

WHAT'S ON THIS WEEK

World Dance Day Celebration

Organiser: Bangladesh Nriya Shilpi Sangstha and Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy
Venue: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy
Date: April 27-29
Time: 10am onwards



World Dance Day Celebration

Organiser: Volga, Nadim's Euro-Asia CEDS Ballroom and Latin Dance Studio
Venue: Russian Centre of Science and Culture, H 510, R 7, Dhanmondi
Date: April 28
Time: 6pm



Art Exhibition

Title: Return to the roots
Artists: 7 Bengali artists from India
Venue: Bengal Gallery of Fine Arts, H 275/F, R 27 (Old), Dhanmondi
Date: April 25-May 9
Time: 12pm-8pm



Terracotta Exhibition

Title: Burnt Clay Exhibition '08
Artist: Tayabuzzaman Topu
Venue: Shilpo Charcha Studio, H 2, R 7, Block C, Section 6, Mirpur
Date: April 21-30
Time: 10am-8pm



International Dance Day celebration '08

International Dance Day is once more on the horizon. Time for dancers and organisers to assess past successes, failures, milestones and envision the future. For some reason this art form has lagged behind in mass popularity when compared to other mediums like films, TV plays and music. While many young dancers have an eye on the more glamorous outlets, dance is picking up slowly but surely and there are many who are ardent devotees to the art form. A heartening trend is the mushrooming dance schools. Beginning in the 1950s with Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA), many dance schools have come up and earned recognition. Prominent in their ranks are Jago Art Centre, Chhayanat, Nriya Nandan, Nriyanchal and Pallavi. And this development is not confined to Dhaka. Some established dancers have taken their art to various districts and organised workshops, lecture demonstrations, cultural exchanges and festivals. For this art form to truly thrive, dance needs patronage from the corporate sector and the exposure from the media. Likewise the Ministry of Cultural Affairs needs to pull its weight on this front. To gauge the status of dance in Bangladesh today, The Daily Star spoke to a few leading dancers. Here's what they had to say:

Reaching out to communities through dance

In conversation with Sharmeen Husain

CULTURE DESK

As president of the Bangladesh Nriyashilpi Sangstha in Chittagong, Sharmeen is constantly on the go. Sharmeen explains the organisation's agenda: "We aim to reach out to the various *thanas* in Chittagong district through workshops and interaction between established artists and dancers of the communities. We also honour veteran dancers who have imparted their skills to the local artists."

Sharmeen has cause to be upbeat about the dance scenario. As she says, the talented dancers of Chittagong, many trained in *shastriya nriyakala*, now all perform on a common platform. Among the major contributors to the development of the art is the Shilpakala Academy in Chittagong.

What does International Dance Day mean to her? Sharmeen is unequivocal on this score: "As we rejoice and celebrate this very special day, we must take time to ponder on how fortunate we are that we can call this day our very own. This is a great day for dancers across the spectrum -- past, present and future. Dance is food for the soul and we must dedicate ourselves to this medium."

Over the years, she says, there have been many changes in the dance scenario in Bangladesh. Now creativity and promotion of the fine arts are the watchwords of these times.

In Sharmeen's reckoning, folk dance is best suited to the lifestyle of the masses. Simultaneously there is a move towards modern compositions in which the dancers celebrate nature and this is complemented by indigenous lyrics and music.

"Undoubtedly, the contemporary performing arts and fusion have taken a big stride," says

Sharmeen. On a lyrical note, she adds, "One has to move with the beat; dance inspires and stimulates the body, mind and soul, helps dancers create and use their body language to convey the message to the audience."

Not that it has been smooth sailing all the way for Sharmeen. Describing the task of organising dancers as tough but gratifying once accomplished, she goes on to say, "The crux of the problem lies in the fact that they are busy in their own spheres such as teaching in schools or they have their own institutions and a tight schedule. Due to constraints of time, they seldom respond quickly to our call. To mobilise dancers for any particular event is a Herculean task. In such a scenario, we need to cajole them and mellow the competitive spirit so that they can spend quality time together."

