

Monday, December 1, 2003

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HE'S ARGUABLY India's first stand-up comedian. But I can't call it that. Because Shekhar Suman insists that it isn't stand-up comedy. "Comedy is a shallow term. It's surface level. I don't know why they call it stand-up comedy. It's a show that I call serious. When the laughter dies out, what you are left with are serious issues. I would call it a stand-up act. It's a satire. It's not entirely fictional. I satirise a piece of news. It's like an exaggeration of the truth. Like lampooning or cartooning. A long nose here and a pointed jaw-line there. It's a cock-eyed view but the visuals don't blur the truth."

Well, that's just an edited sample of how he talks. If we were to print all that he talks in an hour, it would run to pages. Unless you interrupt him and ask another question, you just can't stop his flow. Effortlessly, he raises new questions all by himself and answers them as long as he can. Until either you ask him or he finds another question. No, we are not calling him Mr. Motor-mouth exactly. Shekhar, on the other hand, is a walking talking thinking machine that moves and shakes you.



Pic by M. Moorthy

Mr. Mover and Shaker is the split personality of the real Shekhar Suman. "That's not me but part of me. I never anchor the show, I 'actor' the show. As an actor, I play a character that I have created. It's a theatrical format. I play the 'sutradhar' who connects to the audience. I came to learn about the likes of Leno much later after I started my show. I was inspired by R. K. Laxman's cartoons. I thought 'Why not give this common man a voice?' It's an irreverent show. The view represented in the show is, something I would like to believe, the common view — basically, a reflection of public opinion. When I sit and brain-bash with the writers, I make sure everybody agrees to it. It's not a personal statement. Anyone in my place would say the same thing. It's like reportage. Just like how newspapers don't have any personal ideology. So I'm the editor, I take the call. I decide what is hitting below the belt, what is not."

For all that he does, he's glad to be alive. Though initially people thought the content was "sacrilegious and blasphemous", they soon settled down, he says. "The

response has been good. Even abroad because it's a very specialised genre. A stand-up is about political issues and a common man's representative. It's a common bond that puts us on the same pedestal. Hence, taking it to the people and bringing it live on stage is just a by-product. For me, it's theatre. It's completely live and the response, immediate. In TV, you have the luxury of 'cutting'. Theatre doesn't allow it. That's the high of doing it. It's an enriching and different experience. It's not theatre-theatre. It's not entertainment-entertainment. There are moments when it sets you thinking. I don't want people to come with a preconceived notion of falling off the chair laughing," Shekhar rattles on before proceeding to give a sample of his jokes.

Joke 1: "The father asks a child not to eat chocolate because it has worms. And the child replies that he will drink cola after it and the pesticides will kill the worms inside the stomach."

Joke 2: "An inspector was caught taking a bribe of Rs.25,000. And his senior reprimands him saying: Couldn't you wait till you became IG?" And the non-stop talker continues.

"When you live in a society where people who are supposed to defend you turn out to

Badshah of BLAH

"It's not just comedy. It's satire... we make people think," says Shekhar Suman to SUDHISH KAMATH

be corrupt, it is a matter of growing concern. We live in a country of scams. One scam after another. The latest to be involved is cricketer Abhijit Kale. Before that it was Judev. And before that Daler Mehndi, Mallika Sarabhai... all involved in scams. We can only laugh about it and maybe awaken people about the rude facts and make them speak out. We are in the perpetual state of inherent danger. I'm not a crusader though I would love to be one. So I do whatever I can with the part of me as an actor. An actor is not monolithic but like a tree branching out with leaves and fruits. He plays a character. The social responsibility is manifested in whichever is your persona."

I interrupt to ask what has all the experience of talking, taught him. "It has taught me to speak my mind. It has taught me to be apolitical. It has taught me to be fearless. It has taught me to be honest with myself. You may be my best friend but if there's something amiss, I will certainly bring it up on the show. I will tell you why I liked doing the show..."

Hmmm! Now you know why it's easy to interview an interviewer. And why it's tough as well. Don't blame me if the copy is long. I'm just an innocent messenger. ■