

“The world of theatre faces huge losses due to the pandemic” – Mamunur Rashid

SHAH ALAM SHAZI

Noted thespian, director and playwright Mamunur Rashid spearheads Aranyak Natyadal, one of the most prominent theatre troupes in Bangladesh. His plays have garnered both national and international acclaim. The Ekushey Padak-winning artiste is also the current chairman of Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation. In a candid chat with *The Daily Star*, he talks about the issues in the theatre arena and more.

How are you spending time at home these days?

I have been watching different kinds of movies, from Italian and Russian films to films from the silent age. I am enjoying classic movies now more than ever. Recently, I watched the film based on Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. It was excellent. I also read Mrinal Sen's biography recently, and I have been writing columns for different national dailies regularly.

How do you think theatre artistes are coping with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic?

The world of theatre faces huge losses due to the pandemic. It will be difficult to bring audiences back to the halls and auditoriums. We have no idea when the performing spaces will reopen. Most actors work in theatre because of the passion and respect they have for the craft. For them, money is secondary. Unlike other countries, our actors and workers do not receive minimum wages to have proper careers in theatre. We have approached the government multiple times regarding this issue.

Where do you believe the theatre arena will be headed, once things get back on track?

The future of theatre artistes did not look promising, even before the pandemic hit Bangladesh. Most of our actors do not earn enough. There are many actors and crew

members who work for just ten days in a month to run their families. Now, they are all unemployed. The government helped them out in different ways initially, but those aren't sustainable solutions. It seems like no one cares about our artistes.

As a veteran of the industry, what do you think should be done to help out struggling cast and crew members in this time of crisis?

We have reached out to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and made collaborative efforts to support artistes and workers who are financially struggling, confidentially.

What do you think about the current projects and talent in television, theatre and the web platforms?

I try to keep myself updated on all kinds of projects, and I watch the ones that interest me. I do not have any specific favourites, but I am hopeful about the young generation of actors and creators. Some of the newcomers are doing exceptionally well. However, at times, I feel that some of them still have a lot to learn when it comes to the technicalities and the craft. A sad fact about our industry is that most people are more interested in the financial gains, than the work and the projects these days.

Shongshoptok, based on Shahidullah Kaiser's novel of the same name, began rerunning on BTB in May. You produced the theatrical adaptation of the novel. Tell us a little about how you came across the project.

When Shahidullah Kaiser lived in Kayettuli, I worked on adapting his novel for the theatre stage. I used to go to Kaiser's house in the mornings to read out the script to him. He was a very busy person and yet, took out the time for me. I have great memories of those meetings. Furthermore, when Abdullah Al Mamun started working on the series, he wanted to work with me and I personally chose the role of SekondorMaster. *Shongshoptok* is a masterpiece of Bangladeshi television.



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



Kamruzzaman Shadhin's 'Elephant in the Room'.



Abir Shome's 'Capital-Equal'.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHOBI MELA IX

“An insight into installation art”

PRIYANKA CHOWDHURY

Installation, a relatively new genre of contemporary art, is practiced by postmodernist artists. The difference between installation art and sculpting or other traditional art forms is that it is a unified experience. From the 1960s, the creation of installations became a major feature in modern art. *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* mentions that the late 1980s was marked by a severe recession and a subsequent art market crash, which led to a reawakening in the field of conceptual art, where art was focused on ideas, rather than objects.

In Bangladesh, the precursors were visible in the works of eminent artists such as Kamruzzaman Khan and Kalidas Karmakar. Artist Mustafa Zaman suggests three forms of installation art form: image making, construction of sculptures with found objects or newly made objects and through conceptual and textual means. These are also mixed and matched to create a composite form of installations. He also mentions the sight specific form, crediting it to Mahbubur Rahman and Tayeba Begum Lipi – the artist duo who practiced and propelled the form in the public sphere in Bangladesh.

Among the recent practitioners, Kamruzzaman Shadhin often creates his signature mammoth projects through public participation and exhibits them in public spaces. He is inspired by artists Ashok Karmakar and Mahbubur Rahman. Shadhin learned that any material can be turned into an art piece, from the works of Japanese artists at the Asian Art Biennale in the nineties. “I also feel that their form of art was never foreign to Bengal – is instilled in our culture. We just did not call it art,” adds the artist. He is also fascinated by the gigantic figure of Swami Vivekananda at Kanyakumari. “The story behind the structure is important. How you see it is crucial,” he says. His award-winning work, *Elephant in the Room* (2018) was created in collaboration with craftsmen from the Kutupalong-Balukhali camp. It shelters more than 600,000 people and lies along one of the main migratory routes of critically endangered Asian elephants. Shadhin further shares the lessons he has learned in



Eshita Mita Tonni's 'Hybridity'.

this time of crisis. “I have learnt to care less about the rat race. I'm not sure if the feeling will remain intact, but the prolonged time to think is something I'm enjoying,” he says. On the other hand, Najmun Nahar Keya draws her inspiration from the rapid social, economic and environmental changes happening in the area, as a result of urbanisation. Her practice revolves around the relationship between human behavior and society. She spent five years in Tokyo for her education. Keya amalgamates Japanese technique with strong Bengali concepts. She employs old photographs, gold gilding, drawing and printmaking in her works. In the last Dhaka Art Summit, her work, *The Spell Song*, was lauded by audiences. The work was comprised of a hand woven Tangail Sari molded into Bangla folk sayings to *KhonarBochon*. To Keya, installation art is sight specific. “It is important to blend the work with the environment it is placed in,” she says. During this pandemic, Keya

has turned to drawing as a meditative practice and she also plans to work on some animation projects.

