

WHEN THE CURTAINS RISE...

Understanding Goa's vibrant Konkani theatre

BATCARA
 AT THE
GAIETY THEATRE.
 A MUSICAL COMEDY IN 2 ACTS,
 (Original Composition of the undersigned).
 Will be staged for the Inauguration of
GOAN UNION DRAMATIC CLUB.
 On Tuesday, 22nd November, 1904.

First appearance of our Actress and the introduction of a variety of other...
 our stage such as never been attempted before by any other Dramatic Club...
 Community.

The play is got up in excellent and humorous style, the musical portion being
 admirably executed by our well known Band master, Mr. Zefertina do Cruz.

WORTHY OF SUPPORT.
 COME AND JUDGE YOURSELVES.

A TREAT FOR THE LITERATE AND THE ILLITERATE.
 Best Histrionic talent of the Community on the Stage
COME AND SEE ! COME AND SEE ! !
 TO AVOID CRUSH, DO SECURE YOUR TICKETS AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE



EMPIRE THEATRE
 Bert Bunder.
BATCARA
 OR
THE CURSE OF CASTE.
 By Mr. J. A. Fernandes.
 IN AID OF THE
Women's War & Relief Fund
 (GOAN LADIES' CIRCLE)
 On Tuesday, the 7th December, 1915.

Enter the distinguished Patronage of
H. E. SR. ALFREDO CASANOVA,
 Consul-General for Portugal in British-India.

5 PINE GREENS DISTRICT ROAD
 COME & SEE!! - It will meet your views - All Goan-Community
 People are unitedly invited to the show and especially the members of the
 Arcah Students' & Parents' hold their Campaign against Caste
 in the City.

Leave you a minute to see *Miss Fernand* & *Miss*, and *Miss* selected
 Ladies come and try to outwitting them in the show.

WAKE UP! UNITE!!
 And show the leaders of the trouble may be subsiding your spirit
 towards outwitting the wrongdoers of the 'Kish-deeper'.

By your presenting a Ticket you will augment
 the War Fund of Goan Ladies' Circle.

Dramatis Personae.
 Mr. J. A. Fernandes...
 Mrs. Fernandes...
 Mr. A. Mascarenhas...
 Miss Fernandes...
 Mr. Policarp Men...
 L. Ribeiro...
 N. M. Fernand...
 Mr. A. J. F. 7th...
 Mr. St. Amador...
 M. de Souza...
 Mr. de Seana...
 Mr. S. X. Vas...
 J. M. Nati...
 Mr. E. R. Vas...
 F. X. Pers...
 A. Dinis...
 A. Dias...
 S. Fernand...
 Miss de Seana...
 Miss de Seana...
 Miss de Seana...

ANDRÉ RAFAEL FERNANDES, Ph.D.

When the curtains rise... Understanding
Goa's vibrant Konkani theatre

André Rafael Fernandes, Ph.D.

When the curtains rise... Understanding Goa's vibrant Konkani theatre
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Published with financial support from the Tiatr Academy of Goa (TAG)
S-4, Block A, 2nd Floor, Campal Trade Centre, Opp. Kala Academy,
Campal, Panjim 403001 Goa tiatracademy@gmail.com

Editing, inside-pages layout and book production by Frederick Noronha

Goa 1556

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<http://goa1556.goa-india.org>

Cover design by Bina Nayak <http://www.binanayak.com>

Printed in India by Sahyadri Offset Systems, Corlim, Ilhas, Goa

Typeset with LyX, <http://www.lyx.org> Text set in Palatino, 11 pt.

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ISBN 978-93-80739-01-4

Front cover illustration depicts a handbill for the 1904 performance of *Batcara*. List of characters confirms the early participation of women in the tiatr, at a time when this was not prevalent in other Indian theatre forms. Also on front cover, a handbill of *Batcara*, staged in 1915 for the Women's War Relief Fund in World War I days. Back cover shows a partial facsimile of a book by *Pai Tiatrist* João Agostinho Fernandes.

Price: Rs. 195 in India.

