

# An Interview with "Shared Experience Theatre" from UK A Closer Sense of Participation

by Fayza Haq



**S**PEAKING to The Daily Star, in the foyer of the Sheraton Hotel, after a workshop at the British Council auditorium, Nancy Meckler, the co-director of the "Shared Experience Theatre" that presented "Mill on the Floss" on two successive days at the National Museum, elaborating on the aim of the group said, "We are interested in large themes and big issues, like how to find freedom for yourself without neglecting other people; how to face the fact of mortality; can one live a totally private life or does it have to be political; people sacrificing themselves for high ideals etc."

Asked to comment on the experience that the group has gathered while staging the play, Nancy, with her steel grey curls and gold-rimmed glasses, continued, "we had a wonderful time working on it for six weeks with the actors. It was a great period of exploration and experimentation. There were two directors working on it, along with designer, choreographer and the writer. It was a very special collaboration."

Talking about the countries other than UK that "The Mill on the Floss" (sponsored by the British Council) will be presented to, and giving an idea of the formation of the group she informed, "this production has toured India and is due to visit Sri Lanka. The reaction in Bombay and Delhi was wonderful. People really liked it. This group is not a permanent one. We are together for four or five months, then everybody goes away and we start again. We try to invite people back. They are not always available as they might be doing something else such as television or film work."

Elaborating on the prospect of coming to Bangladesh she added, with a smile, "we did not know anyone who had been here. People could tell us about India but not about Bangladesh. As a result we were curious."

Talking about whether it was difficult to interpret the novel in the play form, she said, "we had a wonderful adaptor in Helen Edmundson, who has real talent and skill. We talked with her for a long time about what aspects of the novel interested us. We can't possibly put every part of the novel on the stage."

Throwing light onto her entry into the stage as a co-director, she said, "I was an actress for two years and then I did some direction. Later I realised that I could get more satisfaction as a director than as an actress. I have been directing for 30 years now, and have handled about 60 plays in all."

Nancy does theatre work exclusively. "Combining work with my private life was difficult when my children were young, but now my sons have grown up — one is studying in America and the other is working there."

Asked about how the props for a work as vast as the "Mill on the Floss" was being carried along during their tours overseas, she explained, "The set is very abstract and simple. Just with lighting and sound the stage looks different at different places — sometimes it may be a mill and at times a bridge."

Giving her views about the secret of being a good actor she continued, "It deals with being generous and open about sharing your life. Not anyone and everyone can be an actor as they are unable to expose their inner life. You must find some training to be an actor either with people who are making theatre or with teachers."

She felt that there was good drama being presented at the moment in UK. "There have been playwrights who have been very good like Harold Pinter, Mick Dear, Tom Stoppard and Deborah Levy." She also informed me that a

lot of bright young people were going in for the theatre presently and that it was very popular, although it is not easy to begin unless one had been to drama school.

Asked what she felt about how a nineteenth century story appeals to a present day audience in the subcontinent, Nancy said, "I believe that this play will go down well because we always choose material that has a universal appeal. It is not important that it takes place in the nineteenth century. It is a story about someone who is trying to find personal freedom and that is a story that can be told any time."

Tall, lithe and blonde Liz Ranker, the choreographer of "Shared Experience Theatre" who had also taken part in the workshop, asked to elaborate on the lives of the actors, said, "It is difficult to make a living just as an actor. Unless they are very successful a lot of them are unemployed often and have to depend on social security. Some get odd jobs in places such as department

stores but it is hard to get jobs for short periods of time. When they are laid off they spend their time in reading, writing, developing skills and attending workshops." Focusing on the problems of aspiring actors she said, "Wages are low, you can't expect to be in work all the time. It is difficult financially."

Liz, who began as a dancer, has been a director and performer as well, apart from being a choreographer. She also does film and television work. "I get on very well with the writer and directors of this particular group — there is a lot of interaction. It is exciting to work as a team. This is greater than some of the individual parts," she commented about her work.

"I suppose theatre has suffered in relation to videos and cinema but a good company can get good audiences," Liz said, as regards the popularity of stage plays.

George Eliot's "Middlemarch" television version coincided with the per-

formance of "Mill on the Floss" in UK. Both novels are placed at the same time in history. It is useful to do a novel that most people have read as viewers are interested to come and see it. The policy of "Shared Experience Theatre" is that you don't have to put the whole book on stage. The adaptor Helen puts on those aspects on stage that interest her. She has followed the development of Maggie and she feels she does not have to put everything on stage, which is a different medium from a novel," adds Liz, who prefers the interaction of the live stage to the rest.

