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AN INTERVIEW WITH SHELAGH GOONEWARDENE
ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

LeRoy Robinson

Shelagh Goonewardene is one of the leaders of English language theatre in Sri Lanka. She was born on December 12, 1935.

She attended Bishop's College and the University of Sri Lanka at Peradeniya.

A member of the University Dramatic Society, she played the part of Lavinia in George Bernard Shaw's Androcles and the Lion in 1956, Professor Lyn Ludowyk's last production in Ceylon.

She was then among the founders of the "Little Theatre Group", which produced among other plays Jean Anouilh's The Lark, William Shakespeare's Macbeth, and Jean Giradoux's Tiger at the Gates.

After the "Little Theatre Group" was succeeded by "Stage and Set", a group of former University Dramatic Society players, in 1966, Shelagh Goonewardene performed in or was a member of the production staff of Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman and The Crucible, Bertholt Brecht's The Caucasian Chalk Circle and Mother Courage, and Shakespeare's Othello and Hamlet.

In 1971 she was Advisory Editor of New Ceylon Writing for a special issue on the theatre.
In 1975 she played Arkadina in Anton Chekhov’s The Seagull, and she directed Eugene O’Neill’s Ah, Wilderness for the Royal College Dramatic Society.

In 1977 she directed Arthur Miller’s All My Sons for the same Society.

In the early 1980s, Shelagh Goonewardene was a free lance writer on theatre, and a drama critic for the Ceylon Sunday Times.

She was a member of the production staff of Ernest Mac-Intyre’s Dark Dinkum Aussie produced in early 1982.

From October to December 1983 she presented a weekly 30-minute radio program, Arts Scene, interviewing prominent people in the arts.

She has been a trustee of the Lionel Wendt Memorial Theatre several times.

She is presently residing in Georgetown, Guyana.

* * *

Robinson: First, let me thank you and your husband Ranjit and your two beautiful children for the hospitality you have always shown me in Colombo.

Now, would you mind telling me how you became interested in theatre in the first place?

Goonewardene: As far as I remember—and that goes back into my childhood—I have always been fascinated by
acting. At school we were fortunate to have teachers who encouraged this interest.

The Principal of Bishop’s College (the parallel school in the hierarchy for girls, as Royal College and St. Thomas’ College were for boys), the Principal was feted every year on her birthday with a program to which each class contributed, and I had plenty of scope to “perform” every year!

The Principal, incidentally, was a Sister, belonging to an Anglican order of nuns. In our time the nuns were English, often graduates of Oxford or Cambridge.

Robinson: You had a very early exposure to English language and literature then.

Goonewardene: Yes. Bishop’s College as a whole encouraged an interest in the arts and when I was quite young hired an English professional drama teacher who produced Alice in Wonderland for the public. I was the mouse-with-a-long-tail!

Anyway, perhaps the climax for me where school drama was concerned was when the school drama team won the Inter-School Shakespeare Drama Contest. We did a scene from As You Like It, and I played Rosalind.

Then I went to university and met people like Professor Lyn Ludowyk and the members of the University Dramatic Society, Ernest MacIntyre, for example.

Robinson: I know from my reading that Professor Lyn
Ludowyk was very important in arousing interest in English language theatre in Sri Lanka, so let's talk more about the University Dramatic Society later.

Meanwhile, can you give me a general idea of the present situation of the theatre in Sri Lanka—or should I say in Colombo?

**Goonewardene:** To put it simply, in our society the theatre artist is not considered as fulfilling a vital and meaningful role in the life of the community—that is, the doctor or lawyer or engineer is considered more important than the theatre artist.

Some positive and far-reaching measures are needed to delineate a true place for the theatre artist in our scheme of things.

In short, we need a national theatre.

**Robinson:** Have you written anything about this?

**Goonewardene:** Yes, in the Sunday Times, in the fall of 1980.

At that time, I proposed that the Tower Hall Theatre Foundation be the focal point of a National Theatre. The Foundation already has a theatre and centre.

I asked if it were not possible for the Foundation to also acquire land in other parts of Colombo and build one or two other theatres that could be designed, each differently, to cater to plays requiring different types of staging.

That piece in the Sunday Times was entitled "Justice for the theatre!" I was quoting Henry Jayasena.
Robinson: The actor?

Goonewardene: Actor and playwright.

Robinson: To go back a little, how does what you just said before—"the theatre artist is not considered as fulfilling a vital role"—how does that apply to a famous actor like Henry Jayasena?

Goonewardene: Well, for example, Henry Jayasena is not a full-time actor. He has worked full-time at the Ministry of Highways for about twenty-five years. In "Justice for the theatre!" I asked about him: "Should a leading stage and screen actor and playwright have to keep prosaic records in a government office?"

Recently, Henry was appointed to a high administrative post in the Rupavahini Corporation, the Government television channel. This is recognition of a sort for his valuable contribution to the arts. But he is still denied a place that enables him to function as a creative actor, director and playwright.

Our theatre artists have one basic problem: they cannot earn a living as theatre artists. So most of them work in government offices during the day and practice their art at night. They have to do this to survive, to make a living for themselves and their families.

