

stages theatre group

WALKING PATH - PRESS REVIEWS and PREVIEWS

This document is a collection of all material carried in the press on WALKING PATH – for its Opening Show in Colombo, Lionel Wendt Theatre, 26TH and 27TH July 2014

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WALKING PATH - PRESS REVIEWS

1. **Groundviews, Harshana Rambukwella – Tuesday 29th July, 2014**

(<http://groundviews.org/2014/07/29/walking-path-a-play-without-words/>)

A play without words is a risky proposition. Why would a theatrical production abandon one of the most powerful tools at its disposal? In a performative audio-visual medium like theatre words can and do carry much weight. Much of theatre is carried by words – sometimes at the expense of the theatrical. The no-words choice in “Walking Path” appears to relate to the play’s thematic concerns at a number of levels. At one level it seems to be about silence: the shrinking space in contemporary Sri Lanka for expressing dissent and our complicity in maintaining and propagating this silence. At another, more pragmatic level it could be about escaping censorship – a play critical of the urban ‘beautification’ efforts of the state may have had a hard time getting through the Public Performances Board. But with no words, what can a censor do? Perhaps the script simply gave a set of stage directions and it is in how the play unfolds on stage that the contours of its social and ideological critique emerges.

The play is firmly anchored to a physical space – the walking paths that have emerged as part of post-war urban culture. But that space is also a metaphor because the paths reflect an emerging culture – a culture of conformity, passivity, apathy, commodification and many other things. “Walking Path” has no plot in the conventional sense but the sequence of scenes reflects something of a circular trajectory. The people in the play seem to begin and end in the same place – anxious and cowering in fear.

As the play opens the audience is confronted with a psychedelic scene of a set of people who seem to be agitated and fearful. We hear what seems to be gunfire and the characters appear alarmed and disoriented but they soon begin to cheer and celebrate. The invitation seems to be to read this as an end to conflict (the most immediate association being the end of war in 2009) and people are expressing their relief. The sounds the audience hears therefore can be either gunfire or fire-crackers or even both. This ambiguity works well because throughout the play there is a pervasive but subdued and haunting sense of menace – fire crackers, a bursting balloon or gunfire?.

The space then becomes more clearly visible. It is a park with pristine white benches but almost sterile and clinical in appearance. The people themselves are uniformly dressed in white track outfits and white sneakers. Awkwardly at first, they begin to exercise and soon seem to be embracing the exercise culture. A lot of this is hilariously rendered with characters twisting, contorting and gyrating on stage. The sequence of scenes that follow capture the contradictory tensions within this emerging walking path culture. As young lovers attempt to embrace whistles shriek out, stepping off the paths – literally and metaphorically – is prohibited and menacing figures of authority (who also seem to be janitors of the park – not much of a stretch to see the connection with how tri-forces personnel manage the new urban parks in and around Colombo) lurk in the background.

The more insidious aspect of this culture of surveillance though is that the park users themselves begin to monitor each other – perhaps a larger comment on how we are internalizing a culture of self-censorship and regulation.

The play also comments on how this walking path culture for all the freedom, health and community it promises, turns out to be a dehumanizing experience where people withdraw into themselves. Frustrated by the regulation of their romantic and erotic desires the performers on stage retreat into a texting, selfie-taking and MMS-ing world facilitated by mobile phones. Human-to-human contact is supplanted by the phone and rather than relate to their real conditions of existence the people lose themselves in virtual reality. As the performance progresses the more menacing and authoritarian aspects of the walking paths become increasingly visible. Young lovers who attempt to confront the restrictions placed on them are subdued by a show of force and people who deliberately or by mistake veer off the strict protocols that govern this space are swiftly warned, punished and subdued.

The play ends with the tragic consequences of refusing to conform. Frustrated with the culture of conformity and silence, an individual literally attempts to run against the tide. He wrestles to the ground a blank sign board prohibiting some unnamed thing, moans in despair and then tries to block a set of robotic joggers, attempting to push them back. The menacing ‘park police’ appears in force. The man is kicked and punched to the ground. The others watch muted and scared to act. When the figures of authority finally go away they try to help their fallen colleague but as they do that another of the authority figures walks in with a set of white balloons, bursting them one by one and the people trying to help their fallen colleague fall down as if shot.

This final scene is perhaps the most powerful and chilling in the play. The man holding the balloons stands as a representation of the macabre underside of this culture. He looks like the friendly fair-ground balloon seller — a source of enjoyment for young kids and an inviting presence like the urban parks with their pristine benches and well-manicured lawns – but here he is a grotesque projection of power and authority. What should be familiar and comforting, bristles with menace. Within this new culture you can play, you can exercise but only according to a moral, social and political script that is decided for you. Step outside this script and the repercussions can be severe.

As a whole “Walking Path” is an effective piece of experimental theatre. It is a theatrical piece which takes something familiar and makes it strange, defamiliarizes it. The walking paths and the culture they signify has slowly crept into post-war subculture and become part of our mundane reality. But the play invites us, like Chandraguptha Thenuwara’s exhibition “Beautification” did last year, to a different reading. It asks us to see the political in the everyday. One reservation I had was though whether the effect of drab uniformity the play sought to create lead to a monotonous quality in the performance. At times I felt I was watching too much of the same thing. Having said that, “Walking Path”, I feel, was for the most-part an ensemble piece of theatre.

2. Groundviews, Sanjana Hattotuwa – Wednesday 30th July, 2014

[\(http://groundviews.org/2014/07/30/invisible-architectures-thoughts-on-walking-path/\)](http://groundviews.org/2014/07/30/invisible-architectures-thoughts-on-walking-path/)

You go to the city to see the law. Upon arrival outside the building, there is a guard who says “You may not pass without permission”, you notice that the door is open, but it closed enough for you to not see anything (the law). You point out that you can easily go into the building, and the guard agrees. Rather than be disagreeable, however, you decide to wait until you have permission. You wait for many years, and when you’re an old, shrivelled wreck, you get yourself to ask:

“During all the years I’ve waited here, no-one else has tried to pass in to see the law, why is this?”, and the guard answers:

“It is true that no-one else has passed here, that is because this door was always meant solely for you, but now, it is closed forever”.

