

THE SINHALA THEATRE OF THE EIGHTIES: A FORUM FOR CREATIVE CRITICISM*

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The past decade has been a time of political upheaval, of violence, terror, and repression. Such periods can inspire enormous creativity or they can be the death of creativity. In the Jaffna peninsula, in the late seventies and early eighties, war and its disruptions produced a new Tamil literature of great vitality, making powerful poetry out of the terror and horror that suddenly overwhelmed ordinary civilian life. It was a poetry of protest, fired by an intense emotional commitment to a cause. The very tensions inherent in the situation inspired and enriched the poetry.¹

A similar efflorescence occurred in Sinhala poetry in the seventies, especially the period immediately following the 1971 insurrection. The work of writers like Mahagama Sekera, Parakrama Kodituwakku, Monica Ruwanpathirana, Dharmasiri Rajapakse, Sunil Ariyaratne, Buddhadasa Galappathy and others brought new life and gave a new direction to Sinhala poetry.² It too was a poetry of political commitment, but the emotional intensity of the writing gave it a particular energy that lifted it beyond the merely didactic.

By the late eighties this energy seems to have dissipated. As the violence became more intense and widespread, and the issues got ever murkier, and as people no longer had any clear sense of whom or what cause to support, literary writing too seems to have dried up.³ Those writers who were prolific in the seventies and in the forefront of literary activity were hardly heard of by the late eighties. Of the older generation of writers, Gunadasa Amerasekera continued to write, but his work got increasingly strident and polemical. The growing political presence of the J.V.P. and the impact of its agenda had at first produced considerable critical debate, and in the late seventies and early eighties several critical journals such as *Mawata*, *Ravaya*, *Vimamsa*, *Niyamuva*, *Sinhale*,

* This paper was subsequently read by the author as the E.F.C.Lodowyk Memorial Lecture at the University of Peradeniya on the 26th March 1992.

¹ See *The Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol.22, no.1. (1986).

² See *An Anthology of Modern Sri Lankan writing* ed. Ranjini Obeyesekere and Chitra Fernando, University of Arizona Press, 1981.

³ The situation seems to have reversed fairly significantly in the Nineties and one now sees again new collections of fiction and poetry being published.

Marga, gave expression to one or other position, on issues of politics, ethnicity or religion. But by the late eighties partisan publications came under threat and these too languished.⁴

The reasons are many. Perhaps the pervasiveness of terror and its fierce partisanships forced people to keep a low profile and silenced many moderates. Perhaps the spiralling inflation made costs of publishing exorbitant. Many small presses were burned for supporting, or sometimes just publishing political literature of one or the other side, so the access to competitive cheap printing which was one factor that had allowed young and unknown writers to surface in the seventies, was no longer available to them. Whatever the reasons, the fact remains that the creative energies that had gone into Sinhala poetry, fiction and criticism, in the seventies, had considerably diminished by the late eighties.

In the case of drama and the theatre however, this pattern seems to have been totally reversed. The continuing, even burgeoning vitality of the sinhala theatre stands in sharp contrast to the decline in creativity in other genres. In the past decade there has been such an increase in theatre activity that one could, if one had the time and energy, see a different play almost every night of the year. The pressure on Colombo's four or five major theatres is such that if one wishes to put on a play the theatre has to be booked at least three months in advance. Publicity for these plays is almost entirely by means of posters stuck on city walls, along major roads, and at intersections. This fact in turn says something about the nature of today's audiences. It is an audience of people who have a certain familiarity with the theatre, who know where to look and what to look for. By contrast there is a large middle class elite who are not even aware of the existence of this theatre precisely because it is not advertised in the traditional manner.

These performances are by amateur groups of dedicated and talented actors, directors, playwrights, musicians, set designers and numerous other back stage helpers, working on tight budgets, and producing works sometimes of a very high standard of creativity and sophistication.⁵ It is the Peter Brooks kind of creativity, imaginatively constructing theatre out of the bare bones of what is available. Some of these amateur groups, like the *save centime* Eighties group, brought to the Sinhala theatre a degree of

⁴ Journals such as *Ravaya* and a host of new ones are once again flourishing in the changed political context of 1991.

