

RESOURCE PACK

The DCS Monologues

(Part of the DCS project)

Dear Children, Sincerely...
A conversation across
generations

stages
theatre
group

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RESOURCE PACK
DCS Monologues

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A DCS Monologue opens a window into a person's life -
a person who lived many years before us, in a country that is
ours but which was also very different to ours. We inherited
the country. We should also be aware of the stories that
made up the lives of the people who lived here before us.

We invite you to not only to read this resource
pack on the DCS Monologues, but to watch the
monologues and reflect on how life is experienced
and remembered and how history is passed on.

It is our wish that this resource pack, the DCS project
and its performances will encourage you to open
your minds to stories you may not be familiar with,
to people you may know nothing of and political
events that may otherwise be forgotten or erased.

DCS Monologues

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Directed by Tracy Holsinger

First performance:

International Centre for Ethnic Studies

January 2016

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Cover photograph:

Mr. Hussein, DCS project interview

photo by Pramila Samarakoon.

Contents

PART ONE: PROJECT	07
What is the DCS project?	08
Why the generation of 1930s?	10
The DCS Monologues	12
Concept behind DCS Monologues	14
DCS Monologues performance history and evolution	18
PART TWO: PERFORMANCE	35
The Disappearance Commission	36
Alone with Computers	40
Menik Farm	44
The Tamil Medal Winner	48
Chandrasekera and the Crown Jewels	52
The Ceylon Coup	56
Muslim Man of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)	60
Partition is not Migration	63
PART THREE: POLITICS	69
DCS and the workings of memory	70
DCS - a conversation across generations	74
DCS in post-conflict Sri Lanka	77
<i>End Note</i>	79



Part One: Project

In the very first section of the resource pack, we will begin by looking at the theatre research project that led to the creation of the DCS Monologues – The DCS project.

How did this DCS project begin? How was it envisaged? How did it develop and how do the DCS Monologues fit within the wider DCS project?

We will also look at the central concept behind the DCS Monologues and how this very important component of the DCS project grew and changed.

Selvi Sachithanandam
performing *Menik Farm*,
photo by Prauda Buwaneka.

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. Initially interviews were sought from public figures of this generation – pioneering women’s rights activists, artists, civil servants, economists, doctors. However, interviews were also sought from persons who had lived quieter, less visible lives. People from various geographical areas of Sri Lanka were interviewed, from different economic backgrounds, beliefs and lifestyles. Often several interviews were conducted with a single person.

Those interviewed were encouraged to reflect deeply on the manner in which they had experienced life, the choices they had made and the way they remember their history.

Though the DCS project was initiated in Sri Lanka and most of the interviews were conducted amongst Sri Lankans, between 2015 and 2020 the DCS project spread to several other countries too – notably, Rwanda, Palestine, the UK, Serbia and Pakistan. Countries collaborated with each other when creating productions from the DCS interviews. (Eg:- the Rwanda Sri Lanka collaboration in 2015, the Sri Lanka-Pakistan collaboration in 2020). We hope the DCS project will continue to grow so that the knowledge and the experience of this remarkable generation born in the 1930s will be preserved across the world.



Why the generation of the 1930s?

The generation born in the 1930s is truly a remarkable generation. This generation has memories of the Second World War and the Holocaust. They experienced the British Empire, witnessed the fall of socialism, the collapse of the Berlin wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union - and the unfettered rise of market-capitalism. They saw the establishment of the United Nations and the enshrinement of international human rights, living through the movements for equality of women, ethnic and racial minorities, sexual and gender minorities, castes and class.

Prof. Ashley Halpe,
DCS project interview
photo by Chanuka
Thambarawatta.

In Sri Lanka, this generation was born during colonial times and have living memories of Sri Lanka's Independence in 1948. Witnessing and sometimes sculpting the turning points of Sri Lanka's modern history, they lived through the rise and fall of the Left, witnessed two devastating youth insurrections, saw the beginnings of the race riots, lived through the 30 year Civil War and witnessed the beginnings of the Sinhala-Muslim conflict.

The purpose of the DCS project is to encourage these senior citizens to look back critically and reflectively on the journey of their country in order to try and understand it in retrospect. The perspectives, memories, stories and journey of this generation, who grew up in parallel lines to the new independent Nation State, are crucial to capture, in order to understand the very complex how and why of current-day Sri Lanka.

The DCS Monologues

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

The DCS Monologues focus on intensely personal stories within wider political events. Some of the monologues reflect the lives of prominent, public personalities; others take us into the lives of lesser known people. Together the monologues give us a way to understand our country not only as a place of repeated prejudice and mistakes, but also as a place of hope, humour, understanding and courage as lived by the people who went before us.

The DCS Monologues were first envisaged by Sri Lankan theatre director Tracy Holsinger in 2016. To date, most of the DCS Monologues have been directed by her.



Concept of the DCS Monologues

The DCS Monologues have now grown to be an integral part of the DCS project. There is little doubt that many more monologues will be written out of the DCS interviews – and many experiments will be created through the monologues.

* * *

Tracy Holsinger, the theatre director who first envisaged the DCS Monologues, reflects on her vision and rationale for these performance pieces, and takes us through the different evolutions of the DCS Monologues.

Director's Notes

Between January 2016 and March 2020, I directed three conceptually different interpretations of *The DCS Monologues*. What I will attempt to describe here, as best as I can, is the creative rationale and process that evolved over these years. I will be writing from the individual perspective of working as a director, and will also comment in terms of the collaborative relationship that grew between myself and the writer, Ruwanthie de Chickera.

The journey with each monologue has been unique. Each has been shaped by the conventions of the verbatim genre, by my desire to highlight truth telling, and by each performer I worked with. I am going to try and share that journey with you. It has been one of the most fulfilling experiences in my career.

Tracy Holsinger,
Director of
DCS Monologues,
photo by
Deshan Tennekoon.



Verbatim Theatre

The creation of the performances of these monologues reflects my growing engagement with the process of Verbatim Theatre. This genre of theatre gives voice to people who do not usually have a platform. Writers and directors conduct interviews or use published reports (audio, video and text) to create a performance using no added dialogue. This latter principle of using no added dialogue has changed over the past few decades, and it has become regular practice to combine the original testimonial with added dialogue and the fictional circumstances of a play.

You might find these links interesting:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/08/michael-billington-verbatim-theatre>

<http://theatrestyles.blogspot.com/2015/01/verbatim-theatre.html>

<https://www.outofjoint.co.uk/old-pages/verbatim-theatre/>

A Creative Rationale: Restraint in recollecting, restraint in performance

When I teach the performance of lyric poetry, I am very emphatic about the use of restraint. In general when we describe such poetry, we comment on the beauty of thought as the most important aspect of the poem. One must, in performance, be aware that it is a presentation of the poet's thoughts and feelings on a particular subject, and that one's interpretation should be truthful, and not overpower the original intention. While our intention is

to move an audience, we must exercise a restraint that allows the author's intent to take prominence over who is performing and how it is being performed. An excess of emotion may cause an audience to become more invested in the performer or performance than the thoughts expressed.

When I first listened to the interviews of the DCS project and then read the transcripts, I was immediately overcome with emotions. Such heartbreak in each one, such a sense of loss; it was a litany of lost opportunities, communicating above all, the deep tragedy of our country. Each interviewee had a distinct manner of speech and vocabulary, and their emotional distance from what they were saying was varied. Some were more composed than others, some were still angry, some were quite guarded about how much they would say.

The use of restraint seemed paramount to me, as a theatre maker, from the outset. The interviews had a resounding impact on me. To this day, *The Disappearance Commission*, *Menik Farm* and *Chandrasekera* move me to tears. I wanted these accounts to have the full respect they deserved. Thus, my decision to heighten the documentary nature of the performances.

