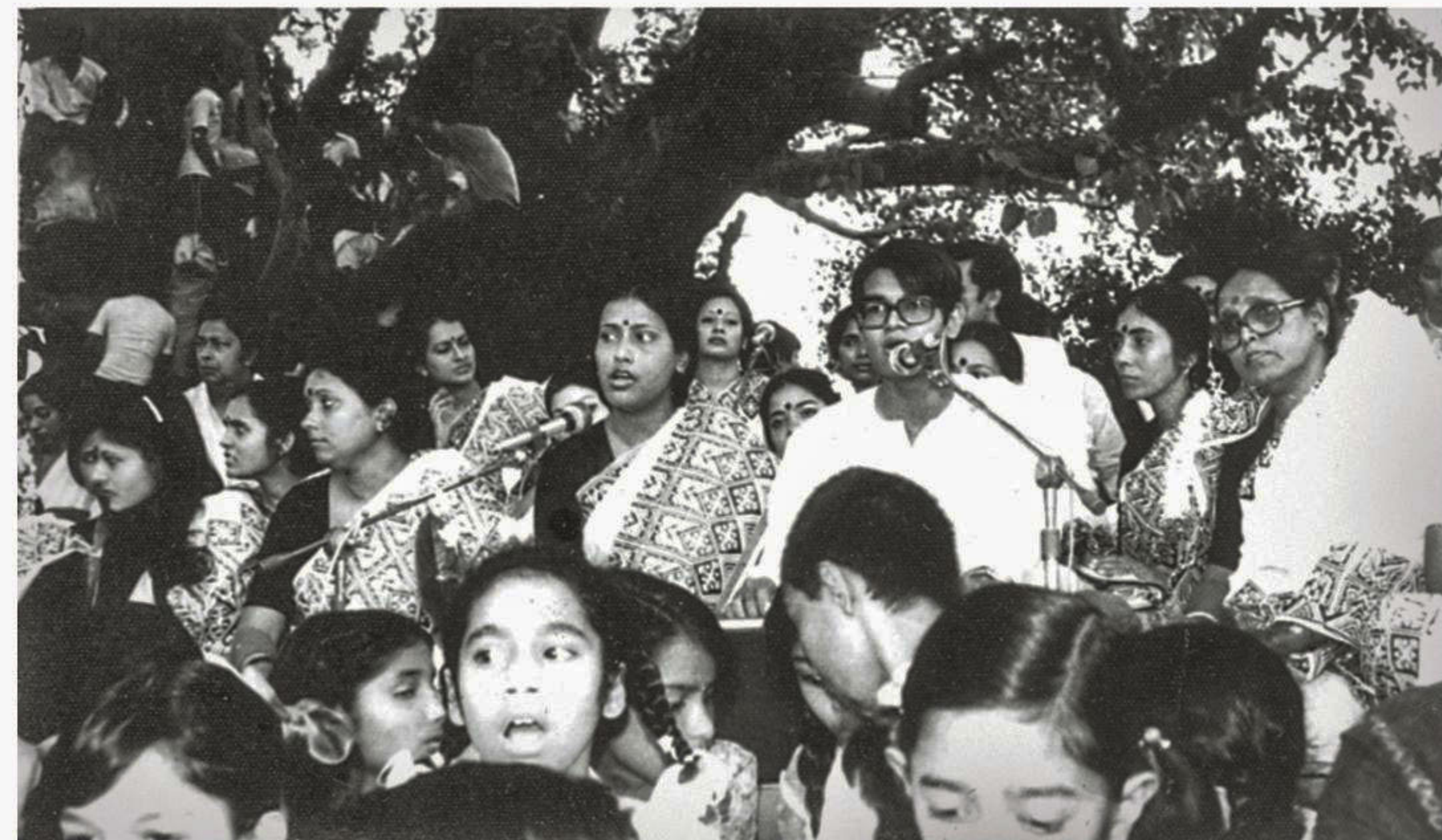


At dawn on Bangla New Year, Ramna Park wears a festive look. People from all areas of Dhaka city as well as different parts of the country congregate at the verdant ground to celebrate Pahela Baishakh. By 6.30 am, the famous park that has been the venue of many cultural and political events, pulsates 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 Chhayanaaut that has played a pioneering role in making Pahela Baishakh into a joyous and grand occasion. As per tradition, each year the Chhayanaaut 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 Chhayanaaut. At a picnic in Joydevpur these Bengali artistes and intellectuals decided that



Chhayanaaut'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 'Chhayanaaut' was taken from a *raga* and unanimously accepted.

This was no small achievement for Sanjida Khatun, one of the main founders of the institution and its principal. Sanjida, at the time, was teaching at Eden College and although she was one of the most active agents in Chhayanaaut's birth and activities, she was forced to stay in the background. She held, after all, a government job and so could not get official permission to be general secretary of Chhayanaaut from the Pakistani government.

In fact, in spite of being its founder she couldn't even be Chhayanaaut's committee member before the



PHOTO COURTESY: CHHAYANAUT

Chhayanaaut's 'Barsho Baran', 1999

PRESERVING BENGALI IDENTITY

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN
AND
LAVINA AMBREEN AHMED



Chhayanaaut's 'Barsho Baran', 1988

PHOTO COURTESY: CHHAYANAUT

with Fahmida Khatun (who sang Rabindra Sangeet) and artistes of classical music.

Chhayanaaut soon became the leading proponent of songs and dances of Tagore, Nazrul, old masters (such as Atul Prashad, D L Roy) folk music as well as instrumental Raga music.

From the beginning, the committee of the organisation decided to stage cultural shows featuring well-known artistes. The first show staged by Chhayanaaut was the 'Sharodutshob' (the occasion that celebrates the Bangla season 'Sharot' in the early 1960s. The venue of the event was Baldah Garden. It was a memorable occasion for Chhayanaaut. 'Sharot' was celebrated in style with children floating paper boats in the pond and everyone having *khoimurki*. The next major event was the 'Bashonto Utshob' (celebration of spring), which took in the Dhaka University area. Thus, Chhayanaaut started a trend to celebrate all the important seasons of the Bangla Calendar, like *Pahela Baishakh*, *Barshamongol* etc.

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.

Chhayanaaut'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 Chhayanaaut was persistent about teaching them through music, the richness of Bengali cultural traditions. This has been Chhayanaaut's underlying objective and continues even today.

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

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ALTERED CARBON

Television's ultraviolet 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-guyprotag 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 manhuntare 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 a 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-fetched 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 ultraviolet science fiction that will go down as a cult classic, even if it does not break out beyond its hard-core genre enthusiasts. ■