

December 21, 2010

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Posted: December 8, 2010 03:46 PM

## The Emergence of an Indian Wanda Sykes

"Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a faraway land called India, I used to be a virgin," Radhika Vaz tells an audience over tea and cake.

"The second thing that I learned was that many, many men would not consider marrying a girl if she did not bring her hymen to the table," she continued, straightening the imaginary creases of her black and white dress.

The show is called *Unladylike* and her New York spectators begin laughing and hooting--louder and louder as the narrative proceeds to thrash out everything people don't talk about in polite company.

Women are pioneers in every facet of life in India from politics to entertainment. But 37-year-old Vaz is probably the first to perform risqué sketches, which could revolutionize what Indian comedians can say.

The comedic-actress explores the countless absurdities that women internalize to keep their boyfriends, husbands and themselves happy in a lifelong facade. There are tales of bikini-waxes, skinny jeans, bisexual fantasies and a superhuman control over farting.

"The point here is that sexism has found its way into a most basic biological function. We have the right to vote, but not the right to fart and relax about it," Vaz observed.



(Vaz)

While drawing inspiration from comedians like Wanda Sykes and Chelsea Handler, Vaz brings an original flavor to the comedy club. "It has the bitterness of tamarind with the heat of chilly," said Brock Savage, the 34-year-old from Maine who is the director of the skit.

The subject matter doesn't break new ground in the United States but it has the potential of being explosive when Vaz and Savage take their act to India. Change, however, may not be sweeping or welcome. To begin with, there are only a handful of female comedians in the country and there are limits to what can be joked about in public.

While smooching in movies has become okay, the government still bumps off shows with "vulgar language" from primetime slots, and in a widely reported incident Richard Gere sparked protests in 2007 when he kissed a Bollywood actress at a public rally.

India's cultural terrain can be tricky to decipher since there is no single rulebook. *Unladylike* may not be the mainstay of the country's 1.2 billion people but there are pockets of urban society who would relish it.

Before they head to India, Brock and Vaz will remove what absolutely cannot be said -- a process they call "desi it up."



(Brock and Vaz)

But the play isn't another formulaic funny spin on the Indian woman's sexual misadventures or the lack of them, which has become a stale topic for comedy. On the other hand, people in the cozy New York theater gave a thumbs-up to the honesty of the script that was relatable to everyone.

"You see, it is thanks to the porn industry that there exists a ridiculous stereotype of what a woman must look like when she climaxes," she told them.

"The truth is this. When I get that special feeling I look less like Jenna Jamison in *Clitty Clitty Gangbang* and more like Sir Daniel Day Lewis in *My Left Foot*. But of all sex is an illusion isn't it."

Vaz, who belongs to Goa and South India, spent her college days studying economics in Mumbai where many of these stories come from. "I had a deep admiration for 'sluts' during this time," she said, signaling quotes in the air.

Unlike second generation Western comedians with origins in India, Vaz doesn't play up the Asian card with the regular gags about the thick accents, arranged marriages and conservative parents.

Vaz's husband's family belongs to Haryana, a province in northern India, where female infanticide is rampant and women have few opportunities.

Surrounded by men, her mother-in-law still cuts a formidable figure in the family. "She is from a village but she raised three sons," said Vaz. "Older women manage to wield power even among the men."

Some of this comedy is inspired from what Vaz describes as the "sisterhood" of daughters, mothers, and aunts, which can be a power plug for women in male-dominated communities.

"I have seen my sisters-in law and my mother-in-law with her sisters ... when they get together they say anything and can really rip the men," she said.

Women get funnier and bolder with age, according to the comedian, who explained that "being closer to 40" helps when talking to strangers about body hair, celluloid thighs and sagging breasts.

"On some days I think I can be more than the Gap. And at times like that I forget my station in life and wander in to the Abercrombie & Fitch store on Fifth Avenue," she said, narrating a delicious expedition of pulling trendy jeans over a "jelly bum" with Lady Gaga's music egging her on.

"I know that the next day I will go to the Abercrombie & Fitch store in South Street Seaport ... and then I will

humbly go back to the Gap," Vaz confessed.

*You can catch Vaz for one last show of Unladylike on Dec 10 at The Producers Club.*

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