



Re-releases

The Girls

The Girls Gehenu Lamai

Director: Sumitra Peries

Production Company:

Lester James Peries Productions

Producers: Sumitra Peries, Lester James Peries

Production Executive: P.E.E. Anthonypillai

Production Co-ordinator: Sumitra Peries

Production Manager: Gerard Fernando

Assistant Director: Upali Perera

Screenplay and adaptation: Sumitra Peries

Original novel and dialogue: Karunasena Jayalath

Photography: M.S. Ananda

Editor: Sumitra Peries

Production Designer: Hemapala Dharmasena

Set Decorator: Errol Kelly

Make-up: Hilton Mendis

Music: Nimal Mendis

Music Arranged and Conducted by:

Sarath Fernando

Sound Recorded and Mixed by: H. Sarangarajan

Sound Editor: Lal Piyasena

Cast:

Vasanthi Chathurani (*Kusum Liyanage*)

Ajith Jinadasa (*Nimal Satharasinghe*)

Jenita Samaraweera (*Soma Liyanage*)

Shyama Ananda (*Padmini*)

Trilicia Gunawardana (*Mr. Liyanage*)

Chitra Wakista (*Mrs Satharasinghe*)

Senaka Perera (*Mr Liyanage*)

Nimal Dayaratna (*Gunapala*)

Dayamanthi Pattiaratchi (*Maduri*)

Sri Lanka 1978

113 mins

Digital 4K

A BFI re-release

Restored in 4K in 2025 by Film Heritage Foundation in association with Lester James Peries and Sumitra Peries Foundation at L'immagine Ritrovata laboratory

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The Girls Gehenu Lamai

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One of the defining auteurs of Sri Lankan cinema, Sumitra Peries was also one of the few international figures from the island nation. Her films capture, in all their nuances and complexities, the torments of being a woman in Sri Lanka, and by extension in South Asia. They dwell not merely on the rift between rich and poor, but also on the innocence of childhood and the torments of adolescent love. They centre on a woman's place in what was, and still largely is, a patriarchal society.

Her first film, *The Girls* (*Gehenu Lamai*, 1978), establishes these themes remarkably well and was lauded by David Robinson in the *Times* for its 'holistic feminine sensibility'. At its centre is a poor village girl, Kusum (Vasanthi Chathurani), who has ambitions for a better life. Midway through, she falls in love with an affluent classmate who happens to be her cousin. But after a series of incidents that culminate with the discovery of their affair, Kusum's situation begins to deteriorate.

The film's success at home and abroad emboldened Peries to make nine more films, all of them centring on female protagonists: *By the Bank of the River* (*Ganga Addara*, 1980), *Friends* (*Yahalu Yeheli*, 1982), *Maya* (1984), *A Letter Written in the Sand* (*Sagara Jalaya Madi Handuwa Oba Sanda*, 1988), *The Eldest Daughter* (*Loku Duwa*, 1994), *Mother Alone* (*Duwata Mawaka Misa*, 1997), *The Garden* (*Sakman Maluwa*, 2003), *Friends* (*Yahaluwo*, 2007) and *The Goddess* (*Vaishnavee*, 2017).

What stands out in these films more than anything is Peries's aesthetic sensibility, a high regard for the right *mise en scène* which, by her own confession, borders on a desire to zoom in and 'prettify everything'.

Mark Cousins put it best: 'When we think of the 1970s, *The Godfather* [1972], *The Exorcist* [1973], *Taxi Driver* [1976] come to mind, but in Sri Lanka around the same time, Sumitra Peries made one of the best films of the 70s: *The Girls*, a film about a young woman enmeshed in her shyness and religion. Peries zooms in and out like in a Robert Altman or Nicolas Roeg film. She creates dazzling images and uncertain emotions. Lindsay Anderson and the critic David Robinson admired her work. Why did we forget her?' She died aged 87 in 2023.

Sumitra Peries on 'The Girls'

I'd been at the fringes of the industry, even though I was the editor of most of Lester's [James Peries] films. So I wanted to break from that and see if I could create my own characters and my own story. I was dying to give expression to whatever I harboured within me. I was looking for a suitable subject and had a chance to return to France for a year and a half on a French government scholarship, and I think that broke the umbilical cord with my husband. I had been his shadow, helping him in every way while also learning in the process. But I wanted to see how I would function on my own.

Karunasena Jayalath had written the popular novel *The Silent Heart* [*Golu Hadawatha*, adapted by Lester James Peries in 1969], and Regi Siriwardena [who screenwrote *Changes in the Village*] was supposed to write the script for Jayalath's next book, *The Girls*. Lester toyed with the idea of filming it, then he

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realised the material was more suitable for me and said, 'Why don't you try your hand?'

He had sold his estate, there was some capital in the bank and I think I found a proper subject because it was set in the milieu I knew, Avissawella, and the story was not unfamiliar to me. Being my own producer, and Lester being the co-producer, we had our own money and the freedom to do what we wanted, to choose who we worked with. When you're doing your first film, you want everything fresh; you want fresh faces. We went in search of an actress to play Kusum and that in itself was a journey and I found Vasanthi Chathurani. I was working with the cinematographer M.S. Ananda, and he and his daughter Shyama [who plays Kusum's schoolfriend Padmini] were anchors for me because he was sensitive to not putting too much reflected light on the faces of the amateur players, and because his daughter was also playing; and Shyama was very supportive of Vasanthi. So all those combinations helped me to realise what I felt was in my destiny, this film.

When it's your first film you want to do everything. Excepting the music and cinematography, I did everything else. I wrote the script; I was the editor, production coordinator, producer. The players stood up for what I expected of them, the freshness came through, and I had super backing from the critics and the audience. We had a marvellous reception for the film, not only here, or even at the London Film Festival; but I took it to the international festival in Madras [now the Chennai International Film Festival]. All the critics were there and saw the film. At first they were a bit evasive and I thought, 'OK, they don't want to see Lester Peries's wife's film, for the fear they wouldn't have liked it,' but I think Nigel Andrews, the *Financial Times* critic, saw it and gave a signal. All that fraternity of British journalists came and in one voice they liked the film and went home and supported it. So I had a London release; I had a special show at the [Royal] Festival Hall. That started me off. I have made ten films and many shorts. But to me, that first film, finding people who had never been in front of the camera, was the most rewarding thing.

Sumitra Peries interviewed by Mark Cousins for *Women Make Film* (2018).

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