

THE FEARLESS ACTOR

HER OUTING AS THE REBELLIOUS YOUNG BEAUTICIAN IN THE CRITICALLY-ACCLAIMED *LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA* EARNED HER WIDESPREAD APPLAUSE AND INSTANT RECOGNITION. **AAHANA KUMRA**, WHO WILL SOON BE SEEN PLAYING PRIYANKA GANDHI IN *THE ACCIDENTAL PRIME MINISTER*, OPENS UP TO **RHEA TONY** ABOUT HOW BEING FEARLESS AND BEING DRIVEN BY A CONSTANT HUNGER TO NAIL THE NEW AND THE UNCONVENTIONAL HAVE BEEN CRITICAL TO HER SUCCESS.

Outfit: Hema Kaul
Earrings: Minerali
Bracelet: Anmol Jewellers

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Your film *The Accidental Prime Minister* is up for release this month. Are you an accidental actor too, or did you always want to get into acting?

I am definitely not an accidental actor. I meticulously thought through before changing career paths. I was studying advertising in HR College, Mumbai, and was in my last year when I had a conversation with my mother about pursuing acting full-time. She did not seem surprised, she figured I wanted to act ever since I attended an acting workshop at Prithvi Theatre when I was 14. In fact, it was she who suggested I go to film school and study acting.

You hail from the historic town of Lucknow. Tell us a little about your journey from the City of the Nawabs to Maximum City.

I moved to Mumbai from Lucknow not for work, but so that we could see more of my father, who worked in Moscow, and travelled frequently to Mumbai on work. My father was in the pharmaceuticals industry and my mother is a police officer. Because of her job, she was not able to leave Lucknow easily; so for a large part, my parents were in a long-distance relationship. One fine day, we decided we had had enough of the distance, and moved to Mumbai, so we could live together as a family. Life in Mumbai was of course very different from my life in Lucknow—it meant a lot more freedom. I was a good student in school, and did well not just academically; I was very active in extra-curriculars too. I did a workshop with Prithvi Theatre when I was 14, and fell in love with acting. After film school, I got my first break assisting the famous casting director Shanoo Sharma for the film *My Name Is Khan*. I worked with Shanoo for

almost a year; parallelly, I continued to do theatre. This was when I got my first break with *Yudh*. For those like us, who don't come from *filmi* families, breaking in is a real challenge—we are also constantly trying to find our paths and voices. I would say God has been really kind with the work I have got all my life.

Bollywood makes you thick-skinned; you have to learn to deal with rejection every day. At the same time, B-town has also made me more responsible about who I am and how I conduct myself in public.

You played Big B's daughter in his first small-screen outing *Yudh*. What was it like to work with such a legend in your first break?

Mr Bachchan is one of the nicest human beings I have met. He's very kind and understanding of the person who is standing in front of him. He is aware that it is normal for the other person to be in complete awe of the legend that he is, and knows how to break the ice beautifully. He sat me down and we spoke for about 45 minutes discussing our characters, putting me at complete ease. Since I was facing the camera for the first time with such a big actor, we always did a lot of rehearsals.

Not for once did he bring his star

status to the fore where work was concerned; his humility will inspire me for life.

Who has been your biggest inspiration in this success journey?

My parents. Apart from them, Naseeruddin Shah and Amitabh Bachchan have been really inspirational to me. These four people have taught me how to work hard every day of my life, and that's what I want to do every day for the rest of my life. My mother taught me to firmly believe in myself and never take no for an answer; Naseer sir taught me how to pay attention to only work, and not



Outfit: Sonaakshi Raaj
Earrings: Minerali
Ring: Minawala Jewellers



Outfit: Hema Kaul
Jewellery: Minerali



Outfit: **Babita Malkani**
Jewellery: **Minerali**

to what people around you say. Bachchan *saab* taught me there's no alternative to hard work.

You now juggle theatre, the web as well as the big screen. How different are the three mediums? What tickles your fancy?

