

Shabana Azmi needs no introduction. Indeed, there is little point in listing the number of national awards she has won in India or the accolades she has garnered on an international platform. (In case you're wondering, she has been nominated as an Asian hero by *Time*, hailed during unique retrospectives at the New York Film Festival in 2002 and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, appointed as a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador and celebrated at innumerable universities and film festivals for both her acting and social activism.)

Most of her 140 films are deeply ingrained in the collective subcontinental psyche, especially *Ankur*, *Arth*, *Godmother*, *Paar*, *Swami*, *Patang* and *Fire*. More importantly, her haunting eyes, expressive features and on-screen conviction have made her an undisputed icon. In Pakistan for three whirlwind performances of the Javed Siddiqui theatre classic "*Tumhari Amrita*", Shabana spoke to the *Herald* about her career and concerns. Her dialogue is more befitting a diplomat and her demeanor remains that of a diva but there is no denying that she is the subcontinent's most sultry star.



Fahim Siddiqi

**“Art is a force
for social change”**

— Shabana Azmi

By Huma Yusuf

Q. Are you glad to be performing "*Tumhari Amrita*" in Pakistan?

A. Yes. There's been a constant struggle to bring the play here. We've performed all over the world and a substantial number of audience members are always Pakistani so it seems logical to be here. It's also a happy thing to have come here to facilitate earthquake relief, especially as the times are more conducive to such ventures. I believe that people-to-people contact goes a long way in fostering good feelings between India and Pakistan.

Q. Do you expect a Pakistani crowd to respond well to the Urdu play?

A. Yes. Some aspects of Urdu will resonate well with a Pakistani crowd. Of course, the Urdu of the play is not very difficult and the emotions expressed can be understood by everybody.

Q. How do you remain invested in your performance, given that you have been playing *Amrita* since 1993?

A. "*Tumhari Amrita*" is an extraordinarily written play and I love *Amrita*'s character despite her many warts — she is ironic, self-destructive, intelligent, searching for her roots and aware of the fact that she can't live with or without her friend Zulfi. Also, this play works opposite the norm, in that we have been forbidden from learning our lines and actually read from the letters each time, which keeps it interesting. Despite over 300 performances, I still enjoy playing *Amrita*.

Q. Do you enjoy performing on stage?

A. Yes. In addition to "*Tumhari Amrita*", I've appeared in two Broadway plays starring Peter Fried and Harold Jones, the National Theatre's production of "*Waiting Room*" in London and completed a run at the

Singapore Repertory Theatre. Javed [Akhtar] and I also do a rendition of "*Sheeshon ka Masiha*" which comprises readings from the letters, narratives and ghazals of Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

Q. What do you enjoy about the theatre that film cannot offer?

A. I think it's sensational to perform in front of a live audience despite the fear of making a mistake without the benefit of a retake. Ultimately, inhabiting the character is the same in any medium — you have to realise that the character lives in subtext, not only in her own lines but also in what others say about her. With theatre, there's more time to rehearse the character, which doesn't happen in cinema. That said, film doesn't allow you to lie because of the closeness of the camera.

Q. Were you trained in a particular method that allows you to jump between the stage and screen?

A. I was trained in the

Stanislavski method which requires one to say, "If I were ...", fill in the blank and play any character with equal conviction, inhabiting any role truthfully and completely. Of course, speaking politically, there are now many roles I would not do. I could not play the role of a subservient woman if there was no transformation in her character, no ultimate empowerment or if a sense of outrage and desire for change was not provoked within the viewer at seeing the woman's condition.

Q. Has it been easy for you to conflate art and politics?

A. Yes. I grew up in that atmosphere as my parents both regarded art as a force for social change. I truly believe that art has the potential of creating a climate of sensitivity which can then allow



change to occur.

Q. Many claim that your performance in Mahesh Bhatt's *Arth* kick-started your career as an activist...

A. It wasn't as simple as that because, as I've mentioned, my background made me sensitive to social and political trends. Of course, early in my career, I was working so much without thinking about what the films I was appearing in were saying. After *Arth*, I had Indian women walking into my house sharing their marital problems with me in an act of sisterhood, not as an interaction between audience and actor. They would solicit my advice and I realised what a huge responsibility it is to project a certain

type of role. At about the same time, I appeared in *Paar*, a film about migrant labourers, and the two roles together transformed my career and politicised me.

Q. In addition to championing women's empowerment, you rallied behind Mumbai's slum dwellers...

A. Yes. As the chairperson of Nivara Hakk, I undertook a five-day hunger strike in 1986 despite official resistance to highlight the problems that afflicted slum dwellers.

Q. It must have been satisfying then to be nominated to parliament in 1997...

A. Yes. It was very empowering and energising to be able to have an independent voice in parliament where speaking on certain issues could actually make a difference. I became very involved in women's and health issues and I rallied against fundamentalism. Even now, whether it's through my films or the work I do in India's slums and villages, I stay focused on the issues that concern me.

Q. Do you think films such as the recent hit *Rang De Basanti* are eroding the boundaries between mainstream and parallel cinema in India?

A. Well, I certainly hope so. I've been quite heartened by the response to *Rang De Basanti* because it has energised the youth and moved them to form activist groups with names like 'Jago Jago'. Such cinema should be nurtured.

Q. Do you agree with the common complaint that Bollywood has been westernised?

A. Not at all. The subcontinent is a place of contradictions, where several centuries exist simultaneously. Therefore cinema needs to encapsulate the multiculturalism and multilingualism of the place. All types of films should be made and thankfully all types are being made. In that way it's a very happy time for actors. It's also high time that the urban realities of India were reflected in cinema — we should show that India is not

only about zamindari and villages. For instance, my son Farhan Akhtar, who made *Dil Chahta Hai*, is as much a part of India as anyone else, except his India is more urban and western.

Q. There are also those who argue that parallel Hindi cinema has been relocated within the diaspora instead of remaining in India, thanks to directors such as Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta...

A. That's a very narrow way of thinking. Everyone has a right to tell their story. And parallel cinema doesn't have to be 'Indian' per se. All types of movies can reflect different realities.

Q. You recently returned to Hollywood to work on *Waterborne*...

A. Yes. The film is about a Sikh woman in the US who disapproves of her son's American girlfriend but then becomes a victim of a hate crime post-9/11. The film is about shedding our prejudices. The project is a small student venture that has been released on the internet so I'm glad to have participated in the filming.

Q. Has Hollywood changed since you last worked in the West?

A. The film industry is far more cosmopolitan and there are people from different nationalities working there. There's also been an increased interest in Indian cinema.

Q. You have also released *15 Park Ave* after a filming hiatus...

A. Yes, it's received rave responses. It's an Aparna Sen film about two sisters, one of whom is schizophrenic, forcing the other to be a caregiver. I play the caregiver — the typical, urban woman who is attempting to be a superwoman. I've enjoyed the role which is closer to me, or more accurately Aparna herself, than many other characters I've portrayed. More importantly, I've just completed *Bangla Town Banquet* which is about a Bangladeshi Muslim woman who has to deal with her husband's decision to marry a younger woman.