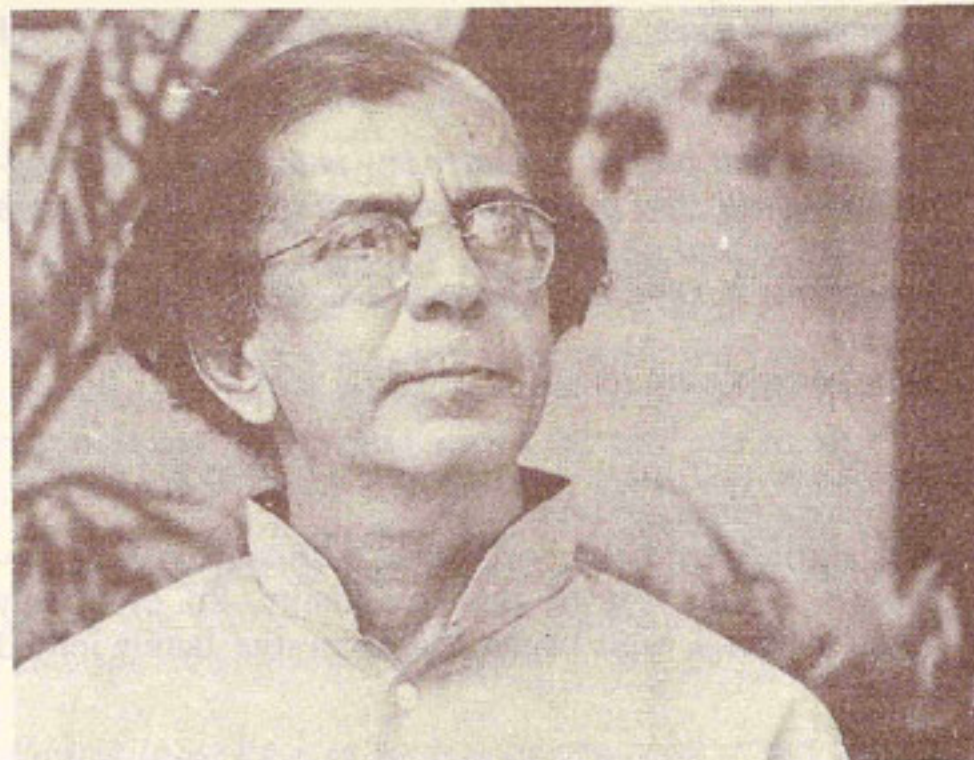


Nissim Ezekiel

COMPUTER CARD

THEATRE PERSONALITY

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| NAME | EZEKIEL, NISSIM |
| BIODATA | 1 |
| PHOTOGRAPHS | 1 |
| ARTICLES/CLIPPINGS/ BROCHURES | 6 + 1 |
| BOOKS BY | 7 |
| BOOKS ON | NIL |
| AUDIO MATERIAL | NIL |
| VIDEO MATERIAL | 4 |



Biodata

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Name | Mr Nissim Ezekiel |
| Date of birth | December 16, 1924 |
| Place of birth | Bombay |
| Address | |
| Residence | 18 Kalaniketan, 6th floor, 47/C Bhulabhai Desai Road, Bombay 400026 |
| Contact | P E N All India Centre Phone: 292175 |
| Profession | University teacher (retired) |
| Education | M A |
| Languages known | English |
| Language of theatre work | English |
| Awards | Sahitya Akademi 1983 Padmashree 1988 |

Books

| | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|------|
| Poetry collections | The Unfinished Man | 1960 |
| | The Exact Name | 1965 |
| | Hymns in Darkness | 1977 |
| | Latter Day Psalms | 1983 |

Books edited

| |
|------------------------------|
| An Emerson Reader |
| A Martin Luther King Reader |
| Indian Writers in Conference |
| Writing in India |

Journals edited

| | |
|----------------------------|---------|
| Quest | 1954-57 |
| Imprint | 1962-69 |
| Poetry of the Commonwealth | 1965 |
| Poetry India | 1966-67 |
| The Indian P E N | 1972- |
| World Poets in English | 1974 |

Has toured abroad extensively as visiting lecturer and as judge for poetry competitions.

Has contributed articles and reviews on books and art in various journals.

Plays written (all in English)

| Title | Year | Ist performance | Group | Shows |
|--------------------------|------|-----------------|---------------|-------|
| Nalini | 1968 | January 1969 | Theatre Group | 5 |
| Marriage Poem | 1968 | | | |
| The Sleep-Walker | 1968 | 1985 | Theatre Group | 8 |
| Song of Deprivation | | | | |
| Who Need No Introduction | | | | |
| The Wonders of Vivek | 1986 | | | |
| A Family Failure | 1986 | | | |

Interview taken by Ms Tony Patel, director of Ezekiel's plays

Since the first part of our interview is to cover your biography we will start at the very beginning. What year were you born in and where?

