

# "An artist must do only what he believes in"

## An interview with Sri Lankan film director Prasanna Vithanage

30 June 1999

*The following is the first part of an extensive interview with the well-known Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage, whose work Pavuru Valalu (Walls Within) was reviewed on the World Socialist Web Site earlier this year:*

*Vithanage has also directed a film based on Tolstoy's Resurrection (Dark Night of the Soul, 1996). The director's latest work is Pura Handa Kaluwara (Death on a Full Moon Day). The film, a Sri Lankan-Japanese co-production, has received considerable international acclaim, appearing at a number of film festivals in Asia and Europe. It was also screened at the Palm Springs International Film Fest in California in January 1999. The organizers of the Singapore festival, where the film was nominated for two prizes and won one, wrote the following synopsis of Death on a Full Moon Day for their catalogue:*

*"For 13 years in northern Sri Lanka, the Tamils have been at war with government troops for an independent state. The blind Wannihami lives in a village with his daughter Sunanda, while his son Bandara is away fighting as a government soldier. Sunanda's boyfriend considers leaving the village to become a soldier so that he can earn enough money to marry Sunanda. Then one day Bandara arrives home in a coffin."*

*The state-run Sri Lanka Film Corporation has yet to take steps to make Death on a Full Moon Day available to the public, despite the eagerness of many people to see it.*

*Participating in the discussion with Vithanage from the WSWWS were Piyaseeli Wijegunasingha, Varuna Alahakoon and Wije Dias.*

*Piyaseeli Wijegunasingha (PW):* You have often emphasized your preference for the cinema as a medium of artistic expression. Many cinema artists like you, who have had working relationships with the stage, prefer the stage to the cinema. Clearly you do not. It is also well known that you are in the habit of seeing a great many films. What are the reasons behind your immense feeling for the cinema?

*Prasanna Vithanage (PV):* I prefer the cinema as a medium of artistic expression because I see it as a powerful medium for self-expression. I have had connections with the stage in the capacity of a translator of plays and also as a director, but I think the stage is always the playwright's medium of self-expression. If we take one of Shakespeare's plays—say for instance, *Romeo and Juliet*—different stage directors may interpret it in different ways, but at the same time, what all these directors would endeavor to arrive at is the underlying meaning of Shakespeare's own play. Therefore the stage could never become for the stage director a medium of self-expression. The cinema, on the other hand, is always the domain of the director—the reason being, that it is the mind of the film director, which is revealed to us by way of the camera angles, and the camera lenses that he chooses to use. But not all cinema directors—however well known their names—are creators.

What many cinema directors aim at is to relate well—that is, in a manner which could earn most income—stories supplied them by production companies. In my youth I never thought film could be a medium for self-expression. In those days the films carried us into a wonderland. We were mesmerized by the magical capabilities of this particular medium.

Later I came to realize that the best medium to express what I needed to express, was film.

*PW:* As we see, the essence of your film *Pavuru Valalu* (Walls Within) is that, through an objective depiction of the contradiction that exists between an individual's deepest spiritual yearnings and the established social institutions and norms—and by way of carrying this contradiction to the highest point of conflict—it brings the spectator to the realization of the necessity of a revolutionary change of society, the need for the socialist revolution. Sometimes an artist is not aware of the revolutionary implications that are contained in his own creation. Are you aware of the revolutionary essence contained in your film *Pavuru Valalu*?

*PV:* After concluding my fourth film I looked back at all my films and what occurred to me was that there was one theme, which ran through all of them. This theme is the contradiction that exists between the individual and the established social institutions and norms. In *Pavuru Valalu*, in *Purahanda Kaluwara*, and on a more superficial level in my first film also, this theme occurs. The social reality that is uncovered by this theme is that the established social institutions and norms do not permit man to live according to his deep-felt spiritual yearnings, that they obstruct man from obtaining happiness and spiritual fulfillment. Looking back on my films I came to realize that they all contained this theme.

With the intention of pleasing you, if I say now that I arrived at this theme by way of politics, that would be a deception. These established social institutions that obstruct man's attempt to live according to his deep-felt desires are powerful. What I consciously portray in my films is how man and woman struggle with these established institutional forces. In my film *Pavuru Valalu* I portray how Violet—the woman who lives inside Galle Fort and earns her living as a seamstress—becomes oppressed by established social forces and how she struggles to attain freedom.

