

WEEKEND MUSINGS

Mahfuz Anam

WITH apology to my readers, assuming that this column ever had any, I restart my column after a gap of several months. It first got interrupted when I visited Japan last April. Then one thing led to another, and I kept postponing writing this column.

Among the many other things, and my readers must know them all by now, that reveal the tremendous superiority of Mr. S.M. Ali as an editor, compared to myself, the ability to write regularly is one of them. There were hardly a week that Ali Bhai would miss writing his 'My World'. Whatever may be the nature of his pre-occupation, however much he would have to do, in the midst of everything, and as regularly and inevitably as the weekend would appear, so would his column. He would never tire of reminding me, that 'the ultimate recognition of a journalist is through his writing'. He would always reprimand me if I missed my columns, and I used to do so quite often. Well, as my readers know, I haven't, so far, been able to live up to his expectations. I begin once again with the hope that I will be more regular than I have been in the past.

SAARC Foreign Ministers' Conference

THANKS to the opposition hartal, the inauguration of the SAARC Foreign Ministers' meeting in Dhaka got off to a rather quiet start, attended mostly by government officials and the visiting guests. Many members of the public, invited to attend the inauguration, could not do so. This paper, in an editorial, appealed to the opposition to shift the strike for a couple of days, as there were no political compulsion for doing so, on those days. This would have facilitated the SAARC meeting, and would have also shown the opposition's support for this regional body. A goodwill of sorts would have been created, establishing the fact that whatever our internal politics may be, about SAARC we are all united. So much for our wishful thinking. What happened was that the half-day strike was changed to a day long one. Of course the redeeming feature was that the second day's strike was called off, saving us one full working day. Since we were the only paper to make such an appeal, can we take credit for having saved one working day for the nation? Why not.

However, the reason I started talking about the SAARC meeting was something quite different. Since I missed the inauguration, I tried my best not to miss the Foreign Ministers' dinner the same evening, in honour of the visiting dignitaries. But having sat through part of it, I really couldn't take the cultural show—I suddenly wished the hartal had extended till late in the evening and that I would have been spared the torture of what was dubbed to be post-dinner 'cultural show'. Dinner, I mean the food, itself was predictably unpalatable. After having had the honour of being invited to these official dinners a few times, I can now not only predict the menu, but my tongue can recreate the very taste of the items to come. And what that does to my appetite, is better left unsaid. Really, it is time that Sonargaon changes some of its spices, or adds new ingredients to them, to make such occasions a bit less predictable.

I must apologise, for I still haven't come to say why I have started talking about the SAARC meeting. I am becoming a typical Bengali story teller, beating around the bush without coming to the story itself. Well, what I really wanted to tell you was about the so-called cultural programme that was forced upon our SAARC ministers and officials. It started off with a mime (since when was mime a part of cultural heritage? As an healthy addition to contemporary Bangla culture, yes. But can we call it a part of our thousand year tradition? But that is also not my point. My point is the quality of the function that our guests were dished out. There were three artists presenting the mime item — two ladies and one gentleman. I never understood what the purpose of the second lady was. She did nothing other than occupy some space on the stage. May be occupying that space had a meaning that escaped my untutored mind. There is, of course, another way of looking at her role. Having seen what the two others did by going around the stage, she perhaps did us a favour by standing in one corner. The theme of the mime item was peace. The man was supposed to represent death, cruelty, killing and violence. This he did by grimacing all sorts of violent gesticulations. The other lady was, of course, Peace, which she represented by whirling around the stage with an outstretched right hand with her palm making a sign of 'stop'. In between the various postures, the two artists would suddenly pick

up a banner with the word 'wel-come' (I was under the impression that there is no hyphen in 'welcome'). So confirms the Chambers and the Random House dictionaries in my office. But of course the organisers of that evening, the Foreign Ministry, thought otherwise), then drop it just as suddenly, to pick it up again later at some other point.

