

Sri Lankan artist speaks about death threats by Sinhala extremists

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The following is an interview with the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) by the internationally-renowned Sri Lankan artistic figure, Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, concerning a series of death threats that he has received recently from Sinhala extremists. He has been targeted for his outspoken views that art can act as a facilitator for bringing peace to the island.

Bandaranayake, 54, has been widely recognised for his acting, play writing and direction of both stage drama and cinema. His films have been entered in international film festivals. In 1990 the City of New Orleans in the US awarded him an honorary citizenship for his achievements in the field of art.

Bandaranayake has received a number of awards for his work. These include: selection in 1987 by the country's Film Critics Society as one of the ten best directors of Sri Lankan Cinema (1947-1987); the Bunka Prize in 1996 for special achievement in theatre and cinema from the Japan-Sri Lanka Friendship Cultural Fund; and the Prasada Pranama award in 1996 from the University of Sri Lanka in Colombo for his contribution to Sri Lankan Theatre and Cinema.

Bandaranayake's latest creation Trojan Kanthawo—a Sinhala language version of Euripides' Greek drama The Trojan Women—is being currently staged throughout the island, including in the war-ravaged Northern and Eastern provinces, and has been widely acclaimed.

WSWS: What has prompted the recent death threats that you received?

Dharmasiri Bandaranayake: This is not the first time I have received this kind of threat. The difference this time is that the threats have been made in public. The place was the New Town Hall, Colombo where a festival of Sinhala and Tamil arts was in progress on October 29. I was invited to speak at this festival by the organisers. But not long after the proceedings began, a group of provocateurs launched a physical attack on the audience, shouting that the event was in support of the terrorist Tigers, meaning the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam].

When the meeting broke up due to the commotion, another armed gang, waiting outside the hall, entered the premises and attacked the participants. It was at that time the threats were shouted at me by the gangsters, who said that I would be killed soon. They called me “a Sinhala Tiger terrorist” and declared that the Tamil Dance and Drama Festival, which was initiated by me through the Trikone Arts Centre and was scheduled to be held in Colombo ten days later—on November 7, 8 and 9—would not be

allowed to take place.

WSWS: Who do you think organised this attack on the festival?

DB: The Sinhala and Tamil arts festival was held in the midst of a hate campaign waged by the Sinhala Urumaya (SU) party against it. SU is an extreme Sinhala chauvinist party. When the festival was announced, SU launched a media campaign alleging that the festival's organisers were terrorists supporting the LTTE. It also vowed to prevent it being held. The Sinhala daily paper *Divaina*, published by the *Island* group, played a prominent role in the campaign. This made clear who was behind the attack on that day. Moreover, SU, which first denied any involvement in the attack, later, when the suspected attackers were released on bail from police custody, conducted a public procession and a meeting to accord them a hero's welcome.

WSWS: What did you think at the time of the attack?

DB: The October 29 festival was the first of its kind, where the Sinhala and Tamil artists were brought together in Colombo after nearly two decades of civil war. The gathering comprised artists belonging to all communities, with some coming from the war-torn North and East regions. I was on the podium when the attack took place and what immediately came to my mind was the massacre of Tamil detainees at the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation camp, exactly three years before in October 2000. At that time, 27 unarmed Tamils were brutally murdered, on the spot, by a rabid Sinhala racist gang that had laid siege to the camp. The widespread pogroms against Tamils carried out during the “Black July” of 1983, also crossed my mind. The attack at the New Town Hall had all the hallmarks of a fascist raid.

WSWS: Why were you made the specific target of death threats?

DB: To put it in a nutshell, it must be the stand I have taken against the anti-Tamil war, which is not to the liking of the chauvinist elements. After the successful premier of my drama, *The Trojan Women*, in December 1999 in Colombo, I staged it in many cities in the south. Then I decided to stage it in the North and the East, as it is an anti-war drama. My first choice was Trincomalee, the main city in the East. As the initial preparations were being made in 2001, I received the first threat in a letter warning me to not to stage the drama anywhere in the North, East or plantation areas of the central hills, where the majority of people are Tamil-speaking workers. Although the letter was written on behalf of the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE), I didn't believe they did it.

WSWS: Why didn't you believe those threats were from the

LTTE?

