OURI unfolded the knotted corner of the soiled sari and picked up the piece of paper. She smoothed it with great care. The small sheet was almost fraying at the edges and quite a few of the words on it were half-smeared. She read them all slowly.

"Husna, my sister:

You will have this letter in your hands only on the day of our victory over the Pakistani brutes. And that will also be the last day of my own ignominy and sufferings. The letter will remain without a date till then.

It is for the sake of our only surviving child Amal and in the hope of seeing the day of victory that I have till today clung to life in this hell on the earth. I can end my life only on the day I am sure that he will be safe and able to grow up as a free man in a free Bangladesh. I shall put that date on the top before I die.

The day has arrived. I am now free to seek in death the honour and dignity the Pakistani animals took away from me in life. I leave Amal in your care in the hope that you will be the mother to him I am no longer capable of being. Joi Bangla, Your unfortunate sister Gouri.

Gouri picked up a pen from the table and put the date on the top of the letter.

Then she took out a small vial from another folded corner of the same sari, Blue coloured pills came tumbling out as she removed the top and upturned the vial. One fell off the table. She picked it up.

"Seventeen", she counted one by

Four or five at a time, she swallowed all the pills.

She kissed the sleeping baby a number of times. Then hugging him to her breast, she closed her eyes.

It was quite late in the evening when Husna heard the repeated knocks on the door. The sound was almost drowned by the joyous slogans in the street and loud reverberations of hundreds of guns being fired all over the city in riotous celebration of victory.

It had been hardly a year since Husna last saw Gouri. Yet it took her quite some time before she could recognize her close friend and neighbour for nearly a decade. And that was also only when she heard Gouri's subdued

16 December

"Husna, it's me — Gouri, Kamala's mother!"

Husna could not believe her eyes. How could this bedraggled old woman be the vivacious, ever smiling Gouri she had known all these years! What a beauty Gouri was even in her late thirties!

Husna had heard so many rumours during the past nine mouths many of which later proved to be true. One of these were about Tapan Babu. Someone in Azim's office told him that Tapan had been killed by the Pakistanis, and no one know what happened to his wife and children. At Husna's urgings, Azim made some discreet enquiries with no result. Trying to find out the fate of the disappeared carried its own risk.

Husna's eyes wandered to Gouri's forehead — she was so used to seeing the bright red mark of vermilion there. "I shall stay with you only for one

night", Gouri said in a flat tone.

Gouri's words woke up Husna from the shock. She took Gouri's hand in her own and without a word ushered her in. It was not the time to ask any question, she realised. Without a word, she led Gouri to her daughter Shireen's room. None else in the house saw them; Azim and all the children were in the porch witnessing the street celebrations.

"You will stay here as long as you like", Husna said. She took the sleeping baby from Gouri's arms and put him in the bed.

"Please wash up. Meanwhile let me fix something for you to eat".

"I don't want any food. Only things I need is a bath, and then sleep. Just leave some milk for Amal", Gouri

She took a long time in the bath. She soaped and scrubbed herself as if to cleanse every pore of her body. Then she changed into the new sari left for her by Husna. Then she woke up Amal and bathed him also. Finally she rocked the baby again to sleep in

Azim joined Husna when she came

back with the milk. He also failed to persuade Gouri to take some food.

"Please, I just want to sleep undisturbed", Gouri almost pleaded.

And Gouri made it sure that she doesn't have to wake up ever from that sleep.

Friendship between the two families extended to all their members. Anything special cooked in one house would be shared with the other. The children grew up as playmates. Kamala, the sixteen year old daughter of Gouri, was in the same class with Shirin. Her elder son Bimal, although a year junior to Alam, spend most of their time together.

It was in January that Tapan received his transfer orders to the mill in the industrial area about twenty miles from Dhaka. It was a promotion, yet Gouri and the children were far from happy, I wouldn't be more than a year before they were back in Dhaka, Tapan reassured them.

"You must come with the children and spend at least a week with us". Gouri told Husna while taking leave of her, "There are lovely picnic spots and you get all the fresh fish and vegeta-

But political troubles began soon after, and Husna's promised visit never took place.

On 7 March, new Bangladesh flag was flown by the mill employees at the main gate, office and every house within the premises. They joined the workers of the neighbouring factories in the daily processions and meetings.

