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***Of Demons and Drama: Ritual Syncretism of Sinhala Exorcism and Forum Theatre***

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**Abstract:** Ranjini Obeyesekere in her 1999 monograph *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in the Permitted Space* noted that Augusto Boal's Forum theatre has not caught on in the island state of Sri Lanka. Almost two decades on this is no longer the case. In this paper I will argue that there is an intrinsic link between the religio-centric exorcism rituals used within Sinhala communities, for the purposes of healing and communal reconciliation, and the adoption of methods of communal performance for the purposes of conflict resolution, following the end of the ethnic conflict within Sri Lanka. Moreover, I propose that due to the irrefutable links, stylistically, between ritual exorcisms and the performance style of Forum theatre that the historical precedent of ritual exorcism allows communities to more openly engage in communal theatre initiatives for the purposes of mediation and conflict resolution.

**Keywords:** Sri Lanka, conflict resolution, theatre, exorcism, healing, trauma

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Performance has been part of the religious nexus of human social life during most historical periods and in most, if not all, cultures and societies. This is as true in Sri Lanka as it is elsewhere. This paper is concerned with the telling of stories, in particular the use of storytelling and performance as a method of conflict resolution and communal reconciliation. As such, this paper will build on the formative work of Ranjini Obeyesekere and her statement in *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Terror: Political Satire in a Permitted Space* (1999) that 'Boal's Forum theatre has not caught on' (Obeyesekere, 1999: 62). Sri Lanka has dealt with over a quarter of a century of devastating civil conflict, which has affected and continues to affect the lives of over twenty million Sri Lankans. Yet, within both Sinhala and Tamil communities there are ingrained rituals, theatres, and folk dramas which aid the process of reconciliation on a communal level. These theatrical and ritual-based folk practices have been documented by Obeyesekere (1999, 1992), who discussed the use of early Sinhala and Tamil ritual and the ways in which communities met to commune and exchange ritual practices; James Thompson (2014, 2009, 2005), who has explored the effect of war on performance focusing mainly on Tamil communities; and Mahinda Deegalle (2006), whose historical study focuses on the use of performance in the preaching of early Sri Lankan Buddhist monastics, known as the *banapot* tradition. Building on this work, the present paper not only seeks to consider

the translation of ritual praxis between indigenous Sinhalese ritual traditions and Sinhalese Buddhism but also analyses the translations and dialogues which are taking place between Forum theatre (a predominantly western theatrical initiative, with roots in south America) and the presentation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Nearly two decades since the publication of Obeyesekere's monograph, and her statement that 'Boal's Forum theatre has not caught on' (Obeyesekere, 1999: 62), this is no longer the case. Forum theatre is being used across Sri Lanka as a method of communal reconciliation and mediation. As a way of bringing up to date the powerful work of Obeyesekere, this paper explores the synchronicity between Sinhala exorcism rituals and Forum theatre as a way of exploring and analysing the successful application of Forum theatre at the level of community within Sri Lanka. However, scholars have noted the detrimental effect that religion can have on the peace-making process (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009), and that in cases where religion has been part of the peace-making process the general consensus was to apply broad generalisations of religious groups in an effort to avoid colonial tendencies (Alger, 2002). Yet religion is key to the peace-making process and, as Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009) suggest, the credibility of faith-based actors within the peace-making can have a legitimising effect on the processes taking place. Cox *et al.*, too, in their report on the place of religion in peace building note that early peacebuilders in Sri Lanka failed to take into consideration the 'complex nature of religions, religious division, and intersection between Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism throughout the country' (Cox *et al.*, 2014: 21). The religious perspectives of those involved in peace-making are integral to the lasting success of mediation processes, especially in the case of Sri Lanka in which religion is inherently connected with both the societal and ethnic identities of its peoples.

This paper will start by briefly exploring the method of Forum theatre before discussing the historical application of this type of theatrical praxis within Sri Lanka—beginning with Ruwanthi de Chickera's *Checkpoint: Three Strangely Normal Plays* (2001). Following this, I trace the application of Forum theatre in the process of mediation and conflict resolution by independent theatre companies, charities, religious organisations and NGOs, before offering a brief discussion concerning the place of the theatre more generally during the civil conflict. I then discuss ritual exorcism and the hybrid nature of Sinhalese Buddhism. Finally, addressing the synchronicity between the methodology of both Sinhala exorcism rituals and Forum theatre, I posit that they are both used as tools for community cohesion. Here I draw on Lisa Schrich's typology presented in her monograph *Ritual and Symbol in Peacebuilding* (2006).

