
Asian American Art Oral History Project

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Danny Pudi Interview

Shariq Jefferi

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Interviewer: Shariq Jefferi
Artist: Danny Pudi
Phone interview Los Angeles, CA/Chicago, IL
Date: June 1, 2009 7:00pm

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring quarter 2009 as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History** research project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design/Director Asian American Studies*

Shariq: I am actually very happy and excited to be interviewing you today. I want to start off by asking if you can tell me a little bit about yourself.

Danny: I am an actor/comedian. I was born and raised in Chicago. As far as my education, I achieved my undergraduate degree from Marquette University in Wisconsin and then completed The Second City's Conservatory program in Chicago. I moved to California about 3 and a half years ago to pursue the acting profession. I am half Polish and half Indian. I bet you don't see that too often. My mother is Polish and father is Indian. Growing up I was influenced much from my Polish side, but not as much from my Indian side. I grew up in a Polish household. I spoke Polish with my grandparents, attended Polish school, and learned Polish dancing. I love 80's music. One of my favorite bands is, Tears for Fears.

Shariq: How would you identify yourself?

Danny: This is kind of a tricky question. I never identified myself as anything. People have always been very interested to know what I am, even strangers. After I would tell them that I am half Polish and half Indian, people would feel a sense of comfort because they now knew! I even felt comforted knowing that now they had a feeling of comfort. Like they just figured out a riddle or puzzle. I generally consider myself an American. But if I had to choose one culture that I identify with I would say that I am more Polish than Indian just because I was raised in a Polish household. My parents were divorced at an early age and I grew up with my Polish mother. I have traveled to Poland. I speak Polish. Over the years I have been able to learn more about my Indian culture, but I didn't grow up in a traditional Indian household. I consider myself a multicultural person, a young male comedian with a twist. Being Polish and Indian I feel has helped me in some ways with my career. It definitely helps to be unique and see things from a different perspective. It helps me to be able to relate to things easier than a person of one race might. It also is a great ice-breaker when I first meet people!

Shariq: Can you tell me a little about "Siblings of Doctors?"

Danny: In Chicago I used to perform with Stir-Friday night, an Asian-American Sketch Comedy & Improv Troupe, and really started to miss it when I moved to Los Angeles. I spoke with a couple of my former cast members (Rasika Mathur & Ranjit Souri) and we decided we should put something together. We all really missed working in collaboration. Being in California and trying to work and create a collaborative show is more challenging and often turns to be more business like. Us three, Rasika, Ranjit, and

myself came up with, “Siblings of Doctors.” Rasika and Ranjit are both Indian as well. You get it? They both have performed solo as well. Because Ranjit lives in Chicago, all three of us would be on the phone together for rehearsals and writing sessions, just giving each other ideas for the show. That was almost two years ago. Since then we have performed in comedy festivals in Chicago, L.A., and San Francisco. We were asked at times if this show was only for Indians. We always have to tell people that it is for everyone to enjoy.

Shariq: How did you come up with your title?

Danny: All three of us would come up with 10 names for the group. Then each of us would vote on each others two favorites and at the end of it all “Siblings of Doctors” won as the title!

Shariq: Is there any meaning behind the title, “Siblings of Doctors?”

Danny: Yes there is. Ranjit’s father is a doctor, Rasika’s sister is a doctor, and my parents would have liked me to have become a doctor. In the Indian culture, like many other Asian cultures, parents often encourage their children to be doctors. The actor/comedian career path is not looked upon as favorably. And since we are all Indian and not doctors, we thought this title made perfect sense. I was actually very fortunate to have a mother who motivated me to become what I am today, and a family that always supported my career choice. Here's my theory for why so many Asians are doctors, lawyers and engineers. Often times immigrant families struggle to get to America in order to build a better life for their children. Medicine, Science, Law...these are all seen as noble professions with guaranteed income. Acting/Comedy isn't at the top of the Noble or Guaranteed Income lists. They're looking out for their kids and I can't blame them. But I think that this is slowly changing in our society and we are realizing that we don't have to limit ourselves. There are many other paths to success and happiness.

Shariq: Do you ever address Asian American identity in any of the work you have done?

Danny: I was actually able to learn more about my Indian culture through entertainment. In Stir-Friday Night and now with Siblings of Doctors I am constantly learning new things about my culture and our tendencies, such as Bollywood films and the phenomenon of shirts with no collars. On television and film, I have also played the character/role of a Middle Eastern, Pakistani, and Indian person. I have been part of the Diwali festival in college at Marquette University where I learned about Indian dance and music. “Siblings of Doctors” actually performed for a large Indian non-profit organization named Pratham. This organization helps children with literacy. Bill Gates has donated as well to this organization. A Pratham survey carried out in 2005 found that although 94 percent of children were enrolled in school, close to 40 percent of them did not know the alphabet and could not count up to 10 after six months of basic education, about half could not read paragraphs after five years of study, and only about 12-14 percent of Indian students went on to complete 10 years of education.

Shariq: Have you ever been offered a role in which you felt that you could not accept because it was offensive to the Asian American side of you?

Danny: I don't want to be the guy that just does the Indian accent and walks out unless there is a specific reason for me to do that in my role. I do not want people laughing at us but with us. I don't decide to do something unless I feel like I can learn something from it. Personally I like to play smart and nerdy characters which have nothing to do with being Indian. I believe that the media portrayal of Asians is getting better. Ten to fifteen years ago I don't think you would see such a thing, where there are the amount of well written roles for Arabs and Indians. And if there was, it was a small part portraying something different than what is portrayed today. I am very fortunate enough that I have never been put in such a position where I had to say no to a role.

Shariq: So you are currently working on a new sitcom on NBC called, "Community," can you tell me a bit about that?

Danny: I am playing a half Palestinian and half white student who is very much fun-loving, energetic, and a bit socially awkward. I feel a bit nostalgic because my character loves the 80's and so do I. I am very excited about working with Chevy Chase and Joel McHale, as well as the entire creative team which is extremely talented. In the half-hour sitcom I tend to have a big brother little brother relationship with the main character Jeff (Joel McHale). This sitcom is something that I am very proud of in my career.

Shariq: For my last question, do you think you have reached your ultimate goal in your career?

Danny: I am always trying to get better as an actor and always striving for more. One day I want to be able to play a lead role in a movie where I am torn between Jessica Biel and Natalie Portman and viewers won't actually think that it's weird. I am always trying to challenge myself in new ways and every role is different, so I don't know if I will ever be totally satisfied, but I am very happy with where I am at. Besides Community, I am in a film called Road Trip 2 which is being released this August straight on DVD. I also enjoy playing dramatic roles. On the TV show "ER" for instance, I had a dramatic role as a Turkish character.

Shariq: Well Danny, I don't have anymore questions for you. It was a pleasure talking to you and always exciting to see you nationally on TV.

Danny: No problem at all and thank you. It was nice talking to you too. Talk to you soon. Take care.

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