

# THE DAILY DRAMA

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## The slow revolutionary of Koodiyattam

Usha Nangiar's interventions in her art form reveal her deep, sensitive spirit

Parshathy J Nath Photo: Saransh Agarwal

**T**en-year-old Usha did not understand why she had to learn such a difficult form. It wasn't a simple art form. You do not get fast results. And, it has a complex structure. But, with the will of her parents, Usha continued her learning of Koodiyattam with the doyen of the form, late Ammannur Madhava Chakyar.

"It was when I was 15 I realised the preciousness of the form," says Usha. And, what followed were years of rigour. Koodiyattam was getting the international recognition it deserved in the 1980s and 1990s. And, Usha being the first and only female student at the Ammannur Gurukulam was involved with documenting the manuscripts, and globe-trotting with her Guru. Her current work is an extension of what her teacher had started. Its about the revival of the Nangiar-koothu Sreekrishnacharitham and bringing into life more female characters onto the Koodiyattam stage like Sita, Draupadi and Ahalya.

"In the 10th century, king Kulasekhara married a Nangiar, smitten by her acting talent. So, there was a strong culture of women performing.. Where did all those women/women characters disappear to?" In Sanskrit drama, women used to have few characters

to play, but thanks to the critical engagement with the form by artists like Usha, now we see Draupadi, Ahalya and Mandodari take centre-stage. Usha's negotiations with the existing framework of Koodiyattam are deeply anchored in the norm, thanks to the strong foundation in the art she got from her first guru, Ammannur Kuttan Chakyar. And traditional structure of the form, and yet they are fresh in how they are shaped by contemporary sensibilities, especially on gender. "In the 80s when I came to Koodiyattam, there were only two female characters on stage, Subhadra and Lalitha. And Shoorpanakha, but her demon avatar is considered male. Apart from her, all women characters have the same costume. I questioned that. And, we fought for more characters in the same costume." The Mandodari Nirvahanam she presented at Adishakti was a nuanced portrayal of the inner monologue of Mandodari that ended with her affection for Ravana. Just one emotion unfolded petal by petal



with time stretched before us. Kalamandalam Rajeev and Kalamandalam Vineesh on Mizhavu, Kalanilayam Unnikrishnan on Edakka and Athira on Thalam amplified the emotional texture with the instruments' subtle variations.

"Koodiyattam shows you the internal landscape of a character's mind." Slowness is ingrained in its core. "In life too, we understand people better through slowness. Slower we are, better our understanding of emotions and deeper our relationships."

## Who Passed By

## Kattaikkuttu whiff in the air

Parshathy J Nath Photo: Raj Khater

**T**he Adishakti theatre comes alive with the rhythms of Koothu. Inside, P Rajagopal and S Tamilarasi are having an amusing



banter. Tamilarasi is speaking in a language Rajagopal cannot understand. What follows this linguistic confusion is a humorous situation which the two actors capture with amazing ease. To the participants gathered for the Masterclass series at Adishakti as part of The Remembering Veenapani Festival by the team, this is such a unique drama motif where in contemporary theatre, a character breaks into the role of jester and makes social commentary.

The Kattaikkuttu Sangam is also rediscovering the form's potential to contribute creatively to a hybrid Indian theatre vocabulary. Currently, through their latest production, Tavam, they are questioning the way Koothu is perceived by the mainstream society and problems faced by pro-

fessional female artists post marriage. "Why do we use the term Koothu as something negative in our day to day language? Why don't we give the form the respect it deserves especially when all over Europe this kind of intimate theatre is valued so much?" The couple has consciously chosen to impart the skills to a lot of girls. "We not only teach them the form, which does not go really well with their families, but we also aid their formal education in schools," says Rajagopal. Just then Vinay Kumar, the artistic director of the institution, passes by and Rajagopal says, "Hey, when do we do our next play?" (A possible future collaboration?)

