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AMATEUR artists, an unknown playwright-director and an off-beat theme. Despite these apparent disadvantages, the Marathi play *All The Best* has made it big. With a record 200 performances in 165 days, the play has gone down very well with the audiences. It is not very easy getting a ticket unless you buy it in black.

While the Gujarathi version of the play is being staged successfully so - the Hindi, Sindhi and English adaptations are soon to follow. In the theatre world it is a success story and is seen as a trendsetter in terms of storyline and performances.

Very unlike the usual ran-of-the-mill melodramatic themes and histrionic performances, *All The Best* comes as a wiff of fresh air. Initially written as a short skit for the ENT competition by Devendra Pem, the play was produced as a full-fledged professional comedy play in the behest of Mahesh Waghade and Chandralaksh. The storyline rests on three handicapped persons (a deaf, a mute and a

Prabhat Dahi).

The curious and at times difficult situations in the play have been deliciously handled - the collective telephone conversation of the trio - being a case in point. Their dependence on each other to explain certain concepts on the phone leaves the audience in splits. Similarly, the interpretation of the Choli ke peechh song by the three protagonists is entertaining. Playwright Pem says he visualised these situations while writing the play. "I also studied the behaviour of my handicapped friends. Then I introduced four artists to them. It helped me in the actual making of every frame."

He adds, "The amateur actors contributed a sense of spontaneity to each performance, which would may not have been achieved with an established cast. The play needed young enthusiastic actors, considering the acrobatics involved. There is not a single dull moment."

Pem makes no bones about the aim of the play, "My

Playwright Devendra Pem's Marathi play *All The Best* is seen as a trendsetter by the theatre world. After the success of the Marathi version - Shafi Inamdar is staging a Gujarathi adaptation which too has been well-received

blindman) who fall in love with a common friend. The efforts to blind their physical handicaps, the novel ways of expressing their feelings for the girl, the resultant tension in their relations create many hilarious situations.

"Unlike the usual serious theatrical treatment given to handicaps in plays like *Kalviragar*, the physical infirmities have been utilised to generate humour. Without ridiculing the characters, the play offers sensitive but healthy entertainment for three hours," says Shafi Inamdar, the co-producer of the Gujarathi adaptation. He says the response to the Gujarathi version (nine public shows as yet) has also been promising.

"The genre of humour in the play is also responsible for the success." After a long time here it is comedy which reflects the younger generation's sensibilities and sense of humour. The youngsters no longer identify with the older stogie comedies or bedroom farces. This play has filled a gap," asserts critic-playwright

mandate was limited to making people laugh. There was no conscious message to be given in the play. Interestingly, when staged in the competition first, it was not adjudged the Best Play because of the lack of a social message. However, the series of awards and records baffled later did justice to my efforts."

Pem justifies the "happy, unaccusatic" end of the play with, "The play could not have ended in any other way." The three disabled are shown well-pleased in their careers, which helps them to enhance their faculties. Their marriage proposals are decided by the girl. Her choice is another disabled youth.

That the play has been well received even by the critics can be gauged from the awards it has won - the best actor and best director awards from Narya Darpan Prashastan. It was adjudged the best play of the year by the Mumbai Marathi Sahitya Sangh. Pem was declared the best writer by the Lions Club of Bombay and the best production award of the Diamond Jubilee



A scene from *All The Best*

Staging a success

Prashastan.

According to critic Kamalakar Naikanti, "After the old musical plays of Bal Gandharva and plays of Kashi Nath Ghoshkar, *All The Best* is one of the few modern Marathi plays to enjoy such overwhelming popular response. This play is running on because it is good. Tickets are sold within the first half an hour. I know people who have seen the play over 20 times and I am not talking of younger alone." The overwhelming demand for the play has even compelled the producer-director to get together a different set of actors to perform outside Bombay.

The producer's imaginative ad campaign certainly contributed to the success. Designed by Kamal Shedge, the ad has been given a

'contemporary' touch. For example, two students shows buying tickets for different reasons. One for passing in the exams and the other for forgetting his failure. Another one reads, just like Shoemaker Levy collision does not take the charm away from Jupiter, *All The Best* remains the best ever. "Weekdays, a good play runs, not only because it is good, but because it is packaged well. The ad has played a major role. In fact, many of the other theatre groups have copied the ad," claims producer Arun Kulkarni of the Awasthakar experimental group. He adds, "an experimental theatre group could not have managed such a successful venture. The 25-year old established network of the Chandralekhas has carried it professionally."