Tracy Holsinger

DCS Monologues performance history and evolution

From its inception in 2016 to the writing of this resource pack, the DCS Monologues have evolved through several phases.

In this section, we will examine the changing nature of the DCS Monologues, how they transformed and responded to the environment and opportunities around them.

DCS Monologues – Phase One

The Creation Of 4 Monologues

4 DCS Monologues are created for a performance at the International Center for Ethnic Studies in January 2016.

Mediated discussions followed the performances.

Alone with Computers – performed by Azira Esufally

Menik Farm – performed by Selvi Sachithanandam

The Tamil Medal Winner – performed by Rev. Joshua Ratnam

The Disappearance Commission – performed by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Director's Notes – Phase 1

The intention of the DCS project is to document and memorialise true narratives and experiences of our conflict. My understanding of this, coupled with my desire that the words be unvarnished- if you will - by theatricality, led to the creation of verbatim monologues that would be performed with minimal suggestions of character and setting.

In 2016, I approached Ruwanthie with the suggestion of creating a series of Monologues from the DCS interviews – with the challenge of minimal alterations to the original interview. We agreed that I would undertake to direct a series of such monologues. Ruwanthie started editing and creating *The Disappearance Commission*, *Alone With Computers*, *Menik Farm* and *The Tamil Medal Winner*. I began searching for our cast.

I decided for the most part to use speakers who were not primarily actors. Although I had not attempted this before, I sensed there would be something quite unique in their delivery, a raw power. I believed it would create a different kind of 'magic' and also achieve a kind of vulnerability that might have escaped a trained professional. Further, I hoped it would take away

the focus from the performer as an individual, a known personality, and increase the perception of the performer as a conduit for the story.

Azira Esufally who performed *Alone With Computers* had acting experience but had not been on stage for some years, and the same is true for Ruwanthie de Chickera and Arjuna Wignaraja. Rev. Joshua Ratnam (*The Tamil Medal Winner*) had no acting experience to speak of apart from school performances many decades previously, and Selvi Sachithanandam, an activist and architect, had some experience singing publicly but no such theatre experience that I can recall. Kumari Kumaragamage is a poet who works primarily in Sinhala and this was her first performance of an English script.

Another factor that helped me to decide on this course in terms of performance, was the fact that I already knew that the first two shows of the DCS Monologues were scheduled to be part of conferences on reconciliation and memorialisation. From my experience of these, I knew I wanted performances that did not require a long time to pre-set and strike. Knowledge of the limited capacity of the venue, the nature of the event, plus who the intended audience was, all served to strengthen my resolve that the first performances of the monologues should not be perceived as ‘acting’ but rather as accounts of real experiences.

Each monologue went through changes as we rehearsed. I would work with the actors, identify issues and inform Ruwanthie, who would edit or re-arrange text and send it back to me.



Photo of set,
Alone With Computers,
production photo
Stages Theatre Group.

For the most part, in terms of working with verbatim text, Ruwanthie and I have both been loath to condense these testimonies for convenience:- purely for the sake of brevity, for instance.

The performances were staged very simply. Rev. Joshua had the most deep and beautiful speaking voice and due to his profession, was a veteran at speaking with fluent, measured confidence. His own instinctive emotion at reading the words, on connecting on a personal level with the bias and violence detailed in the script, was all I wanted. He sat in a comfy, upholstered chair, sipped a drink and told the story. For *Alone with Computers*, Azira sat at a table surrounded by a laptop and phones and a tab, all of which constantly interrupted her. In *The Disappearance Commission*, the actor sits at a desk surrounded by files and

pictures of the missing. *Menik Farm* is the most theatrical in presentation, and that happened quite by chance. One evening, Selvi came in late for rehearsal. She had been singing at a religious function and had her electronic tanpura with her. I asked her to sing for me and was transported by her voice. As she sang, I explored the rehearsal space and found candles, incense, and a small brass oil lamp. I placed all these before her as she sang and indicated that she should light them. She did this, and went a step further, performing actions of worship. I then indicated that she should speak the poem once she stopped singing. I sat there in fading light, with the scent of incense and the tanpura and her gentle voice filling the air, and cried. This became her performance.

I have learned along the way that with forms like verbatim and forum theatre, the responsibility to remain truthful should, especially in the presence of those whose story you are telling, take precedence over all. The people who gave us their stories were in the audience when *The DCS Monologues* were performed at ICES and WINGS. They participated in the panels and discussions that took place afterwards. It was gratifying to introduce Rev. Joshua to Ethir and listen to the conversation of their experiences. It was incredibly moving to hear the very brave and wonderful Manori Muttetuwegama speak of her father's long imprisonment during her childhood, of the loss of her husband and son. Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan shared her wisdom in a simple and sparse manner of speaking, pointing out truths that many in our nation may never confront. It was their approval as to the integrity of our work that we wanted above all else, and it was extremely affirming to receive it.

Tracy Holsinger

DCS Monologues - Phase 2

Monologues As Dialogues

One new monologue is written, and two monologues intertwined and performed together in Kigali, Rwanda, at the Rwandan Genocide Memorial Centre, at the 2nd Ubuntu Festival of Humanity, July 2016.

Chandrasekara and the Crown Jewels – performed by Tracy Holsinger

The Disappearance Commission – performed by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Director's Notes – Phase 2

Also in 2016, Ruwanthie approached me with a new challenge. She had been invited to share the latest work from the DCS project at the Ubuntu Festival. This takes place in Kigali, Rwanda, on the site of the country's memorial to their 1994 genocide, which saw almost a million people killed in nearly 100 days. The Memorial is built on the mass grave site of 250,000 bodies and the festival places focus on arts in reconciliation and memorialisation. Performances are staged at an open air amphitheatre which has the capacity to seat 3,000.

Ruwanthie wanted to take the monologues but they needed to be changed. She was also working on creating a new monologue, which she shared with me. It was the story of Chandrasekera. This piece became important to us. It tells the story of how a Sinhalese man and woman were instrumental in helping a Tamil woman and her children during 1983's anti-Tamil pogrom. This story is the kind of story we want to share. There is some controversy surrounding it.



Photo of set up of
*Chandrasekera and
The Disappearance
Commission*,
Ubumuntu
Festival of
Humanity,
Genocide
Memorial
Amphitheatre,
Kigali, Rwanda.

There are those of the opinion that the story panders to the Sinhalese majority, and does not reflect the true atrocities committed upon the Tamil people at this time. There is another opinion that such stories serve as reminders that seeming enemies are capable of acts of great and small kindnesses, that amidst all the hate there can be compassion and understanding. It is a story of hope.

When I first read it, I quickly agreed with Ruwanthie that the story needed to be shared. So we agreed to combine *The Disappearance Commission* with it and to work on increasing the theatricality of the performance. This led to a slight change in direction, and we departed from the format of using verbatim text only.

Our intention here was to add the bare minimum in terms of additional dialogue to make the two pieces work as one performance. It was vital to keep the majority of the text verbatim, as this is one of the fundamental objectives of DCS. This format worked especially well with the Chandrasekera story. One speaker delivers the full verbatim text of the story as responses to a series of prompting questions from the other performer. *Chandrasekera and the Crown Jewels* has since worked both as a conversation between two old friends and also as a conversation between a mother and daughter. Again, it is the knowledge of the environment we would be performing in and whom we would be performing to, that drove the change or adaptation of artistic direction. We were no longer in conference territory. Ubumuntu was a theatre festival, and that required a different interpretation of the work: one that would engage an audience more theatrically. We titled this short play DCS: Tomorrow Is Another Country, and it featured two old friends reminiscing about their lives over a couple of drinks. The thing that brought the two pieces together turned out to be a piece of music - Nat King Cole's Unforgettable, which we sang unaccompanied. The play moves from the dark descriptions of mass graves in *The Disappearance Commission* to the lighter moments of *Chandrasekera and the Crown Jewels*, which involves descriptions of how the Sinhalese man hid the Tamil woman's jewellery in his underwear for some days. Our Kigali audience loved it, commenting on the blend of tragedy and humour as a strength in the play.

