



# Evolution of Theatre in Bangladesh as a Form of Democracy: A Post-War Analysis

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The current research considers theatre as a forum that voices the historical eminence of a country's culture and looks at how theatre has morphed into a democratic platform representing the voice of the people after the Liberation War (1972 – 1973) in Bangladesh. The present paper analyses the historical transformation of Bangladeshi theatre from 1972 to 2018 and observes the influences of western concepts of theatre in the context of Bangladeshi society and culture. It also discusses the ripple effects of the Kolkata theatre industry on the theatre culture in Bangladesh. It does so by being informed through numerous interviews conducted with key theatre workers and visionaries who have played pivotal roles in elevating theatre in Bangladesh and positioning it on par with other countries in the global market. This study acknowledges such contributions and realises how theatre has been carved into a medium for the people to opine on issues in Bangladesh that plague them, be it in the past, present, or future.

**Key words:** *Evolution of Theatre, Western Influence, Democratic Platform, Post-Liberation war, Bangladesh*

## INTRODUCTION

Evolution of theatre in any context is not a new thing; rather it has been a continuous trend that takes place with the demand of time and place. The word evolution does not imply the alterer of all things, it, however, denotes changes from one form to another form over time without altering the basic things (Bhattacharya, 2019). Evolution is intertwined with the culture of any society. A culture redefines itself in the light of various historical events. Likewise, Bangladeshi culture is influenced by great historical events like the division of India and the formation of East and West

Pakistan in 1947, the Bengali Language Movement of 1952, and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 (Mukherjee, 2014). All these changes have played important roles in shaping the approach to cultural activities and attitudes invariably associated with the social, political, and economic environment of the country. Baumann (1999) states, “Culture is dynamic; it changes and develops over time. At the same time, culture is relatively permanent in the sense that it is socially inherited from one generation to the next and thus there are elements that remain the same within a person’s lifetime and across generations” (p. 83). Hence, culture influences the identity and educational norms of a nation. In this sense, Erickson (1997) asserts, “people are both shaped by their social circumstances and active agents that can make sense of their actions in an adaptive way” (p. 32).

This is the way how the historical past of Bangladesh has been transformed into a redefined and processed culture in an adaptive way. Albeit, it lacks the scholarly attention it deserves, and hence, it is understandable that this inquiry is worthy of research. However, a thorough evaluation of changes in the landscape of theatre in the last fifty years indicates a need of understanding how identity has been established through the performance and art forms presented by the theatre (Guha-Thakurta, 2013).

## **BACKGROUND**

It is a well-known fact that the theatre environment changed after the liberation war of 1971. Most importantly, the spirit of the Liberation War played a key role in the theatre movement to establish a new form of freedom, democracy, and anti-communalism. Theatre activists were able to practise and explore their creativity and experiment with the new knowledge and experiences perceived and attained from the theatrical traditional flow of Kolkata (Guha-Thakurta, 2013). In fact, the post-war theatre had been a culmination of the liberation war which brought about notions and ideas of freedom and revolution that were articulated on stage. In the context of Bangladesh, theatre is interwoven with the spirit and values of the liberation war. As stated by Rahman (2001), “Our theatre has learned to speak the truth and has attained the character of a rebel” (p. 66). Thus, the theatre depicts on stage the present crisis emanating from communalism, fundamentalism, and terrorism portrayed in real life.

Following the theatre movement in the United States, a flock of young enthusiastic and promising activists from Bangladesh also started a theatre revolution. The prominent figures involved were: M. Hamid, Aatur Rahman, Abdullah Al Mamun, Ali Zaker, Asaduzzaman Noor, Mamunur Rashid, Nasiruddin Yousuf and numerous emerging talents. The renowned playwrights like Syed Shamsul Haque, Momtaz Uddin Ahmed, Selim Al-Din, Abdullah Al Mamun, Abdullah al Mahmud, and Mamunur Rashid, depicted the contemporary issues and politics in their writings (Rahman, 1995). Some post-liberation plays that drew attention were Abdullah (1978),



Manoj Mitra's *Sajano Bagan* (1980) (*Ornate Garden*), and Vijay Tendulkar's *Chup Adalat Chalchhe* (1984) (*Quiet! Court in Session*).

