

Genii

THE CONJURORS' MAGAZINE



THE SACRED RIANA



THE SHY, SCARY SACRED RIANA

Riana was a normal Indonesian girl, once.

But when her family moved into a new house in Jakarta, she discovered Riani, a strange, neglected doll that had been waiting, it seemed, for someone to take an interest.

The pair became inseparable, but Riana had yet to understand the consequences of their growing bond. Eventually, Riana realized that Riani was no mere toy. When she kept the doll with her, all seemed well. But left to her own devices, Riani unleashed her magic upon the world.



BY CALOE OLEWITZ

Riana soon discovered that Riani's powers were rubbing off on her, and that in order to mitigate the doll's dark influence she would have to faithfully carry on their connection. Riana was shy anyway, and she knew she could do with a friend, even an inanimate one. With Riani's magic flowing through her, Riana learned to read minds, summon demons, capture ghostly spirits, and communicate with the beyond.



Or at least, that's the legend The Sacred Riana's many creators concocted. The woman who portrays Riana is enigmatic, to say the least. Between her debilitating shyness (a trait she and her character share) and the walls her team has built up around her, the only way to interact with the magician is through her character. And that's saying something, considering that even in character—especially in character—Marie Antoinette Riana Graharani rarely speaks.

Graharani became interested in magic when she was nine years old by watching her father, an Indonesian gospel magician well-known for his satanic character. The anti-gospel trope is

particularly appropriate when framed against the backdrop of the popular understanding of magic in Indonesia—a specter that has followed Graharani since her “sacred” career first began.

While both Graharani and her father make it clear that they deal in magic tricks and stage illusions for the purposes of entertainment, Indonesia's take on magic is mired in a history of belief. Many self-proclaimed warlocks assume the title of *dukun*, or shaman. And while some *dukun* are simply con artists scamming commoners out of cash, it seems many practitioners actually believe they possess magical powers downloaded as ancestral and cultural inheritance.



“We created the character of Riana to smarten our nation ...”

Deddy Corbuzier

Regardless of whether or not the *dukun* are true believers, blind and fearful faith is extremely common among Indonesian laypeople. In 2012, a Pew Research Center survey found that 69 percent of the Muslim population in Indonesia believed in witchcraft. In 2014, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono broke with decades of political tradition to declare publicly that he believes in sorcery.

This kind of widespread indoctrination belies darker forces and illuminates the increasing commonality of bloodshed justified by humanity's willingness to die in the name of the supernatural. Mass killings of self-proclaimed sorcerers swept through East Java in the mid-1960s and again in the 1980s, and struck North Sumatra later that decade. In the 1990s, sorcerers were accused of killing dozens of prominent Muslim religious leaders (Islam is the predominant religion in Indonesia).

Often, the killings were compounded: “ninjas” in black costumes and masks were suspected of murdering sorcerers, then villagers who supported and sought to protect the practice of witchcraft slaughtered the “ninjas.” In 1998, 100 self-styled sorcerers were killed in Banyuwangi, the eastern-most city in Java. The following year, 150 sorcerers were killed in West Java.

The sorcery debate continues in Indonesia to

this day, and it seems to be largely unwinnable. Since 2009, a diplomatic cycle has taken root; most Indonesian officials proclaim the dangers of permitting the perpetuation of occult practices, but every few years, when government organizations move to ban witchcraft officially, they are effectively beaten back by cultural and historical institutions (and the warlocks they protect), who argue that sorcery is a relic of local heritage worthy of preservation and respect.

The stark reality that sorcerer killings continue to this day, albeit with less frequency than in decades past, is what led to the only official public appearance Graharani has made out of character. In February 2014, the then 22-year-old magician was interviewed by Deddy Corbuzier, another well-known Indonesian illusionist, on *Hitam Putih*, a popular Indonesian talk show. She didn't wear The Sacred Riana's signature costume and makeup, but like her character, Graharani also exhibits a tendency to hide behind her side-swept hair.

“We created the character of Riana to smarten our nation,” Corbuzier said on *Hitam Putih*, “that the supernatural things you see can be performed if you know the trick. Let us not be deceived by mystical things that waste our money.”

