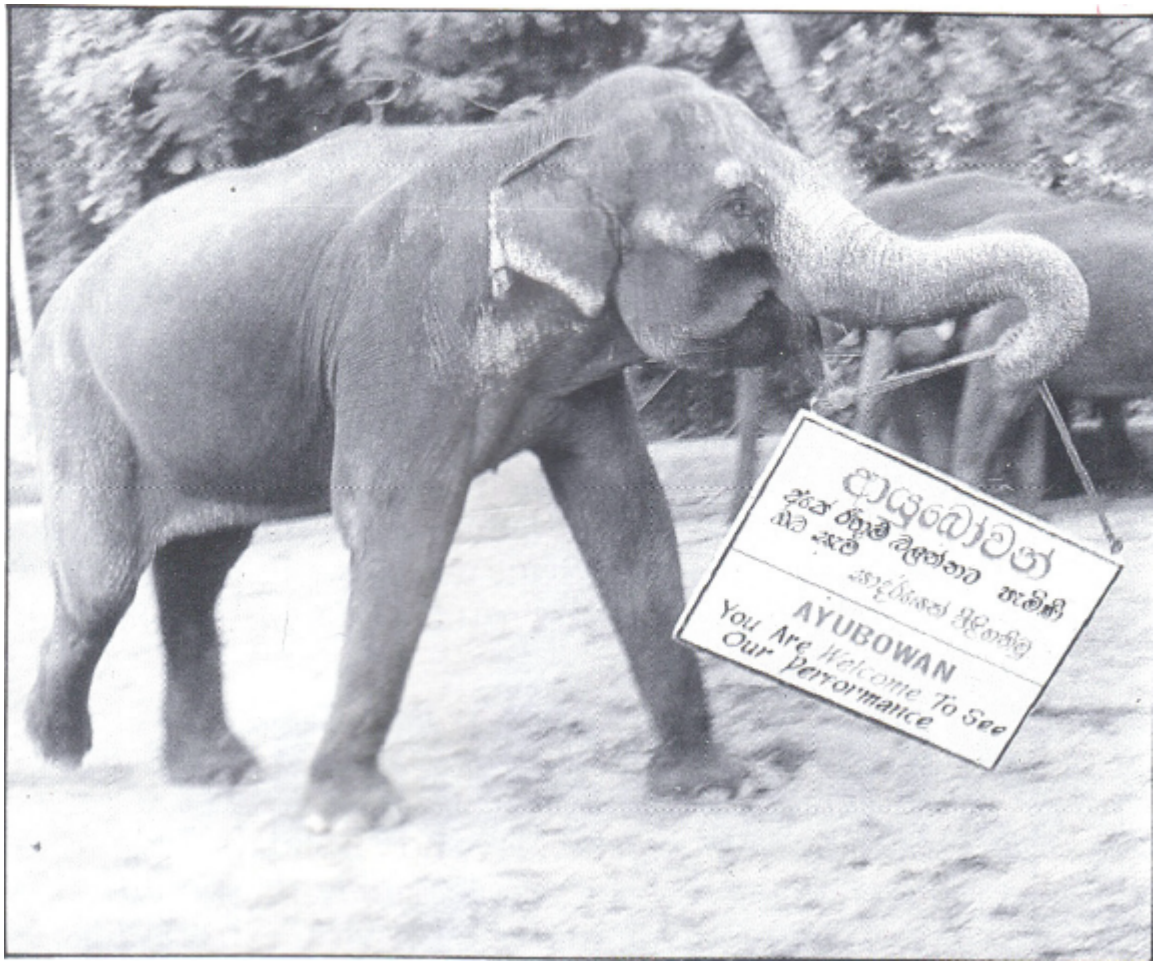
The Evening Elephant Circus

Posted on

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The time was quarter past five in the evening. Fathers, mothers, children, grandparents, locals and foreigners alike formed a motley crowd that filled the middle-sized arena. The tinkling of bells was heard…the loud babel of voices like the sound of a cascading waterfall was abruptly arrested and there was a hushed silence…a silence filled with eager anticipation. They trooped in perfect order of decreasing height, the one behind grasping the tail of the one in front with its trunk.

The elephant circus has begun. The Zoological Gardens at Dehiwela situated a few kilometers south of Colombo is famous for its animals. The elephant circus held every evening from 5.15pm to 5.30pm is one of its major attractions.

Majestic but lovable, five elephants led by their trainer and his assistants enter the ring and salute the audience by folding their trunks against their foreheads. Then the leader is given a board which she carries around on her trunk It says, ‘Welcome! Thank you for coming to see our show.’ She is ‘Babynona’, eight feet four-and-a-half inches tall at forty-three years of age. This veteran performer is now given a mouth organ which she holds in the tip of her trunk Tra . .la .. la .. la and off she goes twice round the ring, the others following her trunk to tail, skipping along in perfect unison to the music from the mouth organ.

