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AN INTERVIEW WITH TISSA KARIYAWASAM
ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Tissa Kariyawasam is Associate Professor of Sinhala at Sri Jayawardenapura University, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

He was formerly Director of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya.

He was born on August 23, 1942, in a village called Ganegama in Baddegama in the District of Galle in the Southern Province.

He went to primary school in Pilagoda and received his secondary education at Ratnasara Vidyalaya, Baddegama.

In 1964 Kariyawasam graduated from the University of Peradeniya with Honors in Sinhala and with Ceylon History and Archaeology as complementary subjects.

From 1964 to 1967 he taught Classical Sinhala Prose Literature and Modern Poetry at the University of Colombo.

In 1968 he received a Master's degree from the University of Peradeniya. His thesis was "Demonological Rituals and Society." In 1973 he was awarded a Ph. D. from the University of London, England. His dissertation was "Religious Activities and the Development of a New Poetical Tradition in Sinhalese from 1852 to 1906".*

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ROBINSON: Now to go far afield from the academic world. In her interview with me, Shelagh Goonewardene mentioned several actresses besides herself who came out of the University Dramatic Society at Peradeniya in the 1950s. Jeanne Pinto, for example, and Iranganie Serasinghe. Manel Jayasena. Somalatha Fernando. Are there any other Sinhala actresses you’d like to talk about?

KARIYAWASAM: As matter of fact, on a recent research trip to the Department of Anthropology at University College, London, where I went through about 600 ola leaf manuscripts on Sri Lankan ritualistic literature that were brought to London by Hugh Nevill at the end of the 19th century, I had the privilege of staying with Piyavi-

* This is the fourth part of an interview the first part of which appeared in Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 66, No. 4, March 1987, the second part in the Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 29, No. 1, July 1988, and the third part in Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 67, No. 3, December 1989.
jaya Fonseka and Prema Ganegoda. Prema was one of our best actresses in the 1960s. She performed in Sugathapala De Silva's Ape Kattiya plays. Translations into Sinhala of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, for example, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Ape Kattiya translates as Our Group or Our Clan. It was De Silva's theatre group. Prema also played in some Sinhala films. Leading roles. Piyavijaya Fonseka is an artist too. They've been organizing evenings of Sinhala music and songs in London. Promoting Sinhala culture in a foreign country.

ROBINSON: Good! Then let's go into some of the details of her career. Tell us about her background.

KARIYAWASAM: She was born in Narahenpita, in the Colombo area, on April 24, 1947. She completed her secondary education at Mahavatta Maha Vidyalaya in Colombo.

ROBINSON: How did she get interested in being a performer?

KARIYAWASAM: As a school girl, she liked dancing. She said she was overwhelmed when her school got Sirisena Rajapaksa as their dancing teacher. I don't mean social dance in the Western sense. I mean classical Sinhala folk dancing. Later she took private lessons in Kandyan dancing from Heenbaba Dharmasiri. He had a studio in Colombo. Later she became a member of his troupe. They presented dance performances at various official functions. By invitation. Prema excelled in Kandyan dancing, and even before she was fifteen she sat for the Gandharva examination.

ROBINSON: Those were conservative times, weren't they? Were her parents amenable to this?

KARIYAWASAM: Prema especially thanks her mother. She says she is indebted to her mother for guidance in her choice of career. Prema was poor in studies, as she admits, and her mother knew that the only avenue for her was entering the field of performing arts. Her mother was quite different from most Sinhala mothers of that time, as your question indicates you know. She took Prema everywhere she wanted to go. She chaperoned her at performances. Her mother was not so well educated, but she was endowed with practical knowledge. She knew the world. She was engaged in catering. Preparing food parcels for people coming into the city for work. Small business people in our country may not be very successful, but they are able to lead their lives with their earnings.

ROBINSON: Knowing the world requires more than mere schooling.

KARIYAWASAM: Well, Prema's mother did complete her primary school education. Then a bad injury to one of her legs disrupted her school education. She developed a great knowledge of the practical ways of life. She and her husband were from the
village at Kirindivela in the Gampaha district. Henry Jayasena’s home area, and Dr. A. V. Suraweera’s too. When they married they migrated to Colombo. But Prema’s father did not like the life of Colombo, so he returned to the village, where he looked after his hereditary lands and property. But Prema’s mother stayed in Colombo and started her own career as a small business woman. Prema Ganegoda was brought up in Colombo.

ROBINSON: Prema Ganegoda said she was “overwhelmed” as a young girl when Sirisena Rajapaksa became her dancing teacher. Was he so famous?

KARIYAWASAM: He was a member of a well known traditional family from Kandy and became a teacher of dancing. He was a good drummer too. He was in the government service as a teacher. Government teachers in Sri Lanka can be transferred anywhere inside the country. So Sirisena Rajapaksa was able to teach in many schools, and he became well known as a teacher. He’s related to Suramba, a famous drummer from Amunugama, a village in Kandy, who was influenced by the Ram Gopal group that visited Sri Lanka in the 1930s. I earlier referred to that. The famous painter George Keyt resided in the same area. Sirisena was probably influenced by this openness.

