

SCRIPT

Tamil Medal Winner

a DCS Monologue

Part of the 'Dear Children, Sincerely ...' project



written by
RUWANTHIE DE CHICKERA

Based on interviews conducted through
the DCS theatre research project

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group

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Tamil Medal Winner – a DCS Monologue

First public performance 2016

A Stages Theatre Group presentation

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Stages Theatre Group presentation
First performed in,
Colombo, Sri Lanka, January 2016,
The International Center for Ethnic Studies

An Introduction to the *DCS Project*

‘Dear Children, Sincerely...’ a conversation across generations

What is the *DCS Project*?

“**Dear Children, Sincerely... a conversation across generations**” (or the *DCS project*) is a research theatre project begun in Sri Lanka in 2015 by Stages Theatre Group. *DCS* collects the stories and experiences of the generation born in the 1930s and takes them to the present-day audiences in the form of storytelling and live performance.

Under the *DCS project*, short performance pieces are created from extensive conversations conducted with senior citizens, with each performance piece not more than 15 minutes long. These stories stand alone as individual performance pieces and can also be linked together to create longer theatrical productions.

Between 2015 and 2020, through the *DCS project*, over 70 senior citizens of Sri Lanka were interviewed and performance pieces created from these conversations.

The *DCS project* has also been implemented in Rwanda, Palestine, Pakistan, the UK, Serbia and DRC.

The DCS Monologues

The monologues under *DCS project* (the *DCS Monologues*) are personal stories of individuals who belonged to the generation born in the 1930s. Each *DCS monologue* tells us the story of one such individual. Together they give us some historical perspective on what people consider important, what people easily forget and what they find unforgettable.

A Tamil sportsman who left the country after securing a Gold Medal for it, an old lady displaced for the first time at the age of 90, a faithful butler who observed the infamous attempted Military Coup, a woman lawyer heading the country’s first Disappearance Commission, a doctor who trusted her family inheritance to a riotous drunk... These are but some of the *DCS Monologues*.

Tamil Medal Winner is one such monologue.

An Introduction to *Tamil Medal Winner*

This *DCS Monologue* is based on several conversations with Mr. Nagalingam Ethirveerasingham. Interview conducted by Gihan de Chickera.

About the Monologue

In 1958 Sri Lanka made history when a young high-jumper from Jaffna, Nagalingam Ethirveerasingham, secured the Gold Medal in the Asian Games High Jump event. In 1958, Sri Lanka also made history in that it marked the beginning of the overt Sinhala Tamil conflict, with riots breaking out against the Tamils by the Sinhalese.

This monologue is the story of the gold medalist high jumper Ethirveerasingham - the story of the first part of his life in Jaffna where he grew up to be a star athlete. It traces the rise of his sports career and the rise of racism against the Tamil people, which happened at the same time – and how this impacted the young national athlete’s career, his sense of self, country, and his future.

Performance History

First directed by : Tracy Holsinger

English language performances : Rev. Joshua Ratnam (Colombo 2016)
(Chilaw, Kuliypitiya, 2017)

For more detailed insights on this play, including the back story about how it was made, an analysis of all its design elements, its production video, soundtrack, publicity campaign, all press reviews and audience comments, and more, please visit its production page on the Stages Theatre Group website www.stages.lk

Tamil Medal Winner

Character A tall, well-built, elderly Tamil Man

•

An elderly, well-built man sits at a table, drinking a cup of tea.

I left Sri Lanka in 1958.

It was a big year for the country. It was a big year for me too.

Silence.

I was born in the 1930s... not even in Jaffna, in a small village outside of Jaffna. To me the whole world was that village.

Opposite our house was a Sinhalese family. The Sinhalese community in Jaffna were mainly carpenters and mechanics. They were very skilled. We learnt all our science from them. This particular family had three boys, just like ours. So either we are at their house or they were at our house. Playing cricket or athletics or soccer. They spoke fluent Tamil. On Vesak days we all made lanterns and went to the Buddhist Temple.

There were other Sinhala families too...

The carpenter community in Jaffna...

Silence.

I lived in Jaffna and travelled into Colombo. And to me it was all our country. Of course we were conscious of the different communities. Us. The Sinhalese. The Burghers. (The Muslims we thought were Tamils also, because they spoke Tamil).

Silence

By 1955 I was recognized as a sportsman. I was sent to a Colombo school to finish my ALs and also to train. That year I was voted "Sports Star of the Year". In '56 also I was voted sports star of the year. First it was Prime Minister John Kotelawala who gave me the trophy, and then it was Bandaranaike.

I was in training in Colombo. We were living near Victoria Park. With this Sinhala family. About ten of us – boys – Sinhala, Tamil... all students.

