

Unchanging woes of dancers

The oldest form of art still faces a lot of challenges in the city

DURDANA GHILAS

Life in the metropolis is changing with time but the odd social attitude towards dance artists still remains a major challenge to the most ancient form of art. Dance troupes and emerging artists also do not have necessary floors for rehearsal, strong patrons or any specialised stage for performance.

For classical dance artistes a big setback is the lack of live musical and vocal accompanists for which they have to collect recorded pieces from a neigh-

bouring country.

The rehearsal rooms are too expensive for most troupes for long practice ahead of a big show. "Mostly dance groups hire school rooms after class hours but that is for only two days a week. Before big performances we have to rehearse for several consecutive days. Then we have to hire houses. But it is very expensive as only a single room costs around Tk 3,000. Moreover, the landlords are often very unfriendly," said Sayeka, a dance teacher teaching the art at Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts.

"Besides, the rooms are not sufficiently spacious. Since I teach children they start crying if one is shoved by another during practice," she said.

"Generally schools do not want to rent the rooms to us for reasons unknown to me. And when they refuse we cannot press for it. Sometimes it happened that I had to practice in the open which is quite uncomfortable because of unfriendly stares," said Sayeka.

Also sometimes dance artistes from middle class families cannot afford the cost of special

us between Tk 11,000 and 16,000. As we have to keep things within the budget, so sometimes it is hard to afford these rooms," said Nipa.

"We do rehearsals four days a week at two schools in the city after school hours. But we do not get big floors there. Before a programme these places are not suitable to rehearse for consecutive days. Then we are bound to hire the expensive rooms of the academy," she said.

"We do not need expensive air-conditioned rooms. We just need big open spaces where all

us," she said.

The stage is also devoid of modern technologies, which are needed for a colourful performance.

Lack of specialised musical and vocal accompanists is another big problem for performers of classical dances.

"In India it is not at all allowed to perform without live musical accompanists and vocalist. But in our country we have to perform using the recorded music bought from India which is a very big drawback and is severely hampering the classical dance," said Lubna Mariam, a noted classical dance artiste and general secretary of Shadhona.

Admitting the small size of the stage, Sunil Chandra Das, head of dance and song at the Shilpakala Academy, said, "We have to place a new proposal for making it anew."

Shafiqul Islam, director of the academy, said, "The stage was made for singers. It happened because of lack of proper planning. During dance festivals they have to perform on the stage of Jatiya Natyashala, which is big and contains 700 spectators. But it is not always possible to give away this stage to danseuses as because the stage was made for theatre shows," he said.

About the high charge of rehearsal rooms he said, "We have four rehearsal rooms and since we are an autonomous body these are our main sources of income. Besides, we have to spend for the maintenance of these rooms and the electricity bill is quite high these days."

About the possibility of arranging cheaper rooms without expensive gadgets like air conditioners he said, "We never thought it in this way. We will think about it in our future plans."

The situation of danseuses outside the city is even worse as they do not have the access like the artistes of Dhaka.

"While participating in national programme we get rooms for rehearsal in the local Shilpakala Academy. But for any other programmes we use drawing room of someone's house, which is quite small for all of us to rehearse," said Smita, a young danseuse from Chittagong.

"Besides, we do not have the access to big festivals or BTV and other TV channels. Our talents go unnoticed," she added.

As the media are inclined to present younger artistes and stars the real talents are often ignored, said renowned danseuses.

"The artistes should be given chances by rotation but the programme makers mostly depend on face value," said Sharmila Bandyopadhyay, head of Manipuri dance at Chhayanot.



FILE PHOTO BY MUMIT M

A dance troupe putting up a magnificent show at the Shilpakala Academy recently.

city express

The latest crop of quotes from the city's press -- words worth repeating, we feel, for their humour, insight or sheer outrageousness. Star City does not necessarily support the opinions expressed in this column.

"The ACC [Anti-Corruption Commission] believes that corruption cannot be uprooted overnight using Aladdin's lamp."

-- Col Hanif Iqbal
Director (admin), ACC

Told reporters at his office after the recent TIB report on corruption, on Thursday. Source: The Daily Star

"People of this country are not faring well. I cannot go abroad leaving them in distress."

