

SPOTLIGHT

Imagine.

You are sitting in the audience row, waiting for a group of children ready to perform. The music starts playing. You see them climbing onto each other's shoulders, flying through the air, spinning, twisting and contorting their tiny bodies into shapes, while you gasp in wonder and surprise.

Now reality check: this is not a performance by an internationally acclaimed team we are talking about here. We are talking about our very own acrobat team.

Back in 1994, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, in association with the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, established an acrobatic training centre in Rajbari under the project of Fine and Performing Arts Training, where many Korean experts worked as trainers. The project had to end abruptly in 2000 due to a shortage of funds, and all these artists had to give up on a stable platform where they could experiment with their skills and live their dreams.

In 2011, Liaquat Ali Lucky, the present Director General of Shilpakala Academy, brought the Rajbari Acrobatic Training Centre under Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA), and formed the BSA Acrobatic Team in 2012. Since then, after a great deal of struggle, they have been district hopping with their performances.

BSA has proactively promoted a number of workshops, fitness training and shows for these artists. "And the good news is, this year an 11-member children's acrobatics team of BSA, led by a team leader flown in from China for a one-year acrobatic training programme, which BSA jointly initiated with Ministry of Cultural Affairs of China, Chinese Embassy in Bangladesh and Ministry of Cultural Affairs of Bangladesh," says Chaklader Mustafa Al Mashud, Assistant Director, Department of Drama and Film. "Next year another team will be heading for the same programme to develop their skills and talents, so as to pull off the most spectacular balances and hoops we have ever seen in the Bangladeshi acrobat scene."

Sounds interesting? If you take a look at the number of spectacular shows and festivals that the BSA has been putting up all these years, and their detailed, thoughtful projects that seek to promote and preserve our almost extinct folk culture, you will be enthralled.

Since its inception in 1974, the Bangladesh National Shilpakala Academy has been the principal state-sponsored national cultural centre of Bangladesh. Under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the academy was established through an Act passed in the Parliament in 1974 as a statutory organisation which was amended through a new Act in 1989. At present, six departments look after the academy's activities- Department of Music, Dance and Recitation, Department of Drama and Cinematography,

Department of Fine Arts and Photography, Department of Production, Department of Research & Publications and Department of Training.

The academy is headed by a Director General while the overall direction for the functioning of the academy is provided by an Executive Council (Shilpakala Academy Parishad) headed by the Minister-in-charge of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Shilpakala Academy has become the cultural centre of the whole country, with branches in 64 districts, while it plans to take their branches to the upazila level by establishing 481 cultural centres in those areas.

"One of our key goals is to promote cultural diversity, and so this year for the first time we had organised a cultural

please pay a visit to the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, and keep your eyes on the newspaper to know about the ongoing and upcoming events there.

"Culture is a complete way of life, a perseverance of beauty, patriotism and love for humanity. Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy believes in and dreams of disseminating this sense of culture all across Bangladesh. BSA has now reached the Upazila Level. We hope all the talents of Bangladesh will flourish under the guidance and leadership of BSA," says Liaquat Ali Lucky, the present Director General of BSA.

While jatra is an important cultural form in the country, it is often disregarded as a vulgar, kitschy art form, and has slowly been disappearing from the public



A HISTORY OF BREAKING BARRIERS

The journey of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and how they have upheld the country's cultural activities throughout the years.

FAYEKA ZABEEN SIDDIQUA

PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

show called Bangladesh Shanskritik Utshob, which lasted for over two weeks, displaying performances from all the districts. For instance, the Sherpur Shilpakala Academy had presented the 'Chandrabati Dance', a speciality of that area, while Nilphamari came up with a genre of music called 'Matiya', and Shatkhira presented 'Poter Gaan', a kind of folk music," says Mashud.

There is a standard answer of Dhakaites when they are asked what they do for fun in the city. And that is: restaurant hopping and visiting eateries. If you would rather die of embarrassment and give this answer one more time, our advise to you is,

eye. However, since 2012, as part of the Jatra development policy, BSA has been organising festivals which invites participation of jatra troupes from all over the country where they register the jatra troupe based on their performance. As per the initiative, a good number of jatra troupes from across the country have already attained registration through the qualifying process. Another edition of this festival will be launched from November 23, where different jatra troupes will participate.

"To attract more audience and expand their profits, a group of jatra troupe owners started adopting vulgar and



Liaquat Ali Lucky, Director General, BSA.

obscene dances in their performances. In contradiction to that, and to emphasise that jatra does not condone vulgarity, we are promoting dance workshops so that this art form can be rejuvenated," says Mashud. "To be registered under the programme, jatra performers have to meet a certain standard, and exhibit that their art does not promote crudity." For those who want to see these artists perform

upfront and feel their voice vibrating with emotions, keep yourself free from November 23 onwards. This is surely an experience that you will not enjoy sitting in front of your TV set in your living room.

Just like jatra, BSA has also been working on archiving songs of different folk genres - Bhaoiya, Jari, Shari, Bhatiyali, Murshidi, Kobir gaan, Gazir gaan, and many more. Moreover, they have also been the organisers of the SAARC artist camp, folk dance festival, handicraft festival; the Dhaka Art Summit; countrywide film festivals; Baul festivals; and the Shakespeare Carnival. They are also trying to revive the art of puppet dance by arranging workshops, seminars, and exchange programmes. The list is exhaustive!

BSA believes in the philosophy that any form of art should not be seen as an insignificant part of culture or as a mere luxury afforded by a few; rather they believe that culture should be able to reflect the deepest evils of society and their greatest strengths, while restoring our belief in moral values.

"As a cultural institution, we always believe in artistic expressions that encourage social change and promote



awareness," says Lucky. "For example, Jhenidah is considered the most suicide prone zone in Bangladesh. Other than organising seminars and anti-suicide campaigns, we have also used drama productions as a tool to raise awareness, to educate the public of high risk behaviours that could lead to suicide, thereby restricting its frequent occurrence. We have organised drama festivals, under the title Mullobodher Nattotshob all around the country that particularly focuses on our decline of social values and lack of moral awareness."

"We have a number of interesting projects in the pipeline. We are now working on a list of nine legends, which includes Ustad Alauddin Khan, Atul Prasad, Sachin Dev Burman, Suchitra Sen,

and plan to construct a memorial centre dedicated to them. Also, we are planning programmes devoted to particular sectors of the society, like garment workers and the non-cadre police of Bangladesh, and hope that such programming could awaken their cultural consciousness and help them showcase their creative abilities."

As we are gearing up for the season that is brimmed with cultural festivals around the city, you might want to step away from the mainstream and do something a little different. Whether you want to experience the melodrama of jatra, or tap your toes to our lesser known folk music, or be witness to some jaw dropping dance or musical productions, BSA has it all and more waiting just for you. ■