Irangani: Versatility Is Her Forte

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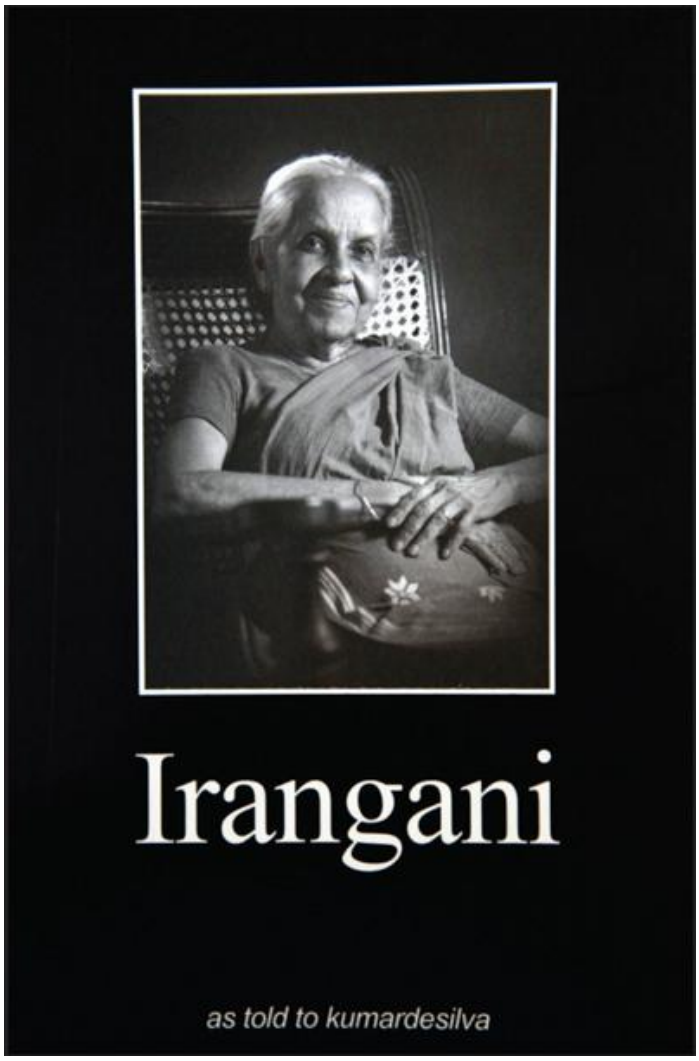

‘Irangani’ relates the life story of Sri Lanka’s most iconic actress Irangani Serasinghe. She started as a stage actress in her university days towards the end of the 1940s, moved over to cinema in the mid-1950s and continues to this day both in the big and small screen.

Words D C Ranatunga

Approaching 86 (her birthday is in early June) she looks back at her career with

great satisfaction. Written in her own words, “as told to Kumar de Silva”, ‘Irangani’ covers her childhood, school and university days, the many jobs he has done before choosing acting as a profession, and her life on stage and screen. Unlike most Sri Lankan actors and actresses, she was fortunate enough to follow courses at the Old Vic Theatre School in Bristol for one year and at the Central School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art in London for two years. “Here (at the London school) I realised that one could go on learning until death. There was so much to learn about theatre that the two years were hardly enough for me,” she recalls.

Though Irangani S is famous for her acting prowess she has gained experience in several other professions. After university, she joined a leading Colombo girl’s school –Musaeus College and taught English and History. She later joined the Times of Ceylon as a features writer ending up as Editoress of the Women’s page.

“Working with men as a journalist was quite an experience. Some tried to be a little too friendly but after some time they were all very nice. After I left the paper I really missed it because when you are working in a newspaper office you are with news minute to minute… not just about our country but the world. There was a thing called a ticker tape. When it kept rolling in the news, we used to rush there to see what was happening. It was great fun during the elections. There was excitement all the time. I learnt not only about journalism but how to lay out a page with photographs and how a paper is printed and brought out.”

The Women’s Page was full of fashion then. She wanted to bring in topics like health and nutrition but admits it did not happen. To her, Colombo’s high society was “screamingly funny.” She comments, “dressing up was so important to them and they would talk about what they would wear to the races or other events. I had to go and cover those events. There was a period where they wore something called ‘glass nylon’. These were worn without blouses by some. It scandalised everybody!”

Irangani S then joined the SLBC’s English section and was in charge of producing English drama. “It is quite different from acting on stage and you have to express everything with your voice only. We had to pay a lot of attention to that. I remember how difficult it was to rehearse at the SLBC, because most of the time the machines were out-of-order.” She didn’t last long at the SLBC – just one year only and left because, “the pay was rather low and work was not very satisfying.”

After a stint at Mackwoods Estates and Agencies – “a rather strange place – with all about estates”, she moved to Walkers Tours which was bought by Mackwoods boss

N S C Mendis. Then she became a tour guide. Her observations as a tour guide are interesting and valid to this day. “Here I got a bit of a shudder to see how our people were dependant on the tourists to get a bit of a handout!” She also recounts an incident when once she told a woman not to beg, she turned around and asked her if it was good for her to make money taking tourists around why not for her. She says though she did earn, she never took tips from tourists. She told them that if they wanted to tip her, they could give the money to ‘Ruk Rekaganno’, the society she formed to protect the environment. She always issued receipts for the donations.

