

KAZI RUKSANA BEGUM

'London Borough of Tower Hamlets' hosted a cultural festival, titled 'A Season of Bangla Drama', from the 1st to the 24th of November this year. For seventeen years, this festival has been promoting Bengali culture, by showcasing enthralling stage performances and bringing forth discussions from a diversified panel of writers, actors, directors and cultural personalities. The festival has a dedicated core team working relentlessly with the aim to bring different nationalities under one platform, and Kazi Ruksana Begum has been part of this program as the Arts Development Officer since 2011. In this special interview, she shares how this event came to be, and what it will be in the future.

Rafi Hossain: *How did you get associated with the Tower Hamlet's Season of Bangla Drama?*

Kazi Ruksana Begum: This event first began in 2003. We started this as a way of paying tribute to the drama festivals that took place in the 1990s. We first held the event during summer, but now we hold it in the winter.

Rafi: *Why is it being held in winter now?*

Ruksana: As the weather is very hot in July, the audience would suffer from the heat. So, we started holding it in November since 2010. Back then, there weren't many events held in November, but that's not the case now. We started off by performing four plays, and made sure that every drama was completed within two nights and one day of the weekend.

Rafi: *The festival also performs English dramas alongside Bangla. Could you share the thought process behind this?*

Ruksana: Since 2009, we started performing English plays as well. We received a lot of criticism for this because the audience was not ready to accept this change. One of the aims of this event is to attract people of different nationalities. Now, we perform both Bangla and English plays equally.

Rafi: *How long have you been a part of this event?*

Ruksana: I have been involved with this event since 2003, but I started as an organiser in 2011.

Rafi: *What changes have there been since the inception of this event?*

Ruksana: Every year, we learn new things, and we

try to utilise those in the years to come. Initially, we only performed plays written by renowned playwrights, but now, we showcase young talents as well. We've also improved our organisational skills. For the last four years, we've been providing dramaturges to theatres to improve their quality.

Rafi: *Do you think this event will help bring together people from all walks of life?*

Ruksana: Yes, I believe we will be successful in doing so.

Rafi: *How do you choose the plays?*

Ruksana: We start advertising through *Facebook*, our website and newspapers in February. We also let the previous participants and others know that we're taking submissions. We try our best to reach anyone who's interested. After two months of submissions,

our selection panel chooses six plays.

Rafi: *Who are in the selection panel?*

Ruksana: There is Queen Mary University, Dr. Canan Salih, Rokshana Khan, Suna Miah, Ali Campbell, and myself, with Karen Hubbard in charge of marketing.

Rafi: *Do you watch the entire play during the selection process?*

Ruksana: We watch a three-minute clip. We have specific themes each year. We mainly look at the story of the play. If it's up to par, we will choose it. Last year, our theme was women's rights. This year, it's human rights. It's not that a play outside the theme will not be chosen, but it helps if it lies within it.

Rafi: *Do you showcase a specific number of plays each year?*

Ruksana: No, the number is different every year.

Rafi: *Is the duration of the event the same every year?*

Ruksana: No. It varies from twenty-eight days to up to five weeks. We start the event on the first Friday of November.

Rafi: *What are the future aims of this event?*

Ruksana: Our event tries to encourage young playwrights now. A lot of changes have taken place in the last seventeen years, and more will take place in the future hopefully.

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Shreya Shomoyeeta
& Amina Hossain

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