

Art and Peacebuilding: How Theatre Transforms Conflict in Sri Lanka

Nilanjana Premaratna and Roland Bleiker
University of Queensland

In preparation for Oliver Richmond (eds), *Advances in Peace and Conflict Studies*.

3rd Draft, May 2008. Comments welcome

Building peace in societies torn apart by violence is a long, frustrating and extremely difficult process. From the Middle East to Afghanistan, from Somalia to East Timor, years and often decades of conflict have left societies deeply divided and traumatized. New forms of violence constantly remerge, generating yet more hatred. Commentators speak of so-called intractable conflicts: situations where antagonisms have persisted for so long that they have created a vicious cycle of violence.¹

Sri Lanka is a case in point: for over two decades now the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have been in a tense and often very violent standoff against each other. Deep-seated historical reasons are said to be accountable for the underlying ethnic nature of the conflict. Hatred is meanwhile so wide-spread and entrenched that even the idea of respectful negotiations among the adversaries seems near impossible.

Only very few peacebuilding organizations can attract involvement from and support by both conflict parties in Sri Lanka. Jana Karaliya, or *The Theatre of the People*, is such a rare organization. It is a mobile, multiethnic and multi religious theatre group. Established in 2004, Jana Karaliya has been touring the island with the

objective of promoting mutual understanding, tolerance and trust within and among communities on the island.

The purpose of our chapter is to examine the methods used by Jana Karaliya in its efforts at contributing to peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. How is this organization able to provide a forum in which both parties to the conflict meet and interact – something that is rarely possible in Sri Lanka? To what extent – and how exactly – can the ensuing interactions contribute to peacebuilding efforts? Drawing on interviews with participants as well as on analyses of performances and documentary evidence, we suggest that theatre can make a modest but symbolically important contribution to peacebuilding by changing conflict attitudes at three related levels: personal, emotional and societal. This is to say that theatre can 1) provide a forum through which individuals can come to terms with their personal experiences of conflict and become more attuned to understanding and appreciating the former enemies; 2) facilitate ways in which individuals and groups can come to terms with the deep emotional wounds inflicted by conflict; and 3) make the surrounding societal discourses more attuned to accommodating parties that were once in conflict; create more inclusive and pluralist historical narratives.

Although we deal with Sri Lanka in particular, we hope that our analysis contributes to a growing scholarly and practical awareness of how the arts can play a crucial role in peacebuilding. All too often peacebuilding efforts focus on processes of institution building or on holding formal elections. The result is a top-down approach that risks imposing a particular notion of a western and liberal understanding of peace.² But many of the key issues that underlie conflict, such as the existence of deep-seated antagonisms, remain unaddressed. Transforming these attitudes into more peaceful – or at least non-violent - interaction is a long process that requires changing the way people think about themselves and their former enemies. This is why so-called grassroots activities that promote dialogue and respect for difference are crucial to the long-term success of peacebuilding efforts. Community based arts projects are part of such activities – and we now proceed to assess the extent to which they can contribute to moving a particular society – Sri Lanka – out of deep seated patterns of conflict.

Background: The Conflict in Sri Lanka and the Activities of the Jana Karaliya Theatre Group

Sri Lanka is an island nation with a diverse ethno-religious population going back some 2500 years. A former colony of the Dutch, Portuguese and finally, the British empires, Sri Lanka is located in a strategically important place in the Indian Ocean. The background of the Sri Lankan conflict provided here is a reduced version that does not encompass the complexities seen on the ground. It is solely meant for the outsider to gain a general understanding of the context for the purposes of relating to theatre as a peacebuilding method and is not comprehensive by any means.

The key conflict today is between the government and LTTE. The widespread stereotyping of each side to represent the voice of Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities respectively has resulted in the conflict being seen as an ethnic conflict. As in most protracted conflicts, the roots of the conflict in Sri Lanka are disputed. Some focus on the colonial legacy while others place more emphasis on the political dynamics since independence from Britain in 1948.³ Others again trace the conflict back through centuries to the periodic invasions of the island kingdom from the Indian subcontinent, especially from Tamil speaking entities in Southern India.

