"Gender and Nationalism, War, Violence, and the Place of Grief and Compassion: The Films of Prasanna Vithanage" - February 8-12, 2006

A series of films, roundtable discussions with Prasanna Vithanage and Robert Crusz, and a workshop.

The Films of Prasanna Vithanage:

ICE ON FIRE (Sisila Gini Gani)
(35mm / B&W / 90 min. / 1992)
Director: Prasanna Vithanage
Producer & Scriptwriter: Sanath Gunatileke
Camera: Suminda Weerasinghe
Editor: Elmo Halliday

Synopsis:

Harris Makalanda is a wealthy aristocrat and well known lawyer. He is also a married man. One day he meets a beautiful girl, Annette, at a party. He meets her again when she hitches a ride with him during a heavy rain storm. He tells her she can change her clothes in one of his bungalows. This leads to a sexual encounter between them. She tells him that she is of Sri Lankan Burgher ethnicity, that she shuns marriage which imprisons people, and that she goes to bed with anyone she likes. As their liaison grows, he indicates that she can, if she likes, come and live in his bungalow. Annette renovates the neglected house tastefully and tells Harris that, for the first time in her life, she has begun to understand what it is like to have a husband and a house of her own. Meanwhile, Harris is contesting the municipal elections. His schedule leaves him no time for Annette but she continues to relish his company. The only obstacle in Annette's path to possessing Harris, completely
and permanently, is Harris’ little boy. She tries to establish a rapport with him. Once when the child goes on a picnic with his school friends, Annette succeeds in separating him from the other under the cover of a sudden mist. Frightened, the child runs away. She sees him heading for the abyss but as hard as she tries, she is unable to save him. After a prolonged search, the police and the air force recover the child's body, by which time Annette, being the prime suspect, is in police custody.

**DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL (Anantha Rathriya)**
(35mm / Colour / 82 min. / 1996)
Writer & Director: Prasanna Vithanage
Producer: Damayanthi Fonseka
Camera: M. D. Mahindapala
Editor: Lal Piyasena
Cast: Swarna Mallawaarachchi, Ravindra Randeniya, Tony Ranasinghe,
Yashoda Wimalaratne, Kitsiri Aponso, Hemasiri Liyanage.

Synopsis:

SUWISAL is a successful, middle-aged company director, but he has a melancholic personality and is very forgetful. His beautiful young fiancée finds herself having to remind him of daily appointments, special occasions and routine things. Suwisal is a reluctant husband-to-be. He has casual relationships with other women and appears to be troubled by something deep in his psyche – something he tries to forget in order to maintain emotional stability. This stability is suddenly upset when he is called to serve on a jury at a murder trial. The defendant is a young sex-worker accused of murdering a client. Suwisal recognizes her as PIYUM, the young servant from his aunt's house, whom he knew twenty five years ago. He had a sexual encounter with her and made her pregnant, but refused to see her again and help her through her difficulties. Suwisal in not sure if Piyum
recognizes him. She says nothing. He is advised to remain in the jury and he votes with the majority to find her guilty as charged. She is sentenced to ten years imprisonment. But we see that it is Suwisal who has been sentenced to a lifetime of guilt, remorse and despair. He now feels he should share some responsibility for the life Piyum was forced to lead. He tries to lodge an appeal on her behalf but he is advised against this because of the adverse consequences if his past becomes public knowledge. Suwisal gets angry. Nobody seems to understand his need to rectify the wrongdoing of twenty five years ago. He is accused of acting like a child, and of only wanting to satisfy his conscience because he can never change what he did. But Suwisal persists. He visits Piyum in prison and offers her help. Did Piyum recognize him at the trail? Does she accept his help? Is Suwisal released from his lifetime of torment? We are given the answer in the last few frames of the film

WALLS WITHIN (Pawuru Wallalu)
(35 mm / Colour / 85 min. / 1997)
Director: Prasanna Vithanage
Producer: Nita Fernando
Camera: Suminda Weerasinghe
Editor: Lal Piyasena
Cast: Nita Fernando, Tony Ranasinghe, Sangeetha Weeraratne, Roger Seneviratne, Mahendra Perera, Damayanthi Fonseka.

