

A serious attempt to encourage Sri Lankan opera

Sonduru Varnadasi (The Alluring Courtesan), directed by Premasiri Khemadasa, libretto by Lucien Bulathsinghala

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Sonduru Varnadasi, Premasiri Khemadasa's latest opera, was recently staged at the Elphinston Theatre in Colombo. Based on one of the many traditional stories about the life of Buddha, the opera is another important example of Khemadasa's fusion of Western and Asian dramatic and musical forms.

Now in his late 60s, Khemadasa is one of Sri Lanka's foremost composers and was recently awarded a doctorate by Ruhuna University for his contribution to film, drama, opera and symphonic music. His most acclaimed works include the symphonies *Sinhala Avurudda* (Sinhala New Year) and *Pirinivan Mangallaya* (The passing away of the Buddha) and the opera *Manasa Vila* (The lake of the mind). His reputation also rests on his film scores and popular songs. Many also appreciate his musical rendition of the *Internationale*.

To one degree or another Khemadasa's creative life has involved swimming against the prevailing current, in particular against traditionalists who oppose his painstaking efforts to fuse Eastern and Western music, including efforts to introduce the western operatic style of singing.

In Sri Lanka during the past Buddhism, which is the state religion, has had a nefarious influence on the development of dramatic art and music. These artistic forms could only develop as folk arts because Buddhism looked askance at everything that gave sensual pleasure. According to Buddhism the search for sensual pleasure, leads to being and rebirth (*bhava*) which is sorrow (*dukkha*) as everything that exists passes away. *Nirvana*, which is the overcoming and

cessation of being and rebirth and thereby the cessation of sorrow, is the ultimate goal of Buddhism.

These cultural barriers, however, began to erode with the introduction of capitalist property relations and the growing influence of Western culture during the 19th century. Dramas such as C. Don Bastian's *Romeo and Juliet*, which was staged in 1884, and John de Silva's *Siri Sangabo* in 1903, helped lay the foundations for a flowering of Sinhala theatre years later in the early 1950s by Ediriweera Sarachchandra.

Sarachchandra's *Maname* was first staged in 1956 and he is considered one of Sri Lanka's greatest playwrights. Sarachchandra used Sinhala folk plays to build a stylised tradition of drama that was also influenced and inspired by Sanskrit, as well as Japanese and Chinese dramatic traditions. Others dramatists followed who began looking towards the West for inspiration to build up a more naturalistic dramatic style.

Today Premasiri Khemadasa, like the earlier musical pioneers in Sri Lanka, is attempting to break new ground. Those who recognise that traditional rhythmic and musical forms are insufficient for depicting contemporary life best appreciate the significance of his work.

Sonduru Varnadasi, which draws on Khemadasa's knowledge of a wide range of musical traditions, is based on a Jathaka story called *Kanavera*. Jathaka stories depict the former lives of Buddha. In *Kanavera Jathaka* Buddha is born as a robber called Suweeraka (played by Desaka Sampath), notorious far and wide for his bravery and daring. Ultimately the king's men

arrest and torture Suweeraka and he is taken in a procession through the city streets to be executed. Sama (Dileeka Abeysekera), the city's the most celebrated courtesan, sees Suweeraka and falls in love at first sight. She is so enamoured by his good looks that she decides to save him and have him for herself. She bribes the city mayor and cunningly supplies a man—her most ardent admirer—to be killed in his stead.

With some assistance the two escape to a faraway city where Sama plans a new life for them. Suweeraka, who has been tortured and is not fully aware of what has happened, is not content living a life of luxury and ease. He also learns that Sama had been a courtesan and that she had her former admirer killed. He begins poking fun at her, calling her a courtesan turned dutiful wife, and worries that she might kill him if and when someone new arrives on the scene. But Sama, who is prepared to do anything to prove her faithfulness, agrees to Suweeraka's demand that they appear in their former roles of robber and courtesan in front of crowds gathered for the spring festival.

Suweeraka, however, decides to leave and return to his former life. He suffocates Sama while embracing her, and when she passes out he thinks she has died and escapes with her jewelry. When Sama revives she cannot believe that Suweeraka intended to kill her and sends messengers throughout the land to try and bring him back. Found by the messengers, he reveals his deep repugnance of Sama and refuses to return. Sama, on being told about his feelings, decides to resume her life as a courtesan.

While *Sonduru Varnadasi* has melody and rhythm patterns that are pleasing and easily accessible, the original Jathaka story is incapable of emotionally moving contemporary readers.

Unfortunately the opera makes no major changes to the original story. The robber and the courtesan fail to arouse any sympathy but are simply portrayed as willful embodiments of larger or small amounts of inherent evil.

Sama, for example, while contriving to save the robber and gain him for herself, cunningly plans the death of the man whom she had favored till then. Although justified by Sama on the basis that the executed man is also a robber and “all rulers and wealthy are robbers”, this crime displays a callousness in the courtesan that is difficult to ignore or overlook.

Sama's attachment to Suweeraka is also built on flimsy grounds. According to the opera, she is enamoured purely by the robber's good looks. This is not convincing. Nor do spectators feel sympathy towards Suweeraka, even though he is portrayed as having a stronger hold on his own principles than the courtesan.

The cast of *Sonduru Varnadasi* performs well, especially the main singer/actress Dileeka Abeysekera, but the libretto prevents them from transforming their efforts into a deep-going artistic experience.

Compared to the standards of classical opera, *Sonduru Varnadasi* also has a number of production inadequacies and one cannot allay the suspicion that its creators have been forced to produce it on a very low budget.

The opera suffers from the smallness of its choir and its instrumentalist troupe and a single dancer is used symbolically to depict the crowds celebrating the spring festival. In addition, although the costumes are aesthetically satisfying, the stage décor was kept to a minimum and a string of flowers used to symbolise death by torture.

While Khemadasa should be complemented on his determined attempts to raise the standards of Sri Lankan drama, music and dance to new heights, *Sonduru Varnadasi* cries out for more favorable material and spiritual conditions for it and Sri Lankan opera to thrive.



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