The book cover features a textured, painterly background. On the left, a vertical strip of vibrant red, resembling a curtain, is partially visible. To its right, a dark, almost black, textured area dominates the upper and middle portions of the cover. A thin, golden-yellow thread or string is draped across the scene, starting from the top, looping around, and extending towards the bottom right. In the center, where the red curtain meets the dark background, two white, semi-circular shapes are visible, resembling the tips of a fan or a mask. The title 'Bring down the House Lights' is written in a large, bold, golden-yellow sans-serif font, positioned in the upper right quadrant. Below the title, the subtitle '50 Years of The Madras Players' is written in a smaller, white sans-serif font. At the bottom, the text 'WRITTEN & COMPILED BY P.C. RAMAKRISHNA' is displayed in a golden-yellow sans-serif font, with 'P.C. RAMAKRISHNA' in a slightly larger, bolder font.

Bring down the House Lights

50 Years of
The Madras Players

WRITTEN & COMPILED BY
P.C. RAMAKRISHNA

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From the President

GAYATRI KRISHNASWAMY



THIS VOLUME HAS been put together by P.C. Ramakrishna to mark The Madras Players' 50th Anniversary. It is a collection of anecdotes and nostalgic pieces in which Ram takes a lighthearted look at some of the early members and later stalwarts of The Madras Players. It is also a collection of essays debating views on various aspects of the theatre by leading theatre specialists and enthusiasts who have supported and encouraged us these many years. We hope the book will entertain you as we have tried to do for 50 years.

The Madras Players came into existence in the fifties, formed by a group of young people, mostly students, who constituted The British Council Play-reading Group. Though we are an independent theatre group, our relationship with The Council has endured, not least because of our active promotion of English speaking theatre.

We are truly an amateur group — our members come from many walks of life, hold day jobs, and come together in the evenings to share a common love for the theatre — but we always try to achieve the maximum degree of professionalism in our work.

We have presented a wide range of plays — comedies and tragedies, classic and modern drama, thrillers and experimental theatre, and plays for children. Since the late sixties, we have increasingly attempted English translations of contemporary plays by Indian playwrights. Recently, in the year 2000, we celebrated the year of the Chennai Playwright, presenting plays written by playwrights based in Chennai, together with dramatised readings of work, which emerged from participants in a playwrighting workshop we organised in collaboration with The British Council.



Looking back through our records, we were amused to find that in our early days we managed to put on major productions for a few thousand rupees, funded mainly by the income from our box office, supplemented by members digging deep into their pockets. But today, theatre is expensive; with rising costs we can no longer manage on our usual slender budgets, and have to depend increasingly on sponsorship and patronage — as the arts have done traditionally.

This is our first venture into the field of publishing. We hope all our members who have unstintingly volunteered their time, energy and talent to make our productions possible, and our loyal audiences, who have shared with us the magic of the theatre, will find it interesting.



Foreword

GIRISH KARNAD



THE CONCISE OXFORD Dictionary defines an 'amateur' as 'a person who engages in a pursuit on an unpaid basis,' and then goes on to give us the related subsense, 'a person considered inept at a particular activity.' In effect, an amateur is someone who is passionate about an enterprise for which he or she may not have much aptitude and which, for all the demands it may make on his or her resources, brings no financial rewards. A person, then, that the Bhagavad Gita advises one to become, one who 'acts', but with no interest in the fruit of his or her actions.



Passion for theatre certainly characterised The Madras Players when I literally walked into the group to play a walk-on part in Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*, directed by S.V. Krishnamurthy in 1965. Before that unremarkable debut, I had only acted in college skits and, although I had already written my first two plays, they had remained on the shelf. The gratifying thing about 'am dram' is that one is always needed and can fit in within its chaotic goings on in some capacity or the other, regardless of one's ability. During the next few years, as I acted, directed, and made myself useful as prompter, stage-hand or light assistant, I learnt everything I know today about the craft of theatre.

I was fortunate. Most amateur groups are content to indulge the popular demand for 'light entertainment', although even that, I now realise, is not very easy to do. But The Madras Players were never short on ambition and we voyaged through some of the best plays in the world — *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *A View from the Bridge*, *The*

Caretaker, Uncle Vanya, Private Ear and Public Eye, Krapp's Last Tape — impervious to protests from our small and devoted audience that we should attempt a fare more within our competence and, from their point of view, more diverting. For me personally it was a revelation to discover that a not very large part like Professor Serbryakov in Chekov's *Uncle Vanya* could be mined endlessly for deeper layers of meaning, while a lead role like Eddie Carbone in Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* left you scraping the surface once you had grasped the distinctive lineaments of the character. Being with The Madras Players was like going to an elite Drama School.

