

STYLE IN THE THEATRE

Notes on ANDHA YUG and KING LEAR

E. Alkazi

Both *Andha Yug* and *King Lear* are grandiose plays. The problem confronting the producer and stage designer is of how to project their epic sweep and power without resorting to bombast.

There is a falacious belief that a "big" play needs to be done in a big way. That only by sheer weight of numbers of the cast, and by sheer bulk and variety of settings can plays of this type be given a full-blooded interpretation. How erroneous such a belief is can be gauged from the Hollywood epic, with its ever-increasing demands of panoramic screens, enormous casts and lavish colour and spectacle. Production is judged by the amount of money spent rather than by its validity as a work of cinematic art. What is immediately apparent in such "epics" is a lack of cinematic style. The full weight and substance of ideas of universal significance, depicted through the actions of almost super-human characters can be sustained only through the creation of a specific *style*. The same applies more pertinently in the theatre.

The characters of the *Mahabharata* are supposedly familiar to every Indian since his early childhood. He visualises these characters, however in the manner in which he has seen them depicted in children's story-books. These in turn have been inspired by the tawdry *nataks* and professional companies. One cannot be certain what the original source of this inspiration was. The famous Ravi Varma has been to some extent responsible for the vapid, sentimental, melodramatic interpretation of scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in a tasteless Victorian manner which surely has nothing to do with the great periods of Indian art. One has only to compare the *Mahabharata* frieze in the Kailash

temple, Ellora, with Ravi Varma's anaemic pseudo-academic interpretations to see what one means.

The Problem

The problem in *Andha Yug*, therefore, was essentially, how to restore the masculinity, the dignity, the direct quality, physical energy and the monumental stature of characters such as Dhritarashtra, Ashwathama, Duryodhana, Sanjay, Yiyutsu, Gandhari. The only way to do so was to go directly to the characters themselves, firmly rejecting the tinsel interpretation they have suffered in art and theatre; by summoning them up anew out of our knowledge of human emotions and out of our own experience of life. Only then could we begin to see these characters as archetypes, and not merely models of clay venerated in empty platitudes.

