

Sunday Island, October 14th 2012

## **My Moral and Multi-talented Father**

### **Kalaguru Sauris Silva – 30th Death Anniversary**

The name Sauris Silva may not be unknown to those in the Sinhala cultural field. Honoured by the State as Kalaguru, he is best known as the pioneer in resurrecting pahatarata naetum ‘Lowcountry Dance’, or Tovil, from the dustbin of a colonized mindset of a people in denial of the past and its cultural treasures. While Tovil had a vibrant existence in rural Southern Lanka in particular, the urban take on it was one of disdain, associated as it is with yakkhas, devas, beliefs, masks, costumes, fire torches (vilakku), etc. - all true, of course.

The opportunity to unravel the artistry of Lowcountry Dance ironically came in the colonial context of welcoming the new Queen of England / Lanka. A cultural program to be held at the Colombo Regal Theatre in her honour was to include, it had been decided, only Upcountry Dance. This is when Sauris Silva, the experienced, and relentless, campaigner went on overdrive. No was no answer. Invitation received to perform!

The young impressionable Queen was supposed to have been mesmerized when the dance virtuoso, presenting three items, let out fire from his eyes (don’t ask me how) in the gini sanniya. Impressed enough was the young Royal, it has been reported, to be interested in an invitation to perform at the Buckingham Palace, although it is not known to have materialized.

Few knew that the young and robust Sauris Silva had been doing a Jekyll and Hyde show. school principal by day, lead dancer by night, in his father Suwanda Henedige Konnehamy’s

renowned Tovil troupe. Encouraged by the Regal Theatre breakthrough, he would now set his mind to putting in print for the first time an oral tradition he claims to date back to the time of Ravana. The product was *Pahatarata Naetum* (1965) published by Gunasena, the leading publisher of the time, and came to be approved by the Sahitya Mandalaya and the Educational Publications Advisory Council for use as a library book. This was to be followed by *Sooniyam Shaantiya* (1970).

Credentials established, and appointed lecturer at the Heywood College of Fine Arts, the precursor to the Department / University of Fine Arts, he would write the first syllabus on Lowcountry Dance, providing the opportunity for a new generation to study and practice the intricacies of dance steps, and the associated *aangika* and *saatvika abhinaya* 'physical and emotional expressions'. Earning respect as a refined dance tradition, the Upcountry Dance virtuoso S Panibharata, Head of the Fine Arts University, would write a *Sauris Silva Saudama* in 1976. It was the duo working on the Faculty at Heywood that had jointly trained the first ever Dance Troupe to perform overseas in India.

1976 was also when the Colombo Museum wisely decided to make the institution a living entity by introducing the living cultures to the public under its aegis. Sauris Silva was the first to be invited, when he donated, in the words of the then Minister of Culture, T B Tennakone, his "dance costumes, masks, books and his other publications, manuscripts, yantra mantra puskola pot, pictures of Bali and the art of Bali Painting" (Sauris Silva Prashasti).

Of course, over time, the highly skilled orator (and I have witnessed him rising on his toes to make a point) was to take the message of Lowcountry Dance across the country, both verbally and in dance, not to mention through the newspapers. This is not to mention his programs over Radio Ceylon when the listeners were able to hear first hand his well-known mellifluous folk-singing voice. So, with what great pleasure, then, on a visit to Canada in 1980, that I would accompany him on the drum as he performed on TV at the ripe old age of 82! Did anyone say that the drum eye facing the camera busted?

If this is Sauris Silva the cultural treasure that most of us know of, little may be known of his social worker side. One of his earliest campaigns was for Independence when he traveled through the Ruhuna district making the case. He was also to make a submission to the Soulbury Commission to have the Sri Lankan membership in the Legislature expanded.

