

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Bangladesh Theatre: An Overview

Aly Zaker

STAGE theatre has been on as a regular medium of performing art in Dhaka since 1973.

Since then, over the last seventeen years, at least 40 groups have emerged in this city which are involved in intermittent staging of plays in the Mohila Samity and Guide House auditoria at the New Bailey Road, renamed, by the theatre workers, as Natak Sarani.

Some of the groups, by dint of hard work, discipline and talent have emerged as the leaders in the field and their shows have better draw than the others. Many of these leading groups have already crossed the 800 show mark over the 17 year time frame, averaging at least 47 shows per year. This works out to nearly one show in 8 days per group. No mean figure that, considering the age of the movement.

In today's Dhaka, one could buy a ticket and see a play in any of the two stages on any evening of the week.

These seventeen years have also seen the growth of a very talented pool of performers and playwright who have transcended the walls of the theatres and have made tremendous contribution in mass media like Television and Radio. In fact, at the risk of being considered parochial, I would venture to say that the best performers of the TV plays today are the ones that have come from the stage.

The group have also formed a federation known as the Bangladesh Group Theater Federation. The federation comprises over 130 member-groups all over Bangladesh. The total number of theater workers belonging to the member groups of the Theatre Federation would exceed 1500.

Besides the Federation, the Bangladesh branch of the International Theatre Institute comprising sectors, playwrights, singers, dancers and workers from all departments of performing arts is very active in Bangladesh. As it organizes effective assemblies of academic interest, it is also working continuously to foster better understanding between cultural activities of Bangladesh & of countries all over the world.

Besides performing local plays, works of Sophocles, Shakespeare, Moliere,



Ferdousi Majumdar in Theatre's 'Kokilar'

Despite numerous stumbling blocks in the theatre movement, the growth of stage plays in Bangladesh has been fairly steady over the past 17 years and the enthusiasm on the part of the theatre worker has kept the medium alive and kicking.



Asaduzzaman Noor, Sara Zaker and Nima Rahman in a scene from Nagorik's 'Swat Manusher Khojey,' an adaptation of Brecht's 'The Good Person of Setzuan.'

'If Dhaka stage productions are failing to turn out anything exciting or if it has not been successful in achieving significant technical improvements, it's all due to the lack of a proper stage.'

Ibsen, Brecht, Zuckmayer, Albee, Becket and a host of other famous playwrights of the world have been very successfully translated or adapted and brought on our stage.

Another redeeming feature of our theatre movement is the successful production of some of Rabindranath Tagore's outstanding plays and adaptation of his novels or short stories hitherto avoided as "difficult to produce". Some of these are Achalayatan, Bisharjan, Dui Bon, Ghare Bairey and Muktdhara. Our theatre workers, by the immaculate staging of these great plays, have proved that Tagore's repertoire is not only exceedingly rich in literary or philosophical contents, it is also socio-politically contemporary, relevant and, when necessary, revolutionary.

The theatre workers of Bangladesh have not only been involved in the production of plays, they have, over the years, also been involved in the process of comprehensively enriching their knowledge of the medium by organising theatre workshops, almost on a regular basis.

Such workshops are usually conducted by senior theatre workers of the country in combination with about a dozen actor-directors who have been trained abroad.

Besides this, a number of workshops have already been held in Dhaka with inputs from foreign directors or teachers.

Some of the most successfully produced translated plays directed by foreign directors were Macbeth and Tempest-Shakespeare, Exception and the rule and Arturo Ui-Bertolt Brecht.

When regular staging of plays started in 1973 it was an event, a novel venture,

and the controls per-historic. Behind the stage, there isn't even a decent toilet for the performers.

Another logical concern on the aspect of sustenance of the theatre movement relates to the question of being able to adopt stage theatre as a profession. As we see, for an actor being able to earn a livelihood through acting should be the ideal situation. In many countries, specially of the first and the second worlds, theatre actors are also active in TV and Cinema. These two media more than compensates for the negligible amount one earns from the stage & a successful actor in TV and Cinema can then use the stage for the achievement of a sense of creative fulfilment. Even the stage theatre in those countries are much better nourished being funded either by the government, as in the case of UK or by the corporate sector as in the case of the USA.

In countries like ours TV does not pay enough and stage does not pay any. The cinema does. But in the cinema, the consideration of commerce far outweighs that of creativity. Therefore, there is hardly any room in our cinema for a discerning actor or a creative director.

For funding of stage theatre it is not possible to expect corporate grants or aids because our corporate sector is tiny by any standards. This leaves us with the only option of turning towards the government subsidy. But, for most of the last twenty years of Bangladesh's existence we have been under autocratic rule which cannot be expected to foster a medium that is controlled by a free-thinking, democratic group of people.

Therefore, in the field of performing arts, the branch that is considered most vibrant and creative ends up getting least attention from the power that be.