Nevertheless, the Nriyashilpi Sangstha has been able to stage quality dance performances and forge ahead in achieving its mission. Sharmeen lives and breathes dance. Learning *Bharatnatyam* at the tender age of four at the Kalalaya Institute in Colombo, Sri Lanka she went on to do her schooling in India, where she had opportunities to develop her dancing skills. This entailed further instructions from Nriya Guru Prohlad Das under the aegis of Nriya Bharati in Kolkata.

The early environment was conducive to learning dance. As she says, her "enlightened and culturally oriented" parents, Shaheed Sayeedul Hasan -- who the family lost in 1971 -- and her mother Fareeda Hasan, encouraged her to blossom as a dancer. It helped of course that her parents were founder members of Chhayanat and had an association also with Oikotana.

In Dhaka she learned, practiced and performed under the supervi-

sion of the late Altamash Ahmed, late Zeenat Jahan in Music College for several years and also in Sangeet Bitan under Shahida Altamash Kochi.

A feather in her cap is directing *Lal Gola Per Jonnyo*, a dance-drama written by Abul Hasnat, which was performed by the first dance troupe and cultural delegation from Bangladesh to India after the Liberation War.

"What an uproar it created in the Calcutta Maidan!" says a nostalgic Sharmeen. Other members of the delegation were Sadya Aftun Mallick, Minu Billah (now Minu Haque), Lubna Mariam, Dalia Salauddin Hasan, Dr. Iqbal Ahmed, Saqera Ahmed, Asaduzzaman Noor, Dr. Salauddin Ahmed and Mahfuz Anam.

Sharmeen's art has taken her to Iran, China and Europe on cultural delegations. She has also played leading roles in dance-dramas such as *Birangana Sakina*, *Borsha Mongol*, *Koch o Debjani*, *Nirhorer Shopno Bhongo*, *Hajar Tarer Beena*, *Bidrohi* and many others.

Her repertoire includes impressive performances -- dancing to the tunes of Altaf Mahmud, the lyrics of Shahidullah Kaiser, the recitation of Professor Munier Chowdhury, the live orchestra of Samar Das, the *tabla/pakhwaj* of Nikunja Pal and the patriotic songs of Sikander Abu Zafar.

The late Dawood Khan Majlish made a documentary on *Nakhshi Kanthar Math* for an Expo to Japan in which Sharmeen played the lead role with G.A. Mannan.

For aspiring dancers, this seasoned danseuse has a word of advice: "Passion comes first; you have to love what you do, focus on your art and put in hard work. My message to all dancers is, dance your way into people's hearts -- touch their souls with the language that you have mastered, shun jealousy, be tolerant and inspire



A photograph of Sharmeen Husain at the Suhrawardy Udyan in the late '70s

others to be good human beings. To top it all, join the fraternity of artists -- and you will shine."

Sharmeen is a firm believer in the necessity for social responsibility. "One has to be a good human

being to start with -- give back to his/her own community, country and the world. If you are a top dancer, make sure that you are also a top community person," she concludes.

Festival to provide an insight on dance in Bangladesh

In conversation with the DG of Shilpakala Academy

ERSHAD KAMOL

For the last few years Bangladesh Nriyashilpi Sangstha (BNS), a common platform for dancers of the country, has been arranging special programmes to celebrate International Dance Day (April 29).

This year Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA) has joined hands with BNS to organise a three-day programme to celebrate the day. The celebration programme -- with the slogan, "Nriyer Taal-e Bishwa Aaj Ekshathe" -- dedicated to the memory of the late dance guru G.A. Mannan began yesterday at BSA. Director General of BSA, Bhuiyan Shafiqul Islam is the convener of the celebration committee. The Daily Star spoke with the DG.

Bhuiyan Shafiqul Islam informed that besides the participation of the leading dance troupes and dance gurus, representatives of ethnic groups living in Bangladesh and a troupe each from China and India are participating at the programme. According to him, another major achievement of the grand celebration is a talent hunt programme.

