

Staging Controversy: The Shifting Perspectives of the Sri Lankan Spectator

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Contemporary Sri Lankan society is extremely sensitive towards interventions made by the arts into the discourse of sexuality and sexual issues. Films that attempted to discuss such issues have received virulently critical reviews for being divisive, and very few theatre productions have dared to touch on the subject.

Both theatre and film media are building based, fairly controlled environments, where spectatorship is often a choice. However, when sexuality and sexual issues are discussed through the arts, even as a means of raising awareness about the existing conditions of society, they share the risk of being branded offensive artistic practices that are harmful to the wellbeing of the community. This popular criticism appears to be a cultural obligation especially in the Sri Lankan post-colonial and post-war contexts.

However, the same politics and norms do not govern the folk theatre practice and its spectator. Sri Lankan ritual performances had a relatively uncensored approach in dealing with sexual politics, including incest. They employed sexual innuendo in language and untamed sign systems to project their views on sexual behaviours of society. But the spectator accepted this social intervention for several reasons. The ritual was received as an intrinsic part of the social organisation and a productive and compulsory intervention in society. The public, consciously or unconsciously perceived the ritual to be a cleansing process that aided the release of socio-cultural tensions. Also, controversial dialogues were delivered by the yakkas who were 'allowed' to disregard the established rules of civilised behaviour and the satirical approach contributed greatly to entertain the spectator. These factors were significantly interrelated.

It is also noteworthy that ritual and folk theatre traditions are a public art practice and the entire community was welcome to participate in the event. It was accessible to all. This condition has altered in the current context, especially as a result of socially incisive theatre and film becoming the arts of the middle class.

This estrangement may have created a gap, where the arts exist as a separate entity and not as an essential part of the contemporary social organisation. Therefore, arts that address sensitive issues in society or criticise its malfunctions are often misinterpreted or branded as being controversial and therefore, having a negative impact on society; and this view is often endorsed by the state. On the contrary, the ritual that addressed similar social issues is accepted as tradition by the same society and the state.