In fairness, let me add that they have received some recognition. Or, will. Government workers who participate regularly in theatrical activities may soon be given more generous leaves
of absence.

On this point, Henry Jayasena has suggested that government servants who want to engage in purposeful artistic activities be permitted to retire early, with adequate compensation for their years of government service. Then they would have the initial capital they need to do productive artistic work.

Robinson: What are private sources doing to improve the general situation in the theatre?

Goonewardene: The Tower Hall Theatre Foundation provides facilities for theatre training programs. It has a script bank. It gives financial assistance to playwrights and producers. It boosts talented new playwrights by giving cash awards in an annual “best script” contest. It even gives financial assistance, old age pensions, to former theatre artists who performed at the Tower Hall.

Robinson: There is at least one bright spot then.

Goonewardene: Yes, but as Henry Jayasena has asked, must the present generation of theatre artists wait until their old age to receive recognition?

We need to establish a fully professional theatre. That should solve the majority of the problems that dedicated theatre people now confront.

Robinson: There seem to be only a few theatres in Sri Lanka, in the Colombo area, anyway. How do theatre people go about preparing a production?

Goonewardene: Let me say something about only one aspect
of production, rehearsal, and I think you'll get a good idea of the situation as a whole.

The Lionel Wendt Theatre provides a rehearsal room at the Art Centre, but it has been used mostly by the Theatre Studio for actors, which has ceased to exist.

The Sinhala Institute of Culture has five areas of rehearsal space available, including a hall with a stage.

The Tower Hall Theatre Foundation has a rehearsal hall at its center in Wijerama Mawatha. This newest rehearsal hall is part of an arts complex constructed by the National Christian Council.

Robinson: Are the rents high for these facilities?

Goonewardene: No, not so high. In fact, they are reasonable—especially at the Sinhala Institute of Culture and the Tower Hall rehearsal stage. From what I hear, the new N. C. C. hall even offers free facilities. The Lionel Wendt Theatre charges the Theatre Studio nothing. At the Sinhala Institute of Culture the rates are up to twenty five rupees for three hours. The Tower Hall rates are fifteen rupees for a three hour session.

But, as I was going to say before you asked me that, some time ago I watched the rehearsal of a play due to go on the boards in less than a week's time.

The rehearsal was held in the car port of a generous patron of the arts.
The problem was that the actors had to share their car port “stage” with a tractor that was being repaired by two busy mechanics. From time to time the activities of the repairmen forced the actors into areas of the “stage” not called for in the script. The tractor dictated the entrances and exits on one side. The actors had to endure the nauseous smells emitted by the various lubricants the mechanics were administering to the tractor.

The actors put up with it with the dedication of theatre people who put up with all kinds of inconveniences for the sake of the show.

That incident made me realize afresh that one of our problems here is that we need more proper spaces to rehearse.

Of course, sometimes school principals make school halls or stages available to theatre groups, but the hours they can be used are limited.

As I said before, most theatre people hold regular jobs during the day. Rehearsals usually begin after working hours. And most rehearsal places available close down at eight p.m. This is too early. We need inexpensive places where we can work up to about eleven p.m.

Most English plays, by the way, are performed only up to ten times in public—after three months of rehearsal, say—so I stress “inexpensive” or “free” because paying for rehearsals is a luxury that many production budgets cannot afford.
Robinson: What are production costs in the Colombo area?

Goonewardene: A serious non-musical play requires a budget of over 30,000 rupees; a musical, about 100,000. Theatre rents and lighting costs amount to slightly more than one-third of the total cost of a production. Quite a big slice. Actually, only Tower Hall has a comprehensive and up-to-date lighting system.

I think that theatre managers have a moral obligation to the community to improve the facilities for which they are charging more and more.

Robinson: Are the prices of theatre tickets also going up?

Goonewardene: Yes, increasing production costs have led to higher ticket prices. 40 rupees, 50 rupees, 100 rupees for a seat.

For these prices, a theatre-goer, always occupying a hard or even bug-ridden seat, is toasted in an oven-like auditorium. Only Tower Hall has air conditioning.

Another aspect of this is that as the price of a theatre ticket goes up, the audience's expectations of the standard of performance rise even higher. This requires an increasing professionalism in the standards of acting and production.

In Sri Lanka, the general cost of living is high—we are in inflation-- and no one likes to feel that he or she has been misled into paying excessively for something counterfeit or second rate.
Robinson: How does all this affect the choice of dramatic works to be produced?

Goonewardene: Producers fear losing money, so may not attempt to produce serious and worthwhile plays. In the English theatre, for example, serious plays are a box-office liability. There is the feeling that musicals are sure to recover their costs.

Robinson: How about in the Sinhala theatre? the Tamil theatre?

Goonewardene: Sinhala theatre seems much more open to experimental and thought-provoking plays than the English theatre. The audiences for Sinhala theatre are much bigger, and plays are performed much longer, so artistic success and commercial success are more easily combined where audiences are more receptive. In the Tamil theatre a similar situation exists.

Robinson: Then, the English theatre is in a precarious financial situation.

