The Voice of a Nation

Posted on

Richard Manicasothy de Zoysa belonged to an entire nation. Some knew him intimately; others admired him from afar. Richard was ubiquitous as an actor, writer, dramatist, teacher, journalist, and broadcaster. Thirty-five years after his death, Richard again finds himself in the spotlight—this time, alongside his mother, Manorani Saravanamuttu. The deeper we explore their lives, the more compelling the story becomes. This piece is a reflection told through the voices of those who knew them best.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Growing Up

Richard de Zoysa always stood out wherever he went— even at twelve, riding the school

bus, he was the star of the show. Steve de la Zilwa, three-years older, first heard the story of the wiz kid on the school bus from his friends who called him the 'Dictionary'—a nickname given by college boys impressed by Richard's remarkable vocabulary. Daily, they would challenge him with words, which he would define with ease and confidence. It wasn't unusual for those who knew Richard to greet him with a fond "Hello, Dictionary," a nod to his extraordinary command of language. At the time, Richard lived with Manorani on Kynsey Road and boarded the school bus from Borella.

A year later, Steve met Richard through the St. Thomas's College Drama Society. What began as a casual acquaintance soon blossomed into a deep friendship, one that carried them onto the stage and beyond, even after their college days had ended. It was during their time at school that Steve first discovered Richard's gift for storytelling. Years later, after Richard's untimely death, Steve stood beside Richard's mother, Manorani, supporting her quest for justice.

Richard Simon, a classmate since kindergarten at STC, described him as brilliant but unconventional—a 'weird- looking' child with the wisdom of someone older. In the 'blue shorts' stage in schooling for Sri Lankan boys—Simon remembers a chubby boy with a square strong face in thick glasses, socks with sandals, and a quiet, mature presence far beyond his years. According to Simon, Richard impressed his classmates with his seemingly endless knowledge on every topic imaginable.

At just 12 years old, Richard would spin the most fantastic tales—entirely made up. Though his friends knew they weren't true, they let him go on simply because of his captivating storytelling.

Gifted from a young age, Richard was reading Reader's Digest at six and discussing Shakespeare by eight. That same year, he wrote his first play. By 14, he was already writing poetry. His love for the arts was evident, and his future as an actor, writer, and poet felt inevitable.

Maria D'Álmeida, Richard's cousin, grew up closely with him. Their families were deeply interconnected—her mother married Richard's paternal uncle, while Lucian's sister married Maria's maternal uncle. The families often vacationed together, and Richard, three years younger, was always the director and star of their home plays. His natural flair for performance, precise enunciation, and stage presence set him apart. Years earlier, both brothers and their families had spent several years living in England during Richard and Maria's early childhood—a formative time that only deepened their familial bond.

Encouraged by his mother, he made his stage debut in Fortress in the Sky, a play about King Kasyapa written by his father, Lucian. Performing alongside his family, young Richard along with Maria played the role of the king's daughters, marking the beginning of his journey in theater.

Maria recalls Richard's intellectual relationship with his parents. Manorani encouraged deep conversations, while Lucian brought playfulness and history into Richard's life, taking him and the cousins to Mount Lavinia every Sunday for sea baths and storytelling.

A little star in costume beside his radiant mother, Manorani.

Richard with his parents, Manorani and Lucian.

The boy full of wonder, with curious eyes and an open heart.

> Though Richard would later gain fame in theater and television, Steve believes his greatest strength was writing. “His command of English was astonishing. His mind was razor-sharp.” Even in school, Richard filled notebooks with stories that reflected insight and depth well beyond his years. “They were thoughtful, mature pieces—and I had the privilege of reading them.”