## **POST-LIBERATION THEATRE CULTURE**

However, the popularity of theatre was slow to rise after 1972 because people did not venture out in the evenings especially after the trauma of the West Pakistan holocaust. Along with that, due to the widespread misconception of the performing arts being forbidden in Islam, Bengalis construed that plays went against the Muslim sentiment (Kundu, 2010). However, the old traditional values eventually succumbed and this transition allowed theatre activities to eventually flourish. This led to the development of the post-independent theatre arena, which could be loosely divided into two major streams: plays based on original Bengali scripts and plays adapted/translated from foreign scripts (Ivbulis, 2008).

## **LOCAL THEATRE CIRCLE FROM THE TRADITION OF BENGALI SCRIPTS**

With the independence of Bangladesh in 1972, “Bahubachan”, a group comprising of young theatre workers of Dhaka, was the first to undertake an organised program to introduce the medium professionally by selling tickets, the first time of this type after Bangladesh came into being. Their team effort was in line with that of “Drama Circle”, a popular theatre group in the pre-independence days; they used to rent an auditorium and stage a play for 3 or 4 consecutive evenings. “Bahubachan” ended up successfully selling tickets and had much greater audience participation than “Drama Circle”. Furthermore, at the beginning of 1973, “Nagorik”, a group founded in 1969 but inactive on stage until after the independence, started to present their productions on stage for regular performances. They performed every Sunday morning for eight weeks. This was the first successful attempt at changing the scenario of theatre, a visible transition from an irregular and haphazard state to a regular and disciplined medium of art. All eight shows were performed at the British Council auditorium and “Nagorik” drew a considerable audience, nearly breaking even with their cost of production.

By the end of 1973 and the beginning of 1974, several other groups like the “Dacca Theatre” and “Theatre” began staging plays regularly. The regular staging of plays was first launched at the local British Council auditorium and then shifted to an auditorium owned by the Bangladesh Mahila Samity (Bangladesh Women's Association). Girls Guide House also made arrangements for regular shows in a weekly schedule. There were also frequent plays hosted at Dhaka University’s Nat Mandal and TSC auditorium, Shilpakala Academy, etc. Week-ends, naturally, were considered most suitable for staging plays, especially Sunday mornings (Liu, 2016).



In 1974, a theatre workshop was organised at Mahila Samity by the American Centre. In the same year, there was a considerable increase in administrative and police interference in the regular staging of plays at Mahila Samity on December 14–15. The police interference during 1974 was because of the newly formed government wanted to keep the entertainment industry under strict and discrete surveillance. The situation at the time was very volatile and, as theatre was rapidly gaining popularity, the government feared that theatre had the capability of greatly influencing the general public (Liu, 2016). So, in order to keep possible riots, violence, and overall turmoil at bay, the government instructed the police to supervise any productions taking place, causing a rise in the aforementioned police interference. On June 29, 1975, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, ordered the abolition of amusement tax on drama by amateur drama groups and the simplification of the procedure of censorship of manuscripts (Ramendu, 1979). which once again uplifted the theatre movement.

However, the interest generated by this constant process of staging has also resulted in the holding of annual theatre festivals by the Shilpakala Academy (Academy of Fine and Performing Arts). The first festival which was participated only by the groups of Dhaka, was held in February 1976 and continued for two weeks. It was also the 100th performance of “Nagorik”, which was the first in the history of the regular staging of plays in Bangladesh. Then in 1976-77, the first National Festival was held at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. In 1977-78, the second National Drama Festival was held and the 100th performance of ‘Dewan Gazi’r Kissa’ (The Story Of Dewan Gazi) by “Nagorik” which was another record in the history of Bangladeshi group theatre. These festivals were annual practices that were applauded by the elite intellectuals of the Bangladeshi society.

