

# Deryck Jeffereis

## COMPUTER CARD

### PERSONALITY

NAME	JEFFEREIS, DERYCK
BIODATA	2
PHOTOGRAPHS	26
ARTICLES/CLIPPINGS	
BROCHURES/PUBLICITY	
MATERIAL	1
BOOKS ON	NIL
BOOKS BY	1
AUDIO MATERIAL	NIL
VIDEO MATERIAL	1

## BIODATA

Name	Mr Deryck Jeffereis
Date of birth	17 September 1920
Address	Kulsum Terrace 7 Walton Road, Bombay 400 039 Phone: 230695
Profession	Electrical Engineer
Languages known	English
Language of theatre work	English
Specialisation	Set designer, light designer, director and producer,

	theatre designer and consultant.
Teaching	Taught lighting at Indian Academy of Dramatic Arts, Bombay, for 10 years.
Books	Stage Lighting (English, Marathi)
Membership	Founder of Theatre Group Currently its President.

Video interview of Mr Deryck Jeffereis taken by Mr Farookh Mehta

*I am Farookh Mehta, and this is Deryck Jeffereis.*

Hi.

*And I am here really to introduce Deryck and to ask some of the questions that you yourself would have liked to ask had you met Deryck. Deryck, before I ask you the questions, and since I know your life pretty well from say the '40s onwards, why not tell us a little pre-40?*

Well, that's going back quite a big distance, 40-odd years.

*Bobby Padamsee*



*Yes. Before you got into theatre.*

Oh, before I got into theatre, I am sorry I was a practical man. I had hands. I had feet. Nothing else. I didn't have a great deal of heart, I didn't have a great deal of brains, and I could use my hands, and I could use my feet. And that's about the only thing I could do. And I did it rather well as a matter of fact, because I did serve an apprenticeship in an organisation for which I worked for 40 odd years. And in that organisation I learnt certain skills which have stayed with me right through my life. But they are all physical skills, the use of the hands, the eyes. And unfortunately nothing much to do with the heart or the brain.

*Well, that's quite right, because I do recall meeting you even before I met you in theatre. And you were very closely associated with the modelling club, or whatever it was called. In those days I remember wooden models of aircraft and . . .*

That was the Bombay Society of Model Engineers. I was one of the founder members. And I think that skill has helped me a great deal right through my life and I am glad I have been able to pass it on to my kids as well. I developed a certain amount of artistic idea in the field of model-making. Of course the obvious question comes in then, how on earth did you get into theatre?

*Yeab.*

Ah, well! That's not a very long story. It is quite simple, as a matter of fact. Coming under the influence of Jotham Bobby Padamsee, who is my brother-in-law, whose sister I married, was the cause of my, I won't say my downfall, but certainly my interest in theatre. And as a matter of fact I say, 1942 was the turning point in my life. From 1920 when I was born, to 1942 when I met Bobby, I was a mechanic and from 42 onwards I won't say I became an artist, that is ridiculous but I became something more than a mechanic. That was more or less the background from which I sprang and of course I have, how would I say, a great belief that it is important that you should know what you are doing, before doing it. I have a lot of friends of mine who say I like that picture. I don't know why, but I like it. I saw that movie, I don't know why, but I like it. I am afraid I can't agree with that kind of an attitude, you must know why you like something. Am I right?

*Yes.*

So I think that the basis of a career is usually built up on something solid. You can then deviate, make it slightly liquid thereafter. But it should be solid to start with. Am I talking sense?

*Well, I won't answer that. But I will ask you another question. You said that you came to theatre by com-*

*ing to know Bobby Padamsee and later on you married one of his sisters, Shiraz. I don't think at all talking to you about theatre can be divorced from talking about the Padamsee influence in theatre. Couple of thoughts which I have always been fascinated about. One is, there were a lot of people who came to be associated with theatre. Ameen Sayani, Pearl Padamsee, you, Alkazi. Atleast these four. By a strange coincidence all of you married into the family. You were interested first in the theatre and through your association with theatre, you revolved maybe around Bobby. You ultimality all married into the family.*

Yes, that's a point I never really thought about, but you are quite right. It has worked out in that manner. I think the influence that was exercised upon, well, everybody as a matter of fact, his sisters and his brothers-in-law to be, was due entirely to the, I won't say genius, it's a wrong word to use, the influence of a man who once . . . seemed to be far in advance of his age. He was aged 24 at that time and the way in which he was influencing the minds and hearts of people around him! Well something was, well its very difficult to explain, what the real influence was, but it was there and there is no question of it. If you take the names of the people you just mentioned, Alkazi, Sayani and won't put my name in the same bracket, but still all of us were definitely influenced by the work we were asked to do and his guidance. Maybe you would like to know how all this happened, where we first got down to brass tacks.