This item was followed by a folk song rendered by Rathindra Nath Roy. I like Rathin. We were in the University around the same time. Quite early in his singing career Rathin mesmerized us all with his powerful and high pitch singing. However he, I think, overdid that neglecting other aspects of the song. Over the years it has taken its toll, which is quite evident whenever one hears him now. It was evident that night. Then there was a Lalan Geeti by Meena Barua, which I thought, was the only redeeming feature of the evening. There was also a 'Fishermen's dance', which was neither here nor there. Two male and two female artists did the usual, depicting how our fishermen catch fish.

Then there was the jatra (an indigenous form of rural stage play). 'Serajuddowah', on the life of the legendary last Nawab of independent Bengal. I was amazed to see actor Anwar Hossain who attained justifiable fame in the film of that name. The film is nearly three decades old. It was surprising to see him on stage, and that also in a jatra. This particular art form is heavy on dialogue, and there are plenty of long ones in this one. And if one does not understand the dialogue of a jatra then there is very little else in it to enjoy. Hence, I wonder how much our dignitaries from SAARC understood this jatra, and how appropriate it was to stage it for them.

I really did not understand why such a poor, in fact almost shameful cultural show was presented at such a high level SAARC meeting. There is such a treasure of songs, dance, drama and plays, and there are so many music groups in the city who render such superb cultural performances, that presenting such a poor show amounted to insulting insults on ourselves. Shilpakala Academy, Shishu Academy, Nazrul Academy or any of the numerous private cultural groups — please, not the ones attached to political parties — would have done a far better job. With the Foreign Office becoming increasingly adept at organising international and regional conferences, it must pay far more attention to the cultural programmes it organises along with its conferences.

National Debate Festival at Dhaka University

A three day national debate festival was organised at the Dhaka University jointly by Dhaka University Debating Society and Bangladesh Debate Federation. During the three day festival they held several competitions, one parliamentary debate, several seminars on debates, one mock UN debate and other forms of public speaking. They even published a book on various aspects of debating. I had the privilege of being the speaker in the first parliamentary debate. What impressed me most was the organising ability of these young boys and girls. When all we hear about students activities is violence and class boycott or strikes, events such as the one I attended shows how constructive and creative our young people can be if given a chance. I was informed that more than 1,300 participants registered for the festival and, of them, several hundred came from the districts. These visitors were lodged in various DU Halls, and were given some pocket money. All volunteers of the event seem to know their specific tasks, and appeared to be performing them in a most disciplined manner. There were quite a few boys and girls, wearing big bands with the word 'security', and roaming the place and maintaining discipline. Most people had their name tags, and performed their designated tasks silently. The audience, that filled the large TSC auditorium, was patient and extremely courteous. I must say, I was terribly impressed by the organising ability of this group.

As for their debating ability, they have come far ahead from the time we were debaters. Most speakers did extremely well. Of particular interest is the rise of parliamentary type of debating. This appears to be gaining increasing popularity. These boys and girls go through the rules and procedure of the parliament and learn how to raise points of order, points of information, privilege motions, etc. These young people are already getting accustomed to parliamentary procedures, along with it they are developing the habit of debating. Both these qualities will help them as and when they decide to join the real parliament.

LEKHAK SHIBIR RALLY: A REPORT

by Areeful Islam

"Is a poem, for example, a mere individual, lonely exercise?" asked a young, inquisitive undergraduate, and the answer came quickly from yet another young man who lectures on poetry: "Yes, a poem begins with an individual, but does not end there. It is a social phenomenon; it even goes to the street." Certainly, on July 21, 1994, poetry went to the street, and it was a different kind of poetry; obviously, it was not poetry for poetry's sake, but was a visible construct made of inevitable breaths, syllables, pronouncements, protests — all fused into an unprecedented concert and heightened into a move on the street against a common enemy of creativity and freedom.