He then proceeds to close the door and calmly walk away.

Franz Kafka, ‘Beyond the Law’

Designed and directed by Jayampathi Guruge and scripted by Ruwanthie de Chickera, ‘Walking Path’, performed recently at the Lionel Wendt offered an interesting critique of Colombo’s post-war beautification drive. Though I am thanked in the programme note, I only met with the director and his troupe once, very early on in the conceptualisation of the play. In our interaction that day, my input was informed by a rather long and public online interaction with the owner of one of Colombo’s leading restaurants on Facebook, over [an article by Subha Wijesiriwardena published on this site](#). Subha noted that, We live in a country where our all basic frameworks are defined by the government: ‘private’ as defined by them, ‘public’ as defined by them, ‘safe’ as defined by them, ‘dangerous’ as defined by them. The government’s control over urban development is simply another way of exerting control over the way we live.

This greatly irked the restaurateur, who claimed that concerns over the way Colombo looked at present could only come from a position of being ungrateful the war was over. Subha and the rest of us who hold deeply critical positions around the Ministry of Defence led plans to beautify the city were essentially seen, by this restaurateur, as killjoys – unable and unwilling to enjoy what the city had become, and hell-bent on spoiling the fun for others. Though wrong on so many counts, the restaurateur was spot on when noting those critical of, questioning or opposed to the militaristic beautification of Colombo were on the margins of society – largely peripheral, at best, to plans already well-made and deeply laid.

Guruge’s central and considerable challenge going in to this production was to address a society that frequented Colombo’s ordered public spaces without ever questioning their use of these spaces, or how they are constructed. Employing just sound and movement instead of spoken language to communicate Guruge’s vision on stage was a bold move.

The strength of 'Walking Path' is in how it can potentially appeal to those who frequent Colombo's public spaces, who are their own class. In contrast to the inimitable Galle Face which has for decades brought into the same space a diverse cross section of society, new public spaces in and around Colombo are frequented by those for whom it is important to exercise entirely alone yet in public, work up a sweat in branded sportswear and drive away in A/C comfort. Guruge's critique was aimed at this group, and therein lies the rub. Whereas this segment of society would love to go see, be seen at and enjoy a Pusswedilla show as their contribution to critical dissent, 'Walking Path' offered a more serious, unsettling critique geared to inspiring reflection over ribald laughter, which was immediately evident from the number of empty seats downstairs at the Wendt. Perhaps indicative of society's priorities and dominant perceptions, filling seats remains an enduring challenge for theatre that grapples with socio-economic, political and cultural critique in a serious manner, even as comedic productions, running for many more nights, never fail to fill the Wendt's luminous numbers.

At one and a half hours, 'Walking Path' was too long, but not disastrously so. Pace and focus in some of the scenes should have been tighter, and the length of the play could have been used to better effect. While I'll get to this later, what for me was the chief failure of the production – and it is a large one – was the lack of any nuance in its depiction of the military as those responsible for the erection and maintenance of Colombo's new public spaces. The Army was depicted as caricature, a shallowness that bears no relation to the spectrum of their involvement with and perceptions of beautification. Guruge's idea of militarisation was to suggest that everyone in the Army, all the time, behaved the same. While his characters acted out their parts very well, what was missing was any depiction of or questioning around how the military itself, especially the lower ranks, may have varied responses and perceptions around that which they are ordered to do. There have been numerous occasions where I have walked through Colombo Racecourse on Reid Avenue observing men in military fatigues looking yearningly or forlornly at what was on display in shop windows, and what was on sale inside them. The gap between the military men who clean the glass tanks at the Arcade Independence Square, literally beneath the feet of those who frequent the place, and those who eat *Kaema Sutra* could not be more stark, mirroring the gap between those responsible for cleaning Colombo's new public spaces and those who frequent them. The military presence – physically and conceptually – in public spaces remains invisible to many, which Guruge has rightfully embraced yet wrongfully extended into a monochromatic depiction of the military's own take on beautification. In an otherwise insightful and incisive production the inability, this is a major flaw. A lack of context marred other scenes. Scene 3 – 'Who changed the lion? (Grrr) – would be largely indecipherable to anyone who hadn't walked (or jogged) around Independence Square. And yet, this was one of the most compelling scenes of the play for those who familiar with the stout lion statues, symbolic of, in the play, a dominant, stentorian mentality combined with the violence of the deep state. Also utterly compelling was Scene 8 – 'My selfie with my friends' – depicting a soul destroying loneliness in the midst of friends, and a broader public, exacerbated by technology and unaddressed by

the new public spaces which do little or nothing to engender meaningful social interaction (a point made again in the scene 'The world in my phone'). Some aspects of the play could have been done better, particularly in communicating the sheer monotony and eviscerating boredom associated with the maintenance of these walking paths. Not unlike Cage's 4' 33' composition, Guruge could have more powerfully communicated through inaction and silence the invisible yet essential lives of those who maintained these spaces, doing the same thing day in and day out, come rain or shine and for a pittance.

Ultimately, plays like 'Walking Path' ask us to observe, question and care. This isn't easy. On one night of the production, Jamiroquai's 'Virtual Reality' was played before the start of the show, which framed quite neatly for me the thrust of the play – suggesting that the conceptualization, construction and subsequent use of walking paths in and around Colombo is a new collective unconscious, co-created by the supine acceptance, by so many, of what key architects of war tell us what a society at peace must be defined by – not a blade of grass more, or less. Kafka's short story offers another unsettling dystopia disguised as desirable – that in celebrating our new walking paths, we remain unable or unwilling to explore, just outside the familiar, why some doors remain closed, right in front of our eyes.

3. Groundviews, Rohan Roamer – Thursday 31st July, 2014

[\(http://groundviews.org/2014/07/31/review-of-walking-pathby-stages-theatre-group/\)](http://groundviews.org/2014/07/31/review-of-walking-pathby-stages-theatre-group/)

It is a 'must see' play which is a bold and insightful critique on the rapidly changing landscape of Colombo. It describes the good, the bad, the ugly and the beautiful that is taking place as a consequence.

