

Madhur Jaffrey Was an Actress First—She Still Is

by Mayukh Sen • November 3, 2016

Madhur Jaffrey spent the morning mulling over whether to go to an audition. She languished during those hours reading a play in her Greenwich Village apartment. Should she have auditioned? She wasn't sure. By the time we met later that afternoon, Jaffrey couldn't even remember the name of the play. Just when she thought she had it, it escaped her. At first, she thought it was *Still Life*, but no—that was another Noël Coward play. It had been awhile since she'd done this.

Today, in the British and American imaginary, Jaffrey has been cast in primary colors as the West's bellwether of Indian food: the “queen of curries,” “the global authority on Indian cuisine,” “the Julia Child of Indian Cookery.” (Her grandmotherly mien welcomes this. She is a short, unimposing woman who wears her hair in a mild frenzy of a bob; her face conveys biblical wisdom.) But she is, first and foremost, an actress. “I have always known myself as that,” she told me. “Acting is what I went to school for. But people don't know me as anything but as a cookbook author.”

Jaffrey, born in 1933 as Madhur Bahadur in the Delhi of British India, grew up watching movies since the age of three. Her father was an erudite, ardent cinephile who worked as the manager of a ghee factory. He raised her and her five siblings on a coleslaw of British, American, and Indian films, ranging from Laurence Olivier's *Henry V* (1944) to the early films of Indian cinema's first female stars, Devika Rani and Leela Chitnis. Their family outings consisted of watching movies at various points in the day.

“My connection to the history of India is tied to my seeing films,” she insisted to me. Before India's independence from Britain in 1947, movies routinely ended with recordings of the British national anthem, “God Save the King.” In the days when the British Raj's grip over India grew more tenuous, Jaffrey's father, a fervent member of India's burgeoning independence movement, would guide his family out of the theater during these sequences, a gesture of rebellion.

Jaffrey would leave India in 1955 to study acting at London's prestigious RADA, shorthand for Royal Academy of Dramatic Art—and she would excel briefly in this chosen profession, climaxing in a Best Actress award at the Berlin Film Festival. But these considerable accomplishments would fade to a footnote in her biography as the public became more concerned with the dozen-plus cookbooks she's written, her years dispensing knowledge on globally-syndicated BBC cooking shows, and her resultant deployment whenever the culinary cosmos demands a voice on Indian cuisine. As her career in food blossomed, films would retire to become transactions of capital for Jaffrey, creating a chasm between the way the public perceives her and the way she sees herself. It's never made much sense to her.

Food was far from being in Jaffrey's birthright. In her late teens, Jaffrey was one of many would-be actors who sought to emulate Marlon Brando in the wake of his performance as Stanley Kowalski in 1951's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This was the Brando performance summarily responsible for shifting the public understanding of an actor's limits, and Jaffrey found herself drawn to his explosive, anxious style.

In 1955, she received a scholarship to study for two and a half years at RADA. The process there was unsparing: The end of each year would see a ruthless preening of students following exams. (Diana Rigg, an actress a few years Jaffrey's senior who'd go on to become a star in the next decade on spy show *The Avengers*, was held back.)

"We were broken up into separate sections, and each year, they winnowed," she said. "So each year, they took out a handful of people who were not performing well—you had to leave, you were no good."

The night before one of her exams at RADA, Jaffrey saw Anna Magnani in *The Rose Tattoo* (1955). Magnani won an Oscar for her role as Serafina, a widow in a Mississippi town who closets herself from the world in the wake of her husband's death. Like Brando's Stanley, another character written by Tennessee Williams, Magnani's Serafina is defined by her earthbound naturalism. "I was so inspired by Magnani," she told me. "And I did flyingly well after watching her—it carried me over into the next test." Brando and Magnani, together, set the standard Jaffrey held herself to during what she intended to be a prosperous acting career.

