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They-See-(desi)-Mac-N-Cheese

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Bard

They-See-(desi)-Mac-n-Cheese

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of The Arts
of Bard College

By

Emily Claypoole

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2017

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To my family:

Thank you for all of your love, support and encouragement over the last four years. Thank you for being there for me through this project and so much more.

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INTRODUCTION

The lights came up on February 23rd at 7:30pm. I waited alone in the dressing room listening to the raucous cries of the cast of “YOU’RE THE ONE THAT I WANT” through the speakers overhead. Satwik sat across the hall, alone as well, waiting. Minutes later, we met in the green room to sing scales, check in with our saxophonist, and have a group hug before we heard an announcement through the same speakers that held the voices of our classmates.

“Emily and Satwik to the stage, please. Places: Emily and Satwik.”

I puzzled over why the stage manager didn’t say the name of our piece. She used the name of everyone else’s when calling them to places. I shrugged it off in an elated miniature scream that barely escaped my lips as I headed up the stairs to the stage left wing. I watched Kirsten and Anna finish their piece to much applause. After three and a half years of essays, acting classes, student theater, in class performances, and months of drafts written and torn up again and again with Satwik by my side, it was finally time. There is nothing that has terrified me more in my life than the moment that the lights went down after our set up was complete. In the blackout, I was supposed to walk on stage and look into the audience. All I had to do was say “Hi”, but despite the ease that comes with giving a simple greeting, I was shaking nonetheless. Once I conquered that moment, which seemed to last for an eternity and a half, I experienced an absolutely unforgettable 25 minutes. Those 25 minutes were a culmination of all of our hard work. Of all the time I spent slaving over moderation and in class presentations and math classes I didn’t want to take. But most of all, those 25 minutes were the culmination of time spent with someone I love, making theater that is important to share.

They-see-(desi)-mac-n-cheese is a conversation. We used this conversation to find our own understanding of one another while giving the audience a glimpse into a relationship complicated by factors that pervade our cultural consciousness every day. A brown man and a white woman joined together on stage to talk about race, class, privilege, music, religion, and love in front of a room full of people well aware of the political and social climate of 2017. A climate that emphasises cultural, racial, and class divides while our own community works hard to strike back against these unfortunate norms. Despite all of these implications, however, we let the audience contextualize the performance in any way that they liked while we focused on each other. Our project wasn't meant to be, nor do I think it was, a grand political gesture. It was not meant to shine a light on the relationships between all white and brown people, people from different cultures, different religions, or different levels of privilege in America or all over the world, because to generalize those relationships would make us as bad as the people who promote the hatred and divides between these groups that we are all too familiar with already. This piece was meant to look at the relationship between Satwik and Emily and show how all of these outside factors, prejudices, and preconceptions have made us who we are to one another over the last four years.

“YOU WONDER HOW THESE THINGS BEGIN...”: Making the Intangible

Although we are glad it turned out that way, this wasn't always our objective. This conversation took many forms before it became what we performed on that night in February. I can honestly say that at the beginning of this process we were absolutely lost. I didn't know what either of us had in mind when we were asked “what are you setting out to do?”. Even in our proposal we had a very general idea of what we were interested in exploring. Satwik and I

stumbled around in the dark for quite a while before arriving at the seeds that planted the final idea in our heads. So, this is how it all began. This is how it evolved from a clumsy proposal to a fully formed piece of theater.

During the spring of our junior year, Satwik and I met three times to discuss, write, and polish our Senior Project Proposal. However, these meetings didn't go as we had planned. Both of us had tons of ideas and sifting through them, as we would find out, would take months. On March 28th, 2016, I emailed my final proposal to members of the department that would review it and come back with notes, questions, and a decision on whether the project was fit to begin. Because of its vagueness, we were told by these members, understandably, that it needed to be refined. At the time I was perplexed. We had so many ideas. How could it be vague? Of course, when I read the proposal now, I see exactly what they meant. We had so many far-reaching, nonspecific, and grandiose ideas that lived more in our heads than they did on paper. To distill this proposal down to a few sentences, I will quote myself on that day in March: "We are going to explore the triumphs of melodrama... while creating a contrast to the form with a personal, emotional, and oftentimes hard to look at inner life... How can an audience feel so welcome by songs and glitter while the characters are truly suffering? What can happen on stage that pushes it from "touching" to terrifying?"

This concept is one that I had been thinking about for a while. I have always been not only interested, but totally immersed in musical theater. I have always loved it. Satwik and I met doing a musical, so why not? But then the question became not "why not", but "why"? Why is now the time to make this piece of work? So we went back to the drawing board with the idea that we would whittle it down, make it more specific, and find ways to think about Satwik's

musical background outside of American musical theater. This began with a singular mention of bollywood in my proposal and although our final performance didn't include it in any way (other than some of our transition music), this was an important jumping off point. We left for the summer after tossing around a lot more ideas, looking at large concepts, and trying to find ways to focus our thinking on something more original, personal, and doable than what we set out in our proposal.