I was born in Bombay. The year was 1924.

Your parents were Jewish?

Yes.

They were liberal or orthodox?

We started by being orthodox, although not as orthodox as the rest of the community. So eventually when a liberal wind began I suppose the family joined it.

I will ask you a very Indian question. What is your native place?

Actually Bombay, although it was customary to say we had come from a place called Tal. Because in the synagogue we were registered as Talkars, and this meant we came from the village Tal, which had a small community and still has a small community of the Israel community.

Your parents then did not actually immigrate or come into the city? They were actually city people, Bombay people before . . .

Yes, because my grandfather came to Bombay hoping to give his children an education.

And the language your parents spoke to themselves and to you?

They spoke in Marathi as well as in English because Marathi had been adopted by the entire community on the west coast of Maharashtra. And English was being rapidly learnt, by the upper middle class and the middle class.

So the first language that you spoke, would you say that was Marathi?

Yes, that's right.

And you are a bilingual family?

More or less, yes.

In a bilingual family when people speak Marathi or when they speak English would you use it for different purposes? We speak Marathi when it's informal or in a loving relationship. Would it be sort of more intellectual when you talk in English?

That happened to me and perhaps one or two other members of the family. That was as far as my mother was concerned. For instance she ran a Marathi medium school. So the question of not using Marathi, whether for intellectual or literary purposes, did not arise for her. And my father lectured in English at Wilson College on a science subject but he spoke Marathi freely and delivered public lectures in Marathi and so

on and so forth. It's just that some of us moved more strongly in the direction of English and I was one of them, because I took to English literature so to speak. I think if it had been English and some other subject then it might have been different.

What school did you go to?

We went to a convent school to start with and went on to Antonio De'Souza High School in Byculla, near Byculla Bridge.

Did this school give you a feeling for English literature which later developed or was it a family . . . ?

I can give a lot of credit to the school, partly because there were a number of teachers who were quite passionately in love with literature and they taught it with great enthusiasm and one of them I think specialised in reading poetry very well, dramatically and forcefully. That made a great impression on me in the school.

Was it in school that you first started writing poetry?

Oh yes, yes. I started at a very early age, must have been 12 or 13 at the very latest.

Did you see that as a serious activity, something you would do for a long time?

Not at that stage. At that stage it only meant, why am I doing this and asking questions to myself and showing the poems to friends and the laughter when they read it said 'ha ha ha poet' you know that sort of thing! In those early days and basically of course I was imitating Byron and Shelley and Keats and all those poets who were in the anthologies which we studied. But I think by the time I finished about two years in college my attitude became more serious and went on becoming serious.

Was there any sort of agency that made you more serious, a friend or some influence that brought this out more seriously?

Oh yes. I left school and went to college and almost immediately made friends with a person who should have left college at that age, but he had made some mess of his academic career so to speak and was still in the first year class when I joined in. He was four or five years older than me and was a great lover of literature. So naturally he introduced me to serious literature in the college.

And what sort of literature did you read before you met him? You said he introduced you to serious literature.

Well, for instance, boys of my age were reading Hall Caine and Marie Corelli . . . I read every novel of Marie Corelli I could get hold of and I could make no distinction between Marie Corelli on the one hand and any serious novelist and the other. I wondered why we were not being taught Marie Corelli and Hall Caine! That is one example of where I was situated when I entered college. But this friend of mine changed my attitudes by giving me more serious work.

By serious do you mean at that point contemporary serious work or . . . you spoke of novels?

Not necessarily contemporary, although it did include some contemporary work, but it was obviously on an entirely different level.

And so you went on from there to reading on your own?

Yes.

Did you have any theatre reading at that time, reading of plays or books on theatre?

No, not really. At that age, let's say roughly between the ages of 16 and 22 when I finished my M A, I thought and most of my friends thought of theatre exclusively in terms of drama. We had no conception of the theatre as such, what it meant to have a play produced, how to judge acting, sets, costumes. I knew nothing about that till a few years later.

That was because there was nothing that you could see there on stage at that time?

There were things, there were the annual college plays and occasionally somebody would say there was a play being produced somewhere and let us go and see it. But somehow the mind didn't open to drama as theatre. It was basically interesting drama. I would read as many plays as I could, but that was it.

That could be Shakespeare?

Shakespeare onwards, yes.

Even modern plays as literature?

Oh yes.

Was there a point then when you began to be interested in it as theatre as performance?

Yes, after meeting Alkazi, as I have said on so many similar occasions. I met him in late '47 and he was at that time producing a play and from the time I entered his house and met him I was in the world of theatre.

It was in 1947 that you finished your M A?

That's right.

And so you met Alkazi in that year?

