

If You Promise Not to Tell

Representing Gay
Sri Lankan Lives
in Performance Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

All over the world, there are men enacting non-heteronormative sexualities in all sorts of ways. Beyond this self-evident fact, things become complex. This study considers how gay Sri Lankans—rather than simply copying often-dominant gay liberation discourses of, say, North America or Australia—experience and (in a Butlerian sense) ‘perform’ diverse male sexualities in a Sri Lankan way. At the heart of the thesis is a piece of “performance ethnography”, developed with local participants in the research. In essence, the thesis asks: What experiences, and understandings, of their sexuality might a group of gay Sri Lankan men choose to foreground if afforded the opportunity to represent themselves in a consciously reflexive performance-making project? What risks could such a project entail and how might these be negotiated? What forms of theatrical expression might be appropriate to this task of self-representation?

In many contexts, this type of research project would be relatively unremarkable (though, no doubt, still revealing and rewarding). In Sri Lanka, the stakes are raised considerably by the fact that sex between adults of the same sex is illegal and a conviction under the Penal Code could lead to a sentence of up to ten years in prison. While the state relies primarily on the threat, rather than the actual application, of this law as a means of suppressing the rights of gay, lesbian, trans and other Sri Lankans, the mere threat is a reminder of Judith Butler’s fundamental point that gender, and sexual, identities are performed under the aegis of social norms, not simply in a voluntaristic way. The thesis draws a link between Butler’s theory of performativity and Boellstorff’s (2005) model of the ‘nation’ as a privileged site of sex-culture analysis in order to explore how the research participants fashion their lives partly through acquiescing to, but also through transgressions of, key

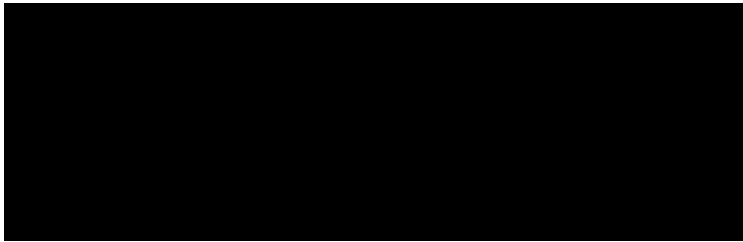
norms in relation to religion, family and kinship, caste and class and the militarized aspects of Sri Lankan society.

Detailed description and analysis of the ways in which the participants engaged in the performance ethnography project suggests that they were acutely aware of the opportunities and constraints afforded by the society in which they live. They also exercised a high degree of agency in successfully crafting a pared-back theatre aesthetic which gave each of them a chance to perform a version of themselves and offered the audience complex representations of local gay men.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- i. This thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated,
- ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
- iii. none of my original work included in this thesis has been submitted for any other previous degree,
- iv. the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.



Matthew Tyne

15/08/2021

Date

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION: WHOSE PRIDE FESTIVAL?

A Point of Departure

In May 2006, Colombo experienced its inaugural “Gay Pride” Festival, hosted by Equal Ground, a then recently formed Sri Lankan LGBT organisation.¹ The opening event of this week-long festival, launched at The Barefoot Gallery, a well-known arts-space in Colombo 3, one of the city’s more chic neighbourhoods,² was a theatrical performance: *Mother/SON*, a play written and performed by Jeff Solomon, a visiting American artist. Throughout this 90-minute, semi-autobiographical monologue set in the mid-1990s, Solomon performs both the role of Bradley, a young writer living in Los Angeles and that of Bradley’s loving and somewhat overbearing mother. Scene by scene, a familiar narrative emerges: Bradley comes out to his mother, who later joins the local chapter of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays); Bradley introduces a boyfriend to his mother; the boyfriend is diagnosed with AIDS and dies; Bradley finds a new lover; his mother goes on a PFLAG march;

¹ LGBT, LGBTI, LGBTIQ etc. are, of course, acronyms that attempt to convey the complex array of sexualities and gender identifications that go beyond the norms of cis-gendered heterosexuality: "L" for lesbian, "G" for gay men, "B" for bisexuals and "T" for transgender people. "I" is often included for intersex people, "Q" for those who are queer or questioning, "A" for those who identify as asexual, or perhaps as 'allies', and a "+" sign to indicate ever greater aspirations towards inclusivity. As will become apparent in Chapter Two below, usage varies widely across South and South-East, Asia where I have lived and worked, not to mention within Australia, and is constantly changing (how could it not, when the 'politics of naming' are so obviously connected to struggles over the visibility and viability of people's lives?). In general, when using such acronyms, or terms such as "gay" or "queer", I have endeavoured to privilege the meanings and definitions used by friends in Colombo and the key participants of this doctoral project.

² Colombo, Sri Lanka’s former capital and largest city, comprises fifteen areas/suburbs. These areas are known by both their respective numbers and names. For example, Colombo 3 is also known as Kollupitiya, and still sometimes by the Anglicised name Colpetty. Colombo 3 is considered a mostly established middle-class part of the city. Barefoot Gallery is part of Barefoot, a well-known crafts and café business (<https://www.barefootceylon.com/gallery/>). The gallery and the gardens feature a café which hosts public talks, as well as musical and theatrical performances.

his mother is diagnosed with cancer and dies. In this episodic structure, we observe the characters rapidly moving through weighty topics, including sex, rejection, acceptance, and death. The actor's performance, it must be said, was strong and engaging, and, notwithstanding the dense subject matter, the writing was often deft and witty.

However, Mr Solomon did not present *Mother/SON* merely as a piece of theatrical entertainment. At the end of the performance, he returned to the stage to explain that his play is often presented in the United States as a theatre-in-education piece in which, typically, he performs only a few selected scenes followed by a discussion with audiences that often include schoolchildren, teachers, social workers and so on. The play, then, has been envisaged as a means of cultivating empathy and some understanding about a certain kind of gay male subject. Not surprisingly, after informing his Colombo audience of this theatre-in-education focus, Mr Solomon invited us to engage in a discussion about the play's themes. He started by asking the audience a deceptively simple question, the ramifications of which have lingered long in my mind and to which, on one level, this thesis constitutes an elaborate, belated response: "Was the play relevant to Sri Lanka?"

I recall there being a silence of about ten seconds before a white man in the audience (white people comprised perhaps ten-fifteen per cent of the total audience that night) affirmed: "Of course, it is relevant!" I wanted to say something different but hesitated. I knew it would not be appropriate to start an argument, and there were other voices in the room that I felt deserved to be heard above mine. Yet the question of relevance had bothered me throughout the performance, and now the polite silence of the audience felt unbearable. So, I put aside my reservations and asked: "What do you mean by 'relevant'?"

Of course, I recognised that Colombo theatre audiences are well able to enjoy a night of camp, New York humour and to empathise with a Jewish mother, who discovers her son is queer but was this enough to justify programming *Mother/SON* as the opening event of the *Colombo* Pride Festival? The first speaker, the other white man, tried to explain what he meant. He began talking about the importance of ‘coming out’ and then suddenly stopped. He turned around to face me, seated some five rows behind him, and asked irritably: “Don’t you think it is relevant?” I replied that I was not sure; however, I was interested in what *he* meant by ‘relevance.’

Other people began to turn and stare at me. My Sri Lankan friend beside me squeezed my arm and told me quietly, under his breath, to “let it go.” Before the other audience member could offer *his* understanding of “relevance”, Mr Solomon reclaimed control of the forum by handing the microphone to the founder of Equal Ground who repeated “Of course, it’s relevant” before moving to end the discussion quickly with a short speech about the difficulties that gay Sri Lankans have ‘coming out’ to parents and others. She thanked her parents for being accepting of her as an ‘out’ lesbian. Her speech was cut short by her welling tears and cracking voice. It was time to applaud and leave.

It is not my intention to make Mr Solomon’s play the ‘straw man’ antagonist of the arguments to be developed in this thesis. The work, as I have already noted, is an accomplished piece of theatre, which has since toured widely around the world to critical acclaim.³ However, my lingering doubts about the relevance of the performance’s style and

³ *Mother/SON* also returned to Colombo, again for the Colombo Pride Festival, in 2014. Clearly, whatever the relevance or otherwise of the piece, *Mother/SON* offers opportunities to an organisation like Equal Ground to associate themselves with a piece of successful theatre from abroad and to promote themselves as being

content to *that particular Colombo audience* provide a useful entry point for much of what is to follow. With the advantage of hindsight, I would argue that two problematic assumptions underpinned the performance and the post-performance discussion: first, the assumption of a universalising 'gay identity,' transcending cultural and historical differences; second, an assumption about the emancipatory potential of an 'educative' theatrical presentation.

Turning to the first of these assumptions, the assertion of the relevance of the play on the grounds of slim, anecdotal evidence assumes that there exists some shared transcultural gay identity that gives the play this relevance. In other words, there is an assumption that this Sri Lankan audience should be able to identify readily with a narrative in which characters' lives are placed in the context of historical events that would, of course, have iconic significance for a North American LGBT audience: events such as the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York; the death of Judy Garland; the 1980s' AIDS crisis; and President Bill Clinton's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy towards gay service personnel in the United States military. This is, at best, a questionable assumption. Indeed, while they had been quiet during the post-performance discussion, as we were leaving the theatre that evening, several gay Sri Lankan men spoke to me about what I had said, telling me that they had not understood much of the play and thought that perhaps it was not relevant to the experiences of many gay men in Sri Lanka. "Where are our guys," one man asked, "our stories?"

connected to a global LGBT polity, marking their organisation as a socially-progressive player in the still-nascent field of Sri Lankan LGBT activism.

Other Pride events in 2006 and at subsequent Colombo Pride festivals have been similarly oriented towards, or have actively promoted, the expression of stereotypically North American gay sensibilities over other forms of gay identities and expressions. The cultural politics at work here are complex. For although gay men and women from countries like Sri Lanka do, of course, fashion some aspects of their lives with an awareness of North American narratives on being and 'doing' gay, this is always mediated through a range of local cultural attitudes and practices. There is always resistance to, as well as adaptation of, what Strongman calls the "hegemonic master narrative of gay liberation" (Strongman 2002: 89). And there is much at stake in these cultural negotiations. For example, not long after the 2012 Colombo Pride Festival, I learned through personal communications with some of the participants in my research that Sri Lanka apparently required a 'Harvey Milk-like' character to "lead" the local gay community.⁴ To this effect, the festival program for 2012 included a series of workshops in which participants were encouraged to inform employers of their sexuality as an affirmation of gay identity. Workshop facilitators reminded participants that gay people would continue to be oppressed and denied their rights until they took such a stand. Again, the assumption underpinning this approach suggests a developmental narrative wherein a supposedly unliberated, inarticulate, amorphous mass of same-sex practitioners need to be mobilised to become fully liberated, articulate, politicised gay subjects. Arguably, this approach demonstrates ignorance or, worse, careless indifference to the legal and socio-political contexts in which gay Sri Lankans live.

⁴ Harvey Milk, often referred to as the Mayor of Castro Street, was a US politician and gay rights activist. He was the first openly gay elected official in California, popularised in part through the 2008 Gus Van Sant-directed film, *Milk*. In late 1978, a fellow member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Dan White shot and killed Harvey Milk and the city's mayor, George Moscone. White was convicted of manslaughter and served five years of a seven-year sentence.

The second assumption grounding the presentation of *Mother/SON* at the 2006 Colombo Pride concerns the use of theatre as a tool for advocacy or sensitisation, in this case, a tool to be used for the ‘liberation’ of gay Sri Lankans. This theatre-in-education focus was evident even before the performer confirmed it, although the didacticism of the play was arguably more suited to a Sydney Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras Festival or a Christopher Street Day parade than its Colombo performance context. As described above, the play comprised a collection of scenes that highlighted themes or, in a sense, rites of passage deemed necessary to gay men; however, the episodic structure within which these themes were explored also meant that nuances of character and situation were dissipated. One imagines the playwright creating the script around the topics: Scene 1 is about tolerance; Scene 2, rejection; Scene 3 is about coming out, and so on. The play’s purpose was to educate and perhaps to change attitudes towards homosexuality. The work could easily be viewed as an example of “applied theatre”, a term which, as Jonathan Neelands, Professor of Creative Education at Warwick University, notes, “encompasses a wide range of pro-social ‘alternative’ theatre practices” (Neelands 2007:305) characteristically deployed in non-traditional theatre spaces, with participants who may or may not have theatre arts skills, for audiences who may have a vested interest in the issues featured in the performance, and which construes theatrical performances as working (potentially and ideally) to solve social problems. The ‘social problem’ addressed by *Mother/SON* was that audiences—in this iteration, the Sri Lankan audience—require educating about homosexuality, and even some skills development so that they too might come out to ‘Mother’ and claim an ‘authentic’ gay identity. While many audience members that night may have had, as Neelands suggests, a vested interest in the issues featured in the performance, the representation and articulation of these issues was inadequate because of

its disregard for the context within which it was performed. There was something uncomfortably patronising, almost neo-colonial, in the presumption of the right to enlighten some imagined, benighted Colombo audience.

In the following section of this chapter, I turn to the study's aim and provide background details of this project's development, suggesting how a more nuanced understanding of the Colombo context might afford participants a method of creative (and, perhaps in a quieter way, political) expression regarding their sexuality.

Aims and Background of this Research Project

This thesis responds to questions like those cited above— “Where are our guys? Our stories?”—by employing a different kind of research-based theatre-making process. At the heart of the thesis is a small-scale exercise in “performance ethnography”, developed over the course of a couple of intensely busy months of fieldwork in the middle of 2012 but enriched—as I explain below—by my experiences of visiting Sri Lanka, including several long stints of living and working in Colombo, over the last two decades. From 2012 to 2020 seems, and is, of course, a long time. I have been a part-time student throughout my candidature, while my paid employment has involved overseas postings, several relocations, involuntary redundancies, and the typical uncertainties of a career in the international community development sector. These have affected my capacity to complete the thesis earlier. The benefit of such a drawn-out candidature, however, has been the opportunity to set the 2012 fieldwork in a much wider context of ‘participant-observation’ than would normally be possible in a PhD project.

In essence, the project involved exploring how a small group of gay Sri Lankan men from Colombo might make sense, at least for themselves, of some specific, local expressions of sexual identity by participating in the consciously reflexive process of creating a piece of aesthetic performance.

Sallis suggests that performance ethnography “originates from a study of real people and their culture [...] the text is written or devised to be performed and [...] its presentation re-performs the real-life experience and situations of the research participants” (2010: 72). A preliminary sketch of how this performance ethnography project developed is offered below and a fuller account of the methodology will be presented in Chapter Four. The rationale for such a study is captured in Peter Jackson’s 2001 observation that “[c]urrent histories, ethnographies, and sociologies of gay and lesbian identities are overwhelmingly from the West” and that, in particular, there is a lack of studies of gay people from major Asian cities (Jackson 2001: 2).

Nearly two decades later, Jackson’s comment still rings depressingly true. There is little research on gay Sri Lankan men beyond behavioural ‘surveillance surveys’—typically investigating practices associated with the risk of contracting HIV or other sexually transmissible infections (Jayawardena et al.: 2012; Rawstone and Worth: 2007), the risk of becoming victims of violence (Miller 2012), or else sociological studies of a decidedly conservative, reactionary flavour wherein homosexuality is considered an addiction, a social disrupter (Samarakoon: 2008) and essentially foreign (Ratnapala: 1999). Fortunately however, more recently, research that does not necessarily pathologise or scapegoat gay

and transgender Sri Lankans has appeared. This includes studies on LGBT activism and its tendency to focus on law reform (Wijeyawardene and Jayawardene 2020;),⁵ self-perceptions of gender identity among lower middle class transgender people (Wijewardene 2020) , LBGT non-government organisations and the ‘institutional politics of queer liberation’ (Ellawala 2019) and sexual and gender identity development models (Ellawala 2018). Notwithstanding the emerging scholarly representations of local homosexualities in Sri Lanka, there exist both formal and informal networks of gay men in Colombo and other parts of the country. Further, despite the apparent reticence of gay Sri Lankan men to speak at the post-performance discussion of *Mother/SON*, my own research and work experiences in Sri Lanka have confirmed that gay Sri Lankan men can be very articulate about their sexuality and skills, as they tactically seek out and grasp opportunities to engage both with each other and the broader Sri Lankan society.

As I hinted above, there is a substantial ‘pre-history’ to this thesis and, given the extent to which the 2012 fieldwork has been nourished by my previous, and ongoing, experiences in Sri Lanka, it is as well to explain some of this context at the outset, including how my interest in the potential of a performance, as a way of generating and sharing insights from fieldwork-based research, goes back to well before the experience of attending *Mother/SON* at the 2006 Colombo Pride Festival.

⁵ In the conclusions in Chapter 8, I ‘revisit’ Colombo and cite examples of activism and update the socio-political situation for gay men.

My first experience of Sri Lanka then, in 1997, was as a volunteer in the HIV-prevention field.⁶ For nearly three years, I worked with a small community-based organisation that ran vocational training and outreach programs in multiple locations for groups of people considered to be at risk of HIV infection.⁷ These groups included sex workers, men who have sex with men, and ‘beach boys’ (mostly young men who work in the informal tourism sector as tour guides and who may sometimes supply drugs and sex to tourists, both directly and brokering with third-parties).⁸ Despite the 30-year-long civil war in the country, white male tourists were still frequenting Sri Lanka’s southern beaches, and the beach boys were known to provide services to these foreigners. Predictably, given my whiteness and male gender, the organisation for which I worked asked me to walk along beaches for hours on end in the hope that I would be able to talk with some of the beach boys and introduce them to the programs that the organisation offered.

As it turned out, my conversations with beach boys did provide the organisation with many contacts, and they were subsequently able to recruit participants for their training programs. However, I found that the conversations I was having were about much more than HIV prevention and avoiding arrest by the police. These conversations covered many aspects of these men’s lives: their families, religious practices, the impact of the war, and their relationships. Some men, to whom I spoke on numerous occasions, told me about

⁶ This was a volunteer assignment supported by the then Overseas Service Bureau, now Australian Volunteers International.

⁷ Community Front for the Prevention of AIDS (CFPA) was a small non-government organisation, started by members of a chapter of the local Lions’ Club in the mid-1990s. It received funds from international donors to undertake HIV awareness and prevention activities across six locations (Colombo, Bentota, Hikkaduwa, Matara, Tangalle and Nuwara Eliya). CFPA ceased operations in 2005.

⁸ The term “beach boys” is a generic name given to males who work on the beaches populated with foreign tourists. Here the use of the word “boy” does not necessarily refer to a child. In Sri Lanka, many people use the term “boy” to describe an unmarried adult male. The boys who attended our programs ranged in age from 15-29 years.

relationships they had with white men who would come to visit them once or twice a year. My initial response was to view these relationships as exploitative and exclusively commercial: a rich white man taking advantage of a poor brown man. Yet this was not the view of many of the Sri Lankan men with whom I spoke. Some of the white male tourists, following years of biannual visits, eventually retired with plump European pensions and came to live permanently “down South” with their Sri Lankan boyfriends, together with the boyfriends’ wives and children.⁹ It was during these many conversations on Sri Lanka’s southern beaches that I first began to think about how male homosexualities might be constructed and enacted in ways that are quite unlike what one could expect in my home town of Sydney. There were, it seemed, very different ways to be, and to ‘do’, gay in Sri Lanka.

Between 2003 and 2006, I returned to Colombo many times to conduct a small piece of research, initially for a master’s degree, on the impact of HIV and AIDS upon gay men. The project evolved and briefly became the focus of an attempted PhD which was to have been an ethnographic study of how gay Sri Lankan men in Colombo think about and enact their sexuality against the backdrop of an evolving HIV epidemic across parts of Asia.¹⁰ The initial idea had been to explore the role HIV played in gay men’s lives, yet I was learning that most of the participants in the study thought very little, if at all, about HIV. They were far more concerned with forming relationships and friendships, concealing their sexuality from

⁹ The Southern Province of Sri Lanka is a popular tourist area, famous for beaches, coconut palms, stilt fisherman, and more recently for being the part of the country most directly devastated by the December 2004 ‘Asian tsunami’.

¹⁰ In 2006 several hundred delegates from nearly 30 countries met in New Delhi to begin discussions on coordinating and improving the HIV response among gay men (men who have sex with men) and trans people in the Asia Pacific region. One of the outcomes of these discussions was the formation of the Asia Pacific Coalition for Men’s Sexual Health (APCOM), which is now a significant player in the HIV response in the region. See <https://apcom.org/about-apcom/>

parents and other family members or negotiating the postponement of marriages that their families sought to arrange. I completed the fieldwork, returned to Sydney and commenced writing the thesis. A year later, however, I discontinued the project. In addition to my own circumstances at the time, my primary reason for doing so was the growing sense that what I had found to be the most interesting insights from the fieldwork were not going to find a place within the framework of the style of social science thesis that I was expected to produce. I felt that the men whom I had interviewed and observed for nine months had offered much more than merely the 'data' that I had chosen to collect using a methodology that employed a standardised semi-structured interview protocol. Indeed, my attempts to represent the interview 'findings', once I had reduced these to the status of data, appeared dull, lifeless, and lacking utility.

Despite shelving this first attempt at a PhD, I maintained the idea that these stories might be told in some other way. Indeed, during the period of fieldwork for this previous project, I already had a glimmer of such a possibility. In late 2005, a Sri Lankan friend told me that Colombo University was to host a South Asian masculinities conference and that one of the local coordinators of the gathering had called him to ask "Ishan, can you do something gay?"¹¹ The conference program comprised many presentations on male-perpetrated violence and this convener felt that it required "something else, something gay". Ishan was familiar with the fieldwork I had been doing. He also knew that I had trained professionally as an actor at the Victorian College of the Arts and we shared a love of theatre. He asked

¹¹ Throughout this thesis, I have changed the names of participants in order to protect their identities and privacy. Where necessary, I have also changed the names of towns and locations that could otherwise make it possible to identify participants. The reasons for such precautions will become clear in later chapters.

whether I would be willing to collaborate on creating a short performance based on stories of gay Sri Lankan men. This struck me as a welcome change from 'data-collection.'

Ishan had known me since my first trip to Colombo in 1997. Over the years, I had dined with him and his friends on many occasions, hearing many stories about their experiences in negotiating relationships with other men, having sex, avoiding marriage, avoiding the police and living with their families. In the retelling of these stories, guests would jump to their feet to perform story elements, much to the amusement of the other guests. The story over, the performer would return to his seat to resume his meal. Of course, then, we had "something gay" for the conference: a group of six men rehearsed and performed a 30-minute collection of scenes including a queer reading of matrimonial advertisements that appear in many Sri Lankan Sunday newspapers. This small performance led to a series of drama workshops for gay men and women, which in turn contributed to aesthetic performances based on stories from gay people's lives. Thus, the idea of creating an aesthetic performance as the primary focus of a study about gay Sri Lankan men's lives began to cultivate. Such a performance, I thought, might enliven 'data' that I had already collected, and perhaps, more importantly, provide an opportunity for participants to tell stories about their experiences and those of their friends.

While in the field in 2005-2006, many of the men whom I interviewed and interacted with as part of the study asked me "How will you use our stories?" Others demanded that my study have some utility: "You must tell others about us." The request suggested that I should raise the issue of local homosexualities in various forums: I could write articles for local newspapers, speak to government ministries and others who might listen. The

requests did not suggest a need to reform laws that criminalise sex between adults of the same sex but to inform others of the very existence of such citizens in Sri Lankan society. I felt a duty to honour somehow the stories I had been given, yet it was neither my place nor desire to speak on behalf of these men. Despite a 23-year association with gay Sri Lankan men, my perspective remains that of an outsider, although this perspective, as will become clear, has sometimes made me a strategically useful partner for those who are more 'inside' Sri Lankan culture, including participants of the current study.

This research responds, therefore, to Jackson's call for more studies of the experiences of gay Asian men in a quite particular way, namely through the collaborative creation of an aesthetic performance, in order to provide a platform for gay men to share their own stories, using their own voices. In so doing, the thesis also draws inspiration from the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who once described his work as exploring different forms of selfhood through analysis of the "symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviours—in terms of which [...] people represented themselves to themselves and to one another" (Geertz 1983: 58). The restrictions on self-representation for gay people in a Sri Lankan context are, of course, substantial. Hence, the central research questions of this thesis are as follows: What experiences, and understandings, of their sexuality might a group of gay Sri Lankan men choose to foreground if afforded the opportunity to represent themselves in a consciously reflexive performance-making project? What risks could such a project entail and how might these be negotiated? What forms of theatrical expression might be appropriate to this task of self-representation?

Snyder-Young encourages “[a]rts-based researchers [to] use aesthetic modes to open up data and analysis for wider audiences, to use art-making as a method of inquiry and analytical tool, and to make transparent their analytical process” (2010: 884). While this description does fit with the ambitions of this thesis, it is clearly inappropriate for “arts-based researchers” to impose their methods without consultation. The participants in this research project, men associated with Sakhi Collaboration,¹² a then-nascent, now defunct, gay advocacy and social group, became co-creators and performers for the study. The co-created work, entitled *If You Promise Not to Tell*, was based on stories from the lives of the performer-participants, taking advantage of the formal setting afforded by the conventions of theatrical performance, to explore, rehearse and perform the understandings they have of their own lives.

The men were mostly known to the Sakhi Collaboration co-founders, who recruited the performer-participants. And while the Sakhi co-founders attempted to encourage men from minority Muslim and Tamil communities to participate in the project, the participants were mostly drawn from lower middle class Sinhalese backgrounds, reflecting the membership of the Sakhi Collaboration. The participant cohort represented a variety of experiences, and yet the project was limited by the dearth of men from ethno-religious minorities and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The participants’ backgrounds are further discussed in Chapter 5.

¹² See Appendix 3 for more details on Sakhi Collaboration

Importantly, the performance-making component of the research was, from the start, encouraged by the Sakhi Collaboration. The organisation's co-founders desired to use a theatrical form as both an advocacy and socialising device for their members and the broader gay community in Colombo. The form also enabled me to use the theatrical conventions of devising, rehearsing and performing to establish a demarcated yet flexible structure to examine aspects of the social lives of gay men in Colombo. These theatrical conventions extended to the audience, who through being seated in a known theatre space, watching and commenting on the performance, became, in effect, temporary participants in the study.

Dwight Conquergood argues that performance locates knowledge in bodies set in a place and time. It "privileges participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious embodied experience grounded in a historical process, contingency and ideology" (Conquergood 1991:187). On this basis, Conquergood and other scholars have suggested that the use of performance may also provide opportunities for marginalised groups, like gay men, to occupy spaces often denied them, or to create new forums to raise issues important to them. These spaces thus, even temporarily, become for participants a forum for visibility. Performance in such a situation offers an alternative for subordinated people who may not possess the "privilege of explicitness" nor the "presumptive norm of clear and direct communication" that those from dominant communities take for granted (Conquergood 2002: 146). The creation and occupation of these spaces through performance constitutes an act of intervention, a type of resistance, a form of criticism and a way of revealing agency. Performance, at least on this account, becomes a kind of public pedagogy through its use of the aesthetic and the

performative to highlight the intersections of politics, discursive formations and embodied experience (Denzin 2003: 9).

Yet the occupying of performance spaces can also clearly involve risk to the participants, particularly when performances disclose subjects of a sensitive, personal or perhaps even criminal nature. This is one of the reasons that Sakhi Collaboration desired a formalised theatre setting in which to stage the performance. Not only do the conventions of theatre produce a particular set of demands on the participants by virtue of the structure of rehearsals, production and opening-night deadlines. The “theatre” also provides a degree of safety through its dominant convention of not being real-life: it is but play or, as Richard Schechner (1985:6) puts it, it operates in a ‘subjunctive mood’, somewhere between the ‘not-real’ and the ‘*not* not-real’. It also enabled the participants to control, to a certain extent, who viewed the performance. However, theatre conventions can also hinder the kind of public pedagogy championed by Denzin if an audience perceives the theatre as too much of a marginal, temporary, merely entertaining or distracting fiction.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapters Two and Three provide detailed background on constructs of gay male subjectivities and selected social phenomena in Sri Lanka that have influenced the study’s participants. Chapter Two argues that sexual identities are not fixed but instead, following Judith Butler, are better understood as performative accomplishments, enacted not simply in a voluntaristic way but under the aegis of social and cultural norms. Certainly, from this perspective, there is no universal gay identity to which all gay people will eventually

subscribe. While there are some local, culturally-specific, pre-modern influences on the development of contemporary non-western gay subjectivities, the research on these is uneven, at best, and I follow Boellstorff's (2005a) argument that ideas of 'the nation' (however contested) are likely to be the most critical influence on how sexuality is explored and applied to a place like Sri Lanka.

In Chapter Three, I consider some of the affordances and constraints of the cultural and social norms in terms of which people in Sri Lanka orient their lives. What kind of place is Sri Lanka? What kind of place is Colombo? What are the prevailing discourses that may shape the lives of gay men there? For this research, I detail four aspects of the Sri Lankan lifeworld, which are of significance to the experiences of gay men. First, I consider *Buddhism*, Sri Lanka's dominant religion, which on the one hand sustains no a priori objection to homosexuality yet has been used by clergy and politicians to silence discussion around sexuality, especially women's sexuality and non-normative sexualities and genders. Second, I turn to *family and kinship*: the family acts as a social safety net, influential in determining ideas of selfhood, and, on the other hand, demands obedience to norms such as marriage. Third, I offer an account of the systems of *Class and Caste* operating in Sri Lankan society. Class remains an ever-present force in contemporary Colombo, including Colombo's gay community for whose members it can be a source of both solidarity and suspicion, particularly since gay men from the higher classes do not necessarily see themselves as part of the same gay community as those from lower classes, many of whom do not speak English. Finally, I briefly examine the influence of *Militarism* on people's lives in Sri Lanka, to show how, while various state agents have the means to inflict violence against gay people

at will, gay men have nonetheless been able to negotiate how to occupy certain spaces from time to time.

Chapter Four details the methodology used in the study which, as noted above, foregrounds performance as a mode of inquiry in and of itself. I examine the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to performance ethnography, especially my dual, and occasionally competing, roles of researcher and co-creator, and the participants' dynamic roles.

The following three chapters constitute the heart of the thesis, detailing the study's main findings. Chapter Five analyses how the study's participants navigated, individually and collectively, risks to which they could otherwise have been exposed through their very participation in the project. It also suggests how the participants processed some of the affordances and constraints of Sri Lankan culture, described earlier in Chapter Three, in developing a piece of theatre based on stories from their lives. Chapter Six focuses in more detail on three of the study's participants and includes some cautionary critiques regarding the use of personal narratives in a theatre-making project like this. Chapter Seven examines further the aesthetic choices made by participants, analyses some key features of the script and reports on the first performance of *If You Promise Not to Tell*, including a post-performance discussion.

Since the performance of *If You Promise*, there have been many political and social shifts, including changes in how gay men in Colombo mobilise and socialise. While sex between

same-sex adults remains illegal, there have been significant changes to how gay groups engage with political parties and other civil society players. Finally, then, in addition to summarising the study's findings, Chapter Eight includes an update: a brief return to Colombo and to the lifeworld of the men with whom I shared the experience of making this small piece of theatre, in order to trace the legacy of our work together.

CHAPTER TWO: CONSTRUCTIONS OF SEXUALITY: FROM PATHOLOGISING MEDICAL DISCOURSES TO A PERFORMATIVE THEORY OF IDENTITY

Terminology, in a thesis like this, is difficult. It needs to be. For the individuals about whose lives I am writing, a lot is at stake. Are the men who feature in this study ‘gay’ or ‘queer,’ or something else? Are they members of an emergent Sri Lankan LGBT, or LGBTQ, or LGBTQIA+, ‘community’? Let us assume, at the outset, that there are men all over the world enacting non-heteronormative sexualities in a variety of ways. Beyond this self-evident fact, things become complex. For instance, some of these men may, at times in their lives, be part of a sexual minority while, at other times, reside in the comparative comfort of the sexual majority. Are we to judge such persons as gay men ‘in denial’? Or are they simply MSMs (‘men who have sex with men’) (Boellstorff 2011) in the bland, supposedly value-free public health parlance used by many of the NGOs for whom I have worked?¹³

In this thesis, I generally use the word ‘gay’ as a coverall term to describe non-heteronormative sexuality and identities wherever they may be situated, notwithstanding an ongoing debate on the utility of this term beyond Western urban settings (Altman 1997; Jackson 2001; Boellstorff 2003). I do so because the word ‘gay’ is commonly used outside of Western locations, including Indonesia, Thailand, India and Sri Lanka (all countries where I have worked). And although the word might be borrowed, its meaning has been adapted through local usage. Thus, while the word ‘gay’, when used in Colombo, does share

¹³ The term ‘Men Who have Sex with Men but do not identify as gay’, often shortened to ‘men who have sex with men’ and to the acronym MSM emerged from the HIV field which needed to categorise men’s sexual behaviours that increased HIV-vulnerability. Although, a once-obscure public health category, used describe behaviours has become to be used as an identity within some communities.

connotations with its use in Sydney or London, there are also some notable and nuanced differences. For example, it is not uncommon for self-identifying straight men in Colombo to have sex with other men and for the 'straight' man to describe the man he penetrates as 'gay.' In this instance, 'gay' designates a specific sexual position and not an identity.

The main reason I retain the often-contested term 'gay' throughout this thesis is because of the frequency with which the study's participants used it. While they were familiar with acronyms like LGBT and terms like 'queer', the word 'gay' was far more prevalent. Not just in this research but during all my time working with groups of men in Colombo, and other parts of Sri Lanka, most have used the word 'gay' to describe their sexuality. I do not believe that they use it only in my presence to make me understand or feel included. Alongside the word 'gay', there are, however, many local slang Sinhalese and Tamil words that are used to describe various genders, sexualities and sexual practices. These are localised and change with time but, where relevant, I will also use these terms because, again, they are the terms that are used in the cultural world with which this study is concerned.

All of the participants in the study self-identified as 'men.' I make this assertion based on my observations and discussions with the participants. I also understand that all the participants were cisgender men, although the term 'cisgender' was not used among participants, at least during my presence. The study does not include the experiences of transmen or non-binary people. It is beyond this study's scope to adequately include the experiences of transmen beyond references in Chapters 3 and 5. And the references focus on class discrimination against, marginalisation of, and violence towards transgender Sri

Lankans. Wijewardene (2007) captures this marginalisation and violence in her work on trans people and advocates for 'self-perceptions of gender identity.' She suggests that her participants:

“...manage the emotional and psychological violence of incomprehension that is forced on them by a society largely unaware and intolerant of gender difference. More damaging than incomprehension may be interventions meant to investigate and 'diagnose' this difference in their gender presentations, as Manel and Shanthi [two participants] have experienced with physicians and mental health experts in Sri Lanka. Using terms of definition should not also blind us to the violence associated with the activity of prescribing (or conferring meaning on) through describing gender atypical behavior.”

(Wijewardene 2007:103)

In Wijewardene's study, the participants' testimonies of the dysfunction created through incomprehension, may be affirmed at a broader level by “women and men who choose nonconformist gender behaviour and can admit to the constant, grim pressures of gender policing in Sri Lankan society” (Wijewardene 2007: 104). Unlike the cisgender men in this study, the gender presentation of Wijewardene's participants can/cannot be “intelligible” to a particular culture's (Sri Lanka) normative comprehension of the continuity of sex, gender, and sexual practice (Butler 1990:17). Wijewardene (2007) argues that the existence of alternative forms of gender self-definition may force Sri Lankan society to confront gender divergence and society's 'own violent repression of these differences at a very fundamental level' (Wijewardene 2007: 105).

Whatever the merits or otherwise of the terminological choices I have settled on, one thing is clear: the contested nature of terminology in the area of gender and sexuality is part and parcel of social and political struggles. These terms are 'keywords' of culture, as Raymond Williams famously puts it: “the problems of their meanings [seem] inextricably bound up

with the problems [they are] being used to discuss" (Williams 1988: 15). The uptake, or the rejection, of such terms is a discursive dimension of the struggle for individuals and communities whose lives do not conform to the norms of cis-gendered heterosexuality to construct for themselves and others a visible and viable existence. In a similar vein to Williams, Norman Fairclough invokes the work of Foucault and emphasises the "dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure [...] On the one hand, discourse is shaped and constrained by social structure in the widest sense [...] On the other hand, discourse is socially constitutive" (1992: 64). Discourse is, therefore, both the medium through which struggles are articulated and, in and of itself, a stake in those struggles. To put it bluntly, it's a matter of who gets the right to represent whom and how.

Another point to be made at the outset is that, while some discourses enable the advocacy of rights more than others, it is not inevitable that individuals or groups will identify their material interests with the 'subject positions' that a discourse notionally makes available to them (after all, if there were such hard and fast correlations between discourses and people's practical actions in the world, the workers of the world would indeed by now have united as classical Marxist discourse once so confidently predicted; no woman would ever hesitate to be labelled a feminist, and so on). Here again, the tension between my assumptions and prejudices, based on my own experiences of growing up gay in Australia, and the attitudes I encountered among gay men in Sri Lanka, are instructive. During my first time living and working in Sri Lanka, with people who were vulnerable to HIV infection, I found it surprising that the 'beach boys' (one such 'vulnerable' group) did not think of themselves as having shared, vested interests in, say, advocacy around gay social and

political rights or the apparent HIV crisis in their midst. I assumed that the virus' presence would have galvanised a besieged Sri Lankan gay community to act in ways that might be roughly analogous to my experience of the early stages of the AIDS crisis in Australia. My assumptions were wrong. Most of the 'boys' I met did not have any sort of overtly gay identity nor any social, let alone political, affiliation with other gay men. Indeed, some of the boys had girlfriends, wives, children; and on occasion, they sold sex to support these dependents.

Again, to be clear, my assumptions were born of my experiences as a gay man in Australia: specifically, a gay Australian man who, in my mid-20s, had experienced living through a time of crisis and heightened awareness. A culture of collective action celebrated through significant mass public events such as the Mardi Gras in Sydney, and working for people with HIV and AIDS, had shaped my experiences and understanding of what it meant to be gay. I was vaguely familiar with the narrative of 'gay liberation' and influential works such as Dennis Altman's (1971) *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, a book that makes a case for a collective struggle towards the empowerment of constituted gay subjects: a subjectivity created through various forms of communal action. As a teenager, I learned more about the history of gay activism in Australia. I realised the significance of how, in Sydney, in June 1978, the first Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras took the form of a street protest, during which New South Wales Police arrested 53 people and assaulted many others (Willett 2000). It was not until 1984 that the New South Wales state government decriminalised sex between consenting men, mostly because of the concerted actions of that politically engaged generation that had preceded me.

The '78ers' as they are now referred to, are viewed as elders in Australia's or at least Sydney's gay community. In recent years, the 78ers have appeared as featured guests at the annual Mardi Gras parade, providing historical context to the event and the broader socio-political struggles of gay people in Sydney and possibly Australia. Much has been written and performed about these events (Willett 2000; Carberry 1995). These historical markers enable contemporary gay people in Sydney to reflect on how things were and how so much has changed. The identification with a common struggle seemingly connects and unites, even if only for the first Saturday night every March. Yet these markers, these defining moments are not necessarily understood outside of the context in which they were created. There is no shared universal or global gay history, although there are elements of shared transnational gay histories, at least between the United States and Australia, for instance. For example, Sydney's 78ers did clearly see in the Stonewall riots in New York City as a momentous touchstone-event that was relevant to their own struggle for recognition. However, while there is this history of transnational struggles for LGBT rights across parts of the West, this transnationalism does not necessarily extend to transculturalism.

Notwithstanding my reservations about the limited transnational/transcultural reach of gay liberation discourse, I am certainly not suggesting that non-Western same sex-attracted communities cannot or do not organise collectively on their own terms. Rather, my point is that such actions are bound to culture, to nation and to time in particular ways, as my assumptions about the beach boys suggest. To offer another brief example, from another radically different context to my own upbringing, in 2011, I was working with a group of gay men and trans women in Papua New Guinea (PNG) as part of an Australian government-

funded community development project. One of the project's objectives was the reform of local laws—laws drawn from colonial-era Queensland—that criminalised sex between men. Thus, in June 2011, a National Dialogue on Law Reform was held in the country's Parliament House in Port Moresby, attended by church and civic leaders and groups of gay men and trans people from across the country. Outside the gathering, media assembled, along with a small group of protestors, who were upset that such topics were being discussed at all.

Following a series of speeches from delegates, the Dialogue closed with a group of gay men, mostly in drag, and trans women performing in Parliament House for all the assembled delegates. Despite great personal risk and warnings from allies not to take to the stage, they performed and invited the other delegates to join them in a closing dance. When the project participants spoke of this event, they were clearly excited by a sense of empowerment, even if only temporary, that arose from their choice to dance with others, some of whom had spoken passionately about the threat posed to PNG society by homosexuality. There are many ways of analysing this performance but what came to my mind immediately was pride and a sense of shared struggle against oppression. Although I do not equate my personal position and experiences with my former colleagues from PNG, I was struck by their immense courage and generosity to the other delegates. A group of marginalised, criminalised people called on their haters to join them in an act of unity, through dance.

In summary, then, this chapter sets out to do two things. First, I review how gay sexualities have been represented in various discourses that are relevant to the experiences of the participants in my research. This review includes Western scholarship but also some

important writings from and about Asia. Second, I will examine the link, implicit in the story above from Papua New Guinea, between identity, performance and performativity. Central to the chapter is an argument about the locatedness of identity. Judith Butler has famously argued that gender identities are not fixed but are, rather, a somewhat tenuous sense of self arising out of a series of acts: “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in a context of a body, understood, in part as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 2007: xv). Critically, Butler highlights that such acts are performed within, and shaped by, specific social and regulatory frameworks, including as we shall see, discursive formations. These discursive formations are disciplining forms of power that inform people about how to act and how to correct themselves to at least appear to be ‘normal’. They manifest in a variety of ways, depending on location and time. They are a form of perpetual training with the inherent aim to produce what Foucault famously described as “docile bodies” (Foucault: 1977: 135). However, as Foucault also observed, every application of “bio-power” generates its own forms of resistance, including, as will be evident in the life stories of some the participants in this research, a capacity to mis-perform the role which a pathologising medical discourse would otherwise assign them (Foucault 1984:324).

Origins of the ‘Homosexual’ in Medical and Sociological Accounts

While the pathologising lens of medical and psychiatric discourses about homosexuality appears to be very much a thing of the past, they have been surprisingly tenacious and still affect the lives of gay men in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere) today. Pathological anatomists

before the nineteenth century viewed “sexual perversions” as diseases of the genitals and caused by abnormalities therein (Davidson, 1991). Throughout the nineteenth century, in part through the influence of organological and phrenological theories such as Gall’s the emphasis shifted to a link between sexual desire and sexual instinct, which was then thought of as a reproductive instinct, necessary for the propagation of humans (Gall in de Block and Adriaens 2013:278). Perversions, or non-normative sexual practices, became defined as functional diseases of this reproductive instinct. During the 1840s and 1850s, the disciplines of psychology and psychopathology were based mainly on a theory of human instincts, their classification and quantity. According to De Block and Adriaens (2013) many psychologists and psychiatrists agreed that the sexual instinct played an important role in human life.

Furthermore, De Block and Adriaens (2013: 277) argue that sexologists Marcus Hirschfeld and Havelock Ellis suggested that sexual instincts did not alter much over time in and of themselves but what did change were societal attitudes towards non-normative sexual instincts. Their history of sexology is seemingly uncritical and maps a course of “progress” of views towards non-normative forms of sexual enactments. De Block and Adriaens argue that Hirschfeld and Ellis’ benign views were largely uncritically endorsed by historians of sexuality and psychiatry until the 1960s and 1970s. It was not until the late 1960s that Michel Foucault argued that what is accepted as “normal, healthy” sexuality has little to do with nature or instinct but is instead constructed by the societal values and norms of a particular society at a given time and place (Crawford:2006). For Foucault, sexology and psychiatry articulated the categories of non-normative sexual behaviours and the defined people who engaged in those behaviours as pathological (Crawford 2006: 413).

Thus, for Foucault, the 'homosexual' originated in sexological discourse in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century (Boellstorff 2011). This subject position emerged through what Foucault calls a "reverse discourse" in which homosexuality began to demand "naturalness" and legitimacy, through speaking on its own behalf, often using the same vocabulary and categories by which it was medically disqualified (Foucault 1978:101). Moreover, while the term "homosexual" was originally created to indicate *behaviour* decoupled from notions of *identity*, this proved impossible to sustain. The homosexual subject became "a personage, a past, a case history and a childhood..." (Foucault 1978:42). Some fifty years later, the terms "gay" and "lesbian" emerged in subcultural contexts and they were subject positions from the beginning (Chauncey 1995; Kennedy and Davis 1993 cited in Boellstorff 2011).

Contrasting the pathological discourses of medicine and psychiatry, sociology and the humanities have led anti-essentialist, non-bio-medical conceptions of sexuality and produced a culture-bound, historically specific sexual subject (Green 2007). The corpus of such social constructionist approaches has become gay and lesbian studies, a branch of sociology, featuring specific gay communities comprising gay and lesbian identities and subjects as research objects. While gay and lesbian studies attempted to locate gay selves in a variety of social contexts, it perhaps left the constructed object that it studied largely unquestioned (Green 2007). "This body of work took as its focus a kind of 'shored up' sexual subject position that could be captured by research and recourse to language" (Green 2007:28). These lesbian and gay subjects of this period were "knowable through observation, recoverable through archival investigation, and anxious to emerge from the historical closet to speak for itself" (Green 2007:28). The focus of this work has been on

uncovering the existence of gay subjects and challenging the assumptions of a sociology dominated by heterosexual orthodoxy. In this way, it might be thought of as a project of recovery, identifying and locating homosexual subjects and subcultures throughout history. While the bulk of scholarship concerns Western settings, there is also, of course, a large body of evidence in the form of anthropological studies that document cross-cultural variations of human sexuality (McManus 2014), some of which I touch on below.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a range of liberatory, emancipatory discourses emanating from North America and Western Europe borrowed heavily from the women's movements in the same jurisdictions, calling gay people to political action. This was done through an assertion of a gay identity and mobilising gay people to take political action because of their sexual identity. While there is no denying the advantages that this discourse and subsequent actions have created in many countries, the gay liberation discourse does, however, share with the medical discourse, the requirement of an essential gay identity or gay self. In gay liberation discourse, the action is enacted by identified and, perhaps, fixed gay subjects.

Queer Theory

Queer theory emerged in the 1980s through a critique of sociology and gay and lesbian studies, which was perceived by queer theorists as conspiring with a regulatory medical, pathologising approach to sexuality, evocative of late nineteenth and twentieth-century sexology and psychiatry. Green (2007) suggests that while gay and lesbian studies

championed the rediscovery of gay subjects and gay history, queer theorists posited that rather than giving voice to silenced subjects, gay and lesbian studies (sociology) reiterated the structures of control and enhanced existing regulatory power (Butler 1993; Fuss 1991; Warner 1993). The development of queer theory, therefore, can be understood as an attempt to account for non-normative sexualities in a non-essentialist manner, and in so doing, construe queerness as a radical critique of subjectivity as it is understood in conventional identity politics. In *Gender Trouble* (1997) Judith Butler argued that “the foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and subsequently, political action to be taken” (p.195). Butler argues that there is no need for an identified “doer behind the deeds, but through enacting the deed, the doer is variably constructed” (p. 195) Further, she suggests that this type of discourse potentially becomes another regulatory framework that in turn constrains and delimits the very “subjects” it aims to “liberate.”

