

## INTERVIEW

## A festival of poetry for the world

Ziaul Karim interviews **Fernando Rendon**, the director of one of the most prestigious poetry festivals on earth, the International Poetry Festival in Medellin, Colombia. This year the festival will be held in June and will host, among others, the Bangladeshi poets Fazal Shahabuddin and Hayat Saif.

*International Poetry Festival in Medellin is considered as one of the greatest festivals of world poetry. It attracts poets from around the world to congregate and engage in creative interaction. Would you please tell us about the idea behind the spirit of the festival?*

The International Poetry Festival of Medellin came into being in 1991, 10 years after the Magazine *Prometeo* appeared in the social and cultural landscape of the country. It seems a difficult task to find flourishing and tranquil decades in our country in the last 150 years, but the decade of the nineties was particularly somber and mournful. We are still in it in some way. The festival arose from a proposal to overthrow the wall of terror and fear imposed by the internal feuds of our country. Not for stopping them of course, which exceeds both our capabilities as poets and of thinking ourselves from a perspective different from that of pragmatism to try to create through poetry, an atmosphere that without ignoring the spiral of death and the inertial strength of hate could put a

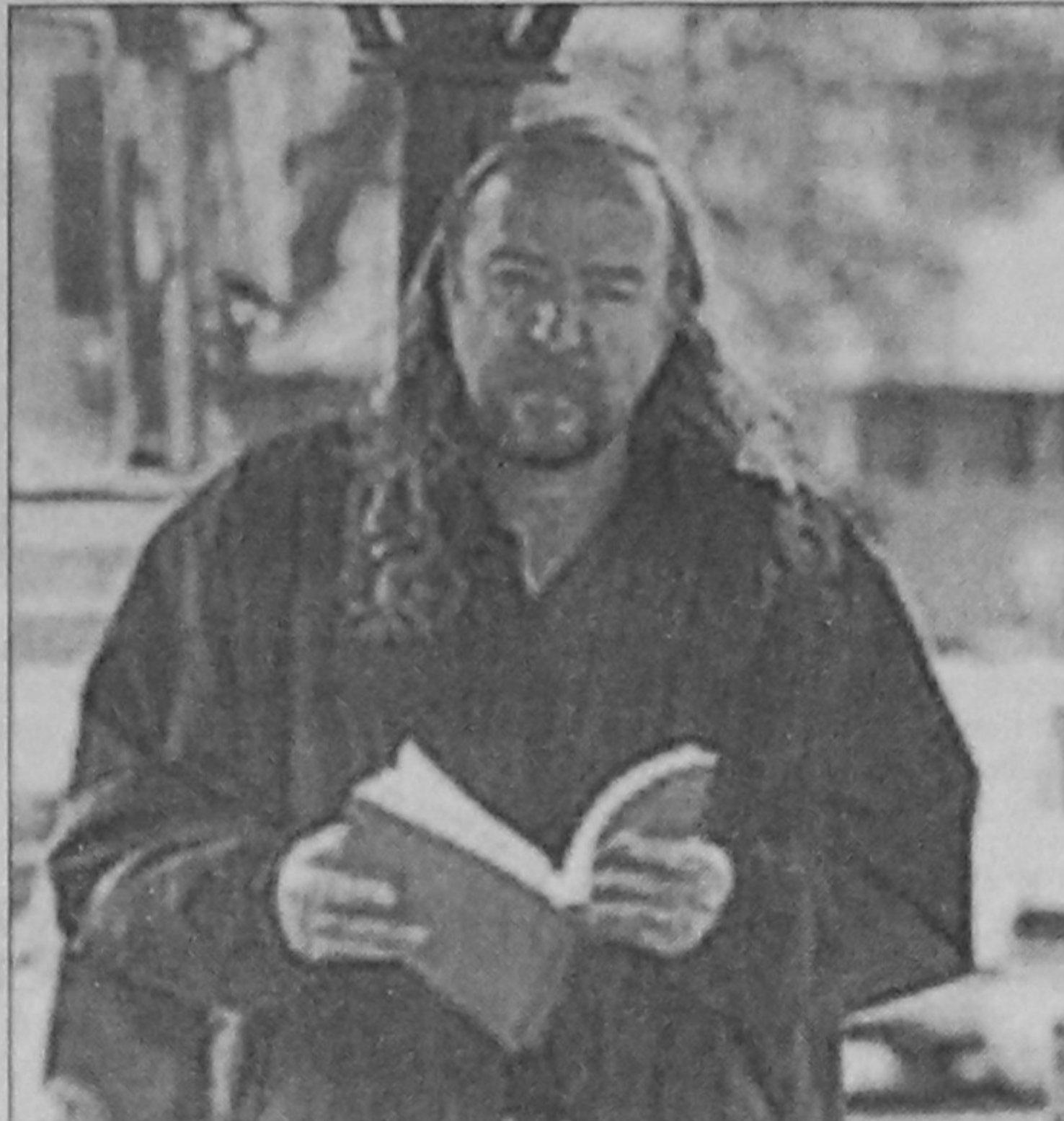
back poetry its lost glory?

