

Sidewalk Shows in Colombo

Shirani Rajapakse



The rugged young man tanned a dark brown by the blazing sun sits down on the pavement. He rummages inside one of his dirty cloth bags and brings out a brightly coloured reed basket. Placing it on a side he rummages further and takes out a little flute, long and slim with a puffed-out body at one end. Bringing the flute up to his lips he begins to play. Moanful and piercing notes float on the air for some time. The lid of the basket begins to quiver, and out of a corner slithers a thin, shiny, speckled snake! The people gathered around draw back. The snake slithers hither and thither sampling the terrain around it.

It is show time now, and the tempo of the music changes. As if on cue the snake begins to sway to the rhythm, its silvery scales gleaming in the noon sun. The dance goes on for some time. Then the music changes and the snake changes its movement. Faster and faster it moves. The hood slowly pulls up. The soulful drolling of the flute reaches a crescendo and then abruptly stops. The air is still. The snake slowly slithers back into his basket. The man picks up the few coins strewn on the ground around him, gathers his belongings and goes on his way. Whither to he knows not. The streets are his home, his audience and his livelihood. The snake-charmer is so like the many small entertainers of Colombo's streets. The street performers. They live in a world of their own with their quaint skills and surprises, and time is theirs to spend... delight and enjoyment is what they give, at a price dictated by the audience.

The street performers each have their own special trade. For some it is an art that has come down the family, for others it's a newly acquired skill, to most it seems enjoyment. But whatever the reasons, it remains their only source of livelihood.

You see them all over the city, wherever you go. Some have their favourite haunts, others go where the wind takes them. You most certainly will not see them ,in the same place for long. They come, they perform and move on, re-appearing again, perhaps after a couple of weeks, months, who knows. They wander from town to town earning their daily living on the way. They flock to the crowded places: bazaars, bus stands, train stations, market squares, festivals-anywhere, anytime there is a curious crowd.

Another delightful sight is the performing monkey. Tied on to a leash or chain it will follow its master around town like a faithful dog. Dressed in a brightly coloured pair of shorts and a tiny vest or shirt, the adorable monkey has a wide repertoire of tricks. It will ride a little bicycle, beat a rhythm on a hand drum known as a "rabana". The good mimic it is, it will imitate a cuckolded husband when the truth is discovered, and it will spare its master the chore of going around the audience for the collection. The monkey will do the round, hat or empty tin in hand.



Walk down the busy streets of Colombo's Fort with the noise of vehicles and the clatter of feet on sidewalks. Occasionally, pause and listen to the music. Beautiful, haunting melodies, old favourites from long forgotten Sinhalese, Tamil or Hindi films, and even older songs from the Sinhala stage of the 1930s or 40s. The voice is that of an old singer. The accompaniment just one instrument: a mandolin, battered violin (no touch of Stradivarius here); it may be an old harmonium or most likely a home-made "violin" -turned out with a coconut shell, stretched rubber, three strings and a crude bow. One of them who seems to be the most popular in the Fort is blind. There are people in the audience who claim to remember him in his heyday on stage. Special requests will be made, and a few coins extra dropped on the mat in front for a particularly good rendition. There is a new breed of street singer in Colombo: little children trying to earn their daily feed with a song. They perform in twos and threes. You see them mainly at the long-distance bus stations, and often inside buses. What is missing in melody and harmony they often try to make up with sheer volume, making a cacophony with a curious array of tinny instruments and loud voices. Some do sing quite beautifully, and one would scarcely mind parting with the few coins which will make their day. The others succeed in making such a nuisance of themselves that you are glad to pay them to go off to the next bus.

In the busier sections of Colombo there seem to be as many performers as there are streets and what a variety. There are the fortune-tellers - palmists,

astrologists, astro-palmists, card readers, those with allegedly psychic parrots. Surprisingly for a country which grows and exports so much tea, there is no one who reads your fortune in the tea leaves. The palmist usually has a huge image of an open palm hanging near his or her little stall. For a few rupees, the lines on your palm will be read, a few questions asked about your date of birth and birth sign, and then your future is revealed. If it is marriage you are in search of, the partner will not be far away. That long evasive journey abroad will surely materialise in good time. Is it your health you worry about, with so many little lines crossing your line of life and good health, there is some cause for concern, but there is nothing that a good doctor cannot put right.

Some palmists will make their work seem more exacting. They will ask several questions about your favourite colour, flower, name, quick calculations will be done on a scrap of paper, and the secrets of your future will be revealed. Is it a promotion in job you are concerned with? Surely it must come to the most deserving. Is it marriage for your daughter? Of course all your daughters will be married in their time.

