

Avish Parashar

The improv comedian loves working without a net.

It isn't really going out on a limb to say that Avish Parashar is the best Indian American improvisational comedian in Philadelphia.

Quick wits and nerves of steel have propelled him to prominence in improv, where audience members shout suggestions that he acts on instantly — accents and mannerisms a specialty. From bombastic British barrister to louche lounge lizard, Parashar is perfection.

His parents came from Delhi to Providence, R.I., in 1969, settling soon thereafter in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., where they raised their son and daughter. While comedy is not part of Parashar's birthright ("I'm not exactly following in my parents' footsteps"), his physician father and homemaker mother "never tried to stop me," he says. "In fact, after I started doing improv, I found out that a couple of my uncles in India had done some acting in college, so being on stage is not a completely outrageous concept in my family."

Inspired by comics such as Robin Williams and Dennis Miller, he honed his razor-sharp timing and delivery by mimicking TV and movie bits for the amusement of high school friends. At Penn, where he majored in computer engineering, he morphed into improv with the campus group Without a Net, and founded Polywumpus Improv Comedy after graduation in 1995.

Now 28, he lives with some fellow Polywumpus members in Chestnut Hill; the troupe has regular gigs at the Brick Playhouse on South Street and The Point in Bryn Mawr. "Eventually I'm going to open a space in Philadelphia where Polywumpus can rehearse, perform and run workshops," he vows.

In the meantime, he runs a Web portal company and comes across as shy and conservative. "Most people I work with are shocked when they hear I do improv comedy. Offstage, I'm pretty reserved, and I watch what I say."

Which is the opposite of the anything-goes mind-set needed for improv. To Parashar, improv is an art, a sport, a challenge. "I fell in love with being in front of a crowd with nothing prepared, and the only reason they applaud and laugh is because of what you and your fellow performers do. Now that's a thrill." ●

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