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Bollywood, meet (off-) Broadway

Arthur J Pais chats with Ayub Khan Din, the writer and accidental star of the Off-Broadway show *Bunty Berman Presents...*

Movie producer Bunty Berman, whose hits include *Father India*, has long been the toast of Bombay, but now Raj, his biggest star and best friend, is bombing at the box-office. Having grown pompous, Raj is not prepared to change it seems.

But wait! This is Bombay — sentiments and sacrifices rule high here. Raj realizes he has become a liability to his friend. But he suspects, despite his declining popularity, his friend Bunty won't drop him. So he engineers his 'disappearance.'

But can he really remain quiet when a mattress king and his son offer to save Berman's studio, and a humble tea boy is waiting for his golden break in the movies as a hero?

In Olivier Award-winning playwright Ayub Khan Din's often hilarious and heartfelt Off-Broadway musical *Bunty Berman Presents...* there is more than a story of vanity, ego clash, sacrifice, serendipity and sudden discovery of buried love.

The show, directed by New York stage veteran Scott Elliott (*Russian Transport*, and two works by Din, *East Is East* and *Rafta, Rafta...* produced to acclaim in New York), is also a homage to the golden years of Bombay cinema.

"To grab the attention of the audience we are using the word Bollywood in our advertisements," said London-based Din. "Personally, I find it offensive. Bollywood denotes Hollywood kitsch. Bombay films today shine on their own and in ways better than many Hollywood films"

The show, which runs in New York till June 1, is expected to travel to many cities in America and Canada, and then to London and other parts of the United Kingdom. By a stroke of kismet, Din, who is an occasional actor (during an Indian sojourn over 20 years ago, he acted in Mani Kaul's little seen *Idiot* along with Shah Rukh Khan) also plays the role of the producer in his show.

"It is about a movie industry far, far away," says Elliot, "but the stories it tells, and the fight to keep the movies rolling can be understood by audiences anywhere."

"I came up with the idea for *Bunty Berman Presents...* while researching *Rafta, Rafta...* (the stories of immigrant families and their children in the UK) over four years ago," Din says.

"I was trawling through YouTube, and reconnected with the classics from India I had grown up with over 40 years ago." Din, the eighth child (out of ten) of a Pakistani immigrant to the UK and his English wife, said in New York last week. The films included *Pyaasa*, *Awara*, *Kagaz Ke Phool* and *Mughal-e-Azam*.

"We know this as the golden age of Indian cinema," he continues. "This was the period which is many ways emulated Hollywood of the '30s and '40s, with the family-run studios and stars attached to a particular studio. But this period also created uniquely Indian films."

Many of the clips on YouTube brought back comforting memories of his childhood, he said, adding that his father was a great fan of these films and their music. "My siblings and I did not understand a word of Hindi, or any other Indian language of the subcontinent, but through these films we were able to embrace our East Indian heritage," he added.

He recalls the films were full of "vitality, glamour and fun," and he was submerged especially during the bleak British winters "in stories of derring-do, where Heroes and Villains fought and beautiful women were swept off their feet by dashing young men, with nothing more than a song, dance and some very old fashioned looks. This was a world of escapism, where everything was possible. With a combination of comedy, tragedy, the will of the Gods and some great dance numbers, they never failed to entertain."

Din, whose hit play *East Is East* — made into a memorable film with Om Puri playing the buffoonish but heavy-handed Pakistani immigrant George Khan — chronicled his life through this large family of 12. He says he may mine his backyard or the extended immigrant world, but he does not want his work to be ghettoized.



He recalled when he was in Mumbai to shoot for *Idiot*, he took a small walk off the sound stage and saw in a shed posters being prepared for a movie. The name of the producer was prominent, and the fact that he was presenting the film, but below that there was a big blank, followed by key credits.

"They had not yet finalized the title," he says with a chuckle. "Those memories came back to me when I was looking for a title."

He decided not to use the traditional spelling, Burman. "I remembered there were many Jewish technicians and artists in Bombay films in the 1940s and early 1950s," he says with a wink. "So why not spell it BERMAN? It could be a Jewish name." He also wrote the lyrics and composed music with veteran Broadway conductor-musical director, the Tony and Grammy



'You take much of what comes your way'

Nick Choksi, who is trained at the Julliard, is happy to work in soaps, even if the roles are fleeting. "The checks take care of my rent and my bills, and that means from time to time I can be on stage," he says.

In *Bunty Berman...* he is Saleem, the tea boy patiently waiting for an opportunity to be on the big screen. For the first time in his five years in theater does he get a chance to sing and dance.

"I could dance like an idiot," he says with a chuckle. "I danced the Raas but here in the show, there is quite a bit of complex footwork and I am enjoying it."