The DG said, "In an era of satellite TV culture, traditional art forms all over the world are on the verge of extinction. Through this programme, we will get an overview of the current state of dance and the general standard of artists of the country. This should help us to make future plans regarding dance. Moreover, through the talent hunt programme, young dancers all over the country will be encouraged."



Bhuiyan Shafiqul Islam, the DG of BSA

On BSA's role in this year's International Dance day celebrations, the DG said, "We are providing infrastructure facilities. We are grateful to Jibon Bima Corporation and Shadharon Bima Corporation for providing us financial support."

On the future plan of BSA, Bhuiyan Shafiqul Islam said, "We are going to present a plan to the government for elaborate talent hunt projects to scout musicians, dancers and actors. Moreover, we are going to publish a yearly calendar featuring artists for the best use of our infra-structure facilities."

"Dancers in the country should work collectively"

-- Amanul Huq

Amanul Huq, who began his career as a dancer in 1959 under the guidance of Ghonoshyam Anjariya in Karachi, Pakistan, is now a prominent name in the Bangladeshi cultural scene. The convener of Bangladesh Nriyashilpi Sangstha (BNS), Amanul Huq is the co-convener of this year's International Dance Day celebration programme. The Daily Star spoke with Amanul Haque recently.

"This year's celebration programme is elaborated and particularly significant as several dance gurus of the country are coming together on the occasion. 'Jealousy' and 'ego' have often created differences among a fraction of dancers and the rest remained out of focus. But this year we, the senior artists of the country, have decided to ensure that all leading dancers of the country take part in this festival," said Amanul Haque.

He added, "Due to the lack of solidarity, dancers have been missing out on so many opportunities. If we don't move collectively, dreams of giving dance an institutional form, including the performing art in academic curriculum and others will never be realised. It is never too late to start working as a team."

On the current scenario of dance in the country, Amanul Haque said, "The overall standard of dance in the country is not satisfactory. Only a few experimental works are noticed. We are yet to establish any dance form as 'classic'. As dance is not an attractive profession, many are not interested in continuing



