

First Sinhala colour film marks 60 years

# LAUNCHING PAD FOR GAMINI FONSEKA'S PHENOMENAL FILM CAREER

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Today marks sixty years since the screening of Sinhala cinema's first colour film *Ranmuthuduwa* - the film that skyrocketed Gamin Fonseka to fame and super-stardom, launching his exceptional cinematic career that made him a silver screen legend. The film was also the first Sinhala movie produced by the Serendib Film Company formed by space scientist and science fiction writer Dr. Arthur C. Clarke together with famous underwater explorer Mike Wilson who directed the film (Shesha Palihakkara was the producer). It was also the debut of maestro Pandit W. D. Amaradeva as a film playback artiste and Nanda Malinee's maiden venture as a playback singer. Sri Chandraratne Manawasinghe wrote the lyrics for the songs.

Apart from Gamini, *Ranmuthuduwa* also provided an opportunity for many artistes to become famous and subsequently go places in the Sinhala cinema as noted stars and starlets. This included Jeevarani Kurukulasuriya who played the role of Kumari in the female lead opposite Gamini who was Bandu in the film. Other prominent players included Joe Abeywickrema (Sena) Shane Gunaratne (Raju), Anthony C. Perera, Shesha Palihakkara Austin Abeysekera, Vincent Vas, Thilakasiri Fernando, Hector Ekanayake and underwater specialist Rodney Jonklaas who featured in the famous undersea duel armed with a spear gun with Gamini. Well known filmmakers Titus Thotawatte, Tissa Liyanasuriya and M.S. Ananda too helped out - the first two as Assistant Directors and the other as camera assistant, gaining their baptism in the Sinhala cinema to achieve greater feats later on.

The story of *Ranmuthuduwa* centred on the quest to discover a statue of a Hindu Goddess which lay at the bottom of the sea following a raid on her abode by a band of Portuguese marauders who then set sail with the stolen statute and treasures only for the galleon to sink killing all aboard while the statue came to rest at the bottom of the ocean together with the stolen treasure from the shrine.

This tale was narrated by the hermit (played by Shesha) to the three youth (Bandu, Sena and Raju) with the dire warning that any person who attempt-

ed to recover the statue for selfish reasons would end up in an untimely death underwater and the only way prosperity could be brought to the country was by restoring the statue at its original site after rebuilding the temple shrine. However, since the motives of Bandu and co. was a praiseworthy one - of displaying the image of the Goddess for public veneration he (Bandu) received the full blessings of the hermit to seek out the statue that lay underwater and do what was required.

