



***Sri Salami* (1989, 1990) A Note from the Homeland: The Turbulent History of a Nation on Stage in Tamil Diaspora Theatre, Switzerland**

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This article explores how the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland employed theatre as a means of political expression and cultural preservation during the Sri Lankan civil war. Through the play *Sri Salami* (1989, 1990), themes of exile, identity, and resistance are brought to the fore, reflecting the community's struggle to reconstruct belonging and preserve collective memory amidst displacement. *Sri Salami*, written and dramatized by A.C. Tarcisius and co-directed by Anton with Swiss artist Braschler, depicts the trauma and resilience of Eelam Tamils. As the first trilingual Tamil diaspora production—performed in Tamil, German, and English—it integrates traditional Tamil performance forms, hybrid stagecraft, and symbolic costuming. Refrains such as “I am running” evoke embodied memory, transforming the stage into a space of shared grief and resistance. The study positions *Sri Salami* within the evolution of Tamil diaspora theatre, highlighting its role in documenting untold histories and reimagining identity through performance. With little existing scholarship on this production, the paper seeks to record its significance and contribution to diaspora cultural practices. Theatre here functions as performative testimony—bridging past and present, homeland and host land—marking *Sri Salami* as a landmark in the history of Tamil theatre in Europe.

Tamil, diaspora, theatre, exile, Sri-Lanka

Introduction: Migration, Displacement, and Diaspora Identity

For many centuries, Tamils have been globally migrating and settling across various regions. The Sangam-era verse by the poet Kaniyan Poongundranar, *Yaadhum Oore Yaavarum Kelir* (every place is our native; everyone is our companion), reflects Tamil ideals of belonging and mutual respect (Hart and Heifetz 1999). However, in the 20th century, Sri Lankan Tamils faced forced displacement, marking a shift from voluntary migration to exile shaped by conflict and loss. Their large-scale displacements in the 20th and 21st centuries were driven by war, political instability, and threats to personal and collective security. Sri Lankans, particularly Tamils, experienced these crises firsthand (Gunasingam 1999). The intensification of Sri Lanka's civil war in the 1980s, especially after the riots of 1983, led to mass displacement and insecurity, forcing many Sri Lankan Tamils to flee. Among the countries that accepted these refugees, one was Switzerland, where a significant Tamil diaspora took root, with around 40,000 Sri Lankan Tamils residing there now (Rajamathangi et al. 2022). Despite the trauma of displacement, the community preserved its language and culture. Even second-generation Tamils continue to speak Tamil, using it as a vital link to their homeland and identity (ibid.). Over time, these experiences have shaped a distinct Swiss Tamil diaspora, now recognised as an ethnic and cultural community that contributes to Switzerland's multicultural landscape.

This article examines how the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland used theatre as a form of political expression, cultural preservation, and collective memory during the Sri Lankan civil war, focusing on the landmark production of *Sri Salami* (1989–1990). Written by A.C. Tarcisius Elakoothan and co-directed by Ponrajah Anton and Swiss artist Peter Braschler, the play portrays the themes of exile, trauma, identity, and resistance among Eelam Tamils (Anton

2025). As the first trilingual Tamil diaspora production (Tamil, German, and English), it blends traditional Tamil performance practices with hybrid stage techniques and symbolic imagery (Anton 2025). This article argues that *Sri Salami* functioned as performative testimony, documenting untold histories and helping displaced communities reconstruct their belonging. It positions the play as a significant milestone in the development of Tamil diaspora theatre in Europe. This article explores how Tamil migrants use theatre—particularly the play *Sri Salami* (1989–1990)—to rebuild their lives, preserve cultural identity, and express nostalgia. Theatre functions as a powerful medium through which the diaspora connects with its past while navigating new environments. In this context, Bhabha (1990) argues that nations are not simply natural or historical entities; they are also culturally produced through stories, performances, laws, myths, and representations. Such narratives remain open to contestation and reinterpretation, particularly among marginalised and diasporic communities. Through *Sri Salami* (1989–1990), Eelam Tamil migrants transformed experiences of war, migration, and cultural loss into theatrical expression, reconstructing ideas of memory, belonging, and collective identity (Anton 2025). The production also reflects what Bhabha (1994) describes as the ‘third space’, where hybrid cultural identities emerge between inherited traditions and new diasporic realities.

Tamil drama, a traditional form of cultural expression, has transformed within the diaspora, adapting to new contexts while maintaining its core purpose: preserving identity. Diaspora theatre has become a vital space for community gathering, cultural continuity, and the expression of shared memories and migration experiences. For many years, these artistic efforts remained largely invisible to those in the homeland due to security concerns and limited communication. However, the rise of digital platforms has begun to bridge this divide. Although live performances were once inaccessible, recordings, scripts, and artist testimonies now circulate online, preserving and transmitting these experiences across borders. I was able to view a video of *Sri Salami*—a pivotal Tamil diaspora play—30 years after its original performance. I was also able to access a video recording of *Sri Salami*—a pivotal Tamil diaspora play—approximately three decades after its original performance, enabling a retrospective analysis of its staging, performance dynamics, and intercultural strategies. In addition, the published script provided further textual insights into the play’s multilingual structure and thematic concerns (Tarcisius 2017, Anton 2025). The context was formed by needing to explain to the native Swiss population who the Tamil refugees were and why they had been forced to migrate. During the initial stages of Tamil migration to Switzerland, many refugees encountered perceptions that positioned them as cultural outsiders whose histories and experiences of displacement were unfamiliar to the host society. The arrival of Eelam Tamils in Switzerland had been shaped by ethnic conflict, insecurity, and the search for asylum rather than voluntary migration (McDowell 1996). Within this new environment, Tamil migrants had to negotiate questions of belonging, identity, and cultural recognition. Ong’s (1999) concept of flexible citizenship explains how transnational migrants navigate multiple cultural spaces, maintaining attachments to their homeland while adapting to the social and political realities of host nations. Within this framework, the Tamil diaspora used theatre as a cultural strategy to narrate their collective identity and communicate the historical circumstances that led to their forced displacement. Productions such as *Sri Salami* became performative spaces where Eelam Tamils represented memories of war, exile, loss, and belonging to both Tamil and Swiss audiences (Anton 2025). These lived realities were dramatized through performative scenes grounded in real historical events, offering what Taylor (2003) calls a ‘repertoire of embodied memory’, wherein performance acts as a means of transmitting history outside traditional archival forms. Tamil drama within the diaspora has continuously evolved over the decades, transitioning from early community-driven expressions of displacement and resistance to contemporary productions that grapple with intergenerational memory, shifting contexts, and evolving community engagement.

