

DEAR CHILDREN SINCERELY

SEVEN DECADES OF SRI LANKA

PART OF THE DCS PROJECT

Directed by
Ruwanthie de Chickera



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RESOURCE PACK
Dear Children Sincerely... Seven Decades of Sri Lanka

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What you are about to read is the documented production process of DCS-Seven Decades of Sri Lanka. This document analyses, in detail, the creative journey of this play, taking you through the entire production process, from its origins to its realization on stage.

This resource pack can be divided into three sections. In the first section you will read of the DCS- Seven Decades of Sri Lanka production, as well as the Dear Children, Sincerely... (DCS) research project. The second section explains the formation and training of the DCS Ensemble - the driving force behind the creation of this play. The third section of this resource pack discusses how each of the 7 scenes in DCS-Seven Decades of Sri Lanka was created. Each scene is analysed under several sub-topics including the historical background of the incident, the beginnings of the devising process and the final style of performance.

This resource pack will help you understand how to create an entire production from a tiny sprout of an idea. You will be able to identify the various creative decisions taken by the artists, along with challenges faced and measures taken to resolve them.

This resource pack is for anyone who is curious about theatre-making, the production and its difficult yet rewarding production process.

DCS - Seven Decades of Sri Lanka
Directed by Ruwanthie de Chickera
Produced by Stages Theatre Group

First performance

November 2016

University of Visual and Performing Arts

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PART ONE

DCS

In this section you will read about the wider DCS research project and also understand how DCS-Seven Decades of Sri Lanka fits within the project.

DCS – Seven Decades of Sri Lanka

DCS- Seven Decades of Sri Lanka created by Stages Theatre Group is the most extensive theatrical production associated with the DCS Project.

The finalized performance was first presented in January 2017 at the Lionel Wendt Theatre. An earlier version of the play created through a collaboration with Mind Adventures Theatre Company had been shown in November 2016 at the Panibharatha Auditorium of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts.

DCS Seven Decades is a devised ensemble performance with 13 actors and two guest artists. It is a multilingual play (English/Sinhala/Tamil), with a runtime of 90 minutes including the interval.

Seven decades of contemporary Sri Lankan history are discussed through this play. The play contains seven scenes. The seven scenes portray seven distinct historical incidents from the 1940s up to the 2000s that changed the trajectory of Sri Lanka. Each scene represents a decade, where a unique historical incident selected from each decade is presented on stage.

The Seven Decades in Seven Scenes

Scene 01 Sri Lanka in the 40s – The Story of Independence
Sri Lanka's Independence from British colonization

Scene 02 Sri Lanka in the 50s – The Story of 'Sinhala Only'
Naming Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka

Scene 03 Sri Lanka in the 60s – The Story of the Ceylon Coup
The attempted gentlemen's military coup

Scene 04 Sri Lanka in the 70s – The Story of Youth Insurrections
The 1971 and 1989 youth insurrections and their violent suppression

Scene 05 Sri Lanka in the 80s – The Story of Black July
The five-day pogrom against Sri Lankan Tamils in 1983

Scene 06 Sri Lanka in the 90s – The Story of the Big Match
The escalating war and media culture amidst the World Cup victory

Scene 07 Sri Lanka in the 2000s – The Story of Menik Farm
The end of the 30 year civil war and the Menik Farm refugee camp

The DCS Project

What is the DCS project?

Dear Children, Sincerely... is an international theatre project initiated by Stages Theatre Group in Sri Lanka in 2015. It collects the stories and experiences of the elders of a society and take them to present-day youth in the form of storytelling and live performance. The DCS project began with recording the memories of the generation born in the 1930s.

Why the 1930s generation?

The generation born in Sri Lanka in the 1930s have memories of Independence and have lived through all of Sri Lanka's post-colonial history. Globally, this is a remarkable generation. They lived through the injustice of colonization and the empire. They witnessed the fall of socialism and the unfettered rise of market-capitalism. They saw the establishment of the United Nations and the enshrinement of international human rights. They saw countries gain independence from the colonial powers, and then they witnessed their leaders squander independence in exchange for petty political gain. Discrimination, injustice, corruption, abuse and violence, discontent, insurrection and hatred have scarred the post-independence journeys that our elders have navigated. They lived through social upheaval – the movements for equality of women, ethnic and racial minorities, sexual and gender minorities, castes and class. Some of them pushed the boundaries of change, others resisted, the rest remained uninvolved. They witnessed society change, as the pace of life quickened and the supremacy of convention evaporated, as access became easier and value diminished, as the protection of one's privacy became more difficult and the search for one's celebrity more desperate. They experienced the dawn of the 20th century and its unprecedented technological advances. Put simply, they were the generation that witnessed the first black and white photographs transform into the coloured digital photographs of today.

The DCS project thus chose this generation to interview with the aim of preserving their memories.

What was the objective of the DCS interviews?

The overall objectives of the interviews was to get the senior citizens to reflect critically on their past. Because of this, the researchers maintained a close relationship with the senior citizens, spending hours and days in conversation encouraging them to reflect deeply on their memories of the past seven decades.

What happened to the DCS interview material?

Once the extensive recollections and reflections were recorded by the researchers, the interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions of these interviews were then taken into rehearsals and worked on by artists- and converted into small scenes which we call 'DCS stories'. Several DCS stories can be woven together to create larger DCS productions.

What are the productions of the DCS project?

The first theatre production created through the DCS project was Dear Children, Sincerely...Rwanda – Sri Lanka Collaboration. The second production was DCS- Monologues. The third production was DCS- Seven Decades of Sri Lanka.



PART TWO **DCS ENSEMBLE**

In this section you will learn how the DCS Ensemble was created and trained so that they could effectively take on the challenge of performing DCS Seven Decades of Sri Lanka.



The ensemble choreographing their act

The Devising Process of DCS – Seven Decades

Having studied and experimented with the method of 'Devised Theatre' for several years, Ruwanthie de Chickera had developed great faith in its processes. This led her to invite the Artistic Director of Mind Adventures - Tracy Holsinger and the artists of this theatre company to collaborate on creating the DCS- Seven Decades of Sri Lanka through the setting up of the DCS Ensemble and through the devised method.

A script is the customary first step of a play. However, a devised production does not need to begin with a script. A devised theatre production has the potential to begin with anything. Its point of entry could be a conversation, a piece of music, an idea, a poem, a word, an image.

DCS - Seven Decades of Sri Lanka did not begin from a script. The 7 scenes of this play are all based on interviews conducted through the DCS project.

Any striking ideas, strong dialogues and vivid memories which emerged from the interview transcripts were collected and brought into rehearsal by Ruwanthie. These memories formed the beginnings of each scene. DCS - Seven Decades of Sri Lanka developed through the devising of each of these individual scenes. The devising process took months and sometimes even years to complete, with the artists often returning to a scene they had already made, in order to delete it and start all over again.

While a production could be devised with a single actor or two or three actors, DCS - Seven Decades was devised by an ensemble of artists who were brought together specifically to create this play.

An ensemble can be defined as a collective of actors, musicians, designers, choreographers who collaborate together for a specific purpose.

The devising process of DCS - Seven Decades was a long and intense experience. It could be divided into three distinct phases - Physical Synchrony, Research and Embodiment- which we will now be analysing.

Step one : Physical synchrony

The ensemble of the production comprised 15 actors. Three of them had been part of the DCS Rwanda Sri Lanka Collaboration production, and so were familiar with the DCS project and the art of devising used by Stages. There was also one artist - Tehani Chitty - who was a seasoned actor from Mind Adventure Theatre Company, a theatre group that is very experienced in devised theatre. All other members of the ensemble joined after an open call audition.

