

Face to Face

An Actor Like No Other

He is the most cerebral thespian of our theatre firmament and demonstrated over the years an extraordinary range and power to portray the characters he played and has never allowed himself to be stereotypical or victim of any particular mannerism. He is Asaduzzaman Noor.

Q: The forthcoming Calcutta Book Fair has Bangladesh as its theme you know. No doubt it is a great honour for us. But what is disturbing is that like existing yawning trade imbalance with India we have little cultural export to Calcutta. On a visit to West Bengal last year I found to my utter disbelief young artists over there know almost next to nothing about our master painters such as Zainul or Quamrul, let alone Monirul Islam, Shahabuddin or Rafiqun Nabi. So how do you think we can improve greater cultural contacts with culturally and linguistically our closest neighbour?

A: I reckon the problem lies in how we present ourselves. When our BTV was available in West Bengal there was craze for our drama. BTV's transmission now covers only border areas. And you will be amazed to know that our TV actors/actresses are extremely popular. This was revealed to us on our recent shows at border areas. About stage drama, the Calcutta audience is well informed about our leading theatre groups.

If you talk about music especially Tagore song I think we score above our neighbours. I'm not talking about the great maestros. Today young talents in Tagore song like Banriya, Mita or Sadi enjoy a fair share of respect and popularity in West Bengal. In Nazrul songs also we have won their attention and Effat-Ara or Shakil's album are selling in Calcutta. As a poor and weak neighbour our position is certainly not as strong as theirs but whatever we have that need to be packed, circulated and marketed professionally. You were talking about Shahabuddin. Has he been in the limelight 5 or 6 years ago? The craze for him is

a more recent phenomenon.

Q: Are you hinting at media's role in bringing someone under spotlight?

A: Yes. Indeed. Then again on my personal visits I have realised that the want is there for Bangladeshi books but somehow there is no effort to meet the need. Who should take the initiative — the publishers, the government or the sellers? I think the crux of the problem lies here. We are now thinking about how to project ourselves culturally in foreign soil. You would be shocked to learn that the authorities had contemplated abandoning participation in Calcutta Book Fair on account of the worst flooding in history. True we had suffered a blow of nature's wrath but that didn't prevent us from organising mini-world cup or take up any development work or put off TV programmes. What we lack is vision to put our country forward. Our missions abroad can play a significant role to promote us culturally and help build a positive image of the country.

I have been invited to recite from Jibanananda Das at the poetry festival in Calcutta to be held soon. There are exchanges at the personal level but media's reaction in this regard is more or less somnolent. This has to go before forging a greater understanding and dialogue between the two cultures.

Q: It was first diagnosed by Edward Said that West has always considered East as the 'other' that does not belong to its culture. East has consumed western 'superior' culture without questioning its implications. Third World intellectuals now speak of a counter discourse. It is true that we know more about what is happening in cultural front in West than say our

neighbouring Myanmar. What do you have to say about this?

A: I always felt the whole thing is related to economics. No one listens to someone who is poor. To be heard you have to be exceptionally gifted. Nigerian writers and playwrights are now coming into limelight by dint of sheer talent. The second deterrent is lack of translation. Since I don't know Tamil or Panjabi or Thai my only translation is English. I think only translation in greater volume of Asian literature can open cultural dialogue meaningfully between the nations of the continent.

Q: Over the years we have seen Brecht, Shaw, Beckett or Moliere are being brilliantly adapted for our audience. Don't you feel that our plays should have been translated into other languages?

A: Yes. Of course. If we can stage a play set in German context I don't think there is any problem to adapt a Bengali play for German audience. I think that would be very interesting to the western audience. Think of Peter Brook's Mahabharat, who could have imagined that Indian mythology can be portrayed without any Indian characters except Draupadi played by Mallika Sarabhai? Before watching the movie I thought whether I would be able to accept an African as Bhishma or a Japanese as Yudhishthira. But it is possible in creative field. So there is no reason why a play set in 19th century Bangladesh cannot be staged in New York and be not communicative.

Q: There is a perpetual complaint that the 1971 War of Liberation has not been portrayed or projected at the scale it should have been in the field of creativity. Our fiction or cinema or theatre has negotiated with

other issues than our freedom struggle. If we look at West the Second World War is still subject of creative quest.