During this time the 'Sinhala Only' bill was being discussed in parliament. But we knew nothing of politics. It was just sports.

But then one day somebody said "*There is a Satyagraha by the Federal Party in Galle face*".

Three of us went on one bicycle.

We got to Galle Face, and there was a big crowd there – they were shouting, throwing things... We were very curious. You know how curious teenage boys can be... There was a dispensary there. We parked the bicycle against the wall, stood and watched.

I had never seen anything like it. That crowd... so violent, so violent. We could not tear our eyes away. But we stayed close to the dispensary.

Three men passed us. The first. The second. Then suddenly... *“Are you Tamil?”*

“No. We are not Tamil”.

I turned. My friends had answered in Sinhala. I don't know why they said that.

“Him?” The man was pointing his finger in my face. And I could only speak Tamil. I didn't open my mouth. Then he came at me, caught me, raised his fist and... froze. He blinked, lowered his fist, blinked again. *“Ah!!”*

Then, he was pulling me towards the dispensary and shouting at the owner. I had no idea what he was saying. We were dragged into the back room – the storeroom - shoved in and the door banged shut.

We were kept there for safety.

He had recognized me. That fellow who tried to hit me... He had recognized me from the papers. Must have been a sports fan.

So there we were – three young Tamil sportsmen, in that dark room – wondering what the devil had just happened... Why had we denied our origins? Why? That struck me. That pained me deeply. I vowed I would never deny my origin after that.

Silence.

That was 1956. That was also the year that I participated in the Olympic Games. And after that I went on training to the US.

Two years later - 1958 - was the Asian Games. Now I was the best in Asia at that time. There was another Japanese athlete and me. All my performances were monitored by the newspapers.

So I didn't even think about the Asian Games selection. I knew I was on the team.

But suddenly my brother wrote to me in America and told me – *“You are not selected for the Asian Games”*.

I was... really surprised. And confused. From America I wrote to the AA¹.

They wrote back saying that they had a list and that I was at the bottom.

¹ Athletics Association

So I wrote to one of the sports reporters. And then I wrote to the AA Secretary, (nice man).

He wrote back – “*This is the list we selected*”. He didn’t say sorry or anything like that. He didn’t give me an explanation.

I then wrote to the Olympic Committee. I didn’t know anyone in the Olympic Committee. But I thought they would understand.

But the Olympic committee also said that I was not selected.

And that was that. The team for the Asian Games left without me.

I was so confused, so angry.

But then – (looking back, these things are so funny) – then, from there, suddenly, the Manager writes to me asking me to come immediately. They suddenly wanted me to take part in the Asian Games. They wanted me to fly in from the US. It was four days before my event. I had to rush. By the time I booked and arrived, it was two days before the event.

I arrived. And had to compete the next day.

I participated and I won the gold.

Silence.

It was a happy time. I was happy to finally be with my team. We had all trained together. None of them had a chance of any medal at all. But we were all friends.

Then the Ambassador visited me. He was a very nice man, an old style gentleman - I still have his card. He brought me a telegram from Prime Minister Bandaranaike. He shook my hand and, I remember, he didn’t say much. He seemed a little distant. I didn’t understand why.

But it was all very nice. We had won a gold medal and we were to now go together to Japan for another international event there.

But then suddenly the manager said the team had to return to Colombo.

I could not understand it. I challenged him – *Why?* This was a chance in a lifetime for our athletes. It was a smaller meet – some of our guys may even win medals.

But he refused. He was Superintendent of Police. And he was also in charge of us. He didn’t offer an explanation. He could not counter my arguments. He just said no.

So I sent a telegram to the committee in Sri Lanka. I was Captain of the team – (now remember, I had not been on the list of athletes selected for the Games but I was Captain. Such things...)

Anyway... a telegram came back – “*The manager makes the decisions. Please cooperate*”. They told me to go by myself. The rest of the team was to return.

So, once again, that was that. I went by myself to Japan to compete. My team returned to Sri Lanka. I competed. I did my best. We were all young sportsmen. It was a new world, you know.

And then, when I was there in Japan, my brother sent me a paper cutting from Sri Lanka. It was about my selection and my medal.

And in the same paper was another paper cutting.

There had been riots in Sri Lanka. Riots against the Tamil people – 1, 500 people had been attacked, 300 killed.

There it was - in the same paper – my story about the medal and the reports on the 1958 riots.

The riots had broken out in Colombo the day I won the gold medal.

And as I looked at this, everything clicked. Everything.

How the AA and Secretary of the Selection Committee and the Ambassador - I have met him many times after that - and he never ever said anything about this – he remained a gentleman – how he had to abide. How they all had to abide. The Olympic Committee had to abide, everyone had to abide.

