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Life's all about drama



Madhuri Shekar's two plays are to be staged early this year in the U.S. In an interview, the Chennai girl, talks to Anusha Parthasarathy about how she quit a plum marketing job to turn playwright

Madhuri Shekar always thought of theatre as a hobby and settled into a comfortable marketing job in the U.S., after completing a degree in communications. But the playwright in her was restless. Soon, she quit her job to pursue a master's degree in fine arts (MFA) at the University of South California (USC), and graduated this year. Now, two of her plays, *In Love and Warcraft* and *A Nice Indian Boy* are being produced and staged by major theatre groups there.

A history graduate from Stella Maris, Chennai, Madhuri has always been interested in telling stories. "I participated in a lot of plays in college but didn't consider theatre as a career then," says Madhuri. But the university where she pursued her master's degree had a theatre department, and Madhuri found what she was looking for. "I feel like I always knew I wanted to do this. I was just waiting for an opportunity." Her tryst with theatre goes back further, though, to when her father staged Crazy Mohan dramas in the Bay Area in California where she was born. "I would watch him rehearse and perform. The interest probably started there."

Taking the plunge

She joined the MFA programme in 2010 and after three years of training in script writing, screenwriting and TV writing, Madhuri graduated with six plays and two screenplays. “The course encourages you to be prolific. It was a really big risk to quit a job and join it but I thought I would regret it later if I didn’t enrol. So I took the plunge,” she explains. “It was a great experience. I spent three years doing what made me happy, instead of doing the course piecemeal.”

In fact, both the plays, in production now, were written while she was pursuing her course. “In the third year, you are eligible to apply for a theatre competition that is open to graduating students. The winner gets a full production at Alliance Group in Atlanta,” says Madhuri. *In Love and Warcraft* was the winner of the Kendeda playwriting contest in January 2013, against other plays from Columbia University, NYU and The Julliard School. The play will be produced in January-February this year. “The year (2013) turned out to be amazing ever since I won the contest. Soon afterwards, my thesis play *A Nice Indian Boy* was selected by the East West Players, one of the oldest Asian-American theatre companies in the country,” she adds. The play will be produced in LA in February-March. It also recently had a reading at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego.

In Love and Warcraft is an American romantic comedy about a girl obsessed with Warcraft and what happens when someone in the real world finds her interesting. *A Nice Indian Boy*, on the other hand, is about a gay American-Indian boy who wants a traditional Indian wedding. “The boy falls in love with a rather unconventional man and is about to introduce him to his parents. The parents have only just accepted their son’s sexual orientation and are now faced with the dilemma of marriage. At the same time, his elder sister, who had an arranged marriage, announces that she’s getting a divorce. The play analyses marriage in the Indian context,” says Madhuri.

There’s also a scene where the protagonist’s partner tells him queer stories from Indian lore, including those of characters such as Shikandi and Aravan from Indian epics. “There is also a Ganesha motif that runs through the play. He is a bachelor Indian god in the Hindu pantheon that celebrates couples. I thought I could interweave it all in an Indian-American context. It’s about someone raised in America but still wants a connection to his Hindu roots. It also looks at the sister, who took the traditional way that worked for her parents but not for her,” she says.

Madhuri has also been invited to attend a workshop by L.A.’s Center Theatre Group. “They invite seven Los Angeles playwrights every year and I got invited to write a new play for them. This will be set in a chemistry lab and is based on the life of my roommate in graduate school,” she smiles. Madhuri also works as a Teaching Artist at the USC. “I don’t want to be seen as an Indian playwright in America, so my first play was an all-out American one. And even the cast is ethnically diverse. I also teach History of World Theatre at the university to supplement my work.”