

PEOPLE'S THEATRE FOR PEACE: LEARNING FROM SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines in what practical ways encounters with people is theatre as one form of cultural movement may have inspired a society to respond (positively) to the complexity of human situations of the day. Using a qualitative research paradigm, this six-month study (August 2007-February 2008) seeks to understand the social praxis of 8 (eight) theatre groups across Sri Lanka that have been active since the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement between the government and the LTTE. The theatre groups observed can be interlinked in terms of vision, mission, and action. Although each group shows its distinction according to the ethnic identity and political aspiration of the artistes, both Sinhala and Tamil theatres have aspired to social change, i.e. creation of peace. The Tamil-led groups focus more on raising social awareness and self-determination of the Tamils, while the Sinhala counterparts prioritise Sinhala-Tamil co-existence. In view of the complexity of the Sri Lankan conflict and its long road to peace, the depth of cultural and political engagements of the theatres under study may function as a barometer for social change against which any reconciliation attempt can be gauged.

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the prolonged civil war in Sri Lanka, while the peace process is yet an unfinished project, social change is a deep cause of concern as proved by the bulk of scholastic writing during 1998-2002 which mainly focuses on the causes, dynamics and consequences of the armed conflict (e.g. Chandraprema 1991, Uyangoda 2001, de Jong et al. 2002). After the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement, attention has largely been paid to the repercussion of the ceasefire breakdown, that is, examination of either the mounting increase in human rights violations (Somasundaran 2002) or, conversely, the humanitarian relief efforts as reported by, for example Jason Hart (2002). Not many of the recent scholarship however, have paid attention to the role of such "outside players" as community practices whose indirect involvement may help expedite the peace process in one way or another; not many studies yet appear on such forces in the cultural circle, especially that of theatre. Indeed, studies on Sri Lankan theatres during the civil war have been attempted by Ranjini Obeyesekere (1991, 2001) and James Thompson (2003), to mention but two. However, little is said in these important works on agency, i.e. people behind the theatres or the cultural producers alongside their possible contribution to engage in conflict resolution.

The aim of this research is therefore to explore the extent to which popular theatre may have shaped people's awareness of reflection on the Sri Lankan conflict. One characteristic advantage of theatre is that, unlike other genres of literature, theatre allows direct interaction

and dialogue with the audience; hence it leads to awareness, which in the long run may possibly lead to social change. Next, in view of their constant, durable disposition, the theatre community is considered influential in articulating their own field of cultural production, hence field of power¹. This present study thus seeks to examine in what practical ways encounters with these particular cultural producers may have inspired the society to respond positively to the complexity of contemporary human situations.

Here, the cultural producers in question are roughly defined as a community consisting of people who are concerned about and engaged with the Sri Lankan world of theatre, such as scriptwriters, directors, actors, musicians, make-up artists, organizers, etc. The term "cultural producers" (sometimes used interchangeably with "cultural movements" throughout this article) is intentionally preferred to highlight the strength this literati or "men [sic] of letters" have in struggling for legitimacy, to borrow Bourdieu (1984), through their use of cultural capital. Thus they include individuals or networks taking action on their own accord to help shape public opinions through their literary activities, in this case, theatrical activities. This research, therefore, looks into the so-called "patterns of behaviour" of individuals or organisations whose concerns extend to the promotion of peace, justice, and democracy in Sri Lanka through their own specific field of interest and expertise, i.e. theatre. But, considering the complexity of the Sri Lankan conflict, this study confines itself to the period after the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A glimpse into the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict will be first discussed to provide sufficient context for the emergence of the theatre. Given the vast scholarship on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict to date, what follows therefore are selected accounts of the main milestones of the Sri Lankan civil war to help approach the present study. Next, this two-part section will provide details of how a fountain of people's creativity is nonetheless aplenty in this land of conflict or, to borrow Virginia Woolf, "a well of tears".

2.1. SRI LANKAN CONFLICT: AN INTERPRETATION

Although the drawn out ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is a postcolonial phenomenon and many still believe in the antiquity of the conflict, one of the modern interpretations thereof is that the basis of conflict lies in the Sinhala-Tamil elite rivalry for (political) position and employment, and the Tamil-Muslim business competition as a consequence of the language policy. On the one hand, there have been long standing grievances from the Tamil population (comprising roughly of 12% Sri Lankan, 7.5% Hill Country and 7% Muslim)² who are

¹ See Pierre Bourdieu. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (R. Nice, Trans.) Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 48.

