

THE DAILY DRAMA

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Off to a Festive Start

The sixth edition of Remembering Veenapani Festival kickstarts on a high note

Parshathy J Nath Photo: Saransh Agarwal

The amphitheatre was alive and brimming with theatre lovers at the Adishakti campus. The space emitted a rare, quiet energy, indicating something vibrant was soon about to unfold. No surprise since the founder of the institution, Veenapani Chawla, was an enigmatic presence herself who lured creative energies into her institution with her vision. The first evening of the 6th edition of Remembering Veenapani Festival began on a reflective note, with eminent theatre artiste from Chennai, Prasanna Ramaswamy lighting the lamp along with Vinay Kumar, the artistic director, in front of the Koothu Kovil.

Prasanna reminisced about her engagement with Veenapani on a personal and creative level. "Veenapani's connect to performing traditions was very deep and her work revealed that conviction in its totality. Even as her work strongly rested on a female discourse, it had a fluid intermediary space, a fragile and ungended space was fantastic for me."

The inauguration was followed by the opening show of the festival Nidravathwam, conceived, created and performed by Nimmy Rafel. The play was based on the epic characters from The Ramayana, Kumbhakarna and Lakshmana, and how differently they related to sleep. One who suffered from an excess of it, the other who lacked it. Nimmy



crackled with energy and emotional precision, as she gently transitioned from one to the other with absolute ease. Packed with humour, playfulness and philosophical depth, the play compelled you to engage with the complexities of revenge, war, love, kinship and, of course, sleep and action.

Soon after the play, the audience streamed out of the theatre, excitedly chit chatting about the performance they watched. While some found their long lost friends near the food stalls, the others chose to just sit by pensively in the benches allowing themselves to process the play they watched. However, the food stalls outside stole the show, post performance. No one could stay too long away from the piping hot egg bajjis, dosais, and sandwiches made by in-house chefs of Adishakti and the

sandwiches and cakes whipped by chef Muthu Narayanaswamy from Auroville. Juice stalls saved the audience from the cruel heat.

However, the summer blues could not beat the excited spirit of the audience who were just happy to hang around in the precincts waiting to speak to the performer of the night, Nimmy. Some of them were perusing through the brochure, their eyes gleaming, promising themselves that they will be back the next day to watch Vinay Kumar transform into Brhnnala. While the others were enjoying the ambience of a decorated Adishakti campus, decked up with fairy lights and sequins. They clearly had no plans to retire. The first day of Remembering Veenapani Festival started off on a vibrant note, giving a foretaste of the days to come.

Who Passed By

Tete-a-tete with Hassane

Actors must listen to become better story-tellers, says Hassane K Kouyate

Dhara Chotai Photo: Saransh Agarwal



"Listening is the backbone for an actor," tells story-teller, actor, musician, dancer and director Hassane K Kouyate to participants of the Masterclass or-

ganised at Adishakti.

"The other needs to be heard, first and foremost, on stage. She is your co-actor, sharing the same space with you; She is your viewer, participating in a same space with you; She is your director, choreographing a space for you; and she is your character, whispering in your ears its story to be told by you. All this can be heard only in the process of 'Listening'."

Listening to the other enables an actor to create a rhythm of movements, expressions, text and context on the stage. Hassane derived his methodology through the tradition in which he was born, family of griots, historians, storytellers, healers, musi-

cians, and directors.

Hassane was exposed to music, singing, dancing and storytelling and occidental theatre too. A mix of all these devices have gone into his methodology for theatre. Hassane, along with his brother, has developed The House of Speech: Regional Centre of the Arts of Storytelling and Oral Literature in Barkino Faso, where they train actors and teachers in the art of storytelling. "Theatre is a public space", says Hassane, "a way of telling a story, for reflections and questions". He admires Adishakti as one such space nestled in the beauty of Nature to practise theatre and enhance performance.

Your Week



Behind The Gesture. Choreographer Anita Ratnam will helm a session on the craft of choreography. Her works draw on her distinct movement vocabulary, rooted in India while being contemporary.