Most of the artists of the ensemble were relatively new to the devising process. The ensemble had both novice actors as well as professional artists drawn from the wider theatre industry. They were individuals who were trained and versed in various forms of theatre. The artists also belonged to different backgrounds, age groups, and geographic regions. This meant that they had vastly different political opinions and life experiences. However, with these differences, the ensemble was required to work together as one if the show was to succeed.

And so, the task of the first stage of the devising process was to establish a well-knit team of artists who were capable of working together with discipline and unity.

Tracy Holsinger assumed the responsibility of directing the ensemble in this first, very important part of the devising process.

Tracy first provided a space for the actors to understand one another's rhythm, their strengths and weaknesses within this process. For this purpose, she conducted several workshops with various acting games and acting exercises. The ensemble gradually familiarized themselves with each other and became trusting and comfortable with each other's bodies as a result of this training. Through the workshops conducted by Tracy the DCS Ensemble learnt to both lead and to follow, to listen and to speak honestly, to respect each other and to expect respect in return. All these ingredients are vital for the workings of a strong ensemble where each artist is confident of his or her unique role, value and contribution to the overall collective - and were an essential foundation which needed to be in place for the devising that was going to take place.

Step two : Research

Since DCS - Seven Decades of Sri Lanka interprets seven decades of Sri Lankan history, it was imperative that the DCS Ensemble had substantial knowledge and understanding of the historical context relevant to the production.

However, what became clear very early on in the devising process was that, except for a few of the artists, most did not have an adequate knowledge about the historical moments the performance had to depict.

One reason for this was that a majority of the ensemble was born in the late 80s or after the 90s - so they had no direct experience of these historical events. However, there were deeper structural reasons for this lack of knowledge.

When I joined the play, I had no idea of the history that was addressed by the play. What we had learnt as history in school was about kings in the Mahavamsa who made pagodas and reservoirs.

According to that, we had a proud history, but we were not taught that we had a history where people died from our own faults. I was aware that we must have had a cruel, contemporary history because I was born in the 90s, right into the middle of an ongoing civil war.

However, there was definitely a curtain thrown over that piece of history which prevented our generation ever knowing about it.

*Prabath Chinthaka
Actor, DCS Ensemble*

Because of this serious and disturbing lack of knowledge amongst the cast about the country's history, the second stage of the devising process was focussed on bridging this gap in knowledge and understanding.

And so this second stage of training consisted primarily of deep discussions on the excerpts of the DCS interview transcripts brought into rehearsal and surrounding research into the history. Research methods such as literature reviews, data analyses and interviews were used for this part of the process. The artists looked for relevant information and context in books, census data, statistics, reports, notices, blogs, government gazettes, newspaper articles, photographs, video clips, songs, advertisements, as well as television and radio discussions.

The research took place individually as well as in groups. Individual research became homework for the actors. Information that they had found on their own was brought to rehearsal and shared with the rest of the ensemble. Everyone's information and opinions were analysed and discussed. Artists also sat together and reviewed works on contemporary history of Sri Lanka, such as "Paradise in Tears" by Victor Ivan.

Another method used to expand the ensemble's understanding of these historical moments was to speak directly with persons who might have lived through these experiences. For this the ensemble invited to rehearsals their parents and senior citizens and engaged them in conversation about their recollections of the past.

Step three : Embodiment

DCS - Seven Decades of Sri Lanka is not a production that could succeed with physical synchrony and research alone. For the devising process to be complete - there was another, very important aspect that had to be introduced to the ensemble and this was the capacity of the actors to embody the experience of the characters they were portraying.

This was not an easy task as the play contained extremely sensitive, traumatic and specific historical incidents experienced by different ethnic, religious, social, class and political groups in Sri Lanka. And the actors portraying these scenes were almost exclusively of one class, one generation, one language and one ethno-religious group.

However, this group of young Sinhala Buddhist actors who largely only spoke Sinhala had to rise to the challenge of portraying Sri Lankans of other ethnicities, classes and religious backgrounds.

In order to achieve this level of sensitivity in performance, Ruwanthie had to utilize various strategies as a director. This brings us to our third stage of the devised process - which is the embodiment of the characters.

During this phase, the ensemble trained themselves to set aside their personal identities and ideological leanings and approach the seven decades portrayed in the play as objectively as possible.

In this phase the DCS Ensemble underwent intense training for character embodiment. For instance, they closely studied photographs and video clips that spanned the 1940s to 2000s, focusing on the body language of the people in the material. They then internalised and practised these stances, the way of moving, speaking, the behaviour patterns and social formations of each of these decades. They also worked hard to understand how the bodies of people changed in stance and energy as the political environment of the country continued to transform. This final stage of deep practice within the body helped actors enter into the headspace and reality of the numerous characters they were called upon to depict throughout Sri Lanka's tumultuous history.

In this manner, through three very distinct stages of devising – Physical synchrony, Research and Embodiment – the DCS Ensemble prepared itself over several months to take on the challenge of depicting 70 years of Sri Lankan history in seven short scenes.



PART THREE

DCS - SEVEN DECADES

In this section you will see how each scene of the Seven Decades was created - the surrounding political context of that time, what the DCS interviews revealed of that period, the beginnings of each scene, how the concept was reached, the initial devising exercises, the style of the performance and the historical facts covered in performance.

Sri Lanka in the 40s – The Story of Independence

Historical context of the scene

Sri Lanka was a colony of three European countries - Portugal, The Netherlands and Britain.

Britain ruled the country from 1815 - 1948, which was called Ceylon during this time. Independence from the British took place on the 4th of February 1948. There was no consolidated people's movement to end colonization in Sri Lanka, unlike in its closest neighbour India. Instead, one year after India's great liberation struggle, Independence was granted to Sri Lanka.

What the DCS interviews revealed

All the seniors interviewed in the DCS project were asked about their memories of Independence. Most of them had a hazy memory of it and an ambivalent attitude towards it. Some of them even opposed colonization ending. It became clear, through our interviews, that Independence in Sri Lanka had not been so keenly experienced or remembered. There was, however, a great respect for India's struggle for Independence and her leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru.

Interestingly, although in the current Sri Lankan context such great importance is given to the Sri Lankan flag, from the interviews it seemed that the national flag did not actually play a very significant part in the Sri Lanka's first day of Independence. In fact, most people who were interviewed did not even remember a flag.

*Our Independence just came. We didn't really ask for it.
We were not really prepared for that next step.*

And I don't remember a flag...

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

This scene was first devised in 2015 for the DCS Sri Lanka-Rwanda Collaboration show which was presented at the 1st Ubumuntu Festival of Humanity in Rwanda. Though a scene was devised and performed at the festival, the artists remained dissatisfied with the scene. And so they returned to it a year later (2016) when preparing for the DCS tour of Sri Lanka and India.

Initial devising exercises

The actors were divided into pairs and asked to create images (moving images or still images) depicting their own feelings around the concept of “Independence”. What did they imagine they would feel as young people if they had lived through the Independence of a country? What comes to their mind when they think of the concept of Independence?

The response to this exercise revealed that many of the images that had been created were images of patriotism, pride, national honour, bravery...etc.

The director then shared with the actors’ direct quotes from the DCS interviews – how the seniors actually remembered and experienced Independence. For example- no one could remember if there had been a flag, the headlines from a newspaper that day were not about Independence, but about the visit of the Duke of Glouster...etc.