The violent turn of the conflict started in 1983. The killing of 13 soldiers in Jaffna triggered organised mob actions in the capital against civilian Tamils that lasted several days. The government at the time failed to provide protection and indeed, were accused of aiding the mobs. These incidents resulted in consolidating the key parties of the conflict as they are seen today, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the armed forces of the government. There are other groupings as well, such as militant Muslim groups in the Eastern province of the country, but the key conflict is between the government and the LTTE. The latter demands a separate state in the North and the East of the country for Tamils, which have a strong Tamil speaking population.

The key points of contention revolve around access to government decision making pertaining to resource distribution and development, as well as language and religious issues. Sinhala and Tamil languages are largely associated with the respective Sinhalese and Tamils ethnicities. The equal official status of both the languages is not reflected in practice within the country. This results in the

marginalisation of minority language speakers on a surface level. In long term, its consequences are seen in the alienation, breakdown of communication and construction of stereotypes between the two main ethnicities. Recent developments in the conflict witnessed the emergence of a religious tension, mainly spurred on by Sinhala Buddhist groups requesting a united ethno-religious identity associated with the entire island. Hence the centralised government is accused of failing to incorporate the interests and aspirations of the Tamil minority. These grievances and points of contention play a major role in the fight for a separate state for Tamils.

In February 2002, the LTTE and the government signed a ceasefire agreement. But relief was only temporary. A new government formed with the support of nationalistic parties renewed intense military operations in 2005. These, in turn, triggered a series of suicide bombings and targeted assassinations. By 2006 the situation had deteriorated to the point that conflict was in the open again. In January 2008, the government officially withdrew from the ceasefire agreement.

The Jana Karaliya theatre group we study in this chapter operates in the context of this deeply entrenched conflict. Meaning “Theatre of the People,” Jana Karaliya was founded by two veteran artists, Parakrama Niriella and H. A. Perera. They had two main objectives in mind: to take high quality theatre productions to distant areas of the country and to promote peacebuilding among different ethnicities. Being a mobile theatre group, Jana Karaliya travel around the country, performing in a mobile theatre tent that can house 500 people at a time. Apart from performing within the tent, Jana Karaliya goes into rural schools and conducts Theatre in Education and Personal Development workshops with the students and teachers. Activities involved in setting up the theatre, performing and conducting the workshops are carried out by the members of the theatre group.

Jana Karaliya is composed of some twenty members from both Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities. They have Buddhist, Hindu and Christian religious backgrounds. Most of the participants had some level of experience in theatre before joining Jana Karaliya and they constantly receive more training within the group. When performing Jana Karaliya stays in one location for about a month, but the time could be shorter or longer depending on the situation. The group lives and travels together except for brief periods when the members visit their homes. They have a house in Colombo to stay in between performances. Members have their living costs covered and also receive a monthly allowance.

The productions of Jana Karaliya include Indian and Russian adaptations as well as original scripts. The scripts of the plays are by Parakrama Niriella, a founder of the group. Often Jana Karaliya plays discuss social injustice and the marginalised. They problematize the existing system, revealing the notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have their rationale in the interest of the dominant social group. Hence the plays invite the viewers to be critical about their own attitudes and thinking patterns.

Jana Karaliya does, on purpose, not engage with the Sri Lankan conflict directly in their scripts. Doing so, they believe, would alienate the audience and only entrench divisive ethnic narratives. The conflict is addressed indirectly, through scripts about justice and tolerance. They draw from Sinhala and Tamil traditions and perform the plays in both Tamil and Sinhala languages. Add to this the politically very significant fact that the plays are organised and performed by a multiethnic cast who work, travel and live together.

Jana Karaliya is supported mostly through external funds. Even though they charge a fee for their performances, that income is not sufficient to maintain the group. Various non governmental organisations have supported the group such as Hivos and Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation (FLICT) as well as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). One of the main issues facing the group today is, in fact, the challenge of generating income to ensure the group’s sustainability.

