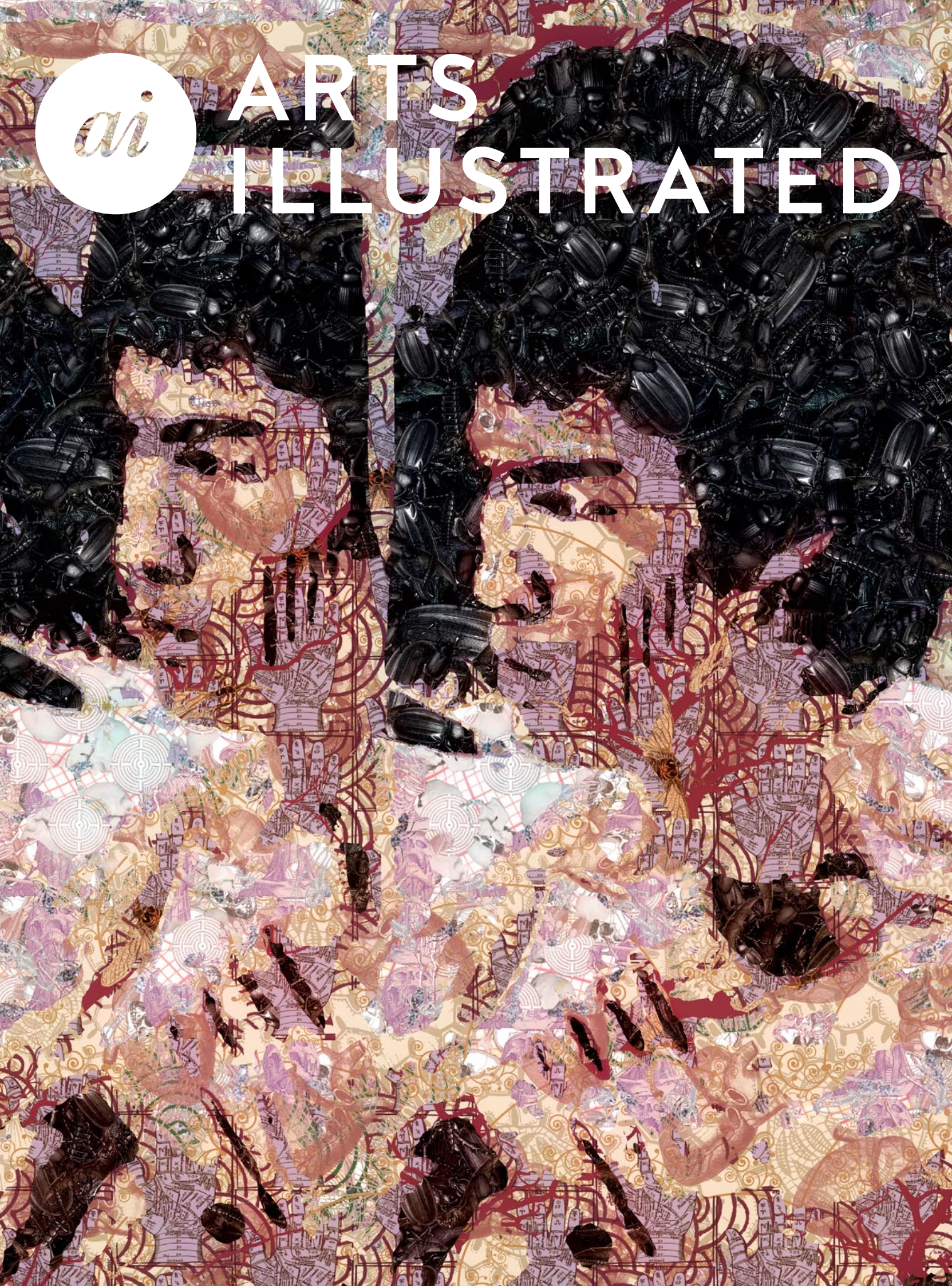




ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Editor's note

On September 6, 2017, I woke up to my newsfeed abuzz with reports of journalist and activist Gauri Lankesh's murder. I did not know her – what she dreamt, what she felt, what made her laugh or cry. The little I did know of her were through her words – searing, scathing, unafraid words. And then some more through the many heartfelt and powerful tributes that poured in. But that did not matter. Someone, who simply voiced her opinions, doing the job she was meant to do as a free-thinking journalist, was murdered. Just like that.

