

Jana Karaliya Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has experienced over twenty years of civil war. Since 1983, over 60,000 people have died and more than 750,000 have been displaced. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam have been fighting the Sri Lankan Government army forces to create a separate Tamil state in the North and East. There has been a cease-fire agreement in place between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE since February 2002. This fragile cease-fire saw the beginnings of peace negotiations but has now returned to armed conflict in the north and east.

Project/Company

First formed in July 2003, Jana Karaliya are a travelling theatre troupe that uses a portable theatre in a large tent that they assemble when they arrive somewhere. This is the first of its kind in Sri Lanka and the company describe themselves as a "forefront theatre voyage for a new trend of drama art" (Jana Karaliya information booklet). The group is composed of 25 young Tamil and Sinhalese youth from all around Sri Lanka who have been trained by the two directors and founders of the group; a well-known television actor and a director. Many of the actors had no experience of being involved in drama or theatre prior to joining the group.

Jana Karaliya in Sinhala, and Makkal Kalari in Tamil, means 'theatre of the people' and encompasses their cultural mission to create a performance space for people living in rural areas of the island. The group believes they also convey positive and useful example of peaceful coexistence as a group of ethnically mixed youth who work and live together. They have developed a diverse repertoire of six plays that they can perform in both the Tamil and Sinhala languages ranging from the Russian play *The Dragon* by Yevgeny Schwartz, the Indian play *Charandas Chor* by Habib Tanvir and two self devised plays called *Seethambarapata / Mayapattadia* and *Andaramal / Erukakalam Poo*. Once they arrive in a district, they assemble their theatre tent in a public area, such as a school playground, and have daily performances open to the local communities. Their theatre can accommodate several hundred audience members and the stage is in the style of 'in the round' in order to create an interactive feeling between the actors and audience.

Jana Karaliya's plan was to tour with their theatre for two years in all the districts of Sri Lanka and conduct applied theatre workshops for teachers and school children in each district. To date, they have visited various districts such as the northern district of Jaffna, the north central districts of Anuradhapura and Pollonaruwa and the southern district of Galle.

In Their Own Words

"When we travel to a new town what we do is that we unload all the stage equipment on to the ground that we'll be using for the show, when the town people see this the first thing that comes to their mind is the circus or the carnival has come to town.....After we start building the tent then their curiosity over comes them and they start to ask questions about what's happening, then they see a stage and by now their curiosity over comes them and they start to ask questions about what's happening."

Actor, Jana Karaliya - Interview

"In our country theatre is mainly in the urban communities and there are many of our brothers and sisters in the villages who have no idea what a stage play is, so not only do we take plays to them we also show them that we can work in harmony."

Actor, Jana Karaliya - Interview

"We can't change yesterday's generation but we can make a change in tomorrow's generation and right now we are slowly working them and I'm sure one day we would succeed in it. One impact that Jana Karaliya has tried to make on people is that Sinhalese and Tamils can work together and another is to improve on their enjoyment on theatre."

Actor, Jana Karaliya - Interview

"As artists if we give out the message against war and encourage people to live together in harmony, I think we will be able to make a change."

Actor, Jana Karaliya - Interview

"Culture is a main thing for development programmes and human development for every aspect, any kind of development we could have a base in culture."

Parakrama Niriella, Director - Interview

"I think artists must deeply understand. Not only the upper part of the problem like the floating glacier, they have to find out the basis of it and treat that section, he has to use his art.....We have to find a very creative way as artists, creative and powerful method to treat that. And one method is using powerful and creative art."

Parakrama Niriella, Director - Interview

Source Material

Accomplishing a cultural mission by the use of 'drama and theatre' in an unprecedented way, through the first ever 'Mobile Theatre' in our country, that will enlighten and build more human intimate relationships amongst the Sri Lankan people from the top stratum to the bottom and from north to south that will enable them to understand themselves to have peace inside themselves, and then to live in peace and harmony with the others of society and nature.

Jana Karaliya Brochure

The accepted procedure in the drama field in our country is the drama troupes to travel to the fixed theatre halls in the cities of distant areas. But, have you ever heard of a troupe of actors that goes beyond these cities to further remote villages carrying the theatre hall with them and perform in that mobile theatre hall giving opportunities for these rural mass to enjoy a drama. The idea consumed in the mind of the veteran dramatist Parakrama Niriella, that this could be achieved if we can have a theatre inside a tent that can be disassembled, transported and assembled in another place. He further developed this idea as a project and discussed this with another dramatist / actor H.A. Perera.

Jana Karaliya Brochure

Since a long time dramatists in our country are accustomed to the picture frame (proscenium) theatre that performs from one side of the theatre to the spectators in the other side. But the Jana Karaliya mobile theatre is constructed as a 'new arena theatre' that performs to an audience in all

four sides. But on the request of a director this theatre can be converted into a "thrust theatre" that the audience will see the play from three sides. We still don't have even a fixed theatre with this flexibility. So this theatre in this mobile tent certainly will be a new experience for the spectators as well as the dramatists in our country. This modern theatre has an audience capacity of 500 adults or 800 children. It can be dismantled and loaded in a single truck and transported to any part of the country.

Jana Karaliya Brochure

"We will not directly speak on peace. But the entire audience who view our dramas will realise that it is as a collective work by both Sinhala and Tamil theatre loving groups. For example, Tamil artistes would play roles in Sinhala dramas and Sinhala artists would perform in Tamil dramas. The presentation of our theatre production would provide some kind of a signal to the inner thoughts of the viewers in an exemplary manner."

Parakrama Niriella, Review Article, *Daily News*, 24th June, 2004