Goonewardene: Let’s say that the English theatre’s worthwhile or significant achievements depend on the efforts of a few dedicated people who are supported financially by a few philanthropically inclined individuals, or business firms. But no one, however much devoted to the arts, can afford to sustain repeated financial losses.

Robinson: When you speak of serious plays, what do you have in mind?

Goonewardene: By serious, I am referring to thematic material. Relevant themes.
Sri Lanka’s present day openness to the rest of the world has developed a blatant emphasis on material wealth. The consumerism of the developed countries has fostered this emphasis as the most desirable goal to strive for.

We have in our society today a great upsurge of greediness for property, for gems, for all types of gadgets as status symbols. Slowly and surely our way of life is becoming eroded by greed, and we are losing sight of the fact that this can change our national character and lifestyle irrevocably.

Robinson: Hasn’t anyone in Sri Lanka written plays on this theme?

Goonewardene: The only recently written play I know of that has been inspired by this theme and is related to it is Vessantara by Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Sri Lanka’s foremost dramatist. As you know, Dr. Sarachchandra has made the most pivotal contribution to the development of the modern Sinhala theatre.

In 1982 he won the Mahakavi Kumaran Asan World Prize, awarded by Kerala State in South India.

Robinson: Do you have any other relevant themes in mind?

Goonewardene: There is a wealth of relevant material for dramatists to shape into thoughtful plays that offer serious and responsible social comment. Possible themes, for example, are the effects on
our traditional village values and on the urban middle classes of the sudden wealth earned in the Middle East, and the impact of new values transmitted through the experiences of those who have been there. What about the problems of development? How do people react to being uprooted from their traditional villages and being resettled in raw new areas?

What happened in July 1983, the communal violence, has made it necessary for the people of this country to re-examine the relationships between different communities in a sensitive and responsible manner. The theatre is a powerful medium that can deal with this theme in humane and artistic terms.

We need more original plays in Sinhala and Tamil and English that deal with day to day living, its problems and its challenges that beset us.

Robinson: Let me change the subject, if you do not mind too much.

I know the name of Lionel Wendt. I have attended performances at the Lionel Wendt theatre. Would you say something about his contribution to culture in Sri Lanka?

Goonewardene: I would like to very much. Even in Sri Lanka many members of the younger generation, young people, sometimes ask me who Lionel Wendt was and what he did. Simply, he made a significant contribution to the arts here.
He was a talented pianist. He was a good photographer. He was a cinematographer. He was a critic.

In the late 1920s, Pablo Neruda, the distinguished Chilean poet, once called Wendt the central figure of a cultural life "torn between the death rattles of the British empire and a human appraisal of the untapped values of Ceylon".

Robinson: As an aside question, do you think Neruda described Ceylon correctly in the 1920s?

Goonewardene: Yes, I think that his description was apt regarding the cultural situation of that time, and it remained true right up to the end of the 1940s, when Ceylon achieved its independence.

Robinson: Please continue about Lionel Wendt.

Goonewardene: As for Lionel Wendt, my former teacher Dr. Lyn Ludowyk was a friend of his, and he referred to Wendt as one of a minority in a minority--"that of the English speaking, who, born and bred in a small tropical island, could move easily and freely in the literary and artistic tradition of Europe".

Robinson: Can you be a little more specific now about Wendt's cultural achievements?

Goonewardene: As I said before, Lionel Wendt was an accomplished musician; he had studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

He was a genius with the camera, and he is remembered now as an inspired photographer
with the eye of a painter. He founded the Photographic Society of Sri Lanka. He helped to make a then comparatively new form of art recognized as a valid art form in this country.

Wendt possessed a particularly sensitive antenna that unerringly detected any genuine artistic talent in those around him. He helped the painters George Keyt, Harry Pieris, Richard Gabriel and others.

Robinson: They were all part of the so-called "43 Group", weren't they? Thanks, by the way, for introducing me to Harry Pieris. The Sunday afternoon at his studio was an enlightening one for me.

Goonewardene: Yes, they were the hard core of "43 Group", along with Justin Daraniyagala and Geoffrey Beling. They all owed much to Lionel Wendt's stimulating criticism--and to his appreciation of their early work. Wendt fostered youthful talent. After he died, an Arts Centre was created as his memorial.

Robinson: May I interrupt? If I'm not mistaken, Wendt was also interested in dance.

Goonewardene: Yes, he was. Lionel Wendt was the one who first paid important attention to the brilliant artistry of the individual Kandyan dancer and drummer who until then had been hidden in the anonymity of a religious ritual.

Robinson: Are you talking about the kind of dancing done by Chitrasena and his troupe? I've seen
them perform, and you're right, brilliant is the word for them. I met Chitrasena, too, A very dynamic man. I wish I had had more time.

**Goonewardene:** Lionel Wendt took abroad the first group of Kandyan dancers to publicly exhibit their exciting art. And, this is important, their dancing and drumming is completely indigenous.

**Robinson:** It's too bad that, as far as I know, a great artist like Chitrasena has not been invited to perform in Japan.

To go back, again, how did the Lionel Wendt Arts Centre get started?

**Goonewardene:** As you know, Harold Peiris, a wealthy man, was a patron of the arts. He was one of Lionel Wendt's closest friends. When Wendt died—he was only in his 40s—he left his entire estate to Harold Peiris. (Now don't confuse him with Harry Pieris!)

