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Event of the decade

Marathi production *Wade Chirebandi*, which premieres on April 11, is undeniably the event of the decade. Chandrakant Kulkarni has the unenviable and hitherto unimaginable task of getting this 8-hour trilogy of the ground, writes **R Ramanathan**

AN eight-hour (yes, 8 hrs) production of an 'once-in-a-lifetime' event - *Wade Chirebandi* will premiere on April 11. Written by (that master craftsman) Mahesh Elkunchwar and directed by Chandrakant Kulkarni, Bombay will witness atleast 25-30 shows of *Wade Chirebandi* in the next 6 months. And may be more.

It's been a while since theatre has been in such business. At least in this country. And if theatre has to take on the might of cinematic vision, it'll have to be with a grandiose, but ascetic spirit. And like Artaud (one hopes) you're not thinking of monuments, but of ruins. Like *Wade Chirebandi* (old stone mansion) a 'first time' trilogy alongwith Magna Talyakathi (pond) and Yuganta (Apocalypse), or to put it simply *Wade Chirebandi-I* and *Wade Chirebandi-III*.

A trilogy which spans 35 years and four generations in a small town in Vidharbha. From a decrepit house (albeit with strong foundations) to a modern house (with weak foundations) and finally to the poetic flourish in the lost part, wherein the remnants (to be read as four characters) of Part I and Part II, in an existentialist imagery of a wasteland go 'monologous' under a clear blue sky. But how much of it'll work on a proscenium stage before the Shamanism of a 'middle-class audience' is unclear. But the end is enigmatic, even as the

littleness of earthly time on an unreclaimable landscape is compared to the longer dimension of Neptune-time.

Of course, Chandrakant Kulkarni through his intensive interaction and reading of Elkunchwar, comes up with a much more straightforward observation 'Even as the plays moves from realistic to expressionistic, the characters from real to symbolic, the scheme of things from the specific to the universal, and a rural village starts to epitomize a larger global village - realisation dawns. In a sense, the message of the play - (there is none) - is one of attitude. A journey of the mind. A theory of life shorn of the obviousness of a positive or negative approach.'

And Kulkarni knows, he will have to turn in a virtuoso performance, if he wants all the above to ring true. Or else, *Wade...* might very well be serving the pharaoh of gimmicky.

"I don't think so," feels the raging, ambitious and idiosyncratic energy within Kulkarni, "because these are three plays with a single 'sur' they had to be performed, together. Yes, it's a challenge. But we had to do it. Especially, since each of us had a burning desire to do something different. And do it well. The experience should be similar to that of reading one's favourite book at one go."

With Mahesh Elkunchwar that is possible. He is the best

(in my opinion) in the playwrighting business. A professor of English from Nagpur, each of Elkunchwar's plays have been modern-day landmarks. From his one-act plays 'Holi' (a hot favourite of the inter-collegiate circuit - albeit without the playwright's knowledge) to 'Sultan'. From the full-length 'Garbo' (directed by Dr Shreeram Lagoo in Marathi and Satyadev Dubey in Hindi) and 'Vasanakand' (directed by Amol Palekar), to 'Party', 'Rakta Pushpak' and 'Atmakatha'.

Of which, 'Holi' was later filmed into an award-winning feature film by Ketan Metha. And *Party* was directed by Govind Nihalani. For the neophyte *angrez* who cannot imagine theatre beyond South Bombay, Elkunchwar's plays are also available in English. Courtesy Seagull Publications, Calcutta.