**Watch their play Santippu on April 25, 7 pm.**

## Your Week



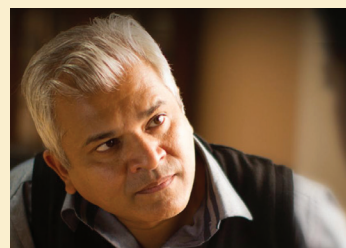
**A**n actor devises Puja Sarup will take a masterclass offering the time and space to explore one's unique storytelling voice using devising tools of theatre.

**April 18, 10 am onwards**



**R**uminations on Art A Mangai will focus on the process of making art in an unequal and asymmetrical society.

**April 19, 10 am onwards**



**I**mprobable Acts Ludicrous Atul Kumar offers a masterclass about Farce in Theatre—a genre of theatre his body of work represents.

**April 20, 10am onwards**



**G**owwli. A folk rock experimental band, Gowwli believes in transformation and recreating themselves through music. They signify struggle, death and rebirth through music where the beauty of existence lies.

**April 20, 7pm onwards**



## Place better than Home

A prolific journalist shares her experience at Adishakti, as she learns through the Masterclass sessions.

Preethi Nagaraj Photo: Saransh Agarwal

As I sit down to recount my time at Adishakti through the first part of the Masterclasses in the second and third week of April, my mind traverses through different shades of emotions. In our pandemic affected lives, we have lived through lockdowns, lost loved ones, may have survived a pandemic ourselves and have got into some sort of an ennui about the future. Something needs to move us and propel us into an excitement of creating something, at least help us to hope.

It was probably in the play Oedipus that I read the lines 'hope springs eternal from the breast of life'. And god, has anything else remotely sounded as close to life as that? In the last few months, if I have looked forward to anything to infuse some enthusiasm and energy into my life, it is - Undisputedly - theatre. Trying to piece together the imagery of energy that the legendary Veenapani has created during her lifetime as a theatre master herself is an example for this. About two-and-a-half weeks of this lifetime, we have lived on this rustic and earthy campus, being initiated further into theatre through different masters to find more fascinating aspects of this lifetime love called theatre and that has been a deeply poignant experience.

These are masters who have dedicated their lifetime to their art, sat with us, sharing a slice of their art in the most unassuming manner. In today's insta age, where everyone with about a 1000 followers is half a celebrity, to see the greatest artists of our times, is a humbling experience. It happened at Adishakti, everyday while we were here, while the campus celebrated the life of Veenapani. I come from My-



sore, a Southern city known for its music, education, culture and theatre apart from a whole lot of royalty, and trust me we have a lot of theatre happening there. But where else can you get to meet a whole generation of experts and gurus par excellence, see an ancient art form and hear a different language everyday, while being astonished at how far this creative space can facilitate people to blend their todays with tomorrows? To me it happened at Adishakti.

The world inside this lush campus almost felt Utopian. The discussions within the sessions of the Masterclasses, those experiments and attempts to assimilate learnings into pieces of performance, those late night conversations at stone benches and concrete tables with people from all ages... it just seemed as if I was reclaiming my life from the hands of time. It felt good. It felt energetic.

It didn't feel like home. In fact, it felt BETTER than home.

## Photo Essay:

### Portrait of Ladies on Fire



Photos: Raj Khater



## Paws Button



### Dog of Small Many Things

Sooraj S Photo: Raj Khater

Para Para.. Pam Pam... Para Para... Pam Pam, that's my hop-walk bgm. Brought up by my kwa kwa kwee pawless mother in this earthy abode of arts, I am a woofly aesthete. An appointed god inspector of all things here. Grrrrrrrr...Don't ask who appointed, okay?

I am sure my pawiew skills are being missed during these woofy festival days, due to my musical tendencies. I miss my inspection duty. My all gathering access card too. That seems to have been confisca-wooooo by kwa kwa ma and people. But you might have heard me on the day I ran out mid riyaz and serenaded the audience on a particularly scorchy show evening. It was indeed the need of the moment, rather the performance of that hour.

