

Tarak Mehta

INFORMATION CARD

Theatre Personality

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| Name | : Tarak Mehta |
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Bio-data

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Name | : Tarak Janubhai Mehta |
| Date of Birth | : 26 December 1929 |
| Birth Place | : Ahmedabad |
| Residential Address | : 3, Navyug Nagar Forjett Hill, Tardeo Bombay 400 036 |
| Profession | : Playwright, actor & director |
| Education | : M.A. (Gujarati) and subsidiary language English |
| Languages known | : Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi and English |
| Languages of theatre work | : Gujarati |
| Awards | : 1) Bombay State Intercollegiate Radio-play Competition (1957) — Best Playwright's award for <i>Bansi Bol No Kavi</i> . 2) Maharashtra State Drama Competition (1963) — Best Director's award for <i>Duniyane Undha Chashma</i> . 3) Maharashtra State Drama Competition (1964) — Second Best Director's award for <i>Ghar Phute Ghar Jay</i> . 4) Gujarat State Drama Competition (1965) — Best Director's award for <i>Ghar Phute Ghar Jay</i> . 5) Gujarat State Drama Competition (1966) — Best Playwright's and Director's award for <i>Duniyane Undha Chashma</i> . |

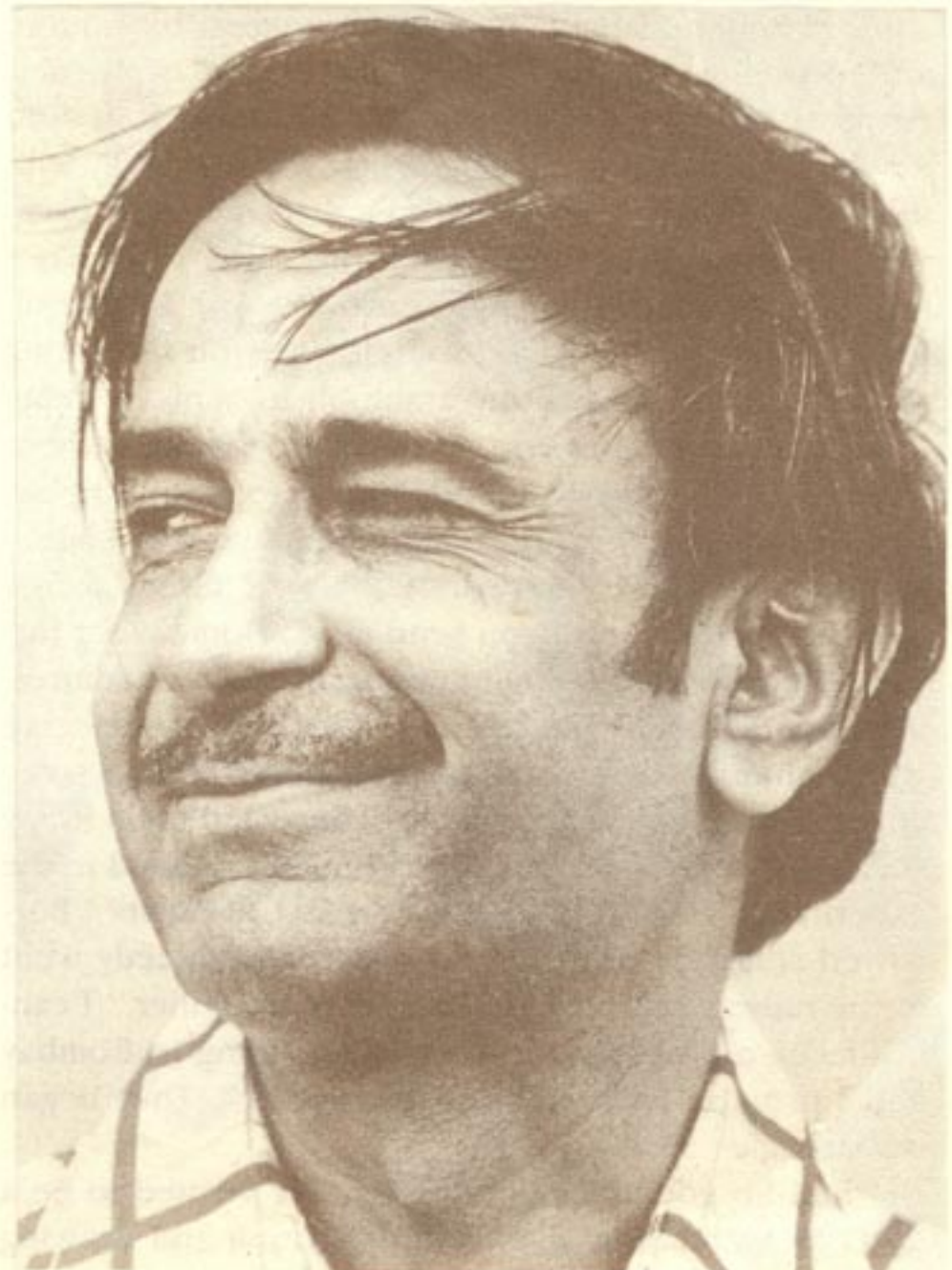
- 6) Gujarat State Drama Competition (1966) — Best Director's award for *Mane Suraj Aapo*.
- 7) Felicitated by the Bombay Municipal Corporation for meritorious services rendered to the Gujarati literature, drama and films (1983).
- 8) Gujarat Sahitya Akademi's Award (1987) for *Tarak Mehta Na Saat Ekankiyo*.
- 9) Gujarat Sahitya Akademi's Award (1992) for *Khangi Khulla Patro*, a collection of humorous articles.

