

NAGORIK

Celebrating 1000th Performance

Birth of a Movement

LAST Friday I joined in with thousands of others for a day-long celebration of Nagorik's (our premier drama group) 1000th performance. It is a magnificent achievement by any measure. More so, because it was achieved against tremendous odds of all types, ranging from non-availability of a proper auditorium, qualified directors, experienced actors and actresses, to that of qualified make-up persons, proper lighting experts, stage-managers, costume designers, etc. In fact, all aspects of drama production had to be started from the scratch. It is with ENTHUSIASM and COMMITMENT that the group made up for what they lacked in terms of expertise and facilities.

I cannot but marvel at the achievement of this pioneering theatre-group for having given birth to what has ultimately become a national phenomenon. It will not be an exaggeration to say that they were the pioneers, whose example encouraged the creation of literally thousands of other theatre-groups throughout the country. Today we can boast of several standard theatre-groups in almost every district of Bangladesh, which can be credited to the leadership role that Nagorik played during those early days.

When we talk about Nagorik's achievement, we essentially talk about the re-birth of an art-form, which was traditionally ours, but got lost

by Mahfuz Anam

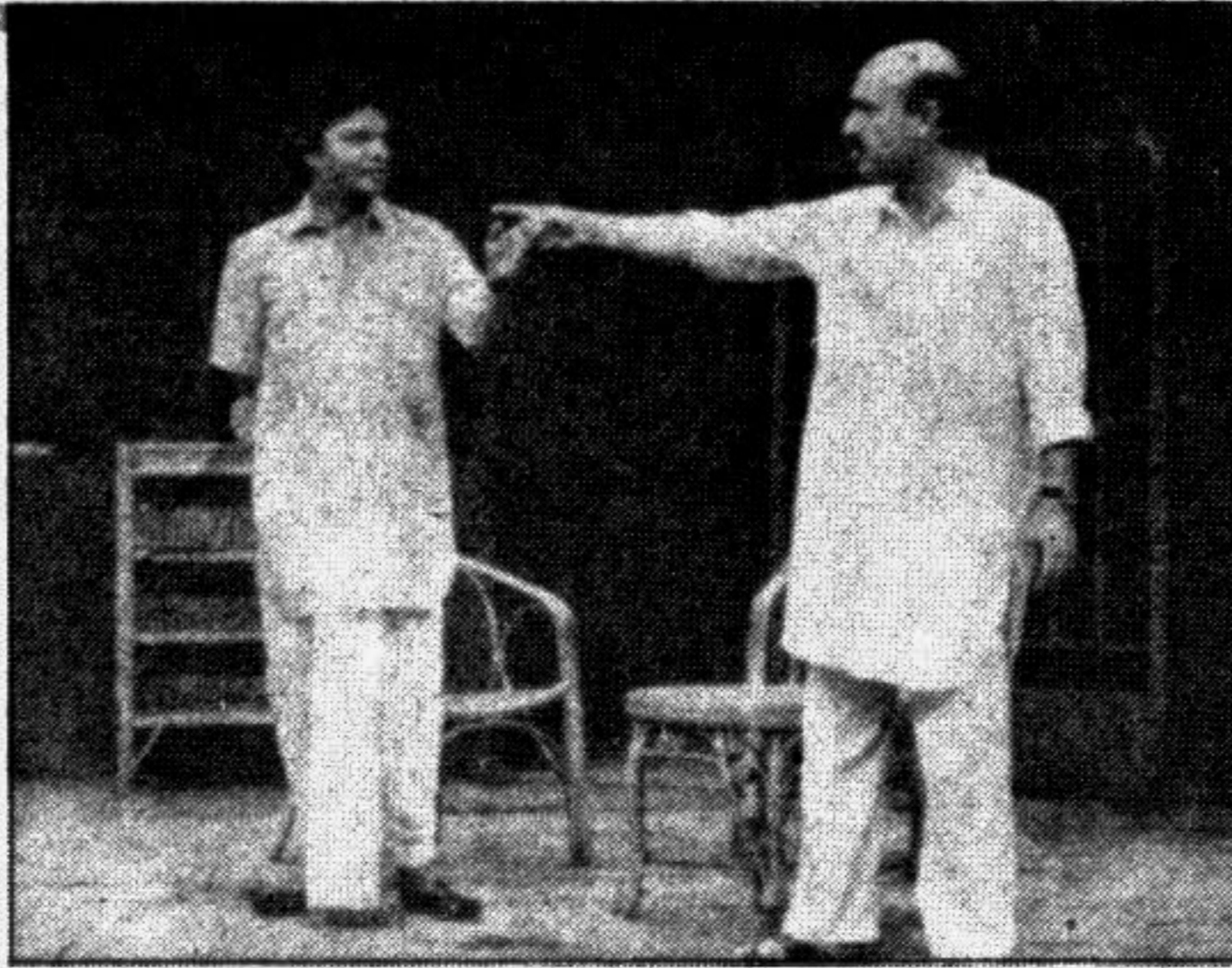
sometimes during the Pakistani days. Thus, the theatre movement that we have today is a direct legacy of our Liberation War. Having fought to free our motherland, many young freedom-fighters, with an artistic bent of mind and a penchant for acting, decided to use the art-form of theatre to help rebuild the country. This explains the choice of plays and the subjects put forward by them. Almost, in every instance, it dealt with issues of democracy, economic justice, cultural and intellectual freedom, anti-imperialism, fundamental freedom, and the like. Who can forget the contribution made by the theatre groups throughout the country in the anti-Ershad struggle? When most sectors of our society either gave up in desperation or were sold out for favours in cash or kind, the theatre-groups kept the light of protest burning. They staged plays in street corners, in public places and during such occasions as Ekushey, 26th March, 16th December, to raise public consciousness, and motivate them to participate in the anti-autocracy struggle. I think the theatre-groups made a singular contribution in the struggle for restoration of democracy in 1991. And even this I would say happened because of what some pioneering theatre groups, Nagorik being perhaps the principal one, started in the early 70s.