In first place, it must be stated that poetry hasn't lost its glory. Poetry, of course, doesn't move within the glorified spaces in which the media usually moves; this doesn't mean that poetry has been silenced or that it has retreated. On the contrary; each day it is evident that the new generations are fascinated by poetry, the traditional speeches of public figures seem not to satisfy their spiritual thirst. And these public figures seem to suffer from exhaustion. Poetry, without yielding its traditions either to the actual media of technology, works over the same material in which it has worked in the last 30 centuries: the essence of the human spirit. That essence is there and it can't be erased or ignored by the pyrotechnics of the media, which moves in what is immediate and glamorous. We also don't think that in the age of satellite television and of the prodigious advance of the technologies of communication the visual media are the truthful representatives of artistic expression. The activities of

suffering from a terminal illness. Moreover it is really probable that the state of isolation to which we are subjugated by the proliferation of media and instant information, pushes us more and more into the search of spaces so that the relation between the poet and reader is produced in a much more intense manner. In the festival we are always surprised positively by the fact of having six or seven thousand people listening in complete silence and absorbing the work of the poets read in their own voice. This is a great experience.

*With the pronouncement of the name Colombia Garcia Marquez's hypnotic history of the Buendias family comes to our mind. Colombian literature for us is synonymous with Marquez. However, we are very much interested now to know about the contemporary trends in Colombian poetry?*

These tendencies aren't so visible, and in any case none of them constitute a coherent organic movement or display a spirit of rebellion or new



Director of the festival: Fernando Rendon

*In this age of Internet and faster and smoother travels between nations and diasporas societies have become multicultural and multiracial. Do you think that twenty years from now there will be nothing that can be termed as national culture?*

Globalization is much more a publicized phenomenon than a reality, and in any case the only thing that has globalized is poverty and cultural penetration; against both of these conditions the struggles of the people are each day getting stronger and more radical. The migrants themselves are in their majority and escaping from poverty and searching for happiness which obviously has had a cultural impact, but this impact is not of such proportions as to endanger the living aspects of the people's culture. In fact, it seems that the cultures defend themselves in more radical ways more and more each time. Besides economic or geopolitical considerations, think about the cultural and religious

components of a good part of the actual conflicts of the world, from the Middle East to the one in the Balkans, or in the dangerous strength that fundamentalisms of any type have acquired, or in the African conflicts. The Arabs lived in Spain for more than 800 years and their cultural impact was very strong although this impact in no way resulted in the disappearance of the national Spanish identity. On the contrary, it leads to an incorporation of new elements to that identity. However, not all the aboriginal cultures of America could survive Spanish conquest, because they fought in terrible conditions of inequality, but still today a strong struggle for the survival of their cultural and religious traditions takes place.

