An Interview with Henry Jayasena on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Henry Jayasena is the Deputy Director General in charge of general programs of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation.

He was born on July 6, 1931, in Gampaha, an interior village about 32 kilometers from Colombo.

His early education was in the village Sinhala school. His English education began at Lorenz College, Gampaha, and continued at Nalanda Vidyalaya, Colombo.

In 1950–51 he was employed as an Assistant Teacher of English at Dehippe, Padiyapelella, in the hill country near Kandy.

In 1952 he entered government service.

In 1964 he received a UNESCO fellowship in theatre arts and travelled to the U.S.S.R. and the U.K.

In 1981–82 he was Deputy Director in charge of cultural activities in the National Youth Services Council.

He has written several plays in Sinhala and has been a drama director and producer. He has translated several foreign plays into Sinhala. He has also performed as an actor in both Sinhala and English dramas and in Sinhala films.

His television series on the theme of Communal Harmony was recently shown on national television.

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ROBINSON: Both you and novelist Alankarage Victor Suraweera were born in Gampaha. Is Gampaha famous for producing writers?

JAYASENA: I did not know that Professor Suraweera was born in Gampaha, which was a sleepy little townlet almost up to the beginning of World War II. The main contribution of Gampaha to the rest of the country was not writers or artists but bundles and bundles of betel leaves. Betel leaf is chewed along with other ingredients such as chunam, arecanut, a little tobacco and some sweet-smelling condiments. As you probably have noticed, this produces the effect of reddening the chewer's lips. Let me add that modern science has found out that betel chewing is a potential cause of mouth cancer. Apart from betel leaf, other money earners for Gampaha were bananas, pineapples, a fair amount of home garden vegetables, and rice.

ROBINSON: You say Gampaha was a sleepy little townlet, but something interesting probably happened once in a while.

JAYASENA: Yes. I remember once during an election campaign when I was a boy of eight or nine, a few of us children were going back home after a bath in the village stream, when a car stopped on the gravel road and a man spoke with us. That was the present President of Sri Lanka, Junius R. Jayawardene. He was on his rounds to get elected to the seat of Kelaniya, which included Gampaha. He gave us some sweets and nuts and asked us to request our parents to give their votes to him.

ROBINSON: You studied English in Gampaha at a local high school. Did many boys and girls study English in small towns in Sri Lanka in the 1930s?

JAYASENA: At that time, I believe approximately 30% of the population of the island would have been literate even in Sinhala or Tamil. Perhaps one or two per cent were literate in English.
ROBINSON: Apart from an early introduction to political campaigning, how did you get interested in theatre in Gampaha?

JAYASENA: I believe my desire to be in theatre—or, to be precise, to be in the limelight!—sprung from the fact that I was a very lonely child. As far as I was concerned, my family consisted of only my mother and me until I was nearly six or seven. Then my father, four brothers and a sister turned up from somewhere, and I was taken away along with them from Gampaha. My mother married a second time and had three more children by that marriage. My father also remarried, but there were no more children from that marriage. About two years later, we returned to Gampaha, by which time my mother was not there, and we lived with our father for at least two or three years before he decided to bring his second wife there. None of us attended school in any kind of logical manner; that is, we never started from kindergarten and sent up the ladder. We were schooled at home by my father until we entered school in the fourth or fifth grade.

ROBINSON: Yet you were employed as an English teacher. Why did you give up that job, by the way?

JAYASENA: You mustn't forget that I had no degree or any higher qualification than the Senior High School Certificate. The Government Clerical Service was an improvement over being an Assistant Teacher. The initial salary was ten rupees more. The promotional prospects were better. After joining the government service, I hoped to study further. I did finally sit for the London AL but had only partial success. That was about 1953 or 1954. I did not pursue any further formal studies after that.

ROBINSON: But you have risen rather high in government service.

