

Performance in a Time of Terror: A Conversation with Dr Ranjini Obeyesekere

Kanchuka Dharmasiri



In 2021, **Dr Ranjini Obeyesekere (RO)** published her English translation of five Sinhala plays from the 1980s and 1990s titled *Performance in a Time of Terror*, to accompany an earlier book titled *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror* (Sage, New Delhi 1999). The five plays are K.B. Herath's *Maya Devi/Goddess of Illusion* (1984); Prasannajith Abeysuriya's *Dukgannarala/Bearer of Woes* (1989); Dhananjaya Karunaratne's *Juriya/The Jury* (1993);

Prasanna Jayakody's *Sevani saha Minissu/Shadows and Men* (1993); and Rajitha Dissanayaka's *Mata Wedithiyannedda?/Aren't You Going to Shoot Me?* (1999). **Dr Kanchuka Dharmasiri (KD)**, dramatist and academic at the University of Peradeniya recently interviewed Dr Obeyesekere in Kandy on her book, and more broadly her engagement with theatre in Sri Lanka as a scholar and practitioner.

KD: *We have had many discussions in the past four years on the five plays you translated. In one of our conversations, you explained that you decided to translate these plays after you saw them performed in Colombo. Could you talk about your experience of watching these plays in the 1980s and '90s?*

RO: It was a very interesting time because so much was happening in theatre. Incredibly more than I ever dreamt could happen. And at the same time, it was a very difficult period for dramatists, young people, and young actors. They were rehearsing in their backyards, back verandas, out under the trees, and producing these shoestring budget plays, but stunningly politically involved, and creatively excellent. And the only advertisement they could use were the posters they put up on the walls. There was no press publicity. There was no way in which you could advertise it as they do now. You just had to take your chances and put up a poster. And that was a time when everyone was putting up posters: the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP—People's Liberation Front), the government, and politicians. So, people were also out, every night, removing posters! All those who went out and posted by day knew they may not last very long – not even till the next day! By next day their posters were off and others would be in their place – sometimes for other plays! But the posters continued to draw the crowds. I realised later that when it goes on the posters, it goes also by word of mouth.

And there was an interested enough middle-class audience who didn't have any other space to express their criticism, their dissatisfaction, and their lack of support for the political system, who attended theatre performances. In that silent auditorium you could have people on stage saying anything about issues that you were interested in and the effect was very subtle. So, you were participating in something where you were reading between the lines, you were enjoying the jokes, you were enjoying the critiques, and nobody could really fault you for it because you were laughing at it all. As a result, theatre gave them a real sense of community and a sense of immunity—of being able to laugh at things. For example, sometimes they would have the picture of a politician in a politician mask, and have them decapitated and thrown out, and everyone would laugh.

Thinking back to those days, I was trying to figure out how so much went past the critics and the censor board. But then, I realised that what was performed could change on a dime. If the actors saw five policemen in the audience, they would change what they were saying or how they said it. It is not permanent. Those who were observing could not come out and say that you

said such and such in a play because they would have no record, no statement of what you did or did not say. In a picture or a painting or an article, it's the written word. It is something tangible and you can't throw it out as easily. So that kind of opportunity was there in a performance – very much so in street theatre too. That's the advantage of it, I realised. A performance is an ephemeral thing and gives both actors and dramatists a lot of space.

Looking back, I also realise that the same thing happens in ritual drama, such as in a *thovil* situation. There the performers can be irreverent. They would be critical of hierarchies, of those who are in power. They might even use obscene words and actions to critique the higher-ups. For example, they can say a lot of negative things about the *Raja*, the ruler, and portray the *Raja* in a negative light; the *Raja* can be a devil. So, there was a sense in which they used the theatre as a space to be critical of the political system, feudal system, caste system, in a nuanced way. People were used to it. They were used to going to ritual performances and laughing and poking fun at the top level, the feudal lords, and higher ups. That tradition has come to us. That's one of the reasons why Sri Lankan theatre has been so lively and so political.

