"Every agent said, 'You'll never work because you're not white or black,'" says Penn, the son of Indian immigrants.

KAL PENN

HOW I GOT HERE

From comic teen icon to a dramatic leading role, *The Namesake*'s Kal Penn is getting serious buzz

At 29, Kal Penn is a Gen Y cult hero. But when director Mira Nair was looking for the lead actor in the Indian-American drama *The Namesake* (see review, page 33), she had never heard of the star of the youth hit *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*. Happily, her 15-year-old son Zohran had. "Every night he'd say, 'Mama, tell me in the morning that it's Kal Penn,'" says Nair. "He's a god to teenagers." So Penn, born Kalpen Suresh Modi, snagged the role. "It's a dream come true," says the New Jersey-bred son of an Indian engineer and his chemist wife—and a long way from school plays like *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, which got him interested in acting. Inspired by Nair's '91 movie *Mississippi Masala*—"It was the first time I saw people who look like me in the movies"—the UCLA grad headed for Hollywood. Still, he's hedging his bets, studying international security at Stanford. "Art can make you happier than a full-time job," says Penn. "But I'd like to run for office someday." ●

FIRST CASE OF STAGE FRIGHT: 1980
At 3, Penn made his acting debut in a preschool play about a strawberry patch. "I was terrified," he recalls. "I'm still pretty quiet. Most people don't realize that because of the roles that I take."

BIG BREAK: *HAROLD & KUMAR GO TO WHITE CASTLE* (2004)
"I get recognized as Kumar," says Penn, who is shooting the sequel to *White Castle*. After a string of bit parts, the movie "was my first big role."

TV EXPOSURE: *24* (2007)
"I was the terrorist next door," says Penn of his stint as a baddie on the Fox hit. "I took a whole family hostage." Up next on the tube? *The Call*, a comedy pilot about EMTs from *24*'s creators.

RISING STAR: *THE NAMESAKE* (2007)
"I wrote [director] Mira Nair a letter begging for the part," says Penn of his role in the movie version of Jhumpa Lahiri's '03 novel. "I was like, 'I want this role. What do I have to do to get it?'"

GROOMER: SUZANNE KATZ; STYLIST: MICHAEL NASH & JOSEPH TURLA/SARAH LAIRD; JACKET: D SQUARED; SWEATSHIRT: NIKE; RIGHT (FROM TOP): COURTESY KAL PENN; NEW LINE CINEMA; KELSEY MCNEAL/FOX; MIRA NAIR/FOX SEARCHLIGHT

Photograph by JOHN HUBA