

# Indian Horizons

Volume 60 No. 1 January - March 2013



## Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded on 9th April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India.

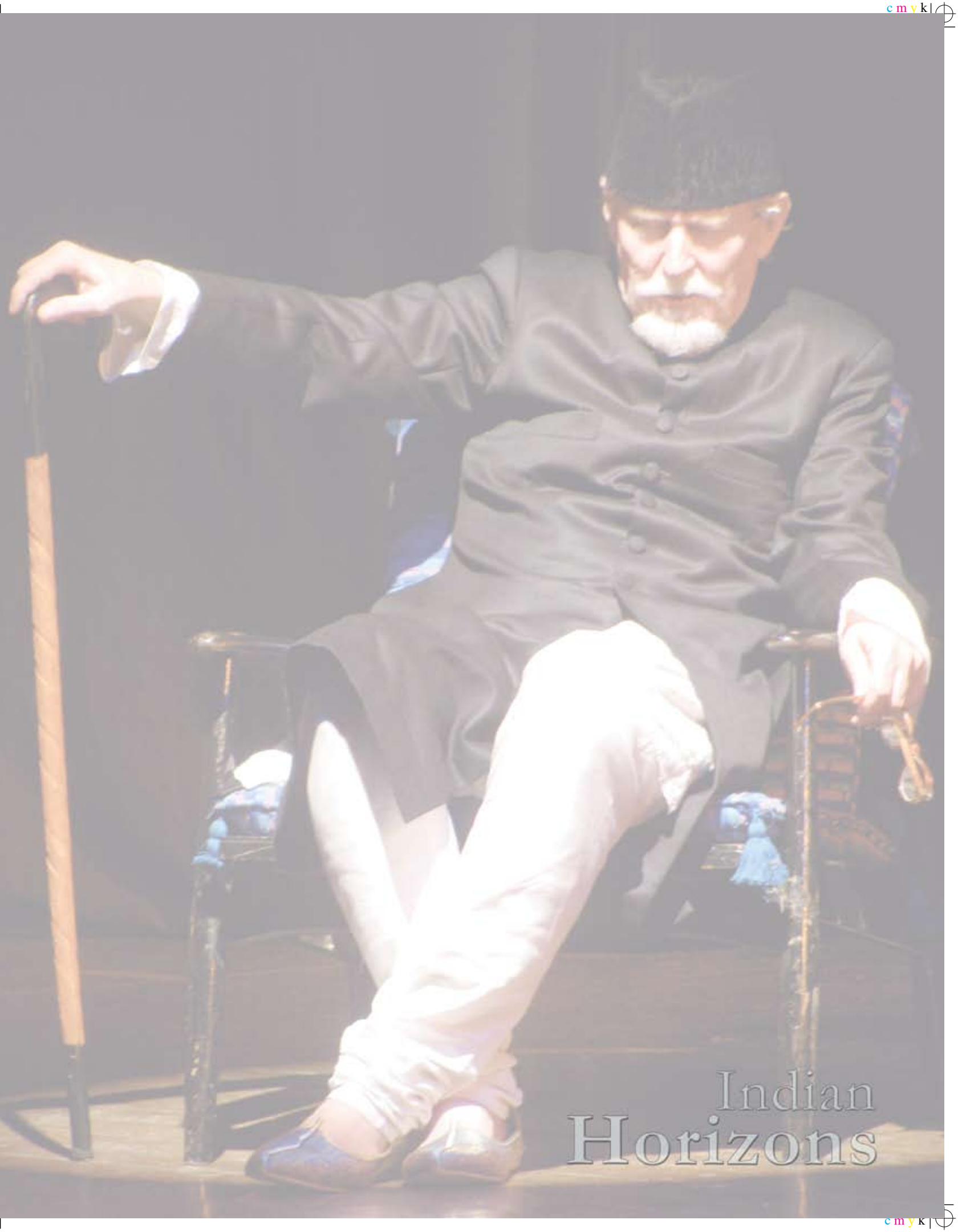
The objectives of the Council are to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.

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The Council prides itself on being a pre-eminent institution engaged in cultural diplomacy and the sponsor of intellectual exchanges between India and partner countries. It is the Council's resolve to continue to symbolize India's great cultural and educational efflorescence in the years to come.

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Horizons

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Volume 60 No. 1 January-March 2013

## Editor

Subhra Mazumdar

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This is to inform you that in the photo essay article on "Habib Tanvir" published in the Vol 59, No 3, Jul-Sept 2012 issue of Indian Horizons. we had inadvertently missed out on giving credit to the author, Anjum Katyal and SAGE publications. We regret the error. The excerpt was taken with permission from 'HABIB TANVIR :Towards an Inclusive Theatre' by Anjum Katyal, Consultant (Publications), Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, India . The book is published by SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.

# Foreword

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Suresh K Goel  
Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The previous issue of Indian Horizons had explored the history of theatre traditions in India and the influence of western, mainly British theatre on the Indian theatre during the last century.

In the contemporary period, particularly, the post-independence era has been witness to innovation and experimentation with a new idiom which could almost be described as Indianization of the heavily western influenced theatre of the pre-independence era. The energy and creativity of young Indians, particularly over the last three decades have begun to create the truly Indian theatre. It draws on Indian traditional ethos to combine with the latest techniques to create a completely new genre.

Ebrahim Alkazi has become not just a legend but an icon and an institution in the evolution of theatre in India. Bhanu Bharti has used the canvas of historical backdrop in places such as Ferozshah Kotla and Purana Qila for his magnificent and huge productions like *Andha Yug* and *Tughlaq*. The combination of these Indian elements with the western techniques have produced some fascinating theatre in India which despite being poor on resources is rich in stage presence and audience reactions. The essays by Suresh Kohli and Diwan Singh Bajeli on these stalwarts amply demonstrate the place they occupy in the Indian theatre.

For a spectacular denouement of an inert script into a flesh and blood performance, the characteristic reference point which is often quoted, are the stage appearances of the veteran actor Tom Alter. His ace

performance as Ghalib or as the aging last Mughal Bahadur Shah, in the production *Sons of Babur*, has expanded the dimensions of theatrical communication into a formidable art and illustrated how characters come to life with his characteristic intonations in script delivery. Ghalib and Zafar almost jump out of history in their stark regalia and splendor.

Our efforts to contact a playwright whose production has continued to arrest the imagination of his audiences, particularly in the metro cities, resulted in an exclusive interview with Shri Salman Khurshid, whose play *Sons of Babur* has been staged frequently for half a decade, before a varied audience. The play has positioned itself as a catalyst for better understanding of the term 'Indianness' and unlike most popular productions, it is written and enacted in English. One learns from the playwright that despite its length, it has appealed to a cross section of viewers, ranging from the collegian to the socialite.

The creative developments of past four decades have resulted in diffusing of boundaries between theatre, television and cinema despite difference of techniques and technology. In this issue, this factor is represented through the interview given by actor and cine star Farooq Sheikh to Rana Siddiqui Zaman, wherein the present-day status of theatre comes into focus.

Having seen through the vision of individual actors whose works have become iconic legacies, this issue also recognizes the place of a collective voice in theatre.

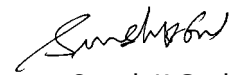
In this arena, women, more than men, have shown themselves capable of shouldering this responsibility and some of the most creative works on the stage have been fielded by women directors. Not just pioneering innovative productions, they have also expressed a veracity of performing techniques that have influenced the craft of theatre making definitively. The directorial roles mentioned in the essay by Feisal Alkazi, stencil a journey balanced on womanly intuition, dogged determination, an indomitable will to fight against the odds and a subtle aesthetic sensibility that blooms, despite all the traumas along its path.

Realizing that matters of drama would remain somewhat misty without touching upon local history, the issue has handpicked one of Indian theatre's stalwart groups, namely the Indian People's Theatre Association, IPTA for this purpose. Through the contents of this essay penned by Aziz Quraishi one unravels the

raison d'être behind the unbroken continuation of the Indian theatre movement through the years.

The smart move of opening independent chapters of IPTA in various cities, has infused resilience into the organisation.

The distinctive features of our issues, namely the art review round-up carries highlights from all forms of art practice, ranging from photography to oils and acrylics. The photo essay focuses on erstwhile theatre personalities who caught the attention of early theatre goers and who thereafter have remained etched in memory as institutions rather than mere individuals. In a slight departure from the theatre-actor- production collection that this volume has become, the essay penned by Sayeed Alam jumps right off the stage and into the milieu of the viewers. Their forthright reactions make instant elixirs to enliven the volume and help understand 'theatre' from off stage.



Suresh K Goel

## Editorial

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Say theatre and at once the mind conjures up images of a stage, actors and a gripping drama unfolding. So when this second issue on theatre was in the making, we decided to enact, through our pages, a virtual parting of theatre curtains with an interview of a playwright. It was Salman Khurshid's acclaimed handiwork *Sons of Babur*, and the playwright spared valuable moments from his busy schedule as the Hon'ble Minister, External Affairs, for an exclusive interview.

Giving an extra 'charge' to this issue have been the essays by two of India's best known theatre writers, namely Suresh Kohli and Diwan Singh Bajeli. Suresh Kohli, is among the handful who have had access to the legendary Ebrahim Alkazi for a face-to-face discussion with the doyen. The veteran actor takes us readers on a tour de force of his landmark years when professional theatre was being brought under an academic scanner without losing its creative core.

In a similar vein Diwan Singh Bajeli, reviews the career of actor Bhanu Bharti, regarded by many to be the father figure of Hindi theatre with his historic portrayal of plays like *Andha Yug* as also *Tughlaq*, in the play by that name. Written with a sensitive flair, Bajeli's essay made me look both on and off the stage. On a more personal vein, the interview by Rana Siddiqui Zaman of noted stage and cine star Farooque Sheikh has the ambience of a tete-e-tete with the artist.

The photo essay captures the original spirit of Indian theatre through the shots of some of Indian theatre's bespoke personalities. It was also a stroke of providential luck for us as this issue's publication coincided with the release of an iconic volume, *The Act of Becoming* and its editor Amala Allana kindly made it possible for us to reproduce those unforgettable memories.

To structure this volume to an appraisal of Indian theatre's imprints, we chose to sketch the career of one of the most versatile 'English' actors on the current stage. Geeta Nandakumar traces Tom Alter's journey under the arc lights from its nascent beginnings to its culminating roles, yielding much food for thought.

One of the finest features in the saga of Indian theatre is the manner in which women directors have taken the genre forward. Their contributions have been relived through the essay penned by Feisal Alkazi, who we thought would be an ideal choice for this exercise.

Theatre audiences which by any yardstick is the essential wit and vigour of a production, have been given their due place in the volume by Dr Sayeed Alam. As expected the writer has encapsulated the psychology of the theatre goer from his own experiences and offered for our readers some choice incidents both hard hitting and frivolous.

Perhaps the most resilient theatre company post independence has been the IPTA or Indian Peoples' Theatre Association and Aziz Quraishi's account of this historic company, brings into focus the glorious history gleaned also the careers of legends such as Shombhu and Tripti Mitra and others of their ilk.

As is customary, the end pages of the issue are dedicated to a round of reviews of the exhibitions held at the Azad Bhavan Gallery. Some of these exhibitions were from abroad giving our viewers a chance to weigh their output against this input. Altogether we have pieced a potpourri of theatre glimpses to give you a sense of the Indian stage from the comfort of your reading rooms.

Editor



Subhra Mazumdar

# SONS OF BABUR

## Sons of Babur: A Play in Search of India

An Interview with the author Shri Salman Khurshid

Published to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the 1857 War of Independence, the play 'Sons of Babur. A Play in Search of India', written by Salman Khurshid explores the very meaning of nationhood within a context of a revisit to the Mughal era. The 'tour guide' through the era is provided by the ailing last Mughal, Bahadur Shah Zafar. The determined college student Rudrangshu Mitra, who is the principal protagonist in the play, follows his ailing guide through the blood stained and eventful passages of history, to unravel its workings, its intrigues, sacrifices and suggestions. As a result, the play arouses in the minds of its readers, a plethora of issues related to the idea of India, by examining the dimensions of an understanding of Islam, the role of women, and above all, reaffirming the thesis of psychological acceptance of the Mughals as the true sovereigns of India, as has been explained so clearly brought out in the play's preface by the noted socio-political analyst Ather Farooqui.

Though the writer describes himself as a 'debutant playwright', Salman Khurshid's links with Indian theatre go back several years, to his college days both at St Stephen's and at Oxford. In particular, the playwright acknowledges his competence in theatre to his association with the legendary Marcus Murch of the Shakespeareana International Theatre Company that in the seventies had played a key role in developing a taste for good theatre among audiences in the capital.

In an exclusive interview given to *Indian Horizons*, Shri Salman Khurshid, Honourable Minister of

External Affairs, and playwright of the work *Sons of Babur, A Play in Search of India*, spoke on various aspects of the play, the writing of the manuscript, its numerous productions, bringing forth its half-decade long reactions among theatre going audiences nationwide.

**As the play is sub-titled 'A Play in Search of India' how has the writing examined the psyche of divisiveness that is so relevant in the Indian socio-political context, vis-à-vis elsewhere?**

Unfortunately, I don't know enough about the syntax of divisiveness in other communities. Their points of view, the inter community or intra community interactions...

In this play I happened to combine my own intuitions, my education, my experiences, the articulations of views on democracy, the sense of history, Although I was never a student of history. I have been closely associated with the subject with several historians in my family and those I have known at Delhi and at Oxford. Although I don't claim my knowledge to be intellectually at par with theirs, I have taken a vicarious advantage of their knowledge in framing my own writings.

**The current play examines an identity issue. While most such plays seek to define identity through cultural roots, religion, community aspirations and linguistic association, your play examines the relationship of the term 'India' in a relationship of**



**Hindus and Muslims, taken in a historical context. Will your writings in the future, as perhaps your next play, examine the role of other communities in shaping the idea of India?**

I doubt it. But yes, I may write another play on the social attitudes of people in modern times. It will be based on a large set of my friends and associates, a reunion of people I have known at Delhi University and as students at Oxford. Indian students there who were ardent followers of Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung, who were their icons in their student days as youthful revolutionaries and have now left behind that youthful revolutionary vigour and settled into the comforts of modern capitalism and yes, how they have reacted to it. These will be the protagonists of the play.

**Although your play, 'Sons of Babur' has received wide acclaim in India, how do you envisage its appeal beyond our borders?**

Set in the Indian context, the play has had an appeal for the Indian diaspora from a discovery element point of view. In the play, the character Sarah is a representative of this feature. Also, the diaspora find themselves more directly involved in conditions they find common with her, because of her Dutch-

Indian parentage. Other than that the play is likely to appeal to readers in our neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, to an extent Sri Lanka. And because of its historical links with Uzbekistan, as Babur came from there, Afghanistan and even Iran to an extent, would be interested. And of course it is hoped that in the country of Bahadur Shah's last resting place, Myanmar, it will generate some interest as the last king of India lies buried there even while the last king from there lies in India.

**Have there been any translations from the original English version of the play? What has been the outcome of these translations?**

There is one done in Urdu, which is a natural fallout, in a way. It is written in Hindi with explanations of words derived from Urdu used in context with the play. But the language of the writing is not easy to read or follow. The trouble with the standard of Urdu used by the translator is because he could not have made it simplified. The setting of the play is in a royal court and hence the language he has used had to be in keeping with the royal context. The elegance of courtly ways would have been diluted in contrast to the delivery of the actors if the language were made mundane. After all, Zafar, the main protagonist of the play, is a royal, and is someone much misunderstood,





so making him utter lines that are too simplistic would have detracted from the gravity of the character. In this context I must say that Tom Alter who performed the lead role in the play did a remarkable job. His diction, delivery and his acting, gelled admirably and made the play come to life.

**You have employed the literary technique of stream of consciousness writing, while penning the play. Was that deliberate?**

Yes, a lot of people have told me about my use of this technique in the play. But I allude to it being due to the fact that I have been a student of English literature and the technique of the stream of consciousness was part of the intellectual diet that I imbibed while pursuing the course. Also the entire writing got built around a very ambitious landscape for a play. It traces the entire Mughal era. Hence its content runs into five acts with four or five scenes in each of them. That makes one performance of the play take up a span of three hours. But yes, I did try to shorten it but even with effort, I couldn't reduce the length of the play... that is because of the number of kings that had to be accommodated, spanning all the major Mughal emperors. I did not want to be focusing on one king alone, Babur or Bahadur Shah, and that led to a stream of kings and did not allow telescoping

of the contents. In fact the line of kings portrayed added to the theatre quality of the production. And yes, the stream of consciousness, I feel also added to the theatre quality of the play as I could use the dreamscape to depict the past and present in the context of the times, where it is a group of college students who speak in the way college students talk in these times.

In the Hindi translation of the play, the dialogues of the emperors are rich and a little difficult to follow but then if it were simplified too much, then it would lose out on authenticity as court language cannot be equated with collegiate talk. Of course to circumvent this issue the uncommon words from each scene have been explained alongside in a glossary that follows the scene enacted.

**What was your feedback when the play came to be staged? What hurdles /eye openers did you experience once it was under the arc lights?**

When it was presented on stage as a play it was a very modest production although I must say, the producers had done their best. It was an amateur theatre club, that undertook it, a kind of hybrid between professional and amateur, and the play did not acquire top place as far as props, sets and effects

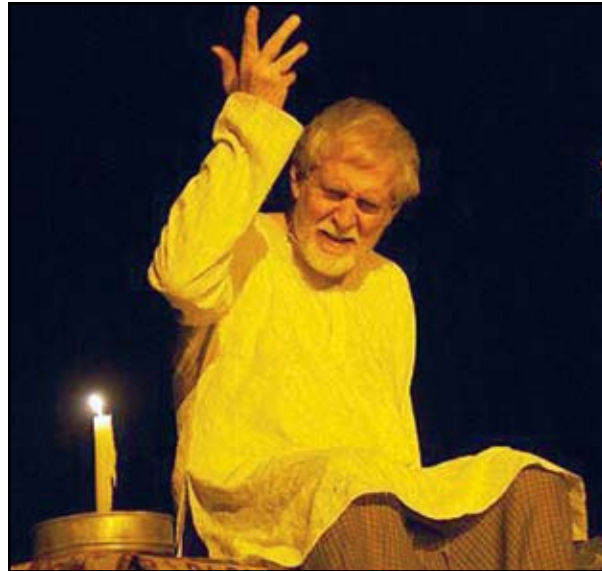
were concerned. As it is a play on a regal theme, depicting the grandeur of the Mughal court, it requires a lot of investment to build up the splendour of a medieval court of the kind that the Mughals had in the country. But I am not complaining. Over the years as the company has come into a little more money they have ploughed it back into the production and sets and props have kept on improving and getting better.

Also, I must admit that the veteran actor Tom Alter did a wonderful job of his role as Bahadur Shah in the play. He put extra life into the play, but of course had the same production been done in Europe or America, it would have been another story. Our production of the play is nowhere near the performances of their drama companies.

As a playwright my work is concentrated strictly with the script. How the producers interpret the script is not within the control of the writer. I suppose what you write is what is within your own system and the actor transforms the play as he thinks best. How the production takes off is not foreseeable, but of course, it is useful if the producers talk to the writer, prior to the production, even if the performer and the producer continue to add or subtract dimensions to the production according as they think best. Sometimes, it feels that they have added a dimension to the play that one has written and enhanced what you want said.

#### **What have been the audience' reactions to the productions?**

This differs from city to city, particularly in the two metros of Mumbai and Delhi. In general, I have found that the audience has laughed at the right places. The Delhi audiences comprising of the upper middle class segment, have sat through the performance, but the gratifying theatre audience for my production has been from theatre goers in Bombay. The play was staged at the NCPA Theatre and there was a serious and passionate involvement of the audience with every movement and denouement of the story. In Delhi,



where tickets are received gratis, the performance reaction has been more social than experiential.

#### **What furtherance can the play achieve through the ICCR platform?**

I would like more and more audiences to see the production as I would welcome a wide viewership. But what I would like above everything else is a television serial or best of all, a film, made on the play. After all, there is so much more in that medium. It would reach out to a vast audience and that would give a true impression of its worth. Live theatre, even with the best performers, suffers from some inherent difficulties. One such, is the non-availability of top performers to tour with the play even across the country. Their engagements make it impossible for them to take such commitments. But a vibrant actor can turn the most insipid play into a vibrant production and that is why my desire to have a film made of the play. In that way even the topmost actor of the industry can perform individual roles in their chosen slots and then their presence thereafter is not needed. Audiences everywhere can see the film with that, say 20-minute appearance on the screen, and it lives on. For a live production, alas, this is not possible. But I hope to see both aspects grow and develop in the future.

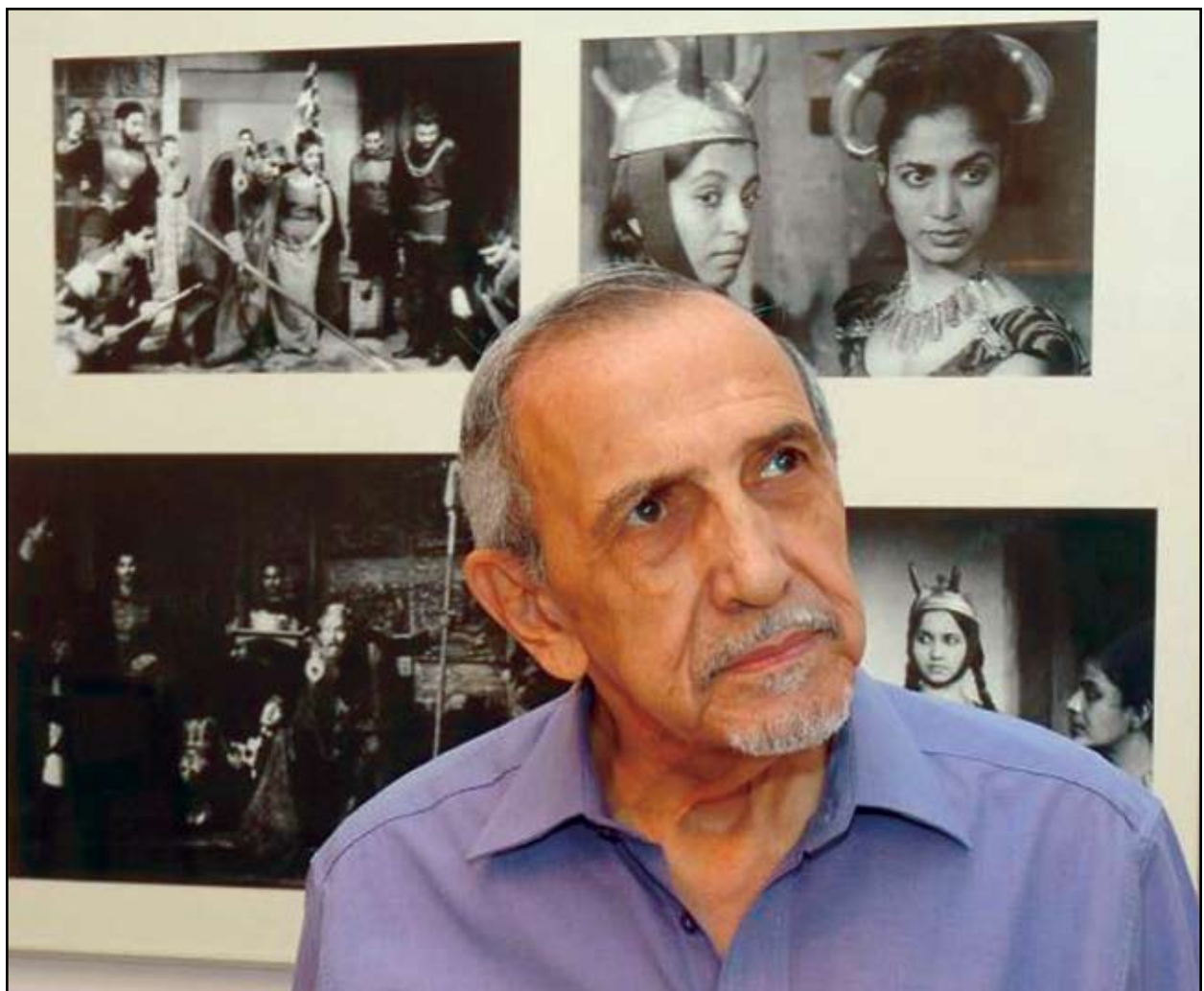
## A Relook at Indian Theatre

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Suresh Kohli

According to Nissar Allana: "E Alkazi's work at the NSD, also from the 1960s, and even before that, showed a masterful understanding of all aspects of theatre, and his productions were greatly

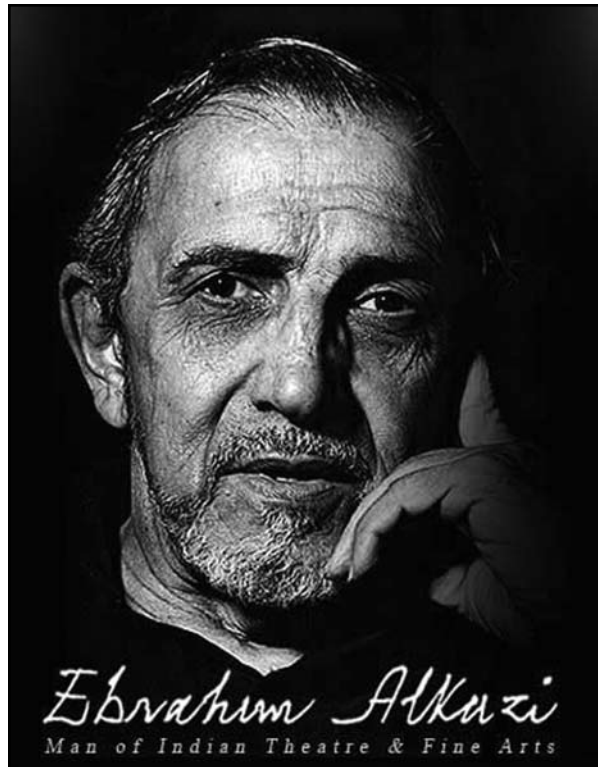
distinguished by the totality of the means by which he constructed them...they were all done with great attention to detail." How Alkazi transformed his own interpretation of European theatre to some Indian



classics like *Tughlaq* and *Andha Yug*, for instance, speaks volumes of his grand vision. He pulled these plays out of the narrow confines of a closed, non-existent theatre stage to open and naturalistic surroundings in the kind of marvel the Indian theatre had not witnessed before. So much so that the reproduction of these masterpieces by his students and otherwise, despite valiant attempts, have remained unsurpassed in terms of impact.

