

Face to Face

Young Man of 72

He has been the fairy godfather of countless heroines: from Shabnam in the 50s to Shabnaz in the 90s. Ihtesham, the finest director the country has ever seen, is a young man of 72. Full of energy and always bubbling with ideas, the most popular dadu of the film industry now passing his period of creative incubation. Interviewed by Ziaul Karim

Q: What has brought you to this industry?

A: When I left army I was without a vocation. I have to do something for my bread and butter. But what that could be. Why not try your luck in show business? suggested some of my close friends and confidants. I liked the idea and was playing with it when I came to know that a theatre hall is available to be hired at Lal-mohrhat. I went for it and was thus christened to this industry as an exhibitor. It was during my stint as an exhibitor that I developed a passion for films and started saying to myself, why can't I be a film-maker? The year was 1957. I went to Lahore to buy films for my company, Leo Films, and came in close contacts with Hamlog famed director Zia Sarhaddi. The successive weeks I was virtually under Sarhaddi's tutelage, learning and getting enlightened about the various aspects of filmmaking. I returned to Dhaka a changed man with a dream to make movie. So the seeds were sown at Lahore.

Q: What was your first step to be a film-maker?

A: Upon returning to my natural habitat Dhaka, the first thing I did was to pen down the story forming in my head. That little story was made into a film called *E Desh Tomar Aamar*, you all know. The message of the film was: We have just achieved our independence, now we have to work together to build the nation.

Q: 'E Desh Tomar Aamar' was the first film in the annals of our celluloid history done with 100 per cent local artists and technicians. How come you did it?

A: I was all along a stubborn person. Getting down to movie making I found to my utter surprise that we

had to hire technical hands either from India or Pakistan, erstwhile West Pakistan. I could not accept it and built my own unit with hard work and dedication. I always told myself if I do something I would do it with my own people. So that was the spirit to make impossible possible.

Q: But you made Urdu films. Why?

A: That was quite interesting. Shortly after *E Desh Tomar Aamar's* release I went to Lahore film festival and was pained to see that stars of Urdu films are better off riding brand new sedans. On the other hand my heroines could only avail rickshaws to come to the festival hall. I could not accept that. Economy was the only divide between them and us. So I thought if we could make inroads into Urdu market our stars would drive latest Mercedeses or Toyotas.

I confided my secretly nursed dream to my partner Dushani. The initial reaction was like throwing acid on his face. Bewildered and flabbergasted he threw at me a question in disbelief "Are you mad?" "Not at all," I said and then told him that I was in army, studied in Delhi and knew the language as a native did. He seemed pretty convinced and we set off to our new enterprise. *Chanda* was the product of our adventure to an uncharted territory for Bengali film-makers. The film was a smashing hit capturing whole Pakistan market. Leading daily *Dawn* in its editorial wrote film-makers of West Pakistan should go to East Pakistan to learn film-making. That editorial was a real boost in my career. After that there was a gang of Bengali film-makers — Zahir Raihan,

Khan Ataur Rahman, Kazi Zahir — overtaking Urdu film industry. We almost pushed the West Pakistan film industry on the verge of closing down. Then came the War of Liberation and the Bengali Muslim for the first time achieved independence, a flag, a territory to plant their dreams.

Q: Do you think we have attained what we had fought for in the war of independence? At least in the field of cinema?

A: What happened after independence is really sad and there is nothing to sing about. Sorry to say, film industry became a hostage to a number of tasteless and mindless crooks. I literally withdrew from the industry and remained outside of the space of what was once my most intimate passion.

Q: But you made a comeback.

A: Yes I did. But why? Because I could not watch the industry go astray. I returned to the industry plucking together my stubborn self and made *Chandni*. This film opened the floodgate for the new people to come into our film firmament and also performed a social duty by attracting the educated audience who abandoned the movie theatre after independence.

Q: But the educated middle-class have again withdrawn themselves from cinema.

