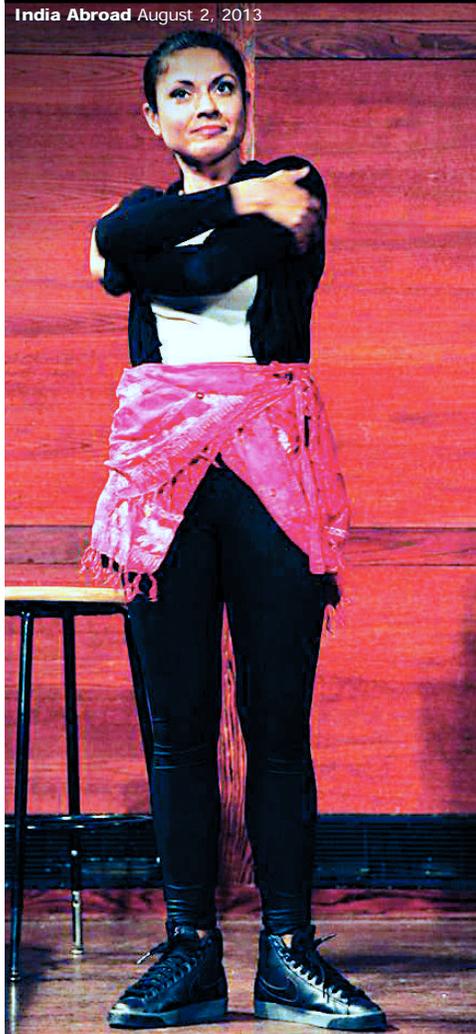
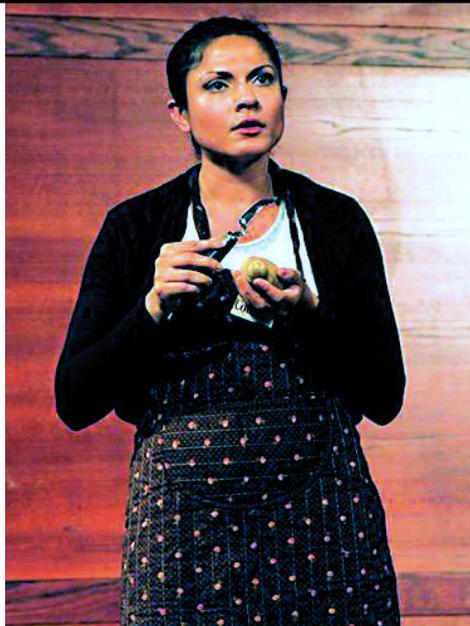




India Abroad August 2, 2013



In the play Qurrat Kadwani mimics voices and facial expressions and idiosyncratic mannerisms of 13 people from her life, including herself.



They Call Her



It was not cushy being the only Indian kid in the neighborhood in the 80s and 90s.

Qurrat Kadwani, the force behind the solo show *They Call me Q*, swaps tales from the battlefield with **Chaya Babu**

Qurrat Kadwani thinks of herself as a 'lovable badass.' Those are the words she used. I agreed that the characterization was pretty much on point. I guessed that the 'lovable' part relates to her warmth, sincerity, and obvious wit. Easy.

'Badass,' on the other hand, rarely conjures the image of an Indian girl. But it's true. And it's not just that she's sassy in her speech and demeanor — this girl's got tales from the battlefield.

"We'd hang out in these, like, courtyards and sometimes I'd cut class," said Q, short for Qurrat, last name Kadwani. "So then my mother would get these slips that were like, 'She missed class on this day,' so then she took away my mailbox key so that I couldn't find them before her and throw them away. Since the age of 12, I haven't had a mail key!"

Don't be fooled by this though. Q wasn't doing drugs in these courtyards and flunking out of middle school. It's, of course, more nuanced than that. She still got straight As, did the 'good Indian girl' thing when it came to her studies, and gained admittance to the uber-selective Bronx High School of Science, where she took enough advanced placement classes to graduate college in three years.

