BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Vajira - The First Professional Female Dancer of the Sinhalese Style

Marianne Nürnberger
University of Vienna, Austria

Abstract

This article analyses the historical role of Vajira, the first professional female dancer of the "classical" Sinhalese style – the Kandyan dance. The focus is on how her life's work in training and presenting women on theatre stage in dances choreographed by her has largely influenced the modern culture of Sri Lanka. Vajira's extraordinary career is described, and her most important ballets, tours, and awards are named. The article describes in some detail some of her numerous contributions to modern dance training and highlights her role as teacher in the development of children's dance training techniques and children's ballet. Finally, it briefly presents the vision of the Chitrasena and Vajira Dance Foundation in 2014.

Vajira, the "Inventor" of the Female Style of Kandyan Dance

How does it feel to be the spouse of an icon? What does it mean to dance side-by-side with one of the most famous, interesting, and beautiful men of Sri Lanka on the stage? How does it feel to do so in Sinhalese culture, at a period in which stage dance is just being invented? In a culture that has many thousands of male ritual dancers of three indigenous styles, up-country, low-country and Sabaragamuwa, but not a single professional female dancer of any of these styles? A culture that in too many respects does not accept women as equal to men? Where women are said to be unable to attain the highest religious goal of enlightenment? Where ritual dance was a domain of males only? Where women dancing in Sinhalese style were believed to be ill, insane and possessed by demons?

Vajira is that woman. While revising this article in 2014, she is 82 years old. Chitrasena was her husband, and the most celebrated dancer of his country. He is said to be the "inventor" of the modern Sinhalese story-telling stage dance. Without doubt he is the foremost pioneer of Sinhalese stage dance. In 1943 he founded the

Chitrasena Dance Company, which became his vehicle for expression both in traditional dance forms and contemporary dance, which set standards and transformed dance theatre in Sri Lanka. In 1944 he founded the Chitrasena Kalayanthanaya (Chitrasena School of Art). Vajira soon worked at his side and became the "inventor" of a graceful female style of Kandyan dance, of modern stage dance training, and of Sinhalese children's ballet. Both have placed their indelible stamp on Sinhalese choreography. They have raised the standard of virtuosity for the traditional Kandyan or up-country dance, and they have added, with sympathetic understanding, new dimensions to the classical repertoire of movement.

Fig. 1. Vajira (1996)

Vajira is a truly astonishing woman. Age has not deprived her of her intensity, her vitality—an austere-restrained form of tenacious energy—, or of her extraordinary courage. She is the mother of a

son and of two beautiful daughters. Although she has taken care of them rather to the verge of spoiling them, this has never hindered her from leading the entire inner organization of the school with strict discipline.

Whenever I remember Vajira, I see her as a teacher leading the dance in front of the regular rows of her pupils. I remember her smile, her stringency, the earnestness of her talk when speaking about her longing for a peaceful time and a place to meditate, her experiences with Buddhist meditation, vipassana, or her vegetarianism. It was no surprise for me to learn that Vajira's extraordinary success in her twenties, in the role of the young and beautiful "Sisi" in Chitrasena's ballet "Karadiya", can be viewed as a result of her own identification with the sad fate and oppressed and confused state of that tragic character (CITY 13).

In Sri Lanka, as in many other countries, women have restricted economic opportunities and they cannot easily find entry into some important social fields. Dance is a technique to get into tune with the universe to such an extent that the threads of destiny can be woven anew. This is in essence what Chitrasena has taught me, although he may have used other words. And this is the reason that dance is believed to be a spiritual vocation. Some of the traditional social and religious concepts discriminate against women vis-a-vis men. Their ability to attain enlightenment as Buddhists is even today questioned by male Sri Lankan Buddhists. Kapferer certainly quotes the opinion of many male Sri Lankan Buddhists, but of fewer Sri Lankan women, whom he unfortunately neglected to mention, when he writes "men are ideally seen as less attached to the matters of this world" (105). It is believed in Sri Lanka as well as in many other cultures that women are more given to emotions than men.

Today in Europe many people tend to believe that women are more competent than men to make decisions, which require social or pedagogical insights. So there is some collective agreement that cognition of emotions is a skill that is more easily learned by females than by males, due to evolution and socialization. Thus female sensitivity to emotion is at least sometimes understood as a strength. In Sinhalese culture, emotions are more predominantly understood as destabilizing and threatening. They contradict the cultural ideal of equanimity and peace of mind. On the one hand, dance is held to be in tense opposition to this ideal; on the other

hand, it has always been, on a certain level, the aim of ritual dance to re-establish harmony and equanimity. In distinction with Europe, Sinhalese dance rites do not serve love magic nor sorcery. They intend to bring about the warding off of illness, misfortune, and evil, of threats, hunger, drought, barrenness, aggression, and war.

As in many cultures that undervalue women, in Sri Lanka too there are myths of a dangerous goddess: myths that grow out of the cultural denial of female competence. In Sri Lanka this goddess is known as Pattini, Kuveni, and also by other names (Obeyesekere, *Cult of Pattini*; my field notes 1980-96). The Sinhalese goddess' dominant side is cruel and vengeful. She is associated with fire and war. She avenges the infidelity of her husband and the death of her children. She hurls her golden bracelet as a deadly weapon against her enemies. In her dreadful wrath she mutilates her breasts, out of which the ashes of sterility and destruction flow. On the other extreme there is the Sinhalese myth of the pregnant queen, who can request anything she wishes, and whose pregnancy cravings (*dola dukkha*) are to be satisfied so that they may not harm the kingdom. It is believed that woman can endanger ritual aims; this is more so for menstruating women. Traditionally, it was not acceptable for women to be healers, exorcists, or priestesses. They were held to attract the demonic rather than to tame it. In this way, the experience of emotion and desire is culturally split apart from the understanding and knowledge of emotion and desire. The latter is reserved for the male ritualism. The peculiar, broad fissure between experience and cognition is in desperate need of ritual disguise. The female is concealed within the movements and costumes of the low-country, and the initiation rites of the up-country dance. The female has to be evoked and conjured out of attributes and techniques, so that the cognition of emotion may be completed. All around the world one can find such rituals, involving the bisexual priest-in-a-female-dress. He resides above the mere male and the mere female. He transgresses the sexes, and he transcends and mediates between the different worlds of gods, humans, and demons. In the extremes of ritual reality, Sinhalese men have to become women, as I have shown earlier (Nürnberg, "Ritueller Geschlechterwandel"). For Sinhalese women there is nothing comparable within ritual culture to compensate.

