

Where water lilies will always bloom

A tribute to Aly Zaker

SHUPROVA TASNEEM

THE sky was unusually blue for an early morning in late November, the day Aly Zaker passed away. Everything else that happened after feels like a sort of blur, except I distinctly remember thinking that he would have appreciated the beauty of that cold, clear morning in Dhaka. That was exactly one month ago today.

To the world, Aly Zaker is perhaps best known as a legendary thespian—a man who changed the face of theatre in Bangladesh with his creative force, who thrilled people on stage with his booming voice and towering persona, and who made audiences roar with laughter in Humayun Ahmed’s TV dramas. He is also known as a freedom fighter and *Shobdo Shoinik*, who played a crucial role in Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in 1971—in response to Pakistani propaganda regarding the liberation struggle, Aly Zaker led the radio’s English language programme that became the voice of the resistance to the rest of the world. Many others will know him as a businessman and industry leader; yet others will remember him as a keen photographer and lover of literature and nature. To me, he has always been my Chhotlu Chacha—my father’s best friend, business partner and a member of our family.

When I think of Chhotlu Chacha, the first words that come to my mind are *allhad* or *ador*. He loved children, and whenever we met, I was always greeted with a bear hug and the usual “*Ki re, Maa?*”. That will always be one of the most endearing and enduring memories of my childhood—the comfort that came from being enveloped in those giant arms, the sense of security his presence inspired. Even as I felt the force of his hugs get weaker in the last years of his battle with cancer, his warmth and compassion remained.

In the dua/memorial that was held for him, two weeks after he left us, almost every single person who spoke about him, remembered this about him most—how he made them feel; that despite being such a towering personality, in physical as well as celebrity stature, he effortlessly made everyone around him feel acknowledged, seen and cared for.

They say that the worth of a man lies not in how he treats his equals, but his “inferiors” (for want of a better word). There are two



Aly Zaker in his last theatre appearance as Galileo.

PHOTO: IRESH ZAKER

instances that always come to mind when I think of this in relation to Aly Zaker. One is the image of him in the 90s, the chairman of Asiatic, playing carrom with the cleaners and peons in the office verandah, his laughter reverberating across the corridor. Another memory is an office picnic, also in the late 90s. When it came time to give the “Employee of the Year” Award, Chhotlu Chacha strode up to the elderly (and longest employed) office assistant Sultan Miah, and handed him the prize. I still remember the tears in Sultan Miah’s eyes when he gave his acceptance speech. His children eventually became employees at Asiatic too, with one of them working at an executive level. His youngest son, despite retiring after being diagnosed with Parkinson’s, still came to Chhotlu Chacha’s burial and followed him all the way to the end, trembling, with tears in his eyes. A true testament to the love that Chhotlu Chacha was able to inspire in people, from all

walks of life.

But to me, the most astonishing thing is that he never engaged in personal PR of any kind. Aly Zaker, despite being something of a living legend (I can almost see him laughing at my use of this term), never felt the need to boast about himself or put on airs. Yet his beliefs, the ideals he held so dear, and the deep and all-encompassing love he felt for this country, expressed themselves in everything he did, and not just in key moments like during the Liberation War, or the mass uprising against Ershad.

His beloved stage productions are salient examples of this. Many theatre activists have spoken about the role he played in taking Bangladesh’s theatre scene to new heights, creating the culture of putting on shows on a regular basis for a paying audience. But for him, theatre was not just art, but the expression of ideals that would eventually guide a liberated and progressive society.

During Ershad’s regime, he insisted that Nagorik Natya Shampradaya put on his adaptation of *The Captain of Kopenick*, a satirical and hugely anti-military play by the German dramatist Carl Zuckmayer, which was initially shut down by the then-authoritarian regime in Bangladesh because of its anti-establishment themes. His role as the revolutionary Nuruldin in Syed Shamsul Haque’s *Nuruldin Sharajibon* is the stuff of legend, and even the comedy *Dewan Gazir Kissa*, based on Bertolt Brecht’s *Mr Puntilla and his Man Matti*, speaks on social divides and the often hollow attempts at philanthropy rather than genuine equality by the upper classes. Of course, his calibre as a performer is undisputed—how else does one carry a role like Macbeth so effortlessly? And I feel that his choice of *Galileo* as his theatrical swan song—a play with an overarching theme of the pursuit of truth in the face of religious dogmatism and abuse of power—is truly

representative of the man Aly Zaker was.

