

The Verses and Metaverses of Satish Alekar

In *Thakishi Samvaad*, an elderly man living by himself finds fellowship in his last days. Satish Alekar wrestles—and makes the audience wrestle—with this simple premise in the most remarkable ways.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai



Suvrat Joshi as the old man and Girija Oak as Thaki in Satish Alekar's *Thakishi Samvaad*

Having read *Thakishi Samvaad* in the English translation by Shanta Gokhale a couple of times, having spoken to some of the people who have brought it to the stage and having watched it in the original Marathi, it still seems impossible to offer a synopsis of Satish Alekar's latest play. I can confirm that it is deeply political and acutely humorous. It is a meditation on fear in the current political climate,

but it is certainly also a farce. It is satirical but also a slapstick-rich, character-driven, musical work with multiple costume changes. It discusses 20th-century literary figures and 21st-century silent majorities while deftly, outrageously, presenting pseudohistory as fact. It is a two-hander, but it is possible that there is only one real character onstage. You, it's entirely possible, might not have got the drift.

And perhaps, that is the way it is meant to be. Alekar's indescribable theatre needs to be experienced and even for that, it helps to know how to do it right. Gokhale, an eminent writer, translator and critic, who is familiar with his oeuvre, says, "With Satish Alekar's plays, it is best not to go in with notions and expectations. He is unique among Marathi writers in maintaining a perfect balance between the real and

the unreal. The unreal could be out-and-out fantasy, or a kind of magic realistic reflection of the real world."

Alekar, who won the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1994 and the Padma Shri in 2012 for his contribution to theatre, has been creating trailblazing experimental work for the stage for half a century. His early play, *Mahanirvan*, a tragicomic satire on Hindu rituals of death, is a milestone in Indian theatre.

Immensely successful today as it was when it was first staged exactly 50 years ago, the play combines Alekar's now characteristic black comedy with traditional Maharashtrian folk music. Having written and directed *Begum Barve*, *Mahapoor* and *Mickey ani Memsahib*, to mention only a few works, Alekar rightly forms the trinity, with Mahesh Elkunchwar and Vijay Tendulkar, that is credited with transfiguring modern Marathi theatre. He was a founder member of the Theatre Academy in Pune and has been teaching in India and the US for several years. Alekar's work has been described as 'most powerful' by Girish Karnad and 'impossible to overlook' by Ramu Ramanathan.

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Thakishi Samvaad begins with a 75-year-old man deliberating over loneliness during the pandemic-induced lockdown. "Another presence on the stage with him is Thaki," says Gokhale. "I use the word 'presence' because she could be a real-life nurse, a figment of the old man's imagination or a virtual assistant technology like Amazon's Alexa, but in human form." Thaki—the word actually means a wooden doll common in regions of Maharashtra—is at once charming and chilling, human yet sometimes eerily robotic. Thaki is portrayed by Girija Oak with delightful light-heartedness and homoeopathic doses of edgy detachment. Director Anupam Barve says, "Since I first read the play, I always had Girija in mind. I have seen her perform and she can act, she can dance, she can sing. That's the kind of persona you want portraying Thaki." The old man, played with precision by Suvarat Joshi, is a 75-year-old unsuccessful, never-married, former owner of a second-hand bookshop who has been obsessed with a very specific research project for the last several years—the origin and evolution of the *kargota*. "This is a cord made of black silk," explains Gokhale, "that is tied around a male baby's waist and which men continue to wear through life. The invented story is about one of the greatest Marathi playwrights, Ram Ganesh Gadkari, handing over an envelope to his friend Diwakar, writer of dramatic monologues, saying it contains the thing that has been closest to him in life." The envelope, always in the spotlight onstage, passes through the hands of many, including Tendulkar, to end up with our old man. What is contained within it subverts all expectations.

"I was a student of Alekar sir at Lalit Kala Kendra," says Barve, who has the rare privilege to direct the first production of a play by Alekar; the playwright has usually taken on this responsibility himself. Barve is profoundly familiar with Alekar's work. "I have been a part of *Mahanirvan* and *Begum Barve*. I have done

Mahapoor as my graduation piece. Alekar is one of a kind, and I don't think there is another playwright like him. I'm honoured and privileged to have an association with him which is now over 20 years old." Barve is a filmmaker, theatre director and film educator based in Pune who, until recently, served as an Associate Professor of Film Direction at FTII. His theatre production *Uchhaad*, an award-winning Marathi adaptation of Yasmina Reza's *God of Carnage*, was presented at the NCPA in May last year.

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Thakishi Samvaad was written during the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic. "It was my anger towards the current regime," says Alekar, "especially for the four rationalists who were assassinated. It has troubled me that nothing has happened so far, that the killers have not been punished yet." Alekar's most recent play before this one was *Ek Diwas Mathakade*, written in 2011. Understandably, the birth of *Thakishi Samvaad* was a big deal. Barve says, "When Alekar wrote a play during the lockdown, my first instinct was: I want to do it. I want to do it before I have read it. I want to do it even before anybody's heard it or made an opinion about it. I just want to do it." That impulse

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aside, Barve thought the text was amazing. "What I vividly remember," he says, "is basically falling more and more in love with the text. You can't claim that you've understood all the thematic contexts and all the layers of the play in the first reading or hearing of it. So obviously, we were shocked and stunned but we were also kind of laughing out loud." The straddling of reality and unreality evident in the play is entirely comprehensible to Gokhale.

