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

Editor in Chief
Prof. Saumya Liyanage
Dept. of Theatre, Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance
Faculty of Dance and Drama
UVPA Colombo – Sri Lanka
Email: saumya.l@vpa.ac.lk

Coordinating Editors
Mr. Ranga Manupriya
Dept. of Theatre, Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance, Faculty of Dance and Drama
UVPA Colombo Sri Lanka
ranga.l@vpa.ac.lk

Ms. Chamanee Darshika
Dept. of Theatre, Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance, Faculty of Dance and Drama
UVPA Colombo Sri Lanka
chamanee.d@vpa.ac.lk

Journal Administration
Center for Research, Creative Works and Knowledge Dissemination (CRCKD), UVPA Colombo

Journal Contact
Address: Editor in Chief, JOVPA-SL, 21 Albert Crescent, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka.
Email: jovpasl@vpa.ac.lk
Telephone: +94 718328086

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PREMAKUMARA DE SILVA
Department of Sociology
University of Colombo

'Kolamba Kattiya' or Colombo Crowd: Religiosity and Pilgrimage of 'Urban Poor' in Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This paper explains the religiosity expressed at Sri Pāda by pilgrims from 'peasant and working class' social backgrounds as opposed to the middle class. Hence, the paper mainly focuses on the religiosity of people living in the proletariat parts of Colombo City, i.e., kolamba kattiya who annually visit Sri Pada as an 'obligatory pilgrimage' which indicates of the continuity of their traditional forms of worship to the Buddha and the guardian deity, like Saman, Pattini and Kataragama. This is built upon my earlier research on bali-tovil and the argument made that traditional forms of religiosity (bali-tovil) are not dying out due to urbanization, modernization even under the globalization instead they are but reforming and rearranging, even revitalized, albeit in rather different forms in contemporary Sri Lanka (see de Silva, 2000). It is argued that globalization and modernization forces can lead to the erosion of traditional practices and values but my limited ethnographical work shows that resilience and adaptation of traditional religiosity is quite possible while maintaining and ensuring their relevance in changing contexts. Traditional religiosity among the urban poor often manifests as a strong reliance on faith for coping with poverty and social marginalization, with religious beliefs and practices serving as a source of strength, community, and hope. This argument is further elaborated through the ethnographical material that I have collected at Sri Pada since 2001.

KEYWORDS:

Religiosity,
Pilgrimage,
Continuity and Change,
Urban Poor

INTRODUCTION

On January 20th 2002, I was sitting in a teashop at Sri Pada, one of the popular pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka. As an ethnographer, while imbibing a cup of tea prepared by a shop-owner, I directed a casual question that most Sri Lankans would ask in an ordinary chat with a trader. "How is business these days?" He said that it was not good but things would be better when *Kolamba kattiya avama* (when the Colombo crowd arrives) in March. I was curious to know who this crowd was. He said 'you wait and see' who this *Kolamba kattiya* (lit. contingent of Colombo), Colombo crowd is. So, in this paper I am going to investigate this special category of pilgrims who visit the Sri Pada temple in large numbers during the month of March every year and how they express their religiosity at this pilgrimage centre. Most of this special category of pilgrims belong to deprived social classes of the capital city[1] of Sri Lanka and inhabited in the most deprived Under Served Settlements (USS) in the city. There are currently 64 such settlements within the municipal limits of Colombo which accommodates half of Colombo's population. Generally speaking, Sri Pada attracts a large number of urban poor and 'peasant and working class' pilgrims compared to 'middle class' Sri Lankans. The absence of middle- class individuals such as big businessmen, wealthy lawyers, doctors and politicians, senior government officers and major landowners is, in my view, a recent phenomenon at Sri Pada. The middle class involvement at Sri Pada is quite minimal when comparing their involvement with other major pilgrimage sites like Kataragama, Anuradhapura and Kandy. Instead, we see Sri Pada as a major sacred site of predominantly representing 'peasant and working classes' characters. This is a quite unique situation when compared with the other national pilgrimage sites like Kataragama; as Gananath Obeyesekere explains, 'people of all social classes and all nominal religious affiliations' (1988: 163) visit Kataragama throughout the year. He specifies the social position of pilgrims at Kataragama as the unemployed educated sons of peasants, politicians, businessmen and big-time crooks in the city of Colombo (1977: 388-389), urban proletariat, mainly 'from the slums of Colombo…without strong

[1] Colombo, the largest city and financial hub of Sri Lanka, occupying an area of 37 km2, and home to an estimated 612,535 inhabitants (2020) and nearly another 500,000 daily floating population.

kinship ties, and …cut off almost totally from traditional peasant society'" (1978: 472). Obeyesekere was quite interested in explaining new forms of religious expression developing amongst 'urban' Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The reasons for development of new religiosity are that of the 'stresses and strains of modern society' or 'social disintegration' that links with the rise of pilgrimage sites like Kataragama. He recognised this new trend as '*bhakti* religiosity'. He explained this new religiosity by focusing on groups of people who display strongly externalised ecstatic religiosity: on those who walk the fire (Obeyesekere 1978) or become priests or priestesses with hair in matted locks (1981); on those who hang on hooks, roll on hot sand, or *kavadi* dance. These ecstatic forms of religious behaviour are highly visible during the festival at Kataragama. This (ecstatic) Hindu-type devotional religiosity among Buddhists, he argues (ibid), was initially popular among the urban poor and then taken up by the middle-classes to fulfil their need for an outlet for the frustrations with economic hardships, with delaying marriage, and high expectation of life (1978). Unlike Sri Pada, Kataragama is not exclusively for the urban poor and peasant social classes, and there is a large contingent of middle-class people attend its festivities. As Obeyesekere reported, 'people of all social classes and all nominal religious affiliations' visit Kataragama. (1988: 163)

Rohan Bastin (2002), has explored similar class relations at Munnesvaram, a popular Tamil Saivite temple with a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist patronage, near the north-west coastal town of Chilaw. He identifies Munnesvaram as a site of not simply attended by the poor, either urban or rural, but by large segment of Middle class Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Saivites (2002: 26-34).[2] Though Kataragama and Munnesvaram attract large number of middle-class pilgrims, Sri Pāda remains a site for pilgrims from the lower social classes. This paper explains the religiosity expressed by urban poor visiting Sri Pada which is quite different from Kataragama and Munneswarm.

Bruce Kapferer (1983) has explored a similar class dynamic when he discusses "A Celebration of Demons" among 'urban' Sinhala Buddhists in and around the southern port city of Galle. Kapferer argues that "demonic practices" in contemporary Sri Lanka have become predominantly peasant and working-class phenomenon. Middle

[2] Bastin (2002) has moved from single class analysis and tries to incorporate other social categories and contrasts such as caste, ethnicity and even locality of the worshippers (insider/outsider).

class Sinhala Buddhists, according to him, distinguish such practices of the working class and peasantry from "true" Buddhism (1983:31). However, he shows that despite the disapproval of deity worship among the middle class, appeal to the deities is a more apparent middle-class practice than a working class or peasant practice (ibid. 32). Increasing middle class worship of the deities, Kapferer explains, they rejected "demonic practices" and "negatively oriented to demon exorcism" (ibid.). This negative orientation, he argues, is a product of a historical process and is reproduced in the tautology of a cultural logic of a class discourse, which has been instrumental in further creating exorcism as a working class and peasant practice (ibid. 34).[3]

When compared to the sociological background of pilgrims visiting national pilgrimage sites like Sri Pāda, Kapferer's formulation is problematic. It is because, as I explain below, the religiosity expressed at Sri Pāda attracts many pilgrims from 'peasant and working class' social backgrounds rather than the middle class. Hence, this paper focuses on the religiosity of people living in the proletariat parts of Colombo City, i.e., *kolamba kattiya*[4] who annually visit Sri Pada as an 'obligatory pilgrimage' which indicates the continuity of their traditional forms of worship of the Buddha and the guardian deity, Saman, Pattini and Kataragama. This is built upon my earlier research on bali-tovil and the argument made that traditional forms of religiosity (planetary rituals [bali-tovil]) are not dying out due to urbanization, modernization even under the globalization but reforming and rearranging, even revitalized, albeit in rather different forms in contemporary Sri Lanka (see de Silva, 2000). It is argued that globalization and modernization forces can lead to the erosion of traditional practices and values, but my limited ethnographical work shows that resilience and adaptation of traditional religiosity is quite possible while maintaining and ensuring their relevance in changing contexts. Traditional religiosity among the urban poor often manifests as a strong reliance on faith for coping with poverty and social marginalization, with religious beliefs and practices serving as a source of strength, community, and hope. This can include participation in traditional religious activities, strong belief in supernatural forces, and reliance on religious leaders and communities for support. Further research is needed to fully understand

[3] I have challenged this view (see De Silva 2000).

[4] This area contains large congested slums and shanties in which the poor, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim live in dreadful conditions. It also has areas inhabited by people with regular employment but low income, as well as a few better-off people in government and business. These urban communities became more geographically concentrated, culturally isolated, and pushed to the margins of social and institutional life. Soon after the war as a part of massive redevelopment projects in Colombo the government

the complex relationship between traditional religiosity, poverty, and social change in urban contexts. This paper attempts to explain how traditional ritual journeys like pilgrimages are still popular and strong among urban poor in the city of Colombo, and I will demonstrate the continuity of such religiosity through one of their popular sacred sites, Sri Pada. Between August 2001 and September 2002, and briefly again in February 2006 and April 2017, I carried out ethno-historical research on Sri Pāda and in addition to that I am following up its activities via digital and social media platforms as well. This paper focuses on a section of larger contingent of pilgrims visiting Sri Pada annually that is of Colombo urban poor.

launched a special project to relocate urban poor by stating it's for improving the living conditions of them but it was backlashed and created new issues of living (see Amarasuriya and Spencer, 2015). As far as their religiosity is concerned, Obeyesekere and Gombrich (1988) pointed out that the most popular deities among the urban proletariats are the newly emerging god Suniyam and goddess Kali and they are well represented in the shrines dedicated to them in this part of Colombo. For them, this new religiosity is mostly sprung from lower-class urban roots (1988: chapters 03 and 04). But in their formulation they have failed to understand the continuation of traditional form of religiosity among urban poor in the city of Colombo.

BACKGROUND

Sri Pāda is a pilgrimage site that has been held sacred by the devotees of four religions namely Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Islamists. While the Buddhist believe that the Buddha left a trace of his left footprint at the summit on a gemstone, while to Hindus it is the Footprint of Lord Siva, hence, called Sivan Adipadham or Sivanolipatha Malai, while some of Sri Lanka's Muslims call it the Footprint of Al-Rohun (Soul) or Adam, a prophet according to Islamic beliefs. Some Christians say the "footprint" in the rock atop the rustred peak is that of Adam when he set foot on earth after being exiled from Eden. Hence it is called Adam's Peak. Other Christians say it is the Footprint of St. Thomas, who brought Christianity to Southern India in the first century AD, in the succeeding centuries not only the royalty with their court retinue, but the ordinary pilgrims had paid homage to the sacred footprint at the mountain top sacred site. The kings, in their devotion and persistence made the peak accessible to crowds of devotees who annually trickled up the mountain at least from the 11th century. This tropical forest mountain territory or Samanala adaviya comes under the jurisdiction of the guardian deity Saman who is venerated along with the sacred footprint at this remote jungle temple. The Sri Pāda temple can be approached through two different pilgrimage footpaths: the southern path from the direction of Ratnapura, the main town in Sabaragamuva; and the northern path which approaches via the hill town Hatton, in Central Province.

Like other major pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka thousands of pilgrims annually make the journey to Sri Pāda to worship the sacred footprint. The Sri Pāda pilgrimage season begins from *Unduvap Poya* (Full moon day in December) to *Vesak Poya* in May. In the past, pilgrims climbed there with the intention of acquiring religious merit and indeed today they visit for many reasons. The contemporary journey to Sri Pāda equally stresses what Morinis calls both "devotional" and "instrumental" aspects of pilgrimage (1992:10-11). For him (1992) pilgrimage is important both to collective ideals and as personal experience. To support study of pilgrimage as structure and experience he defined six types of pilgrimage: (1) devotional, (2) instrumental, (3) normative, (4) obligatory, (5) wandering, and (6) initiatory; all consisting of journey and goal. The goal of the journey is to move from the familiar to the Other, or from home to the place of the ideal, thus locating Otherness outside time and space. The ultimate goal of the pilgrim is salvation, either as transformation /transcendence into the ideal, or acquiring solutions to life's afflictions.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY

The sociology of Sinhala Buddhist religion and the direction of its change has been debated and well documented through both anthropological and sociological perspectives. Most studies focus on how Sinhala Buddhism has changed along with social change in the Sinhala society in general, and have concentrated on a number of interrelated themes: the nature of "orthodoxy" in contemporary Sinhala Buddhism (e.g., Gombrich: 1971,1990; Southwold: 1983; Carrithers: 1983), the relationship between Buddhism and ritual practices (Leach: 1962; Yalman: 1962; Ames: 1963; Obeyesekere: 1963,1966,1968,1978; Kapferer: 1983,1998; Seneviratne: 1978; Scott: 1994; De Silva: 2000), and the transformation of traditional Sinhala Buddhism over the last century (Malalgoda: 1976; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988; Seneviratne 1999). Some of them have argued, (e.g., Obeyesekere 1970, 1975, 1978; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988 and Kapferer 1983, 1997) that a range of "radical" changes has taken place in the religious practices among Sinhala Buddhists over the last few decades. In other words, these studies

show how changes in popular religion reflected changes in society at large (Spencer 1990). Nihal Perera addresses the spatialization of the protestantization and the socialization of Buddhism in colonial urban spaces and further builds on his argument in People's Spaces (2016). These significant changes have heightened psychological tensions among the masses particularly the urban poor and the middle class and, as Obeyesekere argues, both alone and in association with Richard Gombrich, one way of relieving such tensions is to rely on new forms of religious expression (Obeyesekere 1975, 1977, 1978, 1981; Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988). The growing propitiation of gods such as Kataragama, Huniyam, and goddesses such as Kali [who is replacing Pattini as the main goddess of Sinhala Buddhism], and acts of devotion to the Bo-tree (known as the *bodhi pūjā*) and to figures like Sai Baba, have been the result of a collapse of "traditional order" and the resultant lack of coherence and order in social life. The key to all these developments is 'urbanization', consisting primarily of a 'breakdown of traditional structures of authority and meaning' (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 53). Obeyesekere & Gombrich have viewed recent religious changes in terms of class structure. On the broadest level, new religious practices have been explained in relation to 'the emergence of a large bourgeoisie and an urban proletariat' classes. They characterise differences between these two classes as follows:

> The religious values and ethos that spring from the bourgeoisie and the urban proletariat are not only different from one another but also contrast with traditional village Buddhism. Historically viewed, the crucial components of bourgeois religious values come from Protestant Christianity, especially its Victorian forms. Proletarian religious values [….] go counter to the puritan ethos of the bourgeoisie and find their primary expression in an emotional religiosity derived from Hinduism [*bhakti* devotionalism] (1988: 11).

The former has largely, according to Gombrich & Obeyesekere, concerned more protestant type religious innovation among the bourgeoisie/middle class and the latter innovations affecting the lower-class/urban poor people based on the Hindu *bhakti* devotionalism. For example, the rise of lay Buddhist meditation is popular among the middle class, whereas the new deity cults are more popular among the urban poor. Contrary to this formulation, Gombrich & Obeyesekere record among the urban middle class an increase in the popularity of worshipping at the shrines to the deities (Obeyesekere 1970, 1977, Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988) and in the practice of sorcery (Obeyesekere 1975). The Sinhala urban middle class is the main group that visits the main shrine of the god Kataragama to ask for his aid and protection before travelling overseas, in business, at times of personal or family misfortune, or before an examination (Obeyesekere 1970: 59). Obeyesekere (1981) argues that middle class anxiety, frustration, and tension in their daily lives motivate members to the worship of deities. He describes the emergence of deity worship among the urban middle class as symptomatic of the changes in 'Protestant Buddhism' and continued under 'Post-protestant Buddhism' as well (see de Silva, 2006).

'CLASS'[5] AFFILIATION IN SRI PĀDA PILGRIMAGE

Let me now explain why I claim that Sri Pāda attracts large numbers of pilgrims belonging to lower social positions of Sri Lankan society. My argument here is mainly based on the statistical information that I gathered through a simple survey at the Sri Pāda temple, supplemented by ethnographical information. The social class of the pilgrims can be mainly identified through their occupational affiliation, and the nature of the personal problems that they brought to Sri Pāda seeking 'divine' help (*pihita*). The class affiliation of the Sri Pāda pilgrims will be further discussed through two distinctive sociological categories, namely "youth pilgrims" and "Colombo Crowd" present among pilgrims to Sri Pāda. Such a distinction is highlighted to point out the variation evident in pilgrimage to Sri Pāda. Though many youth pilgrims seem to come from a lower social background, there is a considerable number of 'lower middle class' youth[6] also present

[5] Most sociologists agree that society is stratified, to some extent, into social classes but they often disagree on how we should define, measure, and deal with issues related to social class. It is difficult to give a single, all-encompassing definition for 'social class', as what it means and how it's measured has been widely contested over the years. In general terms, social classes are said to be the particular divisions that society is separated into, based on socioeconomic status.

[6] Given the limited space of the paper I would like to direct my readers for a comprehensive analysis of youth religiosity at Sri Pada (de Silva, 2022: 139-156).

(e.g., sons and daughters of teachers, traders and clerical workers)[7]. Interestingly, however, "Colombo crowd" basically comes from the proletarian parts of the capital city of Colombo. In the hands of such "urban poor", according to Gombrich and Obeyesekere "the [urban] spirit religion" has changed its character (1988: 09) and the values of these people, they assert, are different from those of the urban middle class and traditional village Buddhism (1988:11). But my ethnographical information about Sri Pāda does not substantiate this formulation of the "urban poor" as total adherents of urban-based "new spirit cults," because, as I illustrate later, this so-called "urban poor" are not completely cut off from some of their "traditional religious practices", (though they practice them in rather different forms today) For example; going on pilgrimage to Sri Pāda, as they describe it, is a continuous practice of generation after generation which can be traced back to their "village roots". I argue that "urban poor" are not necessarily adherents of "new spirit cults" but also frequent visitors to a "traditional pilgrimage site" like Sri Pāda.

Let me now present some figures from the survey that I carried out during my fieldwork in 2002. If we consider the regional and occupational affiliations of the pilgrims, as table 1.1 shows, over 55 per cent of the pilgrims came to Sri Pāda from the Western, Southern and Sabaragamuwa provinces, the densest and urbanized provinces of the country. Interestingly, most claimed to come from 'villages' rather than towns, but this should not be taken at face value for when one looks at occupation, the pilgrims were in general not agriculturists or fisher folk, the archetypal 'village' occupations, rather the majority were involved in skilled non-agricultural occupations such as drivers, masons, carpenters, mechanics, factory workers, printers, vendors, security services and as unskilled non-agricultural labourers. Also, a small number are involved in white-collar jobs such as teachers, clerks and sales representatives.

[7] I have also noticed small number of environmentally concern English speaking urban middle class youth operate at Sri Pāda under their respective NGOs. They basically there for conducting range of environment awareness programs for pilgrims rather than having any devotion to the sacred centre. In addition to that the contingent of foreign tourists are also attracted to Sri Pada sacred mountain.

	Frequency	Percent
Western	399	43
Southern	110	12
Central	66	7
Sabaragamuwa	239	26
Uva	40	4
North central	27	3
North western	34	4
Eastern	9	1
Total	924	100

Table 1.1 Origin of pilgrims at Sri Pāda by province

	Frequency	Percent
Dependent	277	30
Vendors	99	11
Wage labourers	85	9
Cultivators	70	8
Mechanical work	52	6
Mason/Carpenter/Contractor	44	5
Plantation Small holders	43	5
Drivers and conductors	42	5
Clerical	42	5
Garment Factory workers	41	4
Sales assistants	32	4
Security service	22	2
Administrative work	20	2
Teachers and instructors	19	2
Buddhist monks	19	2
Retired from government service	10	1
Middle-East	4	0.4
Self employment	3	0.3
Total	924	100

Table 1.2 Occupation of pilgrims at Sri Pāda

If we consider the overall occupational background of the pilgrims, 'traditional' occupations are under-represented whilst 'modern' occupations are over-represented. The picture that emerges is that most pilgrims to Sri Pāda are wage and salary earners; most of those who do not live in towns, are also not 'traditional peasants'. For example, as Obeyesekere explains most of the pilgrims visiting Kataragama are 'cut off almost totally [from] traditional peasant society' (1978: 472). The occupational affiliation of the pilgrims to Sri Pāda is a clear indication of a significant departure from the so called "traditional peasant society". It is clear by now that many of the pilgrims coming to Sri Pāda are engaged in non-agricultural occupations as well as majority of them being Sinhala Buddhists who belong to the lower social classes of the Sri Lankan society. Compare to lower social classes it is a smaller number of pilgrims from the so called 'middle-class background' visit to Sri Pāda. Even the Temple authority is well aware about the absentee of middle-class pilgrims and as the former Trustee monk of the temple explained to me that it has considerably affected the temple income and he revealed his future plan how he wants to overcome the issue by introducing electric cable car system which he believes attract the large number of "high income groups".

Some 'professional middle class' people told me they were reluctant to visit Sri Pāda, not because they do not have any faith in the 'sacred footprints', but because of the 'difficulties' of the journey. Unlike Kataragama, Kandy or Anuradhapura, where vehicles can be taken close to the sacred grounds, reaching Sri Pāda in order to tap its sacredness requires physical and mental stamina, which might not be found among the 'busy' middle class people in contemporary Sri Lanka. However, the absence of middle-class individuals such as big businessmen, wealthy lawyers, doctors and politicians, senior government officers and major landowners is, in my view, a recent phenomenon.[8] Prior to the colonial regimes, and even well into the colonial period, going on pilgrimage to Sri Pāda was probably common among all ranks and the sections of Sri Lankan society. For example, as I have shown elsewhere, Sri Pāda always was an important site for "royal pilgrimage", and even in the British colonial period, the landed local elite groups particularly those of

[8] The absence of middle class representation at contemporary Sri Pāda cannot be further explained because limited information on that particular aspect. Hence, one needs further research on this important aspect of Sri Pāda pilgrimage.

Sabaragamuva, were closely connected to Sri Pāda temple (see de Silva, 2018).

Moreover, the present class affiliation of Sri Pāda pilgrims can also be demonstrated through the social background of the temple patrons, particularly the patrons of *pinkama*s (the merit making rituals). Some patrons began to sponsor rather than organise the full moon day *pinkama* way back in the 1970s and some of them even continue to do so until the present time. Remarkably, almost all of them come from lower social backgrounds other than the so-called 'middle class'. Similarly, most *pinkamas* are sponsored by people who come from less educated and non-professionals social backgrounds. For example: carpenters, vegetable cultivators, and vendors. This is quite contrary to the situation of even a village temple, where such *pinkama* is usually dominated by the leading Buddhist families or the *dāyaka sabhava* (lay temple association), which is again normally controlled by the same people. This is quite clear in the urban areas, as Kapferer shows 'it is the middle class [throughout the southern capital city of Galle] who control the lay Buddhist temple associations, who are involved in the appointment of new monks, and who are concerned with the morality of monks, with the organization of temple donations, with improvements and additions to temple structures, and with the organization of major Buddhist calendar of events centred on the temple' (1983: 25-26). And Kapferer concludes, 'the temples have become a largely middle class preserve" (ibid.). I agree with his point but such formulation does not explain the situation of the national pilgrimage sites like Sri Pāda where temple patrons largely come from the non-middle-class backgrounds even though unlike middle class patrons, they are incapable of challenging or gaining control over the temple authorities.