Tracy Holsinger

DCS Monologues - Phase 3

Translation and Tour of Monologues

Another monologue is written – ***The Ceylon Coup***. Though this is called a monologue it actually involves two actors – and it is in two languages (English and Sinhala). A tour of the DCS Monologues is organized in Sri Lanka by GIZ. Performances are done in Chilaw, Puttalam and Kuliyaipitiya in 2017. This is also the first time that the monologues are performed in Sinhala and in Tamil.

Mediated discussions follow all performances.

Alone with Computers – performed by Nilmini Buwaneka (Sinhala)
Menik Farm – performed by Selvi Sachithanandan (Tamil/English)
The Tamil Medal Winner – performed by Rev. Joshua Ratnam (English)
The Ceylon Coup – performed by Ranmali Mirchandani and Sanjeewa Upendra (English and Sinhala)

From 2017 – 2020 the DCS Monologues are performed together and separately at a number of events in Colombo. Eg:- Four monologues are performed in Colombo as part of World Refugee Day (2017).

The Disappearance Commission – performed by Virathi Corea (English)
Alone with Computers – performed by Pia Hatch (English)
Menik Farm – performed by Selvi Sachithanandan (English)
The Tamil Medal Winner – performed by Rev. Joshua Ratnam (English)
The Ceylon Coup – performed by Ranmali Mirchandani and Sanjeewa Upendra



Nilmini Buwaneka
performing *Alone with
Computers* (Sinhala),
production photo,
Stages Theatre Group.

Two monologues performed at 2017 WINGS Festival:
Disappearance Commission (performed as an intervention)
The Tamil Medal Winner – performed by Arjun Vignaraja

10th year remembrance of the disappearance of Sri Lankan
cartoonist and journalist Prageeth Eknaligoda in 2019:
Disappearance Commission – performed by Viranthi Cooray

DCS Monologues – Phase 4

Video Monologues

In 2019 – in response to the Easter Day Bombings in Sri Lanka, another monologue is created – but this time the monologue is not performed; instead the original video material is edited and presented.

Muslim Man of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) – a monologue by Mr. Hussein.



Mr. Hussein, DCS
project interview
photo by Pramila
Samarakoon, (2019).

DCS Monologues - Phase 5

Consolidated Play/Regional Collaboration

In 2020, 06 of the original DCS monologues and one new monologue sourced from Pakistan (***Partition is not Migration***), are consolidated into one play – DCS Remembrance Day. The script is a combination of the original verbatim text with added dialogue stemming from the fictional circumstances of the plot. The play - performed by a Sri Lankan-Pakistani cast - was due to open on 19th March at the International Arts festival hosted by the National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) in Karachi, Pakistan. The festival was cancelled on 14th March due to the global lockdown in response to the Covid 19 pandemic.

DCS Remembrance Day was performed by:

Tracy Jayasinghe (Sri Lanka)

Meher Jaffri (Pakistan)

Sunil Shanker (Pakistan)

Tehani Chitty (Sri Lanka)

Osama Tahir (Pakistan)



Director's Notes – Phase 5

DCS Remembrance Day
rehearsal photo, National
Academy for Performing
Arts, Karachi. Photo by
Ruwanthie de Chickera.

It was with our success in Kigali in mind, that I approached Ruwanthie early in 2020, with a new idea for the monologues. I invited her to join an artistic collaboration that I had begun with a group of Pakistani actors based in Karachi. The bond of our countries' histories of colonialism, independence and ensuing communal violence were a binding factor for the collaboration. DCS immediately came to mind and I approached Ruwanthie with a proposal that was aimed at establishing a new regional collaboration for DCS as well as expanding the scope of what the material could do. Ruwanthie agreed to build a new DCS script combining our favourite monologues. I use the word 'build' deliberately because, through all this change, it was a priority for us both to tamper as little as possible with verbatim text. Ruwanthie also suggested that we interview a Pakistani for a story from their own country's complicated past. As the cast would feature a combination of Sri Lankan and Pakistani actors, we felt this would give the Pakistani actors an equal sense of ownership of the material.

We successfully applied and were invited to be a part of NAPA's International Arts Festival which was scheduled to be held for three weeks in March 2020 in Karachi.

It was an incredibly ambitious and exciting exercise. Remembrance Day includes *Chandrasekera and the Crown Jewels*, *The Disappearance Commission*, *Alone With Computers*, *The Tamil Medal Winner* and our new

monologue, the first from Pakistan, *Partition Is Not Migration*. At the start, Ruwanthie literally tore the monologues apart. The printed sheets were scattered all over her living room floor, and she walked among them, tearing sections off, rearranging and inserting text over and over until a potential story became visible to us. We decided that the play was about a group of friends meeting after a long time to reignite an old habit of theirs called Remembrance Day, in which they would share their personal journeys through the lens of our history of communal violence and racism. This time though, one of them had invited a friend from Pakistan.

The struggle for us both remained the same. How would we remain true to our original text and artistic intentions while adapting the material for a more dramatic setting? How do we continue to ensure that truth telling was not overshadowed by fictional characters and situations? The monologues, those authentic, heart-rending journeys, still had to remain the focus of the work.

This is where the true power of collaboration emerges. Once these words were in the hands of our actors, so much of what we were doing became more clear to me. This was now the most realistic setting we could put the text in. Rehearsing with the actors revealed challenges that we had to problem solve on a daily basis. It also created whole other narratives that we had not considered as much, and which elevated the work as a whole.

It became clear, for instance, that some characters could not talk for pages at a time without seeming unnatural. Ruwanthie was revising and editing daily based on feedback from the actors. She also had to incorporate lines that came out of improvisation into the script. I know we both felt reservations about



DCS Remembrance Day
rehearsal photo, National
Academy for Performing
Arts, Karachi. Photo by
Ruwanthie de Chickera.

this, and upon reflection, would put this down to our departing quite radically from our initial intention for the monologues. It was uncharted territory for us and retaining the integrity of the pieces was uppermost in our minds.

What reassured me was the actors and what their hard work yielded. I'll give you an example. In *Remembrance Day*, the man who delivered *The Tamil Medal Winner* (someone who chooses exile) is married to the woman who delivers *Chandrasekera and the Crown Jewels*. So, they are a Tamil couple with children. He is a star athlete, she is a doctor. Their marriage has been severely strained because he has left the country several times for long spells and she has always refused to go with him. He feels betrayed by his country, she feels she must stay and do what she can. The disintegration of their marriage and the pressures each had to bear become all too clear in

the play. Who is right? Who is a coward? Who is a fool? The exploration of this relationship by the two actors revealed something that I don't think Ruwanthie and I had foreseen. It is an added dimension of tragedy, it reflects the pain of personal choices and how they affect the ones we love, it reveals the terrible pressure that issues of identity and morality would have had on so many thousands of relationships that survived or failed against the backdrop of such violence and division. To me, not only did it make the tragedy of our monologues stories all the more real, it added a depth that we had not fully anticipated. This happened with the other characters as well. I have a better understanding of the huge mental and emotional trauma Manori Muttetuwegama has faced during her long, distinguished yet incredibly painful career in human rights protection. How much can we take, how much can we witness before we ourselves break? This is the strength of Remembrance Day, that we have been able to take these verbatim monologues and weave out of them a rich work full of complexity and questions.

The work is unfinished as I write this. Due to the global impact of Covid 19, the NAPA festival was cancelled and we were unable to complete the rehearsal process. The project is on hold but I believe that Ruwanthie and I have both reached a point of some satisfaction. This time has been a period of reflection and I believe that when we meet again to work on Remembrance Day, we will approach it with the same excitement and vigour as before.

