

A play by Suzi Clark - all enquiries to [suzicb@btinternet.com](mailto:suzicb@btinternet.com)

## **Mrs de Souza's Parlour**

### **INTRODUCTION, SUMMARY AND SETTING**

Mrs de Souza's Parlour is the first full length comedy I have written without being a musical.

This play was commenced after attending a series of new writers' workshops with celebrated playwright Sarah Daniels at Chicken Shed Theatre Company.

The themes presented to the new writers were based on an exploration of bullying, powerplay, death, suicide and dealing with the particular taboo of teenage/young death.

The play can be played by six actors and has 12 characters. It is structured over two Acts.

The main character of Mrs de Souza is modelled on my late mother, a small yet formidable lady of Anglo-Indian extraction who emigrated from Calcutta to north London in 1951. My upbringing in north Africa, where I met a number of strong Italian women, has also been an influence. It always fascinated me how religion could bridge cultural difference.

My own experience as a widow has also added an edge to my writing – strength in widows is still somehow seen as “unbecoming” in our society. Real grief hides behind real strength and the two can be a deadly combination.

### **Chillies in the chutney cake, a body in the freezer ... this widow runs a parlour with a difference.**

GENRES: Comedy, Romance, Mystery, Murder

### **Synopsis**

The play is set in the late 1990's in a suburb of a large city in Britain.

Mrs de Souza is a formidable Anglo-Indian lady in her late sixties, worldly and yet other-worldly. Her kitchen is her Empire. From here, she dispatches her spicy largesse - home-made chutneys and pickles to friends, Indian restaurants, and the W.I. Her speciality is her spicy chutney cake.

So popular have her chutneys become that she is being wooed by a company called *Chutney Mary's* that wants to manufacture them commercially, while keeping the homely brand “Mrs de Souza's Parlour.” They want to buy her out, lock, stock and Scotch Bonnets.

Slight problem. There is already another parlour in the family, the Parlour next door, belonging to *Mr de Souza*. It is a funeral parlour, just a step away from the chutney and pickle-making.

Mr de Souza and Mrs de Souza are alike in some ways -- but not in others. He is solemn,

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rotund, ceremonious, frequently quoting Kipling to his bereaved clients. She is full of home-spun wisdom. Like chalk and chapattis, the pair of them.

I say Mr de Souza is solemn. Actually, Mr de Souza is dead. Mrs de Souza found him, ramrod stiff, out the back where the hearse is kept. He had helped himself to a jar of her experimental extra hot lime pickle. Was this the cause of his sudden demise?

Would she be had up for murder? It can be murder - the funeral business. She sticks him in the freezer, and, when required to play his part, she tiptoes the bereaved in and out of the funeral parlour, murmuring suitable epithets and Kipling, all muddled up. Who's to know? One small brown person ... much the same as any other.

Sadly, she also has had to whip off her late husband's keynote magnificent handlebar moustache, which she keeps in a jar, next to the cumin seeds and coriander on her kitchen surface, under the watchful eye of the Virgin Mary.

"Being kissed by a man who doesn't wax his moustache is like eating an egg without salt" as Rudyard would say.

Mrs de Souza is in control. Phew. The funeral business continues. The chutney and pickle business is thriving. Nobody seems to notice that Mr de Souza is a bit strange - but then, they are usually overcome by grief. Or dead.

In fact, Mrs de Souza talks to the dead and they seem to quite like it. Sometimes they talk back to her, while she stirs her pickles and chutneys. They tell her their stories. It seems to bring them peace. All except her dear-departed husband, naturally.

Her employees - Reginald, a sombre Jeeves-like character, who drives the hearse and does the heavy stuff with his wife, Stella, a twinkly and muscular little Sicilian woman, heavily pregnant - know what is going on, but keep quiet, preferring to stay in employment. They reason that what no-one knows, won't hurt them and why shouldn't Mrs de Souza continue to trade in her husband's good name, after all? A job's a job.

A frequent visitor to both Parlours is the Catholic priest Padre Amici, a cousin – one of Stella's enormous Sicilian family which seems to be the main source of clients for their funeral trade.

Then two things happen which rock the boat.

The Local Education Authority and the Chamber of Commerce sign an agreement to offer work placements to 14 - 16 year olds in the borough. Mrs de Souza, despite her protests, gets Bill for interview and although the interview is a disaster, she takes him on, mainly because she has taken a dislike to the Placement Tutor.

No-one else has ever wanted him. Bill is almost 18, older than the rest of his class – having had to repeat most years at school, a bit of a hard case, into piercing and Gothic dress sense, a no-hoper at school. He has a morbid interest in the business of death. He takes to it like a Bombay duck to water. He is smart. Sooner or later, he is going to realise that Mrs de Souza and Mr de Souza are one and the same. Sooner, rather than later.

What will Bill do? What will *they* do? Kill Bill?

Then, even worse - Mrs de Souza's long-lost son, Aubrey, or "Sonny Boy" as she calls him, turns up out of the blue, having read about the proposed acquisition of the chutney business. All of a sudden, he is not so ashamed of his roots, his parents and his family semi. The problem is, Sonny doesn't know that his father is dead. He is bitter, he is ambitious – he is the

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product of too many jellabis in his indulged childhood – Mrs de Souza blames herself for his rejection of her, and their culture.

What will Sonny do? Not above a bit of blackmail.

And now the LEA are sending around the placements tutor, the lawyer is coming around to sign up on the acquisition of the pickles and chutneys brand – but he seems increasingly interested in acquiring Mrs de Souza herself, another lawyer is lurking from an American Funeral Parlour conglomerate, the priest is popping by to try and wring yet another donation out of Mrs de Souza for the Indian Missions, and it turns out that Stella's Sicilian relations have a vested interest in the funeral Parlour continuing to run. The Don decides it is time to see this business for himself.

As Rudyard would probably have said, in Mrs de Souza's Parlour insatiable curiosity is the key – but the female of the species is most definitely deadlier than the male.

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