Tamil Diaspora Theatre in Switzerland: From Trauma to Cultural Resistance

In the refugee camps of Switzerland during the 1980s, theatre emerged as a vital medium for Tamil refugees to express their traumas, fears, and hopes. Early plays provided them with an outlet for articulating the pain of displacement and the longing for home. For many who did not speak German, performance offered an accessible, non-verbal form of communication that transcended linguistic barriers and fostered empathy. As performance studies scholars observe, when marginalised subjects are cut off by linguistic barriers, the body and performance become alternative sites of literacy (Taylor 2003). For many early Tamil arrivals who did not speak German, theatrical performance offered an accessible, non-verbal form of communication that transcended linguistic isolation and fostered cross-cultural empathy. The directors of *Sri Salami*, Peter Braschler and Ponrajah Anton first met in a refugee camp, where Caritas was implementing a project to foster mutual understanding between refugees and the Swiss population. As part of this initiative, Braschler led a drama project that used theatre as a medium of communication. The first play production, *Maralam*, was created for migrants and became the foundation for further work (Anton 2025). In 1987, Peter Braschler and Ponrajah Anton co-founded the *Maralam* Theatre Group, naming it after their inaugural play, as noted in the company history on the *Maralam* website. The term *Maralam*—an attempt to capture how Tamil sounds to non-speakers—came to symbolise linguistic and cultural identity (Braschler 2024 [personal communication]). Formed by Tamil refugees in collaboration with migrant communities and Swiss nationals, the group grew into a vibrant platform for staging hidden and silenced narratives. Beginning with amateur productions, *Maralam* gradually transitioned into professional theatre (ibid.). For Anton, himself a refugee, theatre became a means of transforming his experience of displacement in 1985 into meaningful artistic expression. His talent was soon recognised nationally, and he emerged as a theatre professional and a pioneering Tamil actor in Switzerland. His long-term contributions were formally acknowledged when the Swiss government honoured him for 20 years of work in theatre—an important milestone for the Tamil diaspora in Switzerland (ibid.). A central role was played in this development by Swiss theatre director Peter Braschler, who was specialised in working with displaced communities. Recognising theatre's transformative power, he collaborated closely with Tamil refugees to help them process trauma, reclaim identity, and engage with Swiss society (Braschler 2024). Among the group's landmark works was *Aiyo*—a Tamil exclamation that can express grief, fear, frustration, surprise, or helplessness. The production captured the layered emotions of refugee life, turning private pain into collective performance (Anton 2025). Through such performances, personal experiences were embodied and shared publicly, allowing theatre to function as a repertoire of cultural memory and testimony (Taylor 2003).

Other notable works, such as *Sri Salami*, further illuminated the trauma, resilience, and memory of the Tamil people. Over time, *Maralam* developed into hybrid forms, blending Tamil traditions with western stage techniques. In the early years, audiences often raised questions such as: who are the Tamils? Why did they come to Switzerland? Are they political or economic refugees? Anton's responses, translated by Braschler after the performances, made theatre not only an artistic practice but also a dialogical one (Anton 2025, Braschler 2024). Another significant intercultural experiment was encompassed by the play *Brother Klaus and Pandava Princes* a story that established common grounds between the Tamil and Swiss by combining Krishna's mission from the Mahabharata with the story of Brother Klaus, a Swiss monk remembered for his role in the country's liberation movement. Thematically centred around themes of war and peace, the play staged Krishna and Saint Klaus as mediators. Performed in Tamil, English, and German, the production fostered a unique dialogue between two spiritually resonant histories (ibid., ibid.). Moving beyond politics, Tamil and Swiss artists explored shared myths and symbolic traditions, forging lasting cultural connections. Elements of *kuthu* and modern theatre were skilfully incorporated into these performances, enriching their expressive

depth. *Kuthu* represents one of the earliest dramatic traditions of the Tamils, distinguished by its unique narrative style that blends dance, music, and performative storytelling (Sivathamby 1981: 360–361). Though it remains actively practised in villages as a ritual and community-centred performance, *kuthu* has been simultaneously appropriated and reworked within contemporary theatre, taking on new aesthetic and political meanings.

