

# SHEETAL'S SHOWTIME

**T**he character Sheetal Sheth plays in Albert Brooks' new comedy is innocent, earnest, and – paradoxically – devoid of a sense of humor.

As Maya in the Warner Independent Pictures release "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World" (opening Jan. 20), Sheth also comes across as pathologically cheerful.

"I'm certainly not that positive all the time," Sheth laughs in an interview with *Indian Life & Style* by phone from Los Angeles. "But I could relate to her spunk."

Shot on location in Delhi and Agra, the film tracks the adventures of a man (Brooks) sent by the U.S. State Department to India and Pakistan on a mission to find out what makes Muslims laugh (and yes, he knows that India is 80 percent Hindu).

While in Delhi, he hires Maya, a bright young journalist (Sheth), to help him compile his report. Notepad in hand, Maya trails him as he conducts man-on-the-street interviews and even puts on an ill-fated standup comedy show.

On the subcontinent, Brooks finds that his brand of humor – largely Hollywood in-jokes, gentle sarcasm and puns – goes over with a loud thud. "Albert's sense of humor is more about intelligent wit, not slapstick," said Sheth. "Obvious comedy is not him."

Brooks launched a months-long, international casting search before settling on Sheth, a New Jersey girl. Every two to three years since she was born, Sheth has spent months at a time in India, so she felt confident that she

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Sheetal Sheth, the Indian American actress on her way to mainstream stardom.

The Indian American actress who shot to fame with movies like "American Chai" is now hitting the big screen with Albert Brooks in "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World." **Lisa Tsering** talks to Sheetal Sheth about her non-hyphenated American identity and the irony of playing an 'Indian' in an American film.

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could "pass" as native born, but she acknowledges that the accent was a challenge.

"The accent was hard for me," she recalls. "It's not my family's accent – they're from Ahmedabad. I wanted to give Maya an accent that was authentic, and I imagined she would speak with a British influence."

She also prepared for the role by renting Brooks' films. Most recently, the writer-actor-director provided the voice of Marlin in the hit animated film "Finding Nemo," but he's also directed "The Muse," "Mother, Lost in America" and "Modern Romance"; and had roles in "The In-Laws," "Out of Sight," "Broadcast News," "Terms of Endearment" and many other films.

Sheth is busting out on the big screen in mainstream America, but she made her mark first in the desi community with starring roles in films like "ABCD," "American Chai," "Indian Cowboy," "Pocketful of Dreams," "Dancing in Twilight" and "Wings of Hope." She's also appeared in a television movie, "The Princess and the Marine," and done guest spots on "Strong Medicine," "The Agency" and "Line of Fire."

Few of her films till now have been seen outside Indian American enclaves, yet she bristles when a reporter refers to those projects as "NRI [nonresident Indian] movies."

"I don't know why people even call them NRI movies," she says. "I disagree."

"It takes away from what we're doing,



Sheetal Sheth in "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World." Sheth is an honors graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

Definitely, the term NRI doesn't even apply to half of our parents, who have lived here longer than they lived in India!

"We're constantly trying to accept the fact that we're born and raised here, and we have every right to be a part of the mainstream culture as any other ethnic group. Then people start labeling the movies that we do like this," she continues.

"They're American films. They're inde-

pendent movies, like any other independent movies that decided to use the backdrop of an Indian family.

"Are you going to call every black film a 'black film'? Or every film with white characters a 'white film'? It's so ridiculous to me, this constant labeling. It's impossible for us to expect anyone else to look at us as part of the mainstream culture if we can't even say it ourselves."

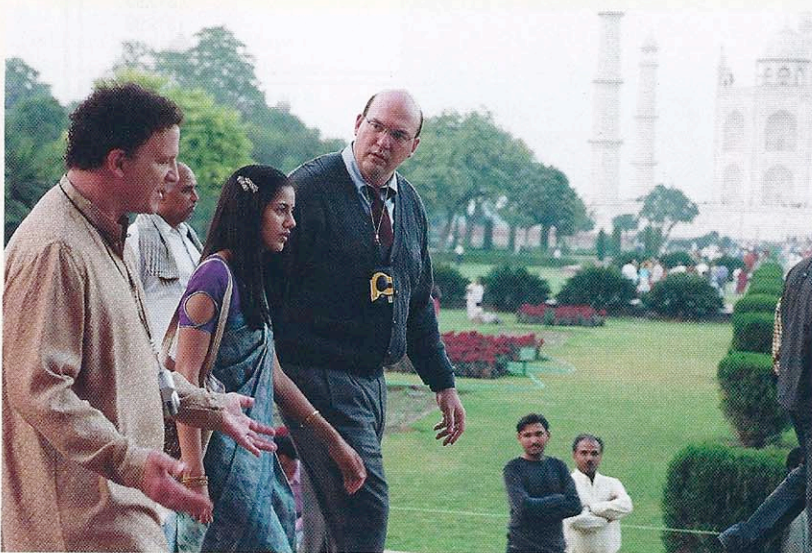
Sheth started acting when she was in high school. "I started as kind of a whim. I wasn't good at it. I was really bad. I sucked, actually!

"But I was a good student and I enjoyed a challenge. I was so intrigued by the fact that I sucked at acting that I was like, 'I need to figure this out.'"

"The more I learned about it, it was like wow. This is not at all what I thought! It eventually became part of my soul, really. There's no way I could not have it in my life."

An honors graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Sheth enjoys dancing, reading thoughtful fiction and autobiographies, and hiking the hills and canyons outside her adopted hometown of Los Angeles.

There are a number of upcoming projects she's close-lipped about, for now, but she says: "I'm looking forward to doing more stuff that I love."



Sheetal Sheth with costar Albert Brooks on location at the Taj Mahal in Agra, India. The film "Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World" was shot both in the U.S. and India.