Born in St Louis, Missouri, Manik Choksi has a BA in English lit-

'Nobody told me it would be difficult to get roles'

She is Shembervi in *Bunty Berman Presents...* who takes her screen name so seriously that she doesn't want her boyfriend from pre-stardom days to talk about the old days. He is just Saleem, the tea boy for her.

"What I like about my part is that it evolves and it becomes quite complex," says Lipica Shah who has got the biggest break of her five-year old career with this play. "It is something very different from my real life. I am a bit of a tomboy in real life."

The Indiana-born actress, who recently appeared in her first commercial for Optimum Online, packing boxes and looking for her cat in one spot, and cooking a meal with her mom's 'help' on Skype in another, was raised in a small town in New Jersey.

"I had stage fright at an early age and spent my childhood actively avoiding the lime-light," she says, adding that she was very fond of forensic pathology and wanted to go into medicine.

Then in high school, fate — in the form of a "double doggy dare" — intervened. She was nudged into auditioning for her school's annual musical. She landed the role, much to her surprise, and it ignited a suppressed passion for character creation and performance.

"An acting career was not on my mind," she says. "I was interested in going to college to study forensic pathology — but I also kept acting in plays and musicals whenever I could, in school and community theaters. One day I decided I would be an actor and surprised my parents with the decision."

She studied acting at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Drama Department. She confesses she has a soft spot for sassy (on the verge of neurotic) female characters, and someday she would like to star in a *Sharktopus*-esque science fiction film.

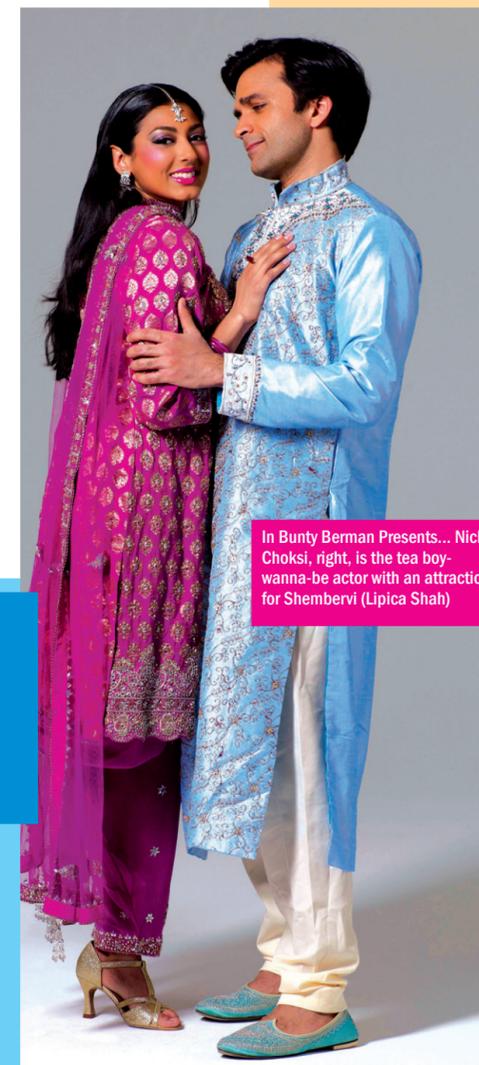
"I never thought of myself as an actor with an Indian background," she says. "I grew up in a small conservative town in New Jersey without many Indian families around. So nobody told me it would be difficult to get roles as one is not mainstream."

The world of theater, unlike television which has over two dozen Indian-background artists, is "rather slow to welcome the multicultural world." But she keeps persisting, looking for color-blind roles.

Meanwhile, she will grab work in television and commercials. Her next episodes of *Pokemon* will air on the Cartoon Network. "I am the new voice of Officer Jenny," she says.

She has been lucky to be noticed by *The New York Times* which declared, after seeing her in *Bumbug: The Musical*, 'Shah is a winning performer: Natural and naturally funny.'

— Arthur J Pais



In *Bunty Berman Presents...* Nick Choksi, right, is the tea boy-wanna-be actor with an attraction for Shembervi (Lipica Shah)

erature from Washington University and studied acting for four years at Julliard.

He has appeared in solid roles in a handful of regional productions, including *Water Rat*, which was staged in Red Banks, NJ, over a year ago.

After fleeting roles on television in *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *The Sopranos* and *The Guiding Light*, he got to play an interesting character in *One Day to Live*, a popular soap.

His character Vimal Patel pretends to be a top earner; his wife (Shenez Treasurywala) lies about being pregnant. He goes to jail after falsifying multiple DNA records and finds out his wife is involved with someone else.

Choksi played an Indian student bewildered by his new life in America in Rajiv Joseph's *Huck & Holden*. The wide acclaim he received for his work in the poignant comedy seven years ago led him to study drama at Julliard.

As an actor with a non-American background, you take much of what comes your way, he says. "And then something substantial could come your way," he adds.

— Arthur J Pais