

“We must work on building a nation free from religious and gender discrimination” -Shahed Ali

SHARMIN JOYA

Shahed Ali is a renowned theatre artiste. Through his hard work and dedication, he has also made his way into television, films and web projects over the years. Born in Old Dhaka, he grew up in an environment that supports communal harmony. In a recent chat with *The Daily Star*, the talented actor talked about his fond memories of Durga Puja, his upcoming projects and more.

“Our festivities with friends in the area would begin from *Mahalaya*,” Shahed shares. “There was a beautiful bond between all our neighbours. Old Dhaka is known for its grand celebrations.”

He further asserted that slowly after the 90s, people began to become more reserved, as a fundamentalist mindset started to surge in. “I eventually had to shift from Old Dhaka due to my work life. Nevertheless, I still have friends who ask me to come over with my family during Puja.”

Old Dhaka still holds the largest Durga Puja celebrations. However, due to reactions of some conservatives and religious extremists, people of other religions have limited their attendance in these celebrations.

Shahed mentioned that since childhood, he was taught at both home and school to treat people based on their deeds and behaviour, not their religion or gender.

“Living in communal harmony plays a great role in creating a society free from all kinds of discrimination,” adds Shahed.

Every year till 1998, Shahed spent his evenings with his friends in Old Dhaka during Puja, right until *Bijoya Dashami*. “We all got new clothes and wore our best outfits. We listened to Puja special music and enjoyed different kinds of feasts,” he shares.

He also shed light on the fact that a generation that grows up with proper care and values will help in creating a great society.

“We must work on building a nation free from religious and gender discrimination,” states Shahed. “We see a lot of discussions on such issues on social media, but sadly, I don’t see any significant changes in the real world. If we start practicing what we are writing on social media, I believe we will be able to bring about real, positive changes.”

Currently, Shahed is busy with the shooting of “Nawab LL.B.” It will be the first Bangladeshi film to have its premiere on an OTT platform. “The film focuses on the oppression of and brutality against women,” he shares.

He will also be seen in Gias Uddin Selim’s “Jatri”, a Binge original. He is also working on the television serials, “Amma” and “The Director”, alongside other projects.



PHOTO: STAR



BASEER: AN ELOQUENT MIND underway at Bengal Shilpalay

ZAHANGIR ALOM

An exclusive exhibition, titled ‘Baseer: An Eloquent Mind’ is now underway at Quamrul Hassan Exhibition Gallery (Second Floor) of Bengal Shilpalay, Dhanmondi, Dhaka. Organised by Bengal Foundation, the exhibition, featuring nearly 70-year works of Bangladesh’s pioneering painter Murtaja Baseer, was opened on October 12.

Murtaja Baseer (1932-2020) worked in many mediums, such as drawing, printmaking, watercolour, oil paint, mixed media and mural. His greatest mastery was in oil paintings. He was the artist of many successful paintings including *Deyal*, *Shahid-Shironam*, *Pakha*, *Ramani*, *Kalema Tayyaba*. His strong drawing, balanced use of colour and his sense of social consciousness gave him a surprising uniqueness.

The genius artist would work tirelessly in the world of painting as well as literature and history. Through the collection of letters, sketches, photographs, posters and paper cuttings in the exhibition, Bengal Foundation has tried to outline his profound art-inquiry, history awareness and outline of social thought. The exhibition also features some rare paintings, catalogs and photographs from various personal collections. Hopefully from the diverse and polygonal art, literature and artefact the art lovers will meet Murtaja Baseer’s larger world.

Murtaja Baseer, considered one of



the foremost painters of Bangladesh, established his individual style in art over the years. Throughout his illustrious career, Baseer gradually transformed his working style from realism and semi-realism to abstract realism.

Born on August 17 in 1932, Baseer joined Dacca Art College (now the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka) as a student in 1949. In 1954, he graduated from the Government Institute of Arts in Dhaka, and in 1956-58, he studied at the Academy

of Fine Arts in Florence and then in Paris, where he studied mosaic and etching at Beaux Arts. On his return to Bangladesh, Baseer joined Chittagong University as an Assistant Professor. He finally retired from teaching in 1998. Since 1954, Baseer was featured in many art exhibitions in Bangladesh, America, Europe, and the Soviet Union.

He has created a place of his own among Bangladeshi artists. His careful portraiture, with detailed lines and balanced colours, expresses his critical

commentary on society. His depiction of Bangladeshi women, in particular, reflects their individuality, strong personality and angst.

Peace is a recurring theme in Baseer’s work. In his collage titled, *No More War*, he depicted the pillage of the Iraq War and highlights the futility of war. The collage titled *Statue of Liberty* portrays the fleeing women and children leaving behind their precious assets.

A folk-themed watercolour portrait by Murtaja Baseer was displayed in Louvre Museum in Paris, France. He did a series of work articulating the complexities of contemporary life.

