

Sri Lankan filmmaker Lester James Peries dies at 99

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Lester James Peries, widely regarded as the “father of Sri Lankan cinema” and revered throughout much of South Asia, died on April 29, a few weeks after his 99th birthday.

Born on April 5, 1919, Peries directed 28 films, including features, shorts and documentaries, and also wrote and produced many of these works, during his more than 60-year career. His best known and internationally acclaimed dramatic features include, *Gamperaliya* (*Changes in the Village* [1963]), *Nidhanaya* (*The Treasure* [1972]) and *Wekanda Walauwa* (*Mansion by the Lake* [2002]), Sri Lanka’s first submission to the Academy Awards.

Peries’s best films, like the great dramas directed by India’s Satyajit Ray and Japan’s Akira Kurosawa, have left their mark on Asian and world cinema.

Nidhanaya, which is regarded by many as Peries’s greatest film, won the Silver Lion award at the 1972 Venice Film Festival and was named as one of the most outstanding 100 films of the twentieth century by the Paris-based Cinémathèque Française. *Gamperaliya*, based on a famed novel by Sri Lankan writer Martin Wickramasinghe, was awarded a Golden Peacock award at the International Film Festival of India in 1964.

Peries made two indelible contributions to Sri Lankan filmmaking. First, his pioneering work helped win acceptance of cinema as a recognised art form in the early years of the former British colony.

In 1947, and during the first decade of Sri Lanka cinema, most films screened in the island-nation were produced in South India and heavily influenced by that culture. Many of the directors, in fact, were from India. These films were partially stylised stage plays or dramas and often included singing and dancing, which tended to overshadow or constrain the cinematic potential of the art form.

Rekava (*The Line of Destiny* [1956]), Peries’ first feature, marked a sharp break from these conventions. Set in a rural village, it tells the story of a young boy and his friend, a blind girl whom he accidentally “heals.” While the boy does not have extraordinary powers, his father convinces villagers that his son is a special healer. The deception is eventually exposed, causing the village to revolt against the boy and his family.

In contrast to most South Indian films, *Rekava*, which was nominated for a Palme d’Or award at the Cannes Film Festival, was realistic and its acting was understated. Moreover, the film was visually arresting, and used contemporary editing techniques and cleverly improvised lighting.

For many Sri Lankan moviegoers, his first feature was a mesmerising experience and marked a revolutionary change in local cinema.

Peries’s second contribution was his use of neorealist techniques. In a country where most artistic work, particularly in cinema, centred on either morality and religiosity or entertainment, neorealist cinema and its artistic cognition of social life, opened many artistic eyes. He was the first Sri Lankan filmmaker to take his cameras out of the studio and capture the natural life and environment of ordinary people in faraway villages.

These innovations influenced filmmakers such as Dharmasena Pathiraja, Vasantha Obeysekera and Dharmasiri Bandaranayake as well as current directors, including Prasanna Vithanage, Ashoka Handagama and Vimukthi Jayasundera.

Lester James Peries was born and raised in a Roman Catholic, middle-class, English-speaking family in then British-ruled Ceylon (Sri Lanka). His father, James Francis Peries had studied medicine in Scotland and ran a successful medical practice in Colombo. His mother, Anne Gratias Winifred Jayasuriya, was a university graduate. Lester had three other siblings, Erica, Ivan and Noel. Family life was a cultured place where literature, music, painting and films were enjoyed and discussed.

Ivan, Lester’s older brother, was a well-known painter and founding member of Group 43, a loose alliance of pro-independence artists. He had a big impact on Lester’s creative imagination. Group 43, which included photographers, painters and documentary filmmakers, were the pioneers of modernism in Ceylon and fought for freedom of art against Victorian naturalism. These artists were attracted to the modernist conceptions that started making their cultural influence felt in many parts of the colonial world in the post-World War II period.

Encouraged by his mother, Lester moved to Britain in 1947 to spend time with his brother Ivan who was studying art in that country. It was a turning point for Lester. Whilst he had previously worked as a journalist in Colombo he began writing a regular column “Letter on the Arts from England” for the *Times of Ceylon* and involving himself in amateur film societies in London.

In 1949, Peries, aged 30, and Hereward Jansz, a remarkable cameraman, made the prize-winning short film *Soliloquy*. Peries directed and wrote that film, following it in 1950 with *Farewell to Childhood*. It won the Amateur Cine World Silver Plaque that year and was named as one of the top 10 short films in Great Britain.