It was 4:30 pm. and the sky was somewhat cloudy. Rabin Ahsan, a very young writer, was standing near the microphone, in front of the National Press Club; his passionate, unbridled, youthful tone had a reverberation which itself bore the message: "We are, today, face to face with the enemies of freedom and creativity that is, fundamentalism, communalism and fatwahbaji, and the on-going move for introducing the so-called Blasphemy Law." Within an unusually short stretch of time, writers, intellectuals,

educationalists, scientists, journalists, women activists, theatre activists, film-makers, actors and leading members of various professions began to come together with a visible sense of urgency, in front of the Press Club on July 21, 1994. It was perhaps the biggest rally of its kind, organised by the Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir, the oldest and biggest organisation of writers in the country.

Azfar Hussain, one of the key organisers of the rally, who also works as Literary Secretary for the Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir, maintained, "Only within 11 days, we've organised this rally of writers and artists who have more than promptly and spontaneously responded and reacted to our call. Given the realities we are facing — the monstrous rise of fundamentalism and fatwahbaji, as well as the conspiracy for introducing the 'blasphemy law' whose worst scapegoats would be writers and artists, the need for organising such a rally has been acutely felt. Indeed, time has come when writers and artists cannot afford to remain content with mere aesthetic accomplishments and struggles; but they must take to the street." And, indeed,

they took to the street. Given the intensity and magnitude of the rally which consisted of more than a thousand writers and artists — both young and old, new and prominent... Akhtaruzzaman Elias, a leading novelist and also a key-organiser of the rally, shot an exclamatory remark: "See, the street is a flow!" Earlier, prior to the organising of the rally, Elias remarked: "Religious



HEARING so much about the tele-film converted into a full length feature film, Shan-khaneel Karagar, written by the renowned writer Humayun Ahmed and directed by Mustafizur Rahman, I, along with my wife and younger sister decided to see it. Earlier we had heard from friends and relatives that the rates of tickets for viewing this film varied from Taka fifty to hundred, on the black market. One Thursday one of my cousins called up and informed that all our relatives would be going in a group and that first class tickets could be obtained at normal rate. After getting the message that our tickets have been obtained, we rushed to the cantonment Garrison cinema hall within fifteen minutes. We made it in time, when the earlier show had just finished at 8 pm. The crowd came out of the hall as if the floodgates had opened; we could find our cousins amidst the crowd waiting to enter the hall. We joined them and were pushed inside almost involuntarily; we went in virtually floating in the midst of a huge crowd. This reminded me of going to see films in Karachi, Mauripur Odeon cinema hall, where in the sixties I had seen many films, and the process of entering the hall was almost identical. The ushers seemed very busy with their torch lights on and for about fifteen minutes we were disturbed by people taking their seats in our vicinity.

The above pertains to the apparent popularity of the movie. Now, before moving on to the film we need to discuss the story and writer Humayun Ahmed's pattern of writing novels. He has a tendency to focus and highlight the plight of the middle class families with their problems and frustrations, although providing no definite solutions. His writings are associated with the realities of human life and the laws of logic.

In Shankhaneel Karagar, he deals with a middle class family. A retired middle class man and his wife have five children,

D RAMA Circle is back on stage. After two years in the doldrums this theatre group of repute has staged its 17th production at the Guide House auditorium on July 31. The play *Drishit* is completely new and somewhat different from what we normally have been watching in Dhaka. Drama Circle has always tried to do something new in the field of theatre arts in this country. Those who have passed the meridian of life and are still followers of this performing art, remember many innovative productions of this august organisation like *Raktakarabi*, *Tasher Desh* and *Raja-O-Rani* of Tagore; *Oedipus* and *Kalbela* by Sayeed Ahmed; *Bohipur* by Syed Waliullah and *Arms and the Man* and *You Never Can Tell* of Shaw (Bengali translations by Bazul Karim and Munir Chowdhury).