ROBINSON: Would you explain “traditional” a little?

KARIYAWASAM: We’ve already mentioned caste affiliations in Sri Lankan society. During the time of the Sinhala kings, people got land for the service they rendered to the state. Those who belonged to the drummer caste received land for the service they rendered at the temple and royal festivals. Later the arts of dancing and painting in the temple walls were limited to people of this caste, and they became accepted as the scholars of these arts. Those who belonged to the so-called higher castes did not engage in these arts. These arts were transferred from father to son. That is how they became traditional. But caste is not a barrier to learning these arts now. They are subjects in the school curriculum and learning them can get people jobs in both public and private sectors.

ROBINSON: Then who was Heen Baba Dharmasiri whose dance troupe Prema Ganegoda joined as a young girl?

KARIYAWASAM: He was also an exponent of Kandy dancing. He also belonged to a traditional family of dancers and drummers. From Matale. Dharmasiri was also a teacher of Kandyan dancing in schools. Teachers’ salaries were very low then — still are! — so they used to conduct private classes to earn a little extra money. They had their own troupes, selecting members from among their own students, who participated in public performances.
ROBINSON: Speaking of Kandyan dance, I've seen Chitrasena and his troupe perform — marvellous! — so what is the background of this style of dancing?

KARIYAWASAM: As the name suggests, it's a system of dancing that originated in the hill country around Kandy. But it was not limited to up country. It spread to other parts of the country with the expansion of education and the increase of dance teachers in the government schools. The elite preferred Kandyan dancing for ceremonial functions. Kohomba Kankariya, which I told you about before, was the ritual connected with Kandyan dancing. Kandyan dancing came out of this ritual. Historically, the land tenure system provided the opportunity for this dancing to develop. The officers of the various governments under the Sinhala kings gave the dancers and drummers lots of land for their service in the temples. They had to perform in Buddhist temples. Compared with the two other systems of traditional dancing here — Low Country dancing and Sabaragamuva dancing — Kandyan dancing has its own particular hand movements and body movements. The rhythms are more elaborate too. Then there are the sacred ideas related to demons that I mentioned before. Sabaragamuva is the area around Ratnapura, which is famous for gems — and for Adam's Peak, where, you know, the Buddhists believe that the symbol at the top of the mountain belongs to the Buddha.

ROBINSON: Do these dance systems also use different drums?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, the shape of geta beraya, the drum used in Kandyan or hill country dancing, is different from that used in the Sabaragamuva and Low Country systems. The shape of the drum brings its name. Gata means a boss, a protuberance, which is about three inches thick at the center of the drum cylinder. The Low Country drum, say, is a little thinner and more evenly cylindrical. The Sabaragamuva drum is called davula. It's beaten with a stick called kadippuva in one hand and on the other side with the other hand. It's used in all the Buddhist religious rituals in the country, actually — during Pirit chanting ceremonies, alms offerings, and at rituals on the full moon days, Vesak. Low Country dancers use the Yak Beraya drum. Yak is demon. Beraya is drum. It's used at demon rituals. Another drum is called Ruhunu Beraya. Ruhunu refers to a traditional geographical division of the country. The country was divided into three areas. Ruhunu is the Low Country area. Maya is the Hill Country. Pihiti refers to the rest of the island. There's also the Pahata Rata Beraya. Pahata Rata. This drum is used in rituals in which the goddess Pattini, the goddess of chastity, and her attendants, called Devol, are propitiated. So it's called Devol Beraya, too.

ROBINSON: Then to get back to Prema Ganegoda, how did she get interested in becom-
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ing an actress?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, perhaps because her older brother Gamini Ganegoda was an actor. In the 1960s he won the best actor prize. Best film actor. At an international film festival in India. The film was called “The Man and the Crow”. As for Prema, she had a good voice. While dancing, she had to recite verses, you see. She took part in competitions reciting verses. She won. While she was in school, of course, at Maha Vidyalaya, she’d already been on stage in school plays. She used to sing folk poetry verses in these recitals. Sinhala literature is rich with various kinds of verses that can be sung rhythmically.

ROBINSON: How did she actually break into Sinhala theatre?

