



**R**adhika Vaz appears on a small stage at the Producer's Club in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan. She is dressed in a short black and white polka-dotted dress, with a red scarf around her neck. As the audience watches, she pours herself tea and breaks into her proper Indian-British accent with a wide smile.

For the next hour Vaz leads her audience through the wild journey of a woman who wants to break free from social norms and sexual taboos. She talks about virginity, fellatio, women passing gas or pleasuring themselves, and even the challenges of bikini waxing. Welcome to *Unladylike*, Vaz's one-woman show — less of a stand-up comedy and more of a character sketch.

During the hour her audience — more Americans than Indians at the performance I attended — laugh, and sometimes go 'oh no!' Some of the items shock the men more than the women, but Vaz continues her act with a smile, giving them a full hour's entertainment.

Vaz's act is in line with similar performances by other women comedians — Margaret Cho, Kathy Giffin and Wanda Sykes. "They are strong chicks and they go out there and say it like it is," Vaz later says in a phone interview. What makes Vaz stand apart is that she is Indian. "I speak for all Indian women," she adds.

Vaz came into world of acting by chance. She arrived in the United States in 2001 and joined an improvisational theater class offered by the New York-based Holly Mandel to fill up time, since her then boyfriend and now husband was training for the New York marathon. Later, she also took classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade — another improv school in New York City.

"I realized that I really loved it," Vaz says. "You meet such nice people. They were completely different from people I socialized with. I stayed on because it was a lot of fun and a cool environment." Today she also teaches at Mandel's school.

Improv, Vaz says, is different from standard stand-up comedy such as what Russell Peters is best known for. "First you can't do it alone," she adds. "It is always a troupe a duo or trio. None of it is written. It is completely improvised."

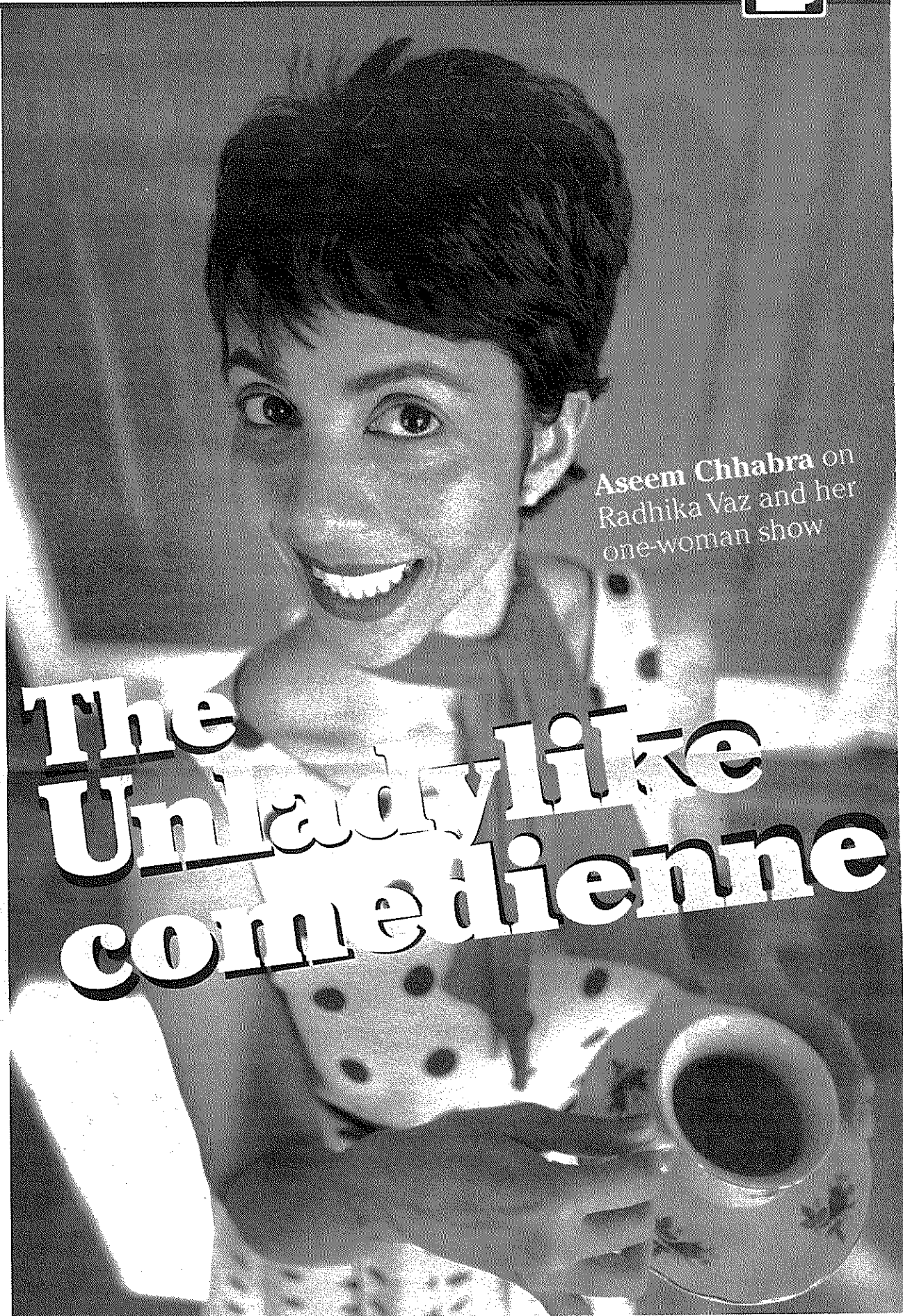
But her show *Unladylike* is scripted, a talent she acquired attending comedy-writing classes from a Lebanese-American performer Mona Mansour. Again her original aim was to hang out with "cool" people, but she enjoyed the process. "Writing to me is improv with a computer," she says.

