

COVER STORY

THE

FATE OF TELEVISION

The television industry is full of individuals from various disciplines trying to make a mark in it in their own distinct manner, but those at the core of it truly understand it and make it their home while making a combined effort in trying to make it better. Star Showbiz recently arranged a meeting with Siam Ahmed, Shahtaj Monira Hashem and Masud Hasan Ujjal for a lively discussion about how the television industry is performing, its shortcomings and its opportunities.



Let's start with the most important one of all; people don't watch TV nowadays and it's failing to bring in new viewers, especially for TV dramas. As fairly new generation artists in the industry, how is your experience so far, and where in the industry do you think the problem lies?

Siam: It's been over one and a half years that I've started acting in TV dramas. The experience so far is very good because the people we are working with and the people we are working for have helped create a lot of networking opportunities. Social media has helped make fan responses instant when one of our works is being viewed and I believe many viewers still watch television, especially in times of special occasions like Eid. However, people do turn to online sources more frequently to watch the dramas because of the high frequency of ads in television which breaks the continuity and appeal of the stories. Still, we try to give our best output within our limits, but one big factor hindering the industry is the shortage of artists, especially male artists. Acting greats like Humayun Faridi Sir, Toukir bhai and others did receive a debut chance in their careers and proved their talents through that. It's harder for newer generation artists to break through as the makers are unwilling to take risks with fresh talents, depriving them of the debut chance.

Shahtaj: I think one reason is that there is a massive crowd of artists and directors in the industry, which leads the real talents to be lost in the crowd of mediocrity in the industry. However, TV advertisements have since come quite far in Bangladesh and have reached a global standard. And for me, it was a natural aspiration to work for the media or work as a model and when good offers started to come in, I just happened to start in the industry. My foray into TV dramas was also in a similar manner,

good offers came and I went ahead with it and the experience and reception I have received has been great so far.

Masud: Since we are talking about TVCs, I'd like to illustrate using the example of advertisements. TVCs are becoming better because there is more money involved there and higher competition; hence there are more talented individuals there, because there is more earning potential. It's simple really. The TV drama segment is not as competitive and growth opportunities are lower there, compared to the ad industry, and that's why not enough talented people come in to the TV drama sector. Another big problem is that we have probably lost faith in the idea of changing the entire scene for the better. Fear of taking the leap into revolutionizing the industry, I believe, is the primary problem we're going through. I started off as an art student at the Institute of Fine Arts, but when I decided to move to directing, I raised my own funds and created my first venture to feature my own ideas, the way I envisioned it and from there my journey started.

What can be done to bring viewers back to local channels rather than Indian channels?

Siam: Indian TV channels obviously have higher viewership than Bengali channels and I believe what the TV stations should do is investing in content which would draw in more viewers instead of airing the same type of shows. The viewers should be given priority in terms of what kind of content they prefer to watch instead of which is cheaper to produce. People tend to make the same type of dramas over and over again until they cannot milk the concept anymore. This mentality must be changed and people should come up with new and vibrant content for the viewers.

Shahtaj: The dramas have lost variation and versatility in our local channels. The artists tend

nowadays which does not create that pull for them to watch local channels.

Masud: I'd like to share an anecdote. When a new channel was starting a few years back, I was asked to meet with the consultant, who was from India. The consultant asked me to make a 1000 episode TV drama, but I had to deny as I do not believe in the concept of serial dramas. They insisted repeatedly, explaining that they're conducting an experiment to find out why people watch Indian channels so much in Bangladesh. I asked the consultant about why he thinks people watch it so much, and he replied comically that it is a natural tendency for people to snoop on their neighbours' lives and the stories provide a window to such an act. Although I am still not in support of promoting such tendencies into our social fabric, the channel is being opened and this should not be the case. Every show should have its own personality. They should develop programs to cater to separate tastes.

So we are all in agreement that good male artists are scarce in the industry, but why is it so?

Siam: To be fair, people in my generation are interested and fascinated by a career here. However, there is no proper grooming and

sexualisation of women is promoted highly for commercial reasons. These shallow portrayals should be taken care of so that generalised opinions are not formed. I was also one of the team members behind "Lux-Channel i Superstar" but I was a part of it as a professional; I cannot say I support the ethical grounds of it. Women are interested in women as well; they tend to take notice of what another woman wears or says. It is a mindset that has been formed through the ages. There are also personality based factors involved in making a male star which are there, but are unfortunately not highlighted in our industry. The sector needs to be formulated in a way so that such artists think of it as a respectable path to walk on.

Despite the shortcomings, there are stars coming up in this crisis, proving that there is still hope. What can be done to solve the remaining obstacles?

Siam: First of all, men should change their mentalities and develop their skills and education regarding the field. Secondly, they should be allowed opportunities so that they can create and hone their skills in the industry. **Shahtaj:** I also agree that male performers get fewer opportunities compared to their



Siam Ahmed

to lose their depth from working so many similar roles in so many dramas and people don't try it in the scripts, and I think it develops a sense of blandness for the viewers. Various kinds of characters should be introduced and played by the actors so that viewers remain interested and excited to see their favourite actors in a myriad of roles with stories that remain different from one another. They should develop programs based on the target age groups and develop separate shows to cater to separate tastes. What hurts me most is that there are no children's television channels and that grooming in does not take place for children



Shahtaj Monira Hashem

nurturing process centred on male artists. There's this lasting mentality that the market needs more actresses and female models but not male counterparts and this is contributing to the problem. **Shahtaj:** Yes there is a shortage of male actors and I agree with Siam's point, plus male artists get to work for longer in the industry than females, so there is a lower turnover. But there is more emphasis on actresses than actors in the industry as a whole which I believe is a prime reason to this issue. **Masud:** Speaking from experience, the single major reason behind this is that the



Masud Hasan Ujjal

counterparts and this should be corrected. Also, new talent should be fostered by the producers and directors so that there remains no disparity among the genders. **Masud:** The policymakers should start thinking about highlighting male actors and creating a field through scripts that make characters shine, while focusing on social issues which would interest audiences and create an industry that is not affected largely by commercialization.