"The training in most drama schools in the late 60s and early 70s had been persuasively derivative of Western sources, forms and traditions." The regional hues were dominant, connect as they were through folk traditions and imperative that by their very nature and temperament relied substantially on song and dance in an undisciplined form, whether in Bengal or the North East, the Southern and the Northern states that was often compared to *nautanki* in the latter, especially Uttar and Madhya Pradesh. But as eminent theatrist from Punjab, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhury states: "The situation changed in the late 70s and 80s. Suddenly folk forms and traditions started being explored and valorized, on the assumption that there existed in these forms a theatrical vocabulary that would enable urban theatre to establish links with their forgotten, invisible past." She was referring to the *Naqqal* tradition in rural Punjab where musical intonations were deployed to great effect. But this was short lived.

The attempts of two individuals though with diverse visions and perspectives, amongst others, changed the theatre scene during the late 60s: Alkazi and Satyadev Dubey in Mumbai. This was before the former moved to Delhi to take charge of the National School of Drama. It was under his tutelage that some exceptional talent, the kind which has never been seen in India again. Many of them are formidable come into forces in their own way and creating theatre inspired from the twosome. Motivated by these two many others dug the earth far and wide, and brought centre-stage exceptional playwrights like Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad that resulted in triggering and energizing a whole



movement. But what Dubey did was unprecedented. He pioneered the tradition of theatre translation that brought about a unity in diversity factor.

**Reproduced** below is a detailed interview with Ebrahim Hamid Alkazi, the then Director of National School of Drama, by the author and published in The Times of India Sunday Magazine of April 26, 1970. **Is it not relevant even today?**

**Question:** Mr Alkazi what do you think of the state of theatre in India? To what extent can it go, taking into consideration the socio-economic conditions in the country?

**Answer:** This is a very complicated question because the situation is chaotic. It is assumed that the theatre can be left to the devotion of a few individuals who spend every penny of their meagre savings in the fulfillment of their passion, or to the enthusiasm of amateur or semi-professional groups with meagre financial resources. Theatre requires a variety of talent, spread among a large group of individuals,

creative, organizational and technical. A goal has to be specified because for some the theatre serves a political purpose; for some it is purely a form of entertainment; for some an educational, for others an artistic experience. I think that the theatre has to fulfill all these functions simultaneously.

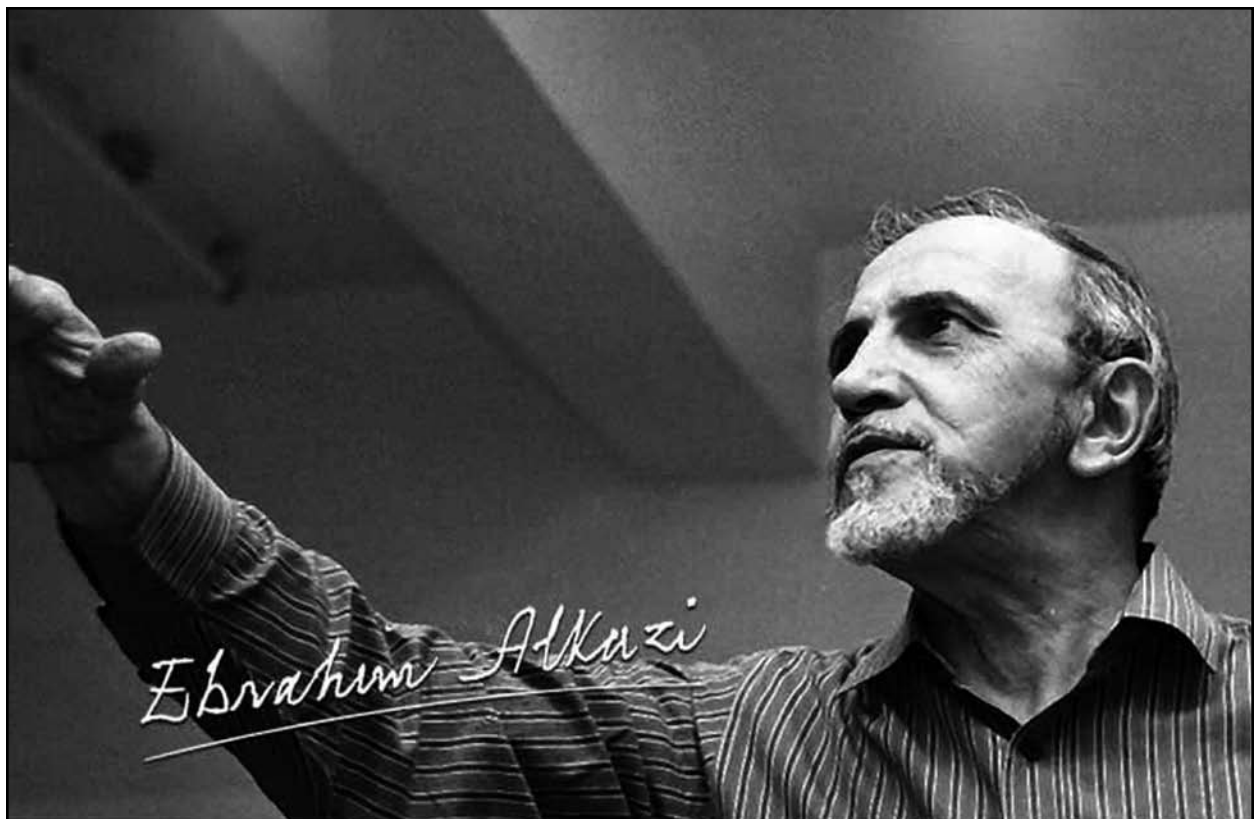
Besides the group, the theatre needs a building which, in the context of stage requirements today, has to be a fairly complex affair: a well equipped stage with all the attendant machinery and equipment for scenery, lighting and sound; an air-conditioned auditorium in which the audience can be comfortable; qualified technicians and a manager and staff for the building as a whole. Open-air theatres are cheaper and, in India, suitable for the greater part of the year but then this type of theatre has its advantages and disadvantages as well as shortcomings; the technical demands, however, are the same as for closed theatres.

Then you need playwrights whose works can make a living contribution to the thinking of a people.

And finally, you need an audience whom the theatre is meant to serve. The theatre just cannot exist without any one of these essential elements. It is an indispensable service for the country, not a luxury which can be deferred till better times. Just as schools, hospitals, libraries are basic to the health of a nation, so is theatre. And like others, it too needs to be completely subsidized.

**Q:** Cinema caters to a large number of audiences all over the world while the theatre has been patronized by the selected few. Why, in your opinion, has the theatre not been able to get a wider audience?

**A:** There are the simple limitations of the medium itself. You can show a hundred prints of the same film four times a day at the same time to audiences all over the country. You put on a switch and the film runs. Every single performance of a play on the other hand requires a tremendous amount of organization before, during and after the event. Can you imagine



the quantity of energy goes into a single performance of three hours, not only on the part of the actors but also the technical crew and the management? The play has to be repeated night after night before an audience with the same degree of creativity, freshness and spontaneity. The fear that the cinema or TV would constitute a threat to the theatre has been proven unfounded. A large number of people are now turning to the theatre.

**Q:** A number of theatre artists have gone to films and do not really want to come back to the stage. Is cinema a better form of expression (I don't mean in terms of mass media) than the stage? What do you think really inspires these artists to get to films?

**A:** To begin with, there are financial considerations: a good actor earns much more in films than in theatre. Secondly, he can reach an enormously vaster audience, even an international audience, and achieve a greater and more widespread reputation in a shorter time. Then there is the challenge of the medium – after all, film, with its incredible potentialities, is the most formidable medium of the 20th century. Actors would certainly return to the theatre if there is a living theatre which provides a decent livelihood. Some of the most distinguished actors in the West return to the theatre as their first and abiding love; they make excursions into the film world for the money in it or for the opportunity to work under gifted directors.

**Q:** What do you think can be done to develop theatre in India?

**A:** First of all, utilize to the full the resources already available. There are a large number of theatre buildings apart from the 17 to 19 Tagore theatres all over the country. These are for the most part inadequately equipped, under staffed and under utilized. Some theatres in Bombay are overutilised. This is a type of profiteering by middlemen and managements at the expense of the professionals. This practice should be put to a stop.

No theatre should be permitted to function or to charge the exorbitant rent it does unless it provides

the basic minimum requirements of equipment and service. The exorbitant rates demanded by these theatres are not at all commensurate with the services they provide. Secondly, the Tagore theatres at least should become living organisms functioning as State theatres with a professional repertory company attached, of the highest standards available in the State, and with a clear-cut artistic policy which will encourage regional playwriting talent as well as traditional theatre forms, effect inter-state cultural exchange, and slowly extend itself towards a national theatre movement. The development will be strengthened by the establishment of professional training schools.

**Q:** What do you think of the folk theatre? Do you think we could possibly revive it; if it is not already dead?

**A:** I do not think the folk theatre is dead; it cannot die until the process of urbanization in India with its 6,00,000 villages is complete and perhaps not even then. These forms are not only moral forms incapable of transformation and change. Forms like the *Bhavai* in Gujarat, the *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Yatra* in Bengal and *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh have shown great resilience and adaptability. They have incorporated themes and problems connected with city life – social, economic, and political issues, showing sharpness of mind and incisiveness of attack along with technical skill of a very high order. Translating a political issue into a song-and-dance one shows extraordinary sophistication of mind.

It is wrong to imagine that the realistic form of theatre as seen in sumptuous theatre buildings has shown up the irrelevance of the folk theatre. Besides, these folk forms arouse memories and associations in the minds of the audiences, which make them experience of them deeper and richer. Most people are not even a generation away from the villages, and their emotional ties with them are still strong. But a much more creative and less sentimental approach to the folk theatre is called for than at present prevails among its enthusiasts.

**Q:** What role has the National School of Drama played, or is expected to play, in the development of theatrical traditions in this country?

**A:** Despite the natural difficulties attendant on such a situation we are trying to provide such training to students who come from different parts of the country as will be useful to them in the development of theatre in their respective regions. We encourage and seek to advance the works of new playwrights in the various languages, study their works and present them on the stage with the seriousness, dignity and sensitivity they deserve. At the same time we are seeking the source of our classical theatre and making a study of traditional theatre forms, and the concepts and conventions which link them together.

Further, we are investigating the forms of theatre in Asia, particularly the Japanese, and are trying to understand their cultural affinities with those of our own country. Finally, we try to keep abreast of the latest developments in other parts of the world. The student thus acquires a sound, comprehensive view of the theatrical experience, all ultimately related to the work he has to do in his specific region.

**Q:** Do you think our young playwrights are doing significant work in the development of theatre? I have my doubts. I find that not much of what they are writing is genuine. For instance, I have been told that in Mohan Rakesh's most successful play, *Adhe Adhure* there are lines and paras that remind of what D H Lawrence wrote in his various novels. Some of the extracts seem to be translations of Lawrence's dialogue. Similarly, Badal Sircar invariably reminds one of Thornton Wilder's plays.

**A:** What is truly gratifying is the considerable number of striking plays emerging in Indian languages. I do not share to your doubts and misgivings. There can be parallel situations in different plays. And except for downright plagiarism, such similarities are fortuitous. Besides, I am not concerned with minor coincidences even if they could be proved to be imitations which, in the case of Rakesh, I very much doubt. I see the

man's plays as a totality, and in relations to his novels and short stories and I respect his increasing maturity and finesse.

The language of *Adhe Adhure* shows a skill and refinement which is not much literary as reflecting psychological nuances and complexities of the characters. This is a historic breakthrough in Hindi drama. Badal Sircar has an instinctive feeling for theatre – in many ways he achieves a theatrical wizardry reminiscent of the virtuosity of Jean Anouilh, only Badal Sircar thinks more deeply and is wracked by philosophical doubts. His plays are an anguished personal probing towards the meaning and purpose of human existence. I am surprised by the resemblance which you say exists between his writings and those of Wilder.

Dr Laxmi Narain Lal's grandiose, epic vision cannot be constrained in the realistic three-act form in which it appears awkward and straitjacketed. The deep mythic resources of many Indian writers and artists are incredible in their richness and expanse. Unfortunately, they are driven to form of theatrical expression which is alien to their genius, to their very modes of thinking, forms which are comparatively shallow and 'realistic' in a derogatory sense. It is for the men of theatre, directors and designers, to discover ways by which the stage can be invested with the imagination and power of its writers.

In the works of playwrights like Girish Karnad and Lankesh (Kannada), Vijay Tendulkar, P S Rege and Khanolkar (Marathi), Agnihotri, B M Shah and Lalit Sehgal (Hindi), RV Shastri (Telugu) to name haphazardly only a few, we have evidence of remarkable talent and awareness. We do not, however, have sufficiently gifted and trained directors and acting companies to do adequate justice to their plays on stage.

**Q:** What do you think of the recent English and American drama? Are you satisfied with the various experiments being conducted? When I say experiments I especially have plays about homosexuality, lesbianism, nudity and sex etc. Do



you think this kind of drama has place in our society or for that matter in the western world?

**A:** The serious playwrights write out of searing awareness, an awareness which is, perhaps, one of disillusionment, deprivation and despair. The need at the moment is for protest. And nudity is, I imagine, one of the forms of protest. The desire to dispense with all sham, subterfuges, false coverings, externals, all vestiges of conformity has been a natural part of our geographical and mental landscape, until the non-puritans in the wake of missionaries came along and invested it with the taint of sin. This nakedness has been paradoxically an assertion of the beauty of life and also an expression of asceticism as reflected in vernal cravings.

Nudity in the West, on the other hand, is just one symptom of a profound spiritual malaise, already foreshadowed by Lear on the heath casting off his clothes and seeing himself as 'un-accommodated man', nothing more than 'a bare, forked animal'. It is a gesture of hysteria and despair rather than one of affirmation and hope. The effects of this discordance extend beyond the individual to relations between the sexes, to family life, to society and nation as a whole. No Western playwright has foreseen and described it better and with greater vividness than Strindberg who had an uncanny gift of prophecy. I am working on a play by Badal Sircar dealing with the tragedy of Hiroshima. And I was shocked while reading a passage only the other way in a recent book by Colin Wilson.

"Towards the end of his life Strindberg made a series of oddly accurate predictions about the 20th century which he saw as a time of torment for the human race. In his last play written in 1910, he has a Japanese who wants to commit suicide to atone for his sins and who has decided to take a drug that will make him appear to be dead, and then leave a note asking to be cremated. When someone asks: "But supposing you wake up in the furnace" he says, "I want to wake up; I want to feel the purifying flames..." But the most hair-raising part of all this is that the name of the Japanese (play) is *Hiroshima!*"

I mention this incredible story because it brings to mind not only the tens of thousands of corpses that littered the ruins of Hiroshima, and the other surviving thousands who were flung naked into the streets by the blast, but also the stripped victims of the gas chambers and the concentration camps. Nudity, it seems to me, is but a step to mass suicide; homosexuality is part of the same malaise. It marks a crisis in the man-woman relationship and is equally a sort of death wish. If procreation leads to mass murder, the only refuge is sterility. These issues have far more complex ramifications than can be summed up in a brief answer. I myself am deeply concerned about these issues; they need to be investigated through the theatre and comprehended. They cannot be brushed aside or avoided.

**Q:** Many theatre groups are engaged in what they call 'experimental theatre'. What is the most urgent challenge facing this kind of theatre, both in India and abroad?

**A:** There is a feeling that the prevailing dramatic form of the realistic well-made play in three acts no longer serves the purpose of projecting present-day reality. This form was suitable for domestic and social drama of a certain small scale. The family was for several centuries the social unit. Life was dominated by religious belief and society was firmly controlled through a feudal system and a hierarchic order which was sanctioned by tradition. But now these basic patterns of life and the social attitudes for which the dramatic form seems appropriate, have vanished or are fast crumbling.

With urbanization and industrialization, feudal and closed guild values have died, and the family as the basic unit of society is disintegrating everywhere – the ancestral, the joint family system, even the small family unit are threatened by changing norms of behaviour between parents and children, by new concept of marriage and morals by new political ideas, by differences in outlook between the generations.

In Europe ever since World War I this social upheaval found expression in one movement after another in



rapid succession: the theatre of social protest, the theatre of cruelty, the theatre of poverty, the theatre of the streets, absurd theatre, living theatre, total theatre, theatre of happenings – all trying to express man's insecurity, his spiritual loneliness, anguish and desolation. These sought to encompass reality and to communicate it to the audience through varying methods of sensation, shock, education, intellectual appeal, physical contact, abuse of nudism, the more extreme methods arising out of a desperate historical need.

Life at least on the social, economic and political plane is not as comprehensible as it is made out to be. We have been able to identify and study the forces that make for human discord, exploitation, outdated feudalism, ignorance and appeal to the emotions, to religious, regional and tribal loyalties. We live in a supposedly rational and scientific age, but our minds are still stirred by blind, irrational impulses. We profess to be shocked and outraged by ritual murder and human sacrifice committed by

superstitious aborigines in a forest, but raise not a murmur when it is practised on a much larger scale by more sophisticated individuals in a parasitic society.

Experiment in theatre is, therefore, not just in terms of form: using projected scenery, discarding the front curtain, staging with the audience on three sides, arena staging, etc. All these by themselves cannot be considered experimental except in relation to content. The real and vital experiment is in one's attitude to contemporary reality. The religious, feudalistic outlook has to be replaced by a scientific, humanistic outlook. The convulsions and anguish of our times are really part of our being born anew into an age for which significant parts of our consciousness are not prepared; or being forced into that age without the adjustment in our inner spiritual landscape. All this is being reflected in the present-day drama.

**Q:** what do you think of theatre criticism in Delhi? Almost all critics seem to be prejudiced against you. Can you give any specific reason for this reaction? Is there a critic whose judgment you value? or to put it

in another way, do you think there is any critic who is objective in his criticism? I am sure you must be looking through what they say about the plays being performed.

**A:** I believe in the need of dispassionate, objective, even severe criticism by critics with the requisite training in and knowledge of the subject. It is essential that the critic has no affiliations whatsoever with any theatre group. In Delhi, a peculiar situation exists which would not be tolerated in any other profession. There is a group of theatre critics, belonging to a single amateur organization, cover drama for influential newspapers with the widest circulation in the country. The questions to be asked in this connection are very simple: Is this a healthy 'democratic' practice, or is one which is more than likely to invite abuse of authority.

These critics are themselves actors and directors. Would the critic of one newspaper not be inhibited when he reviews the work of a fellow critic-cum-director? When the drama critic himself an actor or a director, who reviews his work for his own paper? Does he do it himself, or does the term 'by our drama critic' refer to someone else? When the critics are themselves actors or directors are their performances and productions meant to be examples of their own aesthetic criteria? And if these have never risen beyond the mediocre, are they the yardstick by which others' works are to be judged and condemned by these same individuals?

Is drama criticism merely a hobby or a casual part-time activity which can be squeezed in between the critics' other full-time job and his own productions? Does it not require no preparation and no homework? Do you think there is such a thing as simple unwritten code of public conduct even for critics? What would you

think of a critic who after damning your production (which he has every right to do) attends it for several nights after that, sitting in the front row along with his cronies and guffawing right through the performance deliberately to ruin it for others? Would you regard this as responsible behaviour commensurate with the dignity of his calling? Is this not reducing criticism to a pathetic, infantile level?

Think it is about time that there was such a thing as Drama Critics' Guild which would demand certain minimum requirements from its members and also evolve a code of conduct.

I claim the right to make mistakes, to go wrong. I do not believe in success; I do not really understand what the term means – a box office hit, a following, fan mail, write-up in the papers. I don't care for these particularly. I believe in failure, awareness of my own incompetence, self-mistrust, self-doubt, a personal recognition of defeat – because when one's purpose is to present a 'picture of the world' then the only achievement can at best be only partial, and success; is deceptive. The critic's strictures may hurt one's vanity, but that is only the superficial aspect of one's being. The great danger for a theatre worker is that of self-deception; that is why one has to be one's own severest critic, and go by one's own scale of values.

I do not concede the critic's infallibility. I do not think there is anything sacrosanct and inviolable about his judgments. He has no claim to a type of diplomatic immunity. He should be as much under fire as a performer. He should be repeatedly thrown on the defensive and called upon to justify himself. Samuel Johnson has said somewhere: "Criticism is a study by which men grow important and formidable at a very small expense", and he, as you know, is the last word on critics, crooks and patriots!

# Bhanu Bharti: A Multi-faceted Theatre Artist

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Diwan Singh Bajeli

The two productions of contemporary Indian classics – *Andha Yug* and *Tughlaq* – by Bhanu Bharti in recent years illustrate that he continues to be at his innovative best while creating his distinctive works of theatrical art in terms of production values and fresh interpretations. It is because of his fertile imagination and deep artistic vision that he gave a new boost to the contemporary theatre movement, revealing the enduring value of *Andha Yug* and *Tughlaq* as theatrical masterpieces. Reflecting on his *Pashu*

*Gayatri* presented in 1984, which catapulted him to national fame as an innovator of contemporary Indian theatre, one discovers that in the course of his creative journey he continues to plant milestones, one after another.

A graduate from the National School of Drama, Bhanu went to Japan on a fellowship awarded to him by the Government of Japan to study Noh and Kabuki. Even as a student at NSD and an artist with NSD's



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

Repertory Company and later as the artistic director of Shri Ram Centre For Art and Culture, he produced several works which are artistically brilliant and socially relevant. However, his genius as an innovator of the Indian theatre Idiom rooted in our soil and in the consciousness of our people blossomed into subtle artistry, was reflected in the works he did with Bheels of Mewar, Rajasthan, such as *Pashu Gayatri*, *Kaal Katha* and *Amarbeej*.

In the early eighties Sangeet Natak Akademi launched a project of experimental productions seeking inspiration from traditional, folk and tribal art forms to produce a theatre that reflected contemporary sensibility. Bhanu became its bright star. He was inspired by the traditional theatre of the Bheels known as Gavari and formed *Aaj Rangmandal* in Udaipur in 1984 which became a platform for the exchange of dialogue between the traditional performers of ritualistic theatre of the Mewar region

of Rajasthan and the practitioners of contemporary theatre. Under the banner of Disha Natya Sansthan, he presented *Pashu Gayatri* at Kamani Auditorium as a part of Natya Samaroh in 1984, with an all-Bheel cast. *Pashu Gayatri* is a contemporary play written by K.N. Panikkar in Malayalam which was translated into Mewari by Deepak Joshi. The play was presented in Gavari form. It was a unique experiment of evolving a modern theatre with elements of traditional tribal theatre. The ritualistic elements were used to heighten the dramatic conflict with Bheel music playing an important role in conducting the dramatic action. The production fascinated the audience as a theatrical piece, displaying a synthesis between contemporary theatrical elements with traditional ones evolving a modern Indian theatre idiom. Over the years, *Pashu Gayatri* has been presented in most of the Indian cities and featured at major national theatre festivals. Critically acclaimed as a poetic allegory, it depicts man's rapacious nature and the



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

morbid desire to acquire wealth even at the cost of the life of one's son. It is also the eternal quest for spiritual fulfillment by a man who is ravaged by greed, egomania and savagery.

Similarly, *Kaal Katha* and *Amar Beej* inspired by Bheel legends and ethos presented in Gavari form reveal Bhanu's consummate artistry and perceptive approach to project contemporary human dilemma through tribal art forms, synthesized with modern theatrical technique that stirred the audience intellectually and emotionally. The productions were shown almost at all the important Indian theatre festivals. These productions have attracted the attention of Indian theatre practitioners and scholars. As a dialectical unity between traditional forms and modern content, these theatrical works are viewed by foreign theatre directors with keen interest.

In this context it is essential to say a few words about Gavari which is celebrated by the entire Bheel

community for a month and a week beginning from Bhadrapada — beginning from mid-August to the last week of September.