*PW:* You did not reply to one aspect of my question: are you aware of the fact that your film conveys to the spectator a consciousness of the necessity of the socialist revolution for the individual to attain a life of spiritual fulfillment?

*PV:* Even in my school going days, I had personal connections with leftist politics. I believed in the socialist revolution. In those days, of course I did not have an understanding of the problems and contradictions that are confronted in the development of the socialist revolution. As if to a wonderful dream, I was attracted to it.

Later in my studies about the socialist revolution, I came to realize that there were certain problems and contradictions regarding its development. I came to read books, which enabled me to see the contradictions that led to the degeneration of Soviet Russia into a bureaucratic regime; especially Leon Trotsky's book *The Revolution Betrayed*. I also read Trotsky's autobiography, *My Life*, and Isaac Deutscher's books on Trotsky. Even after coming to know in this manner the problems that exist regarding the socialist revolution—that Soviet Russia and Eastern European countries were degenerated and deformed workers states—my faith in the socialist revolution, the belief that man can attain a spiritually fulfilling life only after the abolition of the system of private property, still exists. What I

want to say here is that—in the manner in which it is stated about artists in David Walsh's pamphlet, *The Aesthetic Component of Socialism*—I am not connected to a definite political movement. I have no understanding of the specific manner in which socialism can be achieved.

*PW*: I would like to ask you a personal question—in relation to a statement you made to the magazine *Cine-Sith* (1998 No. 36). These are your words: “I often live in the past. We all have a nostalgic yearning for a by-gone era. We live with our memories. Such memories and reflections often appear in my films. How our family, during the 1960s—after having dinner, sat on the settee in the living room and conversed and what we conversed; the songs broadcast on the radio at the time. All these had their effect on me when I made *Pavuru Valalu*; *Pavuru Valalu* begins with such a family scene.”

I would like to ask you: how old were you at the time you were speaking of?

*PV*: I was six or seven years old. I was born in 1962. I have an image ingrained in my head of life during those days. At that time the chairs in the living room were kept in a circle. Today all the chairs are placed facing the television because the television holds a prominent place in the household. In those days the radio was switched on, but no one was entirely engrossed in listening. The conversation was carried along various topics and meanwhile we heard the songs too.

I think in creating a film the director must create the situation with its atmosphere and get the spectators involved in it.

*PW*: *Pavuru Valalu* is a film that has a deep and poignant effect on the spectator. At the same time one can see that as a director—rather than portray situations that can have an overpowering emotional impact on the spectator—you have a tendency to portray situations which bring out sharply and realistically the conflict that exist between the individual and the existing social conditions. Is this the result of a deliberate decision regarding artistic portrayal on your part?

*PV*: There are two situations, I seek to avoid in creating a film.

Film directors generally are a set of people alienated from society. In this country too, it is the same. You can see it from the films made here. Each film creates a world that is inherently its own. I reject creating such worlds in my films. These films approach problems in a melodramatic and sentimental manner. I avoid the melodramatic portrayal of situations that can often be seen in Sinhala films.

What I chose to portray in *Pavuru Valalu* are the problems a deeply religious woman faces when she begins to live according to her heart's desires.

When I create a film I never portray problematic situations with the intention of satisfying the spectator or making him sentimental. I only seek the best way to portray how a certain character faces up to a situation. I desire only to be truthful in the portrayal of characters. I never concern myself about satisfying the spectator.

Some who saw *Pavuru Valalu* told me that I should have developed further the conflict between the mother and her two daughters. When I portrayed the relevant situation, I based myself on the understanding that the daughters were not the cause of the problems in which the mother found herself. The mother's problems were spiritual and psychological, and were at the same time social. By my particular manner of presentation, I might lose the interest of a certain section of the audience—but an artist must do only what he believes in.

*PW*: You stated that the film is the director's work of art; but to create a film you need the participation of a great number of artists. In this situation, how do you manage to maintain the desired integral unity of purpose throughout the process of creating the film?

