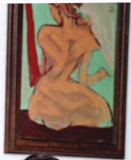


Whose Line Is It Anyway?

TEXT: FARHAD J DADYBURJOR • PHOTOGRAPHS: DHARMENDRA KANANI

They are theatrical onstage, and sometimes offstage too! Meet the husband and wife, mother and daughter and mother and son duos who enjoy a shared love for theatre, even as they try hard to maintain a sharp divide between their personal and professional lives.





Role Reversal

Onstage they play two warring lawyers, but off it the love between husband and wife Subodh Maskara and Nandita Das is infectious. In a conversation with *Hii!*, they reveal why they specifically chose a play that tackles gender inequality, the perils of working together and who eventually has the final say.

"I remember the first time I was asked to audition was for a script by Mahesh Dattani—and I remember my shirt was completely wet," laughs Subodh Maskara, reminiscing. "I was so self-conscious and so nervous and so wanted to get it right—even though I had no idea what right was! Acting seems extremely easy when you see say Salman Khan acting—everyone has these notions about acting. But when you actually go into it and try your craft out, you realise it requires a lot of discipline and a lot of self-confidence and self-awareness."

A corporate businessman by profession, Subodh recently made his foray into acting with *Between The Lines*—a courtroom drama written and directed by his wife, Nandita Das. As we sit in their artfully done-up sea-facing home in Worli waiting for Nandita to join us, he elaborates, "This script basically deals with a level of gender inequality. And it comes from a lot of experiences that either of us has felt or seen at close quarters. Like, I grew up in a reasonably patriarchal setup, except I didn't realise the patriarchy I had been



"I feel that if there's a liability in this play, it's me; at the end of the day, I don't want her (Nandita) to be apologetic about my performance"—Subodh Maskara



PHOTO: ANSARUL HAQUE

"I love experimenting. I like trying new things. I've never really grown up with too much fear of failure"—Nandita Das



"A lot of people in Bollywood are there for the right reasons, but more are there for the wrong reasons—whether money, glamour, power, fame... It's not a world I really want to belong to."—Subodh Maskara

conditioned to be a part of. When I met Nandita, she said, 'don't you find that strange?'—she began questioning certain things that I had just been used to doing for the last 42-45 years!"

Nandita, who plays the lead opposite her husband in the play, pipes in, "I did find certain things strange initially when we were dating, and it wasn't until I visited his parents' house that I understood that that's what he has grown up seeing. I mean I come from another extreme—my father has a huge, almost sort of feminine side to him when he cooks and he clears and that's what I grew up with! So whether it is patriarchy or just being non-judgemental, there's lots that we have learned from each other and that we are still grappling with. What we talk about in the play resonates strongly with our own lives, and as I started talking to other women and men, I realised that we weren't so unique."

Besides having acted in over 30 films, Nandita made her directorial debut with the much-acclaimed *Firaq* and has also served as the chairperson of the Children's Film Society. She says that in fact the first play she ever did was about a gender issue. "The gender inequality that exists in our class has always fascinated me, more so because it's so subtle, so deceptive," says Nandita. "I think I'm very liberal, I'm progressive, I'm outspoken—I don't even shy away if someone calls me a feminist because I don't think it is a bad word. I think every sensitive human being whether man or woman *should* be a feminist—I also realised that when you negotiate through life, you're constantly being made aware of the fact that you're a woman, for good or bad reasons. You can't just be a human being. Like, when I directed *Firaq*, the first question I was always asked was: 'As a woman...'. I was constantly being called to panels of 'women directors'. So however you crack it, your gender constantly plays a big role."

While the play is a part of their Chhuti Production Company, were they at all apprehensive about working together in such close quarters? "There was apprehension and comfort," stresses Subodh. "It was comfortable because I lost a lot of confidence from her, saying