⁵ See Sarath Wijesuriya's article in the *Silumina* of June 30 1991 entitled, "*Natya setrayehi digharena tarunayange lokaya*" (The World of the Young that is opening up in the Theatre.)

professionalism that has paid high dividends. Today, several of them, Dayananda Gunawardene, Jayalath Manoratne, Ranjit Dharmakirti, Felix Premawardene, are leading actors/directors of the Sinhala stage.

The works of the dynamic figures of the Sinhala theatre, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, whose impact was seminal in the sixties, Henry Jayasena, Sugathapala de Silva, Dayananda Gunawardene, Bandula Jayawardene, Somalatha Subasinghe, Simon Navagaththegama, who were a powerful influence in the seventies, continue to play. But a spate of younger directors like Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, Jayantha Chandrasiri, Ranjith Dharmakirti, Nihal Fernando, Vijita Gunaratne, G.K.Haththotuwegama, K.B.Herat, Asoka Handagama, Jayalath Manoratne, Parakrama Niriella, Janak Premalal, R.R.Samarakoon, Nihal Silva, Douglas Siriwardene, Prasanna Vithana, to mention but a few, have given the Sinhala theatre a new image and a vital presence in the life of the country as a whole. My list may seem long but it consists of only a fraction of the better known names working in the theatre today.⁶ Many of these directors write their plays and act in them, and several now also perform in 'Tele dramas' so they are widely known. Drama today is considered a vital and important form of creative activity -- a standing it did not have earlier in the culture.

Up to the 19th century, the only theatre tradition that had survived in Sri Lanka was in the form of ritual performances and folk drama. The *kolam* plays of our folk tradition were often no more than a simple form of satiric masquerade, with impromptu comic dialogue between the narrator and one or sometimes two characters. However, they did establish a tradition of comic satire, using a public arena and a performance mode to criticise persons of their daily world (kings and commoners). It is this satiric tradition that the modern Sinhala serious theatre has very successfully tapped.

Interest in the theatre, as a serious art form as well as a form of secular entertainment, developed only in the twentieth century, in the aftermath of colonial contact. The Ceylon University, later to become the University of Peradeniya, became the dynamic centre for this new theatre, with Professors Lyn Ludowyk and Ediriweera Sarachchandra providing its inspiration and direction. With independence came a growing awareness that the theatre had to move outside the University orbit and reach out to a wider public. Professor Sarachchandra's self-conscious attempt to 'create' such a theatre and the results of that experiment are well known to theatre audiences. In what are today

⁶ A glance at the Annual Drama Festival souvenirs for the past ten years will throw up many more names of directors whose shows were good enough to be selected for the Festival.

theatre classics, *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*, he introduced a new genre of serious theatre which moved beyond the Universities and could resonate in the larger society. This dramatic tradition created in the fifties, tapping into the resources of the folk and classical traditions has today blossomed into an exuberant and vital creative drama, resilient enough to weather the political upheavals of recent times. In fact, it seems to draw sustenance from the very traumas of the political situation, and its wide popular appeal is perhaps because the theatre is today one of the few forums left for critical, political expression.

Many of the plays in the past two decades are socio-political in theme and there is little doubt that it was this socio-political focus that attracted audiences to the theatre. Sri Lankans are avidly interested in politics and there has been a long tradition of such critical involvement. Lakshmi de Silva in a very perceptive paper has remarked that the Sinhalese love language "with a taste for both rhetoric and wry humour". I would suggest they have two loves -- language and politics -- and the two are not so far apart because until very recently the tradition has been for a politics of discourse.

In the late 19th century, with the development of printing, this interest was reflected in the large number of journals, pamphlets, periodicals etc. dealing with a range of socio-political issues. By the first half of the twentieth century, major newspaper chains had tapped this interest and created a reading public that permeated into the remotest corners of the country. However, with the economic austerities of the seventies, the scarcity of paper that struck a blow to posts and street-corner balladeers (*kavi kola karayas*) and the nationalisation by government of the largest newspaper chain, socio-political criticism and concerns sought new forms of expression.

Street Theatre groups such as those that grew out of the Ranga Shilpi Shalika workshop, with G.K.Haththotuwegama, Parakrama Niriella, H.A.Perera, Deepani Silva, Wickreme Seneviratne and others gave creative theatrical form to these political concerns. The episodic nature of street theatre, its low budget, no cost features, its open structure allowing for the input of new relevant material and its lavish use of satire, made it a very effective and popular medium.