Do you, to begin with, reveal to the other artists your particular spiritual involvement in the specific subject matter and by generating in them also the same passionate involvement, accordingly direct them to maintain the desired unity of purpose? Or else do you, as the necessity arises,

undertake the task of explaining to the other artists what you need in the particular situation and more or less pragmatically take from them what is needed?

If it is the first method that you follow, what possibilities are there for success?

*PV*: The two methods described are extremely clear. Undoubtedly the first method is the healthy one. When one says the film is the director's art—that the film is the director's means of self-expression, what one means is that it is the director's own spiritual situation which is revealed by the camera angles and the camera lenses that a director would choose to use. If we consider this in relation to Violet, then it would be the manner in which the director looks at Violet that would be revealed.

When I do a film, I endeavor to generate the passionate involvement that prevails in me regarding a character or a social situation in my co-artists too, and in that way attempt to reach the desired goal. While primarily remaining the director's own self-expression, the film incorporates a part of the other artists' own spiritual make-up. Sometimes an actress may reveal through her acting something she may not reveal even to her husband, something about human nature. She does not convey it in a personal manner as a favor to me as her director. What happens is that when we create the necessary specific situation, it comes out spontaneously. What is of importance is not that we talk about the dark hidden side of human nature while we are on the set, but to have the ability to open up a pathway into these things. It is through generating my own passionate involvement in the subject matter in the others too that a part of their own spiritual resources can be tapped and incorporated into the film. It would be the director's task to see that his own specific involvement in the subject matter would be maintained uninterruptedly throughout the film.

*PW*: You are highly regarded by some critics as a director capable of activating the best potential of the artists including the technicians who work with you. Your ability to activate the artistic abilities of actors and actresses is specially mentioned. The actors and actresses in *Pavuru Valalu*, including Nita Fernando, Tony Ranasingha and Sangeetha Weerathna, perform sensitively, providing deep insights into situations and characters.

How do you accomplish the feat of activating the highest artistic potential of your co-artists?

*PV*: Yes, I think it is an achievement for a director to be able to activate the artistic potential of a co-artist; and if I have done so, it is due—I would not say to my understanding of human nature—it is due to my insatiable curiosity in human nature.

Three attributes converge to make an acting performance memorable. This is not an idea that I myself developed—but I would state it all the same:

1. A sensitive perusal of life.
2. The necessary sensitivity to portray what you have perceived in and about the actor's medium.
3. Insatiable curiosity about life.

Most actors and actresses in Sri Lanka carry on for years in their profession without a single one of the aforesaid attributes. They grasp a character at a superficial level, which is empirically apparent to them at the moment. Good acting never surfaces in such a situation.

When I direct a film, acting takes shape with the writing of the script itself. In *Pavuru Valalu* I did not write the script, but I sat down with the scriptwriter and, scene by scene, participated in writing it. In each scene, developing the script, we built up and wrote the inner meaning too. What is important is the inner meaning. It is the inner meaning one has to feel. In the sphere of acting what you generally see is acting according to the inner meaning; but there is a great deal of difference between acting according to the inner meaning and conveying it spontaneously.

When I direct a film I often tell actors and actresses to enter a character

by way of the situation—the extraordinary situation—the character is placed in. In such instances, sometimes without the actors and actresses even becoming aware of what I am doing, I delve into their lives and take out what is necessary. That is to say, I make the actors and actresses look back at their own life-experiences. I make them look back at situations in their own lives, which were similar—or relatively similar to the situation that has to be portrayed. In a way, it is like disrobing them spiritually. The necessity to gaze minutely on his or her own past is a challenge to an actor or an actress.

Therefore the question here is not whether you act well. There is an extraordinary situation before you and the question is how to portray it. When actors and actresses are directed by way of the inner meaning of the script, they are inspired to approach a situation by way of their own inner beings. On my part it is not ordering, but an activating of their own, past life experiences. It is not possible to follow this method in relation to all actors and actresses in Sri Lanka, due to the prevailing moral environment, ignorance and hypocrisy. On such occasions, to depict the inner meaning of a situation I resort to the method of making them portray it through their external gestures.