It was late in the day on 26 March that the news of the killings and arson by the rampaging Pak army in Dhaka reached the mill, Gouri was alarmed when she heard about the massacre in Ramna Kali Bari, the University and Shankhari Patti, Tapan tried to put up a brave face.

"It just can't be that bad. Most of it must be rumour," he said. "Anyway I am just an accountant and in no way involved in politics. At the worst, they will throw me out of the job."

Yet, more and more stories of army

brutalities poured in. Both Gouri and Tapan started having sleepless mights. They would jump up at every knock on the door. Things got so bad that Tapan had the mill doctor prescribe sleeping pills for both of them.

Quite a few fellow officers told Tapan that being the only Hindu officer it was not safe for him to stay there. He should leave, they advised, before the military turned up. Little they realised at that time that some of them would meet the same fate as Tapan.

Many times almost every day, Tapan would discuss all these with Gouri. But where could he go and how? He had heard how the soldiers and Biharis who joined them roam the roads and raid the trains in search of students. Awami Leaguers and Hindus. Death or worse was the fate of anyone suspected of being so. And no woman between fifteen and fifty could escape these marauders.

The mill had a number of non-Bengali security guards. Junnun Khan, a retried Panjabi army havildar, was their head. He, along with other non-local guards, kept to their barrack before 26 March. When the news of army crackdown in Dhaka reached, they came out strutting. They pulled down and burnt all the green and red Bangladesh flags. They ordered the officers not to leave their quarters till someone sent by General Tikka takes over the charge of the mill. Meanwhile, most of workers left the mill for their village homes.

Junnun Khan took upon himself the task of delivering these orders to Tapan's quarters. He just pushed aside Bimal who opened the door at his knock. He walked into the living room, and sat on a sofa.

His entry took everyone by surprise, Tapan was reading a book and Gouri was on the carpet playing Ludo with the children in an effort to keep them from brooding. . Gouri could almost physically feel

Junnun's beering eyes move slowly over her whole body. It was both scary

gard. This group is untiringly

Kazi Fazlur Rahman

and repulsive. She made a move to leave.

"Don't go away, Bibi Saheba. I have come to warn you as a well-wisher. Don't make me cross, and I shall protect you." Junnun bared his teeth in a grin," Now bring me a nice cup of tea. and then sit down here."

Tapan stood up, his fist clenched in anger. Gouri caught hold of his hand before he could hit Junnun.

"You will be sorry for this misconduct", Junnun grimly warned before he left red in the face.

That very evening, they heard the roar of heavy vehicles, then shouts, cries and random gun shots. The army had arrived. It did not take long before the front

door shuddered with heavy boots kicking at it. Along with it, came the harsh command in Urdu," Open the door". Tapan pushed Gouri and Kamala

along with the baby into the attached kitchen. But Bimal would not leave him. And the door gave in before Tapan could reach it. The Pakistani Captain accompa-

nied by three sepoys with fingers on their gun triggers with Junnun making up the rear strode in.

"Where are the weapons!", the Captain harshly asked holding his revolver at Tapan's head.

Tapan's denial of any knowledge of weapons resulted in a kick in the groin. Another kick on the head followed as he fell down.

Junnun informed the Captain that this "Malaun" was the ring leader of the Awamis. A shot from the heavy revolver took away a large chunk of the brain. Bimal stepped forward, perhaps instinctively, to protect his father. Two successive rifle shots tore through his chest.

Kamala had opened the kitchen door at the sound of the first shot. Like one possessed, she now rushed in with a kitchen knife in hand. A bayonet pierced her abdomen and came out at the back. The soldier drew out the bayonet after holding

down her body with his foot. Then with a single shot he stopped her groans. He raised hear skirt and wiped the bayonet clean with the

By that time, the other two soldiers had their guns pointed to Gouri. "Should we finish her off, sir," one of them asked the Captain.

Junnun whispered something to the captain who laughed aloud. "OK,

leave her alone", he ordered. Before they left, Captain nudged the still body of Kamala with his boot. He looked her over and mildly reproached the soldier who killed her. "You shouldn't have ruined this delectable 'laundy'! She could keep us amused for a few of days."

Everything was over in a couple of minutes. Gouri stood transfixed as if in a trance. She did not wail, nor there was any tears in her eyes. All that happened before her eyes somehow failed to register in her consciousness.