The situation in Sri Pāda is quite different from that in other national pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka. Elizabeth Nissan shows that the major *pinkamas* at the national pilgrimage site of Anuradhapura are always sponsored or organised by middle class dominated lay Buddhist associations found around the 1930s and 1950s but those associations differ from a *dayaka sabhava* because they are not attached any particular temple. She describes the activities of two

of those associations, (The *Pushapadāna Sāmitiya* and the *Bauddha Mandalaya*), which have separate branches to organise such major *pinkama*s at the other major pilgrimage sites in the island (1985: Chapter 2). The absence of such associations, and of middle-class operation at Sri Pāda is further confirmed that the even high-level major Buddhist calendrical events centred at this temple are predominantly organised by pilgrims of non-middle class.[9] However, during my recent visit to Sri Pada I found that major ceremonies of the ritual calendar of the temple including annual motorized procession of escorting sacred paraphernalia are being taking over by affluent middle-class sponsors.

The class affiliation of the pilgrims visiting Sri Pāda temple can be further explained by analysing the personal problems that they brought to Sri Pāda for help from the 'divine power' attached to the temple. Among those, issues related to employment, education, marriage and health were important. Pilgrims do not come to Sri Pāda to take revenge or harm enemies through sorcery or to perform curse-removing rituals, entering into trance and possession, more commonly found among the lower strata of the Sri Lankan society (see Obeyesekere 1981, Kapferer 1997). In my view, the issues that they brought into the Sri Pāda temple are strongly related to the central value of the temple and it benevolent nature. From a Buddhist point of view, Sri Pāda is a religious site, emphasising the highest Buddhist value of "*karünava*" or "compassion" ("kindness"). Such value is mainly represented through the qualities of its guardian deity Saman to whom some pilgrims direct the problems to be solved. Karuniava in the context of Sri Pāda would be understood as the most intrinsic quality of the god Saman. That is why we do not hear this word in other major Buddhist sites where the god Saman is not so powerfully represented. The moral quality of the god Saman is constantly expressed through the devotional language and restrained behaviour of pilgrims and it also plays a vital role to attract a large number of under privilege Buddhist subjects to the temple. Noticeably, these are the class of people who do not get much attention or any sort of a 'kindness' from the ruling and the privilege classes of Sri Lankan society.

This distinction can be further elaborated through a particular

[9] This is not true for the major temple festival of March (*mädin pinkama*), the sponsors of such *pinkama* have recently been taken over by some influential middle-class families and organizations. In post war situation as Alex McKinley (2024) explained there are moments of elite Buddhists exercising over other Buddhists even non-Buddhists on the summit while organizing infrastructure development projects at the temple with the involvement of Sri Lankan military, corporate world and the government.

example of the professional trance consultants or spirit mediums of whom the vast majority are Sinhala Buddhist women popularly known as *mäniyo* (mothers). Obeyesekere (1981) describes *mäniyo* as strongly independent women who, through their ability to enter trance, operate as private religious consultants. Kapferer also provides more information on *mäniyo* as a group that often comes from the urban poor (1997: 247). This is also true in Obeyesekere's analysis of those trance specialists at Kataragama (1981). But Bastin reports that, at Munnesvaram, there are some *mäniyo* whose social background is not urban poor, but middle class (2002: 71). However, all are in agreement that most *mäniyo* are devotees of new urban deities such as Kataragama, Kali and Huniyam.

I met several of these *mäniyo* at the Sri Pāda temple and almost all of them belonged to underprivileged social classes, either urban or rural. Also, nearly all of them were unmarried or no longer married. Surprisingly, at Sri Pāda, their religious behaviour is completely different from the situation described by Obeyesekere at Kataragama (1981) and Bastin at Munnesvaram (2002: 70-72). The strongly externalised devotional and ecstatic behaviours (dance, trance and possess) of those *mäniyo* are completely absent when they present themselves at the Sri Pāda temple. The central quality of the temple is clearly undermined the ecstatic form of religiosity that is practiced by similar groups of *mäniyo* in other pilgrimage sites. The religious behaviour of *mäniyo* at Sri Pāda clearly indicated the complexity of lower-class religiosity in contemporary Sri Lanka. So, labelling them as strong adherents of new urban deities, as Obeyesekere and Kapferer claim, must be treated with scepticism.

In Sri Pāda, the element of expressive emotion can be found in devotional songs and friendly greeting (even modified versions of them) which have a different tone of collective devotion (oriented to the Buddha or the deity Saman) from the expressive emotion of pilgrims at Kataragama. Both involve 'the body' excessively but differently. Also, unlike at Kataragama, the devotional and expressive forms of religiosity are not new for adherents of Sri Pāda pilgrimages. Not only do Sri Pāda pilgrims show visible religious behaviour through the singing of devotional songs and their friendly greetings, but their personal devotion is also physically 'externalised'

through the arduous journey to the sacred mountain. At Kataragama the 'devotional ecstasy' is expressed through dance, trance, loud music, fire walking, hanging from hooks, and so on. At Sri Pāda, it is expressed through rather different forms such as the singing of devotional songs and arduous climbing.

The externalised form of devotional religious behaviour at Sri Pāda can be found among the 'urban poor' of the country long before the advent of Hindu-type '*bhakti* religiosity' described by Obeyesekere (1978). It does not mean Obeyesekere is wrong, but the 'expressive devotion' is not new to those 'peasant' and 'working' class people who more or less annually visit to Sri Pāda. This shows that any generalization of those people's religious behaviours must be cautiously made, partly because their religious behaviour may vary from the central values of the sites and the quality of the gods and goddesses they worship. But it might not always the case, some groups from similar social backgrounds can be unadjusted or compete with the intrinsic value of those sites. For example, youth religiosity at Sri Pāda shows how they produce, contest and negotiate culturally transmitted patterns of thought and practice while forming a religious heritage and assimilating it into their 'lifeworld's' by blending both religious and non-religious activities and expectations in creative and unforeseeable ways (see de Silva, 2020: 139-156).

'COLOMBO CROWD'

As my informant who runs a small teashop for the pilgrims told me, a large number of pilgrims would come from Colombo in March and their presence at Sri Pāda would give him a considerably higher income compared to the other months of the pilgrimage season. For this reason I was eager to see these '*kolamba kattiya*'. As my informant predicted, pilgrims came from Colombo in large numbers with their families, relatives and friends. Almost every group consisted of male/female, young/elderly, and even children/babies.

Interestingly, as I later found, most of these pilgrims came from the so-called underprivileged areas of the capital city.[10] Large numbers seemed to come from the North and the West Colombo slums, especially from areas such as Maradana (Colombo 10), Kotahena

[10] For a general discussion of their life patterns, see K.T. Silva and K Athukorala (1991) and N. Fernando (2017). According to Perera the massive transformation took place during the colonial period particularly indigenization of various immigrant communities but their familiarization of the Colombo city were not even. The different origins, lengths of stay, speeds of naturalization, cultural perceptions, and spaces familiar to them transformed Colombo into culturally and spatially the most diverse city in Ceylon (2016: 33). The expansion of the city limits also incorporated indigenous and migrant neighborhoods. In addition, the "immigrants" in Colombo had also naturalized by the end of the nineteenth century, indigenizing both colonial spaces and their own cultural practices (ibid).

and Dematagoda (Colombo 9)] where a large number of 'urban poor', both Sinhala and Tamil, live. Though they had come from underprivileged areas of Colombo, most of them were dressed in their best 'western' clothes, and rarely in traditional white. Some men and women had covered their necks and hands with jewellery and fancy items. Many spent lavishly on food, drinks and souvenirs.

Unlike other pilgrims, they did not rush home but spent a few days either in the southern or northern pilgrimage bazaar towns in order to relax, take river baths and basically 'enjoy' themselves with their families, relatives and friends. This Colombo contingent usually comes to Sri Pāda during the month of March, particularly around the *mädin* full moon day festival, (hence locals in the Sri Pāda area used to call that festival day as '*kolamba pōya*' the full moon day of Colombo people). During this period several special trains run from Colombo to Hatton, the plantation town neighbouring the northern pilgrimage bazaar. Their presence at Sri Pāda creates a more vibrant and colourful atmosphere, both along the path and at the temple. Like other pilgrims they usually worship and make offerings, both at the footprint shrine and the shrine of the god Saman. I noticed, many offered the fruit basket (*pūjā vatti*) to god Saman, either on releasing the vows that they had made in previous visits, or in seeking a general blessing from the god. The temple staff, though they were critical about their general behaviour at the temple, agreed that the visit of 'Colombo crowed' to Sri Pāda resulted in a large increment of temple income compared to other months.

The visit to the Sri Pāda temple for these Colombo pilgrims is a very important event in their annual religious calendar. As some of the pilgrims I interviewed told me, they begin to prepare for the Sri Pāda journey well before the commencement of the pilgrimage season. They used to save money with the aim of undertaking the Sri Pāda journey every year. Many of them save the money through the rotating credit system popularly known as "*seittu*". This system is most popular among rural and urban women of low-income groups. Considerable numbers of people from these underprivileged neighbourhoods, however, go on pilgrimage to Sri Pāda with the support of individual sponsors in these neighbourhoods. These sponsors are basically influential men of their communities, and

they can be characterized as "strong men" in the sense of wealth and power. Most of these sponsors make money by engaging in "illegal business" in their respective communities. Under such personal sponsorship the expenses of the entire pilgrim group would be looked after by those "strong men". In turn, pilgrims in such a group would offer respect, obedience and behave under the sponsor's words throughout the journey. This kind of personal sponsorship among pilgrims seems not to be an old arrangement, but rather a recent innovation that cannot be even found among other pilgrims groups.

Emergence of such personal sponsors for the pilgrim's group is a clear departure from the 'traditional' arrangement of the pilgrim's groups (*nade*) discussed in my other paper (de Silva, 2019). One informant from the Colombo pilgrims told me how he went on pilgrimage to Sri Pāda with a *nade* of his neighbourhood, normally organised by a *nadegura*, the leader of the *nade*, and how he taught how to sing "*tunsarana*" (devotional songs) prior to the pilgrimage, and advised them on the practice of self-restraint during the journey, and how the *nade* respected and obeyed the authority of the nadegura. Such an arrangement is no doubt very similar to the formation of a village pilgrim group in many ways. Hence, one could consider such arrangements as the continuation of village level pilgrimage practices in a highly urbanised context. Certainly, such practices would have been brought to Colombo by people who had migrated from villages, and became working class city dwellers.[11] However, like other pilgrim groups, the arrangement of today's Colombo groups has undergone a set of changes, including the emergence of an individual sponsor for certain pilgrim's groups from the predominantly proletarian parts of Colombo. One such sponsor justified his spending as "meritorious giving" and he firmly believes such an act would help him to successfully conduct his own business. These new sponsors not only expect to gain material benefit but also seek personal honour from fellow pilgrims. In other words, these new sponsors are enjoying a sense of leadership among fellow pilgrims that was previously enjoyed by traditional pilgrims' leaders, *nadegura*.

Some characteristics of "Colombo crowd" can be illustrated by a

[11] Historically speaking, some of the ancestors of these slum communities were highly engaged in collective 'Buddhist activities' at Sri Pāda, particularly building of *ambalam* (pilgrim's rests), supplying drinking water and free foods for pilgrims (*dansala*). During my field research I observed that some of their descendants still operate few *dansala*s particularly at the time of their own [Colombo] pilgrims visit to Sri Pāda. The collective 'Buddhist activities' of these city dwellers at Sri Pāda, no doubt can be recognized as what John Rogers calls "non-elite participation of the Buddhist revival activities" (see 1997:323-333). The Buddhist revival began in last quarter of the nineteenth century by the upwardly mobile elites against the cultural encroachment of Christianity but as Rogers correctly points out studies of the revival have not yet dealt systematically the non-elite activities in

few case studies, which I have gathered at one of the overcrowded working-class slum neighbourhoods in the North of Colombo, Kotahena. This neighbourhood called Belinwatta is closely situated to the Colombo port where most people in the community work as port labourers as did their ancestors.[12] This area contains an important Buddhist temple; Dipaduttamaramaya which enjoyed virtual hegemony over the nineteenth-century Buddhist revival, particularly its resistance to Christian missions under the revivalist activities of orator monk Mohottivatte Gunananda, from a Southern coastal town who presided over the temple for nearly fifty years. Though this community has its own temple now, some people still maintain their connection with the historically important Dipaduttamaramaya. There is a small Hindu temple in the community where the Tamil segment of the community regularly make offering to the god Murukan. Interestingly, both Sinhala and Tamil people in this community speak both languages fluently and live in considerable peace.

I met Ebert (59) and Ananda (28) at the Sri Pāda temple and briefly interviewed them there, but then made a few follow-up interviews with them at their own community. Let's talk about Ebert first.

CASE A. Ebert Zoysa was born of Sinhala Buddhist parents in 1944. He is now fifty-nine years old. His father was a port labourer at the Colombo port as was his grandfather. Ebert's grandfather originally came from the Southern coastal area called Dadalla near Matara, similarly his mother's father also came from the neighbouring area called Gandara. Ebert's father married in 1942 and he was the second eldest of seven children; six of them are alive at present. All of Ebert's siblings are male except the youngest. Ebert went to Gunananda primary School at Kotehena up to grade five. He is bilingual. He can read and speak Tamil in addition to his mother tongue Sinhala. Several years after leaving school, Ebert became a port labourer following in the footsteps of his father and his father's father. In 1999 he retired. Now he runs own three-wheel taxi for a living. Ebert has three children, all of them married except the youngest son. Ebert made his first journey to Sri Pāda when he was fourteen, and according to his calculation he has visited Sri Pāda thirty five times so far. On one of those visits he first met his marriage

the Buddhist revival (ibid. 324). One such non-elite activist was H. Salamon Singho who was trained as tailor. In 1913 he started a society called "*Sripadabhivadaka dāna samitiya*" with the intention of supplying free food and drink (dansala) for the *pilgrims* who largely visit Sri Pāda around the full moon day in March with the help of the donations from pious Buddhists. In 1926 the society constructed an *ambalama* at the Seetagangula of the Kuruvita path where it gave *dansala* for thirty nine years. After the death of Salamon Singho in 1954 the society ceased to function. (This brief information was obtained from a pamphlet belonging to his daughter. She gave me a copy of the pamphlet but was reluctant to talk much about her father). Similar but the detail story was documented by Kanthi M. Vitharana (see: chapter 03 &

partner who came from a neighbouring proletariat part of the city. When I met Ebert at Sri Pāda he was with a *nade* of twenty-seven; all of then belonged to his extended family apart from a few friends. The journey to Sri Pāda in Ebert words is "religious as well as an enjoyable". He continues,

> *My parents used to take us to Sri Pāda from our childhood, we do exactly the same thing for our children. I took my children to Sri Pāda when they were babies. We go to Sri Pāda every year, but we don't go to Kataragama every year unless we have to fulfil a vow. Sri Pāda is the journey that everybody in this area would hardly miss. People enjoy going to Sri Pāda, but we actually enjoy ourselves after finishing our worship. The worship of the sacred footprint and the god Saman is the main purpose of our visit to Sri Pāda. Every year I offer a fruit tray (pūjā vatti) to god Saman even when I do not make a vow at his shrine. After all of these activities at the maluwa (temple) we enjoy ourselves with our families and friends by spending one or two days at Palabaddala or Nallatanni (the small towns the foothill of Sri Pāda). But today many people take Sri Pāda pilgrimage as entirely 'vinoda gamanak' (a pleasure trip) particularly young people. They hardly perform the customs and the practices (sirith-virith), which are appropriate to Sri Pāda journey. Therefore, unlike in the past the miraculous power (hāskam) at Sri Pāda has been disappearing. For example: there is no rush for large numbers of people is presented at the temple (even it has a very limited space) but today the belief in such miracles don't happened. We still come to Sri Pāda because if we don't make this journey each year we feel like something has not happened to our life (siri pāde nogiyāma aduvak vage dënenava). Even one or two months after the journey we talk about our experiences with our neighbours and friends by doing*

04, 2004) on non-elite involvement in Sri Pada affairs particularly supplying of electricity to the Sri Pada temple after establishing 'Svasthika Brotherhood Society' at Grandpass area, Colombo in 1933. It was dysfunction after the government-initiated project was launched to electrify the pilgrim's paths in 1950.

[12] Interestingly many of their roots go back to the southern province of the island where they originally came from before settling in this part of the city as workers of Colombo port during its expansion under the British colonial rule.

that we enjoy it and sometimes laugh and make jokes. Sometime we start to talk about similar things just prior to the next journey. When our neighbours get ready to go to Sri Pāda we also make our plans for the next journey. When the pilgrimage season comes in each year no one dares to ignore it. I would say it is our annual journey that our parent trained us to undertake from our childhood we still enjoy (he means both sacred and secular manner) visiting Sri Pāda.

CASE B. Ananda is an unmarried Sinhala Buddhist man in his late twenties and has become a well-known moneylender in this area. He runs this business together with his mother and brother and has not allowed others to taken up business in the neighbourhood. Ananda has been visiting Sri Pāda since he was nine, and when I met him at the Sri Pāda temple he was just completing his fourteenth journey together with a group that he had sponsored. According to his words:

We visit Sri Pāda every year, I would be really disappointed if I missed it. When the pilgrimage season comes it is so difficult for me to avoid the Sri Pāda journey. During the month of March everybody talk about the Sri Pāda journey. It is not like the journey to Kataragama, we don't go to Kataragama every year but we all go to Sri Pāda every year. If someone doesn't have money to go to Sri Pāda, people voluntarily support them. This time I took thirty people including myself. I looked after all their expenses, that cost me Rs.30, 000 but some people may think that I am a "foolish"[13]*. I spend that amount of money because people like me strongly believe that spending money on Sri Pāda pilgrimages will encourage us to run our business successful manner. I believe that god Saman helps such people. I have already experienced it myself on several occasions. On one occasion I was about to do a profitable deal [brokerage of land] with a company, before that deal I visited Sri Pāda*

[13] He used the term "*mōra*" (lit. 'shark' but no relevance at all to it real meaning) such language expression is commonly found in the everyday language use of people living in this part of the City.

and asked help of the god Saman by making a vow. Surprisingly, the deal was succeeded. I don't usually offer fruit basket (pūjā vatti) to god Saman as other business people do in our area but I offer money to him and the footprint because my business is directly connected with the money. I know many people not like me they do "bad business" such as drug dealing, selling illicit liquor, running gambling centers. They earn a lot of money by doing such businesses when they go to Sri Pāda they wear a lot of jewellery on their hands and necks to show their richness to others but I know some were wearing imitation jewellery. I myself wear jewellery but not imitations. I remember when I was a child, our whole family was taken to Sri Pāda by a person who sold illicit liquor. He is still taking pilgrims to Sri Pāda with his own money. Since we began our own business we don't go behind them. I have my own group now, I take them to Sri Pāda each year, and anybody would like to join into my pilgrim group they all are welcome, I have the courage to look after them. I usually take my group to Sri Pāda by train as most others do. In the train we enjoy ourselves by singing, dancing and joking with each other. Most of the train carrying pilgrims from Colombo is occupied by the pilgrims from our part of the city. Sometime fighting erupts between different pilgrim's groups when they try to over occupy the train seats. On one occasion, two of my group broke their teeth, and some of them were taken into police custody and as a result we had to cancel our journey. These things are happen every year; it may also happen in the pilgrimage bazaar towns when all the people from Colombo gather there. Once we get to the pilgrimage bazaar town, Nallatanni, we stay there over night and then go to the Sri Pāda temple and return to Nallatani. At Nallatanni we enjoy ourselves for at least three days with our fellow pilgrims. Some

years, after spending a few days at Sri Pāda we make a trip to the hill resort city of Nuwara Eliya to have more fun.

These two accounts give us a different picture of the pilgrims who visit Sri Pāda from lower class social backgrounds. As I mentioned before most "Colombo crowd" come to Sri Pāda from the overcrowded working-class slums, though some of them have managed to accumulate a certain amount of money through "illegal business" and have become pilgrim's sponsors like Ananda (case B) in their respective neighbourhood. As the two case studies show, the journey of Colombo pilgrims to Sri Pāda is not necessarily entirely religious but combines seeking 'divine' help and 'pleasure' (see de Silva 2019). The latter purpose seems to have developed more recently.

Let me compere this situation with Gombrich & Obeyesekere who co-authored the massive book, *Buddhism Transformed* (1988) where they have detailed the religiosity of the "urban proletarian" class, in which city slum dwellers like my "Colombo crowd" are predominantly represented. According to them "urban proletarians" are the adherents of new urban spirit cults that have emerged around three deities, namely Huniyam, Kali, and especially Kataragama. The popularity of these deities among the proletarians, according to them, is further evident in the emergence of new shrines dedicated to them in the proletarian parts of the city. Specifically, in these areas Kali and Huniyam have become increasingly important (ibid.). In my view, however, their interpretation of the religiosity of the urban proletarian class has failed to understand its connection to "traditional" pilgrimage sites like Sri Pāda or the purpose of their visiting those sites. Detailed accounts are provided of the increasing prominence of the three deities among the people belong to this class and their forms of religiosity are identified as "new spirit cults" (1988: 65-163) in the "disordered modern society" (1988:100).

This process has been identified in broad psychological terms. Gombrich & Obeyesekere attribute the key to the emergence of '*bhakti* religiosity' as 'urbanisation', consisting primarily of a 'breakdown of traditional structures of authority and meaning' (ibid.

53), the failure of the economy to meet the aspirations of the people, a political system which encourages unrealistic aspirations, and mass universal education, which, in turn, increases social aspirations. Such changes, according to them, have heightened the psychological tensions of the masses and one way of relieving such tensions is to rely on new forms of religious devotionalism. As I have shown elsewhere such an analysis fails to see how so-called "traditional forms of religiosity" are engaging in continually innovative practices, albeit in different forms in contemporary Sri Lanka (de Silva 2000). Their investigation has failed to identify 'continuity' as well as the 'changes' in the 'old' forms of religiosity. As I demonstrate in this paper pilgrims belonging to the "urban proletarian" class are still attracted in large numbers to sites like Sri Pāda, where the Buddha, and the most benevolent deities like god Saman, have long been worshipped and honoured. Though the motivations of "Colombo crowd", like other pilgrims to today's Sri Pāda vary from devotional forms of worship to the extreme position of seeking pleasure, the point is that Sri Pāda has continued to flourish as a pilgrimage site that attracts people from lower- social class backgrounds. The nature of religiosity of those groups depends upon the intrinsic qualities of the sacred shrines they frequently visit. Also, the paper is not merely focus on the devotional practices of urban poor at Sri Pada and what do such devotional practices connect with many other practices in those low-income settlements.

