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The Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL) is a biannual research publication issued by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. The journal seeks to capture a broad spectrum of scholarly work in the fields of visual and performing arts, while also promoting multidisciplinary approaches within the humanities and social sciences. JOVPA-SL welcomes contributions from both academics and practitioner-researchers engaged in arts-based research, fostering critical dialogue and innovative perspectives on creative practice and inquiry. It serves as a platform for critical engagement, experimental methodologies, and creative pedagogy, addressing themes that are either discipline-specific such as dance, drama, performance studies, music, or visual arts or situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines. The journal invites original, rigorous, and meaningful research in creative arts and performance studies, both within and across academic boundaries. It encourages critical debate and cross-disciplinary exchange through diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to: theatre studies, performance studies, dance studies, ethnomusicology, music education, popular culture, dance and movement analysis, art history, art theory, visual and cultural studies, crafts, digital arts and design, film studies, and fine arts.

Cover Photo: Final Year Dance Production, 'Oracle' performed in 2018 at Panibharatha Theatre. Dept. of Theatre, and Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance.

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DANCE REVIEW

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RIDDHI-MA: A Tapestry between Ritual and Contemporary Ballet

Riddhi Yāgaya also known as Rata Yakuma is one of the elaborate exorcism rituals performed in the southern dance tradition in Sri Lanka. It is particularly performed in Matara and Bentara areas where this ritual is performed in order to curb the barrenness and the expectation of fertility for young women (Fagnoli & Seneviratne 2021). Palihawadana, choreographer and dancer's contemporary ballet production had intermingled both character, Riddi Bisaw (Prince Riddhi) and the story of Kalu Kumaraya (Black Prince), who possesses young women and caught in the evil gaze (yaksa disti) while cursing upon them to be ill (De Munck, 1990).

Palihawadana weaves a tapestry of ritual dance elements with the ballet movements to create visually stunning images on stage. Over one and a half hours of duration, Palihawadana's dancers mesmerized the audience through their virtuosic bodily competencies in Western ballet, Sri Lankan dance, especially the symbolic elements of low country dance and the spontaneity of movements. It is human bodily virtuosity and the rhythmic structures, which galvanized our senses throughout the performance. From very low phases of bodily movements to high speed acceleration, Palihawadana managed to visualize the human body as an elevated sublimity.

The dance production Riddhi-Ma was choreographed in several segments accompanied by a flow of various music arrange-

ments and sound elements within which the dance narrative was laid through. In other words, Palihawadana as a choreographer, overcomes the modernist deadlock in his contemporary dance work that the majority of Sri Lankan dance choreographers have very often been succumbed to. These images of bodies of female dancers commensurate the narrative of women's fate and her vulnerability in being possessed by the black demon and how she overcomes and emancipates from the oppression. In this sense, Palihawadana's dancers have showcased their ability to use the bodies not much as an object which is trained to perform a particular tradition but to presence bodily fluidity which can be transformed into any form what so ever. Palihawadana's performers possess formlessness, fluid fragility through which they break and overcome their bodily regimentations. It was such a highly sophisticated 'contem Their bodies were trained to achieve skilful execution of complex ballet movements, especially key elements of traditional ballet namely, improvisation, partnering, interpretation and off-balance and the local dance



Figure 1: Male bodies covered with heavy costumes. Riddhi-Ma, at Elphinstone Theatre, 28th March 2025, Source: Malshan Witharana.

Contemporary ballet' performed at a Sri Lankan theatre with utmost rigor and precision. Bodies of all male and female dancers were highly trained and refined through classical ballet and contemporary dance. In addition, they demonstrated their abilities in performing other forms of dance.

repertoires. Yet, these key ballet elements are not necessarily a part of the contemporary ballet training (Marttinen, 2016). However, it is important for the dance students to learn these key elements of traditional ballet and use them in the contemporary dance settings. In this sense, Palihawadana's dancers have achieved such vigour and somatic precision through assiduous practice of the body to create the magic on stage.

In the traditional ballet lexicon, it is a 'pas de deux' which is performed by the 'same race male and female dancers,' which can be called 'a duet'. As Lutts argues, 'Many contemporary choreographers are challenging social structures and norms within ballet by messing with the structure of the pas de deux (Lutts, 2019). Pas de Deux is a dance typically done by male and female dancers. In this case, Palihawadana has selected a male and a female dancer whose gender hierarchies appeared to be diminished through the choreographic work. In the traditional pas de deux, the male appears as the backdrop of the female dancer or the main anchorage of the female body, where the female body is presented with the support of the male body. Palihawadana has consciously been able to change this hierarchical division between the traditional ballet and the contemporary dance by presenting the female dominance in the act of dance.