Green argues that in defying epistemological and methodological approaches created for discovering the "truth" of the sexual self, queer theory "empties" social categories of their contents, thereby interrupting (in theory at least) their regulatory abilities. Queer theory has, if nothing else, reinvigorated debates in studies of sexuality, demanding that researchers examine sexual subjects more critically. However, a key critique of “queer theory” and the adoption of the use of the term ‘queer’ to describe non-heteronormative sexualities is that it is very much a product of an academic milieu, which remains dominated by white people. Goldman (1996: 173) suggests that in a "theory that intends to problematise identity and challenge the normative, we often foreground sexuality and

gender” to the exclusion of other types of identity, including race. By failing to acknowledge how race informs our perspectives on queer, there is a failure to "disrupt the hegemonic discourses around race and other anti-normative categories /identities." While there is an appeal in queer theory, its preoccupation with texts and disavowal of “shared social roles that sexual actors occupy” (Green 2007: 522) may appear remote from embodied practices. What remains is an undersocialised queer subject strangely unmarked by the socio-historical forces that shape sexual bodies and identities.

While the sociological position views a modern gay identity as an enduring project founded on moments of interaction, situational negotiation, and cultural obligations (Plummer 1975), queer theorists perceive this same identity as a fictitious affect whereby an actor "does" homosexuality in a repetition of acts and gestures that create the illusion of sexual orientation (Butler 1993: 200). However, the separation between the gay subject and the queer non-subject is not necessarily so great. Despite often being cited in queer theory texts, Judith Butler in her revised preface to her work, *Gender Trouble* (1999), calls for a coalition of sexual minorities that “will transcend the simple categories of identity, that will refuse the erasure of bisexuality, that will counter and dissipate the violence imposed by restrictive bodily norms” (1999:xxvii) She pleads for the coalition to be based on “the irreducible complexity of sexuality and its implications in various dynamics of discourse and to reduce power to hierarchy and to refuse its productive political dimensions” (p.xxvii). Butler is not against sexual identity per se, as such an identity is, she argues,

...a necessity to survival. The mobilisation of identity categories for the purposes of politicisation always remained threatened by the prospect of identity becoming an

instrument of the power one opposes...That is no reason not to use and be used by, identity [p xxvii].

Notwithstanding the counter-critiques of queer theory I have touched on here, for the purposes of this study, queer theory approaches do provide a clear benefit because by emphasising the contingency of identity constructions, implicitly highlighting the need for culturally specific localised understandings of gay social practices outside of predominant Western or North American gay culture.

The Gay International or 'McGay'

Butler sounds an important note of caution for a study such as this when she argues that “[t]he epistemological paradigm that presumes the priority of the doer over the deed (or the doing) establishes a global or globalising subject who disavows its own locality as well as the conditions for local intervention” (Butler 2007: 202). Indeed, one of the problematic legacies of the gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s has been the formation of a gay international discourse in which there is an assumption of a shared, transcultural struggle for social, sexual and political rights. As noted in Chapter One, this discourse frequently positions people of diverse sexualities from non-Western countries as needing liberation. According to Massad (2002) this has manifested in the form of “gay rights” championed by organisations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Human Rights Commission (ILGHRC), the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). In his article, Massad cites public statements made by office bearers of both these organisations that demonstrate a ‘missionary’ approach to the task of recognising homosexualities beyond

North America. For example, Robert Bray, a former public information director at the United States' National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and an officer at ILGA suggested that "the cultural differences make the definition and the shading of homosexuality different among people...but I see the real question as one of sexual freedom; and sexual freedom transcends cultures" (Massad 2002: 362). The style of gay international discourse may also attempt to stabilise apparent unstable polyamorous ways of being. For example, in conversations with colleagues and friends in Australia who are familiar with both my work in Sri Lanka and parts of South East Asia, including Muslim-majority Indonesia, I have often been asked questions that frame "gay" men in those countries as victims of homophobic oppression. Although seemingly well meaning, the questioner will populate the conversation with certain markers of gay liberation, inevitably taken from their own experience. For instance, "Do they have a Mardi Gras in Jakarta?" and "I guess most gay men in Indonesia are in the closet." Indeed, I have been asked about how my close gay Muslim friends 'reconcile' their sexuality with their religion. Unfortunately, I was usually too polite (or too annoyed) to explain that not all "gay" people live under the social aegis of the closet and the aspirational abandonment of it. Instead, I made non-confrontational, comfortable coveralls such as "Yes, aren't we fortunate..." Massad (2002: 364) suggests that the gay internationalist discourse demands that "these resistant 'Oriental' desires, which exist, according to Wockner, in 'oppressive—and in some cases murderous—homelands,' be re-oriented to and subjected by the "more enlightened" Occident."

Activists and academics from the Global South (Strongman 2002; Manalansan 2002) have criticised the internationalist model as an ethnocentric, "Western model" of being and doing gay. The discourse of the offer of gay liberation tends to be accompanied by descriptions of

non-Western cultures as being utterly oppressive of sexual minorities: the suppressed gay 'proto-subjects' living in these backward contexts are positioned as requiring some sort of rescue or education by the gay international missionary. Instead, Massad (2002) argues for localised resistance to the all-conquering gay international or 'McGay' (Boellstorff 2005) trope.

Jackson (2001, 2009) cites a body of research on gay Asia that presents challenges for understanding the globalisation of gay identities. This research critiqued earlier accounts that explained "global gays" primarily in terms of the spread of Western, especially North American, sexual and gender cultures. However, as Jackson points out, diverse gay and gender identities have developed in Asia that are neither direct adoptions of Western forms, nor remnants of pre-modern local traditions but which are better understood as emerging within specific local conditions. Consider for example, the *bakla* of the Philippines. Manalansan (1995) describes *bakla* as "particular types of men who engage in practices that encompass effeminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality" (p. 491). He argues that despite tropes that describe the *bakla* as pre-modern or unliberated, and laws that attempt to fix gender and sexual categories, *bakla* remain a fluid, uniquely Filipino form of gender and sexual expression. The emergence of such forms of sexual and gender difference in Asia, distinct from both their own historical traditions and modern Western gay cultures, suggest that cross-cultural borrowing is not the only force producing the broad-scale sex cultural transformations of global queering (Jackson 2009). Boellstorff argues that a frequent Western misunderstanding is that gay tourism or international gay organisations have played a significant role in the translocation of 'gay' subjectivities to Southeast Asia, an assertion commonly made without a shred of supporting evidence" (2007: 198). He suggests there "has been a failure in queer studies... to set forth any theorisation of the Southeast

Asian gay subject that does not presume inauthenticity, complicity, or domination by presumed Western precedents" (Boellstorff, 2007: 198).

The Role of the Nation in Shaping Sexuality

Writing with specific reference to gay cultures in Indonesia, Boellstorff identifies three spatio-historical scales with which Asian queer subjectivities have been analysed (2005, p. 219). The first is the *local* or "ethnolocal", which anthropological studies often identify as the site of pre-modern transgender and homoerotic traditions. The second is the *national*, which historical research links with the tradition-disrupting impact of colonialism, the imposition of Western heteronormative sexual regimes, and movements for national independence; the third is the *global*, which political-economy and cultural studies approaches interpret as reflecting the contemporary postcolonial movement of transnational capitalism. Of these three scales, Boellstorff positions the nation as the most important in defining the distinctiveness of modern Indonesian gay, lesbian (*lesbi*), and transgender (*waria*) identities. All these subjects vary from ethno-local traditions while also failing to conform to what he terms 'McGay' accounts of a homogeneous global queer culture. Boellstorff's analysis opens the way to consider the nation as a third space of sex-culture analysis between the anthropological emphases on the "local difference" of pre-modern homoeroticisms, on the one hand, and political-economy approaches that assume a transnational 'sameness' among globalisation-era homosexualities and transgenders, on the other. And, of course, each nation's experience of settlement, colonisation and independence struggles differs from others.

Using Boellstorff's nation model, in the next chapter I will examine some key discursive formations in Sri Lanka that, while not exhaustive, contribute much to shape the sexuality of

gay men in Colombo, all of which in various ways left their imprint on the rehearsal process and the performance of *If You Promise*.

This discussion will take up Butler's suggestion that a person's sense of gender and sexual identity arises out of a repetition of acts performed within certain regulatory frameworks. However, such regulatory frameworks are not necessarily so oppressive as to render gay people inactive and incapable of social and political action. As Jose Esteban Munoz (1999) suggests in his theory of disidentification, the disidentifying subject neither totally assimilates with nor rejects the dominating ideology. Such subjects, he suggests, employ a third strategy, tactically and simultaneously working both with and against a cultural form. The subject can rework cultural codes of the mainstream to read themselves into the dominant culture, effecting a simultaneous insertion and subversion.

For example, during the time of my fieldwork for my earlier research in 2006, when asked about the notion of disclosing his homosexuality to his parents, Jehan, one of the participants, replied that he would only make such a revelation if he was in a relationship with another man at the time. For Jehan, "coming out" was *relational*. He described to me how he had imagined telling his family about a possible future relationship with his partner using the language of marriage. This, he said, was to counteract any negative perceptions about gay men and their sexuality. Jehan's sexuality was expressed through an act of doing, in this case doing a relationship with another. Jehan used the discourse of marriage in a pragmatic way to effect change that suited his circumstance.

CHAPTER THREE: SOME AFFORDANCES AND CONSTRAINTS OF CULTURAL NORMS IN SRI LANKA

In the previous chapter, I highlighted the relevance to this project of Judith Butler's approach to sexual and gender identity, namely that such identities are best understood as a performative accomplishment. As noted, Butler suggests that people perform such deeds under the aegis of societal norms, not merely through sheer force of ideological and personal will (contrary to some of the rhetoric of 'coming out' narratives). The previous chapter framed my research in terms of key debates on the construction of homosexuality. Drawing together the arguments of Butler and Boellstorff, this chapter focuses squarely on the nation of Sri Lanka and presents an overview of some key discursive formations that influence gay male subjects and identities in Colombo.

I use the term 'discursive formation' following Foucault's seminal work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which he emphasises the regulatory effects of discourse. Foucault's work helps us to make sense of the way in which various social institutions are sites of contestation, where hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses offer different ways of enabling and constraining certain practices. While there are many social institutions and discursive formations in Sri Lanka in terms of which gay Sri Lankan men (and indeed all Sri Lankans) must fashion a life for themselves, this chapter concentrates on four key sites of contestation: religion; marriage and kinship; social class and caste; and the militarisation of Sri Lankan society. I focus on these four aspects of life in Sri Lanka because they emerged as significant during rehearsals of *If You Promise* and in discussions with this project's

participants. My account below is clearly not exhaustive but hopefully will also help contextualise the performance ethnography aspect of the research for readers who are unfamiliar with Sri Lanka's history, culture and politics. First, however, I must briefly discuss a foundational socialising concept that pervades Sinhalese society and that cuts across the four major sites of contestation to be analysed in this chapter. As with their relationship to Buddhism, kinship, class and caste, and militarism, the project's participants talked about and were influenced by the concept of, and the various practices associated with, *lajja baya*, (*shame/fear of being shamed*).

Lajja baya

In his book, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*, the Sri Lankan anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere uses the expression *lajja baya* (literally, 'shame-fear'; in other words, shame and the fear of being shamed) to describe a common Sinhalese socialisation practice that commences in early childhood. In this context, *lajja* translates as 'shame' (Obeyesekere 1984) but may also be understood in terms of the English words 'embarrassment' and 'shyness'. For example, a child who runs away when first confronted with a new adult stranger experiences *lajja*; a bride who arrives at her wedding feast with eyes downcast in modesty performs *lajja*; a foreigner reluctant to speak Sinhalese to their local friends displays *lajja*; a man arrested by police and remains out of sight of his neighbours, is a victim of *lajja*.

Baya may be translated as a fear of humiliation or ridicule. According to Obeyesekere the effect of *lajja baya* is to make the person ashamed to subvert social norms of modesty and

proper behaviour and to fear the social ridicule that results from any subversion or deviation from the norm. Importantly, the fear of social ridicule is not limited to an individual's fear alone but encompasses a subject's extended family. Spencer (1990) suggests that in the past this was evident in the form of rituals like the horn game (*an keliya*), in which the men of a village would divide into two teams and exchange obscene insults. In contemporary Sri Lankan society *lajja baya* manifests in the celebratory behaviour of the winning political party after elections. There is a set of disciplinary and humiliating practices that includes supporters of the victors using derogatory chants, and damaging property belonging to supporters of the losing side; in the extraordinary, frequently violent, and occasionally fatal, ragging rituals for new students at Sri Lanka's universities; and in the annual carnival of the Colombo big school cricket matches (Spencer 1990: 508).

According to Obeyesekere *lajja baya* does not affect all people in the same manner and is believed to be unevenly distributed within the population. For example, Obeyesekere demonstrates that *lajja baya* affects males and females differently, the discourse of *lajja* informing the social norms of female sexual modesty and appropriate behaviour while the second part of the expression, *baya*—fear of humiliation—has a greater effect on males, for it is men, Obeyesekere suggests, who are more in the public view and who therefore must be more sensitive to the responses and retorts of others. *Lajja baya* is most important for those with the greatest claim to social standing and position: 'It is said that low-caste people have little *lajja baya*; they have no status to lose' (Obeyesekere 1984: 504). So, the insistent emphasis on modesty, restraint and holding back is intensified along three dimensions: it is vital in aspirations to standing and respectability; it is most expected of

women rather than men; and, in contradiction to *this*, it is essential for those with the most public social roles, that is, men rather than women.

Obeyesekere's use of the concept of *lajja baya* and other discussions on shaming practices in Sinhalese society has been useful in many anthropological studies on aspects of Sri Lankan life, particularly the lives of Sinhalese women; including violence in Sinhalese villages (Spencer 1990); suicide among young women (Maracek 2006); female garment workers (Hewamanne 2006, Lynch 1999, Gamburd 1995); harassment of women by the military at security check points during the civil war (de Silva 2013), and with regard to 'respectability' and colonized Lankan women (de Alwis 2005). However, the concept has now been so widely taken up in anthropological studies as a critical discourse to frame Sinhalese cultural practice that *lajja baya* has become what Jeganathan (2000: 50) calls a "gate-keeping concept" in the anthropology of Sinhalese society.

De Alwis argues that Obeyesekere's definition of *lajja baya* largely overlooks its impact on Sinhalese women, and suggests that Obeyesekere "not only resorts to a very rigid and narrow notion of 'public', but compounds this through his uncritical use of the public/private binary (de Alwis 2005: 180). De Alwis suggests that *lajja baya* affects women as much as men as it "circumscribes their practices in the private as well as the public" (180). De Alwis argues that *lajja baya* was actively used by the Buddhist revivalist and nationalist Anagarika Dharmapala, one of the leading figures of the Sri Lankan independence movement in the first half of the Twentieth Century, mainly to target low-country Sinhalese women's attire. Dharmapala was concerned that women were immodest

(lacking in shame) by adopting the attire of the colonial rulers, using clothing as both a symbol of nationalistic opposition to British (and Christian) domination of the country, and as a bulwark against "their (Sinhalese) loss of vitality, virility and morality" (de Alwis 2005:182). Dharmapala shamed and lowered the esteem of the Sinhalese (especially women) about their sartorial practices and then offered a "respectable" alternative: the six-yard long, preferably white, *osariya* (saree) (de Alwis 2005: 183). Another feminist scholar, Sandya Hewamanne (2006) observes that young Sinhalese women working in the country's Free Trade Zones (FTZ) transgress *lajja baya* by living away from home, often alone or in dormitories with other female workers. In her study, Hewamanne discusses how these women, mainly from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds, further transgress behavioural norms through their reading and writing of pornography (Hewamanne 2006: 148). Hewamanne argues that these women, who are already constructed as being unrespectable women for living alone in an urban, frequently stigmatised industry, create new sexualities and subjectivities through their consumption and production of locally produced erotic magazines (Hewamanne 2006: 148). The women challenge both patriarchal and class norms in which women are bound by "middle-class dictates of high and low cultural norms." (p.148). However, these transgressions take place mainly in secret, in the constructed space of the FTZ.

Lajja Baya and Gay Men.

Another omission in Obeyesekere's framing of *lajja baya* is a consideration of the ways in which the concept shapes the behaviour and lives of non-heterosexual subjects. There is, for example, no scholarship exploring this topic. On one level this is not surprising: the nature

of discursive formations such as *lajja baya*, is that their operation and effects are often unmarked: they become almost 'common sense', pervasive yet unnoticed. As I have argued above, *lajja baya* has different effects on people depending upon their socio-economic status and gender. Feminist critics have argued that most accounts of *lajja baya* have overlooked the question of gender. So how does *lajja bay* operate among participants in this study?

The participants seemed to be acutely aware of the tropes associated with *lajja baya* and how it manifests in their own lives and those of their friends and families. During rehearsals and in post-rehearsal discussions, participants would occasionally speak of it, but mostly in satirical ways, especially impersonating parents, monks or the police.

The effect of *lajja baya* on gay Sri Lankan men, particularly the use of the fear of social humiliation is demonstrated in a scene from *If You Promise*, the aesthetic questions associated with which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7. In the scene, a character commences a scene dressed in only his underpants, sitting silently on a small stool facing the audience. Another performer enters the space, playing the first character's mother, bearing clothes. She begins to dress her son, reciting a monologue about how she is fine with her son's ways; his sexuality. She continually says the words "*Ayo samaje!*" ["Oh society!"] with the inference of "what will society think?" Her behaviour and words suggest that her son's sexuality has potentially significant implications for the entire family, including a loss of social status. She attempts to comfort him, implying that she accepts his homosexuality in the private realm; the "problem", however, lies in society's (public) response. It is the disclosure, the open avowal of homosexuality, that has the potential to

affect the family negatively, rather than the associated sensibility and sexual acts, which may be confined to the private realm.

During the initial rehearsals of the scene, the participant performing as the mother hurled himself onto the ground, crying and beating his chest in self-flagellation. As I observed this, I asked the actor and the other participants watching whether such actions were “over-the-top”, perhaps constituting a mockery of a woman's suffering? Two participants promptly rebutted my query by sharing personal stories of female relatives, a mother and an aunt, who had acted similarly upon hearing news about potentially shaming events. They explained that such behaviour arose from a desire to protect the family, its members and its status, and suggested that its inclusion in the performance was necessary and essential because the mother’s acknowledgement of society in this scene positioned gay men within a familiar, Sri Lankan familial setting, subjected to the same fear of shame as any other family member. Far from viewing the mother character as being over the top or ridiculous, at least two participants agreed that she was both a noble and piteous figure. Noble because she performed her motherly duty, even to a son who had caused her distress and piteous because she too perpetuated, and suffered because of, *lajja baya*.

The discourse of *lajja baya* manifested in both the creative process of *If You Promise* and in the way the participants observed and discussed the risks associated with being involved in the project. Several participants during an early discussion on how to mitigate participant-risk, identified a fellow participant, a medical officer, as being “most at risk” because of his job and his civil status. He was seen by some of the others to have “a lot more to lose” through participating in a project that included themes about homosexuality.

Abandoning lajja baya

Foucault argues that when power imposes a norm upon a group, it is pressed to adhere to it. Yet despite the apparent subjugation of different groups (and their associated members) in society, regulatory discourses do not oppress absolutely. There remains for these groups some capacity to resist, to work in and around the prevailing societal norms. If individual subjects ignore or reject *lajja baya*, it may open opportunities to subvert normative sexual behaviours like the women in Hewamanne's study.

The creation of the category "homosexual" provides opportunities for those so labeled to mobilise, seek solidarity in mutual identification and act. In this context, any sexual act or relationship between two men in Colombo may constitute a rejection of *lajja baya* and its prescribed social and sexual norms. The abandonment of *lajja-baya*, even if only occasionally, may represent a type of "coming out." This abandonment may take the form of overseas migration; participating in forms of gay social activism or having sex with another adult of the same sex. Theatre-making too affords opportunities for collectivised embodied resistance.

However, such attempts at abandoning the strictures of *lajja baya* might well be policed by other gay men. As Foucault argues, power is not the sole possession or practice of the State: rather it is present at every level of the social polity. One participant in this study suggested that it was not only the broader Sri Lankan society or State that oppressed gay people. Within the gay community in Colombo, gay people themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, used shame and the fear of shame to affect the behaviour of other gay

people. He used an example of the shaming of men deemed effeminate or those who had multiple sexual partners, rather than being in a mutually monogamous relationship. He regretted this and acknowledged that it was not easy for him to disentangle himself from its influence. Similarly, I recall a conversation during a previous period of field work where class was identified as a critical issue in the effects of *lajja baya* on gay men. Suresh (not his real name) a then 28-year-old, middle-class gay man from Colombo, told me a story about his former partner, whom he described as "a very educated person, a professional person." Suresh could not reconcile that while his former partner was from "a good family," he also sought casual sex with other men.

"Whenever he comes to Colombo, he goes to the Fort toilet, and he has been caught by the police also. I cannot understand because he is a professional person. Then it [their relationship] broke up."

Suresh strongly disapproved of such behaviour and had become more cautious when considering potential partners.

"I only sleep with a particular type of people. I don't go for these toilet guys. He must be decent and come from a good family. He must be like...I only sleep with that type of people...a little bit educated people...I don't sleep with those other people. I have not had sex for two weeks but I don't have a boyfriend. I would rather masturbate while watching a VCD rather than go with them. There are lots of rogues and thieves. Why should you lose your hard-earned money?"

His sister had told him that she read in a newspaper about a man who brought another man home at night. The friend/lover killed the homeowner and fled the scene through a bedroom window. Gay men needed to be careful not to upset their families by having sex

with strangers in public places because it might shame the family. For Suresh such moments of fearlessness, temporary abandonment of *lajja baya* might also produce opportunities for violence and banishment.

Lajja baya may also operate at the supra-familial level and possibly disrupt efforts to establish and strengthen affiliations between local gay communities. For example, while doing fieldwork for my previous research project, I spoke with several upper-middle-class, English-speaking gay men who suggested that Sri Lankan society was broadly tolerant of gay sex (and relationships), so long as it did not disrupt mainstream social structures and functions. One informant told me that he disliked attempts by gay organisations to frame sexuality in terms of rights, as this would create substantial societal disruption and shame many families. He preferred that such organisations focus on providing services such as safer places for gay people to have sex (and distribute condoms) rather than "upsetting people" through increased visibility and advocacy. Although we did not discuss his personal circumstance at the time, the informant perhaps had much status to lose should gay organisations have some success in rights-advocacy: he belonged to Colombo's upper-middle class. As Obeyesekere suggests, the higher a family's status, the greater the concern with *lajja baya* in socialisation, which according to de Alwis (2005:179), reaches its "epitome among the urban educated" classes.

Lajja-baya may be thought of as having an affect akin to that of the concept the "closet" (a much-used trope within Western gay discourse) for gay men in Colombo. However, the closet metaphor cannot be neatly applied in this context because *lajja-baya* is, in many

ways, an amorphous social construction, which men (and women) both contravene and to which they accede from time to time. While the coming out the closet has a sense of finality, of once being in and then being out of the closet, the gay subject may not inevitably leave *lajja-baya* permanently but rather negotiates when it is safe to transgress and when submission to it is required. As noted earlier, *lajja baya* does not affect all people in the same way. However, it does work its way through people's experience of the institutions and discursive formations that I identified above in the introduction to this chapter and to which I now turn.

Buddhism and the Shaping of 'Moral' Lankans

In this section, I outline some of the social aspects and manifestations of Sri Lankan Buddhism, Sri Lanka's predominant religion, that inflect the social and sexual lives of gay men in Colombo. I am interested mainly in the way Buddhism provides codes for shaping a 'moral' Mother Lanka and 'moral' Lankan bodies. According to the country's most recent all-island census held in 2012¹⁴ 70.2% of Sri Lanka's population were Buddhist, Hindus (12.5%), Christians (7.7%), Muslims (9.7%) and others (<0.2%). Although less than three-quarters of the country's population are Buddhists, the religion's influence extends to adherents of other religions and those with no religion. One of the ways in which it has influenced Sri Lankan society is through the conflation of Buddhism with nationalist politics. For example, with the introduction of the Official Language Act No: 33 of 1956 (often referred to as the

¹⁴, The Government of Sri Lanka conducted the previous census in 1981. However, largely due to the civil war, there is a 31-year gap between the two censuses. Source: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/Pages/Activities/Reports/FinalReport/Population/FinalPopulation.pdf> Accessed: 31/03/2019

'Sinhala Only Act'), during the prime ministership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Buddhism came to be viewed by the government and broader society as the country's state religion.

Buddhism's ascendancy became apparent with the introduction of the 1972 Constitution (under Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first female prime minister), which afforded Buddhism the "foremost place" and requests that the state "protect and foster Buddhism" (Coomaraswamy n.d.129). The Constitution mentions freedom of religion; however, Coomaraswamy argues that religions other than Buddhism are protected only under a section of the Constitution addressing "fundamental rights". Rampton and Welikala (2011) argue that political leaders have used Buddhism to foment ethnic divisions within the country through the anointing of the Sinhalese as the defenders of the religion and the legitimisation of their "own rule with references to themselves as heirs to the tradition of ancient Buddhist kingship and religiously sanctioned moral governance..." (2011: 5).

To be clear, religious differences did not cause the country's near thirty-year civil war but former President Mahinda Rajapaksa's victory celebrations at the war's end in May 2009 featured a reimagining of the Sinhalese Buddhist King Duttugemunu, who like Rajapaksa, came from the southern part of the country (Ruhuna). Duttugemunu, who reigned from 161 to 137 BCE, is famous in Sri Lanka, particularly within nationalist discourse, for defeating the Tamil King Elara in Anuradhapura. Less than one week after the defeat of the Tigers in May 2009 (and more than 2000 years since Duttugemunu's victory over Elara), Rajapaksa attended a special religious ceremony at the Sri Maha Bodhi temple complex in Anuradhapura. He is reported to have made ritual offerings of inherited gold ornaments to the sacred Bo tree, a ritual practiced by many of the country's ancient kings. The ornaments

were then given to senior Buddhist monks, while Rajapaksa genuflected at the statue of Duttagemunu.

Even before Rajapaksa, the country's first Executive President, Junius Richard Jayawardena (referred to commonly as "JR"), used religious rhetoric in his plan to create a *Dharmista Samajaya* and *Dharmista Raj* (a righteous society and a righteous state) that he combined with neoliberal economic reforms (Rampton and Welikala 2011, Gamage and Wickramasinghe 2012). JR redesigned the Presidential flag to include the wheel of righteousness (*dhamma chakka*), a significant Buddhist symbol.

In addition to politicians locating themselves within Buddhist pageantry and symbolism, Buddhist monks have sought political office. In 2004, a secular Sinhalese nationalist movement called the Sihala Urumaya combined with a politically active group of monks called the Jatika Hela Urumaya (JHU) (National Sinhalese Heritage) party. In the parliamentary elections of that year, the JHU won nearly 6% of the popular vote and with it, nine seats, including monk-politicians, in the two hundred and twenty-five seat lower house.

Monks have played and continue to play a central role in the preservation of Buddhism within the country. For many Sri Lankan Buddhists, Theravada ("the way of the elders") represents a collection of unaltered teachings (the Dhamma) of the Buddha, preserved throughout history by a legion of monks (the Sangha). While, according to John Clifford Holt (2011), Theravada Buddhism is mostly a conservative religious tradition, understandings and practices of those traditions are dynamic and vary across time and circumstance. The nature and speed of changes in those understandings and practices have accelerated in the past

one hundred and fifty years due mainly to modernity, capitalism, universal suffrage and influences of other religious traditions (Holt 2011).

Buddhism in Sri Lanka began with Emperor Ashoka of India (304-232 BCE), a convert to, and later patron of, Buddhism. When Asoka's contemporary, King Tissa of Sri Lanka, sent an emissary to India, Ashoka took the opportunity to promote Buddhism to the King. Ashoka dispatched his son, Mahinda, and daughter, Sanghamitta, a monk and nun respectively, to King Tissa's court in Sri Lanka. Soon King Tissa and his court converted to Buddhism.

For centuries, Buddhism flourished in Lanka. The Pali Canon was first written there and the Indian scholar Buddhaghosa wrote his treatise, *Visuddhimagga*, there. However, in the sixth century, internal political instability, exacerbated by invasions from southern India saw a significant decline in support for Buddhism. From the twelfth through to the fourteenth centuries, Buddhism regained much of its former influence before it was to face perhaps its most significant challenge: the arrival of Europeans. In 1505, the Portuguese arrived and occupied many of the coastal parts of the country. The Portuguese destroyed many temples and persecuted Buddhism in favour of their religion, Roman Catholicism. They remained in the country until 1658, when the Dutch expelled them. Portuguese rule is considered "one of the darkest periods for Buddhism in Sri Lanka" (Perera 1988: 71). The Dutch, who took control of the island until 1795, were more interested in commerce than religious conversion so left the remaining monasteries alone. They did, however, implement a system to record Christian births, deaths and marriages; and expanded formal Christian schooling. Therefore, many local Buddhists became Christians for marriage; recording births; and to gain employment at schools as teachers.

The last Kandyan (Sri Lankan) king, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha, was a south Indian-born Hindu. In March 1815, the Kandyan chiefs and members of Rajasinha's court signed over sovereignty to the British Crown through a treaty called the Kandyan Convention (Sinhalese: *Udarata Giwisuma*). Then one ruler, the British monarch, governed the entire country; thus, ending continuous self-rule that endured for over 2000 years. In the treaty, the British promised to safeguard Buddhism's rites and practices. Despite this clause, the British, through missionaries, schools and other institutions actively converted Buddhists and members of other religions.

Protestant Buddhism and Sexuality

Gananath Obeyesekere coined the term "Protestant Buddhism" to describe the predominant form of the religion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Sri Lanka. According to Obeyesekere, the term has two distinct meanings. The first is that modern Sri Lankan Buddhism's "norms and organisational forms are historical derivatives of Protestant Christianity" and the second, perhaps more importantly from a contemporary viewpoint, is that Buddhism is a "protest against Christianity and its associated Western political influence" before independence in 1948. In other words, Sri Lankan Buddhists both used and shunned Christian social norms and practices as ways of positioning the Sinhalese within colonial and post-colonial society. Malathi de Alwis suggests that

"indigenous moral orders were remade in articulation with Victorian, Christianized notions of morality within a colonial relation of power. The encompassing modified

formation of "respectability" that was produced thus signified the interplay of both systems" (1997: 129).

An essential aspect of the adaptation of Christian norms and organisational forms was how the religion controlled sexuality, and particularly women's sexuality. Buddhist leaders and revivalists such as Dharmapala saw a need to protect Sinhalese women and position them as the embodiment of all that was good and virtuous about Mother Lanka. The reasons for this are, in part, a response to provocations by British colonial discourses about women and culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Christian missionaries and educational authorities viewed Sinhalese Buddhist women as unrestrained and sought to convert them to Christianity to make them more civilised, obedient, and possess a peaceful manner (Hewamanne 2003; De Alwis, 1997). In response to these characterisations, male nationalists developed an ongoing project of instilling the virtues of Victorian femininity, domesticity, discipline, and restraint in Sinhalese Buddhist women, thus constructing Sinhalese Buddhist women as embodiments of national greatness. Dharmapala introduced dress and behaviour codes in addition to a 'proper' attitude towards sexuality that (at least) middle-class Sinhalese women were to follow. This nationalist patriarchal project positioned women as passive and subordinate, whose lives were best lived at home and the temple. Many across the country enthusiastically embraced Dharmapala's ideas because of their anti-imperialist nature (De Alwis 2005). Some of these measures remain today. For example, Sinhalese women are ideally virgins at marriage and should lack knowledge about sexuality before marriage. To maintain this norm, many Sinhalese families supervise women and avoid having them living alone, where they may experience free time that can lead to pre-

marital sex, echoing the Christian idea that the devil finds work for idle hands (De Alwis 2005).

Buddhism and Gay Men

In the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism there are numerous references to sexual behaviour that today may be understood as homo-erotic, and to individuals who would be called homosexuals and transgender. However, as a series of texts composed over two millennia ago in a non-Western context, sexual categories found in the canon do not necessarily align with contemporary notions of homosexuality or homosexual subjects (Jackson 1995, de Silva 2013 Zwillling 1992).

During rehearsals of *If You Promise* participants occasionally spoke about their religion. One participant, Gayan, was a born-again Christian and spoke more of his religious faith and practice than any other participant. Like the situation in many Asian countries, charismatic community churches are expanding in Sri Lanka (Hefner 2010). Only one of the participants spoke directly of his religion, describing himself, in the opening lines of an early draft of his monologue, as a Sinhalese Buddhist.

“What can I say about myself? I am a Sinhalese Buddhist. We are traditional, but I think a bit... also. At least my father was. My mother was more traditional. I have to take you back to a time before the internet...there was no Facebook, Hi5 and Wikipedia. There was no LGBTIQ, support groups or peer support. Nothing. That doesn't mean we were not having sex ... I started to have sex when I was ... well never mind. I must have been an early bird.”

Saman, 41.

When I asked why he chose to establish his ethnoreligious identity so early in his story, Saman explained that there were two reasons. The first was to inform the audience from the outset that he was very much from mainstream Sri Lankan society; the second was to critique prevailing socio-religious (Buddhist and other) attitudes towards homosexuality. Along with other participants, during rehearsal, Saman talked about the Buddhist teaching of not harming others, a variation of the precept that recommends abstaining from taking life. During rehearsals, he spoke of not wishing to "hurt his mother" through "burdening her about (his) being gay." In his story, Saman also potentially transgresses the precept of abstaining from sensuous misconduct, suggesting that his initiation into sex was with men while he was young. He does reflect on his behaviour and feelings during the monologue: "*But we didn't really mind. Not until I was approaching my A levels. Was I doing the right thing?*" In the performed version of his monologue, however, Saman does not begin by telling the audience of his Buddhism but opens the piece by talking about his coming of age prior to the emergence of the internet. In discussion with other participants, he decided to omit the religious reference, lest the audience saw it as critical and disrespectful of the teachings and practices of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. His decision to omit the religious reference goes to the issue of a certain kind of self-censorship that operated from time to time during the project, a theme to which I will return in Chapter 5.

Marriage, Kinship and Potential Disruption to Familial Relationships

Perhaps the most prominent theme to emerge from the creation of *If You Promise* was the importance of family relationships to the participants. In some respects, this finding is

unremarkable. What is significant, is that participants frequently and deeply considered how their participation in this project risked disrupting relationships with their family members. At an early rehearsal, the participants discussed, in both Sinhalese and English, the risks associated with being involved in the project, a discussion I observed from outside the group. Luuk, who often assumed a leadership role because of his theatrical experience and his position as a co-founder of the Sakhi Collaboration opened the discussion by asking the others "Whose family knows about your sexuality?" and "Where does your family think you are at the moment?". Before continuing their participation in the project, Luuk suggested that they consider their situations and any potentially negative consequences of participating, especially if "non-knowing" family members came to know about their sexuality. Luuk suggested that they discuss these risks with each other to ensure that everyone understood the potential harms to which they and each of their fellow participants were exposing themselves. The issue of participants' understandings of, and negotiations around, risk is discussed in Chapter 5. For the purposes of this current section, Luuk's opening questions are important precisely because the theme of familial relationships infused rehearsals and the content of *If You Promise*. The participants all, to varying degrees, articulated feelings of obligation to their families, to 'protect' them from any unpleasant consequences. This included how they might or might not communicate with their families about this project.

In this section, I briefly outline some of the significant aspects of familial relationships and, given the ages of the project's participants, marriage, in contemporary Colombo. I provide some background to the social context within which the project's participants lived and

performed their social and sexual selves. In addition to this project's participants, I will draw on fieldnotes from my earlier research in 2005-2006, in which the participants of that project frequently spoke about marriage; the strategies they employed to delay or avoid it; and how they might adapt to being married to a woman.

To give an indication of what is at stake in these situations, I want to recall an incident from an earlier period of field work in Colombo. In 2006, I met with a man, whom I will call Priya, in a noisy crowded tea shop and we talked about what was happening in his life at that moment. I made a field note, which I will reproduce here.

Marriage is almost obligatory and with it the advent of adulthood. For Sinhalese men marrying age is about 32. Priya is 31 years and three months old; "31 plus" as he called it. He held an envelope containing four marriage proposals dutifully sent to him by his mother, far away in Kandy. As the end of his lengthy bachelorhood approached, Priya knew he would accept one of the proposals. He was sad as he told me his ten- year relationship with his boyfriend, Rohan, who was up North fighting the remnants of the LTTE would cease and how he'd offer to help Rohan find a bride so they could be best man at each other's weddings. He was not joking.

We sat in a small tea shop on Galle Road. The shop was crowded with commuters eating maalu-paan (fish buns) before boarding homeward buses to Colombo's southern suburbs and beyond.

Priya's horoscope is not good for marriage until late 2008, so any promising proposal acceptance and ensuing marriage can be delayed a bit longer. Once, he told me, a proposal produced a trip to Matara, in the island's south, to meet and lunch with the budding bride's family. Despite pleasant conversation about the reconstruction of a temple wrecked by the tsunami,¹⁵ the trip was unproductive. Priya's parents later made remarks about her family as they travelled home to Kandy. The girl was too dark, his mother had said, she must have been wearing too much powder in the proposal photo. They were also not from quite the same caste. That "girl was low country; we are Kandyan." These comments elated Priya.

He removed one of the proposals, slowly, with great care, as if about to receive final instructions for a vital mission.

"Shall I read this one to you?" he asked, as he unfolded the proposal complete with photograph neatly pinned to the top left-hand corner. But before I answered, Priya had begun reading the proposal silently, suddenly ignoring me. He read quickly, made notes at the top of the proposal letter and occasionally paused to gulp his tea. He repeated these actions for each proposal, and then returned them to the envelope.

"Mata baeae," he said quietly, in Sinhalese, "I can't."

¹⁵ The "Asian Tsunami" (December 26th 2004) affected much of Sri Lanka's eastern and southern coastlines (Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-24/boxing-day-tsunami-how-the-disaster-unfolded/5977568>)

The above passage attends to the significance of marriage in many Sri Lankan men's lives, including gay men. Priya's manner during our meeting demonstrated the tension between his familial obligation to marry, his reluctance to proceed with marriage, and his ongoing relationship with his partner. He used his family's belief in the importance of horoscopes and the concept of 'auspicious time' to delay any potential marriage. Yet at the same time he recognised that he would likely marry a woman while attempting to maintain some relationship with his male partner. Priya's experience is not so uncommon, as I discuss later in this section, and illustrates perhaps one of the most significant challenges to many gay men in Colombo.

A Brief History of Marriage

The embeddedness of family, kinship and marriage arrangements in cultural norms and values translates the language of the kinship of one culture into the cultural terms of another problematic. The naming of one type of kinship relation can be easily misunderstood, outside its context and disconnected from the social networks from within which it obtains meaning. This is seen in anthropological and colonial discussions on whether specific forms of unions in colonised cultures could be called marriage or were merely cohabitation (Risseuw and Palriwala 1995). Given this, there is all the more urgency to contextualise relations of gender, family and kinship, and in particular to distinguish between the ideals of family and family relationships and the practices through which people are giving shape to these ideals in their living arrangements, within various sub-cultures of class, upward and downward mobility, ethnicity, and religion.

In Sri Lanka over the last two centuries under British rule and subsequent decolonisation, the patrilineal bias in its social system has been strengthened. Monogamous, lifelong unions, the social and economic dependency of women, and a category of "bastards" emerged, along with limited and diminishing employment and wage opportunities for women (de Mel 2001). While in the past marriage tended to be viewed as a contract, the sacramental element has gained influence under the impact of colonial, Christian, Victorian, and Hindu values. Goonesekere (1996) describes how in middle-class Sri Lanka divorce is currently experienced as an alien phenomenon to be rejected as one of the dangerous developments of modernisation. This is ironic, as in pre-colonial Sri Lanka divorce procedures were relatively simple, in a context in which marriage was linked to property systems, which guarded the interests of all individuals, including women.

While there are some shared practices and values among the three major ethnoreligious groups in Sri Lanka, there are different marriage and divorce laws for different sections of society (Goonesekere 1996). For example, Kandyans (up-country) are subject to different marriage laws to low-country Sinhalese, who are covered by marriage laws differing from those of their Muslim peers (Risseeuw 1988). The intricacies of the various civil laws in Sri Lanka are not detailed here, however, given that the norms of Sinhalese Buddhists are most relevant I focus on some of the features of Buddhist social and family life.

Sri Lankan marriage arrangements before the arrival of the British rendered women a degree of control over land and property. This was lost within a century of British rule due to changes in marriage and inheritance systems. Local marriage practices included fraternal

polyandry, infanticide, polygamy, and group marriage (Knox 1911: 162-179 cited in Risseuw 1988 p. 20). These practices, combined with the phenomenon of widespread serial marriages—many people would have four or five marriages in their lifetime—horrified the colonisers (Knox 1911, cited in Risseuw 1988). This practice of multiple marriages was particularly shocking to the colonisers as it appeared to subordinate men in favour of women. The pre-colonial state did not interfere in relationships: that was solely the domain of families. The consent of parents and relations was necessary, and for higher castes, the village headman or chief had to approve of the impending marriage.

The British, imbued with Christian morality, bore what Jayawardena calls, borrowing from Kipling's poem, "the white man's burden": converting, saving, and governing brown heathens. One of the manifestations of this burden was the rejection of traditional Sinhalese customs, including marriage practices and everyday social rituals. For example, Jayawardena observes that, influenced by Victorian British beliefs,

"the ideal unit of social organisation was the monogamous British family based on a strict moral code, the local new rich began to condemn liberal marriage customs and sexual mores of the Kandyans, particularly denouncing the prevalence of polyandry and divorce by mutual consent (Jayawardena 2000: 251).

Imposing, then, a range of laws around marriage and inheritance, the British viewed local women as being morally loose and the local men as lazy and effeminate. In response, the Buddhist revivalists were keen to demonstrate the moral and religious superiority of Sinhalese Buddhists by adopting similar social and moral codes. This has resulted in Sri Lankan society adopting the monogamous, heterosexual nuclear family as its norm and cornerstone. Notwithstanding the intervention of the state, first in its colonial form, and

subsequently in the post-colonial Buddhist revival as it attempted to match colonial morality, it is the family that continues to function as the key institution in terms of the maintenance of practices associated with marriage.

Families have tended to arrange marriages for both men and women (Malhotra and Tsui 1996), providing the normative sexual space for cohabitation and production of offspring. These arrangements may include the creation of proposals detailing the habits, skills and aptitude of prospective partners, and the engaging of the services of a marriage broker who will attempt to locate a suitable "match" by examining the horoscopes, caste, religion and social standing of the prospective bride and groom. Family background and the future economic prospects are often considered when attempting to create a match, while dowry is given (usually from the bride's family to the groom's) for between one-third and one-half of marriages (Malhotra and Tsui 1996). Marriage is synonymous with adulthood and "almost obligatory" (Marecek 1998): to remain unmarried may cause deep suspicion among family members and necessitate corrective strategies. In her study on suicide in Sri Lanka Marecek (1998) found that a failure to marry can cause deep unhappiness, loneliness, estrangement, and suicidality. In my own earlier research, participants expressed deep concern about the shame that their continued unmarried status may bring to their families. Two participants told me that they intended to marry a woman to secure their place within their respective families. One of these participants said that once married, he would cease sexual relationships with men, while the other saw his homosexuality as located outside any heterosexual life that marriage to a woman might produce. He intended to 'provide' for his wife (and any subsequent children) and pursue sexual relationships with men.

In addition to the personal distress identified by Marecek, an unmarried person may bring great shame and a loss of social status to the entire family and possibly affect the chances of other siblings or family members marrying. If a man or woman does not either participate in the search for a bride/groom or has not attempted to inform their family of their decision not to marry, the family will likely organise potential marriage partners for their daughter or son. Families use such marriage arrangement strategies to curb the threat of perpetual bachelorhood or to discontinue an unapproved relationship.

“Not married yet?” is a frequently used expression or question in Colombo. In conversations with taxi drivers, shopkeepers, doctors and gay men, over many years of living in and travelling to Colombo, my marital status has been a frequent point of interest. Initially, when asked, “Not married yet?” I would assert that I would never marry, which could elicit either further, more probing questions or a contemptuous silence. Later, I learned from my interlocutors (and friends, work colleagues, and my Sinhalese language teacher) that it is better to suggest, interrogatively, that “there is still time to get married (*tawa kal tiyenawa, ne?*). This response does not negate the possibility of future marriage but diffuses tension and potential loss of face for both parties. However, the older I get, the less effective this invaluable face-saving expression becomes. The last time I used it to deflect a curious taxi-driver’s questions, he replied by suggesting I was very old (I was 48 years of age at the time) and that I was fast running out of time (to marry and have children).

Such experiences are not exclusive to foreigners. Sri Lankan gay friends and research participants have told me that they often avoid large family gatherings such as weddings because of scrutiny by uncles, aunts, cousins, or other unknown wedding guests. Such

scrutiny may intensify as the man or woman ages. I have witnessed, at a large Sri Lankan Tamil wedding, a gay Sri Lankan friend being escorted by his aunt to meet several relatives of 'eligible' women, introducing him to each group of people as her nephew, telling them his name, his marital status, his profession, other interests and skills, and suggesting that he would make a good husband. My friend politely smiled at each of the groups of mothers, aunts and grandmothers, yet said nothing. I stood just behind him and noticed that he appeared to be uncomfortable. As we drove home after the wedding, he told me how angry he was about being "paraded about like a trophy." I replied that I was sorry for how he felt but added, glibly, that I enjoyed observing a moment of a particular cultural practice. He immediately dismissed my ethnographic gaze by telling me that it may be interesting to observe but horrible to endure, for it was not an infrequent occurrence. He had felt humiliated.

Contemporary Marriage Practices

By the mid-twentieth century, with the shifting economy of a post-independent Sri Lanka, many women, particularly those in urban areas, began to find marriage partners in new social spaces, such as universities, college social clubs, friendship networks and workplaces. With these changes, younger Sri Lankans began to move towards self-choice marriages, which may or may not have commenced with a romantic or love affair. With self-choice marriages becoming more common in Colombo many families are not as actively engaged in the pursuit of a marriage partner for their sons or daughters although family approval of one's intended partner remains important (Abeyasekara 2013). Despite significant shifts in attitudes towards marriage and a greater tendency for people to choose their marital

partners, marriage remains a principal strategy in social mobility and an "assertion of status in contemporary Sri Lanka" (Abeyasekara 2013:7). In her doctoral thesis, Abeyasekara notes that her participants were "often anxious about making choices and discerning what they should do regarding marriage" (Abeyasekara 2013: 165). Abeyasekara argues that many Sri Lankans are continuously considering the possible consequences of the clash between "their inner desires against their accountability to family and kin" (page 165), observing that the increased occurrence of self-choice marriages among younger Sri Lankans, at least those from the urban middle classes, is seen as a marker of modernity. However, the "choosing" person is imbued with tensions and anxieties that affect the choices that people ultimately make. There is the apparent apprehension about one's future happiness in the "selection" of a marriage partner and the less overt, but significant, fear of the affect that one's choice of partner may have upon familial standing and unity. Indeed, even when a Sri Lankan man decides to choose his marriage partner himself, he may not necessarily discard the traditional practices and tools often associated with an arranged marriage. These include analysis of the horoscope of both potential marriage partners and detailed background checks.