Using that money, Harold Peiris took the initiative in carrying out the activity of establishing a fitting memorial on the site of Wendt's house. Lionel Wendt's brother Harry also participated in this.

The first Trustees of the Lionel Wendt Memorial Fund met in 1945. (According to the rules governing the Trust, the members of the Board of Trustees change from time to time. A trustee is supposed to do all he or she can to see that the Lionel Wendt Theatre and Arts Centre is properly managed.)
The first Trustees decided that the Memorial they wanted to set up would include all Lionel Wendt’s interests—music, art, literature, photography, drama.

In the realization of their plan, the Theatre and Art Gallery came to dominate the complex.

The Theatre opened in December 1953 with a presentation of Maxim Gorki’s The Lower Depths.

Robinson: Then the Lionel Wendt Theatre is over 30 years old.

Goonewardene: Yes. It was the first theatre in this country to provide modern facilities for staging plays.

Let me mention that Harold Peiris died in 1981. So the Lionel Wendt Theatre has now, in a way, become his memorial as well.

As for the Art Gallery, it is modelled on Boymann’s Museum in Rotterdam. Its most unusual feature is the use of natural light for viewing exhibits. Most art galleries in the world do not have such a feature.

Robinson: You refer to the Centre as a complex.

Goonewardene: This is what it was until recently. The Centre used to house the Photographic Society, the Film Society, the Art Centre Theatre Studio, the Children’s Drama House, the Recorded Music Society—and also provide space for the Young Artists Group.

I am sorry to say that at present only the Photographic Society continues its work. I hope
that as in the past the Lionel Wendt Art Centre regains its role as a complex for all the arts.

After all, the Theatre Studio was one of the first of its kind in this country to offer systematic training in many aspects of theatrecraft.

Robinson: Can you briefly say something about the financing of the Wendt complex?

Goonewardene: The Lionel Wendt Arts Centre has been sustained throughout by the munificence of the late Harold Peiris, and by the support of private enterprises and the theatre public. The Centre has not had any assistance from the government.

Robinson: The theatre is over 30 years old. As I started to ask before, what condition is it in?

Goonewardene: It faces the urgent need to update its technical facilities. It needs to air condition the theatre. The cost could run into millions of rupees.

Isn’t this a cause that is worthy of the support of the government as well as private persons? In the wider interests of the whole society?

Robinson: I assume that you have written about all the things we have been talking about in your Sunday Times column.

Goonewardene: Yes, I did.

Robinson: Your column was called “Let’s Talk about Theatre”. Let’s talk about the University Dramatic Society. Is it still active?

Goonewardene: No, it’s not. Although recently there have been stirrings from the English Department at Peradeniya. The Society was founded in 1922.
It lasted until the late 1950s. Now, English drama as a part of university life seems to be hardly alive.

**Robinson:** Why is that?

**Goonewardene:** There are several reasons. One was the departure of Professor Ludowyk, who took over from Professor Leigh Smith, who founded the Society. Ludowyk took over in 1933 and stayed until 1956, when he went to England to live. Other professors, for example, Ashley Halpe, whom you met at Harry Pieris’s, tried to maintain the tradition, but...

**Robinson:** A tradition of almost 40 years is pretty good these days. Would you mind going into a little more detail about what that tradition was?

**Goonewardene:** To go back to 1922, the Society’s first activities were confined to play readings. These readings became popular at the university. The culmination was the production of a play whose performance was open to the non-university public. That was a short play, A. A. Milne’s The Princess and the Woodcutter. It was a great success. But the Society did not present many other productions at that time.

Starting in 1933, with Ludowyk, the Society began to present a steady trickle of productions that grew into something like a cascade, a cascade of plays, the best comedies and tragedies in the repertoire of the world theatre, plays originating in Britain, the United States, Europe
and China.

A regular member of the audiences seeing those plays would surely have acquired a liberal education! As a matter of fact, one of the aims of the University Dramatic Society was to keep the lines open for internationalism.

As far as the theatre was concerned, at that time there were no drama schools in Sri Lanka, and the Dramatic Society came to fill the need for a course of training for prospective actors. Many people--Iranganie Serasinghe, Jeanne Pinto, Osmund Jayaratne, Rene Perera, Tony Gabriel, to name only a few--owed the discovery and early nurturing of their dramatic talent to the guidance of the Society.

Shall we identify these people a little better?

Iranganie Serasinghe is probably the most widely known actress Sri Lanka has produced. She has made her name in English plays and Sinhala films, most recently in films.

Jeanne Pinto is currently a free-lance writer for the English language press and also does radio programs, mostly on arts subjects.

Osmund Jayaratne is a distinguished member of the Science faculty of Colombo University.

Rene Perera used to be a teacher at Methodist College, a leading girls school.

Tony Gabriel is a well-known doctor in the field of cancer treatment.

Was one of the causes of the University Dra-
matic Society's end political?

Goonewardene: In the late 1950s emphasis was placed on using Sinhala and Tamil in university education. English was de-emphasized. Many of those educated in the indigenous languages had a deep-rooted antagonism to English.

