

People

Face to face

Shimul Yusuf: An actress par excellence

SHIMUL Yusuf was born on March 21, 1957 to Mehter Billaha and Amina Billaha. An infant prodigy, Shimul sang for the erstwhile Radio Pakistan when she was only five. Seven years later, she performed on television in 1964, the year television was introduced in this part of the world.

Shimul did a diploma in classical music and in Nazrul Geeti in 1978 at Altaf Mahmood Sangeet Bhidya Niketan and her masters in sociology at Dhaka University in 1983. She has had the privilege of being under the tutelage of such great names in musical firmament as Ustad Helal Uddin, Pundit P C Gomez, Ustad Imam Uddin, Ustad Phool Mohammad, Altaf Mahmood, Sheikh Lutfar Rahman, Sudhin Das and Abdul Latif.

A veritable genius, Shimul is also an actress of great depth and sensibility. She first performed on the stage in 1972 in *Ujanpaban*. Some of her memorable performances include *Shakuntala* (1978), *Phanimanasa* (1980), *Kittankhola* (1981), *Keramat Mangal* (1985), *Haat Hadai* (1989), *Chaka* (1991), *Ekattur Pala* (1994), *Jaibati Kanyar Mon* (1994) and *Banapangshul* (1998).

She has won a number of prestigious awards for acting, *Lokanaty Padak* (1993), *Nurun Nahar Samad Padak* (1998) and *Mohammad Zakaria Padak* (1999) to name a few.

In an interview with The Daily Star recently, Shimul Yusuf talked at length about how she perceives, personalises and finally portrays a character on stage.

The Daily Star (DS): To what extent does appreciation of a performance in a role influence the style or mannerism of a new role?

Shimul Yusuf (SY): Well, if the two roles I played were fundamentally different from one another, then the role played earlier hardly casts a shadow over the latter.

DS: While portraying a particular character you, as an actor, do develop a certain kind of mannerism. Has it ever occurred to you that a mannerism may be recurring in your acting, especially after you receive glowing appreciation for a certain performance?

SY: In my case, self-criticism does a sort of policing on my being trapped into a certain mannerism. I always consciously try not to slip into a typical mannerism. I don't know how successful I am in struggling it off.

DS: Can we then say, that no matter how well received your performance is, it makes little or no impact on a fresh character conceived and portrayed by you?

SY: Let me tell you what happens when I think of a new character. I really live at the lowest ebb of my spirit when I approach a new character and am very nervous about whether I would be able to give proper expression to the role.

DS: Are you saying that you don't have a style or, at least, you are not conscious of one?

SY: No I didn't mean to give that impression of myself.

DS: Then you have your own idiom of expression?

SY: Of course, I do.

DS: And what is that?

SY: Since I do the music of the plays in which I perform and since I am a singer, my acting is heavily influenced by music. The way I deliver a dialogue or modulate my voice follow a rhythmical pattern, which I reckon, is because of my training as a singer.

