



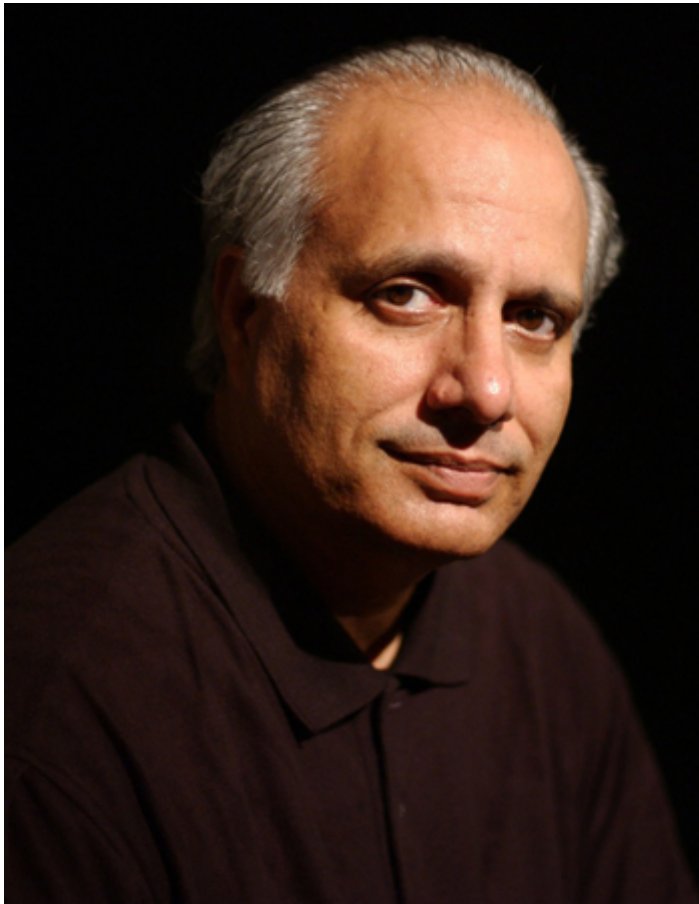
**International Theatre Institute ITI**

World Organization for the Performing Arts

**ITI Newsletter**

**World Theatre Day**

## **Shahid NADEEM, Pakistan – World Theatre Day Message Author for 2020**



Dear Members of ITI, dear Friends of ITI, dear Readers

It is our great pleasure and honour to officially announce that Shahid NADEEM from Pakistan, the leading playwright from Pakistan who has written over 50 plays, has been selected by the Executive Council to write the World Theatre Day Message for 2020.

Born in Kashmir and raised in Pakistan, Shahid NADEEM is an outstanding playwright and a person who relentlessly advocates peace in his region and in the world, through his highly esteemed work and through his actions. Shahid NADEEM believes in the power of theatre and he uses it. When he was put into prison for being against the military dictatorship in his country, he created plays for the inmates of the notorious Mianwali prison. Independent of the burdens he had to experience when he was exiled and when his plays could no longer be shown, he believes in what he is doing, continues to write and follows his conviction.

When Shahid NADEEM does something he does it with determination, accompanied by a special charm, a friendly attitude and with humour. That is why nowadays the doors are open to wherever he travels in his country or abroad such as India, the United States, United Kingdom and so on.

These words are a glimpse about the author Shahid NADEEM, that the Executive Council of ITI has chosen for writing the message for World Theatre Day, which is celebrated since 1962 on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March all over the world.

Below you find the Message for World Theatre Day 2020 and the biography in English and French.

We strongly invite you to read his message and his biography, and hope it finds open doors to you and the theatre community in your vicinity, in your country.

And, please help us to translate his message into the language(s) of your country (see information below.)

With very best regards

Tobias BIANCONE  
DG ITI

CHEN Zhongwen  
Deputy DG ITI

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*Below the following general information, you will find the full Message of Shahid NADEEM for World Theatre Day and his biography.*

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### **Please publish the Message as soon as possible**

Attention: Unlike in other years, you may publish the message and its translation from now on. The reason for this is: In those countries where the message was distributed to theatres, interested groups and media/press very early the circulation and promotion of the message was the strongest. And that is the goal of the message: To reach and inspire with the message as much people as possible.

