

BACKSTAGE PASS

# DISCONNECT Sparks Heated Cultural Conversations



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by Danny Bernardo

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# DISCONNECT



**Victory Gardens** opened the American premiere of Anupama Chandrasekhar's *Disconnect* on January 25th. The play about young call center workers obsessed with American culture based in Chennai, India has sparked an important cultural dialogue during and after the performance. One such conversation was detailed out in a [Facebook post](#) from VG Artistic Director Chay Yew, in which an audience member suggested that the all-Indian cast try to "look more Indian." While most of the post-show discussions are thoughtful explorations of Indian culture, interactions like that one are not uncommon according to cast members. I caught up with my pals **Minita Gandhi** (who plays the progressive-yet-culturally-conflicted Vidya) and **Behzad Dabu** (who plays the equally conflicted Giri) before their Sunday matinee to talk about the creative process, culture, and the post-show discussions.

**Danny Bernardo (DB)** : A huge part of this play is how your characters negotiate their Eastern identity as they try to absorb a Western frame of mind to do their jobs. Can you talk about that?



**Behzad Dabu (BD)**: It's interesting in the beginning of the play, one of the first things he says is "I'm throwing a party: a Fourth of July party." In India. A Fourth of July party. And no somososas, no puris, it's going to be Chicago style pizzas, hot dogs, and hamburgers. And the very next line is, "But vegetarian hamburgers!" But Giri loves somososas, loves puris. That kind of American idealism, it's crazy.





**Minita Gandhi (MG):** I think for Vidya, when I first read the play I think all the characters are struggling with identity and struggling with the fine balance of what is good about Eastern philosophies versus Western philosophies. And Vidya's experience, the way it's written, isn't dissimilar to my own experience growing up here in the States. I think it's great that Anupama's brought up the issue of colorism, the idea that fair skin is so beautiful over anything else. When I was little, I grew up in a place where everyone was blonde hair and blue eyed and that's what I thought pretty was. Anupama does a really nice job of showing of what Desi women experience overseas. So I think the issues for my character that come up are the same thing that any multicultural human being experiences which is what are the important traditional values that I want to hold up to because I really believe in them, that really define me, versus what I was told to believe in? What are the things that I haven't had the chance to explore yet that I know are a great part of myself that I know I want to be a part of.



**DB:** Has the south Asian community been supportive?

**MG :** Yeah, I feel that the South Asian community has been really positive. I feel like I've seen more South Asian faces in this audience versus any other show. I think one of the coolest things is the talkbacks. I think as more of our stories are being told like with this show, I think that's something that's becoming of higher interest to an older generation.

**BD :** Step in the right direction.

**MG** : Yeah, because that's what happens. People come to the theatre, they want to see stories that they can relate to or learn from.

**BD** : Every talkback, someone says "I've been to India, this is not what I saw."

**DB**: Because they saw tourist India?

**BD** : Right. Or they saw slums. And you can't do that anywhere. An Indian can't go to Birmingham, Alabama and say they saw America. It's like "Well you didn't, because you didn't see Chicago, New York, Boston, Philly, L.A., Miami, or Dallas. So you didn't." India even more so, because it's a country of opposites. You have Bombay and you have Kochi. There are different languages and different cultures and different religions and different governments. It's just so different. So don't say you saw India. We're showing you something. Be open to it.

**DB**: That's what's so inspiring about this piece. Western culture as a whole has put this wide stamp on what they think Eastern culture is. The minute you show them what it actually is and what's becoming, it's like, "Wait, wait. I'm used to seeing turbans. I'm used to seeing rickshaws.

**BD** : Barefoot.



**DB**: You have an all Indian cast, which is so amazing and empowering. Does that happen for you guys a lot?

**BD** : No.

**MG** : This is the absolute first time that I have been in a fully Indian cast. I've done two other productions or readings where it's been a South Asian piece and we had characters that were Indian but played by Pakistanis, Iranians... this is the absolute first time. These are all Indian characters played by all Indian people. It is really empowering and beautiful and special.

**BD** : It's also one of few plays that have only Indians in it. Victory Gardens has done a wonderful thing. This is the first play I've done on a major stage that has five Indians, five parts, cast correctly.

**DB**: What was the process like with a non-Indian director?

**MG** : Ann Filmer did a lot of research, read a lot of books on Indian culture, watched a lot of documentaries. We have a lot of dialogue about the characters and where they're coming from and Indian culture.

**BD** : She loves India and she was definitely open to dialogue, for sure. It's one of those things where you don't really know a culture unless you've been there, like we do. So there's a lot of misconceptions and she's completely open minded in stuff like that. So if she came in with a misconception and we were all "No, not really," and she was really receptive to that.

**MG** : Ann was really open and I think the biggest challenge with this play is that it's not a play about old India. It's not a play where we're riding in on elephants and pointy shoes. It's a play about progressive India today and because in progressive India today the culture is changing, the culture shifts, you're seeing a play about culture that is shifting. The conversation in the rehearsal room had to shift with that.





**DB:** Victory Gardens has started doing post-show discussions after every performance this season.

**BD :** There's been a lot of awesome, open-minded conversation between people of all colors. That's totally happened.

**MG :** And people of all ages. The demographic is amazing.

**BD :** But there are times, I'm like "Wow, this is why we do this." And the thing that I keep saying to my friends who aren't at the post-shows, I say, "I heard this today. This is what somebody said." So how many people thought it and didn't say. And then, "This is what somebody said in public, in front of thirty people." So what do they say in front of their best friend, in front of their wife? If this is what they said in public, and I'm shocked, so what do they say in private?