නිපුනි සහ ඉනසන්ට් විසින් මෙම අදියරේ දී නිර්මාණය කළ රූපය පසුව නාට්‍යයේ පළමු රූපය බවට වර්ධනය වුණා.

Main concept

The breakthrough for this scene came when we compared our inherited ideas of Independence with the recollections of Independence by the people who had actually lived through it. We realized how much we had constructed around this idea of Independence through the decades.

Sri Lanka's first experience of Independence seemed to have been a much more complex, subtler, funnier, contradictory affair.

We then felt that at a time when people are being victimized for their disloyalty to the national flag and the national anthem has become a tool to suppress some Sri Lankans, it might be good to remind ourselves how differently this journey of Independence had really begun.

So the basic structure of the scene is a deconstructing of our imagined experience of Independence through the real memories of it.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each Act of DCS 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some those moments...

- Singing the national anthem as children- “God Save the King”
- The announcement of news of Independence over State Radio
- The arrival of the Duke of Gloucester
- Independence celebrations being painted by an European artist
- The headlines in the newspapers that day
- Thousands of hands waving
- The first Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, dressed in a coat
- India’s glorious independence struggle
- Sri Lanka – the Jewel of the British Crown
- Memories of the National flag

Style of performance

The interviews revealed a certain kind of innocence and honesty during this age. It may have been because the generation we interviewed were, themselves, children during this decade, or it may have been because times were actually simpler. However, this had to be reflected in some way. And so we chose to perform this scene in a performance style that was childlike and exaggerated, one that was reminiscent of performance styles in the 40s or 50s.

Special Comment

This scene begins and ends with two images from the present. The first image of this scene is our imagined glory in Independence. The final image captures the current power of the Sri Lankan National Flag.

In present day Sri Lanka there exists a great controversy around the flag. It has even become a symbol of oppression with some groups actively using an alternate flag that omits all reference to the minorities in the country. In our current Independence Day celebrations the lifting of the flag is a very momentous moment.

However, the 1930s generation did not have much of a memory of this moment at all. Many of them didn't remember if there had been a flag. Some of them even insist that there was no flag.

This scene ends with the senior citizens' recollections of the flag morphing into our current experience of the National flag.

The power and the overbearing nature of the current national flag is symbolized by a single light that slowly grows harsher and harsher until it ultimately blinds those on stage

Thus, the scene of Independence which began with such idealism and continued with such camaraderie, ends on an ominous note.

Sri Lanka in the 50s – The Story of 'Sinhala Only'

Historical context of the scene

Eight years after Independence, the country was beginning to split along language lines - Sinhala, Tamil and English. Sinhala was the language of the vast majority, Tamil was the language of the largest minority, and English was the language of power and governance inherited from the British. Post-Independence, the questions and debates arose. What would be the new language of government? Would it be possible that there would be more than one language?

The Official Language Act, also known as the 'Sinhala Only' Act was seen as a defining moment of this

decade. It was set in place in June 1956 and was the fulfilment of the central electoral promise of the newly elected Prime Minister - that Sinhala would be made the country's official language within 24 hours of him being elected. The Prime Minister kept his promise with a simply worded bill "Sinhala Language shall be the one official language of Ceylon."

This created an immediate divide between the Tamil and Sinhala leadership of the country - most famously demonstrated in the violent and humiliating suppression of the Satyagraha protest of the Federal Party (the political party representing the Tamil people) on Galle Face green. The Tamil political leadership – who were requesting that Tamil, too, be recognized as an official language in Sri Lanka- sat in protest in front of Parliament reading newspapers printed in Tamil. The protesters were attacked and stripped.

Two years later, in 1958 were the first mass riots against the Tamil people, in which over 300 Tamil people were massacred occurred. The subsequent build-up of tensions between Sinhala and Tamil people in Sri Lanka finally resulted in a 3 decade long civil war.

What the DCS interviews revealed

The seniors unanimously stated in the DCS interviews that the enactment of the 'Sinhala Only' Act or the Official Language Act was the uncontested most powerful incident in the decade of the 1950s. This decade was recognized by them as the decade where Sri Lanka gained momentum as an autonomous governing authority. They also considered the enactment of the Official Language Act and the subsequent riot as the source of the present ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

There were two peoples – Sinhala and Tamil. The British brought them together. But when they left, the Sri Lanka government broke that covenant. The Tamil people tried to negotiate, tried to negotiate, couldn't.

The fundamental way the extreme Sinhala community is thinking is flawed. Such ancient feudal ideas... Why don't they understand this? Who is going to tell them?

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

This scene was first devised in 2015 for the DCS Sri Lanka-Rwanda Collaboration show which was presented at the 1st Ubumuntu Festival of Humanity in Rwanda. The scene created for this show has continued – with minimal alterations – since then.

Initial devising exercises

This scene was first devised in 2015 for the DCS Sri Lanka-Rwanda Collaboration show which was presented at the 1st Ubumuntu Festival of Humanity in Rwanda. The scene created for this show has continued – with minimal alterations – since then.

Main concept

Sometimes the answer is so obvious it is impossible to see.

Though the vehicle for the Sinhala Only scene came early in the devising process – a metaphor of a bus full of people on their first drive together – I was unhappy with the scene we had. It was one dimensional and illustrative. It did not work on a level other than the literal.

At a very low moment, with no new thoughts in my head I remember forcing myself to return to the basics of this momentous, complex historical happening. I went through it again and again – peeling away to the basic, the even more basic - until I was left with the two words – Sinhala Only.

Only Sinhala.

Sinhala.

Sinhala.

Sinhala.

If we were left with only Sinhala. What did we begin with?

The rest came easy.

There are only two words used in this entire scene.

Sinhala. Tamil.

And at the end of it there is only one.

Only Sinhala.

Sinhala Only.

And an entire country lay changed.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each scene of DCS- 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some those moments ...

- Sri Lanka's independence from the British Empire and its establishment as an independent government
- Sinhalese and Tamils work together – there is the possibility of leaders from both nationalities
- The proposal of the bill to make Sinhala the official language
- The Satyagraha by Tamils for their language rights in 1958
- The satyagraha is brutally suppressed
- The enactment of the Sinhala Only Act
- The Tamil population and leadership is excluded
- Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first woman Prime Minister takes office

Style of performance

This scene is entirely an ensemble performance that is performed in one place on the stage. To portray a crowd that is traveling in the same bus, the whole ensemble is packed into a tight space, facing the audience. Throughout the act the ensemble has to maintain a perfect synchrony of rhythm and movement. This is an intensely physical scene which requires a lot of balancing of bodies within the group.

There are two types of characters here. They are represented through cloth strips of two colours - green and red. Sinhalese and Tamils are represented through green and red respectively.

Only two words are used in this entire scene to denote all action and emotion. These are the words - 'Sinhala' and 'Demala'. Initially everyone in the bus uses these words interchangeably. But as the scene progresses the Sinhala people in the bus use Sinhala only.

The speed of movement is a special feature in this scene. In two instances, the entire ensemble break into a slow-motion sequence. The first instance is when the bus takes a swerve and almost topples, and the second instance is when the Tamils passengers in the bus are beaten up and thrown out.

Special Comment

For weeks, this scene was depicted as an extended choreographed version of the initial little impromptu scene – which began with a group of Sinhala and Tamil people all in a bus, excited about inheriting the power and permission to drive that bus, and then beginning to squabble over who gets to be the driver. The scene progressed through the incremental suppression of the Tamil people by the Sinhalese, and the latter's growing paranoia with regards to sharing of power with the former. The ensemble created the noises of the bus drive themselves.

