

# LIVING

HAVING been brought up on a diet of Sub Continental dance and music from one's childhood, nothing prepared us, that is my husband and myself for the breathtaking spectacle of Shri Lankan dance on our diplomatic assignment there.

Before reaching the shores of Taprobane, Serendib, Ceylon or Shri Lanka as it is now called to distinguish it from all its other names embedded in antiquity, we had been requested by the trustees and members of "Shadhona" - a centre for advancement of Sub Continental Dance and Music if during our stay on the island, we could manage to send over a dance ensemble to acquaint our audiences in Bangladesh with Sinhalese dance forms. We struck gold. In our first year there, we witnessed Shri Lankan dance in its finest form - at the Kala Darshana - a homage to the late and eminent artist George Keyt by no less a personage than Kala Keerthi Chitrassena, of the Chitrassena-Vajira Dance Company-dubbed the Uday Shankar of Shri Lanka. Of course we were years too late to witness the maestro perform himself - but the sinuous grace of his daughter Uppaka and the diamond hard technical brilliance of Vajira his wife, once principal ballerina of the ensemble who performed a short number, had us enthralled.

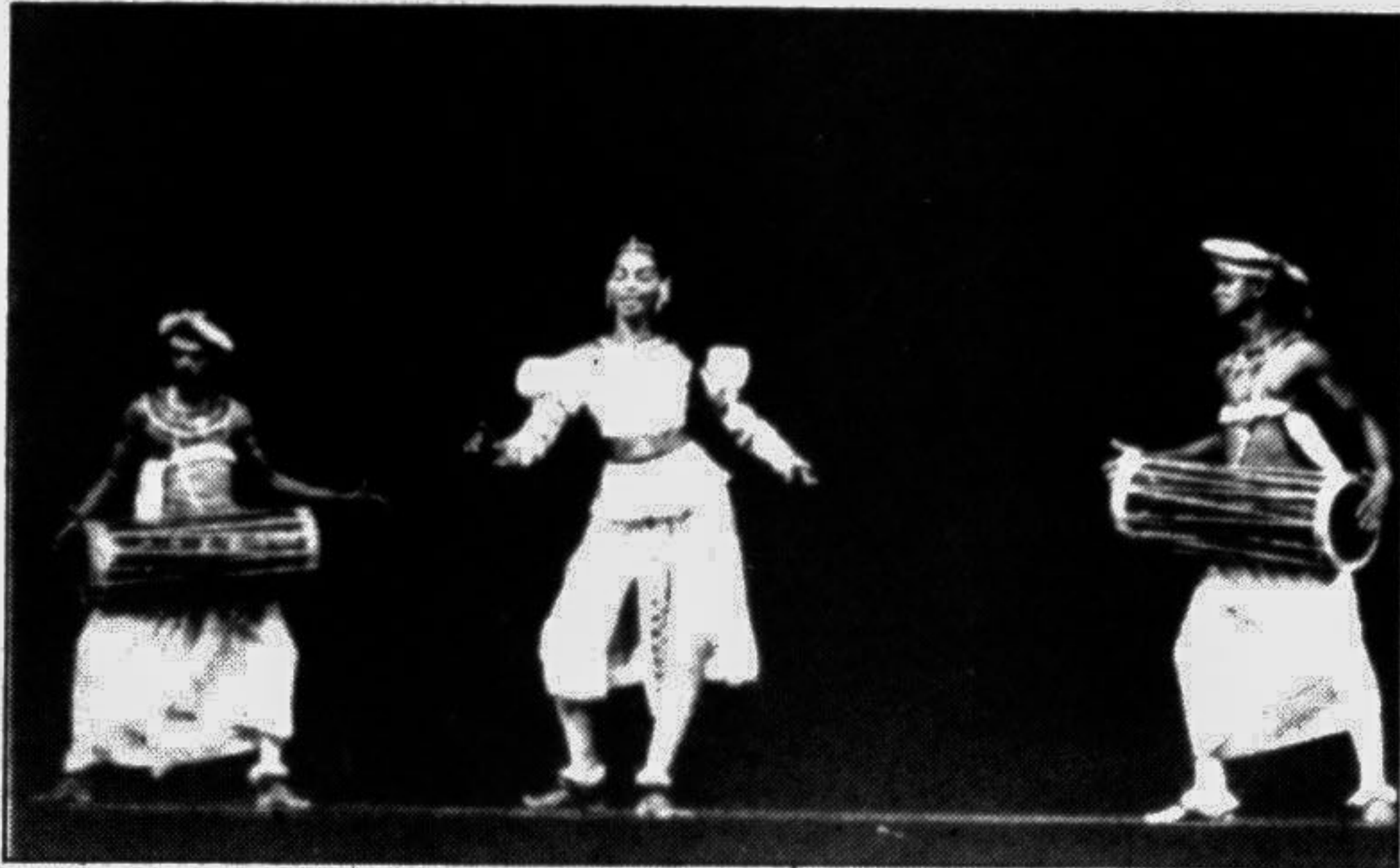
Thus under the aegis of "Shadhona", the dance lovers of Dhaka will be able to witness the Chitrassena-Vajira Dance company perform at Osmani Memorial Auditorium on the 4th, 5th 7th and 8th of February.

