

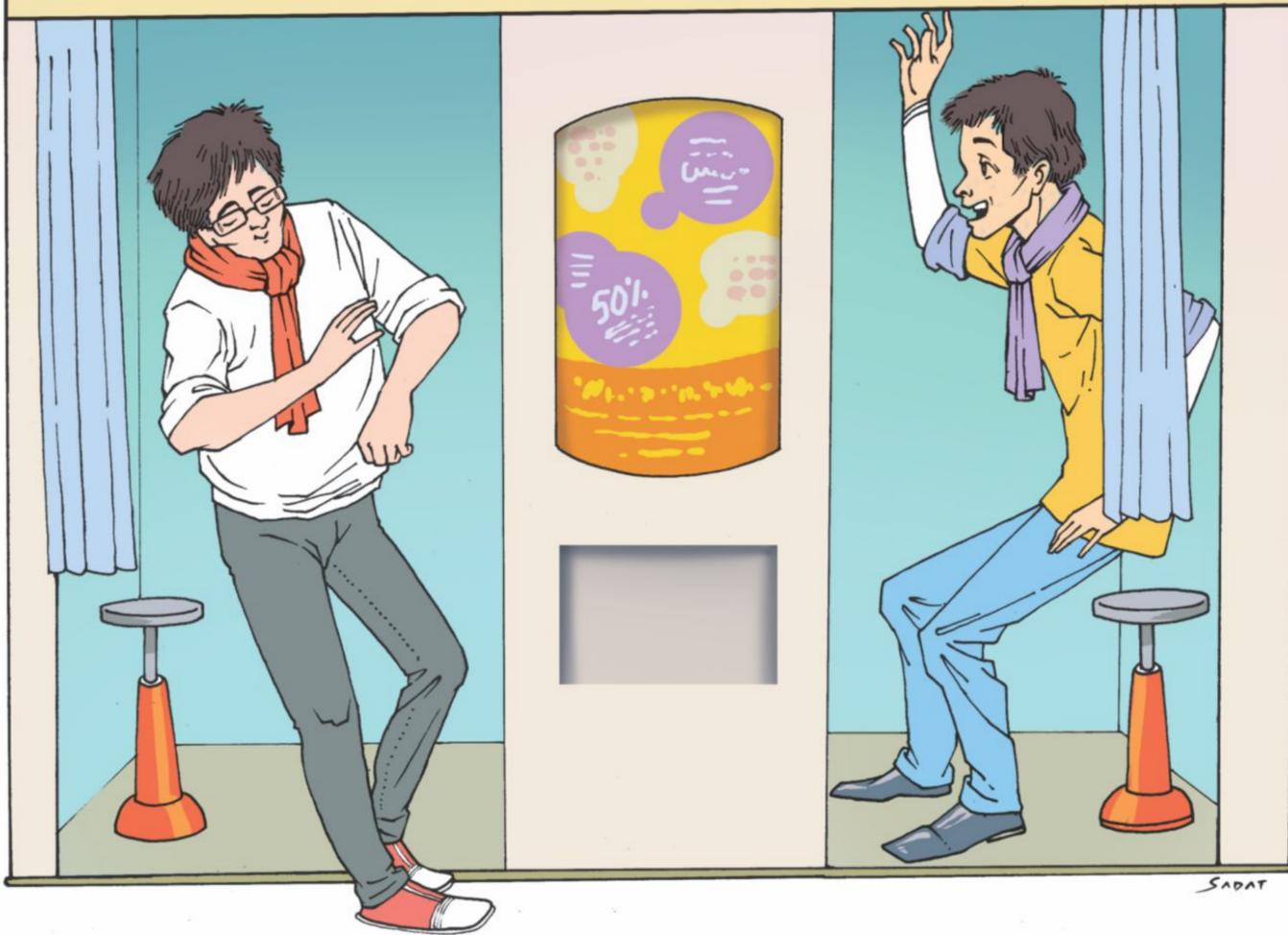
## MUSINGS

## POETRY KAISER HAQ

In and Around Boston  
As an Actor-to-be

SHAHID ALAM

## PHOTOGRAPHIC BOOTH



Almost in front of the entrance to, and egress from, the Goodge Street subway station on Tottenham Court Road stood a coin-operated self photographic booth (used long before the advent of the ubiquitous selfie of our times) on the sidewalk, stolid and indifferent to the tens of thousands of passers by who went by, or around it every day and night. It was high summer in 1996, and I was in the magical city of London. The kiosk was divided into two enclosures overlooking each other. Both were empty as I closed in on the kiosk, and entered one. I took my seat and stared at the contraption before me that was going to spew out four pictures of myself a few moments after I had inserted a coin of the correct denomination to get it going. As I was waiting and wondering when the thrilling moment of my pictures gushing out would come about, Bret walked into the opposite enclosure. I jumped up, heard a whirring sound, and shouted in his direction: "Bret, what the hell are you doing here?"

Well, I had the satisfaction of seeing his face fall, as much surprised at seeing me as I was of him, and heard him exclaim: "Shahid!" I looked down to ruefully discover that my four pictures came out blurred, and, therefore, ruined, and told him that I will meet him as soon as I finished having my pictures taken satisfactorily. The machine ate up another coin but this time delivered some decent pictures. Bret and I came out almost simultaneously with our sets of pictures. We embraced like long lost friends although we had seen each other only a few months back in Boston, Massachusetts. And now Bret Bailey was an American in London! We belonged to the same theater group in Boston, and he had come for the same reason to London: to participate in and complete the rigorous summer program in acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). As we crossed Tottenham Court Road to eventually make our way to Gower Street where the venerable old building of RADA was located, my thoughts went back to Boston and my involvement in the acting business there in what is one of the most London-like cities of the US.

I will talk about my experience at RADA and a roller-coaster life in London in other write-ups but now I would like to reminisce about my Boston acting days.

A chance encounter on the topic of acting with a Japanese woman getting trained in an acting studio kindled a latent desire in me to act professionally in the US and/or London. So I enrolled in the Actors Workshop, located on the much venerated Boylston Street in the Theatre District of downtown Boston. The head of the studio was a rummy old actor who, to me, looked like a lecherous geezer. But looks can often be deceiving, and Frank Storace was not a bad bloke really, although the sneaking feeling that he was a licentious coot never left me. Must have been his face! As it is, I was there for just two terms, learning the basics of on-camera acting from Andrea Southwick and more advanced techniques from Olivia Hamilton.

