

Seattle Welcomes Indian Comedian, Vijai Nathan, at Second Annual ISAFF Launch Party

By Sophia Purekal

Giggles Comedy Club, Jet City Improv, and Comedy Underground: Seattle's three top comedy clubs. Scattered throughout the city, each with its own flare, these institutions are devoted to making people laugh. They are homes to a decidedly different type of art than, say, the Seattle Art Museum. Ironically, however, SAM is the venue chosen to introduce a new kind of pepper into Seattle's laugh. On Saturday, August 27th, SAM will host the launch party to Seattle Second Independent South Asian Film Festival. Headlining that event will be pioneering Indian comedian, Vijai Nathan.

Vijai Nathan is doing something very few South Asians have ever done before. She is the first Indian comedian that most of her audience members have ever seen or even heard of. I think most would wonder how she got to doing it, in the first place. Was it something she just always felt like she had to do, make people laugh? Not exactly, though Nathan's love of performing does have a long history. From before she was old enough to go to school, one of her favorite past times was watching old comedies, like *I Love Lucy*, and then performing out scenes with her grandmother. Taking this "lets put on a show" love out of home didn't always work out as hoped, though. Nathan recalls, "I would try out for a play at school and always get a bad part. Like, I'd want to be the tooth-fairy, and get the part of tooth decay." She knows that this was partly due to her coming from a group with a marginal identity. She just wasn't the one they'd normally have in mind.

Nathan went on to study English Literature at McGill University, letting her parents believe that that meant "pre-law." She then ventured into journalism, eventually landing an editorship at the *Baltimore Sun*. After two years there, she couldn't deny that she hated it. She was tired of sitting at a desk and editing stories about the exciting things that other people were doing. Around about this time Nathan also took a workshop class, on a whim, in stand-up comedy. The class brought her back in touch with her childhood passion for performance, and "I realized that, in stand-up comedy, I was the writer, director and performer- I could pick myself for any part and I didn't need anyone's permission to be on stage." Six months after the class, Nathan quit her job to build her, now thriving, career as a stand-up comic.

The journey started in 1997. It brings Nathan to Seattle in 2005. In between then and now has been an exploration of the world of stand-up comedy and of South Asian and other communities all over the United States. What is particularly interesting is the art of bringing out the right material for her varied audiences. When she started performing at comedy clubs in New York City, Nathan's audiences were almost invariably mainstream, white Americans. Her first

goal was "...to show that Indians are Americans, and I thought the way to do that would be by *not* talking about being Indian," Nathan says. So she told jokes about sex and dating, which- as a repressed, Hindu girl with conservative parents- she had absolutely no experience in. Her act definitely got laughs, but she wasn't satisfied because it wasn't true to her real experience and she felt inauthentic.

Round about 2001/2002, Nathan started to write comedy that was more personal: about her own experiences, her childhood, her family. And she started to reach out to the Indian community to let them know she was there. She called cultural groups, introducing herself as a stand-up comedian who was available to perform at functions. The process presented some challenges. Unlike film, music, literature, or other arts in which South Asians are starting to distinguish themselves in America, stand-up comedy is probably one that you wouldn't find them doing on the subcontinent, either. "They didn't automatically recognize this as an art that could include them," Nathan recalls. She, herself, remembers growing up a fan of Eddie Murphy, Billy Crystal, Ray Romano, and Chris Rock. She felt that appreciation for that kind of comic art was something she needed to cultivate amongst South Asians. She's made many breakthroughs on that front, though, and now cannot keep up with all the requests for her to perform.

Nathan has definitely come a long way and accomplished much. She is constantly working on new projects, even writing a screenplay currently, and her ideas are boundless. She performs material that has a little something for everyone. She still performs mainstream comedy, but can now also address her South Asian experience in a way in which anyone can see the humor, "because," she says, "not everyone has Indian parents, but everyone has parents." Comedy is a unique way of reflecting on the intricacies of our hyphenated culture. Acknowledging the culture gap between immigrant parent and American-born child, Nathan tells jokes about herself and her parents, but she can also give profound recognition to her parents, showing the depth of their own struggles and sacrifices. She will talk funny about the awkwardness and sometimes downright unhappiness of a South Asian girl trying to "fit in" in America, and but won't let you leave without also realizing that she would not give up her quirky Indian-American life for anything else in the world.

Vijai Nathan will perform at the launch party for Seattle's Second Independent South Asian Film Festival, August 27th at the Seattle Art Museum. For more information, please visit www.tasveer.org

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