Those who acknowledge Madhur Jaffrey as an actress by training usually append this to a particular factoid: She won the Silver Bear for Best Actress at 1965's Berlin Film Festival for her work in *Shakespeare Wallah*, a Merchant-Ivory film. Jaffrey credits herself with introducing James Ivory and Ismail Merchant to one another in 1959 when she lived in New York. Jaffrey had worked with Ivory before, narrating some of his short films, while Merchant arrived in New York as a 22-year-old student eager to take on ambitious, heady film projects. Theirs would go on to be a fecund artistic union; they would later work on *A Room with a View* (1985), *Howards End* (1992), and myriad other productions that were lavished with Oscars, setting a certain standard for plodding prestige period cinema.

Set in the twilight of the British Raj, *Shakespeare Wallah* had initially been conceived as being about a roving troupe of Indian actors performing English classics across India. It had been written by frequent Merchant-Ivory collaborator Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Jaffrey and her then-husband and father of her three daughters, actor Saeed Jaffrey (*A Passage to India*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*), were envisioned for the principal roles. She herself had grown up steeped in the dramatic vernacular of Shakespeare—Jaffrey's first plum acting role, aside from a stint as a brown mouse in the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* when she was five (she'd given up on acting after

that school performance, she would write in her 2006 memoir, because she could not sing), was as Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in her teens.

Madhur and Saeed broke up mid-process, though, and Ivory was furious. The breakup, along with Merchant and Ivory's subsequent visit to India to scout shooting locations, compelled Jhabvala to draft a new screenplay entirely. In India, Merchant and Ivory came upon the Kendals, a white, English acting family who were the new script's itinerant troupe made flesh, just English rather than Indian.

After Merchant and Ivory met the Kendals, they recast the film as a star-making vehicle for the family's seventeen-year-old daughter, Felicity, and her Indian brother-in-law, then-ascendant Bollywood star Shashi Kapoor. Jhabvala minimized Jaffrey's role in the picture; as the vainglorious Bollywood star Manjula, she would play third wheel to its two new stars. She would be the human irritant coming between Kapoor and Kendal's blossoming romance, catalyzing the film's love triangle.

Shakespeare Wallah is a stirring, delicately wistful allegory. If the plotline risks veering into apologia for long-gone British colonial dominance over India, the film is more tonally subtle than these rough outlines suggest, and it is largely buoyed by Jaffrey's work. Prickly and self-possessed, Manjula would embody a brazen new Indian cinema that had asserted itself directly in response to the reigning British artistic traditions, the kind that the traveling British family worked tirelessly to keep alive in a country that was no longer theirs. Jaffrey glides through the film as if she, like the infant cinematic vanguard she represents, has something to prove to her former colonizers—that this nascent nation's cinema possessed worth and fiber. Hers is a performance filled with defensive posturing. "I am Manjula! Where I go, hundreds, thousands follow me!" she declares backstage, in the scene some credit with clenching her victory at Berlin.

Jaffrey knew she was a universe away from what the role demanded physically of its actress. Jaffrey, a reedy 5'2", did not fit the imagined blueprint for what made a Bollywood star, a typically buxom, hourglass figurined-woman. Once Jaffrey had been sent this new version of the script, she began the process of burrowing herself in this character.

"The hard part was to get the vanity, which was not all there. The sense of my good looks and seduction. I needed to project that, but not leave out the vulnerability," she explained. "The role wasn't written for vulnerability. That I knew I had to give to round it off for me."

The Indian crew balked at her appearance when Jaffrey, bespectacled and dressed in jeans, first arrived on set. She had just ascended the hill station of Kasauli, throwing up as she ascended its hairpin roads, and she'd emerged gaunt from the spells of vomiting. "They saw me and said," she moved her hands up and down, imitating a breeder sizing up a game chicken, "she's going to play a movie star?" (In actuality, Jaffrey would not star in a Bollywood film for two decades until Ramesh Sippy's *Saagar*, a star vehicle for another member of the Kapoor clan—Rishi, Shashi

Kapoor's nephew. Donning a thinning grey wig, Jaffrey would play Rishi Kapoor's grandmother.)

