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Interview with Nimmi Harasgama

My Homemade Kite WED 16 MAY 7.30PM & SAT 19 MAY 2.30PM

Award winning actress, writer Nimmi Harasgama was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka of Tamil and Sinhalese parents and raised in the UK. We talk to her about why she wrote *My Homemade Kite* and what she wanted to communicate to audiences through it . . .

Q. Let's turn to the play. Why My Homemade Kite? What significance do kites have?

In many of the interviews that I conducted with refugees kites always featured in them. Krishnaveni, the lead female character in the play, mentions this as a memory. Kites represent freedom and childhood I suppose. I have vivid memories of kites from childhood and from as recently as last summer when I was driving through the south of the island. I looked up to see an array of bright and beautiful kites with long tails, dancing on the wind high up in the sky... it was mesmerising... so beautiful to see. Kites have a lot of meaning in Sri Lanka and are still met with delight and joy across South Asia and the world. I wanted to have this vision/memory/feeling running through the play.

Q. What do you want to communicate to the audience with My Homemade Kite?

I really want to break the stereotype of what an asylum seeker is – people don't know what they have been through, who they are, but judgements are made and people are mistreated for something that is not their fault. They are fleeing for their safety and their lives. People, however, are so desensitised

to what is happening to their fellow human beings and I wanted to provide a glimpse of what this looks like from an asylum seekers perspective.

Q. You have had quite a journey from having acted in a controversial film about the war in Sri Lanka to a success with Auntie Netta's Holiday for Asylum, Good Karma Hospital, and now War Plays. How did this all transpire?

I acted in a Sinhala language film, August Sun, that was based on people's true stories from the years of war. It dealt with some controversial issues and as such it was frowned upon by the government at the time. However, it did really well on the international film festival circuit and I was honoured to be presented the Best Actress Award at the Las Palmas International Film Festival in Spain.

Having been born and lived in Sri Lanka the conflict has always been a part of life, of my growing up - it has for all Sri Lankans. Whether it was being a young child in Colombo during the 1983 Black July pogrom and trying to process what was happening and the fear, anger, and sadness I saw on the faces of family members or having gone to the North and East as an adult theatre practitioner to make

documentaries during the war, I was able to see first-hand how people were, and are, still being affected. I think Auntie Netta partly came out of this and also from a series of characters in my family. She became a mix of humour and pathos especially in the one-person show that dealt with asylum.

I have always been keen to explore the issues that Sri Lanka faces from a human perspective rather than a political one.

The government was, and still can be, extremely sensitive about any kind of negative portrayal of Sri Lanka. The impact of the decision to go to war, the consequences for innocent civilians, being forced to leave your country due to state persecution and fear for your life, and the prejudice you are faced with from a society and culture you have no experience with - is an issue that I wanted to explore. I worked with lots of unaccompanied young adult refugees, but at the time there were no Sri Lankan Tamils in any of the workshops I was involved with. I wanted to know why and so I approached an immigration lawyer who put me in touch with a young woman who had received asylum in the UK. Her torture had been confirmed. It is mainly her story that I based *My Homemade Kite* on.

Q. How would you describe the play's main character, Krishnaveni?

She has an amazing, quiet strength that I have seen in many of the people I've met in Sri Lanka who have gone through the worst of the war - losing their families, their homes, their livelihood, been imprisoned, tortured... and, yet, they are still determined to survive, to prosper. They do not tire and, despite having endured so much, they do not give up.