All these mediums are very different from one another. Every medium has its own pros and cons. But you learn from each. Theatre teaches you to be spontaneous; web gives you instant gratification (the feedback is instant); films on the other hand are workshop-driven and allow you to work on and develop your character. What really tickles me is working in theatre and working in the digital space. Theatre gives you a certain unparalleled adrenaline rush; it's an actor's medium, which also allows you to gauge the reactions immediately—it's so liberating! Films are a director's medium; rather it is a very collaborative space where everybody is involved.

How did things come to fall in place for a movie like *Lipstick Under My Burkha*?

When you sign a film, you don't really think if it's going to be successful or not. You just read the script and decide if you want to take it up. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* came to me when I was still doing *Yudh*, but since I had no dates, I could not take it up then. A couple of months later, the casting agents called me up again to tell me that the film was still being cast for, and asked if I wanted to do it. Every film comes with its own fate and I feel my fate was attached with *Lipstick Under My Burkha*. It was a very challenging film to do, it really opened me up as a person, an actor as well as an artist. So, it was shocking when the film was banned initially. Finally, when it was cleared for release, Ekta Kapoor came together with us along with the other female producers. The film did not feel like a release, in fact, it seemed more like a movement of sorts. It was a small film that made money simply by the power of good cinema and

word-of-mouth publicity. End of the day, people will watch a good film, irrespective of the star cast.

It also brought you the Dadasaheb Phalke Excellence Award 2018 for the Most Promising Fresh Face of the Year...

I was ecstatic because I had really worked hard on the film and personally it made me more aware of my rights as a woman. Getting a Dadasaheb Phalke Award so early on is a fantastic feeling because it doesn't come easy. I am very grateful to the Smile Foundation for referring me to the jury, and giving me the award. My parents and I were seated amongst the biggest names of the industry. It's a day I shall treasure always.

There is a constant hunger in me to learn new things, pick new languages, see new cultures, eat new food and meet new people.

You now play Priyanka Gandhi in the *The Accidental Prime Minister*. What was your first thought when the script came to you? Were you interested right away or did you take time to lean into it?

I got a call from the casting director of the film. The director Hansal Mehta had seen me in *Inside Edge* wherein I had done a very small role. When I was first offered the role, I wondered if I resembled her at all.

But when I went for the look test, and they put me in a saree and placed the headgear, I could not believe the transformation! I had of course prepared well, watched a few of her interviews to gauge the way she talks, walks and behaves. I then put out the best version of myself out there. I bagged the role, I really did not read the script so much as I was sure I wanted to take up the role. It was a love-at-first-sight kind of situation for me. Later when I read the script, I was blown.

You also enjoy immense popularity in the digital space. How do you think the web has changed the face of entertainment in India?

I do enjoy my popularity in the digital space and it came



PHOTOGRAPHER: SHASHANK LAWATE; MAKE-UP & HAIR: LAKMÉ SALON; STYLIST: MOHITA ADHIA; LOCATION: LORD OF THE DRINKS, ANDHERI WEST, MUMBAI

Outfit: Shazzle by Shazia Naik
Jewellery: Minerali

For those like us, who don't come from *filmi* families, breaking in is a real challenge—we are constantly trying to find our paths and voices.

about when I did my first web show called *Chukyagiri*, I was in Baroda for a play and I remember a bunch of students came running to me screaming, “Hey, Rati, Rati, Rati”, based on the character I had played. When I took to watching web shows, I suddenly came across a large number of actors who I had done theatre with earlier, doing roles I could never imagine them doing. I also identified with the kind of content out there, which was not OTT like television today. I immediately took to the form. Like theatre, web too gives you instant gratification, where you are able to gauge the reaction almost immediately. I was getting to experiment with roles which I wouldn't get to do in popular Hindi cinema. The web has given immense power to young and talented content writers and directors. Today, you don't need to be in a big-budget film to be popular; you could very well enjoy immense popularity by doing great stuff on the internet.

Finally, what are we going to see Aahana in next?

I have done a very interesting film called *Yours Truly* with Soni Razdan and Pankaj Tripathi; Mahesh Bhatt too has a very special role in the film. I never thought I would share screen space with such wonderful and talented artists. Going forward, whatever you see me in will definitely be interesting, challenging and promising, because possibilities are endless. **NW**