It was a nostalgic experience having been able to drag myself to Bailey Road and once again associate, even for a brief period, with an organisation which is the torch bearer of group theatre movement in this country. The president of Drama Circle Mr Tawfiq Aziz Khan has very rightly pointed out that play production has become costly these days and in spite of one's best desires it cannot be done regularly for want of funds, a suitable place for rehearsal and storage facility for sets and props as well as absence of a real stage and above all severe shortage of good plays. But like me many of my contemporaries are very glad to see Drama Circle staging a successful comeback.

feeling itself can be a creative inspiration. But religious fanaticism and bigotry always put a stranglehold on a writer's imagination, a scientist's quest and a social scientist's analysis. The current conspiracy for introducing the so-called 'blasphemy law' is not only the crudest expression of religious fanaticism and bigotry, but is also a means to legalise them so as to impede the course of creative, secular struggle and scientific progress. Realising this, writers and artists and

Shankhaneel Karagar
A Low-budget Success-story

by Kaiser Parvez Ali

four of them are their own offsprings and the eldest daughter Rabeya is from a different biological father who, after divorcing Rabeya's mother, has settled in the United States marrying an American lady. He visits his daughter and shows her with gifts and takes her out for sightseeing.

Marriage proposals for Rabeya fizzle out after initial meeting with her of prospective in-laws probably because of her dark complexion and age which seems to be in the late

Proposals are sent for Ranu but the prospective bridegroom is interested to marry her younger sister Jhunu. After initial contemplation, Ranu gives her consent but later this marriage turns out to be a psychological shock for her and she becomes mentally imbalanced. This causes the death of her mother. Ranu is sent to a mental asylum. At the end Rabeya receives huge financial support from her biological



A scene from the film: Nazma Anwar and Dolly Zahur

twenties. Her brother Rafiq is in love with his cousin Kitkiti who does not show much interest in him and likes to move around with an expatriate photographer who is wealthy, of good health, and smart enough to attract her.

The photographer, realising Rafiq's love for Kitkiti, asks her to go back to him and leaves the country. As the mother becomes weak, she likes to see her other two younger daughters married off.

father, gets a job as a school teacher and moves out of Dhaka.

During the class lectures she is shown to be engulfed with flashbacks from her childhood memories, even at times when students respond to her questions.

The film has several emotional and tragic scenes. Once when Rabeya gets to know that she is not her step father's biological daughter and overwhelmingly announces it to

her brothers and sisters and embraces her real father, bringing the viewers near to tears. Secondly, when during flashbacks Rabeya is shown to be given a sari as an Eid gift by her stepfather which he did not give even to his own offsprings due to financial constraints is a very touching scene. Thirdly, when Rabeya buys something for her stepfather when she goes shopping with her actual father and fourthly, when the father hears that his son has got a job and becomes so excited that he goes to his boss and reads the appointment letter of his son, making the viewers rather too euphoric and emotional.

The film could have concluded with a more happier note if Rabeya was shown to have gotten married to an exceptionally good man after so long a wait. That would have had positive effect on the women who suffer from this type of fate and also bachelors watching the film would have been influenced, and in future, could have proposed to single ladies suffering from inferiority complexes like Rabeya. Ranu's mental condition could have been shown to improve as it left the viewers sad in the end.

Rabeya could have stayed back with the family instead of leaving them but then, writer Humayun Ahmed surely would not have compromised with his creation just for the sake of entertaining the viewers.

The director of the film Mustafizur Rahman, it seems, has really worked hard during the making of the film. Right from the beginning of 1987 until the film's release, there were lots of obstacles, both natural and man made. On questioning him about the delay in release of the most discussed and, of course, success-

ful film, he cited different reasons, such as: the 'defective negatives'.