*PW:* It is my belief that in creating *Pavuru Valalu*, you have followed the classical tradition in filmmaking. At the same time, certain particularities too are found in your film. I think this is the result of your handling the cinema medium with an extraordinary expertise, not generally found in directors who follow the classical tradition. In your film we see a sharper focusing of attention on the contradictions existing in the subject matter, an essential brevity in presentation, and a strict adherence to the underlying integral unity of purpose.

The final result is that your film has a very poignant and deeply-felt spiritual effect on the spectator. It is my belief that primarily this is the outcome of you being able to overcome certain shortcomings generally found in films that follow the classical tradition—especially the loose narrative-like presentation of subject matter—and raising the said tradition up to a higher level. What we find in *Pavuru Valalu* is very tight editing, which contributes to the film's underlying integral unity of purpose. This certainly enhances the aesthetic appeal that the film holds for the spectator.

What would you say if, after taking all the aforesaid into consideration, I came to the conclusion that you have been able to make a contribution to the classical tradition in filmmaking?

*PV:* Theoretically the classical tradition in filmmaking is considered to be the narrative-like regular presentation of a subject matter in the cinema medium. The said tradition had its hey-day in America during the 1930s and '40s.

I have never pondered the question, whether I am a follower of the classical tradition or not. I always saw myself as a person who attempted to convey my experiences to the spectator in the way that is particular to the cinema medium.

In American films of the classical tradition we often see a literary-dramatic quality in the presentation of the subject matter. These film directors do not subscribe to the idea that the cinema is a medium with its own identity. It is when one uses the cinema medium with a consciousness of its particularity that one arrives at—if I may use your words—an “essential brevity” in presentation of the subject matter.

When a subject matter is presented in an essentially cinematic manner, the way in which it is developed and the way in which the spectators respond to it is different to the way in which a literary work is created and the way a reader responds to it.

In making my films, my endeavor had always been to arrive at an essential brevity in the presentation of the subject matter. When you have seen all my films you will be able to realize this.

*PW:* *Pavuru Valalu* seems to me to be a film depicting a social and life environment that is a little different from what is easily recognizable as

Sri Lankan. The possibility is there for someone to feel the urban life-environment depicted in it as belonging to a town of some other country during the '50s and '60s. This is something novel to the Sinhala cinema. I personally think this adds to the attraction *Pavuru Valalu* holds for the spectator. Any comment?

*PV:* The background to the social drama enacted in the film *Pavuru Valalu* is the Galle Fort. The image of the Galle Fort with the surrounding spaces is itself naturally a part of our culture. I always believe that to understand characters and their spiritual make-up one must have an understanding of the social forces that influence them. What social forces influence Violet? What contributes towards her being what she is? Would she behave in the same way if she lived in some other country?

When *Pavuru Valalu* was screened at a film festival in France the spectators there became spontaneously attached to it. I do not know whether the reason you mention contributed to this.

*PW:* It is well known that the phrase “a slice of life” was used to describe Chekhov's short stories. I think Chekhov's short stories were described in this way because he had the boundaries of the sphere of life he intended to portray well outlined, and objectively portrayed it through carefully selected characters and situations. His works give a deeply penetrating artistic vision of social contradictions. I see this same quality in your film *Pavuru Valalu*. For this reason—and also because the environment depicted in *Pavuru Valalu* could easily be that of some other country, as well as the way you suggestively present nature to reveal the mental atmosphere of the characters reminds me of Chekhov—I stated in my review of *Pavuru Valalu*, published in *Kamkaru Mavata* (1999 March 12), that your film had a Chekhovian quality about it. When watching *Pavuru Valalu* I was several times reminded of Chekhov's short story, *The Lady with the Dog*.

*PV:* Here I must begin my answer by saying that Stanislavsky's ideas influenced me not only during the time I was involved in stage productions and in directing stage acting—but in my approach to the cinema too. It is not possible to consider Stanislavsky apart from Chekhov; Stanislavsky's theory of drama itself was born out of his attempt to understand and direct Chekhov's plays.

When I first became involved with the stage during the 1980s, a kind of artistic expressionism held sway over stage productions. Even in the direction of acting this could be seen; more than portraying the truth about life—a tendency to act the character before the audience. What I mean here is that there was a kind of expressionism even in plays produced in the naturalistic style. Even today the same situation exists. In this country the generally established opinion is that good acting means acting in a manner that impresses on the mind of the audience that one is acting; that good acting makes the audience feel that one is acting. The same situation exists in the cinema too.