Side by side with the street theatre there developed an 'ideological' or 'protest' theatre on the Colombo stage. However, uneven in quality and though dismissed by critics as '*pappadam*' theatre, these plays did perform a useful function. They created a theatre-going public especially in Colombo and the major provincial towns.

This audience interest has been gaining momentum, so much so that in spite of the mounting political turbulence of the mid and late eighties, the censorship and the violence, plays continued to be performed and street theatre flourished. The very

restrictions imposed by the political situation have added range and complexity to the theatre productions and forced dramatists create inventive contexts and performance modes for their themes.

Thus the opening scene of *Naga Gurula* is set in an empty theatre. The cast has fled as a result of political oppression. Only a lone actor and security guard are left. It becomes a powerful opening statement. The play within the play that the actor/director then puts on is *Naga Gurula*. It deals with Spanish colonial exploitation of Inca country, the establishing of a winery by a foreign entrepreneur at the expense of local agriculture, the displacement of local populations, the political use of religion and priest craft to support the exploitative system, the clever undermining of popular protest by the use of hooligans and thugs (in devil masks) etc. These are all themes that have a special resonance of Sri Lankan audiences. In addition, particular nuances in a performance, the mannerisms of an actor, a specific event, or a particular sequence of events can be so enacted as to heighten the dramatic resemblance to the political realities of the day. For example the Incas complain their children are missing, (they are secretly drowned in the wine vats by Higgins' minions.) No Sri Lankan who lived through the violence of the eighties with its daily toll of 'missing' would have lost the reference.

There is another incident when Higgins the winery owner, orders 'special protection' for the Inca chief Manuel. Manuel is carried on stage shortly thereafter, dead. This is followed by a scene where Higgins visits the grieving wife to offer condolences. Again, the innuendoes are clear to any Sri Lankan and the satiric laughter that accompanied the scene on the night I saw the performance indicated clearly that nothing was lost.

Lakshmi De Silva gives a fascinating description of *Mora* (shark) by Jayantha Chandrasiri set in Chaurarajya (Robber Land) where it is a crime to speak the truth, with names like Aprema (loveless), a politician; *Neethiya* (Law) who is a hoodlum; Richarto, a leftist lawyer -- all names (and themes) that have powerful associations with the current political scene.⁷

Simon Navagathegama's play *Sudu saha Kalu* (Black and White) was put on the boards in the late eighties, at the height of the *bhisana kalaya* (Time of Terror). It was set in South Africa and dealt with themes of apartheid, but some of the most gruelling torture sequences seen on stage were part of that play. At a time when political torture was a well known phenomenon of the Sri Lankan world, its impact was searing.

⁷ Lakshmi de silva, "Protest Theatre in Sri Lanka" work in progress.

The enormous popularity of Dharmasiri Bandaranayake's *Dhavala Bhisana* (white terror) is more the content than the production.⁸ Hundreds of people, especially youth, have flocked to the performances not only in Colombo but in distant provincial towns. The play was but a translation of Satre's *Men Without Shadows*, but for Sinhala theatre audiences it was very much more than that.

This enormous political interest and audience support has resulted in a certain 'easy popularity' for any play that happens to deal with political themes or simplistic almost crude satire of politicians. Several critics deplore the willingness of the public to support such second rate plays. As one director declared, "We have a too-ready theatre going audience in Sri Lanka today and too many not-so-good plays". This may not be a fair assessment. There are *many* good plays and there *is* audience support for good theatre, but since theatre is one of the few forms of popular entertainment available to a large section of the middle class, *and* one of the few forums for political criticism, many not-so-good plays also have audiences. As one critic remarked, "Audiences come and clap enthusiastically when anti-government jokes crackle through the length of the script, and the Ministry of Culture with bland impartiality hands out prizes!".

Colombo is today the hub for all such theatre activity. Most plays initially open at the Lumbini theatre, considered auspicious no doubt because it was the first real 'home' of the Sinhala drama. However, there is also a fast growing audience in the provinces and a new category of 'sponsors' who are tapping this audience interest and who 'market' a successful play in much the same way as they do a commercial product. Operating often with only a telephone and a desk, these small-time entrepreneurs now play a crucial role in the dissemination and financial viability of a play.

