

*Pheroza Cooper as Frosine, Hilla Cooper as Marianne  
and Bomi Kapadi as Harpagon in Moliere's The Miser*

## Indian Amateur Drama

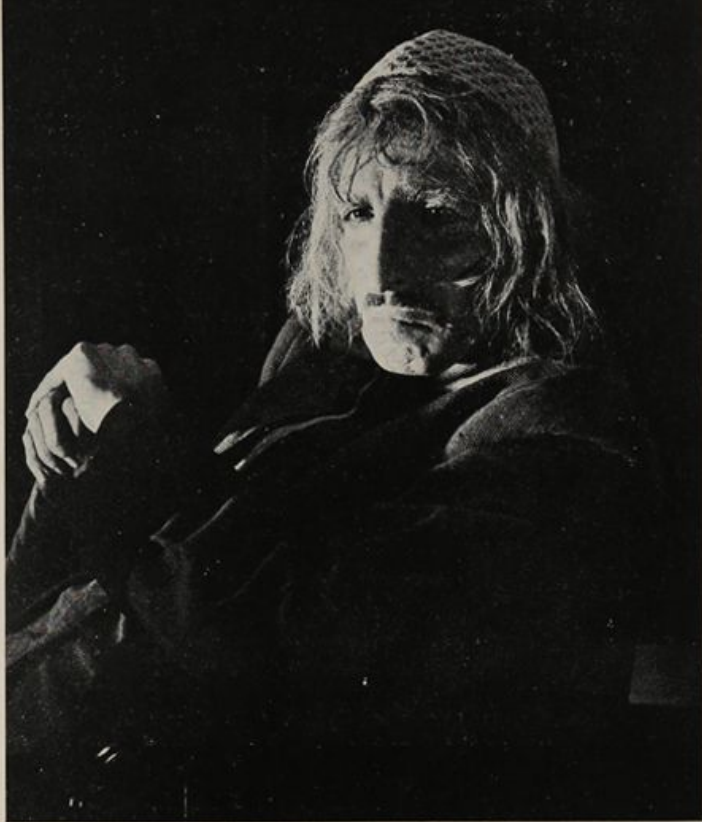
THOUGH it is fashionable in some quarters to decry amateur drama few would deny the contribution made by it to the advancement of the theatre. Led by dedicated and enthusiastic lovers of drama the amateur movement has often found it possible to ignore box-office and other economic considerations and engage in bold experimentation, with no comfort of profit and every risk of calumny.

In India there exists a very vigorous amateur theatre movement. Chiefly confined to the middle and upper middle class, the large output of this movement has rarely attained outstanding merit. Safe plays, traditional or well-known classics or "sure-fire" successes have usually been chosen chiefly because of financial considerations. Nevertheless, in recent times some groups have found enough courage to venture into difficult plays or controversial plays on an experimental level. More attention is paid

to form, decor, lighting, music and other accessories hitherto considered only incidental. The results have often reached unexpected and outstanding levels.

The groups most active in this vanguard have, lamentably enough, been confined in the main to the English language groups. Plays chosen, naturally, have been drawn from European and American drama. And yet in terms of exemplary significance their contribution is invaluable. The photographs which follow depict scenes from the productions of one of the many forward groups in India, the Theatre Unit of Bombay. Led by E. Alkazi this group has now achieved a standing beyond the mere amateur acting group. It has its own classes in dramaturgy and allows members to take an integrated interest in Drama through play production, lectures, discussions, music sessions and so on.





*Bomi Kapadi as Harpagon*

Alkazi's setting for *The Miser* (October 1957) consisted of a chequered platform raised eight inches above actual stage level, one chair, two stools, a table, a bird cage, and a wrought-iron lamp. Three steps framed by two narrow posts provided an entry on one side of the stage; on the other a small ramp served a similar purpose. Originally designed for the Jai Hind College Hall, Bombay, the same setting was adapted to open air conditions when the Theatre Unit presented the play at the National Defence Academy, Khadakvasla.

*A scene from the play*





*Pheroza Cooper as Joan*



*Pheroza Cooper as Joan and Manohar Pitale as Archbishop of Rheims*



In P. D. Shenoy's production of *St. Joan* (January 1958) simplicity of setting allowed for smooth flow of action despite frequent changes of scene. Pheroza Cooper who played Frosine in *The Miser* assumed the leading role in Shaw's masterpiece.





