

With the commercial success of Char Chaughi....., the dividing line between the experimental and commercial productions seems to have faded considerably. Director Chandrakant Kulkarni is amazed at the free exchange of themes, artistes and techniques between the so far isolated sections.

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A scene from the award-winning play, *Charchaughi*, directed by Chandrakant Kulkarni



One step at a time to success

Winner of eight out of ten Natyadarpan awards this year, director Chandrakant Kulkarni is a man without an address. Once tracked down, however, Deepa Gahlot found herself talking to a mix of veteran maturity and schoolboy enthusiasm

FOUR of the best Marathi plays running in town have been directed by Chandrakant Kulkarni. All four of them were nominated in various categories for this year's Natyadarpan awards. His plays swept eight out of the ten awards.

Kulkarni won the best director award for *Charchaugh*, his friend and close associate Prashant Dalvi taking the best playwright prize. At the festival of plays that preceded the awards function, you remember the few seconds of surprised silence when a young man with a shy smile and springy step had stepped onto the stage, followed by genuinely appreciative applause and whispers of "But he's so young!"

"Oh, I'm not that young," he says. "I'm 29." Just about four years in Bombay and he has directed eight successful plays. "*Jwalamukhi* wasn't so successful," he admits; "It did only 75 shows." *Charchaugh*, *Doctor Tumhi Suddhal*, *Rang Maza Vegala* and *Priya Azis* are running simultaneously in Bombay to full houses.

Producers are lining up with scripts for Kulkarni to direct, but the toughest thing is to get in touch with him. He seems to have no permanent address. He lives like a nomad, a friend of his says. But messages reach him alright, he phones, and without a fuss lands up at your door. "Mee Chandu," he smiles. One of the

top Marathi theatre directors today is a slightly built, unassuming chap who speaks with a mix of veteran maturity and college-boy enthusiasm.

Chandrakant Kulkarni's rise to the top, is a story of talent and determination overcoming all hurdles. "I come from a lower middle-class family from Aurangabad. There was no atmosphere of theatre at home, and not enough money for me to be able to pursue theatre full-time. It's just two years since I gave up my job as a sub-editor with *Mumbai Sakal*. I still can't believe I am making a living out of the work I love most, and that there are no financial tensions."

In provincial Aurangabad, Kulkarni did a certificate, a diploma and a degree course in dramatics. Along with friends like Prashant Dalvi, his brother Ajit Dalvi and a group of theatre enthusiasts, he did plays regularly.

"There was no professional theatre at all in Aurangabad," he recalls. Once in a while people did plays as a hobby — mostly copies of what was being done in Bombay. Since we had a playwright, Prashant, in our group, we did plays written by him. We also did other plays, of course, and founded a theatre group called Jigisha. We started a membership scheme under which our members would get to see one new play every month. It was a total loss,

though we brushed up our skills by doing regular work. That's why, when I came to Bombay, I was prepared and confident of being able to make a career in theatre.

"Since, in Aurangabad, there was no opportunity to see the work of others — not to imitate but for motivation — Prashant and I used to come to Bombay for four days every couple of months, see a lot of plays and films and return. Then we used to discuss what we saw. We had lengthy debates on various subjects. One of them was women's lib — Prashant wrote *Stree*, a chorus play about the problems of women. You can imagine how difficult it was to get 12 girls to act in our play in a small town! I think *Charchaugh* also emerged out of *Stree* and our constant discussions about social problems."

A talented and ambitious person can get stifled very quickly in a small town. Kulkarni had done his journalism course and started working with the local newspaper *Lokmat*, when frustration and fear of stagnation brought him and four friends to Bombay to try their luck. "Bombay is the centre of theatre and showbiz activity, so there was no alternative but to come here to prove myself," he says. "Most Marathi theatre people in Bombay are outsiders."

All of the five found jobs in Bombay to keep them going.



A scene from the award-winning play, *Charchaugh*, directed by Chandrakant Kulkarni

Kulkarni had decided that he wouldn't do any more state competition plays, but he had to, for want of better opportunities. He did Ajit Dalvi's *Dehadhun*, won an award and got noticed by producer Mohan Wagh. "My first professional play here was Vasant Kanetkar's *Rang Umatya Man-*

ache. Having assisted Vinay Apte and others, and with a solid grounding in theatre, I was confident. I even had the nerve to ask Kanetkar to do a bit of rewriting.

"I am often asked how I handled seasoned actresses like Vandana Gupte, Deepa Shreeram, Bhakti Barve-Inamdar. At the beginning they checked me out for a day or two, to see if I knew what

I was doing. Once they saw that I knew my job and that I was always prepared with my paperwork down to the tiniest detail, there were no problems at all. Some of them are now my friends and often take suggestions from me for their other plays too.

"I also take suggestions from

they know that the director is the mediator between them and the audience, and he knows how a play will look on stage."

Kulkarni gave the title *Charchaugh* to Dalvi's play and the title clicked with audiences. He says he also makes changes to increase the dramatic content of a play.

"In commercial plays, we can't bring about a revolution in form too often, but little departures from the norm make a big difference. I think plays like *Charchaugh* are the golden mean between parallel and commercial theatre that everybody keeps talking about achieving."

Kulkarni, expectedly, gets scripts sent to him by the dozen, but he says his concept of an ideal play is one that gives the audience a "complete experience" and also

raises important issues. His all-time favourite plays are *Wada Chirebandi* and *Yakrut*.

"There's a demand and supply problem you see," he explains. "Directors have to work with the plays they get. I think directors should demand better work from writers. So far it's been a one-way street. Anybody can take a foreign play or video film and adapt it; very few do original work. But the director should be willing to take risks. We did that with *Charchaugh* — the play is not about 'normal' women — but it worked. If it had failed, we would never have been able to experiment again. Still, I won't say we are working in a negative atmosphere. We have all come from a 'parallel theatre' background and we understand that experimental theatre should be used

as a lab.

"We have to do different things and change audience tastes, but that doesn't mean we should be happy performing for four people. Within the constraints of commercial theatre, we should be able to give audiences a few moments of truth, a few moments of self analysis.

"For example, in spite of the fact that the concept of *Rang Maza Vegala* about the strange relationship between a writer and his reader is completely alien, audiences liked it. Sometimes, you have to set calculations aside and work on what you like."

That this 'method' has worked fine so far is proved by the little stars on his bio-data that mark the award-winning plays. Now he can sit back for a few months and spend time waiting for the perfect script. "With success, my responsibility has also grown," he says. "I don't quite believe in God, but I had the right opportunities and producers like Mohan Wagh, Lata Narwekar and Mahesh Manjrekar who had faith in me. I had to prove myself.

"Nobody gives you a break just because you are a whizzkid from Aurangabad. But when you get a chance to do something, you have to live up to it. There's also the problem of burnout if you do too much too fast.

"It's time for me to do something for parallel theatre now. Ever since Satyadev Dubey told me that theatre is a playwright's medium, I have been toying with the idea of doing a wordless play. But the subject has to justify silence, I don't want to do some mime rubbish.

"I have also discussed the idea of playlets written by Prashant Dalvi, Rajiv Naik, Shafaat Khan and Sanjay Pawar around the theme *Adlai Maza Theatre* and I'll stage them all together. The next step is of course TV and films; but not just yet. I'll do them when I have a little more confidence. There are offers already, but I never do anything unless I am fully prepared." ■

ENCOUNTER