

Face to Face

The man with the golden hands

IT was quarter past midnight at the Zia International Airport. Among the anxious crowd outside the departure lounge, there was this man. One needed not be a Sherlock Holmes to figure out that he lived overseas. Quite a few Sherlock Holmes were there, the vendors and the beggars, looking for a chance to earn 'some bucks'. His companions were protective and trying to shoo them away. But, they just kept coming back.

The man wasn't quite ill at ease. Then again, he was not at ease, either. Evidently, he didn't understand them and they him. There was no connector, no link and thereby no communication.

Well, that didn't last long.

Suddenly, the man took out a deck of cards from his pocket and spread them out before one of his companions, a lady in her early thirties.

"Pick one card," he told her. "Remember what the card is and put it back."

She did what she was told. He shuffled the cards and held it out to her again. "Touch the card on top," he said.

She touched the card on the top of the deck. The man turned the card around. It was seven of spades.

"Is this the one you picked?" asked the man.

Her baffled look had the answer.

"Now there's something funny when I touch this look what happens," he said.

The same card had turned into the three of diamonds. "You touch it now," he told his already-amazed companion.

Seven of spades again. It was magic.

In the next fifteen minutes or so, the show continued. He made a watch disappear from the wrist of one of his companions, turned a candy from one of the vendors into a two-taka bill, so on and so forth.

Soon, there were more inquisitive eyes joining in. The language and social barriers seemed to have disappeared.

"Turn this chocolate bar into taka," said one. Requests started pouring in. The kids wanted more magic.

It was already quarter to one. He and his companions had to go. They got into the white sedan parked nearby and drove away, leaving behind a bunch of awestruck teenagers. They were wondering who the magician was, the man who had turned a mundane night

into one that they would perhaps never forget.

It was Aladin. Not with the magic lamp but with the 'golden hands'.

Our first encounter with Aladin took place two or three days back, right at The Daily Star office. We were to interview him. The only clue we had about him, his works and his achievements was an article carried in the Sunday Times of London.

Incidentally, of all the articles that have so far come out on him, the aforementioned "was splendidly inaccurate," we came to know later on. The flawed account of Aladin's deeds aside, we had bits and pieces on him, revealed to us by the man who had actually set up the tête-à-tête.

He was a high-profile producer-director, a magician par excellence who won the International Magician of the Year 1991 award; a management consultant who has worked with the

head, which is in effect the managerial head, the head with which I produce and direct, which makes me a producer/director. I have another life as well - I'm an artist and within that a live artist. How I describe myself depends on who asks the question and why they need to know.

"I studied economics and international studies at the LSE. After I graduated, I did research there for four years and edited their international studies journal. For the first part of my post-university life, there were a couple of things I did in tandem. On the one hand, I was an academic within international relations, within international finance. I had two areas of specialisation - nuclear strategy and commercial bank lending to developing countries. So, I worked in that academic environment, I edited and I taught.

"On the other hand, I be-

gave him a break from the closed academic environment.

"I'd had enough of the academic and commercial environments; I just wished for another life. It wasn't fulfilling. It is incredibly rewarding financially - but not in other ways. What I got more reward from was working face-to-face with young people. So, I simply resigned from everything I had been doing."

Aladin went on to work with a series of charities that worked with gangs. He was involved in project management and this time, he was paid for his services. His 'magic' was frequently integral to his interactions with youth at risk.

Soon, he became the Chief Executive of a National Charity. As a member of the Chief Executives' Forum of the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (i.e. national youth charities

to glue people together."

The past two years since he resigned from being a charity boss have been rather packed. "It was very difficult to squeeze ten days at a stretch out of my schedule. I have been planning this trip (to Bangladesh) since April last year," he told us. Still, he finds enough time to do "at least a couple of external projects a year", mainly documentaries for television on young people at risk or live art productions.

"I've worked on three series to do with young people in street gangs. A few years back ITV had this documentary called *Girl Gang*, probably one of the most seen documentaries that year. I have to add, I did not edit it. I did not produce it. I just devised it and brought in the young gang members."

Obviously, magic plays a big role in it but how did magic get into all these, in the first place? What drew Aladin to the world of magic?

As a child he was fascinated by the stories and fables his grandma would tell him. He was an avid listener of stories where magic played a major role. He was an active child, determined to have a good time.

His first encounter with magic was when he was about two and a half years old. His family was then in Geneva. Night had already befallen. His father kept telling him to go to sleep, but he wouldn't. He was busy playing with his new toys. There were five of them and he wouldn't let them go for anything in the world. His father then said, "Your toys are tired, too. Say goodnight and let them sleep." He pointed at the bright light with its colourful shade in the middle of the room and said, "The toys are going to go there and sleep. In the morning, they will come back to you again."

Then he took the toys one by one and made them disappear while the little boy looked on intently at the light.

