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Remembering Veenapani

Adishakti's annual tribute festival is back with a stellar line-up **p2**

Spotlight on young artistes

The 'Legends of Tomorrow' is a series that platforms promising talents **p3**



A FILM WHERE A DANCE FORM IS THE PROTAGONIST

'Onkara' takes you through the lives of the Mavilans and nuances of theyyam **p4**

Nature took centre stage at the 'Ragas by the River' festival held amidst the wilderness of Jim Corbett National Park

Stopping by the woods

Chitra Swaminathan
chitra.swaminathan@thehindu.co.in

Hindustani vocalist Kaushiki Chakraborty was thrilled about sighting tigers, while singer Hariharan was delighted at spotting elephants in the wild. Flautist Rakesh Chaurasia left the venue in a hurry after his morning concert to go on a safari. "I wanted to perform before I went into the forest. What if a tiger hunts me down?" he laughed, before playing a soulful raag Pahadi.

CONTINUED ON
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CHARLIZE THERON

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Charumathi Supraja

There are many ways to remember a mentor. Keeping the land she nurtured, watered and green maybe one. Not giving up, for even a day, the rigour and detailing you were trained to value in work – another. Also, managing to draw back the people she taught, influenced and inspired. This and some more are what the core team of Adishakti Theatre Arts, Auroville, achieves every year through the Remembering Veenapani Festival (RVF).

In its 10th edition this year, the RVF will happen at the Adishakti campus in Auroville, between April 1 and 8. Held in memory of Veenapani Chawla, who centre-staged an exploration of the wholesome potential of theatre and created a performance training methodology that is much sought after, the RVF is known for presenting works that bridge the spaces between different forms of art.

Diverse themes

This year's RVF holds out a promise of diversity and richness. The line-up includes a play in Lepcha (a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in parts of Sikkim and West Bengal) that will have live music by Sofiyum, a Sikkimese folk fusion band; a dance-theatre production on Janabai and Lal Ded (two women who unabashedly pursued their chosen spiritual paths through poetry); a gig featuring a musician (who is also a popular actor) and his collaborator bringing alive Hindustani poetry as contemporary music to a multi-art kaleidoscopic exploration of queer love; a play that visualises a meeting between Achilles and Arjuna to one that prods our prejudices



Trailblazer (From left) Veenapani Chawla at Auroville; and with Vinay Kumar in 'A greater dawn'. PHOTOS: T. SINGARAVELOU & THE HINDU ARCHIVES

In memory of a visionary

Adishakti presents the 10th edition of Remembering Veenapani Festival from April 1 to 8

about letting 'the other' into our domain; and a dance-theatre piece that imagines a 21st century Ashta Nayika to music in new voices.

Padmavati Rao, a senior actor in theatre and cinema, is looking forward with much excitement to performing for the first time at Adishakti in the Hindi play *Apne Ghar Jaisa*, directed by Anmol Vellani. She plays the protagonist in the play that will examine the effects of everyday bigotry. Padmavati is certain that Veenapani, who she went and met at a difficult point of time in her life, would have been proud to see her creative journey bringing her to Adishakti as a performer.

Yuki Elias, a theatre-maker for over two decades, recalls her stay in Adishakti in 2006 while working as an actor in Tim Supple's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. She experienced that

"beautiful feeling of being a theatre-maker 24/7," she says, adding how she finds "the craft of Adishakti's work fascinating." She has directed *The far post*, which will be part of this edition.

The play in Lepcha will be presented with English subtitles. "It will employ masks and puppetry, delve into questions on war and redemption," says Yuki, inviting the audience to witness a rare, evocative production.

Vinay Kumar, artistic director, Adishakti, speaking about the festival, affirms this sense of connection that actors, theatre-makers, musicians, dancers, students of acting and audiences feel with the space as an embrace of creative energy. He fully credits this to Veenapani's ability to moor an emerging artiste to their unique artistic voice. "The team she initially gathered at Adishakti

was from small villages with no urban education," he says. "She shaped us in our multiple perspectives" and this, he adds, is what they tried to pass on when Adishakti became an institution, and also through the festival. It is no wonder, over the years, the festival is seeing a rise in the number of theatre groups and audiences wishing to participate. "This year's festival is being mapped to see how more audience-members can be accommodated in the coming years," says Vinay.

