

PUJA CRUISES

to fame

After securing a spot in the top 10 of *Lux Superstar* in 2018, Puja Agnes Cruze chose patience over haste when it came to making her silver screen debut. Now, years later, her moment arrived with *Esha Murder*, where she plays the titular role, a role that not only marks her cinematic breakthrough but also fulfilled a dream she has cherished since childhood.

SHARMIN JOYA

In an exclusive interview and photoshoot with The Daily Star, the emerging actress opened up about the long road to her debut and the dreams that guided her throughout.

"I used to watch *Lux Superstar* since I was a little girl," Puja recalled with a smile. "Back then, I would imagine myself on that stage and tell myself, 'One day, I'll be there.'"

Her dream first took shape during the iconic season that crowned Zakia Bari Mamo as the winner, with Azmeri Haque Badhan and Bindu as runners-up. "Interestingly, it was that season that ignited my passion. Who knew that years later, I would be sharing the screen with Badhan *apu*! Life really has its beautiful ways of coming full circle."

Her journey into the spotlight was anything but easy. "I participated in 2018, as that year felt like the right time to step forward, to take a chance on the dream I'd been carrying for so long. I was named the 'Most Confident' during my run, and that title meant the world to me," she shared.

Without any connections in the media industry, Puja had to carve her own path from scratch. "I didn't have friends or family in the field, nor did I even know how to approach people who could offer me opportunities," she admitted. "But I believed that with persistence and the right project, the right time would come. *Lux Superstar* became that launching pad — a platform that set me on the right track." *Esha Murder* not only gave her a strong character to portray but also the platform to truly begin her journey in the world of cinema.

She took lessons in music at Kabi Kazi Nazrul Academy for eight years, and her mother taught her dancing since childhood. If she were ever asked what she wanted to become, she would repeatedly respond, "Nothing else but an artiste."

Puja, who also made a mark as a ramp model, explained why she took her time before stepping into films. "After *Lux Superstar*, I was regularly walking in ramp shows and staying active in the fashion scene," she shared. "During that time, I did receive several offers for acting — but I'll admit, it was mostly me who turned them down. None of the roles felt right. I was waiting for something that would truly give me the confidence to take that first step into cinema. That said, there was also an invisible barrier — no one had really seen how I acted, so many were hesitant to take a chance on me. And to be honest, our industry still lacks a proper audition system where newcomers like myself can prove themselves and get opportunities based on merit."

The journey to her first film took shape only after a long wait for the right role, one she could truly connect with. "The story behind joining *Esha Murder* still feels like it was destined," Puja admitted. "After years of waiting and not finding a role I felt confident enough to portray, I finally decided to take a break and pursue my Master's degree abroad. But just then, as if by fate, Sunny *bhai* approached me with this project. I gave the audition, and luck was on my side. I was cast as Esha — a character that has now become my identity to the audience."

Although they didn't share much screen time in *Esha Murder*, Puja gradually formed a heartfelt bond with Badhan during the shoot. "Badhan *apu*'s character in the story enters after Esha is already murdered, so our connection didn't grow from working in scenes together," Puja explained. "It actually developed off-screen — on set, and especially during the promotions for the film, when we spent time talking and sharing memorable moments."

Having proved herself with *Esha Murder*, Puja is now eager to take on more diverse roles that allow her to grow as an actor. "I'm open to commercial films that include action or dance," she said. "But what I truly look for are stories that challenge me and justify my talent. I want to work more frequently now, and my full focus is on films!"



PHOTOS:
SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

OUT AND ABOUT
IN DHAKA



Exhibition: 'Lipika'

July 3-9 | 3pm-9pm

Alliance Française de Dhaka,
Dhanmondi



International Mime Festival

July 5-7 | 11am-11:59pm

TSC Auditorium, Dhaka University



Concert: 'Lalchey Bikel Belay'

July 11 | 6:30pm- 9:30 pm

Jatra Biroti, Banani

1-MINUTE REVIEW

'KPOP DEMON HUNTERS'

An ode to identity and unity

KPop Demon Hunters is a vibrant, feel-good celebration of music, friendship, and finding strength in who you are. Blending the glitz of K-pop with fantasy action, this animated gem from Sony Pictures Animation follows three fierce girl group idols who moonlight as demon slayers — using the power of fan love to protect the world.

With its bold, manhwa-inspired animation and charmingly over-the-top visuals, the film bursts with

personality. Whether it's heart-shaped pupils, adorable animal sidekicks, or bubble tea-fuelled spa scenes, every moment feels lovingly crafted.

At its core, the story is about embracing identity, especially for Rumi, whose mixed heritage becomes her hidden strength. The romance between Rumi and the



misunderstood demon Jinu adds a sweet twist, and the message about unity and compassion shines through.

Its catchy soundtrack and heartfelt performances are more than just a fun ride in *KPop Demon Hunters*; they create a joyful, empowering experience that reminds us of the magic in music, friendship, and staying true to ourselves.

WHAT'S PLAYING

'SAPPHIRE'
by Ed Sheeran

Ed Sheeran shimmers in sonic blue on *Sapphire*, an effervescent track that blends his pop sensibilities with the percussive and melodic textures of Indian classical music. Featuring vocals and sitar by Arijit Singh, the track captures the feeling of dancing forever with someone whose presence lights up the room—just like the precious gem it's named after.

The music video, shot across India during Sheeran's tour, captures the cultural richness of

the country as the British singer-songwriter wanders through bustling markets, serene beaches, and vibrant cityscapes—often accompanied by local youth and Singh himself.

Since its June 5 release, *Sapphire* has amassed over 62 million Spotify streams, peaking at No 29 on the platform's Global Top 50. It also clocked 74 million views on YouTube, with India contributing to nearly half of its Spotify plays.



Touted as Sheeran's favourite track from his upcoming album *Play*, the single marks a defining shift from his mathematics-themed past to a more global, joyous soundscape.

With its beats and cross-cultural flair, *Sapphire* is being hailed as one of the most unforgettable tracks of the summer.

TRENDY STREAMS

Netflix
The Sandman



Prime Video
Ballard



Hulu
Such Brave Girls



Apple TV+
The Wild Ones



HBO Max
Back to the Frontier



STYLE STATEMENT

Brad Pitt

Brad Pitt exuded timeless elegance at the London premiere of *F1: The Movie*, effortlessly embodying his signature brand of understated cool. He stepped out in a deep forest green double-breasted suit by Anderson & Sheppard, complete with wide peak lapels and a boxy silhouette that hinted at vintage glamour. The subtly textured fabric added depth to the ensemble, while a silky ascot scarf, casually tucked beneath the collar, introduced a dash of romantic sophistication. The result is a masterclass in modern menswear with a nostalgic twist—pure Brad Pitt.