It was the fear psychosis at that time.

It was then that I understood why our manager had taken the team back to Sri Lanka. He was the Superintendent of Police. He had to return to coordinate the evacuation of the Tamils. Put them on ships to Jaffna. He had to return to do his job.

And this is why the team had to return.

But he did not tell that to the team or to me. He did not tell us that there were riots going on.

I was the Captain of the team.

Silence.

The Superintendent knew what was happening, the Ambassador knew. But then, how could they tell a Tamil medal winner “*Your people are being beaten and killed?*”

I don’t fault them for not telling me. I don’t fault them for not telling me. That would have upset the whole thing. They played it right. They played it right...

If I was a Sinhalese maybe the manager could have told me, but he didn’t. So he played it right, I mean looking back on it... I don’t...

He played it right.

I don't hold them...

Silence.

He knew what was happening even before the event. So I don't know why he didn't tell me, I can't read him, but whatever he did was right because I... we came there for a job and we were focused on that... I had to win that medal.

So I don't...

Why he didn't tell me, that's left to him, and I'm sure he thought it would upset the team and then there would be some, you know...

Because he had to return to do his job. It was only afterwards I knew he had to coordinate the whole thing. He had to evacuate the Tamils.

Anyway, as I was saying... '58 was an important year for me. I left the country. I moved on.

Silence.

I sometimes wonder if my team knew. I don't think they knew. We were very close...

I still have that medal somewhere... I still have it... my grandchildren like it more than I do...

(This whole thing makes me think about my first train ride into Colombo from Jaffna. It was in 1947.

I noticed that from Jaffna to Anuradhapura everybody was talking and shouting and was jovial. After Anuradhapura, there was a sudden change. The only thing I could observe was that the Sinhalese had got into the compartment.

But when that happened, everything went quiet.

It didn't strike me that much on the way out, but when coming in – coming back into Jaffna, everybody was quiet, and the moment we left Anuradhapura, everybody was free again.

That was a very strange experience.

Now I only travel by the AC train up to Jaffna, so there everybody just sits. It doesn't matter who they are, they just sit, and there is no big talking or shouting, or laughing, like in those days.

Everybody is travelling to some place alone... That's how life has become now...)²

² This final section has sometimes been left out of performances. I leave it to the discretion of the director and actor.

END

Production Credits

Tamil Medal Winner was first performed at the **International Centre for Ethnic Studies** in **Colombo, Sri Lanka** in January 2016, with the following cast and crew.

CAST

Joshua Ratnam

DESIGN TEAM

Director	Tracy Holsinger Ruwanthie de Chickera
Designer	Tracy Holsinger Jayampathi Guruge
Composer/ Sound Design	Ranil Goonawardene

PRODUCTION TEAM

Stage Manager	Akalanka Prabhashwara
Backstage	Prabhath Chinthaka Praveen Tilakaratne
Lights	Jayampathi Guruge Saman Malalasekera (2016)
Sounds	Pemanthi Fernando
Make-up	Nilmini Buwaneka (2016) Sanjeeva Upendra (2016) Jayampathi Guruge (2017)
Front of House	Sanda Wijeratne
Production Team	Nilmini Buwaneka (2017) Malshani Delgahapitiya – 2016 Anila Sadasivan Krishnamma – 2016

Admin Team	Miranga Ariyaratne Pemanthi Fernando Sanda Wijeratne
Sponsors	Gehan Gunatilleke Radhika Hettiarachchi Rebecca Owen Sanda Wijeratne
Publicity/Media Team	Gihan de Chickera Deandra Bulner Pemanthi Fernando Pia Hatch
Graphic Design	Venura Navod Balasooriya (2016) Ruvini de Silva (2016) Deshan Tennekoon (2020)
Souvenir Team	Ruwanthie de Chickera Dharini Priscilla Pemanthi Fernando Piumi Wijesundara Praveen Tilakaratne Venura Navod Balasooriya
Photography	Prauda Buwaneka Pramila Samarakoon
Video	Prauda Buwaneka
Video Editor	Jithendra Vidyapathi
Producer	Radhika Hettiarachchi (2016) Pemanthi Fernando (2017) Dharini Priscilla (2017)

The following artists contributed to the making of this script:

Writer	Ruwanthie de Chickera
DCS Interviewee	Mr. Nagalingam Ethirveerasingam
DCS Researcher	Gihan de Chickera
Translator	Rev. Joshua Ratnam (Tamil translation)

For more detailed insights on this play, including the back story about how it was made, an analysis of all its design elements, its production video, soundtrack, publicity campaign, all press reviews and audience comments, and more, please visit its production page on the Stages Theatre Group website www.stages.lk

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