Tracy Holsinger

Part Two: Performance

In this second section of the resource pack we will take an in-depth look into each of the different DCS Monologues created under the DCS project, in order to better understand each individual monologue. Each monologue will be analyzed in terms of its plot, the person on whom this monologue was molded, the interview process and the performance.

DCS was always a very collaborative project, and so a number of opinions have been sought to provide as interesting an insight into each monologue. Researchers, actors, directors and playwrights all share their insights on their experience of being involved in the process and performance.

By the time of the creation of this resource pack in 2020 the following DCS Monologues had been created.

1. The Disappearance Commission
2. Alone with Computers
3. Menik Farm
4. The Tamil Medal Winner
5. Chandrasekera and the Crown Jewels
6. The Ceylon Coup
7. Muslim Man of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)
8. Partition is not Migration

The Disappearance Commission



The Disappearance Commission

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Directed by Tracy Holsinger

First performed in Colombo, 2016

Based on interviews with Manorie
Muttetuagama, Colombo 2015

Interviews conducted by Deanne
Uyangoda, Ruwanthie de Chickera

Medium

Live performance, monologue

Live performance, play
(DCS Remembrance Day)

Language

English/Sinhala/Tamil

Duration

15 minutes

Characters

A senior woman

A woman lawyer of stature

Quote from monologue

It was full time. Full time. The Commission. Full time. Full time.
Twelve hours a day, 7 days a week followed by another 12 hours.

I had to visit the graves. They dug their own graves and they were shot.
You know that now don't you darling? At Suriyawewa, at Suriyakantha...
God, the economy with which those bodies had been packed. No amount
of scientific or forensic evidence was ever going to be able to distinguish
one body from the other. Our people don't have dentist records darling...

Viranthi Cooray
performing
*The Disappearance
Commission*, photo by
Prauda Buwaneka.

Synopsis of monologue

This monologue is based on interviews conducted
with Manourie Muttetuwegama – a well known and
respected human rights lawyer and feminist.

Manorie was one of the lawyers who served on the Disappearances
Commission, set up in the 1990s by President Chandrika
Bandaranaike, to inquire into the disappearances of thousands
of young men and women who were abducted and killed during
the two JVP youth insurrections in 1971 and 1989.

The Disappearance Commission was one of the first of such commissions
set up by the State and marked a significant moment in the democratic
journey of Sri Lanka. However, in spite of the hope that it brought
people and the precedent it set the justice system, the results it bore
in terms of justice and reparation, were ultimately inadequate.

This monologue reflects on the complex nature of *the Disappearance Commission*, the expectations it created, the very specific challenges it had to deal with and the social breakdown that occurs with widespread disappearances of people within a country.

In line with the remarkable interview given by Manorie, the monologue also uses the personal experience of the commissioner – a woman who encountered great uncertainty and pain through her relationships with her own father (who was imprisoned for his political work) and her beloved husband – both who died tragically – to reflect on the experiences of the women who appear before the Commission searching for answers about their disappeared fathers, brothers, husbands and sons.

Creation of the monologue

Manourie Muttetuagama was interviewed in 2015 by human rights lawyer Deanne Uyangoda and playwright Ruwanthie de Chickera. She provided several interviews to the DCS project and her general insights on politics, life and humanity have been used to form several of the productions created through the DCS interviews. However, *The Disappearance Commission* is directly and exclusively connected with the personal narrative of Manorie reflecting on her experience serving on the Commission set up by the State to inquire into the political disappearances that took place in the country.

Reflection on the interview

Manouri carries so much loss, pain, grace and just a simple faith in humanity. Her own experiences of love and loss intersect with her account of the families she met and interacted with while on *The Disappearance Commission*. There is a bluntness and sometimes even a harshness to her account which is based on a long life and long struggle (hers and others). As a younger person I was curious to listen and absorb these feelings.

The interview put me in a different role. Unlike other conversations we've had where we don't always agree, this was her story. And that alone. From watching her father go to jail and what that did to the family, to losing Sarath and Malli. Her own struggle to accept death, despite clear proof (body, funeral) transferred into how she related to the families of the disappeared who still held out hope of finding their family/loved ones alive.

All this and more stood out in the interview.

Deanne Uyangoda

DCS Researcher

Alone with Computers



Alone with Computers

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Directed by Tracy Holsinger

First performed in Colombo, 2016

Based on interviews conducted with
Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan, Colombo 2015
Interviews conducted by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Medium

Live performance, monologue

Live performance, play
(DCS Remembrance Day)

Language

English/Sinhala/Tamil

Duration

15 minutes

Characters

A senior woman doctor

Pia Hatch
performing *Alone
with Computers*,
photo by Prauda
Buwaneka.

Quote from monologue

Aiyo... I don't remember what to press. Once I pressed something that messed up the whole system. It caught a virus or something. I just don't understand how that happens, is it through over-exposure or dust or what? Anyway, I always keep the computer covered and also give it rest. You know. Because these viruses are serious things. And they spread so fast. The other day one of my friend's computer caught a virus and all sorts of terrible things happened to all her photographs. Thousands of photos – all saved in the computer – all affected by this virus and then it spread to all her friends also. Through the wires I think – or the internet, I don't know. Anyway. It was a disaster.

Synopsis of monologue

This monologue was inspired by a conversation that started with Dr. Vimala Ganeshanandan. However it was expanded using the experiences of many of the elders interviewed through the DCS project.

It is a monologue which focuses on the strange dilemma that many of the people of this generation find themselves in, which is a situation of isolation and enforced dependency on technology in order to stay connected to their families and loved ones.

In this piece, a successful lady doctor, and mother of five, spends her time navigating the latest technological gadgets gifted to her by her children, all of them who now live overseas and who stay in touch with her using these devices.

Creation of the monologue

The material for the “*Alone with Computers*” monologue didn’t grow out of a planned interview. Rather, one day I turned up at Dr. Vimala’s house for a scheduled conversation, and I found her seated, peering into her laptop. The first line of the play – “When something disappears from the computers where has it gone?” was literally the first thing that Dr. Vimala said to me as I walked into her house. Even before hello.

The first hour of our conversation was around the challenges of computers, her own struggle to stay in touch with her children who were overseas and her insights, as a doctor, on how important human touch is for healing.

I subsequently developed the “*Alone with Computers*” monologue with added insights from other senior citizens.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

DCS Monologues Playwright

Pia Hatch performing
Alone with Computers,
photo by Prauda Buwaneka.



Menik Farm



Menik Farm

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera
Directed by Tracy Holsinger
First performed in Colombo, 2016

Based on interviews with Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan, Colombo 2015 and a poem written by Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan. Interviews conducted by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Medium

Live performance, monologue
Live performance, ensemble
Live performance, trilingual
dialogue

Language

English/Tamil

Duration

20 minutes

Characters

A very old Tamil lady, born in Jaffna

Selvi Sachithanandam
performing *Menik
Farm*, photo by
Prauda Buwaneka.

Quote from monologue

The people all ran. The rich clutched their gold.
The poor clutched their children. And ran...

Into the Army. Who first held us. Then herded us,
bundled us, drove, dragged and emptied us...

There.

Lock. Lock. Lock. Lock. Lock.

Now, that I didn't see. I didn't see them lock us in.
Because it happened very fast.

I think it's my eyes. My eyes are too old for this.
I don't understand the barb wire fences.
We are not captives. We are just displaced.

Synopsis of monologue

Created from the original poem of Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan, who wrote and spoke about her experiences serving as a GP amongst the displaced communities of Manik Farm, this monologue brings together the gentle observations of an elderly Tamil lady, who is struggling to come to terms with the horrendous reality of long term displacement that affected large communities of Tamil people of the North, at the end of the Civil War.