To me Shri Lankan dance was enigmatic, unlike the dance forms we were used to witnessing, the regal yet glamorous *kathak* court dance of the Mughals the *abhinaya* of the *bharata natyam*, the grace of the *Odissi*, the drama of the *kathakali*, the languor of the *manipuri* or the joyous buoyancy of our simple folk dances. Shri Lankan dance was none of this and yet a part of all of it. As I became immersed in learning the history of the Island, I discovered the history of its dance in particular Kandyan dance which is quite rightly its most exquisite offering.

Shri Lankan dance is rooted in antiquity, two thousand five

## Dance — a Shri Lankan Tradition

by Lita Samad Chowdhury



hundred years of it and is an evolution of rituals, ceremonials, exorcistic rites, demon cults, harvest festivities etc. It shares many common legends with those of South India due partly to the many invasions that took place throughout its history, although the founding father of the (Lion Race (Singha race) hence Sinhala), Prince Vijaya was supposed to have hailed from parts loosely ascribed at various times as Bengal/Orissa in fact, even what today constitutes Bogra District in North east Bangladesh.

Shri Lankan dance can be classified into three broad groups - Kandyan dance found in the central highlands with its highly refined techniques, *Ruhunur* or low country dance of the southern lowlands ritualistic and ceremonial and Sabaragamuwa dance which combines the two traditions.

In the words of Chitrassena "In central Ceylon, under the patronage of the kings of Kandy, Kandyan dancing attained its highest development." Kandy was the last bastion of Sinhala culture as the rest of the island had witnessed colonization by the Portuguese the Dutch and finally the British

from roughly the sixteenth century down to the twentieth. The last king of Kandy was imprisoned by the British. Nevertheless the sanctity of Kandy's cultural heritage remained fairly untainted and the legacy of Kandyan dance continued. However brilliantly executed, the rest of Shri Lankan

dancing maybe, the dynamism of Kandyan dancing is probably the "most magnificent movement" ever achieved.

The sheer aesthetic beauty of this unfettered dancing, spirit pulsing to the throb and percussion only of drums, the virility of its heroic masculine essence (*tandava*) distilled into



"*nritya*", pure and perfect movement, with no vocal or instrumental support in Kandyan dance, there appeared to me a strong resemblance to African dance which I had witnessed a long time ago.

Increasingly women are dancing it today and bringing out its feminine *lasya* aspect

but the male Kandyan dancer resplendent in striking white *dhoti* trimmed in scarlet, with jingling silver headdress and breastplate of silver and cowrie shells, tassels flying in the air as he twirls and whirls to the demonic pounding of the drums brings to mind the striking plumage and strutting of a peacock amongst its lesser feathered friends.

Thus with the pounding of the drums feverishly ringing in my ears, bedazzled from the artistic costumes of the other dancers, the dark serpentine grace of *uppeka* now principal dancer at the ballet, we were introduced to Chitrassena the great guru himself. In fact we were touched to see how his *shishyas* revered him by saluting his feet as most *gurus* have always been revered in the Sub Continent for their practically magical talents. Bandula Jayawardhana, a critic, narrates what I deem the most important in Chitrassena's contribution to Shri Lankan dance for the last half a century - nay fifty-eight years to be precise, although he has not danced for the last eight himself; to any dancer, this is a remarkable achievement, to a dancer, ballet master, theatre master like

Chitrassena. It has been a test of exceptional loyalty and dedication to his art, a trial of unrelenting perseverance in the face of poverty, social scorn, a triumph over severest odds, a tremendous personal victory.

