

Calling Kal

Starring in the cult comedy film series *Harold & Kumar* while also making his name known on the film festival circuit for *The Namesake*, Kal Penn is no ABCD. This talented actor tells SONA CHARAIPOTRA that he's ready to conquer Hollywood - and US Congress - even without a turban.

Like many of her fellow desis, director Mira Nair had never heard of Kal Penn.

Luckily, her 16-year-old son Zohran did. So when Nair was casting her critically-lauded adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's best-seller *The Namesake*, he was Kal's best agent. "Every night before bed Zohran would say to Mira, 'Mom have you auditioned Kal Penn yet?'" recalls Penn, 31, who had tried to no avail to score an audition for the critical role of Gogul Ganguli, the novel's angst-ridden all-American son of Indian parents. Rumours were that Abhishek Bachchan had the part locked up. "The reason that I finally got the audition for *The Namesake* is because her son Zohran is a huge fan of *Harold & Kumar go to White Castle*."

And he's not the only one. "I always get recognized as Kumar. The film has a bit of a cult following. But it's a mix. Brown people, kids who saw the movie," says Penn, "and cops! While we were shooting *The Namesake* in Yonkers, these two white police officers came up to me with a *Harold & Kumar* DVD and were like, 'Hey man, can you sign this for us?' It's cool to see that it transcends type that way. I'll be signing it when I'm 80."

The cult hit, which did respectably on DVD, quickly spawned a sequel, *Harold & Kumar*:

Escape from Guantanamo Bay, which was released this month in the United States. "We still had no budget, so it's really a project you do for the love of it," says Penn. "But it's so refreshing to see Asian characters as the heroes rather than the sidekicks."

Having worked his way up as "a live-action version of *The Simpsons*' Apu" in films like

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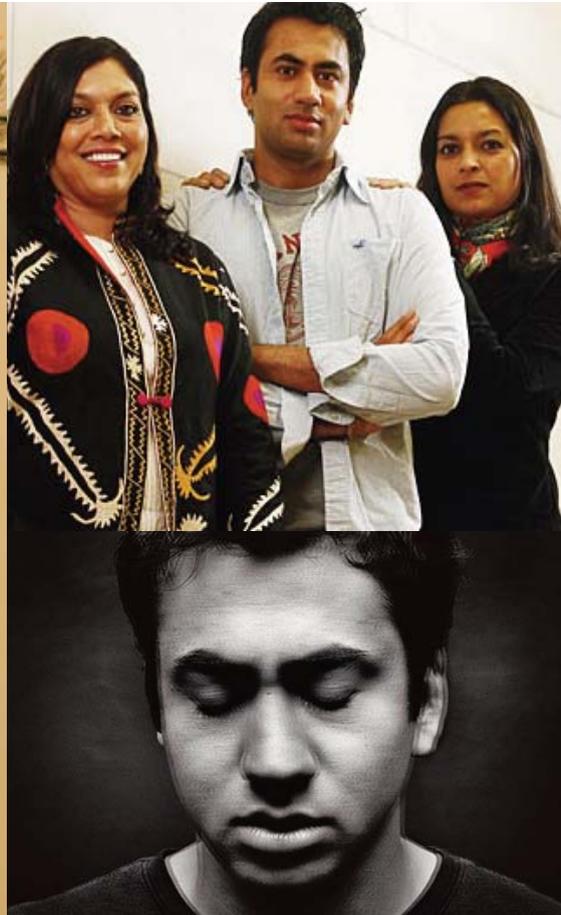
National Lampoon's Van Wilder, *Malibu's Most Wanted* and in a four-episode arc as the terrorist-next-door on *24*, Penn appreciates the opportunity to play an Indian-American character who isn't a stereotype. But it hasn't been easy getting there. "Every single agent who I met with or auditioned for said you'll never work because you're not white or

black," says Penn. "And I said really? So we're not at the point in American society where we're looking for content of people's character or talent? We're just looking at what they look like? And they said this is Hollywood."

He remembers one particularly demoralizing audition. "I went to read for this commercial. The assistant looked at me and said, really loud, really slow, 'You need to sign in here.' So I said, 'Thanks, I get it.' Then she said, 'You speak really good English. Where are you from?' 'New Jersey.' So she says, 'I detect an accent!' So I said, 'It's probably because I just moved here from Jersey.'"

Wait, it gets better. "So I was already a bit irritated and amused, and when I walk into the audition room, this woman asks, 'Where's your turban?'" says Penn. "So I said, 'Excuse me?' And she says, 'You're Indian, aren't you? Where's your turban?'" recalls Penn. "So I explained to her that I'm not Sikh and not all Indians wear turbans, but she cuts me off and says, 'I'm sorry, can you go home and put a bedsheet on your head or something because we really need you to look Indian.'"

As an actor of colour in LA, Penn quickly learned that "you have to work a couple hun-



dred times harder just to get your foot in the door." On the advice of a few producer and agent friends, he adopted his stage name, shortened from his given name, Kalpen Suresh Modi. "I never changed my name legally," he notes. "Acting is a business as much as it is an art, so if coming up with a catchy name helps you get jobs, that's just one part of working. It was never a sore point with my parents, who, like my closest friends, still call me by my real name."