CONCLUSION

In the existing anthropological literature both Obeyesekere and Kapferer agree that deity worship in contemporary Sri Lanka is more a middle-class practice than working class or peasant practice. As I demonstrate above, their formulation is problematic: when compared with the social background of the pilgrims who visit national pilgrimage sites like Sri Pāda. For Buddhists, Sri Pāda is a site of worship oriented to the Buddha and the deity Saman and it largely attracts pilgrims from 'peasant and working class' than from the so-called "middle class". This suggests the looseness of the class analysis of popular worship in contemporary Sri Lanka. In

considering religiosity of urban poor at Sri Pada, we can conclude that they are not necessarily followers of Hindu-type '*Bhakti* religiosity' as described by Obeyesekere (1978) but they continually worship traditional deities like Saman[14] and on top of that the Buddha or his relic like Sacred Footprint. It also suggests that the urban poor use their sacred spaces as arenas for retaining and reviving old and new forms of religiosity but do not necessarily move away from their traditional form of worship, belief and reverence that they have inherited from the older generations before moving into the capital city of Colombo. The findings in this study are not beyond the dialectic of continuities and discontinuities during urbanization, modernization even globalization of Sri Lankan society, but they rebalance this dialectic in favour of continuity and change. Therefore, this paper made an effort to explain how the religiosity of urban poor is in the process of continuity and transformation in the increasingly globalized and urbanised Sri Lanka.

[13] See detail of worship of deity Saman (de Silva, 2008).

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Premakumara de Silva is the Chair Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo. He also a Senior Research Fellow at University of Birmingham, UK and was an Adjunct Professor at Deakin University, Australia.

MARLON ARIYASINGHE
Stanford University

Fugitive Sites: Tamil Memorialization in Post-War Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This paper examines performance as a fugitive site of memorialization in post-war Sri Lanka, focusing on the discussions that followed Strangers in the Night, a devised trilingual performance staged in Tamil-majority regions. Set against the backdrop of Maaveerar Naal (Remembrance Day), the performances generated politically charged audience discussions, emerging as dialogic spaces of remembrance and resistance in a context where Tamil mourning is heavily policed. Engaging Diana Taylor's work on the archive and the repertoire and disappearances, the article shows how testimonies, gestures, and interruptions function as "vital acts of transfer" through which memory persists without stabilization (Taylor, 2003). These exchanges operate as repertoire: ephemeral and embodied. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "ephemera as evidence" further illuminates how affective traces, silences, tears, faltering speech, constitute forms of political testimony that resist dominant regimes of visibility and documentation (Muñoz, 1996). The article also attends to the gendered nature of post-war trauma, foregrounding how women often assume the role of custodians of memory under conditions that seek to silence their grief. Situating Strangers in the Night within a broader lineage of Sri Lankan theatre, the article demonstrates how performance operates as a fugitive practice: temporary, covert and produced under conditions of surveillance and risk.

KEYWORDS:

Acts of Transfer, Fugitive Sites, Tamil Memorialization, Embodiment, Post-War Sri Lanka.

"He left home on his bicycle. Later, we found his slippers and part of his shirt by the roadside."

At a performance in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, a woman shared this account of her brother's disappearance during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war. What was being spoken within the performance space carried risks beyond the room. A local facilitator, who was translating this account into English from Tamil, faltered midway. Overcome, she could no longer continue, and one of the Tamil cast members stepped in to translate in her place. I was sitting among the cast, a marginal witness. And since positionality is already on the table, it is useful to know that I belong to the Sinhala majority - an identity that does not enter a place like Tamil-majority Jaffna neutrally in the aftermath of the civil war. It was only afterward that I learned why the translator had broken down: The woman's testimony had triggered memories of the translator's own brother, who had disappeared twenty-six years earlier. In that moment, however, what registered in me was the knowledge the interruption carried rather than the explanation. The room held the pause, and the performance slipped, almost imperceptibly, into something else.

This unfolded on November 30, 2022, at Chunnaham Library Hall in Jaffna, during a performance of *Strangers in the Night*, a devised piece directed by Tracy Holsinger and produced by Mind Adventures Theatre Company and Semmugam Performing Group. The performance was trilingual (English, Tamil, and Sinhala) and brought together actors from Colombo, Jaffna, Bogowantalawa, and Kandy. *Strangers in the Night* was based on Mike Masilamani's poem of the same title, set in Colombo in 2005, at a time when daily life was shaped by war, suicide bombings, checkpoints, disappearances, and state violence against minority communities. These lived experiences of the multi-ethnic cast and crew were shared unevenly across languages and regions and carried into the rehearsal room[1]. The piece employed a thrust stage to blur the boundary between performers and spectators, generating an intimate atmosphere. The performances in the war-affected North and East of the island took place later and required a series of adjustments to the work as it had first been devised in Colombo.

[1] *Strangers in the Night* was first devised in Colombo in October 2022, over the course of twenty-four continuous hours. We met at 8 p.m.; the performance premiered the following evening at 8 p.m. Within that compressed duration, the cast, hailing from across the island, collectively generated the music, choreography, and scenes that would structure the work.

Having stepped back to sketch the context, I now return to the unfolding moment where I was no longer fully inside the performance and not yet outside it either. The performance had 'ended,' and the discussion had 'begun.' However, in Peggy Phelan's terms, this was one of performance's many ends: where endings become beginnings (Phelan and Lane, 1998). Disappearances, especially in the context of post-war North and East, persist as ongoing presences. Then something happened. Following the woman's account, other audience members began to speak, some recounting personal losses. The exchanges moved from testimony to reflection, from recollection to how the disappeared might continue to be spoken for without being spoken over.

It was much later that I wanted to return to this moment. Phelan explains this belatedness. Drawing on Freud's notion of Nachträglichkeit (afterwardness), Phelan posits that the event exceeds our capacity to grasp it as it happens; it becomes legible only later, in the repeated acts of talking, remembering, and trying to understand what has already disappeared (Phelan and Lane, 1998). This notion of afterwardness also echoes the temporal condition of Tamil memorialization, where loss is repeatedly articulated, sometimes decades after, in fragments, through gestures or testimonies in gatherings. Such forms emerge because the conditions for public mourning are policed or deferred. I structure this account through shifts between scene and retrospect, as part of the repeated returns through which the event becomes legible. I also borrow another sense of the 'ends' from Phelan, where ends are futures, marking consequences the event sets in motion (Phelan and Lane, 1998). From one such future, I re(-)turn to the conversations that followed the 'staged' piece.

When relating this incident, once again belatedly, to a close friend and human rights activist, Ambika Satkunanathan, I used the words "remarkable" and "moving." I hesitate to do so now. Ambika, drawing on her extensive work with communities across the North and East, noted that such moments of collective sharing occur in activist and trusted spaces during and after the war. Ambika's reflection made me think of Sharika Thiranagama's idea of "war as mundane existence," developed in dialogue with Lubkemann's concept of the "social condition of war." (Thiranagama, 2011, pp. 5-8). Ambika's

observation re-marked the event and moved me to contemplate the testimonies. How the intimate stage configuration of the performance reconfigured the conditions of speech, redistributed, though not eliminated, the risks of speaking. The performances of Strangers in the Night in Jaffna took place on November 30 and in Kilinochchi on December 1. These dates carry significance and risks. November 27, for example, is a day of political and emotional significance for Tamil communities in Sri Lanka and the diaspora because of Maaveerar Naal (Great Heroes' Day), or Remembrance Day commemorations. The performance, which occurred days after, thus situates itself within a heightened commemorative atmosphere due to its proximity to Maaveerar Naal. The dialogic acts of collective remembrance that took place within the performance space marked resistance in a landscape where Tamil public memorialization remained heavily policed.



Figure 1: Posters of *Strangers in the Night* performances. Image source: Mind Adventures Theatre Company.

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, police and military forces have routinely harassed commemorative gatherings in the North and East. Tamil memorials were destroyed, and organizers and participants at remembrance events faced arrests and intimidation. Writing about commemorations in Jaffna and Kilinochchi three years after the war, Ruki Fernando notes that participants mourned "for the lack of space to even cry and remember without fear" (Fernando, 2012). Centring the discussions of Strangers in the Night as commemorative acts, I argue that in Sri Lanka, where the state's historical narrative seeks to erase or obscure the trauma of Tamil communities, performance spaces become fugitive sites of resistance and memorialization[2]. In this paper, 'performance' refers to both *Strangers in the Night* and the testimonies that followed the 'staged' piece. I use the term fugitive to describe spaces that are temporary, covert, and produced under conditions of surveillance and political risk, in ways that recall what Ulrich Beck theorizes as the socially mediated nature of risk. Beck argues that in late modernity, risks are "systematically produced" alongside social processes shaping the conditions under which subjects can act or speak (Beck, 1992). Performance emerges as a fugitive site not outside risk but within it. Fugitive sites offer alternative modes of engaging with the past, in contrast to the hegemonic narratives upheld by the Sinhala-Buddhist state. As Sasanka Perera posits, "memory is not a simple matter of accidental or idiosyncratic recall," but is shaped by social and political contexts (Perera, 2015). The discussions offer a plurality of voices that reclaim muffled histories. The work of Diana Taylor, particularly her formulation of the archive and the repertoire alongside her earlier work on disappearance, is helpful to unpack the discussions of *Strangers in the Night*. Taylor draws a distinction between what she calls the archive, which consists of texts, documents, and recordings, and the repertoire, which includes embodied practices like gesture, ritual, and performance. As Taylor notes, histories have often been understood to have "disappeared" when they lack written documentation (Taylor, 2003, p. 16), reinforcing the authority of literate and institutional forms of knowledge. Against this, the repertoire offers an alternative system of circulation. The collective witnessing and memorialization in *Strangers in the Night* belong to what Diana Tay-

[2] In Black studies, fugitivity or 'fugitive planning' has been theorized as a durational practice of minoritarian social life, refusal, and living otherwise within and against institutional structures (Moten and Harney 2013; Campt 2017). Uri McMillan (2015) conceptualizes fugitive acts as "prosthetic performances," where public disguise and the body are strategically deployed as survival mechanisms. My reading of the term refers to the temporary emergence of precarious collective expression within a specific setting.

lor describes as the repertoire. Taylor stresses that performance "also functions as an epistemology… embodied practice… offers a way of knowing" (2003, p. 3). In *Disappearing Acts*, Taylor emphasizes that disappearance exceeds the loss of individual bodies, extending to the erosion of public life itself: "just as human beings disappeared, so did civil society" (1997, p. x). Under such conditions, visibility is at stake. As Ana María Fernandez, cited in Taylor, notes, "the invisible is not what is hidden but what is denied" (1997, p. 135). What is denied in the Sri Lankan state archive is not only 'historical records' but the legitimacy of Tamil grief and remembrance. What lingers in the body. What José Estaban Muñoz calls ephemera as evidence: traces carried in gesture, voice, and affect rather than in documentation (Muñoz, 1996). Ephemera refers to what remains after performance, enabling minoritarian histories to circulate through residual affect and collective memory (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). The testimonies of *Strangers in the Night* resist the hegemonic, monologic history propagated by the Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist (SBN) state and reclaim Tamil memory through embodied remembrance in performance spaces. I also attend to the gendered nature of trauma in post-conflict Sri Lanka, where women's experiences of war take on a distinct form. The testimonies reveal how women are often tasked with sustaining the memory of the disappeared while negotiating the proscription of their expressions of grief. Sri Lankan theatre carries a counter-hegemonic legacy. This paper will also look at this lineage in Sinhala and Tamil performance, tracing how it creates fugitive sites for memorialization.

As a cast member myself, now reflecting as a scholar artist, my own positionality is complex and, at times, tenuous. My role extended beyond performance into documentation as I created an audiovisual archive of *Strangers in the Night* and the discussions it generated. This process was informed by my background in journalism in handling sources and sensitive materials. The documentation of the discussions will remain private. While this paper is a 'written record,' its function is to document the traces, honouring the fleeting, emotionally charged exchanges without rendering them fully visible or betraying their subversive power. When dealing with narratives of trauma, there is always a risk of re-traumatization or of spectators

feeling exploited or objectified. In this context, one ethical challenge was to ensure that *Strangers in the Night* did not reduce the complex experiences of the Tamil community to a 'spectacle.' In responding to questions, the director and the cast explained how the performance did not have a didactic purpose. Instead, one of the primary motivations for bringing the performance to the North and the East was rooted in the desire to present the work in the hometowns of the cast members. The cast served as a powerful anchor for the production. In particular, cast members from the North, who had endured the war's devastation, could relate to the testimonies that were shared. For those from the South, while they too had also grown up in a country marred by war, the performance became a space for dialogic exchange. Through listening to and witnessing the testimonies, and through performance, they came to embody and better understand the costs of war.

POLICING MEMORY

How were we done for in this war?
What did we lose?
What did we gain?
On the walls lining our streets,
we must set down
the history of these heinous men.

From 'Done for by War' by Paamathi (Scroll.in, 2019)

The war can be counted but not contained by counting. The Sri Lankan civil war lasted for 26 years. The government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) left a devastating toll on the country's population and economy. Estimates suggest that between 80,000 and 100,000 people were killed during the conflict, although the actual number remains unknown. In its final stages, particularly from January to May 2009, the fighting intensified dramatically, leading to widespread allegations of human rights violations. The United Nations estimates that 40,000–70,000 people may have been killed during this period alone, with mounting evidence that government forces deliberately targeted civilian areas, while the LTTE forcibly

prevented civilians from escaping by using them as human shields (United Nations, 2012, p. 14). One of the most troubling episodes occurred between 17 and 19 May 2009, when approximately 500 individuals reportedly disappeared after being taken into custody by the Sri Lankan Army and government authorities (Ball and Harrison, 2018, p. 7). Beyond the human cost, the war also had a massive economic impact, with the direct financial loss over the three decades of conflict estimated at around US$200 billion (Keerawella, 2013, p. 2). Yet the impact of the conflict cannot be understood solely through statistics or economic loss. As Thiranagama articulates, "the battlefields of the war were not only the frontlines where soldiers died, but also the internal lives of communities and families" (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 10). The war thus reshaped everyday social relations, leaving enduring psychological and communal scars. This lived reality is reflected in personal testimonies, as one audience member recalls: "We know the terror of war. I remember as a child hearing a shell being fired. I ran as fast as I could, but crashed into a barbed wire fence, injuring myself and breaking a tooth. Then the shell hit." (*Strangers in the Night performance*, 2022, Chunnaham).

The military defeat of the LTTE reshaped the country's internal power dynamics. The ruling government capitalized on its battlefield success, gaining significant political leverage. The military triumph has been repeatedly commemorated through annual Victory Day events. They reinforced the state's ethnonationalist identity, leading to a postwar political environment in which the state apparatus became increasingly centralized and militarized under the guise of national unity and security. The post-war reconstruction in the Northern Province has also been shaped by pervasive militarization, which has intensified Tamil alienation (International Crisis Group, 2012b). The SBN state has consistently suppressed Tamil events that remember LTTE combatants or Tamil civilian victims. In particular, Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day on May 18 and Maaveerar Naal on November 27: the former marks the end of the war and the deaths and killings of civilians in Mullivaikkal, and the latter honours fallen LTTE cadres. Each year in Mullivaikkal, North East of the island, mourners gather to light flames, lay flowers, and play defiant songs invoking Tamil Eelam (Arulthas, 2023).



Figure 2: The Mullivaikkal war memorial at Jaffna University prior to demolition. Image source: Tamil Youth Org, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Sri Lankan state, however, views these commemorations through a security lens, equating them with the glorification of terrorism, and has often responded with surveillance, intimidation, arrests, and destruction of memorials (International Crisis Group, 2012a, p. 14). On 27 November 2011, military and police forces reportedly attempted to block any Maaveerar Naal commemorations across the north and east. Just weeks later, a peaceful demonstration for International Human Rights Day on 10 December was disrupted - activists from Colombo were barred from attending, participants were photographed by authorities, and two organizers were abducted in Jaffna the night before the event (International Crisis Group, 2012a, p. 15). Fernando notes how memorial gatherings took place under surveillance, with army and intelligence officers photograph-

ing participants and questioning priests about services planned to remember those killed (Fernando, 2012). In some instances, the clergy were warned not to conduct prayers for those who died during the final phase of the war. In 2013, alongside official state celebrations of the military's victory, the Rajapaksa government intensified its suppression of LTTE-related commemorations. Citing concerns that such events could mobilize Tamil communities politically, the government formally banned activities associated with LTTE remembrance. The military declared that any observance of Heroes' Day on 27 November 2013 would be considered unlawful (McDowell and Braniff, 2014, p. 96). In January 2021, authorities bulldozed the Mullivaikkal Memorial at the University of Jaffna, a monument dedicated to Tamil civilians killed during the war's final stages (BBC News, 2021; Koneshachandra, 2021; The Contested Histories Initiative, 2021). Later the same year, the courts in Mullaitivu banned public Maaveerar Naal commemorations following requests from the Sri Lankan police, who targeted key Tamil activists and political figures to prevent memorial events (Tamil Guardian, 2021). Such bans and restrictions were issued under the pretext of maintaining public order. In November 2023, authorities arrested at least 10 Tamil civilians under the Prevention of Terrorism Act between November 25 and 27 in Batticaloa and confiscated decorations and loudspeakers from a commemoration vigil (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Satkunanathan, 2023). Among those who were arrested was a bakery employee for selling a cake and an 18-year-old schoolboy (Tamil Guardian, 2023). However, when faced with proscription and erasure, memory endures in different forms.

Performing Tamil memory

> *We've lived through such difficult times, now we're returning to our homes with heavy hearts. Back then, if we had spoken out, we could have disappeared too. But today, we must speak. We need to talk about it now.*
>
> (*Strangers in the Night* performance, 2022, Chunnaham).

Not all memory can be held in one place. Sasanka Perera describes

Sri Lankan visual art as a "repository of violent memory" (Perera, 2015), preserving experiences of war, disappearance, and trauma. Perera examines paintings, installations, and exhibitions produced particularly during the 1990s, to show that visual art operates as an alternative, counter-archive of violence[3]. His analysis privileges visual forms that endure beyond the moment of their production and can circulate as relatively stable carriers of memory within the cultural field. More broadly, theatre and live performance, despite their long-standing role in Sri Lanka as vehicles for political critique and social reflection, fall outside of the scope of the chapter and the volume's wider engagement with memory, erasure and artistic responses to political violence. Perera includes performance art under the category of visual arts. However, his analysis primarily focuses on paintings, installations, and exhibitions whose material persistence allows them to function as repositories of memory. My focus in this paper shifts from repository to fugitivity. I explore how, under conditions of surveillance and repression, memorialization may emerge through the ephemeral, affective acts.

[3] In his chapter "Visual Artists Remember; Visual Artists Narrate," Perera looks at artists who transform personal and collective experiences of political violence into visual forms that challenge dominant state histories and keep suppressed memories in circulation. Among the artists he discusses are Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, and Pradeep Chandrasiri, whose works confront themes of disappearance, militarization, and social trauma. He also examines collective initiatives such as the Aham Puram exhibition.

Theatre has always been recognized as a conduit for affective responses, both in spectators and performers alike. This perception is deeply rooted in the Aristotelian conception of Katharsis, as the purging of strong repressed emotions. Throughout history, instances such as the *Astor Place Riot*[4] in 1849 New York and the controversial premiere of *The Rite of Spring*[5] in 1913 Paris illustrate how theatre has incited intense reactions, sometimes erupting into riots. Antoine Artaud writes, "A real stage play disturbs our peace of mind, releases our repressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion" (Artaud, 2013, pp. 18–19). Artaud delineates theatre as plague, referring to its capacity to indiscriminately infect large congregations and its potent, almost virulent impact on the collective consciousness. Sinhala theatre, from traditional forms like Kōlam, which integrated the critique of public institutions and individuals into everyday life, to Gamini Haththotuwegama's street performances in the 1970s, leveraged public spaces for anti-establishment, socio-political critique. Theatre anthropologist Ranjini Obeyesekere proposes that theatre is a key form of "critical political discourse" that drew "sustenance from the very traumas of the political situa-

tion" (Obeyesekere, 1992, p. 129). Obeyesekere refers to the 1980s, which saw the emergence of the LTTE, the beginning of the civil war, and a violent youth socialist insurrection.

Tamil performance history registers a similar political charge, but under different conditions of publicness. Tamil theatre goes beyond a representational form: "modern Sri Lankan Tamil theatre is an amalgamation of social, political and cultural activism with an oppressed consciousness" often giving voice to "mental illness, trauma and pain of the Tamil communities" produced by decades of conflict (Sharma and Thavachchelvi, 2021, p. 115). Sharma and Thavachchelvi draw on wartime theatre, propagandist street performances, and plays such as *Maathoru Paagam* (1984), M. Shamugalingam's *Man Sumantha Meniyar* (1988), and *Annai Itta Thee* (1998), to argue that Tamil theatre became a crucial space for representing collective trauma, displacement, and sexual violence (Sharma and Thavachchelvi, 2021). In addition to its antagonistic relationship to state power, first under an ethnonationalist Sri Lankan government and then under the governance of the LTTE, Tamil theatre also contended with the Sinhala-centric culture of the island. As Sengupta notes, Tamil theatre was "subsumed in the equation of 'Sinhala' theatre with 'Sri Lankan' theatre" (Sengupta, 2014, p. 47). S. Maunaguru observes that, following the 1983 Black July riots, Tamil cultural activity in Colombo declined and "drama disappeared," and when practitioners moved to Jaffna, they were restricted by the LTTE's "heavy-handed[ness]" (Muttulingam, 2012). Jim Sykes states that Jaffna was "largely closed off from the world for nearly three decades because of war," with postwar relations to Colombo remaining "tenuous" (Sykes, 2018, p. 99). Kanchuka Dharmasiri adds that "for security reasons, it became impossible to hold performances in theatre buildings," and dramatists "moved out of the officially sanctioned theatre spaces" toward "more communal and creative ways of expression" (Dharmasiri, 2014, p. 220). As cited in Dharmasiri (2014, p. 220), Sivathamby similarly argues that the earlier "mainstream theatre withered away," and that "alternate theatre rose to fill the void." M. Shanmugalingam agrees. He declares that "This theatre [Tamil Theatre] did not confine itself to the proscenium stage alone. It went to meet the people in their streets, junctions, markets,

[4] The Astor Place Riot occurred on 10 May 1849 outside the Astor Place Opera House in New York during rival performances of Macbeth by British actor William Charles Macready and American actor Edwin Forrest. The event escalated into violent clashes between supporters of the two actors and state militia, resulting in the deaths of more than twenty people. See Hewett, I., 2013. Did The Rite of Spring really spark a riot? BBC News Magazine, 29 May.