This was difficult because we spent most of our summer on opposite sides of the world. The time difference made it difficult and oftentimes painful to skype or chat over text because almost always, when he was asleep I was wide awake and vice versa. This meant that both of us spent two long months in completely different worlds, coming up with different ideas, and forgetting to consider that mind reading doesn't exist, nor would it work thousands of miles away if it did. The few times we did get to talk for an extended amount of time, we spent all of that time spewing ideas at each other without truly listening and trying to find a way to merge them. Satwik talked a lot about home and Indian culture and the differences that he felt between living there and going to school here. He also talked about how good it felt to be home. I spent the summer in an acting program in New York. I lived in Jersey with my boyfriend and my mom. All I really did aside from my wonderful program at AADA was cook dinner and watch a lot of TV. All around it was a good summer, but this environment created more ideas than I would have liked simply from the television I was watching. There were two things that I watched that completely formed my ideas going into the fall semester: one was a crappy Lifetime drama called "UnReal" and the other was a comedy special called "Make Happy" written and performed by a wonderful comedian named Bo Burnham. These influences brought

me to a stage where I was thinking about performativity over social media, on television, and through technology in general. This deepened the divide between mine and Satwik's thinking even further than the thousands of miles that already divided us. We were going in different directions and I think that is where the trouble began in our development of the show come September.

When September finally came, Satwik and I were in the same place at the same time for the first time in two months, but our minds were still in different places. So, we were left to pick up the pieces of grandiose, broken concepts with influences all over the map. We met for the first time that semester on September 5th. We discussed our ideas and attempted to take what we could from each and merge it into something cohesive. We began by discussing the use of the casting process in order to create material. We wanted to bring people in and interview them about the concepts that the piece would be about (of course, we still were not decided on this at all) and then call them back to play games, respond to prompts, and sing for us. The concepts that we started to hone in on for this proposed process were social media, daily performativity, real life experience through media and theater, emotion and melodrama, hyper theatricality, and home/displacement. Needless to say, we were still swimming in ideas. By the end of the meeting though, we did agree that we wanted to juxtapose hyper theatricality in a traditional performance/theater setting with the way we perform for each other over social media every day. We then decided that we wanted a cast of 6, a bare stage with only a few boxes, and handheld mics a la *Spring Awakening*. We also wanted two main characters out of this ensemble that would loosely represent me and Satwik. We brainstormed audition questions and prompts and were both excited and overwhelmed by the prospect of creating something in a collaborative

environment. This beginning concept was rich in technical dreams projections, live streaming skype, video cues, live musicians, and elaborate light cues, while the concept wasn't rich in plot, structure, or really anything at all. We were staring into an elaborately decorated void, substituting substance and structure for all of the thrills and frills we thought a senior project in theater was supposed to have.

On September 21st we met with our advisor to discuss our new plans. When we came out of that room after that more or less a half an hour meeting, our concept was totally different. We went from having actors and screens and audition prompts to having essentially nothing. Just me and Satwik asking ourselves a simple question: What is home? This 180 degree turn came from a simple question from Gideon. He stopped us mid ramblings and said "What do you want out of this project?" At that point I didn't know. I knew that I am not a theater maker. I knew that when I graduate I will pursue a career in acting. I knew that this project wasn't important for me yet. After considering this question I was continually told that this was the time to make something uniquely ours in a way that was uniquely ours. When Gideon asked what we wanted our practical roles to be in the project, I remember saying that I would be co-creating with Satwik, but immediately making an offhand comment about wishing I could act in it. Gideon jumped on the chance to ask me why not. Why not create something that I could do what I love in? Why even bother with a cast? And why bother complicating something so simple? Satwik and I are actors more than anything else and it amazed me that this didn't occur to us before. So, we changed everything. The piece would be just the two of us and we would look at the concept buried deep in the messes of notes and conversations that we had been having all along: what is home? So, that's where it all truly started. We finally decided what it was going to be: a "25

minute self created duo performance about ‘what is home’... a conversation, some sort of back and forth.” But we were far from being anywhere close to done.

From there, we had to find an answer to this question. Not only that, but we had to find some common ground, which was going to be difficult. It was clear that there was a struggle for power at the beginning of the process and a large part of making something so personal with someone so close to you is to agree to disagree. I’ll admit that we both had issues doing that and we did work through them as the process went on, but that was definitely something that prevented us from really going for it in some of the early drafts of our script. However, from this point, we still had a long way to go before we even began the script. We started by writing prompts and questions and doing free-writes on various things that related to our central question: What is home? We looked to songs that made us feel at home, memories and nostalgia of our childhoods, the types of homes that aren’t necessarily traditional, what gets in the way of home, and how it feels to be away from home, in addition to a lot more. We compared musical styles and our music training from a young age. It seemed from the beginning that music was the thing that connected us the most to one another and to our own, individual definitions of home. This was another jumping off point that was crucial for us, although the format of the piece was still very much up in the air. We still wanted to use projections, maybe even have a huge vanity on stage, and we still weren’t sure if we were going to act as ourselves, or as characters. On the 28th of September we officially settled on the idea that performance is home for both of us. This helped us come up with a loose structure that fell around 3 songs. Each of us would have a solo and then we would sing something together at the end. We also played with the idea that we were ourselves, preparing for a show and that the whole thing would take place “backstage”.

Another meeting with Gideon got us rethinking once again. The very next day, we met with our advisor who gave us the direction that we clearly needed. The questions he asked always seemed to be right in front of us, but we could just never reach them. What is the conflict? Are we in the room with the audience or in a fictional world? What is the truth, what is performed? Where can we go now that we have explored home and found that in performance? It would take the whole process to answer some of these questions, but we quickly jumped on the opportunity to find out where the piece would take place. We were eager for it to take place in the space, with the audience not only being present, but addressed directly. Once this was decided, we had to flesh out the rest in order to fill the more empty, yet loaded space of performing a piece with the theater itself as our backdrop.

