

From Kabul, with love

Annet Mahendru had the ideal profile to play a double agent on 'The Americans'

By ROBERT RORKE

WHEN the producers of "The Americans" decided that Russian characters were going to speak Russian and the show would use subtitles, Adam Arkin, who directed three episodes in the show's first season, went on the Internet and started looking for actors.

"I was really aware that the decision was going to reduce our talent pool," he says.

Arkin went onto imdb.com and found the reel of an actress he'd never heard of: Annet Mahendru.

"Most of the material was light comedy and she was speaking English. It was clear she was talented," Arkin says.

In a couple of pieces on the reel, Mahendru was speaking Russian, and Arkin was hooked. He brought her to the producers' attention.

"She managed to be gorgeous and complex-looking. It was great for the role," he says.

Mahendru does not have a typical actor's background. She was a hard-core academic before switching gears. Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, she has lived in Russia, Germany and Nassau County. Not only does she speak Russian and English, she also speaks Ger-

man, French, Farsi and Hindi. After graduating from St. John's University with a bachelor's degree in English, she trained to be a diplomat at NYU's Global Affairs program. Her father was a journalist who lived in St. Petersburg, Russia, and wrote for a few Russian newspapers.

This background made her the ideal choice to play Nina on "The Americans."

"I think they thought I was a real spy," she says.

"That's how I got the part."

Nina is a trained KGB agent working at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC. She is having an affair with an FBI agent, Stan Beeman (Noah Emmerich), but what he doesn't know is that she is playing

him, dutifully recording their activities on a typewriter that uses the Cyrillic alphabet — that's a hand-double typing in those scenes — and trying to "turn" him into a traitor.

"He's her mentor in a weird way," Mahendru says. "They can connect in their crazy world, which he can't with his wife."

Mahendru is dressed in jeans and a blouse with a floppy, felt hipster hat to prove that she's been living in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, while shooting the series. She won't reveal her age except to describe the range of

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characters she can play — "I am 18 to 28, I can be anything for you."

(Internet sources list her age at 24.) She came to the United States when she was 13, traveling alone to live with relatives in East Meadow, LI. Her father was living in Russia and her mother in Germany.

The actress is tight-lipped when talking about why her mother stayed behind. "It's just how it was," she says. Her initial impression of life in suburbia was rose-colored. "The American home, the family unit, the happy home was here for me, in New York. I wanted to stay. It wasn't as scattered as my life growing up, which I also equally enjoyed," she says.

"It was different. It was, this is your home, here's your backyard, and you live together as a family, always."

Was it strange living in America without her parents? "It was," she says. "It was like acting. You're given a new story. This is your mom and dad and this is your cousin."

American high school was a collection of cliques but having lived in so many places helped Mahendru blend. "You kind of had to pick your circle but I was fine with all of them," she says. "Juggling people from different cultures is what I thought I could do," she says.

She also began acting as a hobby, in shorts and industrials. She came into the city to audition for such shows as "Law & Order," but never saw acting as a profession. She thought she would be a lawyer or an academic. "That

was the path I knew. I didn't know the path to be an artist."

She also began modeling. When she sent the magazines in which her photos appeared to her Indian relatives, they were shocked. "To my Indian side and in Afghanistan, it was viewed as very promiscuous. [To them] I wasn't doing well over here," she says.

Her move to LA confused her family even more. Mahendru was studying with the Groundlings to work on storytelling and improv. "My dad called and said, 'Are you getting a degree? Are you in a school? Are you in a university?'"

There are times when her role on "The Americans" reminds Mahendru of her life in Russia and, more specifically, her mother and what she was like in the early 1980s.

"In the show we had to figure out how to do my makeup so I could look more Russian. Once we did, I looked just like my mom," she says. "It was a special moment."

"The Americans" has wrapped for the season and Mahendru will return to LA, where she has a boyfriend, filmmaker Lucian Gibson, and enjoys camping and

other outdoor activities. Her family was on hand, though, for the Season 2 premiere in New York; her mother paid a visit to the set in Brooklyn. After a circuitous route, she made everyone proud.

But will Nina be as fortunate? The writers promised

"something crazy" for her this season and Mahendru says they did not disappoint. "It's like the best ever," she says. This season, Nina has had to deal with Oleg (Costa Ronin), a very wealthy agent from Moscow who is suspicious of her exalted position within the KGB.

"He senses something's off. He sees a young officer who has her own office, he wants to understand how she became so valuable," she says.

We all know how, but in the treacherous world of "The Americans," it's fair to ask: Does Nina survive the season?

"She fights very hard to stay alive," Mahendru says.



Stan (Noah Emmerich) and Nina (Annet Mahendru) are having a dangerous liaison, spy-style.