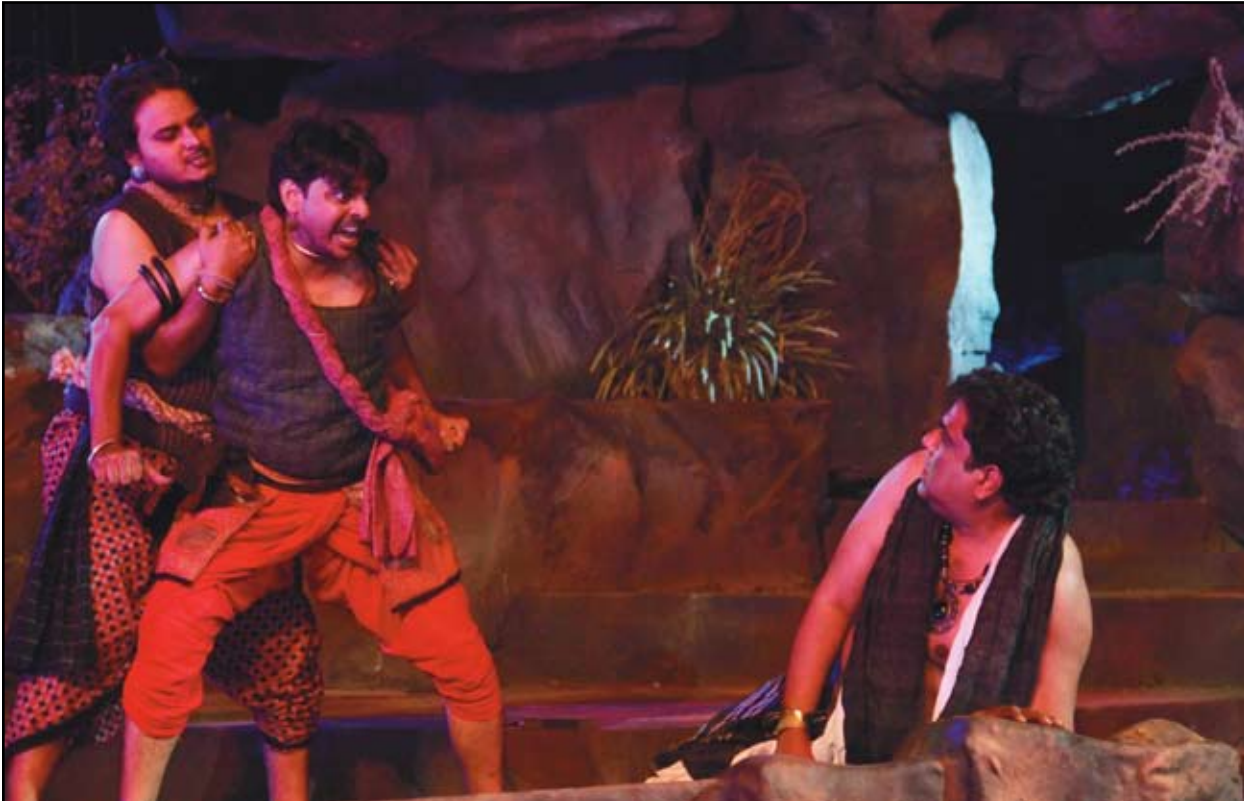
The theatre starts from early in the morning and continues the whole day, ending at sunset. The performers keep wearing their costumes throughout the night during the course of celebration of Gavari and during this period they stay at the temple and sleep there, observing celibacy and they eat a vegetarian diet. Basically a ritualistic theatre, music is one of the main ingredients of the performance. Some of the characters use masks. It is said that during this season, Gavari, Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva, visits the land of Bheels who believe that Gavari is their daughter. Apart from Lord Shiva's consort, she is also portrayed as Mohini and at times she takes the form of some local deity of Rajasthan as the manifestation of the power of nine lakh goddesses. On a secular level, it is the celebration of the welcome of a dear daughter and the power of womanhood. This theatre

has elements of Brechtian epic theatre but it is much more than a mere theatre to entertain. It seeks to elevate man from his humdrum social existence as well as make him aware of social antagonism. Today when most of the tribal and folk art forms are on the verge of oblivion, Gavari is alive and performed over centuries with religious fervour; it entertains, comments on the contemporary situation, seeking to elevate community spiritually. Bhanu, in spite of the fact that he is an urban artist, was able to establish a comradely relationship with them, study various aspects of Gavari and work with tribal artists to produce an authentic modern theatre work with Bheels and in the form of their traditional art form, capturing nuances of modern sensibility.

Born at Ajmer, Rajasthan, in 1947, Bhanu's sensibility is basically inspired by Asian traditional theatre forms. But he has been equally open to major western trends, including the avant-garde theatre, and has directed

major western classics as well as contemporary ones. In this context his productions of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* as *Aazar Ka Khwab* adapted by Begum Qudsia Zaidi which he directed for the National School of Drama's Repertory Company in 1984, was considered as the most memorable Shavian theatrical piece seen on the Delhi stage. As a mark of respect to Henrik Ibsen, he produced his *Hedda Gabler* in a Hindi adaptation as Teji Brar as a part of Ibsen's centenary celebrations. This production also featured at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav organized annually by the National School of Drama. For the students of the final year of the National School of Drama, he directed yet another play of Ibsen's the *Wild Duck* as *Murgabi*, in Hindi translation by Yashpal. Through complex theatrical symbolism with remarkable poetic intensity, his production revealed the conflict between reality and illusion.

Over the years, he has directed about 100 plays belonging to different genres, for various cultural



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

bodies like, National School of Drama and Shri Ram Centre For Art and Culture and for his own theatre companies. He has worked with traditional folk and tribal performers as well as with trained professional urban artists. Among his pathbreaking masterpieces are *Chandrama Singh* urf *Chamku*, *Aks-Tamasha*, *Katha Kahi Ek Jale Ped Ne*, *Yum Gatha*, *Naachni* and *The Elephant*.

A winner of several prestigious awards, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award and Rajasthan Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to enrich Indian theatre, Bhanu is a multifaceted artist. He is a director, actor, designer and a playwright. As a playwright he is inspired by Indian, Japanese and Chinese literary works and his structurally intricate works explore the serious issues of our time.

*Katha Kahi Ek Jale Ped Ne* is based on a Japanese story entitled a *Tale Told By a Scorched Tree*. It is an allegory to reflect the tragic end of an autocratic

and narcissistic monkey queen who rules a kingdom inhabited by monkeys. This is a regime where there is no room for dissent. Sycophants have a good time. The bureaucracy is manned by morons. The monkey queen considers herself the most beautiful in the whole universe and her kingdom the paragon of virtues. Every attempt is made to perpetuate her personality cult.

Suddenly, a fierce battle ensues between dogs and monkeys. The forest is on fire, there is tumult and uproarious distress. The terrified monkeys run helter-skelter rush to protect their lives from the advancing fire. The whole kingdom turned into heaps of ashes. Many, many years later, the forest starts to grow once again. However, there stands a scorched tree which tells the tragic tale of the monkeys and the paintings on the dark walls of the dungeon in which Sookitori – Me, a monkey painter was condemned to die because he dared to speak the truth and was endowed with the power to foresee the future.



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti





Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

This is a multi-layered dramatic piece and an allegory to reflect the struggle of humanity trying to live with freedom and dignity against the forces of fascism. The dramatic situations and characters have allusions to contemporary events and the reacting arrogant and despotic ruling class.

Against the backdrop of the Naxalite Movement that started in the late sixties, Bhanu wrote *Chandrama Singh urf Chamku*. It is based on the great Chinese writer Lu Hsun's celebrated story entitled the *True Story of AH Q*. The action is set in a village on the bank of the river Son on the border of Bihar which once was the centre of Naxalite activities. The central character in the play is Chandrama Singh, an oppressed and homeless villager. Because of his economically low status he is the butt of jokes of the well-to-do farmers. He is boastful and claims to be related to the landlord of the village. Sarcastically, he is called by his tormentors Chandrama Singh, a title for addressing

the thakur clan who own land. Once he remains without work and food for days and leaves the village for the town and returns after a few months with lots of fashionable stuff and starts selling them. There is a craze for his goods but of this material lasts only few weeks. During this period he commands respect. But as soon as he tells the villagers that in the town he was merely an assistant to a petty thief, he loses his short-lived respect.

Meanwhile, the villagers are hearing about the violent agitations of the landless farmers in different areas and there is talk of the Red Army attacking the villages to distribute land to landless farmers. Chamku is happy that revolutionaries are coming to their village and declares that they are good people because they are religious. With his zeal to join the movement he tries to enroll himself in a fake revolutionary committee formed by a wing of landlords to create confusion, but he is not given membership. He is beaten, insulated



and thrown out of the office of the committee for daring to get the membership. Being boastful, he claims himself to be a member of the Red Army and its representative in the village. This imparts an aura of fear about him. He is also in the habit of treating those who are at the bottom of social ladder badly.

One morning, Chamku finds to his horror that the entire village is mourning the death of the landlord and the son of the influential person killed by the Red Army. The Police have arrived and the entire village is in the grip of Naxalite terror. The landlords and the village rich discuss about the murders with the Police officer in a hush-hush manner. Chamku is in the village temple. The Police officer shouts from outside the temple, warning Chamku to surrender. He is branded as the member of the Red Army and the killer. After repeated warnings, Chamku comes out with his hand on his forehead and finds that he is surrounded by the Police force from all sides and he flees from the site. The Police officer commands a

firing, kills him. This is how Chamku's life ends and his murder is shown as a death in an encounter with the Police. A locally made pistol is placed near his body.

In this play Bhanu depicts the life of the entire village, its social milieu and social hierarchy. We meet village bad hats, idiots, priests, landlords and their musclemen on their pay-role, tea-stall owner and liquor shop dealers. To capture a social milieu of this canvas, he staged this play in the lawn, with various locales, for the dramatic action. He did this play for NSD twice—first for the second year students, where the role of Chandrama Singh was played by Vipin Sharma and for the second time he did it for the NSD Repertory Company with Raghuvir Yadav in the leading role. In the productions Chandrama is portrayed as an unfortunate being living in a society oppressed by the feudal ruling class. He lives in delusion. Though an oppressed himself, he tries to exploit those who are weaker than himself. Chamku

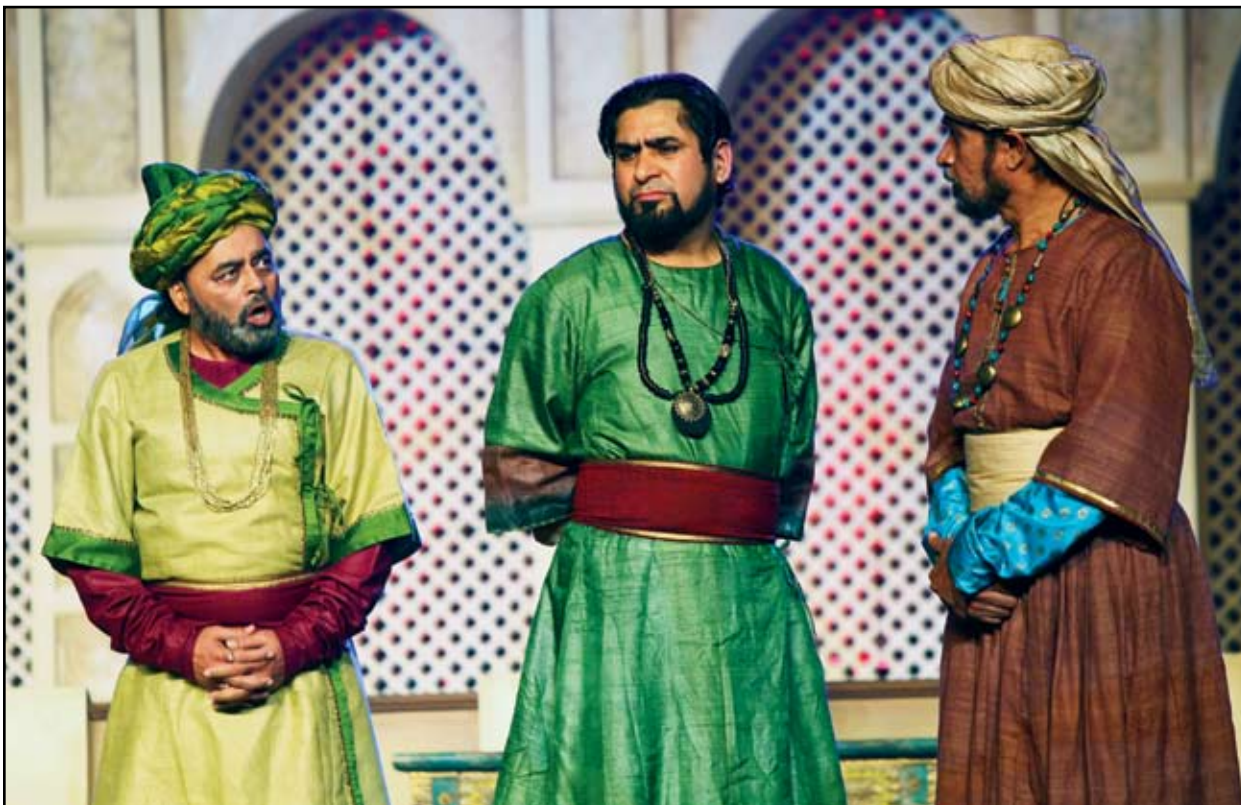
is torn between submission and an intense desire for revolt. His confused moral and social vision and his anarchic lifestyle lead to his pathetic destruction in a feudal society. It is a society whose fetters need to be shattered for human freedom. In a way Chamku is a tragic hero. This is a powerful play that reflects the wounded soul of the landless peasants of India.

This was indeed a great production of a great play—Bhanu's magnum opus—which is at once strikingly contemporary and universal in its appeal. It is worthwhile to quote the director's note to grapple with an understanding of the complex and innovative process of conceptualization of the production of the play which captures the finer nuances of the class characters of the dramatis personae and the authenticity of the socio-economic ambience that shapes their consciousness. The director-writer comments:

"Lu Hsun is one of the great writers of our times and I have a special liking for his *The True Story of Ah Q*.

What excites me most about the story and also what seems to be of utmost relevance is the reflection of the simplistic confusion of a society in transition and turmoil. While a select few strike changes and shape or distort the events at the apex, the majority of the common masses at the base are left high and dry to draw their own conclusions and suffer the consequences. As can be judged by the present adaptation, the story has a parallel with the present state of our society, and therefore, lends itself to our situations with ease and authenticity.

"Also, from a theatrical point of view the story affords immense possibilities for interesting and varied characters and situations. In my adaptation and production I have tried to keep Lu Hsun's characteristic detachment and humour, which helps in gaining a critical view of the whole situation, intact. The technique of building montages through a juxtaposition of similar and contrasting situations



Tughlaq. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

and making the action fluid through the dissolution of one thing into the other in quick succession has helped in achieving this.”

As a playwright and director Bhanu has displayed a rare insight into the changing patterns of the life of traditional female performers. In a character play only a sensitive and imaginative writer of Bhanu's calibre can bring about a whole range of characters and their emotional world with sensitivity and vividness. In *Naachni*, a professional dancer, is the protagonist of the play. On the surface everything about her is sensuous but deep down in her inner self lies a tormented soul, full of scars. Different men with different character traits have come into her life at different points of time. As a little girl, full of life, in tune with an exuberant nature, she dances vivaciously to the tune of the music of the forest which was near her village and is kidnapped. Her kidnapper has groomed her into a virtuoso dancer. Her fundamental right to become a mother was cruelly denied to her.

Her pregnancy was terminated by force because a traditionally professional dancer loses her clientele the moment her motherhood becomes known to the sex-obsessed men who are more interested in the exhibition of her explicit sex appeal. As a traditional dancer she is ostracized by so-called high caste respectable people. It is said that such dancers are shunned after death and are not entitled to a decent cremation Nobody touches their bodies. They are branded sinners without any redemption even after the death, the bodies are pushed to a desolate place.

In this solo play the protagonist is Kisooki Bai and the writer-director reveals her entire life entangled into the mire of social decadence and her suppressed rage against the backdrop of an inhuman society dominated by men, superstition and rigid hierarchy.

The device adopted is the presentation of a solo dance performance by the character of Kisooki Bai who is lonely and bitter. She talks to her daughter killed



Amar Beej. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti



Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

when she was in her womb. The form of presentation is at once story-telling and the display of the art of the professional, transforming her body into a vehicle to convey the anguish, pathos, revolt and a sense of pride as a creative person. At another level, it analyses the decline in the traditional arts and the forces that are responsible for this decline. Sindhu Mishra, a sensitive stage actress and a Bharatnatyam dancer, makes her character memorable.

Bhanu has adapted many scripts from foreign plays. The process of adaptation is, in fact, a recreation of a new play maintaining the fidelity to the original in terms of philosophical content and its inherent universal elements. He simply does not transfer the setting of the original to the Indian situation. He retains the atmospheric colour and emotional layers of the original. This characteristic of his process of recreation is very much in evidence in his *Ek Sapne Ki Maut*, an adaptation of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* which he did in collaboration with J.N. Kaushal. This play was staged by Shri Ram Centre for

Art and Culture under his direction and was critically acclaimed as an outstanding work.

The tragic hero Willy Loman becomes Ramdas in the adapted version which is set in Delhi. Ramdas has migrated from Pakistan in the wake of the Partition of the country. Uprooted socially, culturally and devastated economically, Ramdas confronts all the hardships his people from Punjab known as refugees face. He dreams a lot and works hard and tries to realize his dreams through his job as a salesman. His struggle is shown against the backdrop of refugees acquiring wealth gradually by dint of their hard work and pragmatism.

Bhanu's production reveals the tragedy of a dreamer, Ramdas, projecting a social milieu where everybody is selling and everything is for sale.

One of the noteworthy aspects of Bhanu's oeuvre is that he has great fascination for staging his plays in open areas. But it has nothing to do with Richard Schechner's environmental theatre, a stream of the



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

New Theatre movement of the 1960s. He has adapted this concept from traditional, folk and tribal art forms. Some of his masterpieces like *Katha Kahi Ek Jale Ped Ne* and *Chandrama Singh urf Chamku* are staged in the open air with vast space made available to the performers and at the same time making the viewing experience for the audience intimate and thrilling.

His productions of Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* and *Tughlaq* by Girish Karnad are high points of his directorial art both in terms of their staging in the open air against the backdrop of the ruins of Kotla Ferozeshah and as a creative approach to reinterpret classics.

Written in 1955, the verse play *Andha Yug* was first discovered by Satyadev Dube who directed it for Theatre Unit in 1962. E. Alkazi directed it for the National School of Drama at Kotla Ferozeshah in 1964 which created a wave in the theatre world of the country. Its epic style of narration, its poetry

pregnant with deep meanings, its allegorical richness and its depiction of horror of the last day of the 18-day war of the Mahabharata make *Andha Yug* as extraordinarily powerful contemporary play. Darkness descends on the world, diminishing distinction between truth and falsehood. It is a world which has lost all sense of justice and fair play. Here a sage like man of truth, Yudhishtira, resorts to half-truth when he says, "Ashwatthama hato hatah nara Va Kunjaro Va—Ashotthama has been slain whether man or mastodon. Here Ashwatthama wanders in the shadowy world reflecting the dilemma of the modern man. In this darkness Yuyutsu, the only surviving Kaurava, who joined the Pandavas under the guidance of Lord Krishna to be on the side of Dharma, becomes disillusioned and cheated. He commits suicide after performing the last rites of his 99 brothers.

Considered as an epoch-making dramatic piece, it has been directed by most of the leading directors with varying success who have mostly interpreted it

as an anti-war play. Bhanu, who did it in Kathmandu, Nepal, also followed the same interpretation. This time round he has delved deeper, dissecting multiple-layers. He interprets it not only as a profound and powerful anti-war play but also identifies the causes of wars, violence and counter-violence. Symbolically he displays that humanity who has survived various catastrophic disasters will survive again and there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

Bhanu was at his innovative best as a designer. He has covered a vast area against the ruins of Kotla Ferozeshah with vital action spaces at different points at different levels, exploring the space horizontally and vertically to capture the vast canvas of mythology in which characters come alive vibrantly and their actions are perceived in a new perspective. There are several scenes which are conceived in a spectacular way, especially the one where the wounded, defeated and demoralized Kaurava soldiers return with cries

of pain. It is a crowd scene formed by about 40 performers. The encounter of these wounded soldiers with King Dhritarashtra is heart-renting, projecting the harrowing aftermath of war. The scene is set on about 50-feet high wall of the fort with powerful light and sound effects. The chorus comments on the scene reinforcing the horrors of war. The dramatic power of the production is greatly enhanced by the superb cast. Mohan Maharishi as Dhritarashtra, Uttara Baokar as Gandhari, Zakir Hussain as Sanjay, Ravi Khanwilkar as Vidur and Tikam Joshi as Ashwatthama and Rajesh Sharma as Yuyutsu. Govind Namdev and Om Puri lent their offstage voices to represent Vyasa and Krishna respectively—echoing the voices of sanity in the midst of chaos and destruction.

Another recent landmark production of Bhanu's is *Tughlaq* presented again at Kotla Ferozeshah on a grand scale on a vast canvas. In this major theatrical event he sought creative collaboration with eminent



Andha Yug. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti



Amar Beej. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti

light designer R.K. Dhingra, stage craft and ambience designer Ved Pohoja and costume designer Amba Sanyal. The same team was also part of the production of *Andha Yug*.

Three major acting spaces are minutely thought out—the space where common people meet and discuss policies of the Sultan and their disastrous impact on the people; the second locale is the Darbar of the Sultan where he interacts with his ministers. Then there are actions set in different locales when the capital is shifted to Daulatabad. There is a long road that leads to Daulatabad, a road on which the inhabitants of Delhi suffered untold miseries. The action shifts from one locale to another in a seamless manner, revealing the inhuman tyranny of the Sultan, his enigmatic character, his utopian vision and his clever tactics to outsmart his rivals. There are some scenes where the Sultan inflicts horrible punishment which evokes a sense of terror in the audience.

Bhanu redefines the character of Aziz, symbolizing the rise to political power of a lumpen resorting to unethical and brutal tactics to rise up the ladder of political power—this is a comment on the opportunistic and amoral political class.

These two high-budgeted productions were produced by the Delhi Government and witnessed by thousands of audiences. Each production ran for a week with tremendous demand for more shows. These two productions of modern Indian classics are indeed epoch making events in the history of contemporary Indian theatre. Again, Bhanu cast actors from Bollywood in the lead role which included Yashpal Sharma as Tughlaq and Himani Shivpuri as the stepmother of Tughlaq.

The key to the understanding of the theatre aesthetics of Bhanu Bharti is his ability to see art in a historic perspective and as a mirror of human life that keeps changing—so does his form to strike a dialectical unity between content and form.



# Farooque Sheikh

## “Supper theatre is an insulting exercise...”

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Known for his pure warmth, supreme etiquette and graciousness, veteran actor Farooque Sheikh, doesn't mince words when it comes to calling a spade a spade – specifically when he talks about theatre and its causes. A tete-a-tete with the man, largely seen in sparkling, starched Lucknow-embroidered white kurta-pyjama at most public events...

Rana Siddiqui Zaman

### The Hindu

Ace actor Farooque Sheikh's name is associated with parallel or the new Indian cinema of the 1970s, and 1980s -- *Garam Hawa*, *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, *Gaman*, *Noorie*, *Umrao Jaan*, *Bazaar*, *Saath Saath*, *Chashm-e-Baddoor* – the list of serious and sensible films he worked and established his presence in, is extensive. Stalwarts like Satyajit Ray, Muzaffar Ali, the Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Ketan Mehta ornate list of star directors he has worked with.

His latest film *Listen Amaya*, in which he plays a lonely, aged man who falls in love again with a widow (played by Deepti Naval), has been received with acclaim for his part, and Naval's, though the hour long film failed to make cash registers ring.

Sheikh also emerged as a popular 'emcee' in a live chat show *Jeena Isi Ka Naam Hai* on Zee TV, in which popular actors were interviewed by Sheikh in his inimitable, non-interfering and dignified style. In the thick of non-sensible television serials, Sheikh visibly created his own niche through that show – his style soon came to be imitated on various channels.

He preferred working in serials that not only re-established his choice of substantial roles but also





the producers' inclination for him. He worked in a hilarious, political satire *Ji Mantri Ji* on Star Plus based on UK's famous tele-serial analogy of *Yes Minister* and won over the audiences' hearts. Sheikh also made his presence felt in a few more chosen teleserials like *Chamatkar* on Sony and *Shrikant* on Doordarshan in the mid-80s.

But the avid television viewers seem to have forgotten that Sheikh was active in theatre before he embarked on his journey in films. He did several plays with the IPTA group and renowned names like Sagar Sarhadi. His passion for theatre made him work in immensely popular plays like *Aazar Ka Khwab*, *Tanhai*, *Doosra Aadmi*, *Khalid Ki Khala* (directed by Ramesh Takwar it was a farce in Urdu adapted by Begum Quidisia Zaidi from the English play *Charlie's Aunt* by Thomas Brandon),

Out of all his plays, *Tumhari Amrita* and *Aapki Sonia*, directed by Feroze Abbas Khan have always been staged before packed houses, despite repeat shows. The plays were an Indian context adaptation of A. R. Gurney's American play, *Love*

*Letters* (1988). It tells the tale of unrequited love – read out through reams of love letters between Amrita Nigam and Zulfikar Haider, exchanged over 35 years in the 1940s. A sequel to it was, arguably for the first time on the India theatre scene, played by Javed Siddiqi's *Aapki Soniya*. Though the play stands on its own the letters remain common — unfolding newer layers in the story through Amrita's daughter Soniya and Haider.

Though not very regular with performing on stage anymore, Sheikh keeps a keen eye on theatre progress in Mumbai, his city of residence. Here are a few quick questions he answered on the theatre scene in the city of dreams and things he likes/dislikes about the stage.

**What is the status of theatre productions in Mumbai?**

Of late, the status of theatre productions has improved in Mumbai. It has reached a place where one can make a decent living as theatre producer, in this expensive city. In popular plays, one doesn't even get the ticket.



#### **In terms of quality....?**

In some places, quality of the theatre is not up to the mark. Mumbai excels in newer Marathi plays with original scripts which indicate issues in various domains. It is therefore, soaring up very well. Gujarati plays have not picked up yet. Mumbai is also good with English translations of popular foreign plays. The sad part is, there are no original scripts in English. The play houses do it out of convenience or low risk factor. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't, but that's the way it is.

#### **Audience-wise?**

Mumbaiites patronise 'good entertainment' on stage. And good entertainment doesn't mean fancy locations, daring fight sequences, for stage audiences. There are audiences if plays are engrossing, some buzz about it and advance booking happens.

But I think now the focus is far too much on money making than quality of writing which could cater to all kinds of audiences. Moreover, the ticket prices are kept high; from Rs. 500 to 750. What is theatre when it is not available to 'eager' audiences?

### What is the reason?

Many. The most prominent being exorbitant auditorium rents and rehearsal spaces which are almost nonexistent in the entire city of Mumbai. The production houses charge their expenses from the audiences, hence.

