

Limitless ability not hindered by disability

Inaugural International Disability Art Festival sets example



PHOTOS: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

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DOWEL BISWAS

The National Theatre Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy buzzed with excitement as the inaugural International Disability Art Festival 2024 commenced on Friday (April 26), marking a significant milestone in arts and inclusivity.

Organised jointly by Dhaka Theatre and British Council, with support from Sundaram and the Institute of Informatics and Development (IID), the two-day festival delivered a diverse array of events ranging from theatre shows and film screenings to exhibitions and seminars.

The festival, touted as the first of its kind in Bangladesh, kicked off at 3pm with an inauguration ceremony led by Valerie A Taylor, founder and coordinator of the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed (CRP), alongside representatives from Dhaka

Theatre and IID. Amongst the highlights was an exhibition titled *Odommo Shilpotsav*, adding a visual dimension to the celebration of disability art.

“A platform like this is not just a stage; it’s a bridge to recognition, equality, and empowerment for artistes with disabilities,” remarked Valerie A Taylor during the inaugural ceremony.

Social Welfare Minister Dr Dipu Moni graced the occasion as the chief guest. “Our society must evolve to embrace the talents and aspirations of all its members. This festival is a testament to our commitment towards building a more inclusive Bangladesh,” said the minister.



A total of 10 distinguished theatre productions from eight divisional cities of Bangladesh, along with one production from India, took centre stage during the festival, providing a platform for artistes with disabilities to showcase their talents and creativity.

“Theatre has always been a mirror to society. Through these productions, we aim to reflect the vibrant diversity and untapped potential within the disability community,” said Nasir Uddin Yousuff, founder and director of Dhaka Theatre.

The event, which ran until Saturday (April 27), served as the culmination of the British Council’s project, DARE (Disability Arts: Redefining

Empowerment), reflecting a decade-long journey of fostering disability arts in Bangladesh and beyond.

Matt Cannell, deputy high commissioner and development director, British High Commission in Bangladesh, emphasised the festival’s role in bridging gaps between arts, disability, and society. “This festival embodies the spirit of inclusivity and creativity, showcasing the transformative power of the arts in challenging societal norms,” noted Matt Cannell.

Shannon West, director of British Council Bangladesh (Interim), emphasised the organisation’s commitment to fostering equality, inclusion, and diversity through cultural exchange programmes.

“We believe in the power of the arts to unite and inspire change. Through this festival, we strive to create a platform where every voice is heard and

celebrated,” remarked Shannon West. Sayeed Ahmed of IID highlighted art as a powerful medium of expression, advocating for the establishment of disabled artistes as equals in society, devoid of sympathy but deserving of recognition and opportunity. “Art transcends barriers. Through this festival, we aim to redefine perceptions and champion the rightful place of disabled artistes in our cultural landscape,” said Sayeed Ahmed.

Jenny Sealey, artistic director of Graeae Theatre Company, shared her



excitement and pride in participating in the festival, highlighting the courage and talent of disabled artistes in pursuing their passion for theatre.

“Today, we take centre stage not as individuals with disabilities, but as artistes showcasing our craft and creativity. This festival marks a significant step towards a more inclusive and equitable society,” remarked Jenny Sealey.

The festival also featured thought-provoking panel discussions, film screenings, and exhibitions aimed at addressing key issues such as disability representation, accessibility, and sustainable funding for disability arts.

NEWS

How drugs find their way inside prisons

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Currently, 68 prisons across the country can accommodate 42,866 prisoners.

However, the number of prisoners is over 82,000 – twice the capacity – and one third of them are accused in drug cases, according to jail officials.

Speaking to The Daily Star, an accused in 27 criminal cases, who came out on bail from the Dhaka Central Jail on March 12, after 23 days of imprisonment, said, “The drugs that are mainly available inside the jail are marijuana and yaba. Other kinds of drugs can be arranged but it needs to be ordered earlier.”

“A pair of yaba pills is now sold for Tk 500, and a sachet of marijuana, which can fill up a single empty cigarette, for Tk 200,” said the inmate, who was on level-4 of the jail building named Padma.

When he was in jail the last time in 2023, the cost of a marijuana sachet was Tk 100.

The inmate, who went to jail at least 20 times since 2015, added, “The drugs are mainly sold inside the jails by notorious criminals and influential inmates. To be able to do so, they have to pay a certain amount of ‘toll’ to some jail guards and officials.