The Site

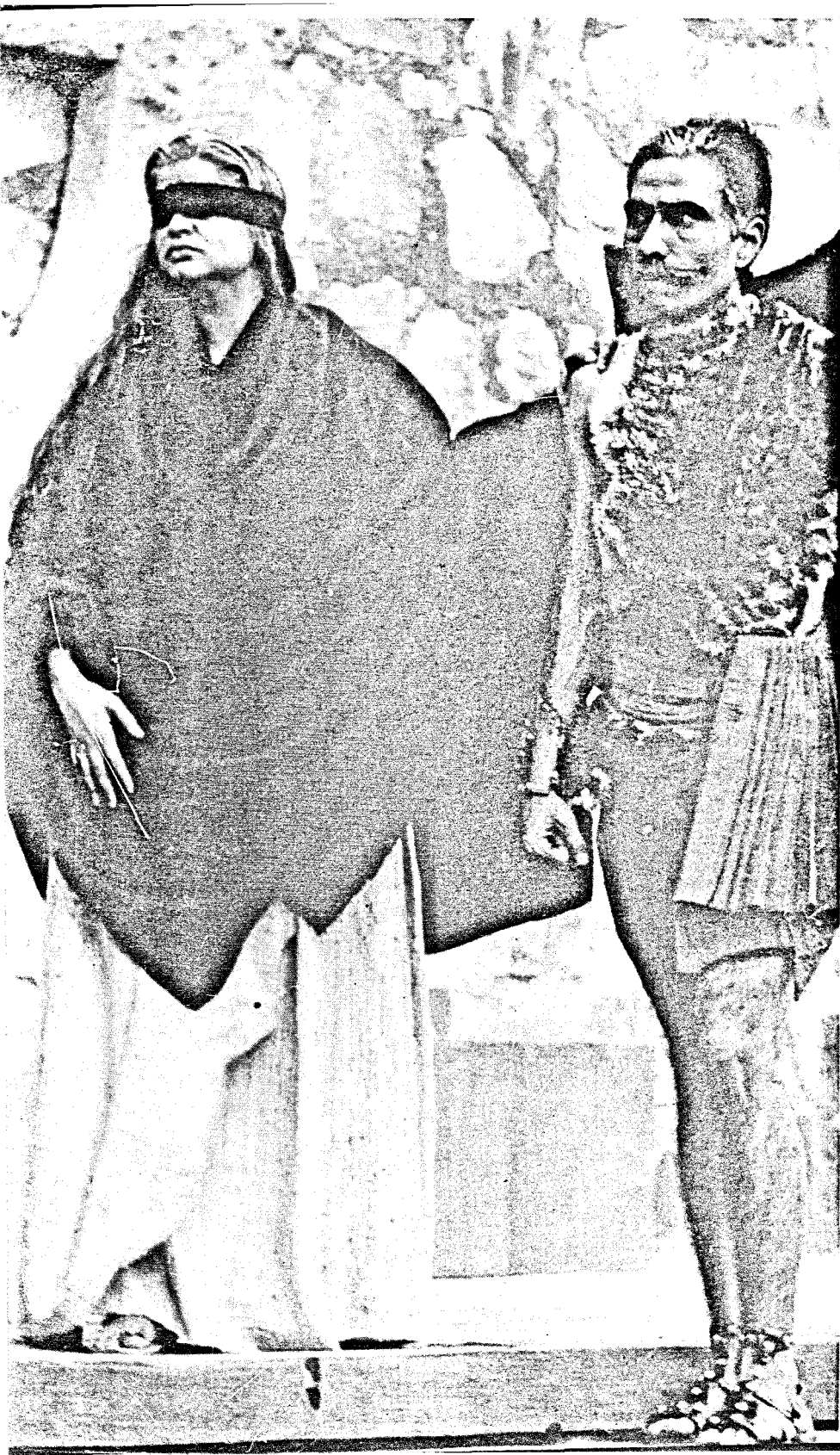
I was very careful in choosing a site such as Ferozeshah Kotla. Its towering massive rough-hewn walls — pitted, scarred and broken — exude a brooding, somewhat oppressive atmosphere, which was just right for the play. There is a quality which the elements, the sun, the wind, the rain, add to trees and stones over a long period of time giving them a living character which can never be artificially achieved within a theatre. The very authenticity of such a background forces the actor to confront himself and to act with honesty and sincerity, with a total lack of artificiality in performance as well as in costume and make-up.

Finally to see events portrayed in this manner in the open air against the vast sky with its moving clouds, gives a sense of the remorseless and inevitable passage of time, of human action as an infinitesimal part of the limitless sky and the inexorable cycle of nature. The cries of birds in the night, the distant barking of dogs, the rustling of trees, the gentle caress of the night-breeze as one is enthralled in the spectacle before one, imbue the experience with authenticity.

