

When Dance Becomes a Bridge

Posted on

Kapila Palihawadana, nATFEST and Sri Lanka's Journey to the World Stage



Kapila Palihawadana, choreographer and artistic director.

Dance can communicate what words cannot. It carries cultural memory, expresses identity, and creates connections across languages, communities, and borders. For Sri Lanka, whose traditional dance forms embody centuries of ritual and artistic knowledge, contemporary dance offers an opportunity to transform this inheritance into a living language for the world.



Gari Giri contemporary ballet by Kapila Palihawawadana.

At the forefront of this vision is Kapila Palihawadana, a pioneering choreographer and artistic director who has spent more than two decades expanding the possibilities of contemporary dance in Sri Lanka. Through nATANDA Dance Theatre and nATFEST, he has championed an ambitious idea: that dance can preserve cultural identity, inspire international collaboration, and contribute to a more connected society. His journey represents more than an individual artistic

achievement. It demonstrates how Sri Lankan creativity can engage with the world while remaining firmly rooted in its own cultural realities.

Rooted in tradition, reaching beyond borders

Kapila founded nATANDA Dance Theatre in 2002, establishing an independent platform for choreographic experimentation and contemporary performance. His artistic development was further shaped by contemporary dance training in Germany through a Goethe-Institut scholarship, which exposed him to international approaches to movement, physical expression, and storytelling.

Rather than turning away from his cultural roots, this experience strengthened his interest in reinterpreting Sri Lanka's traditional dance heritage.

His choreography brings Kandyan and Low Country dance vocabularies into dialogue with contemporary movement, experimental theater, and new forms of storytelling. These traditions carry more than distinctive steps and rhythms; they embody ritual knowledge, symbolic meaning, and collective memory passed down through generations.

Through contemporary choreography, Kapila transforms this inheritance into new artistic possibilities. Tradition becomes neither a museum piece nor an obstacle to innovation, but a source of creative freedom.

His work challenges the assumption that contemporary dance must look elsewhere for its identity. Instead, it demonstrates that Sri Lanka's histories, movement traditions, and social experiences can generate an original artistic language capable of speaking to international audiences.



Captivating moments from Gari Giri, showcasing expressive movement and dramatic choreography.

Dance for Reconciliation: Art with a social purpose

Kapila's vision extends beyond the stage. In a country shaped by ethnic divisions, linguistic diversity, and decades of conflict, he has explored how dance can create opportunities for people to encounter one another beyond established boundaries.

His 'Dance for Reconciliation' vision rests on a powerful belief: reconciliation requires more than political agreements or public declarations. It also requires spaces where people can listen, acknowledge differences, and rediscover their shared humanity.

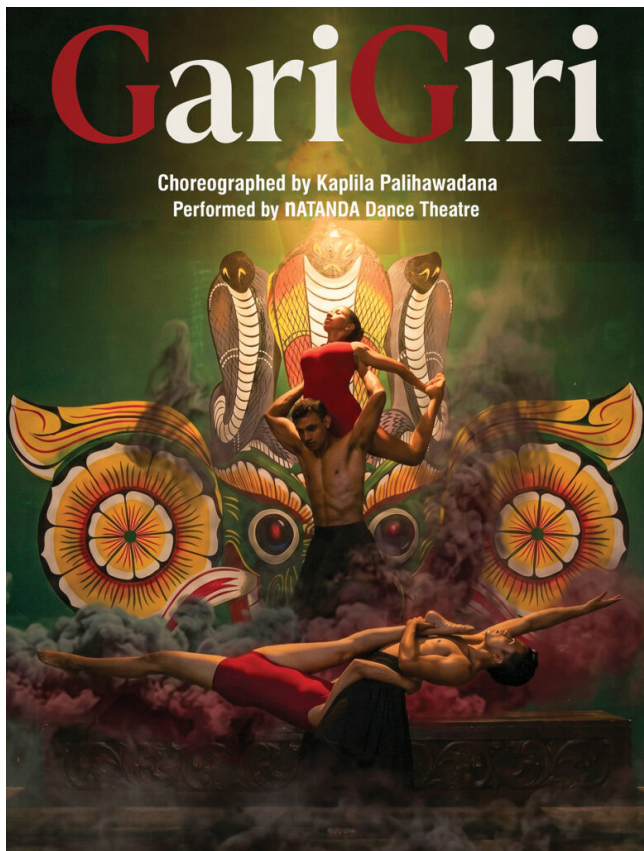
The Prince Claus Fund in the Netherlands was the first to recognize and support this vision, connecting an initiative rooted in Sri Lanka's social realities with wider international conversations about culture, peace, and coexistence.

Dance cannot resolve every social division, but it can create opportunities for dialogue and mutual recognition. In rehearsals and performances, artists must negotiate space, respond to different perspectives, and work towards a shared expression without surrendering their individuality.

This understanding of art as a force for connection informed Kapila's founding of nATFEST in 2015.

