



OVERVIEW

Grease - controversial and quintessential. A show that started out as a cabaret act highlighting the working class Italian & Polish immigrant experience that became a beloved classic. A musical about conformity, adolescence and coming of age around sex, drugs and rock and roll fashion.

When my cousin's wife, Aishwarya, told me about her experience attending *Grease* at JP Stevens High School (in 2023), I immediately wished I could have gone. JP Stevens is in Edison, New Jersey, a town I went to once a month with my parents so that I could shop at the Indian grocery store and get dosas as a treat. JPSHS is very *very* brown - they get a week off for Diwali.

Aishwarya - an immigrant PTA mother herself, married to my South Asian-American cousin - was telling me how interesting it was being in a conservative, South Asian values-holding (at least in public) audience for a show like *Grease*. She said people giggled uncomfortably at the raunchiness, and gasped audibly at moments that - in other audiences - might have earned a laugh. For weeks, I couldn't stop thinking about her account. And I wondered - what exactly in that story grabbed me? I sensed immediately that I wanted to write about this scenario - but why?

I came to this conclusion: because it's an incredible example of art imitating life.

What? *Grease* isn't set in New Jersey's little India! It's about blue collar Chicagoans - Polish and Italian immigrants if we're really reaching. It's a white people show! It's John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John for cryin' out loud!

All of that may be true, but amazingly, I felt this JP Stevens HS production of *Grease* reflected back at the audience all of the discomfort, cringiness, forced assimilation and conformity inherent in a community full of immigrants and first generation teens.

News
Grease is Coming Alive... It's Electrifying!




Sarah Liu
ed Danny Zukor, and Reva Bhalerao, who played Sandy Dumbrowski, pose together at the end
ance.

Almost every person in that theater - on stage and off - knew what it is like to change yourself to blend in to America. And, only in a crowd like that where an otherwise marginalized group is given the majority can you hear the gasps, nervous chuckles and sighs of recognition at a story about doing whatever it takes to fit in at the cost of your own sadness, disillusionment and loss of innocence.

I've had those reactions to *Grease* while watching it, but it's usually drowned out by the obvious joy of my much more comfortable and "well-adjusted" American peers. This is *Grease* how it was meant to be received, in my opinion. And, I'd love to see a fully adapted South Asian *Grease*. But that's not what this play is about.

This play is an exploration of what it would mean for a group of adolescent South Asian Americans to be performing *Grease* - a show that is about assimilating in America - for an audience composed mostly of their immigrant parents.


Grease is about conformity, and this play is about seeing a community in constant negotiation with their own Americanness engage with those themes.



We're set in one the highest stakes environments in New Jersey - a predominantly South Asian high school. We've got our Princeton dreamer girls, who are inevitably dating fade-rocking boys with questionable borderline blaccents who have already laid the political foundation to get into their idealized brown bro fraternity next year at Rutgers.

Pan around the cafeteria and you'll see them embodying their stereotypes fully - rich party teens wearing golden bracelets and Jordans, nerds clutching textbooks with henna'd hands, stoners dealing weed out of Balavihar camp drawstring bags, artsy moody types making earnest South Asian-inspired art they will cringe at in a few years, and the theater kids decked out in their best researched understanding of the *Grease* aesthetic for opening night spirit day - their parents' closets don't have the right vintage, or so they assumed, so they went thrifting and failed.

This is a group of brown kids who have lived without people mispronouncing their names and calling them curry-themed slurs. Of course they still deal with being brown in America, but I think the brownness and relative safe space of the school gives us the ability to have characters say some of their discoveries out loud, and be full fledged versions of these *Grease*-y archetypes rather than shuttled off into nerd/tigermom-land.



Let's quickly talk about the representation in this play. The long and short of it is - it's just happening. No big deal. It comes from the specificity of the actors and designers. The storytelling will come from the team's lived experiences informing the conflicts, choices and jokes, as well as the stories the team will source via interviews and conversations in the community.