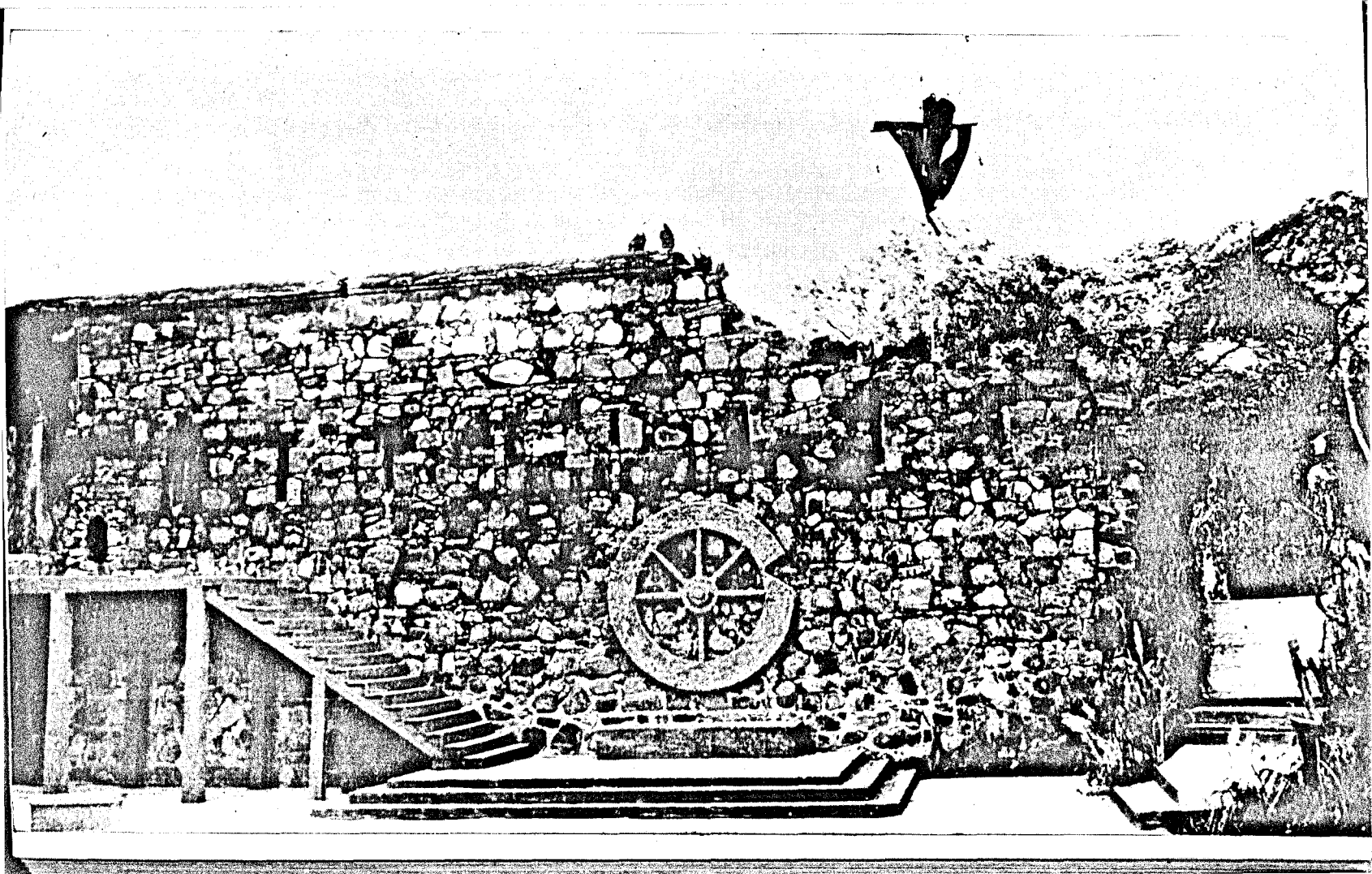
A Matter of Scale

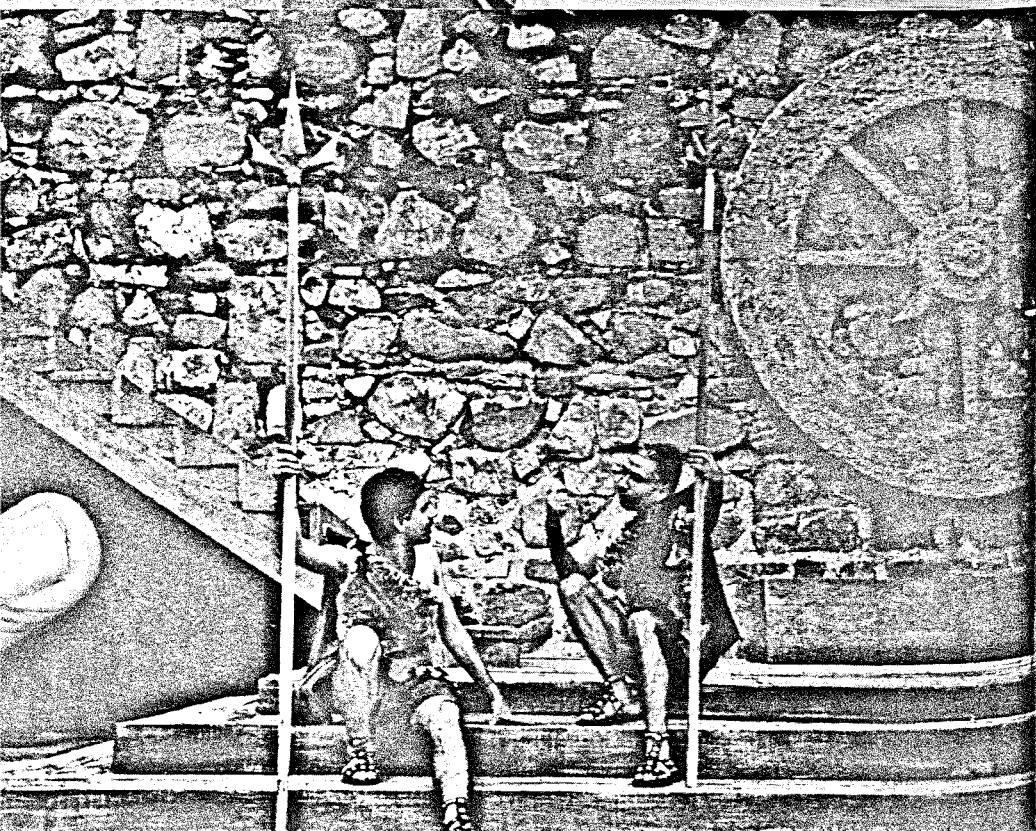
In the performance itself everything becomes a matter of scale: the scale of the human figures; the scale of the 10 ft. wheel in relation to the great flight of steps, to that of the rearing walls behind; the

Photographs : P. 35 Meena Pethe as Gandhari and S. Sidhu as the Guard, *Andha Yug* P. 36 1. The Curse of Gandhari 2. Harjeet as Dhritarashtra, *Andha Yug*. P. 37 Open-air set Ferozeshah Kotla, Delhi, *Andha Yug* P. 38 1. Mohan Maharishi as Sanjay, *Andha Yug* 2. The Guards, S. Sidhu, O. P. Kohli

