



Chacko Vadaketh

Pursuing Passion

BY HIRANMAYIL AWLI MOHANAN

Lawyer turned actor, Chacko Vadaketh has always been drawn to the arts and acting. KL Lifestyle magazine sits down with this talented actor to discuss his memorable roles and plans for Deepavali.

YOU HAVE A VERY UNIQUE NAME. MIND SHARING WITH US ITS MEANING AND YOUR HERITAGE?

Chacko is Syriac, which is a dialect of Aramaic, and is a variation of the name Jacob. This is the language that Jesus spoke. I am Malayalee, my grandparents came from Kerala to Klang in the 20's. We belong to a community known as the Syrian Christians of Kerala founded by one of Jesus' disciples, St Thomas in 52AD. He is thus known as the Apostle of India. Kerala has always had close ties with the Middle East, providing pepper and spices to Europe through Jewish and Arab traders from at least the time of the Roman Empire. Thus Kerala also has one of the oldest Muslim communities in the world.

YOU ARE A LAWYER TURNED ACTOR. WHAT FUELLED THE CAREER CHANGE?

I read Law at Cambridge, but it was not what I really wanted to do. I would have preferred to have read History or English but Law was the sensible option that prepared me for a career. There is a lot of theatre in Cambridge University with the Collegiate system, and I got hooked on it there and even did a year of Archaeology and Anthropology rather than Law, which are interesting disciplines but also gave me more time to do theatre. I then did the Bar in London at Lincoln's Inn and came back to KL and practised for a decade. But always acting on the side. I was tempted to go into it full time but it wasn't really a paying profession and in

a way for many years it worked well as a hobby and with law as a profession. It was nice balance that I had. I had become something of a sub specialist in Medico-Legal Litigation and area of the law I enjoyed very much, and was the Malaysian Bar's rep on the Malaysian AIDS Council, chairing their Law & Ethics Committee for a few years. Though that changed as I got more senior in my legal career and was under pressure to do work in other areas of the law which I did not find as sexy. The acting also got more demanding and Singapore was becoming an exciting place for English Language theatre and television. So finally I had to choose and I got a role, ironically as lawyer in several episodes of the much loved Singapore tv series "Growing Up". That gave me the confidence to quit the law and go into acting and the arts full time. Soon after I landed the role of Sabo Singh, in the then new sitcom "Mr. Kiasu" which was nominated for Best Sitcom in the Asian Television Awards and ran for three seasons.

WHAT IS YOUR MOST MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE TO DATE?

A pivotal performance was playing Othello at the Cambridge Playroom as an undergraduate there. The final night we had a packed house and it was incredible to have them all engrossed in our acting and the tragic epic tale. We got a standing ovation at the end with carnations being flung at me by the many friends and some family in the audience. At that moment I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life.

A production that I am very proud of is M! The Opera composed by Saidah Rastam which I co-produced. It was a ground breaking production with the most beautiful original music played by a combination orchestra of western and Asian instruments, and sung by a wonderfully talented and hard working cast. The Prime Minister at the time, Abdullah Badawi attended the Gala Night. His late wife, Endon Mahmood was the patron of the Production but tragically had passed away before we staged it.

Key roles include playing Sarkar the villain in Sci Fi movie shot in Los Angeles, Princess of Mars opposite Antonio Sabato Jnr and Tracy Lords; King Arthur

in the musical Camelot, voicing Jaffar in the Malay dubbing of Walt Disney's animation feature, Aladdin, Prospero in The Tempest in Singapore and narrating Malam Terang Bulan, the story of our National Anthem with the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra and Youth Orchestra.

Memorable experiences have also been appearing in the hit sitcom in the US Rules of Engagement, CBS soap opera The Bold And The Beautiful and NBC Drama series In Plain Sight.

I am also proud of having spent 5 years in Los Angeles and managed to get an agent and manager there as an actor and voice over artist. It's a difficult town to crack and the competition is intense. I eventually managed to get permanent resident status as an alien of extraordinary ability and got to work on a number of cool television shows and films. And some plays too including playing Mahatma Gandhi at the Steve Allen Theatre in Hollywood.

But it's very far from home and as the parents got older and my mother especially got more frail I thought it's time to move back to KL and to be with them. It has also been very exciting to have been back for the birth of Malaysia Bahrui and to have been involved in the amazing GE 14 elections and seen the Malaysia people triumph over evil and kleptocracy through peaceful democratic means.

HOW DO YOU GET INTO A ROLE/ CHARACTER? DO YOU HAVE A PROCESS?

