

| NON-FICTION |

LUPUS ON THE SEVENTH DAY

This is a short memoir recollecting snippets from the onset of Lupus, a chronic autoimmune disease in which the body resists and is in battle with itself. Lupus is my first act of rebellion, my first lesson in resistance as a young woman. The story is captured in New York, where I was born and raised. The timeline is 2008-2010, ages 17-19.

SHAHANA HANIF



My wigs on a coat-ack.

PHOTO: SHAHANA HANIF

I'm in a wig heaven, all brunettes and blacks. I'm looking into the mirror and all's visible: my bald head and because of the Prednisone I've got a dramatically fatter face, chubby chipmunk cheeks, a humped back, swollen neck, and bulging eyes. I'm unable to love me like this. I purchase my first two wigs. They remind me of my hair.

out more, you wouldn't be sick. Are you sure the doctors are working towards a treatment, you don't look like yourself. You should pray to go back to the old you, this is a test of faith you know. These comments were also in Bangla, and it hurt deeper in the language I grew up with.

4. Ammu warns me, *chelo' der kach theke dure thakba*. Now that I've got Lupus, I've to be careful of what I do with boys. She says that I have to stay away from them. She's saving me from teenage heartbreak; she's protecting me from the patriarchal rules of attraction and desire, that

1. On the 7th day, Dr Barinstein came into the room viciously rubbing her hands with sanitizer mostly splashing off her fingers. The pungent smell of hospital sanitiser still travels with me like a tacky souvenir. She had with her some magazines tucked in the fold of her left armpit. She took a seat and rested the stack of papers and magazines on her thighs. The one on top in theatrical purple letters read Lupus Now. I told myself the Lupus magazine wasn't for me. Though I knew nothing about it, I had seen Lupus at 13. Supermodel Tyra Banks' *America's Next Top Model* shaped my early teen years, also an era of crappy reality shows. It was Mercedes in the 2004 season who, on live television, put a face on Lupus; at 13 I felt her pains with Lupus. She was a warrior.

Dr Barinstein introduced herself as a *Pediatric Rheumatologist* from Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn. Is that where they'd take me next? "Shahana, you have Lupus, and we're going to take care of you. These are for you to read."

September's cold breeze was delicate on my skin. The Coney Island Hospital transporters anchored me into an ambulance for the ride to where I'd live for a still three months. They didn't tell me it was the last chilly air I'd feel on my skin, I guess they too thought I'd be home soon, home soon to the warmth and comfort of *Little Bangladesh*, the section of Brooklyn I grew up in.

During the ambulance ride to *Maimonides*, I just wanted to run out of the van, wake up the next morning, and revel in the anxieties of my 12th grade self. The hardest part of our day was waking up and getting to school on time. In the dim ambulance I dreamt my sister and I rushing to catch the train to Bishop Kearney High School, with our uniform skirt rolled an inch too high matched with black Nike Air Force 1s. The black Nikes were how we resisted the monotony of the Catholic school uniform and elevated our look to cool, because that's what mattered. I dreamt resuming our Literature class discussion of Kate Chopin's (Show-Pan's) *The Awakening*, my first feminist novel. I dreamt of lunch with friends hoping to carefully steal a 6th mozzarella stick to the batch that only sold 5 for too much. *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.*

2. We entered the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) room at Maimonides, my body laid flat on a stretcher unable to take in the Brooklyn I knew with me. One chair, a window overlooking bland buildings and rooftops I'd never visit, a sink that I could walk over to if I was unplugged from the machines but which I never did get to use, and a *bedside commode* (my own bucket to poop in). There was a small, yellow bowl positioned on the overbed table, which I learned was a *bedpan*, also a toilet. I'm in a new Brooklyn. I have Lupus now. And there seems to be more apparatuses to poop in. I'm excited imagining all the poop stories I can share.

I was shackled to the poorly inflated hospital bed. Colourful wires reaching out from a large machine with zigzags and numbers were attached to my body monitoring its rage.

3. I didn't feel like a woman. The curves that took shape from my collarbones to the bump of my breasts to my soft tummy to my arched back leading to my long legs... were no longer in place. The darker than night waves of hair were now all gone. And my insides were swollen and scarred. Zebra'esque, glossy stripes covered my arms, legs, stomach, lower back. They're called *striae*, something that taking *Prednisone* does.

All this time at the ICU, I have no mirror. I don't think to ask for one because I had given up on mirror essentials like getting dressed, playing with makeup, doing my hair; I was also wearing unflattering and loosely tied hospital robes. As a result of the *Prednisone*, several doses of *Chemotherapy*, other medications, and being completely bedridden I am physically unrecognisable. My look guided the piercing comments from many visitors. "You've gotten really fat. If you worked

to be wanted, I have to be physically attractive; no boy wants to be with a sick, ugly girl.

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5. My left hip is officially one month old. Its parts are ceramic and plastic. I'm without pain and this is a new feeling. While learning to walk with *Jimenez*, my physical therapist, I've the tendency to limp because limping helped me position my body in a way that slightly reduced the sharp aches from a deteriorating joint. I'm on a semester leave and worry about not graduating in four years. I've a cane for support but I'm too embarrassed to step out with it. I rarely step out unless it's a doctor's appointment. I'm especially uncomfortable around boys. I just haven't seen any young and disabled couples. Maybe that's not even a thing.