We then wrote monologues about what home is to us, further solidifying the concept that we are both at home in performance. This exercise also led us to discover and solidify the idea that a lot of our love for performance and theater came from specific experiences at a very young age. This is where we started finding specifics. A meeting on October 6th brought us to explore performance videos from our pasts, focus on our musical training and inspirations, and begin comparing those experiences. So we ventured into free writing and making lists about all of these things. We compared them in rehearsal and started to create the show's opening which was based on our respective warm up routines. Satwik taught me, in a rehearsal on the 12th of October, about the "raga" and the tambura as well as the "thala". All of his routine, although more intense than mine and in my training as a child, was actually more similar than expected. Although we hadn't arrived at the opening that we would use for the final performance, this was the beginning of an idea that would stay with us through the whole process. By this time, we knew we wanted

each of us to have songs, we wanted to do a warm up together, and have a duet at some point in the piece. We were making decisions and it felt good.

Even so, we still philandered around a lot of ideas without direction. One of them was the idea of childhood conflicts versus current ones in addition to current musical experiences versus past ones. Once these ideas were implanted in our heads, we had to explore them. Satwik had me listen to some of his favorite carnatic songs and write about how I felt listening to them. I gave him some of my favorite Broadway songs and when we returned to discuss, I found that listening to music so foreign to me actually gave me visible anxiety. I barely felt at home in it at all. I felt almost scared of it. Satwik had no trouble listening to my songs, if anything, he quite enjoyed them while I struggled to find musically familiar patterns in order to feel safe between my headphones. This led us to a discussion of what it's like to be afraid of the unknown and why Satwik is so much more assimilated into American and "western" culture than I am to Indian and "eastern" culture. At this point it was clear to us that Satwik would have to teach me about his music, himself, and his culture. We kept this with us while we considered what I could teach him because it seemed that there was nothing to teach. In one meeting we set this question of me teaching Satwik aside and went back to the differences between our childhood conflicts as opposed to our conflicts now. Shockingly, I had a lot more struggle in my early life and my current life than Satwik has ever had, even being a brown man in America. I talked for an hour about my childhood struggles: my parents divorce, my sister's eating disorder, my father's estrangement from her, my cousin's suicide. Then it was time to talk about now, Satwik didn't even know if he could handle hearing more. He was so shocked by everything. He was shocked that my parents were divorced, maybe even more than he was about anything else. I

trucked on. I told him about my postgrad worries, my grandmother's cancer, my family's continual distance and estrangement, my rape, and god knows what else. We sat in silence for a while. We realized what I had to teach him.

On the Manor lawn on October 19th we met at dusk. We talked about form. Now that we knew that he would teach me about his culture and that I would teach him about my struggle, specifically the concept of divorce, we needed to find an overall theme. We had talked about love a lot and that seemed to make sense, but we also had so many random points of contention that didn't all fall under that umbrella: divorce, training styles, home environment, tattoos. We were almost overwhelmed by the idea that there were things we needed to agree on and spent a while desperately trying to unify ourselves into one direction. In November we finally gave that up. We decided to use all of these points of disagreement in the piece to truly make it a conversation about us. In order to do that we needed to acknowledge our differences in addition to our similarities.

On November 8th, we met and I pushed hard to have the tambura playing for the whole performance. Satwik agreed with me. For most of the process, this was a fixture of our piece. We wanted it to be this omnipresent reminder of home; of how we get familiar with things that are around us all of the time, so familiar that we might stop noticing them until we are reminded that they are there. This covered the question of home in the stylistic realm while we delved deeper into the idea of teaching one another. We wondered: "where is the line between learning about another culture and appropriating it?" This meeting was really when things started to come together for us. We had ideas that we could make happen, things that were concrete and personal and doable. On that day we decided on our opening. We would do our respective scales and then

meet in the center of the stage to have it out. We would tell each other “you’re doing it wrong” and sing over one another until he was singing my scale and I was singing his. Then we would understand, if only for a moment. That is where the conversation would begin and in the final production, although it wasn’t the cold opening of the piece, this section was a true distillation of everything that had happened in our process up to that moment. This revelation was so important to us. A revelation of unity and progress that occurred on the day of the National Presidential Election.

Early the next morning, Donald Trump was elected President.

It felt almost ironic. We were two people from different backgrounds coming together for an artistic purpose. This purpose being to examine what makes us different and how we learn about each other, while the divide in the country at large voted a man who sought to deport thousands and revoke the rights of women into the highest office of this country and the goddamn free world.

This brought a newer lense to the piece, but we were still determined to keep it about us rather than something bigger. This impulse was almost a fault to us, though, because we fought any mention of the government, Trump, the election, or the chaos that is race relations in 2017 when it was simply impossible for us to avoid. So, although some mention did make its way into the piece by the end, no matter how small, we continued to work almost as if the election never happened. From my perspective, this was an exercise in denial. I didn’t want to deal with it, I didn’t want to think that anything had changed, and I certainly didn’t like the idea that me and a very close friend of mine working together was an automatic political statement, no matter the subject matter. So, trucking on with no mention of the election, we began to put together and

rehearse more of the opening sequence. We began to teach each other our warm ups and consider how this might look or sound on stage. On November 13th, Satwik taught me a song called “Alaipayuthey” and the thala. This was quite an experience for me. I had no clue what I was saying, the rhythm and melody didn’t make a lot of sense to me, and doing both the thala and singing the song at the same time seemed impossible. I was totally lost. However, I did try to minimize how much I actually learned through the process so that the teaching during the performance would be as authentic as possible, although I already basically knew what I was doing. In this same rehearsal, we decided what the stage would look like. We would be in the room. The “setting” would be on the stage, but each of us would take one side. We would each have a table dressed with various personal and cultural belongings, with the tambura down center between us. There wasn’t much left to do before we began writing. We sat down in that rehearsal and mapped out the loose structure of the script and the order of the topics that we were going to discuss. Then we wrote.