And something in my everyday bubble of earthly life with all its vicissitudes – sometimes uplifting and sometimes debilitating – snapped... something. The madness had been let loose on our streets and retaining a semblance of sanity behind closed doors wasn't a choice, however privileged, anymore.

When we set out to work on this issue on Sanity/Insanity, we were trying to explore the many meanings, old and new, these words conjured up. Through the stories and artists we encountered, we realised the landscape is vast, the perspectives many, and the definitions fluid. That's what art does, sure, but here, even art preens and revels with the unexpected newness it meets.

What we did not see, and what Gauri Lankesh's murder brought into sharp focus, was the current of hatred that threatened to upset this sense of sinuous, fluctuating acceptance by creating hard lines and loud symbols slowly and steadily erasing nuanced ideologies. 'Sanity' had become a quicksand of right and 'Insanity' the frozen lake of wrong. There was no escaping the fervent righteousness of the former and the silencing of the latter.

Unless, as poet and childhood friend of Gauri's, Mamta Sagar, wrote in her poem titled 'For Gauri':
'With a heart brimmed with agony / let's spread peace... let's spread love...'

And, thankfully, for those of us wishing to sidestep the quicksand and the frozen lake, there is no escaping the collective grief and the rousing hope of Mamta's words.



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Cover Artist



Like much of my practice to date, my work is primarily autobiographical, but an unusual biography at that. Coloured by a condition, I imagine and perceive connections between things that others most often do not. Over a period of almost a decade and a half, I constructed and imagined life through a grand and heroic virtual journey. It was something I felt so strongly connected to that I didn't give it too much thought as to how it would be received by a few others. The cover for this particular issue, therefore, has special significance and resonance to me as something that blurs the line between what is considered sane and insane.

In the first chapter of my journey, I started by hitting a stratospheric mental high and literally vomited out a massive 'script' over a series of a thousand e-mails or so (I am sincerely sorry to those who received it). This script was a grand remix of art, from song lyrics, poetry, film plots, literature and visual art taken from both high and popular culture. In the subsequent chapters of my journey, this 'script' structured my reading of reality. I tried to fit every event and encounter in my life into its ambiguous plot.

One of the fundamental metaphysical elements in my journey was the mirror. And one very critical sequence from a popular film structured everything that I was to go through eventually. This is the final fight sequence in the film *Enter the Dragon* between Bruce Lee and the antagonist. This game of cat and mouse inside a hall of mirrors succinctly sums up much of what I imagined I was living through. It was the perception of a powerful and scathing presence that constantly reflected my own ugly image back to me and broke one self-image after the other in the process.

This is one of the most intense autobiographical references and one that has been on my mind for a very long time. For this cover, I found the perfect context in which to articulate this image. Rather than one print alone, which is how many of my pieces are reproduced, it is important to me that this is a cover and will therefore be reproduced in quantity, a metaphor for a hall of mirrors of its own.



Avinash Veeraraghavan



The Dark Room Rises

Rangaai Theatre Company's Darkroom Project may have started out as an 'insane idea' but it 'turned into an unlikely immersive theatre experience', seamlessly breaking boundaries between the creator, the performer and the performance

TUSHAR DALVI

In the second quarter of 2015, a bunch of us came up with the bizarre idea of performing in a dark room. We brainstormed for a couple of days and started off with scouting for short stories and different theatre treatments. Books, Google and YouTube became our window to the world of theatre. We read about French dramatists, American contemporary theatre, British Intimate/Alternate Theatre and more.