Despite all these impediments, there is no dearth of enthusiasm on the part of the theatre worker of Bangladesh. And that has kept the medium alive and kicking.

Aly Zaker is an eminent stage actor and director. He is the president of Nagorik Natya Sampradaya and Vice-President of International Theatre Institute (ITI), and winner of several national and international awards.

This move has brought about a general tendency to commercialize plays on the stage. However simple it might appear, it seems to be a deep-seated impression on, a) the quality of the movement and b) the quality of the audience.

Over the years the conscientious theatre workers of this country have built-up an appreciative audience without the help of whom it would be impossible to sustain creative theatre movement in this country. With the increase in costs of production the going to retard the growth of audience for good theatre. And this is definitely going to be a cause for concern for the theatre workers of Bangladesh.

The major stumbling block in the theatre movement here is the lack of a proper theatre. If Dhaka's stage productions are failing to turn out anything exciting or if it has not been successful in achieving significant technical improvements commensurate with the years it has put in, it's all due to the lack of a proper stage here.

The theatre group of Dhaka are doomed to be within the confines of the dilapidated stages where they started their work. And these theatres have become worse now through the years of wear and tear. The lights are obsolete

and the controls per-historic. Behind the stage, there isn't even a decent toilet for the performers.

Another logical concern on the aspect of sustenance of the theatre movement relates to the question of being able to adopt stage theatre as a profession. As we see, for an actor being able to earn a livelihood through acting should be the ideal situation. In many countries, specially of the first and the second worlds, theatre actors are also active in TV and Cinema. These two media more than compensates for the negligible amount one earns from the stage & a successful actor in TV and Cinema can then use the stage for the achievement of a sense of creative fulfilment. Even the stage theatre in those countries are much better nourished being funded either by the government, as in the case of UK or by the corporate sector as in the case of the USA.

In countries like ours TV does not pay enough and stage does not pay any. The cinema does. But in the cinema, the consideration of commerce far outweighs that of creativity. Therefore, there is hardly any room in our cinema for a discerning actor or a creative director.

For funding of stage theatre it is not possible to expect corporate grants or aids because our corporate sector is tiny by any standards. This leaves us with the only option of turning towards the government subsidy. But, for most of the last twenty years of Bangladesh's existence we have been under autocratic rule which cannot be expected to foster a medium that is controlled by a free-thinking, democratic group of people.

Therefore, in the field of performing arts, the branch that is considered most vibrant and creative ends up getting least attention from the power that be.

Despite all these impediments, there is no dearth of enthusiasm on the part of the theatre worker of Bangladesh. And that has kept the medium alive and kicking.

Aly Zaker is an eminent stage actor and director. He is the president of Nagorik Natya Sampradaya and Vice-President of International Theatre Institute (ITI), and winner of several national and international awards.



Mamunur Rashid and Nazma Anwar in a scene from Aranyak's 'Samatwat.'



Towkir Ahmed, Zahid Hasan and Shafiq Sadeqi in Natyakendra's 'Bichhu'.

'Theatre Groups have Done a Great Job'

Our Theatre Correspondent

The need for establishing more than one theatre stage with proper facilities for a healthy growth of theatre activities in the country was stressed by Professor Iajuddin Ahmed, Presidential Advisor for Cultural Affairs at a function organised by the local chapter of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) here last week.

Inaugurating a three-day seminar on Theatre Journals in Asia: Cooperation through Communication, at the Shilpakala Academy auditorium, Professor Ahmed pointed out that the theatre movement had emerged as the single most vital performing medium in the post-liberation period.

Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Presidential Advisor on education, attended the opening session as the chief guest. Professor Kabir Choudhury, president of ITI, Bangladesh presided over the opening session.

Professor Iajuddin Ahmed said that in spite of serious physical constraints, the group theatre movement has generated tremendous enthusiasm throughout Bangladesh and can boast of genuinely impressive credentials.

He lauded the role of ITI and its local chapter for the commendable job of projecting Bangladeshi theatre abroad. He also expressed the hope that the seminar would provide the organisers with a scope for

understanding various aspects of the world theatre from the foreign delegates.

It may be mentioned that a number of delegates from Australia, Germany and India participated in the seminar.

Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui remarked that theatre had been closely linked with movement which toppled the past regime and played a crucial role in the movement for the restoration of democracy.

He noted that a permanent stage was a long-felt demand of the theatre workers. He expressed the hope that the government to be elected democratically in the next elections would give the demand due priority.

Professor Kabir Choudhury said that theatre was not only a vehicle for entertainment but also a medium for understanding of ideas and learnings.

The opening session of the seminar was also addressed by Mr. Ramendu Majumdar, Secretary General of ITI, Bangladesh, Mr. Nasruddin Yusuf, Chairman of Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation and Mrs. Pamela Payne, a drama critic from Australia.