Transforming Individual Experiences with Conflict Through Artistic Performances

The first component of peacebuilding we stress is a feature that almost all Jana Karaliya members we interviewed identified as essential for their participation: the hope that transforming their own personal experiences with conflict can eventually create a more inclusive and harmonious societal order. This is particularly crucial in Sri Lanka, where communication between the groups in conflict has broken down. Add to this that each of the two major conflict parties have constituted their identity around efforts to demonize the other. Within each ethnic group, the stereotyped other is perceived as undesirable and a threat: Tamils associate the Sinhalese with an oppressive state and a brutal military apparatus. The Sinhalese, by contrast, see the Tamils as a disruptive and dangerous terrorist group⁴.

These antagonistic attitudes become insinuated into the day-to-day ways in which people articulate their views, sense of self and their interactions with others. The resulting stereotypes continuously fuel conflict and dehumanize the enemy.⁵ Stereotypes are found in all realms of Sri Lankan society. Even highly educated people often propagate the myth of ancient hatreds, alleging some sort of irremovable natural differences that inevitably breed conflict. Consider a statement by a former Dean of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, University of Ruhuna:

I have met with Tamil students and teachers. But I am not in favour of any close association or forming ties with Tamils...I think the differences we see among the races are natural. I think that forming ties with people of another culture is something dishonourable.⁶

Breaking down stereotypes and deep-seated antagonism, as Jana Karaliya tries to do in performances across Sri Lanka for several years now, is a long and arduous task. In fact, the very premise of Jana Karaliya is highly controversial: a multiethnic cast performing in a country devastated by ethnic conflict. Consider the reaction of Sokkalingam Krishanthan, a Tamil participant from Trincomalee, which has been particularly affected by ethnic violence. He stresses how he was initially afraid of the multiethnic cast of Jana Karaliya:

I was seated on a chair in that corner over there and I looked at those around me with great suspicion and mistrust. I was actually quite convinced that one of the guys [Sinhalese] was a member of the CID [Criminal Investigation Division]⁷

Another cast member recalls how theatre resulted in gradually changing similar initial sentiments:

[T]hrough the exercises of drama, singing, music and other activities we were able to forge a strong bond. We were able to overcome many of our preconceived ideas about each other and work together towards a common goal⁸

And here a similar example from Sumudu Mallawarachchi, another Sinhalese Jana Karaliya member:

Before I joined Jana Karaliya I used to judge people by looking at them but after I joined, I've learned to respect them, their culture and their ideas"⁹

The same kind of initial suspicion – and often hostility – occurred in the communities where Jana Karaliya performed. Consider the case of Padaviya, a predominantly Sinhalese village situated between the fault-lines of ethnic conflict. As a result of its location and violent history, the village had a population with very strong anti-Tamil sentiments. Not surprisingly, the multi-ethnic theatre group was not well received initially. But after a few performances and theatre workshops, the situation gradually became less tense. Children who initially reacted to the performance with hospitality started to follow R. Kopika, a Tamil member of the cast, wherever she went. Such a change of attitude – and the resulting ability to form relationships where before there was only hostility – is possible after personal experiences with conflict are transformed into narratives that are less vengeful and more accepting of others.

We identify three key elements in this transformation process: encouraging expression, transcending stereotypes and initiating dialogue.

The first step in this transformation process is the need to express experiences with conflict – whether they be first hand or learned through others in the community.¹⁰ Jana Karaliya embraces this idea by offering a public forum that gives people the chance to voice their feelings. Doing so allows individuals who experienced conflict a chance to come to terms with past events and perhaps even heal some of the related trauma. In an ideal scenario, sharing testimonies of conflict also gives members of the audience – and perhaps members of the hostile parts of the community - the chance to see how the conflict was experienced from the other side.

The ability of theatre to encourage different forms of communication – including non-verbal ones – is central. The inability to speak each other's language substantially hinders communication between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. This difficulty is surpassed in theatre space, since expression also takes the form of music, dance and other activities. Not even the different members of Jana Karaliya could talk to each other initially. But their inability to communicate linguistically promoted

other, non-verbal forms of communication. Such interactions may actually suit the Sri Lankan context well since language is one of the divisive issues that heighten the ethnic divisions.¹¹

The second component in the individual transformation process relates to how theatre manages to create a distance between a fictional performance and the often brutal reality experienced by the performer or spectator in the real world. Theatre provides the opportunity to take part in conflict narratives outside the risks of real life. The performance is a safe space, so to speak – a space that enables individuals enmeshed in conflict to express themselves in a manner they could not do otherwise. In Sri Lanka, the world outside the theatre is far more volatile and would not necessarily tolerate the type of views that are expressed on stage at Jana Karaliya.

