TWENTY PLAYS

SYED BADRUL AHSAN offers a selection of twenty Bengali plays of significance in our times --- for the record

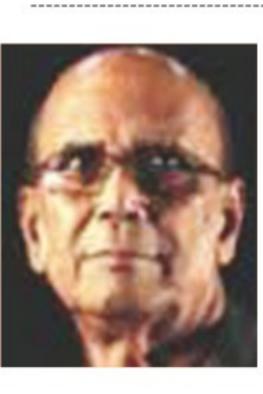


Kobor

--Munier Chowdhury The Language Movement of 1952 was a seminal happening for the Bengali nation and quite naturally it made a deep impression on intellectuals, students and the general masses. This play is a reflection of the times, of that moment when political protest in defence of heritage and culture transformed the

Bengali nation from an acquiescent part of the communal Pakistan state into a force unwilling to surrender its historical secular identity as a people. Munier Chowdhury captures the ethos of the moment in the play. The title Kobor, meaning grave, is much more than a commentary on the plight of a people struggling for a voice. It is, surely, a story of the dead and their graves. On a higher symbolic level, it can also be regarded as a pointer to what was to come --- the death of oppression, a graveyard of all injustices.

Munier Chowdhury was to pay a terrible price for his convictions. On the eve of liberation in December 1971, he was abducted by the local goon squads of the Pakistan occupation army and murdered along with scores of other Bengali intellectuals.



Nuruldiner Shara Jibon

--Syed Shamsul Huq Nuruldin or Nurul Din is but a symbolic yearning for a lost era of heroism. The hero is missing, if not dead. And the voice of Nuruldin --- call him a troubadour or the spirit of a nation --- is heard across the four corners of the country, the country being the whole world for him, asking for greatness to redefine the polit-

ical and cultural canvas of a nation. In broad measure, the play is a constant harkening back to the past. It speaks of the great men who have been and who could yet again be. The message is pretty obvious: the times are out of joint, the flesh is weak even if the spirit is not, and it only needs one heroic figure to emerge from the mists of time to lead the people, once more, to the valley of happiness and purposeful living.

Paayer Awaaj Paowa Jaaye

--Syed Shamsul Huq

Drama in Bangladesh, especially since the emergence of the country as a free nation, has revolved around the theme of freedom. From such a perspective, Paayer Awaaj Paowa Jaaye is a tale of the War of Liberation, of the hardship involved in waging war against a brutal occupation force. And yet within the ambit of the play comes alive the unity of a people unwilling to succumb to immoral force. The playwright presents the work in compactness of a sort that presents the story of the 1971 struggle in unmistakably coruscating light. The footsteps are heard. Could they be those of the occupation soldiers come looking for new victims for their torture chambers? Or could they well be a clear sign of other men, dedicated soldiers, marching in to inaugurate the dawn of a new day?



Ekhono Kritodaash

--Abdullah al Mamun Imagine, if you will, an allencompassing image of man's inhumanity to man. Consider, if you can, the thousand and one sorrows that arise from the sheer helplessness that some men go through in life. Once you have done that, you will know that sorrow may not necessarily have an end, that it may not have the possibility of

petering out at some point. For there is more. In this tale of the character called Bakka Mia, what you have before you is a disabled man, one who lives from day to day begging on the streets and before homes. And yet the worst is yet to be. It comes in the howls of this beggar, piercing shrieks that reduce his humanity, or whatever remains of it, into the animalistic. In his growling, you spot the sheer helplessness of man in overcoming his fate. This is one powerful instance of fate and man unable to extricate themselves from the worst aspects of each other.



Ora Kodom Ali

-- Mamunur Rashid Make no mistake. Exploitation has been part of the history of this country. The exploiting classes have been there and will likely be there, given the semi-feudal nature of politics itself. The few rich take advantage of the many poor; and backed as they are by the political classes, which again are a

clutch of faces reflective of corruption, they have all the goodies for themselves, the country be damned. In this play, then, what you have is the story of a struggle which soon assumes the form of a political enterprise. Class is pitted against class. The affluent are unwilling to give up what they have seized; the poor, their backs against the wall, only know they can survive through hitting back or lose everything by giving in. The poor choose to hit back. And thus it is that a class struggle ensues. Politics as you know it cannot be allowed to stay that way. That is the message here. Kodom Ali is your poor peasant, your worker in the factory, your

Iblish

middle class.

