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Kim Catrall was my first TV kiss

Delhi-born US actor Ajay Mehta often plays Indian characters on the American small screen. He tells us how he has broken stereotypes about brown actors in Hollywood



Ajay Mehta

Priyanka Dasgupta | TNN

Since you were born in Delhi, how strong is your India connect today?

I've always had strong ties with Delhi and I do stay in touch with my friends and periodically visit the capital. I started my schooling at St Columbus High School before I went to Mayo College, Delhi, for me, is a historical city with all its beautiful monuments. I loved the craziness of Chandni Chowk, hanging out in CE, the taste of *chole bhature*s at the Bengali Market, *choot* on Shahjahan Road and the *mujarraz* singers of Moti Mahal. Food was an important part of our experience with the variety of national cuisines. Being in the capital, I was exposed to the political scene nationally and internationally. Having met diplomats socially, I must say that I had a unique experience growing up in Delhi. Delhi traffic still drives me nuts whenever I go there even though the new flyovers have eased things up.

How was it at Mayo College and St Stephen's?

Mayo College, where I got my grounding, is a private boarding school. It is a traditional school with brilliant teachers including some from overseas. Mayo, while developing students in academics and sports, also encouraged extracurricular activities in the arts. I used to do a lot of plays in English, Hindi and Urdu. I wanted to be an actor since I was three-and-a-half. In Stephen's, I was a day scholar. Here too, I was encouraged in pursuing performing arts. I have also worked briefly as a DJ on Yuv Vani (AIR) for their programmes titled "Play It Cool" and "In the Groove". That too was a fun learning experience in my college days.

Having done such a huge body of work in American TV - "24", "Outsourced", "CSI: Miami", "Eli Stone" and "Sex And The City" - which has been the most challenging role for you till date?

They've all been good and different experiences as one starts afresh on each role. I've enjoyed playing the Middle-Eastern ambassador on "24" post-9/11 and a steel magnate and a stern and pompous father on "Outsourced". I have done several doctor roles in shows such as "Eli Stone" and "CSI: Miami". Working on "Sex And The City" opposite Kim Catrall was delightful! Kim is a warm person. A brilliant actor, Kim is comfortable with her sexuality. It reflects in her performance that's free and sensual. I remember telling her that she was my first kiss on television. Her reply was: "Glad to be your first". We sure had a good laugh over it.

Which are the Indian TV shows that you've watched? Ever considered working for here?

I'm not that familiar with the Indian TV series but if the opportunity comes along to work on one, I'll certainly consider it.

Many Indian reality shows are based on formats that've been successful in the West. Do you think Indian TV needs borrowed content?

I think we are perfectly capable of coming up with our own original content - be it quality drama or comedy. Of course, it's good to learn from quality programming from the West. Regarding reality shows, I don't have much of an opinion.

You've also been a part of "Serendipity" and "Spider-Man". Any Hollywood actor about whom you thought it was too unreal to believe he/she was your co-actor?

I can't single out any one actor out as I've had the pleasure of working with Sir Peter Ustinov when I made my primetime TV debut in America with "Around The World In 80 Days". Of course, meeting Al Pacino was terrific, as it was interacting with John and Kate. Even in my most recent work, the HBO film titled "Too Big To Fail", where I play Vikram Pandit the CEO of Citigroup, I have the company of a stellar cast.

How have you been able to break stereotypes about brown actors in Hollywood now?

I have done so since I've played a doctor/surgeon, diplomat, business tycoon, general, lawyer and other white collar roles. We have come a long way from the stereotypical roles though they still exist. I feel respect is in your hands as an actor when portraying a character, particularly when it's from the Indian subcontinent. I do make a conscious effort to do so and often talk to the directors especially about the heavy accent when it's not needed. They understand the point. After all, we are the largest English speaking country in the world with amusing accents that's not strictly limited for comedy only!

WE ARE PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF COMING UP WITH OUR OWN ORIGINAL CONTENT - BE IT QUALITY DRAMA OR COMEDY

Do you watch Indian cinema? What direction would you want Indian cinema to take now?

I try to see Indian films whenever I can. Recently, at the MELACC film fest, I saw "Shor" where my actor buddy Senthil Ramamurthy plays the lead. "Shor" is an interesting story and explores the petty criminal world in our major cities. It is encouraging to see more films being produced by independent filmmakers. I hope that trend continues. We are an ancient land rich with culture and should use it in creating original work - be it in a period movie, contemporary film or TV show. The scope is enormous since we have talented writers, directors, actors and producers who need the opportunity.

When was your last visit to India? Can you ever think of returning to a life back in Delhi?

My last visit to India was this summer. I'm not sure about moving back to Delhi at this point though I enjoy visiting the city meeting my relatives and friends. Of course, Delhi food still remains an addiction.



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