Coming back to where they began, all five sit on their haunches on the short concrete wall that surrounds the ring jostling one another like frisky school children. At a sharp order from their trainer, Babynona shuffles forward and stands in the middle while two other elephants, ‘Raja’ and ‘Namalee’, come up on either side of her. This time all three of them stand on their hind legs saluting the audience with their trunks. Two stools are brought and placed on either side of Babynona. As surefooted as mountain goats, Raja and Namalee ascend these, balance only on their hind legs with the forelegs in the air and then amaze the crowd by placing their forelegs on Babynona’s rump. The audience roars in delight, cameras click and flash. I am sure the performers were thrilled coo because their mouths were wide open as if they were smiling in acknowledgement of the hearty applause.

Ambling backwards into line, Raja accidentally goes into a wrong position but is nudged back into his proper one. Raja is a male, thirteen years of age and seven feet five-and-a-half inches tall. Namalee, a female six feet four-and-a-half inches in height, was captured in the Deduru-oya area in the Puttalam district. The other two are females, ‘Indee’, eleven years old and six feet tall, and ‘Devi’, the youngest standing. at five feet six inches, brought to the zoo from the Udawalawe sanctuary in 1983.

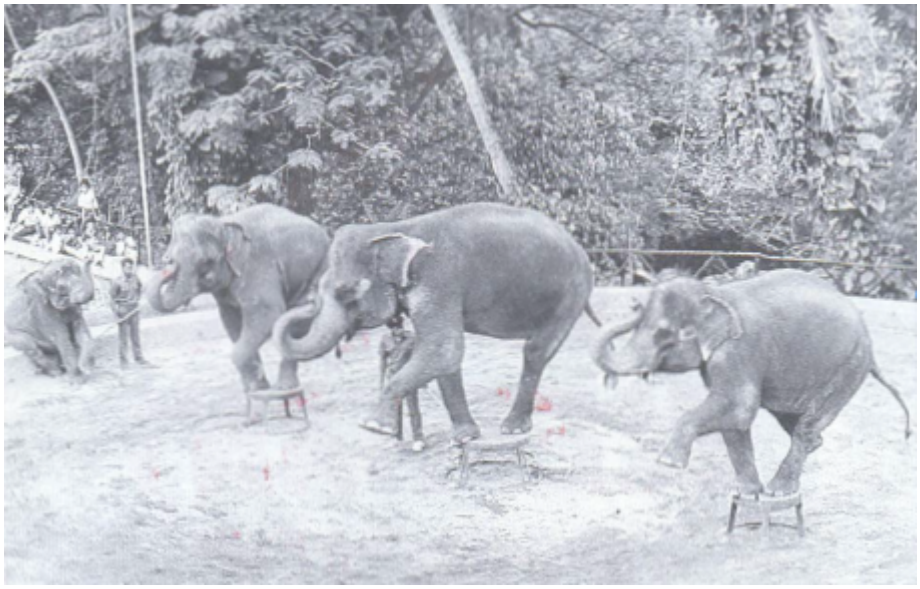
Up comes Namalee, balances on her hind legs, then suddenly stoops down, places her bent forelegs and trunk on the ground and kicks her hind legs in the air with her ample posterior perfectly balanced. Down she comes, accepts the applause from the crowd and returns to her position. Little Devi not to be outdone tries her hand, or should I say trunk, at the same trick. Oops! Up go her hind legs wiggling in the air as she makes a heroic effort to maintain her balance. But alas, she cannot. ‘Herrmp,

I’ll try again,’ she defiantly tells the onlookers who are rolling in mirth at her clumsiness.

The trainer and his assistants quickly tie leather belts bearing small bells around the legs of Babynona, Raja and Namalee. At the beat of a drum all three start to dance, step, hop and skip … round about .. .. step, hop and a skip. With the bells going jingle jingle they prance round the ring like clumsy giant-sized puppies, with their big ears flapping and ridiculous looking tails flailing the air, generating in the audience a desire to join them.

The show comes to an end with a final salute and twice round the ring. It is quite amusing to see Babynona’s huge snout groping and fumbling to find and catch hold of Devi’s wee little tail. The crowd comes to its feet cheering loudly, offering these mute but intelligent animals a round of well-earned applause. Indee looks back as if to say ‘We hope you’ll come tomorrow too.’

Usually the leader of the troop is ‘Bandula’, a male elephant of the species Elephus maximus vilaliya. He is nine feet seven-and-a-half inches tall. But when this huge animal is going through it’s ‘must period’ (the mating season of elephants), which affects him around March each year and remains for about three-and-a-half months, he is very restless and dangerous and cannot be used for the performance. Mr. A.LG. Sumanadasa, the head keeper of these elephants, has been training them since 1979. There are eight assistants to help him in his difficult task. Early in the morning elephants are released and taken to the water tank to drink. The training process goes on-till about 9.30 a.m. Then they are given a bath and a special food mixture afterwards. The keeper said that when a wild elephant was brought to the zoo it takes about six months to train it with the help of tame elephants. The elephant circus, which attracts large crowds including a significant number of foreigners especially on weekends and holidays, is good entertainment for the whole family. It should be a ‘must’ in the programme of every visitor to Sri Lanka.



Jumbos performing at the Zoo.