

## Transcript of the Groundviews Interview with Vajira Chitrasena

**Sanjana: Speaking with Vajira who is often referred to as the *Prima-Ballerina* of dance in Sri Lanka, perhaps a good place to start is to take you back down memory lane to when you began to first dance, when was that? And why did dance in a sense become your life? How did it begin?**

Vajira: Actually the whole idea of my take in dance as a career was my mother's idea. And I learned dancing in school before I joined Chitrasena. In the sense that at the time that I went to school, dancing was a subject in the school. So under various teachers I have studied dance, under different people. Then one fine day, some or other, I don't know what time did Chitra came into our family. When I was quite small,

**Sanjana: This was before the Thirties?**

Vajira: No during the thirties maybe forties that he came to Kalutara to take a class with some interested young people in Kalutara. So at the time that, he has been speaking about Shanthi Nikethan and how the atmosphere and whatever that time, Tagore's visit to Sri Lanka and all and my mother somehow or the other thought I should pursue that line. So she sent me to Sripali. Sripali was started by Mr.Wilmott Perera, who also had been in Shanthi Nikethan. During that time of Tagore, was the best period of Shanthi Nikethan and since he started, and there was music and dance in the school, he sent me there. So I was there for a short time, and at that time I may have been about 11 or 12 years. And somehow when I was taken there also it was like taking me through rubber estates, my grandmother also travelled in that vehicle, she was telling, "*I don't know where you'll be taking this child*", and she was very unhappy. So I didn't like the people who really was my dance teacher and didn't like the way he conducted himself, he was like these people who come to drum for us. He was like "Bharatha Myna". Bharatha Myna they say people who cut hair short. I don't know that must have started by Chithra himself. The style was for males to have long hair up to their ears and these drummers were also like that and they were not real teachers. But they knew to play the drum and he was the dance teacher there at that time.

So I was never very happy and after a year, I said I can't go there. So I was brought back to Kalutara where I was studying at a Balika Vidyalaya maybe in the seventh standard or something. Then again I went under very different teachers for dancing. I started to learn under Mr.Anangalal Athukorale and also after him there was somebody else, Mr.Welgama. So I went under so many teachers, I never had a liking for dancing.

So later on as my parents got to know Chitrasena and he was quite different. He was somebody who brought dance to the stage even at that time. So connection with stage craft was much more advanced and he was presenting real theatre. Even at that time with lights and music composed specially for the stories that created, and Chitrasena started to teach us in Kalutara itself. And later on when my sister was doing higher studies came to Pembroke and during that time, we had only

Chitrasena's house that we knew in Colombo. So mother wanted my sister to stay there and pursue her studies. So after sometime during the later periods I was dancing in the concerts and everyone thought that I was outstanding and so they all thought that I should pursue and make it my career., then I was also sent to Chitrasena's house. From there of course I was always under him. And he was the one who guided me after that for my stage career.

**Sanjana: In terms of those early years and also later on when you became a professional dancer, also renowned dancer along side Chitrasena, I wonder Vajira who your sources of inspiration were, apart from Chitrasena himself, were there contemporaries also in other art forms music and in theatre along with dance both locally and internationally, who inspired you to create your own dance form?**

Vajira: I was made to study music also and I had sort of liking for music and then slowly after I came to Chitrasena he is the one who, as you said my inspiration to perform on stage. And through various characters I portrayed, I started to show that I was capable of interpreting to whatever music or whatever character that was given to me in a constructive way I suppose.

**Sanjana: Which was your own?**

Vajira: Which was of course during later on I was old enough to become an adult and gave me the main role in certain things. A ballet called "*Chandali*", where I played the main role that was also a Tagore's story where Ananda came to ask for water, from a Chandala woman. So that was also a story where I was portraying the daughter of the Chandala woman. So in that programme , Chitrasena also gave me chances to do my own creations with the children. So I started creating small dances for the children. Of course there were always artists in Chitrasena's house staying there, like Ananda Samarakoon, Alvitigala and Lionel Algama, Amaradewa, Sunil Shantha. And all these artists were also part of Chitrasena's house. All the artists started their lives with him. Whenever they came from India, first thing they came and landed themselves in Chitra's house and there was a separate place for these people and we were in a separate place. It was a huge house and could be divided into two parts and there was a nice hall for us to dance. So those times I was listening to Ananda Samarakoon's songs and one of those inspired me to do a thing called "Kumudhini". A dance about the Sun, the Moon and a flower. This flower blooms in the night and closes during the day. So that kind of dialogue sort of inspired for me to have a story for children. That was my first ballet. It went as part of the Chandali programme. I did the main role for Chandali, but same time there was also my creation within that programme. So like that whatever Chitrasena had any programmes for the public, it contained my creations. That means,he gave me chances to slowly build up my career.