Jaffrey compensated for this deficit with her schooling. She found herself calling upon the method acting Brando popularized on film, and what she'd refined at RADA—placing an emphasis on psychological inhabitation, a marriage of animal feeling to studied formalism, and bearing no traces of that strain in the final product. The first scene Jaffrey would film was between her and Kendal's character. Manjula stages this as a confrontation disguised as a friendly meeting over tea. Moments ago, we'd seen Manjula turn volcanic upon learning that her lover, Kapoor, had been romancing Kendal's character.

"We have so much to talk about, two artists together," Manjula, wry and transparently condescending, says to a reticent Kendal. "You have been in films, also? Oh, never mind. I think, uh, stage must also be very interesting? You have many admirers? Oh, don't be modest—I know all about it. I have six fanclubs, five hundred letters every day. Sometimes, I get so tired of admirers."

Before Shakespeare Wallah, Jaffrey had never acted on film. Theater had certain demands of her as a performer—to be at the top of her vocal instrument, the beckon to be larger than life and carry the thrust of size and, as she described it to me, "throw the inner workings all the way back" to audience members perched far from her. Film gave her the latitude to go inward, a possibility she found daunting. She was aware that the camera would be attuned to the most intimate of her movements—the furrow of a brow, the quiver of a lip. Watching Jaffrey at work during that first scene during Shakespeare Wallah, the crew grew quiet, rapt with attention. Jaffrey drew upon the imagined energy of the crew surveilling her, believing she had found her audience.

This moment would anticipate more taxing asks later in her career; "totally everything," she said when I asked her what skills she brought from acting to her career in food. "It's the confidence of standing up in front of a camera and being easy." Though Jaffrey would continue to work with Merchant-Ivory on film, occasionally starring in such films as *The Autobiography of a Princess* (1976) and *Cotton Mary* (1999), most of her work on camera would come in the form of her BBC series that she began filming in 1982, wherein she stepped into another scripted role: that of the strenuously kind woman who can teach you how to make curry.

"Television is a very insidious medium. It tears into every person's ear and eye. You become like Trump, but in a much smaller way," she told me of her later televisual fame. "And a famous person has a peculiar cult following. Which I had a lot of." Jaffrey's career in food would not deprive her of the instincts she had worked rigorously to nurture in her years at RADA. The skills she had in her arsenal were transferrable—her ability to summon the confidence that she can become someone she isn't, to destroy her own slivers of self-doubt.

Of the world's three major film festivals—Cannes, Venice, and Berlin—Jaffrey remains, to date, the only Indian actress to win a Best Actress title. To give a sense of the competition in her particular year, it included French actress Catherine Deneuve for her work in Roman Polanski's psychosomatic thriller *Repulsion* and Madhabi Mukherjee for Bengali director Satyajit Ray's *Charulata*—two performances that are highly well-regarded in cinephilic circles these days, their films equally so. (Jaffrey told me she thinks Mukherjee should have won.) Her competition also included an actress from within Jaffrey's own film—Felicity Kendal.

Though *Shakespeare Wallah* is regarded as the apex of Jaffrey's career in acting, the process of filming was unbearably tense for her, marred by the pervading feeling of competition between Jaffrey and Kendal. When Jaffrey finished shooting her first scene, she walked away pleased with how it had turned out. Yet she heard the next day that Kendal was terribly unhappy with the way she looked in those scenes. She wanted to reshoot it. Ivory had been operating on a shoestring budget, so he didn't have the money to do so; the rushes were left as is.

The tension that Jaffrey experienced during the production of *Shakespeare Wallah* would carry over into the film's release, particularly at the Berlin Film Festival. The film had screened there to unexpectedly rapturous critical praise. The following day, Jaffrey would be lounging in her hotel room when James Ivory called her and said that she'd won the Best Actress award. She was shocked. Yet Ivory sounded terse and impolite over the phone, as if she had done something gravely wrong. Ivory urged her to come downstairs immediately. Jaffrey put a coat over herself and followed his orders, finding that Ivory and Merchant were both horribly angry with her. She couldn't understand why, at first, until Ivory told her, "Go say something to Foo to make her feel better," calling Kendal by her family nickname.

