

The naked truth

THEATRE Aziz Quraishi's "Be-Libaas" is a wonderful play dealing with human relationship.

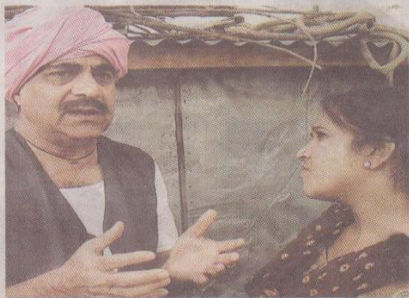
ROMESH CHANDER

Aziz Quraishi is quite a cultural phenomenon having written and directed more than 10 full length plays and acted in more than 50 plays under Alkazi, Sheila Bhatia, B.V. Karanth, Amal Allana, Naseeruddin Shah, Anupam Kher, Ranjit Kapoor, Rajender Nath and many others. Apart from theatre he has directed many TV documentaries and acted in more than 50 serials on different TV channels.

Apart from the performing arts Aziz Quraishi is a well known name in the world of sports like football and athletics, both on the field as also in its administration. His experience in extra curricular activities has helped in broadening his outlook in theatre administration too.

Before we go to Quraishi's latest presentation "Be-Libaas..." a brief introduction to his works. As far as one remembers it started with "Ghalib Kahani Hai" directed by Sheila Bhatia and produced by Delhi Art Theatre. Next came "Ghali Ram Kotwal" directed by Rajender Nath for Abhivan followed by "King Odepius" directed by E. Alkazi and produced by National School of Drama, followed by "Khamosh Adal Jauri Hai" directed by Amal Allana.

Now to IPTA's latest play "Be-Libaas" (The Naked Truth) written and directed by Aziz Quraishi. The play is dedicated to Sheila Bhatia (1917-2008). The play underlines how day to day human relationships in the office, neighbourhood and even at



INTENSE A scene from the play.

home get twisted and cross the accepted boundaries. It raises fundamental issues and depicts how we normally believe that every problem or situation has two sides. But sometimes there can be, if we look, many more answers. The play is a negation of the existing theory of black and white situations of submission and oppression. The play also deals with the subject on exploitation of women.

A Jolt

The play also underlines the fact that at some point in life we all need to be jolted so that our existence changes from "being complacent to being aware". Sometimes a nudge is enough and sometimes a hard knock is needed. The play attempts to give us

that jolt! "Be-Libaas" is a reflection of life and relationships between men and women in some social situations. It is a wake-up call to all human beings who see and know about such relationships and yet do not act or raise their voice against this victimisation. Different anecdotes about human relationships and free choice give us a mirror of society where there are both victims and victimisers. Is it the women who are mostly exploited? It is left to the audience's choice!

For most of the roles the director uses a double cast, but unfortunately there was no indication who was playing which role and where. But Aziz Quraishi who played the role of villager as also the daddy was as usual outstanding.

Revealing reality

THEATRE "Aur Ek Sachh" highlights the plight of women suffering at the hands of a heartless and soulless society.

DIWAN SINGH BAJELI



A COMMENTARY ON SOCIETY A scene from "Aur Ek Sachh."

"Aur Ek Sachh" presented by Indian Peoples' Theatre Association, Delhi, to mark its 50th anniversary at India Islamic Cultural Centre this past week brought to the fore the untold sufferings of old women as well as the brutal sexual exploitation of minor girls and young women in a society dominated by men and superstition. Remarkable for its directorial deftness, the production projected effectively facets in the lives of women condemned to suffer with little power to retaliate.

Author Ismat Chughtai's short story "Dozakh-Hell" inspired playwright director Aziz Quraishi to write "Aur Ek Sachh" through the female point-of-view in a broader social perspective. A newspaper story about a minor who died after being assaulted by her husband on the night evokes a sense of horror and disgust. The narrative then presents a dialogue between a school teacher and a village head about female infanticide causing serious imbalance in the male-female ratio. Far from listening to the teacher with the seriousness the issue demands, the village head keeps staring at a newly-born beautiful woman.

Then we see the dwelling place of Babu where they take rest and then start their verbal battle all over again. Students suffering from all kinds of diseases, specially infertility. While he seduces most credulous women, a few are bold enough to expose him. He, however, manages to prove his innocence through foxy tactics.

