

# SHIMUL YOUSUF

## FREEDOM THROUGH ART AND UNITY

*For many, Shimul Yousuf has been a personification of the independence and strength of Bangladesh from its inception until date. Aside from being one of the most prolific theatre artists in the country, she is a singer, actor and above all: a freedom fighter. 21st March marked this legend's 60th birthday. Before the dawn of our Independence Day we present to you our exclusive interview with Shimul Yousuf. This special interview was taken by Tropa Majumdar, the acclaimed theatre activist and a long time friend to Star Showbiz.*

COVER STORY



*Music and acting are two different art forms and you possessed the aptitude for both, which would you pick as your priority?*

Well, if I had to pick a priority it would have to be acting. That is because I identify myself as an actress. However, this was not always the case. Up until 1971, I was more adept at singing. I actually never thought that I would be acting on stage some day until I actually did it. After Altaf bhai (Altaf Mahmud) left, I had no guardian for me to guide me in music. Altaf bhai was such a big influence to me that I was never quite the same after he was no longer here. And I would say that one definitely needs a guardian who can keep you on the right track.

*So you felt that you had guardians while doing theatre?*

Of course, they were all freedom fighters. I met so many people that I could relate to since I come from a martyr's family. I came across fantastic people like Nasir Uddin Yousuf Bacchu, Selim Al Deen and many others. Honestly, I started feeling very comfortable doing it and Dhaka Theatre became my second home. I would say that I am still an avid music lover, and sing whenever I get the chance.

*Our liberation war had an impact on the lives of every Bangladeshi, tangible or not. More so was the case with you, whose life was molded by the events of the war. I think it would be appropriate that we would want to know the story behind your driving force that was the 1971 war.*

I'll start out by saying that my brother Altaf Mahmud was a huge support for me. I loved and respected him thoroughly. During the war, our house was raided on 30th August early in the morning. The Pakistani troops came looking for him, and I remember that I was prac-

ting music in my room. They asked, "Altaf Mahmud kaun hai? (Who is Altaf Mahmud?)" He stormed out fearlessly and revealed himself. They lined him up along with four other freedom fighters and asked where they kept the arms and ammunitions. They said that they would kill him and his family if he didn't do as they said, and they started counting to

10. At the moment, Altaf bhai feared for our lives and showed them where they had buried the arms. They made him dig up the arms alone, and started hitting him if he slowed down while doing so. I watched it all from the window of the neighboring house. When the arms were retrieved, they tied his hands and started taking him with them. During the walk



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back, he stood in front of me very briefly. He looked me straight in the eyes, as if he wanted to say something. Even though that moment was probably a few seconds, it felt like an eternity to me. After so many years, I still feel as if he gave me a responsibility. It was as if he had passed on a torch to me, to convey his strength and message throughout. That was the last time I saw him. They spared my other family members, because Altaf bhai had taken all the responsibility on him. I just knew that after his demise, I had a huge responsibility on my shoulders. Our Liberation War is what drives me, and you could see it in the work I partake in.

*Altaf Mahmud, Selim Al Deen and Nasir Uddin Yousuf Bacchu. We already know that these figures have influenced you greatly into becoming the Shimul Yousuf that is today. Tell us a bit more about them, and how you got into theatre in your initial stint.*

I have already talked about my brother Altaf Mahmud; he will forever be the figure whom I derive courage and inspiration from. I did not initially understand Selim bhai that well. It took me some time to figure him out. He was a great man, always trying to inspire me. I started out with a rendition of "Bidaye Monalisa", where I played as a proxy for the actress who could not be there. Never before did I think I would be acting! Bacchu (Nasir Uddin Yousuf Bacchu) came over to plead to my mother to let me take part in the play. At that time, I did not know him. My mother was surprisingly okay with it. It was actually me who was hesitant! My career as an actor formally started from there, and I am grateful to these people for giving me the courage to explore my full potential.

*Family plays a huge role in shaping the future for an artist. How supportive would you say your family was?*

