
OSMUND JAYARATNE ON E.F.C. LUDOWYK & THE UNIVERSITY THEATRE MOVEMENT

In my very first year, I came under the influence of Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk, who had directed a play while I was at Royal College. The very first English play that I participated in at University was Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millions*. This refers to the travels of Marco Polo to China and back again. Oh! It was a marvellous play with wonderful references to that period, and a piece of very good drama. I was cast in the role of the 'Chronicler.' Right through the play, before every scene, I had to sit cross-legged at a side of the stage, wearing an 'exotic' turban, dressed in colourful garb, and I had to introduce every theme in the play, in poetic language.

There were other plays, directed by Professor Ludowyk, in which I participated. Bernard Shaw's play, *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isle*. The Italian dramatist, Pirandello's *Right You Are! If You Think So*.

During my university years I acted in 12 plays directed by Professor Ludowyk, first as a student and then as a junior lecturer in Physics.

In the play by Bertolt Brecht, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, again I played the lead role. The female role was played by a good friend of mine, Jeanne Pinto who is unfortunately now dead. Of course, we were unaware of Brecht's politics then. We treated it then just as a play. I must mention, in particular, my role in a play, known as *Tobias and the Angel*, by James Birdie. This was a little biblical story and I played the role of Tobias, and I think I played it very well.

We had a great occasion to look forward to at the end of each performance. Professor Ludowyk and his wife Edith would invite the entire cast to a party at King George's Hall or KG Hall which was a well-known venue of the University where all the plays were performed. Edith Ludowyk was a very accomplished artist who assisted Professor Ludowyk in his productions, and was also a great psychoanalyst who was a member of the executive committee of the International Psychoanalytical Association.

Professor Ludowyk was a very good pianist, and was very fond of German music. On those occasions he would sit at the piano and play piece after piece and song after song: he could sing as well and would sing to us songs also in German. Of course, there were many servings of short-eats, and soft drinks. Every play produced by Professor Ludowyk was an adaptation of a play by an English author, or many continental plays translated into English. His contribution was a massive one. Associated with Professor Ludowyk were two men, both whom I greatly respected. Professor Cuthbert Amarasinghe who helped Professor Ludowyk in all of his productions, and Arthur van Langenberg, a great proponent of English drama who also helped in Professor Ludowyk's plays.

Plays directed by Professor Ludowyk became a big social event in the city of Colombo attracting the English-speaking middle and lower-middle classes. People looked forward to these plays, the whole of King George's Hall was a mass of people. There was tremendous enthusiasm among the visitors, while the press too did us a very great favour. Every one of Ludowyk's plays received encomiums, which no production of that kind received ever before.

It was the custom to repeat each play on three separate occasions. This was the general practice. I have never known a play that went on more than three times. After the three performances of a play in the King George's Hall, some of them were taken to Kandy and staged in the beautiful hall of Trinity College. Once, I cannot quite remember when, a play was taken to the northern city of Jaffna. The English-speaking people of Jaffna appreciated it very much and organized a special dinner for Professor Ludowyk and all of us. Later, I remember taking one play to Batticaloa. As a result of these repetitions more people than ever got the opportunity of seeing Ludowyk's plays. They will never forget the beauty of the productions by Ludowyk.

Now 12 plays in a university career is an achievement. I was in the university for a period of four years, continuing there as a lecturer too. However, I am very sorry that I was unable to take part in the last play during university, where despite my inadequate knowledge of Sinhala, I might have been able

to do a fair performance if chosen. This was the famous Sinhala play *Kapuwa Kapothi* which was the Sinhala version of a Molière play, produced by Ediriweera Sarachchandra. It was directed in Sinhala with the help of Professor Ludowyk, and first staged in King George's Hall.

Sinhala Theatre and Sarachchandra

I must say, although Ludowyk's main preoccupation was English drama, he had a crucial role in Sinhala theatre as well, influencing the Sinhala Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra, who later developed his own idiom based on 'Nadagam' plays. Of course as drama enthusiasts we were proud of his famous plays *Maname* and *Sinhabahu*, and I still remember his little piece *Rattaran* and *Elova Gihin Melova Ava*: both of which I think were played on the same occasion. Sarachchandra, although living in Peradeniya, was deeply interested in Ludowyk's productions. He came very often to Colombo and would sit through some of his plays as well as the rehearsals. Sarachchandra greatly admired Ludowyk's pioneering role – even though it was in the English language – in developing drama in universities, and they were intellectually very close. I know that he and Ludowyk had many, many discussions, on various aspects of drama, on dramatic form, not only of Sri Lanka, but of Indian and international theatre as well. Professor Sarachchandra studied and was later influenced by Japanese 'Kabuki' plays too. He studied it for one year in Japan. Through his experiences in Japan, and through Japanese Kabuki theatre, he introduced Japanese elements to some of his later plays.

Professor Ludowyk and Professor Sarachchandra were great characters who contributed so much to Sri Lanka drama and culture the extent of which can be hardly imagined. This will never be forgotten by anyone who has some interest in the background of culture and drama in our country. I have had discussions with Professor Sarachchandra, who gratefully acknowledged the help he received and his admiration of the methods of Professor Ludowyk – I consider Professor Ludowyk also a pioneer in the development of Sinhala theatre. In 1947 Sarachchandra was known only for his literary activities. His plays, for which he became famous,

came only in the mid-fifties. The works of Sarachchandra were known to the whole country. Later everybody admired his contributions to the resurgence of Sinhala drama. Sarachchandra's contribution to Sinhala drama long pre-dates the Bandaranaike era, which began in 1956.

Men of the calibre of Professor Sarachchandra -- the father of modern Sinhalese drama -- if you consider these pioneers during this period, dramatists, even various artists, not one of these pioneers were involved in or had any connection with communalism. They were independent in their views. It might also be noted that there was no contribution by the then well-known bourgeois Sinhala nationalist organizations to the development of Sinhala drama or to the work of those like Sarachchandra in that period. This development was entirely carried out by a set of young intellectuals both within and outside the university who were influenced by progressive ideas.

All the plays that I participated in were in English and my entire education of course was in English. I will talk later of how I became very competent in Sinhala, but back then I could not take a Sinhala script of a play, look at it, read it and memorize it. I did not have that capacity. Therefore I did not participate in Sinhala plays.

Twenty-five years later, after the death of Professor Ludowyk, his friend the late Percy Colin-Thomé, former judge of the Supreme Court, collected a number of actors, including myself, in order to replay *Marco Millions* by Eugene O'Neill: as a tribute to Professor Ludowyk and the English Drama Society. It was easy for me because *Marco Millions* had been the very first play in which I took part in the university. I had the same role I played then: once again the Chronicler introducing every theme. I now believe the chronicler was really similar to what in our subsequent Sinhala plays came to be known as the *Pothé Gura*. I do not know precisely from where Eugene O'Neill obtained this idea. I never knew whether it was from the Eastern or Western classical tradition. But that was the role I played, the role of *Pothé Gura*. That replay was a great success, and nostalgic for all of us. ■

(Extracts from the *Memoirs of Osmund Jayaratne*, Chapter 2, pp.11-16)

Professor Emeritus Osmund Jayaratne who died on August 31st, 2006, was a frequent contributor to *Polity*.