

The Wingfield Family (Palingu Rena) Fragility, Faith, and Family: A Classic in Sinhala

Posted on

With just four characters, Wingfield Family (Palingu Rena), the Sinhala adaptation of The Glass Menagerie—Tennessee Williams’ celebrated memory play—vividly explores how local theater reinterprets universal themes of family and human relationships, exemplifying the power of adaptation to engage new audiences.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

 L-R: Director of Palingu Rena, Pujitha de Mel, and cast members Bimsara Silva, Chandani Seneviratne, Xavier Kanishka, and Manushie Tania.

Sinhala theater has long been a vibrant and dynamic space where talent has flourished. It has served as a powerful launching platform for numerous actors whose abilities were first discovered through their stage performances. Over the years, adaptations of world-renowned plays into Sinhala—thoughtfully reimagined to reflect local contexts and social realities—have been widely admired. The Wingfield Family stands as the latest addition to this tradition, skillfully adapted to resonate with contemporary local sensibilities.

Pujitha De Mel, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Performing Arts, University of Colombo, deliberately selected Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie as the foundation for this production, as it is a prescribed text recommended by the Ministry of Education for students of English Literature and Theater.

This production marks a shift towards Community Theater, influenced by De Mel’s master’s studies in India. There, he travelled between cities with only a backpack and minimal costumes, using local furniture for performances. These experiences

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reinforced his belief that theater can remain powerful without heavy financial investment.

 Wingfield Family poster, a stage play by Pujitha De Mel.

 Veteran actress Chandani Seneviratne.

Under Pujitha De Mel's directorial guidance, this production, titled the Palingu Rena, stands out for its intentional departure from the slow pacing typical of Western versions, adapting to suit South Asian audience sensibilities, with jazz music and a vibrant entertainment. Thus, De Mel's directorial vision draws on a fusion of three theatrical traditions: Brechtian storytelling, Stanislavski's method acting, and physical theater, resulting in a layered and emotionally resonant stage experience.

Mrs Wingfield, as Chandani notes, is instantly familiar to Sri Lankan audiences. Her pride, pretense, and efforts to maintain appearances are common across many societies.

The adaptation process focused on cultural translation to ensure social resonance. While the first translation by Henry Jayasena reflected an earlier era, De Mel's version deliberately updates language and themes to connect with modern Sri Lankan families—foregrounding economic instability and family struggle as lived realities. This intentional localization emphasizes the transformative impact of adaptation. Veteran actress Chandani Seneviratne portrays Amanda Wingfield, with Manushie Tania as Laura. Xavier Kanishka takes on the character of Tom, while Bimsara Silva plays the role of Jim.

Laura inhabits a small, fragile world she tries to protect. Manushie Tania, a newcomer to theater, brings Laura to life with guidance from the cast. With each performance, Laura's character evolves and grows stronger. Taniya notes that Laura is still in development, deepening with every staging.

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Xavier Kanishka plays Tom, the narrator whose perspective shapes the story. Without a father, Tom reluctantly carries the family's burdens and dreams. Kanishka relates to this role as many Sri Lankan children must take on parental duties early, allowing him to draw from personal experience. Tom is ambitious and longs for freedom, hoping to become a wanderer like his father. Social expectations, however, keep him tied to his family—a single mother and a sister with special needs—while maintaining appearances. Torn between duty and desire, Tom faces constant inner conflict. Even after leaving, guilt and pain linger. For Kanishka, participating in the play led to a deeper understanding of emotional truths reflected in his own lived experience.

 A contemporary portrayal of family conflict, reflecting the quiet tensions and emotional realities of modern society.

 A moment suspended in candlelight — Jim and Laura in Wingfield Family.