Appalling conditions

However, the main thrust is on the appalling conditions in which two old women live. Their world is aptly described as "Dozakh-hell". They are widows and abandoned by their families and the State has stopped playing its role of provider of shelter to the poor and old. They live on crumbs given to them by neighbours. They are terrified of a future which offers them nothing but slow painful death. They live in the past with mixed memories, sweet and bitter. Suffering from all kinds of age-related illnesses and infirmities, they seek shelter in a deserted, dilapidated room. They wear rags and their beds are rotten.

What engages our attention is the way these haggard, semi-starved and utterly neglected women quarrel among themselves, each trying to outdo the other in the use of bitter, insulting and filthy language. When tired they take rest and then start their verbal battle all over again.

Despite the heated and acrimonious exchange of words there runs between them a tender relationship, a bond that is difficult to snap. Given a chance to leave the dingy room and shift to another place, they would refuse the offer.

The play opens with a projection on the screen with two characters — a male character personifying Time and another a woman embodying the universal suffering of women. They discuss gender bias in society and then the focus shifts to live action on the stage. The production culminates with the comments of Time and the woman on the need for a meaningful and emotionally fulfilling relationship between man and woman based on mutual respect.

A veteran actress of stage and radio, Suchitra Gupta's appearance on the screen animates the show. Her accent is impeccable and she delivers her lines with feeling and conviction. In fact, she sets the tone for the production — serious, restrained and intense. Aziz Quraishi in a variety of roles gives a commendable performance. Charu Madan and Ashima Pandey in the roles of two old women give brilliant performances. Her fine performances are rare in amateur theatre of Delhi.

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The royal touch

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THEATRE Aziz Quraishi's "Anarkali-Akbar-Salim" vividly portrayed the tragic tale of Anarkali and the aura of Moghul era.

DIWAN SINGH BAJELI

Formed by the late Begum Ahida Ahmed in 1974, Humsab Drama Group is probably the first organisation in the post-Independence India to initiate a theatre movement to restore the glorious tradition of Urdu drama and theatre in the country. Over the years, Humsab has staged 26 new as well as classics under the direction of eminent theatre directors like Habib Tanweer, B.M. Shah and Nadra Babbar, showcasing the beauty and vitality of the Urdu language and raising burning questions about prevailing social dichotomy. What is heartening is that these shows are watched with keen interest by the public.



PERIOD TALE A scene from Humsab Drama Group's play "Anarkali-Akbar-Salim".

Its latest offering, at Aizawa-Ghalib, was "Anarkali-Akbar-Salim" by Imitiaz Ali Taj written in 1930. The tragic tale of youthful love of Anarkali, a slave girl and Salim, the crown prince, has been adapted into literature and films, the ultimate being K. Asif's magnum opus "Mughal-e-Azam", immortalising the heartrending love, capturing dazzling opulence and magnificence of the all-powerful Moghul empire and the story heart of an emperor blind to the

nobility of human love. Imitiaz has worked on various versions of the legend of Anarkali, transforming her character into a truly tragic one, a virtuous and innocent girl who had died for the sake of love. It is believed that Imitiaz's Anarkali marked a new trend in Urdu playwrighting which emphasised more on characterisation and exploration of dramatic conflict. In Anarkali his emphasis was not on capturing the grandeur of the Moghul empire but to show the intrigue and counter-intrigue of royal court and the manipulative power of royal harem. In fact, it is Dilaram, a powerful member of harem who sets further development of plot afoot. The play has been directed by Aziz Quraishi. Quraishi has added three characters — a guide, a

URDU STAGE
Humsab Drama Group was formed in 1974 by Begum Ahida. It has staged 26 new plays as well as classics under the direction of directors like Habib Tanweer, B.M. Shah and Nadra Babbar.

tourist and a khadim — which add certain intricacy to the otherwise straightforward script, offering brief comments on the perplexities of youthful love and its ephemeral character. We watched the story of Anarkali through the eyes of Khadim who narrates it to the guide and tourist.