### **Translation of the Message into Your Country 's Languages**

If you would like to translate the message into your language, please contact the ITI Centre of your country ([www.iti-worldwide.org/centres.html](http://www.iti-worldwide.org/centres.html)) or the General Secretariat of ITI [wtd@iti-worldwide.org](mailto:wtd@iti-worldwide.org), to find out if there is already a translation being prepared.

If there is no ITI Centre in your country feel free to translate the message and send the translation to [wtd@iti-worldwide.org](mailto:wtd@iti-worldwide.org), Please mention at the end of the message the name of the translator. After receiving it, it will be put on the ITI and World Theatre Day website for further use.

### **How and Where to Use the Message**

Important: The Message (original or translation), biography and photos are for use

for theatres, theatre groups, theatre professionals, theatre aficionados, theatre universities and schools. It should be published, circulated, sent to press & media, be part of an event, read in front of an audience, etc. Many of the ways of its use can be found in the attached PDF: "How to Celebrate World Theatre Day"

### Creation of a World Theatre Day Celebration

If you create an event for World Theatre Day, please send the information about time, location and programme of your event, to [news@iti-worldwide.org](mailto:news@iti-worldwide.org) so that it will be found on the virtual map on: [www.world-theatre-day.org/worldwideevents.html](http://www.world-theatre-day.org/worldwideevents.html).

### Attachments

- World Theatre Day Message 2020 by Shahid NADEEM in English (original) in [PDF](#) and [Word](#)
- Message du Message Journée Mondiale du Théâtre 2020 de Shahid NADEEM en français (traduction) en [PDF](#) et [Word](#)
- Biography Shahid NADEEM in English as [PDF](#) and [Word](#)
- Biographie Shahid NADEEM en français (traduction) en [PDF](#) et [Word](#)
- [Photo Shahid NADEEM \(jpg\)](#).
- [Photo Shahid NADEEM \(jpg\)](#).
- [How to Celebrate World Theatre Day in English in PDF](#)
- [Comment célébrer la Journée Mondiale du Théâtre en français en PDF](#)
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### World Theatre Day Message

## World Theatre Day Message 2020 by Shahid NADEEM

### Shahid NADEEM, Pakistan Theatre as a Shrine

It is a great honour for me to write the World Theatre Day 2020 Message. It is a most humbling feeling but it is also an exciting thought that Pakistani theatre and Pakistan itself, has been recognized by the ITI, the most influential and

representative world theatre body of our times. This honour is also a tribute to Madeeha Gauhar (1), theatre icon and Ajoka Theatre (2) founder, also my life partner, who passed away two years ago. The Ajoka team has come a long, hard way, literally from Street to Theatre. But that is the story of many a theatre group, I am sure. It is never easy or smooth sailing. It is always a struggle.

I come from a predominantly Muslim country, which has seen several military dictatorships, the horrible onslaught of religious extremists and three wars with neighbouring India, with whom we share thousands of years of history and heritage. Today we still live in fear of a full-blown war with our twin-brother neighbour, even a nuclear war, as both countries now have nuclear weapons. We sometimes say in jest; “bad times are a good time for theatre”. There is no dearth of challenges to be faced, contradictions to be exposed and status quo to be subverted. My theatre group, Ajoka and I have been walking this tightrope for over 36 years now. It has indeed been a tight rope: to maintain the balance between entertainment and education, between searching and learning from the past and preparing for the future, between creative free expression and adventurous showdowns with authority, between socially critical and financially viable theatre, between reaching out to the masses and being avant-garde. One may say that a theatre-maker has to be a conjurer, a magician.

In Pakistan, a clear division has existed between the Sacred and the Profane. For the Profane, there is no room for religious questioning, while for the Sacred, there is no possibility of open debate or new ideas. In fact, the conservative establishment consider art and culture out of bounds for its “sacred games”. So, the playing field for the performing artists has been like a hurdles race. They have to first prove their credentials as good Muslims and compliant citizens and also try to establish that dance, music and theatre are “allowed” in Islam. A large number of observant Muslims have hence been reluctant to embrace the performing arts even though the elements of dance, music and theatre are embedded in their daily lives. And then we stumbled on a sub-culture which had the potential to bring the Sacred and Profane on the same stage.