-- Khaleda Zia
BNP Chairperson

Told reporters on Monday. Source: Jugantor

"We are embarrassed of our failure to start holding local government elections according to the roadmap."

-- ATM Shamsul Huda
Chief Election Commissioner

Said at a news briefing at the Election Commission Secretariat, on Friday. Source: The Daily Star

"It is not right to think, based on some numbers, that corruption has increased or decreased."

-- Mirza Azizul Islam
Finance Adviser

Told reporters when they asked for his comments on recent TIB's report on corruption which said that the corruption in different sectors increased in the first half of 2007 despite the government's anti-corruption drives, on Thursday. Source: The Daily Star

"No major change came to the country. Whatever is happening is going through the legal process."

-- Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury
Chairman, Anti-Corruption Commission

Told reporters, on Sunday. Source: Jugantor

Compiled by Durdana Ghilas

costumes needed for a single performance.

"Big troupes pay for the cost of the costumes but small groups cannot afford that. So the members have to pay for the costume themselves. Very often one costume is needed for one performance only. Therefore, dance artistes from middle class families like us cannot always afford them. Small groups sometimes dissolve for this kind of fund-related problems," said Sagar, a dance artiste who once belonged to a small group.

Shamim Ara Nipa, noted danseuse and director of Nityanchal, said that doing rehearsal before staging a show is a big problem for most groups as there is a lack of economical places for the purpose in the city.

"A room at Shilpakala Academy is rented at Tk 1,100 for a day. For a big programme we need to rehearse for 10 to 15 consecutive days, which costs

our group members can dance freely," she added.

Besides, there is only one small stage for the danseuses in the Shilpakala Academy, which they have to share with the singers. The stage does not have enough space and depth.

According to senior artistes, the existing stage is not fit for performance by big troupes but since there is none they have to resort to the theatre stage which is also not always available for show.

"I do not know why such attitude has been shown in the case of dance performers," lamented an artiste.

"This stage is appropriate for solo dance only. For group performance it is too small. Sometimes we want to perform with live music when musicians need to sit on the stage. But it is not possible here due to space constraint. Besides, the hall holds only 300 spectators, which is very discouraging for

In quest of the roots of local dances

Besides performance-oriented problems a big void is palpable in the field of dance as there has been no significant research on the performing art.

According to senior danseuses, the dance form in Bangladesh is still trying to find a style of its own as till today it mostly follows either the South Indian style or some invented forms in the case of folk dances.

Renowned dance artistes observe

that the local folk dances are not original dance forms of this country because artistes can perform it in their own ways.

Lubna Mariam, noted danseuse and general secretary of Shadhona, said, "The folk dances are invented because there is nothing like the dance of the fishermen or the snake charmers. The artistes are performing them in their own ways."

In folk art there are some sorts of



COURTESY: NRITYANCHAL

Two lathials from Kishoreganj demonstrating in a rehearsal room of the Shilpakala Academy the styles of lathinach, which can be a source of original folk dance.

dance forms in gombhira, gajir gaan, padmapuran etc. but none of these are independent dance forms. Dance had never been a mode of social recreation in both Bengalis because of social conservatism. In South India dance is a mode of worship but not in West Bengal, she said.

"In our country the classical dances in its purest form did not get popular acceptance because it is not a part of our culture and because of its involvement with Hindu myths and religiosity. So we followed the trend of Rabindranath's dance-dramas because it is a part of our culture and he did not bring religiosity in his literature."

"To find our roots in dance we will have to do researches in this field which will revive and enrich this art. For an example in West Bengal, they have revived 'marshad dance' -- a kind of folk dance. It was found in 1930s and for the last 80 years the researchers have reconstructed it. Now they are teaching it. If they can do it then why can't we?" she said.

At present, Nityanchal is preparing for a show of lathinach or a folk dance form of the lathial bahini of the old landlords.

"This dance was developed by the lathials of the landlords in their leisure times as a mode of entertainment. We have brought two lathials from Kishoreganj who are showing us the original styles," said Shamim Ara Nipa, director of the lathinach. The dance is produced by the Shilpakala Academy.