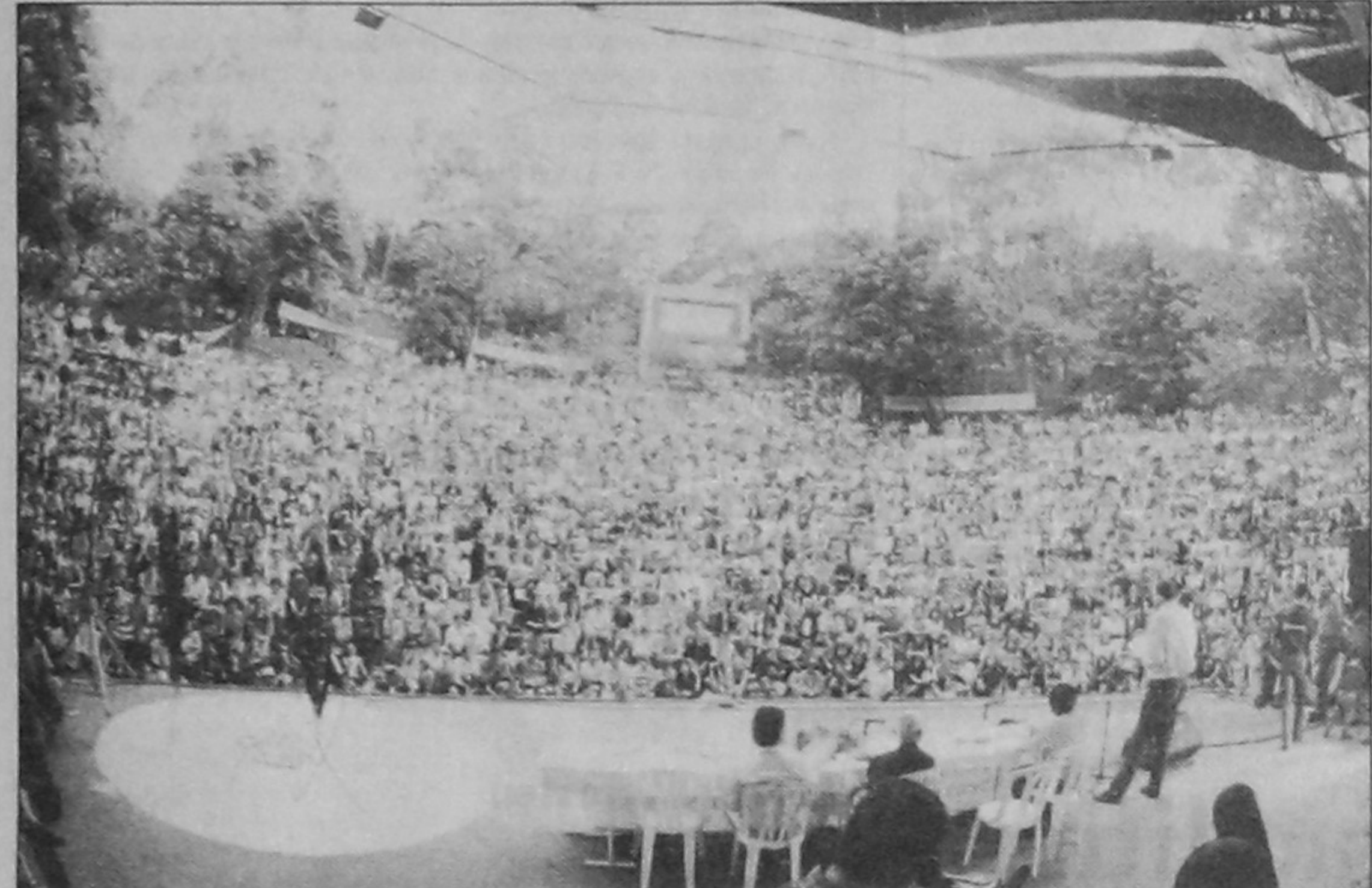
*Is poetry popular among the Colombian people?*

In certain way, more than what is desirable. They still misunderstand the spirit of poetry due in great part to a precarious educational system, with teachers dramatically unprepared to teach poetry and to acquaint them with the Spanish heritage in the education of the emotions. It won't be easy to fight against the deep-rooted tendency that poetry is just feelings and emotion as well as the conviction that "we are all poets", which has allowed the publishing of almost primitive poetry with its roots merely in emotions, poetry without a true commitment either to language or to creation. In any case, we have an important tradition of poetry, and without false modesty we can say that the Festival has contributed to a great extent to the education poetry lovers and in contributing to the exigencies and artistic rigor that the new generation of poets actually has.