*How did you all sort of coalesce into a group? What brought you together?*

Well, actually it was sort of a peculiar thing with the . . . we were very fond of coffee. We are still fond of coffee. And these coffee sessions used to go on till 2 or 3 in the morning and the chit-chat used to be mainly about poetry, about music and about theatre. And the thought came up: from Bobby: let's do a production. There was Adi Marzban, there was myself. Hameed hadn't come on the scene at the time. Bhowmagra, Jean who is not in Bombay at the moment. These were the three or four people who were around him at the time and we decided to do *Macbeth*. That was a fairly strong decision to take because it was the first time that we were attempting a production on the stage. Now I would like to mention here the contribution that I made as far as lighting was concerned, was the fact that prior to this date, the lighting both in the western theatre and in the theatre in India itself was simple. Lighting was used only for the purpose of seeing. It had no other function whatsoever. So long as you could see the actor and the actress that was the end of the story. It had no attempt to try and influence or to try and support characterisation. That was just a seeing medium and nothing more. For example there was an

attempt made to direct the attention of the audience. Like we are right now standing here, full lights around us, and you are seeing both of us together. Now you are doing something which is important and I am doing something which is less important, and you want the audience's attention to be directed towards you, then unless you change the lights or do something with them or shift the camera in your direction, in other words shift all the eyes of everybody on to you, and not on me, the purpose will not be served. So, that I think was the basic fact, the basic point which we started in theatre: the use of the spot-light, which is an instrument which can direct light in a specific direction, at a specific intensity. This was I think the most important thing I consider I had done in my entire lighting career.

*Deryck, you mentioned the importance of lighting apart from helping an audience to see it is to experience, and experience a mood, a moment, whatever it is, on stage by the use of the light, either in forms of tone, in forms of movement, of creating various, am I right, acting areas, less important, more important, through intensity of light, creation of shadows, all this. Did it become possible only because of the availability at last of dimmers, which maybe earlier were not so easily available? Was it because of handier spots or what?*

Well, I don't entirely agree with you, the dimmers have been available right from the beginning of time. If you think about it, the first dimmers were made out of water, salt water. You just had salt water and one plate inside and another plate at a height and you just made a difference between the distance between the two plates and you could increase the resistance and get the effect of dimming the lights. So the dimmers were not suddenly discovered at that moment. Only thing was the use of the dimmer, the use of controlling light by means of intensity, by means of colour, by means of direction, there were the three elements which, I think I wont say I did alone, I did feel that I did on the western stage certainly. Otherwise it was a question of who put the lights on or who put the lights of, and that is the end of the story.

And of course Bobby took the, what's the word for it, the initiative, to introduce a new character into the play. The character was the voice, he was the chorus or the narrator, telling the audience what was going on, behind the scenes. It was not that everybody knew the history behind *Macbeth*: What was happening in Scotland at the time when this particular play was being performed; who was Duncan, and who was Lady Macbeth, and so on and so forth. Their relationships were described by means of this person outside the play. Of course this was the first time we made the use of the chorus in a spotlight; the man was hanging in

space! You only saw his face, you never saw the rest of his body. So that particular effect of a face hanging in space was some of the effects that we tried to create with that particular event. And of course the witches' scene. The witches' scene in *Macbeth*: on the heath. Now if you try and do that particular scene on the stage any time: if you have it brightly lit and try and draw a jungle on the background. You have a bunch of twigs, and you have three cackling witches, it looks comic. But if you have all the lights down and only if you have the red glow coming from inside lighting up the faces of the witches, from the flickering light, the effect is created without your having to do anything. As a matter of fact what we tried to do was to try and get the audience to imagine rather than we telling them: this is a forest. You can even wave one little tree in the air and say this is a forest. The audience does the rest.

*Anybody listening in from this generation would say, 'I mean, so what's new?'*

Yes you are right, absolutely.

*At that point of time, 1942, very little was being experimented. Lights certainly not. This must be quite a step forward.*

Absolutely, then that was one of the things.

*After that what?*

Now Oscar Wilde's *Salome* was important as far as we were concerned, to the extent that the dance of the seven veils was performed by a girl of your community, which gave rise to a lot of problems from the community itself, because she had to perform that dance of the seven veils. We got over that particular problem and it was done: and done very tastefully as a matter of fact. It was possible to do it. Mind I was not there, I had the mumps! But we did manage to do it and the same principle, the same system worked, mainly we set the stage in different areas. We did not use the stage as one large entity. We used separate little areas. And that we are doing even today. If a play is properly performed, properly lit, you might have separate areas and control the lights in these separate areas.

I would just like to mention that the next play was *Othello*. That might be interesting for the people interested in the stage, as to how it came about. We were having coffee, again in the morning, and the question: 'What do we do next?', the point was raised and Bobby said that 'I would like to do *Othello*, you know. I can imagine myself in the part of Othello'. And looking at his face you will be seeing it in one of the photographs which we will show you, he did have that appearance. So he said 'Let's do Othello.' Then we were drinking coffee and so on and so forth and the question, I put to them: 'Let's do it backwards.'

*It must have been very late at night!*

Yes! We said we will do it backwards. So 'What do you mean we will do it backwards?' There was a little chitter chatter. Then Bobby said 'Wait a minute, there is some sense. We will start with the death of Desdemona and we will work backwards through the play, and do each scene three times: Once from the point of view of Othello, once from the point of view of Iago and once from the point of view of Desdemona; and when she is killed at the end.

*This was 20 years before *Rashoman*. Am I right?*

Same principle, you are right. Then of course we were hammered by the critics. They said 'How dare you touch Shakespeare's lines?' We didn't touch Shakespeare's lines, we only repeated them three times, that's all. And that was the end of it.