## **FOREIGN ADAPTATIONS IN LOCAL THEATRE CIRCLES**

It is very evident that Western literature throughout the world has been very familiar. This familiarity has been much intensified with the works of William Shakespeare (Bhattacharyya, 1964). People or readers are very rarely found who hardly heard the name of William Shakespeare (Mahanta, 1985). Bangladeshi drama has become enriched with the flavour of the Western plays where many of the plays of Bengal are originated from Western plays (Guha-Thakurta, 2013). Apart from the local productions, the Bangladeshi theatre workers were also interested in internationally acclaimed playwrights like Shakespeare, Ibsen, Moliere, Brecht, and many more (García-Periago, 2012; Mitra, 2008). On 23 April 2016, a Shakespeare carnival was sponsored by the Cultural Affairs Ministry and British Council to commemorate Shakespeare’s 452<sup>nd</sup> Birthday. Groups from institutions throughout the country staged ten Shakespeare performances.<sup>1</sup> An International Theatre Festival was organised with the initiative of the Cultural Affairs Ministry. Seven countries participated in the event at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy in Dhaka on June 21,

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<sup>1</sup>*Shakespeare carnival at Shilpakala* – The Daily Sun, 24 April 2016



2019. The festival was organised by the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and Bangladesh Centre of International Theatre Institute (ITI), in collaboration with Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation.<sup>2</sup> Foreign productions, like a French production called *Oh My Sweet Land*, an Indian production of *Macbeth*, a Chinese play named *F C K*, a Nepalese play called *Jhialincha (Dragonfly)*, a Vietnamese play called *Kim Tu* (adapted from *The Wilderness*), and a Russian play titled *Light Puppet Show* were staged in a week-long festival.<sup>3</sup>

## EARLY WESTERN ATTEMPTS AND EXPERIMENTS

The initial plays had contained experiments and diversifications in form, content, and stagecraft. Plays of modern and internationally acclaimed playwrights like Shakespeare, Moliere, Bertolt Brecht, Edward Albee, Dario Fo, Ibsen, Chekhov, Samuel Beckett, Girish Karnard, Soyinka, Rabindranath Tagore, Irwin Shaw, Ferenc Molner, Toufiqueul-Hakim, and other foreign playwrights were regularly performed on Bangladeshi stages either in translation or in adaptation; Bangladeshis after 1971 were certainly not prepared to lag in this art form compared to other South Asian countries. Kabir Chowdhury, Shawkat Osman, Nurul Momen, Aly Zaker, Asaduzzaman Noor, and Aaur Rahman have all worked on Shakespeare, Moliere, Brecht, Albee, Ibsen, and Chekov with some outstanding performances and have shown their consecration to western plays with their innumerable translations and adaptations. The impact of the western classic plays could be seen in the dramas, sometimes in the art of characterisation, sometimes in the nature of the irony and humor presented therein, sometimes in the pattern of plot construction, and sometimes in the brilliant witty dialogues of the characters (Anand, 2016; Bhatia, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 1964; Chowdhury, 1978; Dharwadker, 2011).

## WESTERN TRANSLATED PLAYS ON THE STAGE

Over the years, translation of prominent works in any form from one language to another language took place. Hence, Western plays, in particular, almost all the well-known plays of William Shakespeare have been translated by many of Bangladeshi scholars and were staged in different contexts (Anand, 2016; García-Periago, 2012; Guha-Thakurta, 2013). Munier Chowdhury translated Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, which was widely acclaimed at home and abroad and whose television production was most enthusiastically received. He translated *Othello* only half-way before he was killed by the Pakistan regime. It was completed by Kabir Chowdhury and performed in 1981 at the Mohila Samity Auditorium, Dhaka. He also left behind an unfinished translation of Tennessee William's *Street Car Named Desire* which has since been completed by his wife Lily Chowdhury. Apart from these direct translations he had successfully adapted into