The play creates a youthful atmosphere with plenty of comedy and entertaining rhythmic aerobics performed to lively music. However, it also carries a more somber message about Colombo's beautification drive subtly entwined in the fun and games encountered in the new recreational spaces of Colombo.

The simple youth display initial amazement and curiosity as to the purpose of the beautifully paved new walking paths. One can infer that their ignorance is on account of their exclusion from participating in the beautification process. On the other hand, the elites appear to be familiar with the designated paths for recreation and exercise. They influence others in imitating their fashion trends of conspicuous and comic smart phone usage and frivolous sports such as toy car racing. It appears to foster an air of pretention accompanied by social detachment and indifference.

Despite the scenic, clean and safe environment of paths, the play brings out a tense feeling among users of being watched and regulated. It seems that the recreational space does not offer a sense of freedom and public ownership which is essential for enjoyment.

Lovers are restrained from public expression of affection and gay couples are frowned upon, intimidated and even harassed by those in control. Unfortunately, it contradicts the growing social trend, particularly among youth, towards liberal attitudes and tolerance which are the hall marks of a progressive culture. Despite the tension, youth find interesting and amusing ways of beating the system.

The play brings out the deeper implication of a dangerous trend towards covert social control by the state which could burst into social upheaval. Landscape changes have suddenly impacted on the rights of residents in terms of property ownership, household space, livelihoods and lifestyles. It can have serious long term repercussions if left unaddressed as it can cause a feeling of injustice, inequity and social exclusion, particularly, amongst the underprivileged majority.

The lion is a symbol of power as well as Sinhala racial identity. Lions are highlighted in the play through the sculptures set in proximity to walking paths which comically emanate growls when persons do not obey the rules of 'acceptable' conduct.

In a broader sense, are we, as citizens, permitting ourselves to be controlled and intimidated by the state in the name of modernization? Should we not demand for inclusive, transparent and democratic decision making in planning our future?

That is the question that arise in one's my mind at the end of the play. I congratulate the producers on a fine production relevant to our times.

Besides the profound message uniquely conveyed without the uttering of a single word throughout the drama, it was entertaining, humorous and well-acted by a talented cast. It is worthy of mention that the music, lighting, sets and stage effects although simple, were effective in providing the right atmosphere and balance to the tragi-comic theme.

4. Daily Mirror, Marissa van Eyck – Friday August 1st, 2014
(<http://life.dailymirror.lk/article/9158/walking-path-reviewed>)

The synopsis of ‘Walking Path’, a devised, wordless play directed by Jayampathi Guruge and scripted by Ruwanthie de Chickera, mocks me now. It declares the play to be about the new walking path culture in Sri Lanka, the ‘culture of exercise, of healthy living, of beautification of the city and the people within it.’ While all of that is true, the allegorical scope of the play is stunning, turning the already complex events of cities and people going through forced change into something that spans themes that affect the whole country. The whole thing unfolds like a warped social experiment, as if uniformed arbitrators are setting the scene and then monitoring the involuntary participant’s interactions.

As Ruwanthie said, “the audience will have to take responsibility for their own journey”, therefore I am merely documenting mine.

The beginning is jarring, unexpectedly showering gunfire that melds into fireworks. Water pistol toting figures of authority stand as people pose for pictures around them, barely cracking smiles as peace signs are thrown around. The celebrations are scarcely over when the new environment is introduced, it was set in place without anyone on stage noticing. Soon after, there is a steady flow of joggers using the path. The characters slowly try this out, each running in a distinct style that hints at the play’s study of human character. They quickly settle into this lifestyle of exercise, strangers exchanging glances, limited interactions that are exhaustedly repeated.

‘Parana Sinhaya Ko (Grrr)?’ had a symbolic lion that the characters were familiar with suddenly start snarling, perhaps turning on the people who had looked to it with pride. A disembodied piercing whistle in ‘It wasn’t me!’ forbade any public displays of affection – to the point when fellow characters turned on a pair of miscreant lovers. One scene poked fun at our use of cell-phones, a bit of lightness that was welcome in an otherwise weighty play. Not that it was at all a caricature, in fact one part that stood out was a young girl’s selfie-taking efforts being met by lukewarm reactions.

‘Battery babies’ was another open-ended scene, a brilliant metaphor that worked on many levels. The characters played with their toy racing cars; also their children, possibly calling to mind another child who was given his choice of toys. ‘The world in my phone’ had us listening in on what each character allowed themselves to be influenced by, from music to troubles at home to religious prayers, subtly addressing the current racial conflict in Sri Lanka.

‘Alone in a crowd’ had one character struggling to move one of the seats, becoming so enraged at the change that he blocks the joggers and pushes them back. We laughed, but then were quickly moved to an entirely different emotion as he was

carried away and beaten up. Characters that tried to help him were killed for their efforts. Chillingly, the joggers then continued running, over their prone bodies. 'Don't take stupid decisions so...' jolted us back into the real point of the play, a disturbing and moving final scene that was very emotional. I found myself unexpectedly in tears, overwhelmed by all that the play was trying to say.

The acting was superb, each character perfect in their various roles, covering many different types of emotions with ease. Every transition was fluid, the poses, lighting, use of limited props combined with the stellar performances meant that the minimalist play worked extremely well. I liked how the authorities had a vaguely menacing air without obvious weapons except in 'After all the noise' where one emblematic slingshot was fiddled with, now without use. The costumes too were not overtly suggestive, but the polo necks and slacks conveyed a strict uniform. The effects with the balloons were eerily alarming.

Overall, the play was powerful, finding its power in what was never explicitly said but implied in discreet undertones.

