

Karnad's Karmasutra



Photographs: Tayeb Badshah

GIRISH KARNAD is a nice guy. Sorry, but there's no simpler way of putting it. Unless one wants to be simplistic and say that he is a multi-faceted personality and then not be able to comment on any of his facets. He is a well-liked man, not in the sense Miller's Willy Loman might have meant, but someone who would be a strong contender to be Annie Hall's escort. The other one obviously would be Woody Allen. No, Girish Karnad is not terribly funny. He's just inherently nice.

After a few telephone calls (where he always made it a point to come on the line) he finally agreed to meet me. It so happened that at the appointed time we were both waiting for the lift (he had just returned from dubbing). What I noticed first was his umbrella – simple, quaint (with a wooden handle) and yet the kind that would weather many storms. Like the man himself.

But what strikes one most is that he is a gentleman in what comes across as a predominantly chauvinistic set-up. And it's not because he opens the door for you, but because chivalry and a deep sense of equality are very well amalgamated in him. The man gives people (even if it is an opinion) the right to choose. That includes his wife who chose to give up a very good medical practice abroad and has not continued it here.

In most ways he is a Today man, so much so that he prefers to update history.

He is the type who will believe in free enterprise but won't spend hours poring over the shares and stock market columns.

He is as subtle as he is with his roles but not inconspicuous as they sometimes make him out to be.

And he is wary of strangers.

Our conversation in the lift went thus:

He: Frankly, I wanted to get out of this. What purpose do interviews serve?

Me: Everything in life does not have a purpose, but we do move on.

He: Yes, but... anyway, it takes too much time.

I don't know if he had a premonition, but I did overstep the time he gave me. And he did react like the gentleman he is. No, he did not say, "It was no problem at all." Nor did he dismiss me off with "Oh yes, you did." He just smiled and spread out his hands in a gesture that said: "Well, what has happened has happened." Just like what will be.

Though he insists he is part of the scene, he seems very different. Probably he conforms to what Sartre meant when he said that a man must have the courage to act like everybody else in order not to be like anybody.

INTO THE MIND OF MAN



Do you feel like an Outsider?

No, I don't. Ultimately every individual is different. Everyone is his own self. But there is no sense of alienation. If I was surrounded by a pack of idiots maybe I would have liked to be an outsider!

Would you have liked to be someone other than yourself?

No, not at all.

That means you cannot think of a possibility higher than yourself?

I can think of a higher possibility within myself. And at the spiritual and creative level one wants to use it to the best before one dies. One does not have to seek something from outside.

Then you have never had a role model?

I don't think it's necessary to have a role model. My role model in that sense has been myself.



Which means you have to create an idealised image of yourself and then imitate it.

One needs to know oneself not necessarily as one is, because that can be pretty unbearable sometimes! But one does seek possibilities within oneself.

Isn't it possible to discover yourself through others?

Very much so. Others are absolutely essential if the discovery is a social process. If it's a mystical thing then it's different.

How selfless can a relationship be?

A relationship necessarily means two people so there has to be give and take. But one gets into a relationship because one likes someone and is willing to give. And whatever selflessness arises is out of selfishness.

Is a man-woman relationship most fascinating to you at the physical, the mental, the emotional or the metaphysical level?

The physical is the basis though it's not necessarily apart from the rest. What one tends to do is create images and force people into them. That's why marriages collapse, when people don't fit into our preconceived notions of them. One likes a person for what she is and not what she should be. The relationship grows through discovery.

Do you find women exhausting?

Not at all. On the contrary, I find them very stimulating just as I find some men so. But yes, some women can be very exhausting!

Do you feel that women have more stinging power, the power to hurt?

Well, in the Indian social set-up which is closed and claustrophobic some women get back by stinging. A man generally gets away by just shouting.

How would you deal with a woman like that?

If I liked her I'd accept it, if I didn't I would avoid her like the pestilence.

What do you have to say about open relationships, where the person concerned can just walk out because there is no commitment?

It's a nice possibility, I mean who wouldn't like to just walk out! But it's Utopian. No relationship is that simple, even between friends. There are some obligations if you decide to be with someone. Walking out of a relationship means it's over, because you walk out only when there is nothing left. But if a

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would do it."*

relationship is going through a rough patch for whatever reason, but has not ended, I think one has to give it its due and try to make it work.