After shooting for 16 shifts, strike by the TV artists for realising their demands, the natural disaster of 1988, anti-autocracy movement, elections and once again a natural disaster in 1991 delayed the whole process. On questioning how the film finally reached the cinema halls, Mustafizur Rahman, began to narrate over a cup of tea. Recalling the sad story he said, "The total cost of the film stood at Taka 11 lac 35 thousand. Tender was floated for the sale of the film but surprisingly no one turned up to procure it. After a month once again tender was floated, still no one turned up and once again there were no buyers for the film! I was so disappointed that I was even advised by some to procure the film myself for half the price since I had directed it. I contacted the Muktijoddha Council under which some cinema halls are operating. They agreed to screen it and now you have seen the result. The film is a bumper success so to say. Now we have ten prints rotating in various cinema halls of the country."

The cinematographer of the film must be given credit for doing a good job. He has captured the scenes beautifully, specially in the sequences where some birds are seen to move in circles, and when Montu moves with his bicycle on the beach etc.

This low budget film collecting considerable revenue at the box-office proves that a simple film with a good story line, good making, spontaneous and lively acting and excellent publicity can do wonders and could challenge and pose threat for the multi-cast, big-budget so called commercial films costing generally from Taka 70-80 lakh. We need more films like this one which would take people's minds away from the baneful glamorous with a heavy dose of sex and violence, often shown full-house in our cinema halls.

A Remarkable Stage Production

Like the playwright Indrashish Lahiry the director Mustafizur Rahman is also very young and it is his first directorial assignment. But with a brand new team, with the exception of talented Masud Ali Khan, Mustafiz has succeeded in staging a remarkable play. As a first night's production it had its small flaws like not so much synchronisation of light and music with actions of the players and at times unclear speech in high speed by actors, etc. These can be taken care of and I hope that from the next production these irritants will be effectively removed.

But the most important aspect of the play is the capacity of the young artists to portray the characters and the

smoothness with which they take the play to the last scene. It was pretty obvious that the actors were fully aware of their characters and they memorised their lines thoroughly.

The three female characters portrayed by Kanak, Raunak and Nilufer are definitely the mainstay of the play and they performed superbly. None can feel that this is their first appearance on stage. Habluddin and Sharfuddin Ahmed should improve their speech throwing and it will be good to remember that whatever they say should be clearly audible. They should not think that they are weak links in the entire cast.