Complicating matters still further was the political activism among the students.

Robinson: How about English nowadays?

Goonewardene: Currently the status of English has revived. There is a great desire to learn it. Mainly for better job opportunities in an economy that is now open and fast moving.

But English is not merely the language of business and commerce. It also opens the door to universal culture. I think our universities' English departments should draw some inspiration from the Dramatic Society tradition and endeavor to revive it in a way that lectures and examinations can never do.

Robinson: How do the students feel about this?

Goonewardene: Today's students seem completely engrossed in their studies. They need to pass examinations for urgent economic reasons. They don't seem to have time to spare for any other activities.

In my own undergraduate days, pressures were fewer. What I remember as the most stimulating side of life at a residential university campus were the evenings I spent on rehearsing plays.
Undergraduates in the 1980s seem, by and large, ignorant of the University Dramatic Society's traditions.

Robinson: We have been speaking rather generally. I wonder if we could look at your personal experience in English theatre a little more closely. For example, you played Linda in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman. Would you like to talk about your experience in that production?

Goonewardene: I played Linda in the Stage & Set production of 1966, and I have never forgotten it. We were so happy one night, after one rehearsal, we were so drawn together by the compelling power of the play that it was difficult for us, performers and production people alike, to break up the small gathering we had on the stage of the Lionel Wendt Theatre and go home. Long after the rehearsal was over we stayed on, reluctant to leave the stage until the early hours of the morning! The exhilaration and sense of fulfillment we experienced were of the kind that only the theatre can bestow in its most lavish moods.

Robinson: How about the role of Linda itself?

Goonewardene: The role of Linda was a revelation to me personally. It simply took hold and refused to give way either to excessive sentimentality or exaggeration of her courage in the face of Willy's plight. A plight which only she fully comprehends and sees the implications of.

At the end when she finally breaks down at
Willy's grave, it is truly and deeply moving, but it is never trite or sentimental.

The experience of playing this particular scene was among the finest acting moments in my life. The first time the real emotional impact of the scene manifested itself was a thrilling experience for all of us. It was late in the night, the same night I was just talking about, towards the end of the long rehearsal. We did the scene, and suddenly we were all suspended in a moment of pin-drop silence. That is the kind of hush that is the richest reward for any actor, not deafening applause.

We rehearsed Death of a Salesman for four months, and it became a totally absorbing part of our lives.

Robinson: I would like to know something about the staging of the production itself, but there is not enough time to go into that, so may I change the subject?

Goonewardene: Yes, of course. But first I would like to make another, less personal, comment.

The 1966 production of Salesman in English led to a period of close interaction between Stage & Set and some of the leading exponents of Sinhala theatre, Henry Jayesena, for example, and Chitrasena, whom you've met and seen perform, and Dhamma Jagoda. Besides, Henry Jayasena's play Apata Puthe Magak Nathe—roughly translating, There is no path for our
son--its final scene in particular, was influenced by Death of a Salesman. Jayasena and Chitrarasena said this was the first play in English that they had seen performed in Sri Lanka that seemed relevant to their own ideas and conceptions of life and dramatic art.

**Robinson:** As you know, Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman has been produced in the People's Republic of China. It seems to have some international significance. It appeals to people of different cultures.

**Goonewardene:** As Ernest MacIntyre once said, "If your work in the theatre is of the best, it will transcend the language part of it". Salesman has a very real and universal portrayal of the father-son relationship.

**Robinson:** Now to change the subject. I understand that Bertholt Brecht is also popular among English theatre audiences here.

**Goonewardene:** Brecht has always been a challenge and an opportunity to theatre people in this country.

The first production of a Brecht play was given by the University Dramatic Society in 1949. Dr. Lyn Ludowyk and Cuthbert Amerasinghe, who was Professor of Classics at Peradeniya in the 1950s and a good actor, co-produced The Good Woman of Setzuan. Jeanne Pinto played the lead, and Osmund Jayaratne and Iranganie Goonesinha were in the cast.

Then in 1966 Ludowyk, who was then in Eng-
land, sent a copy of the Caucasian Chalk Circle to Iranganie Serasinghe, who showed it to Ernest MacIntyre, who directed it for Stage & Set in November 1966. Some of the outstanding features of the production, by the way, were the use of masks emphasizing character types rather than individual actors...

Robinson: As in Eugene O’Neill’s The Great God Brown...

Goonewardene: ...and the huge painted backdrops, and the music --that constituted a unifying element expressing the whole.

Coincidentally, Jayasena was rehearsing Hunuwataye Kathawa, his translation of Caucasian Chalk Circle. There was a process of active and fruitful collaboration between the Sinhala and English theatres that realized a creative pitch never attained--never attempted--before.

Ernest MacIntyre, Karan Breckenridge, Joe Mustapha, Lucky Wikremanayake and Haig Karunaratne were prominent in the English production, and in the Sinhala one they played minor roles. They found it an illuminating and satisfying experience.

Perhaps I should identify these people a little more too.

Karan Breckenridge was one of the finest actors of the English stage. He played in several MacIntyre shows. His best known roles were Biff in Salesman, the Narrator in Chalk Circle, and Hamlet. He died in 1983 in a tragic car...
Robinson: Please, continue. This is interesting history for me.