"I was mesmerised and awe-struck. After my initial shock I felt that if my father could do it, I could do it too. That was absolutely great."

That was the start. His eagerness to learn, and improve on whatever he has learnt has made him what he is today. He has proved that he can do magic and do it very well.

Today, Aladin ranks among the world's best magicians.

In March 1997, Aladin compered and co-produced a week-long magic festival in Bangalore, India which attracted 800 magicians from around the world. It was featured as a news item on TV broadcasts reaching over 1.3 billion people. The Times of London called it "the biggest event in the history of magic". Aladin has also been an invited artist (the only magician) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the Alternative Arts Festival, the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), The National Review of Live Arts, the British Festival of Visual Theatre, the ZeroZeroZero (000) Festival at the Whitechapel Gallery and at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Aladin recently directed a pop video featuring his magic for a single co-composed by legendary DJs Freddy Fresh and Fatboy Slim. He is in discussion about forthcoming magic projects for television as well as theatre audiences. He is one of only two Gold Turban Members of the Magic Academy of Bangalore, India.

Aladin, however, never had any institutional training in magic.

"I never received a second's tuition from a magician and it wasn't until I was in my mid-20s - by which time I was already a magician - that I have ever had a conversation with a magician."

He was in London. One day, he watched a very good street magician. In the course of chatting to one of his fellow spectators, he



Photo: Manuel Vason

Sherwani ... bridging cultures

came across the name Magic Circle - Britain's secretive society for magicians.

"I was introduced to the Circle, but on joining I realised to my shock that women were not accepted as members. So, about three months later, along with five others I proposed a rule change to admit women to membership."

The renegades lost heavily in the vote.

The strongest argument against inclusion of women was interesting. They said, "We don't have enough space for a women's toilet. There are only two toilets which are hardly enough for men. So, we can't give up one of them for women."

These circumstances seemed philistine to him and he was extremely piqued. So much so, that following that meeting Aladin was out of there.

Magic, for him, is primarily a form of interaction, a means to communicate.

To him, the prop he uses for magic is also an entity. A deck of cards "could become flowing, animated, another person within all of that, another participant, equally precious. As my spectators are precious, so are the objects I use for my magic."

He finds in the street magicians in this part of the world a similar degree of empathy to the objects they use for magic.

"They make their prop out of earth ... little balls made of clay. I really connect with them and love their magic. They simply create magic out of the day-to-day things in life. In our culture, magic is so real."

"As a child, when I watched magicians perform I felt that they were not looking down at me, they were looking at me from exactly the level they would look from had I been an adult - really inclusive, equal. Unfortunately, this style of magic hardly exists any more."

Not only for the magic and the magicians, Aladin harbours in him a profound love and respect for the people of this region and their culture, and it has more to do with than the ancestral bondage he has to the sub-continent (his father is a former Bangladeshi diplomat who defected in 1971 while still being a Pakistani ambassador and his mother an Assamese who is a former VOA broadcaster). Born in Washington D. C., he grew up in many different cultures, went to schools mostly in Switzerland and

"Every human being at all times has worth, has value; other than that, I'm not in any position to judge them... When I'm talking, that is when I watch people the most, am able to understand them best. That is when I can 'read' them, so to speak. Actually, this is all about making connections."

England and had homes in many world capitals. Despite constant exposure to the Western socio-cultural environment, influence of oriental culture on his consciousness has been profound, thanks to his parents. While in Calcutta, Aladin actually took two years of intensive course on Ra-bindra Sangeet. On stage, when he performs for the Western audience, his attitude proudly speaks of his cultural identity, notably that of Bangladesh.

"I always put something Bangladeshi on alongside those my sponsors want me to wear," he said.

"The next century will belong to the Asians," he told an assemblage of senior staff of The Daily Star a few days after this interview. "And it is culture that has started making the difference."

The essence of magic, to Aladin, is to create a bridge between the magician and the audience, the magician and the props he uses, the props and the audience.

"The magic must initiate a communion between the magician and the audience and things he uses for his magic. Communion is a very beautiful thing. It's about the connection. When you go to a library and read a book, you commune with the book and nothing gets in the way. So, when I perform I don't want to get in the way. I want to be part of the magic."

Like his perception of magic, his perception of life is simple as well. Whatever be one's profession is, however taxing one's job is, one must find some time for one's self once a day.

"I may get knocked over by a car tomorrow, you never know. So, I always try, and spend some time in the day on what is most important to me because some-

times tomorrow may never come."

During his recent stay in Bangladesh, he said, he simply brushed his professional concern aside and enjoyed life at a slow pace. He enjoyed waking up to the sound of brick-breaking, opening of gates, and chipmunks chattering. He enjoyed *alu bhaji*, *luchi* for breakfast and vegetable *biriyani* at lunch.