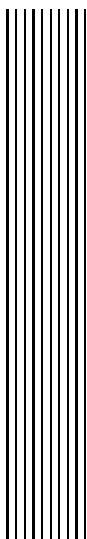
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*Dedicated to tiatrists down the ages...
the pioneers who struggled to develop the art,
the veterans who persisted in keeping it alive,
the contemporary who persevere enthusiastically.*



Foreword

THE TIATR ACADEMY OF GOA is pleased to publish this book, *When the curtains rise... Understanding Goa's vibrant Konkani theatre*, written by Dr. André Rafael Fernandes. In fact, this was the thesis written by Dr. Fernandes for his doctorate. For the TAG, it is a matter of pride that Dr. Fernandes obtained his Ph.D. on a subject – the Goan tiatr – which is the most popular dramatic form of Goa.

The Goan tiatr has progressed in all aspects during the last 118 years. Year after year, its popularity too has reached greater heights. Yet, upto now, there has been no authentic documentation on the tiatr. This vacuum is being filled with the publication of this book.

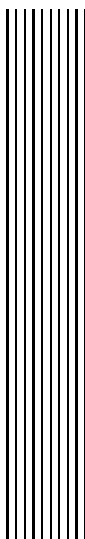
Dr. Fernandes goes deep into the roots of the origin of the tiatr. He analyses the tiatr, its song and its music and he makes a sincere attempt to depict it in an authentic manner. While doing this, he also attempts to widen the vision of the reader by providing additional information about the drama of that time enacted in some

of the other languages in Goa and Bombay. While dealing with the *Kantaram*, the songs that form an essential part of the tiatr, he also enlightens the reader with details of numerous Konkani folk songs and folk music.

When the curtains rise... is definitely an important work of documentation on the tiatr, its song and its music. The TAG thanks Dr. André Rafael Fernandes for his superb presentation of the history of the tiatr and hopes that this book will go a long way in preserving the authentic history of the Goan tiatr.

Tomazinho Cardozo
President
Tiatr Academy of Goa, Panjim,

March 29, 2010



A debt of gratitude

WITH A PROFOUND SENSE of gratitude, I acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor A. K. Joshi, former Head of the Department of English, Goa University. It was under his guidance that the thesis that went into this book was begun and completed. Without his scholarly supervision and perceptive criticism the work would surely not have gained in intensity.

Thanks are also due to the Goa University authorities — the Vice-Chancellor, the Registrar, and other officers and staff. To all of them, a thanks for their help and cooperation.

I also thank Prof. A. V. Afonso, Dean, Faculty of Languages.

To all my colleagues in the Department of English — Dr. Sri-pad Bhat, Dr. Kiran Budkuley, Dr. Anita Vashishta and Dr. Nina Caldeira — a genuine thank you for their support. I am grateful to the late Doutora Selma de Vieira Velho for her encouragement and assistance in documenting and translating original sources in Portuguese.

My gratitude goes to all the Goa University library staff for

their co-operation, help and assistance in tracing out reference material that went into the making of this work. I wish to thank the staff members of the University Office, as well as the Faculty Office.

I am indebted to João Agostinho's son, Tony *Bab*, his wife Ana Maria Carolina Quadros, daughter Sharmila and family members, for all the generous help and material they have been able to extend to me.

My thanks also go to all the tiatrists who have been very cooperative in discussing the topic and giving me invaluable inputs. Among them specially are John Claro (with whom I had several enlightening conversations over the years), Tomazinho Cardozo, John Gomes *Kokoy*, Fr. Dominic Alvares, Remmie Colaço, Master Vaz, Antonio Piedade Moraes, Luciano Dias, C. da Silva, the late Felício Cardoso, Anil Kumar and *Bai* Fatima, Sharon and Wilmix Mazarello, Freddy Barboza, Fr. Antonio Pereira and all others whom I might have missed thanking inadvertently.

I am indebted to writer-publisher Frederick Noronha of Goa 1556. Though the Ph.D. examiners had recommended early publication of the thesis, I was unable to start the task for a long time. Frederick's persistence and editorial prowess were indispensable in ensuring this publication in Goa itself. Without the help and enthusiasm of Tomazinho Cardozo, and the Tiatr Academy of Goa - formed after the thesis was completed - as well as Premanand Lotlikar and the Dalgado Konkani Academy, this publication would have not seen the light of day so quickly and with the minimum amount of hassles; my thanks are due to all those associated with these organisations and who made this publication possible. I must also record my gratitude to Prof. Paulo Melo e Castro, (Professor of Portuguese, University of Leeds) for his close reading and pointing out several corrections of Portuguese and French words.