Comments from audience members

"The play not only entertained me, but was very thought provoking and I was left with a lot of things to ponder on. This is what a good play should do to you. The actors were so natural and comfortable on stage and brought out the emotion and atmosphere of the scenes so well." – Shenali

"I didn't understand some parts, the abstract way they showed situations was really nice but some were too abstract for me. This was the first play I watched and it was good, all the everyday things were shown really nicely. You really can say a lot of things without words." – Surami

"Beautifully crafted and deeply thought-provoking." – Amanda

"It really forced me to engage with its themes through silence, rather than imposing one interpretation. Its lack of clarity allowed each member of the audience their very own experience of the play." - Elizabeth

5. Daily FT, Dylan Perera – Saturday August 2nd 2014
(<http://www.ft.lk/2014/08/02/dangerous-beauty/>)

A review of the play 'Walking Path' by Stages Theatre Group

There is a saying about the approaches to right behaviour in England France and Russia, which goes something like this – in England, if it is not prohibited it is allowed; in France, even it is prohibited it is allowed; and in Russia, everything is forbidden, even if it is expressly allowed. It is possible to argue that contemporary Sri Lanka has, in its post-independence trajectory, started off with the English model, flirted with the French model and is today heading towards the Russian one.

The Stages Theatre Group's latest production, directed by Jayampathy Guruge, is a superb, fiendishly clever, masterly casual, exploration of the Russian model in Sri Lanka. But it is also an exploration of the universal post-modern condition, the human geography of modern urban civic life, post-war ennui and the insidious encroachment of the military mindset.

A play without words

A word about the form. The director's note claims it is a play, without words, scripted by Ruwanthie de Chickera. The man on the street might be forgiven for tripping over the semiotics of it all and calling it mime – but it is not that entirely. For instance, it has much of the impressionistic inexactitude of a cartoon that hints at an idea, instead of the magnified clarity of mime.

The speechlessness of the 'play' is a far cry from pretentious artistic indulgence. It arises naturally as an inevitable necessity that assists the audience and the players to both confront and overcome the well advised self-censorship of the time. It lies at a pleasing convergence point of the aesthetic and the political. Nothing has been said—everything has been communicated. Without the defining, directing and limiting exactitude of words and speech, fragmentary moving images and suggestions tap directly into a stream of consciousness of the audience with a startling compression of meaning. A play without words is also infinitely multi-lingual.

The play, we are informed in deadpan tourist brochure style, is about the culture of exercise, of healthy living, of beautification of the city, and revolves around the walking paths of Colombo.

It opens to a series of figures emerging from the gloom, arms raised—in supplication or surrender? Gunfire. The figures – in white – jerk, fall down, no wait, of course they do not die, they get up; a reassuring balloon man comes on stage. Silly us. It was not gunfire. It was only some balloons bursting. Men, in pure white, walk in bearing pure

white clean guns. Everyone is dressed in white. They form into celebratory team photos – poster shots of the clean righteous joy of victory. Which goes on ... and on. But that can't go on forever – disconsolation sets in – until they all start exercising!

In this fluid style each fragment looks at an aspect of the new lifestyles and behaviours that have emerged around the beautified public spaces dotted around Colombo. The particulars dress the accessories of headphones, hand phones, the self-obsessive culture of selfies, alternating between boredom and hysteria.

'Sex in the City'

One of the most outstanding pieces titled 'Sex in the City' was surely a brilliant visual pun on moral obscenity. A frail and tired looking park cleaner walks in with his ekel broom. As he works he watches a curvaceous, well-groomed woman work out.

There is an implicit symbiotic contract between the two. The rampant exhibitionism of the crass well-to-do and the hungry voyeurism of the faceless underclass that arises when the two meet and share public space.

It then goes on to unpick the latent sensuality of the physical workout as a form of collective observation, providing unstated gratification and titillation. There is tension that underlies the compulsive watching of each other, and the increasingly bizarre exercise routines becoming increasingly explicit.

'The World is in my Phone'

Another gem was 'The World is in my Phone', which deals with the content of the joggers headphones. Some have Pirith, others the Azan, some have music, some have porn, and some even have children playing.

The moment of truth comes when the Azan listener and Pirith listener sit next to each other in the perfectly indifferent amity brought about by privacy. As a comment on the stupidities of sanctimonious public religious sentiment, it was sublime in its ridiculousness.

Omnipresent authority

All this goes on against the background of omnipresent authority. As children, we played on the lions at Independence Square. The new post-war public piety has sanctified the image of the lion. You cannot ride the lions anymore. Someone will growl at you.

There are new unknowns wearing unknown uniforms who will growl at you because they now control the beautiful public spaces and also set the rules. They are the keepers of public morals too, arbiters of how much coquettishness lovers can display in public. Where you can walk and where you cannot. They move with the lazy stiffness of the

extremely fit, the quietude and satisfied menace of the professionally violent. They are the bouncers of this new public club, guiding you on the behaviours that are allowed.

Of course, there is no legal basis for their existence in the public places of civic life – but that matters little because their existence is validated by the power of the ‘one’.

And when you step out of line and challenge the rules, or worse still challenge the very model of this urban Pleasantville, they exercise rapidly escalating violence – and nasty things happen... and yes that’s the balloon man with them. The same one from the start of the play. But now, you realise, you are the balloon. He holds you all, and when you break the rules, his rules, he gives you one prick and you hear the flat report of an exploding balloon.

The tight organic unity of various leitmotifs, the exploration and adroit bringing together of the various themes into a concluding premise was brilliant. The opulent precision of Thushara Hettihamu’s lighting combined with Ranil Goonewardane’s meditative score and impeccable costuming gave the production a depth and texture that offset the stark minimalism of the set.

Is this truly the best we can be?

Well, does all this really matter in the greater scheme of things – people walking in the park? It does in as much as this is the vision and apogee of modern civic life we are being cajoled into accepting as reality (the corollary being that the vicious underbelly of impunity is the lie).

And Guruge poses the question – is this our finest aspiration in urban life, this vacuous façade of modernity rooted in technological gimmicks, propped by public piety held together by menace? Is this truly the best we can be? Depressingly, he might be the 1% that thinks not.

6. The Nation, Dilshan Boange – Sunday 3rd August, 2014

<http://www.nation.lk/edition/fine/item/31853-review-of-wordless-drama-walking-path-walk-on-the-designated-track.html>

How free can you really be as an individual in a space designed for public purpose, seems to be one of the principal questions raised by this artistic endeavor

The Stage Theater Group deserves applause for the impactful work of theater that was brought to life on July 26 at the Lionel Wendt, titled Walking Path. Designed and Directed by Jayampathi Guruge, scripted by Ruwanthi de Chickera and produced by Gihan de Chickera this work of 'wordless theatre', not of the 'mime' genre of performance art, made a profound statement to its audience seated in the gentle darkness. Walking Path takes on the nature of a critique of 'climates of various kinds'. At the heart of this play are questions that relate to desires for expression and enforced limitations in spaces designated as public spaces. How free can you really be as an individual in a space designed for public purpose, seems to be one of the principal questions raised by this artistic endeavor.