*Do you have plans to expand this festival to accommodate other forms of creative arts?*

We have always believed that the measure of all artistic creation is given by the intensity of the poetic experience that precedes it and by the capacity of communicating that experience. Expressed in a better way: All true art is poetic. Unfortunately poetry has been seen as just a verbal expression to the point of being catalogued as only a literary genre. In our opinion, this is a mistake that came from the mania for classification. Poetry isn't just a genre: It's the Genre. This year we will incorporate some activities to complement poetic ones; from one side and within the genre, an exhibition of experimental poetry will take place as well as an exhibition of films that we could call poetic due to their lyrical qualities (The themes of these films relate to poetry in some ways). Also, we will screen an exhibition of

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Poetry is an act of profound communication is the idea behind the spirit of the International Poetry Festival in Medellin

little light in this somber scene. The fact that thousands and thousands of people attend the event, most of them are youngsters, shows us that the mission was not only possible but also necessary. Moreover poetry possesses a secret strength in that it gives us hope for a dignified future. Among other things, poetry is an act of profound communication. When this communication occurs in a community, very strong connections are possible: it's a ritual in which people's dreams and hopes are shared as well as their deepest and most pressing needs.

*Tell us in detail about the format of the Festival.*

The XI International Poetry Festival of Medellin will be held from June 1 to June 10, 2001, with the active participation of 80 poets, coming from 55 countries. The inauguration will take place in the open-air theater of the Cerro Nutibara of Medellin, which has a capacity to hold 8,000 people. Simultaneously, at 6:30 in the evening, simultaneously in the same day, poetry readings in 15 Colombian cities will be arranged in the context of the struggle for the strengthening of the process of dialogues towards achieving peace in Colombia.

A total of 145 poetry readings will take place, of which 100 will take place in Medellin and 25 in 22 cities of Colombia and 11 municipalities of Antioquia. The experience of the festival has proven that although the hours of the acts coincide, all readings will be done in public places. Each poetry reading in the city of Medellin will feature at least three foreign poets and one Colombian poet. In the readings that will take place in other cities there will be at least two foreign and two Colombian poets.

Each poet will not give less than four readings, of thirty minutes each. This thirty-minute will include the version in Spanish, in the case of poets who will be reading their poems in other languages. If their reading is in Spanish, they will be allocated 20 minutes in each act. Each reading will consist of the presence of a presenter, two or three people that will read in Spanish poems written in other languages, and one or two interpreters, according to the necessities of each act. This is actually one of the innovative proposals for the XI version of the festival this year.

*Poetry is one of the oldest form of arts man has chosen to express himself, but in the age of satellite television it has lost the old intimate bond with its reader. Indeed visual media has become the art form of the contemporary world. Do you think that poetry has become elitist and unpopular and there should be more poetry festivals around the world to give*

the media has isolated us more and in that sense, the consequence of that isolation can only result in a strengthening of the poetic needs of man, which are at the same time profoundly interlaced with his need for myths and for what is sacred. On the other hand, too often poetry has been accused of being elitist and unpopular. The problem is not of poetry. To begin with, poetry by definition can't be elitist because poetry talks from the heart and to the heart of man. It's a cultural and political problem. And it can't be simply said that it's unpopular. What is really unpopular is the fact that we have great number of illiterate men, women, children, hunger, etc. Poetry has been there all the time to remind us, among other things about this. In respect to the question about the poetry festival, of course there should be more festivals all over the world, but there should be awareness about the way in which they impact on us. For example, official initiatives are extremely dangerous, because they lose on occasions the spiritual character of poetry and transform themselves into a showcase for politics or a spectacle of public relations for the enjoyment of distinguished ladies.

