

# The Modernist Touch

# The modernist touch



## FOOTLIGHTS

Manohar Khushalani

*Ant Anant*

**N**SD Repertory put up P J Unnikrishnan's *Ant Anant* based on H H Munro's *The Background*. The director Abhilash Pillai graduated from the NSD last year. It is a measure of the great confidence in him that he received such a prestigious assignment at such a young age.

The confidence, of course, sprung from his handling of the diploma production *Lanka Lakshmi* which was a runaway success.

Grab these visuals: sudden darkness in the auditorium as the play begins. A combination of Indian and Western music fills the theatre. Darkness continues for quite some time forcing you to listen to the music. The curtain rises belatedly. There is a screen on the right on which a still is projected showing a poster saying, "this is a holy war."

In front there is a bed with someone under the covers. On the centre of the stage are counters with men and women cooking, peeling and ironing. In front of them, downstage are artists and sculptors working on their pieces of art. On the left is a glass cage with a man's life-size statue in *padmasana*.

The cage lights up. The statue comes alive. A man with the figure of a Greek God wearing a headgear and a waistband that reminds one of Egyptian paintings, he breaks into an Indian dance motif.

The three women on the counters are wearing costumes that carry Japanese; Kathakali and Kashmiri influences respectively. Action takes place simultaneously all over the stage without a focus. On bed are Laila and Ishaq, and all the actors converge to wake them up.

On a television monitor one sees computer graphics of a

human body followed by scenes from the *Ramayan*. The dancer emerges from the glass cube, supported by two actors on two poles, which are held like a stretcher. The cyclorama lights up and an overhead video projector displays scenes from Second World War.

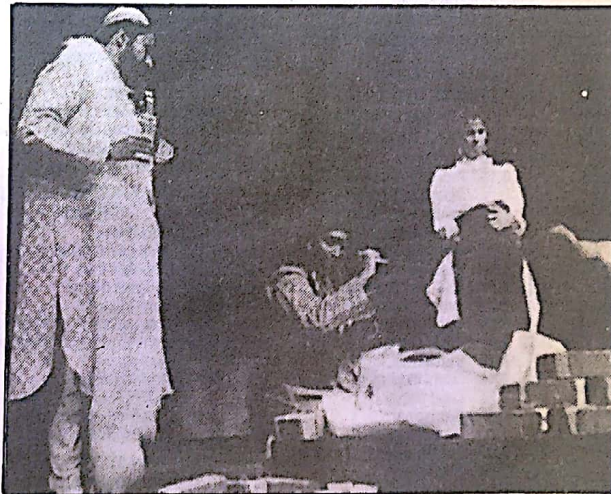
The tale revolves around Laila and Ishaq. However these two characters are catalysts on a vast canvas. One can safely assume it to be set in any spot in India—it projects a common ethos which displays the unity in diversity. It represents the onslaught of technologies, multi-media, dogmas, beliefs and religions of a common man from a rural background.

There is also the orchestration of theatre styles envelop-

ed smoothly without a hitch. On the minus side was the lack of focus in the production.

The vastness of the canvas and the range of simultaneous action intrigued initially but became monotonous later. The actors too were not fully involved and appeared to be uncomfortable.

The kind of abandon and lack of inhibition required in a play of this genre was displayed only by Rohitashv Gaur, and to some extent by Gyan Prakash. The remaining actors were either speaking too loudly or without clarity. The sermons at the end of the play appeared to be a total departure from the style of the production. For some, it was the first realisation that religion was the basic



*Interplay of religion and politics*

ing naturalism as well as video and pop art. The sequences do not follow a chronological order. Amongst the many themes and cross currents are various schools of painting, ranging from Kangra to modern art. Music and lighting, too, give a random feel.

It would be easy to be dismissive about a production like this. There is no doubt that modern Indian theatre needs to be much more experimental if it has to find new answers to reality. In that direction, *Ant Anant* took the necessary first step.

There are, of course, many achievements as well as problems in this experiment. On the plus side are all the technological innovations which work-

context of the play.

It goes to Pillai's credit that he took such a big risk in his very first directorial venture. While reading the director's note, it becomes apparent that there is a clarity of thought and a convergence in his understanding of the interplay of religion and politics. However, that clarity failed to emerge in the production.

One of the faults lay with the unreasonably short period of rehearsals. The production lacked in the coordination and orchestration of the flow of action.

But what has been proved by Abhilash, is, that we are capable, or at least, have the potential to evolve plays with the modernist touch.