A: Yes. That's right. Our film-makers are responsible for that. Instead of believing in themselves they began to ape cheap Hindi movies. Why people would be interested in C-grade cloning of Hindi films loaded with sex and violence? Can you watch a Bengali movie today with your family? We have a long her-

itage and a sense of decency. Look at the titles of today's movies. They will offend your ears.

Film is an important aspect of national culture. See what we have done to it. Think of the dress worn by our heroines. Would you ever like your near and dear ones to wear them? This is absolute degeneration.

Q: What is the thought that frequents you now?

A: See I'm 72 now and not going to live long. But it really pains me when I think of the future of our country. How to salvage the nation? I ponder. I think the only way this nation can be saved from catastrophe is to educate its people. Education is the only antidote to resist disaster. Now the question is how to educate them. To my mind audio-visual media is the only way to educate the nation in the quickest possible time. Let me elaborate it a bit. A good teacher, for example, can only teach a group of students at a time and in a certain place. What if we shoot him teaching and show the tape to different schools of the country, don't you think we would earn golden dividends? Now come to the point. What will we be showing to the people? I am thinking of mobile units that will travel far and wide with documentaries about adult education, reproductive health, population control, pollution, and then, what is human rights. I think the divide is not between haves and have-nots, it is between knows and don't-knows. A person possessing information is a man having the resource to change his lot. Through documentaries you can even teach people about modern farming, good house keeping and what not,



An inspired talker Ihtesham can keep his audience spellbound on any subject he chooses to speak his mind. Though he has won prestigious awards in Moscow and in the then West Pakistan, he takes lot of pains in saying that Bangladesh hasn't recognised his efforts and contributions to the industry. He still dreams winning a national award. Photo: Zahedul Khan

When I was a Teenager ...

BORN in Bagerhat, Mahmudul Haque, the Director of the Institute of Fine Arts, spent his childhood days in the village. Second among his three brothers and two sisters, he spent his days like a typical village lad. His days passed swimming, fishing, playing Darguli, Dariyabanda and Hadudu, playing with marbles, playing football and occasionally cricket, when he had the opportunity to make bats with pieces of wood.

He remembers the time when it was holiday and he, along with his many friends, spent all day in the pond. Later, they were scolded because of the possibility of catching a cold. But they never listened. Every time the holidays came around, the only place where they could be found was the pond.

Going to the village fair was always a big occasion. That was the only time when they were given some money to buy whatever they pleased.

"We were on top of the world with the two paisas we were given," he laughed.

Watching movies without letting parents know was not only exciting but made the little conspirators feel older and important. They watched Bangla movies and sometimes Hindi movies.

"Chhabi Biswas, Uttam-Suchitra, Mala Sinha, Dilip Kumar, Ashok Kumar were our favourite stars. We would save money for days in order to watch one such movie! I watched 'Dip Jely Jay' so many times that I still remember it," he reminisced.

His mother was a religious person and expected all the brothers and sisters to wake up early and recite from the Koran.

"Once we were having a play at our school and I had a big role. The rehearsals would begin very early each day and

IN CONVERSATION WITH MAHMUDUL HAQUE

By Navine Murshid



so instead of reciting the Koran I went off to sing and act. When my mother saw this turn into a habit, she beat me up. That, I'll never forget," he said while talking to the Daily Star at the Institute of Fine Arts.

However it was his mother he was very close to, especially when his father came into the picture. Whenever he wanted something he went and told his mother. His mother in turn would ask his father.

"If my father sanctioned my want, only then could I go ahead with what I wanted to do."

Mahmudul Haque today feels that the reason he was scared of his father was because that was the way he wanted it to be. He deliberately kept a distance from them because then, he felt more like a father.

"My relationship with my children is very friendly. I've given them enough space and they know they can come and tell me anything. Fathers in our times, felt it was wrong to be close to one's children," he said.

But little Mahmud never disrespected his father. In fact, he regards him very highly and considers him to be the one who made him able to achieve whatever he has achieved. His father, a doctor, wanted to educate the poor in their village and so made small classrooms from bamboo and hay in order to teach them. However, the rich in the locality, were against any such education as they feared education would enable them to understand and condemn the injustice the rich often inflicted upon them. His father was just as determined to

educate the people.