Post show I heard our DADA Dogetta, who calls me Bal-an K Nair, woof about how the food stalls are a bigger hit than the shows. And (slurppp) did I feel that in my nose. I did try my best to woof out a few patties and mutta bondais with my awoo song, but the stall keepers seemed tuneless. I shall write to the WWMS (World Woofly Musical Society) about a music initiation for these folks. Anyways, leave that. Scratch Break, chik chik chaaa chaaa. Woofawoo...What I really want to tell all you gawking festive folk is, you don't know who and what you are missing out on. I am very sure Sanjay and Konarak would ask for me on arrival, as I am the known dog of small and every things. Woof woof who there? Sorry, duty calls, got to go-awoo.

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## Words Moved, Gestures Spoke!

Anita Ratnam charmed us with her precise moves and shared the wisdom of her craft with the students. Anil Iyer Photo: Raj Khater

“So shall I begin?” Anita asks the organisers. They give a nod and without a single moment's delay, Anita in a striking long blue tunic does the Bharatanatyam namaskara. And, in that one instant, the participants at her Masterclass, Behind the Gesture, are smitten. “The arc of a movement lies in less and not more. Slowing and grounding creates an imagery,” she tells them as she introduces to them the concept of gestures from the Bharatanatyam vocabulary.

A Bharatanatyam dancer, trained in Mohiniyattam and then Kathakali, Anita moved to New York and got back to India after 10 years. Her exposure to other forms such as Kalaripayattu, movement theatre and also her stints in Adishakti and many more other learnings and influences have gone as inputs into her new choreographies; some of them led her to be termed as one of the finest choreographers.

Over five decades of her experience was shared in over five hours at the Masterclass. And the module was wrapped into tools of five Ws - What, When, Why, Where and Who that led to creating gestures that are appropriate and effective. Seven years of rigorous training is mandatory for becoming a performer. Anita refers to Adishakti's training which employs performance and breath from traditional art forms and weaves them into modernity. “One's mind gets clear only when one's body becomes articulate. The muscle memory comes and seeps into the body and allows it to receive other inputs, maybe from a choreographer or a director or someone else. The timing of when to use a gesture comes after internalising the text and working on the body. There is Vachika (Words) and Angika (Physical movements) and these two with right intentionality create Sattvika (emotions).”

Introduction and practice of multiple vocabularies help you to understand why we chose a particular gesture. Text, body, extremities of the limbs, face, props, costume and space vocabulary are the prerequisites for ev-

ery live performing artist. An artist has to know the vocabulary, speed, time and shape of the work to be able to devise a play or a performance. “Integrating several vocabularies, not negating one or over indulging in the other and conscious recognition of less being more effective are key for an impactful showcase.”



How much to amplify the gesture comes from intentionality, focus, ability to listen to self and understand the thought that needs to be communicated. “Only with this exploration, an actor or a performer will be aware of how to communicate. Many thoughts, various emotions, multiplied movements, and multiple narratives lie behind the gesture.”

## Pickle jar full of stories

Jeeva Raghunath on her journey as a yarn spinner.

There once was a girl born into a family of storytellers. She would travel into her world of imagination as her grandmother told her stories of kings and queens and huge palaces. At a young age, she had a (pitara) of stories, and would always have people around her listening to her tales. Chattering away through her growing years she ended up becoming a teacher. But not your stereotypical teacher. She was fun and loud and full of life. Although she would be pulled aside by the principal once in a while for creating a ruckus in class, the children loved the teacher and were inspired by her stories.

And the Stories loved her for the life she would put into them. Jeeva Raghunath voyaged across oceans, mountains and forests reciting her tales to everyone. One fine day she arrived at Adishakti for a Masterclass to find a group of young performers, hungry to find their voices as storytell-

Garima Mishra  
Photo: Raj Khater



ers. “Be yourself,” said Jeeva, “The stories chose me, they will choose you because they will have an element of you. A good story is like a pickle, you put it in your mouth and it goes “Ttaa”!” She then went on to narrate a story, a perfect mix of sweet gestures and spicy characters and everyone in the audience together went “Ttaa”.

## Vigadan Jibes

Shutterbug thugs in the theatre.

