

Kal Penn: From Hollywood to the White House and Back to the Big Screen

By Kam Williams
Special To *The Skanner News*

Born Kalpen Suresh Modi in Montclair, New Jersey on April 23, 1977, Kal Penn graduated from the Freehold Regional High School District’s Performing Arts High School, attended the Governor’s School for the Arts, and received a degree from the prestigious School of Theater, Film and Television at UCLA. He recently returned to acting after a two-year sabbatical during which he served as an Associate Director of the White House Office of Public Engagement.

During his tenure with the Obama Administration, Kal served in a variety of roles, including that of the President’s Liaison to the Arts Communities, Young Americans, and Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders. He has been an Adjunct Professor of Cinema, Sociology and Asian American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, too, and is currently pursuing a Graduate Certificate in International Security at Stanford University.

Kal is currently reprising the role of Kumar he made popular in “Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle” and its follow-up “Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay.” His other notable feature film credits include Mira Nair’s film “The Namesake,” based on the best-selling novel by Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri; “Van Wilder” and its sequel, “The Rise of Taj”; “A Lot Like Love” and “Superman Returns.”

In terms of TV, Penn is widely recognized for his role as Dr. Lawrence Kutner on the critically-acclaimed series “House,” although he also appeared regularly on season six of “24” and guest-starred on the hit series “Law & Order: SVU.” And earlier this year he joined the cast of “How I Met Your Mother” as a therapist-turned-

with him. It sort of depends on who is approaching me. I would really say my favorite thing about making another “Harold & Kumar” is coming back and working with old friends again: John Cho... Neil Patrick Harris... and Jon [Hurwitz] and Hayden [Schlossberg], the guys who wrote all three films.

KW: Lisa Loving says: There is undeniably a subtle thread of politics running through “Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo,” one of my favorite movies of all time. How have your politics impacted your acting career?

KP: Hopefully, they haven’t at all. I like to keep them very separate. In fact, I would disagree with Lisa in that I don’t think Guantanamo Bay was political at all. At least that wasn’t the intention. The aim was

Kal Penn: The ‘A Very Harold & Kumar 3-D Christmas’ Interview

just to make people laugh, Democrats, Republicans, and everyone in between. We just hope everybody has a good time.

KW: Judyth Piazza would like to know: What is the most important lesson you learned from working in the White House?

KP: Patience.

KW: Yale grad Tommy Russell asks: How much freedom did you have to implement your own ideas while working in the Obama Administration?

KP: The point of serving your country is not to do your own thing or to go rogue, but to work as part of the process. Having a chance to work on President Obama’s agenda was really remarkable, especially when it came to things like access to education, increasing Pell Grants and bringing folks home from Iraq. Those were the sort of things I was working on, and I was very happy to contribute in that way.

KW: Tommy has a follow-up: What would be your dream role?

KP: Oh, wow! My dream role? In many ways, I feel like having the opportunity to play Gogol in “The Namesake” really was my dream role in many ways.

KW: Mirah Riben asks: Have you seen The Ides of March, and if so, how close was the movie to your experience working on the 2008 presidential campaign?

KP: Sorry, I haven’t seen it yet.

KW: Mirah also asks: Has President Obama measured up to your expectations and hopes for the country?

KP: He has exceeded my expectations.

KW: How so?

KP: The media are mostly interested in generating ad revenue, so they focus on the more divisive and more titillating stories. But the reality is that, behind the scenes, I’ve watched the President fight day-in and day-out for the things that matter to most folks, like jobs, education reform, the needs of returning war veterans, investment capital for entrepreneurs, support for Historically-Black Colleges and Universities, etcetera. That’s been my experience. He’s had some huge successes with much of that agenda, but it’s rarely, if ever, mentioned in the mainstream news. So, I’m actually very proud of the work that he’s



done so far, and I believe that he’s going to achieve a lot more, if we elect him to a second term.

KW: What do you think about Occupy Wall Street?

KP: I feel that the sentiment is something that many of us agree with, and I’m looking forward to seeing what the “asks” are from the good folks that are down there.

KW: Wesley Derbyshire was wondering whether you now see any parallels between acting and politics?

KP: [Chuckles] Not really.

KW: Legist/Editor Patricia Turnier asks: Which do you find more challenging: acting or

KP: They’re totally different. You can’t really compare the two. Each is challenging in its own way.

KW: Teresa Emerson says: Do you see yourself ever running for political office someday?

KP: I don’t have any plans to run for office. What I love about L.A. and Washington, D.C. is that they’re almost the opposite of each other. L.A. is a very creative space while D.C. is a very cerebral space. So, they’re the ying and the yang in my world. I like them both for their own reasons.

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Here, he talks both about acting and about taking a break from his career to work for President Obama.

Kam Williams: Hi Kal, thanks so much for the time.

Kal Penn: Of course, Kam. How’re you doing?

KW: Fine, thanks. Since I’m from Princeton, I was wondering whether you still have any connections to New Jersey.

KP: Oh, are you really? Yes I do. My folks are in Jersey. And I have a lot of friends and other family there. So, I try to visit as much as possible.

KW: I’d like to get right to readers’ questions, because I have a lot of ground to cover, between your acting career and your work in the Obama Administration. Kristopher Seals asks: What do you enjoy most about making a “Harold & Kumar” movie, and are you ever confused by fans with your iconic character, Kumar?

KP: [Laughs] Sometimes, I am confused

