

Spotlight  
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## INTRODUCTION

We spend years dreaming of a life on stage, believing that is our calling/ The stage can be a place to be seen, heard, or discovered, and if we are fortunate and supported, we get the opportunity to pursue a career in the performing arts, to expand our education so that music, and to see that musical theater is not just for the elite, but for all of us.

This verse is intended to be performed as a solo on stage. It serves as a juxtaposition for the crowded ambience of an audition room with the isolation of standing alone, in front of casting directors.

After all, as the curtain rises, there you are, exposed, in the spotlight.

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## SPOTLIGHT

Waiting.

The line is long.

We are all waiting  
For a number  
that would identify and label us,  
Label me,  
as one in the crowd  
even though I stand out already.

I look around  
No one is looking at me  
No one is looking up  
No one can see me  
Even though I stand out already

## NEXT!

I line up in front of the voice shouting next  
and say my name  
A whisper first  
Then louder  
And again  
And again  
Still, she cannot say my name  
I take the number anyway.

55

The number,

That calculates who I am in this crowd  
Of anxiety  
Of music  
Of drama  
Of sweat  
Of tears and cheers and fears  
Dreams hopelessly diminished within 8 bars or 16

If you're lucky.

I look down at songs of *Classical Musical Theater*  
Resting on my lap now  
As I sit  
As one in the crowd  
Of hundreds who are waiting  
Pacing  
Humming,

Clutching  
folders of sheet music  
Black and White Headshots with fake smiles  
Perfect hair

With a name in bold black letters

I peek at their *professional* headshots  
Waving in front of me  
Like a flag that shows me

I don't belong here.

Sigh.

Easy-to-pronounce names  
Jessica  
Kevin  
Sarah  
Not mine.

Rekha Sridevi Rangarajan.

I tuck my picture back  
Into the folder  
Into the one-dollar Office Depot binder  
Hiding the torn edges of the printer paper  
that got stuck,

When I printed my headshot,  
upstairs in the den,  
this morning.

Using photoshop to increase the contrast  
of the image,  
and decrease the color of my skin.  
Avoiding the questions  
From family that doesn't understand,  
that asks,

*Why* are you wasting  
Your  
Time.

Why not?  
What other thing is there to do with time,  
But waste it?

NEXT!

I jump in my seat.

Another row.  
Called.  
Lined up.  
Now number 160 to  
170.

Everyone  
Clutching  
Books for Soprano,  
Alto,  
Tenor,  
Bass  
Songs of the North,  
South,  
East,  
West

Pacing and humming was never my thing  
Never even warmed up  
My voice.

Not when I sang Carnatic music  
SA-RE-GA-MA-PA-DA-NE-SA

How can your voice go so high? She would ask.  
My guru  
Never understood how to fit my voice into Carnatic voice

And now, with a voice that goes so high  
Never understand how I can fit my skin color into Musical Theater.

I flip through my songs  
Looking for the familiar  
Looking for comfort

*The Sound of Music*  
*Les Miserables*  
*Phantom of the Opera*  
*CATS*  
*ShowBoat*

I mouth the lyrics in my head  
“Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly”

Is that song even for me?  
I question myself  
Again  
And again  
And again  
And again  
And again.

Pretending that I am practicing  
Focused  
Even though I know the outcome anyway.

It's always the same.  
The look  
The whispers

Is she Jasmine or Pocahontas?  
they ask,  
As though I can only be one or the other

Or both  
Or neither.

I want to scream  
Again  
And again  
And again  
And again  
And again

But no one is listening  
No one is looking at me  
No one is looking up  
No one can see me  
Even though I stand out already.

Dark hair  
Olive skin  
Skinny legs  
A big voice that doesn't fit anywhere.

NEXT!  
201, 202, 203...

The doors open  
A creak that silences the room

A spotlight,  
peeks through the dark backstage.  
A glimpse of seats.  
Empty.

Numbers 40-50, she says  
Please line up.  
They do.

Shuffling  
Pacing  
Humming  
A flip of hair from number 49  
Blonde  
Tall  
Thin  
A swipe of lipstick and  
tilt of her head,  
Drink of water.

I don't even have  
lipstick,  
or water,  
or blonde hair.

The line is the same,  
As every  
Group  
Before  
Clutching  
Books for Soprano,  
Alto,  
Tenor,  
Bass  
Songs of the North,  
South,  
East,  
West.

I look at the clock  
Time has stopped  
Or stalled?

I can't leave now.  
Dad is circling anyway.  
Didn't want to pay for parking.

I said I wouldn't be long,  
But

how long has it been?

I'm suddenly thirsty  
but,  
don't  
have  
water.

Don't need it anyway.  
Being overly hydrated  
Was never my thing.

Doors open again.  
Numbers 40 to 50 come out and my heart  
starts

thump  
    thump  
        thump  
            thumping.

Can they hear it?

I feel dizZy.

Did they go in a group?  
Of  
Course.

How did I NOT know.  
I'm not alone.

Everyone will be watching,  
And listening,  
And judging,  
As I stand out in the line,  
Even though no one is looking at me.

Numbers 50-60.