She was rudely awaken to the reality by the rough touch of Junnun's groping hands. Then everything blacked out. She found herself in her bed when

she regained her senses. She was undressed and Junnun was buttoning up his shirt standing next to the bed. The baby was crying in the next room amidst all the dead bodies. "Don't be upset, Bibi Saheba. I

have desired you since I first saw you," Junnun said. "But I shall do the right thing. Tomorrow I shall get the Moulavi to solemnize our marriage after you become a Muslim."

If Gouri would not cooperate, she would be delivered to the soldiers, Junnun grimly warned. "And the Malaun brat crying in the next room will be used for bayonet practice."

There were enough sleeping pills in the house to end her life that very night. Yet she lived on for eight months with a new name. She was "Dilshad Begum". She decided she had to keep on living till the Pakistani brutes were defeated and driven out. and her son Amal was safe. She made all her plans and wrote

the letter without a date to Husna. Then she waited and waited. That might she reached Husna's

house and her waiting was at last over. On the top of the letter to Husna, Gouri finally inscribed the date — 16 December 1971.

Bangladesh Theatre: A Brave New World special mention in this re-

Shafi Ahmed

EFORE 1971, we cer tainly had a number of dramatists. Early in 1953, Munier Choudhury wrote Kabar in 1953 in the isolation of a prison cell, written with a particular attention to 'a planned structure so that it could be performed under the logistic constraints of a prison house. Nurul Momen's Genesis was characterized by distinct novelty both in theme and in presentation. Showkat Osman and Askar Ibne Shaikh also succeeded to draw our attention. But so far as stageproduction is concerned we experienced all dry days till 1972. There was the lone but remarkable traveller - Drama Born in 1956, this team of a dedicated few, with love for plays and a taste for it, produced plays with laudable success, but not enough in comparison to the labour and attention involved in them. As Munier Choudhury's Kabar is noted to be the starting point of the Bengali dramatic literature in this part of Bengal, so can we say Drama Circle is the mark from which our modern stage-history took off. This group registers its good taste both for quality and variety as we look at the list of its productions: three symbolic plays of Rabindranth Raktakarabi , Tasher Desh and Raja O Rani; Bernard Shaw's Arms and the man and You Never Can Tell, Arthur Miller's All My Sons, Syed Waliullah's Bohipeer and Sayeed Ahmed's Kalbela. But those were in the days of tifties and sixties. And no other group came up to give them company. Surprising And now the Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation enjoys the affiliation of about one hundred and fifty groups. No less surprising.

Bangladesh theatre world is the one hundred per cent pure product of a free Bangladesh. The partition of India that forced an Islamic Pakistan on Bangladesh people created some unwelcome tensions in the cultural scene of this region. Complex issues were invited in order to em ploy some superimposed genetic engineering in the socio-cultural fabric so that a different and new Pakistani cultural identity could be manufactured in spite of the strong possibility of abortion Confusion and doubts voiced by the social historians and cultural practitioners were jibed by the zealots in the administration. However. what all know is that our long struggle against the Pakistani rule did not only have some express political over tones, it was also characterized by ceaseless social and cultural

resistance. But our theatre world assumed a spectacular change

as we emerged as a free nation, now victorious in a bloody war of liberation. It is possible that the forced migration of many of our theatre-workers and playwrights in the making in Calcutta during the days of the war in 1971 prompted them to earn some new experience of stage-productions. And the victory had a magic whistle in it. It brought new warmth and vigour. It brought courage and innovation. It gave them the spirit to conquer. The liberation of the country meant more to the cultural workers than the deed of surrender signed on the afternoon of December 16, 1971. Hey, it is the time for rejoicing in song and dances. Hours of early jubilation are over and now they move ahead to build up what the Bailey Road area is now famous for. And very recently a new province in the Segunbagicha area has been annexed to our Dhaka theatre world. Enterprises of extending the theatre scene to Shahbag Public Library and Russian Cultural Centre in Dhanmondi have also gained success from time to time. One important fact in our theatre history must be mentioned. On February 3, 1973 the bell was rung at the British Council auditorium in Dhaka and the very 'novel' venture- buy a ticket for your seat and enter — had its much-awaited start. Nagorik, pioneering group of our country produced Badal Sir car's Baki Itihas.

but always with a voice of asseveration. But some of the eyebrows were frowned. We have an immediate past of glory writ in blood and great sacrifice. Marks of this historical emancipation have not been satisfactorily recorded in our early productions There was a cry for more care and commitment. And they were found, they were paid heed to; social and cultural demands were met and aesthetics too came under the active consideration of the theatre-workers. One early achievement of notable distinction was the govern ment's notification on June 15, 1975 which exempted theatre-productions from amusement tax.