The notion of playing a fictional role, rather than living real life, challenges preconceived perceptions and makes room for multiple voices and views to be heard. Doing so is essential if one is to address the key issues that account for the cycles of violence: hatred, deep-seated antagonisms and unwillingness to even listen to the archenemy. Through forms of theatre such as Jana Karaliya individuals can take on roles that might often be denied to them in real life, thus giving them the chance to explore new ways of knowing the conflict and expressing its grievances.¹² Neela Selvarajan, a member of Jana Karaliya, notes that many people come to the stage to speak at the end of the performance. They come there to voice their opinions, to share how they felt with others and often they display vulnerability and an openness that is rarely seen in life outside.¹³

The physical set-up of the Jana Karaliya theatre is designed to take advantage of this opportunity to create a safe space for a multitude of voices. The performance takes place in what is called a “new arena theatre.” This is to say that the stage is located in the middle of a tent, with the audience completely surrounding the actors’ performance. The audience must pass the stage when reaching their seating places, which are in fact simply ascending platforms, built around the stage. The entry into theatrical space thus takes place through a vivid physical experience that clearly separates the theatrical realm from the conflict bound personal reality that exists outside the tent. This creates a marked enclosure, a separate space for actors and the audience to meet, thus transcending their respective boundaries and roles.

When participating in the performances of Jana Karaliya the actors do not represent particular ethnic, religious or political groups They are there as actors. They

perform as members of humanity at large. Theatre thus provides individuals with access to – and even ways of acting out – roles that they otherwise would never be able to experience. Consider a youth who attended a performance of Jana Karaliya in Kebithigollewa, another border village that suffered many massacres due to the conflict. He stressed that “this was one of the most unforgettable moments in my life. I never thought that I would ever speak so freely with a young Tamil woman.”¹⁴

Jana Karaliya offers participants a chance to slip in and out of different roles, perhaps even to try on the personae of the enemy. Doing so inevitably challenges the stereotypical perceptions that fuel the conflict in Sri Lanka – the idea, for instance, that Tamils are such and such or that Sinhalese behave such and such.¹⁵ These attitudes often change after performances. Numerous Karaliya members we interviewed stress this point. Take Manjula Ramasinghe, a Jana Karaliya member from the strongly Sinhala community in Hambanthota. He believed that all the Tamils are terrorists and credited the theatre in helping him overcome the fear of interacting with them. Having engaged through the medium of theatre with other Tamil youths, he is now convinced that he has a lot of things in common with them despite the ethnic, cultural and religious differences that differentiates them. These barriers, he stresses, exists mostly in our minds and was established through hostile ways of constructing notions of identity and community.¹⁶

Jana Karaliya produces the same plays in both Tamil and Sinhala. Each performance features a mixed ethnic casts. When the Tamil actors speak with a Sinhala accent, and vice versa, the performance challenges the stereotypes each group believe in, rendering this very stereotype no longer valid to explain their experiences.

The best example for the potential impact of these role-play reversals can be seen in the way Jana Karaliya was received by both the Sri Lankan Government Army and the LTTE. This is an example very much stressed by Parakrama Niriella, a co-founder of Jana Karaliya. When performing in Anuradhapura in a ground close to the Army Hospital, the injured soldiers got so close to the group that they came regularly for performances and often provided food and snacks for the entire group. Similarly, LTTE took responsibility for organising Jana Karaliya performances in Muthur when Jana Karaliya performed in the Eastern Province of the country, which was then under LTTE control. They promised to ensure the safety of the entire group and the LTTE Eastern Commander, inviting the group for tea, voiced that “this is how we want to live in this country”.¹⁷

In an ideal scenario, then, role plays and role reversals reach some sort of common humanity in formerly opposed parties. It breaks down the stereotypes that each side has about the other and opens up more inclusive personal narratives and communal relations.

