

TUESDAY  
MAY 23, 2006

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

50¢  
75 cents in some  
locations outside the  
metropolitan area

City Edition D

WWW.PHILLY.COM

177th Year, No. 357

## Shooting in Media, a teens-in-burbs show

By Michael Klein  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**F**ive teenagers are rattling around inside the grown-up head of Sri Rao: There's the insecure kid. The jock. The gay kid. The outsider. The "everykid."



MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Sri Rao, creator** of the untitled series for The N cable channel, on a bedroom set.

They're finding their way onto pages of scripts and before cameras in an office park near Media as Rao shoots a teen ensemble drama for The N, the MTV-owned Nickelodeon offshoot best known for the *Degrassi* titles.

Since mid-March, when rehearsals began, till the middle of June, Rao and his team are working at least 12 hours a day to package a season of 10 half-hour prime-time episodes that will begin in early 2007.

The show, set in an unnamed Philadelphia suburb, follows five 10th graders bound together only by the street on which they live. Its central character is the jock.

Rao has the plots down, but he and The N are still hashing out the title. For now, it's *The Block*. Officially, it's "Untitled Teen Ensemble Drama," or "You-Ted," as his young actors giggle it among themselves.

*The Block* is the first TV drama to be shot entirely in the Philadelphia area



since CBS pulled the David Morse cab drama *Hack* off duty two years ago after two seasons.

Inside 30,000 square feet of the office park where Franklin Mint once warehoused its kitsch, Sri & Company has re-created suburbia by building a soundstage of sets, including the jock's basement bedroom; the porch of the gay boy's house; the cluttered kitchen and messy

bedroom in a home shared by two stepsisters; and several complete rooms of a painfully neat home.

Rao is also using a tree-lined street in Delaware County, Pure nightclub in Center City, Lower State Road Driving Range in North Wales, Sweetwater Farm in Glen Mills, and the Llanerch Diner in Upper Darby.

See **THE BLOCK** on F4

**A porch set** for the Nickelodeon-offshoot series, being shot in an office park that once housed the Franklin Mint. The teen-ensemble drama will debut early next year.

**INSIDE**

Comics ..... 6

Newsmakers ..... 2

Television ..... 5

Tell Me About It ..... 2

## Magazine

SECTION  
**F**

F4 B www.philly.com

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

### Shooting in Media, a fresh teen series

**THE BLOCK** from F1  
Though the five principal characters are classmates, cameras never go to school. "That's an environment that's been explored already," says Rao, who grew up outside of Harrisburg and went to Penn.

The show, he says, is "a commentary on suburban America, of life in 2006 ... but it's not a

'teen drama.' It's a relationship drama that happens to be about teenagers, like *Six Feet Under* for adults, with the same tone and gravitas."

Parents' lives are a large part of the storylines, he says, "but they're not one-dimensional foils."

Much of the show is subtle, he says. "It's all about subtext, silent glances, things that aren't spoken."

Like all overnight success stories, Rao's took a few years. Sridhar Rao, 30, a lanky, fast-talking guy with a big smile, grew up in solidly middle-class Mechanicsburg, making films and writing plays to escape the mundane. His parents, a homemaker and a now-retired civil engineer for the state, "wanted me to do something sensible so I'd have something to fall back on," Rao says.

After graduating from Penn's Wharton School in 1995, "I was sidetracked into the corporate world, a high-pressure, high-paid way of life."

New York life fueled his passion for theater, and he wrote plays. But as 25 loomed, he quit and moved to Los Angeles.