In summary, marriage remains a significant feature of contemporary Sri Lankan society. It is vital for the consolidation of familial wealth, social status and the production of children. Although self-choice marriages are perhaps more common in Colombo than arranged marriages, families still play a significant role in those choices due to individual members' obligations to their respective families. Class, and to a lesser degree, caste, also shape the role of families in a marriage of their members, as discussed in the previous section.

How gay men negotiate marriage

“...if I was born in another country, in America or somewhere I would like to marry a man...”
Nimalan, 27 years, Wellawatta

Gay men in Colombo, like the subjects described in Abeysekara’s work, experience a conflict between personal desire and accountability to their families. For gay men, however, the conflict is not solely about the choice of marriage partner but about the desire and enactment of their homosexuality, which likely precedes marriage. As part of the accountability to family, gay men might participate in recognised marriage-preparation practices. For example, episodes of family visits to potential marriage partners such as those mentioned in the field note about Priya; discussions among extended family members about a man’s continued bachelor status and matchmaking advertisements in newspapers and on websites, among others, constitute strategies commonly used by the families of many of my friends and participants in my earlier research in Colombo. These episodes are likely to increase as a gay man reaches his late 20s and early 30s: “marrying age.” While Western models of gay subjectivity and identity tend to “presume the pivotal emotional crisis takes place during adolescence” (Boellstorff 2005: 111), in Sri Lanka, as in Indonesia according to Boellstorff’s study, this cathartic period is more likely to occur in the late 20s or early 30s as pressure to marry increases.

Marriage as a Relationship Model

In Sri Lanka, homosexuality is seen mainly as being based solely on certain sexual acts between people of the same sex, and while it may be characterised as perhaps an

unpleasant physical phenomenon, it may at the same time be contextualised as an aberration associated with what is framed as a prolonged premarital adolescence. Intimate gay relationships are so far outside cultural norms that they are rarely recognised. It is the idea of same-sex relationships, then, rather than any single or group of sexual behaviours that gay men perform, that is so disturbing to mainstream Sri Lankan sensibilities.

There are no models for same-sex relationships in Colombo. Instead, gay men tend to adopt and adapt the dominant practices and discourses on marriage to recreate a model for their romantic and sexual relationships with other men: in my earlier research in 2006, many participants spoke of “marrying” a male partner and believed that in the West (“countries like yours” was a term commonly used) men could marry men. The West was often seen as a site not only of economic liberty but also of total sexual freedom for gay people within mainstream heterosexual society. Notwithstanding this fantasy construct of Western societies, many of the men were also critical of those perceived freedoms as gratuitous and possibly too disruptive to family life. In conversation, some participants asked me questions about living as a gay man in Australia. Some assumed that one could live a “married” life with a same-sex partner.¹⁶ This knowledge, gained mostly through local television reports of gay weddings, often of European and North American entertainers, gave the men the idea that such events were widespread and publicly acceptable in the (undifferentiated) West. While some desired to have such an event for themselves, they did not think it suitable in Sri Lanka because of the “culture” and of the shame it could bring to their families. Marriage

¹⁶ At the time of the fieldwork in mid-2012, same-sex marriage remained illegal in Australia. On December 9th 2017, marriage between partners of the same sex became legal with the Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017 being passed by the Australian Parliament.

was both a way to package their sexuality in a form palatable for their families while remaining potentially upsetting and dangerous to familial relationships.

While some of the participants who had either lived or at least visited a "Western" country speculated on what it might be like to have a gay venue such as a bar or sauna, most believed that such developments would most likely be detrimental to Sri Lankan societies and therefore were best left in other cities. Bangkok, for example, is a three-hour flight from Colombo and visitors' visas to Thailand are comparatively simple to obtain for Sri Lankans.¹⁷ Three participants had been to Bangkok and visited gay bars, sex shows, and saunas. For other participants, Bangkok was both alluring and distasteful. The allure lay in the men's perception of Bangkok as a gay paradise with Asian values and norms and yet it was repulsive because of perceptions that Thailand's practice of Theravada Buddhism had gone astray to allow such activities and sites to exist.

Fulfilling Desire and Family Responsibilities

In 2011, according to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka report, 1.7 million Sri Lankans out of a total population of approximately 20 million were migrant workers. In 2010, remittances from Sri Lankan migrant workers were over USD 4.5 billion, making these workers the most prominent foreign currency earner in the country (Sri Lankan Central Bank 2011). In her study of Sri Lankan migrant workers, Gamburd (2006: 692) suggests that despite the hardship of being away from family and working in often tricky positions, the workers do

¹⁷ Sri Lanka is often reported as having one of the least "powerful" passports in the world. This means that Sri Lankans require a visa (even for tourism) for most other countries.

this for the sake of their families. According to Gamburd (2006), each migrant worker supported an average of five family members at home in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka, therefore, remains heavily reliant on migrant worker remittances. Any political and economic instability, for instance in the countries of the Persian Gulf, may adversely affect Sri Lanka's economy. This was most evident recently during the 1991 Gulf War, which forced the repatriation of nearly one-hundred thousand Sri Lankans.

With the migration of male and female workers comes a variety of effects on the family members left in Sri Lanka. As Gamburd's research focused primarily on women, and there is a lack of studies on gay Sri Lankan men's experience of temporary migration for employment, again I rely on the stories I have heard and recorded during my earlier research in 2006. I have also known close friends go abroad to countries in West Asia (Middle East) for work. Many members of gay organisations that I have worked with over the years also had periods of work abroad. Besides the money it provided them and remittances for their families, it offered them an opportunity to delay or avoid a family-arranged marriage. Working abroad, particularly in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), created opportunities for these men to form relationships with men from other countries or with other Sri Lankan men. These relationships may last for a couple of years until the work contract expired and the migrant worker returned to Sri Lanka, or it might mean permanent migration with a partner to his country of origin. Without exception, these men talked of sexual freedom while being abroad, even in countries such as Saudi Arabia where punishments for sex between men are brutal.¹⁸ On occasions, it provided the opportunity for these men to sustain relationships in which their respective partners lived abroad even

¹⁸ Source Accessed 14/08/2019: <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/saudi-arabia>

after the Sri Lankan man had returned home. Going abroad to work for men in their twenties or early thirties is considered a right choice for working-class and lower-middle-class men for various reasons. It enables the men to support their families, in addition to saving money for their likely future marriages and resultant children. Simultaneously, working abroad, enables many gay Sri Lankan men to delay marriage and increase opportunities of meeting a “foreign” partner.

Class and Caste in Colombo

During my years of living in Colombo, I could not ignore the ever-present manifestations of class among gay and non-gay people. It appeared in many ways, from people suggesting they attended “a leading school in Colombo” to gay men who made clear their desire to meet other men who were “educated and decent,”, avoiding “those buggers from the *watte* (slums)”. It permeated perceptions of the gay organisations in Colombo: *Companions on a Journey*, a gay support and advocacy organisation, established by a then trainee-Catholic priest in the early 1990s, was mainly for Sinhalese speaking working-class people, while *Equal Ground* (the host of the 2006 Pride event described in Chapter One) was widely perceived by many gay men to be for English speaking, middle-class people. Class, and more specifically, perceptions of and associated with class, shapes ideas about possible partners with whom one can have sex, perhaps a relationship or at least socialise. In Colombo class counts. The nature of class relationships is further complicated in Sri Lanka, of course, by the continuing legacy of caste systems. Following a brief overview of the formations of class

and caste systems among the Sinhalese¹⁹ in Sri Lanka, I will consider examples from my fieldwork that demonstrate that gay men in Colombo are very cognizant of these dimensions of social stratification.

The Sinhalese Caste System

The Sinhalese caste system's structure was previously regulated according to the occupation of each caste, known as *rajakariya* (services to, or work for, the king). "Each caste", Jabbar explains,

was bound to a principal occupation, which was associated with the concept of pollution. That is, caste is expressed as pirisudu (pure) and honda (good) as opposed to apirisudu (impure) and naraka (bad)" (Jabbar 2005: 3).

The traditional hierarchy of Sinhalese caste begins with the *Govi* or *Goigama* (cultivators/farmers) who in the middle of the twentieth century constituted a near majority (49%) of the Sinhalese community (Ryan:1953 cited in Jabbar: 2005). The caste structure continues in descending order based on the status given to each caste. Following the *Govi*, as the highest ranked caste,

"There is a strong dispute about the second place in the ranking, between the Karawa (fishermen), Durawa (liquor makers) and Salagama (cinnamon workers) groups. There is also disagreement about the ranking of the Vahumpura

¹⁹ I only include details about the Sinhalese class and caste systems because of the predominance of ethnic Sinhalese participants in the study. However, class and caste systems also operate among the country's ethnic Tamil community. The details of their caste structures are also determined by the ethnic divisions of Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils. The latter are descended from indentured laborers from Southern India (mostly from Tamil Nadu) brought in by the British to work in the expanding estate sector in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(sweet/jaggery makers) who believe that they have better social status and [therefore] should be placed higher than the Rada (laundrymen) caste. Among the higher caste groups too there are differences of opinion concerning the order of ranking between the lower caste groups, especially with regard to the position of the Berawa (drummers) and the Bathgama (porter) castes. The Rodi, who are the lowest in the hierarchy are the only untouchables in the Sinhala caste hierarchy. They were the only marginalised group in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy, although since around the 1960s they have gradually entered the mainstream Sinhala caste hierarchy."

(Jabbar 2005:3)

However, various castes dispute this order of the hierarchy and, as pointed out by Jayawardena, "even a hierarchical system based on caste considered to be unchanging, [has undergone] many shifts and changes in the 19th century" (Jayawardena, 2000:161).

A distinctive feature of the Sinhalese caste structure, in contrast with the Indian caste system, in which most of the population are from lower castes, is that the percentage of the lower castes is numerically small: only around 25%. Their comparatively low number has historically exacerbated the marginalisation of the lower castes in Sri Lanka, which have often been denied opportunities to voice social and political issues important to them. Historically, the caste system largely dictated a person's social trajectory including the type of work that one was able to perform, one's marriage partner and access to formal education.

However, the introduction and growth of class as a social marker and determinant under British colonial rule disrupted caste boundaries and afforded varying degrees of social mobility.

Origins of the Sinhalese Middle Class

The class system in Sri Lanka is strongly influenced by that of Britain. While both the Portuguese in 1505 and the Dutch in 1656 disrupted the traditional feudalistic social structure of pre-colonial Sri Lanka, it was the arrival of the British in 1796 that saw fundamental social changes in economic, political, and cultural constructions of contemporary Sri Lanka (Gamage and Wickramasinghe: 2012). Under the British colonial administration, Sri Lanka shifted to a capitalist plantation economy, and adopted the British administrative and judicial systems. This system created a work-for-wages economy for much of the adult (male) population. As a result, traditional Sri Lankan collectivism was disrupted by an emerging focus on individual wage earners. The vast apparatus of colonial administration required significant local personnel to enforce the colonial rule through the provision of native, English-educated subordinates in the British colonial administration system (Gamage and Wickramasinghe: 2012). With this, grew a privileged indigenous class, working in the British administration system that embraced, to varying degrees, the ideology of individualism, the English language, Christianity, and formal education. This system, according to Gamage and Wickramasinghe (2012) created the Sri Lankan middle class.

Pieris describes this English-educated cadre of public servants as a "body of men, respectable from superior education and property" (Pieris 1954: 435). Elaborate social

conventions regulated the conduct of the service's members and served to distinguish them as a privileged class, most of whom, by the late nineteenth century, were associated directly or indirectly with the colonial government. Increased Sri Lankan participation in government affairs subsequently drove the creation of a legal profession, developing state health services required a corps of health professionals, and the spread of education provided an impetus to develop the teaching profession. In addition, the expansion of commercial plantations created a legion of new trades and occupations: landowners, planters, transport agents, contractors, and businesspeople. Certain Sinhalese caste groups, such as the fishermen (*Karava*) and cinnamon peelers (*Salagama*), benefited from the emerging new economic order to the detriment of the traditional ruling farmers (*Goigama*).

As a result, three types of classes emerged: lower-middle, upper-middle and the elite class. According to Hettige (2000), lower- and middle-class monolinguals who had paper qualifications were employed in the state bureaucracy. Some of those in the lower-middle class were involved in trade and commerce. The directors and heads of departments of the ministries mainly came from the English-educated, westernised, Sinhalese and Tamil upper-middle-class whereas ministers came from the English-educated, Sinhalese upper class, elite background (Hettige 1997). The upper-middle-class which acquired knowledge of the English language, and an appreciation of western societies, cultures and lifestyles, have used these as a point of reference to make attitudinal and behavioural distinctions between the upper and lower classes.

Although the emerging bourgeoisie of colonial Sri Lanka were generally supportive of the imperialist system that dominated the economics and political life of the country, there were some divisions around political privilege and opportunity which had their origins in the

caste system. The Sinhala Mudarliyar²⁰ groups among the *goigama* caste, allied with similar elite groups from other ethnic and religious communities, wished and acted to maintain the status quo as it suited their interests. As Gunasinghe observed,

"[...] there [was] a disintegration of the caste system as a division of labour without [this] necessarily leading to the disappearance of caste as a social group or caste consciousness. Both modes of stratification are reproduced in a distorted manner; class due to the presence and interpenetration of caste, and caste due to the presence and interpenetration of class" (Gunasinghe cited in Jayawardena, 2000:160).

The emerging middle class, largely constituted of *goigama* and other dominant castes among the Sinhalese, benefiting from the imperialist system began to question the co-existence of a feudal structure and privileges that limited participation in political processes, lobbying for a restricted franchise for men. As the growing middle classes of Europe demanded greater political rights once their economic position was strengthened, so, too, in Sri Lanka, the new middle class grew more aware of their lack of political rights and agitated for change. However, this agitation did not extend to the formation of a widespread nationalist movement to challenge ongoing British colonial rule, as the middle class' demands remained within the existing colonial system. Rather than focus on the overthrow of the British colonisers, much of the political activism of the new middle classes focused on reducing the privileges of the Mudaliyars who "monopolised the few positions of

²⁰ Mudaliyar is a chief headman, a local-level administrator under the British. While the chief headmen role was critical in the colonial projects of the Portuguese and the Dutch, the British created a "caste" of Mudaliyars, comprising representatives from the major Sinhalese caste groups as part of the colonial administration of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). The British promoted the Mudaliyar's positions of headmen among various communities to a status of a separate caste. They were given privileges, land and enjoyed a significantly higher social status to other Sinhalese communities. The Mudaliyar's earned the trust of the colonial rulers through their loyalty to the Crown (Gooneratne, Y. (1970)

prominence” (Jayawardena 2000: 321) given to locals in the colonial administration and legislature.

Class Mobility in the Post-Independence Era

For decades after independence, Sri Lanka developed and maintained a robust central welfare system, including universal entitlements to health services, education and subsidised food rations. Even with shifts in political leadership and philosophy, such government programs remained strong although expanding and contracting through the late 1970s; coupled with a substantial public service, and an orientation towards nationalised industries.

The considerable government programs were, however, difficult to sustain in the face of broader, global economic processes. Massive changes took place when the United National Party (UNP) came into power in 1977, under President J.R. Jayawardena, with a pivot towards open economic policies and heavy reliance on foreign aid and investment. One of the results of these policies was an increased gap between rich and poor, as the country’s budgets and economic direction came under greater scrutiny and pressure imposed by foreign donors and investors (Miller:1998). Numerous social programs were cut. Besides, the UNP invested much more heavily in tourism than any other previous government. As a result, many of those who lived in beach communities, who previously had relatively steady employment through fishing, coir rope production, and the processing of coconut fibre, faced increased economic marginalisation as infrastructural development focused increasingly on tourism. By the mid-1990s, one study found that nearly three-quarters of families living in these communities survived through casual labour (Miller 1999).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, despite the enormous contribution to the country's economy made collectively by migrant workers, there remains a social stigma attached to the phenomenon. In poorer sections of Colombo and the wider society, work abroad, at least in the beginning, can be seen as an adventure: an opportunity to see life beyond a village and to increase purchasing power for families. However, in middle and upper-middle-class society, there is a certain stigma applied to those who must leave their families and country to work for wealthy foreigners. They are also the centre of many public debates about changing family dynamics and family "breakdown" in Sri Lanka (Abeysekera and Jayasundera 2015:3).

Class and Gay Men

During rehearsals for *If You Promise Not to Tell*, the cast (participants) frequently discussed class and occasionally caste. Participants expressed concern that stories of working-class gay men's lives may be omitted from the performance due to the apparent over-representation of middle-class gay men's stories. This prompted discussion among the participants about what such stories might look like. There were similar discussions too about representations of stories from Muslim and Tamil men. Considerations on the representation of ethnic and religious minorities are discussed in Chapter 7.

The participants decided to tell their stories without consciously locating them within a specific class or ethnoreligious setting. This was because, in part, of concern that performing specific stories about class or ethnicity may appear tokenistic or inauthentic. However,

representations of class continued to be discussed throughout the rehearsal process. For example, for a group scene he led, Gayan required various props including neckties, a newspaper, a basket of laundered clothes, an iron and ironing board. One of the props was a plastic shopping bag from *No Limit*, a chain of locally-owned clothing stores across Colombo and the country, to correspond to the line of one of the characters who suggests her son goes to *No Limit* to purchase a suitable tie to wear to university. Luuk, who assisted in the co-direction of the performance, came to observe the rehearsal. After the actors played the scene, Luuk commented on the use of the shop name. He told me that he knew of gay men who laughed at those who shopped at No Limit and felt that the scene was doing so as well. "Some people have no choice other than to shop at No Limit. We should not refer to it as the audience will think we are snobby and elitist." I told Luuk that I shopped there and that the use of No Limit was to provide a brand that the audience would recognise because of its ubiquity in Colombo. The reference to it was not an attempt to be posh but to be "every day," and recognisable; rather than mock those who shop at No Limit, its use suggested that gay people, and their families, shop there too. The inclusion of naming No Limit was also to enhance the placement of the scene within the lives and experiences of what other cast members understood to be a relatively common experience for people in Colombo- to shop, at least occasionally, at No Limit. The reference and shopping bag stayed. The fact that this was such a point of heated discussion bears out what I have said above about the sensitivity of many gay men in Colombo to the politics of class.

Militarism in Contemporary Colombo

Militarisation, as defined by Anuradha Chenoy, is "the process whereby military values, ideology and patterns of behaviour [support] the structural, ideological and behavioural patterns of the state with a powerful impact on civil society" (2002, 4-5.) The nature and development of militarisation vary among and within states, and can be catalyzed, on Chenoy's analysis, by (1) the central government's response to oppositional, armed political movements with separatist aspirations or the desire to seize state power; (2) the actual or perceived threat to national interests by a foreign power, where the government in power conflates its political interests with those of the nation; or (3) military governments that have installed themselves on the claim that democratically elected governments are unpatriotic, immoral, or inept and, once installed, are invested in perpetuating their status and privilege. Militarisation is manifest by the excessive allocation of national resources to defence needs compared with those of health, education and the arts. The armed forces become significant employers as jobs in other public services ebb. Military formations and ideologies, whether of the state or guerrilla movements, are premised on arrangements of coercive power commonly associated with patriarchy (Tambiah 1998). These arrangements privilege certain constructs of masculinity while inherently requiring specific constructions of femininity projected as "other" to reinforce and operationalise the masculine (Tambiah 1998; Chenoy 2002; Enloe 2000; Yuval-Davis 1997).

Contemporary Sri Lanka is renowned around the world for a near-thirty-year civil war that ended in May 2009 with the bloody defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Weiss 2011). By the end of the conflict between 80,000-100,000 people had been killed,

including nearly 20,000 in the last few months of the battle (United Nations 2011). This conflict and its aftermath are the focus of this section on violence and militarism, in which I examine how the processes of militarisation described above manifest and pervade contemporary life in Colombo, and how this affects the lives of at least some of the city's gay men, even years after the civil war's fighting ended.

The War and its Causes

Animosities between Sri Lanka's major ethnoreligious communities, Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, became "a significant catalyst to Sri Lanka's civil conflict, reflecting the struggle for political representation and group entitlements" (de Mel et al. 2012: 94). While the British governed with the usual practice of 'divide and rule,' post-independence Sinhalese and Tamil nationalisms were driven by social mobilisation based on ethnicity and language (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001). The Sinhalese elite ensured their political domination with, for example, the Sinhala (language)-only policy of 1956. This policy not only made Sinhalese the sole official language but completely marginalised the Tamil language while displacing English.

Consequently, Tamil-educated or English-educated citizens who were not proficient in Sinhalese had their work and promotions in the public service restricted by the legislation. There were other hostilities too, including the settlement of Sinhalese people in predominantly Tamil areas and the violent disruption of Satyagraha (non-violent civil disobedience). Anti-Tamil riots over many years across much of the country fomented Tamil demands for self-determination, at first within the existing Sri Lankan state and later outside

it. In the 1970s, armed attacks in the north by militant Tamil youth against police and government officials, including Tamils who represented the central government, fired the conflict. War broke out following the anti-Tamil pogroms of July 1983, during which time Sinhalese mobs looted and burned Tamil homes and businesses. As a result, hundreds of Tamil people were killed and thousands more made homeless, with the tacit support of individual government members and some Buddhist clergy. Accordingly, processes of militarisation became entrenched, and existing hybrid cultures and communities fragmented into polarised ethnic identities. The development and impact of militarisation are uneven across Sri Lanka. Its most severe effects are in the arenas of active warfare, predominantly the Northern and Eastern Provinces (or "north-east"), which constitute the disputed Tamil homeland, Tamil Eelam. Here, in areas including the Jaffna peninsula, the Vanni, Batticaloa, and Amparai, fighting was fiercest between the LTTE, other Tamil armed militant groups, and the Sri Lankan armed forces. As Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake observes, in such domains, civilian administrations collapsed, "and competing authority structures emerged in the form of paramilitary security regimes and a political economy driven by violence" (2001, 295). In major northern towns such as Jaffna, military commanders headed the civil administration. Suspension of due process and the rule of law, extortion by militant groups, corrupt practices by the state's armed forces, restrictions on the movement of civilian persons and essential goods, fear for life, safety, and bodily integrity effected through torture, rape, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, were common. Elsewhere in the country, militarisation was manifest through ubiquitous military checkpoints scrutinising civilians through the regime of national identity cards and where women became especially vulnerable to abuse. Other modes of military surveillance were directed mainly at Tamils, such as registering with police on arrival from another area, and

arbitrary arrest under the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act and house searches by military patrols.

Militarisation refers not only to the presence of war and its effects upon host societies but is understood as a process that de Mel et al. call the "*ideology of militarism*," one that enables discourse and institutions to be suffused with "aggressive, hypermasculinist, militant solutions to conflict" that "justifies violence and terror" (de Mel et al 2012: 101). The ideology of militarism is yet another legacy of armed conflict. It manifests in government institutions including schools; judicial systems; infrastructure projects; critical government agencies; and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. De Mel et al suggest that "all these features are to be seen in Sri Lanka" (2012: 101). Another manifestation of militarism in Sri Lanka is the abduction (and killing) of journalists and press censorship. The government introduced strict press censorship as a national security measure during the war. Sri Lanka is ranked 126 out of 180 in the *2019 World Press Freedom Report*.²¹ Although the report states that there were zero killings of journalists in 2018, it cites various reports of increased threats of Tamil journalists by police.

The way militarism has seeped into everyday life in Sri Lanka is overtly evident in the presence of military personnel at checkpoints and on public roads, and in chronic aggression on streets, in advertising, TV teledramas, the increase of gun-related crime, and the use of violence in dispute settlement. This signals both the presence of violence as part of routine

²¹ Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/sri-lanka> Accessed: 23 August 2019

social relations and a high level of tolerance for violence as a conflict resolution method, including domestic disputes (De Mel 2007).

Militarism, Gender and Sexuality during the War and Post-War Periods

Tambiah (1998) suggests that military ideologies and processes of militarization have permeated Sri Lankan people's understandings of gender and sexuality, with different, even contradictory, consequences for different groups of people, depending on their positions, such as soldiers, military wives, and sex workers, and also their class, ethnicity, and race. For example, armed forces women gain skills and opportunities generally unavailable to a civilian woman, which offers them the possibility of challenging conventional gender parameters (Tambiah 1998:244).

Given the lack of research on the impact of militarism on gay men in Sri Lanka, I will, in this section, reference studies on its impact upon Sri Lankan women to demonstrate the significant influence of militarism in contemporary Sri Lankan society, without suggesting or implying that war affects women and men in the same way. While some studies on transgender sex workers and police violence exist in Sri Lanka (Miller 1998, 2012; Nichols 2010), a significant gap remains in the effects of the war and its aftermath on gay men. Gender, ethnicity, class, and disability may inform the ways people experience armed conflict, and the levels and types of harms endured. Nichols suggests that feminist research and theory have expanded its focus to include the intersectional nature of victimisation, mainly the intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender (2010: 196). Such research generally finds that gendered victimisation is often intensified and/or experienced in unique

ways when individuals encounter additional forms of oppression. For example, a female sex worker from a lower socio-economic status class or women from religious or ethnic minorities may experience heightened victimisation. However, the focus on the intersections of *gender* and *sexuality* in the victimisation of sex workers is limited in feminist criminological research and theory: most of this research focuses on women and girls.

For example, the research on male sex workers and trans women sex workers is limited but finds that male sex workers are known to experience assault, verbal abuse, and robbery (Scott, Minichiello, Marino, Harvey & Jamieson, 2005). Research on trans women sex workers also finds discrimination against their gender identity in addition to their sexual orientation and occupation (Kulick, 1998; Miller, 2002). Furthermore, research suggests that these sex workers, in general, experience harassment, abuse, and violence with little protection from the police (Kempadoo & Doezema: 1998 cited in Nicholls 2010: 197).

With the strengthening of the militarised state, the civilian population adapt to the shift in the socio-political climate. For example, sex work by Sri Lankan women became more visible because of militarisation. Although sex work is illegal, it flourished in principal military towns during the conflict. The police, too, marshalled support for the troops. Miller (1999) cites an interview with a police officer in Lingikavelendama (1997) in which the officer observed that he and his fellow police officers felt that they could not obstruct their “soldier brothers” serving in the war from satisfying their needs. In the event of a police raid on a brothel, for instance, a soldier could prevent the arrest of a sex worker he was with (Miller 1999). In towns such as Anuradhapura, a sacred city for Buddhists and a key transit point for troops, sex work was organised by civilians for the military. Military personnel returning

from and heading toward the front would transit in Anuradhapura. With money to spend before going home or to fight, personnel frequented brothels (Miller 1999).

Sexual activity during times of conflict, regardless of the circumstances, is often considered risky because loyalty to the military or the nation may be compromised. The idea that any form of sex outside institutionalized heterosexuality (marriage) can cause society to disintegrate further can be manipulated where long-term warfare has severely compromised societal practices and institutions that signal normalcy. Tambiah (2004) provides an example in which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) distributed a handbill exalting the virtues of conservative Tamil womanhood and the implicit dangers in deviating from their narrow construction of what it meant to be a Tamil woman. The leaflet featured a photograph of 'Gowrie', an alleged sex worker who had interacted with men of various political and military affiliations. The leaflet constructed her alleged behaviour as a threat to the aspirations of the Eelamists²² and to the dignity of Tamil femaleness. Where, at the best of times, public discourse is either silent on sexuality or vocal under the title that sex equals violence or violation, rarely (if ever) that sex equals pleasure or intimacy, militarized nationalism is forceful in determining the regimes of sexual and gendered behaviours imposed on subjects within the frame of armed conflict.

In 1998, when I lived in Bambalapitiya, a suburb of Colombo, a trans sex worker, frequently worked on the corner of my street. A small plot of vacant land, perhaps the only one on that busy, narrow road, enabled her some cover at night from the police. I got to know her

²² Eelamists are groups (political and para-military) advocating for a separate Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka.

through my work connection with *Companions on a Journey* (COJ), the country's first gay advocacy and support organisation. Nita, in her 40s, married with two children, had worked as a sex worker for years. Nita had many stories of her encounters with the police. On one occasion, when I met her at the COJ office, I noticed a large scar on the left side of her face. The scar appeared to be new. When I asked Nita what had happened, the COJ members present laughed. Recently one evening the police appeared while Nita was working. As soon as she saw them, she fled. There was nothing unusual in this. Sex work is illegal in Sri Lanka, and the police often assault sex workers (Miller 2011). On this occasion, however, the police chased after Nita on foot. The chase was long. Nita had to wade through a dirty canal in her light blue sari. As she climbed the steep embankment on the other side of the canal, she became caught on a barbed-wire fence, her face cut. Despite the injury, Nita continued to run until the police gave up their pursuit. The COJ members humorously retold this anecdote, complete with impersonations of a fleeing Nita, the hem of her sari in hand. The "punch-line" of the story was that Nita's price for sex would now be even lower as she was scarred.

Following this story, others recounted stories of encounters with the police. Some of these encounters included accounts of sexual and physical assault, threats to "out" them to their families; and demands for money or sex. The stories appeared to be known to all gathered at COJ that afternoon. Such threats and violence from the police and other military personnel were common among gay men and trans women who attended COJ. COJ members seldom reported these occurrences because, according to those members gathered, it was a waste of time. Moreover, the act of reporting an assault by the police (or

other armed services personnel) was dangerous because it invited extra scrutiny. Therefore, COJ members were sometimes told by the group's leadership to "act straight" at checkpoints and not to flirt with the military personnel. Indeed, anecdotally at least, the COJ members who could "pass" as heterosexual reported less incidence of violence, threats and intimidation from the police.

Despite the threats and violence, the war simultaneously perhaps enabled some gay men in Colombo to combine religious obligations with opportunities for sex. While living in Colombo in the late 1990s, I heard anecdotes from several sources about small groups of gay men travelling to Anuradhapura to seek sex with soldiers. Such a venture was precarious, given the illegality of gay sex and the significant police presence and military personnel in this transit city. These anecdotes suggested that those who travelled the long distance enjoyed a certain degree of privilege, particularly about class and gender. The soldiers whom they pursued were spoken about as being "manly," "uneducated," coming from "villages" and being innocent or unspoiled.

Moreover, because they were men, these "gay tourists" from Colombo had a relative level of freedom to travel to and within Anuradhapura. Such acts by a group of women would likely attract greater scrutiny from police. As noted above, in addition to hosting a large military base, Anuradhapura is known as one of the main sacred sites of Buddhism in the country. It remains therefore, a popular destination for Buddhist pilgrims especially during Poson Poya (full moon) in June. The religious festival, like those in Kataragama in the country's south, attracts thousands of people; pilgrims, tourists, gay men, sex workers and intersections of these groups. The site provided a "cover," a socially acceptable reason to

take the trip. It provided the visiting gay men from Colombo with opportunities to cruise for sex, particularly in boarding houses and hostels, the preferred accommodation for most pilgrims. When I again lived in Colombo in 2005 and 2006, I heard similar stories and anecdotes from men who had travelled to Anuradhapura to meet soldiers and pilgrims for “fun.” Some of their peers criticised those who took part in such adventures. Some of this criticism was about class and the perceived fetishising of the rural poor, who were overly represented in the Sri Lankan army, while others argued that any engagement with soldiers constituted a kind of endorsement of the war and a fetishising of the country's pervasive militarism.

In summary, while the military's disruption of civilian life enabled some gay men to take opportunities for sex and to socialise, its presence also restricted and threatened them. As with the stories in research that has focused on the experiences reported by women, gay men, or those suspected of being gay by soldiers or police, could be humiliated and were exposed to threats that their sexuality and gender identity would be used to comprise both them and their families.

Following the Sri Lankan armed forces' victory over the LTTE, and the wild celebrations of many people in Colombo, the then President Mahinda Rajapaksa made a speech to the country's parliament in which he outlined a new vision for the country. With the supposed healing of ethnic fault lines Rajapaksa imagined a new Sri Lanka, reducible to a simple calculus of one's love for the Motherland or, as De Silva puts it, a polity reorganised in terms of varying levels of affection and disaffection “from the sovereign” (De Silva 2013: 12).

There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this country.

The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth.

*Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group.*²³

President Mahinda Rajapaksa
Speech to Sri Lankan Parliament
19 May 2009

This section of Rajapaksa's speech refers to removing the concept of minority ethnic communities from the country's public discourse. He says "We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary three years ago. No longer are the[re] Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any other minorities." There is no mention in the speech of removing any "majority". Rajapaksa's attempt to construct Sri Lanka anew as "one country" inevitably involves marginalizing some people. Tambiah (1998: 249) suggests that with the end of war, a nation needs to be "recovered" and with that comes a recovery of dominant sexual values or "perhaps more precisely, it means elevating, as a shared nationalist aspiration, the sexual values of dominant castes": a return to "normal." President Rajapaksa does not specify in his speech to the Parliament who these "small groups who do not love their country" might be. However, with the war finished, there is a need to identify and disrupt such small groups to recover the nation. The Sri Lankan government needed to redeploy thousands of police previously active in the conflict. The police could concentrate on other aspects of policing, including interrupting the social and sexual lives of gay men. During my fieldwork in mid-2012, I heard of numerous raids on gay parties in Colombo; including arrests, intimidation and extortion by police. In some cases, police threatened to inform gay men's

²³ Available at <https://www.satp.org/document/paper-acts-and-ordinances/president-s-speech-to-parliament-on-the-defeat-of-ltte> (Downloaded: 20 August 2019). The speech, translated into English from Sinhalese, originally appeared on a Sri Lankan Government website.

families and employers about their sexuality. Friends and former colleagues whom I have known since the late 1990s reported that popular cruising areas had "closed" due to a significant increase in police presence since the end of the war.

"They [the police] have too much time on their hands now," a participant told me during my fieldwork in 2012, three years post-war. In discussions with participants of *If You Promise*, all of them were grateful about the cessation of fighting but concerned about what would happen to the country, mainly how minority communities would be treated during these early years of "peace," especially with the nationalist rhetoric of the Rajapaksa government.²⁴ Many commented on the increased police presence in Colombo and their focus on policing "social evils" such as sex work, jaywalking and gay men's public cruising. Participants informed me that the police, both uniformed and plain-clothed scrutinised and raided popular cruising areas such as the "Fort toilet", Galle Face Green, Wellawatta beach and Bambalapitiya railway station. I heard several anecdotes about police arresting gay men at cruising areas and an increase in random identity checks by police for men "loitering." Participants told me that they relied far more on Facebook and other social media platforms to meet friends and potential sexual partners, reducing the likelihood of being harassed or arrested by police.

What constitutes a country and its culture? What are those elusive cultural practices and discourses that create (and are created by) social subjects? In this chapter, I have highlighted some key features of Sri Lankan history, culture and politics, and various

²⁴ Maithripala Sirisena became President of Sri Lanka following the election of January 8th, 2015. Rajapaksa, expecting to win another term, called the election two years early.

discursive formations, that bear heavily upon the lives of the gay men who are the participants in this research. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, below, the influence of these discursive formations is very apparent. They affect participants' decision making and even their participation in the project. These three chapters will illustrate the significance of how participants understand, negotiate and challenge social institutions and dominant discourses as they think about and enact their social and sexual lives as gay men in Colombo. However, before we get to these 'discovery' chapters, I need to flesh out the brief preliminary remarks that I made in Chapter One about the methodology used for this study, particularly regarding the move towards performance ethnography and the implications of this move for the relationship between the researcher and the researched.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY: A REFLEXIVE METHODOLOGY

During this project, I occasionally received comments from friends and work colleagues suggesting that my research topic was either "very specific" or "rather limited." Typically, these comments were followed by questions such as "Why gay Sri Lankan *men*?" "What about gay *women*?" "What about *rural* gay men?" "Why such a small sample?" "What's your hypothesis?" "Why *Sri Lanka*?" Any doctoral study like this one is both specific and limited. As Geertz (1983) reminds us, that knowledge is local. Rather than making claims of universality, it is the local in which the inquiry is located.

In my replies, I suggested that I was interested in how gay men in Colombo think about and enact their sexuality, especially how they experience and navigate the discursive formations (as discussed in the previous chapter) that affect the ways in which they live. My desire to study this group is borne out of long associations, both professional and personal, with gay men in Colombo. Because of these associations, shaped for more than two decades, I have an obligation to honor the participants' contributions to the study and, more importantly, to acknowledge the efforts of these men, and many others, who seek to create various forms of community within and beyond Colombo. This study does not attempt to represent all gay men in Colombo, let alone across Sri Lanka. Instead, this study focuses on a group of men who became research participants and co-creators of a piece of theatre, using their stories and bodies. As both the participants and I were interested to make a piece of theatre, ethnography, especially performance ethnography, enabled me as researcher (and co-creator) to share some of my performance-making skills with the participants to co-create

the data for the study; and to contribute to the objectives of the Sakhi Collaboration.

Ethnography provides a dialogic approach to explore these interests and to attempt to answer the central research question of this study: What understandings of sexual identity and expression might be foregrounded when a group of gay men in Colombo are afforded an opportunity to create a piece of theatre?

My friends and work colleagues were not the only ones to communicate concerns about the chosen participant group and my preferred approach to studying that group. Early in my candidature, and prior to undertaking the fieldwork, I applied to the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (the Committee) seeking approval to undertake the research. Two excerpts from the initial application are included below. The first provides a brief description of the project and the second details the academic merits of the project:

(d) Provide a brief summary of the project in lay language (approximately 100 words)

This study aims to create a performance ethnography based on the social and sexual interactions of gay Sri Lankan men living in Colombo. These interactions are explored within the context of a dynamic socio-political and sexual environment, where both traditional and non traditional constructions of sexuality intersect. The study's participants will co-create, with Mr Tyne, the work through drama workshops; script development; rehearsal and performance. Mr Tyne will undertake 12 weeks of field work in Colombo to work with participants to explore how performance (theatre) can be used by gay men in Sri Lanka as way to contribute to discourses about sexuality. Mr Tyne will document and analyse the process of creating the performance work with participants; the performances; and audience's responses to it.

e. Outline the academic/scientific merits of this study (including potential contributions to the body of knowledge and methodological rigor) (approximately 100 words)

“In Sri Lankan society sex between men is illegal and enacting homosexuality is frowned upon. This study will focus on how performance-led inquiry might be used to open up spaces for communities who are perhaps marginalized and largely ignored in public discourse. Conquergood (1991) suggests performance led research can locate knowledge in bodies in a certain place and time and may provide opportunities for groups to occupy spaces and raise issues important to them. He offers performance as an alternative method to interview notes and observations; another way of “channeling meaning.” This approach requires the researcher to think of ethnographic field work as a collaborative process and to become a co-creator with the participants. Mr Tyne’s research will attempt to explore with participants how stories from their lives maybe shared in a way that benefits the participants both during and after the performance. (Madison 2005) Denzin (2003) calls performance an act of intervention, a form of criticism and a method of ‘revealing agency.’”

A month after submitting the ethics application, the Committee informed me that it had not been approved. The Committee provided a list of reasons and suggested corrections for a revised application. This is, of course, a standard university ethics committee practice.

Given that "participants may be in conflict with local laws any possible risks should be clearly outlined in the Participation Information Statement (PIS)." Although, by participating in the project, the men were not in breach of any local law, I included the Committee’s suggestion about any possible risks to participants in the final version of the PIS.

It is the opening comment of the Committee’s review of the original ethics application that I include here as the basis for a discussion about the use of ethnography, particularly

performance ethnography as a research method. Specifically, the Committee raised issues regarding advocacy and the researcher's role as a neutral observer.

The Committee discussed at length the potential of the research to be taken as advocacy. The researchers²⁵ are not promoting activity that is illegal, however, one of the explicit aims of the project is to provide a positive space to affirm a particular lifestyle. The Committee considered that given the language of advocacy used in the application there could be a potential problem in maintaining a neutral, observational position. Please comment.

Source: HREC comments on ethics application number 14598

The Committee's comment implies misgivings about advocacy in research projects. It is not clear whether these misgivings are primarily because of the alleged advocacy for, and affirmation of, a "particular lifestyle," (an old, and seemingly tenacious, euphemism for homosexuality) or, whether it is only about the risk to the researcher's assumed neutral positioning in respect to the study's participants. In any case, the phrase "maintaining a neutral observational position" implies that "neutral" is the desired, "natural" state of the researcher.

I cite the Ethics Committee's concerns to demonstrate how ethnography as a methodology unsettles positivist assumptions about the relationship between researcher and researched.

This chapter explores some of the qualities of ethnography and performance ethnography

²⁵ The plural of researcher is correct here as because I, Matthew Tyne, am a PhD candidate, I am listed as the co-researcher, while the principal researcher for the purposes of the Human Research Ethics Committee application is Dr Paul Dwyer, my primary project supervisor.

and why this approach is useful for a habitually marginalised, under-examined group, such as gay men in Colombo. With the Committee's anxiety about the relationship of the researcher to their participants' understanding of the nature of the project in mind, this chapter examines some of performance ethnography's strengths and weaknesses, with an emphasis on critical reflexivity, the researcher's positionality and their relationship with the "researched." I outline and analyse the field work activities, including participant recruitment, drama workshops and rehearsals using Omi Osun Joni L. Jones six principles for performance ethnography as a guide.

There is no such thing as a neutral observational position in ethnographic research.

In this next section, I argue that researcher neutrality in ethnography is an undesirable position and impossible to achieve. As suggested earlier, a “neutral observational position” would most certainly have caused suspicion among participants. To gain their trust, it was necessary for me to share with them stories about my own life, including about my sexuality. More of that later in this chapter but firstly, what are the qualities of ethnography and performance ethnography, and why is it the most useful method to study gay men in Colombo?

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a form of qualitative inquiry that seeks to document about certain aspects of people’s lives in a given time and place. It constitutes the writing and documenting of cultural practice. Geertz (1973) describes culture as "webs of significance" created by people and that the analysis of these webs, forever being re-spun, is "not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (1973: 5).

Geertz suggests that researching culture through the creation of ethnographies involves more than a set of textbook-determined steps such as recruiting, developing a rapport with participants, gathering field notes, and so on. He encourages the ethnographer to explore forms of selfhood in different contexts, “to determine how the people who live there define themselves as persons” through analysis of "symbolic forms—words, images, institutions,

behaviours—in terms of which, in each place, people represent themselves to themselves and to one another" (Geertz 1983: 58). As such, expressions of culture are dynamic, always changing and not merely "passive reflectors of the status quo" (Conquergood 2013: 19).

Marcus adds that ethnographic research is "predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities..." (Marcus 1995: 99). To begin to form that intimate knowledge, the researcher spends time in the "field," encounters the study's participants, lives in their environment (even if for a limited time) and attempts to capture and interpret their activities and interactions. Through the in-depth study of a limited, select number of participants (often imagined and represented as a group), the researcher attempts to explain what is particular to that group at that time, and how certain cultural practices are enacted and understood by its members. These practices, and understandings related to those practices, are not static; ethnographies may be limited by time and context. Ethnographies reveal, as Clifford reminds us, "partial truths" (Clifford 1986). Nevertheless, they provide a method of understanding something about the endless variations of being in the world. When the researcher talks with (or in the case of this study, rehearses with) participants about these enacted practices, the revelations are not universal truths but contextualized responses to the researcher's presence, questions and other utterances. The ethnographer uses "thick description" of how participants perform and understand their respective cultural practices. It is through the analysis of this thick description that we may construct meaning based "on other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to" (Geertz 1973: 9).

Geertz cited in Conquergood (2013:67) reminds us that ethnography is not "focused on trivial issues or abstracted from human concerns" but instead it "frequently involves direct, intimate and more or less disturbing encounters with the immediate details of contemporary life" (Geertz in Conquergood 2013: 67). In much of the literature about ethnography's qualities, words such as "intimate", "everyday," "engagement" and "encounter" often appear. These words imply a closeness, a type of relationship created in the field. Perhaps the most significant and essential quality to ethnography is the relationship(s) formed by the researcher with the researched, the study's participants. As Hastrup (1992: 118) suggests, it is these interpersonal, intercultural encounters that produce the ethnography.

In his influential work *"Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,"* Conquergood (1991: 179-180) suggests that the "double fall" of both scientism and imperialism caused a "crisis in representation." The falls also yielded opportunities for ethnographers to undermine the "once dominant ideal of the detached observer using neutral language to explain 'raw' data," displacing it with an alternative approach that tries to "understand human conduct as it unfolds over time and in relation to its meaning for the actors" (Rosaldo 1989:37 cited in Conquergood 1991:179).

One of Conquergood's key arguments is that ethnography privileges the "body as a site of knowing [...] an embodied practice [...] an intensely sensuous way of knowing" (Conquergood p 180), at least when the ethnographer is 'doing' fieldwork. The recognition of the body extends beyond the researcher's body and its experiences of sight, smell, sound,

taste and touch, to the bodies of others; the participants' bodies "speaking, listening and acting together" (p 181). The ethnography is created through these collaborative acts by "historically situated, named, unique" bodies in a concentrated, albeit brief, relationship (Conquergood 1991: 187-188).

Performance-Centred Research

The encounter between ethnographer and participants is not a natural phenomenon. It is a construction reliant on both parties suspending their disbelief during a short-lived, yet intense relationship. The field relationships are contingent upon a series of implicit or explicit mutual agreements about belonging to the same cultural environment (Geertz 1968, Conquergood 2013). Geertz refers to this as the "anthropological irony" (Geertz 1968: 147), understanding the relationship between researcher and researched as being contingent upon "the implicit agreement to regard one another, in the face of some very serious indications to the contrary, as if we are from the same cultural universe" (Geertz 1968: 152). The fictitious "relationship" that enables the fieldwork to exist is sustained through the confirmation and reaffirmation of each other's performance (Conquergood 2013: 20). Whatever truths, partial or otherwise, can be mined from ethnographic practice, require an acknowledgement of the "fictions of fieldwork" (Conquergood 2013: 20). In this regard, Conquergood usefully differentiates the "fictions of fieldwork" from the "falsehoods in fieldwork" in which the ethnographer assumes easy identification with their participants, the Other. In addition to being morally problematical, he suggests that such assumptions may obscure opportunities for a researcher's self-critique (Conquergood 1985).

The ethnographer is like an actor, occupying the body and thoughts of a character, while simultaneously being aware that they are acting. The ethnographic performer, like a stage performer, requires an acute consciousness, an awareness of oneself as both subject and object (Conquergood 2013). I have expanded the concept of the "fictions in fieldwork" in this study because the primary data collection method is the creation of a piece of theatre through the constructed space of theatre rehearsals and theatrical performance: a kind of fattened fiction in fieldwork. The implicit agreement between myself as a researcher and the participants was extended to acknowledge my dual roles as researcher and co-creator (and indeed their dual roles as 'researched' and creators) of a piece of theatre. This required an ongoing awareness, during the fieldwork, of both the implicitly constructed relationship between participant and observer and the more explicitly constructed site of rehearsal and performance spaces.

Despite well-intentioned agreements, the ethnographic encounter is never experienced outside of the historical and prevailing conditions of the fieldwork. Conquergood advocates for thinking about ethnographic praxis as a form of disciplinary performance that enables displacement of positivist claims to objectivity, in which knowledge of the Other is removed from its historical and dialogical conditions (Conquergood 2013:21). While positivist claims may affix the roles of the observer and observed, locating the researcher at a comfortable distance to the observed participants, who occupy and embody the studied field, ethnography, understood as a disciplinary performance, brings researcher and researched together as co-performers, co-creators in a "fragile fiction" and a dialogical relationship (Conquergood 2013: 21).