[5] Igor Stravinsky's ballet The Rite of Spring, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky and premiered by the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 29 May 1913, provoked a famously hostile audience reaction. See Leadon, F., 2024. The Astor Place Riot: Blood on the Cobblestones. Gotham Center for New York City History, 24 May.

fields and palmyra and coconut groves" (Shanmugalingam, 2012). Ranganathan and Queentus show that in the Tamil North, theatre traditions such as isai nadagam and koothu provided a crucial social space in the prewar period to transfeminine performers who played female roles: "as women did not consistently perform in these productions," making stage performance "a crucial space for transfeminine life in Jaffna" (Ranganathan and Queentus, 2025, p. 540). Under LTTE rule, however, "the LTTE banned all cultural production except plays produced by them," and while some performers adapted via sanctioned LTTE plays, others "subvert[ed] this prohibition by organizing secret dance events" (pp. 540-543). Against a backdrop of political turmoil, state violence, and curtailed freedoms of expression, both Sinhala and Tamil theatre functioned as a medium for critical socio-cultural reflection. *Strangers in the Night* can be situated within this lineage of Sri Lankan theatre.

As previously recounted, the story of the disappeared brother took place in the *Strangers in the Night* performance in Jaffna, just three days after Maaveerar Naal or Remembrance Day. The performance took place within a politically charged atmosphere where memorial events in the North and the East were disrupted by the State armed forces and police (Tamil Guardian, 2022). Under these conditions, the performances of *Strangers in the Night* in the North and East took on heightened significance. The story of the disappeared brother created a shift in what could be said. One account made others possible. And as Thambinathan et al. state, such acts of public memorialization are "integral to justice, truth-telling, reparation, and coming to terms with the nation's history" (Thambinathan et al., 2025, p. 732).

Charles W. Mills, through a critical race perspective, examines how memory functions in maintaining white ignorance and racial epistemic injustice[6]. Mills' conception of collective amnesia in his essay, "White Ignorance," refers to the systematic forgetting through which collective memory is structured (Mills, 2007, pp. 28–29). Mills is specifically writing within a U.S. racial context, yet his framework is adaptable to postwar Sri Lanka, where Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist identity and historiography similarly depend on a managed amnesia of Tamil suffering. In Sri Lanka, official narratives marginalize Tamil memory by distorting histories and violently

[6] Mills describes a "management of memory" that operates through socially orchestrated forgetting, particularly of the experiences and perspectives of Black communities and other marginalized groups (2007, p. 28). He writes, "there is an intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia," showing how dominant historical narratives erase Black counter-testimonies and render them epistemically invalid (2007, p. 29).

suppressing commemorative practices. The education system too, is implicated in this process. As a site of ideological conditioning, formal education perpetuated Tamil inferiority. An elderly audience member remarked: "In Sinhala history books, it's written in many places that Tamils are second-class citizens" (*Strangers in the Night* performance, 2022, Chunnaham). There were similar reflections from elderly audience members at the Jaffna and Kilinochchi performances, whose lives were shaped by the civil war and who belong to what Sharika Thiranagama terms the "generation of militancy" (Thiranagama, 2011).[7]

[7] By "generation of militancy," Thiranagama refers to groups of Tamil youth, especially born in the 1960s, who experienced militancy as a broad social and personal transformation, not only as membership in one organization.



Figure 3: *Strangers in the Night* discussions during the Jaffna and Kilinochchi performances. Image source: Marlon Ariyasinghe.

The woman who shared the disappearance of her brother expressed the emotional burden of revisiting this painful history. The translator, once recovered, responded with a deeply personal reflection and a gentle counter:

> I got into NGO work for financial reasons, but I've lost people in my own family. My brother disappeared 26 years ago. Since then, I've been working with institutions to trace the disappeared, supporting 1,200 families

> going through the same pain. I bought new clothes for my mother when I got married, but my mother did not wear them. She wore an old saree. Even 26 years later, she carries the pain within her. We think people will forget and move on, but even on our deathbed, it will remain. Like we learnt to live with COVID. Only if we learn to live with our pain and sorrow can we move to the next stage. I feel sad, but I accept that this happened. I know I became emotional when you shared your story. I ask that you take this story to others. (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham).

The translator's statement "even on our deathbed it will remain" signals that memory, particularly traumatic memory, is not linear. It lingers, commemorated across time and inherited across generations. Another audience member reflected: "It's difficult to find a solution to all of this through a play. But the performance reminded us of our responsibility to address these issues" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham). Another participant expressed appreciation for the forum created by the performance: "I am thankful for this forum/this drama, I know we got emotional, but we need to move forward with the memories, and I ask you to show this drama elsewhere" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham). Here, memory is framed as a shared process, something that should not remain contained.

Art historian TJ Demos extends the Foucauldian notion of counter-memory into the cultural and artistic domain, emphasizing its role in documentary practices, activist art, and social movements.[8] For Demos, counter-memory is "a practice of memory formation that is social and political, one that runs counter to the official histories of governments, mainstream mass media, and the society of the spectacle" (Demos, 2012). Demos identifies counter-memory as a driving force in movements like the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, where the act of collective remembering becomes integral to political mobilization, creating what he calls "experimental collective memory" (Demos, 2012). While Demos locates these practices within large-scale movements, his insistence on the transformative

[8] For Foucault, memory is a discourse, shaped by institutions, systems of knowledge, and historical forces. Counter-memory, or contre-mémoire, opposes what he calls the "regimes of truth" - a key concept introduced in 1975, modelled on power and knowledge and later modified by incorporating subjectivity (Lorenzini, 2015, pp. 2-3). Regimes of truth underpin official histories produced by the state and dominant narratives. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault famously writes: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (1990, p. 95), emphasizing that resistance is not external to power but embedded within its operations. Counter-memory thus becomes a tactical intervention within history itself.

political potential of art offers a valuable lens for understanding the reception of Strangers in the Night. During the discussion, one audience member reflected on this dual potential: "It's difficult to find a solution to all of this through a play. But the performance reminded us of our responsibility to address these issues" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham). This response can be understood through Taylor's formulation of performance as "vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity" (Taylor, 2003, p. 2). It also acknowledges the limits of artistic intervention - art alone cannot resolve political trauma. What the performance does, in line with Demos's claim, is to move spectators toward responsibility and collective reflection. Another participant expressed appreciation for the forum created by the performance: "I am thankful for this forum/this drama, I know we got emotional, but we need to move forward with the memories, and I ask you to show this drama elsewhere" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham). Here, memory is framed as a shared process, something that should not remain contained.

The discussions were at times confrontational. The audience fired back with questions like "What are you doing here?" "Why are you digging up the past?" and "You need to show this in the South, not in the North. We know what happened. The South needs to see this." These responses reflect the deep-rooted distrust and pain that persist within the Tamil communities in the North and East. During the performance at Thanthai Selva Auditorium, Jaffna, one participant connected the play's themes with collective Tamil experiences: "We have similar stories - we have confronted so many issues: culture, land, the disappeared. We have been suppressed by the ruling people" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Thanthai Selva). This statement placed the performance in a broader political context, positioning it as part of a continuum of Tamil resistance and trauma. Another man questioned the performance's intent directly, asking: "Why do you do this?" while yet another criticized its structure and reach: "When it's shown like this - here - how much of this message will go to Sinhala-speaking people? Also, there is no beginning or end, so how will people understand this? We fought for our rights… that is not mentioned anywhere" (Strangers in the

Night performance, 2022, Thanthai Selva). His concern reflects both a desire for clearer narrative framing and frustration over the invisibility of Tamil political struggle within broader public discourse. At the Kilinochchi performance, an audience member echoed these sentiments, speaking about the need for the South to confront its role in the war: "The young people from the South came to the North saying they needed to free the country. But what they did - we feel that. We feel the blood. They don't know what they did. Especially, this needs to be shown in the southern part. They came to kill" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Kilinochchi). His testimony highlights the emotional intensity and the call for national reckoning, particularly among younger Sinhalese who may have participated in the war without understanding its consequences.

The testimonies return, repeatedly, to women. Sisters, daughters, and mothers. Those who remain. This is the gendered nature of trauma in post-conflict Sri Lanka. In these contexts, women's experiences of the war – typically centred around the loss of loved ones, disappearances, and violence – frequently take on a distinct form. As R. Thavachchelvi and Priyanka Sharma observe, women's participation in performance is particularly significant, as their engagement with theatre "represents the resistance as well as the culture of creating a counter culture" (2021, p. 116). The testimonies highlight how women are often left to carry the burden of mourning, tasked with preserving the memory of the disappeared while simultaneously navigating a society that seeks to silence their grief. Diana Taylor notes, in her analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, how state violence frequently targets women "as mothers, in [their] motherhood" (Taylor, 1997, p. 187). Taylor emphasizes that the "performative nature of their demonstrations gave the women a way of dealing with it," that is, the loss and grief produced by disappearance (1997, p. 194). Sri Lanka's protests of the Mothers of the Disappeared, ongoing for over eight years, follow the same example. It is the country's longest-running protest.[9] These mothers, many of whom are Tamil women, have persistently gathered in public spaces, demanding justice and accountability for their loved ones who disappeared during the civil war, particularly in its final stages.[10] Their sustained presence reflects both the per-

[9] There were earlier movements such as the Mothers' Front in Sri Lanka, active in the late 1980s and 1990s, which also mobilized around enforced disappearances primarily in the South. For more on this, see Neloufer de Mel's chapter "Mother Politics and Women's Politics: Notes on the Contemporary Sri Lankan Women's Movement," in Women and the Nation's Narrative (2001).

[10] Taylor argues that motherhood itself operates as a performative and politicized role, one that can be consciously mobilized in contexts of repression (1997, p. 194). By bringing mourning into public space, these women shift what is often confined to the private sphere into a visible, collective act. As Taylor observes, "only by being visible could they be politically effective" (1997, p. 187).

sonal and collective resilience of women who refuse to let the state erase the memories of the disappeared. These protests, much like the discussions, are a response to the state's attempts to suppress Tamil mourning and memory. They also challenge the patriarchal norms that often marginalize women's voices in public discourse.



Figure 4: Scene from the *Strangers in the Night* performance. Image source: Kavindu Sivaraj, Bhanu Ekanayaka and Kannan Arunasalam.

PERFORMANCE AS FUGITIVE SITES

You came
In the dead of nite
You made me stand under the street light,
Now you're saying
I am a thamil in the wrong town
A stranger in the nite?
From *Strangers in the Night*

Live performance offers fugitive sites for memorialization. I now return, as a methodological gesture, one final time to the moment with which this paper began: a testimony interrupted, a translator overcome, a pause held collectively in the room. In that slippage, the performance became something else. Performance transmits knowledge that is unavailable through historically acceptable and endlessly reproducible forms of "evidence." Similarly, the notion of "ephemera as evidence," articulated by Jose Esteban Muñoz, suggests that minor, affective gestures - tears, silences, trembling - constitute a form of political testimony, resisting dominant archival logic through presence and emotion (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). As Diana Taylor argues, disappearance exceeds the loss of bodies to the erosion of public life. The testimonies shared in Strangers in the Night render memory perceptible.

The burden of remembrance is not even. As the testimonies reveal, women: mothers, sisters and daughters, often remain as custodians of loss. For them, speaking carried real risks. Memorialization is a crime, and visibility is precarious.[11] Yet one after another, the audience spoke. As they spoke, they remembered. The more they remembered, the more the disappeared marked their presence. Not just at Chunnaham Library Hall, but at Thanthai Selva Auditorium, then at Thanthai Selva Peace Gallery, in Kilinochchi. What emerged in these discussions was not an alternative archive in any stable sense, but what Diana Taylor would call a repertoire of embodied memory (Taylor, 2003). In contexts where the archive is hostile to minoritized experiences, the repertoire of live performance becomes a radical, fugitive site of remembrance.

At the same time, these fugitive sites do not transcend the conditions that necessitate them. The discussions were fraught with scepticism, anger, and unresolved pain. Questions like "Why are you digging up the past?" and "Why show this only here, not in the South?" speak to the ongoing fractures within the national consciousness. These tensions must be acknowledged as part of the process of Tamil memorialization: disruptive, uncomfortable and incomplete. This incompleteness is precisely the point. Strangers in the Night did not offer resolution, nor did it convert trauma into a finished narrative. What it offered, instead, was an ephemeral, fugitive space in which

[11] "Visibility is a trap," warns Peggy Phelan (1993, p. 6), suggesting that liveness can avoid the dangers of surveillance and co-optation. Taylor, however, contends that visibility is both "a refuge and a trap" (Taylor, 1997, p. 186): a necessary condition for making Tamil grief perceptible, yet one that simultaneously exposes mourners to surveillance. These theorizations, often held apart, are both potent to observe postwar Sri Lanka, where Tamil memorialization is criminalized.

memory can be spoken, heard, and held, however briefly. In that fleeting interval, in the testimony that calls forth another, the disappeared persist, as presences who refuse to be forgotten.



Figure 4: Scene from the Strangers in the Night performance alluding to the disappeared

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Marlon Ariyasinghe (he/him) is a PhD Candidate in Theater and Performance Studies at Stanford University. Marlon's research interests include Southasian theatre and historiography, performing blackness, Southasian antiblackness, cognition and performance, theatre pedagogy, and decolonizing actor-training methodologies.

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THARANGA CHINTHANA DANDENIYA
University of the Visual and Performing Arts
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Devising Playwriting Pedagogy in Sri Lankan Higher Education: Insights from the *Devadoota Sangramaya* Performance Project

ABSTRACT

Incorporating playwriting into teaching merges creative practice with pedagogy, balancing artistic skills and educational goals. This balance can be challenging, especially with large groups and subjective standards for creative outcomes. There is a notable research gap in analytical practices within Sri Lankan higher education, despite theoretical discussions on creative writing pedagogy in general. This study primarily explores strategies to overcome the challenges encountered during playwriting within course modules of a higher degree program. •This research seeks to conduct a reflective analysis of the process involved in developing a devised play text, Devadoota Sangramaya, for identifying the challenges and strategies associated with teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education. This research employs an inductive approach to observe phenomena and convey pedagogical knowledge for identifying and testing effective strategies over two months. This predominantly qualitative research focuses on the performance writing projects of final-year students enrolled in Acting and Playwriting-Directing degree programs at the Department of Theatre, Ballet, and Modern Dance at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. The playwriting process was documented using reflective journaling. The journals of two target groups—lecturers and students (n=10)—were analyzed thematically. Factors such as students' lack of commitment, time and peer pressure, creative abilities, along with poor communication and pedagogical strategies, have contributed to persistent challenges in the educational process. Empowering students through the pedagogical framework has been discussed with theoretical suggestions.

KEYWORDS:

Devise playwriting, pedagogy, andragogy, playwriting strategies, playwriting challenges

INTRODUCTION

In the context of creative arts education, artistic practitioners play a crucial role in shaping both the discipline and its benchmarks. When playwriting is incorporated into a teaching module, the creative practice evolves into a pedagogical process which is deeply connected with the development of artistic skills. The competencies related to playwriting and similar creative arts practices support a pedagogical approach that aligns with competency-based education (CBE) and outcome-based education (OBE), rather than solely emphasizing knowledge acquisition typical of traditional educational models. However, the challenge lies in balancing artistic objectives with educational goals, especially when working with larger groups of students while aiming to produce creative outcomes that meet subjective standards.

Though playwriting is an individual practitioner-based process in traditional creative practice, devised work requires collaboration and collective creativity among artists or students. In terms of developing theatre performance, Allison Oddey highlights the process of devising enables performers to participate in physical and hands-on creativity while working together to develop and enhance an original piece that emerges from collecting, altering, and reshaping the varied experiences each person gathers from their surrounding (2013).

Such a diverse approach cultivates exceptional skills in playwrights, enabling them to become writer-devisers who can adapt and thrive in collaborative contexts that are not attainable in individual creative processes. By engaging in collective creation, playwrights and actors alike can explore narratives that emerge organically from their interactions, resulting in unique theatrical experiences that challenge traditional notions of playwriting. This collaborative process enables a more profound connection to the material, as it often reflects the diverse voices and experiences of all participants, thereby enriching the artistic output.

The devising approach encourages student agency, fosters creativity, and enhances problem-solving skills, making it an effective pedagogical tool in university theatre degree programs. However, while its benefits are well-documented, challenges such as assessment

complexities, institutional constraints, and student resistance remain significant.

Playwriting is not a properly constructed teaching and learning pedagogy in the Sri Lankan higher education system. There is a notable research gap in analytical practices within the Sri Lankan higher education. This immense claim has been made based on this researcher's first-person experience and observation as a playwriting educator and practitioner-researcher for more than 20 years. This discussion employs an inductive approach to respond to creative and pedagogical challenges that emerge from the case study of the *Devadoota Sangramaya* performance project at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts with a theoretical discussion.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study primarily aims to comparatively explore theoretical discussion and identify challenges and strategies associated with teaching, learning, and assessment in the final year theatre performance project at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts in Sri Lanka. This research discusses the foundational pedagogy associated with devising a play text, then employs it in the context of the case study of the final year theatre performance project at the UVPA.

METHODOLOGY

This predominantly qualitative research employs an inductive approach combining observed phenomena of the first-person view over two months and the analysis of pedagogical and devised playwriting concepts. The qualitative data were collected through the playwriting process of the final-year Theatre performance Project in Acting and Playwriting-Directing degree programs at the Department of Theatre, Ballet, and Modern Dance at the UVPA in 2024-2025, which was documented using reflective journaling in the form of Gibbs's Reflective Cycle writing structure. The journals of two target groups—lecturers and students (n=10)—were analyzed. Addi-

tionally, key relevant theoretical discourses relevant to the devising practice are discussed.

CASE STUDY

In November 2024, this researcher was appointed as one of the supervisors to facilitate the course module, Performance Project of Dramatic Theatre, for the 2018/19 academic year. This module is aimed at students completing their SLQF level 6. The Department of Theatre, Ballet, and Modern Dance offers three-degree programs: Playwriting and Directing, Acting, and Mudra Natya and Modern Dance. These programs collectively produce two major performances within two clusters: Writing and Directing, and Acting; and Mudra Natya and Modern Dance. In this course module, performance evidence-based assessments serve as a cumulative showcase of the creative skill development achieved by the student cohort, who are specializing in acting and playwriting-directing over the course of their four years of study.

The module aims to help develop advanced skills in various theatre-related disciplines and prepare students to cultivate their capacities as professional theatre artists. It is the culmination of a four-year undergraduate degree, showcasing the skills gained by students in a comprehensive performance project. The objectives indicate that On completion of this module, the student will be able to:

1. Demonstrate professional skills in theatre arts
2. Apply research and practical skills gained through the years to professional performance projects
3. Develop a capacity to engage in critical assessment and self-evaluation
4. Apply various creative modes to develop and construct a performance
5. Articulate creative approaches and concepts clearly
6. Plan and organize information sharing
7. Generate a vision as a lifelong learner in theatre-related arts

The goals are categorized as follows: developing and showcasing specific professional skills and soft skills, adapting them to different contexts, employing various technical applications, and reflecting analyzing progress in work and personal development.

The playwriting process for this course module is considered a devised work, although practices may vary from year to year. This module encompasses a year-long, two-semester program, typically lasting 30 weeks of direct teaching and directed practice, culminating in a full-length production. The module offers 8 credits out of a total of 120 credits spanning over four years of study. 8 credits consist of a minimum of 400 notional hours, which generally exceeds more than one and a half of the estimated hours due to rigorous rehearsals and designing, including the playwriting process. Students from two primary degree programs, Acting and Playwriting-Directing, must choose one main subject area and a sub-area based on their interests, regardless of their designated degree program. The module is assessed on a formative assessment of 30%, final performance of 50%, viva voce of 10%, and attendance of 10%. However, thoughtful rubrics and different evidence gathering tools are associated with all assessments, including the marking for attendance percentages.

It is generally recommended that students align their main task with their degree program while also exploring sub-sections in other areas, including music creation and scenography practices such as set design, costume design, lighting design, and makeup design. While the primary responsibility for the playwriting and directing process lies with final-year students in the Playwriting-Directing Degree Program, which usually consists of 8-10 students in each batch, other interested individuals from the Acting Degree Program are also encouraged to participate in this collaborative playwriting process.

In November 2024, three playwriting supervisors were appointed to guide the process. The playwriting process for the academic batch of 2018/19 was conducted as a devised collaboration, with input from senior staff members. All participants from the playwriting and directing cohort (n= 41) were encouraged to contribute to the

development of the play

After a few initial meetings, a workshop was held on December 17, 2024, where all the learners were invited to propose dramatic themes, styles, and genres they preferred. From these proposals, the contemporary political theme, combining realistic and non-realistic styles, emerged as the most popular choice. The learners were then divided into groups based on their student numbers, utilizing a random generation application. Each group was tasked with researching contemporary political stories using their mobile devices with internet access. They selected themes within broader categories, including political issues, gender and sexual matters, religious and cultural issues, and topics related to job perspectives and immigration. Each group was instructed to maintain separate notice boards where they could post images, stories, and information they found during their research. Next, learners were asked to retell the stories they discovered, selecting five stories per group, using five body images of actors in an image theatre format, accompanied by music, sounds, or narrations. From these image-based narratives, each team was required to perform two stories.

The Easter Day bombing attack was chosen for presentation based on the combined preferences of the students and supervisors. The divided groups of the students were asked to research the socio-political situations ranging from the pre-Easter Day bombing attack to the post-Easter Day bombing attack, including media reporting, legislation, legal procedures, commission reports, statements of religious parties, statements of victims and families, and promises of political parties who make an advantage on seeking power. Subsequently, the teams gathered information from various media sources, tracing stories from present situations at the time of the writing to five years before the Easter terrorist attack up to the present, to represent the significant periods surrounding the event.

Due to a lack of focused attention from the groups primarily composed of students in the acting subject stream, the writing team has been limited to those in the playwriting stream and those pursuing an acting degree who have an interest in playwriting as either a primary

or supplementary assessment.

The writing process was structured around a foundational skeleton, following pedagogical writing principles conceptualized by Lajos Egri (1960), which focus on establishing a premise and the protagonist's journey to prove that premise. To further develop the play, activities based on image-based performance were integrated, incorporating elements of passion play, chanting, and biblical stories to organize the plot into acts, units, and beats. The religious and cultural sources were integrated in this play because the intertwined context can reflect the socio-political present.

Developing a cohesive plot that satisfied all student practitioners was proved to be challenging. Although the supervisors had various alternative plot constructions for different premises, they refrained from imposing these options on the students to ensure their empowerment throughout the creative process.

The entire production was structured around a backwards-designed plan aimed at achieving a full-length performance. Although it was essential to finalize the playwriting by the end of the first semester, the plan did not meet this deadline due to insufficient contributions from the students and disagreements regarding the plot. As a result, only a few fragmented beats were developed. From the supervisors' perspective, it became clear that these students required more direct writing intervention rather than general advice. A growing concern arose when students began to favor one supervisor over the other two, likely due to his hands-on approach to writing intervention and his previous successes in working with student groups similarly.

The writing process became particularly demanding as the performance began to require production through rehearsals, starting with casting. An inauguration was held as a customary event, and another supervisor was appointed from the outset to lead the theatrical production along with the main writing-directing supervisor. The supervising director organized an introductory performance for the inauguration, incorporating fragmented pieces of writing along with devised improvisation. Notably, this inauguration performance included an interactive opening that aimed to create a sensory expe-

rience in an open performance space. This element had been omitted from the written material due to student resistance. These elements were included based on strong choices made by the directing supervisor during the rehearsal phase.