### **Who is Boal? What is Forum theatre?**

Augusto Boal (1931–2009) was a Brazilian theatrical pioneer who created and established the world-renowned Theatre of the Oppressed, of which Forum theatre is part. As Babbage (2004:30) notes, the 'influence [of the Theatre of the Oppressed] has been far-reaching. There is scarcely a country it has not touched...'. Both Boal's approach and that of the Theatre of the Oppressed are based on the notion that: 'the dramatist should not only offer pleasure but should ... be a teacher of morality and a political adviser'

(Boal, 2008: 2). This two-fold notion of actor-advisor is central to the work of the Theatre of the Oppressed and, as I argue later, to that of folk drama, ritual exorcism, and conflict resolution. Comprising four distinct phases: (1) allowing participants to learn about their own bodies through playful activity and theatrical games, (2) learn to use their bodies as a medium for expression; (3) use theatrical methods in order to accentuate the learnt expression; and (4) use theatrical techniques learnt through stages 1–3 ‘as discourse ... to discuss certain themes and rehearse certain actions’ (Boal, 2008: 102). To further outline the four stages of Boal’s methodology, we might look to his ‘tree of the oppressed’. At its roots we find what could be grouped as ‘societal issues’, including that of the economy, history, ethics, and politics—broad issues that impact and affect the individual and, as such, affect the performance. We move past the roots of the tree through ‘image’, ‘sound’, and ‘word’—the basis of theatre, the root tools which actors use to perform. Next, reaching the base of the trunk we come upon ‘games’ a way of relaxing and connecting individuals initially to allow them to begin to engage in the theatrical openness whilst at the same time providing participants with a space to learn how to use and express themselves through their bodies. From here we move up into ‘image theatre’, in which the theatrical process becomes introspective, allowing the participants to acknowledge and understand their place and current situation. Through this introspection coupled with an understanding of ‘societal issues’, the participants are then able to use their theatrical training to raise discussion points, propose ideas, and rehearse future actions. As I demonstrate below, Forum theatre is not only about acknowledging the existence of societal conflict but about rehearsing its solutions, allowing participants to come to communal resolutions. These understandings and resolutions can be understood as the fruit of the ‘tree of the oppressed.’

The *British Council: Sri Lanka* (BCSL), who have supported and funded a considerable number of Forum theatre initiatives in Sri Lanka, describes the process as ‘... a tool for community empowerment ... a short play which typically ends in a tragedy ... performed before an audience that can related to the problem...’ The same play is then performed again and ‘this time the audience is allowed to stop the performance at any given time and intervene by changing events so that a solution can be found’ (British Council, 2012). It is useful here to acknowledge that although the BCSL definition of Forum theatre is reductive and does not encapsulate the nuanced nature of this applied theatrical practice, it does offer useful insight into the BCSL’s use of Forum theatre. Applied theatre, and Forum theatre more specifically, are tools of social empowerment: a system concerned with allowing the ‘oppressed’ to ‘reassume their protagonist function in the theatre and in society’ (Boal, 2009: 95). Forum becomes a distinct tool which can be used to rehearse actions, and is described by its creator as a ‘theatre of discourse’ (Boal, 2008: 117) for this very purpose. Audience interjection is key to Forum theatre’s success. Unlike traditional theatre, the role of the audience in Forum theatre is two-fold: both spectator and actor. During the entire performance, the *spect-actor* (a term coined by Boal) exists in a liminal space—a safe rehearsal and performative space in which views and opinions can be expressed freely and without judgement. It is this liminality which fosters a space for transformation of thought, approach, and social action. Like ritual

exorcism, discussed later within this paper, Forum theatre offers a liminal space for transformation—a space in which actions and their accompanying reactions can be rehearsed. Rather than conceiving the liminal as the space between, we should consider the rehearsal and performative process as *limen* or as threshold—thereby allowing its space to be conceived as a realm of transformation of understandings, power, and relationships. Through the assistance of a Joker, ‘a contemporary and neighbor of the spectator’ (Boal, 2008: 152), spectators are drawn into the nuance of the story and are offered the opportunity to begin to unpick, discuss, and analyse the unfolding narrative and to offer solutions. As such, the performance develops on two levels: one of ‘fable’ and one of seminar, offering opportunity for critique, understanding, and narrative development (Boal, 2008: 153). Unlike BCSL’s definition, performances need not end in tragedy but must offer space in which change can be generated, allowing the spect-actor to become ‘aware of the strings that move this ritual’ (Boal, 2008: 170).<sup>1</sup>

As noted by Babbage (2004), Forum theatre has been used the world over in a variety of settings. Paterson (2008), for example, discusses three uses of Forum theatre projects in Israel, Liberia, and Iraq. He poignantly reflects that stories and performances used in the Theatre of the Oppressed must ‘teach roughly, situate quickly, and celebrate bravely in the face of catastrophe’ (Paterson, 2008: 117). However, Boal’s theatrical techniques have not only been used in post-catastrophe, conflict, or post-conflict scenarios: they are also being used, for example, in medical schools as a method of understanding issues associated with professionalism (Brett-MacLean, Yiu and Farooq, 2012); in classrooms across the UK to stimulate debate and foster creative understanding; in prisons with narcotics addicts (McCoy and Blood, 2004); and as a method to engage in healthy debate and discussion on environmental issues (Sullivan and Parras, 2008).