Yes, I had just started lecturing at Khalsa College, morning college.

Was he a student at that time?

No, no. He was a dropout from St Xaviour's College and I was introduced to him by another friend, George Coelho, who had incidentally introduced me to a lot of modern poetry. I was introduced to Rilke by George Coelho and writers of that kind.

In 1947 had Alkazi produced any plays or was he talking about it?

Somebody else was producing, one of the Padamsee brothers had started producing plays for the Theatre Group. Alkazi was involved with it and was already dis-

cussing the possibilities of producing a play. That kind of thing. It was in the very early stages of the Theatre Group.

What happened next after you passed your M A?

This was the year when I was teaching in a college and a little bit involved in politics and Alkazi got me into the theatre on a big scale. Also made me take a lot of interest in Art of which I knew little or nothing. He showed me his own paintings, he told me to visit one or two art galleries. So it was a great introduction to another world from my point of view. In other words, from literature as an academic study to literature as something directly connected with one's environment and one's own life's decisions . . .

I'd like to go back to something you said, about politics, something I had not been really aware of. What kind of activity in politics?

Yes, this would be quite an epic if I described it at some length. But I think by the time I was 12 or 13 years old when I started writing my early poems I was already conscious of the political situation in India. I knew about the nationalist movement, I was interested in what Gandhi had to say, that kind of thing. And there were one or two incidents in the school which were motivated by my politics of the day, however immature they may have been.

You were something of an activist?

Not quite an activist but ready to take a stand, let us say. At that stage I remember I was a boy scout and we had to give some kind of a salute, which included loyalty to king and emperor, something like that. And I said why should we declare our loyalty to the king and this created a great commotion in the school and I went to meet the people in charge of the boy scout movement in Bombay and I think to calm things down the school said alright when you are expressing this vow, the boy scout vow, you leave out the king. We won't say anything. Which I did. That's how my politics started.

And then went on to?

Went on to basically an interest in the 1942 movement. By that time I was in the Inter Arts class and I was introduced to M N Roy's writings and that changed my views a little bit. And by the time I finished college and went on to do my M A, I was already involved in the trade union movement in Bombay and also at one stage I became secretary of the local branch of the Radical Democratic Party which Roy had started, and lived in a little room which was the party office.

To pick up again the thread . . . with Alkazi, after you met him, I think you later went to England and Alkazi was also there at the same time?

No. He took me to England in a way. I mean he said come with me to London, I am going there for a few years and I said well you can go to London but how

can I go to London? And Alkazi solved the problem by buying a ticket and giving it to me and said come on!

This was '48?

This was '48.

So when you were there you studied in London?

No, I didn't really go to study in London. I went to live in London so to speak. Soon after arriving there I began to apply for jobs left and right and eventually got a job with the Indian High Commission.

But I read somewhere that you had studied philosophy at the London University.

Oh yes, that was after I had resigned my job and was doing all kinds of other things including some freelancing and I did register for an evening course and studied philosophy for two years at Birkbake College.

And you were writing poetry?

Oh yes, yes. By that time poetry had become the main focus of my interest. I gave up my job because I felt I couldn't cope with a full time job and the attention that poetry seemed to need. So I think at that time I felt that I was now making a bigger commitment to poetry.

You published your first book of poetry in London?

It appeared after I had left London, but I did get copies of it at Marsailles because the book was about to appear when I left to come back to Bombay.

What was the name of the book?

The name of the book is *A Time to Change*.

You decided to come back to Bombay after that three and a half year stint. I would like to talk a little more about your London days. What else did you do besides? Did you contribute some articles to Indian papers?

Yes, as I was doing free lancing and I had friends in India and they would suggest why don't you write for this journal or that journal. There was the editor of the *Illustrated Weekly* who said send me poems and I will publish them. There was *Thought* magazine in Delhi and they published all kinds of reports on the London cultural scene which I wrote for them.

While you were in London, what were the arts that you specifically were interested in? Painting?

Let us say that in my own actual creative work it was poetry. Focus was on poetry.

You read poetry?

I read poetry, I wrote poetry, I went to poetry readings, I read poetry on radio.

Met poets?

I can't say I met many poets but, occasionally I did meet a few. And at the same time Alkazi was still

there in 1949 and early '50. So we used to make a round of the art galleries once a week. And then from time to time he would say let us go and see this play or the other. If we had any question about the tickets he would say you don't worry about it, I will buy the tickets. So that meant I was being acquainted with the whole literary and cultural scene in London.

So you were living a full life in the sense of participating in the arts and writing poetry. You still decided to come back at a specific point. What was it that brought you back?

