

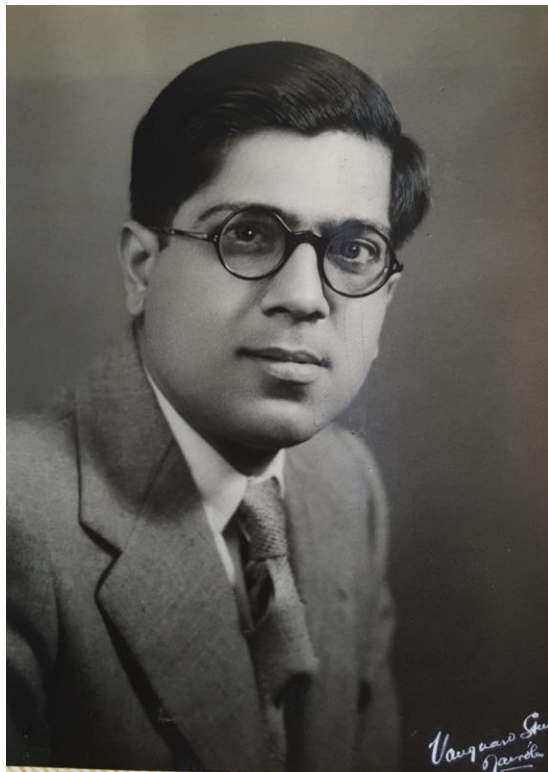
## **P.D. Bhadresa – Tailors and Outfitters to NCP**

**By Suman Bhadresa**

The costumes designed by Mary Epsom for the productions staged by Nairobi City Players (NCP) were elaborate, diverse and numerous. The design and execution of costumes for all of NCP's productions was a monumental challenge that had to be accomplished within strict timeframes and budgets. The task of meeting this challenge was the responsibility of a great double-act who worked diligently behind the scenes – Mary Epsom and PD Bhadresa. Together they ensured that all NCP thespians who threaded the boards of the Kenya National Theatre and elsewhere were suitably attired so that the entire cast presented the illusion of reality on stage.

Mary has written her own account of her 34 years as NCP's costume designer. An example of one of her costume plans, for *Fiddler on the Roof* (1991), can be viewed [here](#). [Fiddler on the Roof \(1991\)](#)

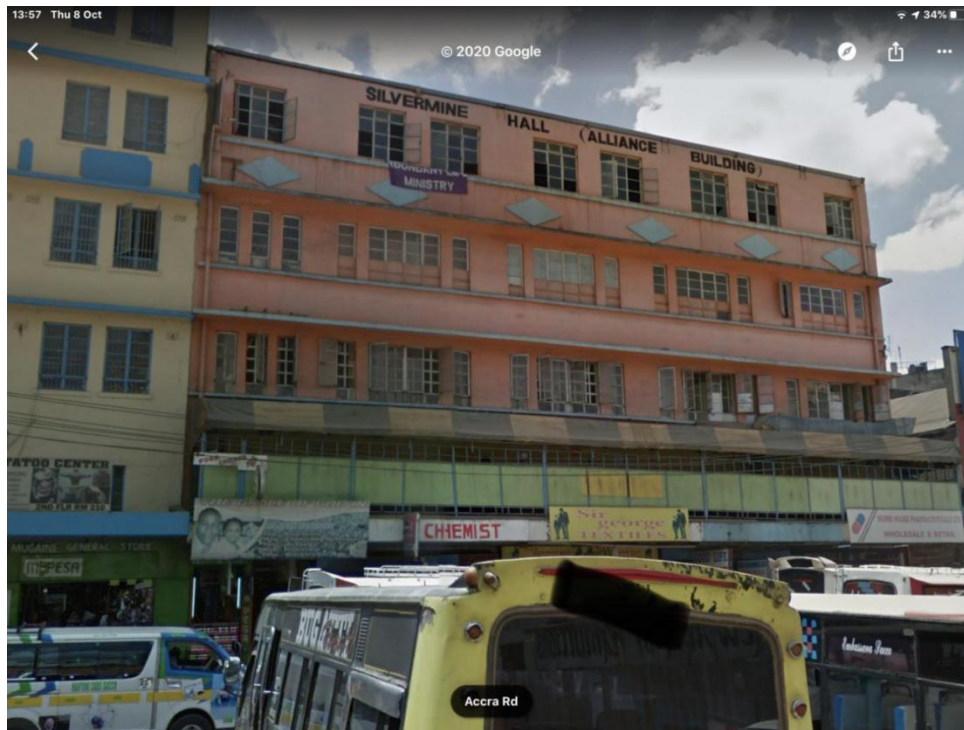
Mary worked in tandem with Bhadresa Tailors who were located on the first floor of the Alliance Building on Accra Road (formerly Reata Road), Nairobi. The proprietor was Prabhulal Dayalji Bhadresa – known as PD Bhadresa. In the Indian caste system, the Bhadresa's are classed as tailors or in the tailoring business.