The performative view enables both researcher and researched to become "mutually engaged collaborators in a fragile fiction" in which "both are vulnerable" (Conquergood 2013:21). Through this collaboration, ethnographers acknowledge that their participants have agency and may exert influence over them and the study itself from time to time. As Geertz (1968: 148) suggests, doing fieldwork is humbling; one of its benefits is to learn how to cope with being foolish and arrogant and being consistently positioned and repositioned by the study's participants.

What is Performance Ethnography?

I now move from Conquergood's all-ethnography-is-a-type-of-performance metaphor to examine the specific methodology of performance ethnography, in which performance is used as a way of producing research data and presenting research findings. There are numerous definitions of performance ethnography, the primary method used in this study. In this section, I shall focus on two of performance ethnography's noteworthy qualities. First, the significance of the intrinsic subjectivity of the embodied researcher in which they co-create the study's data with participants and second, the interventionist nature of performance ethnography (Denzin 2003; Jones 2002).

Hamera (2011), following Conquergood's recognition of the intimacy of interacting bodies, suggests that performance ethnography offers the researcher a vocabulary for exploring expressive elements of culture, a focus on embodiment as a crucial component of cultural analysis and a tool for representing scholarly engagement, and a critical, interventionist

commitment to theory in/as practice. Performance ethnography demands that researchers reposition themselves from a neutral, observational position to one of intimate co-creator (Conquergood 2002, Madison 2005).

Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Professor of Performance Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, concerned with the researcher's presence both in the field and in the presentation/performance of a study's findings, goes further, suggesting that performance ethnography is "how culture is done in the body" (Jones 2002:7). She suggests that ethnographers, fully aware of their own subjectivities, must explore what role these subjectivities play in the work and "determine how they will situate themselves" and remain mindful of how they act as "interpreters of the culture" (10).

The act of "intimate co-creation" with participants is inherently political. Performance ethnography is not morally neutral, nor "ideologically" innocent but instead is deeply enmeshed with moral matters (Conquergood:1985). Such engagements demand regard to the "state of emergency that many people live under," and that the ethnographer "pay attention to messages that are coded and encrypted; to indirect, nonverbal and extra linguistic modes of communication..." (Conquergood 2002:148). The very desire to co-create implies a type of intervention on the part of the researcher. However, much of the performance ethnography literature suggests greater levels of "intervention," pointing to the transformative influence of performance, be it therapeutic for the participants, educative for the audience and potentially for the broader society.

Denzin (2003:09) proposes that performance is an act of intervention, a type of resistance, a form of criticism and a way of revealing agency. He suggests that performance becomes public pedagogy when it uses the aesthetic, the performative to foreground the intersection of politics, institutional sites, and embodied experience. Citing Giroux, Denzin suggests that "...performances make sites of oppression visible. In the process, they affirm an oppositional politics that reasserts the value of self-determination and mutual solidarity. This pedagogy of hope rescues radical democracy from the conservative politics of neoliberalism" (Giroux 2001 in Denzin 2011:193). Viewed as a struggle and intervention, performance and performance events become transgressive actions, political accomplishments that break through "sedimented meanings and normative traditions" (Conquergood 1998:32) while "releasing suspended voices, building connections between the expression of a people and those people themselves, with power, possibility, and integrity" (Corey 2006:332).

While I empathise with the sentiments stated in these intense, ambitious descriptions, performance ethnography and its use with people from marginalized communities, may potentially create unreal expectations among, and risks for, the participants, as indeed my University's Ethics Committee highlighted in its caution about Sakhi Collaboration's hopes for this project. One the Sakhi Collaboration's hopes may have been to use the performance part of this project to make "sites of oppression visible" and to resist those sites, even momentarily. This action held significant risks to the participants because of the potential to attract further scrutiny from authorities. While performance may expose sites of oppression, it also makes the oppressed visible and potentially to further scrutiny.

Therefore, the researcher's zeal for communal and individual change requires careful, constant analysis as they encounter the participants' social realities.

The desire to “intervene” is challenged and possibly undermined by being in the field and interacting with participants. Della Pollock, a professor in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, specialising in performance and cultural studies, eloquently challenges the performance ethnographer’s activist tendencies:

“Performance ethnography encompasses going into a social field at risk of going under. Ideally, ethnographic work folds back on the researcher-subject, catching her in surprising, even disarming, processes of transformation. In so doing, it gives the lie to fantasies of activist instrumentality, as if we were in possessive charge of the knowledge produced, rather than dispossessed and charged by it.”

Pollock (2006:328)

While Corey enthuses about performance ethnography’s transformative qualities, he cautions that its “pre-determined outcomes, over-reliance on pathos, myopia, solipsism, subjectivity and the blurring of fact and fiction are but a few of the dangers" (2006: 331). Pollock, too, suggests that ethnographers often tend to identify too closely with participants. The identification and ensuing empathy for participants may leave the research subjects largely unexamined and critiqued. Such close association and alignment with participants may foreclose on or narrow, analysis. Pollock suggests that

“Whether because of the possibility of perpetuating racisms, limiting critique, and generating more productive relationships between the researcher and participants...it seems worthwhile to investigate and potentially intervene on the values of empathy in performance ethnography”

(Pollock 2006: 326).

Another conceivable snare in scrutinizing the intrinsic subjectivities of *both* the researcher and researched is the potential for doubling the fetishistic gaze (Pollock 2006). The expanded gaze may position the ethnographer as the overly-reflexive “I,” frequently found in autoethnography, or perhaps the submissive “I,” paralysed by, what Pollock calls, “the convergence of discourses marked in reflective perspectivalism” (Pollock 2006: 326), through long, often apologetic descriptor- or identity-lists: I am white, gay, aged, working-class, male, urban, Australian, rich . . . and so on.

D. Soyini Madison, Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, and author of the influential text *Critical Ethnography: Methods Ethics and Performance* (2005), warns of the risk to the creation of dialogic performance by means of a slippage into auto-ethnography, in which the researcher becomes the focus in a “contrived poetics of the self” (Madison 2006: 320). Indeed, autobiographical performance is quite distinct from, the oxymoronically named, auto-ethnography. Madison suggests that much performance ethnography is biography, not ethnography. The ethnographer’s omnipresent “I,” displaces the Other, leaves them “out of the caravan” that ethnography seeks to enlarge. As ethnographers, we do not seek to omit ourselves from the scene, nor do we strive for, or feign, objectivity. However, we must resist positioning ourselves at the centre of the scene and ensuing stories. When the researcher’s gaze is mostly upon themselves, it is harder to see the ground beneath and those standing nearby (Madison 2006: 321).

James Thompson, whose research is mostly on performance and war, applied theatre and performance and care, and who has worked extensively in Sri Lanka, uses the word

“guesthood” to describe the applied theatre practitioner/researcher’s positionality in the field, which he understands as a “carefully negotiated position that is acutely sensitive...of the histories of colonialism and exploitation” (2005:9) that may shape the relationships between researched and researcher. To continue with Thompson’s guest metaphor, the researcher-guest’s sensitivity must extend to the possibility of their hosts’ hospitality. This requires awareness of one’s behavior and worldview, as Thompson infers, and attention to the hosts’ abilities to recognise that the relationship between researched and researcher is not framed solely by colonialist and neo-colonialist tropes. The hosts possess agency and responsibilities too. Dikeç et al, following Derrida, suggest that “hospitality requires that a guest be greeted, addressed, named as a singular individual...welcomed as a Somebody, not as a serialized nobody” (2009:9).

Thompson’s “guesthood” may restrict the relationships between researched and researcher on the grounds of the established dynamic of colonialism and exploitation. There is a risk, for example, that the researcher, birthed in a former colonial power or Antipodean territory, and aware of their identity-markers, becomes fixated on attending to their privilege and neglects to pay attention to the lives of, and their relationships with, the study’s participants (the co-creators of the work); and the environments they inhabit.

Madison succinctly suggests that “... by being in the presence of Others, the fully embodied struggle to pay attention is a methodological and ethical necessity, and a service for freedoms that implicate us all” (2006:323).

The Creation of If You Promise Not to Tell

In the next section of this chapter, I detail the field of study and the process for creating a piece of performance, entitled *If You Promise Not to Tell*. I introduce Jones' six principles for performance ethnography, which acts as a guide for this part of the chapter. Jones' developed these principles through her own practice as a performance ethnographer with Yoruba women living in the United States. While acknowledging the potentially restrictive nature of principles for performance ethnography, whose form and content comes from the ethnographic encounter itself, Jones suggests that "[t]hese principles underscore the personal nature of fieldwork and the bodily understandings that can be derived from performance" (Jones 2002:8). Jones' six principles for performance ethnography are below: although the repetition of the word 'should' gives them an essentialising quality, the six principles combined capture the significant qualities of performance ethnography. I use Jones' principles here as part of the post-fieldwork analysis rather than as a framework within which the fieldwork, including the rehearsals and performance of *If You Promise Not to Tell*, took place. In this section, I chronologically outline the processes undertaken by the participants and myself to create the data for this study and a piece of theatre, *If You Promise Not to Tell*. I will align one of Jones' six principles with each part of the fieldwork process and use that principle to guide the analysis of that part of the fieldwork. Perhaps more importantly, this section introduces all the study's participants.

- The performance should focus on an idea or a question rather than provide a general "you are there" atmosphere.

- The performance should emerge through collaboration between the ethnographer and the participants, to ensure the ethnographer remains accountable to the study's participants.
- [The project should consider] the role that subjectivity plays in the field, the creation of the performance and the performance. Ethnographers must determine how they will situate themselves in the work.
- The performance should include multivocality as it helps to mitigate the authority of the ethnographer, and provide varied, even contradictory perspectives that the audience must synthesize.
- [The project should include the] Participation by the study's participants in the creation and presentation of the data
- [The project should engage] An ethics of representation.

(Jones 2002: 7-11)

In late May 2012, following approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sydney, I went to Colombo for the fieldwork. As I had worked in Colombo previously with the local gay community and with local dramatists (as a vocal coach, teacher and performer in a Sinhalese teledrama) I had already acquired a significant quantity of contacts for this project.

Principle 1: *The performance should focus on an idea or a question rather than provide a general "you are there" atmosphere.*

In late 2005, in collaboration with two Sri Lankan friends, I co-founded Bolo Theatre. One of Bolo's founders was Luuk, the co-leader of Sakhi Collaboration and, subsequently a participant in the project with which this current dissertation is concerned. Bolo Theatre's first performance piece used a selection of local gay men's experiences for different audiences in both Colombo and Galle, in the country's south. In early 2006, Bolo Theatre held a series of drama workshops for gay men and women. The workshops served as a platform for participants to socialise and discuss issues important to them.

In 2010, some of the men involved in those drama workshops with Bolo Theatre formed an online group called Sakhi Collaboration (Sakhi), which aimed to provide opportunities for gay people to meet, organise and socialise. Sakhi, then, existed primarily online as a forum for discussion about issues affecting gay people in Sri Lanka, although most of its members lived in Colombo. Occasionally, those who had 'friended' the group on Facebook were invited to attend Sakhi-organised gay-themed movie screenings or to meet at a party, organised by others. By early 2012, the group's founders explored new ways to engage members, particularly about advocacy and socialising outside the more common social spaces, such as parties.

Given the co-founders' common interest and experience in drama, in 2006 Luuk approached me about doing some work together. We had worked on Bolo Theatre and co-facilitated drama workshops with the Pita Kotte Arts Group in Colombo. Pita Kotte Arts Group, where Luuk worked for a time, specialised in various applications of theatre, particularly in

peacebuilding. It expanded its reach by offering storytelling workshops to actors and non-actors.²⁶

The idea for using performance in this study emerged from collaborations with two of the participants and the desire of these two participants to explore the possibility of producing a piece of performance for a general public audience. Both participants, Sakhi's leaders, claimed co-ownership of the project, and expressed to me their desire to "get something out of the project" for their nascent organisation and its members. Although at the start of the project, the idea for a public performance was present, the participants only later, during rehearsals, collectively agreed to perform for an audience. The performance was but one aspiration for Sakhi Collaboration. The other objectives were to provide members with a gathering site and to impart new skills in speaking, acting and devising performance scripts.

Principle 2: The performance should emerge through collaboration between the ethnographer and the participants, to ensure the ethnographer remains accountable to the study's participants.

Participant Recruitment

Sakhi, as the host organization, offered to use their online and offline networks to promote the project. Luuk suggested that he and I facilitate a drama workshop for Sakhi members and their friends. This workshop would give members "something new to do" and function

²⁶ The Pita Kotte Arts Group was started by a well-known theatre and film director in October 2005. Its main purpose is to promote peace and harmony in Sri Lanka through use of the performing arts. The activities in the Centre include producing drama and films, conducting artistic educational programs, holding seminars and workshops as well as publications.

as a recruitment site for the study. In late May 2012 Sakhi emailed its membership with an attached invitation to participate in a two-day introductory drama workshop.

Following the initial meeting with the Sakhi co-founders, I understood they wanted to use the project as a form of advocacy to the broader public. During that meeting, I told Luuk and John, the Sakhi co-founders, about the difficulties I had with the University's Ethics Committee when they suggested my research project could be viewed as a form of advocacy for "a certain lifestyle." Luuk laughed when I told him and observed that the project may or may not have some advocacy component to it, and that it was not up to me, or the University's Ethics Committee, to make that decision. "Let's see what the guys (the project's participants) want to do," was Luuk's advice.

I have known Luuk for over a decade. I acknowledge that he is a friend, as well as, in this context, a co-worker and research subject. These relational dynamics created challenges and opportunities, as the field note below suggests:

We meet at Barefoot to discuss how the next couple of months might unfold and attempt to outline some parameters of working together on the project. But even as I articulate what these parameters might be, I know that they are artificial. As I speak, Luuk smiles. I can see from his expression that he thinks my attempt to compartmentalise our relationship is futile. He laughs as he accepts the idea that he is a research subject inside and outside the rehearsal room. "Is there ever a time when we are just friends?" he asks. "I am not sure," I reply. I tell him that I am

concerned that our friendship will be changed through working in this way. He disapproves of my concerns with a kind of vocalized eye-rolling. "Aiyo, child! Always so dramatic, no?" The duration of the fieldwork, and our restructured relationship, will run for about nine weeks.

Sakhi led the recruitment of participants. The Sakhi leaders emailed its members and others known to them about the project (Appendix 1). The information was in English and Sinhalese. Sakhi wanted a lot of detail in the initial invitation to ensure three points: one, that potential participants would be clear about what was involved; two, that Sakhi was professional and knew what they were doing; and three, to identify the event as an alternative to parties or "AIDS vigils" (two of the more popular activities for the local gay community at the time).

Before the workshop I had regular meetings with Sakhi about the number of people attending, to answer questions that any potential participants might have, and to discuss what we might do if only a few people turned up. At one meeting with Sakhi, Luuk, and Gayan discussed email and phone responses to the drama workshop advertisement. Both men knew some of the respondents; others were new. Luuk wanted to have a mix of current members and others. Sakhi screened potential participants, because of concerns that some men would only attend the workshop to meet sex partners or might wish to disrupt it.

As they identified "known" names, Luuk and Gayan would share stories about that person, perhaps including information about what school he went to, whether he was "camp" or "closeted,"²⁷ or if there had been crushes and so on. Their banter around potential participants annoyed me by its exclusivist leanings: "How might this be managed?" I thought to myself. I understood that the recruitment could not be a "free-for-all," however, I was concerned that Sakhi could theoretically limit the range of men who might wish to participate at the initial workshop to members, their friends, former lovers and associates. I suggested that Sakhi recruit participants who were not known to Luuk, Gayan, or John. I asked if Gayan could include in his messages to SC members advice not to pass the information to others beyond SC members, to which he agreed.

The primary recruitment platform was the social media network, Facebook. Gayan and Luuk told me that they understood Facebook was used by different men in Colombo, and that many gay men in Colombo have two or more profiles depending on what they wish to use the profile for. The "gay profiles" usually do not contain a real photo of the person, but instead use the face of a Hindi film star or another picture of a handsome or muscular looking man, and every so often, a white porn star. The "normal profile"²⁸ may include postings and photos of family members and office friends, and feature an actual face photograph or something non-controversial such as a flower or a group photo, or, as Gayan observed, "lots of [photos of] Buddhas and Ammas (mothers)", a reference to the common

²⁷ Both "camp" and "closeted" were used by Luuk and Gayan and from what I heard and observed the words were understood in a similar way to how they might be understood in a metropolis in North America or Australia.

²⁸ The word "normal" is used in many ways in Colombo. For example, it may refer to unsliced bread or tap water. I have been asked on numerous occasions at a bread shop if I want "normal paan (bread) da? Sliced paan da? In this instance, it does not refer to "straight" but instead to mainstream or common.

practice in Sri Lanka of devotion to the Buddha and to the Mother, measures of normalcy and decency, as discussed in Chapter 3. Gay friends would not be "friends" of the regular Facebook page, and family members and related friends would not be "friends" on the gay Facebook page.

The participants, especially the two Sakhi leaders, Luuk and John, were involved in all significant decisions about the work, including whether to perform at all, who might be the audience, the content, assessing risks, when and where to rehearse. A discussion of these processes is in Chapter 5. All the participants were gay men, who have had (or will have) sex with another man while in Colombo or elsewhere on the island. That is, they have committed, or will likely commit, breaches of the country's Penal Code. This fact alone required a nuanced understanding of the potential risks to the participants while supporting their decisions to explore those potential risks. It is their project as much as it is my project.

Principle 3: The role that subjectivity plays in the field, the creation of the performance and the performance. Ethnographers must determine how they will situate themselves in the work.

What if nobody turns up?

From the start of the project, I knew that I would be a co-creator of some type of performance and therefore had to occupy two roles, together with that of researcher. Occupying a co-creator role during the field work was part of my commitment to Sakhi Collaboration's objectives. What was not clear initially was the form the co-creator role

would take. From preliminary discussions with the Sakhi Collaborations co-founders, I knew that I would be asked to facilitate some drama workshops for their members and other potential project participants. Beyond that, the participants, Sakhi leadership and time determined the scope and form of my co-creator role.

We needed to move fast to assemble the participants, source the stories, and produce a show. In the first week of the fieldwork, I began to doubt the possibility of staging a show, as the field note below suggests.

We have booked the Punchi theatre in Borella for the workshop. The response has not been very good so far...one confirmed and about 5 maybes. There could well be a rush towards the end of next week as is so often the way here. Or it could be a very small crowd indeed. I am not sure whether to put pressure on SC [Sakhi Collaboration] to recruit harder to find participants for me. Meeting with Luuk and Gayan again today at 3pm. Is there something about FB? The chatter on FB about gay stuff is huge...there are always postings about various events, news items and calls for improvements to rights for gay people and yet trying to get a dozen or so to come together for something like a drama workshop is less obvious.

I feel at times like I am wasting my time, attempting to flog these men into doing something useful for the community. Perhaps they do not wish to do it...shall I prepare to act again? Luuk and I can do a two-hander about a subject's relationship with a researcher. It does seem like I am imposing something from the outside on this scattered and loose group.

At a later meeting, Luuk and I further discussed the recruitment process and contingencies: what would be done if nobody turned up or participants were not interested in the project. I was reluctant to consider that possibility so early in the fieldwork and wanted Luuk and Sakhi to consider collaborative alternatives for the sake of their advocacy and the research project. Luuk suggested that we revisit some of the Bolo Theatre scripts and stories from our previous working engagements and the possibility of putting together a group of 3-4 actors who could create a show from a vast catalogue of stories collected by Bolo Theatre over the past seven years.

However, asking actors to play gay characters is not easy. Sri Lanka is not unique in actors baulking at "gay roles" lest it damage their careers or disrupt their personal relationships. Luuk is an actor and theatre producer, in addition to being a gay activist. He, too, is wary of conflating his theatre work with his activism. He told me that he did not wish to be "pigeon-holed" as a gay actor or as doing "community or message-theatre." "I don't want to be limited and typecast as a gay actor," he said. "So, I need to be careful." Luuk's words were in response to my asking him if he was interested in performing in the project, especially if others' participation proved inadequate. We agreed at the end of the meeting to not settle on contingencies, but to instead focus on the recruitment and retention of the participants.

Jones (2002) writes of being tempted to include something of her experiences as an African-American woman researcher in Nigeria in the development of a performance ethnography with a group of Yoruba women. I felt a similar temptation in the creation of *If You Promise*. The idea could serve as a further response to a lack of participants. During an early rehearsal, Luuk asked me whether I wished to perform a story as part of the piece,

suggesting that it might help to give some context and “credibility” to the project. He proposed “dramatising” some of the interviews from my earlier research. I acquiesced and drafted a one-page script, which I presented in a similar way to the participants, at an early rehearsal, standing on the Punchi Theatre stage, telling a story based on a detailed field note (the story of Priya, mentioned in Chapter 3).

Immediately following this ‘telling,’ however, I became very self-conscious and knew that I would not perform it or anything else as part of *If You Promise*. Several participants affirmed my feelings as they shared their feedback, indicating that it would “look strange” to have me perform in the show. Luuk, who had initially suggested that I present a story to the participants, added that this theatre piece “was not about me.” I shuffled off the stage and never spoke of performing in the piece again. For some years, Luuk and I had discussed creating a performance based on some of my experiences of living and working in Sri Lanka, however that is a very different show: it is not *If You Promise Not to Tell*.

The apprehension about inadequate participation remained with me throughout the rehearsal process. On the first day of the workshop at the Punchi Theatre in Borella (which I describe below), everyone was late. I recall thinking about what I would do if nobody showed up. Fortunately, after a forty-five-minute delay, people began to wander in, and my anxieties abated. I have never adjusted to the common use of time in Sri Lanka. In the many years I have worked there, my inability to adapt to what I viewed as chronic unpunctuality has contributed to much anxiety. In years past, I was surly with those who arrived at meetings late, including friends at social gatherings. I would frequently try (and frequently fail) to reassure myself with those persistent tropes that Asia enables Westerners to

practise patience. This was the participants' project I told myself: if they were late then who was I to intervene or attempt to alter this practice?

The Next Stage: 2-day Introductory Drama Workshop

This first opportunity to meet potential participants was at a two-day drama workshop, named the Next Stage by Sakhi. The project's name was Luuk's idea: "stage" as theatre and a developmental stage; in this case, a platform for gay men to gather and mobilise. The two-day workshop on June 9 and 10, 2012, attracted twenty-two men at the start of day one; seventeen of whom remained at the close of the day, all of whom returned for the second day.

The Next Stage: Day One

Dinesh, a 19 year-old-man from Aluthgama arrived first at the Punchi Theatre on that first morning. Aluthgama is sixty kilometres south of Colombo and well beyond the preferred participant "catchment." He wore boardshorts, a colourful short-sleeved shirt and a choker chain made of small white shells. I introduced myself and asked whether he wanted to wait inside the theatre for the others. There he remained, seated, looking about him as if searching for a friendly face, a fellow participant. I mentioned to Dinesh in Sinhalese about the lateness of the others. He smiled and replied, "*Oyaa Lankans la ta dannawa, neda!*" ("You know, Sri Lankans, don't you!"). I returned his smile and laughed. I was suddenly reminded of "*Sinhala welawa*" or Sinhalese time. I have heard of similar descriptors for "Pacific time" and "Java time." These times are rubbery, flexible. And now, on the first

morning of a drama workshop, all but one of the participants is late. I silently reminded myself that “this is part of the research”, an anxiety-relieving strategy that worked from time to time. In hindsight, however, my reaction revealed the underlying, persistent tension that I experienced as a researcher and co-creator: I had, I realized, temporarily abandoned my researcher’s cap, arriving at the PUNCHI that morning as a theatre practitioner, with the foremost issue in my mind being the whereabouts of the participants upon whom I could practice.

As noted above, by the end of the first day of the workshop, 17 men agreed to participate in the study. One participant dropped out about two hours into the workshop, telling me that he did not think the workshop was for him. Another two participants came along later in the day, one of whom left early. On Sunday, the second day of the workshop, there were again 17, the same 17. In my experience, it is not uncommon for those who attend on day one to invite others to participate in subsequent days, and indeed, a few of the workshop participants messaged or called friends to tell them to join, indicating that it was safe, while others gave detailed descriptions of the participants present at the PUNCHI that morning. While two participants told me that they had some friends interested in joining, the friends did not appear.

On day one, the men participated in a series of drama and movement exercises to assist them to feel "comfortable" with others and to hint at what the next six weeks of rehearsals and script development might look like. Rather than starting by talking about the research project, Luuk and I focused on the drama aspect of the project; the getting together, the

telling stories, the skills development. Luuk suggested that if the workshop opened with lots of information about the research process, the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms, the participants might possibly be scared off by the formality. He also said that the participants may believe that lots of personal information about them might be given to government authorities. Luuk suggested that participants get to know me a little through my guiding the workshop before discussing the research component of the project. I agreed to the suggestion but did mention that we would talk about the research component of the project on day two. Most of the men attending the workshop were new to me. The age range was 18 and 6 months to "41 plus". Of the 17 who participated, I knew or had worked with three of the men previously.

Principle 4: Participation by the study's participants in the creation and presentation of the data

"This is Important to Me."

Following an hour of "warm-up" comprising exercises and games used at Australian drama schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I asked the participants to think of a story based on the statement "This is important to me..." ("*Meya mata waedagat...*"): any story that might reveal something of their lives. It need not have been about sexuality, although this featured in most of the chosen stories.

Luuk and I distributed pieces of paper containing lists of stimulus statements in case participants struggled to identify a story to share. The statements included, "a time when you went against your parents' wishes..."; "A time when you had a crush on someone"; "A

time when you were embarrassed at work/college/school." However, all the participants chose their own stories instead of using the stimulus statements.

For the initial telling, participants were in groups of three or four, scattered around the theatre. One by one, participants told their story for one or two minutes, while the others listened, then commented on what they heard. They considered the main characters present, the main pieces of action, and where the story took place. Each participant took his turn.

The smaller groups then combined to form two larger groups of eight and nine respectively. Each participant would retell his story to the larger group. During this version, participants were able to stand and move around while telling the story. Before they commenced this, I asked them to make notes: a few points on characters, actions and place. Some wrote a list of dot points, while others drew small pictures of the characters, location, and so on. Again, those watching gave feedback on what they saw and heard, and how it made them feel.

This exercise took quite some time. Rather than merely comment on what they experienced as audience members, participants fired questions at each other: where the story came, and the situation from which the story developed, rather than why the teller chose his story. It seemed that the telling of a two-minute tale was enough to elicit questions seeking details about characters, actions and the background to the story. The responses were very supportive and encouraging. I thought there may be more comment on the appropriateness of the stories, especially their apparent "performability." The participants then returned to their notes to add further comments and ideas.

The following is an example of one the participant's (Vimukthi) notes: the names mentioned in text have been changed.

Reasons for coming out to my 2 best friends

- *Emotional glums/ getting moody too often, and I am not talking to anyone*
- *Isolation*
- *Need for acceptance*
- *I am like everyone else: equality*
- *Crush on Peter: need to share that information*
- *Friends asking if I have a girlfriend*

Met Supuni at carols

Dinner with Supuni and met Saumya

Both appeared to be very crazy, loud, bitchy and most importantly, open-minded.

Many days thinking whether to open up to them

Making sure we take the walk up the fire exit to enter some personal space.

Talking about random stuff. Me breaking off the discussion by telling, "I have to tell you both something." Supuni and Saumya stopping to hear me out. My heartbeat is racing and sweating and feeling the fear of my biggest secret being used against me: taking a chance by being courageous.

Saumya guessing, "Are you trying to tell us that you are gay?" in a very bitchy, mocking sense.

Me happily replying with a great deal of relief, "Yes."

"Are you serious?" asked Saumya, surprised.

“Yes,” said me.

“Are you really sure about that?” asked Supuni suspiciously.

“Yes,” I said again.

“Well how can you be certain if you have not had a girlfriend,” asked Supuni.

“Well it’s the same way you know you are sure you are straight without having a boyfriend,” I replied with confidence.

Moving further up the stairs...back in seats at work.

Later on....

- *Me sharing stories about my crush on Peter*
- *Supuni taking pride in having a gay best friend*
- *Supuni and Saumya sharing very intimate stories knowing I won’t do any harm to them as I am gay.*
- *Best friends even now.*

During the production phase of the project, Vimukthi devised three brief scenes, including one based on the notes above in which he disclosed his sexuality to people close to him (his friends, his mother and his brother). His story suggests that while his friends and mother were mostly accepting of his sexuality, his brother responded violently. He then developed his monologue into three short scenes with other participants playing his mother, friends and brother. Unfortunately, Vimukthi decided that he was unable to continue through the rehearsal process. He told me that his work commitments made it difficult for him to fully participate in the project. He did, however, participate in the performance through playing

keyboard and co-authoring the song sung by Gayan in the performance. The discussion of the final pieces performed in *If You Promise* is in Chapter 7.

The Next Stage: Day Two

On the morning of day, two following the warm-up and theatre games, each participant stood on the stage alone and retold their story to the entire group. As part of the preparation for this, the participants did exercises to "invite being seen on stage." The first of these involved each participant walking into the space (without a character) and to take a position somewhere centre stage. Once there they would stop, look at the seats in the theatre, imagining them full of people, then when the actor felt ready, he would turn and leave the stage.

After the presentations, we discussed the research component of the project. I talked about the Participant Information Statement and described the Participant Consent Form in detail. Both documents were read aloud by Luuk and John in Sinhalese and English. I suggested that written consent would be obtained at the end of day two. Participants did not ask many questions. I spoke about confidentiality, the research's purpose, its significance and what I hoped to achieve by the end of the fieldwork. Luuk then informed the other participants of my previous personal and professional connections with Sri Lanka. I suggested that their stories might be the basis of a performance for the public, but I provided alternatives, lest the participants did not wish to perform publicly. If they were not confident enough to perform themselves, we could get actors to perform the stories.

However, by the end of day two, it was apparent that the men wanted to be involved and to perform the stories themselves. I was surprised that they were so keen to be involved. I thought that as several of them were late on day two that perhaps they were not really that interested. I was mistaken. At the end of day one, everyone left excited because of the stories shared and the ease with which the group bonded.

Day two ended with each participant again retelling his story, but this time to the entire group. Following the retelling, the others could make comments and ask questions about choices or make suggestions about what aspects of the story could be explored further. Holding the workshop in a theatre with a stage introduced to the group immediately a sense of performing for others. It was an individual actor, alone on a stage, with his chosen story. Several of the stories were very broad and covered a lot of time during the storyteller's life. Some focused on coming out stories, especially to friends. The stories started with a realisation of being gay and then the experience of telling friends and their reactions. It seemed that many were comfortable about being out to friends; however, the majority were not out to their families. One participant spoke of being "out" and how others knew all about him and in the same story, he revealed he could never tell his family. It could not be considered, was not worth thinking about. The friends to whom he had disclosed his sexuality assisted their friend by not revealing the story to his family. The participants made a very supportive audience; gave loud applause and were generous in their comments. There was praise and encouragement. I found these responses so early in the project very encouraging, as it indicated the beginnings of a mutually supportive environment that enabled more in-depth exploration of such personal stories.

A discussion of the scenes' themes is in Chapter 5. Here I will illustrate how the participants experienced the stories as an audience to their peers during the workshop. Following each "telling" for the whole group, participants frequently identified a prominent theme from the story and then related a story of their own. This post-story discussion was critical in the final story selection and to building trust among the participants. One participant, Ranjit, told me he felt safe to tell his story to a "group of strangers." Ranjit, the youngest of the group, had some acting experience at school, usually in female roles (a common practice at many of Colombo's boys' schools). He had theatre experience although he had never been able to share his enthusiasm for performing with others. At this workshop, he told the group at the end of day two that he could combine his love of theatre with the need to talk about his sexuality.

The participants selected and performed their initial stories through participation in the workshop exercises. I did not intend to conduct interviews with each of the participants to base the stories on interview transcripts as one might for a verbatim theatre project. Rather than the researcher creating a script based on participant interviews, this project privileged the participants sharing and performing fragments of stories with and for each other in a theatre rehearsal space. This process enabled the participants' interactions with each other to influence the content and mode of performance for each participant thus demonstrating greater collective agency over the content and modes of performance.

At the end of the workshop, a draft rehearsal schedule was circulated. The next day some of the participants posted messages on Facebook about the workshop.

"Awesome guys!!! Feel the same. I'm so glad that I got to know all of you!!!! :) can't wait to meet you all again." Posted by Sagara (June 12th, 2012)

"Ok then,, i just logged in, and this was my expression.. :O :O :O ... with loads of surprises I would say we all learned something... so hi 5 to everyone and thanks Matt Tyne ... :)" Posted by John (June 12th, 2012)

"Thankz Matt Tyne... it waz sooooo great....!! miss u all soo much....!! I admire u all; u guys gave me a lot of strength in dis weekend :) ❤️" Posted by Ranjit (June 12th 2012).

The participants' responses were positive. Sakhi founders John and Luuk expressed surprise at how well the group bonded and at the levels of participation.

Following the introductory workshop, seventeen men joined the early rehearsals for what became *If You Promise Not to Tell*. By the night of the performance in late July 2012, eleven participants remained. None of the participants received payment for their involvement in the project. I provided (courtesy of the University of Sydney) refreshments during rehearsals and post show party. I also provided a small ex-gratia amount of about two thousand rupees (approximately twenty Australian dollars) to each participant as a contribution to their project-related travel expenses. Sakhi used the money raised from ticket sales to restage *If You Promise* in late September 2012 at the Punchi Theatre, Borella.

Principle 5: *The performance should include multivocality as it helps to mitigate the authority of the ethnographer, and provide varied, even contradictory perspectives that the audience must synthesize.*

Rehearsing If You Promise

The participants and I held the group rehearsals mostly at the Punchi Theatre in Borella. We rehearsed from mid-June to late July, for six consecutive weekends (from 10.00am until 4.30pm) and most weekday evenings from 5.00pm until 9.00pm. Further individual rehearsals, particularly in the initial stages of story development, took place in the house where I lived for the duration of the fieldwork. The individual rehearsals provided an opportunity to further explore each participant's motivations and other stories. At the end of each individual rehearsal, I wrote field notes about rehearsal and actor notes specifically on the actor's performance. I recorded the rehearsals on a digital audio recorder and occasionally filmed fragments of the rehearsals on a small, handheld camera. I used the audio and video recordings to supplement the detailed field notes and as "notes" for the actors. The actors wrote their own notes alongside their handwritten scripted stories. During the weekday rehearsals at Punchi Theatre, actor-participants had about an hour each on the rehearsal floor. This time included notes and discussions with each actor-participant. Luuk and I were present at all these sessions and other participants invited to attend to observe. Luuk assisted each participant with vocal exercises and if an actor needed to change his allotted rehearsal time, he merely swapped it with another actor.

When not rehearsing with individuals or groups of actors, I wrote and reviewed field notes, met regularly with Luuk and John to talk about progress, and, because of my previous work

in Colombo, seeing old colleagues and friends. I had minimal contact with participants besides Luuk and occasionally John, with whom I met to reflect on progress and any concerns that either of them had about the project.

While in Colombo I rented a large four-bedroom house in Colombo 07. A former work colleague had contacts with a local, who knew the Colombo landlord. I had received offers of accommodation from friends but wanted the option to be 'removed' from those relationships from time to time. The large rented house provided me with both privacy and a suitable rehearsal and meeting space for participants. Rehearsing at home saved money and created an informal space for individual rehearsal sessions. The casual, intimate space of my lounge room enabled each participant to explore his stories in relative privacy, away from other participants, family, workmates and friends.

Unfortunately, the landlord frequently arrived unannounced, often while rehearsals were taking place. To his credit, the landlord, despite knowing I was undertaking research on Sri Lankan life, did not ask many questions about the study, nor did he quiz participants in Sinhalese about what this white man was "really" doing in Colombo. He did, however, send his "boy" (servant) around to the house to clean and undertake small maintenance tasks. Given the intrusions, I was reluctant to host all the participants at home, especially at night, lest the landlord, his servant or neighbours began to inquire about what was happening. I did host one party for all the participants at the house and invited other friends to attend. The participants brought food and drinks. It was one of the few times during the rehearsal period when the whole group came together in a social setting to sing songs, swim in the overly chlorinated pool and get drunk on local beer and arrack. At that moment, I was their host, not their researcher.

Who are the participants?

In addition to the seventeen people who participated in the initial drama workshop, from time to time, other men, friends of the participants attended rehearsals, ran errands on behalf of the project and assisted in promoting the performance. I have changed all the participants' names to protect their identities. While the areas of the city in which I lived, and location of the rehearsal spaces and performance venue are given, I have changed the names of suburbs and other pieces of information that may identify individual participants. All the participants were aged above eighteen years, most being in their twenties, two in their early thirties and one participant was in his early forties.

The final eleven participants and their age at the time of the performance, were:

Luuk, 30, actor, activist and co-founder of Sakhi Collaboration, Anglican

John, 32, advertising and co-founder of Sakhi Collaboration, Catholic

Indaka, 28, government medical officer, Buddhist

Ranjit, 18, college student, actor, Buddhist

Nuwan, 23, college student, dancer, Buddhist

Saman, 42, accountant, long-time gay rights activist, Buddhist

Sagara, 27, advertising, Buddhist

Hasitha, 23, university student, actor, Buddhist.

Vimukthi, 26, musician, accountant, Buddhist

Murugan, 34, accountant, dancer, Hindu (Murugan dropped out during rehearsals and returned for the second staging of the piece about two-months after the first show.)

Gayan, 26, designer, lay preacher, Pentecostal Christian.

All men lived, worked or studied in Colombo or its environs during the time of the fieldwork. In Chapter 6, I use case studies of three of the men to illustrate the diversity of their experiences, their motivations for being involved in the project and most significantly how they negotiate their roles as citizens and family members.

Principle 6 *An ethics of representation*

This principle for performance ethnography is the least prescriptive of Jones' principles, and perhaps the most difficult to address. I interpret this principle in terms of how the researcher represents the participants both in the performance and the ethnographic text that may follow. Despite participants' contributions to and influence in the scope of the performance part of the project, the author's voice remains dominant in the non-performance text. During rehearsals in Colombo, some participants asked me about what life or purpose the written thesis might have beyond being marked by anonymous assessors. Two participants suggested that sections of the thesis be translated into Sinhalese and Tamil for publication in Sri Lanka to provoke discussion about sexuality. A further three participants requested that I send them a 'Readers' Digest version' of the thesis. I did not promise to fulfill either of these requests. However, the exchange reminded me of two important ethical considerations. The first is about how the researcher writes about or represents their participants. In this case, are there enough descriptions and

analysis of all participants? How dominant are Luuk's and John's voices and opinions throughout the thesis, for example? The second consideration is how my writing of the study aligns with, and potentially contradicts, the participants' versions of events, themes and understandings of what we did together.

The next three chapters contain further, detailed representations of what we did. I shall return to the principle of "an ethics of representation" in Chapter 8, the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPANTS' MOTIVATIONS AND THEIR NEGOTIATION OF RISK

“There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one, but many silences and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”

The History of Sexuality Vol. 1

Michel Foucault (1984: 309-310)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Sydney rejected this study's initial application because, at least in part, they interpreted the project as “advocat[ing] for a certain lifestyle” and, perhaps worse still, located the researcher, intent on studying aspects of gay men's lives, in a non-neutral, observational position. I do not deny my lack of objectivity about this study's subjects. This study is an attempt to feed the slender body of research about South Asian expressions of sexual diversity. As I will illustrate in this chapter, however, the men in this study were the advocates for a set of values and beliefs. They did not need a foreigner, neutral or not, to advocate on their behalf. Their participation in a piece of theatre that could have them arrested or shamed is evidence of their commitment to the project and, more importantly, to other people in Colombo, who embody a variety of sexual identities and expressions. For example, ten days out from the show, and before a rehearsal, the participants convened one of their regular discussions. Luuk asked of the others, as he had done repeatedly throughout the six-week rehearsal period, “Why are we doing this?” “Why are each of you

putting your bodies and stories on stage to be watched by a group of mostly strangers?”

These are critical questions, although Luuk’s timing, so close to the performance, scared me. I thought that asking your cast, a bit over a week before a show, for their motivations to participate seemed a tad late. Luuk had already asked the other participants about their motivations during the initial rehearsals, and they had responded. Motivations noted. In the meanwhile, I thought, some participants were struggling to remember their lines. The scene mentioned above, adapted from fieldnotes, describes both participants, exceedingly aware of the circumstances in which they lived and created, and a researcher, who, at the time, failed to attend to the risks to the researched, his co-creators. I had not fully grasped the participants’ need to regularly “check-in” with others to understand changes in risk or shifts in motivations for their continued participation in the project.

In this chapter, I argue that from the very beginning of the project, the participants were cognizant of the personal risks involved in participating in the project. Moreover, the participants, as a collective, deliberated on risk throughout the project and used the performance of *If You Promise* to attempt to represent gay men in a mostly positive, non-sexual way. They did this by adopting locally known techniques to negotiate both the State’s censoring tendencies and a form of group-, or self-, censorship to counter any representations of gay men that the audience may perceive as negative or stereotypical. Perhaps informed by potential audience expectations, the processes for selecting the stories for the performance featured frequent and, at times, intense discussions. The discussions reveal moments of tension between the participants, particularly between the Sakhi leaders and the other participants, and a nuanced understanding of the contemporary socio-

political climate in Colombo. The participants decided on a public performance for a paying audience during early rehearsals, yet they revisited the decision until the night of the first performance of *If You Promise*. The continuous attending to decisions and to each other demonstrates motivations of deep concern for fellow participants; to ensure a degree of safety and project ownership.

As mentioned above, the participants discussed their motivations and risks up until the night of the performance. In the next sections, I demonstrate that although Sakhi hosted the project, each participant was dependent on the other participants to fulfil the organisation's objectives. This required John and Luuk, representing Sakhi, to both lead and follow their fellow participants. The regular pre- and occasionally post-rehearsal meetings enabled Sakhi to form the project's direction and to listen to the others' expectations and fears.

Participants' Motivations

Sakhi Collaboration

Sakhi Collaboration had three co-founders, two of whom, Luuk and John, participated in the project. The third co-founder—let us call him Upul—I was told had 'fallen out' with the others over Sakhi's direction. Upul, who ran his own small business, had been critical of Sakhi's "slowness" in "doing something." Given his entrepreneurial nature and the growing gay party market, Upul wanted Sakhi to arrange parties, which, he had told Luuk and John, provided somewhere for gay people to go and the parties' ticket prices could contribute to Sakhi's limited income. The question of financial support was always present, and while it is

outside this study's remit to analyse the complex dynamics of Sri Lankan gay organisations (a worthy object of study in itself), here it will suffice to consider simply how the founders of Sakhi negotiated the politics of funding and decision making.

Luuk explained to me that he and John did not want to seek foreign funding. While other gay organisations—Equal Ground, Companions on a Journey, and the Women's Support Group—had received funding from abroad, Luuk felt strongly that the receipt of funds compromised the three organisations as each of them would be accountable to the donors and their agendas, regardless of how supportive, or progressive those donors may appear. Further, according to Luuk, the gay community generally was suspicious of gay organisations, with numerous accusations of misuse of funds, and what was perceived as an over-emphasis on questions to do with law reform.

As a result of these concerns, Sakhi had deliberately started slowly, to enable interest to build and to avoid creating significant community expectations too soon. Sakhi's advocacy objectives were less clear, although Luuk suggested that any advocacy strategies would emerge from Sakhi's membership. This, he argued, was in distinction to Equal Ground's and Companions on a Journey's approaches to advocacy, which centred on the leadership of their respective founders. This approach, according to Luuk, perpetuated the feudalist tendencies of the 'big man' or 'big woman', prevalent among non-government organisations in Sri Lanka. Both Companions and Equal Ground centralised all decision-making with their founders instead of sharing it with others. While the decisive, authoritarian leader model facilitated a visibility and clarity of their organisations' visions, it also left them vulnerable to criticism around governance and representational legitimacy. Sakhi wanted to mobilise and

build support within and beyond the gay community. This would take time. In early conversations with Luuk about Sakhi's interest in the project, he told me that the project had been part of Sakhi's strategy to build trust with the gay community and to initiate dialogue with the broader Colombo citizenry, through participation in the creation of theatre.

A few days after the preliminary drama workshop described in Chapter 4, John hosted a meeting at his office with all potential participants to talk about the process. There, he and Luuk explained to the group Sakhi's motivations for hosting the project: to provide an alternate space for gay men to meet and to create awareness about the lives of gay men. They had chosen theatre as the medium as both had some experience in theatre, including working with Bolo Theatre some years earlier. In addition, using theatre met the implicit objectives of participation and group ownership. As Luuk had told me before, for Sakhi, the project, and theatre generally, enabled gay men to participate in a making process, instead of simply consuming an event such as a party or online information. For Luuk, the nature of theatre projects demanded that participants had to contribute to its success or otherwise.

Sakhi's stated motivations or objectives appear benign and perhaps easily achieved.

However, Sakhi remained a nascent organization, limited in the main to online engagement.

Luuk told me that numerous Facebook messages had come from gay men outside of Colombo, provoking both enthusiasm and alarm in Luuk and John: enthusiasm because of the potential reach social media enabled; alarm because of the likely expectations that a local gay organisation might create. For example, Luuk told me that they had received messages from young men under the age of eighteen seeking social contact, to which Sakhi

replied informing these young men that Sakhi could not assist them because they only worked with people eighteen years and above.

But what of the motivations of individual participants? Why were they, as Luuk asked, willing to be part of the project when there were significant risks involved? “What are your expectations and motivations?” Luuk asked the others. Silence. Slowly the other participants spoke:

“I want other people to know about us,” said Sagara.

“[It would b]e good to do something for the community” suggested Ranjit.

“I want to develop some new skills and meet new people,” explained Indika.

These initial comments about motivations demonstrate a diversity of views, although the three included here are not mutually exclusive. For example, Sagara's observation suggests a sense of gay community informing a broader public, while Ranjit too assumes a gay community to which he can contribute. Indika's motivation for wanting to meet new people again points towards the possibility of community.

Ranjit, the youngest in the group, had recently left school to take up a design course. The story he performed in *If You Promise* illustrated his reasons for doing so. His motivation for participating in the project, he later told me at a one-on-one rehearsal, was that he enjoyed performing on stage as he could be himself: he did “not have to hide on stage.” The story he performed featured him reviving a version of himself as Lady Macbeth. At his all-boys school, he had played many heroines but, as we talked, he told me another story about a fledgling relationship with another schoolboy. He had been in love with his friend, who had recently died in an accident while trying to climb into his (Ranjit's friend's) house during

heavy rain. The boy slipped and fell to the driveway below. Ranjit told me that he had thought about performing this story because he wanted to reveal something about the relationship and its abrupt end. At the end of that rehearsal, he had decided not to play it as he thought that the story was too sad. He said that he wanted his story to include something happy: something about overcoming a challenge.

