

Silver Screen Hits Gold

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The Minerva 3D cinema in Kalutara, which celebrates its 50th Anniversary

Don's Plaza and its Minerva 3D Cinema celebrate their Golden Anniversary. A renowned name in the 1960s, it is a pioneering leisure establishment in Kalutara.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda



Don Alton Liyanage, the founder of Don's Plaza and Minerva Cinema

Fringed by a row of shops and swathed in the gracefulness of late 1900s architecture, Don's Plaza charmingly sits by the tarmac. The brainchild of Don Alton Liyanage, the man who essentially introduced cinema to Kalutara, the Don's Plaza and its Minerva cinema celebrate 50 years this month.

From the screening of films with a projector at makeshift locations to setting up his first cinema, named 'Richmond', in Matara, Don Alton Liyanage was a true pioneer in providing entertainment to areas out of Colombo. In 1967, Liyanage founded the New Minerva cinema in Kalutara, named in tribute to the Roman goddess of arts. At its grand opening on July 7, the Sri Lankan favourite "Juli Hathai" (July Seven) was screened to a full house. The most expensive ticket at the time was priced at 3.50 rupees: for the balcony seating. The original employees at the Minerva cinema hall, Sumanasiri Fernando and M A V L J Seneviratne, recall an age of long queues as well as an eager crowd rushing to the ticket booth. It was an era where cinematic fandom was at a peak in Sri Lanka, where the entire 100 days of the film's screening saw the Minerva cinema at full capacity. Fernando who was with Don Alton Liyanage even before the opening of the New Minerva recalls how every screening required police protection to control the film-crazed fans. Enthusiasm for some films even saw movie screening times extended; for example, Nommara 17 (Number 17) was shown for 150 days.

The finest equipment available during the era, has always set the cinema apart. The movie projector used by the New Minerva in the 1960s is showcased at the lobby today. Today, under the helm of Don Alton Liyanage's children, Minerva 3D Cinema and Plaza 3D that was opened in 1984, are both equipped with the latest digital technology of the new millennium, though their 20th century appeal is preserved. In the screening room of the Plaza 3D, a 20th century vintage projector using reels is even today operational. The old projector still has more glamour than today's sleek digitized equipment.

In keeping in line with their father's philosophy of offering only the best, the current directors saw to the cinemas being upgraded in 2013 and 2014. Therefore, the Minerva 3D cinema and Plaza 3D are in fact the only solar powered cinemas in Sri Lanka. With the state-of-the-art cinema equipment, quality audio and comfortable seating as well as carpeting, Don's Plaza offers the only air-conditioned cinemas of their kind from Mount Lavinia to as far as Matara. The charismatic box seats are an artistic touch; they are also a rarity in present Sri Lanka.



The movie projector used by Minerva Cinema in the 1960s displayed at the lobby

Today, Minerva 3D and Plaza 3D play popular and independent films from Sri Lankan cinematic creations to Hindi and Tamil movies as well as Hollywood blockbusters. Echoing an unmistakable homely touch, the lobbies of the cinemas are furnished with comfortable wicker and timber armchairs.

A truly cosmopolitan venue offering cinematic entertainment, retail, eateries and even audio and video editing facilities, Don's Plaza, 50 years on, understands the needs and wants of the present generation. With its careful selection of movies, the plaza provides amusement for the entire family.

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