My all black Converse sneakers save me during this time. But I could do away with the cane. Years later I learn, me in cane is just (as fun) as me in school uniform skirt rolled an inch too high, stealing a sixth mozzarella stick.

Shahana Hanif is a New York based non-fiction writer traveling in the motherland learning to read and write Bangla. Write to her at shahana.hanif@gmail.com.

| THEATRE REVIEW |

Bangladesh's theatre scenario has been the source of my personal frustration ever since I started working as an arts journalist. What is most aggravating is that it is the section of our mainstream performing arts which, I believe, produces the most high-quality content across the board, but has the smallest following – and that is probably because rarely is a theatre play in Bangladesh mindless, 'easy' entertainment.

Bot Tala is not one of the foremost names in our country's theatre in terms of stature or portfolio, but there is one area in which it stands shoulder to

landscape is a task so daunting that even before the play begins, I was flooded with questions and anticipation of how it will be handled. History, especially the political kind, is often at a junction of interpretations, and Bot Tala chooses the route of presentational theatre to bring clarity whenever that junction arrives. The play openly addresses the moral qualms of visualising landmark historical and political events and characters by seamlessly transforming the stage of the play into their rehearsal room, injecting discourse and clarification of the actors in their real lives before establishing the narrative. It

common element of Bangladeshi theatre and "Crutch'er Colonel" is no different, and considering it's a two-hour play with numerous characters portrayed by a cast of 12, the energy on stage is commendable. Element of humour in a play as serious as this is difficult to inject, but is present in an appropriate dose, mostly through a fantastic satirical portrayal of Khandakar Mushtaq Ahmed. The actors constantly switch roles (Taher alone is played by seven different cast members at various depths) but it's not disruptive. The depiction of historical moments – like the March 25 genocide and the assassination of Bangabandhu – are chill-inducing, as are the ones where Taher and cohorts escape from Pakistan's garrison town of Abbottabad

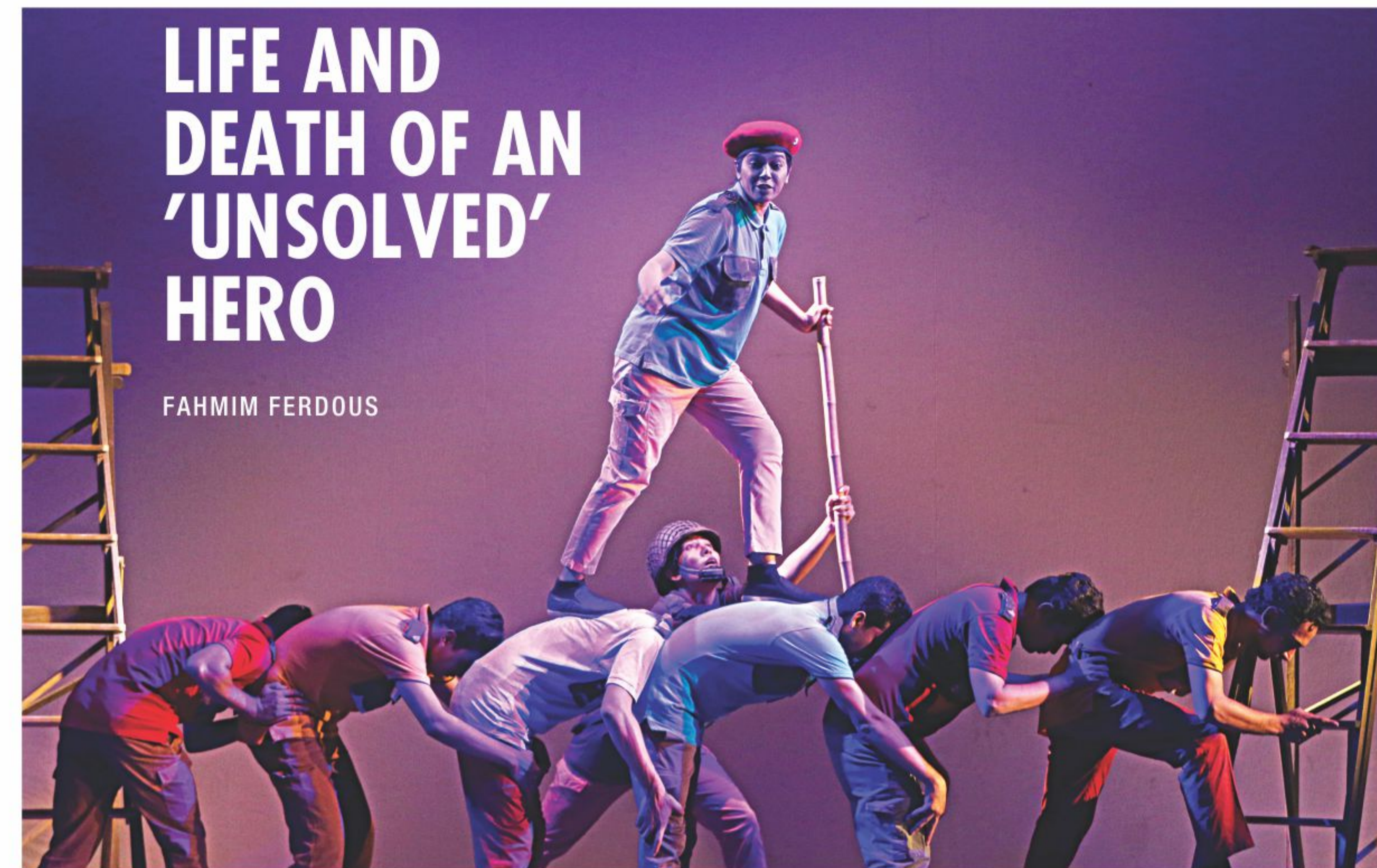
would not harm the production too much.