The phenomenon of 'sponsors' and 'managers' who market plays has in turn led to the growth of a commercial theatre. Nihal Silva's *Sergeant Nallathamby* was the first play to become truly a commercial success. Its immense popularity (it played to Sinhala audiences even in the Middle East) and financial success paved the way for a new category -- the commercial pot-boiler. A host of lesser talents quickly sought to cash in on the audience support for socio-political satire. What is interesting about the Sinhala theatre scene is that both categories of plays, those that produce the easy laughs and the more serious socio-political critiques *do* get their audiences -- which is no doubt what draws so much new talent into the theatre.

⁸ *Ibid.*

A few weeks ago I happened to pass through the small town of Kalawana on the periphery of the Sinharaja forest. I saw posters all over the town for a drama name *Thuthiri* (Grass Weeds) playing at the Central School hall. The names of the director and the cast were not those familiar to me from the Colombo stage. I had thought that only plays that were successful in Colombo, the big names, could expect to draw audiences in the provinces, but clearly this is not the case. Colombo's successes do find a guaranteed provincial circuit in towns like Kandy, Galle, Matara, Badulla, Matale, Kurunegala, and even in remoter areas like Polonnaruwa, Anuradhapura, Amparai or Eppawela but perhaps the very existence of provincial theatre audiences may in turn have created a space for local dramatists and actors especially in the smaller towns. Thus while Colombo is still the centre for almost ninety percent of the plays, there seems to be a steadily growing audience and theatre in the provinces.

There is considerable criticism from intellectuals and fears about the threat to serious theatre from the rapid growth of 'commercial' theatre. But I for one, think they perform an important function. They have 'popularized' theatre, attracted young talent to the stage (a good example is the case of Palitha Silva who was first seen in Sergeant Nallathamby and has since gone on to do brilliant performances in serious avant garde theatre such as *Godot Enakal*, and *Kaspar*). It has also helped develop a theatre going habit among a large section of the youth. While serious theatre may never hope to reap the enormous financial proceeds the commercial theatre does, the latter has not yet eclipsed the former. There is still a solid audience for good theatre as evinced by the packed halls for drama festivals.

Parents often bring quite young children to see plays. On more than one occasion I have heard the auditorium echo with uninhibited children's laughter. This interest is fostered in the schools. Parental and school support for theatre is another indication of the degree to which theatre has permeated society. Many of the young actors and producers I interviewed had been initially attracted to the theatre because of their early involvement in school plays and the dramatic competitions arranged by Youth Councils (*Taruna Seva Sangam*). These are no longer the amateur 'end of term' plays that used to be performed in schools, but serious drama by up and coming young directors. A brilliantly original piece by a young actor/director that was shown at a recent such event was Udayasiri Wickramaratne's *Ilanga Javanikavak Nati Natyak* (A play without a next act). It is an excellent example of the originality, sophistication and professionalism that surfaces at these Youth Festivals and drama competitions.

Another category of children's and youth theatre are productions by recognized theatre directors for and with young people. Somalatha Subasinghe's *Thoppi Velenda* (The Hat Seller) and *Hima Kumari* (Snow Queen) are good examples. So are Dayananda

Gunawardena's *Ananda Javanika* and K.B.Herath's recent production of *Visakha*. Both were done to celebrate school anniversaries but they have become excellent dramatic productions in their own right. Lalitha Sarachchandra and a troupe of players travel to various schools in and around Colombo performing some of Sarachchandra's well known short plays for the benefit of school children during school hours. the permeation of theatre into the school curriculum in this manner is an implicit acknowledgement of its importance in the society.

The role of theatre workshops in developing acting skills and popularising theatre among young people cannot be underestimated. Begun in the late seventies by actors like Dhamma Jagoda, Gamini Hatthotuwegama and Richard Soysa, they rapidly caught on and many young actors came from great distances to participate. Soon the Cultural Sections of several embassies in Colombo invited visiting directors to conduct similar actor training workshops. Recently we have seen two such productions, "*Kassapa*" the excellent production directed by Muller Elmau (and sponsored by the German Embassy) and *Adisi Paura* directed by Sunetra Rajakarunanayake and sponsored by the Iranian embassy.