The Theatre District could easily be, and must have been, a haven for the non-conformist. It is simply enchanting. Obviously it is not Broadway, but the playhouses there would usually serve up good local productions, as well as, from time to time, plays from Broadway and elsewhere. The ambience then was kind of seedy and run-down, giving off an "artsy" vibe with matching characters going about their way, or not going away at all for a considerable length of time. One could almost visualize a cinematic portrayal of Charles Dickens' or Arthur Conan Doyle's London, with cars instead of horse-drawn carriages, and electric streetlights instead of gaslights. It was all so quaint, especially with the onset of evening. And there were the drug peddlers lurking in dark corners. I must have had an addict look about me because, on two occasions, as I was coming out of my acting classes in the evening, dreadlocked dudes would come up from dark corners and offer "high grade stuff," only to receive a polite "sorry" from yours truly.

Then, again on the Japanese woman's advice, I enrolled in The Studio at Collinge-Pickman, located in upscale Cambridge, and within striking distance of Harvard University's main campus. That turned out to be a rewarding

experience, since the Studio doubled as a local casting agency, courtesy of which I got called to several auditions for commercials and TV films, and managed to land a few jobs, including in a role as an extra in the CBS TV movie *Acts of Contrition*. I was instructed in stage and on-camera acting techniques by Carolyn Pickman, Patti Collinge, and Peter Kelley. Kelley was a no-nonsense teacher, critiquing trainee performances in front

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of the entire class, which was always small in size. He also invited me to join the Harrison Project, which I did.

Peter counted among his many students Chris O'Donnell (of *NCIS* and *Batman and Robin* fame) and Eliza Dushku (*True Lies* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Though not a great teacher, he was a good one. He taught at Collinge-Pickman, but his heart lay in his Harrison Project that was located in East Dedham Street, which, like Actors Workshop, was also situated in another quaint part of Boston, although it did not possess the magical ambience of the Theatre District. I continued my training there, and graduated to the senior level where I practiced with scenes from plays and scenes using what is known as Method acting (developed by Russian Konstantin Stanislavski and further

evolved by Americans Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner and others). It was tough, real tough, but so rewarding!