I must emphasize that I am not saying here that *Sinhabahu*, a play written in the stylized tradition, can be enacted using Stanislavsky's method.

I translated Alexander Vampilov's play *The Elder Son* (*Puthra Samagama* in Sinhala). I was the co-director too of this play. In directing this play our endeavor was to grasp life through portrayal of reality on the stage—that is, through our portrayal on stage of people going about their lives' tasks. By this I do not mean a portrayal of what people do in their daily lives. I mean that the inner meaning of the play can only be conveyed through the manner in which the actors moved about and behaved on the stage as human beings. A play succeeds in becoming a “slice of life” when its inner meaning is conveyed to the audience.

In cinema too, I attempted to see men and women as they are. This is not an extra-ordinary thing either. Seeing it you may wonder whether it is not what you have always seen; but what I am saying here is that in many films made here and abroad human beings have been portrayed according to clichés built up in the cinema for over a hundred years.

The idea that influenced me is this. It is not necessary to say and do for the film anything more than what people say and do normally in their lives. It is not necessary to show in the film anything more than the life people normally lead; but the changes that occur within their minds, the internal changes are what we should feel. Acting is necessary for this reason; this cannot be accomplished by just showing the way people eat and drink.

The other thing I learnt from Chekhov is that the biggest crimes take place in the ordinary day to day life people lead. More terrible crimes than even gunning people down occur in ordinary life. If we take for instance Chekhov's play, *The Three Sisters*, the three women's greatest expectation is to go to Moscow. What destroys them? Mediocrity. Their hopes for a better life, their expectations for a better life, are destroyed by the cheap coinage of day to day life.

From 1996, I began attending international film festivals. Then I realized that there were better films being made than the ones I had considered good till then; I realized that the films I had seen till then were embellished falsifications of life. The films I had appreciated earlier were not honest in their portrayal of life and more honest films were being created in Asia.

These films, especially the creations of the "Fifth Generation" Chinese film artists, moved me a great deal. I will explain to you the political reasons that led to these films being honest and realistic. In the power struggle that occurred during the cultural revolution, Chairman Mao, attempting to establish his power, brought forward a slogan—"Learn from the people," or "Go to the villages and learn from the people." The fifth generation Chinese cinema artists grew up working in village communes. These youth realized that the ideal Mao had described did not exist in the villages. It was the reality that existed in the villages that they portrayed in their films. In 1976 Mao passed away. These artists brought to the screen—in films such as *Yellow Earth* and *Red Sorghum*—what took place in China after Mao's death. Until then no one in China had seen life at that deep level. It is due to this that one can say they saw life in a more truthful manner. Because of their honesty they came to prominence. As Asian cinema artists they influenced me too.

A good film created by an artist of this generation can also be called a "slice of life".

*PW*: You said—in the interview you gave *Cine-Sith*—that the honesty and originality apparent in the first creations of these artists faded away or sometimes was completely destroyed, partly as a result of their being influenced by false "radical" criticisms. Do you think you are guaranteed protection from the destructive influence emanating from false radical and reactionary criticisms by any spiritual armor you possess?

*PV*: I specially mentioned this, because in the '80s, the magazine *Mavata* (Path) published here, divided artists into two camps, and called the majority the populists. *Mavata* also labeled their creations "populist," and presented them to the people. These artists themselves liked to be called populists; but I do not think such a label is necessary for a true artist.

After *Pavuru Valalu* I get a lot of invitations to direct films, but not all these invitations are honest. Nita Fernando's acting in *Pavuru Valalu* is good. So now I find actresses who tell me that they are ready not only to act under my direction, but also to invest in the production of these films. I know, however, that if I engage in such a venture, I cannot succeed. If a film is not born out of my inner self, if it becomes just a vehicle for an actress, that film and I too, as its director, will be destroyed.

Even though your question did not concern this aspect of the situation, I would also like to mention that the populist movement is almost non-existent now. I would also like to say that the spiritual armor I need, to withstand the pressures produced by false radical and also reactionary criticisms, I find in the artistic integrity of cinema artists greater and more dedicated than myself.

To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>