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VIJAYA AND FARROKH MEHTA

# A Perfect Pair

**F**ARROKH MEHTA has just completed a full-house run of the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where in his role as Mitch, he stole the show. His wife, Vijaya has just successfully launched a classical theatre production in Sanskrit, *Abhigyan Shakuntal*, which is amassing rave reviews from critics. Right now however both the Mehtas are going through a relative lull in their theatre activities.

It is unusual for both a husband and wife to be stage personalities. It is even more unusual that they should be in different language theatres. Vijaya Mehta has been the *grande dame* of the Marathi stage for nearly three decades now—in Kamlakar Sarang's words: "She is the best director we have". Farrokh Mehta has been making steady

and significant contributions to the English theatre movement in Bombay, for about the same period. Alyque Padamsee, has this to say about Farrokh, "He is one of Bombay's outstanding character actors."

In spite of their heaving on the creative see-saw however, the couple has arrived at an amicable plateau in their marital life. As Padamsee, who knows both quite closely puts it, "It is surprising that a couple who are both performers can live so harmoniously together." Indeed, they share an easy camaraderie that comes through in their good-humoured bantering with each other, and in the frequent interspersing of endearments like 'sweetheart' in their conversation—especially when used in mock protest.

"But then, our ambitions are so different, aren't they?" says Vijaya, looking at her husband for confirmation. "Of course," is his reply. "With me, my job at Pfizer's comes first."

**Different Careers:** Which is probably one of the main reasons why their work has not interfered with their marriage. While Vijaya is entirely devoted to the stage—"I belong to Marathi theatre"—as an actress, a director, and a producer, Farrokh, as the marketing director in charge of agricultural products at Pfizer, has made marketing his career. With him, "theatre is more of a hobby."

Living with their three children in a spacious flat, at Napean Sea Road, the Mehtas convey an impression of casual warmth. "Both my sons and my daughter are interested in drama," says Vijaya. Adds Farrokh, "the only person not yet initiated into theatre is my first child,"—pointing to his beagle-hound—Monty. All the three children make it a point to see Daddy's and Mummy's plays. "I like Mummy's plays because they are different," says 13-year-old Anahita, "and Daddy's because he acts so well."

In the late '50s to the early '60s, when English theatre in Bombay was loosening up and just beginning to discard some of its *sahibi* rigidity, Farrokh was in college, picking up the ropes from "people like Bobby Padamsee, Adi Marzban—from whom I really learnt personnel handling and backstage work—and Alkazi." Those were the days of Shaw, Shakespeare and one-act plays. Working with the then homogeneous Theatre Group, Farrokh acted in several plays like *The Crucible*, *The Little Hut*, and *The Man who Came to Dinner*. With Alyque Padamsee, for whom he later did *Tughlak* and *Vultures*, (from Tendulkar's *Gidhade*) he started out right in college. "I have had the pleasure of directing Farrokh for more than 25 years now," says Padamsee. "In fact I remember the very first play that we did together in college—Hemingway's *The Killer*. Recalls Farrokh: "We also used to do a lot of visual enactments. They

Dilip Chakravarty



Vijaya: setting trends in Marathi theatre

took very little time, required the minimum of sets and costumes, and best of all, one could read out the lines," he smiles. "Besides, then, one can do plays which don't have any mass appeal, without feeling disappointed".

**Marathi Theatre:** And while the English theatre "was dropping its Oxford accent," as Farrokh puts it, an avalanche was taking place in Marathi theatre. Explaining the "wave of new talent" that suddenly emerged, Vijaya says, "Whenever commercial theatre finds itself in the doldrums, amateur theatre emerges." In those days, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan began organising inter-collegiate and state competitions to revive a theatre which was flagging. Using these platforms, a bunch of enthusiastic collegians and graduates got together and simply let their imaginations and talents run loose, and came up with a "theatre of ideas", which was unlike anything Marathi audiences had seen before.

Interestingly enough, many of them are still prominent on stage today—Vijay Tendulkar, Kamlakar Sarang, Arvind and Sulabha Deshpande, to name just a few, and of course, a very dynamic and ambitious Vijaya. "It was all so informal," she reminisces. "If Tendulkar wrote a play, we would get together and just do it. If the Sahitya Sangh asked us to put up something, well, Tendulkar or someone else would even write a play." It was from this voracious theatre activity that Rangayan was born. Although the idyll broke up in the '70s, the Vijaya-initiated Rangayan has done more for modern Marathi theatre than any other single group. "Vijaya's work with Rangayan was a major breakthrough," agrees Padamsee, "just as her work in collaboration with the Germans is setting a new trend today."