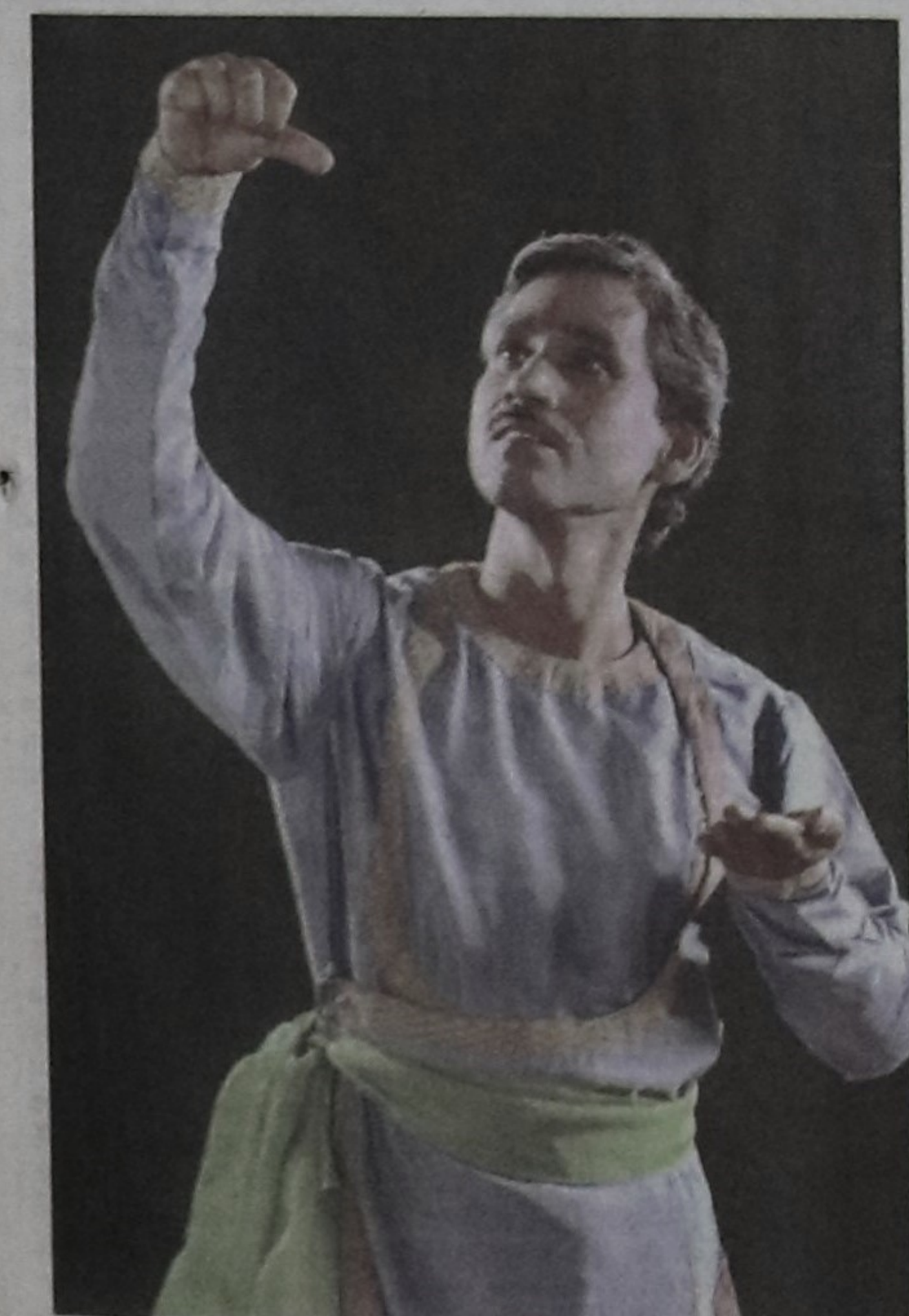
Amanul Huq

dance in the long run. Participation of male dancers is few and far between. Getting male dancers for a quality dance drama is difficult."

But Amanul Haque is optimistic. He believes that this year's International Dance Day celebration will encourage the dancers to work together for the betterment of the art form. He hopes for more patronage from the government, especially from the BSA.

"Dance is a form of education"

-- Shaju Ahmed



Shaju Ahmed

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

"Dance is a form of education. It has its own rules and regulations -- geometry, emotions, colours and numerous other dimensions," says noted Kaththak dancer Shaju Ahmed. On the occasion of International Dance Day, Ahmed took the time to speak with The Daily Star on the art of dancing and the effect of globalisation on this medium.

