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Peacebuilding through Theatre Arts in Sri Lanka:

“Checkpoint” as a Case Study

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Abstract

In Sri Lanka, the contribution of the arts towards conflict studies and peacebuilding is rarely acknowledged, and many scholars and conflict resolution activists seem to exclude this area consciously. While all forms of the arts have the potential of making an impact on conflict peacebuilding, theatre can be highlighted as effective as any other form of art because “theatre is (also) a form of knowledge; it should and can be means of transforming society” (Boal 2001:xx). Moreover, Boal (1979:7) states that “drama is practically effective in changing attitude because it holds the real experiences of its participants in mind at the same time that it creates an imagined world in which characters are engaged in struggling with the central paradox”.

The treatment of this research is twofold. Introductorily, the study views, in brief, what peacebuilding is; amongst a myriad of definitions that are transient and influx some relatively important theorists are discussed. Next, the theoretical backdrop to applied theatre is examined so that the dynamics of applied theatre could be examined in detail in the textual analysis. Here, theatre is recognized as a successful mode of building and rekindling memories: memories help people to build identities, restructure them, give them the drive and construct their politics. Then, in the first part of the study, the research records the trends in theatre in Sri Lanka and its receptiveness towards “peacebuilding” by looking at textual evidence in some of the plays that have been written based on the issue of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

Initially, when observing the general trend of theatre it is clear that theatre in Sri Lanka is divided on linguistic grounds. While Tamil theatre is found only in the Tamil spoken north and in the diaspora, Sinhala plays can be found touring throughout the island and English plays are found mainly in Colombo and Kandy. Although textual evidence of Tamil plays are not included in the study, partially due to time restrictions and the author's inability to understand the language, the Sinhala and English plays that have been presented in the mainstream theatre from 1998-2008 are examined extensively in terms of their thematic context; the ethnic conflict. In the process the author identifies that there are general shifts in terms of theatre trends in Sri Lanka: English theatre embodies a paradigm shift towards 'boulevard theatre' mode and in Sinhala theatre there is a significant decline in the numbers being produced and the actors seem to shift from theatre to small screen productions.

Out of the mainstream Sinhala and English mainstream theatre productions five plays are selected and the characterisation, plot and genre are examined in order to determine their ability to build peace through perspective change. Both the Sinhala plays have been penned by Visakesa Chandrasekaram and they engage with various issues dealing with the ethnic conflict. While *Thahanam Adaviya* deals mainly with the psyche and the making of an LTTE suicide bomber, *Sehesi Danawwa* deals with the futility of segregation according to ethnic identity. The three English plays examined in this study are MacIntyre's *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* and *He Still Comes from Jaffna* and Delon Weerasinghe's *Blood is thicker than Water*. MacIntyre's *Rasanayagam's last Riot*, is set in the heat of 1983 July pogrom where the dilemmas of Sita Fernando, an English speaking Tamil married to a Sinhalese, and the dynamics of her relationship with her husband and her own people are explored. The plot

gets thicker as Phillip's university friend Rasanayagam, a Jaffna Tamil residing in Colombo, exiles in the Fernando household in Wellawatte to escape the persecutions of the Sinhalese mobs that go on a killing spree. Tamil nationalism and ethnic identity cause the death of Rasanayagam and the migration of Fernandos mark a rejection of discrimination based on ethnic grounds. In *He Still Comes from Jaffna*, comedy is juxtaposed with human tragedy and various issues about migrant (internal as well as external) Tamils, the loss of their homeland, the meaninglessness of racial identity, violence and terror incited by the LTTE and issues relating to social class are discussed with natural poignancy. Delon Weerasinghe's *Blood is Thicker than Water* is a rendering of corruptive party politics in the country and how a disabled soldier donned with the mantle of 'war hero' becomes a victim of a devious politician. Moreover, Major Suresh's realization about the futility of war coupled with his frustration of being disabled creates a pathological pessimist who is critical of the war machine. Here too, the value of ethnic identity is discussed in detail and with the death of Major Suresh at a political rally the play foregrounds the brutality of politics, perhaps worse than the war itself.

The second part of this study considers *Checkpoint- Three Strangely Normal Plays* directed by Ruwanthi de Chickera (performed from 1st -5th of September 2006) as a case study; the actions, reactions and suggestions that took place in the theatre are recorded. Special focus has been given to the "forum theatre" performance that was built around the ethnic conflict, which was acted on three days, and the success or failure of the performance in making an impact on the audience is devised along the social and cultural dimensions of the sample. It was evident that the 'classic realist model' that the Sri Lankan audiences are used to

impinges on the vitality of forum theatre practices. Further, the envisioning of forum theatre as a mode of pure entertainment fundamentally allows the audience to trivialise the situation and turn it into a 'spectacle'. Moreover, the study analyses the *Checkpoint's* deviation from 'theatre of the oppressed' and the pros and cons relating to this deviation. Consequently, the study highlights the short-term effectiveness of such mechanisms that can be remedied by continual theatre practices such as 'street theatre' and if practiced regularly they can be synergised with conventional peacebuilding tools.

