The Life and Theater of Indu Dharmasena

Posted on

Indu Dharmasena, the entertainer, continues to enjoy the journey.

After decades on stage, Dharmasena describes himself simply: entertainer. Though a playwright, actor, director, and producer, he chose this title. It accurately reflects a career focused on bringing joy and reflecting Sri Lankan society's peculiarities and humanity. Yet behind the laughter is a life shaped by privilege, loss, resilience, and love for theater.

Born into a prominent family with deep roots in Sri Lanka's plantation and transport sectors, Dharmasena enjoyed a childhood of comfort and opportunity. His family owned the High Level Bus Company, a major private operator of its era, and held significant estate wealth. His grandfather funded and donated land and resources to build the Homagama Hospital, leaving a legacy of public service that continues to benefit the community.

Dharmasena also faced an early loss. At eighteen, his father died at forty-three. His nine-year-old brother and eleven-year-old sister depended on their mother, now responsible for the family.

Indu credits his mother for shaping his character. After her husband's death, she managed her husband's estate and family life with determination and grace. Dharmasena still admires her, her influence lasting decades later.

"My mother always told me never to lie," he recalls. It is a principle he still attempts to follow.

His family experienced Sri Lanka's nationalization policies firsthand, losing transportation and estate holdings before regaining some land with adulthood. Dharmasena saw the impact of political change on personal fortunes.

Reflecting on these changes, he sees them as part of life's unpredictability. Through it all, material possessions came and went, but other things remained. One of those constants was creativity.

Dharmasena's theater journey began unexpectedly. At school, he appeared in concerts and productions as an extra before gradually receiving larger roles. He credits one teacher in particular, Yolanda Abeyweera, whom he affectionately describes as his guru, for introducing him to the fundamentals of stage performance and teaching him how to speak on stage.

If Abeyweera nurtured the performer, two other teachers, Kusum Dias and Indra

Ganegoda, encouraged the writer. Recognizing his talent for storytelling, they persuaded the teenage Dharmasena to write original plays.

> For Dharmasena, comedy has never been merely about laughter. Beneath every joke lies an observation about society, human behavior, prejudice, ambition, language, class, or relationships.

His first play, written at fourteen or fifteen, adapted a folk tale shared by a family driver for a school Christmas event. This modest start began a creative journey lasting over fifty years. Those early scripts were written entirely in Sinhala. It was only later that Dharmasena began experimenting with the linguistic style that would eventually become one of his trademarks: Singlish.

At a time when linguistic purists frowned upon mixing English and Sinhala, Dharmasena observed something simple. Sri Lankans already spoke that way. He noticed Sri Lankans naturally switched between English and Sinhala. For Dharmasena, portraying real speech patterns was honest, not rebellious.

The criticism came quickly. Some accused him of “murdering the Queen’s English.” Yet Dharmasena persisted because he believed theater must reflect real life rather than artificial conventions.

Trading scripts for brush strokes – Indu at one of his favorite pastimes.

Time ultimately vindicated him. Today, Singlish has become commonplace in advertising, television, social media, and everyday communication. What was once controversial is now widely accepted.

Throughout the 1980s and beyond, Dharmasena wrote, produced, and staged 65 plays, as well as over 100 short sketches for various events and functions.

Comedy became his preferred medium. He rejects the notion that comedy is somehow less serious than tragedy. On the contrary, he argues that making people laugh is often the more difficult task. “It is much harder to make a person laugh than to make a person cry,” he says. The timing must be perfect. The performance must feel natural. The humor must resonate. A slight misstep can destroy a joke.

Yet for Dharmasena, comedy has never been merely about laughter. Beneath every joke lies an observation about society, human behavior, prejudice, ambition, language, class, or relationships.

Between rehearsals and belly rubs — Indu and his Beagle.

Audiences may notice the deeper messages or simply enjoy the entertainment. Dharmasena appreciates both. After all, life itself can be heavy enough. “If it makes you laugh, just laugh and be happy,” he says.