²These three Tamil-speaking nationalities have their respective histories. The Hill Country Tamils (Indian Tamils) who are predominantly Hindus are distinct from their Sri Lankan (Ceylon) Tamil counterparts who are Sivaite, while the Christian Tamils are often politically backward and identify themselves as Sri Lankan Tamils. Though speaking Tamil, the Muslims are assertive about their own distinct identity. Meanwhile, there are other minorities within these 'Tamil' minorities such as the Borah and Memens in Muslim communities and the Colombo Chetties and the Parava among communities with Tamil identity. Outside the Tamil-speaking people, the other minorities in Sri Lanka include the Burghers (descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch), Malays, Atho and Malayalies. See S. Sivasegaram's "The Sri Lankan National Crisis and the Search for a Solution" accessible through <http://radicalnotes.com>.

economically, culturally and politically discriminated, to say nothing of the denial of their linguistic rights. On the other hand, the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese that make up 74% of the population begrudge the demand of the Tamil secessionists who reside mostly in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country and agitate for a separate homeland which amounts to one-third of the country's territory.

When Sri Lanka gained its independence from the British in 1948, welfare and political opportunities that were perceived to have favoured the Tamils in colonial times went largely to the Sinhalese majority to the dismay of the Tamil minority as a result of the various discriminatory laws passed throughout the 1950s by the their government.

In 1956, for example, President S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in his bid for power, played his Sinhalese nationalism card by making Sinhala the official language. The Sinhala Only Act systematically marginalised the minorities as proved by the shrinking quotas for Tamils in the universities and the government sector. The first anti-Tamil riot broke out in 1958, but the biggest militant Tamil movement did not emerge until the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), popularly known as the Tamil Tigers, in 1975. The LTTE's objective was to create an independent Tamil country for the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka's North and East, ignoring the fact that first, there were other minority groups living in these provinces, and second, Sri Lankan Tamils were by now scattered across the country, for whom separation might pose problems. As such, the LTTE's struggle for liberation was often challenged with resentment, especially by the Sinhalese chauvinists who have chosen to ignore the injustice done thus far towards the Tamils. This ethnic tension was further exacerbated by state repression. For example, the state's cultural demolition and humiliation of the Tamils were displayed by the burning down of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981.

But, the culmination of the conflict was the assassination of 13 Sri Lankan Army soldiers in Jaffna by the Tamil Tigers in 1983. The subsequent retaliation by the angry Sinhalese mobs (although there is evidence that indicates that these mobs were more politically organised than they appeared) caused the deaths of thousands of Tamils throughout the country and destruction of their property, forcing their exodus to Australia, Canada, North America, the United Kingdom, and other Western countries³. The government did nothing about this pogrom for which tensions continued to fester.

Numerous peace talks were made to no avail, one of which was the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord signed with the Indian government in 1987 which led to the arrival of the Indian Peace

³ One critic argues that economic policies in favour of the Sinhalese have driven away the otherwise productive Jaffna Tamils whose work and education ethic would have been useful for the national economy. The middle-class Tamil emigration has caused not only the brain drain in the homeland, but also internal alienation that may explode at any time. See Razeen Sally's paper "Sri Lanka: The Political Economy of Failure", presented at the Conference on Globalization and Economic Success, Cairo, 13-14 November 2006.

Keeping Force, turning the political situation from bad to worse. It was not until 1989 that the nearly deposed government of Premadasa crushed the rebels in a draconian manner, and the Sri Lankan government-LTTE relations continued to worsen. Among a series of the LTTE's acts of violence were the ethnic cleansing of the Muslims in the East and the North in the 1990s, political assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, attempted assassination of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1999, attacks on strategic places like Kandy's Temple of the Tooth in 1998, and Sri Lanka's airport at Katunayake in July 2001. Under the state's Terrorism Act, the Tamil Tigers have been held responsible for hundreds of bombings, robberies, and various crimes taken place throughout the 2000s. Meanwhile, Sinhala youth movements which had equally committed gross acts of violence against civilians since its insurrection in the 1980s were reportedly never equated as terrorists. The JVP, which was heavily repressed in the 1980s was an exception.

Then, in February 2002, a Cease Fire Agreement negotiated in Norway was signed by the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran to fall through in no time. The break down of the ceasefire agreement was as complicated as both parties were equally to blame; while the government never implemented the joint mechanism agreed upon, the Tamil Tigers on their part started killing soldiers. The Sri Lankan government vowed to win the war at the despite a deteriorating record of governance and a crippling economy. Likewise, the LTTE, supported financially, ideologically, and emotionally by Tamil Diasporas worldwide, set out to continue the war at all cost including its use of such infamous practices as the recruitment of child soldiers intimidation, and self-afflicted martyrdom. By January 2008, peace in Sri Lanka was again back to square one with the break down of the CFA.

Albeit the long-standing war, it was indeed the July 1983 riot that became the defining moment in the history of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. From then on, retaliatory killings, threats to civilian, and other human rights violations committed by both sides showed no sign of absences. It is within this political context that one needs to understand Sri Lankan cultural productions, because the year of living dangerously is often the year of writing skilfully and shrewdly. The next section will discuss the emergence of drama during the creative period of the post 1980s.

