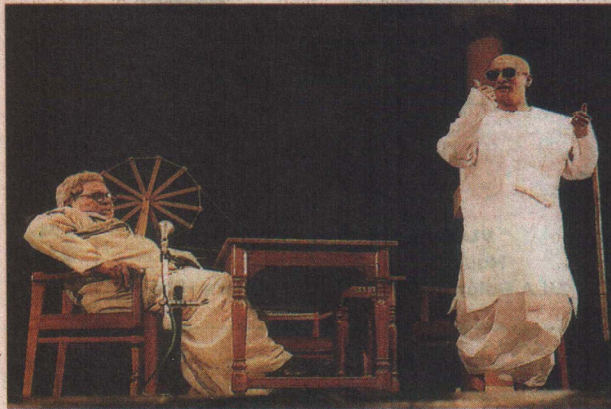


Last hurrah



Deft handling by director Nagabhushana Sarma made it interesting.

The golden jubilee performance of 'Prajayanayakudu Prakasam' was probably the last but that did not deter the cast and crew from giving a spirited performance.



Prakasam (Chatla Sriramulu) in a heated argument with Rajaji (Mutnuri Kameswara Rao).

THE DIRECTOR set the tone with his appeal to the noisy students from government junior colleges to be calm and attentive, for what was coming up was a play on Tanguturi Prakasam, the greatest personality Andhra Pradesh has produced in the modern era...

There were also a bevy of senior bureaucrats - Kanda Mohan (Chief Secretary), P.V.R.K. Prasad (Director, Marri Chenna Reddy Institute of Human Resource Development) and theatre people of all hues and ages in strength.

The Chief Secretary had to leave, and so the play - otherwise a continuous run of two and a half hours - was interrupted for the mandatory ritual of garlanding and speeches. Luckily, it was brief. The golden jubilee show of the play was probably its last. The

logistics and cost of a cast of 50 and 15 backstage people, had proven to be too much of a burden on the ten-year-old theatre organisation, Rasaranjani.

Apart from good theatre, Rasaranjani has fiercely stuck to the principle that the audience must pay for their tickets. But they have already lost Rs 2 lakh on the play. And the principal forces in and behind the production like Prof. Sarma, Garimella Ramamurthy, Chatla Sriramulu, Burra Subrahmanya Sastry, and JV Somayajulu are all past 70. For this event, though, they were all charged up and turned out an inspired show.

For Prof. Nagabhushana Sarma, author and director, it was a labour of love. Deftly avoiding the trap of docu-drama, Dr. Sarma has been able to create a kind of epic play - a series of 15 episodes



The play had its share of rough edges too.



Young Prakasam (in Abhimanyu's costume) with his mother and brother Sriramulu.

laced with fine narrative commentary, and slides to denote the place and date. Five years of extensive research into the life and times of Prakasam preceded the writing of the play. Originally the play had 32 episodes, which were pared to 15 in the final version.

"For me it is an expression of Andhra glory, and a tribute and payment of gratitude to the bold, uncompromising personality of Prakasam and his kind of idealist politics," says Dr. Sarma. "In another sense, the play is an exploration of the puzzling but sad reality that we Andhrates have not been able to rise to a nationally or internationally recognised position of leadership or unquestionable achievement. I think the reasons for this monumental failure of potential can be seen at work in the political career of Prakasam."

What is most interesting is

the able mixing of a populist, emotional appeal to Andhra patriotism with stark dramatisation of historical personalities and events stretching from Prakasam's childhood days in Ongole in the 1880s to his death in Hyderabad in 1957. The decades he spent in Rajahmundry and Chennai receive the longest treatment. From tear jerking family melodrama to passionate political discussions, the play evokes the socio-cultural and political history of pre-independent Andhra with great fidelity.

Prakasam's celebrated clashes with titans like Rajaji, Patlabhi and even Gandhiji, political manoeuvrings and betrayals, and panoramic events like the agitation against the Simon Commission, Salt Satyagraha, the formation and collapse of Congress governments in the composite Madras state, the

painful and failed tussle to keep Madras with Andhra state - the play is packed with all of them.

The manner in which contemporary theatre environment has been woven into the play is most admirable. Prakasam was a talented and passionate actor and later as his legal practice flourished, a patron of theatre too. The eminent playwright Chilakamarti Lakshminarasimham was a close friend of his. Verses and references from famous plays in the background feature in many episodes.

Chatla Sriramulu as the elderly Prakasam - hurt by the treachery, pettiness and rank partisanship of close friends and leaders whom he admired, yet resolute and tough - gave a sterling performance despite severe arthritis of the knees. "I don't know if I will be able to do this role again," he commented as friends, fans and students congratulated him. Another vintage performance came from Burra Subrahmanya Sastry in the role of Prakasam's mother.

It would be difficult for any actor (or actress) to better him. M. Anjaneyulu (as Konda Venkatappaiah), Surabhi Syamala (as Tanguturi Suryakumari), Goparaju Ramana (as Pattabhi), M. Kameswara Rao (Rajaji), S. Mohan (leader of the protesters) and Surabhi Pratima (as child Prakasam) were outstanding. The care taken in keeping the acting style restrained and well modulated was apparent in almost every actor's performance.

The play had its share of rough edges and slips. In particular, the choreography of the clashes between the police and the strikers could have been exquisitely stylised. Conscious as Prof. Sarma is of it, you cannot attribute such failures to the same faulty trait in the Telugu character. One would rather attribute it to the blindness of the powers that be.

For its sheer message, it is a play that ought to be shown in every college and town and mandal in the state. Somebody should have thought of commissioning the group for a hundred or two hundred or more shows. With that kind of support, and something to pay the actors, the troupe could have easily raised the play to the level of a classic. Speak of Telugu pride!

• SUMANASPATI