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When Mere Movements Conjure The Magic

by Fayza Haq

Mime is a theatrical art. The first thing that all theatrical people have to learn — whether they are in the film, drama or dance — is mime, says noted Bangladeshi mime artiste Partha Pratim Majumder who is in town on a short visit from Paris, his temporary home since 1981.

Partha Pratim Majumder, a mime of international repute from Bangladesh, is here in Dhaka on a short visit to see his ailing father. Based in Paris since '81, he has come to the country a number of times since then, to get married, and to keep in touch with his family.

Even though he has re-doubtable international acclaim, every time he is here, he is unable to give performances because of political upheavals and strikes. Syed Ahmed, presenter of Bishwa Natok had requested him to perform for the TV. The recording was scheduled on the 13th of this month, when TV decided to have a strike, and consequently Partha's much longed for programme was cancelled.

Partha, who has become the toast of Paris, and has won the friendship of his maestro, Marcel Marceau, gets New Year cards from prominent citizens like Jack Lang, the Minister for Culture, and Jean Jacques Querryanne, the spokesman of the French Socialist Party. He has been awarded the title of "Master of Mime" by the Jogesh Mime Academy of India, while the Malaysian media proclaimed him as the "Master of the World" for combining elements from numerous cultures in his show.

"Mime exists all over Asia but it has been incorporated into other art forms such as the shadow theatre. Practitioners of the art are rare. As chance would have it I studied with Jogesh Dutta in Calcutta. Dutta happens to be "the master of the silent art" in India," Partha narrated. He also attended music college and gained some popularity as a singer.

His art today remains a combination of the eastern mime and the modern western technique. He is extremely aware of this privileged position as an individual who has best of both worlds. "I want to keep my own culture," Partha insisted, "I love the French culture but I don't want to be French."

His performance in Europe at the festivals are imbued with Asian sensibility, which the audience can identify and relate to. Even his make-up — his white face has the resemblance to an Indian classical dancer than that of a conventional clown.

Chaplinesque as is the humour of some of his creations like "A Bus Passenger," complete with the banana peel, the situation is definitely Asian, where the passenger, late for his appointment, has difficulty



Onstage: Mixing oriental mime with that of occidental.

in catching a bus. After a long sojourn, late for his appointment, he has his pocket picked in the overcrowded bus.

Humorous as are his conce-

ptions, they are not as arresting as his "serious" works. Partha has a definite tragic element in some of his performances. In "Birth to Death" we find a poignant narrative of a

woman's life — from her birth, to the birth of her daughter, to her own death. He has incorporated many of the Indian "mudras" and so brings in a symbolic treatment, in addition to the universal reflection of man's relationship with Nature.

"The Boy and the Bird", based on a story by Tagore, is about a boy who shoots and kills a bird. Partha's virtuoso performance alternately shows the boy's anguish and the bird's death throes, making us believe that the crime was a matter of mistake and innocence. "Mime," Partha insisted, "comes from the soul to express things that cannot be spoken."

This lanky young man from Pabna, with a receding forehead, has done his stint for the good of his country. He, with the help of the painter Kalidas Karmakar, collected twenty lakh takas with their combined performances, and sent it home through French volunteers such as the Secours Catholique and Medicine Sans Frontiers. He himself had to shell out Tk 50,000 to cover

the cost of the technicians for the occasion.

Apart from Kalidas, he also obtained the help of the well-known photographer, Anwar Hussain, to get the photos of the cyclone in Bangladesh well focused before the eyes of the French. "I always think of combining various arts together. The photos of the cyclone helped scour sympathy and understanding," Partha informed me.

In "The Soul of Padma" Partha depicted the life of a fisherman, and he had rubbed himself all over with mud. Kalidas synchronised with the act, and did a sketch of a fisherman in a cyclone within a matter of twelve minutes.

The people of Paris really appreciated their consolidated efforts in Bordeaux and the ex-Prime Minister and now Mayor of Bordeaux, Jacques Chavon Delmas, took an initiative in the programme and awarded Partha and Kalidas a medal each. The Bordeaux and Nantes performances were highlighted both on the local TV and radio.