Forum theatre first gained popularity in Sri Lanka in 2001 with the performance, at the British Council in Colombo, of Stages Theatre Group’s *Checkpoint: Three Strangely Normal Plays*, directed by Ruwanthi de Chickera.<sup>2</sup> Since *Checkpoint*, Forum theatre has, much like the tree of the oppressed, grown roots in the Island state and has been workshopped, developed and performed in various settings. As de Mel comments, ‘applied theatre workshops have been held in rehabilitation and refugee camps targeting war survivors as well as those affected by the 2004 Asian tsunami, youth groups, disabled youth and soldiers, ex-LTTE child soldiers and combatants, and plantation workers’ (de Mel, 2016: 108). I will briefly discuss several of the major Forum theatre initiatives in Sri Lanka before moving forward to discuss the place of Forum theatre in the context of ritual interaction and conflict resolution.

Established in 2004, *Beyond Borders Sri Lanka* (BBSL) is a voluntary youth project formally commissioned and supported by the British Council. Since 2007, when the programme was ended in Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and the United

<sup>1</sup> I will not dwell on discussions of Forum theatre as a theatrical method in the context of this paper. Boal, along with many other scholars, have devoted considerable time and attention to Forum theatre as method, see: Boal: 2002, 2008; de Mel: 2007, 2016; Thompson: 2005, 2009, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Checkpoint: Three Strangely Normal Plays* debuted at the British Council Hall, Colombo in July and August 2001. Since then it has been revived in several cities across Asia, including: Lucknow, Varanasi and Bhubaneshwar (November 2005); Mysore (November 2005); Delhi and Calcutta (January 2006); Colombo (September 2006); Chennai (August 2007); and Kandy (September 2007) (<http://stages.lk/about/history/>).

Kingdom, BBSL has reimagined itself as a self-sufficient project supported in part by the BCSL and several Sri Lankan governmental bodies. As well as concentrating on fostering communal values, a considerable amount of theatrical outreach conducted by BBSL focuses on youth engagement with sexual health initiatives, particularly HIV/AIDS, disability and sexual harassment.<sup>3</sup> The BCSL, working in conjunction with PAN: *Intercultural Arts* (London) and the *Sri Lankan Centre for the Performing Arts*, has also developed the theatre company *Shakthi*, a multi-ethnic theatre company whose members had all been affected by the Sri Lankan civil war. PAN *Intercultural Arts* suggests that *Shakthi's* plays prompt the audience to recognise their problems and ask how they can be resolved 'through their own efforts rather than waiting for outside help' (PAN Intercultural Arts, 2018). In addition, the Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum (SDJF) aims to develop vibrant democracy. In 2017 SDJF completed the fourth phase of their extensive school and college-based Forum theatre Programme in the Eastern (phase 1),<sup>4</sup> Central (phase 2),<sup>5</sup> Southern (phase 3),<sup>6</sup> Northern (phase 4) provinces.<sup>7</sup> The work of SDJF is mainly concerned with the way in which media can aid the promotion of equality and social transformation. During all four phases of this programme, SDJF trained groups comprised of young people from Muslim, Tamil, Sinhala and Christian backgrounds in Forum theatre (SDJF, 2015: 21). *Act4: Theatre for Change* also initially established an interactive applied theatre company using Forum theatre supported by the BCSL.

<sup>3</sup> *Beyond Borders Sri Lanka's* more recent performances include: *Wrong Turn* (Borella, 2007; Colombo, 2008), *Censored: A Forum Theatre Performance* (Colombo, 2008), *Jerk? A Forum Theatre Performance on Learning Disabilities* (Borella, 2009), *Who Turned the Lights Off?* (Borella, 2010), and *Virus: A Forum Theatre Based on Dangerous Love* (Colombo, 2012) (<https://beyondborders.wordpress.com/>).

<sup>4</sup> Batticaloa performances in: Meeravodia, Karuvak Kery, Vaakarai, Eravur, Valaichenai, Kaluthavalai, Kattankudy, Mangalagama, Kiraan, Semmannodai (March 2014) (<https://goo.gl/dxg9Xf>). Ampara performances in: Thirukovil, Akkaraipattu (two performances), Ninthavur, Kalmunai, Irakkamam, Pathiyathalawa, Vakkiyala, Karaithiwu, Pottuvil (March 2014) (<https://goo.gl/Zn7WUL>).