“Even then, if a trader is caught red-handed while selling, they have to pay an additional amount of Tk 5,000 to Tk 20,000 [to those guards and officials] in order to avoid charges.”

He gave an example of an inmate who, in the beginning of March, was caught red-handed while consuming drugs and had to pay the jail guards off with Tk 5,000 at ward-4 of level-4 of the Padma building.

A former jail doctor, requesting anonymity, told this newspaper, “A huge number of patients of the Dhaka Central Jail are drug addicts. There have been several instances where inmates did the drugs inside the jail and some of them even admit to it.

“Asked, they said they usually carry it in plastic rolls that they hide inside their rectums.”

Md Rasheduzzaman, the deputy director (intelligence wing) of Chattogram division’s Department of Narcotics Control, told The Daily Star, “We have information that a section of jail inmates is involved in drug trade and even consume those inside the prisons.

“Though we have limitations in conducting drives inside prisons, the

jail authorities do it regularly and also take action. Besides, we also try to conduct awareness programmes in this regard at least once a month inside the prisons with the jail authorities.”

On September 19 last year, Additional Sessions Judge’s Court-3 of Gazipur sentenced Kashimpur Jail-2 guard Azizar Rahman to five years imprisonment in a narcotics case, after he was found providing drugs to inmates.

It happened after some guards found an inmate – Shahidul Islam – with 100 yaba pills in his possession on September 21, 2017.

Upon interrogation, it was found that Shahidul had gotten the drugs from Azizar. Further searches found 600 yaba pills and 100 grams of marijuana in Azizar’s home.

“Disciplinary actions have been taken against at least 25 jail guards for drug trafficking in the past year alone.”

About the involvement of jail staffers and the rampant drug trade and abuse inside jails, Col Sheikh Sujaur Rahman, additional inspector general of the Department of Prisons, told The Daily Star, “We have a zero-tolerance policy against drugs. If any staffer or official is found involved, the both departmental and lawful action is taken against them.

“We have taken departmental actions against at least 25 jail guards for their involvement last year,” he said.

Col Sujaur further said, “There is no scope to enter prisons without security checks. Whenever anyone is found with narcotics, even if it’s a staffer, strict action is taken against the responsible one under the supervision of divisional deputy inspector generals.”

However, arrests for carrying narcotics were not limited to junior staffers.

On October 26, 2018, Sohel Rana Biswas, jailer of the Chattogram Central Jail, was arrested with 12 bottles of Phensedyl, along with cash amounting to Tk 44 lakh, Fixed

Deposit Receipts amounting to Tk 2.50 crore, Tk 1.30 crore in cheques, five cheque books of different banks, and a DSLR, from a Mymensingh-bound Bijoy Express Train in Kishorganj’s Bhairab area.

Tawohidul Haque, associate professor at Dhaka University’s Institute of Social Welfare and Research, told this newspaper, “Mainly two separate groups work as suppliers to meet the demands of drug addicts inside the jail. One group is responsible for supplying the narcotics at the jail gate or premises, and the second group, which consists of dishonest jail staffers, backs up the business inside the boundaries.

“These staffers even manage their supervisors with money to ensure a smooth supply chain.”

He suggested stronger surveillance, both technologically and manually, like installing CCTV cameras; conducting random searches; and monitoring the movements of suspicious officials’ movement to stop drug trade inside prisons.

A state-run intelligence agency in a report stated that narcotics traders used innovative techniques to supply drugs inside the jail.

While some wrap the drugs in small packets and hide them inside shoes, sandals, shirt collars or even jewelry, others, more recently, have been making use of residents living near the jail boundaries.

“Once a deal is struck between a dishonest jail staffer and an inmate, the residents [living near the jail], upon instructions from the traders, throw the packets of drugs inside from the other side of the jail boundary at specifically given times,” a high official of the agency said, requesting anonymity.

He added that the authorities concerned have been alerted to increase surveillance in this regard.

Subrata Kumar Bala, superintendent of Kashimpur High-Security Jail, admitted there was a residence near the jail boundary where traders throw in drugs.

“We have strict vigilance and monitoring inside the jail complex. But we can’t ensure security outside the boundary too.

“We have, however, written to the authorities concerned to beef up security around the jail and police and Rab have already increased their patrol after that.”

Ethiopian, Air China set to start flying

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Islam said.

