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The Ceylon National Dancers

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Message

Nittawala Mulyakdessalage Guneya and his troupe are well-known dancers, who are skilled in various traditional Ceylon dance forms.

I know they go to a land, the U. S. S. R., famous for ballet, dance and song. For this reason, I am sure, the peoples of the Soviet will welcome our dancers, and be interested in their performances.

Our dancers come to you as Ambassadors of Goodwill, and they have my blessings.

S. W. R. D. BANDARANAIKE,
Prime Minister, Ceylon.

Colombo, 12th July, 1957.

THE CEYLON NATIONAL DANCERS

(Dancing Ambassadors)

Presents

a

Programme

of

CEREMONIAL
PURE TRADITIONAL, RITUAL, CLASSICAL DANCES OF CEYLON

BY

NITTAWALA MULYAKDESSALAGE GUNEYA

AND

HIS NATIONAL DANCERS

OF

THE NITTAWALA SCHOOL OF NATIONAL DANCING

36/8, NITTAWALA

KANDY—CEYLON

1957.

N. M. GUNEYA ..	(Kandyan Dancer) ..	Leader
N. M. SOMADASA	,,	
N. M. AMARAWATHIE	,,	
T. U. JAYATURA	,,	
S. V. G. POOLA	,,	Drummer
K. S. FERNANDO ..		Mask & Fire Dancer
M. H. PANTIS		Fire Dancer & Drummer
WILLIAM PERERA		Musician
D. A. LIYANAGE		Stage Manager

DIRECTED BY :

NOEYAL PEIRIS

MANAGER OF THE TROUPE

&

LEADER OF THE CULTURAL DELEGATION

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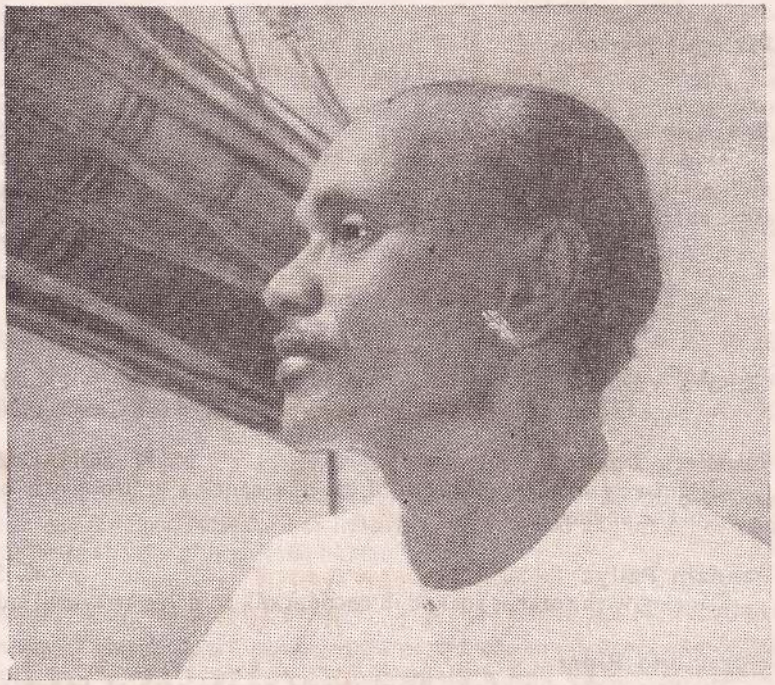

Photographed for the SUNDAY TIMES by NIHAL FERNANDO

Dancing Ambassador

AT a time when Kandyan dancing is being "streamlined" almost out of existence, the school that Nittawala Guneya has established in his village—the undisputed home of the classical tradition—is the only guarantee that this incredibly strenuous and disciplined art will survive in its purest form. For Guneya comes of an ancient stock of perahera dancers and began learning his basic technique at the age of twelve from his father. Without departing one iota from the rigid conventions of his immemorial art, he achieved a mastery that led reputable critics abroad to name him as one of the world's great solo dancers of our age.