Dwelling on the state of mime in Dhaka, Partha remarked, "It is the oldest art form. When no language was born mime expressed feelings and emotions. Then dance was born, where every 'mudra' or symbol stands for something tangible and important."

"During the modern times," the soft-spoken and sensitive mime expert added, "people don't always want to hear conversation. Mime is a theatrical art. The first thing that all theatrical people have to learn — whether they are in the film, drama or dance — is mime. If the individual does not know how to gesticulate and carry himself he cannot do his role effectively."

"I did not initially know the grammar of the corporal mime. I did rudimentary pantomime style. I learnt corporal mime from Etienne Decroux, who is the founder of this art.

at the moment, in Paris. He taught me how to change the body movements — varying from the toe to the head — I learnt how the body is controlled from within. Sometimes a white mask is used so that there is no facial expression. People comprehend from the gestures of the body alone and facial expressions are superfluous" Partha elaborated, about his work and training.

Talking about his apprenticeship under Marcel Marceau, Partha was ecstatic about his master. "He is a universal artiste. He doesn't depend on corporal mime alone. He takes from all cultures. He took the 'mudra' from the Bharat Nattyam, he borrowed from the Japanese Kabuki Noh Theatre, from the Peking Theatre, and from the Commedia de l' Art in Italy. Marceau is famed for projecting a universal culture and not just a French or European civilization," he said.

"I learnt how to put dance — such as ballet — in mime. Classical geometrical acrobatics, theoretical acrobatics, stick fighting, sword fighting were all woven into the mime and the tradition of the Theatre Blanche," Partha elaborated.

Before going to Paris and studying there, he did not have any idea of the combination of time, space, musically of silence or the wealth of gestures. "I was certainly not aware of the subtleties of mime before going to Europe," he commented.

Has he done anything to promote mime in Bangladesh? "I have trained a few boys for a couple of years in Natya Chakra Drama School for a couple of years, but nothing professional developed from this," he confessed.

Who are the people who sponsor mime artistes, like himself, in Paris? "There are thousands of theatres in France to sponsor us. But you have to be able to attract the attention of these authorities. The Municipality of Hotel de Ville takes a main role in promoting culture and sports all over France, and they have different types of organisations paid by the Cultural Ministry," the mime artiste said.

Why does he not return to Dhaka and practise his art here? "It isn't just that life is easy in Paris. Life is hard everywhere. In fact living is more relaxed in Dhaka. But who will come to see me perform every night? Even if I make four performances a month, in a place



Partha Pratim Majumder — a portrait study of the mime in Paris by Anwar Hossain.

Going by his performances we see that he has combined Ravi Shankar, Jean-Michael Jarre and Bengali folk music with brilliance. When Partha is at his weakest he is deliberately funny. At his best he brings in the tragic streak with a tremendous awareness of the human mind and soul.

like Mahila Samity, it is not enough for my family. I still wouldn't be able to survive," Partha explained.

When I asked him to compare the theatre production here in Dhaka with that in Paris, he replied, "A play can extend for nine hours in Paris and people will stay to watch it. Peter Brook, for instance, had his 'Mahabharata' with two intervals, stretching on for hours. You cannot imagine something like that here in Bangladesh."

"I don't think I am a great artiste yet," Partha insisted in a self-effacing manner, "but I feel I can contribute something tangible to the theatre and art lovers of Bangladesh. What I have learnt from the experts of the world I want the audience in Dhaka to share. This will add a big dimension to our theatre."

The whitened face, and the

over-done arching eyebrows that Partha flaunts, could be mistaken for that of a clown's. But going by his performances we see that he has combined Ravi Shankar, Jean-Michael Jarre and Bengali folk music with brilliance. When Partha is at his weakest he is deliberately funny. At his best he brings in the tragic streak with a tremendous awareness of the human mind and soul.

Partha retains his heavy eastern accent when speaking French or English. He sticks to the gestures like side-way shake of the head, and prefers to eat with his hand, despite the fact that he has been in Europe for ten years. For Partha to be a success in Bangladesh, he will need the backing of not only the government authorities, but also the affluent commercial houses, who have the means to patronise genius at will.