KARIYAWASAM: That’s a good story in itself. Once she was dancing for a flood relief fund at the Havelock Town Theatre. In the early 1960s. After the performance, a stranger came up to her and said: “You’re alright on the stage. No stage fright. But I don’t know whether you can act or not. I hope I can do something. Why don’t you come with your mother to see me?” Later her mother told her the stranger was Sugathapala De Silva. Prema frankly admits that she did not know anything about De Silva. By that time he’d already done Bodin Karayo (Lodgers) and won the best script writer’s award. Also Prema didn’t know very much more about drama than that like dancing it was performed on a stage! Anyway, she and her mother went to the Royal Primary School to meet Sugathapala De Silva. That’s how her career began. Incidentally, other members of Ape Kattiya were Cyril B. Perera, Ralex Ranasinha, Tony Ranasinha, Wickrema Bogoda, and others. Perera was an advertising man and journalist and a critic of drama and cinema. The Ranasinhas are brothers. Ralex was a staff photographer for the Independent Group of newspapers and a stage designer and art director in plays and films. Tony had been a stenographer but became a popular film idol in the 60s and 70s. Now he’s a TV actor. He’s also produced Julius Caesar for the stage. Wickrema Bogoda is an executive at the Bank of Ceylon. He was a highly talented stage actor. He was also popular in films. Let me add this historical note. Ediriweera Sarachchandra’s Maname Nadagama was very popular in the 1950s, and most producers tried to imitate its stylized drama style. Sugathapala De Silva revived the naturalistic style in dialogue. When he invited Prema Ganegoda to join Ape Kattiya he was getting ready for Tattu Geval (Flats).

ROBINSON: How about some background on De Silva?

KARIYAWASAM: When Sugathapala finally retired he was a producer at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. Before that, he’d been a journalist. He’s from Navalapit-
tiya, in the hill country. He came to some prominence in 1961 when he entered a script in a drama competition. *Eka Valle Pol* (People of the Same Group). Then he formed Ape Kattiya. Then he wrote *Bodin Karayo* and *Tattu Geval*. He's also done a translation into Sinhala of *Marat/Sade*, and another original play called *Nil Katarol Mal* on the famous wall paintings at Sigiriya. Mal is flowers. Nil Katarol is *clitoria ternatea*, a kind of vine. De Silva's also published two novels, *Ballo Bat Kati* (Dogs Eat Rice) and *Ikbiti Siyallo Satutin Jeevat Vuha* (Everyone Lived Happily Ever After). Both these novels deal with social changes in urban life here in the 60s and 70s.

ROBINSON: Then, we may be repeating ourselves, but would you mind briefly summarizing the stylized style of *Maname*?

KARIYAWASAM: *Maname* was based on the Nadagama tradition that I described to you before. It's a kind of operatic drama. It was brought to Sri Lanka from India in the 19th century. Call it Natya Dharmi drama. The stage is bare. There are no stage props. There's only a curtain in the background. A narrator, the Pote Guru, reads from a book. Like the leader of the Chorus in a Greek play. In Natya Dharmi, there's a chorus that helps the Pote Guru by singing. He describes the scenes of the play. He tells the audience the things they have to imagine while watching the play. The involvement of the audience is essential for the appreciation of the play. In the 19th century this was the only medium of entertainment in our villages in Sri Lanka. In *Maname* Sarachchandra restructured and revitalized Nadagam. He used the same style in *Sinhabahu* in 1961. But the pre-*Maname* university productions and the Tower Hall productions followed the naturalistic theatre. In the 1956 and 1957 productions Ben Sirimanne played Prince Maname. Henry Jayasena played Maname in later ones.

As for the stories, *Maname* is a Jataka tale of the past life of the Buddha. Prince Maname, the best student of Disapamok at Taxila, was able to win the daughter of his teacher through his talents. In the forest they meet a Veddha king who challenges Maname to a fight. Maname asks his princess for his sword, but she does not give it to him. The Veddha king takes it and kills Maname. The king takes the princess for himself. Later he realized that this woman will do the same thing to him, so he deserts her and runs away with all her valuables. *Sinhabahu* is the story of the Sinhala nation. Suppa Devi, the daughter of a king in Vanga Desa in India, leaves the palace and lives with a lion. She becomes the mother of a son and daughter. When the son grew up, he questioned her about his father. The wife and children desert the lion and go to a city. The lion follows in search of them. Along the way he kills people. The people tell the king, and he orders the lion to be killed. The son kills the lion, his father. Then he mar-
ried his sister. They had a son called Vijaya. He later became the founder of the Sinhala nation in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Going back again, before you mentioned Prema Ganegoda’s being interviewed by Sugathapala De Silva at Royal Primary School. What’s the connection?

KARIYAWASAM: At that time the school hall was the only place available for producers for rehearsals. I say hall, but it was a small room. Royal Primary School was then headed by H. D. Sugathapala — no relation to Sugathapala De Silva — who was also chairman of the Drama Panel of the Arts Council. H. D. Sugathapala was a writer of literature for children. He was the principal of Royal Primary School for more than thirty years. He was the first teacher responsible for the molding up of a majority of later civil servants and politicians in this country who went through their early education under him at Royal Primary and then at Royal College. So he was a well known figure. He was chairman of the Drama Panel for more than ten years. He also was responsible for the establishment of the New Theatre Hall or Royal Junior Theatre in Colombo. Royal College was one of the oldest schools run by the British government here from the second decade of the 19th century. It was first known as the Colombo Academy. The main aim was to get the white collar workers in the island under the instruction of this school.