*Well, I think the critics in Bombay, till maybe the early '70s, were no real friends of the people who worked on the stage. Let me ask a couple of questions, particularly because you worked with so many people. In theatre for example, you worked with Adi Marzban, you've worked with Bobby, you've worked with Aleque Padamsee, you've worked with Pearl Padamsee, you've worked with Silvi D'Cunba, you have even produced my first play. So I think you've worked with such a large number of people, Pesi Khandalawala. I think it would be very interesting to see that, to get to know how you've related to these different people, because each one was so different from the other, and yet you: the Deryck Jefferets that I know: managed to get on with everybody.*

Yes I suppose. I think maybe the secret lies in being able to listen; not to talk too much. That is partially due to the fact that I was not fully qualified to be able to talk too much in the first place because I was new to the game. And then of course the fact that what was being spoken by these people was interesting as well. All these people approached me from a different angle. In other words they had the creative ideas and I would like to do something in this particular manner how would you execute it. Now they were beholden to me to produce the goods on the stage. In your own case for example you wanted to do a huge set on the stage and you said . . .

*I wouldn't have done the play without it! Deryck, I was saying that you had an opportunity to work as, shall we say, the producer. A producer meaning that you looked after the entire backstage operation: lighting, set design, set management, props, everything. You worked with people like Bobby, Alkazi, Aleque, Pearl, Silvi. When you look back for each of them, what were the most significant plays you recall for each of these people?*

Yes, but I think I have mentioned Bobby already. The two plays I consider his outstanding ones were *Macbeth* and *Otello*. These two productions were, in my opinion, the, I won't say the progenitors or the prime movers of the modern theatre in the country. And then of course if you go down, the next person in line, as you mentioned just now, was Marzban. Now Adi Marzban was a totally different kind of a gentleman. He was purely a practical man, he was practical, if not more practical than I was, and I am. Sorry I shouldn't use the past tense. And he was able to talk on equal terms. And even then his attitude was simple: that I should produce the goods that he had in mind. This division between the director and the producer, which is obvious on the cinema screen today, didn't exist on the stage. You had the director, I mean you had someone who took charge of the whole show and did the show on the stage. Now the division between direction and production was not clearly defined. It only came about now. The director was the person who actually took charge of what was happening on the particular stage at one time, whereas the producer took charge of everything else: the lighting, the set design, booking the hall, pacifying the actors and actresses, and all the rest of it. So, that was his job. So the director's job was a very lovely job I think. He only directed, look at you for example: you did not produce.

Adi, as I said before, was a practical person; he did not tout any theories of stage work or stage play. And he was down-to-earth. That's it, as far as I am concerned. And he was really the person who could get your teeth into any production, which he did. There is a chunk of meat over there. Now that in itself is an asset to some people and it is a pain in the neck to others. So it depends on which side of the fence you are. I am not quite sure where you are but I presume you have your own views on that subject.

*Considering that you have worked for so many years producing and helping people stage shows, and with your vast experience in lighting, set design, and generally production, how come you really did not move into Indian language theatre?*

Well, I am afraid I, I think the basic factor is that I am lazy. I didn't, I really could not take the trouble to develop my interest in the Indian languages. It is a wrong thing to do and I plead guilty. I am sorry about that. And in retrospect I feel sorrier still. But still on the other hand there is an advantage, whether you like it or not, of being able to sit back objectively and see what is going on, is a big advantage. When you get involved in a particular movement, there is a tendency to get too involved into it, whereas if you can stand back and watch what's going on you are able to guide it a little better. And I have always maintained that my function in theatre has been to be able to see what is going

on in the West and in the more advanced forms of theatre. I am using these words deliberately. They can be argued about. Whether it's more advanced or not I can't say. I am using them best I think fit. More advanced forms of theatre, to see what's going on in the West, assimilate it myself, present it to the audiences here, and thereby influence their, what's the word for it, contribution to theatre.

*I think there is no doubt about it that the West has been a couple of steps ahead in technique.*

Oh yes.

*In the technical aspect of theatrecraft it has certainly been ahead. You just now said that you saw that this could be your contribution. And I agree that anybody: I don't say that in English theatre only, anybody in any language, makes a contribution, I expect if he can influence others to grow and develop. So I think that is important. Deryck, you have been associated with the Theatre Group and you are its president and I think you have been its president from ever since I can remember.*

Yes.

*What do you say as the president, and for such a long time a close supporter of advocate of Theatre Group, what do you see is the primary purpose or contribution of Theatre Group?*

Well, I think I enunciated this thing long, long ago when we first started. As a matter of fact with the death of Bobby Padamsee, and during the time when we had Alkazi, within the group itself and others who diversified later on as their skills developed, I think that the main function that the Theatre Group was performing and is still performing is to present, to assimilate what is going on in the West and present it to our own people here in this town, or in this country as the case may be. Now not only in the form of the technical side purely of lighting, of music and so on, but in the forms of acting, the delivery of language and every other aspect of theatre is being assimilated by us and presented as far as possible to the Indian audiences, who we think, we hope and we have seen being influenced, and being able to, not recreate, but to absorb those influences. And now, here comes the crunch. I feel that the Theatre Group members by themselves, by and large, are totally western oriented. So there is a difficulty when you are western oriented, and in the effort to keep your feet in both camps you make a mess of both. So prefer rather to sit in one camp and direct the other people, rather than try to do two things at the same time. I am not sure whether you agree with me. I have always found that unless you concentrate on one particular aspect of life, of theatre, whatever you want to, even love making, unless you do

it properly it's a waste of time!

*Deryck, you yourself have worked perhaps longest with Adi Marzban, of all the directors. Am I right?*

Yes.

*And yet Adi straddled two worlds: English theatre and Parsi-Gujarati theatre. And you yourself were associated with a lot of Adi's Parsi-Gujarati Theatre.*

Yes, but actually I was. . .

