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They-See-(Desi)-Mac-N-Cheese: A Conversation to Make the Invisible Visible

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Bard

They-See-(Desi)-Mac-N-Cheese:
A Conversation to Make the Invisible Visible

A Collaborative Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts
of
Bard College

By
Satwik Srikrishnan

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

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PRODUCTION

Title: They-See-(Desi)-Mac-N-Cheese

- I. The Script: Written by Emily Claypoole '17 and Satwik Srikrishnan
performed at the Luma Theater on February 23-26, 2017
- II. Photographs from the Production

Acknowledgements

This show was developed away from home, about home.

To Amma, Appa and Sriya, for their constant love and support throughout my undergraduate career, and for inculcating me with the values of hospitality, politeness, integrity and affection.

To Emily Claypoole my collaborator, for being a cordial partner in this process, and for helping us create 'REAMS of work'. You will always be a hunter in hunter's skin.

To Gideon Lester, for assisting us in creating an efficient creative trajectory.

To Paul Duhe '18, the SAXiest musician at Bard.

To Etienne Coutinho, for his mentorship and advice.

PROGRAM

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

our brains are doing amazing things right now.

All at once

Harmonizing and emphasizing

on the accord of the new things around us

We all feel a certain way

You thought that she thought that he...?

Hug it. Don't act it.

Embrace it. Don't appropriate it.

Be curious. Go out and find more

for after all

I.

Process: Creative Journey from Home and Away

A. My Project Partner: Emily Claypoole '17

Emily and I worked on our first show at Bard together during Freshman year. It was a student directed show, performed in the Old Gym titled: 'Wolf' (written by *Aleah Black '16*). Looking back at our shared sentiment and experiences during the production of 'Wolf', we decided to pair up for a final showcasing to recreate a similar process for our T&P Senior Projects, when the necessary proposals were due. I was looking forward to the collaborative process with her. We decided early on in the process, that we would trust the Fisher Center's ability to help fund and support the show, since we were given liberty to conceptualize our pieces. Hence, we made the decision to take part in the Senior Project Festival, along with our peers, whom we've both shared fantastic experiences with. During the weekly senior meetings (before collaborating with Emily), the T&P students collectively created a common cloud document, with an excel sheet with the names of T&P Seniors, and initial thoughts, to make sure everybody was on the same page.

After listing my thoughts, I found that Emily and I both had an inclination toward inventing a 'new' narrative, using musical theater. Having previously worked with her, I sensed her passion for performative actions through music, except, I had a different understanding. As for American musical theater, I was unexposed and held sparse information about the production process and vocal techniques utilized for a performance. I was curious to know more and wanted to be able to compare my background in musical performance (Bollywood films) in relation to

Emily's forte. Emily and I also shared an interest within the storytelling of childhood memories and being able to reproduce it in a space. This was based on documented childhood performance videos, to compare ways of remembering monumental childhood performances, respectively both as children and performers—holding a set theme of Identity in mind. Emily also longed to use the concept of 'hyper-theatricality' while thinking about our presentation. By this, she wanted to accomplish conveying 'the personal, private, emotional and vulnerable' to an audience that 'wasn't supposed to see' the things presented to them. We were both interested in the idea of performing 'every moment in your life'. Additionally, it reminded me of the manner in which Bollywood films were constructed. The maternity of women stands as a powerful symbol in every film produced and the melodramatic stances of unrequited love and jealousy (usually punctuated with a song) serve as an underlying basis to scriptwriting. Emily's understanding of Bollywood at the time, was that it was similar to American musical theater, especially the intention that comes with breaking into song and dance. We grew to be obsessed with the intention, and began questioning it.

In agreement with the stated goals (and to fulfill Emily's Bollywood fantasy), we accepted each other as collaborators.

B. Understanding Identity (and our Differences)

Every conversation turned into a comparison contest, a constant back-and-forth dialogue about conflicts from childhood to adulthood. We exposed ourselves to each other and attempted to answer each "Why are things the way they are?" question as adults. We drained the answers to its roots, so as to understand the motive of why and how 'x'¹ things occurred. We were lucky to share our respective childhood performance videos from our younger days with each other. This nostalgic practice assisted in helping us trace and recollect what home was like. Furthermore, we began using improvisational techniques in the rehearsal space to compete with each other's information that we laid out on the table (through stories, images, videos). Our slow development of 'performing every moment in your life' led to the question of identity and who we were, based on our respective social, geographical, and cultural units, reflected in the moment. How were we able to relate to each other's intercultural and personal experiences ?