The conflux of artistic visions in this production proved that silence can be impactful, and despite the absence of verbiage, diction and witticism that constitutes engaging dialogue 'wordlessness' too can create 'discourse'. The set design was minimalist and one cannot in anyway classify this work in terms of genre as being of the realistic genre. Symbolism is one of the essential approaches to 'read' Walking Path. If you are not attuned to evoke your visual senses to grasp nuances of body language and not the kind to enjoy wordless communication, you may find the play rather tedious to sit through. The lack of an intermission was very well understood since to break the performance at any point would be to rupture the fabric that was being woven through occasional oral sounds, which do not form 'diction', music, lights, and vibrant energetic displays of physicality of the human body.

What purposes do public spaces as parks and leisure grounds serve? People derive some notable health benefits them which can be both for physical and mental wellbeing. But they can also serve the purpose of socialising. And although everyone would like to turn a public space to serve their own personal needs and even though not obstructing another's right to use the place there can be official limitations imposed by authorities. The blow of a sharp whistle signals that young lovers aren't supposed to embrace in public. The growl of the guard dog warns against stepping on certain parts of the green. The omnipresence of authoritarianism was compelling.

Some notably contemporary aspects that speak of the age of digitalisation were emphasised with scenes that showed how deeply the presence of mobile telephony and 'non oral' communication methods as texting and multimedia messaging, especially 'selfies' snapped from mobile phones, occupy a significant place in the lives of today's youth. Social media and being 'plugged in' or 'wired' to the information superhighway is an essential to some youngsters today. The leisure spaces that are designed with

pathways for walking, spaces for strolling and seating are today apt for youth to find space to congregate. And the mobile telephone that supports internet access to social media is an integral part of their lives wherever they go.

Walking Path is in one sense a proposition that 'purpose' is not necessarily innate to any object and fixed beyond reassignment. The way seats get rearranged by the curators is an indication that designs themselves are not fixed. But the policies on which rules are conceived and enforced are. A very interesting aspect that I observed that depicted the individual and the connection with music is how different audio tracks that varied from ones sounding like religious chants to Sinhala songs and even something like a woman's sensual moaning were played over the sound system when different joggers came on stage at different times listening to their i-pods. To anyone who ever wondered looking at joggers what they may be listening to, that scene gives an impression of what may be found in a given common space where different people are 'tuned out' from their surroundings and 'tuned in' to their chosen 'tunes'. It's an artistic impression about trying to get into their 'heads'.

The scene where a lone rebel tries to claim territory over the park by urinating in the corners in the canine habit was especially pitiful and indicative of the state of despair that he had fallen to in the face of insurmountable authoritarianism. His own pitiful state makes him break down in self pity on realising how dehumanised he is. The final scene is one that is especially powerful showing how regimentation becomes all pervasive and engulfs all. Walking Path can be in general thought of as a theoretical critique against undemocratic authoritarianism. The performance constituted of the acting talents of Bimsara Premaratne, Govinda Palagolla, Jeena Gheeth, Kanishka Fernando, Poojana Dandeniya, Shanaka Fernando, Thivanka Ranasinghe, Charith Dissanayake, Lakshitha Edirisinghe, Tharkana Kulathunga, Randhika Gunathilaka, Vidura Manoratne, Amith Prasad, Nadun Dissanayaka, Eraj Gunawardena, Rajitha Hettiarachchi, Eshani Seneviratne, Thilina Udayaratne, Minul Muhandiramge, Nelum Chathurani, Manusha Hirimuthugoda, Nadeesha Madushani, Kasuni Rangalla, Gavin Ranasinghe, Nipuni Pathirage and Dinoo Wickramage.

7. The Irrawaddy, Marwaan Macan-Markar – Thursday 9th October, 2014

<http://www.irrawaddy.org/asia/small-stage-depicts-societal-shifts-sri-lanka.html>

Small Stage Depicts Societal Shifts in Sri Lanka

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — New walking paths are measures of progress in the Sri Lankan capital. They abound in Cinnamon Gardens, an affluent neighborhood of tree-lined avenues, colonial and modern mansions and a charming café culture. Some of these paths cut through a well-manicured park in the heart of this urban lung. Others unfurl on the edge of the country's monument to independence from the British Raj.

But even in such a serene setting, the legacy of the near 30-year conflict waged between government troops and the separatist Tamil Tigers in this South Asian island-nation is evident. Once the rebel army was vanquished in a bloody final chapter that ended in May 2009, there were two choices for the triumphant Colombo government: demobilize the battle-hardened troops or draft them into the post-conflict agenda. President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his hawkish brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, the country's defense secretary, settled for the latter. Troops were subsequently deployed to grow vegetables, clean public buildings and beautify civic spaces. The new walking paths are proof of military labor.

For the creative minds at Stages Theater Group, a local ensemble of dramatists, the new paths have also served as artistic inspiration. The group's most recent play, titled (what else?) "Walking Path," innovatively strung together 16 episodes of contemporary life unfolding in the world of the walking paths. Some scenes of the 90-minute, wordless play probed the new trends of a post-war middle class life style, taking digs at the exercise culture and the narcissistic "selfie" world. Ultra-patriotism was also played, with nothing more than deft body movement and facial expressions, while the control freaks in the military were presented as threatening, whistle-blowing minders trying to impose order in civic spaces meant for walking and camaraderie.

This production also spoke to the contours shaping the small, yet dynamic world of Sri Lankan drama. Local theater groups are increasingly tapping the country's contemporary political and social realities as fertile ground for material. The debilitating ethnic conflict, which killed over 100,000 people, has inevitably found its way onto the stage, with some scripts touching on the wounded ties between the country's Sinhalese-Buddhist majority and Tamil and Muslim minorities.

