

A Living Legend of Cinema

Posted on

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In the 1950s, Sri Lankan cinema was in a sad condition. Story lines, scenery, dances, songs and music were moulded very much on the same lines as in South Indian films. The most profound themes used were sorrow, poverty or variations on a theme like a poor boy falling madly in love with a very rich girl or vice-versa, garnished with various damsels and swains

dancing, singing or weeping their way around trees or bushes against elaborately, painted back-drop.

It was at a time when the local audience, subjected to this kind of “formula” fare for some years, had begun to enjoy having its imagination tickled by the pseudo-fantasy life which was projected on screen, that little-known film director, Lester James Peries, decided it was time Sri Lanka forged an identity for herself as a film-making country. Thus in 1956 he released his first film “Rekava (‘The Line of Destiny’), which was a total commercial failure. Movie-goers couldn’t relate to it. After years of being saturated with films on glamorous high living, the public couldn’t adapt itself to a type of film that dwelt on down-to-earth people, problems and settings. It was a different style altogether. The film received tremendous critical acclaim, but even that couldn’t save it.

Lester James Peries’ major influences, when it came to film directing, originated from two sources, one of them being the Italian neo-realist cinema of the late 1940s. Italian film directors were “shooting” out in the streets with ordinary people we meet in real life. They were very unlike the traditional heroes the Sri Lankan audiences were used to. His other source of inspiration came from his participation in the making of documentaries in London. It influenced him in the making of feature films on location using typical, everyday people. Both influences resulted in a style of film that was very different from what the South Indian formula had produced. Their initial reaction to his technique could be gauged by their reception of “REKAVA”, which was almost like a village documentary, and was about the persecution of a little boy who was considered evil by the villagers.

Perceptive critics feel that Lester James has a recurring theme – that of the Lankan family – and he admits that this is the theme that most attracts him. Practically all his films have dealt with family life, the various influences on it (be it social or cultural), conflicts, blood ties and changes that affect the family special mention must be made of the trilogy “Gamperaliya”, “Kaliyugaya” and “Yuganthaya”. It is based on Sri Lanka’s best known Sinhala novelist Martin Wickremasinghe’s famous trilogy on three generations of one family. He has taken the family through fortunes and misfortunes, tragedies and triumphs, and through it depicted the social changes that have taken place in this country over the past 50 years. He wrote about the move from a rural society to the city, the impact of city life on it, and the breakdown of the traditional values of the family. The three parts were filmed by Lester James Peries over a span of 20 years (1963-1983) and are powerful examples of his genius as a film director.

To local audiences, Lester James entered the scene as a revolutionary. It was not until the ‘60s that they began accepting the down-to-earth, realistic kind of film that had been

introduced by him. He says of his films: "My kind of films are not money-makers, and I'm surprised I've been able to make as many as I have, because basically my films are serious. Some find them far too serious. Some find them lacking in emotion. Too intellectual, they say." Nevertheless, he has a steady, appreciative cinematic audience in Sri Lanka and abroad today.

Internationally, critics have recognized him as a major artiste. The National Film Theatre, London, honoured him with "A Retrospective", which was repeated in Paris in 1988. "Nidhanaya" ("The Treasure") won The Silver Lion' at the Venice Film Festival in 1971, and "Ahasin Polowata" ("White Flowers for the Dead") won the main award at the Cairo International Festival in 1976. He carried away the Golden Peacock Award and the International Critics Award at the New Delhi International Film Festival in 1965 for "Gamperaliya".

He has also been awarded Diplomas of Honour for "Nidhanaya" in 1970 and for "Baddegama" ("Village in the Jungle") in 1980 based on Leonard Woolf's novel, as two outstanding films of these years, at the London Film Festival. "Gamperaliya" ("Changes in the Village"), "Nidhanaya", "Baddegama", and "The God King" are some of his films that have received many international awards and much critical acclaim.

His strong point has been his uncompromising faithfulness to serious film making. He blends it with entertainment and emotion that is totally refined in its balance. As a director his main concern is with people. "Nuances of feeling, of emotion, the minutest change in sensibility, these can be caught by the camera with the precision of a seismograph," he says. (Quoted from "The Lonely Artist" by Philip Coorey.) Over-indulgence in this interest could lead to sentimentality, which he has disciplined himself against. The tempo of his films is relatively slow because, as he claims, the tempo of life is slower here than in the West anyway. When you capture life as it is lived here, one needs to respond to it.

He is entirely a self-taught artiste, and as with many such artistes there is a willingness to experiment with various techniques in film directing. He has not shot a single film on a studio set, and for this reason has been labelled a location director. In Sri Lanka in 1955 it was considered technically impossible to make an entire feature film on location, because sound recording with limited equipment was a tremendous problem. He made it a reality. One film of his generally takes about a year of work before it reaches the public.



Lester James at the camera while directing a film.

Over the years, his main obstacle has been hard-to-get financing. Funding for his films, so far, has been by big companies like Ceylon Theatres Ltd. and some private entrepreneurs. Another obstacle to proper film making that he and other directors in Sri Lanka face is out-dated technical equipment. Something else that could break the continuity of film making is the time commitment of artistes. They don't work on one film, complete it and then go on to another. Instead, they work on a number of different films at the same time.

He is in the midst of directing a film called "Awaragira", which is about a family destroying itself. His continuing to make serious films is welcome news since there are never enough of this genre in Sinhala today. Too many films are close copies of Tamil and Hindi films. He sees potential in a whole generation of younger dedicated film makers such as Dharmasena Pathiraja, Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, Tissa Abeysekera and Sumithra Peries, who are preoccupied with making a better and more serious kind of film.

Sumithra, his wife, is also a film maker now. Having shared the same interests and having knowledge of his style of directing, he was able to edit his films earlier. She has now become a director in her own right and has been responsible for some excellent films released in the recent past. Lester James Peries is also a consultant at the Government Film Unit. He will keep on making films, that much he is sure of. He says: "Making films has been my whole life. It's been more than a way of life - it's been an obsession." An obsession that has transformed the face of cinema in Sri Lanka.