

In conversation with Abdur Rahman Boyati

AFSAR AHMED

DAYAGANJ Bazar, a small locality on the outskirts of Dhaka, used to be the meeting place of legendary folk singers such as Khaleque Dewan, Kobi Alauddin Boyati and many others in the late '40s. They used to sing mystical songs in the informal *ashors* of Bauls. One day a small boy came to them and said, "I want to sing". On stage he sang *Mon tumi kar bhoroshai boisha rola* and mesmerised the singers and the audience. Alauddin Boyati was so moved with the little boy's singing style that he instantly declared, "I wish I could have a student like you!" And the little boy quickly responded, "If I ever sing I will give you the stature of my guru." That little boy is none other than today's legendary mystical singer Abdur Rahman Boyati.

Mon amar dehogori, shondhan kori, banaisey kon mistory, these famous lines of the timeless song gave Rahman a niche in the spiritual music world. "That was the time when I was under the tutelage of Kobi Alauddin Boyati. One fine day I heard him humming the lines of this song. Instantly I fell in love with those lines. Then I went to him and said that I wanted to give a nice tune to this song," reminisces Rahman. And the rest is the history.

"I used to sing Urdu and Hindi Qawalis," smiles Rahman and starts humming some lines *Khoda banda mohabbat mein yeh kya...*

"Every Thursday there was a Qawali Jalsha at the High Court Mazar and I regularly performed there," asserts Rahman.

This renowned singer first ventured into the media in the '70s. But it wasn't easy for him to get a chance in TV and radio. "It was in the mid-'70s and at that time BTV was at the DIT building. I went there to give an audition and the concerned person asked where I was from. And when I replied that I was from Dhaka, that person told me that I was disqualified. Apparently those people had

the weird idea that singers from Dhaka cannot sing folk or Baul songs," says Rahman. As he continues, "I was rejected thrice. On the fourth attempt when they asked me the same question, I told them I was from Bikrampur. And then they were ready to take my audition and I passed at last."

Rahman Boyati's first TV programme is firmly imprinted in his mind. "It was the time when BTV used to telecast all the programmes live. I was selected to sing with the legendary folk singer Abdul Aleem and the programme was directed by Mustafa Monwar," reminisces Rahman. Monwar was so impressed by his spiritual song, *Moroner kotha keno smaran koro na*, that he recruited him for the following week's programme. Not only that, later he helped Rahman to take his Baul and spiritual songs to 33 countries—among them Germany, England and Scotland and Japan—and mesmerised the audience there. He still cherishes the memory of his visit to the White House where he met President George Bush.

This folk artist, who is also a poet, a lyricist, a vocalist and a music composer, began his professional career in 1956. He specialised in Boyati (folk) and all other forms of folk genre such as Jari, Palli, Marfati, Murshidi, Dehatatya, Shari and even Qawali. In 1982 he formed the Abdur Rahman Boyati Group.

"I have launched around 1,000 cassettes," says Rahman. And he has sung numerous songs. For the first cassette, a composition of Jari songs, he got Taka 25 as an honorarium. In 2001 Rahman sang 16 songs for a CD under the banner of Digitone but he didn't get an honorarium. "There is a lot of struggle in the contemporary musical world," sighs Rahman. He has a reason for a grouse: his songs and tunes have been copied and misused by the established singers of the country. Rahman has a suggestion for his counterparts, "Don't copy songs, rather try to create new songs using your own talents."

On September 17, 2003, Rahman was performing on



Abdur Rahman Boyati (2nd left) performing at a Baul festival

BTV on a show called *Shodosh Songskriti*. During the programme he suddenly had a stroke. His situation has worsened and he is unable to afford his medical expenses. It is very unfortunate to see a great folk artist suffer in this manner. What's worse is that not many people have stepped forward to lend him a helping hand

during his tough days.

However, the powerful singer still maintains his optimism about his musical career. To quote him, "Music is my soul. *Ami gaan gamu, ami abar gann gamu* (I will sing again)."

Small screen

Tagore's work *Dui Bon* to come alive

NOVERA DEEPTA

The entrance of the Bengal Studio, located in Gopibagh near Old Dhaka, is rather unimpressive. But as soon as one gets inside, one is greeted with a spacious green lawn with trees in front a snow-white 100-year-old *zamindar* palace—a rare sight in the city. Chayanika Chowdhury has chosen the studio to shoot her new TV play based on Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Dui Bon*.

When this reporter entered the house with its elevated ceiling and ornamented wooden doors, a very dramatic sequence was being shot. Talented actress Bipasha Hayat, in the role of Sharmila, was lying on a bed. She looked genuinely ill and devastated thanks to her appropriate make-up and, of course, her high calibre acting skills. She was crying in anguish because she had just learnt that her beloved husband was having an affair with her own younger sister.

Bipasha's histrionic skills were so well developed that she could



Tarin (L), Mahfuz and Bipasha in *Dui Bon*

give a realistic touch to her role. When asked whether she was really ill, a smiling Bipasha said, "In the play, of course!" Make-up artiste Jahangir deserves appreciation for his artistic effort.

