

GIRISH Karnad's new play Bali, which is being directed by Sarvesh Dubeey and Navaraddin Shah and Rama Pathak in the lead roles, is quite unlike his earlier plays Tughlaq and Hayavodana. Its complex structure with forays from the physical plane of action to the metaphysical realm of intention and the Sanskritised Hindi in which it is performed, make comprehension difficult. Bali was opened to poor reviews in Bombay but

“This is the play that has given me the greatest trouble in my entire writing career. I must have made at least 20 separate drafts of it.”

many great plays like Waiting for Godot have to go through several drafts. Karnad has been understood in their first production. Bali (meaning sacrifice) centres on King Yashodhan who has converted to his wife's religion, Jainism, with its special emphasis on non-violence. One night the queen is enraptured into making love to a woman's voice coming from the temple. The singer turns out to be a hunchback with a scarred face and a lamp. The king has followed her to the temple. She denies nothing.

Author than reveal his wife's infidelity to his mother who has come on her knees to beg him to have an affair with her. The queen neither interprets the dream as a bad omen and declares that a hundred sheep be sacrificed to goddess Kali to save the kingdom from disaster. His wife, a staunch Jain, refuses to permit the sacrifice saying that since the dream did not occur the sacrifice is unnecessary. The mother insists that if the sacrificer is not performed she will take her own life.

Can a cock of dough substitute for a hundred sheep? Is the intention to kill as crucial as the actual act of violence? These are the questions Karnad sets out to explore. What is your reaction to the reviews of Bali? Well, I don't really react to reviews, one has learnt not to react, if you invite a critic to come and review your play, it's his right to like it or not, to criticise or praise.

Do you think the play has been understood? I don't think most of the reviewers have understood the play at all. It took over 15 years to write the play - I wrote it in 1967 and it was produced in Delhi by Prema Karanth but it was not a very successful production. Then I read it out to Satyadev Dubey and he said it is a bad play, throw it out. I respect his view so I literally threw it out. And yet the basic method excited me very much, and I

tell that if it excites me and stimulates me, there must be something in it that I had missed. So I kept on working at it. This is the play that has given me the greatest trouble in my entire writing career. I must have made at least 20 separate drafts of it. Then I had the solution to it. Then three to four years ago I knew I had the solution to the whole play from the beginning and I read it out to Satyadev Dubey. He said, now it is quite good.

How was it in the first draft? Oh, it was very different. I think I myself was not very clear on how to bring out all that happens in one night in one place. It took to be a very wordy play. Not that I have anything against wordy plays. Some of the best plays like Don Juan in Hell or No Girl are wordy. But to come back to your first question of how I respond to the reviews... when you've worked so long on a play and you

know why everything is in its place when even actors of the calibre of Naseeruddin Shah and Rama Pathak have worked over y for sever to eight months and reviewers say it's inescapable. And as I started thinking more and more about it, I wondered why the singer was so ugly, why couldn't he be handsome. It seemed so unrelated to the main plot. Why does the story must he's so ugly. And suddenly I realised that the myth says he's ugly because she

really fell in love with his music. So the adultery was committed the moment she heard the music. A half experience like Hayavodana... But here they're saying it's a complete experience. The Jain point of view is that it's not a half experience. Your intention is a complete experience. So once the cock intends to sacrifice the cock there's no difference from actual violence. What the queen does is another aspect of the same thing except it is no longer related to violence but to sexuality. Once she was seduced by the music, the adultery was as good as done.

There were tremendous possibilities in the myth and in my first draft I had only expressed them verbally. It hadn't been translated into action. But ultimately a play is action. The dialogue must become externalised in terms of hits at the very notion of drama. Because in drama the physical action is supposed to express what happens in the mind and the myth is about the relationship of man's mind to the physical relationships in the world around him. So the relationship between the mind and the body which is the theme of the myth is also a theme with which any dramatist would be concerned. There's a sort of frustration. The play says there is, she



Navaraddin Shah and Rama Pathak in Bali, auditions of violence.

college and from then on it had haunted me. I thought, what a marvellous story. You try to avoid violence but ultimately you're faced with it. It is inescapable. And as I started thinking more and more about it, I wondered why the singer was so ugly, why couldn't he be handsome. It seemed so unrelated to the main plot. Why does the story must he's so ugly. And suddenly I realised that the myth says he's ugly because she

Fatalism, from the king's side, yes. Not so much fatalism as an inevitable gravitating towards violence. The conflicting ideologies are not represented by the king and queen but by the queen and the queen mother. The queen is a Jain from childhood. The queen mother is the unrelenting Shaktapati, the Kali worshipper who says

“I'm not saying that what I've done is necessarily good or great. But the difficulties are such that the critics cannot accuse me of not having seen them. To me the play has said what I ultimately wanted it to say and I'm quite content with it.”

ritualistic violence is very important. The king is the convert. He is caught between. His problem is that he brings the cock of dough as a compromise but then because of the intention, because of the suppressed violence in him, he begins to believe in it. It becomes a new argument for him. He starts talking of it as if it had enormous powers. And there's this claustrophobic atmosphere according to him. The play says there is, she



