

# THE DAILY DRAMA

WEEKLY FESTIVAL MAGAZINE | SUNDAY 24- 30 2022 | ADISHAKTI THEATRE, PONDY

## Blues, Carnatic and all that jazz...

Kirtana Krishna, the musician, gives us a perspective on the relationship between music and Adishakti, and what to expect this festival month. Photo: Raj Khater



The Koothu Kovil at Adishakti has seen many feet walk on its teak floor, and the laterite walls have echoed a myriad of sounds. Here's a stage that beckons to the performer in us all. And of all the many art forms to have taken centre stage, music shows at Adishakti have always had that extra special flair.

Adishakti's relationship with music is deep and personal. Every single one of their plays has given homage to the art form, whether it be live or recorded music, with their latest play, Bhoomi, being a complete musical. The core team consists of practitioners of music themselves, each of them playing multiple

instruments. Naturally, the curated music shows at every festival, from its very inception, have had to be in line with the excellent taste of the company.

This year however, Adishakti have sought to outdo themselves with the music performances, bringing some truly extraordinary acts onto the stage. Beginning with Gowwli, a folk rock band from Auroville, which promised to get the crowds going and absolutely delivered on that front, engaging the audiences with their rock beats and verbal improvisations.

The next act is that of Just Sisters, which again promises to be something unlike any music performance to have come to these

parts. A vocal harmony trio, accompanied by minimal percussion, covers some classics in blues, jazz, bossa nova, across a range of languages, and specially arranged for 3 voices. This will be a goosebump rendering session.

Another highly anticipated show is that of Sanjay Subrahmanyam. An improviser unlike any other, this concert is one that is sure to attract a voluble crowd while also being particularly transcendental for the listeners as he navigates the complex rhythms and modal terrains typical to Carnatic music.

Then there is the duo of Pallavi MD and Bindhumalini performing in a show titled The Threshold. Featuring award-winning musicians, this show will be a delight to all lovers of pure melody.

Look For Me In The Stars is a presentation by two stalwarts of contemporary instrumental music in India. Konarak Reddy and Roberto Narain will take to stage only to show us how it's done, sans voice, sans ornamentation, just guitar and drums. Finally, Rang -e- Thar is a high energy folk performance from Jodhpur, which promises to be the perfect culmination for the festival, apart from being a rare and highly sought after act of excellence in musicianship and

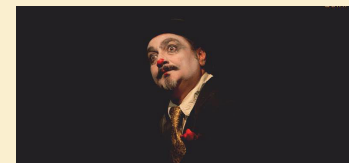
## Your Week



**S**antippu Kattaikkuttu Sangam from Kanchipuram will perform the epic story of Mahabharata using traditional Tamil music, story-telling and movement. **25th April, 7 pm**



**K**utti Illavarasan Silk Route Theatre will be performing an adaptation of The Little Prince in Tamil featuring string and shadow puppets. **26th April, 7 pm**



**N**othing Like Lear Rajat Kapoor & Vinay Pathak will be presenting an adaptation of Shakespeare's King Lear through the eyes of a clown. **27th April, 7 pm**



**S**anjay Subrahmanyam will be singing a concert in Hindustani Ragas with a blend of tradition and modernity **28th April, 7 pm**



**E**lephant in The Room Yuki Elias will be re-telling the story of Ganapati as a poignant reinterpretation of the social, cultural and environmental realities of our times. **29th April, 7 pm**

## Who Passed By

## Actor in a flow

Parshathy J Nath Photo: Raj Khater



**C**uriosity is the driving word when it comes to defining Puja Sarup's approach. That seeps into the most mundane elements of life like traffic. After doing her higher studies in theatre in Italy, she dwelled deeper on the craft of theatre devising. She shared some of her devising triggers with the participants at Adishakti as well, and mask making was one of the

main motifs. It was as if the actor's bodies got a new lease of life, when they wore the masks she handed to them. We could see the same transformation when the actors tried to perform a colour or an inanimate object. "I can never be bored," she tells them. "Short stories, photographs, observing people around...these are tools to become versatile." These devices have been imbibed by her from her training in Italy that demanded her to be observant of the world around her. "Being in the state of water flowing down the mountain, a fried egg on a saucer, aspirin in water...in real life these are very real things we do. Take the state of being glacier...someone being cold like a glacier while talking to you...these are real life situations!"