Date: April 11

Time: from 10 am onwards



The Good, Bad and the Brilliant. Sathya Saran, A prolific writer from Mumbai will take a session on ways to evaluate a piece of work in cinema or on stage

Date: April 12

Time: from 10 am onwards



Process and Performance. Neelam Mansingh, is an award-winning theatre director from Chandigarh, whose body of work includes Kitchen Katha, The Suit, Yerma and Little Eyolf.

Date: April 13

Time: from 10 am onwards



Breath and Emotion. By our very own Artistic director

Date: April 14

Time: from 10 am onwards

Festive Vibe

Director's Note

Artistic Director of Adishakti, , Vinay Kumar, talks about the vision and history of the festival

Photo: Saransh Agarwal

The Remembering Veenapani Festival started in a non-organised way in 2014 when our late founder Veenapani Chawla passed away. We wanted to organise a festival in her remembrance. So, when her birthday came a few months later, we spoke to our friends, and other groups, and asked them to perform in her honour and all of them readily agreed. Without an effort, we had a festival.

We wanted to keep a structure which was not rigid, but as fluid as possible and not constrain ourselves with polar excesses. Theatre's primary source of inspiration is in music, dance and mime and we wanted to find out the possible expression of it to be showcased in this festival.

Are we taking the festival to a curated manner? We will only know it in a few years' time, as the fest grows into a bigger and more significant manner, which is already shaping that way. People are actually marking their calendar already to attend the fest.

With wider participation, we have been able to organise it in a way that stimulates and represents different art practices. We are waiting to see how it develops in a few years' time. We plan to hold newer fests that accommodate more divergent ideas and concepts.

This year's fest showcases some of the performances which we were planning to feature in 2020, but unfortunately they were cancelled due to the pandemic. Some additions have happened thanks to artists who have been generous enough to agree to perform such as a Rajashthani music group and musician Sanjay Subrahmanyam. So this year, the performances will be a conflu-



ence of shows we planned in 2020, 2021 and 2022, altogether. Apart from that, we are also celebrating 40 years of Adishakti, packed together as a month-long celebration with discussions and masterclasses.

We do not want idioms and ideological beliefs to dictate this festival. It should be a fluid space, which accommodates opposing arguments and where people share their views.

In the post-pandemic era, when the world is opinionated and divided, this kind of festival creates a pluralistic space that encourages dialogue. Left or right, everyone can do theatre.

Paws Button



Gulfi at his best, minding his business

Photo: Saransh Agarwal

I'm a dog of few words. During this festival, I think I am the only one who has his paws empty. Unlike other dogs, I don't want to spend my nights barking away, instead I want to try my paws at writing.

Today, sometime after I had my third lunch, I was sniffing around, you know, looking for a flower, to give to... someone... ummm... I'm a little shy, wait for my next column for girlfriend reveal. Anyway, I couldn't find a single flower.

Sniffing around suddenly I saw all flowers in one place right outside the theatre and I ran towards them to grab one for... you know... but, "Gulfi don't!" someone reprimanded me. The flowers were arranged into a Rangoli and had to be strictly kept aside for that. To be honest I did not like it, I was yelled at and given no attention all day.

All of them are too busy decorating for Veenapani festival. If they gave me some attention, I would have told them that Veenapani visited to bless them but only I can see her.

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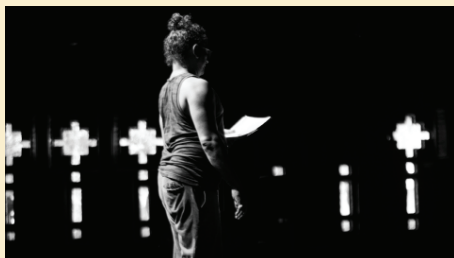
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Photo Essay: Vinay in Action

Photos: Saransh Agarwal



Review

Between sleep and action

Nimmy's performance offered us an interpretation of the epic which has barely been talked about Janaky Sreedharan Photo: Saransh Agarwal

Watching Nidravathvam the fifty minute solo performance after a gap of some years at the Remembering Veenapani Festival 2022 in Adishakti, I was struck by the unwavering intensity that pulsed through every breath of the writer/director/actor Nimmy Raphael. The play takes its title from the boon/curse Kumbhakarna the Asura is gifted with in the Ramayana which is 'Nidravatvam' or the state of uninterrupted slumber. Gods play a pitiless prank on this clumsy brother of King Ravana for his aspiration (or ambition?) to destroy the devas (Nirdevatvam).