Tarak Mehta — a self-introduction

You may wonder who is this man with his legs stretched strangely against a wall and why is he doing so!

I am Tarak Mehta. Now about the strange posture. My father had told me a story when I was a child. Story of a clown. The clown fell seriously ill. On his death-bed he was anxious only about one thing, 'All my life I have made people laugh to their heart's content. Now when I die, they will weep. How can this be accepted?

Tarak Mehta



My duty, my religion is to make them laugh. I cannot lose my religion. So I must do something which will compel them to laugh even in my death.' He thought and thought. Called all his family members and said, 'Please listen to me carefully. My work is done. I have a last wish. If you promise to fulfill it, I will die happily.' Everybody of course agreed. The clown then said, 'Take my body in the funeral as it is in my last moments and give it over to pyre.' All gave him their pledge.

The clown moved near a wall and lay down with his legs stretched at right angles to the wall. This was the posture in which he died. Obviously people laughed and cried while taking his body for the funeral.

I want to follow the moral of this story.

As a child I was very shy. I had lot of stage fright. Even today my voice shakes when I see a camera! I lost my mother early and grew up as a lonely child. I used to draw cartoons and write stories to forget my loneliness. That made people laugh. I became aware of my ability to make people laugh. I had a close friend, Govind Saraiya who went on to produce *Saraswaticandra*, a well-known film. He used to act in our school plays and I used to criticise his performances. Finally he once said, 'No use just talking! Why don't you act yourself and find out what it is like?' This went on till I became a college student. At that time Jaswant Thakkar used to run a dramatic group. He had many people working with him. But I was too shy to approach him. So I brought together many frightened souls like me, charged them eight annas subscription, and presented three one-act plays. One of them I wrote, directed. I also acted in it! This one-act, *Apesbu Kaniyal* succeeded (1950-51). I fell in love with dramatics so intensely that I failed in my Inter Commerce examination thrice! I told my father, 'I do not like Commerce. Allow me to enroll in Arts'. I was allowed to do so. My friend's circle went on increasing in number and so also my ambition to achieve something in theatre. However, at that time theatre did not afford much scope. Everybody hoped to go to Bombay and win fame in films. To mention filmdom was a taboo at home. Hence I asked my father, "If I seek a first class in Inter Arts, will you send me to Bombay for further education?" Looking at my past record of failures, my father agreed. I worked hard. One or two subjects I was frightened of. I consulted my friends, wrote some answers on pieces of paper and concealed them in my socks—to copy them well! Unfortunately, I failed in the experiment. How could I show my face at home? I borrowed some clothes from my friend and directly went to the railway station. I sent a note to my father, "I cannot face you but do not worry. I am going to Bombay and I promise I will not commit suicide". Thus began the struggle.

