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## JANAKARALIYA MOBILE THEATRE- SRI LANKA

by: Dr. Ajay Joshi

Dr. Ajay Joshi speaks to Parakrama Niriella of Sri Lanka's first mobile theatre which works towards social integration and harmony in a country with a history of bitter ethnic conflict.

The lights dimmed on the open stage in the auditorium at the British School in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which was the venue for the second edition of the Colombo International festival, organised by the theatre organisation Interactart, from 26th March to 5th April 2013 and spearheaded by its artistic director M.Safeer. Since this was the last play of the festival and that too in Sinhalese, I fidgeted waiting for it to start and finish quickly. But what unfolded before me took me into its fold and I glided along, oblivious of the language barrier, to witness one of the best performances of the festival and probably the most spectacular I had seen in recent times.

The play in question was *Disaster Market* performed by the brilliant artistes of the Janakaraliya Mobile Theatre - the theatre of the people of Sri Lanka, under the direction of Parakrama Niriella, the founder of this theatre. It talks of the commodification of all forms of 'disaster' and how it is being used to promote self and the market. Seeing the raw energy unleashed on stage and the meticulousness and precision with which the actors unfolded the story onstage, I was compelled to meet the director and get to know of his theatre. The other more captivating reason was that this mobile theatre is the first ever such to make its mark in Sri Lanka. It has seen the tumultuous years of the ethnic war and has been an important tool in bridging the gaping divides between the warring factions - the Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims.

Parakrama Niriella studied Drama and Theatre at the Art Centre Theatre Academy of the Lionel Wendt Centre in Colombo since 1974. His career in theatre began as a pioneer member of the first street drama group in Sri Lanka. Later he expanded his creative activities into the field of cinema and television, many of which brought him accolades locally and internationally.

Parakrama Niriella

**When did you start the Janakaraliya Mobile theatre and how did the name come to mind?**

We registered Janakaraliya and started organising activities legally on the 25 February 2003. Actually I initiated this as a collaborative work with one of my colleagues, veteran actor and dramatist H. A. Perera, who passed away in 2010. In Sinhalese 'Jana' means 'people' without any ethnic, language or cast barrier. 'Karaliya' means 'performing space'. As Janakaraliya Mobile Theatre provides access to the people to watch dramas sitting around the performing space without any class, race or cast barriers I named it as 'Janakaraliya'.

**What was the objective of starting this theatre?**

There are several objectives. I started my career as a street drama artist. I was a pioneer member of the first ever street drama group joining my theatre arts teacher, Dr. Gamini Hattotuwegama, in his street drama group in 1974 after studying theatre arts. We produced three dramas and travelled across the country performing them at waysides, under trees, open grounds, threshing floors, out-door stages and sometimes interior proscenium stages. It was a marvellous as well as a valuable experience for me to watch the common folk watching and enjoying the same dramas performed in different 'performing spaces'. What I saw made me realize that performing dramas shouldn't be limited to urban proscenium theatres. The fundamental weakness of our street dramas was they lacked in artistry, aesthetics and finesse. The principal objective of our street drama group was not to take theatre arts to the underprivileged majority who cannot afford nor have access to watch dramas in urban proscenium theatres. In my opinion we must inculcate the creative excellence, professional values, aesthetic qualities, smoothness and flow in our creations too. In order to prove my position I created a drama titled *Sekkuwa* (Oil Press) in 1976. It depicted the existing political situation using various symbols. It was an aesthetic drama consisted of dancing, music and singing that could be performed at any performing space just like our street dramas. After that, in 1978, I produced Albert Camus' *The Just Assassins* in Sinhala and performed it in an open village space as an experiment. I realized that there should be a method to overcome obstacles from the environment when performing dramas of this nature in village spaces. The need of a full fledged mobile theatre as an alternate option for a proscenium theatre emerged at that time. That dream was realized after 25 years in 2003.

In 1977 an attack was launched against the Tamils living in this country. An organization was established to prevent this type of ethnic conflicts under the title Movement for Inter Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) with the participation of major leftist political parties and trade unions. I worked as a bureau member of that movement. This is the period 1979 / 1980. I created a street drama group under the title Open Arts Circle and tried to add a Tamil drama group to the team. Since there were different confrontational needs among the Tamil youth rather than acting in dramas my effort was unsuccessful. Another reason for the failure was that I was not known well among the Tamil community at that time. My endeavour was to create a multi ethnic drama group connected inseparably with my dream mobile theatre. I wanted to establish such a cultural group capable of taking drama and theatre in both Sinhala and Tamil languages for the entertainment, ecstasy, and wisdom of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim people living in far corners of this country.

