

On learning to care less



Comedian Sindhu Vee discusses refining as she goes, following her urges, and centering herself in a new body of work.

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As told to Lexi Lane, 1599 words.

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What does a typical daily routine look like for you?

I don't really have a routine unless I'm working towards something that's a deadline. I basically carve time out and tell everyone else to disappear. I go sit somewhere and quietly get on with it. Otherwise, there's a lot of effort to spend time productively. When you're sort of self-employed and you have a phone and you have Instagram, it's like, "Oh my god, I want my time on there." Right now, I'm obsessed with the Beckham thing. It's getting me through January.

I think I do a number of things as my career has gotten busier, to keep myself productive. Not just for comedy, but in this body. Often, standup has so much unhealthy potential built in. I'm prepping for this tour that's going to start in the United States in a couple of weeks. I get as much *good* in me, because I know it's going to all get counterbalanced with late nights.

Is it hard being on the road for long periods? How has that experience been?

Yeah, I mean, it's not easy. But let's just temper the word "hard." It's a career I choose. It's something I love. I get to go to great cities. I get to meet my audience. So obviously it's fantastic, but both things can be true. I think it's very physically demanding. America is big. I've been from Vancouver to the East coast. They're not 12-hour [flights], but they're still five hours, and there's a big time difference. I think emotionally it can be demanding for me, because I'm not 20. I have a family. I have a very full, busy life. Then suddenly you're just on your own. You can see why a lot of comics, especially male comics, talk about their porn and drug habits. I have a Netflix habit and I think the hardest thing is not eating trash late at night.

Has your creative process changed over the years at all?

When I started, I was always incredibly nervous about not having what I considered a perfectly honed five minutes. I would become very rattled if I got thrown off my joke in the middle. Now it's a function of practice. The process prior to getting on stage is often much more internal. I'm like, "Is this funny?" I write on stage and do a lot of new material nights. I record everything. As me and the audience engage, it gives me a sense of how I want to develop the joke. Then I come home, listen to it, and rewrite it. I used to be really scared that I would run out of funny. And I used to worry that I'd be too tired to do a show. But I realized I've understood how adrenaline works.

Before you go into a tour, have you been workshoping the material for months, maybe even years in advance?

At least. Before it becomes the show that I know is going to go out, usually that becomes clear several months before I do go out. Then you refine it. You also have to be careful because you always have new stuff, and you

can't have an open-ended show. At some point in my hour, the beginning and the end will become very established. Then, I'm like, "Now everything else that I'm writing has got to go into some new material file. We'll worry about it later." But I continue right up until the moment I'm getting on stage, to sometimes add pieces to the same joke.

Did you watch any comedians growing up? What shows, films, or other creative things inspired you as a child?

I had never seen live standup when I started. I didn't grow up in the West, and in India there was no live standup. I certainly remember very clearly from a very young age watching Bollywood movies with my parents and my cousins, and everyone being like, "Oh my god, that was such a great drama," or, "Oh my god, the heroine died at the end. It's so sad." I always remembered the comedic parts of the film. There's a very famous actor in India, Amitabh Bachchan. He's well-known as a dramatic actor. But even as an eight-year-old, I was like, "This guy's funny."

Between the ages of 4 and 11, I lived in the Philippines and went to an American school. All my friends watched *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Company*, and *The Muppet Show*. A lot of grown-ups watched late-night TV. I only watched Carol Burnett. I thought *Sesame Street* was stupid. I only liked Oscar the Grouch... In many other ways, I was a pariah. No one liked me in my class. And I was like, "Well, that's okay. I'm different." It was also kind of a defense, because when you're below the not-cool kids, when you're the kid who gets beaten up in the playground all the time for being very different, enjoying different things makes you feel like there's something special about you.

I think it's interesting that you watched Carol Burnett and now you're a comedian.

We moved back to India where there was very, very different entertainment. We had two channels. One was on farming, and one was the news. So I left all that behind and I never thought about it again. It's only when I started comedy in my early 40s that I was like, "Oh, what about Carol Burnett?" Thank god for the internet. I was so hungry for this stuff and I went back to it.

I also watched your We The Women interview where you mentioned growing up with the belief that it wasn't enough to be good, you had to be first. Have you found a way to work through that mentality over time?

Yes, absolutely. That's a really good question, actually. The first time I did [comedy], I got home, and I thought, "Whatever this is, I've got to preserve it." I understood immediately that the way to preserve it was to not bring that [feeling of], "I've got to be really good at this; what is this going to be?" I was like, "I'm not doing that shit again." I was a mother of three who was going to go out and do open mic. I didn't know whether it would last a week or a month or anything. I had such an urge, such a pull, that I just wanted to preserve it like a flame in the wind.

I really forced myself, and continued to force myself, to cool my jets on that stuff. Let me be very clear. I've understood the ways in which that mentality has been an extraordinary asset, but I've also understood the other side of it. I try to keep a balance. I mean, I'm considered very competitive, even in comedy. When we have these panel shows and I don't win, I'm furious. People are like, "Bro, it's a show."

I want to talk about your new special, Swanky. It touches on your decision to focus on yourself, on familial loss, on getting older and having a new sense of confidence with that. Do you feel like it's more vulnerable than your past material?

It is probably more vulnerable... I haven't, in the past, tended to talk about what it feels for me to be in this body as a woman—not because I haven't thought those things. It hasn't been the time. I've had all these other things to talk about. It's like, Sindhu was a mom, Sindhu was a daughter, but what is Sindhu as a woman in herself?

Also, I haven't talked a lot about my identity, my sense of myself in sort of a cross-cultural sense. I very much identify as Indian-Indian from India—especially as I get older, because I'm defaulting back to my origin so much,

but I don't telegraph that on stage. I have a feeling some audience members will be surprised, because I think people are very comfortable hearing comedy about family, but you start talking about your body and people are like... I genuinely think that I've surprised myself with how little I care. If it's funny, I'm fine. I don't have a straightforward relationship with saying things that I think my existing audience [might be confused by]. We'll figure it out.

You're trusting them to make the natural progression with you.

I think so. You think, "Oh, well, I'm so much older than most comics. How can I still be progressing?" But we do. I don't have material about menopause or perimenopause... I don't do that stuff, but I do talk about some other aspects of female awareness in their bodies that is not spoken of. And it can make people very uncomfortable, but I think it's very funny. And women in the audience are just like, "Oh shit, you're not going there." And I'm like, "Yes, I am." And then it's very fun.

Sindhu Vee recommends:

Every day, find a way to pay attention to an animal.

Make a mental note of three things that you were grateful for that happened that day.

Find certain aromas that matter to you. (I love the smell of Jasmine. It reminds me of my childhood.)

Don't hold back on dessert. There is no upside to that.

Fundamentally by Nussaibah Younis. I'm taking this book on tour.

Name

Sindhu Vee

Vocation

comedian

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