In the early years, however, some suspicions lingered. As some feared that Anton was involved in Tamil politics, Swiss artists remained cautious of him as they were cautious more generally about political theatre (ibid., ibid.). This Swiss wariness was rooted in the history and memory of the Second World War, when German authorities had conscripted artists—particularly theatre practitioners—into propaganda. Many Swiss artists carried the legacy of resisting such coercion, remembering colleagues who had been exiled or persecuted. This historical consciousness also shaped their initial approach to Tamil refugees with caution. Over time, however, mutual trust deepened, and Maralam emerged as a rare cultural meeting ground that connected communities through art. Tamil communities in Switzerland continued to stage cultural programs addressing identity, memory, displacement, and ties to the lost homeland. Traditional art forms such as Tamil music and *Bharatanatyam* dance performances continued in playing a central role in this revival. Organisations like the Saiva Tamil Sangam, the TACA (Tamil Art and Culture Association), Bharathi Artists Group, Vanavil Artist Group, Swiss Tamil Students Union, and Kannathasan Kalai Mantram, helped to sustain these initiatives. As Clifford (1994) notes, such performances not only preserved tradition but also reaffirmed shared identity and belonging, acting as symbolic acts of continuity and solidarity. A milestone in this cultural development was the establishment of the Swiss Tamil Drama School. It provided formal training in theatre arts, fostered connections with Tamil artists worldwide, and encouraged collaboration with Swiss practitioners. Productions over here ranged from traditional Tamil forms to contemporary genres that reflected both cultural preservation as well as innovation. Importantly, the school became a hub for dialogue, challenging the stereotypes surrounding Tamils as ‘refugees’, defined only by marginalisation. Through their performances on the other hand, the diaspora asserted: “we didn’t come by choice, but by tragedy.” From camp uncertainty to professional collaboration, Swiss Tamil theatre emerged into an act of resistance, healing, and identity-making, and reclaiming dignity through cultural expression.

An Introduction to *Sri Salami*: A Landmark Diaspora Play

As already mentioned, I first encountered *Sri Salami* in 2020—33 years after its first original staging—through a combination of script reading and video recordings. The script was published in *Tarcisius 75 Anniversary Volume* (2017: 525–570), and issued by the Centre for Just Peace and Democracy (CJPD) in Switzerland. The video recording of the performance was archived and owned by the Swiss Tamil Drama School, which holds the production documentation and audiovisual rights to the work. Born in exile, this diasporic Tamil play deepened my understanding of how theatre functioned as a vessel of memory, resistance, and cultural survival. *Sri Salami* was the first foreign drama to receive this cultural award, selected from among thousands of plays. The play was broadcast on Swiss national television, gaining widespread recognition (Anton 2025). It offered viewers a powerful theatrical portrayal of the 4 centuries of suffering endured by Eelam Tamils and the historical forces that led to their displacement. This universalised the play’s theme to the story of a nation that was on the run. In a broader sense, the play explored the complex relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor, revealing the enduring dynamics of power, resistance, and survival. According to Anton (2024), audience members from different countries who shared similar experiences deeply resonated with the performance (Anton 2025). Originally written in Tamil under the title *Why Are You Running?* by Tarcisius in 1988, the play was first performed by members of the diaspora in London. Later, it was renamed *Sri Salami* and adapted to suit Swiss audiences,

with revisions developed in collaboration with Peter Braschler. Co-directed with Swiss theatre artist Braschler and Eelam dramatist Anton, *Sri Salami* thus exemplifies rare intercultural collaboration. Tarcisius was also Ponrajah Anton's teacher at the College of Drama in Jaffna, and the theatrical tradition they shared was revived in Switzerland, where the dispersed Tamil diaspora came together through shared cultural memory and collective performance. The play acted as a unifying site, allowing individuals separated by exile to negotiate identity, reconstruct communal bonds, and assert a shared history through performance. It stood as a foundational contribution to Tamil diaspora theatre, marking a significant chapter in the cultural history of Tamils in Switzerland. Any serious account of diasporic Tamil theatre would be incomplete without acknowledging the pioneering work of the Malaram troupe and the central role that Anton played. Importantly, the actors were compensated with regular monthly payments, underscoring the professional standards established by the troupe. After one year of rehearsals, the play was staged in 1989/ 1990 in Kulturpanorama, Switzerland, at the height of the Tamil refugee migration to Europe, under the banner of the Malaram Drama Groupe (Tarcisius 2017, Anton 2025).

The title itself carries profound symbolic meaning. *Sri* refers to Sri Lanka, while *Salami*—a cured meat sliced thin and eaten gradually—evokes both Swiss culture and the notion of slow curing and preservation over time. This metaphor operates on multiple levels: just as salami's flavour deepens with age, unresolved ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka have intensified over the decades, leaving deep and lasting scars. Furthermore, just as salami is consumed in thin slices, the Tamil population in Sri Lanka was gradually diminished, displaced, destroyed, or killed in fragments. What begins as a cultural metaphor is thus transformed into a political one. The harmless imagery of a Swiss food product becomes a striking allegory for the systematic erosion of Tamil existence in Sri Lanka, turning the act of 'slicing' into a metaphor for state violence, displacement, and slow annihilation. In this way, the title unsettles audiences by exposing how everyday cultural symbols can carry profound political resonance. Through this symbolic transformation, *Sri Salami* demonstrates how everyday cultural objects can acquire political meanings within diaspora performance, turning theatre into a space where memory, trauma, and identity are negotiated (Taylor 2003). The term *Sri* further deepens this shift from culture to politics. In 1957, Sinhala authorities mandated the use of the Sinhala character Sri (ශ්‍රී) on vehicle license plates, a symbolic act of cultural imposition (Gunasingam 1999, Wilson 2000). Tamil resistance to this decree—including the smearing of tar over the character—marks an early form of protest that foreshadowed the widening ethnic divide. Thus, the title *Sri Salami* merges historical trauma with transnational cultural dialogue, embodying how cultural metaphors can be reinterpreted as political critique, and how theatre itself becomes a site for resistance, memory, and identity. What further sets the play apart is its trilingual structure—it is performed in Tamil, German and English. This multilingualism not only reflects the diasporic condition but also makes the play accessible and meaningful to diverse audiences. Though characters speak in their native tongues, the rhythm, emotion, and theatrical coherence of the play are never compromised. Experimentation with multilingual adaptive forms in Tamil theatre is evident from as early as the 19th century through the example of *Kandy Arasan Natakam*, attributed to Arasanakileshapillai (1853–1910). It stands as one of the earliest documented Tamil dramatic texts that reflects not only the integration of multiple linguistic registers but also sophisticated engagement with narrative structure and performance conventions. Another significant moment in the development of Tamil theatrical tradition can be traced to the work of Sir Muttukumaraswamy (1834–1879), who was Ananda Coomaraswamy's father. He contributed to the modernisation of Tamil drama through his play *Harichandra*, in which the classical *Arichandra Natakam* was adapted from its original verse form into prose drama, commonly referred to as *Vilasam*. This transformation reflects an important shift toward accessibility, performative realism, and broader audience engagement. Such interventions demonstrate the literary and performative sophistication of 19th-century Tamil theatre and

