

BIDDING ADIEU TO RADA

SHAHID ALAM



The terrible realization was setting in almost all, if not all of us. The dream days of fun and work in equal measure at RADA were drawing to a close. In just over a week, we would all go our separate ways, to our own individual destinies, with only a scant chance of meeting each other again. Aside from the reality that we were from various national backgrounds and, therefore, be largely confined to our own little (or big) parts of the world, the more compelling reason would be that at least a fair number of us would not even get a toehold in the professional acting world. For that group, RADA would be a journey that would not result in the realization of their dreams.

As the day of the last official programme drew near, our group was given the honour of performing passages from Shakespeare's plays in the George Bernard Shaw Theatre of RADA's main building. I opened the

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proceedings with Duke Orsino's opening piece (Twelfth Night, "If music be the food of love, play on...") that went rather well (even if I do say so myself!) with an audience that included Kenneth Barter and a few other guests observing from the balcony. Peter Oyston, the group leader, had selected my (and the rest of the group's) piece, and the actors' showcase was one of the highlights of my short, but intense, RADA programme.

Peter Oyston. I had decided in late December 2017 that I would compose this piece, and that Oyston would figure prominently in it. I remember much about the man and his love for

the theatre as well as painting, but I wanted to know more about his activities since I had left RADA more than twenty years back. And so I took recourse to that monumental postindustrial convenience (as well as curse!): the Internet. And I learnt that he had passed away in his beloved Australia on October 9 of that year at the age of 73. So many memories flooded back from those heady days of the summer of 1996. Since he had been placed in charge of Group 3, which was made up of trainees with at least some professional experience in the audio-visual medium and/or the stage, we had some inkling of his credentials to guide us. A few of us had more than a notion. The summer experience and the Internet have allowed me to give the reader an idea of the man and his lifelong dedication to the arts.

I was not disappointed when he first walked into our classroom. Well, he definitely looked the notional "artsy." He had longish dirty-blond hair falling around his weather-beaten lined face, had a lazy gait, and was wearing a loose-fitting blue shirt tucked inside black trousers. He spoke slowly, and although there were varied inflections, he was never loud. Though he never expressed it, I had the feeling that he was conscious of dealing with professional trainees and, therefore, chose to guide, rather than teach, us. He introduced himself by revealing that he was an Australian national who worked in London, but loved going back to his country at every opportunity. Only later did we find out that he went back primarily to paint landscapes of his homeland. He was also, to reiterate, a painter. And, strictly speaking, it was his adopted country, having been born in England (information gleaned courtesy of the Wikipedia!).

He had directed more than 200 productions, (mostly theatre, but also

film) in Australia, UK, Japan, France, and the US. His paintings were mostly of landscapes, a big portion of which dealt with the Australian countryside, and he taught regularly at RADA. He was a caring and dedicated teacher, and I cannot resist the temptation to quote screenwriter Ray Mooney to illustrate the essence of his teaching and directorial method: "Oyston always pushed the people he worked with to reach their potential... (he) didn't allow people to accept the comfort of mediocrity." I personally experienced his philosophy during the course of my training and in conversations outside of classes and the odd occasions we met after the programme was over. In one of these meetings he commented that I had the potential of being an accomplished director. Hopefully, some day, I will be able to demonstrate his assessment of my latent potential!

Peter's legacy in the field of the performing arts may be seen in his work as the founding Dean of Drama at Australia's College of the Arts. His forte was in directing Shakespeare's plays, but he was quite an accomplished painter. Months after our RADA stint had ended, I got a card from him, inviting me to "River to the Sea", which was an exhibition of his (and Lisa Dalton's) paintings at the Bartley Drey Gallery in London. I went, saw a wide range of landscape paintings, and had a pleasant chat with the two painters. He had another exhibition of his (and Jean Hobson's) paintings soon after at the Hanover Galleries in Liverpool. His themes deal with the sea, bush, desert and rivers of the Australia he was enamoured with. Incidentally, he had directed two acclaimed productions at the Liverpool Cathedral --- *A Man for All Seasons* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. He had a fascination for Liverpool, just as I had for that place, what with me being a lifelong Beatlemaniaic and

an avid fan of the Liverpool football team. Peter had directed several plays for various churches and cathedrals. He died in the bush home that he loved.

