

Lucky Breaks

An interview with drama artist Lucky Enam

UCKY Enam has been highly prolific in Bangladeshi theater. Besides acting in some of the most highly acclaimed Dhaka plays. she has directed and written plays also. The actress started her stage career with Nagorik Nattyasampraday, one of the prominent theater groups in Dhaka. But recently, she, along with a few other actors, split off from Nagorik Nattyasampraday to form their own theater group. Nagorik Nattyangan. The actress met with The Daily Star to discuss her new group, opportunities for women in Bangladeshi theater, and children's drama.

on the Dhaka theater scene. DS : So how did Nagorik Nattvangan come about?

She also gave us a good pulse

I think I should give you a little background. Actually, a group called Nagorik Nattyasampraday was founded in 1968 with the TV production of Oedipus. Their first stage production was in 1972. I joined in 1972, as the first female member.

DS: You were the first woman to join?

I was the first woman member. There were no other female members then. Others joined later. Anyway, you may ask why, after so many years, in 1995, this group has split off into 2 Nagoriks. You may say that we differed on some basic issues, regarding drama, acting, etc. The sentiment was that not everyone can write and direct nataks.' I acknowledge that. But only a handful of senior members were directing, etc. The rest of us, who'd been involved with Nagorik right from the start, who'd brought so many great nataks to the stage, for example Nuruddiner Shara Jibon, were deprived from major roles, the chance to produce.

So a few of us senior members felt that we were wasting our time. Life is so short, don't you think? If I can't use my time effectively, then I think if's useless, a waste. A crime. It I have the confidence that I can do something well, but I

by Gemini Wahhaj

don't have the opportunity. why not create the opportu-

DS: Who were the other

members that to separate? My husband Enamul Huq. Rawshan Ara Hossain, Jamal Uddin Hossain, Abul Qasem . . . at one stage, we felt that no. we couldn't do nataks together anymore.

But we didn't come out to create just another new group. We will work with the same thoughts, the same tradition.



with which we first founded Nagorik. Everything shall remain the same, except we shall work a little differently. Within one month we brought out a production, and by now we've had a few shows. And hopefully, if we can keep this same speed and spirit, Insha Allah, we shall be successful.

DS: What will be different about your Nagorik?

Different? Hmm. Take the word group theater. There should be no dictatorship. All the members form a family. There should be mutual respect and regard. Don't you agree? That's what we tried to foster in our Nagorik. We've taken some new members the young generation. We've taken them in with love, and they respect us. We hope to involve them all in future productions.

DS: When you started acting

you were the only female member of your group. How was that? What was it like then, being a female actress?

I'd just passed my SSC then. From childhood, i've been raised in such a family. that there was always dancing. singing, poetry recitation going on in the house. I've been performing on stage since age three. We used to all learn to sing together. Singing teachers, dance instructors, were always coming to our house. Then, my father was very interested in these things also. Therefore, I'd been practising these things since I was a child. So at one stage, I became addicted, I wanted to do nataks. And then, I became in volved with such a man, that

When I started, Nagorik needed a female character in a play Buro shaliker ghare rog (Michael Madhushadhan). So they were looking then, who'll do the female character. Then they found me. And I also found my link, you could say, with the natak world.

I've been living in this natak

circle since then!

DS: So what was it like then?

In 1972, there were really no problems. It was really very free. It was fantastic in 1972. It was right after liberation. The atmosphere was very different then. In fact, I think now women don't get as much opportunity. I don't remember any badha from anywhere. Everyone, including my family, was very excited.

DS: Were there women in other groups as well at the time?

Yes. Ferdousi apa was with Theater. Then Shuborna was with Dhaka theater.

DS: And what was the role of women in theater then? Were you limited? Could you write a play, or direct if you wanted to? How is the situation now?

I was too young in 1972. But now, among those who're writing for the stage (You could say there are no female writers at all for the stage). I want to create a space for my

self here. I've already written an adaptation of Begum Rokeya's Sultana's Dream for Mohila Parishad. I also directed and acted in it. Different women from different theater groups act in this natak, on special occasions. We enjoy it a lot.

I think that women in our country should write. Because women can really write with a lot of feeling about issues that are very personal to us. They can present our general problems.

DS: Since we don't have female playwrights to speak of. do you think female issues have been explored adequately in Bangla nataks?

No, to tell the truth, no. Only very common issues are explored. For example, the torture of women. But the fact that women are suffering psychologically, or not getting enough opportunity - these issues are neglected. So if women write, they'll be able to 'write with a lot of feeling.