### ...And there are no union of performing arts which could speak on behalf of theatre walahs?

There has never been. No one speaks on behalf of theatre artistes. We could have spoken (performers/directors/producers) together but there is a lack of unity and an attitude of 'who will bell the cat?' Moreover, every person related to theatre prioritises his act first. They go for shorter gains. For instance, his attitude is, 'I am on the verge of staging a play, or my films is ready for release, let me first run it peacefully'. Causes can wait! *Theatre ko Ram bharse chor rakha hai.*

### What's the attitude of the Mumbai municipal/ Urban Development Ministry towards theatre?

The attitude of the Mumbai municipal body is amazing. It is like, 'we won't do anything for you, but we will be right there to collect entertainment tax on your tickets'. The approach of every administrative officer is, 'This can't be done' or 'This is not allowed', and 'you' (the theatre folk) do everything, and we (the administration) will do nothing!' My friends who do regular theatre tell me how an attitude of respect for such an art form is missing among administrative fellows. They look at artistes as performing monkeys and wonder why they should throw peanuts at them.

### Has the media been any more supportive?

I regretfully say, never. The attitude of theatre critics in Mumbai is annoying and on occasions, even shameful. They position themselves in such a way that suggests invited only through passes, hosted to dinner and booze and then they 'might' write 'good



reviews'. If the theatre producer can't afford such tore, either they don't write, or they unnecessarily 'write off' the play. So, it sort of becomes an equation of mutual give-and-take; professional ethics are kept sideways.

### What can be done about it?

Government support is required. We need newer and better auditoria and marked rehearsal spaces. Government is not interested in constructing auditoria or even better the ones which exist. In Lucknow, Madhya Pradesh, staging plays is easier. Getting an NOC is a far less tedious and hassle-free exercise. Theatre critics should change the maaer in which a review is penned; they can be the harbingers of change.

### Does the presence of an actor or a celebrity help the theatre?

Off course it does, anywhere in the world. If a Broadway actor acts in a play, audiences will pour in.



**Have you been satisfied with audience ethics while doing a play? We witness some of them talking on cell phones in the middle of a performance...**

There is something seriously lacking in an audience's genetic serum if he/she does not put his mobile on the silence button while watching a play. On such occasions, actors should stop acting and wait for that person to finish, and then announce, 'We will resume when you finish so that you have time to listen to us too!' If we do it just three times, audiences with some self-respect will behave. I wonder that in India we need to announce before the commencement of the play that one should switch off/silence their mobiles.

It never happens in any other country. Does a lawyer need to be told to wear his black coat inside the court? He does it like any natural act, so why do the audience need to be 'told' about a part of ethics?

**Do you endorse supper theatre? Don't you think it is a insult to a performing artist?**

I condemn supper theatre. First of all, one should be not be 'supping' while a play is on. You should not be tinkling cutlery and cheering up glasses when a performer is performing. The attention should either be on eating or on the performance. The whole idea of supper theatre is insulting, humiliating and rude to the skills of an artiste.

## Theatre Actors Down The Decades

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**T**he photo essay is excerpted from the volume 'The Act of Becoming' edited by Amal Allana

"*The Act of Becoming* is a fascinating account of the evolution of modern Indian theatre, putting actors at the forefront of this powerful medium. The range of these stalwarts spans a period from the 1850s-1990s. These personal narratives altogether contribute to a riveting account about the encounter with the theatre of the west that was absorbed

rapidly by Indian practitioners. The 'interaction' with Indian traditions lays the foundation for the evolution of a national culture and identity that comes into its own with the intensification of the freedom struggle."

*The Act of Becoming* is a collaborative publishing effort between the National School of Drama and NIYOGI BOOKS

Photographs courtesy Amal Allana



Utpal Dutt as Hiralal Desai in the film, *Hiralal Desai*, 1980. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



Binodini Dasi as Rupmugha (smitten by beauty), Studio portrait, 1884. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana

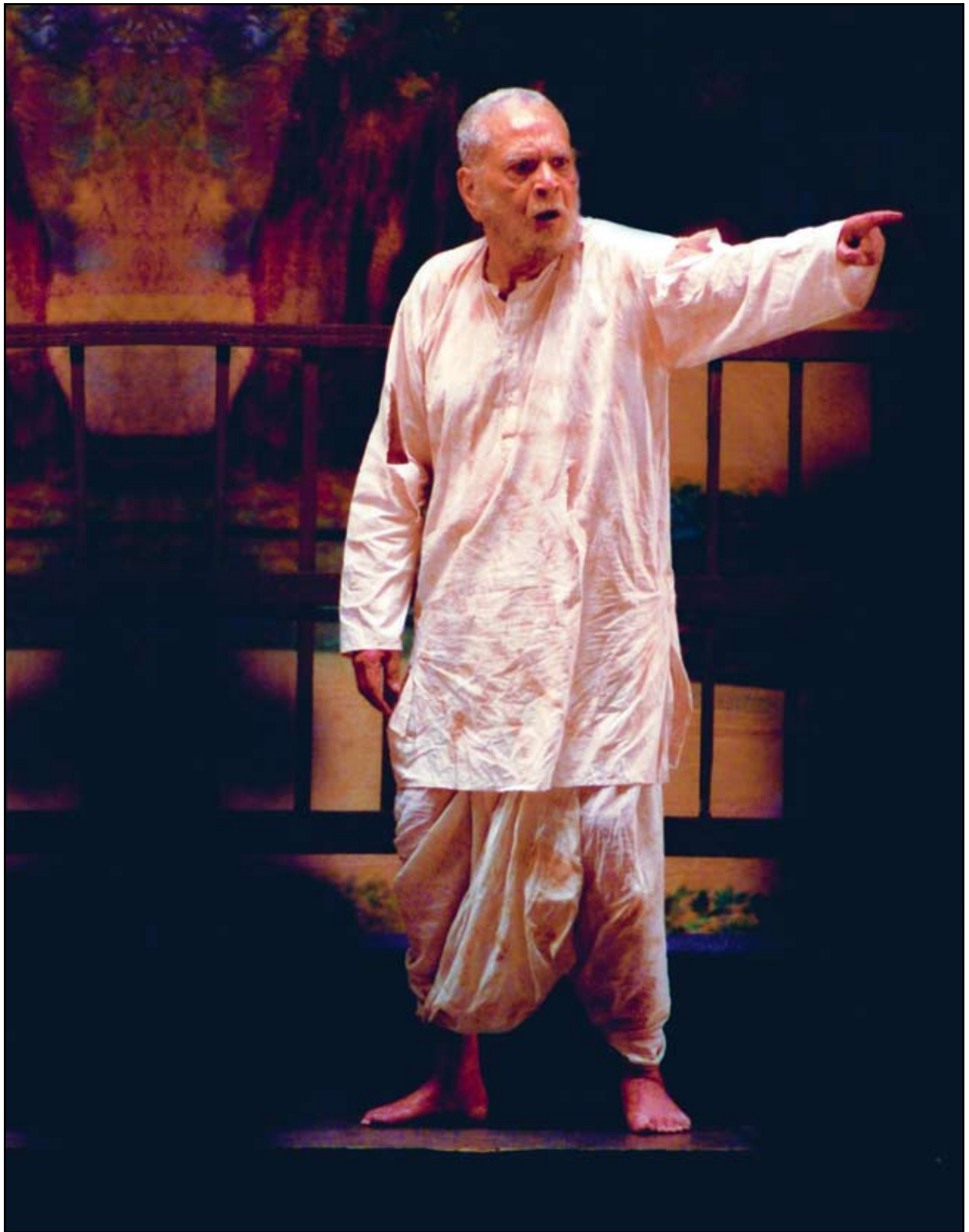


Bal Gandharva (left) as Revati in *Sanshaya Kallol*, 1916. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana





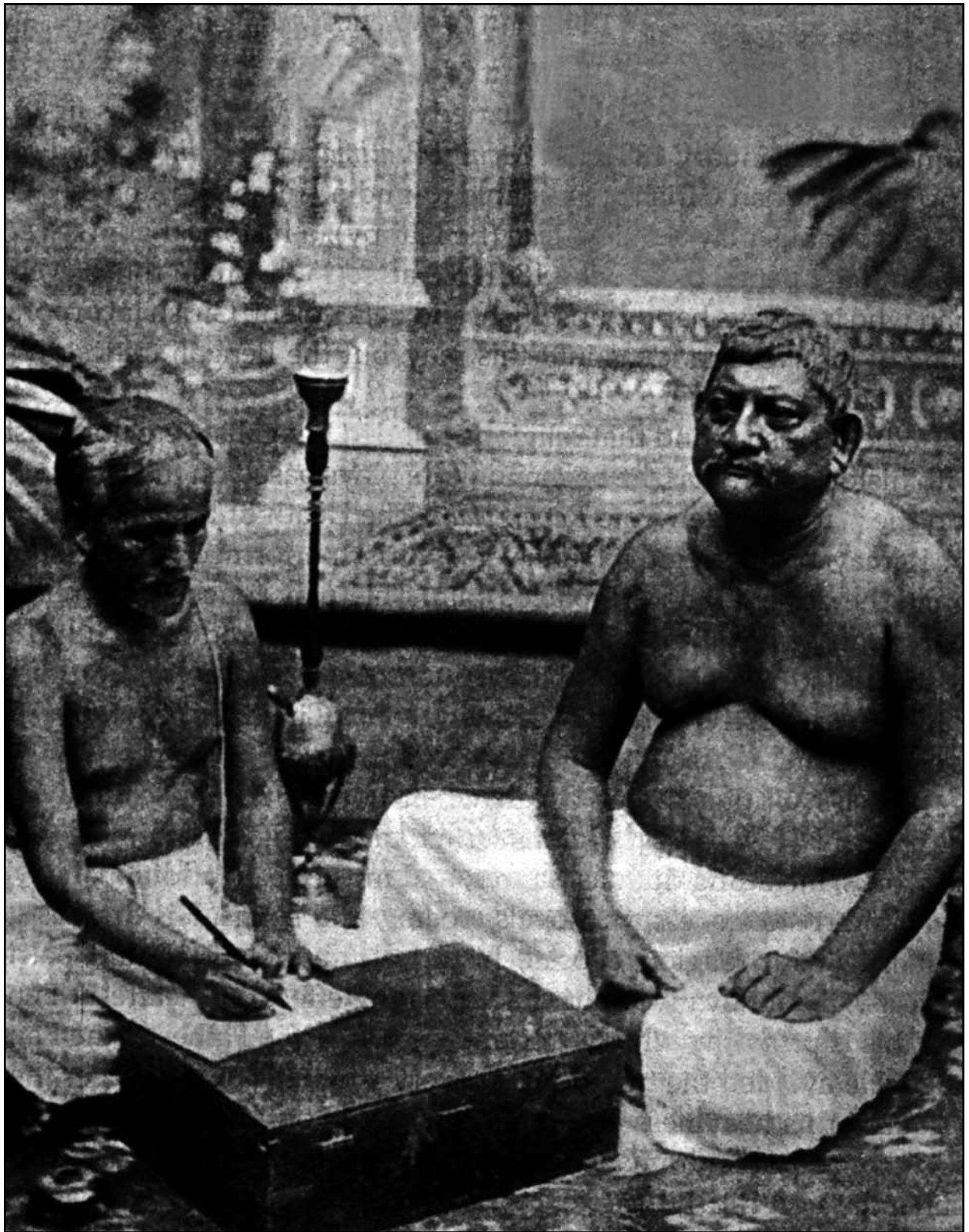
Fida Husain Narsi as Captain Halim in *Kashmir Hamara Hai*, 1965. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



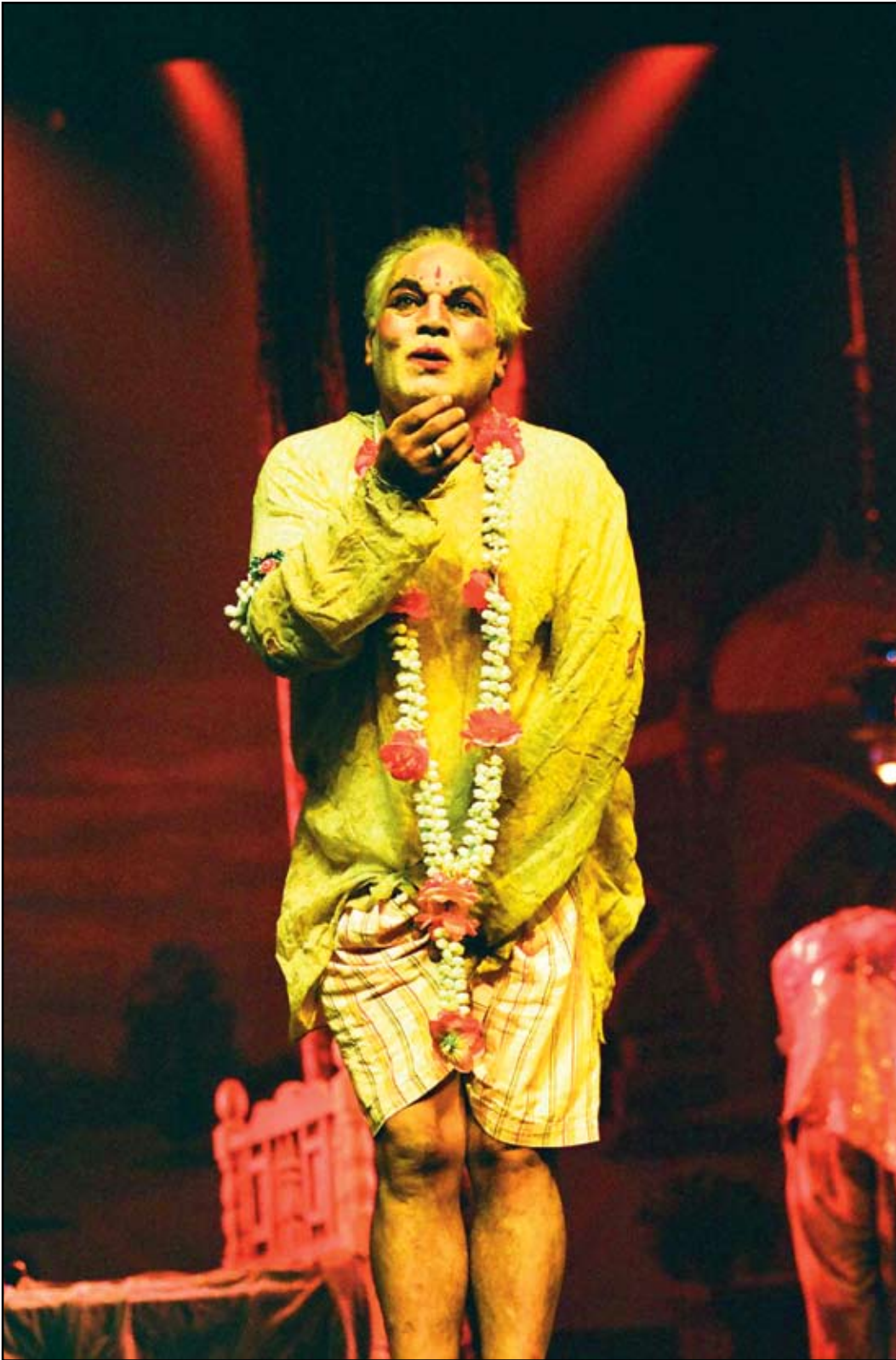
Shreeram Lagoo as Belwalkar in *Nat Samrat*, 1970. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



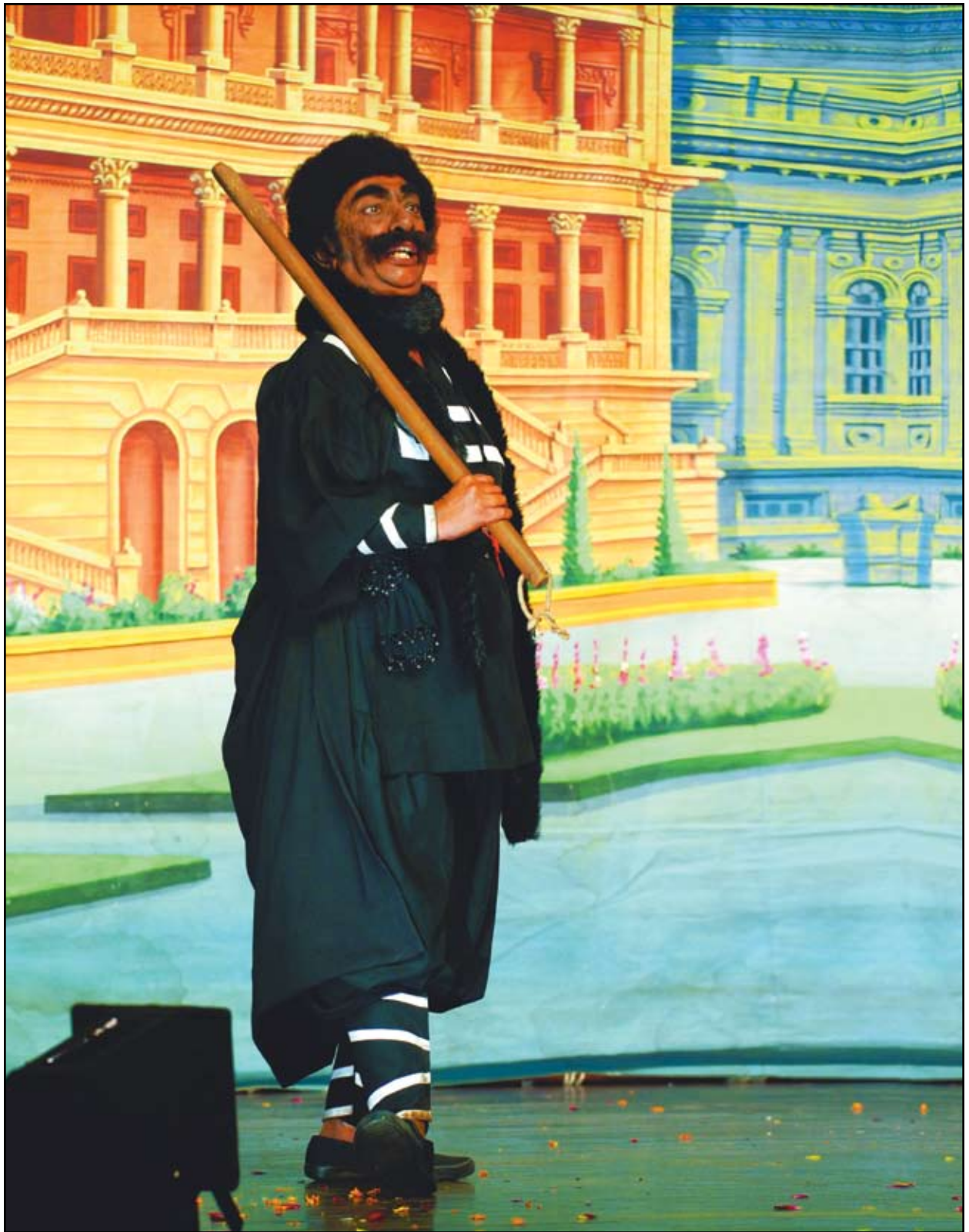
Sombhu Mitra as Galileo in *Galileo-r Jivan*, 1980. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



Girishchandra Ghosh (right) dictating a new play. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



Manohar Singh as Barve in *Begum Barve*, 1996. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



B. Jayashree as Kalla in *Sadarama*, 2009. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



Sabitri Heisnam (centre) as Draupadi in *Draupadi*, 2010. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana



Maya Krishna Rao in *Lady Macbeth Revisited*, 2010. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana

## Tom Alter – an auteur and a humanist

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Geeta Nandakumar

Versatile actor and an auteur, Tom Alter has carved a place for himself in the Indian cultural landscape as a multi-faceted persona – writer, actor, director of theatre, TV serials and cinema, and donned all these hats with equal élan.

What sets Tom Alter as an artist in a class of his own, is the consummate artistry and the range of knowledge of India's cultural and historical past. Again, moving

with ease from the Western to the Indian idiom comes from his deep understanding and ability to blend both western and Indian thought. If he has enacted the role of 'Lucky' in English in his first foray into theatre in Samuel Beckett's celebrated *Waiting for Godot*, in more recent times, he has done the same in the Marathi version too. Portraying the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar in the play *Sons of Babur*



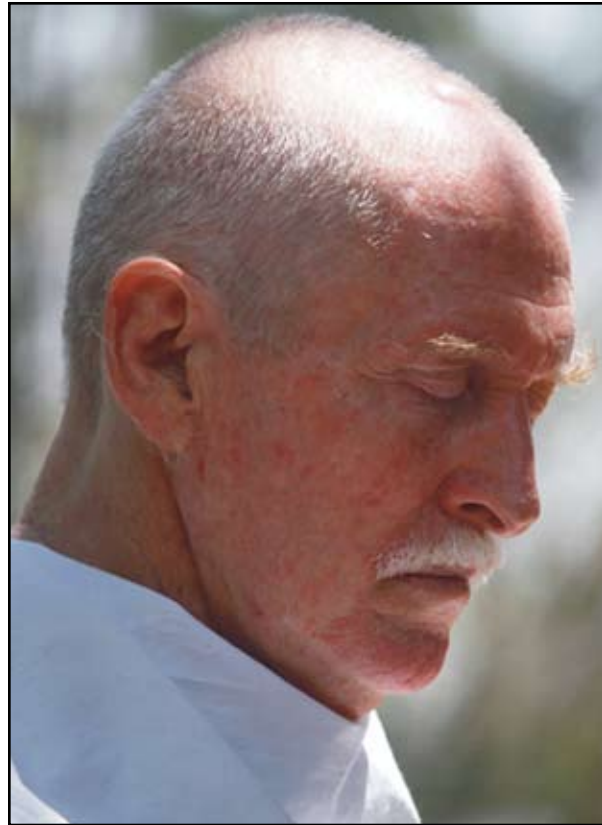


penned by External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, it is amazing to see the ease with which he is able to transform himself through Urdu to English and moving from another time to the present one with immaculate delivery. Every nuance and movement is well chiselled, denoting an actor of rare depth of knowledge, skill and sensitivity.

Thus, it is that in the play *Trisangha*, which he has co-directed with Uday Chandra, the theme of universalism is well brought out with a beautiful melange of poetry, music, speech and drama. The theatre performance starts off with Vivekananda's celebrated speech in Chicago and goes on to weave in Urdu poetry, Bob Dylan's poems and concludes with legendary poet Nirala's Jayadrath Vadh. That is the essence of Tom Alter - an artist who thrives in the multicultural ethos, and is yet, deeply rooted in the Indian culturalscape. That is what endears him to the audience. For Alter, born to American missionaries of English and Scottish descent but, settled in the subcontinent, there was never any crisis of cultural identity. He is at home speaking in Hindi/Urdu, as much as he is while speaking in English. And as for the sheer extent of imbibing the Indian ethos and culture, his works are an astonishing and fascinating voyage of discovery for audiences who are left spellbound at the depth and range of his artistry and sensibility.

Imbued with a deep artistic vision, Padmashri Tom Alter has carved a niche for himself as a person of refined sensibilities by drawing upon India's rich cultural tapestry — the Indian ethos and sensibility, philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, myths and religious beliefs.

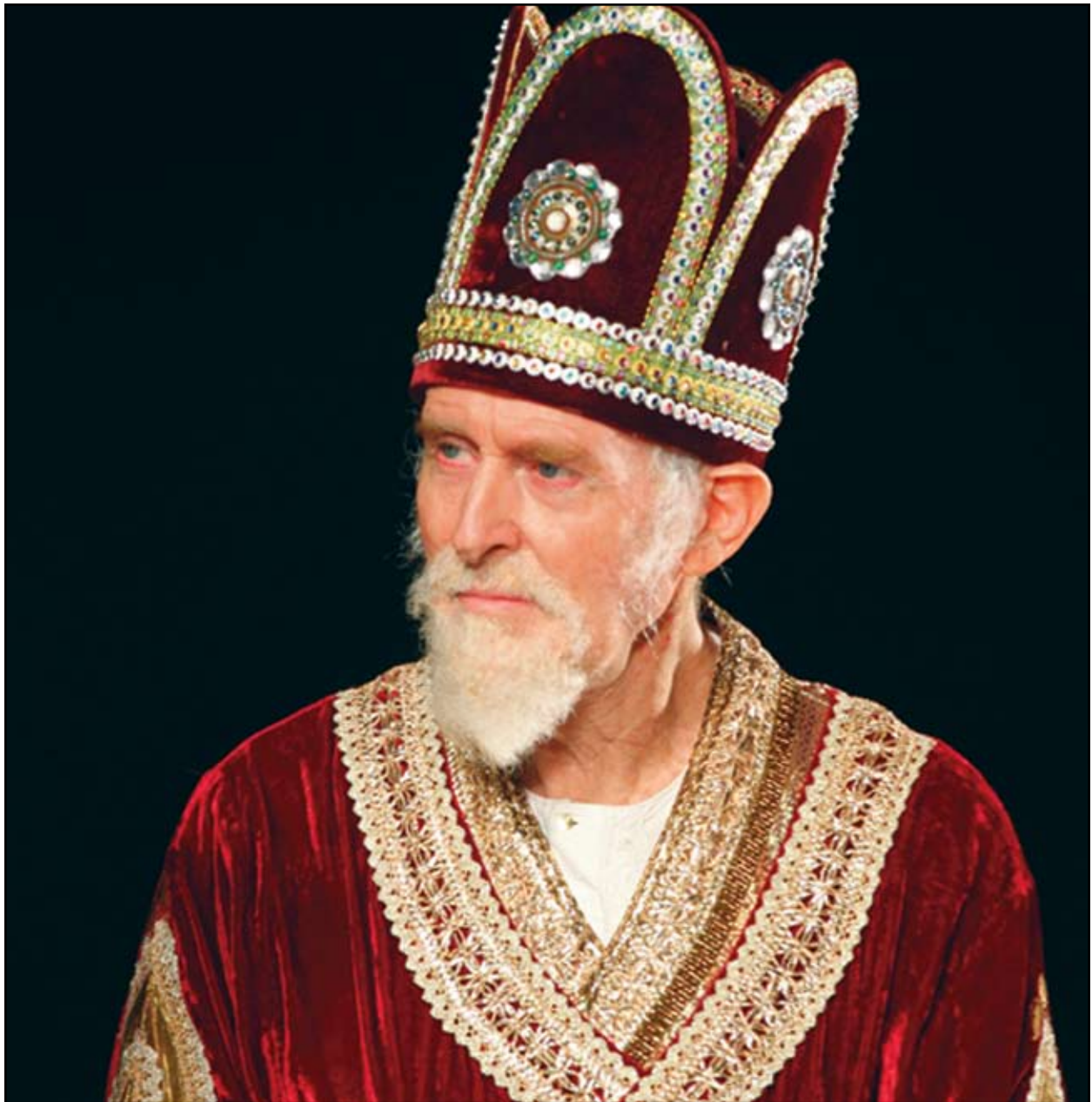
A disciplined actor, Alter has worked with the legends of Indian screen and stage. Satyajit Ray cast him in *Shatranj ke Khiladi*, very early in his acting career, where, the young Alter, enacting the role of Captain Weston speaks fluent Urdu. A scene that takes place between General Outram (Sir Richard Attenborough) and Captain Weston (Tom



Alter) prompted V. S. Naipaul to comment, "It's like a Shakespeare scene. Only three hundred words (actually over 500 words) are spoken but goodness! - terrific things happen." Shyam Benegal cast him in *Junoon* and in *Sardar* – a biopic on Sardar Patel. About the legendary filmmakers, Alter says: "Ray was controlled brilliance; Raj-sahib (Raj Kapoor) was inspired and had a romantic vision, and Shyam was intellectual art."