positions it as a dynamic cultural practice capable of crossing linguistic and social boundaries while sustaining popular appeal (Singham 1973).

A Trilingual Tamil Play Rooted in Tradition and Diasporic Reality

The inclusion of German and English dialogues in *Sri Salami* invites the host audience to listen, reflect, and understand the lived experiences of the Tamil diaspora. For example (Tarcisius 2017: 137):

Oppressor: “You want a country, and you want a language?”

Oppressed: “I don’t want to take your country. I won’t let you take away my country.”

Oppressor: “You want freedom. And you want a government.”

Oppressed: “Just as you are not my slave, I shall not be your slave.”

While the oppressor speaks in English, the oppressed speaks in Tamil. The dialogue then continues in German. Right after that, a Tamil character exclaims: *aiyo Amma! Oh God, save me!* The argument escalates into a heated exchange. The rhythm of the language conveys emotional intensity. For audiences who speak different languages, these rhythmic transitions make it easier to emotionally connect with the play, regardless of the language being spoken.

The story of the play is structured through Tamil traditional theatrical practices and adopts non-linear storytelling to evoke the fragmented and unpredictable nature of memory and identity. This approach challenges the conventional assumption that national identity can be explained through linear historical writing or a fixed sequence of factual events. Traditional historicism conceive of the nation as a stable, unified cultural and sociological entity rooted in territory and permanence. However, Bhabha (1994: 140–145) challenges this assumption by arguing that the authority of the nation does not derive from any fixed or empirical reality but from its symbolic and narrative force—how it is imagined, articulated, and performed through cultural practices. This reconceptualization is particularly relevant to the Tamil diaspora, for whom nationhood cannot be anchored to a permanent homeland. Instead, belonging is produced through memory, affect, and collective cultural expression. In this context, drama and theatre become crucial sites of cultural production where an ‘imaginary homeland’ is staged and shared, allowing dispersed communities to reconstruct a sense of land, history, and unity. Diaspora Tamil theatre thus unsettles the conventional belief that nationhood depends on territorial stability, demonstrating instead that the nation can be performatively created even in the absence of land. As is customary, the play begins with a blessing from God. Here, the hero who awakens Switzerland and resolves its problems is called upon through song with ‘God’ in this context understood as a true embodiment of the hero (Tarcisius 2017: 525):

For the Eelam Tamils’ suffering and the wounds they bear,
Those who have endured unending sorrow without relief,
Switzerland, we sing with hope in our hearts to heal pain,
Come, O hero who resolves suffering.

In Tamil traditional plays, the performance often begins with a prayer to the gods for blessings and success. Similarly, *Sri Salami* opens with a devotional invocation, honouring this custom and setting a spiritual tone. It is common for songwriters to embed their signatures or personal marks within their compositions in the Tamil tradition, especially in devotional or lyrical works, as a way of asserting authorship and ownership. This play includes a similar signature (ibid.):

With dedication, we present the voice of Tamil drama,
uniting the three arts—drama, music, and literature.

We sing in honour of the valiant hero,
Eelak Koothan, whom we seek to protect.

Diaspora in Performance: Collective Voice and Lived Memory

In *Sri Salami*, characters such as the Oppressor—a national leader symbolising the power of the state and other authorities—and a fleeing Eelam Tamil are presented not in a hierarchical order but as equals. The actors inhabit multiple roles, bringing their lived experiences into the performance. In doing so, *Sri Salami* becomes a space of resistance, challenging dominant narratives that erase or distort Tamil suffering. Performance functions here as embodied memory, enacted and transmitted across time and space (Taylor 2003). The characters are not simply individuals; they serve as collective representations of a shared struggle and historical experience, making the stage a site where memory, identity, and resistance converge. For instance, the character Bobo functions as narrator both as witness and commentator, echoing traditional Indian clown figures such as *vidushakan* and *komali* (Vatsyayan 1980). His narration—delivered in German—bridges cultural and linguistic divides, providing accessibility and insight for non-Tamil audiences. The figure of Bobo also resonates with the festive traditions of Switzerland and Germany, where clowns (such as *tilu-tilu* in carnival culture) captivate audiences with their playful humour. Drawing inspiration from the comic and entertaining elements of the clown and *kattiyakaaran* in Tamil folk theatre, these features are reimagined and integrated into the character of Bobo. Designed to speak in three languages, the character became accessible across diverse audiences and is seamlessly incorporated into the play, embodying an intercultural fusion of performance traditions. The character Bobo is introduced as the narrator of the story of an ethnic group. Initially, he stands apart as a storyteller. Later, he moves among the people and engages in dialogue with them. Their conversations revolve around history, philosophy, and ideological concerns. Gradually, he abandons his abstract presence and transforms into one of the people. In the end, he becomes the figure who carries the story forward.