After a break for the first semester exams, which involved applied performance development based on field experiences with specific communities, students returned to the writing process following a three-week pause. Even during the applied performance development, some student groups continued to rely on their supervisor's intervention for their writing needs. During this subsequent writing phase, students were presented with four options:

1) Continue completing the script under the same supervision as before;
2) Select a translated play text or a play script in another lan guage (preferably English for better understanding) and adapt it for their cultural and theatrical context;
3) Write the script themselves without constant oversight;
4) Have the supervisors write the play text while students ob serve the writing process.

The majority of students opted for the fourth option, but this choice contradicted the course model's aims and objectives. Consequently, the plan was revised to allow supervisors to provide ongoing intervention, helping to write fragmented sections of the acts they selected from the plot while the students developed the play based on this guidance.

In practice, however, students were resistant to this agreement, as they preferred to have the supervisors write for them or great intervention. This may have stemmed from peer pressure, with many awaiting the production to begin with a complete script. Despite ongoing close monitoring by all supervisors, two supervisors for playwriting decided to stop active instruction on their own accord. This

decision was made due to a conflict between the module's aims and objectives and the students' intentions, as well as to prevent any potential confusion in instruction given by peers. Eventually, the play was developed with input from the remaining supervisor, who assisted the students with writing. The play has been named *Devadoota Sangramaya*. The play was then directed by the directing supervisor and ultimately performed at the Panibharatha Theatre of the UVPA on 10th March 2025.

CHALLENGES IN THE PLAYWRITING PROCESS

After analyzing the journals, it can be summarized that the process encountered several challenges, including:

1) a lack of commitment and teamwork
2) disagreements regarding artistic choices
3) predetermined preferences and strong suggestions
4) insufficient creative solutions due to a lack of subject knowledge and socio-cultural awareness
5) anxiety about completing the task
6) issues with pedagogical communication.

These challenges are not uncommon in devised playwriting projects.

Observations and experiences revealed that the target learners' willingness was uncertain, primarily due to a lack of commitment among students in the playwriting process. Most students who were in the acting degree program showed little interest, while those in the playwriting and directing degree program needed to collaborate through the process. Students noticed this issue, even in the beginning. A student's journal reported that on 17th December 2024. "The process was delayed until 9:30 am due to low student attendance, which had originally been scheduled for 8:30 am. I believe that the responsibility fell on the regular attendees, who took the initiative for all related tasks". On the same day, a journal reveals "people constantly avoided taking responsibility and placed that responsibility on others". On December 19, 2024, a journal input indicated "Like

every day, today too we were unable to arrive as previously agreed. we were unable to start the work on time due to everyone arriving at different times".

The journals also reaveal the artistic disagreements of participants delayed and created tensions in the writing process. on December 19, a journal entry specified,

> *I believe that the frequent disagreements that arise among us are due to an underlying problem in our collaboration. On certain occasions, I feel deeply saddened by the lack of respect shown to ideas generated within our group by different individuals.*

Similarly, another entry noted that,

> *We must always respect the ideas of others. If an idea is to be rejected, proper reasons and evidence must be sought, and it should be dismissed only with the consensus of all members. It is very important that everyone works together in a spirit of cooperation.*

On 20th December, a journal entry also revealed that "students' arguments were a bit aggressive when they tried to correct their issues in the writing of the prologue, as we are still working on it". Additionally, on December 23, 2024, one student reported, "We are experiencing disagreements as we continually forget that we are all working toward the same goal." The latter statement is the awareness that all the participants must follow in devising playwriting work; however, it is difficult to maintain in the initial stages when working with amateurs.

In some approaches, strong suggestions could be effective for working with amateur playwrights. The following statements can be evidence of it.

> *The lecturer (name removed) assigned us the task of en-*

> *gaging in a writing exercise for the development of the drama script, using several dialogue extracts from the character Isō—which depicts a church damaged and weakened by an attack being restored*

.

On January 10, 2025, a journal entry stated;

> *After pausing at a certain point in our previous writing, we were given the exercise of writing a monologue by the lecturer (name removed), which was considered to occur at the end of the play. I first worked with a fellow student to compile the assigned character traits, and then engaged in writing the monologue individually. In this exercise, since our knowledge of the subject matter had grown further, I carried out the task with great enthusiasm.*

In contrast, a well-constructed instruction or guidance can be misleading or rejected because of prejudice. In addition, communication strategies can play a vital role in smooth engagement. The open instructions or over-explanations could make situations as mentioned in the following journal input.

> *When arranging the events of the play in sequence from the beginning to the present, and when developing them towards climactic moments by introducing conflicts, I encountered a somewhat confusing situation in trying to fully grasp certain points explained by the lecturer (name removed).*

However, some working with theoretical underpins of technical playwriting could be advantageous when the playwriting process has no time pressure for meeting deadlines. The following journal inputs are from the earlier stage of writing on December 23.

> *That morning, the lecturer's (name removed) lesson*

> *made it very clear how to build a plot for dramatic action. That afternoon, the lecturer's (name removed) lesson was greatly helpful in enhancing our knowledge regarding the development of the first scene of our theatrical production.*

A few days later, a journal entry exposed the following;

> *On this day, we had an in-depth discussion on characters, during which (name removed) lecturer presented various ideas about characters and explained how the inherent traits of a character are created. Although we brought the characters onto the stage as we imagined, it was not possible to do so exactly in that way. I came to understand that any character should have a definite journey and destination. In this sense, developing a character is somewhat difficult, especially because we still do not have a definite ending.*

Despite the prior learning on playwriting, some students' concerns about their lack of socio-cultural awareness and insufficient practice, on December 21, a journal revealed;

> *I realized that one reason might be our insufficient use of books and resources in various fields, and also the lack of high-level social awareness among us regarding the Easter Sunday attack.*

On the same day, another journal disclosed;

> *We developed beats for the play. I learned how to manage actions and reactions (of characters) today. I acknowledge that we lack fundamental knowledge of it. The lecturer (name removed) helped to make us aware of it. It may be the result of our lack of exposure to the*

subject knowledge through books and the outside world.

.

When the deadlines are overdue and the pressure can be mounted from all participants, despite the writing process being a part of learning. On December 30, a journal entry of students exposed;

> *Because our time is limited, we can't write this lightly. This is because we need to quickly prepare and hand over our work to our fellow students who are doing the staging. A drama script is not something that can be done within a certain time frame for a fixed date—it is an artistic creation of aesthetic value that requires a mind working in harmony. Therefore, quickly writing a drama script is not only difficult but can also, in some instances, erase its beauty.*

The pressure can cause a failure to apply effective teaching methods. Additionally, diverse artistic perspectives in lectures can complicate the playwriting process, especially when they incorporate biased approaches into their practice. A student journal revealed;

> *The fact that there are certain differences in the lecturers' ideas is influenced by the different nature of their fields of study and the way they look at Easter, which in turn also affects students' perspectives and leads to disagreements.*

A journal entry from a lecture on January 22, 2025, stated;

> *I wish to cease this practice. Our peer lecturer excessively assisted students with their writing, despite our agreement to empower them instead. I believe students might exploit the supportive supervisor's approach […] These students' behaviours and our malpractices might be contributing to our current problems. We could have*

> *set clear ground rules and introduced the pre-established Departmental guidelines to the students earlier.*

A student journal also captured the aftermath as follows;

> *Due to certain tensions that arose during the final-year drama production work, and because the lecturer (name removed) withdrew from writing the production script, it was difficult for me on that day to resolve the problematic state of the existing script. Nevertheless, I actively contributed to the lecturer's (name removed) guidance.*

DISCUSSION WITH THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The process of the *Devadoota Sangramaya* playwriting mirrors Kolb's (1984) four-stage learning cycle in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) underscores the importance of learning through action and reflection. Devised playwriting follows.

The four stages are:

1) the Concrete Experience in which students engage in improvi sational exercises;

2) Reflective Observation, they analyze their work through discussions and feedback;

3) Abstract Conceptualization, in which participants can refine their ideas and integrate new insights;

4) Active Experimentation, in which practitioners implement changes and perform their devised work.

After gathering initial performance presentations, the playwriting process and devising started with theatre strategies ranging from improvisation, image-based theatre, and storytelling. In the concept of Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal introduces Image Theatre in which static configurations, crafted from physical forms or symbolic objects, embody complex ideas or emotional states (1992). This method allows participants the power to shape and transform

theatrical meaning collaboratively. Norris (2020) emphasizes that image-based methods are influential in experiential pedagogy, especially when aiming to engage students in an audience to promote and perform socio-cultural matters and harmony. In addition, employing theatre improvisation in higher education teaching and learning enhanced empathy, creativity, and interpersonal communication skills of students (Phelps et al., 2021), which it is inherent in the performance practice. In addition, improvisation could enhance creativity by preventing prejudiced text-based thinking and encouraging participants to respond spontaneously to the contexts and improvisations of others, as Johnstone suggests (2017). *Devadoota Sangramaya* playwriting process adapted such techniques; the group presentation through image-based storytelling was most effective when selecting a powerful, dramatic narrative for continuation at that stage.

The playwriting process tried to collect information about the selected dramatic event through the historical encounter and make it a more embodied story through familiarizing it by retelling and performing. Educational theories such as constructivist learning theory by Piaget (1950) and Vygotsky (1978) are also impactful in devising. The theory emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through experience. The Easter Day bomb attack intertwined their lives as they recalled the day when the student group sat for their university entrance aptitude test. Five years after the incident, they began writing the play. They faced challenges in constructing a dramatic plot that reflected the lives of the victims in both the aftermath of the event and the present time.

The process also resembles the Scaffolding Model based on Bruner's (1960) Scaffolding Theory. The Scaffolding Model provides structured guidance that gradually diminishes as students gain confidence and independence. In university settings, scaffolding may involve guided improvisation exercises, dramaturgical frameworks, and instructor-led feedback sessions. This process helps students transition from structured learning to autonomous creative exploration (McCammon & Betzel, 2020). Similarly, Lev Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) describes the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can

achieve with guidance (1978). During the project, several students lacked the foundational knowledge and confidence required for devised playwriting. The foundational knowledge was provided, and the semi-open tasks were completed through guided instructions and writing sequences with students as part of the ZPD sequences. However, the independent stages were not successful. This indicated that even when scaffolding was in place, the shift to independent creative exploration was delayed because students were unfamiliar with collaborative writing methods in the context of aiming for results, such as a finished play text, within a shorter timeframe.

Based on the Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984), Gibb developed a model for self-developing through reflective analysis own work (1988). Through the reflective journal's following the model of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, the learners were allowed to understand their engagements and transitions by recording their experience, while allowing them to reflectively correct their actions through different perspectives:

1) description of the event that the practitioner engaged in an event;

2) the feeling of the practitioner during each situation of an event;

3) evaluation of the emotional experience that the participant encountered through the event; analyses of the event through logical reasoning and any theoretical underpins.

4) conclusion of the event;

5) action plan for future engagement with corrections. At the beginning of the program, students were instructed to keep a journal to document their experiences using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle Model (1988). While some students recognized their mistakes, such as not contributing enough and lacking creativity, their journals did not contain clear suggestions for improvement, and these issues were not addressed during meetings.

Devise theatre writing is creating new knowledge and new insight through the learned knowledge, skills and conveying. Robin Nelson's model for "Practice as Research" (PaR) in the arts emphasizes rigorous and personal engagement with creative practice. 'know-how' – is a tacit and embodied form of knowledge that the learner

developed through the practice over time, 'know-what – is the tacit made explicit through critical reflection, and 'know-that' – is conceptual frameworks and 'outsider' knowledge. The arts 'praxis' (theory imbricated with practice) sits at the center of this model (2013).

This model is important because it suggests that cumulative performance outcome is the result of three combinations of knowing in this context: prior learning skills at least gained through the degree program and industrial practice, the learner's reflective knowledge of employing the implicit knowing for explicit demonstration by knowing what works and what does not and awareness of existing knowledge in the field.

Balancing experiential student writers and learners is challenging. Limited students had an experience in dramatic writing. The benchmark is set up for the claim that either their play text was performed in a national performance festival or at least a student-led performance festival. Only those who had potential did not have experience in devising playwriting. Because of this conflict, performance work was shadowed with predetermined preferences, intention to follow the styles of prior idolized creations and dialogue writing patterns of both learners and educators. predetermined preferences arose with the influence of previous students' led productions and the expectations that built the benchmarks of the performance. The pre-determined preferences can be traced in selecting themes, dramatic style, language, theatrical choices, including the theatre space of the performance.

It is possible that those students had tacit, embodied knowledge limited to individual writing, and they were unable to convert it into explicit demonstration. Additionally, tacit knowledge and external knowledge can sometimes be harmful. This performance work was shadowed with predetermined preferences, intention to follow the styles of prior idolized creations and dialogue writing patterns of both learners and educators. Many students who familiarized with structured scripts may feel uncomfortable with the open-ended nature of devised playwriting. The absence of a predetermined plot and dialogue can lead to uncertainty and anxiety among learners. To address this, educators should implement strategies that build

confidence. These strategies could include structured improvisation exercises and collaborative trust-building activities, as suggested by Heddon and Milling (2006).

While it may hold that developing a play text becomes more effective when all participants share similar artistic qualities and objectives, the feedback from students indicated that they primarily viewed artistic intention as the main objective. However, their actions during the process that led to rewording for assessments suggested otherwise. Additionally, the dynamics of small clusters among participants influenced the playwriting process through shifting micro-power positions.

A lack of TPACK (Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge) (Mishra & Koehler, 2006) among writing supervisors could lead to resistance. In the TPACK model, Mishra and Koehler emphasize the importance of three areas independently and in combination within teaching and learning practices: the content knowledge related to the subject; pedagogical knowledge, including teaching techniques that can be utilized; and technological knowledge concerning the use of technology in teaching. Reflective analysis by teachers reveals that a deficiency in prior practice of devising playwriting pedagogy caused some disruptions. The teaching process can become problematic. when the appropriate teaching techniques for the specific content are lacking, knowledge of how to teach with the necessary tools is not applied, and understanding of how technological tools work with the content is not updated.

As the technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge is essential for educators, learner practitioners also need certain knowledge and skills. Dandeniya's theoretical model for hybrid learning, the Tandem Bicycle Model, explains the following:

> [O]nsite, synchronous, and asynchronous learners are the required skills and knowledge 1) Content Learning knowledge and skills (CLKs) is a competency that learners develop to learn content; 2) Pedagogical Learning knowledge and skills (PLKs) is a competency that learners aware the pedagogy associate with their learning; 3)

> Technological Learning Knowledge and skills (TLKs) is the competency that learners employ appropriate technologies for their learning and assessments; and 4). Reflective Learning Knowledge and skills (RLKs) is a competency that learners reflectively acknowledge their learning progress through self and program assessment. (Dandeniya, 2025. P 93)

Dandeniya's Tandem Bicycle Model further suggests, Technological Pedagogical Ecological support (TPEs) is essential for devising playwriting. In higher education, such an ecosystem is created with the support of communities including peers, families, educators, administrative staff and industry, as well as with quality curricula, adequate institutional facilities and resources, policies, and economic-socio-political governing of the country. All participating parties must maintain their currency in professional practice, self-development through training, and adaptability to situations (Dandeniya, 2025).

The ensemble model prioritizes collective creation, where all participants contribute equally to the artistic process. This approach promotes peer learning and shared leadership, breaking away from traditional hierarchical teacher-student relationships (Oddey, 1994). In higher education, this model cultivates collaboration, adaptability, and problem-solving skills, which are indispensable in both academic and professional theatre settings. Oddey argues that the interaction among individuals, their relationships, and the dynamics of the group are key characteristics of devising theatre. The connections among individual specialist members contrast with the production hierarchy found in text-based theatre. (2013).

One of the primary challenges in higher education theatre programs is assessing devised playwriting. Devised work is process-driven, making it difficult to apply conventional grading criteria. When it comes to creative assessments, educators often struggle to balance the subjective nature of creativity with institutional demands for measurable outcomes (Hope, 2010). This challenge can be exacerbated when students focus more on securing higher grades than on

the collaborative process of creative work. Boyce-Tillman and de Faria (2012) suggest considering several factors: originality, innovation, rigor, virtuosity, complexity, and dissemination. The *Devadoota Sangramaya* process, which includes completed texts, reflective journals, and viva voce examinations, is insufficient for measuring students' engagement and collaborative creativity as a team. Based on a case study of the UVPA, Liyanage points out that summative assessments were the primary focus, while the creative process and the development of students' skills, important aspects of knowledge creation or learning environments, were previously neglected previously (2017).

Various strategies have been employed for assessments at the Department of Theatre, Ballet, and Modern Dance. With proper rubrics, alternative assessment methods such as self-evaluation, peer review, and portfolio-based grading are being increasingly explored to better address this issue. Three ways of assessment can be effective with an understanding of the assessment philosophy:

1) process assessments for measuring scaffolded support toward independence within ZPD as well as knowledge creation in appropriate learning environments under TPEs;

2) product assessments; dramatic quality with originality, innovation, rigor, complexity, and dissemination potential.

3) reflective articulations, the ability to explain and defend their creative decisions of three knowing.

Students need to possess knowledge and skills in content, pedagogy, technology, and reflective aspects of their learning and assessments (CLKs, PLKs, TLKs, and RLKs), which should be introduced to them from the beginning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion. Playwriting and devising are insufficiently addressed through the lenses of pedagogy of adult learners in the HE sectors in Sri Lanka. Though some are case-specific, factors such as students' lack of commitment, time management issues, attentiveness,

and creative abilities, along with teachers' and trainers' insufficient communication and engagement strategies with TPACK currencies, can contribute to persistent challenges in the educational process. In addition, an impoverished learning ecosystem and the transitional learning behaviors between devising and individual learning impact student performance and require strategic attention. The assessment of creative practice needs to be carefully considered. Empowering students through activities, peer learning, experiential and reflective learning, and effective time management were identified as key successful elements in the pedagogical framework. In any mode of the educational process, whether face-to-face, synchronous, or asynchronous, the mindset and attitude of both the learner and the educator must be strong to achieve positive outcomes.[2]

[2] This article acknowledges that Grammarly has been used to check language functions.

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Dr Tharanga Chinthana Dandeniya is a PhD holder from Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. He is a playwright and director and currently teaches at the Department of Theatre Ballet and Modern Dance, Faculty of Dance and Drama, University of the Visual and Performing Arts. He is the director of the Research and knoweldge Dissemination Centre, UVPA Colombo.

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AYOMI INDIKA IRUGALBANDARA
The Open University of Sri Lanka.

Teaching Drama across Cultures: Navigating the Global South–North Translation Challenge

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, educational researchers often undertake higher studies in western universities, collecting data in their home countries and languages before engaging in analysis in the language of their academic institution. While this process seems straightforward in theory, the reality—especially in the arts and humanities—is riddled with complexities. The act of translation becomes a site of negotiation, not merely linguistic but also cultural, cognitive, and methodological. This article reflects on the intricate challenges encountered during a doctoral study involving Process Drama in Sri Lanka, conducted under an Australian academic framework. It delves into the multifaceted issues of linguistic translation, cultural interpretation, and methodological integrity that emerged when attempting to adapt and analyse creative arts education interventions in a cross-cultural context. Using a mixed-method approach, including pilot studies, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and intervention feedback, the study critically interrogates the limitations of traditional translation practices and reveals the necessity for culturally nuanced and methodologically reflective frameworks in arts-based educational research. The insights offered aim to inform future cross-cultural research practices, especially within the creative arts, where meaning is deeply rooted in cultural context and expressive practice.

KEYWORDS

Back translation, cultural difference, cross-cultural research, creative pedagogy, drama education, process drama, translation, Sinhala-English, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

Completing my PhD at a Western academic institution was both a prestigious and transformative journey. While intellectually rewarding, it presented significant challenges—particularly because my primary data collection took place in a non-Western, non-English-speaking context. In such settings, translation became an indispensable tool—not merely for linguistic accuracy but for preserving the richness, context, and intent of the original data. As a result, the translation process carried considerable methodological significance, especially within the humanities and creative arts, where meanings are often nuanced, symbolic, and culturally embedded.

This article stems from my doctoral research in the field of Process Drama—a pedagogical approach that uses dramatic techniques to explore issues and foster creative engagement. Although I conducted the study in Sri Lanka, it was framed, supervised, and assessed within the academic structure of an Australian university. Throughout the research, I encountered multiple challenges, not only in translating language but also in reframing pedagogical concepts and practices to align with both cultural contexts. These challenges extended beyond mere linguistic barriers and deeply influenced the way drama-based education was understood and implemented.

While I recognize that Back Translation (BT) is a well-established method in cross-language research, I have found its application in creative disciplines such as Process Drama to be significantly underexplored. BT typically involves translating a document from the source language into the target language and then re-translating it back to check for consistency, as outlined by Lincoln and Gonzálezy González (2008). However, in my experience working in performative fields—where meaning is co-constructed through gesture, tone, cultural references, and lived experience—I have observed that such linear techniques often fall short. I have also noticed how the assumed universality of pedagogical models from the Global North can obscure the epistemological and methodological tensions that surface in Southern contexts, where language and meaning are deeply embedded in different cultural matrices.

In this paper, I unpack these tensions through a detailed account of

a Process Drama intervention I conducted with Grade 7 students in Sri Lankan government schools. I examine how translation difficulties—relating not only to language but also to educational concepts and pedagogical practices—shaped the research process. Drawing on personal reflections, interview data, and classroom observations, I argue for a more flexible and culturally sensitive approach to translation in educational research, particularly in the arts. The sections that follow detail the research design, the linguistic and cultural translation strategies I employed, and the challenges I encountered during various phases of the intervention. Ultimately, this work aims to offer insights into how we can conduct cross-cultural research in creative education contexts more ethically and effectively.

DATA TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

In qualitative research, particularly in cross-cultural settings, translation is far more than a mechanical act of replacing words from one language to another. It is a deeply interpretive process that shapes how knowledge is constructed, communicated, and understood. In my study, the translation of interviews, classroom discussions, and written reflections from Sinhala into English played a central role in ensuring the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research. However, in the context of Process Drama - a pedagogical approach rooted in performance, improvisation, and cultural symbolism - translation presented unique challenges that demanded careful methodological attention.

Sri Lanka's linguistic heritage introduced additional layers of complexity to my research. The dominant language, Sinhala, is diglossic, comprising both formal and informal variants. While native speakers navigate this duality effortlessly, translating these nuances into English—which lacks a comparable diglossic structure—presented significant challenges. In particular, conveying tone, emotion, and culturally embedded references proved difficult. As Liamputtong (2010) and Agustian et al. (2014) suggest, preserving the fidelity of translated qualitative data requires translators to be not just bilingual, but also bicultural—able to mediate between both linguistic and cultural frameworks.

To navigate these challenges, I adopted a two-tiered translation strategy. Initially, I translated all qualitative materials—including interview transcripts and group discussions—into English. My fluency in both Sinhala and English, along with my deep immersion in the Sri Lankan cultural context, enabled me to retain much of the cultural nuance and accurately interpret participants' intentions. To enhance accuracy and ensure trustworthiness, I then collaborated with a certified bilingual translator based in Australia, who performed back translations. This approach reflects best practices highlighted by Son (2018) and Colina et al. (2017).