**Sanjana: Your first production, Gini Hora was in 1968?**

Vajira: That was much later.

**Sanjana: But that was your first production?**

Vajira: No that was, normally you say ballet is a story in the form of dance. To say that "*Anga Chalanayen Kathawak prakasha karanawa kiyalai*" Mudra Natya was defined like that. So Gini Hora

was one ballet that came out without a single song. So that means you have to give the idea in dance only. So that was the real sort of first production that came out without any expression with words.

**Sanjana: And then the last one was the *Dance of Shiva*?**

Vajira: That was much later, after I got a lot of experience in creating movement for others and also how to tell a story in dance. Anyway Shiva's story also Chitra whenever we were travelling together in the car, he always played a piece of music of Ravi Shankar and always told me I must portray a ballet with a sitar as an object. And it should be around the sitar. Because he was very fond of Ravi Shankar's music. So I am always listening and we were going in this car, I somehow thought that to have a full length ballet like two hours or so, it was difficult with the sitar only. Not a character where you can portray human emotions no. So I started reading picture books and I got hold of lot of Indian stories. Like "Shiva and Paarvati" and out of that there was a thing called "Shiva and Sathi" where Sathi to show her purity she jumped into the fire and of course nothing happened to her. That stuck me and I thought that I can portray that kind of thing with emotions and so many characters and then Ravi and Channa were both my students at that time. There was also the idea that Upeka should come out now and I have been dancing for so long and I thought that she was blossomed to come on her own in main characters. So then I found this story fitted the three of them. So that's how Shivaranga came out and it was a great success and of course Chitra gave me all the stage craft. Also Somabandu was behind my ballet, he was the one who created background atmosphere for telling of the story. It is important that whatever is on stage, the scenery whatever added to giving the story out. Somabandu's deco and costumes and music of Ravishankar and it suited them and it was a great success.

**Sanjana: You are 78 now and well over half a century of dance actively participated, but also witnessing Vajira, when you look at from all those, I mean wealth of experience you have and if you take a look at Sri Lankan dance today, what do you think of it? Has it blossomed? Has it grown? Is there more professional dancing today? Are you happy with the way dance has evolved? Do you wish that there could be more dancing done by the gurus or the state or by the Chitrasena Kalayathanaya?**

Vajira: Of course the State never supported us. So we didn't have state support, but the educational system has allowed children to learn dance, music and all aesthetic subjects. They have a chance to pursue it to higher levels.

**Sanjana: More than your time?**

Vajira: Yes more than my time, and there is the University of Aesthetic Studies where they can take a degree. So everybody can have some kind of a paper degree. Because most of them didn't have the chance to go and stage like us. Because Chitrasena is the one who always had stage performances. From the time I was a child, he was the one who always had most of the performing arts on the stage. So all the others never came up to that standard. And so there were much more women taking up. Males were not taking up because I suppose that didn't help to finance their lives. So there were less males and more females taking to dancing. And also I created a style for the women.

I learned the male dance because Kandyan dance is a male dance. Only males dance at the time it started.

So the *Gajaga Vannama*, *Ukusa Vannama* all those things were created for the stage. Otherwise they would sing and dance. The whole time somebody was dancing and others didn't depict anything. Depicting the character of the elephant or the bird, there was no,

**Sanjana: Just one point Vajira, you said the Aesthetic studies on various universities offer degrees, but I wanted to ask the question is a degree what dance means to you? If not, what does dance really mean to you?**

