

Chandani Senevirathne: A Journey In The Limelight



Chandani reflects on her vibrant career and the many pleasures of acting
Photograph : Menaka Aravinda

A familiar face with a ready smile that has found its way to the hearts of many Sri Lankans, Chandani Senevirathne has a string of popular films and teledrama titles to her name. The characters she has portrayed have themselves materialised into household names. Her special ability to embrace characters with abandon, has led to her great many successes. Recently her role as Vanessa in the teledrama Rala Bindena Thena has won her best actress awards at four main award shows for television in Sri Lanka. Chandani fondly reflects on her past and the many pleasures in a career of acting.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara

“It all began during school years,” says Chandani reflectively. “Till then a career in acting had never entered my mind,” she declares. Instead she attributes her introduction to acting to Somalatha Subasinghe, a veteran dramatist who was then her teacher at St Pauls Milagiriya. Till then her interest was limited to simply enjoying a film or a good play. However by chance she found a place with Somalatha Subasinghe’s group and she soon got involved in numerous children’s plays.

Thus her career began on stage acting in children’s plays and Theatre of the Absurd genre (vikurthi natya). Then in 1981, in the days where television let alone teledramas were unheard of, Chandani got her first breakthrough playing a role in the film Sathi Puja. She went on to win the Presidential Award for Best Supporting Actress for her debut role in film. Then on, she gained much recognition from her success and it marked the beginning of a succession of roles in both television and cinema.

Her fortunate association with Somalatha Subasinghe led to her first casting in

television as well - Dharmasena Pahiraja's Gangulen Egodata, a docudrama on epilepsy. It was soon evident that Chandani possessed versatility, able to take on characters vastly different to one another. "My choice of characters depends on the complexity represented from the script. The intricacies expressed through the script, is what appeals to me," she explains. Her recent performances in the award winning teledramas Arungal and Karuwala Gedara are an example of her capacity to play different roles, earning her the Best Actress awards for both roles at the Signus Awards held recently. "It's not about a preference for a certain type of character, at times there are characters that take on a similarity, but within the same boundaries, it's how the characters have developed and their subtle differences are what's important," she further explains.

Her successes in film are equally admirable. For her performance as a lead actress in the film Udu Gan Yamaya, she won the coveted Best Actress Award at the Sarasavi film awards, in 2007. Since then, not until her recently completed films Vidhu and Nikini Vassa has she undertaken the lead roles in films. These latest roles Chandani speaks very fondly of. "I consider them to be very special, as they are rarely portrayed in films and touch upon complex aspects of life," she says. In another upcoming film Su Visi Vivaranaya Chandani takes on the lead role in a story based on the country's traditional dance forms and revolves around the lives and interactions of families in a rural village. Of her latest completed projects however the film 'Nino in Live' is a vastly different one as she plays a supporting role in a story that addresses a contemporary issue of the ever-growing reality show culture prevalent today.



Looking back on her experiences Chandani finds herself at home in all three mediums of acting - theatre, television and cinema. While acting itself is an arduous task that demands time and commitment, the demands in stage acting, Chandani says are far greater. "A lot of time has to be spent, you literally have to live alongside it and remain responsible through to the end," she says. In spite of this Chandani finds that it is an opportunity to refine and enhance one's acting skills. "Being in touch with stage acting is good, it builds one's energy, voice and acting abilities and it is the best platform to polish your skills," and even at present she is engaged in a theatre production, an adaptation of a Spanish play named House of Bernard Alba.

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Aside from acting, Chandani has ventured down other roads. Incidentally she has produced five short episodes for television, which she says she undertook “to push my own limits and test my skills.” As with all her endeavours this effort in self-discovery has borne fruit as well, winning yet another award, this time as the best single episode for the last of the five productions, Sulang Seenuwa. Alternately her interests in film also spread beyond the boundaries of acting. Right from the beginning of her career she found herself questioning her peers on the technical aspects of production and direction. And it is her aspiration to direct and produce one day, which she recognises as the ultimate goal in this trade...“there is so much you can do and so far you can go in this career, and discovering its limits is a satisfaction in itself. I like to criticise my own work... it’s a comfort level that I have and as long as I enjoy it I will continue this journey.”

As she stands for a photo op, Chandani laughs rather abashedly, “however much I perform in front of people or in front of a camera I will never get used to being photographed”, and it appears that Chandani is most comfortable in the throes of a character, which she willingly portrays to the viewer. In her own shoes however she prefers to steer clear from the limelight.

As the tête á tête wraps up for the day there is no time to lose for Chandani is off to yet another rehearsal.



In character: Chandani in her upcoming film, Nikini Vassa