Personally, I can't wait to write all of these glorious, archetypal American teens in their South Asian dominated high school. And I can't wait to represent their parents with complexity, humanity and care. My parents didn't want me to watch *Bend it Like Beckham* because they felt hurt by that movie's representation of South Asian immigrant parenthood. That won't be happening here.

STRUCTURE

Beginning

We are in tech week rehearsals for *Grease*. Relationships established, social structure established, conflicts begin. Show parallels are drawn.

Chetan: *I mean, can you believe that he's Danny and she's Sandy? Like, the teachers MUST know.*

Sayili: *That they're fucking? No way.*

Chetan: *I mean...*

Sayili: *Ok like, Dhruv makes sense as Danny. But it just cracks me up more that she's Sandy. Like..*

Chetan: *Yeah. I mean, you know what they say.*

Sayili: *What?*

Chetan: *If all the boys of our high school were a giant tootsie roll, she'd know how many licks it takes to get to the center.*

Sayili: *Oh my god ew why is that so gross also nobody says that! (Chetan makes lurid tongue shapes. Beat.) I would've made such a good Sandy though.*

Chetan: *No doubt.*

Serious problems start to develop between the main relationships of the story. Truths come to light and beliefs are tested.

STRUCTURE

Middle

As we approach opening night, everyone starts finding out the truth about everybody else, and everyone is reacting in the BIGGEST way possible. Kids are doing weird rituals in the dressing room. Parents are learning things about their kids and facing the realities of their kids' assimilation (and their own) not lining up with how they were raised.

Neha: *Suresh, he has been dealing! To these idiot artistic types! College resume gaya khatare mein, na. This was all supposed to be enrichment for him to make up for his embarrassing grades? Now see!*

Suresh: *Yaar. I know. Ok? I know. I mean, with me my parents would have just...but we decided not to do that with Shiv. (Beat.) Remember Raju?*

Neha: *Shiv is not Raju.*

Suresh: *Ok! But I mean, Charu was his biggest customer in college and now he lives down the street from us in the corner lot. With Shiv I am mainly worried about how big this whole operation got. He's so young to be doing this.*

Neha: *So let's send him to rehab!*

Suresh: *Meri jaan they would laugh at us there. He just needs some, a little, help. Maybe from us, if we can. You know, it is natural to be curious. To want to appear...cool. I mean, we knew what we were signing up for, raising him here.*

Neha: *Well. That was your choice.*

Things are about to bubble over when - BAM! It's opening night!

STRUCTURE

Middle

Grease Dream Ballet act 1: We see an artistic montage of Grease the actual musical. This is super abstract and uses all the characters that we have gotten to know by now in the play. Maybe there are some backstage scenes.

Break for intermission of Dream Ballet: vignettes in the bathroom line of parents revealing more secrets but also coming to terms with stuff, and recognizing patterns from the musical that also relate to themselves.

Aarti (9 yrs old): Ammi, why is Aarohi so sad in the play?

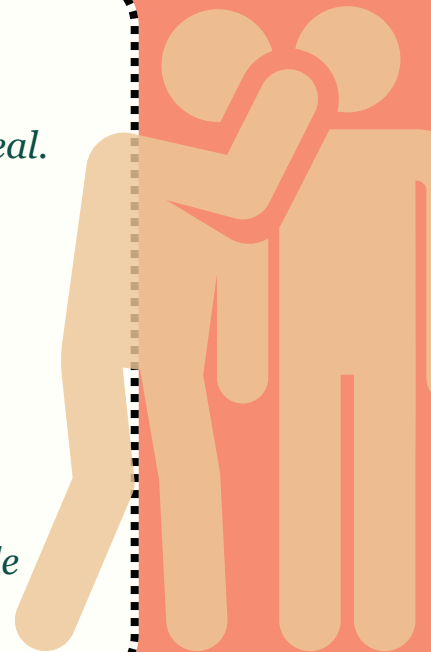
Ammi: She's not sad, beta, her character is sad. That is all not real.

