

A black and white portrait of a middle-aged man with dark hair and glasses, looking directly at the camera with a slight, knowing expression. He is wearing a patterned shirt with a repeating geometric design. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# HUMOUR *is his* STAGE

Y Gee Mahendra  
Champion of Chennai – Arts

One of theater's most recognized voices,  
Yecha Gunja Mahendran's razor sharp wit  
combined with his love for performing,  
has been entertaining audiences  
with his unique brand of humour through his plays,  
movies and television shows.

YgeeM, as he is popularly referred to, tells it like it is, giving viewers the ability to laugh at a gamut of subjects - even about a sensitive issue such as the challenges of Alzheimer's in his play "Charukesi," the latest production from his theater group, United Amateur Artistes (UAA).

Conceived by the late 'Crazy' Mohan, the play has been written by Venkat and directed by YgeeM. It opened to enthusiastic reviews and continues to run to packed houses. As the banner reads, "Charukesi is a powerful story laced with UAA's brand of classy humour and a liberal dose of classical music."

Started by his father, Y G Parthasarathy (YGP) in 1952, UAA has been an integral part of YgeeM's life. As Chennai's oldest and longest running Tamil theater group enters its 70th year of showmanship, YgeeM has been at the forefront of its productions, directing and starring in them for six decades now. His splendid movie career follows a similar course and timeline. His formative years were woven with the growth of UAA. "At any given point, the cast and crew of a play in production would assemble at our house, doing rehearsals or being involved with script writing etc," says YgeeM, reminiscent of his father's labour of love.

It was almost like UAA was a sibling, taking up all of his father's time

and attention. The atmosphere was always lively and charged with spontaneity and creativity, twin tenets that are YgeeM's core strengths. He has taken his plays to audiences all over the world, and UAA was among the first to introduce interesting props to bring in variety to the stage settings.

In a freewheeling interview, the multifaceted actor speaks about his journey and his repertoire of work in theater, film and television industries.

What philosophy has stood the test of time for him, across generations and over six decades? Gratitude. "Never forget where you come from. If we have made strides in our line of work it is mainly because of the efforts of our predecessors. They rode the rough path and have made it easier for us."

The Sanskrit phrase, 'Matha, Pitha, Guru, Deivam,' is something he swears by. Respect and revere the four cardinal influencers who have shaped our lives. His mother, Padmashree Y G Rajalakshmi (Mrs YGP, founder of the Padma Seshadri Bala Bhavan Senior Secondary Schools), instilled strong academic foundations. She led by example and ensured that he always set goals and worked towards accomplishing them. Even though acting was what YgeeM was interested in, thanks to her, he completed schooling and earned his Engineering degree with distinction.

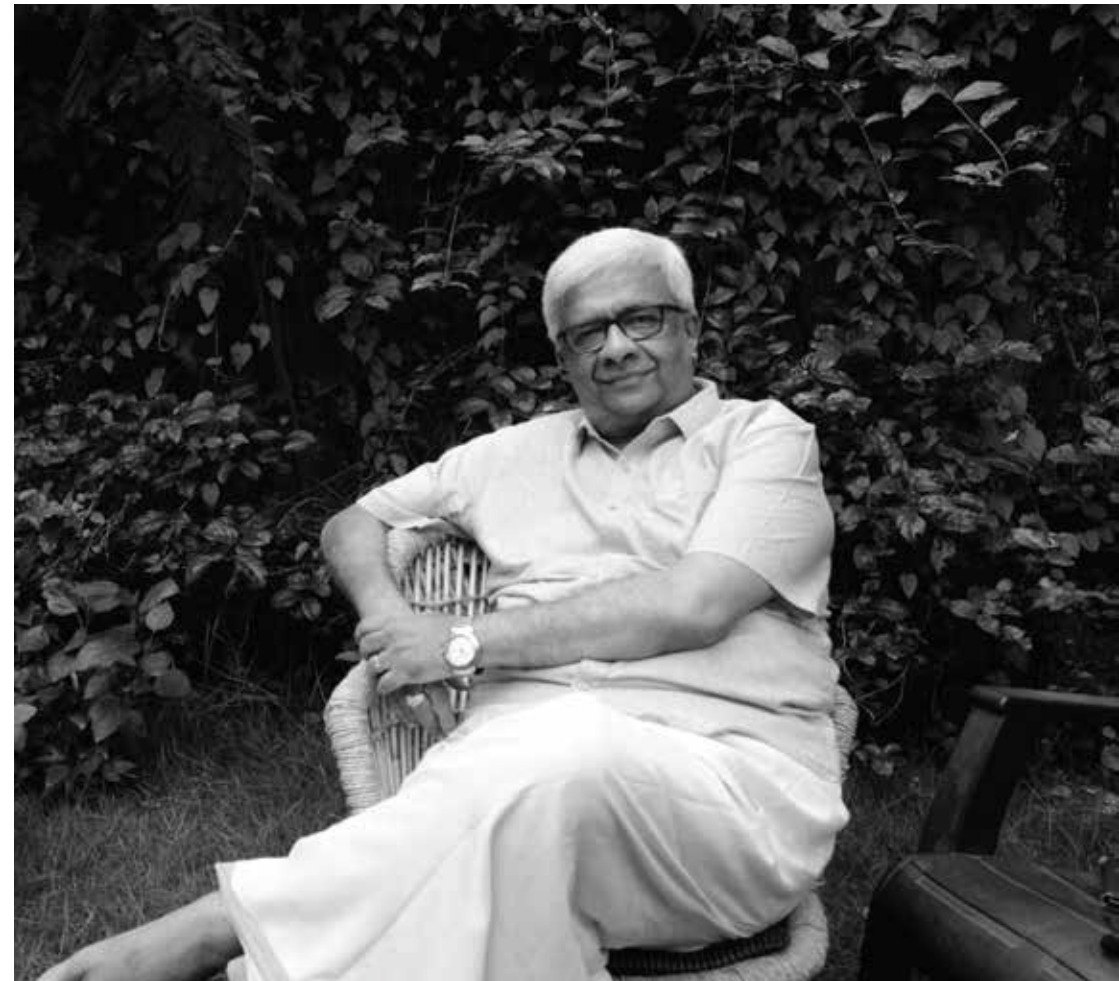
To his father, the ensemble of UAA was like family. No matter where they traveled, he would retire to his room only after all the troupe members had settled down first. A short-tempered man he was, but YGP was the first to apologise if he was at fault. YgeeM inherited his father's sense of fair play and this principle guides him in his everyday dealings.

