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Hiran Abeysekera: Best Actor at Olivier Awards 2022

Making history in the performing arts

BY ANURADHA KODAGODA

Making history in the performing arts, Sri Lankan theatre actor, Hiran Abeysekera won the Best Actor for the stage adaptation of 'Life of Pi' at Olivier Awards 2022 in London last Sunday at the Royal Albert Hall.

The Wyndham in London's West End, Hiran's consistent stellar performance rightfully earned him the award of Best Actor. Hiran was the 'star' of that jubilant evening of the most prestigious, historical theatre awards festival in the world by winning the Best Actor award for playing his extravagant performance as Pi Patel in the Lolita Chakrabarti's stage adaptation of Yann Martel's book Life of Pi, one of the highly acclaimed productions of Sheffield Theatre Production.

The news itself is indeed a moment of celebration for all Sri Lankans as this young and absolutely talented actor, Hiran Abeysekera marked his imprints in gold once again in international theatre arena as the first Sri Lankan actor to win the Best Actor award at Olivier Awards 2022, whilst in 2019 Hiran was the second Sri Lankan to win the Best Performance award in a play at the UK theatre awards.

Society of London

The Laurence Olivier Awards, or simply the Olivier Awards, are presented annually by the Society of London Theatre to recognise excellence in professional theatre in London.

This year the awards ceremony was held at the Royal Albert Hall and was attended by the crème de la crème of actors and actresses from British theatre.

In a touching speech, the show's

star Hiran Abeysekera said he was "overwhelmed" to win the best actor.

He also paid tribute to his home country, Sri Lanka, which he said was going through a "tough time now... I think of you and wish I was there with you".

Life of Pi theatre production began its performances on June 22 in 2019 and had its premiere at Sheffield's Crucible theatre with a press night on July 9 and being the first major stage version of Life of Pi has been hailed as "unmissable" and "pure theatrical magic" from the beginning, according to international news sites.

Hiran Abeysekera (36) stepped into the English theatre through Equus by Peter Shaffer in 2007 with his brilliant performance as Alan Strang and he was a member of Lanka Children's and Youth Theatre Foundation and learnt the basics of theatre under veteran dramatist, the late Somalatha Subasignhe.

His luminous performance as the lead role of Equus resulted in an opportunity for him to audition for the leading drama school at the UK Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) a decade ago and was fortunate enough to get selected to one of the 34 places available of the 2,700 applicants from all over the world and he graduated from RADA in 2011.

In 2018 he began appearing in the Nickelodeon sitcom Find Me in Paris as Dash Khan. Abeysekera made his professional stage debut with the English Touring Theatre in 2011, playing Valere in Tartuffe. In 2015, he played Peter Pan on the London stage, and in 2016 he was cast as Puck in the BBC's new production of A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Martel's Booker Prize-winning novel Life of Pi where Hiran played the lead role told the story which be-



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gins in a zoo in Pondicherry in 1976, in the face of political upheaval, about a 16-year-old Indian boy who sets off to emigrate with his family, but becomes trapped in a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean with a tiger for company.

All the animals of the play including giraffes, orang utans and zebras are created in the play through puppetry.

International media reported that the biggest fear of the production's puppetry director, Finn Caldwell was that although they wanted something muscular, vivid and dangerous – their biggest hor-

ror was whether people would call the puppets cute.

Chakrabarti who adopted the story into a play said in an interview that she loved the book when she read it in 2002 and when she checked the possibility with Martel to adopt the story into a play he just said, "take it, do what you feel, and good luck".

Designing the puppets

Explaining the process of designing the puppets Cladwell, the puppetry designer said any animal puppet always begins with research

into the real creature; and the internal frame for the tiger was based on the animal's skeleton, constructed of wood and aluminium, and the joints made with elasticated bungee cords.

International media quoted Cladwell saying, "It's what we call a universal puppet, capable of everything that the live creature would be."

"The tiger has to be able to look seasick, to attack with great speed, to turn tight circles on that lifeboat,"

Although for the rest of its audiences Life of Pi was an extraordinary journey, speaking at the premier to the International website



about his performance as 'Pi' Hiran said, "I've had a terrible trip."

Life of Pi was adapted for the big screen in 2012 in a film directed by Ang Lee, which won the filmmaker one of four Oscars.

And it's a captivating and thrillingly realised film, suffused with magic - a testament to the power of imagination and the film also was well received by its audiences similar to the book.

As Sri Lankans we are not yet fortunate enough to witness a similar magic on stage.

Hiran Abeysekera's award proves and reminds us again that though a small country with limited infrastructure to produce massive art projects, we are not at all limited in talented artists.

Hiran's weightless grace and precise physicality, charm, wit and seriousness make him a compelling narrator of his own magical-realist tale.

As a nation we are proud of his achievement.

His victory is not just an individual accomplishment, but a victory for the uplift of Sri Lankan theatre.