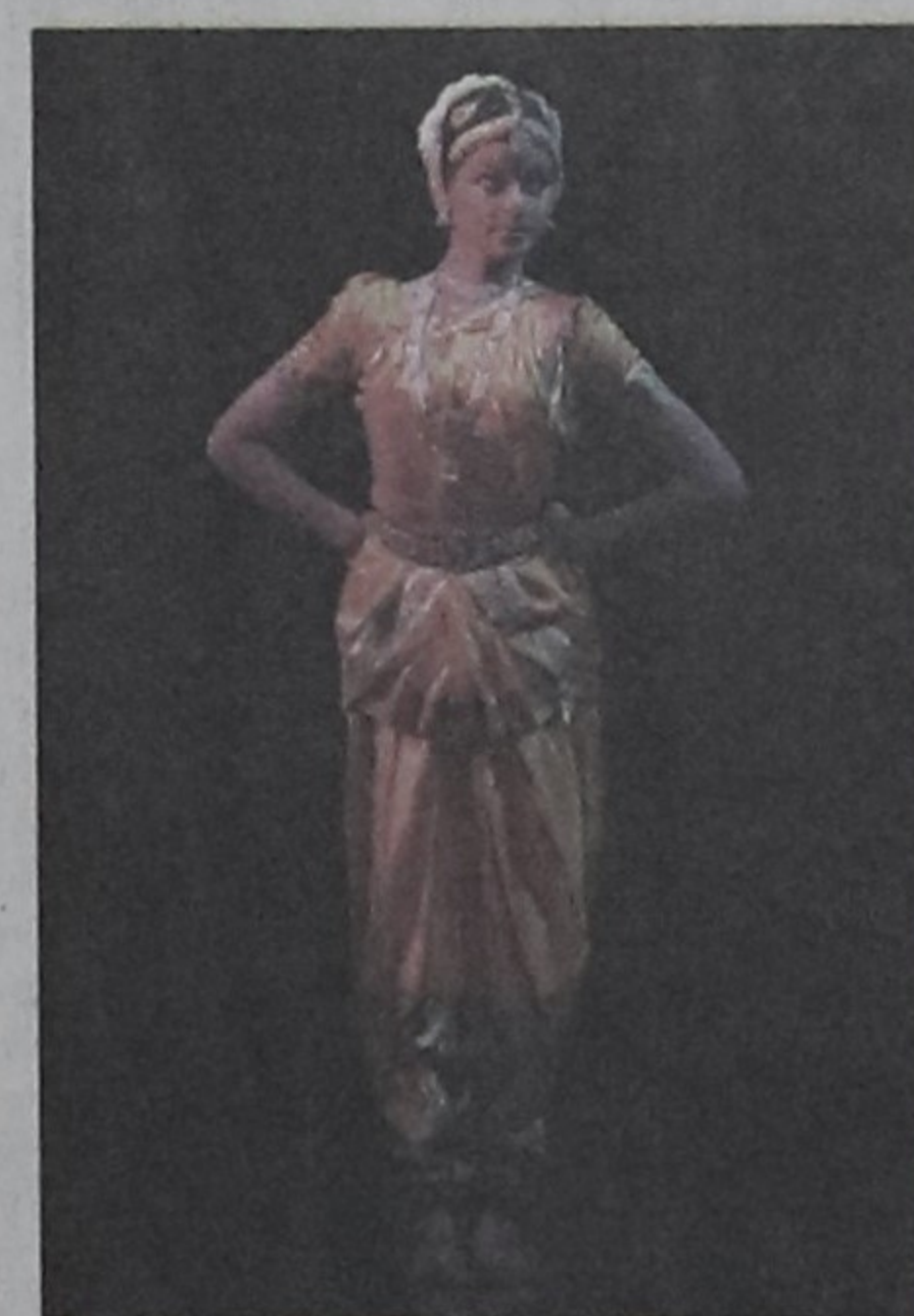
Talking about the upcoming dancers, Ahmed said that he feels they are talented. "The world is evolving at a furious pace and so is dance. The new generation of dancers have potentials and it is our responsibility to provide them guidance so that they can reach their goals," he said.

On the occasion of International Dance Day, three troupes trained by him from Kaththak Nriya Sampradai will perform at Rabindra Sarobar and Shilpakala Academy. Shaju Ahmed firmly believes that dance is a gift worth striving for. To quote him, "Everyone can speak, but not all can sing; many can write but not all of them can write poems. Similarly, everyone can move but only those with the ingrained sense of rhythm can dance. A person cannot learn to dance by taking lessons only; the spirit of a dancer has to be there."

Ahmed's father was a singer. He had a hard time convincing his father when he decided to take dancing seriously. In 1968 came a breakthrough: Ahmed started performing on stage. After that there was no looking back. As for his formal training, he took dance lessons at Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) and Shilpakala Academy. Ahmed has had the opportunity to train extensively (for seven years) under the legendary Indian Kaththak exponent Pandit Birju Maharaj.

Ahmed cherishes the dream of setting up a centre for performing arts where art enthusiasts will have access to different forms of music and dance.

Dance competition finale at Shilpakala Academy



Finalists perform at Shilpakala Academy yesterday

CULTURAL CORRESPONDENT

The International Dance Day celebration '08 began yesterday morning at the Music and Dance Centre Auditorium, BSA with the final of the talent hunt programme.

Thirty-six talented young dancers (between the age of 14 and 25) participated in six categories -- Kaththak, Bharatnatyam, Manipuri, Odissi, Folk and Creative. Six panels of judges including leading dancers of the country selected best three artists from each category.