*Contemporary poetry has witnessed a lot of experimentation. Visual poetry, performance poetry, video poetry are some of the newer forms of expression contributing to the expansion of the boundaries of poetry. But don't you feel that these are threats to the traditional intimate one-to-one relationship between the reader and the poet.*

The widening of the borders of poetry must always be welcomed. However there are some things to be clarified in this respect. The first one is the character of the widening of such borders: it is we think a matter of form. In all of this there can't be no dependence on the means that are used: performance, sound poetry, visual poetry, etc. These by the way aren't new forms in art. There is, of course, much of an aesthetic juggling with these forms. In any case, we aren't the ones to say if everything that's produced, as poetry will survive as true poetry. Particularly the XX century was very prolific in respect to poetry experimentation and both the American and European vanguards of poetry in the beginning of the century left unforgettable testimonies of beauty and spiritual richness, testimonies which still nourish us today. In respect to the traditional intimacy of the relation between the poet and his reader, we could say that it's not the only link that is threatened. Several death certificates have been issued to the Book, and yet it remains alive and without showing even signals of

postulates and aesthetic proposals. Colombia seems to be in this sense an arid country, which isn't bad by itself. With the exception of the *Nadaista* movement (poetic movement of the 60's), there hasn't been any other movement of significance. True, the *Nadaismo* didn't leave very important works neither, but the effects of its action were important and can't be undervalued. Before the *Nadaismo* and parallel to it grew the poets of the *Mito* generation (a movement gathered around a Poetry Magazine called *Mito*) headed by the great Colombian poet Jorge Gaitán Durán, a movement that was much more cultivated and aesthetically more important than the *Nadaistas*. This movement (The *Nadaismo*) has been useful as an important landmark for the critics and helped in their later classifications, although, as we stated before, the same critics were not able to locate many of this poets in a tendency or another. The landscape is however rich and diverse despite the traditional formal conservatism that generally has characterized Colombian poetry throughout its literary history. At the time when Latin America was a center for the vanguards of art and aesthetic and political controversies, Colombia is still confined to the last period of

*Is there a specific theme for this year's festival?*

No. The festival is too big in respect to the number of poets, countries, poetry readings and public to be limited to a specific theme. The thematic limitations can be functional and even necessary for other type of encounters, but in poetry this limitations are prejudicial because they imply omissions and exclusions in a space that is by definition limited.

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Poetry reading in progress

*Modernism (a poetical movement born in the XIX century). With only shy babbling in evidence to liberate us from its influence. Some few solitary voices stand out: Luis Vidales, León de Greiff, Porfirio Barba Jacob and a little later Aurelio Arturo, Jorge Gaitán Durán and Alvaro Mutis. Mutis, we must note, is considered by many as the most important living poet of Colombia.*

*ates featured in the earlier festivals? There were none even though some of them had been invited: Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, Wislawa Szymborska and Gabriel Garcia Márquez. The Nobel Prize; desired by so many writers has also a negative side, Nobel prize winners many times don't have enough time for themselves, they have to confront the disadvantages of fame and also*

videos related to poets. On the other hand, we will organize musical concerts, with the North American group Poetic Justice and with a group of musicians from The Orquesta Sinfónica de Antioquia who will perform their music using some poems from the Colombian poet León de Greiff.

All photos are by Luis Fernando Ospina

## BOOK REVIEW

## A million stories still to be told

And are all the stories of the birth of Bangladesh necessarily Bangladeshi ones? Professor Rahman's *My Story of 1971* indicates that there was an international dimension to the events of Bangladesh and that citizens of countries such as India, USA, and the United Kingdom who had become actively involved in our struggle for independence have their own stories to narrate about that year. Thus the Foreword to the book by the eminent Indian economist and politician, Dr. Ashok Mitra, and Chapter Four of *My Story of 1971*, titled "Robert Geise's File", a record of the letters that an American economist friend of Professor Rahman sent and received in his bid to mobilize international public opinion about the genocide going on in East Pakistan, and the testimony provided by Professor Rahman himself, demonstrate how citizens of other countries became involved in the birth of our nation because of friendship, love, and our common humanity.

FAKRUL ALAM

HOW many stories of 1971 are still to be told? Ever since Jahanara Imam published her unforgettable narrative of the eventful year that changed our lives forever, *Ektattor Dingulee* ("Memoirs of 1971"), all of us, surely, have come across countless stories of 1971. Not all of them are chronicles as well told as Mrs. Imam's poignant account of the year she and her family became inextricably involved in the birth of Bangladesh and in the excitement and pain of the nation's emergence. Not all of them impress us as stories of heroism and the indomitable spirit that led to independence as is her unadorned but gripping personal account of her family's predicament in that fateful year. Nevertheless, her example has inspired many others to relate their stories of the liberation war, stories of courage, defiance, and devotion, or of strain, loss, and survival.