I had no godfather in films. I never wanted to be a star. My inclination was towards writing and drawing

cartoons. Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy were my heroes. I went from one studio to another. In those days the studio atmosphere meant abuses right and left. Assistants were treated as slaves. It was difficult for me to bear all that! One fine morning, however, a financier gave me a letter of introduction to Kishore Sahu, a well-known actor-director. To look impressive and well-bodied, I wore four shirts and a leather jerkin. I was called in. Instead of interviewing me, Kishore Sahu went to a window with his back to me and lit a cigarette. I did not know what to do. Suddenly he turned back and asked me, 'Yes, young man, what can I do for you?' His tone was so authoritative that I felt he would not do anything for me. I was flustered. Gujarati, Hindi, English—no language came to my mind! He repeated the question. I said, 'Nothing, sir' and came out.

Days went by and I met the film director Raja Yagnik. He used to produce stunt films. Now he wanted to produce a fantasy. He told me, 'Come from tomorrow'. He used to chew tobacco all the time, had black teeth, laughed uproariously and abused everybody!

I decided to bear all that, thinking this was the beginning of my career. He, of course, treated his assistants as slaves. In that film, Babu Raje, a well-known comedian in Gujarati theatre, was playing a role. I used to meet him at the Radio Station etc. and we were friends. During a shooting, after scenes Babubhai used to inquire after me and my writing etc. Raja Yagnik did not like this. He once called me and asked me, 'Why do you waste time of the artistes?' 'Babubhai knows me and he invited me. I do not interfere in his work'. Yagnik overbearingly said, 'If you want to behave in this fashion you need not come from tomorrow'. I asked him 'Do you mind if I go now' and I walked off. He went on staring after me. Many such questions and then I met Ramchandra Thakur. With Kedar Sharma he was one of the few graduates in the film world. Learned and gentle. Though he did not have a vacancy for an assistant, he asked me to come. His only advice was, 'work hard.' . . . This went on. A period of my rustication from the University expired. My father wrote to me, 'I send you money so that you should not starve. But now resume your studies.' I bid goodbye to films and rejoined the college. I used to earn some cash to support myself. Felt interested in the intercollegiate competitions of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. This was the Prabodh Joshi period of the competitions conducted by the Kala Kendra of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. Out of 25 plays staged in the competition, 20 used to be from his pen. He pioneered a new tradition of comedy. The Gujarati comedies in vogue were never performable and those performed were not well-written. Prabodhbhai started the trend of performable comedies. I was impressed because this had commercial possibilities. That could help me, I thought, in my

struggle for existence. Keeping that as a model, keeping some performers in mind I began writing one-act plays. I also joined a group run by Mr Herbert Marshal. The main intention was to improve my English and to know more about stage technique. I used to act in the crowd-scenes of his production *Pygmalion*. The INT-wallahs saw me there. A Gujarati working in an English group! They invited me to join the INT, which I did.

The first production was Firoze Antia's *Rangilo Raja*. Superhit. Nearly 150 performances. I was a change for Krishna Shah. Next I got an opening in *Vadlani Chhaya* directed by Adi Marzban. Adi Marzban was a director of a national stature. From him and other Parsi theatre personalities, I learnt farce, comedy, comedic timing etc. People suffer and, therefore, there is enough scope for comedy! There are not many comedy writers too! Gradually I developed into an actor, director as well a writer. I must have done around 10 plays for the Parsi section of the INT. Later it became difficult to try out new experiments. Sometimes we used to get financiers who would insist on doing everything themselves—financing, announcements, as well as playback singing! Their participation bored us so much that we once performed a basically tragic play as a comedy and it ran 50 shows!