From then on, it was a

happy go, not always smooth,

Bailey Road's Mahila Samity auditorium was not built as a hall ideally suited to stage productions. But the sensation and thrill and zeal that possessed our theatreworkers in the post-libera tion years had some built-in push to drive them with a spirit that encouraged them to conquer what was visibly impossible. The state of a acoustic and seats was poor. other facilities also failed as per requirement, but our theater-workers did the job with amazing success. Regular shows of one production.

this week, next week and again, was an unknown experience for the Dhaka people. But probably the people had become attuned to the enterprises of the theatreworkers. The budding Dhaka middle class, responded quickly to the evening calls of Mahila Samity and gradually theatre-going became a mark of class taste and status. Newspapers and periodicals offered generous space to the reviews which, if course, took some time to mature. And the audience also found something new on the stage. the experience of the amateurish productions done on the occasion of annual fairs of offices and educational institutions absorbed a positive shock. The lengthy, loud and emotional dialogues have been tamed to aesthetic moderation, the hyperboles of a legendary figure faced strict directorial censorship and there is a serious attempt to achieve a harmony of acting, lighting, sound and presentation hitherto un known. When theatre produced Syed Shamsul Hug's Payer Awaj Pawa Jai we were struck by a new reality of what theatre is. Written in the background of our war of liberation, the characters here speak in verse and they underline an issue to which the audience felt glued. The production has a speed of which we were not aware before. The crisis takes on a gloomier hue, the conflict becomes heavy whit spongy tears. Real-life situations become transfigured as collision of words sparkle on the stage. The liberation as background or as a subjectmatter have appeared again and again on our stage and that seems very reasonable as well as theatrically effective

And as the theatre-work ers stood shaken and grim at the horrific ambiguity created in the cultural world in the wake of the transfer of power to the military junta again in mid-1975 following a brutal bloodshed, evocation of the spirit of liberation became a pressing endeavour for them. Theatre assumed the role of the speaker of some voices that are usually suppressed in other areas And herein lies the glory and achievement of our theatre. Right from when it asserted its existence in Munier Choudhurys Kabar till this day theatre has played a very significant role in the socio-cultural struggle of Bangladesh. The political change of 1975 had as serious and sordid impact on our social and cultural scene. Theatre-workers were engaged in reientless efforts to build up a humane, liberal and secular society away from the binding shackles of the conservatives and reactionaries. Most of them were young

and the memories of the war

were still very fresh in them

and the commitment for which they stood up and participated in the war had been hammering them without a cease. Moreover, theatre itself has journeyed its initial path and the uncertainties and problems have been positively settled, new playwrights are coming up with their creativity, new areas of art are being explored by the directors. The new playwrights, imbued with a spirit of Bengalee nationalism have by now gained confidence and strength which was hard to crack. During the social and political struggle of the sixties people abhored bondage, conservatism, communalism and dictatorship. Now they also expected that theatre would project this aspire mood of the populace and theatre people did not fail there. People showed their concern for the preservation and upliftment of traditional Bengalee culture, so many of the theatre workers now came forward in order to rediscover the past of Bangladesh, our heritage. Stories and legends from various folk-epics became the subject matter of many of the plays. Playwrights like Selim Al Deen and Mamunur Rashid went on a creative hunt in many of the folk narratives. Some tried to glean the basic themes of rural Bangladesh from the pages of My mensingh Geetika, Stories relating to the state of women, tales of great love, expedition, of communal harmony and heroic deeds of generous and philanthropic nature now found room in our theatre. And they found newer, more humane and sociological interpretation and presentation at the hands of our theatre people. In fact, theatre initiated a regeneration that prompted us to connect our past to the new reality of a free nation. Legends and tales that have

become a part of the collective unconscious in the popular belief and memory were brought over to the stage. New people with new ideas, dedication and talent felt throbbed to make new experiments on the stage and renewed interpretations and keen sociological analyses were not all for which they thrived they had, at their convenient disposal the modern gadgets and stage apparatus and the qualities of creative improvisation which they used as best as they could under the awesome limitations of Mahila Samity Auditorium. And in this way the culture of the country becomes a centre of our exploration and discussion which. in a circular way invites further discovery. Bangladesh theatre has enormously contributed to this cultural talks which helped to underline the characteristics of our