ROBINSON: Then what happened to Prema Ganegoda at her first interview with Our Group?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, De Silva asked her to read a line from his script. Of course, up to that point she had been used to a certain type of recitation: Sinhala verses meant to accompany dancing. De Silva said: “Forget about dancing. Imagine you are acting and read this line as you would say it to a friend in normal life.” Prema started to understand that acting was a different art from that of dancing. She can still remember that first line, by the way. Oya hariyata temila. You’re soaked to the skin. She read it the way De Silva wanted her to. He was happy and asked her to continue. So they rehearsed every evening from 5:30 p.m. for two months. When Tattu Geval was staged, the critics praised her performance. She had had no formal training in drama; there were no drama schools in Sri Lanka then. She had natural talent. Anyway, her photograph appeared in the newspapers. And a tobacco company selected her to appear on their annual calendar. That was in 1964.

ROBINSON: She was becoming famous in Sri Lanka.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, that’s what she said. In a way she was becoming famous. Dhamma Jagoda was doing his first play for the Drama Festival — in 1966 — and he in-
vited her to act in his translation of *Streetcar Named Desire*. *Ves Muhunu*. Before Prema accepted this offer, she went to Sugathapala De Silva for permission. You see she thought it was her duty to consult with him because he was the one who had brought her on stage. Actually, he told her that he himself was working on a play script, *Harima Badu Hayak*, based on Pirandello's *Six Characters*. And he told her she had to act in that. So she accepted that offer. She did very well in it too. She was called the Queen of the Stage by one critic who said she walked away with the play. He called her performance “sizzling”. Anyway, she was lauded as an actress who could dominate the stage merely by her presence. And for the festival of 1966 De Silva was ready with another script, *Hele Nagga Don Puta*. A Sinhala version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Tennessee Williams was popular here in those days. Dharmasiri Wickremaratna, Malini Weeramuni and Wickrema Bogoda were also in the production. Prema Gangoda played Maggie, of course. A difficult role. It moved her career forward.

ROBINSON: Before we move forward, could you go back to 1966 and briefly describe the Drama Festival of that year as an example?

KARIYAWASAM: O.K. There were three parts. An amateurs competition. Dhamma Jagoda's *Ves Muhunu* was awarded the prize for best production in that. There was a section of commissioned plays. That is, more established producers were invited to compete. Henry Jayasena, and Sugathapala De Silva, and Premaranjit Tilakaratna and S. Karunaratna took part. Others too, of course. The third section included selected plays of 1966. Plays by Bandula Jayawardhene, P. Welikala, Lucian Bulatsinhala, Chandrasena Dasanayaka. All together there were 18 productions. As you may have already guessed, the Drama Panel of the Arts Council adjudged Prema Ganegoda the best actress for the year. As for her critics, one said that the role of Maggie the Cat lent itself to Prema's uninhibited style of acting. Her style, you see, was rare in the serious Sinhala theatre of the time. And sexual frustration is not a topic that women in this country talked about. A woman was there to satisfy the sexual needs of a man — that was the end of it. Therefore to act a role so alien to our culture was a serious matter. Prema did it nicely.

ROBINSON: Could you describe Prema Ganegoda's acting style?

KARIYAWASAM: First of all, Prema is not a big woman physically, but she has a good stage figure. Her appearance on the stage was incomparable to any other actress's at that time. She is fair complexioned. This was another quality that attracted the audiences. But the main point was that she has a good voice. Even when she talks at home her husband advises her to talk smoothly. Her voice attracted the crowds. Her intona-
tion was very clear. It was colloquial language, and she knew what to do with that like an experienced Western actress. She was able to control the whole stage with her lively gestures. She was sometimes alone on the stage, but, unlike her counterparts of those days, she used the whole stage. They stayed under the spot light and uttered their lines. She did not do that. Sugathapala De Silva's stage lighting was very modern, and Prema was like a lively vigorous woman on the stage. She created moods in the audience.

ROBINSON: Please give us a little background on some of these theatre people you've referred to.

KARIYAWASAM: Dhamma Jagoda was a draftsman in the Surveyors Department. He acted in Henry Jayasena's *Kuveni*. He played the part of an attorney and became famous. He submitted his own *Ves Muhunu* to the Art Council's Drama Panel in 1966 and produced the best play and won the best actor's award. Later he produced *The Bear* and *The Proposal* by Chekhov. I myself translated these into Sinhala. Then Dhamma went to Britain to study drama. He was instrumental in introducing drama into school education in Sri Lanka. Later he was a producer of TV dramas. He was only 47 when he died.

