

## Kuweni: A Dance of Love and Tragedy

In the heart of Sri Lanka's ancient history lies a story that transcends time—a tale of love, betrayal, and fate set against the backdrop of a land rich with culture and beauty. The Noir Queen Kuweni, the ballet by renowned Sri Lankan dancer and choreographer Chandana Wickramasinghe in January 2025 at the Nelum Pokuna Theatre, is a journey through the noir complexities of a relationship, the beginning of Sri Lanka's written history.

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Renowned Sri Lankan dancer, director and choreographer Chandana Wickramasinghe with acclaimed dancer Dr. Ravibandu Vidyapathi, who portrays the role of King Panduvasudeva.

Kuweni and Vijaya's love story laid the foundation for the chronicle of the island – the Maha Vamsa. Their story, a love between a woman of the island's indigenous people and Prince

Vijaya, a prince from India, is brought together by a powerful and cruel destiny. Their union soon becomes a tragic tale of betrayal and heartbreak as the forces of politics and power take hold of their lives. Yet, within this tragedy, there is also a poignant love story – a love that marks the dawn of a new chapter in the island’s history.

Their story has captivated the imagination of millions, often given life by the enigmatic Kuweni, who embraces the role of the scorned woman and becomes pivotal in the noir that is brought to the stage through ballet with grace and depth, capturing the intensity of emotions, the complexity of their relationship, and the contrasting forces that shaped their lives.

The ballet “The Noir Queen Kuweni— The Devil Leopard” is a provocative and dramatic journey through love, betrayal, and transformation. The production is structured into eight powerful performances, each unfolding a pivotal moment in the epic tale of Kuweni and the intertwined destinies of those around her.

The story begins with Kuweni’s birth. It moves to the arrival of the exiled Indian prince Vijaya, whose shipwreck on the shores of Sri Lanka signals the start of his turbulent journey. As Vijaya struggles to survive the sea’s fury and overcome the shackles of his youthful past, the ballet reveals the complexity of his relationships, especially his deceptive love for Kuweni, the woman who will shape his fate.

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Devangi Wickramasinghe as Princess Baddakachayana.

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Every performance is expertly crafted with unwavering dedication and a profound passion for the art.

The third performance depicts Kuweni's true love and how betrayal ultimately overshadows her, leading her into profound despair. In the fourth performance, the narrative shifts to Princess Baddakachayana, an Indian royal who embarks on a journey to find love.

As Kuweni loses everything, her pain transforms her into a vengeful creature— the Devil Leopard. This evolution is depicted in the fifth performance, where she transitions into a fierce symbol of wrath, a central theme in the ballet, as Kuweni's anger manifests in a supernatural, primal form. In the sixth performance, one will see King Panduvasudeva, who ascends the throne after Vijaya's demise, experiencing a disturbing dream as he confronts a Devil Leopard, Kuweni's vengeful form, who casts a curse upon him. This divine affliction, Divi Dosa, begins to consume the king, and the ballet beautifully depicts the moment when the dream materializes into a transformative ritual.

The following ritual, the Kohomba Kankariya, is a sacred ceremony to ward off the affliction. It is deeply ingrained in Sri Lankan culture and has survived centuries. In the time of King Panduvasudeva, this holy ritual successfully restored harmony and balance to the land, providing a cultural cornerstone that endures to this day. The ballet illustrates the profound significance of this ceremony, intertwining spiritual symbolism with the physical realm.

The seventh performance, Rahu's Destruction of the Nandana Garden, delves into cosmic conflict as the demon Rahu wreaks havoc on the royal garden, a symbol of beauty and pleasure. This scene contrasts the kingdom's beauty with the devastation wrought by powerful forces, enhancing the story's drama and stakes.

Finally, the eighth performance marks the arrival of three kings from Malaya (believed to be part of ancient India), signaling the beginning of the Kohomba Yak Kankariya ritual in Sri Lanka. This moment is pivotal in the ballet, as it represents the cultural and spiritual renewal central to the narrative and Sri Lankan heritage.

Chandana Wickramasinghe, the visionary director and choreographer behind Kuweni, returns to the stage after a seven-year hiatus following his 2016-2017 production of a ballet based on the Sita story from the Ramayana. This time, he brings to life an iconic Sri Lankan tale, weaving the poignant and emotionally rich story of Kuweni, the first known heroine in the island's history.

The script was crafted before the global COVID-19 pandemic, but Chandana recognized a profound void in the theater world during the following lull. This realization inspired him to create Kuweni. The production offers an insightful exploration of Sri Lanka's rich history and the life of a tribal woman who, from humble beginnings, emerged as a pivotal figure in the island's chronicles. Casting the production was a meticulous process.

Chandana sought exceptional performers who could skillfully balance the demands of acting and dancing, which was essential to portraying the emotional depth of Kuweni and the other key figures in the story. The cast features some of Sri Lanka's most respected and accomplished actors and dancers.



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Niranjani Shanmugaraja's portrayal of Kuweni's journey is both authentic and compelling, making her the ideal choice to share this timeless tale with a modern audience.



A young performer at practice.