Richard’s STC Days

Richard de Zoysa came of age during the golden era of Thomian theater. At St. Thomas’s

College, Mount Lavinia, he was part of a vibrant group of schoolboys determined to make STC a beacon of theatrical talent. But beyond the stage, Richard was also a bright student. When Richard returned to STC after a short stint in Liberia with his mother, he had already passed his Ordinary Level exam with distinction in the arts stream. According to Simon, at this point Richard had developed an idea of following in his mother's medical footsteps, joining the science division. During this time, he reconnected with Simon, sitting next to each other in class. However, within weeks, Richard realized medicine wasn't his calling and switched back to the arts stream— where he truly belonged. Simon recalls that Richard left college in 1976 without ever sitting for his Advanced Level examination. By then, Simon believes, Richard had simply outgrown the need for formal education — and lacked the patience to endure its restrictions. Perhaps that explains why, as Maria notes, Richard's mother, Manorani, never pressured him to pursue higher studies. Instead, she encouraged him to follow whatever path made him happiest. Still, Simon remembers Richard eventually taking the A Level exams in the arts stream in 1980, long after his time at STC had ended, and enrolling in a local university degree program — a journey he never completed, passing away before he could see it through.

The early 1970s marked a cultural renaissance at St. Thomas's College (STC). The STC Drama Society (DRAMSOC) emerged as a vibrant platform where gifted schoolboys brought their theatrical talents to life. In 1973, the launch of the inaugural inter-school Shakespeare Drama Competition ignited a golden era of STC dominance. Their entry—an excerpt from The Taming of the Shrew—swept the competition, clinching every major award: Best Play, Best Director, with Steve de la Zilwa winning Best Actress for his portrayal of a female role, and Richard de Zoysa honored as Best Actor. Under the inspired leadership of the Ponniah brothers, STC claimed the Shakespeare title an unprecedented eight consecutive years—a reign that only ended with the brothers' departure in 1981, closing a remarkable chapter in the school's dramatic legacy. The spirited young actors of DRAMSOC would go on to shape Colombo's theater landscape for more than a decade.

That same year, Richard joined a powerhouse ensemble—featuring Steve, Rohan Ponniah and his brother, along with Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu—under the banner of DRAMSOC, to stage The Matchmaker for Colombo audiences. It was an ambitious project for the schoolboys of 1973, but it proved to be a resounding success. Richard took on the lead female role of Dolly Levi, the spirited widow who made her living arranging marriages, and captivated audiences with his performance. Steve recalls how effortlessly Richard slipped into female roles, a testament to his remarkable versatility. In fact, Richard's very first award-winning performance was as Kinduri, a celestial maiden, in a Sinhala play based on the legend of King Dutugemunu— an early glimpse of the brilliance that would define his theatrical career.

Simon recalls that as members of the same house—De Saram—they worked closely on the annual Inter-House drama competition. Rather than adapting an existing play, Richard boldly created an original script and encouraged Simon to co-write it, marking Simon's first public foray into writing.

As friends, Richard's influence on Simon was profound, introducing him to poetry, books, films, and new ways of thinking. He remembers teachers and students drawn to Richard's charisma. While Richard and Simon indulged in typical teenage antics, their bond was rooted in shared creativity and curiosity.

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> "We saw a change," says Simon. Richard became increasingly drawn to the vernacular culture, a shift that marked his growing disconnection from the English-speaking elite. Given who Richard was— intelligent, widely read, and with a vast breadth of life experience—he understood the complexities of life, and he saw the struggles unfolding around him in Sri Lanka.

Steve de la Zilwa – theater buddy.

Maria D’Almeida – cousin

Richard Simon – classmate.

Ajita Kadirgamar – media colleague.

Television and IPS

In the 1980s, Richard de Zoysa became a familiar face on Sri Lankan television, known for his poise and professionalism as a newsreader at Rupavahini. Often arriving at the studio just minutes before going live, he would grab the poorly written news script, edit it on the go, dash to the makeup room, and prepare for the broadcast. “He was, after all, a polished actor and brilliant at his craft,” said Ajita Kadirgamar, who joined Rupavahini in 1982 and remembers how Richard took her under his wing with a brotherly affection.

Richard would smooth his curly hair in the studio and double-check his notes with seconds to spare. As the ON AIR sign lit up, he transformed into the consummate professional,

delivering even propagandist news with conviction and grace. Always composed, he could ad-lib seamlessly and recover from slip-ups with flair. His trademark black Bata slippers were just out of frame—a quiet reminder of the man beneath the polished exterior.