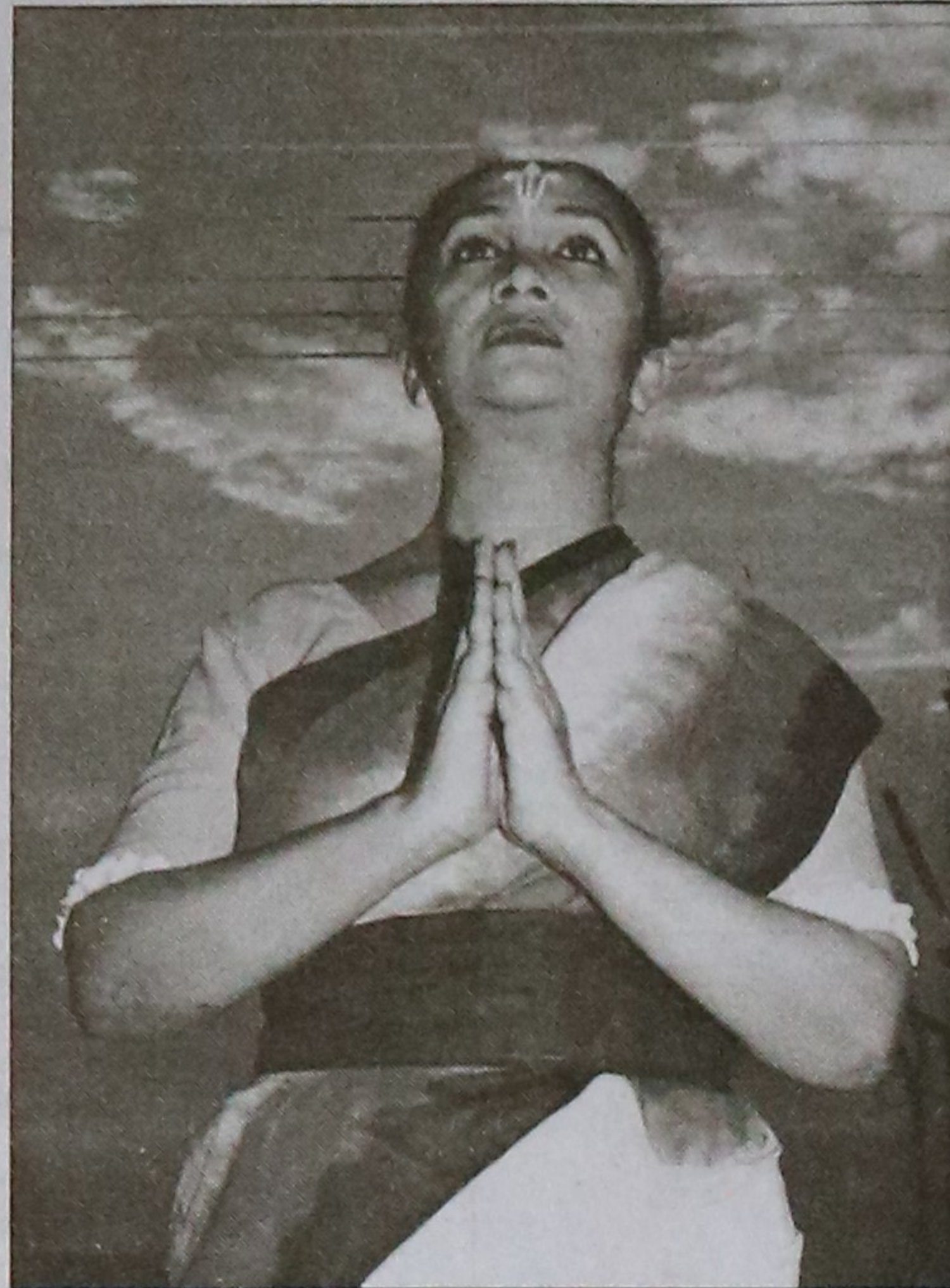
DS: You have had academic training as an artist. You are an accomplished dancer and an acclaimed singer on top of it. Your multi-disciplinary interest is obviously of immense benefit in visualisation of a character?

SY: Yes, indeed. When we, the members of the Dhaka Theatre, work with a play at the script level, we basically read it as fiction. By and large the duration of such a reading session or the preparatory work for a play lasts for a month or so. Then, the senior members of the group sit with the director to share their ideas about our dialogues and the colour of the characters. We engage ourselves in cross-checking our perceptions with the director. This is one example of how painting can actually enlighten us in exploring the shades of a character.

DS: How do you actually interact with the director as an actor, particularly when the director of your group is your husband who happens to be a critically acclaimed theatre director?