*Adi was an exception.*

Well, I actually consider myself an honorary Parsi. That is true. But don't forget that Adi's . . . as you were saying, Adi has worked in two languages but the western influence on Adi's Gujarati language was very, very strong. I don't think he . . . I have a great doubt whether he worked completely on the Gujarati stage. Now can you say that he did a *sbuddha* (pure) Gujarati play at all? Would he dare to do it?

*He did a sbuddha Parsi-Gujarati play.*

I am not saying that, I am not saying that . . .

*Which is . . .*

I am not saying that, I am not saying that. I am at the moment . . . as an honorary Parsi I can say that the Parsis, really speaking, are not, surely speaking, Indians, in the sense . . . have an Indian background, have an Indian creativity and so on.

*Parsi background, meaning you couldn't possibly see those plays being taken for English plays if they were translated. That just couldn't have made any sense. And therefore, the language was not only Gurarati, Parsi-Gujarati, but the ethos was Gujarati, really 100%. Nobody could possibly translate that into . . .*

Well, I think he has the advantage there. He was born a Parsi, he lived a Parsi all his life, and western influences were on him. But basically he was a Parsi, whereas I, poor idiot, was born in a western community; unfortunately, English is the mother-tongue and so on and so forth. So I didn't have the influences, I didn't try to attempt and get them into my ethos.

*Deryck, another area that . . . Sorry, before I move into that I want to ask one question. The Theatre Group as you said, you defined what you think is the major function, its major responsibility. You had a split in the Theatre Group many years ago.*

That's right.

*Maybe you can for the purpose of this record: what led to it, how you saw it? Because you were really a kind of, I always regarded you as a kind of cementing force, between the two groups.*

Yes, I think I know what you are getting at. The point is that theatre is a very flimsy organisation, in the sense that if you have two people of strong personalities, they will tear themselves apart. And so whether it is possible to fuse them together, with a strong personality at the same time I think is a very difficult task, and it requires a certain amount of give and take. And unfortunately if a person is creative, if a person is able to do things in artistic manner, he has not the power to give at all. He has got the power to take. So that's it. So I think that is the basis of the split that took place in the Theatre Group and Alkazi. Well it was quite clean. He said: 'Look, I would like to do things for myself, by myself. And I would not like to be to be under the control of a committee and so on and so forth. So that was that and that was quite simple.

*Well, looking back on it, I think perhaps that was a very healthy thing that happened for Bombay theatre because it allowed two different approaches to theatre to flourish. And not only that, a number of young directors came up, who otherwise may not have.*

That's right.

*And in the process the audience got an opportunity to see two different types of English Theatre: Alkazi's where he was very much into the classical or the neo-classical when it was Anouilh and so on. And the others who were picking up very modern plays, bedroom farces, you know even Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams and so on. So I think, it did a lot of good I think, looking back on it. You were also very, very closely associated with St Xavier's College Dramatic Club. In fact my first exposure to you was when I joined the club. . . And before I ask you a question I am going to make a statement. In those years Adi and you used to turn up every Monday at 1.15 sharp and you used to help us hold that weekly meeting till 2.30, 2.45, sometimes till 3. If someone were to ask me what has been the most important influence on me, it really was what you and Adi did for us in those college days. How you encouraged us, nurtured us, guided us. Never really said 'hey look, you are going to do that and that's it'. You gave a lot of freedom. The encouragement that we all got, and when I say all: well look at, in the English Theatre, all seniors were Gersun D'Cunha, Silvie D'Cunha, Aleque Padamsee, Pearl Padamsee: a whole range of people. And we all have this benefit from you Deryck.*

Well, I think that was the, one of the high spots of my career, my association with the St Xavier's College, because they were at that time, I presume it's the same now, but tremendous amount of energy, enthusiasm and support. I use this word deliberately because the college themselves were supporting the theatre to a

great extent. All these people . . . they built the hall for that particular purpose. But I still think that the efforts that have been put in over there, were supported so well, that we were able to cooperate in that production which we did there with you kids at that time, the college kids. And things like . . . for example huge productions of that sort. And no questions were asked, money was spent, not a great deal of it, but it was spent. Don't forget that in those days the chances of redeeming the money were very small indeed. I you will agree.

*I think if we ran four shows, we were considering it lucky. Four shows we ran but not full houses. We went out to get ads, actually make an effort to sell tickets person to person. Am I right?*

Right . . . to fill the hall . . .

*Things have changed. There must have been some kind . . .*

I will give you the point when it changed . . . with the advent of Mr Pesi Khandalawala, who I can say was the saint of commercial theatre of Bombay. He was the precursor. It was quite simple. He knew how to add two and two and make five. And he made sure that everybody else did. And he was able to produce plays in a reasonable budget and sell the tickets. And getting out of one or two good productions, and having the guts to go on repeating them without necessarily waiting for a tremendous income. Just the reputation of a play. The formation of a theatre habit which I think was missing until the advent of Pesi Khandalawala. I think that is his major contribution to theatre today.

*You are right. Let's talk about some of the plays that you feel very close to which you must be . . .*

I would like to take just a few landmarks, if you want to call them milestones, in the development of the theatre. The first Hindi translation of a western success was *The Glass Menagerie*, which was translated into *Sbeesbeke Kbilone*. And unfortunately the Hindi language by itself has not a tremendous following in Maharashtra. If I make that statement I can be lampooned for it. But maybe I won't be totally wrong if I do make the statement. That was one landmark of the theatre. The second landmark in my opinion was this particular production of *Ab! Norman* which was done by Pesi Khandalawala. That was the first production which ran over a hundred nights. We never had any production upto that time to be running a hundred nights. It happens in Marathi and the other vernacular languages, but certainly not in English. So those were the landmark productions which I think that could bear with emphasising.

