

***“With Age Comes Wisdom And Compassion” – An Interview With M. Shafiq
Shahrayar***

Taqwi Haider



Theater director and educator M. Shafiq Shahrayar was interviewed by Assistant Professor Taqui Haider. He discussed the practice and instruction he believes young people need to become outstanding performers.

TH - Tell us when did you first hear about the term drama or theatre?

SS - When I was in the 12th grade, I heard the word drama and wanted to be an actor from the beginning. I didn't have much information about the dramatic field at that point of time, so we started the drama club in my second year of graduation and learned about theater from there. To

stage our play, we called on theater practitioners from the Bharatendu Natya Academy. This also broadened my knowledge of the theater arts. At that time, movies were very famous, and compared to today & there was no social media to get information from.

TH - What kind of change did you see in yourself after passing out from Bharatendu Natya Academy ?

SS- I saw a dramatic change in myself, to enter in films or become an entertainer delivering dialogue isn't sufficient, I was concentrating on acting, however acting was a piece of my educational plan, this course showed me every one of the parts of theater expressions and dramatization. I came to know about dramatic arts, Indian drama, Bharat Muni's Natyashastra, western drama, western writers, Shakespeare, Russian arts, Bertolt Brecht, etc. After studying these important things, this resulted in a huge mindset change about dramatic arts. These changes are responsible for sustaining myself in this field till now. So I can say that Bharatendu Natya Academy taught me everything from A-Z about dramatic arts.

TH - Is acting your purpose in life?

SS - Yes this statement is 100% right. From the very beginning I wanted to become an actor ,theater practitioner & theatre director hence I can say that this is the purpose of my life. Be it acting in front of the audience or teaching dramatic art my career is going on in this field & I am very very satisfied with my purpose. I want to explain more & more about acting, dramatic arts & various other methods related to this field. As mentioned this is my purpose in life, I am not doing anything beyond this .

TH- Tell us about the challenges you faced while directing the play Hamlet ?

SS- This is a very good question if i say that there are 5-6 difficult plays in the world & Hamlet is among those plays. I faced a lot of difficulties so in order to overcome these difficulties I organized a 4 months workshop prior to the actual performance, basically in Shakespeare's plays the monologues are very long. It's a challenge to do a Hamlet play & secondly how you hold the audience there were a lot of adoptions like K.N. Kakkar, Harivansh Rai Bachchan. If I talk about these adoptions the language was very tough. So the first challenge was to make language easy

& edit a few monologues. I have edited a few scenes as well. If you see the duration of this play it is around 3 hours so the biggest challenge is to make this play 2 hours or less than that so that for an audience they will not feel alienated from the performance. And the next challenge was the casting of this play.

There are many directors who have different visualizations about Hamlet's father King Claudius, how to show the ghost of Hamlet's father King Claudius to the audience was still a big challenge because some of the previous directors depicted the ghost Hamlet's father in various ways. Few of them used masks & other ways so this brings to all the confusion in which way I am going to portray the ghost of Hamlet's father. For the casting of Hamlet's father ghost Claudius it took me 30 days. The other challenges were designing, props, voice modulation, and blocking. There were challenges everywhere how I was going to make the costumes realistic. I overcame all the challenges & at the same time I directed one of the best plays of my life. There were a lot of people who questioned me that you have cut a few of the scenes of the actual play. So as a director you have the freedom to communicate with your audience the best way possible so that your audience will get value out of it.

There is one scene of fencing particularly during this scene few of our actors got injured while practicing fencing during the rehearsal. Few swords were also broken during rehearsal. So the biggest challenge in this play was to show the fencing scene to the audience. But my team overcame this challenge & we completed the drama with flying colors.



Pic - Hamlet Play Directed by M. Shafiq Shahrayar

TH - Name 4 prominent personalities of theater who according to you changed and influenced the outlook of people.

SS - According to me the first prominent personality is Habib Tanvir who did lot of experiment in drama, used different language, the actor of his play are not very educated, I have worked with him, the best part of Habib Tanvir was that he focuses on good music & impactful topics.

Ebrahim Alkazi Shah - He is a man who needs to be introduced, he is responsible for the big changes in the theatre arts. He did a lot of good plays, he also headed the National School of Drama, & was responsible for giving talents like Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, & Pankaj Kapoor. The other names I would like to mention are K V Karanth, Sachdev Dubey, Ranjit Kapoor, & Ram Gopal Bajaj. These people gave a great service to theater art in India.

I would also like to mention about Anamika Haskar's short play that I did under her direction, the duration of that play was 30 mins, it took us three months to prepare that play, I learnt about the designing & she changed my way of acting style in this play, I found out this acting style was very unique & different from the one I was practicing before.

TH - Nowadays OTT platforms are giving artists the freedom to showcase their talent, what is the role of theater in such a situation ?

SS - Role of theatre is very positive in OTT platforms, according to me 70% of artists are coming from theatre field to become part of this unexplored OTT world. This is a very interesting fact, if I talk about National School of Drama they take only 25-30 students every year, & in FTTI Pune intake is 8-10, in this huge country where more & more people are incline towards acting & content creation, they seek help of theatre before making their career in OTT platforms, they have this thought theatre can help them to learn the art of acting, hence if they are not selected in the above mentioned prestigious institute, they become part of local theatre groups & starts performing on a regular basis. This shows theatre playing an important role in OTT platforms. Take the example of Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Pankaj Tripathi, Rajpal Yadav, Pankaj Kapoor, Vijay Raaz, the common factor which unites all of them is that they are all from

theatre field. So these people created a legacy & now the talented youngsters will follow their footsteps, and will try to achieve the same.



Pic - Shafiq Shahrayar with Nawawuddin Siddiqui

TH - Why regional plays or theater are not given equal importance ?

SS - The reason behind this is if you see regional plays or theatre they are not part of mainstream, usually during some festival these plays are performed, for example during Dushhera, Ram Lila performed in North India & regional plays are more state centric and that did not appeal to the large audience. Look at the example of Bihar, they performed either in Maithali or Bhojpuri, but the same play can't be performed on a regular basis in Delhi or Mumbai, the reason behind is the language barrier..

TH- Is it true, english plays get more importance than hindi plays?

SS- This statement can be true or false as well. All these theatre personalities are doing both hindi & english plays but all these personalities love Shakespeare play & will not be able to say no to these plays since Shakespeare has a prominent name in dramatic arts. The matter of fact is that most of the dramatic arts works are taken from western countries as I just mentioned about Shakespeare, Bertold Brecht, Stanislavski & the english plays are given so much importance that it is included in the syllabus of M.A. English literature. So for any dramatic art students it is important to learn from them. From the perspective of literature, unique style & designing. As a

theatre artist we should not favor any language. We have to be open to accept & appreciate different language places & also make sure to spread these works among the audience so that the audience will get some kind of value from these plays. The Indian director experimented a lot & did vernacular plays during their era.

Ibrahim Alkazi passed out from Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), London. He did Shakespeare plays and Indian plays as well. The majority of plays are performed in hindi or in some regional language. I have taken three plays namely Hamlet, Andha Yug & Tughlaq, & it's my dream to direct a Hamlet play, since it is considered to be one of the difficult plays. I have also performed a play Julius Caesar at different locations when I was studying dramatic arts under the supervision of Raj Besaria. As a student we have to do a lot of foreign plays, which gave us insight about the vast dramatic arts field.

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