

HAIL TO OCTAGENARIAN OSMUND JAYARATNE !

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Professor Osmund Jayaratne is on the brink of octagenarianhood. Knowing him as I do, I have reason to believe that three passions have shaped his long, purposeful life: the love of physics, the challenge of politics and the excitement of dramatics.

Born on 2 October 1924, Ossie - as his friends fondly call him - won the prestigious Turnour Prize at Royal College, Colombo, in his time. He gained entrance to the University of Ceylon in 1942, specialized in physics, graduated with honours and went on to acquire a doctorate in the subject from Imperial College, University of London. He ended his distinguished career in academe in 1991 as a Professor of Physics in the University of Colombo.

While an undergraduate he joined the Lanka Sama Samaja Party once and for all in 1944, and matured into one of its leading theoreticians. Combining theory with praxis, in the 1950s, Ossie won three successive elections to the Colombo Municipal Council in the name of the Party.

As if reading physics and politicking were not occupation enough for an undergraduate, he was also picked by renowned Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk himself, to play important roles in about a dozen plays. The acme of his achievement in dramatics came in the late 1960s, when under the direction of Professor Ashley Halpe, he played the lead role in Swedish playwright Strindberg's famous play called 'The Father'. So impressed was one raving critic by Ossie's impassioned performance that he summarily dubbed him "the best actor in the country."

Because his life was so suffused with abstruse physics, principled politics and high quality dramatics, Osmund Jayaratne would be my first choice for the putative title of 'Sri Lanka's last Renaissance Man'

Nobody need tell those who know Ossie well that he is bilingual with a vengeance. The bad news is that Ossie cannot write anymore because he is - as we must perforce say nowadays - visually handicapped. The other day when I gently probed the degree of his visual disability, Ossie - never one to call a spade by any other name - bluntly said : "Look, I am as blind as a

bat." The good news is that he is not batty. Actually, only the truly sane like Ossie (and me) can remain indefinitely loyal to the LSSP, but that is beside the point. Though unable to put pen to paper, Ossie can still talk accurately, blithely, cogently, definitively, eloquently and fluently. In truth he is a delightful talk-show. He talked to the Social Scientists' Association about his life and times which the SSA faithfully recorded. The SSA then contracted Mr. Sirisumana Godage - surely Sri Lanka's leading publisher as of now - to publish the *Memoirs of Osmund Jayaratne*. To politically conscious English educated members of the older generation reading Ossie's memoirs is bound to be a vicarious, nostalgic, even cathartic experience. To socially sensitive members of the younger generation who read and understand English, Ossie's memoirs will provide a glimpse into the sense of inner satisfaction that comes from unselfish commitment to a visionary goal one believes in. I understand that among those warmly felicitating Professor Osmund Jayaratne on the occasion of his 80th birthday are Her Excellency the President and the Honourable Prime Minister of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

Fittingly, Ossie's memoirs was launched by the SSA at the Dr N.M. Perera Centre, Borella on Friday the 1st of October 2004 at 5 pm. I do not know how much personal history Ossie has recounted in his Memoirs. What I do know is that he has been a public intellectual, and something of a celebrity in academe. Perhaps he has recounted his life like it really was, warts and all. With or without warts, many of his former pupils literally worship their teacher, friend and philosopher. Ossie's close friends can only gape at the devotion with which his wife Joyce (whom he married twice) looks after our amiable buddy. He can still expatiate on the nature of this thing called light which he no longer enjoys. He *listens* critically to the news on international television which he cannot watch, and perceives in his mind's eye the crisis of globalized capitalism and the need for a humane socialism. On demand he will reel off chunks of texts of the roles he played decades ago. Physics, politics and dramatics continue to fuel the life of this indomitable spirit. He is an unyielding Samson who cannot be downtrodden by the trampling march of blind matter. Thank Dialectical Materialism for Osmund Jayaratne!

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