani is a young ambitious and energetic woman on a path to success. A small town girl, Kadwani graduated from SUNY Geneseo last May, after completing a BA in Theatre. Seeking a faster paced lifestyle and the bustle of a city, at the age of 21, Kadwani made her way to the Big Apple.

With experience from college days where she directed and acted in basically everything that she could, Kadwani knew she wanted to produce a show. At first, she thought she would do a feminist piece, but then realized that she wanted to do something that not only included strong female characters but that included her strong cultural values as well. She then saw *Metamorphoses* by Mary Zimmerman, and adaptation of myths by Ovid and quickly realized that there was no play that incorporated the rich Indian folklore and literature. It became really important to her to do a play that left a mark while being very careful not to be offensive.

The Genesis

A research trip to the library in November 2002 on Indian folktales or literature she found a book that contained folktales from all over India. The book gave her images in her head and she knew what she had to do. Adapting several tales into a larger play a script was created in February 2003.

Funding

Next step was funding. She tried to get some money lined up first because she really wanted to be sure that there would be a production. She already had investors before the play was written because they believed in her so that was actually the easy part. She is of course, always looking for more funding and sponsorship. Kawani also has the help of her brother, Obaid, a host on AET Namaste America, who has also played a large part in helping her get sponsorship. Her current sponsors are Prina, Netip, The Bollywood Group, TVAsia, V-Desi and Namaste America. With an Indian production, spreading the word throughout the community creates interest and awareness of the project. To create additional awareness, she has a publicist, Valentina Benrexi, who handles press releases and postcard and newspaper announcements.

The Production Crew

Putting a production crew together was easy. An ad in the paper, interviewing candidates and finding those who were passionate about the play, believed in the project whole-heartedly and would sacrifice the pay for the sake of the project, resulted in an expert production crew volunteering their time for this workshop production. They also have a sound designer, Eran Philip, who has included classical to contemporary styles of Indian music and produced his own music as well.

Rehearsals

Rehearsals started in March and the show went up in April. This production has been very quick. According to Kadwani, it is difficult being a minority in this industry. She is producing and acting in her show - that's how hard it is. Based on her experience with this production, she doesn't

think there are enough opportunities for South Asians yet - not in theatre, especially not in film, unless

Page 5

it has to do specifically with South Asian characters. Kadwani wants to get past all of this – who cares if the character is named Mary Smith – it is just a role that can be personalized by the actor. She believes that a production like **Beneath the Banyan Tree** is unique for many reasons. “First, no other play like this exists that incorporated Indian folktales. Secondly, Randall and I tried to stay away from stereotypical images. I have always felt that the reason South Asian actors keep getting stereotypical roles is because we’re not promoting ourselves enough. More South Asian plays need to be done that show the culture in a positive light. **Beneath the Banyan Tree** is magical because it’s so simple, so honest. Here are some homeless kids who want a better life, and they find this tree who, through her own sadness, helps them. We also tried to challenge the notions of age, beauty and race. The fact that there is a multicultural cast was part of the play from the very beginning. We have to assert that South Asians and non-South Asians can work together in theatre, be a part of a family with ethnicity playing a positive role. It doesn’t matter if the mother is white and the father is Hispanic and the child is Indian. This is about characters and the folktales and being honest. Banyan Tree has a plotline, weaved through the folktales so that you care about the characters. The Tree represents the Indian culture, vibrant and alive, constantly changing.”

Kadwani’s advice to those who are thinking of getting into the industry: Be strong. Be brave. Have patience. If you want something, and you have a really good idea, pitch it to people even if you don’t think they will help you. If you’re meant to make it, you will.