Peries returned to Sri Lanka in 1952 on the invitation of Ralph

Keene, then head of the Government Film Unit. He worked as Keene's deputy, and directed several documentaries, which taught him much about village life and allowed him to experiment with various filmmaking techniques.

Peries resigned from the Film Unit and in 1955 launched Chitra Lanka Ltd, his own production company. It was a period of rising nationalist and "anti-imperialist" sentiment. Peries hoped that his film company would encourage a new realistic cinematic tradition in Sri Lanka and replace the predominant wave of empty commercial films.

Asked by a journalist 20 years ago about his approach to filmmaking, Peries replied: "My success I think is partly due to the fact that I never compromised. I went ahead and did what I wanted to do and did not deviate from that, no matter what the pressures on me were. Also one must have a deep sense of dedication, despite ups and downs."

Referring to the relationship between his films and politics, he said: "I cannot make intensely political films. Politics is there on the periphery, in films like *Yuganthaya (The End of an Epoch [1985])*, where there is reference to the tension between labour and capital. All my themes are about the Sri Lankan family. I use the family as a microcosm through which the problems of a larger world are reflected. I understand my limitations and work within this. To me the battles within the family are more important and far more intense than anything outside of it."

Regardless of Peries's insistence that he could not make "intensely political" films, his dramatic features are imbued with a deep-going sense of the social forces and class pressures determining the actions and behaviour of his characters.

The best example of this is his trilogy, *Gamperaliya, Kaliyugaya (The Era of Kali [1982])* and *Yuganthaya*, based on Martin Wickramasinghe's novels. *Gamperaliya* is a tragic story about a young man hired to teach English to a young woman who is member of an eminent family. The two fall in love, but cannot marry because he is from a lower class.

In a review of *Kaliyugaya* published in *Kamkaru Mawatha*, the organ of the Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), Piyaseeli Wijegunasinghe wrote:

"The life of the old capitalist and his wife is as dark as the night; it is empty and sorrowful too. They are surrounded by wealth, the real fruits of their efforts to gather capital and honors that come with it which was to strengthen their social status. However, these are not sweet fruits but unbearable ones.

"The only happy memories the old couple had was time they spent in Koggala village, a long time ago. Bourgeois social life in a capitalist industrial city has separated the couple from each other and distanced their lives from one another."

Wijegunasinghe ends her review with the following: "The sympathy of the filmmaker towards these characters is not a barrier to exposing the mercilessness, infertility and sadness of bourgeois life depicted in *Kaliyugaya*. It is a remarkable piece of cinematic poetry and one that artistically expresses the reality of the social existence of the bourgeoisie."

Nidhanaya (1972), previously referred to as Peries's greatest film, has as its theme the tragic collapse of a wealthy feudal family

in a small village. The last representative of the family, Willey Abeynayake (Gamini Fonseka) is desperate and disoriented. He comes to believe that the only solution to the family's social and economic ills is to take possession of a valuable ancient treasure. But to get the treasure he has to sacrifice the life of a beautiful woman, someone that he deeply loves and marries.

Emotionally torn, he eventually takes her to the spot where he believes the treasure is located. He kills her but there is no treasure. In fact, the real treasure, he later realises before committing suicide, is the enchanting woman he has just murdered. Peries's depiction of the main character's strangely disoriented behaviour and yet intensely human qualities is extraordinary.

In concluding this obituary it is appropriate to point to Peries's strong belief in the future. "Now the cinema belongs to the younger generation. What has been made is made, these films cannot be changed, but I fervently hope the younger generation will have the humility and the good sense to learn from our mistakes."

Peries's films, despite their well-deserved international acclaim, have never been widely distributed in the English-speaking world. The seriously under-funded Sri Lankan National Film Corporation, moreover, has failed to properly preserve all his movies and other classic local films. Many original camera negatives have been lost or are in poor condition.

Earlier this year, Damith Fonseka, who heads Gamini Fonseka Foundation, told an international film conservation and preservation workshop that no Sri Lankan government since 1947 has taken "any measures to preserve and archive our films." The Gamini Fonseka Foundation is named in honour of his actor father who starred in most of Peries's films. Shivendra Singh Dungarpur, founding director of India's Film Heritage Foundation, told the same event that although some 200 Sri Lankan films were supposed to be in good condition at the National Archives, the country "has lost 90 percent of your film heritage."

While *Nidhanaya* was restored and digitalised in 2013 by the World Cinema Foundation, decent quality DVD versions with multiple-language subtitles remain difficult to obtain.



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