

Theatre of conflict

Asif Currimbhoy's extraordinary but unfeted work met with greater success on Broadway than in his own country. Meher Marfatia on the late Indo-English playwright, whose powerful play, *Goa*, is to be read by a theatre group this week

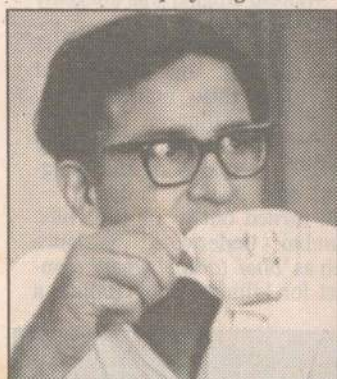
WHY does a man write plays? Why does he put himself through the humiliating agony of exploiting himself artistically and — too frequently, in Currimbhoy's case — to open himself to rejection?" asks Ruth Meserve, a director in the faculty of theatre at Indiana University, in a critique of Asif Currimbhoy's work. Three years after his death, this prolific author of 30 plays penned between 1955 and 1975 remains a controversial figure. Undoubtedly among India's best-known dramatists writing in English, Currimbhoy has enjoyed considerable success on Broadway while facing "exile and estrangement from my own country".

In plays like *Goa*, *The Dumb Dancer*, *Monsoon*, *The Doldrums* and *The Hungry Ones*, Currimbhoy — an executive for Burmah Shell — unswervingly focused on problems, patterns and conflicts inherent in Asian societies. "I speak about things that tear one's heart," he admitted. "And the only exciting theatre in life is the theatre of conflict, because this is life itself." This resulted in *Inqulab* discussing the trauma of Bengal with Maoist-Naxalite revolutionaries, *The Refugee* dealing with Bangladesh's dispossessed, *The Miracle Seed* with drought conditions in Bombay State, *The Dissident MLA* with riots and student power in Ahmedabad, *Om Mani Padme Hum* with Tibet at the crossroads of Lamaism and communism, *Angkor* with the ancient temples in a frightening echo of the Cambodia-Vietnam wars...

Probing current issues through the trenchant thrust and counter-thrust of dialogue assigned to his characters, the forthright tone earned Currimbhoy, among other labels, that of a protest playwright. *The Doldrums*, for instance, became notorious for its Bombay censorship ban in 1960 which, sadly, detracted from the serious purpose of the play about the frustrations of alienated youth. And though Currimbhoy made it clear that he welcomed "constructive dissent", he repeatedly drew attention to the unique dilemma of the English-language writer in a developing nation — "He falls between two stools".

Declares writer Shanta Gokhale, "I have always found Asif one of the most interesting playwrights the Indo-English genre has produced. He certainly doesn't need to be endorsed by the West before being appreciated in India. What unfortunately happened was that a responsive enough audience for his style did not present itself here. As it is, drama has a very tricky place in literature, and right from the time he began being published there was a strong resistance to new writing." In Gokhale's view, theatre audiences continued to be comfortable with Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and, perhaps a little later, Harold Pinter and John Osborne — with few exceptions, it has been time-honoured American and British dramatists who are easier accepted.

Agreeing with her, Jiten Merchant, drama critic of *The Times of India* who has adapted and arranged the *Goa* reading at Max Mueller Bhuvan on August 21, adds that Currimbhoy's work tends to polarise people into almost two camps: "You get to either love it or dislike it. Basically, not everyone connects with the language used, so those who don't turn their backs on him with just a cursory look. Indians writing in English tend to be snobbily disregarded by the English theatre circuit, especially in Mumbai. If worked around carefully, Currimbhoy's style may be more accepted." Merchant dismisses accusations of the playwright's lines