Well, I think there were atleast two major factors. One is that I couldn't really support myself in London. It was all very well in the first year when I had a job, but once I began to rely on freelance writing it was quite a struggle and occasionally I received money from friends, sometimes as a loan, sometimes as a gift. My brother sent me money. And it all looked hopeless. And I thought why don't I go back to Bombay and get a job as a lecturer. I had completed one year as a lecturer in Khalsa College. So I said I can go back to teaching. So that was one motive. The other motive of-course . . . every Indian abroad occasionally begins to say to himself, What am I doing here and why and how long do I want to stay and will I be contributing something here or do I belong here.' I am not saying that I was very clear about all these questions but certainly there was some confusion in my mind about it. And in view of the material circumstances, as I said the two things went together. I thought let us go back to Bombay and see what can be made out of it.

And when you came back . . .

And when I came back I walked into the *Illustrated Weekly* job, because Mandy had already told me that when if you come back to Bombay at any stage you can join us. There is no problem about getting a job.

So now earlier you said maybe when I go to Bombay I will take up a job as a lecturer and instead of that you took a job in a newspaper?

In a magazine, yes.

Was there ever this feeling in you that you are a teacher basically?

I think I began to feel that without taking the kind of decision that was necessary, I sort of drifted on in the job, and went on from that job to some work in . . .

In advertising?

In advertising I went in by chance, by accident and I remained on for a few years, but when I got out of all that six or seven year period I said I will go back to teaching. I think that was one of the major decisions that I made.

When you tried all the other things that are outside of, which are in the big bad world, commercial world, so then you decided that it was teaching that you basically

wanted to do?

Yes.

Ofcourse also writing, which you did side by side, and published a series of books of poems?

Not really a series, I published poems all over the place, but when it came to books I added only two books to what I was doing. That is all.

Yes, but that was the first two books after the one you published in London?

That is right.

If one looks at it now from hind sight there seems to be a book every four-five years.

Roughly, yes.

It is not bad at all for poetry in this situation.

Not too bad. A poet wants to publish a book every two years.

I would like to go back now to the Alkazi days. This was when you got back from England and Alkazi was already producing plays in Bombay. What was the first memory of the early plays you saw with Alkazi?

I may not be able to immediately mention the plays themselves. What I know is that he would first announce that he was going to produce a particular play. Then he would organise a reading, then he would spend some time picking the cast. And from that point right upto the production I was involved in it because I was a member of the Theatre Group and eventually I was an office bearer and that kind of thing. We were working on the *Theatre Unit Bulletin*, so I knew everything that was going on in Alkazi's mind and in his actual work.

So this was sort of a fantastic view of what went on behind the scenes before you finally saw the productions?

Yes.

Would you say that was very very useful to you for your future development in the theatre?

Yes, for ever and ever. Because even if I had not written plays at all, to go into a theatre and watch a production and to appreciate not only the play, which I tended to do, but also the acting and the sets and the costumes and the lighting and the choreography, everything that adds up to what we call theatre. This is what I learnt from Alkazi.

You mean that you attended rehearsals regularly, or as often as you could?

Virtually every day I was there, because I was involved in the work of the Theatre Group.

What were the kind of plays that he seemed to be, to have an interest at that time, this early time which was fifties, mid fifties?

Yes. Well Ibsen for example. Shakespeare was always a possibility. Brecht, and particularly he loved Brecht.

It had to be a serious play. Moliere he was interested in. If it was a comedy then it would still have to be a comedy with some serious implications. But it was never a play selected because the public was sure to like it. That was never the criterion. It had to be good theatre, it had to be good literature, it had to have serious substance, and then he would be interested in it.

Did you have interest in a different kind of play from what Alkazi would have chosen at that time or had you not yet formulated your taste?

No. My taste ofcourse took a very long time to formulate compared to Alkazi because he was very sure of himself and I had never been sure of myself anyway. So if I occasionally made a suggestion to him, for example I remember saying to him why don't you produce a play by Bernard Shaw, because I had read most of Shaw's plays and I loved them. And he said, 'I don't care for Shaw, I don't think of theatre in terms of Shaw's plays and I have an intuitive feeling about these things. So I am not saying anything against Shaw or any other playwright that you recommend, but if I don't have a strong response I am not going to produce the play, however suitable it might be from your point of view.'

Shaw then you certainly seem to have an interest in?

Yes.

What else that Alkazi would not have touched?

I don't know whether I can give you many examples but I remember from time to time going to him with a particular play and I would say I love this play and he would say 'I love it too but I don't want to produce it.' So it had to be a very personal kind of decision. And eventually I came to respect that attitude because the producer cannot produce a play if he is a serious theatre man merely because somebody says produce this play.

So actually his taste was both classical and contemporary, but a certain kind of contemporary. Later he did Waiting For Godot?

Yes.

Krapp's Last Tape. But I don't think he did any Pinter?

No.

Any of the experimental . . . I mean the kind that involved a lot of words more or theatrical devices?