Alter's outing with commercial Hindi cinema saw him playing key roles in films like *Charas*, *Kranti*, *Karma*, *Parinda*, *Vidhaata*, *Ashiqui*, *Saltanat*, 'Asambhav' and several others.

Graduating from the FTII in Pune, he worked alongside cinematic legends like Raj Kapoor, Manoj Kumar, Dev Anand and Dharmendra and rose above the vicissitudes of mainstream Indian cinema to enact roles on stage and offbeat cinema, that are a connoisseur's delight. Apart from delving into



Shakespeare, Shaw and Beckett while he worked with Motley, the theatre group, he formed with Naseeruddin Shah and Benjamin Gilani, the artist in him came into his elements with works in *Tughlaq* (directed by Girish Karnad), *Hanush* by Bhisham Sahni and Dharamveer Bharati's *Andha Yug*. These brought out the deep humanist and thinker in Tom Alter, the artiste. And he emerged as one of those rarities, who never compromised art at the altar

of commercialism. His, has been a journey from Bollywood roles to heights of immense artistry on stage and screen. Bitten by the Bollywood bug and being an ardent fan of yesteryear superstar Rajesh Khanna, Tom Alter has through sheer artistry and brilliant histrionics raised his own artistic oeuvre to iconic levels. Witness him holding the entire audience in thrall in a riveting soliloquy on 'Maulana Azad', the deeply resonating cultural richness as he enacts

Tagore, or, when he keeps the audience regaled with his fluid and deft performance in *When God Said Cheers*, and you can see an artist who has chosen to raise the bar consistently and tremendously.

As his theatre career flowered with roles coming thick and fast – both in Urdu/Hindi and English, Alter, began to leave an auteur-like stamp on the plays and offbeat films that he appeared in. Some of the memorable plays he has enacted in recent times include Cyrus Dastur's 'When God Said Cheers', Sayeed Alam's 'Maulana Azad', Ghalib', Ranjit Hoskote's 'Last Annals of Alamgir' (which Alter himself rates one of his finest performances), Shivani Tibrewala's 'Whatever You Say' and 'Old man and the Sea', Nadira Babbar's 'Pencil Se Brush Tak', William Dalrymple and Rahul's 'City of Djinn's', Mallika Sarabhai's 'Tagore', Vaikom Mohammad Basheer's 'My granddad had an elephant', Aavaan Patel's 'Copenhagen', Badal Sircar's 'Teesvein Shatabdi'. His latest includes Alam's 'Lal Kile ka Baadshah' and 'Parchaiyaan', a musical take on legendary poet Sahir Ludhianvi's life. 'Yadi Gandhi nahin marte' written by Asghar Wajahat and directed by Tom Alter is a watershed play that brings out in full Tom Alter's love of truth and fine humanistic values. Portraying 'Gandhi' in a hypothetical situation where he escapes the gunshot wounds and is in conversation with Godse, the play goes on to delineate where India's political leadership missed the bus in carrying forward the country's future by not working to mobilise and uplift people at the grassroot level.

Alter is at his best in some of his celebrated works where Indian history has been deeply delineated and these include his role in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, Bhisham Sahni's *Hanush*, Saeed Alalm's *Maulana Azad* and *Ghalib* as well as Bahadur Shah Zafar. Besides, he portrays Aurangzeb in Ranjit Hoskote's *Last Annals of Alamgir* and Mallika Sarabhai's *Tagore*. Besides the dialectics involved in the historical process, there is Alter's quest for truth and compassion in life and art.

When one speaks of Tom Alter, the humanist, his abhorrence of war and violence is very evident in the choice of his works like Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* with students of the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, Badal Sircar's *Teesevein Shatabdi*, which details the deep psychological scars and ethical conundrum of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, as well as the plaintive cry for communal harmony in the riveting monologue *Maulana Azad*.

A native of Mussourie, Alter's love of the deep Himalayan woods and his consciousness about protecting bio-diversity and the environment is brought out through his ballets like 'Ganga' and 'Tiger Tiger' as well as readings and translations of the works of the legendary Jim Corbett.

Some of his riveting performances in offbeat cinema include *Ocean of an Old Man* and *Cheeka* – both made with immense artistry. In *Ocean of an Old Man*, where he is the protagonist, he portrays humanity's sorrow in the aftermath of the death and devastation caused by the tsunami - a natural disaster that crept in silently from the ocean. Alter's stupendous performance as the grief stricken school teacher, who loses his entire class of students as well as family has won him rave reviews. In *Cheeka*, which is a sensitive exploration of a chance meeting of a monk and courtesan, Alter, who has co-produced the film, has played one of his career's finest performances as the monk who brings solace to a courtesan. The film, which is sheer poetry has won accolades at the Kolkata and Kerala film festivals for the debutant director Manoj as well as for Alter. Over the years, Alter's artistry is plumbing new depths and as he navigates fresh ground, there is a new fillip to this seasoned artist's works.

Similarly, his love of poetry has made him an ardent fan of Faiz, Rumi, Ghalib and Gulzar. Says Alter: Gulzar's best shayaris are in his songs like 'Woh sham kuch ajeeb thi, ye Shaam bhi ajeeb hai'. Those are incredible and there are so many songs. Even Ghalib's ghazals are lyrical and sound so good



three novels to his credit -*The Longest Race*, 'Re-run to Rialto' and *The best in the world*. His love for acting is matched by his passion for sports as well as for writing. Besides his sports columns, he has penned scripts and serials. His love of sport has him rooting for the likes of Flying Sikh Milka Singh, the legendary track and field sprinter and numerous other sportspersons - some famed ones and other unsung heroes. Also, the first to interview the cricketing prodigy and legend, Sachin Tendulkar, Tom has an unerring eye for talent and integrity in sport as well as in art. He can rattle off the names of Indian sportspersons and their individual achievements in various national and international meets. This comes from a deep love of the sporting ethos.

Tom hits out at those who have turned this 'gentleman's game' into a pure profit-making activity. "Does no one realize anymore the beauty of bat on ball, the simple and so, so difficult art of spin and speed?

when sung. As he dipped into his cup for one last sip of his favourite Assam tea, he recited one of Ghalib's poetry—

***"Na tha kuch to khuda tha, kuch na hota to khuda hota  
Duboya mujh ko hone ne, na hota main to kya hota."***

Fond of the great outdoors and a deep lover of sports, especially cricket, he has penned numerous columns for sports magazines including *Sportsworld*, *Debonair*, *Sunday Observer* and *Outlook*. He also has

... We have marketing everything – everything—now we market grief, and violence, and greed.

"Would it not be wonderful to see our players representing the country with only India written on their shirts; on their hearts? To have a sponsor who had no wish to have his name even bigger than India's on the beloved jersey? To have a player say that he will play for India for free, and wear a jersey, of his own choice, with only India written on it, in royal blue?"

Alter's book *The longest race* is a tribute to the indefatigable sporting spirit of small town India and the integrity of the rural folk.

Alter is also equally sharp in his criticism of the way filmmaking has become a business and the corporatisation of the film world, which he feels has robbed the creativity in filmmaking. Ideation is sacrificed at the altar of mammon, he feels, though he acknowledges that there is a new breed of bravehearts, who have shown the courage to explore the realms of creativity without compromising on artistic integrity.

The young lad from Mussourie, who hoped to keep the shine in his gold medal that he won at the FTII upon his graduation, has come a long way. With over 200 films and 50 theatre performances to his credit, he is a legend of the stage and screen and is today known for his uncompromising artistry and a constant striving to unravel human truths. As in art, so in life, Alter's is a constant quest for the deeper truths. Rigour, focus and professionalism form the core of his art and craft. Nurturing a culture of lifelong learning, he strives unendingly to explore new terrain. Similarly, he keeps polishing his art and craft to unerring perfection, pulling off unbelievable depths of artistry in every new role. For him, every new role is a creative challenge and he relishes the new heights that come as posers. His humanism extends to helping new artistes and talent gain an understanding and a foothold, be it on stage or screen. Simplicity, a humane and genial approach, are the hallmarks of his character

Recalling a conversation with screen stalwart Manoj Kumar, he says: "The great Manoj Kumar, his tall figure stretched out over his bed in his Juhu mansion, one hand behind his head, the other holding a cup of tea) once told me – in Punjabi of course – "Tom Yaar, always remember the dream that brought you to Bombay –always remember that dream. That will show you

the way – the true way." It was these words that have kept me going – through long years".

The dream that began in Mussorie and traversed to Bombay has spawned a pan-Indian artist. Alter has been through the entire gamut of the road most travelled, and also the one less travelled. Showing a never-say-die spirit, he didn't mind the hungry days early in his career when he often had to go without food, when there were no roles coming forth.

Recalling an incident early in his life when he was shooting in Lucknow in late '74 for a film called *MrigTrishna* (his second film) and having to return to Bombay without having been paid for his work, (with the remuneration promised after his return), he was left with no money for a ticket.. He managed to purchase a ticket as far as Jhansi, and on reaching the station took a cycle rickshaw and with nothing but hope and a prayer in his heart, asked the driver to take him to the mission-hospital – knowing that all towns of north or central India have mission-hospitals, as did Jhansi. Asking the rickshaw driver to wait, he got in line in front of the doctor's door and when his turn came found to his joy that she was a missionary nun and taking a chance mentioned his father's name. The lady knew of Alter's father and his work as a missionary in Mussourie. Alter sought a small loan of Rs 50 and was given the money. The lady smilingly acknowledged him as he took down the address to return the amount by money order. And leaping with joy he was on the next train back to Bombay. He also recalls days when he walked long distances and travelled ticketless for small cameo roles and slept a dreamless sleep.

But, there was the fire in his belly, that desire to make it in the land of the 'Great Indian Dream' – the Bombay film industry. And over the years he has refined his quest with a rare sensibility to emerge as one of the finest in screen and stage craft – an auteur and a gentleman.

# Uncertainty – An Appraisal of His Acting Roles

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Tom Alter

Now I am not too certain about the details, but it is fact that Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, a Danish and a German, guru and chela, both Noble-Prize winning atomic physicists, put together the 'Uncertainty Principle' in the mid 1920s – in Copenhagen.

For a layman, like myself, 'Uncertainty' – in the simplest of terms – means that to understand the atom correctly, one has to allow for certain 'uncertainties' in the movements of atoms after they have been fissioned, or split just as there are definite uncertainties in the movements, the emotions, of human beings after they are fissioned, or split --

In a most remarkable play – titled, simply, '*Copenhagen*' – the English playwright, Michael Frayn, deftly interweaves physics and physicality, photons and friendships, atoms and attachments, into a tale, a legend, a legacy upon which the entire future of the human race rests – or is restless –

For it is from the work of Bohr and Heisenberg that the atomic bomb developed – and in the play, the famous meeting between the two great minds, the two great friends, the two great rivals in Copenhagen in September of 1941, becomes the axis – an uncertain axis – from which spins out not only neutrons, but nuclear war itself –

But – but – but – did in fact Heisenberg actually try and warn Bohr at that meeting – warn him of the immense danger of using their beloved physics for destructive purposes? – warn him that he, Heisenberg,

would try and stop the Nazi bomb if Bohr did the same for the Allied bomb? – warn him, as chela and friend, that his hands were tied in patriotic and emotional knots, but he would still walk a tightrope of science and research and danger to trick the Nazis into believing that a bomb was not possible, at the same time keeping the Nazi atomic programme in his trembling but trustworthy hands? -- and did Bohr heed the warning? – did he understand the warning? – did he comprehend the terrible uncertainty of the warning? –

And to balance these two male minds on their uncertain, deeply moving, deeply intense, deeply scientific journey, is Margarethe, Bohr's wife, who is both skeptic and scholar, personal and persuasive, lover and lecturer –

It is a play of journeys – travel – within the atom, within the 'cloud chamber', within the reactor – nuclei split by neutrons, energy released, more neutrons produced, and the chain reaction splits and spreads through the uranium, with the final destination the bomb –

Travel – from Germany to Denmark and back again -- by foot, by train, by dreams, by despair – a flight in the night to USA for Bohr, ending up at Los Alamos and then, in the form of the first atomic bomb, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki –

And for Heisenberg, from Nazi unwanted glory to equally unwanted defeat, and capture, and questioning,

and humiliation – even back to Copenhagen, to meet Bohr and Margarethe once again – not the conqueror now, but the conquered – but the pain, the uncertainty just the same –

And more than thirty years before Frayn wrote this magnificent play, Badal Sirkar, one of India's greatest playwrights of the twentieth century (he passed away only months ago) wrote an equally magnificent play, captured an equally disturbing and dangerous journey – it is called, in its Hindi translation, *Teesvein Shatabdi*.

And in this play, the atomic bomb is mourned and remembered from a different angle – Hiroshima and Nagasaki are now history (if that word can be used), the hydrogen bomb has been tested, and in post-Nehru India a young man – again uncertainty – is trying to grapple with the fact that under similar circumstances – (the end of a great war, an enemy refusing to give in – an enemy hated and now almost humiliated – a chance to end the war and that enemy with a single thrust of the atomic sword) – would not another country – India, for instance – have done the same thing that the USA did? Is not the horror of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the horror of the entire universe, the entire sweep of humanity? Do not we all have to beg forgiveness for it, but only after understanding and deeply feeling it? –

And in the young man's uncertain search for uncertainty, he calls back from history – from death itself – both the victims and villains of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; young children who had survived and written about it, doctors who worked with the victims, the victims themselves – and then people such as Einstein himself, and Squadron Leader Cheshire of the Royal Air Force, who was an observer for the blast at Nagasaki – and who would go onto become a priest, and start the Cheshire Homes, to somehow try and assuage the guilt and pain so deep inside him.

Journeys again – that flight, those flights, from a South Pacific island to the mainland of Japan in August of 1945. Huge bombers carrying the ultimate bomb; the quick, sudden journeys of the victims – to death and

beyond; of Cheshire; of Einstein, who never recovered from the knowledge that his deep knowledge of the atomic truth led the way to the bomb; and the most uncertain journey of all – of the young Indian man in the mid-1960s, striving to find a truth amidst the horror and madness of the nuclear world –

And my journey – for I play Bohr in *Copenhagen*, and Cheshire and Einstein in *Teesvein Shatabdi* – a journey far from completed, a journey which is making the certainty of my own uncertainty more and more clear and complex with every performance, every rehearsal –

As an actor, you must be certain about the truth of what you do or say on stage, or in front of the camera. Now, if the truth is 'uncertainty', than what a journey it becomes – acting seems a rather frivolous individual pursuit; yet, it is only through 'acting' that one can make this journey --

In school, science was the weakest of my weak subjects – as was, or is, probably the case with many of us ; and here I am – acting, playing – two of the greatest scientific minds in history – Einstein and Bohr – (and in both plays, the former speaks of the latter, and vice versa) -- as they deal with physics and atoms and fission and neutrons and relativity and uncertainty and reactors and wave theories and Hahn and Fermi and Pauli and Schrodinger and cats and cap pistols and letters to Presidents and Los Alamos and final death and destruction –

How do I even attempt to make this journey?

Because – because – Einstein and Bohr – and Cheshire – were people – and both Frayn and Sirkar, because they are such fine writers, never let the physics overcome the physical – never let theory be stronger than fact, never let research score over human experience – as Margarethe so wisely says, "Really, it is ridiculous. You reasoned your way, both of you (Bohr and Heisenberg), with such astonishing delicacy and precision into the tiny world of the atom. Now it turns out that everything depends upon these really

rather large objects on our shoulders. And what's going on in there is ----"

Is the atom a nucleus, or the electrons on the spin?

Is energy created, or creating?

Are we journeying, or are we being taken on a journey?

Bohr and Einstein and Cheshire – they seemed to be masters of their fates, their own ships and their own captains – until, until, until –

This is the only way I can dare to play such people – to understand their frailties, and through them, their strengths –

Ghalib says (roughly translated) – 'When there was nothing, there was God – if nothing would have happened, there would still have been *god*; I have drowned only because I existed – if I had never existed, then what would have happened? (or – 'if I had never existed, then what would I have been?' –

Uncertainty even in the greatest poetry – or is the poetry great because of the uncertainty?

For in the midst of the journeys of *Copenhagen* and *Teesvein Shatabdi*, I have the honour – the blessing – the audacity – the privilege of playing Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mirza Ghalib, M.F. Husain, and Maulana Azad –

It is like the first four of India's batting lineup when it is – was – functioning in full health and happiness –

In the course of a month – Einstein, Cheshire, Zafar, Ghalib, Husain, Azad and Bohr –

Uncertainty? – five of them were alive when the bombs descended on Japan's heartland – the other two witnessed the destruction of Delhi in 1857, at a time when bombs were hurled from cannons, and did not rain down – reign down – from the sky – but 1857 and 1945 are part of the same journey – the journey which so deeply disturbed the hero of "Teesvein Shatabdi", and every one of the seven characters I am so fortunate to play – the journey which all of us are a part of, for we are all made of the same atoms, the same nuclei, the same blood and flesh and failures – the journey of mankind, of humanity, as we fly – like split nuclei – at ever increasing speed through the uranium which is our world, our minds, our cities, our countries, our hatreds, our loves, our passions, our dreams, our fantasies, our religions, our castes, our creeds, our colours – that uranium which is both us and not us, because we can control part of it, but not all – that uranium which dangles over our heads each second of each day, waiting only for a human hand, a human error, a human passion to cut the thread and let loose atomic hell --

So I play those seven men, those seven minds, those seven collections of atoms – I am humbled and almost hollow – and yet, from inside, I am inspired by them – by their frailties and strengths, to somehow do justice to their lives and their dreams –

To somehow create, with whatever art I possess – from whatever art my own journey has carved without and within me – the truth of those seven men – those seven human atoms -- for their truth is my truth, is our truth – is our hope and our warning –

Uncertainty – certainly – oh, my --



# Women Move Centre Stage

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Feisal Alkazi

The woman in Indian theatre: as director, as actress, as the subject matter... a sea change in perception has occurred over the years as we sweep forward, from the 1940s where to be an actress meant to be a 'fallen woman' to the perception of today – where it is a glamorous profession, one to be aspired for.

Just before independence a ferment swept through the art scene in India – in painting and literature,

cinema and theatre. The 1940s had seen several changes in the Indian theatre scene. The age of the 'Parsi' theatre was coming to an end, melodrama played in loud garish costumes with an orchestra accompanying each twist in the plot. The Parsi theatre tradition drew from an eclectic range of sources : the Arabian Nights, Shakespearean tragedy and comedy, travelling British theatre companies and the visual



Tughlaq. Photo courtesy: Bhanu Bharti



Zohra Segal as Begum Qudsia in *Din Ke Andhere*, 1992. Photo courtesy: Amal Allana

kitsch of Raja Ravi Varma! Kings and queens, gods and goddesses peopled these plays that had extended runs in professionally managed theatres, drawing largely working class audiences. But now change was on the cards.

In a marvellous biography of Gulab Bai, the queen of the Nautanki and Parsi style theatre in Kanpur, writer Deepti Priya Mehrotra recreates the fortunes of a travelling theatre group where women were seen as prostitutes.

At the age of 12, Gulab from the Bedia caste, joined Nautanki in 1931, thought to be the first female actor in Nautanki and She rose to dizzy heights as the heroine of countless dramas and later, started her own Great Gulab Theatre Company. By the 1940s she was earning the astronomical fee of Rs. 2,000 a month, playing roles such as Laila in *Laila Majnun* and Taramati-in *Raja Harish Chandra*. Till today in Alwar in Rajasthan and in Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh,

similar drama companies criss-cross the rural landscape. But now women play the female roles!

The early tradition was of course of men playing all the women's roles on stage. Bal Gandharva (1888–1967) was one of the greatest Marathi singers and stage actors, famous for his roles of female characters in Marathi plays, as women were not allowed to act on stage during his time. He began his career with Kirloskar Natak Mandali in 1905, and later with Gandharva Sangeet Mandali. Bal Gandharva became the sole owner of the debt ridden company in 1921. The debt was paid off in 7 years' because the audience thronged to see that great female impersonator! Bal Gandharva set the style for women's clothes in his time. His fashionable hairstyles and the draping of his saris on stage were diligently copied. Similar traditions existed across Asia, particularly in Japan.

But the barrier that kept women off the stage had already been broken 50 years earlier, where women

from the Tagore family had acted for the first time. In Rabindranath Tagore's many of his sisters and sister-in-law began performing. This was a revolutionary step for Calcutta society, where for a woman to appear in public was frowned upon. At the time even to bathe in the Ganga, a woman remained in her palanquin which was then immersed in the Ganga!

In the decade preceding 1947, IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) was set up with the express purpose of producing plays strongly supportive of the national movement. In fact, IPTA helped mould many leading lights of contemporary theatre, many of them women. Bombay IPTA included the three talented sisters – Shanta Gandhi, Tarla Mehta, and Dina Mehta. IPTA's Bombay wing

drew on working class and folk traditions and both Tarla and Shanta reworked traditional Gujrati folk plays in the Bhavai tradition— *Maina Gurjri* and *Jasma Odan* into strong feminist fables. Calcutta IPTA had the formidable talent of Tripti Mitra. The trailblazing production of *Nabanna* that explored the different facets of the man-made famine of 1942, brought the downtrodden onto the stage for the first time. Utpal Dutt's wife Shova Sen played the lead in this production.

In 1943, amateur theatre in India came into its own with the establishment of two groups who initially performed solely in English. The Theatre Group in Bombay, from which appeared directors such as Alyque Padamsee and Ebrahim Alkazi, and the Unity Theatre headed by Utpal Dutt, in Calcutta.



Ankur

It was difficult for the Theatre Group to get a woman to play Salome in their first production of this Oscar Wilde play, because the part involved the dance of the seven veils. Finally a Parsi girl agreed to play the role on the stage on the condition that she would not do the revealing dance! This was because she was threatened by the Parsi Arjuman that she would be excommunicated so the sister of the director Sultan Padamsee was roped in to do the dance.

Another innovator was Prithviraj Kapoor, who created a travelling theatre company 'Prithvi Theatres' that toured the length and breadth of India. From 1944-1958 this group performed a repertoire of eight plays in 112 different cities of the subcontinent. Among their plays were *Gaddar*, *Deewar* and *Pathan* on social themes such as the need for communal harmony or the brotherhood of man. Other than Prithviraj's own family, including the young Shashi Kapoor, the star attractions were the sisters: Zohra and Uzra. Each performance ended with Prithviraj himself at

the auditorium door, eyes closed, chadhar in hand asking people to donate generously for the victims of Partition.

But by the late 1950s, it was clear that the era of the travelling theatre was past; that art-form had been irreversibly supplanted by the cinema. No longer was it financially feasible for a troupe of up to 80 people (as Prithvi Theatre was) to travel the country for four to six months at a time with their tons of stage props and equipment, living in hotels where possible and at campsites otherwise. The financial returns, through ticket sales and the rapidly diminishing largesse of patrons from the erstwhile princely class of India, was just not adequate to support such an effort.

Zohra Segal, now 100 years old, is one of the sole senior survivors of the era. Her own career took her to theatre and TV in London, and then she returned to India to once again work in theatre, TV and film, which she continues to do.



Ashad Ka Ek Din



Adhe Adhure

Though women had appeared on the silver screen for many decades already, acting was still considered a low-down profession. It was only with the establishment of the National School of Drama that it became a 'respectable' profession and many of its stalwarts such as Uttara Baokar, still remember the social censure of their early years.

But there was still a shortage of playwrights dealing with contemporary themes in the spoken language of the people. The life of people had completely changed after independence but the plays being staged were either adaptations or translations of the best of European and American theatre. Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Miller were largely the staple fare, with occasional attempts at the staging classical, Sanskrit drama.

It was only in the early 60s that Hindi theatre showed the way for the emergence of a unique contemporary Indian voice. Dharmavir Bharati's reinterpretation of the Mahabharata in the light of the nuclear holocaust

of 1945, *Andha Yug* (The Dark Age) and Mohan Rakesh's lyrical portrayal of the early life of Kalidasa in *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (One Day in the Monsoon) were major successes.

*Andha Yug* opened the doors wide on a host of modern interpretations of characters drawn from our epics, particularly the Mahabharata. The strong and questioning Draupadi, Karna's search for identity, Abhimanyu's ability to enter the chakravayuh but never to know how to exit from it, all became symbols of the contemporary dilemma.