2.2. ALTERNATIVE THEATRE FOR ALTERATION OF SRI LANKAN SOCIETY

Since the 1970s, the Sri Lankan political atmosphere has been conducive to the growth of progressive, radical, and alternative theatres. Such a mood of resistance was then a worldwide trend among the youths of the decade with their street drama, although signs of ethnic bonding seemed slow to emerge because of the existing theatres' preference for performing in front of their separate Sinhala or Tamil audiences.

To start with the Sinhala-led theatre, several important figures with their success in street theatre include Gamini Hattetuwegama, Parakrama Nirielle, and H. A. Perera, while Dharmasiri Bandaranayake was then known for his anti-war proscenium theatre. Altogether,

these pioneering theatres were effectively used to transmit social problems of the time. The unique contribution of Gamini Hattetuwegama was his modern street drama introducing the idea of an activist theatre associated with people's struggles for freedom in Sri Lanka as early as the 1970s. Since then, his model of theatre training workshops and experimental plays with radical and political overtones set the trend of the English/Sinhala theatre followed by such outstanding artistes as the younger Parakrama Nirielle and H. A. Perera. By the 1980s, theatre gathered momentum with the popularity of the protest, political plays, both in the form of street dramas and performances in fixed theatre halls. Obeyesekere (1999) asserts that the government surprisingly did not enact any censorship but co-opted this activity instead.

Meanwhile, the Tamil section operated in a rather different way as proved by the nascent artists hailing from Jaffna who became increasingly more politically alienated and thence expressed this overload of political anxiety through their creative works. The post-1983 era saw an escalation of ethnic riots, ceaseless clashes involving the army and the Tamil separatists, atrocity in detention camps, shelling and bombing, especially in the North and East. Here, the unaddressed grievances of the Tamils, the growing militancy of the Tamil liberation movements, and the government's heavy-handed handling of the rebels had all bred political tension. As a result, unlike their Sinhala counterparts, the Tamil theatre could be seen more as a propaganda tool for the Tamil causes.

Sivathamby (2005) claims that for the Tamil theatre world, the year 1984 was momentous, just as the rise of the Sinhala theatre in 1956. In that year, students from the University of Jaffna began to experiment street drama with a strong political message. The university opened its Drama and Theatre Department staffed by Shanmugalingam, Maunaguru and the then young student Sithamparanathan, introducing as it did the new concept of theatre to be used as an outlet for political expressions. These young talents used playmaking to create a space to involve the populace to voice out matters relating to social and political problems, thanks to Augusta Boal who gave them the idea of forum theatre. Also in Jaffna, Reverend Dr. N. M. Saveri from the Centre for Performing Arts is worthy of mention for his early efforts to bring together the different communities through the Sinhala Tamil dance and drama performances. This centre uses theatrical activities for social purposes, i.e. bridging the gap between the Sinhalese and the Tamils by revitalising the Catholic *kooththu*⁴ tradition.

Indeed, reformulation of traditional play like *kooththu*⁵ has always had its own appeal and significance for the Tamils in the Eastern province right through to the present. Maunaguru who planted the seed in Jaffna is now at the Eastern University, Batticaloa promoting the development of local theatre. His promising protégé S. Jeyasankar, a graduate of the Jaffna University is his colleague at the Eastern University. The younger man used the concept of applied theatre to reformulate the *kooththu* tradition.

⁴ Information regarding this peace effort can be seen in Abayasekera, J. (2001). The Role of the Churches: A Historical Perspective. *Marga Monograph Series on Ethnic Reconciliation*, 18, p. 7.

⁵ *Kooththu* is a traditional play of Sri Lankan Tamils in which the setting gives space for the audience to engage in performance, discussion, sharing and relaxing while enjoying the play.

Theatre is thereby very popular in Sri Lanka. It is folk-centred, spontaneous, and interactive. Although some conventional dramas have often served the status quo, theatre involves people directly. Theatre is thus helpful to channel people's aspirations, for example the anti-institutional folk dramas like the Sinhala sokari and kolam or the aforementioned Tamil kooththu. Unfortunately, ethnic-based theatres usually tend to champion their respective ethnicity, and this is likely to lead to ethnic polarisation. The present study looked specifically at the theatre of the people, led by Sinhala and Tamil communities respectively or else performed by mixed communities, with the power to reach audiences at the grass roots level, to respond to the emerging socio-political changes in the country.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Methodology. Using a semi-ethnographic inquiry, this six-month qualitative study sought to explore the social praxis of the Sri Lankan theatre workers. The research activities included in-depth interviews, participatory observation on the creative processes, socio-political awareness, and political economy of their artistic pursuits, as well as immersion in everyday experiences.

