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Actress Qurrat Ann Kadwani performs one-woman show 'They Call Me 'Q!' at DePaul

by Clare Edlund | on February 24, 2014 | in [Arts/Life](#) | [Leave a comment](#)



The stage was dimly lit. On it, a table decked out with a navy New York Yankees cap sat, along with a foot-long trophy and a powder pink tapestry embroidered with parades of white elephants and lucky eyes. The full house of audience members awaited for the arrival of the award-winning actress – the Indian immigrant raised in “Da Broncs,” who popped out in a white tank top, Nike high-tops, and sporting a rose tattoo on her right shoulder blade.

Her dark hair was slicked back in a long ponytail. Her square jaw, fierce eyebrows and enticing smile grabbed the audience. And then her powerful voice took the audience aback, as she began her story as an infant held in her mother’s arms, dubbed “a name so difficult that the other Indian mothers would never name their children”: Qurrat Ann Kadwani.

Kadwani shared her self-written solo story, “They Call Me Q!” at DePaul Feb. 19.

In this true story, starring herself as “Q,” Kadwani portrayed 13 different characters (including her parents, friends, teachers and bullies), guiding the audience through the trials and tribulations of an immigrant.

“They Call Me Q!” is a comedy that manages to “voice the universal struggles for identity and self-understanding experienced by immigrants of all nationalities.”

The event, organized and hosted by the DePaul Center for Intercultural Communication, also held a diversity workshop earlier that morning. At the workshop, Kadwani personally spoke with multiracial students about self-identity. She discussed ideas about individualism vs. institutionalism.

This marked the 50th performance of “They Call Me Q!” Along with this, Kadwani has shared her piece with the United Nations. In March, she is headed to off-Broadway at St. Luke’s Theatre in New York to perform twice a week.

Her awe-inspiring tale began when Kadwani, “Q,” emigrated from India to New York at a young age. Throughout her life, she felt torn between her family and New York, both cultures conflicting. Her mother always wanted Q to be a top-notch student in her suburban class. Q imitated her mother in a flawless Indian accent:

“Ninety-eight? What happened to the other two points, Qurrat? A man wants to marry a woman who is smart.”

Q was envied by her peers at school for her intelligence and also questioned about her Indian identity – one of her ex-friends sought out Q after she (who helped teachers grade papers) refused to give her friend a perfect score on a test. Q, fervently hiding from the girl, bumped heads with her after school one day.

“Fight-Fight. Fight-Fight. Fight-Fight,” Q huffed in a rhythm resembling a panicky heartbeat.

Q punched the girl’s face in self-defense. Afterward, a teacher, Ms. Farley (whom Kadwani impersonated by gliding on mismatched lipstick and a pussface), pummeled Q.

Later on, Q was ambushed at her own front door with a group of girls.

“My sister wants to be a lawyer – why you wanna get in da way of that?”

And she sucker-punched Q, leaving a fruitful mark on her lip. From then on, Q had no choice but to toughen up.

Kadwani did not have it easy growing-up. Her parents held high-standards for her, while the kids at school were ruthless. Q did not feel a sense of self – in junior high, she went through great lengths to fit in. “I wanted their curly hair and nose rings ...

I wanted a family who would teach me how to swim and drink beer ... so I cut my hair, permed it and dyed it,” a young Q said, putting on 10K fist-sized hooped earrings.

“You look like a boy!” cried Kadwani’s impersonation of her mother.

“I went through that Latina phase for about a year,” Kadwani told the audience in her talkback Q&A that immediately followed the performance.

Though it was no cakewalk, Q decided to “be herself” again, attempting to embrace both Indian and American cultures.

Through time, she lost a dear friend from the debate team in high school, who abruptly committed suicide. She had the American college experience while struggling to learn Indian recipes away from home. She eventually returned to India, after her yogi friend inspired her.

“It’s not about your friends or parents ... it’s about you – always has been. It’s about love.” The yogi said, passing Q an imaginary joint.

After visiting India, Kadwani was finally at peace with herself. She returned to New York with a smile on her face and a new outlook.

“I wanted to mold myself and remold myself like the Play-Doh I played with as a child,” Q said.

What made this performance subsequently genuine was Kadwani’s reality. Her impersonations were meant to humor the audience, but the events were all true.

“(They Call Me Q!) was beautiful to see how somebody’s culture can present a challenge as trying to live an American lifestyle,” Galen Cook, DePaul student, said. She had attended the event for her multi-culturalism in the U.S. class.

Kadwani’s piece intrigues the audience to look within people as individuals, rather than what society labels.

“The fact that your parents took a risk and moved to New York to allow you to be an individual was random – the element of chance, it’s complex, yet random,” one audience member spoke out at the Q&A.

“They Call Me Q!” took Kadwani about four years to write. When she paid a teacher to read her script and give her constructive criticism, the teacher told Kadwani “it was horrible” and “it could never amount to anything.”

Kadwani, crushed by the assessment, was motivated by her parents to continue writing. In the end, Kadwani became so successful that she received “Best Actress Award” at The Harvard Festival in 2012 and “The Best Play Award” at the Maui Fringe Festival in 2013.

“Now, that same teacher wants my secrets, and she will never get a response,” Kadwani said.

Kadwani encouraged the audience to keep working on something that is true to them, no matter what someone says.

“To be an immigrant is to dream,” Kadwani said.

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