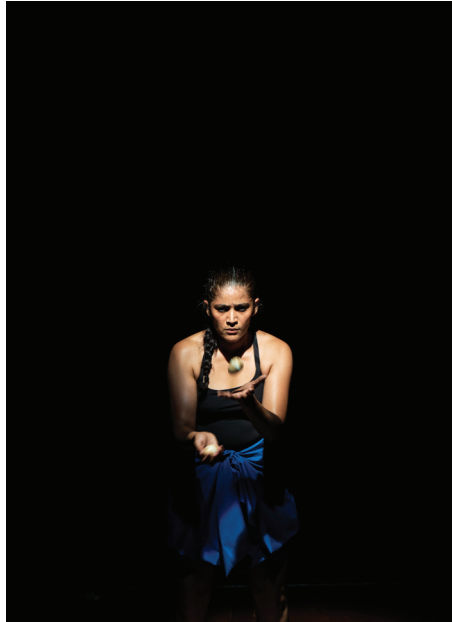
The lore goes that he mispronounces the word due to Goddess Saraswathi's (Vakdevi) clever play on his tongue and he ironically slides into inaction (sleep) instead of action (wakefulness). But Lakshmana, the brother of Rama is blessed with an ability to suspend sleep to guard his brother during the fourteen years of exile in the forest. Urmila his wife will sleep in his stead. Is this blessing a bane or a boon?

Nimmy dredges into the existentialist possibilities of this conundrum and invokes the entire scale of an epic war through a distinctive creative physicalization altogether. Her dramatisation of a less talked about paradoxical sleep positionings in the epic delves into hitherto unexplored philosophical nuances of boons/curses and their paradoxical energies. Nimmy explores the pathos and tragedy of the human conditions through a highly stylised vocabulary of the body—a gestural language at once rooted in tradition and abstraction.

Her body transitions from the heaviness of sleep to eternal guarded nature of wakefulness and slithers into the seductive rhythms of everyday playfulness and sensuality with an amazing ease and rhythm. Lighting and music blend in to the performance perfectly in sync with the alternating patterns of hilarity and melancholy.

Enriched by music and lighting designed by Vinay Kumar and with a text support

carried out by Arvind Rane the play continues to engage and intrigue. It essays to find contemporary resonances even as it moves into many layers of consciousness through which the human mind moves. Between the



ever attentive body of Lakshmana and the slumbrous slumping body of Kumbhakarna is a spectrum of bodies implied and intermeshed. There are bodies activated in a war only to be killed for the powers that be. In wars about which they know nothing of ---bodies made to fight someone else's war. Nimmy's theatrical interpretation makes the spectator involve, reflect about the infinite expressions the human body is capable of. Memories of love and war the body is capable of actualising through art.

I felt Nidravathvam is a brilliant initiation into the vocabulary of theater conceptualized by Veenapani Chawla in whose remembrance Adishakti comes alive every year.

Vigadan Jibes

Supernatural Spotted

Talking about some behind-the-scenes drama before the fest began, Yours Truly, Vigadan, found a supernatural presence when the huge Veenapani banner was put up. All the furry friends started barking as if they saw someone. Now we all clearly know who it is, don't we?



Humans of Adishakti

Garden Songs

Garima Mishra Photo: Saransh Agarwal

We bonded over mosquitoes. I was slapping my arms and legs trying to get back at the mosquitoes when Chinnasamy anna said to me, "Nariya kossu" (lots of mosquitoes). I looked at him, laughed and said "Aama anna", to this he responded with a long sentence in Tamil. "Tamil teriyaade anna" (I don't know Tamil) I said to him to which he laughed and said, "Ippadida ni tamil pessarien" (You just spoke in Tamil). Our conversation after this ice-breaker, thanks to the 'nariya kossu', was based on expressing through our bodies and broken Hindi, English and Tamil.