Having Graharani appear on national television was a calculated move; a gamble designed to protect her from the mortal danger that still stalks sorcerers in her home country. Outing her as a magician, as a stage performer who has studied and practiced to present illusions as entertainment, was intended as a cure for the many Indonesians likely to believe that The Sacred Riana was truly powered.

During the interview, Corbuzier shared credit for creating The Sacred Riana's character with Sisca Hormansyah, producer of Indonesian television show, *The Next Mentalist*, and Bow Vernon with his team at Trilogy Magic Factory. From the audience, Hormansyah discussed how she had been searching for a female contestant to round out the cast of the first season of *The Next Mentalist*. Instead of seeking out a woman who could take on the same “gothic” style that was popular in Indonesia at the time, Hormansyah wanted to jolt viewers with something new and unexpected.

By that time, Graharani had already started working with Trilogy Magic Factory. Her father

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SACRED RIANA
LIVE AT
S&S
TV





Because neither The Sacred Riana nor the magician that portrays her are prone to granting interviews, Genii's Editor Richard Kaufman was permitted an audience with her doll, Riani, instead. Here's what Riani had to say, from the comfort of The Sacred Riana's lap. Happy Halloween.

GENII: Are you excited to be on the cover of *Genii*, Riana?

Riana mumbles something affirmative ...

RIANI: This is her excited.

Genii: How did you first become interested in magic?

RIANI: Her father was a gospel magician with a satanic character. When she was nine years old, she watched his performances on TV.

Genii: How old were you when you first performed?

RIANI: She was 17, but she wasn't The Sacred Riana yet.

Genii: Riani, I get the impression that Riana is really shy.

RIANI: Even when she's not in character, Riana is a very shy person.

Genii: Does performing as a character make her less shy on stage?

RIANI: It helps her feel more confident because she feels like she has special powers.

Genii: Does she feel like she's wearing a mask?

RIANI: It doesn't feel like a mask, it feels like a different personality. The character is a multiplier, so she's already shy, but by the time she becomes The Sacred Riana, her own personality is multiplied by 1,000.

Genii: How did you and Riana meet?

RIANI: We met when Riana moved to Jakarta; I was already living in her new house. Riana played with me and started to wear a dress just like mine. She realized that when she leaves me, bad things happen, but if we are together, nothing bad happens.

Genii: Was Riana a normal girl before she met you?

RIANI: Yes.

Genii: What's your relationship like?

RIANI: I'm Riana's best friend. She doesn't have friends, but she has me. Her power comes from me, actually.

Genii: How does she get her power from you?

RIANI: Riana shares my innate power. I love her. Our relationship goes two ways.

Genii: What about Feng E? It seemed like they were friends.

RIANI: Riana likes Feng E. She wanted to take a photo with him after she saw him perform, and everyone noticed that Riana was making a friend. When he interviewed her, he played Riana's music from her finale performance.

Genii: After *Asia's Got Talent*, how did Riana feel to have people scared of her?

RIANI: She felt happy.

Genii: She likes it when people are scared of her?

RIANI: Yes, because that means her character is working well.

Genii: Does she like the power?

RIANI: Yes, it makes her feel more confident.

Genii: Is The Sacred Riana alive? Or is she dead?

RIANI: The Sacred Riana is alive, even though a lot of people think she's a ghost.

Genii: Riana's character reminds me of the classic J-horror film, *Ringu*. Have you seen it?

RIANI: We watch a lot of horror movies. Riana loves them.

Genii: Does Riana maintain her character at all times?

RIANI: Yes, on the stage and off the stage.

Genii: If she goes to the supermarket, does she act as The Sacred Riana buying groceries?

RIANI: No, she ties her hair back and wears glasses. She's like Supergirl; when she takes her glasses off she becomes The Sacred Riana, but when she is wearing them no one knows her.

Genii: I wouldn't recognize her.

RIANI: When we were filming *Asia's Got Talent*, she would be wearing her glasses when we arrived and the production team would ask, "Where's Riana?" She was standing right next to me, but no one recognized her.