Jaffrey's memories of Berlin are not uniformly terrible; she would tell me, for example, of sharing an elevator with Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida and Shashi Kapoor. Lollobrigida was utterly transfixed by Kapoor, and Jaffrey would later receive a bouquet of flowers to her hotel room with an invitation from Lollobrigida inviting her to lunch, realizing it was for Kapoor. "I don't think she could tell one name from another," she remembered. "Indian names—Shashi Kapoor, Madhur Jaffrey—blend into one another for her."

But Jaffrey could not shake that moment of her victory, now evinced as the crowning achievement of an aborted acting career. She has since associated awards with this ungainly mix of pleasure and pain—the understanding that winning comes at a price, and is, in effect, a form of losing.

"I remember when we got to the New York Film Festival, at the Lincoln Center—and I think the London Film Festival was to follow, and [Ivory] said to me, don't you dare come to the London Film Festival." Madhur, in Ivory's eyes, had enjoyed her allotted share of the spotlight. (Kendal would later gain prominence in the next decade for her role in the BBC's *The Good Life*. In other

words, she would be just fine.) London, Ivory said, was supposed to be Felicity Kendal's time—not Madhur's.

Jaffrey exited the experience of Shakespeare Wallah believing it would promise a steady stream of acting assignments. This never happened. "I had this expectation myself," she told me. "I talked to a man at the Public Theatre, who kept telling me, we're trying to place you. He couldn't. There was no non-traditional casting at the time like there is now," referring to her daughter, Sakina, who has maintained a steady role as Cuban-American Linda Vasquez—or, as Jaffrey couched it, "a non-Indian"—on Netflix's *House of Cards*.

There was no preordained rubric for a stardom like Jaffrey's in the film industries of India, the United States, or the United Kingdom. In India, she was seen as too thin to fit the skin of a Bollywood star. In the West, she would find herself offered roles that made a caricature of her heritage, such as a dancer hailing from a vague, unspecific part of the Middle East.

"My first play Off-Broadway was something like that. I was a Middle Eastern dancer. Otherwise, we had to do these roles where we're supposed-to-talk-like-this." She bobbed her head and cupped her hands. "We were all supposed to talk in this awful, exaggerated Indian accent." Consider the context swirling around this—Peter Sellers donning brownface and a prosthetic Dravidian nose in 1968's *The Party*; though his performance is alert and engaging, I suspect time will not be much kinder than it's been to Mickey Rooney's Mr. Yunioshi.

For Shakespeare Wallah, Jaffrey received the kind of reviews that one associates with star-making performances. She cited the "fabulous, fabulous notices" from Kenneth Tynan and Judith Crist, two of America's totemic critical forces of the time, notoriously difficult to win over. In hindsight, such write-ups forecasted a large career in cinema that, for Jaffrey, never arrived.

The boons of Jaffrey's newfound semi-stardom would come, instead, in the form of a profile in *The New York Times*. Merchant brought Jaffrey into the vision of *Times* food scribe Craig Claiborne. "Ismail was a terrific impresario salesperson, and he got into Craig's world and said, there's this actress and you must meet her, she's a great cook," she said. "I always cooked. I was cooking all the time. So then Craig approached me for a page-long profile."

She had begun cooking during her days at RADA. Jaffrey was a poor drama student in those years, subsisting only on meager scholarship money. Her parents couldn't send her money, given the fact that India couldn't get foreign exchange at the time to convert its rupees into British banknotes. As such, that period was culinarily awful, her diet orbiting around fish and chips and the decaying, lilac-grey cabbage served at RADA's cafeteria.

Jaffrey would inevitably begin to pine for home, missing the taste and scent of her mother's cooking. She began writing to her mother and asking her to mail recipes. Her mother, who did not speak English, wrote her back with three-line recipes for three different dishes. Even with her mother's minimal instructions, Jaffrey was able to recreate them: She would harness these nascent leanings into a skill, gaining a newfound calculus for egg curry and potatoes with cumin.

