

THE STARS OF YESTERDAY

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We laughed with them, wept with them, sighed with them, applauded them... and now we'll never forget them. I'm talking about our very own superstars – our beloved *tiatrists* of yesteryear. We flocked to their *tiatrs* and movies. We never tired of playing their gramophone records. And oh! How we loved listening to their songs over the radio! Time was when the *tiatr*, *tiatrists* and Konkani songs were so intimately blended into the flavours of daily living that they became a part of our lives. Not just that... they added the zing to our mundane, middle class, Goan lives.

The *tiatr*, or *teatro* as it was originally called, is a unique form of theatre that sprung from Goa's vibrant bicultural heritage. But interestingly, it is not exactly a home-grown bloom. In fact, the *tiatr* took root not in Portuguese Goa, but in British India – in Bombay, the city of gold, where thousands of Goan immigrants earned their living.

Two elements influenced the germination and blossoming of the *tiatr* in Bombay: Italian opera, and the presence of hundreds of talented Goan musicians, who, thanks to the excellent musical training they received in the Portuguese-run parochial schools in Goa, could coax the sweetest notes out of their violins, saxophones, trumpets, and pianos.

During the British Raj, Italian operas were popular with the elite in many Indian cities. Lucasinho Ribeiro, who worked as a backstage hand in an Italian opera company in Bombay, was impressed by the grandeur of operas. Determined to make a similar form of entertainment available to Goans, he translated one of his company's operas into Konkani. And so, on a balmy Easter Sunday night, on April 17, 1892, the first Konkani *tiatr* "Italian *Bhurgo*" (Italian Lad) written and directed by this spunky twenty-nine year old Goan was staged at Bombay's New Alfred Theatre. To keep the audience entertained while the stage sets and costumes were being changed between scenes, Lucasinho thought of having funny songs performed in front of the curtain, with a rollicking, brass band

in attendance. And that is how the *tiatr* got its unique format.

But the man acknowledged as "Pai Tiatríst" or "Father of Tiatr" is the late Joao Agostinho Fernandes of Margao, a contemporary of Lucasinho's. He wrote the first original *tiatr* script entitled "Belle de Cavel" (Damsel from Cavel) which he staged in Bombay in 1895. In the early years, just as in the case of Western drama, men in drag played the role of women in Konkani *tiatrs*. It was Joao Agostinho's wife, Regina, who created history of sorts in 1904 as the first woman *tiatríst* to step on to the Konkani stage.

The story line of a Goan *tiatr* is episodic and spread across six or seven scenes, each called a *pondho* (curtain) since a curtain that can be rolled up or down provides a painted backdrop for each scene. In between two scenes, the audience gets to enjoy a couple of songs or *cantaram* (solos, duets, trios or quartets) on diverse topics unrelated to the play's story. This sideshow of *cantaram* is the key ingredient in the *tiatr*'s delicious mix of drama, comedy, music and quick-witted improvisation. By the 1930s,



M. Boyer: portrait in black & white by Alex Braganza



hit *cantaram* began to be preserved for posterity within the grooves of gramophone records and Goans found one more new source of entertainment.

Till a few decades ago, *tiatr* directors had to make do with a limited variety of curtain backdrops, maybe just three or four. Therefore, they often had to rely on the audience using their imagination to figure out what the setting was actually meant to be. I remember one *tiatr* in which a scene supposed to be taking place inside a poor man's house had a garden for a backdrop!

The Konkani *tiatr* has always mirrored Goan Catholic society. Interesting themes (usually contemporary issues or social problems) seasoned with political satire, rib-tickling comedy and great music have made the *tiatr* the most popular form of entertainment for the masses. On feast days, Goan Catholics still wake up to the joyful

pealing of church bells, wish each other "Boas Festas" after Mass, gorge on steaming hot *sannam* and *sorpotel* for lunch, and then in the evening, flock to see a *tiatr*.

Thanks to the patronage of working class Goan Christians in India and abroad, the Konkani *tiatr* has survived for over a century. Its golden era spanning the fifties, sixties and early seventies may now be history, but it is firmly entrenched in

the collective memory of Goans who witnessed this glorious period. And as I let my thoughts go winging back to those good old days, I know the nostalgia I feel is only a microcosm of the sentiments shared by thousands of Goans scattered across the globe. I hope my reminiscences will spark some of their own.

