

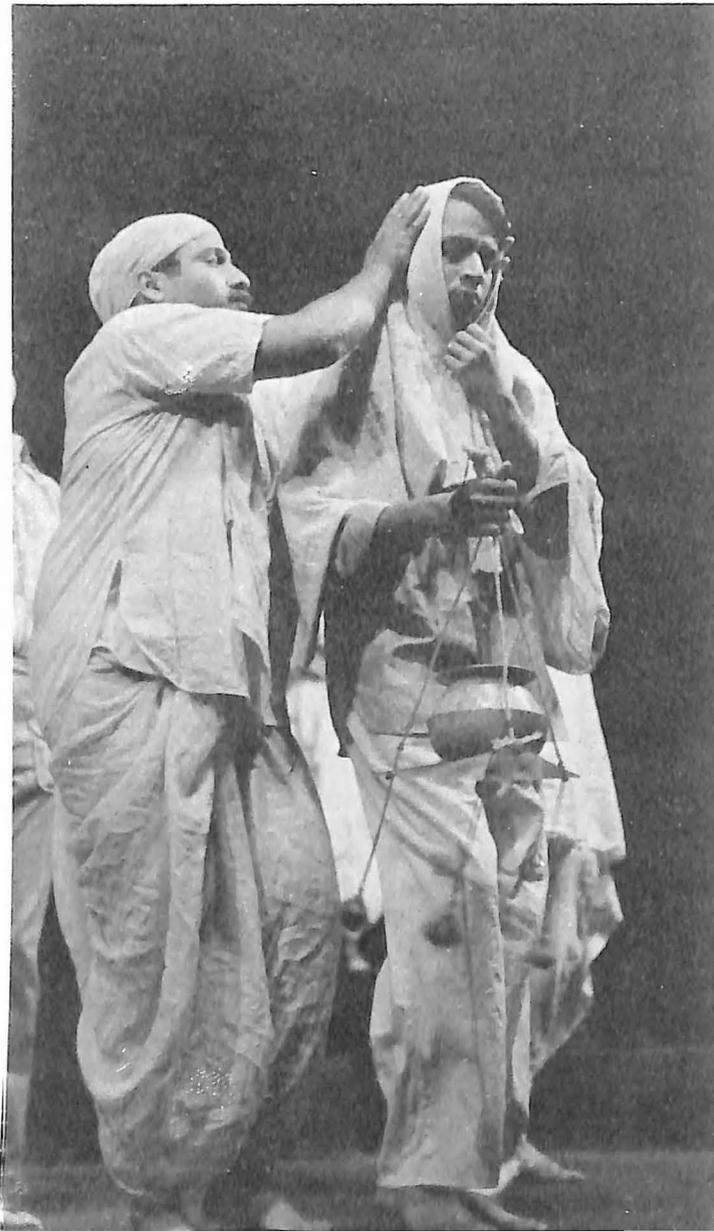
MAHANIRVANA by Satish Alekar, Neelkanth Prakashan, Pune, 1974, Rs. 6.00 (*In Marathi*).

A favourite subject of most Marathi playwrights (all of them of middle-class origin) is the past, "those happy bygone days". Sometimes this pre-

occupation with the past takes the form of a straight romanticizing of history. Sometimes the dismal present becomes an occasion for pious recollections of the past or an excuse to glorify it. It is rare to find a play which remains firmly entrenched from beginning to end in the present, a play truly rooted in 'here and now'; in today. *Mahanirvana* can be said to be this rare exception.

The writer himself comes from the white-collared middle-class. His play is conceived in the actual context of this very class, its traditions, its customs, its habits and its values. But it harbours no feelings of sentimentality for all these; instead it ridicules in an extraordinarily unbridled manner this very sentimentality and the massive hypocrisy and vulgarity that such sentimentality generates.

But the play is not just this. Its central theme is as startling and thought-provoking a subject as Death itself. It begins with the death of a man



of the middle-class, a family-oriented individual. For some time the wife cannot bring herself to believe that her husband is actually dead. The neighbours think, and even with some trace of envy, that the fellow has overslept after a night's fun in his wife's company. His only son, young Nana, has gone off to another town to take part in a sports tourney. He hasn't returned yet. The dramatist thus gives an oblique slant to what appears at first sight a very serious occurrence and what is in a middle-class chawl a rather rare event.