However, though this scene had the energy and the emotions that this moment required, Ruwanthie was unhappy with it as it was too literal. However no one could think of a breakthrough.

It was the night before the performance opened in Kigali, Rwanda, and the actors were exhausted with a very long day of rehearsals. They were getting ready to take this scene one last time and then Ruwanthie asked them – instead of using the dialogues and the noises they had always used before, if they could limit all words and noises in this scene to the two words 'Sinhala' and 'Demala' (Sinhala and Tamil).

It was well past midnight but the actors agreed and suddenly... the scene was lifted to a place of real resonance and power. A few hours before the show opened, the scene fell into place.



The ensemble identify each other's rhythm and maintain the visual aesthetic of the scene through synchronized movement



Although black is used in the overall design of the play, red and green are used symbolically

Sri Lanka in the 60s – The Story of the Ceylon Coup

Historical context of the scene

The intriguing and unsuccessful ‘Gentleman’s Coup’ took place in 1962. It was called thus because of the social class and calibre of the main respondents - the top brass, English speaking officials of the armed forces.

Eventually, 24 men were charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government. Of the 24 charged 21 were Roman Catholics/Christians and only one was a Buddhist. The third Trial at Bar sat for 324 days and convicted 11 of the 24 accused and sentenced them to 10 years in jail and their properties were confiscated by the state.



The reaction of the government was that the coup was a move inspired and directed by Christians. This event marked the beginning of the end of rule of the almost exclusively Anglo-Christian ruling class, with the language of power shifting from English to Sinhala - a shift that began as a result of the Sinhala Only Act brought into play by Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike in the previous decade. The shift in power and language also seemed to signal the end of a particular culture of politics, a certain worldview in terms of how life was approached and how problems were solved. Ironically, Prime Minister Bandaranaike, the master mind behind the Sinhala Only Act, was assassinated by a Buddhist monk a few years later and this shocking act gave rise to a culture of extremist Buddhist politics in the country.

Mr. Bandaranaike’s widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike became Prime Minister after his death and was the first woman Prime Minister in the world. The attempted coup occurred during her tenure.

Sri Lanka in the 60s - The story of Ceylon Coup scene(2019)

What the DCS interviews revealed

Most seniors recollected two powerful developments of the 60s. The move towards the nationalisation of estates, and the failed 'Gentlemen's Coup'. The Ceylon Coup- scene that was created to represent the decade of the 60s, was based on an in-depth interview with one senior citizen, where both these developments were described in great detail.

*We laughed so much in our time.... about everything.
About religion or politics or all of it. Everything was ultimately laughed at.
I think that today you know, it's a kind of, there's such bitterness.
Especially in young people.*

Why do they take themselves so seriously ah?

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

While this scene was originally created for the larger play DCS - Seven Decades of Sri Lanka, it was later added to the repertoire of the DCS Monologues as well.

The scene is based on a personal narrative chosen from amongst the DCS interviews, adapted to a script by Ruwanthie. The script follows the memory of an English-speaking woman from the upper class of society.

The script was written first as a monologue in English, reflecting fairly closely the conversation of the interview.

However, there then emerged the problem of how to take this performance to a Sinhala speaking or Tamil speaking audience.

Accordingly, a new character named Wijesoma was created. Wijesoma was fashioned on the real-life butler/driver/carer to the lady we interviewed - a faithful and trustworthy companion who had served her most of his life.

In the scene, the character of Wijesoma stands by the character of the Lady and provides a line by line interpretation of her story in Sinhala (or Tamil). Through this he provides the audience with his own version of the events. In this manner the audience gets two perspectives on these nuanced battles of class, language and religion fought in the confines of the upper class gentry.

Initial devising exercise

The core of this scene - the narration of the Lady and Wijesoma - was entirely scripted and so there was no devising around the central narrative of the piece.

However, in moving this story into the DCS - 7 Decades show, the ensemble was brought into the scene on two occasions to expand the narrative beyond a straight-forward telling of the story.

The ensemble enacted two significant incidents in the central narrative. These were 1) The nationalization of the estates and the stripping of land of the gentry, and (2) The social and political tension between the English speaking upper class and the young politician and 'soon-to-be' Premier - SWRD Bandaranaike - who maintained close (and strained) ties with the class he was about to betray.

In devising the nationalization scene, the actors were asked to methodically strip away the enormous set that the lady was seated on in the beginning of the scene. The Lady, who begins the scene seated in a massive 'sofa' like structure created with several black boxes, is finally left seated on a single black box - her wealth and assets visually stripped away.

In devising the tension between SWRD and the upper class, a dinner party scene was devised where the shift of power balance between English and Sinhala is symbolized by the various hand greetings of the British set against the 'Ayubowan' greeting of Sri Lanka. Without saying a word, SWRD shuns all the attempted handshakes, salutes and embraces of the dinner party guests with the ominous and triumphant 'Ayubowan' gesture.



Devised western greetings incorporated into the scene

Main concept

Central to the concept of this scene is the relationship shared, but not shared through language.

An aristocratic English-Speaking Christian lady and her Sinhala speaking Buddhist butler.

The nuanced intimacy, complexity, mutual respect, dependence and genuine love in this relationship is real. They are two people of vastly different backgrounds, extreme inequality, who have travelled life together as faithful companions.

They have shared almost everything.

They have almost shared everything.

That complex reality - of being together, differently in every milestone in life – gave rise to the equal use of English and Sinhala in this scene. The butler and the lady have an equal amount of lines, of equal length, they refer to the same moment - but the language they speak determines their perspective of what happened. And these two languages combined provide a deeper understanding of the politics of culture and class during that time.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each scene of DCS - 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some those moments...

- SWRD's political move of the 'Sinhala Only' Act
- Parliament opening its doors to the public
- The impact of the 'Sinhala Only Act' on schools.
- SWRD's change in language, dress and behaviour
- SWRD's comment at a dinner party about 'Arabic Only'
- The Sirimavo Govt's Land Reform Act (State take-over of agricultural land in excess of 50 acres)
- The key respondents of the Gentlemen's Coup
- "Onward Christian Soldiers" being played on SLBC on the day of the Coup and the person who played it being fired.
- Officer Barker receiving orders from Temple Trees to arrest the officers who planned the Coup
- Officers getting arrested and being remanded at Welikada prison
- Smuggling in food, books and drinks into Welikada prison
- S. W. R. D. being assassinated by a Ven Telduwe Somarama
- Ven Telduwe Somarama being visited by Fr, Mathew Peiris in prison (in order to convert him)

- Ven Telduwe Somarama being hanged to death
- The scattering of Ven Telduwe Somarama's ashes outside the borders of the Sri Lanka's waters (by a helicopter driven by Officer Barker.)
- Fr. Mathew Peiris accompanying helicopter ride

Style of performance

This scene rests on a story-telling style of performance. The core of the scene is very simply the Lady and Wijesoma, speaking directly to the audience, relating to them the events of this time.

In DCS - Seven Decades, this simple story-telling technique is expanded on two occasions with the inclusion of the ensemble in the background - who enact two of the incidents being described on stage. The style of performance of the ensemble in both these interventions is stylised and exaggerated in comparison to the naturalistic story-telling performance-style maintained by the Lady and Wijesoma.