I grew up in Mazagaon, and luckily, the three main venues for staging *tiatrs* in Bombay in those days – Victoria Gardens, St. Mary's, and Princess Theatre, Bhangwadi – were all nearby. My earliest memories of watching a *tiatr* go back to the early sixties, to my school days. The play was staged at the spacious open-air theatre at Victoria Gardens. Unfortunately, this venue is no longer available for stage performances and so, the present generation of Goans in Mumbai will never know the excitement of watching a *tiatr* in the

fresh air, beneath a twinkling night sky.

I can see it all so clearly. Mum is rushing around, attending to umpteen things, including prodding us slow coaches to get ready fast, lest we are late for the show. And thanks to her hurrying us, we make it to Victoria Gardens on time. Goenkars in their Sunday best are streaming in non-stop through the main gate, making their way down the path leading to the theatre, and queuing up at the entrance. As we join the queue and await our turn to be ushered inside, my parents hullo a few familiar faces. (We were always bumping into people we knew on occasions like these.) Once inside, I see the auditorium is almost jam-packed.

The show is yet to start. Gusts of wind ruffle the tasselled velvet curtains on the stage. In the background, we can hear the loudspeakers blaring the latest Konkani hits. They're the songs from the recently released movie, *Amchem Noxib*. In the fast fading twilight, I listen to a mellow female voice crooning "*Mogan assonk borem...*" (It's so wonderful to be in love...) with an anglicized accent. I'm clueless about the singer, but think the song sounds like one of those slow romantic numbers my aunt listens to on Radio Ceylon on Sunday mornings. Soon, the gramophone music is turned off and the live orchestra gets into the act with some popular Konkani songs. It's well past show time, but the music still plays on. Dad says, "See! What was the use of all that hurrying and scurrying? I told you we won't be late." Mum decides that silence is golden, keeps her cool and says nothing in reply.

Finally, there's an announcement. The lights in

the auditorium begin to dim, the babble around me dies down, and as the curtains begin to part, the band breaks into a catchy tune. The stage has a painted cloth backdrop depicting a neat row of buildings on what looks like a deserted street. A nattily dressed young man wearing a panama hat and twirling a baton in his right hand makes a flamboyant entry. He begins singing in Konkani, and then switches to English for the last few verses. Having completed his song, he doffs his hat with a flourish and makes his exit to thunderous applause from an appreciative audience.

The performer with the golden voice and crystal clear diction was the late Alfred Rose who had the honour of singing the opening song for many a *tiatr* in his heyday. His songs were always thought-provoking theme based and set to foot-tapping music. My personal favourites were "*Rochnar Dev Nidonk Na*" and "*Sui, Suz, Kator*". Alfred Rose's many duets with Hindu themes, sung with Antonette and Shalini, had lilting music and were thoroughly enjoyable. This illustrious son of Aldona had the distinction of having composed and sung thousands of songs in Konkani and English. His song "A Date with Daisy" is the first song in English to be recorded on disc by a *tiatr*ist. Alfred Rose passed away in 2003 at the age of seventy-one.

Coming back to *Amchem Noxib*, the music was composed by the incredibly talented Frank Fernand and the playback singer mentioned earlier was Molly. The movie featured a new heroine, Rita Lobo, and well-known *tiatr*ists like C. Alvares, Kid Boxer, Antonette and the inimitable Anthony Mendes in stellar roles.

Born at Margao in 1920, Anthony Mendes was a gifted comedian who could make audiences laugh uncontrollably without uttering a single word. I remember how he used to yank his pants up to his armpits and almost disappear into them to the delight of the crowd who revelled in his zany antics. Whenever he sang on stage, non-stop whistling from the crowd would compel him to come back for several encores.

Those who have grown up in the post Anthony Mendes era have only to see *Amchem Noxib* for glimpses of his comic genius. The scene with the forgetful patient who drives him nuts is too hilarious to need description. His evergreen hit duet with Antonette – “*Bencdaita Pai*”, is beautifully enacted, and is a delectable blend of comedy and romance.

A big reason for the popularity of Anthony Mendes's songs was that the lyrics were so witty. The lyrics of “*Taxi-Driver*” still make me chuckle. Like these lines:

Taxi choloitanam fattlean kitem tum choitoloi,

Eka mekak gopant dhorun alloi-dolloi

Tea amchea fuddlea arxeant cinema kitem poitoloi...