I was with them for five years. P.C. Ramakrishna has been for thirty-five. My last play with them — *The Crucible* — was his first. The first half of this volume consists of Ramakrishna's personal tributes to those many gifted people with whom he had the pleasure and good fortune to be associated as they were drawn in by the group's relentless attempt to realise the best. In a sense these pieces show us Ram developing technically as an artist and emotionally as a social activist through theatre. But they are more than merely autobiographical. They also illustrate various facets of the history of The Madras Players, how much those who got involved with the group learnt from it, how much they learnt to love it, how much they gave to it.



The second half is made up of essays by different theatre experts and critics. These papers are about the larger theatrical scene and analyse the broader movements in theatre history during our life-time. Basically they unravel how the theatre scene has changed in Tamil Nadu, how much richer and more diverse it has become, in this half century.

During my last couple of years in Madras, new plays had begun to appear on the vernacular stage in India and we plunged into translation. We discovered that, even in English, Indian plays received from our audience a response far more electric than that generated by our productions of Western plays. *Evam Indrajit, Shantata Court Chalo Aahe, Hayavadana*..... It was exciting to be with The Madras Players as they played midwife at the birth of Indian drama in English, and again, as they broke through the circumscribed world of 'am dram' to provide the launching pad for Patabhi Rama Reddy's Kannada film, *Samskara*, which went on to win international acclaim.

All that is already history, taken as given, in Ram's articles, while the group strides forward, belying the conviction of every departing member that once he or she has moved on, it will grind to an agonising halt. Given the number of amateur groups I have

watched disintegrate or disappear during this period, I am amazed and delighted at how The Madras Players have continued in their 'act', with no diminution in the passion or idealism with which they started half a century ago. This book is a loving tribute to the vitality of 'am dram' by one who has been in the vanguard of the movement, who has helped enrich it and who has, quite simply, loved it.


Girish Karnad
4 July 2006, Bangalore



Introduction

P.C. RAMAKRISHNA

50 YEARS OF The Madras Players – 37 years with them!

Nostalgia takes over. I remember the wonderful people who have walked the path with me.... and some who have walked the path beyond to another Stage.

Some of these personalities, who shone in the 70's and 80's, would perhaps be just names to many involved with theatre now, but their contribution has been significant in so many ways, that it is worth recalling their special skills. They are the milestones that define the distance that we have travelled, pioneers of a then uncharted territory, trailblazers of technique that governs the grammar of theatre even today.



What I have written is only from my personal knowledge and experience, and lays no claim to be biographical or exhaustive. I merely wanted to remember these guys with affection, take a few friendly swipes, enjoy again the moments we shared on stage, examine what we could learn from their many abilities, and find out what made them tick. I must hasten to add that the views expressed are mine alone, and need not represent the thinking of The Madras Players. It is an opportunity that I have used to reflect on what I have observed in them as relevant to theatre skills and discipline.

There have been many others who do not find a place in this gallery of people to whom, undoubtedly, The Madras Players owes much. It is just that either I have not known them personally or had any significant interaction with them. Longevity of contribution is another factor that has determined my choices. Without exception though, every one of them was in theatre for the sheer joy of being there, with never any commercial interest in such participation. In fact, the terrific thing about The Madras Players is that money has never been an issue at any time. None of us sought recompense - even for conveyance. We were, in the early days, clueless as to where the funds for a production were coming from, or how much a play was going to make or lose. Somehow, even with no sponsorships worth the name, and tickets priced at Rs.30 (tops), some

money came in, the play was done, and cast parties held. And, if there was some moolah left in the kitty, it went into the next production. Hand to mouth existence? Yes – but look at the result! 50 unbroken years, and more than 200 productions! Not a bad track record, wouldn't you say?

Of course, one cannot operate in this fashion today, and the initiatives taken by younger groups to become commercially more proactive are to be considered not only inevitable, but necessary.

But The Madras Players will continue to be the 'grand old lady' of theatre in Madras, looking on with a benign eye, as the young turks take energetic steps forward, pushing at the boundaries of new discovery. And the colourful people who have been part of The Madras Players' history, whom I have written about in the following narrative, are the ones that have shown the way, and whose place in The Madras Players heritage cannot be denied.

Today, The Madras Players too have restructured. The experience of T.T. Srinath, Ejji and Shankar Sundaram, complemented by the youthful exuberance of Rajiv Choudhry and Kaveri Lalchand, gave new direction to the old faithfuls on the committee. And, with the joining in of M.Ct.P Chidambaram, Y.G. Rajendra, Bharat Raman, S. Ramachander, and Indrani Krishnaier, the tracks for the future have well and truly been laid.

You will observe that all through I have used the name, Madras, rather than Chennai. Madras has a sense of history, and seemed appropriate to use when writing about the 50-year-old Madras Players. None of us will be around though, to celebrate the centenary, but I do hope the baton gets passed on, and that The Madras Players survive the next 50.