SY: I would say we have, over the years, developed quite an interesting team spirit to share and enjoy. Since I do the music for the plays the group stages, my husband and I,

have to work closely to translate a given script into action. When we work with a script, especially the ones by Selim Al Deen which invariably would be not less than a five-hour play, what we do, as a music composer and a



Star photo: Zahedul Khan

By Ziaul Karim

“The story of the play (*Sutradhar*) revolves around an unclaimed corpse that is to be returned to its relatives and buried properly. I found a reflection of my life in that setting: My guru and brother-in-law Altaf Mahmud was picked up by the Pakistani armed forces during our struggle for freedom in 1971 and was killed. His body was never found.”

director, is bring it down to a three-hour play. In order to do this creative surgery, we begin to work as a team even before the play goes into the rehearsal stage. What I mean to say is that I interact with Bachchu (Nasiruddin Yusuf) well before assuming the role of an actor which I think helps me immensely in reading the mind of the director and deliver accordingly.

DS: Recent plays of your group such as *Haat Hadai*, *Chaka*, and *Jaibati Kanyar Mon* are written in the traditional folk pattern of panchali. Since this particular traditional form of theatre is highly musical, does that mean that your role as a composer is more important than that of the director?

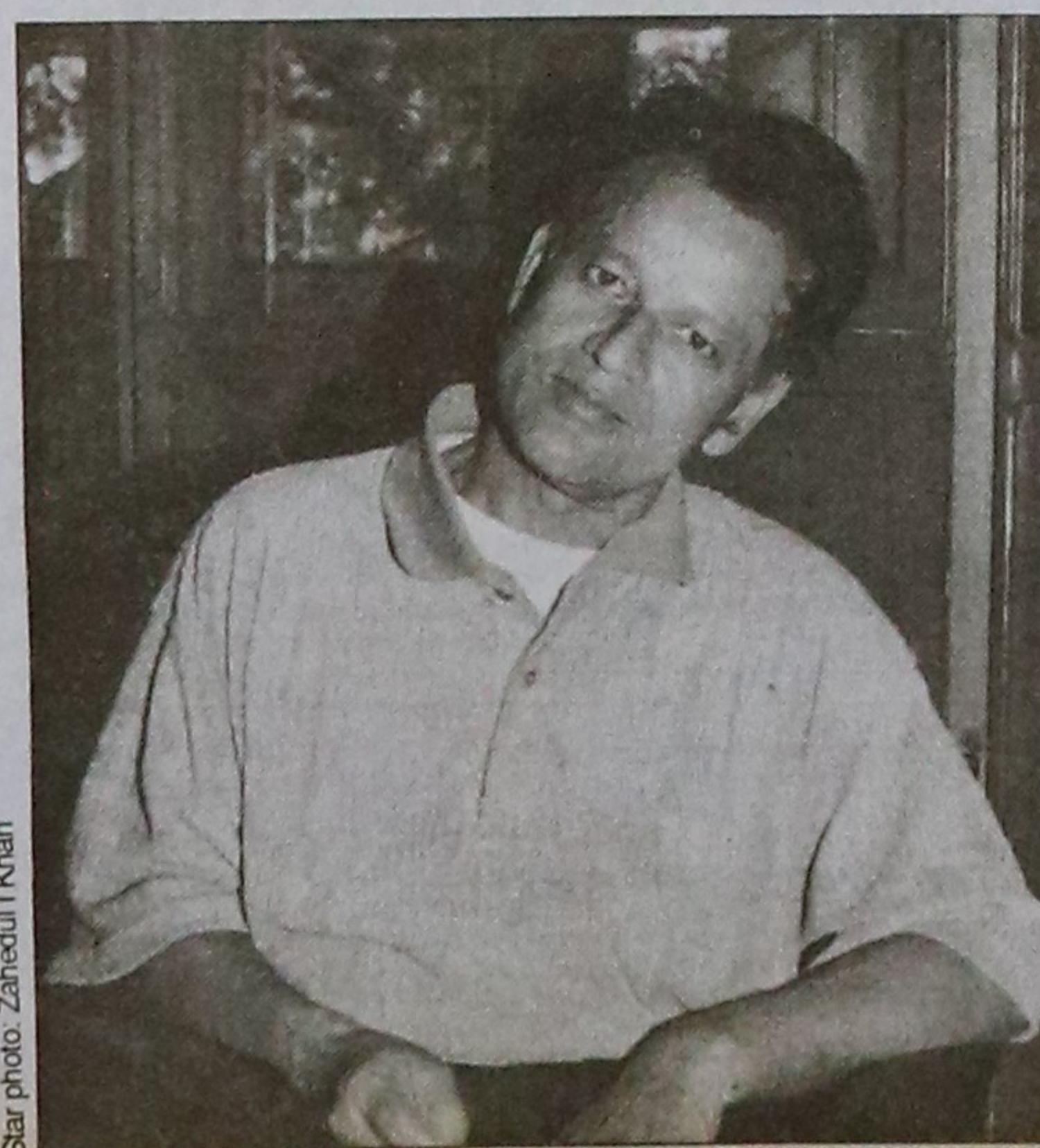
SY: Well, in case of the plays you have just mentioned, I composed the theme music before Bachchu actually started off. So, fundamentally the interaction that we have between us is that of an intellectual and emotional partnership.

