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Sunday ~~Afternoon~~

INTERVIEW

THE 'BRANDFATHER'

**Alyque Padamsee
celebrates 50
years of theatre
and advertising**

BY ASHISH VIRMANI

Come Tuesday evening when Alyque Padamsee releases his first book there will be a huge party. Not the regular kind of party you understand, but a theatre event. Scenes from his plays - the musicals, the tragedies - orchestrated alongside the book launch will emphasise the fact that it's been 50 years since the first play he directed hit the marquee.

have been a mind-boggling 63 productions since, including 1998's *The Odd Couple* with Sharon Prabhakar and Karla Singh. No mean feat this, considering that he had a full-time and entirely glorious career in advertising all the while.

"The book is called *A Double Life: My First Hundred Years In Theatre And Advertising*, because I just added up the 50 years in each field,"

Padamsee explains. "David (Davidar) asked me to write about my advertising years and when I explained that my life was also theatre, he supplied the title for the book on the spot. It's been under the pen for the last seven years because I hate writing and avoid it whenever I can."

Padamsee first joined J. Walter Thompson as a copywriter drawing a "princely sum" of Rs. 300 per month.

He was earning Rs. 750 per month when his mother threw him out of the house for wanting to marry an older, already



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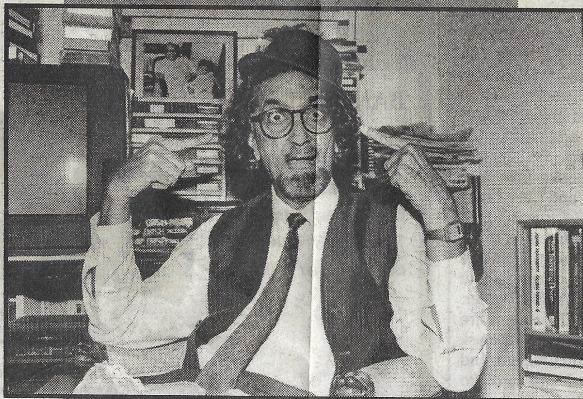
For those who've come in late, it's difficult to describe the euphoria that accompanies the opening of a new **A l y q u e** Padamsee p l a y . *Tughlaq* in 1970 opened with a

newcomer called Kabir Bedi, in a shocker of a prologue. Entire hordes of teenaged girls bought balcony tickets for a better vantage point and went 'ooh' as the curtain parted to reveal a nude Bedi. *Jesus Christ Superstar* had its stage shaped as a cross that went right into the audience, and gave a new dimension to the intimacy of theatre. Not to mention that there were at least 40 members of the cast who performed from among the stalls. A memorable and ingenious *Evita* sequence included a golden 'hand' symbol out of which Sharon Prabhakar emerged — this at the height of Indira Gandhi's second coming — to stupefy audiences with her liquid voice. And in the 1988 *Kabaret* Padamsee pin-pointed the fascism of post-Independence India comparing it to the Nazism in the original *Cabaret*. Perhaps that's what Padamsee is best at doing — giving a spin to the clichéd, the mundane. As he confesses, he hates *deja vu*.

Now he puts on his bowler hat with child-like glee, punches the camera with a boxing glove and shoots at it with a toy gun — the child within Padamsee seems to be emerging stronger as he grows older, perhaps spurred on by the fact that his ten-year-old daughter Shazaan is in the next room. "Shazaan," he announces "is growing up in a wonderful atmosphere with theatre vibes all around her. Pretty much the situation I was in when I was her age and would watch my elder brother Sultan interacting with Mumbai theatre actors at Kulsum Terrace, my mother's place. Unfortunately Sultan died when he was 24."

That however did not prevent Padamsee from setting up Theatre Group in 1946. His first play *The Killers* was produced and directed in 1949 and there

The child within Padamsee is emerging stronger as he grows older. Give him a bowler hat and a toy gun... and give him his space.

