



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

"Acting has been my lifelong pursuit"

- Sharmili Ahmed

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Sharmili Ahmed is a powerful presence for the television and film industries of Bangladesh. She is a living legend who has acted in numerous television dramas and also appeared on the big screen in several movies back in the sixties. The eminent and inspirational actor has been working for more than five decades. She recently turned 73. In a candid chat with *The Daily Star*, she looks back on her glorious career.

Based on your experiences as an actor, who do you think plays the most critical role in a tele-fiction, play or film?

The captain plays the most important role on the ship -- and on the sets, the director is the captain. The director has the most critical role, and can bring out the best in an actor. My film career started with eminent director Subhash Datta, and I consider him my mentor.

When you first started working, how did your family react?

My family has always been supportive of my career. I never had to face any obstacles from them. My acting career started with the help of my father. Him and his brothers were artistes themselves. My mother used to play the sitar and she was an avid reader. I am grateful to be born into such a culturally rich family.

You're still a graceful presence on the screen after so many years. What is your mantra for success?

I believe that I have come this far because of my willpower. I am never tired of working, as acting has been my lifelong pursuit. I feel honoured to receive so much love from the people of this country.

You are known for playing maternal roles on the screen nowadays. Do you like playing such roles?

I feel very lucky, as so many people address me as 'Maa'. Everyone sees me as a mother figure in their lives, and that is a huge achievement for me. During shoots, my co-artistes always help me pack up and cook meals for me. I feel truly blessed, as not everyone gets to have such adoration. My co-artistes are like family to me.

How are you spending time at home now?

I am reading books, watching television and films. I recently watched *Abirbab*, a film that I was in. Many of my colleagues check up on me regularly, and I have been talking to my close ones on the phone as well. Dilara Zaman sent me home-cooked meals just a few days ago. I am having a good time at home.

When the shows don't go on

Theatre professionals on grappling with the coronavirus pandemic

PRIVANKA CHOWDHURY

As we wrestle with the coronavirus pandemic, theatre artistes and production workers are trying to figure out how to stay afloat and take care of their community, since the very notion of live entertainment has become taboo.

"I haven't been to rehearsals or performed on the stage for so long. However, I am happy because I finally have some free time to read my books without any distractions," says actor and costume designer Samiun Jahan Dola. "The panic is very real, but it is also the right time to reflect upon our actions," she adds. "Dola also noted that proper education and research is necessary to understand the consequences of the pandemic. "We will face a global economic crisis. Unfortunately, the arts are one of the most neglected sectors," she adds. "Freelance performers and technicians are not doing well at all, as live shows have been cancelled. Some groups and individuals have taken initiatives to support struggling artistes temporarily, but a better strategy is needed in the long run. We might need to rethink our performances in ways that may not adhere to the classic form of theatre, but they may give rise to a different form."

Dola recently practiced a soliloquy by Dr Faustus, from home. "I've been in touch with some of my friends, and we are trying to collaborate on certain projects. We also need to stand beside the underprivileged communities at this time. I believe in the words of Swami Vivekananda -- those who serve others serve the Lord in the true sense," she explains.

Theatre activist and President of Goti Theatre Mony Pahari noted that the coronavirus pandemic has inevitably jeopardised people's livelihoods. "As our group works in remote areas of Rangamati, we are hardly known in the mainstream scene. Since we are at home, I, along with my husband and daughter, have turned our bedroom into a small studio, from where we have been recording charity shows since March 31," she adds. "We wanted to help people in need. We have received generous donations from our fellow theatre activists and the public from nine countries, including Bangladesh. Till date, we have reached out to

nearly 255 families through our theatre workers and teachers all over the area. So far, they have conducted 12 charity shows, and hope to help more families in the future. "My daughter Falgun, who is otherwise shy, played the keyboard at one of the shows when she learned that it was for helping others," adds Mony.