Genii: Does Riana get tired of staying in character all the time?

RIANI: No.

Genii: She likes being in character?

RIANI: Yeah.

Genii: It lets her hide.

RIANI: Yes.

Genii: Does Riana sleep standing up in the closet?

RIANI: No.

Genii: I would think if The Sacred Riana sleeps at all, she would sleep standing in the closet.

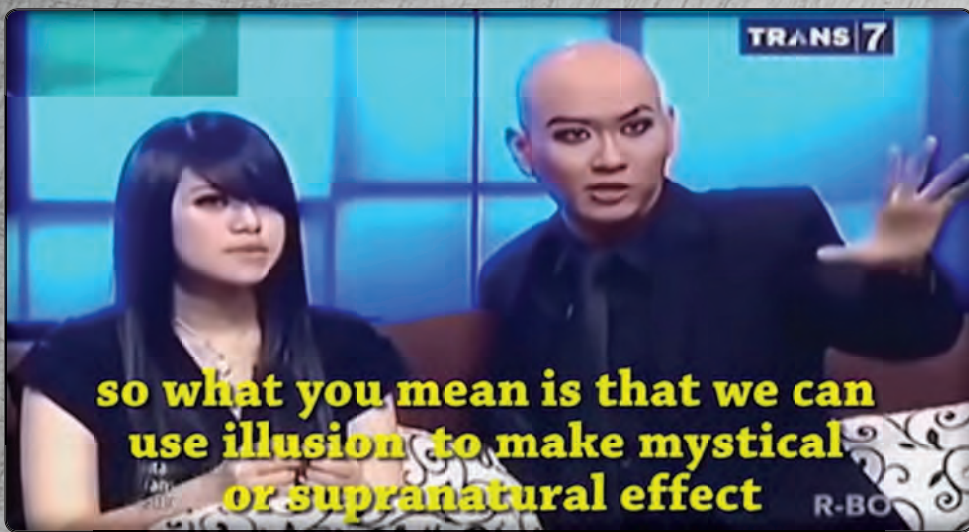
RIANI: No.

Genii: Has Riana ever broken character accidentally?

RIANI: No.

Genii: Never?

RIANI: Never.



Magician Deddy Corbuzier, right, interviewed Graharani on Indonesian television to dispel the idea that she was a sorcerer, which could endanger her life. The character of Riana was created by Bow Vernon and Sisca, pictured at bottom.

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had asked Bow Vernon to mentor her and help take her career to the next level; Vernon's role has developed into that of manager since The Sacred Riana took off. In the years before she became The Sacred Riana, Graharani had tried her hand at performing as a mentalist. It didn't go very well; her intense discomfort in social situations made her miserable, and her insurmountable shyness made it nearly impossible for her to interact with audiences in any meaningful way.

Graharani agreed to do the interview shortly after The Sacred Riana was named the runner-up on *The Next Mentalist*. And although the move was specifically designed to make her safer, Graharani was devastated when she realized just how necessary the appearance was. She broke down in tears before the cameras started rolling and she sobbed when the segment wrapped. The broadcast laid bare Graharani's painful social anxiety, but her intense emotional response was also

prompted by her practical concern over the impact of exposure. "I cried because of all our hard work," Graharani told *Genii* in a very one-sided interview earlier this year.

Creating the character of The Sacred Riana was a group effort, not unlike the work of the creative development team that once catapulted Derren Brown from aspiring card magician to sensational mentalist with international clout and name recognition. But no matter how many collaborators contribute to the concept,

only one person takes it all the way. Even with everyone behind him, then and now, there's still only one Derren Brown.

"I think we succeeded because no one knew that the real Riana is just an ordinary, sweet girl and has a unique personality outside the image we created," Hormansyah said on *Hitam Putih*.

Solidifying The Sacred Riana's mythos required Graharani to change her personal habits and her daily lifestyle. She erased herself for the sake of her character's legend, scrubbing all her social media accounts, deleting every photo, comment, or post that might portray her pre-character nature as a regular Indonesian woman. She doubled down on her natural introversion and her anti-social tendencies, which simultaneously precluded her from participating in normal social interactions and also strengthened her tether to her managerial machine.