The method applied herein was progressive, interactive, and eclectic, using, among others, sociology of literature (particularly Bourdieu's sociology of arts). In times of revolution/war, performing arts are often more powerful as proven by the existence of numerous theatre groups in the country. Here, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach by Max van Manen (1990) was useful. Such an approach offers pedagogic reflection on how the theatre communities under study live and make meaning of their cultural engagement with which they have tried to come to terms within the reality of war. Yet, considering the relatively short duration of the research, this study narrowed its scope to studying the (major) works that have appeared and have been performed since 2002.

Research Procedures. The selection of the research participants was based on the consistency and depth of their engagement in the world of theatre. Interviews with limited participants were conducted to put together descriptive notes on their formal, demographic encounter with the country's conflict. Data of this kind was necessary to assess the community's struggle for legitimacy through their respective artistic *fields* when talking about war, reconciliation, and ethnicity. Guided by the descriptive notes, the next type of data (obtained via in-depth interviews and participatory observation) was the live experience of the movements' members. Such reflective notes may provide thorough information on the background, influences, and social outlook -*habitus*- of the literati in question, which were then used to analyse their social praxis in dealing with the continuing Sri Lankan conflict. Like any live experience research, this study is thus an attempt to interpret the participants' perceptions from which the researcher can also benefit⁶.

⁶ It is worth noting that two major events took place in the global peace (and/or war) calendar of 2008 that coincided with the closing stages of my research project. The first was the Sri Lankan government's withdrawal from the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement signed with the LTTE by January 2008, which spiralling violence unleashed by both sides continued to rage. The other peace-related event at the turn of the year was the nomination of the Brazilian theatre guru and activist Augusto Boal, who is also a household name among Sri Lankan theatre makers, for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. Indeed, these two milestones and the whole series of events throughout my Sri Lanka stint have not only tied in with the goal of this study, but they also helped shape my perception of the overall project.

To sum up, the social acts of the literary-based cultural movements can be read through what Pierre Bourdieu (1984, p. 48) postulates as the process of distinction, in order to see in which (symbolic) ways the particular communities under study mark their identity in expressing cultural values as different as others. Here, the triangular design of analyzing concurrently the three types of data may look like a prism with three sides breaking up light into each other. It is through this prism that war, reconciliation and ethnicity in Sri Lanka can be glimpsed.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: THEATRES FOR PEACE IN THE THEATRE OF WAR

To give a sense of the theatre groups under observation, a brief discussion of each theatre profile is important to see the degree to which these selected cultural movements have contributed to social change. For convenience, first I will focus on the 5 groups headquartered in Colombo, the next 2 groups in Batticaloa and the last in Jaffna⁷.

1. *The Jana Karaliya* (henceforth JK). Founded by Parakrama Niriella and H.A. Perera in 2004. This mobile theatre uses the forum theatre concept of integrating audience participation in the live performances. The JK play in both Sinhala and Tamil mediums.
2. *The Trikone Arts Centre* (henceforth TAC). Beginning as an independent organisation established by Dharmasiri Bandaranayake on 24 October 2005, activities in this centre include producing drama and films, conducting artistic educational programmes, holding seminars and workshops, and publications.
3. *The Wayside Theatre Troupe* (henceforth WTT). Gamini K. Hattetuwegama established this group in 1974. At the heart of the WTT is an alternative theatre art-cum-non-formal-education. As a rare non-commercial theatre, the WTT receives no financial support from either individuals or state institution.
4. *The Lanka Children's and Youth Theatre Organisation* (henceforth LCYTO). Somalatha Subasinghe established it in 1981 as a volunteer organisation promoting children's and youth theatre in Sri Lanka.
5. *The Pahura*. Prasannajith Abeyesurya founded this street drama group in 1997. Pahura is at present defunct for lack of financial support.
6. *The Third Eye Local Knowledge and Skills Activist Group* (henceforth Thirdeye). The man behind the group is an academic at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Sivagnanam Jeyasankar who established it in 2002 with the aim of reformulating the traditional Tamil dance *kooththu* through participatory, applied and street theatre forms with children and youth.
7. *The Theatre Action Group* (henceforth TAG). Based in Jaffna, the TAG is a community of Tamil theatre artists founded by Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparanathan. The TAG aims at helping Tamil communities in transformative theatrical experiences, healing rituals, educational workshops, political demonstrations, and dialogue.

⁷ I met Dr. Sithamparanathan of TAG in Colombo near the end of my research and since then we have continued to communicate. He left behind his TAG in Jaffna following death threats. Consequently, I never went to Jaffna and information on this group is based on my interview with him and with some TAG members as well as written materials sent to me later. I shall use this opportunity to thank Dr. Sitham and his family for having assisted me and sustaining sustained our friendship.

8. *The Butterfly Peace Garden* (henceforth *BPG*). The Garden was established in 1995 through the partnership of the Batticaloa Health Reach with the Canadian artist Paul Hogan. The aim is to provide healing space for children traumatised by the war through arts and play. The *BPG* provides an arena conducive for healing that appeals to children's imagination, hence the motto "earth, arts, and hearts".

