

Real Super Stars

By Marisa Fernando

Programme Officer

Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation – GTZ/FLICT

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Real Super Stars

On July 29th 2006 the Janakaraliya / Makkal Kalari cast celebrated their 2nd anniversary. However this momentous occasion passed by with little celebration as the cast exhausted from a 2 month visit in the Puttalam district had all dispersed to their homes across the country to rest and recuperate. A few days after this anniversary some members of the cast and the directors came together with me to reflect on their journey and to discuss ideas on how they should continue with this innovative and challenging work that they had begun. The one point that was variously voiced by the whole group throughout was that they were now different persons. In the two years they had grown and in the words of one young man they had now 'become big men (persons) capable of taking on any responsibility, confident in their own abilities'.

Sitting around in the quiet surroundings of the cast's home away from home at first the reflection was a little awkward but as they became more comfortable, it was as if the floodgates had been opened as the young men (unfortunately there were no young women) opened up their hearts and shared their innermost thoughts, and moments that remained etched in their minds, moments of both joy and pain. After awhile I was almost just an observer as each one spoke, encouraged another to share a story, as they each shared a joke, or shed a tear. I almost wished that I too had been on this journey. Although in a sense I had also been on a journey as I observed the changes that have taken place within this team during the past year as they travelled across the country. This day was also a journey of sorts as I listened to them tell their stories and experiences.

The beginnings

"2 years ago 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 was a member of the CID. I didn't know what was happening here. We had come to be part of a theatre group but all these people from all parts of the country was over whelming. For the first 3 months we fought and struggled to get along and live together" recounted Krishanthan a young man from Trincomalee.

Parakrama Niriella whose dream it was to form a mobile theatre group that travelled across the country performing and conducting drama workshops recounted "In the beginning we wanted to perform plays across the country, to take Sinhala plays to Tamil

areas. As we discussed this idea we were encouraged to form a multi-ethnic cast and perform plays in both languages. We believed in the power of theatre for social transformation but we had absolutely no idea how one went about establishing such group. As Sinhala directors we were unsure and even afraid of tackling such a task. We had to use many different strategies (advertisements, personal contacts etc) to recruit persons. Even then many very talented young persons were reluctant to join such a venture. This has been an incredible process which even I find difficult to always comprehend”

Theatre unites

“When we first came here we did not know each other and we had many difficulties with language and communication. But through 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 goal. This is not the way society is outside, but we were able to show them that its possible for a diverse group to come together, to live and work together”, stated a young cast member as he recalled his experience.

Another young man Khalidas from Bogawantalawa recounted how they were welcomed in Jaffna not as Sinhalese and Tamils but as ‘artists’. This acceptance from other artists as well as the general public was a huge encouragement to them also as well as helping them to break through ethnic or religious identities.

Theatre breaks down barriers

Padaviya is a predominantly Sinhalese border village in the Anuradhapura district (?). This community has been exposed to much violence and witnessed many horrendous acts of murder and barbarism in their villages due to the ongoing conflict. As a result they have little tolerance and acceptance for people of Tamil origin. In their eyes these would be their ‘enemy’. When the group first entered this area they were viewed with much mistrust and at first there was little interaction. But as they began to conduct their drama workshops, to speak to the children, a gradual change became visible in the area. They recounted the scenes of how all the little children would follow Gopika a young girl from Trincomalee where ever she went and how even some of the children together with their parents had visited her home. They recounted how the children who had first been so reluctant to interact with them had given every single member of the cast a Wesak card, accepting them and welcoming them into their hearts. They talked about the letters they receive, the sms and phone calls from people across the country who have been touched and moved by these committed and dedicated young team.

I was also witness to a similar incident in the border village of Kebethigollawa (also the site of many previous massacres) where the cast had been invited to perform at the village temple. Although many of the elders who still had visions of the violence that had been unleashed in this area, were reluctant, the youth were more accommodating. All day the youth from the village and the cast worked together to set up the stage, to

collect water, to cook the meals etc. The play was well attended as people from all corners of the village converged to the temple. But the real story is bigger than the successful completion of the play. The next day the youth from the village were besides themselves with excitement as they tried to convey their experiences to me. One young man said *“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”*. Other youth begged for a chance to go to Jaffna. This is from a village located along the now open A9 who the day before had been too afraid or even unwilling to go into Tamil speaking areas.

These are all ours

Sumudu who is from Ratmalana recounted how this experience made him appreciate all the many dimensions of our culture and heritage. A significant lesson learnt for him was that the Tamil language was also ‘ours’. We needed to learn it and appreciate it not because we needed it to communicate but especially since it’s a special heritage as a Sri Lankan. *“With this understanding I am not afraid to speak the few words of Tamil that I know. To speak English I am afraid because its foreign to us but Tamil is ours and that is why we should learn it”*

Attracting the uninterested

There is a significant Muslim population living in the Puttalam district, both traditionally as well as a result of displacement from the North and East due to the ongoing war. While they also possess a significantly developed and complex form of art and music, there has been little interaction between the Muslims and the other communities in the field of cultural activities. Attracting them to participate in the work of the theatre group was also a particular challenge. The directors and the cast felt time and again that there was a great reluctance on the part of the Muslim community to be involved in the theatre work. They were also challenged on how they could integrate them within the theatre activities keeping in mind the cultural restrictions and traditions of the community especially with regard to women. Although they were unable to attract any person to join the cast they felt that over the two month period of being in Puttalam that they were able to achieve some significant milestones including the encouraging ‘transformations’ that took place among the young people who did participate at the drama workshops. They recounted that in the beginning of the day the young girls and boys would hardly look at each other during the activities but that by the end of the day they were comfortable enough to hold hands. (of course this was not always well received by the village elders).