Manik Farm, made notorious by its rumored inhuman conditions which lasted for months, then years, became held up as proof of the deep structures of indifference, racism and violence within the State system against the Tamil people, as at the end of the war, civilians of the North were subject to possibly one of the biggest challenges of the 30 year civil conflict.

Creation of the monologue

Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan was interviewed on several occasions by Ruwanthie de Chickera. *Menik Farm* was based on a poem written by Dr. Ganeshanathan on her experiences volunteering as a GP in the Menik Farm refugee camp.

This monologue is also inspired by the true story of an elderly Tamil lady who lived in the north of the country her entire life, throughout the 30 year war, and then, right at the end of her life, at the age of 90, and at the end of the war, is displaced.

The DCS researchers heard about this lady and tried to locate her to interview her, but were not successful. However, the experience of surviving all the challenges of war and being displaced right at the end of one's life was drawn on when writing this monologue.

Reflection on the interview

It was in the second interview that we got to speaking about the end of the war. Dr. Vimala is a remarkably understated woman. When you meet her you don't expect to hear the extraordinary stories she has to tell. Not only has she faced the challenges life threw her with real strength, but she has also sought out situations of uncertainty in order to address injustices. Her voluntary visits to Menik farm to treat the people there are an example of this.

I was so touched by her attempt to process what she saw in the camp by turning to writing poetry. She really had it all – the doctor's instinct to heal, the citizen's instinct to help, the poet's instinct to reflect.

There was very little for me to do.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

DCS Monologues Playwright

The Tamil Medal Winner



The Tamil Medal Winner

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Directed by Tracy Holsinger

First performed in Colombo, 2016

Based on interviews with Nagalingam

Ethiriveerasingham, Jaffna 2015

Interviews conducted by Gihan de Chickera

Medium

Live performance, monologue

Live performance, play
(DCS Remembrance Day)

Language

English/Tamil/Sinhala

Duration

20 minutes

Characters

A senior Tamil man who
was once an athlete

Quote from monologue

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.

Rev. Joshua Ratnam
performing *The
Tamil Medal Winner*,
production photo,
Stages Theatre Group.

Synopsis of 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. 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, and the story of the first part of his life, as a

young boy and 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 on this young national athlete’s career, his sense of self, country, and his future.

Creation of the monologue

Ethiriweerasingham was interviewed by journalist and cartoonist Gihan de Chickera on two occasions. Gihan travelled to Jaffna to interview Ethir in his home. The story captured in the monologue is just a portion of the material covered in the wider interview – in which Ethir spoke to Gihan about his life, his political engagement and his analysis of the breakdown of relationships between the Sinhala and Tamil people of Sri Lanka and his self-imposed exile.

Reflection on the interview

We travelled to Jaffna in the night-mail to meet Ethir. When we arrived at his place early in the morning, Ethir had buns and tea ready for us – something so typical of that generation. He didn’t rush us. When we had freshened up and settled down, he began talking. He had a calm and clear way of speaking. This contrasted with the violence and confusion he was talking about.

We had just made the train ride from Colombo to Jaffna. Ethir spoke to us of his first train journey to Colombo. He said after Anuradhapura he had noticed the body language of Tamil passengers changing. They had grown more tense and insecure. This had confused him. That is until he himself had to escape an anti-Tamil mob in Colombo.

He explained how these incidents had impacted his Tamil consciousness and political growth. The external tension in the country had impacted him internally. This was felt especially so as a young athlete representing Ceylon and winning medals for the Lion flag. He had transitioned from living in a bubble in Jaffna to being exposed to the rest of the country—and the world.

Ethir rejected the notion of Tamils being called a minority. He explained he had begun hearing the term ‘minority’ to describe Tamils only in the 1990s. And even in the context of peace talks back then, this word had upset him. For him there was no minority or majority – just equality. Between people and nations. And that should be the basis for respect and reconciliation.

Another thing that really struck me was that Ethir still used his Sri Lankan passport, even though he was a US resident. I found this hard to comprehend. Why would he want to be inconvenienced by a weak passport of a country that turned its back on him and his community? This made me think of the so many ‘patriotic’ Sri Lankans I know who would jump at the first opportunity to shun our passport for a US one.

But I was not there to question, but to listen. And listening to Ethir was easy. Despite all his pain, he still had hope. He was in Sri Lanka, helping students in the North through an organization he had set up. He showed no animosity towards the Sinhalese. Just a deep disappointment in their inability and unwillingness to understand Tamils.

Gihan de Chickera

DCS Researcher

Political Cartoonist

Chandrasekara and the Crown Jewels



Chandrasekara and the Crown Jewels

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Directed by Tracy Holsinger

First performed in Ubumuntu Festival, Kigali,
2016 (as part of Tomorrow is another Country)

Based on interviews with Dr. Vimala
Ganeshanathan, Colombo 2015. Interviews
conducted by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Medium

Live performance, monologue

Live performance, dialogue

Language

English

Duration

15 minutes

Characters

Two old friends - a Sinhala and a
Tamil woman

Tracy Holsinger with
Tehani Chitty performing
*Chandrasekara and
the Crown Jewels*, photo
by Prauda Buwaneka.

Quote from monologue

Chandrasekera is why I am here today. Why my children are here today. On the day of the riots – when the mobs were coming, and looting and burning houses and burning people on the road... on that night when we saw the mobs coming towards us – all those people with swords and flaming torches and madness in their eyes...

On that night... when the rest of the town burnt to the ground, Chandrasekara stood on his balcony, drunk as a lord, bottle in his hand, shirt undone, sarong raised up to here – he just stood there on that balcony and he just screamed. He screamed and cursed at anyone who tried to come down our lane... He screamed the most terrible filth. I couldn't even understand what he was saying.

He shouted and shouted and he wouldn't stop, and no one, not one of those men in that mob dared come down our lane.

Synopsis of monologue

Two old friends – a Sinhalese and a Tamil – recollect their experiences of the Communal Riots that erupted in the capital of Colombo in Sri Lanka in July 1983. In 5 days over 3000 Tamils were killed and 150,000 were made homeless. 'Black July' marked the beginning of the 30 year Civil war that then tore up Sri Lanka.

In this scene the two old friends reminisce about the horrific events of the five-day program. How the Sinhalese mobs took to the streets – rioting, looting,

burning ordinary Tamil people. The Tamil and Sinhala lady recount a story of tenderness and humour that occurred in the madness and terror of the riots.

Creation of the monologue

This monologue was a result of a series of interviews conducted with Dr. Vimala Ganeshanathan by playwright Ruwanthie de Chickera. This monologue is based on the real experiences of Dr. Ganeshanathan as she faced the 1983 riots alone with her 3 young children – when her husband was overseas.

Reflection on the interview

The thing that struck me the most about Dr. Vimala's recounting of this story was how helplessly and good naturedly she laughed in the re-telling of it. I was struck by what she recalled but also by everything she left out. She must have been terrified facing all of that by herself with three small children, but looking back, she managed to still focus on the tiny acts of goodness and faithfulness of individual human beings as opposed to the vast destruction of political maneuvers and the terror of mob violence.

Ruwanthie de Chickera

DCS Monologues Playwright

Tracy Holsinger performing
Chandrasekara and the Crown Jewels,
photo by Prauda Buwaneka.



The Ceylon Coup



The Ceylon Coup

Written and directed by Ruwanthie de Chickera
First performed in Colombo, 2017 (as part of
DCS Seven Decades)

Based on interview with Chloe de Soyza,
Colombo 2017

Interview conducted by Gehan Gunatilleke

Medium

Live performance, Dialogue

Language

Live performance, ensemble
English and Sinhala/ English and
Tamil

Duration

15 minutes

Characters

An upper class lady and her faithful
butler

Quote from monologue

- Lady* None of us were happy with the changes in the country.
- Wijesoma* The country went to the dogs. The government started taking over everything.
- Lady* Such a mess. Ask Wijesoma! Every morning we'd wake up not knowing what else had been taken over by the govt. The Bandaranaike's ...
- Wijesoma* ... both of them – (but Sirimavo madam more than Mr. Bandaranaike)
- Lady* Both Bandaranaikes changed the culture of politics in Sri Lanka. Look at the mess in the estates! Tell them Wijesoma, I get a headache thinking about it.

