



# When angels only pretend

The emergence of a cinema of red apple, wine and blood: Will this be the revival we have been waiting for?

By DINIDU KARUNANAYAKE

With his record-holding low-budget feature *El Mariachi*, Robert Rodriguez made history in 1992 as an ambitious filmmaker of 24. With a sum of only US\$ 7,000 in hand, he proved the possibility of making a box-office hit which inspired a whole generation of successive emerging filmmakers. Unfortunately, Rodriguez did not fuel the flame he ignited, as he was welcomed to the Hollywood high-budget film industry. However, emulating the dream realised by Rodriguez, a young filmmaker duo is ready to venture on an unprecedented mission in the Sri Lankan cinema. *The Nation* talks to Chinthana Dharmadasa and Udaya Dharmawardhana about their low-budget debut feature *How I Wonder What You Are* which is going to be released in the first week of May.

This will be an unprecedented moment in the annals of Sri Lankan cinema. On one hand, this is going to be the first time two directors collaborate in a single major production. On the other hand, this will be the inauguration of 'the first independent Sri Lankan cinema' which is at loggerheads with the mainstream 'privileged' filmmaking tradition. While unleashing an alternative filmmaking convention, the director duo is ready to prove their potential to illustrate the dark and impenetrable complexities of modern, urbanised human life through a low-budget film. Undeniably, this will be a lethal blow on the current 'deadly' tradition of cheap comedies which are cheap in terms of their production cost as well as quality. Inspired by the works by Wong Kar Wai (an internationally renowned Hong Kong director) and *Cold Play* (a British alternative rock band), Chinthana and Udaya are determined to paint a story of red apple, wine and blood on the fabric of a human life in a state of a spiritual death. Having formed

'The April 9 Movement' upon the concept "when cinema becomes you," the two directors started nurturing their own traumatic experiences which are of course tainted with 'red apple, wine and blood' on a script. First Independent Cinema in Sri Lanka. Speaking of their journey of the low-budget filmmaking tradition which is the foremost step towards realising an 'independent cinema', the duo is highly critical of the existent 'mainstream' cinema conventions in Sri Lanka. In their opinion, it is the "privileged cinema" which forthwith annihilates the emergence of new filmmakers with no capital. There is no such thing called "a cinema industry" in Sri Lanka, they say, for it might not be impossible for an ambitious filmmaker to realise his hopes otherwise. There are no networks, formal or informal within the so-called Sri Lankan film industry, which are essential for the progress and survival of the industry.

The gross average budget of a film is Rs.10 million. In confrontation with the seemingly impossible challenge of raising such a huge amount, the duo decided to not adhere to their 'celebrity dream'. "We didn't have the keys to unlock the doors of that privileged space. So, we had to think of alternative ways for our cinematic expressions. The best way possible was to deconstruct the stereotypical format. We had to plan our project from the level of the script in keeping with the available resources. So, we opted for the DV technology. We had to make use of available locations, and the limited equipment within our access. We made use of the natural light in natural environments. This is a one-location film, and therefore, we had to make it visually poetic as much as possible to make it watchable. Even track dollies were used and everything was filmed with the hand-held camera. However, it

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Udaya Dharmawardhana

Chinthana Dharmadasa (Pix by Rukshan Abeywansa)

stream screening convention because it allows no flat form for the creators to be actively engaged with the audience. Therefore, they intend to go into the audiences in various communities around the country, and thereby to receive their original feedback, as well as to be networked with like-minded audience members. Undeniably, in my opinion, this move will be a groundbreaking step towards building up a cinema culture in Sri Lanka, the absence of which is the root cause of the current deadly situation.

The film will be screened in Colombo for the public in the first week of May. It features Prasanna Mahagama and Poornima Mohandiram in the lead roles, while W. Jayasiri, and Mahendra Perera in cameo roles. The music is composed by Jayanti Dharmawardhana while the theme song is by Indrachapa Liyanage.

**Fallen angels?** In 2008, the two directors collaborated in making the music video for the song *Aadare* by the Super Star Singer Sanka Dineth. Inspired by Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City*, the video featured two 'fallen angels' (in a literal sense, because the two lovers fall from a high-rise building to become angels) and this was a landmark in the Sri Lankan music video tradition in terms of narrative and conceptual treatment.

The obsession with fallen an-



gels is extended by *How I Wonder What You Are* and as its tagline says: "Angels don't hear, but they pretend." The story of the film is woven around a guy who is yearning for connectivity, or more precisely, he is looking forward to the arrival of 'an angel'. Eventually, an angel arrives with celebration, but unfortunately, she is not strong enough to keep the celebration alive.