Richard was equally compelling on the radio. On the political and social commentary program Left Luggage, he'd often arrive late, helmet under his arm, still scribbling notes as he walked to the studio. Yet, he never missed a beat once the mic was on. Getting into Rupavahini in those days was easy. Steve and friends would stroll into the newsroom or makeup department, waiting for Richard to finish so they could head to the Art Centre Club at Lionel Wendt. Steve vividly remembers Richard in mini- shorts and a high-collared tunic, reading and editing scripts as he walked. On- screen, he was poised and eloquent from the waist up. Below the desk were Richard's bare legs and shorts.

His gift for news reading wasn't just technical. His voice was clear and sincere, but more importantly, he understood and felt what he read. Steve believes Richard often wrote flawless scripts, reflecting his intellect and precision—one of the reasons he became a beloved household name.

Ajita recalls Richard as charming, kind, and passionate about theater and teaching. Though she didn't witness his political side at Rupavahini, they did collaborate on a big Shakespearean production for national television— excerpts from four plays performed in English for the first time. It was Richard's debut on screen in English theater, with a strong cast including Steve de la Zilwa.

At the same time, Richard worked for Inter Press Service (IPS). Just before his abduction, he was due to take up a post in Portugal. Many believed Richard used IPS to report on state-sponsored violence, documenting atrocities. Maria is confident this work made him a target of the government.

Manorani

Manorani Saravanamuttu, born in 1928, was the daughter of a British mother and a Jaffna Tamil father—an esteemed journalist and diplomat who later moved to Malaysia. With her brother Lakshman settling in England and little contact with extended family, Manorani grew close to Maria's family instead.

Educated at Bishop's College, Colombo, Manorani dedicated her life to medicine. She

worked at the former Sulaiman's Hospital in Grandpass, before opening a private clinic in the same area in the 1970s, earning the local community's trust, especially Muslim women who often sought her help with childbirth despite her not being an obstetrician.

Manorani had a commanding yet warm presence, was strikingly beautiful, and was always in a sari. Though she acted briefly— encouraged by her husband Lucian, a prominent English-language playwright— her true calling was medicine. After her marriage ended in the early 1970s, she took a job in Liberia, bringing young Richard. Upon returning to the country, she went back to Grandpass to Sulaiman's Hospital. She later opened a private clinic, serving a largely lower-middle-class community with unwavering compassion.

Medicine was sacred to her—it was never about money. Even when unwell, patients would ask to see her photograph, believing it had healing power. Manorani also worked for several private hospitals in Colombo. She would sleep on Maria's couch beside the telephone because she didn't own a phone, ready to rush off for late-night deliveries at those private hospitals, delivering babies for her patients who consulted her at her private clinic. She was always on call, working tirelessly. Steve remembers her treating friends and offering support on sensitive issues like contraception to young women in his circle.

Richard and Manorani were inseparable after their separation from Lucian. They lived together until his death, bound by a deep, unshakable closeness. As Steve spent more time at their home, he came to know her well—intellectual, witty, kind, and wise. Their house was open to all—Richard's friends, students, and collaborators were always welcome.

Despite her devotion and hard work, Manorani and Richard never owned a house. They moved often. Steve recalls her living in at least six different houses. After Richard's death, the threats to her life forced her to move.

She was not a woman who wore her emotions openly. Even in her darkest moments, she remained composed. Steve remembers the one time she allowed herself to weep: the morning after she had identified Richard's body. Standing before a mirror, combing her hair, a few quiet tears slipped down her face. It was a calm, heartbreaking moment that etched itself into Steve's memory.

Manorani, the quintessential queen of sari.

A moment on stage – Manorani was drawn into theater by her husband Lucian.

A fearless mother who demonstrated unwavering strength and resilience.

Richard’s Foray into Sinhala Cinema

Richard has acted in several Sinhala films and television dramas. He didn’t act for any random director but for the best of the best of Lankan cinema. He was cast in films by legendary filmmakers like Lester James Peries and shared the screen with icons like Gamini Fonseka. Lester, Steve recalls, had a deep affection for Richard. An English-speaking man, Lester enjoyed the company of people like Richard— intellectually curious, articulate, and steeped in theater. Gamini was much the same; he relished conversation with those from the English stage, eager to explore ideas and art beyond the frame. Lester admired Richard for his performance and who he was—someone who came from a world apart, a different cultural current. Sumithra Peries, too, was fond of him.