<sup>2</sup>Bangladesh international theatre festival under spotlight- The Daily Star , 19 June 2019

<sup>3</sup>Bangladesh International Theatre Festival sets off tomorrow- Daily Star, 19 June 2019

Bengali a number of full-length and short plays of the West (Liu, 2016). For instance, *Keu Kichhu Bolte Pare Na*, an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*, *Rupar Kouta*, an adaptation of John Galsworthy's *The Silver Box*, *Janak*, an adaptation of Strindberg's *The Father*. Kabir Chowdhury adapted *Shatru* from Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and *Ochena* from Priestley's *Dangerous Corner*. In *Dandakaranya* (1966), Munier Chowdhury was clearly influenced by the non-realistic experimental theatre of the modern West, while the impact of expressionistic theatre is evident in his play *Kabar (Grave)* which was written in the background of the Bengali Language Movement of 1952.

### ADAPTATIONS OF MODERN WESTERN PLAYS IN BANGLADESHI THEATRE

Bengali theatre is undoubtedly influenced by the western theatre that helped the Bengali playwrights reconceptualise the art of writing and performing plays (Chakrabarty, 2020; Ivbulis, 2008; Mahanta, 1985). The audience and producers looked for modern plays but Munier Chowdhury reminds us of the cultural realities faced in a society in his article *Adhunik Natok (Modern Plays)* written in 1965 and published in "Theatre" in March 1976 where he writes about modern plays in the contemporary world. He questions how well the concept of the philosophical plays or "absurd plays" appeal to the Bengali culture. He questions the communication gap which may be formulating with the concept of modern plays.

The impact of the West on Nurul Momen's famous play *Nemesis* is also unmistakable in its technique of composition. Shawkat Osman's *Doctor Abdullahr Karkhana* (1973) (*Doctor Abdullah's Workplace*) is an adaptation of Capek's famous play *RUR*. The indirect influence of Ben Jonson, Moliere, and Shaw can also be seen in Shawkat Osman's other original plays like *Kankormoni (The Pearl Inside the Stone)*, *Tashkar o Lashkar* (1953) (*The Thief and The Soldier*), and *Amlar Mamla* (1949) (*The Lawsuit of The Government Officials*). Aly Zaker adapted *Bidagdha Raminikul (Intellectual Woman)* from Brecht's *The Good Woman of Suetzan* (1938-1940), *Aei Nishiddha Pallite (In this Forbidden Garden)* from Albee's *In the Garden*. Other adaptations include Moliere's *Les Femmes Savantes*, *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre, *Exit the King* by Eugene Ionesco, and *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne.

Ali Zaker, renowned for his stage acting, has also performed in Brecht's *Mr. Puntila and His Servant Matti* (1977), directed by Asaduzzaman Noor which is perhaps to date the longest surviving play in Dhaka. Zaker played the role of the 17th Century polymath, Galileo Galilei, alongside Asaduzzaman Noor in a Bengali adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* (1988) at Dhaka's Natok Sarani (Bailey Road). He also played Macbeth in an intercultural production of *Macbeth* (1982) directed by Christopher Sandford from Britain which led to another Shakespeare production where he acted as Prospero in *Tempest* (1987) directed by Deborah Warner. In 1991, Ali Zaker adapted and directed a play called *Darpan (Mirror)* where he

transposed Hamlet to a village in Bangladesh. “Darpan” means mirror and so symbolically he has epitomised the hero in his play to reflect the condition of society in rural Bangladesh.

