

Mani Rabadi

ALMOST everyone who saw
Sholay liked the 'Mehbooba' 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 gipsy 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 learn tailoring. She attended Singer classes, and when she had learnt everything, other 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

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 filmland. 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." Costumedesigning 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,

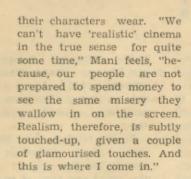
MANI RABADI ... with designs on stars

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

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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.



lenge, she says, because Raj Kapor wanted Zeenat to look realistically poor-not filmily poor, "Most of the 'poor' characters in our films studiedly 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



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

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.

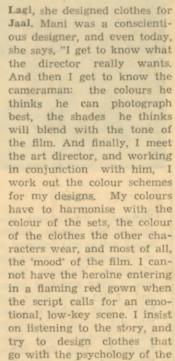
Although she hasn't had any formal training in art, Mani designs all the costumes she does herself. She has a tailoring section in an adjacent flat, an embroidery section at Bhendi Bazar, and also a workshop where fake jewellery is made to her specifications, to go along with her costumes. So the next 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 Sahni wore in Bobby (and she saw the film only in the 18th week). She designs often 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 competitiors — Bhanu Athayya, Leena Daru, and Shalini Shah. Altogether, Mani Rabadi is a very nice person, not at all the type that would have designs on you.

Chaitanya Kalbag



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

character."

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