

## The Naming Game: V.V. Raman's Comedy:

### "What's in a Name?"

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Words are nothing, if they don't have feeling. This is just one message in V.V. Raman's recent play "**what's in a name?**", that premiered on May 18<sup>th</sup> in dinner-theatre fashion at the India Community Center in Penfield New York. Accompanied by laughter and learning, the production was repeated the next two nights. The play appeared under the auspices of *Kalidas*, the Indo-American Community Theater Group of Rochester and was directed by Baal Bhagat, an accomplished director and actor in his own right. Bhagat's theatre career began at the University of Bombay and has flowered at several venues in the U.S. For this multi-culti play Bhagat – and Raman – took pains to find actors fit for the parts, ethnically and linguistically.

As all his friends know, Dr. V. V. Raman, Emeritus Professor of Physics and Humanities at the Rochester Institute of Technology, has long watched his P's and Q's., that is, his Quarks and Puns. In this comedy, wordplay – his stock in trade – serves the advancement of the human. At every turn in the play there is a misunderstood word here, an interpolated concept there. Kalamazoo becomes "kamala zoo." Would that be a patch of lotus flowers or a gaggle of women? Throughout the full length drama Raman keeps us hopping to make quick sense of misunderstood words, appropriate and mis/appropriated cultural and sometimes religious sensibilities

Raman's plot references three national-cultural spheres: Kalamazoo (USA), Italy; India. The chance for missteps is already given. Add much that makes us different (personalities, diverging religious inclinations, culinary dogmas, body languages, accents, ancient or not-so-ancient *shibboleths*, three worlds), and two family groups could be ready to implode. It will happen when two sets of parents arrive on the doorstep of their respective married son and daughter to name the first child. The name must be Catholic Italian; the name must be Hindu Indian, all that within a surrogate culture: Secular American. (Would you be eagerly awaiting your parents and in-laws to settle the matter in the Kalamazoo apartment complex where your neighbors could hear everything?)

The plot commences: Srini (Milind Phadke), a Tamilian, and Angela (Christine Wade), an Italian, themselves young immigrants, are expecting their firstborn. It's already a good sign both can take a joke,

as each uses words to say what is not true; it's only April Fools Day. But more seriously, they must choose a name for their expected daughter. Here is the axis of the play upon which all the rest turns. Their humorous but patently uncomedic behavior will get them through. They are calm, unflappable young people who can apply reason to their dilemma, be it about child naming or where to set house plants. Here Raman's dramatic creation hints at the Brechtian "*Lehrstück*," or teaching piece, that intends for theatre-goers to do more than laugh; they must think.

Enter the widowed gynecologist Dr. Dev (Samir Kumar) and Latika Bose (Shrabani Bhowmick), his woman friend recently divorced. Dev is kind and straightforward; Bose is kind and caught up with her karma, also conversant with house plants. (We already sense that these two will get along, despite their intra-cultural differences.)

Theatrically, as a variation on the immigrant experience, they balance Srini and Angela. The *Sitz im Leben* of both couples hints early at the gradual transformation of root ethnic practices, and therewith the proper relationship of culturally laden names and rituals to the deep, essential human values they are made to serve.

The setting then shifts to the home of Srini's



parents in Chennai.

They are the Ayyangars of this drama.

Nalini Ayyangar (Janani Parthasarathi), remains, for a good part of the evening,

true to her dualistic upbringing: no, nary the twain shall meet for her. Nalini is everyone's mother. She is so lovingly sure of herself, that we must immediately say yes, however she pontificates. Venkatakrishna Ayyangar (Shiva Ramaswami), or Prabhu, her husband, believes it all as well. He loves his newspapers, likes to believe what's in black and white, but may not take things as seriously in future.

The other architectonic balance in the play to the American family friends (Dev and Bose), is the couple Devdas Savarkar (Rajesh Mehta) and Anandi

Savarkar (Lakshmi Rao), whose daughter had married a Muslim. (We don't know if he is a Sunni or Shiite. Anyway, I have it on good testimony that these factions in Chennai get along socially but still rarely intermarry.) Devdas and Anandi try to convince Nalini that her Ayyangar son is not lost to a (Catholic) Christian. Would she have been as displeased if Srinini had married an Ayyar – in Chennai? One wonders. Srinini's baby girl must have a good Hindu name, nothing concatenated with Christian sounds. The Savarkars cannot convince Nalini. Prabhu is flummoxed.

The baby – the *bambina* – is soon to be born. The Italians are next. Mother (in-law) Susanna Previtali (Lori Nolasco) arrives from abroad along with her husband Roberto Previtali (Antonio Toscano), her agreeable husband, as it should be. Her Catholic Italian world binds her as strongly to the name she chooses for her grandchild, *Eugenia* ("well born"), as to the name-giving ritual of *christening*. No less is true for Nalini, who then arrives with Prabhu, shored up to stand diplomatically by her side, as best he can. She must have her Hindu ritual *namakarana* and the name of *Sujata*, the name of Srinini's grandmother. Srinini had already paved the way by suggesting the name. And after all,



the family to feel equally involved?

At this point the plot, with its convolutions on words, names and life-affirming rites begs for a *deus ex machina*, who graciously appears in the person of Professor (who else?) Vachaspati Sharma (Tarun Kothari) to set things aright. He patiently and soothingly explains the sameness of putative human difference by translating the names Sujata and Eugenia into English.

See, things are not so different or "other" after



all. Is it right, then that we should demand and have what we've always possessed ritually and have only known, to the exclusion of others?

Given time and opportunity, Angela and Srinini could (would?) themselves have righted all things within the extended and multi-cultural family, even without an intellectual boost. Hooray for cool, young heads. Are our children really direct extensions of ourselves? Raman's comedy nudges us close to Khalil Gibran on children, when he asserts in a poem: "And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts. For they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls. For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams."

### An Interview with the playwright, Dr. Raman

by Indu Maitra

#### 1. What inspired you to write the play?

Dr. Padmanabh Kamath expressed the wish to see a play relating to Indians in America, and challenged writers in the community to come up with such a play.

#### 2. Did you find someone who provided some constructive criticism that helped?

Shyamal Mitra provided many valuable suggestions. Then there is my close friend and companion of 45 years Marilu

#### 3. Do you believe that literature is the reflection of life?

Of course. I was conscious that I was portraying people and mind-sets of different periods, but I felt that some of the fundamental traits of the human condition are always the same: prejudice, imagining one's own culture/religion to be superior to others, yet beginning to respect and like others when there are personal encounters, and discovering that there is goodness everywhere, etc.

#### 4. Did you use your life experience to create some situations and characters?

In 1980 I accompanied my father to a close Ayyangar friend of ours in Chennai. My father had been invited to, bring some good sense, to a 22-year old in the family who wanted to marry an Ayyar girl he had met in college. I witnessed that conversation. It made a great impact on me.

#### 5. What is the genre of your play?

It is a comedy with a message, something that makes people laugh and also reflect.

#### 6. After knowing the fact that you have created a very successful play, please explain your present feelings.

I feel very fulfilled, and am very grateful to Padmanabh Kamath, Baal Bhagat, and to all the very fine and enthusiastic players who gave so much of their time and energy to transform my lines on paper into such a lively and enjoyable performance.

