

Q & A with Anjul Nigam and Sid Veda, MetroPCS's "Ranjit and Chad"

What kind of work do you do outside of the MetroPCS ads?

Anjul Nigam: I'm fortunate and blessed to have been making a living as an actor based out of Los Angeles for over seventeen years now. Much of my work is in television, including a recurring on "Grey's Anatomy" (as Psych ["Dr. Raj"](#)) and on JIMMY KIMMEL LIVE! (as the lead in the quartet of ["Indian Call Center Guys"](#)).

Beyond my work as an actor, I am a founding partner at [Brittany House Pictures](#), where we have several projects in various stages of development.

Sid Veda: Outside of the MetroPCS ads, as well as the rest of Hollywood, I work in support for a Financial Software company in NYC. I help I-Bankers structure municipal bond deals with a program called DBC Finance. In 2010, every vacation day I took was a break from tech support to pretend to be a tech/phone supporter for MetroPCS and "Outsourced." My life has a theme, apparently.

What's your favorite one so far?

Anjul Nigam: So far, my favorite spot for the "Tech & Talk" ads is ["Solo."](#) I loved shooting this one because we got a chance to really let loose in it, and it's not too often I get to be an air-guitar rock star!

Sid Veda: That's tough... some of the more popular ones (["Solo,"](#) ["Spicy News."](#) and a couple others) were rather painful to shoot for me. It's not like I have memory-pains or recurring bruises or anything, but I think I prefer [the one with the Mongoose](#). I got a good rolling "rrrrrr" whilst petting that thing.

I read somewhere that there was a lot of competition for the roles, with hundreds of actors auditioning. What were they looking for at the auditions?

Anjul Nigam: I was very lucky with regard to the audition process. As is standard for a commercial, I was put on tape at the first audition which was then presented to the triumvirate of decision-makers: the director (Jim Hosking), the ad agency (The Richards Group) and the client (MetroPCS).

However, as the director knew me from another commercial (Comcast) he had directed me in, and the ad agency knew me from a series of Super Bowl Bud Light spots I had done, and the client knew me from "Grey's Anatomy," it was decided that I would not be brought in for a callback session, particularly since they were seeking an unrecognizable face. However, when the three parties could not agree on one actor for the role of "Ranjit", and they all already knew my work from before, they cast me from just the tape. And in order to maintain their vision of unrecognizability, they decided to make me look very different from any of my other work... this explains the "Ranjit" look!

Sid Veda: Between the first round and the callbacks, I saw at least a dozen actors whom I know personally, and the ads would have been just as funny with any of them instead of me. I am so fortunate that the brand of idiocy I put on tape while doing "bad robot dance" (the only kind I know, by the way) resonated with the right person. The spots are written and directed so well that Anjul and I get much freedom to play with ideas. As he and I have very good chemistry and crack up at pretty much the same things, some of the sillier things we do end up in the finished product. That always gives me a warm tingly

feeling inside my heartballs.

In a Buzzine Bollywood interview one of the ad's writers, Kiran Koshy, says Ranjit and Chad are based on real people. What direction did you get for portraying Ranjit and Chad and how did you develop the character's accent and zany qualities? Is Chad a nickname or short for anything?

Anjul Nigam: By real people, I believe Kiran means the characters are based on the saturation of H-1 visa holders from India in Silicon Valley. They are super intelligent, technology enthusiasts and often have heavy accents based on having been raised in India. Sometimes their sense of style is a little dated or even middle-aged, which they in fact are. I was born in India myself, and although I was raised in the US, my household was quite traditionally Indian. In fact, I grew up speaking in Hindi with my parents at home, so the Indian accent has always been of easily accessible for me. Probably the most important direction we receive regarding the characters is to really enjoy ourselves... these guys love what they do (host a talk show where they get to talk about technology!) and they're at the top of their game.

Sid Veda: Interestingly, Chad's accent, if not his entire person, is based on a South Indian and Kiran has worked hard with me to nail the hint of dialect/accents he had in mind. He and Jason, the other writer, are extremely helpful in communicating goals and message. As for the zaniness, much of that comes from the deep recesses of the director, Jim Hosking's mind. For some of the more challenging spots to shoot, I would be trying to follow direction or suggestions as they're being shouted out thinking "why the why do we have to shoot a bunch of noise that will never make air?!?" When I see the finished product for the first time, I am always like "OOOOOOOOHHHH... that's why he wanted me to lick the amplifier!" I am happy to take so much of the credit that Jim actually deserves for Chad's dancing skills.

