

Face to Face

Razzak: Heartthrob un-limited

An actor of the golden days, **Razzak** still glitters with youthfulness and vibrancy. Today, an actor and director, he hopes for the day when Bengali cinema would gleam like it did way back then, write **Navine Murshid** and **Ekram Kabir**

ROMANTIC heartthrob of the 1960s, Abdur Razzak is still very much present in the film arena. Till 1990, Razzak played roles of the hero, often the romantic hero. He took a break for about five years. Then, quietly, but firmly, he stepped back into the film world in 1996, as a character hero and a director with films like *Abhijan* and *Shantanu Chakor* to his name. He still stars as the hero in some films, but not as the kind of hero most are acquainted with, that is, not as the lovey dovey sweetheart who sweeps his love off her feet! At a time when Bangladeshi films are at its nadir, Razzak tries to make films that are social, realistic and of good quality.

Razzak talked to The Daily Star on the sets of *Premier nam Bedona*, a Purnima, Shilpi, Amit Hassan, Bappa Raj starrer, at FDC. His presence was felt on entry to his set from the silence that prevailed there. It was learnt he liked to work in a quiet environment, even when nothing is being recorded.

"From 1960 till today there has been a 95 percent decline in the quality of Bengali films. This is sad because in most other countries, film industries improved and prospered. I would say, the quality of everything, starting from theatre, music, dance to television has declined. This is not only appalling, but it saddens me to see such a state. In my time, films were very good; we depicted life as it was; we had social values; cinema had a social role to play. Today, most movies are unrealistic, pretentious and melodramatic. They have no touch with the real world; of what happens here. I don't

know how we have allowed ourselves to come this low" he said.

For this he feels that the lack of artists is to blame. "Who do we cast in our movies? What are the criteria? We see a good looking girl walking down the street, we teach her to dance and fight and there we have a heroine. Now, this is not how it should be done."

Most other countries have film institutes for training the artists. This is not so here. Actors and actresses of the 1960s had another kind of advantage. They acted on stage (in theatre) before they got into movies. But today, stage actors do not want to come into the movies. One primary reason is that they do not feel the movies can act as the connector between them and the people. Razzak feels that the entry of stage personalities into movies would significantly improve performance.

"Since I was in Calcutta, I had the opportunity to work in theatre groups. I worked with *Ranga Shabha* and *Bahurupi*. I learnt a lot from there. That was way back in 1964, just before I came to Dhaka. Years later, people here don't get even that much," he lamented.

On the other hand, he feels that the people have a role to play in quality control. He divides the people into two groups: the regular movie-goers, namely the rickshaw pullers, truck drivers etc. and the 'so called elite' who managed to create a 'drawing room culture'. He feels that the 'elite' group goes crazy watching performances of Indian and English film stars but do not care two pence about Bengali movies. They have tagged Bengali movies as bad and they are

adamant in their belief.

"Not all Bengali films are bad. I would say my films like *Baba keno Chakor*, *Shantanu Chakor*, *Shantanu Chakor* have powerful messages to convey. And they did well. Yet, the 'elite' do not know about this. *Shantanu Chakor* is much better than *Hathat Brishti*, yet we hear of *Hathat Brishti* from critics all around because it was televised. I could've done that too, but why would I? People here feel elated to see foreign names. If someone does a PhD from here, people would say he cheated. If someone from abroad did it, they would say he really worked hard. This is something like that. There was the name Basu Bhattacharya in *Hathat Brishti*. Since it was Abdur Razzak here, no one cared. They look at the name, not the quality."

He points out the charity cricket where film stars from

Bombay participated. There was hardly any audience there. Why, he questions. Because to our people, the Bombay film stars mean nothing. To them Razzak, Bobita, Kobori, Champa means a lot. And those who can relate to Shahrukh Khan and the rest, they would rather watch the game on television.