There is a third and directly related element in how theatre transforms personal narratives: it improves communication and understanding between groups in conflict. Performing together is a process that requires communication between performers as well as between performers and the audience.¹⁸ Jana Karaliya promotes dialogue by structural and psychological means. Seating the audience in ascending platforms built surrounding the theatre allows them to watch the performance while seeing the faces of those who are sitting all around them. Manjula, a member of the cast believes that this is a key feature that encourages community dialogue.¹⁹ The smiles and tears brought onto the faces are able to convey subtle messages that would rarely be satisfactorily captured by words. Hence M. Kalidas, Neela and other commentators do in fact stress that theatre – and the arts in general – are the key instrument through which dialogue can be reintroduced into communities that no longer talk to each other.²⁰ Needless to say, theatre can only be a starting point. Numerous commentators, such as Parakrama, admit that the next step would require bold initiatives at a more high-profile political level.²¹ But the types of lessons learned through community theatre can provide political leaders on both sides of the conflict-lines with key insights about how to open up a dialogue that can not only convey grievances but also begin to dismantle the stereotypes that continuously fuel conflict.

Theatre and Emotional Healing After Conflict

The second theme under which the role of theatre in peacebuilding can be discussed is its potential in creating more inclusive and less violent-prone communal narratives. Doing so requires engaging the types of collective emotions that fuel the conflict cycle.

Emotions are central in determining how we feel and behave as members of a collective. They are even more central when dealing with the aftermath of conflict – a time when fear and hatred dominate the political landscape. A number of studies have demonstrated that the human mind is more likely to remember incidents with strong

emotional associations for all emotional memories receive preferential processing in registering, storing and retrieval in comparison to cognitive memories.²² This privileged position in memory enables emotions to identify specific issues and establish priorities in the general reasoning mechanisms of the mind: hence emotions actively engage in devising strategies to achieve their preferred choices.²³ Through this process of influencing our remembering and decision making, emotions become critical in deciding where we place ourselves and with whom we form alliances.

In post-conflict societies feelings of anger and revenge are often so strong that they generate whole new and highly dangerous cycles of violence. Consider the stereotypical perceptions that each of the conflict groups in Sri Lanka has of the other. These stereotypes, which continually fuel conflict, are mostly based on anger and fear. They have been formed through the memory of violence and death.

Any peacebuilding effort needs to deal with the role of collective emotions in order to be successful in the long-term. The challenge is two-fold: firstly it consists of recognizing how fear and anger create ever more conflict. Secondly it requires finding a way through which a sense of community can be created around feeling other than hatred: these can be empathy or compassion for the former enemies or a mutual sense of grief. Establishing such an emotional transformation of community attachments and interactions is, of course, a long-term and gargantuan task. This is why it has to start at the local level and gradually work its way through society.

Local theatre groups, such as Jana Karaliya, are ideally placed to initiate and spread such processes of emotional transformation. The capacity to engage with emotions is, indeed, one of the key features of theatre as a peacebuilding method. The role of emotion within theatre can be explored under two main categories.

The first emotional feature of theatre is its ability to provide actors and the audience the opportunity to relive emotions. This allows them to come to terms with their grief and anger. Consider the strong visual impact of theatre, which many commentators associate with the potential of replacing old (conflict prone) memories with new, different ones.²⁴ Kalidas²⁵ astutely picked up on this aspect of theatre in saying that “people see theatre like pictures. If we do a workshop for theatre, it will end with the day. But because theatre creates pictures it is different. We are remembered”. He further explains his point with an example: “we stayed in Anuradhapura for about three months, and the people there tell us that when they see

the ground, it is always Jana Karaliya they remember. This stays inside people's minds because it is pictures. That is what theatre is".

The second aspect has to do with how theatre can contribute to the establishment of more inclusive emotional attachments to communities. In the process of re-living emotion, Jana Karaliya might help to turn attenuate often divisive emotions, such as anger, fear and hatred. These emotions often become key rallying points after conflict, thus entrenching antagonistic attitudes even more. Grief and loss, by contrast, are often silenced and so are attempts to show empathy to the opposing side. The resulting culture of fear has to be healed in order to bring reconciliation.