Chandani Seneviratne finds the play familiar despite its American roots. She notes that parental hopes, expectations, and anxieties for children are much the same in Sri Lankan society. These sentiments grow stronger when family dynamics, like in the Wingfield home, are more complex. Likewise, Mrs Wingfield, as Chandani notes, is instantly familiar to Sri Lankan audiences. Her pride, pretense, and efforts to maintain appearances are common across many societies. This made the role easy to embrace. Jim, played by Bimsara Silva, enters as an outsider. He is Laura's potential suitor and brings hope to the Wingfield family. Unlike the family's fragile emotions, Jim's contrasting presence offers the chance to change their fate. Jim represents the American Dream seeker—ambitious, optimistic, and forward-looking. Yet, like life, he has flaws. He stumbles and faces instability, but always recovers with resilience. His confidence and openness distinguish him from the Wingfields.

The production was the first drama staged at the Sri Lankan Parliament, selected by the newly formed Select Committee for Art and Culture with Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya in attendance as the chief guest for this

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historic performance.

While the play's circumstances feel intimate and recognizable, the challenge was making them resonate with local audiences. The goal was to move beyond simply telling the story—to engage viewers emotionally, spark reflection, and help them see themselves in the characters. The team also sought to avoid a purely dialogue-driven approach. They instead transformed the play to hold attention and communicate its deep emotional core. Thus, the production's true strength was the ensemble's spirit. Cast members emphasized connection—among themselves and with the audience—to create a unified theatrical experience. Their desire to move beyond conventional interpretations helped them offer something unique to local audiences.

The play begins with Tom directly engaging the audience, inviting them into the story. This immediate interaction forms an emotional bond. Throughout the production, choreography, music, lighting, and acting draw the audience in, creating a palpable sense of excitement and immersion. The cast describes the experience as magical—an effect made possible through deep teamwork and trust. In other words, familial bonding allowed the director to guide the performance with clarity and cohesion. Chandani notes that this unity emerged from the absence of ego, hierarchy, or boundaries. By setting aside seniority and approaching the stage as equals, the cast achieved a powerful sense of unity and success. This collective vision was further enhanced by the evocative music composed by Nadika Waligodapola, the dynamic lighting design by Thilina Perera, and production by the Shaili Foundation.

De Mel avoids a domineering directorial style. He believes every team member shares responsibility for shaping the production. This approach fosters discipline and a sense of family, which are pillars of the production's success.

 Amanda and Laura share an intimate moment on stage, where emotions speak softly.

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A gentle embrace that speaks volumes of unspoken emotion of a mother and daughter.

The cast's chemistry, built over 18 months of rehearsal, was vital before the play debuted. During this time, they engaged in ongoing dialogue, reworked scenes, moved past rigid structures, and embraced improvisation.

Music in the production serves as a character itself, providing the emotional and narrative backdrop for each scene. It functions as its own language, enhancing storytelling alongside sound, set design, and costumes. In creating The Wingfield, the director and his team recognized that today's audiences are very different from those of the past. Immersed in social media and accustomed to instant gratification, contemporary viewers are less patient with long monologues and extended dialogues. To respond to this shift, the play has been crafted to run for just 90 minutes, with constantly moving scenes and a dynamic pace designed to align with today's audience's attention and psychology. With each performance, the play evolves, shaped by experience and teamwork. This shared spirit is central to the adaptation's ongoing strength.

Beyond the conventional theater space, this production has been designed to be staged in virtually any environment—a garage, a car wash, a lobby, or even an office recreation area—where audiences can simply gather and watch. This marks a departure from traditional theater, which typically relies on formal venues and fixed seating.

 A cast united by trust, joy, and the magic of shared purpose.

By bringing the play directly to the people, the team seeks to make theater more accessible, reaching communities without requiring them to travel. The play has achieved significant recognition, completing 13 performances, including three in Australia in May 2025. Notably, the production was the first drama staged at the Sri Lankan Parliament, selected by the newly formed Select Committee for Art and Culture, with Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya in attendance as the chief guest for this historic performance.

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Symbolically, the play represents innocence and fragility. Like the delicate glass figures at the heart of the story, the characters embody those who wait, hope, and dream, even as life moves forward around them.



L-R: Pujitha de Mel, Director of Palingu Rena, and cast members Bimsara Silva, Manushie Tania, Chandani Seneviratne, and Xavier Kanishka.