Although he is over 50 years old today, he is still the supreme stylist in the Kandyan technique, with a grace and precision of movement that transforms him from the mild-mannered farmer that he is into a god-like figure on the stage.

Within the last seven years, Guneya has led his troupe of dancers with sensational success in India, Germany, Belgium and Holland, earning the right to be called our best unofficial ambassador.

Lovers of Kandyan dancing will rejoice to hear that one of Guneya's sons shows remarkable promise as a dancer. He has only to follow in his father's footsteps to become a great artiste.

PROG

1. **Sabda Pooja—Ritual Ceremony.**
   Sound of the Conch shell, Horanewa, Daula, Thammattama, Bera, Magul-Yakbera Thalampota, songs and offerings to Lord Buddha.

2. **Mangala Netuma** ... ... N. M. AMARAWATHI
   A Dance. The blessings of the Devas are invoked.

3. **Waddiga Patuna** ... ... K. SUDERIS FERNANDO
   How a Brahamin religious teacher came from the Waddiga Desa to Ceylon.

4. **Bo-Leaf Dance** ... ... N. M. GUNEYA, N. M. SOMADASA, T. U. JAYATURA
   The Life of a Bo-leaf, how it withers and falls; and its end. The Sacred Bo-Tree reminds Buddhists of the Enlightenment of Lord Buddha.

5. **Gahaka Vannama** ... ... N. M. AMARAWATHIE
   A dance depicting the sound and reverberation of the Conch shell.

6. **Pantheru Dance** ... ... N. M. SOMADASA, T. U. JAYATURA
   Originating from the custom of dancers dancing in front of a battle array in defiance of the enemy.

7. **Pandam Paliya** ... ... K. SUDERIS FERNANDO
   Dancing with torches soaked in coconut oil, to drive away evil spirits.

8. **Horse and Rider** ... ... N. M. GUNEYA
   His first steps out of the Royal World on the path of Enlightenment were taken by Prince Siddartha on his horse, *Kantaka*. The last exercise of his imperious earthly power in summoning his Royal mount, and the first shadow of His divine authority as a Buddha, appear as a natural development in this dance.

9. **Death Flight of the Butterflies** ... N. M. GUNEYA, N. M. SOMADASA, T. U. JAYATURA
   Myriads of butterflies compress their brilliant lives into a few short hours. Their loves ; their mass flights and the brief moments of rest, while they sip the nectar of the flowers, carry them from the luxuriant gardens by the sea through the forests to the bare heights of Samanalakande (Adam's Peak) where they dash themselves to death against the mountain sides in ecstasy at their arrival, at the feet of Lord Buddha.

10. **Raksha Netuma** ... ... K. SUDERIS FERNANDO
    A dance with a Raksha; or a mask dance. These dances are performed to drive away the evil influences of devils from people when they are possessed.

11. **Uddekki** ... ... N. M. SOMADASA, T. U. JAYATURA
    Dance with small drums like an hour glass. Magic rhythms are played.

INTERVAL

THESE DANCERS REPRESENTED CEYLON IN THE 1955 INT

RAMME

12. Harvest Dance

Dance to depict the work on rice fields. The reaping and collecting of paddy and the placing on their heads of the sheaves, singing as they leave the fields.

13. Double Drum and Assembly ... ... S. V. G. POOLA

The double drum is used to call the people to weddings, funerals, and meetings—in processions, and all other ceremonial occasions. It shows an astonishing development of complex rhythms, which were at one time a language of their own.

14. Kalagedi Netuma ... ... N. M. AMARAWATHIE

A dance with small pots held in the hands, formerly danced by women walking to and fro on a tight rope in the courtyard of the Royal Palace to entertain King and Courtiers.

15. Daha Ata Sanniya ... ... M. H. PANTIS & K. S. FERNANDO

There are 18 devils that overpower people; and this dance shows a few of the remedial measures taken to appease these evil spirits.

