



Snata Shahrin

Shibli Mohammad

PHOTO: STAR

An unwavering dedication TO DANCE

In conversation with Shibli Mohammad and Snata Shahrin

PRIVANKA CHOWDHURY

In Indian classical performance art, the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* plays an integral role. It is handed down from teachers to their disciples. Traditionally attributed to traveling bards in the North of Ancient India, called ‘Kathakars’ or storytellers, Kathak is a dance form that involves telling different stories through movements and extensive footwork, but most importantly, through facial expressions. In a recent chat with *The Daily Star*, Kathak exponent Shibli Mohammad and his disciple Snata Shahrin spoke about their bond, and more.

Snata’s first meeting with Shibli Mohammad was in 1993, when her father Solaiman Khoka, an artiste himself, took his wife and daughter for a surprise visit with him. From that day, she considered the Kathak exponent as a parallel figure to her parents. “He is a wonderful person to be around. He goes out of his way to bring the best out of any students, if he sees their dedication,” shared Snata. “Despite his stature, his politeness and kindness touch hearts. I have been fortunate to receive his blessings.”

Snata has been an assistant to Shibli Mohammad at the dance company, Nrityanchal, for a long time. “You can call me a teacher’s pet,” she expressed. “I do not want to have an individual school. Rather, I want to train children under the shadow of my guru.” Snata has not only excelled in Kathak, but also showcased her skills in contemporary dance.

Shibli Mohammad is one of the recipients of the Shilpakala Padak 2020. His teaching



Snata Shahrin and Shibli Mohammad.

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techniques vary from one student to another. “I treat all my students equally, because they are spending equal amounts of money for lessons. As far as the craft is concerned, I believe that *Bhakti te Mukti* – if you have absolute dedication to an art form, it is possible to reach the desired space,” explained the Kathak exponent. He also stressed that

Snata is a patient and dedicated dancer.

Snata recalled her early learning of *Thaat*, a composition in Kathak, during which her guru asked her to imagine a beautiful garden in front of her while looking at the audience, to bring the required facial expression. “If I have achieved anything today, it is only for the guidance of Shibli

Mohammad and my dedication to overcoming my challenges,” Snata shared.

Shibli Mohammad, on the other hand, spoke about his gurus, who bestowed unconditional love and the passion for dance upon him. His first guru at Bhatkhande Music College in Lucknow was Smt Purnima Pandey. “I lived in her house for three months at one point. She treated me like her own child,” he said.

Later, he was trained in Kathak by Pt Birju Maharaj at Kathak Kendra in New Delhi in 1981. “When *guruji* visited Dhaka, my students saw me treat him as my parent. That is when they understood the relationship between *Guru-Shishya*,” added Shibli Mohammad.

Snata received a gold *ghungroo* from her guru, which she made into a necklace for her wedding. “Only three of his students have been given this token of appreciation so far,” she added. Similarly, Shibli Mohammad received a *panjabi* from his guru, Pt Birju Maharaj, which he treasures.

Shibli Mohammad explained that it is only when students are released from the tutelage of their gurus that they come up with their unique characteristics and add to the learning lineage. “I have confidence in all my students. Snata has immersed herself into my training. I can proudly say that she will carry my teachings forward in my absence,” he concluded.

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Catching up with Siam

SHAH ALAM SHAZU

Popular actor Siam Ahmed rose to fame with consecutive successful performances in a career spanning just a few years. The actor has been immensely busy with film projects lately intending to establish himself as a permanent face of the film industry. Currently working on several projects simultaneously, on a candid chat with *The Daily Star*, the actor shares details of his works and more.

You recently signed the first-ever cyber thriller film in Bangladesh, share some details with us.

The film is “Ontorjaal”, directed by Dipankar Dipan. The shooting is scheduled to begin soon and currently, we are holding workshop sessions on the film. This is a new and different genre for a Bangladeshi film, the first-ever cyber-thriller of the country.

As an actor, we tend to look for different stories and diverse characters and this film offers both. The workshop is helping me to bring the character to life before we start the actual production.

The new web series ‘Morichika’ will be released soon, can you share your experiences on working in the series?

The web series, directed by Shihab Shaheen is currently awaiting release online. Shihab Shaheen has a particular fanbase, who are always excited to see his work. I also had the chance to work with Afran Nisho on this project. Nisho is an immensely talented actor and the overall experience of working on the series is great. The trailer was released recently, garnering much praise. Hope the series can meet the audience expectations.

You wrapped up shooting for another film, “Damaal” recently. Tell us about the film.

We started shooting for the film during the winter days of last year. Amid severe cold waves, we had to shoot for the film outside Dhaka. Bidya Sinha Mim is my co-star in the project. We recently finished the shooting in Dhaka, we’re hoping this film will present the audience with a different kind of experience.

What are some of the other projects you have been working on?

