

Yesterday, once more!



ALY ZAKER

THE title of this column is borrowed from a very popular song from many years ago which we used to hum all the time. It was a rhapsody of personal emotion, of memories, of nostalgia. I have been nostalgic for as long as I can remember. I have been nostalgic about the day before, the day after.

March 26th comes back to me every year—and more strongly than the preceding year. As the world around me becomes more averse to plurality, more prone to violence, more restive and, most of all, more indifferent to impunity, I go back to the day that inspired me to launch myself into the glorious war that brought us our freedom.

"Yesterday that was" 48 years ago had ended with awe and anguish bringing in its wake a sense of anger and retribution. That evening forty-eight years ago was no different from the evenings before. In fact, it was more or less the same every day and night since February, becoming ever so turbulent since the 21st. After the days' chores, the political rallies and all were over; we used to converge in a room of our friend Benoo, a very young teacher of statistics and a famous singer, at the ground floor of what was known as the Science Annexe Building of the Dhaka University in those days. We drank tea that Balai, the owner of the canteen in that building, used to very kindly serve us long after the usual university hours.

We drank tea, discussed the day's political events and played chess. Right across the road, in the Shaheed Minar, various cultural groups used to perform musical soirees, plays or ballets every evening since the beginning of March. Each of these programmes talked about Bangladesh's independence. On the night of the 25th, the evening was the same. A friend came in and casually said that talks between Sheikh Mujib and Yahya had failed. By 9:30 that night, the performers had

concluded that evening's performances. We were busy debating over the political strategies. Someone suddenly remarked, "why is it so quiet?" We came out of the room. It was dark and the Shaheed Minar, hardly visible in the darkness of night, was desolate. A pall of eerie silence seemed to have engulfed the atmosphere. A signal of something ominous seemed to have gone down my spine as a

dared to venture out of the cantonment. This perplexed us and again made me feel uneasy. At Bangabandhu's residence, everything was quiet. A place that used to pulsate with hundreds of thousands chanting slogans, politically important people busily going in and coming out of the building, was now deserted. There were a couple of watchmen who told us that the leader had retired to his

bedroom and that he had asked everyone to be vigilant. The army might crack down on the people of Bangladesh. We started for our homes with a heavy heart.

It was just over 11 at night that we heard slogans and commotion from the main street by the Rajarbag Police Lines. The slogans were interspersed with distant crack and booming sounds of firing. We ran out of our home and

from the lines in a lane, the heat was unbearable. I remember dousing ourselves with wet towels that went dry every few minutes. The attack went on through the night.

Towards the end of the night when the firing had become less frequent and the 303 firing of the policemen could be heard no more, we heard a knock on our front door. When I opened the door with utmost caution, I saw two silhouetted bare-bodied figures in lungis with two 303 rifles. One of them said, "We fought to the last. Many of our comrades are no more. We are leaving for now, but we shall come back again. Please hide the rifles somewhere. Joy Bangla." And they disappeared into the darkness.

I was dumbfounded with two rifles, one in each hand. There was an abandoned well in the backyard of our home. I released the rifles in the hole. I sat by it for some time. Water welled up in my eyes. I started to cry. It was a cry of despair, of sorrow, of failure and misery. I hadn't noticed that the east had become light with the glow of the early morning. I rose and stood firm by the well and thought that this sin of the Pakistanis could not be allowed to go unchallenged. That we owed it to our motherland to avenge this ignominy. I had to do something. Soon the east became red with the light of the rising sun. It was the sun of freedom that also adorns our national flag.

How I wish this spirit of yesterday could be relived once more, now with the steadfastness of getting our motherland to help establish the values and the ideals for which so many of our compatriots had laid down their lives; to let the resolve of yesterday be fulfilled through a new resolve that would take our nation where we intended it to be—a non-communal, pluralistic, honest and hard-working nation. Don't we owe it to our martyrs?



PHOTO: ARCHIVE

shiver. We decided to go to Bangabandhu's residence at road number 32 in Dhanmandi to find out what was going on.