A: This is my question as well. Why we have failed to perceive the greatest event of our history in our creative eye? See what BTV is churning out in the name of depicting our freedom struggle which nothing but sentimental trash. The killing of Bangabandhu is one definite reason of our cultural ailment. The assassination brought on disturbing change in our political and social scenes. The politics of self-defeatism in the following years had affected all our cultural pursuits.

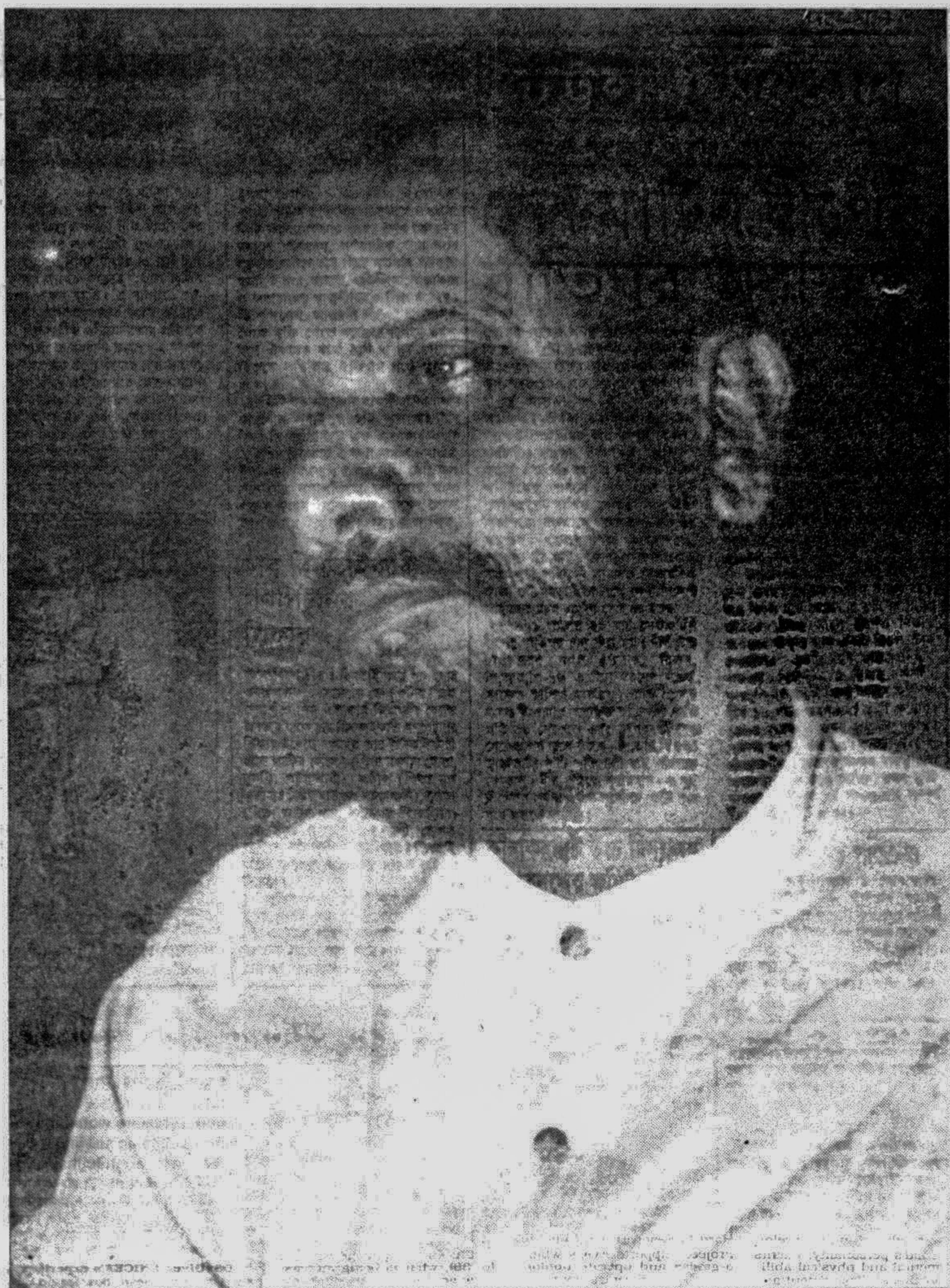
Q: But don't you feel that it is a bit funny? We have seen in different culture crisis occasioned great artistic works. Pasternak is one glowing example.

A: I really do not have any answer to it. Maybe we lost our focus, maybe we haven't felt the urge or maybe it is really difficult to create artistically successful play on a subject of such a magnitude. Dealing with emotion, sentiment and dream one is always at the risk of becoming sentimental. Mixing fact with art is a tough job.

