

Theatre groups long for venues

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For some 200 active theatre groups in the capital, there are only two theatre halls the Mahila Samity Stage and the Experimental Theatre Stage where regular performances are held. But there are ten other theatre halls that can solve the long-standing venue crisis for theatre workers with a little enterprise from authorities concerned.

Bangladesh Mahila Samity Stage, built originally for holding seminars and symposiums, has been used as a theatre venue since 1973. It is popular for its location but is not an attractive venue. "The rate for hiring a hall with over 200 seats is Tk 2,025. If a group wants to use the air-conditioning system, it has to pay an additional Tk 2,000. For shows, the lighting system has to be hired from outside also," said a theatre worker about the shortcomings of the Mahila Samity Stage.

There is also a schedule crisis for staging plays at the Mahila Samity.

"Representatives from Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation (BGTF) and the Mahila Samity had decide on a monthly schedule for the plays," said Aktaruzzaman, programme secretary of BGTF. "The representatives placed the renowned groups at the top of the schedule list. As a result the lesser groups could not get any schedule even in three months," he added.

Two theatre halls the National



Theatre Stage and the Experimental Theatre Stage owned by the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy have helped to reduce the hall crisis somewhat.

The Experimental Theatre Stage is gaining popularity all the time. Rate of a centrally air-conditioned 290-seat hall with modern equipment there is Tk 3,450 including VAT (value added tax).

"That is why theatre troupes prefer the hall to other venues. For premiere shows and especially for experimental productions, the Experimental Stage has become the number one choice for groups," said a theatre activist.

"The National Theatre Stage is too expensive on the other hand. Hall rate should not exceed Tk 5,000. Anything more than that is difficult to bear for any local theatre group," said Mamunur Rashid, chairman of BGTF.

Hall rate of the National Theatre Stage is Tk 7,500 with a 15 percent VAT. Its centrally air-conditioned 750-seat auditorium provides international standard light and sound system. But apart from high profile theatre festivals and shows, groups do not usually go there.

The Dhaka City Corporation recently reopened the Lalkuthi Hall (North Brooke Hall), a traditional theatre venue of Farashganj which was originally built in 1880.

"This all red venue is a hallmark of British-era architecture. The proposed rate for its 365-seat hall is Tk 2,800 which includes cost of sound system and light equipment," said Mohammad Abdul Awal, protocol officer of Dhaka City Corporation.

Mahanagar Natya Mancha is the other theatre venue owned by the DCC. Built in 1999 at Gulistan,

Mahanagar Natya Mancha has a huge complex.

"But from the beginning, there have been complaints about its faulty acoustic and lighting systems," said general secretary of BGTF Liaquat Ali Lucky.

In August 2001, the BGTF general secretary had requested the Mayor to fix the problems of the theatre hall in a letter. Abdul Alim, who is in charge of the Mahanagar Natya Mancha, forwarded the letter.

"I had forwarded the letter identifying the limitations and added a few suggestions to develop the infrastructure. But the authorities took no initiatives. As a result, despite its comparatively much cheaper rate, it has failed to attract any major theatre group," said Alim.

Mahanagar Natya Mancha charges Tk 2,500 for its 600-seat hall from member groups of BGTF and Shammilito Shangskritik Jote. For other groups the rate is higher.

The once popular Bangladesh Girls' Guide Auditorium has remained closed for the last two years.

Mirpur Town Hall was the only hope for hundreds of cultural activists of Mirpur area as there were no other suitable venues there. But the DCC has demolished the hall recently and plans to construct a commercial building there.

"To serve the interest of some local ward commissioners, the DCC is constructing the commercial building. A coalition of 26 groups including 12 theatre

groups protested against the decision and had appealed to the Mayor to stop the demolition. But nothing fruitful transpired," said Apu Aman, a local cultural activist and a member of theatre troupe Abayab.

Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka however promised that a floor would be provided for cultural groups in the multi-storied commercial building.

Bangladesh Public Library authorities have taken some initiatives to popularise the Central Public Library Hall at Shahbag. Some re-construction work is in progress to turn it into an international standard venue.

Abu Saleh, director of Bangladesh Public Library said that once completed, cultural activists would get a centrally air-conditioned modern hall with light and sound system at a lesser cost compared to other halls in the city. "For cultural groups our hall rate will be Tk 2,000," said Saleh.

Surprisingly, there are no theatre venues in posh localities like Uttara and Gulshan. The protocol officer of DCC said that the corporation did not even have a community centre in Uttara and Gulshan as the RAJUK did not allot land for that purpose in those areas.

An auditorium owned by the Nazrul Institute in Dhanmondi 28 can be used as a venue for cultural programmes. Rates for the 311-seat hall is Tk 4,000 (without AC) and Tk 6,000 (with AC). For programmes related to legendary poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, there is a 50 percent discount available.



'Lalkuthi' the theatre in Farashganj in Old Dhaka, built in 1880 has been re-opened to the public.

6x3

3x2

9x2

12x3

6x3

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