

Down Memory Lane

It Has All Been Worth It

By Lalita Pawar
(as told to Sheila Vesuna)

Lalita Pawar has spent fifty-five years of her life as an actress in the film industry. Her career has spanned both the silent era and the "talkies". She still continues to act—a veritable rarity. In a Lalita Pawar film, the audience is never indifferent to her performance. She always makes her presence felt, be it the role of the wicked mother-in-law, who brings havoc to her family, or that of a loyal, heart-of-gold governess. Lalita Pawar is practically a living example of the adage 'Work is Worship'. In fact, single-minded concentration such as hers is unusual. It is she who has been all along the complete professional.....

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"I started out way back in 1928, when I was still a child. My brother Shantaram and I had come along with our father to Poona in connection with his work. That was the first time we saw a silent movie. It was at Aryan Cinema. Instead of dialogue, there were written titles flashed on the screen, which audiences used to often read aloud. A few musicians sat near the screen and played music at appropriate times, i.e., whenever there was sword-fighting, riding, sad scenes, hilarious scenes, love scenes, etc.

"All this was a wonder to me, since we had only seen the village Ramleela, which had living characters. After watching



Lalita Pawar

*As she appears in 'Mahasati Behula'*

the film, I went behind the screen to find out who the people were, but was astonished to find no one there. Then I met the operator and asked him who the dumb people on the screen were. He then explained, told us about the Aryan Film Company, which was situated at the foot of the Parvati Hill Temple in Poona itself. Shantaram and I landed there, and managed to get to the so-called studio. It was made of many tall pillars with a roof of white cloth. Under this roof, a hall was made of cloth itself. The walls, windows, doors etc., were painted, and some furniture was placed. The shooting was carried out in daylight with the help of reflectors. The director was Nanasaheb Sarpotdar, also a partner of the company. He saw us and enquired if we would like to work in a film. He then spoke to my father. He agreed and I began to work as a child-heroine on a monthly salary of Rs. 18. My brother was paid Rs. 7.

"With the Aryan Film Company, I made about 20 films that included 'Aryan Mahila', 'Patit Udhar', 'Raja Harishchandra', 'Bheemsen', 'Samsher Bahadur', 'Prithviraj Sanyogita', 'Subhadra Haran' and 'Chatur Sundari'. Later, in 1930, Gubbi Veeranna, owner of a drama company, started his film company called the Karnatak Film Corporation in Bangalore. I went there to work in his first film 'Song of Life' and then returned to Poona to work with Shyamsunder Agarwal in

'Gallant Hearts'. Then Shiraz Ali Hakim, who had started his new company, The Standard Film Company, offered me his first film 'Sweet Angel'. I also worked for Chandra Rao Kadam, who is the present owner of Chandivali Outdoor Film Studio, in films like 'Royal Friend', 'Divine Treasure' and 'Beloved Blade'. I then produced my own film 'Kailas' in partnership with Ganpat Bakre, a hero from Kolhapur. I played the heroine, the vamp and the mother.

"All these were silent films. By now, the "talkies" had already arrived. I did my first talkie in 1935 with 'Himmat-e-Marda'. I sang all the songs myself. We had to. In 1936, I produced my own talkie 'Duniya Kya Hai', based on Tolstoy's 'Resurrection'. It turned out to be a grand success. I was appreciated for my acting. Since then, I got established as a dramatic actress. I did a number of emotional roles as the heroine in films like 'Netaji Palkar' and 'Amrit'. Unfortunately, soon came a turning point in my career, which marked the end of my days as a heroine.

Eye-sight Impaired

"While acting in a film, I had to receive a slap from my co-actor according to the script. The actor had a grudge against me. He gave me such a realistic hard slap, I fell down with a facial paralysis. The shot had come out marvellously but I got disfigured with my eye-sight impaired. For four long years, I

Lalita Pawar in her own production 'Duniya Kya Hai' (1937)





Lalita Pawar with Baburao Pendharkar in 'Amrit'

was under medical treatment, and out of work. Those years were extremely tough, but I managed to survive the crisis. The damage, of course, remained and I still have a stiffness on one side of my face. I knew my career as a heroine had ended, because you need softness of expression to convey emotions. I decided to take on any kind of role that was offered and do my best.

“The first film that I took up when I resumed acting was ‘Grihasti’. It was a jubilee hit. There were some awards for my performance. Since then, there was a flood of character roles for me. What is important is not whether one is a heroine or a character actress. One should be able to act well. And I have tried to give of my best in all the 500-odd films I have done since 1928. My only commitment in the world has been my work at the studios. I try and put in my very best in every scene of mine. And you don’t have to be appreciated for the length of the role. Even one scene can suffice. In ‘Shri 420’, one scene was good enough for me.

Typing of Characters

“People have felt that I am “typed” as a shrew, but I feel otherwise. If the film-maker “types” me as such, I can’t help it. I believe in versatility. True, only my loud vampish roles get noticed. But I’ve done significant roles in ‘Professor’, ‘Anari’



With Dilip Kumar in 'Daag'

and 'Memdidi'. The role as Mrs. DeSa in 'Anari' has always fetched me appreciation. I received the **Filmfare** award for it, and even if it is screened to-day, it brings tears to people's eyes.

"I have never tried to go out of my way to bag roles. It is all one's destiny. As an actress, the worst thing that can happen is damage to one's face. I've survived the worst of crises. My career has been chequered but it has strengthened all right. I am an illiterate person. I belong to a poor family. But it doesn't really make any difference to me. I have learnt from the school of life, from practical experience and therefore never feel that I am any less than those who have read Shakespeare and all the great works of masters. Perhaps my lack of education left me out of a hectic social life. But then, I've never had time for friends, parties etc. I am devoted to my work. And I have never let anything come in the way of my work.

"Today, when I look back, I feel it has all been worth it. Few actresses have been fortunate to have worked for fifty-five years continuously. From the silent to the "talkies", I have worked with all kinds of film-makers, great film-makers like V. Shantaram, Amiya Chakravarty and Raj Kapoor. One learns a lot from them. More important, my work has been appreciated and recognised. I feel I have been sufficiently rewarded for devoting my life to films. What more can I ask, except to be able to go on?"
