

## **A practitioner's view of delivering drama in war-torn Sri Lanka....**

by

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As a practitioner of drama in education for over 20 years I was recently offered the opportunity to develop my practice internationally with young people in Sri Lanka alongside a colleague of mine Sue Allen, an English Teacher who works at Tibshelf Secondary School, Derbyshire.

As a developing country, Sri Lanka has been a victim of both natural and man-made disaster - after a truce with the LLTE (Tamil Tigers) in 2002, Sri Lanka was enjoying a healthy period of peace and rising tourism, when on Boxing Day 2004 the Tsunami ensued - over 35,000 people were killed and 500,000 were displaced even four years on the damage is still clearly visible and young people continue to grow up in crowded orphanages. On top of this the truce has collapsed between the Sri Lankan government and the LLTE and civil war has broken out again. Not surprisingly tourism has trailed off, and with the LLTE now targeting public buses (suicide bombers are becoming an-all-too frequent event) – road blocks, bag searches, and soldiers parading semi automatic rifles on high streets and beaches remain commonplace.

The purpose of my visit was to be able to deliver drama workshops with young people and teachers. After the Tsunami – many charities were set up - one in particular, Adopt Sri Lanka, – was to create cultural exchanges between young people in the UK and Sri Lanka. It would be true to say that some relationships have not survived after the initial flurry of aid following the Tsunami. Most schools offer a bare minimum in relation to resources and teaching styles are formal 'chalk & talk', and although Sinhalese is the mother tongue as an ex colony, English is still the aspirant language. At Ihalgoda Secondary School (near Galle) I used a range of in-role exercises and Boal's Image Theatre – this would provide an invaluable non-verbal snap shot of how the young people felt/their beliefs etc. As any practitioner in the UK will know, ask any group of young people to create images of authority figures - parents, teachers, police and the image rarely changes from a pointing finger and a shouting mouth, but there the young people produce images that are starkly different. All are respectful and caring – not a single image suggests anger or oppressive behaviour. Are these images to please me, or to

honour their on-looking teachers? Or was this the truth for the pupils? Was everyone so calm that no-one in the heat of the moment expressed anger? I knew from discussions and my Rough Guide that “*Sri Lankans place great emphasis on politeness and manners.....raising your voice makes you look foolish and ill bred*” (Thomas, 2006). The workshop had gone well but I was left feeling uneasy as to how to interpret the images, and I was to discover later that they were far from the truth.

In planning for the teacher training for Adopt Sri Lanka, I bore this in mind as they wanted me to conduct a demonstration workshop using a group of 12 year olds orphaned by the Tsunami, but to be watched by the 50 teachers. I set out my learning outcomes emphasising the benefits of drama as a learning methodology on the premises that if “*90% of learning is unconscious*” (Norman, 1999) then drama, offers additional learning; i.e. team building, communication skills and emotional intelligence etc. The in-role exercises worked particularly well and I was delighted to see their creativity emerge. *(picture)*

The demonstration was followed by practical workshops for the teachers and I opened the session with a quick game of Fruit Salad. I have never seen a game attacked with such fervour! - everyone pushing each other out of the way, as they squealed with delight and dashed across the circle for a seat. This was certainly more truthful – as anyone will know in developing countries trying to get a seat on public transport is a fearsome task! But at the evaluation 96% of teachers said they felt more confident and commented “*I will try them [drama games] all overtime! Why not?*” and “*[I have learnt] the importance of learning English through fun activities, games and drama*”.

During my time in Sri Lanka I also met up with theatre practitioners, community artists, workshop leaders, and arts educators discussing their work, their political beliefs, and their frustrations. Now a different picture emerges - domestic violence, huge pressures to achieve academically, alcoholism are all too common, and Sri Lanka has the highest suicide rates in the world for the under 25's\*! Artists, however, are often criticised for addressing these issues or worse face censorship and physical intimidation. The artists spoke openly about how they use drama and how it can play a vital role in healing religious and cultural differences. But although artistic differences were few, practically I cannot imagine what it must be like to have work in such an oppressive situation – many of the Tamil areas are particularly fraught with danger and without any

professional organisations (there is no central funding, Arts Council, Equity or ITC) the job of delivering educative drama safely and to a high standard becomes nearly impossible. So whatever difficulties small project funded companies in Britain like Tangere Arts (with whom I am also associated) have, these pale into insignificance against the situation that artists in Sri Lanka find themselves facing daily. They really do have to believe that “*Where there is art, there is hope*” Sunera Foundation, Sri Lanka

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### **References**

Norman J. (1999) “Brain Right Drama”, *Drama Magazine*, vol. summer, p10.

Thomas G. (2006) *Rough Guide*, Penguin Group, London

(\*) “*Sri Lanka has the world’s highest suicide rate, over 55 per 100,000 people— average ranges between 10 and 25 per 100,000*” 2001. (<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/dec2001/sri-d28.shtml>)

If anyone wishing to know more about the charities mentioned please go to:

[www.adoptsrilanka.com](http://www.adoptsrilanka.com)

[www.sunerafoundation.org](http://www.sunerafoundation.org)

Ava Hunt is a Senior Lecturer in TIE at University of Derby, and Co-Artistic Director of Tangere Arts based in rural Derbyshire.



Photograph One

*(the picture shows two boys opening their mimed birthday presents to spontaneously reveal - in the foreground a guitar and in the background a piano).*



Photograph Two

(Lanka Children's Theatre Company)



Photograph Three

(Ava working with teachers in 90% humidity and 35 degrees)