Negotiating Risk

Although the participants, during the meeting held at John's office, shared a range of expectations and largely altruistic motivations, they were not naïve about the realities of Colombo life and the potential affects these realities might bring. At the first rehearsal for *If You Promise* at the Punchi Theatre in June 2012, the participants indicated they had already thought much about censorship and advocacy. The University's Ethics Committee suggested that the Participant Information Form warn participants of the potential risks to them through their involvement in the study. However, the participants did not need to be alerted to those risks: they themselves articulated that participation in the project potentially held risks for each of them from the first rehearsal. Acknowledging and attending to those risks became both an individual and communal task for participants throughout the six weeks of rehearsals, and the post-performance question and answer session with the audience.

Luuk told me before the initial discussion that he wanted everyone to be clear about what the risks were to them as a group and as individuals. It was in part, he said, a necessary risk-management exercise for Sakhi Collaboration, one that mirrored the style of the University's Ethics Committee. He asked the following questions to stimulate the discussion: "Who in

your family (or among your friends) knows that you are gay?"; "Where do your families think you are right now?"; "Do you think there are any risks to you by participating in this project, and if so, what are those risks?"; and "Do you have something that you could lose as a result of being in this project?" Before he asked the questions, he requested that the participants respect each other's privacy and confidentiality by not talking about other participants outside of the rehearsal space.

Two participants had told their families that they were attending a drama workshop, although no one had communicated details about the content or themes of the workshop. This was understood by the group members: saying too much about the workshop would likely attract unwanted questions from family members. After each participant spoke, John summarized the risks and suggested that they did not have to perform on stage or be involved at all. Moreover, if they did participate, he explained, they needed to consider what aspects of their lives they would, and would not, choose to disclose. According to the participants who answered these questions, the men with most to lose were those with a "profession" and those seen as possessing a higher social status, such as being the youngest son in a Sinhalese family and being of "marrying age." Such an understanding of risk is shaped by *lajja baya*, as discussed in Chapter 3, in which the more status one has, the greater *lajja*. Finally, Luuk encouraged the other participants to "keep talking about this stuff (motivations and risks)" and to "not feel pressured to perform or to reveal things about your lives." Following these initial explorations of risks and motivations, John and Luuk led further discussions to examine each risk in more detail. Perhaps the most significant of these was whether the performance towards which we were working would be public.

Public V Private: Who do you want to see the show?

Who do you want to see the show? You can invite friends or family if you wish. Or do we take it a little further...to people who work in the fields of HIV or human rights. These are things to think about. The impression I got from last weekend [during the drama workshop] was that people felt it was important to perform beyond our immediate circle of friends. It may well change. It can be easy to come to a theatre and perform in front of friends and say you're out and gay and proud. We do not have to make a firm decision now, but I want you to think about it.

(Luuk)

When trying to decide what audience; Is it beyond our friends? And if so, how might we control it to make it safe for us?

(John)

From the beginning of the project, Sakhi wanted the participants to consider some form of public performance. Sakhi made its position clear yet indicated that if the participants decided to do an in-house performance or no performance at all, that it remained committed to the project. Again, Luuk asked the other participants what they thought about performing for an audience and what it might mean to each of them? What were the risks? What opportunities were presented? However, early in the meeting, most of the participants indicated that they wanted to perform in front of a general public audience. Some of the participants spoke about their reasons for wanting to do a public performance.

"For me, it is about letting others know the real us beyond the stereotypes." (Hasitha)

"...it is about sharing about how a person or a group think. They might think the same way, but it might be about sharing some ideas that people might not be

familiar with. I did think before it was about educating, but I don't think that so much now." (Luuk)

"...it is a graphic way of sharing things." (John)

"To perform in front of a general audience is like creating awareness about what we feel and how we live..." (Sagara)

"I am excited to be able to combine my love of theatre and let others know about my sexuality and do that with other gay men." (Ranjit)

Picking up the concept of awareness-raising, Luuk asked if we include a question and answer session following the performance. He suggested that this would give the audience an opportunity to respond and comment on the themes and explore concerns with the cast. The group appeared to support the concept of a post-show discussion with the audience, although the format of the discussion would be discussed later in the rehearsal process. From the initial considerations of a post-show audience discussion, Hasitha, who seemed very nervous, asked whether the actors would remain in character for the conversation with the audience or respond as themselves: "...when the questions start," he said, "I have a feeling we will become ourselves ...and we will try to answer as ourselves."

I assumed, incorrectly, that the participants would respond to the audience as 'themselves', albeit as a type of acted-self. Hasitha's comment suggests that he at least would prefer to maintain his character's mask for the post-show discussion. The participants might use their temporary status as actors to further explore the piece's themes with the audience. Luuk suggested that "being the actor is a type of protection too." Other participants sought

additional "cover" by remaining in character and indicated that responding to audience questions as 'themselves' may elicit personal disclosure about their sexuality. Luuk suggested that the group could decide closer to the date of performance and suggested that they all respond in character or as themselves.

The "gay" and the "non-gay" audience

The audience's composition became another issue for participants. Again, during discussions on this topic, I remained an observer and did not comment unless a participant asked me a question or sought my input. Luuk facilitated these discussions, asking "Who would you like to have in the audience?" "Ohhh...anyone but my parents" was the first reply from Ranjit, the youngest member of the group. Other participants laughed at his comment, some supported it with further comments about the crazy (*pissu*) idea of family members attending the performance. The participants suddenly began to break into small groups or pairs sharing their unimaginable horror at the thought of their parents in the audience. Ranjit's comment highlighted one of the significant fears among the participants and for many gay men in Colombo: that of being discovered to be gay by one's parents. It is common for gay men to say that they are "open" or "out" about their sexuality, but that does not include family, particularly parents. Even Luuk, a self-described activist and Sakhi co-founder, has not disclosed his sexuality to his parents. There are degrees of disclosure, and this required explicit consideration among the participants as a group and as individuals.

The discussion about the audience's composition moved to whether it should be a 'gay-only' audience or 'mixed.' Through subsequent discussion about the audience composition, the

participants divided" the audience into two groups: 'the gays' and the 'non-gays' or 'normal'.²⁹ Both audiences needed attention, so the show had to appeal to both groups. The gay men needed identifiable stories to represent a range of lived experiences from the various ethnoreligious communities in Colombo, while the non-gay audience required none-too-threatening entertainment about a group of people, who belonged and did not belong, to the same society.

Therefore, the issue was not only about what to share with the audience(s), but how these stories were to be shared. The non-gays must not be lectured to about gay rights or allowed to pity gay people. A few cast members recalled seeing a play at the Colombo Pride festival in 2011 in which the final scene of the play had the cast on stage in darkness except for a small candle each carried. The ensemble lined up across the stage, then asked the audience "to bring some light into our dark lives." The Sakhi leadership did not appreciate the sentiment. Luuk suggested it was defeatist and self-pitying. He told me "our show" would not be like that. As a co-creator of the project, I was relieved; there would be no pink agit-prop, no psychodrama. Some participants had experienced forms of didactic theatre, much of it, local adaptations of Forum theatre, in which Boal's joker figure appears as an all-knowing, kindly pedagogue with some essential life lessons for the audience to consider. One participant suggested he "simply wanted to share some stories" from their lives with the audience. However, the development of such a seemingly simple idea required the participants, often led by the Sakhi founders, to frequently consider what they wished to

²⁹ The word "normal" is used in many ways in Sri Lanka. Mostly it denotes the majority or most popular, such as normal bread (unsliced bread). The opposite of normal is not necessarily abnormal but a type of other, an alternative. So for the cast of gay men to use the term normal to describe the non-gay audience does not position gay men as abnormal but merely as an alternative to the majority.

share and to not share with the audience. The sharing did not happen in a vacuum. Luuk, in his role as co-creator of the performance, told the participants that there was no need for them to reveal everything about themselves or to even provide sensational anecdotes from their lives. He used this to support his argument that one of the performance's objectives was to show that gay people in Colombo were as exciting *and* as dull as anyone else.

However, individual performers occasionally rejected this desire for a type of gay-everyman.

Perhaps counter intuitively, the idea of performing for other gay and trans people caused the participants *more* anxiety than performing in front of non-gay people. There were multiple reasons for this, although the main concerns expressed were about perceived judgement from peers. *"You know how our guys are...always looking to criticise"* said John.

The fear of criticism from peers concerned Luuk and John. They had both years of association with the country's other gay organisations including Companions on a Journey, Equal Ground, and the Women's Support Group. This led to discussions about how the performance might represent gay men in Colombo. Given the limited representations of local gay people on stage, film or in other public forums, the cast offered several areas in which the audience (especially the gay audience) would critique the production. These included the lack of ethnic, religious and class diversity; the lack of stories about gay women; and the use of English language in some of the monologues.

The representation of the men's sexual lives, too, became a point of early concern.

Participants suggested that the gay audience would criticise the performance for containing too many sexual references or for *not* including enough sexual references. Should stories on sex be included and if so, how? The primary concern was that the inclusion of overt gay sexuality would reinforce the stereotypical view that gay men were sex-obsessed and

concerned for little beyond sex. Representations of overt sexual practice might elicit knowing sniggers from the 'gays' and alienate the 'non-gays.'

In summary, the participants were aware of the potential demands of the two audience groups. As public representations of gay people's lives are so limited in Colombo, the men knew that they might be expected to provide some acceptable, 'essential' account of a gay man in Colombo; capturing all the city's diverse subjects. However, during these early rehearsals, the participants decided that they would only represent themselves through sharing fragments of personal stories. The stories and the men's experiences were not exhaustive nor representative of a broader gay polity.

Ticket Prices

At the first group rehearsal the cast discussed ticket prices for the performance. Three men spoke in favour of ticket prices, and three against charging any admission. The younger men tended to be more in favour of charging for admission, albeit a nominal amount. The arguments included that the work of the cast should be rewarded in some way: the cast had invested their time and creativity to make something to share with others in the community; therefore, a request for some small recompense was reasonable. The arguments against included the idea that the play was "doing something for the community," so it was perhaps impolite to ask them for money.

Another case against charging for admission was that the cast was 'not professional.' Others reacted strongly to these arguments by asking why did gay people (and others) need to get something for free. The counter-argument was made that many gay men in Colombo would

spend more on the ticket price for one of the posher gay parties, which sold for at least Rs 1,000 (about \$10), without food or drinks. Those in favour of charging admission suggested that any funds made from ticket sales would be used towards restaging the play later; to again "do something for the community." Eventually, just ten days before the performance, the participants decided to sell tickets. Also, each member of the cast could give one complimentary ticket to a friend or family member.

Despite this, there remained some anxiety among the cast about charging the audience for admission, concerns raised with me outside rehearsal:

"We have to have a good show or else what would the community think of us."

(Hasitha)

"Will the show be good enough?"

(Nuwan)

"How will others view the show and the gay community?"

(Sagara)

Some of the cast sought reassurance from me about the quality of the show and how it would be received by other gay people. They assumed that they had a responsibility for delivering authentic, mostly likable, representations of gay men's lives, and that therefore, the performance had to be very 'good,' and to represent the lives of local gay men as being whole, rounded and, most critically, as being connected to other members of communities, families, work and so on.

The anxiety and perceived responsibility shared by the participants demonstrates the high stakes involved for both individual performers and for Sakhi. For Sakhi, the use of this project to promote their existence and to provide another platform for gay people to occupy was risky. As a group, they had avoided formal structures and had never sought funding from overseas donors. As noted above, their justification for this was the apparent divisions within the gay community and resultant disappointments with the lack of activities by the country's existing gay organisations. Sakhi had taken a deliberately slow approach to building credibility and publicity. Hosting *If You Promise* was part of that strategy. Sakhi's 'slowly, slowly' approach had its own inherent risks, including community perceptions that SC was a 'do-nothing organisation,' lacking direction and a sought-after community mandate.

Anticipating the Audience

At two rehearsals, the participants discussed potential questions that the audience was likely to ask in the post-show Question and Answer session. They appeared to know their potential audience well. They identified that questions on ethnicity, religion, class and gender, themes that I discussed in detail above in Chapter 3 would dominate. Participants discussed possible general responses to these questions, although each participant was then able to give a more specific response on the night of the performance.

First, the participants discussed ethnicity and religion. Luuk asked the others to share their own ethnoreligious backgrounds. In Sri Lanka, questions of ethnicity and religion are readily answered. "Sinhala Buddhist", "Tamil Catholic," "Muslim" "Sinhala Christian;" are some of the responses one hears in conversations with Sri Lankans. Of the eleven men who

participated in the performance of *If You Promise*, three were Christian, the remainder Buddhist. Both Sakhi founders are Christian; an Anglican and a Catholic. In early rehearsals, Murugan, a Tamil man, and a Hindu, participated but withdrew because of a work opportunity in another city. This however did not indicate a lack of commitment on his part. Murugan returned for the second iteration of the piece in late September 2012.

As detailed in Chapter 3, notions of ethnic and religious affiliation in Sri Lanka permeate public discourse. The group decided that it would not try to incorporate specific references to ethnic and religious minorities or attempt to include stories particular to those communities, in case audience members accused the production of tokenism or cultural appropriation. For example, one participant cited seeing a play in which Muslim women were portrayed through clichéd gestures and dress, their eyes downcast, voices soft, and their heads covered with a light shawl. The participants discussed the possibility of locating a Muslim man to join the group to ensure Muslim representation. I heard various names of mutual Muslim friends and acquaintances mentioned along with questions about their respective suitability and availability. Within ten minutes of the discussion starting, participants dropped the idea because it might "distract" from the production's purpose. Several participants suggested that issues facing gay men in Colombo were mostly shared across ethnic and religious boundaries. Sexuality was the participants' focus and marker of belonging. One participant suggested that politicians used ethnicity and religion in public discourse to divide Sri Lankans, while this performance, he said, focused on "something" (shared sexuality) that "unites us" despite other socio-political differences between the participants. The participant's assertion is partially true. Given the absence of Hindu and

Muslim men in the project, I cannot assume what differences may or may not exist for these men. And although the participant's point about sexuality as a unifier across social boundaries is valid, the pervasiveness of ethnoreligious discourse in Sri Lanka suggests a much-contested unity. However, the theatre, for a moment, creates an alternate, yet transitory world, one that enables the foregrounding of sexuality as a marker of belonging, temporarily decoupled from the standard identifiers; creating a different sort of "us." Yet, the participants knew that this desire was illusory because their audience would likely remind them of the ubiquity of religion, ethnicity and class. The post-performance question and answer session with the audience is discussed in Chapter 7.

Naming the Production

The name for the production came about following a discussion among the cast during a break at a rehearsal. The initial two-day workshop at the start of the project was called "The Next Stage" by Sakhi founders but this had only been a working title: a play on the word "stage", a place for theatre and movement towards an objective. Participants dropped the name early in the rehearsal period because it sounded dull and, more importantly because it suggested a type of linear personal development narrative for the men, namely, that they would emerge from the almirah.³⁰

During a discussion about naming the project, participants suggested the play was about telling fragments of stories, instead of trying to tell all. From this suggestion, the participants brainstormed the idea of "telling and not telling." Words like "a secret", "shadow,"

³⁰ Almirah is a commonly used term in South Asia, including Sri Lanka for cupboard or wardrobe. One of the participants joked that Sri Lankan men might "come out" of the almirah instead of the closet. The word closet is sometimes used in Sri Lanka as part of the term water-closet, a colonial term for a lavatory.

"exposed," "silent," sharing were used in a variety of possible titles. Those calling out possible titles in Sinhalese had them immediately translated into English and vice-versa. The title needed to "sound good" in both languages.

The use of the words like 'secret' and 'shadow,' for some participants, suggested that gay men had something to hide, something of which to be ashamed. Likewise, titles that sounded 'too camp' or 'too gay-lib' were rejected. Interestingly, the word Pride was banned. Luuk suggested that the title should 'invite' the audience to listen. He suggested ***If You Promise Not to Tell***, which translated roughly into Sinhalese as "*Kiyanna Epaa Kaatath*" (Don't tell anyone.). The title, at least the English version, asks the audience to be co-conspirators with the cast to participate in something risky, taboo. Both the English and Sinhalese titles appeared on the promotional posters.

State Censorship of Performing Arts: The Public Performance Board Certificate

Before they can be publicly performed or screened all stage performances and films require a Certificate of Approval from the Public Performance Board (PPB), an agency of the Government of Sri Lanka. The Certificate enables a company, or a performer, to advertise and to sell tickets for the performance. Without the Certificate, it is illegal to perform and promote any performance or film. Theatre and cinema owners are required to view the certificate before allowing the production to book the space. Some performers and filmmakers have used a variety of ways to have their production proceed without obtaining the PPB's certificate. For instance, some companies, considering staging productions that contain controversial topics, will often host private, 'invitation only' performances or

screenings. This way, a certificate is not required; however, these performances or screenings must not be advertised to the general public in any way, including online ads or social media posts. It is also illegal to charge for a ticket for 'invitation only' audience members.

Unfortunately, obtaining the certificate was not a simple or clear process. For example, neither the project's participants nor other contacts I have in Colombo's theatre and film community could tell me the names of the current PPB members and what criteria guided the Board's decisions. Luuk, who, over the years, has submitted many scripts to the PPB, suggested that the Board chairman's mood influenced decisions. The lack of transparency about regulations regarding the PPB's work and how it might enforce them are perhaps useful to the government because the bureaucratic opaqueness creates enough anxiety among the country's performing artists in the country to be careful about the way productions containing controversial topics are advertised and performed or screened, if indeed such topics are addressed at all. Some of the topics frequently censored by the PPB are anything to do with the Sri Lankan military, the LTTE, and criticism of the current government.³¹ The PPB edits swearing and is usually more strict with play scripts submitted in Sinhalese and Tamil rather than those in English. The rationale is that there is a limited English-speaking audience available in Sri Lanka. Therefore, there was less opportunity for the audience to be stirred into a new insurrection against the State (personal communications with Sri Lankan theatre and filmmaker, Dr Visakesa Chandrasekaram).

³¹ In January 2015, President Mahinda Rajapakse was defeated by Maithripala Sirisena at a presidential election. It is perhaps too soon to assess how this new president and the government will respond to criticism by performers and other creative artists.

Working in and around the Public Performance Board

This was not my first interaction with the PPB. In 2006, I had begun to direct a production of Steven Berkoff's 1981 play *Decadence*. Luuk, who would play the two male roles, reckoned we could get funds from the British Council by positioning Berkoff's critique on Thatcherite Britain and its class system as having parallels in contemporary Colombo. Luuk submitted the script to the Public Performance Board to obtain the approval certificate. *Decadence* contains a great deal of swearing and explicit descriptions of sex, so the PPB's response did not surprise Luuk: it had significantly edited the script, removing all the swear words and sexual references. The PPB's light-blue pencils erased what looked like half of Berkoff's text. We cancelled the production.

Rajini Obeyesekere (1992) explores how, in the early days of Sri Lankan independence, Sinhalese language theatre in Colombo, despite significant government censorship of play and film scripts, continued to flourish. She suggests that there are two main reasons for this. One is that many theatre performances are different from those that are recorded in play scripts submitted to the PPB for censoring and approval. This may take the form of interpretations by actors through voice and gesture, using sounds in place of censored words or phrases. The submission of a script to the PPB is a type of bureaucratic process with the ephemeral text becoming a collection of forms, carefully filled-in to comply with government requirements. It appears almost as if the actual performance may or may not reflect the words on the page received by the PPB. The second reason is that local performers and writers devise theatre that is less overtly political or didactic in style or is an adaption of a foreign language play, that contains political themes that closely parallel those in contemporary Sri Lanka.

For example, the success of Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1990), which explores the impact of life after a period of a brutal dictatorship in an unnamed South American country. Although the play explores the political violence of somewhere in South America—for example, Chile—the themes and production resonated in Colombo. The production I saw in 1999 at the Lumbini Theatre in Colombo, remained faithful to the script by locating the action in South America, and heightened the exotic “otherness” of South America through bright costumes, excessive alcohol consumption, ‘Latin-sounding’ music, and a steamy theatre (courtesy of switching off the fans). These motifs loudly proclaimed that the play was about somewhere else and not Sri Lanka. However, the play did, of course, reflect Sri Lankan political themes relevant to the time and recent past (disappearances, extra-judicial killings, corruption and the protracted search for justice from the family members who remained) and its implications were not lost on a local audience. The theatre, at least among the Sinhalese-speaking middle classes, served as a platform for political discourse during both the war with Tamil separatists and the two, armed uprisings of the Marxist-inflected, Sinhalese nationalist People’s Liberation Front (*Janata Vimukthi Perumuna-JVP*) in 1971 and 1989. It created opportunities for commentary on the political situation of the time when other vehicles for protest such as the press, were heavily censored or government-controlled (Obeyesekere: 1992).

Anecdotally, the PPB rarely sends its staff or engages police to monitor the performances of the scripts submitted. There have been occasions when police visited theatres where productions that have possibly political or other controversial themes to demand to see the performance certificate, but the police do not necessarily bring copies of the approved

script with them and can therefore not be sure if the performance reflects the actual text or not. In 2004, I worked on a production of a local play called *Katu Yahana* (Bed of Thorns) by Visakesa Chandrasekaram, with whom I have collaborated previously. The play is about a married couple who take in a young male lodger to help pay the rent. The husband and lodger become lovers. Eventually, the wife finds out and after some initial conflict accepts the new relationship of her husband. The play ends happily and explores the taboo subjects of adultery and homosexuality through original songs, borrowing heavily from folk songs, prevalent in traditional Sinhalese theatre. The PPB rejected the submission of the original script, editing the writing so much so that it could not be performed (personal communications 2004). Visakesa then submitted the same text, changing the gender of the lodger from male to female. The PPB accepted the "new" (heterosexual) version without changes. Visakesa then used the PPB's decision to promote the play and raise the subject of attitudes towards homosexuality, censorship and the contradictory views on sex outside of marriage. Visakesa and his cast did not perform the 'heterosexual version' of the script. Instead, the Russian Cultural Centre (RCC), known among performing artists because it did not require a certificate from the PPB, hosted *Katu Yahana* in its original form. And, perhaps, because the RCC was a gift from the former Soviet Union, formerly an influential supporter of Sri Lanka, police seldom disturbed performances there. As it was illegal to sell tickets or publicly advertise the show, the producers promoted it through word of mouth and by taking the PPB's decision to the media. As a result, Visakesa did several radio and newspaper interviews. The performances were billed as a private performance and tickets not sold but given free to the audience. Instead, audience members were asked to donate or purchase overly-priced refreshments.

If You Promise and the PPB

As the men involved in the creation of *If You Promise* were highly motivated to present their performance to a paying public audience, so the production required a certificate from the PPB.

Luuk warned the other participants that the State might intervene to censor their stories and potentially not allow the production to proceed. As the PPB required a Sri Lankan national identity card number as part of the submission, Luuk told me not to include my name on the script. Luuk, John and I spoke at length on several occasions as to whose name (and ID card number) would appear on the text. Although *If You Promise* had many authors, the PPB required that one person be named responsible for the script. Luuk and John decided that it would be John who gave his name and his National identity Card details to the PPB as the sole author of the *If You Promise*. One of the reasons for using John's name was that his family and work colleagues knew about his sexuality. No other participants' names appeared in the script, in case the PPB might inform their respective families and workplaces that they were involved in a performance that contained adult themes.

Although the PPB is not a law enforcement agency of the government, the men's fears were based on a poor record of confidentiality and privacy by government agencies and services. This includes, for example, anecdotes of gay men being asked to "perform as a woman" when requesting an HIV test at a government clinic.

Before submitting the script to the PPB, the participants discussed various words in some of the monologues and scenes and wondered if the PPB would censor them. The obvious word

for censorship, according to the participants, was *ponnaya*, which is Sinhalese slang for an effeminate or emasculated man and is often used as a derogatory word for gay men. I asked the participants what they thought about the word. Without exception, all the men thought it profoundly offensive. *Ponnaya*, they explained, was a coarse word and often associated with lower-class people, demeaning to both the intended target and the speaker of the word. To use this word suggested that the speaker was poorly educated and from a lowly caste or class. Some suggested that another word of abuse be used in its place. John, the performer who was to say the hateful word, however, after consideration decided to keep it because, as he told the group, it represented reality for many gay men and trans people. The PPB did not censor *ponnaya*.

John added his name to the script as both "devisor" and "director," together with his National Identity Card (NIC) number, home address and mobile number. If the text was determined to be seditious or too disturbing for the Colombo public to tolerate, then the PPB knew how to get hold of him. Even putting one's name to a script that is all about gay men's stories is a courageous act because under Sri Lankan law promoting illegal activities such as sex between men is against the law. By devising and staging such a show, authorities may have believed that John had encouraged other men to conduct illegal activities: in case, to have sex.

Luuk and I prepared the script and accompanying cover sheet, which John signed, the details of his name on the submission matching, precisely, the name of his NIC. A fee of Rs 1,000/- (approximately ten Australian dollars) accompanied the script submission. Once the deposit is made to the PPB's Bank of Ceylon account, the applicant submits the receipt,

together with two script copies (in the language to be performed), including details of the director, number and names of songs to be sung, the names of the songs' authors to the PPB. The submitted script was in English, although the final performance was approximately fifty per cent Sinhalese. The *If You Promise* script contained minimal stage directions or character descriptions, partly because one of the scenes included kissing and a man dressed only in his underpants.

The participants expressed relief and pride once Luuk submitted the application even though the very act of submitting the script invited the State's approval and scrutiny and thus added to potential risks for the men. Eight days later, the PPB issued the certificate for *If You Promise*, and to Luuk's and my surprise, with only minor alterations to the text, and the condition that the play be advertised as "Adults Only". An adults-only rating generally means the play has explicit references to sex, which, ironically, may assist in increasing adult male audience numbers.

Sakhi's Censorship of Participants

As discussed in the previous chapter, at the first meeting with Sakhi founders about the project, we talked about potential participants. Sakhi produced the advertising and developed the criteria for participants, although I stipulated that they had to be 18 years or over and currently living or working in Colombo and its environs. Luuk determined not to include men over 40 years of age. His rationale for the decision was that older men's presence might silence the "younger ones." Further, he believed that recruiting older men

to participate in a gay-themed play would be difficult because many older gay men were married and thus "retired" from gay community engagement. I felt unsure about how to challenge Luuk's assumptions, so I complied with his ageist criteria. I know of several gay men in Colombo over 40 who are married and keep away from any gathering seen as "gay." These men usually arranged their lives differently, as they had obligations to wives and children, besides their same-sex desires.

At the initial two-day drama workshop, discussed in the previous chapter, I wondered how many of the stories would feature sex, and importantly, how might the men perform these sexual stories. During the many years in which I have worked in Sri Lanka, I have observed that when talking about sex, its practices and desire, many gay men will use English words and expressions instead of Sinhalese or Tamil. I have asked former colleagues, groups of university students, beach boys, sex workers, and friends why they used English when speaking about sex. For many, the Sinhalese words for sexual behaviours were "dirty" or coarse, often eliciting a snigger or giggle. The Sinhalese words were not often mainly used because sex and its embodiments were not topics to be discussed. English is the preferred language of sex. Again, the concept of *lajja baya* appears, this time, as a modifier of expression.

The Sakhi founders expressed concern that they did not want the show to be "all about sex," whether in Sinhalese or English. They told me they did not want too many stories on cruising, especially off-line cruising which involved occupying spaces frequented by heterosexuals such as beaches, parks and temples. Such stories, they suggested, supported commonly held views that gay men had lots of sex with strangers, apparently their primary

pastime. John and Luuk's concern did not indicate that they may explicitly 'intervene' in the stories but they both wanted the performance to incorporate several aspects of the participants' lives. From these early discussions, I understood that Sakhi wished to position gay men as being, in many ways, like everyone else. The resultant play would surprise the audience by its lack of overt gay sexuality and "otherness" rather than shock them with salacious tales from the city's gay underground. Sakhi's implicit strategy was to represent gay men in Colombo as being interdependent citizens, living similar lives, and facing similar challenges, to their non-gay compatriots.

Sakhi's strategy materialised on the morning of the workshop's first day. Luuk started his speech, suggesting that participation in the project offered the men "a chance to be gay on stage." He indicated that the creative process itself provided a way of "...making other gay friends in a space that was not primarily about sex."

Luuk warned the other participants that the audience would perceive the performed stories as being "representative" of all gay men in Colombo. Therefore, John and Luuk created a process of assessing each story's "suitability" to be performed for an audience. The Sakhi founders desired a public performance, so they established certain filters of representation early in the production process. The filters were not overtly used to discredit or eliminate a story or part of that story but were employed more subtly and manifested in participants—often the Sakhi founders—questioning an image or a line from a story as it was rehearsed. The filters became apparent when a participant asked the question, "How might the audience(s) receive this story?" More specific questions might follow depending on the nature of the concern.

The filters in question usually pertained to local stereotypes of gay people, class, ethnicity, religion and sexual practices. For example, on the morning of the first day of the workshop Indika, one of the participants who had never acted before nor did he know any of the other sixteen men present that Saturday, walked on to the Punchi Theatre stage to tell a story. Before telling the story, he suggested that he was unable to think of anything "interesting enough to tell." He remained silent for some time before suggesting that his story might not be suitable. I asked him to tell it anyway and to not worry about the story's suitability, so long as he felt comfortable to tell it. Indika's story ran for about two minutes. Below is the story in written form. The formatting is Indika's.

Bus Ride to Hell

A boy (myself) gets into a bus, looks tired.

He gets a seat and falls asleep with his bag on his lap.

An older man looks around and sees lots of empty seats. He spots the boy and then sits next to him.

Minutes go by.

The older man is progressively getting closer to the boy, he puts his hand on the boy's lap.

A few moments pass.

The boy seems to be moving in his sleep, suddenly wakes up

He looks groggy, looks down, looks at the man, who smiles at him, looks down at his pants again.

The boy looks confused and angry.

The boy asks, "What are you doing? Take your hand off." (some turn away when they hear this; nobody turns to look)

The man smiles gently at him as if it is no big deal.

He takes his hands off and looks away

The boy tries to get up but then changes his mind and sits down

He moves his bag from his lap so people can see.

The man gets up and gets down from bus not looking scared.

The boy puts his head in his hands.

He punctuated the story by announcing "That's it." The other participants were silent. They neither clapped nor cheered as they had for other pieces, instead looking at me as if asking me to respond to the story, to say something. Before I could comment, Luuk politely suggested that the story might not be suitable for public performance because it would likely reinforce popular connotations of gay people, and their sexual lives, with child sexual abuse. I was unsure of what to say. I thought of how to stage Indika's story, about the sexual abuse of a child on a bus; but I could not find words to comment. I diverted attention by thanking Indika and asking the others to comment on what they had seen and heard. The participants' comments focused on the significance of the topic, which opened a brief discussion of some ten minutes about sexual abuse on buses.

Several other participants had had similar experiences as children. Participants expressed concern about how such a story would fit with the others, even though this was the first day

of the workshop, the very first day of the project. I was silently concerned that the workshop might trigger a range of difficult emotions caused by past traumas. I recalled attending a psychodrama training workshop in the 1990s and witnessing trainees acting out historical, emotional traumas. That psychodrama workshop was an unpleasant experience, but I became concerned that these men might mine deep emotional wounds and that I might be incapable of adequately supporting them. Therefore, before the next storyteller presented, I talked about the "power" of theatre to affect performers profoundly and that telling these stories might be painful and challenging at times. Luuk picked up on this theme and used it to rally the cast to support each other and not to reveal to others the details of the stories that were told in the workshops and rehearsal space.

Moreover, the participants demonstrated their mutual care during the rehearsal of Nuwan's monologue in which he describes visiting a psychiatrist with his mother following several months of staying in his room at home, depressed. The psychiatrist's response to Nuwan's revelation about his sexuality is very positive and supportive. When Luuk first saw the monologue rehearsed, he asked Nuwan whether the psychiatrist's response was real. When Nuwan replied that it was the actual response of the psychiatrist, Luuk asked Nuwan for his name and contact details. "It's always good to have the name of a *good* person to refer people to. There are too many scary arseholes in mental health here," Luuk concluded. The exchange triggered further comments from other cast members who had attended counselling services. Most of these experiences appeared to be unpleasant for the men. Some had been told to get married, to undertake "therapy" to make them straight, to meditate and follow other religious practices to reduce sexual desire and to avoid certain foods.

Only one of the stories chosen by the participants to perform as part of *If You Promise* contained explicit sexual references. In this story, devised and performed by Hasitha the PPB censored the words (scripted in English) “dick” and “fucked.” Hasitha’s story centred on a relationship between a middle-class man, who picks up a lower-class man at a gay dance party. They go to Hasitha’s place and have sex. After a series of encounters, the story’s middle-class protagonist notices his laptop is missing, stolen by the lower-class youth in “rubber slippers” (a conventional marker of class in Sri Lanka). The laptop is retrieved when the protagonist uses his connections with the country’s military to intimidate and threaten the lower-class lover-thief.

When Hasitha received the censored script, he, together with the other participants, discussed what words or actions might replace the offending “fucked.” The original line was “We fucked twice and went to sleep.” Luuk suggested that Hasitha use the censored line to protest at the state’s intervention. He indicated that the line could be played as follows:

“We . . . <the performer steps out of character and addresses the audience>.

“The State has censored the next word because you as adults and citizens of this country are deemed too stupid and too sensitive to appreciate context.”

<The performer returns to the story>

. . . twice and went to sleep.”

Other cast members thought that Luuk’s suggestion interrupted the action too much and proffered a sexual gesture, a pelvic thrust, a sensual lip-licking, or an ugly “beep,” instead of the word. Finally, Hasitha decided to omit both the offending word and replacement

gestures. He rewrote the line as “We did...nothing...twice and went to sleep.” His faux-naive delivery of “nothing,” complete with a knowing raised eyebrow, was followed by a satisfied, defiant, “twice.”

The participants, as a collective and as individuals, frequently reflected on their story content and how an audience might interpret the story. Much of the reflection took place in a group during or at the end of a rehearsal. The participants permitted me to observe these gatherings. Additionally, individual participants asked me occasionally about the content of their own stories; checking on a story's suitability. The participants' processes for selecting material to be performed indicate a very highly developed awareness of the risks that they each faced by participating in the project and a strong belief that they had a responsibility to "positively" represent a broader "Colombo gay community." Each participant made the final decision on the content of his performed story. Each participant's understanding of current cultural norms within the gay (and broader) community, other participants and my presence all influenced those content decisions.

The following examples are drawn from the first drama workshop (*The Next Stage*) and the subsequent rehearsals of *If You Promise* to illustrate the complex processes established by the participants to select what stories to share with an audience. From very early in the project, the participants frequently examined the content of potential stories for inclusion in the performance based on, at least to some extent, on whether the audience would negatively view gay men. The content examinations included class representations, particularly the perception that gay men were elite or "posh." For example, Hasitha's story about being robbed by a lower-class lover both resonated with and concerned other

participants. Following Hasitha's first telling of this story, other participants revealed stories of their own with lower-class, "uneducated" men, that often included being robbed or blackmailed. Luuk asked the others if these narratives would make the audience think that gay men exploited more impoverished people and 'got what they deserved' by bringing a lower-class person to stay in their bed overnight. Other participants suggested that it is Hasitha's experience, regardless of his class and that other gay men in Colombo had similar experiences.

Beyond representations of sex and class, if Sakhi intervened to shape the content of the stories performed, I am unaware. Nevertheless, this form of restriction need not have been overt because Sakhi's position as project host meant that all representations required Sakhi's implicit approval. Sakhi then became both an enabler and restrictor of the other participants' representations. The Sakhi founders, responding to comments made by other participants, then lead a discussion on how they wanted to represent aspects of gay men's lives in performance.

Representing Sex

"They cannot imagine that we could *love* other men" Indika, 28.

Yet, the participants discussed ways of representing sex far more than representing relationships between men. Indika's comment above was a strong indictment of prevailing public discourse on homosexuality in Sri Lanka. With the non-gay audience in mind, the participants discussed the type of sexual content to be included in the performance. Here again, the participants wanted to add something about sex, although it should not be too

explicit. Hasitha's monologue, discussed earlier, includes the most explicit sexual reference in the whole show. In one of the group scenes, devised by John, a character, played by Hasitha, is dressed only in his underpants. Hasitha was 23 years of age at the time, small, slim and vulnerable looking. In the scene, he sits in a chair, staring blankly at the audience. He remains silent and still throughout the scene while, one by one, four other characters engage with him. Hasitha anchors the scene by continuing to be detached from the other characters that include a straight male, who advises the semi-naked Hasitha to keep quiet about his sexuality and denigrates gay people for talking about such an unpleasant subject. He then requests sex from the silent actor, stands him up, embraces and kisses him. Hasitha, the silent actor, does not resist but is not actively engaged.

Further discussion ensued about Hasitha's body, the type of underpants he wore and how the audience might read the image of a young-looking slim man on stage in his underpants. One participant asked if it would be useful to include some padding in his underpants to make it appear that he had a large penis because the "gays" in the audience would comment on the actor's penis size. The group rejected the padding idea lest it distracts the audience from the point of the scene. Participants frequently monitored images and sections of speech within each monologue and scene to determine how the audience, both the gay and non-gay, might interpret them. Luuk and John suggested that for a non-gay, general public audience, the stories needed to be careful about how they represented other people, especially women and ethnic and religious minorities.

Representing Women

Despite the apparent influence of Luuk and John on the final composition of the performance, their suggestions at times caused heated arguments about the representation of gay lives and of others with whom those men interacted. For example, one cast member wanted a scene which required female characters. As all the cast were men, they would have to play women for this scene. Luuk attempted to dissuade the use of cross-dressing for the scene because he was concerned the audience (at least the non-gay section of it) might conflate transgenderism with homosexuality; (a perennial issue for queer activists around the world it appears). While participants acknowledged that local trans women were marginalised within the local gay community, citing denial of entry to some gay parties. I witnessed this discrimination during the fieldwork. I saw online postings advertising a gay party with the words “**NO DRAG!**” in bold. In small print underneath, in both Sinhalese and English, a warning to ‘men’ not to wear saris or dresses. When I asked friends (some of whom supported the NO DRAG! policy) in Colombo what this meant, they told me that many trans women often referred to as “*nachchi*” in Colombo, gave gay people a bad name because they did not behave appropriately.

“Just because they are gay, and I am gay doesn't mean I want to spend time with them (*nachchi*)” (personal communications with Sajith, 58)

The *nachchi*, who do not refer to themselves as “gay” nor have sex and relationships with gay men, were considered rude and often attended the parties with their straight, working-class boyfriends. The straight boyfriends often expressed disgust at the sight of two gay men embracing or dancing together. In the nearly twenty-five years, I have been travelling to Sri Lanka, I have witnessed three incidents of violence at a gay party involving *nachchi*.

Although it is impossible to understand the complicated reasons for the violence, all three featured *nachchi* fighting among themselves, verbally abusing each other and acting theatrically. The party organisers informed me that the *nachchi* were welcome at the NO DRAG party if they wore trousers and refrained from make-up and wigs. The politics of Colombo's gay community are complex, and participants in *If You Promise* were acutely aware of these ruptures. For some participants, this meant that the play's content should avoid confluences of transgenderism and male homosexuality, while for others, such ideas did not matter because as one participant suggested, "[...]this is a story I want to share[...]who cares about those bullshit posh parties."

Representations of mothers emerged as an issue during rehearsals of several monologues and group scenes. The participants debated the presence of the mother as a character in the performance because of concern that frequent references to mothers suggested that gay men were dependent on their mothers, and through this dependence, emasculated. Others argued that the description of the mothers was very positive- mothers helping their sons, mothers caring, mothers being strong. This, too, promoted discussion about the portrayal of women in the show. The participants asked questions like, "Were women only to be represented as mothers?" and did such frequent references to mothers connect the performance to a broader nationalist trope about the mother as nurturer and keeper of Buddhism and the country's moral integrity generally? Did the presence of mother-characters indicate support for the theory that mothers "caused" their children to be homosexual? The participants came to a consensus decision to include the various

representations of mothers in the performance. In Chapter 7, I discuss in detail the representations of the mother characters in *If You Promise*.

The participants in this study were acutely aware of the social situation in which they both lived and created a piece of theatre using their own stories and bodies. This is demonstrated by their constant discussions about the content and style of the show and their nuanced understanding of both government and societal power. This understanding and navigation of localised forms of power is one of the primary influences on the content and aesthetic choices made by the participants. They, at least Luuk and John, were aware of what the production could and could not get away with, what might be said and what might endanger themselves and their fellow participants. For example, the submission of the script in English to the censor board and the limitations of overtly sexual references throughout the scripted stories were deliberate strategies to reduce the risk of having the performance censored or banned.

What becomes clear in this chapter is the dominant role played by the Sakhi co-founders, Luuk and John, in the creation of *If You Promise*. And while both men were participants in the study, together with the other men, their authority, dare I say influence over the other participants, and indeed the whole project, cannot be ignored. In Chapter 4, I referred to Geertz's request to the ethnographer for humility and to acknowledge the influence and agency of their participants. Yet agency takes various forms and not all participants may be as agentive as their peers. In this case, Luuk and John possessed more agency as participants due to their co-leadership of Sakhi, the 'sponsor' of the study. The socio-political terrain of the research site was certainly not flat and even. Despite this, as I

describe in the next chapter, other participants possessed and used agency in various forms from time to time, influenced by, but not beholden to the Sakhi leaders. The enactment of gay or queer bodies on a theatre stage in Colombo, suggests the performance of sexuality in the end can be a choice, albeit a somewhat complex one to achieve. This achievement represents a form of participant agency. In the next chapter, using the experiences of three of the participants, I further explore the men's strategies to both participate agentively in the performance and to maintain their familial and social status.

CHAPTER SIX: WHAT, AND WHAT NOT, TO TELL: BEYOND THE SINGLE STORY

I have explained how, from early on, this research project eschewed any ambition towards offering a comprehensive ‘take’ on the lives of gay Sri Lankans in general, preferring, instead, to work in depth with a small number of participants while trusting that my wider engagement with Sri Lanka over more than two decades would be sufficient to set the life experiences of this small group in an appropriately rich context. For encouragement, I have looked to the work of scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod who urges researchers to concentrate their energies on “ethnographies of the particular” (1991: 149). Her advice is to resist generalisations and to be unafraid to reveal stories from individual participants who are in dynamic relationship with the researcher over space and time. In line with this advice, personal narratives of the participants were the primary content source in the creation of *If You Promise*. From the initial drama exercises at the first workshop through until the final performance, the participants told stories: to each other, to an audience, and to me.

Of course, on the one hand, such use of personal narratives is entirely unremarkable in a group-devised theatre project. Indeed, it is a staple of numerous ‘applied theatre’ approaches in education, activism, health promotion and community development settings, perhaps most notably in the methods of ‘theatre of the oppressed’ developed by Augusto Boal (1992). On the other hand, there has been critique of such methods and, in this context, it is worth noting some wariness on the part of Luuk, from Sakhi Collaboration, who was very familiar with methods like those of Boal which take, as a starting point for the

creation of a supposedly emancipatory social change theatre, participants' stories of their lived experience of social oppression. Without discounting the reality of such experiences, Luuk did not wish for the performance's content to be *solely* about oppression.

In this chapter, I offer a detailed account of the way three of the project's participants dealt with the challenge of crafting a performance from the basis of personal narrative. I argue that the participants remained conscious of both the risks and opportunities associated with this approach to theatre-making. Potentially, the approach made participants vulnerable: they would be sharing stories that audience members might well assume were an authentic account of their own lived experiences. At the same time, because these narratives were so personal, participants were able to maintain a high degree of creative control over what they would and would not reveal, and what they would alter.

Arguments for and against the use of personal narratives

Before turning to the three case studies in this chapter, I want to elaborate on the substance of the concerns expressed by Luuk about the use, and possible mis-use, of personal narratives since his views find important echoes in recent critiques of Boal and other applied theatre practices (Thompson 2009; Dwyer 2016) and it is important to situate our small-scale performance ethnography project within this larger body of critical writing.

One of the key contributions to these debates has been the work of Kristin Langellier on what can be learned from attending closely not only to the substance of personal narratives

but also the manner in which they are told. Langellier notes how the use of personal narrative may assist in situating the observer/audience “among marginalized and muted experiences” as one witnesses the “mundane communication practices of ordinary people” (Langellier 1999: 126). Drawing on her work with a diasporic community of Somali refugees living in Maine, Langellier argues, further, that personal narrative is a “performance strategy with particular significance for socially marginal, disparaged, or ignored groups or for individuals with ‘spoiled identities’” (1999: 134). Clearly, on this account, the use of personal narratives in a theatre-making project has at least the potential to help disrupt dominant master narratives and offers the promise of “transformative power to assert self-definitions about who matters and what matters” (Langellier 1999:134).

Equally clearly, as Langellier recognises, it is important to acknowledge the constraints of a personal narrative, particularly when it is framed as a ‘command performance’ (for instance, when an asylum-seeker is obligated to tell their story in order to substantiate, for immigration officials, a claim to refugee status but also, as can happen in verbatim theatre projects with refugees, when a well-intentioned audience desires nothing more than to ‘bear witness’ to a traumatic story). The risk when using personal narratives as a source for performance material is the possibility of binding the performer too tightly, too exclusively to their story, fixing the performer’s position to a series of singular events and experiences. Forman (2001: 44), also writing about the experiences of young Somali refugees in the United States, suggests that such stories of suffering may be compelling and celebrated by an audience in a way that those performing the stories are not.

Obviously, I am not equating the experiences of Somali refugees in the US with the circumstances of this study's participants. However, there are some similar risks. For example, the narrative performed by a project participant may become his 'story', in the singular, rather than simply one of many stories that he, the *subject*-participant, might possess or create. The telling and retelling of the singular story of suffering works to fix the performer to an identity position, one that is mostly dependent upon their own history. In other words, although the use of personal narrative may be a "voice-enabling" method to support disenfranchised or oppressed communities (Langellier 1999: 126), it might also discursively shackle the performer by limiting their capacity to redefine their own subjectivity and subvert their personal histories.

There is also the further risk that theatre-makers will foreground more painful narratives for superficially dramatic purposes. For instance, Leffler describes witnessing rehearsals for a community theatre project in South Africa as follows:

To encourage high-stakes storytelling, Denise [the choreographer/director] validated some narratives [of towns people] as 'real' and criticised others as dishonest. 'Real' stories were traumatic tear-jerkers-stories of harassment and emotional abuse. Less intense stories, sibling squabbles and romantic jealousies, she deemed 'dishonest'

(Leffler 2012: 347)

This is precisely the sort of situation which leads Salverson (1999) to argue that the use of personal narrative in community theatre work tends to privilege an "aesthetic of injury," which may reinforce victim discourse and ultimately disempower the participants that the work seeks to back. Thompson (2009a), out of a similar concern to Salverson, thus

advocates for an “aesthetic of beauty”, in which participants’ attention is aspirational, decoupled from pains, past and present. He suggests that theatre, which uses personal narratives is heavily influenced by North American therapeutic models that potentially supplant local aesthetic and therapeutic models. The demand to ‘tell your story’ constitutes a form of stricture and, in circumstances where the theatre director (or researcher) is an outsider, can become a neocolonial practice. Thompson suggests that participants “create something they understand to be beautiful” to engage them in “a quest that has powerful and potentially positive results” (Thompson 2009a: 136). Yet both an aesthetic of injury and an aesthetic of beauty may potentially constrict participants insofar as they are situated as opposites or two ends of a continuum, with participants apparently forced to align their account with one of two mutually exclusive positions.