Aarti: Ok.

Ammi: And well. Rizzo...she's scared.

Aarti: Of what?

Ammi: Well. That she may...that her life may change. And people definitely wouldn't like it. She might not either.



Meanwhile in the next stall someone takes a pregnancy test. Maybe some parents leave and don't come back for act 2. Teenage conflicts start to get resolved too but first they get more complicated.

Grease Dream Ballet act 2: Complete the show in abstraction all the way until bows. The show is over and something really dramatic happens (not sure what this is yet - somebody stumbles onto stage and moons everybody? Somebody does something unhinged in the audience? Grease Lightning strikes?)

STRUCTURE

End

Time to go to the diner! Except the diner is really an Indian street food chain restaurant - Haldiram's.

Drama over who drives whom to Haldiram's. A senior? A boyfriend? Your parents? A Rutgers student who peaked in high school so he still hangs around weirdly?

Big fights happen now. We get to food and maybe there's even a food fight?? With samosas and chutney?? People get lassi dumped on them! People are raging and also happy and also drinking in the parking lot.

We end up at the cast party eventually and some problems get resolved there. Other problems get postponed or at least neutralized. Something tells us it is the end. We sing the finale.



IDEAS AND IMAGES I THINK ARE INTERESTING FOR THE SHOW

Below I am listing a few of my imaginings about the show. In our process I will offer up these ideas in our initial meetings for us to devise around, think on and react to as a team. A lot of these are questions and ideas that will likely be answered, ignored, or subsumed into the next phase of the creative process. For now, I think they give some shape, flavor and sparkle to our project and drive me towards writing and discovering more.

Ridhi: Our “Rizzo” type girl still embodies the hot cool girl pink ladies aesthetic, but the outfits and the specificity of how she wields power are different. She isn’t telling the girls how to put their hair in curlers, she is telling them about how to wax all of that South Asian hair right off while she wears a sari blouse as a crop top because she knows her own exoticization has power. She is definitely not in the musical, but maybe her mom is still involved (maybe too involved) because Ridhi’s older sister used to be the star of the shows.

***Ridhi:** Well, Sanjana’s mom doesn’t get her own stache threaded or bleached or like, anything probably, so why would Sanjana?*

***Farah:** Stop Rid, that’s so mean.*

***Ridhi:** What? I mean, she can look how she wants. Princeton won’t care.*

***Farah:** Oh... Maybe if I let mine grow, schools will think I’m a serious student too.*



Frenchy: This PTA mom is giving Beauty School Dropout vibes, running an Indian fashion wear “boutique” in her basement

Magic Changes: An immigrant parent thinks through how to discuss puberty with their (unbeknownst to them) sexually active kid, while also grappling with their own American adolescence/love life.

The Car: The drama of the car! Is there a scene in the car that is part of the set of *Grease*? Someone in the show also drives a really iconic Toyota Camry - complete with ridiculous, beaded, acupressure seat cushion covers.

Butts: Who is going to moon the audience? And when and why?

Fashion: *Grease* is about FASHION and so is the assimilation experience! Theater is a visual art form and we can have fun with this.

- What does it mean for *Grease* being about slicked back hair, but South Asians being made fun of because their hair is “so oily”? Jokes in the dressing room for sure.
- What is the Sandy leather look at the end? Opportunity for some magical realism here?
- Maybe our student costume designer spends the beginning of the show fretting over this costume reveal - when she realizes that actually what she wants to make is something that would land with the audience she has, rather than the white people gaze she is aiming for.
- What is a South Asian American black leather Sandy male gaze fantasy look equivalent? Sexy sari, that is slowly unwound? A lehnga with stilettos with a pink ladies jacket?
- Maybe this isn't a student designer, but a parent!