Many of the new young directors whose plays surface regularly, each month have acquired their acting skills and theatrical experience from participation in such workshops and by acting minor roles in the plays of better known directors. Then, on shoe string budgets, sometimes with loans from friends, or if lucky, a small time entrepreneur/sponsor, they write, act in, and produce a play. If the play is good, as for example in the case of the young writer/actor/director, Prasannajit Abeysuriya's *Dugganna Rala*, it may make it to the annual Drama Festival, and perhaps even hit the provincial circuits. Or, as in the case of Nihal Suranji's *Sinhala Kankariya*, initially produced with a band of young actors from the rural hinterland of Padiyapelella, the exigencies of the political situation and the pressures of rural poverty, can cause a potentially powerful play to die an untimely death.

There are no statistics of the percentage of survivals, but we do know that new plays constantly surface and a fair number survive and play over a period of months, sometimes years. It is not easy to predict which plays survive. For example, Douglas Siriwardene's powerful play *Hitler* which opened in May 1986 had 75 performances in one year, but has not survived into the nineties. Manoratne's *Tala Mala Pipila* (The Talipot Flower has Bloomed) is justifiably popular, has been showing for almost three

years, and is likely to continue to play.¹⁰ Yet again, a new play, *Alsatian*, by a little known director, Gamini Sisil, had its inaugural performance at the Lumbini only a month ago. Today, I see it advertised to play in Matara and Amparai. Clearly the play has caught the eye of a sponsor and may even make money for its director.

The first night audience for a new show consists mainly of invited guests, friends and kinsmen, and a fair number of young people, (the new category of theatre afficiandos, who spend their time making the round of the theatres.) But as the play gets known, reviewed, advertised, and talked about, audiences grow. Once an actor or a playwright has acquired a reputation, a sponsor may organize a 'Festival' of a collection of his/her plays, showing continuously for a week or more. Audience support for such festivals is overwhelming. At this year's Sarachchandra festival spectators filled the hall and overflowed into the aisles. So also with the recent Ratna Lalani festival of award winning dramas in which this very talented actress has played. The John de silva theatre was filled to capacity every single night, for seven nights, with crowds standing at the back and in the aisles.

In addition to these *ad hoc* festivals there are the annual events such as the State Drama Festival in Colombo and the Drama Festival at Peradeniya which are both important events for theatre goers. Audience support is unqualified and whether it is the John de Silva hall in Colombo or the Sarachchandra open air theatre (*vala*)¹¹ at Peradeniya, they are filled to capacity. Festival audiences in Colombo are mainly regular theatre afficiandos. For the festival in Peradeniya however, the audience consists of thousands of men, women, and children, not just students from the campus, schools, and residents of Kandy, but drawn from the surrounding villages and even young monks from nearby temples. The *vala* audience is a highly critical audience and it is accepted in theatre circles that any play that can evoke a pin drop silence response at the *vala* can claim to have passed a test of fire.

¹⁰ This does not mean that the play runs consecutively for two years, as with Broadway productions. They appear at different places and times over the course of one or more years. Performances run generally for one or two nights at a time.

¹¹ The *vala* or pit is how the University students refer to this space. It has now become its name.

This enormous audience interest whether in Colombo, Peradeniya, or now spreading rapidly to the provinces, indicates the powerful hold the theatre has come to exercise on the people's imagination, and its important place in today's society.

From my limited and as yet preliminary investigation of some of these issues, I find that not only has the number of theatre groups and their audiences risen exponentially but the social composition and economic base both of actors and audience have changed dramatically. Whereas in the fifties and sixties it was mainly a solidly 'bourgeois' middle class, generally middle-aged, audience, with only a scattering of students, now the larger percentage seems to come from a new middle class, the sons and daughters of small entrepreneurs, and they are very much younger.

Theatre has increasingly become the entertainment of the less affluent, but educated, youth, and of a new entrepreneurial class of small time business people who are willing to sponsor a production not just as a financial investment but for the 'social status' such sponsorship confers. One young director told me his first play was sponsored by the son of a 'market mudalali' whose father had made money selling fish and was willing to invest it in a theatre production. Another got Rs. 10,000 from a friend who had collected his 'pocket money' given by his father who was a small time businessman. Many of the new plays that appear are in fact sponsored by this category of person, sometimes as a high risk venture that might bring in profits and sometimes as a predictable loss that might have the compensation of a moment in the sun.