Simon Andrews, who plays Mr Tulliver, the father, has been acting professionally since '81, having studied English and Drama earlier. He said, "I have been to Malaysia and Singapore earlier with the same group, but the excitement of coming to the Subcontinent is overwhelming. It is so different from anything any of us has witnessed. Here the audience is perceptive, under-

standing and cultured and there is more of a sense of participation. The audience is not inhibited, as say in England, and they laugh and talk during the play. To see this response is enjoyable for us as well. Hearing Indian music in UK and seeing the dance in the native setting is different. We managed to see some dance in India, along with visiting some temples, and mosques at Dhaka. We find the different culture and environment very stimulating. Travelling in a rickshaw in Dhaka what struck me was the friendliness of the people. A lot of people came up to us to say 'hello' and shake hands as we toured the Lalbagh Fort. The ride on the Buriganga river was enjoyable too."

Jonathan Cake, with his BA (Hons) in English from Cambridge and three years experience of acting, was lured to the group as "it tries to create a unity among the performers on stage and the audience. It more than merely hopes that

the experiences will be shared. I found my part difficult as we work in a physical way, bringing out emotions that are dormant in us. The emotions are sometimes difficult to handle properly as they demand a certain integrity. It is very easy to do too much, too little or not the right notes. It is difficult to draw the thin line between appearing to be an exploiter and someone who is genuinely in love with the protagonist. Apart from acting as Stephen Guest I play four different parts and I enjoy this juggling of roles."

The main character is played by three different actresses. Anne-Marie Duff, who plays the role of little Maggie, and has worked for a very similar theatre company at Cambridge for 18 months, talking about her role said, "It is not so much difficult exciting. Everybody likes to play, and in the role of a child I enjoy the sense of play all the time."

"It wasn't essential for the play to have three persons to play Maggie's lead role but it was the idea of the adaptor Helen Edmundson. It is more dramatic in a way to see the changes she goes through. She becomes a new person each time. She is still Maggie but she has such a different life in life that she has to change herself each time to cope up with her problems," said Catherine Cusack, who plays the second Maggie — when she is no longer the wild curious child and her father is bankrupt and sick. "Maggie has to stop and control her desires to cope with her situation. She also discovers religion, she added. "Catherine is obviously happy to join the group, apart from her her film, TV and radio work."

Helen Schlesinger, who acts as Maggie in the final stage, and who has eight years experience of the stage and TV, commented about her part, "It is as demanding as all the other roles. Every conflict that Maggie has is very dramatic. I play her after she has tried to keep herself from the world and when she goes back to society. When she falls in love with Philip she has another difficult time."

Simon C, said about his part, "I had the journey in which I go from the young optimist to the adult person who faces hardships as enjoyable indeed. The latter part requires a great deal of concentration." Dwelling on his experience of the Subcontinent, he adds, "It is a visual feast, with a constant mass of energy around one."

George Eliot, who wrote the novel on which the play is based, presented a self-portrait in Maggie Tulliver, the dark, disobedient, passionate and imaginative creature who is at odds with the simple provincial world into which she is born. Eliot is not a feminist writer although in her work she strongly expressed the good qualities that she ascribes to women.

"Shared Experience Theatre" says about itself, "At the heart of our work is the power and excitement of the performer's physical presence and the unique collaboration between actor and audience — a shared experience." Helen Edmundson, the adaptor, remarks, "On first reading The Mill, I felt, as many did at the time of publication, that the ending was somehow unacceptable; a convenient way of resolving an almost insoluble situation. Now, however, I feel it is the only possible — the climax of The Testing of Maggie Tulliver."

"Oxford Time" described the award-winning play as "A theatrical work of genius". "Brighton and Hove Leader" wrote of it as "Innovative, physical, poetry in motion," while "The Times" said about it, "All human life is here."

that his "Judge" self has put his "villante" self on trial.

Episode 11 on BTV on Sunday at 9:00pm

### Crystal Maze

Episode 10 on BTV today (Friday) at 9:05am

### Design with a Human Face

Continued from page 11 sky, which is neither a piece of furniture nor a machine, all of whose functions are concealed behind the circumspect shape of a paralleepiped."