"After everything Riana did to conceal her real identity, just like that, it was being exposed," Vernon told *Genii* of the *Hitam Putih* reveal. "All of her hard work was for nothing." While Vernon said that he agrees the intentional exposure doesn't invalidate her work, and he believes that The Sacred Riana's success has surpassed anyone's expectations regardless of that interview, he acknowledges and also shares some of the pain behind Graharani's anxiety.

Underlying all this mortal concern hides the fact that the team did set out specifically to convince the public that The Sacred Riana was the real thing, proving their willingness to capitalize on the nation's tendency toward belief. "In Indonesia, people buy into that kind of character," Vernon says. "Even now, people ask if it's real. 'Can she really do that?'"



In 2017, The Sacred Riana appeared on Season 2 of *Asia's Got Talent*. She stood her ground on the "X" during the audition round, saying nothing and giving nothing away; the wordless visual of her character painted a picture that was jarring from that first moment. Her trademark twitches punctuated the judges' interview questions, and when she dropped Riani to the ground and stormed toward them, she was met with laughter from the audience, not gasps. Even without any TV production value backing



Riana's intended scary effect, the judges still played along: David Foster and Anggun leapt from their seats and hid behind Jay Park.

Over the course of the season, The Sacred Riana's magic tricks evolved from close-up routines played for creeps—during her audition she performed “Haunted Key,” “Haunted Deck,” and a haunted polaroid that revealed a life-size Riani standing behind Anggun when she'd never visibly been there—to world-building stage pieces, like a stream of zombie demons emerging from a giant Lament Configuration (the puzzle box made famous by the film *Hellraiser*; here a “Million Dollar Mystery”-based illusion), and David Berglas's “Floating Table” presented as an object possessed by a spirit from beyond the pale.

One of the subtler elements of her *Asia's Got Talent* audition established Riani's influence as a spirit much larger and more powerful than the doll's physical form might suggest. “She helps me,” The Sacred Riana croaked with one finger pointed toward the haunted Polaroid. In a later round, The Sacred Riana presented a Haunted Dollhouse. When she screeched out, “Do you want to play?” on a chalkboard, the response came from within the dollhouse in uneasy chalk lines: “Not with you, with Anggun.”

When Anggun declined, The Sacred Riana was visibly concerned, even displeased, likely because of the rage she anticipated Riani would unleash. When she tossed Riani into the dollhouse, the doll's physical nature and magical spirit collided. “She doesn't like being rejected,” The Sacred Riana explained, and a human version of Riani crashed out of the dollhouse and charged straight for Anggun.

It's impossible to apply any kind of analysis to judges' reactions on shows like *Asia's* and *America's Got Talent*, simply because we know so much of that air time is subject to prepping, staging, and convenient camera editing. But with that said, the judges on both shows



appeared, at times, to be legitimately creeped out, startled, or spooked. When The Sacred Riana competed on *America's Got Talent* in 2018, judge Howie Mandel said: “The magic is incredible, but the horror is real.”

Less than a year passed between The Sacred Riana's 2017 *Asia's Got Talent* win and her audition on the American version of the show. She took the *America's Got Talent* stage in much the same way she first appeared on *Asia's Got Talent*—hair hanging in her face, eyes downcast, twitching on one straight leg and one bent, with Riani's wrist clenched in her fingers and the rest of the doll hanging limply from her grip. But after making it clear she wouldn't be answering any of the judges' questions, when The Sacred Riana dropped Riani to the ground on *America's Got Talent*, the show had already begun layering on production effort and sound effects to inspire that spook factor.

The “Dollhouse” act on *America's Got Talent* was a darker version of the same effect, leveling up to the production value AGT had clearly already decided to invest in communicating The Sacred Riana's story. She swapped the

Riana places Riani in the Dollhouse on *America's Got Talent* July 2018. The doll becomes a human and bursts out of the dollhouse.



chalkboard she had used to trade messages inside the dollhouse for an empty notebook, and when Riani returned her request: “I want to play with Mel B,” the rest of the notebook’s pages were filled with forlorn children’s drawings and bloody handprints.