Bare stage

The play was enacted on a bare stage with a raised platform used as acting space for Akbar and his queen. The costumes were aesthetically designed with a view to capture the ambience of the Moghul court. The aim was to focus on the conflict between three main characters, Anarkali, Akbar and Salim. The use of off-stage vocal and instrumental music imparted the production some poignancy that stirred the heart of the audience who emphasised three characters — a guide, a

dial appeal of the production was in the subtle use of periods of silences and the stage compositions. Ramesh Manchanda, an alumnus of National School of Drama and a senior actor of Delhi stage, as Akbar impressed the audience. His gait, his delivery and his facial expressions projected the image of an emperor with unquestionable power more concerned with preserving the blood of the royalty. Maghalema as Anarkali vividly brought alive the portrait of a love-lorn young girl. Jitin Gaur as Salim, Radha Yadav as the mother of Anarkali, Ashima Pandey as the sister of Anarkali, who was bold enough to face Salim and Akbar condemning for burying alive Anarkali and Charu Madan, as Dilaram who plots the killing of Anarkali as her revenge. Flora Dose as the Maharani all acted admirably.

Pain of the poet

THEATRE Aziz Quraishi's "Aetraaf-e-Ghalib" creates a poignant portrait of Ghalib.

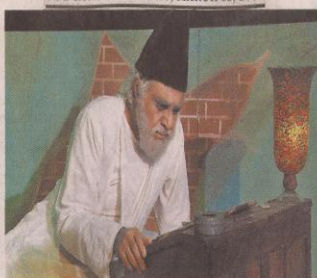
DIWAN SINGH BAJELI

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Staging plays about Mirza Ghalib is a labour of love for Aziz Quraishi who has directed some significant dramatic works based on Ghalib, like "Tamasha Aur Tamashahi", "Ghalib ke Udenge Purze" and "Ghalib Ki Dilli". His "Aetraaf-e-Ghalib" (Confessions of Ghalib), which was presented by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) Delhi at several venues in the Capital, including at Azad Bhanu under the auspices of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations recently, is yet another fine theatrical work on one of India's greatest poets, a humanist and a champion of the country's composite culture.

Compiled, written and directed by Quraishi, the production is a gripping theatrical piece tinged with sad musings, a sense of self-reproach and helplessness. It captures the conflicts of Ghalib's life when he is old and suffering from chronic ailments.

The play opens with two visitors entering the room of an old and ill Ghalib. He keeps the entry door open as he is too feeble to get up from his bed and walk to it. Structurally, the play deals with two time planes — the present and the past — in the life of the poet. While the two time levels keep alternating, the most decisive moments in the poet's life are vividly brought alive. The stage is imaginatively designed to project different episodes and the dramatic personae confronting the



MUSE MATTERS A scene from "Aetraaf-e-Ghalib".

poet in a smooth, harmonious and rhythmic way. Ghalib is played out in three stages — the old and sick man, the poet and the Nawab — by different performers.

The flashback scenes are illuminated by stylish lighting which imparts a surrealistic touch. The director's use of Ghalib's soul-stirring poetic pieces rendered in melodious voices gives the production emotional depth and provides insight into the inner world of the characters. Though the music is taped, it has liveliness. The director uses the same device of taped voices to convey Ghalib's reflections on the decadence prevailing in Urdu mushaira during his old age, as a result of which he stopped participating in

two characters representing the contradictory facets of Ghalib's personality and worldview.

Similarly, Ghalib's confrontation with his wife Umrao Begum exudes the bitterness of a woman who is forced to suffer all her life in silence, leading a loveless life, living in utter penury, looking after a large family. She asks if, there is any place in the poems of Ghalib, the great poet, for her untold sufferings. Ghalib appears to be on the defensive with the suppressed feeling of repentance.

There is a reference to the death of Ghalib's brother. He says that his brother died because of high fever but the fact was that the mentally unsound brother died from the bullet of a British soldier during the Revolt of 1857. The introduction of the character of Fakir enhances the dominant mood of pain, repentance and deprivation. In the midst of the chaos of his personal life and of the times, there emerges Ghalib, the poet par excellence.

Aziz Quraishi as the ageing and chronically ill Ghalib acts with restraint. His Ghalib is terribly lonely and miserable, mentally and physically. S.M. Zahoor as Ghalib's poet and Ashok Lal as Ghalib the Nawab create dramatic intensity through the clash of the arrogance of a Nawab and the sensibility of a poet. Anika Gusain as Mughal Jaan and Shobha Bhardwaj as Begum Umrao create brilliant portraits of their characters, evoking empathy.