(Watching lovers in the backseat through the rear-view mirror is like watching a movie ...). And then, feeling guilty for being a Peeping Tom, he ends with the line “*Saiba maka kierpa di..... haum poitam mhunn tancam gomoi!*” (Dear Lord, please let them know I'm watching!)

Another brilliant composition is the song “*Dadlo*”, an ode to the macho male and his remarkable ‘strength’. Anthony Mendes begins with the line “*Dadlea, dadlea, dadlea, dadlea, kito ghott tum vortotai*” (O man, how great

is your strength), continues with creatively conceived plaudits like “*Dantanim batleancheo guddeo kaddtai*” (You can even remove the crown caps of soft drink bottles with your bare teeth), but ends sardonically with “*Piann bailank poitoch pochok zatai!*” (But the mere sight of ladies makes you go weak in the knees!) When this wonderful actor died in 1964, he was only forty-three.

M. Boyer, now retired due to old age and ill-health, was born in 1930 at Ponda as Manuel Santan Aguiar. He was another *tiatrist* who could make us laugh till our stomachs hurt. I remember this *tiatr* in which he played the role of a *tavvoti*. In one scene, Boyer appears on stage with a chef's hat on his head and an oversized loaf of bread tucked under one arm. The crew is signing off and when the captain shakes hands with Boyer he says, in English, “We must keep up our friendship.” Pumping his captain's hand energetically, a beaming Boyer replies, in pidgin *tavvoti* English, “Yes, yes, you ship, me ship, our friendship...” The rest of the play's dialogue peppered with more of such goofy replies by Boyer had people almost falling off their seats and rolling in the aisles with laughter.

Then in another show, he sang a solo number to the tune of “Lara's Theme” from the movie “*Dr. Zhivago*”. The song was a satire on escalating prices and the crowd really loved it. I have this knack of recalling bits and snatches of songs I hear at stage shows. So each time my Dad extolled Boyer's performance even in later years, on his insistence, I've regaled I don't remember how many people with this verse I remembered from

his song. It went like this (remember the tune is that of Lara's Theme):

Baazrant voichac, sokannim vetai utton;

Punn gheun yetai torkari, Because 6 Rs Kilo motton!

(You wake up in the morning and go to the market; but you return with only vegetables, because mutton is too expensive at 6 Rs a Kilo!) So now you know. In the 1960s, mutton was selling at the princely rate of Rs 6 a Kilo. And there's one more thing. Whenever I remember the way Boyer intoned the word "motton", it really freaks me out even today.

The crowds could never have enough of Boyer. They always forced several encores on him each time he sang on stage. And anticipating this, the smart guy always had two or three extra verses up his sleeve. The surprise, extra servings of entertainment would cause an overflow of adrenaline and inevitably bring the house down.

The late Jacint Vaz was yet another brilliant comedian. Born in 1918 at Mandur, Ilhas, he was a natural, a sort of lovable tramp, in the Charlie Chaplin mould. People only had to take one look at him and they would laugh their heads off. His outstanding performance in the hit movie "Nirmonn" bears out his appeal as a comedian. For Jacint Vaz, comedy was serious business. He used scathing humour to make a point and to take digs even at the government. The veteran made his exit from the stage of life after delighting audiences for over five decades.

One *tiatr* I remember had two veterans pitted against each other – Souza Ferrao and Anthony D'Sa.

Souza Ferrao played the aged god-father of Anthony D'Sa. Having moved up in life, Anthony D'Sa is now ashamed of his poor parents and other relatives. At a party he throws for his rich friends, and to which he has reluctantly invited his folks, he insists they call him Mike like his new friends do. His mortified parents don't have the nerve to protest. But an outraged Souza Ferrao gives the arrogant snob a piece of his mind. He roars, "Mike? What Mike? You mean standing mike? Or dangling mike? Your parents gave you my name, a beautiful name, Minguel. And you want us to call you... (he almost spits this out) Mike?" I remember how every strategic pause in this dialogue drew wild applause from the audience. And throughout the *tiatr*, Souza Ferrao was in his element entertaining the packed house with similar repartees.

