

Press release 11.09.2025

barbican

KISS WITNESS: *Prayers for a Hungry Ghost*

World premiere

Wednesday 29 October – Saturday 1 November 2025

The Pit

Press performance: Wednesday 29 October, 7.45pm

Award-winning company KISS WITNESS premieres the darkly comedic *Prayers for a Hungry Ghost* exploring intergenerational trauma this Halloween, created through the Barbican's prestigious Open Lab talent development programme



KISS WITNESS's *Prayers for a Hungry Ghost*. Credit Genevive Reeves

Prayers for a Hungry Ghost makes its world premiere at The Pit this autumn, developed by KISS WITNESS through the Barbican's Open Lab 2023 programme. The production is supported by a commission from cross-arts organisation Kakilang as part of their season celebrating world-class performances by East and Southeast Asian artists.

Led by award-winning theatre maker **Elisabeth Gunawan** (*Unforgettable Girl*; *Stampin' in the Graveyard*), **KISS WITNESS'** latest production is a mesmerising family drama set in the underworld (the realm of the hungry ghosts), exploring the intergenerational trauma born from the pressures of meeting society's impossible standards. This sardonic yet tender ensemble production powerfully combines horror, physical performance, live cinema, dark comedy and Chinese mythology – in which 'hungry ghosts' are reincarnated souls of those who were greedy or violent in their lives.

In the nightmarish underworld of hungry ghosts, a migrant family confronts the true cost of their pursuit of the American dream. Father (**Daniel York Loh**, *ITV's I Fought the Law*)

migrated from a life of poverty in Hong Kong to become a capitalist success story. Meanwhile, his daughters' lives spiral in opposite directions: Little Sister (**Jasmine Chiu**, *Life of Pi* International Tour) ascends to classical piano stardom, while Big Sister (**Elisabeth Gunawan**) is ravaged by a mysterious illness. Each path eventually leads them to the same pit of despair and insatiable hunger, unless their familial bond can somehow transcend the cycle of inherited trauma.

KISS WITNESS harnesses the visceral power of horror as a genre to expose the intergenerational trauma that lies beneath the surface of 'model minority' narratives. The 'model minority' myth suggests certain migrants, particularly East and Southeast Asians, succeed through inherent cultural values like diligence and respect for authority. This oversimplified narrative obscures systemic racism while dehumanising these communities as monolithic and psychologically unreal.

Even beneath the veneer of economic success, British East and Southeast Asian communities face persistent erasure and exclusion, with 45% of UK's East and Southeast Asian people experiencing hate crime in the last year ([source: University of Leicester](#)). The rewards granted to 'model minorities'/'good immigrants' – social acceptance, economic success – become like food entering the scorching mouth of a hungry ghost, never satisfying the deeper hunger to be truly recognised and accepted.

Performed by an all-East Asian cast in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Malay, and created by a female-led majority East and Southeast Asian creative team, the company brings to life the complexities of migrant and diasporic experiences with the criticality and inventiveness that underpins KISS WITNESS' critically acclaimed and award-winning works. KISS WITNESS is an independent global-majority-led company, hailed for their "*distinctive and ambitious*" (The Stage) work that "*leaves an indelible mark on its audience*" (The Stage & Theatre Weekly).

Prayers for a Hungry Ghost's world premiere marks the culmination of development through the Barbican's Open Lab 2023 programme, which supports emerging and mid-career performing companies as they experiment with new ideas and challenge the perception of what theatre and dance can be. Performances will run in The Pit, the Barbican's intimate and unique studio space that brings audiences closer to artists who are creating dynamic new ways of storytelling.

Elisabeth Gunawan, founder of KISS WITNESS & performer, says:

"KISS WITNESS exists to harness the power of theatre to create spaces of belonging for people who don't have it in real life. For too long, East Asian bodies have been borrowed to present Eurocentric, orientalist narratives that rob us of our personhood. Our work is committed to reclaiming these narratives and centring East and Southeast Asian stories in all their depth and complexity. Here, ghosts and hauntings are more than tropes in the horror genre, but a manifestation of absences and erasures in history. I want the piece to make visible a worldview that has been historically marginalised to present East and Southeast Asian people as idiosyncratic human beings with fears, desires and fallibilities. This is the story of my family, and of many migrant families."

Toni Racklin, Barbican Head of Theatre & Dance, says:

"We are delighted Prayers for a Hungry Ghost will make its world premiere in The Pit as part of our Theatre & Dance line-up for autumn-winter 2025. The Barbican champions artists who challenge convention, and KISS WITNESS's genre-defying work sheds light on our lives in all their complexity to offer both confrontation and catharsis. Fusing striking imagery, movement, and design, Prayers for a Hungry Ghost delves into timely questions of identity, belonging and historical erasure with ferocity and compassion."

Chinese-Indonesian writer and performer **Elisabeth Gunawan 吳金蘭** founded the company **KISS WITNESS** (formerly Saksi Bisou) to decolonise the imagination, empower people and create spaces of belonging. Awards include The Stage Debut Award for Best Performer in a Play (2022), OffFest Award (2022) and The Pleasance's Charlie Hartill Award (2023). Following a sold-out award-winning run at VOILA! Festival in 2024, Gunawan presented a *"multi-faceted and electrifying performance"* (Binge Fringe) of her immersive headphone theatre piece *Stampin' in the Graveyard* at Summerhall, Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2025.

