

‘INVISIBLE STORIES’

Puppetry, ghosts, and traditions under one roof

‘Invisible Stories’, a captivating body puppet theatre performance, has recently debuted at La Galerie, Alliance Française de Dhaka. The show enchanted audiences with its surreal portrayal of the mystical world intertwined with daily life in Dhaka.

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Directed by French puppeteer Laurie Cannac, the show featured Bangladeshi artistes Diana Meriline and Md Farhad Ahmed. This multidisciplinary performance blends storytelling, puppetry, dance, and song, offering a magical exploration of Bangladesh’s rich folklore and history. The story follows two scientists in Dhaka investigating the presence of ghosts in everyday life. Their research soon transforms into a fantastical journey to the Sundarbans, where they encounter the wilderness, spiritual wisdom, and the supernatural forces



PHOTOS: THABIT AL BASHAR

approach to puppetry. “I always work with traditional old tales, so when I was invited to create a show in Bangladesh, I looked into stories popular here,” she explained. “Ghost stories are vivid and emotional—they’re scary but also funny. And as a puppeteer, ghosts are very inspiring.” Laurie’s creative process with the actors involved extensive improvisation, especially around body movement and puppetry. The choice to use body puppetry—where human actors manipulate life-sized puppets—was a natural one.

“The world of traditional tales is perfect for body puppets, especially the Bangladeshi ghost world. Body puppets are human-sized, just like ghosts, and their movements mirror human ones,” she noted. Laurie also highlighted the similarities between puppets and ghosts, describing both as figures hovering between life and death. Although grounded in tradition, *Invisible Stories* addresses contemporary issues, creatively linking ancient ghost tales to modern challenges, such as Dhaka’s notorious traffic. “It seemed clear to me that old ghost tales still have relevance in everyday life,” Laurie remarked. “For instance, I used the idea that Dhaka’s traffic jams might be caused by tree ghosts who migrated to the city due to rural exodus.” The show also explores the contrast between scientific rationalism and a more spiritual, nature-connected worldview.

embedded in the region. Combining humour and horror, the production draws from various Bengali oral traditions, including ghost stories and supernatural elements. Through the artistes’ use of puppetry and physical movement, the invisible becomes visible, offering a glimpse into the unseen forces shaping the world around us. From “tree ghosts” blamed for Dhaka’s infamous traffic to the “ectoplasm” holding up the city’s walls, the show plays with the supernatural in ways that are both whimsical and profound. Laurie Cannac has long been inspired by traditional tales, and she saw Bangladesh’s folklore as a natural fit for her unique



Full-length Film Grant Committee reformed with 10 members

The Full-Length Film Grant Committee has been reformed with 10 new members, chaired by government advisor Md Nahid Islam. The newly formed committee was announced yesterday by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting via a notice signed by Deputy Secretary Md Saiful Islam. The committee’s secretary is the additional secretary (Film) of the ministry. Other members include the secretary of the ministry, managing director of Film Development Corporation, professor Abul Bashar Md Ziaul Haque Bhuiyan, director Akram Khan, Rainbow Film Society President Ahmed Muztaba Zamal, filmmakers Nargis Akter and Sameer Ahmed, and actress Zakia Bari Mamo.

Linkin Park’s new track dominates 11 Billboard charts upon release



Linkin Park’s second single *Heavy Is the Crown* from their upcoming album *From Zero* has made its debut on several Billboard charts this week. The track entered 11 different Billboard charts in the United States upon its release, with 2,200 copies being sold. The song landed at No 24 on the Digital Song Sales chart, which ranks the best-selling songs in the country across all genres. At present, *Heavy Is the Crown* has made an appearance on just one streaming-specific chart. The track debuts at No 12 on the Hard Rock Streaming Songs chart and is expected to climb higher as streaming numbers continue to accumulate over the coming days.