In view of the objective of this research, i.e. to interpret the meaning of the eight participants' engagement with their worlds of theatre, the discussion will be organised under 3 (three) themes: historicity (what), intentionality (why), and action (how).

Historicity. The historicity (meaning events that have taken place since their genesis up to the present development) of the people theatres under study is very similar. They are all pioneered by performance artistes (mostly veterans in their fields) with known commitment nationwide or even internationally. The architects of the *JK* are Parakrama Niriella and (the late) H. A. Perera⁸, two veteran artistes in small screen and stage drama, who started to draw up a plan in June 2003 which materialized by the next year.

Another veteran drama and film director Dharmasiri Bandaranayake is the inventor of the *TAC* whose mission is to use performing arts to promote peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. A renowned figure in the world of theatre, he received numerous international awards and esteemed Sri Lankan presidential awards such as *Kalashoori* (1995) for arts, *Kalakeerthi* (2005) for drama.

The rest of the founders are performers as well as scholars. Despite his culturally elite position as a lecturer of English Drama and Theatre at Peradeniya University, Kandy and an authority on English Theatre, (the late) Gamini K. Hattetuwegama had persistently made a break through to securing interests of the populace through his artistic pursuit in street drama. Beginning their debut performance at Anuradhapura Railway Station on the Poson Poya Day of 1974, Gamini and his *WTT* artists had since then faithfully played a non-elitist, activist theatre troupe advocating liberation struggles of the Sri Lankan people, while commenting on many of society's ills today. The government honoured Gamini's contribution to alternative theatre on World Theatre Day 2001. This recipient of the 2005 Kalakirithi was also awarded later at the National Drama Festival 2007 for his contribution to the theatre as teacher, critic, playwright, actor and director in both Sinhala and English.

A very good friend of Gamini Hattetuwegama, the expert in children's theatre and playwright Somalatha Subasinghe believes that it is important to educate the young ones through the medium of theatre if we are to nurture a benevolent society. Known as the "Play House-Kotte", *LCYTO* has produced a repertoire of children's and youth theatre and award winning mainstream theatre productions and participated in many international festivals and conferences.

⁸ Special thank to my friend and "guru" Lalith Abeyasinghe who set up an appointment for me to meet Parakrama for the first time on 8 October 2007 at the Colombo General Hospital where he was treated for his heart surgery. Since then I have become friends with all Jana Karaliya troupe. H. A. Perera, being then a mobile person, preferred to see me at ICES than being visited at home or his Telcom office at Fort not far from my office. His demise recently was indeed a great shock to the theatre world.

As for the *Pahura*, its founder is a gifted young man and one of Somalatha Subasinghe's brilliant students, Prasannajith Abeyesurya. This lecturer at the Visual and Performing Arts University, Colombo said that his hard work was a tribute to Somalatha and the 'grand-teacher' Gamini Hattetuwegama. Lack of funding has forced the group to procure support from commercial production. For example, Prasannajith and his wife and two children produced the highly rated TV Series "Olu".

Like *Pahura*, the founder of *Thirdeye* is the young academic Sivagnanam Jeyasankar who is also a skilled *kooththu* performer. His intention is to challenge the conventional, intellectual method of performing arts property of the academia by exploring the creative potential of the village performers. Jeyasankar thus attempts to translate the community's need to flock, play and learn together, believing that it is important in today's world where globalization continues to overshadow the significance of communal life.

Jeyasankar's concern to transform the community of Tamil theatre artists is shared by Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparamathan, the Director of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna. This 1998 Brandeis International Fellow established the TAG to provide a safe venue for people to heal from trauma and a catalyst for social change. As an independent organization, this theatre group has often collaborated with other institutions such as the Department of Psychiatry of the University of Jaffna in the "Theatre as Therapy" project. Thus, the mission of the TAG is social empowerment, village communication, personal awareness and self-discovery with which individual and societal change are likely to occur.

Meanwhile, the *BPC* is funded by the Peace Fund and the Canadian High Commission and, for the first few years, HIVOS (Netherlands). The committed artist here is Paul Hogan, and acting as the local partner is the Jesuit priest Rev. Fr. Paul Satkunayagam, a trained counsellor who has had previous experience in his counselling centre for ex-detainees and widows of war. Basically, the *BPC* is a peace-making effort, that is, replacing the war ethos of violence and destruction with gentleness and creativeness with which those children can heal and subsequently become healers within their own community.

Intentionality. The term "intentionality" here means the underlying reason(s) with which each of the eight theatre groups later based their action(s). This is to answer: what do they hope to achieve through their theatrical praxis, and why are they so committed? What distinction can we unfold from this?