She also got into the prestigious Manhattan Arts and Music School, LaGuardia, for her singing talent, but her dad said she could sing at Bronx Science if she pleased. Choosing to do the theater thing for a living was a source of strife at home for a while, but now she's doing it and doing it well. Still, there's no denying that she grew a little rough around the edges over the years.

It was not the cushiest of upbringings as the only Indian kid in her neck of the Bronx in the 80s and 90s.

"Look, there were girls getting pregnant, having abortions," she said. "It was crazy, I'm not gonna lie. This was, like, seventh grade. Boyfriends. We were 12; they were, like, 17. And I would see this, and I was like, 'Woah man.'"

Talk about the generation gap. And the culture gap. All that stuff that comes to mind when we think of Indian immigrants and their children. Q's parents — her father, who worked at law firm, and her mother, a teacher — came to the US from Mumbai when she was 3 and her brother, Omaid, was 12.

The Kadwanis did well for themselves, and where they lived wasn't really the 'hood,' the way it sounds. But the mix of factors that made become Q the street-smart, irreverent but poised young woman who can get on stage and talk about her personal experiences of being bullied, getting into fights, learning about suicide, and resisting her mother's attempts to teach her to cook were certainly not easy to navigate.

All this is what she hands over willingly to strangers in *They Call Me Q*, her semi-autobiographical solo play, which won awards for Best Actress at the Variations Theatre Group Harvest Festival and for Best Play at the Maui Fringe Festival.

The play is hilarious because Q is naturally funny. She



M3

mimics voices and facial expressions and idiosyncratic mannerisms of 13 people from her life, including herself.

She puts on big — and I mean BIG — gold hoop earrings when she's impersonating her wannabe-Latina alter ego from her adolescence, which we all connect to the stereotypical New York Spanish girl image we have in our collective imagination.

Yet the hour-long performance is also surprisingly earnest. Not just in the moment when she turns her back to the audience to take a phone call in which she hears the news that her friend, at 16 years old, has hung herself, but in the meandering exploration of figuring out the limitations of freedoms of being Indian and female in America.

“I wanted to show various Indian women with different personalities, different voices,” she explained, “and how



I wanted to show various Indian women with different personalities, different voices, says Qurrat Kadwani.



They Call Her Q

that helped me to see that you don't have to put yourself in this box. You don't have to say, 'I'm this' or 'I'm that.' You can just be who you are.”

What's interesting is that these characters, specifically Rayya and Soraya, who appear at the end of the story on Q's symbolic 'return home' trip, are *in* India. They are not the quintessential liberated women of the New World giving Q an ideal to which she ought to aspire. Nor are they backward barefoot wives slaving over a stove in their in-laws' kitchens in the conservative land of her ancestors.

Like everything else in the play, it's more complicated than that. They round out her slow, stumbling realization that there is no right way to be the right kind of Indian woman.

That's the best part of seeing the aunts and uncles in the audience laughing along with Q's iteration of the characters who influenced her identity struggle in both positive and negative ways.

While some Indians of an older generation may have their own ideas about what it means that she truly was, at one point, the rebellious, loud-mouthed teenaged Q with a fake Puerto Rican-tinged accent and a punch that rivaled her attitude, this is all a part of her journey to define herself. And it's enthralling to watch.

Over Thai food in Midtown, with her in a T-shirt with an

owl on it, she chuckled as she recalled the 'do it yourself-don't do it yourself' dye that turned her hair a brassy orangey-blond — you know, that color that makes brown girls look monochromatic.

“They were mad at me all the time. *All The Time*,” she said of her parents. “But as a kid I didn't think I could tell them all these things. There was so much. I mean it was so crazy the way that the girls I was around were growing up really fast. It was all over the place, the sex thing, the boyfriends. Constantly.”

It wasn't just her attempts to fit in with these girls, at least on the surface, that created tension, but also the fact that she ended up fighting with them — repeatedly.

The play depicts a scene where the older sister of a classmate shows up at Q's apartment with her clique and punches Q cold in the doorway, and another has Q getting slapped by a teacher, who pronounces her name 'Qatar' and takes sides with the friend-turned-enemy, a girl who start-

years, when Q's parents made her switch schools between seventh and eighth grade because of the trouble she kept finding herself in.

