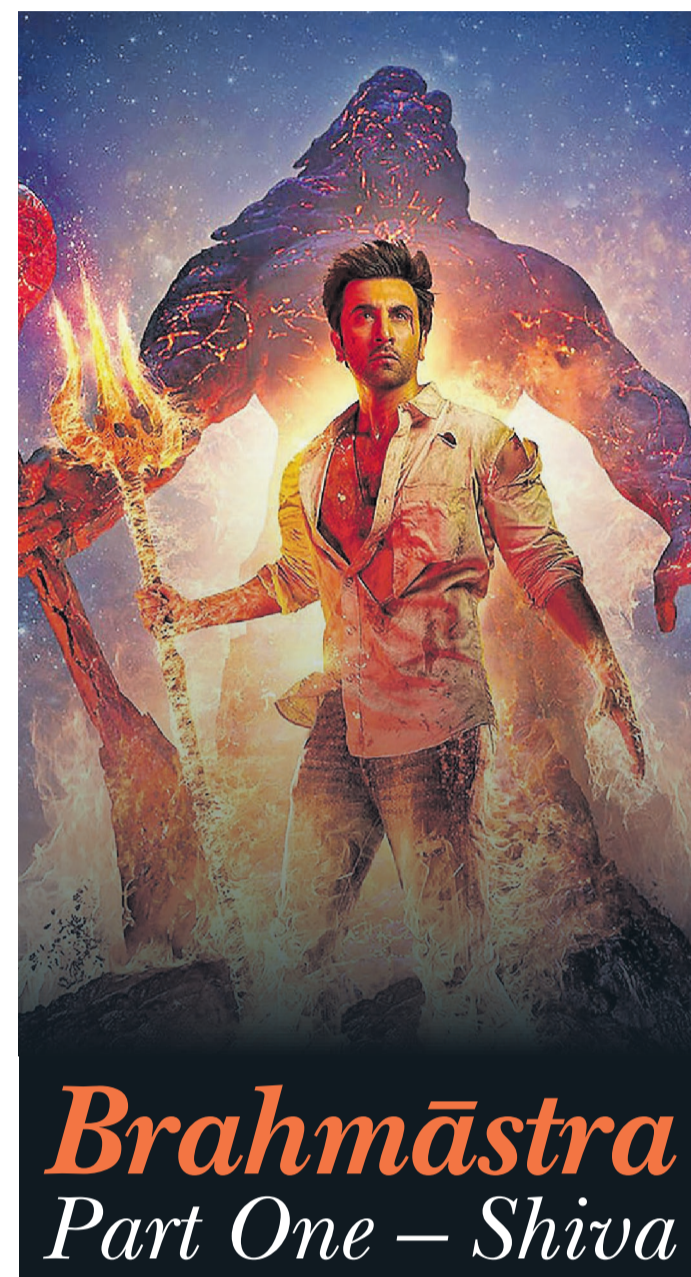




Sunday, September 18, 2022



Brahmāstra Part One – Shiva

*A visual epic, a feast for the eyes
and the return of 3D to SL*

BY DIMITHRI WIJESINGHE

'Brahmāstra: Part One – Shiva,' the latest Bollywood epic written and directed by Indian filmmaker Ayan Mukerji, premiered at the PVR Cinemas in One Galle Face on 9 September 2022.

The fantasy/action/adventure flick was screened in 3D at PVR Cinemas, and as the film is being distributed by EAP Films and Theatres it will be available in both 3D and 2D in all EAP theatres islandwide.

The film has been licensed to be screened in Sri Lanka courtesy of Antenna International Director Devashri Abideen, with the company acquiring international territorial rights for distribution of this particular film as well as numerous other films of multiple languages. Abideen spoke of the significance of Brahmāstra, noting that it was the first 3D film in a long time that was being screened in Lankan theatres.

"There haven't been any 3D films screened in Sri Lanka in about three to four years. This is the first one we've brought down in a long while," she noted. She also shared that the film had both Sinhala and English language subtitles. This too is a relatively unique characteristic as subtitles are often in English when it comes to theatres. Abideen explained that this was a step taken in hopes of bridging the gap between languages and allowing all audiences to enjoy the film.