I would like to continue my account with the words "and then came Vajira"—but of course this is not entirely true. Of course it was not Vajira alone who broke through the gender barrier to stage dance,

who set the pace for the first Sinhalese female religious specialists and female ritualists. Numerous women came before her (Nürnberg, *Dance is the Language* 253-55). Sinhalese historians write about a lost tradition of female ritual dancers who were similar to the devadasis of India (Coomaraswamy 26; Kulatilleka and Abeyesinghe 6; Raghavan 10, 29f; Seneviratna 22f). There were various movements of the Buddhist nuns, who, over the course of the centuries, again and again tried to re-establish the place of women in the Sangha and with it the acceptance of the ability of women to attain salvation (Pitzer-Reyl 19; Gombrich, Obeyesekere 274-95; Tsomo; Weerakoon). Then there were the female ecstatic priestesses of the Tamil Hindu rituals in Sri Lanka, who gained importance through the rise of Kataragama as a religious centre also for the Sinhalese population (Gombrich, Obeyesekere; Obeyesekere "Kataragama Cult" and *Medusa's Hair*). To a certain degree, women in Sri Lanka always had some kind of silent power and authority inside their houses. There is no despising of widows, no killing of female babies after birth—altogether a much milder form of discrimination than in many other places. A further factor is that in recent times, the social order has opened up to women opportunities to work outside the family. Furthermore, Vajira began her career at a time when modern Indian dance, with both male and female dancers on the stage, had already reached a first heyday.

Since the beginning of the 1980s Sinhalese female ritual dancers could for the first time be seen to practice as exorcists and dance priestesses. In the same way that men of groups other than the traditional Berava caste took over the ritualistic dance-art (Nürnberg, *Dance is the Language* 250-55), women now appeared on the scene, to get their share of the activities of the new ritualist. As opposed to the other group of male modern ritualists, e.g. the Goyigama exorcist or the new exorcist Buddhist monk, the women need more effective means to prove their suitability for the new job before the Sinhalese society, and a more spectacular initiation period (Obeyesekere, *Medusa's Hair*; Vogt-Fryba).

There is no suggestion here that Vajira's modern dance-art solely caused this change. Rather, I believe that because of the central socio-religious significance of the traditional dance-art, modern stage-dance and school-dance gave an important impetus to the opening-up of religious and ritual functions to women. Turner refers to the significance of dramatic art and non-verbal

transmission in connection with social development when he says that human actions and institutions are in many ways enveloped in fabrics of interpreting non-verbal symbols, for we express ourselves in mime as well as in dance (104). I think it is valid for Sri Lanka as well, that life is just as much an imitation of art as the reverse (cf. Turner 114). Modern non-ritual dance has astoundingly managed to close the gap between castes and sexes on the terrain of its rituals. It has become a social bridge to new ritual forms and has also contributed to new female professions in this field. And Vajira was the first Sinhalese woman who made dancing in the Kandyan style her full-time profession, her main source of income. Is it too much then to say that her life's contribution reaches far beyond the sphere of stage dance?

Vajira is no ritual dancer. She was a stage dancer for fifty years. Now she is principal of the Chitrasena-Vajira Dance School, where she also teaches. She is a devout Buddhist. She tries to participate at least once each year in a Buddhist meditation retreat, and to follow the lectures and advice of a Buddhist monk. Together with a dozen other believers she then spends many hours per day to achieve quietness of mind and perfect concentration, sitting cross-legged on a palm-leaf mat in the shadow of a Buddhist monastery in the Kandyan region. The Sinhalese say "to sit," when they mean "to meditate". Vajira at the retreat fights in quiet concord with the like-minded for the control of her intellect, her body, her emotions, and her impatience. After a week or two she comes back to the hot, colourful, happy, loud, and puzzling city of Colombo, where her large family and the dance school with its artists and pupils await her. At times she entertained thoughts of retiring to a monastery in the hill country to lead a life of quiet contemplation. Always she dismissed these thoughts to return to her life's work – the dance. She is an artist, a searcher, and a fighter.

It is difficult even today for a Sri Lankan woman to become a professional dancer and to stay in that profession for the rest of her life. Most women who learn to dance end up as teachers and do not devote themselves to dancing on stage (CITY 13). Yet Vajira's pioneering work keeps ensuring the income of quite a number of teachers and stage dancers. She is an artist who has again and again spent months to perfect the choreographies of the Ballets Chitrasena. She is a pedagogue who has researched dance teaching methods in India, Russia, America, and Europe. And she is a mother, grandmother and great grand-mother.

Vajira's Career

Vajira grew up to be the founder and the first female interpreter of the *lasya* of the Sinhalese up-country dance form. This form was, in her words and most truly in essence, "a heroic male art." (Handunnetti). Through her collaboration and engagement as head of the dance school, organizer, and manager, and through her teaching the Chitrasena and Vajira School of Dance developed to become the greatest dance school, and the Ballets Chitrasena became the greatest ensemble in the country. Vajira became the first fully professional female dancer of the Sinhalese dance, above all of the Kandyan style, at a time when the traditional dance forms of the island were dominated exclusively by males. And she paved the way for thousands of dancing women, who now earn their incomes as dance teachers and a few of them as female stage dancers, and who in total outnumber their male colleagues by far today.

Vajira was born on 15 March 1932 as a daughter of the Goyigama (land owner's caste, highest Sinhalese caste) family of N.C. Perera in Kalubowila, close to Colombo. Her full name was Vajira Nalaperuma Arachige Perera. The members of her family were employed as government servants. Her father had much landed property in Matale, in the Kandyan hill-country. He was a government officer attached to the local government administration (Nürnberg, Dance is the Language). Her mother, Lilian Y. Perera, taught at the Kalutara Boys' School. Lilian Perera belonged to the English educated middle class as did Chitrasena, and she is sometimes seen as the one who pushed Vajira on the stage. Both of her parents patronized the arts in the provincial town of Kalutara (CITY 13; Abeyagunawardena).

In 1932 it was immensely beneficial to be born into a family of the highest caste. Vajira could hope for a life of some social standing and dignity, and for a good marriage into a family with wealth and high social status. How could it then happen that she devoted her life to the up-country dance, which does not fit at all with the expectations associated with her social origin? Most of the up-country dancers were members of the drummer's caste (*berava*)—a caste of rather low social standing, although also a numerically very strong group. Thus, once in the 1940s, when Chitrasena danced in Kurunegala wearing the traditional vest costume of the Kandyan dancer, the middle class audience booed him and the drummer. To see an "English educated man" dancing in the Kandyan style on the

stage was "too incongruous for an audience of those times to accept" (Abeyagunawardena). Up-country dancers worked in the Buddhist temples or for the Buddhist processions (peraheras) with elephants, or as dancers for the lengthy Kohomba Kankariya ritual, and for other rites, which were performed for the well-being of the peasants of the Kandyan region. The dancers and drummers were solely men. Women were not expected to dance in public. Dancing women were viewed as either immoral or as possessed by demons and therefore ill. But as Vajira grew up, some changes could already be felt. Women began to win ground on the modern urban stage.