But incidently this phase came to an end because he went on to Delhi.

Yes. And you think it is because of that, you think there might have been a change there?

No, he had already decided that he would have to do at some stage major work in Hindi. And I think he was the only member of the Theatre Group who actually had a tutor.

And that did affect his later development even in Bombay? The kind of people who came to act with him?

Surely. He wanted some linkup with the local language theme.

But your own taste in theatre, judging from the kind of plays you went on to write. Incidentally these plays were written much after Alkazi left Bombay?

Yes.

Was it very much later, in '60?

It was much later.

So your first play was produced in 1969. Is that about the time you had written the play?

Yes.

This is Marriage Poem?

Yes. *Nalini* I wrote, that was my first play. Then *Marriage Poem*, then *Who Need No Introduction*.

So in a sense these plays were written after the shadow of Alkazi was not on the scene and they are the sort of plays that are not in that high classical grand manner that one associates with Alkazi's productions. I also feel that some of your plays have a lot of theatricality in them in the best sense of the word, a sort of a need for a certain kind of music, certain kind of lighting, which is very very important. Would you say that you were influenced by some kind of theatre? I am not quite sure of the influence.

Well, I can explain it although it is a bit complicated. Alkazi certainly expected me to write the kind of plays he would produce and I was sure that I would do it. But you know what happens when you set your pen to paper and actually start writing. You may find that you are not quite ripe for it and you are basically imitating other playwrights, you haven't found your own voice in the theatre as I had to some extent felt in poetry. I didn't feel when I was writing a poem that I am basically imitating a poet I love. I never felt that. I felt I am writing an entirely different kind of poem from the poems I love. But in the case of the theatre I couldn't do that. And so effort after effort collapsed. But it was not because of Alkazi's shadow so to say. It was very much my own very slow development in the area. And by the time I sat down to write a play very confidently and sure that this is the only kind of play I can write, whether it is good or bad or whether it is the kind Alkazi would like or not makes no difference. By that time it was quite late in life, so to speak.

And when you said you had to first find your voice you also meant that you had to find the language that would seem right for our atmosphere, that would not sound like an Ibsen play but that has been brought to our stage.

Yes, the language question was and is very important because I remember the first few plays that were not even complete plays. They were just one-actors or a few scenes. When I showed them to friends they would be very critical of the kind of English spoken by the

characters. And they would say these Indian characters never speak English in this way. All the characters talk like you and so on. So I felt that this was my fault because I wasn't really listening to the way English is spoken in India. And for the first time I began to attend to it. I formed a habit of listening to English spoken around me, in the buses, in the trains, in the offices. Not just finding fault with them but the rhythms of which, the tone of which, the choice of vocabulary, the special effects depending on the mother tongue the speaker. And so when I finally wrote those five plays, three of which were in a book and two were still unpublished, I felt that the characters would basically speak like that in real life.

The reading of your plays, would that pose a problem? Obviously they work very well when they are performed. I can say this after seeing the performance of Nalini on the stage. Would you say people have a problem of . . . people who have been reading all the English plays and translations of other plays, would have a problem of adjusting to the Indian speech and not knowing exactly how to react to this?

Yes, there might be problems to the reader. But I think that they might suspect, they are likely to suspect, that the English they are reading in the plays is in fact the English not very remote from their own daily experience. And once you make this very minor adjustment everything falls into place.

Would you not say that more productions of them would help put these things more into place than they would be otherwise? Even people must get used to hearing with an inner ear only when they hear the performances. Would you not say that?

They don't want to give my plays such an important role in this whole situation, culturally.

Maybe to start with your poems also had a similar initial reaction that this is not English as we know it.

No, that was not the reaction. Because in most of my poems I am the person speaking, my perceptions and my language. So everything fits together. But of course I have written poems in which a certain character is speaking, an Indian character. In that case I would put certain kind of English into his mouth. And I am the creator of the character. He makes the speech.

And the difference in a play, in the reading of a play?

If I am reading the play aloud then I am basically putting myself into the position of various characters and speaking the way they would naturally do so in real life. I have no conflicts on that point and no doubts and reservations at all. If I have created a character called Mr Nanda, then Mr Nanda has to speak the way he would in real life and I have to get a grip on that kind of English. That is my problem in creating this character.

Ofcourse when you say as he would speak in real life . . . in fact he has passed through, the speech has passed

through, certain kind of a change. Probably you will not be Mr Nanda in real life, it would be a refinement of some kind so that one could accept that as Mr Nanda in real life. But they know that this is an artifice?

No, because after all if you meet half a dozen Nandas, each will have his own level of acquaintance with the language and each will also have something in common with the other Nandas. So I have to create a character who is so to speak 'acceptable'. That this is the way he is going to speak. He should not suddenly speak as if he is an Englishman or an American.