Dharmasiri Wickremaratna was an advertising man. At J. Walter Thompson. Now he runs his own advertising business. He wrote original plays. He wrote *Ran Todu* (Gold Earrings) and produced it for the 1963 Festival. A controversial play questioning the validity of traditional values regarding female virginity at marriage. Later he wrote and produced *Handata Banda Iniman* (Ladders to Reach the Moon) a confrontation between reality and fantasy. For reasons unknown to me, he gave up writing. His *Sahan Eliya* (A Ray of Hope) of 1965 introduced Simon Navagattegama to the stage. It questioned the validity of arranged marriage.

Malini Weeramuni is the wife of Namel. He's an attorney and now practices law in London. Malini acted in *Ape Kattiya* productions. When he was a student at the University of Peradeniya, Namel himself acted in Sarachchandra's *Rattaran* (Gold). *Rattaran* is a folk tale. Husband and wife have their mothers in law living with them. The wife suggests getting rid of the husband's mother. When she's sleeping at night they take her to the cemetery to put her into a funeral pyre. But the husband, the old woman's son, realizes they have not prepared a fire, which they start to do. Meanwhile, the mother runs away into a cave in which robbers have hidden their booty. She frightens the robbers, who run away. She goes home with many precious things. She told her daughter in law that when you are burnt alive you get all your wishes in
heaven. The daughter in law burns herself in the pyre. The mother in law says she is a fool to believe such nonsense.

Back to the people. Premaranjit Tilakaratne wrote an original play, a dialogue play, *Vahalak Nati Geyak* (A House without a Roof). Vahalak is roof. But here it’s the father of the family. The problems faced by a family whose father is imprisoned for misdeeds done to earn some money to protect his own family. Tilakaratne also did Strindberg’s *The Father*. At first he was against the stylized plays, but he later changed his mind and produced *West Side Story*. Now he’s an administrative officer in the Ministry of Motor Vehicles.

And S. Karunaratna is an officer of our Central Bank. He first appeared in *Guttila Musila* in the 1960s and later produced Tennessee Williams’s *The Rose Tattoo* and Camus’ *Caligula*. Guttila Musila is also a Jataka tale. Guttila is Musila’s teacher. The student challenges his teacher to a performance. The old master refuses. But the king orders him to do it. The teacher, helped by the deities, wins. Musila is killed by onlookers. The dramatist questioned the impartiality of the king.

Bandula Jayawardhene used to be the Editor in Chief of the Encyclopedia of Buddhism published by our Ministry of Cultural Affairs. In 1960 he wrote and produced *Gosaka Vastuva*. It was the best script of that year. Gosaka is the name of a young boy. This is a Buddhist tale, too. A family problem comes up when Gosaka is refused his inheritance by his step-mother. Jayawadhene also did *Svarnahansa* (Golden Goose), and *Berahanda*, a Greek satyr play — he’s an expert on Greek theatre — and two originals, *Diyasena No Panineema* (The Non-arrival of the Future Leader), and *Bihi Vana Bosataneni* (May the Future Buddha Be Born), which is like *Waiting for Godot*. He believes in traditional folk theatre and he organized the Theatre to the Village Movement here. Theatre to the people. He became chairman of the Drama Panel after H. D. Sugathapla. He’s now in retirement. Diyasena is a mythical figure who will come to this world 2500 years after the passing away of the Buddha. That was in 1956. A controversy takes place in heaven, where all the great kings who died are living, as to who can go to Sri Lanka to save the country. It has a political theme in Bandula’s play. The people of the island believed that Diyasena was none other than S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who came to political power here in 1956! Bandula’s plays were too advanced for that time, not only thematically but also dramatically.

And P. Welikala is retired now too. He was a program producer of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. He was a pioneer in the writing and production of
radio drama in Sri Lanka. He also did a few translations for the stage. Especially Sanskrit plays. *Sudraka* (The Clay Cart) and *Sri Harsha Ratnavali*.

Lucian Bulatsinhala was a producer of TV programs. In 1966 he acted in Bandula Jayawardhene’s play in the Drama Festival. He was a good actor. He later wrote and produced his own plays. One of his popular productions was *Taravo Igletiti* (Ducks Are Flying). It was an adaptation into a musical of the Roman playwright Plautus’s comedy *Menaechmi* about twin brothers. Lucian was a lyric writer too.

Chandrasena Dassanayaka won the best production award in the school drama competition of 1966 with a satire of the U. N. He was influenced by Sarachchandra’s folk drama style. He was also an actor in *Rattaran*. Later he produced *Rankanda*, a Sinhala adaptation of *My Fair Lady*. Now he’s the General Manager of the Film Corporation.