16. Udara Wannama ... ... N. M. GUNEYA

A survival of the courtly function of the Kandyan Dancers. The Royal manner is drawn in action neither in caricature nor in flattery, but rather as a model of etiquette; and a reminder of the King's essential humanity.

17. Gajagaa Vannama or Elephant Dance ... N. M. AMARAWATHI

Many orders of elephants are observed here, the ceremonial servants of the King and the Temple, the forest worker and the untamed wild wanderer of the wild jungle. His majestic pace, his adaptable trunk and ears, his bathing, eating and drinking are all faithfully recorded.

18. Swans ... ... N. M. GUNEYA, N. M. SOMADASA, T. U. JAYATURA

The dazzling majesty of these great, birds in flight, afloat, and which in their lives from one transition to another have inspired.

19. Gini Sisil or Fire Dance ... ... M. H. PANTIS & K. S. FERNANDO

Dancing with fire torches. This shows the power over fire with charms. No trace of any burning on body or in mouth is seen.

20. Khomba Kankariya or Ves Netuma N. M. GUNEYA, N. M. SOMADASA, T. U. JAYATURA

Originally this dance formed the background to the ritual of sacrifice. No female was allowed to see this and the dancers were screened on all sides from the moment they put on their Ves—the head dress which gave the popular name to the dance. When an aspirant has learned the ritual he is examined by his teacher and another senior dancer. If he passes their tests he receives the " Ves " at a solemn investiture in the temple. The full performance may take over 15 hours and a single dancer can go on for one hour or more without a break. What is presented here is but a brief impression to suggest the essential symbolism of the dance. It is only within living memory that the " Ves " has been danced in public.

TERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL IN BERLIN AND TOURED EUROPE

THE NATIONAL DANCES OF CEYLON

THE historical record of the Sinhalese, the *Mahavamsa*, tells us that the Aryan Prince Vijaya listened to music on the day he landed on the shores of Sri Lanka in 600 B.C. Since then the songs and dances of Ceylon have persisted in spite of foreign invasions and internal unrest. The purest form of Sinhalese dancing is found in the ceremonial dances associated with religious and public festivals. This form of dancing, commonly known as Kandyan Dancing, is vigorous and virile. It is a synchronization of movement, words, sound and emotions. The movement is an open one, particularly masculine, and keeps time with the incantations and invocations of the deities or of great men ; or of birds, beasts and reptiles.

The art of music was considered incomplete without the three elements of dancing, singing and the playing of musical instruments. Percussion instruments take a predominant place amongst the variety of musical instruments used. The art of drumming is, therefore, highly developed and is taught through a system of mneomonics, that is, spoken sounds of syllables which are imitated by the hand and fingers on the drum. Of the wind instruments, the horaneva (oboe, large and small), vies for equal importance with the drums. Metal percussion instruments such as the pantheru, (brass tambourine), are used to accompany the dance.

The men who will dance and sing today are the best exponents of their art, and, as such, according to the judgment of Pavlova, Ruth St. Denis and Uday Shankar, among the best male dancers to be found anywhere in the world.

Kandyan Dancing dates back to pre-Buddhist times, which makes it at least 2,500 years old, It is historically a hereditary profession, practised by families of the present exponents for over 1,000 years. The original families were presented with lands in perpetuity by the Sinhalese Kings who first sponsored the Perahera on condition that each generation should train its males in the traditional dance and ritual observed at this annual procession, when the Relics of the Lord Buddha are carried in procession around the Lake at Kandy in an unforgettable scence splendour which has not altered since first it began.

The Kandyan Dancers have, therefore, been land-owning peasants with a repertoire of folk dances second to none in the world. The life of the village and the surrounding jungle has been their fundamental source of inspiration and material for interpretation. From this background comes a vigour and realism which can seldom be seen on a stage. The present origin is also reflected in the simplicity of their music—a single drum provides all the accompaniment that is needed but with rhythms of an astonishing variety.