"What do you do here?" I asked. "Gardener", he replied, "lemons, tomatoes, brinjal, all". "Acting?" I asked wanting to know if being in a theatre for years, did he ever feel like being on stage! He laughed and said, "Yes yes. Six year ago, in one scene, I acted as a postman character. I come on cycle- tring tring tring- POST! POST! POST!" he

partially performed for me. "Do you want to act again anna?" I asked. "Yes!" he exclaimed as if it was obvious. "Old man character," he said as he stood up, cleared his throat and bent his body taking a posture of an older man pretending to hold a cane in his hand.

What happened post this was a full minute of pure entertainment followed by a jam session during which Anna and I bonded over old songs. I hummed along while he sang the Tamil songs and he hummed along while I sang the Hindi songs.

Do you sing them to your wife? "Oh no," he



said. "She doesn't know so many of them. So all these songs are stored right in here, within me," saying that he belted out one more.

Theatre meets poetry

Suresh Kaliyath on his craft and its anchoring in literature

Harshini Boyalla Photo: Saransh Agarwal

"Being here is like coming back home," says Suresh Kaliyath while discussing the feeling of performing for the festival. Suresh's collaboration with Veenapani Chawla began in 1997, while he was performing for the young artist fellowship for which she was a jury member. They discussed and discovered how theatre and Thullal as art forms are complimentary, thullal being an intersection of dance, poetry, music.

Suresh began learning and practising Thullal at the age of 14-15 years after exploring Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi. The teacher and trainer at Kerala Kalamandalam said, "the role of art is to mould a personality. It helps you grow, it helps you think and focus." Thullal is performed with colloquial Malayalam, classified into Ottanthullal, Seethankan and Parayan Thul-



lal. When is the best time for his preparation? "The state of a performer few hours before the show." Thullal Trayam, explained that very sentence! It was breath-taking; the show ended with standing ovation and left the audience in awe.

Citizen Review

Play Pulse

Garima Mishra Photo: Saransh Agarwal



The play just got over and the audience is stepping out of the theatre. I quickly came out to notice their after-play-faces. Is that a thing? If it's not, it should be. I can see a thinking face; does that mean the performance was thought provoking? Of course it does! I see a... ah a couple holding hands, that's sweet, oh no I'm getting distracted. A bunch of them are wearing masks which although I appreciate but I wanted to see their, again, after-play-faces, damn it Covid! Ah, finally, I see two excited faces approaching me. Let me strike up a conversation and I'll get back to you. *Striking up conversation* *Conversation over*.

These are Acting students from Pondicherry University and from the conversation I just had with them, I can tell you that they going back inspired by the physicality of the play and in their words, "the acting, the lights, the

music, everything". A common emotion in the audience tonight is... wait for it... here it comes... just a minute... fangirling over Nimmy, the performer, writer and director of Nidravathwam. A gentleman was struggling to approach Nimmy because he was overwhelmed by the performance *awww* so I rose to the occasion and spoke to him to give him a gentle push. He is an actor too and for him the play was a spectacle that he witnessed after the unfortunate dry spell of live theatre, thanks to the Pandemic.

A crowd has gathered near the food stalls. Probably the hunger of Kumbhakarna, the protagonist of Nidravathwam, has translated into the audience. I am keeping the Kumbhakarna in me aside and moving towards a new group to see what they thought of the play. "Kutti stood out for us", says one of the gentlemen and it's followed by a loud "Yeahhhh!" and a gasp from the group. Who

is Kutti you ask? Kutti is one of the characters from the play and is clearly a fan favourite! You must catch the next show and tell us if you agree. People are now going at it with the Bhajjis and the much needed buttermilk and hibiscus water, the elixir for this heat. I'm contemplating if I should bother anyone with my, "So what did you think of the play?" Still thinking... Let me test the waters with a small Hey. Guys, it worked! *conversation* *conversation* *conversation* Aah a lovely conversation over a plate of hot raw banana bhajjis during which I realised that the audience loved the concept of the play.