Award-winning actress Niranjani Shanmugaraja plays Kuweni, capturing the character's complex emotions and multifaceted circumstances. She brings Kuweni's tumultuous journey to life with authenticity, making her the ideal performer to share this timeless tale with a modern audience. Niranjani's portrayal highlights the enduring relevance of Kuweni's story, showing that the trials of life, then and now, are not so different.

The role of King Panduvasudeva is portrayed by the acclaimed Dr. Ravibandu Vidyapathi, a renowned Kathakali actor and dancer who studied at the prestigious Kerala Kala Mandalam in India. With his profound mastery of traditional dance and choreography, Ravibandu brings a dramatic intensity to the role of the king. His experience spans a broad range of styles, from classical to contemporary, and his performances have earned him accolades across the globe.

Professor Mudiyanse Dissanayake, an esteemed exponent of upcountry Sri Lankan dance

and the first Sri Lankan to be bestowed with such a high title in Sri Lankan dance, plays King Malaya, an essential character in the story and a key figure in the sacred Kohomba Kankariya ritual. Professor Dissanayake's expert handling of Sri Lankan dance traditions will captivate the audience as he brings the ancient ritual to life in a stunning and mystical display under the night sky.

The Kuweni team is large, consisting of 200 individuals handling multiple roles in the ballet. Seventy-five performers of different ages study under his tutelage at the Chandana Wickramasinghe and the Dancers' Guild. They have practiced for six months, from nine to five, to create an enrapturing ensemble on stage.

The talented young dancer Lakshitha Nilantha portrays Kuweni's transformation into the devilish leopard, symbolizing her vengeful wrath. His expressive movements capture the ferocity and sorrow of Kuweni's character. The role of the young Prince Vijaya is played by Rasindu Lakshan, while Narendra Chathuranga portrays the mature King Vijaya. Devangi Wickramasinghe embodies the character of Princess Baddakachayana, while Kuweni's mother is brought to life by Kaushalya Madhuwanthi and her father by Duminda Dharshana. Each performer brings a unique energy to the production, enhancing the emotional complexity of this powerful story.

Chandana's meticulous attention to dance, choreography, and storytelling ensures that Kuweni is a cultural force capable of captivating the global stage.

The production also features a talented team of creative contributors whose expertise elevates every performance aspect. Bandara Ehaliyagoda and Prof. Praneeth Abeysundara crafted the lyrics for the ballet, while the soulful voices of Amanda Uthpali, Thanura Madhugeeth, and Mahesha Sadamali bring the music to life. Music composition is by Peshala Manoj, and King Sandalindu by Ranjith Priyanga. Sadara Supathum directs the Kathak dancing sequences, infusing the performance with cultural depth and beauty. Costume design by Nupathi Nilambara transforms the performers into their historical and mythical counterparts, while Harun Shaydeen's hair styling and Priyantha Dissanayake's makeup work seamlessly enhance the visual narrative. Lighting and visual mapping art by Chandima Karunathilake creates an immersive atmosphere, helping to transport the audience into the magical world of Kuweni. Top of Mind manages the event, ensuring a smooth and professional production. At the same time, Manju Wijayarathna handles the social and print media design, amplifying the reach and impact of this critical cultural production.



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The title *Noir Queen* immediately evokes intrigue, hinting at a character of depth and complexity, one whose darkness is intertwined with mystery and power. This term encapsulates the essence of Kuweni, a character whose transformative journey from innocence to malice is a gripping tale of betrayal, making her perhaps the first islander to turn against her own people. As the ballet *Kuweni* unfolds, it brings this complex figure to life. It fulfills a larger cultural mission: to spotlight Sri Lanka's rich history through the dramatic lens of performance art.

In an era where modern short dance recitals are often disconnected from their ancient roots, *Kuweni* offers a rare opportunity to reconnect with the profound meanings embedded in traditional practices. Chandana Wickramasinghe, the visionary director and choreographer behind this masterpiece, uses ballet to protect and preserve the island's heritage while crafting a brand that resonates globally. Through this powerful production, he aims to take the story of *Kuweni* beyond Sri Lanka's shores, sharing this timeless tale's cultural depth and emotional intensity with audiences worldwide.

Supporting the powerful performances on stage is an innovative use of technology, which enhances the narrative and elevates the theatrical experience. The lighting, visual effects, and stage design work perfectly, creating an atmosphere that invigorates the performers and immerses the audience in the story's emotions. From the innocent beginnings of *Kuweni*'s love for Vijaya to her tragic descent into vengeance, the technology on stage amplifies the intensity of her journey, bringing to life her inner turmoil and transformation.

In this ambitious production, *Kuweni* becomes more than just a ballet; it becomes a bridge between the past and the future, a celebration of Sri Lankan history, and a bold statement of artistic innovation. Chandana's meticulous attention to dance, choreography, and storytelling ensures that *Kuweni* is a cultural force capable of captivating the global stage.

*January 3*

*Venue: Nelum Pokuna Theatre. Time: 6pm. Tickets: Rs.5,000, Rs.2,500, Rs.1,500*

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Ravibandu delivers a captivating performance that embodies the king's dramatic intensity.



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Kuweni expertly capturing the character's intricate emotions and diverse circumstances.