Chhotlu Chacha’s ideals, his unyielding patriotism, his love for the arts and for all things good and beautiful in life (including food), his great, big heart—everything he stood for was never taught to us in a lecturish way but seeped into our lives in the simplest manners. Just little things keep coming back to me every once in a while—how he loved escaping Dhaka and often took us for picnics in what was still quite a rural area in Savar back then, patiently answering my questions about the names of different trees and impressing upon me that our real roots will always go back to this land; how when I visited him as a teenager when he was admitted in a hospital for a while and asked him if he was bored, he replied with words from a poem by Keats, thus influencing me to buy my first book of English poetry; how when I first read *Julius Caesar* in school, he made me look at the play with different eyes when he told me that he always preferred Brutus’ speech over Marc Antony’s one, especially when he says, “not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.”

That was also just like him, preferring Shakespeare’s gullible patriot over the seasoned diplomat. Chhotlu Chacha’s love for his country was unparalleled and reflected in a passion for nature, and he spent some of his happiest times in his homestead in Ratanpur, where he could be close to nature. A common point of conversation between us was the *shapla* (water lily) flowers that he had planted in the pond opposite the original Asiatic building (an area where I incidentally ended up spending most of my life). The very last time I met him was three weeks before he left us. Even in the last stages of his illness, he did his best to hide any pain that he was experiencing from his family and friends. I was sitting in front of his bed, chatting away, but I was also watching him closely, and at one point, I saw an expression of pain flit across his face. But he caught me watching him, and his face immediately relaxed into a smile. To distract from any question about his health (I’m sure), he asked me, one last time, “*Amar phool gulo dekhite parish akhono?*” (Can you still see my flowers?)

Chhotlu Chacha, the flowers you planted, in that pond, in our lives—they will bloom and stay with us for as long as we are alive.

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For US, after a terrible year, perhaps a respite?

Forthcoming changes bode well for the future



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

HERE in America, are we finally beginning to see light at the end of the tunnel?

As we get ready to ring in the new year, two major developments ought to give even the most dour pessimist cause

for hope.

The vaccine is coming.

Trump is going.

However, we live in strange times. My second observation, utterly uncontroversial on the basis of facts, will likely have a substantial number of Americans baying for my blood.

So let me step aside for a moment from my reflections on our esteemed (and mercifully soon to be gone) President Donald J Trump and reaffirm what all Americans can agree upon—a rare thing in this bitterly polarised country: This has been one heck of a year. The coronavirus pandemic and the economic devastation that has come in its wake have crippled America.

Most Americans agree that for the entire world, this was indeed *annus horribilis*, as Britain’s Queen Elizabeth’s had called 1992 following a spate of royal scandals. That’s a fancy way of saying it’s a been a no good, very bad, terrible year.

I don’t know about y’all, but I still wake up every day and have to pinch myself to make sure I’m in the real world and not in the middle of a chilling dystopian sci fi movie.

What’s scarier—and more humbling—is that the virus has exposed an ugly truth. We’ve met the enemy, and it turns out that it is us. The few nations that have come out of this well have several things in common—they respected the science, addressed the challenge with massive, draconian public health measures, and gritted their teeth through the painful economic and social cost.

To be sure, the effect of the coronavirus is protean. But there can be a deadly reciprocity in how coronavirus affects a nation.

If you respect the science, get your entire population to hunker down and do what needs to be done, with some luck you can get the virus on the run, though it’s no sure thing.

On the other hand, you can decide to be ornery about it. You might say this thing is like the flu, no big deal. You may come up with the asinine notion that health safeguards like wearing a mask are a commie, pinko plot to take away your freedom. Your leader may well egg you on as he squabbles with scientists, trashes the nations world-class public health research organisation that is the envy of the world and comes up with bizarre solutions like injecting disinfectant.

Yep, I am talking about the good old US of A. It simply boggles my mind that one of the most developed, wealthy and powerful countries in the world could botch its coronavirus response so horribly.

The results break my heart. Coronavirus is out of control today as the US grapples with millions of new infections, hundreds of thousands of deaths and critical care at a breaking point.

Then there is the economic fallout.



US president-elect Joe Biden received his vaccination at the Christiana Care campus in Newark, Delaware.