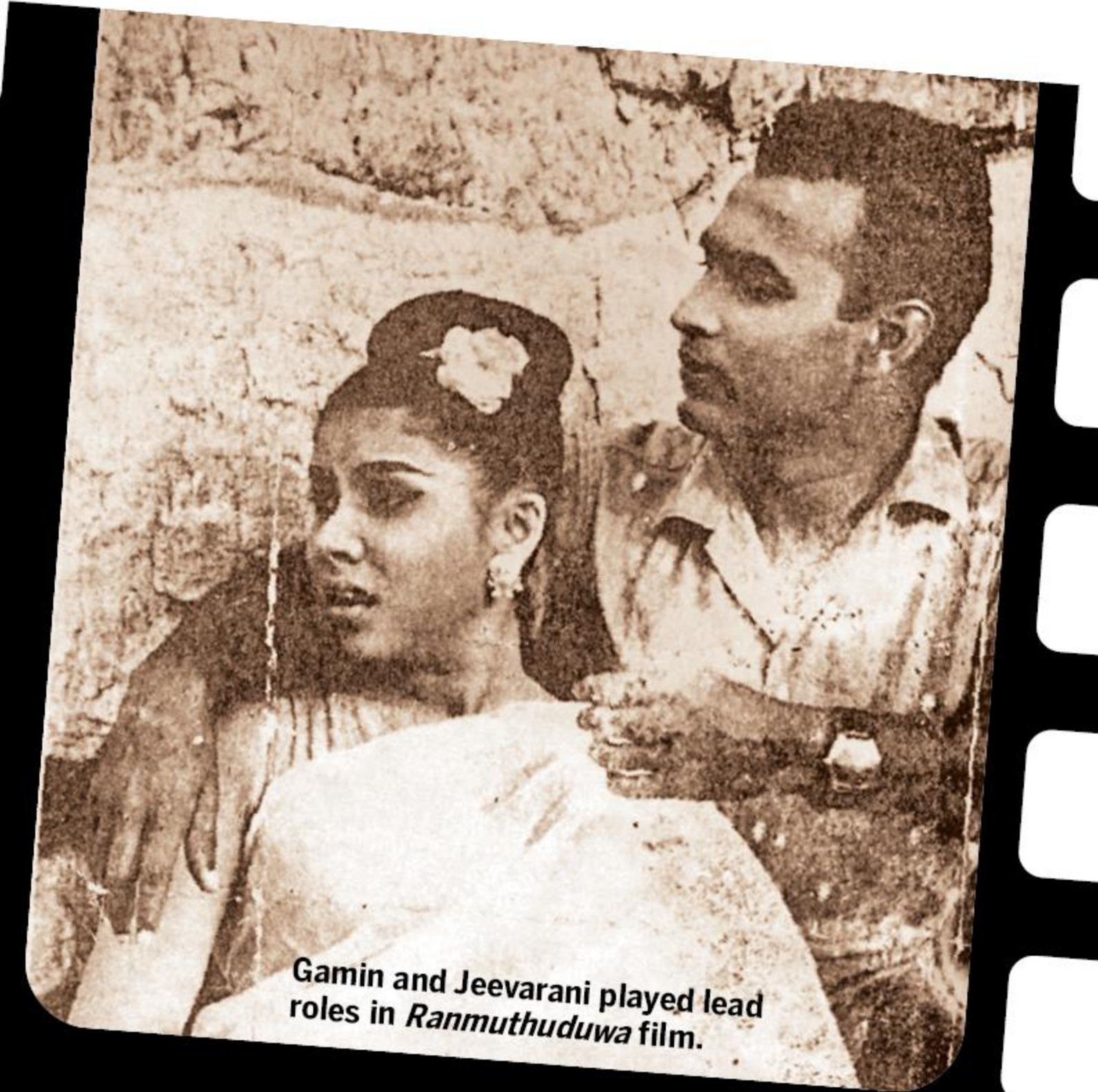
However, the trio met with stiff resistance with another party too eyeing the statue, not to restore it in its original abode, but to steal the treasures that lay beneath the ocean together with statue to enrich themselves, and, hence, due to the dishonourable motive of the campaign meeting with death in the ocean waters, but not before making every attempt to foil Bandu's bid to get there first with the trio eventually prevailing by effectively countering all the plots and machinations of their rivals, to restore the statue as pledged.

The adventure film was full of breathtaking underwater scenes, expertly captured by Mike Wilson. Gamini of course was in his element - the quintessential hero and matinee idol - that later made him a much sought after actor and a sure fire box office draw. He was ably complemented by Joe, Shane and Anthony C. Perera all of whom later went on to

become household names after *Ranmuthuduwa*.

It was said that director Mike Wilson wanted to purchase a high powered motor boat to assist him in his skin diving pursuits but was lacking in the necessary funds, hence the reason for him to make *Ranmuthuduwa*. The film was a huge box office success which more than provided him with the funds for his boat. *Ranmuthuduwa* was entirely filmed in Trincomalee in the backdrop of the famous Koneswaran temple and the Swami Rock overlooking the breathtaking "Lover's Leap" by which Kumari as a sacrifice to the sea gods, was being chained to one of the rocks by a member of the rival party while the sea waters threatened to engulf her, and partly in Kirinda in Hambantota.

Following *Ranmuthuduwa*, Serendib produced three more Sinhala movies, *Getawarayo* and *Sorungeth Soru* with Gamini in the lead and *Sarawita*. Following this Serendib wound up after reportedly falling out with Gamini. Had the company remained intact and produced more Sinhala films the local cinema would certainly have witnessed more high quality watershed movies that would have gone on to enrich the cinema industry as a whole. Alas, only three persons connected to *Ranmuthuduwa* are alive today, Jeevaranee, Hector Ekanayake who played the villain Renga and Nanda Malini who sang that still popular playback song *Galana*



Gamin and Jeevarani played lead roles in *Ranmuthuduwa* film.



*Gangaki* with Narada Dissasekera who also went on to render *Pipi Pipee* for Gamini which was on everybody's lips at the time. *Ranmuthuduwa* had a second rerun in a brand new print screened at a well-known theatre in Colombo that at one time exclusively catered to only English film audiences, in 1978, to packed houses for nearly six months running. The thirst for the viewing of *Ranmuthuduwa* was so great it was said the film reels and copies became

exhausted in double quick time with no replacements available. However it was recently reported that the film was still available at London's Colour Lab studio and it is now left to the State, a generous citizen or a Sinhala film buff with the necessary means to afford the opportunity for the present day youth and all film fans to once again enjoy viewing the grounding breaking cinematic creation in the country's 75-year-old movie history.