However, there has been some pushback with regard to this effort at inclusivity by some locals, demanding that the Sinhala language subtitles be taken down. Addressing this, Abideen stated that prior to its public screening, the film had been subject to evaluation and approved by a nine-member board representing the Public Performance Board.

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The two leads – Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt



A scene from the film

The one-man show that never stops

LEETH SINGHAGE

BY NAVEED ROZAIS

To meet a personality whose onstage and offstage energy is both one and the same is admittedly rare, and *The Sunday Morning Brunch* recently had the opportunity to meet one such personality – Leeth Singhage, the teenage actor, singer, and writer fresh off performing a one-man show at one of the UK's biggest theatre festivals.

Or perhaps we should say we met Leeth's alter ego, Sarong Hoodie. But in any case, our chat with Leeth spanned his work in theatre and the arts, of which there is a lot, as well as his hopes for the future both creatively and academically.



Leeth's origin story

At 19, Leeth already has considerable experience performing. A student first at St. Joseph's College and then at the Elizabeth Moir School, he was actively involved with the choir as well as any other performance opportunities that came up, from inter-course and inter-school events to working with other theatre groups and directors outside school as well.

Since starring in the title role in 'Peter Pan – The Musical' (Cold Theatre 7) at age 14, Leeth's acting credits have grown to include Ariel in 'The Tempest' at Sri Lanka's Shakespeare in the Park Festival (AnandaDrama and The Workshop Players), Friedrich in 'The Sound of Music' (Andrew Lloyd Webber and David Ian's Really Useful Group's touring production in Colombo), Doody in 'Grease – The Musical' (Cold Theatre 7), and Kalana in 'Grease Yaka Returns' (AnandaDrama) at Sri Lanka's State Drama Festival and at Asia's largest theatre festival – the Bharat Rang Mahotsav in India in 2020.

The year 2021 saw Leeth coming into his own, making his television debut as Shaan Murthy in the fourth season of 'The Good Karma Hospital' (Tiger Aspect Productions), the same year in which he wrote and performed his first original play, 'QUARANTeen'. The 'One TEEN Show,' which Leeth recently performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, one of the greatest celebrations of arts and culture in the world, is Leeth's second original play, and the first to debut internationally.

Leeth began working actively on his own material following his O/Ls, and admitted: "I do love theatre and stage and writing, and I still sing as well, but I would love to expand. My dream is to make it in film, TV, and screen projects."

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The one-man show...

SarongHoodie: an alter ego turned company

Leeth's journey to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe was not an especially planned one. It was something he decided to do almost on a whim, and part of his application required that he form a company from which to apply. And this is how SarongHoodie as a company came to be.

SarongHoodie by and of itself is Leeth's alter ego – something he created as a means to feel comfortable when returning to the office post-lockdown. "It was one of those days where I didn't feel like coming into work. I'd gotten used to working from home in front of the computer. I really didn't want to go and I just didn't want to be myself, so I decided to cover myself up and the best way I felt I could do that was with a sarong and an oversized hoodie," Leeth explained of the birth of the SarongHoodie persona.

"It was an odd moment for me because I wasn't someone who wore sarongs much before that, but it felt right at the moment, and then it developed into an alter ego. When applying to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe they asked about my company and what company I was coming with so I decided to make one and I went with SarongHoodie as its name."

As a company, SarongHoodie is an eclectic Sri Lankan entertainment company producing theatre, film, and music, that for the moment focuses primarily on Leeth's work.

Putting together a one-man show

The 'One TEEN Show,' the performance that Leeth took to the UK, was not Leeth's first original production, and not even his first one-man show – that was his production 'QUARANTeen,' which was released in November 2021 as part of the Stages Theatre Group's Children

in Lockdown Arts Festival – an eight-month-long creative endeavour curated by the Stages Theatre Group that focused on youth experience in lockdown.

At its core, 'QUARANTeen' chronicled a teenager stuck in lockdown with the bleakness of socially-distanced university applications, online life, poor judgement, and how teenagers navigated the pandemic. Leeth compiled 'QUARANTeen' based on interviews conducted with teenagers on how they experienced lockdown and took us through the stages of the pandemic through a teenager's eyes.