Synopsis:

With the money she earns making clothes day and night on a battered sewing machine, Violet manages to provide a living for herself and her two daughters in their small home inside the old fortress of the southern port city of Galle. Violet is faithful to the behaviour expected of a single mother in this traditional, post-colonial, Roman Catholic community of the 1960's. Her husband, a boorish pompous
man, who left her when the children were very young, visits now and again to see his daughters and to gloatingly remind Violet that he is still her lawfully wedded spouse. The eldest married daughter returns home with her husband to give birth to Violet's first grandchild. The younger daughter is attracted to a dashing James Dean-like young man on a motorcycle and Violet agrees to see him and his family to arrange a marriage. But these two happy milestones in her life are overtaken by the arrival one dark night of a message from Violet's first and only love, Victor. He has returned to port after twenty five years of sailing around the world as a merchant seaman. He is unwell and needs special treatment. Violet introduces Victor to her family as a distant relative and takes him into her house to provide him with the care he desperately needs. As he recovers from his illness, their love is rekindled. The passions kept hidden for so long, resurface, and the relationship is noticed with disapproval by family and friends. Violet gets pregnant and is forced to induce a miscarriage. Her younger daughter's engagement is called off. Unable or unwilling to play the guilt-laden role expected of her by an uncompromising and unforgiving society, Violet decides to follow her heart and live 'happily ever after' with Victor. She finally finds this happiness. But some call it insanity.

(Films, contin’d on next page)
DEATH ON A FULL MOON DAY (Purahanda Kaluwara)
(35 mm / Colour / 75 min. / 1997)
Writer & Director: Prasanna Vithanage
Producers: Sota Yamamoto / Makota Ueda / Damayanthi Fonseka
Camera: M. D. Mahindapala
Editor: A. Sreekar Prasad
Cast: Joe Abeywickrama, Priyanka Samaraweera, Linton Semage, Mahendra Perera, Nayana Hettiarachchi.

Synopsis:

The Land is stricken by drought and ethnic conflict. The lake on the edge of the jungle is almost dry and a few miles away the sons of the rural poor are dying on the front lines of a bitter civil war. As he collects water from what is left in the lake, Wannihami, the blind old man, knows the rains will come soon. A few days later, on the Buddhist holy day of the full moon, his soldier son's body is returned by the Army in a sealed coffin. The day the rains fall is the day Bandara is buried. Wannihami refuses to sign the papers which will entitle the family to the Government's compensation payment for his son's death in action. Sunanda, the younger daughter, silently accepts her father's decision and finds a job in a garment factory. But her boyfriend Somay, her elder married sister Yamuna and the Local Government Officer pressure Wannihami to sign the papers. The customary alms-giving three months after Bandara's death is fast approaching and money has to be found to pay for the food. Somay earns a pittance as a brickmaker. He too feels, like Bandara once did, that the only way to earn a decent living is to join the Army. The local Buddhist monk wants to construct a memorial in the name of the valiant son of the soil who gave his life for his country. Faced with this pressure from people blinded by desperate poverty, day to day hardships and the empty glories of being nothing more
than canon fodder, Wannihami retains the clarity of vision which gives him the wisdom that reaches far beyond what the eye can see. He picks up the mammoty to dig up and open his son's sealed coffin. By doing this he knows he will invalidate the compensation claim, but his greater purpose is to believe that the war cannot kill his son.

**AUGUST SUN (Iramadiyama)**
(35mm / Colour / 108 min. )
Director: Prasanna Vithanage
Script: Priyath Liyanage
Producers: Soma Edirisinghe
Camera: M. D. Mahindapala
Editor: A. Sreekar Prasad
Cast: Peter D’Almeida, Nimmi Harasgama, Namal Jayasinghe, Mohammed Rahfiulla, Nadi Kammallaweera, A. A. Mansoor.

Synopsis:

The film revolves around three narratives, which unfold simultaneously. During two scorching days in August, three different groups of people face different experiences due to circumstances beyond their control. These are ordinary people thrown into the heat of war. The experiences they encounter may not be directly related to the conflict. These events, like the weather, govern their lives. Yet they have to continue beyond these encounters to exist in a society that is traumatized and disturbed by nearly twenty years of civil war between the majority Sinhala government forces and the rebel movement from the minority Tamil community who are fighting for autonomy and self-determination. An eleven year old Muslim boy, Arfath, is struggling to keep his companion and friend, a dog, while the family are forced out of their home by the rebels. Chamari, a young woman, is looking for her husband who is a soldier missing in action. A young soldier Duminda walks into a brothel to find his sister
among the working girls. The main action of the film takes place in Sri Lanka's northern territories, parts of which are controlled by the Tamil rebels who have created a de-facto separate state. These stories are about people who are struggling to hold on to their hopes and dreams while being swept up by the torrents of war. The film is about their quest for life.
About the Film-maker Prasanna Vithanage: Director’s Profile


In 1992, he directed his first film "Sisila Gini Gani" (Ice on Fire). It won nine OCIC (Sri Lanka) Awards — including Best Director, Best Actor and Best Actress.