Having gone through the story time and again, Bipasha is determined to portray her character exactly the way Tagore created it—right down to the dress. She is draped in a bright handloom saree, a rose-red blouse with lace trimmings and designer ornaments. "In this TV play I have done the same spade work as I generally do for all plays. However, this is definitely a distinct story with strong emphasis on the psychological sufferings of a girl who misunderstood her near and dear ones," she says.

The same applies for the other prominent cast members: Mahfuz Ahmed as her husband Shashanka and Tarin, who plays her sister, Urmila. Clad in a Jamdani saree, Tarin is easy on the eye. In a reserved but confident voice Tarin says, "The women characters of Tagore's works have always attracted me because they are very tempting for any actress. Moreover,

the script is not adapted; it is a direct portrayal of Tagore's novel."

Mahfuz Ahmed joined *Dui Bon*'s unit on the very first day of shooting, just after his return to the country from overseas. He was so excited to act in the play that he paid no heed to his jet lag. "There are very few characters I enjoy playing. You could call Shashanka's character my dream role. More precisely, any character created by Rabindranath Tagore is my dream role," he says.

The main concept of the set design and make-up is by the director herself. Uttam Guha designed the final set. Under the banner of Ananya Shrishri, Arun Chowdhury has penned the script of the play. Alam Ara Minu lends her voice to the theme songs composed by Farid Ahmed.

All the members of the unit, including debutante Imon, who is playing Nirod, are very optimistic about the play. Among others Sajjad Mahmud, Ahsanul Minu and Tauhid Antu are also playing different roles.

The play will be aired on ntv on the occasion of Rabindranath Tagore's death anniversary.

Blast from the past

Introducing Dorothy Dandridge

KARIM WAHEED

Before there were Beyonce Knowles, Halle Berry, Tyra Banks, Vanessa Williams and other dazzling black superstars, there was an immensely talented singer-actress who turned every head around in 1940's Hollywood. Her name was Dorothy Dandridge. She was strikingly beautiful, charismatic and her acting skills were no less than her contemporaries like Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn and Judy Garland. She was everything America wanted in a movie star — everything except for being white.

Introducing Dorothy Dandridge is her story — the

story of dreams unfulfilled, the accounts of double standards in Hollywood and the tale of a woman who was left broken by adverse times. And who better to play Dorothy, the very first African-American Actress to be nominated for an Oscar in the best actress category, than Halle Berry, the first African American actress who won an Oscar as best actress.

The film depicts the private and professional life of Dorothy from the early '40s to her untimely demise in 1965. Her mother Ruby Dandridge, was a busy character actress. Unfortunately for Ruby, the characters offered to black actresses then were mostly of maids and household help. Dorothy and her sister Vivian

were looked after by their abusive "Auntie".

Dorothy gets married to singer-dancer Harold Nicholas, but soon learns of Harold's promiscuous ways. They have a child together and as her fate would have it, she discovers her only daughter is intellectually challenged.

Dorothy's luck takes a turn uphill, when she comes across Earl Mills. Mills is determined to make Dorothy a star and convinces her to proceed with 'night club' singing instead of pursuing acting. Reluctantly Dorothy follows his suggestions and becomes a hit for her vivacious performances. Her success as a performer fetches offers from Hollywood. Soon, Dorothy finds herself working with famed Austrian director Otto Preminger and studio mogul Darryl Zanuck. She has a brief affair with Otto, who cannot accept Dorothy publicly, as Dorothy is not white.

Dorothy makes history as the first African-American woman to be nominated for an Academy Award as the Best Actress in 1955 for her portrayal of Carmen in *Carmen Jones*. She ultimately lost to Grace Kelly. As her career takes its ups and downs, the pressure begins to be too much for Dorothy and she sets herself on a course of self-destruction. She dies virtually unnoticed, on September 8, 1965 from an overdose of Tofranil, an anti-depressant she was taking.

Introducing Dorothy Dandridge does an amazing job of depicting not only the life of a star, but of a period in American history that saw racial minorities being treated as third class citizens. The racism that Dorothy had to face makes the film extremely eye-opening. The thought that Dorothy couldn't swim in a pool with whites due to "health reasons" or was not let to get into clubs through the main entrance or having to use paper cups as she couldn't use "white only" restrooms, might seem insane to us today, but it is exactly the kind of humiliating treatment she received.

Although Halle Berry is widely known for her remarkable performances in *Jungle Fever*, *Losing Isaiah* and the Oscar winner, *Monster's Ball*, *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* presents a Halle Berry who is not just an actress, she becomes Dorothy Dandridge. For the role, Halle won a Golden Globe award, an Image Award, and was nominated by the Screen Actors Guild in 2000 as best actress and she deserves all of those honours. Brent Spiner as Earl Mills shows that he is capable of doing more than playing a pale android in *Star Trek*. Klaus Maria Brandauer is fantastic as Otto Preminger.