**What was the political situation back then?**

In 2002, while Chandrika Kumaranathunga was the executive President of Sri Lanka the

opposition won the legislative power and Ranil Wickramasinghe became the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. He signed an MOU with LTTE leader Prabhakaran and established a temporary peace in the country. Janakaraliya was launched during this temporary peace pact in 2003.

### **How was the mobile theatre concept accepted in the initial years?**

It is a common practice in other countries for artists belonging to different ethnic groups to work together. But due to the friction, as the expectations of the Sri Lankan Tamils were not fulfilled by governments with a Sinhala majority and the resulting attacks against the Tamil population in 1956, 1977 and 1983 gradually these two communities started to drift away from each other. Therefore joint artistic creations by Sinhala and Tamil artists died away. In such a social context creation of a multi ethnic drama group after a number of years was subjected to scepticism and mistrust by extremists blinded by Sinhala and Tamil racism. Some racist newspapers attacked us saying we were white washing LTTE tigers while Tamil extremists thought it was a joke to use drama as a tool for bridging differences in an environment where their problems are stagnated. Some others accused us of taking advantage of the peace pact to earn dollars and dirty money. For some others it was a temporary effort. Most of the artists' response towards Janakaraliya was perverse. The mammoth performances by Janakaraliya during 10 years have silenced unjust critics of it.

### **Did you have any role models in mind when you started? Your inspiration?**

In 1978 the Asian Cultural Forum on Development conducted a workshop in Raipur, India. I had the opportunity to participate in that session. The workshop was conducted by prominent Indian dramatist Habib Tanvir. There I was able to watch the drama *Charandas Chor* performed by Naya Theatre in an open stage at a village on one night and on a bare floor of a ground at another village. After watching that aesthetic drama, with dancing, music and singing, my opinion on street drama and how a drama should be created for performing for the common people was consolidated. Two Japanese dramatists participated in that workshop. They were from the Black Tent travelling drama group in Japan performing their dramas in their tent. During the workshop they showed a video documentary on the Black Tent drama group. I saw how dramas are performed in their tent theatre with approximately 250 seating capacity. This was a good answer for my imaginary mobile theatre. But they performed in a stage constructed in the proscenium method. This reminded me of our rural dramas known as Teeter. Teeter dramas were shown in large thatched sheds with about three hundred to four hundred audience. Also there are circus groups in our country. In their circus tents they performed for the audiences who were seated on all four sides. Circuses and other sports are performed in the space in the middle. One day I took 20 actors and performed in one of these circus tents. I realized it was ideal to perform dramas in a space where the audience is seated on all four sides. Accordingly I made the audiences sit around the performing space of my Mobile Theatre.

### **You worked right through the war. How was your experience?**

Yes, even during the terrifying period of the war we travelled with the Mobile Theatre and regularly conducted drama festivals. In all districts we travelled to we conducted theatre arts programmes in the schools too. Our mission for an inclusive society with social and cultural harmony was conducted unbrokenly. Not only in the North but also in the South of our country there were tight security cordons. We encountered regular road blocks and barriers. The

Tamil boys and girls of our drama group were subjected to tough security inspections. But as the higher officials of the central government as well as the key officials of provincial governments accepted the need of a cultural movement to ease the conflict situation, our endeavours were supported at all districts. The civil status and country-wide recognition and trust enjoyed by me and my partner late H. A. Perera also helped in getting support from different sections of the society. Our biggest challenge was to protect the Tamil members from security forces and Sinhala extremists. The parents of the Tamil members were at ease since they thought their children were better protected at Janakaraliya than in their villages. Two of the most skilled members (a boy and a girl) had to flee to India with their parents due to threats. They are still living in refugee camps in Tamilnadu.

### **Did you face any resistance then?**

In two locations in the South we confronted two minor incidents. One day in the Southern Province (Hambanthota) a group made a big clamour in front of our lodge. On another day while doing a street publicity campaign in another town in the same province, the public surrounded the team and handed them over to the police. When the task conducted by the group was explained they were released.

During the first two-three days at locations with Sinhala majority, the police emergency had been informed about a 'suspicious group'. In these instances the police had surrounded the lodge and inspected the group. Once they realized the truth they left. This has happened several times. After we were known to the general public there were no such problems.