I kept in touch with Peter for several months after RADA, but had to bid adieu to all my group mates within a week following the course completion. A few members of my group had to leave the very next day, and we decided to give ourselves a send-off to remember by invading one of the very few bars (with blaring dance music in accompaniment) that operated beyond the 11 p.m. curfew for those institutions in the London of those days. We danced away into the small hours of the morning until the realization dawned that some of us had to leave for the US or Canada in early morning flights. The good byes were not easy, RADA had unwittingly formed such a strong bond among us, but they were made, with promises of keeping in touch with each other. But, of course, almost inevitably, I lost touch very soon with most, except for some lingering exchange of postcards and letters with two or three. That also did not last beyond a few months. There was no Internet in those days for long distance real time communication. I went back to my hostel feeling hollow having had just bidden adieu to a number of wonderful people. For me, from then on, RADA became just a venerable building. And I was not into moaning inside empty buildings, RADA or no. So, I hardly went there beyond the rare visits. Soon I discovered that the American actress, Heather Ryon, from another group, had stayed back, looking for jobs in London, and, for me, a new phase of discovering London began.

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POETRY

Tagore Songs

TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

O Je Maane Naa Mana

With him, "no" will never do.
The moment I take my eyes away, he says, "No, no, no!"
The more I say, "Night's ending and the light dimming
He looks at my face, saying, "No, no, no!"
Depressed, and overwhelmed by the crazy wind,
Spring seems to wail in the flower garden
The more I say to him, "Time now; you must be going
He stands in the door, saying, "No, no, no!"

Bhalobeshe Sokhi Nibhrite Jotone

Write my name, dearest, alone, and in secret,
In your mind's innermost sanctum,
Lovingly
Learn the beat of the song playing in my heart,
And let your anklet bells tinkle to it,
Melodically
Keep holding on to my garrulous bird,
In your palace premises,
Fondly, tenderly
Remembering me, tie my hands' *rakhi* thread of union
To your gold bracelet, letting it shine there
Resplendently
Picking up a blossom from my climbing plants
Set it aside for your curls,
Absent-mindedly
Make a vermilion dot of good fortune to remember me,
And let it adorn your forehead,
Wondrously
Blend the desires and fantasies obsessing me
Into a fragrance you can daub on yourself,
Endlessly
Extract all that has been perplexing me lifelong
And in delight make me a part of you
Matchlessly!

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NOTICE

The Daily Star Literature team invites write-ups from authors for a special edition to be published on the occasion of the upcoming Eid-ul fitr. We particularly welcome original short stories (1000-1800 words) and poems. But you can also send translated pieces and memoirs. The submission deadline is May 25, 2018.

FICTION

Prodigy

ROSHMI BHAUMIK

The smell of spicy food was making Sam hungry. After a long wait at the restaurant, the waiter came with the food. He had a mask over his face. A bowl of soup was placed on the table. Sam looked for her parents, who were sitting with her, a minute ago. They were nowhere around. The soup was bubbling. Out of the bubbles, long serpents came out and wound around her neck. She was gasping for breath. Then everything became blurry.

Sam woke up with a start. An impenetrable darkness surrounded her. She could hear a faint sound of water dripping at a distance. Her head felt heavy. When she attempted to touch her head, Sam realized that she could not move her hands. An inexplicable fear filled her brain.

After some time, she started to perceive unfamiliar shapes around her. Even though she could wriggle her fingers and toes, her hands and feet were bound with strong ropes. She was lying on a wooden floor with a piece of sticky tape over her mouth. The stuffy smell in the enclosure told her that she was not at home.

The fifth grader thought of her comfortable room and her parents. They lived in a small town in Colorado where rugged mountains formed a beautiful backdrop along the western horizon. Her neighborhood streets, lined with trees, had corner flower beds. Her school, Blue Peak Elementary was a mere ten minutes' walk from her house.

The front-desk lady told the caregiver that Sam will be going to Nina's house after school. She left a message on her mother's cell phone. Sam's mother, Maya, busy in meetings, was surprised to learn this, when she came to

pick her up at six o' clock. She called Nina's mom. "Hi Sue, when should I pick up Sam?" "Sorry, Maya. But Sam did not come to our house. It's Nina's birthday. Her teacher told us that she was feeling sick. We thought she had gone home." Maya was shocked. She could hardly believe her ears. She called her husband, the neighbors, the clinic and what not, and finally, the police.