In some ways, the injury-beauty dichotomy provided a kind of perimeter for the content of *If You Promise*. Oppression (injury) and sex (beauty) were the two dominant themes to emerge from preliminary discussions with Luuk. Both concerned him. “We could name the show ‘Poor Us. We Just Fuck,’” he once joked. Even before the rehearsals commenced, then, Luuk was attentive to the potential risks of a performance predicated simply on a ‘sex-and-oppression’ narrative throughline. Having said all that, I would argue that to label *If You Promise* as simply a performance based on “personal narrative” is somewhat misleading. For, although I asked participants at the first drama workshop to tell a story prompted by the statement “this is important to me”, the participants’ stories developed in numerous ways which, clearly, in some cases, involved the inclusion of non-autobiographical elements. Furthermore, neither Luuk nor I ever asked participants about the “authenticity” of their

stories. Nor did we ask the participants to focus on an experience of pain or pleasure.

Participants were at liberty to create their “personal narratives” as they chose.

Moreover, as the rehearsals of *If You Promise* progressed, the participants openly discussed their own views about the critical issues around personal narratives that I have canvassed above. From the initial workshop, both Luuk and I asked the other participants to choose a story, something that they thought might be able to be performed on a stage. We did not ask them to choose a story that they thought could ‘define’ them as gay men or any other identity or role markers. Luuk also suggested that participants use creative freedom with the stories because the stories they told and performed would not, and could not, represent a life. Their stories would remain a ‘partial’ representation in both senses of the word.

In what follows, I take an in-depth look at how three of the project’s participants made use of the offer presented to them to share some life stories that were important to them.

While it is true that the monologues explored in this chapter emerged, at least in part, from painful self-reported experiences, these were not solely stories about the participants’ pain. Some but not all of these stories made their way into the final script for performances of *If You Promise* (and a copy of the full draft script is provided in Appendix 2 to enable the reader to see how those stories which did make it to the stage functioned dramaturgically in relation to other participants’ stories). However, in order to show the level of agency that the project participants exercised, it is just as important to highlight the ways in which stories were edited, or dropped altogether, or performed only after participants had found

a suitable device for creating a certain aesthetic distance between their personal lived experience and their *personae* on stage.

Indika: Oppressed and Oppressor

Indika attended the first workshop on June 9 and 10, 2012. He was unknown to any of the other group members. A friend of his had suggested he might be interested in going along. He emailed me seeking permission to join. At the time of the first workshop, he was 28 years old and lived just outside Colombo. He is a Buddhist and "out" to his immediate family. He told me his family is "OK with it (his sexuality)" but never speak about it. Indika had recently graduated as a medical doctor and had commenced work at a government hospital in Colombo.

At the very first workshop, he told me that he might have to withdraw from the project as he was awaiting deployment within the health service to an "outstation" hospital. It is a common practice in Sri Lanka for new medical graduates to work in small towns and cities. Throughout the rehearsal process, he returned to the idea that he may have to leave. He suggested that it might be better if he withdrew immediately because of this potential work requirement and the potential disruption it might bring to the project. It was a considerate gesture. The other participants, as a group, discussed this possibility and suggested that Indika remain with the project.

This persistent concern did not appear to undermine his commitment to the project or engagement with other participants. In fact, because of his status as a doctor, some younger cast members called him "Doctor" as a sign of respect. As the friendships among participants developed, I heard participants call him Indika, occasionally followed by the

more intimate honorific *ayya* (older brother). They demonstrated their respect for Indika as a doctor while planning an after-show party, at which some of them wanted to get drunk. As they spoke of their plans, heads turned to Indika, "Is that OK, doctor?" someone asked. He informed them that he did not care whether they drank alcohol. He told the group that he was not involved in the project as a doctor. Indika's gentle admonishment of his fellow participants seemed to have worked, at least in the rehearsals; the others did not ask him further health-related questions.

In the final days before production week, I rehearsed with Indika. As the participants performed most of the stories as monologues, it afforded me a chance to talk in-depth with each actor about his story, performance and his life outside the rehearsal space. On this occasion, while giving him notes, Indika asked me, "Why are we doing this?" I asked him what he meant by that. He explained that during the rehearsal process, he kept asking why each of the cast was doing this. A phone call the night before from his sister only intensified the question's significance. She had asked Indika many questions about why he was involved in the play.

"What's the purpose?" "Was it not enough to be gay? Was it necessary to talk about it publicly?" She asked him to consider his career as a medical officer and the possibility of damaging it through his involvement in the play. "What would people say?" His sister's questions had upset him. Indika told the participants some of the content of these talks with his sister. He did this for two reasons. The first was to let the others know of the pressure he faced and the second, undoubtedly related to the first, was that he trusted the other participants not to judge his situation. On one occasion, Indika himself argued that perhaps the risks to the participants and their families were too high. Despite the men's goodwill and

determination to share something from their lives with others, risks perpetually threatened the performance. Indika plainly told me that I was not at risk, unlike the participants.

He was right. I was a foreigner and would remain in the country for a short period. His critique of my position within the project made me think that perhaps I (and Sakhi Collaboration) had coerced the participants to do a public performance. Maybe I had used the men for a show and research while remaining inattentive to the risks to them. Now one of the participants articulated his concerns and challenged the direction of the production.

I asked Indika why he was involved in the project even when he was aware of the risks. He told me he wanted to let others know that gay people are everywhere, even in medicine. He thought that, as medicine was a pillar of the establishment, it was necessary to share with an audience that gay people may act as public servants and hold jobs deemed critical to the broader society. He seemed unsure about why he was involved, but he said it was in part to make new friends and to be open about his sexuality with those friends. He said that a situation he faced at work, which became the basis of his monologue, had troubled him.

In 2011, Indika submitted a story he had written to a regular newsletter produced by Equal Ground. The newsletter included input from gay community members through stories, photos, upcoming events, and so on. Indika submitted a one-page article entitled "Waiting for Godot" under the pseudonym of "A Gay Sri Lankan." The use of the title of Samuel Beckett's play is oblique. Below is a section of a paragraph from the original article that suggests gay people are waiting for "a Godot," some non-existent outsider, some other, to improve the lives of gay Sri Lankans.

“We owe it to that child, and to many more such children, men, women, suffering in silence in our country. Those of us who are willing and able to blend with the straight majority are doing so in selfish silence. For those of us who are brave, who are not willing to compromise themselves for the sake of acceptance, they will be fighting a losing battle if we do not add our voices to their chorus. But who among us is willing to do that, waiting for someone else to do that for us, waiting for a Godot who will never come.”

The story critiques gay people's treatment of each other. While much gay advocacy and awareness-raising is around straight people's attitudes and practices, he suggested in the article that gay people too can be disrespectful and express hatred towards other gay (and trans) people. He cited an example in which he, as a junior doctor, was bullied to become complicit with a senior registrar to refer a young trans patient for a psychiatric assessment based on the registrar's opinion that because the patient was "female," had short hair, and was wearing shorts, the patient was abnormal. Indika told me (and other participants) that he was "scared to come out at work in case he lost his job," but he still had a strong desire to perform for others; to reveal his constant conflict. Indika believed it necessary to critique the comparative privilege of gay men, including himself, who can pass as straight.

Following his first storytelling session, at the first gathering of the participants, about an experience of sexual abuse and its suitability, Indika wanted to adapt his earlier article to the stage. During rehearsals, he confessed a deep feeling of guilt for his part in oppressing another gay or trans person. Indika acknowledged that part of his desire to perform a story in which he might be an oppressor had an objective of redemption.

I presented the patient and was hoping to get her discharged and move on quickly to the next patient. It was a busy morning. The Senior Registrar had other ideas. She too had noticed that there was something different with this patient, and she didn't like it. She turned to the patient and started shooting questions at her. Right in front of everyone.

"Why are you dressed like that, in shorts and trouser, you look like a boy, it's not normal."

"Why aren't you wearing earrings? Your ears are not even pierced, are they?"

The poor girl didn't know what to say. She looked scared at the way we had surrounded her and barely seemed to understand what was happening.

"I took my earrings off; the skin grew back," that's all she could say.

"Where are your parents? Do you have brothers or sisters? What kind of an example would you be to them?"

"I am orphan, I live with my grandmother."

"Well, your grandmother should take better care of the way you dress."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No"

The Senior Registrar turned towards the Consultant and said, "This patient needs a psychiatric referral." And she turned to me and said, "Make sure you write a psychiatric referral for her before you discharge her".

What was I to do? I was the most junior person in the team, I have to carry out the orders without question.

I am a normal man, doing a normal job. I don't have long hair, I don't wear earrings. I can hide behind my white coat and my straight act, and when my fellow doctors behave like this, I say nothing.

In his performance Indika presented his character as someone with immense privilege and power. His privilege extended to his ability to pass as straight, and he used this to contribute to the suffering of a person perceived to be trans. He asked the audience to consider his ethical dilemma, one in which he was both oppressor and oppressed. He asked them to consider what they would do in his situation. He pondered his future career and the inevitability of further episodes of oppressing other gay and trans people. As he mused on his dilemma, he gave the audience some hope that he might rebel and intervene to not make the psychiatric referral. However, he does not. Finally, he admits that he could not resist the orders of his work superiors.

I did not know what to say or what to do. I sat down with her file. Finally, I somehow wrote that referral and sent her off. I don't know what happened to that girl, and I still wonder...

Following his final rehearsal at the Punchi theatre and just before moving to the British School theatre for production week, Indika spoke to me about his participation in the project. He began, "Matt, I don't think I can do this." I asked him what he meant. He

explained that, by participating in the performance he felt he had perhaps placed himself at too much personal risk. While he felt comfortable at rehearsals, performing in front of other participants, as the performance date loomed, he had thought much more about the potential implications. He told me that his concern was not about a lack of confidence to act but the potential risk to his career and the shame his performance could bring his family through his involvement with a show about gay men. Further, while his immediate family (parents and sister) was aware of his sexuality, his sister had approached him two days before he told me that he did not think he could remain a participant.

Indika told me something about that conversation with his sister. She had reminded him that his participation "would cause his parents' great distress," and had asked him why he "felt the need" to participate in such a production. She said that since his family knew and accepted his sexuality, there was no further need to discuss or promote it. Participation would draw unwanted attention to Indika and, perhaps more importantly, to his family. She reminded him that one of the five precepts of Buddhism recommends that people should refrain from harming living things. Many gay Sri Lankan Buddhists over years have quoted this precept to me. The act of disclosing one's sexuality to one's parents would likely cause a great deal of distress to them. This distress, his sister had argued, may trigger heart attacks or other catastrophic health interruptions.

Sensing Indika's distress, Luuk joined us. Indika's vocal tone was agitated, and he wanted me to do something about the situation. He suggested that Luuk could play his part using Indika's story. I tried to reassure Indika about his performance, and the strategies the group had taken to mitigate risks, but he appeared not to believe me. I had misread his anxiety

because I thought perhaps it was his "nerves" (given the proximity of the performance date) or his lack of theatrical experience. He continued, agitated, desperate for a solution. He suddenly suggested that he wear a mask or some other disguise to protect his identity. My initial response, an involuntary, disbelieving laugh, was unhelpful. Immediately I had an image of Indika as John Hurt in the film *The Elephant Man* with the bag on his head, with a small opening for his eyes. I thought, but did not say to the others, that Indika could end his story with a queering of John Merrick's defiant line, "I am not an animal."

I returned to a distressed Indika and attempted to remain calm. "What did you have in mind?" I asked him.

"Perhaps a beard," he replied.

"Can you grow a beard within a week?" I asked.

"No. I was thinking of a fake beard."

"No! No fake beards! We are not doing some amateur *Fiddler on the Roof*," was my dismissive, unhelpful response.

I am not sure he got the musical theatre reference, so I suggested a fake beard would look out of place on stage given the intimacy of the British School theatre. I thought a phony beard would distract from the stories and suggest to the audience that these gay men must hide their ugly, sordid lives behind a tacky stage prop made from a coat-hanger, chicken-wire and hair-dye infused-cotton wool.

Luuk, on the other hand, was sympathetic to Indika's situation and thought a beard might work. I groaned disapproval. With less than a week before the performance, I responded to Indika as a theatre director, who had a show to put on rather than as a researcher,

attempting to understand him and his situation. I hastily, and unreasonably, told Indika I would prefer not to have him on stage if he wanted the beard. Indika looked dejected. As I write these lines some years following that conversation, I feel ashamed at my responses to Indika, a research participant. Despite witnessing the participants' frequent risk discussions, I had lost sight of the study's purpose and its research question. Indika had sought my help to resolve a theatrical problem, which in turn may have addressed a more significant concern, a threat to his wellbeing.

To conclude the story of Indika's attempts to remain in the project, Luuk suggested a pair of glasses as a disguise, instead of a fake beard. The glasses idea pleased Indika, and he abandoned the beard. He tried on a pair of glasses. It reminded me of Superman as Clark Kent, who wears a simple pair of glasses to mask his hero persona. In this show, the glasses would allow Indika to perform his story while protecting his identity. A few different pairs of glasses were brought in for him to try. "Nothing too colourful," he instructed fellow participants. Finally, he selected a plain pair of black, plastic-framed glasses, without tinted lenses. He told me that the glasses would indicate to an audience (and to his sister) that he was playing a role. Besides the glasses, Indika wore a white coat during the performance of his story. However, as Indika viewed the white-coat as synonymous with his job as a medical officer, it acted to underline that this was indeed Dr Indika, himself, on the stage, telling his story. While the glasses, being pure costumery, showed the audience and made Indika believe that he was an actor, playing a character, anyone other than himself.

It was a moment of high tension, a dispute with a participant that revealed the inherent conflict between my dual roles. Luuk reminded me of that conflict by asking me, "Whose show is this?" By this, he implied that the show belonged to the participants and if they wished to use fake beards or another costume, that was for the participants to consider, not for me. Luuk was right. The incident exposed my attempts to influence the production, and my insensitivity, to the real risks these men believed they endured through their participation in this project.

While the other participants rejected Indika's initial story-offering primarily because of persistent public discourse on the conflation of child sexual abuse and gay men and the resultant victim subjectivity, his performed monologue revealed something of the complexity of a gay male subject in Colombo: a gay subject, both oppressor and oppressed, shaped by class and social status.

Saman, his Mother and Freud

Saman was the oldest participant at "41 plus years" when the project began. I had known Saman since 1998 when he was volunteering for Companions on a Journey, the country's first gay advocacy and support agency. We are not close friends but do have several close mutual friends. Given his age and long personal history with the gay community in Colombo, the other participants respected Saman. He was frequently given the honorific *ayya* (older brother) by other participants. He appeared to enjoy this fraternal role. I witnessed at rehearsals on several occasions Saman encouraging the younger participants, sharing

anecdotes about his involvement with gay organisations in the early 1990s and his disillusionment with the broader movement in the country.

Luuk had indicated a reluctance to include any participant over forty because he thought the younger participants would be disinclined to speak or make suggestions. However, as he knew Saman previously, he believed that his experience as an activist would bring different perspectives to the group and project. Saman wanted to participate at least in part because of his age. He told me it was essential to show the audience (and the other participants) that "gay life in Colombo didn't start with Grindr and Facebook."

Saman's age did not necessarily carry with it additional responsibilities, such as facilitating discussions at rehearsal, nor did he use the rehearsals to share anecdotes from an earlier time. Throughout much of the rehearsals, I observed that he often spoke last among the participants and occasionally did not speak at all. I do not know whether Luuk had suggested this, or whether Saman had made this decision consciously, alone. He told me once, outside of a rehearsal, that he wanted to listen to what the "newer guys" thought and how they understood "gay life." Although he contributed to the formation of the Sakhi Collaboration, Saman left the leadership roles, at least for this project, to Luuk and John.

On the afternoon of the first day of the drama workshop, Saman stood on the Punchi Theatre stage and delivered his monologue. I had seen him many times at friends' places and other locations impersonating people, often stock Sri Lankan characters that one sees in television serials, advertisements and in *baila* songs. These include the pious aunty or mother character, and the strict, big-bellied, loud *mudalali* (shop-keeper) complete with a heavy sing-song Sinhalese-English accent, head-wobbles (synonymous with stereotypical representations of South Asian people), and imagined, hitched-up sarong and quotes from

the Dharma. Saman's impersonations are often funny. However, before his first storytelling appearance, I was silently concerned that he might use these in his monologue, expecting, unfairly, that he would play for laughs as I had witnessed him doing over many years at various Colombo dinner tables. Saman began his story by introducing himself in a very traditional way. He was a Sinhala Buddhist from a rather conservative middle-class family. He promptly distinguished himself as the senior member of the performance troupe with what became the opening line of his performance monologue.

I have to take you way back to a time before the internet. There was no Facebook, Hi5 and Wikipedia. Nothing. That doesn't mean we were not having sex.

Because he did not have the internet while growing up, the curious adolescent Saman had turned to an alternative source; his father's 1965 set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, that dominated the family's sitting room.

The only resource available at that time was my father's 1965 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. This was printed in 1965 and the American psychologist association hadn't woken up yet. So, I looked under sex, then reproduction...that didn't help either. It didn't speak of men having sex with other men. Then I looked for ...ahhh there it is... homosexuality. So, this is it. There were jokes at school. Freud said something about this. There was this feminine element, mummy's boy, overbearing mother, distant father. I started to analyse myself. Where do I fit? Do I fit in to any of these descriptions? Is this some sort of disease? Who do I tell? We never had help lines for this thing...we only had lines for suicide. I wasn't having suicidal thoughts. I started to think something has to change. What if my parents find out? Are there any tell-tale signs of me? Was I in some way not masculine enough? Forward enough?

Saman's monologue achieved several things. It provided a snapshot of Colombo's recent pre-internet past and how a gay man might, in that context, explore writing about homosexuality. Saman's story of perusing encyclopedias to locate information fragments reminded me of my experiences of furtive glances at books in the school library. And, like Saman, as an adolescent, I identified my sexuality in the pages of a World Book encyclopedia dominated by medical discourses. According to his 41-year-old self's reflections, those discourses captivated the adolescent Saman. His story explored his sincere regret in shattering his relationship with his mother because he thought it might help fix his sexuality, following his interpretation of Freud's teachings on sexuality. His short sentences delivered rapidly provided an overview of a theory of homosexuality's "cause" and the constant self-questioning and self-monitoring that follows. Saman's story clearly demonstrates the pervasive power and influence of the medical discourse on the apparent 'cause' of his sexuality as noted in Chapter 2.

He quickly moved the story to his age and his long association with the gay community and gay activism. He was self-deprecating yet defiant about gay men of his generation. He then spoke of his relationship with his mother. The three-minute monologue climaxed with his palpable regret over the disintegration of his relationship with his dying mother. It was an intense, exciting performance. It appeared he had been waiting to perform this story for some time, as his story contained conflict and progressed to a dramatic climax before a reflective denouement. At its completion, the other participants whooped with delight and applauded.

Some of the others then quizzed Saman about the story. "Was it really like that?" was the dominant question. It was like that, Saman replied. His reply prompted a discussion about participants' relationship with their mothers and problems with some of the theories touched on in Saman's monologue. In it, he mentions reading about Freud's notion of a distant, absent father and dominant, close mother as a contributing causal factor in male homosexuality. As he had read it in an *Encyclopedia Britannica*, he thought as an adolescent that it must be true. Again, participants discussed the 'causes of homosexuality.' Nuwan asked for my opinion, and I gave it. For a brief, and yet a necessary moment, I stepped upon a rhetorical soapbox to give my views on gay-related causal theories. I then asked the participants what they thought as I descended from the rhetorical soapbox and returned to the roles of researcher and theatre co-maker.

The influence of the mother on these men is critical. Not in any causal way but as a figure of deep respect and central to the continued functioning of Sri Lankan families. While I did not observe any discussion about the presence and portrayal of mothers in the stories, through the development of the pieces, I recalled attending a dinner during the fieldwork with a group of Sri Lankan friends, all of whom were gay men. One of the men told a story of recently being late for an urgent appointment. As the appointment was in the evening and some distance from home, it was likely he might have to forgo dinner. He lived at home with his parents, and his mother, keen that her son should eat before he left home, followed him around the house, while he dressed and prepared to go for the appointment, depositing small handfuls of rice and curry into his mouth. He concluded the story by saying his mother helped him get to the appointment on time. This story was received with appreciative coos for his mother and several nods of shared experience from the others.

The concept of a mother chasing her 34-year-old, adult son and feeding him with her hand was not unusual for them.

On the contrary, it marked a devoted mother's self-sacrifice. I was quietly horrified by the story and feigned neutrality by asking if that was common for older men of 34 to be hand-fed by their mothers. There was a chorus of agreement, "Yes!" "It shows a mother's love." "It is not like the West here," was another comment. I then knew it impolite to challenge this practice.

In discussions with Saman during one on one rehearsals, we talked about his motivations for being involved in the project. He told me he was interested in how the gay community had changed over the years and how the "younger generation" as he referred to the other participants, socialised mainly through online platforms. As he was in his early 40s, other participants perceived Saman as an elder. Saman has never married, unlike many gay men of his age. His parents are deceased, and he is financially secure, following the inheritance of his family home following the death of his mother.³²

In conversation with Saman *ayya*³³ during an early rehearsal, I asked him why he was interested in the past and was his growing up and realisation of his sexuality so different from men in their 20s, for example. He suggested that it was very different and shared a

³² Traditionally, the youngest child (nicknamed *badapisa* in Sinhalese) inherits the family home, once both parents have died. Saman is the youngest child in his family.

³³ I was called Matt *ayya* or *sudu ayya* (white older brother) by some of the cast. It is simultaneously respectful and intimate. It is also preferable, at least to me, to the term *maama* (uncle), which is respectful of an older man but less intimate.

story of how he met his first partner. Like many middle-class, English speaking Sri Lankans, Saman was a member of the British Council. The BC, as it is often referred to, provides library services, English language training, hosts film nights and offers space for theatre. Other former European colonial powers, too, offer similar centres including the Alliance Française and the Goethe Institut. Given the colonial links, and unceasing Anglophilic nature of much of Colombo's middle classes, the British Council remains the most popular of these outposts.

Every Saturday morning, Saman went to the BC to exchange the books he had borrowed the week before. Saturday mornings were a busy time for the BC. Saman had a few gay friends but did not have a partner. In his story performed as part of *If You Promise Not to Tell*, he suggests that although there were very few parties and places to meet, that gay men still met for sex. Saman told me he was keen to find a partner. In addition to limited meeting places for gay men, information about homosexuality was limited. Saman said there were very few books on the topic in the BC library and nothing at all in Sinhalese language bookshops and the Colombo public library. There were a few books on ancient Greek sculpture with brief descriptions of homoerotic love and a few psycho-social tomes that explored likely causes and tips for 'living as a homosexual.' He would occasionally pick-up these books, to check the inside the cover to see how often others had borrowed the book. Unfortunately for Saman, there were only a few "Due Date" stamps on the slip soundly pasted inside the cover. One day Saman decided to borrow one of these books. His decision distressed him because he had to consider how he would keep the book hidden from his family and servants. The more immediate difficulty lay in getting the book off the library shelf and checked out by the lady on the loans desk without too much fuss. To overcome

this potentially difficult obstacle, he surrounded the 'gay book' with plenty of 'straight ones,' books on war and sport.

When it came time to return the book, Saman decided the book itself might act as a space for meeting other gay men, for friendship or a relationship. He attached a small note to the inside of the back cover of the book. On it he wrote that he was gay, his age, his suburb and his interest in contacting other gay men. As he did not have a mobile phone and was scared to give his home number, he requested that any potential respondents write on the note inside the book.

He returned the following Saturday to find that someone had written in response to his note. Saman added to the reply. He was both excited by the possibility and scared at the potential risks. Here perhaps was a man, of a similar age, who desired to meet him, to be friends or maybe a boyfriend. Here was someone planning to meet him and trick him, take him to the police, ban him from the BC and shame him and his family. After about a month of exchanging a few lines of communication, the two agreed to meet, at the BC. He had not seen a picture of his "friend" and was unsure if he would even turn up. Saman waited on the lawn outside the BC library. Young students coming and going from English language classes filled the lawn. Finally, Saman's friend approached. He was real, not a trickster. The two men talked briefly at the BC before going to a nearby café.

Upon hearing this story, I thought about how we might include it in the performance. It had clear romantic and dramatic elements and ended happily: they became lovers. However, Saman was not interested in sharing this story in the performance for several reasons. The

primary reason was that his now-former partner, the one he met on the BC lawn, would possibly see the performance. He told me it was not his story, alone, to tell.

Ranjit's Theatrical Resistance

As explained above, participants in the project were aged 18 to 41 years. The youngest participant was Ranjit, who was "18 years plus" when the project started. Given his age, he was asked by Sakhi founders Sameera and John to provide identification through his National Identity Card (NIC), as they had determined that the minimum age to join the project should be 18.. Ranjit had previously attempted to join a Sakhi activity in 2011, but they turned him away because of his age. While Luuk was sympathetic towards the experiences of adolescents, he was firm that SC would not consider working with this cohort, citing several Facebook pages and local websites that offered a platform for gay adolescents to meet online. Mobilising gay youth, Luuk told me, had potentially severe risks for any organisation. It was difficult enough for gay adults to occupy discursive and physical spaces without embracing the needs of gay youth.

The now-adult Ranjit had returned to SC through this project. He had recently left his all-boys school in central Colombo because of persistent, and occasionally violent, bullying. He was unknown to the other participants at the first drama workshop, and one of the few participants to have any previous performing experience. He revealed on the first day that he had played many Shakespearean heroines at school. It is a common phenomenon, as mentioned earlier at Sri Lanka's "leading schools" for boys to play female roles. Ranjit told

me that it was often the 'gay boys' who played Ophelia, Desdemona, and Juliet in such schools. Ranjit's favourite part was Lady Macbeth. He had played her in a school production the year he left school. He had recently commenced study at a fine arts college in Colombo at the start of the project. He told me his motivation for joining the project was to be able to be on stage again and to socialise with other gay men. Ranjit developed his story to performance level within the first three weeks of rehearsal. He was very clear about what he wanted to do. He based his story on his recent personal experiences, and he told other participants that he wanted to tell others how schools treat people who are different.

As he told me about his time at school in our initial one on one rehearsal, he revealed that behind both his desire to act and the bullying he encountered at school was a romance. He and an older boy at school were close. Ranjit loved him. One afternoon after school, during a storm, the older boy was attempting to climb a tree to get over his fence at home (as he had forgotten his key). His school uniform soaked with rain, he slipped from the tree to the concrete paving below and died. News about the boy's death spread quickly at the school. Ranjit was distraught yet was unable to tell anyone. He could not concentrate on his schoolwork. He did not eat much, cried a lot, and generally withdrew. The accident had occurred merely eighteen months before Ranjit shared this story with me. Yet his retelling was bereft of sadness, which somehow made the story all the more moving. I became unsure of what to do. I wanted to comfort Ranjit, to say how awful it must have been. I had questions on my mind, "Do I ask more questions about his relationship with his deceased friend?" As quickly as the questions came so too did my own answers: "No, that would be too voyeuristic." I immediately thought of the story as part of the production then dropped

the idea because it was too stereotypical of love stories between men- someone had to die. But this was Sri Lanka, not Australia or the United States so perhaps such a narrative was new. I did not share these thoughts I shared with Ranjit as we sat in my living room. Again the issue of the participants revealing intimate details about their lives was both encouraging and troubling: encouraging because it indicated a level of trust in me, a stranger, to acknowledge and respect a participant's experiences; and troubling because I was unsure what to do should the stories lead to, or trigger, trauma to which the project (and I) had contributed. Ranjit completed the story of his recently dead friend and immediately stood up. "Shall we look at the script again?" Ranjit asked.

If You Promise was not designed or intended as a site of therapy either for the participants or, indeed, the audience. However, the aesthetic form that the show ultimately took could be viewed as a form of theatrical confession, given the content came largely from the individual performers' personal experiences. I later thought about some of the shared stories from the early workshops and questioned whether the project was possibly exploiting painful experiences for entertainment.

Three particular stories—Indika's first story of child sexual abuse, Nuwan's story of how he lived in his room for three years and found solace in his mother, a psychiatrist and the Little House on the Prairie books, and Ranjit's experiences of school—had the potential to align with Salverson's (1999) and Thompson's (2009b) "aesthetic of injury." As Thompson argues, the applications of imported 'telling your story' models have the potential to displace local aesthetic forms and therapeutic methods, and he suggests that regardless of intentions, such models constitute forms of neo-colonialism [2009b:48].

Yet it also can be argued that Thompson's, and indeed Salverson's, focus are on what the outsider seemingly imposes on the 'local,' without acknowledging local sensibilities, and the agency of insiders to adapt or reject such offers. In fact, marginalised communities, such as gay men in Colombo, may be further stigmatised and restricted by local aesthetic forms. The 'imported' approach potentially offers these groups an opportunity to undermine the authority of local aesthetics and avoid potential censorship within their own societies. For example, during rehearsals for *If You Promise*, at least two participants told me they wanted to perform their story in English because references to sexuality were more easily conveyed through English, particularly around sexual acts and genitals. The use of the imported language and monologue form 'saves face' for both the performer and audience as it enables the performer to 'speak' about sensitive issues yet preserves the shared language and sensibility of speaking about sex and non-normative sexualities.

In short, Ranjit and other participants could have been exploited by the process and aesthetic form, but he (and others) undoubtedly possessed some agency. His engagement in rehearsals demonstrated this. He frequently sought notes from me following a rehearsal and entered these notes into a book. He listened and would seek clarification about the notes he received from Luuk or me. He referred to his notebook if he thought he was receiving contradictory directions from Luuk or me. He was not a passive recipient of Luuk's and my perceived wisdom. He would try our suggestions and occasionally reject them. Once, following a verbose notes session, he simply said, "Matt, I don't know what you mean. Can you show me what you want?"

Although the participants in the project chose "a" story from their lives, they did not necessarily select "the" story of their lives. In early discussions with Ranjit about his story

selection for the performance, he told me he wanted to have an account with "a happy ending." Ranjit's story answers, in part at least, Thompson's call for the triumph of an "aesthetic of beauty over an aesthetic of injury." However, within his monologue, as with others, in *If You Promise* both aesthetic forms co-exist; beauty is not without its injuries. He had chosen to not include aspects of the romance-story into his work. It had a dramatic, sad finish, but his performed monologue focused on his love of performing and how he negotiated a hostile school environment to continue doing what he loved.

The monologue opened with a recreation of his Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*, Act Five, Scene 1) that he had performed during his final months at school.

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!

Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.

He breaks the scene by turning to the audience as an actor playing Lady Macbeth while he removes his costume.

I always played female characters in school plays. And I loved it. I felt so free. It was me on the stage. Yes, I tried playing a male character...wearing a sarong, and I felt...horrible.

While I got good feedback about my performances, some students and teachers mocked me, called me names and questioned why I was playing female characters.

This led to an incident in which one of his peers questioned Ranjit's gender.

There was this boy. I really liked him although we had never spoken before. One day he came into my class, with a serious look on his face. I thought he was going to ask me out. I was happy. But the first thing he said to me was, "Do you have a penis?" "Yes, I have a penis. I perform as a girl on stage, but I am a boy. I like being a boy." The head prefect came and took me to an empty room with a chair in it. I sat. He gave me some papers and started asking questions. "Why are you different?" Why are you acting like this?

"I am not acting. This is the way I am," I replied.

He told me to write [all about] my whole life story on the papers. Starting with my childhood to now. Every...single...thing. I was scared, so I wrote everything. After 3 hours and 6 foolscap pages, I stopped.

The story reveals how Ranjit spoke with his parents about bullying and their support to assist him in leaving school. He completes his monologue by sharing a little of his present role as a student at art college, where he is shocked that people just accept him. He finishes his piece by returning to his Lady Macbeth costume and Act 5, Scene 1

Wash your hands, put on your nightdress. Look not so pale. I tell you yet again.

Banquo's buried. He cannot come out on's grave.

To bed, to bed, to bed.

Importantly, Ranjit's story about his fellow students' attempts to extract some type of revelation from him connotes the demand for a command performance and aligns with the critiques of the use of personal narrative with which I opened this chapter. Indeed, from a

Foucauldian perspective, this could be read as an instance of a subject being disciplined through the practice of a confessional narrative. However, as Foucault reminds us, that every application of bio-power produces its own resistance. For Ranjit, the act of performing on stage constituted the perfect opportunity for resisting such oppressive demands. He told me that the stage was a place where he could be himself, even while he knew teachers and fellow students would criticise him for playing female parts. To perform on a stage for Ranjit, was liberating.

Although all three participants highlighted in this chapter initiated their stories using deeply personal material, the resulting performed stories were not solely personal narratives. Instead, their stories combined elements of testimony and of fiction. The fictions were apparent in Indika's glasses and Ranjit's use of his performances of Lady Macbeth. The following chapter examines the participants' aesthetic choices for the production and how they responded to the audience during the post-performance discussion.

CHAPTER SEVEN: INTERCULTURALISM WITH A SMALL 'I': FINDING A FORM FOR THE PARTICIPANTS' STORIES AND PRESENTING THE WORK FOR AN AUDIENCE

As a convenient point of departure, in the opening chapter of this thesis I suggested that my research originated partly in response to the performance of an American actor's one-person show, in English, for a mostly local Sri Lankan audience, at Colombo's first ever "Gay Pride" Festival. The concern I raised at the time—a concern that I subsequently learned was shared by at least some local audience members—was whether Jeff Solomons' production of *Mother/SON* was relevant enough to the lives of gay Sri Lankans to merit its prominent programming as the festival's opening event. It is only fair, then, to ask the same question of the performance of *If You Promise* which, after all, shares a number of formal characteristics with *Mother/Son*: the use of monologues; actors using personal stories to create theatre; and the inclusion of a discussion with audience members after the performance. There are also, of course, some important differences between the two works, most obviously the fact that *If You Promise* featured multiple performers, and they, together with the stories, all originated in Sri Lanka. Yet the question of relevance remains. It is linked partly to the methodological issues I have discussed earlier, regarding the small number of participants involved in the research, but it also goes to the issue of the aesthetic framework within which performers and audiences come together.

As with the discussion of storytelling practices in Chapter Six, in this chapter I will not shy away from self-reflexive questioning of the ways in which I, a foreigner, influenced the style

and content of *If You Promise*, through my role as co-director. Nevertheless, despite my visible presence in the production process, the participants clearly exercised considerable agency not just in the generation, selection and editing of stories but also in the ideas they offered and the aesthetic choices they made about the production's form and, indeed, the way in which these dramaturgical and staging decisions helped determine the format and scheduling of rehearsals. This chapter therefore examines the aesthetic framework for the production of *If You Promise* that was developed in collaboration with the participants. In doing so, I situate the project in relation to some long-running debates on the poetics and politics of interculturalism in theatre. I also, in the concluding part of the chapter, revisit the discursive formations and social/institutional arrangements that I argued, in Chapter Three, above, have a major bearing upon the way in which many Sri Lankans—including the gay men who performed *If You Promise* and the diverse audience to whom they performed—enact their multiple identities.

Stepping into the deep waters of interculturalism

During the first workshops and early rehearsals of *If You Promise* I was often worried lest I fall into the trap of arbitrarily imposing on this group of mostly inexperienced Sri Lankan actor-participants the approaches to creating theatre that I had learned in my professional training at drama school in Australia. Luuk in part alleviated my concerns by suggesting that I need not feel guilty about “imposing” ideas on the participants. He told me that in Sri Lanka foreigners often represented opportunities to learn new concepts or a different way of thinking. He reminded me that, in any case, the interactions between the participants

and me were never going to be simply a case of me imparting knowledge, in a one-way process, for the participants to then consume and reproduce through their performances.

Indeed, throughout our regular 'catch-up' meetings in the first weeks of the fieldwork, Luuk appeared to enjoy reminding me that, although I had my objectives and had offered a structure for the project, the participants would do something for themselves too. "You will get frustrated [with the participants]" he told me: "It's new... they might drop out". In part, I think Luuk was trying to prepare me for the possibility that few or indeed none of the participants would remain or would want to perform for an audience. After all, my desire to create a piece of theatre with the participants (even if it was an idea that Sakhi Collaboration readily supported) was perhaps, in and of itself, an imposition. Yet Luuk also expressed hope that the theatre-making project would provide a stimulus, something novel for members of the gay community with which to engage.

For my part, having conducted numerous workshops in health promotion and community development roles, I understood that any proposal to impart "knowledge and skills" is always going to be mediated through differences in understanding the meanings of, and responses to, that knowledge and those skills. Luuk was right to argue that whatever I might bring to workshops and rehearsals would be transformed and "localised". This project, he continued, would be an opportunity for the participants to learn something about a type of theatre, which they may or may not use again. At one point, he even went so far as to reprimand me for having the arrogance (a common trait in Westerners he suggested) to

assume that the participants would be so personally and culturally threatened by what I had to offer in a handful of workshops and six weeks of rehearsals.

Luuk's predictions were borne out on the very first day of the initial workshop, when the participants, one by one, walked on the Punchi Theatre stage for an exercise about allowing the audience to "see" them, without the performer even entering into a character, without "acting" as it were. The task—one that I had practised many years earlier when I trained as an actor—involves improvising around the image of casting a net far and wide, over the audience. With the cast-the-net movement, the participant "takes in" the gaze of all the audience members before hauling in his "catch" (the entire audience) as he "retrieves" the net. The first participant who volunteered to do the exercise subverted my expectations by creating an elaborate character, immediately recognisable by the other participants as a local fisherman. He hitched up and tied an imagined sarong tightly before walking onto the sand and the water's edge to cast his net. Net fishing from a beachfront is a prevalent occupation in Sri Lanka, so the act of tying the sarong placed the actor on any number of beaches across the country. He smoked an imaginary cigarette, acknowledged other (imagined) fisherman sharing the beachfront. In short, what I had believed to be an almost "value-neutral, context-free" exercise—lifted directly from the Victorian College of the Arts in Melbourne—was adapted and used by Sri Lankan participants in an entirely different way.

“After Appropriation”: Interculturalism as more than a ‘zero sum’ game

This small act of interculturalism offers a salutary reminder of the dynamic nature of such exchanges, even in a relatively low-key, grassroots project such as this research, and it resonates strongly with some of the more robust critiques and counter-critiques of ‘high end’ intercultural performance processes. John Russell Brown, for instance, famously took Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine to task for their lavish intercultural theatre productions of the 1980s. He argued that their borrowings from various Asian and South-Asian forms—no matter how well-intentioned—were essentially one-way traffic, a kind of theatrical “pillage, and the result is a fancy-dress pretense or, at best, the creation of a small zoo in which no creature has its full life” (Brown 1988: 14). However, as Craig Latrell (2000) observes, this language of “pillage,” and the other militaristic metaphors used by Brown, also betrays, in its own way, a similar Eurocentrism by playing into the familiar stereotype of seeing a vulnerable, passive non-Western world dominated by a rapacious, assertive West.

Notwithstanding the evidence of inequality and capitalist exploitation of people in developing nations, under the aegis of neo-colonial, neo-liberal reforms to the global economy, Latrell offers an alternative account of how interculturalism—at least insofar as the everyday practices of artists are concerned—can operate. His critique of the position advanced by Brown and others is that, by only ever attending to the power of an assertive West over a passive non-West, their explanations of interculturalism maintain a dogged focus on the West and virtually rule out any and all agency that might be exercised by local

artists who, of course, are dealing with the legacies of a colonial past and continuing neo-colonialism but who, nevertheless, have plenty of insight into their situation. The concept that non-Western artists could incorporate—indeed ‘pillaged’—ideas from Western arts practice is almost entirely absent from the account of interculturalism that Brown offers and, for Latrell, this amounts to denying non-Western artists the “sophistication and multiplicity of responses” to outside influences that is commonly afforded to Western cultures (Latrell 2000: 45). Worse, Latrell argues, this narrative has an essentialising tendency that reduces artistic practices to either “Western” or “non-Western” rather than acknowledging the syncretism and hybridisation that permeates many cultural practices, including the creation of theatre. In short, the kind of narrative that Brown offers is one that assumes interculturalism to be a monologic phenomenon rather than a dialogic one.

Without ignoring global inequalities of wealth and power, or the pervasive influence of Western (predominantly North American) cultural products, Latrell starts from the assumption that Non-Western artists and cultural practitioners are likely to be just as discerning borrowers and adaptors as their Western peers. One of the case studies that Latrell offers to illustrate his argument is the example of *dangdut*, a popular hybrid musical form from Jakarta, Indonesia, which, as Latrell points out, borrows heavily from Portuguese and North Indian musical traditions. A similar argument could be made about the traditional Sri Lankan dance and musical form, *baila*, which is a hybrid of local, African³⁴ and Portuguese forms.

³⁴ During the time of Portuguese occupation of Sri Lanka (1505-1658) the colonisers imported Bantu from Africa to work as slaves and soldiers in the new colony. Known now as Sri Lankan Kaffirs, they remain a tiny minority ($n < 1000$: 2009 Census) in contemporary Sri Lanka

As Latrell suggests, “the act of borrowing itself (no matter who is doing it) is an essentially creative and artistic one, and one that deserves to be examined as an aesthetic phenomenon rather than as simply a demonstration of (or reaction to) political power” (Latrell 2000: 47). In the next sections of this chapter, I go on to demonstrate how the participants in this research went about shaping the aesthetic framework of *If You Promise* with reference to long-standing Sri Lankan practices of borrowing from other cultures.

However, before proceeding with this discussion, two final observations about the arguments of Latrell deserve to be noted. First, the form in which he develops his critique of the narrative advanced by Brown and others—namely, a narrative premised on a rampant, rapacious West whose artists, despite a veneer of interest in *interculturalism*, inevitably end up imposing their models on a supposedly unsuspecting or backward non-West—follows the same logic as the arguments I canvassed in Chapter Two which call into question the presumed globalisation of the gay international subject or ‘McGay’. This convergence reminds us that the aesthetic choices being made by the participants in *If You Promise* are not simply about finding a suitable performance style but also entail an awareness of how they might want their performances to be read against both local and global perceptions of gay sexual identities.

Second, Latrell makes the very pertinent point that often, when borrowing from foreign cultural forms, local artists (he gives the example of Indonesian theatre companies adapting

the conventions of Western stage realism) deliberately avoid the option of entirely localising the foreign form. On the contrary, in such cases, local artists are often happy for their audiences to sense that there remains something foreign about the style in which the work is presented because this veneer of foreignness can allow the artists to advance a more bold and direct social critique than might otherwise be possible. In summary, Latrell's position aligns well with the arguments Luuk had put to me in the early period of our workshops. Not only were the participants in this project quite comfortable with re-appropriating exercises such as the modest little "fishing" improvisation described above; they also showed great reflexive awareness when considering the potential strengths and weaknesses of borrowing from local performance traditions in the creation of *If You Promise*.

Assessing the Potential of Existing Traditions of Cultural Borrowing in Sri Lanka

In early discussions with the participants about modes of performance that might suit our project, I asked about the kinds of theatre and other performance genres they had seen in Colombo or elsewhere in the country. Some participants spoke of the well-known theatre artist Ediriweera Sarachchandra who adapted Sinhalese folk drama to bring it to a more mainstream, theatrical form and audience. His two most famous plays, *Maname* (1956) and *Sinhabahu* (1961), are adaptations of stories from the life of the Buddha (*jataka* stories). These plays became very popular in the early years of Sri Lankan independence from Britain, contributing to the regeneration of interest in *jataka* stories and drama as an artistic mode. They also helped to propagate the concept of Buddhism's unique role in Sri Lankan society. Despite being criticised for being nationalist by modern theatre critics and those from the more activist Sinhala theatre, Sarachchandra adapted Western forms of theatre through the

writing of plays and staging these in proscenium arch theatres. His fusion of local and Western styles enabled him to bring the perennial stories of the Buddha and Sri Lanka's 'glorious' past to a new and urbanising audience. As Gunawardena (1999) suggests, the modern Sinhala theatre has its roots in the translation and adaptation of mostly British and European plays and this is merely one instance of a well-established practice in Sri Lanka of artistic borrowing and adaption, of intercultural performance making.

Gunawardena also argues, however, that—notwithstanding the extent of borrowing from British and European theatre—there is not a strong tradition of naturalism or realism (familiar to Australian, Western European, and North American audiences) in Sri Lankan theatre which has, by contrast, tended to use a heightened performance mode, with stock characters and familiar plots. The cultural borrowings in this instance, such as the staging, theatre design and content are thus blended with heightened styles of performance to which Sri Lankan audiences are accustomed.

During my discussions with participants about the style of the performance they wanted to create, I also asked them if they might be interested in using more traditional forms of performance. For example, might elements of conventional and more easily identifiable forms of dance, music and theatre be used in the creation of *If You Promise*? One participant (echoing the final point I made above in connection with Latrell's arguments) suggested that we avoid using popular and traditional dramatic styles and motifs because using such performance forms might attract criticism: while it may be acceptable for gay men to appear on stage performing about their lives, to include motifs from Sarachchandra

or Kandyan dance, for example, would be too much. There was to be no queering of *jataka* stories, no gay *Maname*. The rejection of the inclusion of references to Sarachchandra's work was also because of its age and its perceived association with Sinhalese nationalism.

Further, Luuk asked the participants about other artistic skills and interests (for example, movement, singing, musical, dance, visual arts) they possessed, and a follow-up question about the main forms of traditional Sinhalese dance (Kandyan, low country and Sabaragamuwa). While some of the participants were familiar with these dance forms, again there was little interest in incorporating these dance styles into the work. Some participants suggested that these forms, while still relevant to the country, were mostly cultural relics, or associated with religious rituals and village life. Use of traditional dance, Hasitha suggested, might enable the audience to view homosexuality as merely a dance: a set of repeated movements for an audience, and a costume, easily removed at the dance's completion, thereby rendering being gay as a momentary performance, a type of falsehood. Hasitha's other concern was the perceived stereotype (shared in much of the West) that male dancers lacked masculinity and were likely to be gay. The participants frequently fluctuated between being cautious of offending the straight audience members by "being too gay" and trying to ensure that those who watched the show left the theatre with some further understanding about the lives of gay men in Colombo.

Later in the rehearsal process, a new participant, Murugan, a Tamil man, and *Bharata Natyam* dancer, joined. The other participants encouraged him to include some *Bharata Natyam* sequences in his piece. *Bharata Natyam* represented Tamil (and Hindu) culture and

was regarded as sexy and masculine by some of the participants. However, two of the older participants questioned this enthusiasm by suggesting that the use of *Bharata Natyam* by a Tamil man was stereotypical and best avoided. The participants discussed the cultural politics of the use of traditional dance and musical styles, especially the representation of ethnic minorities. Aesthetically too, the use of a conventional dance style for one of the performers would draw unnecessary attention to the actor's ethnicity, as an exotic other. Although this was countered by others, who suggested such colour and movement would help to locate and anchor the entire performance in Sri Lanka and offer relief during a series of “largely talking head” performances. As it turned out, Murugan had to withdraw from the production due to his having found employment in another city. He did, however, rejoin the cast when a version of *If You Promise* was remounted by the participants themselves in September 2012 and, during his monologue, he did decide to dance *Bharata Natyam*.

These early discussions about performance styles indicate that the participants had an awareness that theatrical representation had potential consequences. The use of traditional cultural motifs needed the participants' careful consideration lest it attract criticism and distract the audience from the stories themselves. As Latrell suggests, “cultural exchange is a dialogue involving a variety of aesthetic as well as local political factors” (2000:47). The participants' practice of regular reflection upon aesthetic choices and potential audience responses to those choices demonstrated an acute sensitivity to the socio-political situation in the country.