Many important plays were written: Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* that echoed the Nehruvian dilemma of being the ruler or being ruled, as also Vijay Tendulkar's major success the feminist piece *Shantata! Court Chalu Ahe* (Silence! The Court is in Session). From the Bengali stage came the more experimental 'Absurdist' work of Badal Sarkar –*Evam Indrajit*, on the need for non conformism. The 60's was therefore the decade of the playwright.



Adhe Adhure

And with the character of Savitri (from *Adhe Adhure*, 1972) Mohan Rakesh created one of the first heroines who questioned patriarchy on stage. Savitri is important, because for the first time there is a redefinition by the woman of herself. Questioning who she is. And what she stands for: in society, in the family and perhaps, most crucially for herself. Savitri soon became the stereotypical 'modern' Indian heroine, appearing again and again on stage and screen. One of the earliest 'stars' to emerge from the National School of Drama was Sudha Shivpuri who essayed the main roles in all the first productions of these plays in Hindi. The young lovelorn Malika in *Ashad*, the crafty stepmother in *Tughlaq*, the rebellious Miss Benare of *Shantata*, the nonconformist Savitri of *Adhe Adhure*. She continues to act, most recently as the oldest dadi in the extremely popular soap opera-- *Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*.

But 'Savitri' of *Adhe Adhure* who challenges patriarchy was only the first of many such heroines who took on the Establishment – Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth*, Shyam Behgal's '*Ankur* and '*Bhumika*' – all with Shabana Azmi and Smita Patel in the lead roles, created the strong female protagonist on the screen.

And as gender issues slowly began to creep into the cultural discourse newspapers, novels and cinema – they crept into the theatre. Three plays in particular made ripples – Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* that depicted the live-in relationships of a lower middle man with two very different women; Surendra Verma's *Surya ke Antim Kiran se Lekar Surya ke Pahli Kiran Tak* that brought into our consciousness the traditional practice of a queen being able to take a lover for a night if her husband was impotent and Ramesh Bakshi's *Devyani Ka Kehna Hai*, that looked at live-in relations in middle class Delhi. Sex was

suddenly out there in the open and it was acceptable for a woman to articulate her sexual needs and desires – at least on stage! But even now the playwrights were male – a male questioning of a patriarchal order through feminist characters. Where were the women writers?

It was from the world of literature that the first women writers emerged in the 80's with dramatizations of two immensely popular novels, Mahasweta Devi's *1084 ki Ma* and Manu Bhandari's *Mahabhoj*. The first of these detailed the slow political awakening of a *Bhadralok* woman in Kolkata whose son dies as a Naxalite in a police encounter. The second talked of the rot in the political and bureaucratic system. Several productions of both these powerful plays that dealt with the interplay of the personal and the political were staged across India to popular acclaim. And this has remained the mainstay of the woman's voice on stage. Dramatizations of Ismat Chughtai or Krishna Sobti's stories for example are extremely popular wherever they are staged, while women playwrights were and are, few and far between.

Solo performers by women of texts created by either themselves or others brought a different energy to the stage. Mona Chawla in Delhi and Sushmita Mukerjee in Bombay brought alive the Dario Fo/Franca Rame

monologues – *A Woman Alone* and others in the early 90s. Saoli Mitra's *Draupadi* in Kolkata and B. Jayashree's work in Kannada theatre popularized this trend, now well exemplified by the consistent eclectic dramatic vision of Maya Rao in Delhi – whose sources vary from Bertolt Brecht's *The Job* to *Ravanama* to African short stories.

As early as the 1970s, theatre practitioners began to look beyond the western model of the well-made three-act play. The performance traditions of the folk theatre excited many and drew them to explore these in depth. The lively *Nautanki* of Uttar Pradesh often draws on romantic Persian literature for its themes, the raw vigour and bawdy humour that characterizes the Tamasha of Maharashtra or the *Bhavai* of Gujarat, the blood and thunder of the *Jatra* melodramas of Bengal that are in great demand during Puja (Dussehra festivities), or the dance-drama form of *Yakshagana* from Karnataka, to name just a few.

What links these varied traditions together is the form, as the action on the stage is never realistic; it is a stylization of reality. And the key moments of the plot are studded with dances or high emotions expressed in song. The performer is therefore actor, musician and dancer, all in one. In certain folk forms acting is a hereditary profession. The young child first



Ghasiram Kotwal

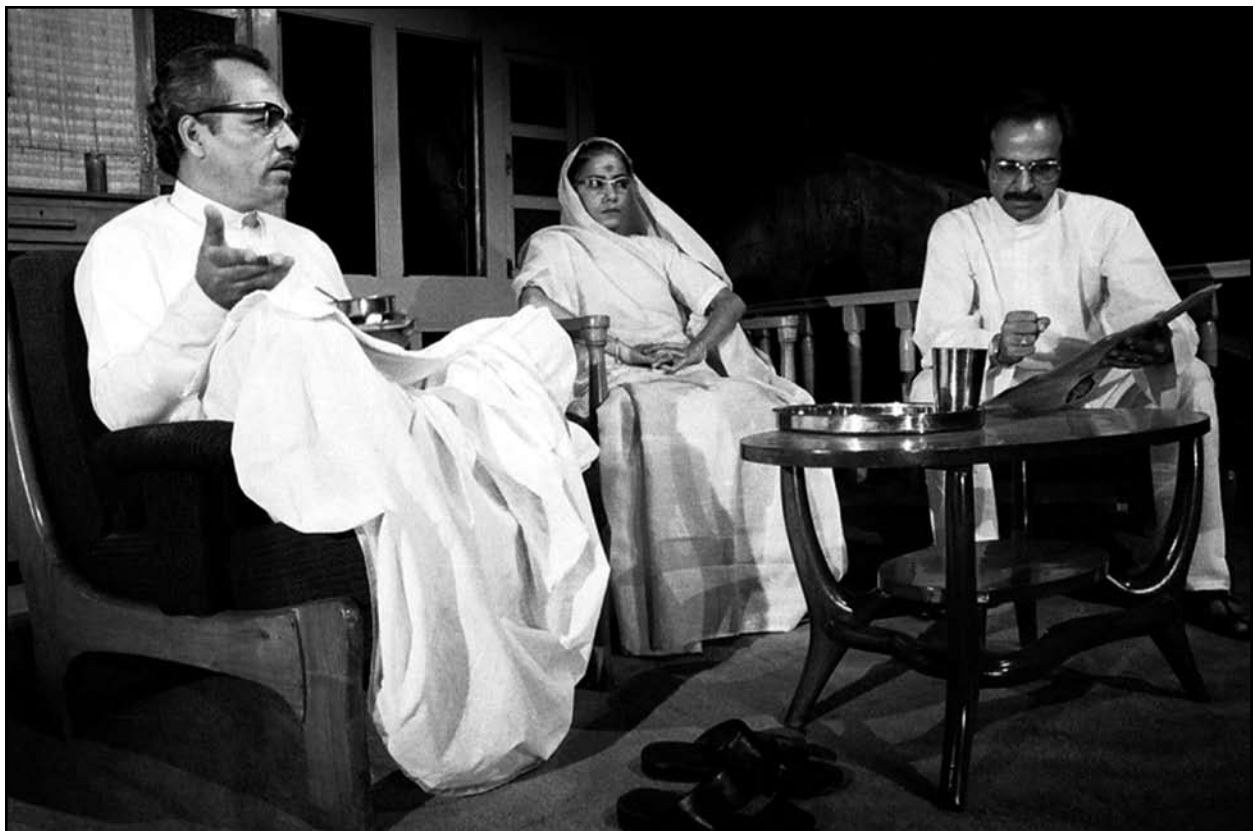
participates by drumming and helping backstage, the adolescent boy plays the female roles and finally male roles too.

In urban India there was an attempt to learn from these traditions, to resurrect the Indian actor as a composite actor, singer, acrobat, mime artist and craftsman. Breaking away from the realistic format several experiments were tried. Jabbar Patel's production of Vijay Tendulkar's powerful play *Ghasiram Kotwal*, used Maharashtrian folk traditions to tell a story of Brahmanical oppression, while Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* delighted audiences world wide with rustic Chatthisgarhi performers.

The 80's was an era of political debate in the theatre. It became a focus for anti-establishment thought. Play after play exposed the corruption of state machinery, the hypocrisy of the middle class, the wheeler-dealer journalist and the Dalits, while

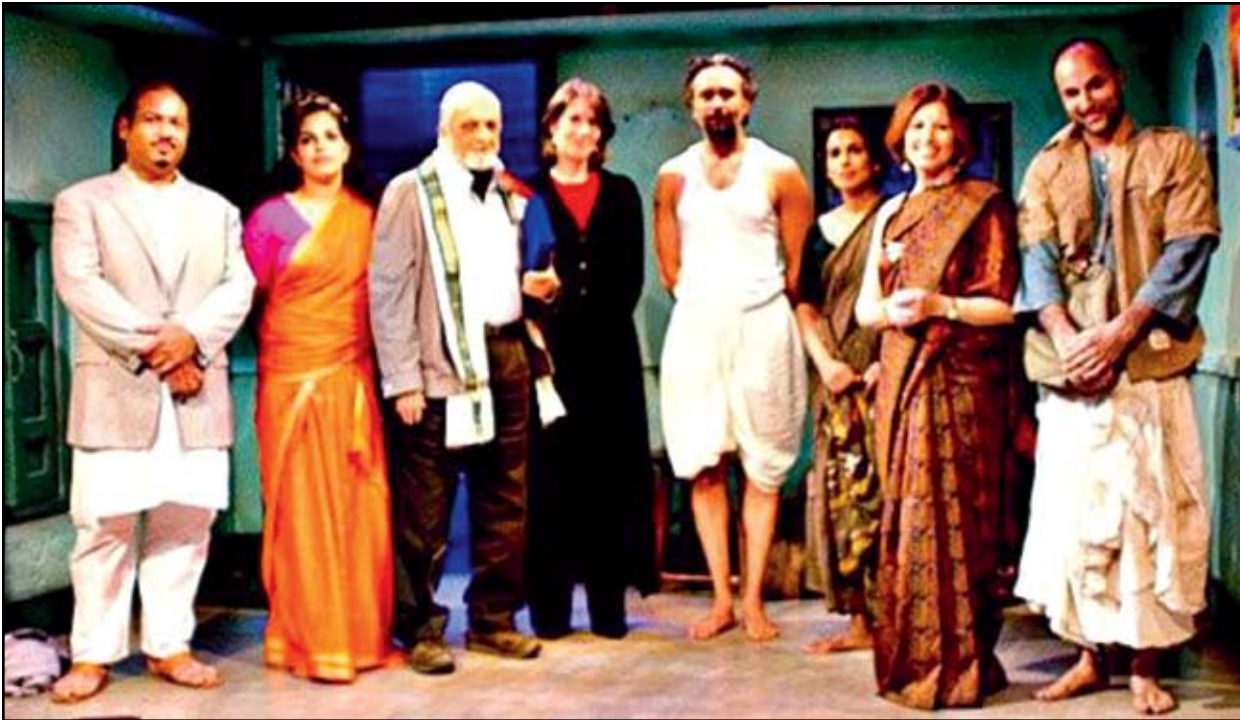
on the streets, a different kind of theatre came alive. Here drama was used as a tool by the activist/actor to directly bring issues forward and dialogue with the audience. The newly emergent women's movement saw the extensive use of this unique form of protest. Outside courts and railway stations, in crowded colonies and mohallas, scripts detailing women's oppression by rape and dowry demands, by law and society were played again and again, to raise popular consciousness. Amongst the most popular of these was *Om Swaha* on dowry deaths and *Roshni* by the Manushi Collective.

But along with the more serious, socially committed theatre – the changing global scene and the recent liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s saw a tremendous increase in commercial theatre particularly in Mumbai. While veteran women directors of the Marathi stage Sai Paranjape and Vijaya Mehta were still active, other women : Sarita



Mahabhoj





Sakharam Binder

Joshi (in Gujarati) Pearl Padamsee (in English) and Nadira Babbar (in Hindi) held sway. Big budget musicals like *Evita* and *Grease*, bedroom comedies like *Run for Your Life*, murder mysteries and star cast plays became popular not only in English, but even more so in Hindi, Marathi and Gujarati.

The 90's saw a slowing down of the theatre scene, as several major talents moved into the much more lucrative fields of TV and cinema. A new trend emerged women directors and authors explored the lesser known world of women. Neelam Man Singh's *Shahar Mein Pagal Aurat*, Anuradha Kapoor's *Umrao Jan*, Maya Rao's *The Job*, Amal Allana's *Begum Bawre* and Usha Ganguli's *Rudali* revisiting Mahasweta Devi's work of the same name, were notable productions of this decade. Till today these women directors lead the way.

Drawing on vibrant Punjabi folk traditions, alive with throbbing rhythms and raucous voices, the colourful world of Neelam Man Singh's plays are in complete contrast to the more cerebral, cool word of Anuradha

Kapur where text, video and visual create a theatre for tomorrow.

Amal Allana's work in Delhi theatre has turned more 'gendered' over the years – exploring men in female roles (Manohar Singh in *Himmat Mai*) and women's sexuality in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* or Marquez's *Erindira*. Usha Ganguli, working in Hindi in Kolkata, is more drawn to stories of oppression as in *Court Martial* or *Rudali*. Arundhati's own performance space in Bangalore, Ranga Sankara, draws troupes from all over the country, while for many years Sanjana Kapoor's Prithvi Theatre in Bombay did the same thing. Women impresarios in the theatre scene are as important as women directors and actors.

The new century has brought a new vitality to the theatre scene with experimentation being the key word. In small, alternative spaces, with scripts based on poetry and dance, movement and masks, young practitioners are reshaping the theatrical canvas. Many streams flow alongside: the vibrant folk tradition of the annual Ram Leela rubs shoulders



Adhe Adhure

with the latest 'Western' import of meaningful drama. For instance the ever popular liberatory *Vagina Monologues* In the Annual Theatre Festival in Delhi every January, you can see the best of Indian and International theatre in the same evening.

The amateur theatre worker, or 'evening actor' as many of them prefer to be known, working at their theatre for the love of it rather than as a profession, has been, and continues to be the mainstay of the contemporary movement. Today tickets are priced between Rs.20 and Rs.1,500 and are a clear indicator of the audience being catered to. One of the latest trends is performing in Indian English, either original

works like those of Mahesh Dattani, exemplified in the many fine productions by Lillete Dubey of *Dance like a Man*, *30 days in September* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* among others. While urban audiences throng performances by amateurs and professionals, the rural countryside sits entranced through an all-night folk performance.

As we step into 2013, it seems as if the woman in Indian theatre is once again at a crossroads. Forty years after Savitri stepped over the *lakshman rekha* that trapped her in tradition in *Adhe Adhure*, the woman seems to be in search of a new, more contemporary voice.

# Woh Aaye Bazm Mein

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Dr. M. Sayeed Alam

Dear Readers;

This piece of writing emanates out of my inability to write; to write in English and to write anything that belongs to the genre of non-fiction. The result has, otherwise, been quite heartening. I have ended up writing lots of fiction i.e. plays -- in Hindi and Urdu. I attempted one in English also. It, instead, turned out to be an IND-lish one, which, because, or, despite of that, is the by far one of my most successful comic plays.

So I am writing this, a non-fiction, presuming that what finally reaches you is no less the result of the hard work put in by the worthy editor of this coveted magazine to make it readable, English-wise. As regards the subject matter, I am simply jotting down whatever comes to my mind.

My career in theatre began on a funny note: My first play was staged in 1993. It was watched by barely 20 people, while I, in spite of being a cynic to the core, was expecting an audience of 200 at least. Why? What else could one expect from a 12-million strong city comprising Delhi, New Delhi and the National Capital Region?

Doubly disappointing was the fact that out of the 20 people who had watched that play, only two had bought tickets. The rest of the audience were the friends and family members of the Director.

The fault was entirely mine. I had come from Aligarh Muslim University where nearly 2,000 students used to watch a play, even a small skit. I soon discovered that there is a world of difference between the world of 'Aligarh Theatre' and the world of 'Delhi Theatre'





A scene from Lal Qile ka aakhri Mushaerah

even though the two cities are hardly 130 km geographically apart.

Since then, it is a long story. As of now, I (read Pierrot's Troupe) have won 'thousands' of audience (s) and 'one' award. And the experience has been quite thrilling (*that of winning the audience*).

Imagine: Imagine that after six years of that forgettable, or unforgettable, experience your troupe has put up a ticketed / public show in Delhi. This time it is a sold out show. A gentleman asks for two tickets. You tell him, rightly but with some sadistic pleasure, that the show is houseful'. He begins to walk back, but not without reminding you that he also watched your first play and bought tickets they as well. And you, to your amazement, realise, "Oh! He was one of

those two persons who had 'paid' to watch my first play".

Yes! It happened to me in the year 2000. After the initial shock, I joyfully took him inside the auditorium and requested my cousins (*who also had bought tickets*) to vacate their seats for him.

Or imagine; you are performing to a packed house in 2013. The play is about to start. A Union Minister arrives. He is kind, good and humble enough not to inform us in advance about his arrival lest it causes inconvenience to the performing party. He also insists that he would buy tickets and you have no tickets left to be sold.

Well! Thank your stars, nay one of your audiences, solves the crisis. He offers his tickets to the minister

and watches the play sitting in the aisle. That very gentleman, in the true sense of the term, had reserved the first three seats of the first row of the auditorium a week in advance.

Am I very subtly and smartly giving the impression that Pierrot's plays always draw full houses?

No! We were staging **Ghalib In New Delhi**, the troupe's most popular play, on a Sunday evening. It was the last Sunday before Dipawali. Only 16 people turned up to watch the play.

Everyone of the would-be audiences was busy buying something or the other, save the play tickets. The troupe incurred a huge loss, leading one of the troupe members to remark; "*Diwali ne Diwala nikaal diya*".

Similarly, once I was invited to a seminar titled, "*Disha' and 'Dasha' of Indian Theatre*". While others spoke of the lack of audiences in theatre, I spoke eloquently of **Pierrot's Troupe's** knack of drawing houseful (s) without fail. I had every reason to claim so. For the weekend that preceded the seminar, the troupe had staged *Ghalib In New Delhi*. About 450 people had watched the play in an auditorium that could seat of 375 Moreover, about 100 odd people went back. The

weekend that followed the seminar, the troupe put up another comic play – *Big B*. We were expecting a full house. However, a mere 100 or so came to watch the play in an auditorium meant for seating 375.

Anyhow, you do not mind discerning audiences even if the number is far less than expected. What if you have to perform to an audience with their back's turned to you?

Yes! This did happen to us. We were once staging **Ghalib In New Delhi** in a five-star hotel. The performance was a part of a 'Supper Theatre' initiative. The buffet was placed at the other end of the Banquet Hall in such an aesthetic manner that one could either watch the play or dine. The audience decided to eat.

As against the earlier-mentioned pre-Diwali show, this one was a huge success though and we were paid well for the performance. Yet, we all were massively demoralized; so massively that we almost decided to shelve the play forever. We could have done so had I not recalled that once I had gone to attend a *Mushaira*, but spent the entire evening feasting on *Kebabs, qorma* and *biryani* outside the *mushaira pandal*. As you sow, so shall you reap: Poetic justice, indeed.



With this, let me come to the point: The charm of a play performance, or any live performance for that matter, is 'the audience'. It is the integral part of a play. Those who sit on the other side of the stage are not mere spectators; they are the participants as well. And the artist-audience bond before, during and after the performance, is the most cherished moment of a performer's life.

Otherwise, how many times does one become the centre of attraction to so many people in one's life time? Possibly three times – at the time of one's birth; at the time of one's marriage and at the time of one's death.

There is nothing like the first phone call you receive for the advance booking of the tickets of your forthcoming show (*although it is a different matter that the first few callers who reserve the tickets do not usually show up*): There is nothing like the first laughter that you receive from the audience while performing a comedy and there is nothing like the pin-drop silence when you are doing a 'tragic' one.

This is an area, and probably the only area, where we are more blessed than our otherwise extremely

fortunate cousins – the screen artists. They are never able to connect with their audience live. They never get an instant response to their performance – negative or positive. Even the audiences' negative response and criticism work in our favour. It gives us the chance to improve; to put up a better show the next time.

I must admit that we have benefitted a great deal from the comments and suggestions of our audiences. Once we were staging a play titled **A Private Affair**. The lead actor uttered a dialogue, "*tum acting kar rahe ho*". The moment he did so, someone from the audience prompted, though softly, "*tum over-acting kar rahe ho*". When told of this, the actor in question admitted that he was over acting. Since then, he started 'acting' only.

We were performing **K L Saigal** in Hyderabad. In one of the scenes, set in the 1930s, an actor says, "*hum ne Jyotish Vidhya se ek 'naya' paisa bhi nahin kamayaa*". A banker was also watching the play came to meet us after the play and said that 'Naya' paisa, as its coinage testifies, was introduced as late as the 1950s. We rectified the mistake.





Raja Nahar Singh

We were performing the same play in Mumbai. A scene from the play shows the protagonist, K L Saigal, meeting legendary R C Boral for the first time. Boral asks Saigal to sing a *bhajan* or a *ghazal*. Saigal sings his famous *bhajan* "Nain heen ko raah dikaho prabhu". A renowned music director later informed us that the *bhajan* that Saigal sang was not 'his' composition. Moreover, it was composed much later than Saigal's first meeting with R C Boral. We now have Saigal singing another *bhajan* in that very scene – one that he himself composed, a year or two before he met R C Boral for the first time.

We were performing **Maulana Azad** in Hyderabad in 2005. A few weeks after the show I received a letter from a Professor of English. The professor very courteously pointed out in the letter that **Tom Alter**, who plays **Maulana Azad** in the play, should pronounce the word "*paudha*" as "*pauda*". He elaborated: Though "*paudha*" is the correct pronunciation, yet **Maulana Azad**, given his Arabic–Persian background, would not pronounce it so. I cross-checked and found that the Professor was spot on as **Maulana Azad** has spelled the word *Paudha* as *pauda* in many of his writings.

Sometimes even a few uncalled for interventions from the audience are welcome. These give us the chance to improvise then and there. What if a phone rings during the performance of **Sons of Babur**, a period drama? It prods one of the actors, playing a Mughal Badshah, to intervene; "*Is qadar be-hangam mauseeqi? Yaqeenan ye hum Mughlon ki ijaad nahin*". Things have come to such a pass that if a phone does not ring or a child does not cry during a performance (and this rarely happens), we feel deprived of the opportunity to improvise.

Even extremely bad comments have helped us positively. The troupe has received a fair amount of criticism for making fun at the expense of the great poet **Mirza Ghalib** in **Ghalib In New Delhi**. We have paid heed to that by coming up with three more plays on **Ghalib** – on his life, his times, his works, his worth. **Pierrot's Troupe** is, in fact, a proud and distinctive producer of three plays on **Ghalib** – all well received and critically acclaimed.

And there is nothing like the post-play interaction with the audience, particularly those witty remarks from them. The play **Ghalib**, for instance. It, based





on Ghalib's life and times, shows him in four stages: Ghalib the child; Ghalib the young man; Ghalib the middle aged and Ghalib the old man; played by four different actors, with fair skinned Tom Alter portraying Ghalib the old man. This role play by four different actors once led a member of the audience to observe, "*aapka Ghalib jaise jaise boodha hota gaya, gora hota gaya*".

Or take the case of **Maulana Azad**, a solo performance by Tom Alter. After a recent performance of the play, I thanked the audience for giving the play 'standing ovation' every single time it was staged. One of them said, "*The first thing one wants to do after sitting through a two hour long production is to stand up*".

Or, not many people believe that Tom Alter can play, with ease and aplomb, the Urdu centre characters like *Maulana Azad, Ghalib, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Buzurgwar*

in Pierrot's plays. Many of them have confided in us by saying that they thought that we had pre-recorded Tom Alter's part in someone else's voice and he merely did the lips movements. I must say the audience has sometimes been unfair to this 'fair' actor.

And, then, it is a vicious, nay vivacious, circle. Both the performers and the audience go back home, readying their selves for the next show; you anticipating a good turn out and they anticipating a good play: And this is how a 'play' becomes a 'performance'. Many more performances follow and the curtain never really falls.

Yet I must stop.

With lots of love from

Sayeed – a playwright by choice, a director by chance and an actor per force.



Tom Alter as *Ghalib* in *Ghalib* in New Delhi

# IPTA—As I See It

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Aziz Quraishi

It was a time of tumult and turmoil— On the one hand was the background of the Second World War and on the other was the Bengal Famine of 1943, with massive starvation deaths in India and repression by the colonial masters, in the wake of the Quit India Movement.

**I have found that the human spirit always rises during adversity and necessity becomes the Mother of Invention.**

Around the 30's the thought came to a group of people led by Harindranath Chattopadhyay in Bengal. They started a creative movement that would give expression to the agony of the Bengal Famine in the heart rending song 'Bhuka hai Bangaal'. Folk songs, street theatre and stage theatre also became the most important medium of emotional expression. The most significant of the dramas were *Nabanna* which is a folk-cultural festival of Bengal to celebrate the harvest. This Bengali drama, written by Bijon Bhattacharya and directed by Sombhu Mitra, portrayed the evils of the Bengal Famine of 1943, and the alleged indifference of the British rulers, as also of the richer strata of Indian society towards the plight of the millions dying from the famine.

A People's Theatre Movement was also started by a few intellectuals, scientists and artists at Bombay in the years 1942-43, and was christened IPTA by late Homi Bhabha. This theatre group was a movement in Bengal.

IPTA was formally established on May 25, 1943, at a conference in the Marwari School in Bombay. In his presidential address, academic and noted social thinker Hiren Mukherjee issued a call to all those present: "Writers and artists...come actors and dramatists, come all, those who work by hand and thinkers come and dedicate yourself to create a brave new world and a society that values freedom, independence, and social justice." The All India People's Theatre-IPTA took pride in promoting consciousness in the overarching nationalistic mood of the country. IPTA, through its innumerable street plays, dwelt on subjects and stories that directly concerned the people. Issues such as hunger, famine, poverty, communal violence, and feudal and colonial exploitation, featured constantly in its plays.