Children Plead with Bush: Keep Pong and Kiko

by Abby Tan

IN an abandoned lumberyard, with weeds and rusty tin cans lying around, stands a rickety structure. The klieg lights are the only indication that this is a studio.

Amid these dishevelled surroundings, almost bare of props but littered with sparse furniture that look like throwaways, a world-class children's television programme is created.

The Filipino show Batibot, a home-grown version of the American puppet series Sesame Street, began seven years ago. Last June it ran away in Munich with the top prize in the Prix Jeunesse International, the Oscar equivalent for children's programmes.

Batibot's mainstays are a turtle puppet called Pong Pagong and a chattering monkey called Kiko Matsing, counterparts of Big Bird and Kermit the Frog.

The Munich euphoria was short-lived. In September producer Lydia Benitez-Brown received a terse letter from the Children's Television Workshop (CTW) in New York, creators of Sesame Street, asking her to "cease and desist" using Pong and Kiko. The two had been loaned to Batipot for use without any formal agreement.

Brown and her small staff are fighting back hard. They

are asking Filipino children to collect one million signatures so that they can keep Batipot on TV. Brown hopes to send the signatures to President George Bush.

Brown admits she is on shaky legal ground. All puppets created by CTW belong to them in perpetuity all over the world under a copyright clause.

Batibot began as a co-production with CTW in 1983. The producers, backed by the Philippine government, paid \$1 million in the first year and \$375,000 in the second. When the economy spun into recession they could not pay. The contract was ended, but Brown was determined to go on.

Pong and Kiko were created with CTW help, though CTW did not like the result because it thought the turtle too clumsy. Brown insisted the turtle and monkey were part of Filipino folklore written by national hero Jose Rizal. Pong and Kiko, made of rattan and foam, are a huge hit with the very young.

Brown claims that Batibot is not Sesame Street but a separate Philippine production made after its contract with CTW expired. She says: "They knew for six years we were using them. They did not implement their rights."

The show has no funds, no government subsidy and gets a few spotty grants. It costs only \$2000 an episode to produce against Sesame Street's \$200,000.

Brown has recycled Batibot to keep it going. New material is inserted into old tapes to be viewed again and again by Filipino children. Brown says CTW reacted when it found out she was negotiating with a new private channel in Indonesia to produce a Bahasa version of Batibot.

She says: "The objective of Sesame Street is education. We have never veered away from that. We have never commercialised Pong and Kiko to sell any product. The simple truth is that we cannot afford to give them back."

Batibot was forced to get funding from the Filipino-Chinese community to do a Fukien version. The programme does not teach the children to speak the dialect, Brown says, but to create an interest and awareness of a language spoken in many homes.

Laments Brown: "Pong and Kiko really mean something to the children. They are not Ronald MacDonald." - GEMINI NEWS

Abby Tan is a Singaporean journalist specialising in economic and political affairs. She has been based in Manila since 1977.

Some Common Birds of Bangladesh

by Tulip Ibrahim

BANGLADESH is a low-lying country with a total area of about 144,000 square kilometres. It is almost entirely surrounded by Indian territory except for a small strip of frontier with Burma on the Southeast and the Southern border fronting the Bay of Bengal. The Geographical location of Bangladesh allows a rich variety of birds to exist in the country. A small country, riddled with poverty, natural calamities and thousands of other problems, Bangladesh is rich in the variety of birds she has.

Next to the beauty of flowers, birds and the butterflies are insignificant gifts of nature. Bangladesh, a country with natural beauty to soothe the eyes, has another joyful gift to offer: her numerous birds. On the countryside the serene beauty of green paddy fields is enhanced by the birds calling to each other. With the break of dawn we are roused by the doves sweet calling, the rooster's 'caw.'

The variety of birds found in Bangladesh may be about six hundred in number. This is an estimation drawn from various information on the wild life of Bangladesh since 1850. It is evident that there are about 1200 or more species of birds in the Indian sub-continent. It does not seem unlikely that of these 600 may be existing in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh is the cuckoo or locally known as the 'kokil'. It is an annual visitor in the spring.

It is a small bird. It is well known for its sweet song. Just as spring enters the cuckoo's song can be heard floating clearly early in the morning. Beginning with a soft 'koo-oo' the cuckoo's song gradually rises to a higher pitch. Then it keeps quite for some time, starting once again at the beginning. It is the male cuckoo which sings in search of its mate. The male cuckoo is jet-black in colour while the female cuckoo is grayish with white spots. The cuckoo loves freedom and cannot be easily tamed. It likes to live in solitary bushes. The cuckoo does not build its own nest. It lays eggs in the nest of a crow. The crow hatches the cuckoo's eggs.