<sup>5</sup> Kandy performances in: Hatton Highlands College, Hatton; Risikala Aesthetic College, Mavilmada; Hatharaliyadda Central College, Hatharaliyadda; Harangala Dwithika Vidyalaya, Harangala; Kathiresan Central College, Nawalapitiya; Gampola Muslim College, Gampola; Dehianga Al-Azhar Muslim Vidyalay, Muruthawella; Zahira College Katugasthota, Kandy; D. S. Senanayake Vidyalaya, Kandy; Saraswathy Central College, Pussellawa (19–30 January 2015, <https://goo.gl/WXKc6V>). Polonnaruwa performances in: Kawuduluwewa Mahinda Maha Vidyalaya, Medirigiriya; Sungavil Muslim Maha Vidyalaya, Lankapura; Hevanapitiya Tamil Maha Vidyalaya, Karupala; Gal Amuna Maha Vidyalaya, Hingurakgoda; Mannampitiya Tamil Maha Vidyalaya, Mannapitiya; Wijayapura Maha Vidyalaya, Medirigiriya; Al-Hilal Central College, Thambala; Muttukal Kanishta Maha Vidyalaya, Muttukal; Diwulana Al-Akza College, Thamankaduwa (03–13 February 2015, <https://goo.gl/1WULmL>). Trincomalee performances in: Al-Tharik Maha Vidyalaya, Kanthale; Dharul Uloom Maha Vidyalaya, Kinniya; Kiliveddy Maha Vidyalaya, Kiliveddy; Al-Nooriya Muslim Maha Vidyalaya, Kuckcheweli; Medawachchiya Maha Vidyalaya, Gomarankadawala; Kalaimahal Hindu College, Pallikudiyirippu; Mahaweligama Maha Vidyalaya, Serunuwara; Kulakkodan Tamil Vidyalaya, Thambalagamuwa; Al-Hamar Maha Vidyalaya, Thoppur (17–26 February 2015, <https://goo.gl/vDD8mN>).

<sup>6</sup> There is little information available concerning the third phase of SDJF's Forum theatre programme. According to the SDJF website ten performances were held in schools and colleges in each district. Performances took place in: Kalutara (07–18 September 2015, <https://goo.gl/M7Edtx>), Galle (28 September–09 October 2015, <https://goo.gl/dAcgKy>), and Matara (12–23 October 2015, <https://goo.gl/uK2Z9W>).

<sup>7</sup> Again, there is currently little information available concerning the fourth phase of SDJF's Forum theatre programme. According to the SDJF website ten performances were held in schools and colleges in each district. Performances took place in: Mannar (06–18 September 2017, <https://goo.gl/uYf5Vg>), Vavuniya (19 September–02 October 2017, <https://goo.gl/89XzsJ>), Kilinochchi (03–17 October 2017, <https://goo.gl/Tui9Cs>), and Jaffna (23 October–02 November 2017, <https://goo.gl/eynNzm>).

Act4's work revolved around the 'say no to child abuse' campaign in conjunction with the *Department of Probation and Child Care Services, Sri Lanka* and the *Police Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse to Children and Women* as well as campaigns concerning women and children's health, education and empowerment with the *World Health Organisation* and the BCSL.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, we also have organisation across the nation who are engaging with Forum theatre as part of other training programmes. These include the *Federation of Social Development Organisations (FOSDOO)*, who in 2016 conducted Forum theatre workshops in the Vavuniya district of Sri Lanka's Northern Province with the intention of responding to and averting gender-based violence. FOSDOO, though, adopted what they referred to as a grassroots approach, performing in local communities, in communal non-theatrical spaces, rather than in local arts venues.<sup>9</sup> As well as FOSDOO, *GIZ Vocational Training in the North and East of Sri Lanka (VTN) Project (GIZ-VTN)*, alongside the *Janakaraliya Theatre Group*, have discussed their use of Forum theatre for students undergoing the National Apprentice and Industrial Training in 2013. These performances focused on not only raising awareness of societal marginalisation but also the 'importance of learning [a] second language'.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as well as performing for the trainees, an additional performance was also conducted for the students of the college in which the first performance took place, engendering the supportive nature of the theatrical process. However, Thompson notes that those agencies which entered Sri Lanka to offer their services tended to overlook the practices of indigenous Sri Lankans and that there was a 'broader sense that local capacity for relief and recovery was systematically undermined in the process' (Thompson, 2011: 73). In subsequent decades, Boal's techniques have been used as a tool for communal integration and reconciliation. They have been approached, engaged with and altered by Sri Lankan nationals themselves, who have forged theatrical methods for their own purposes, thereby creating a distinctly Sri Lankan tradition of Forum theatre rooted in indigenous theatrical practice. From here, we will take a step back in order to explore Sri Lankan theatre more generally in the context of civil unrest.

### Theatre and Terror

The theatre of Sri Lanka has been described by scholars as both an 'oasis' (Palihapitiya, 2011) and a 'permitted space' (Obeyesekere, 1999). Of historical interest is the relative safety—both physically and ideologically—which the theatre held both prior to and during the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, preceding the introduction of Forum theatre to the nation. Theatre in Sri Lanka is a grassroots industry, and as Obeyesekere noted, Sri Lankan theatre 'is one of the few forms of critical political discourses left' (Obeyesekere, 1992: 126). Early Sri Lankan theatre's political and even spiritual safety is discussed

<sup>8</sup> *Forum Theatre for Awareness: An Innovative Approach to Protecting Human Dignity*. Legal Aid Commission of Sri Lanka and Act4 (North Central and Eastern Provinces, September 2015) and *Empowering the Girl Child*. Act 4 (St Paul's Church, Milagiriya, May 2016) (<http://act4.lk/>).