Did Number 49 come out?  
Still in there?  
A callback, no doubt  
Perfect for a role  
that would never be perfect for me.

I listen.  
Now inside this secret space.

Each singer,

Screaming,

with each belt,  
each high note,  
each dramatic,

Pause.

Dreaming,

with each arm lift,  
each turn,

each bow.

It's too late  
to turn back.

I panic and change my song  
So  
Be  
It.

I hand "Colors of the Wind"  
To the accompanist.

The 16 bars marked with bold lines

Start here.  
End here.

He nods.  
I nod.

And you are?

The voice from the audience.  
I squint, slightly.

He has glasses and dark hair  
She has short brown hair and whispers into his right ear,  
He leans towards her,  
Nodding.  
Looking at me.  
Do they see me?

Rekha.

I don't say my last name.  
Too many letters  
Too distracting.

What will you be singing for us today?

I tell them,

but DON'T tell them that



I know the song doesn't fit  
I know I don't look the part  
I know I shouldn't have changed what I practiced  
I know Dad is still circling  
I know number 49 got cast already.

I hear them whisper,  
I feel the others watching,  
I know how this will end,  
The same as it always does,

A colored, Indian girl doesn't have a place in *Fiddler on the Roof*  
A musical about a Russian family.

So WHY would you audition anyway?  
Why would you –

Rekha  
Sridevi  
Rangarajan

Waste your time?

What else was I going to do,  
With my time,  
On a Saturday afternoon?

As the music starts, I take a deep

breath.

Breath.

Breath.

Breathe.

And step,

Into the spotlight.

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**REKHA:** I had the best experience studying at Roosevelt University – at the Chicago College of Performing Arts. We thrived in a city rich with culture and opportunity, connected to the famed Auditorium Theater and guided by professionals who performed at the Metropolitan Opera and Lyric Opera or started their own performing arts organizations.

While I learned how to manipulate my voice; control and train the instrument that was my body; learn how to reach the audience member in the back of the room; and use my eyes, face, and hands to express emotion, what I wish I learned was the pressure, exhilaration and stress of auditioning. Recognizing that if someone white and blonde is auditioning for the same role, studied with the same voice teacher, and sang the same song, 9/10 times she will get the part over me. Many of us want to be performing artists, but with that comes the risk of seeing ourselves in new ways and recognizing that we might not be seen at all.

This verse described my first experience at a professional audition. I did not know you should have a \$400 black and white headshot with your resume typed into the back. I printed mine upstairs in our den/office, with Kodak printer paper from Office Depot and used a basic version of “photoshop” to make myself look like I belonged.

**TOPIC OF INTEREST:** Musical theater, race, and music education

**GUIDING QUESTION:** How does race and culture influence how we prepare students in music education for the multifaceted dimensions of the field, including preparing for auditions (color-blind casting or otherwise) and marketing oneself?

Similar to how a college of business trains students on how to develop a resume, should we not educate students in the performing arts on how to build a resume? Where to find the best headshot/photographer? How to market yourself as a performer? In the past decade, the newest generation of performers have turned to social media by finding fame through twitter and Instagram, TikTok and Youtube. This has become a great marketing tool, and in many ways, an opportunity to skip the audition room. Performers who relish and share their rich cultural heritage through dance and art and music. When I was in school, however, we left out our race on our resume, or worse, lied and said we were “mixed” or “unknown” to have a better opportunity of being cast in a show.

**CONTEXT:** In my years of research, I have found that the experience of stepping into that often sterile space (either a cold room with a table lined with chairs and blank faces) or the open stage, blinding you with a spotlight so that you cannot see who is seated in the velvet red seats) is a part of the experience necessary for pursuing a career in musical theater (Rajan, 2012; 2017). You learn to adapt to the anxiety that fuels you both outside (as you wait and are judged by those auditioning) and inside (when you know you are lucky if they do not cut you off after 16 bars).

In this reflection, I am not questioning the audition process. Afterall, it is as important to our profession as how we train teachers or surgeons. It is a necessary part of the “cut-throat” world

of performing. What I question is why are we not sending our *students of color* to be better prepared? Why aren't we acknowledging that color-blind casting exists even though it is often one-directional? Blonde girl in my poem was cast in the show (*Fiddler on the Roof*) even though everyone from Russia is not blonde. But I didn't have a place in the cast, no matter how perfectly I sang, because of my skin color. This is not an assumption. I have been told this numerous times by casting directors.

This discussion is more than color-blind casting, race, and skin color. We should recognize our own bias and assumptions with casting (Rajan, 2019). While nearly every performance of Jasmine in *Aladdin* is consistently portrayed by a white female, I have yet to see the role of Maria in the *Sound of Music* performed by a black female. When did we forget that musical theater began as a response within communities that was created by the people for the people as an avenue for sharing their stories, experiences and struggles?

When did we stop letting those voices be heard?

### **THINGS TO THINK ABOUT:**

How can we ensure students of color are provided opportunities to play characters of their race?

How has the student body's racial, ethnic, and cultural demographics of your educational experiences influenced the selection of your musical theater experiences and how might educators do more to be representative of their student body's demographics?"