During Vajira's first years in Kalutara, the Sinhalese dance changed in Colombo. In an effort to revive Sinhalese culture when British colonisation ended, elites with an artistic bent had no reservations about sending their sons to India to learn vocal and instrumental music and the dance at various institutes, the best known of which was Shanthiniketan, founded by Rabindranath Tagore. In due course these young men returned home well trained, filled with enthusiasm, and full of energy and new ideas. One of the most ingenious was Chitrasena, who with the help of Lapaya Gurananse, an exceptionally open-minded up-country dancer, whose ancestors for many generations had been dancers, opened a modern dance school in Colombo. The best advertisements for this school were its ballets, which were put on all the modern stages, which had been built during British rule to show Shakespearian theatre. But at this time, as a result of resurgent nationalism, people longed for the native arts. Chitrasena found fertile soil for his stage experiments, first with the Indian dance and later with the age-old ritual dance style of the up-country. And he soon received very good press reviews. This was not only because of his skills, but also because his family had excellent social contacts. Nationalist politicians, historians, journalists, dancers, teachers, traditional dancers: they all, irrespective of their social origins or caste, found their way to the open house of his father, which later became his own home. Here met everybody who contributed to Sinhalese culture (Nürnberg Interviews).

Vajira was the liveliest child of her family, a buoyant girl. She was the second child in a family of seven children. She had an older sister and two younger sisters as well as three younger brothers. One of the younger sisters, Vipuli Samarathunge, later became the head of a Sinhalese school of dance in England. Vajira started to dance as a six year-old at the Kalutara Balika Vidyalaya, the town's

school. This was an extracurricular activity, as it was for many other girls at that time. Vajira's mother had a special interest in the dance and encouraged her students—among whom was W.D. Albert Perera, now famous as Amaradewa—to participate in dance dramas staged in the Kalutara Town Hall (CITY 2). Vajira's enthusiasm for the dance was aroused when she saw the performance of Chitrasena and Chandra Lekha at the Kalutara Town Hall on 27 March 1941. At that time, both dancers had just returned from India, and displayed dances in the Indian style. Vajira had not seen anything like the spectacular dance of Shiva before: Chitrasena, magnificent in physique and vibrant, dancing in a circle of fire (Subasinghe 3). However at that time, Chandra Lekha was at the centre of public interest, if only because she was one of the first Sinhalese females who danced in public.

According to Vajira, Chandra Lekha and Miriam Pieris were the two women who preceded her in dancing on stage. They were adorned with the male costume. Chandra Lekha was the more popular of the two. She was not an outstanding dancer, for she had begun serious dance too late: in her late twenties. These first female dancers had the courage to break through the gender barriers altogether. Women of Chandra Lekha's social class had done ballroom dance in the European style in Colombo, but stage dance and Sinhalese ritual dance styles were worlds apart in terms of social acceptability (Nürnberger, *Dance is the Language* 138). Nonetheless, mastery of the complete repertoire of the up-country dance remained reserved for Vajira (Vajira).

In the early years, Chitrasena performed with his new ensemble in Kalutara. And whenever he stayed there for a show, he was invited for dinner by Vajira's parents, during which Vajira, not yet in her teens, listened to Chitrasena's accounts of life in Shantiniketan, the Indian Institute for Dance and Music founded by Rabindranath Tagore (CITY 2). Vajira, who was by now keen to learn the traditional dances, was sent for a while to Sri Palee, which Wilmot Perera, inspired by the example of Shantiniketan, had established in Horana (*ibid.*). Tagore had come to lay the foundation to Sri Palee and he had held his Indian concerts at the Regal Theatre, in Colombo. Since this period, in the 1930s, the influence of India has been great (Nürnberger, *Dance is the Language* 139). But because there was little hope that dance could offer a teenager an opportunity to build a career, her parents brought her back after a short while to Kalutara to resume secondary studies and to learn

dance as an optional school subject. Also, there were hardships at Sri Palee. Because of shortages during World War II, students at Sri Palee were not provided meals. And living some distance from home added to Vajira's inconveniencies (139). Back in Kalutara, her dance teacher finally adorned her with a ves, which is the headdress with which male up-country dancers are crowned by their teachers when they have mastered the entire repertoire of dances in the Kohomba Kankariya. Vajira was not aware of tradition then, but she probably became the first woman to be crowned with the ves (Subasinghe 3). Vajira herself did not find this event worth mentioning when asked about her teachers.

Fig. 2. Vajira and Chitrasena (1948)

In 1942 to 1943 her guru in the Kandyan dance style was Nimal Welgama at the Kaluthara Balika Vidyalaya. Vajira had her first solo appearance on stage at Kalutara town hall in 1943 (Vajira). From 1944 to 1945 she learned under Anangal Athukorale at Sri Pali in Horana and appeared at his dance drama "Wessanthara" as "Jaliya" (Subasinghe 3). In addition, she learned music, singing, and to play the dilruba and sitar at this institute. Vajira later attended the

Methodist Girls' College in Colombo. In 1946 her ambitious mother was happy to be able to place her, at the age of about fifteen years, entirely in the charge of Chitrasena, who at the time was already a promising, celebrity-bound artist.

At the start, Chitrasena visited her weekly at her home to give her dance lessons. When he returned from Shantiniketan, she visited him at his studio in Kollupitiya in Colombo, in order to continue her lessons. Above all it was Chitrasena's conviction that she had the required talents that pushed her into becoming a professional dancer. It was Chitrasena who imparted this idea to her mother who, as a result, allowed her to continue to learn from Chitrasena. Soon, Vajira lived permanently at the school. In a short time, through her indefatigable effort and natural grace, she distinguished herself as the most talented female dancer of the Chitrasena School (Nürnberger, *Dance is the Language* 139).

Chitrasena, as the first professional stage dancer, had to overcome several obstacles during the early period to establish in Sri Lankan society the notion that the dance profession was an accepted vocation in India and the world over. In 1946, when Vajira started a career in dance, Sri Lankan society had gone through many changes. "The public had started to accept dance. Dance was a subject in the school curriculum. The elite of society in the capital city paid attention and it became a fashion to learn the national dance. I too was a student in that rich artistic circle" (Vajira).

In 1948, Vajira played the deer in Chitrasena's ballet "Ravana", an interpretation of the Ramanaya (see Fig. 2, an illustration from that period). This play was part of the Pageant of Lanka, a major cultural event held to celebrate Sri Lanka's attainment of freedom from foreign rule. On this occasion, at the age of seventeen, she earned her first commendations in the press.

In 1949, she commenced training with Bavillgamuve R.G. Lapaya Gurunanse, the famous traditional (nekati, berava caste) dance teacher who was, for the greater part of his lifetime, in fruitful collaboration with Chitrasena and Vajira. As a generous teacher he was aware of the talents of both Chitrasena and Vajira (Abeyagunawardena).

