

At dawn on Bangla New Year, Ramna Park wears a festive look. People from all areas of Dhaka city as well as different parts of the country congregate at the verdant ground to celebrate Pahela Baishakh. By 6.30 am, the famous park that has been the venue of many cultural and political events, pulsates with activity. Although a number of regular programmes take place every year within Ramna Park and Dhaka University area, it is the musical programme arranged by the country's leading cultural organization Chhayanaut that has played a pioneering role in making Pahela Baishakh into a joyous and grand occasion. As per tradition, each year the Chhayanaut artistes and students welcome the Noboborsho with a collection of well-chosen Rabindra, Nazrul, folk and other patriotic songs. Enthusiasts of different religions and social backgrounds mill around the batamul to enjoy the performance. But how did it all begin?

The year was 1961 and it was the 100th anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore's birth. For most culturally minded Bengalis it was a cause for great celebrations to honour Tagore. Unfortunately, the last thing the then Pakistani government wanted was a lot of Bengali hoopla over a Hindu Bengali cultural icon. The government had even thought of banning Tagore's songs altogether not to mention its attack on the language itself. Defying such state disapproval, which no doubt would have repercussions, singers, artistes and intellectuals got together to celebrate the birth centenary of Tagore. A Rabindra Committee was formed and included prominent cultural personalities such as Muklesur Rahman (popularly known as Siddhu Bhai), Begum Sufia Kamal, Waheedul Haque and Sanjida Khatun. It was this grand celebration that set the stage for the birth of Chhayanaut. At a picnic in Joydevpur these Bengali artistes and intellectuals decided that



PHOTO COURTESY: CHHAYANAUT

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Chhayanaut's 'Barsho Baran', 1999

PRESERVING BENGALI IDENTITY

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN
AND
LAVINA AMBREEN AHMED



Chhayanaut's 'Barsho Baran', 1988
PHOTO COURTESY: CHHAYANAUT



Chhayanaut's 'Barsho Baran', 1983

PHOTO COURTESY: CHHAYANAUT

there was a pressing need for an institution that would help to develop Bengali culture. Prior to this, Bengalis had never really done anything together and the success of the centenary celebration clearly indicated that when they did, the outcome would be something quite spectacular. The name 'Chhayanaut' was taken from a *raga* and unanimously accepted.

The committee that came into being to celebrate Tagore's birthday, decided to set up a cultural institute that would impart lessons in every aspect of traditional music. Thus Chhayanaut Sangeet Bidyayatan was born. Besides providing lessons in Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Sangeet and Palli Sangeet, the institute also offered lessons in classical forms of dance such as *Monipuri* and *Bharat Natyam* and lessons in playing the *tabla*, the *sitar* and other Eastern musical instruments.

Chhayanaut then began to arrange informal cultural gatherings calling them 'Srotor Ashar' first with artiste Firoza Begum (a well-known Nazrul Geeti artiste) then

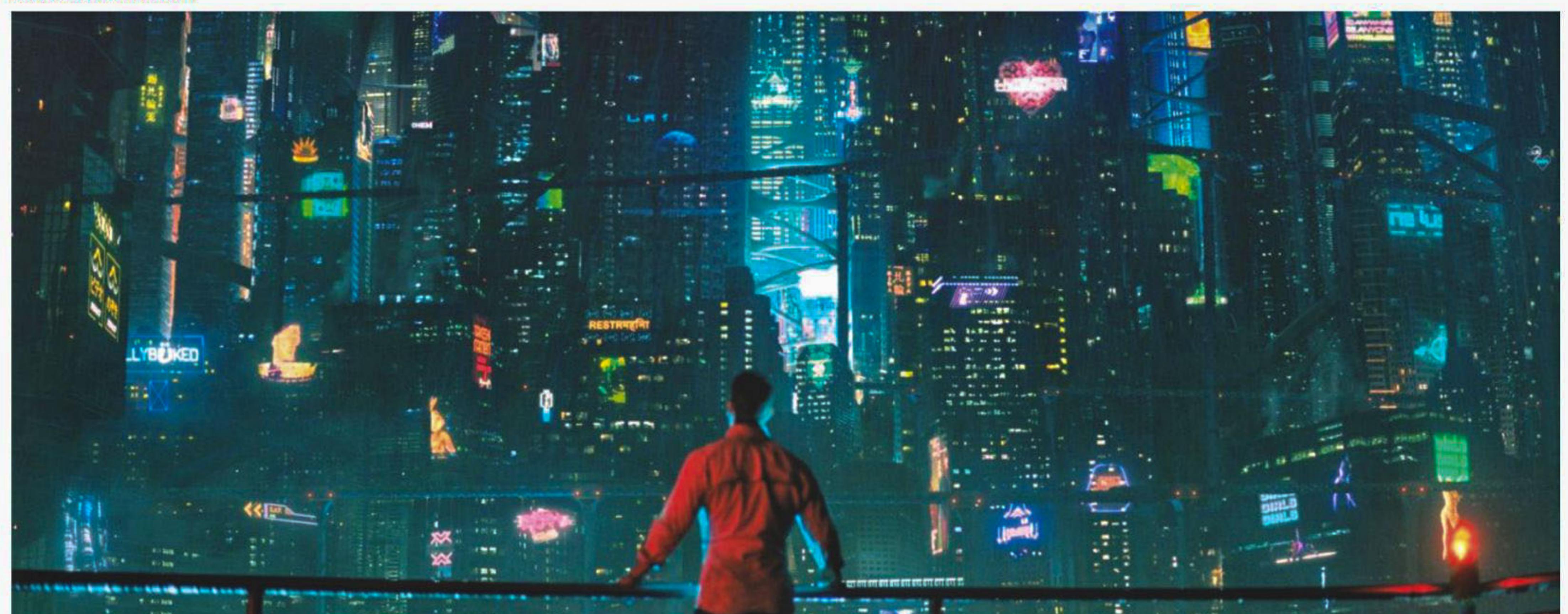
Liberation War as she was constantly being watched by government agents. In 1963 Chhayanaut celebrated Pahela Baishakh, setting a tradition that would endure the onslaught of communal forces and political oppression and has still remained an important part of our lives today.