*You are right. It certainly developed a kind of 'let's go to the theatre' feeling.*

That's right.

*The Bobby Padamsee Award, I forget exactly when, which year it was . . .*

'69 I think.

*Why not tell us a little about this award?*

An important contribution . . . The idea of the award was the fact that we did feel that we had any number of directors, atleast we had any number of actors, fewer directors, and still fewer technicians, but we had practically no playwrights at all in the English language, in our own country. There were plenty of playwrights in the west, in the western backgrounds; but very few, none as a matter of matter of fact, in English. So the Bobby Padamsee Award was instiuted in '69 for the best play which was submitted in English on an Indian theme.

*Wasn't the first winner a play by Gurcharan Das?*

Yes, the first play called *Larins Sabeb* and written by Mr Gurucharan Das. *Larins Sabeb* of course was the fictional account of Sir Henry Lawrence who was the collector of Lahore in the time of Rani Ranjit Kaur. So the so called, not necessarily the true story, but the fictional love affair between the Rani and the collector, who had taken on himself the task of forming a seperate, I won't say a separate state of Punjab, but nevertheless to act as a buffer between Russia and British India. So that was the story and I produced that play myself in '69.

*Deryck, was Gieve Patel also one of the playwrights?*

No, not at that time. For the second award he was. He has submitted *The Princess*. It had been produced also.

*How many awards were given?*

We have had upto now only two, I am afraid. Every five years or so we do it.

*And after that there was one . . .*

*Meera* was done by Gurucharan Das, but that was not an award winner. It wasn't entered for the prize either.

*It is just a thought: has Theatre Group never thought of going in for publishing or supporting or subsidising the award-winning plays?*

You mean printing them? No, actually we intend to produce the plays, a much more expensive business to do. And we have done it all the way along the line. But this is a slightly shameful admission, but the backbone of Theatre Group were people now, like you and me and others who have got their own tremendous responsibilities on their own shoulders at the present moment. So the group has been to a certain extent

*before miniaturisation reared its beautiful head, before the cbtp came in, the, you know all today's electronic gadgets, came in. Do you have that control-board still?*

Yes. I do have as a matter of fact. The genesis of that was brought about by the fact, especially came after *Otello*. And in order to control those lights, those 30 or 40 spots, you would have to have a dimmer for every two spotlights. So we had 30 spotlights on the stage which required 15 dimmers; 15 dimmers of the normal auto-transformer type required you to be not one octopus but at least two.

*So you needed atleast six guys . . .*

So that was a point which struck me and we worked on there with the basic idea of the silicon control rectifier with which it is possible to control the same load by means of, the word you used was correct, miniaturisation, just moving one volume control up and down. Therefore you could control ten lights with ten fingers, or circuits with ten fingers. If you put two lights on every circuit you got 20 lights controlled with two hands. So that was the basis of the whole thing.

*I still remember having seen. How come your were not able to commercialise that? I thought it was a great idea. With theatres coming up and more and more theatre activity coming up, people would have welcomed that.*

Yes. I don't know really, frankly, because you know I am not very much interested in the business side of activity at all and that needs a certain amount of skill which I don't have. I have other skills, of course. I am sorry I can't add two and two and make it four. So I think that's the only reason I can give. We didn't proceed with that particular device. It served its purpose, it still is serving its purpose. I use it in school plays as well.

*When touring organisations come in, touring companies, they bring in their actors, they bring in their sets, they bring in their lighting plans etc. But they don't always have the local expertise. You have often been called in saying, 'Deryck, can you help out . . .'*

Yes. In the year '56 Martha Graham the famous ballet dancer had come with her company here to Bombay, and we were asked to do the backstage work, to help backstage work there. And we learnt a tremendous amount from them because that was the first time I had seen what we call flying of sets, in other words the whole set was lifted up the stage and a new set dropped in its place. So that was one aspect. The other aspect of course was the use of recorded music. Recorded music was I think used for the first time then to which dancers danced. That means the people were skillful enough to be able to dance to recorded music.

Normally you have to have a rapport between the musician and the dancer, in case they fall behind time in stepping and so on. Whereas here they were so perfectly trained that the music was dead, in the sense it was on a record, they couldn't do a thing about it, and they had to dance to that particular . . . And that was the first time I saw this in Bombay and I have a feeling that this also is a landmark as far as theatre development is concerned. I am talking about the year 1956.

*As far back as that?*

Yes, so, of course the recorders they used at that time were still, as compared to the recorders we are using now, very elementary. But they worked.

*Any other groups that you . . .*

Ah, subsequently Mr Merce Cunningham came, also a very a very famous American dancer. And he then . . . was not making use of classical music in the western tradition, but making use of modern music, and you will be surprised to know that it was John Cage, who was a composer of, I mean one of the foremost modern composers today. He had composed the music for the dance which I couldn't understand at all. But there are two points here that I would like to mention. John Cage had worn a pair of gloves and he had got on to the piano, the big grand piano which was loaned to them and he was plucking the strings with his fingers,

*A view of the small dimmer in operation*



been put into second place. And unfortunately, that is the situation. In the younger people who are coming up are not prepared to take up that responsibility, for producing for the time being. So there is a slight tendency to go into a slight decline. Whether that will improve matters or not I can't really say. The future will only tell us. But we have not done anything further on those lines.

