

Artiste Profile

Arun Kakade or Kakade Kaka as he is fondly known completes 75 years on 19th January 2007. In a series of discussions that he had with Pragya Tewari for E-stq (an e-theatre newsletter, published by the Seagull foundation) he reminisced his childhood and his long career in the theatre. The following article is a personal profile that Mumbai Theatre Guide is only too happy to reproduce. While Kakade Kaka's memories give us an insight into his personal life, they are also a valuable document of Awishkar's history. We thank and acknowledge Pragya Tewari's help for being able to republish the article on our site. The article has been edited as necessary.

Arun Kakade - The man behind the scene

If someone tested Arun Kakade's blood group, it would be Theatre Positive. He epitomises the hard-core *Rangakarmi* by being the backbone of Rangayana and then, Awishkar. Be it, Chhabildas or The Mahim Municipal School, he's been around to pamper the egos (and talents) of the big *badshahs* of theatre. Here he looks back on his life to trace his journey in the theatre.

"From age 10, I have been on my own. I stayed with relatives and had to work so that I could educate myself. It was a hard life. This was how I passed my SSC (Secondary School certificate). I worked as a student manager to get through college. It was in college that I started watching plays. Plays by Bhalba Kelkar and Acharya Atre made an impact on me. I worked under Bhalba Kelkar during my years as a student at Wadia College in Pune. Later he invited me to join the Progressive Dramatic Association (PDA) of which I remained an active part until 1955. It was in PDA that I realised for the first time that theatre is not just about acting. I became acquainted with other aspects of the theatre and felt an urge to get involved in the totality of it all.

In 1956, I came to Mumbai for a job. Here I learnt that the Indian Academy of Dramatic Arts (IADA) was holding a theatre workshop and I went to meet Vijaya Jaywant(Vijaya Mehta) who was the registrar of the Academy. She had heard of PDA and welcomed me in the group. A gentleman by the name of Sam Berkley Hill used to do speech workshops for us but we protested. Since we wanted to do Marathi theatre we saw no point in learning English speech. We decided to produce a play called SHITU written by Go. Ni. Dandekar and directed by the then Vijaya Jayvant. We rehearsed for three months. On 1st January 1957, a Sunday morning we opened the play in Opera House. It was a historical place. Prithviraj Kapoor used to perform there on Saturday evenings. Soon after the play opened IADA withdrew its support. By then we had a nucleus of people who wanted to do real theatre, avant garde, experimental, whatever you call it. So I suggested to Vijaya bai that we stage this play SHITU, independently under her banner. Initially she was reluctant. She said we need an organisation but we went on to do about five or six shows of this play. Then we went to INT (Indian National Theatre) and did plays for children for about a year. We went to Colaba Mahila Vikas Mandal. We were allowed to stage plays for them. But eventually they backed out as well. That night we decided to form our own group. We wanted to call it Rangmanch and produce a play by Tendulkar, 'Chimnicha Ghar Hota Menacha'. When we initiated formalities to register the group, we were told that Rangmanch was already registered as a name. Rangayan was suggested to us by the famous poet, Pu. Shi. Rege.