A relatively new, but in some ways related and now frequently observed feature in the Sinhala theatre is the lighting of the traditional oil lamp before the curtain goes up. A large brass lamp is brought on stage and several distinguished guests, such as the sponsor of the play and some other dignitaries are invited to light the lamp. The lamp is then dragged off stage and the curtain rises. The lighting of the lamp in the theatre is both the incorporation of an 'auspicious' element drawn from the ritual tradition and also the creation of a space to acknowledge the important role of sponsors in today's theatre productions.

While most new plays have small time entrepreneurs for sponsors, once a play or a playwright has established a reputation, he/she can get significant financial backing from big companies like the Ceylon Tobacco company. Such sponsorship is often controversial because of the political implications of multinational corporation support. Sponsorship of whatever kind, governmental, NGO, the cultural sections of embassies, or private businesses, continues to be a source of considerable ambivalence for playwrights and directors. They see it as a necessary evil and try their best to withstand the inevitable pressures that result from the increasing dependence on them for the considerable finance needed for a production. One well known dramatist told me he waited three years to save enough money to produce his new play, so he could do it on

his own terms. For him, it was a high risk venture, involving a financial commitment of over Rs.50,000/-.

The financial support of friends and kinsmen is another, small source of funds. I have seen members of the audience come backstage after a show and hand the producer an envelope with money. This is perhaps a carry over of the traditional custom of showing appreciation with a gift of money. In a *kohomba kankariya* ritual for example a particularly good dancer or dance sequence is immediately acknowledged by a gift of money from the patron or sponsor of the event. Today's envelopes of money may be a simple gesture of friendship and solidarity, a way of showing support for such theatrical ventures.

Though sponsorship of one kind or another is often crucial in the initial stages of a production, in the final analysis it is the audience that keeps a play alive. Sri Lanka today has such a theatre-going audience, both in Colombo and in the provinces. They actively support theatre. This is a marked shift from what it was three decades ago.

What is equally fascinating is the role theatre has come to play in the consciousness of the society at large. During the recent years of political upheaval or *bhisana yugaya*, as it has come to be called, when most other literary activities withered or died, the theatre continued to grow and flourish in the teeth of crisis situations. In August 1989 I was in Colombo, at a time of great tension, because of the sudden 'curfews' ordered by the political activists on the one hand and the government on the other. People hardly went out, nobody talked politics in public places, in buses or trains, (and that in a culture that in the sixties and seventies talked nothing but politics.) Yet the posters advertising plays continued to appear on the walls, ironically enough, often side by side with political posters put up by the JVP and counter posters by the government.

One might ask again, in a time of political tension, when official censorship of the press and unofficial self-imposed censorship, and controls of all kinds were being imposed, how did the theatre escape? Why did not the JVP who were extremely puritanical in their opposition to drinking, smoking etc, not also demand the closing down of all forms of theatrical entertainment? Or why did the government which clamped down on so many avenues of political expression, allow, sometimes extremely critical plays to pass the censor? The answers to such questions might say something about the nature of Third World politics and the unusual ways in which the democratic processes embedded in a culture surface and survive even in times of stress.

Perhaps the political activists saw in the socio-political criticism some kind of 'unwritten' support for their movement and so permitted the theatre to function, and perhaps the government, equally eager for populist support, felt it was wiser not to come down too hard on the theatre where unlike with the political posters, the criticism was often general, muted and subtle.

An incident concerning a well known actress, who has dedicated a lifetime to her dual roles as a teacher and a theatre person, provides an insight into the important almost dependent relationship that has come about between the public and the theatre. The actress had been invited to Germany to participate in a workshop. It was a time when hundreds of Sri Lankans were leaving for study or employment abroad because of political uncertainties, the closure of the Universities and schools and the possible collapse of the economy. When she went to collect her bags at the Hamburg airport, she saw, scribbled in white chalk all over her luggage, comments in Sinhala saying, "Don't go away". "We want you here". "Good wishes". "Come back". She was very moved and proud that the baggage handlers at the Colombo airport who had seen the name tag, knew and supported her work in the theatre.