--Mamunur Rashid

Once again it is the proletariat that Mamunur Rashid focuses on here. It is all about bad politics, brought on by the refusal of the feudal classes to acknowledge that their days are numbered and that they can avert disaster only

by listening to the voices of the dispossessed. As always in history, though, the haves have precious little time for the hapless have-nots. The result then is a struggle, launched by the poor against the machinations of those entrenched interests reluctant to part with their ill-gotten riches and their unholy hold on power. But popular struggle does not compromise. Here, it is eventually poetic justice that comes through.

Ekhon Dushshomoy

--Abdullah al Mamun

Tragedy brought on by the forces of nature can often snowball into bigger misery thanks to the acquisitive and predatory instincts in men. This tale is a powerful comment on how the dirty rich can exploit natural calamity to come by more wealth for themselves. A group of dishonest businessmen turn up with relief goods in a flood-hit region of the country, giving the victims of the disaster the feeling that here at last are some good Samaritans ready to give of themselves to the service of the miserable. The illusion is soon shattered when these very businessmen reveal their fangs as they reach out to grab the lands and other property of those they are putatively providing relief to. The inevitable happens. Those battered by the floods and now confronted with wolves in human clothing rise in angry protest. Again, poetic justice comes into play.



Kittonkhola

--Selim al Deen One of the defining instances of drama in Bangladesh, the story here begins with the razing of a village on the banks of the river Kittonkhola by the Pakistan occupation army. And then the story moves on, to bring into the picture a wider ambience of social conflict engendered by prejudices and class

consciousness. It is a tale of the bede community, peripatetic men and women, snake-charmers, crisscrossing the land in search of a living through providing entertainment to others. There is the old classic romance here. Young men fall for the charms and graces of young female snake charmers. And then comes a larger crisis that raises all sorts of questions spanning the fields of gender, religion and ethnicity. Social and caste rigidity put a whole world on fire. The casualty is dreams of romance.

Keramotmongol

--Selim al Deen

Keramot is your story-teller, one you have always heard of or pictured in your imagination. In this tale, what you have is a huge question of morality that you must tackle. Or you could suggest that there must be a way of coming to terms with it. Really? It is man who creates the circle of sins he suffers through. There is paradise on earth or paradise is earth itself. It is only men who have that paradise mutate into layers of hell through taking themselves farther and farther away from nature. It is man's isolation from nature that leaves him a battered being. That is what Keramot tells you as he goes from place to place, Everyman-like. Even so, there is in the narrative, as there is in every morality tale, a hint of the optimism that might yet be.



Ki Chaho Shonkhochil

--Momtazuddin Ahmed The searing effect of the War of Liberation on the consciousness of a people is here portrayed in inimitable style. It is the story of a struggle, individual as well as collective. Fundamentally, it portrays a society torn asunder by the sudden genocide launched by the Pakistan occupation army and yet that society calls

forth all its resilience to confront the enemy and hit back. In this story you have a woman whose sufferings as a citizen, as a loving mother and as a loyal wife, are the focus of her life. In the image of the white-breasted eagle are the symbolisms which define her existence. There is profundity in the tale, as there is pathos all around.



Ei Deshe Ei Beshe

-- S.M. Solaiman Ei Deshe Ei Beshe is a mirror of declining values in a country which once laid great store by values. The playwright draws attention to the decline, moral and ethical and political, taking place in the land. The old ideal of liberty, insofar as individual thoughts and movements are concerned, is under assault from the forces of fanat-

icism. All the old songs must follow a new, not necessarily happy format. Solaiman brings into this intense tale the image of social discrimination and political decline, giving it an edge that leaves a deep, gloomy impression on the soul. The satirical is most wonderfully combined with flashes of the musical.

Bibaho

--Momtazuddin Ahmed

Here again you have a play with a distinctive political message. It is the story of the young Sakhina, preparing to wed the man who will spend a lifetime with her. And yet fate has something else in store. In the uncertain times that dominate the land in the early 1950s, Sakhina's fiancé loses his life to the insensitivity of the state. He is gunned down on 21 February 1952 when the police fire on a procession of students and youth demanding the place of Bengali as the language of the state. The death of these young gives the country a renewed birth of freedom. For Sakhina, it is the death of a dream. She makes her choice: she will live with the dream. She remains wedded to it, just the way she would wed her young man had he lived. She is, in short, content to remain the widow of the man she was not fated to marry.

Meraj Fokirer Ma --Abdullah al Mamun

There are questions you confront in this highly complex tale of human emotions. And those questions relate to the overall canvas of values that must sustain life, indeed sustain the varied relationships an individual may have with others. How does a son relate to his mother, especially when perceptions of existence seem be unbridgeable between the two? And to what extent must religious faith come into defining the links between individuals? Or could it be argued that a misuse or exploitation of faith often undermines the natural instincts of goodwill and humaneness that are a natural underpinning of life? Within the story of one individual, or two, Mamun explores a wider expanse of human experience.