Renowned director Aaur Rahman directed translations and adaptations *Waiting For Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett, *Galileo* by Berthold Brecht, *Bury the Dead (Kobor Diye Dau)* by Irwin Shaw, *Hamlet* (2017) by William Shakespeare, and *Dear Liar* (2018) by Jerome Kitty. Rahman adapted Ferenc Molnar’s play *Lily* titled *Bhepute Behag (Behag in Sounds of a Flute)* and adapted *Herr Puntila* in collaboration with Azaduzzaman Noor. Momtazuddin Ahmed, a playwright, actor, director, producer, adapted Lady Gregory’s *The Rising Moon* titled *Swadhinata Amar Swadhinata (Freedom, My Freedom!)*. Apart from the aforementioned adaptations, many short Western plays have been successful on stage and have been adapted in Bengali such as Kabir Chowdhury’s collection of seven adapted one-act plays published under the title *Praner Cheye Priyo (Dearer Than Life)*, Momtazuddin Ahmed’s *Dakhiner Janalai (The South Window)* and *Surjer Alo Cheye (Gazing at the Sun)* and Zia Haider’s *Prajapati Nirbandho (1975) (The Butterfly Fad)*.

Influenced by some Avant grade playwrights of the West like Beckett, Ionesco, Camus, Sartre, our playwrights have also made bold experimentations in their plays both in respect of theme and technique (Mukherjee, 2014). One is easily reminded in this context of Syed Waliullah, author of *Bohipeer (Artificial Brevity)*, *Ujane Mrityu (1963) (Death at High Tide)* and *Torongobhango (Breaking Tide)*, of Sayeed Ahmed, author of *Kalbela (Ominous)*, *Milepost (Milepost)* and *Trishnai (Thirst)*, of Selim Al Deen, author of *Explosive 0 Mul Samsya (Explosive and the Main Problem)*, *Sangbad Cartoon (Cartoon News)*, and *Muntasir Phantasy (Muntasir Fantasy)*, of Momtazuddin Ahmed, author of *Spartacus Bishoyok Jotilata (Complexities of Spartacus)*, *Harin Chita Chil (Deer, Cheetah And Hawk)* and *Ki Koho Shankhachil (What do you say, White Hawk)*, of Al Mansur, author of *Roller 0 Nihata LMG (Roller and Assassinated LMG)*, *Bidaye Mona Lisa (Goodbye Mona Lisa)* and *Revolution O Khrishtabdo Sandahna (In Search of Revolution and Years)*, of Zia Haider, author of *Shuvra Shundar Aalvani Anonda* and of Alauddin Al Azad, author of *Narake Lal Golap (1972) (Red Rose in the Underworld)*, *Nihshobdo Jatra (1972) (The Silent Journey)* and *Joar Thekey Bolchhi (Speaking from High Tide) (Chowdhury, 1978)*.

## WIDE REPRESENTATION OF SOCIETY

It is a matter worth noticing that, there was no longer an embargo on cultural activities after 1971 and this brought about a near euphoric zeal that found its expression on stage. Already the stage workers were exposed to the theatrical activities of Kolkata and now were ready to experiment in their new space to compete with the international market (Anand, 2016; Banerji, 2020). Besides, the independence of Bangladesh brought about the banning of the importation of foreign films, and the class of audience that normally frequented cinema houses to see foreign films had also

diverted to the stage. However, the war of liberation left its scars on the nation. Bangladesh's economy, its educational system, and its political environment were unstable. In fact, Bangladeshi people wanted to alienate themselves from the social realities and the stage theatre came as an escape (Liu, 2016). The workers found in stage a platform to vent their anger, desperation, and rising frustrations and the audience at the receiving end also shared the same intent. This is seen in many plays of Abdullah Al Mamun who took the degradation of moral values in our society and realism as themes in his plays and in the plays of Saleem Al Deen who took a fancy to the world of imagination. Nevertheless, all the plays staged reflected the adverse forces of contemporary life. For instance, Nagorik's *Baki Itihash* (1973) (*The Rest of History*), *Toila Sankat* (*The Oil Crisis*) or *Cross Purpose* (translation of Albert Camus' *La Malentendu*), Dhaka Theatre's *Sangbad Cartoon* (1974) (*Cartoon News*), *Samrat-o-Pratiddandigan* (1974) (*The King and His Contenders*), *Jaundice-O-Bibidha Balloon* (1975) (*Jaundice & Various Balloons*), Theatre's *Shuba-chan Nirbashane* (*Good Words in Exile*), *Akhon Dusshomoy* (*Now is a Bad Time*), etc. all speak of the anguish and torment of the human being subjected to a devastating cataclysm in a post-war society of an underdeveloped country (Zaker, 1978).