But pain and trauma are not all the Colombo stage has to offer. "Pusswedilla," a play laced with local political humor, continues to be a runaway success, drawing packed audiences who revel in the opportunity to laugh at their excessively selfish, predatory political class.

Experimentation is also being embraced. Some production houses use devised theater, where the script is not the work of one person, but a collaborative effort. Others are exploring “forum theater” in which performers act out a basic scene on a social issue, with the audience shaping the direction of the play as it unfolds. Even the proscenium has been happily dispensed with in some quarters.

Jana Karaliya, a leading exponent of the forum theater style, is one group that has turned its back on the traditional theater settings. It takes its plays to the people, using rural locales for its shows. Mind Adventures, another experimental theater company, transformed the hall of an old abandoned Colombo hotel into the staging ground for a play in which actors performed in the midst of the audience. The latter, on occasion, were roped into doing their bit, including holding up props.

The advance of innovative dramas with local themes was inevitable, say those in this world of amateurs and semi-professionals. Original local productions have begun to replace adaptations of plays from Latin America and other politically traumatized societies from across the world. Although local interpretations of an Ariel Dorfman play like “Widows” had served to shed light on stories of oppression that have parallels in Sri Lanka, it did so through a foreign lens. “I got tired of doing other people’s work,” said Tracy Holsinger, a veteran of the stage and head of Mind Adventures. “I made a conscious decision to do original theater after May 2009.”

Since the war’s end, local theater has become a mirror to reflect what is unfolding in Colombo, where politics, the economy, media and culture in the country is centralized and shaped. “As we moved away from the war, it became more comfortable to talk about things,” remarked Dylan Perera, an actor and director. The national conversation shifted from hysteria and hatred to reflecting on the ethnic conflict in more measured tones. “Directors [have] become more comfortable pushing the boundaries of what is being done and said, even if it means staging plays on a smaller scale,” said Perera.

Theater proponents have identified the boldness of post-war productions in Sinhala, Tamil and English as in stark contrast to the output of mainstream media. Playwrights are offering a more honest portrayal of post-war society than journalists, they argue. “Theater is playing a significant role in raising a critical consciousness,” said Neloufer de Mel, an academic in performance arts studies and a theater critic. “There are plays produced by university departments and alumni that are political commentaries of our time.” The editors of some independently-owned newspapers sheepishly admit their critics have a point. The Rajapaksa regime has an impressive array of henchmen to bring challengers in the media to heel.

Plays, like films, are also subject to the approval of the government’s censorship board. Yet, they often get a pass, some with minor changes, even if the scripts have politically charged content. This is not an indication of a liberal spirit shared by the men and

women with the censors' scissors. Rather, it is illustrative of a political calculation on behalf of the elites—that plays appeal to a small cultural constituency that do not amount to a political force. “The reason we are allowed to do what we do is because theater is not seen as threatening, unlike the media,” admitted Holsinger of Mind Adventures. “We are allowed to exist because many of us are under the radar.”

WALKING PATH - PRESS PREVIEWS

1. Daily FT – Uditha Jayasinghe – 19th July, Saturday 2014

(<http://www.ft.lk/2014/07/19/the-renowned-and-experimental-take-the-boards/>)

The renowned and experimental take the boards

Stages Theatre Group presents ‘Walking Path’ and ‘Daasa Mallige Bangalawa’ next week:

The experimental and the tried-and-true are being presented on one stage in a four-day drama extravaganza next week.

Stages Theatre Group, headed by well-known dramatist Ruwanthie de Chickera, will be presenting these two plays from talented directors at the Lionel Wendt.

The run starts with Daasa Mallige Bangalawa on 23 and 24 July, followed by Walking Path on 26 and 27 July. Both plays start at 7 pm.

The “family” unit

‘Daasa Mallige Bangalawa,’ co-directed by Ruwan Malith Peiris and Kalana Gunasekera, is an Indian tragicomedy adapted to Sinhala by S. Karunaratne from the original ‘Sakkram Binder’ by Vijaya Tendulkar.

The play won seven awards at the State Drama Festival in 2004, including Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress and Best Direction, and returns to the stage after 10 years. The plot revolves around power, the female, self-centeredness and human relations.

Peiris admits reviving the play was attempted at various times but the effort was stalled largely for financial reasons.

“This is a drama that I strongly believe is extremely relevant to our current environment. Sri Lanka at the moment is trying to find itself and finding peace begins within the family unit. This is where we feel the most pressure, where our moral code is most tried and where we define change at the most fundamental level,” he told the Weekend FT.

The play opens with Daasa, a fishmonger, bringing a woman the audience believes to be his wife home. It transpires that this is the seventh woman to enter life in the house and the difficult, often abused life that she leads, provokes deep contemplation within the audience.

Daasa has given the woman freedom to leave whenever she wants but as long as she is under his roof she is virtually his slave. Daasa himself has a Muslim friend who adds a different perspective to his character and the events of the play. The narrative motivates discussion on a range of issues revolving mostly around god, religion,

patriarchy, human nature and choices. All through five superbly-drafted characters and at times shocking storyline.

“Something that struck me while doing this play is that people can use truth to subjugate someone else. This play caused controversy in India when it was first shown and received strong responses ten years ago in Sri Lanka and we are hoping for similar reactions from viewers this time as well,” Peiris said wrapping up rehearsals for the day.

The cast comprises Jayantha Muthuthanthri, Dharmapriya Dias, Nilmini Buwaneka, Ravini Anuradha and Hemantha Iriyagama.

More than walking

The second play, ‘Walking Path,’ is a play about the new walking path culture of Sri Lanka – the culture of exercise, of healthy living, of beautification of the city and people within it.

The play uses Colombo’s walking paths as a symbol to understand this emerging sub-culture in post-war Sri Lanka, and was created along the walking paths of Colombo, where the actors spent many days observing human behavior and interaction.

‘Walking Path’ is a play without words. This is because most of the human behavior around the walking paths happens without the noise of words and Director Jayampathi Guruge feels strongly that words trap or limit meaning. “When people think of a play with no language, they immediately think of mime. For this reason mime is deliberately minimised and music is also used sparingly.”