The soundtrack of the movie is a 'must have' for music aficionados who are heavily into the '40's 'swing music' and jazz. Besides classics such as *I Got Rhythm* and *Chattanooga Choo Choo*, there are also a few new swing compositions by Bill Elliott. Halle's singing voice in the movie was that of Wendi Williams, making for a credible portrayal of Dorothy as a night club singer. The original compositions by Elliott fit seamlessly into the movie.

Aishwarya Provoked



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, *New Delhi*

For Bollywood beauty Aishwarya Rai, her next role on the reel is going to be based on the real-life story of a battered British Asian wife that had caused a sensation in the United Kingdom.

Rai is going to be busy next five weeks shooting for Jagmohan Mundra's next movie, *Provoked*, in England in the role of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a girl who migrated from a non-descript village in India's Punjab state to London only to be abused by her British husband of Indian origin.

The story of Kiranjit, who had murdered her husband after being tortured by him for several years, had sparked a furore through Britain in 1992 and is believed to have forced a change in British law to recognise the trauma of a battered wife.

According to Mundra, "The power of the story derives from the

extraordinary struggle of a woman to break free from domestic violence."

The film also has Indian actress Nandita Das who plays the role of an activist, a role that comes naturally to her as she is so in real life as well. Interestingly, Das had played the role of a victim of domestic violence in Mundra's earlier feature film *Bawandar*.

The script of the film is written by Kiranjit's friend Rahila Gupta who had campaigned against domestic violence of Asian wives under the banner of Southall Black Sisters. According to Rahila, the British judge had understood Kiranjit's trauma and in a landmark verdict changed the definition of being provoked to murder.

Both Mundra and Rahila believe the portrayal of Kiranjit's role is going to be challenging for Aishwarya and it remains to be seen how she responds to that. It's a role the actress has not played so far, feel both.

Short Takes

Kurukkhethra staged in Scotland

Celebrity couple and theatre activists Shahiduzzaman Selim and Rosy Siddiqui recently staged their new stage play *Kurukkhethra* in Glasgow, Scotland. The couple was invited as representatives of Bangladesh to participate in a festival organised by Bengali Performing Art, a cultural group of the expatriate Bangalees in Scotland recently. According to Rosy, "Among the performances by all four participant groups from UK and Kolkata, ours were considered as the best one and we were awarded for it." Written by Harun ur Rashid and directed by Shahiduzzaman Selim, this play held its maiden show in



Rosy Siddiqui

the festival. The 45-minute play is about an expatriate couple who miss their country and long to return home. Rosy says, "The response of the Bangalee audience was satisfactory. Such appreciation is a great inspiration for me as it was my first performance in Europe."

Mannan Hira's new ventures



Mannan Hira

The popular playwright Mannan Hira, who has written the script of *Champa Dangar Bou* and

Shawkat Osman's *Janani*, is working on other classic novels. He is preparing scripts for *Char Odhyay* by Rabindranath Tagore, *Chander Omaboshya* by Syed Waliullah and *Parineeta* by Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay. As he said, "I will be true to the basic essence of the original stories. I am committed to give an authentic portrayal of these classic novels." The other two yet-to-be-named scripts he is working on are for stage plays. One is his own creation and the other one is an adaptation from Bertrand Russell.

Yet another serial in Bangkok

Three young friends, students of Dhaka University, fly to Bangkok for a vacation. There they meet a couple who has come to the same spot for a honeymoon. These people get so carried away with the scenic beauty of big mountains surrounded by blue sea, they can hardly keep a lid on their feelings. Their feelings give a twist to the story. This is the basic theme of the TV serial *Neel Joler Bhalobasha*. Written by Mannan Hira and directed by Azizul Hakim, the serial will be shot in Bangkok. The artistes, including Mahfuz Ahmed, Tarin, Farah Ruma, Azizul Hakim, Farzana Chhabhi and Sharmin Shila are now shoot-



Farah Ruma

ing in Thailand. Their work done, they are scheduled to return by July 20.

Sisimpur: Delighting young minds

Today's episode of *Sisimpur* embarks on its journey with a story by Halum and Shiku, says a press release. In the course of this work, children learn about democracy. Then follows the Bangali letter "Kha" and the number "Two (2)". The concept of near and far will also be explained. Big Bird shows the viewers how he falls asleep. Shuvecha goes to the airport to see the planes and a young girl named Jhinuk takes the audience on a trip to the zoo. Could one ever imagine

that one could learn about different shapes while eating sweets? Cookie Monster tells stories about up and down and a ceramic bowl talks about its life. One also gets to take a closer look at a zebra. Lastly, Tuktuki and Shumona discover that in order for a tree to stay alive, it needs water, air and light.

The new episode will be aired tonight on BTV at 9:05 am. Reruns are slated at 2:05 pm on Saturday, Monday and Wednesday.



A scene from tonight's episode of *Sisimpur*



Halle Berry as Dorothy Dandridge



Dorothy Dandridge in the movie *Carmen Jones*