

An exercise in compromise

The value of a retrospective lies in the glimpses it gives of the gradual development of a movement and the differences it has gone through, says UMA VASUDEV

A RETROSPECTIVE of contemporary Indian theatre without an Alkazi production is like hearing the story of Ramayana without the mention of Sita, or the Mahabharata without Arjun. It is not that the other characters may not be even more important or play central roles. But the focal point, the plot-binder and the catalytic factor is one without whom the story would not be a story and history, not history. Till as long as Alkazi played a regional role in Bombay, he was like Utpal Dutt and Shombu Mitra in Calcutta, refining a genre and setting a trend which rippled across the country in tours and translations and made fitful impacts on other regions with a shock here and a wave there. But from the time that he took over as the first director of the National School of Drama in Delhi with students from all over India he set such an implacable criterion for excellence in production values that it infected both amateur and professional groups in the whole country and virtually forced them to rise above their own levels. With these rising standards of production which one began to see in the decade after Alkazi began to make his impact there came the inevitable concomitant of better status for urban theatre, particularly in the Capital and those areas which had never been able to match the record of Bengal and Maharashtra.

The Sangeet Natak Akademi's presentation of a retrospective of modern Indian theatre with 15 plays directed and produced over the last 50 years as a commemorative venture of the Nehru centenary celebrations this year was necessarily an exercise in compromise. First, because it had to get down on older directors to get to recreating their productions of 30 years ago or more or less. There are no film versions of Habib Tanvir's first version of "Agra Bazaar" or Utpal Dutt's "Kallol" or Alkazi's presentations of "Tughlak", "Andha Yug" or "Adhe Adhure" and a host of magnificent productions that flowed in an unending stream from him and his institution. Memory can recall the first impact of those productions, but not much of the intricate details that could act as reference points for the new learner. That would have to be primarily through what was written then and through the examples in stagecraft and imagination set by the first batch of Alkazi's protégés and their individual productions or through photo-

graphs. So unrelenting has been Alkazi's decision not to come back to theatre after his traumatic exit from the National School of Drama after a total commitment of 12 unforgettable years that the question of getting a production from him did not arise. Along with Alkazi were missing the names of actors and actresses who graduated out of the Alkazi years and held the tradition together for more than a decade afterwards, Manohar Singh, Uttara Baokar, Surekha Sikri and of course, those whose names now flash on the screen with recurring effect — Anupam Kher, Om Puri, Om Shivpuri and others. Naseeruddin Shah was one major NSD name from the Alkazi era who was present, but in a production of "Andha Yug" by Satyadev Dubey. It was a pity that Shombhu Mitra's "Bohurupee" in any production, could also not be represented. Those who have seen Mitras at their best, with the late Tripti creating legends with her roles as in "Rakta Karabi" would know how vital is the link that was missing in this nostalgic recreation of the last 50 years of Indian theatre.

MOREOVER, there is a contradiction in what Girish Karnad, the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi said in his introduction to the event. He admitted that there can be no retrospective of the theatre because a theatre performance is not "a frozen article unpacked for display, its content unaffected, in a different situation". But he went on to affirm that "we believe the attempt worth making if only to see how these stalwarts, still active in theatre would reevaluate their own earlier creations. Would they in their more mature years find new meanings in the texts they had in many cases discovered and helped to establish as classics? Will a director attempt



Girish Karnad

an approximation of his earlier interpretation or will he approach the play as though it were an altogether new text? Will the plays, some of which survive only as texts for academic study, stimulate today's viewers as they did their original audiences?"

Mr Karnad probably did not realise that if an option is given to a director to reevaluate his earlier work and give it a new form in terms of his or her later aesthetic or social experience then it immediately loses its historical context and cannot be included in a retrospective. The value of a retrospective lies in the glimpses it gives of the gradual development of a movement and the different stages it has gone through or with regard to individual cases, how it shows the evolution of an artist's mind and the distinct periods of influence manifest in his or her work. The idea of holding a theatre retrospective should be in fact to insist that a production when repeated should approximate as much as possible to the original version so that students of theatre and those otherwise interested should be able to have a yardstick by which to judge the merits of creative evolution.

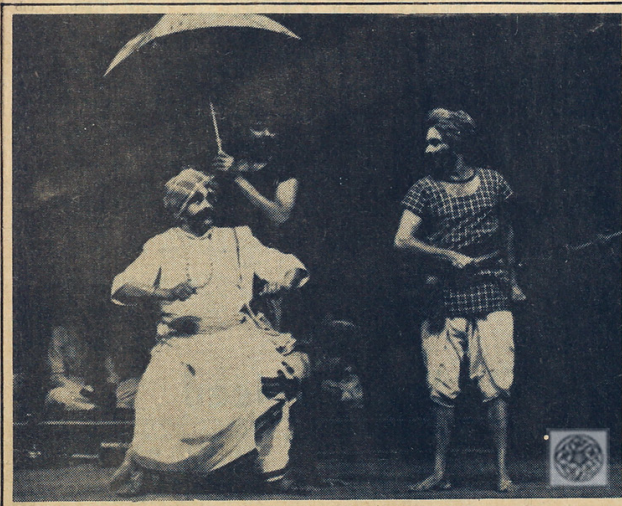
Another interesting experiment could be to centre the whole festival of theatre round only one imperative, that earlier productions by reputed directors should be presented by them with a new format in the light of their later inspirations. It would be interesting then to see how a director has evolved or whether he or she has remained only at their static best. "Agra Bazaar", first written and staged by Habib Tanvir in 1954 seemed to look very much like when I first saw it — it retains its old world ambling gait, its loose, flexible structure including some easy, amateurish sequences of Hindi theatre's pre-professional standards. In that sense, it was the most sincere entry for a retrospective.

ONE of the most serious lapses in the Sangeet Natak Akademi's concern for showing 50 years of Indian theatre has been its indifference to theatre in the English language in India. Plays in English performed by Indians and the English in India even after independence were and still are of continuing interest to urban audiences in Madras, Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. There are theatre groups specialising in producing plays in the English language, including plays in English written by Indians.

The SNA should have had no inhibitions about including an English play. First of all, English is very much on the way to becoming an Indian language. Secondly, for a retrospective you should show the different aspects of the development of Indian theatre and theatre in English in India had a strong, viable role to play from the fifties onwards. It is not as if the SNA's retrospective consisted of rural folk theatre alone. It had sophisticated adaptations from traditional idioms like K. M. Panikar's "Urubhangam" but also realistic drama like the Pravin



Bhasa's 'Urubhangam' in Sanskrit



'Jokumaraswami' in Kannada

Joshi Theatre's "Kumarni Agashi" or Shreeram Lago's direction of "Uddhwasta Dharmashala". A recreation of a straight play in English done in the '50s or '60s when a production by the Little Theatre Group or the British High Commission's Amateur Dramatic Society provided high entertainment for the limited urban audiences that there were then would have been

of historical interest. But, above all, apart from Pearl Padamsee in Bombay and Alique who flooded the scene later with the musical form, there is in Delhi Joy Michael and her Yatrik. Twenty-five years of contribution to the national theatre scene has not yet earned her the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award. But the most unjust cut of all was not to have included a Yatrik

production in a theatre retrospective. Why? Because she has chosen the medium of English? What are we writing in then? And who is reading it? Nothing could be more shocking than this distortion of theatre history by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. One only hopes it was a lapse and not a deliberate judgment. Either way it needs amends.