Murtaja Baseer was also a poet, short story writer, novelist, researcher, numismatist and filmmaker. He wrote novels and was acclaimed for his meticulous style and unique choice of themes.

Baseer also worked as a screenplay writer, art director and chief assistant director for the Bangla film *Nodi O Nari* in 1964, and as an art director for the Urdu film *Kaise Kahoon* in 1965.

In 1987, he received a fellowship from British Council to carry out research on the folk and traditional art of Bangladesh. He was also a philatelist -- a lesser known fact about him.

In 1988, he visited several museums in Delhi, Calcutta, Banaras and 3,000 villages under nine districts of West Bengal, under the fellowship of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). His work *Mudra O Shilalipir Aloke Banglar Habshi Sultan O Tothkalin Samaj* was published in 2004. Several articles by Baseer were published in the Journal of the Numismatic Society of India, a prestigious publication.

The exhibition will remain open to all till January 16, 2021 and can be visited everyday from 3pm to 8pm. The facility is closed on Sundays.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF BENGAL FOUNDATION

Warda Rihab on adjusting to life during the pandemic

Manipuri exponent Warda Rihab is a two-time gold medalist from Rabindra Bharati University, India. She also received a scholarship from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR).

Under the tutelage of eminent dance guru Kalavati Devi, Warda Rihab mastered the art of classical Manipuri dance. She is also the founder of Dhriti Nartanalaya, an organisation aiming to promote the classical and contemporary values of Bangladesh. Currently, she is a dance teacher at the Department of Dance, University of Dhaka, as well as Chhayana Institute and Kobi Kazi Nazrul Institute. We recently caught up with the artiste to find out more about her recent projects.

ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

Are you teaching at the moment?

It has been two months since I started online lessons for my students at University of Dhaka. I have also been taking online classes at Chhayana Institute for the past four to five weeks. My team at Dhriti Nartanalaya is regularly participating in online trainings since June. Over a hundred dancers regularly join these sessions online from different parts of the country.

What else are you currently busy with?

The famous dance-based programme “Nritter Taale Taale”, which airs on Bangladesh Television, was closed for over seven months. Now that it has finally restarted, I, along with my team, recently finished shooting for one of its episodes on Manipuri dance. Throughout the pandemic, we have been very active, consistently organising virtual events and uploading videos of our performances on social media platforms. We have also performed at BTV’s programme, marking the birthday of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, recently.

Do you think the situation for stage performers, especially dancers, has gotten any better in the recent days?



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

I certainly do. We are now getting remunerated for our virtual performances. Recently, I performed online at the inaugural ceremony of New York Bangla Book Fair 2020. They paid us well, just like organisers do when we perform live. My team of eight dancers also recently performed at the inaugural ceremony, marking the construction of a new terminal at Osmani International Airport, Sylhet. The programme was virtually attended by the Prime Minister, while we performed a Manipuri and patriotic routine at the event. It was an invite-only event, with a limited number of guests at the physical venue.

Will you be performing anywhere on Durga Puja this year?

Durga Puja has always been a very special occasion for me, particularly as a dancer. This year, I will be performing virtually at the Puja celebrations in Washington, DC, along with a team of dancers. The programme will feature eminent artistes from India and Bangladesh. We have been working on some beautiful routines, especially based on Durga Puja. We hope that we can successfully arrange these programmes after ensuring safety measures, as the pandemic is yet to subside.



PHOTO : SHAHREAR KABIR HEEMEL

Bappy’s Puja memories

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Bappy Chowdhury has become a favourite amongst cinemagoers in a short span of time, thanks to his remarkable performances on the silver screen. The popular actor has been busy shooting his upcoming films. In a candid chat with *The Daily Star*, he talks about his childhood memories of Durga Puja.

Bappy used to visit the famous Gulshan Diamond Cinema Hall in Narayanganj with his friends during the weeks leading up to Durga Puja. “The tickets were only BDT 11, back in those days. We used to watch 3 to 6 films every season,” he shares. “I had four different *punjabis* for the four main occasions, along with new t-shirts. My friends and I got a bit competitive about who could buy the best-looking *punjabi*.”

Visiting different neighbourhoods with friends and family during the Puja days

was also special for Bappy. During Kumari Puja, on the eighth day, he went to the *mandap* as early as possible to grab the best seat.

“My father orders special sweets on every Puja. It is a long-standing family tradition,” says Bappy. “These sweets are distributed among all our friends and relatives. I will spend the Puja days in different locations, visiting my maternal and paternal ancestral homes.” Bappy will travel to his home in Narayanganj.

This year, Durga Puja will be different, as people are confined to their homes.

Bappy urges everyone to follow basic hygiene and social distancing rules while celebrating. “I hope we get some normalcy back in our lives, and are able to combat this virus,” concludes Bappy, wishing his fans and well-wishers a safe and prosperous Puja.

Translated by Rasheek Tabassum Mondira