On the other hand, Jyoti Sinha, General Secretary of Manipuri Theatre and Cultural Office of Shilpakala Academy in Moulvibazar, noted that the most important factor in theatrical performances is the audience. "The pandemic is affecting us financially and psychosocially," she says. "Several of our artistes are students, for whom theatre is a much-needed breather from their hectic academic lives. Most of our performers are also freelance dancers who depend upon live shows. Like most organisations, we are

who has worked on over 700 plays, has been completely out of work for over two and a half months now. He returned to his hometown once all cultural events were cancelled by the government. "I have been asked to return to Dhaka, but I am skeptical about going back," he says. "I am also afraid of losing my job. Some well-wishers from different groups have offered help, but I have not been informed about any permanent solutions."

Theatrical productions have been the only source of income for make-up artiste Shubhashish Dutta Tanmoy, for the last 25 years. Needless to say, the absence of live shows has hit him hard. "A few theatre activists came forward with aid, but that was given to two of my assistants, as they had greater priority. It is indeed a frustrating time," he says. "I have served Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy for



A performance of 'Kuhukjal' by Dhaka Theatre at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

also exploring the digital platform, but the essence of theatre lies in the interactions with the spectators. "Nonetheless, basic communication and individual practices are keeping their hopes high for a quick recovery from these difficult times, according to Jyoti. "We are worried about the aftermath of the pandemic, as the return of audiences in the auditoriums will take some time, but we are not giving up. Financially, we have reached out to our members, with support from the district administration," she adds.

Sound assistant Ujjal Chandra Sarker,

years. I am hoping that they will take initiatives for the livelihoods of workers like us."

On the other hand, set designer Mohammad Monir Hossain has worked with different theatre groups and designed the sets for numerous events at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. He has been out of work with no payment, for quite some time. "Currently, I am living in my hometown, but the situation is not ideal here either. The Group Theatre Federation has asked me to submit my National ID Card. I am hoping to receive some support from them," he adds.

Golden Globes changes foreign-language eligibility rules due to Coronavirus crisis

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

The Hollywood Foreign Press Association (HFPA) has updated its rules for Golden Globes submission and eligibility, along with a few minor twists to reflect the changes in the film and TV industries due to coronavirus pandemic. The HFPA alters the rules annually, as a result of what happened the previous year, and many of these changes reflect the nominations and wins.

According to Variety, HFPA has announced that foreign language films will not need a theatrical release in their own country to be eligible for the 2021 Golden Globes.

Earlier the rule stated that foreign films must be released in their country of origin during the



SOURCE: AP

15-month period from 1 October to 31 December prior to the awards.

The temporary new rule is: "Foreign-language motion pictures that had a bona fide theatrical release planned to begin in their country of origin

during the period from March 15 until a date to be determined by HFPA when cinemas in that country have generally reopened, may instead be released in any country in any format (e.g. a motion picture format such as in theatres or on pay-per-view

or a television format such as subscription streaming service, subscription cable channel, broadcast television, etc.) and will still be eligible for the Golden Globe foreign-language motion picture awards'.

Also, the movies will not be screened for HFPA members in a theatre or screening room, but the distributors of these films will have to get in touch with the HFPA to make a screening date on the official HFPA calendar and provide all the members with a screening link or a DVD copy of the film to make it possible for the members to view it at home.

Tina Fey and Amy Poehler will host the 93rd Golden Globes. No date for the awards ceremony has been announced yet.

Nuhash Humayun and Pritom Hasan join the fight against COVID-19 through 'Bichhuz'

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

WaterAid collaborated with director Nuhash Humayun and musician Pritom Hasan to launch a creative campaign, through the web series, Bichhuz. The show sheds light on the importance of handwashing with soap, as the first line of defense against the coronavirus.



The cast of 'Bichhuz'

The story is about four rebellious friends, who are reluctant to follow basic hygiene practices. Bondhu the puppet, voiced by Pritom Hasan himself, tries unconventional ways to pursue the four of them to develop good hygiene habits. The four friends in the series are played by members of Tokai Theatre. The series takes audiences on a journey with all the characters, as they learn the importance of handwashing through humour, sarcasm and existing challenges.