Vajira: For me I was brought up in such a way that one has to dedicate them in life to bring out whatever artistry that is there in the dance. Or to do what we have done. To portray stories and bring it to the public. And then also every time that some dancer visited our country from India, they also sort of inspiration in the sense not only eastern and also the western dances. I have seen Martha Graham and from Martha Graham, I have been inspired to do certain things on the floor and then the second stage, sitting positions, the knees, the kneeling positions. Then it comes to people's normal way of standing positions. So the three levels of dance were introduced to Sri Lanka by Martha Graham when she visited Sri Lanka. Not that I had any communication with her, but seeing all those things and also Chitra used to give me nice books about Viginisky and famous dances of the West. How they were created and people were thinking that how they were staying for that long and things like that I have been reading. Reading the lives of great dancers inspired me to become what I wanted to. To portray dance in the form of giving meaning to it. And of course that was Chitra's subject as well. I mean he is the one who pursued it to that level. And then brought us up to follow that same style of giving meaning to movement. So with all these experiences of seeing other dancers, my creations and my style of teaching in the school and all those things developed. In our syllabuses, we have floor exercises so the whole school and the teachers can follow it. Then sitting exercises, kneeling exercises with the bar and also nobody takes to the bar because no one knows about the bar in Sri Lanka.

In the villages they did. My Gurunnananse's house, there was a bar always constructed as a piece of furniture in the house and in the garden they had an aericonut tree like that, two stands and at that level for children, the square position we have in the dance. So that when you bend your knees you come to the level of the bar and that is our main position for the Kandyan dance. So those things also, somehow or the other I put into order. Where my whoever is now our dance teachers they all can follow. Then I called the turns and jumps that there were in the Kandyan dance and made them into an order so that we have all the kind of jumps and turns for children to learn as exercises. Then with the bar, I also turned into another level. So when you stand you hold it and you jump so that can be corrected. So when you are holding into a bar, and jump in your legs can be placed in that way. So all those things were not there when we started learning. These things are the things which were evolved with my maturity.

**Sanjana: Vajira, one often speaks and hears about Chitrasena's legacy to dance in Sri Lanka. All of what you said, you believe is your legacy? What is your legacy? What do you want the**

**people to remember you by? What have you left for students to learn from? All of what you said was new and by you?**

Vajira: Yes, putting this dance into order was my contribution.

**Sanjana: What is your legacy, you feel in your own words?**

Vajira: I have contributed to being recognized as a female dancer, who has set standards for the stage, where people have good morals any students can follow and I created a style for the woman. So maybe since the younger generation, also follow the same style and they will remember me for standards I set for them. And now I see that, Thaji specially has imbibed all my qualities and my style of dance, but she has not seen me.

**Sanjana: In fact on that point, the last time you dance was in 2007 for your seventy fifth, when they dragged you onto stage. When you look at Kalayathanaya today and hundreds of students who pass through these corridors and you take a look at the future you mentioned Thaji imbibing your style, your form, your experiences and what is the future?**

Vajira: It's there. Now I'm so happy that Heshma has started. Her standard of choreography is about what we have done. The kind of changes she does and its vibrant.

**Sanjana: So you are happy with this?**

Vajira: Yes I am really happy that the three granddaughters will carry on Chitrasena's legacy and my legacy. More than my legacy, I'm very much attached to Chitrasena's legacy so I'm part of his legacy and the three of them, I'm happy that their standard of work is really high.

**Sanjana: Where would you go from now, you are 78 and still very active in the kalayathanaya's training and basically a feature here, you will always continue to be involved for the foreseeable future? You will not retire into a cave in the Himalayas and meditate clearly not. You want to involved in the kalayathanaya and its dance?**

Vajira: Yes I feel that even when I'm involved with dance, my mind is always in this no, so any other thoughts such as thoughts on running the house, I have never been running the house, I always had my mother in law to run the house when I was a student. Even after marriage, I stayed with them. So they continued with that. So now I am living with my son and my daughter in law. So I really don't have to think about what I'm going to eat next. But I feel that Heshma has imbibed the way I work and she like me to be around her all the time. So that she can still take whatever I have with me, like teaching of dancing. Whatever things that I am still participating in class work. So she still wants me to be actively around. So when one is wanted, you want to live in this atmosphere. So I think the best thing for me is to just carry on the way I'm doing till one day when I breath my last. So I am satisfied with the work that is happening around.

**Sanjana: Vajira, Thank you very much.**