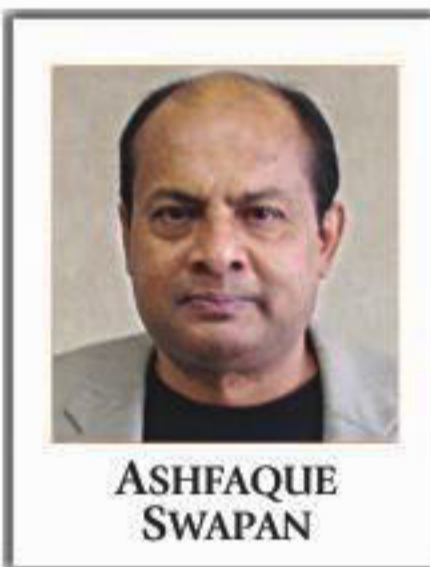
On our way, in a battered VW Beetle, as we came to the entrance of the Rokeya Hall, we were appalled to see a number of army trucks full of soldiers, some of whom were busy removing the barricades in front of the hall. This was the first time that the army had

It must have been 11.30 when volleys of mortar shells and what seemed like cannon balls started to land on the police lines. In response to one 303 bullet, the Pakistan army fired thousands from a variety of firearms. In a matter of minutes, Rajarbag Police Lines, at the time comprising bamboo-walled tin shades, went up in flames. The fire was so pervasive that at home about a few hundred yards away

This is an edited version of Aly Zaker's column "One Off" originally published in *The Star* magazine in 2009. Aly Zaker, an eminent theatre and television actor, a writer and director, is a freedom fighter and a founder trustee of the Liberation War Museum. He was awarded the Ekushey Padak in 1999. He also worked for Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, the radio in exile of the independent Bangladesh.

Capturing political history in film

Fagun Haway, based on the 1952 movement, is smart but not flawless



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

WE at the Seba Bangla Library in Atlanta recently screened Tauquir Ahmed's *Fagun Haway* (In Spring Breeze).

The film, based on the 1952 language movement, is a mixed bag—while it truly soars in concept and approach, its execution is flawed.

The approach is smart. Instead of directly taking on the explosive politics of the 1952 movement in Dhaka, its take is more tangential.

Fagun Haway is set in a sleepy countryside town, far from the hurly-burly of Dhaka. The arrival of an Urdu-speaking police officer creates a big ripple in this quiet small town. The newly minted officer-in-charge, it turns out, is a rude boor bursting with cultural arrogance. Urdu, he declares, will be the language everybody speaks. People don't know it? Well, by God they better learn it fast.

This does not sit well with the townsfolk. The students of the town's college, the vanguard of the nation's conscience, are incensed. Matters come to a head as news filters in of the entire region rising up in arms.

The socio-political context of that era is murky. The memory of the 1947 partition is still fresh, and political honchos of the Muslim League, the key architect of partition, walk with a thug's menacing swagger, harbouring an ugly prejudice

towards Hindus that they do not bother to hide.

