[**Zia Mohyeddin played with air**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1738319/zia-mohyeddin-played-with-air)

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JOSH Malihabadi was in full cry at a private soiree in Karol Bagh, in the modest second floor home abutting old Delhi that S.M. Mehdi had settled in with his meagre earnings as a Communist Party member.

Sajjad Zaheer and Sardar Jafri were in the audience. Josh Sahib took a break from the voluble recitation of his landmark poems. Habib Tanvir, a major name in progressive theatre and literature, was requested to step in with his well-rehearsed recitation from verses of Insha, the much-loved 19th-century poet.

Tanvir had a musically gifted voice but Josh interrupted him right away. Why would anyone recite someone else’s work in a gathering? Tanvir said politely that he was asked to do so. “Well, if Habib is going to recite from the legendary poets, then I should feel compelled to recite from scriptures.” Josh’s rebuke notwithstanding, the mehfil continued into the wee hours.

Zia Mohyeddin, who [passed away](https://www.dawn.com/news/1736907) at 91 in a Karachi hospital last week had made an art of reciting master craftsmen’s works, an art that Josh would have made an allowance for, and even approved of, given its important purpose for Urdu. Besides, Zia was a stickler for correct diction like Josh, which would have helped. Crucially, Zia was sharing bits from the treasure trove that Urdu literature is, with an audience so parched for it.

His was a driven mission, transmitting the best in literary thought, philosophy and humour in Urdu prose and poetry to the masses. You may have partaken of food served to soul-seekers at a langar at a gurdwara, or tabarruk handed out at khanqahs or imambargahs. Zia turned Urdu literature into manna from heaven.

His repertory of prose, which he read with flair from some of the best, remains unparalleled.

Paying homage to the legend requires a detour via Ustad Bade Ghulam Ali Khan who interrupted a fine performance of an evening raag with a delicate message to the audience. The words kindled a fearful idea that there could be no music in the cosmos except on earth. “Who can control the air we breathe?” The portly doyen of the Patiala gharana of classical singing spoke with measured humility.

“Here I am trying to flirt with air, and that is all that music is. But can I always handle the air’s waywardness to my liking? No. That entirely depends on divine intervention at any given time.” The ustad’s fulminations affirmed how some of us remain irretrievably tone-deaf, while others find the flair to dissect the finest notes. Air doesn’t let everyone flirt with it equally. It was partial to Zia Mohyeddin.

Two other thoughts flowed from the interruption. Sound is percussion on our eardrums through the medium of air, making music a pleasant form of percussion, be it melodic or rhythmic.

Poetry doesn’t need either. The cognoscenti can enjoy Shakespeare or Ghalib in solitude, in total silence, without the help of a reader that Emperor Akbar, for example, needed. Bringing great literature to the uninitiated, even while addressing the discerning connoisseur has been the work of missionaries like Zia Mohyeddin.

Shakespeare’s audiences included an unlettered majority. Plays were purposely staged, unless summoned by royalty, in far-removed places from the city centre. The audience included hecklers and dandies.

An excerpt from the Folger Shakespeare Library: “Elizabethan audiences clapped and booed whenever they felt like it. Sometimes they threw fruit. Groundlings paid a penny to stand and watch performances, and to gawk at their betters, the fine rich people who paid the most expensive ticket price to actually sit on the stage. The place was full of pickpockets and prostitutes, and people came and went to relieve themselves of the massive quantities of beer they had consumed … Audiences came from every class, and their only other entertainment options were bear-baiting and public executions — and William Shakespeare wrote for them all.”

The looming presence of the supernatural in Shakespeare’s plays, with ghosts and witches and characters bearing animal heads, pandered to the realm of the unlettered audiences, least interested in causality. Only about a third of Englishmen were literate at the end of the 16th century, and women were way behind. Shakespeare, to his credit, tried to instil reason occasionally, telling the audiences that earthly problems existed not in the stars but in us. It seemed to have been a struggle.

Ghalib wrote in slightly improved circumstances some 300 years later. Zia Mohyeddin’s strength lay in bringing together the range of geniuses with his brilliant intellectual and linguistic prowess. Zia was a language puritan like Josh but catered to as wide an audience as his recordings of Urdu poetry, and more significantly, of prose found in remote homes cutting across national and cultural boundaries.

In India, for example, Zia Mohyeddin became a household name among lovers of Urdu, including those that knew the language and the script, those that learnt the language from the movies but were unfamiliar with the script, and those that came to support the language as a tenet of India’s syncretic culture, which they found to be under a mortal threat in recent days. Groups like Rekhta run by a dedicated Marwari businessman have helped bring the best representatives of Urdu literature to India from across the world, and Zia Mohyeddin showing up was a prized possession. His repertory of prose, which he read with flair from some of the best, remains unparalleled.

Zia’s interest in Shakespeare and in theatre generally was honed at RADA, London’s premier academy of the performing arts. But he acknowledged that he imbibed the craft of modulating his breath and pauses, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan’s elusive air, from the iconic Z.A. Bukhari, another missionary who served Urdu with his soul.

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