Such seasonal festivals became a regular feature and soon became integrated with Bengali cultural consciousness. "In this way, we tried to remind Bengalis, what it meant to be Bengali," comments Sanjida.

Chhayanaut's main target, however, was the younger generation. Young people being impressionable and easily swayed by imported cultures, had to be reminded of who they were and Chhayanaut was persistent about teaching them through music, the richness of Bengali cultural traditions. This has been Chhayanaut's underlaying objective and continues even today.

A longer version of this article appeared earlier in The Star.

| ENTERTAINMENT |



ALTERED CARBON

Television's ultraviolent new future noir

AMIYA HALDER

Although it's been out for over two months, the visually-thrilling, ultra-pulp tech-noir Altered Carbon has enjoyed relatively little fanfare.

Created by Shutter Island screenwriter Laeta Kalogridis, Altered Carbon is set in a depraved new world 400 years in the future. Human consciousness now exists on "stacks", and if you're rich enough, it can be downloaded and transported via the cloud. If you die, your identity can be simply booted up in a new "sleeve", and if you can afford it, in your very own bio-enhanced clone. This means immortality, body-switching, planet-hopping and perfected virtual reality are the MO of the new world order.

Rebel-turned-super-sleuth, tough-guy protag Takeshi Kovacs has spent the last 250 years with his consciousness "turned off". He is spun up in a buff new body (owned by recent RoboCop Joel Kinnaman), and tasked with solving the murder of the world's wealthiest and oldest-living human, Laurens Bancroft. Joining Kovacs on his manhunt are AI hotelier Poe, disgruntled ex-Marine Vernon Elliot, and Kristin Ortega, a detective who's got moves as well as an ulterior motive.

Small-screen sci-fi always runs the risk of being financially unsustainable (e.g. Joss Whedon's short-lived Firefly that was originally designed to span seven years) or looking tad plasticky (think: DC's Legends of Tomorrow or

The 100). But looks is one department where the series definitely prevails. With a budget described as being bigger than the first three seasons of Game of Thrones', Altered Carbon is a punchy, high-grade cyberpunk fix.

Rather it is the casting which misses the mark with some characters. Amateurish theatrics by Dichen Lachman and one of the Pussycats from Riverdale, are disappointing, even for an action-heavy, gratuitous space-thriller dripping with bright neon lights.

One of the criticisms making the rounds is the show's stylistic emulation



of Ridley Scott's deathless classic, Blade Runner. One might ask why 36 years later, Hollywood is still producing television set in exotic, ghetto flesh-pots, but there simply isn't enough skin-job pastiche going around to fault Altered Carbon or be exasperated by it. So for those who wish the electric dream never ended, it promises to not disappoint.

To a lesser degree, the series echoes other genre-defining film. For example, stacks and how they work resemble the SQUID disks from Strange Days, and there is a generous helping of Matrix-like reality-hopping—no doubt exciting for the futurist freak in you.

Whether it is the Sade-esque sexual debauchery or the outlandish socioeconomic strata propagated by mankind's newfound immortality, true to the dystopian genre, Altered Carbon is as hyper realist as fantastical.

If all goes well, the Netflix series will run for a total of five seasons, but the show has already got people wondering if its so-far-niche following will support such an extravagant endeavour.

However, genre appeal certainly does not define the artistic and intellectual merit or even entertainment value of a production, and Altered Carbon's multi-planetary human civilisations and marvellously gritty splendour entertain to say the least. Kalogridis' dark, sensual meditation on disconnecting mind from body is a work of ambitiously ultraviolent science fiction that will go down as a cult classic, even if it does not break out beyond its hard-core genre enthusiasts. ■