For you it may be a genuine respect for relationships, but don't you think that as a rule in our society the concept of a one-woman man is to a large extent the result of social conditioning?

It differs from man to man. It depends on what one looks for. I have very few real friends, but the friendships have lasted years and they fulfill my emotional needs. In that sense there have been very few women in my life. Probably I've just had casual relationships – I am not talking of counting the score. Had I married earlier I think I would have been a one-woman man. It's just that because one married late one had relationships before that. But I wouldn't condemn a man who bed-hopped. People are constantly proving things in their life!

Which means that you wouldn't get into an extra-marital affair?

Talking of marriage, it can also be an unhappy thing. It's not by definition a very happy thing! My wife is a very qualified person but she has given up her job out of choice and also because the children are small. But if she was 25 and was just content to look after the husband it could be a deadly existence. You may like your husband a lot but two people living together with nothing from outside could be a dead relationship. This is where extra-marital relationships come in because both are and. A

MEN

woman may however choose to only look after the home and children and find that creative.

So much is being made of motherhood. Do you think it's all a myth?

Women are constantly becoming mothers! I think it's marvellous. I think my wife is a very good mother and it's a pleasure watching her.

Are you a chauvinist?

No, I don't think I am. I'm not a chauvinist in any sense. I am a genuine liberal.

But are you also liberated from the concepts within you?

Oh yes. What concepts one has come from the family. My mother was a widow who remarried many years ago, so one was brought up with liberal ideas. In fact, recently a young woman was telling my mother about the problems she was having with her marriage and my mother said why don't you get a divorce and that woman was absolutely dumb-founded. Here was this 82-year-old woman and this young woman. See, even today people are not willing to go against the tide.

Does chauvinism arise only as a result of insecurity?

If it arises out of insecurity it is not chauvinism, it's an emo-



said all right let's make the sexes equal in every way, don't expect sensuousness from women. Then what difference is left? There is just sex. So ultimately we'll all be reduced to sex objects, nothing else!

Can we have a Chippendales kind of situation here?

I am sorry, but I don't know what that is.

It's a place in America where men strip and women pay to watch.

If women enjoy it, why not? Some men do have good bodies, you know! Here, of course, the option is not available.

How would you define chivalry in the context of our times?

Horseplay. Because it comes from the same source - chivalerie! Frankly, it is just one of the games that people play.

Do you play it?

Of course I do. I like old-fashioned games. I like women to be coy to a certain extent. If a woman wouldn't want me to open the door, I wouldn't. But my natural reflex would be to do so. I can't imagine a state where one does not play roles at all.

How would you feel if in a job situation you had to compete with a woman?

I would not feel anything. I would not even occur to me. If

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tioned. Chauvinism is something that the ego may need, it's a result of believing in stereotypes, in perpetuating the macho image.

So Superman was invented to perpetuate that image?

Superman is basically a children's comic strip and all fantasy. But you are right, most of these characters are only male.

Today when some men talk of equality it's almost in a patronising tone, like she's been asking for it so long so let's give it.

I myself don't know what equality is. There is a difference between the relationship I have with a man and the one I have with a woman. With a man I don't expect a certain kind of sensuousness. If a man gave me a comforting shoulder it would be an almost business-like gesture, with a woman I'd like her to mother me. It could be said that I expect her to play a role. But then if there was no difference one would not need women.

Talking of feminism I must give credit to Prof K G Shah. He

someone, man or woman, got something that I too was in the running for I'd probably resent it, nothing else.

Considering you have such an open attitude, are there many women who have influenced you, women you admire?

They are all in the family - my mother, my wife, my mother-in-law. Because I know them best. I am lucky to have women around me who are truly admirable. My mother-in-law is a Parsi who married a Coorgi 42 years ago and fought for the right to be permitted to enter the fire temple. If you want to do something you can do it. They did not let circumstances overtake them.

If you were to spend an evening having an intellectual discussion, who would you choose to be with - Amrita Pritam, Rekha, Jane Fonda or Germaine Greer?

