

# Akazi rushes to rescue 'Tughlaq'

KULDEEP KUMAR on the final act in an unseemly controversy

**TUGHLAQ** left for London on October 1, shrouded in a mystery which is just appropriate to it. Famous play, scheduled to be sented at the current Festival India some time next month, being directed by none other than former National School of Drama Director Ebrahim Alkazi—but not before two directors were picked and dropped in quick succession by the Foyal Committee under

pressure. How Mr Alkazi, an Indian of parentage who reportedly held Kuwaiti citizenship after leaving NSD amidst fierce controversy in 1976, came to accept the offer he had initially declined, remains a jealously guarded secret. Repeated enquiries with the National Heritage, an organisation run by Mr Alkazi's wife, were met with a cryptic one-line reply: "Mr Alkazi does not have time to talk to the press." How secretive the whole affair is can be gauged from the fact that there has been no official announcement about Alkazi directing the play for the Festival. It is also true that no shows have been held at the prestigious Kamani Auditorium booked for four days precisely for this purpose.

*Sunday Observer* had reported on how *Tughlaq*, the late Mr Karnad's celebrated play, was first assigned to Mr Prasanna, a young talented director from Bangalore, following the refusal of both Mr Ebrahim Alkazi and B V Karanth to produce the play for the Festival. Prasanna dropped at the last minute in an unseemly haste after he had received his production and theatre earnings from critics alike. Prasanna's production, which cost Rs 50,000, was cancelled reportedly on the instance of the present NSD Director B M Shah owing to "political considerations." Prasanna turned out, had committed the blasphemy of having campaigned against Mrs Indira Gandhi during the historic 1978 general by-election.

Following Prasanna's unceremonious exit, NSD Repertory Director Anand Singh, a seasoned director known for his directorial talents, was chosen for the possibly "to revive" the play. The production of the play in the style of

too has been shown the door even before he could decide on his script and begin rehearsals.

It is learnt that this time, it was the playwright himself who put his foot down and clinched the issue once for all. Incensed as he was over the quixotic handling of the whole thing, Girish Karnad is believed to have raised this matter at the meeting of the NSD Society, the apex body governing the School, held on August 28 in New

Delhi. record time—that is, barely 15 days.

Contrary to the practice adopted in the case of Shanta Gandhi's *Jasma Odan* and Prasanna's now discarded production, no shows have been held for the public at home, which has prompted Prasanna to quip: "Probably, they themselves are not sure of what they have done. I wonder how can anybody produce a play in 15 days when normally

these remarks and says: "At a time when all sections of informed and democratic public opinion are unitedly opposing the nefarious Bihar Press Bill all over the country, it is a very serious matter for the head of a supposedly enlightened and prestigious institution like the NSD to take such a blatantly anti-Press stand..."

"Interestingly, this stand of Shah throws new light on that long period of the uncertain



Prasanna, Ebrahim Alkazi and Girish Karnad : Mrs Gandhi's opponent had to withdraw

Delhi. Karnad is said to have expressed his firm opinion that if *Tughlaq* was to be produced in the Alkazi-style, then there could be no better choice than Alkazi himself. He, it seems, also doled out the threat that he would be constrained to withdraw permission to produce his play in case anybody other than Alkazi directed it for the Festival.

This came as the proverbial last straw. The options were now very clear. Either to send *Tughlaq* under the direction of Mr Alkazi, who first produced the play way back in 1967 and raised it to its present stature in the subsequent productions; or to face the ignominy of not sending the much-publicised play to the Festival, an event designed primarily to boost

India's image in the international cultural market place.

Politically, it suited the loyalists too well. As the theatre grapevine has it, Alkazi has always been very close to the Nehru family, and it is the request from the highest quarters that made him come all the way from Kuwait to produce the play in

the whole exercise takes at least six weeks."

For all this mess, the Festival Committee has found an easy scapegoat in NSD Director B M Shah whose play for the Festival has been dropped without assigning any reasons whatsoever. The overzealous espousal of the Con-

gress(I) cause could not come to Shah's rescue and the axe fell on his much-too-willing neck.

Mr Shah has come under fire from theatre groups as well. Jan Natya Manch, a prominent street theatre group of the capital, has issued a statement condemning Shah's anti-press remarks in an interview recently published in the Hindi news weekly *Dinman*, where he has candidly admitted that he is a loyal Congress(I) man and his job as NSD Director is to implement the government's policies. In the interview, Shah has blamed the press for creating a needless controversy over the *Tughlaq* affair and has favoured restrictions on "irresponsible journalism."

The statement issued by Jan Natya Manch takes exception to

search for a suitable person for the post of the NSD Director, after which the mantle of running this august institution had fallen on him. Shah has finally revealed the qualities that the powers that be look for in the director of the NSD. Future aspirants for the job may take a cue from here," the statement reads.

Shah's role notwithstanding, with Alkazi directing *Tughlaq*, the play has traversed the classic Tughlaqian trajectory—from Delhi to Daulatabad; from Daulatabad back to Delhi.

The entire *Tughlaq* episode smacks of the same senseless perversity that dominates the eventful life of Emperor Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq, the main character in the play. The same political intrigues and despotic temper that the play attempts to portray and denounce so successfully have come to characterise its production.

Perhaps, this is the way a truly "realistic theatre" is being sought to be developed in our country by the all-powerful cultural overlords who have the final say in every matter.