Navigating between the local and the foreign

Latrell, citing Carlson, suggests that there are a variety of different relationships between the culturally local and culturally foreign. These artistic borrowings may take the relatively superficial form of borrowing costumes or staging to “deeper attempts at syncretism [which might] represent different aesthetic goals on the part of the artist/creator” (Carlson, in Latrell 2000: 47). It is important to note, in this regard, some parallels between the way in which the project participants were assessing the prospects for borrowing various cultural forms and some of the ways in which how gay Sri Lankans strategically borrow from established discourses of gay rights and identities.

For example, Equal Ground hosts the annual Colombo Pride festival to coincide with other similar festivals around the world. The Pride festivals have included performance, films, workshops and discussions about gay rights. The borrowings have included the adoption of the rainbow flag, workshops on how to come out at work, and extended to pressuring the Sri Lankan government to reform laws that criminalise sex between same-sex adults. Yet gay people in Sri Lanka strategically use their national identity, their "Sri Lankanness", to reject attempts to adopt Western models of being and doing gay. The almost-constant tension between and within gay organisations in the country around the issue of law reform demonstrates this. Equal Ground is well connected with international gay networks such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and advocates on law reform. Other gay organisations have criticised Equal Ground for giving too much attention and resources to law reform at the expense of social services to the community. I have been told by many

gay men, some community activists, that "we in Sri Lanka do not need to follow the west. This is Sri Lanka!"

The nationalist discourse deployed by those who wish to discredit the gay community as foreign interlopers and a threat to the nation is also used within the gay community to appeal to a perceived "authentic" representation of the country's gay community. Other gay community members frequently attack the head of Equal Ground because she supposedly carries a United States passport. Suspicion of dual-citizens is a common trope in Sri Lanka. Terms like "cockroach" (Sinhalese: *kaerapota*) or "coconut" (Sinhalese: *pol*)—i.e., brown on the outside and white on the inside—are sometimes used to describe people who are deemed to be too affiliated with the West.

The monologue form in If You Promise

Ultimately *If You Promise* relied heavily on the form of spoken-word monologues, directly addressed to the audience, supplemented by three group scenes: a movement piece, that opened the performance, and two other scenes which will be discussed below. I mentioned in Chapter One that this was a form with which—in a previous project involving Luuk and John—we had already experimented. Bolo Theatre, formed in late 2005 by Luuk, me, and another mutual Sri Lankan friend, used participants' stories to create monologues and group scenes for performance and as a social activity. Bolo Theatre produced at least three performances using monologue-based performance. It also developed larger scale proposals to develop the methodology further. Bolo Theatre participants suggested that the form may be used to create performances with those affected by the country's civil war and the impact of the Asian tsunami in December 2004. In addition, in late 2005, I had also

conducted workshops in Trincomalee.³⁵ While I did not consciously plan it as such, undoubtedly this earlier foray into monologue-based performance served as a useful pilot for the development of *If You Promise*.

However, it was not only my friendship and previous collaborations with Luuk and John that brought us to the decision to work mainly with spoken-word monologues as the form. As described above, there were many explicit discussions between all of the participants in *If You Promise* about various possible forms in which the work might be presented and all played a part in our development of what might best be called a naturalistic Western aesthetic “with Sri Lankan characteristics.” Despite describing *If You Promise* as a pared back monolog-driven performance, the participants’ stories and performances were not unmediated, untruthful accounts, stripped of local motifs and characteristics.

Theatre from Everyday Sri Lankan Life: Monologues

The participants also recognised and supported the fact that the monologue form had a pragmatic benefit when it came to scheduling rehearsals. As the participants were busy with their daily lives, and time was limited, I scheduled rehearsals at a time and location

³⁵Trincomalee is a city on the northeast coast of Sri Lanka. Famous for its vast natural harbour, the Allies used it extensively during World War II. At the time of the workshop, Trincomalee was under the control of the Sri Lankan military. However, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) saw the city and its surrounds as part of their “homeland.” Despite the ongoing conflict (in Trincomalee, one could hear mortar and small arms fire from time to time), over 20 teachers, many of them specialising in drama teaching, travelled many hours by bus to attend the 2-day workshop.

convenient to each participant. While we held group rehearsals at the Punchi Theatre during weekend days, individual rehearsals took place at various hours at my house, in cafes, and in vacant rooms. The rehearsal location, on occasion, lacked space. However, these apparent limitations assisted the participants in becoming more used to performing in a relaxed, relatively naturalistic style, as there was no stage to stand on. Furthermore, the ability to schedule rehearsals around the rhythms of participants' everyday lives seemed especially appropriate for a project like this since, as Alan Read suggests, "The everyday [...] is the reality which we are made aware of when theatre is good and when theatre is done. [Typically, in theatre] the premise is that everyday life must be pushed aside for theatre to occur. The opposite is true. Everyday life must be known, and intimately, for good theatre to happen" (Read 1993: 17).

By directly addressing them, monologues assisted the performers in creating an intimacy with the audience. The title of the piece, *If You Promise Not to Tell*, itself suggests an intimacy between the storyteller and listeners; it conjures the notion of conspiring to share and keep a secret, inviting the audience to become joint custodians of these personal stories. The form honoured each participant's individual experience, while simultaneously acknowledging the implicit links between the stories.

Using monologues also enabled the inclusion of many stories, to demonstrate a diversity of lived experience. The monologue form provided each performer and his story, about six to eight minutes in the spotlight. Despite the variety, what emerged during rehearsals are the common motifs that recurred in some of the monologues. For example, three of

the monologues mentioned psychiatrists and four of them feature an invisible yet very present mother character. The identification of the recurring motifs triggered further discussion among participants. The recurring figure of the psychiatrist was important, given the dominant medical discourse in Sri Lanka that frequently conflates homosexuality with mental illness. Many of the participants had been referred (mostly by parents) to psychiatrists during their lives; a few had sought a "cure."

The monologue form brought challenges of course such as privileging an individual's experience over collective experiences; the repetitive use of monologue may have given a similar rhythm to the piece. While the Sri Lankan audience may have viewed the monologue form as a foreign, exotic form, its use (or overuse) might have been perceived as altogether too foreign, and therefore lacking relevance to the country's culture. And with the common trope that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon and influence, there is a risk that the piece's content would be dismissed together with the form.

The monologue form exposed each performer, made him vulnerable and possibly allowed the audience to guess the story was that of the actor performing it. The possibility of the audience conflating the performed story with the actor performing it concerned many of the participants. One participant suggested that we share the stories among the performers so that they were not performing their own story. He argued that it would be interesting artistically to see our friends' (other participants') stories reinterpreted by others. It would, he concluded, provide a mask for the performers, a way of lessening audience speculation about each performer's sexuality. The group discussed the idea. John suggested that swapping stories might require greater rehearsal time for each performer to "know" the story he was to enact. Luuk, standing outside the group of

others seated on the floor, reminded the others about "identity and visibility." He said that the performance was enough of a mask and encouraged the other participants to take a risk by performing their own stories. He offered that during the post-performance discussion with the audience that the participants might indicate that they were in the project as performers and not necessarily providers of source materials. A lengthy silence followed Luuk's suggestion. I observed participants, some with their heads bowed, others flopped onto their backs stretching, perhaps awaiting someone to say, "Yes! That's what we should do." Given my obsession with time and my anxiety to 'deliver' something, I broke the silence by telling the group that they needed to decide soon as it would shape the rehearsal process. Sagara politely followed my intervention and said: "OK, let's do our own stories." He repeated a similar statement in Sinhalese. Other participants replied with "OK" or handclapping.

Theatre from Everyday Sri Lankan Life: Group Scenes

In addition to monologues, Luuk suggested that we include a couple of scenes with multiple performers, to "change the mood and focus" of the show. He added that as Gayan and John each had some difficulties selecting a story to perform alone, their ideas might be developed further by using other actors. In this section, I discuss how the participants created these two scenes through constant negotiation with each other and how these are inflected by the discursive formations described in Chapter 3.

Gayan's Story

Gayan's story idea was a fantasy of middle-class Sri Lankan life in which the family accept their son a gay man. Gayan and five other participants devised a scene in which the banality of everyday Sinhalese family life accommodated a well-mannered gay son. From the relative foreignness of the first-person narratives, this scene's structure was very familiar, as it resembled, for many of the participants, a Sri Lankan television soap-opera, or 'teledrama,' as they are known locally. The scene included easily identifiable character-types; a devoted, dominant mother; a laid-back, largely silent father and a doted-upon son whom his mother showered with affection. Unlike most of the monologues, this scene required markers of Sinhalese domesticity; a traditional wooden and wicker father's chair; a basket of washing, iron and ironing board. The mother in a housecoat (although in the actual performance John, who played the scene's mother wanted to 'dress up' a little more, so wore a sari),³⁶ while the father wears a sarong and sleeveless vest. He reads a Sinhalese language newspaper. The performance style is heightened. It is a scene immediately recognisable to a Sri Lankan audience. The scene opens with the mother ironing, the father reading. The son enters; he prepares to go to university. He is dressed in traditional poly-cotton trousers and a plain poly-cotton business shirt, as one might wear in an office. From a shopping bag, his mother pulls out three neckties and shows them to her son. He selects one, and she assists him to tie it around his neck. She completes dressing him by pinning a sizeable checked handkerchief to his chest and trying to fix his hair in place with her hands. He turns to the audience. He looks like a respectable, everyday office worker. While dressing her son, the mother asks him when

³⁶ Many Tamil and Hindi language soap-operas (dubbed into Sinhalese) are popular in Sri Lanka. The images in many of these soaps is that of a well-to-do mother character cooking while wearing a silk sari. I recall Sri Lankan friends laughing at this image as it was impossible for a "posh" woman to be cooking, especially wearing a silk sari. The inclusion of the sari in this scene was a "nod" to those Indian soaps.

he will bring home a boyfriend to meet the family. She suggests that as he is so handsome, her son must be very popular with men at university. She seeks her husband's approval. The husband barely looks up from his paper and grunts approval. The son squirms in embarrassment. The audience laughs in recognition at the familiar scene and at the supposedly extraordinary, yet banal comment of the mother about bringing a partner home to meet the family. Neither the son nor his parents problematise the son's sexuality. It is his lack of a suitable partner with which his mother is concerned. The mother suddenly remembers she had purchased a new book, a Sinhalese language version of a self-help book for parents of gay children, "*Now that You Know.*" She sits beside her husband and reads a few lines from the book, hoping to attract his attention. He slowly lowers his newspaper, looks at his wife briefly before returning to reading, grunting his acknowledgement. In the second part of the scene, the son meets his university friends and begins to agonize about telling them of his sexuality. When he does finally tell them, it is in the form of a song that includes lines like "Have you ever wondered, why I never did well, at ruggar or cricket, or nearly anything with a ball..." The song culminates in the other characters, his parents and friends smiling and shouting out in celebration that "He's gay!" This colourful "pride" moment at the end of the scene is shattered as the son sadly announces that, "This is *not* how it went."

The choice to locate the story within an "ordinary" family setting anchors the piece in mainstream Sri Lankan society, while gently subverting the assumed normative responses to a family member's homosexuality. His family is aware of his sexuality before his university friends are aware. The household, with parents undertaking everyday activities (reading a newspaper, ironing), functions as a place of belonging.

John's Story

John's story explored separate encounters with three different characters. Firstly, a homophobic bully, who seeks (and has) sex with men but remains critical of those who 'make a fuss' about their sexuality and are 'too sissy.' Secondly, a sympathetic heterosexual, often left-wing, university student activist, who tries to co-opt the gay 'cause' as part of a broader call for social disruption. Thirdly, the mother character appears in the final part of the scene; an enactment of *lajja baya*, the shame brought about by stepping outside 'normal' behaviours and 'normal' relationships discussed in Chapter 3. The scene highlights each of these discourses by using an actor playing a gay male character, silent, semi-naked, seated on a chair in the middle of the stage. Each of these three characters speaks to him, touches him and does things to him, yet he does not respond. Rather than have the gay protagonist rebutting their positions, he is silent. The three characters speak a lot, repeating their beliefs without concern for their impact. John wanted to ensure the audience heard from those who attempt to shape, silence (and possibly control) gay men in Colombo. These voices are unchallenged. While the final character of the mother, embodying a family's shame, is well-known, the former characters are less well known outside of the gay community. The first character, the same-sex-attracted homophobic bully, disrupts the concept of a fully formed gay-identifying subject. For the bully, having sex with men is something he does, while decoupling the sexual act from his identity, reminiscent of the MSM category in the introduction to this thesis. When John and the other cast members initially presented the scene, other participants questioned its relevance to the piece as this may 'muddy the

waters,' and thus potentially disrupting the communication of the message to the audience that gay men were reasonable, well-formed and contributors to society at large. The character was menacing, ugly and used his physicality to coerce gay men into sex. One participant asked if the audience might think that this man's bad behaviour was due to him being gay, confused and sexually aggressive. John replied by sharing his own experiences of sexual harassment and abuse from a similar man, and he wanted that story told.

The scene with the bully contained the only explicit sexual image in the performance, when he grabs the silent gay character and kisses him. He also rubs his penis through his jeans before the kiss. John's choice to include such an image, one of potentially violent sexual coercion, stirred further debate among participants. Several participants asked the group if a sexual image or action would be included, particularly coercive ones. Another suggested that the gay character in the scene was portrayed as a silent victim, to be used by straight men when they wanted sex. John insisted that it was necessary to show a breadth of gay men's experience including men who had sex with men but did not identify as gay, even if the character, at least in this scene, was unpleasant.

The second character was a sympathetic leftist. He shouts his theories at the gay character sitting silently. Despite being sympathetic, his theories sound removed from local experience and he intellectualises about oppression and the need for a revolution. When I first saw this character, I asked John if he thought these leftist activists were allies of the gay community. He replied saying that he believed that he felt patronised by sympathy. He suggested that often left-wing groups wanted to use gay people as a *cause-*

celebre. John portrayed the sympathetic leftist as a comic figure. He spoke his lines to the silent gay character as if trying to inspire attendees at a political rally. His words do not evoke any response from the gay character seated. In frustration, the leftist leaves.

Finally, the third part of John's scene, which I have touched upon featured in previous chapters, one of the cast dressed in a sari, playing the silent gay character's mother. The sari-wearing mother character wailed about the shame her son might bring to the family. She begged him to think of 'society.' She crawls along the floor, slapping her forehead in the act of woeful self-flagellation. Finally, she crawls to her son's feet and begins to dress him, to make him presentable. Again, here the image of the mother dressing her adult child is easily recognizable to a Sri Lankan audience. She remains a figure of devotion, despite her protestations at her son's sexuality. Several participants expressed approval at the image of the mother displaying care and a type of acceptance of her son, through the act of dressing him while two others interpreted this image as an attempt to make his sexuality invisible again. At the end of the scene he is dressed in trousers and a long-sleeve shirt; he is respectable and can pass for normal. Luuk asked about the image of the mother, a woman again at the feet of a man, serving him, taking care of him. Luuk said he was uncomfortable with perpetuating that perennial gendered role. This provided him an opportunity to talk about minority struggles and the temptation to focus solely on one's own group oppression. He suggested that gay men needed to try to understand and challenge discourses that oppressed others, including the mother figure in Sri Lankan society. Some participants agreed with Luuk's sentiments but countered that the purpose of this piece of theatre was to show something about the lives of gay men and to

represent mothers in such stereotypical ways was useful, as it demonstrated that gay men were as exciting and as dull as their non-gay peers. Gay men too contributed to the oppression of others. One participant countered this argument when he suggested that portrayals of mothers doing something out of the ordinary might lead the audience to conclude that (again) it is a mother's actions that distort her son's sexuality, through her poor and unusual mothering behaviour.

I asked John and Nuwan, who played the mother in this scene if they thought that the mother's histrionics, would cause the audience to laugh at her. Nuwan told me he based his performance on that of a friend's mother, who upon discovering that her son was gay, crawled on the floor at home, wailing and cursing herself for failing as a mother. She repeatedly hit herself in the head and mumbled "Oh my son, my son." Nuwan believed his characterisation was an authentic portrayal.

The staging of the group scenes was far more complex than the monologues because there were more actors involved and more "characters" with which to contend. The use of group scenes immediately invited further discussion and input from participants. It provided a platform for Luuk to challenge the other participants' assumptions, such as the role of women or the portrayal of the poor. While I assumed the role of director for the monologues, this role was more dispersed for the group scenes. Initially, rather conservatively I thought, that the disruption to my director's role might create problems for the production, especially its cohesion. Nevertheless, as the scenes, including the monologues, did not share a common narrative, the piece in its entirety did not require a single director. The participants appeared to develop the confidence to offer opinions on

what should be included or excluded from the scenes, even if they were not performing in that scene. This phenomenon enabled me to observe further their cultural and artistic references and influences, such as family characters drawn from popular teledramas. This process became a site for constant negotiations over what the participants as individuals and sub-groups believed to be suitable both aesthetically and politically. The group scenes required the participants to act as another character, one not based on their own lives. It was a chance to play.

Luuk and I discussed the group scenes and how they would 'fit' with the monologues. Luuk expressed concern about the lightness of Gayan's scene and that the actors were "camping it up a bit" but with the inclusion of an original song, sung by Gayan's character and composed by Luuk and Vimukthi, and the often seriousness of the monologues' subject matter, camping-it-up was a useful choice.

Lighting and Design

The performance lighting was minimal, due to the availability of lights, the budget and an aesthetic choice to rely on the actors' stories and performances. We did not use any cyclorama or set. The stage comprised carpeted rostra, open on three sides with black curtains at the back. The piano used during the show sat off the rostra stage opposite prompt. The performers did not use a prompt, which is still prevalent in many plays in Colombo. How the stage was set, prevented a prompt's presence. If an actor lost his lines and train of thought, the other performers seated to the side of the stage would, if necessary, shout a few words that related to the actor's monologue to remind him of his story. During the performance, none of the actors required this type of prompting. When

not performing, the actors sat beside the rostra, watching their peers perform. A rack with costumes and a small props table sat prompt side of the rostra.

The Audience Responses

An imagined audience was ever-present during the rehearsals of *If You Promise*. Many of the participants' decisions on aesthetics and content were made with consideration of how the audience members, both gay and non-gay, might respond. In addition, the participants had agreed to conduct a post-show question and answer session with the audience. While it provided an opportunity to further discuss the themes from the play and to promote Sakhi Collaboration, Luuk was concerned that the casts' responses might come across as a plea for understanding or didactic. Luuk told them to respond as actors and not as their character-selves. He reinforced the idea that they were actors performing a story, someone else's story.

In a pre-show welcome, I informed the audience that, as they entered the theatre, they had become participants in this study. I briefly outlined the project's multiple purposes and my role in it. I asked them if they would remain following the curtain calls and invited them to share their observations about the performance with the performers.

Goodwin (2004: 317) suggests that in a "productive post-show, audiences talk back and to each other and (with good facilitation) listen to one another, making sense together of a common experience." I am not sure this occurred during the post-show discussion of *If You Promise*. Luuk had engaged an external, experienced, non-gay, facilitator, who,

unfortunately, on the evening of the performance had to attend a personal emergency and therefore did not appear at the theatre. Luuk reluctantly took on the role of facilitator. He informed the audience about the misfortune of the external facilitator.

One of Luuk's first statements as facilitator was to clarify for the assembled audience that the men on the stage's edge were actors. I am unsure whether the audience believed him, but it was a useful fiction and no-one from the audience asked the question, "Were the stories performed, the stories of each actor?"

The comments from the audience focused on the experiences retold in the monologues rather than on the aesthetic form. The intimacy of the monologue form coupled with a small, simple stage, triggered reflections from audience members as some shared bits of stories from their own lives. Some audience members commended the performers for bringing to light stories of gay men's lives and suggested that there is a scarcity of theatrical representation of other minority communities in the country.

The aesthetics of *If You Promise*, while perhaps resembling a drama workshop, received praise from members of the audience for its attention to the performed stories. One audience member commented that the lack of affectation, through elaborate sound and lighting, enabled him to "listen and watch more deeply" to the performers on the stage. He suggested the cast's focus on each other while performing gave a strong sense of a collective performance even though the monologue form dominated.

For the post-show discussion, I stood on the other side of the stage from the actors. As the discussion began, I suddenly felt very protective of them. They appeared vulnerable and yet relaxed. This was part of the performance that we had prepared for yet could not fully control, as the audience might ask anything. Although some of the participants were hesitant to join the post-show discussion, all eventually did so, although not all spoke.

There were about 170 audience members, and nearly all remained to talk to the actors or at least listen to the conversation. Luuk then asked the audience what they thought of the show and whether they had any questions about the process, the performances, the stories and the research project. It is difficult to know of the demographics of the audience. There were no questionnaires for them to complete, no pre- or post-show survey. We never discussed who might be in the audience beyond a gay/straight split. The focus was on getting as many people as possible from outside the gay community to attend. Many of the audience I assumed were gay men. They laughed at in-jokes, some held hands in the stalls and cruised following the discussion. Later, at the cast party, some participants complained that the audience had used the show as an opportunity to cruise. I too, had witnessed the exchange of glances and numbers. Yet the project had created a momentary space for gay men to connect.

The first audience question was for me. It came from a woman in the front row. She asked why I had chosen to have only men's stories told. Where were the women's stories? I answered by suggesting that, as I was a gay man, it was easier to limit the stories to those of gay men. I suggested that the piece did not attempt to represent a broader gay polity. She suggested that women's stories would be more interesting. I said nothing to this comment,

although my mind raced with thoughts about encouraging the questioner to undertake such a project. Luuk, who had prepared for such a question, suggested that it was perhaps better to feature women's stories in another performance. And that women produce those stories. He cited the production's limitations around time and scope.

The initial comments were congratulatory about the performances, on the simplicity of the staging and the stories. One of the first comments from an audience member suggested there was a lack of representation of ethnic and religious minorities. One member of the audience followed with a comment suggesting that the play supported the narrow, nationalist agenda of the government because there was no overt critique of government policies and actions. The participants in their rehearsal discussions had anticipated comments on ethnic representation and lack of government critique. Luuk addressed the second comment by suggesting the mere fact that gay men's stories were being performed on a Colombo stage was in itself a critique of the status quo, a critique that went beyond party politics to Sri Lankan society in general. Another audience member, a Sri Lankan man, addressed the initial comment about ethnic representation. He suggested that the primary theme was on expressions of gay men's lives and that for Hindu, Tamil and Muslim gay Sri Lankan men, their experiences would have more in common, rather than differences with, the majority Sinhalese gay community. I added that we had one Hindu man in the play, but for personal reasons, he withdrew. Cast members then addressed the issue of minorities by citing that several of the cast were from religious minorities and ethnic minorities. One cast member suggested that they were not attempting to represent any community (ethnic or religious). This led to a further question about how members of the cast were selected and had I tried to advertise the project to ethnic minorities through channels such as Tamil language newspapers. I had not, although I had thought of it. There had been inquiries from

Muslim men. However, it was not the intention of the project to specifically recruit representatives from the multiple ethnoreligious groups within the country.

This male audience member implored the audience to focus on what was in common for gay men in Sri Lanka and to momentarily resist the temptation to define citizens through the ever-present ethnoreligious lens. Some audience members assumed that the actors were privileged because they (at least some of them) performed in English. John, a Catholic, who performed in Sinhalese, was the first to answer the question. He replied by saying that it was not only language that defined one's social status in Sri Lanka. He informed the audience that most of the cast were Buddhist and Sinhalese, while others were from religious and ethnic minorities.

There was little media coverage of the play. Again, there were concerns among the cast that media representatives might be there to focus on one or two performers and out them. Despite the desire of the participants to 'tell others about us,' as the performance date approached some participants expressed uncertainty about the widespread promotion of the play. They decided not to produce media releases lest it attract journalists with an unsympathetic understanding of gay people. While any story may serve as a review of the performance, the theme of gay men in Colombo would surely dominate any reportage. This is demonstrated by the press coverage of the play "Katu Yahana" (Bed of Thorns) and the film "Tani Tatuwen Piyabanna" (Flying with One Wing) both of which featured sexually and gender diverse characters. Although such works of art bring about public discussion on a mostly unspoken topic, many gay activists appear to withdraw from such publicity. This is in part due to the small number of spokespeople for the gay and trans community in Sri Lanka.

The frequent appearance of the same people in the press brings unwanted additional scrutiny of those activists.

Representations of Colombo Societal Norms

In this section, I analyse the final script of *If You Promise*, half of it translated from Sinhalese.

The focus of the analysis is how each of the monologues simultaneously affirms and subverts aspects of urban Sinhalese society, especially when considering the roles that Buddhism, family and kinship; caste and class; and militarism as discussed in Chapter 3 play in shaping the society in which the participants live.

Participants carefully chose and shaped each of the monologues in part to acknowledge the sensibilities of both non-gay and gay audience members. While determined not to present didactic, agit-prop theatre, or to portray gay men as freakish and sick, the participants insisted that the monologues would include moments of revelation; glimpses into gay sexuality. However, these moments of revelation needed to be located within contemporary, heteronormative Colombo life, including workplaces, families and social events. The participants conscientiously determined that their stories must be seen to be inflected by and created within Colombo society, for fear that the audience might align representations of homosexuality to foreignness, and therefore see them as less relevant. In rehearsal discussions, participants suggested that the monologues reveal the many shared experiences of both gay and non-gay people. The participants wanted to explore more of what gay and non-gay citizens had in common rather than the uncommon, 'other' experiences of gay men. Participants' deliberate attempts to position themselves as being

just-like-everyone-else enabled the storytellers/performers to reveal aspects of their sexuality rooted in a local contemporary context. Luuk suggested that perhaps the stories were so banal and undramatic that even subtle attempts to challenge the thoughts of the non-gay audience about sexuality might be sacrificed. The two group scenes devised by John and Gayan discussed earlier in this chapter, countered Luuk's concern with their respective overt depictions of gay men's experience in contemporary society and the optimistic fantasy of acceptance. What follows are examples of how the performers provided moments of revelation about their sexuality within local contexts that they believed would be easily recognised by the audience.

Kinship and Conformity

In the first few lines of the opening monologue, Sagara establishes two themes that continue for the duration of the entire piece. Firstly, the need to conform to ways of being male; and secondly, the need to modify one's behavior to conform.

When I was a child I always heard things about how a man should act. How a man should be. I had some different interests. I played with dolls, helped mum in the kitchen, I even liked dancing and the arts. People said you are not supposed to do that. Play cricket! Men do hard work! The stuff friends and relatives said made me want to change. I thought there was something wrong with me.

This opening monologue is situated within an affluent middle-class Sinhalese Buddhist family. As a child, Sagara learns that to be accepted he must conform. Even as a pupil at school, he learns quickly to pass as normal. He appears to overcompensate by joining the "cool guys at school," becoming head prefect, and engaging with various social and sporting

clubs. He says he did not really want such honours yet his desire for acceptance was strong. He was capable of “creating” a personality to survive and thrive at school.

He then introduces Sameera, a young man slightly older than Sagara, the object of the younger’s desire. He shares anecdotes about his unrequited love for Sameera, who is employed by Sagara’s father. Sameera is straight yet displays affection for Sagara. Such affection between adolescents and between men in Sri Lanka is not uncommon. For example, it is not uncommon to see male friends holding hands while talking or sitting together. In many ways, Sagara’s tale is one of unrequited adolescent love. The attempts to be close with Sameera, the shopping trip together and Sagara’s attempts to call him “one hundred times” and the blaming of his family for driving his object of desire away. This story starts with the Sagara character acknowledging his efforts to conform and yet he is conflicted because he knows there is some deception of his friends and family. He wants to share aspects of his feelings with his family so as not to deceive them. When he expresses his feelings for another man, the family, or at least the father, react to restore normalcy by ending any contact with Sameera and forcing him to seek medical assistance. The father’s actions are not unlike those of a father who does not approve of a straight relationship between his child and a lover of the opposite sex. However, although it is not made explicit in the monologue, Sagara implies that the father’s insistence on psychiatric intervention was at least in part due to his love for Sameera, a man. Like in many other jurisdictions, psychiatry is used in Sri Lanka to “treat” non normative sexualities.

I was so angry then. My family took me to a psychiatrist. I just could not express my feelings because they did not understand.

The one sentence about a psychiatrist is enough to indicate to the audience that this, intervention by families into gay Sri Lankan men’s lives, was not uncommon. Yet Sagara

does not dwell on the “treatment” and its affects, nor does he blame or criticise his family for taking him to a psychiatrist. Rather he concludes the monologue by speaking about Sameera and his remembrance of that time.

The themes of conforming and the ability to conform appear in other monologues. In discussions during rehearsals, other participants commented on Sagara’s manly demeanour. “I wouldn’t have guessed (that Sagara was gay),” confessed one participant. Sagara and the character he portrayed, a version of himself, could pass as straight. The ability to “pass” was not shared by all the participants’ characters. Both Nuwan, a dancer, and Ranjit, an actor, performed stories that spoke of their respective artistic abilities. Both reveal that they were abused and marginalised because of these artistic expressions, their apparent lack of manliness and their failure to conform to how a man should behave. Nuwan withdrew to his room for 3 years, while Ranjit withdrew from school. At the end of their respective stories, both men emerge with a greater sense of hope and purpose.

Following a single consultation with a psychiatrist, Nuwan’s situation changes:

The consultation ended and I floated out of the room. Something had changed.

My room became messy. I began going outside. I met more and more friends, got high marks in studies and wore the clothes I liked. And I love dancing...

Similarly, Ranjit eventually finds a better situation not because of a medical service but through a change in his educational environment:

But I missed my friends, my rehearsals, my performances...yes, my performances. I then went to an art school. The students there didn’t ask why am I like this. They

talked to me and were friendly to me. I don't regret leaving school. I have learned so many things about my life. A whole new world. What people think. Who I really am. So, I am a whole new person.

The desire (and need) to conform to what a man should be in Colombo is also explored through the relationship between a gay man and his mother. In Saman's story, about his relationship with his mother, he uses nostalgia to locate his story in a very familiar context. In Sinhalese families, it is often the responsibility of the youngest son to take care of elderly parents. Saman's siblings were older and all had married and moved away from the family home. As he was the youngest child and unmarried the responsibility of looking after his ailing mother fell to him. The youngest son inherits the family home after the death of the parents. This happened to Saman. His story reveals the pain he endured during his mother's illness and death. He expresses regret at his efforts to conform to a way of being a man and its effect on his relationship with his mother.

Some guys thought that their parents pushed them away. I pushed her away. So, what would have happened if I told my mother I was gay? Maybe she would not have accepted it. She was a traditional housewife. Opinionated but educated. She might not have accepted it. It would have been too much for her. She would have worried about me. It would have been impossible but it doesn't mean I should have pushed her away. This was my best friend for a large part of my life...my best friend. And probably the only woman to ever love me.

When he first performed the story in rehearsals, many of the participants who saw it cried. Following this initial performance, the participants praised Saman for his devotion to his mother, despite the "gap" that existed between them. He was seen by the other participants as a good son, who acted selflessly as his mother approached death. Other

participants encouraged Saman to perform that story partly because of its portrayal of a devoted, gay son. It showed that gay men remained part of the family. Even as his mother lay dying, read to by a nurse paid for by Saman, there is no final revelation about his sexuality, no neat tying of loose ends. What matters is that Saman provided the best care he could afford and could give to his mother. It is an act of redemption. He did not contemplate sharing his regrets with her towards the end of her life because he believed it would have caused her further pain, an action that that went against the teachings of the Buddha.

In Ranjit's monologue it is the father figure to whom he turns for support. Following an incident in which he had to write about his life for some school-bully peers, he asked his father to not send him back to the school.

[The school-bully] told me to write my whole life story on the papers. Starting with my childhood to now. Every, single, thing. I was scared so I wrote everything. After 3 hours and 6 foolscap pages, I stopped.

In the school van on the way home, he decided to leave school and told his father that he was being bullied. In telling his parents about the bullying Ranjit risked divulging his sexuality and potential ostracism from his family. This was exacerbated because the student who initiated the bullying has written documentation about Ranjit that might further distress him. Ranjit informed his father about the abuse, including the demand to write about his life. His father (and mother) responded favourably and removed him from the school. By the end of his story he joined an art school, where his fellow students "*didn't ask, 'why are you like this?'*"

When he first performed his story for the other participants, there were several comments about his parents' responses to his need to leave school. Ranjit deliberately focused on the father's response to show that they were close, and that his father understood the situation. Other participants asked during rehearsals if he told his parents that he was gay. Ranjit had not told them nor had his parents asked too many questions. He understood their lack of questions to indicate that they knew about his sexuality. He did not believe he needed to cause them further distress by discussing it. He told the others about his parents' kindness and generosity. Some participants expressed admiration for, and surprise regarding, Ranjit's father and his response to his son's crisis. Sagara suggested that it was more usual for the mother to respond sympathetically and a father to be critical of a son or remain silent. Ranjit was asked by his co-participants if, in 'real life,' his father responded in this way. Ranjit affirmed that this was so. He wished to include his father's apparent "unusual" behaviour to indicate to the audience that there are Sinhalese fathers, who are supportive of their gay children. His sentiments are like those of the mother character in Nuwan's story, in which she accompanied him to a psychiatrist's appointment following his years of depression. Here again, some of the participants wanted to present their parents as supportive of their respective situations. None of the stories criticised their families. Even in Saman's story in which he twice acknowledges the "gap" between himself and his mother, he suggests that the fault is his:

And that's where it started. I started pushing away...my mother. Creating an artificial gap that I have never experienced before. And ahhh...that distance, that gap; I have never been able to bridge that again. I don't know why. But once you have created that gap...its difficult...then she started respecting that gap.

I should have been reading to her. She was there for me. She listened to hours and hours of my bullshit. Why wasn't I there for her? It was that distance I had created. It is something that I will carry as a burden in my head.

It is easy to be critical of these participants and other gay men, who for the most part have chosen not to disclose their sexuality to their families. Prior to the participants performing elements of their stories in the project's early workshops, I wondered if there would be any "coming out narratives" among the stories. There was one which unfortunately was omitted due to the withdrawal of the participant. Vimukthi, who created a type of coming-out triptych could not commit to the rehearsals due to a new job. He did however participate by playing keyboards live during the performance and co-writing the song that featured in Gayan's story.

In the first of Vimukthi's vignettes, he performed a scene in which he had decided to inform his mother of his sexuality. His reason for doing so was because of his upbringing and his parents' insistence that he always tell the truth. He had thought about it for many months in his early twenties. The Buddhist concept of Right Speech became a counterpoint to his sense of "telling the truth." Yet Vimukthi felt conflicted because he knew that in the telling he would cause his parents pain. One afternoon, while his mother gardened at their home in Kandy, Vimukthi asked her to come inside because he needed to talk. We rehearsed the scene with Luuk playing the mother character. The mother entered the room and sat. She asked Vimukthi what it was he wished to discuss. Before responding, Vimukthi sat on the floor, at her feet. He did not face her but abreast, facing out. He looked at the floor and spoke. The image of an adult son seated on the floor before his mother attracted many comments from participants. Some asked if that was what happened. "Did you sit like that?" Vimukthi replied that he did and that he had always done that as a form of respect for his

parents. At least one participant gently teased Vimukthi by saying, “Oh that’s so bloody Kandyan!” Other participants laughed knowingly. Vimukthi is from Kandy. In popular Sri Lankan culture, Kandyan Sinhalese are often considered to be of a higher class of people. Much of this stems from the rule of the Kandyan kings and the fact that they were only colonised in the nineteenth century by the British, while maintaining significant powers. Kandy is often cited as the spiritual home of Buddhism in the country.

The comment about being “so bloody Kandyan” in part references Kandy as being the preserver of traditional Sri Lankan values against a modern, morally ambivalent Colombo. Although some participants mocked the image of the adult son, cross-legged on the floor before his seated mother, participants also described it as “cute” “innocent” “sweet” and a connection with the country’s traditions. Personally, I was moved by the image of Vimukthi on the floor and keen for it to be included in the performance. It was aesthetically beautiful and told much in that one image. In this scene, Vimukthi then spoke about ‘liking men.’ His mother replied that she too liked men and had proved that by marrying Vimukthi’s father.

The second part of story featured his work friends with whom he was very close. During a lunch time break, Vimukthi fumbles for the right words to disclose his sexuality. He is rescued by one of his friends, when she asks, “Vimukthi are you trying to tell us that you are gay?” He is relieved yet then encounters those all-so-common questions from straight people when they become aware that a friend or colleague is gay. “How do you know until you try girls?” “Are you sure?”

His final story returns to the family, this time it is a violent confrontation with his older brother who suggests that Vimukthi has brought shame to the family. The brother refers to Vimukthi’s disclosure about his sexuality and subsequent inviting a new partner to the

family home as a gross intrusion into the lives of the family members. It appears that the brother-character's objections are not his younger brother's sexuality but the disclosure and its visibility through Vimukthi's partner's presence. The scene ends with the older brother assaulting the younger brother. Vimukthi, in deference to his older brother, did not return the punches, accepting the "punishment." Like with all other stories, the participants gave opinions on including physical violence in the scene. Participants suggested that showing violence against gay men on stage maybe uncomfortable for the audience yet also stressed the importance of including a wide range of lived experiences, including assault.

Vimukthi wanted to include all three brief scenes to represent the normalcy of gay men's lives as having family, a job and relationships. By including the mother, workmates and brother characters in the piece, he gave voice to people's responses to his sexuality and the subsequent effects of those responses. Vimukthi preferred to present each scene without his additional commentary or reflection in part to give the stories proximity to the audience.

Caste and Class

After many changes, Hasitha chose a story about his experiences with a man whom he had met at a party. During the late 1990s and early 2000s parties became more popular within the gay community. While many of the more recent parties have a very high door price, some of the earlier parties were reasonably priced and as a result attracted many younger men often from lower socio-economic groups. This brought together people of various socio-economic backgrounds. Hasitha's monologue contains perhaps the play's most sexually explicit descriptions about seeking and having sex. In this instance sex between men from different classes.

[I] was at a party... one of the gay parties. My friends couldn't make it so I was alone. There were a few cute guys around but one guy was particularly hot. I kept looking at him... hoping I would get his attention. He was with friends. When he looked like he was about to go to the toilet, I went too. I managed to get his number. The next day I called him; his phone didn't work. Arsehole. He had given me a wrong number. I had done that before too. A few hours later I messaged him. So, I called... no response. He picked up. "Hey Man, remember me? You gave me your number at the party yesterday...the guy in the red t shirt... at the toilet. Oh ok I'll call you back later." He said he couldn't talk. But at least he had given me the correct number.

This opening section of the monologue was immediately recognized by other participants when Hasitha first performed it at rehearsal. During the discussion that followed, a few participants suggested that the Hasitha-character in the monologue was too bold, too direct in his man-pursuit. They cited his meeting the man near the toilet to give him his phone number. This discussion broadened into a discussion about what happens at the parties. Older participants shared stories from the "good old days" when parties were fewer and thus "more exciting." John argued that meeting men in toilets at parties was a reality. Another participant asked the group rhetorically, "Have you ever been to the toilets during a party? Terrible!" Many participants laughed, knowing that Hasitha's representation of giving his number to a man near the toilet at a party was tame when compared to other party activities.

Hasitha, who lived alone despite his family living in Colombo, invited the young man to his place for dinner and the young man obliged. They shared a meal and a kiss before the young man asked for 800 rupees for a taxi fare home. Following each of his subsequent visits to

Hasitha he requested money for transport home. The practice annoyed Hasitha but the reliance on financial and material aid from a lover is not uncommon within Colombo's gay community. The capacity to provide such support is a clear marker of socio-economic status. During rehearsals, participants occasionally swapped snippets of stories about their lovers and making contributions to their transport or food costs. At the entrance of parties there will be many younger men lingering, waiting for someone to purchase them a ticket. They are commonly called "money boys." They operate alone or in small groups. Other, wealthier gay men tolerated and patronised the money boys.

That particular night he came over quite late. We had dinner as usual and then we started kissing him and from there we moved to the bedroom. We fucked and went to sleep...I slept well. Next day early in the morning I woke up to the noise of someone trying to open the door. "What are you doing? What's the hurry, Rajeev? What time is it?" I checked time on my phone it was 6.03a.m. I was a little annoyed. "Why do you wanna leave this early?"

Apparently, he had a practice match to go for by 9a.m. and as usual he asked me for money. This had become a habit. "You should have told me last night. I don't have extra money to give you." He looked pissed off...and he just walked off.

You didn't go to practice? He said he had broken his slipper.³⁷ He wanted to borrow one of my pairs. Why don't you eat some breakfast. I made some eggs and went for a shower...when I got back out he was gone again. I was relieved I guess. I was tired of giving.

I was about to leave for work...started looking for my laptop and it was gone. He had taken it. THAT BASTARD HAD TAKEN IT! I panicked.

When he performed this part of the monologue for the other participants, Hasitha received some sympathy for his situation, yet one peer suggested that he had brought it upon

³⁷ In Sri Lanka, the word "slipper" refers mostly to sandals or thongs/flip flops "rubber slippers."

himself. As the lower-class man had asked repeatedly for money, Hasitha, as an educated middle-class person, should have known that the situation would not end well. As the relationship was premised on patronage, Hasitha had failed to establish strong parameters with his “malli.”³⁸ Therefore, the man from the lower class was bound to take advantage of him. The evident class difference triggered further discussions as to its appropriateness for the show. One participant suggested that the one monologue that featured references to sexual relationships would be more “effective” if it occurred “between equals.” By this he meant that the story may be received more sympathetically by the audience if the issue of class was removed from the relationship. The class difference might relegate gay men to belonging to the middle and upper classes, complete with sexual exploitation of people from poorer classes. The rebuttal from other participants suggested that in addition to substantially changing Hasitha’s story, the replacement of a lower-class lover for one from a similar class, would be dishonest, and limit the array of experiences that gay men in Colombo had encountered.

Hasitha’s monologue had a strong contemporary feel about it. As if it happened yesterday. While in the other monologues, the storytellers spoke about various pasts, a different phase of their lives, Hasitha spoke of his more recent experience. The immediacy of his story gave it an edginess that appeared to both excite and concern some of the other participants. This was in part due to the shared experiences of gay parties, of exchanging numbers with new lovers and of discovering that the man you had sex with has stolen from you, or worse.

During the rehearsals of this story, other participants told of their own experiences, of “sex

³⁸ Malli is the Sinhalese word for little brother. However, it commonly used to refer to any younger male person, from a restaurant waiter to a taxi driver. It is also used by gay men when referring to a lover, if the lover is younger.

with “bad trade” or a “bad bugger.”³⁹ A broader discussion touched on sexual assault, violence, threats and blackmail. The issue of “decency” was critical to many of the participants, and many other gay men I know, when it came to choose sexual partners. Decency included class and education. If a man was decent, it meant he was less likely to rob you, demand money or threaten to inform your family and workplace that you had sex with men. A decent man might qualify to be a partner, someone to be introduced (as a friend) to one’s family.

Following the theft of his laptop, the Hasitha character asks “What was I to do? Go to the police?” He delivers this line directly to the audience with a knowing sarcasm. The police would ask too many questions and, given the illegality of gay sex in Sri Lanka, Hasitha decided to retrieve his laptop with the help of friends.

I called a friend and after listening to him telling me what an idiot I was... he started asking me what I knew about him... and I realized I wasn't sure of anything he had told me. I felt helpless. So I did the only thing I could... I went on Facebook and messaged all his friends telling them about it but also asking them for an address or phone number.

In a similar response to other participants during rehearsals, Hasitha’s friend from the story also criticised him for allowing the theft to take place. He employed shame as a tactic to retrieve his belongings. Courtesy of social media, Hasitha quickly informed Rajeev, his robber-lover’s friends about the incident. Hasitha chose to shame Rajeev around the theft and took a significant risk that Rajeev’s friends would respond positively to the messages.

³⁹ The English word “bugger” is still commonly used in Colombo. It is a term of derision, a curse. It is not a specific reference to buggery or anal sex.

Hasitha anticipated that recipients of his online plea believed him and would refrain from asking too many questions about his relationship with Rajeev, lest it further expose him to blackmail or threats.

In the original version of the story, Hasitha included reference to another strategy to retrieve his items; contacting military officers known to him. Given the massive militarisation of Sri Lanka since the advent of the civil war, it was not uncommon to have family and friends who either work for, or were linked to, the military. In Sri Lanka, the police also are considered part of the country's military forces. In the original version, Hasitha contacted his friends within the army and to brief them about the situation. The idea was that they would go to Rajeev's house in uniform and in a military vehicle and ask for the goods to be returned.

Given that the country's Public Performance Board tended to be more censorial about performances that include characters from or are critical of about the armed forces, Hasitha omitted the references to his army friends' involvement in the retrieval of his laptop and rubber slippers. This decision, Luuk believed, would improve the chances of the Board approving the script, which was already laden with controversial topics.

So, how intercultural was *If You Promise Not to Tell*?

The participants' efforts to appeal to both gay and non-gay audience members ensured that they analysed and discussed the text, images and their potential effects on the audience.

While I appreciated their diligence in working together to shape the final version of what was performed, I think the constant focus on how the audience might respond limited the content of the piece and distracted the participants. Luuk's question, "Whose show is this?" reminded me that I did not have to endure any horrible fallout that may have eventuated

from performing these stories to the general public. The performance and its consequences belonged to the participants. As the night of the performance approached the participants became more conscientious about the content and style of the piece: such a pivot in the participants' roles, I had not anticipated. As Luuk's question suggests, the participants' bodies and stories were on the line. The participants took control of the show through their collective concern about what could, and could not be said, and the ways in which they would say it to the audience.

While arguably the primary aesthetic employed, the monologue, is derived from Western theatrical forms, it is not unknown in a country that stages a national Shakespeare competition each year for high schools. The participants chose to embrace the monologue form because it provided polyvocality and a sense of the intimate; a conversation between performer and audience. The participants used the pared back, conversational style of the monologues to convey an almost anti-theatrical ordinariness to highlight the extraordinariness of the stories.

In reviewing the script from *If You Promise*, now some eight years after its performance, the stories read as banal and every day, yet that is what the participants sought, in part, to achieve. They wanted themselves as gay men to be represented as coming from and belonging to the greater Colombo society, members of regular families. None of the stories featured the total rejection of family or banishment from society, although there were temporary estrangements. The performer-characters acknowledged and critiqued the discursive formations discussed in Chapter 3. The critique is made by embodied subjects,

who are shaped and inflected by those same discursive formations as others in Colombo society.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion and Postscript

The final chapter of this thesis contains both a conclusion and a postscript- an update on the situation of gay men in Colombo. In the years since the fieldwork, much has happened. For example, in January 2015, Sri Lanka voted out war-time president-hero Mahinda Rajapaksa in favour of his rival Mathiripala Sirasena. In November 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Mahinda's brother, was elected as the country's president. At the time of writing, Gotabaya and Mahinda occupy the offices of President and Prime Minister respectively. In August 2020, the country will hold parliamentary elections in the destructive economic wake of Covid19. For some years I have ceased to follow Sri Lankan politics as closely as I once did, so I will not speculate on the possible results of the election. One significant change, discussed in this chapter's postscript centres on the country's third major party, the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) (People's Liberation Front) and its recognition of the country's gay citizenry.