Goonewardene: Then in May 1967 both the Sinhala and English productions of Caucasian Chalk Circle were performed on alternate days for a short period. Theatre-goers had an unusual opportunity.

This process of collaboration and interaction led Ernest MacIntyre to his debut as a playwright. He wrote The Full Circle of Caucasian Chalk, which was produced late in 1967. Henry Jayasena played one of the main characters.

In May 1969 the Aquinas Theatre Workshop presented Brecht’s Galileo. It was directed by Percy Colin-Thome. He is one of our distinguished judges and is active in theatre. Arthur
Weerakon played Galileo. He recently retired as a University professor of Science. Winston Serasinghe and Graham Hatch headed the supporting cast. Harry Pieris helped design the costumes.

Winston Serasinghe is the actor with the greatest stature in our theatre. He's in his 70s now. He's been acting over a period of 40 years, in English theatre and Sinhala films. His wife, by the way, is Iranganie Serasinghe.

Then, to go on, in September 1969, Ernest MacIntyre directed Mother Courage and Her Children for Stage & Set. He conveyed the effect of war, the dominant atmosphere of the play by projecting a war film showing battle scenes on a cyclorama. Winston Serasinghe and Lucien de Zoysa were among the performers.

Lucien de Zoysa is also in his 70s now, with a long history as an actor. He has also written several plays on Sri Lankan historical themes. His best know play is "Fortress in the Sky", the story of Sri Lanka's parricide king who built Sigiriya.

In April 1972 Henry Jayasena produced Mother Courage again with Manel Jayasena and Somalatha Fernando alternately performing the leading role.

Manel Jayasena is Henry's wife. She has played good roles in Kuveni, for example, and Hunuwataye Kathawa.
Somalatha Fernando is a leading Sinhala theatre actress and director. She also has her own drama school for children and young people. She recently produced her own play, Vikusthi, dealing with the problems and frustrations of youth. It was a great success.

To continue, in 1980, Richard de Zoysa, who had played a small boy in the 1969 production of Mother Courage, directed the play again.

Richard de Zoysa is Lucien's son. He is an excellent actor. He also directs plays, writes poetry, and appears frequently on television as a newscaster.

Last year there was a production of Galileo and an excellent production of Puntilla, both in Sinhala.

So, as you can see, there is a tradition of performing Brecht in this country.

Robinson: Why is Brecht so popular in Sri Lanka?

Goonewardene: There are several reasons. Major ones and minor ones. The major reasons center round the fact that this century marks the emergence or the common man in the spotlight of the stage of history. Brecht is the playwright of the common man, the foremost spokesman, in the theatre, for the "dumb masses". In theatrical terms, most, if not all countries recently freed from colonial rule that are proceeding, socially and politically in a generally "left" direction must be attracted to Brecht's work. Another
major reason is that for Asian countries the various stylized devices that Brecht borrowed from Asian theatre strike an immediate rapport with audiences here.

Robinson: Changing the subject again, is there any local playwright who interests you?

Goonewardene: In the 1969 Stage & Set production of Mother Courage, one of the two-member musical ensemble was Nedra Vittachi, who played the drums. Her interest in music and in Brecht led her to write plays. Her latest play, Poppy, on the theme of drug addiction, was produced in Colombo in January this year. Her earlier play Pasteboard Crown had played at the Lionel Wendt Theatre.

An original play by a Sri Lankan in English is a rare occurrence here. She also composed the words and music that are an integral part of the whole.

Robinson: Will you describe Pasteboard Crown?

Goonewardene: Nedra Vittachi herself describes it as a pastoral play and musical satire. Its main theme is the corrupting and dehumanizing influence of power.

Robinson: What is the story line?

Goonewardene: The childless queen of a prosperous kingdom cold-bloodedly delivers up her mute and defenseless handmaiden to the king for the sole purpose of begetting a crown prince. The handmaiden mother would have no claim to her son, who is
to be given over to the queen to forge the vital link in a chain of power—the chain of power to be consolidated and extended not only over the existing kingdom but also over its neighbors and perhaps even the rest of the world.

The handmaiden’s child is born. But then the queen herself conceives. The arrival of her own child poses the central dilemma: two claimants to the throne.

**Robinson:** What was the production like?

**Goonewardene:** Obviously the story is simple, and the play has some technical faults, but the production, although a trifle overlong perhaps, was effective. The Experimental Theatre Group did it, by the way.

As for the staging, the stage design was expressive and enabled the action to develop smoothly. There was an excellent “People’s Chorus”. Perfect blending and harmony in the singing. A naturalness and spontaneity of expression and movement. The chorus riveted the attention of the audience. The lighting design complemented and reinforced the action. The visuals—colorful costumes, effective movement—stimulated the imagination.

This is the ultimate poetry of the theatre, when color, shape, sound, gesture, movement, light and shade, weave patterns that communicate an experience.

**Robinson:** I suppose I should have asked the next question
before, but I would like to get it in before we conclude this interview. You said you as a school girl sort of began your stage career when you did a scene in the Inter-School Shakespeare Dramatic Competition. Is this Drama Competition still in existence?

