

Nuga Gahak: Theater Beyond the Familiar

Posted on



Veteran actor Priyantha Sirikumara.

Departing from the linear narratives to which audiences are accustomed, Nuga Gahak, an adaptation of Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree*, challenges conventional theatrical expectations, offering an experience that is as thought-provoking as it is unconventional.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Not every play follows the familiar structure of a beginning, middle, and end. Some challenge conventional storytelling, inviting audiences to experience theatre in unexpected ways. Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree*, adapted into Sinhala as *Nuga Gahak* by Dr. Kanchuka Dharmasiri, promises to be one such production.

Written in 2005, Tim Crouch's *An Oak Tree* is an experimental two-character play that explores grief, guilt, and the fragile boundaries between perception and reality. At its heart is a tragic accident in which Tim, a stage hypnotist, runs over and kills a 12-year-old girl. Months later, the girl's grief-stricken father, Andy, volunteers to be hypnotized during one of Tim's performances. Haunted by his loss, Andy believes that an oak tree near the accident site has transformed into his daughter. Their encounter becomes an disquieting exploration of memory, loss, and the human desire to make sense of tragedy. Yet, beneath this seemingly straightforward narrative lies an unconventional theatrical approach that challenges the very nature of performance.

In *Nuga Gahak*, the hypnotist is played by Priyantha Sirikumara, while the grieving father is portrayed by a different guest actor at each performance. What makes this theatrical arrangement particularly intriguing is that the guest actor takes to the stage without having seen, read, or rehearsed the script. Instead, Sirikumara guides the performer through the unfolding narrative, providing scripts on clipboards, prompting dialogue, and offering directions as the performance progresses. This unusual interplay between the two actors draws the audience into the very process of theatre-making, where spontaneity, uncertainty, and trust become integral to the experience. The play challenges conventional notions of acting and performance. Its complexity lies not merely in the story itself, but in the fact that one actor is effectively directing the other in real time, before the audience's eyes.

Dr. Kanchuka Dharmasiri, director of *Nuga Gahak*, explains that the play challenges the very conventions of theatrical performance. While the hypnotist's role and the narrative are established, the unpredictability begins when the second actor enters the stage. The audience, unfamiliar with the story, discovers it as it unfolds alongside the second actor, and the interaction between the two performers is not always predictable. The narrative moves between the present and the past, with sudden flashbacks revealing details of the tragic accident. It is this nonlinear storytelling, combined with the unpredictability of the performance, that makes the play complex and intriguing.

However, Kanchuka emphasizes that this does not necessarily make the play difficult to comprehend. Rather, playwright Tim Crouch deliberately places greater responsibility on the audience, challenging them to move beyond passive observation and piece together the narrative like a puzzle. The play demands active engagement, inviting audiences to immerse themselves in the unfolding performance. It is also why the production lends itself to repeated viewing, with each performance offering a different experience.



Guest actor Saumya Liyanage.



Guest actress Kaushalya Fernando.



Guest actress Dinakshie Priyasad.

Kanchuka recalls watching *An Oak Tree* for the first time at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It was after watching it for the second time, a decade ago, that Kanchuka decided to adapt it into Sinhala, a proposal that received Tim Crouch's enthusiastic consent. Despite her experience in theatre translation, this production posed a

different challenge: making the story accessible and relatable to a Sri Lankan audience while preserving its unconventional theatrical form. The adaptation required more than translating a script; it had to work as a live performance. While the original narrative and structure remain intact, names and settings have been localized, with the oak tree becoming the familiar Nuga tree in the Sri Lankan context.

For Priyantha Sirikumara, playing the hypnotist has been a different kind of role, presenting a challenge he has thoroughly enjoyed. As the only constant performer, he must navigate each performance with a new actor, while simultaneously assuming the roles of hypnotist, performer, and director. Rehearsals, therefore, focused on preparing him to manage these overlapping responsibilities.

Two hours before each performance, Kanchuka and Priyantha meet the guest actor to explain the process and what to expect. Their principal instruction is simple: remain present, receptive, and willing to embrace the unexpected.

Each guest actor brings a distinct personality and energy, creating a different dynamic at every performance. Priyantha moves between the narrative and the theatrical process, directing the guest actor to inhabit the grieving father before reminding them of their identity as a performer. Some respond with intense emotion, others with playfulness or detachment. This unpredictability makes every performance a unique experience for both actors and audiences.

According to Kanchuka, several guest actors have described the experience as profoundly moving, sometimes struggling to distinguish between their own emotions and those of the character. Interestingly, she has observed that the Sinhala adaptation evokes particularly strong emotional responses, raising questions about cultural differences in how grief is expressed.

The instructions the guest actor receives from the first actor are sometimes audible to the audience; at other times, they remain private, creating moments of suspense as the performer responds to instructions unknown to those watching. At times, even silence becomes part of the experience. Kanchuka admits that she was initially uncertain how Sri Lankan audiences would respond to such an unconventional production. However, their attentiveness, patience, and willingness to follow the unfolding narrative have been encouraging.

Nuga Gahak also marks Priyantha's return to the stage after a decade. An

accomplished theatre director and film actor, he has the versatility and experience that made him Kanchuka's choice for a demanding role requiring the maturity to perform and direct simultaneously.

Kanchuka's interest in theatre began at an early age, taking a more formal direction through the DRAMSOC at the University of Peradeniya. Beginning with English theatre, she later ventured into Sinhala productions, translating works such as Woody Allen's *God* and Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. She earned her Master's and PhD from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA, before returning to the University of Peradeniya, where she spent four years in the Department of Fine Arts. She joined the Department of English in 2017 and currently serves as its Head. Kanchuka credits Gamini Haththotuwegama for inspiring her to explore theatre beyond conventional boundaries and Professor Ashley Halpe for introducing her to the theatre of the absurd.

Nuga Gahak

November 13 and 14

Venue: Namel Malini Punchi Theater, Borella.

November 13 - Time: 7pm (Guest Actor Saumya Liyanage)

Nov 14 - Time: 3 pm (Guest Actor Dinakshie Priyasad);

Time: 7 pm (Guest Actor Kaushalya Fernando)

Tickets will be available via mytickets.lk and at the venue. (Inquiries: +94 77 590 3949)