<sup>9</sup> *FOSDOO Forum Theatre Performance*. Federation of Social Development Organisations (Olumadu, Vavuniya North, September 2016, <https://goo.gl/opK4DB>).

<sup>10</sup> *NAITA Phase I Training Workshop*. GIZ-VTN and Janakaraliya Theatre Group (Kilinochchi Central College, Kilinochchi, May 2013, <https://goo.gl/1ujEUY>).

in the work of Robert Knox, who notes the way in which these early folk dramas both implicitly and explicitly lampooned the country's hierarchy, including not only nobles and kings, but gods, demons, and even the Buddha himself (Knox, 1961: 116). There is, through Buddhism, a stance of skepticism towards ideologies—religious, political, or otherwise. Verses such as the following from the *Dhammapada* underline this ideal, and therefore underline to practitioners both the need and importance of critical discourse:

Regard him as one who points out treasures,  
the wise one who seeing your faults rebukes you.  
Stay with this sort of sage.  
For the one who stays with a sage of this sort, things get better, not worse.  
(Dhp VI: 76)

We might therefore infer that there is an engrained history in which folk drama has acted as a 'permitted space'—a space which has paved the way for the theatrical practices of twentieth and twenty-first century Sri Lanka. This concept can be underpinned in the context of Palihapitiya who, as a Sri Lankan national, partook as both academic and practitioner in theatre during the civil conflict. He refers to the theatre as not only a place in which he could express both his political and religious angst but as an 'outlet for open expression and discussion' amongst peers (Palihapitiya, 2011: 75).

Both Palihapitiya (2011) and Obeyesekere's (1999) frameworks complement each other, as practitioner and researcher respectively, but Palihapitiya (2011) provides an interesting shift in focus. Rather than questioning *why* it was that theatre outlets were not attacked during the media censorship, he suggests that it might have been a positive factor for both the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to allow these performances. Obeyesekere (1999) contends that 'Sinhala protest theater ... was not intended to stimulate audiences to immediate political action' (Obeyesekere, 1999: 152). Whereas Boal's theatre called for the passive actor to become protagonist, in Sri Lankan theatre 'political criticism was permissible *only as theatrical performance in a theater* and would have been given short shrift if seen as "reality"' (Obeyesekere, 1999: 151). Governmental support of theatrical activities can be seen during the civil unrest following the United National Party's return to power under the leadership of J. R. Jayawardene, during which cinemas that had been converted from theatres were once again refurbished to be used for their original purpose (Obeyesekere, 1999). Further, governmental support was given to the successful annual drama festival, which had been running independent of the government since the 1960s. Obeyesekere (1999: 50) herself notes that by the middle of the 1980s the theatre was more critical than ever of the government, yet it continued to receive its support. This turn towards an ever-critical theatre could be due to a previous government initiative in the 1970s in which 'discontented youth' (Obeyesekere, 1999: 50) were channeled into forms of non-violent discourse. However, the United National Party's Youth Council scheme was paradoxical in its approach: it saw young people across the nation being channeled into theatre programmes that were instilling values of critique and political subversion, even if just in the context of the theatre itself. However, to further understand this we must trace back further to question where theatre in Sri Lanka first took root.



### **Ritual exorcism, communal reconciliation**

Sinhalese Buddhism, and arguably much of contemporary religious practice, is a hybrid. This hybridity is forged through ‘invasions, alliances, peaceful migrations, on-going cultural contacts, influxes and cross-influences’ (Obeyesekere, 1999: 20). Moreover, the history of Sri Lankan folk drama, and its ritual underpinnings, is ultimately engrained in the indigenous Sinhala and Tamil practices of the island state. Although syncretic, these practices are dominated by Buddhism, with Buddhism generally understood as the religion of the Sinhalese, coupled with the village and locally relevant practices of their adherents (Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Kapferer 1991, 1997).

Ames’ early understanding that the Sinhalese categorise ‘everything as either of the world (*laukika*) or not of the world (*lokottara*)’ (Ames, 1964: 22) provides a relevant departure point to dissecting this dichotomy. A general understanding can be found that the Buddha is *lokottara*, meaning that adherents’ interaction with folk deities can be reconciled through their use to aid the individuals with problem which have arisen *laukika* (in this world); rather than troubling the Buddha with perceived mundane matters. Adherents would therefore not look to the Buddha for aid in their problems in this world but would address the pantheon of ‘ghosts’ and ‘goblins’. There is a general hierarchy with regard to these spirits, in that: ‘...all ghosts are controlled by goblins, and all goblins by gods’ (Ames, 1964: 35). The use of the word goblin here is of interest. As this rendering is a hangover from the colonial past.