## THE CULTURE OF THE THEATRE FESTIVAL

The development of festivals can be noted through the activities of festivals and are initiatives that draw an audience towards theatre. For instance, during the year 2017, Dhaka-based troupes premiered 25 plays at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. The troupes who performed included "Dhaka Theatre", "Natyachakra", "Padatik Natya Sangsad", "Desh Natok", "Samay", "Nagorik Natyangan", "Kadamati", "Bangladesh Shishu Academy Theatre", "Noibedyo", "Open Space Theatre", and "Battola". "Padatik Natya Sangsad" premiered traditional ballad-based *Gunjan Bibir Pala* (2017) (*Miss Gunjan's Turn*) while "Battola" staged a premiere show of *Banyakherium* (2019) last year. In addition to this, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy produced a Bengali version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, translated by Syed Shamsul Haque and directed by Aatur Rahman.<sup>4</sup> Renowned group "Theatre", headed by Ramendu Majumdar, one of the leading theatre directors of the country, selected and staged three popular plays that reflected the country's history and culture, depicting the liberation war and the non-communal spirit to celebrate Pohela Baishakh 1424 (14 April 2017). The plays were staged at the Mahila Samity Auditorium, Natak Sarani, Bailey Road. The first play performed was *Payer Awaj Pawa Jay* (1976) (*Footsteps Can Be Heard*), written by Syed Shamsul Haque and directed by Abdullah Al-Mamun. This play was modified by Sudip Chakroborty. After that, Theatre's latest production *Maya Nodi* (2017) (*Compassion River*) was written and directed by Maruf Kabir. Finally, they performed *Meraj*

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<sup>4</sup> 25 plays Premiered- The New Age, 31 December 2017



*Fakir-er Ma* (1997) (*The Mother of Meraj Fakir*), which is one of the most popular plays of the troupe, written and directed by Abdullah Al-Mamun.<sup>5</sup>

AK Azad Shetu was one of the five narrators for the three-hour-long archaeological play *Mahasthan (Grandiose Place)*, which took place on stage in Mahasthan, Bogra in November 2018.<sup>6</sup> He was a member of the Asian Theatre (CAT), a professional theatre group and he has already completed a total of 25 productions voluntarily. CAT is registered as an NGO as most of their productions are funded internationally. This includes a theatre festival held on March 15, Friday, 2019 at Lalmonirhat's MT Hossain Institute, called "Natya Utshaber Ashor 2019", jointly organised by the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and the Lalmonirhat District Shilpakala Academy. The century-old stage had hosted a theatre festival after nearly five decades. Five theatre groups performed at the event and took the centennial stage back to its glorified past.<sup>7</sup> *Kaljoyee Moncho Nibhrite Kade* (2019) (*Ageless Stage Cries in Solitude*) was performed, produced by Shamim Ahmed, Uttam Kumar Roy, and Akter Hossain. The whole story of the play was based on the internationally famous stage of the MT Hossain Institute. Also, Bornomala Theatre's *Hobar Noy* (2019) (*Not to Happen*), a composite drama about the contemporary local political scene, directed by Motiur Rahman, was staged during the festival. Porshi Theatre's *Shey Kaler Golpo* (2019) (*Story of Those Times*), directed by Saidul Haque, and Sapko Theatre's *Dulalir Biye* (2019) (*Dulali's Marriage*), directed by Anil Chandra Roy was also staged.