*Hima Devi as Hedda Gabler,  
Derek Bond as Jurgen Tesman and  
Malcolm Macrae as Eilert Lovborg*

*Hima Devi as Hedda Gabler. This  
picture shows the "inner room"  
seen beyond the main sitting room*

Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* produced by E. Alkazi (June 1958) was the occasion for a lively controversy in Bombay's theatre circles and newspaper columns. Some critics said the settings were "un-Scandinavian". However, the striking feature of this production was the fact that three rooms were seen simultaneously on the stage—the main sitting room, at the back of which was the hall-way with a mirror, cleverly utilised to catch the reflected faces of the actors in certain scenes. To stage left of the sitting room was the "inner room". In the second act the action of the characters in this room served as an effective counter-point to the major action on the stage.



*Hima Devi as Hedda and Hilla  
Cooper as Julie Tessimson*





not only upon English and Sanskrit plays but also on those in other Indian languages.

A substantial number of original dramas came from powerful writers like Kailasam Sriranga, Karant, Masti, Parvatvani, Bendra, Kallur, Kulkarni, Dixit, Gundamma, Inamdar, Hegde and a host of others. Kannada drama covers a wide range from straight plays to blank verse drama, from grand operas to the comic, from shadow plays and mimes to folk plays.

#### Forms and Expression in Marathi

The first decades of the 20th century saw the Marathi stage being developed by two noteworthy pioneers, Kirloskar and Dewal, working under the influence of the Indian classical and the Western dramas, especially after the advent of the English theatre in Bombay. The outstanding dramatist of this time was Khadilkar, followed by Kolhatkar, Gadkari, etc.

A new drama for the stage began with Mama Warerkar and P. K. Atre who set a fresh tone and character. The Marathi professional stage at this time was strong but caught up in the meshes of music. Still its continued popularity sustained it even through its twilight period.

The present neat, well-knit plays with crisp dialogues which have now set the pace, came largely with Rangnekar. The new plays cover a long range from the simple to the highly sophisticated, in dramatists like Shirwadkar, Nana Jog, Tendulkar, Kanekar, Sarita Phadke, with a variety of experiments in new forms and expressions.

The Marathi stage, like the Bengali, has succeeded in maintaining an unbroken tradition of its own, with sustained popular support. Thus the playwright has the confidence that not only will his play be put on the boards but will be watched by a warm, understanding and appreciative audience.

The Marathi stage thus offers a rich fare and there is always something new and exciting to keep the theatre-hungry audience guessing.

#### Experimentation in Punjab

The Punjabi theatre seems to begin with Ishwar Chand Nanda, whose first play produced in 1913 launched the movement and is, therefore, new in the real sense. Gradually from mere social plays it entered the wider realm as a galaxy of writers like Sant Singh Sekhon, Harcharan Singh Duggal built up the Punjabi theatre.

After the partition, the Punjabi theatre re-established itself in Delhi, to which Gurdial Singh Khosla made a great contribution. Balwant Gargi, who has had opportunity to see and study the new trends in the theatre in the West, has made a very valuable contribution. Equally significant is the work of Sheila Bhatia with her experiment in Punjabi opera with folk melodies. A great factor of advantage with Punjabi language is that it has no class shades, it is universal and the same tongue flows from the illiterate to the academician.

#### Production Deficiency in Tamil Theatre

The modern Tamil stage begins in the early part of this century with Sambanda Mudaliar who as a vigorous votary of the modern theatre tried his best to eschew music and popularise straight plays. He wrote his own plays, directed the shows, acted the leading part, and assumed the leadership of his troupe to keep the stage alive. He succeeded in running it for over two decades and put on something like fifty dramas. The movement caught on and Tamil Nad has not only a vigorous amateur theatre but also quite a powerful professional one. Historical and social plays are very popular and the theatre artists occupy a high social status.

While Tamil drama was earlier enriched by translations from other Indian languages, as also from European





dramas, there has also been an appreciable output of original drama in Tamil like that of A. Srinivas Raghavan S. D. Sundaram, C. N. Aunadevai, S. Krishnamurti, Aru Ramanathan, Gomati Swaminathan and others. There has been a revival of dance-dramas especially through Kalakshetra. Tamil stage has, however, still much to do to improve the production quality.