The sequence was choreographed around a powerful depiction of the possession of the Gara Yakā over a young woman, whose vulnerability and the powerful resurrection from the possession was performed by two young dancers. The female dancer, a ballerina, was in a leotard and a tight while wearing a pair of pointe shoes (toe shoes). Pointe shoes help the dancers to swirl on one spot (fouettés), on the pointed toes of one leg, which is the indication of the ballet dancer's ability to perform en pointe (The Kennedy Centre 2020). The stunning imagery was created throughout this sequence by the female and the male dancers intertwining their flexible bodies upon each other, throwing their bodies vertically and horizontally while maintaining balance and imbalance together. The ballerina's right leg is bent and her toes are directed towards the floor while performing the en pointe with her ankle. Throughout the sequence she holds the Gara Yakā mask while performing with the partner.



Figure 2-a: Umesha Kapilarathna performs en pointe, and Figure 2-b, Narmada Nekethani performs with Jeewaka Randeepa, Riddhi-Ma, at Elphinstone Theatre, Maradana, 28th March 2025. Source: Malshan Witharana

The male dancer behind the ballerina maintains a posture while depicting low country hand gestures combining and blurring the boundaries between Sri Lankan dance and the Western ballet (see figure 3). In this sequence, the male dancer maintains the balance of the body while lifting the female dancer's body in the air signifying some classical elements of ballet.

One significant element of this contemporary ballet production is the costume design. The selection of colour palette, containing black, red and white combining with other corresponding colours and also the costumes which break the traditional rules and norms are compelling. I have discussed in a recent publication how clothes connect with the performer's body and operate as an embodied haptic perception to connect with the spectators (Liyanage, 2025). In this production, the costumes operate in two different ways: First it signifies sculpted bodies creating an embodied, empathic experience. Secondly, designs of costumes work as a mode of three-dimen-

sional haptic sense. Palihawadana gives his dancers a fully covered clothing, while they generate classical ballet and Sinhalese ritual dance movements. The covered bodies create another dimension to clothing over bodies. In doing so, Palihawadana attempts to create sculpted bodies on stage by blurring the boundaries of gender-oriented clothing and its usage in Sri Lankan dance.

Sri Lankan female body on stage, particularly bodies in dance have been presented as an object of male desire. I have elsewhere cited that the *lāsya* or the feminine gestures of the dance repertoire has been the marker of the quality of dance against the *tāndava* tradition (Liyanage, 2025). The theatregoers visit the theatre to appreciate the *lāsya* bodies of female dancers and if the dancer meets this threshold, then she becomes the versatile dancer. Kandyan dancers such as Vajira and Chithrasena's dance works are explored and analysed with this *lāsya* and *tāndava* criteria. Vajira for instance becomes the icon of the *lāsya* in the Kandyan tradition. It is not my intention here to further discuss the discourse of *lāsya* and *tāndava* here. But Palihawadana's contemporary ballet overcomes this duality of male-female aesthetic categorization of *lāsya* and *tāndava* which has been a historical categorization of dance bodies in Sri Lanka (Sanjeeva 2021).

Dance imagination in Sri Lankan creative industry exploits female body as an object. The colonial mind set of dance body as a histrionic, gendered, exotic and aesthetic object is still embedded in the majority of dance productions produced in the current cultural industry. Moreover, dance is still understood as a 'language' similar to music where the narratives are shared in symbolic movements. Yet, Palihawadana has shown us that dance exists beyond language or lingual structures where, it creates humans to experience alternative existence and expression. In this sense, dance is intrinsically a mode of 'being', a kinaesthetic connection where its phenomenality operates beyond the rationality of our daily life. At this juncture, Palihawadana and his dance ensemble have marked a significant milestone by eradicating the archetypical and stereotypes in Sri Lankan dance.



Figure 4: Riddhi-Ma's costumes create sculpted bodies combining the performer and the audience through empathic projection. Dancers, Sithija Sithimina and Senuri Nimsara appear in Riddhi-Ma, at Elphinstone Theatre, 28th March 2025, Source, Malshan Witharana.

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