I first get to understand the setting of the story, the time, the place, the events. Then I work out the character, what is his back story. What do I have from my own life, my own character that I share with him. What are his reasons his actions and reactions in the scenes in which he appears. What was he doing just before and just after that scene. I like to rehearse if possible, that's my theatre back ground. But often in film and television you don't have much time or opportunity to do so. I like to get the lines down by singing them, in different styles, that helps me get them into my skin and adds a dimension to them. I also like to break down the scene into the passionate purpose of my character for different parts of my dialogue and actions.

WHAT IS YOUR DREAM ROLE AND HOW WOULD YOU CONTRIBUTE TO THAT CHARACTER SHOULD YOU HAVE IT?

Playing a Bond villain! Villains are fun! And though I am not villain like in real life, I easily read as villain on screen I am told and I can bring a dimension of evil and darkness if need be and also a sense of enjoyment at unleashing chaos and destruction. An intelligent, elegant but ruthless villain.





WHAT HAVE YOU WORKED ON RECENTLY AND WHAT PLANS FOR THE FUTURE.

I have been busy with the shoot for Cinemax series Strike Back. An action packed series and they are shooting the whole season here in Malaysia. But the storylines go to different parts of Asia and the middle East and that is something exciting that is happening in film and television as Malaysia is truly asia and international productions are finding that they make films or tv shows set in many parts of the region right here in one country with great infra structure and facilities, good crew and good actors.

Last year I was in the BBC series Our Girl and played a Bangladeshi General in Bangladesh and Carcosa was my Military Headquarters. Before that I was in UK's Channel 4 series Indian Summers which was shot on Penang Hill which stood in for Simla, India in the 1930s.

I was in Anak Merdeka made for Merdeka last year, acting in Malay for the first time in many years and after my move back from LA. A great mini-series on Astro, unusual in being multilingual, reflecting the way we speak in many languages all at the same time in Malaysia and broadcast on the different linguistic channels on Astro.

I have just finished the shoot for the Malaysian Singapore version of the Danish Swedish murder mystery thriller series, The Bridge by Double Vision and starring Bront Palarae and am about to start shooting in Malay horror series Ghaib for TV3. I have also been narrating the Nat Geo series Road to Nationhood for Rack Focus Films which is on air as I write this. I am working on screenplay of a film that

is close to my heart, a historical love story and am also looking at reviving a theatre show I did over a year ago and seeing if it can go on tour.

I would also like to help bring more theatre into our schools to enrich the lives of our children.

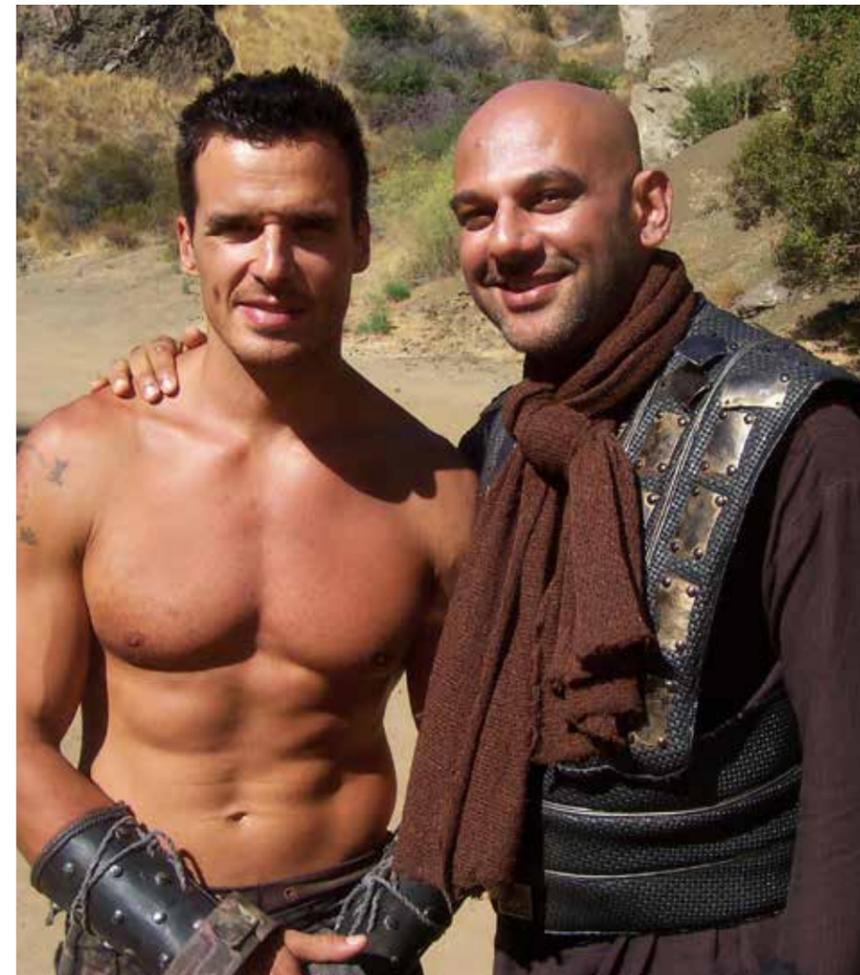
DO YOU HAVE AN ADVICE FOR ASPIRING ACTORS OUT THERE?

