

APARNA BRIELLE

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WITH A BACKGROUND IN DANCE and theater and a successful television career as Sarika on NBC's *A.P. Bio*, Aparna Brielle is a modern-day renaissance woman. Born Aparna Parthasarathy just outside of Portland, Oregon, she began learning seven different dance forms at age 6, and by 9 was the youngest Indian classical dance graduate. Dancing was Aparna's first taste of storytelling, and she was instantly hooked.

Even before she knew what it meant to be an actor, Aparna was enthralled with the craft. As a kid, she aspired to be a character inside the television, imagining that "you just get transformed through some kind of magical machine," she recalls. Growing up in Portland, she wasn't exposed to professional acting, but at 14 discovered Hollywood and made it her goal. She joined a local theater and in high school added film and television classes to the mix.

A marketing major, Aparna only took one term of acting in college, "But I was studying at a studio in Portland in the Meisner method," she shares. Her trek from school to the acting studio was three hours both ways. "But because I knew that's what I wanted to do, I was willing to make that drive twice a week," she says.

After a few minor parts, Aparna's breakout audition came in the height of pilot season. While sifting through roles, she came across a script that stood out. "It was very funny and it was very edgy for a network comedy," she recollects. The role was Sarika Sarkar.

"I remember reading this part, and she was kind of a blank canvas," Aparna recalls. Her interpretation of Sarika as "Reese Witherspoon in

Election combined with a hint of Hermione Granger" was risky, but it got her a callback. A few weeks after, Aparna got a call saying that the producers had liked "what someone did in the room" — now they wanted to see a character like Reese Witherspoon in Election. "I remember going, "That was me, so I guess I'll just bring that back," she laughs. After Aparna's network test, the universe fell silent. Even her Bed Bath & Beyond email wasn't coming in, and she remembers throwing her phone across the room in defeat minutes before receiving the good news call.

Aparna describes the show as "a very sweet world where a very cynical man gets dropped", and with its unique color palette and score, Whitlock High seems like *The Good Place*, but is more of a reverse-Glee, she notes. *A.P. Bio* follows ex-Harvard philosophy professor Jack Griffin (Glenn Howerton), who is assigned a high school biology class. Frustrated with his life, Jack refuses to teach and instead uses the students to terrorize his enemies. Underneath his cynical exterior, however, Jack cares about his students, and Aparna loves the saccharine interruptions in an otherwise dark program.

It's been amazing seeing fans connect with the characters, Aparna says. Aside from the number of repurposed *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* fans, she was most surprised by the outpouring of love for Sarika. "I adore her," she quickly qualifies, "But I also know she's quite punchable." Through watching the show as it airs, Aparna has begun to see Sarika as the fans do, who like her "take charge, take-no-shit mentality."

The show, created by Seth Meyers, Mike O'Brien, and Lorne Michaels, draws talented names in improv. Aparna had only been on set for a few weeks when Taran Killam (of *Saturday Night Live* fame) cameoed. He shot six versions of the same scene, including a spontaneous rap battle with Glenn. "I didn't even know how to respond to it," Aparna laughs. "I wish I recorded it." Along with impressive guest stars, the show sports talented regulars like Patton Oswalt, who plays Principal Durbin. "He would come in and just start riffing and we couldn't actually tell the difference between him and what was scripted," Aparna adds. With such remarkable actors and showrunners, "every day is an adventure", from shooting a noir interrogation to watching Glenn calmly drown animatronic babies.

Outside of *A.P. Bio*, Aparna aspires to grace the silver screen in an action movie, but would rather play an anti-hero or villain than a superhero. She loves period pieces, but "the only question is finding something I could do," she jokes. Her dream is to play Merle Oberon, an Indian actress forced to mask her ethnicity for the sake of her career. "I think her life is so fascinating. She really was one of the Old Hollywood queens," but was forgotten in favor of Marilyn and Audrey.

Although she is currently focused on television and film, Aparna would love to take up theater again. "There's something so exhilarating and incredible about being on stage," she reflects, because the live audience comes with both increased responsibility and renewed energy.

Aparna's love for storytelling has yet to fade. "I love being able to explore all these incredible imaginary

spaces and worlds,” she explains. As an actor, she is able to step outside of herself while still looking inward. “People have this misconception that you’re playing somebody else, and to an extent you are,” she remarks, but to build a character, “you’re really finding elements of yourself and putting them in that place.”

In understanding Sarika, Aparna discovered more similarities than she expected, including ambition and leadership, but they have many differences. “She’s a lot more manipulative than I am,” Aparna points out. While Sarika is very academically driven, “there were definitely classes that I didn’t really care about at all,” Aparna admits, as she prioritized acting over schoolwork. “But I will say I did well in Honors Bio, so at least I had that in common with her,” she laughs.

Aparna’s high school experience was somewhat unusual, as she transferred from Catholic school to art school her junior year. As a dreamer pursuing an artistic career, Aparna always stood out from her peers, which helped inform Sarika. “She’s a different kind of weird than I was,” Aparna shares, “But I still remember very much what it felt like to be a part of a group, yet so different from everyone in school.”

The locker-lined *A.P. Bio* set comes with nostalgia. Stepping into a classroom full of new faces with unique personalities felt like returning to high school, but in the best way. “Everyone’s differences and weird little quirks, we really embraced those a lot,” Aparna adds, and she can be herself and “own all the things that make me weird and different and unique and be accepted and loved as part of this group.” NKD



