

Finger play for thought

Amar Sen and Sabyasachi Sen put up quite a show of hands, and with mesmeric effect, says shreyosi chakraborty

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.
Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

THIS extract from *Macbeth* merely serves to reflect the immortal genius of Shakespeare and the underlying value of his works that have served the test of time since his passing more than 400-plus years ago. His reading of a gamut of human characteristics remains second to none and his analogies have paved the way for scholars and dramatists alike, his ability of foresight never more apparent than his ability to walk between and literally converse with shadows... the defining points throwing centric definition on the core of a singular entity. Human history is what it is because of an intermingling of light and darkness, given how recent vintage has Bacon feeling that "darkness was the reason for light to shine brightly", never mind that the Bard of Avon compared "light with life". Always compatible, could one ever perceive of darkness without light? When opposed, light succumbs to darkness and the associated shadows.

Delve into the supernatural and you might be given to wondering if

Shakespeare's doppelganger didn't ethereally contribute to either illuminating or darkening our lives, and try as I might have, I would never have been any the wiser till I caught the act of Amar Sen and Sabyasachi Sen at Nandan in Kolkata recently.

Like twin selves, they formed shadows without light, juxtapositioning, aligning and synchronising, with the use of 16 fingers and four thumbs, a constant source as an aid to their dedication to handshadowgraphy. Mesmerised and enthralled, I could only watch as they wove a magic that was no less entralling than an audiovisual film. The much celebrated and acclaimed Amar and Sabyasachi are the only patrons of handshadowgraphy in all of Asia. To go a step further, counting the number of practitioners of this rare art form in the rest of the world would call for barely the fingers a normal person possesses — just nine who make it a show of hands in keeping a vanishing art from dying! Glued to my seat, they made me realise that "every darkness too has a story to convey" and it's up to the individual to perceive whatever.

Be it an old man walking past a beach in a conversation with a passer-by, with crabs scuttling around here and there; or two dogs fighting; or be it great personalities like Rabindranath Tagore or a Sourav Ganguly, Mother Teresa or even Tintin of comic book fame; or a peacock displaying its plumage with pride during the monsoon; an elephant blowing its trumpet; or a mother nurturing her young — everything was created and recreated with bare fingers.

The Sens always gift their audience with charisma. Sabyasachi in Bengali means ambidexterity and



Amar Sen (left) and Sabyasachi Sen (right) at their performance, Nandan.



Elephant

Amar personifies immortality and the duo couldn't have been more aptly named. Handshadowgraphy is an art that might die even before it shows signs of flourishing because of the absence of a capable predecessor to carry the legacy forward. "At one point in our career," says Amar, "people even retreated saying that 'aibar bachchader kichu programme rakha hoyi. (This time we haven't kept any programme for the kids).'" Even more pathetic is the realisation that this "child's game" does not draw a single little kid when it comes to learning the art. Amar, fortunately, has an institution where he teaches handshadowgraphy, but with little to show for it. His Academy of Magical Arts and Research is the only one of its kind in Asia and beginning with the "White category" that nurtures everyone in the age group of even to 97, it conducts three other classes according to a hierarchy — Yellow, Blue and Red. And yet till date not a single person has even qualified for the Blue group.

"Momentary illusions are what attract these people and they come to learn either the Sourav Ganguly or Mother Teresa. And when they understand that this 'child's game' is enough to justify their childhood whims is when we get the respect." A sense of drawing, anatomy, behaviourism, a clear concept of drama, dexterity, a flexibility of fingers and, most importantly, creativity of the mind, is what one must possess to master this art form. "I want to



Mother Teresa

catch them all young, before their fingers become stiff," says Amar, as he explains how a five-degree compromise of a finger against the light can turn a Mother Teresa into a fox!

Way back in 1973, when power cuts were a routine affair, Amar and Sabyasachi were forced to while away time in the dark. The latter made an attempt to create something against the flickering light of a candle, and "I imitated the quacking of a goose... that was how it all began!" Talk about instantaneous and impromptu! Described as "cinema in silhouette", this dying art has cinematic techniques amalgamated with music, mimicry and magic. How an old man, while walking along a beach is made to advance and retreat is understood vividly, so intricately are the long and close shots kept in mind.

"We did not get the opportunity to be taught," says Sabyasachi. "Standing for hours under the glaring sun, ready to devour even the sweat, we waited for a tortoise to peep out of its shell. Other movements were also followed. Rigorous toil and alacrity with each others fingers has won us these accolades today. Selling the concept was the biggest challenge for us. People had thought it to be photography. Establishing the name and explain-



Two men in conversation

ing our work was a very big challenge."

With a limited arsenal of just so many normal digits that grace two pairs of hands but that seem to emanate from a single body, and an unlimited scope to innovative, their work was "as varied as existence and as profound as truth". The absence of serious effort, though, threatens to reduce their art of obscurity. Unknown and hidden under the shingles, the duo also has films done on widow remarriage and Neeldarpan — the rape of a woman by an Indigo worker — kept at the Calcutta panorama.

But then, why did it all begin with *Macbeth's* candle that was, if anything, a dark image? Was it to induce the game of shadows? The future, for a fact, always comes across as a deception when you are tired of the petty tomorrows and human existence is but a summation of passing shadows, right? What with each day passing just like a candle that has served only to beguile the foolish mortal, one might wonder at this pompous striding about making a great deal about a short-lived period before vanishing into a dark void. But such is the promise held out for individual life: Sabyasachi has been diagnosed with lung cancer and perhaps this was the last show the duo will perform. Be that as it might be in the face of inevitability, I was fortunate to have caught their act on that fateful day.