JAYASENA: I was fortunate in the departments I was assigned to in the
clerical service. I was assigned to the Public Works Department, which is a technical department. In a technical department, a clerk is hardly ever noticed. So I could take a lot of time off for my theatre activities. Nobody in the office missed me, and nobody complained. When I won a couple of awards and the news appeared in the newspapers, it was a surprise to my bosses in the Public Works Department. I became a bit of a hero in their eyes. I was allowed even more privileges like short periods of leave, leave without pay.

ROBINSON: And now you are a Deputy Director General in the Rupavahini Corporation. How do you translate Rupavahini into English and what exactly is the corporation?

JAYASENA: Rupavahini literally means the carrying of pictures. Rupa is picture. Vahini is carrying. Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation is the state-run television organization. We produce and telecast nearly 60% of the total telecast. Telecast time per day is approximately six hours, from 5:30 p.m. onwards. We have a special morning telecast on Saturdays and an afternoon telecast on Sundays. Some of our documentaries, dramas and educational programs have won awards abroad. Incidentally, this television station is a gift from the government of Japan. It was set up on February 14, 1982. Besides the gift of the station and its equipment, Japan also sends us gift programs. We have received prestigious programs such as the World Music Album and a number of vintage films, including Rashomon and Seven Samurai.

ROBINSON: As a Deputy Director General of Rupavahini what do you do?

JAYASENA: As the Deputy Director General in charge of general programs, I am in charge of all programs made by the Drama Unit, the Variety Entertainment Unit, the Folk Arts Unit, the Tamil Programs
Unit, the Sports Unit, the Music (Oriental and Western) Unit, and the Films and Dubbing Unit. Occasionally, I contribute my own song compositions, one—episode dramas, and serials.

ROBINSON: Television broadcasting is still rather new in Sri Lanka. What is its status?

JAYASENA: Television has become easily the most powerful of the public media in Sri Lanka. Our population is approximately 16 million. According to the latest statistics, there are approximately 400,000 television sets on the island. But television viewing here is quite different from television viewing in the West or in Japan. In the rural areas here especially, a popular program on TV may be viewed by as many as fifty people at a time. This means that neighbors drop in to watch TV at any place where there is a television set.

ROBINSON: You used to be a Deputy Director in the National Youth Services Council. What is that?

JAYASENA: The N.Y.S.C. was set up in the 1960s under the government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Later its powers were enhanced. And after the United National Party came into power in 1977, it was even further strengthened. Now it functions under the Ministry of Youth Affairs. Practically all governmental youth services schemes are channeled and administered by the N.Y.S.C.

ROBINSON: What did you do in the N.Y.S.C.?

JAYASENA: I was in charge of the section for cultural activities and training. The work was useful and important. Under the auspices of the N.Y.S.C., I took cultural groups to countries like Singapore, the German Democratic Republic, and the U.S.S.R. To be a little more specific, the N.Y.S.C. maintains several youth groups—the Youth Ensemble, the Youth Musical Group, Oriental and Western bands, Men’s and Women’s Volleyball teams. These groups are housed and
fed by the Council and an allowance is paid to each member. These
groups are very popular in the country and have won several awards. I
was in charge of these groups for about two years from March 1981 to
February 1983. I composed lyrics for their songs, wrote plays for
them, and ballets. A song that I composed for the Council recently
won the Second Prize in an International Youth Song Contest in
Tokyo. I also produced the first video film of the dance and musical
groups.

ROBINSON: Before we go into detail about your work as a playwright,
would you briefly say something about your work as an actor?

