

EGO

eyeBLINK Entertainment

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By Sumita Sheth



If you live in New York, you have probably already heard of [eyeBLINK Entertainment](#). A company striving to give opportunities to artists from all ethnicities, they have brought us an array of plays, tasteful cruise evenings and short films.

EGO recently got the opportunity to interview Qurrat Anne Kadwani (right) who is the co-founder of eyeBLINK Entertainment with Obaid Kadwani. A staunch believer in the philosophies of Bertolt Brecht, we found her to be poised, vivacious and obviously full of passion and drive for her chosen metier.

So, Qurrat what is eyeBLINK Entertainment about? What was the inspiration and impetus behind founding it?



eyeBLINK Entertainment is an entertainment company founded to create opportunities for artists of all ethnicities. When I first graduated from college, getting professional roles as a minority actress proved to be difficult. The quality of shows being produced in the off-off Broadway circuit in NYC was also lackluster. I wanted to create a home for actors and directors to return to when they wanted to work on projects with solid scripts by quality writers. Along with theater, eyeBLINK also produces other events like a Masti Sunset Cruise in 2004 that promoted diversity in dance and fashion shows.

I really like the name "eyeBLINK" - is there a story behind that?

Yes definitely! eyeBLINK entertainment means that we, think, breathe and sleep entertainment. I am an artist/actress/producer because there is nothing else that I'd rather be doing. This is a very challenging industry and I feel positive that I am supposed to spread tolerance through entertainment.

The title also means that life goes by in the blink of an eye. We must, as socially conscious people, think critically about everything that is thrown in our paths. We cannot simply accept what's in the news and what surrounds us; we need to assess the truth for ourselves.

I like that! What are the specific preconceptions and stereotypes that you have come across which led you here? What are the barriers that eyeBLINK artists want to tear down?

Historically, theater and entertainment in America excluded people of different ethnicities. Even today, plays are produced and cast with all Caucasian casts, regardless of whether the play absolutely requires it. Similarly, in plays dealing with a family, the cast will somehow look similar. These traditions are not always necessary.

Our society is changing and theater casting practices need to change with the times as well. Most families are multiethnic and most family members don't resemble one another! In most plays, it really does not matter if everyone is the same ethnicity. While many companies will open up roles to actors of any ethnicity, there are so many more roles that could go to actors of any ethnicity, but will go to a Caucasian actor for the sake of believability.

But I believe that theater is not believable. It is a stage in a room and people sit in seats watching other people move around pretending that they are other people. All the artists at eyeBLINK strive to challenge these practices by using non-traditional casting and this puts the focus on the acting and the relationships rather than the ethnicity of the actor.

eyeBLINK also uses the philosophies of Bertolt Brecht who believed that theater should be entertaining and educational. When he felt that an audience member would be sucked in too much into the believability of a show, he would do something that was political and educational, pulling the audience out of the safety net of the theater and throwing them into the reality of how the play impacts their lives.



Who is your audience?

Our audience is our society today. People of all ethnicities and of all age groups.

What are some of the most memorable reactions to your work from your audience?

The reactions to all our works so far have been very positive. Many people return to see our new shows even though they haven't heard of the actors. People also email me days later to say that they are still thinking about the themes presented in the shows.

The sold out shows of *Beneath the Banyan Tree* in both 2003 and 2004 also proved that audiences are also open to South Asian stories too.

You had an installment of your American Colors on May 20. What was this series inspired by?

American Colors is an acting series that allows actors of every ethnicity to work on plays written by classic playwrights. Started in 2004, this series is still going strong. There are performances every other month in a

theater in NYC. We did an entire year of plays by classic American playwrights like Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill, Mary Coyle Chase. This year, we have moved on to classic European playwrights like Anton Chekhov, August Strinberg and Henrik Ibsen.

It started because after college, I stopped reading classic plays. The plays that I read were those for auditions, which for me, consisted of contemporary works, those works that could be cast non-traditionally. I felt deprived as an artist, not knowing enough about which plays contemporary playwrights draw from. American Colors allows actors to read the classic play that they are working on, as well as other plays by that playwright so that they can get a sense of the works associated with that writer.