Zahedur Rahim is quite normal in his portrayal of Shaheen Bhai. His dress has

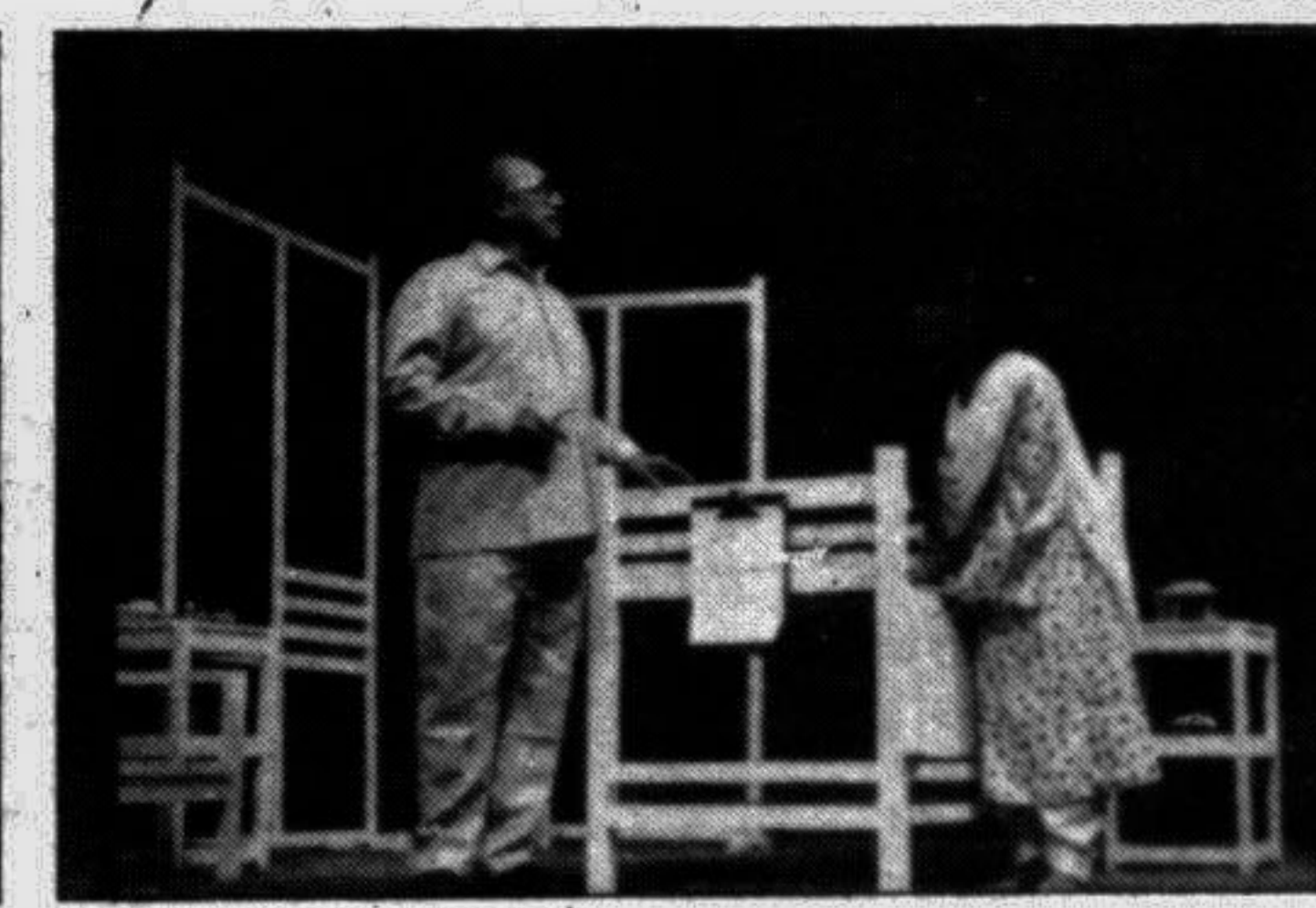
represented half his character. 'Shiblee' (Mr Howlader) has to practice a little more the art of a Chittagonean trying to speak Bangla correctly. He must remember that he provides the play with vital relief when it is most needed.

Veteran Masud Ali Khan, a very popular TV personality, is brilliant in a small role. His portrayal of the shrewd father-in-law is an object lesson for any youngster in character acting.

With improved light and sound from the next showing, 'Drishit' is expected to have a long run. Taukir's set design deserves special mention. Daphane du Maurier's 'Blue Lenses', from which the dramatist got his inspiration to



Raunak, Sharfuddin and Habluddin



Masud Ali Khan and Kanak

in scenes from the play

Photos: Tameem

issue was being used by the Jamaat to suppress the progressive writers and artists in the country.

Before the festoon-decorated, slogan-sounding procession of thousands of writers and artists was brought out in the street, Abdul Matin Khan who chaired the rally read out a historic declaration which contained a seven-point demand including 1) the trial of the war criminals of 1971 and 2) a fresh legislation to stop the use of religion as weapons of politics. The declaration also called for: 3) introducing uniform family act and ensuring equal rights for men and women; 4) introducing uniform, scientific, non-communal, mass-oriented education; 5) withdrawing false and humiliating cases against writers and journalists and ensuring full freedom of writers and artists; 6) also ensuring religious rights of all citizens of the country, and 7) setting free any field of creative activity including sciences, social sciences, art and literature, journalism, etc., from any form of direct or indirect regulation.

ERRATA

In the 22nd July issue of Weekend Magazine, Prof Anisuzzaman (article: 'Recalling Moulvi Mujibur Rahman...') was identified as Chairman, Bengali Department, DU. He is no longer holding that post.