This week has been a Mega Excruciation. Yours truly, Vigadan and fellow masterclassians were held hostage by a bunch of camera goof -goons! In the name of learning we were made to bend, dive, duck and lunge in uncomfortable positions just so that the goof-goons could get a perfect frame of the masters. What about our atma-sammaan?! Vigadan protests. ‘No Lens, Only Pens’



## Humans of Adishakti

### Man of Action

Garima Mishra Photo: Raj Khater

I was craving for a cup of tea when I saw Tapan bhaiyya for the first time. He was pouring some for himself. I was new so I was shy to ask. He saw me looking, “Aapko chahiye?” (Do you want some?) he asked me. I nodded with a yes. “Le lo na, apna ghar samajh ke jo karna hai karo.” (Please have, do whatever you want to, consider this your home) I instantly felt comfortable. “But with respect.” He was firm but sweet. He is the caretaker of Adishakti; nothing escapes his eyes. Be it solving the mystery of the ‘bread stealer’ from the kitchen or feeding the animals or keeping an eye on the entrance of Adishakti, he does it all. “I am Vinay sir's right hand,” he says with pride. “The artists work so hard inside so I want to take care of the outside.” He will never be found in a crowd, sometimes you might find him reading a book. “I read spiritual books, something that will help my thoughts evolve,” he says. Other times, he helps those in need. “We have a small group; we

contribute from the little we have, to help anyone who needs it,” he says. “Does it have a name, a website or a social media handle?” I ask. “No, I don't do it to show anyone, there are no pictures of us online,” he replies. “Can I take a picture of you for this article?” I ask hopefully. “No,” he smiles.

Next, he plans to go to his hometown in Assam and help the homeless in that region. When asked where he will find the money to do it, he says, “The one who waits for money to start something, will keep waiting. Start with whatever little you have.” And, from where did he learn all this? “We began from zero, no education, just life experience,” he replies.





# A Play for Our Times

Bhoomi engages us with its strong theme and vibrant form

Kirtana Krishna Photo: Saransh Agarwal



The air was palpable with excitement as crowds lined up, waiting impatiently to enter the Koothu Kovil and grab a seat. Adishakti's performance of their latest play, Bhoomi, for the festival this year was a highly anticipated one. A play, which was tuned to near perfection during the depths of pandemic lockdown, was now being performed a year after its premiere.

Bhoomi begins with a bang. Ashiqa Salvan's opening lines set the tone for the play, and the next hour-and-a-half whizz by taking the spectator along on a hilarious ride that shifts into an uncomfortable gear. Here goes the story. All is well in the Dandakaranya forest. Springtime

is here and along with it, preparations are being made for the Vasantholsavam. Sage Shukracharya, played by Sooraj S., is wonderfully comical. As is his dithering female student, Jawara, played by a stunning Meedhu Miriyam.

Shukracharya's daughter, Araja, played by Nimmy Raphael, is all innocence, a girl at the cusp of womanhood, awaiting to explore a life away from the one steeped in rules and ritual in her father's ashram. At the Vasantholsavam, along with her friends, she expresses herself, singing and dancing and frolicking. She is spotted by King Dandaka, played by an excellent Vinay Kumar, who is overcome by his lust for her and follows her back to the ashram and express-

es his desire to her. She rejects his advances, and in his fury, he rapes the girl. At this point, we are brought into a play within a play, reminiscent of A.A. Milne's The Man in the Bowler Hat.

The actors debate on finding a resolution that is atypical to the norm even as we find out that one of the cast of the play within has been raped by a colleague. The vibe sours instantly and we are transported from lala land to reality. The rest of the play involves the director, Kamala (played by Ashiqa), trying to find a resolution to enable her to speak her truth, at least on stage, even if it can't be spoken in real life.

This play breaks away from the quintessential Adishakti, in style and musicality. The company is trying to forge a new direction for their creative work. Kudos to the ensemble cast for a matured performance and musical stamina (think of all those tricky notes, rendered by them without amplification, all the while dancing and projecting!). The compositions by Vinay did justice to the feel of the forest and Vasantholsavam.