Our first production, SASA AANI KASAV, directed by Vijaya Jayvant was for a State Drama competition and we won the first prize. We had no place of our own. We would meet, everyday, at Wilson College. The professor in Marathi, Wa.la. Kulkarni was admirer of Vijaya bai. He believed in our kind of theatre and organised that space for us. When we had to shift from there also, we went to Bhulabhai Desai Memorial Institute at Warden Road, headed by Solibhai Batliwala , who was a great lover of art. That was an ideal cultural centre. There was Theatre Unit, Ravi Shankar's group, sculptors, painters and our Marathi group. There was a terrace and a space where we would perform. After some years they wanted to reconstruct the building, so we had to ultimately leave from there as well. Meanwhile Vijaya bai left for London. There was a vacuum in leadership and Arvind Deshpande took over. We did three or four plays after which our landmark production, SHANTATA COURT CHALU AHE, came into being. This was in 1967. There was the Koyana earthquake and there were no electricity at night for theatres, so we had to perform in the afternoon at Ravindra Natya Mandir for competition. The judges said it was not a play and rejected it. But there was positive feedback from the audience so we decided to stage it at Shivaji Mandir and other places. But we could not meet the expenses and the deficit kept increasing so we had to stop after 30 performances. After a year the play had won the Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya award. Tendulkar met me at Vile Parle station and informed me. In the evening, I went to meet Arvind and we decided to reopen the play. After a house full performance at Sahitya Sangh, a professional contractor came up to us and offered to run the play. He used to work at the railways but never went to office. He would organise anything- from free-style wrestling to plays. We agreed to give him 25 performances in the beginning. In return we asked for royalty and nothing else. We toured all over Maharashtra and our deficit was cleared.

After three years Vijaya bai returned from London. There were some issues between us. I was the first person to disagree with Vijaya bai. She wanted us to close plays after five performances. Initially when we were doing Ionesco's plays, for instance, it did not make any difference but later we began staging plays penned by our playwrights. I told her that they would not have an incentive to write if we shut their plays after five shows. Besides, the idea was to take these plays to a larger audience. She was worried about who would handle the responsibilities of the organisation. I said I will. That was the beginning of the responsibilities I am still shouldering. She gave in and we toured all over Maharashtra with Tendulkar's plays like MEE JINKLO MEE HARLO which she directed and Dr Lagoo acted in. After her return from London, a dispute arose over leadership. She saw that Arvind Deshpande had established himself. When tensions started mounting we sat together and decided to part ways. Tendulkar and I were amongst the first people to quit. The whole team of SHANTATA COURT CHALU AAHE left thereafter and we formed 'Awishkar', but not before we finished 100 shows under the banner of Rangayan. It was very unfortunate but there was no alternative. We still love Rangayan.

Years later, all of us including Vijaya bai laughed at ourselves for having done this. We had been silly but it was too late. It was 1971. Awishkar had no place of its own to begin with. We would meet at Arvind's place everyday and stage our plays at regular theatres. But commercial proscenium theatres were proving uneconomical for the kind of plays we wanted to do. Sulbha Deshpande was teaching at the Chabbildas Girls High School then. So was the playwright Madhav Sakhardande. They suggested we try and procure the Chabbildas hall for our activities. Some of the teachers in the school had been our sympathisers. Authorities of the General

Education Institute to which the Chhabildas School belongs, agreed to give their Hall for our activities from May 1974 on a yearly rental basis.

At Rangayan, since we had no fund-kitty, we would enroll sympathiser-members every year, and against their guarantee, give them three productions. Once we were registered we did get Rs.2000/- as grant but this was our main source of funding. Once we were established nobody wanted to do a clerical job anymore. People are always interested in acting but to run an institution and to do continuous day to day work, the financial and administrative aspects need to be taken care of. I was the only fool who volunteered and I have been doing this work for 50 years now! This is the 5th generation I am working with. People come and go but the objective which with we started is intact.

Those days we did three to four plays a year with 30 to 40 performances. Today, things have changed. This year we did eight productions and about 150 performances.”

This theatre movement has been possible because of one man named Kakade Kaka who stood behind it, supporting its framework.

“Soon after we left Rangayan, it shut down. The same could have happened with Awishkar but I took care of everything except my own creative needs. I sacrificed my creativity in the larger interest of the theatre.

This infrastructure of Awishkar in Chabbildas was extended to other like-minded groups and thus began the so called Chabbildas Movement. We would charge Rs 50 as rent for the hall, Rs.5/- for spots, Rs.3/- for dimmers. And so, in Rs.150/- you could put up a show. There was a strong influence of Europe on Indian theatre at that time. At the same time, playwrights like Tendulkar and Khanolkar were writing our own stories. In fact, we started in Chabbildas with PRATIMA, a free verse play by Khanolkar. We consciously stayed away from propaganda theatre. We did not come out in support of any single ideology with our theatre. That remains the case, to-date. We do a DAVEDAR and also a play like IRAQ. We have always believed in theatre for the sake of theatre and our commitment is towards pure Theatre. We don't believe in any kind of dogmatic theatre.