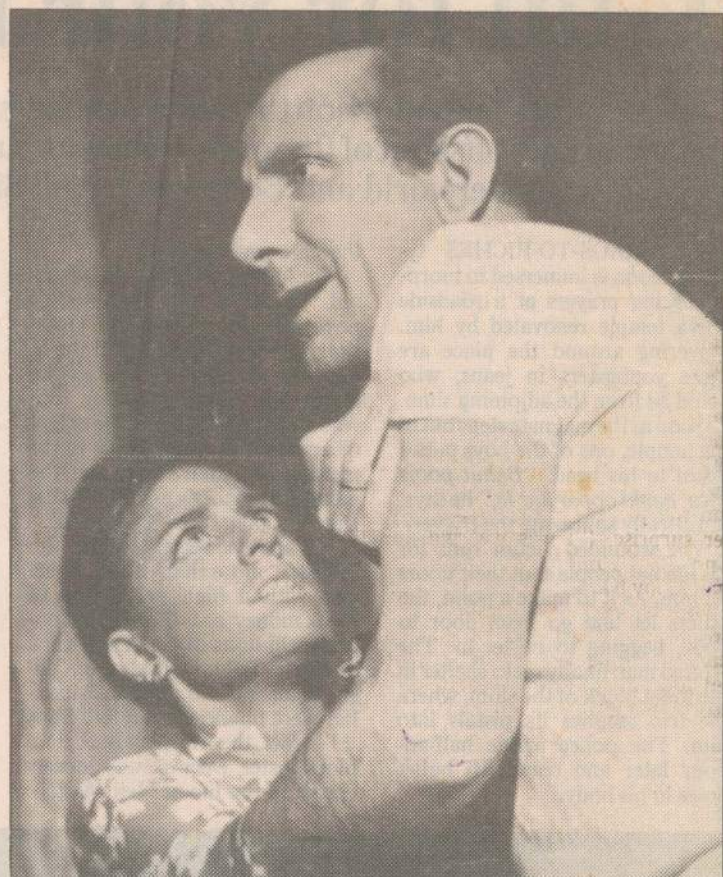
Asif Currimbhoy

sounding too archaic, contending, "Why take up Wilde or Brecht repeatedly, then? Shouldn't their tone seem as dated? The important thing to remember is simply that different writing styles demand different styles of performance."

Shockingly taut and marked by coiled symbolism, *Goa* unfolds as an allegory, the grotesque interaction of its characters paralleling the exchange of violence and hate between the Indians and Portuguese before *Goa's* liberation. In a letter to Currimbhoy, a clearly impressed Graham Greene wrote: "...It strikes me as a most remarkable piece of work. It would need a very imaginative director such as Peter Brook to put it on the stage."

Goa opened to packed houses at Michigan State University, then catapulted to the Martinique Theatre on Broadway and subsequently in Delhi, Calcutta and Singapore. Remarks film-maker Sai Paranjpye who performed the lead role of Maria in the Delhi production, "As with all his writing, Asif wrote this story too with tremendous passion. Playing the virago I did was memorable — my not-quite-typically-Indian looks ruled out acting for me, save this solitary fling, *Goa*, allowed me to let go uninhibited!"

Attempting to stage *Goa* on an ambitious scale earlier this year, replete with backdrop art by F. N. Souza, costumes by Wendell Ro-



A still from *The Hungry Ones*

dericks and music by Remo Fernandes, director Rooky Dadachanji came up against several problems, not the least of these being the lack of a cast convinced about the venture. Once again, Currimbhoy's language came up as a stumbling block, its density and construction considered "not today". Personally drawn to the pure theatre dynamics that Currimbhoy had a flair for, Dadachanji however concedes, "He has regrettably low visibility. People now have this suspicion of anything remotely intellectual, fighting off what they see as more angst burdening their life. Asif is completely non-commercial, and how many sponsors would go with that? Attention spans are getting shorter every day in our MTV generation which wants snappy one-liners even in theatre."

Currimbhoy's widow Suraiya explains how there is no escape from the philosophic even in his ostensibly light themes. Described as a comedy of manners, *Darjeeling Tea?* actually examines plantation life with pathos and sentiment, while the flippant Joe of *The Doldrums* is really probing the strange ways of the universe. Revealing that her husband grew up in a politically stimulating environment provided by his distinguished Khoja baronet family in Mumbai (his mother Zarina was known for encouraging evening visitors such as Saro-

jini Naidu, Jayaprakash Narayan, Minoo Masani and Vijayalakshmi Pandit), Suraiya Currimbhoy attributes his fervour for social realism to those early influences.

Addressing the question of the playwright's wider popularity abroad, Pearl Padamsee points out that the decades of the '60s and '70s when Currimbhoy travelled and lectured extensively were absolutely right for satisfying the thirst of the West trying to understand the mysterious complexities of the East. An authentic Indian playwright was readily welcomed. "If his home country didn't appreciate him, it could be that we've twigged on a bit late. It may have been different, were he to write today."

Veteran actress Sabira Merchant who reads the part of Maria in *Goa* is of the opinion that Currimbhoy may still gain wider acceptance simply because of the fire in him. "He writes with his soul. But his work does need a new kind of energy; to sustain passion of that nature you have to cut it somewhere, prune the lines without robbing their essence. And that is the director's job. A play reading is a good compromise — practically speaking, it entails less expense and fewer rehearsals, yet holds the listening audience emotionally. Yes, I think as far as spreading an awareness of Currimbhoy is concerned, reading *Goa* makes for an interesting experiment."