On a parallel track, our desire to incorporate music still existed. I have always had the passion for 'fusion' (arranging and performing acoustic mixes/covers of English and Hindi song lyrics with the same musical key). Emily and I started experimenting with music early Fall 2017, while maintaining the goal of keeping aside the integration of musical interludes while writing the script. We found this to be our guiding principle for the rest of the process, as it maximized and complemented the larger refinement of the question: "What is Home ?"

¹ expanded further in Section I.iii

"Emily, I am going to tell you what home was like for me"

Emily and I exchanged personal information about each other about subjects that were of great importance to us--love & relationships, tattoos & the body, home & life, song & dance. We were asked by our advisor, Gideon to each produce five research tasks for the other, while refining and asking the central question. The prompts were:

- Listen to assigned music (for Emily: MS Subbulakshmi, for Satwik: The Fantasticks soundtrack);
- Free-write about home while listening;
- List all childhood conflicts v. current conflicts;
- Where would you like to be married?
- What does home look/feel/smell like?

The responses when shared aloud during studio time, clearly seemed divided. Upon realizing that it was out of difference: musical interest and method, views on love & marriage. It drove us to a larger societal status of trying to understand difference--If we feel this way, what about the others? How do we make the invisible visible?

C. Making the Invisible Visible

Carnatic South Indian Classical Music	American Musical Theater
Raga form, devotional love, Tamil language, 'Gurukula' system of training	Opera form, humor, pathos, love, anger, musical theater training

Around mid-October, the performative tableaux started to initiate a creative arch for the rest of the process. During one of our music rehearsals, based on our respective performance videos as children, we grew to become interested in each other's styles of song. As I sat in the rehearsal room with Emily, watching an old video of an eight-year-old Satwik rocking out to 'Johnny B. Goode' by Chuckberry, I remembered by guru's words: "If you have a classical base of vocalizing, you will be able to experiment with other styles of singing too". When I shared this with Emily, we explored the importance of musical training in our lives.

In Mumbai, I went to 'Carnatic' vocal lessons every week from the age of eight to fifteen. It was a base to help expand my musical horizon in the future. I shared the first Carnatic scale that I ever learned with Emily. As I sang my version of the scale: "*Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Da Ni Sa*", she shared hers right after: "*Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do*". This process of comparing vocal 'solmization'² led us to formulate methods of teaching each other (like our teachers did when we were young). Emily continued to ask the question: How do I engage with someone + some things that are perceived differently, here in the United States? At this point, we were transparent with each other in terms of 'how things are done' back home, except, we wanted to know why. Our culture and background were still invisible to each other.

² Solmization is a system of attributing a distinct syllable to each note in a musical scale.

I asked Emily during one of our studio rehearsals: "How does one perform familiarity or unfamiliarity?" We both found home to be a consistent, comfortable and familiar place. However in the presence of each other, we found ourselves to be unfamiliar with the social mechanisms of our respective backgrounds. This was based on how we familiarized and absorbed our environment (from youth to maturity). We realized the level of vulnerability of being unfamiliar to something through this experience. In the following rehearsal, we asked each other to perform a 'familiar song that was unfamiliar to the other'. Additionally, we asked each other to pay close attention to reactions. Could I successfully familiarize Emily, a white girl born and raised in the United States, as to what home was like for me ?

We applied the same artistic model to help generate dialogue. The themes that stood close to us were: religious affiliation, love & divorce, home & belonging and music training. We came up with steps to formalize the teaching process, As we started spending more time with each other, we showcased curiosity about subjects that we both were unfamiliar with. How do we engage with someone else's familiarities ?

D. Curiosity and Exchange (while maintaining Identity)

I sensed awkwardness in Emily and myself when explaining situations from home. I refer to one situation in particular: The possibility of my parents arranging my marriage in the future. This was not 'familiar love' to Emily. Her parents got divorced when she was four years old. This was not my idea of 'familiar love'. However, we commenced a constructive argument (not termed as constructive at the time) about the pros and cons of arranged versus love marriage.

Did I find it strange that Emily was unable to comprehend? No. Not in the moment. It only drove me further to learn that culture comprehension and a sense of curiosity from the other end is deemed a slow, unforced learning process. I wanted to be able to think of providing Emily a crash course³ (*noun*. a fast, intensive training in or study of a subject, esp. on the basics) about Hinduism, how its practices have changed, and why devotion and parental possession go hand in hand. What was the fine line between learning another culture and appropriating it ?

"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."

³ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/crash-course>

We started off creating boundaries, spatially and in discourse and broke them to disquiet the brimming frustrations about each other's differences. All of a sudden, it led to a comparison of power. We caved into 'acting' out the teaching process and this made me uncomfortable. It was in the back of my head that a predominantly white audience (audience sensitivity to theme) would attend the Senior Project Festival Shows, and I felt a slippage in who I was versus who I presented myself to be. I started acting. I was averse to portraying myself as an insensitive individual, and so was Emily. It felt dangerous at the time, but we did not foresee the perils we could visit (for the sake of performance), while maintaining ourselves as Satwik and Emily, our true identities. We had the potential to drive the argument further. We just didn't know then.

It was the end of the semester, and we were through with the first draft of our script (*sans* title). Gideon asked us to move into a more conflicted and combative territory, and attempt to take it far by addressing the audience directly. We were on the road to adding a driver of urgency and risk into the scriptwriting process and attempt to remove the 'fluff' from the narrative. Before breaking into winter, Emily and I felt like the themes lacked specificity. We were jumping from one topic to another, undermining our intrinsic relationship with the subjects being discussed. Consequently, we needed to level the play-field, measure our limits, quit being polite and remove the safety elements from the script, as and when it was necessary. We established that we would continue to develop the music sections after break, with the potential addition of instruments.

Emily and I Face-timed often over break to create more contention points, within the same themes, which will be discussed in the research section.

II.

Research: Indian Mac-N-Cheese ante 'They See' (Desi):

A. Inspiration and Research

My moderation piece during sophomore year was about a memory from home: Husbands disallowed their wives from sleeping on the same bed as them because they were menstruating and it was considered 'impure' in Hindu tradition. The piece was a visual representation of two female actors wearing white, creating boundaries each with black and red paint. The lights were set dim to amplify the focus on the color red. In the background, there was a playback of recordings of my guru, from when I learned how to play the 'Mridangam' (A south-Indian percussion instrument). Using this as inspiration, we successfully channeled it into our senior project, when Emily and I were discussing the importance of childhood music training. This was incorporated later in our Senior Project as vocal tableaux. Additionally, we discussed certain religious superstitions (like the act of disallowance). My moderation piece as a source of inspiration was apparent throughout the process, and we kept revisiting its creative structure.

In one of our meetings with Gideon in the Fall semester of Senior Year, he shared an article by Claudia Rankine—the recipient of the MacArthur “genius grant” of \$625,000, with which she founded the Racial Imaginary Institute. The article⁴ discusses the idea of “presenting space and a think tank all at once, where artists and writers can really wrestle with race”. A phrase that stood out to both Emily and I, was “curate dialogues”. We were inspired to begin discussions in the same playing field.

⁴ Thrasher, S. W. (2016, October 19). Claudia Rankine: why I'm spending \$625,000 to study whiteness. Retrieved October, 2017

“He said something like ‘I can’t write about people I don’t know.’ That, to me, is more complex. So, why don’t you know these people? What choices have you made in your life to keep yourself segregated? How is it one is able to move through life with a level of sameness? Is that conscious? Is segregation forever really at the bottom of everything? When he says something like that, I find that really interesting as an admittance to white privilege: that he can get through his life without any meaningful interaction with people of color.” - Claudia Rankine in response to the writings of Jonathan Franzen (Source: Thrasher, 2016)

“Is there a right way of appropriating?”, Emily asked me during one of our rehearsals. Subsequently, we stayed close to curating dialogue, while being able to integrate the teaching process. We had the courage to write about the people we didn't know. I was writing about white people, and Emily was writing about brown people. This altered our project, in trying to make the invisible visible, leading to a change in title of our piece: They-See-(Desi)-Mac-N-Cheese.⁵

Our third prominent source were the childhood performance videos that we each shared, from our younger days. Early on in the process, we wondered if we could project these videos out into the audience, and re-perform them as twenty-one year olds. Although, the research on our own identities altered the musicality of the show (South Indian classical music and Broadway performance).

Our fourth source resulted in the choice of adding instrumentation to the musical exchanges. Mumbai my hometown, has a strong connection to jazz-fusion roots and when I was home for winter break, I was fortunate to attend three saxophone recitals that were fused with ‘Hindustani classical music’ (very different from the Carnatic style) that inspired me to

⁵ a person of Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi birth or descent who lives abroad.

incorporate the fine talent of Paul Dube ('18), to musically arrange a carnatic-jazz piece in the performance.

