
Sri Lankan Drama in English: Metamorphosis Through Migration

Ceylon, from whatever direction it is approached, unfolds a scene of loveliness and grandeur unsurpassed, if it be rivalled, by any land in the universe.

Sir James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon* (1859)

By D. C. R. A. GOONETILLEKE

Sri Lanka—or Ceylon, as it was known till 1972—has been regarded as virtually paradise by those who have sojourned here. However, despite the shrinking of the world into a global village brought about by the communications revolution in recent times, Sri Lanka remains to most outsiders a vague speck. It is an island situated off the southeastern tip of the Indian subcontinent in the equatorial belt. It has a land area of 25,300 square miles or 16.2 million acres (about the size of Greece) and an estimated population of over 15 million. If outsiders have paid attention to the media, whose emphasis is naturally on the sensational, the paradise will appear, literally and metaphorically, tattered.

If the country which achieved political independence in 1948 after 450 years of colonial domination by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and, finally, the British, seems an amorphous (and perhaps now turbulent) spot, its literature is generally a blank space on the literary map. It is considered as an extension of the literature of India or as of no consequence, artistic merit being equated with the island's physical diminutiveness and political and economic insignificance—if it is considered at all! Sri Lankan fiction and poetry in English have been occasionally published outside the region, but drama has not.

Sri Lankan drama in English is a product of a metamorphosis through migration. England exported the histories of Shakespeare, drawing-room comedies, and "popular" literature via P. and O. both through texts and traveling troupes. The staging of British and American plays in Sri Lanka by

British touring companies still continues. Performances range from memorable experiences and lessons in serious professional production such as the Oxford Playhouse's staging of *The Tempest* in the 1960s and the clever, hilarious, modern-dress version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presented by Cheek-by-Jowl in 1986, to the merely competent such as the London Shakespeare Group's *Twelfth Night* in 1983, and even the downright poor such as the Watermill Theatre's *Merchant of Venice* in 1984. Expatriate groups stage imported (British and American) plays for a mixed audience of fellow expatriates and Sri Lankans and usually purvey light entertainment. The performances of *And So to Bed* (1959) and *A Little Bit of Fluff* (1969) by the Ceylon Amateur Dramatic Club are typical of this trend. It persists today with the Colombo Amateur Dramatic Society, preoccupied with American drama yet not having gone beyond Neil Simon's comedies. The International Theatre Group, which was as important as the Ceylon Amateur Dramatic Club in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, does not quite fit this category in that its key membership consisted of both expatriates and Ceylonese and in that, while much of its fare was of the same kind, it did venture at times to put on serious drama. Thus its productions included, on the one hand, *Charley's Aunt* (1953), *Black Chiffon* (1955), and *Blithe Spirit* (1957) and, on the other hand, Anouilh's *Ring Round the Moon* (1954) and *Waltz of the Toreadors* (1959) and Tennessee Williams's *Streetcar Named Desire* (1968).

Local groups too perform British, American, and other foreign plays. The heyday of this trend was in the 1930s, the 1940s, and the early 1950s, when the Ceylon University Dramatic Society under the guidance of Professor E. F. C. Ludowyk dominated the theatre scene. The Society was the creation of Leigh Smith, Ludowyk's predecessor as Professor of English at the University College (affiliated to the University of London), and was founded in 1920; but when Smith retired in 1932 and Ludowyk took over, the latter established the tradition of performing plays "in public for the benefit of an audience not confined to the university."¹ The outstanding

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