# Art for whose sake?

Rahul Bishnoi shares his ruminations on Mangai's session that threw vital questions on art practice. Photo: Raj Khater

**D**r. V. Padma's nom de plume is Mangai, meaning a woman or a lady in Tamil. She recalls she took this name when she was in her 20s and this became the identity of her theatre and politics.

Mangai's theatre explores the two major points of intersection of gender and performance, the body and narrative. In her play, *Pani Thee* (2003), she presented the story of Amba/Shikhandi and the themes of sexual ambiguities with social justice. Mangai chose to tell this story in Therukkoothu form which was an all-male art form till 1997. She worked with Usha Rani, one of the first twelve women to perform Koothu. The performance was aesthetically unsettling in ways both form and the narrative counter the masculine presence in theatre. She's telling the story of a woman defeating the man who cannot be killed in *The Mahabharatha* and in the art-form which was exclusively performed by men.

In Adishakti Theatre's Remembering Veenapani Festival Masterclass, Mangai used several performance tools to make the participants question the same two elements of her research: body and the narrative. During one of the movement drills, Mangai says, "Love begins with self-love. Own your body and identities without any obligation of social validation."

In another exercise she divided the participants into groups based on contextual structures of society (public transport users, personal vehicle owners etc) and created an educative discourse. This discourse highlights the boundaries of class, caste, and privilege that are often overlooked in theatre spaces.



Like Marcel Proust, Mangai also presented an emphasis on seeing the 'mundane' as art and not underestimating 'the routine'. She quotes Susan Hawthorne and says, "Art is not something exotic". Artists who trade their blood and sweat to earn a living, cannot afford to separate their lives from their art. The cooking, cleaning and sleeping is as much an art as the visual of a thespian on stage.

It's intriguing how art is leisure for the privileged and resistance for the oppressed. Mangai too confesses that she comes from a place of privilege but she chooses to create with the oppressed. And that is my rumination from her work: how can a man tell a woman's story; how can an urban citizen speak of the pains of the tribals? By acknowledging, listening and telling with care, love and responsibility.



## On the Bucket List?

Parshathy J Nath Photo: Raj Khater

**S**o, who is the best Kalari practitioner in the campus? The feline queen who owns the terrace territory above our artistic director's abode and keeps a tab on who comes and goes. No surprise since she is a close associate of Nimmy Raphael, the powerhouse performer of *Adishakti*. But, the current dwellers on the upper floor are faced with a small trouble: we have to either duel with Bucket for a quick stroll on the terrace or an instant urge of intellectual reflections, or else just surrender and let her claw and sniff us out for her to permit our existence around her. Meoww much, we say.