This is how I came to sow laughter on the Gujarati stage . . . I still continue to do that. In the last 10 years or so I have stopped acting and directing. Now the producers are of a different kind. The whole atmosphere has turned commercial. I am like the clown in the story I told you at the beginning. I cannot renounce my religion to make people laugh!

Excerpts from audio-video interviews:

Joshi: Gujarati theatre is 140 years old. Tarak Mehta has been active for nearly 42 years as a writer, actor and director. Tarakbhai why did you come to theatre?

Mehta: I lost my mother at an early age and my uncle brought me up. I was a lonely child. On a number of occasions I would talk to myself pityingly, 'Poor Tarak' etc. This mood of self-pity was expressed through poetry, novels and cartoons. Obviously theatre was a medium to bring all this together. In addition Govind Sarraiya, one of my friends, used to tease me about my theatre-capabilities. I accepted his challenge and entered theatre.

Joshi: You began by writing one-act plays. The first one was Hriday Rog, published in Kumar. It won many prizes. Tarak Mehtana Saat Ekanki, your anthology, also won an award. Which of your plays performed at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan competitions did you like?

Mehta: Najook Savari. In it Pravin Joshi, known other-

wise for his serious roles, played a comic lead.

Joshi: In fact this role made a come-back possible for Pravin.

*Mehta: You may say so. Perhaps both of us received a break. The original idea of the play was Russian but we could not trace the Russian text so we created a play from our memory. The second play was *Prasanna Dampatya*. Shivkumar Joshi directed it and this was nearly a radio-play. No action.*

Joshi: How did you come to the full-length play?

*Mehta: As an actor. In 1952-54 I was working with Mr Herbert Marshal's group as a backstage hand. I was paid Rs 4 per month! I said to myself, it may help to improve my English, a coaching class for English would have surely charged me Rs 50 per month! I also took up minor roles in *Pygmalion* and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* . . . Shakespeare to Shaw . . . I learnt what comedy is . . . While doing a stint with the INT, I continued to write for different media to make both ends meet. For the radio, for advertising firms etc. Finally I completed my M.A., got a job, but the writing continued. Though I began as an actor, I knew I would never be a star with my skeletal figure!*

Tarak Mehta and Ruby Patel in I.N.T.'s Taru Maru Bakalyu.



Joshi: *Did you begin writing (columns) because you did not like the plays which were performed?*

Mehta: If I had not liked the plays, I would not have even attempted the adaptations which I did. However, I was dissatisfied because adapting from many in the range from Moliere to Kauffman never allowed a touch of 'Gujarati' life. My first attempt to combine western craftsmanship with Indian reality was in *Duniyane Undha Chashma*, a full-length play in three acts. It became popular and suggestion was made to name my column for 'Chitrlekha' after this play. Thus I became a columnist and a humourist in journalism.

Joshi: *This play has been performed in Africa, London, Muscat and various other places. How much do you owe to Moliere in it?*

Mehta: The theme was Moliere's.

Joshi: *And what about Kauna Bapni Diwali?*

Mehta: Moliere's thought, 300 years old but relevant even today. The first act of this play is one of my early one-acts. On this background we have Moliere in the second act and merely a situation from Moliere in the third act.

Joshi: *You have directed Gulabdas Broker's adaptation of Ibsen, Mane Suraj Aapo.*

Mehta: Originally it was a translation with even the character names retained. Therefore, while directing I followed the original English text . . .

Joshi: *You have helped in reviving the Parsi theatre.*

Mehta: Well, I have produced at least 8 to 10 plays, beginning with *Taru Maru Bakalyu*. Writing, acting and directing. The I wrote *Lafra Sadan* and also acted

in it. From *Hello Inspector* onwards I had Arvind Thakkar's help. *Hello Inspector* must be described as an experimental play. Of the same category is *Night of 16th January* by Ian Rand.

