

VANGUARD



*The Block*  
creator Sri Rao  
produced his first  
dramatic play in  
kindergarten.



# DRAMA KING

Writer/director Sri Rao is poised to take his edgy teen material mainstream.

IT'S A WINDY AND BITTER-COLD DECEMBER AFTERNOON in Northern Liberties, but Sri Rao, a 31-year-old writer and director swings a sledgehammer at an old TV set with nothing to protect him from the chill but a pinstriped Hugo Boss suit. He keeps this up for hours as photo assistants and other onlookers shiver under their overcoats and scarves. He doesn't realize yet that an up-and-coming writer/director/producer of big buzz television shows can opt out of torture at the hands of a magazine staff—He's too nice a guy. Rao hasn't made it to the top quite yet, but he's on the edge.

In the next year, Rao stands to become much better known than he is now. *The Block*, his show about the trials of growing up in the suburbs, a show he's filming in Philadelphia, is a hit in the making for MTV Network's teen channel, The N. He also closed a deal with Fox for a show called *U.N.* about young adults who work for the United Nations. It's a long way for a guy who quit a big-time consulting job and was producing his first Off-Off-Broadway play in 2000. Rao's play, *Precipice*, about four 20-something friends facing big life decisions, is a piece that drew from his own experiences.

Rao got into the show biz craze early. He wrote and directed his first dramatic production in kindergarten as a child in the Harrisburg suburb of Mechanicsburg. The piece was an adaptation of *The Tortoise and the Hare*. The passion for writing and producing his own material stuck with him, even while he studied at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. He got a high-powered consulting job right out of school at Booz Allen Hamilton and was living very well. "It was great," he says, "but then I just got to this place where I was living this life but I wasn't happy so I quit. That was my quarter-life crisis."

The crisis, it turns out, was nothing more than the beginning. *Precipice* was soon picked out of Tribeca and produced at big theaters in New York and L.A. That was followed by material around the same themes: dramatic work about young people but edgier than work by his peers. "I'm really interested in telling stories about young people in a dramatic, authentic way," he says. "But the only depictions we see of people at that age are really vapid, not really meaningful characterizations. I'm about sort of breaking that barrier and saying, look, these are our lives and these are the things that we're going through and they're not always easy to look at. They're very complicated; they're painful and dark."

Now he has his own television production business, Sri & Co. It's a vehicle to produce Rao's scripts, the work he cares very much about. "It's not about the money or the credit, 'cause those haven't been there for me. So it's been really challenging for me over the past six years, not being paid and still having to pay rent." It doesn't seem like he'll have to worry about that much longer. —Pete Mazzaccaro

PHOTO ASSISTANT JACQUE SPANNEY; STYLED BY TARA KILCOY; HAIR BY MICHELLE MONTAGNANI FOR PALOMO; MAKEUP BY DANIELLE BACCO FOR THE SQUARE