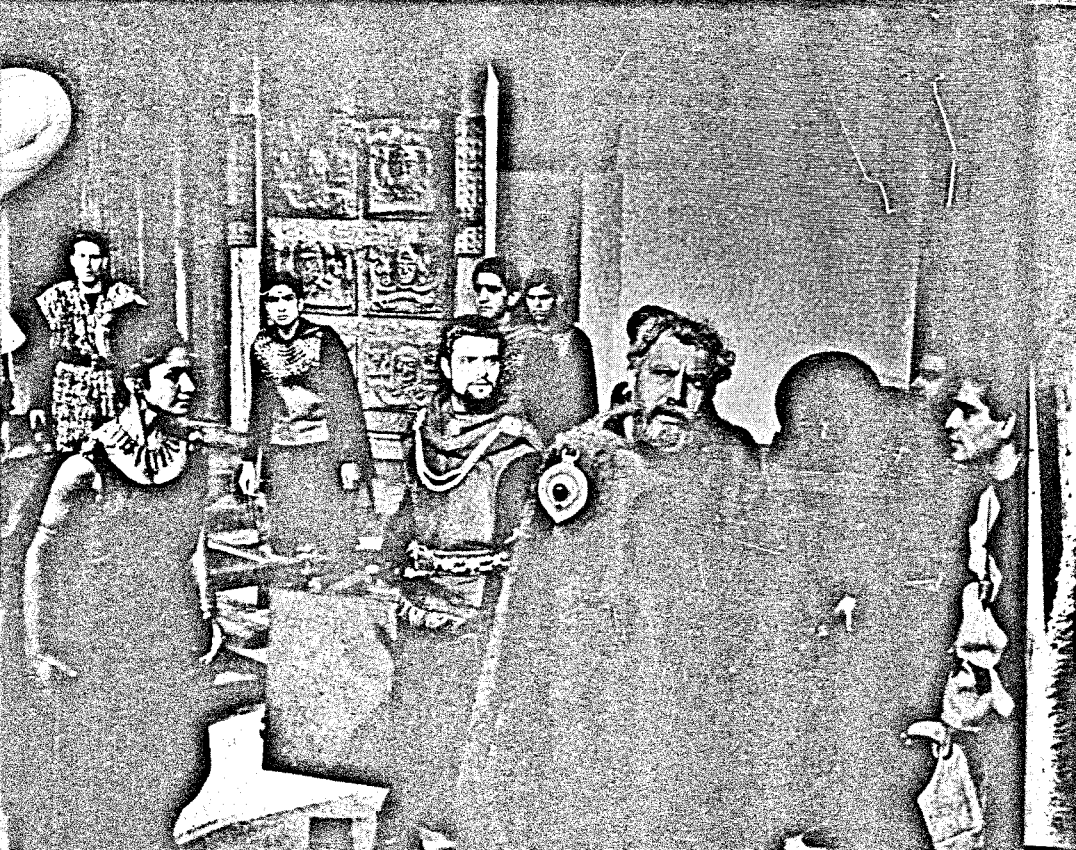
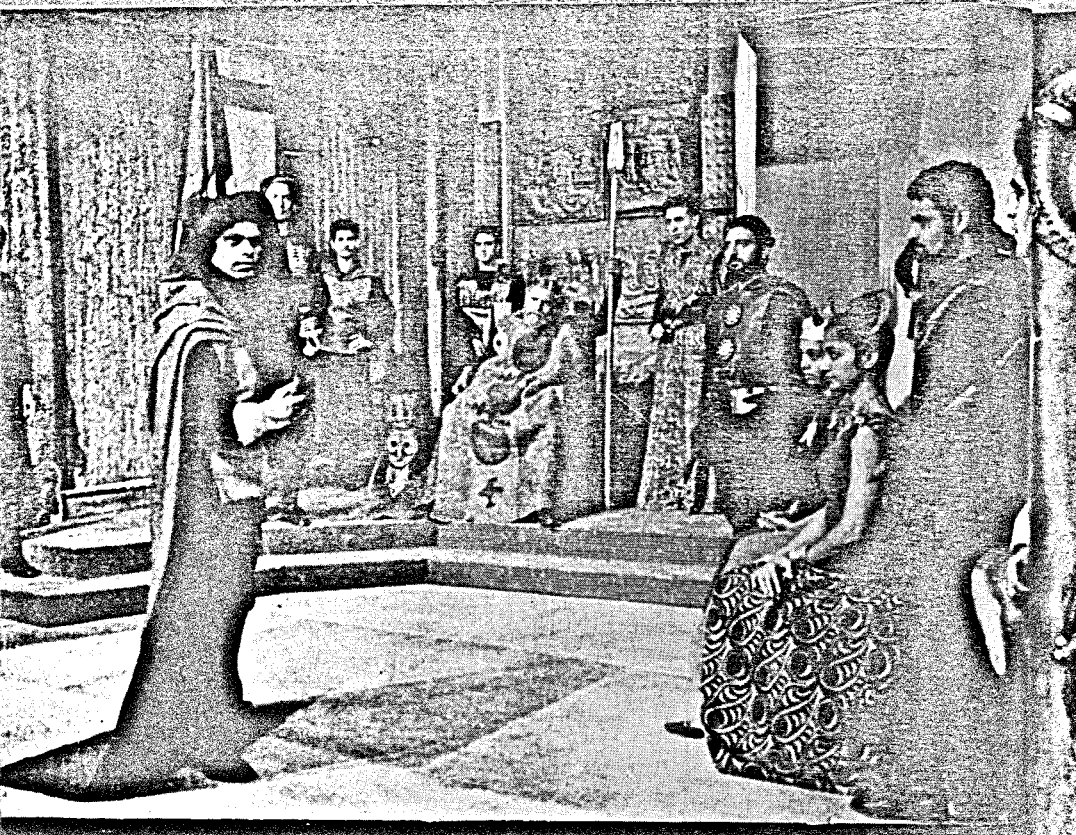