Scene: Sri Lanka in the 60s - The story of Ceylon Coup (2019)

Sri Lanka in the 70s – The Story of Youth Insurrections



Scene: Sri Lanka in the 70s - The story of Youth Insurrection (2019)

Historical context of the scene

There were two youth Insurrections which changed the course of Sri Lanka. They happened 19 years apart. The first one - in 1971 - drew from the idealism and energy of the emerging wider global socialist movement, which had caught the hearts and imaginations of the young people the world over. In Sri Lanka, like in several other countries at this, time it was the Leftist parties that were providing the most inspiring leadership and drawing the sharpest minds. The 1971 insurrection was grounded in an idealistic student movement and aspired a daring takeover of the State.

This State take-over was crushed when its bold plan to attack all police stations in the country on one single night was foiled after one attack took place prematurely. 1,200 students were killed.

Approximately 3,000 arrested and about 18,000 surrendered. The fledgling revolution lasted barely 3 months. Nineteen years later the movement returned - much harder, more organized and ultimately more brutal.

1989 is remembered as a time of prolonged terror with the youth and the State attacking each other through the people trapped in-between. The two-year period from 1987 - 1989 was characterized by its intrigue, paranoia, its escalating horror, its madness and public brutality. Hundreds of thousands of young people were tortured and killed during this time. Choreographed executions, kidnappings, revenge assassinations, mass killings, torture houses, public humiliations, mutilation and display of dead bodies secured for this period the term "Time of Terror".

What the DCS interviews revealed

The generation of the 1930s would have been adults by the 70s and 80s. Many of them were academics and activists; some of them were actively involved in the politics of this time, all of them were deeply affected by it, all of them knew young people who had been killed through it, and families that had been destroyed by this time of terror.

There was an overwhelming sense of helplessness and regret about this period. This generation seemed to feel a great sense of loss, being witness to the generation of young people after them, being wiped out in this manner.

The young people of the country one side and old people of the country on the other side. How heart-breaking. We gave young people this grand education and made them feel they can achieve anything... and then... we could not support them... Oh the tragedy of it.

It was a disaster. The state came down so hard on the boys. It was a disaster.

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

This scene was first devised in 2015 for the DCS Sri Lanka-Rwanda Collaboration show which was presented at the 1st Ubumuntu Festival of Humanity in Rwanda. However, it only became a fully-fledged scene during the 2016 tour of the same production.

The origins of this scene are based in two dance traditions of Rwanda and Sri Lanka.



This scene was first devised in Rwanda with Sri Lanka – Rwanda actors

Initial Devising exercise

This is a very physical scene which was put together, incrementally, through various physical experiments, right throughout the creative process.

The base for the first half of the scene was laid by the Rwandan Gumboot dance which the Rwandan artists taught the Sri Lankan artists when they first came together in 2015 in Rwanda.

The Gumboot Dance, which is a high energy dance with an infectious and repetitive movement and rhythm to it, was not easy for the Sri Lankan actors to learn. When learning it, there were the initial hesitancy and mistakes, there was the curiosity and fascination with its potential power, there was the hard work put in, the subsequent elation of mastering the technique; and finally there was the explosion of combined energy in the room when the dance came together.

This very journey of the Sri Lankan cast learning this dance was retained in the performance of this scene. It mirrored the young people of 1971, curious and fascinated by the promise of a Socialist world, working hard to understand it and finally mastering the power behind it and exploding their energy on the audience.



Main concept

The JVP insurrections – like any Left-led revolutions – drew upon a high level of intellectual rigour. The freedom discovered by the young people, was the power of knowledge and education which emboldened them to break through old power structures based on class and language.

*So much has been written and theorized about this revolution – how were we to condense this complexity into a few minutes on stage and still remain true to the central experience of the insurgency?
Sometimes the vehicle is the problem.*

*We decided to reject the complexity of words.
Well then, what are you left with?*

Bodies.

Young bodies.

*Young bodies with energy. Boundless energy. Young bodies willing to die.
Hundreds of young bodies willing to die.*

Thousands of young bodies, young minds of limitless energy being destroyed. The old people of a country destroying the young people of a country.

What a tragedy.

It is the unspeakable sadness of this wasted potential that the scene aims to end on.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each scene of DCS - 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some those moments...

- The frustrations of the first generation of young people educated under the Sinhala Only policy
- The initial secret nature of the 1971 Marxist insurgency (the secret gatherings and indoctrination)
- The influence of Marxism and Russian literature
- The emphasis on education in the '71 insurrection
- The plan to attack and take over all police stations in a single night
- The one premature attack
- The violent suppression of the 1971 insurrection
- The youth fall-back
- The beginning of the 1989 insurrection under the leader Rohana Wijeweera
- Women's representation in the movement
- The gestures and symbols of the movement
- The torture, killing and public display of burnt bodies in the country
- The Goni Billa identification parades
- The escalating deaths
- The killing of Rohana Wijeweera
- The fall of the 1989 youth insurrection

Style of performance

This scene was completely non-verbal. It was performed entirely through energetic and dramatic choreographed sequences.

The scene comprised two parts. The first part represents the 1971 insurrection while the second part represents the 1989 insurrection. The first part is fashioned around the Rwandan Gumboot dance and the second section is based on the Vaahala dance found in the Devil Madu Shanthikarmaya, which belongs to the Sri Lankan low-country dance tradition.

The first Gumboot dance has a carefree, youthful and hopeful colour to it - and it reflects the relative innocence and hope of the initial student revolt of 1971. This second dance form used to depict the 1989 Time of Terror shows the increasing madness and frenzy of this time with its swift descent into mayhem and chaos.



Choreographer Pradeep Gunaratne performing the role of the leader of the 1989 insurrection in the scene



The mistake in training developed as the final moment of the 1971 insurrection scene



The scene ends with the vibrant, energetic bodies lying, unmoving on the stage

Sri Lanka in the 80s — The Story of Black July



[Scene: Sri Lanka in the 80s - The story of Black July (2019)]

Historical context of the scene

The '83 riots, also known as Black July, refers to the anti-Tamil pogrom in Sri Lanka in July 1983. The riots were triggered by the ambush and killing of 13 Sinhala soldiers by the then fairly unknown LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). This was the first such bold act of aggression against the Sri Lankan State by a Tamil group and it caused shockwaves within the majority Sinhala Buddhist population.

The rumours around the attack, the build up towards an unprecedented State funeral, the dramatic transportation of the 13 bodies back to Colombo, the tussle between the Govt. and the families over the dead bodies, all led to a tense situation which led to riots in Colombo on the 23rd of July 1983.

Over the next week, the increased organisation of mobs, the inaction of the police and the deafening silence of the President led to an escalating boldness in the looting, burning and murdering that was taking place publicly along the streets and neighbourhoods of the capital. The accurate targeting of Tamil households and businesses revealed a complicity of the State which added to the impunity the mobs felt in public attacks and killings.

Shockingly, it was only on the 27th of July - 4 days after the riots began, that the President broke his silence and addressed the nation. And even then, his ambiguous address fuelled a resurgence of the riots - which finally ended on the 30th of July. By then there was an estimated 3,000 people killed, a further estimated 150,000 rendered homeless and around 8,000 homes and shops destroyed.

Black July is generally seen as the start of the 30-year Civil War between the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan State. Thousands of Tamils left the country after the '83 July riots, creating a strong global Tamil diaspora and several young people joined the LTTE - until then, a fairly side-lined, extremist militant group.

What the DCS interviews revealed

Black July was described by the seniors interviewed as the most significant incident of the 1980s and possibly that of the entire modern history of Sri Lanka.

