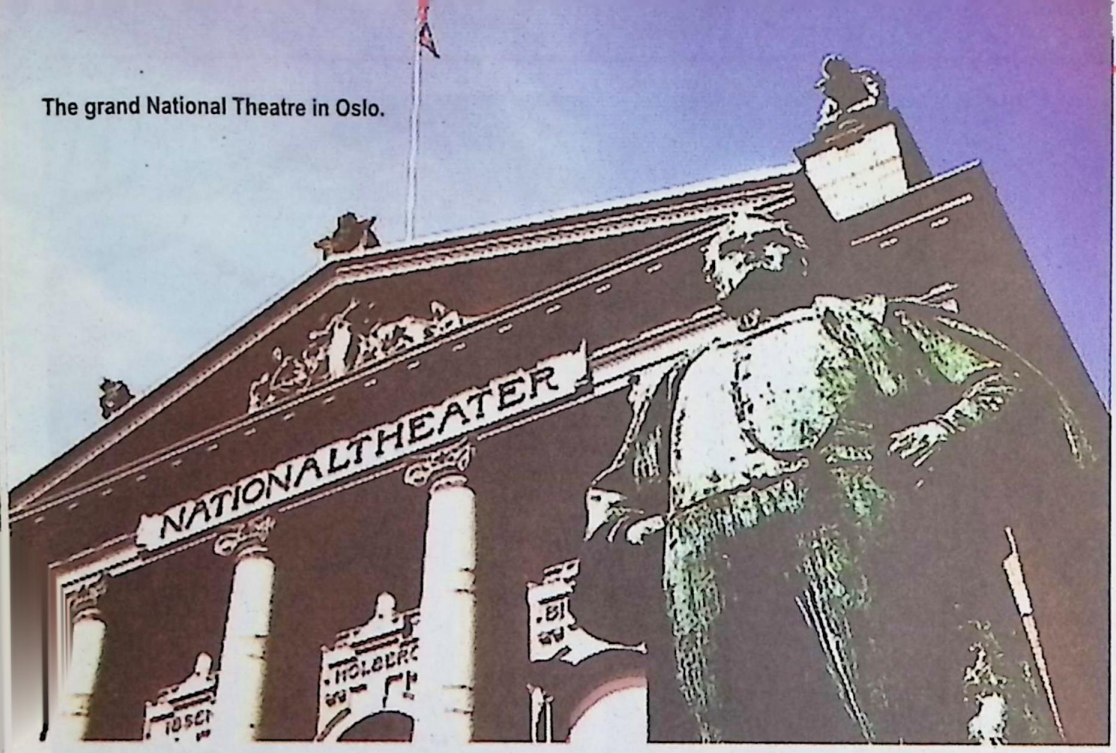


The grand National Theatre in Oslo.

PHOTO: INTERNET

Brooks was presented to the audience by the Chairman of the Award Committee Liv Ullmann. Sir Brooks in his brief speech dug into his past and shared moments of frustrations and joy of his long eventful career with the audience. He said culture has a universal language of its own that transcends national boundaries. He talked about Ibsen's Nora and said Noras still continue to exist in all societies and all cultures. Present day Noras are in no way better than the Ibsen's Nora of 'A Doll's House (1879)'.

The next day we left by bus from Oslo for Skien (pronounced Schien), the venue for the announcement of the National Ibsen Award. Skien is a small town and municipality of the county of Telemark. Ninety miles from Oslo, Skien was founded in the 11th century as a meeting place for inland farmers and sailing traders and also as a shipping harbour for whetstones from Eidborg (inland Telemark). Telemark is one of the twenty communes (district) of Norway with Skien as its Administrative Centre. Oslo to Skien is a two hour journey by road. The roads wind through hypnotising, picturesque mountainous terrain. It is just the one you see on picture post cards. Leaving at 8.30 in the morning we were just in time for Skien part of the conference to begin. Held at the spacious Ibsenhuset (Ibsen House) the conference was inaugurated by the Minister of Culture of Norway. There were no protocol and when during the lunch time lunch boxes were being handed over he had no problem standing in the queue with others.

In the evening the awards were announced. In an auditorium full of about three hundred participants and invited guests when my name was announced to receive the International Ibsen Projects Award on behalf of the Centre for Asian Theatre (CAT) I felt a few inches taller. The achievements of CAT were announced including its international presence along with a brief introduction of the theatre movement in Bangladesh. The monetary stipend that accompanies the award will be spent to produce Ibsen's 'The Lady From the Sea,' by CAT to be directed by Norwegian Director Unn-Magritt Nordseth. The play is expected to be premiered next December. The night was spent at the fabulous Clarion Collection Hotel Bryggeparken. The hospitality at the hotel was par excellence.

The following day we left Skien at 10.00 a.m. On our way we stopped at Venstop, in the outskirts of Skien to visit the Henrik Ibsen Museum. It is the family house of Henrik Ibsen (built in 1815) where he was born on March 20 1828 that was turned into a Museum in 1958. The house is surrounded by a lovely old cultural landscape, including an English garden with large trees, a pavilion, paths and historical roses and shrubs. It is the property of the Telemark Museum. Opened normally only during the summer the family and Ibsen's personal belongings are preserved in the Museum. The Museum provided another opportunity for us to feel proud to be Bangladeshis. In the Museum gallery hangs nine paintings of nine artists from Bangladesh on themes of Ibsen plays. These paintings are part of thirty paintings that were commissioned by CAT in 2006 when it organised the first International Ibsen Conference in Dhaka.

The nine paintings are replaced regularly by nine others. Because of the severe Norwegian winter the valuable paintings are exposed to harsh weather conditions and they cannot change the structure of Ibsen's family home to accommodate the paintings. The authorities are looking for an alternative place to display the paintings permanently.

We left Oslo with full of everlasting beautiful memories. Peter Daee, the Honorary Consul General of Bangladesh to Norway, came to our Hotel at 9.00 a.m. to see us off at the railway station which was five minutes walk from the Hotel. A shuttle train left every ten minutes for the airport. Seeing the wheels of my trolley bag broken he picked up my heavy bag and started walking towards the station. Jamil Osman and I followed. The Honorary Consul carrying my bag was the departing sign of the legendary Nordic hospitality and warmth.

Professor Abdul Mannan is a former Vice Chancellor of Chittagong University.

Photographs by ***Dag Jensen***