The plays that were first written and published in 1969, after that there seems to have been a gap, I think a four-five year gap after which you wrote very interesting short plays. One is Song of Deprivation and the other one is Who Needs An Introduction?

I think the gap really has nothing very much to do with the theatre. It has something to do with my poetry. Because I looked back on what I had written and found that it was absolutely necessary to work harder at the poems. And when I wanted to combine that with all the other things I was doing, like teaching and book reviewing and editing and that kind of daily work, art criticism, and then I felt that the poems I was writing were basically repeating the kinds of poems I had written earlier. And so I began to focus very strongly on poetry for a certain period of time, which ended with the two books in '79 and '82.

That's Hymns in Darkness and . . .

Hymns In Darkness and Later Day Psalms. And I felt that in those two books, in a sense, I had left behind the earlier kind of poetry. Then I began to turn my attention to drama again.

And then recently you have written a series of new plays . . . ?

I have written two full length plays, one comedy and one tragedy, and I have written three oneact plays, all three of which are satirical, comic, little serious, occasionally some pathos creeps in. No fixed form for them but they have all arisen out of my contact with daily life in Bombay.

They are no different from what you wrote before in terms of a new formal interest, something that you may have seen in theatre recently or over the last ten-five years?

Well, I am going to let the critic judge this. I don't want to make claims on behalf of the plays. All I can say is that I feel more at home and more confident with all the theatrical devices that I use which I wouldn't have dreamt of in '69 or earlier.

Does that also have something to do with the fact that for the last say five-six years there has been more of theatre in English of one kind or the other that one has experienced. Has this helped in any way?

It hasn't really directly in any way stimulated me to write, although if I describe a particular incident you

might say ah there you are, you see. Production of plays does affect your writing of plays.

Would you tell us this incident?

Well, there were three oneact plays produced at the American Centre and I went and saw them. And soon as I came out of the theatre I said to myself why don't I write three oneact plays straight away as quickly as possible. And within three weeks I had written them, in fact at the rate of one play a week. So in that sense there was a kind of stimulus. But behind the scenes all this business had to go on anyway, of wanting to write plays and how and why, what kinds of scenes and situations. And I have made up my mind about all those things. Mostly I write about people I know, so certain classes I left out. The working classes I left out because my acquaintance with them has been very limited since the trade union days. The richest of the rich are almost left out because I meet them only occasionally at a party or some such place, but I don't have any daily contact with them. So I would say upper middle class, lower middle class people are the ones I know best. And they are all urban. There is no rural character.

Except for the politician in Song of Deprivation?

No, I wouldn't say he is rural. I may say that he may have a rural origin, and since he has become a politician he has a wide range of contacts with the Indian people from the working class to the peasantry to the middle class in the cities. So he just speaks the way he does to everybody in the same way.

The kind of English that you used in some of the late, what you call the Indian English poems, do you use that language in any of your plays?

Well, there is a problem if you do that in the plays unless you are aiming only at the comic effect. If there is a serious situation and if a character speaks Indian English, which might arouse laughter for example, then the laughter at the language might conflict with the actual feeling of the situation. So one has to modify the Indian English and make sure that the comic effects are not exaggerated. Whereas in a poem as soon as you start reading a poem in Indian English everyone recognises it as basically a comic poem. So whatever errors of speech there are and whatever characteristic Indian intonations and expressions there is, the poem is comic. So it is all right, it fits in.

Then we are talking about the broad use of errors in the Indian language?

Variations, not exclusively errors, but variations on the standard patterns of British English. And certainly we are very far away from American English.

In translation, if doing a translation from an Indian language into English, it would be very difficult, would it not, to find a language which was suitable?

Yes. I think it would be difficult but I don't think it would be impossible. Because I have even heard

Marathi spoken on a variety of levels even within my community. There are people who speak Marathi which, really literary Marathi, a person would find amusing, but which was standard at that level. Acceptable. And the communication creates no problems. So a translator might have to face such problems if at all he wants to translate. But he might leave them alone and not translate them. And if you know the minimum English such poems communicate immediately to the reader.

Since you have written poetry and you have written plays, your plays have always been in prose. How is it that you did not think of writing a verse play?

I did think of it, I think almost every playwright today has given some thought to the subject because it has been so much in the air. And I can add that from time to time I have written scenes or segments of a play in verse hoping that I will be able to develop it into a complete verse play. But I have not succeeded. In other words something goes wrong with the play and its relationship to the language. The language used for the verse is really the kind already established by some other playwright like Eliot or Christopher Fry. So having spent years on that effort I just gave it up. That is all. And I decided that I will go back to prose and tackle the problems that prose creates.

But you mentioned contemporary or recent playwrights who wrote in verse. What about earlier playwrights who wrote in verse, like Racine? These have never been of interest to you?

