

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.

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.

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?"