Thus, the film will analyse the intricacies of modern life which are afflicted with absences, and thwarted, unrequited, unmet human desires. Defying the conventional crude depiction of harsh realities, the film will ro-

## The directors

**Udaya Dharmawardhana**  
Having studied photography under Lal Hegoda, and later, film-directing under Prasanna Withanage, Udaya studied cinema in India. He is one of the most prominent local music video directors at present. Currently, he is directing his second film *Les Papillons Noirs*, a French-Sri Lankan production.

**Chinthana Dharmadasa**  
A graduate of the Peradeniya University, Chinthana began his career as a film critic and script writer. He also studied cinema under Prasanna Withanage. His first short film *Afterwards, He Fell Sleep* won him a one-year scholarship of filmmaking at highly reputed Lodz Film School, Poland. He is also the co-script writer of *Alone in a Valley* by Ecodice Keerthisena which is in post-production at the moment.



## The Picture of Dorian Gray

The Classic Oscar Wilde story's latest incarnation on film

By PETER MARSHALL

The only novel Oscar Wilde ever penned became a classic almost on publication back in 1890. Over the years it has been adapted to film numerous times. This latest adaptation is by Director Oliver Parker and features a star-studded cast, including an Oscar nominated turn by Colin Firth.

The timeless retelling of what is essentially a Faustian tale of a man who sells his soul to the devil only to wish he could buy it back, stars Colin Firth, Ben Barnes in the title role and Basil Hallward.

The film is set in Victorian England where Firth plays the devil's advocate to Dorian Gray's pleasant, well-mannered and handsome young man. Slowly Firth, as Lord Henry, begins to work on his subject, persuading him that a life of libertine vice is far preferable to the 'dull' alternative of goodness and virtue. The only two things worth having, he proclaims, are youth and beauty. Soon Gray is partaking in heavy drinking and vacating broths, despite being engaged to a young lady at the time.

Meanwhile, Dorian's friend Basil Hallward, an artist, paints a portrait of the handsome young man, a portrait that all Dorian's friends agree is a perfect likeness. The crux of the story is that after an off-the-cuff comment about throwing away his soul for pleasure, as Dorian's spirit becomes more and more corrupted and he grows in his lifestyle, it is the painting that represents the corruption of his soul and the decomposition of his spirit, while he is unaffected by his actions, even to the point of his acting out his life.

Perhaps Dorian's greatest moral outrage, apart from a party when he seduces a young girl and then her mother some months later is when he violently kills Basil after the artist realises the truth of what is happening, then dumps his dismembered corpse in the River Thames, desperate to keep his secret.

It is years later, when Dorian's old acquaintances have all aged but Dorian of course has not aged at all, that he falls in love with Lord Henry's daughter Emily Wotton, played well by Rebecca Hall. Lord Henry, a man who may have talked like a libertine but who lacked the courage to follow his convictions is now horrified that the monster he's created has desires for his child.

The performances are solid enough though the main failing of the film is the fact that the morale of the tale is all too obvious, that unbridled hedonistic excess eventually brings about the revellers downfall and that this rendition doesn't offer enough of a new direction to add anything that the audience doesn't expect. On the plus side, the special effects are refreshing in the economy of their use; audiences have grown so used to films being driven solely by the quality of the CGI content it will come as a refreshing surprise to have a film that uses its visual wizardry to underpin the film, and not make it the star of the show. A little section of the film does drag a little and whole thing has the feel of a novel that could have been wrapped up adequately in a short story.

Not as good as the classic novel, but still an exciting piece of cinema (none the less) with some adequate performances, and one great one by Colin Firth.

## Sunanda wins 'Best Lyricist' award

At the annual art competition held among employees of the People's Bank, organised by the People's Bank Art Circle, Sunanda Kodagoda of the People's Bank West Zone II won the award for best lyricist for his song, 'Budun wandina ath osawa depa wandimi amme.' He also won a special award for the 'Vinoda Rasanga' publication.



# All that glitters...

By SARASI PARANAMAMANA

Gold has been the symbol of wealth and success throughout history and wearing gold jewellery meant that a person is of status and class in olden times and, in fact the crown of the monarch which signifies sovereignty and supremacy of the state was made out of gold.

However, with changing of times gold jewellery has become an essential item for joyous occasions and Sea Street, being the gold smith's street in Pettah, has become a popular destination for jewellery lovers in Sri Lanka.