During her quarter-finals performance, The Sacred Riana appeared in a fiery illusion using a thin-base platform. She approached the judges’ table, unfolded a photo of the four of them, and declared: “She is coming for one of you.” She refolded and unfolded the photo once more, showing Mel B’s face suddenly burnt out of the picture. A box placed onto the table popped open on its own, and the voodoo doll inside wore the frayed-edge image of Mel B’s face that had disappeared from the photo.

Suddenly, Riani appeared in her human form

at the judges’ table and chanted over the Mel B. voodoo doll. The Sacred Riana pleaded with Riani to stop, but as she retreated to the stage, an army of Rianis followed her, all clad in the same schoolgirl outfit and hairstyle, twitching as they chased her straight up the stage’s flat back wall. But as The Sacred Riana defied physics to scale the wall, vertically and backward to boot, the camera switched to a wide shot of the stage and panned way out. There was a bloodcurdling scream, and the show cut to commercial.

Fans of both The Sacred Riana and *America’s Got Talent* took to social media to complain that they’d been left hanging—when the show returned, host Tyra Banks turned to the judges for feedback as if nothing had happened, with no conclusion to the act and no explanation



During her first appearance on *America's Got Talent*, Riana guides Mel B through a prediction, then the person predicted appears in a polaroid of Mel B, taken by Riana.



offered for why the camera had cut away. The Sacred Riana was eliminated after that performance, perhaps because of the awkward direction decision, but an allegedly leaked page of production notes later showed that the plan had always been to cut to black.

In the end, another magician won season 13 of *America's Got Talent*—2018 was the year of Shin Lim. But even as The Sacred Riana's fans reflected on how frightening and creepy her act had been, there was always less of a risk that an American audience would believe that an illusionist on a network competition elimination show was really a sorcerer.



Riana's final performance on *America's Got Talent*, where Mel B's face appeared on a voodoo doll, and many women dressed as the human version of Riana chase Riana up a wall before the room goes dark and the broadcast cuts out.



The elements that make up The Sacred Riana's mask are complex. Her costume is modeled after the outfit she found Riani wearing when they first met at the house in Jakarta. Riani's aesthetic clearly draws inspiration from Annabelle, the Raggedy Ann doll who first appeared briefly in the 2013 film, *The Conjuring*, which led to a series of spinoff films based on that character. In her interpretation, The Sacred Riana usually layers a blood-red smocked-hem schoolgirl dress over a white button-down shirt fastened up to the neck, with opaque white stockings tucked into her low-heeled black shoes.

Other classic horror films have influenced The Sacred Riana's look, in particular J-horror films like *Ringu*, whose main character Sadako Yamamura (later Samara Morgan, in the American remake *The Ring*) inspired the way Riana's hair constantly hangs forward to obscure her face from view. Riana's head and arm twitch in a sort of involuntary tic, and she stands with one leg bent, nearly pigeon-toed, like a broken doll abandoned too long, forgotten in the attic.

“At first it was very hard because it's not me at all,” Graharani told Corbuzier during the *Hitam Putih* interview. “I was a cheerful girl.”

The result is a sort of push-pull sort of response—audiences want to see behind the curtain of Riana's bangs, to peel away the mask in search of some evidence of a normal girl, the wires and riggings of a stage performance. But the world of The Sacred Riana is so convincing, the sight of Riani's limp arm dangling from her fist so compelling, that in a way, *not* seeing what lies beneath that mask of evil feels like a relief, or a narrow escape.

This opens the door to a broader conversation about the nature of Bizarre Magick. Max Maven describes Bizarre Magick as “magic that acknowledges, not necessarily literally or with conviction, but nevertheless acknowledges the existence of a real magic hovering in the background.” Graharani says she has been studying Bizarre Magick, and names Dan Sperry and Eugene Burger as her influences in the genre.