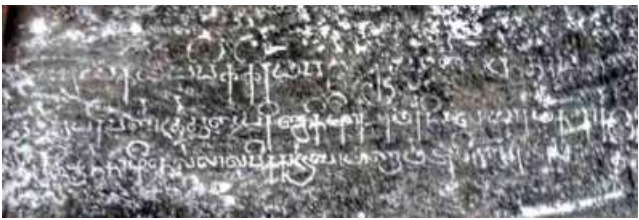
Theatre for all

Having all facilities like guest houses, a kitchen, a state-of-the-art theatre, technological equipment and staff, they are only limited, as a self-sustaining arts space, by a flow of funds that they wish to channel towards artistes bringing their work to the festival. "This is taken care of to a great extent by the community that steps in when we open the festival's crowd-funding campaign, but since all shows are not ticketed (in keeping with Veenapani's ethos that theatre should be accessible to all), donations from the audience become crucial," says Vinay.

The festival this year will include two workshops (one on nirgun and bhakti music and another on didgeridoo crafting and playing) besides 'gupshup sessions' that will offer an opportunity to interact with artistes participating in the festival and understand their artistic processes.

The line-up

- April 1:** Vinay Kumar's 'He-Rose', an Adishakti production.
- April 2:** 'Mad and Divine' by Rama Vaidyanathan.
- April 3:** 'Apne Ghar Jaisa' by Rangashankara.
- April 4:** '8' by Deep Design.
- April 5:** 'Be-Loved' by Tamasha Theatre
- April 6:** Music by Namit Das and Nishant Nagar.
- April 7:** 'The Far Post' by Dur Se Brothers.
- April 8:** 'Kha' music by Adithi Sagar. (All performances at 7.30 p.m.).
- Workshops** - April 2 to 4: 'Sur Naiyya - The Boat of Melody' by Ananyaa Gaur from and April 6 to 8: 'Tempo Tubes' by Brandon Colaco. Time: 10 a.m. - 1 p.m.



Journey with a purpose

Inscription at a Alandur temple shows a woman from Chola nadu studied Jain doctrines in the Pallava region

Suganthy Krishnamachari

The Alandur Siva Subramaniaswami temple is near the Saint Thomas Mount railway station. On the step at the entrance to this temple is a Kampa Varma Pallava period inscription (875 CE). It was recorded by the Tamil Nadu State Archaeology Department in 2004 and talks of Mangaattu Thiruvaraanandaanam. "The word 'araandaanam' indicates a Jain temple. The same word is used to refer to Jain temples in *Manimekalai*, and a similar word is used in *Perumkathai*," explains epigraphist S. Ramachandran. The inscription mentions a Jain acharya called Veerakkuravar, and his disciple, who is said to be the daughter of a man who belonged to the village of Arkkaattu Kootrathu Paripandathurai Parisai. "This name is very similar to the name of a village near

Kandiyur, mentioned in Thiruppazhanam and Thirumazhappadi inscriptions. From the inscription we find that the woman made a donation for food offerings at the Mangadu Jain temple," says Ramachandran. The inscription is important not only because of its antiquity, but because it tells us that a woman from Chola Nadu studied Jain doctrines in the Pallava country, became an ascetic, and donated to a Jain temple there. Ramachandran says that the inscription might have fallen into disrepair, and the stone slab with the inscription must have been used in the Siva Subramaniaswami temple. The latter temple is now being renovated. The inscription has suffered some damage because of people treading on it. Ramachandran says that the renovation presents a good opportunity to remove the stone slab and preserve it elsewhere, to prevent further damage.