During the military rule in Pakistan in the 1980s, Ajoka was launched by a group of young artists who challenged the dictatorship through a socially and politically bold theatre of dissent. They found that their feelings, their anger, their anguish, were so amazingly expressed by a Sufi bard (3), who lived some 300 years ago. This was the great Sufi poet Bulleh Shah (4). Ajoka found it could make politically explosive statements through his poetry, challenging corrupt political authority and bigoted religious establishment. The authorities could ban or banish us but not a revered and popular Sufi poet like Bulleh Shah. We discovered that his life was as dramatic and radical as his poetry, which had earned him *fatwas* and banishment in his lifetime. I then wrote, “Bulha”, a play about Bulleh Shah’s life and struggle. Bulha, as he is lovingly referred to by the masses across South Asia, was from a tradition of Punjabi Sufi poets who fearlessly challenged the authority of the emperors and the clerical demagogues, through their poetry and practice. They wrote in the language of the people and about the aspirations of the masses. In music and dance, they found the vehicles to achieve a direct association between Man and God, by-passing with disdain, the exploitative religious

middlemen. They defied gender and class divides and looked at the planet with wonder, as a manifestation of the Almighty. The Arts Council of Lahore rejected the script on the grounds that it was not a play but merely a biography. However, when the play was performed at an alternative venue, the Goethe Institute, the audience saw, understood and appreciated the symbolism in the life and poetry of the people's poet. They could fully identify with his life and times and see the parallels with their own lives and times.

A new kind of theatre was born that day in 2001. Devotional Qawwali music (5), Sufi *Dhamal* dancing (6) and inspirational poetry recitation, even the meditative *Zikir* chanting (7), became parts of the play. A group of *Sikhs* (8), who were in town to attend a Punjabi conference and had popped in to see the play, invaded the stage at the end, hugging and kissing the actors and crying. They were sharing the stage for the first time with Muslim Punjabis after the Partition of India in 1947 (9), which resulted in the division of Punjab on communal lines. Bulleh Shah had been as dear to them as he was to Muslim Punjabis; for Sufis transcend religious or communal divides.

This memorable premiere was followed by Bulleh Shah's Indian odyssey. Starting with a trail-blazing tour of the Indian part of the Punjab, "Bulha" was performed in the length and breadth of India, even in times of gravest tensions between the two countries and in places where the audience did not know a single word of Punjabi but loved every moment of the play. While the doors for political dialogue and diplomacy were being closed one by one, the doors of theatre halls and the hearts of the Indian public remained wide open. During the Ajoka tour of Indian Punjab in 2004, after a very warmly received performance before a rural audience of thousands, an old man came to the actor playing the role of the great Sufi. The old man was accompanied by a young boy. "My grandson is very unwell; would you please blow a blessing upon him." The actor was taken aback and said, "Babaji (10), I am not Bulleh Shah, I am just an actor playing this role." The old man started crying and said, "Please bless my grandson, I know he will recover, if you do." We suggested to the actor to grant the old man his wish. The actor blew a blessing upon the young boy. The old man was satisfied. Before leaving, he said these words: "Son, you are not an actor, you are a reincarnation of Bulleh Shah, his *Avatar* (11)." Suddenly a whole new concept of acting, of theatre, dawned upon us, where the actor becomes the reincarnation of the character he or she is portraying.

In the 18 years of touring with "Bulha", we have noticed a similar response from an apparently uninitiated audience, for whom the performance is not just an entertaining or an intellectually stimulating experience but a soul-stirring spiritual encounter. In fact the actor playing the role of Bulleh Shah's Sufi Master, was so profoundly influenced by the experience that he himself became a Sufi poet and has since published two collections of poems. The performers involved in the production have shared that when the performance starts, they feel that the spirit of Bulleh Shah is among them and the stage seems to have been elevated to a higher plane. An Indian scholar, when writing about the play, gave it the title: "When Theatre Becomes a Shrine".

I am a secular person and my interest in Sufism is mainly cultural. I am more interested in the performative and artistic aspects of Punjabi Sufi poets but my

audience, who may not be extremists or bigoted but may hold sincere religious beliefs. Exploring stories such as that of Bulleh Shah, and there are so many in all cultures, can become a bridge between us, the theatre-makers and an unacquainted but enthusiastic audience. Together we can discover the spiritual dimensions of theatre and build bridges between the past and present, leading to a future which is the destiny of all communities; believers and non-believers, actors and old men, and their grandsons.