To begin with the travelling theatre *JK*, commitment for the common good makes the group perform in a public area inside a huge theatre tent that can be assembled, disassembled, and then transported from one area to another. The *JK* usually stays at one place for 2 to 3 months distributing pamphlet, recruiting, conducting, workshops and rehearsals followed by performances. The *JK* plays both in Sinhala and Tamil mediums depending on the majority of the local communities in the area and Sinhala and Tamil artistes would play roles in each other dramas. In this way, the diverse members of *JK* grow in togetherness. It is fascinating to

see Parakrama who does not speak a word of Tamil patiently and energetically train the rehearsing Tamil players⁹.

Since the increasingly intense ethnic war during the 1980s, Dharmasiri has steadfastly committed himself to producing a series of documentaries featuring the rich legacy of Sinhala and Tamil folk arts in his attempts to foster understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures. His goal is to make Sinhala and Tamil communities collaborate for a common goal, i.e. peace through art since he believes in the power of theatrical images to increase awareness of the futility of war. Among his celebrated plays is the oft-staged *Trojan Kanthawo* [Trojan Women] -a witty Sinhalaisation of Euripides' Greek tragedy. Refusal to accept war propaganda is displayed herein while drawing the audience's attention to the high values of classical theatre. It is this vision that exposed him to death threats and to labeled "Sinhala Tiger" by some chauvinist Sinhalese¹⁰.

Gamini K. Hattetuwegama's debut performance was his street play performed at the Anuradhapura Railway Station on Poson Poya Day of 1974. Central to his WTT is an alternative theatre art-cum-non-formal-education. This liberationist and postcolonial strategy is meant to embrace as wide an audience of all social classes from village to town as the troupe can possibly manage. Despite the fading enthusiasm for street drama as their number adds up to about 60 in the country, his troupe is committed to nurturing this genre of performing art by producing plays of contemporary people's dilemmas and madness.

When I met him in 2007, Gamini had been battling with cancer but this devout Buddhist remained dedicated to teaching groups of young people coming to his workshop - an activity done for years resulting in the nation's best award winning younger artists many of whom have similarly shown sheer steadfastness, as to pay tribute to their maharishi in the theatre world¹¹.

LCYTO founder Somalatha Subasinghe offered free programs for the youth who are committed to studying drama and theatre especially for children to become professionals in the future. The programme entails all round training such as acting, script writing, directing, movement, and vocal training. Also available are training on practical applications such as designing stage sets and props, costume designing, preparing stage lighting, stage management, and programming sound effects. Such complex tasks in drama and theatre undoubtedly require commitment and hard work.

⁹ I spent two full days with the group (28 and 29 December 2007) to see their Indian tour preparation.

¹⁰ Interview with Dharmasiri, 18 December 2007. He looked amused when recalling this, though, he said, he was shocked by the repeated death threats back then after the performance. I thank him for the discussion time and copies of the valuable documentary films given to me, to say nothing of the updated information sent to me regularly to date.

¹¹ Gamini must have been exhausted after talking for more than 3 hours, yet he did not stop, knowing my equal enthusiasm and interest in his story. He was indeed an excellent raconteur to capture his audience. I could only see greatness in his frail body. (Fieldwork Notes, 6 November 2007).

To mention but one example of her dedication, the then wife of the Ambassador of Sri Lanka for Malaysia (1997 - 1999) took time to promote *LCYTO* abroad. While on leave, Somalatha, who always prefers to use her maiden name, entrusted her older daughter Kaushalya Fernando and her son-in-law Chandana with charge of the drama troupe. Partly because of distance - a three hour flight to Malaysia - Somalatha used to return to Sri Lanka once in two months and stay on for one month, especially for such important rehearsals as the staging of "Mother Courage" - a production to support the anti-war women's organization.

Next, when she accompanied Mr. Fernando to the Netherlands in January 2000, and until 2003, this passionate artiste came to Sri Lanka to accompany the drama troupe to participate in the World Theatre Conference in South Korea. This is to say that *LCYTO* is indeed on its way to build a concerned society. Somalatha and *LCYTO* have thus given their commitment to live up to their vision and mission¹².

So eager was Somalatha about theatre that she informed Prasannajith Abeysurya to see me about his *Pahura*. From our discussion¹³, it was clear that his commitment to the world of theatre (for peace) can be seen from the kinds of plays he wrote (performed or unperformed) and helped to direct. But, given that this group was then temporarily non-operational, I was not able to get much from the otherwise resourceful venue for social change.

To move to the intentionality of the Tamil-based theatre, Jeyasankar through his *Thirdeye* explored the creative potential of the village performer in Batticaloa. The *kooththu* players together with the youth create performance pieces, facilitate children's drama and games workshops as well as organise children's performances. Different group members coordinate and specialise in different activities depending on their skills and training. Ethnic conflict and the 2004 tsunami are among topics discussed and performed by the group.

I can never forgive myself for not being quick enough to complete my work before he died. May he rest in peace.