While YgeeM looks up to many veteran theater and film artistes, his foremost mentor and guru was the legend, Sivaji Ganesan. The thespian is known for his powerhouse performance just as

much as his disciplined approach to work and his professionalism.

"When he no longer did stage performances, the one thing he missed sorely was the applause during the curtain call. He would ask longing and leading questions: if our play went well, if we said our dialogues correctly and if our show got massive cheering from the audience. That is the instant feedback we slog for," says YgeeM about the *raison d'être* for actors.

One time, a member of the audience was on his phone, and it was distracting





the performers. With an impromptu dialogue insertion, YgeeM asked that person to take the call elsewhere. He is known for making on the spot improvisations, and the cast members take it in their stride and play along.

Not overtly spiritual, YgeeM practices the religion of discipline. He worships God Almighty, his work, routine and the basic humanitarian principles. His motto? "Be a good person. But if you can't go out of your way to do good, do no harm to others."

On being asked how popular theater is with the current generation of youngsters, YgeeM says when they write screenplays, they keep in mind all categories of their audience - from the intellectuals to the layman and their age groups - and tailor the message to reach every last member of the assemblage.

And thanks to the popularity of YgeeM's recent appearance in the movie "Maanadu," his name is familiar with a section of today's youth. It is a great sense of fulfillment when the millennials

and gen Z come to watch their shows, observes the character artiste par excellence.

"This city has given us a lot and I have been fortunate to hear that our plays have empathized with the different backgrounds our viewers come from too." Says YgeeM

When asked if streaming platforms can take over theater plays, YgeeM points out that movies and television shows don't have the same intimacy or sense of participation. Elaborating, he adds, "When watching a programme on an OTT platform, the viewer can hit pause at any moment -

freezing the character/ performer/ singer midway - to suit the need. The momentum is lost, even though they resume from where they left off at a later time. The mood/ suspense that was building up doesn't deliver the intended effect."

He agrees that the platform gives viewers the flexibility to watch as per their comfort. He also feels that small-budget films by independent filmmakers and first timers, are categories who can be promoted by OTT streaming services.

The print medium falls short, when trying to capture the essence of YgeeM's interview. Words don't do justice to the hammy gusto with which he speaks his mind nor do they convey the range of expressions that he effortlessly conveys.

When we asked how he balances the weight of his achievements and that of his hugely star cast family, without missing a beat he replies, "My immediate need is my own weight management issue." His family is the backbone of all his endeavours and they bounce off ideas around the family table. In fact, before "Charukesi's" 25th run, his wife, Sudha Mahendra, made a recommendation, which he incorporated in the play. He says "It was a subtle but a brilliant input which elevated the impact of the scene." YgeeM is a multi-talented person - A skilled percussionist, YgeeM plays the tabla, bongo and the drums. He conducts periodic concerts for different occasions. YgeeM manages one of the city's leading cultural organization called Bharath Kalachar and arranges many classical performances under its auspices. What is next on his to-do list for this voracious reader and hardcore Chennaiite? "Keep getting inspired and if Hollywood beckons I already have my bags packed. Dhanush has beat me to it with "The Gray Man" but then you never can say what the future holds.