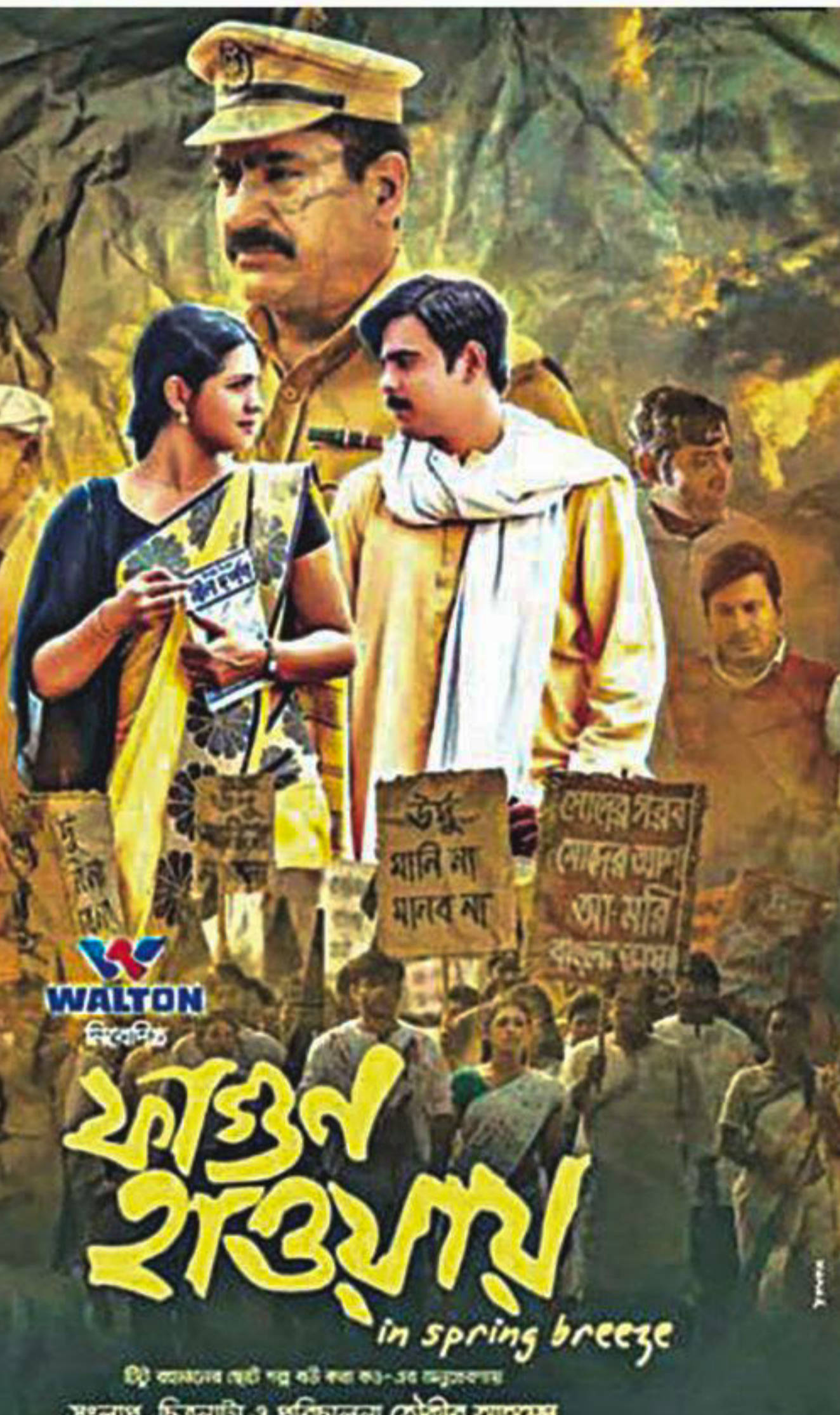
It's a bracingly honest portrayal of that time.

What impressed me deeply was the director's guts and integrity to fly against the face of over half a century of Bengali cinema convention. It's really odd when you think about it, but go back all the way to the 1950s, and you will be hard-pressed to find a single Hindu character in a Bangladeshi/East Pakistani Bengali film or a Muslim character in a West Bengal film, although both regions have substantial minorities.

This is not a trivial matter. Films and books shape our views of the world around us. In the US, before the 1960s, schoolchildren grew up reading textbooks unsullied by images of non-white people. Popular US history failed to recognise non-white contributions. The civil rights movement in the 1960s brought much-needed awareness: textbooks have become inclusive; school children today learn that the first American to die in the American revolution was Crispus Attucks, an African American.

In *Fagun Haway*, the pain and humiliation of the genial, elderly Hindu doctor is shown with deep sensitivity and affection. The sweetshop owner and the director of the student play, both Hindus, are an integral part of the diverse Bengali community—which has been the reality that our films and TV have ignored for over half a century.

Ahmed is not unique—recent films *Debi* and *Swapnajaal* exhibited similar humane inclusiveness, a heartening development during an



age of vicious sectarian schisms which Bangladesh has not escaped unscathed.

A word about the music. The romantic song "Fagun Haway" by Pintu Ghosh and Sukanya Majumder simply took my breath away. It's wondrously melodious, exquisitely

rendered (especially Majumder), and tastefully picturised. (Good riddance to the dancing-around-trees scenes of my youth!)