While sitting in the British Council auditorium and listening to other people reminiscing about Nagorik last Friday, I realised that Nagorik's history of growth and development is integral part of the country's own history of trials and tragedies. I do not clearly remember which was the first play I witnessed. But the one that made a tremendous impression on me was "Baki Iti-hash". Everything about the play thrilled me, especially the acting. I was so proud to see the group perform with such superb professionalism. The fact that this group was staging it every week, and was, for the first time, trying to attract audience for a fee (we were used to seeing plays free) made me realise the enormity of the task that they had undertaken.

I am extremely proud of the fact that Nagorik has been able to perform that onerous task which the 1000th performance testifies to. As it proceeded toward that target, one performance at a time, it created, step by step, a whole new generation of enlightened viewers, who felt gratified at the chance to see such stage performances; elevated by the intellectual experience that such plays provided; and enlightened by the levels of artistic performances that could stand on their own, perhaps anywhere.

If the development of public's taste for the performing arts, albeit within a limited

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First staging of Baki Iti-hash on February 3, 1973 (Abul Hayat and Ataur Rahman starring) and its revival in 1992 (left).

FELICITATIONS

For over two decades Nagorik has been at once delighting and stimulating our theatre audience by their fine performances. The group has brought on the stage works of contemporary play-wrights of Bangladesh along with those of Michael Madhusudan Datta, Rabindra Nath Tagore of course, modern-day Badal Sarkar. In addition it had been particularly energetic in presenting a number of excellent plays from world drama by way of translation and adaptation which include works by Shakespeare, Moliere, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Carl Zuckmayer and Edward Albee. Nagorik's productions are neat. Their set designs reveal imagination and skill, and the quality of performance by most of their performers is of a high order.

It must keep up the good work. As a matter of fact it should try to attain higher levels of excellence in all the spheres of dramatic arts. This will require both creative thinking and relentless hard work which Nagorik is capable of. I wish Nagorik all success in the years to come.

Kabir Chowdhury

"Of Course We Will"

by Aly Zaker

IT was the mid-night of the first of February. We had just finished the technical rehearsal of the maiden play of our repertoire Badal Sarkar's *Baaki Iti-hash* at the British Council auditorium.

The members of the cast, fatigued after an evening's gruelling exercise, started leaving for home one by one. Abul Hayat, the famous character actor of the stage and television, then a government engineer lived close-by. He had his office Land Rover, and old but strong contraption. Ataur Rahman, Nagorik's founder general secretary, actor and an eminent stage director, left in his one-eyed Volks Wagen. Actually his was a proper car with two head lights until both headlights of my battered VW were stolen from in front of our rehearsal room a few days ago and Ataur had very kindly lent me one of his which kept me going during those few crucial evenings.