Judging from the plays put on the stage in recent times, the themes cover a wide range. There are a few that are straight forward and simplistic political satire like *Uturu Rahula* (Rahula of the North,) which has been playing for several years now, the text changing to accommodate shifts in the political arena. Many others such as Somalatha Subasinghe's brilliant musical *Vikurthi* (Distortions) which deals with parental, social and economic pressures on today's young; or Ranjit Dharmakirti's new play *Megha* (The Cloud), which focusses on the life of Dostoevsky but deals also with problems faced by a writer wracked between the demands of creativity to produce a lasting work of art and the demands of the commercial world which supplies the money by which he lives. Jayalath Manoratne's excellent play *Tala Mala Pipila* (The Tala tree has blossomed) is a moving commentary on the collapse of the traditional world and its value system and the destructive but macabre play *Maya Devi* (Queen Maya), provides a searing commentary on the soul-destroying and subtly corrupting role of money and depicts human greed in its multitudinous forms undermining human relationships. All of them provide a critique of society, the corruption of values, the political bankruptcy, and the pressures of modern life on the young and the old. Almost all of them are political in a fundamental sense but their appeal I think is that they 'deal with' and explore, (in richly nuanced and witty dialogue not just strident 'protest') issues that the society is concerned about. What is even more significant is that given the political climate they are issues that often cannot be raised in other contexts.

Economists and social scientists writing on Sri Lanka in the seventies and early eighties commented on the stability of the political system, and the enormous interest and involvement of ordinary people in politics. Whether in the bus stands, train stations, village tea shops, in public gatherings or in private homes, 'politics' was a popular topic of conversation. It was a politics of discourse, however, not the activist politics of today.

By the mid-eighties, all that changed. The violence, unleashed on society by almost every category of political group, successfully killed any popular interest in politics. Rigorous censorship exercised by governments in power, the take-over of certain presses and the sealing of others, undermined the function of newspapers, which, earlier had played an important role in the dissemination of information, in fostering debate and discourse, and in the cultivation of public interest in political issues. By the eighties all that had changed and political commentary or news, whether it came on the Radio, Television or in the Newspapers was given little credit.

The growth and popularity of the theatre I believe is because it has begun to fill the space left by the loss of credibility of the other media. When people no longer believe what is being 'officially' said, when the encompassing violence prevents individuals from participating or expressing opinions on important political or social issues, the theatre has begun to provide a comforting space, where in the anonymity of a darkened auditorium, one can be part of a group that can see and hear issues of interest, raised, discussed, even satirized. The individual's contribution to this discourse is through his/her physical presence in that audience and by the quick response to all the nuances of the production. Though silent for the most part, it is an active involvement.

This social and political criticism in the serious theatre is, for the most part, neither one dimensional nor ideologically didactic (as was the case with the 'socialist-relevant drama' of the seventies)¹². It is multi-faceted, and expressed in exhilarating, imaginative and creative performances within the charmed world of the theatre.

Thus the theatre is not so much a form of protest, though it is that too. It is rather a form of creative criticism, a kind of socio-political discourse at a time when all other such forms of discourse are not readily available to the general public. The challenge for the creative artist is to find new and exciting ways in which to carry on this discourse, engage the public interest and give it imaginative expression.

¹² The dramatic productions sponsored by the Devasarana Open Air People's Theatre of Ibbagamuwa are good examples of plays with an ideological political agenda.

One might ask how is it that censorship, which successive governments however democratic they claim to be, have continued to exercise, has not killed the theatre? What is it about drama rather than most other art forms that gives it this special advantage vis a vis the censor? Perhaps it is one form where the distance between the text and the interpretation or performance of that text can be such as to allow for almost two different texts. What one reads on the printed page may be very different from what the actor, by the slightest gesture, shift of emphasis, intonation or movement, expresses on stage, or what the director through the sets, costumes and lighting conveys. A performance is an ephemeral moment, intangible, and its very transience gives it a kind of freedom. This is one important reason. Another is that many playwrights and producers today are engaged in serious theatre, works that are subtle, challenging, critical but not easy to censor because for the most part they are not didactic political pieces. It is also possible that drama being a 'communal activity' backed by overwhelming audience support, gives it a degree of immunity not enjoyed by other genres. All governments in power claim to be 'populist' and to ban popular plays might undermine such claims in too visible a way.

The complexities and involutions of the process can be illustrated by the tragic killing of Richard de Soysa. He was the first (and only)¹³ theatre person to be abducted and murdered during the era of killings when thousands of young people died. The rumoured reason that he had been working on (acting, directing or had written the script for) a play that was a devastating satire on a senior politician and had been killed for that, suggests the public's perception of the power of the theatre.

