

PRIYA D'SOUZA



82-year-old Deryck Jeffereis



Birthday Party staged in the living room of Kulum Terrace



Kabir Bedi in and as Tughlaq



Pearl Padamsee and Gerson da Cunha in the Shrew

# An original script

Bombay's very first English theatre group turns 60 next year. This is their remarkable story

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## Act I, Scene one

**T**HE year is 1944. The setting: an old Colaba flat. Around a horseshoe-shaped dining table four men sit together hammering out a dream that hopes to achieve one objective – good theatre. They are Sultan (Bobby) Padamsee, Deryck Jeffereis, Jean Bhowanagary and Adi Marzban. A short while later what's believed to Bombay's first theatre group is founded. Called Theatre Group, TG to family and friends, it then goes on to give young talent scope and also proves to be a successful launch pad for people such as Kabir Bedi.

With the four of the above in title cast, its director, Bobby three years earlier, while still a student at St Xavier's College, had persuaded the authorities to let them enact Macbeth. From Macbeth emerged a steady stream of solid theatre put together by the group. Their repertoire incorporated scandal too.

There was Salome, which horrified Bombay's Parsi community because a young Parsi girl performed the Dance of the Veils. But between Shakespeare's Twelfth Night and Kamiano, the story of Father Damien's work among the lepers of Molokai in Hawaii, all was well again.

The idea at all times was to

give theatre a definitive arena. And the platform of Theatre Group was registered and set up.

## Act I, Scene two, Exit the king

A couple of plays later however, out of cue, Bobby Padamsee died at age 24. "He just got sick of life," says the now 82-year-old Deryck Jeffereis sitting in his beautiful terraced Colaba house, one wall away from the historical horseshoe-shaped table.

By then, an entire household had changed. The Padamsee living room on the top floor of Kulum Terrace, also known as KT to family and friends, long used to the sounds of swords clashing, the swishing of cloaks and the spurt of fake daggers found that the proximity of theatre had turned it into one big family. Quite literally as Bobby's three older sisters married members of the Theatre Group — Ebrahim Alkazi, Deryck Jeffereis and Hamid Sayani (Ameen Sayani's older brother).

Endless cups of coffee and food for starving actors post-rehearsal led to bonding, remembers Alyque Padamsee, Bobby's younger brother by 10 years. "My mother really kept the whole thing together. It was she who offered premises where we could rehearse; it was she who would lay on food almost everyday after rehearsals; it was she who come to the rescue when the chips were down. I remember when I was doing my first play while in college, Taming of the Shrew I couldn't raise enough money. So my mother and my sister, Jerry (who married Hamid Sayani from the Bournvita Quiz Contest), went down Colaba Causeway asking shop owners to take an ad in the brochure. An ad

then was Rs 100 and they raised an astonishing total of Rs 5,000."

For Jeffereis, the same play holds another flashback because after 60 years of TG and 150 plays later, it's the only play he's ever acted in. Essentially the lights man, involved in the finer aspects of production, Jeffereis found that he had to step in to play the father of the shrew when a last minute dropout took place.

## Interval

Theatre was binding. The passion from the stage followed the group to their parties, famously known as The Hunt. The first edition of their newsletter, Script in November 1954 says:

*Of a social gathering*  
Veteran members of the Theatre Group looked forward to Saturday, October 2. That was because the day saw a sort of revival of the old TG 'Hunts'. The Hunts are today only remembered revels. They used to be fun and they used to be useful.

Every Saturday, as many TG members as cared to do so, gathered in the home of the host member. Each one brought something to eat. The host provided the drinks and the music. Of course, there was a new host every Saturday. Or what would the neighbours say?

But that is digression.

On October 2, some fifty people met at Kulum Terrace. Lots of prospective members were nudged forward. These persons signed forms and the fact that they were new members is triumphantly attested elsewhere in this issue of Script.

Music helped the evening along pleasantly. Drinks, samosas and even cake materialised from the Padamsee pantry. At one

stage there was a frightened pause. Mr Deryck Jeffereis cleared his throat genially and directed a few Presidential words at the gathering. He outlined briefly what the Theatre Group stood for and detailed some of the items of the Group's programme for October and November.

There were no casualties; but Mr Hamid Sayani complained bitterly that too few tangos were played.

Clearly the group was not only about striving to perfect their Shakespeare but also about acing their fox trot. As remembers the Binaca Geetmala man, Ameen Sayani, "The hunt was where people sometimes even found their life partners. We danced and that's in fact where I learnt the fox trot. We also used to play a very nice game of dumb charades, called The Game. Here a certain title of a book/play/film was given and we had to act it out." Of course being a theatre group the game actually served a purpose. It got people practising their talent. People bonded, laughed, there was no alcohol served, it was just in all good, clean fun.

## Act 2, Scene one

Most Mumbaikars bemoan the English stage right now, but those actively in it, past and present, agree that the '60s and the '70s were the golden decades — where various directors came up with productions that a previous theatre-going generation fondly recollect. They not only remember the plays but some remember attending a couple of film appreciation workshops the group conducted, some recall the poetry readings at the flat, while

others reminisce the 'evenings of music' where many developed an appreciation for classical music.

With regard to theatre, there was Marat/Sade, Kabir Bedi's first play with Theatre Group. Set in a lunatic asylum, it was performed using the entire length of the St Xavier's College hall, all 100 feet of it. The audience sat upstairs in the surrounding balcony. "The reason being that this was a lunatic asylum and everyone was looking down at them. Gerson da Cunha played the lead and I played second lead," says Alyque, the play's director. "It was a very revolutionary play for its time, because it was brutal, violent and had a wonderfully intellectual script. At the end of the play, which was probably, shall we say, my most theatrical play, the lunatics revolt and kill the guards who are on the ground floor, then they start climbing up into the balconies and start assaulting the audience. They then run screaming into the quadrangle and into the night."

Bedi says, "I had a small, but fiery role, I think I only had about 20 lines in the whole play." Kabir, at that time, was just a young man who had come from St Stephen's College, Delhi.

Then there was Tughlaq, where Bedi's nude silhouette in the opening scene made Bombay stir from their seats and notice him. "I thought he was ideal for the part, but people thought he was too young and said, 'What's he? He's only a model'. But I had faith, we put him on stage and he was a sensation, both in his looks, his voice and his acting ability. This was the play that brought him to the attention of B R Chopra. And the rest, as they say, is history," says Alyque.

A fact seconded by Bedi who says, "We were performing it for