*Deryck, you talked of a number of your associations in theatre. Your most recent one also goes back 10-15 years maybe, and that's being with schools.*

Oh yes, that's a very important point as far as I am concerned. I came into this by accident of course, because my wife was interested in teaching. Mrs Shiraz Jeffereis, that is Shiraz Padamsee, was interested in teaching dramatics and English in the school and as part of the course she used to perform atleast one play in the year. Now the funny thing happened there. But if anything happened in my dealings with school children. . . I found them far more malleable, able to be moulded into people who were better than what they were without the training. I won't mention a few names, but I could mention them. The impact of this particular training on the children was so startling that as far as I am concerned, became really a dragging motive to go into theatre to a greater extent. Firstly, the kids were easier to handle. Secondly, the results were startling. So it was a far more satisfying experience with us. But I think my, the work in the theatre, along with my wife of course, is the high point as far as my career in theatre is concerned, coming at the fag end of it.

*A scene from Murder in the Cathedral*



*Do you see very significant difference between the theatre work that you do with school kids and those that you have done with let's say the adults?*

Yes, as I said before, they are much more amenable to discipline, and the ability to get performances out of them is quite remarkable. I don't know if you may agree with me, but . . . we can all say that producing a play is a suspension of disbelief. Now, if you go to a play, you are sitting in Bombay and you are looking at a place supposed to be New York. For the moment I am not in Bombay. But I am sitting in New York. You are suspending disbelief, and you are projecting yourself into a New York background. In the same way with the theatre the kids who are usually 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 years are playing senior roles. And yet because of their makeup you still believe that those people are 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 but 45, 50 or 30 as the case may be. And you get a tremendous shock when you go backstage and see them getting into their school costumes. How on earth that gentleman who was the, what's the word for it, the prosecutor, the inquisitor, your son. How is that that gentleman, that boy, that gentleman on the stage who was the inquisitor, a senior man who was questioning in the jury finally turned out to be your son ten years of age? That kind of a thing I found was fantastic.

*In this school theatre, unlike in the adult theatre, are they encouraged to do everything for the play, that is, you know, create the sets, you know run around, do the carpentry work, stitch the costumes? Or is it all done for them?*

No. We try as far as possible to get them involved in everything. I mean there are certain things which they can't do, but I mean basically even the design part of it, that is definitely executed by them. The actual execution of the sets and so on and so forth, that requires a little bit of carpentry knowledge and so we try to help them do it. There is a workshop in the school and they do it as well, but by and large the design is theirs, the performance is theirs, and the time spent is theirs as well.

*Deryck, we started on this whole talk by your saying that you had no artistic tendencies, which perhaps is one of the big lies in your life. The other one that you said was that you were good at lighting, backstage work etc. I recall some excellent lighting work that you have done. For example the lighting that you did for the outdoor production of Othello.*

Yes.

*Then I remember the lighting that you did particularly for Hamlet which we staged. I think in '63 or '64 or thereabouts at the K. C. College. At some stage you had designed a switch-board, a control-board and I was fascinated by it because this was long*

much to the horror of the Parsi ladies who owned that piano . . .

*The Time and Talents Club.*

The Time and Talents Club. So that was the thing. Secondly, what I saw later on, this gentleman asked me 'I would like to have a broom.' So I said 'what are you going to do with the broom?. We have got sweepers, they would do it.' 'No, no, I just want a broom.' So he said 'Is it possible, a wooden broom or with sticks?' So I said 'We will give you a *jhadu*.' He said yes, so I gave it to him, and he banged it on the ground and he scraped it back and forth and the noise he was making was amplified and used for a dance.

*Now that you talk of the bizzare experiments with sound, I think he also asked for a bucket, took a coin, twirled it inside and . . .*

These things might be funny, but the people didn't mind. I am pretty sure Mr Vanraj Bhatia must be influenced with people like that.

*I think what was happening then with music as done by Cage was music was moving a little away from the pure melody aspect into the sounds and effects that we see all around us in our lives. And Cage might have been one of the earlier, extreme experimenters. Deryck, you've been called in sometimes, as a consultant for advising on the architecture and designing of theatres, particularly the stage, the backstage.*

Yes. That is due to the fact, rather a nice fact, that architects by and large: hope there are none in the studio right now: architects are by and large ignorant people. They do not know very much about the use of the spaces which they create. So as a result an architect will build a building, a theatre which will not collapse and look very nice from outside, it won't collapse. But whether it will work as a theatre, that's a different point altogether. The more perspicacious of them come forward and say 'O.K. Jeffereis, you have worked in the theatre, and you know what's wrong in the theatre you've worked in. Why don't you apply your knowledge and tell us how we should design the spaces, that we are going to design, and how the allocation should be made.' So that's the reason I got into theatre designing, just because of the fact that I have suffered all my life with the theatre.

*We have all worked in the theatre where the wing space is about that much and you have to take off a set which is about 10- 15 feet. But since I don't see any architacts in the audience who are going to ask 'All right, Jeffereis, tell us what you think is wrong with theatre design, I'll ask a question. What do you really see are the key requirements from a very practical point of view, to be able to use theatre space well?*

think the most important thing in the case of theatre is the proportion of length to height. Now you take some of the theatres in Bombay you end up like a letter-box slot where the proportion is four times the height. The height is one and the width is four. So you end up with a slot like that. So it's very difficult to work in that particular area. And the most practical proportion is one is to one and a half. So these things are usually found out by practice. But mind you: a good architect or a good theatre designer can break all the rules but, I insist, he must know the rules first, before he breaks them. Like for example you see the experimental theatre right here in this particular area. There is no proscenium at all. Okay fine. He has discarded the proscenium, he knows what the proportions of the proscenium are, but he discarded it knowingly that he could do without it in this particular manner. That I agree is the right way to go about it. But the other way round, not knowing, I don't know why but I don't like it.