The 'One TEEN Show' was initially meant to be a reprise of 'QUARANTeen,' but enough time had passed between the two for experiences of the pandemic to be more discussed and universally accepted because it was a universal experience. Sri Lanka, however, while also having dealt with the pandemic, was now dealing with an entirely new crisis – this one was of its own making, and for Leeth, this was a much more powerful story to be able to tell.

"Just like 'QUARANTeen,' the 'One TEEN Show' is very lighthearted even though it talks about serious topics and themes like the political and economic crisis. It features music and dance and there are caricatures of some of the characters that play in the story of the crisis," Leeth shared.

"The play itself is about rethinking and reevaluating the ways in which we live. There are two symmetrical storylines – one is a teenager coming of age and the other is the country dealing with its own crisis."

And in a way, the two storylines mirror each other, for as Leeth sees it, Sri Lanka is also going through its own coming of age, which is why it is important to illustrate the necessity of rethinking our ways and how our



ways have come to be.

"All of us are affected by external factors and by what our parents and friends think and say. For a country like Sri Lanka, a lot of our ways and stigmas are what the British left us with after colonisation and things that have been renegotiated elsewhere but we still follow without thinking," Leeth said.

A couple of examples Leeth pointed out that illustrated this concept was how Sri Lanka's authoritarian education system worked, as well as Sri Lanka's legal stand on non-binary relationships.

Getting his act together

"Getting into Edinburgh Festival Fringe was a super exciting feeling," Leeth shared. "But then, of course, there was a lot to do and sort out. And this was happening during an economic crisis. The festival had its own schedule that we had to stick to despite power cuts and whatever else was going on. It was tough to keep up with at the time."

Leeth, with the help of many professionals and well-wishers, was able to make this happen, and he looks back at being part of such a big creative event fondly, saying: "It was such an experience in terms of organising and networking."

We also asked Leeth how he handles things practically, especially things like nerves, and he shared that while he did get very nervous just before he went on stage, the second he stepped out on stage or in front of a camera, that nervousness went away because he knew what he needed to do.

Outside of going on stage, Leeth did note that he found preparing for performances stressful because of all the little things that needed to be done, but again, as the performance drew closer and things fell into place this became less and less stressful.

What's next?

With such experiences already under his belt, we asked Leeth the famous question: what's next?

Immediately on the horizon is college – Leeth begins studying at Stanford University this fall. Despite such talent for the arts though, he shared that he wasn't intending to devote all his academic energy to the creatives.

"I have no idea what I'm majoring in. The system is such that for the first few years I get to explore a wide array of subjects. It's only at the end of the second year that you get to decide. I did Maths, Economics, and History for my A/LS and I'm very interested in cognitive science and how the brain works," Leeth said.

"But I'm also mostly interested in entrepreneurial things. One specific business idea that appeals to me is vegan alternatives to meat. It's a fast-growing industry around the world and I think it can be made mass market so that it's easier for people to abstain from animal products."

This next step will not be solely academically focused though, with Leeth saying: "I will definitely continue to act and work while I'm there as well and keep SarongHoodie going too, but I will probably pursue something unrelated to the arts in terms of my major."

Creatively, the 'One TEEN Show' has received a new offer to be performed in New York at its biggest solo theatre festival, NYC's United Solo 2022. Leeth will be refreshing and retitling the play, putting it forward as 'Growthesque'.

He's also working on a micro film series titled 'BAGUETTE!' that stars his younger brother. Additionally, he's filming a version of the 'One TEEN Show' to release online and shooting music videos for a couple of his original tracks from his productions.

To keep up to date on Leeth's creative exploits follow SarongHoodie on Instagram
@saronghoodie

Brahmāstra...

The film

Considering the film itself, the hype around it leading up to its eventual release speaks for itself. The film has been highly anticipated, with it having been in the works for years now; principal photography for the film lasted five years and the production and release of the film were delayed multiple times for numerous reasons, including the pandemic.

The film is also said to be the most expensive Hindi film ever made, with an estimated budget of \$ 51 million, and really, the money was quite well spent as it really does show in the end product. This film simply looks expensive.

Brahmāstra has also been notable in its efforts to become a genre of its own for Indian and also South Asian audiences – a kind of answer to the superhero epic that Marvel has held a monopoly on for over a decade now.