Coming of age for the parents: The parents in the play are in an American adolescence of their own. Most of them, being immigrants, have spent the same number of years in America as their children. They are finally settled in, and starting to feel the tug of change, a new identity forming, and a new country's ideals taking root in their sense of self.

It's that feeling of "too American for India, too Indian for America" - but while often we assume this is the kid's experience, this is a more painful parents' experience, because they remember what it was like to belong to a country and be in the majority.

There are a lot of scenes and situations and colorful characters I'm imagining with the parents, and I think they are very much part of the fabric of the community in this play (which is a fun departure from how this genre usually handles adults)

Parents are acting in juvenile ways!

- A desperation to be cool and liked by society
- The cringiness of making everything so high stakes when it is just a kid's college application, or the choice for what to wear to opening night, or their citizenship test, or a work happy hour.
- Parents hosting underaged drinking parties

PTA parents, parents on the board, parents as teachers or substitute teachers, Cast moms, narc parents, parents just trying to do their best.

Parents who have gone through pregnancy scares of their own, or been suspended, or are old summer loves that have reconnected across an ocean through their kids?

Scenes with parents dealing with their teens' Americanization alongside their own:

- Often these moments are tough for the parents to stomach, but how can their evolution be handled with complexity?
- Other times, parents delight at their children's success at assimilation.
- Other times, they are grappling with their own histories.
- Other times, they react with fear and in extremes.

Coming of age for the kids: A lot of the kids' growing up will follow a more classic teen angst template. I'd like to explore the specificity of how they misunderstand their parents. Perhaps a teen would assume their parents will be crazy strict and unaware of USA culture. Other teens might feel frustrated by their parents' hyper assimilation and feel distanced from their own culture.

The South Asian American element to the social structure will also influence the drama that happens at the high school parties, in the hallways and at the temple/mosque.

Of course, so much of the drama at this stage is in love, friendships and frenemies. A lot of these relationships are dictated in high school by identity. Who do you roll with? Who do you fight for? And at this school - how brown are you? How brown do you present?

Apart from South Asian identity, here are a few of the other intersections I am interested in exploring among the student body:

- Queer students
- immigrant students
- non-South Asian BIPOC
- white students
- Religion and Casteism
 - Sandy type is a devout Muslim? Aware of her idealization and how people look at her
- language, cultural comfort, cultural literacy

Teachers: how are their identities reflective and also different from the student body? Do we have South Asian teachers? Or non-brown teachers directing *Grease* not knowing how things will land on South Asian audiences? I am also interested in how these teachers mentor the kids & how they hurt these kids (unintentionally or intentionally).

FORM

Framing Devices? Maybe!

- We could be in the future, flashing back
- We could use a “yearbook” or newspaper type student who is gathering information and interviews from around the school. Or, filming a documentary for their project.
- A parent’s perspective post show - complaining at a Board meeting about the content of *Grease*.

Play is in conversation with others in the genre: I think this play makes direct references to High School Musical, Heathers, Mean Girls, etc. throughout. In thinking about what sets it apart from the baseline high school musical type story - Carrie has a supernatural element, Heathers has a violence element, this play has...a parent element? I think focusing on the parents behaving like adolescents could make this piece really interesting. But, this all still needs to be discovered in rehearsal!

Play with Music: I don’t think this play is a musical, at this point. Mainly because imitating the music of *Grease* is a losing game - it’s so iconic. Possibly in our process we may discover some characters want to sing, but it will likely be more fun to have orchestration in the style and vibe of *Grease*/echoes of the iconic songs/versions of the iconic songs with a modern/South Asian twist.

This way we are still bopping and living in the high energy world of that genre and sound, but not trying to do what the original musical has already done at such a high level.

I do think there should be one mega closing number. *We Go Together* is such an iconic closer. Maybe we get the rights to that, or devise some other version of it that is equally fun and playful and hints at the original.