Conceived as an international dance festival, nATFEST brings artists and movement traditions together through performance, artistic exchange, and collaboration. Its ambition goes beyond presenting overseas productions in Sri Lanka. It seeks to create a meeting ground where artists can share knowledge, challenge assumptions, and develop relationships that continue beyond the festival.

International cultural partnerships, including the longstanding relationship with the Embassy of Switzerland in Sri Lanka, have supported this outward-looking vision. Such cooperation highlights the value of sustained partnerships in creating opportunities for independent artists and connecting Sri Lankan creativity with international networks.



GariGiri, choreographed by Kapila Paliawadana and performed by nATANDA Dance Theatre, blends powerful movement with Sri Lankan cultural symbolism.

Sri Lankan choreography on the international stage

Kapila's international engagements have further expanded this dialogue. His work with Inlet Dance Theatre in the United States forms part of his cross-cultural artistic journey. His collaboration through 'Space of Becoming', involving Sites of Memory in the Netherlands, nATANDA Dance Theatre, and CAMESA Create in South Africa, explores memory, identity, and human connection across cultural contexts.

These collaborations demonstrate that international engagement need not dilute cultural identity. It can deepen an artist's understanding of their own heritage while opening new creative possibilities.

For Sri Lanka, such exchanges offer an important opportunity to strengthen cultural

diplomacy, build professional networks, and introduce international audiences to contemporary artistic expressions beyond the country's established cultural image.

DANCE FOR COHESION: The vision for 2026

At the nATANDA International Dance Festival 2026, Kapila's philosophy is advanced by the theme 'Dance for Cohesion'.

While reconciliation focuses on acknowledging divisions and rebuilding relationships, cohesion asks how people can move forward together while respecting their differences. It does not demand uniformity; it recognizes diversity as a source of collective strength.

Scheduled for November 19–21, 2026, at Colombo's Elphinstone Theatre, the festival will bring together artists from Sri Lanka, India, the Netherlands, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. The program includes 'Garigiri', 'Space of Becoming', 'Adhara Angika', 'Lost', 'Slavery', and 'Chuto', reflecting diverse choreographic approaches and cultural perspectives.

A special presentation is planned for November 22nd at Villa Dance nATANDA, extending the festival's commitment to the next generation.

By bringing different artistic traditions and experiences into a shared space, nATFEST invites audiences to consider how creative collaboration can reflect the possibilities of a more inclusive society. Its commitment to emerging dancers is equally significant: the future of Sri Lankan dance depends on opportunities for young artists to develop their skills, encounter new practices, and build sustainable professional careers.

A cultural leader in Sri Lanka should recognize

Kapila's contribution extends beyond choreography. As founder and artistic director of nATANDA Dance Theatre, founder and curator of the nATFEST International Dance Festival, and a Panel Member of the Arts Council of Sri Lanka, he has worked across artistic creation, festival development, and international exchange.

His experience raises an important question: how can Sri Lanka better connect the expertise of established contemporary artists with national cultural development?

One possibility worth exploring is an appropriate ambassadorial role, such as a Sri

Lankan Contemporary Dance Ambassador, to promote Sri Lankan dance internationally, cultivate partnerships with overseas institutions, and create opportunities for emerging choreographers. Such a proposal could form part of a broader cultural strategy rather than serve merely as an honorary appointment. Recognizing artists who have built independent platforms and international relationships would acknowledge that contemporary arts are integral to national identity, cultural diplomacy, and the country's creative future.

The world is the next stage

From founding nATANDA in 2002 to establishing nATFEST in 2015 and advancing DANCE FOR COHESION in 2026, Kapila Palihawadana has pursued a consistent vision: connecting tradition with innovation, Sri Lanka with the world, and artistic expression with social responsibility. His journey demonstrates that cultural identity can open doors rather than close them, and that dance can be both an artistic achievement and a meeting point for different communities.

As nATFEST 2026 approaches, Sri Lanka has an opportunity to recognize contemporary dance as a vital part of its cultural future, support the artists who sustain it, and strengthen their access to international stages.

When dance becomes a bridge, the stage becomes more than a place to perform. It becomes a place to meet, understand, and imagine a future together. For Kapila Palihawadana, that is the enduring promise of dance. For Sri Lanka, it is an opportunity to carry its cultural voice confidently onto the world stage.

nATANDA International Dance Festival 2026

November 19 – 21, 2026

Time: 6.30pm.

Venue: Elphinstone Theatre, Colombo 10.

Tickets: Rs. 1,500, Rs. 2,000, Rs. 4,000, Rs. 8,500, Rs. 12,000 (four-day festival pass), and Rs. 13,000 (special) (Ticket reservations:

+94 72 291 1703, +94 76 972 5596,

+94 77 514 9015, +94 71 470 5337)

Special presentation: November 22, 2026. Time: 6.30pm.

Venue: Villa Dance nATANDA