**[Adieu, sweet prince](https://www.dawn.com/news/1737182/adieu-sweet-prince)**

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ZIA Mohyeddin was horizontal the first time I encountered him, reclining on a couch in his dressing room at the Central TV studios in Birmingham. I was there — by appointment, of course — to persuade him to fetch up in Oxford for a performance. What I had in mind was a recital of Faiz’s poetry.

He sensibly dismissed that idea, saying it would require an extended period of preparation, but suggested an alternative: a talk on Pakistani culture. I can’t recall much else that was discussed more than 40 years ago, but one thing that my flawed memory has refused to erase is his irritated lament that one of the hottest current topics of debate in his homeland and mine was whether the left or the right hand should be deployed in washing one’s behind.

Zia sahib drove drown to Oxford in his white Mercedes a few weeks later. To my enduring embarrassment, I had failed to whip up much interest in his lecture, and the audience of about half a dozen (at most) might have been the smallest he had encountered in his storied career. He was politely critical of my organisational inadequacies, although I’d like to think he was more amused than appalled.

In our extended conversation over (a Chinese, I think), dinner afterwards, he was justifiably scathing about the cultural philistinism that had accompanied Pakistan’s third descent into martial law under his infamous namesake.

Zia Mohyeddin leaves behind a vast cultural imprint.

He had, of course, experienced it before, even during the heady heyday of the landmark Zia Mohyeddin Show on PTV at the turn of the 1970s. It was the age of extended sideburns, double-breasted suits and bell-bottom trousers, but Zia sahib’s nods to contemporary fashion never descended into sartorial ineloquence. His guest lists extended from film stars to writers, poets, intellectuals to hitherto unknown professionals, not least young women.

Runa Laila, a frequent guest entertainer, served as a reminder of what was being lost just as the nation was being pulled asunder. From the little I recall — it’s a childhood memory, after all — the show steered clear of politics. But the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune were nonetheless directed at him for crossing cultural red lines in the eyes of the nation’s self-ordained ideological godfathers.

Zia Mohyeddin responded by putting himself in the dock, in an unforgettable one-man performance, playing both prosecutor and defence counsel. Separately, there was a riveting one-man play, likely an adaptation, that only he among his peers in Pakistan could have pulled off. The title, unfortunately, has receded into the mists of time.

Zia sahib had been honing his thespian craft since the 1950s, during and after his stint at Britain’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, appearing both on stage and in TV shows. I had not realised until this week that it was an early stint with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that persuaded him to seek out greener pastures outside radio. In Britain, he took his inspiration from the likes of John Gielgud, Judi Dench and Laurence Olivier, and E.M. Forster insisted on him being cast as Dr Aziz in the stage presentation of A Passage to India.

By the time he assayed the role again in a British TV production by Waris Hussein, he had already made his mark in small but memorable roles in Lawrence of Arabia and Behold a Pale Horse. Numerous appearances on film and TV followed, including more su­­bstantial roles in the likes of the Merchant-Ivory-Jhabvala production Bombay Talkie, alongside Shashi Kapoor, Jennifer Kendal and Aparna Sen, followed many years later by Jamil Dehlavi’s Immaculate Conception.

But Zia sahib was always much more than an im­maculate act­or. It would have been a shame had his impeccable bilingual elocution gone to waste. Thank­fu­l­ly it didn’t. He was a full-blown Shakespearean scholar and, beyond that, a litterateur whose expertise extended deep into both the English tradition and its Urdu equivalent.

His helmsmanship at the PIA Arts Academy in the 1970s was cut short by martial law, but luckily a future military dictator saw things differently, and Zia Mohyeddin’s extended stint at the National Academy of Performing Arts was a blessing for culture in Pakistan.

He was expected at last weekend’s Faiz Aman Mela until a health emergency intervened, and he breathed his last, at 92, on Faiz’s 112th birth anniversary, after having dedicated considerable effort to popularising Faiz’s verse with his pitch-perfect renditions. Of course, he also covered many other Urdu poets and writers, and just listening to him read Patras Bukhari or Mushtaq Yusufi works miracles as an instant pick-me-up.

It would be inappropriate to bid farewell to him with anything other than a line or two from Shakespeare, specifically Horatio’s adieu to Hamlet: “Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!”

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