

# Whatever happened to aapro Parsi theatre?

On the occasion of Navroz, golden theatre couple Ruby and Burjor Patel hark back to the glory days of the *naatak* genre

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**Theatre** | "Aapri Ruby will give Goldie a run for her money!" a doughty dowager declared 25-odd years ago, watching the former irrepressibly relive the *Cactus Flower* role she thought Hollywood's Hawn had essayed. Sounding ten times more trenchant hissing this in Gujarati, if slightly off-mark with the comparison (Ruby Patel played Ingrid Bergman's part from the original Walter Matthau-Bergman-Hawn flick), the lady was still bang-on in her opinion of one of Parsi theatre's most adored actresses.

Patel is one of the descendants of a theatre that struck roots way back in 1853 with the Parsi Theatrical Company. Flowering into a well loved genre, its success encouraged Parsi proprietors to establish theatrical companies countrywide. A fistful flourished into the 1950s, although demand started dropping from the 1920s onwards, partly due to the rise of cinema which appropriated Parsi theatre's technical innovation, social themes and grand music. Likewise with some of the venues—Bombay's Royal Opera House erected in 1925 by Jahangir Karaka as an active drama hub was converted by 1935 into a film-screening venue with only Sunday morning slotted for live performances.

From the 1950s to the '80s, under writer/director giants Adi Marzban, Firoze Antia, Dorab Mehta and Homi Tavadia, actors Ruby and husband Burjor Patel, Aban Patel, Pilo Wadia, Dinshah Daji, Jimmy Pocha, Fali Master, Dadi Sarkari, Noshir Ratnagar, Bomi and Dolly Dotiwala regaled playgoers, packing Tejpal and Birla with shows that often went over 50 performances. On occasions like Parsi New Year it was almost de rigeur to spend the evening enjoying capers like *Piroja Bhavan*, *Mancherji Kaunna? Kaataryu Gap...* from Marzban's stable. But today a thinner line trickles into auditoriums for that annual risqué humour-laced Parsi play.

When did the charm begin to vanish, given that Parsi plays were so popular that they were patronised even by Gujarati-speaking Hindus and Bohris who thronged the theatres to guffaw at gems like *Shirinbai Nu Shantiniketan*, *Gustaadji Ghore Charya* and *Sagan Ke Vagan?* Stars held mesmeric sway then—"Comedians like Mino Davar would simply walk on to the stage and people couldn't stop clapping," Ruby Patel remembers. But now, "Ticket queues for farces, revues and thrillers have vanished," says Burjor Patel.



Noshir Ratnagar and Ruby Patel in *Hello Inspector*: those were the days

The glory days live on in the hearts of Parsi theatre's golden couple. "We had a lot of adaptations but they were so well transplanted; only the merest germ of an idea stemmed elsewhere," says Burjor. So INT's *Ugee Daapan Ni Dor* was reborn as *Cactus Flower* in the Burjor Patel Productions version. If her lauded lead in *Hello Inspector* was earlier Liz Taylor's turn in *Nightwatch*, the first-onstage experimental finale illuminating *Solmi January Ni Madhraat* (Ayn Rand's *Night Of January 16*) ranks among Ruby's treasured memories: "Its subjective ending left to viewers, I prepared to be director-cued 'Guilty' or 'Not Guilty' on various nights, the verdict changing as the audience jury accused me!" she says.

Barely a body from Gen Next taking the fun forward implies an unhappy adieu to naatak creativity. The loss, the Patels point out, may also have to do with the fact that few present-day Parsis are proficient in their own language. That's tragic. Because, expletives apart, insipid translations of colourful Gujarati phrases seeped in ethnic idiom risk falling flat, meaningless. Find anything to match the delicious wickedness of just two little words, "*Marere mua*"?