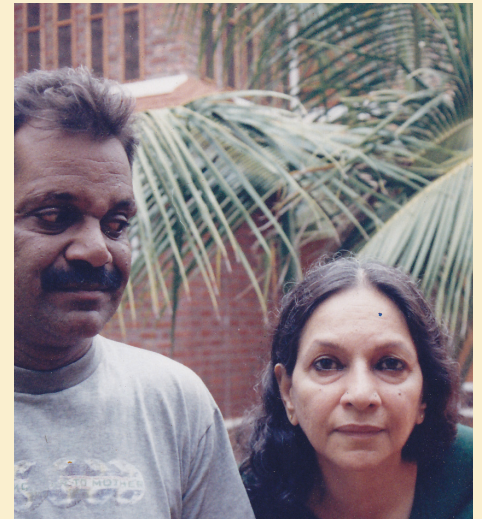
"I never drew a parallel between sleep and the wakefulness of Kumbhakarna and Laxmana respectively. It evoked sentiments in me for kumbhakarna", said one. "The effortlessness in the body and voice of the actor just shows the kind of practise that has gone in the training" said another. By now my inner Kumbhakarna is ready to throw a curse at me if I go for another conversation so I surrender and my body rushes towards the stall whose aroma it likes best. "Hey", I hear a voice and turn around. It's one of the audience members I spoke to a while ago. "I loved the shadows", he says. "The shadows? How so? I ask. "Just the shadows of the actor performing were fascinating to me."

You know how they say, whatever is on stage, is seen, it cannot escape. Not even the shadows!

Memory lane

The First Time

Arvind Rane travels back in time to tell us about the first time he was caught under the spell of Veenapani Chawla



The very first time I met Veenapani was in January, 1975, at the beginning of my 9th standard at Arya Vidya Mandir, Bombay. We were waiting to meet our new History teacher who was to prepare us for the ICSE exam the next year.

And, in walked Veenapani. The class was stunned. Slim, bright-eyes, big bindi, ethnic sari and with that penetrating look that no one who has ever met her will ever forget. She was sharp, radiant and mesmerizing. Her look encompassed the whole class -- twenty two of us, eleven girls, eleven boys -- all staring at her in stunned silence.

Then, after, "Good morning, Miss", she spoke -- softly, evocatively and emphatically, with deep conviction and perfect articulation. She impacted each and every one of us, the very first time we met her as she continued to touch every single person she has ever met in her entire life.

Stall Stalk

Drama in your Palate

Parshathy J Nath Photo: Saransh Agarwal

It was a potpourri of flavours at the food stalls in Adishakti the last one week. While from one side, Suresh anna and the Ammas beckoned us with the seductive whiff of egg dosais and multi-flavoured chutneys, from the other end chef Muthu Narayaswami drew us to sandwiches made of pesto sauce and cheese cakes and pannacotta.

Just as we settled into the routine of this menu on the first day, these chefs decide to up their game! So, on second day Suresh anna



springs a surprise. "Hot chapathi and chicken curry, ma," he extends a plate to us as soon as we come out of the theatre. "Guys, burgers are here!" Muthu calls out from the other end. There is already a queue for his juicy patties!

There have also been iced treats in the offering. Popsicle stalls are a hit among the spectators for whom it's become a habit to meander into the alley where the bright fluorescent stall is set up. While two foodies fiercely debate which flavour is the best, chocolate banana or grape, their third

friend grabs the opportunity to slyly steal a lick or two from each. And, what's summer without some nannari, hibiscus juice and butter milk! Adishakti's juice stall has become not just a space to down these flavourful drinks but also an adda corner for post show chit-chat.

Many who resolutely stick to their diet plans have been tempted to try out these goodies. While a few others happily indulge away; for what's a theatre festival without yummy food!