However, there was also a distinct sense of defeated-ness and even a slight distancing from these events in the narrating of them. It seemed that many of them were trying to get away from the tragedy of these times - which was different to the approach they had to the problems they faced in their youth (like the Sinhala Only Bill).

Since when did people start using the word 'demalaa' ... In my childhood there was no such word ... but when did that word come into the Sinhala language?...

I think it might have happened suddenly ...

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

This scene was first created for performance in the 2017 production of the DCS - 7 Decades show.

Of all the scenes in the play, this was the one that was the most difficult and the last to finalize. Its devising process began in 2016, for the opening performance of this play. However, that scene was then dropped, and another devising process undertaken afresh. Following a one-year devising process, the scene was finally completed and became a part of the performance staged in July 2017.

The beginnings of this scene are rooted in one sentence quoted from the interview of veteran film actress Iranganie Serasinghe in her DCS interview - "Since when did people start using the word 'demalaa'.

Initial devising exercises

After lengthy discussions about how to represent this turning point in Sri Lankan history, a decision was taken that though this tragedy affected the Tamil people of the country, the cast for this play, being almost exclusively Sinhala, should attempt to begin to understand it through the perspective of the Sinhala person.

Upon research, the ensemble discovered that the most debilitating aspect of this time was the silence maintained by the State during the crisis. Quite apart from the silence maintained during the actual riots, the silence maintained even before the riots broke out, fuelled panic and paranoia about what had happened and what was about to happen as a result.

In order to help the actors understand this sense of collective confusion, fear, curiosity and dread, a group-warmup exercise the actors were already familiar with was used as the first devising exercise.

In this exercise, the group has to follow the flight of an invisible fly - as it spins around the room, settling at different points on different surfaces for short periods of time and then flying off again. The challenge to the group is for everyone to move as one with the entire group's focus on a single invisible point right throughout the entire exercise. This is a classic ensemble exercise used to develop unspoken connectivity between a group of actors.

When devising this scene, the DCS Ensemble started this exercise that they were already familiar with. As a group they followed the flight of a busy-body invisible fly - searching for it as it appeared and disappeared around the room. After a point, the actors were asked to add to this exercise any of the possible rumours

that might have floated around the shocked Sinhala community of 1983 as they waited for the 13 bodies of the slain soldiers to be transported back from Jaffna to Colombo.

When these sentences were added to the movement, an immediate sense of loss and confusion and growing dread took over the scene, and the artists transformed from a group of actors searching for an invisible insect, to a group of citizens searching for answers to critical questions.

Main concept

This scene moves forward through violence and silence. It marks the moment in Sri Lankan history when the public humiliation of Tamil people became silently endorsed.

The 5-7 days of the 1983 riots fluctuated between moments of unprecedented violence and days of deafening silence. The Tamil people lay caught in-between - victims of the violence and victims of the State silence on the violence.

Through this silence the State sent a message to Sri Lankans that Tamils are second class citizens, they could be destroyed publicly with impunity. This changed the dynamic of Sri Lankan society overnight.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each scene of DCS - 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some those moments...

- Rumours that spread on account of the killing of 13 soldiers in Jaffna
- Transporting the 13 bodies down to Colombo by train
- The crowds that gathered at the Colombo cemetery

- The attack of Tamil households
- The looting of Tamil businesses and houses
- The questioning of Tamil people by Sinhala mobs
- The burning and killing of Tamil people in the street
- A man being burned to death outside the President's residence
- The significance of the 'Baaldhiya'
- The radio silence of the Sri Lankan State during the riots
- The final radio announcement made by President J R Jayawardena four days into the riot.
- The photograph taken by Chandragupta of a Tamil man being stripped before being killed by a laughing Sinhala mob

Style of performance

This scene was a mix of naturalistic acting and stylised acting.

Initially, this scene is somewhat stylized, synchronised and neatly choreographed. The ensemble silently moves all over the stage, moving in one body, seemingly controlled by an invisible hand. With the growing rumours, the tension in the movement increases but the synchrony remains. There is still some form and order to the group.

Then, suddenly, one of the actors is isolated (this is the actor who represents the Tamil people). For the rest of the scene, this actor occupies a difference area, energy and headspace and the rest of the ensemble behave as a separate collective.

At the isolation of the single actor, the ensemble breaks from the stylised acting. They switch to realistic and frenzied and riotous acting, as the chaos and mayhem of the 7 days unfolds, and the ensemble becomes a murderous mob.

In between the increasing madness and turmoil in the mob, there is stillness and silence on stage, and it is during this time that the single Tamil man moves.



segment 01 - 'demellu' - Tamils



segment 02 - 'lutex' - Lutex

Special Comment

There were two structures that held this scene together. And both structures were conceptually connected to the silence maintained by the State and the President during this time of anarchy and national crisis.

The first was the structure of the initial rumours surrounding the killing of the 13 soldiers that the ensemble caught as they moved together through the space, trying to find clues of what had happened. This structure of the developing rumours was physicalized by the collective movement of the ensemble in this scene. As the rumours around the killings grew amidst the silence maintained by the State, the tension in the ensemble also increased.

The second structure was the structure of the announcements that came over the radio (or more accurately, the announcements that didn't come over the radio). This was an auditory structure.

The radio served to play a big role in the second half of the scene. As the lawlessness and violence increased on the streets, within homes people gathered around the radio expecting the security of some kind of protection, directive or assurance from the leadership. But this never came. And in its absence, the world around them collapsed.

Thus, the second half of the scene is held together by the silence of the radio - broken right at the end of the scene with the airing of the tragically overdue and ultimately destructive national address by the President of the country.



The theatrical exercise is used in performance, as well as at the beginning of the scene to intensify the emotion and tension of the 1983 Black July.

Sri Lanka in the 90s — The Story of The Big Match



Scene: Sri Lanka in the 90s - The story of the Big Match (2019)

Historical context of the scene

The 90s, which began with the dramatic assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by a Sri Lankan in 1991, unfolded into a time in which the war and its surrounding morbid culture became normalized within the country.

The decade proceeded with a number of high-profile political assassinations and a turbulent political culture of intrigue. Civilian and military deaths increased exponentially amidst a flourishing war industry; but in spite of the spate of tragedies that plagued this decade, the 90s is probably most remembered for the country's cricket World Cup victory in 1996.

This was also the decade in which newly established private media channels began to sprout and also began to compete for viewership. This led to a culture and practice of daily newspapers and news briefings flashing high war casualties and sensationalizing tragedy. Through this all, the financial industry around the war flourished publicly. All of this led to a culture of desensitization to war within the Sri Lankan public.

Amidst all this, the 1990s was also when Sri Lanka won the cricket World Cup and Sri Lankans, torn apart by war, united over their obsession for cricket.

What the DCS interviews revealed

In the DCS interviews, what most of the seniors recalled most easily about this decade was the 1996 World Cup victory. Nonetheless, they all also identified the culture of mistrust and foul-play within politics, the huge number of political assassinations and the changing nature of the media.

The 90s was a very complicated period of Sri Lankan history.

I can't really believe that I've been through that period (laughs) it was such a long period of working with (uh...), with leading political figures, that... (uh)... in this stage of my life I begin to wonder, did it really happen? Did we really go through all of that?

I think that with experiences like this we... (uh)... we find ways of selecting only some things and forgetting other things because... (uh)... the 90s was a very complicated period of Sri Lankan history.

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

The devising process of this scene began in 2016 for the play, DCS- Seven Decades of Sri Lanka.

