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# UK-Bangladesh joint production 'Sahasa' gets standing ovation in England

*For the first time ever, in collaboration with 'Sonia Sabri Company' and 'Shadhona', two respected internationally renowned art organisations from the UK and Bangladesh, presented mesmerising live dance and musical performance 'Sahasa', at Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery as a part of the 'Transforming Narratives' project on February 28 and 29 this year.*

*Transforming Narratives* is an initiative that aims to establish Birmingham as a global centre for contemporary arts from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The three-year project, initiated in 2018, brings different artists and cultural organisations located in Birmingham, Pakistan and Bangladesh together. *Sonia Sabri Company* is one of the leading contemporary South Asian dance and music organisations in the UK, and has an international reputation for presenting Kathak in a contemporary context. *Sahasa*, which means 'The Brave', continues the award-winning company's strive for female empowerment, and their new research and development project focused on women's stories, particularly from the Bengali community in the UK and cities in Bangladesh.

As a part of the two-day event, Sonia Sabri and Arthy Ahmed performed an open rehearsal on February 28 in the museum's Round Room. On the following day, they presented two separate one-hour performances in the museum's Gas Hall. These afternoon performances consisted of short solo recitals from each of the dancer to give the audience an understanding of their different styles of Kathak and Bharatanatyam respectively, before they moved on to *Sahasa*. They were

accompanied by music from Sonia's husband and director of the company, Sarvar, an internationally renowned tabla player and composer who created the musical score, and Sanchita Pal on vocals. Each performance of *Sahasa* was followed by a question and answer session with the audience. Many reacted to the powerful and moving performances with a standing ovation.

*Sahasa* was conceived during Sonia's trip to Dhaka in April 2019, as a part of a research and development project supported by *Transforming Narratives*. She visited various organisations and connected with women from different backgrounds during that time. She intended to find out about the experiences of women from communities in Bangladesh and see how women who were born and brought up in the country were different from those who immigrated to Birmingham and how their opportunities and challenges were similar. While in Bangladesh, she met Arthy and visited *Naripokkho*, an organisation that gives refuge to women from challenging backgrounds and restores their confidence by enabling them to find jobs through art and literature. The women shared their stories with Sonia. Arthy came to Birmingham for two weeks and worked

at the *Sonia Sabri Company's* studio to craft together a piece that would reflect the stories they collected from the interviewees.

The two dancers and their team talked about the stories, their personal experiences and observations. All the artists involved in *Sahasa* are from different backgrounds. "We all took the responsibility to ensure that artistically, we pushed our respective forms outside of the norm, challenge our own selves as artistes and grow as a team," says Sonia.

*Sahasa* uses the play of symbolism, abstract sketches, subliminal imagery and music to evoke emotions. "There were a lot of teary eyes in the audience, and several people eagerly came up to speak to us at the end. Many of them were emotional and clenched our hands to say thanks," says Sonia.

For Sonia, *Sahasa* is the start of what she envisions will be an international touring production of dance and music in the future. This project from the UK and Bangladesh proved to be a huge success for social dialogue, cultural inclusion and international collaboration.

Adrian Murphy