PHOTO: AFP

Unemployment numbers have hit the roof, countless small businesses have closed their shutters for good and millions of people face eviction.

I return to the two developments I mentioned that give me hope for the next year. I’ve rarely, if ever, praised Trump—but his plan for a fast vaccine produced results. The development of a vaccine within a year is a stunning accomplishment. This

is one occasion where pride in American exceptionalism has the ring of truth.

Most experts say that the US economy is on the verge of a recovery, and that may well help the nation get back to its feet faster.

I stand by my assertion that the pandemic and the Trump presidency was a marriage made in hell. It is hard to think of a leader and an administration more ill-suited to deal with the coronavirus.

Thin-skinned, narcissistic, self-obsessed with politics, incapable of understanding basic facts of science, Trump and his administration’s response has been ruinous.

There’s also the serious damage Trump has caused to American politics. The whole world is still watching in appalled horror as a sitting president refuses to concede after pretty much everyone says the elections are over—the courts, the archaic system of electoral college. Trump continues his futile, disgraceful effort to overturn the election results as he pardons crooks and felons.

Next year, he will be gone. The planned distribution and administration of vaccines gives us hope that sometime by the next year the pandemic nightmare will largely recede.

There is cause for believing that economic rejuvenation will accompany the fading of the pandemic, as this nation, battered by the double-whammy of a health crisis and an economic crisis, tries to get back on its feet.

The challenges remain daunting. The administration of vaccines to such a huge population is a logistical challenge. After four years of invective from the White House, the US Congress remains crippled by partisan rancour. And expect Trump to continue to create mischief even after he is out of office.

President-elect Joe Biden has his work cut out. Yet no matter the challenge, America has recovered from crises before, and only a fool would underestimate its capacity to bounce back.

Ashfaque Swapan, an Atlanta-based writer and editor, is contributing editor for Silliconeer, an online South Asian publication.

QUOTABLE Quote



SUKARNO (1901-1970)

Leader of the Indonesian independence movement and Indonesia’s first president.

“Learning without thinking is useless, but thinking without learning is very dangerous!”

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

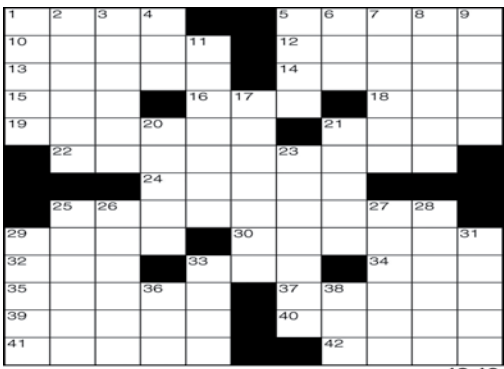
ACROSS

- 1 Set eyes on
- 5 Casino game
- 10 One of the primates
- 12 “Network” director
- 13 Fight sight
- 14 Banded rock
- 15 Salon stuff
- 16 Pig place
- 18 Energy
- 19 Takes care of
- 21 Plays the ponies
- 22 Flight
- 24 Train stop
- 25 Intimidate with a look
- 29 Close
- 30 Refuses

DOWN

- 1 Some carpets
- 2 Makes baby food, maybe
- 3 Egggy dish
- 4 Leather shade
- 5 Potter’s stuff
- 6 Floor cover

- 7 Floors
- 8 Dress size
- 9 Dance units
- 11 Less civil
- 17 Sub sinker
- 20 Egypt’s Anwar
- 21 Relay stick
- 23 Cough queller
- 25 Native healer
- 26 Groom’s garb
- 27 Aware of
- 28 Former liberal, for short
- 29 Longlegged bird
- 31 Act part
- 33 Supplies with staff
- 36 Procured
- 38 Poorly



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

C	A	G	I	N	E	R	S
A	M	I	N	O	P	R	I
M	O	O	D	S	A	G	A
E	R	R	E	S	T	O	N
L	A	G	S	A	T	O	N
S	L	I	P	D	E	L	I
C	A	R	A	T	E	S	T
F	A	R	P	A	L	R	H
A	R	M	O	I	R	E	S
C	R	A	V	E	A	W	A
T	O	N	E	R	P	A	C
S	T	I	R	S	T	R	E

BEEBLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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