August Remedios Souza Ferrao was born in the village of Ambora in 1909. An accomplished singer and actor, he could play any role convincingly – a crabby old man, a priest, a Kunbi, or even an old spinster! His trademark gravelly voice and shuffling gait never failed to draw a favourable response from spectators. When this grand old man of Konkani *tiatr* passed away, the Goan stage lost one of its most versatile actors.

Like Souza Ferrao, there were others too who were well accepted by audiences in female roles even after women *tiatrists* began to grace the Konkani stage. Andrew, Star of *Arossim*, Rennie, and before them, Marekin, played memorable roles as women. Early in his career, Rennie, all decked up in a wedding gown, played the part of a bride with a dashing young C.

Alvares as a heart-broken sailor in a poignant duet composed by the latter – “*Tarvar Vetam*” (considered by many to be one of the best).

Think ‘evergreen hero’ and one spontaneously recalls the multi-talented *tiatr*ist from Saligao – Celestine Alvares, or C. Alvares, as he was popularly called. Actor, playwright, director, singer, songwriter – he wore several hats and distinguished himself in everything he did during his long career. He penned the lyrics for some of the hit songs from *Amchem Noxab*, including *Molbailo dov*. Besides *Amchem Noxab*, this handsome, light-eyed hero played the lead role in several other Konkani movies such as *Nirmonn*, *Mojhi Ghorcam* and *Bhairantlo Munis*. Along with Anthony D’Sa, both C. Alvares and his leading lady, Shalini (what a moving rendition of the lullaby “*Dol mojhea bai*”), won accolades for their sterling performances in *Nirmonn*. C. Alvares passed away in Mumbai in 1999.

C. Alvares was also instrumental in bringing abundant female talent to the Konkani stage. Mohana, Ophelia, Shalini, and Betty were some of the women *tiatr*ists introduced by him. Antonette was mainly paired with Anthony Mendes, M. Boyer and Alfred Rose; but Mohana and Ophelia mostly had C. Alvares as their hero.

I had the privilege of seeing Mohana Cabral and her younger sister Ophelia from very close quarters on several occasions as a child. The two of them would often visit a friend of theirs, Vincentine Cardozo, who lived in my Granny’s building. As they click-clacked their way on high heeled sandals up three flights of

stairs, everyone, young and old, would stop and stare at these gorgeous women in their tightly draped chiffon sarees with a glittering brooch securing the *palloo* at the hip and ‘film star’ written all over them.

Down the years, numerous *tiatr*ists have dazzled audiences with their talents. The great J.P. Souzalin, Minguel Rod, Cecilia, Philomena, Carmen Rose, Rita Rose, Jessie, Cyriaco, Seby, A. M. B. Rose, Valente, and Prem Kumar are just a few of the long line up of luminaries who have left their mark on Konkani theatre.

Finally, this tribute to our all time greats won’t be complete without acknowledging the contributions of the golden trumpeter – the late Chris Perry, and his protégé – the one and only Lorna. While Chris Perry shattered the traditional mould and created a heady cocktail by spiking Goan music with a dash of jazz, Lorna enchanted Goans all over the world with her amazing voice. Together they created magic on the Konkani stage and gave us timeless hits that will enthrall Goans forever. Their break up in the early 1970s brought the curtain down on a golden era in the history of Konkani theatre.

Is there a future for the *tiatr*? Will there be another golden age in the near future? Or is it going to be a case of “*Te poder mele, te paon gele*” (Those bakers have passed away; we won’t see that kind of bread anymore)? I don’t know. But of one thing I’m sure. Like me, many of my fellow Goans have their own collection of virtual ‘Kodak moments’ of *tiatr*ists of yore etched in their minds. By sharing these stories of our old-timers with

Goa's generation next, we could inspire aspiring *tiatrists* among them and give them a vision for the future.

But primarily, the government of Goa should take concrete steps to compile and preserve those memories of our *tiatrists* that have already been captured on film and soundtracks, and in print. We owe it to future generations to safeguard this component of our cultural

heritage.

And now, as I reminisce about what was, I'm grateful for the memories. I'm grateful for the worthy sons and daughters of Goa who have kept her language, spirit and cultural tradition alive. Many of them are no more. But they will live on in Goan hearts, to be remembered with pride and cherished forever.



Lorna and Sonia: portrait in black & white by Alex Braganza