And so it was that I first met Bret Bailey. The Harrison Project organized a show to raise money for a charity. I was one of the volunteers, and one of the organizers was Bret, who was also a longtime student at Harrison. We got along well, and met off and on when I made my stage acting debut in Boston's Lansdowne Street Playhouse, which was located in Beantown's club district, and was owned jointly by the doyens of the club scene, the Lyons brothers, and Boston's own iconic rock group, Aerosmith. That is how I got to meet Tom Hamilton, the group's guitarist and back-up vocalist.

He and his wife came to the opening night of the play I was in, Howard Korder's *Search and Destroy*, directed by Peter; this performance marked the debut of the playhouse. I played in a small role of partygoer and ensemble cast. Got paid for my efforts, too, which made me a professional! The play got good reviews, and ran for over a month. Later, in 1995, to raise more money for charity, Harrison Project organized "An Actor's Scene Showcase" at the Playhouse, where I acted in the opening scene, which was from the play *The Indian Wants the Bronx*. Guess who played the Indian! Bret was involved as an organizer as was yours truly. It was a blast. That was the last time I saw him --- on a cold autumn day in October 1995, until that summer morning in London in 1996. I auditioned in New York for RADA and got accepted for the summer program. I also auditioned for, and was cast as Dr. Samji in a PBS TV pilot for the series *Connect with English*. The money I received from the gig (my co-actor was Michael Carrey, who was the police captain in *Dirty Harry*, starring Clint Eastwood in the name role), went in paying for my tuition at RADA. But that RADA saga is left for another episode of this thespian's education and professional life!

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SIX SHARED SEASONS  
(for Rubana, a true Southasian)

Since we are  
Our worst enemies,  
Is it any surprise

That barbed wire,  
Watchtower and searchlight  
Keep neighbours apart,

Border guards suddenly  
Slug it out  
For no apparent reason,

Families picnic  
Willy-nilly, as they wait  
In visa queues,

And poor people are  
Rounded up – undesirables  
Or aliens or both –

We're almost as bad  
As Europe was  
Till the other day.

All the time  
The year keeps rolling  
To its celestial schedule.

Grishma's furnace heat,  
Barsha, monsoon floods,  
Sarat's mellow skies,

Hemanta's fresh harvest,  
Mist over the fields,  
Dew underfoot,

Warmth of embroidered quilts,  
Winter bonfires, snow on mountains,  
Fog on the plains,

Then every girl a beauty  
In *basanta's* vibrant amber,  
& flowers with humid lips

Kissing the passionate bee.  
Six seasons to everyone else's  
Four – from the Himalayas

To Serendip, & the Indus plains  
To the delta  
Of the Ganges & Brahmaputra –

Hold the whole  
of Southasia together,  
Six shared seasons

Making nought  
Of borders & barbed wire.  
Nature is usual, is

Prodigal with gifts and lessons –  
& as usual, alas,  
We take one & ignore the other.

(Note: Writing 'Southasia' instead of 'South Asia' is a charming orthographic innovation that indicates the region's civilizational unity; it is used by Himal, the weekly published from Kathmandu, and the Southasian TV Channel, of which Rubana was CEO for some years.)



## THE BORDER

Let us say you dream of a woman,  
and because she isn't anywhere around,  
imagine her across the border.

You travel hunched and twisted in a crowded bus,  
on a ferry through opaque night  
lacerated by searchlights,

to this squalid frontier town:  
a one-legged rickshawallah takes you round  
to a six-by-eight room, the best in the best hotel.

But instead of crossing over you lie dreaming  
of the woman, and the border:  
perfect knife that slices through the earth

without the earth knowing,  
severs and Joins at the same instant,  
runs inconspicuously through modest households,

creating wry humour – whole families  
eat under one flag, shit under another,  
humming a different national tune.

You lie down on the fateful line  
under a livid moon. You  
and your desire and the border are now one.

You raise the universal flag  
of flaglessness. Amidst bird anthems  
dawn explodes in a lusty salute.

Kaiser Haq has just retired as professor of English from the University of Dhaka; he is currently the Dean of Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, and a poet and translator.