

Mary Paul

Heroine of Bombay Malayalam Theatre

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Mary Paul was a popular drama actress of Bombay and the audience loved her for her performance. The trophies and awards once filled her drawing room but now many of them were lost. But she vividly remembers the first Nrityasindhu Award presented to her along with V V Achuthan, by K D Chandran's Fine Arts organization Nrityasindhu.

Mary, a chirpy student of Std IX, returning home along with her classmates after the school hours, reminiscing and discussing the events of the day and the day to come, met a neighbor on the way. He asked her to rush home as someone has come there to meet her. Thinking who it could be and why, she rushed

only to see so many pairs of foot wear by one in the living room. There were several voices of serious discussions, laughter coming from upstairs. She could hear the voice of her father too among several other strong voices. She was about to go up when her father came down and asked her to get down downstairs. She wondered if her father brought the boy with him as he had promised to bring him so that both the boy and girl could see each other. Then a young man came and sat on a chair. As Mary was curious to see the boy, she did not pay much attention to him. After a few minutes, that man went away. Mary was disappointed.

After some time all of them came down then her father asked if she did like him. Mary said she did not see him so could not give a definite answer. Then one of the relatives said that the man who sat with her for some time was indeed the 'boy.' Mary threw a glance towards that person and quietly went inside.

Mary's father Anthony was employed in a Bombay textile mill. She spent her childhood in Bombay but as her brother could not adjust with the climate, they were compelled to return to Kerala. Thus Mary, Annamma, Mary and her younger siblings Ammini, Annie and Baby were sent to Kerala. This was a matter of great concern as Anthony had to send money to his family while managing his own affairs in the city. Out of the pittance of salary, Anthony used to send home Rs.500 a month.

Mary and her siblings joined a school at Ollurkara. Vatsala Marar (after marriage, became Vatsala Menon, now a well known character actress in Malayalam films) was a close friend and neighbour.

Anthony was worried about his six children (five girls and a son) and wanted to see them settled before his time. Those days, girls were married off quite early and his social connections helped him in identifying a promising bridegroom for his eldest daughter Mary.



informed his relatives accordingly. He promised his wife Annamma that he would bring the prospective bridegroom so that they could see each other.

Their marriage was fixed then and there and no one sought Mary's opinion. It was to take place within one week. After making the nitty gritty arrangements essential for a wedding, Anthony proceeded to the town to buy the necessary jewellery and bride's wedding clothes. On his return, a single bullock cart hit him on his abdomen and he started bleeding. The doctors expressed their fear that he would not survive. When the close relatives and the bridegroom Varkey Paul suggested that the wedding could be postponed, Anthony insisted that everything should take place as decided earlier. Without seeing his elder daughter married, Anthony passed away. On the seventh day, Mary married Paul but told him that she preferred to stay back with her mother until she completed her education. He as his wont, agreed to it and left for Bombay. He took over the responsibility of looking after

Mary's mother and siblings. As Anthony did, Paul used to send Rs.500 every month. After completing her SSLC, Mary came to Bombay and she was then in the family way.

Even after settling down in Bombay, Paul continued to support Mary's kin. Despite their poor financial conditions, the couple was happy. When she was only sixteen, Mary gave birth to Ammini.

Anthony was a keen arts lover and had acted in a few Malayalam dramas. He had acted in

'Misiha Charithram', the first play in Malayalam with Jesus Christ as its main character. During the Onam celebrations of Bombay Keralaleeya Samajam, one female singer was suddenly unavailable and Anthappan, one of the organisers, approached Paul to get Mary as a replacement. During her school days, Mary was attending classical vocal music lessons along with Vatsala Marar and her training came handy in drawing the appreciation of the audience. Soon she was approached by other Malayalee organizers for singing during their festivities.

Koliwada Malayali Samajam was planning to present a Malayalam drama for their Onam celebrations but their main female artist was forced to withdraw from participation as her son died in an accident. Desperately, they approached Paul seeking Mary's co-operation in carrying their drama forward and Paul consented. It was a tough task. Paul was having second shift and the rehearsals were held far away from their residence in Bhandup. Nanappan, considered the father of Malayalam drama in Bombay, used to send a boy to accompany Mary and her two children to the rehearsal camp and Paul would bring them back after he completed his shift. It was total devotion to the art. Mary with a heavy heart acknowledges that without his support it was impossible to manage the house and looking after the children while attending the rehearsal camps.

Soon Mary's presence in Malayalam theatre was recognized and Samajams and other drama troupes started approaching her for participation. During those days, former Mayor M Madhavan came into contact with Mary through her acting. When he realized that she was the daughter of Anthony, whom he knew well, he took her under his wings. He called her and Paul to his office and asked her if she decided to remain a home maker. During his inquisitive questioning, she revealed that she liked to be a nurse (because of their neat white uniform and their benign persona). Madhavan wrote to the Lokmanya Tilak Hospital



Mary Paul as nurse



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Wedding photo of Mary and Paul

authorities and asked them to take her as an apprentice, train her as a nurse in their nursing school and pay her during her training period. Normally trainee nurses were required to remain in the nurses' hostel attached to the hospital yet the matron allowed her to stay at home sympathetic to her situation as a mother of two daughters.

