

A Sri Lankan Tale

After a ten and a half hour flight, eight hour drive, one hour spent digging the minibus tyre out of a sandy road, we arrive in Batticaloa, Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. This is where the Shakthi theatre group have been meeting, and the surrounding towns and villages are where the different members of the group originate.

Since 2008 when Pan, supported by the British Council and the Centre for Performing Arts, jointly trained young Tamils and Singhalese in forum theatre techniques, the performance groups have been presenting plays to villages across the area. Using forum theatre to engage villagers who have been affected by both the recent war and the tsunami, they encourage audience members to become empowered and to debate a range of social issues such as young marriages, the destruction of the stable family unit, child abuse and alcoholism. In preparation for their upcoming performances in Europe, members of both Tamil and Singhalese groups have come together to form a single theatre company which will present their work to the British Council and international NGOs at Act 2: The Power of Theatre Post Conflict conference in September in Geneva.

Pan (both myself and John Martin, Artistic Director) have arrived for a week-long stay in Sri Lanka in order to prepare the group for their upcoming trip and to see how they have been getting along over the past year and a half. For me, it is my first time both in Sri Lanka and on an international trip with Pan, so I am particularly excited about seeing the work put into practice in an international context. After introductions (with 3-way translation in English, Singhalese and Tamil) we spend time catching up. As we move around the circle the group's experiences are both surprising, moving and often told with humour. For many it is the reaction that the performances have elicited from audience members that is the most revealing; men, women and children, many of whom have never seen a piece of theatre before. There has been no shortage of audience volunteers getting up on stage to have a go at 'interventions', where they decide an alternative plot outcome, one which sees the oppressed empowered. There have been tears, laughter and even threats of violence against evil characters with the excellent facilitators in the group being experts at diffusing a violent situation and using the moment to suggest a more positive alternative. It is heart-warming to hear the pride in the young people's voices as they tell of performing to over 500 audience members late at night, with emergency stage lighting supplied by a British Council jeep. Another young woman, Prabha, tells how, after dramatising the story of a father forcing his young daughter to marry, she was asked by female members of the audience who were experiencing a similar problem, to come to their house and speak to their father. After a discussion, the father changed his mind and agreed to allow his daughter to continue her education rather than marry.

Listening, I can't help but marvel, after spending countless hours in the office on evaluation forms, that here is impact assessment in its purest form!

No hands fill the air when the question is put to group if any of them have travelled out of Sri Lanka. With help from a Swiss Tourist Board promotional DVD we attempt to prepare the group for their upcoming visit to Geneva. Take spice, jumpers and closed shoes! They will be travelling via London to Geneva to spend a week working with young people from post conflict areas across the globe, trained by John and Pan artists. This will culminate with the group performing at the Act 2 conference before flying to London for a two day stay which will see them perform in a London venue before flying back to Colombo. For the most seasoned traveller quite an itinerary, for this group, who have never been on an airplane before, it is a lot to take in!

The following days are spent putting together scenes from past performances to create a storyline which will portray the social issues in Sri Lanka as a result of war to a European audience. Having the experience of the past 18 months behind them this is relatively easy for the group as they are aware of which issues the local audience best relate to. The complicated bit is bringing together a Singhalese and Tamil cast, many of whom don't speak each others' language and asking them to act alongside each other

in both languages ensuring that they make the action and dialogue clear to an audience who might only speak one of the languages. Add 38-degree heat and it gets even more confusing!

Actually it is impressive how easily the group adapt to a mixed language performance and how hard they work each day, keeping their energy levels up so that each rehearsal gets better and better. In between rehearsals they also provide interviews to a British film crew which has accompanied Pan on the trip and arrange for the film crew to visit their homes to interview their families (often returning with tasty sweet treats from their parents for us!). At the start of each morning one member of the group leads us in a warm-up session, this is good practice to get them ready for leading sessions with the other young people on the training programme in Switzerland. It is also a good bonding exercise and testimony to the power of drama and movement in overcoming barriers such as language.

With the sounds of Sri Lankan pop music booming out of the stereo our rickety bus manoeuvres over the bumpy pothole laden Batticaloa roads. It is our final evening with the group and we are off to Mahiladitivu, a village about an hour's drive from the town to premiere the performance to a live audience. To get there we must board a river ferry. I say ferry, but actually a plank of metal with an outboard motor attached. Thankfully, I think to myself, the ferry operators have deemed the bus too heavy to cross so we pile on board with the equipment, British Council jeep and locals with their motorbikes. We make it across and the performers then squeeze into four tuc tucs to ensure that they get to the village on time. Eventually we all arrive and start to set up in the village central space which has a small stone stage dedicated to those who were killed in the village in 1987 as a result of the war.

As we hang the banners and set up the lights the village children help us carry the chairs from the school for the audience and slowly people start to gather to see what is going on. As I wait for the audience to gather, a group of young girls from the village come and sit with me and we exchange short sentences in English. They tell me their names, ages and their ambitions, many of which are to become teachers. Behind me the film crew are surrounded by young children who are intrigued by the camera and the iPod which we have set up to entertain them with the latest films. We finally get the loudspeaker working (by attaching the wire directly to the overhead electricity pylon – don't tell health and safety!) which will blast out music to announce the performance across the village and its outskirts. As dusk draws in and more villagers take their seats, the performance is ready to begin.

The performance tells the story of Kumari, a girl who suffers at the hands of various oppressors with the recent conflict in Sri Lanka being the crux that starts the downward spiral of her life. After her father is killed in the war, her mother decides to go and work abroad with the idea of providing a better life for her family who she leaves in Sri Lanka. Kumari is then raped by an alcoholic uncle, forced into a marriage with an abusive husband by her grandmother and dies from a beating by her husband and the negligence of the local hospital nurse. Her husband then turns his attention to her younger sister whom he wants to marry and when grandmother tries to protect her granddaughter he turns the violence on her, killing her and leaving the youngest sister alone and afraid. It is a sad tale which highlights real social issues facing the Sri Lankan people in the aftermath of a 30-year war.

However Shakthi's strap line is 'power to the powerless' and the second half of the evening sees a repeat of the performance with a request for the audience to shout 'Stop' whenever they feel there is an opportunity in the plot for the oppressed to stand up to the oppressors and change the outcome for the better. There is certainly no shortage of volunteers with women and men, young and old, taking to the stage in order to have their say against the negative characters in the play. We are in the village of one of the performers and her father takes a turn on stage, acting alongside his daughter to change the fate of Kumari for the better. This is all done with the excellent skills of Shakthi's two performer/facilitators who ensure that the audience and performers fully understand the potential outcomes of the performance. After a full day rehearsal, the journey to the village and a two-hour evening performance, topped off with a helping of the Sri Lanka sun, I admire the energy of the group's performance. However on the bus journey home most of us collapse into a bumpy back road snooze, against the backdrop of a British/Sri

Lankan rap intercultural dialogue between the film crew and the performers at the back of the bus, and the occasional military checkpoint stop.

After the final breakfast of toast and egg hopper we pay a last visit to the group in order to help them fill out their Swiss visa forms. This takes a little longer than expected as half way through we are all ushered into a building for a security search, due to the imminent arrival of the President's brother...but we're used to this kind of interruption by now!

As we climb into the British Council jeep for the final journey back to Colombo, the group wave us goodbye, or I should say 'See you soon' – Prabha, Senthu, Nilu, Niro, Prasad, Gopi, Prince, Shani, Vakshi, Yali, Rasika – See you in Switzerland!