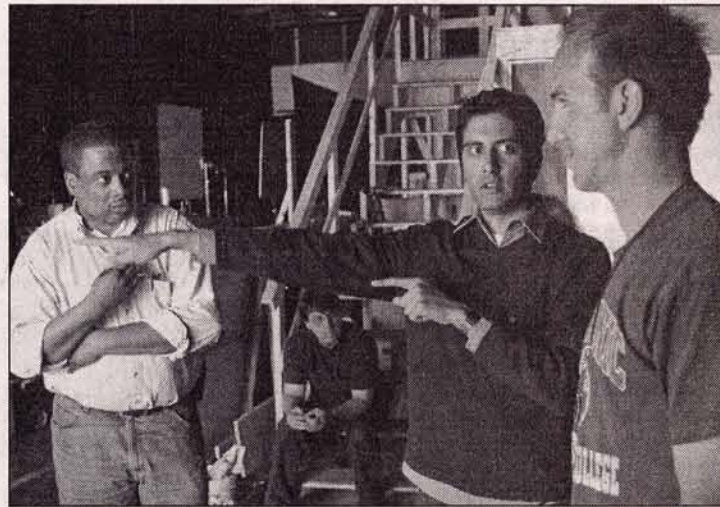
"It was my quarter-life crisis," Rao says. (In fact, he and producing partner Angela Grant created a series pilot called *Quarter Life*, also an ensemble drama.)

Rao moved in with a friend and started going out for staff-writing jobs in L.A., "hack stuff." The friend had digital cable. "One day I found this show. It totally hooked me in."

It was *Degrassi*, The N's tween-and-teen drama.

"I totally recognized this! I grew up in this!" Rao says. "It occurred to me that this is the reason that I dreamt of being in this business. I thought, why am I getting on some [not so good] Fox show when I could get on The N?"

Rao started e-mailing everyone he knew who may have had a connection to the network. That led him to vice president Amy Friedman, a Moorestown native, who met him impromptu in her lobby. She says she was immediately impressed with Rao's sincerity and passion for his project. "He told me, 'I am obsessed with your network,'" Friedman says by phone from New



MICHAEL BRYANT / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Creator Sri Rao (center) talks to director of photography Tom Camarda (right) during a rehearsal of the new series.

York.

The network wasn't looking for pilots. Friedman wanted a development executive. She hired Rao and allowed him to develop his series on the side.

Rao got the green light to shoot the *Block* pilot in June 2004, and went back to Mechanicsburg Area Senior High School to refine his ear for dialogue. Richard Kramer, who wrote and produced such series as *thirtysomething*, *Once and Again*, and *My So-Called Life*, was brought in.

"We're interested in new voices, and [Rao's] is a refined, new voice," Friedman says. "Part of the appeal is that this doesn't sound like everything out there. Sri has an amazing eye and ear."

The N is the sole investor in Rao's series because "we believe in this so strongly," Friedman says.

Earlier this year, Rao set himself up in an office in Center City. His five young actors, ages 19 to early 20s, arrived in mid-March and found apartments in Center City and Old City. The three-month relocation was easiest for Deborah Venegas, who studied acting at the University of the Arts in 2003-04 and 2004-05.

Venegas plays Coral, a troubled girl who moved east from California after the death of her

mother to live with the father she barely knew. The father recently married a woman who has a 16-year-old daughter, Meghan.

Venegas, like the other actors, sees herself in the script. "You always find a way to relate to your character," says Venegas, who grew up in California with her father and moved to New Jersey as a teen to live with her mother. "I know what it's like to have one parent," she says.

Ian Nelson, a handsome kid from Minnesota, says his character, the jock Brady, is "close to my type." Also in the cast are Shaila Vaidya, who plays Dia, Brady's girlfriend and the insecure only child of an Indian-born mother and white father; Laura Bottrell, who plays athletic "everygirl" Meghan; and Zach Booth, who plays gay-and-out Ethan.

"All of these characters are a part of me," Rao says, walking through Dia's living room, which looks like a showroom at Pottery Barn.

It's just like any suburb. "It doesn't matter if it looks idyllic," Rao says. "There's always something else beneath the surface."

Contact staff writer Michael Klein at 215-854-5514 or mklein@phillynews.com.