Jana Karaliya brings together communities and enables them to address these issues. In doing so it potentially creates new and less divisive communal narratives. At the end of each performance, the cast introduces themselves, saying their name and hometown in the language they are most comfortable with. This is seen as a very emotional moment for the audience. As a group member observes: "when we talk to them some of them start to cry, there's always a reason behind why they cry and most of the time it's because they feel silly about the grudge they've been holding against the Tamil people".²⁶

Theatre can transform emotions so that anger, fear and hatred are no longer dominant, but make room for sadness and grief which, in turn, can be shared and become a source of commonness. Long and Brecke²⁷ emphasise that reconciliation might come about when certain emotions, such as hatred and anger, are superseded by different ways of engaging with past traumatic events. Focusing on loss and grief, for instance, is much more likely to bring about a shared sense of community. Consider how a member of Jana Karaliya observes interestingly that "If we've made a change within the people then I feel that this is what we've achieved".²⁸ Hence theatre in Jana Karaliya has an emotional aspect and actively engages with emotion, thus facilitating the process of creating inclusive communal narratives of emotion in the place of divisive narratives of hatred and fear.

Theatre and the Transformation of Societal Attitudes Among Parties to the Conflict

So far we have examined theatre as a peacebuilding method by focusing on how Jana Karaliya's performances have the potential to transform personal and emotional experiences with conflict. We have suggested that theatre provides a space through which participants and audiences can come together and overcome at least some of the attitudes that have fuelled conflict in Sri Lanka, thus paving the way for the emergence of a cultural of reconciliation.

We end this chapter with a few concluding remarks that demonstrate how personal and emotional transformations are part of a larger peacebuilding process that involves transformation of societal attitudes among the parties to the conflict. This is to say that questions of identity, historical memory and cultural belonging are essential to the process of overcoming conflict. In the Sri Lankan context, each party to the conflict rehearses a different understanding of the past and upholds a different notion of what it means to be a member of society. Very often these forms of identity are highly politicized and involve constituting the other party to the conflict as despicable and inferior.

Jana Karaliya is involved in a process of societal transformation that seeks to change these deeply entrenched societal discourses in a way that makes them more inclusive. For Parakrama Niriella, the very space of theatre is a forum where different cultural and aesthetic traditions can come together and produce a new and more positive attitude.²⁹

While there are some similarities between artistic and cultural traditions in the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, there are also some major differences. In producing their plays, Jana Karaliya draws from both traditions. Charandas, one of their productions in both Sinhala and Tamil, is a good example. The Sinhala production of Charandas uses drums and other music instruments along with costumes and steps used in Tamil theatre styles while the Tamil production does vice versa. Niriella perceives this to be a new turn in Sri Lankan theatre since this transition of cultural aspects to both ethnicities at the same time has not happened before. In the process of effecting this transition, Jana Karaliya bridges the relationships between Tamil and Sinhala artists.

While theatre exists among both groups as a valued form of art, Tamil theatre is not visible on a national level. It is more or less limited to small areas and small audiences despite the wealth of resource available within it and the artists engaging in it. But Jana Karaliya also plays a critical role in claiming a place for Tamil theatre at national level through its Tamil language productions. Similarly, as Neela personally testifies, it takes Sinhala plays to communities where Sinhala theatre has not reached before: being a Tamil from a peripheral area, she saw a Sinhala play for the first time after she joined Jana Karaliya.³⁰

Take the example of Kalidas³¹, who comes from an estate Tamil community in the upcountry. The impact of Jana Karaliya has been immense upon him and his community. Recipient of the Best Actor Award in the State Drama Festival in 2006, he perceives the momentum of Jana Karaliya and his role in it as a turning point for his entire community. It enables him to open new avenue for his community to belong to the larger society and make themselves heard. For him, it marks the beginning of different, new cultural narratives for a group of people who were marginalised and traditionally limited to a set of given designations that all too often created conflict and violence.