The innocuousness of the bloodiest decade of the civil war, being identified by most Sri Lankans as the decade the country won the World Cup, led directly to the vehicle of this scene. Neither the World Cup victory nor the escalating death-toll of the civil war could be ignored or cast aside, so these two realities were brought together in the scene. The civil war would be presented like a live commentary of a cricket match.

This meant that the statistics of the war had to be refashioned to fit the vehicle of a cricket match. As a starting point, the ensemble gathered together all the war-related facts, figures and numbers. This constituted the scoreboard of the war.

Initial devising exercises

Once the research into the various facts of the war was done- the actors were asked to first categorise and then align the war-data with typical cricket-match data. Once this information was separated into these categories the characters of the TV personalities presenting this information to the public were created through improvisation exercises.

A metaphor of a live running commentary of the 'Sri Lankan Civil War' was very soon in place.



The ensemble devising how to present data and information as journalists

Main concept

This scene hinges on 4 aspects of Sri Lankan life which dominated the 90s - the war, the war industry, the private media and the World Cup.

The central concept of this scene is the scoreboard, and the adding up of numbers towards victory. These numbers could be deaths, assassinations, political ploys, financial profits or runs in a cricket match.

The scoreboard culture is driven by an emerging media motivated by profit and political agendas.

The political manoeuvres, the conspiracies, the fixing, tampering, the ploys and strategies, the prolific leaders who were destroyed in quick succession, the civilians, soldiers and militants who continued to be killed in large numbers - and even the break in the war - half way through the decade, where everyone stopped killing each other and watched Sri Lanka win the World Cup in Cricket - all this contributed to a morbid sense of a game being played at a very high level with human lives as stakes..

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each scene of DCS - 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some of those moments...

- 1987 breakdown of war ceasefire
- 1989 assassination of Rajini Thiranagama
- 1989 expulsion of 70,000 Muslim Population from the North.
- 1990 war death toll 3,924
- 1990 military budget 16 Billion Rupees
- 1991 assassination of former Indian Prime Minister- Rajiv Ghandi- by LTTE
- 1992 assassination of Lieutenant General Denzil Kobbekaduwa in Jaffna Fort Battle
- 1992 assassination of Minister of Education/Presidential candidate Lalith Athulathmudali
- 1992 - 157 civilians killed in Polonnaruwa
- 1992 - 35 civilians including 14 children killed in Mailanthei massacre
- 1993 Jaffna sea battle death toll 1236 (army – 632, Navy- 135, LTTE – 469)
- 1993 assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa on May Day
- 1993 military budget 58 Billion
- 1993 D B Wijetunga made President
- 1994 Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga wins Presidential election with 62% majority
- 1994 - 10 civilians killed in Anuradhapura bus bomb

- 1994 - 17 fishermen killed in Kudiramalai
- 1994 proposal of the Devolution Package
- 1994 LTTE sea attack
- 1994 October 24th, Eelam War III begins
- 1994 - 50 civilians killed in LTTE bomb attack
- 1995 Weli Oya attack, 400 LTTE Carder killed
- 1995 Jaffna battle, 245 killed
- 1995 - 65 refugees killed in Naveli St Peter's church attack
- 1995 total civilian death toll 505
- 1996 - 88 killed, 1400 injured in Central Bank bomb attack
- 1996 - 1200 army soldiers killed in Mulathivu camp attack
- 1996 - 500 LTTE carders killed in Kilinochchi battle
- 1996 - 245 civilians killed in Dehiwela train bomb attack
- 1996 Military budget 160 Billion Rupees
- 1996 World Cup Victory and two-day war cease fire
- Overall UN official military death toll Sri Lanka Army 23,790, LTTE Carders 27,639, Indian Army 1155
- Total war budget for 1990s decade 1572 Billion Rupees

Style of performance

The scene is presented as a live TV commentary on an event - in this case a decade of war. The performance style is crafted on the announcing style of private media personalities and popular sports commentators. All jargon used for this scene is from the vocabulary of sports commentating, specifically that of cricket. The jargon and gestures of popular media personalities is also absorbed into the act. The performance style is that of exaggerated and caricatured comedy.

Obviously, the style of performance contrasts sharply with the subject matter being presented - grim facts of death and destruction during a war. As a result of this conflict the scene falls within the style of a dark comedy.



How the characters of the journalists and the general public are positioned on the stage

Sri Lanka in the 2000 – The story of Menik Farm



Scene: Sri Lanka in the 2000s - The story of Menik Farm (2019)

Historical context of the scene

Sri Lanka's three decade-long civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009, after a concerted military attack of the Government in the North of the country.

The Government was subsequently brought under local and international scrutiny for the large number of civilian deaths and unresolved displacement that resulted from this final phase of war.

'Menik Farm' is the name of a refugee camp in which approximately 225,000 displaced persons were detained. The camp was strictly controlled by the Sri Lankan military and soon became notorious for its

inadequate living standards and rumoured incidents of killing, abuse, forced recruitment etc... Since access to the camp was controlled, many of the information and stories around the camp and its people remain unconfirmed.

Though the Govt provided assurances of quick and fair resettlement of the persons held within Menik Farm, the camp continued in existence till 2015 and even then, when it was officially closed, there were a large number of families who had not been resettled.

What the DCS interviews revealed

Although this decade is the closest to the present and crucial to the current political landscape, the DCS interviews on the 2000's did not bring forth the overall insights that the previous 6 decades did. This was possibly because the generation born in the 1930s had distanced themselves from socio-political events towards the latter phase of their lives.

“My eyes were too old. Too old to see what I saw. Too old to understand what I didn’t see.

*But let me tell you this, my dear children.
I understood one thing, clearly.”*

Quote from DCS Interview Transcript

Creation of the scene

Origins

This scene was originally written as a monologue and performed as part of the DCS Monologues in 2016. The script of the monologue was written by Ruwanthie and was based on her conversation with a Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan, a General Practitioner who used to visit Menik Farm as a volunteer. Dr. Vimala had written down her recollections in a poem which she shared with Ruwanthie. This poem, along with the material of the interview was used for the script.

The monologue Menik Farm was subsequently expanded into an ensemble piece and incorporated in the DCS Seven Decades show in 2016.



Initial Devising Exercise

The challenge of moving the Menik Farm monologue into a larger ensemble piece was, how to do this while retaining the original gentleness and dignity of the monologue narrated by an elderly Tamil lady, displaced by the war at the end of her life. Any incorporation of the ensemble had to enhance the fragility of the monologue, rather than pull at it or compete with it.

As such, one of the first decisions made was to limit the movement of the ensemble to a tiny space - and this place came to represent the cramped conditions of the refugee camp. The next decision was to limit the sound of the ensemble. So instead of any words or lines, the ensemble was given the challenge of just creating an atmosphere for the monologue.

As a devising exercise, percussion instruments were divided amongst the cast and they were asked to listen to the monologue and create an accompanying sound scape for it.

Selvi Sachithanathan delivering the Menik Farm monologue



The ensemble choreographing their act



Main concept

The central concept for this scene lies in the line “My eyes are too old for this”.

This line holds the performance together like a refrain.

It refers, implicitly, to a Sri Lankan lady who was displaced for the first time in 2009 at the age of 90.

What would it be like to live through the hardships of a 30-year war, and right at the end of your life, at 90 years of age, be uprooted from your home and life?

This inability to understand, or the inability to accept the cruelty and the absurdity of war and the crude cultures that sustain it; the unwillingness of a gracious old lady to say anything even slightly inappropriate or hurtful, provided the restraint, decency and gentleness to the words which were used to describe the most horrific inhumanness.

The central concept of this piece is in the decency of understatement.