Goonewardene: Oh, yes! It continues. It is a continuing tradition in this country. As a matter of fact, I was a judge in the semi-finals recently. In 1983 students from twelve schools took part. The contest arouses enthusiasm in the schools, and even in the general public, so it has a future. Of course, one may not wholly agree with the way it is presently conducted.

Robinson: What do you disagree with? What suggestions for improvement do you have?

Goonewardene: In the semi-finals, seven out of twelve schools performed the specified scene from The Merchant of Venice, two did Antony and Cleopatra, two Julius Caesar, and one As You Like It. In other words, out of eight possible selections, only four were performed. The perfect method of selection still eludes the competition.

Robinson: Perfect methods are hard to come by. What do you think needs changing?

Goonewardene: There could be a better balance between comedy and tragedy and history, I think. Many selections will be ignored by the schools, of course; they generally opt for selections that are familiar.
Scenes ought to be chosen that are really rewarding to the performers, scenes from which they can draw deeper insights into Shakespeare's art and the full dimensions of which life is capable.

Fairness demands that the selections make roughly equal demands on acting, directing and production abilities.

Robinson: Aside from that, don't you think that there is too much stress on competition?

Goonewardene: I think the rigorous tension of the business of competing should be tempered with more genuine enjoyment of the activity for its own sake.

Perhaps the event should be more in the nature of a festival. A competition tends to be equated with a sports event where feelings run high, where the spirit of rivalry is aggressive and the only motive is to win.

I don't think that something as sensitive and as subtle as a stage performance can be treated as simplistically as netting a goal or placing a ball accurately.

Participating in a performance of Shakespeare--I'm repeating--is a learning experience, a creative one in which the primary satisfaction derives from the act itself.

Aside from that, these performances are valuable because they expose students to English literature, which by and large is not taught in the schools here today.
There is the fundamental issue of language itself. A celebration of Shakespeare’s works is an affirmation of the continuing importance of a language that broadens the mind and deepens the vision.

**Robinson:** In Japan there is no national school Shakespeare competition, but there are many recitation and speech contests sponsored by newspapers. These are won mostly by girls from big city schools.

**Goonewardene:** The Inter-School Shakespeare Drama Competition is sponsored by the Rotary Club and the Y.M.C.A.

The performances by students from girls schools are often better than those by students from boys schools.

Schools from rural areas are under-represented. Once every two years the venue should be shifted to Kandy or Galle, to raise standards all around and to lessen the hard and fast distinctions existing between Colombo schools and outstation schools. Teachers in outstation schools need theatre workshops where they may expand their knowledge of theatre.

We must get down to doing something positive about these problems, if the Shakespeare Competition is to be more than a standard theatrical exercise. It should aspire to be more—a means of creative experience fulfilling self-expression of a finer calibre.
Robinson: There is a growing interest in children’s theatre in Japan. How about in Sri Lanka?

Goonewardene: That is happening here too.

We have the Institute of Theatre for Children and Youth. It is directed by Gamini Wijesuriya. He’s a teacher and a stage and film actor. He’s probably the most knowledgeable exponent of children’s theatre in this country.

Robinson: When was this Institute established and how?

Goonewardene: In 1971 Wijesuriya and Hemasiri Premawardhana, formerly a Secretary in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, and Chandrasena Dassanayaka, a talented director in the Sinhala theatre, started the Children’s Theatre Group. They produced plays done by adults for children. For example, they did a Sinhala adaptation of an original German play. That was in 1973. This play, Shtokkerlock and Millipilli-Tikiri Menike, in Sinhala—was directed by Dr. Norbert J. Mayer, the Artistic Director of the Munich Theatre for Children and Youth. This production’s success led to the creation of the Institute. It was inaugurated in late March, 1976—on March 27th, to be exact; that was World Theatre Day.

Robinson: What other kinds of productions does this Institute do?

Goonewardene: One outstanding one was a workshop production, Ane Ablik. This play explores the problems in our contemporary society as seen by our youth. It’s distinctly humorous. Yet it displays
awareness of the seriousness of some of the issues it touches on. Gamini Wijesuriya has translated this play into English, and you can get a copy at the Institute.

**Robinson:** Another question about money. O. K.? How is the Institute of Theatre for Children and Youth financed?

**Goonewardene:** As is the case with most of our theatrical ventures, the Institute is financed mainly by well-wishers, local and foreign, and the little money that comes in from its productions. There is no regular or steady source of funds. So a free newspaper called Young Theatre published by the Institute in Sinhala and English had to fold up some time ago after two years for lack of money.

Despite this under-funding, the work of the Institute goes on, however. A children’s theatre is planned for the new city of Jayawardenapura, and there are plans for a puppet theatre.

**Robinson:** I’m going to ask you a question about puppet theatre in Sri Lanka, but first would you mind telling me a little more about Gamini Wijesuriya himself?

**Goonewardene:** I often ask myself what would the theatre in Sri Lanka do without the sheer persistence and dedication of a few people who devote their time and energy to advancing the theatre despite innumerable obstacles and without any thought of remuneration or praise or recognition.
Gamini Wijesuriya is one of these determined people. His career in the theatre is self-made, parallel with his career as a teacher. He is trying to actively create and expand the facilities available to children and youth for expressing their creative abilities.