From an Artistic Director view, I usually read eight plays by that author before picking the play for that month. When the series first started, we would do selections from two or three different plays by the same playwright. For the past few months, though, I have chosen one play, split it into two or three different sections. I then select different directors for each part and different actors for each part, even though they are all playing the same role. All of the artists also know that this is a workshop to stretch and strengthen themselves and to really work on strong characterizations and relationships.

It all sounds very exciting!

Yes, it is extremely exciting, especially for the audience, because they can see how changes in casting affect the overall performance and they can assess for themselves which vision they liked best and why. It is also like seeing two or three different plays all

in one night! The reaction to this has been very positive, with many actors and directors retuning for more!

Tell us more about your colleagues – who are the kind of people who come and act in your works?

We have all types of actors who audition. I usually feel that resumes don't say a whole lot about acting ability, so I try to call in as many people as I can. The directors and I try to choose actors who bring something different to their audition experience. We are looking to be moved. So, the actors that I work with are very talented and they have the ability to tell a story. They are extremely focused and driven in their own careers and I appreciate the hard work that they put in. The best actors have been those who have been able to grow through the rehearsal process and allow their characters to grow as well. They are vulnerable and listen to their scene partners and director and they believe in the mission of the company.

Which language do you think has the best theatre pieces written in it?

This is very hard to say. There are fantastic pieces written in every language.

Are there any languages you wish you knew or strove to learn just so you could access a playwrights' works?

Definitely Sanskrit and Gujrati. French, Swedish...oh there are so many!

Why this kind of theatre, why in New York and why now?

New York is so diverse. It is so massive with so many people, mostly immigrants. I'm an immigrant! We all need our voices to be heard. We all need to urge people to constantly decide for themselves what works and what doesn't and we should have a say in what is being produced professionally. On a small scale, my company gives audiences a lot to think about. We don't dumb anything down; we firmly believe that our audiences are intelligent and capable of appreciating this art form of theater, which is generations old. Especially in the current political time, we need to have theater that is inclusive of all types of people that speaks of tolerance.

I heard about your acting classes– what convinced you it was the need of the hour? How has the response to that been?

I started the acting class because a few actors that I have worked with in the past told me that I would be a good teacher. The response for the acting class has been okay. It's difficult competing with teachers who have been working for years. It's also challenging because I am young and I have to prove that I know what I am doing. Regardless, I have taught a few classes so far and aim to continue doing so while there is a need for them and always discuss my teaching style before accepting students.

Besides theatre, eyeBLINK also wants to impact "the art of story telling, film, and fashion". How do you plan to carry out the film and fashion parts?

eyeBLINK collaborates with other artistic forums. We produce and work on fashion shows and we hope to have something like the cruise that we produced that fused dance, fashion and music together. Eventually we hope to have a film festival and theater that

has multimedia with film and fashion. I hope to start another project in a few months that are competitions: slam poetry, plays written in 24 hours, and films made in 24 hours.

What can we expect from eyeBLINK Entertainment in the near future?

On June 24, we begin Tomorrow's Gold! New Works Series. One new play will get a staged reading every month. This month is The Moon Away by Edward Crosby Wells, directed by Khary Wilson, a wonderfully suspenseful and witty play about tolerance for the gay community and how that impacts identity (More info on eyeBLINKEntertainment.com). July 29th is the next installment of American Colors: An Evening of Harold Pinter with the play Betrayal, a play that moves backwards in time with two people who are having an affair and how that impacts their spouses and their own lives.

Where do you see yourself and eyeBLINK in 5 years' time?

With non-profit status, applying for grants so that we can produce shows with longer runs, expanded to include every aspect of entertainment. Hopefully producing on the Off-Broadway level, both new works as well as classic plays utilizing non-traditional casting. We also hope to acquire our own theater space so that we can have classes and shows year round!

We wish eyeBLINK Entertainment well as they work towards their dreams.

Don't forget to keep an eye out for the upcoming eyeBLINK events on June 24 and July 29.

Images courtesy eyeBLINK Entertainment

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