NEWS

Tk 353cr anomalies found at Sonali Life Insurance

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insurances are set to mature. Sonali Life has 204 branches with 26,693 agents across the country. Since the inception of Sonali Life in 2013, a total of Tk 169.09 crore has been withdrawn in cash from six of its accounts with five banks until December 2023. Withdrawing excessive amounts of cash from a public limited company’s bank account is risky, indicating embezzlement, according to the BFIU report. On September 30, BFIU directed banks to freeze the accounts of Quddus, and seven of his family members, along with 19 other individuals and three organisations linked to the insurance company and Rashed. Besides Quddus, the extended family had his wife Fazlutun Nessa, eldest daughter Fauzia Quamrun Tania, youngest daughter Tasnia Kamrun Anika, Anika’s husband Sheikh Mohammad Danial, Quddus’s son Mostafa Kamrus Sobhan, and Sobhan’s wife Shafia Sobhan Chowdhury as directors on the 20-member board. The extended family controlled the board with 44.38 percent of the company’s total shares.

The BFIU report noted that Quddus, his wife, their three children, a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law violated the Insurance Act by owning 24.34 percent of Sonali Life’s shares together when no individual or family group is allowed to own more than 10 percent of shares. **THE BUILDING** As per the BFIU document, Quddus owns the building, in which Sonali Life is headquartered. The building was mortgaged to Jamuna Bank for a Tk 35.5 crore loan. However, no board meeting agenda included the purchase of the building, and no approval was given by the board or by IDRA. The Tk 139.10 crore was paid for the building to benefit Quddus’s companies, including Dragon Sweaters, CD Acrylic, and Imperial Sweaters, the BFIU report said. Quddus, during a conversation with BFIU officials, claimed he received the funds as rent, according to the report. But the company had documents to back the payment of only Tk 18.17 crore as rent from 2015 to 2023, the report said. “Because of a lack of documents, it could not be confirmed how much he took as office rent.” The family in a statement claimed

Tk 159 crore attributed to Quddus and his relatives was received by him as rent, repayment of loans given at the inception of the company, and for the purchase of the ERP software from another concern of Quddus. It claimed the insurance company still owes Quddus Tk 12 crore as of December 31, 2023. The family also claimed that Rashed’s failure to maintain proper records led to the inconsistencies surrounding the “rent”. **MONEY LAUNDERED?** The report said a total of Tk 6.46 crore was withdrawn from the insurance company and sent abroad via Hundi, an illegal channel of cross-border money transfer, through Crown Money Changer Co Ltd. The funds were paid to purchase British pounds, send money to London, for shopping in London, for Dubai tour, and payments to Quddus’s granddaughter. Crown Money Changer Co denied having any transactions with Sonali Life and no documents were found on the transactions, BFIU said in the report. But a receipt on a visiting card of Crown’s Manager Tariqul Islam, and a conversation with Rashed’s chauffeur revealed \$100,000 was paid to the

money changer in cash, and another Tk 74.5 lakh, the report said. Also, Tk 37.64 crore was paid to Galaxy Holidays Ltd for foreign tours, seminars, Umrah trips, and Cricket World Cup tickets in Australia. These funds were likely laundered abroad by Rashed, according to the BFIU report. **EX-SON-IN-LAW RASHED** Former acting CEO Mir Rashed Bin Aman was once married to Fauzia, the eldest daughter of Quddus. Rashed received financial benefits in various ways. He booked a flat in Gulshan, valued at Tk 18.39 crore, under his and Fauzia’s names. The BFIU found evidence to believe that the payments for the flat were made by Sonali Life via its agents and pay orders. The family statement said it would not share details about the purchase of the Gulshan flat because the transactions were under legal scrutiny. Sonali Life appointed Rashed as deputy managing director and chief financial officer in 2013 by showing that he had worked at Meghna Life Insurance from 2005 to 2013. Meghna confirmed to BFIU that Rashed had never been their employee.