In Shri Lankan cultural history, Chitrassena emerged in the middle of a most important epoch. In India, Tagore had already established his *Shantiniketan*. Tagore's lectures on his visit to Shri Lanka in 1934, had inspired a revolutionary change in the outlooks of many educated men and women, the *kobi guru* had stressed the need for a people to discover their own culture in order to assimilate fruitfully the best of other cultures.

The ballerina Pavlova had visited India and taken Uday

Shankar to Europe where his performance was making a name for oriental dancing. Menaka and her *kathak* performances, Ram Gopals' *bharata natyam* were acquiring international repute. All these famous exponents of dance had visited Shri Lanka in the early part of this century. The upper echelons of Shri Lankan society with their highly anglicized backgrounds were abandoning the piano concerto and ballet, for

Kandyan dancing 'the *sitar* and the *esraj*. The indigenous arts were rejoining favour and although there was still too much ostentation in all this, Chitrassena at this time sought to go to Travancore to study dance and *kathakali* with a famous guru. Nevertheless the major tide of colonial civilization in Shri Lanka flowed unabated and a slavishly imitative westernized elite flourished, setting trends and imbuing the nationalistic elite on the other hand with over virulent cultural chauvinism.

In the villages the dance masters desperately tried to hang on to their traditional craft but social mobility and democratic institutions lured their children and disciples to different vocations. The purity of Shri Lankan dance which had flowed in a continuity from father to son or nephew from guru to disciple was seriously threatened. It was into this ethos that Chitrassena returned after having trained all over India including Shantiniketan. He fused traditionalism with innovation, Conformity with rebellion, Nationalism with internationalism. Universality with particularity. He accepted a challenge with such sureness and dexterity and synthesized tradition with modernity without sacrilegious results to the art. Conservative preservation of traditional dance norms by others, would certainly have seen the end of Shri Lankan dance if Chitrassena had not perpetuated it by creation and innovation, to make the elite able to assimilate dance from the common folk and to sophisticate it before it returned to the masses of the future." He has been ably abetted and seconded all through by his wife Vajira, unique and inspired, his pupil and once prima dancer of compelling grace and technique, assured of *stree* balance and an unequalled sense of rhythm.

After having witnessed the perfection of his school of ballet and its executors, the dazzling sets, the humane touches the soaring leaps the pageantry, and color the unity of the *tandava* and the *lasya* the "marriage of sinewy steel with gossamer silk", I wished I could have seen Chitrassena and Vajira dance in his youth for I had read somewhere, that to witness that spectacle was to see them "dancing not for men but for the gods."

"A rose by any other name smells just as sweet." Little did Shakespeare know that his centuries old prediction would prove to be so true in the modern context. No, names here are not only restricted to names of human beings, but we have to admit that, too can sometimes be very interesting. Imagine an extrovert, a vociferous person or a downright "creep" called "Shanta" or "Shujan" meaning calm or good person in Bangla or perhaps a dark complexioned person named "Shuvra" (fair). Sorry you people out there, no offense to you personally, these were just some easy examples. But honestly, when it comes to names of people, you cannot really blame your dearly beloved parents for hoping you would have that certain "quality" or "virtue", can you? In any case most of our names are not appropriate for us. So the above mentioned names can be justified, but what about "Hitler"? Believe it or not but they are folks crazy enough to name their offspring Hitler - Surely, not because they want him to turn out to be a tyrant, a psychopath or a sadist like him? Then, what is the reason behind such an unusual choice? It must be Hitler's power and if there is a Hitler somewhere one might also find a Mussolini, Idi Amin or a Cheausescu too!

But names of human beings are not really the issue here, it is more about names in general. Look around our capital and just go on reading the names of shops, streets, enterprises, kindergartens, schools, coaching centres, food joints, restaurants etc and you will get the drift soon enough. That is, if you have an average IQ. Not that all the names are meaningless, but some are positively hilarious.