Fig. 3. Three generations of dancers in the Gajaga Vannama (1996): Vajira in the front; second row: her daughter-in-law Janaki (left), her elder daughter Upeka (right); third row: her younger daughter Anjalika in the centre, her grand-daughters Umadanthi to the left and Heshma to the right. This dance posture is in total a creation of Vajira. The arms imitate the elephant's trunk, the step into a half kneeling position shows the majestic animal's gait.

He continued untiringly to pass on to them, over a period of many decades, all the dance knowledge which he had accumulated through his ancestral roots. The resulting respect for him and for other excellent traditional dancers and drummers has found its way

into the current program of the Chitrasena and Vajira Dance Foundation, where the following principles are noted:

- Respect for the dance
- Respect for the artists
- No compromise on artistic excellence
- Being firmly rooted in Sri Lankan traditions (6).

These guidelines have been valued from the early beginnings to the third generation of the Chitrasena family, as they continue on their course to innovate both within and beyond the creative space of the traditional Sri Lankan dance forms.

In 1949, Chitrasena's ballet "Vidura" was revived, and Vajira appeared as a snake maid in Snake King Kururaja's court (Vajira). Her breakthrough as an artist came with her interpretation of the role of the swan in Chitrasena's ballet "Nala Damayanthi" in 1949. This appearance instantly brought her much fame, and she became more confident in playing her roles. In this ballet, Chitrasena gave her the role of his partner, which was a big step for her: as a student to dance with her teacher (ibid.). Vajira explained, "The role of the swan in 'Nala Damayanthi' was one which allowed me to move away from myself, to transform myself into an ethereal being" (CITY 13). The theatre critics perceived in the "Tandava-Lasya" performances of this period the first historical arrival of a feminine Sinhalese dance style. "Within living memory the Kandyan dance has been a masculine dance in the heroic style. Even Chandralekha, the pioneer Kandyan danseuse of the 1930ties, conformed to the male or thandava form" of the Kandyan dance, which is widely perceived as the 'classical dance' of the country. Chandra Lekha "did not venture to break out from that form". (Abeyagunawardena)

Vajira was the first to lay the foundation for the creation of the *lasya*, the feminine form of the Sinhalese up-country dance. With polished movements that were the outcome of continual dancing, she gave to the feminine dance style its own soft gracefulness without coquetry, while retaining the athletic vigour and the religious solemnity which characterize the Kandyan style (Nürnberg, Dance is the Language 139f).

Vajira's *lasya* interpretation finds its most effective expression in her adaptation of the Gajaga Vannam (see Fig. 3), a traditional up-country dance of the royal court of Kandy. Her modified choreography of this dance has even been incorporated into the curriculum of the government art colleges. She complemented the traditional choreography with expressive (*nritya*) elements, in that

she made the female dancers imitate the trunk of the elephant. She transformed the masculine style into a presentation of feminine grace without losing any of the original beauty and dignity of the court tradition (CITY 14; Abeyagunawardena).

The song texts of older Vannams include descriptions of various birds and animals, but no interpretations of the texts were originally shown in the dance. The choreographies of the Vannams of the Chitrasena and Vajira school introduced such imitations. From that time onward, Vajira was given the opportunity to develop her own choreographies at the Chitrasena School, and the female parts she created all had the *lasya* quality. In 1948 she started to teach at the Chitrasena School of dance. All the major ballets of the Chitrasena and Vajira School from 1952 onward were the outcome of the fertile collaboration between Chitrasena and Vajira (CITY 14, Chandula).

Moving from dance to choreography was a big step for Vajira. She recalls, "My body knew the technique and I was transformed into an instrument of dance. I began to create dance steps and sequences for different moods, for different characters ... The first long piece I composed was the swan dance in 'Nala Damayanthi' ... The whole repertoire of dance sequences is handed down from teacher to pupil and it is quite tightly structured ... It is a real challenge to work with these traditional forms and try to introduce some new elements into the old repertoire" (CITY 14).

Abeyagunawardena writes about her progress:

"Vajira learnt a great deal watching Chitrasena create ballets and from overseas dance students who came to the Chitrasena-Vajira studio from time to time. Teaching these students provided her with opportunities for an exchange of ideas and experience, especially about the use of stage space, entry on to the stage and exit, management of sound and the use of lighting to create dramatic effects."

In 1950, at the age of eighteen, Vajira married her guru Chitrasena. In 1951 she had a baby girl named Upeka. 1952 was another very important year for Vajira: she was the lead dancer as *Prakrithi* in the ballet "Chandali." In the first part of this program she presented her first children's ballet, "Kumudini," and thus became a choreographer at the age of twenty years. In 1953 Vajira created the ballet "Himakumariya" for children. In the midst of producing

this ballet, her second baby girl, Anjalika, was born. Her beauty, she said, represented Himakumariya – the Sinhalese “Snow White.”

In 1955 Vajira created the ballet “Sepalika” for the students of the Chitrasena Kalayatanaya (Chitrasena Dance School) and at the same time it was recreated for the students of the Princess of Wales College in Moratuwa. In 1956 the ballet “Kindurangama” was created for adults. It was a story of a mermaid, and Vajira played the role of the mermaid Kinduri. In 1957, her son, Anudatta, was born, and there was great rejoicing in the family. Even in a modern family like Chitrasena’s, the birth of a son—especially, since he was the first son after the birth of two girls—gave the family reason for special pride; a son carried more social prestige than a daughter. Shortly afterward, she went on tour to Russia to perform the ballet “Sama Vijaya” at a festival organized by the World Peace Council. Vajira was the lead dancer in the ballet (Vajira).

Vajira has choreographed twenty-six productions, eleven of which are children’s ballets and fifteen adults’ ballets (Chandula). Vajira’s last production was “Bera Handa” (see Fig. 4), an adults’ ballet, staged in 2001. It told the story of the god Sakra’s dalliance with an earthly maid, and of the son born of their union who created the first drum. The play followed Bandula Jayawardene’s drama, which is based on a Greek story. Originally choreographed by Vajira in 2001, it was re-choreographed and restaged by Upeka Chitrasena de Silva, her eldest daughter, in February of 2003. This production won great media acclaim for the Chitrasena and Vajira Foundation in the newspapers (e.g. de Silva; Mendis; Perera; Karunaratne).¹

In addition to her own dance-plays, Vajira danced in various productions and dance recitals in collaboration with Chitrasena. Her performances are too numerous to be listed here, and they include many one- and two-week festivals which were celebrated almost every year from 1965 on. At the celebrations commemorating her fifty years of dancing at the Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo in 1996, she announced her last performance on stage (Aloysius).

In addition to her work as instructor at the Chitrasena and Vajira School of Dance, she was a dance instructor at the following schools from 1948 to 1973: Visakha Vidyalaya, Dharmapala Vidyalaya, University of Colombo, Presbyterian Girls’ College, Prince of Wales College in Moratuwa, Sri Sumangala Balika Vidyalaya in Panadura,

Ladies' College Colombo, Lindsay Balia Vidyalaya, Good Shepherd Convent in Kotahena (Vajira).

