

A Vision To Entertain



As far back as the early 80s, a very young Sandya Mendis boldly took on a new industry. Her spiritual guidance, passion and dedication contributed to establishing one of the most recognised brands in television production. More than three decades on, Susila Productions continues to do what it does best—entertaining the masses while nurturing family values through versatile telefilms. Today Susila Production is on the path of change to deliver entertainment to a new generation of viewers. Although known for some of the most well-loved and award winning teledramas, little is known about the woman behind the brand. This is her story.

By Prasadini Nanayakkara

Photographs Indika De Silva

You are one of the pioneering and award winning teledrama producers in the country, having ventured into the field at a very young age shortly after television was introduced to Sri Lanka. Can you talk about how you began in the industry?

The way I came into the industry is quite unusual. When I was in school, I was very interested in studying different religions. I believed in God and wanted to have a spiritual experience. Then I joined a movement called Subud-Susila Budhi Dharma which was a spiritual organisation that helps you develop direct contact with God and experience his power. Prior to that I didn't think much of the importance of making money but through my spiritual journey I realised that according to God's wish there is so much good that you can do through the use of your talents whether it is art, culture or anything else.

I realised the path I wanted to take. I was about to attend the Colombo University for my degree and I had submitted all my forms. In the end,I did not attend, as I felt I would spend five years there only to start from the beginning, where I already was. I wanted to start my career right away. Many others may have thought it too difficult but I didn't feel that way as I had a passion for it. I had the idea to do television productions, make some money and go on from there. My story is different from others as my beginning has a spiritual background. That is also why I named my company Susila.

I was only 26 years old when I started my company in 1984. At that time there were hardly any young people in the industry. There was Tele Cine and two other companies as well and we were the pioneers. When television came to Sri Lanka, I felt it was a very good social medium where you could convey valuable messages, have an indirect conversation with viewers and share and introduce good values to society. The term teledrama was very new at the time and was introduced by Dhamma Jagoda. The rest of the world referred to them as telefilms or soap operas. Teledramas, I felt were a very good medium as the whole family could sit together and watch them.

You Must Have 100 Percent Dedication To Whatever You Do. I Strongly Believe In That. If You Don't Have Passion, I Don't Think You Can Succeed In Anything.

Although my very first project was Charulatha, in which I worked with Wijaya Dharmasiri and Bandula Weerakkody, it was my second teledrama, Yashorawaya that was successful. During my mass communication diploma, I met Somaweera Senanayake and Edwin Ariyadasa. I was a fan of Somaweera Senanayake's novels and thought that nobody had created a story about a middle class family for television. I was keen on turning his novel Yashorawaya into a teledrama as I felt it would be valuable to society. That became my second project.

As the founder of Susila Productions which has in its portfolio some of the most popular teledramas to date such as Doo Daruwo and Yashorawaya, what do you attribute to your success?

Number one is passion. You must have 100 percent dedication to whatever you do. I strongly believe in that. If you don't have passion, I don't think you can succeed in anything. Secondly I was surrounded by very good people. Bandula Weerakkody, Somaweera Senanayake, Nalan Mendis, and Rowland B Perera are among those who were very supportive and they were much older than me. My cousin brother, Rolan B Perera was a director in the film unit and under him I learnt about making television programmes and the technicalities involved. I was lucky to have had a very good backing and apart from that my intentions have always been good. These are what I believe led to the company's success.

These are teledramas that have connected with the audiences in a very profound way. What do you look for when selecting projects?

I always look at the family aspect. If you look at Sri Lankan audiences, every family has only one television. All members, from the 70 year old lady to the four year old child must watch together. I felt we must produce something that the whole family could watch together. This is unique to television as with other media you can chose to go and see what you like. Television viewers have to watch what you present to them and therefore it should be for the whole family. For Doo Daruwo we had viewers in India as well and to this day no other teledrama has been able to break those records. It was a milestone in television history as the first long series produced in Sri Lanka. If I am not mistaken, at the time of Doo Daruwo, even India had not produced a long series telefilm.

As a result I am very careful about themes and avoid topics such as murder and adultery. I consider the family very important and television is a way to bind families together. As a producer you should respect that. That's why I believe Doo Daruwo was such a success. It has many records to its name. 80 percent of Sri

Lanka’s population has watched it and includes 97 percent of television owners.

