



Parvatibai informs Nana (Mohan Agashe) of Sangabai's pregnancy.

"Ghashiram Kotwal", the play by Vijay Tendulkar which exposed the corruption and decadence in the court of Nana Phadnavis, is now being made into a film by Yukt, a co-operative of Film Institute graduates. SUDHIR SONALKAR talks to co-directors Mani Kaul and Hariharan about their adaptation of the play to suit the impersonal style and fluid form of the film.

# GHASHIRAM KOTWAL: From Stage To Screen

this whole business of alienation. According to Brecht's theory, it is an artistic weapon against false consciousness. And false consciousness in the Marxist sense is manifested in art as an attempt to subsume the class struggle. Other than this, identification, entertainment etc. are not taboo in themselves. It is almost impossible to conceive of art without a sense of "play", a sense in which Brecht's theatre abounds. Also, introspection is not possi-

with Mani Kaul and Hariharan, co-directors of the film.

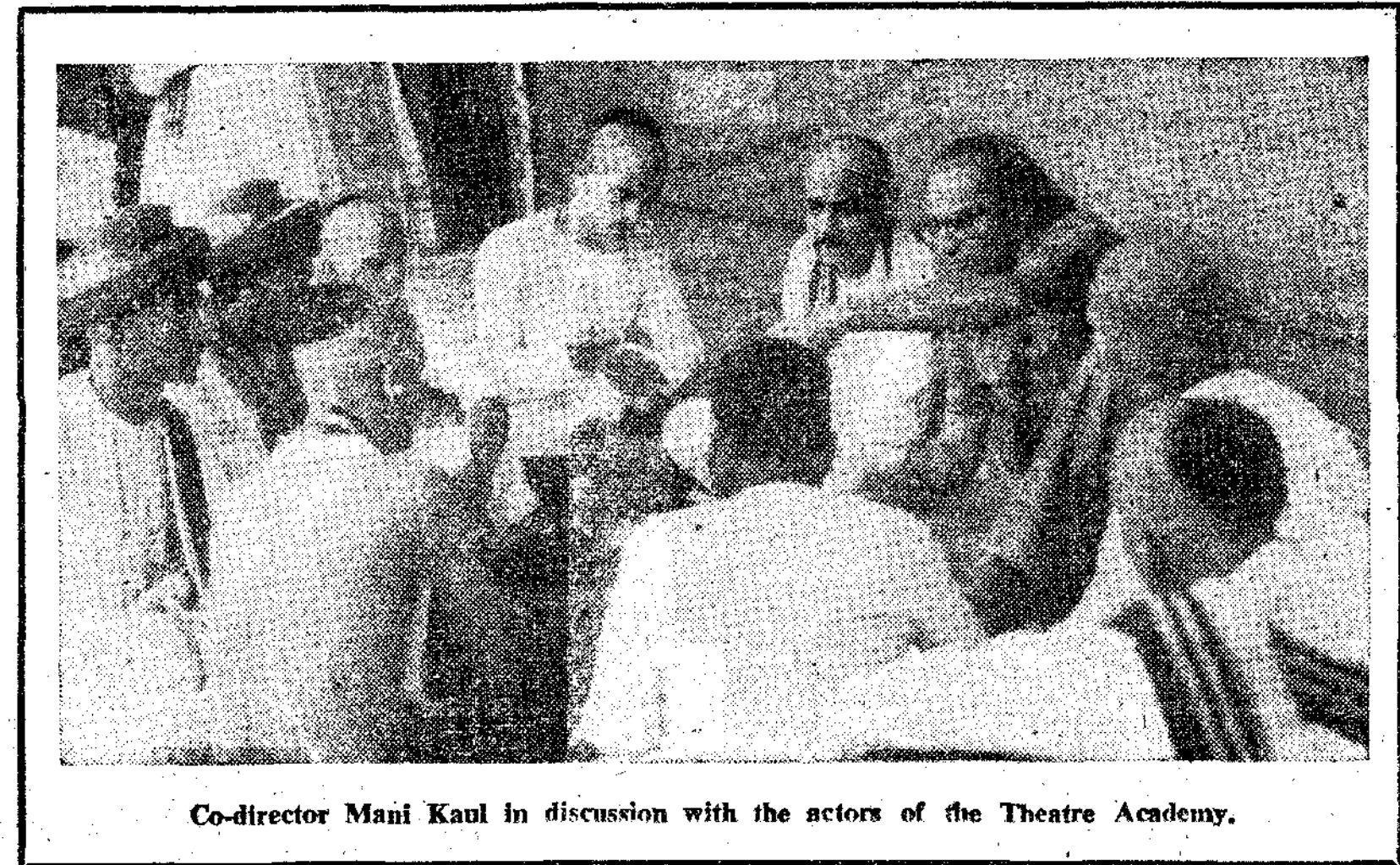
**Mani:** The style in the film is impersonal. Some Indian painters today, for instance, simply reproduce the same paintings. If a painting cannot be identified as the work of a particular artist, it doesn't sell. This sort of thing applies very much to films, e.g. Bresson and Ozu. But take sculptures from Ellora which are far more plastic and epics like

is given, permanent. This is true about that kind of music, but a raga can go on for two hours or eight hours. The paintings of Ajanta do not really stop. If there had been more walls they would have gone on. But as they are they have their own completeness. The totalising factor is not time or space, but content.