— the ulterior stage of evolution, according to Starck, should be "biomechanical design", that is to say a synthesis of the mechanical and the organic, in which the object becomes an extension of the body, a prosthesis.

Concerning these few precepts, Philippe Starck prefers to speak of method rather than theory, a pragmatic method to "do" for Starck is a man of action, an unsatiable worker, driven by pure energy. He often uses the image of a whale which swallows up everything that crosses its path, in its enormous mouth, to express his curiosity and his gluttonous interest in everything around

him, indefinitely, images, objects and people, without any censorship. He is in on all journeys and all experiences, daytime ones just as much as night-time ones. He no doubt draws this taste for adventure from his original childhood, which was complex although wealthy, during which he was unable to fit into any standard mould or any classical framework. Since then, he has enjoyed being in that avant-garde fringe of the world and in that out-of-synch position from which he is able to perceive his period and be in tune with it so as to better invent it and anticipate it in its modernity.

Perhaps Philippe Starck's greatest quality, in this arid world of specialists, is to be all-embracing, in the humanistic acceptance of the term, that is to say a free spirit. — L'Actualite en France

## Viewing Video

by Lenin Gani

**B**ODY BAGS ARE three short stories by master horror writer John Carpenter. The viewer may be relieved of not being subjected to low budget special effects.

The first story titled 'Gas Station' is about how a young woman's first night at a local gas station is anything but routine after she encounters a serial killer.

'Hair' is my favourite. Here a man's obsession with his hair leads to steady deterioration in his personal life. And after using a host of chemicals without success he turns to a miracle announcement on TV.

Later he realises he got more than he bargained for.

Finally, 'The Eye' narrates the experience of a successful sportsman who has everything going for him: his club doing well in the league and his wife expecting a baby.

But after a freak road mishap he loses an eye and it is replaced. However, the doctor fails to mention the donor was a dead murderer and before it can possess him drastic action must be taken.

To give the whole film a touch of humour a dead corpse is on hand to act as host and gives insight before each story unfolds. There is even a guest appearance by Carpenter himself at the end.

de. To Sleep With A Vampire is actually an excellent drama that focuses on the relationship between a vampire (Scott Valentine) and Nina (Charlie Spradling), a nightclub performer.

One cold night after rescuing Nina, the vampire offers to let her stay at his place for the night. Unwittingly, she accepts his invitation not knowing his true identity.

Don't jump into conclusions thinking that something sinister is going to happen. Actually, all that the vampire wants from Nina is the answers to certain questions.

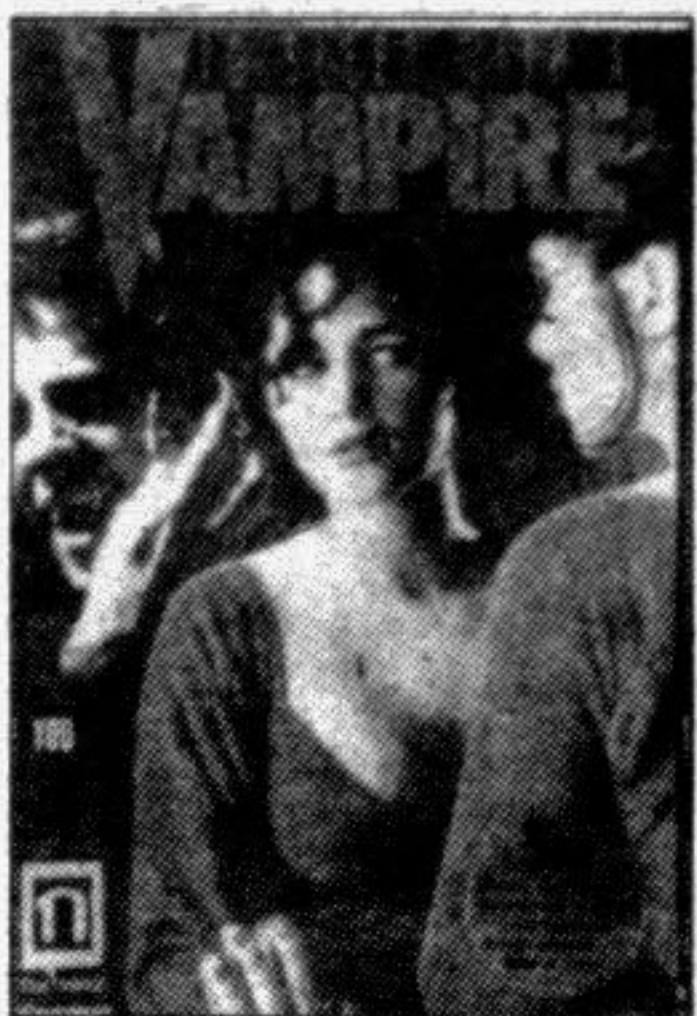
The punch line comes when the vampire asks: 'What is the day like?' And she replies: 'I am only like you. I work all night and sleep all day.'