Joshi: *In the next about 100 years many plays have been written for two characters, but only two ventures to succeed have been Saptapadi and Mausam Chalke.*

Mehta: Initially my wife and myself wanted to produce *Saptapadi* but we were not confident. In addition plays were going flop on account of the Indo-Pak War . . . During the same period Pravin Joshi learnt that I had adapted *Four Poster*. He gave me an idea. He said, "Have different pairs in each act to draw crowds." I consented. In those days Sarita was doing very well in *Chandravo*. Pravin got to know her and he proposed to do *Saptapadi* with her. I agreed and edited the script drastically. This is how *Saptapadi* came to be performed. *Mausam Chalke* had a different story. Entirely unacquainted couple comes together through physical attraction but things do not remain physical . . . To show this transition required skill . . .

Joshi: *After a long gap you have recently given us Sakha Sahiyara . . . You have given more than 100 plays to the Gujarati stage. Which are your favorites?*

Mehta: *Duniya Ne Undha Chashma* is an original play and *Saptapadi* is an adaptation. *Saptapadi* has enjoyed versions in other languages too. Most of the times people have preferred to refer to the Gujarati version than the original English text.

Interviewed by Prabodh Joshi

Tarak Mehta: Performance Index

| Sr. No. | Title of the Play | Language | Year | No. of Shows |
|---------|--|----------|---------|--------------|
| 1 | Mungi Stri (Actor) | Gujarati | 1952-53 | 1 |
| 2 | Rangilo Raja (Actor) | Gujarati | 1955 | 40 |
| 3 | Neta-Abhineta (Actor) | Gujarati | 1958 | 30 |
| 4 | Jagi Ne Joyu To (Director) | Gujarati | 1958/59 | 25 |
| 5 | Jhuthi Jagatni Maya (Actor/Director/Writer) | Gujarati | 1959 | 6 |
| 6 | Kulvadhu (Actor) | Gujarati | 1959 | — |
| 7 | Adhuri Shodh (Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1960 | 5 |
| 8 | Tarna Othe Dungan (Writer/Director/Actor) | Gujarati | 1960 | 5 |
| 9 | Kona Bapni Diwali (Director) | Gujarati | 1961 | 60 |
| 10 | Bar Varshe Bavo Bolyo (Director) | Gujarati | 1961 | — |
| 11 | Ek Murakhne Evi Tev (Writer/Actor/Director) | Gujarati | 1961 | 270 |

| <i>Sr. No.</i> | <i>Title of the Play</i> | <i>Language</i> | <i>Year</i> | <i>No. of Shows</i> |
|----------------|--|------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| 12 | Duniya Ne Undha Chashma (Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1963/64 | 60 |
| 13 | Maa Te Maa (Actor/Director) | Gujarati | 1964 | — |
| 14 | Navu Akash Navi Dharti (Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1964 | 3 |
| 15 | Mari Veni Ma Char Char Phool (Director) | Gujarati | 1964 | — |
| 16 | Chor No Bhai Ghanti Chor (Actor/Director) | Gujarati | 1965 | 90 |
| 17 | Ghar Phute Ghar Jay (Director) | Gujarati | 1965 | 27 |
| 18 | Mane Suraj Aapo (Director) | Gujarati | 1966 | 7 |
| 19 | Roopali Ratan (Actor/Director/Writer) | Gujarati | 1966 | 30 |
| 20 | Aage Aage Gorakh Jage (Writer/Actor) | Gujarati | 1967 | 10 |
| 21 | Pankhi Ek Dal No (Director) | Gujarati | 1967 | — |
| 22 | Saptapadi (Writer) | Gujarati/Kannada | 1967 | 90 |
| 23 | Ame Tame ne Ratanyo (Writer) | Gujarati | 1968 | 70 |
| 24 | Leela Laher (Writer) | Gujarati/Marathi | 1970 | 250 |
| 25 | Manav Matra Adhura (Adaptation & Director) | Gujarati | 1971 | 19 |
| 26 | Keshav Kya Rami Aavya (Actor) | Gujarati | 1971 | 60 |
| 27 | Ugi Dahapanni Dadh (Writer) | Gujarati | 1971 | 75 |
| 28 | Solmi Januaryni Madhrate (Actor/Writer) | Gujarati | 1972 | 30 |
| 29 | Darling Darling (Writer) | Gujarati | 1973 | 10 |
| 30 | Taru Maru Bakalyu (Actor/Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1973 | 90 |
| 31 | Hello Inspector (Writer/Actor) | Gujarati | 1974 | 100 |
| 32 | Jhooth Bole Kauva Kate (Writer) | Gujarati | 1975 | 35 |
| 33 | Chitrele Suraj (Writer/Actor) | Gujarati | 1975 | 10 |
| 34 | Lafra Sadan (Writer/Actor) | Gujarati | 1975 | 200 |
| 35 | Vat Ek Raatni (Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1975/76 | 5 |
| 36 | Angat Rangat (Writer) | Gujarati | 1976 | 19 |
| 37 | Rang Rasiya Have Athlethi Atko (Actor) | Gujarati | 1978 | 90 |
| 38 | Mausam Chalke (Writer) | Gujarati | 1978 | 100 |
| 39 | Lagan Khel (Actor) | Gujarati | 1979 | 20 |
| 40 | Roopni Poonam No Pagal (Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1979 | 17 |
| 41 | Chumban Chor Machaye Shor (Writer/Director) | Gujarati | 1981 | 20 |
| 42 | Gup Chup Gup Chup (Writer) | | 1981 | 70 |
| 43 | Chinta Thi Chaturai Vadhe (Writer) | Gujarati | 1989/90 | 40 |
| 44 | Sakha Sahiyara (Writer) | Gujarati | 1990/91 | 250 |
| 45 | Zalak (Writer) | Gujarati | 1992 | 26 |