Although family members of a director are strictly barred from holding the post of CEO in an insurance company, Sonali Life promoted him to acting chief executive in 2020 and CEO in 2021. Sonali Life’s board of directors cannot evade the responsibility for Rashed’s misdeeds since it appointed him by violating the rules, BFIU said. Rashed’s brother Mir Khaled Bin Aman was working as an agent of Sonali Life and he was supposed to be given a commission of Tk 39.97 lakh, but got a total of Tk 2.40 crore. His aunt Monowara Begum was paid Tk 4.72 crore from Sonali Life as salary and commission despite having no official link to the insurance company, the report said. Quddus and his family said in the statement that Rashed’s aunt Monowara, his peon, and chauffeur have submitted affidavits stating that they were neither aware nor gave consent to open bank accounts or BO accounts used by Rashed to embezzle funds. Sonali Life also paid Tk 1.47 crore for the purchase of a Mercedes Benz E 200 Coupe in 2019, Tk 2.2 crore for a Mercedes Benz GLE 53 AMG in 2020,

and Tk 3.5 crore a brand new Porsche Taycan Turbo S in 2021 – all for Rashed, BFIU found in an inspection. Quddus and his family claimed that they were the “victims of a targeted campaign of manipulation” by Rashed. They also said Quddus, who became a director of the company in 2021 and chairman in 2023, took firm steps to mitigate the losses caused by Rashed before IDRA intervened and suspended the board. The Daily Star could not reach Rashed for comments despite several attempts. “We have learnt about the BFIU report on Sonali Life, but it has not yet reached our Financial Crimes Unit,” Azad Rahman, an additional superintendent of police at CID’s media wing, told The Daily Star on October 1. The Daily Star also tried to contact an ACC spokesperson for comment, but there was no response. IDRA spokesman Jahangir Alam told The Daily Star yesterday that the authority’s current Chairman M Aslam Alam is undergoing treatment. A decision will be taken after the matter is presented at the meeting of the authorities upon Aslam’s return, Jahangir said.

Harassment of women in public spaces on rise

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Another senior journalist Jharna Roy described being humiliated for not wearing a headscarf when she was at street food joint with her family. Due to the increase in the discriminatory attitude towards women, those like Sangita and Jharna now hesitate to protest or speak up against such abuses, fearing violent repercussions. “I always protested such incidents. My films focus on women’s freedom and I advocate for it. But that day, I couldn’t protest. Faced with torrents of abuse and threats, I was afraid that if I protested, people wouldn’t believe me and instead might point fingers at me because of his age,” Sangita said. Shelly Islam, a school-goer, said thin police presence makes her feel vulnerable to harassment on the streets, leaving her too afraid to

speak out like she used to. Women on social media have been sharing similar experiences, with hundreds commenting on the increase in catcalls, verbal abuse, and various forms of harassment. One woman reported being harassed for wearing a tip (a coloured dot on the forehead), while another was targeted for not wearing a burqa during a job interview. Others mentioned being victims of stalking. Khushi Kabir, women’s rights activist and coordinator of Nijera Kori, emphasised the urgent need to restore law and order, questioning why the situation hasn’t improved despite the army being given magisterial powers. “I don’t understand why the advisers haven’t made a public statement condemning such behaviour,

especially given the number of these incidents; their silence on these issues is unacceptable.” Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, noted that ultra conservative groups have become emboldened and are acting without consequence. She highlighted that no actions have been taken against those who have engaged in such harassment, resulting in increased online trolling and hate campaigns targeting women. She also pointed out that the overall mindset towards women remains unchanged. “While major reforms in the Election Commission, judiciary, and law and order are crucial, women’s issues are being completely sidelined, with social concerns not receiving the attention they deserve.”

To address this, she called for louder voices from women’s organisations and social movements through writings, seminars, and advocacy. “This government came to power through a movement against discriminations, yet discriminations against women remain unchanged.” She emphasised the need to hold authorities concerned accountable, including the women and children’s affairs and social welfare ministries. Meanwhile, she suggested the ICT ministry act against online hate campaigns. Bangladesh Mahila Parishad President Fauzia Moslem expressed her surprise that the Nobel laureate Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has not yet addressed women’s issues despite their vital role in the movement for societal progress.

She also criticised the male coordinators, who led protests with female students at the forefront, for their silence on the matter. Fauzia noted the rise of misogyny, which has shifted from social media to the streets. She called for clarity from those in power, stating, “The state cannot function like this – there must be guiding principles.” She added that if the situation does not improve, women may have no choice but to take to the streets to initiate a movement. She also emphasised the need to address the demoralisation within the police force, so that they can discharge their duties properly. Contacted, Sharmeen S Murshid, adviser to the women and children’s affairs ministry, declined to comment on this issue.