Ranmali Mirchandani
and Sanjeewa Upendra
performing *The Ceylon
Coup*, photo by Prauda
Buwaneka.

Synopsis of monologue

The 1962 attempted Coup was also called the 'Gentlemen's Coup' – as it was seen as the rising up of the elite Christian English speaking class against the State – in response to the measures brought in by the Sinhala Only Bill and the Bandaranaikes.

After the British left, those left in power were very much the ruling, Oxford-educated, English speaking elite of Colombo, and this monologue talks about the time when a young politician – SWRD

Bandaranaike - who, himself, belonged to this class, broke away from his friends and community and introduced the concept of Sinhala Only, a political masterstroke that brought him into power as Prime Minister, and changed the course of the country's history irrevocably.

Creation of the monologue

This monologue grew out of a conversation that Gehan Gunathilaka had with Chloe de Soyza.

The interview was conducted in English and originally the monologue was written by Ruwanthie de Chickera in English only. However, the challenge of performing this to local audiences who did not understand English led to the creation of another character – based on a real person in Chloe de Soyza's life – her loyal driver, butler, housekeeper and longtime companion - Piyadasa.

Though Piyadasa never contributed to the interview, observations of the relationship between the two led to the scripting of this story as one narrated by two people who share a deep friendship but belonged to two completely different classes.

Reflection on performing the monologue

I have to admit that this monologue reminded me of the relationship my grandfather had with his butler. He could not move an inch without Wilson. It was quite unique to that class and that age of person. That interdependency between the classes was very complex and interesting. I think it's a wonderful friendship – with the whole underlying and constant reminder of the boundaries that needed to be respected. However, as I performed the monologue I often wondered who was leading the narrative – the lady, who was telling the story, or the butler – who discretely steered her.

Ranmali Mirchandani

Performer, The Ceylon Coup

Muslim Man of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)



Muslim Man of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera

Edited by Pramila Samarakoon

First screened in Colombo, 2019 (as part of DCS Seven Decades Deep)

Based on interviews with Mr. and Mrs. Hussein, Colombo, 2018 and 2019. Interviews conducted by Azra Jafferji and Ruwanthie de Chickera

Medium

Video

Language

English

Duration

5 minutes

Character

Mr. Hussein himself

Quote from monologue

I am a 93 year old Muslim. Born in Ceylon – which is now Sri Lanka.

My father and mother were both born in Colombo.

My grandparents also were born here.

Easter Sunday... when it happened, I was in a state of shock.

We boast that we are a cultured people.

We boast that we have a high level of literacy.

We boast that we are compassionate because we have all the four religions represented here.

I can't see any of that.

Synopsis of monologue

This monologue is created out of the interviews conducted with Mr. Hussein.

In this a 93 year old Muslim man, born and bred in Sri Lanka, struggles to come to terms with the shock of the catastrophic Easter Bombings attack in Sri Lanka in May 2019 – and the implications on the Muslim community.

Belonging to a generation that valued gentleness and decency, strengthened by his own personal interest in reading books and humans and politics, this monologue gently traces the perspective of an elderly man faithful to a country he no longer recognizes. In spite of the breakdown around

Mr. Hussein, DCS
project interview
photo by Pramila
Samarakoon, (2019).

him, which he struggles to fathom, Mr. Hussein speaks passionately and sincerely to the youth of the country to resist the prejudices of previous generations and fight for a good and decent life for all.

Creation of monologue

Initial interviews were conducted with Mr. and Mrs. Hussein by Azra Jafferjee in 2018 about Muslim life in Sri Lanka and the story of the Borah community within this wider narrative. After the Easter Bomb attacks the DCS team returned to Mr. Hussein to speak to him about the severe scrutiny and pressure the Muslim people were coming under.

Mr. Hussein was well known and respected for his erudite observations and liberal worldview. The purpose of the interview was to try and understand how a pacifist, liberal Muslim man who has lived in this country for over 90 years understood the current situation.

Mr. Hussein spoke to Ruwanthie de Chickera for hours. His personality was so captivating on camera that it was decided that the strongest representation of this interview was through Mr. Hussein himself.

And so for the first time a DCS monologue was created without someone performing the material.

The monologue created from this interview was added to the DCS Seven Decades Deep production as an Epilogue and also DCS Remembrance Day.

Partition is not Migration



Osama Tahir rehearsing *Partition is not Migration* in *DCS Remembrance Day*, National Academy of Performing Arts, Karachi, Photo by Ruwanthie de Chickera.

Partition is not Migration

Written by Ruwanthie de Chickera
Directed by Tracy Holsinger
First performed in Karachi, 2020
(as part of DCS Remembrance Day)

Based on interviews with Khalid Ahmed, Karachi 2020. Interviews conducted by Meher Jaffri, Sunil Shanker, Tracy Holsinger

Medium

Live performance, monologue
Live performance, play
(DCS Remembrance Day)

Language

English

Duration

20 minutes

Character

A senior artist and activist
from Pakistan

Quote from monologue

...when you ask me to tell you a story about my country... I see myself at 18 years old.... By the time I was 18 I had already been born to three different countries. Can you imagine that?

I was born in India. I was then told that that was not my country. Then I was sent to what I thought was Pakistan. Because I was told that that was my country. Until suddenly that was also not my country. That became Bangladesh – and then I was sent on to Karachi.

And each time I moved to a new country – I had to leave behind a part of me but also there was a big part I would carry forward.

These were such powerful identities – ‘India’, ‘Pakistan’, ‘Bangladesh’ – all of them such grand and great ideas... created with such passion.

Synopsis of monologue

In this monologue, actor, director and academic Khalid Ahamed reminisces about his childhood in the wake of the partition of India, which created Pakistan in 1947. Khalid and his family were split across three Indian cities which then became cities of three different countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) within a short, turbulent time period.

The monologue recounts the story of a young boy who was moved from India to Bangladesh and then to Pakistan in search of a country that he could belong to.

Sunil Shanker
rehearsing *DCS
Remembrance
Day*, National
Academy for
Performing Arts,
Karachi. Photo by
Ruwanthie
de Chickera.



Heralding from the muslim landed gentry in India, the speaker tells of growing up with memories of the faded grandeur of India, the easy affinity with Bangladesh and the promise of Pakistan. Finally settled in Karachi, the boy, now an old man, talks about the journey of his family that still lies divided over the three countries, unable to visit each other. He talks about the unique experience of Partition, the violence through which these three countries formed their identities separate from each other and the complexities of life as divided families try to stay connected in spite of warring States.

Ironically the loss of his own family is not the most painful experience for this man – who chose a path as an artist and an activist. The monologue refers to the global breakdown of the socialist ideal in the 70s - and the subsequent loss of the moderate space in Pakistan – where now the choice remains between different forms of extremism.

Creation of the monologue

This was the first DCS interview to be conducted in Pakistan and was done in connection with the creation of the play DCS Remembrance Day – which combined 5 monologues from Sri Lanka with a new monologue sourced from Pakistan. DCS Remembrance Day was envisaged to be the beginning of the launch of the DCS project in Pakistan, and hopefully in the wider Region.

Khalid Ahmed, an actor, director, academic and activist was identified for this first conversation and interviewed by Meher Jaffri, Sunil Shanker and Tracy Holsinger.