KD: *When did you decide to translate these plays and why these specific plays?*

RO: When I was working on theatre, doing my research, I was collecting texts from writers who were producing plays around that time. I was writing in English. Therefore, I had to translate. I couldn't get half of it or even two thirds of it done at the time. Then the research was over, I was back to teaching. And I left them there in a file for years. I had almost forgotten them. Then you came and said, "Let's publish them." And that's how it came about. I had the texts in one bundle and the translations in another bundle. I did not even know what had happened to them. At one point, I had the translations and could not find the texts. When I found the texts, I had to hunt in my computer for the earlier drafts of the translations, and rework them. I did not rework them until we restarted this three years ago.

KD: *I am glad you reworked them and eventually published them! What was the translation process like?*

RO: Translating for the theatre, as opposed to translating critical theory or any other work, even a short story, is different. The language of the theatre is spoken idiom

and it is easier in terms of the translation. If you have a sensitivity to the nuances of the original and a sensitivity towards the nuances of the language you are translating to, then the translation moves more smoothly. I find it much harder if I take a critical article because I do not have the new vocabulary that they use. I might not have the ability to have the same sensibility with other texts.

The first text I translated was *Riders to the Sea*—English to Sinhala—and then I translated *House of Bernada Alba*. It was easier for me than a critical article on theatre or something. I was a young lecturer when I translated them. I wanted the audience to see the drama as the production it was in its original form – not an adaptation or a transformation into a Sinhala play. Most foreign dramas at the time were adaptations—and excellent ones at that—but it was not the original Lorca play or the Ibsen or the Brecht.

Ratna Handurukande^[1] and I used to do translations, believe it or not, in the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens. This was the 1970s and '80s. We would go there during the lunch break. There was no ticketing. We would drive our car there, park where we felt like, sit under a tree, and discuss what we had translated, under a tree. She was working on translating a text into English from Sanskrit. I would check her English and she would check my Sinhala. We would then sit there and discuss and talk about what we had done and issues that had come up. That was Peradeniya during those days. Amazing.

Namel Weeramuni^[2] acted in my translation of *Riders to the Sea*. I must tell you this very funny story. When we were performing those days, often in the quadrangles in the women's halls [of residence], we would go and borrow props from students who had rooms close by. Bartley, the youngest son, and central character was played by Namel. At a very tense moment in the play, the mother says, "Son, don't leave tonight. Don't go to sea tonight. Don't go". I'm just paraphrasing. "You are the last of my sons and the only one left. So-and-so died in the waters. Everyone has died. Please do not go today." And finally, Bartley says "Mother, I have to go". He turns and pulls the coat off the clothes screen (borrowed from a women's dorm at Hilda Obeysekera Hall). You know what happens? He hurriedly pulls his coat and with it out comes a bra! The entire audience burst out roaring with laughter, and that was to be the tensest moment in the tragedy.

KD: You have worked as an actor, director, playwright, and translator. How did you navigate these different roles?

RO: Yes, in a different order. First as an actress, when I worked with Jubal^[3] in *Liliom*,^[4] as a first-year undergrad. Then, later, as a director when I was a lecturer in the English Department and produced two Lorca plays for DRAMSOC [Ceylon University Dramatic Society]. I did *Blood Wedding* and Jayantha Dhanapala^[5] took part in it. He was a student then.

KD: You directed both Sinhala and English plays while you were teaching in the Department of English. Can you talk about the cultural context in which you worked?

RO: It was very interesting. Our period, the 1960s and '70s, was the time when the bilingual group was moving into creative work of various kinds: theatre, novels, translation, poetry. Works were coming out in both languages [English and Sinhala]. And there was an audience that could move between the two or read between the two. I think it was very much a part of that time, the interest in this kind of work. There were two ways of going at translation. One was adaptation. Laleen Jayamanne talks about this in her article on Dhamma Jagoda's *Wes Mubunu* (Jayamanne 2023). She mentions how he did a different kind of adaptation where he retransformed the original. It was so with Henry Jayasena's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as well. They did brilliant adaptations. And adaptations were what were most popular at that time. They were taking these plays from English and transforming them. The *Caucasian Chalk Circle* has become Henry Jayasena's play. It is no longer that of Brecht. What I was trying to do was a different kind of thing. I was very keen that people should also know the play as it was originally conceived, that is we see translations of Shakespeare as Shakespearean, we see translations of Ibsen or Strindberg directed as Norwegian plays.