For Royce (James Belushi) trouble seems to follow him wherever he goes.

After successfully rescuing a group of hostages in Bosnia, Royce learns his organisation is going to be shut down because it's time to end the Cold War.

But his colleagues don't like the idea and plan to kidnap a senator and also hijack a shipment of nuclear warheads in the Ukraine which they want to sell to the highest bidder. Of course, Royce has other ideas.

hi stark contrast to the ti-



ENGLISH

NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Rivers	(Action)	James Belushi
2. The Spy Within	(Thriller)	Scott Glenn/ Theresa Russell
3. Pasi Teise		Scott Glenn/ Anthony La Paglia
4. Flashfire	(Action)	Billy Zane
5. Bullets and Blood		Harold Diamond/ Stuart Whitman/ Della Sheppard
6. Fearless Fuzz		Marion Van Thijn
7. The Barfoot Kid		Lilly/Thom Hoffman
8. Spyder		Maggie Cheung/ Aaron Kwok/ Ti Lung
9. The Roller Blade Seven	(Adv)	Frank Stallone/Karen Black/Joe Estevez
10. Eagles	(Concert)	
11. Red Room	(Rom/Thriller)	
12. Rushweek		Nick Cassavetes
13. Trust Me	(Comedy)	Theresa Tinting/Bob Morrissey/Susan Goforth
14. Dark Future	(Sci/Act)	
15. Mandroid		
16. When Dinosaurs Ruled The World		

HINDI

NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Andolon	(Soc/Act)	Jarjay Dutt/Govinda
2. Nishana	(Soc/Act)	Sanjay/Mithun
3. Paandav	(Action)	Akshay Kumar
4. Pathreeta Raasta	(Soc/Act)	Dimple Kapadia
5. Jawab	(Action)	Karishma Kapoor
6. Surakshaa	(Soc/Act)	Moica Bedi/Aditya Panscholi
7. Police Jung	(Action)	Mamooty/Kiran Kumar
8. Vartaman		
9. Lady Killer	(Horror)	
10. Film Fair-18	(Musical)	
11. Very Best-94		

Source: Film Fair Video and other clubs.

### Drishyakabya comes up with Pragoitihashik

Drishyakabya, a new professional theatre group makes its debut Sunday evening by staging "Pragoitihashik". Manik Baidopadhyay's classic short-story of even title rendered into a modern play, at the Guide House Auditorium in the City.

The drama will be directed by Amrith Haque Chowdhury. Lighting will be devised by Tapas Sen, a regional figure in the 'most plastic medium'

while Khaled Chowdhury, an artist of similar stature, also from Calcutta, will design and oversee the stage.

The main two characters, Vikhu, and Panchi, will be portrayed by Amrith Haque Chowdhury and Lucky Inam respectively. Other major roles will be performed by Rahmat Ali, Sunon Mallick, Wahida Mallick Jolly, Kazi Anis, Eva and Mohzur Rahman.



Amrith Haque Chowdhury and Lucky Inam, rehearsing to face audience Sunday evening.

### TELEVISION

#### Arabian Nights: Story of the Trader and the Goat

**S**HEHRAZADE continues the next night the story of the trader and the Goat, to the curious Sultan.

Sirajuddin marries again: Sirajuddin wishes goodbye to



his loving wife Duraksha — who has not borne him a heir from five year of marriage.

Sirajuddin was a part of a Caravan which included a very rich trader Abdul-Bin-Khalid and his only daughter Ghozala who were carrying rights, Golds and pearls.

As the caravan of traders moved into the night, unknown to them — they were being watched by dacoits.

The trader's beautiful daughter Ghozala was saved by Sirajuddin from being abducted by the dacoits.

The Meer-o-Karwan (head of the caravan) advised Sirajuddin to marry Ghozala — since she is now left alone in this world.

Nikah takes place between Sirajuddin and Ghozala.