Since possession is understood to unbalance the strict hierarchy of the Sinhalese cosmology, the risk posed by the possession of the individual is in fact far greater for the community. ‘Not only do demon attacks confuse the boundaries between human beings and demons it [sic] also disrupts distinctions between demons and gods’ (Kapferer and Pipigny, 2005: 17), therefore the entirety of the community must enter a liminal space, through ritual, to address the imbalance and bring about order. Demonic possession, furthermore, ‘enables the surfacing of forces at the root of human existence ... which are the sources of human suffering in Buddhist teaching’ (Kapferer and Pipigny, 2005: 17).

#### *Side note on trauma*

For the most part, the need for an exorcism, or the adherent’s possession by a demon, arises from trauma (Duijl *et al.*, 2010; Thompson, 2009; Sar, Alioğlu, and Akyüz, 2014). The experience of trauma also plays an integral role not only in Forum theatre, but, the Sri Lankan civil conflict. As Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana have noted, ‘religion has often been portrayed as having a negative impact on conflict and peace-making processes’ (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009: 199). However, in the case of the SDJF, BBSL, BCSL, and the myriad of other Forum theatre practitioners across Sri Lanka, faith-based actors have provided both trust and legitimisation to the peace-building process. Forum theatre has therefore encouraged wider participation with peacebuilding.

Furthermore, ethnic identity is considered a unifying factor, bringing parties together through perceived shared experiences, under the ‘banner of identifiable

groups' (Ross, 2001: 160). Traumatic experiences are therefore seen as acting upon communities; but they can also be viewed as events which *create* communities and foster cohesion and unity. Vertzberger, for example, rightly notes that 'collectivism allows individuals to better cope with the personal impact of trauma' (Vertzberger, 1997: 861). Therefore, the building of a community, both in and following conflict, allows for the cueing of 'appropriate rituals of expunging the adverse emotions' (Vertzberger, 1997: 865). Although the process of coming to terms with a traumatic can take years, communal recognition can aid the processes. James Thomson to this extent remarks that:

[...] traumatic incidents, then, overwhelm the memory-making facilities of the person to create a numbness close to the event and an uncontrolled revisiting at periods sometimes long after. The etched brain replays the event as an actual return to the moment rather than a version that is a representation of the event mediated through recall (Thompson, 2009: 49).

### **Narrative Mediation**

Forum theatre can take from the counselling practices of John Winslade and Gerald Monk and their methodological processes of *Narrative Mediation*. The approach of Winslade and Monk relies on one very simple premise 'that people tend to organise their experiences in story form' (Winslade and Monk, 2000: 3). *Narrative Mediation* is based on the understanding that conflict has arisen because parties do not have 'direct access to the truth or to the facts about any situation' (Winslade and Monk, 2000: 41). According to this notion, conflicts arise because groups recall cultural perspectives rather than a situational overview of events; as discussed above by Ross, trauma forges 'banner[s] of identifiable groups' (Ross, 2001: 160). These traumatic events therefore lead to 'diametrically opposed readings of events' between parties (Winslade and Monk, 2000: 41). The deconstruction of these diametrically opposed narratives via mediation creates a single narrative and therefore fosters unity through the creation of a single united group (Winslade and Monk, 2000: 71). This is attempted through finding the underlying roots of the conflict, through the exchange of information between the two parties, allowing both to find a situational overview of transpired events. Within Forum theatre there is an appreciation of this shifting perspective through the playing of games and the necessity to rehearse and re-rehearse actions to find fitting solutions for all present. The theatre, and the use of performance, provide the necessary emotive cushion to 'soften... formally authoritative approach[es]' (Winslade and Monk, 2000: 22). By engaging in the moderating of authoritative approaches, tensions encountered during the mediation or performance process should, in theory, relax. As individual parties become more socially aware of both their own and opposing parties' communal narrative, dialogues should become more open and fruitful.

As parties remove themselves from the perceived 'front-line' of the conflict by entering into the liminal space created by both the rehearsal process and performance, each party is able to unfurl their communal banners in front of the others, with each party involved pro-actively seeking to understand the other. As Victor Turner asserted:

Meaning is connected with the consummation of a process—it is bound up with termination, in a sense, with death. The meaning of any given factor in a process cannot be assessed until the whole process is passed (Turner, 1988: 97).

Through performance, these processes pass quickly, lasting several hours at the most—not months or years of negotiation. Thompson underlines this notion, stating that the performance itself creates a space within which ‘the ritual of confessing exonerates, redeems and purifies the person involved’ (Thompson, 2005: 5). However, the speed of a performance needs to be read against the days, weeks, or even months of rehearsal in which the stories and narratives are created, honed, and tailored. Similar to the ritual exorcisms discussed later in this paper, in the context of Forum theatre rehearsals are key to the practice. Thus, cumulative performances are but one part of the overall process.

