

Published Date:	10 Aug 2024	Publication:	The Statesman [Kolkata]
Journalist:	Manjira Majumdar	Page No:	1
MAV/CCM:	46,115/8.02	Circulation:	123,538



Published Date:	10 Aug 2024	Publication:	The Statesman [Kolkata]
Journalist:	Manjira Majumdar	Page No:	12
MAV/CCM:	591,514/128.59	Circulation:	123,538

Ebrahim Alkazi – Holding time captive

MANJIRA MAJUMDAR

The dramatic reading from parts of Ebrahim Alkazi's *Holding Time Captive*, a biography penned by his daughter Amal Allana, brought in focus the man behind the legendary theatre person, his passions, and most of all, his vision in making theatre what it is at the national level today.

As Allan said in the discussion that followed at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity (in collaboration with the Asia Centre India Centre recently), with theatre and film personality Suman Mukhopadhyay, that being a daughter she saw him at very close quarters. Yet she distanced herself when writing the book, assessing his other persona as someone committed to theatre, an artist and definitely as a human being, with his weaknesses. She then became a chronicler of the times, rather the cultural history of India, roughly the period between 1940 and 2000.

Born in Pune in 1925, Alkazi died in 2000. He was of Saudi Arabian descent from his father's side. His mother was a Kuwaiti. His wife, Roshan Padamsee, whom he called Rosh, stood by his side throughout his life. And Elk as he was referred to became an institution. The evening totally belonged to him.

Those were heady times in Bombay during the forties and fifties, with progressive-minded thespians and painters who later became part of the Art Heritage Gallery in New Delhi. Alkazi was among the first promoters of modern artists as members of the Progressive Artists' Group, others being F.N. Souza, Maqbool Fida Husain, Tyeb Mehta and Akbar Padamsee. He too was an artist.

Alkazi's Bombay days in an 800-square-foot flat in Vithal Court and later in London were where his ideas on theatre were shaped in addition

to rehearsals, lively debates and impromptu dinners for many. The closest thing theatre can be compared to is a musical band; no one person is responsible for its success. There are many who contribute to it, and Allan records the various influences and people behind her father. She records in a story-telling manner the various chapters in his life. The discipline, the joys and heartbreaks connected to events and people in his life, including his close family, are almost dramatised by his daughter.

Literature meets theatre in the book.

Among the very well-known plays Alkazi directed are Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* and various Greek adaptations, not to mention Shakespeare. And as Allan said in her conversation with Suman, he went around the country and the world, imbibing local and, when possible, global influences. Brecht, the Japanese classical theatre form of Kabuki, and closer home, Badal Sircar, were among some of his inspirations.

What was Alkazi's theatre? From English he moved to Hindi. He once said in an interview with the BBC, "I think that there are certain ground-root elements in theatre; there is a certain set of rootedness and earthiness in the work you do, and unless your inspiration and the concept in the work of theatre start from there, I don't think you can create fine work. You have to create an atmosphere; you have to work within a salubrious surroundings."

This becomes relevant when we talk of theatre in India growing from an ethnicity of folk culture, which gradually combined with global perspectives in order to survive as a live performing art.

It is common knowledge that Alkazi was behind the national school drama school NSD in 1952 and later

as its director in 1962. Alkazi also believed in an entire cultural ecosystem where trained actors would get work in the film industry too, and that is why he encouraged them to also attend the



Film Television Institute of India. No wonder that some of the best actors we have had in the way of Naseeruddin Shah, Om Puri, Anupam Kher, Manoj Bajpayee, Pankaj Tripathi, Irfan Khan, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Neena Gupta, and many more are products of one, if not both. And as it happens with great visionaries, Alkazi faced several challenges as time went by, and the focus to get things done often resulted in being termed in some of the unkindest of ways; dictatorial is just one of them.

The dramatic readings by actors Sonam Kalra and Joy Sengupta brought the evening alive in presenting to us this magnificent persona, who also had a wicked sense of humour hiding beneath a serious façade. Once at a party, Elk landed up in just a bush

shirt, as the dress code specified bush shirt only! The legacy continues through his children Amal and Feisal and through such words that may or may not resonate with other artists.

An artist belongs to no political party, and an artist belongs to no religious ideology, an artist has to distance himself from each one of these in order to see each one of these objectively... and finally he has to release himself and distance himself from himself.