The dramatist also makes this dead man, this ordinary householder, the narrator in the play. The narration is not in straight prose, but in the traditional style of the *kirtana*. The playwright inserts the verse and music of other forms like the *saki* and the *dindi* and, of course, expects them to be sung in the usual full-fledged manner. In keeping with the style of the *kirtana*, spiritual subjects now make their appearance. And alongside there is that coarse pleasure-loving streak which among the middle-aged sometimes wears the mask of honesty. Before your eyes there unfolds a whole cluster of complexes which fill the mind of a certain white-collared type and then by an extraordinary twist the dramatist carries into the realm of fantasy what till now has emerged as a straight narrative.

The dead householder hero is laid on the funeral bier. At this point the neighbours in the chawl dance and sing in chorus as they tie the body to the bier. The son comes back from the sports tourney and the funeral procession leaves for the cremation grounds. But due to a municipal regulation issued on that day and owing to some technical hitch the cremation grounds are closed down. There is a proposal to start an electric crematorium instead. So the last rites of the householder hero cannot be performed since there are no facilities to burn the body in that place. The dead hero languishes without a funeral pyre and the situation is further complicated by the pleasant memories he cherishes of the traditional burning-grounds and the atmosphere there. He pleads fervently that his body be burnt there and nowhere else and, of course, he refuses pointblank to have the funeral rites performed in the new and modern crematorium. So he rots, and the stench of the body begins to spread. His fingers begin to decay, and to fall apart.

Now his young son, Nana, is faced with a serious problem: what is he to do with a father in this state? How is he to solve the mystery of that faceless male, ('wearing dark glasses and a suit'), who has become an obsession with his widowed mother? How is he to trace the identity of this individual.

Nana's decaying and foul-smelling father, a throwback to the Ghost of Hamlet's father, hovers in the background, wandering freely wherever he chooses to go. Now the play gradually closes in on this young hero, Nana. He bribes the sentries of the cremation grounds and arranges for the illegal cremation of his father's body. As the father burns joyously on the funeral pyre, Nana heaves a sigh of relief. So the play ends, as pictures of his own life (the unknown female, priced five or seven rupees, 'sitting' at the window) float in Nana's mind for the first time.

Instead of trying to take this play—which does border on fantasy—into the realm of make-believe, the dramatist treats it on the level of the usual kind of play. He makes pointed references, at certain crucial moments in the play, to the paraphernalia of the stage like the curtain or the wings. They make you aware that a performance is on, that it's a play which is being staged.

The dramatist introduces popular film tunes, chorus music and group dances at precisely those points in the play which, in the conventional sense, might be regarded as serious, sad or climactic. As a result, this play, which has as its central episode such a serious, terrifying and time-honoured subject as Death itself, becomes, in actual fact, a hilariously funny and extraordinarily refreshing affair. It is, at one and the same time, wholly heartless, yet vivid, and delightful.

There is in it no trace at all of any pious sentiment. Even so, it disturbs the mind. The imprint it leaves behind is that of the sorry state in which young Nana is placed—the imprint of his mental state. A sensitive spectator, even after he has had his fill of laughter, cannot quite escape the force of this impact. In this lies the most significant aspect of the play's success.

Perhaps the second half of the play might be thought of as too wordy. In comparison, the first part has in it, apart from the words themselves, an attractive visual element and also the unhampered use of both music and dance. It has, therefore, greater entertainment value while the latter half does remain a little too dense because of the weight of the words that it contains. The expectations regarding 'form' roused by the earlier half are not quite fulfilled in the second half. Even so, the latter half of the play is, as an independent entity, important and even quite successful in its own way.

In the context of western drama practice we might describe it as one more successful 'black comedy'. But in the context of the Marathi theatre it assumes a larger dimension. The dramatist has in this play (and in the production which he directed himself) literally dragged the Marathi theatre away from the grooves of the school of 'dear bygone days' and from the 'non-realistic' use of realistic techniques. He has effectively brought it into a freer sphere. Plays, such as *Mahanirvana*, lead us to believe that the Marathi theatre does have a future.

—VIJAY TENDULKAR

[Translated from the original Marathi by Kumud Mehta]

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