The Eelam Tamil community often says: “we are running,” a phrase that reflects both continuous internal displacement within Sri Lanka and forced migration abroad. It symbolises an enduring struggle—uprooted by conflict, denied stability, and scattered across towns and countries. In theatre, “I am running” becomes a powerful dramaturgical device—spoken, sung, or chanted—to evoke urgency and vulnerability. It connects personal stories with collective histories, transforming individual flight into a shared experience. In diaspora contexts, running signifies more than just physical escape; it represents a continuous search for safety, identity, belonging, or justice. The phrase “I am running” resonates with audiences across cultures, making it an accessible entry point into the specific struggles of the Tamil diaspora. At the same time, running can symbolise resistance—running towards freedom, towards a dream, or away from oppression—rendering it a politically charged refrain. Through repetition, the phrase acquires ritual-like force, turning into a mantra that embodies resilience, memory, and hope on stage. This play encapsulates a historical reality by portraying how Eelam Tamils have been struggling for over 4 centuries. The recurring dialogue among actors, where they interject with “I am running, I am running,” functions as a dramatic device that reinforces the central theme and rhythm of the play. Furthermore, this phrase operates as a connective refrain that links individual scenes, emphasising continuity amid displacement. Repeating the same line through collective singing enhances the sense of belonging and serves as a collective expression of the Tamil refugee experience. In the first scene, the performance symbolises the ongoing, multi-generational nature of displacement. The actors move in the same rhythm, repeatedly saying, “I am running.” This repetition also reinforces a sense of belonging to a group. The repetitive, rhythmic movement builds and circulates energy, reflecting both the urgency of flight and the strength found in collective experience. The Eelam Tamil expression

“we are running” encapsulates both the experience of internal displacement in Sri Lanka, as well as their forced migration across borders. On stage, the refrain “I am running” functions as more than a literal description; it becomes what Schechner (2002) might call ‘restored behaviour’—a performative act that carries layers of memory, repetition, and cultural transmission. Through its utterance—whether spoken, sung, or chanted—the phrase transforms the stage into a site where trauma, displacement, and resilience are simultaneously enacted and remembered. Within diaspora performance, ‘running’ operates as an ‘embodied metaphor’. It signifies not only physical flight but also a continuous search for safety, identity, belonging, and justice. As (Taylor 2003) argues, performance serves as a repertoire of embodied memory, transmitting histories that often elude archival preservation. The repeated act of saying, “I am running,” therefore collapses the distance between past and present, enabling performers and audiences to inhabit the affective landscape of exile. At the same time, ‘running’ acquires a political charge. It is not only a movement away from oppression but also a kinetic assertion of agency—running towards freedom, towards dreams, or towards reconstituted futures. The play incorporates authentic statements made by political figures, lending a stark realism to the narrative. For example, a high-ranking official from the oppressor is quoted as saying: “If you want war, you shall have war. If you want peace, you may have peace.” This statement encapsulates the tragedy of a nation’s leader calling his own people to war, highlighting the precarity of Sri Lanka, where many lack guarantees for their safety and livelihood.

Person 1: “Hit... cut... kick... stab...”

Person 2: “Amma (Mother)... Oh God... *Aiyo*, save us!”

These contrasting lines by Tarcisius (2017: 534) highlight the brutality of violence and the victims’ desperate pleas. Single words carry intense emotional weight, evoking shock, fear, or urgency without dilution. The scene relies on rhythm: short, forceful words, repeated or sequenced that form a drumbeat-like cadence and mirror the act’s physical intensity. Language becomes physicalized—each word demanding breath and body. Violence disrupts order, and fragmented speech reflects this rupture. Language itself breaks down, mirroring the chaos and disorder caused by violence. This performative use of sound and movement allows the play to transcend linguistic boundaries. Even without full comprehension of the verbal content, multilingual audiences are able to grasp the emotional and narrative weight of the performance. In this way, the play establishes a communicative bridge across languages, relying on the affective power of sound, gesture, and embodied language to foster connection and understanding.

Diaspora theatre is inherently intercultural, emerging from communities that live *in-between* cultures—sustaining the traditions of their homeland while negotiating the sociopolitical realities of their host societies. As Pavis (1996) notes, intercultural performance is not simply a borrowing of aesthetic techniques but a process of negotiation, translation, and transformation. The production of this play exemplifies such a process: while the actors were all Tamils (Anton 2024), the creative team included a multicultural ensemble of playwrights, directors, and music composers, making the stage a site of encounter between multiple cultural and artistic traditions. The actors embody the characters by visualising and expressing their own lived experiences throughout the play, as in Tamil traditional theatre, where the same performer transforms into different roles to suit each situation. The actor training method, deeply rooted in Tamil traditional performance practices, was adapted for the diasporic context of the play. In this sense, training became what Fischer-Lichte (2008) describes as a ‘transformative practice’, where performers embody and reconfigure cultural memory through rehearsal and enactment. According to Braschler (2024), certain elements of this training echo Stanislavski’s techniques, demonstrating the open-ended and dialogic nature of the year-long

rehearsal process. Rather than imposing a single 'system', this training wove together Tamil performative traditions and western theatre practices, creating a hybrid aesthetic.

