Filming Sri Lanka with Passion

Samantha Alexandre meets Suren De Silva, the man behind a new innovative video promoting Sri Lanka’s attractions.



Capturing a visual image on film is a passion which caught hold of Suren De Silva when he was just 14 years old. As the founder and Managing Director of Video Image, one of Colombo's leading film and television production companies, De Silva has been able to transform that passion into a profession. Although first introduced to photography, it wasn't long before De Silva moved on to video and being equally fascinated by the myriad ways in which he could work with moving images. Having cut his teeth on making videos of family functions (which brought him a tidy sum as pocket money), he moved on to an apprenticeship at Telefin, a small private video production company, soon after leaving school. From its founding in 1993, De Silva has developed Video Image into a "total solutions" company with its own filming equipment, editing and audio facilities as well as a state of the art, graphic animation department. The only one-stop-shop of its kind in the local film industry, Video Image's unique services are being called on by both local as well as international clients. With a team of almost 50 full time and freelance team members, Video Image can take on productions of any size – from a 30 second commercial to a feature film. One of their most recent commercials was for JWT Mumbai, an Indian advertising agency, and coordinated through JWT Colombo. It was an aerial, bird's eye view of Sri Lanka for the "Small island – Big Trip" Sri Lanka tourism cluster campaign (see box). But perhaps the most challenging production was coordinating and providing the local services for an episode of 'The Amazing Race' which entailed almost four months of pre-production preparation. "The preparation time was very intense," recalls De Silva. "Everything had to be perfect. One little detail missed could mean that everything would come crashing down." Offering international television networks a viable production service in Sri Lanka is but one of the many trail blazing efforts of Video Image. Introducing local expertise in cinematography for TV commercials was another – and one that turned the Sri Lankan television industry on his head.

" Until a few years ago, there were a lot of foreigners, mainly Singaporean and Malaysian cinematographers, who were hired to film in Sri Lanka because there were no Sri Lankans with the same expertise in the TV industry," explained De Silva. "It was usually a very expensive job and it discouraged a lot of companies from using the film medium and TV commercial were usually shot on video. "So one of my cameramen and I started attending training workshops overseas, and we gradually started shooting on film. We experimented a lot with this new medium, initially with a hired camera, but soon with our own. We actually pioneered the local industry's shooting of commercials on film. And we brought the cost down to very affordable rates. Now, almost everybody shoots on film because you can afford to

do so.”

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De Silva is well known in the advertising industry for his quick grasp of a TV commercial’s storyboard and visually adapting the creation,·e concept into the perfect mo,in° ima e. After much prodding on how” he developed this ability, De Silva admitted that it helps to understand all the different elements involved in production. “When I started in this field, I started as a light boy. Then I was an editor and later I went into camera. So I covered all the spheres of film production. That experience is very useful to me now because when I direct, I know exactly how I’m going to edit the commercial so I shoot precisely what I will use in the final production. I have total control over all the departments in a shoot which is vital to quickly transforming a concept to a finished product.” The outstanding TV commercials produced by Video Image have won many awards, among them are dozens of SLIM (Sri Lanka Institute of Marketing) Awards and other advertising industry awards. De Silva walked away with four of the five awards given for TV Commercial Direction at the recently introduced ‘Reggie’ awards. Although television commercials are certainly what he is best known and recognised for, De Silva is also an experienced television journalist who worked as the Sri Lankan correspondent for Associated Press Television (APTV) for half a dozen years. “News is a totally different ballgame to TV commercials. Actually news is more fun. At that time I worked for APTV, it was the height of the military conflict, so there was a lot happening all the time. The most important factor in TV news coverage is to get the story out as fast as possible. We were the new kids on the block, and had to compete with established agencies like Reuters, but we managed to stay ahead of all the rest.”

As a long standing provider of services to the cinema industry, De Silva has been involved in pioneering techniques and standards in this field too. “The film industry has invested in new equipment and the producers are very conscious about quality.” Unlike many who have predicted the death of Sri Lankan cinema, De Silva sees a completely different trend. “In the past 2-3 years, the film industry has boomed. People are now making money off films. And with the production standards improving, our films are comparable to international productions. Many of