I've written 7 nataks for BTV. And in each one, I brought to light 7 different problems that face women. DS: For example?

In one play, Jonakir Alo, a middle class educated woman's husband dies in a road accident. And then suddenly, this self-assured woman becomes helpless.

DS: How about directing plays?

I'm very much eager to direct in Nagorik Nattayangan's plays. I may be doing so soon. in the future. Among other women, Ferdqusi Apa has directed plays, and Sarah [Zaker]. But I think women will do very well in Bangladesh theater.

DS: Are you involved with children's drama as well?

I've written three children's productions up to now. I think this is a very neglected field, very neglected. Our children have to speak adult lines when they act. A few days before the last Eid, there was a children's drama festival at Shishu Academy. I was one of the judges. But, in watching the nataks, I realised that there are no good children's nataks. No-one's writing for

Making Women's Roles a Lightweight Issue By Shaheen Anam With improved communication with the rest of the world, meaning our access to BBC, CNN, ZEE TV, Star Plus etc. we

Women in Television

gender Lenses and what I see is not at all encouraging. Unfortunately, most of the Television programmes has been very slow to catch up with the changes that have been taking place in society in relation to women. It continues to perpetuate myths and stereo typed images of women and in fact assists to further the existing status quo of the male dominated society. Often it is behind time portraying images of women as mothers and housewife whose only aim in life is to dedicate her life to the service of the family or as super. sexy paragons of beauty constantly enticing men. The reality for

are now getting a first hand view of life in other parts of the

world. Lately I have been looking at programmes through the

pletely. What has surprised me most is the lack of seriousness with which Television often deals with important women's issues such as women's role in society, domestic violence and legal rights of women. In some drama series's the women's movement is often depicted as some kind of activity that a group of bored housewives from middle class homes are undertaking in order to pass their time. The struggle for empowerment

and emancipation is portrayed as some kind of a joke where

women refuse to cook on holidays or demand extra spending

most women is somewhere in between. Women in most part

of the world have come far beyond that image, but most tele-

vision programmes seems to have missed the point com-

The struggle and triumphs of the women's movement is rarely reflected in their programmes. This is not to say that Television does not have special and excellent programmes for women. To name a few the ZEE TV programme "Shakti" is a thought provoking programme highlighting critical day to day issues that women face. Bangladesh Television has aired some good programmes such as Ain Adalot, etc. I do not remember seeing anything very gender sensitive on Star Television, on the other hand some of the programmes are out and out demeaning portraying women as sex objects.

As the women's movement has gained strength over the years one of the strong recommendations has been for a positive Image of Women in the Media. The media, both in the West and in Developing Countries stand guilty of portraying an image of women which is neither real nor complementary. International Conferences on Women has time and again made recommendations to stop portraying the existing

especially in the advertisements which are aired.

skewed image of women. The soap series which are shown on Star Plus is a disgrace and a mockery to average Western or American women. Devoid of support from the extended family, the average Western woman's life is a constant struggle to juggle family and professionals demands. They seldom have time to frolick away their time in idleness going from one love affair to another.

The drama series in Bangladesh and Indian Television are no better. In these dramas, women are often depicted as vulnerable dependent, and prone to irrationality. I was especially disappointed to watch a humorous series on Zee Television in which domestic violence was being treated with a kind of callousness that can give very wrong signals in societies which traditionally has been slow in reacting to domestic violence. The scene is of a domestic maid who comes to work with bruises all over her face. Seeing this the eldest daughter of the family decides to start a movement demanding compensation-for the abuse. The message of the episode is that when two people live together there is bound to be fights and just because the husband beats up his wife once in a while does not mean that he does not love her! In other words it perpetuates the common belief that domestic violence is a familial problem, should be resolved within the family and outsiders should not interfere with it. In other instances women are made to choose between a career or family and if she chooses the first than she is somehow made to pay for it by giving up her marriage or children.

The importance of the media in women's struggle for emancipation and empowerment cannot be overstated. Most of the discrimination towards women in our society is due to age old perceptions and attitudes that needs to be changed to bring about a positive change in the lives of women, be it rights within the family or outside. The media can play a pivotal role in this respect because it molds public opinion.

Given the many talented playrights in our part of the world, somebody could surely write a drama series which portrays the real lives of women as homemakers, mothers and professionals. Perhaps a series where women are not punished for wanting a career and a family too. Women can be shown not only as weak and vulnerable but instead as strong. capable, yet loving and caring homemakers. I am not inferring that Television has never portrayed a positive image of women, all I am saying is that more and more of this should be the norm so that we may begin to see its positive impact in our day to day lives.

them. No-one's writing gentime shishu mataks, in which children can act in their own

plan to write several children's plays' and publish a book. If you don't publish plays, then the general public doesn't have access, all over the coun try. Someone has encouraged me also. He said write the book, I'll publish it for you.

