

# IMPACT

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## TRADITIONAL PUPPET ART 'HANGING BY A THREAD'

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March 21 is the day to celebrate the vibrant world of puppetry amid threats to its very existence due to various forms of entertainment that emerged in the world, from the radio, television and cinema to social media.

Puppetry is further threatened with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic that led to the halt of any sort of public gathering, leading to dire consequences for puppeteers around the world, including Sri Lanka. Therefore, now is the time most apt to revitalise the dying art on World Puppetry Day and bring traditional artists and their stories to the fore.

### Museum

The best place to start such an endeavour is the Puppet Art Museum in Dehiwala where a large collection of puppets belonging to many schools in all colours, shades and sizes are on glorious display, perched atop shelves, suspended from above, or peeping out from behind doors.

Established in 2007, the Puppet Art Museum is the proud product of Sarath Wijaya Abeygunawardana, who rose to the occasion to save the vanishing art by spending his own money. His vision was to revive the traditional puppet art while taking it to the international stage to relate Sri Lanka's unique story through puppets.

The museum is not only a display of puppets but also a vibrant cultural centre holding different types of events ranging from puppet shows, trainings and research work, and seminars.

Traditional puppeteers have the opportunity to present their shows and even sell their creations in the local and international market facilitated by the museum. Abeygunawardana even provides them the opportunity to gain foreign exposure by taking them to international shows and conventions, and manages to bring fame and accolades to Sri

### CALL FOR REVIVAL ON WORLD PUPPETRY DAY

Lanka. However, all these activities to revive the dying art had halted for nearly two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which was a hard hit on the economies of traditional puppeteers.

### Awareness

Abeygunawardana says we must think of new ways to revive this unique heritage and the World Puppetry Day is a most opportune time to create awareness.

"First of all, we have to thank the traditional puppeteers for preserving this art to date. To mark the World Puppetry Day, the Intangible Heritage Board, chaired by Prof. Kamal Waleboda guided by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the Department of Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Education, will bring together puppeteers, educators, researchers and other stakeholders to honour their contributions.

I am also a member of this Board. I wish to congratulate all traditional puppet artists on this occasion," he

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said.

Abeygunawardana developed a passion for traditional puppetry due to a friendship built with some puppeteers in his village. Speaking to them and viewing their fascinating show moved him. He realised the importance of preserving this national heritage that led him to establish Sri Lanka's first puppet museum.

### Accolades

Abeygunawardana is now the Sri Lankan President of UNIMA - the world body preserving traditional

puppetry affiliated to UNESCO. Sri Lanka's stringpuppetry was named a UNESCO World Heritage recently due to the work of the museum.

In 2017, Abeygunawardana was conferred national honours with the Kalasoori title and also won several Presidential Awards for the service towards traditional puppet art. He is the only Sri Lankan to be awarded the Certificate of World Master from the World Master Organisation in Korea.

"We plan to launch a new project to take the traditional puppet art to the Colombo city and hold shows - hopefully - on a daily basis. We are in



Sarath Wijaya Abeygunawardana

discussions with the relevant Government parties in this regard," Abeygunawardana said, explaining the proposal to construct and operate a museum to empower traditional puppeteers and promote the art.

### Traditional puppetry

Puppetry is an ancient folk art which had been the mode of communication between the king and his subjects. Messages of the king were passed down to the people in the form of puppetry where royal artisans would maneuver the replica of the king to seem as if the message is being read by the king.

Sri Lankan traditional puppetry is influenced by Indian art of Rajasthan which mixed with the Sri Lankan 'nadagam' tradition. There is also evidence that Sri Lankan puppetry was influenced by Asian countries such as China, Malaysia and Japan as well as Europe.

Puppetry became popular about 300 years ago and specialised in the Ambalangoda and Balapitiya areas. Podi Sirina Gurunnanse of Ambalangoda is known to be the pioneer of traditional puppet art and he had performed even before the Duke of Edinburgh when the latter visited Ceylon in the late 19th century.

### Types of puppets

Traditional puppetry employs many types of puppets where the classifications are made in terms of the nature of manipulations. Among the different two dimensional and three dimensional puppets, there are thread puppets, club puppets, shadow puppets, hand puppets, and finger puppets.

The classification depends on the skill of the puppeteer. The wood of the *kaduru* tree is used to create puppets due to light weight and versatility where two methods of puppet-making such as *prathimakala* and *balikala* are employed. Puppeteers belong to about 25 schools; most of them from the Southern Province.

Legends of the bygone era in the likes of Ehalepola Kumarihami are retold through puppet art adding comedy and tragedy to capture the audience. The stories of the local Mr. Know-it-all (*Mahadanamutta*) creates humour while beloved characters like Jasaya - Lenchina, and Kalagola - Dikthala are brought to life from folklore to the puppet stage.

Jathaka stories, traditional oblations, devil dances, healing rituals, kolam and nadagam educate and entertain the young and old alike. About 10 puppeteers participate in a play that uses musical instruments, song, dialogue and poems for storytelling.

Abeygunawardana said that these stories need to be brought back to the stage with new vigour and modernise Sri Lankan traditional puppet art to suit today's audiences. He added that his endeavour will not stop with the museum but will continue looking for more ways to 'pull'at many more 'heartstrings', here and abroad.