### **Of demons and drama**

As discussed above, theatre in Sri Lanka has been described as both an ‘oasis’ (Palihapitiya, 2011) and a ‘permitted space’ (Obeyesekere, 1999). Both Obeyesekere (1999) and Palihapitiya (2011) have noted the relative safety in which the theatre has existed both prior, during, and after the Sri Lankan civil conflict. Moreover, what I am terming ‘a realm of safety’ is a common factor not only in performance, but also in folk drama and ritual exorcism. Such oases and permitted spaces generate an idea of physical safety—either from governmental or institutional laws, or from the rebels fighting against these institutions. However, these terms *should* also be read in terms of providing a distinctive element of mental safety, as well as in terms of fostering unity.

Within Sinhalese performances of communal exorcisms, specifically in the *Mahasana Samayama* and the *Sanni Tovil*, we find distinct commonalities that also seek to foster safety from malevolent spirits for both the client and those witnessing the event.<sup>11</sup> Bruce Kapferer exemplifies this in his reference to the *vidiya* (a simple awning created from wood and leaves) which is constructed prior to the ritual to ‘protect ... the patient from sorcery of *Suniyam* by other persons who wish to harm the patient’ (Kapferer, 1991: 337). Further, John Halverson notes that the *vidiya* is integral as ‘when the demons are invoked they must come through [it]..., not just from anywhere; thus they are channeled and controlled’ (Halverson, 1991: 337). Safety is also rendered via the ritual specialists’ dominance over the malevolent spirits, which is enacted several times throughout the ritual; instances of this include dancing, prayer and chanting through which the ritual specialist allies themselves with the ‘power and authority of the sacred’ (Halverson, 1991: 337). Further, spaces of safety are established via stating blessings of the Triple Gem over the client, as well as the instance of the ‘ritual of the mat’ through which the ritual specialist is seen to cheat death (Obeyesekere, 1969: 178). This sub-ritual usually involves the ritual specialist lying on the ground with offerings for the demon laid on top of them; the demon’s consumption of the offerings is synonymous with the

<sup>11</sup> The *Mahasana Samayama* and the *Sanni Tovil* are two of the most common Sinhalese exorcism ceremonies performed throughout Sri Lanka. There is considerable discussion of both exorcism ceremonies and their associated performance rites in Kapferer, 1991, 1997; Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988; and Obeyesekere, 1992, 1999.

consumption of the ritual specialist's sprit. Now 'dead', the specialist is removed from the liminal performance area in a traditional reed mat and subsequently reappears through the *vidiya*, thereby cheating death and gaining further dominance over the demon. The establishment of safe spaces is echoed within Forum theatre, in which a space of safety needs to be created in order for parties involved to rehearse actions. Forum theatre provides its actors with 'creative freedom' (Boal, 2002: 4), which in turn allows parties involved to deconstruct their 'mask of behaviors' (Boal, 2002: 104). By removing their masks, participants collectively create a realm of safety in which to hone their craft. Moreover, much in the same way as the ritual exorcisms are called for to aid both client and the wider community, Forum Theatre workshops also have pre-designated purposes, such as to address community cohesion or societal concerns (such as spousal abuse), or even to deal with grief. Just as a group of actor's form bonds with the 'spect-actors' of their Forum workshops, a group of ritual specialists come to aid both client and community.

Whether exorcism or Forum theatre performance, the purpose is essentially the same: to move closer towards the healing of trauma, physical, mental or otherwise. These realms of safety in which healing take place are integral to any method of conflict resolution or social cohesion exercise. Just as the ritual specialist or theatre director create their liminal space, so too do peace-building practitioners. According to the work of Schirch (2006), there are four key factors for peace-building spaces:

1. To find a setting neutral to all parties,
2. create a setting which provides support
3. create a setting in which each individual holds an equal share of the power [and]
4. to create limits and rules which ground and determine the construct of the mediation work (Schirch, 2006: 68).

I will now deconstruct these four key factors for peace-building spaces in relation to ritual exorcism and Forum theatre, before positing a conclusion.

*To find a setting neutral to all parties.* Within the previously discussed exorcism rituals, liminal spaces are specifically created for the ceremony to take place. A 'set' of sorts is designed for the purposes of the ritual; the above discussion of the place of the *vidiya* is a significant example of this practice. In Forum theatre, however, the intention is to create an open and supportive place of safety. Just as the Sri Lankan political theatre in the latter part of the twentieth-century engendered an atmosphere for political outcry in the safe confines of the theatre, Forum theatre seeks to engender a space for the open discussion of past-actions, current troubles, and future issues. In the context of the civil conflict, we can understand why 'Boal's Forum theatre has not caught on' (Obeyesekere, 1999: 62): it is a rehearsal of non-violent political action and movement, something which would not have been possible during the civil unrest. As one Sri Lankan told Thompson (2009: 42), 'there is a time for showing and a time for documentation'. Although the physical spaces in which Forum theatre takes place might not be neutral ground (schools, hospitals, prisons, etc.), it is the intention that the space which is engendered in the liminal experience of the performance and rehearsal process is neutral, allowing

each individual and party, guided by the Joker, the opportunity to explore and discuss their proposed actions and outcomes.