Let us start with food joints. There is a typical snack bar in a city shopping mall called "Hiraman Snacks". Only the owner knows the relevance of such an absurd name or does he? Then, there is a Chinese restaurant called "MacDonalds", now, this could not be a feeble attempt to copy the name of one of the most well-known food chains throughout the world, if so, then why a "Chinese" restaurant? Honestly, do these people think we customers are that gullible? What about the chain of pizza joints all over the city with names like - "Pizza Palace", "Pizza Inn", "Pizza Lake", "Pizza Park", or whatever, where it is

## "What's in a Name?"

by Lavina Ambreen Ahmed

common knowledge that the so called "pizza" is certainly not the main attraction? A city restaurant is known as "Sicily Biryani Ghar" one might wonder since when the Sicilians started eating "biryani"! Also, so many cafes exist in the city, i. e. "Cafe Jheel", "Cafe Corner", "Cafe Madina", "Cafe Baghdad", that it is not surprising that a person gets confused about what a cafe really is while a Frenchman might scream in outrage, "Mon Dieu, these Bangladeshis are crazy!"

Enough about eating places, let us switch over to shops and enterprises. Did you know that, there is a shop dealing in imitation jewellery and cosmetics named "Honeymoon"? As if only women about to get married can shop there, if such was the case then, they would have lost a lot of their female clientele of all ages. There are at least two "Romeo

Hair Salons" - both of which probably promises to make all the desperate Romeos look attractive to their Juliets.

Some of the shop owners have a tremendous liking for "Royalty" or popular TV personalities. As a result we see "Royal Snacks", "Elite Snacks", "Lord's Hair Salon", "Diana's Beauty Parlour", "Princess Fashion", "King Garments", "MacGyver Electronics", "Oshin Tailors" etc. May be if you look carefully, you might even find a "Raven Martial Arts School", or a "Eric Clapton" music school somewhere in the city! A special favourite of some proprietors seems to be the name "Madonna". Madonna's beauty salon or clothing shop can be understandable, but what about "Madonna Dental Clinic"? The renowned "material girl" might be famous or notorious for a lot of things, but, seriously not for her teeth? Sometimes the tiniest

shop is called a "mansion" or a "palace" or a "department store", where shops with names like "Shoe Mansion", "Furniture Palace", or "Book Fair" have become a common sight these days.

Within the last few years or so hundreds of kindergartens, schools and coaching centres have suddenly sprung up welcoming the concerned ones with their long list of achievements and often with a weird name. "Evergreen", "Sure Success", "Confidence", "Green Way", "Green Gems", "Genuine and Friends" are several among them. The "Oxford Coaching Home" probably guarantees to make all their students of the Oxford standard. Heaven knows, what to expect next from these money-grabbing commercial institutions. Pretty soon we might even see a "Harvard", a "MIT", "princeton", "Berkeley", "Cornell".

That is not all, just switch on the TV and you'll be entertained by a number of funny ads having names such as "Pancha" shoes and soap, "Prestige Lungi", "Sunmoon Tailors", "Paradise Cables", "Postman Oil" and many more. Some people complain that there should be Bengali comedies or sitcoms, but, then who needs comedies, when we have our ads? Most of you, have perhaps seen the ad of "Shampoo" cardigans and sweaters - the one, where a group of young people parade around, of course, wearing the warm clothes in question. They look so happy and proud that they obviously could not bear to tear the tags off if saying "I'm the lucky owner of a 'Shampoo Sweater', don't you want to be one too?"

There are so many other preposterous and totally inappropriate names of shops and products, that if one wishes to conduct a research (just a thought) it will take him/her ages to finish.

Did anyone ever wonder why a tailoring shop is called "Garden", a curtain shop "Skipper" or why a hospital situated here, in Dhaka, is called "Greenland"?

It is about time the people concerned gave it some thought, or used their grey cells like Hercule Poirot. Agatha Christie's favourite detective would say, before naming a certain thing.

Meanwhile, we the rest of us can enjoy all this, as there is a funny side. Only you need time, patience and not to mention a keen sense of humour for that.

## Unofficial Aunts Advise the World

by Nicola Cole

THEIR advice is sought by millions, their sympathy by millions more. "Don't struggle on alone with your problem," urges one advice columnist, typical of many. "Share it with me..."

And a mass readership, of course. For he agony aunts who write such columns never reveal names, but nearly always reveal problems. It is what they have been doing for the last century, since they grew with the rise of cheap printing, increased literacy and demand for popular magazines.