### **Were your movements or plays banned?**

Other than the Forum dramas all our drama scripts are approved by the Public Performance Board. We neither produce agit-prop' dramas openly talking politics nor dramas that the board is compelled to ban. If we continue to do dramas subjected to regular bans we won't be able to carry out our mission. We produce dramas in order to widen the knowledge of the people and their astuteness through ecstatic and aesthetic entertainment.

### **What kind of topics do you handle? You have an assortment of actors- Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim. How is it working with such multi-ethnicity?**

Most of the times we choose topics close to our experiences, those that criticise political and social situations. Take *Charandas*, which was based on Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*. From the third scene the story was changed to suit Sri Lankan political and social realities. It strongly criticised the falsehood, corruption and anomalies existing in our society. We produced a drama titled *Makaraksha* based on the Russian dramatist Yevgini Swath's *The Dragon*. It depicts pervasiveness of a backward society that fails to rise against a cruel autocratic ruler. *Andara Mal* interprets the anomalies and unequal distribution of resources within the education system. *Seethambara Pata* shows how rulers fool people. Although these dramas discuss politics and social discrepancies they are not populist dramas or agit-prop that discuss raw politics.

### **Charandas**

Our dramas do not discuss peace or send messages on peace. Our process of making dramas and the way we perform them help communicate and propagate philosophies of peace and harmony. Sometimes dramas with light substance help in this matter. For example,

while we conduct workshops for Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim youth or for school teachers we use light entertaining stories such as *How Andare Ate Sugar* or *How the Village Chief Went to Heaven*. Making use of such light stories sometimes helps to communicate solid messages. The important factor in these is how a group of youth or teachers belonging to three communities work together in a creative process as one team. Are there any better ways to promote or inculcate peace and harmony among people and teaching them to respect each other's cultures, other than the process of working together? Students and teachers belonging to three communities are working towards a common goal of creativity! The process is stronger than any message given by a drama because the persons actively engaged in such processes understand better the values of inclusiveness and strength in unity.

There is an instance where this process was advanced. I used the Sanskrit drama *Mrichchakateeka* believed to have been produced in 400 BC by a king named Shudraka. At a glance it is a light entertaining drama based on a love story without deep substance. But there are more dramatic or theatrical features in this drama compared to other Sanskrit dramas. Initially we edited the script and produced a Sinhala drama under the title *Meti Karattaya*. It was a great production bagging several awards at the State Drama Festival. Then the Sinhala and Tamil actors of that drama went to Batticaloa in the Eastern Province and produced a Tamil version, of it namely *Mruchchakateeham*, as a joint venture with the Tamil students of Swami Vipulanathan Aesthetic Education Institute affiliated to the Eastern University. Sinhala and Tamil traditional drama styles and music were infused into that drama. It became an outstanding production and created a wonderful impact among the Eastern Tamil community and scholars. These are exemplary productions for our pluralistic society for promoting inclusiveness.

We can cite three similar examples. We established a drama group in the estate sector training a group of Tamil youth. I gave them a unique assignment during the training. It was to produce a drama based on a Sinhala, Buddhist Jathaka story *Nalapana*. They produced a wonderful drama using dancing, singing and music of traditional Kaman Kuttu style prevailing among the estate Tamil population. It's being performed at Janakaraliya drama festivals to date after some improvements. It was recognized as a great infusion of two traditions. *Enthayum Thayum* by veteran Tamil dramatist Kulanthei Shanmugalingam was translated into Sinhala and produced by the Tamil members of the Janakaraliya drama group. Parallel to that a Tamil drama was produced by the Sinhala members of the group. These types of integrating productions have not being produced in Sri Lanka for decades. In a multi-ethnic society of Sri Lanka these productions have become outstanding creations.

#### **From where do these actors come? Their background?**

We recruit members for the Janakaraliya drama group from far away localities of the country. Most of them are from rural families. Few of them are from urban middle class. Some Tamil members are sons and daughters of the labourers working in the upcountry tea estates. Majority have failed to secure university entrance, not trained in any profession. They were given continuous theoretical and practical in-house training.