*"Let the story come to you, but the story will decide where you go."*

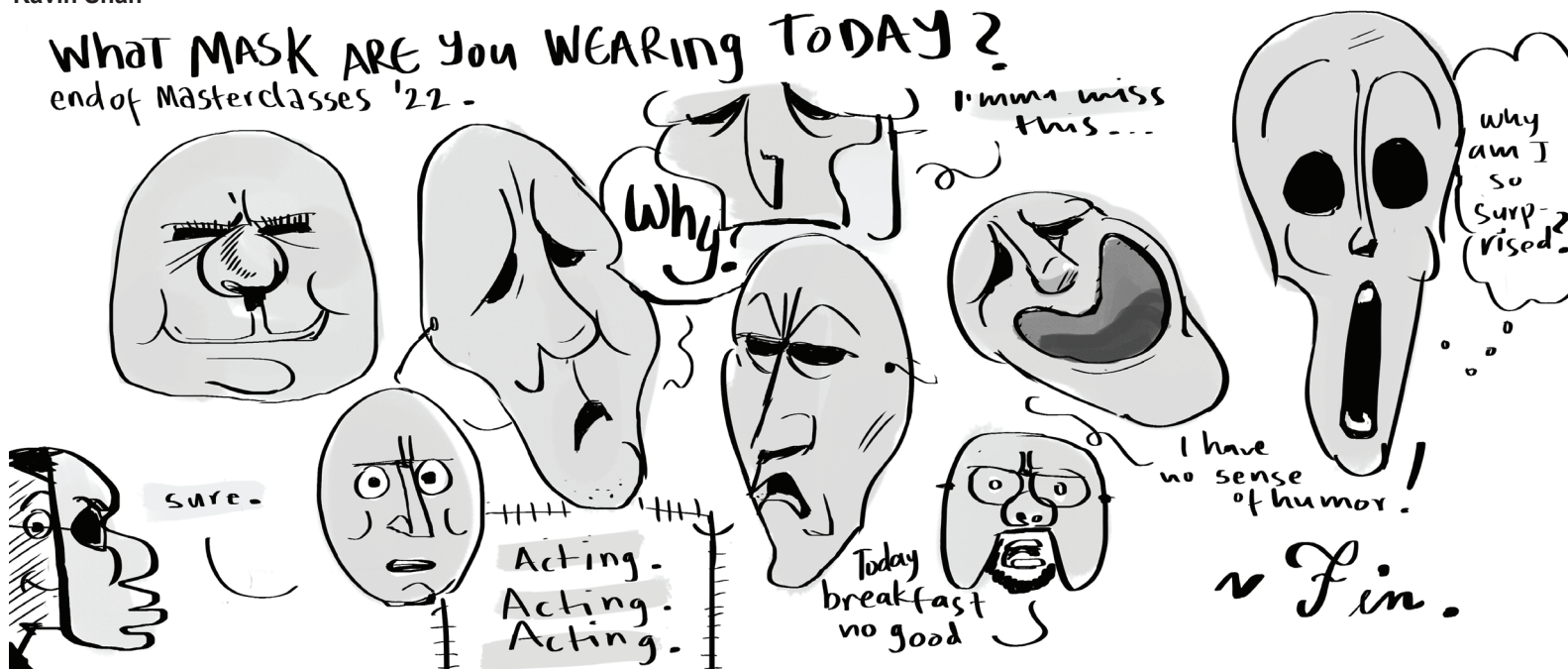
- Hassane K Kouyate

*"Before make-up we put a red ribbon on our head, once we do it, we do not touch anyone's feet. We don't get up even if our Guru comes. We are actors then!"*

- Usha Nangiar

## Sketch Pen

Kavin Shah





# The fluid spaces of Koothu

Sooraj S reflects on Bharathakoothu's contributions to a performer's work, based on his Masterclass observations.

Photo: Raj Khater

“I am Dushasana, I am Dushasana, I am Dushasana...” whispers the koothu performer to himself as he paints the vividly vocal dots around the corners and curvature of the face, reminiscent almost of a method-actor whispering her/himself into the landscape of the character. The difference, and a significant one it is, in Bharathakoothu is that the actor post the said ritual, sings in the chorus, joins in on the beedi breaks and is teased and excited into a very liminal performative space by the continually present Kattiyakaran/ the narrator-joker. M D Muthukumaraswamy, the director of National Folklore Support Centre, in his Masterclass on Bharathakoothu, the month long post-harvest koothu performative tradition of The Mahabharatha in the northern regions of Tamil Nadu, weaved many a beautiful thought-strands around what the contemporary performer could imbibe or rather take inspiration from Bharathakoothu.

He started the conversation by directing attention to how a form seated deeply in many regional collective memories and populated by mythology that is part of the whole subcontinental consciousness, manages to permeate a kind of reflexive and sublime character; traits most often claimed by the contemporary terrain of performative arts but are rarely delivered upon. Performed on the grounds of Draupadi/Panchali kovil (temple), who is also a key character in the narrative, the form functions around the rendition of the lore to a key character within the story over a period that could vary between 3- 20 days. In this tradition of reenactment of rooted cultural memory which is also perceived as the shared history of the collective, the act of witnessing or the idea of being a witness becomes very important; it's an act which the form achieves with its devices such as the continual clown (Kattiyakaran) and regional variations in reading. It's done with a kind of reflexivity that the contemporary performer is always in pursuit of, but seldom manages to concretely arrive at.