Saraswathi Nagarajan

Dancer and academic RLV Ramakrishnan wants to perform Mohiniyattam on every stage in Kerala. "That is how I plan to protest the racist and casteist remarks made against me by Kalamandalam Sathyabhama," he says. Veteran Mohiniyattam dancer and teacher, Sathyabhama had said that those with dusky complexion should not perform on stage. During an interview to a YouTube channel, she remarked that men, especially, those who are not good-looking, should refrain from dancing. Without specifically naming Ramakrishnan, she referred to a "dark-skinned Mohiniyattam dancer from Chalakudy". Ramakrishnan, who hails from Chalakudy, also runs a dance school there. Following his graduation from RLV College of Fine Arts, Tripunithura, he secured first rank in post-graduation in Mohiniyattam from the Mahatma Gandhi University. His doctoral thesis was on *Aatathinte Aamvazhikal* (The path of men in dance). Ramakrishnan speaks about the opposition and challenges he has faced in his artistic journey.

Question: Kalamandalam Sathyabhama hinted that Mohiniyattam should only be performed by women. **Answer:** Mahakavi Vallathol, who founded Kalamandalam, felt that the name Kairali

It is violation of a dancer's fundamental right

Mohiniyattam dancer RLV Ramakrishnan plans to perform across Kerala to protest against the discriminatory remarks made by a veteran artiste



Nritham would suit this dance form better than Mohiniyattam. This is mentioned in books on the Kerala Kalamandalam. She has unnecessarily raked up an issue by claiming that only 'mohinis' can perform Mohiniyattam. One must remember that Vallathol had suggested the name change to do away with the stigma associated with Mohiniyattam.

I am going to request the Department of Culture and those in the art field to help rename the dance form as Kairali Nritham.

Q: She also commented about your complexion. **A:** Never should an artiste and teacher make such discriminatory remarks. In art only creativity matters. Her comment that dark-skinned



Ramakrishnan and Kalamandalam Sathyabhama. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

artistes should not perform Mohiniyattam is a violation of a dancer's fundamental right. From the time one begins to train in a dance form, the ultimate desire of a student is to go up on stage. She has demoralised several aspiring dancers in Kerala.

Q: When you joined RLV College as a student did you come across people who made such adverse remarks? **A:** Never at RLV College. But at Kalamandalam, I had to face many disheartening situations, especially when it came to Kalamandalam Sathyabhama. When I applied for a

performance opportunity at a festival conducted under the aegis of Department of Tourism, she got my phone number from the application and called me. She spoke in a derogatory manner. In the world of dance, there are still people like her who are unable to accept progressive changes. Once I was attending a seminar on Mohiniyattam at Kalamandalam, when an official asked me to leave saying that the event was meant only for women. I protested. Also during my research, I was harassed by some Kalamandalam office-bearers. Only when Mani chettan (late actor Kalabhavan Mani is his elder brother) intervened, we managed to get the actual results of my appraisal. **Q:** How do you feel about the outpouring of support? **A:** That is how it should be. It is not just about an individual. Many like me, dark-skinned and from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, have been scarred by her statements. I have struggled to reach where I am today. So it is only right that Kerala has stood by me in this matter.

CALENDAR

Honour for artistes



Mridangam maestro Umayaipuram Sivaraman's Laya Laavanyaa Fine Arts Foundation will felicitate artistes at its annual event. "It is my way of giving back to the music world, which has enriched my life," said the veteran musician. To take place on March 30 at 6 p.m., Madurai T.N. Seshagopalan, Sriram Parasuram, P.C. Ramakrishna and Priya Murle will be the chief guest and Sridhar Vembu, CEO, Zoho Corporation, guest of honour. The evening programme also includes the presentation of the thematic production 'Srinivasa Kalyanam', choreographed by Sheela Unnikrishnan and performed by the students of her Sridevi Nrithyalaya. **Venue :** Narada Gana Sabha Main Hall, Alwarpet, Chennai

Celebrating an icon



As part of ABHA's 'Immersive Experience with a Legend' series, the 80th birthday of Bharatanatyam exponent and guru Sudharani Raghupathy will be celebrated on March 31 at 4 p.m. Sudharani Raghupathy, who founded Shree Bharatalaya, is known for her distinct approach to nritta and abhinaya. At this special event, to take place at Andhra Mahila Sabha, Mylapore, listen to the veteran share her experiences besides providing valuable insights into her artistry. The evening also features a special performance that will trace her dance journey. For details call 89037 17751.