The aunts are both praised for doing a huge amount of practical good and condemned as "well-meaning busy bodies," but they have become as indispensable to successful newspapers and women's periodicals as cartoons and crosswords.

The agony aunt is a sob-sister, mother, confidante, confessor, female Freud, sex consultant, marriage counsellor, health adviser and - on one memorable occasion - an expert on carpet underlay.

"Where can I get felt?" asked a worried questioner.

"You can get felt anywhere if you put your mind to it," replied Marje Proops gleefully, the advice columnist for Britain's Daily Mirror newspaper.

Then she added a note that gave the name of a department store and suggested questions about carpet felt should be more delicately phrased.

There is a popular belief that such agony column problems are specially devised by the aunts themselves. Their collective reply is that they are quite busy enough, thank you, with genuine letters - many of them seemingly beyond the scope of imagination - to need to invent them.

Yet made-up massive are not unknown. Among them is the spoof "Letterbox" in Al Ain, a cheerfully vulgar magazine for English-speaking expatriates in the United Arab Emirates.

A recent plea supposedly came from a young woman who wrote: "Every night a strange thing happens. Just after I get into bed I have a sensation of old age creeping up on me. What should I do?"

"Dear Sheena," came the reply. "Tell Uncle Bob to stick to his side of the bed."

As satire it is deadly accurate: sex is the main worry of the advice-seekers, along with divorce, loneliness and bereavement. In Africa and the Far East, queries tend to concern religious, ethical and moral matters, rather than inter-personal relationships.

But around the world, men

seem to write in with only three questions: "How big? How long? and How often?" This eagerness to air bedroom topics would have appalled Victorian-era readers, for whom open reference to sex was taboo.

"Preserve your dignity and womanly pride" was the council loftily dished out by The Woman At Home's columnist in 1897 to a young lady clearly desperate for a closer affair with her beau.

The ancestors of today's agony aunts really felt much more comfortable with "safe" domestic issues such as what to feed husbands for dinner, bringing up spirited children ("I think, my dear, that a little wholesome neglect would benefit both them and yourself"), and reassuring readers who fretted that "the female constitution will break down under the strain" of typing - a very real concern of New Yorkers in the 1880s.

Present-day aunts need the broadest of broad minds. "People write very intimate things - things which are often shocking, libelous, not to mention sometimes illegal," revealed Virginia Ironside in "Problem! Problem! Problem!", her tell-all book on advice columns.

There are crazy letters in green ink from crazy people, there are shaky letters from the elderly and there are dreadfully wonky letters in unformed writing from people I always hope have not put their address at the top.

Wonky or well-balanced, the writers customarily receive a personal reply, even if their letters don't appear in print - it's one of the main reasons why people pour out their hearts.

"We will always be a joke," Marje Proops once wrote, "but who cares, really, as long as our readers continue to take us seriously and we are around when someone writes: 'I'm desperate and I don't know what to do or where to turn. Please, please, help me...'" (Gemini News)



## Cookery

### Cup Pudding

2 oz. butter  
2 oz. flour  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
2 oz. soft sugar  
3 eggs  
flavouring  
apricot jam

Beat the butter to a cream, add the sugar and then the flour and eggs by degrees, and keep beating the mixture until light and frothy. Flavour to taste with chopped lime-rind.

Butter some small cups or tins, half fill them with the mixture and bake in a moderate oven until nicely browned and firm to the touch. Turn out and serve with a little Apricot Jam on the top of each, and custard sauce.

### Devonshire Pudding

4 apples  
2 tablespoonfuls butter  
caster sugar to sweeten  
grated rind of half a lime  
3 tablespoonfuls halved stoned raisins  
4 oz. breadcrumbs  
2 eggs  
cream or custard  
Bake the apples until very soft, remove all the pulp and beat this in a basin until smooth. Add the butter, and

enough caster sugar to sweeten the finished pudding - about 4 level tablespoonfuls, but this depends on the sweetness of the apples.

Beat the eggs well, add the breadcrumbs and the prepared fruit, then the rind of lime and raisins. Beat all well together with a wooden spoon, turn into a buttered pie-dish, and bake in a hot oven for 15 minutes. Serve hot, with cream or custard.