PD Bhadresa

PD was born in Kenya in 1925. In the 1940s, he followed in his father's footsteps as a tailor. He started his career in a clothes shop called Pir Mohammed on Government Road. The shop sold ladies and gents clothes and PD did the repairs and alterations. The majority of the shop's and PD's customers were European. PD was self-trained and learnt on the job.

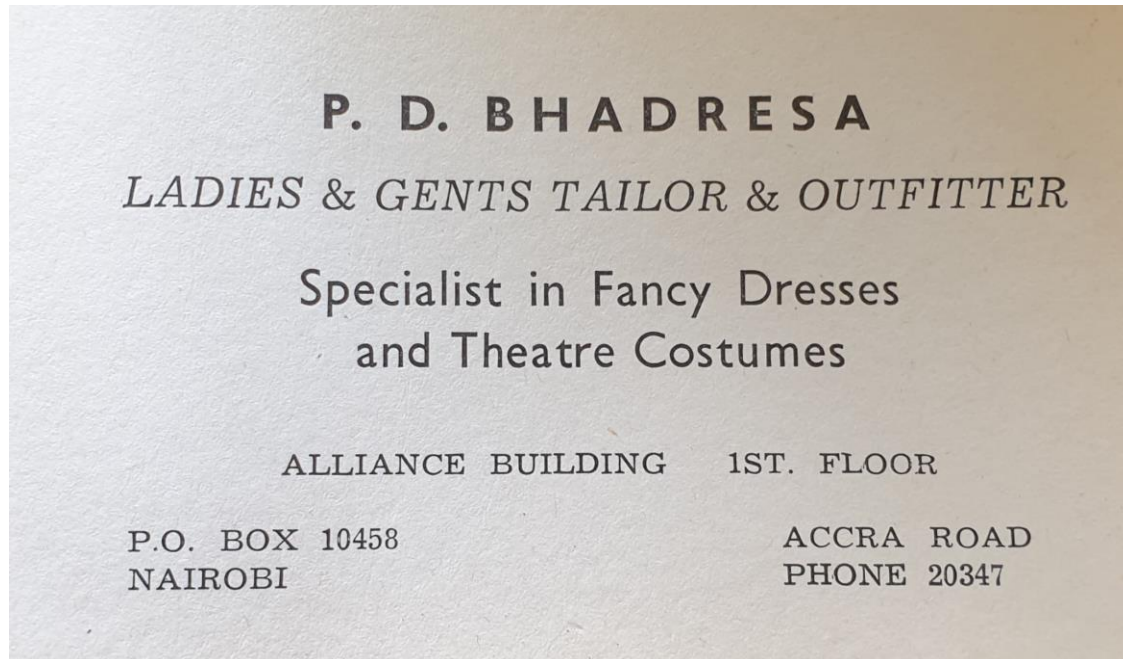
He then established his own shop in 1956/7 on Reata Road (now known as Accra Road) on the first floor of the Alliance Building. The shop was one big room which contained the work station, a dressing and changing room plus an area for administration. Initially, the majority of customers were European ladies. The European customers came with patterns from American and UK magazines and catalogues which PD copied, adapted and tailored to each individual customer. The majority of the business was theatre related - percentage wise it represented about 70%, the rest was alterations and women's dresses.



PD premises on Accra Rd

In the early 1960s his collaboration with Mary Epsom and Nairobi City Players commenced in this small studio and from there on the business specialised in theatre costumes and ladies' dresses. Throughout the 1960s, Mary and NCP were PD's main customer. Mary was PD's guide with regards to the theatre costumes. She would tell him exactly how she wanted things to look and PD would then develop and create the concept.

PD quickly became a legend in the world of theatrical outfitters in Kenya. He was hard-working, meticulous, available at all hours, paid attention to detail and took great pride in his work. The quality of his work was second to none. PD was a true professional and lived up to the high standard of tailoring expected of him by his many clients.



business card

He had to work under pressure to meet strict theatrical deadlines and he had to provide quantity as well as quality to NCP. For example, *Annie Get Your Gun* (1964) required over 200 costumes. Together with Mary, PD somehow managed to complete all the costumes whether they were challenging or not. His work ethic was exemplary. Although NCP was his main client, PD also supplied costumes for other amateur groups such as Nairobi Musical Society, The Theatre Group and the Zerkovitz Ballet. NCP was PD's main client but he also did some costumes for the Donovan Maule Theatre. PD was the regular sponsor of an advertisement in the many production programmes published by NCP.

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# **P. D. Bhadresa**

**1st Floor Alliance House**

**Reata Road**

**NAIROBI**

**Theatrical Tailor to Nairobi City Players for 10 years**

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His eldest son, Suman, helped him with the making of theatre costumes during the run up to a theatrical production. Most of the work was done in the shop and any extra workload he would bring home where Suman would assist in completing the costumes.