If my memory serves me right, Badal Rahman, Naila Zaman (Khan), Sara Amin (Zaker), Asaduzzaman Noor and I managed to pack ourselves into my tiny Beetle and started for home. The girls would be dropped first and then the three of us would go to my hub to spend the night.

It was when we were in front of the Rokeya Hall that my car huffed, puffed and huffed again and then passed out.

I with my meagre knowledge of cars pulled this, pushed that, pumped the other, but nothing would work. Then we tried to push start the junk. It would not release a whimper. So we decided to

push it all the way. Naila and Sara also joined in this effort. This, however, was not uncommon in those days. The girls had a common role in our groups theatrical and not-so-theatrical chores, like pushing cars.

One might ask, at this point, what has "car pushing" got to do with Nagorik's 1000th performance? A lot I'd say. That night, by then the early morning of the second of February, when a few tired theatre workers of Dhaka were endeavoring to roll the bleached car to its destination I had a cold wave go down my spine. A gripping fear. An apprehension on the possibility of not being able to reach the goal we had voluntarily set for ourselves. Towards the final days of rehearsal of *Baaki Iti-hash* we had discussed the pattern of staging the play. Ataur and I thought it was worth our while to go ahead and commit ourselves to regular staging of plays rather than one off performances. Until then the concept of staging of a play on a particular day of the week and repeating it week after week, month after month and year after year was not on in Bangladesh. We had decided that we would book the British Council stage for eight consecutive Sunday mornings, launch and continue to stage *Baaki Iti-hash* for as long as we were not able to add another new play to our repertoire.

That morning, I think it was about two by the time we were half-way through, the cold wave seemed to have reminded me of the gravity of

our commitment. I had become a bit shaky. Would we succeed? Or will we be forced to abandon pre-maturely? All on a sudden I withdrew and stood thinking by the road. My compatriots were taken aback. They were perhaps wondering on what had gone wrong with me at that hour of the morning. I said to myself, almost in a whisper, "shall we"? "Of course we will", the answer seemed to have invaded my ears in a chorus. From all those that were in Nagorik then.

Was it my imagination in that early hour of that second February? It couldn't possibly have been. At least when we look at the statistics: 1002 performances of 29 plays in 22 + years averaging a production in 8.44 days. A group that can boast over the highest number of staging of one single play (*Brecht's Puntila* — 257 stagings); the first group to have completed 100 staging of plays; the first silver jubilee staging of a single play (*Good Person of Szechuan* — Brecht); staging diverse plays of famous playwrights from all over the world and Bangladesh, like — Shakespeare, Moliere, Brecht, Camus, Zuckmayer, Beckett, Molnar, Albee, Rabindranath, Syed Waliullah, Badal Sarkar, Syed Shamsul Huq, Sayeed Ahmed.

Today, on the occasion of the celebrations commemorating the 1000th performance, I remember all those that I had the privilege to work with and those that I am still working with. I am proud of each one of them. But for their untiring effort, sincerity and integrity it would not have been possible, for us to earn the distinctions we are proud of.



Members of Nagorik

Nagorik in Retrospect

by Abdus Selim

BACK in 1978, when my Bangla translation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* was printed, one of my comments in its introduction had to do with the adapted plays that were being performed during the time and acclaimed by general audiences. In fact, I had Nagorik's adaptations of *Mr Puntila* and his *Man Matti* and *The Good Person of Szechuan* in mind, when I made the comment, and I do not deny after all these years of my close association with Nagorik — not being its member though — that I was a bit over-critical of those performances for presenting Brecht as a comic playwright on the stage. What I wanted to do then was to endorse dramatist-director-actor Ajitsh Bandopadhyay's views on the advantages and disadvantages of adaptations. I had always been against adaptation, for I fully agreed with Ajitsh on the ground that adaptations were the most effective and convenient means of communication with the audience which was "aesthetically immature." And I did