spent hours studying the way he painted; the way he used colour.”

At school, most of the students were Hindus. But he never felt that they wanted to intimidate him or any of the Muslim students.

“The time when I was a teenager, that is the mid-1950s, were turbulent times, but there was a unity among students at schools. Students were held in high regard.”

Although his family members never opposed to his artistic inclinations, young Hamid did not have the courage to tell his parents he wanted to continue with it. A friend of his father's did the needful.



Star photo: Zahedul Khan

When I was a Teenager...

In conversation with Hamiduzzaman Khan

WHEN a good student like him decided to get admitted to the Institute of Fine Arts, his father was rather disappointed. Little did he know that, Hamiduzzaman Khan, one of the senior painters of today and head of the Arts and Crafts department at the Institute of Fine Arts, would grow up to be the man he is today.

Hamiduzzaman Khan remembers the times he spent at his village in Kishoreganj as a youngster. The railway that ran along his village always attracted him. As a child, he would spend hours after hours looking at the greenery around him, the railways.

“Everywhere I looked, there was green. As a child, I was mesmerised by different shades of green. That was truly a gift of nature,” he said while talking to The Daily Star.

Youngest among the three brothers, he was a pampered child. He remembers being engulfed by the love and affection of his family. It's not that he never fought with his elder *bhaiyas*, but he was what can be called a 'very

By Navine Murshid

good boy'. He being a good student only added to his parents' pride.

“Since my father was a homeopath, he perhaps had dreams of me becoming a doctor as well. Although I liked to study, my interest in painting overpowered everything else.”

He has been drawing and sketching for as long as he can remember. He wasn't very conscious of his attraction, but those around him felt this attraction grow by the day. The remarkable aspect was that his studies were never hampered.

“I realised that I loved to paint when I found myself asking for colour pencils and water colours when my father went to town. Later, I did not have to ask for them anymore. He brought me paint whenever he went to town.”

What enhanced his artistic sense was exposure to Hamendra Majumdar's (a well-known painter of that time) works. Even before he was born, the artist had passed away. But the artist's home was next to Hamiduzzaman Khan's village home and therefore, he had the opportunity to see his works.

“The art pieces, mostly water colours, intrigued me. I

DS: When you continue to play a particular role for quite some time did you ever feel that you started to live in that character or were being haunted by it?

SY: Yes, it did happen when I was playing the role of *Sutradhar* in *Chaka*. The story of the play revolves around an unclaimed corpse that is to be returned to its relatives and buried properly. I found a reflection of my life in that setting: My guru and brother-in-law Altaf Mahmud was picked up by the Pakistani armed forces during our struggle for freedom in 1971 and was killed. His body was never found. That unclaimed body in *Chaka* reminded me of Altaf bhai and I got intensely involved with the play. I used to have nightmares then and a feeling of uneasy fatigue descended on me after the performance.