If I had to have a stimulating evening I'd rather read Amrita Pritam or Germaine Greer. Otherwise I'd prefer to be with my friends. I hate spending time with celebrities. It takes too much

time. When one is young it is different.

Indians are basically a lethargic people, aren't they?

Not basically, but in the last 200 years we have become so. After being colonised we have become defensive and self-conscious of our creative effort. Our responses have not developed, that is why so much talent gets wasted.

Is the spirituality of India only a glorified myth?

This is something that has never attracted me. India is not a spiritual country's just that there have been very many spiritual people here.

Are you a rebel only because you want to play the role of an angry artist against the establishment - another kind of role-playing?

No, I have never done anything except what I have wanted to do. Sometimes it is rebellious, sometimes it is conformist. The thing I ask myself is: Do I want to do it?

Are you apolitical?

No, I am aparty. How can anyone be apolitical in an environment such as ours?

But it is often so. Is that the reason why even the Left movement in India is rootless and directionless?

I feel there are two Left movements. One is the Naxalite one,



which is unfortunately directionless and because it is so regional it can also be easily suppressed. It has no sustaining power. The other is the fashionable Left which will happily continue through journals and in drawing rooms, like any literary activity.

Taking into account your Rhodes scholarship do you consider yourself a scholar?

Not any more, I wish I was. But knowing some great scholars I wouldn't dare to refer to myself as such.

By compartmentalising yourself is it possible to concentrate more on a given activity?

That is one thing I have never done and will never do.

Now when people talk of life beginning at forty is it camouflage the fact that one has not succeeded in doing much earlier?

Do you know that when the Greeks wrote biographies of their she is like Sophocles, Socrates, Pericles, as they had no dating time when they presumed that they must have written their best

works in their 40s. And much later Yeats said, 'It's easy to be a genius at twenty, it's difficult to have talent at forty.'

If you were to make a film on a contemporary topic what would you choose?

I wouldn't choose something only because it's like a newspaper headline! A myth can be contemporary. History can be contemporary in its relevance.

What relevance does 'Utsav' have?

It is as contemporary as myself.

What if people consider you outdated?

I haven't read about it. Probably they do. In fact I am most certain they do!

Do you often question your moves?

I do it all the time.

If hypocrisy comes down to eating your cake and having it too, and is therefore beneficial, would you be hypocritical?

Of course, I would. I am not a saint. What you say is one definition, but whatever it is if something is to be gained by it I would be hypocritical, at a light level. If I have to be nice to a producer to get a role and the money that goes with it. I would do it because making the film is more important to me.

"There are quite a few gentlemen here, some crooks and a lot of stupid people too!"

Do you feel you are too much of a gentleman to be in this industry?

No, there are a lot of gentlemen here, but few of them get publicity! Besides 'industry' is a misnomer, nothing works like an industry here. Therefore, there is a lot of insecurity. Of course, there are also a lot of crooks here. And quite a lot of stupid people too!

You may not consider yourself an Outsider but have you ever faced an existential crisis within yourself?

It's not so much the crisis as the whole attitude to existence. One has to grasp the nuances and grow. I don't define it as an existential crisis. Existentialism teaches you to differentiate between the authentic and inauthentic. It teaches you to cope with everyday. And that's what one tries to do. What I am trying to do.

—Farzana Versey

don't fit in together. In friendship I might meet ten people but become friendly with only one and drop nine. But in in-law relationship it's there for keeps. So the best thing is to make it work. There might not be deep love but understanding, acceptance.

Bharathi: Well from my own experience, I can say it's absolutely possible to make it work. All three should work at it.

Rubaina: (Troubled) That's true but what do you do when one party doesn't want to work at it? One party is prepared to take ten paces but when the other doesn't respond, what do you do then?

Sheila: (Patting Rubaina) This is a very complex relationship. Let's not sit on judgement. Let's give each other time.

Rubaina: But how much time?
Bharathi: Sometimes it affects the health of the girl. I've seen them losing weight, being depressed....

Shobhana: The fact remains that if you don't resist each other, matters will be much easier. (Flinging her arms wide) Open out to each other.