"The bamboo-made small classroom has become a big school today and about 150 students complete their Secondary School Certificate exam from there each year," he said proudly.

His teachers were the other kind of people who he thought wanted to keep them at a distance. There were often occasions when the teachers beat them up with canes.

"Once when a teacher beat me up very severely, I was very hurt. So, I took my friends and complained to the headmaster. Nothing could measure my joy, when I saw the headmaster scolding the teacher because he beat me!" he said gleefully.

In those times, drawing and painting were considered a waste of time as well as against religion.

"Art, in my time, meant drawings of plants and trees, designs on handkerchief corners and beautiful, flowery handwriting."

Little Mahmud was attracted to book illustrations and good handwriting. He fondly remembers Kazi Abul Kashem, whose illustrations in children's books inspired him to draw. He also recalls his Primary School teacher's handwriting and the way he wrote down their names in the attendance register, which too attracted him. His inclination towards aesthetics was also influenced by AKM Rouf's handwriting who, incidentally, wrote the constitution because of his beautiful handwriting.

The unavailability of proper colours, paints, brushes and other equipment in those days

made art a very difficult thing to pursue. Even if they brought them from the town, the quality would be so poor that nothing could be created with them.

"The brushes were so rough and hard that it was no different from any other stick. The paint too, was synthetic and often would not stick to the paper."

The most remarkable thing about the village was that there were no religious conflicts. Even during the post-war era, the Hindus and the Muslims lived there alongside one another in contentment. In fact, most of little Mahmud's friends consisted of Hindus and they were never in friction for religious differences. During Eid, they came over to his place and he went over during Puja. They all maintained their religious positions, but they were very good friends.

Years later, he still feels that the simple, uncomplicated village life is better. The barefooted walks along the green pathway, the way all the village homes belonged to all the children, the way the villagers are happy with the little things in life make this artist want to return to nature, to the by gone days. Yet, he understands that things are bound to change with time.

"At one time, it took three days to come to Dhaka from Bagerhat. Today it takes a few hours. There are changes and there will be changes and we have to be able to adapt and turn with the change time entails. Today, I see the past as my inspiration, the present as the time to utilise what resources I may have and the future as being brighter and better. A true artist is one, who can adapt to the changes, be a modern man and still have the capability to travel back in time," he ended.

"Soul Search"

Hayat Saif

Poet



Q: What gives you the greatest pleasure?

A: To see people around me happy.

Q: Do you have any recurring nightmares?

A: Yes. Having to go to the same routine work next morning.

Q: What do you dislike most about yourself?

A: I am an inveterate procrastinator.

Q: What is your greatest fear?

A: Slow and silent proliferation of fanaticism.

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

A: Having been a public servant and thus letting life pass by me.

Q: What makes you cry?

A: Being in the vicinity of high ranking & garrulous asses.

Q: Who is your role model?

A: My father, who was an extremely wise but a modest and humble man.

Q: How important is money to you?

A: Reasonably important.

Q: What is the quality you most like in a man?

A: Open-mindedness.

Q: What is the quality you most like in a woman?

A: A healthy attitude to life.

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

A: Most certainly, my personal life.

Q: Are you afraid of death?

A: None whatsoever.

Q: Which book has influenced your life most?

A: Difficult. Gulliver's Travels? or Hamlet?

Q: If you were given a chance to start all over again from zero, what would you want to be?

A: An inanimate object. At least I wouldn't have to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, etc. etc.

Q: What worries you most as we are standing at the threshold of the 21st century?

A: Cloning of humans.

Q: If you have to sum up the philosophy of your life in three sentences, what will that be?

A: Give love to people if you can. If you cannot give it to others, keep it within yourself so that it may blossom into something that others may some day love. If you cannot give love to people at least don't give them the opposite of it-hatred.

— Interviewed by Ziaul Karim