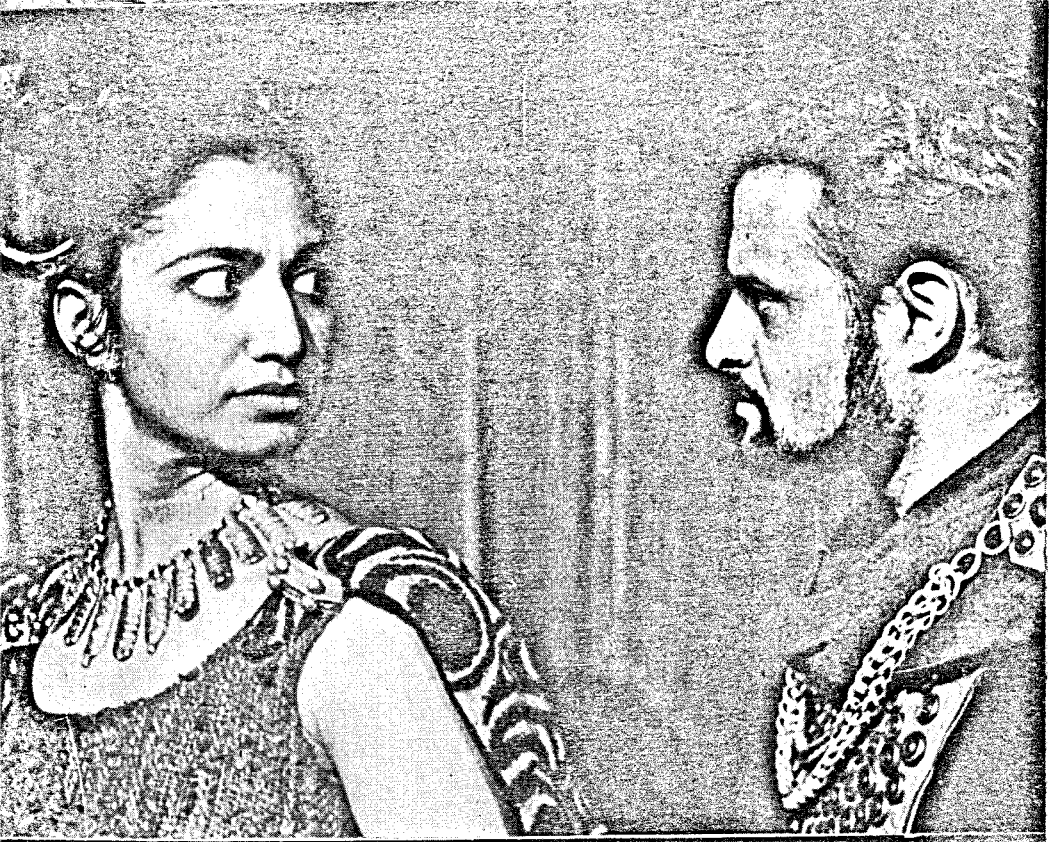


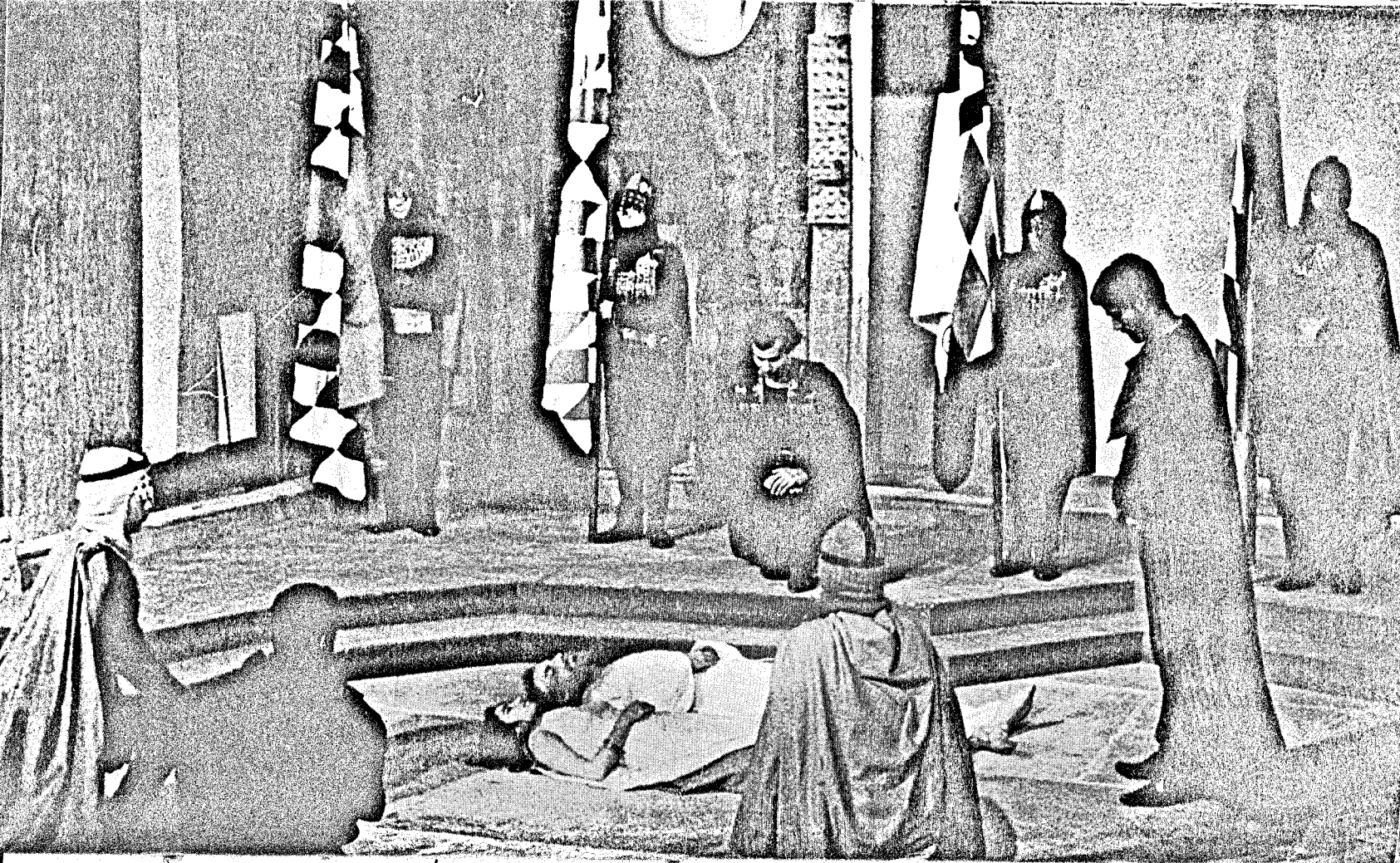












scale of the actor's gesture in relation to all these; the scale of the human voice (undistorted by microphones) in relation to the characters they are depicting and the open space in which the words must be spoken and yet remain expressive.

I used torches frequently for the night scenes, not only because they were historically accurate but because of their dramatic impact; the naked flame lights up fitfully the charged scene.

Actors' Aids

For the actors I required to help them to visualise themselves as archetypes ; to help them think big, to match the dignity and loneliness of the characters working inevitably towards a fateful destiny. I referred them to classical Indian sculpture and to Biblical characters and incidents. These two sources of inspiration worked in separate ways : from the sculpted grace and serenity of classical Indian and Buddhist sculpture, they could glean a sense of style, of repose beyond the frailty of human action. From the more realistic Western art—such as Rembrandt for Gandhari and Dhritarashtra and the violence in the Etchings of War by Goya and the battle-scenes of Delacroix for Ashwathama — they could learn to appreciate the sweep and power of monumental movement.