that being fully aware that the phrase "aesthetically immature" is a highly derogatory term to be used against the audiences of Bangladesh who are hyper-sensitive about their art and culture. In the introduction to *Bangla Galileo*, I finally said, as I recollect now, that a few theatre groups in our country were doing a fine job by trying to give a universal flavour to our stage through adaptations, but the theatre movement in its totality lacked any definitive character. I admit now that I did not perhaps say the right thing at the right time, for the theatre movement, at the time, was in its embryonic stage and even after seventeen years that have now passed, the time is not ripe yet to evaluate the achievements of the movement so critically. But I can say one thing safely and loudly that, Nagorik, being among the pioneers of this

movement, will spontaneously receive rapturous applause from the audiences as well as theatre activists when seen in retrospect. One can say now that what Nagorik did during the initial period of the movement was appropriate and timely. Because Nagorik had to do two difficult tasks simultaneously — keeping the movement alive through regular practice and creating audiences that were ready to pay for the performances. Though Nagorik was not alone — there was of course, 'Arynak', they deserve mention primarily for their diverse experiments on the stage, especially with the foreign plays. The group's major breakthrough with a translated play was, perhaps, *Galileo*, and I am almost sure, Nagorik's horizon broadened further with it. It has become evident now that the audience of Bangladesh are ready for any

kind of good foreign play, if it can be staged creatively. The productions of Nagorik till this date bear strongly attest to the fact that it is quite at ease with all sorts of plays — be they originals or classics or adaptations or translations. At this point, I am really tempted not to remain so biased against adaptations of the foreign plays as I was before particularly on the ground that they often distort and misrepresent the messages of the playwrights, directors or producers in the way of making them palatable to our audiences, and the ready example is the way Moliere's plays are now being staged in Bangladesh. In reality, Nagorik has been able to convince me sufficiently that it can hold in most of its productions almost all the elements of theatrical aesthetics that any foreign playwright and director contemplate to retain. Nagorik has also made its

remarkable efforts along with other groups — and perhaps more when judged qualitatively — to establish theatre as a powerful medium of art, and to give a special identity to artistes, performers, producers, directors and to anyone who is linked with the stage.

One can say emphatically that Nagorik is a trend-setter, and immediately after independence, during the 70s, quite a number of theatre-groups emerged, and with that a new tradition of regular staging of plays started to take shape. Along with it grew a fine middle-class habit of viewing theatre-performances, and an eminent theatre-audience became distinctly visible by the 80s in our society. Thus, Nagorik has proved to be a vital force in the history of the theatre movement in this country, not only by being able to produce extremely powerful directors, actors and theatre-workers, but also enhancing the audience test through its wonderful and meaningful one thousand theatre performances.



Galileo

To You-My First Love

by Nima Rahman

APRIL 1974. The first *Kal Baishakhi* (seasonal storm) of the year had just blown over before dusk. The atmosphere was intriguing — cool quiet and tranquil, as it always is after a storm. I think it was destined that I meet you on an evening of such overwhelming attractiveness. At the time I was too young to even fathom the true essence of the meeting but gradually, day by day, it was revealed to me that in the years to come my relationship would be just as diversified as that evening — stormy and restless on one hand and, on the other, calm and enchanting. My mother introduced me to you. It was in the house "Chhayanir" in Rajarbagh. Here also destiny played a small joke with me. Because this was the very house I'd been brought up in

and had lived the first eight years of my life. How astonished I was then! Was it mere coincidence or was it an act of fate that I should meet you in that very house? So from the very first day I felt like I knew you from my childhood. I was too naive then to notice let alone realize what was in store for me in the years to come. How incidents that would occur could change my whole being — my life — in fact myself. Now, after 20 years, when I look back to that evening in April when we were first introduced, I cannot but think it was inevitable that we should have such an intense and thrilling relationship. Gradually from a mere acquaintance you became the centre of my attraction and I fell in love

with you. Today, I can say relentlessly that you're the first love in my life. At the very beginning, I guess, it was puppy love but as the years went by, it became more serious and now, after reaching maturity, I can say that it is also the true love of my life. You're also a true and wonderful friend. Someone to whom I can turn to when I'm in distress or when everything else is going wrong. And like all true and long time friends we've also had our tiffs and fights. We've also had a few break-ups but in the end had always managed to get back to old terms. Our relationship has always been sweet and sour. We've so much in common and we've shared so much together that it is quite awesome to even think how deep down our

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