Dhaka Theatre deserves

identity

interested in bringing in the indigenous themes over the stage. They recurrently go back to the traditions of our age-old narrative theatre in which lie the roots of native Bengalee theatre. Nasiruddin Yousuff, the leader of the group, himself a freedom fighter on the war-front, uses his great creative talents to bring to the urban reception the essence of the traditional story of our folk, tradition in which communal harmony, love of the common folk the treasury of our music are discovered with a modern man's seeking or his roots. But in them social exploitation was also a common phenomenon, there was a reigning tone of stoicism coupled with the struggle to overcome the hurdles of life that constitute the central fabric of Bangladesh life. And Dhaka Theatre tries to enact over the stage this comprehensive presentation of life. They try to draw out the myths of the society and put them into the body of the play and some times without any further interpretation so that the audience may find out a parallel explanation of the same in the context of the modern times. Their productions Kittonkhola, Keramat Mon gol, Jaibati Kanyar Mon are great epic productions which make us aware of our cultural heritage and they offer great answers to many to the confusing 'fatwas' by right-wing cultural pundits.

Bishad Sindhu, a remarkable production of the recent times by the group. Dhaka Padatik deserves special mention. It is a marvellous adaptation of the famous nineteenth country epicnovel which for itself took old legends as its subject which relates to the incidents from the lives of the grandsons of Prophet Muhammed. The play is per formed in a spectacular fashion with a wide rectangular stage, on the sides of which the audience take their scat tered seats. The narrative style of our indigenous the atre has been mixed up with classical and modern ele ments, thus creating a great and distinguished aesthetic experience. Issue, relating to power and authority have been artistically dealt with in conjunction with the myths.

Nagorik Natya Sampradaya, the foremost theatre group of our country, does the thing in a diverse way. This group has earned outstanding fame in the production of adapted versions of Bertolt Brecht's plays. The members of the group, young and vigorous - many of whom were directly connected with the war of libera tion feel concerned at the presence and perpetuation of ills, corruption, exploitation and evil in the pervasive body

Brecht plays and his dictates about the theatrical presentation simply agreeable to the state of Bangladesh society and only a simple transformation could make superb productions both as good stage enterprises and as examples of arts for peoples' sake. And by playing a committed role in the Bangladesh theatre world, they contributed quite visibly in the social struggle of the country in its fight against corruption, exploitation and injustice. The fun, satire and sarcasm with which most of the Brechtian productions are infused, have created remarkable impact on the audience. Another production of Nagorik, Syed Shamsul Hug's play Nural Deener Sara Jiban is a distinguished production so far as the social struggle as well as the rediscovery of our glorious past are concerned. The play dramatises in an immaculate way the peasant revolt of North Bengal during the British colonial rule. The story has almost a charming influence and it excites the audience to feel the passion of patriotism and the courage to stand up against the forces of oppression. One will be reminded of another production in this regard. Nankar Pala, a production of Aronyak another important Dhaka group. This play reveals the exploitation and tragic incidents that took place during a an oppressive system relating to land, labour and cultivation in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh - Sylhet The oppression of the feudal lords and the revolt of the nankars' (the slaves bought for bread) make the play a One of the important fea-

of the society. They found the

tures in the stage-history of Bangladesh theatre is the adaptation of non-native plays in the context of our country This was certainly prompted by the gradual increase of stage performances. Theatreworkers are the persons who are always involved in exper iments and never lived in their pursuit for the search or novelty in presentation This again is provocative by nature to look for different themes in the theatres of other countries. The most important play wright who has been very successfully adapted in Bangladesh is Bertolt Brecht. And here again Nagorik did the marvel They took the audience al most by surprise when they brought to our stage Brecht's The Good Woman of Setzuan when there was still some lingering cloud over the sky of our new theatre. The play adapted and directed by Aly Zaker took the Bangla name Sot Manusher Khonje (In Search of an Honest Person). The typical Brechtian flavour