The final competition began with a discussion. DG of BSA, Bhuiyan Shafiqul Islam was

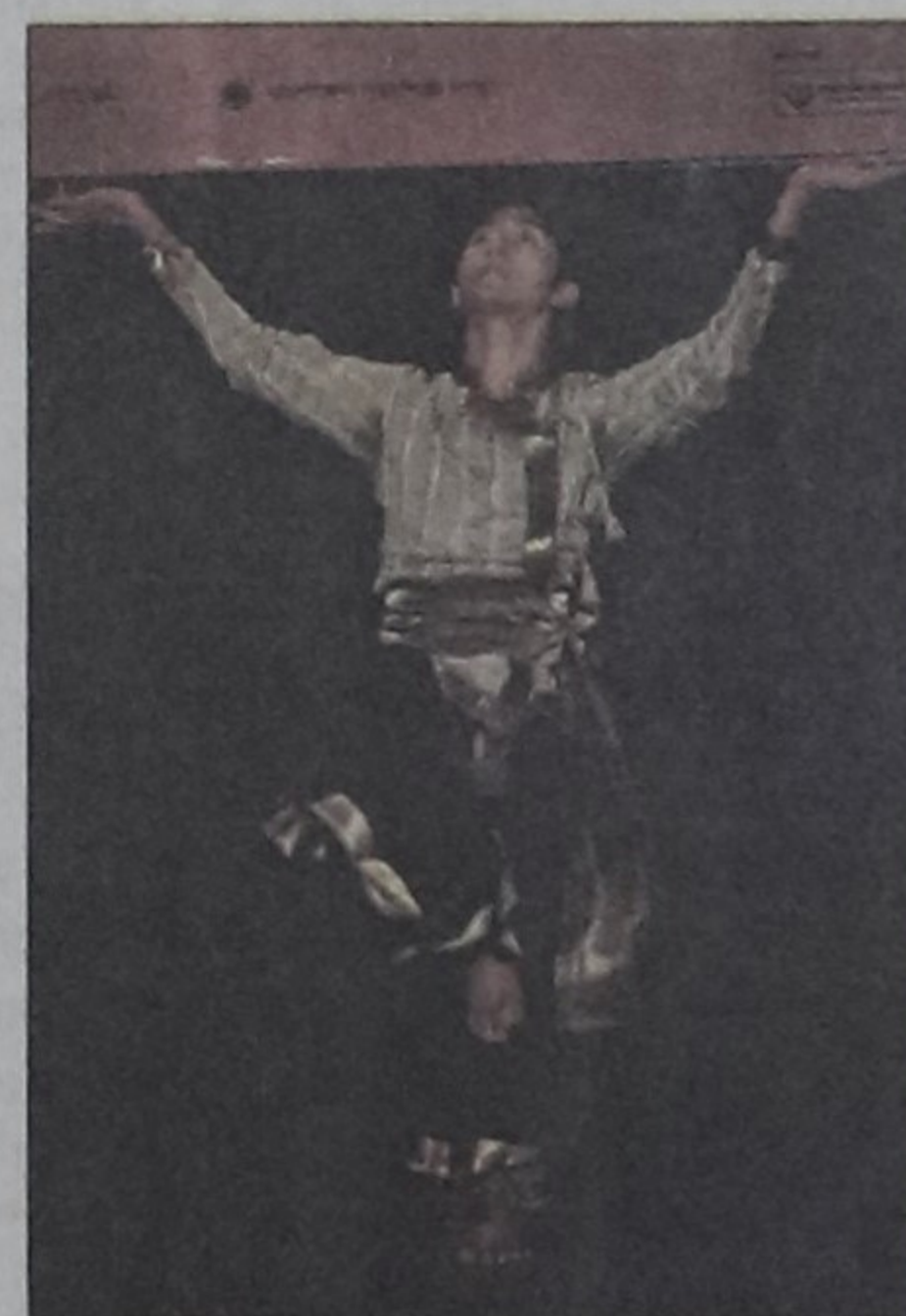


PHOTO: MUMIT M.

