



Mani Rabadi

ALMOST everyone who saw *Sholay* liked the 'Meh-booba' dance number immensely. Apart from Jalal Agha singing in R. D. Burman's voice, there was Helen—swooping, whirling, and twirling all those scarves. I thought she looked every inch a gypsy dancer.

And Mani Rabadi thinks so too.

Mani designed Helen's costume for that song. Her telephone's busy with people ringing up to congratulate her on her job. Mani doesn't climb on to Cloud Line, though. She thanks her industry 'fans', puts the receiver down, and thinks up a costume for Parveen's next movie.

Ten years back, Mani Rabadi was just another average woman. And then, after a tiff with her folks, she moved out of home. Alone and with the wolves at her door, she began looking for a way to earn her bread. Mani had edited a Hindi magazine called 'Gori' for quite some time, and she was wondering whether to go back to journalism. Then some friend suggested she learn tailoring. She attended Singer classes, and when she had learnt everything, another lady friend bought her a sewing machine. Mani began her tailoring business, and soon, she had a large clientele on and around Peddar Road (where she stays).

Sometime in 1968, her friends asked her why she didn't try to design costumes for heroines in Hindi films. Her sister Shammi was a heroine some years back, and Mani had quite a few contacts in film land. So "One fine day," Mani says, "when I met my old friends Johnny and Tony Walker, who were producing a film called *Dil Lagi*, I offered to design the costumes for their heroine, Mala Sinha." Costume-designing hadn't come into prominence then, and the Walkers were not very enthusiastic. But Mani persisted, and finally got to meet Mala with a few of her sketches. Mala liked them, and so Mani got her first designing job for films in *Dil Lagi*. After that, she designed all of Mala's costumes. Her work drew attention, and Sharmila, who was co-starring with Mala in *Humsaya*,

asked Mani to design her clothes, too.

And then, like we all know, nothing succeeds like success. Mani soon had an enviable roster of heroines in her design files, and she closed her tailoring shop.

Two things contributed to Mani's success at that time: the paucity of good costume designers, and the fact that colour films were just then coming into vogue. After *Dil*



Lagi, she designed clothes for *Jaal*. Mani was a conscientious designer, and even today, she says, "I get to know what the director really wants. And then I get to know the cameraman: the colours he thinks he can photograph best, the shades he thinks will blend with the tone of the film. And finally, I meet the art director, and working in conjunction with him, I work out the colour schemes for my designs. My colours have to harmonise with the colour of the sets, the colour of the clothes the other characters wear, and most of all, the 'mood' of the film. I cannot have the heroine entering in a flaming red gown when the script calls for an emotional, low-key scene. I insist on listening to the story, and try to design clothes that go with the psychology of the character."

A big job Mani landed recently was Zeenat's costumes in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*. Her job here was a real chal-

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lenge, she says, because Raj Kapoor wanted Zeenat to look realistically poor—not filmily poor. "Most of the 'poor' characters in our films wear studiously decrepit clothes," Mani says. "The rents in the sleeves, the grime on the back, the missing button, all smack of theatrical poverty. I believe in studying the clothes the poor wear, and then incorporating them in my designs. There are compromises, of course. The industry is full of compromises," she finishes wryly.

Wouldn't the rise of the 'realistic' cinema make a dent in Mani's business? No, she says, because even realistic films have to have some thought put into the costumes

their characters wear. "We can't have 'realistic' cinema in the true sense for quite some time," Mani feels, "because, our people are not prepared to spend money to see the same misery they wallow in on the screen. Realism, therefore, is subtly touched-up, given a couple of glamourised touches. And this is where I come in."

Mani goes on a designing spree when it comes to visualising the costumes for cabaret scenes. Sequins, jewellery, shimmering slit gowns, sexy plunging necklines—we've seen umpteen Bindu and Helen and Padma Khanna items in these costumes. Won't the ban on cabaret scenes affect Mani's scope?

Once more, she disagrees with me. Our producers will certainly inject their quota of glamour and glitter, she says, because they cannot sell their film otherwise. Instead of cabaret scenes, they'll have 'mujras', she smiles. "I wouldn't be bothered if my business went 'phut'," she says, "I'm a 'fakir' at heart."



I can accept anything." And she raises her eyes to the ceiling.

A producer comes in, to ask Mani whether her design for Bindu in his forthcoming film is ready. Throughout the discussion, he keeps reminding Mani about the Censors, and begs her to keep the new strictures on sex and vulgarity in mind. Mani soothes his overtaxed nerves, promises to have everything ready for the



shooting, and walks with him to the door.

Although she hasn't had any formal training in art, Mani designs all the costumes she does herself. She has a tailoring section in an adjacent flat, an embroidery section at Bhendi Bazar, and also a workshop where fake jewellery is made to her specifications, to go along with her costumes. So the next time you see Bindu dancing on the screen, watch her jewellery closely. Chances are it was pasted together by Mani's intrepid workmen.

Don't the heroines prove very difficult, I ask. Don't they change their minds often and throw Mani's plans awry? "Which woman doesn't keep changing her mind?" she replies. "The heroines I design for are entitled to their moods—they work under tremendous stress."

Mani has a lot of assignments on hand—Chor Ke Ghar Chor, Dharmveer, Maha Guru, and Mama Bhanja are films in which she's designing for Zeenat, apart from *Satyam*..... She's also designing Hema's costumes in *Aap Ke Khatir*, *Aap Beati*, and *Dream Girl*. She designed all the clothes Dimple and Sonia Sahní wore in *Bobby* (and she saw the film only in the 18th week). She designs often for her favourite male model, Pran. And she's designing the clothes for the cast of *Chamatkar*. Even those worn by Rajesh Khanna!

Publicity-shy, Mani rarely appears at parties, and funnily enough, rarely sees the movies in which her designs grace the female stars. She's full of verve and ideas. And she respects her three competitors—Bhanu Athaiya, Leena Daru, and Shalini Shah. Altogether, Mani Rabadi is a very nice person, not at all the type that would have designs on you.

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