of humour and characteristic

criticism of the society

stuffed with shabby corrupt

ibility and hypocrisy has been ably projected in the Bengalee context presented in witty and racy dialogues. The message was there, the fun was there, the sense of detachment was there and the warm reception by the audience hinted at some more prospective adaptations of Brecht. Moreover, the success of Sot Manusher Khonje naturally created a great enthusiasm amongst the Nagorik workers themselves which is verified in their new venture. Asaduzzaman Noor adapted Brecht's Puntilla and His Man Matti which was nativized in to the Bangla ver--sion as Dewan Gazir Kissa. The audience was only too eager to enjoy another Brecht play; it has already formed a taste and love for Brecht, so a simple beckoning was enough to command its presence at Bailey Road. The contents of a Brechtian play make the people think and encourage them to look at the society with the insight and ideas furnished by the German play-wright, so such plays acquired some remark able social relevance in Bangladesh torn between the problems of social inequality, exploitation and injustice. This is, till to this day, a super hit stage production That Nagorik produced Brecht both with commitment and veneration is exemplified by their recurring return to him. Just on the eve of the Victory day, 1995 they are going to perform the first show of their latest production - Brecht's Mother Courage. But of all their Brecht productions, special mention should be made of Galileo. This lengthy play of Brecht was artistically tailored to the suitability of our stage-constraints and the taste of our audience. This, of course, was not an adaptation. It was presented in the flavour of the original; rendered in Bangla speeches the contents of the play very naturally persuaded the audience to connect the state of present day Bangladesh soci ety with the Middle Ages of Europe. The other European dramatist who has found a formidable place

Bangladesh theatre through adaptation is Moliere. Here again Nagorik legitimately claims the primary position. In the very early days of regular stage productions in 1973, they brought to the stage the Bengali adaptation of a Moliere play — Intellectual Ladies — Bidagdha Ramonikul in Bangla. Beautifully adapted to the context of the Bangalee society by Aly Zaker, this play was a success on the stage. But the French drama tist was not immediately repeated either by Nagorik or any other group in Dhaka. Moliere underwent a hiber nation for some years but he surfaced again with his fun.

wit and cutting jokes, this time carried by a young and radical theatre-worker Tario Anam Khan who adapted Moliere's The Miser entitled in Bengali as Konjus. The setting is transferred to the region of old Dhaka famous for notorious wit; dialogues were rendered in the local dialect with funny intorations and characteristic mispronounciation - all this created a hilarions entertainment to which the audience responded with a loud clap. Tariq Anam, encouraged by the success of the earlier play again adapted Moliere's That Sconndrel Scapien which ushered a Moliere craze on the Dhaka stage. The presence of Moliere on our stage is quite important for its history because amidst the banners of theatre as a medium of social protest and commitment and when everything was judged by the seriousness of the message it carried. Moliere brought in a break and with his spicy mood he took little pains to teach us the welcome lesson that comedy can as well be the the vehicle of protest.

Yes, Shakespeare was also

adapted though he lagged in

the competition much be-

hind. Aly Zaker adapted Hamlet with some success. Syed Shamsul Huq adapted Julias Caesar, that again could not create a news on the stage. Rather Shakespeare walked on our stage more often in Bangla translation and that way his presence was better felt. Two major productions deserve special mention. The two front-rank groups of Dhaka, Theatre and Nagorik jointly produced Masbeth. This was unique in our stage history and it was a commendable production with able acting, light design and stagecraft. The Bangladesh centre of International Theatre Institute in collaboration with the British Council, Dhaka, produced The Tempest in 1987 in which workers of as many as eight groups worked together. Noted British director Deborah Warner came to Dhaka to direct the play though done from the Bengali script, ITI Bangladesh Centre later on produced another play in the similar fashion this time a Brecht's play -Man Equals Man and this time the director was Fritz Bennewitz, the illustrious German director who, very unfortunately, has passed away some months ago. There was, of course, a number of Shakespeare productions in Bangla translation. Theatre produced Othello with considerable success. A play like Corielanus was produced by Aronyak again with a moderate success. Romeo and Juliet is also in the list. Interesting to note that one of Shakespeare's contempo-

raries Marlowe put his pres-

ence on our stage.