

# The Fantasy of Our Detachment: Racism and Complicity in Vijith Nuwan's *Silgath Billo*

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Nuwan, V 2016, *Silgath Billo*. Directed by Vijith Nuwan. Performed by Academic Players [Colombo, Tower Hall], 21 August 2016.

**S***ilgath Billo*, Vijith Nuwan's maiden foray into Sinhala theatre went on the boards at Tower Hall recently. Nuwan's play is the latest in a line of women-centered dramas staged by the Drama and Theatre Unit of the University of Kelaniya. In plays such as *Ada Wagey Dawasasaka Antigone*, *Visekariyo*, *Bernardage Sipirigeya Nohoth Sinageya*, and *Dahas Ganang Vandambuwo*, the Academic Players have consistently posed a number of critical questions about the role that women play in negotiations over what has taken place in the country after the end of the war. Within this dramatic heritage, Nuwan's *Silgath Billo* provokes a number of extremely interesting cultural and political questions that require careful consideration. In this short review, I hope to tease out some of these considerations with a view to encouraging Nuwan and his colleagues to continue to interrogate, challenge, and reflect the many contradictions that mark social relationships in the country after the end of the war.

At the level of craft *Silgath Billo* was of an extremely high quality. I personally appreciated the nuance of using the fourth wall as a television set broadcasting violent mob attacks. For me this powerfully, yet subtly, underscored the complicity of the audience in producing the steady stream of unproblematically entertainment-oriented media coverage that is passed off as news in this country. Along with a number of other extremely interesting uses of dance, humor, and dialogue, *Silgath Billo* maintains the extremely high standards that the team at the Kelaniya University consistently sets for and raises by themselves.

More interestingly to me, I was struck by Nuwan's acute observation of the ironies of life in modern Sri Lanka. For example, lines like "*sadaranaya kiyanne apita kittu wenna beri grabhalokayak*" (justice is like a planet we can never reach) speak to a commonly held dissatisfaction with the function of justice in this country. Another good example of Nuwan's incredible capacity for close observation is the short yet fascinating dialogue regarding what constitutes cheating in a relationship. Is it a viber call to an old flame? Is it friendly banter with a colleague? Does the pursuit of amusement

compensate for the willing acceptance of a boringly predictable life? In a similar vein, the play poses some significant questions about racism and violence. One such question was: is injury the sole purpose of violence or is there something more sinister and ambitious lurking behind its most obvious façade? It is these little touches and queries that Nuwan plays up and explores in fascinating ways through this play. For me personally, *Silgath Billo* is an important drama because its intervention is premised on a deep exploration of the minute yet significant dilemmas that shape our lives as Sri Lankans today.

Stemming from Nuwan's capacity for critical observation, the play also included a nuanced conversation about the political-economy of racial violence that has emerged in the South today. There have been a number of attempts to highlight and respond to the increasing prominence of hardline groups that appear to be intent on inflaming already tense ethnic relationships in the country. Some groups have chosen to hold vigils. Others have called on the state to take legal action against those promoting hate speech. As important as these interventions are however, they appear to be increasingly ineffective counter-measures to the spread of racial violence around the country. The uncharitable among us have even suggested that these attempts to combat hate speech have had the opposite effect and have only served to embolden the racist violence of groups such as *Sinhale* and the *Bodu Bala Sena* (BBS). What was unique to me personally about *Silgath Billo* was that it demonstrated the complex political-economy within which these racist groups function. The play highlighted how racial tension can actually be profitable and, in fact, encourage social mobility for certain groups of people. It emphasized the contingent nature of support for racial violence. For some, support for these hardline groups is rooted in an ideological belief in the need to protect one's race. For others, it is a question of securing the survival of their business or their children's education. For still others, racial tension provides a valve for releasing personal frustrations over the situation of their lives. As the play reminds us, our ethnic affiliations encourage and rarely bar us from achieving our own ends. In other words,

what *Silgath Billo* so radically demonstrated was that racial tension in the country can offer many different mechanisms for working out and achieving multiple, yet paradoxically, harmonious fantasies.

While these features of Nuwan's play excited me, I also left feeling quite dissatisfied with the final direction of the play. A lengthy post-drama conversation, a night's rest, and a few ruminations later, I realized that my dissatisfaction stemmed from two issues that are central to the play. The first of these issues is the question of a feminist understanding of love. On the one hand, like the other strongly feminist plays staged by Academic Players, *Silgath Billo* was dominated by an extremely strong female cast. It was particularly heartening to see a female character who was unafraid to both call out and refuse a man's attempt to coerce her into a relationship. On the other hand, however, she pays a heavy price for this refusal. How are we to read this assertion of independence and her subsequent punishment? Is this then what the playwright sketches as the limits of an empowered woman's fantasy? Similarly, my second source of dissatisfaction was with the political focus of the play. The terminology, marketing, and advertising for Nuwan's play suggested that this would be a play that squarely tackled the rising tide of racist hate speech in the country. As my discussion thus far highlights, the play certainly did offer a powerful critique on this theme. In fact, the final climax of the play arguably shifted the focus of discussion away from racism to the system that produces it. However, I felt this shift, while indeed a critical intervention, may have left the audience with the impression that what is taking place in Sri Lanka today is an individual rather than a collective tragedy. And for me personally this seemed to rub against the larger critique that the play seemed to me to be developing (more on this later). Reflecting on my twin sources of dissatisfaction, I felt that we actually witnessed

two very different plays – one, a feminist perspective on love, the other, a political critique of racism – that were connected somewhat tenuously by the playwright. Perhaps Nuwan could consider developing this script further to give full reign to his creative, dramatic genius to separately plumb the emotional and psychological depths of both issues that are critical to Sri Lankan society today. Given that this is Nuwan's first play, I am sure that this would certainly be something that he hones over time. This reviewer for one will certainly be looking forward to his next effort.

Finally, what does *Silgath Billo* offer those of us concerned about the increasingly hateful and racist tone that appears to be emerging in our public discourse? For me, Nuwan's play powerfully confronted me with my own complicity in producing the very trends that I hope to critique and challenge. It reminded me that I encourage racism each time I chose to look the other way because it will be to my benefit. It asked me to consider how I support racism by choosing to rationalize problematic choices on the basis of survival and ambition. Finally, and most powerfully, it asked me to re-evaluate the importance of a principled rather than pragmatic approach to tackling the challenge of promoting reconciliation and democracy in a country fractured by decades of war and ethnic tensions. In short, *Silgath Billo* turns the mirror on our darkest selves and reminds us all of our own complicity in producing racism. It suggests to me that perhaps the place to start a conversation about reconciliation is not necessarily with our hopes for a shared future. Instead it may need to be with our shared complicity in our fractured pasts. For this, and this alone, I encourage the reader to go and watch Nuwan's *Silgath Billo* the next time it goes on the boards.

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