Colonel Taher is one of the most colourful, fascinating characters of our liberation and post-liberation history, but he is also one of the biggest 'unsolved' characters of Bangladesh's history. While his valour and leadership in the War remains unquestioned, it was his vision of the military force as a 'People's Army' and his communist ideology that make him a character who inspires heated debates. In his ideology Taher was clear, resigning from the Army because it did not reflect his vision, and joining politics to bring about the change he envisioned for Bangladesh. He failed in establishing that and he paid the price for it, unapologetic at death as he was in life. The play doesn't try to answer whether

CRUTCH'ER COLONEL

LIFE AND DEATH OF AN 'UNSOLVED' HERO

FAHMIM FERDOUS



PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



shoulder with the biggest troupes of the country: at less than 10 years of age, it has found its signature 'language' of expression on the stage. Their latest production, "Crutch'er Colonel" (based on Shahaduzzaman's documentary novel of the same title), is a creative follow-up to their previous production "The Trial of Mallam Ilya", a political drama. Adapted by Samina Luthfa and Soumya Sarker and directed by Mohammad Ali Haider, it chronicles the life of Colonel Abu Taher, a decorated Liberation War hero turned controversial military revolutionary. A high-achieving officer of the Pakistan Army who deflected and joined Bangladesh's Liberation War as a Sector Commander and lost a leg in battle, Taher eventually led the military mutiny that took down Khaled Mosharraf's government and freed Lieutenant General Ziaur Rahman in 1975, and was eventually sentenced to death in the country's first court martial.

To visually adapt a historical, non-fictional novel on the birth of Bangladesh and its subsequent tumultuous political

is in these passages that questions like "Is Taher a hero or a villain?" are raised, while important reminders like "To understand Taher, you have to understand his relationship with Zia" are also uttered. These little passages of the play also act as disclaimers of sorts, putting at ease the audience in what otherwise could have been an uneasy auditorium. But Bot Tala makes sure to express that these clarifications are not from a place of fear and safe-playing, as epitomised in a bold moment of stage-writing genius with the dialogue "Every historical event has a grand narrative and a small narrative; our Liberation War's grand narrative has not yet been established."

Aesthetically speaking, the play has lots of great elements, most of which are trademark Bot Tala. Using a minimalistic stage, the use of human bodies as stage props to great effect is something we have come to expect of the troupe, and they have a few of those moments – be it using human bodies to create a boat or a high wall. Choreographies are a

to join the War and the battle scene where Taher loses his leg. The music, by Pinto Ghosh, is done with a lot of care. The pacing of the story is also good, and the two-hour runtime doesn't feel overly prolonged. In terms of acting, seasoned campaigners like Samina Luthfa, Kazi Roksana Ruma, Pankaj Majumder and Imran Khan Munna are brilliant in their multiple roles, and younger cast members like Evan Riaz and Manzurul Islam Roni go toe to toe with their senior counterparts.

One of the weakest aspects of the play is its costumes, but considering the small number of the cast, the multiple roles they play and the pace of the story, it is a genuine limitation. The production goes the representational route to counter it (for example, Taher is symbolised by a red cap, while the female characters have a frontal drape representing a sari) with some success. Although the play has already been truncated from the initial production runtime of three plus hours, maybe curtailing some of the choreography

Taher is a hero or a villain, but puts him in the true light as depicted in the book – a man living by his idealistic sword and dying by it, and a life in between dedicated to a Bangladesh free of class divisions that he envisioned.

"Crutch'er Colonel" was not written as a play; coming back to the point that history is often subject to interpretation, in a book that scope is much greater for the reader. To give it a much more concrete interpretation in the visual form leaves a potential threat of a telescopic depiction, and the play punches above its weight to navigate that minefield. The story, by its sheer historical nature, is magnetic, but to bring it to stage is a brave, brave thing to do and to see that come from a 'smaller' theatre troupe is a testament of the strength of Bangladesh's theatre. Just for the subject matter itself it is safe to say "Crutch'er Colonel" is a potential landmark in the country's theatre history, but it is Bot Tala's execution that takes it in that direction.

Fahmim Ferdous is a subeditor, Arts and Entertainment, The Daily Star.