A little more than a year ago, Vaz met actor and director Brock Savage (director of *Unladylike*) at Mandel's school and found a connection because they had a similar sense of humor. "But that is not enough to make a writing team," she says. "What we discovered over the last year was that we find specific things about each other funny, and we were able to hone in that. The stuff he finds funny about me are things that I instinctively think will be funny to the audience. We work very well together."

Savage encouraged Vaz to write her stories, some of it autobiographical, and helped flesh them out into what eventually became the one-woman show.

"Essentially I tell a story, either anecdotal or observational," she says. "I do the whole show in character. A lot of improvisational actors write sketch comedy like on *Saturday Night Live* or *MADtv*. My character is very prissy and proper and yet she talks all this stuff. I felt like an Anglo-Indian school teacher, the kind of a woman who would teach English in India."

The show is made up of seven monologues and Vaz, who also posted some of her writings on her blog and saw readers take to them there too, realized that there was a theme emerging. "The double standards and the hypocritical stuff that I included, we all deal with and will deal with for many, many years — it's not like things are going to change," she says. "But I thought they were funny and that women could relate to them."



Aseem Chhabra on Radhika Vaz and her one-woman show

# The Unladylike comedienne

It surprised here that men found her act funny too.

Last fall Vaz's parents were planning their first visit to the US and she and her husband requested that they arrive in time for the opening performance of *Unladylike*. "They know me and they loved it," she says about her parents. "This is how I speak. I am very blunt. My dad is like that too. He's an older guy and he doesn't censor himself one little bit. I grew up around that."

Growing up at her home in Mumbai, Vaz used to listen

to long playing records of American comedians, including Bill Cosby, George Carlin and Richard Pryor. Even Cosby, the most family-oriented comedian, would come up with jokes about Noah's Ark and the animals defecating and urinating in the boat. "My dad and I find that very funny," she says.

While her father did not specifically comment on the nature of the issues Vaz talks about in the show, she knows he had a good time. "I could hear him laughing," she says. ■