Given the absence of standardized guidelines in the literature regarding who should perform back translations—especially between Sinhala and English—I developed a context-sensitive approach informed by insights from Wild et al. (2005) and others. Lincoln and Guba (1985) underscore trustworthiness as a foundational criterion in qualitative inquiry. In cross-language research, this extends beyond the data to encompass the translation processes on which findings depend (Agustian et al., 2014). With this in mind, I prioritized translation procedures that preserved the cultural integrity of the original (Sri Lankan) context while maintaining academic clarity and accessibility in the Australian research setting.

Squires (2009) provides valuable criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of cross-language qualitative research, emphasizing the importance of clearly outlining both the researcher's language competence and the credentials of any translators involved. In line with this guidance, all twenty interview transcripts in my study were back-translated by an officially certified Sinhalese–English translator based in Australia.

While Squires (2009) also recommends beginning data analysis in the participants' original language, I made a deliberate decision to deviate from this approach for two key reasons. First, my supervisory team consisted of English speakers who would not have been able to engage meaningfully with data presented in Sinhala. At that stage of the research, their input was crucial in helping me identify emerging themes and patterns. Second, I sought to ensure consistency and transparency in my research process, which led me to translate all interview transcripts into English prior to commencing

thematic analysis.

To manage this translation phase, I personally translated all pre- and post-test papers, interviews, and group discussion transcripts, drawing on my bilingual fluency in Sinhala and English. To further enhance the accuracy and professional quality of the translations, I collaborated with a registered professional translator based in Queensland, who completed additional translation tasks in both directions—English to Sinhala and Sinhala to English. This collaborative process ensured that the final versions were both linguistically sound and culturally appropriate.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE

I conducted this research as the first non-randomised controlled trial aimed at evaluating a Process Drama intervention program for Grade 7 drama students in Sri Lanka. The study sample included 145 students, aged 11 to 12, and six drama teachers from three government schools. These schools were purposefully selected based on their willingness to implement drama-based pedagogy and their basic familiarity with elements of Process Drama. To ensure consistency across the study, I chose schools with similar socio-economic characteristics.

The intervention group participated in 20 custom-designed lessons that incorporated Process Drama techniques such as hot-seating, improvisation, and role-play. These activities were specifically developed to foster everyday creativity, adaptability, and student engagement.

Teacher preparedness and commitment were essential to the success of the intervention. To support this, I conducted an intensive training session for the participating teachers, which covered both the theoretical foundations and practical applications of Process Drama. However, introducing this methodology into Sri Lankan classrooms - where didactic teaching methods and examination-oriented instruction dominate - posed significant pedagogical challenges.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of an Australian university. This reflected the dual-governance structure of the project, a common feature of

Global South–North research collaborations. However, this structure also introduced additional layers of bureaucratic and cultural negotiation.

Ultimately, the design and implementation of this intervention revealed not only pedagogical and linguistic challenges but also systemic barriers. Issues such as rigid curricula, high-stakes assessment pressures, and limited infrastructure significantly constrained the transformative potential of creative education in the Sri Lankan context.

RESULTS CHALLENGE 1: TRANSLATING PEDAGOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The initial pilot study, which I conducted in Queensland, Australia, was a formative step in refining the proposed intervention. Twelve Grade 7 students participated in this small-scale trial, led by an experienced drama teacher. While the pilot affirmed the general feasibility of using Process Drama techniques with students of this age, it also revealed a series of cultural and pedagogical assumptions embedded within Western teaching models.

In the Australian classroom, the drama pedagogy was rooted in child-centred learning, emphasizing exploration, emotional expression, and collaborative creativity. The teacher employed strategies such as group observation, positive modelling, and promoting student autonomy - values that sharply contrasted with the teacher-led, examination-driven approach that prevails in Sri Lankan schools. As Morin (2013) notes, pilot studies often expose unanticipated implementation challenges, and in this case, the cultural divide between drama education philosophies became immediately evident.

Even the term Process Drama was unfamiliar in the Sri Lankan context, both linguistically and conceptually. Although I had substantial experience teaching Aesthetic Education, I was only introduced to this particular drama pedagogy upon beginning my doctoral studies in Australia. This late exposure highlighted a significant conceptual gap, which was further reinforced by the pilot teacher's feedback. She found the activities engaging but considered them more suitable for a younger age group than Grade 7. Her comments pointed

to assumptions about developmental appropriateness and curricular norms that did not translate easily across educational systems.

This pilot study proved to be pivotal. It exposed not only logistical and content-related issues, but also fundamental philosophical mismatches between the pedagogical intentions of the intervention and the expectations of students, teachers, and the broader educational system in Sri Lanka. It became clear that for the intervention to succeed, it would need to bridge these conceptual and cultural divides with great care.

CHALLENGE 2: TRANSLATING CONCEPTS, NOT JUST LANGUAGE

Designing an intervention manual that was both culturally and linguistically appropriate emerged as the next major challenge. The 20-lesson curriculum I developed incorporated core Process Drama techniques such as hot-seating, improvisation, and storytelling - each rooted in pedagogies of exploration, ambiguity, and open-ended inquiry. Translating these techniques into Sinhala turned out to be far more complex than finding lexical equivalents.

Sinhala, as a diglossic language, posed particular difficulties due to its dual formal and informal registers. This made it challenging to choose the appropriate linguistic tone for educational materials. Terms like "process" and "hot-seat" had no direct cultural or functional counterparts in Sinhala. To address this, I coined the term *Kriyawalle Natayaya* (ක්‍රියාවලි නාට්‍ය) to represent "Process Drama," attempting to convey its dynamic, experiential nature. Similarly, I created *Vichra Asana* (විචාර ආසනය) for "hot-seat," blending the ideas of inquiry and performance. While these neologisms were innovative, they still required significant contextual scaffolding to make sense to Sri Lankan teachers and students unfamiliar with the concepts.

Choosing the content also posed a methodological dilemma. Sri Lankan drama education traditionally follows a content-heavy model focused on examination preparation and rote memorization. In contrast, Process Drama emphasizes reflection, experience, and creativity. In this environment, both teachers and students equated "con-

tent" with "notes" to be memorized - a perception often reinforced by parental expectations. Balancing the introduction of core drama concepts with the realities of this content-driven system required a careful negotiation between innovation and institutional constraints.

These translation challenges extended well beyond language. They involved adapting an entire pedagogical worldview, one that values creativity, improvisation, and emotional authenticity into an educational system that prioritizes uniformity, predictability, and academic performance.

CHALLENGE 3: TRANSLATING INTO PRACTICE

Despite extensive preparation, the rollout of the intervention surfaced practical challenges that lay at the heart of cross-cultural educational research. Although the participating teachers were experienced in drama education, many felt unprepared for the methodological shift that Process Drama demanded. Weekly interviews and classroom observations revealed their struggles with lesson planning, time management, and staying faithful to the intervention manual.

Several teachers admitted to reverting to traditional habits—delivering content through lectures, skipping lesson plans, and managing student passivity with rigid direction rather than open-ended exploration. These responses were not due to resistance but to deeply ingrained systemic pressures. As Efland (2004) and Eisner (2002) argue, effective creative arts education requires not only subject knowledge but also a willingness to take aesthetic and cognitive risks - traits often discouraged in Sri Lanka's exam-centric system.

Time constraints and curricular overload further exacerbated the challenges. Teachers frequently found it difficult to complete the lessons within the scheduled time, citing frequent delays and a lack of dedicated drama spaces. More troubling was the psychological resistance from students, many of whom had internalized the belief that creativity held less value than academic content. Some even questioned how Process Drama would help them perform better in exams, a sentiment echoed by their parents.

Teacher feedback underscored this dilemma. One teacher, despite over a decade of experience, admitted she had never consistently

used lesson plans, relying instead on recycled notes. Another expressed anxiety about deviating from the official Teachers' Guide. These responses reflected a deeper struggle between professional aspiration and institutional inertia, showing just how difficult it is to enact pedagogical change without systemic support.

These practical obstacles were more than logistical concerns - they revealed deeper epistemological tensions between contrasting visions of education. They highlighted the necessity of aligning educational innovations with the values, expectations, and structural realities of local contexts.

DISCUSSION

The findings from my study highlight the profound challenges of conducting educational research and implementing pedagogical interventions across cultural and linguistic boundaries. While the intervention showed promise, engaging students and introducing teachers to new modes of creative expression, the research process revealed a complex landscape of translation. This translation extended beyond words; it involved concepts, educational ideologies, and deeply rooted systemic expectations.

CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC MEDIATION IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

Teacher feedback and classroom observations made it clear that assuming educational concepts like Process Drama can be transferred seamlessly across cultural contexts is fundamentally flawed. Language is not merely a system of signs, it is a cultural framework that carries embedded epistemologies, social norms, and power structures (Lincoln & Gonzalez, 2008). This view aligns with Colina et al. (2017), who argue that translation must be seen as a dynamic, purpose-driven process, rather than a simple act of linguistic equivalence.

In my study, even with the use of best practices such as back translation and professional review, I could not fully bridge the interpretive gap between Sinhala and English, or between Australian pedagogi-

cal frameworks and Sri Lankan classroom realities. The neologisms I developed—Kriyawalle Natayaya for "Process Drama" and Vichra Asana for "hot-seat"—were examples of the kind of adaptive innovation required when working across conceptual systems that lack shared foundations.

However, language was only part of the challenge. I also had to consider teachers' professional identities, everyday classroom routines, and the assessment-driven culture as cultural artifacts themselves. As Craft (2003) and Jeffrey & Craft (2004) point out, there is a meaningful distinction between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity. Each requires different pedagogical mindsets and institutional conditions. Attempting to translate these concepts into a context dominated by rote learning and exam-oriented teaching was not only difficult but often culturally dissonant.

RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

Introducing change in rigid, centrally controlled education systems is rarely straightforward. In Sri Lanka, as in many postcolonial nations, the education system heavily emphasizes standardized testing and content delivery. As a result, teachers operate within a framework that prioritizes measurable academic outcomes over experiential or creative learning. From my interviews, it became evident that deviation from prescribed formats, such as the official curriculum or Teachers' Guide, often attracted scrutiny from administrators, parents, and even students.

Teachers' reluctance to use detailed lesson plans or depart from traditional practices was not due to lack of training or motivation. Rather, it reflected systemic conditioning that favours conformity over pedagogical innovation. Teachers are ultimately held accountable for exam results—not for fostering creativity or engagement. As Robinson (2011) and Efland (2004) argue, this accountability model is fundamentally misaligned with the goals of arts education, which require ambiguity, inquiry, and personal expression.

This systemic tension was also evident in student attitudes. Many students saw creative tasks as distractions from what really mattered,

exam preparation. This perception was reinforced by parents who gauged academic success strictly by grades and test performance. These findings echo broader research in Global South contexts, where creative pedagogies are often sidelined unless they clearly contribute to exam achievement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

These findings hold important implications for international researchers, particularly those working in creative fields. As Squires (2009) and Liamputtong (2010) emphasize, qualitative research in cross-cultural contexts must address not only linguistic accuracy but also cultural credibility. This means rethinking how we design, implement, and analyse educational interventions. It also involves recognizing the value of including local stakeholders, teachers, students, translators, not just as participants, but as co-creators of meaning.

One of the most important insights I gained is that educational translation must be dialogic. Pedagogical practices cannot simply be imported from one context to another. Instead, they must be negotiated, reshaped, and sometimes reimagined through ongoing dialogue with local values, expectations, and traditions. This requires humility, methodological flexibility, and a deep respect for the educational landscapes in which we work.

My experience in Sri Lanka reinforced the value of such engagement. Despite the many challenges, I witnessed moments of transformation, teachers reflecting critically on their methods, students experimenting with new forms of expression, and myself as a researcher gaining a deeper, more reflexive understanding of educational translation. These small shifts, while subtle, point to the potential for long-term change, provided there is continued support, collaboration, and sustained critical reflection.

CONCLUSION

This study has illuminated the multifaceted challenges involved in

translating both language and educational ideas across cultural contexts, particularly within the creative and pedagogically rich domain of Process Drama. Through my doctoral research, conducted in Sri Lanka under the academic framework of an Australian university, I explored the methodological, linguistic, and cultural complexities that arise in cross-cultural educational interventions. In doing so, I aimed to contribute to broader conversations around international research practices and qualitative methodologies in education.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a central paradox: while educational innovation often draws from global models, its success depends on local relevance. My attempt to transfer Process Drama techniques, developed within Western educational paradigms, into the Sri Lankan school system revealed significant tensions. These included cultural mismatches in teaching and learning practices, linguistic translation difficulties, and resistance rooted in an examination-driven educational culture.

The process of translation, both literal and conceptual, emerged as profoundly complex. While back translation and professional linguistic review were necessary, they were not sufficient on their own. These technical processes needed to be accompanied by cultural interpretation, pedagogical adaptation, and critical reflexivity. In this context, translation was not just about accuracy; it was about preserving meaning, aligning with local realities, and maintaining pedagogical integrity.

What this research ultimately demonstrates is that meaningful educational reform, particularly in creative subjects like Drama, requires more than curriculum development or teacher training. It calls for a fundamental shift in values: a rethinking of what it means to learn, to teach, and to create. The resistance I encountered from both teachers and students was not due to ignorance or unwillingness, but rather the result of systemic pressures that equate educational success with standardization and test performance. Until these expectations shift to value creativity, emotional depth, and process-oriented learning, approaches like Process Drama will continue to sit at the margins of mainstream education.

Despite these challenges, this study also revealed moments of genuine transformation. Teachers began experimenting with new

methods; students responded positively to creative engagement; and schools showed openness to unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. These moments -though small- offer meaningful indicators that change is possible. They suggest that with sustained support, collaboration, and critical reflection, creative education can find a stronger footing even in traditionally rigid systems.

In an increasingly globalized educational landscape, the need for intercultural understanding, adaptive translation practices, and ethically grounded research is more urgent than ever. My experience serves as a reminder that knowledge production in education must be both global and local, deeply attuned to the intricacies of language, culture, and human expression.

As educators, researchers, and practitioners engage in international collaborations and interventions, I offer this work as both a caution and an invitation: a caution against the uncritical transfer of pedagogical models, and an invitation to embrace translation as a creative, ethical, and dialogic process, one that honours the complexity of communication and the transformative power of drama education.

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CHAMILA GUNAMUNIGE
University of Texas at Austin

Form Beyond Content: Defining the Public Sphere through Mäyämän Political Performance in Northern Sri Lanka During the Civil War

ABSTRACT

The form of a performance does not depend solely on its content but is also shaped by the agency of the space in which it is performed. The play Māyāmān, performed in rural Jaffna in the 1980s at the onset of the ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka, is used as a case study to support this argument. The uniqueness of Māyāmān lies in its ephemeral form. This article explores how that ephemeral form is not derived from the play's content but rather results from the agency of the counter-public space in which it was performed. The Tamil society that performed Māyāmān had a significantly more vulnerable agency compared to the dominant Sinhalese sphere of Sri Lanka. Hence, the ephemeral nature of Māyāmān can be understood as a result of that limited agency. In contrast, this paper questions whether a performance presented within the dominant Sinhalese sphere is necessarily more free. It becomes evident that the mere presence of agency within a space does not guarantee the freedom of the performance. The key determining factor is the degree to which that space is autonomous from the state.

KEYWORDS

Public Sphere, Mäyämän, Political Performance, ephemeral nature, autonomous

INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the mutual relationship between a performance and its public sphere through a Tamil-language performance called Mäyämän, which was performed in northern Sri Lanka in the 1980s. The Tamils living in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka were the most affected by the civil war that lasted for almost thirty years (1980 - 2010). As a reaction to the brutality of the war, a stage play was created in 1985 by students and teachers studying theater at the University of Jaffna to discuss the rights of the Tamils affected by the war. Eventually, this group formed an organization and decided to perform selected scenes of this play at the rural areas outside the university. As a result of this, traveling performance of Mäyämän were born. Since the government security forces imposed censorship on public gatherings, especially performances, this group had to develop tactics to protect the performance and their lives. For instance, the group rode bicycles from village to village while covering their faces with masks, not identifying themselves to the people. In addition, these performances were brief, and the performers tried to erase all evidence afterward. The performance resembled a guerrilla attack, as even the audience was unaware of it. The distinctive feature present within the form of Mäyämän provides a clear pathway for this paper to discuss how the agency of the public or counter-public sphere influences a performance. Susan Lorrie Parks writes in The Six Elements of Style: "A playwright, as any other artist, should accept the bald fact that content determines form and form determines content; that form and content are interdependent." (07) On the contrary, the ephemeral form of the Mäyämän was not a requirement of the content but was determined outside the performance. Therefore, the question raised in this paper is why the form of Mäyämän was determined by external factors that was not related to its content. The public sphere of Mäyämän consisted of Northern Tamils who had been oppressed by state repression and violence as a consequence of the war. This paper shows how the powerless condition of Sri Lanka's minority Tamil community affected to determine the ephemeral form of Mäyämän performance. Eventually the paper argues that the form of performance is not necessarily determined by its content;

somewhat, it is shaped by the agency of the public or counter-public sphere in which the performance takes place, particularly within a specific political context.

MÄYÄMÄN AND ITS PUBLIC SPHERE

A key characteristic of performance is its capacity to generate a distinct public sphere. For example, when a play is performed, it creates a public that exists within the spatial and temporal boundaries of the theater. Michael Warner articulates this idea, stating: "A public can also be a second thing: a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space" (50). In this sense, the space that Mäyämän created for Tamil rural communities living in the war zone can indeed be understood as a form of public space. Nevertheless, there was a unique aspect of Mäyämän that extends beyond Warner's definition. In the politically volatile environment of the Sri Lankan civil war, public gatherings of Tamils in the North were often suppressed or discouraged by government security forces. Under such conditions, the act of assembling for a political performance—especially one addressing human rights violations—became far more complex than the conventional notion of a theatrical public. Yet, the fact that Tamils gathered around Mäyämän despite the dangers they faced reveals the distinctive nature of the public space created by the performance. This space was not merely defined by physical presence but by a shared sense of urgency, resistance, and collective identity. On the other hand, when Tamils were isolated by the dominant majority and its ideology, they experienced a deep identity crisis. To cope with this, they needed to come out of their isolated lives and find a shared space where they could connect with others and feel a sense of belonging. In this context, the Tamil people find themselves in a challenging situation where they must protect both their private and collective spaces. In such circumstances, the ephemeral nature of the Mäyämän performance becomes particularly effective due to its guerrilla characteristics, which make it difficult for security forces to track and disrupt the collective space being created.

PUBLIC AND COUNTER-PUBLIC

Mäyämän performance provides an excellent approach to identifying the division between a public and a counter public. In simple terms, a public sphere is a space where private goals are hidden and public interests are brought into focus. Nancy Fraser Writes, "According to Heberams, the idea of a public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest""(58). Habermas's conception of the public sphere opens a pathway to understanding the political context of Mäyämän's public sphere. The Tamil audience came together to the Mäyämän, putting aside their personal life aspirations and gathering around the performance for their community and political freedom. The key question is whether this unique political space was considered unsafe simply because it challenges or opposes the government. Warner's following statement leads to a deeper discussion in this regard. "If it were not possible to think of the public as organized independently of the state or other frameworks, the public could not be sovereign with respect to the state" (51). Since Mäyämän did not stand on behalf of the state, the space constructed through that performance cannot be called a public space. Fraser writes, "Thus, at one level, the idea of the public sphere designated an institutional mechanism for "rationalizing" political domination by rendering states accountable to (some of) the citizenry." (59) As Fraser emphasized above, Mäyämän did not justify the dominance of the state, on the contrary, it challenges the suppression carried out against the Tamils by the state. So, such a space can be identified as a counter-public sphere. Fraser further writes: "I propose to call these subaltern counter publics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." (67) All the characteristics identified by Nancy Fraser as defining subaltern counter publics are clearly reflected in the space created by Mäyämän, highlighting its role as a site of resistance, alternative discourse, and marginalized voices.

The war in Sri Lanka led to numerous major crises, most notably the significant loss of life and property, as well as the deepening divide between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Furthermore, the war reinforced a dynamic in which the minority Tamils came to be viewed as subordinate by the Sinhalese majority. According to the Sinhalese dominant historical narrative, the Tamils are a foreign nation to Sri Lanka. The recent history of bringing Tamils from India to work in Sri Lanka's plantations may have also contributed to shaping this narration. In such a situation, the Tamil people are excluded from the greater public space of Sri Lanka and are positioned as a subordinate social group. Hence, the space created by Mäyämän aligns with Fraser's concept of subaltern counter publics. The primary demand of the Tamil rebels during the war was that they needed a separate state. The central government opposed this separatist idea and announced the war was to ensure it remained an undivided country. The Tamil rebels wanted to escape from the greater public space of Sri Lanka to obtain sovereignty on their own, which meant making a greater public space for just the Tamils. Ultimately, the counter public space formed around Mäyämän aimed to establish a public sphere independent of the dominant Sinhalese space. Warner writes: "Counter publics face another obstacle as well. One of the most striking features of publics, in the modern public sphere, is that they can in some contexts acquire agency" (88). Due to the counter public space of the performance, it did not have much agency, so, Mäyämän formed a guerilla performance for its survival. This performance lacks a strong public space to confront censorship by security forces because the Tamils have no agency in the dominant Sri Lanka's historical narration. The ephemeral form of Mäyämän emerges in response to this historical obstacle.

AGENCY IN NATIONALIST CINEMA AND THE DADA MOVEMENT

This section discusses the impact on artistic works within public spaces that are either supported by the government or exist without its support, through two examples outside of Mäyämän. The first ex-

ample is films that glorified Sinhala nationalism during the Sri Lankan civil war. Many movies were produced during the final stages of the Sri Lankan war and, notably, centered around the dominant historical narratives of the country. These films appeared to be inspired by stories from the Mahāvamsa, the primary historical chronicle of Sri Lanka, which spans from the 6th century BCE to the 4th century CE. The central theme of the Mahāvamsa is to glorify the superiority of Sinhala Buddhists—the ethnic and religious majority in Sri Lanka. This chronicle has significantly contributed to the formation of the recent Sinhala Buddhist dominant ideology. So, the films based on the Mahāvamsa's stories glorified the war ideology against the minority. For instance, the Sinhala film Abā is based on a king who is regarded as an ancestral figure of the Sinhala ethnic group. Since these films aligned with the government's ideology, they received significant support from the state. Building on Fraser's concept of the public sphere, the space created through these films attained a degree of sovereignty from the state. These movies were not subject to any censorship, and the movie makers didn't want to hide their identities to survive as performers of Mäyämän. When comparing these two spheres—movies and Mäyämän—reveals that the agency of the space plays a crucial role in shaping forms of performance. This raises an important question: can the form and content of performance truly be independent when it emerges from a public sphere that has agency? Sinhala nationalist movies were not independent of the state's ideological influence; rather, they were deeply embedded in the dominant narratives approved by the state. Nancy Fraser writes, "The official public sphere is the institutional vehicle for a major historical transformation in the nature of political domination" (62). Thus, performance is often subject to the power structures and dominant ideologies of the public space in which it takes place.

