Riverstone: The routine face of Sri Lankan state murder

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18 September 2026

In 2025, Sri Lankan writer-director Lalith Rathnayake's *Riverstone* won Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography prizes at the Shanghai International Film Festival, as well as the Best Director award at the Singapore International Film Festival. This year, it won a Golden Cyclo, the top prize at the Vesoul International Festival of Asian Cinema in France.

These awards are well deserved. Rathnayake's two-hour drama, his second feature, is a work of considerable artistic intelligence, and its subject matter—the extrajudicial killing of a prisoner by Sri Lankan state security forces—is a reality that has afflicted the island for decades.

Thousands died in such killings during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led uprisings by rural youth in 1988–90 and during the 26-year communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which ended in 2009. More recently, over 100 police custodial deaths have been reported in so-called anti-crime and anti-drug operations, with suspects allegedly killed while "attempting to show a weapon cache" or "trying to escape."

Set in the aftermath of Colombo's bloody war against the LTTE, the story unfolds almost entirely within the confined space of a police vehicle travelling through the central highlands to Riverstone, its destination in the spectacular Knuckles mountain range.

The drama involves three policemen—a senior officer, a sergeant and a junior constable—and Nanditha (Randika Gunathilaka), the alleged criminal, who is being transported to a pre-arranged execution.

While the film's protagonists are mainly confined to the police vehicle, long stretches of winding mountain roads, enveloped in mist, rain and dense forest, reinforce a mounting sense of entrapment. Director Rathnayake repeatedly juxtaposes the serenity of the natural world with the casual brutality of official power.

The extraordinary and, at times, foreboding beauty of the central highlands, brilliantly captured by cinematographer Prabath Rhoshan, intensifies rather than softens the horror of what is unfolding. Rather than relying on graphic violence or melodramatic confrontation, Rathnayake patiently builds tension through carefully composed framing, prolonged observation, sparse dialogue and silences.

Long before the execution occurs, the audience learns about its inevitability. As one police officer chillingly explains, "[Our prisoner] still thinks he won't be killed. Everyone who comes on this journey believes so… until the very last moment." The inevitable execution derives its impact not from spectacle but from the unbearable certainty with which it has been anticipated. This is mature filmmaking.

Mahendra Perera gives perhaps the most compelling performance as the experienced sergeant whose professional cynicism masks years of participation in illegal killings—a man for whom carrying out murder has become a vocation almost like any other. Shyam Fernando is convincing as a senior officer driven by ambition and careerism, while Priyantha Sirikumara captures the moral unease of a junior policeman trapped between personal conscience and institutional obedience.

One of the director's most important decisions is his refusal to portray the policemen as simple villains. During the journey, they quarrel, discuss promotions, worry about financial difficulties and family crises, hope to win a refrigerator through a radio competition, and interrupt the mission so that the senior officer can visit his mistress.

These seemingly ordinary conversations expose

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individuals shaped by economic insecurity, personal frustration and social decay. At the same time, they callously prepare to carry out an organised execution almost as if it were a routine administrative duty.

This is where the film achieves something that political analysis alone cannot. While such a text can explain that the police are a "special body of armed men" through which the capitalist state defends the existing social order—and this is correct—*Riverstone* shows, dramatises how this operates in practice. Not through monsters, but through individuals whose training has prepared them to kill as a matter of routine.

The line delivered early in the film by Nanditha, who is a small businessman, that police kill for their job while criminals kill for a contract is devastatingly precise. It identifies the institutional and occupational character of police violence. This is not personal cruelty but professional duty.

If the policemen are rendered with a density that is genuinely realist, Nanditha is less credible because he lacks complexity. He is educated, compassionate and remarkably calm. He breaks down in tears on only one occasion—when listening to a song about motherhood, explaining that he was brought up in his mother's absence.

Upon learning that the constable's wife has suffered a heart attack, Nanditha offers practical advice and proposes transferring money from his own bank account to assist with her medical treatment. His girlfriend's residence, and the way villagers address him, indicate that he has a respected family background.

Rathnayake's decision to develop Nanditha as a figure of exceptional virtue makes him less convincing. While this is not a fatal flaw, the asymmetry is real: the killers are rendered with a realism that the victim is not fully granted.

Soviet Marxist critic Aleksandr Voronsky noted in the 1920s that "in a society divided into classes, class demands are a defining element. Some class conceptions of the world assist the artist in serving as a smooth mirror with regard to reality. Others, on the contrary, make this living mirror curved, concave, clouded, uneven or scratched" (*Art as the Cognition of Life*, page 331).

This points to both the achievement and the limitation of *Riverstone*. On the questions of the routinisation of state murder and the ordinariness of evil, Rathnayake's mirror is largely clear. But his decision to make the victim such a universally virtuous figure clouds the mirror.

The audience is led to feel that a spotless citizen is being killed, rather than being forced to confront the more difficult truth that the state kills all sorts of people, including those who are not good, whose lives are messy and shaped by social forces they did not choose. The impact of the film's indictment of the police should not depend on the victim's exceptional goodness, but on the absolute character of the state's violence against its perceived enemies and the fact that this is what defines it. These limitations, however, do not seriously diminish the film's considerable achievements.

As Rathnayake explains in the film's press kit, "Choosing such a theme, which directly challenges the state, even brought threats to my life, but I did not hesitate to bring this story to the screen, a story I had carried in my mind for years."

The police violence depicted in *Riverstone* is not some relic of the past. The same institution continues to suppress dissent, crush strikes and enforce government austerity, helping to explain its strong resonance with Sri Lankan audiences.

That Rathnayake has made such an unflinching exposure of what the state does and what it makes of the men who do its work is significant and testifies to the persistence of artistic conscience in a country whose ruling elite has little use for truth-telling of any kind.

In a global cinema landscape dominated by trivia, cynicism and the industrial production of distraction, a work of this honesty and seriousness deserves the widest possible international distribution.

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