Admittedly the play is bewildering at first with actors silently jogging around the stage, couples sitting together and confusingly one chap seemingly having a conversation with a sock puppet. Gradually sense creeps in and explanations filter into the mind.

One couple gets a bit too physical, then hastily separate after feeling the weight of disapproving stares; this type of enforced morality is common on the walking paths, says Guruge, who insists he is trying to capture the subtle nuances that make up the structure of this subculture.

“People who use walking paths are of a certain class but within that there is great variety and I want people who are part of this subculture to take a step out of themselves and see what they are part of. I also want people who are not part of the walking path culture to get an insight into it,” said Guruge explaining how experienced actors from both English and Sinhala drama have joined together to provide this bridge of sorts.

“I’m not judging them,” he emphasised, “I’m simply trying to show what is and let the audience take what they will. If they find it interesting, or meaningful or deepening their understanding, then it’s an individual experience.”

Guruge, a multidisciplinary artist, has worked as an actor, set designer, costume designer, lighting designer, stage manager and makeup artist since 2002. Guruge has a degree in Drama and Theatre from the University of the Visual and Performing Arts and recently toured India with Ruwan Malith Peiris as a part of the artists’ training program of Stages Theatre Group. Be a part of his endeavour to move beyond the spoken word to open a new dimension in Sri Lanka’s theatre spectrum.

‘Daasa Mallige Bangalawa,’ 23 and 24 July at 7 p.m. at the Lionel Wendt. ‘Walking Path,’ 26 and 27 July at 7 p.m. at the Lionel Wendt. Tickets for both plays are priced at Rs. 1,500, 1,000, 750, 500 and 300 (Balcony).

2. Ceylon Today – Ranga Chandraratne – 20th July, Sunday, 2014

<http://www.ceylontoday.lk/96-68597-news-detail-understanding-a-complex-human-situation.html>

Understanding a complex human situation

Walking Paths have added a new dimension to the emerging urban socio-cultural landscape in Sri Lanka. In a way, Walking Paths became a metaphor and symbol for myriad of human activities virtually creating a sub-culture redefining the very notions of recreation, health living and beatification of the city.

Above all, walking paths convey a rather a false sense of peace and prosperity particularly in the post-war context. In this latest production titled Walking Paths, a No-word play by Stages Theatre Group offers an un-censored perspectives on the phenomenon of Walking Paths offering a wide scope of interpretations of the complex human situation associated with the sub-culture of Walking Paths. The play is by Jayampathi Guruge and is a production of Stages Theatre Group, a theatre company founded by Ruwanthie de Chickera, which produced hit plays such as CHECKPOINT and most recently Kalumaali. Stages Theatre Group is respected for the cutting edge, high quality, original Sri Lankan theatre it has been producing over the last 15 years.

Question: One of the principle objectives of Stages Theatre Group is to support cutting-edge innovative original and contemporary Sri Lankan theatre. The silent play Walking Paths would mark a milestone in this context. How would you perceive Walking paths a powerful metaphor in the post-war Sri Lanka which, among other things, reflects upon the changing mindset of a segment of Sri Lankan society?

A: In the past, places like the parks and the spaces open to the public were accessible to all segments of society. Most people felt at home in these areas. Now, with the beautification of these areas, with the cleaning up and the dressing up of these places, these places have become the possession of a certain class of our society. There are people who feel absolutely comfortable in the walking paths and those who will now never step in.

Q: 'Walking Paths' culture has virtually redefined the urban cultural landscape as well as physique adding what the authorities believed a Singaporean dimension to Sri Lankan urban built-environment. Your comments...

A: I would like to answer this question with a little story. I was recently chatting with one of the civil defence personnel put to monitor the Viharamahadevi Park. He told me an interesting story. One day when he was doing his duty, a man had got off a vehicle and come walking across the grass in the park. Then the personnel had blown his whistle and told him to get off the grass, to stick to the walking path. The man had then asked him why. The defence personnel had answered 'we are going to make this like Singapore'. The man said – 'sorry I thought I was in Sri Lanka. My mistake.' The defence personal told me he had felt ashamed but that all he had been doing was his duty.

Q: From a broader socio-cultural perspective, walking paths has become a culture changing the very perception of exercise, of healthy living, of beautification of the city. What an

important role that it would play in urban Sri Lanka in the post-war context in terms of creating a space for recreation and social interaction?

A: Another story. One of my friends recently got in a three wheeler at a three wheeler stand near one of these walking paths. As they moved along my friend had started commenting on the place – 'Isn't it very beautiful? Look at that fountain.' etc... All the three wheeler driver had to say was 'those are not made for us sir.' And this was a man whose three wheeler stand was at that park itself.

I think the answer about relaxation and social interaction is all in there.

Q: How would you define Walking Paths as a metaphor for emerging sub-culture associated with Walking Paths?

A: When you go to one of these walking paths and observe what is going on, you will realise that most people walk in one direction. No one has told them to do that. But they have decided that by themselves. They stick to the path and walk in one direction.

Q: How would perceive the 'underlying reality that goes either un-noticed, unacknowledged, or hidden beneath it'?

A: At a place where so many people gather with the objective of enjoying themselves, the fact that you don't hear any noise is an indication of the reality that is hidden there.

Q: 'No-word play' would be refreshing experience for Sri Lankan theatre goers. How effective 'No-word play', particularly, in articulating abstract concepts through a series of well-orchestrated scenes, leaving ample room for interpretations?

A: When one takes a complex and nuanced human situation and puts it within the framework of words, one limits it. The very language one chooses imposes a limit. The moment gets labeled by the words, by the language and so one 'truth' triumphs and many truths are lost. When one takes language out of complex human situations, the moment is open to several truths at the same time.

Q: The on-going activities in and around Walking Paths from parking vehicles to having meals at restaurants around the walking paths is diverse as well as the behaviours of the people who use them. Your comments....

A: If you look at vehicles parked at the entrance, the number of push cycles as opposed to bikes as opposed to Monteros will give you an indication of the diversity of the people inside. And in terms of diverse behaviour, most people exercise and then fill themselves up with the fast food at the food counters.