¹²Thanks to my dear friend Anushaya Collure who is also Somalatha's niece. I have maintained contact with them and I shall quote at length Somalatha's e-mail (24 March 2008) to me when I asked her about one incident during her overseas trip after the riots of July '83 when at the airport her suitcase was scribbled with notes begging her not to leave Sri Lanka:

"By this time I was married. In fact I married on 6th September 1962.

This happened in the 1987/88 period when most of the artistes left the country due to the deteriorating conditions. I did not have the intention to leave though. If I remember right the scribbling on the baggage was not in fluent English - "Do not go. We like your play. Do other play." made me think that they were written by the airport workers. I found the scribbling in Leipzig. I was touched to know that people of that social class - not fully competent in English- patronised Sinhala Theatre, especially the kind of plays I did. They had not mentioned the film which I had acted which was another important factor. It touched my heart and I felt a maternal sense of responsibility. I also felt if not for this kind of response and reaction I would not want to rest and relax. Even when I went to the bank or went for a walk I saw the common people acknowledging me, giving me a nod. I felt that I was being appreciated, from the things they told me whenever I came in contact with the common man."

¹³Again, I am indebted to Anushaya Collure for arranging my meeting on 3 January 2008 in my office at ICES with Prasannajith and for becoming an excellent interpreter for both of us.

Meanwhile, the TAG and its founder Sithamparanathan believed in using theatre as a safe venue for people to heal from trauma as well as a catalyst for social change. In 2000, the TAG managed to mobilise and organise each village in the Northern part of the country in a theatre forum using not only performances, but also group discussions on common interests and day-to-day problems.

Unlike the TAG, children are the transformation target of the BPC. Sprawled in a land used to be the property of the French Jesuits' garden of mangoes, the BPC is a centre for creative therapeutic education for the young victims of war¹⁴. The BPG has served with difficulty over 600 school children selected from around 20 villages in Batticaloa, representing different ethnic groups (Tamil and Muslim) with their 9 month after-school and weekend 9 program at the Garden. Facilitated by staff animators and trained local adults from mixed communities, these children are led to play and indulge in art activities such as clay work, arts and crafts, drama, storytelling and music with the purpose of healing them from the trauma of war and ensuring their healthy personal growth.

Action. Finally, the discussion turns to action. Here "action" is roughly translated as 'interiorised values impelling the participants to act and do something consistent with their conviction'. Some of the eight groups under study in their own way have engaged in honest and respectful dialogue with people outside their ethnic backgrounds. Some others seem to focus on professional development in preparation of building such dialogue and/or cooperation. The JK, for example, performed for the victims of the 2004 tsunami across the country. Thanks to their specious mobile tent that can accommodate several hundred audiences it was possible to create actor-audience interaction, given the 'in the round' installation of the stage. The JK has also played for the paying audience and travelled to India while waiting for the tent to be fixed after its frequent wear and tear.

Meanwhile, with his TAC artists, Dharmasiri made several cultural performances troupes in the northern and eastern parts of the country as well as overseas, with the single mission of showcasing the possible mutual exchange of cultures among diverse Sri Lankan ethnic groups.

Still inspired by the 1975 radical and political performance of "Loka Ahara Sammelanaya"¹⁵, to date the WTT has continued to participate on special days like International Women's Day or Labour Day, and many other theatres have followed suit.

¹⁴ My trip to Batticaloa and visit to this group were made possible by the kind arrangement of Fr. Guy P. Rajendram, S. J. Travelling 'with a vicar in a vicar's car' is the best way to avoid the hassle of check points in the Eastern province. I shall acknowledge my huge debt to all Jesuits in Colombo, Batticaloa and Kandy for their supports constant prayers and comforting reassurance, without which my study away from home would have been an unbearable ordeal.

¹⁵ Gamini in his troupe performed at the dinner venue for the delegation of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) international conference in Colombo, criticising as it did the first world's food policy towards the third world.

Although at this time of writing Jeyasankar of *Thirdeye* is completing his Doctorate in India, the group remains active in their cultural activities, such as publishing poetry, and organising events and workshops pertaining to gender, violence, and various awareness training¹⁶.

As for the TAG, its role in creating a platform for social and individual change at the village level was often challenged when it extended its attempts to be involved in Sri Lanka's conflict resolution project. A case in point is Sithamparanathan's involvement in the innovative Pongu Tamil Movement on the eve of the 2002 CFA. Large segments of Sinhala ultra-nationalists misread this action as being war preparation by the Tamils through arts, hence a clear threat to their interests. This misunderstanding was clearly the result of the communication gap between Tamil and Sinhala artistes and the absence of information on what Pongu Tamil really was. Although to date Dr. Sithamparanathan has made it a medium of social and personal empowerment, he has often been misunderstood by some Sinhala sectors¹⁷.