Rashtro Bonam

--Mamunur Rashid

There are the obvious political undertones spelt out in the title. It is once more in the mould that Mamunur Rashid has always worked in, which is an identification with the masses. It is, in short, a question of the state pitted against those who constitute it. When the interests of the people collide with the compulsions of the state, it is the people who need to emerge triumphant. There is always the overwhelming presence of politics in life. This play purports to demonstrate why that must be so.

Ekatturer Khudiram

--Mannan Hira

The young revolutionary Khudiram remains a legend in the history of India's struggle against British colonialism. In an era when politics in many instances was turning radical and young men and women were increasingly identifying themselves with the struggle for freedom, Khudiram openly declared his goal of fighting for freedom or perishing in the attempt. Eventually captured by the British, he was sentenced to death and hanged in the early phase of the twentieth century. Mannan Hira's play is based on the old tale of sacrifice for the country. He relates the young soldiers of the Mukti Bahini, indeed all freedom fighters in 1971, to the struggle of Khudiram and so portrays an image of continuity in the Bengali urge for liberty, of his willingness to sacrifice himself in the greater national interest.

Amena Shundori/Shokhina Shundori

--Chottogram Lokgatha

Folk tales have been part of the drama repertoire in Bangladesh for as long as anyone can remember. In this story, known as either Amena Shundori or Shokhina Shundori, the focus is on a beautiful woman around whom an entire world moves. And it is not just her beauty but the wisdom and good judgement she brings to her character that enrich the protagonist in her. Narrated in the tradition fashion, the tale takes the audience back to an era of simple romance confronting worldly difficulties which again must be put to an end through a triumph of valour and values.

Aami Noi

--Manzur-e Mawla

This is one play that tests the psychological core in you. It is a situation where one man plans the murder of another. Curiously enough, the one about to die appears to have a premonition of his death and yet goes through the motions of living. Deep questions are probed, with answers that may not always approximate the loaded nature of the questions. You could also be prompted into thinking that all the existential queries which have long assailed you are here explored in a new format.

Mon Pabaner Nao

The play, staged by Natyabed, is an adaptation of Bibhas Chakravarty's Madhob Malancha Koinna. It is again that old-fashioned tale of romance and sibling rivalry leading to intrigue. The murder of a young prince, who just might ascend the throne, is plotted by his four elder siblings. He takes the easy way out of his trouble. He flees to another kingdom, falls in love with the princess there. What happens then is what has historically befallen star-crossed lovers. The prince must deal with the question of his paramour's imminent marriage to another prince. Thorns and boulders must therefore be crossed. In the end, everything settles down. Everyone lives happily ever after.

Ei Shob Din Raatri

--Humayun Ahmed

Drama, apart from being enacted in theatre houses, has also made powerful inroads on television and radio. Ei Shob Din Raatri remains an instance of how a drama serial can draw a huge audience in homes all over the country. A fundamental reason of course is the portrayal of middle class values and aspirations in the play. Everything that you may have experienced in life, or seen others go through in their quotidian existence, is here shown in realistic form. Ambition, greed, envy, humour, the sufferings of the underdog and the smug complacence of the achiever are all here laid out in a way that you cannot but identify yourself with the story. It is your tale. And the family in whose rising and ebbing fortunes you are taking so much of interest is your own.

Raarang

--Mamunur Rashid

Alfred Soren died not many years ago defending the rights of the indigenous people of Bangladesh. His story is particularly remembered because of the attention it draws to the helplessness of a community constantly under threat from a larger community, in this case the Bengalis. Soren's murder has remained unresolved. A thick wall of silence has seemed to be erected where a revelation of the truth ought to have been. It is this tragedy, together with the sense of insecurity among Bangladesh's indigenous tribes, that is the theme here. There is justified anger in the narration. Anger can lead to results or it can be ignored. Soren's tragedy and the resultant indifference to it shows that it can be ignored. Not in this play, though. You emerge from it with a heightened sense of political consciousness, along with a dash of despair about everything going wrong around you.