**The Meeting:** And so, although unknown to each other, both Vijaya and Farrokh were making headway in their own language theatre. It was only in '64 that the two came together for Pratap Sharma's play—*A Touch of Brightness*. "A year later, well, we were married," says Vijaya matter-of-factly. "That was perhaps the brightest touch to the production," jokes Pratap Sharma, "for it was 'a marriage of true

minds'," he adds, quoting Shakespeare. "They were part of a wonderful team, and we were all delighted when they teamed up for life," he recalls.

Since Sharma's play, however, the two have never been on the same sets together again. "We prefer it this way," explains Farrokh. Adds Vijaya, "I am never comfortable with English," Neither proffers advice about the other's work. "She, of course does not need my help," says Farrokh, "and the only help I take from Viju, and that from the whole family really, is for learning my lines. I take a lifetime to memorise my part," he confesses, with a smile. "Then the whole family makes me recite it as if I were a child—and they land up knowing my part better than I do."

Says Vijaya, of her husband, casting an affectionate glance in his direction, "Farrokh is an intuitive actor. He has this unique ability to create laugh lines—which is why I think he's best at humorous roles." "Farrokh is a comic actor *par excellence*," affirms Pratap Sharma. "In *Oh Dad, Poor Dad*, he was just excellent."

**Two-fold Talent:** Farrokh howev-

er protests at the dismissal of him as merely a comic actor and feels that he can handle serious roles as effectively. His wife agrees, citing the example of his performance in Tendulkar's *Gidhade*: "Though the character is so harsh, Farrokh somehow made him likeable."

"That is because I made him three-dimensional," interrupts Farrokh modestly. "I try not to project too much of myself into the role. Someone who sees a play of mine should not say, 'Hey, that's Farrokh,'" he explains. It was, in fact, precisely this quality of receding into the character of the play which made the portrayal of Farrokh's Mitch so sensitive and credible. "Farrokh's a thorough professional," agrees Padamsee. "His timing is impeccable. His performances as the gravedigger in *Hamlet* and as the Arab in *Tughlak* are masterpieces of the English stage."

If Farrokh analyses himself critically, he waxes eloquent about his wife. "I think she's fantastic," he enthuses, nodding his head, as if in support of his statement. "If I were to rate directors in Bombay today, she'd top the list with Alyque a close second," says he. Ex-



Farrokh: "I take a lifetime to memorise my part"

## PERFORMANCE

panding on what must be a favourite theme, he continues, "She has never compromised. Consistently, over the last 10 years she has produced quality theatre—and brought it to a large audience, successfully." Farrokh, although not fully conversant with the language, religiously watches every Marathi production that his wife puts up. "She is so thorough in her work," he says admiringly.

**Critical Acclaim:** Although Vijaya's best champion seems to be her husband, there is no dearth of critics to appreciate her work. Sharma says of her, "She is one of the best, most progressive, most searching directors in Indian theatre today and also a great actress." Padamsee calls her "one of the few directors on stage who is extremely disciplined. There is nothing amateur about her work." He adds, "She has a keen eye for detail."

Right now, Farrokh's talented wife is about to transfer her attentions to another medium, which, she admits, she has avoided till now, in spite of several offers—films. Somehow, more and more theatre personalities have been making a similar switch in the last few years—notably Tendulkar. "I think it is part of a natural process," says Vijaya. "After all, if audiences are what matter, then a change to a more accessible medium is bound to come."

With this in mind, Vijaya has spent the last few days with Shyam Benegal, on the sets of his film *Kalyug*. "I learnt a lot from working with him," she says, disclosing that she had done a small role in the film. Vijaya has also been commissioned by Doordarshan to translate Laxmibai Tilak's book *Smriti Chitre* into celluloid. "Right now, I am engaged in doing research into the period 1880–1900," she said.

And while wife Vijaya launches headlong into yet another massive task, husband Farrokh seems content resting between plays. Since a Pearl Padamsée production is still on the brew he hopes to catch up on lost time with his first priority—his job at Pfizer, and also, his family life.

—Robini Soman

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