**MG :** The fact that we're a full South Asian cast has come up almost every time. Isn't it interesting that it's so remarkable right now that we have to remark upon it and won't it be great in a few years when it won't be so remarkable. Because this shift is hopefully the beginning of that. There are a lot of questions that come up about culture, women's rights specifically. Last night during the talk back, someone brought up the issue of domestic violence, which was really interesting to me.

**BD** : Yeah. I don't like the way she said it either.

**MG** : She said it was specific to Ross [another character in the play], "Why was he so sensitive to Sarah [an unseen character in the play] being beaten by this guy on the phone?" Because...

**BD** : AKA Indian men beat their wives.

**MG** : Right! And I responded, "The issue of domestic violence is just as it would be anywhere else. There's a culture of silence around it. "

**BD** : But there are countries in this world where it is accepted. And there are absolutely countries in specific region eight thousand miles from India where it's law, where it's ok for men to beat their wife. And India gets thrown into that so much, into that region. And it's just not. What's interesting is that India is also a place that has a female Prime Minister within twenty years of its independence. That's the equivalent of our third president being a woman. Can you imagine?

**MG** : Here's what's hard about only learning about cultures through books. Really, it's only about books and it's never the full experience.

**BD** : There's always been one thing, every other night I'll say, that's been like, "Huh?! Can you believe that person said that at the talk back?" And I think what I would love the audience to know at the talk back is, "See?!" We are here at the theatre, **in the talk back**, so we have gone a long way, you have come to the theatre, to a show, where there are five Southeast Asian actors, you stayed for enough of the talk back. Then you said this thing, and it's still so much work we have to do. There was that one gentlemen that said, "What about our perspective? The Americans are sitting at dinner and it's 6:30 PM and I get a phone call and on the other end it's like (*with a mock offensive Indian accent*) 'bundi bundi bundi...'"

**DB**: He did NOT say that!

**MG & BD** : He did!

**BD** : He absolutely did. And I'm thinking to myself, there's so much wrong with that. First of all, there's the "bundi bundi bundi" thing. Second of all, you want the perspective of us? The American perspective? Walk outside, turn on any television show, watch any movie, go to any other play and you'll get the American perspective. This is one play that's not showing you that.



**DB:** What's frustrating about that to me is, what play was that guy watching? To me, I saw more about the American perspective through the eyes of these characters. And I think that's discomforting to people.

**MG :** I think this play makes people uncomfortable for a large number of reasons. I think that's great because there are so many conversations about the cast being South Asian, why should we be telling this story right now? Specifically in the theatre community, what does it mean to be telling this kind of a story with this kind of a cast right now?

**BD :** There's a young actress in Chicago named [Samantha Bailey](#). She said something on that [previously mentioned Facebook] post yesterday and I was like, you know what? You're right and I never thought about it. She said, "The big theatres with a lot of money, they're doing it right in Chicago. It's the off-Loop theatres that aren't." Think about that: that's our friends, they're the ones... it should be flipped. It's really crazy that she pointed that out, and I was like, man, you're right. Off-Loop theatres don't have any subscriber base to satisfy, they don't have those limitations, and they're the ones that aren't always who are as open. Isn't that something? I never thought about that. Because Chicago Shakes, Steppenwolf, Goodman, and Lookingglass, and Victory Gardens are pretty much... I don't see any major controversies there. [The only major controversy in town was with an off-Loop theatre](#).

**DB:** What do you hope audiences are taking away from this show?

**BD :** That as the world gets more "colored" the stories have to get more "colored"; the stories are falling behind. I work at Columbia College Chicago and its mission statement is something I say everyday: "artists are the authors of the culture of the time." So if that's true, we have to author this time. And right now, the time that we live in is a time of increased mixing and increased color of our world. Our stories have to reflect that. And a woman responded, "Actually, artists are authors of the

future."

**MG** : Victory Gardens is trying really hard to create that shift and is fostering that in the Chicago community. In some ways, I feel like Chicago is more actively progressive about diversity and telling brave stories than other cities.



Behzad will next appear in TimeLine Theatre's *Blood and Gifts* while Minita will next appear in Silk Road Rising's *The Lake Effect*. **Disconnect** runs Tuesday through Sunday and closes February 24th. Tickets are available [here](#). A limited number of \$15 tickets are available using discount code EMAIL, so reserve early. If you are intrigued by conversations about culture in theatre, stay after the show and take part of the post-show discussion.

You can also be a part of the larger discussion of Asian Americans in theatre tonight in a panel moderated by yours truly and featuring acclaimed playwright **David Henry Hwang**, VG Artistic Director **Chay Yew**, Silk Road Rising Artistic Director **Jamil Khoury**, and actress **Eliza Shin**. [Building a Theatre of Inclusion: Perspectives on Asian American Casting and Producing](#) is part of the **League of Chicago Theatre**'s ongoing conversation **Race and Representation**. The panel is at 7 PM at Silk Road Rising (77 W. Washington in Chicago) and is free to the public. RSVP to ben@chicagoplays.com.



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