DB: To me, the enslaved, persecuted women of Troy so many centuries ago, are no different from the modern day women who have become victims of war-ridden Kosova, Kashmir or Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the North and East suffered most due to the war. The sufferings of the Tamil women in those areas, at the hands of the state security forces, are reflected in *The Trojan Women*. So, a threat against the drama cannot be mooted from the Tamil side, I thought. This does not mean that I ignore the anti-democratic repressive acts of the LTTE. As you know, I have strongly condemned the LTTE death threats against the Socialist Equality Party [SEP] members in Kayts. However, my belief is that the threats against my anti-war drama came from Sinhala chauvinist warmongers.

WSWS: Can you explain the connection between the present death threats and those leveled against you in 1988?

DB: In 1988 I produced *Dhavalabheeshana*, a Sinhala version of Jean Paul Sartre's *Men Without Shadows*. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which was engaged in fascistic attacks against working class militants and organisations during that period, alleged that my drama defamed Rohana Wijeweera, the leader of the JVP. A local JVP leader forced us to cancel the staging of the drama at Thelijjavila, a suburban town in the South. They were whipping up anti-Tamil and anti-Indian chauvinism at the time of the Indo-Lanka accord. I had to go underground because of the death threats issued by the JVP.

I have always hated war and racism. I have attempted use the medium of art to educate the masses on these lines. This is why I produced the drama, *The Trojan Women*. I chose this play as my contribution to the efforts to end the civil war raging in our land and to bring lasting peace to our society. Even 25 centuries after its creation *The Trojan Women* remains the most powerful and foremost antiwar play produced in world theatre. It has been the most powerful weapon in the hands of artists using the arena of theatre in the struggle against war and barbarism. Staging this play and taking its unique dramatic message to all corners of the land, I believe, is the most powerful service and contribution that I can make as an artist to the efforts to end war.

WSWS: What initial political measures should be taken to end the war?

DB: The state armed forces must be immediately withdrawn from the North and the East. Here I am in total agreement with the long-standing campaign of the Socialist Equality Party for the immediate withdrawal of the armed forces of Sri Lanka from the North and the East. When I was releasing a statement opposing the attack on the SEP by the LTTE in Kayts, I stressed this policy of the SEP. In the drama workshops in the North and the East, I have publicly raised these points. Even in the South I have stated this matter.

WSWS: What is your opinion of the present "peace process"?

DB: Several governments have taken various steps, in various periods, claiming to bring about a peace. In each of those periods we also have tried to do something for peace. In 1987, I along with some other artists, such as Dharmasena Pathiraja, Wasantha Obeysekara and Prasanna Vithanage, collectively produced documentary videos on life in the war-torn areas. The state

television Rupavahini censored some of them. One such work is my *Echo of War*. It was shown on Doordharshan, an Indian television network, and several other international television networks. Nevertheless, we could not go beyond that.

However, this time, due to the cease-fire agreement, we could reach Tamil artists. We held a Sinhala Tamil art festival in Jaffna and as a follow-up we held the Colombo festival. To tell you the truth, now I can see that this present peace affects various layers in different ways. That is, for big businesses it is an opportunity to fatten their profits, and for workers and the ordinary masses it has only increased their misery. I must admit that such a clear and precise analysis has not taken place in our circles.

WSWS: What is your opinion of the LTTE?

DB: Under LTTE rule, if such a thing arises, one can expect an anti-democratic autocracy. Such an administration will not be conducive for art or any other aspect of social progress. I have had discussions on this matter with Tamil-speaking artists and intellectuals in the North and the East. Artists living in those areas, although they do not openly criticise the LTTE for their personal safety, have expressed their opposition to the nationalist program of the LTTE through their creative art and other activities. Internal laws and norms of art themselves demand the integration of the whole of mankind and its cultural achievements for the development and benefit of the art. So, national separation naturally has a destructive effect on art.

WSWS: Now, from your own experience, the system of nation states, each existing separately from the other under their own laws and regulations, is a stumbling block to the advancement of culture and art. How is this barrier to be overcome?

DB: I have realised that for a creative artist a deeper and consistent political perception is a must. I am already surfing the WSWS for this purpose, as the WSWS, according to my view, is the best source for internationalist political perception. An excellent example is the statements of the SEP about the present political crisis we face and the two-part series by Nick Beams on "The political economy of Sri Lankan peace process". Some of my Tamil-speaking friends, artists, were in a confusion regarding the present crisis of the Colombo ruling elite and were looking for materials to read. So I promptly posted them the WSWS articles.



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