My thanks to Pundalik Narayan Naik, Jayanti, Maria, Sabita, Phadte, Seby and all the staff at the Goa Konkani Akademi. I also thank the staff at Konkani Bhasha Mandal at Margao, Kala Academy and All India Radio and the late Andrew Greno Viegas — who in his unfortunately short life became well known for painstakingly documenting the history of Konkani film.

My sincere thanks to Santan and Elaine, Fr. Eufemiano Mi-

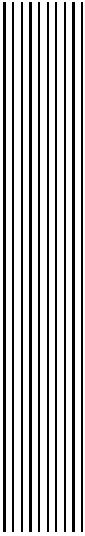
randa, Fr. Mousinho Ataíde, Perpetua, Tony, Guilly and Peter.

Finally, I thank very sincerely my wife, Nirmala, and my sons Krish and Joshua for their tremendous forbearance, their loving concern and cooperation. Without them, this work would have been impossible. I thank my brothers John Piety, Antonio and Joaquim and sisters Rita, Merciana, Shanti and Annie for their encouragement.

I thank all others who have helped me in some way or the other, and seek their understanding for not being able to mention each one by name.

Above all, this work was made possible by God's grace and strength, and particularly His faithfulness and comforting spirit in the toughest of times.

*André Rafael Fernandes,
Panjim, Goa*



Behind the curtains

DOWN THE DECADES, hundreds of tiatrists have kept audiences enthralled for thousands of performances in Goa, Bombay (Mumbai) and elsewhere. Just one figure that gives you a hint of how popular this form of the Konkani stage is: on any given weekend during the theatrical season, at least ten shows are held in various parts of Goa.

In spite of the general apathy of official and government bodies and the onslaught of cable television and alternative forms of entertainment, the tiatr has so far managed to hold its ground as the premier form of staged entertainment for Konkani speakers. But there is no space for complacency. Issues, problems and challenges in contemporary tiatr are discussed in this book.

Khells moved from ground-level to the stage. Antonio Piedade Moraes innovated the path-breaking transformation of the ground-based *khells* to stage performances of *khell-tiatr*. Then came the evolution of the non-stop drama. Put together, all this has meant that the tiatr has been enthused with new life and dynamism.

With the gradual decline, however, of the tiatr production in Bombay or Mumbai — the long-time home of a large section of the Goan diaspora — and corresponding spurt in formation of Goan troupes, theatrical activities have seen a resurgence.

Tiatrs incidentally entertain not just local audiences, but in recent times also perform for the benefit of Goan emigrants elsewhere in India, the Middle East, London and Toronto. When expat communities based in Karachi met in Goa recently (December 2009), they made a plea to send across some interesting tiatr to that part of the subcontinent, the sometimes-tense relations between India and Pakistan notwithstanding. Claiming a population of 20,000 Goans mostly in Karachi, they said a good tiatr could draw audiences of upto five or six thousand strong.

Developments in communication technologies, such as the Internet, permit the Goan diaspora to be aware of contemporary artistes and performances. Considering all its inherent strengths, the tiatr has an assured future as a medium of entertainment, education and social transformation.

* * *

THIS BOOK, BASED ON my Ph.D. thesis, traces the development of this popular Konkani drama form called the tiatr from its various origins. For some time now, the general impression has been that this dramatic form began in 1892 in Bombay. But, as you will read in the pages that follow, this text traces the tiatr's genesis to the traditional *zagors* and *khells*, which in turn evolved over several centuries from other ancient performances.

When the curtains rise... digs out available references from the earliest Portuguese plays in Goa. It tracks developments in music and song — both Indian and Western — and studies their integral functions in the tiatr.

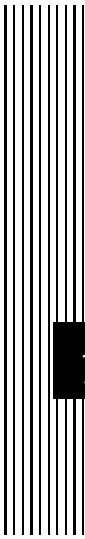
It takes a close look at variations in the spelling of the term '*tiatr*' but retains the original spellings to maintain historical context, even though this may appear confusing at times. The etymology of tiatr provides an explanation for these variants. The study points to the diverse aspects such as genres, thematic concerns, phases of growth, structure, use of language, roles of actors,

roles for women, set designing, lighting, innovations, stage management, publicity, censorship, limitations and audience participation, among other themes.