“REAMS OF WORK”: Making the Intangible, Tangible

Since the writing process began towards the end of the fall semester and we were slated to go up in February, we really had our work cut out for us. After the meeting on the 13th, we worked up a short draft of the opening sequence and part of the conversation that came after it. We presented this to Gideon on the 17th. He essentially told us this: Stop being so polite, make your ideas bigger, acknowledge the election, be insensitive, and tell us why you are doing this. This was a lot to process, but essential for what was to come. Through all of these notes, Satwik and I came to the conclusion that we should solidify our presence in the space as the stage by addressing the audience. This also would help us address the things going on in the world as well

as making a point about how we should treat one another outside of the arguments that we were having with one another in the piece. We worked on this until the end of the semester, trying to cement all of the topics and ideas that we wanted to include in the structure that was coming together around us. We added audience address, we acknowledged our ignorance (mine, mostly), and wrote based on real conversations that we were actually having. But it still wasn't interesting enough. It wasn't theater yet, it was just transcribed notes of conversations between friends. We struggled to find the balance between the conversation and the theatricality, to find a place for the music that wasn't cliched, and to be mean to each other.

Over winter break we worked a lot on the script separately, but this proved to be difficult because we were playing ourselves. When I was writing alone, I could only write myself. I didn't know how to write Satwik because even though I know him well, I'm not him. In addition to that, the point of the piece was that he's teaching me about things that I never knew about him or his culture. I took what I could from my notes, assumed some things, and encouraged him to get on the Google Doc at the same time that I was so we could write in conversation with one another. With the time difference once again, this didn't really happen. So, we worked as best we could and spent the beginning of our time back at school trying to fix the mistakes, make it more cohesive, and create more of a flowing, natural conversation. By the time the first version of the script was finished, it was long and slow and uninteresting. We didn't give the audience enough to make them care and we didn't go far enough to shock them or even make them understand the gravity of our differences.

We went back to the drawing board on the script so many times that we didn't even create some of the final and most important elements (like the opening that actually occurred in

the show) until the week before tech. I never could have realized how much it would take for us to write ourselves. Our lives, our struggles, and our differences were all so personal and we wanted to show them, but Gideon reminded us time and time again that we weren't giving enough. He was right. We weren't. We were scared of letting go.

In the weeks leading up to the show we were still struggling with this and constantly making changes, taking out parts of the conversation that didn't seem relevant anymore, and trying to figure out how to escalate the piece. At one point we thought we were done. After staring at the damn thing and changing it for weeks in a row, we thought we had finally got it where we needed it to be. We showed it to Gideon before tech week and we ended up throwing out a lot. The main problem with the piece, other than it needing more intensity and danger, was that the audience still didn't know who we were to each other. We never spelt it out and never gave any inclination about why our relationship and this exchange was important. So, we decided to make a bold move. We opened the show with a blatant audience address stating our relationship, how we met, what they were about to see, and why it is important because of the way the world is today. We said it in simple words: Tonight is a conversation. We had met when the world was seemingly moving in the right direction: Barack was president. And now we meet under new circumstances: Today he is not.

This new opening spelled out a new life for the piece. It became more stylistic. We added more audience addresses and they began to tie it all together. There were moments of intimate conversation, there were moments of anger, and there were moments of performance. Now we just had to figure out how to make them all different, while still flowing and making sense. We were performing in a more abstract space now. We ditched the tables, we limited the use of the

tambura, edited important moments, and found a balance between showing and telling certain things to the audience. When the script was finally done (and it still went through minor changes until the day of the show) we decided it was finally time to take the next step.

“CAN WE HAVE THOSE WEIRD LIGHTS”: Bringing the Text to Life

This was such a critical part of the process: making the set, lights, and sound mirror the text. Up until right before we teched, we had no idea what the piece would look like because we were so focused on the words. Now that we had the words, it was time to make them into theater. As far as the stage set up went, we had nothing. Once we decided to get rid of the tables and personal items because they were clumsy and physically limiting, the stage was blank and we had very little idea what to do with it. We knew that the tambura would stay down center and we knew we wanted more than just a blank stage, so we talked about ways to make it homey for both of us. We wanted it to be neutral ground. So, instead of having furniture and some sort of setup that would give the impression of a more traditional set, we settled on just using rugs. This gave something to the space that made it more comfortable and welcoming for both of us and gave us an allotted space to play within. We decided on the style of rugs that we did because we had both had similar ones in our homes as kids. In addition, we never left the rug during the piece other than to sing our respective scales on opposite sides of the stage (and even then, we weren't seen off of the rugs much because both times we sang scales we were in black out). This is because it gave a complimentary visual symbolism to the idea that both of us have limitations with regard to our knowledge (culturally and personally) and our judgements of one another. This limitation also gave us a smaller space in which to be trapped with one another. This helped

us as actors to really get in each others faces and experience the intensity that we were so lacking in the beginning of the process.