Fig. 4. Pansilu (Mahesh) with the captured bull (Isuru) in "Bera Handa" (2001).

From 1948 on, Vajira appeared before numerous distinguished audiences, heads of state, presidents, prime ministers, royalties, and famous artists and scientists of various countries. Members of her audiences included Queen Elizabeth II at the Regal Theatre in Colombo in 1954, Martha Graham in Colombo in 1956, and Prime Minister Chou En-Lai of China in 1957 at Temple Trees, Colombo (Nürnberg, Dance is the Language; Vajira). Since 1957, when she began a tour to the Russian Youth Festival sponsored by the World Peace Council, she has undertaken foreign tours that have led her throughout the whole world. Vajira regularly visited Australia from 1963 to 1997, and several countries in Europe, Asia, and America.

In 1996 her last performance took place in the play "Chandalika". This item was performed to celebrate her 50th year of dance. She

played, however, a cameo role in a much later production, "Guru Maga", which was created for the Chitrasena Memorial Production "Art of Chitrasena" in 2006 (Chandula). The following citation of a review in the newspaper Sunday Observer may give a taste of the nostalgia this production evoked:

"They danced and they danced and they danced" – Upekha, Ravibandhu, Janaki, Umi, Thaji and cast with Vajira herself making a cameo appearance. They danced to immortalize the words of their Guru, Husband, Father, Grandfather ... Chitrasena, who when asked by a friend what he would say of his life on earth, when posed the question at the pearly gates, said "I will say I danced and I danced and I danced". They did him proud that day, his pupils and his family. (Vanderkone Mendis)

Vajira was given more than a dozen awards, among them in 1985 the award "Zonta International" given to "Women of Achievement in Fine Arts" and in 1988 the Presidential Award "Kala Suri" from the President of Sri Lanka J.R. Jayewardene (Nürnberger Interviews 1996). More recently, in 2005 she was also given the Presidential Award "Deshabandu" for services to the dance from the President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Bandaranaike. In 2006 she got an "Award for the Preservation of National Ballet" from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. In 2011 the University of the Visual and Performing Arts awarded her an honorary doctorate. In 2014 an "Award for the Contribution of National Ballet and the Performing Arts" was given to her by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Sri Jayawardanapura (Chandula).

In the 1980s, in the midst of this period of great achievement, the original Chitrasena School of Dance was forced out of its premises. E.P.A. Fernando, one of the richest men of his time, had been the former owner of the building and premises of the Chitrasena School and a great patron of Chitrasena (Nürnberger Dance is the Language 131). After his death the heirs to E.P.A. Fernando had other and more profit-oriented plans for the premises. Although Chitrasena had some powerful help from the government's side, the heirs, a few years after the death of E.P.A. Fernando, succeeded in having the Chitrasena School removed from the original place. The school then moved for some years to Kadawathe, an outer Colombo suburb, to the premises of a house which Chitrasena had bought with some financial aid from the state. But since many of the pupils had a long way to travel from Colombo to Kadawathe, Vajira

decided in the 1990s to move the teaching activities to the premises of the St. Paul's College, the Dharmaraja College, and other colleges in Colombo (Nürnberger Interviews 1996). Vajira recalls that for some years they were like gypsies moving teaching premises from place to place. In 1998 a plot of land for a new school was gifted by the Government of Sri Lanka under President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, who was also a former student of the dance school. The foundation stone for this building was laid by Chitrasena in 2002. In January 2007, with the help of friends and family, the Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation was able to construct a simple dance hall and re-establish the Kalayathanaya at no. 590, Elvitigala Mawatha, Colombo 05, thus ending 15 years of tenuous and wandering existence (Chandula, Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation 7). The new dancing premises have been described in a contemporary report of the Journal Groundviews as follows:

"The present day Kalayanthanaya itself is nothing more than an expansive stage, adorned by two portraits of Chitrasena. There is a small office and two or three rooms that serve as changing areas, storage and space for set-design. The back wall is of an earthen shade, against which a stunning black and white, larger than life photo of Chitrasena seemed an ill fit, yet from the perspective of a dancer was perhaps a source of inspiration during performance. There is a simplicity and economy of architecture and décor as well as a certain air of stoicism, perhaps the result of a perennial struggle for funds to maintain the institution." (Hattotuwa).

Vajira's dance virtuosity and her outstanding creativity as a choreographer established her reputation as an artist. She has, as a pioneer, offered to date the broadest spectrum of forms of movement for female dancers of the Kandyan style in Sri Lanka, and today there is hardly anyone who comes close to the achievements of her heyday. Her work as an educator and choreographer of the first children's ballets also received high recognition. However, a good portion of her organizational and other activities found no exposure in the media. In the 1970s and 80s, the entire internal organization of the school was, in effect, in her hands. Among other things, she took over from the 1950s responsibility for the training costumes and performance costumes of the troupe. Specialists such as Somabandu Vidyapathi designed them according to her wishes, and the sewing was done under her supervision. The very first

female costume for the traditional Kandyan dance was designed by Somabandhu for Vajira, and made by C. Wickrama, Chitrasena's sister. It was used for the opening puja dance of the ballet "Ravana" in 1949. Subsequent costumes were primarily sewn by Vajira's mother. Like the traditional costume of the Kandyan dancer, the first costumes of the male and female dancers consisted of meter-wide lengths of fabric which were artistically draped around the waist with many folds, layer upon layer, almost reaching the floor: a product of time-consuming labour. The female dancers substituted the breast and belly ornament with a tight-fitting top in the style of an Indian sari blouse, and wore a more simply-designed head ornament. Vajira, however, soon modified the costumes considerably, as the new stage plays demanded greater freedom of movement. In the course of aestheticizing a dance which was previously reserved for ritual purposes, there also arose the need to display the body of the dancer in order to emphasise the beauty of the movements. Because dancers made quick changes back stage, it was also required that the costumes be easy to be donned. Thus, under Vajira's direction, there was a gradual simplification of the costume of the Kandyan dancer. In outward appearance, the new "ves" was hardly different from the original, but it could be put on with two movements of the hand. In addition, she introduced the light costumes of modern Sinhalese stage dance. These costumes became major influences for the present-day costumes at the examination of applicants for the post of government dance teacher. Vajira's style of training costumes also influenced the design of training costumes in the government institutions. The latter today consist of long elastic trousers with bare upper-body for boys, and the same trousers, short and wide skirts, and tight sari blouses for girls. In the early 1950s, the spectators finally became accustomed to these costumes, which allowed a greater freedom of movement (Nürnberg, *Dance is the Language* 140f; Vajira).

"Despite the diverse demands on her ... Vajira always maintained an outstanding standard of dance technique, and she is even today the most reputed female dancer of the country. At the beginning of ballet's history in Europe, in France of around 1680, the first women to dance in public were selected from the court ladies; similarly in Sri Lanka it was the women of the upper class who turned to the stage dance art. As in Europe, women followed after men, only to take over the main role in the stage dance art a few years later," (Nürnberg, *Dance is the Language* 141).

