Clarion Review

Essays

Actor. Writer. Whatever. (essays on my rise to the top of the bottom of the entertainment industry)

Mellini Kantayya
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Five Stars (out of Five)

As the title of the vintage song goes, “There’s a Broken Heart for Every Light on Broadway.” Yet for as many disappointments, rejections, setbacks, and snubs that Mellini Kantayya has endured during her “rise to the top of the bottom of the entertainment industry,” she is the quintessential poster child for the philosophy that a positive outlook can conquer just about anything.

In *Actor. Writer. Whatever.*, her backstage anecdotes, self-deprecating humor, and unflappable confidence will resonate with anyone who has ever tried—or is in the process of trying—to not only break into show business but also earn enough to pay the rent.

Her snappy delivery, candid observations, and unabashed silliness about what it takes to be successful are similar to that of *The Office*’s Mindy Kaling, another Indian-American actor, writer, and producer. Kantayya is blunt in her disdain for both overnight success stories and the Horatio Alger mantra to persevere despite constant failure. “Overnight success stories abound, yet at any given time 97 percent of the 120,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild are unemployed. Ninety-five percent of Sundance films don’t get distributed. Good novels, poems and plays sit in dusty desk drawers everywhere. This is the plight of the rank-and-file Actor, Writer, Whatever. These are my people.”

Like many of her fellow performers waiting for opportunity to come knocking, Kantayya has had no shortage of mindless temp jobs. “I could type (sort of). I had half a brain (sort of). This and a pulse, even a weak one, were all the agency required.” She quickly determined that the common denominator wherever she temped was that she was little more than window dressing—“a trophy temp”—sitting at a desk all day and doing nothing. Doing nothing, however, was inconsistent with her unapologetically dynamic personality. “This gave me time

to write, memorize scenes for acting class, balance my checkbook, read. If I had an audition, I considered it my lunch break, even if it was at nine-thirty a.m." As a young woman with a limited wardrobe budget, she also realized that working in a different office every day allowed her to wear the same outfit consecutive times without anyone noticing.

Her essays about relationship building in a cutthroat environment are priceless; they include her assessment that "Facebook can be an artist's worst enemy" and her confession that she regularly Googles her own name to make sure she still exists.

The front and back covers of *Actor. Writer. Whatever.* are engaging, the chapters flow smoothly, and the essays are just the right mix of mirth, nostalgia, courage, optimism, and inspiration to make readers feel as if they've been chatting with an irreverent but deeply passionate gal pal, a woman who understands show business inside and out and steadfastly refuses to take no for an answer in her quest for fame.

Christina Hamlett