Simply Irangani

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A veteran actress and a household name for generations past, she certainly needs no introduction.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

In the afternoon glare that envelops her slight frame, Irangani Serasinghe sits before me, her familiar face lighting up as she reflects on a particularly mischievous childhood. She demurely brushes aside any mention of accolades and high accomplishments. It is the simple pleasures of life that have given her the greatest joys.

The early years…

Having spent her childhood days in the peaceful retreats of a village, Irangani Serasinghe yearns for that elusive quiet once again. “In Mudu Gomuwa off

Ruwanwella where I grew up, there were surrounding hills and a river nearby where we could bathe," she says of a simpler time. "We were never bored, our toys were natural things and flower petals were pretend money." These lasting impressions have left a void today as she seeks out the comfort of tranquillity. "I have been looking for that silence and nowhere can I find it," she says.

Sporting trousers as a child, Irangani was noted for her tomboyish ways and her grandmother nicknamed her 'Chandi'. "I was once gifted a toy car, which was the best sort of present I got." However, since her tender years, Irangani had her nurturing ways, "I simply loved my doll and I have always loved babies!" she declares. To her delight, one Christmas little 'Chandi' was gifted a doll. "My mother had a pig sty where we lived and I ran to show the little piglets my new doll." Her enthusiasm got the better of her however. "I climbed up with the doll and fell into the trough!" She laughs gaily of this memory although she ran a fever of 105, as a result, that Christmas.

It was this somewhat rebellious nature that led Irangani to leave the school boarding. Bored of her stay there, Irangani took matters into her hands and informed the Principal that she would return home. "I was such a nuisance that my mother wanted me to go back before I could lose my place at the boarding," she laughs.

It was a time when becoming an actress was unheard of and naturally never entered her mind. Nevertheless, during her schooling at Bishop's College, Irangani part took in several plays such as Mickey Mouse and Water Babies. Her first serious exposure to theatre came when she was schooling at Girl's High School in Kandy with the play Pygmalion. "It was a public play as well and I played the part of Prof Higgins," she says and one wonders how her light hearted nature would have transformed to the very austere Professor.

"You can learn all your life…."

At a time when pursuing higher studies was uncommon for women, Irangani was adamant about going to university, much to her father's chagrin. "When I was at home I got on my mother's nerves for doing nothing. She even dragged me to the kitchen but I didn't want to learn cooking. I was out the other door." Irangani began meeting people who had entered higher studies. Her exposure to various topics kindled her interest, in particular Marxism, which agreed with her distaste for social inequalities. "I found it most fascinating, as I hated the discrepancy between the

rich and the poor. I thought Marxism was the answer and led me to think that there was so much to learn."

With her father's reluctant consent Irangani went on to engage in her higher studies at the University of Colombo to study History, English and Economics. At university, Irangani continued to dabble in theatre and amateur dramas. "Still I didn't think of it as a career, I simply liked doing it," she says.

"The only two instruments we have to communicate with the audience are our body and our voice. We were encouraged to watch people all the time but never imitate. Imitation is not acting."

It was in UK that Irangani received a formal training in theatre where she gained valuable insight into acting. Accompanying her first husband to the UK, Irangani took the advice of her English professor and enrolled in theatre schools. "I didn't know there was anything to learn, I thought it was simply getting on to the stage and acting, I was so foolish." And soon she discovered her thirst for learning the art form. "I discovered that there was so much to learn, you can learn your whole life." As an actress she became conscious of how to prepare herself, and the various nuances involved such as movements, body language, voice projection and modulation and even sensitivity to textures. "You become sensitive, both physically and emotionally," she adds.

"We only have our bodies and our speech, those are our instruments," she adds thoughtfully. "But," she adds "at the same time you must forget that you learnt anything at all. It should have become a part of you, imitation is not acting."

From the stage to the silver screen… "My goodness, I ruined you, I made you a mother"

Following her return from England Irangani was cast in in her first film, the Lester James Peiris classic, 'Rekawa'. "Of course I was very nervous, I had never done cinema before. I hadn't even done anything in Sinhala. That made learning the dialogues a little daunting but I was from the village, which helped me a great deal," she says of her first experience.