Buses to have electronic ticketing system soon

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

Syed Ashrafur Huq normally goes to work hanging off a door of an overloaded bus that belches smoke and goes nowhere fast in Dhaka, the gritty, traffic-clogged capital.

Yet, his biggest complaint is how the ticket seller always seems to hand out tokens to the person standing next to him despite the fact that he is the one standing right before the counter.

"This happens almost every day," said Syed Ashrafur Huq. "I am standing right there before the counter, holding the fare money in my hand, yelling out for the ticket as I know the bus would not wait for too long. But the ticket seller would take the money from the hand next to mine and hand him the ticket instead of me."

"By the time when he finally notices me and hands over my token, the bus is already full. When lucky, I get to travel hanging off the bus door. But most of the time I end up waiting for the next bus," he said.

"The bus operators should be more efficient with their ticketing system," he said.

Commuters like Ashrafur should be happy to know that their complaints have not gone completely unheard. A private bus operator has come forward to replace its everyday token-based ticketing system with a fully computerised one.

Trans Silva Bus Paribahan, operating in Dhaka and city fringes, will soon introduce electronic card ticketing system and install card-reading devices in their buses.

Giasuddin Chowdhury, in-charge (operations) and a spokesperson for Trans Silva, said the new scheme is intended to bring more efficiency in the ticketing system. It will also help

stop evasion of bus fare by a section of people.

"Almost all the major cities in the world, including the ones in our neighbouring countries have electronic fare collection systems, so why not in Dhaka," he said.

According to Chowdhury, they have already signed a contract with Sony Corporation who will supply and install technology required for the new system.

This is how the system will work: Passengers will buy electronic fare cards from the office of the bus operator. The cards will be magnetically coded to indicate the amount of money that a passenger has fed into the machine or paid to a token clerk.

Passengers will swipe the fare card across an electronic reader on the bus when getting in, and once again during getting off the bus. The reader will monitor the amount of distance the passenger has travelled and deduct the fare amount from the card.

Dhaka's commuters can expect to see the new ticketing system in Trans Silva buses in around three months.

"We have already discussed the matter with the BRTA [Bangladesh Road Transport Authority] officials, and if things go smoothly, they will help the 53 bus companies adopt the new system," said Giasuddin Chowdhury.

Officials from other bus operators said the new system would drastically reduce fare evasion, which has been on the dramatic rise over the past years. It will also allow transit companies to offer discounts to passengers like students and women, and others who travel during the off-peak hours or who use bus frequently.

"If implemented properly this system has the potential to revolutionise the city's public transport system," said Farhad Hossain, an official from

Kolmitata Paribahan.

Despite the benefits, electronic ticketing systems are not flawless, especially during the initial start-up. Officials at the BRTA said the use of such advanced technology during the first months of operation might cause confusions for passengers and bus staff.

The system will need adequate publicity and demonstration before its launch as Dhaka's bus passengers may still want to give their fares to bus staff as they have been doing for decades, BRTA officials said.

"The idea needs to be publicised to make the public convinced that the system is more convenient and easy to use," said an official at BRTA.

Giasuddin said after introducing the system in about three to four months they will make a promotional demonstration on how easy it is to use the system.

"We expect some initial resistance from passengers but they will eventually become accustomed to using the fare cards," he said.

Each card-reading device will cost around Tk 1.5 lakh. "While the amount seems quite big, it will be beneficial in the long term as it will help slash fare evasion," said Giasuddin. "We have urged Sony to keep the price of the devices as low as possible."

A workshop jointly organised by Japan's N-Wave, Bangladesh's Bright Tech Ltd and Trans Silva Paribahan on the new ticketing system was held earlier this month.

Communications Secretary Dr Muhammad Mahbubur Rahman inaugurated the workshop, which was addressed by BRTA Chairman Sunil Kanti Bose, Association of Bus Companies President Rafiqul Islam Kajal and Trans Silva Paribahan Chairman Syed Rezaul Karim.



FOCUS BANGLA

A 'tiffin boy' checks the empty tiffin carriers collected from offices in the Motijheel Commercial Area after lunch hours. Sometimes the leftover food becomes the source of his lunch of the day.