



## Kunal Nayyar Finding Peace with a “Bang”

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Women take notice as Kunal Nayyar strolls into a Studio City tavern, exuding a coolness not associated with his television character, Dr. Rajesh Koothrappali, a brilliant, young astrophysicist terrified to speak in the presence of women on CBS' hit sitcom, “The Big Bang Theory,” which follows four über-nerds forced to confront their social awkwardness by a hot blond (Kaley Cuoco) living across the hall.

Born in London and raised in New Delhi, India, Nayyar fell in love with acting and, with his parents' blessings, came to America, where he earned a BS in Business at the University of Portland, and a Master of Fine Arts in Acting from Temple University. His studies soon paid off. He won a Garland Award for Best Male Lead for his performance in the 2006 Los Angeles stage production “Huck and Holden,” guest-starred as an Iraqi terrorist on the CBS crime drama “NCIS” (2007), and then hit the jackpot when he landed a starring role alongside Johnny Galecki and Kaley Cuoco on the madly popular Chuck Lorre/Bill Prady creation, “The Big Bang Theory,” which is entering its fifth hilarious season this fall.

In person, Kunal Nayyar is a sincere guy with a centered presence, a playful nature, and a confident vibe. As he settles in to talk with Venice, women turn their heads, trying to make eye contact with him. By playing a socially maladjusted geek and failure with the ladies on a hit TV show, the young actor attracts a lot of attention from women in real life. Only in Hollywood.

**Venice:** How does acting make you feel and what inspires you to continue doing it?

**Kunal Nayyar:** I've never felt any feeling that parallels what I feel like when I'm on the stage. It's the same sensation as hitting a homerun or hitting the perfect golf shot or a hole in one. I can't completely describe what happens, but it feels amazing and it's very addicting. Maybe that's a selfish reason. [laughs]

**Growing up in India, were there any American TV shows that influenced you in any way?**

“The Wonder Years” (1988-1993) really affected me. My very first kiss was with a girl who was older and aggressive. When she kissed me, the image of Winnie kissing Kevin in the park flashed in my mind. I pictured that scene from “The Wonder Years.” [laughs]

**Where did your path towards a career as an actor begin?**

I had some experience doing plays in high school. When I was 18, my parents encouraged me to get out of India, to see the world and get an education. I came to America and went to college in Portland, Oregon. I was in a new country. I was shy. I had no friends. I was lonely and I wanted to meet people, so I decided to audition for a play.

**And you got the part?**

Yes. And I started making friends with the other theater kids and started getting cast in other plays. I took more acting classes. My friends were all theater majors. I truly fell in love with acting, even though I was getting a degree in business.

**How did your parents back in India feel about your getting interested in acting in America?**

I’m very blessed to have extremely supportive parents. I could be the most successful guy in the world in finance or business or acting, but if I was not a nice person, they would feel like they failed. Their only mission in life is to make sure their children end up being happy people. When I told my dad I wanted to be an actor, he said, “Okay. What’s your plan?” We decided that I’d finish my business degree and also pursue acting. I wanted to be smart about it. I figured that if I failed as an actor, I could always use my business degree.

**A lot of artists say they never had a “Plan B.” Your approach to a career in the arts took security into consideration.**

I call it “calculated risk.” [laughs] My parents always said, “No matter what happens, you’ll always have a home,” and that gave me the confidence to take risks. I knew that if I fell down, I had a safety net. And I think that’s a good thing to instill in future generations. Take calculated risks.

**Once you got your undergraduate degree in business, you decided to get a Master’s in Acting.**

Yes. I wanted to be an actor, and coming out of undergraduate school, I knew I wasn’t good enough. I didn’t have the range. I didn’t have the confidence. So, I applied and got accepted to Temple University in Philadelphia. I wanted to prove to myself that I was good enough to get into graduate school and that I was patient enough to do what I needed to get better at acting.

**What brought you to Hollywood?**

I got a call asking if I wanted to audition for a play called “Huck and Holden” in L.A. I told the director that I was interested and she said, “Do you have a Mac?” I was broke. I didn’t have a Mac. [laughs] She said, “Go to the Mac Store on Fifth Avenue. Use their computer. You can audition for me.”