In sum, the eight theatre groups observed can be linked to one another in terms of vision, mission and means of sustenance. The theatres of *Thirdeye*, *BPG* and *TAG* come from the Tamil culture, while the Sinhala tradition is represented by the theatres of *JK*, *TAC*, *WTT*, *LCYTO*, and the *Pahura*. Some of them e.g. Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka, use experimental classical theatre while others use ritualistic theatre like the theatre of Dr Sithamparanathan and the Butterfly Garden artistes. Yet others use tradition-based theatre like Jeyasankar's *koththu*, age-based, theatre for children and youth like those of Somalatha Subasinghe and Prasannajith Abeyasurya, setting-based as in Parakrama Niriella's on-stage and/or mobile theatre, and the street theatre of Gamini Hattetuwegama.

As for the goals, they may vary according to the ethnic identity and political aspirations of the artistes, although both Sinhala-led and Tamil-led groups have aspired for social change, specifically peace. The Tamil groups tend to focus more on social upheaval and self-determination, while the Sinhala counterparts have prioritised the co-existence between the Sinhala - Tamil groups.

It would seem that given their past achievements, the Sinhala-led groups like those of Parakrama Perera and Dharmasiri have access to well-placed contacts among all communities including government echelons and, business and professional networks. As such, it would seem easier for this kind of theatre as a cultural movement, to find their way to mend the tarnished Sinhalese-Tamil relationship when compared to the less 'popular' Tamil groups in terms of influence. It is the latter groups that Bourdieu would call "low in cultural, economic, and political capital."

¹⁶ Samples of these art materials are in my possession. Thanks to *Thirdeye* members Karunenthiraj and Nevinathan who took the trouble of handing them to me at my Colombo residence, all the way from Batticaloa during a troubled time like November 2008.

¹⁷ From Dr. Sithamparanathan's notes sent to me through e-mail, 14 February 2008.

Meanwhile, from my observations I found that that the road to peace is sometimes hampered by the presence of such international players like NGOs and donors whose intervention is through effectively support for culturel-related activities. On the one hand, partnership with big benefactors is the most viable way for the theater makers to materialize their programs. On the other hand, when funding evaporates, dependence on sponsorship has proved troublesome. Fortunately, as I observed, the genesis of the theatre groups under study is invariably self-supporting. As it is, despite the impediments they have often met such as 'public distrust of the unknown' or the more tangible problems like lack of stable economic sustenance, there has been no sign of stopping. These cultural workers have invariably committed themselves to the promotion of social change in Sri Lanka.

4. CONCLUSIONS

So, what is peace? "We could talk of peace, we could talk of war," said the Tamil poet Sivasegaram, "Those talking of peace could peacefully sell arms to those who talk of war."¹⁸ I shall conclude by saying that peace is yet an unfinished project in Sri Lanka as bemoaned by the above quoted poet. The country's long-drawn-out war is replete with layers of problems: politicization of almost all aspects of public life, a deteriorating economy, mistrust of public institutions and people's representatives, forceful militarization of society and the increasingly taken-for-granted attitude towards violence, to say nothing of the intervention of international players. As such, the complexity of the ethnic problem has forced each ethnic group in conflict to grapple with identity and, in relation to cultural expression, with preservation of each ethnic tradition. This is to say that when the talk turns to cultural approach of peace making, it needs to take into account the possible Hobbesian fear experienced by each ethnic group that precludes restoration of relationships across the divide.

However, this study has shown that in this war-torn country there are still people who are committed to furthering the cause for peace through their artistic pursuits so that the fear of each other's dominance has slowly diminished. These are people who proactively work by making use of arts and culture to create equality for all, support co-existence and oppose suppression and denial of any ethnic group of their rights. Indeed, the magnitude of one culture's artistic productivity has often depended on the ways in which a community reflects on and sometimes refracts from their life experiences; and such is shown by outstanding performances of people or group of people I met and subsequently participated in my research. Hopes exists in these responsible members of the cultural movements, for they are capable of recognizing and working to overcome prejudices (be they race, religion, culture, age, gender, socio-economic status, intellectual ability, physical differences and impairments) that often hamper building a genuine spirit of citizenship and feeling.

¹⁸ Quoted from S. Sivaegaram. (2004). *Faces of War*. In *About Another Matter*. Colombo: Dhesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai.

I thank Prof. Siva for access not only to this treasured collection of poems which wittily sums up Sri Lankan political history, but also to his exceptional insights into yet "other matters" in the world today.

As long as such cultural movements as people's theatre flourishes in Sri Lanka, it will hopefully provide better grounds for communication with people in whom the seeds of social consciousness, mutual understanding, peace, and reconciliation may grow. Here we see that the eight theatre makers, to say the least, make up what Hardt and Negri call the "biopolitical power" of the "multitude" that provides sources needed for democracy. These cultural workers are not just a part of the nation, but they are its conscience. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world," said Margaret Mead, "Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has".

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