The 'bulbul' is well known for its sweet continuous short notes. It is very active. Singing in different sounds it hops from branch to branch. It can be seen within the city as well as the country side. The 'bulbul' is deep brown in colour with red feathers on its head and a little bit of red at root of its tail. The eggs of the bulbul are spotted on a very pale pink shell.

Another songbird is the 'shama'. It is well loved for its sweet singing voice. Black in colour with a little brown on the chest 'shama' does not come near humans. However 'shamas' are also kept as pet birds. When free only their floating songs acknowledge their presence.

The 'maynah' is a favourite pet bird. It has a keen habit of imitating sounds. It lives near homesteads and sometimes builds its home within nooks and corners of the house. The maynah has a surprising capability to express anger or happiness through its voice. Long time back I had a pet 'maynah' whom I tried to teach to speak. For some days I said 'say hello!' But since it would not say it I started calling it 'Stupid.' One day to my great joy, moving its head from side to side it started calling out to me. 'Stupid!...stupid!'

The 'doel' or the Indian Robin is loved as a song bird also. A small bird; it practices sweet small musical notes like a professional human singer. The male 'doel' sings but the female 'doel' is silent. The male 'doel' is jet-black in colour with few white feathers on its wings. The female 'doel' is a shade paler.

The 'bou-karha-kow' is also known as the 'halde-pakhi'. The beautiful yellow colour is responsible for name 'halde' meaning yellow. It has black feathers mixed on the sides of the wings.

The 'choru' or the sparrow comes right inside the house. It builds its home in the nooks and corners they find around and in the house. Twittering constantly and

NATURE

hopping to and fro they it is so often seen that the soft brownish bird seem very insignificant. The sparrow has enough cleverness to make use of the resources available. Their eggs are small and creamy white in colour.

The 'babul' is the group of Weaver Birds. It is a clever bird that build beautiful hanging nests. The male 'babul' brings in long leaves and ties them around the branches of palm-trees. When the house is half done, the dull yellow coated male-'babul' performs various tricks to attract the female. When a fe-

male-'babul' chooses the home, together they finish the beautiful nest. A 'babul's nest is marvel of creation of thin straw woven so as to form separate rooms inside. The 'babul' cleverly brings the fire-flies inside their nest to use as light. When female-'babul' lays eggs the male can leave and build another home.

The 'moutushi' or the purple rumped Sunbird drinks honey from the flowers. The 'moutushi' builds a long nest among the ivy plants with the help of spider's web and light dry leaves. Its nest is hidden behind so much of rotten dry leaves that it is very difficult to find it out. This bird is generally multicoloured.

Of all the birds in Bangladesh the crow or the 'kak' is the most common to all. The crow is constantly flying around. Either in the city or the country they are perhaps the most unwelcome visitors. Their harsh voice is not all liked by people. There are two kind of crows in Bangladesh. One is the jungle crow (dar-kak) and another is the house crow (patti-kak). The jungle crow is jet-black in colour while the house crow is deep grey. They have large beaks and big wings. They have a habit of taking away things

where ever they can makes them. Soaps on the window sills disappear while food stall left open vanish within minutes. The bird that is so disliked does us some good too. It eats away a lot of dirt and filth. Thousands of crows inhabit the Dhaka city itself.

We cannot forget the tiny birds they fly short distances at a time. They cannot fly long distances. They live near the homesteads.

The pigeons and the doves are also well known and seen often. The fisher with its glossy wings and the red long beak present a fine sight. The wood pecker makes holes in the trunks of the trees and live there. The herons and the cranes are the two white birds which live in the marshy lands. Bigger birds like the kite and vulture live on the branches of big trees. The sky-lark makes loud cries at dawn announcing the day break. There are two types of hunter birds in Bangladesh. Some of them hunt during day time and others at night. Vultures and eagles hunt in day light. The owls hunt at night.

We cannot forget the owls which does us much favour by eating harmful rats and insects under the cover of the dark-

ness of the night.

There are hundreds of birds in Bangladesh. The birds found in Bangladesh could be divided into two categories. Those which live within this soil throughout the year are the resident birds. The other birds are migratory birds which fly into Bangladesh from the Himalayas and some parts of the Europe. Some also come from the Siberia.

The beautiful peacock is the loveliest bird to look at. It is sad that the beautiful feathers of peacock makes them prey to feather collectors. Even now perhaps the peacocks are available only in the Mirpur Zoo and sold as stuffed birds. Their existence stands at danger at the hands of the bird hunters. Killings of the migratory birds by the amateur hunters discourage the arrival of these birds in the future. The birds hunters flock towards the haors, beels where the guest birds arrive. We should be more alert in preserving and protecting the birds in Bangladesh. The killing of the birds should be stopped to help promote generation of birds to maintain ecological balance. The year 1991 is supposed to be the Decade of Environment. Let us each take a keener interest in protecting the birds around us to make the Decade of Environment more successful. Decrease of fish population already the migratory birds have lessened.