Girish Karnad, unperturbed by criticism

Yashodhan's heritage and the strategy of non-violence. The cock of dough represents the compromise that doesn't work. So what happens when two opposing value systems are in conflict? Fatalism, from the king's side, yes. Not so much fatalism as an inevitable gravitating towards violence. The conflicting ideologies are not represented by the king and queen but by the queen and the queen mother. The queen is a Jain from childhood. The queen mother is the unrelenting Shaktapati, the Kali worshipper who says

interested in it. I'm not interested in a film that hits you today and 10 years later feels exactly as if it were made in 1985. Do you accept the way society is? No, of course not. But the reformist attitude doesn't seem to be any kind of questioning of values at all. I think my plays question values. My films also. The questioning is not of an obvious kind. In terms of what it says, Bali is very contemporary. Tughlaq is also contemporary. That's why they get done though they're not easy plays to perform. They deal with the world of ideas while others attempt to make changes in the environment. And those ideas are not relevant to our life today? Not many people comprehend them. If you take the critics as enlightened persons in the audience and you say they didn't understand (your play), not many others will stay with the struggle of trying to understand. I can't bother with them. I struggle with my plays. I'm not saying that what I've done is necessarily good or great. But the difficulties are such that the critics cannot accuse me of not having seen them. To me the play has said what I ultimately wanted it to say and I'm quite content with it.”

5.7.1985 A.M. 2.00.00

Tribal theatre

A bridge between two sensibilities

Tribal theatre has a vitality that is unique. The author speaks to directors Habib Tanvir and Bhanu Bharti, who are using the tribal dramatic form and working with tribal actors.

It was afternoon and at the Pata theatre in Bombay a group of *shahi* clad men gathered on the stage under the intense gaze of a slightly-built, grey monostichoid man. The night before they had performed at the other end of town, acting out the story of a man who was willing to sacrifice his son for the treasure guarded by snakes; his repentance over the loss of his

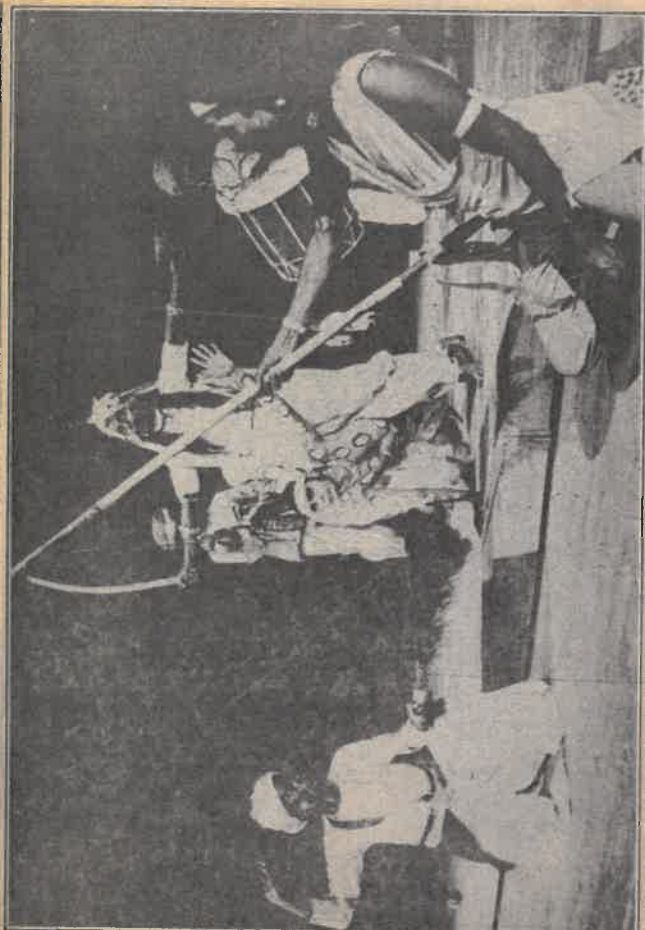
by **Amrita Shah**

in response to the sharp, almost stern orders he gave in Mewar, the group despaired. The soft-spoken director-actor and ex-director of the Shri Ram Centre for Art and Culture, Bhanu Bharti, talking about his latest production