That was what I wanted to do as an experiment in translating *Riders to the Sea* and *House of Bernada Alba*. I kept it as close to the original text as I could. It was not an adaptation; it was not transferring it. So, in a sense it remained Garcia Lorca's, not my, play. It was directed as a Spanish play, with Spanish costumes. And it worked, in *Bernada* especially. *Riders to the Sea* was a production we did as university students. But in the Lorca play, *Blood Wedding* that I did for the DRAMSOC when I was teaching there, that was in English; and we did that too with Spanish costumes. We retained the original context. The content went into the audiences. They could absorb it, engage with it, react to it because you had this mother, this son, and that hold between the mother and the son, and the son going out to marry

this girl on the other side of the valley, and the conflict between the parents of the two groups. The last thing they wanted was for him to be involved with a girl there. Those things were very natural for anyone to respond to in this part of the world too. Even today, one encounters very powerful mothers. I have seen many Bernada Albas in my life! It continues to be very popular. And I remember Lalitha Sarachchanda^[6] taking part in the first production as the mother. She was a serious mother. ‘Sarath’ [Ediriweera Sarachchandra]^[7] did the songs for it with a friend. They came up with a lovely song for the young harvesters.

KD: *Did you publish the translations of The Riders to the Sea and The House of Bernada Alba?*

RO: One of the texts, yes. *The Riders to the Sea*, much later. The other one, *The House of Bernada Alba*, I did more as a director’s experiment. I had a group from Somalatha Subasinghe’s^[8] school who came. Some of them were acting in a lot of plays and had quite a bit of a name, and others were just new. One girl said, “No one gives me a substantial role ever. I just always enter and exit the stage, [with] no chance to act.” When I found that the actresses were not coming to rehearsals regularly, I had to have almost every actress at some time or other, to stand in for another. I then decided to pick up the text halfway through the rehearsals saying, “If so-and-so was not there, someone would do that part.” They shifted roles. I realised there was quite a lot of talent among those who were not doing the main roles. So, as an experiment, I said we will have two performances, one with the main actress, and the next show we shift roles. So, the old woman became one of the sisters; one of the sisters became another character. It went beautifully. They did such a good performance. No one could say which was the better performance. Sarath came up after the play and said “Ranjini, this is a superb acting cast.” They were quick on their cues, the basics of timing, all the sophistication that went into Western theatre. I insisted on it. And then they were able to do it in a totally different way. Laleen Jayamanne played the old woman in one performance. Ratna Handurukande went to every theatre performance.

I want to tell you another funny story. Ratna came to visit me in San Diego. We used to go for a lot of theatre. I had a lot of friends who loved to see plays like Audrey and Melford [‘Mel’] Spiro.^[9] We had planned to see a theatre production two days after Ratna’s arrival in San Diego. They had not met Ratna. I said “I have a friend. I’ll bring her.” A moment’s pause and then Mel said “It’s a bit of a risqué play. Will your friend

from Sri Lanka find it difficult? It’s alright, no problem with us, but I don’t want to embarrass her. I hope she won’t be uncomfortable with it.” So, I told Ratna we are going to see a play and my friend said he’ll be happy to have you come, but it might be a bit risqué. You know what Ratna said? “Tell Mel that if I have taught classical erotic poetry to Buddhist monks, I’ll be able to handle this play.” She said it in an unflappable tone. They never forgot that! That was Ratna. She went for all our shows.

KD: *That’s a great story! Returning to the five plays, so, these plays were written in the 1980s and ‘90s and you translated them in the ‘90s—30 years ago. I teach some of them in my classes and we have very engaging discussions. Many of the themes in these plays resonate with socio-political and economic issues we are facing in the current context. How do you relate to these plays now?*

RO: I think the issues are still the same: the bureaucracy, the corruption, the political set up, and the way it goes down. At the same time, the humanity in the plays—the man who sees this, and yet the comedy of the situation when he goes into a police station and they are working on totally different levels, the human and the official, those are very important things that people can still relate to.^[10] They resonate, they are still happening.