"Alekar has spoken of a childhood experience when a friend of his father's would walk around on his hands, even climb stairs, as a natural form of locomotion. When the real is so unreal, Alekar might even claim to write realistic plays. We all have dreams, we all harbour fantasies, we all lose ourselves in reveries. That space is as real as rice and dal," she says.

Once Alekar agreed to let Barve direct the play, the hard work began. "It took us a lot of time to decipher how to actually do it and where to place it in terms of its idiom, the language and the staging. Alekar has got a sense of poetry and rhythm in his language which also needs to be delivered in a particular way. So sometimes that can be an impediment to actors who might feel they cannot explore beyond the confines of what has now come to be understood as an Alekari form," notes Barve. That, however, was not a challenge for the two brilliant actors in the cast. Meanwhile, Alekar showed his support by simply staying away

from rehearsals till everyone involved was comfortable with and not intimidated by his presence.

While directing, Barve kept in mind what he has learnt from Alekar over the years. For instance, Alekar's idea of theatricality takes a step back from depicting realism. "If you just have a chair onstage and say: Hey, I'm sitting in a railway compartment, it becomes a railway compartment. You don't necessarily need a big mise en scène," says Barve. This is theatre, Alekar would tell his students, you have to work on your make-believe. "That's why we had great confidence in casting Suvrat, who's my age. Once we've established the fact that he is an old man, do we need to keep on doing the persona of the actor playing an old person accurately? Suvrat does maintain his character prudently throughout, but the burden of having to do that was completely gone because of what Alekar taught us."

With such an unconventional text, it was also instrumental to have the right kind of support to make the play possible. "Ameya Gosavi and Gandhaar Sangoram, our producers, have been unconditionally supportive, despite all of us being clueless about how this would turn out and whether this would go beyond a first run," says Barve.

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Thakishi Samvaad enjoyed a successful run in Pune in May 2024. "When I began directing it, I didn't expect the response to be so positive. Across the board, it has been very gratifying and overwhelming. There are people who may have disagreements with the politics of the play, but they enjoyed it. They liked the performances. They liked the jokes that have been embedded in the text," says Barve. Gokhale avers, "Alekar takes the fullest advantage of the artiste's right to invent just what he pleases, following no external dictates, only his own vision. *Thakishi Samvaad* is arguably Alekar's most inventive play and equally arguably, his most ironic."

Meanwhile, Alekar, who becomes exceptionally

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chatty when talking about young, up-and-coming theatre directors he admires and almost self-effacing when asked about himself, is busy. He is looking forward to the production of *Mahanirvan* that will soon be presented at the same venue where it premiered 50 years ago—Bharat Natya Mandir in Pune. Barve, who has watched it as a member of the audience and worked on the 2018 revival as a light designer, says *Mahanirvan* is no longer a show, but a sort of pilgrimage. "It just refuses to grow old. After 50 years, I'm still laughing my heart out, I'm still crying at the brilliance of the dark humour. It should be celebrated much more than it is. It is a landmark play," he says. Alekar, who turned 75 this year, points out that the entire cast of the revival of *Mahanirvan* was not even born when the play premiered. "It is nice for any playwright when his play, during his lifetime, has been on for 50 years. The third generation is performing it right now. I am really humbled," he says. And, as one would expect, he is working ceaselessly. "Right now, I am working on three plays. Let's see how it goes." ■

Thakishi Samvaad will be presented on 24th November at the Experimental Theatre. The English translation of this play and of Mahanirvan can be found in the book Two Plays: 'The Grand Exit' and 'A Conversation with Dolly' by Satish Alekar, translated into the English by Shanta Gokhale and published by Seagull Books.

The theatres of the NCPA have witnessed Satish Alekar's brilliance since the organisation's early days. *Mahanirvan* was staged by the NCPA in 1975. The first production scheduled at the Experimental Theatre after its inauguration in 1986 was *Pralaya*, Alekar's Marathi adaptation of the German play *The Flood* by Günter Grass. In the same year, a Gujarati adaptation of *Mahanirvan* was specially conceived by Mahendra Joshi for the Experimental Theatre. When Alekar revived the play in 2018, it was staged at the Tata Theatre as an NCPA co-presentation in the same year. Theatre lovers at the NCPA have also had the pleasure to watch the journey of *Thakishi Samvaad* from a dramatised reading presented at the Experimental Theatre in August 2023 to a full-fledged production this month.



A scene from the 1975 production of *Mahanirvan*. Photo by Rajdutt, from the NCPA Library Archives. Citing the play's existence as proof that Marathi theatre might indeed have a future, Vijay Tendulkar wrote in his 1975 review: "It is rare to find a play which remains firmly entrenched from beginning to end in the present ... *Mahanirvan* can be said to be this rare exception." (Translated from the original Marathi by Kumud Mehta).