People ask her whether she hasn’t had enough now that she is in her mid-eighties. “If you have the urge, age is no hindrance”

She sums up her observations on tourism thus: “they never get tired of seeing the countryside, especially the wilderness. I remember showing some people elephants crossing the Habarana road. They were delighted. Taking them to Yala and Wilpattu was ideal. They also enjoy the beaches. Even though there are beaches in places like the Maldives, the speciality in Sri Lanka is that you can travel from one eco-system to another very fast, be it a rainforest or the mountains.”

She makes a plea not to destroy the goose that lays the golden egg – meaning the need to preserve the forests and wilderness which the tourists love. “The wonderful thing here is that we have such beautiful places contained in such a small area. We have to preserve and make the most of that.

Breaking into cinema with ‘Rekawa’ it was a challenge for the 29-year old whom Lester James Peries picked to play the role of a much older woman. Since then she has played different kinds of mothers over six decades in films and teledramas. “Some were very stereotyped…especially in the long teledramas with the mother uttering the usual conventional platitudes. At times you keep on saying the same thing in a number of roles. Then you get a bit tired of the conventional mother,” she says. What does she do then? “I go for other roles because they enliven me. I was getting scared that I would lose my ability to do other roles as a result of being trapped in the mother role. But this did not happen to me fortunately.”

“It was marvellous working with Lester,” is how she capsules her first experience in ‘Rekawa’ followed by ‘Sandeshaya’, also directed by Lester Jame Pieris who she says never lost his temper or shouted. She remembers Dayananda Gunawardena, director of ‘Bak Maha Deege’ (1969) where she played the role of a Mudaliyar’s

wife, as “a very soft and patient man.”

She relates unforgettable incidents during her long film career from ‘Rekawa’ (1956) to ‘Machang’ (2007). She doesn’t say in how many films she has acted – possibly she has lost count! As for the actors she acted with, she comments that it was a treat to work with Joe Abeywickrema. When she saw Gamini Fonseka starting as a very young actor, she thought what a superb actor he was.

Iranagani S was very nervous when she started acting in the first teledrama – ‘Yashorawaya’ directed by Parakrama Niriella. She found early teledrarmas to be more akin to cinema where directors took their time over filming. This has changed today. “Sadly today, time is the driving factor and everything is a rush.”

The second, ‘Doo Daruwo’, directed by Nalan Mendis was extremely popular mainly because it had the real life experiences of so many people. It was a family drama and was so well received. It ran for five years. (Unlike today there was just one episode per week then). Talking of ‘Sudu Seeya’, Henry Jayasena, she says he was the voice of sanity in the teledrama and he was a lovely character. “In a way I was stifling him because I was too clinging to him. Henry was not very old when he played that role. He was rather annoyed because when people met him they would call him Sudu Seeya.”

She remembers an incident when at a concert some women who told her they benefited so much from the teledrama because it was so close to real life. One of them said that she had three sisters and a brother in her family and that there was constant property issues. When they saw ‘Doo Daruwo’, they realised they were seeing themselves and thus decided to settle it once and for all. ”I thought then that it was well worth doing this teledrama,” she says.

While she enjoys acting in teledramas even if they are not very adventurous, she gets a greater joy when viewers come up and tell her how much they liked a ‘tele’.

The book also covers her wedded life with the well-known actor Winston Serasinghe and the two sons Ravi and Ranjith. “My sons were my joy,” she says.

“Ravi really adored snakes and badly wanted to keep them at home. One day he came back with seven snakes and I nearly dropped dead because I was so terrified. My husband was even worse,” she recalls. She describes several incidents when the snakes were found all over the house or in the garden and scared everybody. Once

she found a cobra wrapped around the wheel of her Volkswagen. “I screamed for my son. He came rushing and greeted him like a long lost friend.”

The younger son Ranjith was adventurous. He did not want to do an office job. He wanted to join a ship as a sailor. She describes her feelings: “My stomach churned over – he was so young and I knew what kind of life he was in for. But he was very keen and I thought I must not stand in his way. I think I died a little bit every day. I was so happy when he returned – so much the adult. But then, he did not stay long. Off he went again, this time to Canada and the USA.”

After some years Ranjith came back because his older brother died. He wanted to look after the ageing parents. He is married and Irangani S loves the two grandsons Suramba and Ansuman.

As for Irangani S’s commitments, we will soon see her in Sumithra Peris’ ‘Vaishnavi’ and Channa Perera’s ‘Kalpanthe Sihinayak’.

People ask her whether she hasn’t had enough now that she is in her mid-eighties. “If you have the urge, age is no hindrance,” she says. “While ageing, you should be active. If not, it is possible that you will become physically and mentally ill, although I must admit that slouching in an armchair gazing at the sky is one of my favourite pastimes. But I think I earned it. And gazing at the sky can be mentally stimulating as well as immensely peaceful.”

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