To Teach the Dance

Chitrasena was an exceptional dancer and accomplished choreographer. But he quite soon left the practice of teaching to others: first to traditional teachers, such as the sensitive ritual dancer Lapaya Gurunanse, or the charming traditional drummer Punchi guru. Chitrasena was more inclined to devote his energies to publicity and theatre work, to choreography, and to rehearsals, but even this work was later taken over by his spouse.

Vajira was allowed to train the youngest pupils from early on. And she did her job very well. She was interested in the methods of the modern Indian schools of art, as well as the methods of classical European ballet, and also modern dance of the Martha Graham style. For instance, she integrated Martha Graham's exercises for the different levels of space, and adapted yogic exercises from India. But above all she worked with children's natural desire to play. She let children imitate animals and plants. Nobody had tried this in Sri Lanka before. So she took care that the school soon had a strong reputation for its teaching. The classes at the school began to grow rapidly. Instead of a small handful of new pupils there were now twenty, forty, or more who were admitted each year. Soon the school had several hundred pupils. It became the country's pioneering school of traditional dance. In 1985 Vajira and thus the Chitrasena School of Dance introduced the first syllabus for a fully structured professional stage-dance oriented training of the "classical" dance of the Kandyan or up-country dancing style of Sri Lanka (Nürnberg Interviews 1981-1996). From her meticulous observation of numerous Kohomba Kankariyas she devised an additional system of exercises to make it relatively easy for her urban students to learn the dance, as for instance to hold the balance on one foot, to learn the basic mandya-position, to coordinate the head, hand and foot movements, to jump, and to move at varying speed (Abeyagunawardena). The outcome of her efforts can truly be claimed that:

"Since its inception the school has provided the opportunity for generations of aspiring dancers around the country to establish themselves as professional dancers, drummers and choreographers, and represent Sri Lanka as cultural ambassadors across the globe." (Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation 5)

Already in the 1980s, approximately 99% of the pupils were female, as opposed to the traditional teachers of the school, who were all

male. This finding is based on data collected at Chitrasena's and Vajira's dance-school from January 1980 to January 1981 at the old Chitrasena School of Dance in Kollupitiya (Colombo), with its 400 pupils and 26 teachers; from May 1984 to July of the same year at the Chitrasena School of Dance and Music in Kadawata; and during classes at St. Paul's College in Bambalapitiya (Colombo). This goes along with a general shift in the social background of families. A majority of the pupils' families came from higher-caste origins; their fathers had respectable jobs, as private employees, civil servants or the urban self-employed, and a high percentage, 48%, had working mothers. 98% had been given schooling at compulsory state schools. The traditional teachers all came from the berava, the low-esteemed drummer's caste. Their families earned 75% of their livelihood from dance and 25% from agriculture; 75% of them had attended village or temple schools (Nürnberg Interviews).

Teaching activities take up the greater part of the work time, and ensure the continuation of the school. Income from the performances is comparatively insignificant. The surplus funds from teaching activities finance the rehearsals of plays. And the teaching activities also include the training of members of the troupes, and serve to maintain the artistic and technical standards of the performances. In 1981, Vajira alone taught 189 pupils in seven classes (Nürnberg Interviews 1981).

Chandula states, that in 2005, following guru Chitrasena's demise, Vajira took on the position of the principal of the school. From 2007 onward, with a small, yet permanent home, the Chitrasena Kalayathanaya (i.e. the Chitrasena School of Dance) experienced a renewed vigour and creativity and is actively training and creating from this space. Currently the school conducts classes in Kandyan and low country dancing, drumming, yoga and exercise. These classes are held six days a week from Monday to Saturday with the attendance of over 300 students from age 4 to 55. The school conducts special classes for children of pre-school age (age 4-6), children of special needs, and a scholarship programme for university students. And it is also the home of the Chitrasena Company's creative work and production process. Chandula further reports, that Vajira currently (2014) teaches Kandyan dancing and fitness.

Formerly, for many decades, Vajira had preferred teaching the youngest ones. Teaching which requires the highest ability. But her

influence was not confined to this area; it was felt everywhere, in every aspect of the manifold work at the School of Dance. Some of Vajira's innovations shall be noted here (if not otherwise stated: Nürnberger, *Dance is the Language* 181-216):

"Vajira introduced new contents to the ritualised salutation performed at the start of each lesson. This salutation is now, according to Vajira's instructions, explained as follows: The namaskara over the head is to the Buddha or the God of the Christians or of the other religions. The salutation in front of the face is to the gods of the folk religion or the angels of the Christians. The salutation on the breast is to the teacher. Here she showed consideration of non-Buddhist beliefs in the form which Vajira introduced into school pedagogy. Thus one endeavours to maintain the religious and ritual touch even in the modern institution, where multi-cultural conditions prevail. Furthermore, for younger age groups, Vajira has simplified the ritual movements of the salutation, the taking-leave form (namaskara) or Kandyan salutation at the end of the lesson, and she builds up the salutation's complexity according to the age of the pupils, in three grades. In more recent years, Vajira has even told the pupils simply to kneel all together on the floor and to bow and think of the teacher. This saves time and is a less formal way of greeting, more suitable for a modern school. Only advanced pupils learn the classical salutation dance-sequence, the so-called Jiku Thä salutation, named after the drumming sound of its rhythmical beginning.

The organization of the curriculum reflects influences of Indian and Western Dance, as well as Vajira's and Chitrasena's own exercises, which were developed at the school itself. Vajira formerly used to give instructions for the arrangement of lessons to all the teachers. In 1985, a first syllabus was compiled by her, which was also intended to serve the maintenance of teaching standards in the branch of the Chitrasena and Vajira School in England, which was run by Vajira's younger sister Vipuli Samarathunge. Heshma Wignaraja now belongs to the third generation of the family of dancers. Around the turn of the century, Heshma, granddaughter of celebrated dancers Chitrasena and Vajira, her mother is Anjalika and her aunt is Upeka, studied theatre management in the United States of America, where she also taught dancing (Heshma). Vajira herself showed the junior teachers the ropes and placed the pupils, according to their age and ability, into the various classes.