ENDS

Press Information

For further information, images or to arrange interviews please contact:

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IMAGES + VIDEO

Images can be downloaded here: [Prayers for a Hungry Ghost](#)

Trailer: youtube.com/watch?v=j28jgzZYKTc

LISTINGS

Barbican Centre, Silk Street, London EC2Y 8DS

Box Office: 020 7870 2500 (Monday-Friday 12noon - 5.30pm)

Email: info@barbican.org.uk

Barbican Centre's ticket sales team can also now help via WhatsApp on 07480 801406 or send a text to 07380 975000

Access enquiries: 020 7101 1188 (Monday–Sunday 10am–5.30pm), via WhatsApp on 07480 801406 or send a text to 07710 854085

KISS WITNESS: *Prayers for a Hungry Ghost*

World premiere

The Pit

Wed 29 Oct – Sat 1 Nov 2025 (5 performances)

Wed 29 Oct – Sat 1 Nov at 7.45pm, Sat 1 Nov at 2.30pm

Press performance: Wed 29 Oct at 7.45pm

Post-show talk with Dr Broderick Chow (Director of Learning, Teaching and Inclusion at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama): Thu 30 Oct. Free to same-day ticket holders.

Audio described performance: Thu 30 Oct, 7:35pm. Audio described by Caroline Burns. Touch Tour 5:45pm.

Captioned performance: Fri 31 Oct at 7.45pm

Running time: Approx 70mins (no interval)

Age guidance: 14+

Content guidance: Contains a haze effect, coarse language, sexually suggestive scenes, depictions of violence, themes of bereavement and complex family dynamics, as well as horror imagery that some viewers may find distressing

Performed in English, Mandarin, Cantonese and Malay with English surtitles

Tickets £20 plus booking fee; £10 Young Barbican tickets available

<https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2025/event/kiss-witnesselisabeth-gunawan-prayers-for-a-hungry-ghost>

Presented by the Barbican

Commissioned by Kakilang, with support from ArtsAdmin, Barbican Open Lab and curious directive's HYPOTHESIS retreat.

Cast and Creative team

Performers/Devisers: **Elisabeth Gunawan, Sook Kuan Tang, Jasmine Chiu, Daniel York Loh**

Movement Direction: **Matej Matejka**

Directing Team: **Elisabeth Gunawan, Matej Matejka, Sook Kuan Tang**

Sound & Music: **LI YILEI**

Lighting Designer: **Natalia Chan**

Video & Set Design: **Erin Guan**

Puppetry: **Aya Nakamura**

Costume Design: **Ezra Barnard**

Writer: **Elisabeth Gunawan**

Prayers for a Hungry Ghost: Creating Theatrical Worlds

A visual language workshop for young creatives

Fountain Room

Thu 30 Oct 2025, 5pm

Tickets £12 Young Barbican members only (Aged 16-25)

A ticket for this workshop will also give you entry to the performance of Prayers for a Hungry Ghost on Thu 30 Oct at 7.45pm.

<https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2025/event/prayers-for-a-hungry-ghost-creating-theatrical-worlds>

About Open Lab

The Barbican's Open Lab programme supports the development of emerging and practicing artists, giving artists the chance to experiment in a working theatrical space without the expectation of a final product. Alumni include Rhiannon Faith Company, Krishna Isha, Malik Nashad Sharpe, Louise Orwin, Bullyache and The PappyShow.

About the Barbican

The Barbican is a catalyst for creativity, sparking possibilities for artists, audiences, and communities. We showcase the most exciting art from around the world, pushing traditional artistic boundaries to entertain and inspire millions of people, create connections, provoke debate, and reflect the world we live in.

We are an international arts and events centre rooted firmly in our own neighbourhood, collaborating with local communities and putting the City of London on the map as a destination for everybody. Central to our purpose is supporting emerging talent and shaping opportunities that will accelerate the next generation of creatives.

As a not-for-profit, we rely on the generosity of individuals and organisations, including our principal funder the City of London Corporation. Every ticket purchased, donation made, and pound earned supports our arts and learning programme and enables the widest possible range of people to experience the joy of the arts.

Opened in 1982, the Barbican is a unique and audacious building, recognised globally as an architectural icon. As well as our theatres, galleries, concert halls and cinemas, we have a large conservatory with over 1,500 species of plants and trees, a library, conference facilities, public and community spaces, restaurants, bars, and a picturesque lakeside oasis.

We're proud to be the home of the [London Symphony Orchestra](#), and a London base of the [Royal Shakespeare Company](#). We regularly co-commission, produce and showcase the work of our other associates and partners including the [Academy of Ancient Music](#), [BBC Symphony Orchestra](#), [Boy Blue](#), [Darbar](#), [Doc'n Roll Film Festival](#), [Drum Works](#), [EFG London Jazz Festival](#), [London Palestine Film Festival](#), [Serious](#), and [Trafalgar Theatre Productions](#).

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