Celebrating the Prima-Ballerina of Sri Lanka’s Dance

Posted on



Chitrasena and Vajira in 1950.

Chitrasena and Vajira owned the stage for over 50 years. Guru Vajira passed away at the age of 92 and left a legacy to be continued by the school and the company. One year after her passing, her extended family, including past and present students, will pay tribute to her memory through the production Namo Vajiraye—The Unfolding Legacy, honoring her life and contributions to traditional dance theater. It is a three-day commemorative performance and exhibition at the Lionel Wendt Theatre from September 26 to 28 2025.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Photography From the archives of the Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation.

Namo Vajiraye pays tribute to Sri Lanka’s godmother of dance, Vajira Chitrasena, a trailblazer who paved the way for generations of women to claim the stage. At a time when our traditional dance forms were performed only by men, Vajira shattered conventions, opening the doors for women to ascend and shine. Her husband, Chitrasena, and she reimagined and arranged performances including women, creating an equal performance space, blending innovation with reverence for tradition. Vajira was Chitrasena’s greatest supporter on his groundbreaking journey to bring traditional dances to the modern stage. Vajira helped reveal the immense potential for women in Sri Lankan traditional dance—as a highly technical dancer as well as a character dancer. In Vajira’s words, “It was Chitra who molded me.”

> Vajira left a legacy as a pioneering female professional dancer in Sri Lanka. Vajira’s contributions extended beyond performing. She was an exceptional teacher who developed a unique syllabus to train dancers for stage performances, distinct from traditional ritual dance training.



Vajira: The veteran who brought Sri Lanka’s dances to the stage.

Chitrasena recognized this potential and encouraged Vajira to push her creative boundaries in their pursuit of creating compelling dance theater. Together they honored the essence and spirit of the ancient dance forms, crafting arrangements that carefully expanded the vocabulary, infusing drama, creating a new way of storytelling through our dance – in their ‘mudranatya’ – all the while, preserving its soul. In doing so, she inspired countless women to take up traditional dance as a career.

Vajira left a legacy as a pioneering female professional dancer in Sri Lanka. According to her granddaughter Heshma Wignaraja, who is choreographing and producing Namo Vajiraye, Vajira probably never set out to break barriers, but her unwavering passion for dance did.

Heshma explained that her grandfather, with his theater background and education in India sought to create a movement language of our own. He recognized the potential in ritual dances once confined to village settings and wanted to share them with the world. At first he was faced with resistance from both traditional artists and the colonial-influenced Colombo elite. Dance existed in Sri Lankan courts and folk culture, but indigenous dance forms weren’t formalized for stage performance. Chitrasena and Vajira re-presented traditional dance and set new standards for dance theater in Sri Lanka. While her grandfather was the visionary, Vajira was the perfect partner who executed this vision. Heshma describes Vajira as “the blotting paper”, who absorbed his ideas and brought them to life. The duo identified a precise language and grammar in our dance, similar to classical ballet or Bharatanatyam, which then allows creative expression while maintaining core principles.

Vajira’s contributions extended beyond performing. She was an exceptional teacher who developed a unique syllabus to train dancers for stage performances, distinct from traditional ritual dance training. This approach included body conditioning techniques that helped dancers adapt to conventional theatrical settings or theater discipline. Vajira’s aesthetic sensibilities significantly influenced costume designs for the solo dancer, duets, and group performances, with her demands shaping the work of costume designer Somabandu Vidyapathi.

Heshma emphasized that while the family continues to modernize their

presentations as successors of the Chitrasena-Vajira legacy, they remain firmly rooted in the language of dance established by their grandparents. She described Vajira as a perfectionist, often watching performances from the veranda with a keen eye. Though deeply traditional, Vajira was also receptive to innovation, modernizing elements of dance while preserving a distinct aesthetic that suited each dancer’s strengths.

Namo Vajiraye will have six dance items divided into three segments with breaks between them. The performance will celebrate Vajira’s journey, solos, duets, group performances, traditional acts, and excerpts of mudranatya’s. Vajira’s family, past and present students, will perform in this tribute to her memory.

Thaji Dias, another of Vajira Chitrasena’s granddaughters, finds Namo Vajiraye a profoundly special occasion. The performance honors her grandmother’s enduring legacy and allows Thaji to step into some of her iconic roles.



Vajira performing a Kandyan Solo in 1965.



Vajira as the Chief Swan in Nala-Damayanthi (Australia 1963).



Three Generations, L–R: Anjalika, Vajira, Thaji, Umi, Upeka and Heshma.

According to Thaji, this performance is meaningful and challenging, including traditional pieces and demanding character roles in ballets. Adding to its significance, Thaji will wear some of her grandmother’s original costumes—timeless pieces that have been impeccably preserved for over 50 years. Paired with authentic headpieces and accessories, these historical garments connect past and present, offering Thaji a moment of pride that allows her to embody her grandmother’s artistry on stage.

The event will also include an exhibition open from 10am to 4pm from September 26–28, showcasing photographs, video footage, documentaries and select costumes from the family’s extensive private collection of dance theater history. Guided walkthroughs will be available upon registration.

As custodians of a remarkable legacy, the Chitrasena family preserves an extensive private collection that chronicles the history of Sri Lankan dance theater. This archive guides how the dance and its allied arts transitioned to a modern setting through relentless study and practice.

It is a living testament to how a pioneering couple built an entire dance genre from the ground up. Looking ahead, the family envisions establishing a museum in honor of the duo— transforming these timeless pieces into sources of inspiration, knowledge, and guidance for future generations of dancers and theater lovers.

September 26 – 28, 2025
Venue: Lionel Wendt.
Time: 7.15pm.
Ticket prices: Rs.2,000, Rs.3,000, Rs.4,000, Rs.5,000, Rs.7,500
Exhibition time: 10am–4pm