In 1996, his second feature "Anantha Rathriya" (Dark Night of the Soul), which he wrote and directed, participated in several international film festivals and won a Jury's Special Mention at the First Pusan International Film festival. The film also won all the main awards at the 1996 Sri Lanka Film Critics Forum Awards (affiliated to FIPRESCI), including awards for Most Outstanding Film, Best Director and Best Scriptwriter.

"Pawuru Walalu" (Walls Within), his third feature, in 1997 won three awards at the Amiens International Film Festival. It also won ten out of eleven awards, including Best Picture and Best Director, at the Sri Lanka Film Critics Forum Awards. The lead actress, Nita Fernando received the Best Actress award at the Singapore International Film Festival 1998 for her role as Violet in the film.

His fourth feature "Purahanda Kaluwara" (Death on a Full Moon Day) of the same year, 1997, which he wrote and directed, won the Grand Prix at the Amiens Film Festival. Joe Abeywickrama received the Best Actor Award at the Singapore International Film Festival for his role as Wannihami in the film. Initially banned by the government of Sri Lanka, the film was subsequently released after a long drawn out court case between Vithanage and the State.
"Purahanda Kaluwara" has since become one of the most successful films in Sri Lanka.

His latest film, "Iramadiyama" (August Sun) made in 2003, won the Silver Award for Best Film and the Best Actress award for Nimmi Harasgama at the Las Palmas IFF in Spain in 2004. It also won the FIPRESCI and NETPAC awards at the Singapore IFF of the same year.

Vithanage is currently in pre-production for his next film - a historical drama set in the 19th century British period of Sri Lanka, during the reign of the last King of Kandy. He is also returning to directing for the stage with the commencement of rehearsals for three short plays by Dario Fo. Both film and plays are scheduled for release in 2006.

Additional information about Prasanna Vithanage can be found at www.vithanage.com.

**About Robert Crusz**

Robert Crusz is the Director of the Tulana Media Centre, a center for education in media in Sri Lanka. He is a documentary and fiction film maker with at least five powerful pieces on ethnicity, diaspora, the census, death and war. He is also the chief editor of "Cinesith," Sri Lanka’s premier film journal. He has written extensively on Sri Lankan film, on film, diaspora and race. He has also designed traveling media programs, taking video, audio and photo to villages to engage people in debates and conversation about war and ethnicity, violence and forgiveness.
Schedule of Events

Wednesday Feb 8

Collins Cinema

4.30 pm: Reception with Prasanna Vithanage and Robert Crusz
5.15 pm: Robert Crusz, "Cinema and its place in a time of War"
6.15 pm: Film AUGUST SUN (Iramadiyama)
           (35mm / Colour / 108 min.)
8.00 pm: Discussion

Friday Feb 10

Location TBA

12.30-3.00 pm: Workshop "Bearing Witness: Violence and the Place of Cinema"
               with Prasanna Vithanage and Robert Crusz.
               Pizza will be served at this workshop.
               Download readings for the workshop  (PDF)

Collins Cinema

5.30 pm: Reception
7.00 pm: Film DEATH ON A FULL MOON DAY (Purahanda Kaluwara)
          (35 mm / Colour / 75 min. / 1997)
8.15 pm: Discussion with film-maker Prasanna Vithanage

(Schedule of Events contin’d on next page)
Saturday Feb 11

Collins Cinema

3.00 pm: Film WALLS WITHIN (Pawuru Wallalu)  
(35 mm / Colour / 85 min. / 1997)
5:00-7:00 pm: Dinner with Filmmaker (meanwhile reception at Collins)
7.30 pm: Film AUGUST SUN (Iramadiyama)  
(35mm / Colour / 108 min.)

Sunday Feb 12

Collins Cinema

3.00 pm: Film ICE ON FIRE (Sisila Gini Gani)  
(35mm / B&W / 90 min. / 1992)
5.00 pm: Film DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL (Anantha Rathriya)  
(35mm / Colour / 82 min. / 1996)