What happens now is that, at least two days before the performance I try to concentrate on the character I have to portray and when the play being staged I try to be on stage all the time and have an undivided and uninterrupted concentration. I personally feel that when one is passionately involved with a character, possibilities to develop the character get lost. A character should be thought of as a character and nothing else. While I, Shimul Yusuf, am playing as *Suki* in *Banapangshul* I must not forget that the character is a creation of the playwright. I may not have seen such a character in my life and may not have lived the life she lived, but as an actor I should be conscious of whether the portrayal is faithful or not.

DS: Are you not being contradictory here?

Theoretically you agree that emotional involvement with a character hampers the quality of performance but in reality you get passionately involved with the character. *Sutradhar* in *Chaka* is a good example of the contradiction in you.

SY: It is true that while I did *Chaka* back in 1991 I got deeply involved. But I feel over the years I have matured as an actor to handle my emotions better than the way I did in the early 1990s. Plus, I think now I can distance myself from the characters that I portray. But there should not be



Star photo: Zahedul Khan

“Since I do the music of the plays in which I perform and since I am a singer, my acting is heavily influenced by music. The way I deliver a dialogue or modulate my voice follow a rhythmical pattern, which I reckon, is because of my training as a singer.”

“My father's friend worked at the Post Office. He kept a good account of what happened around the country. He informed me of the Institute of Fine Arts. He had noticed my interest in painting for a long time and so felt I would do well in this field. He told my father, who, after a little persuasion agreed to let me join the Institute. I learnt later that he had always wanted me to become a doctor. But, by that time, it was too late.”

There was criticism from relatives as well. They felt that only bad students got into fine arts. However, young Hamid got the support of his parents and hence went off to start a new life.

The Institute of Fine Arts was all he had hoped for. He recalls a time when he was a second year student, when Zainul Abedin, the then head of the Institute, called him at his office.

“He never sat on his official seat, but on a sofa nearby. Apprehensive about what is to come, I went in. I could not believe my ears when he said, ‘You are doing a good job. I like your water colours and so I bought some of your works for a foreign delegation.’ I was on top of the world that day. That day gave me the inspiration to move ahead. That day is memorable to me.”

A road accident after he had completed his BFA in paintings changed his way of thinking. He was in a critical condition. He had to go to England for operation and plastic surgery. Although he was in a critical condition, he enjoyed the journey by ship to England.

After operation, the slow recovery gave him a lot of time to move around. He took this opportunity to visit art galleries, museums, historic places and so on. He developed a liking for sculptures.

“I began to fall in love with the notion of creating sculptures myself,” he said.

With the aim to master his inborn skills, Hamiduzzaman Khan went off to Baroda, India to do his masters in sculpture.

From the present day teenagers who are into painting, he expects a lot.

“I believe the present generation artists will maintain the international standards that the masters have attained.”

any ambiguity about the need for involvement with a character. The question is up to what level. Without emotion a character would appear lifeless. A good actor knows how to apply his/her emotions intelligently.

DS: A very basic question now. How do you conceive a character? Or, put in another way, how do you visualise a character? Do you tune in to your memory to check out with a parallel experience in your life?

SY: First of all, I do not approach a character with a preconceived notion. In fact, that is the method the group has been trying to follow. Initially, we sit together with the script and just read out to each other and then do the rehearsal for months together. By then the play is normally memorised by the group members. The final production is the result of a lively interaction between the members. Nothing is being forced or fed by the director. We do it collectively. Interestingly, at the reading level we do not know who would be doing what. The director decides that. Meanwhile, we have a close reading of the text of the play and mentally interact with the characters. For some time we keep guessing about what our roles would be. In the process we get to know all the characters intimately. I only begin to think about the character I play at mature stages of the rehearsals. So, it is basically when the character has taken a concrete shape I put in my personal input into it – not at an embryonic stage. Since we, my husband and I, have been working together for a long time, I don't have to tell him about an improvisation that I feel required. It just clicks. You cannot explain it all the time.

