



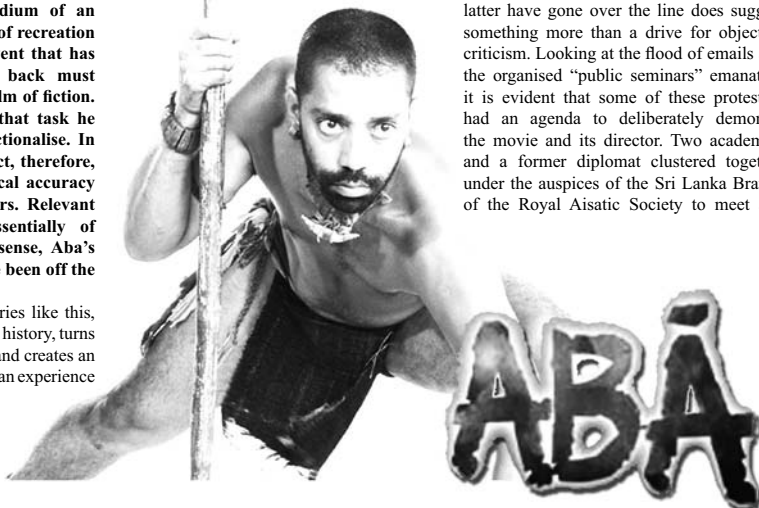
Flying in to Melbourne, 'Aba's director, Jackson Anthony, made a brilliant speech the other day before a thousand - strong audience at the Astor. It was a curt and cutting defence against the braying critics of his movie at home. He made the point that the critics had confused history and aesthetics. "The discipline that teaches us about the past is history," Jackson said, "while the discipline that teaches us artistic appreciation (rasaswindanaya) is literature". Both these subjects, he pointed out had been banished from Lankan school syllabuses in the seventies. Current critics of Aba mostly came from that literarily and historically illiterate era, Jackson suggested.

Aba is an attempt to recreate an historical event in the medium of an artist's imagination. An act of recreation of a two millennium- old event that has scrubby hard evidence to back must necessarily belong to the realm of fiction. When an artist takes over that task he does so with a licence to fictionalise. In the assessment of the product, therefore, questions relating to historical accuracy of plot elements barely matters. Relevant assessment criteria are essentially of an artistic nature. In this sense, Aba's history- obsessed critics have been off the mark.

In the case of period stories like this, the artist picks a little plot from history, turns it around in the way he wants and creates an imaginary though realistic human experience for the audience. Shakespeare has been guilty of historical inaccuracy and many others have. The academy award winning movie *Shakespeare in Love* makes no pretence to historical accuracy at all. Looking at our own local scenario, one remembers how Martin Wickramasinghe was

vilified for his *Bhavatharanaya*. To give an illustration that most of us can easily recall, in *Sinhabahu* Ediriweera Sarachchandra takes the legend and twists it such as to bring out a theme that evokes an intense existential

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IN MELBOURNE

feeling over a father-son relationship.

The critics of Aba have been well-known public figures who have come out to speak unsolicited on behalf of the Sinhala nation. Gunadasa Amarasekera, renowned litterateur, known to get alerted over national issues, in a recent comment admitted that historical accuracies are not relevant criteria in judging Aba. Gunadasa comes out with a relevant criticism namely that Aba lacks the appeal of a true human experience. Sucharitha Gamlath, also a renowned writer, however has chosen to dwell with historical issues and this is surprising for a man of his literary mien.

One can understand if such history-minders kept an academic distance with their disapproval. However, the fact that the latter have gone over the line does suggest something more than a drive for objective criticism. Looking at the flood of emails and the organised "public seminars" emanating it is evident that some of these protestors had an agenda to deliberately demonise the movie and its director. Two academics and a former diplomat clustered together under the auspices of the Sri Lanka Branch of the Royal Aisatic Society to meet and



critics are not on firm ground. In the film it is suggested that a leader of the indigenous Yaksha clan was the father of Aba. This is too hard for our critics who like to believe the Mahawansa story that Vijaya and his men formed the first Sinhalese community and that King Pandukabhaya (Aba) was third in line in the Vijaya dynasty. The Mahawansa links Vijaya's arrival with the *parinibbana* (passing away) of the Buddha and suggests that Vijaya's followers were picked by the Buddha as his chosen people. Professor Kingsley De Silva, reputed Sri Lankan historian, suggests that this is a myth that constitutes the ideological root of Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalism by equating country, race, and religion. It is stated in the Mahawansa how a number of gods stood around the Buddha during the *parinibbana* and how the Buddha requested god Sakka to protect Vijaya for the reason that Buddhism will be established by the latter. That section in the Mahawansa has only to be read for any intelligent person to conclude that it was a mythical construction by the Bhikku who wrote the Mahawansa. It is clear that Pandukabhaya's origins is at best shrouded in mystery thereby opening different possibilities of interpretation like the one given in Aba. This hypothesis is used to explain the fact that it was King Pandukabhaya who destroyed the foreign invaders and brought back independence to the island.

There is evidence that the Yaksha and Naga tribes constituted a pre-existing civilisation at the arrival of the Aryans.

The film Aba has helped to generate

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Shyamon Jayasinghe

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condemn the movie. I just got an email announcing a seminar by Professor Nalin Silva under the auspices of the "Chinthana Parishad". Nalin, we know, has become the theorist for Gunadasa Amarasekera's *Jathika Chinthanaya* -whatever that may mean. I presume he is going to slam the movie. I read with surprise how Nalin has been sanctified in the Wikipedia as a "philosopher". Indeed he is in great company: Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and so on! His listed "works" are largely focused on identity issues of the Sinhalese- hardly the interest of a philosopher.

What one observed was an orchestrated campaign against the film. Such campaigns become counterproductive as record crowds are flocking to see Aba. In Australia too, Aba (along with Somaratne Dissanyake's *Sooriya Arana*) provoked an extraordinary interest.

Even over the historical issue the

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