DS: How about funny plays? Well, I think children's plays should be funny. They'll enjoy them. Funny plays in Bangladesh means Humayun

Ahmed. He has that wit. He may be able to write good children's plays. Also Nazma Jasmine Chowdhury has a few children's plays. These are the ones that children usually perform. Also, Indian plays like h-

DS. Is the theater world (in Bangladeshl alive, exciting? It used to be till very re-

cently. Just recently, it's been a little strange.

DS. How would you rate the theater-going scene in Dhaka? I think it's good. There are

so many groups, so many dramas. How would that be possible without a good audience? People say we get the same audience every night, but that can't be true. I think our audience is increasing.

But it's sad that our the-

aters aren't improving. There's no air-conditioning even. People don't watch dramas for fear of the heat. We had two shows at the British Council. and the house was full! Why? Because there was air-condi-

tioning. It takes Tk. 25.000-60,000

to launch a production. To break even we want to show as many plays as possible. So we need a bigger theater-going crowd, more halls, better halls, etc.

DS. What are Nagorik Nattyangan's plans for the fu-

We shall work in our own group, and then also work with other groups. I mean, we must keep the whole theater angan alive. We should all share. This "I'm the star" mentally should

had gone to Rasulpur early in August, 1976 to start a development project among the destitute women from landless and poor families. We started our work there by organising the women into groups, and introduced various income generating activities on a cooperative basis. These included involving women in fisheries, agricultural activity on land leased from the govt, sericulture and so on.

One day, a woman called Lily Begum came to our office, as she wanted to learn silk spinning. She was carrying a healthy four year old boy on her hip. When I asked her why she wouldn't sit down, she explained that the boy was her only son, and that he would cry if she sat down. She had on a very old saree, torn and patched, of an indeterminate gravish colour. I took a good look at her face. She was pretty; slim and straight, slightly taller than the average Bengali girl. But as she stood before me, her whole body revealed her stark poverty. Her face looked exhausted and dejected.

She must have been over thirty. She had four daughters and one son. Her two older daughters were already married. The two vounger ones were working in two of the village mathars' houses, for which they were provided with food and accommodation at their employers' houses. Her husband was sick and bedridden. She worked at two houses in order to feed for husband and son. But her husband was not receiving any medical attention, because she was not earning any money. She did however, visit a fakir in the village to get some holy water, which her husband drank. But it brought no luck, since her husband's condition was only getting worse. He had grown very irritable, and would often beat her up for no reason. "How do I know why he beats me, Chachiamma? Do you think that I am going to ask him for an explanation? If I do. I might get a real thrashing. and people will also criticise me for being an impertinent

Often, we noticed the marks of beatings on Lily Begum's body. Normally, we tried to ignore them, but some were hard to overlook - a cut on the forehead, swollen lips

and black eyes, were all signs of vicious beatings. He did not like her coming to the centre. as he believed that the women there were of bad character. although she badly needed the money. "Even if I do stop coming here, he will find some other reason to beat me up. He has been beating me for so long now, that I don't even resent it any longer." She continued, and eventually became a member of our women's samity, taking part in all kinds of income generating activities, such as earthwork, road construction etc.

I did not see her for nearly two years, but I was informed one day that she had lost both her husband and her son. When I met her soon afterwards, I found her busy with work. She worked continuously, as if she had turned into a machine. She replied that it was her work that helped her to get through each day, "If I stay at home, I will simply suffocate." With that, she revealed for the first time the depth of the loneliness that plagued

Lily Begum of Rasulpur came to the rescue. The next

his son, who was barely twenty. To her shock, he turned on her, calling her a prostitute, and saying that she should be turned of the village. From then on, her house

After a few days of continual

by Rokeya Rahman Kabeer

morning, she went and complained to Mr Khondakar about

was regularly raided at night. A number of young men from that village, and from the neighbouring ones, started coming to her house to assault her on a nightly basis. The entire village knew what was going on, but they had to ignore it. The important people of the village pretended not to know anything about it, because it was mostly their sons who were involved. The poor, who had sympathy for Lily Begum, had to keep quiet. Challenging those young hooligans would not have been safe for anyone.