Nuhash and Pritom are also the advisory board members of the Youth for SDG 6 platform. Apart from working on this series, the duo has been supporting WaterAid to raise awareness amongst the youth.

"Today's youth confides in understanding things on a deeper level, rather than being told what to do. We need to speak to them in their language -- be that unconventional, rebellious or completely unexpected," Nuhash shared at the launch of the campaign. "As a director by profession and an advisor to the Youth for SDG 6 platform, this project is very close to my heart. I believe it will bring about a wave of positive hygiene habits and fulfill our main aim of development."

Voicing Bondhu the puppet has been an exciting journey for Pritom. "The

whole process required dedication and days of training. We all have the power to convince people through music, humour and sarcasm. It's what brings people together," he said. "Bichhuz has been developed for a cause. We have to remind people that washing hands is one of the most effective ways to protect ourselves right now."

Episodes of *Bichhuz* are now available on WaterAid Bangladesh's official Facebook page and YouTube channel, along with other social media platforms.

"We are happy that youth icons like Nuhash and Pritom are supporting us. The youth are our catalysts for change. They can promote handwashing as a practice for their families and their communities -- leading to a healthier and safer Bangladesh," shared Hasin Jahan, Country Director of WaterAid.

WaterAid launched their #FightCoronaUnited campaign in March 2020 to support people and communities across the country through online and on-ground awareness activities. WaterAid's youth wing, 'Youth for SDG 6' was inceptioned last year. They currently work with over 1,000 student volunteers for developing healthy hygiene habits across their institutions and in their communities.

"If I don't raise my voice, I can't call myself an artiste"

-Shafayet Mansoor Rana

SHARMIN JOYA

Talented television director Shafayet Mansoor Rana predominantly reflects on contemporary issues through social satire and dark humour in his stories. Widely appreciated last year was his Eid tele-fiction *Amader Shomajbiggan*, a story about the voices of the masses. This year, his Valentine's Day release, *Poripurok*, based on a true story, also stood out.

Since directors have mostly been confined to their homes due to the coronavirus outbreak, they have ample time to come up with innovations in storytelling. Rana shared that he wants to work on dark humour and political satire, if he makes anything based on the pandemic.

Television channels and production houses are highly competitive in the country. Every year, more than a thousand tele-fictions are produced, targeting

festivals such as Eid. "When art is considered just as a tool for business, the quality of stories is compromised," shares Rana. "A forty-minute tele-fiction is shot in just a few hours. If such is the case, can we truly expect the product to be worthwhile? Good productions need enough time and consistency." According to Rana, the mismanagement in the industry has resulted in the lack of grooming institutions for both directors and actors. The television arena also lacks proper platforms for constructive criticism.

Owing to the pandemic, this year, channels are likely to release leftover productions, that were previously shot. "I am hoping that these projects will be an eye opener to the policy makers and they can find the loopholes," asserts Rana.

According to Rana, the television industry seems to be dependent on trending topics and audiences' preferences. There are



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

hardly any risk takers who will invest in challenging ideas. "This has been a tradition followed by our television channels," states Rana. "You will see that most television channels are almost doppelgangers of one another, with similar content. If we can't give our audience anything new, we certainly can't blame them. Satyajit Ray always tried to convey messages through his films. I don't think he ever thought about how the audience will accept them, which is why his films are considered to be some of the best works in cinema."

At the same time, Rana suggested that artistes should be conscious about taking up projects, noting that unprofessionalism affects the whole process as well.

"Every profession has certain defining features. However, the arts are still not considered as 'serious' fields," he explains. "We need to raise our voices against unprofessionalism. If I don't raise my voice, I can't call myself an artiste."

Among the thousands of tele-fictions that are produced every year, the critics and viewers appreciate only a handful. Despite that, the process of producing tele-fictions has remained the same for years. "Prior to taking up a project, I arrange rehearsals and schedule meetings with the artistes. I spend a lot of time on a single project," asserts Rana. "The quality of a project will fall if my concentration is divided."