And so, on February 15, 2016, after much deliberation, many ups and downs, many internal 'yeses' and 'nos', the Rangaai Theatre Company was born with 'The Darkroom Project', a collection of five stories all purposefully chosen because of the common subject they shared of abuse and violence. The stories were all classics written by renowned authors except one, *Durga Poojo*, which was a true account of child abuse anonymously written by the victim herself. The other four stories featured were Munshi Premchand's *Kaafan*; Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*; Sa'adat Hasan Manto's *Khol-do*; and Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Match Girl*.

These stories were brought to life using photography's 'darkroom' theme. Actors dramatically narrate some part of the story and perform the rest. Similar to the photo developing process where a photographer would 'burn' (over expose) or 'dodge' (under expose /block out) certain parts of the picture to give a dramatic effect to the final print on the photo paper, the short stories were used as negatives reflecting our society, the audience's psyche as the photo paper, and our performance as the developing process.

Our objective through 'The Darkroom Project' was to create an immersive experience through innovative ideas and narrate stories to the audience as they experience and visualise the story with the use of all their senses. The performance usually begins with a blindfold entry with

specific scents introduced at certain intervals during the performance, and a lollipop as part of the multi-sensory experience, clubbed with different treatments for all the five stories.

In *Durga Poojo*, for instance, we used Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty to present the absurdities existing all around us and to bring out emotions such as empathy, disgust, pain, guilt and anger. In *Kaafan* we used the Dastango treatment where usually two Dastangos (storytellers) narrate stories of Tilisma (fantasy/fiction) by switching between the dual role of a narrator and the characters that come up in their stories. We added the smell of roasted potatoes for this story. *Lihaaf* was showcased using shadow play with sandalwood powder and itaar (perfume), while *Khol-do* was done as simple monologues and the scent of a cremation ceremony using flowers, cow dung cakes and incense sticks. For the *Little Match Girl* we used the clowning technique and a

life-size Bunraku-style puppet of a small girl.

By connecting with the audience and putting them right in the middle of the act, we realised that it became a powerful memory-creative device. For 'The Darkroom 2.0' we introduced additional features such as secret venues, a touring audience and modular design as part of the experience. For the first show of the edition, audience members were picked up from a certain point and dropped off at a secret venue. Then, with their blindfolds in place, they were shoved into a van with a recording of a gang rape that played for ten minutes. For the 'Touring Audience' concept, we shifted location and setting for each of the stories – an outdoor pandal set-up for the *Durga Poojo*, a Nawabi-style baithak for *Lihaaf*, a camp fire set-up for *Kaafan*; and Manto's study, where he would write all his stories, for *Khol-do*.

To be honest, I have never had any professional training in theatre. After completing my MS from Scotland, I moved to Newcastle for work. I stumbled upon a local youth theatre group called Live Theatre. As a member, I had the opportunity to see a variety of plays. One of them, *Knight Watch* by Inua Ellams, was set in a parking lot a mile away from the actual theatre space. That was when I had my first real taste of the concept of space-audience relationship. The word 'Rangaai' is a combination of two Marathi words 'Rang' and 'Aai'. It refers to the Goddess of Theatre; as our mother who nurtures the artist in us. With this in mind, our aim is to not only create, innovate and transform our ideas into reality using both new and old theatre techniques from around the world but to also use art to spread awareness and keep the torch burning.



● Durga Poojo (Anonymous) performed by Abhinay Bansod and Nikita Iyer at Yamas - The Experimental Space, Fort, Mumbai

● Khol do by Sa'adat Hasan Manto performed by Priyesh Patel and Kirti Sani at The Drama School Mumbai, Charni Road

● Kaafan by Munshi Premchand performed by Tushar T. Dalvi and Chirag Khandelwal at Harkat Studios, Versova

● An audience member with a blindfold during the sensory experience segment for the play 'Durga Poojo' performed at Whistling Woods Andheri Base.

Photo Credit: Nikhil Pawar for Rangaai Theatre Company