#### **Aesthetic Standards Wanting in Telugu Drama**

The end of the 19th century witnessed the modern Telugu theatre take shape. There came into being a well established professional stage which attained strength and popularity over a quarter of a century. In the earlier days mostly mythological and historical themes were in vogue. The new and original drama forms found expression from the early twenties which launched the current plays with effective and crisp dialogues even when dealing with poetic themes—such are the plays of Chinta Dikshitula or Viswanatha Satyanarayana.

One of the outstanding writers wielding the pen with iconoclastic power is P. V. Rajmanna whose plays attained great success on the stage. Equally original are playwrights like Narla, Atreya, Arudra and Buchibabu who have broken new ground and introduced novel forms. The professional stage still goes strong and seems to possess vitality enough to gain popularity and draw audiences, though it needs better aesthetic standards of production.

#### **Social and Political Themes Popular in Kerala**

Even though Kerala is renowned for its variety of dance-drama forms, the straight drama in the modern sense is comparatively new, less than a century old. The early dramas were mainly Sanskrit translations. As in other regions, the end of last century saw the ushering in of translations from European languages into Malayalam. With writers like C.V. Raman Pillai started

the current modern Malayalam theatre followed by a host of other dramatists like K. Padmanabh Pillai, K. Krishna Menon, Gopinathan Nair, Sivadas Menon. The theatre gained popularity through actors like Keseva Pillai, Parameswaran Pillai, Chellappan Nair. The social themes were largely popular.

In contemporary plays quite a few with political themes are found by writers like Ramkrishna Pillai, Kesheo Dev, Varkey, Vasudev Govindan Nair. The themes are wide in variety dealing with political elections to cooperative farming. Despite this large and varied volume of output the Kerala theatre as such has still to find its feet and build its wall and roof.

#### **Royal Background of Urdu**

The Urdu theatre is said to have had its roots in the Royal Court of Wajid Ali Shah, king of Oudh in the middle of the 19th century. There did flourish a professional Urdu theatre, rather hybrid but full of novelty and vigour, whose influence was felt pretty nearly everywhere because of its mobility to tour, from the end of last century up to the second decade when the film began to sweep the country beating back the stage.

Even though Urdu plays continued to be written the revival of the current Urdu theatre began only in the forties, greatly influenced by modern thought and technique. Dramatists such as Ashk, Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Krishan Chander and others have made valuable contribution in this field. The practical contribution of Prithviraj Kapoor to the theatre by maintaining a professional troupe, getting special plays written, himself directing and acting them, is invaluable, even though there is yet no established Urdu theatre as such.

#### **The Emergence of National Drama**

The dawn of freedom marks also the beginnings of the national drama and the stage. The establishment of

*(Continued on page 157)*



## Drama in India (Continued from page 110)

the Sangeet Natak Akadami (national body for dance, drama and music), the birth of a national theatre federation like the Bharatiya Natya Sangh to string and weave a national approach in the creation of drama and the stage, the organising of national drama festivals that bring together on one stage plays from all over the country—all these are visible marks of a new fabric that is being cast, with varied strands, shades and patterns to make one monumental piece. This is the period of flux, of doubts, of death and regeneration, when the old is being cast away, the new is yet in the cauldron, when one swings between stretching out to the stellar spaces and sinking down to the caves of gloom. Great waves of new ideas sweep over the land leaving vivid traces. But they have yet to assume a more definite shape and strength. The times call for challenging artists who will make the theatre the open creative arena, an organic part of the national life, the voice of all the people. It cannot conform to any one style or form of a region for this country is made up of a variety of expressions.

A significant collective effort in the life of the theatre was the creation of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh (Indian Theatre Centre) in 1949, which now has nearly three hundred groups affiliated through Natya Sanghs all over the country. It pools resources for common purposes and creates a sense of kinship between theatre artists and groups. At the same time it allows full play for the individuality of each group, and fosters local colour and traditions in order that the Indian theatre may become known in all its rich diversity. Through its relationship with the International Theatre Institute the Natya Sangh seeks to keep pace with contemporary world theatre while at the same time offering its own contribution.

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