Claiborne, at Merchant's urging, wanted to come and photograph Jaffrey at her apartment, yet Jaffrey was sheepish about showing off her stuffy, cramped Greenwich Village home, where she lived with her second husband, violinist Sanford Allen, before they were married. To remedy this, she approached an Irish couple who were her friends and had an apartment a block away, asking if she could use their apartment for the purposes of the shoot and just feign it was hers.

As Claiborne interviewed her, she remembered, he was looking at the cookbooks on the shelves in their kitchen. She was forced to pretend that these were the cookbooks she used. Instead of interviewing her and leaving her be, he asked Jaffrey to cook a dish for him—but at a later date, next week. So she had to go back all over again to borrow her friends' apartment. Claiborne couldn't tell it wasn't Jaffrey's; he would describe it in the write-up as "her brightly lit Greenwich Village apartment."

The profile did for Jaffrey what Jay McInerney did for Chloë Sevigny in *The New Yorker* in 1994—ushering her into a world that did not know her and asserting her brilliance within it, urging that a new class of spectators pay attention. Claiborne's writeup attracted attention that brought Jaffrey into the purview of a freelance editor who wondered whether she'd be interested in doing a cookbook on Indian food.

Through the goodwill of this editor, she would eventually come into contact with Knopf and Judith Jones, the editor who was the sole early booster of Julia Child. Jones would edit Jaffrey's first cookbook. Where editors at publishing houses of analogous stature were bullish and didn't respond to queries about the book, Jaffrey discovered in Jones a sympathetic editor privy to Jaffrey's authorial voice; she would place enormous value in Jaffrey's sensibility as a non-restaurateur.

"When Madhur Jaffrey's manuscript came to me at Knopf, I was immediately persuaded that food-conscious Americans were ready for authentic Indian food, particularly if they had someone as skillful as Madhur guiding them," Jones would write in her 2008 memoir. "She was canny enough to realize, it was apparent, that she had to seduce us slowly, step by step."

That book, 1973's *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*, took five years to write, because Jaffrey wasn't trained to measure ingredients accordingly. She was working from the palette of her memory. The book would be received breathlessly; so wide-reaching was its import that it was inducted into the James Beard Cookbook Hall of Fame a decade ago, the ultimate arbiter of prestige in culinary literature. Claiborne would call it "perhaps the best Indian cookbook

available in English.” This first cookbook, she confided in me, remains amongst the proudest of her achievements, next to 1985’s *A Taste of India* and last year’s *Vegetarian India*.

Coupled with the book’s release was a stint of teaching classes on Indian cuisine at the James Beard Cooking School, which Jaffrey took on at the behest of Jones, who was aggressive about championing the book. Food emerged from the paucity of acting opportunities; she would describe these years to me as ones in which she “wasn’t getting good roles. There were little things here and there, but nothing I considered worthy enough. Small parts.” In 1982, the BBC approached Jaffrey with the possibility of hosting her own educational cooking show on Indian food, asking her to audition. She only had a radio broadcasting studio to record her audition in, so she imitated one of her classes at the James Beard Cooking School and pretended she had a ladle and a dish in front of her. What she could not convey with her physical gestures, she would channel with her voice. This won the BBC over; they gave her a contract to host Madhur Jaffrey’s *Indian Cookery*. The series would be syndicated by PBS in the United States, introducing her to an uninitiated viewership.

While these accomplishments are remarkable, it bears remembering that Jaffrey’s robust career in food has been an extended, dreamlike accident. “I found it unusual to be called the face of Indian cooking, because I was never a cook.”

What such sweeping characterizations inevitably miss, beyond their disconnect from Jaffrey’s self-assessment that she’s principally an actress, is India’s outright density. The country is home to 1.2 billion people and 29 different states. It’s an astonishingly large burden to thrust an ambassadorial responsibility upon one person. Besides, a woman who grew up in an upper-class family in a city during the last gasps of the British Raj can only represent this totality so much.

