



The Making of Maname

On November 3rd falls the 58th anniversary of the first staging of Maname. That was way back in 1956. Most of you readers would not have been anywhere near the pipeline of a process that would have put you out to this world. If I state it in another way, most of you would have been somewhere on a time scale ranging from minus 15 to minus forty, assuming you were in some metaphysical sense in the queue of samsaric wanderer. I was then 20 years old - a fresher at the University of Ceylon, Peradeniya. That was how the University was called at that time because there was only one University.

I entered Peradeniya as one among just four others from St Joseph's College, Colombo. Peradeniya appeared mystique to me when I parked into Ramanathan Hall looking around for friendly souls that may share my woes and joys. I had been a regular in the St Joseph's College Catholic Choir where I sang in both Latin and English trained by that musical genius, Father Ignatius. (My Buddhism came later and my neo-Buddhism, minus rebirth, now) I had a good voice and would always love to sing. My voice grooming was to impress Professor Sarachchandra, later. In the Primary School level I had won a gold medal in an inter-school singing competition, singing the haunting Western piece, "Beautiful Dreamer." I remember Revd. Father Ignatius Perera, carrying little me and rocking me up and down when the results were announced. Teachers at College were absolutely inspiring and Father Ignatius was one such educator. I recall with special fondness Mr. M.I Kuruvila, a person of Malayan origin, who was our English literature teacher. He was the first, and not Sarachchandra, to hone me to experience the joys of poetry and literature. How he used to read from Ezra Pound; from WB Yeats and so on! Kuruvila transported us to another reality with consummate ease.

Thus, in many ways I was made for Maname when, as a fresher, I saw a notice on the boards that someone called Ediriweera Sarachchandra was going to make a Nadagam play, called Maname. I knew nothing about either the author or the type of play. The notice announced an audition. It was by pure accident that I saw the notice but that led me on a path that I never thought would have such impact on our times and such personal impact on me. About a fifty of us gathered at the audition. We were not required to act but only to sing. The reason became clear only later because the Nadagama was a kind of singing drama and not the genre of prose drama like Hamlet or Othello. If one cannot sing one is out.

I found a Sarachchandra who looked very profound but pretty jocund, good-humored and funny and this, too, fascinated me as a youngster. At moments of reflection, he used to stroke the back of his head. Rehearsals first began in the professor's house on Sangamitta Hill-above the girls' hall by that name. Those were breezy times when the environment around us spoke of no stress and where a strong intellectual ambience defined university life. Wider society itself did not seem to pose any serious existential problems and an unreal calmness and tranquility was just the bedrock for a play that belonged to the genre of the purely aesthetic, which Dharmasiri Bandaranayake once aptly described as soundarya natyaya. Maname was not meant to raise social issues like much of the modern prose drama of Brecht, Ibsen or Beckett.

The residence of Sarachchandra (we used to call him 'doctor') was a little haven full of musical, paintings and books. Many of the actors ogled at his beautiful first daughter Nandita, who later sadly ended up terminally ill. I still have an image of Nandita playing the Sitar. How life can turn tables on us! There was a bachelor Civil Servant who used to come for Maname rehearsals just to see Nandita. Sarachchandra's first wife, Eileen, was a wonderful and caring host with little of her ego on display. On her own, Eileen was an accomplished actor and make-up artist. Unfortunately, again, the two fell apart but even after divorce they got on well. My impression from those early days of my acquaintance never changed: great artist and learned man that he was, Sarachchandra wasn't a down-to-earth man. He lived in an inner world of his own unique creation and largely failed to meet the pragmatic routines of a householder or even father. There was a bifurcation in his life between artist-cum-scholar and lay family man. This caused him and his family many a personal tragedy. Once, while doing a walk in the campus towards the Engineering faculty, 'doctor' told me how life's difficulties prompted his artistic outcomes. Many great artists, like Dostoevsky or Van Gogh for instance, could have said the same. I sometimes felt that Sarachchandra pursued personal crises in a kind of Freudian urge. Eccentricities are the flip side of genius.

The rehearsals were both adorned and informed by the presence of the Nadagam maestro from Ampe, Balapitiya, Charles Silva Gunasinghe Gurunanse who had been a virtual Sarachchandra family member during the whole course of Maname rehearsals. I cannot remember our beloved Gurunanse taking to

drinks-something that his progeny frightfully did. He was a most cheerful old gent with his hair tied up in a knot on top. He was squint-eyed and I recall how he used to endorse our stage performances with the radiant and infectious turn of the squint. Without Gurunanse Sarachchandra would not have created Maname.

