

# GLF, the stars and all that's art

BY RENUKA SADANANDAN

Vikram Seth was having none of it. We would see the short, almost nondescript-looking man sauntering along the stretch of road between the Maritime Museum and Hall de Galle, with his cloth bag dangling from his shoulder. Unfortunately, trying to pin the celebrated author of 'A Suitable Boy' down for that interview we so desperately wanted for the cover page of the Plus section proved impossible. No, he said - no press interviews, and that was that.

That was Galle Literary Festival, 2008. We were bitterly disappointed and more than a little miffed after having laid down a virtual red carpet of pre-publicity. One of the founding fathers of postcolonial fiction, Seth's very presence seemed a tantalising opportunity not to be missed. But that was the one that got away, and one we had to put down to experience; to redouble our efforts the next time around, and make sure we had those interviews the readers who couldn't make it to Galle would so want to see. Since then though, we've managed to feature most of the big names who've come to GLF - Germaine Greer, Gore Vidal, Ian Rankin, Edna O'Brien, Chimamanda Ngoze Adichie, Jung Chang, Richard Dawkins, Tom Stoppard and a host of other celebrity authors in the Sunday Times.

This year was our sixth consecutive year of sponsorship - yes right from the inaugural Galle Literary Festival in 2007. The whole process starts months ahead, early meetings with the organizers, the first

exciting glimpse of the confirmed writers, drafting our wish-list, now getting those pre-festival email interviews (this year we even had a Skype interview) and finally the coverage on the ground as the four days of sessions are carefully mapped out. It all culminates on that final Sunday as the festival draws to a close and the literati reluctantly say goodbye for another year. Then, after a few sleepless nights, our dedicated and indefatigable team (spearheaded by our special arts writer Smriti Daniel who's been covering the GLF since its inception) can sit back and see their work in print, being enjoyed by readers both at Galle, all over the country and abroad through our web edition.

The Galle Literary Festival may be one of the most demanding sponsorships the Sunday Times undertakes but over the years, that sponsorship list has not just grown, it has gone viral. Not every sponsorship is likely to land on the Plus cover, but this is a detail. Each sponsorship is important, and the planning that goes into making sure that each and every one is represented thoughtfully and interestingly is what occupies us. One week, it may be Indu Dharmasena with another of his hilariously incisive comedies, a Namel Weeramuni production at the Punchi Theatre, or that august venue, the Lionel Wendt Theatre ('the Maha Gedera of English theatre' as one dramatist called it) presenting its Festival of Arts, the Geoffrey Bawa Award for Excellence in Architecture, a school play, a rock concert or the Gratiaen Prize for Creative Writing in English. Behind each edition is a flurry of activity, but going behind the scenes, writing previews, interviewing the players, setting up photo shoots that will give us our Mirror cover shot are all challenging and stimulating each time. Occasionally, the shots will be a disappointment or the planned interviews fall through (as in the case of Vikram Seth), and then hours from deadline we find ourselves scrambling to find a replacement.

When requests first began coming in for the Sunday Times to join hands with an arts production as print media sponsor - our first question would be 'what's the show in aid of?' If the proceeds were for charity, as with the Country Roads concerts, we would have little hesitation in supporting the effort. Now, there is a virtual flood of sponsorships coming in from all quarters and we can no longer maintain that yardstick, though we do our best to give priority to ventures that have a greater cause. In these past 25 years, we've been privileged to be associated with almost all the major theatre groups and equally to spotlight many young, emerging talents. Seeing the arts sponsorships occupying more and more space in the Plus and Magazine sections of the Sunday Times, and realizing how deeply our journalistic interests aligned with the arts, our editor suggested we use the line 'The Sunday Times supporting the Arts'. As we look back on our sponsorships in the first few months

of this year alone, from the GLF, to the Galle Music Festival, the Gratiaen Award, the Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation's production of Samhara with the Indian Nrityagram Dance Ensemble among many others, we know it's a tag that we're proud to carry.

Meanwhile pop stars and celebrated entertainers have stopped by in Sri Lanka with increasing frequency, and many are the big names we've been associated with - remember Bryan Adams, Michael Bolton, Engelbert Humperdinck, Cliff Richard, Shah Rukh Khan, jazz legend our very own Yolande Bhavan, Sonu Nigam, Shaggy, Olivia Newton John to recall just a few. Getting interviews here can be a tedious process, and one in which the journalist has to learn patience and tenacity - given the hectic schedules and layers of personnel to infiltrate.



Dance fusion: A scene from 'Samhara' staged last month and below left, the poster issued by the Sunday Times for Miss World Aishwarya Rai's visit in 1995

Looking back over the years, we can't forget the glamour events too. Shortly after win-

ning the Miss World title in 1995, Aishwarya Rai, now a global Bollywood star, accepted an invitation from the Rotary Club of Colombo East to grace their Presidential installation dinner. She was also to flag off the first ever anti-drug run organized by the Sri Lanka Anti-Narcotics Association at Galle Face. We were media sponsors and Aishwarya got a special supplement the next week, with pictures and stories of her stay in Sri Lanka - from her arrival, her visit to an orphanage, and her Saturday night Rotary Gala dinner, where resplendent in her finery she dazzled the guests. She then appeared early the next day in a plain white T-shirt with minimal make-up, yet ethereally beautiful, at the health run. In the exclusive interview she gave this newspaper shortly after, she spoke with youthful candour of her hopes and dreams, maybe to enter Bollywood. Little did we realize how meteoric her rise would be. In the years that followed two more Miss Worlds were to visit our shores, the long-limbed Venezuelan Jacqueline Aguilera and hazel-eyed Greek Irene Skliva. The Sunday Times was the print media sponsor for these events too.

There are many more events worth mentioning, but it seems important at this point to acknowledge that the small steps in our past have paved the way for the future. The future of the arts in Sri Lanka is promising with such a plethora of talent - and the cause of writers, artists, actors, dramatists is a mission close to our heart. With our team of journalists and contributing writers who are committed and passionate, we look forward to fulfilling this role in greater measure in the years ahead - supporting the arts and bringing you our readers, the best of stories, interviews and reviews through our pages. Thank you for the trust and support that has made our work so enjoyable.



Photograph by Mettaram

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With the compliments of  
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