There are those who combine the mysteries of street-come palmistry with astrology, they are the astro-palmists. Naturally you have to pay a little more for their greater expertise. If you have the time, the astro-palmist will spend half an hour with you on the sidewalk, or even one hour, it is you who pay the bill. It could be anything from Rs. 10 to Rs. 50 depending on the length and depth of reading.

One man who was getting his palm read lit up with joy when he was told "there may be good luck for you." His joy did not last, when told that his wife was the cause of all his worry, and it was best he got rid of her. There is hardly any privacy when all this probing into one's future and the revelations of one's inner secrets are made. There is always a small crowd around. All with eager ears. Picking up the secrets of others, and some counting the cash in their purse to get their own fortune read. Morning, afternoon, evening, the fortune-tellers are busy the whole day. There is one popular person in the Pettah who gets a pet parrot to pick up cards and then read your fortune. A woman at Maradana will read your fortune from the way you arrange flowers and betel leaves on the sidewalk.

One morning in Pettah I saw another man, rather old and feeble, but still about his business. He was sitting in a somewhat secluded area down Fifth Cross Street

and had a whole lot of drawings of palms, of different shapes, sizes and colours, carefully drawn with lines, stars and crosses all over. "Find the one matching closest to your palm, and I'll relate it to your life," he said. I did not have all the time to compare. But there were many other takers.

Across the road, selling his wares was the "medicine oil man." Ananda was his name, and he claimed descent from a long line of ayurvedic physicians. He was a true "vedah" he said. He had an oil to cure any ailment. All extracted from the best known herbs and roots of the ayurvedic pharmacopoeia. He was keeping quite a large crowd captivated by his description of ailments and symptoms, and often his clownish imitations of the sick would make his audience laugh. There were oils for rheumatism and arthritis, for heartburn, and as he said even for heartaches. He had oil to grow hair on the most shiny bald pate and to remove even the most stubborn acne. He had a brisk sale, that day. He began selling before the evening rush hour began. He ran out of stock of some oils. He even gave a money back if not satisfied guarantee. But no one would find him in the same place again for another month, at least. By then only his jokes would be remembered.

In the Fort, I met another man with wonder medicines. He was a sidewalk pharmacist, peddling western medicines. Sitting by the wayside with an array of jars and bottles full of pills and capsules of all colours and varieties. A great entertainer, this guy, fluent in English and Sinhala and the occasional use of Tamil too. He knew the symptoms of every common ailment, and had the right pill for any of them, with the correct dosage given by rote. The crowd rocked with laughter when he began the sales talk for his remedy for male impotency. He held out promises which the best doctor would shudder to give. But he made his sales all the same.

It was near the main bus stand in the Pettah that I came across the street orchestra. It was a six-piece band of musicians with a harmonium, flute, two dholaks (Indian drums), bongo drums and a tambourine. They were holding the attention of a large crowd, some no doubt missing their buses as they listened to the medley of local popular songs played. One member of this orchestra doubled as the emcee and also did some acting of how some of the better known singers perform on stage. It was a very popular orchestra. The crowds kept growing, and the money falling into the till regularly. They have two shows per day, both at crowded hours, and they do make a good taking, while giving cheap

entertainment to weary bus travellers. It was on another day that I discovered the wayside circus. The show was on near a cinema, which was showing a popular film, and there were long queues outside. The high-pitched voice of a woman asked the audience to pay up for her next act. She was sitting on the kerb, with her long tresses falling over her face to the ground, and on the two somewhat large rocks, to which the hair was tied with rope. She kept up a steady flow of conversation with her assistants and members of the audience and soon began her act. She stood up, pulled the ropes with her hands till the rocks were waist high and then began a slow spinning around of the head. Soon the rocks were swirling around her, held by her hair. The crowd cheered demanding more. It was her son and husband who did most of the balancing tricks on the bicycle. But the show stealer was a little, skinny dog with a pink frill round its neck which could do many a trick.

The show was complete with usual stunts of swallowing swords and, believe me, fluorescent tubes. It was over by the time the box office opened and the crowd in the queue moved in to the cinema. The circus team packed their gear and began leaving, all their props just filling one small cart and overloading a bicycle. It was a family of stunt people: father, mother, two sons and two daughters and the dog. They went to another part of the city. The nomads of the city ming from one sidewalk show to another. For those who prefer to walk the streets of Colombo, and avoid crowded buses or speeding taxis, it is hard to miss a wayside show, given good weather, which is more the pattern in Colombo. But one word of caution, there could be other performers too, making use of your interest in the show that is going on. The pick-pockets also frequent the street shows to make their own takings for the day. It won't cost you too much to be alert.



A woman performer adds two rocks to her burdens.