At the outset, the play opens by evoking the atmosphere of a Tamil cultural event or a traditional *kuthu*. Symbolic elements of Tamil heritage are foregrounded: a rhythmic percussion-like sound is heard, which, though not produced by a traditional *mattalam* (drum), recalls its sonic memory and texture. This repeated *thakida-thakida-thakida* rhythm establishes a processional tone, guiding the synchronised entry of the actors. On the front left corner of the stage, a *niraikudam*—an auspicious pot decorated with a coconut—is placed, flanked by *kuthu vilakku* (traditional lamps) that are ritually lit. The script is then ceremonially handed to the actors, echoing Tamil *kuthu* traditions in which the *annaviyar* (*kuthu* master) formally presents the *edu* (palm-leaf script) to actors. The lead actor circumambulates the *niraikudam*, bows before it, and receives the script with reverence. Following the *kuthu* structure, the songs then begin with prayers, marking the formal commencement of the performance. This act recontextualises a traditional ritual, intertwining the sacred and the theatrical within the stage environment. The presence of cultural symbols such as the *niraikudam* and *kuthu vilakku* not only creates a sense of cultural rootedness for the performers but also extends an invitation to the host culture's audience to engage with Tamil traditions, fostering meaningful intercultural dialogue.

The stage design reflects the play's power dynamics and symbolic geography. The right side of the stage is dominated by a single figure, representing authority, while the left and central areas are occupied by a group of actors embodying the collective voice of the Eelam Tamils. This spatial arrangement mirrors a socio-political landscape in which ethnic communities exist in tensioned proximity, often within contested spaces. As the play moves toward its climax, depicting escalating ethnic tensions and civil conflict, the entire stage becomes a site of chaos and violence. Yet much of this dramatic action remains concentrated on the left, symbolically aligning with the marginalised group's continued exposure to oppression and displacement. Visually, the design reinforces this narrative. At the rear, two layers of semi-transparent fabric allow a diffused light to penetrate, while a grid of thin vertical cords suggest both separation and permeability—barriers repeatedly crossed. Actors emerge from behind these layers, emphasising movement from concealment into visibility. The lighting is intentionally dim and subdued, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty, memory, and displacement. This low, dreamlike illumination evokes the fragmented, often melancholic recollections of homeland. Live music, performed with traditional instruments, heightens immediacy and sensory engagement, immersing the audience in the performance's emotional and cultural terrain. Throughout the play, scene changes are deliberately minimal, conveyed not through set transformations but through designed narration, song, and sound. To represent a house on stage, a square-shaped gobo is projected, and the actors' movements—entering and searching its boundaries—symbolises the quest for home. In this staging, homes exist only as shadowy recollections, mental imprints of places left behind through displacement. The use of gobos, which create shadows and outlines rather than solid forms, is particularly effective for evoking a home that no longer physically exists or that survives only as a distant memory.

Costume, Embodiment, and Collective Memory

The performers wear stylised costumes consisting of loose pyjamas and a small cloth tied at the waist, resembling a loincloth, patterned with dotted circular motifs. This ascetic-like attire conveys ritual austerity, simplicity, and discipline, situating the body within a performative space that evokes both tradition and restraint. At the same time, the costume subtly reflects the layered histories of colonisation in Sri Lanka—Portuguese, Dutch, and British—through elements such as the cut of the sleeves and the form of the lower garment that symbolically recall these successive cultural imprints (Tarcisius 2017, Anton 2025). Each actor also wears

a chest badge inscribed with the Sinhala letter ‘ශ්‍රී’ (Sri), echoing the emblem once mandated on Sri Lankan vehicle license plates. Introduced in 1957, this symbol—detached from its purely linguistic function—acquired political weight and became one of the early flashpoints in escalating ethnic tensions that later culminated in civil war (Wilson 2000, Gunasingam 1999). In the play, the emblem is recontextualised as a decorative medallion. Through this transformation, it operates as a powerful visual marker of historical memory.

The costume design functions as a symbolic bridge, linking the aesthetic space of performance with lived political history, and transforming the actor’s body into a site where ritual, colonial memory, and ethnic politics converge. On their heads, the actors wear crowns or ritual-style headdresses reminiscent of ornaments used in ancient clan ceremonies. Through this hybrid costuming, the performers embody displaced Tamils, not as isolated individuals but as collective protagonists. The costumes reflect five centuries of oppression of Sri Lankan Tamil history, representing the influences of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British periods. They symbolise the shared consciousness, historical trauma, and cultural resilience of a community in exile, transforming stage presence into an enactment of memory and identity. Another significant aspect of the play is the absence of any gender-specific markers in costume and makeup. The performers’ bodies are presented in neutral, balanced aesthetic, enabling them to fluidly inhabit multiple characters on stage, and to express universal human emotions that transcend everyday gender identities. The actors have dots painted on their faces that are traditionally prepared using the milky sap of the *chithravalli kilangu* (root). These markings recall the makeup conventions of Tamil traditional theatre, in which the sap forms the base of dot patterns that are later overlaid with coloured powders (Anton 2025). Symbolically, the faceless design represents the condition of the diaspora, suggesting anonymity, displacement, and the erasure of identity. Once completed, the makeup glows vividly in torchlight during the performance, intensifying the visual impact of the actors’ movements on stage. By removing gendered signifiers, the production invites the audience—particularly those from different cultural contexts—to engage with a ‘shared human vocabulary’ of emotion and embodiment. The acting methodology in *Sri Salami* thus relies not on mimetic realism or naturalistic characterisation, but on what can be described as a performative universality, where the actor becomes a vessel for communal memory rather than an individual subject. Neutral costumes help shift attention away from personal identity and towards the shared experiences of the diaspora community, such as displacement, loss, or survival.

