

MAIN SECTION

Front Page
News
Editorial
Opinion
Financial Times
Sports
Features
Mirror Life
Obituaries

GROUP SITES

The Sunday Times
Hi!! Magazine
Wijeya Pariganaka

Archives

Mirror Life

Sirasa TV marks 8th birthday Channel Head vows to take television to next level By Ramesh Uvais

Television has undoubtedly become part and parcel of our lives and when it comes to Sirasa TV it has become more closer to the hearts of people, largely due to some of its programmes that has taken the country by storm.

The channel marked its eighth anniversary on June 10. Mirror Life spoke to the Channel's Head Nilendra Deshapriya who outlined his future plans and also called for the setting up of an academy to train youngsters in the media business.

"After the huge success of Sirasa Super Star, now we have a self-imposed responsibility or challenge to take television to the next level. After almost 27 years, since the emergence of television in Sri Lanka, we have been just producing conventional, easy-format creations. In other words I feel that the electronic media have underestimated the viewer," he said.

Continuing, Nilendra said, "The enormous success of Super Star and the way people rallied round the programme was unbelievable. So, now we are planning to take television to the next level.

There are many aspects in television from crime and thrillers to other areas. We have been terming tele dramas from the inception here but the word had been devised when Rupavahani teles were launched by Dhamma Jagoda. Sirasa is introducing new facets to so-called tele dramas and the viewers will be able to relish on a dish filled with loads variety. Even where programming is concerned a channel must have the right mix ranging from education to entertainment, infotainment, musical and news. So, our new programmes will certainly consist the right mix.

You do the programming to the best of your ability but how the viewers take it is so unpredictable. Yet good programmes will also have a place among the masses. We believe in interacting with the people and that's why we are today considered a truly peoples' channel. We always believe that television is not one-way communication.

Television has evolved so much that it is now all web based and mobile based. At one point cinema was the ultimate but today it is television. So, we have to live up to this expectation.

Though the Sirasa Super Star programme was a success, there were charges that the SMS vote system did not really help choose the right singers, largely because the general viewers who voted had little or no knowledge of music. They just voted by impulse. Don't you think it was unfair?

This programme was extremely popular in Asia and other continents and it was Sri Lanka's turn when we launched it. Sirasa Super Star Ajith Bandara is launching his maiden album on June 24 at the Sugathadasa Stadium while the final 12 have also contributed to it. Another album comprising songs of the final 12 will also be launched on the same day to coincide with Sirasa TV's eighth anniversary.

Now, music for these songs have been composed by maestro Premasiri Khemadasa, Navaratne Gamage, Tissasiri Perra, Mahinda Perera, Bathiya and Santhush, Ranga Dassanayake and others while the lyrics have been written by top wordsmiths in the country. The albums will prove the immense talent these youngsters possess and that the people's verdict was not just a farce. They are truly talented and I hope this album will create history. In Sri Lanka the most sold album is about 100,000 copies and we hope to smash that record.

What kind of role can television play to boost the cinema industry?

We have always been supporting the film industry by way of screening films and touching upon film-related areas but Sirasa TV is the only channel I should say, that packages films in retrospect. We had a series of such programmes covering a whole list of top film personalities and this anniversary month has been dedicated to Anoja Weerasinghe. By doing so, it is evident that we contribute towards the welfare of our own movie industry. While still on the topic of uplifting the film industry, I must stress that this country urgently needs an academy to train film, television, radio and print media personnel.

We do not have a proper institute where youngsters are trained to these media. What unfortunately happens now is that almost all learn the trade while on the job? Can we expect professionalism from them? The situation is going to be worse in the coming years if no action is taken immediately. If action is taken today, at least by 2010 we will have at least 50 professionals. Television as I told is the ultimate media and it can open avenues to any aspiring filmmaker. Today you can make films even with your digital camera. All you need is to express and if you do so in the right manner, converting it into 35 mm film, or showing on television is not a big issue.

There is another allegation that Sirasa TV is showing Indian teledramas dubbed in Sinhala thus depriving chances for our own artistes and technicians who have to struggle for existence. How do you defend this stand?

This is a very valid question, which certainly demands explanation. In 1998 when Sirasa was born the people were used to watch tele dramas on a weekly basis. We had a different attitude and a new strategy. As part of this strategy we introduced a daily running soap called 'Damini'. The story, which ran from Monday to Friday, was entirely cast from the local industry.

So, our artistes who were depending on a 24 episode or 30 episode tele drama which was telecast once a week, had an opportunity of acting in a 600 episode tele drama which running on a daily basis. The concept of soaps is daily. We are now running another local serial 'Vasudha' which is also comprising local talent. Another long-running local tele serial will be



Sirasa TV Head Nilendra Deshapriya

launched soon. The new serial titled "Kawya" will be introduced in the coming weeks to coincide with the 8th anniversary.

Television viewer ship is a habit. The most powerful innovation of the 20th century is not anything else but the remote control. The remote control empowers a single person with enormous power. So we are in the business of influencing individuals because 75% of households in this country have televisions. In this background, those who are watching our dramas are simply endorsing the way we cater to their needs. Even if you take Sri Lankan cinema, Sri Lankan music, history or even politics, we have been heavily influenced by India.

We need to have cross-cultural connections in an era where we talk about globalization. We wear designer denims, drive world renowned brands of cars, use reputed brands of mobile phones but when it comes to teledramas and films, we always want to be within our local frame. I don't see any logic behind this. Will you believe that Mahagedara, which is extremely popular here, has also been dubbed in Chinese too. This drama is produced by a company headed by a youngster – Ektha Kapoor. If our country has trained people who have studied the basics of the industry, I am sure that we could produce tele dramas which will be bought up by other countries. You know that quality TV products are put in the market where the best are grabbed so we should be able to produce quality products compelling global broadcasters to watch your programme and buy them.

We must therefore look beyond this frame. We should understand that viewers will always be with you if you offer them the right programmes. The people in Sri Lanka are not channel loyal, they are programme loyal and that's why I told you about the power of the remote control. That is in their hands and there's nothing that we could do.

I am also a man who began my career in the film industry. I have worked with almost all reputed directors. I have also done tele dramas and I know the real plight of those in the fields. Once you get your local artistes on a platform where the product goes on air daily for years and years, just imagine how much the artistes are benefited. It is much more than their contributions in even in ten 24-episode tele dramas. Those who are involved in our long-running serials are engaged with us for almost half a month and they are paid well. I think all other channels should also follow this concept instead of acquiring them from out.

What is the allocation in Sirasa TV for educational programmes?

Frankly, it is when it comes to children's or educational programmes that the real expertise comes into play. It is not just teaching maths or science via television. It requires a lot of resourceful personnel with a good television background as well. We can't think of a real educational programme that has given real information to children except for a tele drama or two which were made for children. Producing software for children is the most paid job in the world. We are doing it with the available resources. You can get a child psychiatrist and host a programme but such talk shows don't really educate the people. There must be programmes that gives an insight and global view on any subject.

Sri Lanka should set up an academy to train youngsters. This is an urgent need. I hope the authorities will take serious note of this plea and work towards producing professionals in the field.

Sirasa's next attraction would be 'Rangabhishekaya' - a contest aimed at producing the best actors and actress in the country.