Vajira was also the first to teach dance at a kindergarten. It was foreign children below 7 who learned, above all, bodily control and bodily expression. Vajira let the children walk, skip, and jump, run, and bend their bodies and limbs to practise use of toes and heels and balance. Landing after leaping was also practised in different variations. She accompanied all movements with rhythm, mostly performed on the up-country *gatabere*, popularly called the Kandyan drum. Training in dramatic expression was imparted through playful exercises. Independent and controlled movements of the limbs were practised by playing different animals. Dance lessons of those youngest children begin with the "frame posture" (*māndiya*): feet and knees turned wide outwards, knees bent, heels a foot apart, arms in front of the upright trunk, elbows turned outwards and bent, palms in front of the chest facing forwards, fingers stretched. This is a posture that requires extreme tension and stretching of different muscle groups, and allows, like the basic position of European ballet, movements to be made from it in every direction. Lastly, the smallest ones were taught the "Kandyan walk." Starting from the basic posture described above, one foot is placed in front of the other while keeping it in a turned-out position, and due to the elegant and swaying motion and the extreme bending of the legs during each step, the legs are never completely stretched out, even in between strides. The palms, alternately after each step, are turned toward the body and then again outwards, emphasizing the extreme stretching of the fingers after each turn; the thumbs lead in the rotation so that the hands give the effect of leaves fluttering in a soft breeze. Vajira explained to me that the work with the youngest students demands the greatest patience and experience of the teacher. Only the best teachers are suitable for it. The exercises grew out of the lively exchange between pupils and teachers, for the youngest ones are, unlike the older ones, not yet able to simply copy the teacher. This playful form of teaching is almost entirely an innovation of Vajira.

As an opening to the lessons for the age-group of 6-10 year-olds in the first proper dance training class, instead of the traditional exercises at the bar, Vajira introduced simple movement exercises which are connected to dramatic representations. These are equally Vajira's own inventions. All types of movement sequences, traditional as well as new inventions, used for the training of all age-groups, were, in the exercises for the portrayal of emotions and feelings, enriched by Vajira and Chitrasena with mime and

gesticulation. This is the most important innovation of the school: the inclusion of expression technique and acting, which became necessary during the development of Chitrasena's and Vajira's stage dance plays. For this purpose, Chitrasena introduced certain expressive technical exercises from India. Vajira introduced the combination of drama with movement-technical exercises (e.g., springing up out of the cat posture and showing surprise). Furthermore, Vajira introduced different body positions (asanas) from the yoga tradition into the basic course. They fulfil the purpose of the stretching exercises of European dance, toning the muscles and increasing flexibility. Moreover they improve the concentration skills of the pupils. They are, among other things, a part of the eleven different floor exercises of the curriculum. In these exercises Vajira was further inspired by the stretching exercises of the Bolshoi Ballet, which she had seen in Moscow. Further innovations of Vajira include exercises to heighten the flow of movements. These are inspired by the Martha Graham style of using the different levels of space, and consist of a series of different positions which produce the effect of an uninterrupted movement sequence. To them belong the five exercises to sixteen beats of the curriculum. Different floor-exercises are introduced for Vajira's children's ballets. These exercises include the graceful sitting upon the lower legs, and elegant movement transitions to kneeling and lying. To train pupils' memories of the movements, instructions are given for longer movement-sequences up to sixteen beats (matraya). This includes both hand positions with the palms gracefully turned inwards and outwards, body and head rotations, bending of the elbows, neck, head, and body, accompanied by the corresponding glances, and also simple jumps and rotations.

Adults learn a set of five exercises per hour. Children require two to three hours to learn the same exercises. In the first year the exercises are repeated and the five speeds introduced. In the second year creative exercises are added, and pupils can take part in small folk pieces and ballets. The pedagogical goals of taking part in these first plays are: to help children overcome stage-fright from an early age, to learn motivation and discipline through concentration on performing in public, and to convey ethical ideas through the subject matter of the piece. The last is also of educational value to the primarily young audiences. A successful performance is, for the pupils, the greatest reward for the trouble they have taken.

Vajira has also introduced slow balancing exercises: very slow movements on one foot. Against the wall, leg-flexibility exercises and stretching exercises are done. They serve as preparation for jumps and figures in the air. The feet are strengthened by walking on the toes and turning on the balls of the feet, but not on the tips of the toes. Two kinds of jumps are taught: those which end in a pose (stationary jumps) and those which end in quick steps (travelling jumps). These exercises only have English terms, and they do not all belong to the traditional practice repertoire. They are taught to pupils from 13-14 years upwards.

Finally, Vajira also instructed the junior teachers in the art of teaching, choreography, and dramaturgy and, during the preparations for performances, other aspects of stagecraft and their practical applications. Sri Lankan ballet, as it was developed by Chitrasena, Vajira, and other modern dancers of the country, definitely belongs to the genre of ballet d' action. These are dance-plays which tell stories. Sri Lankan ballet does not generally use forms of classical western ballet, but mainly its own movement techniques and stylistic means. But it does, like Western Ballet, have a number of acts, in which there are pantomimic sequences and sequences of pure dance, or a combination of both. As complex, creative artistic performances, they require extensive preparation in various artistic fields. The choreographer determined the basic structure of the scenes according to the subject matter of the play. In doing so, certain principles are followed, which have proven to be helpful. These guidelines have grown out of their own experience or the examination of dance and theatre traditions of the West and of India. Thus, as in Indian dance, a basic mood (*rasa*) of the scene is established, and also its shadings, deviations, and transitions, if any. These are reflected in the choice of the tempo of the single movements, and their order. Finally, suitable types of movement are considered. The resulting rough design provides the basis for the composition of the musical accompaniment and for the stage design, costumes, and design of the promotional materials.

I observed that during creative work at the school from January 1980 to January 1981, although the choreographer was ultimately responsible for the grouping and for every gesture, the precise nature of the movements was often not fixed. Vajira allowed the advanced students to bring their own creative ideas directly into the lessons and into the rehearsals for the stage plays. They were not drilled or trained passively to carry out the commands of the

master, as one might perhaps expect. Instead, teachers, and even principals, did not hesitate to ask advanced pupils for advice when they forgot certain rhythm-sequences, or the melody of an accompanying song did not sound quite right. Each dancer could bring in his own ideas and suggestions for improvement. In some cases, particularly when there were long solos, room for individual improvisation was given from the start. In practice, the choreographer often gave loose instructions such as: "now make a nice high jump so that you land behind so-and-so," and the person concerned tried four to five different jumps before the critical eye of the choreographer until he or she was satisfied with one version. The dancers who were not directly taking part in the rehearsal watched from the front. While the more experienced ones sometimes called out suggestions for correction to the one who was dancing, body postures were only corrected by the master. The co-operation of the advanced pupils was a natural part of their training, and prepared them for the time when they would work on their own stage dance productions.

When numerous groups of dancers with different roles took part in large scenes with many dancers, each of these groups was instructed by its own teacher. These were experienced trainers from the school who had taken part in many stage productions. The dancers were first given practical instructions in separate groups, so that they may learn, as quickly as possible, and together with the other dancers in their scene, the movements set to the music. But each group still had its own trainer, who stepped in to make corrections during the rehearsal. This kind of highly coordinated, cooperative work was further encouraged by Vajira. Initially Chitrasena, in the production of his plays, held discussions with all those taking part. But the first plays required fewer performers, and the scenes were less complex than later on.