Gamini Wijesuriya was sent abroad by the government in 1969. He was then Manager of the National Theatre Trust, which is now defunct. He took a comprehensive course in theatre, but, when he returned here, he found that political and bureaucratic changes did not permit him to fulfill the role he had originally envisaged.

**Robinson:** What kind of changes are you talking about?

**Goonewardene:** Well, for one, the function of the National Theatre Trust had been absorbed by a Cultural Council. Programs and priorities were altered.

Anyway, rather than lose his commitment to children’s theatre, Wijesuriya strengthened his resolve. So he started the Children’s Theatre Group.

Incidentally, this may interest you, Wijesuriya has a very good collection of books on the theatre, including all the books on the theatre in Sinhala and copies of all the published plays written in this country.

**Robinson:** That library may become an important source of research someday.

Now let me ask you about puppet theatre in Sri Lanka.
Goonewardene: If you are interested in puppet theatre, you should read Dr. J. Tilaksiri’s book on puppetry in Sri Lanka. He is our foremost authority on the subject. He used to be pessimistic about the future of traditional puppetry as practiced by professional puppeteers who refused to change or even adapt traditional styles to contemporary needs in entertainment.

Robinson: That practically asks my question for me. What is the present status of puppetry here? Was Dr. Tilaksiri’s pessimism justified?

Goonewardene: Maybe not.

Gamini Wijesuriya is now also Director of the Sennehasa Puppet Center initiated by the Institute of Theatre for Children and Youth.

Robinson: Sennehasa?

Goonewardene: Wijesuriya chose this name. It’s derived from “sneha”, meaning the highest form of love, and “hasa”, meaning a smile.

I personally hope that this Puppet Centre will be a creative opening for change and provide the lead in bringing our puppetry abreast of the art in other countries and in stimulating traditional puppetry and preserving it.

Robinson: Someone, I forget who, has told me that puppets are used in teaching English in some schools in Sri Lanka.

Goonewardene: No, that is not a common practice in schools here. I think what you may have been told was that some years ago student English teachers at
one training college wrote scripts of playlets with the aim of improving sentence structure.

The Puppet Centre is now in the process of making puppets to represent the characters in these playlets. The stories are lively fables such as "The Tale of the Foolish Lion".

The idea is to perform these and other plays with puppets before school audiences and so test out the climate for new experiments in puppetry.

Robinson: You have mentioned internationalism as one ideal of theatre in Sri Lanka, and it seems to me that puppetry is now very active throughout the world.

Goonewardene: There is an International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, and there is a Union Internationale de la Marionette in Austria. The Austria group invited members of the Sennehasa Puppet Theatre to perform in a festival there in 1981. It was the first international performance of a puppet group from Sri Lanka. Among our puppeteers who went were D. S. Dharmasiri of the Sigiri Rukade Kalakavya, that is, the Sigiri Puppet Art Group, who is a traditional puppeteer who learned the art form from his father, who learned it from his father.

Robinson: I would like to ask you at least one more question. I understand the Institute of Theatre for Children and Youth has given a performance of John Steinbeck's The Pearl. I'm interested in hearing about this production.
Goonewardene: Robin Howarth, a British director, transformed the story into a script for a play. This was an excellent choice for a workshop production. The story is compelling in its simplicity in illuminating certain aspects of human nature, and it possesses the lyricism and strong emotional content that is the raw material of drama.

Robinson: What was the production like?

Goonewardene: Howarth's work in general has stressed internationalism in theatre. His approach in directing a youth production in Sri Lanka was to seek out techniques peculiar to our theatrical traditions and to combine these with techniques familiar to Western theatre.

He aimed at creating a stage experience that would relate as meaningfully as possible to our local audiences, while also giving it the benefit of fresh insights.

Robinson: Can you be a little more specific? And, by the way, what is The Pearl in Sinhala?

Goonewardene: Muthu Ate. This was in the translation by Dr. Tissa Kariyawasam from the University of Kelaniya.

The production, as I said, was the culmination of a workshop that lasted for three weeks.

Howarth brought together elements of our traditional rituals, folk drama, folk song, and folk dance techniques, with the sophisticated use of modern stage lighting and stage design.

The play lasted one and a half hours. There
was no intermission.

Robinson: As a critic, were you satisfied with the performance?

Goonewardene: I wondered whether the number of techniques and theatrical elements used did not tend to obscure the stark dramatic impact of the basic theme—the evil and destructive effects of human greed.

One problem was the over-acting of one main character. His over-acting made the role a comic caricature. Also the fight sequence was straight out of a melodramatic Sinhala film. The audience tittered. They lost the point of what was happening?

Robinson: What are you suggesting?

Goonewardene: Shouldn’t traditional techniques be used selectively? Only when they are appropriate to the purpose and the movement of the play? Or is their use justified more on grounds of anthropological interest? Societies and times change. Audiences require fresh interpretations according to their contemporary experiences. To reach back into the past may not always produce the most satisfying results.

Robinson: Thank you for a very informative interview.

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