Maven told *Genii* that, most of all, he admires Graharani's unwavering commitment to the character. “One of the things that I feel plagues magic of all sorts in this era is this endless winking,” said Maven. “Magicians are afraid of magic. They're afraid that if they commit

to mystery, they won't look cool. So you get a lot of magicians who may do stellar work, but they're winking—not necessarily literally, although sometimes that—conveying this attitude to the audience that if I took this too seriously I'd be a nerd, so you shouldn't take it too seriously either. And in so doing they devalue everything they've done.

“When David Blaine first surfaced, he was a guy who didn't apologize or wink. He just went out there and did it. He embraced the mystery rather than the supposed risking of coolness. You're certainly getting that with The Sacred Riana. There's never a moment where she lets you off the hook. She's committed to the whole thing.”

Both opportunity and risk appear in this type of Bizarre Magick portrayal, particularly when a performer commits completely in the way Maven describes. But when taken to its extreme as a fear-inducing form, and perhaps even moreso for the women who perform in this style, the question arises: how far is too far?

During this year's season of *Britain's Got Talent*, a magician named Elizabeth competed with a Bizarre Magick act that came to be called The Haunting. Her semi-finals performance seemed to so genuinely petrify judge Amanda Holden that the general public took to social media to denounce The Haunting for being too frightening and even too cruel. Sure, it's only Twitter. Yes, that commentary was often uttered in the same breaths with which the viewing public called out poor camerawork and editing on the part of *BGT*, and spent the entire season tweeting their (often off-base) theories about the methods employed by the many magicians who competed this year. But all the same, The Haunting was eliminated after that exemplary performance of, shall we say, commitment.

“We like getting scared,” Maven said, “and we like getting scared in a fraudulent context. Because no matter how scary the dark ride is, we expect that when it's all over we're going to come out the other end and be okay. I think that's one thing that most of us want from scary movies or scary books or seeing scary young women on talent shows. We like that idea of flirting with dark dangers from a perch that, even though it may affect us viscerally, deep down we know is safe.”



Meanwhile, in the wider world, the occult is experiencing yet another resurgence beyond circles of magicians stuffing their pockets with pentagrams and pendulums. Self-proclaimed witches no longer run the risk of trial by fire in the public square, and the stigma around “alternative” belief systems is slowly dissipating. But it’s worth noting that Indonesia is certainly not the only country in the world where faith, spirituality, and belief die hard.

Max Maven remembers bumping up against belief in his own performances of Bizarre Magick in the United States. In the 1980s, when he booked a week-long gig at a nightclub in South Dakota, he was asked to go on a radio show to explain to local listeners that he wasn’t in league with Satan. “The woman who owned the club had been getting angry and threatening phone calls,” Maven explained. “This was before the internet, but people were reacting to my presence in their community. You don’t have to go to Indonesia for that.

“There’s a great deal of chauvinism, cultural chauvinism, when it comes to the anthropology of belief systems. We as modern-day Americans tend to make fun of so-called primitive cultures and their beliefs. At this very same moment, within miles from here, there is someone sitting behind the wheel of a car stuck in a traffic jam who believes that pressing on a loud horn is going to change the dynamics of the traffic. Who’s the primitive?”



Because Bizarre Magick is so deeply intertwined with mythology, and in turn with storytelling, it’s generally unflattering (if not impossible) to try to present it within the crunched and highly edited limitations of a *Got Talent* show. How much story can one spin in a three-minute clip cut for time by network editors?

America’s Got Talent is, generally speaking, a larger production than its Asian sister show, right down to the prizes—\$1 million on the U.S. version and \$100,000 in Asia. But even though The Sacred Riana worked to broaden her performance style for the bigger of the two AGT stages, her character’s fundamental mandate of near silence never wavered.

Graharani says that the most difficult thing about playing The Sacred Riana is maintaining her concentration. This was particularly true early on, when she had to constantly resist the urge to laugh. But it’s precisely that impenetrable facade that makes her performance so powerful. The fact that she’s become known for never breaking, that audiences have come to understand and even appreciate that behind the scenes humanity just isn’t part of this particular package—all these elements serve to amplify the impact that much more.