Rangayana laid the foundation for experimentation that Awishkar took forward. All groups were welcome. I was at the helm of things. Sulbha and Arvind Deshpande were working in film, television and commercial theatre for a living. Their commitments kept them busy, so I told them that I will manage things. They could come and go at their convenience and contribute to our theatre mission. We would invite groups from all over Mumbai and other places to perform. We would provide them with infrastructure but above that we could also give them a couple of hundred rupees. There was no hard and fast criterion for the selection of plays. If we felt any group was genuine in its commitment and efforts, we would provide it with a platform.

A pan national theatre movement of sorts started. As a result playwrights like Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Shankar Shesh, Badal Sirkar, Girish Karnad, were made accesible in languages other than those they wrote in. However, I wouldn't say this was a result of any conscious effort on our part. Directors like Satyadev Dubey would pick up plays in any language that they found interesting and direct them. That is rarely happening now. One reason is the lack of good young playwrights today. There isn't much writing happening outside Marathi. If there is, nobody is talking

about and it is not coming to us. After Arvind's demise we held a national theatre festival, the first of its kind. There was Prabir Guha's play from Kolkata, Rajendranath's from Delhi, B Jayshree's from Bangalore, Pannikar's from Kerala. In other words, groups from all over the country. Today, that kind of a conscious effort needs to be made to revive a national theatre movement. Today Prithvi Theatre, Nehru Centre, and the Department Of Dramatics, Mumbai University, do organize these national festivals.

At Chabbildas we would meet for regular discussions and debates. We would discuss difficulties that we were facing, problems that confronted our theatre, where contemporary theatre stood; basically how to survive. There would be disagreements but I don't recall any argument that led to breakdown of communication ever. I have seen Dubeyji and Arvind fighting, for instance over their principles, over each other's productions, over interpretations of plays like SHANTATA... and EVAM INDRAJIT. But no one would quit after discussions or walk out. We would stick it out and work together no matter what.

The Chabbildas Movement began to lose its strength towards the 90's. Groups began to die out. Directors were not coming up with plays, with consistency. Their reasons could have been financial and such but by the 90's, plays were significantly lesser in number. Awishkar was the only group that survived. In 1992 we were asked to vacate Chabbildas. We came to Mahim Municipal School but were not allowed to perform here. We would store our properties here and perform at three different centres, in Karnataka Sangh, Goregaon and Vile Parle. In a couple of years we could not afford them either and again found ourselves without a performing space. Eventually we were given permission to perform at the school and we have been here ever since.

My mantra as a producer and an organiser is that I treat my colleagues as equals, even the youngsters. I don't ever get nostalgic about the good old days. I avoid confrontations. I learnt a lot from Bhalba, Arvind and Vijaya bai. For example, Vijaya bai was so meticulous and disciplined. She would put on paper everything that was being planned. This helped to foresee difficulties. For instance when we started Awishkar we wanted to start with a bang. We picked Karnad's TUGHLAQ. It was a spectacular production, with 70 to 80 artistes, huge sets and costumes. Tapas Sen was lighting for us. It took us 6 months to put it up. There were financial difficulties; there always have been. We begged and borrowed but never stole! It is very difficult to strike a balance between sustaining the production financially and satisfying its creative needs. Planning is crucial. Money saved is money earned but one also has to make sure one is a professional in his/her attitude and approach about such things. As an organiser, Mahesh Elkunchwar's trilogy of the WADA plays, which was directed by Chandrakant Kulkarni was perhaps my biggest challenge. It was certainly one of the biggest events on the Marathi stage. We would stage all three plays on one day, 8 and half hours at a stretch. Elkunchwar had suggested the idea to everyone in Maharashtra but found none who was ready to produce this trilogy. Awishkar accepted the challenge and did about 35 shows at various places, including Dehli.

