



Sorab Wadia, trained in Western classical music and opera, is having the time of his life playing the often self-important, but over-the-hill Bombay star Raj Dhawan in the off-Broadway show *Bunty Berman Presents...* The 43-year-old actor is not new to mainstream critical acclaim.

'A performer of real class, who can both sing and dance, and brings the whole production to life every time he is on stage,' wrote *The Times* in London when he was in a show in that city.

Wadia, who has travelled across America in novelist Khaled Hosseini's one-actor show *The Kite Runner* based on the international best-seller of the same name, heard from his agent many months ago that director Scott Elliott was looking for an actor to play an aging matinee idol in Bombay films. The role required him to sing and dance.

"I am not anywhere as old or fat as this character is, I thought immediately," says Wadia. "But I went for the reading, and I sang a Bernstein song with a really heavy accent."

Scott told him he liked the way Wadia presented Raj. "On the way home, I was reading the script and I was howling with laughter. Everyone on the subway was looking at me strangely but I kept laughing. Ayub (*Khan Din*) has written many funny scenes, but there is also tenderness in the play. And that is how I come to mentor the tea boy (*the very endearing Nick Choksi*), who is not only pining for his boyhood friend who is a big star in Bombay (Lipica Shah) but also wants to be a star himself."

Wadia plays more than one role. When Raj suddenly disappears Wadia comes back to the stage in the role of a blind soothsayer from Sind.

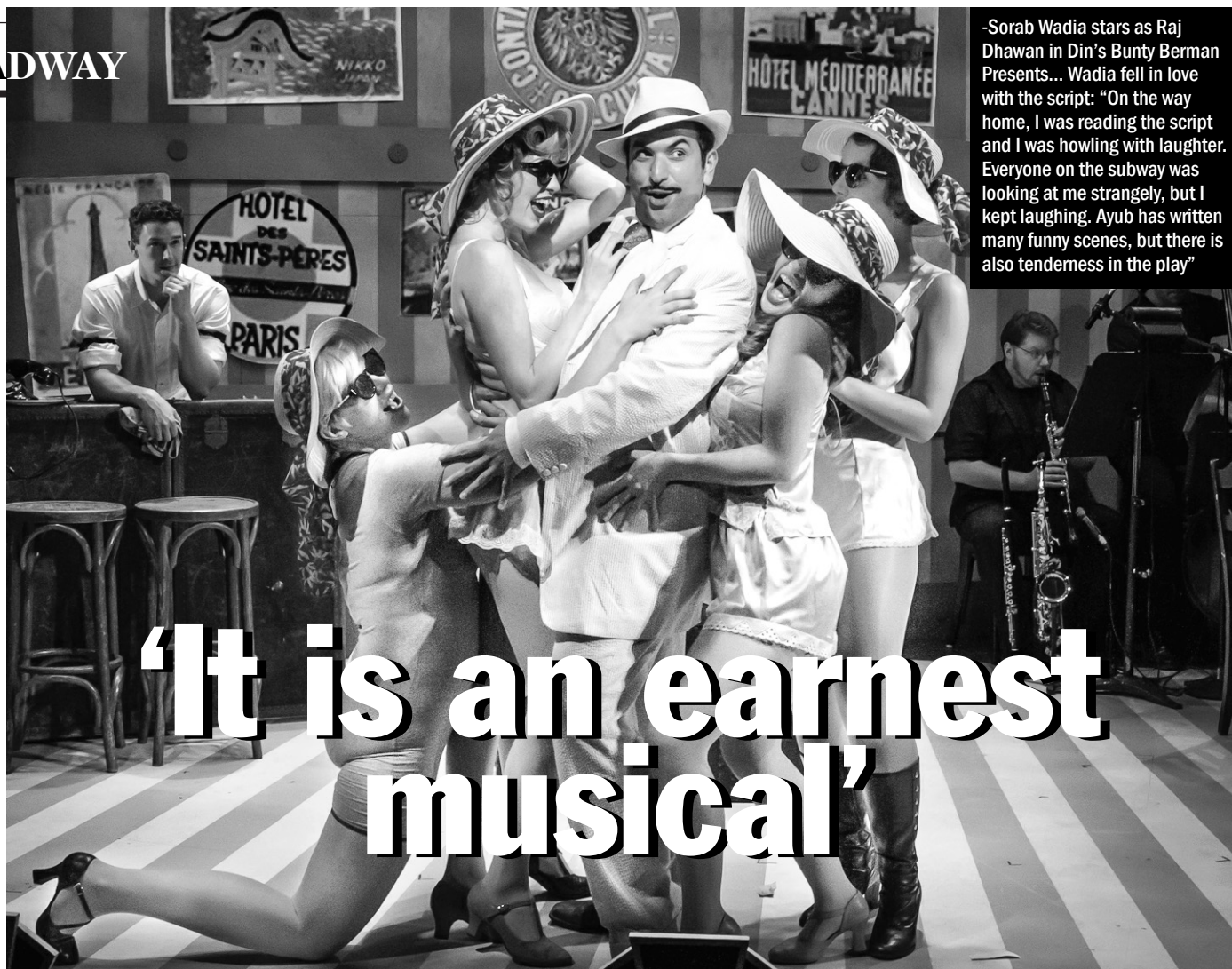
"Raj may at time look like a buffoon," he says, "but there is a seriousness to the role. There is also some deep sadness in him."