After training, Mary was appointed in the same hospital and she continued till her

retirement after 30 years. She was very popular as a nurse and every nook and corner of Lokmanya Tilak Hospital in Slon was familiar to her. She worked practically in all departments and earned respect of her superiors, colleagues and patients.

Though Mary was residing in Bombay, her heart was beating for her mother and sibling. Once she started earning her salary, every month without fail, she used to send money to her mother so that they could leave a normal living and take care of the education of the children.

During these days Mary and family found it very difficult to stay in Bhandup and travel long distances to reach the hospital, school, Paul's workplace etc but were somehow managing the routine. Then she learned that Mayor Madhavan had made a deal with the Housing Board for providing three buildings for the nurses working in Municipal hospitals. She and Paul managed to raise some money and went to Madhavan's residence and requested him for a flat for them in one of the buildings. Madhavan expressed his helplessness as the time had run out of submitting the application. Their pleading had no effect on him. Then Mary moved forward and kept the paper packet containing money before him and said, "Whatever you could raise is in this packet. You may c

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whatever you like." They then walked out. When the allotments were declared, Mary was one of the proud owners of a flat in one building in Kanjurmarg. Mary's entire family thereafter stayed there till they sold it to raise money for their son's emigration plans for Canada.

Mary accepted invitations from the stage not because of her untiring love for the theatre but to support her kin. Her mother, on hearing that Mary was acting on stage, disowned her, as a career on stage was not acceptable for girls from a respected family. Her mother feared that Mary's stage appearance would adversely affect the matrimonial prospects of her younger sisters. Those days, artistes were not paid any remuneration for their services but often get some clothes as gift, souvenirs and rarely some cash. Mary said that she never bargained for a stipulated remuneration but slowly a practice was developed that female artistes should be paid something in cash to meet their family needs and also to supplement the men's income. Even after her mother's renouncement, Mary continued to send money to her mother and she was happy that all her sisters were well settled in life.

Mary's entry to the theatre started with 'Pathicha Bharya' (Educated wife) and till she retired from the stage in 1989, she acted in about 70 plays on approximately 350 stages in Bombay and other cities of Maharashtra. Today she does not remember the titles of the plays she participated as she never thought of the need to remember them. According to her, she acted with most of the actors, both male and female, of her time and worked under all prominent directors. She also directed one play, *Manalikkattu*. A few names she mentioned were of P N Nanappan, M Chandran and Anthappan (all three of Films Division), V V Achuthan, Augustine Fernandes, Captain Raju and Vatsala Menon.

About her experiences on stage, she distinctly remembered two incidences. In one play, she had to slap Achuthan and she was just going through the symbolic act and the director asked her why did she not realistically do it. She asked Achuthan if she could do so and he consented. When they were on the stage, at that particular scene, she forcefully slapped him on his cheek and pain was visible on his face. After the scene, Achuthan asked her why did she slap him so forcefully. She said she did so after getting his consent and

both of them laughed.

When Augustine informed her about booking an auditorium for their yet to start rehearsal of 'Katalpalam', she was aghast. Mary was into her sixth month of pregnancy and the drama would be staged after one month. When she told him about her predicament, he was also a little confused but later said that she could wear a bigger traditional Muslim blouse and a long shoulder piece to cover her bulging belly. Luckily nobody noticed the pregnant appearance of the old Muslim woman.

Mary was proud to say that she never used glycerine or any other aid to shed tears on stage.

Her well known plays were *Ummakku* (play based on Uroob's novel of the same title), Ponkunnam Varkey's *Kathirukanakkili*, *Iniyum bhakkiyannu*, *Agniparvatham*, P J Antony's *Manna*, *Raagam*, K T Mohammed's *Katalpalam*, *Sandhyakkoru Sooryodayam*, *Theovalum theombayam*, *Kaakkapponnu*, *Manalikkadu*, *Akkaldama*, *Daivam maricku*, *Yaagasala* and many more.

Mary has four children, Varghese, Sheela, Vatsa and Antony. Varghese is married and settled in Canada. He wanted to take his youngest brother Antony to Canada but somehow that plan did not materialise. When Antony got a job with the Railways, Paul was sick and bedridden. When the son showed his father the letter of appointment, the latter kissed the letter and told his son that it would be his bread and butter and so he should give all his dedication to it. Soon Paul departed to the ether world. Now Mary is staying with Antony and his family, consisting of wife and two daughters.

Of her children, Sheela and Vatsa are settled down with their families in Palarivattam, Ernakulam and in Dubai respectively. Mary is a proud grandmother of 8, five girls and three boys.

When turning back, Mary feels that her life so far has seen many twists and turns, some tragic moments at unexpected moments and some feelings that she could cherish for a long time. "But if that is not life, what it is?" she avers. Every tragic moment has made her stronger and prepared her to face challenges. It was God's grace that she had a wonderful husband and loving children to share the ups and downs of their lives. Her colleagues in the hospital and on the drama stages always extended their hands in support. What more one could expect from life, she asks herself. According to Mary, she never planned her life and accepted all that came her way without remorse and regrets. Mary is content now as she gets her pension, a part of her husband's pension and the social security allowance from the Canadian government. ■



Mary Paul