The cast recounted how difficult it was at first to even stage a play as they were constantly heckled and disturbed by the crowds. At times they were forced to stop the play and talk to the audience and to ‘educate’ them on how to watch a play. The persons distracting the audience tended to be young men who were more familiar with the commercially popular musical shows which brings into town the more famous singers and musicians for live performances. Over time there was a marked improvement in the audience participation. Krishanthan who had been working at the gate during the final performance of the group recalled how the show was sold out and the gates had to be

closed and how groups of young men threatened him with large sticks insisting that they too wanted to see the show!

Attracting the ‘other’

The years of fighting has heavily polarised the communities. Access to LTTE controlled areas is extremely restricted and only a few favoured persons have had the opportunity of entering and travelling around. Uniquely the fact finding mission to the areas in the East were first conducted by 3 Sinhalese persons! They described the roads and the scariest motor cycle rides they had ever been on, the remote locations, the under resourced schools and the often bemused teachers and principals who did not quite understand what they wanted to do. An aspect that had struck home to all of them was how unhappy the little children looked. Their faces and eyes were devoid of laughter and joy. The cast recounted that the happiest gift they received was to see the smiles on the faces of the children and tears in the eyes of the adults. The LTTE spies who followed them around just to observe what they were doing often forgot their roles and joined in the activities ! These communities had never had the opportunity to have seen a play and they begged the group to stay with them longer. They assured them that they were safe and that no harm would come to them.

Even the LTTE eastern commander was moved by his meeting with the theatre group and remarked “*this is how we should all learn to live together*”. Maybe as the artillery fire, mortar guns and RPGs pound the eastern province some memory of this encounter will remain in the hearts and minds of the commander as well as people living in these areas. However on a sad note the cast also mentioned how they had heard that the school in which they had stayed in and conducted several workshops had now been reduced to dust and rubble as a result of artillery fire. They wondered silently about the fate of the families and youth that they had met and made many connections with.

The Process

At the end of the session I asked them What really triggered the change? Was it just that if a group of people spend enough time together that they begin to ‘like’ each other? Can art, music, theatre change the hearts and minds of people? What were some of the significant moments?

Veteran actor H.A. Perera who has travelled with the groups, trained and coached the young team along is convinced that media products and processes can play a powerful role in transforming individuals. He stresses that the process is often far more important than the final product. The exercise that are built into the drama workshops help the cast to first understand themselves, their attitudes and how they related to those around them as well as with nature played a significant role in moulding and shaping the group. This helped them when they moved into interaction with a diverse range of people in various parts of the community.

The group living together (often in very difficult circumstances), sharing of work loads, delegation of responsibilities also contributed greatly towards the cohesion among the group members.

Parakrama Niriella reflected that a touching and powerful moment for him was when the Sinhalese plays were translated into Tamil and performed by the cast. He had never envisioned that this was possible. And even as the shorter plays were translated he never dreamt that “Charandas” a much more complex and longer play would ever be translated and performed. It was made even more significant because most of the work was done by the cast themselves. The cast had grown in leaps and bounds regarding their talents and capabilities even as they fought, laughed and taught each other as the play was developed. Parakrama recalled how he would come to the training sessions everyday...not because he had to be there but because there was a powerful force that drew him to be there. He said that the entire place was filled with an amazing light that kept one within its force. At the end of it all he feels that he must be the luckiest theatre director in the country today.

There was really no planned process and the strategies were developed and adapted as the work progressed. As a role model and a pilot initiative it has paved the way for similar innovative work to take place in this field. The proof of the pudding is in the eating of it...and this in a sense has proved that drama, and theatre when properly used and harnessed can contribute towards peace building and conflict transformation.

At the end of this reflection one young man pensively stated how their actor friends receive all this fame and glory on TV etc and I had no words to convey to them that at the end of the day they were the real Super Stars.

The 4th anniversary of this amazing theatre group has come and gone..again silently and unnoticed except by a few of us. They have travelled to more places, touched the hearts and minds of hundreds of people especially children, they even travelled to India and stole some hearts there. For the first time in the history of Sri Lanka a full Sinhalese cast performed a play in Tamil and vice versa. The audience couldn't tell them apart. I could write 5 more pages about how they have grown, about how they continue to inspire me...how Sam from Trinco is harassed endlessly by the Police but how gently he speaks to me about the wonderful Sinhalese friends he has made in Hambantota...how fluently the Tamil persons express themselves in Sinhalese, or even how I watch in amazement how Sumudu, Suneth, Ronica and others can now train others on the finer points of singing, dancing and acting. I listen to Ajanthan who tells me that before he joined he was frightened to change a light bulb but now he can handle all the lighting needs of the theatre. As a group they have contributed in no small way towards the healing and reconciliation of the country.