the films are accepted at international film festivals, and Sri Lankan films are winning awards." De Silva is sufficiently astute to appreciate the wide gap between the commercially successful films in Sri Lanka and those that win accolades overseas. "The films that stand out internationally are not the films that run in Sri Lanka. We all recognise that. As Sri Lankans, we struggle so much in our daily lives that we're not going to watch a film and be bothered by other people's problems. We just want entertainment, and the cinema's one place where our problems are blacked out and we don't have to deal with life. "People want light entertainment, and films which cater to that need are doing very well. But the serious films which have a good story and a well developed plot are getting the international recognition they deserve. I think the commercial films and the more serious films are both needed in the industry. Looking at the current output of the industry I think we have achieved a pretty healthy balance between the two segments." De Silva has also been pushing the industry to keep raising the bar on standards. 'Tm definitely guilty as charged when it comes to talking non stop about raising our quality standards" chuckles De Silva. "I've been talking about improving quality and being more creative with the stories and plots with any film industry professional I meet." With plans to produce his own film in 2007, De Silva may raise the quality bar himself, setting another benchmark for the industry to catch up with. "Basically, I make a film every day in 30 seconds! I just have to extend the 30 seconds into 90 mins!" is his rather self-deprecating view on his latest venture. More important than making his own mark in the film and TV industry is De Silva's drive to push the Sri Lankan film industry to develop its own identity. "We're constantly trying to copy from other sources – a whole lot from India, a little bit from Hollywood and so on. We're always trying to ape what others are doing. We need to develop a Sri Lankan identity if the industry is to survive and develop into a viable industry. "I believe the answer lies with involving young people and helping them to be the visionaries of a localised identity – young people bring dynamic ideas, new ways of thinking, a totally different approach. I think the industry needs it and there's a small trickle of them coming in."

De Silva is perhaps most comfortable behind a camera, shying away from speaking about himself or his achievements. The fascination with images which parked off a career path in a teenaged boy, is still very evident in this veteran TV professionals. Ask him what drives and inspires him to continue in his chosen field, and he says, very simply: "My work. I love my work." The edge of discovering new facets in the moving image is far from wearing off: "There's still so much to learn and explore. I'm still trying out new things in film, exploring new ideas," De Silva says with a

sparkle in his eye.



It's not every day that you get to see like a bird. But that's just what Suren De Silva did when he filmed Sri Lanka from the air, for a special Sri Lanka Tourism cluster campaign aimed at the Indian market. Entitled "Small Island – Big Trip" the campaign seeks to bring out the natural beauty as well as attractive holiday options awaiting the Indian upmarket tourist.

Commissioned by JWT Mumbai and coordinated through JWT Colombo, the bird's eye view of Sri Lanka entailed filming for five days from the air and compiling an international standard commercial within a tight timeframe of just a few weeks.

JWT's international search for the perfect production company brought them right back to Sri Lanka – Video Image offered not only competitive rates and international production standards, but they had wide experience in mobilising themselves for the mammoth logistical task.

Having won the contract, the Video Image team had to quickly get things going. In order to get the bird's eye view which he visualised, De Silva decided he didn't want to film from outside the door of a helicopter but opted to mount a cine (film) camera on to the underbelly of the helicopter while controlling it remotely from inside the chopper.

"This usually requires very specialised equipment which costs hundreds of thousands of dollars. Since we didn't have that kind of budget, we had to design and build one ourselves," says De Silva. His team produced a workable prototype within five days.

Once the equipment was in place, the challenges of aerial filming began: working as director and cinematographer, De Silva usually had about 10-15 seconds for each "shot". Within this timeframe he had a lot to do.

"When I see the place we're going to film from the air -- which is the first time I'm seeing that place from the air, too -- I had to tell the pilot which angle to fly in (depending on the light), what altitude to fly in, what speed to fly in, then I had to adjust my camera accordingly, set the exposures on the camera and then film it. All this had to be done in about 10-15 seconds in every shot that we filmed."

The challenges were not limited to the air. On the ground, five teams were "setting up" special events and organising the visual in specific locations, finishing one and moving on to the other to try and keep pace with the fast moving helicopter.

"In some places we had to set up visually appealing scenes. To mention a few - we launched a group of fishing boats in the southern coast, we had a troupe of Kandyan dancers on a cliff's edge in the central hills, and we had about 100 people worshipping at a dagoba in Polonnaruwa."

With frequent stops to refuel the helicopter, change the magazines on the camera, all while sticking to a GPS-specific route plan, it was an intricately coordinated and minutely planned effort which certainly paid off. Watching the final 10-minute longer version of the commercial, you are mesmerised by the natural beauty of this special island.

De Silva was equally mesmerised by the experience. "I had never seen Sri Lanka like this and I was amazed at what a beautiful country it is. Just 15 minutes from one place to another and what a change you experience – from the climate to scenery to even the light. When you look at Sri Lanka from the air, it is such a paradise".





Bird's eye view of Kandy from "Small Island - Big Trip"