Could you talk about the range of services, functions and processes offered by Susila Productions?
Our main business is teledramas. We provide these dramas to various channels, but previously we were producing dramas for individual companies. Apart from that we carry out audio visual productions for companies and we introduced another segment as we plan to venture into the film industry and produce films as well.

The Younger Generation Is Very Much In Touch With The Latest Developments And Trends. Our Creativity Must Evolve To Blend With The Technological Advances.

We are also starting an academic school, which I believe is very important for Sri Lanka. We do not have proper systems in place to introduce professionals to this industry. Furthermore, technology is developing very fast and we must move in that direction as well. In another ten years everything will shift to mobile phone formats and we must align with that. With that in mind we have a separate research and development section where we evaluate what we should do and what areas we should move into in the future. As a result of these studies, we have decided that we must produce apps and television films for mobile phones.

How far has Sri Lanka developed in this field and where do we stand in terms of technology and quality in teledrama production in comparison to the rest of the world?
I strongly believe that any media, not just television, will move very fast in terms of technology. The younger generation is very much in touch with the latest developments and trends. Accordingly, we must evolve creativity to blend with the technological advances. In this respect, I feel we are far behind. We must aim to merge creativity with technology. That is why we felt that it is important to have an academic school where creative people will be encouraged to incorporate technology. In the olden days, creativity and technology were separate aspects, but in future they will need to be combined. Creativity will not stand alone.

There is huge potential in the entertainment industry. No matter what crises a country may be facing, the entertainment industry will always survive. Whatever the circumstances, people will look for some form of enjoyment in their free time. Television is the cheapest form of entertainment, but we are not ready to meet

those requirements. A proper mechanism is needed to introduce professionals to this industry.

You have worked with renowned actors and actresses. What stands out among the memorable moments throughout your career?
I must say it was when Ms Iranganie Serasinghe played the role of the mother's character in Doo Daruwo. Many people in Sri Lanka rallied around her. We received many letters, revealing how much it impacted their lives and how it led them to understand their own mothers. Some revealed how they have not sat together for a meal as a family, but after watching Doo Daruwo they managed to unite after many years to have dinner with their parents. These were among the many letters we received and it gave me much satisfaction.

Could you share your thoughts on the challenges that you have had to encounter in this profession and how you have risen above them as a businesswoman in this industry?
Susila Productions is now 31 years and we are one of the few companies that has sustained from that time. One of the challenges I faced was that I was too young when I started and nobody had much confidence in me. At that time there weren't any young people getting into the industry, male or female. That was the main challenge. I had strong support from experienced people, which allowed me to overcome this obstacle.

If You Are Professional, Passionate And Genuine You Can Overcome Any Obstacle.

I have to mention Rupavahini Corporation in particular as they were very supportive and professional. At that time the Chairman was Mr M J Perera. The professionals and the proper systems were there, which allowed a young person such as me to enter the industry. No preferences were given. Your company had to register with them and then you had to present your storyline, before providing the telefilm.

There were other challenges that anyone would encounter in this field, but I was able to overcome them. If you are genuine in what you do you will always find support. People will identify that. Even when we produced films for private companies, the managing directors, CEOs and chairmen, were always very supportive, and gave us the free hand as they had confidence in us. I was very

lucky that way as there were good systems and professionalism. If you are professional, passionate and genuine you can overcome any obstacle.

What are your thoughts about the Sri Lankan industry today?
It is very different today. There is a lack of professionalism. People think of this avenue only for making money. You can do that, but it must be done in the right way. There must be systems in place and a level of professionalism.

The tragedy in Sri Lanka is that we don't have proper brands. I strongly believe in brands and systems. However, we focus on individuality.I do not want the name Sandya Mendis or any other individual name to be emphasised. It should be Susila Productions. That is the brand. In future we have to be very brand conscious and develop brand names. It's not that individuals don't matter, but even an individual has to become a brand, only then will it sustain for years. The opportunities to build up a brand are limited as there are no proper systems and procedures in place. Brands are the way forward in the entertainment industry.