Q: We do not have that in our artistic culture. A fiction like *Sei Samaya*, where the 19th century development of Bengali intelligentsia is being reconstructed, is not written here.

A: True. Even if we look back there are instances in West Bengal of great historical novels. Maybe we have to wait for someone of Sunil's calibre.

Q: You are a gifted reciter yourself. Poetry is traditionally the most rich genre of creativity in this part of the world. We all have great appetite for poetry. But for the past one decade not



ing significant has been produced in this field. If you ask me personally I won't be able to name one poet of eighties or nineties. Poetry in a way plunged into a period of stagnation.

A: But recitation has become a prominent genre of performing art over the years.

Q: But do you see the same enthusiasm about poetry that there was even in seventies?

Books on poetry do not sell well in book fairs is also a testimony to it.

A: Yes. True. It is difficult to name a poet of the 80s or 90s now. Not in poetry alone. In every sphere of creativity we are going through a lean patch. The tendency to achieve things instantly without having the pains of creativity has now taken an epidemic form.

Q: Let us change our course

and turn to our political culture. Do you feel there has been a qualitative change of late?

A: See, the practice of democracy was not there for a long time. I think we need time to learn the ideals and values of it. With the killing of the father of the nation many traditional values were erased from our society. To recoup that we need time. Someone was asking me on the other day whether I support

hartal as a political weapon to press home rightful demand or not. I told him that hartal is a valid political weapon. But the question is when to apply. Hartal should be used as the last weapon. After hartal you don't have any option but to resort to civil war, something no opposition, I am sure, wants to get into.

Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

When I was a Teenager ...

ABOUT ten years ago, 'tokais' stormed the newspaper media. All of a sudden they were the most popular people around. The way they talked, walked and did everything somehow became everyone's business. And then in the 1990s, during the fall of Ershad, when the atmosphere spelled tension, his cartoons appeared as comic relief. Rafiqun Nabi is the man behind such doings. Previously, cartoonists were associated with an inability to paint or draw. Nabi broke away from that myth, and proved to all concerned that cartoons are no less an art. He brought to cartoons a sophistication that led many youngsters to take it up without feeling like an outcast.

Although cartoons allowed him to become a household name, he actually specialises in paintings, especially water colours. In fact, he is internationally reputed for his contribution to the painting world. The awards he has to his name prove that. Although he took birth in Chapainawabganj, his childhood days were spent in different parts of the country, which meant attending different schools and having many different friends. From Class 4 onwards he was in today's old part of Dhaka. His friends were of two types: school friends and neighbours ('para' friends). He often bunked school to go and watch movies in the theatres. Their all time favourites were Tarzan, Superman, Captain Marvel and the like. The reason they chose the English movies was that these were morning shows, and if they had to bunk classes, it had to be in the morning! The Bangla and Hindi movies were shown at night, a time when they weren't allowed to go out. Why, were his parents very strict? "No, in fact they were relatively lib-

eral. My parents tried to maintain, and I would say, succeeded in keeping, a warm and friendly relationship with my ten other brothers and sisters and me. My father was a little more strict though. For example, today we see parents and children sitting at the same crowd of people, talking, sharing views and children's voice being heard even in a serious conversation. When I was a child, we never dared to even peek when a guest dropped by without fearing a roaring voice, 'What are you doing?' Yet, on most occasions I found them quite liberal. They never restricted me from going to my friends' place or them from coming over, a problem I saw in many of my friends' places. They just wanted us to study

well and be educated. They tried to provide a good academic environment so that we could give our best shot. And we tried according to what we could do."

>From when did he start to paint or draw? "All children draw at a tender age...whatever they can draw, irrespective of if it make sense. They don't start singing from a very young age, but they do draw on pieces of paper, on walls or whatever the can get. That is how I started drawing as well. In fact we (my brothers and sisters) all drew pictures together. As we grew up, when I was in Class 5 and 6, I noticed that people were attracted to what I drew. Then I realised that this was not actually a bad thing to do for a living. It

dawned upon me that without doing anything if people still liked my drawings, then if I took it up professionally, I wouldn't do that bad. As I matured, I found out that paintings were not merely about painting itself, it concerned studies as well; that there were a lot of things to be learnt in this field as well. I realised that this was no less an academic subject. From 1954 I knew there was an art college in Dhaka and I harboured the dream of going there in my heart. So, finally when the time came, and I completed my matriculation, I decided to go and join the college. I had my parents' support in here wholeheartedly. In fact, at times I felt they were more enthusiastic than I was! My family was inclined towards the art field

from before. My father made miniature sculptures merely out of hobby. So, my interest in art was sort of like a blessing. I sometimes wonder if their enthusiasm was because they thought I couldn't do anything else! Whatever the reason, my parents paid a deaf ear to all my 'well wishing' relatives and acquaintances who disapproved of my going on to specialise in the art field, and stuck by me through all the procedures," he ended, the love for his family evident from the way he spoke. So, when did he start drawing cartoons?

