



Prof. Modali Nagabhushan Sarma

Burra Suryaprakash

Prof. Modali Nagabhushan Sarma is a person I greatly admire, and a person who has a great deal to be admired for. It is therefore, with the greatest pleasure that I agreed to share some of my experiences with him in this compilation that is being put together on the occasion of the AjoVibho Foundation deciding to facilitate Prof. MNS. In fact I am grateful to them for having given me this opportunity.

Prof. Nagabhushan Sarma is a multi faceted individual who has the rare distinction of excelling in each of his special interests. He is a near authority today on Telugu theatre and drama, Dance in general with a special focus on Kuchipudi, Telugu novels and short stories, History and tradition of a range of performing arts from the telugu speaking world, be it YakshaGana. Surabhi Theatre, early gramophone records, the Telugu Cinema from its very nascent days, if not its very inception, and many others if this list is not sufficientlyexhaustive in itself. I propose, however, to remind his many admirers of a relatively lesser known facet of his many attainments—namely his involvement with English Literature, especially its theatre. It should not be lost track of that Prof. Sarma started his academic career in the Department of English Language and Literature and that in fact worked for and obtained a PhD from a very prestigious university in the U.S. It was only thereafter, when he could not withstand the lure of Theatre and of Drama that he branched out full time into the domain of the Performing Arts and of Theatre.

My association with Prof. Sarma began when I joined the Dramatic Circle Hyderabad or DCH in the early 70's. By then he was already associated with this group, with whom he later went on to become it's Secretary and conscious keeper. Prof. Sarma brought with himself a rare combination of an academic, an author of dramas, a theatre personality and a director of plays; and he was an acclaimed authority in each of these areas.

For the DCH he directed four plays and he was associated with a fifth as Associate Director. Three of these plays were Indian plays in translation—Girish Karnad'sHayavadana and Tughlaq and Sudraka'sMricchakatika. On each of these



productions he left his impressive imprint, but if one were to choose one from among these three, it would have to be Mricchakatika. The tasteful inclusion of music and dance and mime and the successful adaptation of a centuries old Sanskrit classic into a meaningful experience for a contemporary audience was no mean achievement. On a more personal aside, this production is for me that one in which my daughter made her first brief entrance onto stage pulling the little clay cart. As the play was being rehearsed in my house, she would be woken up each night for her to make her entrance at the appropriate time!

As another aside, almost a decade after the performance, one of the actors who played the Sutradhara in this production, which played for exactly two evenings, was recognised and accosted by a Railway inspector while on a journey from Hyderabad to Vijayawada, who excitedly recounted by impressed he was with that evenings production. That that evening's performance left such a lasting impression on its audience is, I think, the ultimate accolade of which any theatre director can feel a sense of well-earned pride.

Prof. Sarma was always fascinated by period plays and he often chose to deal with large cast, grand productions. One such play which he directed for DCH was Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*. After examining many possible venues, we chose to use the amphitheatre at the Hyderabad Public School. This was a venue that provided ample scope for presenting this period play in an appropriate setting. When we were all gathered for the first time, there on the stage with the seating in the amphitheatre reaching upwards on all sides before us, Prof. Sarma paused for a moment and quickly came up with what was a real master stroke. He turned the theatre 180° around its axis and said the play will be performed on the hillock facing the stage. He then said the audience would be seated on the stage facing the hillock. The play was so performed on this hillock and on the steps on which the chairs were usually placed. This move added much to the atmosphere of the production and indeed this unusual performing area for the play – one hesitates to call it a mere stage – turned out to itself be a performer if not the hero itself of the production. This is the great theatrical sensitivity, strength, skill, and the supreme confidence in himself that Prof. Sarma brings to his productions.

One more unusual twist to this production of *Tughlaq*. We rehearsed for many days at the venue, but only during daytime. On the day of the dress rehearsal when



we gathered in the evening, around dusk, the company was hit by a strong, unpleasant smell of putrefying chemical waste wafting over us. Needless to add, that the actors were fighting this malodour with handkerchiefs to their nostrils, wondering, or if, the audience would sit through the production with this powerful stink. Seeing all this, Prof. Sarma came up with another masterstroke of his. He said, on the evening of the production, a bevy of girls all decked in *ghararas* ' would stand at the entrance and welcome each member of the audience with a dab of *ittar*. This added to creating a period atmosphere even before the audience reached their seats and came up for much positive mention. From the stage, the actors saw, hands moving to the nostrils of the audience at periodic intervals, in a graceful gesture which echoed the period of the play. For my part, I wore a false moustache playing the part of Ratan Singh a bit actor in the play, and dabbed a liberal dose of the *ittar* on these whiskers. I thought this was a mini masterstroke on my part.

Not to be typecast as a Director of Indian plays in translation for DCH, Professor Sarma directed Durrenmatt's *The Visit*. With its set on two levels of the small and ill-equipped Indira Priyadarshini Auditorium in Hyderabad's Public Gardens, this large cast production was able to hold its own against the raucous rumble of passing locomotives. It stands out as an example of what can be achieved by a great script, a truly imaginative director and a competent cast and crew, without needing to resort to or rely upon complicated and sophisticated technological inputs. Align with Alan Moller, Professor Sarma also worked on an Indianised version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, for which he was associate director. The two of them independently handled separate segments of the play, with Alan taking overall responsibility of integrating these segments.

All this happened more than 35 years ago and brought me into Prof. Sarma's circle of friends & admirers, and to proximity to him that I greatly value.