"I enjoyed having fish three times a day at my Boro Khala's - and eating by hand. I've got turmeric stains on my fingernails. This time, I can accurately be called 'the man with the golden hands'!"

Perhaps, his simple views of life, his unassuming behaviour and, more importantly, his inexhaustible love for fellow human being make him readily acceptable wherever he goes. And, wherever he goes, he watches people. Not to judge them, but more often to discover how it would be possible to connect with them.

"Every human being at all times has worth, has value; other than that, I'm not in any position to judge them... When I'm talking, that is when I watch people the most, am able to understand them best. That is when I can 'read' them, so to speak. Actually, this is all about making connections. I feel it is important to animate exchanges. I find that I am doing this a lot of the time and I feel that magic is a beautiful way through which to connect people."

As our conversation neared end, we asked him the same question we had started with, although in a different manner and in a different context.

One of us queried, "Are you a psychic?"

"No," said Aladin. "I am a magician."

By Mir A Zaman and Navine Murshid

governments of developing countries during their debt crises and with multinational companies helping them draw their restructuring plans; a corporate executive who stepped down as CEO of an investment bank; an academic who has edited top-quality journals; a nuclear strategist who has acted as Cabinet-level adviser in Britain; a community worker whose work with the violent young people and especially the streets gangs earned him international acclaim ... Well, that was about it.

Naturally, we were unsure of what to think or believe. We perhaps expected him to be a magician with a pointed hat and mysterious looks. But when we went downstairs to greet him, with a feeling of trepidation and anticipation, we saw a man like any one of us. Nothing pretentious, nothing ostentatious - just another ordinary guy.

But then, as the conversation progressed that changed, too. His words, his style of talking, the way he carried himself and the way he could see through people changed our first impression about him and within seconds we found in him a man larger than life.

How would you introduce yourself, a management consultant, a community worker or a magician? - was our first question to him.

"Well, basically I'm an artist. I work with magic as well as other contemporary art forms. I have another

gan working as a consultant, primarily advising developing countries in rescheduling their debts and then advising the intermediaries to the debt crisis - the merchant banks, international organisations, IMF and the World Bank. And later on, I began advising the trans-national corporations, multinational companies who were heavily exposed to developing countries' risks. I was looking after their risk exposure."

At the same time "there were a couple of other things that were going on".

"While at the university as an under-graduate student, I did voluntary work with young people at risk. I began working with 'young offenders', including young people who have been arrested and perhaps instead of being sent away they have been enrolled on some programme. Over the years, I got more training to work with young people at risk, those with disabilities, profound disabilities, the street homeless, those with mental health challenges. I had to do more applied and more intensive work. Then, I went on to work with street gangs and those who were street homeless."

That part of his life gave him immense satisfaction. Working with the young gave him an insight into a world that he had hardly known: a world he nevertheless wanted to know more about.

On the other hand, his work with the young at risk

throughout Britain - including the Scouts, UNICEF etc) he was involved with liaison with the Cabinet and the proposal and testing of public policy relating to young people. His was a prestigious position no doubt and provided handsome salary, but what he enjoyed most was the interaction he had with troubled young people. His managerial skills were very much in play.

"I was training people, raising funds, so on and so forth. It became, in two and a half years, the largest single project outside the United States and probably the largest working with street gangs. We had about 29 staff specialised in street gangs and working in dangerous neighbourhoods in South London where there was a lot of BNP, Yardie, Triad and Colombian cartel activity."

He was internationally acclaimed for his works with the street gangs. Unfortunately, with the growth of the organisation and the increased responsibilities, came back a sadly familiar phenomenon. He once again found himself imprisoned in managerial drudgery.

"I got removed from what I actually enjoyed - connecting with people." Naturally, it had a claustrophobic effect on him. Besides, it was time for him to "make another move" and do something he could "connect with". That's when his life as the producer-director began. However, it was not new to him.

"By the time I left the academic and consultancy worlds, I had actually produced four projects. I was involved in the setting up of a night-club: the Ministry of Sound; I was also the first host. The Ministry was owned by Jamie Palumbo, whose father Lord Palumbo was then the Arts Minister. It was in those days the kind of place Robert de Niro, Madonna and the likes could slip into. It became rather an exclusive club - which I didn't like.

"Basically, I love art and culture but then again there is something in working within culture that is sometimes not so great, which is to do with status. At the Ministry of Sound, what I wasn't really into was the fact that it was exclusive and the fact that they excluded people. Believe me, if I could I would let everyone in."

"Anyway, I discovered that while I loved art and culture, there was a lot of great culture out there which isn't being heard and seen.

Essentially, community-based culture."

This realisation led him back to his familiar milieu, out on the streets amongst the gangs and homeless as well as those with disabilities.

Photo: Manuel Vason