The strategy of Jana Karaliya to hold repeated performances for an extended period living and working within one area is the reason for much of their success. It facilitates the time and social engagement required for the gradual formation of new cultural narratives in the place of existing ones. Manjula³² explains that after about a month of performances, the villagers start coming every evening to the theatre, not only to see the performances over and over, but also to be in an environment that allows them to associate with various people they would otherwise not interact with, including people from opposing ethnic groups. The gradual breakdown of social hierarchies and divisions within the village that occurs here results in a process of creating more inclusive and collaborative cultural narratives within the community. This goes hand in hand with Jana Karaliya's commitment to live the change they want to see, rather than simply advocate it.

The very strength of this local and extended engagement also demonstrates the limits of the contribution that Jana Keraliya and other theatre groups can make to processes of peacebuilding. Healing the wounds of conflict takes time – often generations. It has to happen at the local level and it inevitably involves compromises and setbacks. We have already stressed that Jana Karaliya shies away from directly

engaging with contentious issues related to the ethnic conflict. Doing so could lead to repression from political authorities. More importantly, it could alienate the audience and thus defeat the very idea of promoting peacebuilding processes. Theatre has to tread a fine line between aiming for legitimisation and vocalising its political objective of reconciliation. But recognizing these limits, and acknowledging that transformation takes times, does not negate the power of theatre to create spaces that contribute in important ways to peacebuilding processes. These ensuing artistic engagements are crucial both because they create the necessary local preconditions for peace and because they offer hope and insights that political leaders can use to promote reconciliation at the national level.

There are a range of larger lessons we can learn from this – admittedly very brief and limited - study of art and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka. For one, it demonstrates that peacebuilding is far more than the reestablishment of institutions and democratic procedures. Building long-lasting peace requires parties who had been in conflict to deal with – and move beyond - the traumatic past. Doing so is a gargantuan and inevitably long-term task. It requires transforming deep seated attitudes that people hold of themselves and the enemies they had opposed for years, often decades. It requires coming to terms with death, loss and grief. Artistic engagements are a good example of community-based activities that can bring people together and given them the chance to step outside the type of role assignments that the conflict has given them. Doing so gives individuals the chance to reassess who they are and how they might relate differently to those who are located behind the – physical and mental – dividing line. Art alone can, of course, not solve a conflict. But is part of a larger set of activities that are essential in the process of transforming conflict into peace. Perhaps even more importantly, artistic engagements, as exemplified by the Jana Keraliya theatre group, can serve as a model – a type of experimental spearheading – from which community leaders, politicians and scholars can draw important lessons about the larger dynamics at play in peacebuilding processes.

Bio-Sketches

Nilanjana Premaratna is currently completing her Master of International Studies: Peace and Conflict at the University of Queensland under an Australian Leadership Award. She works and lives in Sri Lanka, researching into different aspects of the Sri Lankan conflict. Her interests mainly concern the potential of using aesthetics for peacebuilding.

Roland Bleiker is Professor of International Relations at the University of Queensland. His publications include *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Divided Korea: Toward a Culture of Reconciliation* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and, as co-editor, *Security and the War on Terror* (Routledge, 2007). He is currently finishing a book on *Aesthetics and World Politics* for Palgrave and conducting research that examines the emotional dimensions of security and peacebuilding through a range of aesthetic sources, including literature and visual art.

¹ See Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*. (London: Picador, 2005)

² See Oliver P. Richmond, *The Transformation of Peace* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), esp. pp. 149-180.

³ See George Frerks and Bart Klem (eds). *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2004)

⁴ These stereotypes are used as a point of analysis here. We need to recognise that the range of attitudes and behaviours of Sri Lankans cannot be reduced to these extreme positions regardless of the context.

⁵ See Cynthia Cohen, "Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence," in *Imagine Coexistence* (San Francisco: Joseey-Bass, 2003), 267-279

⁶ Saman Kariyakarawana, "Attitude and Responsibilities of the Southern Academics," in *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2004), 102-103

⁷ Marissa Fernando, "FLICT Super Stars" (Unpublished Document, 2006), 1

⁸ Ibid, 2

⁹ Jana Karaliya Group Members, interview by Charlotte Hennessey and Jenny Hughes, September 27, 2005, interview 1, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka.