How many stories of 1971 still remain to be told? Millions! Take Professor Muhammad Anisur Rahman's *My Story of 1971: Through the Holocaust that Created Bangladesh*, for instance. As the blurb of the book claims, this is very much the account of the life the author lived as an economist working for the Government of Pakistan in the 1960s, of his return to East Pakistan in 1970 to take up a teaching position at the University of Dhaka, and of the manner in which he escaped the wrath of the Pakistanis in 1971 when they savaged the university in March 1971. But *My Story of 1971* is also noteworthy because it includes at least four other personal accounts of 1971 in its annexes: brief first person accounts provided by the author's sisters, Mrs. Akhter Jahan and Husne Jahan Alam, his mother, Mrs. Anwara Begum, and his sister-in-law, Dr. Flora Majid. Concisely and simply told, they are proof that all of us have our own stories to relate about that traumatic year. They also demonstrate that even when one story overlaps with another for all of us intertwined lives they constitute distinct accounts and are thus worth narrating, if told sincerely. After all, millions of us had parts to play in the drama of 1971, no matter where we were or what we did or didn't do then.

And are all the stories of the birth of Bangladesh necessarily Bangladeshi ones? Professor Rahman's *My Story of 1971* indicates that there was an international dimension to the events of Bangladesh and that citizens of countries such as India, USA, and the United Kingdom who had become actively involved in our struggle for independence have their own stories to narrate about that year. Thus the Foreword to the book by the eminent Indian economist and politician, Dr. Ashok Mitra, and Chapter Four of *My Story of 1971*, titled "Robert Geise's File", a record of the letters that an American economist friend of Professor Rahman sent and received in his bid to mobilize international public opinion about the genocide going on in East Pakistan, and the testimony provided by Professor Rahman himself, demonstrate how citizens of other countries became involved in the birth of our nation because of friendship, love, and our common humanity. That Geise not only provided Professor Rahman with his file but also urged his Bangladeshi friend to write his story of 1971 testify to the value other people see in the personal histories of a people traumatized and stung into action that year.

But is *My Story of 1971* a typical tale of 1971? Professor Rahman readily acknowledges in his Preface that his story is "not a typical one" he came from too "privileged" a background to be representative of the ordinary Bangladeshi in 1971. A Harvard trained economist, he always had more options than most people caught up in what Professor Mitra describes in his Foreword as "a veritable cauldron of bestial torture". Also, Professor Rahman seemed to have been more perceptive than most East Pakistanis about the outcome of the crisis in Pakistani politics occasioned by the Awami League victory. That is why he was able to evade certain death when the Pakistani army systematically killed male academics living in Dhaka University's staff quarters on March 25, 1971. By the simple ruse of locking his exit doors from the outside, he was able to save himself by giving the impression to an outsider that he and his family were away that night. Moreover, Professor Rahman was able to make use of a network of family members and friends to cross the border and journey to the West. Escaping first to India and then to USA, he managed to get away from the nightmare that was Bangladesh from March to December of 1971, and soon found work as a teacher at Williams College in Massachusetts.

However, in some ways Professor Rahman's story is quite representative of the heroism and patriotism induced in most Bangladeshis by the brutality of the Pakistani army. Indeed, while Professor Rahman may be right in declaring in his Preface that "countless millions of people (in Bangladesh) less privileged than myself went through much, much more" his story is in many ways not an untypical one. Thus he ran through the entire gamut of experience that a Bangladeshi went through in 1971: the initial months of hope, disappointments and anxiety; the experience of Pakistani brutality on March 25 and afterwards; the pain of loss and separation as well as the spirit of resistance and the desire to fight back demonstrated by most Bangladeshis throughout the year; and the excitement and the renewal of hope in them at the coming of independence. It is important also to note that Professor Rahman played his part in our liberation, contributing in whatever way he could to the cause of independence even from exile. Moreover, his love for Bangladesh and Bangladeshis is everywhere evident in *My Story of 1971* as is his idealism and his sincerity.