**You auditioned in the Mac Store?**

Yes. I did a monologue. People were staring. [laughs] But I got the role! I only made seven dollars a performance, but it got me a lot of exposure.

**Prior to “The Big Bang Theory,” almost all of your work as an actor was in the theater. Did you have any experience with comedy?**

I’d done a lot of comedy on the stage. Mainly farce. I had a good handle on farce. The comedies that I grew up watching in India were strongly rooted in physical comedy. They helped me develop good comedic instincts. And physical comedy always came very naturally to me.

**How did you navigate the transition from comedy on the stage to comedy in a multi-camera format?**

Coming from the stage, I was used to doing big reactions and big facial expressions for a thousand people in a theater, but if you do that on camera, it looks insane. I had to learn to be subtle. In the beginning, Chuck Lorre used to always tell me to “just trust the words.” And that really helped. He’d say, “Just throw it away. Let the words do the talking.” The show is so incredibly well-written.

**Raj, your character on “The Big Bang Theory,” can talk to guys, but is much too shy to talk to women. Do you relate to him?**

I’m a completely different person than Raj. I am not an angel. [laughs] I’ve made horrible mistakes. I’ve burned relationships. I’m not innocent, but I do relate to his innocence. It comes from a very pure place. I’ve been a fish out of water. I still am. Every new swimming pool you jump into, you are always the new kid. I know where Raj is coming from. Every guy dreams about walking into a bar and talking to the hottest girl. Everyone wants to be that guy.

**What’s the biggest challenge in playing a guy whose biggest challenge is extreme shyness with women?**

The biggest challenge is to understand what it would actually feel like to not be able to talk to a woman, to understand what physically happens to someone when they’re in a state of panic in a public place. What’s it like to have a panic attack in a very public place where you cannot scream and freak out? I have a fear of heights, so I use that. I imagine myself freaking out on the sixtieth floor of a building and I ask myself, “What would this feel like when I’m in a restaurant at the bar?”

**Why do you think a show about social misfits is so successful?**

Because life is about being a social misfit. Everyone is a social misfit on some level. For example, George Clooney seems like he’d be someone who could walk into any room and be completely at ease, but I’m sure there are situations where even George Clooney would feel like a social misfit. Maybe he’d feel that way around teenagers? Or musicians or the athletes that he idolizes? Everyone knows what it’s like to be in a position where they don’t belong, so everyone can relate.

**You mentioned that Chuck Lorre gave you valuable advice for camera acting. What else has being on “The Big Bang Theory” taught you?**

The most important lesson I’ve learned from the veterans I work with — Johnny Galecki, Kaley Cuoco, Chuck Lorre, and Bill Prady — is to just be thankful for what I have now and really be in the present moment and enjoy it. When I first started doing “The Big Bang Theory,” I was always thinking about the next step. Winning an Emmy. Winning an Oscar. How can I use being on a sitcom as a step to get into a more glamorous atmosphere? I thought I was above it all and I thought this was the attitude I was supposed to have. I was lost. Completely lost. It took advice from Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady for me to understand what it really means to be successful in the industry. They always said, “Humility is the only way to be.” If you don’t understand this, even if you win an Oscar, you’ll only want to win another. And then three. And then four. It will never be enough. You have to understand that if you are not enough without a gold medal, you still won’t be enough with one.

**So, what does it feel like to be in the present moment while being on a huge TV show?**

I feel at ease, which is a feeling that actors don’t typically have. In the present moment, I feel at peace with my career. I know that it can all change, but in this moment, I feel calm and at ease. I hope I never have to go back to looking to see how much something costs on a menu. I don’t mean that literally. I mean that metaphorically. That’s where I am in life right now, and it feels very peaceful.

**Any advice for guys who are too shy to talk to girls?**

Stop being a wuss. [laughs] ▼

Season 5 of “The Big Bang Theory” begins September 22nd and airs Thurs- days at 8pm on CBS.