Within a short span of time, almost 500 units of IPTA sprang up all over the country combining the dynamism of Punjab, the lyricism of Bengal and the pain of rural Assam and Andhra, and welded all these on to a common platform.

*Nava Jiboner Gaan* (Song of New Life) by Jyotirindra Moitra and the film *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth) by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas followed *Nabanna* in addressing the needs of the people. These performances were characteristic for their vivid, stark portrayal of the suffering of the masses. Similar productions were carried out all over India, like *Desha Sathi* in Marathi which was about the attack on the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany; *Prarambham* in Telugu;

and *Zubeida* directed by Balraj Sahni and based on the story of a Muslim girl from Malabar. Manikuntala Sen, the firebrand woman of left politics acted in this play along with Gopal Halder, who later became an educationist.

Born as a result of a long-felt need among writers and artistes, IPTA brought about a sea change in the prevalent concepts about Indian Theatre. It was formed to co-ordinate and to strengthen all progressive tendencies that had so far manifested themselves in the form of drama, songs and dances. Its roots lay in the cultural awakening of the masses of India, seeking to revive the cultural heritage of the country. Its initial impact was so powerful that a new form of expression took shape. It was to leave a lasting impression, making the arts an expression of the people's yearning for freedom, economic and social justice and a democratic culture.

The role of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in building a progressive platform for theatre and other artistic activities in the country remains of great value. It has inspired generations of Indian theatre movements that followed suit.

IPTA transformed the meaning of entertainment and art in India, which had historically dealt only with tales of fantasy and mythology. IPTA is one of the oldest performing art groups in the country. Indian cinema, performing arts like music and theatre and now even television, have drawn their many personalities from the IPTA fold.

IPTA was founded by stalwarts like KA Abbas, Dr. Bhabha, Anil de Silva, Ali Sardar Jafri and Dada Sharmalkar. Over the last six decades many prominent artistes, writers, musicians, directors, dancers and singers, have been a part of IPTA. These include Amar Shaikh, Shombhu Mitra, Homi Bhabha, Kaifi Azmi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Sahir Ludhianvi, Balraj Sahni, Prem Dhawan, Ismat Chughtai, Chetan Anand, Dina Pathak, Pt. Ravi Shankar, Salil Chaudhari, Tarla Mehta, Khayyam, Dev Anand, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, VP Sathe, Durga Khote, Utpal Dutt, Satyen Kappu,

Sanjeev Kumar, Basu Bhattacharya, M.S.Sathyu, Kuldip Singh, Shabana Azmi, Farooque Shaikh, Kader Khan, Yunus Parvez, Mac Mohan, Javed Siddiqi and many, many others. The list just goes on and on and would read like a who's who of Indian art and culture.

Over the past six decades IPTA has been at the forefront of the theatre movement in the country. That is why IPTA is not just a cultural group, it is a National Movement.

The role of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in building a progressive political platform for theatre and other artistic activities in the country remains of great value. It has inspired generations of the Indian theatre fraternity to follow suit.

In recognition of IPTA's contribution to Indian culture, the postal department released a commemorative philatelic stamp on 25th May, 1994, in Mumbai.

IPTA, which went on to become one of the most dynamic performing art movements in India and was and is like a magnet for the young and radical artists, actors, musicians and dancers.

#### **As IPTA turns 70, the Delhi Chapter of IPTA turns 50.**

The Delhi initiative of IPTA started much later than Kolkata and Mumbai. A dedicated group of creative and financial contributors has helped it survive through the decades," According to data from the IPTA archives, the eighth national conference of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) at the Ramlila grounds in the capital from Dec 23 to Jan 1, 1958, led to the birth of the Delhi Chapter of IPTA. The conference was attended by 1,000 artists.

The records say that the theatre assembly was inaugurated by the then vice-president of India Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and the national IPTA committee comprised of theatre legends like Sachin Sen Gupta (Kolkata), Vishnu Prasad Rawa (Gauhati), Rajendra Raghuvanshi (Agra), K. Subramaniam (Chennai), Niranjana Sen (Calcutta), Nirman Ghosh (Kolkata),

Radheyshyam Sinha (Patna), Raja Rao (Andhra Pradesh) and Muhani Abbasi (Mumbai).

A couple of years later, in 1960, the several units across the country began to chart a decentralized course of independent, socially relevant and creative theatre with more focus on regionalism and local folk forms.

In the capital, the early plays of IPTA reflected the northern Indian theatrical traditions and the city's rich plural heritage in its *jan natyas* (people's plays) with a slight by socialist tilt.

IPTA-Delhi's primary role through its 50 years has been to bring about social and political awakening amongst the youth of the exploited/weaker sections of society into the mainstream through the medium of theatre. Their focus has been to give youth the chance to develop their personality, stand up and be heard.

Being a people's organization everyone has the right to **walk in through our gates** and find a readymade platform to showcase their talents be it through drama, street theatre, dance, musicals, choir group evenings, painting exhibitions and other cultural activities. The aim has been and is, to spread awareness and inspiration so that our youth stand up to fight against injustice of any kind.

**IPTA has also benefitted by this 'open-door' policy.**

These sensitive youth bring us firsthand knowledge of the prevailing ills, of socially-exploited and vulnerable sections of society which gives us authentic concepts to develop and present.

Given the plethora of TV serials and film opportunities, we find more youngsters flocking towards theatre which is the foundation and learning ground for any kind of performance, be it hardcore acting in drama serials, anchoring, hosting game shows or competitions. In fact, it is this foundation where many young talents get their first break.

Today there is a popular demand for entertainment and with it opportunities for youth to come out with passion and dedication. Innumerable young enthusiastic people meet across the city every day, putting in hours of extracurricular work to mount their productions. They may be on a shoestring budget and suffer intermittent rebuffs from the family bread earners, but these diehards refuse to kick the habit.

**But with the good there is also the bad—**

Theatre has become a bit difficult in the last few years. The cost of auditoriums has increased; there are less rehearsal places and plays need too much marketing.

Bright young individuals out of sheer love for the medium spend the best part of their lives training themselves in a theatre discipline, but end up in the job market to fulfill their bread and butter needs.

Many young enthusiasts who start their acting career with full passion, dedication and sincerity, are soon lured by the glamour of films and TV, thus using theatre merely as a springboard.

Today, the responsibility of a progressive organization like IPTA becomes even more important. We want our youth to be able to treat theatre as a vocation and not have to give up their passion

In post-Independence India, as leaders and statesmen began the process of nation-building, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) began its own task — of establishing a powerful cultural grounding for the new nation. Though linked inextricably with the early days of the republic, Delhi-IPTA is just as active today.

**On Dec 27, 2011-2012, the Delhi unit of IPTA celebrated its 50th birthday.**

As part of the celebrations, the association staged a 1977-vintage play *Anarkali-Akbar-Salim* The festival opened with *Aetraaf-e-Ghalib*, a musical in Urdu in which the poet laureate looks back at his own life. Based on Ghalib's letters, it dwells on little-known

facts about his life, introspective passages and spiritual reflections. Also, an adaptation of Ismat Chughtai's *Dozakh*, titled *Aur Ek Sacch* showed how women are trapped by men due to their own vulnerability and ignorance, and how they are brutalised through child marriages or marital rapes, manipulated through religion or societal norms, abandoned through divorce or bigamy.

After that, *Anarkali-Akbar-Salim* was staged. The play begins where most stories on the Mughal court dancer end, with her being walled in. On stage, the storyline explores how Anarkali's mother reacts and how the tragedy redefines Salim's relationship with his father. As the action unfolds, the play raises the issue of honour killings, a social evil that still persists in India. During the celebrations, IPTA felicitated theatre personalities like Zohra Segal, Ebrahim Alkazi, Kabir Bedi and Roshan Seth, who began their careers on the capital's stage.

The festival ended on with *Be Libaas*, a tale of men sexually exploiting women, which follows IPTA's tradition of social plays. The play negated the theory of black-and-white situations of suppression and oppression.

**IPTA-Delhi**, during the 50 years of its existence has done more than 100 full-fledged plays with around 3,000 shows all over India. In its **crusade** to promote and popularize theatre all our shows have always been an **open house with no tickets** and no government grants or aid.

An apolitical, patriotic, cultural group we have been targeting and raising our voice against the exploitation of economically and socially weaker sections of society for five decades through theatre, dance, musicals, choir group evenings, street performances and other cultural activities. The aim has been and is, to spread awareness and inspiration to the largest number of people with the help and financial generosity of likeminded organizations.

For more than five decades, IPTA has been targeting and raising its voice against the exploitation of economically and socially weaker sections of society and strengthening the fabric of secularism and nationalism in India through theatre, dance, musicals, choir group evenings, street performances, painting exhibitions and other cultural activities.

On the occasion of the **completion of its 50 years**, **IPTA-Delhi** planned and executed a series of programmes in collaboration with Doordarshan and India International Centre.

This multifaceted, interactive and demonstrative series called "**Transforming India**", aimed to revisit the **Secular Civilizational Thrust of India**. The main purpose was to try and combat **social ills like communalism, atrocities against women etc.** The endeavour was to capture the various dimensions of inter-faith and inter-group interactions to bring about social transformation through Interactive theatre, enactment films, demonstrative TV films and discussions. Eminent thinkers, scholars and experts on the subject like Shyam Benegal, Bipin Chandra, Zoya Hasan, M J Akbar, Mridula Mukherjee, and Swami Agnivesh were invited to explain concepts and interact with audiences.

Our focus was to inspire and create a new crop of talented youth who will carry the messages forward as writers, actors, playwrights, directors etc.

Currently, IPTA will be staging a new play—*Akbar Ki Mehbooba-Anarkali*. Supported by ICCR, the play gives an eye-opening point of view about Anarkali that is different from the popular and well-known romantic legend of Anarkali and Salim.

In the pipeline are four new plays—*Teesra Rukh*, *Kash-Ma-Kash*, *Bhool Pal Bhar Ki* and *Tyaag Patra*.

Though the concerns are the same, the focus areas have changed over the years at IPTA. When IPTA was born, it was about the country's independence and then about building and improving the nation. Today,

the plays are about social causes. We have over the years kept the philosophy of socially powerful theatre, going. Being with an association linked inextricably to the cultural awakening of a people, even if we pick up old plays we make it a point to give them all a new perspective.

If plays run on for years elsewhere, in Delhi even a handful of shows are a consolation. The Hindi belt is weak. In Gujarat, Maharashtra and Bengal, plays run for months. Theatre in the Hindi belt is not on its feet and we are still diagnosing the cause.

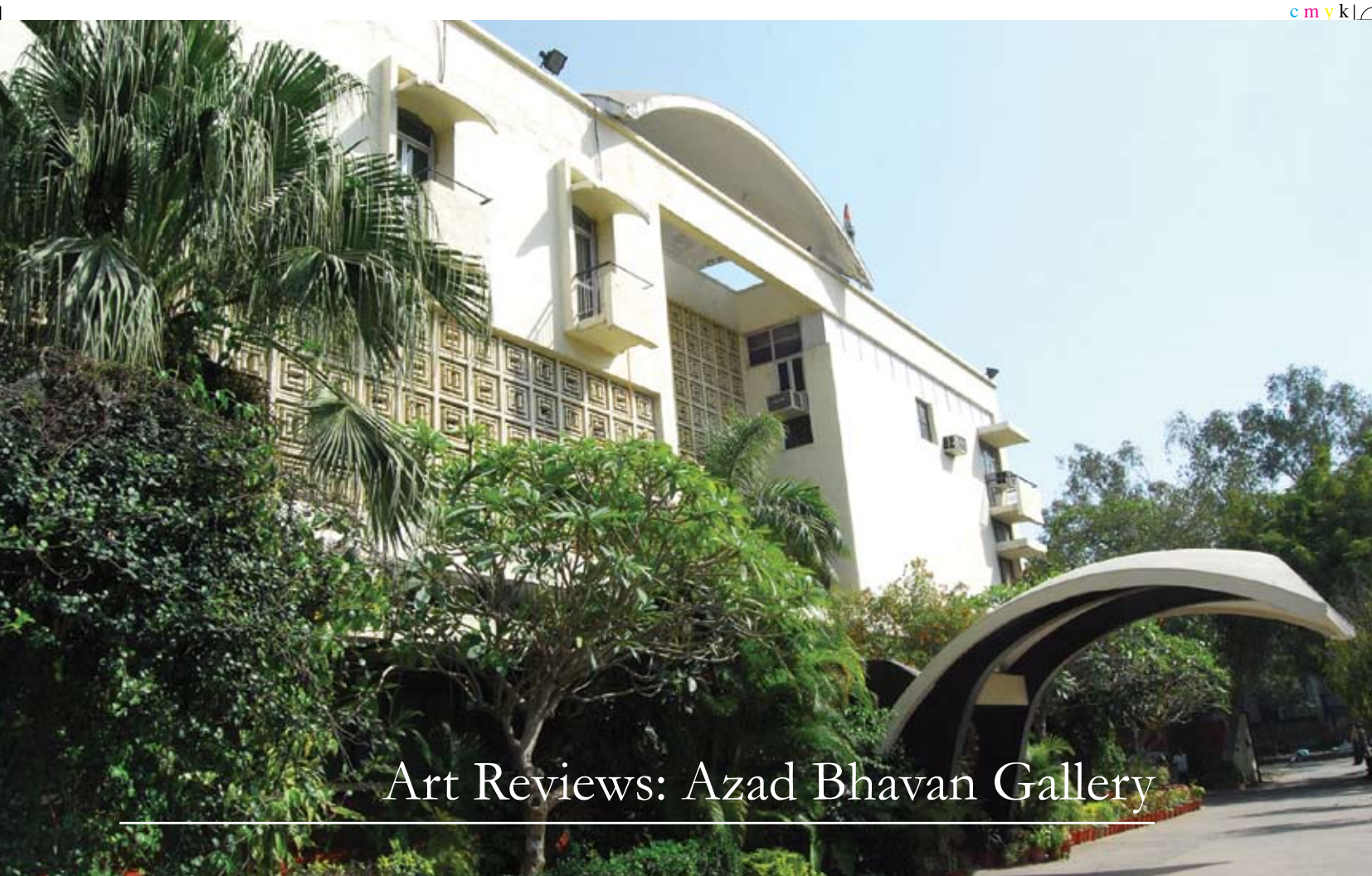
In 1977, when IPTA was rehearsing the play, *Raj Babbar*, then a struggling actor, left for Mumbai three days before the play was to be staged. We were at a loss and Pankaj Kapoor was brought in at the last moment to play Salim.

IPTA-Delhi has given several Delhi-based actors a toehold in Mumbai. Actor Pawan Malhotra, who once

earned Rs.250 from an IPTA show and was over the moon with the amount, is one of them. And so are Neelima Azeem, Neena Gupta etc., who were all associated with IPTA early in their respective careers.

According to old-timers, the local chapter of IPTA has not been able to carve a niche for itself because of two reasons. The early generation of talented actors like Raj Babbar, Pankaj Kapoor, Om Puri and Pawan Malhotra found their calling in the movie world of Mumbai and could not devote time to theatre in New Delhi.

It's been fifty years since IPTA-Delhi was born and despite stiff competition from reputed institutions, like the National School of Drama and other independent companies of contemporary theatre, television and cinema — the Delhi chapter of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is surviving with a relentless zeal to bring theatre lovers plays with astoundingly novel perspectives.



## Art Reviews: Azad Bhavan Gallery

The tradition of holding art exhibitions at the Azad Bhavan Gallery of ICCR, with weekly regularity, year round, reflects several skills. On the one hand, it is a practice that demands committed organisational skills, but transcending the obvious strictures of regulation and upkeep, the works unveil a state of commitment to art and a salute to the human imagination. The choice of artists handpicked for showcasing at this venue are varied, while at the same time specific and universal. They not only hail from various parts of the country, but even encompass artists from around the globe, giving the gallery space an intrinsic cultural relationship stretching beyond the boundaries of location and inviting a look beyond.

Intrinsically, these works of fresh make even have a link with the foundational concepts of Indian art, wherein an artwork in itself did not exclusively hold the key to its greatness. It was its context, its awareness and understanding of its times, its appeal in the eyes of viewers, that were also to be taken into consideration

before passing the final judgement on the work. In the light of this trajectory for judging the worth of a work, the exhibitions at the Azad Bhavan Gallery hold significance. Every one of the artists on display remains well connected to their times, their cultures and their aesthetic sensibilities. In short, there is a deep undercurrent of personal data, which identifies and individualises what is on view on the canvas or paper or metal. Their outcome is not isolationist but conglomerative as their works appear both familiar and yet undiscovered.

A study of the works on display in the quarter under review shows representations of different schools, genres and styles. Some of the works are by innovative self-trained artists, who too, have added a unique dimension to the various strands of art at the gallery. While at times the themes are repetitive, their treatment appears wholly different, showing clearly that every work on the wall has been infused with a level of personal introspection that has left a signature of the artist's personality on the creation. The making



of their works exudes a sense of 'ananda' or pure bliss and some of that feeling rubs off on the viewers as well. Other canonical references that surface from this collective of art at the Gallery is the fact that the works combine in them the foremost principles of all art creations in India, namely harmony, unity and rhythm.

One of the talented artists whose works satisfied the above criteria of Indian art was **Parameswar Elanji**, whose exhibition titled 'Parameswara's Creations' was predominantly a series of works based on Gurudev Tagore and his surroundings at Santiniketan. An interesting study in the exhibition was the realistic take on the gurukul system of imparting knowledge that is the hallmark of Santiniketan's lifestyle. The sprawling canopy of trees effect a calming feel on the mind while the monotonal colour palette heightens the sensation a notch higher. The serene proceedings of a prayer session or perhaps a cameo shot of a

classroom scene at this locale, encapsulates the entire philosophy of the poet on the canvas surface. It adds a timeless quality to the work making the viewer look beyond the rules of technical excellence and probe deeper into the philosophy of Tagorean thought amplified through this rustic scenic setting beneath the trees.

Besides respecting the essential principles of art making in India, the artist has also remained sincere to the rules of portraiture in his takes on the Master. The faces depict various stages of Gurudev's life, culmination in a portrait of the poet in his last days, where the features are slightly drawn but the heightening of facial contours through a concentrating on aquiline features, a piercing eye contact and an elegant posture, add grace and dignity to the composition. A rare find amidst the works on view is Elanji's depiction of Mrinalini Devi, the wife of Tagore. This is a subject that few artists have chosen to depict and he has displayed commendable exactitude to the work through his concern for detail. The meticulous expertise with which the artist has drawn the drapery has established the periodicity of the figure with convincing realism. The oval framework setting of the work, too, harks back to the days of early photography, giving the work added meaning.

Elsewhere, Elanji has shown an uncanny knack of age differentiation. The youthful features of a young Tagore in the role of Valmiki bears the stamp of his young years as distinct from the teenage years when Tagore is depicted dressed in the Pirali topi and pyjama, made popular in the Tagore household. The wisened features of the mature sage complete with flowing beard and locks, is given a sense of drama with the help of a red choga, instead of a more sober choice, while the visual creation of the National Anthem, bears the flight of imagination with aplomb. The Tagore profile in graphic and flowing lines, mingling with the geographical contours of India, gives rein to his artistic imagination.





In yet another link from Santiniketan, but depicting an entirely different genre are the works of artist **Gyanendra Kumar**. Currently a resident in the Doon Valley, this artist is an alumni of Santiniketan and has been trained at the feet of the legendary greats such as Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij. His works are marked by a liberal use of bold colours, strong strokes and deeply entwined compositions. In fact, so alluring is his play with his strokes that the viewer is enticed to look time and again at each work to get to the bottom of the mystery and unravel the image

hidden in its depths. Also, the freedom and elegance of the strokes express a certain breakaway from all bondage offering a liberating sense of freedom in the bargain. In another look it appears that the vivid brush strokes are infused with the charm of the folk



idiom, endowing the works with an informality that endears itself with the viewer.

Above all, the works are suffused with a poetic metaphor expressed through the vocabulary of colour. The artist picks on his hues with a thoughtful volition. The palette relates to a close understanding of what colour means in the Indian context, where each tint contains within it a symbolic language to express human emotions. Thus the contrast of reds and yellows in the work titled 'Awakening' denotes the fiery quality of red with that of pitta or yellow, a symbol of awakening according to traditional diktat. Similarly the work 'Blues' cocooned within a female form revealing folk influences from Bengal's pata chitrawork, lends itself to an interpretation of life using colour as the vehicle to unravel its hidden layer of meaning.

The charming busy looks of the work titled 'Embrace' and the angular compactness of the work titled



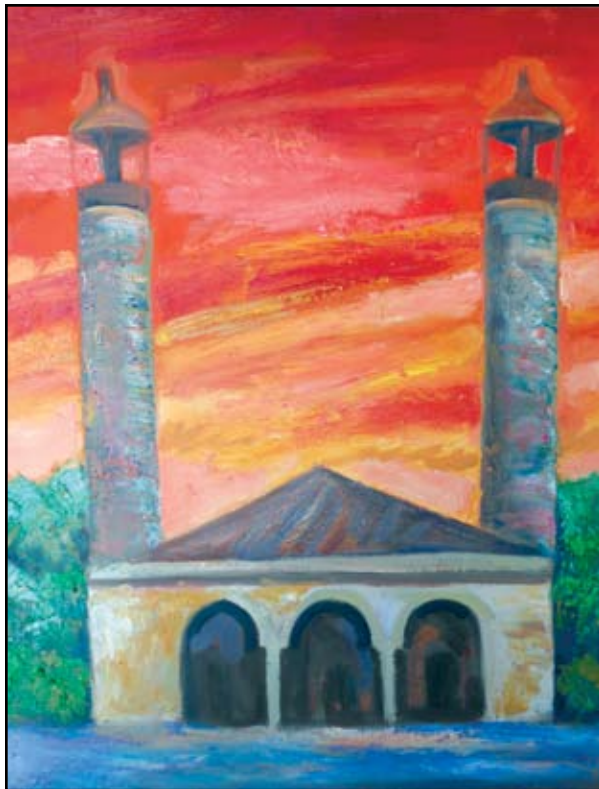
'Density' bear a sensuous and ornamental context in them. The sharp feel of the angular strokes strangely do not evoke a metallic register in the mind but coalesce into a roundedness that is the hallmark of Kumar's artistry. The works are definitely those of a master whose affair with colours and canvas date back several decades and have been polished and honed through various triumphs, travails and takes to emerge into a mature and finished completeness.



Absheron Motives

While on the theme of colour, what better way to felicitate ties between our nation and another than through the world of colour born of contemporary art? This is what added greater meaning to the exhibition of the works of artist **Ashraf Heybatov**, an honoured artist of the Republic of Azerbaijan. The exhibition, dedicated to celebrating two decades of cultural ties between India and Azerbaijan, contained glimpses of the countryside of Azerbaijan as well as charming portraits of its people, in large size wall paintings. The unique methodology of painting adopted by this veteran master reflects the age-old history of his land, the diversity of its culture, customs and traditions. As a member of the Azerbaijani Artists Union and a laureate of the Association of World Art, among others, this much felicitated master delighted viewers with his selection of works for the Gallery.

Noteworthy among the works was his depiction of the 'Mountains of Azerbaijan', their rolling contours suggestive of a rare serenity. Instead of a craggy brown landscape, these gentle hills allure with their expanse of fresh green, through which a narrow streak of a dirt track seems to break the monotony of the splendour and affords a gentle reminder of humanity's connect with the world below. The artist's brush has convoluted the blues and greens into a graphic detailing of the various ranges enunciating both a merger and a differentiation symbolically. In another of his mountain series is the work titled 'Mountain Path' wherein, the viewer is exposed to the joy of colour through the repertory of a disc-like space in full view, engaging the mind to conjuring images of colourful flower-filled paths winding down the slopes. The far off horizon, is streaked with reds and oranges

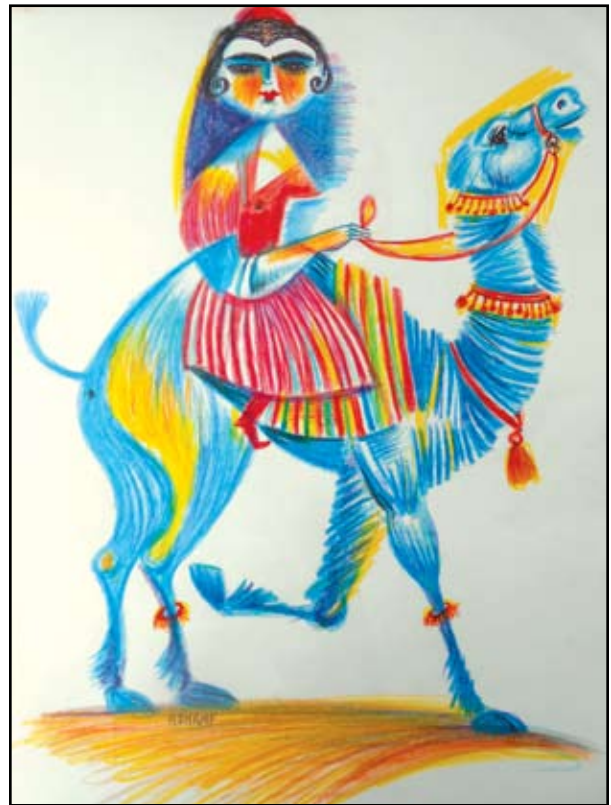


Mosque in Shusha City

just below the billowing clouds reminding one of idyllic summer days in such regions.