"The people who practice such culture would never come out of their homes. They would say mighty things comfortably seated in their living rooms. If they are our target market our films wouldn't do well, because they won't be coming anyway," he said sardonically.

Other than shortage of artists, he feels that the present status quo of the country is responsible for the decline in quality of films. Today, people are restless. Crime and violence has gone beyond bounds.

There is no security, of property or life. Children disrespect their parents. Social and political unrest is the order of the day. The film industry is not beyond society. These things get reflected in films.

"Where a society is as turbulent as ours, how can a film industry be healthy?" he questions.

He still insists that some movies are well made with a good story line. He cites the example of *Poka-makorer Ghor Basati* as one of the good movies of this time that was also commercially successful.

Razzak is worried about the shift in cultural bondage.

"How many people listen to Bangla music? How many watch Bangla movies? Perhaps, the elderly do, but mostly, people are inclined towards foreign production. The other day, my grandson was telling me about a Shahrukh Khan starrer that would be shown on TV. 'They'll show *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*,' he told me excitedly. When I queried about one of my movies that would be shown, he simply replied, 'I'll see yours if I get the time!' This is the trend today. We are going crazy about band music. Yet, we hardly go to listen to Rabindra Sangeet or Nazrul Geeti performances. The same goes for our movies."

He is disheartened by the disrespect that he finds visible in the people of today towards Bangla language. Language was a major part why 1971 took place.

"Our language is our base. This is what binds us together as a nation. When we disrespect this language, we disrespect ourselves. When we disrespect this language, we move away from ourselves. Bangla is our strength, our energy,



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our force. If we lose that, we have nothing."

Razzak has his own production unit called *Rajlakshmi Productions*, which has quite a number of films to its credit. Razzak opened this production house with the hope of producing pure Bangla movies for clean entertainment, which also conveys social messages to the masses. So far, he has been very successful. He

makes movies that can entertain the whole family. He presents his messages in such a way that it works indirectly on the people, thus making them more acceptable to the people.

"People don't like to be imposed upon. They like to think on their own. I think my movies can make people think, even if for a little while."

He feels that it is his duty to make some good films for

the industry. It is his duty to try his best in upgrading the present depraved status of the film industry. With *Rajlakshmi Productions*, he aims to do just that. "The industry has given me a lot. It is now time for some return. The least I can do is contribute in making a healthy, social, entertaining movie. I can never repay what the industry gave me, but I'll give it my best shot," he said.

When I was a Teenager

IN CONVERSATION WITH ATAUR RAHMAN



ATAUR Rahman, Dhaka's prominent theatre director, actor and founder of *Nagorik Natya Shampradaya*, learnt to rejoice "life" and "living" in his adolescent years. The person "who" he is today had the groundwork prepared on the stretch he fielded, as part of his maturing up. Having a humble family background, growing up in Noakhali and Chittagong, and pampered by an executive father, Rahman remembers his parents had all the elements of getting him started in life.

"My father loved *yatra*, football and theatre; it is possible that I inherited the love of life from him; but it was my *nana* (grandfather) who influenced me most. With his enthusiastic support, I started honouring things that are significant to go on; he had an agreeable way of instruction," told Ataur Rahman to *The Daily Star* at his office in Motijheel.

Indeed, his *nana* wrote him letters, while Rahman was studying in Chittagong Collegiate School, in *weird* English so that the little one could weed out the mistakes, so that *nana* could be sure that his *nati* (grandson) understands the language properly. "He was a social rebel in many ways; he did not follow rules that other did and even defied certain norms. For example, he was a very religious man, but in his own way, giving importance to his human principles. He did not fast or pray all day all, but he was a believer," Rahman says.

Little Rahman's interest in Tagore emanated from his

family's cultural wealth and productiveness. This was when Rahman, a school-beginner in Class Three, was exposed to novels, drama etc. On one occasion, he remembers, the entire family performed in Tagore's *Notir Puja* at their house. Likewise, music and dance were also their favourite family feasts. With all this, Rahman learnt how to live life to the fullest with a broad mind.

