

THROUGH THE EYES

# SHAMIM ARA NIPA

## OF MY LAND, OF MY DANCE

*Her dance resembles elegance and serenity. A proud disciple of maestros like G A Mannan and Nikunja Bihari Pal, she is a figure that carries the legacy of Bangladeshi heritage and culture across the world. She has also won many prestigious awards, including the Ekushey Padak, Lux Channel I Performance Award, Prothom Alo Award, Bachsas Award and George Harrison Award.*

### MADE OUT OF SOFT CLAY

I grew up in a family highly influenced by the arts and culture, where the siblings were deeply into singing and playing musical instruments. And eventually, I also started to pursue the divine art of dancing. The turning point in my life came when I was in class 9. It was 1977 when I got selected for a government funded cultural foreign tour. At such an early age, it was totally unexpected for me. But many senior artists appreciated my performance after that show, which greatly boosted my confidence. I thought I had to take this seriously. A couple of years later the Cultural Ministry of the Government of Bangladesh started a new institution, called Performing Arts Academy. It recruited a group of dance artistes, singers and musicians, and I was fortunate to be amongst them. After the huge succession of this group, I didn't have to look back anymore. And I had Mustafa Manowar sir like a guardian figure in my life. PAA was creating history under his guidance. Exclusively dance oriented, we would regularly practice, do dummy performances, study international artists' works and whatnot. It was a complete package for our growth, and I will forever remain indebted to Mustafa Manowar for this. He wouldn't let me work for just anybody. He taught me how to optimize and organize myself for the best possible output. This very supervision at such an early age has helped me come thus far. Mustafa sir has been like an open sky; I could only look up to him and admire the endless vastness.

### THROUGH THE ROAD DISPERSED

It is a disappointment that projects like PAA are not seen these days anymore. Our approach primarily focused on showcasing our own culture and history. Later the academy had to merge with Shilpokola. After that, the exposures got lesser and lesser. Doli Iqbal, Nilufar Papri, Amy Rahman, Zinath Barkatullah were some of our most talented contemporary artists. Dance in itself would hardly address one's solvency issues or career problems, so many had to discontinue. But despite all the challenges I held on, and I still am doing what I love doing most. Of course, career is a big factor. If I couldn't survive through dance, I wouldn't even be saying all these today. But when your love for dance is true, you will find a way out. In the beginning, I had received other career offers like modeling and acting as well. But I focused only on my first love. Had I chased other pursuits, I would have ended up as a jack of all trades but master of none. I did appear as

a Lux model. And it was a huge achievement for me, because by this I proved that even a dancer could become a popular brand face. I consider myself lucky that I received recognition through only my dedication and hard work. People know me as THE Shamim Ara Nipa, that's the best feeling ever. Once I received an offer for a show abroad. But shortly before that, I had seen Mustafa sir designing a dance costume especially for me for an upcoming show. I immediately decided to reject the offer from abroad, because all I knew was that I had to respect sir's effort and plans for me. I was very young at that time, and such offers were rare back then. But still I had no problem to pay the homage my mentor deserved. I have

believe every dancer has to carry a notion of legacy. The legacy that was passed on by G A Mannan, Gaowhar Jamil and such artists, the legacy that carries the smell of our own soil, has to be kept alive through our dance. I tried to introduce my own signature gharana this way, by collaborating with folk and modern styles. Our dance has to blend with the contemporary demand, and at the same time has to carry the uniqueness of our legacy. I could and would never forget where I belong to, where I come from. Ignoring one's roots is the biggest mistake one can make. I hail from the Mymensingh – Kishoreganj region, lands with notable cultural and historical backgrounds. And so with every step and every move, I feel the urge to

with a dance school. This way in the year 2000, *Nrityanchal Performing Arts* and in 2002, *Nrityanchal Dance School* began their journey. We now have two branches. It is a wonderful feeling to witness the journey of an amateur enthusiast becoming a confident figurant, from missing the beats to attaining featherlike feet. And in this academy, we not only focus on making dancers, we focus on building a total artist. We have quite a few things planned for the future, especially regarding introducing the folk heritages to the urban lives and combining the two for something never-before-seen.

### DEAR TO MY HEART

I believe in the saying, 'Deeds, not words'. When I watch a dance performance, I forget who the person is, and only concentrate on the performance. And because of that, even my students sometimes amaze me with new and innovative steps, make me want to learn it from them. Guru Birju Maharaj is a maestro who had a huge influence in my career. The way he sings, dances and plays tabla and sitar, it seems there is no comparison to him. Once I got an opportunity to perform a dance item in front of Guru Birju Maharaj. It was a main character of the dance drama choreographed by Guru Birju Maharaj himself, and he appreciated it very much. When I saw Uday Shankar's *Kalpana* I felt that it was far ahead of the time. I am also a fan of dance based films like *Umrao Jaan* and other classic Hindi films. I have a soft corner for paintings and sculptures, as well. I even studied in art-college for a short period of time. I admire the creations of both Nazrul and Tagore. Many have told me that it is unbelievable that I know so many songs by heart. But I think there is nothing surprising, because as an artist it is my responsibility to know what the songs are about. It is the only way for my dance to dissolve within the hymn.

### FOR THE MEMOIR

Currently, there isn't much exposure or space for new dance artists. Every time we organize a dance-oriented event, we have to struggle to find sponsors. Here I would like to thank 'The Daily Star' for being an exemplary patron of the arts and culture. It is praiseworthy, what 'The Daily Star' is doing for the next generation artists. Many of our true artists are slowly falling into oblivion because their content is rather sophisticated than flashy. I would humbly request the TV channels to come forward to promote true art, rather than blindly chasing TRP growth.



always felt that I belong to the stage. And now this has become a part of my entity, of who I am.

### ROOTS AND LEGACY

I had to fight hard to establish myself in a scenario where a dancer has to have academic recognition or certificate to attain success. Dancers from India and other countries almost always carried a big ego; they couldn't tolerate the idea of a dancer without certificates coming into the lime-light. But I fought back with the love of my audience. Later, my career as a dancer flourished with many diverse accomplishments. I danced Kathak for a significantly long time with Shibli. Our duo has been a national sensation for a long time. I

make sure my roots are reflected perfectly.

### PASSING THE TORCH

Establishing my dance school *Nrityanchal* was like a dream for me. I wanted to see in the next generation what I couldn't see in myself. Shibli and I were fortunate to perform in a show where the Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Muhammad Yunus was present. After the show he praised our performance, but also said, "What's next? I don't see new faces in this field. You must do something for the next generation! If you don't handover the torch now, it might become too late in the future." Yunus sir immediately requested his brother Muhammad Jahangir to play the organizer's role, and told us to get going