

Actor Amol Palekar returns to the stage after long absence

Kusur, a thriller, will be performed in Mumbai on November 24

SHOUMOJIT BANERJEE
PUNE

There's a touch of painter Lucian Freud about the famously reclusive actor Amol Palekar as he welcomes me into his studio in the leafy environs of Pune's Prabhat Road, far from the city's madding crowds.

"When I turned 70, I decided to go back to my first love that is painting. For the last five years, my vocation has primarily been that of a painter. I paint the whole day," says the actor, as he settles down to talk about his return to the stage after 25 years with the thrilling play titled *Kusur* ('The Mistake').

What made him turn back to theatre after his long, enforced absence?

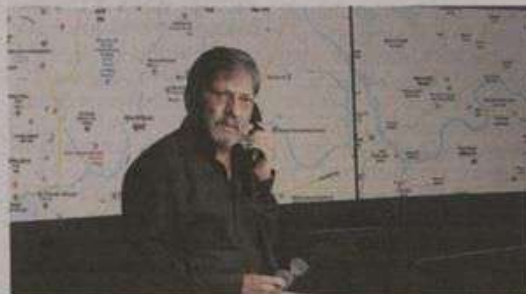
"The problem was to find a good enough script. While I keep getting a steady stream

of offers to perform in plays and films, I found nothing which was particularly exciting, challenging or different. So, when Sandhya came up with *Kusur* which is absolutely riveting, it made me start biting my nails and wonder whether I will be able to stretch myself and remove the rust of so many years," says Mr. Palekar.

Partners in play

Adapted by his wife and intimate collaborator Sandhya Gokhale from the 2018 Danish film *Den Skyldige* ('The Guilty'), the play – jointly helmed by Mr. Palekar and Ms. Gokhale – will be staged in Mumbai's NCPA on November 24 on the occasion of the actor's 75th birthday.

The thespian plays a retired Assistant Commissioner of Police at an emergency



Back in the act: Amol Palekar. *SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

control room in a Mumbai police station on a rainy night which proves to be momentous and disconcerting.

The unconventional drama, with its byzantine twists is also a probing and trenchant 'social thriller' at the same time.

"What appealed to me about *Kusur* was that without our realising, we have our own points of view, our own biases which are very difficult to overcome. Here is a thriller which is completely

different. Every seven or ten minutes there is a disconcerting twist that keeps changing like a kaleidoscope and overturns our assumptions while laying bare our prejudices. I thought the exercise was riveting and challenging," says Mr. Palekar.

The play is also a thanksgiving of sorts for the actor's legions of fans who have clamoured for his return to acting.

"In this long passage of time, I have been simply

overwhelmed with the love and affection the audience still keeps showering on me and this, despite me not having acted in theatre and films for such a long time. When people, especially from the younger generation still walk up to me with so much warmth and say that they miss me, I am all the more surprised and happy. So, I thought, well, this what I owe them and I hope I give them my best with this new offering," he says.

According to Mr. Palekar, *Kusur* offered him a chance to be on top of his game as well as satisfying his ever-present fire to conquer new horizons and experiment anew.

"If you see a musician, however acclaimed he may, he religiously does his *riyaaz* daily. Likewise, the dancer practices her or his craft rigorously but never the actor. We actors take things for granted too early. So, this

play has made me go to the basics I learnt as a young man and brush up what I had forgotten," he observes, remarking, "Only when you are in command of your craft can you start experimenting".

He notes that the fascinating part of the play was that it is a thriller.

Nuanced offering

"The offerings in the thriller genre these days are either a murder-mystery or a high-octane, larger than life film with convoluted plots. But not so with *Kusur* and the kind of nuance that Sandhya has brought in adapting it to Indian conditions is amazing," he says.

If Mr. Palekar's gentle, yet perceptive comedies and dramas like *Rajnigandha*, *Chhoti Si Baat* and *Gol Maal* echoed Jack Lemmon's American everyman, his sneaky, startling and devious turns in films like *Bhumika*,

Plot No. 5 and *Ankahee* brings to mind subtle European actors like Jean-Louis Trintignant.

"I have never followed the dictates of the market. Right at the beginning of my career, after my first three silver jubilee hits as a hero, I chose Shyam Benegal's *Bhumika* in which I played a negative character. This was unheard of at the time and thoroughly upset many in the industry who questioned my choice. My simple answer was that once I know that I can do this easily, I lose my interest in that thing," says Mr. Palekar, stating that he has always gone against the tide.

"The artist in me wants to find out if there is something else which I haven't tried out and if I can do that successfully and whether people would like this new experimentation. So, I have never been perturbed by market forces. The best part is that

people have not only loved me but today they respect me for this," he remarks.

In *Kusur*, one finds a perfect symbiosis and harmony of his primary vocation as a painter and his 'accidental' vocation as an actor.

"The painter in me has always inspired the actor and the director in me and vice versa. Whatever I learnt in films, especially the usage of sound and the visual quality of a sound, I can relate to as a painter," he says, remarking, "I am only grateful that I can dabble in three different art forms."

Mr. Palekar has made a commitment for a limited run of only 25 shows.

"I do not only want to perform in the major theatre-going cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru of Kolkata but want to take this play to places like Guwahati or Surat where such plays or performances may not reach audiences there," he says.