Movements like the Happening Movement, Fluxus and Arte Povera inspired Abir Shome to take up installation art. He also works with drawings, texts, videos and digital art. “A friend of mine did some installation works while we were students of Charukola,” he says. “I wasn't initially drawn to it but as I became more familiar with the concept, I wanted to practice it.” Majority of his works question ideology and power, delivered in seemingly imprudent manners. Through his work, *Capital-Equal* in Chobi Mela IX, he highlighted how texts, objects, photographs and drawings together were made to conspire against the prescribed art revolution society. Installation art is a form of relief for Abir. These days, the artist spends most of his time playing his ukulele at home.

On the other hand, artist Eshita Mita Tonni's practice is comprised of different disciplines of printmaking, photography, videography and sculpting. The artist, who



Najmun Nahar Keya's 'The Spell Song'.

resides in Jamalpur, uses found objects and children's playing materials. She sets these objects into seemingly mythological characters for her striking art projects. “The fork I use in my sculpture work loses its cutlery feature and becomes something else,” she explains. She also enjoys teaching children about art.

PHOTOS: COURTESY

“We must learn to be tolerant in accepting novelty” — Redoan Rony

SHARMIN JOYA

Known for his modern approach in presenting stories, celebrated director Redoan Rony started out on television, before making a mark in the world of cinema with films like *Chorabali* (2016). He shared his views on the issues in the television industry and the prominence of web-based platforms in a candid chat with *The Daily Star*.

Bangladesh's television industry has been going through tough times for a while. As it turns out, more often than not, television productions do not serve a purpose, from an artistic standpoint. “Third party intervention in television channels is the main cause behind the quality detention,” asserts Rony. “When I started out in the industry, there was a preview committee that assessed the content, in terms of presentation and quality. However, this practice began to fizzle out as productions were made just for marketing purposes.”

On the other hand, releases on YouTube offer tough competition to the television channels. “YouTube earns profits from views. As a result, if a low-budget show earns millions of views on the platform, creators will not run after television channels to persuade them to air it,” adds Rony.

In addition, the lack of knowledge and technical skills is reflected on most contemporary projects these days. While the number of productions is increasing, the depth, originality and quality of the stories on television are deteriorating. “Like any other profession, direction also needs proper schooling and training. For instance, I assisted Mostofa Sarwar Farooki for four years, before starting out as a director on my own – those four years were my schooling,” shares Rony.

He further talked about the audience's growing interest in web-based platforms. “Streaming services are the ‘new normal’ for entertainment,” shares Rony. “International



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime are trending around the world. The content on these platforms is carefully assessed and curated.” The director also added that subscriptions to international platforms are on the rise because they provide high-quality content, and local platforms need to keep up their quality to compete with them.

Recently, there have been debates over the censorship of web-based content. Rony weighed in on the subject. “Restriction is not the solution,” he asserts. “For the growth of our community, we have to let go of such restraints. He also shared that the industry has to go through ups and downs, to flourish. “We are going through a transitional period and we will overcome every challenge, with time,” adds the director.

According to Rony, censorship will not serve streaming platforms in a positive way.

“Initially, the culture of band music was also not fully accepted in our country. But today, some of our leading musicians are from bands. We must learn to be tolerant in accepting novelty.”

Furthermore, several noted personalities have asserted that the mature content on web-based platforms to attract viewers is objectionable because it is hampering the traditional values of our country. Rony shared his opinions about the issue. “We all perceive things differently. What seems indecent to me may not be indecent to someone else,” he says. “I also believe that our culture and traditions have reformed over time. We don't dress, talk, behave or even think like our ancestors did. I am against impropriety, but I am not against imposing restrictions, as long as there are logical reasons behind it and freedom of expression persists.”

Dabur Bangladesh and The Daily Star organise online art competition for kids

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

Dabur Bangladesh, in collaboration with The Daily Star, organised Ghorer Eide Ronger Chhite, an online art competition for children, for the occasion of Eid-Ul-Fitr. In this regard, The Daily Star contacted 25 schools across Bangladesh. In the span of four days, the organisers received over 750 submissions. Children aged between 4 and 13 participated in the competition, in three categories. The esteemed judges selected three winners in each category.

Mahdia Ansara Anuranon from Sir John Wilson School won the third prize, while Mahir Tazwar from Islami Bank International School & College won the second prize and Dwaipayan Kar from Drexel International School, Dhaka, won the first prize in Category A (4-6 years old).

In Category B (7-10 years old), Samara Hoque and Prokriya Choudhury from Willes Little Flower School and College won the third and second prizes respectively, while Omera Fidan Tuana from Cantonment English School and College, Chattogram, won the first prize.

The third prize in Category C (11-13 years old) was won by Aayan Zahin

from Sunnydale. Nawba from Shaheed Bir Uttam Lt Anwar Girls College won the second prize and Preyonty Amin Pue from Narayanganj Govt Girls' High School won the first prize.

“The time at home over the past few months has been difficult, especially for the children. Our purpose was to ensure that they are engaged in activities which could make their Eid this year more colourful,” said Talat Rahim, Head of Marketing, Dabur Bangladesh. “The competition was successful. At Dabur, we promote an active lifestyle and this joint initiative played an important role to encourage kids to be creative.”

Md Tajdin Hassan, Head of Marketing, The Daily Star also shared his thoughts. “We have been organising events involving the youth for a number of years, and we are happy to be a part of this competition,” he said. The winning submissions from the contest were exhibited online on the official Facebook pages of The Daily Star and Dabur Bangladesh.