The flexibility of the performer-actor was another point of observation



that occupied the larger conversational picture; how the performers of koothu, trained by their vaathiyar (teacher) in the stylized adavus (foundational steps), can shift landscapes, both emotional and ambient, with the prowess of the form's vocabulary and a strong sense of socio-cultural memory and the dilemmas that arrive with it. They are musicians, story-tellers, dancers, critical audience all bound in one.

The participatory liminal ecosystem the form manages to sustain as its general format is also something that is enunciated. There exist many levels of engagement/ participation. There are folk who only listens from their homes, while there are also people who only take part in the day time story-telling sessions. Then there is the section that sits through the night long performances, sleeping, drinking, smoking and sometimes even performing in capacities asked of them. A fairly democratic existence that allows fluid participation is seen in the general eco-system of the Bharathakoothu performance space, an area that the contemporary brethren still need to explore beyond the generic layouts that are followed. Muthukumaraswamy's masterclass as a whole traversed the variety in potential a contemporary performer could explore within the form of Bharathakoothu, a strong culturally and socially rooted folk form. In brief, the session examined how the folk form lends itself in the most unassuming of manners, for a performer, to form readings and learn from.

## Freedom in breath

Robin Philip Photo: Raj Khater



Given that a part of my mind had yet to overcome the spell that had been cast by Brhannala and Impressions of Bhima, Adishakti productions featuring Vinay Kumar as solo performer, I was more than just excited to hear that one of the Masterclasses in Segment 1, would be

Adishakti's famous 'Breath and Emotion' session by him. In the session, he showed us how every action in all of our lives can be classified into a certain rhythm pattern, based on beats or counts or numbers. After making a quick witty comment on the importance of Maths in theatre, he touched upon the rhythm of life, before transitioning into the rhythm that controls everything in us, including our emotions - Breath!

Vinay used the Navarasa and broke it down as the eight stories in the world of emotions, from which all other stories arise. He then introduced us to more exercises, this time, with breath, and the use of breath clubbed with facial expressions, sounds, and movements, all of them laid out in various permutations and combinations of rhythm, to bring out the desired emotion. This was an eye opener for me, and for almost everyone else, that real emotions could be triggered with breath in rhythm. The session freed and enlightened me, and I was left begging for more.

## Vigadan Jibes

War of flavours

Yours truly, Vigadan senses a masaledhar war stirring up between the food chefs. Standing side-by-side making katak matak sounds one louder than the other. Who has a longer line? Who's cow is better than who's chicken? Who's sauce stains are spotted on how many collars? Who's sweat droplets have better tang? Vigadan proposes that an Official Ladle-Duel be Scheduled!



## Humans of Adishakti

### A woman's f(l)ight

Garima Mishra Photo: Raj Khater



Shanti madam this... Shanti madam that... Ask Shanti madam... I heard her name multiple times before I met her. I pictured her to be a strict accountant with thick glasses sitting behind her table with bills all around. "Ummm where is Shanti madam?" I asked someone hesitantly. "There," they pointed. She was sitting in the garden with the dogs. "Come", she said. Her face is as bright as her golden earrings and as fresh as her gajra. "First thing I bought from the Adishakti's salary is these earrings for myself," she says with pride. She is a single mother of two sons. She got married when she was 26. "Maa, what is

this compulsion to get married? I didn't want to get married. I wanted to work." Shanti Madam has been with Adishakti for 15 years now. "My life changed after Adishakti...bigger house, school fees for children, all because I am here." Remembering Veenapani, she said, "She always treated me as family only. She wanted women to grow." Suddenly she broke into laughter. "First time I went on flight was with Veenapani madam. That time I was very scared," she continued laughing. "She helped me with the belt. Take-off time was okay but landing no... I thought my stomach will come out!" We both laughed uncontrollably. "What do you want to do next in life akka?" I asked. "Maa, I love to travel. Anywhere! I have to go; I have to meet different different people." Again, one more round of laughter! "Two years back, me and two friends had gone to Himachal Pradesh. My friends were flying for the first time. Then, it was my turn to tell them, 'Don't get scared!', " and she continued laughing.



