

## Well deserved award to a premiere artiste

Recently, the President of Sri Lanka, Her Excellency Chandrika Kumaratunga awarded the "Deshiya Narthanadhari Keerthi Sri" award to Kalasoori Piyasara Shilpadhipathi for his service as a dancer/choreographer in Sri Lanka and abroad. For those of us who are abroad, and directly exposed to his ability and talent to work with foreign artistes, this is a well-deserved award that has been given to a premiere artiste in Sri Lanka.

I came to know Piyasara Shilpadhipathi in 1996, when he and his talented daughter toured the USA, and ever since then, I have had a close relationship with him as a sponsor and a student. When I moved to Ottawa, Canada, a few years ago, there was minimum awareness of the Sri Lankan dance forms here.

At that time, Shilpadhipathi was a regular visitor to California, USA and Mr. Gamini Wijesooriya, who passed away a few years ago, promoted his work. Shilpadhipathi was the visiting lecturer for several universities in California, and trained local artistes, and had several cultural presentations every year in the USA. It is one of those visits in 1999, that I decided to sponsor. Shilpadhipathi to Ottawa, and with the co-sponsorship of Mrs. Laurie Stevens, the Director of the Odyssey Theatre of Ottawa, we conducted a series of workshops for theatre artistes based on the Kolam Theatre connected to the low-country dance form, at the prestigious National Arts Theatre.



Piyasara Shilpadhipathi

All of the participants became enthusiastic and impressed enough to request for more opportunities to study our dance forms in the future. Two years later, the opportunity arose with a funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada, who sponsored the visit of the Piyasara Shilpadhipathi and his student, Prasanna Rupathillake from the Sri Lanka State Dance Troupe.

They became the first dancers to be sponsored by the federal government of Canada, and once again Shilpadhipathi conducted workshops to theatre artistes and drum workshop were so well-received by the participants and his visit and his work among the Canadian artistes was recorded by the TV Ontario and was aired as a segment of 'Studio 2' program. All of the participants admired. Shilpadhipathi and his ability to assess the level of talent and to bring out the skills possessed by the students. Most students expressed a desire to travel to Sri Lanka and further study the art of Kolam theatre and drumming under the guidance of Shilpadhipathi.

He also trained the members of the Sri Lanka Youth Dance Troupe, and we were able to present Shilpadhipathi and Prasanna Rupathillake to the Canadian public in the premiere presentation of "Nirta Ranga", where the Sri Lanka High Commissioner to Canada, Her Excellency Mrs. Geeta de Silva was the Chief Guest, Hon. Mr. Mac Harb MP, was the Guest of Honour and Mr. Peter Stephens, represented the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada.

I am positive that several Sri Lankans from different countries who have been involved in the promotion of the Sri Lankan culture abroad will unanimously agree that the best representative of our dance forms is Piyasara Shilpadhipathi, for several reasons. His ability to uphold our traditions, yet adapt to a foreign culture, his gentle manner of handling any person or situation, his deep and vast knowledge of our dance forms as well as his skills as a choreographer, dancer and a drummer, the simplicity of his lifestyle, give us a great joy to know and to work with him.

I know his name was given to his forefather by an ancient monarch, who appointed him to safeguard our dance forms. Today, Kalasoori Piyasara Shilpadhipathi has taken that duty one step further, and he has taken our dance forms across the seas to many foreign countries and to the hearts of many foreign people, who will in turn value, and I hope, will nourish our dance forms in the future.

All of us, who truly cherish the vanishing traditions of our ancient and rich culture, associated with our dance forms, are exhilarated and extend our warm and heartfelt congratulations to Deshiya Narthandhari Keerthi Sri Kalasoori Piyasara Shilpadhipathi and his talented wife, Kanthi Shilpadhipathi.

- Rukmal Gunasekara, Canada

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