Richard had, in many ways, a head start. Born into the illustrious Saravanamuttu–de Zoysa lineage—two of Sri Lanka’s most prominent Tamil and Sinhala families—he carried a legacy of privilege, education, and influence. That heritage gave him access to elite artistic circles and a kind of cultural capital few possessed. He was, as Steve puts it, born into greatness.

Yet, in Steve's eyes, Richard was never a remarkable film actor. What he did have, however, was a presence—and a certain charm that drew the attention of the country's most respected directors.

The Art Centre Club

Most evenings after the news, Richard would head to the Art Centre Club above the Lionel Wendt Theatre, often with a few Rupavahini colleagues. His other theater friends would be there too. It was a vibrant hub for Colombo's artistic, eclectic, and gay community. Ajita's introduction to this unusual world was through Richard. He thrived there—effortlessly social, surrounded by friends, admirers, and kindred spirits.

Steve and Richard spent most evenings at the Art Centre Club. They never drank at Richard's home—there was no alcohol there. Richard never used drugs, and his drink of choice was arrack, which Steve says reflected his down-to-earth nature.

When Simon returned from university in the UK, he often met up with Richard at the Art Centre Club. It was the 1980s, and the two of them, then in their twenties, embraced the carefree spirit of youth. "Richard and I were young bohemians, living it up around town and enjoying our drinks," Simon recalls.

The Change

When Steve returned from England towards the latter part of the 1980s, he found that Richard had changed. There was a new intensity about him—he had grown more sympathetic to the JVP cause. Steve was never sure whether Richard was an official member, but he liked to believe Richard saw himself as one. They even talked about it openly. At the time, Steve recalls, people were eager to erase any link between Richard and the JVP. But now, he sees no reason to hide that part of the story.

"We saw a change," says Simon. Richard became increasingly drawn to the vernacular culture, a shift that marked his growing disconnection from the English- speaking elite. Given who Richard was— intelligent, widely read, and with a vast breadth of life experience—he understood the complexities of life, and he saw the struggles unfolding around him in Sri Lanka. He recognized that this very English-speaking elite had, in many ways, caused the turmoil, perpetuating political systems that had entrenched inequality for decades. During this period, Richard started spending his evenings at the Art Centre Club in

the company of a new crowd — young men from social backgrounds quite different from his own.

It took Simon a long time to fully understand that he could not have acted any differently, given the person Richard was and the conscience that drove him. Richard could not stand by while a brutal regime reigned; his deep sense of moral responsibility compelled him to take a stand, become politically involved, and protest. In the end, Simon realizes that Richard's actions were inevitable, given his character.

The Aftermath

When Richard died, his friends vanished. Gripped by fear-they fled the country. At the funeral, Steve found himself searching for pallbearers. But many of Richard's friends were nowhere to be seen. Even those who had grown close to Richard's mother, Manorani, had disappeared. Steve understands their actions, given the fear and uncertainty that gripped the political climate after Richard de Zoysa's killing. At the cemetery, the pallbearers who carried Richard to his final rest were a poignant gathering of those who loved and admired him: his half-brother Michael, celebrated actors Iranganie and Winston Serasinghe, his uncle Neville De Jacolyn Seneviratne, Eric Fernando of the Rupavahini newsroom, and Richard Simon.

Manorani envisioned Richard's funeral as a spectacle—a grand, unforgettable tribute. Steve remembers it vividly, perhaps because he was the one who organized it. She insisted on an open pyre to infuse the moment with drama. Manorani stood solemnly beside the flames, adorned elegantly with flowers on her hair. As Steve puts it, it was a photographer's dream: cinematically striking and emotionally raw—a stunning portrayal of grief and defiance.

Manorani's meeting with President Premadasa was nothing short of dramatic. Despite strong objections from her family and friends, she was determined to go. She let her hair down to symbolize mourning and defiance—a gesture steeped in Tamil tradition. With a cynical smile, she reminded the President of her lineage: her ancestors' role in Colombo's mayoralty and their ties to his roots in Kehelwatte.