No, if I don't write in a particular form it does not mean that the form is not of interest to me. After all I have lectured on Shakespeare and Elizabethan playwrights, and verse was taken for granted. Everybody wrote in verse at that time. But if you adapt it to present day conditions, not anywhere in the world but in India, and you have Indian characters speaking in verse in a particular situation, then you have to face the technical problems involved in making that verse credible.

The playwright you mentioned earlier, T S Eliot, in some of his plays he tries to use earlier myths, Greek myths, to modernise them and make them more relevant, or bring them to the present day. This has never been an effort on your part in writing plays? I mean either Greek or Indian mythology.

No. I would have to explain why not in terms of my broad, general philosophy of life. I think if I made the attempt now it wouldn't be so difficult to take a myth and use it for literary and realistic purposes. But over a 25 or 30 year period myth was suspect in my eyes. I thought it was against rationalism and commonsense and all the things, the scientific attitude, all those things that I tended to emphasise.

In spite of the whole concept of Freud that these myths are basically a part of the psyche?

Yes. I read all those theories and I was often con-

vinced by some arguments about the importance of myth. But myth never played a central role in my own life. So it did not enter into the drama.

Might you say that it is also partly due to your being outside the tradition of both the deeper myths either in the Hindu tradition or in the Greek?

Yes. If I had been brought up, let us say, in a world where the myths of India were, so to speak, natural to think in terms of, then it might have come more easily.

You have done a lot of art criticism, written a lot on various subjects, literary criticism, book reviews, some political writing as well, all these so many diverse activities. Do you feel that these have in any way contributed to or are a part of the writing of your poetry or are they separate, distinct from your playwrighting?

Well, first of all if I review books or I write about art it is out of some interest. I then begin to think in terms of why am I doing this, will it be of some use to me? Then some kind of dream enters into the picture and at some stage I say I might write a poem or a play in which all this interest will be integrated. It tends to remain a dream. That is all I can say, but I have never done something without being interested in it. Even in my politics, the editing of a political magazine and contributing political articles for about 30 years to a single journal has been done out of interest in politics. But how to write a political play or a political poem in which the politics is not something external, is not something merely added on in order to make it political, but is a total expression of emotion as well as political conviction? Then I would say I have not really succeeded in doing that. I hope to, I mean.

I think what I was trying to say is that there is no doubt about it that when you write about art that you are interested in the general trends: what motivates artists, how this affects our life and how the artist is affected by our life in his painting. And often of course one sees that your reviews are asking these questions. It is the same with theatre reviewing. But how does it affect your working in terms of a play? For instance do you also feel that when you are writing a play that you should fulfil all these aims and all these demands you ask, that you put to the general scene?

If it happened then it would enrich the play. If it is done because you want to do it then you are tagging on things to a play and the play will reveal its weaknesses to any serious critic who will expose it all and say the politics of it is not convincing, the alleged aesthetics is not convincing. He will say the kinds of things about my work that I say about other people's work! That will be a terrible punishment. So I have to wait when I am actually doing the writing to see how it works. Does my interest in politics come in naturally and effortlessly into the scene that I am depicting so that one more level of meaning has been added to it?

If I may say so in a play like Nalini it is rather interesting the way all these things do come in. Nalini is about

an advertising agent, I mean an advertising man, apparently very superficial and who is only interested in luring a woman into his apartment. But then something very strange happens. Because as he is talking about his interest in art, something of a critic I think, and how he actually is searching for something . . . It is a kind of an exposure of the human being rather than this superficial person. Slowly something else is revealed, how he is himself manipulated in a sense by all the values that are around him. He is forced to see clearly, then finally by the fact that his search has ended . . . exposed by this girl, what he is. But he is ready to see it, he can see it.

But that is the point of the playwright's interests. If the playwright's interests are limited and he really does not know anything about that world . . . If I had created an advertising executive or if I had created an art critic and knew nothing about them, if I had created a fashion model: I have never seen or met a fashion model and can't imagine what fashion models are like, then putting them into a play would be a hopeless proposition. It would be what one calls journalism I think, in the bad sense of the word journalism. That is the daily newspaper, when you read certain opinions and ideas and put them aside for ever! You don't do that with literature obviously. You come to it again and again. And so I would say that interests which I have pursued, not for the sake of playwrighting and poetry but because I am interested. But finally they do play a role in the work. One hopes for it subconsciously or consciously . . . it comes into the picture.

This interest in poetry, in literature, in teaching, in playwrighting, in production of plays in as during the Alkazi times, music: you also wrote some criticism of music?

No, I did not write criticism of music because I don't know enough about the technical side of music. But certainly I listen to a lot of music and read whatever I get about music.