In South Asian weddings gold is the most valuable and important asset as the very bond between the couple is signified through golden wedding band and everyone who comes to the occasion expects the bride to be festooned and adorned in gold jewellery.

With the wedding season coming ahead in the month of May many people are looking forward to purchase gold jewellery and the Sea Street becomes a busy hustling place with the growing demand. Hence, *The Nation* visited Sea Street to find out about this glitzy trade.

When walking along the Sea Street passing boutique like jewellery stores and grand showrooms, one can see the busy businessmen and shoppers wandering about going from store to store to get the best deal. Mostly, these shoppers who admire the magnificent works of art under the brightly lit fluorescent lights are the ladies who have come to purchase jewellery for brides and the salesmen

exhibit the jewellery that are neatly placed in velvet casings with intricate details, showing excellent workmanship.

The art of making gold jewellery has a history in Sri Lanka. According to the traditional system, the goldsmith has to put the gold in a crucible tong in order to melt it. The goldsmiths heat it until the melting point arrives and they pour the melted gold into the ingot mould to get the desired shape and work on the jewellery to draw designs.

However, the process has changed with the development of technology.

Eranda Silva the jewellery designer of Muthukaruppan Chettiyar explained how the latest system of gold



jewellery making works. Now with the new technology the goldsmiths are aware of the melting point in gold and accordingly they heat the gold under the melting temperature of 1945° F. The casting is done by an electronic system and the casting machine pours the melted gold into a wax mould and by the rolling mill or by hammering they get a specific shape to design the jewellery. The new electronic system allows the traders to produce jewellery with lower time consumption, wastage and it gives the jewellery a fine finishing touch. Eranda Silva told us that the gold jewellery is machine cut and the craftsman adds the refined designs by hand to add more quality and

lustre to the jewellery. **Malleable gold** The purest form of gold is 24 carat which means the 24 parts in gold are pure gold without any traces of other metal. Speaking to *The Nation* Eranda Silva said that the most popular one is 22 carat in Sri Lanka. 22 carat gold being 91.3% in purity is popular in jewellery making because intricate designs can be beautifully carved as it is softer and malleable. Even though it is soft, 22 carat gold jewellery does not get damaged quickly and can be worn for years. The softest type would be 24 carat gold and the hardest would be 10 carat gold as it has 41.6 percent of gold and the rest is other

With the onset of the month of May starts the wedding season. With million and one things that go into the preparation for the dream day for most young women, making gold jewellery takes a foremost place. As the purpose of gold jewellery in a marriage ceremony has a traditional significance beyond its purpose of decoration and beauty. The Nation took a walk down Sea Street, Pettah - better known as the gold capital of Colombo

# The life and times of a self-confessed Lankaphile: Part Two

By PETER MARSHALL

Only part of Richard's career was spent in the feature film industry - discussed in the last edition - mostly as a scriptwriter. After becoming disillusioned with features due to tricky and bloated egos as he puts it, he turned to what was actually his favourite form of film-making, the documentary. Before working in features he had, around 1970, attended a British Film Institute course on documentary history. As fate would have it, one of the classics screened was *Song of Ceylon* by Basil Wright, who was present. Richard quizzed him on what it was like to film in Ceylon, unaware that in 18 months time he would be working on the island with Lester James Peiris on the God-King. He says *Song of Ceylon* was the documentary that greatly influenced his perception of the genre: "I have viewed it dozens of times, given talks on it to film students, and written about it extensively," he said.

"I got married to Shamini, the very first news producer at Rupavahini, in 1984 and subsequently she set up a specialist documentary production company. Over a period of 10 years she directed and scripted documentaries to service UN-affiliated organisations, foreign and local NGOs, educational establishments and government departments. One of my favourites is *Dr. R. L. Spiller: Surgeon of the Wilderness*, made in 1987 for Rupavahini. It was then that I got to know Spittle's wonderful daughter, Christine, who unfortunately died recently."

A decade of working in this field was enough for Richard and the third phase of his career was looming. He said he wanted to concentrate on more 'pure' writing - which scripting films and documentaries didn't involve due to the medium's strictures. "I'd wanted to be a 'pure' writer since childhood. In fact at the age of fourteen I won second prize in the Brooke Bond National Travel Scholarships and Educational Awards in England for a short story regarding an anaconda and a Mayan temple. Rather like *Song of Ceylon*, this was another pointer to my future, for years later I wrote an essay, *The Anaconda of Ceylon*, which includes a spurious report of a giant anaconda found on Colombo's outskirts. Published in Scotland in 1768, this fantasy provided the first instance of the name anaconda, later bestowed on several large South American snakes but probably derived from the Sinhala *henakandaya*, the name for a small Sri Lankan species.