High school, Gaspar said, was when Q finally found some peace and happiness for the first time and started to learn self-acceptance, partly through Beenie, whose funeral provides a poignant scene in the play.

“I saw the show and I literally had tears in my eyes,” said her mother Fareeda Kadwani, of her pride over how accurately this phase of their lives, and she herself, were portrayed.

“We didn't realize that she was preserving it in her mind and that it would come out like this after all these years. At the time, though, we didn't know how it was for her.”

“I think sometimes kids hide these things from parents. Especially because we are from another country. Now we realize how difficult things are for children, but back then, no,” Fareeda said.

“We were new immigrants and we had a typical Indian mindset, like just, ‘Study hard; stay away from bad kids; don't bring us any problems.’”

Fareeda is articulate and thoughtful about the ups and downs of her daughter's past and the trauma of it. She expresses awe for Q's ability to connect to people of all backgrounds and walks of life through a personal story of peer pressure, a desire to belong, and the balancing act of adhering to different cultural norms.

But Q herself continues to see her parents as somewhat quiet and traditional, simply enjoying the show for entertainment, and they are yet to discuss its themes together.

With this familial disconnect, one that many children of immigrants face, Q basically forged a path on her own. It was full of detours, roadblocks, and setbacks as mentioned, but a number of characters in the play were influential in moving her search for herself forward.

Beenie, her vivacious friend who brings Q to a New York City night club the night before taking her own life; Alicia, a SUNY Genesee classmate who introduces Q to passionate, eloquent expression of race and ethnicity politics; Lina, a free-spirited dancer who rambles about the endless possibilities of the world — through them, Q takes in her wealth of options of who and how to be.

Near the end, Rayya, a friend from Q's childhood who lives in Mumbai, tells Q:

‘I wish I was young again and dreaming with you. Dreaming of going to China or Japan or Egypt. And to work — to be a doctor or an actor or a boring secretary in an office — anything but staring out the window, gossiping with aunts. I don't dream about doing anything now because I know I won't be able to.’

“What's the point of dreaming if you know you won't have the chance to make it come true? Oh oh oh! Don't feel bad for me, okay? I've become very used to having people take care of me actually! I like it! My life is so easy, *Mashallah*. But you like to be independent. It's difficult, no? It's a different life altogether, *yaar*.”

Rayya represents a culmination of sorts. She is 25 and stays with her family in *Bandra*; she says that fathers of potential matches come by every day. Her monologue reflects her reality in modern, upper-class, urban India, and yet she still reminds Q of the restrictions she herself might have lived with if her parents never migrated across the world.

“We're always talking about that, Indian people, the immigrant experience, we always have that in our consciousness,” Q said. “But for us, our generation, we have to work to truly get this idea. And I've always thought, like, how different my life would have been if I had stayed there. I don't know, I can't imagine. Coming to this country truly has, indeed, opened up so many doors that...” she trailed off, thinking. “You know, you can really do anything here.”

So she is. And as she takes her solo show from city to city, she's bringing her feisty, bling-ed out, 14-year-old self with her. And all the others. ■

ed a brawl over Q's academic excellence.

“Girls would just decide that they wanted to mess with you one day,” she said. “Somebody who was your friend yesterday might not be today. It was like jail! Junior high school is the worst ever.”

Q was trying desperately to stray from what she felt was her destiny as an Indian girl: Going straight home to do homework, learning how to make *Dal* and *Shammi Kebab*, and definitely not going out and being on the street.

Her mother, a central figure in the production, is enacted numerous times, warmly telling little Q what kind of girl will get a good husband. But the more effort Q put into being the opposite of this as her way of pushing back on such notions of gender roles, the more she got bullied on the playground for being something she's not.

She was treading a fine line.

“Finding your way and being in the Bronx was hard; it was definitely very culturally mixed but a lot of people did just stick with their own kind,” said Claudia Gaspar, who was on Q's high school speech team and who co-directed the play with Omaid.

“Even then, Q had friends in all different groups, probably because of the environment she grew up in, having to figure it out as the Indian girl where no one was like her.”

They met shortly after the particularly rocky puberty