

## **Whispers and Identity: Stories of Gender and Expression at What You See Festival**

Dankó Kiss, 18/11/2024

Shishani performing songs their new album *Whispers*

Intimate setting, chairs arranged in a rectangle shape around Theater Kikker's stage. When the audience walked in, they were greeted with the musicians already present on the stage. There was the pianist, a string quartet, and the singer-guitarist Shishani. They were all facing each other in sort of a circle, but because of the stage's set-up, they could not face all the audience members. Each musician was looking in a different direction, and each member of the audience had a different view of the performers. Soon, as everybody settled down on their chairs, Shishani, the singer shortly introduced themselves. Shishani shared that they recently finished their new album, *Whispers* and that at the opening night of the festival they were glad to share some new songs. They performed beautifully since the arrangement of the songs for the string quarter, the piano and the guitar seamlessly complemented each other and elevated Shishani's songs. The music filled up the room and was audible crystal clearly, given the proximity of the audience to the musicians. What also made the artist's presence special was the way they conferred each upcoming song. Shishani's songs share the themes of growth, self-love, resilience which come from the artist's personal experience and battle with depression. Shishani openly talked about the challenges they have overcome in life in between the songs, especially highlighting how those contributed to their artistic expression and to their songwriting. One thing is for certain, *What You See Festival's* inviting atmosphere, that not only addresses issues related to gender and identity, but also celebrates the artists' and the audience's uniqueness, made this performance possible by providing a safe

place for the artist to freely express themselves and share these personal experiences and stories through their songs. The audience seemed to be captivated, as there was a lot to take in. One could listen to the beautiful melody of Shishani's voice, the shooting harmony string quartet, or the rapid yet romantic and notes played by the pianist. Or, one could focus on the lyrics of the songs, which worked in a way as poems do. One might resonate and find some underlying truth in them, empathize with the person who lived through these certain emotions expressed in the text, or could relate to them according to their own experiences and feel heard and understood. Somehow it felt like Shishani's song work in this way. They aim to share the emotions felt while also striving to look for connection and community in those people who ever went through hardships, especially hardships in terms of self-acceptance. Shishani's songs and the touching live arrangement of the music shared the notion some might find familiar, that is, the only way out is inwards. Shashani's music reveals that introspection is required to navigate life's challenges, and at the same time it offers both solace and empowerment for those present at their performance.