Penn did several desi productions, including *ABCD*, *Where's The Party Yaar?* and *The Arrangement* before landing his first big Hollywood role, playing a doltish immigrant college student in *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*. Taking the part was not an easy decision for him to make. "I remember getting a phone call for that movie and having my agent say to me, 'The character's name is Taj Mahal,'" says Penn. "And I hung up the phone. She called me back and said, 'Look, I know you don't want to do this and I know you're going to be offended by the script but for somebody who is not white or black it is really hard to get you into auditions. If you're good enough you'll get the part.' So I did it. And actually were it not for *Van Wilder* I would have not gotten to do *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. And had I not done that, I would have never gotten *The Namesake*."

Once Nair finally decided to audition Penn for the part, she says that Kal just moved her. "He was so honest and able to capture Gogol's angst, his awkwardness, and also his distinctive coming of age. It's a role very close to Kal's heart because he sees it as being about his family and where he comes from. There was a genuine sense right from the start that he owned the role."

Like *The Namesake's* protagonist, Penn has struggled to find his place. "Gogol's internal struggles to find his true identity spoke to me very deeply and very immediately," says Penn. "Both of us are Americans who happen to be of South Asian descent, but that doesn't define who we are inside. Gogol is more interesting than the colour of his skin, and I certainly hope the same is true of me."

Working with Nair was a dream come true for the New Jersey-raised son of an Indian engineer and his fragrance-tester wife. "My parents never watched Indian movies while I was growing up, so whenever I went to an Indian relative's house, I'd watch them," recalls Penn. "And I found them interesting. They're completely different films; you can't really compare them to Western films."

But it was Nair's 1991 multi-ethnic romantic dramedy *Mississippi Masala* starring Denzel Washington and Sarita

KAL-IGRAPHY

The role that got him noticed was the seemingly nonsensically named Taj Mahal Bada-landabad with Ryan Reynolds and Tara Reid in *National Lampoon's Van Wilder*. However, a closer analysis of the surname and a knowledge of Hindi reveals a hidden meaning.

People magazine named Penn one of the sexiest actors under the age of 30 in 2006.

When he changed his name from Kalpen Modi to the more palatable Kal Penn, job offers escalated by 50%.

He can't stand watching TV.

A graduate of UCLA in film and sociology, he is currently attending Stanford University studying International Relations. In spring 2008, Penn will serve as visiting lecturer in Asian American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He will teach a course titled "Images of Asian Americans in the Media".

Penn "could turn out to be the desi Tom Hanks," writes *The Boston Globe*. "Scratch that - he could be the next Tom Hanks, period."

He had a blink-and-miss role in 2006's *Superman Returns*.

Penn was featured, with his friend Brandon "Superman" Routh, in the infamously rejected MTV pilot, *Awesometown*, and has guest-starred on episodes of *24*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *ER* and *NYPD Blue*.



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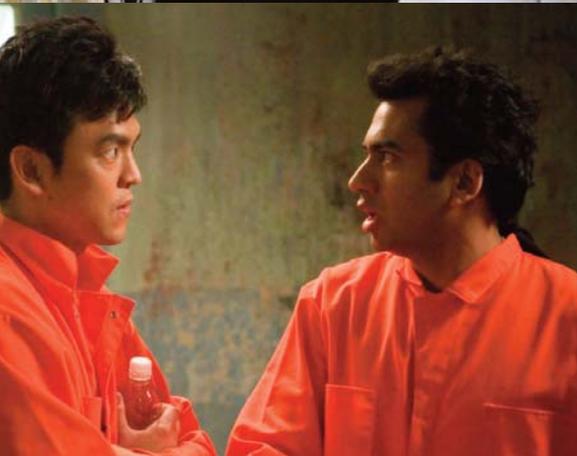


Choudary that provoked him to act. “It was the first time I saw people who looked like me who weren’t white folks in brown faces with bad accents,” says Penn. “I thought, maybe this means that I can do this, too.”

He pursued acting in high school, doing plays like *You’re A Good Man Charlie Brown*, but like many Indian parents, his were wary of his decision to get serious about the craft in college. “It wasn’t like progressive-land where they were like, ‘Okay, beta, go ahead.’ We had all the typical Indian dinner-table arguments,” says Penn, who studied sociology and film at UCLA in California. “I didn’t listen and my parents were like, ‘You’re not an

idiot, so if you really want to do this, do it. Go ahead, fine.’ I’ve never asked them about this, but in the back of my head, I would imagine that they had a conversation one night that was like, ‘If we let him do it right now, then it’s a phase and he’ll get over it.’”

Luckily, the acting thing seems to be working out. Penn just started a stint on the American TV drama *House*, and the *Harold & Kumar* sequel should cement his cult following. But if it ever gets old, Penn already has a back-up gig sorted out. “I’d like to run for Congress one day,” says the Obama supporter. “Growing up, my grandparents used to tell me stories about marching with Gandhi and stuff. And I didn’t realize until much later that this is like really historically important stuff. It’s not: ‘So one day I went to the market and blah...’ It’s like being thrown in prison for standing up to the British. So social activism and working toward social equality has always been a part of my family’s values. Now I get kids emailing me about how to get into it or about the problems they’re having getting their families’ support. I don’t know their parents, but maybe I can share my story and it’ll help.”



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