

# BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY CARLOS RODRIGUEZ MARTORELL

From Harlem to the streets of Baghdad, all the world's a stage for actress, playwright and "artist" Kayhan Irani—literally.

The dreamy-eyed 28-year-old New Yorker of Indian descent has been involved in dozens of plays and artistic actions advocating social justice. Her celebrated one-woman show, "We've Come Undone," has toured colleges and community centers nationwide.

The series of monologues first staged in 2003 portrays the struggles faced by Arab, Muslim and South Asian communities following 9/11 in a suddenly hostile America. For instance, a young girl experiences bewilderment at her father's disappearance after being interrogated by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

After the performances, Irani normally receives the gratitude of audience members for giving voice to their story.

"Ever since I was little, I had this idea that your life is to serve a greater world," she says in her cozy apartment in Harlem.

"Also, it's a very important part of my work," explains Irani, who is a Zoroastrian, a millenary creed founded in ancient Persia. "The tenets are good thoughts, good words and good deeds. It's not only about having happy thoughts; it has a lot of social justice ethics. Those are also essential ideas to her work."

Irani facilitates artistic workshops for colleges and community organizations such as the Riverside Church, Suffolk Law School, Communities of Faith for Housing and the International Rescue Committee.

She also finds time to do street performances in Harlem or attend protests against the Darfur genocide in Washington.

"Art is such a powerful medium to explore understanding," says Irani, who calls herself an "artist."

"You can say, 'Okay, terrorists, people of the Middle East...' but you don't understand what their life consists of every day."

"Through theater or the arts, people are able to suspend that kind of judgment, whatever it may be, and they can actually somehow connect and care. Even if they hate the character, they want to see how it ends."

Anny Bakalian, author and associate director of City University of New York's Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center, said Irani's play has made a difference for an increasingly isolated population.

"She captured the dilemma of people caught in the 9/11 backlash with accuracy and compassion. What is



Kayhan Irani play, "We've Come Undone," has been playing to audiences around the nation since 2003.

ANGEL CHEVRETT

## ARTIVIST WITH A CAUSE

Indian-American Artist Raises Awareness Through Her Theater

more amazing is that she managed with her writing and acting to explain to her audience the human side of governmental initiatives," says Bakalian.

In search of this human side of conflict, Irani traveled to Iraq in February 2004 with the pacifist organization Code Pink and held theater workshops with children.

"Somehow I needed to see what was going on," she says. "I thought, how can I not be doing more?"

On Nov. 18, Irani will premiere her latest play, "7 Women, 7 Heavens," at the ASMA Society in Manhattan. The new piece exposes "different scenarios of women in Islam who are trying to exert their right to self-actualization," says Irani, who will not act this time.

Kayhan Irani was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), but her family soon moved to Iran. When she was 3 they fled an Iranian revolution unfriendly to non-Muslims and settled in New York.

Irani grew up in Queens, at the border of Forest Hills and Rego Park, sharing a one-bedroom apartment with her brother and her parents. "And, on top of that, we would have people who came to live with us!" she remembers with a glint of nostalgia. "For my parents, there was always room as long as you had an open heart."

At home, she would speak Gujarati and eat Indian food, only to discover another colorful universe across the door: her Korean, Puerto Rican, Chinese and Jewish neighbors. The perfect environment for a would-be actress: "I think I am good with accents anyway, but I was able to pick up a lot of accents and gestures."

Her artistic passion grew in her very early, and she swears that her first memory ever is in a preschool class, trying on clothes and making up characters and stories.

"My first instinct was to make theater, and ever since I first remember I was doing it," she says. She had bold ideas, too. A play she put on in school in the fourth grade was about an abused woman involved in the suffragette movement.

The natural career choice was show business, so she enrolled in the High School of Performing Arts (the "Fame" school). But she felt disillusioned after it.

"I thought it was a very self-serving industry," she says, and she didn't replug with her early passion until years later, when she got acquainted with Brazilian Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed.

"I realized: Wow, this is exactly what I was looking for! It says: Theater is a tool for communication, a way to analyze problems and understand the world better."

After 9/11, she got deeply concerned by the social retaliation it sparked. The law that forced all immigrants from Arab countries to register and get interviewed by the government was the catalyst for "We've Come Undone."

"These people are contributing members of our society," she says. "Nobody was saying, 'Hey wait a minute that's my friend, that's my neighbor.' In fact, the opposite."

In "We've Come Undone," she doesn't only play dramatic characters. There is also room for humor in the rant of an INS officer. "What terrorist is going to stand in line for eight hours?" she fumes.

"I wrote it for my country and for the society I live in. I thought, how could we just enter into a round where no one talks to each other, where people are suspicious of their next-door neighbors?"

Irani is now back in college, majoring in theater and social change at CUNY. As for the future, she wishes only to do more work and training internationally.

And no, although she wouldn't mind working in a mainstream production to raise money for her work, she is not planning to become a star.

How to measure success, then?

"Success is raising awareness," she says carefully, after some hesitation. "The more people who get to hear about an issue and think about it and maybe even discuss it, the better."

For more information on Kayhan Irani's performances visit [www.artivista.org](http://www.artivista.org)

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Thursday, November 9, 2006