A ten-member delegation of the Bangladesh Jatiya Rabindrasangeet Sammelan Paribdrasangeet Sammelan Rabindrasangeet Sammelan went to Calcutta in July to join in the celebrations of the 91st birth anniversary of Dr Sailajaranjan Majumdar, the legendary Guru of Tagore songs. The team reached Calcutta by land route and reached the residence of Dr Majumdar well into the evening. They were received in audience by the great man as he lay unable even to sit up.

A sequel to the travelogue that appeared on this page under the same caption two weeks ago.

SAILAJARANJAN, it was clear from his first utterances, was expecting us. It has always happened like that. I had never sent out a notice about our impending visit, and he had always received us as if he had been waiting for us to turn up any moment. I didn't even had the satisfaction of giving him a surprise. And this now was a special occasion — his birthday — which can never pass without us being there to sit at his feet. He was so certain about that. Which he was not about his own brothers and others as close to him — people who had been groomed and established in life by this man now laying on his side in a simple, small and unostentatious bedroom perhaps Tagore would have loved to live in. Who is this man — diminutive still not — never for a moment diminishing even in his nine-tenth century?

Sailajaranjan Dutta Majumdar was born on July 21, in the first year of this century — 1900 that is — in what is now the district of Netrakona in

CALCUTTA REVISITED The Password is Accommodation

by Waheedul Haque

greater Mymensingh. Twenty-four years later he came out first class first in Chemistry in the Calcutta University. The formidable field of his contenders included Qudrat-i-Khuda and other illustrious scholars. But even that apparently failed to impress his father who had a roaring practice as a lawyer in Netrakona. Father wanted the son to take to the bar. And Sailaja had to take a degree in law three years later. Obiding his father beyond this was not in his power and he joined as a lecturer in chemistry at the Shiksha Bhavan, Santiniketan in 1932. It was more Tagore than chemistry or the lure of a job that drew him to that unique university set up by Rabindranath with the motto 'Jatra visvam bhavatyeka needam' — where the universe becomes a nest. In 1974 the Rabindra Bharati University, housed in the ancestral residence of the Tagores in Jorasanko, Calcutta, made him a Doctor of Literature. In 1985 Visva-Bharati decked him with one of the highest honours of that great nation — Deshikottama.

Why, what has he done to earn all that? Nothing by way of being an extraordinary chemist or a science teacher to be sure. As soon as he joined the Visva-Bharati as a teacher in 1932 he started taking music lessons from the legendary Dinendranath Tagore. He had earlier taken lessons at playing the Esraj from the greatest master of that instrument —

Sital Mukherjee while pursuing his chemistry and law studies in Calcutta. Soon enough, in 1934, he started taking music lessons from Rabindranath himself and, bidden by the great orator, began teaching music as well the next year. In 1939 he was appointed the first head or Principal of the Visva-Bharati Sangeet-Bhavan by Rabindranath himself. He continued in that capacity for long 21 years. He resigned in 1960.

From the beginning of his association with Tagore, he started writing notations of

Calcutta metro is another world. Nowhere on this earth can a city have two so different faces — the sub-face clear and shiny and the surface bursting with garbage and people and vehicles.

Rabindra-Sangeet, authenticated by Rabindranath himself. And he kept it till long after the death of Tagore bringing out of his trove the treasure of songs created by Tagore in his glorious and hyperactive closing decade. This made him become the third of that great trio to whom both teachers and learners of Rabindra-Sangeet of all times would remain indebted and grateful. The apex is held by Dinendranath of course with his numerous rotations distinguished by their simplicity. Anadi Kumar Dasgupta of Sylhet and Sailajaranjan of Netrakona

fill up the other two places of honour — the later excelling in writing very detailed and authoritative notations. Most of Tagore's dance dramas and major songs of love and the rains were transcribed by Sailajaranjan into musical scores. Their number is overwhelming. To my mind it could surpass works of all other such transcribers of Tagore songs.