Theatre in Bangladesh, after 1971, also incorporated indigenous themes in its content. This is due to the fact that people of different ethnicities call Bangladesh home and the production of plays related to indigenous concepts further highlighted the anti-communal spirit of the country (Liu, 2016). A prime example of this would be Theatre troupe "Arannok Nattyadal" staging its 40<sup>th</sup> production *Rarang* at the Experimental Theatre Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy on Friday, October 25, 2019. "Rarang" is a Santal word which means 'the call to rise'. The play, written and directed by thespian Mamunur Rashid, revolves around the struggles of the Santal community, an ethnic minority group living mostly in the northern part of Bangladesh. Highlighting the life of a great Santal leader Alfred Soren, the play depicts the Santal Revolt of 1855 against the British Raj and the corrupt Zamindari system. It also touched on some burning social issues of that time including the remarriage of widows, social negligence, etc (Kundu, 2010). The cast included Mamunur Rashid, Tamalika Karmakar, Dinu Majumder, Sajjad Saju, Hashim Masud, and others.<sup>8</sup> A 10-day theatre festival titled "Bangla Natyautsob" was also held in 2019, staged at the National Theatre Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

<sup>5</sup>*MerajFakirer Ma to be staged at BSA today*- The Independent, 21 August 2015

<sup>6</sup>*Archaeological play "Mahasthan" staged in Bogra* – The Daily Sun, 22 November 2018

<sup>7</sup>*Bangla NatyaUtsab begins at Shilpakala Academy* – The New Age, 20 October 2019

<sup>8</sup>*Aranyak Natyadal stages Rarang* – The New Age, 27 October 2019

To add more, the Ganga-Jamuna Cultural Festival 2019 ended with the staging of four plays at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy and Bangladesh Mahila Samity.<sup>9</sup> Theatre troupe “Natyam Repertory” staged its play titled *Dear Liar* at Studio Theatre Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Bangladeshi and Indian theatre troupes entertained theatre lovers at a theatre festival that began at three venues in Dhaka. A week-long internal theatre festival organised by Jessore – based theatre troupe ‘Bibartan Jessore’ (2019), ended at Jessore Shilpakala Academy auditorium.<sup>10</sup>

## THEATRE IN RECENT YEARS

Through street or open-air presentation, ‘theatre for development’, a new genre of play-presentation, is gaining popularity (Anand, 2016). Organisations like Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation and International Theatre Institute are very active in the country, working towards the upliftment of theatre. The class structure of the audience, over the past years, has also undergone a considerable change. Like in all cultural functions held in the city of Dhaka, the audience of the theatre initially belonged exclusively to the upper strata of society. But now, the number of middle class and middle lower classes is increasing and drama festivals and competitions are organised regularly in places like Chittagong, Mymensingh, and Dinajpur.

In celebration of Shakespeare’s 455<sup>th</sup> birthday, students of the Department of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) staged *Caliban (2019)* at ULAB’s “Campus A” auditorium on April 26 and 27, 2019. The play was written and directed by internationally famed playwright Rani Drew, a visiting professor who had previously taught in different universities in Singapore, China, and Hungary. This is a sequel to Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*. Drew started from where *The Tempest* ends. As the colonisers - Prospero, Miranda, and their aides—depart the island, Ariel and Caliban discover themselves a life without slavery. Spurred on by the spirit of freedom and camaraderie, they start to work together to build the future with other inhabitants of the island amid its natural resources and flora and fauna. In the process, the island’s myths of gods and spirits reveal the rich culture of the people. Thus, they move into a new history of hope and progress.<sup>11</sup> This was hugely successful and serves as a testament to the fact that popular Shakespeare adaptations have been successfully performed in Dhaka both at the domestic and international level (Chakrabarty, 2020). Furthermore, the theatre troupe Chorus Repertory Theatre based in Manipur, India staged William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

<sup>9</sup>Ganga Jamuna Cultural Festival 2019- The Daily Star, 22 October 2019

<sup>10</sup>Weeklong int’l theatre fest ends in Jashore – The New Age, 20 October 2019

<sup>11</sup> ‘Caliban’: A play inspired by Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” staged at ULAB- The Dhaka Tribune, 29 April 2019



in Manipuri dialect at the Bangladesh International Festival on June 21, 2019. It was directed by Ratan Thiyam<sup>12</sup>.