JAYASENA: Since 1956 I have acted in a number of stage plays produc-
ed by reputable directors such as Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, P.
Welikala, Dayananda Gunawardhana, and others. For example, I
played the principal role of Prince Maname in Sarachchandra's
Maname for some time in 1956 and 1957. I have also played a number
of roles in over twenty films. In 1965, for example, I played the leading
role in Gamperaliya (Changing Village) adapted from Martin
Wickramasinghe's famous novel. The film was directed by Dr. Lester
James Peiris—he's Sri Lanka's most internationally known film
director—and it won the the first International Cinematic Award in
the New Delhi Film Festival in that year. As you know, I have also
done a little bit of acting on the English stage here too. My most suc-
cessful stage production has been my translation of Bertholt Brecht's
Caucasian Chalk Circle into Sinhala, which is still running into its 20th
year! Most of the members of the original cast are still playing the
lead roles: I play Azdak, my wife Manel is playing Grusche, Wijeratne
Warakagoda is doing the Narrator, and Santin Gunawardhana is
Simon Sashawa.

ROBINSON: I know you have done several translations and adapta-
tions—to mention only three: Sheridan’s *The Rivals*, Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance*, Aristophane’s *The Clouds*—but let’s deal now with your original plays written in Sinhala. Would you at least describe their main story lines?

JA YASENA: My first original play was *Pavukarayu*, in English The Sinners. That was in 1958. The story line is very simple. There is a poor family, a mother, her son and her daughter. The son is employed in the city in an unimportant job. The sister is to be given away in marriage. This requires a dowry, a present in cash to the bridegroom. Dowry giving is still a custom in this part of the world, you know. Her brother does not earn very much money, although the people in the village think differently. In desperation, the boy decides to rob an old money lender and in the process accidentally kills him. He takes the money to the village for his sister’s dowry. On the very day of his sister’s wedding, the police trace him back to the village and arrest him.

ROBINSON: Was *The Sinners* produced?

JA YASENA: Yes, but with a cast of university students. Not a very successful production. To go on, my second original was *Janelaya*, in 1959, The Window. A group of office workers are living in a boarding house in the city. The play deals with their individual aspirations, their loneliness and frustration. The characters are depicted symbolically. Mr. Sky is the ambitious hero, the one who reaches for the sky. The other characters are Governor, Minister, Commissioner, and so on. It was a semi-stylized play, dialogue interspersed with song and dance.

ROBINSON: Were stylized plays such as *The Window* common on the Sinhala stage in the 1950s?

JA YASENA: This was shortly after Sarachchandra’s *Maname* stormed the local theatre world. Doing a Sinhala play without at least a
measure of song and dance would have been unthinkable at that time. *The Window* was produced twice. The first time in 1959 with a cast of university medical students. It was not quite successful, but it created a fair amount of interest. The second time was in 1961. With more experienced actors, it was much more successful. Actually, the play was quite popular, and the Sinhala playscript was published.

ROBINSON: What was your third original play?

JAYASENA: *Kuveni*. As you know, that is the name of the first queen of ancient Sri Lanka. The play itself was a sort of updating of her character. I tried to symbolize all womankind through her.

ROBINSON: That reminds me of Kamala Wijeratne’s poem “A Love Like Kuveni’s”, which she wrote after seeing a performance of your *Kuveni*. The poem concludes: “O Kuveni / You are the timeless woman!”

JAYASENA: The general story of the play is based on the Vijaya legend. When Vijaya, the legendary founder of Sri Lanka, is banished by his father from India for his misdeeds, his ship is wrecked, and he lands in Sri Lanka. According to the legend, he meets Kuveni, the Queen of Sri Lanka. She falls in love with him. She offers to share her throne with him, an outsider. They were king and queen together for more than seventeen years. They had twin children, a girl and a boy. But Vijaya finally abandons Kuveni to marry a princess brought down from India. Of course, the play itself is worked out as a fantasy where time ceases to exist. I used the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. I make Kuveni to be reborn in modern society. She is still seeking her lost love. But a modern court of law can only offer her things like alimony and maintenance, but not the man she loves. Once again she is disillusioned. She goes back into the jungle in search of her twin children who are still waiting for her in the jungle. In the State Drama Festival of
1963 *Kuveni* won several awards: best script, best production, best music, and best actress.

ROBINSON: Your wife Manel?