Rubaina: Accept each other's faults and don't try to change the other. (Takes a deep breath) Your daughter-in-law may have a lot of faults but you are not perfect either. So there should be acceptance. But if it is not there, even if you give it ten years, what's going to happen?

Sheila: Then of course it's best to opt out of it.

Rubaina: (Softly) I think that's the only answer.

Bharathi: If you are a martyr you lump it or you opt out of it.

Sheila: That's much better than going through torture all your life.

Shobhana: Communication (stresses on the word), I think, is very important. When I'm able to communicate with my daughter-in-law I'm on a much better level with her. My relationship with her is complete. When I try to look at things from not one point of view but from different points of view and see why a certain thing has happened, I find life is much easier. I hated my three sons-in-law but now when I am able to communicate with them I find there are no barriers between us. I don't put up an act with them because I am not keen to be called a good mother-in-law.

Rubaina: (Interestedly) But who took the initiative?

Shobhana: I did. I took a stand that I need not be afraid of anyone.

Sheila: I think we are all hypocrites (heaves a sigh) You have been told to be polite all the time, it's sort of dinned into your heads.

Shobhana: (Adds hastily) It's not that I'm rude now. But the fear that what he/she is going to think is not there. All the time we live in fear.

Sheila: (Looking at Shobhana admiringly) How long did it take you to get out of this fear?

Shobhana: It took me hardly three days.

Rubaina: That's probably because you put your mind to it.

Shobhana: (Sits back to explain herself at length) It is after I did EST and a communication workshop. Before that whatever I had read in the Gita or Koran or the Bible did not make any sense to me. I did not understand these religions. But I did EST which has nothing to do with religion. It is an education. How and why we react to a certain context in our life and the repercussions of these reactions. Like when you carry grudges you are not able to communicate.

Bharathi: You said that EST has made your relations with others happy but has it made their relations with you happy?

Shobhana: Everybody is happy. Nutan and I had a fight for twenty-two years, we even went to the court. But after I did

sometimes one person doesn't want to budge. No amount of flattery moves her.

Bharathi: (Disapprovingly) But flattery is a very wrong basis.

Sheila: Flattery is very very wrong. (Everybody is silent).

Bharathi: Just today somebody was asking me about my opinion on the Indira Gandhi will — she has left a bit to Varun but under the trusteeship of Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi and not his mother Maneka.

Sheila: Maybe Indira felt that Maneka might misuse it because of her political ambitions....

Bharathi: If it is Indira's money, I think she has every right to leave it to whosoever she likes.

Shobhana: But leaving the trusteeship to Rajiv and Sonia, the mother will naturally feel hurt.

Rubaina: Considering the relationship between Indira and Maneka, I think this was expected.

Sheila: But all said and done, if it is her



“Young people shouldn't play an equalisation game like if it's one for you then it's one for me too. It's not a game we are playing. It's give and take!”

(Sheila)

EST, I communicated with her. Before that I had the fear that she may never ring me back which is what happened. But later after EST, when I rang her up she was not at home. I was sure she would call me back and she did. I asked her, 'Nutan can you change the fact that you are my daughter?' She said 'No. So I said, 'the differences are between you and me. Can we settle them across the table?' So the moment we communicated we came to terms.

Sheila: This was probably because she respected you.

Rubaina: (Looking at the others one by one) I think what happens most often is that we are trying to change each other.

Bharathi: Communication is possible if all three are ready.

Sheila: Anyway let's not give it up before we start.

Shobhana: Don't take the negative approach (Looks at Rubaina directly).

Rubaina: Not negative approach. But

own money she has every right to leave it to anyone in the way she feels like. (Each one is lost in her own thoughts.)

Bharathi: (Shakes herself out of her reverie) I think calling the mother-in-law mummy is very hypocritical, because you cannot accept another person as your mother. You are not 15-16 year olds getting married.

Sheila: Even at 15-16 it's difficult to accept someone else as mother.

Rubaina: Because then you tend to compare the two. You start equating them and always the mother-in-law will fall short. It's not her fault but it's there in your head.

Bharathi: It's more than enough to have a workable relationship.

Sheila: A workable relationship is very important indeed. You should relate with each other as from person to person. And if you can enlarge the relationship, it's marvellous.