This is why I do not promote myself, as Susila is more important than the people behind it. That is why we can sustain it. Without the brand I cannot transfer it to anyone else.If you add value and maintain your brand it will last for generations. People still remember Doo Daruwo along with the song and the logo with the Susila name. This is because we built up our brand and that can take up any form.

It must be the brand name and not the people behind it. We are lacking in brands in the entertainment industry and we need to introduce young professionals to the industry who are capable of developing their own brands without limiting their goals to personal interests. Your personal interests must tally with the society interests. Ultimately you must end up with a brand and how you develop and maintain that influences its value. Although there is considerable competition there is great potential in the entertainment industry.

As for teledramas today, I feel the current standard is not satisfactory. When I refer to technology I do not mean high-end camera equipment. Instead creativity and knowledge must align with technology. Back in the day, the teledramas were able to cater to the viewers' needs and expectations. People ask me why I do not produce Doo Daruwo again, but I feel it should be a completely different concept

today. The Sri Lankan industry might be a small market, but the market in any country in this industry will never die. Everyone seeks the pleasure of entertainment even for a few minutes at a time. As a result, it is an industry where you will never lose. You can do wonders with it provided your ideas are on par with society.

What do you see in the future of teledrama in Sri Lanka and how is Susila Productions evolving to meet with changing demands and trends?
Today nothing new is being produced. The presentation must be new and should be appropriate for the younger generations. Everyone today is with their mobile phones and we must keep that in mind. We must not try to resist the changes in society but instead align our creativity to suit these changes.

If You Give Your Product With Love To The Society It Will Touch Their Hearts. When You Have Your Own Business There Is An Opportunity To Help Each Other.

We have to be on par with the new era. If we make a teledrama for a mobile format, people will watch the clips on their phones. You cannot prevent people from looking at their phones, but we have to adjust ourselves to meet the needs of a new mind set. We must understand that today it's about instant access and convenience. We cannot always talk about our history and civilisation. I don't mean that we must lose our values, but the presentation style must change to suit the times. We cannot criticise dubbed Indian teledramas and their introduction to Sri Lankan television either. It is not advisable to resist those changes.

What we must do is strive to be better. People may look for variety in everything. There is Chinese, Indian and Western food in restaurants, but at the end of the day, you look for rice and curry for your everyday meal. Every channel requires the local productions as well. And we must be better at what we do.
In order to create stories that suit this new mindset, we need capable writers. This is where I see a great dilemma. I feel there is a lack of knowledge in young people. You have to have wide knowledge to be creative.They should be aware of their surroundings. Even an article in the newspapers about Taj Mahal should be of interest. When you read you learn to think broadly and raise questions. It's not about knowing facts about Taj Mahal, but your ability to be inspired. With this regard, I think it's a good investment to have a separate brain storming wing in each organisationThis is the reason we have introduced the research and development arm at Susila Productions. They give us the ideas and based on those

we are planning on producing teledramas for the mobile format. The concept of storytelling will survive till the end of time, but it is the medium that must change. Apart from changing our presentation and theme, we are also looking to introduce new artists including multicultural and multi national artists. It doesn't have to be Indian artists as there are many different talents in Sri Lanka belonging to various cultures and nationalities. We introduced a Tamil actress for Raena. Now she is very popular. We should continue on that path. In future we intend to do many changes to strategies and presentation.

Early in your career, your spiritual journey inspired you to achieve success to help others. Could you share your thoughts on this?
I believe it is all about day to day life. For instance if you need a cup of tea now, there is no point if I give you many cups a week later. Your need is now. I don't have much belief in organised charities. Needs must be fulfilled as and when they arise. People who work around you must be content with their lives. There are about 40-50 people who work within the office and on contract basis and they have remained with me for many years. Reaching out to people, I believe, must happen on a day to day basis. There need not be a special occasion or an organisational structure in place to do so. Needs must be met today, not a week later. This is why I hold a strong belief in God. When I am in contact with God I am always guided.

You must be honest and dedicated in whatever you approach. It's not simply about money. There are many aspects in business-how you mingle with people, your dealings and associations with them and how you help young people. If you give your product with love to the society it will touch their hearts. When you have your own business there is an opportunity to help each other. And I experience that every day.


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