

## *Interview with Rizwan Manji*

*Rizwan Manji, 36, is married to Taslim with one child, Ayana, and another one on the way. They live in Studio City, CA.*

**Sameera Gokal: For how long have you been in the acting career? When did you start?**

**Rizwan Manji:** I went to acting school in New York at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. I graduated in 1995 and have been acting ever since. It was mainly theater at first and then slowly independent films, and TV started happening more and more.

**SG: What motivated you to go into the field of acting?**

**RM:** I think ever since I started Junior High School and got cast in my first play, I knew this was what I wanted to do. Once I got my first laugh it was very clear I wanted to be an actor.

**SG: What was your first act in?**

**RM:** In Junior High School I got cast in a one-act play called "Final Curtain." I played a dimwitted detective who needs the help of his wife to solve a murder case.

**SG: How many acts have you done in your career as an actor?**

**RM:** I don't have an exact number so I will just say a lot. I have been really lucky and have gotten a chance to be in a lot of theatrical productions.

**SG: What are some of your strengths and weaknesses as an actor?**

**RM:** Strengths as an actor: I feel like I have good instincts, especially when it comes to comedy. I also feel like I can find the serious moments in comedy and vice versa.

Weaknesses as an actor: I am very impatient and try to find the quickest way to get the joke and sometimes don't do all the work I should do. I also need to improve on memorizing my lines quicker. With working 5 days a week for 13 hours a day (with sometimes same day script changes), I feel I am getting more practice and getting better at it.

**SG: Could you please describe your most recent acting job?**

**RM:** I play Rajiv Gidwani, the assistant manager of a call center in India, on the NBC sitcom, "Outsourced." It is the first sitcom ever on national television in America to feature a primarily South Asian cast. It is currently the number 1 new show on NBC and is on the famous Must-See-TV Thursday line-up that has featured shows such as "The Cosby Show," "Friends," "Seinfeld" and "Cheers."

**SG: What are the relationships among the cast?**

**RM:** There is a great camaraderie amongst the cast. We surprisingly all get along really well, and I think that is partly what makes the show work. Ken Kwapis, the director of the pilot, thought it was very important that we felt comfortable as a cast. So, prior to shooting, he arranged for all of us to go and have a day at a Karaoke place so we could all sing and get to know each other. As for my opinions about the cast, they have all very quickly become very close friends, and I think they are all brilliant in their roles.

**SG: Why do you like your job?**

**RM:** It hasn't always been easy being an actor. There has been a lot of rejection and long stretches without employment. However, I wouldn't change it for the world. I love creating new characters and making people laugh. I feel very fortunate to now be able to perform on a regular basis. Rajiv is a fun character to play because, though he is mean a lot of the time, he also gets those moments where he surprises you and shows some vulnerability. It is always fun to play characters that have a lot of levels.

**SG: Are you the only South Asian person in the cast? On the set?**

**RM:** As I mentioned, "Outsourced" is the first sitcom with a primarily South Asian cast, so in this rare instance, I am one of 5 series regulars who are "brown" in the cast. Besides "American Desi," another set I was on with a lot of "brown" actors, this is the only other instance I can remember on screen that I have had the opportunity to act with so many South Asian actors in major roles.

**SG: So, how does it feel to be one of the few prominent "BROWN" actors in Hollywood?**

**RM:** There are a lot of us in Hollywood these days, and I think it is a lot easier to get work now than it was when I first started in this business over a decade ago. It is still a struggle, but there are more and more "brown" actors showing up in sitcoms, dramas and films. A South Asian actress from London just won an Emmy Award so things are definitely looking up.

**SG: How do your co-stars feel about your religion? About Muslims and Islam?**

**RM:** Being an Ismaili Muslim is a very important part of my life. I have always been part of the volunteer corps, and last year I was the Principal of the Religious Education Center (REC) at our Jamat Khana [house of worship] in the San Gabriel Valley. I hope that it has instilled in me a moral and ethical compass that not only guides me through my career but in all aspects of my life. I never hide the fact that I am a Muslim. Everyone on the set knows that I am a Muslim. We actually have a character in the show that is a Muslim who is played, but I talented a Hindu (ironically, I am a Muslim playing a devout Hindu), and there have been a couple of instances where the producers have asked my opinion (knowing I am a Muslim) on what that character may or may not do in a scene.

**SG: Has any aspect of your faith ever entered your work?**

**RM:** I have played Muslims on TV and Film (American Desi, Charlie Wilson's War, Without a Trace, etc). I didn't write these characters but simply was cast and brought my personal take on them, but nevertheless, they were Muslim characters. It has always been a tricky situation with

current political situation navigating the "terrorist" roles that came up. For the longest time, I would turn down auditions for "terrorist" roles because being Muslim, I did not want to perpetuate a stereotype. However, I did play the role of Ahman in the final season of "24." Many may argue with my rationale, but I felt that in that season of "24" they had an entire story line that focused on Muslim characters that were portrayed in a positive light, so it was ok to portray a villain in that instance. Sometimes in order to see the good, you also need to see the bad.

**SG: How do other Muslims feel about your career?**

**RM:** The Ismailis here and in Canada that I know have been very supportive of my career. People have thrown "Outsourced" viewing parties. Everyone in the Jamat Khana I go to watches the show, and Ismailis have been helping publicize it on Facebook and Twitter. The cast and myself have also been asked to be special guests at the Partnership Walk in Los Angeles. So to answer your question, I think there has been tremendous support from the Ismaili Muslims that I know.

**SG: How do they feel about your character on the show?**

**RM:** I initially auditioned for the role of "Gupta" and went on to screen test, and I eventually lost that part to the awesome Parvesh Cheena. I think at the end of the day, I got the part that fit me the best. I love Rajiv Gidwani, and as I mentioned earlier, it is precisely because he has so many levels. He has the back story of an engagement to the woman he has always loved, and his diabolical quest to become manager makes him a great antagonist to the lead character. I could hands down say this is one of the most enjoyable characters I have had a chance to play!

**SG: Do you have input on the scripts?**

**RM:** The short answer is no. A third of the writing staff, however, is Indian so there is definitely input and creativity from a South Asian contingent. Every now and then they will ask us our thoughts, but I have full confidence in the writers and they have been developing some hysterical scripts.

**SG: If you could, would you change anything about the show or your character?**

**RM:** In all honesty, we are currently shooting episode 11, and I am having so much fun that as of yet there has not been anything that I would change. It has been a great ride so far.

**SG: What advice would you give to aspiring actors?**

**RM:** My advice to aspiring actors would be to follow your passion. Having said that, know that if you are becoming an actor to get famous or make a lot of money, then this is not the business for you. The majority of my career, I have made far less than most people on an annual basis, and this is the case for many actors. The reason other actors and myself continue to stay in the business, despite all this, is that we have a passion for the actual work.