A scene from *Goon ka naam sasural: robarat performer*

to your tastes. We had to study this epic in



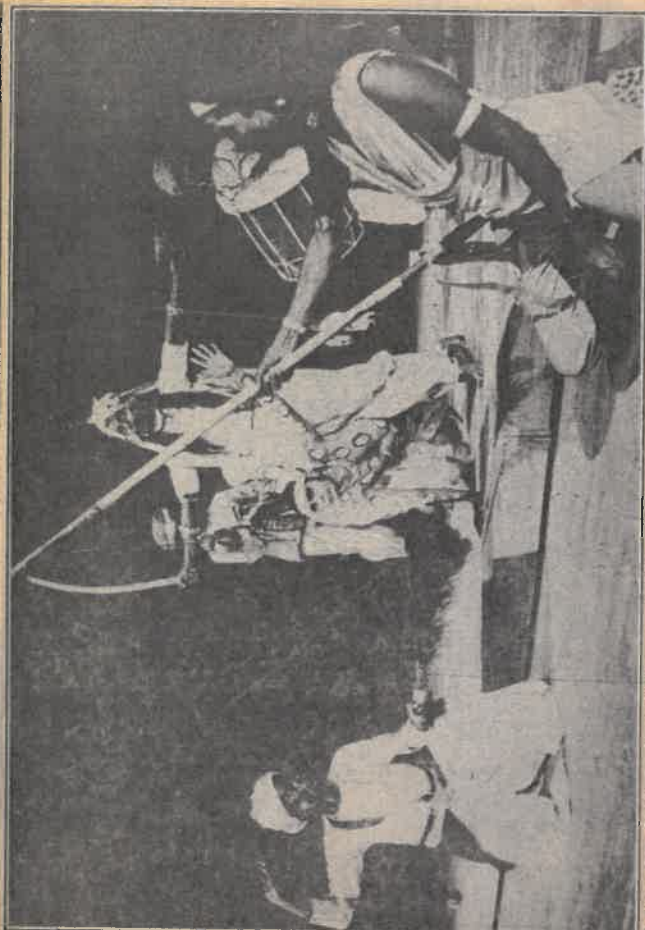
A scene from *Pashu Gavari*; return to pure theatre

habib tanvir on the other hand, has built up over the last 27 years - Naya Theatre, which the Chattisgarhi performers from Madhya Pradesh played their part in. Starting with Fida Bai, the heroine, playing her part with customary brilliance. The raw vigour of the two plays came as a refreshing change to a city routinely inundated with mindless Broadway imitations.

Unfortunately neither play got the reception it really deserved. *Pashu Gavari* did not sell out and people walked out of Tanvir's play, realising that it was not the hackneyed comedy they had expected to see.

But Tanvir is used to this. For 15 years after he started experimenting with tribal theatre he played to empty halls in the cities. From 1958 to 1973, he found appreciation only in the villages of Chattisgarh. Then unexpectedly in 1973, *Goon ka naam sasural* became a major success. "That broke the ice," the director recalls. Successful runs, foreign tours and a Padma Shri for Tanvir followed the initial break-

deals with today's social problems. The queen says there is. She says what happened in the



A scene from *Pashu Gavari*; return to pure theatre

his earlier method of mixing urban and rural. It was a mistake - all militancy against the form, the explanation of this point of view in *Pashu Gavari* where, in a mixed cast, the city actors were obviously less graceful and less than their village counterparts. And despite his self-confessed admiration for the producer, Tanvir feels that combining the two, flawed the product. Elucidating further he says, "The central character, an urban boy used his eyes and face to express his emotions, while the tribal actors used physical movements and kept their faces blank." The contrast was made even more apparent by the uniformly robust performances in *Goon ka naam sasural*.

Bharti, however, disagrees strongly with this thesis. "I am trying to build a bridge between two sensibilities," he asserts. "The process will take time, but it is possible." Getting tribals to leave their homes for an uncertain existence in theatre was not an easy

task for either director. For that the link was made doubly difficult by the fact that he was using a religious form. The actors all went and asked the *devi* for permission, he says. "There was a brilliant performer among them who couldn't join because the *devi* refused him permission."

Tanvir built up his company by scouring the Madhya Pradesh countryside. He attended *melas*, listened to women singing in the fields, watched rustic theatre and picked his performers. Initially the women were hesitant. "But with repeated workshops, things got more established and their men folk let them go," he explains. Some of the members of his troupe were regular village performers. And most of the women were singers and dancers belonging to a poverty-ridden nomadic tribe.

The players do well financially. Tanvir pays them a regular salary with additional show money. And in season there is a show almost every

Surely there is a possibility that instead of producing theatre they will become like travelling musicians. The evidence, so far, points to the contrary. Bhanu Bharti's Rajasthani group, for instance, was perfectly capable of performing a play from the south and Tanvir's company has even performed Moliere and Brecht in the past. Obviously they have evolved as actors and not degenerated into mere showpieces of tribal art.

As far as explaining complex themes to simple rural actors goes, it has not been so difficult. Bharti had to translate the ideas of the play into experiences within the comprehension of his troupe. Tanvir, meanwhile, has followed the policy of harnessing the story to his performers and letting them improvise. There is no concession to Indian terms. The players understand the universal elements of greed, avarice and love in the plays and respond to them.

In addition to which the performers go home for Bholi, Dwalli and at harvest time. Commenting on Naya Theatre, Peter Brook once wrote, "They represent an absolute extreme of purity: a peasant company directed by a highly sophisticated man who brings them to town and takes every conceivable precaution to prevent the town from contaminating them."

Tanvir, however, is not so sure about the ability to protect them from contamination. But contact with the outside world, he feels, has in fact a positive effect on them. "Earlier they came to me with film songs," he recalls. "I had to dig into their memories for folk songs." Now, he feels, with the awareness of an appreciation for their culture, they have gone even deeper into it.

So much emphasis on tribal culture brings one to question these efforts. Is there not the danger that the efforts of these two directors will veer away from the original intentions?