Do it only if you really love it and there is nothing else you would rather do. It's a tough industry, uncertain, no clear career path to take, no regular source of income. But if it gives you joy and satisfaction like nothing else, then go for it.

WHAT DOES DEEPAVALI MEAN TO YOU?

Being Christians our main celebration as a family is Christmas. But we have many close family friends who are Hindu and so we celebrate Deepavali with them. It is a wonderful celebration of the triumph of good over evil. I love the Ramayana story, of Rama winning Sita, going into exile, of defeating Ravana and rescuing Sita with the help of Hanuman the Monkey God and the return to his capital Ayuthaya with Sita, which is what Deepavali commemorates.

But it's also a celebration of Indian culture, food, arts and music. I love dressing up in traditional Indian clothes, so happy to do so on Deepavali when visiting Hindu friends or colleagues. The Malaysian tradition of Open House as a family thing is dying out I feel which is sad. It's now often more a corporate thing, and many folk either just celebrate on their own or go away on holiday. This applies to all our festivals. I guess it's harder to have open houses, or they become too big and unwieldy and expensive. Also as more of us live in small apartments, that makes it harder to open our homes to more people.



WHAT DOES DEEPAVALI DAY LOOK LIKE IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD?

We don't do anything special to the house, but we do get out some of our Indian outfits to wear to the Deepavali parties and Mum and if my sisters are in town from Australia, they will be sorting out sarees and saree blouses and such.

As a child, I remember one Deepavali, my mother was asked to create a "Pookollam" for a TV program on Deepavali. Kollams are traditional geometric designs done on the floors in front of homes during festivals times. In Kerala we fill these designs up with flower or petals and leaves, something unique to the state. And she did this in a Hindu neighbour's house, which was all prepared for the celebration. And all the kids from the neighbourhood were roped into help out. Go collect flowers and leaves, dress in Indian finery and help with creating the design in the porch of the house. So there was a lot of excitement in our little lane that day.

Mum is a paediatrician, and in the latter part of her career she taught paediatrics at University Malaya. But she is also very artistic and paints and made stunning pookollams. This time she drew out a huge mango shaped designed, very Indian, and a little different to the usual circular designs that are done for kollams. And we all had a lot of fun being on tv and helping create the colourful exotic pookollam.

I do miss the sense of neighbourhood we had when growing up. Us kids were in each others houses, we all played badminton most evenings in one of the houses which had a court. The adults too would come over to play badminton as well with great gusto.

WHAT ARE THE STAPLE DEEPAVALI DISHES YOU LOOK FORWARD TO?

Paal Appam is my favourite with coconut milk. I also love murukku and some of the north indian sweets like bharfi and khulfi.

But it still is a wonderful way to reconnect with close Hindu friends. And to eat great Indian food. As my parents are now very old, it is special to go with them to visit their old friends of many years as each time and these friendships have become more precious with the passing of time.

ANY PLANS FOR DEEPAVALI?

No special plans but my parents and I will be planning out who to visit, either with them jointly or our own individual friends. And it's just mapping out the day and working out how to fit in the visits. Often the open houses are over nearby weekends and not necessarily on the actual day itself which makes it less hectic.

I love the Ramayana story also because it is loved all over South and South East Asia, regardless of whether the main

religion today is Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism. And so it is celebrated throughout the year in dance dramas like the Ramayana Ballet in Jogjakarta or Wayang Kulit in Malaysia or Puppet shows in Thailand. It is sad that in Kelantan much of the arts with Hindu elements have been banned. My family is Christian but my sisters learnt Bharathanatyam and told Hindu mythology tales through dance and in the same way Malay Muslims have been telling these tales without detracting from their beliefs as Muslims and these beautiful ancient traditions and art forms should be allowed to continue.

This first Deepavali in this new era for our country will thus be extra special, light has returned after many years in darkness and uncertainty.