One-act Plays

Hriday Rog, Adambari, Paying Guest, Najuk Savari, Sanjeevani, Avali Mati, Chhagane Vivah Todoyo, Ram Bharose, Patra Kadhitva, Pranay Ane Policechoki, Rani Baug, Do Duni Paanch, Megh Dhanush, Avash Ane Chhed, Kadar Chitro Dhumado, Phatakiya Moti, Lalni Rani Chokatno Ghulam, Adhar Padhar, Interview, Tapudanu Tandav, Waiting Room, Koini Topi Koine Mathe, Biladi Adi Utri, Blue Film, Ughadi Bari.

Excerpts from additional discussion on Gujarati Theatre

Participants: Prabodh Joshi, Tarak Mehta and Ashok Ranade

Ranade: Over the years you have changed the character of your work. Are you satisfied with what you are doing now?

Mehta: Satisfied as a writer! My first love was writing. Then actor and director. I took it up as a medium. Over the years I developed it. Then came a phase when I thought that I am becoming stagnant. Partly because theatre was commercialised, it was getting more and more difficult. Commercial because cost of production went on increasing and people were sort of discouraged from experimenting. I continued as a writer, retired as a director-actor for the simple reason that it demanded a lot of physical energy also. I thought that my writing was suffering. As a writer I feel I am satisfied though not very!

Ranade: If you are writing for theatre the quality of the word which you write is different. The quality of the word which you write now in journalism is different. Do you feel that this change has been a come down for you or this is also equally legitimate?

Mehta: I would not actually compare them. Writing for theatre is almost like sculpture. You can't afford to miss a single word you have to carve from! If you are writing a story you may write ten to fifteen pages. You can go on adding, like a painter. In sculpture if you add one extra stroke the whole sculpture is lost. In theatre every word is precious that way. Whatever work I am doing now is not theatre but for that concerned medium I am happy. When I write a play I am a different writer.

Ranade: You have mentioned Shaw and Wilde, the quality of humour which they write and you write as well as quality of perception of their audiences and your audiences . . . would you like to comment?

Mehta: The level of their audiences allowed Shaw and Wilde the use of subtlety. For two sentences of theirs our audiences need ten. Otherwise you have to make it very loud in performances as well as writing. Instead of suggestion you need here underlining! Punches, emphasis . . . You have to make it 'comic' as they say in Gujarati.

Prabodhbhai, I want to ask you a straight question. How would you identify Gujarati theatre?

Joshi: I would identify as the performed theatre. I must say one thing. Let us accept the fact that beyond Bombay there is no Gujarati theatre.