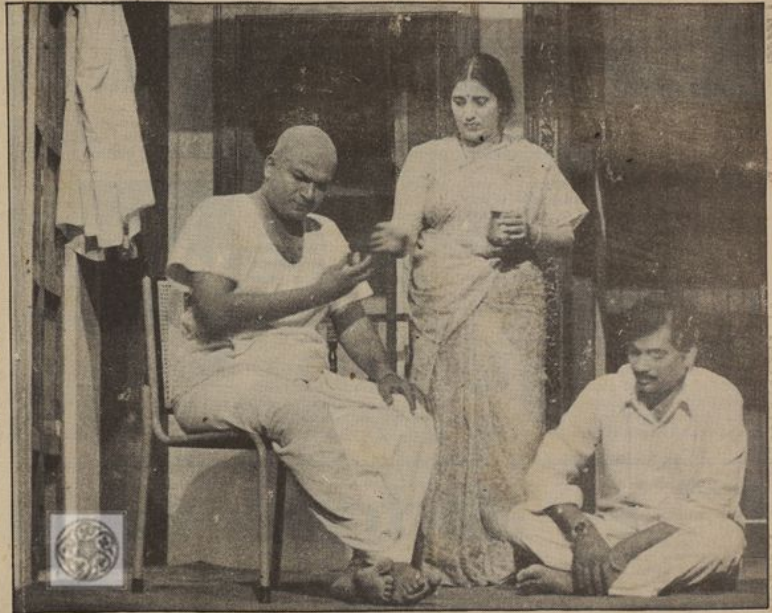
It would be intriguing to note, that *Wade Chirebandi* emerged from Elkunchwar's inky nib after a gestation (creative-death) period of approximately 7 years. Which according to Elkunchwar, "is the first play in which I find myself going out of myself, looking at the world with sympathy... *Wade...* is not a simple family drama. It is more than that, a document of social and political change..."

As Samik and Sandypodhyay points out, "*Wade Chirebandi*, is a close study of the feudal (joint) family degenerating and

disintegrating slowly and steadily... which is located in history..." In a sense, the Indian stage-version of Alex Haley's 'Roots'. But more private and personal with its own indigenous brand of individuality.

And Chandrakant Kulkarni will have to make it work on stage. He, and his vast battalion have the patronage of Awishkar (the bastion of Marathi parallel theatre movement) who're underwriting the production cost of Rs 7-8 lakhs. And although these two have teamed up only recently with Shyam Manohar's State-competition award winner 'Yalkot'. It is still a curious duo. Because Kulkarni is the small-town entrepreneur who rocked Bombay's Marathi stage out of its commercial complacency. Everything he touches, is a box-office bonanza. Kulkarni thinks, this is inevitable and though his heart, soul and groundings are in the parallel theatre movement, it was impossible to continue work in it because of dwindling funds and scaling down of budgets. And so, a middle-ground had to be forged. "Which is how Kulkarni went into business."

But the good news is - this young and maverick director hasn't burnt-out (as yet). He's tried every trick in the book-and pulled it off. Yes, his is a ticking mind that understands the psyche of the mass congregation of men and women who flock to the theatre. With *Wade*



Rocking the Marathi stage out of its commercial complacency - Chandrakant Kulkarni style

Chirebandi, one can expect Kulkarni to leave no stone-unturned to ensure that his 'childhood hero' Elkunchwar is wholly and wholesomely accepted by the audience.

For this task, Kulkarni is backed up a posse of assistant directors: Deepa Shiram, Neena Kulkarni, Pratima Joshi and Vijay Kulkarni, who have fine-tuned a cast of - Sulabha Deshpande, Deepa Shiram, Vandana Gupta, Dilip

Kulkarni, Prashant Subedhar, Kishore Kadam, Nandu Mahadev, Meenal Paranjpe, Sachin Khodakar and others. All of whom have put in more than 100 days of strenuous rehearsals - free of charge!

The sets, lights and costumes (lots of them) are by Pradip Mulay. Anand Modak is in-charge of music. The producer is Arun 'Kaka' Kakde, the old veteran with theatre-positive as his blood group.

Yes, and the more one thinks about it, the more daunting it seems. The hitherto unimaginable task of getting a 8-hour trilogy together. To cope with the practical and theatre problems in the hurly-burly madness of Bombay seems unimaginable. More so, when one considers that for *Wade Chirebandi* the audience is expected to be rooted to their seats and stay awake. They can relieve themselves - literally

and metaphorically - only during the two long intervals (30 minutes) or the two shorter ones (10 minutes). Or watch the play over a period of two days.

Yes, *Wade Chireband - I, II & III* is undeniably the event of the decade. Be there (and be patient) when it happens, because this might be the play, which is bound to set of whole new trend to the theatre tradition in this country. Don't miss it!