It is meant to remind us of the many people we destroy, through our action or our inaction, who continue to believe the best in us, simply out of their own high sense of decency.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

Significant historical memories highlighted

Each scene of DCS - 7 Decades of Sri Lanka carries several references to historical moments recollected in the interviews. Here are some those moments...

- Civilians fleeing the final battle
- 5,000 people killed by chemical bombs (Phosphorus rain)
- Fleeing refugees being gathered by the Army
- Refugees being transported to a camp
- The camp being guarded by military, with a barbed wire boundary
- People praying in the camp
- No toilets in the camp
- Children falling into cess pits and drowning
- Ice-cream vans being brought into the camps
- Super Markets appearing in the camp
- Banks appearing in the camp
- Well-dressed sales-persons appearing in the camp
- People dying in the camps and bodies being taken away
- The visit of President Rajapakse and his family
- People throwing stones at the Rajapakses
- Foreigners coming on tours - UN, Delegates from embassies

- Foreign soap sent to the camps
- People being interrogated
- Young girls taken for interrogation after dusk
- Camp being sectioned off into Areas - A, B, C...

Style of performance

The performance of this scene takes place on two levels. The original monologue continues without any changes and the style of performance of the monologue is like a recital of a poem.

Behind the recitation of the monologue is the ensemble, who contribute to the scene mainly through the soundscapes they create. The movement of the ensemble is limited to periods of long stillness through which the sounds of the percussion instruments are heard. All of this together- the poetic nature of the monologue, the stillness of the cast and the accompanying sounds of the landscape contribute to create an atmosphere of vulnerability, desolation and emptiness.



The scene ends with an extremely loud clamour rising from the musical instruments

End Note

Dear Children, Sincerely... Seven Decades Sri Lanka is a play based on the memories of the generation of the 1930s, interviewed through the DCS theatre research project.

DCS Seven Decades is the end result of a complex, long drawn out and staggered ensemble devising process. Though the initial scenes for this play were created as early as 2015, it was only in 2017 that the final play really came together.

DCS Seven Decades is made up of 7 scenes and each scene represents a decade of Sri Lankan history from 1940 - 2009 (or from Independence to the end of the Sri Lankan civil war). Each scene is rooted within the DCS interview material, but each scene was created differently in line with the inspiration for the scene and also the nature of the incident being presented. Each of the 7 scenes (or decades) began with a direct excerpt taken from a DCS interview, which was the basis of that scene. In this manner, in a little over an hour, the cast takes the audience through 70 years of turbulent Sri Lankan history as remembered by the generation that lived through it all.

In order to carry this massive production, a decision was taken to create the DCS Ensemble - which is a group of actors who would be put through and trained specifically in line with this show. The training the DCS Ensemble received was not just physical training, it was also research based training and it led several members of the young cast to completely change their political stances on the history of the country.

In after-show discussions conducted with audiences, several members of the ensemble admitted publicly to initially being completely unaware of the political history of the country that they had just performed on stage. Much of the after-show discussion centred around the misrepresentation or the silence around recent violent political history of the country in school syllabi, and the corresponding ignorance of the youth of the country about crucial political events.

DCS Seven Decades of Sri Lanka is a trilingual performance - with the lines spoken on stage changing between the 3 languages of Sri Lanka - and corresponding subtitles in all three languages being projected on a screen throughout the play.

It remains the most ambitious undertaking of Stages Theatre Group thus far.



Subtitles of each dialogue is projected using multimedia during the scene



Relaxing after keeping peek energy in their bodies for 90 minutes

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This resource pack was produced as part of the 'Artist Research, Archiving and Documentation Project' of Stages Theatre Group.

Through this project, practicing artists engaged in systematic and critical analysis of their own work, analysing a decade worth of theatre productions and processes of Stages Theatre Group. The decade spanned the immediate ten years after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka (2009 to 2019).

Sixteen resource packs, such as this one, were created for publication in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Each resource pack, written and researched by artists, examines the surrounding socio-political context within which these productions were created and analyses the creative decisions taken within the process. Supporting video material was also created as part of this initiative. All material produced through this research project can be found at www.stages.lk

Resource Packs

Editor (Writing): Ruwanthie de Chickera

Editor (Video): Malith Sulara

Language Editors: Nipuni Sharada Pathirage (S) King Ratnam (T)

Writers: Ruwanthie de Chickera, Pemanthi Fernando, Jayampathi Guruge, Nadie Kammallaweera, Nalin Lusena, Nipuni Sharada Pathirage, Piumi Wijesundara

Layout and Design Editors: Malshani Delgahapitiya, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha

Proofreaders: Asha Abeykoon, Geetha de Chickera, Pemanthi Fernando, U. D. R. H. K. Gunasinghe, Tracy Holsinger, Aravinda Jayasekara, Nadie Kammallaweera, Nipuni Sharada Pathirage, Sudeshna Ranmuthugala, King Ratnam, Thilaka Subasinghe

Layout and Graphic Designers: Prasad Aluthwattha, David Cotterrell, Sanjaya Ekneligoda, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha, Venura Navod, Deshan Tennekoon

Layout Assistants: Kiyas Ahamed, Malshani Delgahapitiya, Janith Harshana

Research Assistants: Kaushalya Attyagalle, Nalin Lusena, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha, Akalanka Prabhashwara, Dinushika Seneviratne

Translators: Hiranyada Dewasiri(S/E), Arundi Jayasekara(S/E), Manuli Lavanya(S/E), Lihini Nilaweera(S/E), Jinadani Parameshwaram(T), Shamala Vedanayagam(T), Piumi Wijesundara(E)

Video Crew: Venura Navod, King Ratnam, Pramila Samarakoon, Kasun Ukwatta

Web Design and Developer: Ransaka Galmangoda

Administrators: Malshani Delgahapitiya, Mahesh Lakmal

Stages Theatre Group
RESOURCE PACKS

DCS 7 Decades of Sri Lanka

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera, Nipuni Sharada Pathirage

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Design by: Venura Navod

DCS Girls at Checkpoints

Written by: Piumi Wijesundara

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Venura Navod

DCS Monologues

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera

Assisted by: Pemanthi Fernando

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Deshan Tennekoon

DCS Rwanda

Sri Lanka Collaboration

Written by: Nipuni Sharada Pathirage

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Prasad Aluthwatta

Grease Yaka

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera, Pemanthi Fernando

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Deshan Tennekoon

Kalumaali: a fairy tale for grown-ups

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera, Nadie Kammallaweera

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Deshan Tennekoon

Love and Other Objects

Written by: Jayampathi Guruge

Assisted by: Nalin Lusena

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Venura Navod

Ovaryacting!

Written by: Piumi Wijesundara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Venura Navod

Passing Stage Project

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera

Assisted by: Kaushalya Attygalle, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Sanjaya Ekneligoda, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha

The Syrian Monologues

Written by: Jayampathi Guruge

Assisted by: Nalin Lusena

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Deshan Tennekoon

The Certificate

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Sanjaya Ekneligoda

Thought Curfew

Written by: Piumi Wijesundara

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: David Cotterrell

Walking Path - a play without words

Written by: Jayampathi Guruge

Assisted by: Nalin Lusena

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Prasad Aluthwattha

Stages Artist Training Programme

Written by: Nalin Lusena

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Prasad Aluthwattha

Stages Junior Ensemble

Written by: Piumi Wijesundara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Prasad Aluthwattha

Stages Senior Ensemble

Written by: Jayampathi Guruge

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Prasad Aluthwattha

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