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DD's Comedy Show

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IN THE days when Doordarshan's drab socialist vision was the only one available on our airwaves, there came a breakthrough. In 1984, India's first soap opera, *Hum Log*, was launched. Its success and popularity is part of broadcasting lore. At about the same time, along came India's first genuine sitcom *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*. Again, it rapidly became a huge hit: it was new and funny, and no one had seen anything like it before.

Twenty-five years on, all 67 episodes of *Zindagi*... are out in a DVD box set (DD used to veer between 13 and 26 episodes those days; you got more hours only if someone in Mandi House was extremely favourably inclined towards you, or if your soap or serial was so flat-out good that no babu could sit on your file for ever). After a fresh round of viewing this past week, we can safely say that much of *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi* has travelled well: the first 20 episodes are laugh-out-loud hilarious. To our eyes now, used to the over-the-top opulence of the Ekta Kapoor brand of TV, the sets of *Zindagi*... may seem spartan, but there's such wholesomeness to it that you are immediately nostalgic.

It has legs because it captures so wonderfully, and with such endearing simplicity, that thing called life. Ranjit (the deceased Shafi Inamdar), his wife Renu (Swaroop Sampat) and her brother Raja (Rakesh Bedi) live under one roof and have, for constant company, a Bengali couple (Vijay Kashyap and Sulbha Arya) and

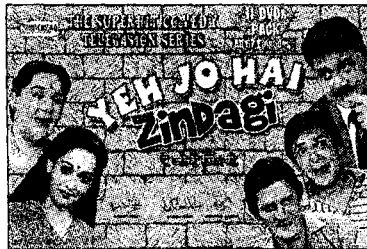
Ranjit's boss (Tikku Talsania). And, of course, appearing in each episode in a fresh guise, is the inimitable Satish Shah.

They flit in and out of each other's houses and offices, borrowing sugar and receiving unwanted advice, sharing trouble and joy. In an early episode, a south Indian couple have prospective grooms coming to "see" their daughters, who inevitably have their own ideas about who they want to marry. With the minimum of fuss, Ranjit dons a veshti, Renu sports a bright Kanjeevaram and Raja turns into a pundit, and much merriment ensues.

What strikes you is the underplaying of the

south-Indian-ness of the couple — there are jokes aplenty about "glasses of kapi", but the "aiyyos" are kept to the minimum, something that our Hindi movies have never managed to do.

This was due to the deft direction of Kundan Shah and Manjul Sinha (Shah was fresh from making his iconic *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron* just the previous year), and you can



YEH JO HAI ZINDAGI
DVD SET, 67 EPISODES
SHEMAROO, Rs 1,299

see his hand in the occasional mild sting that leavens the humour, or something that leaves you thinking, after you're done laughing.

Inamdar decided to leave mid-way, and *Zindagi*... went off air. When it did come back on, due to popular demand, minus Inamdar's adroit drollness, it didn't have the same zing. But Shah's jaunty presence continued all the way till the end, and he ensured that *Zindagi*... was always watchable. Do revisit, to reminisce; and to remember just how good some of Doordarshan's bad old ways used to be.