Today Irangani reflects on her career without regret. "I am very happy with what I've done as I like to act and I have made many friends along the way."

Acting in front of a camera was vastly different from her experience on stage, Irangani soon discovered. “On film, the camera is very close to you and I was taught to cut down on reactions,” she explains. However her love for theatre remains even with a portfolio of over 20 films. “I greatly missed acting to an immediate audience. There is some kind of energy between us that makes it much more exciting.”

While film or teledramas do not require a thorough knowledge of the script from beginning to end as theatre demands, it does little to alter her sentiments. “I prefer the stage any day,” she says.

In Rekawa, Irangani portrayed the role of a mother though she was in her mid-20s. With many successes that include classics such as Delowak Athara and Ran Salu it seemed Irangani was destined to play the motherly figure. It led Lester James Peiris to often declare, “my goodness, I ruined you, I made you a mother!”

“Nevertheless these are different kinds of mothers,” she says of her roles. It was with the film Bakamaha Deege, a film with a touch of comedy that served as a break from the routine. In her portfolio today, amidst numerous films, and widely popular teledramas, include a role in an Indiana Jones film. An experience she summarises down to “an interesting experience.” Her most recent role was in the film Machan as aunty Magie.

Irangani is fondly remembered for her many memorable roles in teledramas. Doo Daruwo and Yasho Rawaya are those that easily come to mind and are spoken of to this

day. These firm favourites are amongst the longest running teledramas in history. “Tele dramas are important because they reflect what is happening in our society today and people identify themselves in these roles.” And this insight came to light in particular while she was seated in the audience of a show. Recognised by other audience members seated in front, they were quick to reminisce about the olden day tele drams and reveal what impact it had on their own lives, in resolving their own issues. “So I thought how wonderful if you can help people with their problems through something like tele dramas!”

Her true passion

The one time Irangani’s smiling disposition subdues, is on the topic of conserving the environment. “My greatest interest has been the natural environment,” she

declares, despite her journey in the spotlight that has won the hearts of many Sri Lankans. “What I always try to say is that we are all linked together, one affecting the other.”

Irangani was amongst a small group of nature lovers that established the society ‘Ruk Rakaganno’ – protectors of trees, to which she remains a patron today. “Sri Lanka is blessed with a wonderful natural heritage,” she states adding that, “I worked in tourism as a tour guide for four years. I know what they seek most and that is our natural environment.” Her unfaltering passion has on several occasions compelled her to visit schools to educate young minds on the subject of conservation. I myself remember her visit to my school and still remember her as she spoke at length on the imprtance of conserving our nature. “This is going to be their world, if it gets destroyed, they will have no future,” she says earnestly.

“People should dance! It is a natural thing to dance to music!”

At the end of recollecting a vibrant past there is one failing that Irangani dwells on. “I wanted to be a dancer!” she says at once. She had even taken lessons under Chitrasena, while discovering a love for all forms of dancing. “At one point I thought I should have been a dancer instead of an actress,” she enthuses.

She recalls a visit to a village in Belihul Oya where a musical show was going on. Seeing all the men quick to start dancing with their sarong’s hitched up, she tried to coax the women who were hanging behind. “I said ‘lets go and dance!’ but they were too shy even though they were dying to. Such a pity!” Dancing, she believes drives away the worries, enmities and cares of life away. “People should dance! It is a natural thing to dance to music!”

She voices the same sentiments on singing. “These are simple pleasure, you don’t need money to do that.”

“I am not happy with competition”

Today Irangani reflects on her career without regret. “I am very happy with what I’ve done as I like to act and I have made many friends along the way,” she says. However it is today’s climate of pitching one against the other that concerns her. “I worry about the little children of this country. They are made to compete and I am not happy with competition.”

It may be why that Irangani speaks so little of her own accolades, and accomplishments. “I prefer people doing things together,” she says simply. “All these awards create such unhappiness, and on such occasions I try to remind them that its just a group of people who decide who is better than whom, so don’t worry about it” As an actress, to Irangani its the public opinion that matters. “If they say you are a bad actor then of course you shouldn’t be acting.” It is indeed both inspiring and hearwarming to listen to her life’s journey; an actress whose work speaks for itself, beyond which is a kindred spirit, well loved and respected by Sri Lankans.

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