After Richard's death, Manorani leaned heavily on Steve, so he became her sole anchor. It wasn't easy, he admits, giving up his life for about six months. He became her driver, her confidante, her constant companion. She needed him to be present—punctual, dependable, unwavering. If he were even a little late, she would be upset. The emotional toll was real.

She needed someone to be with her.

After Richard’s death, Manorani was relentless in her pursuit of those who had abducted her son. Thanks to the influence her family once held, she received the names of the men believed to be responsible. Contrary to popular belief, Manorani didn’t identify the primary perpetrator by chance on television. Steve clarifies this common misconception. The truth, he says, is that she already knew who they were. She lacked a face—a clear image to match the name. That moment came unexpectedly during a news broadcast. She saw him on screen, saving a cow from slaughter.

One strange detail from the night of Richard’s abduction stood out in Manorani’s memory: the presence of a single uniformed officer. He was a high-ranking policeman attached to the Fort Police Station.

Steve recalls Manorani mentioning this officer again and again. Her repeated remark that he looked like Steve made it more disturbing. It wasn’t until Steve eventually met the man that he understood what she meant. That night, many neighbors had borne witness to the abduction. The Ellepola family, in whose annex Manorani and Richard lived, were the first the abductors questioned in their search. With the help of her lawyer, Batty Weerakoon, Manorani pursued justice for her son. The main suspect died in a bomb explosion. In the end, due to insufficient evidence, the case was dismissed. The only uniformed officer that night survived it all, still alive in Australia.

Young Richard de Zoysa – strikingly handsome with a captivating presence.

The Mothers' Front

Mangala Samaraweera encouraged Manorani to lead the Mothers' Front after Richard's death. Mangala was present from the very beginning—supporting her in the immediate aftermath and helping lay the foundation for the movement. He had known her through Richard, as both were part of the Art Centre Club's artistic and intellectual circle.

Steve recalls the inaugural meeting vividly. Manorani was unsettled when Sirimavo Bandaranaike arrived unannounced. To Manorani, her presence was disturbing—she represented the violent suppression of the 1971 uprising that claimed over 20,000 lives. Steve had to persuade Manorani not to leave. As a compromise, Sirimavo had to sit at the far end of the stage.