And yes, just like Sid is short for Sridhar, Chad is short for something. That's all you need to know at this time.

The ads have been running for a while now! They play a lot on TV and the web and even aired during the Super Bowl. Do people recognize you from the ads? Have they helped you get work?

Anjul Nigam: The exposure from the ads is probably more than anything I've experienced before. It's quite interesting. One of the first things people ask is if I actually use MetroPCS. The answer is yes... the company has been generous to provide both of us with their top tier phones, and we've quickly learned, like our characters, that MetroPCS is an excellent cell phone provider! The recognizability factor has been helpful in opening some doors for work. For example, I had a meeting for a television series that Imagine Entertainment was behind, and the show's creator felt I was too young to play the character they were casting. However, the creator's bosses, David Nevin (Imagine's President of Television) and Ron Howard (Imagine's co-founding partner), requested to meet with me based on knowing me from the ads; they knew I would be able to play the age the character required. I ended up getting the role, but eventually the network, which had more authority than Imagine, decided to change the role to Korean.

Sid Veda: Because Chad's look is very different from mine (it's a fake mustache. And I hardly ever shape my hair like a bullet is exiting my skull), I have only been recognized a handful of times over the last couple years. The funniest times have been when friends and family have found out that I am Chad from over-hearing someone talk about it and responded with "WHAT?!? I have known you for 20 years and didn't know that's you in those ads I see all the time!"

** Please note, those exclamation points were my choice. I do not mean to imply they were any more or

less excited than regular ol' sentences with periods.

I have heard of a few cases where Chad has either helped me into a room or, in one case, a job. I feel like I graduated to rooms I didn't really belong in before (in terms of competitors' resumes). Which is nice.

I've noticed different reactions to the ads, including people variously finding them 1) light-hearted and hilarious, 2) unfunny racist stereotypes, and/or 3) politically-charged ironic sendups of ethnic caricatures. What's your take on the ads? Given these responses, do you have any regrets about working in them?

Sid Veda: No regrets whatsoever! We made two silly characters to pitch a terrific telecomm deal; we are not making a statement about 1 billion Indians. The fact that Ranjit and Chad were born to pitch the most cost-effective deal in celluworld (by far) is a blessing.

And seriously... having worked in tech support since 2000 (as well as in telemarketing for Stanley Steemer in college), how offended should I be by the stereotype?

Anjul Nigam: I have absolutely no regrets about working on the campaign. On the one hand, humor is subjective, so if someone finds the ads unfunny, then I know it's not the kind of humor that person responds to. For example, I'm not a fan of toilet humor, and am usually turned off by content that contains it; but I'm not judgmental of it.

Meanwhile, I find the negative response is often misplaced. Perhaps, sometimes people have a knee-jerk reaction to things they believe are caricatures, but it's important to remember that every stereotype is based on a certain reality. Personally, I have known many Indians who are very much like Ranjit and Chad, their accents, style, energy, etc. And yet still, beyond that, for me an accent is merely an extension of a character's wardrobe. I don't ever hear anyone finding Hugh Jackson's Australian accent denigrating. It's all a matter of perception.

The more relevant concern regarding characters is whether they are three-dimensional? Do they have a beginning, middle, and end? Do they fit in the story arc in a way that it moves it along and is integral to it? Of course, it's one thing if a character is perpetuating a negative stereotype which often occurs when the character is on the fringes of the story arc and its main role is to quickly fulfill an idea the audience has a preconception of; there is no development of character involved. But when a role is significant and substantial, the stereotype is often used as a tool to give a wink to the audience that says, "let's have a little fun with these guys we know you've seen before." We (Ranjit and Chad) do have a beginning, middle and end; we do have a certain character arc the creators are building toward.

With regard to racism, it's worth taking a look the cultural immersion of other ethnicities, each which have their own set of challenges and advantages. For example, twenty years after the Civil Rights era, African American filmmaker Robert Townsend made a movie called HOLLYWOOD SHUFFLE, which satirized the racial stereotypes of African Americans in film and television. A significant portion of the black population in America had achieved a certain position in American society, and it was being depicted in content like "The Cosby Show." Townsend's film was a no holds barred depiction that Townsend was able to make through humor. In the same light, Indians are now one of the most successful minorities in the US, a group that continues to have an increasingly greater presence in the forefront of technology, business and media. If we are not in a place to have fun with ourselves, I don't know who is.