

FORTUNE

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

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Sex? Money? Family issues? They've been done to death. Here's something fresh: a play about customer service. By Kate Bonamici

SO THERE'S THIS PLAY, *Alladeen*, that's been touring all over the world for about a year. In New York City last December it sold out five shows and got a rave review in the *New York Times*. You might want to catch it if you get the chance. It's about... outsourcing.

Well, offshoring. Customer-service call centers in India, to be precise.

"As material, you almost can't think of anything dumber, which I think is great," says Keith Khan, one of the drama's co-creators.

Khan and his collaborators-Marianne Weems of the Builder's Association, a New York theater group, and Ali Zaidi, a partner of Khan's at Motiroti, a London arts group-actually started out to write a multimedia play using the story of Aladdin. "He is transformed through the magic of the lamp," says Weems. "That really interested us, because it's such a deep fantasy that people still have. But we were trying to find something else to mix with that."

Then Weems noticed an article about India's call centers in the *New York Times* in March 2001 with the headline HI, I'M IN BANGALORE (BUT I CAN'T SAY so). Bingo! "That sort of opened this whole other door for us, looking at the shifting identities of workers," she says. The trio traveled to Bangalore, interviewed workers in call centers there, and wrote their script.

In a sense, *Alladeen* is just the latest in a distinguished tradition of dramas about business. There's *The Merchant of Venice*. *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. *The Producers*. But this production is quite unlike its predecessors-for one thing, audience members are encouraged to leave their cellphones on.

I caught up with *Alladeen* not long ago at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H. The theater in the Hopkins Center was pretty full, considering that it was Friday night at an Ivy known for its frat parties. An especially enthusiastic portion of the audience was made up of members of the college's South Asian club (which invited the cast to its party after the show). And I am pleased to report that, Khan's self-deprecation notwithstanding, it was not a dumb concept at all. It was superb.

The thing the *Times* liked so much about the production was its sense of newness. It's a multimedia extravaganza, with a set anchored by a huge screen hanging over the stage. Lowered to the floor, the screen displays complex 3-D effects that cleverly create New York and London street scenes, complete with buses and passersby. Raised higher, it is a base for swirling visuals-computer screen shots, scenes from old Aladdin movies, fake Hollywood posters, the faces of the actual cast magnified 100 times, and a second, virtual cast of actual call-center employees filmed in Bangalore. Clubby music plays almost constantly, and a crawling ticker at the bottom of the stage streams wishes submitted to the "World-WideWeb Jinn" at www.alladeen.com.

The plot woven through all this technology is minimal-call-center workers train and take calls (some weird, some mundane); one gets fired, one does exceptionally well. There is a flirtation, quickly rebuffed, but the joy of Alladeen is in the details. The call-center operators pick American names from *Friends*-Aman, Savitri, Satya, and Tanya become Joey, Rachel, Monica, and Phoebe. A training course on American culture features a hysterical explanation of American football (teams wear "representative costumes," and groups of players "try to shackle this man" who is running with the ball). The call-center workers on film tell of handling calls from perverts, of trying to eliminate "mother-tongue influence" in their accents, and of their bizarre new lives, working 3 A.M. to noon, during U.S. business hours. "I want it to be a 9 to 6," says one, explaining the impossibility of a social life when 6 P.M. is the middle of the night. "That's my only wish." Alladeen begins with great laughs from the audience during the training sequences, but it ends wistfully, as the most successful of the operators sits alone in a London nightclub, talking on his cellphone in his new American accent.

Taking advantage of Alladeen's visit, Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business convened a panel discussion earlier in the week called "Inside Outsourcing." Khan joined a handful of corporate executives and policy wonks to discuss the difference between outsourcing and offshoring, why call centers should be the least of people's worries, and whether creative R&D work will eventually follow lower-level jobs to India and beyond. Said Paul Gaffney, executive vice president of supply chain at Staples: "What's gotten the debate raging is [people like] my friend, who runs a big division for a chip manufacturer, outsourcing his Ph.D. work. I think the picking-up-the-phone part is a very useful social context for us to understand the human issues. [But] it's not the significant economic issue."

Alladeen, says Weems, "is really ultimately using the call centers as a metaphor for these larger issues about cultural masking and cultural reversals and the whole hybridity of identities." The audience in Hanover seemed to appreciate it-especially the Southeast Asian students behind me, who exploded in gales of laughter when one of the actors argued with his mother in Hindi. I missed those jokes, but then, it seemed to me that you could see this play several times and still not get quite everything. It's an eclectic, multi-culti experience that leaves the average audience member feeling as if he's taken a long trip in the course of 90 minutes. Between the settings (New York, Bangalore, London)

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and the creators (American, British/Trinidadian, Indian) and the cast (IndianAmerican, Indian-British, just plain American, etc.), I was dazzled.

You could even say I was transported.

Alladeen is headed to Norway, Germany, and Australia over the next few months. The production may return to New York and other U.S. cities before closing at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D. C., in May 2005. For more information, go to www.alladeen.com.