Ranbir Kapoor, who plays the male lead Shiva in the film, has reportedly said that they had hoped to create their own India-specific Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU): "We had the opportunity to create our own Marvel, which Ayan is trying to do with his Astraverse [astras are the mystical objects that form a huge part of the world of Brahmāstra]. Any film, any good compelling story, made in your culture, in an authentic way, in a true form, will connect to a large audience."

While the story beats do leave quite a bit to be desired, it is clear that Ayan Mukerji had a very clear goal in mind, and he was ready to achieve it even at the expense of the plot or storyline. It appears that he set out to make a visually



Devashri Abideen and Chandan Rutnam at the premiere

stunning masterpiece, recruiting the best in the industry for visuals to create an absolute feast for the eyes: V. Manikandan (Cinematographer – Ra.One), Pankaj Kumar (Cinematographer – Tumbbad), Sudeep Chatterjee (Cinematographer – Dhoom 3, Gangubai Kathiawadi), Vikash Nowlakra (Camera Department – Black), and Patrick Duroux.

The other key highlight of this film is its score; the film score is composed by English composer Simon Franglen, responsible for cinema classics like 'Seven,' 'Avatar,' and 'Titanic'. This score will keep you at the edge of your seat even on occasions when the story starts to falter just a little bit: especially during the second half of the film when it somewhat loses its way, the score will bring you right back. The soundtrack for the film was also quite beautiful, composed and written by Pritam with songs written by Amitabh Bhattacharya.

Astraverse vs. the MCU

As the title of the film suggests, 'Brahmāstra: Part One – Shiva,' is part one of a larger story which has been Marvel's MO with its long-running films, sequels, and prequels. Much has been said about the 'Astraverse' and its comparisons to the MCU.

Having watched the film for ourselves and also following the comments we received from audience members, the comparison is understandable, especially with the storyline focusing on building a brand new superhero, with part one essentially being the origin story. However, when it comes to epic cinema and larger-

than-life action sequences, India has been doing that for years. There's not a lot of borrowing from Hollywood in that regard.

With Marvel fatigue setting in with audiences, we have seen how Western audiences are turning to other forms of media – the recent popularity of Indian Telugu language action drama 'RRR' is the perfect example of how hammy action sequences feel cinematic and fresh to an audience who has been fed droll Marvel content for years now. The same can be said of the West embracing Korean films and television shows – there is a market for 'similar but different' content and the 'different' here can be language, history, culture, music, and any number of other non-Western things.

Sri Lankan cinema

Having watched the film in 3D, we must make a personal note that 3D has always felt like somewhat of a chore rather than a necessary experience. However, technology has come a long way and watching this specific film at PVR Cinemas was quite comfortable – the equipment, especially the 3D glasses, have improved immensely. So much so that watching the film in 3D actually doesn't take away from the experience. Moreover, this film is available in 2D as well, so we were happy to see that option available.

It has also been interesting to note that, despite Sri Lanka's current situation and its deepening economic crisis, it appears as though cinemas are doing just okay. Commenting on this, SCOPE Cinemas Director and CEO Thushan Meemanage said: "People are under a



Lankan actors Dhananjaya Siriwardena and Yashoda Wimaladharmasiri (centre) at the premiere

lot of stress and they are looking for a way to get comfortable and take a break from their realities. So when it comes to difficult times like these, it is not too surprising to see the cinemas packed. This coming October is when the season really starts and films like 'Black Adam,' 'Black Panther,' and then 'Avatar' will be released and you will see packed cinemas."

He noted in 2009, 'Avatar' was able to break records in viewership despite being released in the middle of a recession. "It is all about value for money; customers will come as long as we have good, interesting content and we hope to exceed expectations of our customers as and when we provide our services," he said.

There is definitely something to be said about looking for immersive

experiences that allow us to escape our realities when living through difficult times. The cinema and even other spectator experiences like sports allow the public to feel relief, even for a moment.

If you are on the lookout for such enjoyable escapism, then perhaps Brahmāstra might be just the thing. The film is screening in EAP cinemas islandwide and it is available in both Hindi and Tamil, complete with both English and Sinhala subtitles.

Book your tickets for 'Brahmāstra: Part One – Shiva' through:
<https://www.pvrcinemas.lk/>
<https://www.eapmovies.com/>
<https://www.scopecinemas.com/>