There was also the fact that he was a reporter for an international paper, sending out data and information on the many human rights violations that were taking place in the country. Given what was happening in the country, he could have been killed for that. Whatever the reason, whether it was the one, or the other, or both, or none of these, the popular perception of the political role and possible influence of theatre personalities is indicated in the stories.

That a play as crudely and obviously satirical (as the account of it that I read in the *Attha*)¹⁴ could have got past the censors and was about to open, was itself a commentary on the involutions of the socio-political scene.

¹³ The producer of the play Richard de Soysa was supposed to be involved in, also went 'missing' about the same time, but he was more a political than a theatre person.

¹⁴ Published shortly thereafter in the Communist Party newspaper *Attha*.

Ironically, it was because Richard de Soysa's face was 'known to the public' that fishermen who found the body washed up on the shore, reported it to the police instead of burying it, as they probably had done with many bodies on many other such occasions. Had he not been identified he would have been just one more of the missing. But because of his public image, and his activities as a theatre person, there was enormous public outrage and protest at the killing.

Even if the killing of Richard de Soysa had nothing to do with his involvement with a play, the role that theatre has come to play in the consciousness of society or society's perception of that role is I believe indicated by the rumours.

Sinhala creative work, especially literary work has always been closely tied to the political life of the country. The connection has been direct, and debate, discourse, polemics, have been an integral part of the Sinhala literary tradition. This tradition is reflected even as early as the chronicles. The *Mahavamsa* and the *Culavamsa* were not only written for "the serene joy and emotion of the pious" but as a political history of the Sinhala nation. They are in a sense an embodiment of religio-political concerns, and should be contextualised and read as such.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this connection between literature and politics is reflected in the myriad journals, pamphlets, newspapers, books and other literary artifacts of the period. I see the Sinhala theatre today as a continuation of that tradition, adapted to the changing needs of the society, but providing that all important space for criticism and debate -- satisfying the public's dual interests in language and politics. At a time in our society where the traumas of violence and political repression from a range of sources may have silenced the individual, the theatre has surfaced as a communal voice to keep the critical tradition and the human spirit alive.

EDITOR'S PARABASIS

This double volume of the Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, the research organ of the Humanities in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Peradeniya, commemorates fifty years of the University, from its inception as the University of Ceylon in the academic year 1941-42 upto 1991-92.

Up until 1952 the University was located in Colombo, and from that year onwards continues in the panoramic surroundings and salubrious climes of Peradeniya, seventy miles from Colombo on the approach to the historic hill-capital of Kandy.

The original research journal, of which the Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities and its sister journal, Modern Sri Lankan Studies, are successors, was the University of Ceylon Review, which terminated in 1972 after the publication of twenty-five volumes during half the lifetime of the University. The research output of the Review is catalogued in the preceding volume (Vol.XVI) of this journal. The articles and book-reviews which have since appeared, in volumes I-XV of the Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, will be found catalogued by the same compiler, Dr.D.P.M.Weerakkody, in pages 357 to 375 of the present double volume.

The Editor takes opportunity here to express his thanks to the several contributors who helped build up this commemorative journal, and also to Mr.Roy Ranasinghe who prepared the computer manuscript for risograph reproduction - a laborious and exacting undertaking. He is also very grateful to Mrs Sudharma Nandasena, Acting Deputy Registrar, Academic and Examinations, for her ready assistance where administrative problems sprang up, to Mr.D.M.E.Dissanayake in charge of the printing unit, and to his staff, G.L.D.L.Gunawardena, K.G.Siriwardene, D.W.Navaratna Banda, M.A.Gunasena and W.G.Ranasinghe Banda for the actual print-outs and compilation of this volume. He also likes to place on record the help given by Dr.M.A.Nuhman in preparing the final manuscripts of both his own and Prof.W.S.Karunatilake's articles for reproduction.

Above all, his thanks are due to the Managing Editor, Prof.P.V.B.Karunatilake, for his assistance and support in several ways, and to an appreciative and helpful Publications Boards chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, Prof.J.M.Gunadasa.

The Editor and Editorial Board of the Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities will think their efforts at bringing out this commemorative issue well rewarded if it becomes what they hoped to make it - a worthwhile souvenir of fifty years of research in the Humanities undertaken by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Peradeniya.

Merlin Peris,
Editor.