*Create a setting which provides support.* Both exorcism and Forum theatre by their design seek to find spaces which will empower all parties involved. Within the above discussed exorcisms, for example, a team of ritual specialists provide support not only for their client and the wider community, but also for one another. This can be seen within the example of the ritual of the mat discussed previously. The wider community also supports the client and the ritual specialists in the preparation of the pre-liminal and post-liminal rites, such as building the integral *vihira*. Just as, for the most part, the entire community swells around a single client during exorcism rituals, within Forum theatre only one party at a time engages with the actors to change the events of the play, aided by the Joker. In this way, each member of the community who is willing to perform supports the others in constructing ways to rectify the situation and bring about positive outcomes for those involved. This would be an exemplary practice of applied theatre; *in situ*, however, this is not always the case. In her work with disabled ex-military personnel turned theatre practitioners, de Mel notes the surprise that the disabled soldiers had when told they were to work with other, one soldier they go on to suggest 'resented being grouped with children with Down's syndrome' (de Mel, 2016: 111). Further, de Mel also draws attention to problems during the rehearsal process between the ex-military cast members and a survivor whose brother had been killed by governmental forces during the conflict (de Mel, 2016: 111, 2007: 129). Based on this, it could be suggested that the space fostered within these performances only provoked discussion of disability without nuance. As she rightly suggests in the context of theatrical performance and workshopping,

by amalgamating disability ... the Butterflies Theatre constituted the disabled as a homogenized corps, and permitted its cast, audience and reviewers to slide away from confronting the fact that the maiming of soldiers occurs by *design*, social and politically sanctioned as a deliberate goal in war (de Mel, 2007: 130).

Additionally, Forum theatre has also been at the heart of continued unrest in Sri Lanka. Twenty-seven surrendered and uncharged child soldiers were murdered at the Bindunuwewa rehabilitation centre in October 2000, just three months after Thompson had run a series of theatre workshops for the detainees (Thompson, 2009). As Thompson and Schechner (2004: 14) suggest, when engaging in theatrical practices in zones of conflict, those participating 'do not get a chance to choose their roles'; thus, work takes place with individuals 'who are characterized as victims, perpetrators, combatants, or civilians'. As such, although it is the intention of all applied theatre work, and of peace building, to create spaces which foster support, the work of applied theatre within zones of conflict needs to look not only to the workshop space itself but to carefully consider the social, political, and cultural implications of its work.

*Create a setting in which each individual holds an equal share of the power.* This notion is more complex. Within the ritual exorcisms, the idea of each party holding an equal share of the power becomes problematic because the aim of the ritual specialist is to gain dominance of the malevolent spirit. Yet during the post-liminal rites associated with

the exorcism, the wider community is at liberty to become integrated into the ritual through theatrical interaction with the spirits and practitioners. This redistributes the distribution of power as the client is reintegrated into their community. Within the Forum theatre setting, this is moderated by those running the workshops, making sure that each spect-actor wishing to be involved has equal opportunity to do so. Again, this notion is made more complex in relation to Forum theatre and applied theatre initiatives taking place in settings where it is not possible for an equal share of power to be held by all present (McCoy and Blood, 2004; Thompson, 2009; Thompson and Schechner, 2004).

*Create time limits and rules which ground and determine the construct of the mediation work.* Each setting, whether performance or ritual, provides set limits and rules that form the setting in which their distinct processes can take place. The exorcisms, for example, are enacted over a twelve-hour span from dusk till dawn (Kapferer and Pipigny, 2012: 25). In Forum theatre, much the same as with the ritual exorcisms, there is ample guidance available from group leaders and moderators. Changes to standard action can also take place at the digression of the entire group.

### **Ritual performance and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka: Some Conclusions**

In this article I have argued that there is an intrinsic link between the religio-centric exorcism rituals used within Sinhala communities for the purposes of healing and communal reconciliation and methods of communal performance designed to bring about conflict resolution. Moreover, I proposed that the historical performance precedents of both folk drama and ritual exorcism have contributed to the success of Forum theatre in Sri Lanka. The theatre became a realm of safety for the discussion and airing of social-political grievances during the quarter century of civil unrest. More importantly, the theatre broke down socio-economic barriers between communities and assisted with the continuation of the critical theatre tradition of the kind Robert Knox described. Many applied and Forum theatre companies now exist across Sri Lanka, and praise must be given to all those participating within these communal theatre initiatives, which are laying the path towards a better future for the youth of Sri Lanka. Many individuals across the country are taking the opportunity to become protagonists. As the work of de Mel (2007, 2016) and Thompson (2009) has shown, the use of applied theatre requires careful consideration. Having undergone over a quarter of a century of civil conflict, the process of conflict resolution and mediation in Sri Lanka will never be fast. However, with the careful application of applied theatre is advancing with remarkable speed.

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