## Audience Review

## Melt-mush-worthy music

Gowwli swayed hearts and notes with their lovely riffs and vocals. Garima Mishra captures the post-show mood.

Photo: Raj Khater



a traffic signal gone green, they are all rushing towards the whiff of bhajjis and burger patties being thrown on the pan, which is understandable after all that dancing! No problem, I will wait patiently to start up a conversation... I hear giggles from a group of girls. "Their energy is infectious", says one of them. "Which one's your favorite?" I ask steering the conversation towards some drama. "JJ has a great vibe", blushes one of the girls.

I agree! JJ is the bass guitarist of Gowwli and a crush for many this evening! A few grumpy faces around have caught my attention. "We didn't have enough space to dance," they complain and I understand, when Gowwli performs, we dance! A few of Gowwli's constants are here too. "All four have a different way of pulling the crowd, with their stories, compositions, and their energy! We love them!" A gentleman is approaching me very sincerely. "Please tell them, they travelled all night and came here to entertain us. We appreciate it very much."

My heart is melting a little. An hour flew by but the tunes and the stories will remain with us.

An hour to go for Gowwli's concert tonight. I enter the auditorium to witness the pre-show drama. I open the door and... (Mic check, reverb, vocals) It's madness! I step out. Outside, it's the exact opposite. Beautifully dressed volunteers are putting diyas equidistantly. Audience members are exchanging occasional "Hellos", "How have you beens", and "So longs"! Odomos is being passed around because more audience means more food for the mosquito gang.

Talking of

food, the stalls are back! And the first ones to crowd the stalls like a swarm of bees are the volunteers, so much so that everyone is going around working with one hand and holding the popsicle in the other. Oh, there goes the bell, it's 7 already! See you after the showww..! \*Show\* \*Dancing\* \*Cheering\* Audience chanting: "Once more! Once more!"

Haahhhh! The show is over but our toes are still moving to the folksy tunes of Gowwli that have cut through the intensity of the masterclasses. I am the first one out to see the after-play faces! I see a... woah! It's like

**"Story is the way we link ourselves to the world, it gives meaning to our lives."**

- Koumarane Valavane

## Memory lane

## Let them drink tea!

Arvind Rane sips on a few memories that reveal the sheer grit of Veenapani's spirit

In Adishakti's early years in Bombay, it was literally a hand-to-mouth existence. All the actors held day jobs and we would meet every evening after work.

Rehearsals were in garages, industrial estates, municipal schools and friends' terraces just two floors above roaring, cursing, hooting Bombay traffic. The only luxury was the tea from a corner shop that came during the break.



One day, there was no money for tea. Then those of us who were salaried would pitch in the money. And then, a friend in Australia sent us 500 U.S. Dollars, apologising for how paltry the sum was! But it bought us many more teas. And that was Veenapani --determined, tenacious, relentless, bashing on regardless, completely focused on her objective -- to evolve ideas, concepts and performances that made a difference. And it is this single-minded determination of Veenapani Chawla, carried forward by her successors, that has brought Adishakti to where it is today. If there was a precipice looming, she never slowed down but went off the edge at full speed and the sheer momentum generated would carry us to the next mountain.

And this is the guiding ideology for Adishakti to this very day.

## Stall Stalk

By Parshathy J Nath  
Photos: Saransh Agarwal  
and Spoogy Yarbles

Remembering Veenapani Festival is abuzz with not just theatre, music and dance, but also food stalls selling mouth-watering treats whipped up by expert chefs. As we launch into the segment of shows featuring guest artists, the festival space comes alive with people buzzing around two new stalls: one featuring ITISU, a clothing brand that believes in sustainable and ecologically responsible fashion and another is an Upcycled crafts stall selling

bags, book marks, accessories and pouches made of upcycled products. Do not forget on your way to the theatre, to take a peek at the Adishakti T-shirt stall selling some cool tees in mustards and greys, carrying signature Adishakti imprints. Along with that grab a bar of Mason and Co chocolate, sea-salt flavoured, and munch on that chocolate goodness. Is there a better way to kill time while queuing up to watch a performance?