One of the strange things about people in India who do good work is that you never find or hardly ever find that they are doing just one thing. When they are doing it they are doing five or six things reasonably well. Would you say that there is something about our atmosphere that makes us do this? Like Alkazi who is a producer of plays, who has always been keenly interested in art and now runs an art gallery and is something of a connoisseur of art, or you as a poet?

Well, let me attempt an answer to that question by saying that perhaps one reason why it happens is that you get an outlet when you have a variety of interests. Supposing I had been in New York and the editors of various newspapers had a choice of one out of 500 potential art critics he would never have asked me to do it. They would have said, 'Well, you are interested in art but basically you are a poet. There are lots of people specialising in art criticism and we can have them.' So I would have been kept out. Whereas here the number of art critics potentially available in Bom-

bay would be one, two, three, four, then you stop and wonder who else there is! So if you have interest there is a possibility that you can actually express it in your daily life.

That is putting it very nicely. But could it be the other way about also that perhaps basically one wants to write poetry or do plays. But when you are balked in that direction, which happens very often in our kind of setup, then you do the other thing which is right there next to you, which you can and do. Would you say that that might be another reason?

On the other hand all over the world one hears of writers who have long sessions of sterility, failure, they can't explain it but they haven't done any writing for two years. You constantly hear of such cases. And I have never heard of these people suddenly going into art criticism, book reviewing, this, that and the other. If they can't write what they want to write they wait, they struggle, they suffer and a time comes when they finally write what they want to write. Whereas here we have opportunities in a sense because there is less competition.

That sounds very good, I mean opportunities. People are also mourning because of lack of opportunities. So, it is a question of scale also, what one means by opportunities. It is like, as you said, not being able to publish a book of poems every two years instead of that having to wait five years. Perhaps, even if you are ready, two years ahead.

Yes.

How does all this interest in various arts affect your writing of plays and your expectation of how they are to be produced?

No. Again I would like to say that I do not consciously and deliberately bring it all into the picture. From writing a play I am thinking of the problems of playwrighting. I am thinking of the ideas, the material, the characters I have met, my own memories, all kinds of things enter the picture. And what I am hoping for is that this variety of interests that I have somehow will influence the playwrighting. But how and when, at what point cannot be calculated. It is more a subconscious process. And I trust that greatly and allow it to function.

I have often found that when people do an original play, or when a director attempts an original play, you will either find people saying the play is very good but the production is dreadful or the production is wonderful but the play is terrible. But you as playwright, do you have an ideal production in mind after you have written your play, some kind of a view of how it would appear to you it should be done on the stage?

In fact that would be a little unfair to the producer. I can say that in my early career in the playwrighting world, I entered the picture as if I was an associate director and I now blame myself for that. And when I saw the rehearsal I say no, no I don't mean this, I

don't mean that, I don't want this character to behave in this way. And then the director would say 'Keep out please. You are not going to interfere and tell me how to interpret this character of yours. You created the character, I am interpreting it.' But today I accept that and if I have written a play and if I hand over the play production to a producer or director I would withdraw from the scene and go and see it perhaps the night before the production and make one or two comments to the director. If the director says, 'What do you think?', I might say something about what I think. But I won't interfere with the interpretation.

You don't see it as a personal collaborative effort?

No. That I have given up for ever. I will never do it again. I will just write the play and hope that the director will understand the sense of it. And if he or she asks me some questions I will answer them.

And you don't have any sense of possession about that script of yours, that what kind of person will do it, and whose hands will it eventually go? Do you feel totally free once you finish your play?

I wouldn't say I feel totally free. I might be sceptical, I might have reservations about one kind of director or another but in a sense I would have to take a kind of existential decision and say to this director 'O K go ahead'. Once I have said that then I have no right to say he is not the right kind of person to direct my play. I think that would be foolish. I would hand it over or I would say I am sorry I am looking for some other kind

of director, and take the risk of offending the person. That is my view about production, but I am not going to be the producer under any circumstances.

And also the risk of it not being done at that time?

Yes, it might be postponed, it might be produced and not successful. You have to take all those risks. But I don't think I would constantly worry about the movements on the stage, what kind of lighting is used, and so on. Basically that is it.

How does this differ in your attitude to your poetry? I mean if you were asked by a group of people can we use your poetry and do poetry reading? Would you worry about who these people are and how they would read your poetry?

No. If they ask me to read my own poems first of there is no problem at all, whereas in the case of the play there is a problem. I can't produce the play, whereas I can in a sense read out the poems. Now if somebody says I want to read out your poem at a particular poetry reading I would just give him the poem to read and say if there is anything about the poem you want to discuss you come and discuss it with me, I will express my opinions. And then I would go to the reading and hear him read. If after that he asks for my opinion, I am emphasising that, because I don't want to be the interfering type who has some opinion of how something must be done. The way I want to do it is the way anybody must do it and that is it. That attitude I don't appreciate at all.