Mumbai-raised Wadia has appeared in more than 20 plays, musicals, operas in significant roles in the last decade.

Ask him to describe himself, and he will put on a serious face before declaring, "With his ethnically ambiguous looks and his nearly three-octave range Sorab Wadia has sung music from the 13th century to pop and rock via oratorio and opera and taken on an array of characters from - in alphabetical order - Algeria, Afghanistan, Brunei, France, Germany, Greece, India, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Turkey, and the United States."

"I relish resisting the clutches of typecasting," he says, adding that nothing thrills him more than collaborating with writers and composers to create new roles in fresh-off-the-press plays and musicals.

"I have played many deliciously colorful characters," he adds in an accent which still has the sing-song Bombay touch. "I have been The Sultan of Nubai, the world's rich-



'It is an earnest musical'

LEE WEKLER

est man, in Niko Tsakalakos and Janet Allard's *Pool Boy*, at Barrington Stage; Hussein al-Mansour, the beleaguered middle-management terrorist in Benjamin Scheuer and Zoe Samuels' *Jihad! The Musical* on London's West End; and now Raj Dhawan."

Some of the new plays he has premiered recently include: The American premiere of the English translation of Evelyne de la Chenelière's *Bashir Lazhar*, a haunting story of an Algerian immigrant to Quebec, at Barrington Stage and *Fear Up: Stories from Baghdad and Guantanamo* at the NY Fringe.

Asked about his extraordinary ability to move between these characters and sustain their uniqueness, Wadia explained to a Michigan journal that his training as an actor allows him to be totally in the character, to see, hear and feel every detail of the scene with extreme accuracy. Only then can his audience fully participate in the emotional reality, he added.

Wadia says he has never known life without music, drama, and art while growing up in Bombay. His mother Coomi, conductor of the globetrotting Paranjoti Chorus, was prepping and conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony up until nine days before he was born, he says. His father Nariman is "a maverick: Jewelry designer, elec-

tronic engineer, composer... does pretty much whatever he sets his mind to."

Wadia came to the United States to study piano at the Peabody Conservatory at the Johns Hopkins University, got his Masters there nearly two decades ago. He had acted in couple of plays in Mumbai, but he was not sure he should go into acting.

After "the briefest of careers" as a classical pianist he began to pursue opera and theater at the University of Tennessee, where he got a second Masters.

"I always want to try different things including knitting and gardening but acting seems to have a good hold on me," adding that he spent about two years with master-teacher Maggie Flanigan at her studio in New York and prepared for an acting career.

He says he is having "a blast of a time" in *Bunty Berman Presents...* "It is an earnest musical," he explains. "It has a heart and soul. And I have an opportunity to be with some terrific artists."

What is it he tells himself from time to time?

"I would never want to be funny for funny sake," he muses, "and I will guard myself against being a ham. These things keep me going as an artist."

— Arthur J Pais



Paul Bogaev (*Les Miserables*, *Bombay Dreams*, *Chicago*) using

one song from Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* entirely, with the tea-boy singing it in Hindi.

Din, who has also produced the show with Elliott's *The New Group*, had not planned to play the title character. But two weeks before the show was to open Erick Avari injured himself on the sets and dropped out.

Seven shows were cancelled till Din, (who has acted in the British film *Sammy*

and *Rosie Get Laid* starring Shashi Kapoor) was ready to step into the role meant for Avari.

'You couldn't have written this if you had tried,' Din told *The New York Times*. 'I trained as an actor but I haven't been on

the stage in 20 years. Everyone has been incredibly patient with me, after being the writer behind the desk. Everyone else has had six weeks of rehearsal but I started rehearsing last Thursday.'

Director Elliott, who first collaborated

Bollywood, meet (off-) Broadway

with Din some 15 years ago, said he had tried many times to get Din on stage. 'That it's happening at this moment, in the first musical he's written, is thrilling to me,' he added. 'I truly think he's written himself the perfect part.'

So eight times a week, Din looks at the audience from the stage, feeling, first hand, their reaction. "I have written a piece that is going to be readily accessible to all and not rely on the knowledge of Indian cinema," he says, "and which will open up that world easily to a newcomer's eyes. And that includes second generation Asian Americans. Hooray for Bombay." ■