To further clarify the relationship between public or counter-public space and agency, it is vital to examine the Dada movement, which emerged during the First World War. The Dada movement began during World War I in a secret cabaret space in Zurich, Switzerland. In response to the repression caused by the war, several artists gathered in secret to create artworks in this space. Lacking the freedom to produce fully developed pieces, Dada artists embraced improvisa-

tion and spontaneity, which gave their works an immediate and raw quality compared to conventional art forms. The immediate, improvised nature of Dadaist works can be understood as a response to the crisis of agency within the counter public sphere constructed by the Dada movement. Dada emerged from a space purposely created by artists who opposed the war and refused to align with the hostile states. This lack of official support meant that Dada artists operated in precarious conditions, often creating under the threat of repression. As a result, their artworks are shaped by the insecurity and limited agency of the space. The interplay between the ephemeral form of Mäyämän performance and its counter public sphere echoes the Dada movement and the cabaret sphere in Zurich. Nevertheless, whether public or counter-public, the ultimate control and agency of these spaces often remain under the influence of the state. As a result, artistic works produced within these spheres cannot be fully independent of the influence of the state. This tension is a shared characteristic of both Mäyämän performance and Sinhala nationalist cinema in Sri Lanka**.**

ART BEYOND THE AGENCY OF THE SPHERE.

When discussing the connection between an artwork and the agency of the space, it is impossible to overlook the recent aragalaya movement – public protest in Sri Lanka against the government. In 2022, Sri Lanka faced a severe economic crisis that sparked widespread protests against the government. Initially, these protests began with quiet candlelight vigils, but they soon escalated as opposition political parties joined in, organizing large marches with significant public participation. A defining moment came when people from all regions of the country set up tents at Gall Face in Colombo, declaring they would not leave until the President resigned. Over time, this protest site evolved into a "protest village," transforming into a cultural hub. Within this space, a variety of cultural expressions flourished. It became home to a theatre, cinema, school, library, university, and even an art gallery. Protesters and visitors engaged in live performances, music, theatre, and puppetry, with some attending simply to experience these cultural expressions. The content and

form of these artistic creations were not determined in any way by the protest space. Using Augusto Boal's Image Theatre technique, I developed a performance that served as a powerful example of this. Both the content and structure of this piece were designed specifically to critique the prevailing political authority. Notably, the form of the performance was not influenced or restricted by the nature of the protest space in which it took place. Together with my team of actors, we presented the performance across the protest grounds over several days, drawing significant attention and engagement from large audiences. In her book Communal Luxury, Kristin Ross highlights Élisée Reclus's perspective on the Paris Commune , which helps in understanding the nature of the artworks that emerged in the protest spaces of Sri Lanka.

> "The Commune, we might say, is perhaps best figured as having the qualities Reclus attributes in his book to the mountain stream. Its scale and geography are livable, not sublime. The stream, in his view, was superior to the river because of the unpredictability of its course. The river's torrents of water barrel down a deep furrow precarved by the thousands of gallons that have preceded it; the stream, on the other hand, makes its own way." (19-20)

Many of the artworks created within the Sri Lankan protest space, which took resistance as their core purpose, carried the characteristics of a stream of artistic expression independent of state control. Like the Paris Commune, the Sri Lankan protest site functioned as a counter public space autonomous from the state. As such, the question of agency did not arise in the works created within it. Therefore, the purpose, content, and form of these protest artworks were not shaped by any external authority but emerged with a sense of independence. In contrast, when discussing the ephemeral nature of the Māyāmān form, in the end, was subject to the agency of the state. The concept of a separate Tamil state introduced by Tamil rebels was, in fact, an attempt to escape this very agency. As Habermas states, "Private designated the exclusion from the sphere of the

state apparatus; for public referred to the state that in the meantime had developed, under absolutism, into an entity having an objective existence over against the person of the ruler" (11). According to this view, although Māyāmān could be considered an activist performance, it cannot be described as part of a truly public sphere, because the space in which it was performed remained under state control. Its ephemeral nature reflects this very limitation. In contrast, the artistic expressions that emerged in the recent Sri Lankan protest space demonstrate a level of autonomy characteristic of the evolved public sphere that Habermas describes. Therefore, the autonomy and interdependent relationship between the content and form of a performance largely depend on how free the public sphere is from state control or the influence of any dominant ideology.

CONCLUSION

A central question that emerged in this discussion was how the ephemeral form of Māyāmān performance came into being. It became evident that the character of the counter-public space in which Māyāmān was performed played a decisive role in shaping its form. During the civil war, the Tamil community faced repression, and gathering in public spaces posed significant dangers. In such a context, expressing dissent or injustice through performance in public was extremely risky. Māyāmān performances emerged in response to this danger, utilizing brief, improvised acts and dispersing quickly as strategies for minimizing risk. These characteristics, shaped by the precarious nature of the counter-public space, reflected the limited agency available to the performers. On the other hand, using Sinhala nationalist movies created during the Sri Lankan civil war, the paper raises an important question: can the form and content of performance truly be independent when it emerges from a public sphere that has agency? Therefore, for the content and form of an artistic work to be truly independent, the public space must be completely free from state influence.

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Chamila Priyanka Gunamunige (he/him) is a theatre artist and scholar. He is a PhD student with a specialization in performance as public practice at The University of Texas at Austin. His recent publication is "Ideological Crisis, Compliance, and Self-Censorship: Identifying the Symptoms of Sinhala-Speaking Theatre Through Its Responses to the Civil War" for the Asian Theatre Journal, 2024. He won the USA Fulbright Scholarship in 2016, and as a result of that, He obtained his MFA in Theatre Directing at Long Island University, New York. Chamila did his BA in Political Science at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

BANDHUKA PREMAWARADHANA
Faculty of Graduate Studies
University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Body as a Conscious Linguistic Signifier: The Primacy of Body Consciousness in Performance

ABSTRACT

Through the encoding of the film on the part of the film maker and the decoding of the film language on the part of the film viewer, the film making and viewing process can be identified as taking place through two points of consciousness. This process of encoding and decoding can be studied more clearly through semiotics. The digitalized body of the film actor is a moving semiotic signifier. It is the role of the film actor to be aware of this owing to the fact that it is their body that is the semiotic signifier. The body/signifier captured on film faces a greater challenge than the body/signifier captured through the photograph since the filmic medium incorporates time and movement into its narration. Through Barthes' understanding that language takes place through absence just as much as presence, we see that the semiotic signifier that is the body of the actor is tasked with being 'readable' to the film viewer in a way that the consciousness of the film maker is communicated in an effective manner. This demands that the film actor is aware of their body as not a body of the self. The film actor must become a conscious semiotic signifier. The development of body awareness takes place through the development of repeated physical movement and the creation of muscle memory which creates the bodymind.

KEYWORDS:

Film, Acting, Performance, Consciousness, Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

Film is a digital medium, while theatre is live performance. In contrasting the two forms, Susan Sontag sees Film as an "object" and Theatre as "performance" (Sontag, 1966). As an object in the digital form catering to the auditory and visual senses of the viewer, film provides incredible detail and realism in to the auditory and visual senses of the viewer. The film viewer is immersed in the film with very little opportunity to contest the illusion of reality that they are immersed in (Metz, 1974). Film enters the consciousness of the viewer and transports them to a different reality, an experience both different and similar to the real that they are located in. The film maker is in control of the reality that the film viewer is taken to, but not entirely.

Sontag identifies all Art as a "fact of consciousness" (Sontag, 1966) and through this we know that there are two consciousnesses involved in the Film process. That of the film maker, and that of the film viewer. Given its digital form, there is absolute codification of consciousness through the communication that is the filmic medium. It is through this understanding that we come to the discussion of film as a language. The language that is film is then 'decoded' in the consciousness of the film viewer, which makes it a communication. This paper discusses this codification through the actor's body and a study of semiotics and simulation, bringing us to a discussion of the role of the actor in the film making process.

FILM AS A LANGUAGE

The communication between film maker and film viewer takes place through the digitalization and composition of objects through the camera. Since the camera captures objectively, the body of the actor is objectified in the process of digitalization. Film is the objective scrutiny of not only space and matter, but also time (Benjamin, 1935). Christian Metz begins his identification of film as a language through the discussion of motion.

> Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual

> participation in the spectator (one is almost never totally bored by a movie). They spontaneously appeal to his sense of belief—never, of course, entirely, but more intensely than do the other arts, and occasionally films are, even in the absolute, very convincing. They speak to us with the accents of true evidence, using the argument that "It is so." With ease they make the kind of statements a linguist would call fully assertive and which, moreover, are usually taken at face value. (Metz, 1974, p. 4)

The film viewer is 'drawn in' to how convincing the work is, to the extent that the real is replaced with the realistic. Through film we experience not just digitalization of picture and sound, but also digitalization of time. A past and present, a then and a now, making film a chronological art form.

The process of editing through a carefully selected sequence of events arranged in a selective order and the portrayal of space relatively gives the film maker the freedom to deliver a highly detailed narrative. This narrative, though assuming the illusion of reality, is highly manipulated. The narrative includes everything that the film maker wishes to communicate, and (more importantly) exclude everything they wish not to communicate. Furthermore, there is a distinct beginning, middle, and end of a film, and this beginning, middle and end is determined by the maker of the film during the process of production and also during the process of post-production.

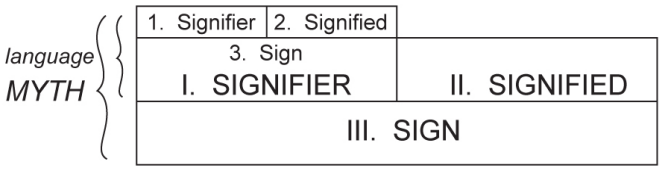
> The spectator perceives images which have obviously been selected (they could have been other images) and arranged (their order could have been different). In a sense, he is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages but some "master of ceremonies," some "grand image-maker" (grand imagier) who (before being recognized as the author, if it is an auteur film, or, if not, in the absence of an author) is first and foremost the film itself as a linguistic object (since the spectator always knows that what he is seeing is a film), or more precisely a sort of "potential

> linguistic focus" ("foyer linguistique virtuel") situated somewhere behind the film, and representing the basis that makes the film possible. (Metz, 1974, p. 21)

The construction of the narrative through inclusion and exclusion is a deliberate and conscious speech act of the film maker. The artist intentionally creates the presence of a certain narrative, and in turn is intentional in creating absence as well. The spectator is then drawn into an ultra-realistic narrative structure that works through both presence and absence.

SEMIOTICS IN THE FILM-LANGUAGE

The body of the actor is captured, digitalized and turned into semiotic signifiers in this film making process. Unlike in theatre where the actor is live and can never be dissociated from the time and space within which they are performing, the film actor is detached from reality through the objectification of the camera. The body of the film actor is a semiotic signifier.



(Barthes, 1991, p.113)

Roland Barthes discusses speech as a system of signification; a composition of a series of signs through which meaning is created through absence as well as presence. The understanding of the absence through the presence is the process of signification; the understanding of the myth.

> But what must be firmly established at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of significa-

> tion, a form. (Barthes, 1991, p. 107)

In the creation of the myth, what we must recall is that the process of signification at the point of codification fills the signifier with meaning, and at the point of the de-codification in the listener (film viewer), the signifier becomes empty, void of meaning. The body of the actor is then filled with meaning at the point of performance, but in the creation of the character in the mind of the film viewer, the body of the actor is no longer "the body of the actor" but rather the character in its entirety. Hence, there is demand for absence in the body of the actor. Sontag discusses this as there being no distinction between the actor and the character in the film. This way, the character is completely empty of the actor. "As the film actor and his role are identical, so the image cannot be dissociated from what is imaged" (Sontag, 1966, p. 29). The character takes priority over the actor through the emptying of the signifier. The actor is both empty of the self, and full of the character. The body of the actor becomes a sign which the film viewer decodes while engaging in the film language. The actor then is present, but empty (absent).

> I shall not exceed the limits of an objective analysis if I point out that the ubiquity of the signifier in myth exactly reproduces the physique of the alibi (which is, as one realizes, a spatial term): in the alibi too, there is a place which is full and one which is empty, linked by a relation of negative identity ('I am not where you think I am; I am where you think I am not')." (Barthes, 1991, p. 122)

The creation of the myth that is the character (and/or the film, and/or the point of consciousness form which the work of art originates) is through the signifier (the body of the actor) transitioning into the character (the signified). Through the union of the signifier and the signified (or the emptying of the signifier) meaning is formed in the mind of the film viewer through their consciousness. For the film viewer to decode the body of the film actor at their point of consciousness, the film actor must be absent from the body.

In contrasting film and theatre, the process of distinction between

actor and character takes place to a lesser degree in the body of the stage actor since the performance is a live one. The audience member is present at the moment of the creation of performance, and thereby the body of the stage actor is detached from objects that it is located amongst. The theatregoer enjoys the performance of a live actor engaging with props and other actors on a stage while the film viewer engages with a narrative of objects located among objects. This is how the creation of the myth behind the film language differs from the creation of myth in theatre, the expression of the point of consciousness. The objective digitalization of the body of the actor in film activates two points of consciousness for meaning to take place – the point where the body is encoded by the film maker, and the point where the body is decoded by the film viewer.

To further define the body of the actor in the filmic medium – the body of the actor in a moving picture differs from the body of the actor in a still photograph. The body-signifier captured in a still photograph is 'more absent' since the frame is a frozen one. The body of the film actor is a moving signifier that also demands absence due to objectification. Given the digital nature of film, the body of the film actor must still be 'readable' through absence. The moving body of the film must be aware of this. The decision on the part of the actor on what movement to make is simultaneously a decision on what movement not to make. Movement becomes a highly selective process. The role of the actor is to be conscious of the deliberate decisions that build the language of the film.

THE BODY OF THE ACTOR AS A CONSCIOUS LINGUISTIC SIGNIFIER

The codified body of the actor is activated at the point of it entering the consciousness of the film viewer, where it is 'read'. This body must give a specific readable narrative to the viewer/reader through its emptiness or absence. For the purpose of this exploration. The readability of the body of the actor takes place through the stillness of the body of the actor. Liyanage discusses this concept through the development of the bodymind – a consciousness located in the body. It is understood as the "pre-expressivity of the actor"

(Liyanage, 2016, p. 62). It is crucial that the actor is able to contain, control, maintain and project one's bodymind in order to manipulate the semiotic signifier that is their body. To be successfully present of the character (what is said) and to be absent of the actor (what is not said) is the achievement of stillness. This consciousness is the bodymind. The understanding of acting as a viewed performance is highlighted through Liyanage's discussion of forms of stillness. The stillness for the actor varies from the stillness of the yogi; the primary contrast being that the stillness of the yogi is not one experienced by a third party.

> It should be noted that the seated yogi's stillness of the body and the actor's presence cultivated through the assiduous practice of martial arts such as Angampora are two distinctive approaches of somatic training. A yogi's intention is to achieve mindfulness through meditation and attain *nibbhana* or blissfulness. Yet, the actor's intention is to cultivate her bodymind apparatuses to be effectively used in performance situations. Effective in the sense that the actor should be able to cultivate the habitual body that is thematized and operated as a backdrop of her/his enactment. (Liyanage, 2021, p. 24)

Exploring the communication of thought and emotion through the body of the actor to the viewer is a study of embodiment. The development of an acting technique with embodiment as most important requires a study of training methods that rely on embodiment through repeated physical movement. Phillip B. Zarrilli brings to the forefront the importance of developing a bodymind awareness of the actor's self. Discussing his experiences with Indian Kathakali dance and *Kalari Payattu* martial arts, Zarrilli highlights his development of mindfulness, stillness and tranquility, heightened self-awareness through bodymind trainings.

> Gradually, after years of practice, the relationship of my body and mind in practice and my understanding of that relationship began to alter. When demonstrat-

> ing the martial art or when acting, I found myself able more consistently to enter a state of readiness and awareness […] My tensions and inattentions gradually gave way to sensing myself simultaneously as "flowing" yet "power-full", "centered" yet "free", "released" yet "controlled." I was beginning to actualize what Benedetti described as a "stillness in my center." I was learning how to "stand still. (Zarrilli, 2002, p. 183).

The engagements in Angampora and Kalari highlights the role that repeated physical movement (the development of muscle memory) plays in the development of the awareness of the bodymind. Through the development of the bodymind, the actor is conscious of the image that they body is at the point of performance. An image which is manipulatable through the bodymind; leading to highly detailed consciousness of movement, developing extreme precision in pace, position and posture. It is a conscious image. This argument brings together the understaning of readability of the film actor, and the importance of actor training to go in the direction of body consciousness and the development of the bodymind. In a Lankan setting, developing actor training for the filmic medium brings us to Angam Mechanics.

Angam Mechanics is an actor training methodology that relies on Lankan martial art systems to develop a body-conscious actor. It links Angampora training systems with the actor training methods of Stanislavsky and Meisner to create a body movement system that touches on the techniques of popular actor training methodologies. The AHEAD DOR HEMS no.73 project *A Lamp in a Windless Place*, through Angampora training, develops a system of body movements that heighten consciousness of the body. This allows the actor to go further in the direction of image control and projection in order to deliver a more precise performance, closer in tune to the point of consciousness where the film is being digitalized. The body of the actor aims to be an emptier canvas at the first point of consciousness (the making of the film), and a more readable semiotic signifier at the second point of consciousness (the viewing of the film).

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Bandhuka Premawardhana is an actor, theatre/film practitioner and academic. Following his post as research assistant at the World-Bank funded AHEAD project A Lamp in a Windless Place, he is completing his MPhil in performance studies at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts and is also engaging in actor training. He uses Angam Mechanics techniques in his projects and further continues to explore body consciousness and awareness of the physical through Angampora as well as through basketball.

W. A. P. WICKRAMASINGHE
ANUSHA JAYASIRI
University of the Visual and Performing Arts,
Colombo, Sri Lanka

The Role of ICT in Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Visual and Performing Arts Degrees at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the University of the Visual and Performing Arts' (UVPA) Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) degree programs are affected by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) subject. ICT integration into arts education has grown in importance as digital technologies continue to revolutionize creative processes. This study explores the ways in which ICT supports professional growth, artistic expression, and curricular improvement in the visual and performing arts. The study evaluates the experiences and the opinions of the academic staff and students on the usefulness, difficulties, challenges, and possibilities of ICT subject using qualitative techniques, such as interviews with academics and students, using review reports, study techniques, various dimensions of the subject, and curriculum analysis. The results show that the impact on ICT in Visual and Performing Arts subjects provides new opportunities for innovation, teamwork, hybrid learning environment, and international outreach while enhancing the quality of arts degrees. Further, there are some drawbacks as well, including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of training, and resistance to change to new advancement of technologies.

KEYWORDS:

Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Visual and Performing Arts Degree, hybrid method, Learning Management System (LMS), online resources

INTRODUCTION

University of the Visual and Performing Arts is the only university in Sri Lanka which offers honours degrees in the Visual and Performing Arts areas: Dance & Drama, Music and Visual Arts. Information and Communication Technology is a subject which deals with the integration and application of information technology (IT) and communication technologies for teaching, learning, research and administration. By the exploration of these two subject areas, it has been identified that there is an impact on the ICT subject for the effective conducting of Visual and Performing Arts degrees of the university. Accordingly, the main objective of this research is to find the role of ICT subject for the Performing Arts degrees in the University of the Visual and Performing Arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authors referred several research papers related to the study area. In this phase, the main purpose is to get a clear understanding of the nature of the two areas, ICT and Visual and Performing Arts with the idea of identifying the usage and impact of ICT in education, usage and impact of ICT in Visual and Performing Arts, online resource utilization for art field and employability for the degree holders of Visual and Performing Arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON USAGE AND IMPACT OF ICT IN EDUCATION:

Raja and Nagasubramani discussed how the use of technology has made the process of teaching and learning more enjoyable. (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018) Moreover the paper discussed the impact of ICT on education such as it increased active learning, collaborative and cooperative learning, creative learning, Integrative learning and evaluative learning. Advantages of ICT in education are: it makes students more excited to learn, help students with busy schedules, freedom to work at home on their own time, train students to learn new technology skills they can use later in the workplace, decrease

paper and photocopying costs, and promotes the concept of "green revolution". In addition to this, paper discussed the disadvantages of ICT in education such as many experts and experienced people say that, due to such technology in education, students imagination is affected, their thinking ability is reduced, sometime it's also time-consuming from teacher's point of view, it is costly to install such technology, there can be health issues too when used over limit, and some students can't afford modern computer technologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON USAGE AND IMPACT OF ICT IN THE AREA OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS:

An (2019) discusses the interrelationship between IT and Art. Further, this paper explains the fact that the compulsory requirement of introducing technology for aesthetic education in China. It further explores the possibility of reforming the college aesthetic education in China using IT. As an example the author has analyzed image aesthetic features using computer algorithms and highlighted the quality of the results due to the computer technology. These research findings will provide a theoretical guidance for the modernization of aesthetic education in colleges while enhancing the quality of education of the students.

Ilic argues in his book that ICT has revolutionized the education of Visual Art by addressing the limitations of traditional teaching methods by providing pedagogical tools which facilitates a more dynamic, interactive and multimedia-rich learning environment in the classroom. His argument is persuasive and well-structured for integrating digital tools into visual art education. He further pointed out that practitioners and policymakers would benefit from follow-up studies that address implementation challenges and explore outcomes across diverse educational settings (Ilic, 2019).

The continuous development of digital technologies has transformed the educational process to a digital platform (González-Zamar et al., 2020). This paper further emphasizes that the way of teaching and learning is influenced by the technology while giving a more interactive mode. The aim of this research was to identify global trends in digital education especially in the visual and artistic education using

the bibliometric technique for 1291 documents. As a result of this research, the key current and future lines of research were detected. Moreover, the most productive territories in this research topic are the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, China, and Australia. This study has also detected the most significant areas of knowledge where publications are classified: social sciences, computer science, and arts and humanities.

Carvalho et al. (2024) discussed about the requirement of new educational model using the experiences at the Corona (2020-2021) time period in Portugal as a part of a broader project that aims to develop a new pedagogical model that can be integrated into Higher Education curricula. At the time of corona there was a growing need felt by the performing artists to turn to digital environments: uploading creative products such as artwork, recordings of theater plays, creating performances using online mode, live streaming of home rehearsals by facing new creative challenges as artists and groups of artists. Within the time of Corona, in the higher education context, despite previous advances in e-learning and blended learning, most academic institutions responded to the immediate nature of the pandemic and converted their classes/methodologies to online mode using video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet. In this paper, it is subjected to use these experiences and create a new model of educational pedagogy to fulfill the current requirement of the higher education system. Authors discussed the idea of using the crossing of experiences between the teaching and artistic world from a methodological point of view to use questionnaires which applied to the academic context and interviews carried out with artists and performers. As a result of this paper it has been pointed out that despite the constraints, some elements can be seen as positive, opening new opportunities in performative and teaching practices for the future ahead.