In this work, we give due credit and highlight the contribution of João Agostinho Fernandes, rightly regarded as *Pai Tiatríst* (a title bestowed on him, which could be interpreted to mean the 'Father of the Tiatr') for his pioneering role in this genre of a still-vibrant Konkani stage. Several of his major plays are analysed and their impact assessed.

João Agostinho comes across as not just an excellent groundbreaking playwright, but also a forceful votary of social reform. One can notice the innovative documentation of João Agostinho's manuscripts, handbills, brochures, news clippings, reviews and related items in his collection. He is, obviously, a role model for tiatrists of all times.

While justice cannot be done to all the generations of tiatrists in just a single book, an attempt is made to briefly analyse the published plays of nine other playwrights. These are: Aleixinho de Candolim, A. R. Souza Ferrão, Kid Boxer, J. P. Souzalin, C. Alvares, Remmie J. Colaço, John Claro Fernandes, Prem Kumar and M. Boyer. Towards the end of this book, there is a list of tiatr personalitys (tiatrists, musicians, stage managers, set designers and others involved in the production of tiatr).



1 Origin of the tiatr

EASTER SUNDAY, April 17, 1892 is generally regarded as the date on which the first documented performance of a modern tiatr was staged. *Italian Bhurgo*, the first teatro, as this form of Konkani stage-based entertainment was then called, was enacted on that day in Bombay, at the New Alfred Theatre¹, which existed where the present Police Commissioner's Head Office is located.

This play was composed by Lucasinho Ribeiro. Ribeiro had landed in Bombay from Goa in search of employment. He was proficient in English², knew music and could play the violin. He was a good composer and singer.³ Hence he could understand and appreciate operas being performed by an Italian opera company whose tour coincided with his arrival in Bombay.

Impressed by the presentation, he attempted to obtain a job as a stagehand with the troupe. His desire was fulfilled through the recommendation of a prominent Goan. He travelled with this Italian opera company to Poona, Madras, Simla and Calcutta. When the troupe proceeded to Burma, Ribeiro parted company and re-

turned to Bombay, but not forgetting one of their operettas.

While leaving this job, he purchased the velvet costumes of the opera company in the hope that he might eventually be able to utilise them in his own venture.

He composed *Italian Bhurgo* (*The Italian Boy*) on the basis of the Italian operetta and staged it as a teatro with the assistance of Caitaninho Fernandes, Agostinho Mascarenhas, João Agostinho Fernandes and another unidentified person.

This performance, however, was not the fruition of just a random creative impulse of Lucasinho's. The development of theatre in Konkani must be traced back to several centuries, and its development as a language still earlier. Historical evidence indicates the evolution of the language in the Konkani region between the eighth and the tenth century.⁴



Lucasinho Ribeiro

Tiatr's antecedents, religious drama

Goa has had traditions — imported and native — of festivities associated with religious celebrations. Such festivities included the staging of plays of a spiritual, moral or secular nature.

Just as Mystery and Miracle plays or Morality plays, Passion plays and Biblical or Lenten enactments were performed in Europe, they were also performed in Goa. As emigrants or missionaries generally carry some facets of their culture with them, the Portuguese colonists and religious also brought along their own cultural, spiritual and catechetical practices. The earliest documented evidence of a performance comes from the early sixteenth century.⁵

References are found to the staging of many tragedies, comedies and tragi-comedies on religious themes by the church in Goa. There were performances of Passion plays and dialogues on religious themes.

The correspondence of the Jesuits in Goa with their superiors in Rome and Lisbon contains brief accounts of such performances. The language used in the performances was Latin. The purpose of the staging was to demonstrate the achievement of the native seminarians to the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, to propagate faith and to provide wholesome diversion.

It may be mentioned here that following the installation of Asia's first printing press in Goa⁶ in September 1556, the first book published in October 1556 was *Conclusionnes Philosophicas*.⁷ This was a compilation of the dissertations by seminarians. The previous year, a significant event had taken place in the form of the staging of a play — *Auto de Filodemo* — authored by Luís de Camões.⁸

Luís de Camões, in Portugal and India

Luís de Camões left Portugal for India in 1553. Besides being renowned for *The Lusíads* (1572, trans. 1655), considered as Portugal's national epic, Camões's fame rests also on his substantial number of posthumously published shorter poems: odes and sonnets, elegies, and canzoni.