How many stories of 1971 still remain to be told? As Professor Rahman narrated his "untypical" story of flight from Dhaka at the end of the event-filled month of March, I could not help thinking how his story was at least a bit like mine in a few ways. Thus while reading what is undoubtedly the most compelling part of his

book, Chapter Two, titled "Escape from Death", I could not help thinking how his path intersected with mine at that time. A second year B. A. (Honours) student of Dhaka University's English Department in 1971, I was in Sylhet on March 25, along with three of my sisters, a brother-in-law, and my father. On March 29, Professor Rahman was fleeing from Dhaka in a "journey for the unknown" to the Indian border via Narsindhi and Brahmanbaria: a couple of days later my father and I were trying to come back to Dhaka, in our own journey to the unknown that Dhaka had become, to reunite with my mother and one of my sisters using the same route, although we were travelling in the reverse direction. I remember vividly the Bangladeshi flags flying everywhere, the thousands of people fleeing into the countryside, the eagerness of Bangladeshis trying to assist people in flight or to help the Muktibahinisituations recounted by Professor Rahman in his narrative. When I read the part of Professor Rahman's narrative where he describes how he and Professor Rehman Sobhan were beaten up because people suspected them to be collaborators, I recalled the way my almost six feet tall father was eyed suspiciously by a few overzealous people on a launch that we were on in crossing over to Narsindhi because he had talked to me in English!

And why should we be reading stories of 1971 in 2001? As I have tried to indicate above, one reason must be that reading an account such as that authored by Professor Rahman in *My Story of 1971* will help us to remember our own experience of 1971 and will be an antidote to the amnesia that may be setting in on some of us. As Professor Rahman puts it: "The motivation of my presenting this book is to help all of us know of and face yet another example of the nature of the inhuman forces that raises their heads in human societies and of the brutality of their actions once they grab power and find things not to their liking." And as we all know, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. To state it somewhat differently, who would like to see a repetition of the carnage that took place in 1971 in the name of



Muhammad Anisur Rahman. My Story of 1971: Through the Holocaust that Created Bangladesh. Dhaka: Liberation War Museum, 2001. Tk. 200.00

religion? But perhaps that is putting it too negatively, for we must remember so that we can be inspired by simple acts of heroism as those recorded in *My Story of 1971*. Another reason why books such as this one should be written is offered by the author himself. "I owe it to history to present my own story. It is, after, part of the 'reality' that make up history". All our stories of 1971 are important and, hopefully, many more of us will be recording our experience of that cataclysmic year and the travails suffered during the birth of Bangladesh for the benefit of posterity.

Which is not to say that *My Story of 1971* is perfectly produced. For one thing, I could not see the point of the Introduction written by Dr. Tariq M. Siddique. Why would anyone bother with an Introduction, which claims, fatuously, "this book needs no introduction, no preface"? Careless proofreading and editing has also flawed the book and the language is at times somewhat lax. Thus on page 31 we read that Professor Rahman's analysis of developments taking place on March 25, 1971, "left no double" in his mind that a military solution would be imposed by the Pakistanis. On page 34 he writes that he "dropped" his wife and children at her "parents, and went over mine". On page 38 he declares that "he could not believe our eyes to see the Bangladeshi flag" flying in Narsindhi or the "wild scramble, scores of country boat carrying intending passengers". Finally, I can't help feeling that Professor Rahman's narrative proves to be much less interesting once he has told us about his arrival in USA, but I guess this was inevitable, for how could his sojourn in America compare to the excitement of the events leading to March 25, 1971 and the tense account of his flight to safety from Dhaka?

Nevertheless, Professor Rahman's *My Story of 1971* is well worth reading and inspirational in all sorts of ways. Without a doubt, he and his publishers, the Liberation War Museum, are to be commended for the publication of this book, and for reminding us once again of the countless stories still waiting to be written of 1971. Is it too much to hope that the Museum and other publishers will be sponsoring more such accounts in the future?

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