*Deryck, I believe that with your very many years, in fact decades, of experience in theatre you have also been called upon to advise on shall we say the needs of actors and producers being spelt out when theatres are being designed.*

Yes, that is correct. As I have said earlier on, the architects have atleast come to realise that building a theatre is not the end of the story, building a box is not the end of the story. How spaces are to be allocated is something which they are obviously not aware of for the simple reason that they have not been involved in theatre itself. And although these spaces are spelt out in various textbooks on the subject, but with the practical experience that people who have been associated with theatre is something you can't really substitute. So for that reason I have been doing a certain amount of work on this aspect of our theatre design, starting with the open air theatre at Jaipur . . . And we recently did the Kalamandir theatre at Mysore. And just recently the Nehru theatre at Worli designed by Mr Kadri, spaces have been allotted and lighting setup designed by me. And the one I am working on at the present moment is the British Council Auditorium in New Delhi. There is one in Bombay which I finished as well, that one was designed by me. So that is a kind of an off-shoot of my interest in theatre.

*What do you say are the key requirements as a practitioner on the stage?*

Well, I think the key requirement is space. Space is unfortunately at a high premium because there is always a fight between economy and space. The person who is building the theatre wants the maximum amount of seating so as to get the maximum amount of returns. Whereas the theatre practitioner or the artiste who is

using the theatre wants to have adequate space into which to move, both on the stage and off the stage as well, so there is a clash always between the two of them, and I am afraid isn't always that the theatre practitioner comes off first. Economic reasons, economic considerations very often play an important part. And a basic fact is that no person can see from a distance greater than 75 feet. So the last seat in the auditorium should not be more than 75 feet away from the stage. You can stack them as you like, stack them on top of the other. That is why if you look at some of the big theatres in the west you would think that there are tremendous auditoriums and stadia. That is not true. The actual space in the auditorium, the auditorium space is limited and they bank the people up in the shape of balconies, in the shape of boxes on either side, but the distance that the audience has to see is never in excess of 70 to 75 feet. That is the maximum the eye can perceive, otherwise it looks like Gavaskar playing cricket, and you can only see his expressions through binoculars.

*I see what you mean. That's important. Also I think what lot of our theatres in Bombay built recently lack is enough height. I mean if you wanted to do a play at two levels, you couldn't because at the second level invariably the actor is standing with his head . . .*

Yes, that is unfortunate. That is again a question of economy, because usually there is some other structure coming on top of the theatre, which would be a library or housing space or whatever. So there is always that clash which takes place and unless you are pretty tough with these people there is a tendency to economise.

*Do you subscribe to the idea of experimental theatre, the small compact ones?*

Yes, I do, to a certain extent. The experimental theatre, the small compact ones are very, very good indeed. But it requires a completely new approach to theatre. And it's coming around slowly, it's taking a little time, because there is a tremendous, well, let me give you an anecdote. We were invited to attend a seminar in Delhi, where Mr Alkazi was there and Mr Prithviraj Kapoor was there and so on. And we had gone to Chandigarh where Carbousier had designed a theatre and he had a thrust stage which was sticking out by about 30 feet in front of the proscenium arch, and the audience was sitting about six feet away from him. And Prithviraj said, 'Deryck, I couldn't act here.' I said why? He said 'I need the protection of the arch, and I need the footlights there to protect me from the audience.' I said 'You are not trying to get protection, you are trying to get at the audience.' He said, no that was not his conception at all. So you can have your proscenium theatre, and your projected theatre and your stages

and so on but everybody has to be, not everybody but people who use it must fall into line.

*Well, in the case of Prithviraj, you are taking of an entirely earlier generation, different acting technique. But till recently I think, maybe Prithvi Theatre in Bombay, in Jubu, then the N.C.P.A. Experimental Theatre. Till that everybody who wanted to build a theatre wanted to build a large space, a large commercial theatre, and there were no real opportunities for experimental work to be economically presented. I think this is a major contribution.*

There is no question about that. Especially now with the rising costs of productions unless you have got something which is going to be a sure-fire hit and you are able to meet the cost which is rising phenomenally, the only way to perform theatre is in experimental size. Only thing . . . it does impose some restrictions. At the same time, thanks to restrictions in one way, and there is opening up in another way. They are two separate kinds of plays and I think there is something that the director can only fight with.

*Deryck, we have now talked about your real contribution, your life in theatre. Starting from all the way back in Bobby Padamsee's time, about '42-'43, right upto the current moment. Maybe you might like to take us through a kind of chronological journey in what you consider milestones or highlights in this theatre odyssey of yours.*

Well, I am afraid I have got a lousy memory so I will have to use some notes to be able to get on with it. Sorry if I make some rustling noise with paper, but that's how it goes. As I said we started off with Bobby Padamsee's *Macbeth* which came up in 1942 and we have the picture of him playing the part of Macbeth, and a close-up of Bobby himself from which you can see the kind of gentleman I had been talking about all this time, who has had tremendous influence over my theatre life and personal life as well. The next play I would like to talk about, was the production of *Music at Night* which was performed after Bobby's death in 1946. It was done in memory, produced by me and Adi. And at that time one new actor came on the stage: Ebrahim Alkazi. He played the lead role. Then of course the advent of Pesi Khandalawala came about in 1948 and his contribution to the theatre as we have seen it in the past. Then in 1950 I had taken a trip to U.K., a business trip actually, but did a certain amount of reconnaissance in theatre as well.