Coming to brass tacks, the play is said to have earned over Rs 40 lakh in the last six months, thanks to the household theatres after the 500 performance. However, it is rumoured that the amateur artists and the director of the play are not party to this profit. They continue to get Rs 100 to 250 per show, as per the initial agreement. Wagh denies this, "When I staged this play with amateurs, I was taking a risk. The tough competition in theatre made our task even more difficult. Fortunately, the play was a success. The artists are not being given the share of the profits now, but they will be paid bonus soon. The profits will be utilised for similar ventures. The artists will not be the losers."

Suresh Raut

ALL The Best, Devendra Pem's Marathi play which has been running for two years, is inching towards a place in the Guinness Book of Records for its record number of shows. Besides, having wowed audiences in Gujarati and Sindhi, it is now set to make its debut on the Hindi stage under the aegis of Feroz Khan's Platform Productions.

Feroz Khan, himself an accomplished director, is thrilled about it, even though the original playwright, Devendra Pem, will be directing the Hindi version as well.

Feroz feels all the credit for the stupendous success of the play goes to the young director and wants to keep things that way. He is merely the producer and keeps himself well in the background while enjoying each performance as much as his audience do.

Speaking about why he took up this project, Feroz Khan says, "I hadn't laughed like this in a long time. I saw it in Gujarati first and even now when I all through it I laugh; that gives me great joy. Also, all the actors in it are new, so there is the satisfaction of nurturing new talent. It is a very intelligently written play and to write a comedy, particularly in India, is difficult. One finds it hard to move away from the clichés and tomfoolery. That's why I decided to give full control to the man who has created the work."

A compliment indeed coming from a commercially successful director with plays like *Tumhari Amrita* and *Shaughrah* to his credit.

"This is Devendra Pem's first play but its success is no fluke. He explains shyly, "I'd had this idea for a long time; how would three people—one blind, one deaf, one dumb—live together and communicate? But it wasn't simple to give it form. All I was sure of was that there should be no sense of demeaning the handicapped and that it should be a comedy. Finally, I worked it out in Marathi and the play opened on December 31, 1993. It did so well that we had to train another team to perform it simultaneously.

"In the last 22 months we've done 795 shows in Marathi with the first team, 72 shows with the second team. It has been translated into

All the Best gets better

A record-breaking Marathi play gets ready to storm the Hindi stage, writes **Lata Khubchandani**

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A scene from the hugely successful *All the Best*

Gujarati. Earlier there was a record-breaking play in Gujarati *Ba retire thaye che*, which had done 232 shows but we did 242 in a year.

"In Sindhi, where the best plays average about 12 performances a year, we've done 25 shows in six months. We're opening with the Hindi version next week and there are proposals for doing it in Tamil, Bengali etc. This means the play has broken records practically in every language. Now I've become clear that the play can be done in any language and it'll succeed.

"Working with people like Feroz Khan, Mohan Wagh in Marathi and Shah Inamdar in Gujarati has been a learning experience for me. In fact,

Feroz has made me a partner in this. I think this sort of experience at the beginning of my career is very good for me."

About his experience while directing the play, he says, "I'd felt that if a handicapped person came to see the play he should not feel bad. Their handicaps should not be exploited for the purpose of a laugh. Though I wanted it to be a comedy, for me there was an inbuilt sense of tragedy in it. But everytime I tried to bring it out people laughed so much that I decided to keep it lighthearted. Like the time when the girl asks the dumb guy to read the poem and he pretends to have a sore throat and the blind man thinks she is telling him—

for me that scene had a sadness in it but the audience are in splits so I thought, better not get too ambitious."

The roles of the three handicapped are played by Vrajesh Hirji, Iqbal Azad and Kikoo Sharda, the girl by Mansi Joshi, daughter of Anand Joshi. The play is a long one. Pem laughs, "When I wrote it first it worked out to be a 4 and 1/2 hour performance but incredibly enough even the actors didn't feel it. That's how involved they were. I've trimmed it down now to 2 and 1/2 hours."

Clearly, it's the high level of commitment that has made *All the Best* the success it's turned out to be.