**ROBINSON:** You said Dhamma Jagoda was instrumental in introducing drama into school education in Sri Lanka.

**KARIYAWASAM:** Yes, as I suggested, drama was not recognized as a subject in the school curriculum. Then in 1972 the Ministry of Education proposed to have it as a subject in the G. C. E. Advanced Level. Of course, in our schools teachers had used drama as a medium to narrate stories during classroom work, but, unfortunately, when the formal curriculum was prepared, its level was too high. Like an M. A. course in a university in the West! All the best things can be ruined in this country. When the students had no suitable subjects to enter with, Drama became the scapegoat. A subject not so serious. No books on the subject. Teachers gave students notes and students reproduced them at the exams and got through. Even without watching a single drama. Even without any practical experience. But they were able to get good passes in exams. It was an utter failure. I’m the controlling chief examiner for this subject, but I haven’t been able to change the structure yet. I have suggested to the authorities that we need a new, a good, syllabus.

**ROBINSON:** Shall we return to Prema Ganegoda — again? Of course, we can’t follow her career year by year, but, after 1966, what did she do next?

**KARIYAWASAM:** Actually, the next year, 1967, was a big year for her. De Silva’s *Bodin Karayo* was revived, and she was the leading actress in that too. She told me that it was a hectic job for her. They were booked every weekend, and they went from town to town all over the island. She also appeared in at least three films that year. Yasapalita Nanayakkara’s *Vasanti*. Ruby De Mel’s *Pipena Kumudu* (Blooming Flowers). And Douglas Kotalawala’s *Kinkini Pada* ( Anklets). But Prema concluded
that for her there was nothing like drama, like live stage productions.

To satisfy your curiosity about people’s backgrounds, Yasapaliya Nanayakkara is a businessman. He produced and directed popular Sinhala films. He’s become involved in politics lately and recently became a member of the Provincial Council. Ruby De Mel belongs to the upper middle class. She was involved in the art world. She appeared in Sinhala films as an actress. Later she directed *Pipena Kumudu*. Now she acts in TV dramas. Douglas Kotalawala is a businessman. He’s in rubber products.

ROBINSON: May I ask why you mention social class only in reference to Ruby De Mel? Are all these other theatre people from different social classes?

KARIYAWASAM: Mentioning Ruby De Mel’s social class is a common thing among Sinhala audiences. She’s from Colombo 7, the richest area of the capital. She’s from the upper middle class. She’s rich. She’s English educated. She speaks English well. None of the others who engage in Sinhala theatre and cinema here belong to this class. She’s an exception. Except for Irangani Serasinha, for example.

As for Prema, the next year, too, 1968, was a big year for her. She married Piyavijaya Fonseka. And while she was expecting her first baby, she was asked to play a role in Dharmasiri Wickremaratna’s play about a woman threatened by her own society. *Onna Babo Atinniya*, a political satire. The title comes from the line of a lullaby: “Look, My Baby, the Elephant!” The role was that of a pregnant woman. A suitable role for her, Prema said! After her child was born, she continued working in the Sinhala theatre. But her mother insisted if she went out for plays she had to take her child with her even while she was still breast feeding it. So she did. The baby was a boy. Born in the spring of 1969. Hasantha Vibhava. He’s now an undergraduate at the University of Salford. Anyway, with her child in her arms, she went to rehearsals, feeding the child during intervals. As a matter of fact, her husband often joined her. He was assisting in those productions too.

ROBINSON: You said before Piyavijaya Fonseka was an artist too.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes. He was the nephew of Bernard Lokuge, a famous art teacher. Lokuge studied at Rabindranath Tagore’s Shanti Niketan. Once he did the paintings for *pandal*. During Vesak, when the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and death are commemorated by Buddhists. Pandal are structures made out of arecanut tree trunks in such a way as to exhibit paintings of various scenes associated with the life of the Buddha. Actually, this is a notion that Buddhists here borrowed from the West. Earlier pandal exhibited the lives of Jesus Christ and certain Christian saints in church yards.
Illuminating bulbs are used. They're very attractive at night. Anyway, Piyavijaya assisted his uncle. He was also influenced by his brother Cyril Fonseka, who has had a number of exhibitions of his paintings. Piyavijaya studied art at Ananda College, Colombo, under Dayaratna Perera. He read about stage decor and costuming. In school plays he did the decorations. He's done art work in London too. For Buddhist ceremonies he's decorated altars. Traditional motifs: lotus, Wheel of Dharma. He was assistant art director in some of the Ape Kattiya productions. As a matter of fact, in 1971, in the Drama Festival, he won the prize for the best art director. He designed the costumes and stage sets and props for Simon Navagattegma's *Gangavak Sapatu Kabalak Saha Marananyak*. A long title, isn’t it? Translate it as A River, a Worn Out Shoe, and a Death. Bandula Vitanage produced it for the festival. And I don’t think it will surprise you that Prema Ganegoda acted the main role and won the prize for the best actress. Bandula Vitanage is a program producer in the drama section at the Rupavahini Corporation. He used to work in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. At that time Bandula Vitanage formed a Shakespeare Drama Group with Tony Ranasingha. He translated and produced *The Merchant of Venice*, and he produced *Twelfth Night* in Tony’s translation. Later he acted in a few Sinhala films. He translated into Sinhala Thornton Wilder’s *The Match Maker* (Senehebara Dolly, or Darling Dolly) and produced it. That was his most successful production.