The reason why I am sharing the story of Bulleh Shah and our exploration of a kind of Sufi Theatre is that while performing on stage, we sometimes get carried away by our philosophy of theatre, our role as harbingers of social change and in doing so, leave a large section of the masses behind. In our engagement with the challenges of the present, we deprive ourselves of the possibilities of a deeply moving spiritual experience which theatre can provide. In today's world where bigotry, hate and violence is on the rise once again, nations seem to be pitted against nations, believers are fighting other believers and communities are spewing hatred against other communities... and in the meanwhile children die of malnutrition, mothers during childbirth due to the lack of timely medical care and ideologies of hate flourish. Our planet is plunging deeper and deeper into a climatic and climactic catastrophe and one can hear the hoof-beats of the horses of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (12). We need to replenish our spiritual strength; we need to fight apathy, lethargy, pessimism, greed and disregard for the world we live in, the Planet we live on. Theatre has a role, a noble role, in energizing and mobilizing humanity to lift itself from its descent into the abyss. It can uplift the stage, the performance space, into something sacred.

In South Asia, the artists touch with reverence the floor of the stage before stepping onto it, an ancient tradition when the spiritual and the cultural were intertwined. It is time to regain that symbiotic relationship between the artist and the audience, the past and the future. Theatre-making can be a sacred act and the actors indeed can become the *avatars* of the roles they play. Theatre elevates the art of acting to a higher spiritual plane. Theatre has the potential of becoming a shrine and the shrine a performance space.

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#### 1. References

- Madeeha Gauhar* (1956–2018): Theatre director, actress, feminist and founder of Ajoka Theatre. , holder of Masters in Theatre from Royal Holloway College, London and recipient of Medal of Distinction from the Government of Pakistan and Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands.
- Ajoka Theatre*: Established in 1984. The word Ajoka means “Contemporary” in Punjabi. Its *repertoire* includes plays on themes such as religious tolerance, peace, gender violence, human rights.
- Sufism*: The Islamic mystical tradition, which seeks to find the truth of divine love through direct personal experience of God, became popular due to its preaching of universal brotherhood and opposition to rigid doctrinaire enforcement of religious teachings. Sufi poetry, mostly rendered in music, expresses mystical union through the metaphors of profane love.
- Bulleh Shah* (1680–1757): An influential Punjabi Sufi poet, who wrote about complex

4. *Bulleh Shah* (1680-1757): An influential Punjabi Sufi poet, who wrote about complex philosophical topics in simple language, was a strong critic of religious orthodoxy and ruling elite, was exiled from the city of Kasur, accused of heresy and denied burial in the city graveyard. Popular among the devotional and folk singers. Admired across religious divide.
5. *Qawwali*: Devotional Sufi poetry, presented by groups of singers (*Qawwals*), originally performed at Sufi shrines, leading the listeners, to a state of ecstasy.
6. *Dhammal*: Ecstatic dancing at Sufi shrines, usually on drumbeat.
7. *Zikir*: Devotional rhythmic chanting, reciting prayers, achieving spiritual enlightenment.
8. *Sikhs*: Followers of Sikh faith, founded in Punjab in 15<sup>th</sup> Century by Guru Nanak.
9. The Muslim state of Pakistan was carved out of India in 1947 amid unprecedented communal carnage and massive migration of population.
10. *Babaji*: An expression of respect for an elderly man.
11. *Avatar*: Reincarnation or manifestation on Earth of a divine teacher, according to Hindu culture.
12. *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* are described by John of Patmos in his Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament. In most accounts, the four riders are seen as symbolizing Conquest, War, Famine, and Death, respectively.

## World Theatre Day Message Author

### Biography Shahid NADEEM

#### Shahid NADEEM

Playwright

Shahid Nadeem is Pakistan's leading playwright and head of the renowned Ajoka Theatre.

Shahid Nadeem was born in 1947 in Sopore, Kashmir. He became a refugee at the tender age of 1, when his family had to migrate to the newly-created Pakistan after the 1948 war between India and Pakistan over the disputed state of Kashmir. He has lived in Lahore, Pakistan where he did his Masters in Psychology from the Punjab University. He wrote his first play as a university student but became a dedicated playwright when he started contributing from his political exile in London, plays for Pakistan's dissident theatre group, Ajoka, set up by Madeeha Gauhar, a pioneer theatre activist, whom he later married. Shahid Nadeem has written more than 50 original plays in Punjabi and Urdu and several adaptations of Brecht's plays.