Acknowledgements

I HAVE NEVER published anything. So, when this project took shape, diffidence was a constant companion. I must thank my good friend, T.T.Srinath for pushing, nay, driving me on to finish this book. But for him, I doubt whether it would have seen the light of day, remaining like a dried leaf of fond memories within the pages of a personal diary, forgotten over time.

I could have asked for nothing more than for Girish Karnad to have written the Foreword. It is at once nostalgic and touching and places the 50 years of The Madras Players in perspective. I am truly beholden to him.

To Ranjitha Ashok, I owe a debt of gratitude for taking on the unenviable chore of putting all the material together, giving it shape, not to mention adding her own lovely article to the collection. Jayan Menon of Grantha Consulting has done a great job with the total design, while Lakshmi Srinath's wonderfully imaginative cover art has given that personal touch from my point of view.

My wife, Hyma, has, over the years, "sat like Patience on a monument, smiling at grief", coping with an oftentimes unsocial husband preoccupied with theatre. This is a good time for me to say "Thank you."

And...of course, The Madras Players – the mother lode.

Where would any of us be without its all-embracing warmth and tradition? It is the passion that sustains us all.

–P.C. Ramakrishna

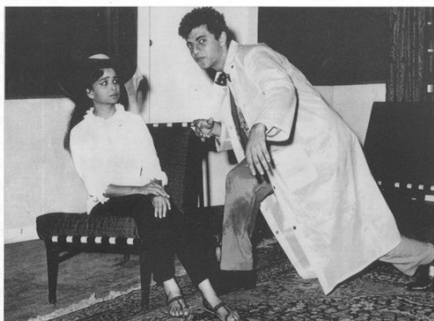




A snapshot after the play "A View from the Bridge" (1966):

Foreground (l-r): Girish Karnad (dark shirt), Ammu Mathew (white saree), Snehalatha Reddy (black dress) - Founding Member, The Madras Players.

Sitting: Ravi Baskaran (with tie), Tamby Kadambaranam (white shirt) extreme right - Founding Member, The Madras Players, S.V. Krishnamurthy (extreme left, sitting 3rd row in dark shirt).



A scene from "The
Private Ear and
Public Eye" (1967).
Girish Karnad and
Vishalram
Ekambaram



A scene from "The Care
Taker" April (1966).
[H] G.S. Gopalakrishnan
and John Smith.



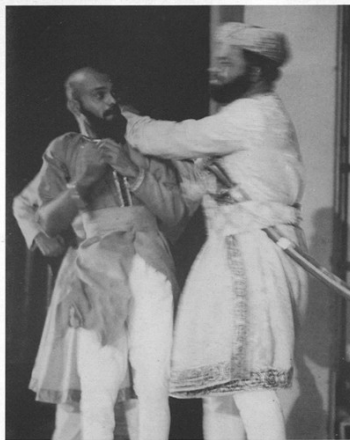
(Top) From "Silence, the Court is in Session," (1969). [L-R] S Ramachander, Viraf Kanga, Vishalem Ekambaram, Lakshmi Krishnamurthy, P. C. Ramakrishna and S. V. Krishnamurthy.



"Uncle Vanya" (1968)
Girish Karnad and
Vishalam Ekambaram.



(l-r): Ronnie Patel,
Sherry Bativala and
Ambi Harsha in a scene
from "Luv" (1975).



"Tiger Tiger" (1972).
(l-r): Mithran Devanesen and
Mohamed Yusuf.

"Plaza suite" (1976) – Curtain Call

(l-r): A V Dhasnushkodi, Leela Wood, P C Ramakrishna, Vishalam Ekambaram and Arun Santhanam.



"The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi" (1979). Vimal Bhagat and Vishalam Ekambaram.



"Brides are not for
Burning" (1981).
[L]: Preminda Jacob
and a friend.



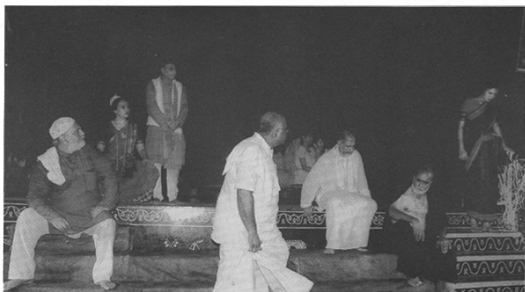
"Dance Like a Man"
(1997).
[L]: P C Ramakrishna,
Anuradha Ananth,
Karthik Iyer and
Bhagirathi Narayanan.



A scene from "Ashwaha" (2003).

"Nagamandala" (2004).

[R]: Mohammed Yusuf, Gayathri, P.C. Ramakrishna, Shankar Sundaram, T.T. Srinath, Anil Kumar, and Andrea Jeremiah.





"Aadhe Adhure" (2005).

(l-r): Mangai, Namrata Kartik, P. C. Ramakrishna, Manasi Subramaniam and Siddharth Raju.



A scene from "Rural Phantasy" (2006).