The Bobo character serves as the storyteller throughout the play, narrating the experiences of displaced and migrating people, where the oppressor may change, but oppression remains constant. Bobo appears on stage wearing a mask depicting a seven-headed serpent, a striking visual motif grounded in both mythological symbolism and performative abstraction. The mask is not merely decorative; it positions Bobo as a symbolic figure rather than a literal character. The seven-headed serpent draws on rich mythological traditions across cultures: in Hindu mythology, the *Adishesha* serves as Lord Vishnu’s eternal couch, supporting the cosmos through cycles of creation and dissolution, serpents or *nagas* are associated with natural forces reflecting cycles of life, death, and rebirth. Such performances not only convey the serpent’s mythic associations but also engages the audience in an embodied narrative. Before migrating to the UK, Tarcisius had already begun evolving his system of actor training in Sri Lanka, developing a methodology that fused Tamil traditional performance with western techniques. This hybrid approach reflects a postcolonial theatrical sensibility in which reclaiming indigenous performance traditions is both an aesthetic and political act. By resisting the dominance of Eurocentric models on the other hand, Tarcisius positions Tamil performative grammar being as central rather than peripheral, thereby challenging colonial hierarchies embedded in global theatre training. He provided intensive training to actors portraying Bobo, emphasising spinal coordination to authentically convey the character’s serpentine movement

(Anton 2025). The integration of these techniques into *Sri Salami* reveals a dedication to preserving traditional performative methodologies while adapting them to contemporary diasporic narratives. On the right side of the stage, beneath a canopy, stands the Bobo—an observer, narrator, and questioner who moves among actors, engaging with the unfolding action. While the play is performed in Tamil and German, Bobo speaks in English or German, serving as a cultural and linguistic bridge. By addressing the audience directly, Bobo narrates key events, guides understanding, and provides insights into the play's complex themes and historical context, ensuring that a multicultural audience can follow and connect with the performance. Behind the stage is a throne-like structure resembling a sun-embossed tomb, from which ambient sounds emanate. This symbolic prop evokes the national emblem of Sri Lanka, recalling the historical and political context embedded within the drama. The throne acts as a powerful visual reminder of the nation-state, conjuring images of sovereignty, power, and contested identity.

From Silence to Voice: Embodied Storytelling

Using body language to convey narrative is a hallmark of plays about displaced communities. In this play, the scene involving the aunt during the 1958 ethnic riots exemplifies storytelling through physicality. The scene is particularly suited to a single actor, who embodies both the horror and immobility of the victim. The play depicts a tragic event (Tarcisius 2017: 526):

At the Anuradhapura junction, my aunty was dragged and plunged into a barrel of boiling tar. She couldn't struggle, flinch, bend, or move. She trembled... then stopped. Unable to act, they placed her, barely alive, on the ground and fixed six nails in the Sinhala Sri form on her breast

Through precise bodily gestures, stillness, and subtle trembling, the actor conveys the frozen terror and helplessness of the victim, allowing the audience to viscerally experience the trauma without the literal enactment of violence. Rape is rendered symbolically rather than through explicit representation. One of the most striking moments is when the daughter repeatedly cries out, *appa! appa!* (dad! dad!). What begins as a tender, intimate call gradually shifts in tone, pitch, and intensity, becoming an anguished desperate outcry. This subtle vocal transformation turns a simple word into a piercing articulation of grief and terror. With minimal staging, the voice alone generates a powerful emotional and psychological impact. The sound seems to arise from a concealed, haunted interior space—as though the trauma is surfacing from the survivor's troubled consciousness. Through this restrained yet evocative technique, the scene conveys violence not through spectacle, but through the reverberations of memory and inner disturbance. Through such concentrated use of body, voice, and imagination, theatre enables audiences to grasp why people fled or cannot return. Theatre evokes emotional experience through songs, gestures and spoken words, activating the audience's imagination to visualise events as if witnessing them directly (Vatsyayan 1980). It demonstrates how *Sri Salami* transforms inherited theatrical practices into embodied expressions of displacement, resilience, and collective identity. In Tamil and broader Indian theatrical traditions, scenes of torture are typically suggested rather than explicit, following a long-standing convention that frames such portrayals as a form of memory work. The recurring phrase, "I am running, I am running," vocalised as the performers move in circular patterns on stage, functions as both refrain and motif, echoing cycles of movement and memory. Rooted in Tamil theatre and broader Indian performance traditions, the play adopts a cyclical structure that grounds its scenes. In Indian cosmology, the circle (*chakra*) signifies the eternal cycle of time, wholeness, and the *mandala* transforms the stage into a sacred space. The repetitive, rhythmic chant of "war, war, war, war", combined with shifting lighting effects, effectively conjures up the atmosphere of the battlefield. Alternating lights symbolize the fragmentation and harsh realities

of war, allowing the audience to experience its intensity without the need for any explicit depiction of violence.