It is similar with K.B. Herath’s^[11] *Maya Devi*, the pressures that are on young women and the ways in which they respond to them, either through depression or manic episodes. And the humanity behind it when she thinks that the man really likes her and cares for her. And that is a deep tragedy when all of them succumb, one by one: the mother, the mother-in-law, the father and son, everyone; and she’s then isolated and lives with the reality of total isolation.

So those are the issues that have not changed. They are old, but very relevant. The conflicts have become deeper and more pervasive, the humanity and value system have become even more submerged, and yet [humans] can respond to it. Somewhere there is that instinctive knowledge, this is not necessarily how it should be.

That could be the Buddhist values of the culture in which the play was written. Although it can be the values of any religious group when they surface. And the interesting thing is that these guys in the 1980s and ‘90s were able to tap into that. They were quick enough and they had that creative urge. A fantastic creative spurt because there were hundreds who gave me their plays. Maybe not hundreds, but there was a large number, maybe 30–40 plays.

GK [Gamini Haththotuwegama^[12]] was one of those who started again with small groups. I remember GK telling me this incident. They were performing somewhere around Kegalle and suddenly word spread that the police were coming. GK said it was a matter of minutes [before the police arrived] and they [the cast] just blended with the crowd in their sarongs and shirts and t-shirts. They would just merge with the crowd and disappear. So, when the police came to round them, there was no one! They were able to do it. It was great that they were able to do so. Then, afterwards, they would meet and talk about what happened. Yet, at times they would get arrested. After all, their work was critical of those in power and was intent on creating political awareness among people.

KD: *This brings us to a topic I wanted to discuss with you: arts, politics, and censorship. In your book Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror, you talk about theatre as constituting a permitted space in the 1980s and '90s. You argue that even during the most violent times, theatre provided a space for critical expression and discussion. How do you see the situation now? What is the role that the State plays in relation to the arts, especially theatre and performance?*

RO: The 30 years of fighting gave military might a kind of place it didn't have before. So [before], you could critique a system and, while admittedly one or two plays were banned, you would also have a policeman in the audience laugh and be able to participate in it. This going with tear gas and a whole military phalanx, did not exist in the South because the enemy was the Other, if at all. Even in the '90s it was a distant war that was being fought. It didn't come militarily into their world as it has done now. Maybe I was not there for so much of the latter part, when barriers and checkpoints came up. And this was what the people in the North were going through, for so long. The tear gas and the military squashing has been done tremendously in the North and people in the South are still not aware of the extent of what was done.

KD: *Some people say that theatre in Sri Lanka has declined. There isn't much happening. What is your take on this idea?*

RO: I have not seen the same amount of theatre as I have before because of my age, and living in Kandy. Living away from the theatre scene [in Colombo] makes a big difference. So, I cannot quite comment on that.

But I do not think it's very different. The creativity is there. People like Ruwanthie de Chickera^[13] have been able to use the power of theatre. The difference may be in the heavy cost of production today. Transport costs so much, even the minimal amount of sets that must be moved costs so much. I mean you can rehearse in your backyard, you can do all these things, but when you put it up on stage, you need a place to perform, lighting, and so on. It is so expensive. You cannot do hole-in-the-wall productions and take them around. It used to be the case that all you needed was a rice packet and the bus fare. You get your cast in a van and you go to a school and you would perform there. You did not pay the directors or actors. All were volunteers. Now you cannot do that. These are people who have to live.

Those days, when I was a first-year undergraduate, all the people were older people; DRAMSOC people that 'Ludo' [E.F.C. Ludowyk]^[14] had trained: Sita Parakrama, Iranganie Serasinghe, Winston Serasinghe, and various old-timers who were there. We went as freshers to the audition. Jubal was auditioning. We were nervous; there were around five or six of us. I got the main role of Julie in *Liliom*. I think some of the seniors were not happy. Some were constantly telling me that is not the way to do that, etc. As an undergraduate it was quite difficult. I felt pretty cowed. But I have to say Jubal was very good. He treated everyone the same. He selected the characters and afterwards treated everyone the same.