¹⁰ See also B. Hosking, "Playback theatre: A creative resource for reconciliation," Brandeis University, http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/Slifka/vrc/papers/hosking_hutt/index.htm (accessed September 24, 2007)

¹¹ Abeyratne, Upul, "The Ethnic Problem and Sri Lankan Political Culture," in *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2004), 93

¹² See Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (London: Routledge, 2006) and Jennings and Minde, *Art therapy and Dramatherapy: Masks of the soul* (London: Jessica Kingsley publishers, 1993).

¹³ Palitha Abeylall, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka.

¹⁴ Marissa Fernando, "FLICT Super Stars" (Unpublished Document, 2006), 2

¹⁵ For a conceptual discussion see Bagshaw and Lepp, "Ethical Considerations in Drama and Conflict Resolution Research in Swedish and Australian Schools," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 22, no 3 (2005), 381-396

¹⁶ Palitha Abeylall, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka.

¹⁷ Parakrama Niriella (Jana Karaliya founder), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 4, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

¹⁸ Danice Brown, "Dancing the Darkness Away," *Journal of Undergraduate Research* (2007): 85-103

¹⁹ Palitha Abeylall, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka.

²⁰ Ibid, M Kalidas (Jana Karaliya member), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga Thambuttegama, Sri Lanka. February 22, 2008, interview 3, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

²¹ Parakrama Niriella (Jana Karaliya founder), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 4, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

²² William J Long. and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and emotion in Conflict resolution*. (Massachusetts, the MIT Press, 2003)

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no 2 ,(2002), 179-197

²⁵ M Kalidas (Jana Karaliya member), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga Thambuttegama, Sri Lanka. February 22, 2008, interview 3, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

²⁶ Palitha Abeylal, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka.

²⁷ William J Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and emotion in Conflict resolution*. (Massachusetts, the MIT Press, 2003), 28

²⁸ Palitha Abeylal, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

²⁹ Parakrama Niriella (Jana Karaliya founder), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 4, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

³⁰ Palitha Abeylal, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

³¹ M Kalidas (Jana Karaliya member), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga Thambuttegama, Sri Lanka. February 22, 2008, interview 3, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

³² Palitha Abeylal, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

Bibliography

Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (London: Routledge, 2006).

Abeyratne, Upul, "The Ethnic Problem and Sri Lankan Political Culture," in *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2004), 93

B. Hosking, "Playback theatre: A creative resource for reconciliation," Brandeis University,

http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/Slifka/vrc/papers/hosking_hutt/index.htm

(accessed September 24, 2007).

Dale Bagshaw and Margaret Lepp, "Ethical Considerations in Drama and Conflict Resolution Research in Swedish and Australian Schools," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 22, no 3 (2005), 381-396

Cynthia Cohen, "Engaging with the Arts to Promote Coexistence," in *Imagine Coexistence* (San Francisco: Joseey-Bass, 2003), 267-279

Danice Brown, "Dancing the Darkness Away," *Journal of Undergraduate Research* (2007), 85-103

George Frerks and Bart Klem (eds). *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2004).

Marissa Fernando, "FLICT Super Stars" (Unpublished Document, 2006), 1

Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*. (London: Picador, 2005).

Saman Kariyakarawana, "Attitude and Responsibilities of the Southern Academics," in *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflict* (The Hague: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2004), 102-103

Sue Jennings and Ase Minde, *Art therapy and Dramatherapy: Masks of the soul* (London: Jessica Kingsley publishers, 1993).

William J Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and emotion in Conflict resolution*. (Massachusetts, the MIT Press, 2003)

Wulf Kansteiner, "Finding Meaning in Memory: A methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 41, no 2 ,(2002), 179-197

Interviews:

Jana Karaliya Group Members, interview by Charlotte Hennessey and Jenny Hughes, September 27, 2005, interview 1, Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka.

Palitha Abeylal, Manjula Ramasinghe and Neela Selvarajan (Jana Karaliya members), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 2, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka.

M. Kalidas (Jana Karaliya member), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga Thambuttegama, Sri Lanka. February 22, 2008, interview 3, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka

Parakrama Niriella (Jana Karaliya founder), interview by Nilanjana Premaratna and Harshadeva Amarathunga, February 22, 2008, interview 4, Thambuththegama, Sri Lanka