

# CONFRONTATIONS WITH PAIN

## Review of Syed Jamil Ahmed's theatrical production 'Rizwan'

*Syed Jamil Ahmed's latest theatrical production 'Rizwan' has been a matter of much discussion in recent days. Star Showbiz has exhibited various opinions regarding the stage play from a variety of people, but we felt a third perspective was needed to truly understand 'Rizwan'. Thus, we asked Lubna Marium to review 'Rizwan' from her own point of view.*

'Tread lightly for you tread on my realities' (Playwright Connel Morrison, on the ethical dilemma of reducing the complexity of conflict situations into narrative theatre)

Writing about the merits of creative ventures, in one of his many erudite writings, Syed Jamil Ahmed, Director of the recently premiered Bangla version of British playwright Abhishek Majumdar's play 'Rizwan', questions, 'And after the war is over, leaving behind a barren landscape of mutilated bodies and mangled memories, it is pointless to ask who has won. What is necessary and humane is to ask, how do we heal the pain, recover from bereavement and rise from the ashes of loss to perceive that the bells are tolling for 'us'? As a corollary Ahmed states, 'Knowledge, understanding and deep insight are achieved through aesthetics and the capacity that relies on intuition more than cognition. Therefore, I suggest that the Lederach-inspired ethical imagination can be best generated by means of artistic performance'.

Syed Jamil Ahmed's intentions, therefore, are clear. As Brian Doerries, an ardent advocate for use of theatre as catharsis, corroborates, 'Tragedy is an ancient military technology, a form of story-telling that evokes powerful emotions in order to erode stigmas, elicit empathy, generate dialogue, and stir citizens to action'.

The play 'Rizwan' is based on three of the late, exiled Kashmiri poet Agha Shahid Ali's poems, where the tragedy of Kashmir is the leitmotif, and discourses of 'history as violence' and 'narrative as tragedy' constantly confront each other. In 'A Country without a Post Office', Agha Shahid writes -

'Each post office is boarded up. Who will deliver parchment cut in paisleys, my news to prisons?'

In 'I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight', the poet talks about an 18-year-old Rizwan, who was killed by soldiers -

'Rizwan, it's you, Rizwan, it's you,' I cry out.

As he steps closer, the sleeves of his pheran torn

'Don't tell my father I have died,' he says

In another prose-poem, 'Dear Shahid', he writes a letter to himself.

'You must have heard Rizwan was killed. Guardian of the Gates of Paradise. Only eighteen years old..... I want to ask the fortune-tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife?'

After Shahid Ali's untimely death, Amitava Ghosh's evocative obituary states, 'Shahid had a sorcerer's ability to transmute the mundane into the magical'. In an interview Ali, himself, elucidates, 'I see everything in a very elegiac way. It's not

something morbid, but it's part of my emotional coloring.'

But then, these were not the only thoughts playing in our minds, as we waited for the theatre doors to open for the Premiere presentation on the eve of Eid. There were heightened expectations that night. This was Syed Jamil Ahmed's 'come-back' project with theatre group Natbangla. Directing, outside of his academic circle, after a hiatus of nearly two decades, news had trickled around about intense two months of closed door, dawn to dusk rehearsals, including two out-of-city 'camps'; unprecedented institutional support by the Ministry of Culture; a budget of over Taka Twenty-seven lacs; and finally, auditorium bookings for a straight run of

*en masse*, the sparse first-night turn-out was a disappointment. It was worth noting the sole presence of ITI President Ramendu Majumdar representing the entire community of senior practitioners. More generosity would have enhanced the network of theatre activists and set an example of camaraderie, for the young.

And, of course, it was a spectacular production.

Syed Jamil Ahmed left no stone unturned, no corner of the Experimental Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy unexplored, no potential unutilized, almost doing the impossible to transform the theatrical space into 'the Valley of the Departed', with the misty waters in its midst turned into a bridge between life

the non-linear unfolding of the tale, where theatrics begins with Rizwan's dead sister Fatima welcoming him into her arms, after his death by torture, and then slips back to the merriment of his birth in the bower of flowers that was Kashmir. Like a jigsaw puzzle the spectators rearrange the tale from the bits and pieces of randomly sequenced events; contextualizing the given end, to the slowly unfolding past. This play will be remembered for long, as yet another trend-setter by Syed Jamil Ahmed.

Very sensitively designed scenarios such as the whispering of undelivered letters, quirky depictions of rape and counter-rape, sensitive dialogues between the siblings, their mother and grand-father, set the stage, for the ensemble of actors to deliver Agha Shahid Ali's mellifluous elegy. Unfortunately, the lament gets drowned beneath the spectacle. It gets one to rethink the Director's intentions.

Often in present day productions, the Director shifts the responsibility of a male protagonist to a female lead. We've been awed by Sabitri Devi Heisnam's Amal in Tagore's 'Dak Ghar', directed by Heisnam Kanhailal. In Rizwan, the play begins and ends with Fatima's despairing wails. Yes, surely, not much literary attention has been given to the situation of women in Kashmir and this was the Director's way of drawing our eyes to it. Jamil Ahmed's intentions could have been lauded, only if the actor had been able to carry it off. One would have expected the experienced Ahmed to have comprehended the burden of responsibility on a novice actor. Unfortunately, the weakest link in a stupendous production were the three main actors in the role of Fatima, Rizwan and their Mother. Though very subjective and personal assessments, they are honest opinions coming from a lot of goodwill for the cast and crew.

Other things which didn't work for me, were the tacky row of plastic flowers dangling on a thread, the dolls which could very well have been from China, and the kid's scooter, which was definitely made in China. They didn't go with Naila Azad's sensitively designed Kashmiri costumes. An ethnic touch to these would have been more culture sensitive. Yes, very minor details, but, again suggested with goodwill in heart. Though the music was stupendously designed, I would have liked a more Kashmiri touch to the lullaby.

Productions have a shelf-life of anywhere between three to four years, and are more 'the process' than 'the product'. I feel certain that Syed Jamil Ahmed's 'Rizwan' will age like good wine and take its place in the pantheon of memorable productions from Bangladesh, if it hasn't already done so.



ten days with two shows a day; including Eid holidays. In fact, I later confirmed these informatics with Ali Ahmed Mukul, Auditorium Manager of BSA, and production assistant of Rizwan. The general consensus, of course, was that no one else deserved more, and, certainly, no other theatre stalwart could make better use of these boons. We were definitely in for a treat, even though the Premier show was priced at Taka 1000.- per ticket. Certainly, a nominal price to spend as a tribute to one of the greatest and most innovative of Theatre Directors of Bangladesh.

As an aside, Eid notwithstanding, expecting the theatre fraternity to show-up

and death. Using multiple levels of performance - from the catwalks high above, to moving platforms suspended mid-air operated on pulleys, aisles and back-stage turned into performance space, all the way to ground level - the entire Hall came alive. Lighting was used to best advantage with sharp precision. The practiced dexterity of the cast leaping in and out of different levels, climbing rope-ladders, sliding down ropes like combatants, the unconventional entries and exits were all like watching proficient acrobats in a circus. To this was added the unlikely narrative of the dead.

Soon, the audience came to grips with

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