His celebrated Tomiya series exemplifies this philosophy. While some viewers interpreted the plays as satirical attacks on people who struggled with English, Dharmasena insists that was never the intention. Instead, he sought to expose social divisions and demonstrate how language often becomes a barrier that limits opportunity. The comedy emerged not from mocking individuals but from revealing shared human weaknesses and insecurities across social classes.

> For him, success is seeing audiences enjoy themselves. It is hearing laughter fill an auditorium. It is watching performers grow. Perhaps his greatest contribution is training hundreds of young performers through school productions and theater programs.

Acting can be emotionally demanding, but Dharmasena creates rehearsals that actors enjoy. He encourages focus and fun, believing energy on stage resonates with audiences who come to be entertained. While theater shaped his public identity, it wasn’t his main income. After earning a degree in Mathematics and Economics from the City of London University, he considered careers in academia and economics but ultimately chose a different path.

Indu with his wife, Sanwada, and their beloved “baby” — a partnership on and off stage.

Dharmasena worked in advertising, television, and media with top agencies, but his family’s assets and plantations provided him with financial stability. This allowed him to follow theater without depending on it for income.

This financial independence also shaped his approach to the arts. Theater, he believes, should never be solely about money.

Indeed, he readily admits that theater in Sri Lanka remains financially challenging. Rising production costs, shrinking audiences, and economic uncertainty have made it increasingly difficult to stage productions profitably. Yet he continues because the rewards are measured differently.

For him, success is seeing audiences enjoy themselves. It is hearing laughter fill an auditorium. It is watching performers grow. Perhaps his greatest contribution is training hundreds of young performers through school productions and theater programs at institutions including St. Bridget’s Convent, St. Peter’s College, and Visakha Vidyalaya.

Away from the spotlight in the wild.

Generations of actors have trained under him, learning technical skills, discipline, confidence, and appreciation for theater.

He remains deeply committed to nurturing young talent and often works with schools for little or no financial reward. Theater, he believes, should remain accessible to anyone with enthusiasm and potential. Away from the stage, Dharmasena is a passionate wildlife enthusiast and traveler. He has photographed tigers, jaguars, and more, traveling through India, Kenya, South Africa, Brazil, and beyond.

Photography itself evolved from another lifelong passion: painting. As a child, he frequently won art prizes at school. Later, he studied painting formally and continued producing artwork as an adult. Eventually, photography became a more immediate way of capturing the scenes that once inspired his paintings, but the artistic impulse remained unchanged.

His home reflects this creative sensibility. He speaks proudly of contributing to its design, blending architectural influences in ways that mirror the fusion of styles found in his theatre work.

Books were another important part of his upbringing. His mother maintained an extensive library, fostering a household culture of reading. Agatha Christie, Jeffrey Archer, Georgette Heyer, and countless other writers influenced his imagination, with some eventually inspiring theatrical adaptations and original works.

Today, declining eyesight has made reading more difficult, prompting a shift toward television. British comedies, crime dramas, and investigative series continue to captivate him. Yet the storyteller’s curiosity remains intact.

Dharmasena describes himself as retired, managing what remains of his plantation interests while continuing to engage with theater whenever opportunities arise.

He has mellowed, he admits. The quick temper of youth has largely disappeared, much to the amusement of long-time cast members who occasionally claim they miss the fiery director he once was. Age, he says, chuckling, changes perspective.

Looking back across a life that has traversed privilege and loss, plantations and playhouses, mathematics and comedy, Indu Dharmasena remains refreshingly unpretentious about his accomplishments. He has never sought grand labels or lofty artistic status.

Indu and Sanwada exploring the wild, capturing life’s most beautiful unscripted moments.

Instead, he has spent decades doing something both simple and profound: helping people forget their troubles for a few hours and reminding them, through laughter, of their shared humanity. Today, he lives a contented life with his wife, Sanwada, who, apart from their shared love for their dog, also indulges in other interests such as painting, and together they demonstrate a perfect fit on stage and in real life. One cannot help but appreciate their conviviality and carefreeness; perhaps that is why they are relatable to actors of every age, from their generation to the next, as they continue to pursue their passion for theater in their own inimitable way.

In a world that often takes itself far too seriously, that may be one of the most meaningful legacies an artist can leave behind.