The world has nevertheless granted Jaffrey the license to speak on Indian food. And as of late, she has grown especially forthright and animated about the way the West continues to flatten its particulars. “Look at the history of Indian food here [in the West], and they keep saying that Indian food is next,” she complained to me, referring to restaurateurs. “But it’s never come. It’s not here. They always want us to change it. Change it in some way. Less hot, simpler, whatever.”

This attitude she’s adopted dovetails with her understandable pessimism about food media’s greater problem with India—what some see as the quest for accessibility and speaking to all readers registers as a dangerous oversimplification to her. “I think everybody’s so busy making it accessible to Americans, which everyone does. Including Food52,” she told me. “And when I see that, I don’t know. I grow a little less hopeful that we will ever come into our own.”

I’d heard this precise refrain from her a week earlier, when I’d seen her at the James Beard Foundation Food Conference. There, she lamented the tendency for restaurants to continually offer riffs on Indian food that, unfailingly, missed its soul. Skeptics may contend that Jaffrey has, in effect, participated in the economy she criticizes by writing cookbooks for non-Indian audiences. Yet this critique overlooks a key nuance of her output: Jaffrey’s cookbooks have

spoken a language of democratic generosity, as if to say, you can cook this, too, without forgetting that there is a certain impossibility of capturing Indian cuisine in its scope and texture. Return to the warning in her preface of *An Invitation to Indian Cooking*: "If you are looking for an encyclopedic tome encompassing all Indian food, you certainly won't find it here."

There's a litany of roles Jaffrey would have loved to have played had she been given the chance in this lifetime—for one, all of Meryl Streep's roles on film. Or Lady MacBeth. Jaffrey told me she values perceived intensity in actors—the same characteristic she revered in Brando and Magnani. She cited, among actors working today, Johnny Depp, Joan Allen, and "the man with the scrunchy face who usually plays druggy guys," Benicio del Toro, as among her favorites.

There was a time when she had high opinions of Robert de Niro, Dustin Hoffman, and Al Pacino before old age and desperation poisoned their output. Jaffrey admitted that she has not been able to escape this herself. She's "done real crap, real crap" she told me, later in her career, when acting work had been even more slow-going than it had been in her youth.

Her last film was 2012's *A Late Quartet*, a drama starring Christopher Walken as a Parkinson's-stricken cellist; Jaffrey played his doctor. She is currently filming another in India with Kamal Hassan, the magnanimously popular South Indian actor (whom, coincidentally, she starred with in *Saagar*). She has no idea when the film is due to come out, and seemed curious to see whether it'd come off the ground at all. The process, she described to me, has been rather harried.

Jaffrey was unable to outline a "typical day," because she still does not enjoy one. She had just returned from a friend's wedding in Ireland for the past week. Now, she was readying herself to go to Sri Lanka to film a cooking show. For Ireland, she had to pack wintry clothes; now, she had to pack for more tropical weather. After our meeting, she was set to go vote—"It's called a secret ballot, but I'm obviously not voting for Trump," she cautioned me.

It is somewhat comforting to think of Jaffrey's career in food as an oblique realization of her primal desire to act. She has ended up on camera, playing dress-up both literally and metaphorically in the public eye. Yet this—the belief that she has simply metabolized her talents in a vocation other than acting—strikes me as terribly dim, for it betrays how she self-identifies. The stock of her biggest imprint on film, *Shakespeare Wallah*, has fallen: For a brief time, *Shakespeare Wallah* enjoyed a release by the Criterion Collection, dedicated to restoring cinematic artifacts that call for preservation. The Criterion version of the film has since fallen out of print, its asking price on Amazon now ballooned to a reasonably affordable \$109. Consider Jaffrey's filmography—twenty films, most of them in supporting roles, her force and charisma relegated to the background in cinema. I recall her as another face at the table as Stockard Channing recites her sterling final monologue in 1993's *Six Degrees of Separation*; one wonders what Jaffrey could have done with such a scene herself.

Jaffrey, who is now 83, has not yet received the opportunity to tear into a role with the abandon her training and talent demand. She remains unerring and resolute about pursuing her life's first great labor of love. "I do still have to audition," she reminded me. "I'm not above it yet."

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