JAYASENA: Yes. And to continue do you know the famous Western Opera by Rodgers and Hammerstein? "Oh, what a beautiful morning. Oh, what a wonderful day."

ROBINSON: As a matter of fact, I saw *Oklahoma* in Chicago in 1943 or 1944 with the original cast including John Raitt.

JAYASENA: My fourth original play *Thavath Udesanak, Another Dawn*, a pastoral play, was inspired by a few lines from that song. I wrote it in 1964. The plot revolves around one of my childhood experiences. As I mentioned earlier, when I was about 10 or 11 or 12, my father had come back to Gampaha and had settled down there on one of our properties. He had no proper job. In order to earn a living, he started a small dairy. I did a fair amount of work to help him, like feeding the cows and looking after the calves. I was very fond of a particular calf, and my father gave it to me as a present. It was very docile and would follow me wherever I went. Later, when the Second World War was over, in about the year 1945, we shifted to Colombo, where my father started some business. In the process, we had to sell all the cows and calves in our dairy. My pet calf also. Much later one of my friends came to visit me in Colombo and told me that my pet calf had fallen into a disused well and died. I always had a guilty feeling about that. And in this play the central character is, in fact, this particular calf, although it never appears on stage. In the play the calf belongs to a little boy, given to him as a present by his widowed father. The two of them, the boy and the calf, become great friends. Then there is a drought. The family (the father has a second wife by now) faces difficult times. Food becomes scarce. The woman falls ill. The father,
without telling the boy, takes the calf to town and sells it. This breaks the boy’s heart. But the rains come and it looks as if times are going to be good again. So the father promises the boy to buy another calf for him. The play is full of song and dance, and it proved to be quite popular, especially among rural folk. In fact, it is still performed at various schools as a school drama.

ROBINSON: What did you do next?


ROBINSON: I meant what did you write next, but what did you do in the U.S.S.R.?

JAYASENA: My Fellowship kept me very busy in Moscow. In the mornings I observed drama classes at the “Gee—tee—cee” or the “Mahth” theatre training schools. Or at the Bolshoi Ballet Training Center. I made excursions to theatre museums, the Stanislavsky Archives, and so on. In the evenings I attended drama, ballet, opera or puppet performances. Although I understood little Russian, I understood the inner language of the theatre.

ROBINSON: Then, what did you write after Another Dawn?

JAYASENA: In 1966 I wrote Mana Ranjana Weda Warjana, Strikes and Strikers. It was also a time of a fair amount of trade union activities. I was myself a trade union member of the General Clerical Service Union. I tried to look at both sides of the picture, that is, the striker and what compels him to strike, and the non-striker and what compels him not to strike. This play created a lot of controversy. I was criticized, especially by the left-wingers, for making out a fairly strong case for the non-strikers. But others who were less partial saw some plain truth in the production. If I’m allowed an opinion and a pun, I think it was one of my strongest and most “striking” produc-
ROBINSON: What then?

JAYASENA: In 1968 *Apata Puthe Mangak Nethe*? Loosely translated, Son! Have We No Way? Here again there is an interesting background to the play, I was inspired to write this play after reading a news report of the suicide of a student at the University of Peradeniya. The boy came from a very poor family. His father had either died or abandoned the family. The mother earned her living by what we call metal breaking, by breaking big pieces of rock into smaller pieces that could be spread on the road surface before being tared. It was on this income that she had to support her son who was bright enough to enter the university from a central school near Kandy. The boy had apparently been quite a bright student at that school, but perhaps the new and sophisticated atmosphere in the university had overwhelmed him. In addition to this, some of the nastier elements in in the university had tried to humiliate the boy by striking stones against the walls and pillars in the university premises and thus producing a sound like metal breaking. This was obviously meant to humiliate the boy by reminding him of his mother's occupation. To add to his troubles, the boy failed his first year's final examinations. As a result, the bursary—the scholarship—paid to him by the university was suspended. This was a regulation at that time. The boy—his name was Sumanadasa—apparently could not face his mother. Obviously, he could not carry on with his studies without the grant. This surely must have led to his suicide. I built my play around this incident. In the final scene, I have the mother sit by the graveside of her son and speak to him alone. The play ends with the mother telling the son:

Why did you do this, my son? I did not raise you up to be a defeatist. If I were you, I would have struggled alone. At least for the
sake of other children like you. I have no reason to live now, now that you are gone. But I will not take the easy way out. I will continue to live and will try to be an example to other mothers like me. Son, you must forgive me for saying this: I cannot forgive you for what you did. I am not angry with you, but I cannot forgive you.

At that time— in 1968—there were a lot of university reforms being effected in Sri Lanka. And for the first time in the history of universities in this country students boycotted classes. There were a lot of student protests. And they even tried to occupy the university grounds by force. For the first time, police used tear gas on the students. The entire system of bursaries and grants was questioned. Naturally, I combined all these elements into the play.

ROBINSON: Was Apata Puthe Mangak Nethe controversial too?

JAYASENA: Yes. As the production neared completion, the then Minister of Education I.M.R.A. Iriyagolla banned the performance of the play. You see, I brought to the open certain unpleasant realities of the time. I appealed against the ban. The Minister was good enough to send a junior minister to a preview of the play. And late in the night, after the preview, there was a discussion about the play among the Minister, junior minister and myself. That took place at the Minister’s private residence. The arguments and counter—arguments went on till nearly 2:00 in the morning. Finally, the Minister allowed the play to be performed with a few cuts and alterations here and there. And so we had the premiere of Apata as scheduled, on September 9, 1968. The play took the town by storm. There was a great demand for the play from all parts of the island.

ROBINSON: That must have been an unforgettable experience.

JAYASENA: What is most interesting and most unforgettable to me is that, when I took the play to Kandy, I went in search of the mother of
the boy who had committed suicide. I met her in a humble line—room in one of the tenements of Getembe in Kandy. I offered her a small financial gift that she accepted with great charm and dignity. What surprised me most was that, in looking back on her son's suicide, she told me, she had expressed, if not exactly, but almost the same sentiments that I had had the mother express at the end of the play.

ROBINSON: That is a good subject for a short story. But do you write fiction too?

JAYASENA: I have published one short novel and one children's story—and three collections of children's poetry.

ROBINSON: What's the title of the novel and, briefly, what is it about?

JAYASENA: Minusun Vu Daruwo. In English Those Children Who Grew Up. It's mostly autobiographical. It was published in 1965 as a dedication to my father. He died recently at the age of 101. The book captures all my childhood experiences, my parents, brothers and sister, as well as my own particular kind of loneliness. The narrative is rather loosely knit and even haphazard, but I would call it a moving piece of writing.

ROBINSON: Then, to continue, your seventh original play?

JAYASENA: That was Gamanak, A Journey. It was a short play presented with another short play by R. R. Samarakoon, Minihek, A Man. That was in 1974. Gamanak deals with the subject of the arms race among the powerful nations. A man and a woman are going out for a long journey. They are tired, hungry and thirsty. Several parties symbolic of the Power Blocs offer to feed them and help them. But at a particular price—that is, as long as they toe the line.

ROBINSON: And original play number eight?

JAYASENA: Eighth and last so far. In 1975 I did a play with a rather long title for a Sinhala play, Sarana Siyothe, Puthuni Hamba Yana. In
English, simply, Exodus. The play dealt with the problem of “brain drain” in, out of, our country. You know, students here enjoy free education, free medical care and food at subsidized rates. Bursaries and bank loans and other benefits are provided for young undergraduates. The young people who enjoy all these benefits end up as doctors, lawyers, engineers...... Immediately after they qualify, a good many of these professionals, whose services are absolutely essential for this country, leave Sri Lanka for better and more profitable opportunities in other countries. In the play, I tried to focus attention on the injustice of this attitude of these young people. I tried to tell them they should serve their country for at least some time before they go away because of their sheer greed for money and material comforts. Sarana was the least popular popular of all my plays. It did not turn out to be a particularly good production, either. It had only a few performances.