Other than the two rugs, the only other things on stage were Satwik's tambura and the apple box that it sat on at the edge of the stage. Even though we eventually decided to have the tambura operated in the booth rather than by us on stage (it was just too clumsy for us to do it), we wanted to keep it on with us because it was a constant reminder of where all of this originated. It is a symbol of home for him and it is a symbol of something new for me. In addition, the look of it is something that would be incredibly unfamiliar to the majority American/white audience that would be seeing the show, so we wanted that to create that same bit of confusion that I felt upon learning about it and seeing it for the first time. When we decided to not have the tambura playing throughout the whole show, we moved more towards using it in important moments, particularly the performative ones. The only times the tambura was used was when either of us were teaching or singing a song and when we sang the scale sections. This became important because it highlighted the singing since there was very little outside accompaniment and it served as a device to engage the audience in familiar and unfamiliar music overtop something that is also jarring and, for many, unfamiliar. Not to mention the fact that even if you are familiar with the tambura, you would never expect to be hear it being used to sing Broadway songs and traditional scales.

Now, as for costumes, we had a lot of ideas in the beginning. We talked about having Satwik in traditional, formal dress and me in something that looked similar but notably American, and then actually switching our clothes with one another by the end of the piece. Once we decided to strip down the last few bells and whistles that haunted this process, we also

decided to scrap this idea and go with something more simple. We wanted to dress the way we do every day. I wore a light pink dress and Satwik wore a navy blue jacket and pants. We wanted to have just a twinge of the traditional colors for each gender since we didn't get to discuss it as much as we would have liked to in the piece while generally making our colors coordinate in a way that wasn't too distracting. One other thing that we did in order to coordinate our outfits, though, was to both wear a pair of Adidas Stan Smith sneakers so we would have one matching piece.

The final element that we needed in order to truly make the show come to life was lighting. This took shape during the final writing and rehearsal process right before tech. We had some friends come in to watch us perform and we all agreed that there was something missing: more active lighting. We decided that we needed more to delineate the sections of conversation, performance, and audience address. We wanted to make the differences quick, yet subtle, while coordinating all of the lighting changes with the use of the tambura to emphasize the differences in those moments. We used the boom lights in the teaching and singing sections to create visual interest and a larger contrast from the conversational sections that were lit very simply. We also wanted to use the spotlights at the beginning and end during the audience addresses in order to create a more direct line of communication from actor to audience member and emphasize the partnership that Satwik and I had while we both addressed them and performed the piece as a whole. We came into the spots with a united front no matter what, and that felt really good for both of us in both the start and end of the piece. I think the lighting really changed the game for us in the end. It gave the piece a sectionality, a sense of urgency, and the interest that it needed to truly become the theatrical performance that we wanted it to be all along.

“WHO SEES WHAT?”: A Moment for the Title

One thing that I would like to add before wrapping up would be an acknowledgement of the title of the piece. People often ask me what it means or how to say it and I will admit that I don't like explaining it to them, especially if they saw the performance. Despite this, it is a part of the production that I am very proud of because of the layers of significance that it has for us. From a very early part of the process we had made jokes about how people in America try to make things that are “Indian”. A prime example of this is a dish that Kline often serves on nights when they feature Indian-style dishes. They call it “Indian Mac and Cheese”. This was hilarious to us because there was nothing Indian about mac and cheese in general nor the mac and cheese that they served in Kline under that name other than the fact that they would sprinkle curry powder on the top before serving it. This was not only funny, but served as an interesting metaphor for cultural appropriation. A very distinctly American thing, being dressed with something perceived to be an essential representation of another culture, therefore generalizing the product as something distinctly a part of that other culture, no matter what the majority of that thing is (in this case the mac and cheese itself). Putting curry powder on mac and cheese is like sending a white girl to Coachella in a bindi. It doesn't make her Indian and it sure as hell does not make her appreciative of the culture since it is being used for fashion rather than function, just as the curry powder is used to “dress up” the mac and cheese in order to fit into a mold set very loosely by the rest of the dishes served.

Indian mac and cheese stuck with us in the back of our minds for a while, until we began teaching each other songs. When Satwik taught me “Alaipayuthey”, he had to constantly sound out the words for me and associate each syllable with an English word in order for me to get the

pronunciation right and remember it. Later, he taught me that the word “Desi” can be used as a descriptor of something or someone that is Indian. We laughed that “desi” sounded like “They see” so I could pronounce it correctly. When the time came to think up a title, we wanted to call it “Desi Mac and Cheese” rather than “Indian Mac and Cheese” in order to give it a more authentic culturally mixed vibe. However, it finally came to us that the interesting part about using the word “desi” was the way that I had learned to pronounce it, just like in the song. So, we changed it to “They-See-(Desi)-Mac-n-Cheese”. This iteration of the title highlighted an element of learning about another culture that was both silly and relevant to the piece as a whole while still making reference to the original word in order to clarify the use of the phonetic language that begins the title.

CONCLUSION

After this whole process, I am insanely proud of this piece from the title to the last word of the script. I definitely couldn't say that I felt that way through the whole process, though, simply due to all of the peaks and valleys we experienced along the way. Thankfully, at the end of the day, the final product accomplished what we wanted it to, even though it took a long time for us to figure out exactly what that was. I think the whole thing was really a learning experience for both of us. We learned so much about each other, about cultural differences, and how to agree to disagree, while learning a lot more than expected about what it takes to collaborate, especially with people you love.

