

Artiste of the month

Balan Tripunithura

“Acting is my Passion”

“Malayalam theatre did not develop in Mumbai the way Marathi and Gujarati drama progressed in Mumbai,” laments Balan Tripunithura, alias Balaji, a Malayalam actor who lives in Mumbai and has performed in more than 400 shows.

“In the eighties, there were many stage troupes who regularly conducted Malayalam dramas during Onam, church *perunnal* and Ayyappa Mandala celebrations. But lack of professionalism, a systematic approach to the theatrical performance, nuances of acting, working in depth on the characterisation - all these were sadly not there, and the Malayalam scene today is not very bright,” Balan feels.

“Right from my childhood, I was fascinated by drama. During my schooldays at Tripunithura, stage troupes used to come to our town and do rehearsals at the temple premises. I used to hang around there watching the rehearsals. I did odd jobs for the actors, so that I could see the rehearsals. One day the actors noticed me and asked if I was interested in doing the role of a poor boy in *Vidarunna mottugal* directed by Kalamandalam Ramu and KTS Padannayil. This was in 1957. I was eight at that time. Then followed other roles in *Nilavuam Velichavum*, and *Nakshatra vilakku*. This is how I started acting in Tripunithura. I did a memorable play, *Manalkadu* there,” Balan reminisces. “Though I did not have formal training in acting, I consider K T S Padannayil and Kalamandalam Ramu as my gurus,” he says.

“I came to Mumbai in 1968. I realized that acting was my passion. I found out that there were people in Mumbai who were interested in Malayalam plays and participating in them. I came to know of various Malayalee Samajams that hosted Malayalam dramas. K T G Nair introduced me to the well-known director V Achuthan. It was through the Bombay Kerala Samajam that I started my acting career in Mumbai. My first drama in Mumbai was *Samasya* in 1975”. Since then Balan had joined Kavitha Theatres in Dombivili, Aadham Theatres, Kairali theatres, Pratibha Theatres and others and



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acted in their plays. I learnt a lot about acting from Venu (S P Nair) and E K Namboodiri who owned Pratibha Theatres.

“With Pratibha I got an opportunity to do challenging roles. For instance in *Jwalanam* I play the role of an unemployed youth whose mother is a prostitute and whose father is in jail because he has murdered his wife's lover. I hate my mother and want to kill my employer who dismisses me from my job. However, I have great regard for my father who succeeds in preventing me from committing the murder. This is the story of *Jwalanam*”.

Another play that Balan remembers is *Pavam Usman*. The play written by P Balachander was directed by Madhu Sankaramangalam, a student of National School of Drama. It was staged by Natya Kshetra a newly formed Mumbai Malayalam theatre organization that wanted to stage meaningful theatre performances. Sankaramangalam brought into this play native arts of Kerala like *oppana*, *aravanamuttu* and was thus a trail blazer in the Mumbai Malayalam Theatre scene. Balan recalls that for this play he and the other actors of the 24 cast team had to learn the nuances of acting like graceful stage movements, voice modulation, dialogue mugging and group scene co-ordination.”

“It was two months of rigorous rehearsals. But the play won a lot of critical acclaim and was a pathbreaking one in the Malayalam theatre scene in Mumbai.” Balan says. The play was such a success that Natyakshetra got Sankaramangalam to direct three more plays for them. In all these, Balan acted meaningful roles.

To improve the Malayalam theatre scenario, Vinod Ranganath, assistant to the wellknown theatre personality Satyadev Dubey, conducted a four month theatre workshop.

“It was a wonderful learning experience for the actor in me,” Balan admits. “Though the workshop started with 45



Balan and Mangala in *Vishwaroopam*, Malayalam play

people, at the end of 4 months, only ten people were there who continued till the end of the workshop. "This is the situation in the Malayalam drama scene. Many people in the theatrical field think that drama means just giving a forceful dialogue on the stage and making a dramatic entry into and exit from the stage. However, this is not the truth. The workshop taught me the finer shades of acting, the importance of improvisation, voice modulation, body movements, natural acting and the need to get into the skin of the character one is playing."

He acted in some plays staged by the workshop and directed by Vinod Ranganath. *Avinash*, *Ormagal Unarthhaathe*, *Mumbaide Kaakkagal* are some of them.

Balan has also acted in Hindi and Malayalam films like *Chandni Bar*, *Prehnam*, *Daya*, *Loudspeaker*, *Millenium Stars*, *Tilakkam*, to name a few. He has also acted in Film Division documen-

taries. He has won some honors and awards. His wife Meenakshi is also a drama actress and has acted in Film Division documentaries. They have two daughters, one married and the other doing her graduation.

Balan at present is acting in a couple of Malayalam films, *Christian Brothers*, *Track with Rahman*, and a Tamil/English venture film *Oraayiram Parvai*. He is also acting in a Marathi/Malyalam film venture *Trinetra* and *Trikannu*. Shooting is going on in all these projects.

Apart from acting, Balan co-ordinates with the Malayalam producers, actors and directors when they come to Mumbai in connection with their film productions. He was the co-ordinator for the award winning *Pazhassi Raja* in Mumbai when the unit came for production mixing which was done here.

Speaking on the differences in acting in films and acting on the stage, Balan explains, "In films, we can finish the

work, once the shot is over. However, theatre is live and we have to be aware everytime we enter the stage. I would say that theatre acting helped me in my film acting. Thanks to Venu, E K Namboodiri, Madhu Sankaramangalam and Vinod Ranganath, I learnt how to emote, how to hold emotion, how to improvise from all of them. In theatre, an actor has to over react and dialogue delivery is important. You have to hold the interest of the viewers until the end of the play. Once an actor enters the stage, he must remember that he is the character in the play and not the individual that he is. This gives veracity to the role he is playing and catches the audience attention."

Balan was working with the Times of India newspaper. Now he is with Times Now, their Entertainment division.



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