From the opening, the stage is spatially divided to represent opposing forces—on one side, the oppressors and the oppressed; on the other, the Tamil people. The larger portion of the stage is visually dominated by the oppressors, while the oppressed occupy a smaller space, symbolically reflecting the operation of power. In the war scene, the entire stage transforms into an artistic battlefield, with shadow effects evoking the chaos of conflict. The Buddhist chant *Buddham Saranam Gacchami* gradually intensifies and embodies the mounting horror of war, while intermittent gunfire interrupts the chant, heightening tension and driving the scene toward its climax. This Buddhist chant reflects the political influence of religion in Sri Lanka, and the play uses it symbolically. The Tamil equivalent of ‘chanting’ is the *othuthal*, which traditionally refers to the repeated recitation of words, verses, or sacred texts. Interestingly, in colloquial Tamil usage, *othuthal* can also carry another meaning, of influencing or manipulating someone through repeated persuasion. Here, the chant becomes a layered performative device, conveying tensions between oppression and resistance. At a critical moment in the play, a character laments in Tamil, “Is there no one to speak about the cruelty?”—a powerful expression of anguish echoed simultaneously in English as, “I have to live...” This bilingual expression deepens emotional resonance and underscores the shared human experience of suffering. Another example of such minimalism is the depiction of the arrival of foreign military forces in the homeland. This is represented symbolically through the playing of a musical motif resembling the Indian national anthem, that is accompanied by lighting effects that evoke the vastness and presence of the nation, and the significance of the 1987 intervention.

Traditionally in the concluding ceremony of Tamil Hindu funerals, ritual hymns or songs called *Potchunnam* are sung. Towards the end of the play, the *Potchunnam* is again sung and performed. Its inclusion serves as a powerful emotional and cultural anchor, connecting the audience to the collective grief of the Tamil community. In the play, this historical event is reimagined and stylized through the *Kandyan* dance, a traditional Sinhalese performance known for its rhythmic intensity and ceremonial elegance. The actors embody the protest through codified movements and rhythms of the *Kandyan* dance, thus rooting the political act within the cultural heritage of the Sinhalese community. A comparable fusion of religious symbolism and political mobilisation can also be seen in the opposition to the Bandaranaike–Chelvanayakam Pact in 1957. As documented by Ponnambalam, Jayewardene led a march to Kandy on 4th October 1957 to invoke the blessings of the *devales* in opposition to the pact (Ponnambalam 1983: 159). The play re-enacts these events with heightened theatrical intensity: as the figure representing political authority ascends the throne, lights illuminate the flag above him, rendering his body statue-like and monumental. As he descends, he moves towards the percussion, symbolically linking political authority with ritual, sound, and embodied performance. The *sthala jathirai* (processional/ pilgrimage motif) sequences in the play are rendered rhythmically by chanting and coordinated movements that function as performative motifs that evoke collective historical memory.

As the war begins, the figure standing beneath the flag slowly starts to dance. A *kuthu*-based horse dance motif is used in this scene, with five actors joining in the dance. The leader figure positioned on the throne dances in his place, while the others dance in front of the throne. As they dance, the flag above the throne also appears to move. This creates a grand impression of warriors mounting horses, ready for battle. Midway, the dance pauses briefly, and then all the actors across the stage start dancing and chanting *por, por, por* (war, war, war). The actors spread across the stage and depict Tamil people who have endured violence—both as victims and as fighters. Their movements, which occupy the entire stage, symbolically reflect how the play suggests conflict to transform lived spaces and remembered homelands into zones of

violence. Their movements align with the rhythm of the music, and in the warm lighting, all the actors appear as fierce warriors. The way they hold their hands evokes the image of warriors gripping weapons. The play conveys that their homeland is shrouded in long, dark shadows, and there is a need to dispel this darkness. The play ends with a plea to overcome this dark history and move toward renewal, leading displaced people into a state of emotional release. Compared to conventional plays, this concluding scene is extended and functions more as a ritualistic plea or communal lament.

Conclusion

The examination of *Sri Salami* (1989, 1990) highlights how Tamil diaspora theatre in Switzerland operates as a vital medium for both cultural and political expression. Through its multilingual performance, symbolic stagecraft, and engagement with traditional Tamil theatrical forms, the play embodies the lived experiences of exile, displacement, and collective trauma. It constructs a 'third space' in which Tamil refugees negotiate identity, assert historical legitimacy, and reimagine connections with both their homeland and host society. The third space is hence a cultural 'in-between' where individuals do not fully belong to any single, fixed identity; rather, through interaction and performance, they produce new, hybrid meanings and forms of belonging (Bhabha 1994: 53–56). At the time of its performance, *Sri Salami* attracted significant attention in the Swiss mainstream media—a rare moment when refugee voices entered public discourse with both agency and aesthetic impact. Despite its cultural importance, the play was not published until 2015, a delay reflecting the precarious conditions of artists living under asylum, fear, and legal invisibility. Many of these refugees navigated surveillance and repression, often opting for anonymity and silence—a strategy theorists' term 'strategic opacity'. Nevertheless, the play remains a crucial chapter in Tamil theatre history, forging innovative forms that interweave lived experience, political memory, and intercultural aesthetics.

Diaspora drama in Switzerland represents a timely and significant cultural intervention. Its central goals have been to preserve language, nurture cultural identity, and foster a sense of belonging in exile, while acknowledging the risks associated with returning to the homeland. Over time, the artists' engagement has extended beyond theatre. They have led social and cultural activism, established spiritual institutions, produced films, published personal and collective narratives, supported rehabilitation initiatives in Sri Lanka, and fostered global connections among Tamil theatre practitioners. Even those not directly involved in staging plays continue to contribute to the growth and sustenance of Tamil arts and culture in both their homeland and their host countries. The play resonated not only with the Tamil community but also with other diaspora groups in Switzerland, who recognized their own struggles reflected on stage. Recurring refrains such as, "God will protect us!" functioned not merely as dialogue but as performative invocations of faith under duress. This echoes Thanthai Chelva's iconic call, "God! Save the Tamils," capturing the intertwined experience of hope, fear, and resistance among refugees. Similarly, the Aramaic line, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" reinforces the play's central themes of abandonment, faith, and survival, bridging the sacred and the political while anchoring the community's spiritual and emotional resilience.

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