The Workshop Players Take on The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Posted on

Cast, Choir and Creatives of The Hunchback of Notre Dame, coming together for an ambitious new production.

Everyone looks forward to the October productions by The Workshop Players, and this year they return with the beautiful and challenging musical The Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Following the stupendous success of Fiddler on the Roof in 2024, The Workshop

Players are taking on another global favorite and one of the more demanding musicals to stage. With a stellar cast, a large ensemble, and a powerful choral component, The Hunchback of Notre Dame promises to be an ambitious production. Now, with The Hunchback of Notre Dame, the company is once again bringing an internationally recognized classic to a Sri Lankan stage.

For Dr. Sean Amarasekera, who plays the central character Quasimodo and serves as President of The Workshop Players, the production also represents something of a full circle. After all, The Hunchback of Notre Dame is the second work by Victor Hugo to be staged by The Workshop Players, following Les Misérables. While Les Misérables is set in the 19th century, The Hunchback of Notre Dame takes audiences back to the 15th century, creating a different but equally compelling world. The production draws on the musical score of Disney's animated adaptation, including much-loved songs such as Out There, Hellfire, Rhythm of the Tambourine, and Someday, while following the more complex narrative of Hugo's original novel. It is also the first officially licensed Disney Amateur Adult Production with the rights acquired through Music Theatre International.

Dr. Sean Amarasekera as Quasimodo in 'The Hunchback of Notre

Dame.

“This is a very theatrical production,” Sean explains. “There are a lot of new songs, and the music is almost liturgical.” The cathedral itself becomes a character in the story, given a voice through an on-stage choir of 30 performers. The choir does more than provide musical accompaniment; it represents the cathedral, commenting on and underscoring the action. The effect is intended to be almost as if Notre Dame itself is speaking.

At the heart of the production, however, is a story that remains remarkably relevant. The Hunchback of Notre Dame is fundamentally a story about outsiders and how society treats those who are different. Quasimodo may be physically deformed, but his character is defined by love, empathy, and compassion. In contrast, those who appear outwardly respectable can conceal deep darkness. The musical’s opening and closing ideas revolve around the question of what makes a monster and what makes a man. It is not simply how a person appears, but the nature of their thoughts, words, and actions that defines them.

For Sean, this is what makes the story particularly meaningful today. Although the events took place more than 500 years ago, the questions it raises remain unresolved. How do we treat people who are different? Do we accept them? Are we capable of compassion and kindness towards those whom society chooses to place on the margins? “The story is about the others in society,” he says, pointing to the continuing relevance of its themes of acceptance, equality, and compassion.

Jerome de Silva, Artistic Director, The Workshop Players.

The production is designed as much around theatrical imagination as elaborate realism. Rather than relying heavily on prosthetics or literal representations, the actors transform themselves through performance. The ensemble constantly shifts among characters, becoming townspeople, gypsies, soldiers, beggars, the wealthy, the poor, and thieves. In many ways, it becomes a play within a play. The performers enter as storytellers, take on their characters, and return to their storytelling personas. The approach allows a large, sprawling narrative to be created through the collective strength of the cast.

The cathedral remains the dominant setting, but audiences are encouraged to use their imagination. Elements of Notre Dame will evoke the iconic building, including its towers and famous rose window, while six enormous bells form part of the production. It is deliberately more theatrical than literal.

The choral music strengthens this presence. The choir performs pieces associated with the score, including Dies Irae, Mea Culpa, and Olim, creating moments of grandeur, sorrow, and hope.

“It is deep, but it is definitely entertaining,” Sean says. “It is entertaining and transportive, and hopefully inspiring hope at the end of the day.”

The scale of the production is considerable. Around 200 people auditioned, demonstrating the depth of theatrical talent available in Sri Lanka. The final production has a cast of approximately 70, with the principal roles divided between two sets of performers across the ten-night run.

Sean shares the role of Quasimodo with Rehan Almeida. Mario De Zoysa and Kanishka Herat play the role of Dom Claude Frollo. While Daniella Perera and Ayushka Nugaliyadda play Esmeralda. The creative team includes Surein de S Wijeratne as director, Jerome de Silva as artistic director and producer, Nishantha Warnakulasuriya and Vindula Perera as music directors, and Ayushka Nugaliyadda as choreographer. The large ensemble is particularly important to The Workshop Players’ philosophy. Alongside veterans are performers who are new to the stage, creating a mix of experience and fresh talent. For Sean, this is essential to ensuring that the tradition continues.

The undertaking has not been without its challenges. Musical theater is among the most expensive forms of theater to produce, with licensing costs, sets, costumes, musicians, and a large cast all adding to the expense. Rehearsals began in May, with the cast meeting every weekend and undertaking demanding vocal, physical, and emotional preparation. The challenge is intensified by the need for performers to move between multiple characters and to find the truth of each.

Jerome de Silva’s approach incorporates techniques associated with Konstantin Stanislavski and Sanford Meisner, encouraging performers to understand their characters’ motivations and inner lives. This applies not only to the principals but to every member of the ensemble.

The Workshop Players’ commitment to quality has long been part of its identity. Founded by Jerome de Silva in 1992, the company is now approaching its 35th year. Its alumni are spread around the world, yet many return to contribute their expertise in lighting, sound, technology, and other aspects of production. It is this accumulation of experience, talent, and technical knowledge that allows an amateur theater company to operate at an unusually professional level.

“It is amateur theater, but it’s as professional as it probably can get in this country,” Sean says. “Every year we try and raise the bar, and we try and live up to our own

standards, if not anybody else’s.”

For audiences, the production promises spectacle, music, and a sweeping story. But beneath the bells, choir, and theatrical grandeur is a much simpler message—one about kindness, acceptance, love, and the dignity of every human being.

October 9–18, 2026

Venue: Lionel Wendt Theater, Colombo 7;

Time: 7.30pm

Tickets: Rs.10,000, Rs.7,500, Rs.6,000, Rs.4,000, Rs.1,500