I recently finished shooting for the film, “Operation Sundarban”, though one song is yet to be completed. I also wrapped up shooting for “Adventure of Sundarban”. The film, “Shaan” is yet to be released. The dubbing for the film, “Paap Punno” is completed, awaiting a release date.

I plan to continue working on different film productions. I expect to give my best to this industry, to gift memorable performances to the audience.

How is the experience of working in the time of a global pandemic?

We all came back to work with newfound inspiration. We are the lucky ones to yet survive this pandemic as many of our beloved ones left us due to COVID-19. I consider myself extremely lucky to still have the opportunity to live and work.

I love to keep myself busy with work, during the lockdown days I was getting bored staying at home with so much free time around. Now we are back to working and this means everything to me. In the free time we get nowadays, we share moments with each other, cherishing our loved ones.

Fellow actor Pori Moni recently spoke up about an incident claiming attempted rape and murder, any comments on this?

Pori Moni is a citizen of the country and she deserves to lead a safe life. None of us want such unfortunate events for anyone. We have certain laws in place and I hope the real culprit is brought to justice. The truth must come out. I hope Pori Moni gets the rightful justice she deserves.

PHOTO: STAR



The case for origin movies of iconic villains

MADIHA ATHAR KHAN

“Cruella”, starring Oscar-winning actor Emma Stone, is Disney’s latest attempt to tell a compelling story about a villain, following the two “Maleficent” movies. While many see this as a low-stakes effort to profit off of long established franchises, “Cruella” poses itself as an elegant yet unhinged story about a fashion designer’s rags-to-riches journey.



Joaquin Phoenix as ‘Joker’.

Aided largely by Stone’s brilliant performance, impeccable music, and outlandish costume design, it is a comprehensive showcasing of proper utilisation of creative talents by one of the largest studios in the world. However, it comes at a time when movies about villains are nearly the norm. Many wonder whether these origin stories that generally break down the tragic events that led ordinary, well-intentioned characters to become criminals, take away from the mystery of antagonists, who are often the reason for powerful plots.

From a broader cultural context, there is some explanation for an advent in such films. Studios have nearly been saturated with stories about heroes, and fairy-tale endings. As a result, the audience has come to regard the “all’s well that ends well” trope with a healthy amount of speculation and skepticism. More than ever before, young people these days are highly critical of established norms perpetuated by pop culture stereotypes. It is

apparent that when a traditional hero wins at the end of a movie, a large part of the picture is left out. In that sense, movies about villains are an effort by filmmakers to fill in the gaps.

As most of these films are traditionally widely consumed by children, they are one of the earliest gateways for young people to extend their creativity and imagination. It is important to feed children with a combination of different stories, which ensure that they start thinking more critically from a younger age. Children tend to have a black-and-white perspective on most things, and they take time to unlearn certain ideas.

Arguably, films are not bound to be aspirational. While the audience should not be infantilised by the assumption that they are motivated by the violence and aggression they see on screen, all entertainment fits into a complex system responsible for shaping the moral fabric of society. Memes with captions such as “As children we loved the heroes,

as adults, we understand the villains” are popular. It is particularly concerning when Joaquin Pheonix’s Joker is viewed as an understandable villain. Films are an excellent medium to expose how the very society that sets the standards for success and moral righteousness is equally responsible for its contributions to making villainous monsters. Filmmakers have taken advantage of the fact that it has become increasingly easier for the public to applaud the criminals who break out of their cages, metaphorical or otherwise.

Perhaps what would be more aligned with the current cultural moment is new-age anti-heroes deconstructing oppressive systems and reimagining the status quo. In this regard, “Cruella” falls short as her success story is merely one of personal

are multiple times that movies did this really well. Magneto’s backstory of being a Holocaust survivor and exploited by the Nazis for his superpowers substantially added to the character’s merit in “X-Men: First Class”. One of the reasons it works so well is that the movie (and its sequels) does not make the mistake of softening the character. In contrast, Angelina Jolie is brilliant at playing Maleficent, but the audience is made to sympathise with the character to an extent that seems strangely unnecessary.

Movies about villains fit into a genre of their own, and there is an art to making them powerfully. People look to films and TV shows for much more than entertainment. If done well, stories can leave lasting impressions, and many attest to having been permanently shaped by something they watched. This responsibility must be borne by storytellers and filmmakers, which is uniquely challenging since they are tasked with telling stories about wicked people as they are, not as how people wish they were.

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Fans have requested a standalone movie for Darth Vader.



Michael Fassbender as Magneto.

revenge, resulting in no change to the mass-accumulation of generational wealth. On the other hand, Marvel Studios’ “Falcon and the Winter Soldier” makes a powerful case for misunderstood vigilantes by placing a responsibility on the lawmakers to do better.

When the makers of “Star Wars” told Darth Vader’s story that led to him becoming one of the most beloved characters of all time, they set a precedent for what was to become a trend of over explaining the motives of the villain. However, there



Emma Stone as Cruella DeVile.