There are a lot of things that I might have done differently had I not been so happy with the outcome, however, there is something very special about what the piece became and how unique it was to us due to how the process unfolded. If we had done it any other way, we

wouldn't have come out with the product that we did. I am so glad that our focus shifted in that first true meeting with our advisor. It changed everything and set us on a course to create something so unique, interesting, and personal that I think had a large effect on us and our audience. To put it simply, a lot of the things that I would think that I would have wanted to do differently ended up making the piece what it was, but if I had to say, then I would give only a few changes. First, I would have added more intensity to the conversation right off the bat. I would have tried to not be afraid of offending or looking stupid. A lot of our notes were that the piece was too nice and although it ended up having more of a bite to it than it had when it began, I would have enjoyed ramping the stakes up even more and really going for the jugular with one another. Despite this, I think that that isn't really what mine and Satwik's relationship is. It isn't who we are with each other and that definitely stood in the way of breaking more boundaries in the rehearsal room. Another thing that I would have changed would have been to have gotten the script done sooner so we could have really refined our individual performances for the final product. This, however, is unrealistic considering that it wasn't unfinished because of procrastination, it was unfinished because the words and ideas hadn't been discovered yet. I loved the process, but with the time constraints I wish that there was a way to have pushed our brains past some of the work phases that lead to dead ends so we could have gotten us to where we ended up sooner, so we could have worked more on the acting and performance of the piece.

After all of the ups and downs, highs and lows, script edits, and agonizing attempts to communicate overseas, we made it to that final night in February. On Sunday February 26th, 2017 at 7:45pm, Satwik and I prepared ourselves for the final performance of our senior project.

We were in our ritual group hug when, as I had each night before, I heard a voice over the speakers.

“They-see-(desi)-mac-n-cheese to the stage, please. Places:

They-see-(desi)-mac-n-cheese.”

She finally said it. And I don't know why she did, but I like to think that after every tech and every show leading up to then, it is because she finally understood it. And, for me, that is what this whole project has been about.

THE SCRIPT

Lights up on the front of the stage. EMILY and SATWIK are standing side by side, prepared.

EMILY: Hi.

SATWIK: Welcome.

EMILY: My name is Emily Claypoole and I was born on August 25th 1995 in Staten Island, New York at 10:51am. I am a white woman born and raised in the United States.

SATWIK: My name is Satwik Srikrishnan and I was born on June 15th 1995 in Mumbai, India at 10:30am. I am an Indian man born in India and I moved to the United States when I was 18 on a student F1 visa.

EMILY: Tonight we're here to talk about us. Among other things.

SATWIK: Emily and I met almost 4 years ago, here. We were very different people back then.

EMILY: It was 2014 and the spring semester of our freshman year. We did a musical together.

SATWIK: Emily was my first on stage kiss. It was terrifying.

EMILY: I could tell. He was a foot taller than me but still shook at the thought of kissing me.

SATWIK: Things were different.

EMILY: Things were simple.

SATWIK: Barack was president.

EMILY: And today he's not.

SATWIK: We did our first show together and now our last. A musical exchange.

EMILY: Tonight is a conversation.

BLACK OUT. Tambura turns on.

EMILY: Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do

SATWIK: Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Da Ni Sa

EMILY sings again.

EMILY: Do Ti La So Fa Mi Re Do

And then SATWIK again.

SATWIK: Sa Ni Da Pa Ma Ga Re Sa

And EMILY, but this time she only makes it half way through. She ascends. SATWIK sings the other half in his words. He descends.

EMILY: Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do

SATWIK: Sa Ni Da Pa Ma Ga Re Sa

SATWIK begins again. Ascending.

SATWIK: Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Da Ni Sa

EMILY follows. Descending.

EMILY: Do Ti La So Fa Mi Re Do

They begin to overlap, next EMILY sings her scale ascending while SATWIK sings his descending. They switch, EMILY descending, SATWIK ascending. They sing variations on top and around each other. They stop. LIGHTS UP (they snap up quickly) and the tambura shuts off with the light change.

EMILY: You're doing it wrong.

SATWIK: You're doing it wrong.

EMILY: No.

SATWIK: Yes.

EMILY: You're doing it wrong

SATWIK: No.

EMILY: Yes.

SATWIK: Stop it.

EMILY: Stop it.

SATWIK: No.

EMILY: No.

EMILY begins to sing her scale again, taunting him. He responds and they essentially go back and forth. A full scale, then a half finished by the other, another half, another full, variations, and then variations piling over, just like before, except this time with notice. This time with frustration until EMILY is singing full scales using "Sa Re Ga..." and SATWIK is singing "Do Re Mi...". They take a moment to notice again. This time with curiosity.

EMILY: I like it better your way.

SATWIK: I like it better your way ?

EMILY: Huh ?

SATWIK: Hm.

They consider.

EMILY: Is it ok if I do it your way?

SATWIK: Is it ok if I do it your way?

EMILY: It's not the same thing.

SATWIK: I guess it isn't. (Beat.) I am okay with it, when you do it my way.

EMILY: But is it like OK when I do it? You know?

SATWIK: I don't really know. But if it's ok for me to do it your way then why can't you do it my way?

EMILY: I'm white. I'm trying to steer clear of "appropriation".

SATWIK: How could you appropriate a raga?

EMILY: A what?

SATWIK: The raga. I was doing my morning raga.

EMILY: It's 8 pm.

SATWIK: It's 6 am at home. Home home.

BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS UP and EMILY and SATWIK are now seated on the floor facing each other, moved as if by magic. When the lights return so does the tambura, except this time light floods in from the wings, lighting each actor's back and the negative space around them.

SATWIK begins the thala. EMILY attempts to follow. He shows her how and begins to sing the first line of 'Alaipayuthey' by 'A.R Rahman'. She attempts to repeat. He sounds the words out phonetically for her. They try again. It should be a struggle. She has no idea what the words mean. She gets frustrated that it is getting difficult. SATWIK continues to sing. Paul follows out and accompanies SATWIK. EMILY watches from the sidelines, making herself comfortable as she observes. The song ends and the moment settles.

BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS UP. They return to normal as the tambura shuts off. EMILY and SATWIK are moved once again, as if by magic.

EMILY: What's the song about ?

SATWIK: *(To EMILY)* It's a love song. Its devotional.

EMILY: To who?

SATWIK: Lord Krishna. He's a mythical God. The blue one.

EMILY: Didn't Heidi Klum go as Krishna for halloween one year?

SATWIK: Actually, she went as Goddess Kali...?

EMILY: *(to audience)* And thus begins the part where I have no fucking clue about anything. And say some mildly offensive stuff because I'm white and don't get it and white people ruin everything even though I'm trying to learn and discount all the things that I think I know about India and Hinduism.

SATWIK: And I'm not offended by the fact that she doesn't know that! *(to Emily)* Goddess Kali is highly revered in Hinduism and she is meant to be worshipped in temples and not to be used in clubs for publicity stunts or thrown around loosely for dramatic effects. *(Pause before he answers the question she begins to ask in the silence.)* No, Emily. They're not all blue.

EMILY: Are they all different colors?

SATWIK: There's no color scheme. It's not a fucking art project. Krishna is the god of divine love, knowledge, and beauty.

EMILY: Ok ok sorry. I just got excited. I was raised in church and everything was just... Brown. We didn't have Goddesses or any vibrant colors. Maybe that's why I didn't stick with it. Too boring... So tell me about Kali. What's her deal?

SATWIK: Kali represents Time, Creation, Destruction and Power.

EMILY: Now that is lit. Kali: the blue bad-ass of destruction.

SATWIK: And time. And creation. And power. *(To audience)* People only ever hear what they want to hear.

EMILY: Yeah, but the destruction is so bomb. I feel like there aren't any Christian female figures like that. All of the women are either virgins or harlots. There's no in between.

SATWIK: Is it just me or do you know just as little about Christianity as you do about Hinduism?

EMILY: You're probably right. I went to church for my whole childhood and I barely remember anything except watching veggie tales in sunday school and being super freaked out by all the talking food... So back to Krishna. Love, knowledge, and beauty.

SATWIK: What about love, knowledge and beauty ?

EMILY: Can you elaborate on that at all??

SATWIK: I can't. I can't fathom it. My parents love each other...I know that for sure. They were told to marry each other. They fell in love after they were arranged by their parents... I have this silly idea of love from the movies. The blue-eyed boy of Bollywood, rolls his eyes, woos the women of his dreams, and suddenly has it all.

EMILY: That's so weird to me. I don't even think my parents would have been paired up if they had to get arranged marriages. They got divorced when I was like 4.

SATWIK: They what?

EMILY: The funny thing is that I wasn't in school yet and when I started school and made friends and went to their houses I was shocked to see both parents there. I thought all parents were divorced I guess. Except in movies and musicals where love was this magical thing... sorta like in bollywood I guess. It was always mythical and otherworldly to me. You know? People weren't happily married and all la di dah in real life because that just didn't happen in real life.

SATWIK: I didn't even know what a divorce even was until I was 12.

EMILY: What?

SATWIK: I didn't understand the word. They never taught it at school or used it frequently till I was "of age" to hear it. Once I thought you were married, you were together forever.

EMILY: So people who get arranged marriages never get divorced? How do they even pick people who are good for each other?

SATWIK: They know what you need and who fits well with your personality. That's how my grandparents matched my parents. They love each other so much and they're grateful that someone else decided it for them. They didn't tell them who to love. They sat them down and

said “talk”. And after they were married, they accepted the other. They decided that part for themselves.

EMILY: Wow. Huh. I never thought of it like that. I guess here it’s the opposite. You love someone and then choose whether or not to marry them. Your parents push you to get married... but only once you have so magically and mysteriously fallen in love.

A long, thoughtful pause. SATWIK doesn’t know what to say. EMILY doesn’t either. The mood is not right.

EMILY: I guess I assumed that you totally understood “western culture” and I was the clueless one. I feel better knowing there are some things you don’t know.

BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS UP(boom lights), tambura comes on. SATWIK and EMILY are standing where they were seated before. This time they are in opposite places.

EMILY begins to snap the tempo out for him. Then she hums a tune. He hums it back. She sings some words, he sings them back. Before they know it they are singing “Soon it’s Gonna Rain” from The Fantasticks together. EMILY moves into the emerging spotlight and starts from the beginning with nothing but the tambura beneath her. SATWIK runs off stage to grab his guitar and lightly strums along for the rest of the song. The song ends. The moment settles. LIGHTS snap back to normal as the tambura is turned off.

EMILY: Do you know more now than you did before?

SATWIK: I do. About you.

EMILY: I know more about your culture... but not about you.

SATWIK: Isn’t it the same thing?

EMILY: Definitely not.

SATWIK: Well, what do you want to know?

EMILY: Are you going to get an arranged marriage? Weren’t you dating that girl freshman year? The one who you didn’t tell about kissing me on stage?

SATWIK: Here's the deal. I wasn't allowed to keep close relationships with girls. My father would get all awkward and so would mom, because they weren't aware of what it feels like to be with somebody. I hid all of my girlfriends from them. I was afraid they would yell at me. I always received the brunt of "OH dating at your age is not love, it's infatuation" bullshit. The one 'serious' bond I had (You know, the one from freshman year) was jeopardized by mom because she never got it and Dad was unaware too. They found out and my mom told me to break up with her because she "toxified my brain". So now it's been about keeping them happy, and reducing the "drama". I'm not going to marry any girl I date, anyway. So yeah, I want a fucking arranged marriage.