Among the series on people and places one is attracted to the work titled 'Beauty' a young belle from Azerbaijan. The danseuse is fully engrossed in the joys of her dance posture and the rhythm of movement comes out clear through the movement. The expressive eyes, the fullsome mouth and the details of her jewellery make this portrait both realistic and culturally expressive, for one look at her and one is given a complete lesson in the cultural richness of her country Azerbaijan. But it is in the monumental depictions of his country that Hebaytov surpasses all others. The flat roofed landscape, the rounded domes rising here and there and the vast countryside beyond wear a familiar ring for Indian viewers. In another take, titled 'Asheron Motives' the stone construction on the shores touches the senses and ingrains a sense of loneliness where the silence of the surroundings is given voice through the art.

The contrast of blue-green waters, the grey stone of the building and the earth tones of the single boat in the frame have a sensitive feel to it through the proportion and symmetry of this composition.



Bride



Beauty



Kodla Math, Bagerhat, 17th century A.D.

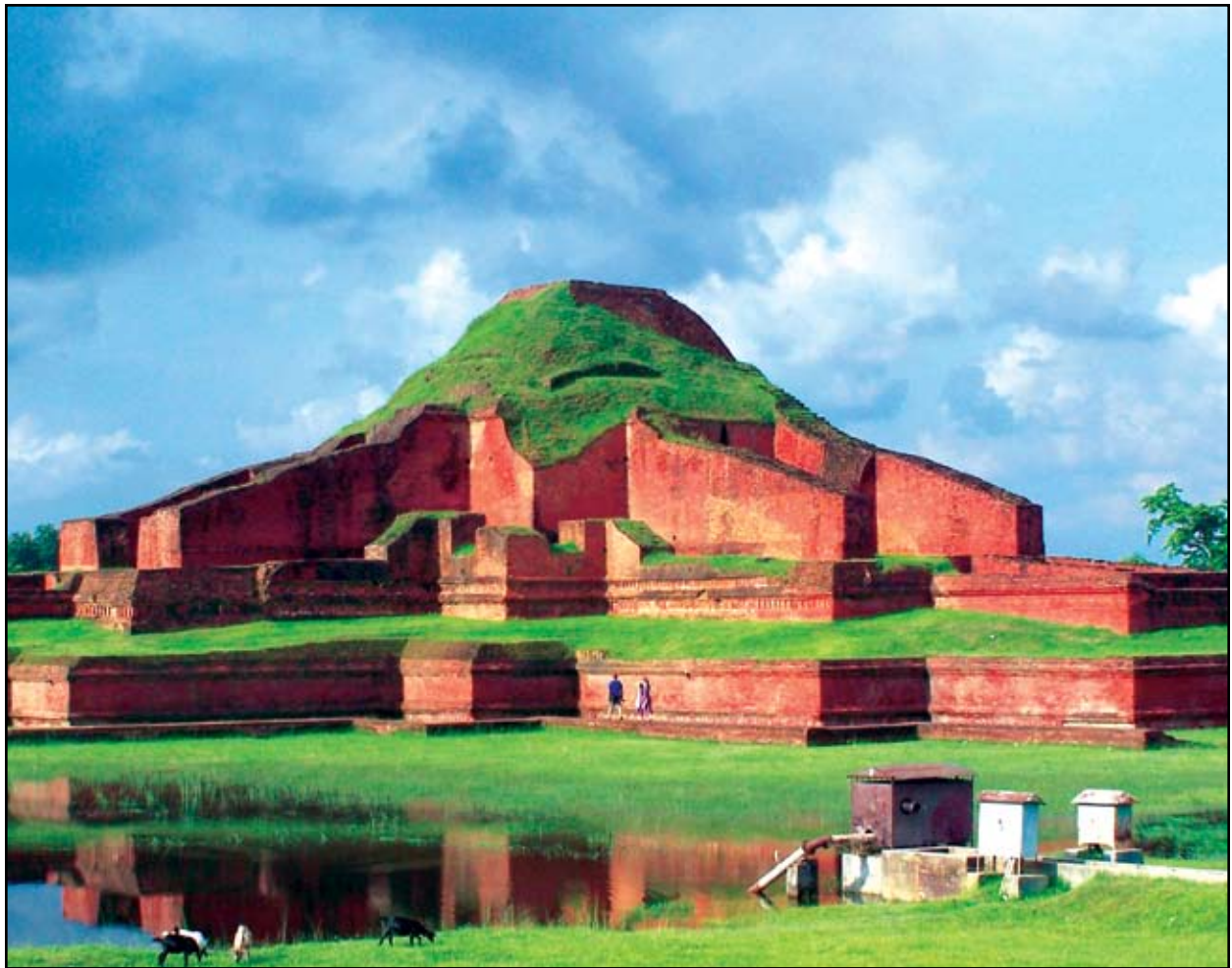


Birthplace of famous Buddhist monk Sri Gyan Atish Dipankar (980-1053) A.D., Vajrayogini, Bikrampur, Bangladesh



One of the star attractions among exhibitions at the Gallery each quarter is a photographic show that captures glimpses of people and places both at home and from abroad. This time round, it was the exhibition of **Arindam Mukherjee** titled 'Glimpses of Bangladesh' that made the grade. A much acclaimed photographer and documentary film maker, Mukherjee has been touring Bangladesh for than half a decade for research purposes. During his tours and travels which has taken him through the length and breadth of the country, ha has amassed a sizeable collection of photo shots which are valued as archival samples among other advantages. For the exhibition at the Gallery, Mukherjee personally made a selection of 300 representative samples of Bangladesh to give viewers a rich and satisfying experience of the land.

What struck one at this display is the uncanny selectivity of the show. Instead of the usual scenes of boatloads of people at ferrying points, or rivers in flood or busy market places, this photographer has treated his camera with a trekker's insight. What comes into view is the many monuments that dot the countryside, harking back to historic Buddhist links that Bangladesh once enjoyed during the early centuries. One such take is the Rankut Bonasram Buddha Bihar entryway, through dappled sunshine from the shade of giant banyan sprawling in rooted splendour across the space. The sharpness of the shot brings out with telling clarity the contours of



Sompura Mahavira, Paharpur, Bogra District. C. 7-12 century A.D.

each gnarled growth clinging to the earth in sort of a conjoined relationship.

Other selections ring in a shade of nostalgia as one views the homes of erstwhile zamindars from the country. The grandeur of the Nator mansion, preserved with care is a delight for architectural students who can clearly see the influences of Dutch, colonial and French links in the collanaded verandah stretching across the front of the house. The grey foundation level makes an impressive colour contrast besides being an engineered device to stop seepage ruining the building. Similarly the shot of the Pogiose School reputed to be the first private school of the country would bring back memories for the older generation while serving as an delightful vignette for history

buffs on both sides of the border. Though the building bears a strong resemblance to public buildings in West Bengal and even some parts of Lucknow, there is distinct separateness in the site that is exclusive to Bangladesh it seems. The angle of the shot brings into view almost the entire building and registers the solidity of the structure in the mind of the viewer. An almost artistic touch is obtained through the lens look at the Somapura Mahavira Paharpur. The crumbling walls and sections of the single structure have been caked with a mantle of greenery growing in shards that contrast delightfully with the red terracotta of the solid walls. The presence of water in which the structure is reflected knits the scene into a storyteller's setting, evoking the past in a fascinating take.

Back to a conventional show of acrylic on canvas, one picks up for mention the works of artist **Nirupam Borboruah** whose works bear the vivacity that comes of spontaneity. Says the artist of his art: "I refer acrylic paints as I paint spontaneously and fast without a break until a painting's complete. I prefer not to disturb the rhythm and oneness established among my soul, mind, body, colour."

Using human forms as his primary leitmotif, Borboruah has evolved a unique geometry out of the facial features so that their forms conjoin like crafted wooden parts of a jigsaw puzzle that will click into position once correctly manipulated. Naturally this device has helped bring home the message of human interaction with subtle exactitude. Besides taking recourse to using the elements of geometry to convey human relationships, the artist has used decorative patterns in the background, as well as



The meditating musician, acrylic on canvas: 24x30 inches



Complexity of Romance-3, acrylic on canvas: 24x36 inches



Complexity of Romance-3, acrylic on canvas: 24x36 inches

symbolic bird forms like the parrot and dove, to work as his vocabulary for human dialogue. The more formally attired gents hold up a mask in their hands depicting thereby the split personalities that humans carry as baggage when mingling with one another in society. Glimpses of urban everydayness is conveyed in his work titled 'Multitasking' where the colours and strokes can be deciphered into a feminine form, a child, playfulness and concentration writ large thereby describing the daily existence of millions in India.

The man-woman relationship has been enumerated through a portrayal of its complexities. The 'other woman' syndrome, the moments of intimacy, the lonesomeness of estrangement and also the joy of togetherness are given a subtle twist in his series titled 'Love Ajkal'. The artist's mastery over colours is remarkable and celebrates his preference for the monotone. The figures are doll-like yet powerful



Blue nights, acrylic on canvas: 24x30 inches



Love aajkal-06, acrylic on canvas: 30x36 inches

statements of human feelings and give off a feeling of solidity. The lines are bold and graphic yet softened by the artist's graceful eye depictions, an elongated doe-like format, harking back to the era of the miniature artists. The unique frames within which all his works are placed show a remarkable skill of manipulating the small canvas frame to perfection. The single work on an urban landscape has an other-worldly angle to it as the night time scene down a silent street devoid of human activity is overshadowed not by its shadowy forms of buildings but by an larger-than-life size moon bathing the scene in its soft glow.

Bringing his ideas into a nutshell, the artist sums up his creative abilities in his own words: "Every second I have a different idea to capture or a different mood. I let my mind move freely. I dislike boundaries. I just enjoy the freedom of being myself. I paint the subjects that animate my soul." That is what draws viewers into taking a second look, or staying glued to his works for while the eye roams across the canvas, admiring colours and forms patterns and animals on it, the inner voice awakens and begins to hold a tete-a-tete with the works. The inner thoughts of the artist seem to echo just what one is about to query when he explains: "I feel like a mountain stuffed with a boiling volcano trying to release itself every moment. To remain calm I strive to burst out, often either in the form of paintings or a few poetic words. I call it a controlled eruption. I free my soul on the blank canvas. Art has always been there inside me and I am developing my skills everyday."



Mask-01, acrylic on canvas: 40x30 inches





Nature

When it comes to human forms and societal depictions it is the feminine form that holds primary sway. For artist **Surjit Akre**, a senior on the Indian and international art scene, it is the strength of woman power that delivers the telling statement in her works. A veteran with various mediums of art, her forte has been in the field of canvas works made with acrylic and oil. This woman-centric artist is also known for her landscape works which too, found appreciation from viewers at the Gallery. Of note was the autumn scene in the woods, where the tree forms were ablaze with the richness of the season when the waning greenery is bathed in a riot of flame, orange, ochre and browns and the trunks of the trees appear as singed skeletons in the midst of this autumnal splendour. A sense of regenerative undercurrent is expressed in these works through the presence of a few crows pecking at leftovers from picnickers's baskets. At other points of



Jaimala

the space, the artist has included couples engrossed in their private world or a family party on an outing to the park. The entire setting has a ring of familiarity and yet wears a distinct stamp of exclusivity as Akre in her works does more than what meets the eye.

Coming face-to-face with Akre's depictions of womenfolk brings one into a world of enormous possibilities. Through her manifold stances, her everyday chores, the woman in her works engages with her viewers in highly personal terms. The dancer is depicted in a bower of fresh flowers, reminiscing her state of mind, which at that moment enjoys the sheer momentum of the dance and the joy of creativity. Nestled in a bower of white fragrance, the lovers are the ideal symbol of earthly bliss and the artist has managed this fleeting moment of happiness within a bower of eternity. The viewer can almost feel the delicacy of the blooms and feel the soft fragrance even as she envisages the charm of that intimate moment of togetherness. The dancing Shiva amidst the fish, is

a throwback on the Ardhanarishwar concept for Shiva in her works loses his rugged masculinity and instead acquires the grace of femininity.

But it is in the scenes of community living that Akre finds her true form. The pair by the village well stealing a moment of gossip as they await their turn at filling their pots, is a colourful spread in the drapery, the ornamentation and even the manner in which they hold their veils. The sight of children having balloons filled by the balloon seller, or the crowd of women and children hovering around a chaat seller brings a smile to the features of her viewers as they recall this everyday familiarity on every street corner or neighbourhood market. The crowd around the pigeon collective as they throw grain to the birds is touched with finer feelings of sympathy, gentleness and even the joy of caring. Every face on the canvas wears an expression of exclusivity even as they express easily discernible feelings of sharing and togetherness in the midst of the white pigeons. The rather disturbing cameo of the battered wife and the domineering man is another facet of reality that is usually referred to archly by most artists but which provides a factual reappraisal of the current status of the woman in the 21st century. All of these works drive viewers into a state of reveries as they walk out of the Gallery thinking, contemplating and going over the works in the mind's eye. That perhaps is the lasting effect of art that Akre places before her viewers through her feminine-centred canvases.



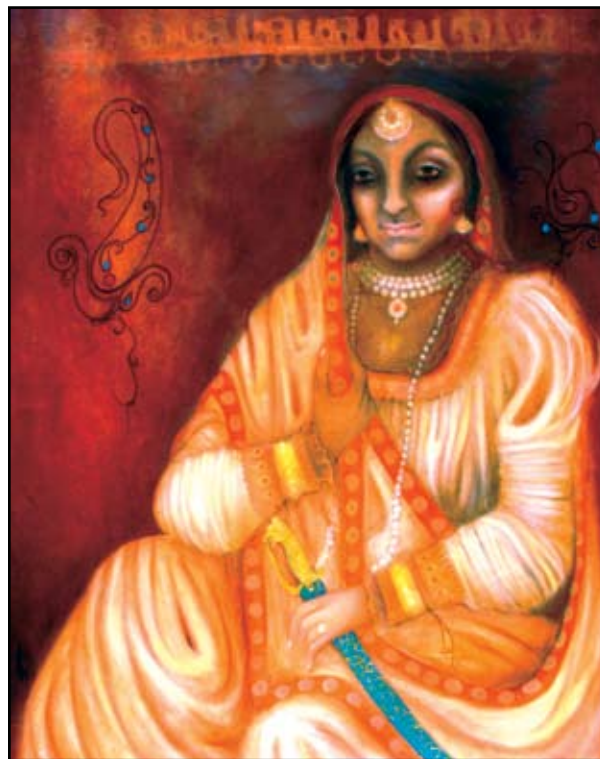
Old Delhi



The queen in locks

Painting a historical persona with passion is no cakewalk, but artist **Simret Jandu** makes light of it in the exhibition titled 'Retrospectives: The Messalini of Punjab'. Her choice of portrayal centres on Rani Jinda, the 17th wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of Prince Duleep Singh, the last Sikh King. Basing her work on research into the life and times of the erstwhile queen, she comes up with telling portraits of the empress, tracing her life through all its vicissitudes, right from the time when she was a young bride to the time when she was kept a prisoner after the demise of the Maharaja. Her imperial presence as the ruling emperor's Maharani is replete with regal splendour and commands social standing. As the series mughals, which according to the artist is still an ongoing one, the artist has not left her subject within a linear framework. She has included immediate members of the Rani's family, namely the Maharaja Ranjit Singh and her son, the young Prince Duleep Singh. In all of them there is a richness of portraiture, a sense of history and a linkage with real life characters giving a fullness and completeness to the works.

What is striking about this unique series is the manner in which the works display an understanding of the history of those turbulent times in India's northern state that was strategic to British interests but which refused to give the British colonial power a chance to make headway into the kingdom. Going beyond the parameters of painting a beautiful feminine form on the canvas, Jandu has expressed 'intending to exalt a lesser known woman and queen seen for beauty which proved to be her energy, strength of purpose and a capacity to overcome challenging situations for as long as her being could fight to save the Sikh empire from (coming under) British rule.' The gradual transformation is conceived through a masterful detailing in which the first portrait shows her subject as the Maharani Jind Kaur, arriving fresh from the neighbouring state of Himachal. She is dressed in iconic jewellery of her home state complete with elaborate silver head ornaments, embroidered full sleeved woollen jacket, fashioned after a Himachal belle's outfit. Her transformation as a Sikh queen in her middle years, displays her carrying the kirpan, the



The making of a queen

raiments of a Punjabi matron and her regal air of one who is in command. The pathos-stricken portrait is of the widowed Rani living out a lonely existence in her palace as a virtual prisoner, while the warring feudal lords of the Sikh Empire have provided the right opportunity for the British to intervene and cross the Jhelum into Punjab into the once-invincible Sikh Empire. All this and more have been included into the portraiture, like a powerful undercurrent knitting together the events of history with the aesthetic makeover of art.

The exhibition also included an outstanding portrayal of the Emperor Ranjit Singh, where the detailing of the raiment, particularly the gauze-like refinement of the jama of the subject, give the work a lasting quality. By leaving her backdrop a serene and regal cobalt, and using the technique of light placement to form a halo-like glow around the central form, additional grace and dignity. She has imbibed the

portrait with The legendary Koh-i-Noor, which was originally in the possession of the Maharaja is given a mandala format linking all the legendary hearsay around the stone into a cycle of episodes, patterns, and centralized importance. In another work, the young prince is given a teenager's boyishness with accents that have a Krishna recall, perhaps alluding to the Prince's personal life which was bogged by innumerable marriages, failed relationships and tragic fallout from them. But the gagged and bandaged rocking horse on which the derelict Prince Duleep is mounted has a metaphorical overture referring to his years of exile in England under the watchful eyes of the reigning queen. In short, all these works require more than a look at the canvas expertise. It is the close-knit merger of history and art that uplifts this series from that of being a set of paintings to that of works with telling content executed through the medium of art.



The Marriage



Bound of Promise. 60x48 inches, mixed media on canvas

The iconic image of deific forms for most artists is regarded as established home ground. Almost every one of them at some time or other has created Ganesha forms with reasonable satisfaction and middling success. In the case of artist **Aloke Kumar Paul**, the images have stayed and gradually, over the years, have acquired an elegance that seems to define his style. His recent exhibition titled 'Voyage Towards Peace', brings home this truth. Extending himself beyond the signature symbols he has managed to combine them into a challenging composition where identities become secondary and the entire arrangement becomes one of visual significance. Not restricting himself to iconic symbols he has even explored themes such as raga-based paintings, choosing as his leit motif the Raga Todi, for a start.



Raga Todi. 30x40 inches 2010, mixed media on canvas



Folk in modern idiom of music. 30x40 inches



Realization. 30x40 inches, mixed media on canvas

Also in the range of his inspiration are a series based on the meditative Buddha form, which too, is given a meticulous structured arrangement where the serenity of the subject becomes the centrepoint of concentration for his viewers.

What comes out clear in the works is the fact that the artist does not combine images in order to play visual tricks his viewer. There is a strong conversational interpretation conveyed through the images, as the graphic and cubistic forms, arranged in a mirror-like placement of opposites, seem to be in conversation with one another. As a modernist who interprets the world through an interesting array of forms both realistic and mythological, his starting point has been his colour palette. Restricting himself to a contiguous circle of reds, oranges, ochre and earthy browns, Paul conveys the spiritual quality of his art, as the colour wheel reminds one of glowing lamps, temple interiors and even the rosy hues of twilight. As the figures are larger than life forms there is a sense of control and power conveyed through them. The focus of the canvas space thus becomes a portal to present a vocabulary of sorts, wherein, the forms, the spaces, the themes and the thoughts are distinct and yet mingle into a holistic combination that harmonise into a pattern of easy presentation.



The Inspiration. 25x38 inches, mixed media on canvas



Euphoria. 60x48 inches, acrylic on canvas

Paintings that remain enmeshed in a sense of quietude, and do not resonate with sudden highs and lows at first, might look predictable and unexciting. Not so, the works of artist **Nikki Anand** whose show titled "Euphoria" at the gallery drew highly positive reactions all around. The fantasy element that infused the works had something enticing in them and charmed viewers into remaining glued to the canvases, trying to decipher and 'discover' the colours and forms emerging to the surface on closer look. Speaking of her art, Anand surmised that her art was: 'Basically symbolic which has spontaneity and purity. Be it figures or abstract or landscapes impression of



Bliss. 48x36 inches, acrylic on canvas



Divine Romance. 30x34 inches, acrylic on canvas

the creations of the universe they seem to be magical, spiritual and powerful.' Technique-wise the colours merge into a diffused form to read as a mass of detail. The flow of her lines is intuitive and rhythmic as she allows her brush to record her interaction with the universe on her personal terms.

While the female form is the anchorhold of the painting process in her art, it is not an in-the-face representation that one encounters. The figure is veiled behind a series of flowing lines and strokes and at times dissolves into the backdrop like a seamless

neutrality only to entice the viewer to go deep within and mentally image out her contours from the aura of the space around her. And just as one begins to think that the aqua blue palette is ideal for her subject, the artist springs a surprise by dipping into crimson hues to come up with an equally subliminal effect. The flowing strokes, the dreamy figures, the control and quietness in the composition speak out a message of inner grace that only an artist like Nikki Anand, who has spent years in the world of canvas art, can command.





Is Not My future. 34x35 inches, oil on canvas

Mention the word outdoors and the Indian psyche will immediately affix a corollary... 'tiger', to it. This was just the way in which artist **Gita Bhattacharya**, expressed her inner urges when she took to painting seriously. A passionate lover of nature in the wild, Gita has explored this theme not just through close shots of the tiger but also through wide screen, panoramic views, of outdoor settings in India and even abroad. Closer home, she has dabbled in a few works focused on interiors with antique furnishings and grimy, brick-lined walls, conveying thereby a sense of atmosphere on one's mental imprint. Thus the works, wrought in a riot of greens, ochre, tan, sky-blue and desert-dust, wear an air of symbolic and allegorical richness. The forms therefore cease to be graded as copies from photographs and become an enjoyment of open spaces, imagined within one's home space during a quiet interlude.



White Tiger. 27x31 inches, oil on canvas



Waiting for Prey. 35x25 inches, oil on canvas

Besides this subtle blending of scenic settings and their impressions on the mind, one is drawn to the artist's special treatment of water, on her canvases. While some of them glorify the torrent-like appeal of

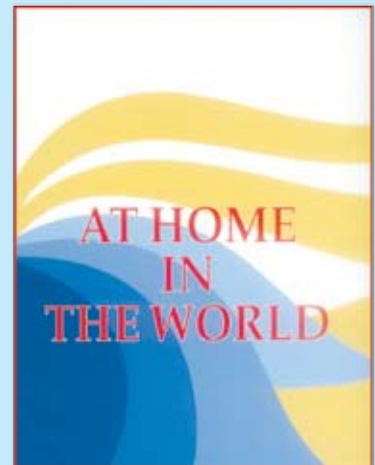
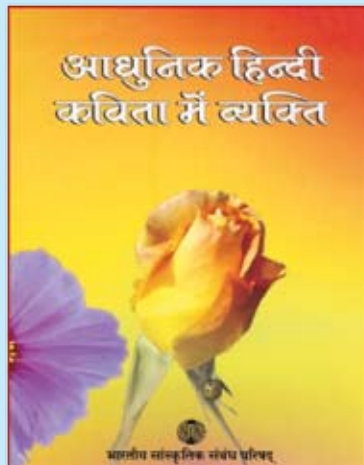
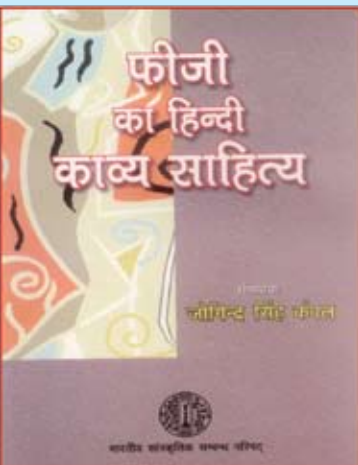
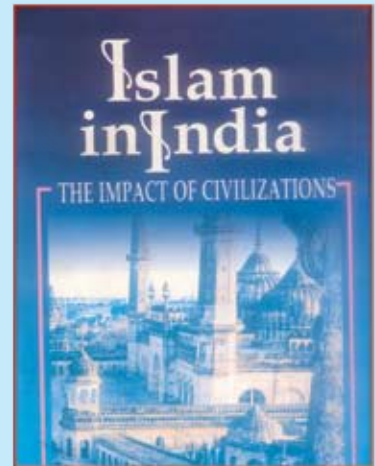
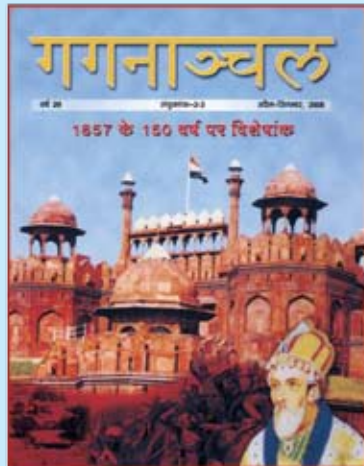
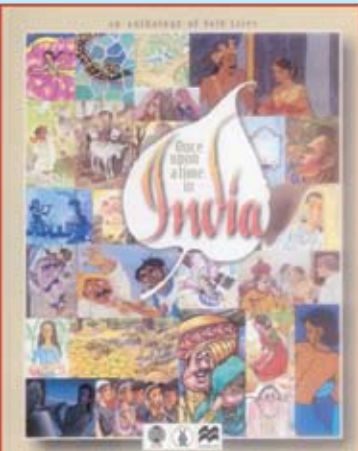


Sunset Dive. 24x36 inches, oil on canvas

the water mass, elsewhere it is the serene passivity of the surface that magnetizes the senses. The splash of a giant whale into rust-tinted waters at sundown, the soaring of a bald eagle above a river combines hill and dale into a composite grouping. In other works, the water front image captures the velvety smoothness of pools where reeds line banks, rocks are mirrored on the middle course and trees stand like sentinels along the water's edge. Admittedly none of the works are depictions of the unusual or unsightly, tools that artists employ to grab viewer attention. In these works, it is the familiarity, rather than an attempt to present an intriguing dialogue that remains grooved upon viewer sensibilities. By reminding viewers about such scenic delights once again through her art, Gita had won over the minds and hearts of viewers at her show.



Traditional and Contemporary. 32x25 inches, oil on canvas



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