"My first commission as an author, in 1988, was a book titled *B.P. de Silva: Royal Jeweller of South-East Asia*, which relates the life of de Silva - from Magalle, Galle - who migrated to Singapore in 1872 and became the leading jeweller in the city. The book also documents the history of the company named after him that is located today in Singapore and Colombo, but which is now more associated with watches than jewellery."

In 1990 Richard was asked to contribute to *Serendib*, the in-flight magazine of what was then Air Lanka, and has been writing for the various editors that have come and gone ever since. Of course, every type of writing requires different methods, different approaches, and he had to learn the nuances of travel writing. This knowledge was of tremendous help when he became editor of the magazine *travelsrilanka* in 2003 at its inception, as he had a team of enthusiastic scribes who had little experience in right writing and needed to be quickly steeped in the right direction. The magazine ceased publication in late 2008 due to financial difficulties.

Apart from being Editor he also wrote some 150 articles in five years, which exhausted the Editor, and possible the subject matter alike. However, Richard's *travelsrilanka* seems to have rekindled of late and he told me of his interest in editing a similar publication in the future, when tourism flourishes. Fortunately Deep Mudadeniya, Managing Director of the Sri Lanka Tourist Promotion Bureau, recognised the strengths of the magazine and now the text of all 59 issues of *travelsrilanka* is available on the Sri Lanka Tourism website.

In the mid-90s Richard decided that he wanted to become a regular feature contributor to a newspaper to showcase his work for a Sri Lankan readership and decided on *The Sunday Times*. "Who knows," he said to me with a smile, "today I may have chosen *The Nation*." Since 1996 he has bombarded the resilient Features Editor with articles on virtually every Sri Lankan subject imaginable.

From 1999 to 2005 he gained valuable experience in reviewing books - particularly those with a Sri Lanka association - for the prestigious *Times*



*Higher Education Supplement* in London. Books such as Christopher Onstad's *Wood in Ceylon*, Yasmine Cooner's analysis of *The Village in the Jungle*, John Falconer and Ismeth Raheem's *Regeneration: A Reappraisal of Photography in Ceylon, 1850-1900*, T.J. McConnell's *The Forest Farms of Kandy and Other Gardens of Complete Design*, and James L.A. Webb's *Tropical Pioneers: Human Agency and Ecological Change in the Highlands of Sri Lanka, 1800-1900*.

In 2000 the Editor of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* forwarded to Richard an appeal from the Oxford English Dictionary for volunteers to assist with the revision of the second edition that would result in the third edition. He answered the call from Colombo with the request readily accepted, that he restrict his research to words of Sri Lankan origin or association - Sri Lankan English. In 2001 and 2002 he read many descriptive books and novels about Sri Lanka from Robert Knox's *An Historical Relation of*

*Ceylon* to Michael Ondaatje's *Ani's Ghost*, searching for references to the 90-odd Sri Lankan English words in the Oxford English Dictionary. His task was to provide a greater range of illustrative quotations for the dictionary, suggest revision of definitions, and discover antedating quotations that proved words were first used prior to the date given in the dictionary. Ten years later he is still involved - in fact the work is projected to last 35 years, so he'll need to pass the baton to someone else, sometime!

It was Robert Knox, of course, who was the originator of Sri Lankan English. Twenty-odd words introduced to the English language by him appear in the dictionary, the most recognised universally being *Buddha*, *pooja* and *rattan*. Richard Boyle's research resulted in the book - although it's more of a glossary - called *Knox's Words: A Study of the words of Sri Lankan origin or association first used in English literature by Robert Knox and recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary*. It was published in 2004.

Since the mid-1990s he worked towards the compilation of a themed collection of previously published articles, revised and expanded. It took a long time, but he has done it. The book is *An Historical Relation of Ceylon* to Michael Ondaatje's *Ani's Ghost*, searching for references to the 90-odd Sri Lankan English words in the Oxford English Dictionary. His task was to provide a greater range of illustrative quotations for the dictionary, suggest revision of definitions, and discover antedating quotations that proved words were first used prior to the date given in the dictionary. Ten years later he is still involved - in fact the work is projected to last 35 years, so he'll need to pass the baton to someone else, sometime!

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