EMILY: How can you just resign yourself to that? To me, all of it just sounds like a transaction that just goes towards maintaining your family's status based on appearances and stuff. Sounds like something on "Game of Thrones". Like they need to join the "worthy houses" to keep the bloodline strong.

SATWIK: That is sort of what it is though. You've to impress the other family with your status to make a perfect match. We are the children of God. My people - the brahmins- have a direct connection to God and that comes through in an arrangement. I'm not being preachy. This is an internal perception.

EMILY: What makes you so connected to God? What about everyone else? And what the fuck is a Brahmin?

SATWIK: We're the top of the caste system. My ancestors were given preference towards getting jobs to feed their family, entry into temples and other perks. It's a mode of survival.

EMILY: Ok yeah but what makes you so special? It's a money thing right? Who the fuck decided that you were better than everyone else? Or closer to God or whatever? It's gotta be a money thing because clearly your life in India isn't some "slumdog millionaire" shit and no one can just say 'these are the special ones and these aren't because I said so' and let that be the end of it.

SATWIK: Yeah it turned into a money thing. My father looked for success and found it! He came from sparse resources but all he had to do was aid his family or no one else would. It was time bound.

EMILY: Ok but he was still born a Brahmin. That's still the highest caste right? It's not like he had like actually sparse resources. I mean for a high class person he probably was like struggling

but I mean come on he can't be a totally self made dude because he was born into privilege. Just like you.

SATWIK: He didn't come from a wealthy background, if that's what you think. Yes, he was a brahmin, but his parents/my grandparents struggled to feed 6 kids in the house, and send them to school.

EMILY: So being in a high caste doesn't necessarily mean a lot of money? I mean like, you have a lot of money now, but like your dad made his fortune is like what you're saying.....

SATWIK: (*imitating Emily*)LIKELIKELIKELIKE....NO! You're just treated differently by society by their perception of you being a brahmin!

EMILY: Why are you so fucking defensive about being rich? It's not a fucking curse.

SATWIK: (*cupping hands into face*) Because I didn't fucking ask for it!

EMILY: Doesn't change that you have what you have. My family has money. I didn't ask for it... and I sure as hell don't have as much as your family does but at least I own it. I don't try to pretend I don't have what I have just because I feel villainized for having privilege. I'm glad I have what I have and rich people do generally suck but still I'm just gonna be a non-shitty rich person at least.

SATWIK: Are you saying I'm a shitty rich person?

EMILY: No. I'm just saying that by not admitting how much money you have doesn't exactly show gratitude... and kinda makes it seem like you hide it so people don't think you're shitty. Rich people aren't inherently bad people. They just don't do what they should with their wealth and power most of the time.

SATWIK: I just think you're inflating my privilege and acting like I have so much more than you and it kind of feels like you're attacking me for it. You're white. In today's America. You were born with advantages too just because of that. What gives you the right to call me out on my upbringing ? You're white. And sure, I was born into a certain class, but ---

EMILY: Yes. I'm white. That is important, but I'm also a woman. In today's America. I get two steps forward and 3 steps back. You're a man. Maybe you're not white, but men run the goddamn world and you can't tell me that and this caste bullshit hasn't made your life what it is.

SATWIK: Not the same thing. Women were made to accept their place regardless of anything, back home. They never questioned it.

EMILY: And what is that place exactly? You'd prefer if women never questioned their man? Or the archaic, misogynistic bull shit that your society was built on?

SATWIK: THAT ALL OF OUR SOCIETIES ARE BUILT ON. *(back to audience)*. I have a lot to say about this and we're running out of time. Come talk to me after the show.

EMILY Give me a fucking break...

BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS UP (downstage spotlights) and the actors appear as they were at the top of the show, standing side by side center stage.

SATWIK: *(he brushes off her attitude and chugs along)* What's worse? Being racially privileged as a white person or belonging to a rustic, "so-called abolished" caste system that is clearly present in every move that I make and have ever made in my entire life? How does all of this fit into our endeavor to learn about each other and each other's cultures?

EMILY: *(to audience, interrupting SATWIK)* I don't know, to be honest... but what I do know is that both of us are damned privileged and should at least be glad that we're arguing about it on stage inside Frank Gehry's fucking wet dream at a \$70,000 a year liberal arts college in the "greatest country in the world".

SATWIK: *(to audience)* I'm aware that everything is set up according to a system... A religious system that brought comparison to be one of its vitals. I didn't ask for it...

EMILY: *(to audience)* I didn't ask for it either. But at the end of the day... I don't consider myself the enemy of the masses because of it...but ONLY as long as I do something with it to help people who didn't get the chances that I got, who weren't born with my race and class and status and country.

SATWIK: Or born a Brahmin whose father busted his ass to give his family a good life. *(They look at each other and nod)* We're not going to end the night by tying this all up with a pretty bow.

EMILY: It would be impossible to just say that the last 24 minutes made everything “great again” (*mimes puking, SATWIK mimes puking too, but makes a sound*). We just wanted to have a conversation.

SATWIK: Even if we don’t see eye to eye.

EMILY: So do it someone else’s way.

SATWIK: Notice. Think. And self evaluate.

EMILY: Is it ok if I do it your way?

SATWIK: Is it ok if I do it your way?

BLACKOUT. Tambura simultaneously turns on. In the dark they sing.

SATWIK: Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do

EMILY: Sa Ni Da Pa Ma Ga Re Sa

The tambura remains for a moment then shuts off.

END OF PLAY