

An Outsider in South Africa (Wisconsin, Too)



The New York Times
May 4, 2008

By JOE RHODES

LOS ANGELES

Two summers ago, when writers Moses Port and David Guarascio were pitching their unorthodox and potentially controversial premise for the CW Network television series “Aliens in America” – a comedy built around a Pakistani Muslim exchange student who moves in with a somewhat reluctant family in small-town Wisconsin– they were relieved to discover that studio and network executives were surprisingly enthusiastic about the idea.

“They were game for it,” Mr. Port said, asked if their had been any doubts about airing a show that finds much of its humor in the assumptions and suspicions that

some Americans have about Islam. “I think everyone realizes that there’s a diminishing audience in television and they are willing to take some chances to try and rectify that. They realize we need to be taking some big swings.”

The difficulty, it turned out, was not the premise – the idea that the Pakistani exchange student, Raja Musharaff, and the awkward Wisconsin teenager who would become his best friend, Justin Tolchuk, often felt equally out of place in the clique-driven and frequently-unjust society that is an American high school – but finding an actor who could play the pivotal role of Raja.

“There was a danger,” Mr. Port said, “of the character being a caricature.”

After extensive casting searches in Los Angeles, New York and Toronto, producers were beginning to wonder if they would ever find a young actor who could pull off the precarious balance of comedy and believability that the part demanded, not to mention the extra scrutiny that would surely come with portraying a Muslim character on an American sitcom. They’d just about given up.

Then a London casting agent e-mailed them a low-resolution audition video of Adhir Kalyan, a South African actor of Indian descent, then 22 years old and with small credits in a couple of British television productions, including “MI5.”

“There was something about him,” Mr. Guarascio said. “He seemed

extremely wise beyond his years which is such a key component of the character.

“And he imbued the material with a sweetness that really elevated the material,” Mr. Port said. “There was kind of soulfulness that we hadn’t seen with anyone else.”

Although the ratings haven’t reflected it and there’s a real danger that the series won’t be renewed for a second year, “Aliens in America” has been one of the most lauded new shows of the strike-shortened 2007-08 television season, high on every “Shows You Should Be Watching” critics list, smarter and more subtle than it’s fish-out-of-water sitcom construct might indicate. And Mr. Kalyan’s portrayal of Raja as a sometimes naive, occasionally horrified, outsider in the heart of America has drawn particular praise, not just from critics but from American Muslim advocacy groups who had expressed initial concerns that the character could easily descend into stereotype.

“I understood that I had a responsibility not just to the character, but to the Muslim community,” Mr. Kalyan, said during a recent interview at a Los Angeles restaurant. “It was important to understand the core things in his life and to portray him as a complete person, not a stereotype and also not as an absolute saint.”

He succeeded so completely that Mr. Kalyan still encounters casting directors who are surprised to learn that he is not a Muslim and does not speak with a Pakistani accent. It’s an

assumption he has learned to turn to his advantage.

“Once they realize that I’m actually a South African with a predominantly British accent,” he said, “I think it makes them more intrigued to see what else I can do.”

Mr. Kalyan grew up in Durban, the academically-gifted son of a successful fifth-generation Indian family, his mother a psychologist and opposition member of the South African Parliament, his father an executive at a resin manufacturing company. He studied psychology and international politics but never really had any doubt that acting was the career he would choose. There were auditions at acting schools in London, mentorships with theater programs in South Africa and, finally, when he was 20 years old, the decision to move to England.

“If I hadn’t left South Africa, I felt I was at risk of being pigeonholed,” he says. “I looked around and saw actor who, 10 to 15 years into their careers, were still playing stereotypical Afrikaans characters, stereotyped Indian characters. That was not something that I wanted for myself. I had higher expectations than that.”

He didn’t get his first acting job in England, the small part in “MI5” until he’d been there more than a year. There was another small part in an Irish soap opera, but not much else. His visa was running out and his return to South Africa seemed inevitable. Then, out of nowhere, came the notice of the

audition for the “Aliens in America” pilot.

“My agent calls and says, ‘How would you like to work in America for a few years?’ And I said, ‘Why are you asking me such ridiculous questions?’”

But Mr. Kalyan says he understood Raja immediately, the notion of what it feels like to be an outsider, to have assumptions made about your character, your intentions, your way of life, based on the way you look and sound.

“Growing up in this post-apartheid era, the first generation of teens in South Africa living in this new democracy, I often found myself feeling different,” he said. “I was often the only person of color in an otherwise all-white school. And within the Indian community, because of my training with an English acting teacher, my accent was very different. And to an extent, so were my aspirations. I’d tell people I wanted to be an actor and they would say, ‘yes, yes, that’s very nice. But what do you want to DO?’”

“And also by the time I auditioned for “Aliens in America” the July 7 bombing had happened in London. So I’d had those experiences where I would get onto the tube and people would get off. So there was a lot about Raja that I understood.”

Whether or not “Aliens in America” is picked up for another season, the show has already paid off for Mr. Kalyan. He’s already finished a part in a Kevin James feature film and is currently filming “Fired Up,” a

film comedy in which he plays a gay cheerleader, a character about as far removed from Raja as he can imagine.

“I think the chances of avoiding typecasting here are greater, just because there is such an abundance of opportunity,” he said of his life in Los Angeles. “To be honest, I thought it would be a greater problem than it’s been. Most of the time when I go in for roles here, it’s not because the character is written as an Indian role. I’m not auditioning to play convenience store clerks. I don’t see any benefit in that. It’s not what I came here to do.”

--30--

Joe Rhodes is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.

©2008 joebo productions.