In a testament to the character’s broader appeal, Graharani portrayed The Sacred Riana in a much longer world-building work, acting out her origin story in a full-length film that expands

The character of The Sacred Riana delivers Graharani from the trap of her paralyzing shyness, generating the conditions from which this impressive, other-worldly thing can emerge.

the legend originally conceived by Trilogy Magic Factory and the rest of the consulting team. Most people have an awareness of Indonesian film that ranges from *The Raid* to *The Raid 2*, but *The Sacred Riana: Beginning* seems to have been a horror hit across Indonesia.

Building on “Beginnings” momentum, Graharani will soon star in a horror anthology called *The Sacred Riana: Bedtime Stories*. Each episode in the English-language series will tell a self-contained story inspired by folklore and urban legends from across Asia. The show will be aimed at a worldwide audience, a result of the production collaboration between Indonesian group Wahana Kreator Nusantara and Fremantle, which recently produced *American Gods*.

The more widely Graharani presents her character in its truest form and with the greatest integrity, the more effective it becomes. Speaking publicly or accepting interviews (even with *Genii*) outside the context of an effect or an illusion weakens the world of her character in a way that wouldn't easily be recovered. We can respect that.

There has been one notable exception to The Sacred Riana's (or is it Graharani's?) anti-social modus operandi. During her time on *Asia's Got Talent*, The Sacred Riana grew to appreciate the music of Feng E, a prepubescent ukulele player from Taiwan. With cameras rolling, Feng E and The Sacred Riana, against all odds, bonded. He strummed her theme song on his ukulele. She patted his head, held his hand, and even, at one point, hugged her fellow finalist. No one had seen The Sacred Riana interact with another human that way, on camera or even just on set, but it was also a shocking moment in that it gave something up. It wasn't quite a wink, but more, an admission. It's unclear whether that revelation hinted at a real magician hiding behind the costume and the hair or just built on another layer to The Sacred Riana's character, and yet, it was still endearing.

The Sacred Riana's success is as much a function of Graharani's innate talent as it is of her expansive effort to maintain the mythos, and yet it's still a day-to-day challenge. Erasing oneself from the narrative of one's own success can be painful. Today, that may manifest as a mandate to delete social media posts and avoid

the flash of the camera, which seems innocuous, even inconsequential. All the same, at best, it's a prioritization of character over self, and at worst, it's a daily sacrifice.

Is it worth it? Probably. “In this case we don't want to see the actor engage in normal behavior when they're not working,” says Richard Kaufman, editor-in-chief of *Genii*. “It can get in the way of the work.” The total erasure of Riana the Real emboldens the legend of Riana the Sacred. In this respect, Graharani's work is no different than an actor on a movie set, who takes a script and a costume and makeup and works with the director and other actors in a scene to birth moments that are, if not real, at least a certain kind of believable.

Of course, Graharani is perfectly happy for her character not to talk. The trembling, unsure voice that comes out of The Sacred Riana's mouth isn't put on as part of her character—it's just an amplified version of the way Graharani naturally speaks. It's a combination of her severe nerves as a performer, a deep anxiety about the fragility of her masked identity, and a lack of confidence in her English language skills.

To audiences, the shaky voice is just another layer of distortion in The Sacred Riana's world. But to Graharani, using character as mask is, at base, as simple as a tried and true acting technique. It's a liberation. The character of The Sacred Riana delivers Graharani from the trap of her paralyzing shyness, generating the conditions from which this impressive, other-worldly thing can emerge. Performing mentalism skinned as herself clearly wasn't going to cut it for Graharani. But even as she continues to develop her magical skill as The Sacred Riana, it's her talent for acting this character that shines through.

Without Graharani's delivery, The Sacred Riana would not have taken off the way she did. The character's success is a testament to Graharani's performance skill, her acting ability, and her wink-free commitment to something altogether strange. The Sacred Riana may be a concept created for the stage by a team of producers and illusionists, but it was an extraordinary, talented young woman who took that character on, and in her own way, ran away with it. •