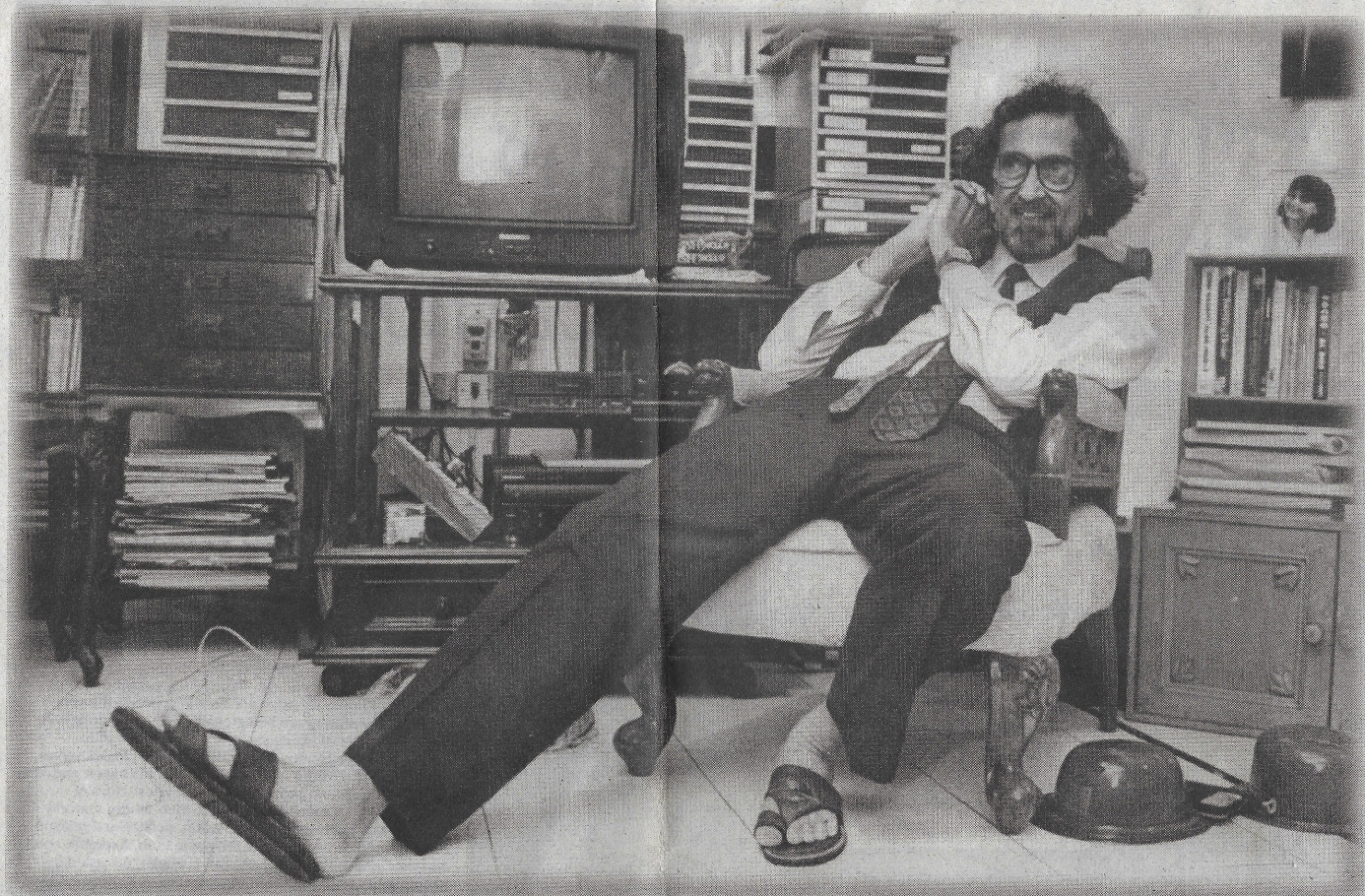


married woman with two children — Pearl Sayani, Padamsee was adamant about his decision, as was his mother and Pearl and he shifted into a smaller rented house. In doing so he went overnight from propertied gent to passionate pauper: "From someone whose family owned ten buildings in the city, two cars and holidays abroad, I was reduced to travelling by bus and looking into the milk bills. It put steel into my spine. I'm very grateful, in retrospect, to my mother for what she did — it made me a man," he says. No wonder then that 12 years after she died, Padamsee's book is dedicated to his mother, Kulsumbai.

Padamsee's greatest inspirations were all risk-takers, he says, and it is thus imperative for him to take risks in life, in love and above all in work. Ample indication of this is witnessed by the women he has consorted with — whether Pearl or Dolly Thakore or Sharon, all three have been very, very different from each other. "I don't," he repeats, "appreciate *deja vu*."

Which brings one to ask what his three different choices of companions gave him. At which point Padamsee looks reflective and after an extended pause answers, "Pearl was my greatest support during my struggling days. She was my Rock of Gibraltar. Dolly, after her, was a good counterpoint to me — an independent woman with strong views, without whom I couldn't have made *Jesus Christ Superstar*. But Sharon is my muse. While she (Sharon) may not possess similarities to Pearl, she's inspired me in all my plays, from a *Kabaret* to *Tara* to *Begum Sumroo* to *Othello*."

Of course, there's the unmissable fact that



● "For me, advertising is drama," says God of the two 50-year-old passions in his life.