Yet, one wonders what would have happened if Araja was a contemporary, strong woman and the music was devised accordingly. Special props to Parshathy on lights, and Arvind Rane, who plays King Surata while also playing a variety of percussion. Overall, Bhoomi is an enjoyable fare that tackles the topic of violation with sensitivity, something necessary in these strange times.

## Memory lane

### Herstory re-told

History wasn't just about dates for Veenapani, recalls Arvind Rane, the school student

Veenapani was a History teacher like no other. She gave us a feel of the ebb and flow of world history, emphasising the conditions that caused the advent of circumstances that led to their demise, when their time was up. She gave us an objective overview of history and her approach was unique. "Forget dates. Get the facts and understand the circumstances." Most other teachers of History made the kids mug up the dates of events, without understanding the conditions that caused them to occur. And her methods of maintaining discipline in class were unorthodox but never authoritarian.

Her classes were always riveting but sometimes, when the class got a bit noisy (school kids, after all), Veenapani used to start speaking so softly, in her gentle voice, that all of us had to perforce maintain pin-drop silence, to catch her every word.

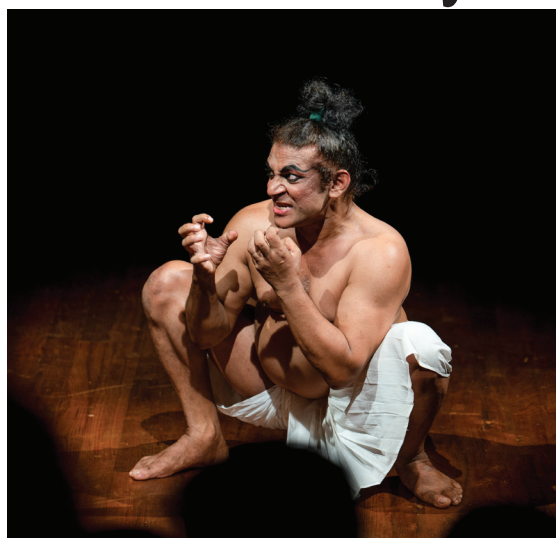


One day the boys in class were creating a disturbance. Veenapani's voice cut through the mayhem, "Silence! Whoever doesn't want to pay attention, get out of my class and go to the library!" All the boys rose as one, and walked straight out of class. On the way to the library, there was a lot of smirking and giggling and a good time was had by all. But the next day, Veenapani had the last word. Because she gave us a spontaneous written test on a topic she announced in the class we had missed. All the boys fared badly while the girls were on top.

## Review

# Many Beings, One Body

Charumati Supraja Photo: Saransh Agarwal



At the 'Remembering Veenapani Festival 2022,' it was impossible not to notice the jugglery of the Adishakti actors off stage – managing, coordinating, troubleshooting, handholding, hosting and more! And the same bodies would go on stage bearing texts, music, gesture and philosophy, funneled through a craft, honed over 40 years. Not a note would be off or a single player out of character.

This Adishakti way of being an actor is embodied foremost in Artistic Director Vinay Kumar – a close mentee and collaborator of Veenapani Chawla. How does

an actor body relate to a text it has held over 24 years? Are the memories of performances and experiences had during then coded into the body's cells?

'Brhannala', the solo act by Vinay, is held together by a team that works marvellously in tandem with each other. Though the musicians are seated by the side, their each breath integrates with the actor's and makes the play a multi-layered treat.

Through Brhannala, Veenapani, the director, dispenses with our need to understand and takes us to a place of seeing. We travel through the landscapes traversed by the innocent Tiger and laugh with the cynical but caring Dog.

The actor transitions between different worlds through the light play. In the early moments of the play, Vinay establishes that his body is the meeting point of the polarities being explored.

The masculine and feminine reside in his muscles – one side rippling, the other curving. His performance was riveting with every movement, gesture, expression and word being followed closely by all – from small children to adults.

The live music was a powerful character in itself. Having premiered 24 years ago, Brhannala has found a home in the actor's body, a shining mirror to the play's questions.