All this is great work, no doubt. But greater still was his grooming of two generations of great artists of Tagore songs on the one hand and training

into teachers hundreds, if not thousands, of other musical aspirants. Sailajaranjan has thus been instrumental in the spreading and popularising of Tagore songs all over the sub-continent and among all Bengali speaking people anywhere on the globe. His teachings are carried far and through the radio and television and the magnetic tape and cassette round the clock. In achieving all this Sailajaranjan never for a moment compromised perfection and authenticity — the fact that explains turning against him by a number of his illustrious dis-

ciples. He says of his life and mission that he has nothing of his own and is wholly a carrier — transmitting Tagore aurally to the generations that haven't had the chance of hearing Tagore in person. It is quite understandable that everyone of our more successful singers wouldn't want to remain a carrier only. They would like to add flavours that would go well with the change of taste down the years, and make them popular. But 'guru' would have none of this and a break with even a very dear close disciple always looms large as an inevitability. This has been happening all his life starting from Suchitra Mitra and Rajeshwari Dutto to the lately alienated queen of Rabindra-Sangeet who has been entirely his own creation Konika Bandyopadhyay. Subinoy Roy, another stalwart among his disciples, still keeps to his 'guru' but meeting demands of saturation-popularity leaves one with little time and energy for making feet-touching visits.

It was getting late. Time for him to be led and to let him go to sleep. We came out and sent the loveliest of our girls — well all the girls on the team were indeed paragons of beauty, but this one with a bright chocolate complexion wore a face of utter innocence — as an emissary to the mistress of the house, Kamala Boudi, to tell that all of us would go out for a stroll around the place. Kamala Boudi worked up quite a rage — roaring at the girl, — "you will see me returning such



Sailajaranjan Majumdar, at a very wasted 92 and glued to the bed by geriatric incapacities, cannot help doing what he has done constantly for sixty years: guiding avid learners at the majestic intricacies of Tagore's music. He has nowadays to resort more and more to 'mudra's expressive of the melodies and rhythms of the songs being transmitted to his students.

unctillities when I go to Dhaka to visit you. Here I am laying the table for you all — an old hag of 67-and you walk out on it. Stop that cheek of stroiling in a drizzle at well past nine."

Chastised, we find for ourselves improvised seats as the dining table seats only six. It was the best dinner we all had for years — it responded so wonderfully to the needs of a travel weary band of pilgrims uncertain about everything but prepared to take anything.

We woke up in the morning in a leisurely, even lordly manner. All our worries seemed unnecessary masochistic exercises in times long past. We had on our team some who were in Calcutta for the first time or for that matter have come out of dear Dhaka or Rajshahi for the first time. We had to plan the day keeping that in mind. Calcutta metro or underground or tube-came first on the card. Birla Planetarium, the Indian Museum, Jorasanko Thakurbar, the Ganges Promenade and the Victoria Memorial were all there and in the right order.

We go first to the New Market in order to change our dollars into Rupee from an authorised dealer in foreign exchange. And the girls just melt away as soon as we reach the spot.

Save two of us including myself, all of the team, including three men, danced their way into the mazes of the old and the New Market — to trickle back after some three hours. It had taken

us an hour and Rs 50 to reach the spot. Add to that three hours of hectic marketing — spending nearly all of their dollars endorsed on their passports — and the team was dog-tired. It wouldn't walk up to the great eating place Kamalavilas on a Dharmatolla side-lane for a lunch of exquisite masalla dosa. We had to settle for the way-side Aminia. It took us full thirty minutes to get seats for us — and another thirty to gorge down an atrocious meaty meal.

We walked up to the Esplanade station of the metro without much ado. We never for once suspected that the girls were also interested in the station we would get down at the end of our metro ride. It must be as close to Garinhat as can be. The shopping spree was still very much with us, who knows how.

Calcutta metro is another world. Nowhere on this earth can a city have two so different faces — the sub-face clear and shiny, uncrowded and 'arty' in an uneasy manner, cool and breezy and the surface bursting with garbage and people and vehicles as also high decibel noise and high-carbon atmosphere making you tire out in hours without your knowing why.

The metro is one thing Calcutta can indeed be proud of. I am advisedly not saying India.

The mega-sized nation which has achieved advances in science and technology far spectacular than building a metro, a hundred-year-old wonder for London and Paris.

The fact that it was a case of purely Bengali engineering skill and knowledge succeeding in the fabrication as well as setting up and running of the