

## THE ARTS

## AN UNCONVENTIONAL PLAY..

WHEN Girish Karnad wrote his brilliant trio of Kannada plays, *Tughlaq*, *Yayati* and *Hayavadana*, more than a decade ago, an aura of legend enveloped him. Here was a Rhodes scholar who had majored in Math at Oxford but one who wrote gratefully in his mother-tongue. However, Karnad's plays would not have won the country-wide acclaim that they did if he had not boldly essayed vital new forms at a time when a ferment was already evident in our theatre.

By DNYANESHWAR NADKARNI

*Tughlaq* has a historical basis. *Yayati* derives its theme from Hindu mythology. *Hayavadana* (which means "horseface"), on the other hand, is rooted in our folklore. Karnad went to Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads* for his plot, but the German work in turn borrows from our own *Panchatantra*. In all three plays there is a strong element of wish-fulfilment; but only in *Yayati* and *Hayavadana* does the supernatural come into play. Oblique parallels are struck between the mighty Tughlaq and one of his subjects running away from the law. In *Yayati*, the king of that name pines for a youthful alter-ego—a dream accomplished through the sacrifices of his son. In *Hayavadana*, the nature of the self is explored on a metaphysical level when a moral conundrum is set following the transposition of a couple of heads against the bodies of two men who are contending for the love of the same woman.

In the play, two strands of folkloric tale run parallel to each other and finally intertwine to lend muscle to the whole purport of the playwright. The longer and more central story is that of two bosom friends, Devadatt, the patrician scholar-poet, and Kapil, the plebeian man of brawn. Devadatt, after constantly falling in love with the young women of the town, is smitten with Padmini, the beautiful daughter of a rich merchant. It is Kapil who woos her on behalf of his friend. Much later it is revealed to us that Devadatt commits himself to a strange vow: to lay his head at the feet of the god Maharudra if he succeeds in winning Padmini's affections.

But the crisis in their triangular relationship does not arise till Padmini is pregnant. Meanwhile, Kapil himself becomes emotionally involved with her; but, loyal as ever to his friend, he tries to keep his

A number of eminent directors have tried their hand at Girish Karnad's brilliant play, *Hayavadana* (reviewed immediately below), which deals with the eternal dilemma of mind versus body. The latest attempt by acclaimed director Vijaya Mehta (see companion piece) has been extremely successful.

distance. A distinct contrast is built up between the two men *vis-a-vis* the woman. Padmini finds herself more and more embroiled with Kapil on ventures in which her bookish husband has little interest.

Finally, when at Devadatt's behest, the three set out on a trip to Ujjaini (the town redolent of Kalidasa, the Sanskrit poet-playwright), the ghastly incident which turns the play around towards tragedy is staged. Sending his wife away on some pretext with his friend,

death. The briefer story is set close to the folk theatre framework of the play. A party of rustic actors comes across a man endowed with a horse's head. He is the product of a marriage between a princess and a horse (the latter an accursed man whom this marriage releases from his animal state). *Hayavadana*, as this strange creature is called, badly wants to achieve some unity of physical being. Ultimately, when the god Maharudra grants him his wish he



Padmini (Rekha Kalekar) and Kapil (Uday Mhaikar): "The central theme of the incompleteness of man is stressed throughout (the play).

Devadatt swears by his old vow and severs his head at the feet of the goddess Mahakali. When Kapil returns in advance of Padmini, he sees his friend thus dead and, unable to bear the sorrow, also beheads himself. Padmini returns and cries havoc over this double self-sacrifice, prays to Mahakali and is granted the boon that only if she were to replace the severed heads, her husband and her friend would come alive.

And there's the rub, in the shrine of a comical and somnolent Mahakali, Padmini transposes the heads. With the two men springing to life, the physical and moral poser emerges: who is the real husband? The one with the husband's head or the one with his body? Padmini accepts the first alternative; but soon after her child is born, the three have to come to terms with themselves and, in diverse ways, seek the solution of

becomes not a complete man, but a complete horse. Nonetheless, he is happy.

How do we relate the story of Padmini to the anecdote about the horse-man? It is the central theme of the incompleteness of man that is stressed throughout both the stories. If the Padmini story had not sounded this, it would have merely been a tragi-comic story of the mischief played by fate and a sleepy goddess.

Karnad's play, in the format of a performance somewhat on the lines of Karnataka's traditional form of dance-drama, *Yakshagana*. We have, therefore, a chorus-like *Bhagavath*. In Satyadev Dubey's Hindi production of the play many years ago, it was this part that was handled unmusically. Even with such gifted actors as Amrish Puri, Amol Palekar and Sumit Pradhan in the main roles, the production

lacked colour and lightness. There was no proper balance between the romantic and the ludicrous.

When Karnad's colleague in theatre and cinema, B. V. Karanth staged the original Kannada production, it was a distinct contrast to Dubey's effort. The actors moved with a dancer-like grace and verve. Karanth, who is steeped in music, invested the proceedings with the spirit of a song. It was visually and aurally a most satisfying production. Leaving the theatre, the audience continued to unravel the exact connection between the central story and the marginal one in the nature of a philosophical comment.

And now, after an interval of several years, we have a truly professional Marathi version of *Hayavadana*. The late Chhim Tryamb Khanolkar a gifted poet, had translated the text a decade ago but it had to be considerably refurbished. This has been done by D. G. Godse with much imagination and an attention to linguistic variety and authenticity. What makes this version all the more stageworthy are the original lyrics penned by Shanta Shelke.

From the foyer of the theatre (in Bombay, where the play is currently being staged), a procession of villagers comes down the steps carrying a picturesque palanquin. This sets the tone of the entire production. These are the actors and the singers, who will perform the story of Padmini and the two men in her life. The production is staged in a stylised manner, the impression nowhere being withheld that the actors are not from the village troupe but sophisticated urban artistes trained and choreographed to relate to our classical acting.

It is in this context that Rekha Kalekar as Padmini, Ravindra Mankani as Devadatt and Uday Mhaikar as Kapil, make such a wonderful impact. For buffoonery and 'horse play', we have Vijay Kadam and Vijay Chavan, with Vidya Patwardhan playing a hilarious Mahakali. Sharad Jambekar is the Maharashtrian alternative to the *Bhagavath*, a fine singer aided by skilled instrumentalists. The music of the play comes from B. V. Chandra-  
varan (the *Bhagavath* fame) who, with Godse, has been an associate of Vijaya Mehta's on a number of internationally staged experimental theatre projects.

The final impression which this *Hayavadana* leaves on one's mind is of verbal and visual virtuosity, of a sensuousness combined with depth of thought and feeling. It is, perhaps, the nearest to the playwright's intent.



..AND ITS CONTROVERSIAL DIRECTOR