Reflection on the interview

In my conversations with Khalid Ahamed from Pakistan, in which he reminisced about his childhood – and how his family split across three cities which then became three countries - he never completely relaxed his guard, and confessed that he found it ‘difficult’ to engage fully with his personal and political history. “I moved on”, became a familiar phrase from him when he was unprepared (not unwilling), to confront incidents from his past that he had buried.

Tracy Holsinger

DCS Monologues Director

Reflection on performing the monologue

It was surreal to have an actual person’s experience be relayed as a character. Not to mention to see how a person actually felt during such trying times in our history. I realised again and again how war destroys lives, no matter what anyone ever says, war divides us more.

Monologues like this shed light onto something which the history books don't talk about. They don't talk about how we are all one, regardless of our language and religion. This must be done to show the injustices that we all have gone through again and again over a false sense of superiority.

Osama Tahir

Actor, Pakistan



Part Three: Politics

The DCS project was created in Sri Lanka in response to a political window that unexpectedly opened up in 2015. A 30 year old war had ended in 2009 and in 2015 the people voted out an increasingly authoritarian regime in favour of governance that promised more accountability and freedom of expression.

The DCS project consciously made use of this opportunity to critically address the mistakes made in recent history. The Govt that came into power in 2015 had a National Policy Framework on Reconciliation to build on “common and shared multiple narratives among the communities of the country”. Though the Govt failed to systematically implement these objectives, the fact that the space for this was acknowledged was adequate motivation for DCS to claim a place in society for people to look back at our history, and specifically our mistakes – and to do this creatively and collectively.

In this section we will look at the placement of the DCS project and the DCS Monologues within this wider context of Sri Lanka’s transition into a post-conflict country.

Pia Hatch
speaks to
audience at
forum
moderated
by Gehan
Gunathilaka
(*extreme right*),
photo by Prauda
Buwaneka.

DCS and the workings of memory

Reflections by a DCS Researcher

Modern history is not taught in our schools. More so, people are not used to critically engaging with history — to hear ‘other’ sides and ‘other’ stories. People also find it hard to understand and accept various versions of the truth embedded in different histories. They also find it hard to connect stories from the past to understand what’s going on at present.

DCS is a great way to get people — especially young people — exposed to a different way of history telling. We are a new country, but an old civilization. The young ones of this new country are now old, and soon they’ll no longer be with us. But their stories are important to us. We can learn a lot from them.

There’s a saying: “Those who don’t know history, are doomed to repeat it”. DCS is valuable because it introduces us to a very important part of our history, and helps us to get to “know” it.

Gihan de Chickera

DCS researcher

Political Cartoonist

There is a self-deprecating stereotype Sri Lankans somewhat thrive on that we are the nation with the shortest memory. The Sri Lankan ability to shrug, smile and move on is touted as an extension of our easy-going

nature. However, this very characteristic has been exploited to cover up, forget and ignore many tragedies, injustices and mistakes of history. It has led to the isolated suffering of communities and individuals who are unable to forget – and so are erased, unacknowledged, or silenced.

This unofficial culture of collective amnesia is further consolidated by the complete elimination of contemporary political conflicts from the national school curriculum. Sri Lankan school children are not taught about the violent post-colonial history of the country and school syllabi do not encourage engagement with current local issues either.

All this, coupled with recurring incompetence, irresponsibility and corruption by political leadership and increased fragmentation of Sri Lankan society through repeated migration has left the country without a culture that supports the value of building on a collective memory. Memory – because it is not shared and not endorsed and not constructively challenged or allowed to grow – is often an experience of isolation, and one that fragments and divides rather than pulls together and reconciles. Within a post-conflict situation, with an official recognition given to reconciliation, this devaluing of the importance of building on a collective memory, simply leaves us in a place where moving forward means forgetting the past.

Creating a culture that supports and endorses the sacredness of memory is very much at the heart of the DCS project.

A standard DCS performance is a collective experience of memory. Through the performance and then through the discussion that follows the performance, artists and audience, protagonists and critics, senior citizens and youth – all share a space and respond together to the stories of the people of this country recollected through the memories of the generation born in the 1930s.

Through this experience of absorbing a personal memory collectively and then responding to it – the act of remembering, retelling and re-interpreting – memory becomes a living dynamic which feeds both the present and the past.

The DCS project is a fascinating insight into how memory works - what people retain and how they retain it; what gets carried on and how histories are built or why they are erased.

The DCS project makes no claims to objective truth. Rather it values the subjective experience of the truth and seeks to create a space of value within the public for this.

The Monologues, within the DCS project, place great importance on the personal experience of history. The stories that are converted into the DCS monologues are highly personal and opinionated. But it is in creating the space for such stories that understanding, appreciation and appetite grows for the complexity of truth that we gain through the balancing of opposing voices rather than the monopoly of one voice.

The creation of public spaces for the sharing, the listening and discussion around recollected stories is something that contributes directly to creating a shared culture that protects the sacredness of memory.

The act of collective reflection on the memories and perspectives of this generation, pushes present day audiences to open their minds to stories they may not be familiar with, people they may know nothing of, communities they may not have been interested in, and worldviews that they may have discarded.

Reflections by a DCS Researcher

As this generation that inherited the new Nation State of Sri Lanka begins to leave us, being privy to their experience is of paramount importance. Not in the sense of passing on wisdom because what is relevant always changes... But in the sense of understanding our past, the opportunities they lost in creating a better future for us and being able to reflect on the opportunities that we are presented with today. The choices may not be the same and the opportunities might not be the same, but there are lessons to be learned from our past. This is why a conversation across generations is imperative to our future. We need to know. So that we can inform our choices with experience, if not ours, theirs.

Radhika Hettiarachchi

DCS Researcher

Dear Children, Sincerely...

A conversation across generation

The DCS project is more than an archiving project. It envisages a dynamic much more complex than interviewing and storing the memories of a very important generation in Sri Lanka.

The DCS project is a ‘Conversations across generations’, and this objective is built carefully into the entire process.

Initially, in our selection process, the DCS project actively looked for senior citizens who had lived their lives with a certain degree of passion and conviction. People who had broken through societal barriers, who had forged their lives in line with their personal and political vision, people who had chosen flavor and exception over security and complicity in life. We also looked for people who were natural storytellers. People who had the ability to reflect on history in a manner that stirs the imagination, links dots and creates a canvas that is larger than a personal narrative. Through the course of the interviews, we also pushed people to be self reflective, self critical – to focus more on the things that went wrong – because this is where the lessons and the stories lie.

As much as possible, we set up interviews through personal connections. The interviewer and the interviewee were always known to each other, sometimes even related, often in a close personal or professional relationship. This allowed for deeper conversation. We also allowed

for the interviews to be as long as was necessary, often returning again and again to speak with the people as their memories became sharper and they were able to reflect more deeply on issues.

Once the conversations were transcribed, they were discussed in rehearsal rooms by groups of artists – who brought their own interpretation, their own stories and experiences to the original material. Sometimes the person whose interview was being studied was consulted, or brought into the rehearsal room for deeper discussion.

After performances we tried, as much as possible, to host post-show discussions with a panel comprising the seniors who had granted the original interview, the artists and the audience.

In this manner, through the interview process, through rehearsal, performance and post show discussions, in an evolving space shared by researchers, artists, audience, critics, senior citizens, youth, families; a dynamic of conversations across generations is created by listening to the stories of the generation born in the 1930s, retold by artists to live audiences in collective spaces.

Reflections by a DCS Researcher

The project helped me connect with my grandfather in a way that was much more meaningful than ever before. The interviews covered his childhood, university days, and early years in the civil service. We tried to capture what it was like for his generation to experience a world war, and independence. I was left with an impression that he had led a remarkable life. I discovered

who he was, and where I had come from. He, in the process of recalling his past, eventually launched into a much broader project of putting together his memoirs. I imagine he would have written his memoirs in any event, but I suspect that my interviews with him sparked something. I think it's not an exaggeration to suggest that my interviews with him changed our relationship. We have now made it a weekly habit to speak over Skype - every Saturday for one hour. We speak about his recollections of the past, literature, and how it has shaped him, politics, and my current doctoral work. It is one of the highlights of the week for me. I have discovered over these years that we only really discover ourselves by tracing our history - who our parents were, who their parents were, and so on. It seems self-evident, but there's nothing quite like putting such thinking into practice. So perhaps the DCS project is never really over - it continues in our lives.