ROBINSON: In the 1970s, then, did this creative couple — Piyavijaya Fonseka and Prema Ganegoda — continue to work together in the Sinhala theatre in Sri Lanka?

KARIYAWASAM: Well, no, because in 1972 they moved to London. With their son, of course. They settled down there. They have a very comfortable life there.

ROBINSON: You said they’ve been organizing evenings of Sinhala music and songs in London.

KARIYAWASAM: Yes. You see they have a comfortable life in London. “All the luxuries”, as Prema herself put it to me. But they both missed something. They had Sinhala music records, for example, but that could not satisfy their need. And, I must say, the need of other Sinhalese living in London, where there is little cultural activity that they can participate in. Did you know that there are up to 40,000 Sinhalese living in London? The point is Prema Ganegoda and Piyavijaya Fonseka arranged to have Sinhala films shown to the Sinhalese there. Then in the mid-1970s Namel Weeramuni’s play *Nattukari* — it was a Sinhala translation of a French play — was produced in London. Malini Weeramuni and other Lankan actors who had done it in Colombo in 1969, including Prema, performed it in London. It was an effort in behalf of their
cultural identity on foreign soil. After that, the two of them — with the assistance of the Sinhala Association — Piyavijaya was the main organizer and treasurer — the two of them brought over some Sinhala singers and musicians to perform for mainly Sinhalese audiences. Prema turned into the “mother” of Sinhalese artistes visiting London for the first time. She cooked food for them in the Lankan way. Our curries are prepared with spices, too, but they’re not as hot as Indian curries. Incidentally, Indian foods are not well known among Sinhalese people. Anyway, besides feeding them, she has to take them around because they’re not familiar with the roads or the subway system. May I add that she has a second son now, Tumula Udara, who is only seven years old, and she does all this with him in hand.

ROBINSON: Are all of these cultural activities official?

KARIYAWASAM: Not at all. As Prema told me, they’re doing the work of a cultural mission but unofficially. In lieu of an official one. They felt it was, it is, their duty to look after the artistes from Sri Lanka. If they didn’t help them, they would not have seen London in their life time. Sri Lanka has missions abroad, embassies manned with political appointees, but their activities to promote our culture are few and far between.

ROBINSON: Pardon my curiosity, but how do these two people make a living in London?

KARIYAWASAM: Piyavijaya works at British Airways. He’s a ground engineer. Very recently he’s started his own business — a super market type of complex — and has been doing rather well. But to continue about their cultural activities, he has organized Art Lanka branches in Paris, Rome and Munich. So when they invite an artiste from Sri Lanka he or she is able to perform in four countries. Prema has to telephone Art Lanka people in these countries to prepare lodgings for the performers. She has to telephone people in London too to describe performances and to sell tickets. Sometimes before she can sell a ticket over the telephone she has to sing some of the songs that will be in the show. She has to help decorate the hall. Then she introduces the show. Aside from this, most of the Sinhalese artistes who go to London cannot converse in a foreign language, so Prema has to act as a translator too. It’s not exactly on the point, but both her sons can help her in this because they speak English and Sinhala. Most of the Sinhalese children living in Europe cannot speak Sinhala.

ROBINSON: Am I correct that Prema Genegoda and Piyavijaya Fonseka do all this altruistically?

KARIYAWASAM: Yes, if you mean they do not receive remuneration for these efforts. But, as Prema told me they do these things because in a foreign country they need
ROBINSON: Now I'm curious about your impression of Sinhalese in London in general.
KARIYAWASAM: The Sinhalese in London are trying to make as much money as they can. They always think they must not associate with their fellow countrymen while they're in London because they may ask for some sort of help. There are 35 Sinhala organizations in London, and this shows the disunity among the Sinhalese. London Buddhist Vihara, Burmese Vihara, Croyden Buddhist Temple — all have Buddhist religious activities on Full Moon Day. But the participation is not much compared with the size of the Buddhist population in London. The Sinhalese in London have a problem regarding their culture. What sort of culture do they need in London? A singer must be able to sing baila and Western hits. They want to dance. Most of the children cannot speak their mother tongue, as I said. The point is this second generation go to school and learn English the whole day. They forgot Sinhala. There is no other Sinhala cultural knowledge to which they have access. The Sinhala people in London went there looking for greener pastures. They get jobs. Both husband and wife work. Children come home after school and cook for themselves. The second thing in life is housing. With the assistance of agencies they get a house or a flat on mortgage. Then, a car, then household goods, furniture, etc. Therefore, life is a struggle for them trying their best to make ends meet. It's not surprising that they don't have time for friends or for national religious or cultural activities. Recently I participated in the Sinhala New Year Day Festival in London. Fewer than a hundred people attended. Some of the Sinhalese in London have lost contact with their homeland, their parents, their friends — everything.