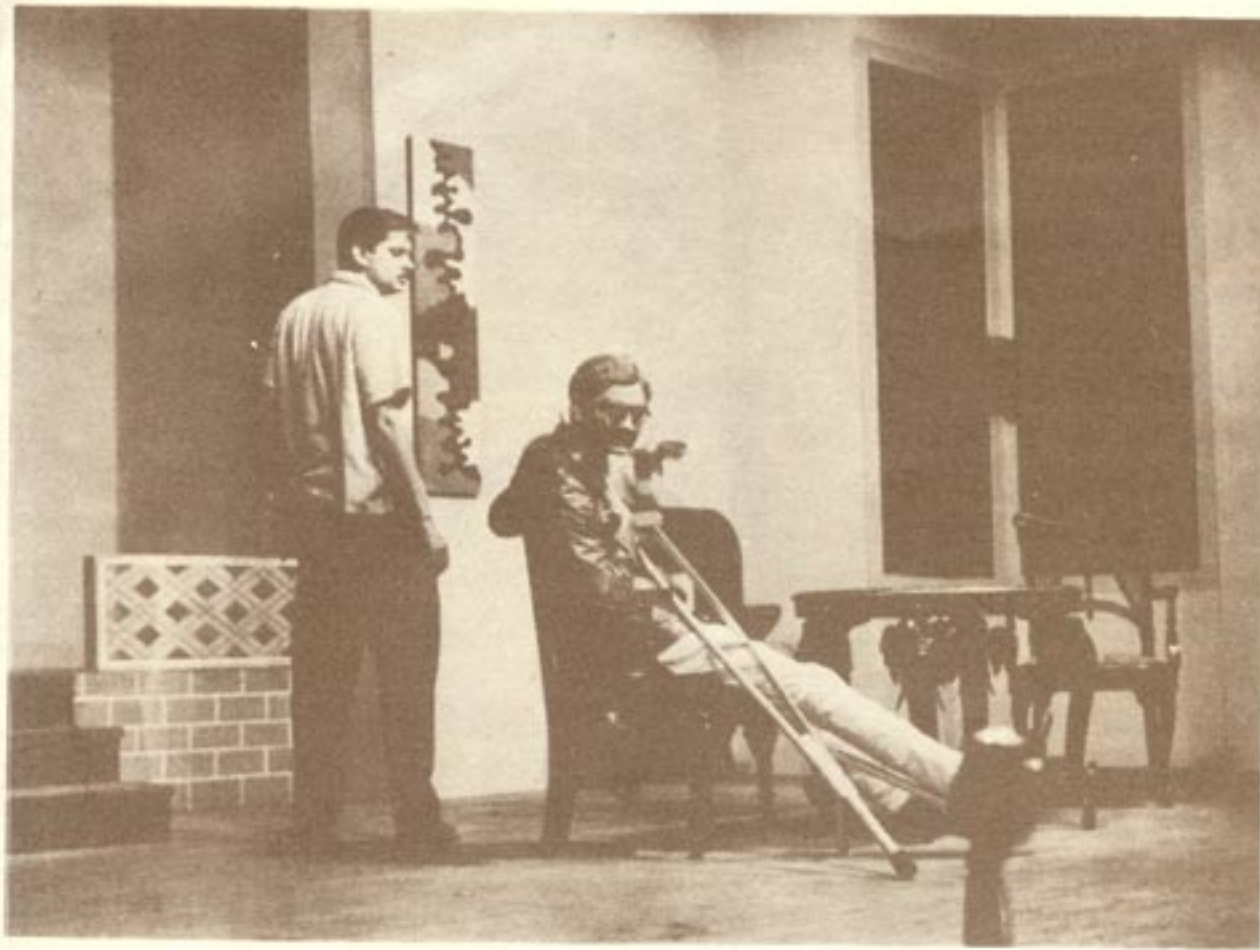
Ranade: Would you like to comment a little on 'Parsi-Gujarati theatre' . . . the quality and everything it had . . .