For music I discarded the classical because the *alāp* was too refined and sophisticated, instead we chose primitive-sounding folk and tribal chants for their feel of 'hordes', of the raucous, hard-pressed cries of human beings at the end of their tether.

Leitmotif

In *Lear* the problem was one of compression. Of how to retain the play's dimensions within the small intimate School theatre. One set had to serve for many scenes. It had to be spare, strong, barbaric and express a contained, potentially explosive force.

I chose barbaric European sculpture in bas-relief for the revolving panel-door, with a single massive mask on the reverse. Rusted corrugated-iron sheeting and big weather-worn beams lent a feeling of age and use. Furniture was limited to stools, a single table.

From the sculpts obtained both the mood and style of the entire production : the movement, costumes, make-up, music. The costumes

Photographs : P. 39. Cover for Brochure, *King Lear* P. 40 1. Burgundy, (B. P. Sinha) at the Court of Lear 2. Goneril's Court. P. 41. 1. Narindar Tiwana as Goneril and Arun Joglekar as Duke of Albany 2. Om Shivpuri as Lear and Harjeet as Gloucester. P. 42. Death of Lear

caught at earth-colours, strong, bold patterns and crude designs. Materials were chosen for their heavy fall and coarse texture; the jewellery — chains medallions and the horned head-dresses of the sisters—had a savage feel.

For the actors the task was formidable. They were playing Shakespeare straight in an adequate Urdu translation not an adaptation for the first time. They came to the play without the background of having seen any other production — there was no tradition to either follow, or pit themselves against, although they read and studied these on paper and we also mounted an exhibition to help them visually.

Speech and Movement

The problem was to project 'real' people through speech that was unsentimental yet poetic and movements and gestures that were wide, virile, bold and often directly against their own natural "Indianness". Their clothes, close-fitting tights with well-strapped boots and heavy mantles or cloaks, gave weight and a taut held-in bearing and encouraged wide, strong movement.

Each character had to be worked out in terms of the complicated tangle of relationships: parent-child; husband-wife; brothers and sisters as rivals in love, as enemies at war, as fellow-conspirators; bonds of all types, of crossed loyalties.

Emotional Patterns

Each emotional pattern had to be carefully sustained and nurtured to its culminating explosive end — love, hate, envy, jealousy, lust and fear — to the final edges of lunacy. And all this had to be contained in spaces; in the vast feel of the landscape, the sky, the moon, the sea, the battle-field; and in the spaces within — the inscape of loneliness, of sudden isolating sorrows, of agony leading to madness, of the human creature bound on a wheel of fire.

To give this feeling of space — of the physical space of the elements, as well as the inscape of the inner crisis — the music required was difficult to choose. It had to be in continuity to hold the play together, yet widely varying in mood and tempo. Finally we decided on modern electronic music. It achieved a remarkable effect and was both a unifying and defining factor. It contributed richly to the style of the production.

Finally with *Lear*, it was interesting to note how the production stood the test of transition to a larger theatre for two shows. In the Fine Arts Theatre, with its much larger stage and auditorium the spatial elements and visual effects came into their own. The actors, too,

could gauge their place within these spatial elements more correctly. The lighting was without tricks or effects, it arose and worked from the strict requirements of the play. Yet, distance and space added to some telling moments that mysterious yet profoundly-felt meaning that is the essence of the theatrical experience.

E. Alkazi, Director of the National School of Drama and Asian Theatre Institute, is an associate of the Drama Board of Great Britain. Founder of the Theatre Unit School of Dramatic Arts in Bombay, he edited its Bulletin, one of the pioneer journals in the field of drama in the country. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi's Award as Best Producer, in 1962. He broadcasts, writes and lectures on theatre and art. He is known for his work in scenic design, and several of his stage-sets have been featured in "Stage Design Throughout the World since 1950.