NON-FICTION

My fellow traveller

TAHERA CHOUDHURY

We met in the first class lounge of Heathrow airport while travelling from London to Dhaka by Bangladesh Biman. As my husband and I settled down with a cup of tea, a voice from the next seat made me conscious of the surroundings. The mobile phone conversation was aimed at the person at the other end, but it touched my soul. The conversation went like this: 'Imagine we are at a train station, waiting, knowing that

the train is to arrive at a certain time. It is up to us to board

the train, the train will come and pass with or without us

anyway. Likewise God is watching and waiting for us, knowing that in Him is our destiny. He sent us to this world, gave us the power to choose between good and evil. It is up to us to make that choice and bear the consequences. So do not blame God for your own misconduct as we ourselves are responsible for setting our goals in life.' This was a conversation between two brothers. The spoken words were from an elder brother to his younger sibling, both having lived in London all through their adult

lives. But my fellow traveller was now happily living in Dhaka as a widower. Two daughters and a son stayed back, married to British (white) partners. The father was coming back to his roots. His children's roots were firmly grounded in British soil. He said a retired life in Dhaka was much more rewarding and enjoyable. 'What is there to enjoy?' I asked. The answer

came thus, 'You enjoy quarrelling, arguing about petty matters with family members, neighbours, flat-mates, say your prayers five times and the daily routine of eating and resting takes your day before you know it.' 'On the other side, life in the UK is all about work --monotonous, dull and lonely. Wife died ten years, left a

house in charge of the children who shared the rental income. Son and daughters living life as they please, better not to get too involved with them, better still not to get too close to the grandchildren either. It is the company of outsiders that you enjoy - where you are not tied up with any obligation.' Yet he finds himself living with a nephew and his family,

who are waiting on the sidelines, hoping one day to occupy the flat after the uncle passes away. However, there is no possibility of that as the children in England will be the rightful heirs to their father's property. As a British pensioner he is obliged to make two journeys a year back to the UK. Living in Dhaka with a British pension has enabled him to live a rich and comfortable life, which arouses envy in others.

What am I to learn from his experience.....?

My life is between Dhaka and London, my home is between Dhaka and London. My family is between Dhaka and London. We go back and forth until one day when we take a decision and will not travel any more. But how far away is that day? Perhaps my roots in Dhaka will be my final resting place. At least, if I take a lesson from the life of my brother who passed away six years ago in Dhaka, I should do the same.

My brother Dr. Rezaul Haq Khandker lived an eventful life. Beginning with a teaching position at the University of Rajshahi, his long colourful career led him to serve his own country and government, in the Middle East and in Washington, serving the World Bank, or at the UN in New York. In his retired life he opted to live with his eldest daughter in Toronto. I have many fond memories of my brother passing through London and I was privy to many of his journeys. I saw him initially move to Dhaka for six months and spend the other six months in Toronto. A few years into retirement, he decided to move permanently to Dhaka. He took a one-way ticket, advising his children to visit their parents in Dhaka from then on instead of having their parents coming to see them in Toronto.

I will not go into the details of how challenging it was for him to make an entry into Dhaka life. I will only say that through his own entrepreneurship he found time to be busy with events in life, found out his expatriate friends in Dhaka, got involved with the Rotary Club and was very much involved with his family of seven brothers and two sisters. I missed him in his Dhaka life because my stay in the city was never for more than two to three weeks. In between I would go to my in-laws in Sylhet, shortening my time in Dhaka even more.

Now I find myself in similar circumstances. My family situation in London permits me to shift to Dhaka. My husband Dr. Jamshed S A Choudhury by dint of his sheer hard work in the last ten years has made a niche for himself in Dhaka society. But where do I begin? Will I need another ten years to make a breakthrough for myself? My son says I have worked hard all my life, and now I should be able to sit back and enjoy. Maybe I should do just that.....

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POETRY Mend

SANGITA AHMED Unbind me, capricious

love For the sun is about to sleep Do not brush my broken

With your playful fray For I am the stream That embraces you but in dreams I soak you in my love

Ready to drown with you

But alas! Sweet love flutters Like a dove ready to fly

Before I sink to depths Of despair, grant me Sweet oblivion Release my broken soul Unchain my heart Unblind my eyes or Leave me lie like pebbles At the bottom of the stream The caressing waters

Will be my retribution The tender breeze of love Once touched my soul Like the wings of a dove

Now prepare for flight

To the endless blue sky

Alas! Cruel awakening! Love, were you ever mine? Love, did you not Promise me eternity?

Mend my broken soul If not with love then Adorn me with fluttering Wings So I may elude painful illusion Lift me up so I may behold Elusive reality

Piece together my shattered shards So I may be a Samurai sword And pierce the love That engulfs my being And chokes my heart

Let me rise like the Phoenix

Make me whole again

As steady as a rock Impenetrable rock Let the veins of gold inside my heart Be hidden in stone for a million aeons So I may live And not shed a tear Anymore!