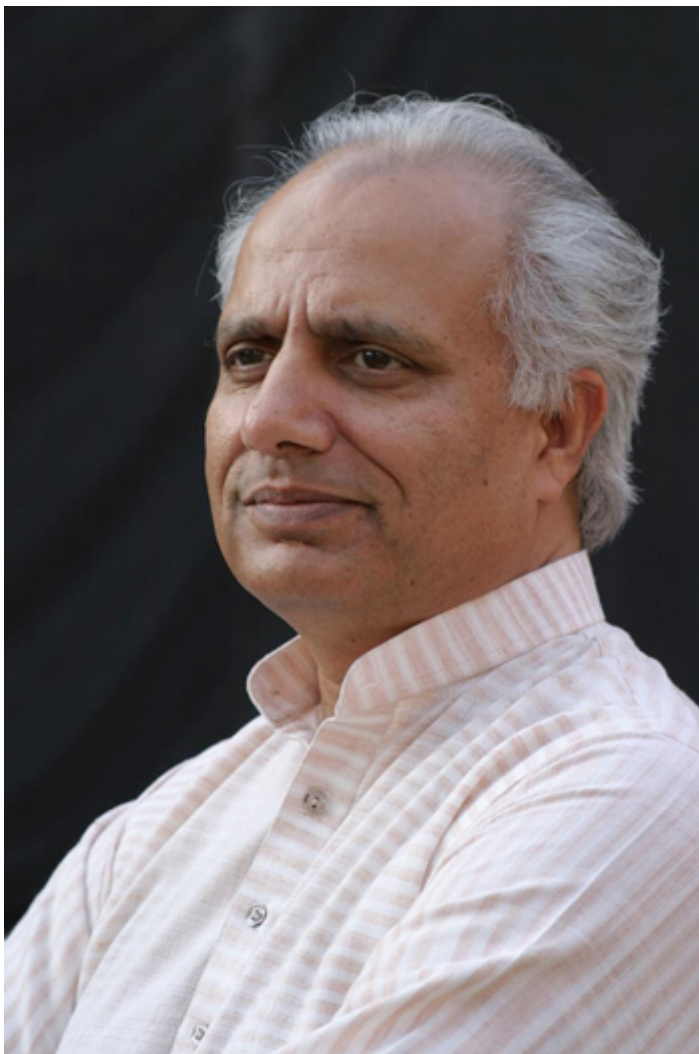
He has been associated with Pakistan Television as a producer and member of senior management. He was imprisoned three times under various military-led governments for his opposition to military rule and adopted as a *prisoner of conscience* by Amnesty International. In the notorious Mianwali Jail, he started writing weekend plays produced by and for the prisoners. Later he worked as International Campaigns Coordinator and Asia-Pacific Communications Officer for Amnesty International. He has been a fellow at the Getty Research Institute, International Pen, USA and National Endowment for Democracy. He is also a member of Theatre Without Borders network.

Shahid Nadeem's plays have been widely performed and published in Pakistan and India. His plays have also been performed around the world including *Bulha* at Hammersmith Theatre (London, UK), *Tramway* (Glasgow, Scotland, UK) and *Helsingør* (Denmark), *Amrika Chalo* at Davis Centre for Performing Arts, Georgetown University, Washington (USA), *Bala King* at Black Box Theatre (Oslo, Norway), *Burqavaqanza* in USA at Bravo for Women Theatre (San Francisco), *Acquittal* at

Highways (Santa Monica) and Theatre Row (New York) and *Dara* at Lyttleton Theatre London (UK) and University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (USA).

His plays have been translated into English and published by Oxford University Press, Nick Hern Publishers and in several anthologies. He was awarded the President of Pakistan's Medal for the Pride of Performance in 2009. He has also directed plays for stage and television and organized Theatre for Peace festivals in India and Pakistan. He has contributed for leading Pakistani and Indian papers and BBC's Urdu Service. He has produced documentaries on cultural subjects including Lahore Museum, Punjabi customs, poet Iqbal and painter Sadeqain.

Shahid Nadeem's plays are well-regarded for their bold socially relevant, sometimes tabooed subjects such as religious extremism, violence against women, discrimination against minorities, freedom of expression, climate, peace and Sufism. Several of his plays address the issues of Partition of South Asia and shared cultural heritage of the region. He skillfully combines contemporary social and political themes with traditional forms and folk heritage to present an entertaining and intellectually stimulating theatre. Music is an inherent part of his theatre productions. He teaches art of writing at Ajoka Institute for Performing Arts and the Institute for Art and Culture, Lahore.



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