**While lecturing at the university esp. in Batticoloa, I realised that many drama students were involved in community theatre and your mobile theatre. Is it a common feature for students from the university to be a part of the troupe?**

Your understanding is correct. Lecturers teaching theatre arts in the University of Batticaloa in Tamil language mainly, probably only use Community Theatre as practices for the students. They also focus on sending raw messages to the Tamil people through Community Theatre on subjects such as women's liberation, household aggression, child abuse, consumption of liquor, usage of insecticide and modern machinery in farming, etc. Other than that they concentrate mainly on teaching traditional and historical styles like Kuttu. Teaching universal theatre arts is limited to theory only. There are no teachers knowledgeable in teaching modern or contemporary theatre arts. They are caged firmly within their traditional styles and Applied Theatre. Both students and teachers are engaged in theatre arts without a universal attitude but with an anthropological attitude. It is a great obstacle for the development of Sri Lankan Tamil theatre arts. The reason for this situation is that the conflict situation prevailing for years has separated the Tamil people including the scholars from the external world limiting resources to acquire universal knowledge of theatre.

**Currently you have a big mobile theatre space. Was it always so big from the beginning?**

Janakaraliya has two different mobile theatres. One is big and known to us as Mother Theatre. 600 adults or 800 school children could be seated in it. This can be arranged or assembled for watching from all four sides, as Thrust Theatre for watching from 3 sides or as Proscenium Theatre where the audiences are seated against the performing space at one side.

We have two more mobile theatres known as Mini Theatres. Most of the time these are assembled in schools grounds where there's no space for performances. 300 children can watch dramas in these theatres seated on the ground. It is constructed similar to a wide spread shadow under a tree.

a performance in the Mother Theatre

**Who are your audiences for the plays? Do they pay for watching the plays?**

Janakaraliya audiences include Provincial Governors, Ministers and Members of Parliament, senior officers of armed forces and people from states including people traditionally considered as lowest ranks. Our common seating arrangement cannot be separated class wise. Our audiences congregate without biases of race, class, creed, cast or status. We charge Rs. 100/- for adults and Rs. 50/- for a child to watch dramas at our festivals. We perform our dramas free of charges for rural peasants and marginalized communities in open spaces, with support of funding from local sponsors, funding agencies or NGO's.

In addition Janakaraliya dramas are performed for the urban population at proscenium theatres in towns. These are organized by professional contractors engaged in organizing drama performances. Urban audiences pay for these performances ranging from Rs. 50/- to Rs. 3000/-. Janakaraliya and its members are able to earn additional income through these performances.

**Considering that you have Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala actors, how do you handle the language issue? How do you decide which language to do the play in? Is it decided by the area in which you are performing? Have you done plays which are bilingual or trilingual?**

Majority of Tamil and Muslim people in our country know Tamil language. Most of the Sinhala people do not know Tamil language. Therefore we perform dramas in Sinhala when the majority living in that particular location are Sinhala and if the majority of the audience is Tamil or Muslim the drama is performed in Tamil. When all three communities are congregated we perform in both languages. Our multi ethnic drama group is trained to perform all our dramas in both languages.

**You said this is the only one of its kind in Sri Lanka. Any particular reason for that?**

I always say this is the first ever mobile theatre in Sri Lanka and the first ever multi-ethnic theatre group in Sri Lanka. It is the truth. This wonderful theatre and the multi ethnic drama group inseparably connected to each other. We were able to establish the mobile theatre and the Multi Ethnic Drama Group because we opted to stay away from the traditional method of drama performance and focused on our mission of social integration and communal harmony.

**What the future plans for the mobile theatre?**

My objective is to find ways and means of revenue for self subsistence for the continuity of the institution and its members. Janakaraliya now has the resources collected for that purpose. There is a massive fan support for us. Today Janakaraliya has arrived at an important juncture. Many of its artists have won highest awards at the State Drama Festivals and National Youth Drama Festivals. Dramas considered being Best Dramas have been produced by Janakaraliya. Members' have had opportunities to participate in international drama festivals and travel overseas. As a result Janakaraliya is recognized nationally and internationally. Janakaraliya has been selected as one of the 10 Best Cultural Groups in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition Janakaraliya has received numerous donations and resources. From 2011 International Organizations stopped assisting Sri Lankan NGOs. Under such a situation Janakaraliya will not receive international aid, but with above mentioned positive factors the need to forge ahead is our challenge today.

*Dr Ajay Joshi is a practicing dentist, with a PhD in theatre criticism and an MA in Journalism and Mass Communication. He has freelanced as a theatre journalist for publications like Times of India, Indian Express, Saakal, PtNotes, Himal etc. He is involved in theatre as a media person, organiser, coordinator, judge and teacher*

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