Amicability sure helps to run productions smoothly but it does not always bring adulations. I remember a fight with Nana Patekar once. We were doing a children's play in Chhabildas. One actor broke the discipline on stage and Nana held me responsible for it. He felt I was too lenient with the actors. I said I would talk to the

actor but he was determined to quit the play! I could pacify him but only after a lot of difficulty. A lot of actors want to quit productions after a number of shows because they are bored; Nana for instance. As a producer, I never insist on continuing with the production. If the actors don't relish and cherish what they do on stage, the audiences naturally won't. When I produce a play, it is like giving birth to a baby and I try my level best to nurse it through as many performances as possible. I never allow any play to die. Because of this philosophy, today we have a repertory of 25 full length and short plays running regularly.

I have seen generations of theatre people. Things have changed over the years. Everything was very systematic earlier. Music, lights and movement were recorded to the minutest detail before the shows. I observe that the younger lot is not so disciplined. They don't want to fix things till the end. That did happen with us too, but rarely. When we did PRATIMA, for example, we decided on one interpretation but Amol wanted a symbolical approach. Arvind, Khanolkar and me did not agree. Sulbha suggested we try it, so we did some performances but went back to our original design. But today's directors operate too much on trial and error. IRAQ for instance, has been cut from being a two act play to a single act after some deletion of some scenes which were found to be irrelevant.

The young Playwrights are fewer now. Chetan is our most promising playwright. He is a complete theatre person-actor, director and playwright. Shafaat Khan, Gopu Deshpande, C.P. Deshpande, Rajeev Naik, Ramu Ramnathan, Premanand Gajvi and others are also important playwrights of this generation. New playwrights like Irawati Karnik, Sachin Kundalkar, Girish Joshi are coming up. These youngsters have done workshops and trained unlike the older lot. But the craftsmanship that Tendulkar had, is not to be found any more. When he wrote a play, he visualised it. It is evident if you read the instructions in his plays. But you cannot confront the youngsters with this observation. They say we're suffocating their spirit of experimentation. I never interfere in their efforts. I feel, they will learn by their experience, the art and craft of playwriting.

What is experimental? Anything which is different from what is going on. The commercial practitioners perform plays for the audience, we do plays for theatre. Theatre has always faced challenges. In the early days of cinema, it posed as much of a threat as the other mediums do, today. We have to survive. One can hope for a revival but it is hard to imagine. None of us have the basic infrastructure and our own place. Just think about this. We built a place like Chhabildas for 18 years and were asked to leave. It's the same thing here at Mahim. The government is apathetical towards our movement. It's been over five years now. The state government has taken our grants away. I recently heard from an eminent theatre person from Kolkata, that all grants from the cultural ministry of the Central Government to theatre and dance groups all over India will stop. Private entrepreneurs don't want to help either. They ask what is in it for them. This is the worst crisis that experimental theatre faces in this country and I don't see a change of attitude coming in the near future.

As I look back I am happy that I have managed two major theatre groups- Rangayan and Awishkar. Further, I have successfully carried out the responsibility of producing more than 150 full length and short plays both for adults and children. I have staged nearly 4000 performances of these plays and in addition I have organized nearly 2000 performances of other theater groups at Chhabildas.

I am grateful to Sulabha Deshpande and Prema Sakhardande for keeping Awishkar going during my illness for two years.

If I am asked about my plans for my future, I have none. I only plan for the theatre. I cannot see myself distinct from it. I have been working without any expectations. You may call it `Karmayog'. I don't want fame or even recognition. My only desire is to do good theatre, support good theatre and see good theatre. I have been and will be - *seva bhavi, natyadharmi, rangakarmee*. I thank you, Pragya for your questions and I also thank Ramu Ramanathan, who convinced me to speak."