He, however, said the capacity of Biman Bangladesh Airlines should be increased at the same time so that Biman can start flights reciprocally.

“Otherwise, foreign airlines will gradually grab the maximum share of our aviation market.”

Foreign airlines currently dominate with about 75 percent share of international passengers from Bangladesh while Biman and US-Bangla have the rest.

Kazi Wahidul Alam, a former member of Biman Bangladesh

Airlines’s board of directors and a prominent aviation expert, said foreign airlines’ coming to Bangladesh is definitely a good thing. “Passengers will have the opportunity to choose the airlines of their choice and the fares will also be competitive. Airlines’ service quality will improve, and passengers will be benefitted.”

The Ethiopian Airlines is to operate five Addis Ababa-Dhaka flights a week from next month.

Shohag Hossain, managing director of Rhythm Group, Ethiopian’s general sales agent in

Bangladesh, said the carrier serves 10 destinations in the US, plans to conduct daily flight to Dhaka with its Boeing Dreamliner 787 soon after initiating the commercial flights to Bangladesh.

Chinese state-owned carrier Air China is set to fly twice a week between Beijing and Dhaka. Currently, Dhaka has direct flights to two Chinese cities – Kunming and Guangzhou.

FitsAir will operate two flights a week on the Dhaka Colombo route. At present, Sri Lankan Airlines is the only airlines operating direct flights on this route.

Corrupt official let off with just a temporary

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will start receiving the regular salary after 12 months, says the notification signed by Mohammed Mezbah Uddin Chowdhury, senior secretary of the public administration ministry.

Contacted, Hamza, an officer of the 34th batch of BCS, said, “The man who filed the complaint is dead. His testimony was not taken during the investigation. Therefore, I do not think that the allegations have been proved. But I am still being punished.”

According to the notification, in May 2022, a departmental case for misconduct and corruption was registered against him under the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 2018.

The investigation officer filed

the first investigation report on July 26 last year, but the report did not clarify the matter, says the notification.

The officer was then asked to reinvestigate on an urgent basis. The officer came up with the second report on February 18 this year.

Several officials of the public administration ministry said such a light penalty in a proven case of forgery may encourage others to commit corruption.

Requesting anonymity, a colleague of Hamza said, “If someone commits forgery at such a young age and still has a job, it is not difficult to imagine what he would do in the future. If the fraud and corrupt individuals in the administration are not severely punished, such acts will

only become more frequent.”

An officer of the 33rd batch of BCS administration named Pramath Ranjan Ghatak was recently demoted for three years for corruption during acquisition of land for the Padma Bridge.

2 RMG workers

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Later, some locals including Sajjad and Sakib picked up and took the three to a club room in Jamtola Bazar area.

The male colleague was beaten up there and held captive. Later, the criminals took the two women to a nearby forest in Arabari area and raped them in turns.

“We are trying to arrest the accused,” the OC added.

Justice eludes victim families

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directive in expediting the case trial so that the verdict could be executed.

Jahangir Alam’s wife was pregnant when he was killed in April 2014. His daughter, Roza, who was born a month after his death, knows him only from his photos.

“I always keep one of his photos with me. When I look at his photo, I feel like my father is with me,” said 10-year-old Roza in a choked voice, adding, “I want punishment for his killers.”

Selina Islam, wife of Nazrul Islam, said, “The court delivered the verdict, but the death sentence was not

executed. The murderers are very influential. By abusing that influence, they are not allowing the judgment to be executed. However, I still have trust in the judiciary system.”

“As the convicts are so influential, we are still living in fear,” she added.

On January 16, 2017, Narayanganj District and Sessions’ Judge Court sentenced Nur Hossain and 25 Rab members, including Tareque Sayeed, major Arif Hossain, and lieutenant commander MM Masud Rana, to death in the case.

The trial court jailed nine others on different terms.

On August 22, 2017, the High

Court upheld the death penalty for 15 convicts, including three former top Rab officials and the expelled Awami League leader Nur Hossain for their involvement in conspiracy, abduction, and murder.

The HC bench of Justice Bhabani Prasad Singha and Justice Mustafa Zaman Islam, however, commuted the capital punishment of 11 others to life imprisonment.

All eleven had been sentenced to death by a Narayanganj court in the case.

The judges also upheld jail terms of nine others on various terms ranging from seven to 17 years.