Q: Walking Paths have added a human dimension to the very perception of beautification of the city implying rather a 'false' sense of prosperity and peace in the minds of the people at large. Your comments...

A: The Walking Path is like a 365 day live exhibition of peace and prosperity. Its an ongoing show. There are people who are in it – exercising, socialising. And there are also a number of

people who don't venture into it, but who stand on the outside and watch. Sri Lanka without a problem. Happy Sri Lanka.

Q: Walking Paths have, in a way, contributed to create a picture of an emerging prosperous nature concealing the actual oppressive socio-political environment and rather volatile economy. Your comments ...

A: To link it with the previous questions. There is yet another type of person in the Walking Path. That is the person who is there to monitor the activity in the place. Merged with the people who are on display, showing off peace and freedom – the people who monitor this peace and freedom.

Q: One of the cardinal objectives of an artist is to interpret, reflect upon and codify the contemporary socio-economic and political reality and what is the role that play Walking Paths would, play, according to your view in this regard?

A: We all have ways of looking at the world and understanding it. This is a basic human activity. The artist has the responsibility of adding craft to what he feels and thinks. This is what I and how I am trying to understand it. It is not a message – it is not a play that says if the walking path is good or bad. It is my attempt at understand a complex human situation. And I have put this into a craft that I know.

3. Sunday Observer – Anuradha Kodagoda – 20th July, Sunday 2014
(<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2014/07/20/mon01.asp>)

DAASA MALLIGE BANGALAWA AND WALKING PATH:

Two sizzling plays at the Wendt

By Anuradha Kodagoda

The Stage Theatre Group will hold two plays, Daasa Mallige Bangalawa (The House of Daasa Malli) by Ruwan Malith Peiris and Kalana Jayanath Gunasekara on July 23 and 24 and Walking Path by Jayampathy Guruge on July 26 and 27 at the Lionel Wendt Theatre at 7 p.m.

“For the past 15 years I have been involved with theatre and this is the first time that we facilitate to showcase other directors’ work that we believe as important for the betterment of Sri Lankan theatre.

Therefore, we plan to showcase something old and something new, to stage two plays that represent the core principles upon which we were founded, and the ways in which we are evolving. As the name implies, this run includes the revival of a successful old play, and a new experimental play,” talking to Montage the founder of Stage Theatre Group and dramatist Ruwanthie de Chikera said.

Ruwanthie de Chikera is a dramatist who has experience in English and Sinhala theatre and 15 years of hard work has created a solid fan base.

“As we have a limited audience for the Sri Lankan theatre it is not easy to attract newcomers. That is one of the reasons why we decided to showcase other directors’ plays. Ruwan Malith Peiris and Jayampathy Guruge are part of the Stage Theatre Group and they had a concrete idea of what they want to do in theatre.

Therefore, we facilitated them to showcase their theatre productions and we hope to continue the trend further to bring meaningful theatre experiences for theatre goers in the country,” she said.

Montage interviewed the two directors of the plays.

Excerpts-

Question: How did your debut drama Walking Path materialise?

Answer: Initially it’s a concept I gradually developed into a stage play. As walking paths are the new culture introduced to us recently as a part of city beautification, it’s interesting to observe and study how people get used to it. I selected a few actors and actresses at walking paths in Colombo. So, Walking Path is the outcome of what we have observed and experienced in walking paths of Colombo.

Q: Walking Path is a play without words. Why?

A: Before this play I did another two short plays when I was at the university and they were also without words. I love to do plays without words. I think even in life the most complicated emotions can never be expressed in words.

I strongly believe that when we try to say something in words we restrict the listener's imagination and try to deliver a fixed idea through words.

Through my creations I want to deliver something that I have experienced and I want to share it with the viewers. This is done leaving space for their imagination and interpretation. This is not a miming play and I do not hope to use any miming techniques for Walking Path.

Sub-culture

Q: Walking paths is the emerging sub-culture in Sri Lanka. It is accompanied with the culture of exercise, healthy living and beautification of the city. It can also be identified as an element of a developed city with cultured people. Are you against this culture?

A: No I'm not. I'm not drawing any conclusions I'm only an observer. I have used the walking path as a symbol to understand the emerging sub-culture in Sri Lanka.

How do walking paths reflect human relationships, values and society in current urban environment? How do human relationships and society, in turn impact on the sub-culture of the walking paths? What can we learn about the reality of it, through the existence of the other? These are the questions that came to my mind when and I tried to find answers through Walking Path. I hope spectators will agree with the outcome.

Q: Why did you select the theatre as your medium of expression?

A: I have been engaged with the theatre from my school days. I'm quite addicted to this medium and I have no life without it. I do theatre for self satisfaction and I have something to share with the audience.

Q: Daasa Mallige Bangalawa (the House of Daasa Malli) was produced in 2004. Are there any changes in the production when you re-produced it after 10 years?

A: There are a few changes in the script and also in the cast. But there are no major changes compared to the production in 2004.

Q: Daasa Mallige Bangalawa is an adaptation from the original Sakkram Binder by Vijaya Tendulkar. What made you to select this play and do an adaptation as your debut drama?

A: This was a collaboration with my friend Kalana. The main reason to select the play for an adaptation was the beautiful storyline of the play and we were really moved by it. It's not merely a tragi-comedy but it brings out complicated human relationships in a very subtle manner.

There are a lot of changes in the adaptation from the original play. For example, the original play is based on a book binder and we adapted it to a fisherman. The whole story is based on low class people and the story revolves around power, sex, violence, self-centeredness and human relations.

Q: Even though Daasa Mallige Bangalawa won eight main awards at the State Drama Festival in 2004 including the best director and the best script, we hardly see any other theatre productions of you. Why didn't it influence you to get involve more with the theatre?

A: I don't believe that winning awards would lead you to do more plays. I don't think awards would lead us anywhere. Only money does.

Everything in society is based on money. During the 10 years we tried to produce the play again but we couldn't do so due to lack of funds.

Q: Why did you select the theatre as your medium of expression?

A: I loved the theatre from my school days. I met an inspirational person named Premakumara Karunaratne who taught us drama at school. For me theatre is not just a subject but a source where we can learn about people.