abuse, Lily Begum has at least been strong enough to make the men pay for it." I could see that our staff members were really ashamed of their irresponsible and unsympathetic behaviour. But what other reaction could I have expected from them? Our middle and lower middle class girls had been brainwashed into thinking that prostitutes were social untouchables, sub-human creatures. But why exactly does a woman resort to selling her body? Who and what leads her into it are marketing that are never even asked. Yet when men visit prostitutes, people

invariably view it indulgently. Two years later. I came to know that Lily Begum had married an eighty year old man, who already had a wife, several grown-up children and whom I used to call "uncle" and begged him to marry me hist to save me from what I was going through every night. His wife was a very kind woman. She persuaded him to marry me

But it was decided that Belayat Ali could not look after me, of could be live with me, as he has his own family. I have been looking after myself for a long time, so I didn't need his money. The arrangement suited me line, as long as people believed that we are married. What really matters, is that now I have a husband That is more than enough. don't face those young hooligans raiding my house at night anymore. Yet my door is still tied with the same sort of rope as before. The only change is that now I am a married woman, with a husband. It does not matter how tenuous and marriage is.

· hachiamina, you all always tell us that we are in no way interior to men, that if women could unite to demand their rights, then they could get a far better deal from society. admit that after we organised ourselves into samities, we had more freedom to go out and work. All these things could not have happened before you started your project here. But, does that mean that all the things we were told earlier were wrong? It has even been said that when our husbands beat us, the portion of our body which has been hurt will go to "We know that both men

and women have been created by God. Now, if He has created both of us as human beings, then why should He create women as inferior beings, of such low status? He might as well have made us animals instead of human beings. But the real problem is that it is not God Himself who is standing in front of us to say things against us. Repression is coming from society. Can you really fight against the entire society. Chachiamma? Somehow, I do not think that you can win. This social order has been there for thousands of years,

like an old banyan tree that has stretched its roots deep into the earth. Storms will not be able to uproot it. The only way is to cut the tree down. Can you do that?" Although illiter-

ate and uninformed by ac-

cepted standards, Lily Begum was right. The answer to her question haunts me still.

Taken from the book "Seven Women,

Sketches from village Life in Bangladesh" by Rokeya Rahman Kabeer of Saptagram Nari Swanirvar Parishad, 1994.

> Edited by Farah Ghuznavi



But why exactly does a woman resort to selling her body? Who and what leads her into it are questions that are never even asked. Yet when men visit prostitutes, people invariably view it indulgently. harassment, Lily Begum had munber of grandchildren.

After that, I was again out of touch with her for a couple of vears, but hearing no special news, assumed that she was all right. Then, urgent work took me to Rasulpur, where I was shocked to hear, upon my arrival, our Saptagram staff insisting that Lily Begum's membership from the samity should be cancelled. I soon found out the reason - she had become a prostitute. But I had no desire to punish anyone, nor did feel that I had the right to do so. Women are already suffering considerably under the strictures of this overbearing society we live in.

Lily Begum came by to see me at my request, and poured out the whole story. She lived in a small, miserable hut, with a door secured by only a rope. One night, as she was sleeping in her house, Phorman, the eldest son of the most powerful man in the village, Mr Khondakar, cut open the rope that secured her door, and then forcibly raped her. She screamed for help, but nobody

had enough. Mad with anger, she decided that if she had to work at night as well, then she should be paid for it. She demanded money from those young men, and to her surprise, she found out that they were willing to pay without a murmur of protest. So she became a prostitute. "I don't know what is right or wrong," she said, "but one truth is clear. Alone I cannot fight the whole of society. So I did what I had to do to in order to sur-Ashamed at the lack of help

she had received from our project, I turned to the girls and sald, "You have heard the whole story. Did any of you try to help her?" Their answer was negative. "So why are you demanding that she be punished? Members of Lily Begum's samity have taken no steps against her, in spite of her being branded a prostitute. because they understood the situation much better than you did. Faced with this male

Even after the marriage, the man continued living with his first wite. His house was quite far from Lily's, he paid her no maintenance, and I could not find any rationale behind that marriage. When I asked Lily why she had consented to this senseless marriage, she smiled at my naviete. Maybe she was also a little irritated by it. "There is a lot of sense in it. But how would you understand that? You are rich, you can do anything you want. The truth is, you can even get away with murder if you are rich. But do you really think that we can get away with the slightest part of what you do?"

has true that since you started the project, we have had some freedom in our lives. Non an emi go out to work. and we do not have to fear repercise on serrom the village elders. And som saw what happened to me after my husband; died. How long do you think I could have borne it? So, in the end, I went to Belayat Ali,