"That was in the 1960s. National revolutions had started to take place in certain parts of the country at a preliminary level. At that time, there were many little magazines which had cartoons of different movements. I was good at drawing and I thought that I could do it too. I saw that what they did was observe life and the surroundings and the cartoons portrayed the dark aspects of civilisation, and yet, made you smile. I followed suit and tried to portray my own surroundings the way I could. Soon I had people coming to me saying, 'Could you draw this?... Could you portray that?... With time I matured and allowed myself to grow. The 'tokai' character I created is not fiction at all.

These vagrants roamed around the place I lived in Old Dhaka and talked to me. Every time I walked out of the house, a particular 'tokai' would say, 'Sir, what is the time?', while another would ask me what I am doing. They often advised me as to how to do things as well! Af-

ter sometime I realised that they often said reasonable and truthful things, except that they could not organise what they said. I decided to put them forward and let people understand their own faults, but in a light hearted way."

Coming to the present day, what do the artists have to give to us? To this Nabi replied that the artists, not only painters, but musicians, actors, poets, writers...everyone have something to contribute to our society, and that is direction. "People look up to us and if we show them the right path, perhaps they will listen to us. We do say things, against hartals, against anti-liberation forces, and people listen to us, but not really listen. We do not call hartals if they don't listen to us, like the political parties. At one call, there are millions at a political public meeting. We do not have that kind of authority. But we are more educated, we think more and we have no motive behind our love for our country. Therefore, we can perhaps hope that one day, they will listen to us. Till then, we will go on saying, oblivious to the deaf ears. We will do our duty, for we owe it to the people and to ourselves. So, there is a distinct connection between politics, humanity, love for one's country and art. They are all inter linked and variations in one affect the other," he finished. What would be this great man's advice to the people of today's generation? What are his hopes for them? "Dear readers, we are on the threshold of entering the new century. On this step, have something worthwhile to take there, for 2000 is believed to change the world, and we have to keep up. My advice is to take preparation for tomorrow. We have high hopes. Please don't let us down," he ended with hope in his eyes.

Soul Search

Sayed Ahmad
Playwright and Critic



Q: What gives you the greatest pleasure?

A: To be among people. I abhor loneliness, except on occasions when I am writing, thinking. I like to be with people and observe their activities. I like to take long walks on my own but not on quiet roads. I like to be in the thick of busy centres. I pause and I observe, I observe endlessly.

Q: Do you have any recurring nightmares?

A: I do not have recurring nightmares. In fact I do not have dreams. Once in a while I have had experience of a dream, but I forget it on waking up.

Q: What do you dislike most about yourself?

A: I sometimes indulge in self-pity. This causes me to become morose which I do not like. It is my nature to be happy and thankful. Sometimes I am overpowered by dark thoughts.

Q: What is your greatest fear?

A: Helplessness in old age, either through a physical or mental disability. Good health is a boon. Let us celebrate it with gusto.

Q: What has been the biggest mistake in your life?

A: That I did not pursue a career in music. I had a passion for music and a gift for it, but I could not continue due to circumstances.

Q: What makes you cry?

A: I cry when I see the limitations of human beings. That in spite of their goodness they are thwarted in showing love for each other.

Q: Who is your role model?

A: My mother who embodied the noble qualities of patience, generosity and tolerance, otherwise we, four brothers, would not have achieved what we are today.

Q: How important is money to you?

A: Money is not an important factor in my life. Just to have enough to be comfortable, with basic things as a simple shelter, clean and aesthetic surroundings and pleasant companions.

Q: What is more important to you, your personal or professional life?

A: My personal life. I have always valued my family, relations and friends.

Q: Are you afraid of death?

A: No. I am not afraid of death per se. But presently I am not able to gauge whether I will be courageous and strong enough to face the ultimate moment.

Interview by Ziaul Karim