However, the film does not do justice to Tauquir Ahmed's lofty reputation as the filmmaker of *Haldaa* (2017) and *Oggatonama* (2016).

First, Bangladeshi filmmakers simply should not attempt period films. We just lack the wherewithal. The Brits excel—look at their television shows like *George Gently*, *Endeavour* (both set in the 1960s), or my favourite, *Miss Marple* (set between the two World Wars). The meticulous attention to detail that brings a period to life requires the support of an entire industry of props and costumes that's simply beyond our means. I admire the presence of the vintage Volkswagen car, but there were several scenes—the home of the elderly doctor comes to mind—which were not convincing.

The acting itself and the positioning of actors often had a theatrical feel about it. Instead of nuanced, complex characters, many characters fill preordained slots—the valorous young hero, the supportive heroine, her firm and kind guardian, the avicious Muslim League thug, his partner in crime.

Overall, the film's aesthetic veers closer to daytime soaps, where 30-year flashbacks happen at the drop of a hat, and high drama is all that matters, because indulgent viewers aren't terribly fastidious.

This film is far more ambitious, and it's a pity its drawbacks keep it from reaching its full potential.

Some recent films that captivated me include *Roma*, *Cold War*, *Everybody Knows* or *The Salesman* (which shares with *Fagun Haway* the storytelling device of having a play inside a film. In *The Salesman* it was—you guessed it—Arthur Miller's *The Salesman*.)

What all these films share—and alas, *Fagun Haway* does not—is a sum that is greater than the parts. And what are the parts? Sets that are realistic, messy and look lived-in, characters that are nuanced and act naturally, and cinematography that never gives the impression of facing a proscenium.

The sum of it all is that critical thing, verisimilitude—an illusion of reality so compelling that within a few minutes, a viewer forgets he/she is watching a film and feels as if by some magic he/she has been transported into a world where it's all happening.

For all its good intentions, *Fagun Haway* fails to do that. The film ends with a statement in English that sums up the historical importance that is marred by egregious typographical errors ("curfew," not "carfew"!)

It is still an admirable effort, and we were delighted to screen it in Atlanta.

Finally, a word about our screening. We were overjoyed to discover a minuscule but growing group of people who are repeat attendees. It's still tough going, but so what? We remain committed to screening good Bengali films in the future.

Ashfaque Swapan is a contributing editor for *Silicooner*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.

QUOTABLE Quote

HARRIETT JACKSON BROWN Jr.
American author
(Born: 1940)

Never forget the three powerful resources you always have available to you: love, prayer, and forgiveness.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Niger neighbor
- 5 Pond paddler
- 9 Short putt
- 10 Koran faith
- 12 Guinness and Baldwin
- 13 Capital on the Nile
- 14 Flying toy
- 16 Afternoon break
- 17 Bauxite, for one
- 18 Regardless of
- 20 Pearl producer
- 22 Super sews
- 23 Knight wear
- 25 Location
- 28 One way to repay
- 32 Internet stop

DOWN

- 1" Le Morte d'Arthur" author
- 2 High points
- 3 Defeat
- 4 One with access to secrets
- 5 Chops into cubes

- 34 Gift topper
- 35 Long swimmer
- 36 Editor's request
- 38 Samuel of the Supreme Court
- 40 Art supporter
- 41 Daughter of Lear
- 42 Turn outward
- 43 Refuse
- 44 Smooch

- 6 Can. Neighbor
- 7 Doctor's place
- 8 Dojo doings
- 9 Forbidden
- 11 Sulks
- 15 House muncher
- 19 Urban oasis
- 21 Skin art, Slangily
- 24 Common pay period
- 25 Take an oath
- 26 Did a KP job
- 27 Compel
- 29 Wading birds
- 30 Observed ones
- 31 Residant
- 33 Bitter humor
- 37 Sitarist Shankar
- 39 Sandy color

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

B R O W F A D E
R U M O R I D E A L
O S A K A C A S T E
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