And I have this lovely memory. In King George's Hall [in the University of Colombo], on one side of the stage is this open pathway, something like in the engineering auditorium here [E.O.E. Pereira Theatre in the University of Peradeniya]. Before the play, everyone was rehearsing lines and going up and down. 'Ludo' also had a part in this play, a small part, but a part. Whom do I see walking up and down behind me? Ludowyk! He is also walking. And you know, that sense of confidence, you know that you are not the only one who is having stage fright. Your professor is also going through that. You know the first night jitters is something everybody has. When you act you realise it. The tension, and then also the power over the audience you hold in your hand, no? Two lines or one line or five lines. They are all there, watching you intensely. You do not see, you do not see a single face, but they are there and you feel the tension in the audience, in the hall, and the energy. You have done it, so you know, as actors and directors. It is a thrill also. It is fantastic. The heart-beating, the *dada-bada*, *dada-bada* feeling, the first night is really terrible, very stressful. Because whatever it is, it is a performance and a performance is a performance. It is something where you are out there before an audience—of 20 people,

20,000 people, 10,000 people, or 500 people. Whatever it is, it is the same. It is you, and the audience that you hold in the cup of your hand.

KD: That is a lovely note to end this conversation on— that tension, that energy, that energy of the audience, that makes us create and takes us forward. Thank you for giving your time to us, and thank you for the inspirational ideas!

Dr Ranjini Obeyesekere taught literature and society at the University of California San Diego and at Princeton University.

Dr Kanchuka Dharmasiri is a theatre director and translator teaching in the Department of English at Peradeniya University.

References

Jayamanne, Laleen. (2023). “Dhamma Jagoda’s *Vesmuhunu*: Irangani Serasinghe & Rukmani Devi’s Double-Act”. *The Island* (21 June 2023). Available at <https://island.lk/dhamma-jagodas-vesmuhunu/>

Notes

[1] Professor Ratna Handurukande is Emeritus Professor of Sanskrit in the Department of Classical Languages at the University of Peradeniya.

[2] Namel Weeramuni is a director, playwright, and actor. He is the co-founder of the Namel-Malini Punchi Theatre in Borella, Colombo.

[3] Neumann Jubal was a Hungarian Jewish dramatist who conducted theatre workshops in Sri Lanka in the early 1950s.

[4] *Liliom* (1909) is a play by the Hungarian playwright Ferenc Molnár.

[5] Jayantha Dhanapala (1938-2023) was a Sri Lankan diplomat and former UN Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs.

[6] Lalitha Sarachchandra is a director and actor.

[7] Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra (1914-1996), a pioneer of modern Sinhala theatre, was a director, writer, and playwright. He taught at the Department of Sinhala, University of Peradeniya.

[8] Somalatha Subasinghe (1936-2015) was an actor, playwright and theatre director who founded the Somalatha Subasinghe Play House (theatre for children and youth).

[9] Professor Audrey Spiro taught Art History at the University of California Los Angeles, University of California San Diego, and several other universities. Professor Melford Spiro was the founding Chair of the Department of Anthropology, University of California San Diego.

[10] Dr Obeyesekere is making a reference to Dhananjaya Karunaratne’s play *The Jury* here.

[11] K.B. Herath (d. 2023) was a veteran director and playwright.

[12] Gamini Hatthotuwegama (1939-2009) who taught English at the University of Kelaniya, was a playwright, director, and actor credited with the popularisation of street theatre in Sri Lanka.

[13] Ruwanthie de Chickera (b. 1975) is a playwright, dramatist, screenwriter, and artistic director of Stages Theatre Group.

[14] Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk (1906-1985) was a writer, playwright, and a seminal figure in English theatre in Sri Lanka, who taught in the Department of English at the University of Peradeniya.

Reading Group on Political Economy

SSA hosted a six-session reading group by Dr. Devaka Gunawardena on political economy between May-July 2024, focusing on historical introduction to the major events and processes that shaped the emergence of political economy as a field of inquiry, social reproduction, democracy, and variations between political regimes. The series sought to grapple with such questions as, how people reproduce their livelihoods through historically contingent social arrangements, the origins and limitations of liberal democracy given underlying tensions in the capitalist process of wealth accumulation, and the role of specific types of political regimes in mediating contradictions between contending classes and the State.