In '56 was the visit of Martha Graham which I referred to earlier on. Then we came to a hit that I consider one of the first hits that we have ever produced. The first long running longish play was *The Little Hut*, We made use of a setting which I think was quite unique in the sense that it was created by an artist in the

cartoon style. It was created as a cartoon in the first place and was then converted to reality on stage. That contribution was important and was used many, many times there after.

In '57 we did the Hindi version of *The Glass Menagerie*. Aleque directed it, with my sets. Aleque's first production was this *Sbeesbeke Kbilone*. It was a landmark as far as the production was concerned, but it did not make any money. In 1960 was this seminar I was talking about with Prithviraj Kapoor. I was then appointed the western-India designer for the Rabindranath Tagore theatres. So I did the ones in Jaipur, in Bombay and Poona.

*That's why Ravindra in Bombay has enough wing space backstage?*

Oh, yes. Luckily we were not beset upon by economy. An important play in 1960 was *The Man Who Came In To Dinner*. In 1964 was the visit of Mr Cunningham, with John Cage and the others.

Then '64 saw the beginning of the commercial theatre with the production of *Barefoot In The Park* with Adi and Pesi producing and I designed the settings. Thereafter came the productions of Neil Simon's plays by me: *Boeing, Boeing; Come Blow Your Horn*

*Mr Deryck Jeffereis engrossed in teaching at the N. C. P. A. workshop on lighting design*



and *The Odd Couple*.

In 1969 was the Bobby Padamsee Award. I go back to '66 with my interest in children's theatre starting with *Charlie's Aunt*. Then there was a waltz we produced in school where we made use of a new device namely when the actors were going on the yellow, big road they mimed the action of walking and the scenery behind them was moved in the shape.

Then came *The Sleeping Beauty*. The design was done by Mario Miranda, and the cartoon was actually drawn on the stage.

Now '71 was an important year because I took a daring leap into the Church. I am a Roman Catholic and I got the idea in Lent, the holy time of the church, Jesus Christ was crucified, the passion which he went through as depicted by Johannes Sebastian Bach . . . be depicted in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. So we got the church in 1971 with the cooperation of Cardinal Gracious. He allowed us to use the altar. We played music and projected slides of Durer of the classical artists and we did modern paintings as well.

In 1972 came the production of *Ab! Norman*, one of the hits, on the stage and which ran for a long, long time, produced by Pesi Khandalawala. The scene design I conceived that the production would be

something like a circus tent. The entire set was just curtains hanging and you could hang them anywhere on vertical pillars and you knocked them down at back and have curtains in front. The entire action was done in front of this. That was a cheap production as Mr Khandalawala was always worried about the rupees, annuas and pies.

In '72 I did with my wife *Alice In Wonderland* and that was an effect over there where Alice grew smaller while the objects on the stage grew larger. On stage, it was achieved by she going behind, she did not grow smaller but the objects grew larger. The table had legs extended. It was a long three-legged table, telescopic and it was hoisted up. She was not visible, she was behind something, so you got the impression that everything was much larger.

Then in '73 we did Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* in the school. I consider this an important landmark for the simple reason that we converted the quad of a school into the Globe Theatre. It was a square quad actually, but we had the audience sitting all

around and the action taking place in the middle. There was a spiral staircase going up and the herald ran up the staircase, raised the curtain and the play started.

Then came *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Now that was where the money started to pour in. The Theatre Group was rather a broke organisation for a long, long time.

In 1975, me and my wife collaborated and did *Owl And The Pussy Cat*. In this production we made use of backprojections, that means we projected some objects on the screen like a butterfly for example. And the professor came along with a butterfly net to catch the butterfly. There were three screens. The butterfly would disappear, and appear on the other screen. We had to be very careful with the lights. The only way you can do is with bandors, cut the light down as far as possible, so as not to spill it.

After that we collaborated again in 1978 with *Midsummer Night's Dream* where we created the entire ambience of a jungle, woods in the quadrangle.

Now the two important productions we did together, namely Jean Anouilh's *The Lark*, which was the story of Joan of Arc, which was produced in St

Thomas' Cathedral and was performed against the main altar. The second one we did was called the *Book of Job*, a scriptural reading of the tussle between God and Satan for the soul of the man called Job. The setting was designed by Pilu Pochknanawala which I think was quite unique in the sense that it was made from thermocol. It looked like God had thrown a dart into the Church and it had gone and stuck a huge pile of rock. The costume and the makeup was designed as the effect on the stained glass window.

Now to go from the sublime to the ridiculous we go to the last thing we are just now running in the theatre in Bombay, it won't get off the theatres. That is *Bottomsup*. Basically here comes the art of the designer. You get him a script which has nothing much to say and the only way you can make him say something is to dress it up. The work of the designer here has to be entirely that. We dressed it up in such a manner, that although it says nothing it goes on saying it for a hundred and seventy nights.

*I wouldn't call it ridiculous because the producer must be laughing all the way to the bank.*

So that is the career in a nutshell. You can add that to the obituary!