

REVIEWS

PINTER'S HOUR

The University Drama Festival—September '93

Denice Landers

The Inter-University English Drama Festival was an event of significance both within and without the hour upon the stage. Happening so rarely, it is the focus of greater notice than perhaps warranted. Apparently this occasion was not made a competition, so as not to scare off fledgeling participants treading their first hour upon the stage.

The subtext of event might yield a reading of dons who had finally figured that containment of the revolutionary impulse was a big, subtle and fulltime business, that might do well to take a page out of the old school ideology, *mens sano corpo sano*. Which might mean helping students let off steam by gadding about the playing field or the stage and, perhaps incidentally, providing them with something of greater value than notes, if not greater employability; which was indicated by the fact that the festival had a healthy peppering of dons in theatrical gladrags.

Pinter himself truistically is a product of his age, but perhaps equally a product of the critical culture, created by the merchandisers of ideas and cultural norms, subject to the dictates of supply and demand, product image, consumer perception, sales figures and market shares. It is my deepest suspicion that the kind of symbiotic relationship you-scratch-my-back-I-scratch-yours, between the critic and the artist, highlighted by one critic as the characteristic of the Sinhala stage, might apply in a far more sophisticated, subtle and unsolicited way to the emergence of the Theatre of Menace. Pinter's sellability was that he discovered a distinct voice and tone.

Kelaniya University's production of one of Pinter's later plays *Mountain Language* is an ideologically sound good-guys vs. bad piece play about how the lackeys of a nasty authoritarian regime will not disallow the next of kin to the standard harassment. These are perennial situations of drama and human existence, which the French wartime playwrights in particular had a whopping good time with. Of course what would be the beginning for some playwrights is the be all and end all for Pinter.

Denice Landers calls himself a thespian.

A young wife waiting to see her prisoner husband says to the prison guard some thing to the effect of "I want to see my husband, it is my right"!

"My Right". I wouldn't say the word to a traffic cop.

The problem and challenge with Pinter is that one has to move inward into the script and find an internal dynamic inside the lines. The static, almost tableau quality of the storyline is of no assistance. Either you have the audience spellbound, or talking to each other. The Kelaniya production did not really get inside the lines, relying instead on the resonances to the current ethnic situation to carry it through. Further one might think the editing of the play which is a curiously hard thing to do with Pinter was perhaps done without sufficient care.

The play *Family Voices* was originally written for the radio. It traces the changes in a young man through a series of letters home and the responses of his aging neglected mother. Of course things tend to become improbable as the play introduces a dead father who talks a great deal and naturally too. Funny how even absurdity works only if constructed to be so, by an unmentioned agreement between the players and actors, something this production particularly lacked. The Institute of Technological Studies players seemed determined to treat the 'radio play' as literally sacrosanct; however, one hopes for more thought if less ambition in their future efforts.

Peradeniya University dished out a relatively competent, vintage Pinter—*Old Times*, which again is a delving into a transitory, ephemeral and uncertain past. This time between a couple and their relationship with a third party—the outsider who revels in the unconventional. The production was stark and low key. Three actors, two female and one male stood on stage with three blocks of wood for props on which they sat, leaned and lounged and talked about an obscure past vaguely to do with the energy and sexuality of youth. Of course Pinter's approach is *a la sex!*—lets talk psychological layers of London dwellers. The impetus for this play comes from the quest that yields a continuous ordering of the past for the characters and the audience. The production was characterised by much control in voice and restraint in movement.



ty Time was Pinter's version of "nava gilunath ban on." Lots of superficial glitzy people having a good time while lots of human beings who are not superficial or glitzy are getting killed. It appeals to the righteous and the politically correct. As that great iconoclast Gamini Hathotuwigama once said, "political titillation for the audience". Colombo University's literal Black and White approach with the sparse edge of colour and lighting gave the production a hard glinting edge. But then it is impossible to say anything about Pinter without using the word menace. The Colombo production literally mouthed every word with it. Despite this backstage commandment, the acting was excellent. A well-filled, carefully cast production which only sagged by the weight of the single word.

For the players of the evening this reviewer would choose Bryan Jeganathan of the Colombo Campus production, who as the whimsical host of the party enjoyed himself hugely on stage. It was a nice reminder of how small one can play to what clear effects. Sashikala Mendis combining profile and languor to great effect as a bored socialite, purred her way through the party. Udayanga's startling entrance as the tortured 'brother' Jimmy, needs to be remarked on for its virulent intensity that unfortunately went beyond the delicate threshold of belief.

As far as the Peradeniya triad went, it would be impossible to divorce the players from each other and single out a performance. The subtle interplay between the three was a key to its success.

GENDERING IMAGES IN FILM

A festival of short films took place amidst a spate of film festivals in September, and passed without mention in the local press, perhaps, due to the lack of glamour in its subject matter. *Women of Sri Lanka*, presented by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, dealt with various aspects in which women are victims of gender discrimination in Sri Lankan society, whether it be in their respective religions, work-places or homes.

The films, most of them with a screening time of less than half an hour have been made for, and used by, non-governmental organisations with the intent of awareness building, consciousness raising, and generating discussion after screening. Very few of them have been aired over the public television networks.

The work screened varied in cinematographic quality, and some made a deeper impression on this viewer than others. For instance in films such as Ein Lal's *Shakthi Pirakkuma?*, which examines the waning power of the goddess Shakti and the changes within Hinduism, in Sharmini Boyle's *Violated* that equates gender based violence with the violation of women's fundamental rights, and in *Invisible Contribution* which highlights the fact that women's participation in the agrarian economy is hindered due to the fact that the vital role played by them in agricultural production goes unrecognized, one was struck strongly by visual images and narratives which were combined with skill by two women film makers who handle their medium with technical mastery, and obviously have the assets of good cameramen and editors. It is these technical skills that Sriyani Perera lacked in her *Beeralu Sittham*, which explores the difficulties faced by women lacemakers in Southern Sri Lanka and the extent

to which they are exploited. One wished for less panning, tighter editing and more overt commentary from a woman-director obviously sensitive to abusive exploitation of women of all ages.

Against these strongly stated films committed to women's empowerment, a few such as Chandraratne Mapitigama's *Saviyaki Aa* a stilted tele-drama made for the Women's Bureau and aired over Rupavahini on International Women's Day, '93, stood or rather limped in contrast because of the script's lack of sensitivity on feminist issues. The film had one young Wonder-Woman battling a host of stereotypes and traditional expectations in a village. One wondered about the confusion created in combining propaganda for the rural banks and sensitising awareness in gender discrimination. This viewer regrets having missed Shani Jayawardena's *Women Credit and Shelter* and, *A Woman's Place*, both films on development, and Anoma Rajakaruna's *Vilangu* a film on illegitimate pregnancy and responsibility in society, work by two women film directors who have, hopefully, only taken leave of working in this medium and not given it up altogether.

At a time when we are making a conscious effort at ethnic harmony it would be moot to request film makers and the organisations that fund them to include and combine more visual images that are empathetic to all cultures and not only that of the dominant culture of our society. But given the short five years in which films of this genre have been used as a vehicle of expression for women's issues, this viewer hails the courageous efforts of its organisers and wishes them more patronage from television networks and audiences next year.

L.G