The Third Generation

In February 2013 the production "Ridmaranga - Vajira in Perspective" (See Fig. 5) celebrated the life and work of guru Vajira. The performance included a selection of solos, group items, drum compositions, and scenes from selected ballets spanning the period 1963-2004 (Chandula). The performance was acclaimed enthusiastically by the press. Gunesequera wrote about "Ridmaranga":

"Today, indigenous dance theatre in Sri Lanka is firmly based on the foundations developed by Chitrasena and

Vajira. While the efforts of these two pioneers have spawned many commercially successful artistes and dance companies in Sri Lanka, the Chitrasena Dance Company continues to represent the core ideals of these two great gurus — a deep commitment to presenting world-class dance performances firmly rooted in tradition.

Conceived and directed by Heshma, Artistic Director of the Chitrasena Dance Company, 'Ridmaranga – Vajira in Perspective' thoughtfully restages a number of Vajira's finest creations to showcase her continued impact on dance theatre in Sri Lanka.

The third generation has now taken over the overall management of the Chitrasena Kalayathanaya (i.e., the Chitrasena School of Dance) and the Dance Company. Following the demise of guru Chitrasena, grand-daughter Heshma Wignaraja (see Fig. 5) became the artistic director in 2005. Daughter Upeka Chitrasena de Silva (see Fig 6, second row, right) who was also the principal dancer from 1978 to 2011 retired from stage in August 2011 and is currently vice-principal and managing director of the dance company and continues to teach at the Chitrasena School. Daughter Anjalika Melvani choreographed and directed her first major production, "Kumbi Kathawa" (Ant Story), a children's ballet, in 2007 and leads the programme for students age 7 and under. Thus the work with children of pre-school age, which was unfortunately discontinued in the 1970s due to Vajira's lack of time, and the lack of other suitable teachers for many years, is presently (2014) taken over by her (Chandula). Thaji Dias, grand-daughter of Chitrasena and Vajira and daughter of Anudatta Dias and Janaki Dias, has been the principal dancer since 2011. In 2012 grand-daughter Umadanthi Dias was appointed the manager of the Chitrasena Dance Company and continues to work in the administrative team. The most recent addition to the administrative team is Janaki Dias (see Fig. 6, second row, left) who is the coordinator of special projects. (Chandula; Abeyagunawardena, Messages)

Today, when revising this article in 2014, the Chitrasena-Vajira Dance Company (CVDC) does not have a principal male dancer. First male roles, therefore, are usually danced by a changing small handful of competent guest dancers, some of them former students of the school, according to their availability.

Fig. 5. Thaji in "Ridmaranga", portrayed by Perera, Samantha. Heshma Vignaraja. Daily Mirror 14.02.2013. Web. 21 July 2014. JPG. [http://life.dailymirror.lk/media/images/review%20(1).JPG].

Ravibandu Vidyapathi, who seemed to fit into that position back in the 1980s and 90s (Nürnberg Interviews 1980, 1984, 1996), had his last performance as a guest artiste back in 2006, at a memorial

performance for Chitrasena. The company has not had a principal dancer since Chitrasena retired, though the school currently has a candidate in training. "He will need a lot more intensive practice before reaching principal dancer status. However, he is currently performing with the dance company." (Arjuna Wignaraja cited by Abeyagunawardena, Messages).

Total commitment is required of anyone who wishes to make dance his/her career and rise to the top. The CVDC has not been successful in attracting personable young males to go through six years of rigorous training required before they can come into serious contention for selection as principal male dancer. It has not been easy to find girls with this commitment, either. So the CVDC is extremely fortunate to have Thaji ready to step into the role of the company's leading female dancer when Upekha retired in 2010. "I breathe dance, it is my life, my religion...I strive to achieve perfection... I practice for at least two hours every day", she told Abeyagunawardena (Interview).

This regimen must seem forbidding to young Sri Lankan men more drawn to train for a career that assures them of a steady income with long-term security. The dance does not offer such guarantees. Its main attraction is the satisfaction one derives from success in high artistic endeavour and from public acclaim. But that's for a while, perhaps thirty years if one is lucky. Most young men (and women, too) leave the Kalayathanaya after a few years to join the permanent teaching staff of a school. Young men who wish to earn an income from dance take the easier course of learning some basic movements in six months from a tutor and performing to entertain guests at weddings and/or foreign tourists at the big hotels. The performers wear a dress similar to that donned by traditional Kandyan dancers. This is a dance of sorts but emphatically it is not the classical Kandyan dance. (Abeyagunawardena, Messages. 21 April 2014)

Fig. 6. Vajira in the early 1980s, behind her dance Janaki to the left and Upeka to the right.

In January 2014, the Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation (CVDF) launched its "Vision" for the next 5 years. Accordingly, the vision of the foundation aspires to create a self-sustaining Centre for the dance that includes:

- a healthy pool of new talent from all parts of Sri Lanka
- a growing base of well trained teachers across the country
- a professional dance company performing new work and reviving classics on a consistent basis
- a vibrant centre for dance that provides a space to live, collaborate and commit to the dance
- and a program of outreach, education and marketing to increase the base of knowledgeable and discerning audience at national and international level.

In order to support this vision the Foundation has launched a General Endowment Fund to generate resources to be used to establish the Centre for Dance and for activities that will ensure

sustainability of the efforts of the Dance Company and the School. (Chandula; Chitrasena and Vajira Dance Foundation)

Arun Abey, a Sri Lankan expatriate in Australia, is patron of the Chitrasena-Vajira Dance Foundation (CVDF). During an event at the Kalayathanaya in February 2014 he, on behalf of the three generations of the Samson and Annapurni Abeyagunawardena family settled in Australia, pledged \$(A) 100,000 (about eleven million Sri Lanka rupees) to the Endowment Fund and invited others to chip in. Directors of CVDF estimate that two hundred million rupees would be required to build the proposed Chitrasena-Vajira Centre for Dance. A plan drawn up by a renowned architect has been approved. The plan includes a large hall in which to hold teaching classes, a studio in which to conduct rehearsals, a studio for creative work, an apartment for the principal to reside in, library, office, dormitories for males and for females, dining room, storage room, and kitchen. The dormitories are for students who travel from distant outstations and have to stay over-night.

The new Centre would help to achieve the CVDF's vision: to inspire the transformation of the Sri Lankan traditional dance into a universally recognizable rigorous and professional art form by preserving noteworthy traditions and innovating from them, discovering and sustaining new talent, and fostering creativity and artistic excellence. (Chitrasena and Vajira Dance Foundation; Abeyagunawardena, Messages).

Dance always has remained sacred for Vajira, a serious art, not merely entertainment, or a way to make money. She has always lived for the dance, in total dedication to the dance. Due to the productive lives of Chitrasena and Vajira the Chitrasena Dance Company has presented to their country a considerable number of well trained and devoted and creative dancers. This is the big challenge for the future: to keep up to the standard they have set of their great dance theatre (Abeyagunawardena; Silpadhipathi), and to even go beyond it and move on.

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