

# Two Sri Lankan actors shine on the London stage

By Gerard Raymond

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Hiran (with Muzz Khan)

“Talent is one thing, application is another, but you also need good opportunities when you start,” says Sri Lankan-born actress Thusitha Jayasundera, talking about the secret for success in professional theater. Both she, and fellow Sri Lankan actor Hiran Abeysekera, have certainly got all three requirements. They are currently performing in *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*, a new play by the eminent English playwright David Hare, at Britain’s National Theatre in London. We chatted recently with the two actors about their current work and their paths to becoming professional actors in England.

*Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*, based on the award-winning book by Katherine Boo, depicts life in Annawadi, an impoverished, makeshift shantytown surrounded by a string of luxury hotels near Mumbai’s international airport. Abeysekera plays Sunil, a plucky teenager from the slum who tries to eke out a living as a rubbish picker. “He is full of life and energy and completely fearless, and his main ambitions are to eat well and be taller,” says the actor, who delivers both the opening and closing lines of the play. Jayasundera plays Fatima, the most desperate character

in the story. “She’s a very damaged person,” explains the actress. “Fatima grew up in a very rural environment and the combination of being born a female and having a deformity from polio has meant that she has suffered enormous abuse. Ultimately, she takes these irrevocable steps to be avenged against the family who live next door to her and ends up killing herself, while completely destroying them.”

Jayasundera arrived in London in 1990 to study at RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, one of the leading acting schools in the UK. Abeysekera attended the same institution some 18 years later. Coincidentally, they both discovered their love for theater at the age of fourteen.

“I felt very rootless and not really settling into school very well; my house captain said I should do something with myself and



Thusitha is in the middle in pink (others in the photo, Mariam Haque and Meera Sayal)





Hiran Abeysekera



Thusitha Jayasundera

persuaded me to audition for the inter-house drama competition," recalls Jayasundera. She got cast in the lead role (the King in a parable version of *The Ugly Duckling*) and received the prize for Best Actress as well. "Something stirred inside me at that point and I got very addicted to that feeling of achievement."

Abeysekera got picked for his first stage role – a rat in *The Pied Piper* – because he had been misbehaving in class: "My teacher got me to stand on the desk because I had done something naughty," he recalls with a grin. "Then, another teacher, who was looking for actors to cast in a play, happened to walk in; I heard my teacher say to her, pointing at me, 'Oh, you want someone who can dance? This one can dance very well.' That's how I got picked. Once I started acting, I just loved it."

After that it was just a matter of time before their exceptional talents propelled them forward. Having seeing her perform at an inter-school Shakespeare drama competition, the late Richard de Zoysa,

who was one of the judges, urged Jayasundera to apply to a drama school in England. In Abeysekera's case, he caught the eye of William Scott Richards, who directed him in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Abeysekera's performance in the lead so impressed Richards that the director helped pave the way for the young actor to get to England to study acting.

After she finished at RADA, Jayasundera received the kind of breaks that, twenty years ago, didn't come very often for South Asian actors. "I wasn't cast to type or to race – this is where opportunity and good fortune comes into play," she explains. "That's what I'm constantly fighting for – somebody to see me as an actor first." She has since worked at both premiere institutions in England, the Royal Shakespeare Company (*The Comedy of Errors*, *Peer Gynt*) and the National Theatre (*War Horse*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*); she will next be seen on BBC One in the five-part television series *Dr. Foster*, written by playwright Mike Bartlett. "When I entered my late 30s, I found myself at a bit of a crossroads," Jayasundera reports. "I asked myself if this how it is going to be for the rest of my life, and I found I'm not willing to give it up. So I'm committed to being here, being surrounded by this work – as much as I can get of it."

Straight out of drama school, Abeysekera landed the role of the young lover Valère in the English Touring Theatre's production of Moliere's *Tartuffe*, for which he received an Ian Charleson Award commendation. This led to work with the RSC, as well as the role of Puck in the Oxford Shakespeare Company's production of *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*. When he finishes his stint in *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* in May, he will play the title role in the Regents Park Open Air Theatre production of *Peter Pan*. "I'm now 29 and, at the moment, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life," he affirms.

To conclude our chat I asked if there was somewhere back home in Sri Lanka that was meaningful to them personally. "When I was younger I used to go almost every year on a hike with friends to Meemure," says Abeysekera, referring to a remote village in the Knuckles Mountain range, about 70 km from Kandy. He recalls camping out on a *kamatha*, the threshing floor in the paddy fields, and then discovering a rock pool nearby. "There were little fish in there that would nibble at your feet," he reminisces. "At the dead of the night we made fires around the pool and then got into the water and hung out there, just chatting for hours about life and art... I always remember that."

"Mine is a particular stretch of the old coast road between Galle and Colombo, just beyond Ambalangoda, which is very beautiful and very special for me," says Jayasundera. "I took that road almost every week to see my grandmother and it is indelibly marked for me. If I ever want to be moved to tears instantly when I am doing the play, I just think about that and it works."

## Cinemas

What's new at cinemas this month? There's a lot to enjoy; from Hollywood to Tamil and Sinhala classics!

Showing this month island-wide, **Cinderella**, **Home**, **Fast & Furious 7**, **Insurgent**, **Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2** and **Seventh Son**, and Sinhala movies like **Mage Yalu Malu**, **Gindari**, **Maharaja Gemunu**, **Sinhawa Atharin**, **Ko Mark No Mark** and **Sanjaana**. Tamil movies such as **Kaaki Sattai** and Hindi movies including the popular **PK** are also being screened.

**Maharaja Gemunu** depicting the story of a Sri Lankan King in the second century BC – is an interesting experience!

There are hundreds of welcoming cinemas all over Sri Lanka. So wherever you travel, there's sure to be a movie cinema within close proximity.

## Theatres

Find out the most recent happenings at theatres...

Cultural and modern plays, dramas and performances are portrayed at a multitude of theatres. English plays such as **'The Dance and the Railroad'** while Sinhala plays that are more traditional like **'Nari Bena Samaga Jasaya Saha Lenchina'** and **'Makaraksha'** are shown at the Auditorium of British School in Colombo.

Non-verbal performances like **'Soul Solo'** and **'Light Puppet Show'** at the Auditorium of British School in Colombo are also noteworthy.

**'Makaraksha'** has been translated and staged in 1985 and has won 12 awards and is now being shown again by popular demand.



Full listings [time-out.com/sri-lanka/art-culture](http://timeout.com/sri-lanka/art-culture)