Sam was lying on the cold floor, waiting for something to happen. She remembered that her Math teacher was substituting for her class teacher. Her best friend Nina had brought cupcakes for the whole class to celebrate her birthday. Towards the end of the day, the teacher distributed them to everyone. Sam thought that smelt weird but ate it anyway. Sam tried hard to remember what happened after that. Unfortunately, her memory was completely blank.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps outside. The sound stopped for a brief moment followed by a key turning in the lock. Sam saw a bright ball of light coming. She closed her eyes instinctively. Footsteps came closer and stopped about two feet away from her. Cold water splashed on her face. A high-pitched sound behind the light spoke. "Look at these graphs," it commanded her. She opened her eyes, slowly. On the sheets of paper, there were graphs of dollar value plotted against time. Each graph had a label, a meaningless jumble of letters like "BBL" or "ADR" or "SLV."

Sam guessed the acronyms were stock symbols. Her father, Sujoy, an avid investor, regularly watched financial news on TV. Sam often saw Jim Cramer, talking about the bear

and bull market. A few months ago, she remembered overhearing a conversation between her parents about how one could bet on price fluctuation of commodities. Her father had said, "This way you can make money even when stock prices go down." Sam thought that was crazy.

Her thoughts, then, flew to her math teacher, Mr. Own, who had an accident and had to take six months leave. Thankfully, Mr. Jenkins joined as the replacement teacher within a week. He was a recent Masters graduate from Colorado University, Boulder.



The principal had found him through a friend. Therefore, Mr. Jenkins started to teach even before the background-check papers came through.

He tried to make the math classes interesting. Last week, he had given a challenging project to engage the gifted fifth graders. "Write a program to compute the first thousand prime numbers." Most of the kids were diligently working on the problem. The inexperienced teacher, fiddling with his

college ring, was making rounds to check the progress and to answer questions when needed. He stopped in front of a happy girl, smiling at her computer screen. But then seeing her reading a science journal, he asked, "Sam, why aren't you working on your assignment?" "It's done, Mr. Jenkins," replied Sam truthfully. He could not believe it. "OK. Answer this for me. What is the 1265th prime number?"

"One..zero..three..one..three," Sam took five seconds to calculate the answer as she spoke. Mr. Jenkins had a puzzled look. "Sam, did you use the program to calculate this, earlier?" Sam lowered her gaze. "I solved it, mentally," she admitted. His jaw dropped in astonishment. In a split second his eyes sparkled.

Mr. Jenkins, later, reported this to the principal. He wanted Sam to stay after school and learn advanced topics in geometry and probability from him. But her parents disagreed as they did not want to overburden their child. Within a few days, the entire elementary school was talking about the prodigy.

A sharp knife cut off the rope around Sam's hands. The alien voice spoke again. "Write an algorithm to pick the graph, which will increase the most, out of a given set. Do this quickly, if you want some food. Otherwise, starve to death." The small enclosure reverberated with an evil laughter.

Sam hated bullies. She shook her head in disagreement. The effect was swift and drastic. A tight slap hit her across the face. She also noticed the knife's edge in the peripheral light. She fought against the idea but finally gave in. When she finished writing the equations,

her abductor walked away. But what he didn't know is that Sam managed to hide her cell phone all this time deep inside her back pocket. It was switched off as it usually was when she was at school. She turned it back on and almost simultaneously, heard footsteps, again. Sam shoved the phone back into her pocket, along with the last glimmer of hope she had to be rescued.

The duct tape was pulled off. "Eat quickly," the voice boomed. When the bowl of pasta was placed near her, she could smell that weird stench, again. She carefully scooped the food out but let it drop inside her T-shirt. She smeared some of it around her mouth. Soon, the bowl was quite empty. The kidnapper now pulled her hands behind and tied it firmly. As a hand brushed off the food around her mouth, Sam saw a familiar college ring.

Sam felt drained and dozed off. She woke up to the sound of police sirens. The door was broken apart and light streamed in. Two police officers came in and picked her up. In the backyard, there stood two cop cars. Sam's parents came running to meet her. As she was getting into the car, she turned to check the kidnapper's face. Mr. Jenkins's bloodshot eyes were bulging out in anguish. With Sam's algorithms, he could have become rich.

Sam was glad that her phone had a tracking device that helped the police save her. Soon, Sam and her parents were home. She could smell the delicious food, waiting for them. Together, they sat for dinner. It felt good to be home.

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