In addition, “Empty Space”, a new theatre troupe, staged *A New Testament of Romeo and Juliet* on September 29, 2019, at the National Theatre Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Saymom Zakaria adapted the script while Noor Zaman Raja directed the play and designed the stage, lights, and costumes.<sup>13</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Theatre in Bangladesh flourished after independence in 1971 and a rapid increase of activities was observed after the liberation war. The theatre workers, afterwards, felt that the new democratic environment would prepare them for the challenges that lay ahead to do something new and meaningful. Their exposition to the drama scene of Kolkata also served as a catalytic effect and many of the theatre workers were inspired by the successful endeavors of Bengali theatre in Kolkata, both that of traditional and western plays (Mahanta, 1985; Mukherjee, 2014).

The influence of western theatre in the plays mentioned before include the choice of themes, style, stagecraft, the combination of fantasy and fact, in the treatment of time according to the situation and the introduction of alienation, in the way the Theatre of Absurd<sup>14</sup> has affected the style of acting, and the way scenes are created and music is used on the Bangladeshi stage (García-Periago, 2012; Mahanta, 1985). The effects of foreign plays tend to create intercultural productions integrated with Bangladeshi culture, producing a unique form of theatre representing a new hybrid form (Chakrabarty, 2020). Hence, it is fair to say that western theatre has contributed to the growth and enrichment of Bangladesh’s theatre arts through studies, translations, adaptations, and the experience of stage performance which has been modified to fit into the Bangladeshi culture today (Chattopadhyay, 2017).

However, in the core of the newfound success of theatre in Bangladesh is the hard work of the dedicated theatre workers of Dhaka including actors, writers, directors, and translators, and their devotion for the art form. As stated by Aly Zaker in an interview, “when we started practicing theatre in 1972 there was no fund, no producer, no training and even a suitable stage wasn’t there

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<sup>12</sup>Macbeth, *Oh My Sweet Land*- The New Age, 23 June 2019

<sup>13</sup>*Empty Space begins its journey* – The New Age, 28 September 2019

<sup>14</sup> Theater of the Absurd refers to a literary movement in **drama** popular throughout European countries from the 1940s to approximately 1989. Absurdist playwrights adhered to the theories of French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus, in particular his **essay** *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in 1942. Albert Camus defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. The **origins** of the **Theatre of the Absurd** are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s.



at that time. Day after day, with our collective efforts, we gave the urban theatre an institutional shape though the support from the government was very limited. And now, we have modern venues for theatre, but the art form is losing its appeal in the 21st century.”<sup>15</sup> Currently, theatre has managed to thrive and steadily increase its cultural activities due to the labour of these revolutionaries (Liu, 2016). Thus, we can see that the theatre workers are able to selflessly represent the voice of the people on stage through the art of performance without any concern for any return, other than that of the satisfaction of the people and themselves (Kundu, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Theatre was never a profitable business; most theatre workers acted on the stage purely out of passion and love for the art without any concern for remuneration. With funding from patronages, ticket sales, and advertisements, the production companies barely managed to break even. However, this did not hinder the artists in any way; theatre workers in liberated Bangladesh realised the art form as a bold medium of communication and artistic expression of ingenious creativity. The theatre workers felt that the new democratic environment would prepare them for the challenges that lay ahead to do something new and meaningful and their exposition to the drama scene of Kolkata served as a catalytic effect. It was the younger generation that kindled the activities, first in Dhaka University which then spread across Dhaka and moved further into other districts. As theatre has evolved over the course of the years, with more shows being held than ever before, it has allowed the theatre workers and writers to experiment with their work, cultivating a nascent yet unique theatre culture in Bangladesh on par with any other country involved in the theatre world.

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.newagebd.net/article/77442/theatre-needs-new-talents-dedicated-activists-aly-zaker>

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