In addition, he also wrote three plays, *Auto de Enfatriões*, *Auto de El-Rei Seleuco* and *Auto de Filodemo*. Two of these plays — *Auto de Enfatriões* and *Auto de Filodemo* — were published for the first time in a book titled as follows:⁹

PRIMEIRA PARTE DOS AUTOS E COMÉDIAS

PORTUGUESAS

feitas por António Prestes, por Luís de Camões & por outros Autores Portugueses, cujos nomes vão no principios de suas obras. Agora novamente juntas e emendadas nesta primeira impressãõ por Áfonso Lopes, moço da Capella de sua Majestade à sua custa.

It must be noted that *Auto de El-Rei Seleuco* was unknown or forgotten, and Manuel de Faria e Sousa was ignorant of its existence when he published his *I Vida del Poeta* in 1639. It was only in 1645 that the play was re-discovered among the manuscripts of the Count of Penaguião. It was published in 1645 in the printing press of Paulo Craesbeck, with all the necessary permissions.¹⁰

Auto de Filodemo: An insertion in the manuscript of Luís Franco, a contemporary of Camões, states “*Comédia feita por L. de Camões — representada na India a Frº de Barreto*”. Francisco Barreto was invested as the Governor of Goa in 1555. So it is presumed that this was the date of its first presentation on the stage.

It is a novelistic play — and has the sentimental romance background — which is no novelty, since it was a practice in the Iberian Peninsula to turn eclogues into theatrical episodes (Encina). Gil Vicente had transformed the *Romance Of Amadis De Gaula and Dom Duardos* (Portuguese high chivalry romances) into well-balanced theatrical episodes without removing their hallmark of chivalric romances.

At such a time, theatrical representation was a sufficiently elastic literary scene to enable everything and anything to be inserted in it. Whatever the faults of technicalities or shortcomings, the audience’s imagination would fill in the gaps, since there was no possibility of time gaps for the changes required in the alteration of space of action.¹¹

Whenever such situations occurred, as for instance in the very argument of the play *Auto de Filodemo*, the narrative takes over the argument with picturesque language, and humour which was often sharp and biting.

Hence there are two aspects — the “palaciano” and the “campesino” — each with a pair of “namorados” in unequal social condition:

- In the palace of Lusidardo, Filodemo is his servant and in love with his lord’s daughter;
- In the pastoral scene and fields, Venadoro, also a son of a high-born aristocrat has suddenly fallen in passionate love with a shepherdess, Florimena.

It is obvious that in the society of those times such passionate entanglement would get the complacent acceptance of the writers

and the public. This happens also in the case where the servant Filodemo and shepherdess Florimena revealed their high birth through their lofty ideas and language – which were considered the telltale signs of undeniable noble inheritance.

While the pair of “namorados” in the palace had their confidants, these were absent in the pastoral background. Filodemo confided in his friend Duriano and Dionisia in her maidservant Solina. The young couple in love express themselves in subtlety and sublimation of language of Petrarchan love because society imposed a self-conflict and a large distance between them.

Duriano presents a different philosophy — that of a youth free of external impositions and full of good humour, who laughs at Platonisms, which he exposes as hypocrisy and lies. On her side, Solina exhibits a womanly cunning undeterred by any scruples; her only yardstick was the appearance and reputation of honesty.

Religious drama, in early times

Besides these dramas in Latin and Portuguese, religious plays in vernacular languages were staged on festive occasions such as Christmas, Easter and Corpus Christi. Passion plays were enacted during Lent.

A play, in vernacular, performed in 1586 on the feast of St. Paul’s conversion (January 25) at the College of St Paul in the City of Goa seems particularly noteworthy because of its connection with the form of the medieval spectacle and pageant plays of Europe.

The play described as a “short and gay dialogue on conversion to Christianity”¹² was performed to celebrate the baptism of native neophytes. The plot was very simple.

It opens with the appearance of the City of Goa, accompanied by the neighbouring islands of Chorão, Divar, Salcete and Bardez. God complains of the scanty zeal shown in matters of conversion. To this, the devout Lady Conversion, who enters next, responds by reassuring Goa that there would take place new conversions. She then disputes with various pagans and the devil himself, refuting their arguments. As a result of this, the “pagans” discard their turbans, cut off their topknots and partake of the food of the Christians amidst general rejoicing.