Joshi: Gujarati theatre itself started, it is said, in 1852. The Parsi-Gujarati theatre that came into being in the 19th century was a sheer xerox copy of the Elizabethan theatre. You see there two plots running simultaneously, music and comedy. Music because of different reasons. So in the beginning, Gujarati theatre done by Parsis—they brought in all the English plays adapted into Urdu and transformed into Gujarati. There was a time in Parsi Theatre, it is said, Khatau Alfred was running 39 companies at a time! So they got the form from Elizabethan theatre which was picked up by the total theatre. All major pioneers were Parsis and this continued till Adi Marzban. Then we see a different approach. Later on, I.N.T. had a Parsi wing, Kalakendra too had a Parsi wing. You have to have some 2 or 3 Parsis and then you call it Parsi play but see Rusi Karanjia's group in Surat, which is still surviving, doing the typical Parsi plays. Dr Jehangir Wadia was the pioneer of the Parsi plays, *Hamlet No Omelet* and such plays. They were absolutely crude. To be very frank Adi Marzban should be given credit for one thing. Gujarati Theatre learnt pace, tempo and perfection. *An Inspector Calls* he did as *Ghungatpat*. He did 3 acts in close-up, mid-shot and long-shot.

Mehta: Nature of performance . . . Adi Marzban inherited the humour of Parsi generations, Adi modernised it in every aspect. Comedians before his days used to do lot of shouting and all that as in the Desi Natak Samaj. Adi was the person who made it natural. He brought in timing and pacing.

Ranade: Did this humour influence the sense of humour you have?

Mehta: Yes, I learnt at his feet, no doubt about it. To state a basic fact. Actors from Ahmedabad etc. believed that drama is to be recited but if you mug up the lines then you lose your spontaneity, naturalness. We believed in adlibs. Adi Marzban used to say: "First you know your lines, otherwise there is no need for you



*Giresh Desai and Jagdish Shab
in Tarak Mehta's
Tarna Othe Dungar, 1960.*

to come to the rehearsal!" Then I started learning how you can play with words. In the beginning while ad-libbing you can't control your voice. Either you will 'shout' it out or you will drop the voice and you are not audible. When you have mugged up your lines, you can ride on your lines like a rider on a horse. This I learnt from Adi and practically everybody on modern stage from Pravin Joshi to Kanti Madia and Chandravadan Bhatt.

Ranade: Would you feel that inspiration of this theatric reform lay outside India or did it come from India?

Mehta: As far as Adi was concerned it came from Broadway.

Joshi: I don't agree with you. You see he was a very voracious reader and an observer. He had a very good sense of blending things. Inspiration of theatre also came from the West but to put it differently.

Ranade: One of the modern trends in bringing about modernity to Indian theatre has been to go back to our own folk traditions. It seems you have never tried it.

Mehta: This goes on but has never worked.

Ranade: What is your opinion about it?

Mehta: Traditional theatre such as Marathi *tamasha*,

Bengali *jatra* continued. But not so the *bhavai*, partly because of the Gujarati audience which I will say is more interested in eating *batata-wada-s* in the interval! At the same time the mentality of the Gujaratis is such that they do not have any pride. They never say, "We must encourage our folk form." If there is no entertainment they call it rubbish. They have no interest in their history. In Bengal or Maharashtra they have pride in their theatre.

Joshi: Problem has boiled down to the neo-rich people among the Gujarati theatre audience. Going back I may be wrong but before the recorded theatre as we know, there are two legends — *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* transformed and carried on by folk arts, folk singers-players. Today if you see in Hindi film — Amitabh would be hitting ten persons at a time! We would not like it, true, but village audiences approve of them because they have heard that Krishna using his *sudarshan* can kill 100 persons or Arjun can do this! These basic old traditions are within the people . . . inherent . . . If the folk is properly placed then it might click. For example, *Mena Gurjari* . . . it is not a play at all according to me. It is only a small *garba*. But adding Pransukh Nayak's character describing *bhavai* and all these forms . . . then Dinaben.

Mehta: But this was not revived! That is what I am trying to say!