It is thanks to his efforts much earlier that the Tangalla Hospital came to have once-a-week visits by medical specialists, as well as an ambulance service (Sauris Silva Prashasti). Another social outreach was the building of a hospital ward at the Tangalla Hospital for the exclusive use of the Sangha (now built over), harnessing the resources of Jayanti Kala Sangamaya founded by him. Helping found the Tri-Nikaya Sudharma Bhikkhu Association in hometown Tangalla, he was to become its lay secretary.

He is also known to have led the Keep Dry movement (*amadyapa vyaapaaraya*). Successfully also, as I have been told, did he campaign to allow males of the 'drummer caste' to cover their upper bodies. Then there was his successful campaign against 'Taapasa Nikaya' imposters in the home area, said to have sought to impress a gullible people by living off cow urine.

But Sauris Silva was not one to miss the tree for the forest. If his contributions to Lowcountry Dance and the public good constitute the forest that he sought to water, he did not fail to nurture locally either. One way was to lead by example. That is to say that he was no lowketa parakaasay gedarata maragaatay ‘public saint, home disaster’. Personally principled, he would be a teetotaler and non-smoker all his life. And homage to the Buddha was a daily evening routine at our home.

Savvy about the realities of life, he would add on a Portuguese / Dutch last name Silva to his Sauris name, this presumably by way of keeping up with the Joneses, or keeping with the times (we are talking about a century ago or less), at a time when a Sinhala school principal would earn a mere half of what an English school principal did.

The beneficiaries of his practical wisdom were, of course, us children. And so it was on the same pittance of a salary that he would send us – my two older sisters and I, to a fee-paying, and English-medium, Catholic school, Christ Church College. His nephew, the later well-known ‘dancing lawyer’, the late Chandrasena Daluwatta, too, by his own claim, dancing also learned from loku maama ‘older uncle’.

It is difficult to imagine the juggling act my mom, Missinona Warnakulasuriya, would have had to perform to put food on the table. That is, when she was not working on the husband’s dance costumes with her own hands.

In case it was missed, Sauris, of course, means ‘liking ‘em all’ < sau + ris . An occasional violin player, he would entertain soldiers, stationed in the area during war years, going past our house. Hence his brag line – ‘the Sauris Silva who put to the lie the line ‘one can excel [just] in one’’ (lovin ekek eka theykata vei samata)!

Being multiskilled, and lifetime teetotaler and non-smoker, may be what I, too, got from my father. But, born in 1898 to Wikramasingh Saranachchi Patabaendige Dinohamy of Walgameliya, what he would not know is how, even in his death, 30 years to the day (Oct. 12, 1982), he would catapult me into new territory. Poetry! Imagine, poetry. Killing time at the Schilphol Airport in Amsterdam on my way to his funeral, the first lines came to me, just like that, out of the blue. True, back in Sri Lanka, I had published works of fiction (two). But that was in Sinhala, and nearly twenty years earlier. Since arriving in North America, my nose had been deep in the academy, and creativity was furthest from my horizon. But here, sitting at the airport, I was writing my first poem. In English! Surprised it was on Death?

## DISARMING DEATH

I myself not  
see  
in the dazzling  
brilliance  
of my breath-  
less consciousness,  
your faint image

projected  
 on life's screen,  
 moulded,  
 and masked,  
 by the living  
 in a Neanderthal seizure  
 with the clay  
 of a destruction seige,  
 go find your prey.

(2nd ed. 2001, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka: Sarasavi)

If the clock tower in Devinuwara stands as a monument to his philanthropy, isn't it sad that the street sign of 'Sauris Silva Mawata' in his hometown Medaketiya, Tangalla is nowhere to be seen? So perhaps, a fitting memorial for this national treasure, may be for the Tangalla Town Council to get the street signs back on, setting it up with a firmer, and long-lasting foundation.

Artist, social worker, educator – all that, yes. But from my Buddhist perspective, what I see is a model sentient being who epitomized the Buddha's ideal – the one who walks on the two legs of self-care and other-care, in critical balance.

On this 30th Death Anniversary, then, Dear Taatta, may the merit transferred by us - me, my family and our readers, be accrued to you. May you experience that supreme Nibbana!

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