Gehan Gunatilleke

DCS Researcher

Human Rights Lawyer

DCS in post-conflict Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's post colonial history (1948 onwards) has been marred by continuing political and armed conflict of varying intensity. The country endured a debilitating 30 year civil war which ended in 2009. Since this, the country has been officially in a post-conflict era. However, without a priority or a concerted effort being given to meaningful reconciliation, the country and the communities within it continue to experience new and old tensions and challenges to a peaceful life.

Sri Lanka's journey towards reconciliation is a conversation that needs to take place on many levels; between communities, within communities, within ourselves and across generations. We need to give each other the space to talk and we need to open our minds to listen.

The DCS project – which seeks out the elders of our society – and together with them, creates performances for young people – is, at its very core – a conversation across generations. A conversation – or several conversations - about who we were, how we changed, what we lost, what we are left with.

Each performance, based on the stories gathered in conversation with our elders, will target bridging a gap between the generations – a gap of comprehension, a gap of empathy, of knowledge or perspective. It is only by looking back on the mistakes we have made over the years and understanding how and why they were made and have shaped our past that we can learn to move on and also to keep from making the same, if not similar, mistakes.

Further, through the facilitated discussion that follows the performances, the programme hopes to create the space for critical and open conversation around the act of storytelling – and will bring together the real people behind the stories, with the artists who performed these stories with the audience who watched the performances. This dynamic is envisaged to increase the public involvement and engagement not just with their history but also with arts that is current and relevant.

Reflections by a DCS Researcher

In my opinion, the most valuable thing about the DCS project, was the documenting of historical events by survivors of terrible times in the country - and the gentle social education of the masses who are blissfully unaware of these very real parts of our history, with the creative use of theatre.

As someone who struggled with this gap in knowledge all my life, I found it deeply cathartic to be able to dress up and sit among people I had no space to have these types of dialogues with and watch reality being so engagingly portrayed through movement, dramatisation, narration etc. Despite the difficult nature of the content for some, I thought the multiple modes of expression used helped to keep people safely engaged.

Angelica Chandrasekaran

DCS Researcher

Mindfulness based Behavioural Therapist, Teacher & Trainer

End note

Director's Notes

The Monologues refers to individual stories of personal experience, all pertaining to the myriad, complex issues that are compressed into umbrella terms such as Conflict and Identity. I appreciate these words now, more than I have in the past, when I feared that such words would lose power, that we would become desensitised to them and what they signalled. Perhaps it is only once one engages with the lived experiences of those whose testimonies lie bound up in these two short words, that one becomes actually grateful that these indicators exist, because it gives one a vocabulary, a kind of shorthand when one is at a loss to find the words to describe each particular atrocity, each unique trauma.

The monologues and life in general were interrupted by a global crisis. From within this pause, I can't help but wonder what is in store for us. The pandemic has suspended our entire profession indefinitely, and the future of live performance will be a changed landscape. One we have no way of predicting at this juncture.

I take hope in the vision of the DCS Project. That we create work in the hope that these attestations to our history will remain after we are gone. That we are in for the long haul, and that we can take our time because there is no timestamp on telling the truth and disputing sanctioned narratives.

Tracy Holsinger



**Thank you very much for engaging with us in this
journey of the DCS Monologues.**

Ruwanthie de Chickera interviews Mr. Hussein,
DCS project interview photo by Pramila Samarakoon, (2019).

The following artists, academics and researchers contributed to this resource pack with their writing and opinions.

<i>Angelica Chandrasekeran</i>	Mindfulness based Behavioural Therapist, DCS Researcher
<i>Gihan de Chickera</i>	Political Cartoonist, DCS Researcher
<i>Ruwanthie de Chickera</i>	Playwright, DCS Monologues
<i>Gehan Gunathilaka</i>	Lawyer and Academic, DCS Researcher
<i>Tracy Holsinger</i>	Artistic Director, Mind Adventures Theatre Company, Director, DCS Monologues
<i>Radhika Hettiarachchi</i>	Development Practitioner, DCS Researcher
<i>Azra Jafferjee</i>	DCS Researcher
<i>Ranmali Mirchandani</i>	DCS Actor
<i>Osama Tahir</i>	DCS Actor
<i>Deanne Uyangoda</i>	Lawyer, DCS Researcher

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This resource pack was produced as part of the 'Artist Research, Archiving and Documentation Project' of Stages Theatre Group.

Through this project, practicing artists engaged in systematic and critical analysis of their own work, analysing a decade worth of theatre productions and processes of Stages Theatre Group. The decade spanned the immediate ten years after the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka (2009 to 2019).

Sixteen resource packs, such as this one, were created for publication in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Each resource pack, written and researched by artists, examines the surrounding socio-political context within which these productions were created and analyses the creative decisions taken within the process. Supporting video material was also created as part of this initiative. All material produced through this research project can be found at www.stages.lk

Resource Packs

Editor (Writing): Ruwanthie de Chickera

Editor (Video): Malith Sulara

Language Editors: Nipuni Sharada Pathirage (S) King Ratnam (T)

Writers: Ruwanthie de Chickera, Pemanthi Fernando, Jayampathi Guruge, Nadie Kammallaweera, Nalin Lusena, Nipuni Sharada Pathirage, Piumi Wijesundara

Layout and Design Editors: Malshani Delgahapitiya, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha

Proofreaders: Asha Abeykoon, Geetha de Chickera, Pemanthi Fernando, U. D. R. H. K. Gunasinghe, Tracy Holsinger, Aravinda Jayasekara, Nadie Kammallaweera, Nipuni Sharada Pathirage, Sudeshna Ranmuthugala, King Ratnam, Thilaka Subasinghe

Layout and Graphic Designers: Prasada Luthwattha, David Cotterrell, Sanjaya Ekneligoda, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha, Venura Navod, Deshan Tennekoon

Layout Assistants: Kiyas Ahamed, Malshani Delgahapitiya, Janith Harshana

Research Assistants: Kaushalya Attyagalle, Nalin Lusena, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha, Akalanka Prabhawara, Dinushika Seneviratne

Translators: Hiranyada Dewasiri(S/E), Arundi Jayasekara(S/E), Manuli Lavanya(S/E), Lihini Nilaweera(S/E), Jinadani Parameshwaram(T), Shamala Vedanayagam(T), Piumi Wijesundara(E)

Video Crew: Venura Navod, King Ratnam, Pramila Samarakoon, Kasun Ukwatta

Web Design and Developer: Ransaka Galmangoda

Administrators: Malshani Delgahapitiya, Mahesh Lakmal

Stages Theatre Group
RESOURCE PACKS

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Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera, Nipuni Sharada Pathirage

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Design by: Venura Navod

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Written by: Piumi Wijesundara

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Venura Navod

DCS Monologues

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera

Assisted by: Pemanthi Fernando

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Sri Lanka Collaboration

Written by: Nipuni Sharada Pathirage

Assisted by: Akalanka Prabhashwara

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Assisted by: Nalin Lusena

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Written by: Piumi Wijesundara

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Venura Navod

Passing Stage Project

Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera

Assisted by: Kaushalya Attygalle, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha

Layout and Graphic Designed by: Sanjaya Ekneligoda, Rajitha Pavithra Madhubhasha

The Syrian Monologues

Written by: Jayampathi Guruge

Assisted by: Nalin Lusena

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Written by: Ruwanthie de Chickera

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