



## Mobile theatre concept hits Sri Lanka

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Parakrama Niriella, a pioneering personality in Sri Lankan theater is currently engaged in another experimental theatre-concept called 'mobile theatre' which is quite a novel experience for Sri Lankan theatre lovers.

Following is a discussion Daily News had with the veteran dramatist about his adventure in finding a new dimension in the performing art.

Exploring the ground for a new theatre...

In 1911 when the Tower Hall Foundation was established, the proscenium theatre was popular and loved by most people, irrespective of the class they represented. It was well established in Sri Lankan society and at the same time we seriously believed that it's the time to open up a path for a new dimension of theatre and by the time there was a tendency of the European and most of the Eastern dramatists, to explore new dimensions of performance art.

As a result our first street drama was performed in the platform of Anuradhapura railway station. It was such a co-incident and we were waiting for the train to Colombo once we finished a short drama series the previous day in Anuradhapura.

Without hesitation the initiative was taken by Gamini Haththettuwa who took the challenge to perform a short drama in the platform of the railway station.

It was a novel experience for us as dramatists and we also got favourable feedback from the audience who were also waiting for the train to Colombo.

Thereafter the first organized step was taken by Gamini Haththettuwa in 1974 to go beyond from the theatre which was centered among the city audience. This was started as the concept of street drama.

The main objective was to open up opportunities for a novel experience for the people who are in rural areas.

As a member of the pioneer street drama team, the attractive experience I got was, they used different and various theatres for the same collection of dramas. So far we have experienced the main theatres in Colombo or in other cities the halls which were not allocated for performing plays but for the meetings or gatherings.

Nevertheless we were capable enough to perform the street dramas not only in theatre halls but in open stages, in factories, markets, villages, temples and even in threshing-floors where people can gather we could convert it into a theatre.

But in the past most of the dramatists, artists and intellectuals who were in the field and those who were addicted for the standards, were not supportive and under estimated street drama and the whole concept.

This underestimation comprised many reasons. The standards which are deep rooted in the society were the dramas which were performed in the proscenium theatre are the noble or classical plays. Since it gives the opportunity to the audience to appreciate plays without any disturbances.

In the proscenium theatre includes attractive back grounds, lighting systems and sound balancing as well.

However in street drama these features are not included, and also it cannot go beyond the attractiveness of standard classical drama. But from the very beginning, street drama was popular and loved among the leftist oriented intellectuals and connoisseurs. Still it's quite challenging to establish the concept of street drama in the society.

However during the early stage, the dedication from the people who were engaged with the street dramas, was extremely high and couldn't be compared with the artists who were engaged with classical drama.

'Janakaraliya' begins....

Since I have been in the field of performing art for quite a long time, as a dramatist I had the thirst of exploring and opening up novel dimensions of theatre to the Sri Lankan audience. As a result of our experiments of exploring new theatre concept we could take the initiative of introducing the concept of mobile theatre through our 'Janakaraliya' project.

At the time I was studying performance art at Ranga shipa Shalika, we used to learn about the concept of establishing theatre or in other words proscenium theatre. This concept was used in Sri Lankan theatre for a long time and it was being used in eastern countries and in Europe for more than 100 years. And gradually they have developed and applied some other concepts of performance art which could surpass the proscenium theatre. Mainly the influences of eastern concepts have compelled for this change.

There are so many ways of using drama and theatre. But only one of those practices is established in our country at present.

That is the writing of a play, producing it and performing in front of an audience which we call the 'Performance Theatre'.

But since a long time my colleague and famous artiste H.A. Perera had the idea of establishing the other usages, such as using drama and theatre in education and personal development which is commonly called 'Applied Theatre'. The foundation to the mobile theatre was laid by the combination of their two concepts.

The accepted procedure in the drama field in our country is the drama troupes travelling to the fixed theatre halls in the cities.

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 performing in that mobile theatre hall giving opportunities for these rural mass to enjoy a drama.

So, that was our main objective of establishing this new concept of 'mobile theatre 'or 'New Arena Theatre' that performs to an audience in all four sides.

When we are conducting theatre workshops in rural areas under the program of 'Janakaraliya' I used to ask from the student, "where should we perform drama?" "In the theatre", most of the times they used to answer. This is the common ideology towards performance art among the apprentices in rural areas to matured artists in cities.

The main intention behind exploring these new theatre concepts is how we can attract the audience and how to get them involved and participate in the play and how to create a closer relationship while maintaining two way communication method between the troupe of the play and the audience.

As a result of the long, hard, tiresome effort of both, the concept became a reality, and now there is a mobile theatre and a mobile troupe to perform using this new methodology, and also to use drama and theatre for education and personal development. It is travelling all over the country with this modern theatre, not only performing in it, but also doing island-wide provincial and district level 'theatre education' and 'theatre in education' programs.

Due to the ongoing war situation in our country we could hardly see any of the Sinhala or Tamil artistes working together. But in our mobile theatre troupe both Sinhala and Tamil dramatists are working together and also we got the opportunity to introduce many artistes who are from all around the country. It's a positive tendency of building the trust and co-operation between the ethnic groups in our country.

Future of 'Janakaraliya'...

Actually it's quite challenging to sustain and develop further this Janakaraliya project. Currently we're funded by a non governmental organisation which we cannot depend on for future funding procedures. However we are getting a lot of invitations from schools and organizations to

conduct theatre games, relaxation programs, trainings and workshops. So we are having specialized trainers who can conduct these training programs and workshops.

There are some plays which I'm planning to re-produce in Tamil language in the near future. We have formed three freelance artistes groups in Bogawanthalawa, Anuradhapura and Hambanthota. We are planning to develop and expand these groups in other districts as well by offering the opportunity for the people who have the passion towards theatre.