For the first few nights of a performance they would also be in the theatre itself so they could make last minute alterations to outfits. Mary Epsom recalls fond memories of labouring at the Kenya National Theatre alongside PD fitting costumes on performers to ensure that everything would be perfect for opening night. Together with Mary Epsom, PD was responsible for the production of over 5000 pieces and over 2,500 costumes for NCP alone. Suman does not recall PD ever complaining about the difficulty of any of the costumes. Everything was delivered according to specification.

PD left his beloved studio of 20 years in 1977 to settle down in London with his family and enjoy his well-deserved retirement after a lifetime of tailoring in Nairobi. When PD departed Nairobi, the theatre critic of The Standard newspaper, Nigel Slade, paid tribute to him in an article which can be read [here](#).



# CITY PLAYERS LOSE OLD STALWART

**SAD NEWS** from Nairobi City Players is the forthcoming departure to Britain of their resident "man behind the seams", Mr. P. D. Bhadresa.

Think of any musical you can recall — then of another — then of yet another! In almost every case the costumes were the handiwork of Mr. Bhadresa, who "cut and stitched" for the Players for 17 years.

It is estimated that up to 3,000 costumes have come from his fingers — for City Players alone!

Mr. Bhadresa's involvement with entertainment stretches back to 1952, when a local square-dancing society commissioned him to produce costumes for its members. This awoke a hitherto undiscovered interest in costume-making and he quickly took up offers from dramatic and dancing groups in Nairobi at that time.

At a production of an exotic *Aladdin* in 1962 his craftsmanship caught the eye of skilled City Players' designer, Mary Epsom. She quickly made contact with him and he has sewed for them ever since.

He has operated with the absolute minimum of assistance, preferring to make even 70 or 80 costumes for a single show all on his own. For *Annie Get Your Gun* (his first assignment) he made 200.

"It has meant weeks of working up to 17 hours day and night," he recalls. "But the only way to be sure that a costume will please me (and Mrs. Epsom!) is to make it myself."

This, plus added assign-

ments for other groups, became almost his exclusive interest. So bitten was he by the theatre bug that he would turn ordinary customers away in favour of work on a show.

Sometimes he has wondered why. "It was heavy work," he says. "There were very short periods for making — as well as sudden orders for quick completion for photographs next day. I could sometimes persuade a normal customer to wait a little longer — but never a producer!"

But moments of doubts were rare, and forgotten when he viewed finished work under the lights.

He is full of praise for Mary



**A sample of Mr. Bhadresa's more recent work — the acclaimed "Hello Dolly" gown (worn by Alice Dale) from the 1972 production of that name.**

**THEATRE by NIGEL SLADE**

Epsom. "She is very, very clear about what she wants; so are the other designers, Shirley Bishop and Marlene Docherty."

At a recent farewell party, Mary Epsom paid high tribute to his non-stop industry. "He was like Rumpelstiltskin weaving straw into gold — and chain-smoking at the same time!"

She added: "We shall miss his unshakeable confidence! Even at bad moments he used to predict 'It will come automatically right' — and it nearly always did."

At Mombasa Little Theatre Club things are warming up for Denis Patience's production of the thriller *Grand National Night* which runs from Friday to Saturday May 6.

The play concerns the death of a rather unpleasant woman and its effect on her acquaintances in the horse-racing world.

Stage-manager Dorothy Patience tells me that rehearsals have gone very smoothly, and that all involved are very impressed with Stewart Russell in the demanding central role. He apparently has a photographic memory and came to early rehearsals almost word-perfect!

Others in the cast are Daphne Bagshawe (in a dual role), former LTC chairman, Arthur Ratcliffe, Club Treasurer Vic Newcomb, Roland Minor, Clare Atkins, Charles Atkins and Henry



**Mr. P. D. Bhadresa**

Dale, who plays the Detective-Inspector.

Meanwhile Saturday marks the final performances of both *Carmen* and the Donovan Maule Theatre's *Pygmalion*. Both shows have been strongly supported — in fact a D. M. spokesman describes response as "super"! Could a reason here be that there is now at least one generation which has never seen the play and is determined to seize at the chance? Certainly some parents have explicitly said so when taking their children.

Indeed this was a reason suggested for the popularity of D.M.'s *Importance of Being Earnest* some time ago and puts a case for more classics in the D.M. repertoire.

Finally, I hear that on Saturday the artistic director of Bomas of Kenya, Mhlangahezi Ka Vundia, will be co-starring with Miss Waha Aruwa in a very special event, namely their own wedding. I am sure their many friends will join with me in wishing the couple every happiness together in the future.

Opening tomorrow

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PD collected the programmes from several of the productions in Kenya that he supplied with costumes and took great pride in seeing his business acknowledged in those programmes. He never forgot all the wonderful times he had working with NCP.









Suman on bench



plaque

Suman returned to Kenya in December 2018 and visited Mary Epsom to recollect countless fond memories of the wonderful collaboration on theatrical costumes between Bhardesa Tailors and Nairobi City Players over the years.



Suman & Mary