Shehani Nipunika, (2023) discussed online music learning as one of the learning trends in the world. She emphasized the challenges and constraints arose in online music learning among higher-education students in the Faculty of Music at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts (UVPA), Sri Lanka using a quantitative case study methodology. After analyzing the data, it was identified that

participants encountered challenges with technical issues, a lack of interconnection between the student and the lecturer, and a lack of motivation to listen to the lesson due to isolation. Results of this research revealed that although participants faced these challenges and constraints of the availability of instruments, they had overcome it. Accordingly, it will highlight the fact that the integration of technology with education, especially in the field of music, dance and drama and visual arts would give a real impact enhancing the quality of the VPA degree programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON ONLINE RESOURCE UTILIZATION IN ART FIELD:

Yasanthini and Santharooban have studied how visual and performing arts students at Swami Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, use online resources and the obstacles they face (Yasanthini and Santharooban, 2022). Sixteen students participated in a focus group discussion, and 246 randomly chosen undergraduates completed a questionnaire survey administered by the authors. According to the findings, students mostly use websites, mobile applications, social media, and Google apps for academic purposes. Students' academic disciplines are closely linked to these internet resources. Students studying Visual Technological Art are strongly linked to Instagram, Google SlideShare, Google Art and Culture, Google Photo, Google Drive, Art Galleries, and Museum Collections. YouTube and Viber are strongly linked to the dance discipline, whereas YouTube and Carnatic Music Apps are strongly linked to the discipline of music. However, YouTube, university and library websites, and general Google searches are the main sources of information for drama and theater students. Inadequate internet connectivity was the main obstacle to obtaining media content. Performance-based research found that using online resources led to a loss of creativity and traditional teacher-student connections. The study suggests that in order to support the current curricula, the library should help students become aware of the relevant online performance-based resources.

Hong and Jo conducted study on the various kinds of online sources

and the standards used to assess how helpful online content is for assisting students in learning about and comprehending geographical ideas and procedures (Hong and Jo, 2017). In addition to standard course materials like textbooks, online information can be a useful resource. Higher education regularly and extensively uses a variety of online resources, such as web pages, articles, data, videos, and papers. Students can also learn and comprehend geographical concepts and processes with the aid of a variety of online resources, including maps, photographs, videos, and images. In this study, 65 undergraduate students taking a fall 2015 world geography course were instructed to look up 20 online resources on recent fluctuations in oil prices and then rate the sources according to how helpful they were for learning about the subject. Online news sites, company websites, newspaper and magazine websites, broadcasting websites, academic journals, educational websites, radio stations, Wikipedia and online encyclopedias, individual blogs and websites, and online discussion forums are the sources of the findings. Additionally, they disclosed that if students use any of the resources, they do so only if the website is user-friendly, thorough, reliable, organized, engaging, and up to date.

Girakaduwa has studied how the University of the Visual and Performing Arts library's e-resources and services are used and what issues arise when using them (Girakaduwa, 2019). One of the main information sources for research, teaching, and learning activities nowadays is electronic resources. However, most library users lack the necessary knowledge and abilities to utilize the computerized materials and services. Therefore, it is crucial to gauge how library users use e-resources and services, as well as any problems or difficulties they may encounter, before launching awareness campaigns and orientations. Users of the UVPA library made up the study's population, and participants were chosen at random. A total of 450 library users were chosen as the sample from the population. The core data was gathered through interviews and observations, while structured online questionnaires served as the primary data gathering tool. According to the survey, most library users (72.7%), including both staff and students, are aware of the e-resources and services the library offers. However, just 62.2% of library patrons took advan-

tage of the electronic resources and services. OPAC (searching and renewing service), library Web-resources (website), and past exam paper downloading facilities were utilized by the majority of respondents (62.2%, 60.9%, and 57.8%, respectively). Furthermore, it was shown that 46% of those surveyed made use of the Digital Repository System and e-journal.

In contrast to the other services Database and email service utilization was quite modest. 62.2% of participants expressed satisfaction with the usability and usefulness of e-resources and services. The results showed that a lack of infrastructure facilities, a lack of user education and awareness initiatives, a lack of IT skills and knowledge, and English language hurdles were the main causes of the reduced use of e-resources and services. As a result, libraries ought to take an active part by launching carefully thought-out user awareness and education initiatives, building out their infrastructure, and purchasing additional e-resources. To get the most out of the e-resources and services, experts also recommend updating the curricula by including more practical sessions and setting up email or mobile alert update services.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON EMPLOYABILITY IN THE AREA OF VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS:

One of the biggest problems in modern society is unemployment. Employers' need for the same appears to be outpaced by the rate at which the number of job searchers is growing. This makes it more difficult for businesses to choose qualified employees from the graduate pool. In these circumstances, it is the responsibility of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), graduates, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure that the employability needs and expectations of graduates are met. For graduates to be employable in SMEs, they must possess a variety of skills. However, given the increasing sophistication of today's society, graduates are increasingly in need of ICT abilities.

Samaradiwakara and Gunawardena (2017) discussed the application of ICT skills in higher education in Sri Lanka. Authors emphasized the fact that ICT would equip graduates with a sound techno-

logical background to face the challenges in the job market. It is elaborated about the issues with university students such as reluctance to learn ICT course modules while learning their main subject stream especially in the fine arts and humanities faculties in the universities. In this paper, use of ICT by undergraduates, factors related to ICT use in universities, strategies to promote using ICT in universities are discussed in detail. It has been pointed out that nearly 80% of the applicants who were graduates in Humanities and Arts did not possess the skills needed. Semi structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at the four selected universities and various other fields in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, there were different thoughts from three categories of staff: ICT Lectures, Instructors, Marketing Managers and the students in State universities regarding the requirement of ICT skills in the competitive job market in Sri Lanka. According to the data collected, it has been revealed that basic ICT is an essential component for today's job market and that employers believe that a graduate can easily capture the demand by him/herself for their position with advanced ICT skills.

Given that ICT technicalities are necessary to carry out a number of fundamental tasks in the workplace, it is noted that the globalized economy creates an additional demand on graduates to possess these skills (Mushi, 2020). Numerous studies have examined the impact of ICT skills on employment. This paper discusses how ICT is necessary even in non-technical industries like manufacturing, construction, and agriculture, at least for graduates with a baseline skill set. However, it's unclear what the fundamental abilities are in this situation. Using Value-Focused Thinking (VFT), this study attempts to investigate and comprehend the kinds of fundamental ICT skills required as well as the importance of each ICT skill on employability. To determine the basic and intermediate concerns about ICT skills on employability, VFT employs in-depth interviews. Accordingly, this study explored five main fundamental issues which have to be handled effectively by the stakeholders to make sure that ICT graduates are more employable within the Small and SMEs. The outcome of this research will propose guidelines to the SMEs, graduates and HEIs through objectives which should be achieved.

Jusoh et al. (2011) examines the expectations gaps of recent gradu-

ates in Malaysia in order to close the research gap and add to the body of information already in existence. This study is interesting since it offers a comprehensive view of the list of expectation gaps and how they affect new graduates' commitment and job satisfaction. Since there are expectations gaps, it is crucial that businesses, higher education institutions, and graduates themselves solve them effectively and efficiently rather than solely relying on government action. In this context, various measures suggested in this study can be taken as guidance to reduce the expectation gaps. Failure to do so will have a severe effect on the graduates' job satisfaction, commitment, and more importantly, their performance. Due to the limitations of this study, the findings ought to be interpreted with care. First, the study was conducted on a relatively small sample in Malaysia and thus, limits the generalizability of the findings.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach to thoroughly examine how the Visual and Performing Arts degree programs are affected by the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) subject. To guarantee a comprehensive grasp of the subject, the study integrates qualitative data gathering and analysis methods such as interviews with academics and students, using review reports, study techniques, various dimensions of the subject, and curriculum analysis. Accordingly, research was employed using a descriptive and exploratory design to examine how ICT is integrated into the academic curriculum, teaching methodologies, and creative practices in Visual and Performing Arts disciplines. The study also explores perceptions of students and academic staff toward the effectiveness and challenges of ICT in their fields. It mainly analyzed the procedures and mechanisms used by the academic staff for the teaching of this subject for the degree programs in the university within the last 20 years duration. Document Analysis related to existing course syllabi and assignments were reviewed to assess the extent to which ICT components are embedded in the curriculum. Collected data through above methods were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and insights.

DATA COLLECTION

Authors gathered the data from the following stipulated questions using the above methods.

RQ1 The relationship between the subject of Information Technology and Visual and Performing Arts subject?

The University offers Information and Communication subjects for all levels of the visual and performing arts degree programs. For the first-year students, digital applications for performing arts are offered. There, it has included the fundamental concepts in computers and the knowledge of basic computer applications such as word processing, spreadsheet design and presentations design because those skills are essential for their entire journey of the University for doing assignments or projects, budget preparations for their creative works and report or thesis writing.

The Multimedia Technologies course module is offered for second-year students in the university. This subject is very useful for students in the visual and performing arts field because it qualifies them with the skills to create posters, banners, advertisements, invitation cards for their dance and music performances as well as art exhibitions. Moreover, the module enables students to create soundtracks and video clips for their artistic works. Also, learning this module helps students to enhance their design skills in areas such as book cover and magazine designs.

Moreover, a web application module is offered for Digital Portfolio Management for second-year students. This module enhances their skills in the areas of design and developing digital platforms to manage their portfolio. Third-year students are offered a digital marketing module and statistical application module for performing arts research. Digital marketing module enhances their theoretical and practical knowledge of how to use web, social media platforms to promote their creative works to the general public. Statistics module develops the third-year undergraduates' IT competencies in theoretical and practical knowledge in the area of statistics which can be

used for Performing Arts research. For the final-year students, there is a module called Computer Based project in visual and performing arts to apply the acquired IT skills during the study period in relation to their contexts.
Hence the above Information Technology based course modules are very essential for undergraduates to uplift their knowledge in the field of visual and performing arts and to bridge the knowledge gap and make new technological based artistic works which are highly standard than using only the traditional methods.

RQ2 What are the available facilities in the university to offer the subject effectively?

ICT subject was introduced for degrees of the UVPA in the year 2006 under the center for multidisciplinary studies with the purpose of enhancing the quality of the degrees by the first Vice-Chancellor of the university, Prof. Sarath Amunugama. Accordingly, IT Course modules for all the levels in the degrees of three faculties: Faculty of Music, Faculty of Dance and Drama and Faculty of Visual Arts were introduced as compulsory basis for level 01 and level 02 and auxiliary basis for level 03 and level 04. In the year 2010, IT Center was established for the university under the purview of the late Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Jayasena Kottagoda. In the year 2022 August, there was a milestone for the history of IT teaching and learning in the University after establishing the department of information technology under the Faculty of Dance and Drama. After identification of the requirement of computer laboratories for the practical and self-assessment of the students, five computer laboratories were established in three faculties (two laboratories in the Visual Arts, one large laboratory in the Dance and Drama faculty and two laboratories in the Music Faculty). Furthermore, IT services such as internet, email, web, eduroam and LMS are provided for students and staff of the University for teaching, learning, research and administration. With laboratory facilitation, the practical infrastructure requirement was fulfilled to support the understanding of theoretical knowledge provided for the students under the IT modules offered under the degree programmes.

RQ3 The impact of the Information Technology for the educational activities during the COVID 19 period in Sri Lanka.

Studying Information Technology was a big help for the Visual and Performing arts undergraduate students during the COVID 19 period. University conducted online lectures through synchronous online teaching and learning platforms: ZOOM, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts and Google Meet. The University's Learning Management System was used for distance education. So, even though subjects such as dance, music and arts consisted of traditional methods for learning, during this period students learned them through online modes. Assignments and Examinations are also conducted in an online environment such as submission of written files, images of conducted art works, recorded video clips of student's dance items and recorded audio clips. Moreover for the entrance of the University of Visual and Performing Arts, there is an aptitude test for the dance, drama, music and Visual Arts streams. This complete process such as application calling, application submission, answer submission and marking was conducted online through Google forms.

RQ4 How can IT skills be utilized for hunting the new knowledge of subject areas of Visual and Performing Arts?

This matter is so crucial and timely. Students are required to search for new knowledge related to their subjects efficiently and effectively. Actually, this is a case in which students have to spend money, time and space as it would require data searching, data collection, analysis & interpretation using the latest technologies and methods. ICT knowledge is very important in this context to fulfil the above requirement effectively. Let us take a few examples and try to understand the idea properly. For the information collection, visiting the library physically is the normal scenario happening in the academic institutions. But, with the advancement of ICT technology, the concept of digital library has been introduced for referencing libraries rather than physically visiting which is a time consuming job in Sri Lanka. Further, the information search through google

and other web searching methods are user friendly and easy methods compared to referencing other printed media including books, magazines etc. Another trending area is artificial intelligence which majority of the people are using for day today requirements, especially for the academic related activities. By following these mechanisms, rooms are opened for researchers to find their information needs effectively. Accordingly, they have clear and correct pathways to proceed with their research through IT skills. Due to this digital space created through ICT, all the economic and other barriers are removed so that all of the students have equal chances to fulfill their final achievements.

RQ5 The effect of the Information Technology skills for the job industry locally and Internationally?

University has an annual output of approximately 600 graduates. But the University's graduate's employment rate is not very satisfactory. University's unemployment rate is significantly high. The majority is employed as government school teachers. Hence learning Information Technology related modules are very important to find jobs in their career life. Web developer, web content editor, web designer, creative designer, UI/UX developer are some identified jobs in the IT Industry to which the UVPA graduates are likely to fit locally as well as internationally.

RQ6 What are the challenges of the IT department to offer the IT subject smoothly?

When challenges are considered, there are two main management aspects, namely physical and human resources required for the effective management of subject implementation. These two aspects are managed to minimize the effect for the course implementation with the help of university authority. But, the political, economic and social changes of the country will directly affect the smooth management of these areas. Our goal is to face these challenges and drive our path forward with the commitment of the staff of the IT department, under the guidance and instructions of relevant officers in the

university authority.

Findings of the Research

Data retrieved through above questions were analyzed through the different methodologies. As a result, it has been identified following impact on the Information and Communication Technology subject for the Visual and Performing Arts Degrees in the University of the Visual and Performing Arts.Enhanced online teaching and learning experience:

The integration of ICT into the curriculum has significantly improved the online teaching and learning environment. Students now have access to learning materials, recorded lectures, and digital resources leading to their artistic disciplines. Interactive platforms enable real-time feedback and engagement, while multimedia tools support a more dynamic and creative virtual classroom experience.

ENHANCED HYBRID LEARNING METHODOLOGY:

The adoption of a hybrid learning model combining face-to-face practical classes with digital components has allowed for greater flexibility and accessibility. Students can participate in studio-based sessions while benefiting from online tutorials, project-based assessments, and collaborative tools. This blended approach supports diverse learning styles and encourages the practical application of ICT tools in both physical and virtual environments.

COLLABORATIVE AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING:

The concept of collaborative learning means working in a group of two or more individuals to achieve a common goal / objective. Collaboration can either be achieved through traditional or technological approaches through ICT. In the traditional perspective within the domain of academic programmes, a group of individuals (a team) can work within a particular place in the form of a group project / assignment or any other assigned task related to an academic programme. In the technological approach, collaborative working can happen through many different ways such as conference calls, video conferences and online software platforms. These technological ap-

proaches are more efficient than the traditional approach as it will remove practical barriers such as physical appearance, travel costs, time saving etc.

SHIFT FROM TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES TO DIGITAL SPACE:

Due to the advancement of ICT technology, digital space such as social media, web and other online platforms are there for the creative learners and artists to showcase their products effectively to the general public without experiencing space, time and money issues. Actually, on one hand this is a paradigm shift which happened due to the technological advancements through ICT. With the advancement of Artificial Intelligence, this impact was thoroughly affected to Visual and Performing Arts Studies as several new digital technologies (software tools) have been introduced for manipulating creative productions in the areas of Dance & Drama, Music and Visual Arts. Accordingly, learners as well as practitioners (students and lecturers) are adapting to these AI technologies as a supplementary tool for their teaching and learning process.

ADDRESSED THE SPACE ISSUE IN THE UNIVERSITY:

By incorporating more online and hybrid learning methods within the ICT subject, the University has effectively alleviated physical space constraints. Virtual classrooms and digital collaboration platforms reduce the need for large, on-campus gatherings, allowing better management of limited facilities and studio spaces.

ENHANCED STUDENT'S DIGITAL SKILLS:

The course also focuses on equipping students with essential digital skills such as digital marketing and social media management. These competencies empower students in the visual and performing arts to promote their work, engage wider audiences, and build professional networks using contemporary online platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of the research is to find out the role of ICT in enhancing teaching and learning Visual and Performing Arts degrees at the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. Collected data through stipulated research questions using interviews, focus groups of academics and students, study techniques, curriculum analysis was thematically analyzed. The results show that the impact on ICT in Visual and Performing Arts subjects provides new opportunities for innovation, teamwork, and international outreach while enhancing the quality of Art degrees which will make students a competitive demand for the current job market in local and foreign countries. In addition to that it was identified that there are some shortcomings and challenges in the area of human and physical infrastructure for the smooth conducting of ICT course modules in the degree programs at the university.

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W. A. P. Wickramasinghe is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Information Technology at the Faculty of Dance and Drama, University of the Visual and Performing Arts. He holds a B.Sc. in Science, a Postgraduate Diploma in Statistics, an M.Sc. in Computer Science, an M.Phil. in Computer Science, and a Ph.D. (Digital Conservation). He is the Director / LEARN Board of Directors representing the university. His research interests are Computer Vision, Image Processing, Machine Learning, Computational Aesthetics, Digital Conservation, Software Engineering, Statistics and Mathematics.

Anusha Jayasiri received a Doctor of Engineering degree from the Department of Information Processing, Interdisciplinary Graduate School of Science and Engineering, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Japan in 2015. She also holds a Master of Engineering degree from the above university and a Bachelor of Science (Special) degree in Statistics and Computer Science from the Faculty of Science, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Her current research interests are in the fields of virtual reality, haptic devices, computer vision, multimedia technologies, computer graphics and image processing.

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BOOK REVIEW

THARUPATHI MUNASINGHE
University of Melbourne
Book Review: The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies

The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies

Bull, Michael (ed.). 2024. The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies. London and New York: Routledge. 536 pp. Hb.: £190.00. ISBN: 978-0-415-78594-8. Pb.: £48.99. ISBN: 978-0-415-78595-5.

Sound has emerged as one of the most compelling analytical frameworks for understanding contemporary life's technological, political, and sensorial transformations. Michael Bull's The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies captures this intellectual moment with remarkable breadth and sophistication, assembling an extraordinary array of scholars, artists, and practitioners to both consolidate sound studies as a vital interdisciplinary field and chart bold new directions for sonic inquiry.

This ambitious volume spans over 40 chapters organised around the key themes that define contemporary sound studies: sonic media and technologies, listening practices, spatial acoustics, embodiment, social justice, and the politics of audibility. The scope is deliberately expansive and intellectually invigorating, inviting readers on a journey from the sonic weaponisation of urban environments to Indigenous cosmologies of sound, from acoustic

ecology and field recording to algorithmic listening under platform capitalism.

The collection's central provocation is both elegantly simple and profoundly challenging: sound is never neutral. Rather, as the contributors consistently demonstrate, sound remains deeply embedded in social relations, politically consequential, and intimately connected to structures of power, exclusion, and resistance. Contributors including Jonathan Sterne, Jennifer Lynn Stoever, and Steve Goodman reveal how listening always involves positioning oneself in relation to race, gender, class, coloniality, and state power. Stoever's contribution proves particularly illuminating, powerfully foregrounding the racialised dimensions of listening and demonstrating how Black sonic practices have been simultaneously policed, appropriated, and erased whilst forming the foundation of dominant cultural soundscapes.

Perhaps the volume's greatest strength lies in its decisive move beyond Western and Eurocentric frameworks. Several essays challenge the field's earlier tendency to universalise sonic experience, incorporating decolonial, Indigenous, and non-Western epistemologies that fundamentally expand our understanding of sonic possibility. This shift towards what might be termed a pluriversal sound studies offers readers fresh vocabularies for understanding listening, resonance, and relationality. Contributions examining Afro sonic imaginaries, diasporic listening practices, and Global South urban soundscapes underscore how context, history, and positionality shape sonic analysis in ways that resist easy generalisation.

Methodologically, the Companion demonstrates an impressive commitment to both innovation and rigorous interdisciplinarity. Chapters seamlessly blend critical theory, media studies, anthropology, cultural history, musicology, and science and technology studies, often productively destabilising traditional disciplinary boundaries. The volume particularly excels in highlighting experimental forms of sonic research—audio walks, sound installations, digital archives, and participatory fieldwork—illustrating how listening itself becomes a mode of knowledge production that extends far beyond conventional academic methodologies.

One of this collection's defining achievements is its successful bal-

ance between theoretical sophistication and genuine accessibility. The essays maintain conceptual richness whilst adopting an inviting tone that engages readers across different levels of expertise, from advanced undergraduates to established scholars. Bull's editorial framing provides helpful navigation through the breadth of contributions, though the volume's impressive scale inevitably means some thematic crosscurrents remain underexplored. However, this diversity of voices, topics, and approaches constitutes precisely what makes the book valuable—not as a fixed canon, but as a dynamic, ongoing conversation that reflects the field's vitality and continued evolution.

The Companion's significance extends through its clear future orientation. Many chapters grapple seriously with emerging issues around surveillance, algorithmic mediation, climate crisis, and post-human ecologies, highlighting sound's complex entanglement with contemporary infrastructures and global uncertainties. The volume makes abundantly clear that sound studies is not a niche academic subfield but rather a critical lens for examining how we inhabit, resist, and actively remake our worlds through sonic engagement and awareness.

For educators working across multiple disciplines—media studies, cultural studies, anthropology, musicology, and design—this book will serve as an invaluable foundational text. For researchers, it opens exciting pathways into the affective, political, and material dimensions of sonic experience that have too often remained under-theorised. For practitioners working as sound artists, curators, and archivists, it offers essential tools for reimagining their practices in productive dialogue with cutting-edge critical scholarship.

The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies stands as a landmark publication that definitively affirms sound's relevance as both object and method of scholarly inquiry. It offers a genuinely polyphonic, politically engaged, and richly layered intellectual resource that energises rather than simply codifies the field. The collection remains carefully attuned to history's reverberations, present urgencies, and the speculative futures of listening that continue to emerge in our increasingly complex sonic landscape.

This is not merely a comprehensive reference work—it represents

a compelling invitation to listen differently, think relationally, and engage politically with the worlds that sound makes possible. For anyone seeking to understand how sonic experience shapes contemporary life, this collection provides both essential grounding and inspiration for future inquiry. A vital, expansive, and thoroughly necessary contribution to the evolving sound studies canon.

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DANCE REVIEW

SAUMYA LIYANAGE
University of The Visual and Performing Arts
Colombo, Sri Lanka

RIDDHI-MA: A Tapestry between Ritual and Contemporary Ballet

Riddhi Yāgaya also known as Rata Yakuma is one of the elaborative 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 (Fargnoli & 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 while 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 (Sanjeewa 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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