

Sri Lankan Theater in a Time of Terror

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In Sri Lanka, at the tail end of the 1980s, argues Ranjini Obeysekere in her *Sri Lankan theatre in a time of terror* (Sage Publications: New Delhi 1999), dramatic art was a lonely site of resistance against state authoritarianism and political violence.

Between 1987 and 1992, at least 40 000 Sinhala youth were murdered during a campaign of terror and counter-terror waged by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP – Peoples Liberation Front) and the Premadasa government.

The militarisation of the state and ever-present threat of assassination and ‘disappearance’ from both quarters subdued a civil society, unable and in some cases unwilling, to sustain resistance earlier that decade to emergency rule and war against the Tamil minority in the North and East.

A weak and ineffective parliamentary opposition, a muzzled press, and constrained human rights movement posed no challenge to the growing authoritarianism of the State.

Sinhala-language theatre stepped into this breach, satirising powerful politicians, including President Premadasa himself and his pet projects, and lamenting a largely Buddhist society’s descent into barbarism.

These performances were staged in auditoriums and designated public areas, advertised openly, and attracted large crowds even during years of curfew, checkpoints and conformism.

On the other hand, street theatre was rare, subversive in its very form, it raised suspicion of association with the JVP through its impromptu performance and direct dialogue, having escaped regulation by government authorities.

‘Regular’ theatre was tolerated and even subsidised by the State which having scrutinised scripts through the Censor Board was tolerant of critical political theatre and its protagonists.

The exception being the cause celebre of Richard De Zoysa who was abducted and killed by state agencies in February 1990 before his biting Sinhala-language satire of President Ranasinghe Premadasa – “*Who is he, What is he doing?*” – could be staged.

Nevertheless De Zoysa’s murder probably had more to do with his fearless, independent journalism than his dramatic œuvre, and as a scion of the Colombo elite, he was a unique personality on the Sinhala dramatic scene.

Unlike the English-language theatre, Sinhala-language theatre is based on popular classes of society and draws its scriptwriters, directors and cast from the same profile as its audience – the rural and urban poor and low-income public sector workers. Theatrical groups hail from all over the island and thanks to the low cost of public transport especially buses, travel widely around the country.

Whereas English-language theatre in Sri Lanka revels in staging British productions invariably a

'comedy of manners', Sinhala-language theatre prefers social commentary, evocations of historical myths and light entertainment.

For example, plays that were performed in the years of terror ranged from adaptations of 19th century Russian productions, to Sri Lankan historical drama, to Brecht and other 20th century European playwrights.

Unsurprisingly, Latin America inspired many Sri Lankan dramatists, both as locale and in the work of its playwrights. The parallel of dirty wars and disappearances and the routinisation of torture and terror were too compelling to avoid.

How did these scripts survive the Censor Board, and largely intact? Obeysekere suggests that the satirical construction of their texts, avoiding direct reference to recent events and individuals and eschewing propaganda for allusion and metaphor, was deemed permissible by the State.

However the same text when dramatised in performance took on a different meaning - more biting, more personal, more contemporaneous - easily and hungrily digested by the audience.

Theatre was permitted as a regulated medium to articulate criticism and dissent. It was tolerated so long as it did not ally itself with political movements or espouse anti-systemic political ideologies or advocate armed struggle. No doubt, had Sinhala theatre changed its character, the Sri Lankan state would have been less permissive of it.

Following Premadasa's assassination by the Tamil separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1993, there was a marked liberalisation in the political and human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

An explosion of tabloid format newspapers and alternative magazines, some running no longer than a few issues, displaced theatre as an arena for dissent. The print media had greater diffusion and accessibility than theatre in a highly literate society. It engaged more vigorously and acutely with the everyday happenings and political processes of society.

The appearance of commercial television stations in the 1990s and the public's appetite for tele-dramas led to a haemorrhaging of theatrical talent as the best were lured away from the financially precarious world of the stage and into the studios.

Ironically, better times for Sri Lanka had proved less favourable to its Sinhala-language theatre.

P.S.

* Source: This article was written for the online magazine, Viewpoint, published by Arif Azad for the London-based Aaj Kay Naam campaign against military dictatorship and for democracy in Pakistan.