

Anthology Vol. 1: Chapter 4 Summary**THE CREATED SPACE: Peacebuilding and Performance in Sri Lanka****by Madhawa Palihapitiya**

In this chapter, Sri Lankan peacebuilder Madhawa Palihapitiya introduces readers to the work of two noted theatre artists who are contributing to peacebuilding in Sri Lanka by means of two different approaches.

Dharmasiri Bandaranayake is a well-known Sinhalese playwright, actor, and director of stage and film. His work has consistently challenged the violence and repression—and the marginalization of all communities of Sri Lanka irrespective of space—that has been at the root-cause of violence in Sri Lanka for decades.

Kandasamy Sithamparanathan (Sitham) is a Tamil theatre artist who draws on both Western and traditional ritualistic forms of cultural expression to help Tamil people “to process their collective and private traumas and to rebuild their capacities for imagination, reflection, and ethical action.”

Context

After gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1948, Sri Lanka found itself riddled with ethnic conflict. Tamil people feared that the Sinhalese majority would discriminate against them, and the 1956 Sinhala Only Act—which was initiated to regain the rights of the Sinhala majority, declared Sinhala the country’s official language, thus creating fears among minority groups. In the decades that followed, militant Tamil secessionist groups emerged backed by India—the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) gained the upper-hand by decimating all Tamil opposition including Tamil moderates—and the Sinhalese-led government used military action to quell opposition from all quarters, including the Sinhala dominated Communist movement, the JVP. Since the 1970s, ordinary Sri Lankans have been caught in the crossfire of a brutal conflict between the government, the LTTE, the JVP and other opposition groups.

Although there have been periodic pauses in the violence, the effects of the war continue to this day, though at a lesser intensity. Countless people from both sides were tortured, disappeared, or killed. The root causes, though being addressed politically, will take time to resolve, but the forces attempting to divide the people of Sri Lanka are still quite powerful. Fears and suspicions that are decades old could get reinforced through any mistakes made in the process of reconciliation. The political landscape is still deeply divided, with the ruling party claiming complete ownership of the military victory and subsequent efforts to transition to peace. They have not been able to share the peace dividend with other political forces in Sri Lanka or to broaden the ownership of that transition. In this environment, any policies aimed at creating a shared society in Sri

Lanka that are not very well thought through could strengthen spoiler elements. The country's infrastructure and economy have been also been crippled by the war. Recent charges of human rights abuses by the security forces acting under government leadership have put the ruling party at loggerheads with the United States and the European Union, while countries like China, Iran, Russia and Libya have become closer to the Sri Lankan government.

Throughout this political conflict free expression has been severely curtailed; both the state and the LTTE used violence to silence those who said things they don't want to hear. Performance, however, has been one of the few domains in which free expression has flourished quite remarkably, despite some of the worst acts of terror in human history. In it people found a 'permitted space' to criticize their leaders, express their hopes for a more just and peaceful future, and reach out to "the other side."

Dharmasiri Bandaranayake

Dharmasiri Bandaranayake has directed four plays and twelve films, all, according to Palihapitiya, "highly critical of the conflict and the mistakes made by Sinhalese-dominated regimes." His productions have contributed to peacebuilding by "emphasizing the traumas of war and legitimizing resistance to violence, corruption, and repression."

Palihapitiya highlights Dharmasiri's 2001 adaptation of the ancient Greek play *The Trojan Women*, which depicts the horrors of war and the abuses of power that inevitably come with it. In his version of the play, Dharmasiri draws out the parallels between the violence and trauma of ancient Troy and the violence and trauma of Sri Lanka at war. He emphasizes that, "despite persecution and violence by the authorities in power at that time, the patience and resilience of the common person endures and has value."

The Trojan Women was well received among both Tamil and Sinhalese audiences, and Dharmasiri became the first Sinhalese director in many years to be invited to stage a play in LTTE-controlled areas. With this play, Dharmasiri aimed to "provide Tamils with a forum for reflecting upon their experiences as victims of war" and to send a message to them that the Sinhalese people care about their suffering.

Kandasamy Sithamparanathan

Palihapitiya discusses Sitham's work as a founder of the Theatre Action Group (TAG), which worked in the villages surrounding the Tamil city of Jaffna during the 1990s, when the state government was strangling Jaffna with an embargo.

During this time, the situation was dire: food and other goods were in short supply, violence between the LTTE, Tamil militant groups opposed to the LTTE, the Indian Peace-keeping Force, and the government of Sri Lanka had uprooted tens of thousands of people. Women were being raped and children were being abducted and turned into fighters. Sitham had begun to question the relevance of the western theatrical mode in which he had previously been working. He wanted instead to reach people through the

elements of traditional Hindu rituals. TAG performers thus went into the villages and constructed multi-day rituals involving drumming, singing, dancing, and meditation, facilitating a process in which people could articulate their deepest emotions within the safety of a supportive community.

Sitham says that the participants in these workshops would

leave as stronger, more courageous people, and with the feeling that they have been part of a family. They leave happier people, who have experienced peace of mind. They are not ready to accept oppression, but neither are they willing to oppress others. Going to a workshop like this gives them courage, and so they speak without fear.

Palihapitiya also addresses Sitham's role in the development of the Pongu Tamil, a movement of "self-discovery, self-expression, cultural celebration, and political awareness and activism" which later fell into the hands of the LTTE. What began as an assignment in Sitham's theatre class at Jaffna University ultimately culminated in four festivals in four different cities, in which more than a hundred and fifty thousand people participated, expressing the dreams, aspirations, and cultural traditions of the Tamil people.

Different Paths to Peace

Palihapitiya posits that Dharmasiri and Sitham are taking distinct but related approaches toward the common goal of a just and sustainable peace. Both men use performance to create spaces for reflection, expression, critical thinking, and healing in an environment with few other outlets for such work.

With *The Trojan Women*, Dharmasiri drew on a western canonical play in order to indirectly comment on and critique the contemporary situation in Sri Lanka. His indirectness was essential in that it kept the project from being shut down by government forces. It also allowed audiences to reflect upon their experiences without getting so close to their own pain that it became impossible to see. Dharmasiri's use of *The Trojan Women*, Palihapitiya says, is an example of "how the theatre can provide people from opposing sides with both a connection to and a critical distance from their situation, helping them to reflect, bear witness, and empathize with the 'other.'"

Through TAG, Sitham used performance to help oppressed and traumatized people find non-violent ways to express themselves, to heal, and to make change. TAG helped people to strengthen their capacities for self-love, self-expression, communication, and trust. "This kind of psycho-spiritual work," Palihapitiya notes, "seems to me to be essential for peacebuilding, since the anger and pain that fuel the conflict burrow into people's hearts and minds." On a macro level, the Pongu Tamil did a similar thing, helping the Tamil population "to strengthen itself psychologically, culturally, and spiritually in order to be better prepared for making peace with its neighbors."

More from “The Created Space: Peacebuilding and Performance in Sri Lanka”:

- This chapter begins with the author’s personal story of growing up in Sri Lanka’s capital, Colombo, during some of the most severe violence the country has seen.
- Palihapitiya discusses the ancient rituals that are the origins of performance in both Tamil and Sinhalese communities, demonstrating that in Sri Lanka performance has always been “a medium through which communities can identify and raise awareness about problems and seek solutions.”
- He provides vivid pictures of *The Trojan Women*, of Sitham’s work with TAG, and of the Pongu Tamil. He also goes into detail about some of the other projects Sitham and Dharmasiri have been involved with.
- Finally the author discusses the challenges that Sitham, Dharmasiri, and other artists and peacebuilders in Sri Lanka still face today.