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First wife Duraksha cannot bear a child: In the meanwhile Sirajuddin's first wife goes to Amul — the Pir-o-Fakir — to grant her a child.

Also she will never bear a baby — but the second wife of her husband will give birth to a torch-bearer of the clan.

This saddens Duraksha. First wife Duraksha accepts the second wife Ghozala: Sirajuddin brings his second wife Ghozala to his home and introduces her to his first wife Duraksha — who is reluctant to let her love being shared.

Sirajuddin reminds her of her permission to marry again. Duraksha accepts Ghozala but not within her heart and soul.

Sultan spares Shehrazade for one more night: The soldiers arrive to take Shehrazade to the executioner.

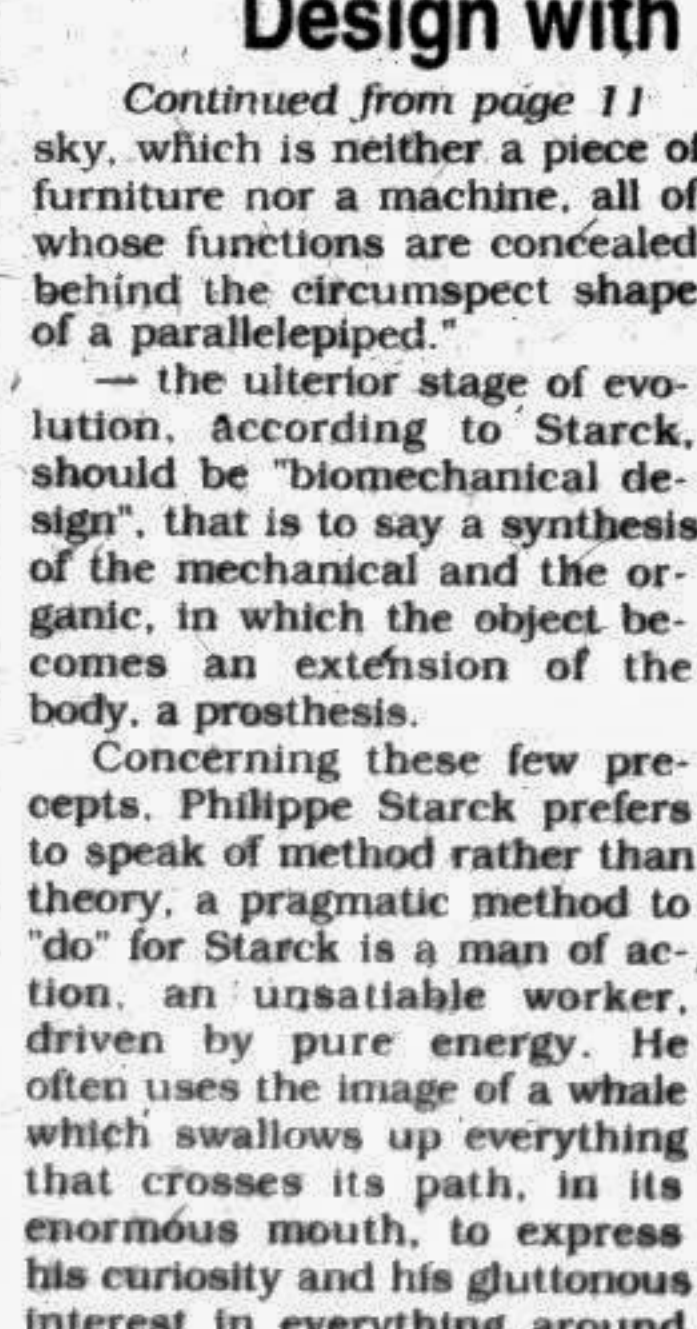
The Sultan's appetite for the story remains unfulfilled. He spares Shehrazade's life for one day more so that she can complete the next night the story of the trader and the goat and unveil to him the secret of the two wives and the trader.

Thus life smiles on princess Shehrazade for one more day. Episode 10 on BTV today (Friday) at 8:30pm

#### Dark Justice: "Marshall Law"

Almost killed by an ex-convict's bullet, Judge Nicholas "Nick" Marshall (Ramy Zada) hallucinates during surgery

Episode 11 on BTV on Sunday at 9:00pm



that his "Judge" self has put his "villante" self on trial.

Episode 11 on BTV on Sunday at 9:00pm

### Crystal Maze

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