But since his childhood days, he was never comfortable with classroom education, and disappearing from the classrooms always appealed to him. "But I loved Literature and History

conflict in him; on one hand he hated attending classes, on the other he was always eager to learn something new.

"We always sat at the back, and during certain periods, we used to vanish. I remember, one day, I escaped but my friend Rono got caught and he was about to be expelled from the university. I felt the need to stand by him and consequently went to the teacher concerned and said, 'if you have to expel Rono, then you will also have to expel me because I was with him.' Then our teacher smiled, and asked us not to repeat this. We were

Time, *Newsweek* etc., were financially burdensome, they used to buy these magazines by creating a common fund. And this way of learning made their world more meaningful; there was friendship; there was unity.

"And we read these gazettes in to-to, especially the *National Geographic*. We all wanted to prove ourselves as to who knew more about Tagore, who knew more about Vietnam War; and this way of acquiring information made us quite knowledgeable about the world. More so, because that was also when Dhaka University campus was almost sensitised with

From his teen days, Rahman was a rebel. His understanding differed from others most of the time, even from his family members. There has been times when he walked out on his family at the dinner table. Then there came a time when he felt his parents were a bit scared of him; rather, scared to talk to him, fearing an argument! He soon became a non-believer in religion. He argued about religion, about erratic social norms.

"I was agnostic, not a believer, nor an atheist, but I never imposed my beliefs on others."

He feels that such a perception was a reaction to being forced to read the *Quran*; to practice religion.

"I hated waking up in winter mornings for *oju* and prayers. But it was a must."

Rahman believes that whatever happens, happens for those who are living.

Today he finds a lot of opportunities in the young ones of today. Internet and television does have an influence on them, but that is not the end.

"The youngsters of today are progressive and vibrant. Apart from watching television, they are up to date with Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie. They keep in touch with the literary world, the science world and everything else. Of course there will be changes. Globalisation will not be unfelt in this part of the world. But that does not mean that this is degrading. It is good that our children are being able to keep up with the world."

By Ekram Kabir

classes, and I did my best not to miss those; I admired my teachers everywhere - at the school, at the college and at the university. These people were amazing; they were simply magnetic! Mr. Sadar Ahmed, who house-tutored me in 1956-57, taught me using his vast aptitude; he taught me everything - Sharat Chandra, Rabinranath Tagore, Shakespeare etc., and I still remember his lecture on Thomas Gray's *An Elegy Written at a Country Churchyard* when I was going to appear for my matriculation exams. What surprised me most was his ease with which he taught every subject," says Rahman.

The fun of bunking classes saw more of it at the university. That was when life became more flexible; more open; more merry; and also more inclined towards knowledge. There was a

forgiven."

Talking more about his university days, Rahman says: "As far as education is concerned, I was never a good boy, but I definitely was an intelligent boy. Maybe, we spent a lot of time in *adda* at *Madhu's* Restaurant nearby, playing cards etc., getting the best from our time, but our endeavour to learn was far from being neglected. Now, if you live all your life studying, then you do not have the time to look around and see many other sides of life! If I evaluate myself, I would conclude that even being a mediocre student, I could do a lot. But there was a friend of ours who was so studious that he did not even know where the *Shaheed Minar* was!"

Rahman is right; they chased knowledge. Although it was a television-less world, and magazines like

the hype of Expressionism, Post-modernism, works of Sartre and Samuel Becket - and we had to prove that we that we understood everything, although there were times when we did not!" says Ataur Rahman in his flashback.

Interpersonal relationship was wonderful; it was considerably romantic with women. He saw no harm in getting romantically involved with girls. He also held them in high regard. He felt that they were instead of being inferior, they were often superior to men.

"Except women are biologically different, they are no different from men; they can do everything we men can - they are even better than men due to their perseverance. They are more strong, and that is why they are the ones who carry children in their wombs," says Rahman.