B. "Why does Satwik have the upper hand in this argument?" (Senior Year II)

When spring semester began, we were ready with a concrete, working script. We shared it with some friends, performed excerpts in front of our peers and constantly tried to refine the 'danger' element, to remove the politeness from the subject. This led to a larger problem of an unceasing question: "Why does Satwik have the upper hand in this argument?" There was a slippage in who we were, versus who we presented ourselves as. Emily to me, was not a dumb white girl. She possessed enough knowledge about my identity, standards and tradition (as did I about her) at this time of the process. The biggest alteration we made during the ongoing research period, was to stop acting. While working with the script, Emily and I both acted as if we were hearing this information exchange, for the first time. This was not true. At this point in time, we built a relationship of recognition during the whole process, and the current status of presentation displeased us. We were being entertaining, not informative.

Unfortunately, it stood true that I was exposed to western culture from a young age, because of the way people around me idolized the West (both family and friends). It was certain that the knowledge possessed (for both) was lopsided during the process. By now in the creative process, Emily was exposed to my people's identity. She started to formulate opinions in her head, except it was not reflected in the script just yet. Thereafter, we made the biggest alteration to our introductory portion, and fine-tuned the focus points. It finally started to feel like a conversation, rather than a performed one.

C. An Alteration under the wire: Dangers of Cluelessness

The alterations made were based on realization. We had finally reached the pinnacle of danger during the process, removing all shyness, niceness and safety from the script. Realizing that one of the dangers of cluelessness from the opposing party, is actually the aggression in not being able comprehend an idea, implied our initial lackadaisical attitude toward the enterprise created (of cultural cross-fertilization). Thenceforth, in all necessity, Emily began attacking my privilege, tradition, and lifestyle, adding to the risk of the scene. We both went far with being insensitive and blunt with each other. However, we tried our best to embody a sense of sincere curiosity, illustrated by the conversation format. We leveled the play field by showing equal aggression towards the unknown.

Our respective critical junctures of disagreement, were a way to grapple with the ‘cluelessness’. We moved to conflicted territory within our identities, and dug up controversial subjects that we were unable to understand about each other, and at the same time showcasing the irritability of each other’s differences.

III.

Outcome: The Gluttonous Experiment

A. Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses: Objectives then and now

Our final showcasing was on for three successful days, with constructive criticism from the audience every night, helping us improve the next day's performances. The outcome of this piece stood strong in its ability to view a covert form of micro-aggression to the audience. Our objectives changed towards the end of the process, but we successfully maintained the focal points and themes of the piece, right from its inception. Early in the process, we set out to compare each other's differences, and we unfortunately undermined the forced elements that rose out of cluelessness. Now, we were visiting the dark corners of unknowingness, and its prevalent dangers.

The use of a minimal set design (a rug and tambura), and choice in lighting were successful in underscoring our emphasis on the dialogue, and postures during the play. The differences portrayed through the dialogue, mirrored the rigidity of our postures. In this case, I refer to posture as the concomitance between our real identities and dialogue. We were also successful in maintaining and exemplifying our own relationship.

As for the project's weaknesses, we did not discuss the effects of making work, based on the sensitivity of a predominantly white audience. This is because we did not imagine our limits of danger. When we thought about it after, we learned that we could have opened the piece up further, and unravel the climax of a 'cultural clash' by making the ideas last longer, like a debate of sorts. Another weakness of the piece was that the the private exchange did not reflect the

numerous disparities that exist between cultures, other than Indian and American. If the piece had to be developed, it would include a breakdown on cultural dissimilarity as a general issue.

This project taught me that culture is in fact, invisible. Emily and I achieved what we set out to make, by breaking the boundaries that we had set for each other, early in the process. Our objective changed from a polite exchange to one that was captivating, because of the rapid changes in ideas, situations and experiences. If it had to be re-performed, we would change and develop the brimming frustrations that we held against each other, and take it further by using different aesthetic models (other than a conversation format).

PRODUCTION

I. The Script

They-see-(desi)-mac-n-cheese

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.

They go back and forth for a moment, telling each other "no" until 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 return to their tables and sit down to 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. (*shakes head away from body to show distance*)

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, laying down and making herself comfortable as she observes. The song ends and the moment settles.

LIGHTS return to normal as the tambura shuts off.

EMILY: What's the song about ?

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

EMILY: Towards whom?

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/ side lights), tambura comes on. SATWIK and EMILY are sitting on the floor again. This time in opposite places.

EMILY begins to tap a beat over her heart. 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 (normal) 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

II. Photographs from the Production





