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Plus

A celebration it was!

By **Smriti Daniel**

They came from all over - from India and the UK, from Thailand and America, from Hong Kong, Australia, Canada, Pakistan and Singapore. They came to an island besieged, to talk about books, language, architecture, ideas, history, passion, issues, food, culture, and identity; they came to meet each other, to laugh and question, to eat and simply to celebrate a shared love for literature.

Did the Galle Literary Festival live up to some of its promise? Yes. Did they pay for it? Through their noses. Could it have been better, wider, more effective? Definitely.

Fortunately, there's always next year. In the Hall de Galle the first session of the second full day of the festival is underway. "Reading Jane Austen is like eating chocolates," says author and Austen aficionado Yasmine Gooneratne, and it seems a strangely apt description of the effect the festival ultimately had on its audience - with the end of each session seeming merely to beg another...and sessions there were in abundance.

The festival opened on January 10 with a tribute to the late Nihal de Silva, and moved on to Bevis Bawa's fabulous garden estate Lunuganga. The remaining three days of the festival were hosted at the Galle Fort and the Hall de Galle in particular was the venue for the majority of sessions. Approximately 150 people wandered in and out of various sessions, selecting those that most interested them, while a few of the most determined sat through them all.



William Dalrymple

For its debut performance, the festival managed to pack quite a punch, welcoming over 60 participants to a corresponding number of 50 festival events. The programme, which boasted numerous panel discussions, debates and writing workshops was enhanced by several Feature Events - literary lunches and dinners where famed celebrity chefs created memorable meals. An alternative option on Friday featured a comprehensive children's programme at Samakanda - an eco-tourism and learning centre.

Typically a day would hold six to seven sessions, with breaks for lunch or Feature Events and the option of free entertainment - ranging from poetry readings, to jazz sessions and movies - in the evenings. Speaking at one of the sessions, author Nuri Vittachi looked out over his audience and commented on what a great mixture of nationalities his audience presented. "Half of you were born in Sri Lanka, half of you weren't," he said, going on to add, "people don't mix as much as they should."

And mix we did. Underlying the whole festival was a marked intimacy, where writers met other writers and both of them met



Nuri Vittachi

their readers in the beautiful environment of the Galle Fort. Several times, I sat beside a stranger, but left behind a new acquaintance. It was something of a unique experience – listening to Pradeep Jeganathan, Lal Medawattagedera, Jagath Kumarasinghe and Madhubashini Ratnayake talk about the use of vernacular in English, while Elmo Jayawardena nodded in agreement from the chair in front of you and Kiran Desai looked on from across the aisle.

Of the sessions held on Friday and Saturday, several were particularly enjoyable – both for the humour and wit of their participants, as for the insight they afforded the audience into the opinions and technique practised by the writers. 15 to 20 minutes at the end of every session were left open for audience questions, and it was in these that Yasmine Gooneratne found herself identifying Mr. Collins as the Austen character most like George W. Bush; or Mark Tully explored what the West can learn from the East and Carl Muller addressed the conflict felt between dictates of society and the needs of the self.

While each session had more than one thing to recommend in it, William Dalrymple was one of the undisputed stars of the show. The famous travel writer turned scholar, delivered an informative, insightful lecture of his latest book *The Last Mughal*. Using pictures and words with equal skill he brought the Indian rebellion of 1857-8 to startling, vivid life, and tellingly managed to move some of his audience literally to tears with his account of the final days of the last Mughal emperor.



Suketu Mehta

Interestingly, authors like Dalrymple, Suketu Mehta and Mark Tully, had an appeal that went far beyond being just for the literary crowd. History, economy, business, journalism, and more found their way into the discussion. Predictably, Kiran Desai drew the largest crowds, and the Barefoot bookshop set up at the back of the hall did brisk business selling not only *The Inheritance of Loss* but many other books written by participating authors as well.

The stated objectives of the festival focused on raising “awareness of the increasing depth and diversity of Sri Lankan writings in English,” giving “Sri Lankan writers an equal platform to their international colleagues,” encouraging “the use of English among young people” while attracting visitors from overseas to Galle and the Southern Province. The festival brought Sri Lankan authors together, giving them much prominence in the programme. Sri Lankan writers and their foreign counterparts mixed and mingled, often sharing the stage. Young Yashodha de Silva’s winning submission to the festival’s creative writing competition (written in English) was much applauded, while heavily discounted passes were made available to students. And, of course, more than one hotel, which had resigned itself to running at a loss through the season, suddenly found every room accounted for.

The question however, was not whether the festival lived up to the letter of these stated objectives – but whether it really embraced their spirit. The tickets which amounted to a hefty Rs. 10,000 for a four-day pass, excluded the average Sri Lankan from joining in the celebration. It did not help that anyone coming in from outside Galle



Absorbed: The audience at the Hall de Galle.

would need to factor in transport, accommodation and food; considerations which weighed heavily even with students who paid only Rs.1,750 to attend all four days. Attending a "Feature Event" – a gourmet meal with your favourite author – would set you back by around 5,000 rupees. Not pocket change by any means.

Initial publicity for the festival left something to be desired, with most people hearing about it only by word of mouth. Looking around, one audience member remarked that the "appalling publicity" had resulted in only the usual suspects making an appearance. The lack of a brochure, and heavy reliance on the website made it difficult for those ignorant of the workings of the Internet to access the festival schedules. And, surprisingly, desperate calls for volunteers were sent out till the very week before the festival.

Holding the festival at Galle Fort garnered mixed reviews with some glad that it was something to draw people out of Colombo, and another saying it ensured the attendance of only the elite, socialite crowd. Taking it even further, detractors have been quick to point out that many of the featured Sri Lankan authors were "expats", that Sri Lankan Tamils writing in English were at best poorly represented and that the whole event was inappropriate in the context of the escalating violence in the country. Complicating the situation even more were allegations of misuse of tsunami funds on the part of the organizers and confusion surrounding sponsorship of the event.

Not surprisingly, the festival has been at the centre of a heated war of words, with many baying for blood. Speaking with Janet DeNeefe, organiser of the renowned Ubud Literary Festival and consultant for this festival, however, helps put things into perspective. This is something of an experiment, she emphasises, pointing out that the Galle Festival will only find its legs next year. At which point expanding to include individuals writing in Sinhala and Tamil for instance (a common complaint against the festival), becomes an option.

At the end of the day, the festival was a success on many levels. It has tremendous potential, one which we can only hope will be fully realised in the years to come. I, for one, am crossing my fingers.



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