ROBINSON: Let me change this painful subject. You often refer to productions of Sinhala translations of foreign plays. Is this a recent practice in Sinhala theatre?
KARIYAWASAM: No, it's nothing new in Sinhala literature. Even in the 12th century our poets imitated Sanskrit poems written in India. Later they followed the models of Sandesa poems. The messenger poems of Kalidasa. When it came to drama, we got it all from India. Nadagama from South India. Nurti from Bombay. In cinema the same.

ROBINSON: I guess I was thinking of Western, European, drama.
KARIYAWASAM: Well, from the 1930s when the University of Ceylon started to produce plays, Professor Lyn Ludowyk did English plays every year, and he created a tradition. In 1945 he did The Marriage by Gogol for the Sinhala theatre. After that, the Sinhala Society at the University produced translations and adaptations of English plays. When Ape Kattiya was up in arms against the stylized tradition sponsored by
Dr. Sarachchandra, they accepted translated scripts. They did not do adaptations, though. Sugathapala De Silva selected mostly American and Italian plays. Of course, the problems dealt with in these plays — by Miller, Williams, Ibsen, Strindberg, Pinter, Ionescu, to name only a few playwrights — are not the problems of Sinhala society in Sri Lanka, but they had good productions. One point was that the audience for these plays was largely a bilingual one. They had sometimes read the plays and were longing to see them on the stage. But the plays themselves, depicting the economic and social problems of Western industrialized permissive societies, do not go hand in hand with our Sinhala society. For example, sexual life is treated differently. Of course, these things have changed a lot since the 1960s.

ROBINSON: Earlier you referred to some of the movies that Prema Ganegoda acted in — Vasanti and Pipena Kumudu, for two. What were they about in general?

KARIYAWASAM: They were average films but commercially successful. Ves Gatto (In Disguise) was a better film. Vasanti is a story of love between a city boy and a village girl. Disagreement among their relatives comes up. This theme is common to the contemporary popular Tower Hall cinema. Pipena Kumudu relates to the activities of an orphanage for young girls. They are subjected to various humiliations. The orphanage keeper earns money by exploiting them. As for Ves Gatto, it's the story of four young men. All of them are looking for employment. One is a university graduate. Prema's father — in the movie! — is a rich businessman. They come to him for help. She does not like the way her father treats these young people. She sympathizes with them. She falls in love with one of them.

ROBINSON: Also I got the impression that Prema Ganegoda did not particularly like acting in movies.

KARIYAWASAM: Frankly speaking, Prema did not get the chance to fully express her talents in the film medium. And acting in a drama before an audience was more satisfying for her. Film making is more of a business. But it was the producers who made the money. Prema has talked about this with me. For the cinema there was a script and a director. The actors did not need to study the script. The director told them what to do. He told them what sort of character it was and told them what they had to do. That was acting in the cinema in those days. On the stage with an audience in front of her, Prema really felt like acting. She still remembers one director coming to her and saying: "Prema, we must show our colors today. A good and intelligent audience." Prema enjoyed the personal contact with the people in the audience. When they went to Polonnaruwa or Anuradhapura, say, people used to bring the actors various presents.
In Matara they were given pots of curd. Matara is famous for its milk and curd.

ROBINSON: As for the economics of cinema, you gave the impression that actors did not make much money.

KARIYAWASAM: Prema says that actors were often cheated by film producers. Before she left Sri Lanka in the early 70s she filed suit against one such producer. They signed her to a contract, but they did not pay.

ROBINSON: On the other hand, she hardly could have made much money in the Sinhala theatre.

KARIYAWASAM: She says she was better paid in the theatre than in films. "Highest paid," she said. For two shows including one matinee, for example, she was paid 400 rupees. One show was 250 rupees. She was given taxi fare for rehearsals every day. Two rupees. You're interested in the economics of the arts in Sri Lanka, so... A whole play was given to an exhibitor in the outskirts for 750 rupees for one show. For two shows, 1200 rupees. Tickets were sold at two, three and five rupees. In shows for the schools the exhibitor was able to earn some money. Teachers used to bring the children to the theatre. It was part of their education. In the capital, Colombo, the producers sold tickets at the gates. They put up wall posters and advertised in the newspapers. They had to pay 125 rupees for the hall including lighting. They were serving tea and refreshments to the performers before and after the show. These theatre producers didn't make much money. They did it mainly for the pleasure. But, as Prema says, everything is changed. It's more commercialized now. For example, Sugathapala De Silva used to pay the actors from the first onwards. In the 1970s some producers introduced a system in which the actors had to do the first ten shows for free, without pay.