

Shilpakala Academy: A cultural oasis in the city



Photo: Prabir Das

Situated in the old neighbourhood of Segunbagicha, near the lush Ramna Park, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy has always been the go-to place for theatre, exhibitions, and cultural programmes. It is the National Institute of Fine and Performing Arts and a cultural hub in Dhaka.

I still remember my first visit to this premises in the late seventies when Chinese cultural groups came to perform in Dhaka and how in their soft, low tone voice sang Bangla songs. And then there were acrobats doing impossible feats and Russian performers that enthralled the audience with their songs and acts. Today, after so many decades, the place still invokes nothing but fond experiences for me.



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The academy promotes the arts and culture and the creation of necessary facilities for their development. The activities of the academy also include organising workshops, seminars, discussion meetings, short-term specialised training, providing scholarships and financial grants for talented artists, and organising competitions in the various fields of fine and performing arts.

The place has now expanded into a maze of galleries, theatres, and seminar halls and people are always in queue to avail the tickets for whichever play is being performed. Come rain or shine the

place is buzzing with activities and enthusiastic art shows.



What made me happy was that the place attracted a young, trendy crowd. There is always more than one play, exhibition or workshop going on within the premises. Art appreciation course, recitations, dance dramas —almost everything that is art — Shilpakala Academy is your trusted choice.

"Big halls allow the performer's charisma to come across as larger than life. The current crop of young directors who love riotous experimental work all opt for these halls. Experienced directors with their classy sophisticated plays prefer Shilpakala Academy at one go for their show dates. It is a perfect place to go on dates, for ladies' evening out, or friends' day out — I even took my mother to enjoy a play on Mother's Day," says Aziza Ahmed, who regularly goes to the place with her family.

Having done praising, academy regulars like Meher Nigar feel the Experimental Hall should be renovated and modernised and particular emphasis must be given to the seating arrangements.

NB Mansoor on the other hand loves the arty ambience with like-minded people who seem very interested in drama, film, music, poetry, or painting.

"But in the middle of a performance, you hear the creaking sound of the old wooden platforms, it is kind of off-putting. I think some government funds should be allocated to modernise the old halls of the Academy, where performing art is played. However, the exhibition halls are state-of-the-art as it is comparatively a new infrastructure," she adds.

The waiting lounge has a sad look of the eighties with litter and cobwebs making it more lacklustre; an interior consultant can be hired to give the place a contemporary edgy look.



"There should be proper toilet facilities and a good food court inside the premises besides the old canteen serving tea and shingara, and attention must be given to cleanliness," Ahmed feels.

The area surrounding the premises is lively with pop-up eateries, selling quintessential Bengali favourites like puri, hot tea, piyaju, lentil fritters and so much more. With puris, you can choose assorted sides like duck curry, fried tripe, and chicken jalfrezi. There is a fried noodle or chow mein option. You can gulp it all down with fresh coconut water or hot tea.

So, the next time you have nothing fun to do, visit Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. Dhaka is thriving with entertaining activities. You just need to know where to go and when.