The analytical critic will next observe the kingly flavour of the performance, a formality and magnificence which could only be maintained by those who had for generations to entertain at Court. This is reflected in the ornate dresses and more subtly in the themes of some of the dances which show how these official performers were used not only to flatter and amuse the King but also to communicate royal wishes to the people. It is believed that this use of dancing and mime as a technique of persuasion and propaganda is unique.

In 1946 we decided to revive our National Dances, traditional and classical, which had been forgotten completely. A party of thirty dancers was chosen after a great deal of scouting, and weekly shows were arranged at Nittawela, the House of Guneya. They were then brought down to Colombo in 1947 and given regular rehearsals. During this time the leader of this group, Nittawala Mulyakdessalage Guneya danced two new Vannams created in the pure traditional Kandyan technique, namely, the Bo-leaf Vannam and the Butterfly Vannam. The dance of the Swans was also recreated from unknown antiquity.

In 1948 they travelled all over Ceylon dancing in many schools and showing their art which was fast developing. In 1949 they did an All-India tour for six months. This was the first organised tour out of the Island and created history. In Calcutta they danced before Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, and before the Governor of West Bengal. They danced at Gaya and Buddha Gaya ; paying their respects to Lord Buddha by dancing at the very place he attained Buddhahood. They danced in Benares and Sarnath. In Bombay the troupe was known as Dancing Ambassadors owing to the many Cultural shows given by them. On their way home they danced in Madras and were featured in the first Sinhalese film where Kandyan Dancing was shown. They were and still are " The Dancing Ambassadors."

SOME PRESS OPINIONS

The Ballet critic of the " Statesman," New Delhi, writes :

" It is especially in the matter of foot work that Indian dancers could learn a great deal from these Ceylonese Colleagues, as well as in the compact and finished composition of their numbers. I found the Udara Vannama dance the most entrancing of all. This simple and fascinating dance shows " how the King walks in a kingly manner "; and it is a document of the most wonderful folk imagination, resembling some Russian Folk Dances. But how about a delightful dance depicting nothing else but how the sound of a conch shell walks the air ? Could imagination soar higher ? There, in that fact, lies the secret of the whole art of these Kandyan Dancers. Kandyan Dancing is typically Ceylonese and of its type is perhaps unique in the world."

The Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, (University of Calcutta), writes :

" The Kandyan Dances are as pure and fresh as flowers. They have dignity and virtuosity of traditional art. They are moved by the spirit and enchant. Music and dance in them are an incomparable unit. The costumes are flawless in their simplicity and grandeur. What culture and power in their discreet use of colour. What wisdom in the lines of their white garments as they accompany the movements. The Kandyan Dances are amongst the few unadulterated forms of traditional dance in the East. They are, moreover, amongst the very few forms of art, in the world today which are perfect."

Berlin, Germany

" The Sinhalese Temple Dancers from the East, received twenty curtain calls on their first show. They gave twenty-eight performances in this city and a cultural film of the dance was made.

Belgium

" The dances of your people are more interesting than the dances given by Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal. You have more movement. It is vivid and full of life. Shankar and Gopal, being beautiful dancers, are too static, too calm in their movements."

Rotterdam, Holland

" The Sinhalese Dances have not much to do with Indian Dances. They are active and energetic, which always find their height in technical clever whirled dances who proceed from ecstasy . . . These Sinhalese Dancers gave a performance worth going a

long way to see . . . By the nearly endless staying powers, one is charmed from the first to the last by the rich and well groomed costumes. The music is accompanied by trumpet and drums. The rhythms created by these drummers are astounding.

" It was an art of dancing of the most cultivated power and gracefulness worthy of being seen over and over again. Guneya and his dancers left behind them a deep impression of the exotic world they hail from, of which we shall by their performance keep at least the most beautiful memories and expectations."

IN THIS TROUPE FATHER, SON AND DAUGHTER PERFORM.

N. M. AMARAWATHIE, DAUGHTER OF GUNEYA

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