To your query whether I dig into my memory to find out a parallel experience in my own life, my answer is no. There are characters like the *Suki* of the Mandai tribe in the play *Banapangshul* about whom I know next to nothing.

DS: But *Suki* is one of your most acclaimed performances. When you know nothing about the cultural nuances that is associated with a character, then how do you negotiate with the character?

SY: As a serious reader of poetry and student of music, I try to visualise a character riding on my imagination. Poetry helps me to visualise an image and music helps me to understand the mood or sentiment breathed into the character by the playwright.

DS: But when you do that without knowing the anthropological and social aspects of a tribal character you are interpreting the character into your own terms rather than looking at the character from their perspective.

SY: Yes, of course, I will never be able to feel their life from their point of view. And even if I try to do that, that will be nothing but a caricature. I can only feel a character the way I understand it. The type of plays we have been doing are basically modelled after the traditional *panchali* format which tells of life in eighteen or nineteen century Bengal. So, what we brought on stage is not a traditional realistic drama.

DS: Then what are they? Even if you try to bring on stage moments from your lived reality that would be a theatrical reality, an abstraction from your life. So how do you explain reality?

SY: I don't know. I have never thought that I have portrayed a character. I felt it and interacted with it as an actor.

DS: Can we conclude from what you have just said that you basically act from your impulse?

SY: Maybe, I don't know. I wanted to develop a style using my knowledge of music, dance and training as an artist. Moreover, in my acting career I have never tried to follow any established acting method.

DS: You have been talking about your group and the way you conceive a script and give shape to a play collectively. Now, let us talk about you. How much does the quality of your performance rely on the performance of your co-actors?

SY: It did matter in the earlier stage of my acting career. But now as I'm growing old – I can be very flexible and can perform with even a rookie without much difficulty. I agree had they been excellent performers my performance would have been even better. The way I look at it now is, however they perform I try to stick to my level. I must agree when I find co-artists like (Raisul Islam) Asad, Pjush (Bandapadhyay) or Subarna (Mustafa) I feel I'm a better actor than what I usually am. The problem with the newcomers is that they are shaky and always conscious about working with a senior actor. Now, at this point of my career, I'm least bothered about my co-artists' performance. I try to be very focused about the role I play and nothing else.

DS: Say, for example, you have been performing with some co-actors and have struck a synergy of sort, but all of a sudden they are being replaced by a fresh set of actors. Will that hamper your acting?

SY: Yes, definitely. A fresh synchronisation takes a few weeks to grow.

DS: In retrospect, do you feel that the way some of the characters you have portrayed would assume different contour if you play them now?

SY: Oh yes. I can readily remember one character *Gautami* in *Shakuntala*. When I played the role I was only 18-year-old. I did not understand the pain and the suffering of a mother. Now that I am a mother, I know what exactly it is like, if I played the role now it would be different.

DS: Stage acting is live performance. Unlike television and cinema, it gives you the advantage of getting the audience's instant reaction, doesn't it?

SY: While performing I remain engrossed in the given space where I have to move as an actor and beyond that nothing exists. In other words, the audience does not exist for me when I perform. I find it quite amusing when my co-actors say they have seen such and such person among the audience.

DS: When the theatre is said to create the scope of an animated interaction between the audience and the performers, you prefer to be blind to the fact and do not want to celebrate it. Why?

SY: It may sound as if I'm being prejudiced, but I can't help it. Once I'm conscious of the presence in the audience, I feel I might lose my concentration or may feel overconfident. I'm haunted by it and psychologically erase the audience from my consciousness.

DS: Why haven't you taken TV or film acting seriously? TV and cinema provide one the kind of blind acting that you are talking about.

SY: Interesting. Well, you see I blind myself only after being conscious of the presence of an audience. They are in my sub-conscious. If I blind myself, then I do it as a way of my interaction with the audience. I enjoy their response when the play concludes, when they appreciate my performance with great applause.

DS: Thank you very much for your time.