**Hari:** Such an approach gives the spectator more capacity for participation. When relationships are



The "abhishek" of infant Madhavrao Peshwa (Tibu Ranade) performed by Nana to achieve total political power.



Co-director Mani Kaul in discussion with the actors of the Theatre Academy.

ble at times without personal identification, unless the canvas, as in the case of Eisenstein's *Battle-ship Potemkin*, is epic and broadly historical. This in turn creates the need for stereotypes that are yet significant enough to carry meaning.

However, the experiment, both in terms of a collective effort as well as an attempt to build a film around consciously formulated theory, is certainly new enough, and the film promises to be an interesting venture. Following is an extract from a dialogue

the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They have such a wide canvas, they cannot accommodate a personal style.

**Hari:** But an impersonal style is not limited only to the epic form. A film can take a modular form, where each scene is a complete entity in itself, and does not need another scene to bring it into focus.

**Mani:** Satyajit Ray has said somewhere that Western music has given us finite (in terms of time) composition. The notation

completely defined there is no open-endedness. No ambiguity, no leaving an element of probability so that the audience has a chance of variance.

**Mani:** Of course relationships are defined. But there is a difference. The proportions applicable in Indian sculpture for instance are very rigid, but they create relationships that are very revealing.

People come to see films to enjoy themselves. Some films they enjoy and some they do not. This

existential reality has first to be realised and then gone beyond.

Let me give you an example from the film.

Vijay Tendulkar wrote an *abhang* (religious song in Marathi), for the film. We used to call it an industrial *abhang*. Then we found that the *abhang* was beginning to acquire its own religiosity. So we overcame the problem in the following way:

Some workers are working in a quarry. (And of course they hate their work. The things they look forward to are eating and drinking).

Just then the *sutradhar*, now dressed as a worker, and two brahmins, also dressed as workers come down a big rock and towards the workers, chanting the *abhang*. As the *abhang* progresses, the workers all begin to fall asleep, except one worker who keeps working, the sound of metal on rock punctuating the *abhang*.

The *sutradhar* and the brahmins go towards him and start going round him. The worker continues to work. Other workers wake up. A tremendous amount of sound builds up on the soundtrack. Then we hear the sound of a truck approaching. The worker who has kept on working rushes past the brahmins, and with the others, scrambles on to the truck and the truck moves off. Nor does the film present myths, as did the play. It is an open conflict where the myth makes you see history and vice versa. And when modern images break the historical setting, it is not a mere gimmick. It is more

a transgression or period to achieve contemporaneity, which is really the object of the film.

The film is not "historical", of course, in the sense of recreating the past. The modern images break the historical setting in places. Once when a Britisher comes and stands leaning against an electric pole, in the truck sequence and at the end when two Britishers are shown surveying the land during the ryotwari settlement.

**Hari:** We have always striven to make the background as neutral as possible. Then the actors come into contact with the neutral background and make it come alive.

**Mani:** The central part of the play is, in fact, this duality. The actors are told sometimes to enact the role and sometimes to confront: the same applies to the film. Sometimes it becomes the play while sometimes it confronts the play. Even amongst each other we discuss every shot, and in fact when there is disagreement, the result finally is usually better.

The film is not about the brahmin-non-brahmin conflict mainly. We have, for instance, taken extracts from Nana Phadnavis's autobiography, which does not appear in the play, and treated the conflict in his character as that between religiosity and sexuality at that time.

We faced an amusing situation during our shooting. We wanted to do a scene at Nana's wada in Menavle. But Phadnavis's descendant who owned the place refused to let us use it, because he thought Ghashiram Kotwal de-

famed his ancestors. We tried to tell him that we were not interested in the brahmin non-brahmin conflict except in a larger context. But he was adamant. In fact, he said, it was not Nana sitting and watching dancing girls to which he objected so much, but to Nana dancing himself! That was too much.

**Hari:** The co-operative really tries to work in a collective way. There were constant exchanges between technicians, actors and directors. For instance, when we wanted to shoot a crowd scene, we would tell the actors to move into a certain area. Then we would move around with them with the cameras. Only after about two hours of such effort, with constant stoppages for taking notes, would we start shooting, so that all mannerisms, and everything that was simple improvisation would not go on film.

**Mani:** The thing is that we are interested in development of acting and not improvisation. Even in a crowd scene, some people would relate to each other, some would break such responses and achieve others' and so on.

Alienation is a general theory for art, inbuilt in it, and not a devise. For film it is all the more important. It is so naturally temporal a medium that the process of identification is automatic. You have to make little effort to create identification. You have to in fact stop it.

In all art forms, expression at some point becomes illusion. And when it becomes illusion, it must be broken.