Padamsee himself has played Svengali to innumerable women and a few men as well. From Dolly Thakore to Sharon



1 949: The Killers, 1952: Antigone, Dr.



marches up to her and reads it out line by line explaining exactly what he means. Bhojwani does it again. The

Padamsee himself has played Svengali to innumerable women and a few men as well. From Dolly Thakore to Sharon Prabhakar, Suneta Rao to Alisha Chinai, Kabir Bedi to Dalip Tahil, Shiamak Davar to Rachel Reuben, they all started out with him before going on to greater things. Thakore was a model co-ordinator before she met Padamsee who helped groom her into one of the most recognised faces in newscasting in Indian television. Alisha Chinai came to Padamsee singing slightly off-key yet he awarded her the famous *Another Suitcase in Another Hall...* song in *Evita* which raised the goosebumps in the audience and was the beginning of a sensational pop career. Which same song was subsequently assigned to a dancer in the play called Suneta Rao who convinced the director that she could do it. Today Rao's snazzy song-and-dance acts come as a direct inspiration from the director who showed her the spit-and-polish routine.

As we talk socialite Devika Bhojwani saunters in with hubby Suresh. The duo have come to rehearse for Tuesday's show for which Devika will be singing Virgin Mary's song in *Jesus Christ Superstar* just as she did exactly 25 years ago when the play was running at Birla Matushri. Bhojwani lets us in on the not-inconsiderable fact that she met her husband through the play - he was apparently transfixed by her stage persona and came to meet her afterwards. "Three months later, we were married," says Devika simply, "so you can say that the play changed my life." She's not the only one who owes Alyque one: Kabir Bedi met and fell in



1949: The Killers, **1952:** Antigone, Dr. Faustus, **1953:** She Stoops To Conquer, The Way of The World, An Ideal Husband,

1954: The Taming of The Shrew, **1955:** Candida, **1957:** Shishon Ke Khilone, **1958:** Of Mice And Men, Shayad Aap Bhi Hansen, **1959:** A Long Day's Journey Into The Night, All My Sons, **1960:** A View From The Bridge, **1961:** Sara Sansar Apna Parivar, **1962:** The Madwoman of Chailot, Julius Caesar, The Zoo Story, The Death of Bessie Smith, Hello Out There, **1963:** Othello, The Crucible,

1964: Hamlet, **1965:** A Touch of Brightness, **1966:** The Word, Asylum, **1967:** Bedroom, **1968:** O Dad, Poor Dad,

1968: Bury The Dead, Trial Balloon,

1969: Marat/ Sade,

1970: Tughlaq, **1971:** Mede,

1972: Mira, **1973:** The Birthday Party, **1974:** Jesus Christ Superstar, **1975:** Vultures, Inherit The Wind, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? **1976:** Exit The King, A Streetcar Named Desire, **1977:** Man of La Mancha, **1979:** Razzle Dazzle, **1981:** Pagal Khana, Death of A Salesman, **1983:** Evita, **1984:** All The

50 YEARS of THEATRE



● Alyque in *Death Of A Salesman*.

King's Men, **1986:** Aap Ki Farmaish, Titali, Tarantula Tanzi, Maha Dada, **1987:** Suicide in B Flat, **1988:** Kabaret, **1990:** Othello, **1991:** Tara, **1992:** Butterflies Are Free, **1993:** Death And The Maiden, **1994:** Final Solutions, **1995:** Roshni, **1997:** Begum Sumroo, **1998:** Odd Couple.

love with his wife Nikki Vijaykar on the sets of Padamsee's *Othello* nine years ago. So if marriages are made in heaven, you couldn't blame Padamsee for occasionally feeling like God.

As Bhojwani goes through

numerous rehearsals in the study room where we are seated, Padamsee directs, nodding his head absently, his spectacles in hand. There's no getting around some particular notes in the song, which for some reason just aren't

sounding right. Bhojwani takes it a semi-tone lower tip-toeing around the falsettos that the song requires, then one tone higher but it still doesn't sound right. "Feel the song," Padamsee advises, "it's got to have more feeling" and he

marches upto her and reads it out line by line explaining exactly what he means. Bhojwani does it again. This time it's much better, but the falsetto still isn't right. Padamsee examines the song from left and from right and finally pinpoints that the problem lies with Bhojwani's breathing. "Take a breath on 'ho-ly' and hammer the 'name' part to glory," he instructs. Bhojwani tries it again and it's just perfect. The song has come alive. Glory be, this has got to be the stuff that directors are made up of.

"You know," says Padamsee with a sudden burst of illumination, "the brands I built in Lintas - my 'brandchildren' as I call them were all drama. So whether it was Lalitaji in the Surf ad, the Kamasutra Girl, Park Avenue, the MRF muscle man, or Jet Airways advertising for me is drama. When I squished the three tomatoes in the jar for a family planning campaign it was drama. The time when the disabled child drew her mother and herself as whole on a slate and subsequently rubbed out her leg, was drama. It's all drama," he says waving his hands in the air happily.

As one gets ready to leave one cannot help feeling that it's been a hell of a life for Padamsee. For him as for no one else do Shakespeare's words about the world being a stage and all men and women being merely actors, hold true. And on Tuesday when they get together to celebrate his first 'hundred' years they'll be saluting a director and an ad guru who had the opportunity to play God more than anyone else. And believe you us, while it may have been fun, it was damned stiff work all the way.