Sara Zaker: Advocating for a Future of Bangladeshi Theatre

By: Samya Kullab

To pigeonhole Sara Zaker is no easy commission. Her resume is the mark of a jack-of-all trades: an actress of both film and stage, a director, a social communications executive, an entrepreneur, a teacher and a social activist. Questions relating to how she manages to reconcile these seemingly incongruous occupations are shrugged off with a simple, “I’m a workaholic.”

The name might not ring a bell for many north of the equator; a mere mention of it at a cultural function in the deltaic nation of Bangladesh elicits impassioned remarks of veneration. Indeed, Zaker is a darling of Bangaldeshi cultural life.

Zaker initially pursued biochemistry, and then switched majors, graduating with a degree in English literature. Upon graduating from Dhaka University, she traveled to London and trained with the British Theatre Institute in 1981.

She works primarily with the local experimental company Nagorik Natya Sampradaya, founded with her husband and artistic partner, Aly Zaker. The company is renowned not only for producing original work, but also innovative adaptations of classics, such as Molière’s *Les Femmes Savantes*, Bertolt Brecht’s *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and most recently Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

“We were influenced by *Cherry Orchard* when we produced *Kanthal Bagan* (Jackfruit Orchard), but it would not be accurate to call it an adaptation, really” She says. Rather, Chekhov’s story serves as a crucial reference point to depict social changes in a centuries-old rural lifestyle. Aly Zaker, who wrote the play, was beguiled by the similarities between 19th century Russia and the transformations currently taking place in rural Bangladesh. The play portrays the experience of a Bengali aristocratic family during this transitional period.

Zaker assumed the role of Zohra, likened to Chekhov’s Lyubov Andreievna Ranevskaya, a commanding figure, representing the still-lingering romanticism of a fading aristocracy. Along with her estranged brother Tasadduq, Zohra visits her ancestral estate, where the scene is set, only to learn that it will be auctioned-off due to tax evasion.

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“The themes in the play are pertinent,” says she says, “The decadence of a family without resources, the lack of practical thinking about property, giving up ancestral land and migrating from the village to the city, these are all issues that resonate with the current Bengali consciousness.”

Those with the means travel and live abroad, sustain the emotional bonds to their beloved motherland, but do not have the foresight to look into managerial capacities required to maintain their homes.

“This problem has been with us for many years,” she explains.

Since 1973, Nagorik Natya Sampradaya has been experimenting with local and international aesthetics and storytelling methods, and has managed to attain a unique balance between the two. Zaker, however, fears for the future.

“I am worried about the future of our theatre, we need better writers, new concepts, new ideas. We need leaders in theatre. Those who can start a theatre movement in our country are too old to keep going.”

With the aim of introducing young people to stage-craft, Zaker began giving acting workshops, borrowing methods from her basic training in London and her own technique. She focuses on the basics: physical exercises to release inhibition, articulation and voice, as well as improvisation and text work.

To her students she imparts an important lesson: be committed.

“That was the biggest lesson I’ve had to learn throughout my career: be committed all the way through during a performance. It’s not enough if someone says ‘You were great in that scene’. You have to maintain the same level of focus and engagement in every scene.”

Though youngsters from outside the capital city are keen to join the theatre, according to Zaker, talent is scarce. No very many students demonstrate a willingness to cultivate their talents with patience and dedication. “Theatre is not the place to rise to stardom quickly,” she warns them.

In all, she believes a more professional approach to theatre is necessary if things are to improve in the long-run.

“Most people consider the theatre to be a hobby because they hardly make any money. Other countries subsidize their theatres, and as a result, their performers are more focused. In our country, the government hardly has any provisions, so we have to look to NGOs.”

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“Many things must be done at the policy level to improve these conditions,” she explains. This statement rings true for most places; the theatre is reliably impoverished almost everywhere. However, in the capital city of Dhaka the case is especially acute.

Zaker advocates for subsidization, and the establishment of new auditoriums to stage plays. Corporate sponsorship has been difficult to acquire over the years because theatre audiences rarely encompass a large fan base, as the ones of film or television.

And then there is the ubiquitous problem of traffic. Dhaka is one of the most densely populated cities in the world, and most of her citizens have had to accommodate their lives around this inconvenient reality. Making a 7 o’clock show becomes impossible for some who are commuting from different neighbourhoods.

“Large platforms are not easily do-able in Bangladesh, so we have to decentralize if we want it to flourish.” She says.

There are historically contingent reasons for these infrastructural challenges. Since gaining Independence from Pakistan in 1971, the nation has been engaged in a difficult developmental struggle that has only been exacerbated by population growth and a limited land base. Dhaka’s notorious traffic conditions are symptomatic of severe population congestion.

But Zaker concludes hopefully, “We have an audience, even today. Their numbers are increasing slowly. But we need a place large enough to accommodate them.”