ROBINSON: That must have been a big disappointment to you as a playwright. But I understand you have been very successful as a producer of traditional Sinhala drama.

JAYASENA: Yes, in 1978 I mounted one of the most favorite vintage plays of John de Silva, the playwright of the Tower Hall era. As you probably know, the Tower Hall Theatre was the nerve—center of Sinhala theatre from the early part of this century until the end of World War II, when it was taken over by a cinema company. The giant cinema more or less annihilated the Sinhala drama. Then, in 1978, the present Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa bought back the Tower Hall Theatre and resurrected it in all its pristine glory. I was selected to produce de Silva’s Sirisanghabo for the opening of the re—awakened Tower Hall. Sirisanghabo was the name of a very pious king who ruled Sri Lanka in the middle of the third century B.C.
Sirisanghabo belongs to the Nurthya tradition, the tradition of Sinhala theatre that includes lilting songs, splendorous stage sets and costumes, and, of course, a moral. I brought out all these elements on the stage, if I may say so, in spendid style. The President, the Prime Minister the entire cabinet of ministers, the diplomatic corps, and a host of other dignitaries graced the opening night performance on the 15th of September in 1978. The production was a resounding success. At the Tower Hall alone, it was shown consecutively for twenty nights, and later it was repeated again and again. This was my last major theatre production on the stage.

ROBINSON: Does “last major production” mean you have done others?

JAYASENA: My final stage production was in early 1983 on the occasion of the Independence Commemoration Day of Sri Lanka, which falls on the 4th of February. I did a sort of massive spectacle called Jayathu Lanka, Hail Lanka. This was a sort of condensed history of Sri Lanka beginning with the landing of Vijaya over 2,500 years ago up to the present time. I used a cast of over 300 people on a massive built—up stage. The orchestra was over 60 people. I combined dance, drama, song, silhouettes, slides and even cinema projections, to bring out various aspects and facets of the history of Sri Lanka. It was performed for only two nights, on the 4th and 5th of February. They were very colorful and highly enjoyable evenings for the guests, who filled the Bogambara grounds of Kandy to capacity. That means a crowd of perhaps 10,000 people each night. This sort of production, of course, could never be repeated. Two days later I joined the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation. My latest work is a teleseries on the subject of communal harmony in 12 episodes. It is about the effort of a group of multi—ethnic people to create peace and harmony in their immediate neighborhood, a multi—ethnic housing complex in the heart
of Colombo. They hope that their efforts will spread to other areas too. I cannot say anything more about it, until I get the feedback from the viewers. All I can say is I worked very hard to maintain a balance in this series.

ROBINSON: Shelagh Goonawardene has told me about the theatre activity in Sri Lanka during the 1960s. Would you care to comment on that period?

JAYASENA: Those were great years. Great things happened in both the Sinhala and English theatre. The Tamil stage, too. That was a time when we learnt from each other, shared our experiences and talents, and even acted together on the same stage. It was mostly Karan Breckenridge who made this happen. "Breck" was the connecting link and the leading coordinator. "Breck" and Ernest MacIntyre and Shelagh and Lucky Wickramanayake and a host of others got together and revived their theatre group Stage & Set. They staged the most moving production of Death of a Salesman I have seen anywhere in the world. (Of course, my experience is limited.) It was such a moving piece of theatre that I simply sat down and wrote a review of the production and submitted it to Lankadipa, a Sinhala daily. I did not bother to think who I was writing for. I simply had to do it, to get the job out of my chest. Later I realized this was the first time ever that an English production of the local stage was reviewed in the Sinhala press. And that too by a Sinhala dramatist, if I may call myself one.