The motivation to undertake this study arose from fragments of hundreds of stories told to me by gay men in Sri Lanka over two decades since I first went to Colombo in 1997. I have occupied rare and privileged positions as a "foreigner," an outsider to Sri Lanka, and simultaneously, a kind of insider because of my sexuality. Some of the stories were shared with me because, as I was told, "[I] didn't know anyone's family" in Sri Lanka, and thus not seen as a threat to stories of gay life. I was also considered safe because I, too, had stories from my own gay life that I occasionally shared. Some of the men's stories were very sad and did not focus solely on the complexities of their sexuality. Many were fused with the

impact of the civil war, of being an internally displaced person, the scattering of families to other countries and the limitations of the local economy. Yet other stories focused on forming friendships and relationships with other men, the pleasures of the once-a-month parties in Colombo and the centrality of family in the men's lives.

The study, is, as suggested in Chapter 1, a lengthy, belated response to a theatrical performance at Barefoot. The study's use of performance ethnography has become a vehicle for acknowledging those stories and for the activism of gay and queer Sri Lankans whom I have known for over two decades. I therefore arrived in Colombo for the fieldwork with an idea to create a piece of theatre using stories from participants' lives. I had also a well-established friendship with Luuk, one of the three founders of Sakhi Collaboration, and a theatre practitioner with whom I had previously worked. Luuk both enabled the project to take place and leveraged our relationship to achieve objectives for his recently formed organisation.

The research is a component of a larger imagined project that featured multiple objectives. In addition to the research question, Sakhi Collaboration, as the study's host, had explicit objectives to further its work with Colombo's gay community; namely to provide an alternative space for men to socialise and to communicate significant issues for gay men to a broader Colombo public. My experience in theatre became a useful element to advance Sakhi Collaboration's project.

This study's key research questions are: What experiences, and understandings, of their sexuality might a group of gay Sri Lankan men choose to foreground if afforded the opportunity to represent themselves in a consciously reflexive performance-making

project? What risks could such a project entail and how might these be negotiated? What forms of theatrical expression might be appropriate to this task of self-representation? The questions are answered in part by the fact that following just six weeks of workshops and rehearsals, the participants, the majority of whom had never been involved in theatre before, co-created and performed a theatrical work, based on stories from their lives, for a general public, adults-only audience on two occasions. The form and use of theatre in this situation, with this group of participants was never going to bring about legislative change or even to change the mind of an audience member, who perhaps thought poorly of the performers' sexuality. There is no theatre-informed social revolution in Colombo because of the performance. Does it therefore fall short of Denzin's hopeful description of the powers of performance ethnography? And if so, does it matter?

Unlike Mr. Solomon's performance on that warm, May evening at Barefoot, the creation of *If You Promise* was led and mediated by local participants. They brought with them a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the context in which these stories were created, performed and experienced by the audience. The participants used languages, gestures and themes familiar to the audience, as they performed being gay in a Sri Lankan. This study's theatre making process gave the participants an opportunity to examine their own experiences in relation to the experiences of their peers in the socio-political context of contemporary Colombo. It afforded them choices in how and what to share with an audience. Finally, the participants opted to locate themselves and their experiences in this contemporary city, rather than being apart from it. The performed stories sought further understanding and acknowledgment instead of legislative or cultural change.

In Chapter 2, I have argued that gay men in Colombo are influenced by, and adapt elements from, Western concepts of gay liberation and a broader gay international movement. In the opening to Chapter 1, the scene described is about the opening event of an occasion called “Pride.” Rainbow flags and a few pink triangles adorned the venue that evening. The LGBT acronym and its variants are used among some gay men in Colombo, including at least two of the participants in this study. The participants also referred to the notion of “coming out” or disclosing (or not disclosing) their sexuality to friends, colleagues and family. Despite acknowledgement and displays of what might be initially understood as a type of copying or dubbing of a predominant Western or globalised gay paradigm, the participants in this study reveal that their sexuality is inflected by various discursive formations that inform the way Colombo society functions. The participants used, as have gay activists in Sri Lanka (and elsewhere) symbols and concepts from globalised gay discourse while maintaining the practice of, and engagement with, local forms of socialising and ways of being in their society. It is not one or the other. In Colombo, overt displays of ‘gay pride’ even as a staged performance, potentially exposes those involved to ridicule and shame. Yet the participants in this study (and others whom I have known and observed for years) have very finely developed attention skills to the opportunities and constraints in the country, so that they may function and flourish as gay people in Colombo. This is demonstrated by participants’ regular debates about *If You Promise’s* content. Each participant could share any story he chose during early workshops and rehearsals. Then the co-directors, the storyteller-performer and the participants as a collective shaped, informed, censored, guided and influenced the story’s journey through the rehearsal process to performance. All participants compromised and adapted their original story according to the needs of the

participants as a collective, and to a lesser extent, to the at-times vague demands of the State's Public Performance Board. The process itself provided opportunities and constraints for the performer-storytellers. Yet without the group-established norms, the performance would likely not have occurred. It is here too that theatrical norms, for example, learning lines, remembering blocking and entrance cues, turning up to rehearsals and listening to your fellow performers, functioned as a discipline for participants because it required significant commitment to their own story development and to those of their peers.

Luuk told me he wanted to use theatre with Sakhi Collaboration members because he had used it before and considered it as a vehicle for advocacy. Therefore, my idea of wanting to "dramatise" gay men's stories coincided with Luuk's notion of theatre as a space to organise and potentially to advocate to a broader public.

In Chapter 4 for instance, I discuss how Luuk led discussions with the participants about the potential opportunities and threats that using theatre offered. Firstly, it afforded participants a chance to work collectively with peers to create something important to them. Secondly, Colombo had an active theatre-going public in all three of the country's major languages, so if performed for a general public audience they were certain to get a crowd. Thirdly, and most significantly, the theatre form itself acted as a kind of shield from ridicule and shame because it was after all make-believe: actors performing stories.

The aims of Sakhi Collaboration to use the project to advocate about the lives of gay men was achieved. Luuk expressed to me his skepticism about the "power of theatre" and its

ability to bring about various forms of social change. He understood the limitations. However, in the post-show debrief/party (held a few days after the show), participants again discussed among themselves, and with me, the possibility of using the approach in this study to create similar pieces of theatre with other gay people outside of Colombo. They promptly sketched a model of how this project might be reshaped as it ventured to Sri Lanka's smaller cities and towns. But who would lead it? Who would fund it? The plan and enthusiasm promptly waned. Luuk, afraid of being seen again as the gay-theatre-guy declined to take it on. Indeed, most of the participants lost contact a few months after the second performance of *If You Promise*. A few remain in contact with each other and, in addition to contact I have with Luuk, I have met Indika and Nuwan on my subsequent visits to Colombo. Two of the other participants migrated to Australia.

To state the obvious then, this study is limited. As a piece of ethnography, it is in some way already out of date. The lives of the participants and researcher have undoubtedly changed significantly since mid-2012. After completing the field work and being part of the communal euphoria that accompanied the performance, I considered, together with some of the participants, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, how the model might be adapted and used in other sites. I felt that after such effort from the participants in creating *If You Promise* and the group dynamic among them that perhaps three or four of them would advance the idea into being. I offered to act as a remote advisor (should they require it). My desire to see something else, something more, arise from the research is a type of limitation- the researcher's need, my need, for the research to provide a benefit; to be useful.

One of the study's limitations was that the Sakhi Collaboration leadership decided to limit participation through screening all potential participants prior to the first workshop. Given the duration of the field work (some nine weeks), I did not question the decision. While there was no detailed list of criteria, it included the total number and age-range of participants. While religion and ethnicity were not barriers to participation, there were not any Muslim participants and the one Hindu participant withdrew for personal reasons. The study's small sample size is perhaps another limitation although the study does not make claim to being representative of all gay men in Colombo. One of the criticisms from the audience focused on the narrow range of ethno-religious backgrounds of the participants. Prepared for such comments from the audience, the participants readied themselves with responses while acknowledging the absence of stories from two ethno-religious minority communities.

One of the challenges to this study was that I possessed the dual roles of researcher and co-creator. This challenged me because, for example, I would facilitate a drama workshop with participants and, as part of that role, give them an exercise on "dramatising" their personal stories. I attempted to be "present" with the participants as the drama teacher while simultaneously observing the interactions between participants and their interactions with me. I admit that I tended to favour being in the moment of the drama exercise and observing participants enact the exercise. This preferred position is further demonstrated by my occasionally insensitive responses to participants' distress about performing. During those moments, I was subsumed by the desire to get "my" show on stage.

A Postscript

I have maintained some interest in developments in the gay community and the lives of the participants. Much of the information I have gathered has been through discussion with friends while visiting Colombo for work. I wanted to formalise some of the information about changes in how gay men in Colombo now lived. I had sought a brief update from Luuk on the situation. What was his opinion on changes within the community? What were the broader societal attitudes towards gay people since the performance of *If You Promise*? Just a brief set of dot points I had suggested. Since the end of the field work, my relationship with Luuk has now returned to that of friendship. In the period after the fieldwork I have visited Colombo on just three occasions twice for work and once for a holiday. On all three occasions I met Luuk. We did not talk about this study (except his question about when it would be completed) To which I replied, "Soon, soon." I then promptly changed the subject. I asked him if he kept in touch with some of the participants. He told me that he had lost contact with most of the others although from time to time saw some of them at parties or at a restaurant. Colombo is a small town. Luuk now works on an HIV related project in addition to his drama teaching and other theatre gigs. When I ask him about his activism, he rolls his eyes. He has grown tired of it. Despite asking on at least four occasions, Luuk did not reply with his observations of changes to gay life in Colombo.

Since the performances of *If You Promise* in 2012, there have been several aesthetic representations of the lives of gay and trans Sri Lankans. In 2020, the Canadian director Deepa Mehta directed a film version of Sri Lankan-Canadian author Shyam Selvadurai's

1994 book, *“Funny Boy”* about a Tamil boy’s coming of age set against the growing ethnic conflict in the early 1980s. In 2013, Visakesa Chandrasekaram directed and produced *“Sayapethi kusuma”*⁴⁰ (English title: *Frangipani*). According to Boyagoda (2018: 28) the “first Sri Lankan film to successfully present gay protagonists seeking public support to overcome persecution of LGBT community in Sri Lanka.”

One of the political changes in Sri Lanka has been the type of public demonstrations that have taken place in response to the government’s slowness to bring about economic reform and strengthen human rights. In the past few years, groups of gay and trans people have participated in demonstrations together with members of other civil society groups, including trade unions, women’s groups and church leaders. There also appears to be broader support within the media in responding to homophobia (Karunanayake 2016).. For example, in November 2018, at a political rally, the then President of Sri Lanka, Mathripala Sirisena used a homophobic slur towards the country’s then Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who Sirisena had recently removed from office. In an attempt to discredit Wickremesinghe and his political party, the President referred to the Prime Minister as a ‘samanalaya’ (butterfly), a Sinhalese-language slur for a gay or effeminate man. He suggested that the Prime Minister was out of touch with ordinary people because he lived a ‘butterfly life.’ The comments were widely reported and condemned by queer activists and others (Wijewardene 2020, Fernandopulle 2018, Swaran 2018) and led to the formation of a new activist group, the “Butterflies for Democracy.”

In personal communications I have had with two of the participants in those demonstrations, I was informed that the other civil society groups were “mostly friendly”

⁴⁰ <https://www.films.lk/sayapethi-kusuma-frangipani--sinhala-film-2135.html>

towards the gay and trans protestors. I recall in the early 2000s how gay women were asked not to participate in marches on International Women's Day. Churches and trade unions too have seldom expressed "solidarity" with gay and trans people in Colombo. Yet, the issues for which they were protesting affected a range of people. I was told that gay activists in Colombo had "become smarter" because they understood that participating in demonstrations for other issues beyond gay and trans rights would show others that 'we' belonged to the broader community and were committed to the rights and livelihoods of others. Furthermore, the JVP in developing its manifesto prior to the November 2019 presidential elections, met with several gay and trans activists to get their input about recognition of gay and trans Sri Lankans and a path to legal reform. Although it is highly unlikely that a member of the JVP would become president or the party could hold the balance of the power in the upcoming parliamentary elections, the fact that a mainstream political party appears to be engaging in dialogue with the gay/trans community is certainly a significant change. Despite these apparent changes, the laws that criminalise same-sex love in Sri Lanka remain.

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Appendix 1: Invitation to Participate

The following is an email sent to all Sakhi Collaboration (SC) members and others known to SC. The information was in English and Sinhalese. Only the English version is included here.

Thanks for your inquiry about The Next Stage.

The Next Stage, a joint project of the Sakhi Collaboration (SC) and Matt Tyne (a PhD student at the Department of Performance Studies, University of Sydney), invites you to participate in a 2-day drama workshop. The Next Stage's participants will work with Matt and SC to create a piece of theatre based on stories from queer Sri Lankan men's lives. These stories might come from your own life or from your friends'. The 2-day workshop in Colombo will be about storytelling/ presentation skills. Participants will then have the option to develop the stories into a piece of theatre for performance for an audience.

You do not need to have any previous experience in acting or drama to participate in the workshop.

The Next Stage has 4 major parts:

- 1. *Drama Workshop (June 9 and June 10) From 10am until 5pm***

A two-day workshop on storytelling and presentation skills for queer men.

Please bring to the workshop with you:

- *stories you would like to share with others. The stories can be about any aspect of your life.*

- *think about the following statement.... “This is important to me...”*

Think of a person, an object, a relationship, a hobby, anything at all that you value, that is important to you. Now think of how you might like to share this with others. How might you tell others about what is important to you? During the workshop we will work on these stories to make them dramatic.

Lunch and refreshments provided. Venue: Namel Malini Punchi Theatre, Cotta Road, Borella

2. Rehearsal period (from June 11-mid July)

Taking fragments of stories from the workshops, participants in this period will further develop the stories and work to create a piece of theatre for performance. The style of performance will be decided by the group. The audience for the performance will be determined by the participants.

Participating in this part of the project will require a commitment of 5-6 weeks (including performances). Rehearsals will take place during some evenings and weekends. Rehearsal times are negotiable.

3. Performance (from July 20)

At the end of the rehearsal period, participants will perform their work for a selected audience. The number of performances will be decided by the group and will most likely take place in Colombo.

4. Reflection

Following the final performance, participants will be given a chance to reflect upon their experiences in the project; provide feedback to SC and Matt and talk about future work together.

If you would like to participate can you please email Sakhi Collaboration (sakhicollaboration@gmail.com) or call Matt on 0716073001. Places for the workshop are limited so please let us know by June 6.

Appendix 2: The Complete English-Language Script with Footnotes

If you promise not to tell

Stories from queer men's lives

Devised and Directed

by

John ⁴¹

A play in six monologues and three group scenes

⁴¹ The version of the script submitted to the Public Performance Board had to contain only one name for the writer and one name for the director. Participants decided to make John both.

Scene 1

A group of people wearing white walking. Each character engages in free movement in regulated intervals. There is music playing. Each pauses in poses and interactions with others. Interactions will show a spectrum of reactions and implications of mimed actions (loving, accepting, offensive, defensive, indifferent, inclusive exclusive.) Two actors meet centre stage. Others freeze.

Person 1: Who are you?

(The two actors then struggle for supremacy. Person 1 pushes Person 2 to the ground. This provokes chaos among others. Resulting in some actors being knocked to the ground also.

Four masked actors cover another actor on the ground with a cloth.

Blackout.

(Voice over in darkness)

(Lights Up)

Monologue 1

(Man 1 enters)

Man 1: When I was a child I always heard things about how a man should act. How a man should be. I had some different interests. I played with dolls, helped mum in the kitchen, I even liked dancing and the arts. People said you are not supposed to do that. Play cricket! Men do hard work! The stuff friends and relatives said made me want to change. I thought there was something wrong with me.

Several of the monologues examined experiences of masculinity while growing up. Both Bhanuka's and Kazun's monologues position them as outsiders early in their lives. This comes through perceptions that their respective behaviours are not manly enough

So, I made a conscious effort to be a 'strong man'. To please them I started joining other guys...hanging around the macho, cool guys at school. I managed to fit in with them. I became interested in the things they were interested in. I became this person, who was very strong... I was able to lead others...a very macho type. I was accepted. People respected me. I became head prefect... I held positions in various clubs and associations. I never really wanted these things it just happened. There were others who competed for these positions... It felt good to be voted in by my peers. I sometimes think maybe I got it because of the personality- the one I had created. I sometimes felt dishonest... like I was misleading the people around me...I constantly struggled inside.

Girls were attracted to me. I used to get chocolates and even anonymous cards to my house. Some had pressed flowers in them. (Laughs) I used to get them to do my homework sometimes, photocopy past papers... But when they started asking me out it became hard. I couldn't give them a good reason why I didn't like them ...I couldn't explain to them that I didn't like holding their hand or kissing them touching their breasts ... why I didn't try to put my hand under their dresses.

Sameera lived close to my house. He helped my father in his business...he did the paperwork. He was very friendly and only a few years older than me. I was around 17 and he was 21. He was very lively, spontaneous, I was never bored when he was around. He used to be at home most of the day so we spent a lot of time together. Whenever I wanted to go somewhere I would go with him. We would take the motorbike. I could ride the bike but my father didn't like me riding and so Sameera would take me. Sometimes he would drop me off at school or if I needed to go to the town. It got to a point where I needed to see him every day... We were very close...We used to talk for hours and hours... about life, about future plans, we even talked about sex- Sex with women.

I couldn't tell him what I was feeling for him; he would have thought I was mad. I used to like wearing shorts at home... he always thought they were too short and used to make fun of them.

Sometimes I would be in bed reading and he would come and sit next to me and we would chat. I would have given anything to have touched his body. At the time I didn't know what it all meant. It was like instinct ... I wanted to touch him to be close to him to feel his body ... but I'm not sure I wanted to have sex with him... is that weird? I had never thought about having sex with any guy even Sameera, who I was so drawn to. I could have researched on the internet but I wasn't interested in that.

I don't know if it was because in my mind I still wanted to be attracted to women. Sometimes I would look at Sameera and think he was the kind of man I wanted to be. He had a great body, dark, slim, attractive. He used to go clubbing, was into sports...He could do anything. He even had a girlfriend.

He would sometimes put his arm around my shoulders. Sometimes I think he might have known how I felt, he didn't seem to mind. He didn't say anything. I remember at the time I wanted funky underwear ... I liked the new CK⁴² boxer shorts. He would take me on the bike and we would go from shop to shop.... and if I still couldn't get something I liked he would take me to Colombo. We would go to Odel⁴³. Sometime when he bought new underwear he would show me...he would pull down his pants and would say "see my new CK underwear." (laughs)

My father didn't like my friendship with Sameera. He told me it was "weird" and asked why was I hanging around a silly guy. "Stop it," my father said. "Concentrate on your studies!" But I couldn't. When he tried to stop me from seeing Sameera, there was friction. I started to hate my father. I was falling in love with Sameera. It was too much. He had a girlfriend and was about to get married.

I started rebelling...I didn't listen to my father ...Sameera became the one I turned to when I needed advice... he would tell me to study and advise me about not skip

⁴² Calvin Klein brand. Very popular in Sri Lanka in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Branded underpants became very popular in Sri Lanka with the growth in the garment industry and the ability of manufacturers to sell a small percentage of products to the local market. These became a status symbol among gay men. In discussions with participants and other gay men over many years in Sri Lanka, I have heard stories of men feeling disappointed by lovers who wore "pavement store" underwear, which were usually in dark colours; were cheaper, brief-style underpants. Crocodile was a popular brand for pavement underpants. Wearing Crocodile underpants was associated with being poor.

⁴³ Odel is a department store in Colombo. In the early 2000s it sold mostly clothing manufactured in Sri Lanka and branded for sale in Europe and the United States. It was here that many gay men would go during those years to purchase branded shirts and underwear.

classes. He threatened not to take me on the bike if I skipped classes. He would tell me what to do and I would do it. One day it all ended... He stopped working for my father after it was discovered that he had taken money from one of my father's clients...I am not sure of the details but he stopped working there and moved away.

I felt lost. I kept trying to contact him. I begged him to meet me, somewhere, so we could just talk again, so I could see him. He avoided meeting me. I went to his boarding place in search of him and they said he had moved out. I must have called him a hundred times... When I started insisting and telling him how much I missed him he must have realised how I felt. Because he told me he was only treating me like a brother.

I was so angry then. My family took me to a psychiatrist. I just could not express my feelings because they did not understand. I could not focus on anything else... it took me so long to get over him. I still sometimes think of him...when I see guys on motorbikes. On the street ... and sometimes when I wear CK underwear.

Blackout

(Man 1 exits, Man 2 enters)

Analysis

The opening monologue places the scene very much within the Sinhalese family. He shares anecdotes from his home life: his attempts to be hyper-masculine as a strategy to gain acceptance among peers

Monologue 2

Man 2: (Translated from the original Sinhalese.)

(Begins to dance jive or cha-cha. No music) I love dancing. I had my own style. Not everyone liked my style. They said "What is the way you are dancing? Like a girl. Come on at least if you dance, dance as a man." I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. So, I kept dancing. I like dancing.

(He stops dancing and falls to the ground. He gets up resumes his dance. He acts out being knocked to the ground several times. He get s up again and is again “knocked” down. Finally he remains on the ground. The music stops.)

My room is beautiful; organized, simple and peaceful. Everything was the way I wanted. Inside these light blue walls was my special, peaceful place. I cleaned it everyday. Inside here I have my table, my bookshelf and my bed. Simple and peaceful. I didn't go to school. I cut classes, I didn't see friends. Or go to the shop near my house. I was afraid so I didn't go out. I wanted to go out...wear my pink T-shirts. Study. Dance like I used to.

I don't want to go to classes, I can stay here and learn. I don't want to go. What are you talking about? There is nothing wrong. You are becoming a pain. You are a fucking pain.

After 36 months I gathered the courage to ask my mother to take me to a psychiatrist. I knew I needed to go but was too shy to ask. So, we went. We came to a small green waiting room. I was shy that someone would see me there and think I was crazy. There were posters on waiting room wall. Peaceful scenes. Temples, flowing rivers.

“Number 58” the nurse called out when my turn came. My mother and I went in to the doctor's room and sat. He must have been qualified...there were 3 large heavily framed certificates. He was a plain looking man, who looked at us but did not smile. I wondered what he might say to us, to me. After 5 minutes he asked my mother to return to the waiting room so he could speak to me alone. As my mother left the room I could feel my heart racing. What was he going to say to me? I had waited for this moment for 3 years and now was scared I might not be able to say what I needed to say. “So what would you like to say?”, he asked me. Without a thought, I blurted out that I was gay and didn't know what to do. His expression did not change. He spoke slowly and plainly. He told me I was normal and to be myself. He gave me medicine for my depression and told me there is nothing wrong with me. When I heard him say that I felt a breeze across my face. I cannot explain the feeling. The consultation ended and I floated out the room. Something had changed.

My room became messy. I began going outside. I met more and more friends, got high marks in studies and wore the clothes I liked.

And I love dancing...

(he begins his dance. With music. After 2 minutes the music and lights fade)

(Man 2 exits, Man 3 enters)

Monologue 3

Man 3: This was a 17-year-old girl, presenting with an undifferentiated fever of 4 days duration, her vital parameters were stable. She was treated for viral fever, with the standard fluid regimen and monitoring according to guidelines, and she was ready to be discharged, or so I thought.

You see, there was something special about this girl, something a bit different. And it is because of that I remember her even now. We were doing the ward round that morning, me, I am the House Officer, the most junior person there, along with my Senior Registrar and the Consultant.

I presented the patient, and was hoping to get her discharged and move on quickly to the next patient. It was a busy morning. The Senior Registrar had other ideas. She too had noticed that there was something different with this patient, and she didn't like it. She turned to the patient, and started shooting questions at her. Right in front of everyone.

"Why are you dressed like that, in shorts and trouser, you look like a boy, it's not normal."

"Why aren't you wearing earrings? Your ears are not even pierced, are they?"

The poor girl didn't know what to say. She looked scared at the way we had surrounded her and barely seemed to understand what was happening.

"I took my earrings off. The skin grew back," that's all she could say.

“Where are your parents? Do you have brothers or sisters? What kind of an example would you be to them?”

“I am an orphan, I live with my grandmother.”

“Well, your grandmother should take better care of the way you dress.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.”

The Senior Registrar turned towards the Consultant, and said “This patient needs a psychiatric referral” And she turned to me and said, “Make sure you write a psychiatric referral for her before you discharge her.”

What was I to do? I was the most junior person in the team, I have to carry out the orders without question.

I am a doctor. I am gay. I am a normal man, doing a normal job. I don't have long hair, I don't wear earrings. I can hide behind my white coat and my straight act and when my fellow doctors behave like this, I say nothing. Or I join in with them. This was not the first time this had happened, and certainly this won't be the last. According to these doctors, I am the crazy one, I am the one who needs psychiatric support.

Do you think this girl needs psychiatric support, for wearing shorts and a T-shirt? Do you?

I did not know what to say, or what to do. I sat down with her file. Finally, I somehow wrote that referral and sent her off. I don't know what happened to that girl, and I still wonder....

(Lights fade. Man 3 exits and Man 4 enters)

Monologue 4

Man 4: I have to take you back to a time before the internet. There was no Facebook, Hi5 and Wikipedia. Nothing. That doesn't mean we were not having sex. We had sex we

just didn't have terms. There were terms. But we didn't really mind. Not until I was approaching my a/levels. Was I doing the right thing? Behaving this way with guys was it right? Should I change? Ah I started referring to stuff. I wanted to find out more about it. What I was feeling and why do I like it so much? Is it going to affect my normal life? The only resource available at that time was my father's 1965 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica⁴⁴. This was printed in 1965 and the American psychologist association hadn't woken up yet. So, I looked under sex, then reproduction...that didn't help either. It didn't speak of men having sex with other men. Then I looked for ...are there it is homosexuality. So, this is it. There were jokes at school. Freud said something about this. There was this feminine element, mummy's boy overbearing mother, distant father. I started to analyse myself. Where do I fit? Do I fit in to any of these descriptions? Is this some sort of disease? Who do I tell? We never had help lines for this thing...we only had lines for suicide. I wasn't having suicidal thoughts. I started to think something had to change. What if my parents found out? Are there any tell-tale signs of me? Was I in some way not masculine enough? Forward enough?

So, I thought I have to change this ...Change this personality. Where to start? My relationship with my mother. Yes, let's get back to Freud. Overbearing mother and distant father. Anyway, he was an alcoholic so I wasn't so close to him but I was very close to my mother. I even almost got my whole family killed as I could not stay on aunt's lap while my mother had driving lessons at 60 miles an hour on the Kandy-Kurunegala road. Nearly killed us... I was so attached to my mother.

We used to watch TV. She fed me until I was 13. So, what the hell? Isn't that what mothers in Sri Lanka do? But no, no, no ...that might be what mothers are supposed to do but this was too much. Relatives made comments..."Come from behind your mother and show your face." People are going to notice something very soon...maybe some others have heard of this Freud's theory. Maybe I should just get away from her. I mean what the hell...look at my brothers...they don't need to tell

⁴⁴ Sets of encyclopedias were common among the Sinhalese middle class during the 1960s and 1970s. They were a symbol of an interest in education and English language knowledge. They would often be displayed in common areas such as the living room.

everything to her. She is not my best friend...she is my mother. I had to get that freedom. And that's where it started. I started pushing away...my mother. Creating an artificial gap that I have never experienced before. And ahhh...that distance, that gap; I have never been able to bridge that again. I don't know why. But once you have created that gap...its difficult...then she started respecting that gap. My brothers have already got that gap. They have that distance, that freedom. So, I kept moving away from her. And that is something I regret even to this day. Why? Well eventually by the time I realised what being gay was...now I am lecturing people on gender, masculinity and sexuality. Bloody hell I wish I knew...I wish I knew then half of what I know now. Then I would not have done that. By the time I realised all this. My mother had a stroke. Repeated strokes. She was bedridden. I saw her. She was alone. Her friends were also old and my brothers had moved away. Now don't get the wrong idea. I loved my mother. I didn't neglect my responsibilities I got her a Ceylinco⁴⁵ nurse. A Ceylinco nurse was taking care of her. The best of medicines. Durdans⁴⁶. But you know, this was the woman who loved reading. Whatever reading habit I have got it from her. She would read to help me sleep to make me eat. One day I saw the Ceylinco nurse was sitting next to her reading the paper to her. I should have been reading to her. She was there for me. She listened to hours and hours of my bullshit. Why wasn't I there for her? It was that distance I had created. It is something that I will carry as a burden in my head. Some guys thought that their parents pushed them away. I pushed her away. So, what would have happened if I told my mother I was gay? Maybe she would not have accepted it. She was a traditional housewife. Opinionated but educated. She might not have accepted it. It would have been too much for her. She would have worried about me. It would have been impossible but it doesn't mean I should have pushed her away. This was my best friend for a large part of my life...my best friend. And probably the only woman to ever love me.

⁴⁵ Ceylinco is a private health care provider in Sri Lanka. It specializes in oncology and diabetes treatment. One of its services is home-nursing care. Such services are quite expensive.

⁴⁶ A popular private hospital in Colombo. The private hospital industry has grown rapidly in Colombo. Durdans, is one of the more established private hospitals.

(Man 4 exits and Man 5 enters)

Monologue 5

Man 5: *(Enters as Lady Macbeth)*

Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!
Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none
can call our power to account?--Yet who would have thought the old man to have
had so much blood in him.

(he removes his Lady Macbeth costume)

I always played female characters in school plays. And I loved it. I felt so free. It was
me on the stage. Yes, I tried playing male character wearing a sarong and I felt
horrible. While I got good feedback about my performances some students and
teachers mocked me, called me names and questioned why I was playing female
characters.

There was this boy. I really liked him although we had never spoken before. One day
he came into my class, with a serious look on his face. I thought he was going to ask
me out. I was happy. But the first thing he said to me was, "Do you have a dick?"
"Yes, I have a dick. I perform as a girl on stage but I am a boy. I like being a boy."

The head prefect took me to an empty room with a chair in it. I sat. He gave me
some papers and started asking questions. "Why are you different?" Why do you act
like this?

I am not acting. This is the way I am.

He told me to write my whole life story on the papers. Starting with my childhood to
now. Every, single, thing. I was scared so I wrote everything. After 3 hours and 6
foolscap pages, I stopped.

On my way home in the school van, I suddenly thought, what will happen if they give
those pages to my parents. What would they think? That was my last day at school. I
could not go back thinking how much those people knew about me.

I had to tell my story to my father.

Thaththi⁴⁷, I cannot go back to school. I love my school but they are teasing and bullying me. I do not want to be bullied again. The head prefect asked me to write my whole story. I cannot face them again. They know everything about me now. My father understood me. My parents took me to get the Leaving Certificate. I thought then I could forget it all...Forget what had happened.

But I missed my friends, my rehearsals, my performances...yes my performances. I then went to an art school. The students there didn't ask why am I like this. They talked to me and were friendly to me. I don't regret leaving school. I have learned so many things about my life. A whole new world. What people think. Who I really am. So, I am a whole new person.

(he begins to dress again as Lady Macbeth)

But I still love to act as a girl on the stage.

(as Lady Macbeth)

Wash your hands, put on your night dress. Look not so pale. I tell you yet again. Banquo's buried. He cannot come out on's grave.

To bed, to bed, to bed.

(Man 5 exits. Man 6 enters)

Scene 2

Man 6: *(A man sits on a chair centre stage. Man 6 enters. Man in chair remain silent throughout)*

(Translated from Sinhalese) Bloody shit. We should kill these buggers⁴⁸. Listen. It's ok to be a faggot but don't try to show off that you're a faggot. See. Because of you

⁴⁷ Sinhalese for "dad."

⁴⁸ Bugger is a common term of derision in Sri Lanka. It does not refer solely to gay men.

buggers we can't even face the society. You bugger, you're a straight acting⁴⁹ bugger right? I can't even believe that you're like this.

Listen. We are on the same boat. Just don't be a 'charter'⁵⁰ you bugger. Don't even look at me if you ever see me in the road. Ok? I just can't be notorious like you.

Anyway you have become sexier huh? You have put on bit. There's no one at home tomorrow. Shall we hook up for some fun?

(Man 6 leaves. Man in chair remains. Enter another actor (Man 7) playing a young woman. She speaks to the man in chair. He says nothing and does not respond)

Man 7: That's the guy I told you about. That gay boy aney⁵¹, aney darling. How are you aney? After a long time. Aney. You have become more sweet. Sweet. Oh, I forgot, this is my boyfriend. Aney Sugee. He also has a sweet boyfriend. Darling is that your boyfriend? Yours? Boyfriend? Aney sweet aney. Aney Sugee⁵² aren't these two sweet? Babo⁵³, can you please take a photograph of mine with this sweet couple? Wait, wait, give me a second. I want to go to the middle. Wait. How about this pose? And this? Aney take like this, also will you? Let me see. Let me see.
(looking at the photo) Aney sweet aney. I'm going to upload this in Facebook now itself. Sweet aney, aney darling we are getting late. Have to go. Will catch you later ok? Aney sweet aney. Bye...

(Man 7 exits, the man in chair remains. Enter Man 6 playing another character. He talks to man in chair who remains silent)

Man 6: Are you a homosexual? You don't worry brother. We are here to talk in behalf of you. You don't worry. The society should be educated of these matters. Now see.

⁴⁹ The English term "straight-acting" is used in Sri Lanka. It is a popular descriptor on gay dating sites and applications. It means as it does in the West, possessing a manner and set of behaviours to enable one to "pass" as heterosexual.

⁵⁰ "charter" is a Colombo-slang word, a term of derision, for an overtly gay man, as opposed to "straight-acting." Gay activists are also referred to as "charter." Despite its use here, most of the participants in the production were not familiar with the word. This prompted a discussion during rehearsals on the words that were used to describe different types of gay men, trans women and sexual acts.

⁵¹ "Aney" or "anee" are commonly used words in Sinhalese. It is one of those words with various meanings. It can be used to express disappointment or shock. However here it is used to indicate the age of a young person, who uses the word in cooing appreciation. The second syllable is often lengthened, "Aneeee!" Even when Sinhalese people are speaking English they may use anee.

⁵² A man's nickname.

⁵³ Nickname for a friend.

Do you know about the sympathetic theory? We should look at these people with this theory. Ah, no, no, no brother. Read this book. It's all in this about sympathetic theory.

Now see. There's no problem with you guys. What do say? These are really radical stories. It's not enough talking like this matter. We should look at these people with sympathetic theory⁵⁴. No, no. You guys are not like us nah. So, we need to use this sympathetic theory and sympathize with you guys. You don't want to be sympathized? Ah... Don't worry brother we still sympathize you with the sympathetic theory. Now do you know this sympathetic theory...

(Man 6 exits and Man 7 enters as mother and again talks to the man in the chair. He remains silent)

Man 7 : Translated from Sinhalese

Sumaney⁵⁵. Aney see will you what has our son done...How can we face the society? Aney Sumaney. Why did you do something like this to us son? Why? Aiyo!⁵⁶ the society...What did you said my son? What? No, my darling. I don't have any problem...But the society. *(she begins to dress her son, who remains silent throughout)*

You will be my son forever. Aiyo, the society. What will the society will say my son? See how your brother and sister are. Why can't you be like them my son? Aiyo Sumaney! Aiyo the society!

(Man7 as mother exits. Man 8 enters)

⁵⁴ Sympathetic theory is a made-up term. The character here is a left-wing (Marxist) university student, who attempts to sympathise with gay people and show solidarity with a supposed oppressed minority. The use of the made-up theory is to mock the way in which gay people are analysed and constructed by others.

⁵⁵ Sumaney is another way of saying anee. In this scene, it denotes disappointment and disdain.

⁵⁶ Aiyo is a frequently used word in Sinhalese which denotes surprise or disappointment. It is difficult to directly translate it. Even when Sinhalese speak English, it is not unusual for them to use aiyo when wanting to indicated disappointment or surprised.

Monologue 6

Man 8: I was at a party... one of the gay parties. My friends couldn't make it so I was alone. There were a few cute guys around but one guy was particularly hot. I kept looking at him... hoping I would get his attention. He was with friends. When he looked like he was about to go to the toilet, I went too. I managed to get his number. The next day I called him; his phone didn't work. Arsehole. He had given me a wrong number. I had done that before too. A few hours later I messaged him. So, I called... no response.

He picked up. "Hey Man, remember me? You gave me your number at the party yesterday...the guy in the red t shirt... at the toilet. Oh ok I'll call you back later." He said he couldn't talk. But at least he had given me the correct number.

I tried calling him few times and when I couldn't get through to him I gave up... figured he wasn't interested. Then after about three weeks I got a message from him. He had said, "Hi what's up?"

I was too excited to type a message so I just called him straight away. "Hi! So where had you been last few weeks?" – "aha, ok. Can I meet you?"

He said he was in the area. I asked him to come over. "Jackpot!" I was horny. I had cooked dinner so I asked him to have some with me. While we were having dinner, I couldn't take my eyes off him: his body.

After dinner we sat on the couch & watched a movie. I hugged him. And he didn't move away. I just pressed myself closer. I just loved it. It was a good feeling. I wasn't watching the movie anymore; I was in another world. "Can I kiss you on the cheek?" I asked. He said, "Yes!"

We sat like that for an hour. And then he said he needed to leave; it was late. He lived in Katana⁵⁷. I called up a taxi for him and he asked if I could give him Rs.800/- for the Taxi⁵⁸. He took the cash and left.

I called him the next day for a quick chat. I would message – no response. He would text once in a while. I texted almost every day he texted much less. But he would sometimes reach out and that kept me going. We spoke a lot about nothing.

Sometimes he would come over, he had sports practices somewhere close to where I lived. He would come over to my place after practices, and even stayed the night a few times. I grew to look forward to that. We got physical when he was over.

That particular night he came over quite late. We had dinner as usual and then we started kissing him and from there we moved to the bedroom. We fucked⁵⁹ and went to sleep...I slept well. Next day early in the morning I woke up to the noise of someone trying to open the door. “What are you doing? What’s the hurry, Rajeev? What time is it ?” I checked time on my phone it was 6.03a.m. I was a little annoyed. “Why do you wanna leave this early?”

Apparently he had a practice match to go for by 9a.m. and as usual he asked me for money. This had become a habit. “You should have told me last night. I don’t have extra money to give you.” He looked pissed off...and he just walked off.

You didn’t go to practice? He said he had broken his slipper⁶⁰. He wanted to borrow one of my pairs. Why don’t you eat some breakfast. I made some eggs and went for a shower...when I got back out he was gone again. I was relieved I guess. I was tired of giving.

I was about to leave for work...started looking for my laptop and it was gone. He had taken it. THAT BASTARD HAD TAKEN IT! I panicked. I ran downstairs and out of the gate onto the road and started run-walking towards where he had told me his friend was living. There was no trace of him. I asked people who were on the road

⁵⁷ A town in the Gampaha district to the north of Colombo.

⁵⁸ A taxi ride to Katana from central Colombo would be considered expensive

⁵⁹ The word “fucked” was censored by the Public Performance Board. The actor changed the line to “We did nothing, twice and slept.”

⁶⁰ In Sri Lanka, the word “slipper” refers mostly to sandals or thongs/flip flops “rubber slippers”

..describing to them what he was wearing. I felt so stupid...it was 7 am on a Tuesday. No one had seen him. I tried calling him and he didn't pick up. What was I to do? Go to the police? I had just been robbed.

I called a friend and after listening to him telling me what an idiot I was... he started asking me what I knew about him... and I realized I wasn't sure of anything he had told me. I felt helpless. So I did the only thing I could... I went on Facebook and messaged all his friends telling them about it but also asking them for an address or phone number. A brilliant idea struck me. I went to his profile and wrote to all his friends to explain. I received many replies. Among them were dodgy invitations. But one sent me a telephone number saying it was Rajeev's brother's telephone number.

It was exactly one week after I was hanging out with my friends. I was telling them exactly what happened and of the number I received. One of my best girlfriends offered to call the number and pretend to be my mother. It worked. Rajeev returned my laptop and my Arugam Bay slippers⁶¹.

Scene 3

(Shehan is getting ready to go to university with the help of his mother and father)

Shehan(off): Amma⁶²!! Maa! Where are my pants?

Mother (ironing something): Ah?

Father (seated, reading) : Ranjini!

Shehan: Ma! Where are my pants?

Mother: What?

Father: Ranjini, where's my tea?

⁶¹ Arugam Bay is a popular beach area in the country's east. The name is used as branded beach wear including rubber slippers, thongs.

⁶² Amma means mother.

Shehan: Ammey, Mage sudu Ammey (Mummy, my white mummy.)

Mother : Aiyo, child (turns in direction of son), (turns in direction of father) Oh Lord!

Shehan: Found them.

Mother : (walking around Shehan) Oh, look at you! So nice and handsome. But you know what, how will they know...you know?

Shehan: Er, what do you mean Ma?

Mother: You know. Here, I brought some ties from No Limit⁶³, maybe you should wear one of these? (she picks one out of 3). What about this one, or maybe this one? What do you think Lionel?

Father (looking above his paper):Hmm, yes. What does your book say Ranjini?

Mother: Ah the book... (pulls out "Now that you know") (reading)

Shehan: Amma, how often have you read this book?

Mother: A couple of times. So the book says its best to dress in an obvious manner when broaching the subject with friends, you know giving them something to fall back on: this suggests that you dress in a colorful tie. Pick this one. (he tries on a bright tie.)

(Takes hanky she was ironing, neatly folds it and pins it to Shehan, pins it and admires him wipes his mouth. Mother takes lunch box and hands it to him.)

Mother: (proudly smiling) So are you ready. Do you know what you are going to say?

Shehan: It'll be fine, it's no secret.

Mother: Puthey⁶⁴, you'll make a man very happy someday! Looking so handsome!

(Shehan goes up to the Father to worship him and signify that he's leaving)

Father (moves newspaper to look, grunts): Good luck.

⁶³ A popular discounted clothing chain.

⁶⁴ Puthey means son.

(Shehan moves into next scene with his university friends, seated.)

Girlfriend 1: Oh Shehan, look at you all dressed up today.

Shehan: Hello girls, what do you think?

Girlfriend 2: Oh my so handsome.

Shehan: What do you think of the tie?

Girlfriend 2: So beautiful. (she hugs Shehan, who slowly breaks away from her)

Girlfriend 1: (to Boyfriend 1) Why don't you dress like this?

Boyfriend 1: Probably because I am not- (looks at Shehan). Never mind.

Shehan: Maybe if you did you would find a girlfriend.

Girlfriend 1: So why are you dressed up? Going somewhere?

Shehan: No just. I felt today might turn into a special occasion.

Girlfriend 2: Special occasion? You dressed up for me no?

Boyfriend 1: That's a fancy looking tie. Your mother picked it out for you?

Shehan: No, your father did.

Boyfriend 1: You have a thing for my father don't you?

Shehan: No. Just for you.

Boyfriend 1: What?

Shehan: Guys, I have something to tell you.

(they all turn to Shehan)

(Piano plays, Shehan sings)

Have you ever wondered

How you have never met a girl, I dated before?

Or how I have never been interested in them.

In the way I am supposed to be

Girlfriend 1: Not for lack of willing candidates

Shehan (singing):

Or how my mind wanders

At just the thought of ruggger.

(a ruggger player walks by)

Or cricket, or football or anything with a ball.

Boyfriend 1: Because it's the love of the game?

Shehan (singing):

Well there is a reason for it all

Something you might not be happy to hear

But it makes me a little glad I can tell you now

Everyone: Ohhhhhh he's!

Shehan (to audience): But this is not how it is. This is a fantasy.

Blackout

Appendix 3: Description of Sakhi Collaboration

Source: Organisational Facebook Page

SC is relatively new advocacy and social group in Sri Lanka. They began their activities in 2009 largely online. The group did not receive any funds from local or overseas donors. Part of its point of difference from the other organisations at the time, namely Companions on a Journey and Equal Ground was SC's reliance on its volunteer members to donate time and money to SC activities. These activities were chosen by a leadership group before being posted on Facebook seeking input from members. Members joined the group's facebook page.

The language SC uses on its Facebook page resembles that of other gay organisations in South East Asia, North America and Australia. In the opening paragraph on the group's Facebook page the increasingly popular acronym including gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex is used to state who SC is for and what it does.

The Sakhi Collaboration is a peer-led peer support group for Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender communities belonging to the wider Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersex and questioning(LGBTIQ) community of Sri Lanka.

It uses community development jargon suggesting the group is "a peer-led peer support group." The language uses human-rights language with appeals to English is only language used on the page. There is an appeal to community

'Sakhi' was initiated by a group of queer-identifying men in 2009. All contributions are voluntary and at present, out of choice, the group operates without any external funding. Finances for particular projects are accepted as donations from members of the community.

Sakhi needs your ideas and energy!

Sakhi recognises that volunteers can make a significant contribution to our work and enhance the range of activities it undertakes. Feel free to contact us through Facebook messages or sending an e-mail to sakhicollaboration@gmail.com if you would like to volunteer or if you would like to be part of our activities.

*** Please note that you should 18 years old or above to be a member of the Sakhi Collaboration Face Book Group, Connect with our Profile or participate at events organized by Sakhi.

The Sakhi Vision

We believe in the right to dignity security and equal opportunity and freedom for all Lesbian, Gay ,Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Intersex (LGBTQI) persons, and envision a world free of stigma and discrimination, where all people have equal rights and privileges under the law.

The Sakhi Mission

To promote a unified approach towards the realization of a society free of legal and social discrimination towards diverse sexual and gender expressions ensuring human rights to all. To work towards an empowered LGBTQI community able to live a healthy, fulfilled life.

Terms of use :

As a peer support group we advocate for the rights of all LGBT people and believe that the freedom of speech is one of the most important political rights of all citizens of Sri Lanka. Free discourse is a necessary condition for intellectual and social progress and by extension the progress of the LGBT movement in Sri Lanka.

Censorship :

This facebook group was created as a platform for dialogue and a means of connecting with the LGBT community of Sri Lanka. As a group we are opposed to the idea of censorship, in

principle. And practically we feel that a silenced opinion can contain some element of the truth or provide a discussion that may be productive.

However, we will be forced to moderate discussions and remove comments if the space is used

- To make personal attacks against individuals or organisations.
- To compromise the privacy or security of another individual or group.
- To advertise personal products and services.
- To publish material that is considered pornographic.

We will not remove comments/posts that are factually or politically incorrect because we believe

1. Individuals are more likely to abandon mistaken beliefs if they are engaged in an open exchange of ideas.
2. By forcing other individuals to re-examine and re-affirm their beliefs in the process of debate, these beliefs are kept from declining into mere dogma.

Removal of users from this group :

Sakhi is an inclusive space for people of all orientations and sexualities and we welcome you to contribute to the facebook page in a way that is not disruptive or offensive to others.

People will be removed

- If a user repeatedly harasses other users in cyber or real.
- If a user misuses information shared by individuals on this page in a way that compromises their privacy or security.

Complaints made to Sakhi will need proof of claim and users will be removed only after a prior warning message is sent via facebook.

Disclaimer :

The content published on our facebook page is the sole responsibility of the respective authors/users. The views and opinion expressed, and the content published herein do not necessarily reflect our own, unless expressly noted by the Sakhi Collaboration.

The content may include publications with technical inaccuracies or typographical errors that will be corrected as they are discovered

Changes are periodically added to the information contained herein. Services provided by the group may be subject to change without prior notice.