Trilicia Abeykone (later Gunawardena) and Hemamali Gunasekera (later Gunasinghe) did the princess role alternately until Hemamali was grabbed by senior don, Siri Gunasinghe who did the costumes and décor. Siri Gunasinghe took her away to Canada where she later became a Professor herself. Hemamali had an attractive figure and she performed her nuances superbly. Siri Gunasinghe knew that it would have been a personal danger to his prospects had he kept her doing this art. I used to sometimes travel next to Hemamali in the Maname touring bus and did I not enjoy the touch which a swaying Ebert Silva bus would mercifully gift me with? Trilicia had a superior voice that flowed through the audience; she did thousands of performances until the younger generations took over. Trilicia died of cancer and that was sad, too.

Ben Sirimanne was the inevitable prince Maname. He was much older than us as he came as a teacher diploma student. Ben ('Bena' as we affectionately called him) had a regal voice with the richness of a Christmas cake. Like me, he too, had been Catholic-choir trained. He also had an appearance of arrogance that suited the role. There are many stories about Bena, which requires additional space to mention.

If Maname is a tragedy the biggest related



personal tragedy had been Edmund Wijesinghe. We had to stop Maname rehearsals for a period without a suitable Veddah King. Sarachchandra, in fact gave up in disgust and cancelled the play. This was when the organizers, The Sinhala Literary Society's Arthur Silva, Nawagammuwa, KDP Perera and others took the challenge. They strolled all over in search of the great talent needed and found it in a most unusual venue-the annual Kandy Esala Carnival grounds where a tall, bony man was hammering away pop songs over a mike. Edmund Wijesinghe did not need a mike and his physical features just matched the role. He happened to have been a Peradeniya student who had failed the first year exam and who was thus out in the doldrums for some time. Doctor was impressed at the Columbus-like discovery. It was eureka! Edmund stepped into the rehearsals and imme-

diately delivered! I haven't seen anyone do the Veddah King as powerfully as Edmund did it. But, as is now on record, Edmund succumbed to drink and became a write-off a decade later. I cannot think of another personal tragedy for Sinhala Drama than the end of Edmund Wijesinghe.

Lionel Fernando played proficiently the part of the King's assistant or Vedi Detu. Other Veddahs included M.B Adikaram, Gunaratne and Piyasekera.

The chorus located at the corner seated in



Kabuki style and the action at the centre combined pleasantly in our Maname days largely because of the esprit de corps or team spirit. Out of memory the chorus had Nanda Abeywickrema, Paster Peiris, Ramya Thumpela, Indrani Peiris, and Trixie Mendis.

Instrumental backing led by the Gurunanse himself included H.L. Seneviratne, another who turned out later to be a Professor in America, and Somaratne Edirisirisinghe who was called 'brungaya,' because of his proclivity toward the female. Sarachchandra, now as the musician, never failed to be part of the instrumentalists playing as he did the Tampura; he was both the audience and the participant and his presence meant living inspiration. I used to know how I was going from the expression of the squint-eyed Gurunanse. That he liked me a lot I knew when one day I saw my photograph hanging on the wall above the entrance door of his humble home at Ampe.

During the creation phase of Maname make-up came to be done by Eileen Sarachchandra, Siri Gunasinghe, and the famous translator-actor A.P. Gunaratne. Wimaladharma Diyaseena too joined, later, as an apprentice under Siri Gunasinghe. Special tribute must be paid to Vasantha Kumar, well-known traditional dancer and teacher, for his part in the choreography of the Veddahs. What a dramatic scenario Vasantha Kumar had created!

In what is taken to be his autobiography Sarachchandra records that I was the biggest surprise performer. Doctor states that he did not know how the Potheeguru's role should be dramatized as his was something new to Sinhala Theatre. He wasn't impressed by me during rehearsals but thought that if I just sing the narration and be seated it would do. I am not embarrassed to tell you that I wasn't myself sure how to handle this role until the first performance day when it came like magic to me. My success was a good illustration of how an audience can contribute to an actor's performance. Sarachchandra records that what he witnessed from me on November 3rd 1956 was "a miracle" as I had evidently succeeded in getting the audience in my grip. Reggie Siriwardena, erudite scholar, wrote the first review and there he stated that I "sang beautifully and maintained a perfect rapport with the audience." Other critics including Chandraratne Manawasinghe followed with likewise generous tributes. I thought all along that it would be boring to sing the verses and take my seat. I felt something more is needed of me. It suddenly struck me that I should link the audience