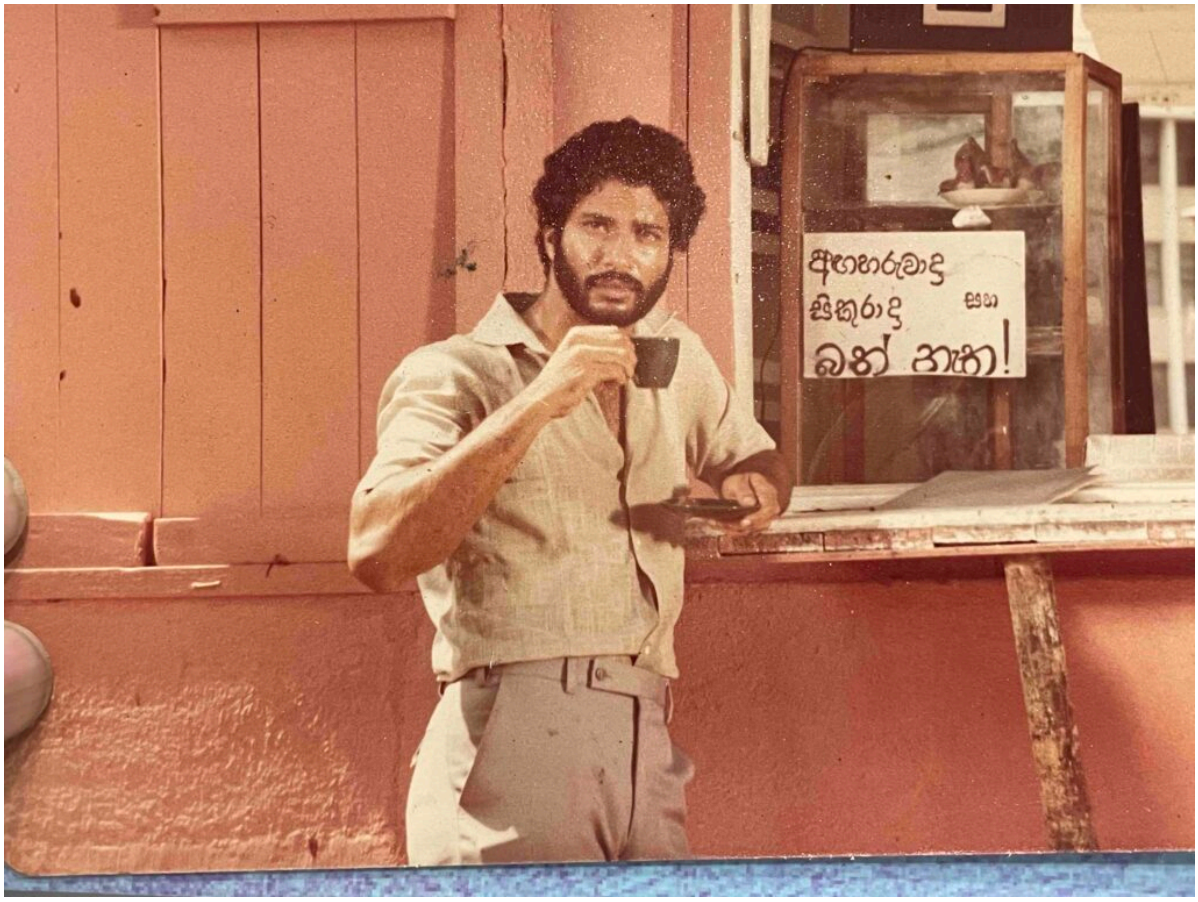
It soon became clear to Manorani that political agendas were co-opting the Mothers' Front.

Disillusioned, she established her initiative with an office in Borella, focused on helping women who had lost their husbands to political violence. Richard's friends rallied around her, including a young activist from the University of Kelaniya who had known Richard and Steve through theater. She threw herself into the cause—until, years later, she married a politician implicated in the 1988–1990 violence. For Manorani, it was a profound betrayal. Though she rarely showed emotion, Steve remembers two moments when she wept. Once, quietly, the morning after, she identified Richard's body. The other, upon hearing of the activist's marriage. It was not just disappointment—but deep heartbreak over how quickly people forget.

What was Richard Like?

"Nothing short of precocious," Steve says without missing a beat—a perfect summation of a brilliance that shone early and brightly. He had other traits too. According to Steve, Richard had a reputation for being notoriously unreliable—rarely seeing things through to the end. He was the kind of person who could walk away from a project in the blink of an eye. Yet, curiously, he never abandoned any of Steve's productions. Richard was infamous for skipping rehearsals, but Steve insisted that such behavior wasn't unusual in art.

When Steve brought Richard into a play, Steve ensured Richard stuck with it until the end. Without fail, at some point during each production, Richard would confess his doubts—uncertain whether he could go on. Steve would talk him down every time, urging him not to overthink it and to enjoy the process. Despite the chaos, their creative bond held firm, carrying them through many productions.



From English theater to Sinhala cinema – Richard in a scene from Yuganthaya.

Richard was a man of contrasts, says Simon. Kind-hearted, witty, and often laced with a touch of sarcasm. He could be excitable, slow to anger, and diplomatic when the situation called for it. But beneath his humor and charm was a sensitive soul who would often be downcast when a performance or piece of writing didn't meet his high standards. "He was known for his intelligence, thoughtfulness, and seriousness of mind. He could indulge in playful antics – he wasn't the po-faced misery people try to make him out to be, but he was in no way a clown."

According to Ajita, Richard was a deeply complex individual who concealed an inner world of anguish. She believes he was grappling with a tangle of personal, political, and ideological struggles— demons both within and without. On February 18, 1990, the darkest of those external forces finally closed in, extinguishing a bright, beautiful soul.

We appreciate Maria D'Almeida for her gracious contribution of photographs from her

album, which significantly supports and enhances Richard de Zoysa's article.