Title for senior dancer



The valedictory function of Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha's 'Bharat Nritya Utsav' will take place on March 31 at Narada Gana Sabha at 5.30 p.m. On the occasion, the Natya Kalasarathy title will be presented to senior Bharatanatyam dancer and teacher Jayanthi Subramaniam. Certificates and mementos will be given to best performers chosen from among the dancers who performed at the Utsav. The evening will begin with 'Guruvandanam' (4.30 p.m.) by the students of Jayanthi Subramaniam and conclude with Anitha Guha's thematic 'Parishvanga Pattabishekam' to be presented by her students. Art patron Nalli Kuppuswami Chetti will preside. Alarmel Valli and Meenakshi Chittaranjan are the guests of honour.



M CH-CHF

Onkara, which was screened at the Bengaluru International Film Festival, explores the connect between the Mavilan community and theyyam

Shailaja Tripathi

Onkara, a film about the Mavilan community, – an obscure tribe of Kerala and their love for theyyam, a ritualistic dance form of the state, was recently screened at the 15th edition of the Bengaluru International Film Festival (BIFFES). The tribe of hunters, gatherers, and herbalists regard theyyam as sacred.

According to Unni KR, director of the film, their life revolves around this dance form. “Everything is connected to theyyam. And that’s what I have tried to show.”

Onkara reminds of the blockbuster Kannada film Kantara as far the theme is concerned. Both deal with theyyam, but the portrayal in Onkara is subtle.

Onkara is reportedly the first film in Markodi, a dialect of the Tulu language, which doesn’t have a script.

The film follows the life of Karumban, a theyyam artiste and the son of Chinkam, the village head. Chinkam in Markodi means lion, and Chinkam leads the Mavilan community, akin to the king of the jungle. Karumban wants to follow in the footsteps of his father and become the next Chinkam. He leads a life of poverty. Karumban’s wife suggests he take up farming but he is consumed by his passion for theyyam. His elder daughter Manikyam falls in love with a bangle seller and elopes. The villagers turn against Karumban



The dance of identity

and question his right to become the next Chinkam. Meanwhile, Manikyam returns to the forest after being sexually assaulted. Chinkam orders the villagers to sever ties with Manikyam.

The film is peppered with theyyam performances by Karumban, essayed by Sudheer Karamana, making it a visual feast.

Colourful costume
Theyyam is derived from the word ‘daivam’. The dance form was never meant to entertain but to invoke the deity and seek blessings for prosperity. That’s how theyyam became to be the dance of gods. It is believed that during the

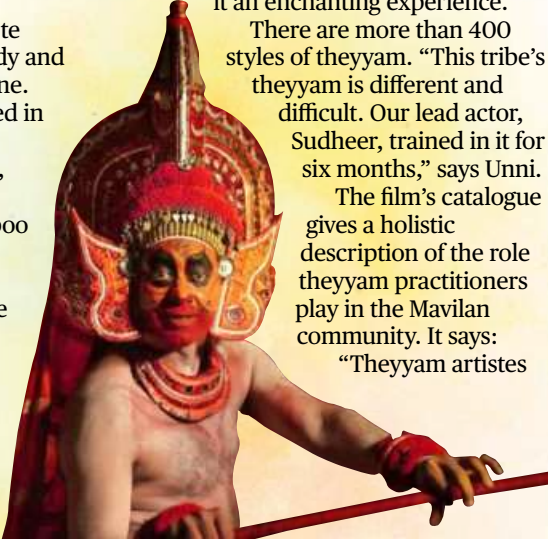
performance, the artiste transcends his/her body and connects with the divine. With the face painted in bright colours and dramatic eye-make up, donning an elaborate costume, a huge bamboo headgear and unique jewellery, the male dancer performs to the beats of musical instruments such as chenda (percussion), kuzhal (double reed wind instrument), elathalam (cymbals). In an open-air setting, he then

enacts the stories of Kari Chamundi (goddess of disease), Vishnumoorthi (a representation of Vishnu), Bhagavathi, Raktha Chamundi and other gods.

The audience is immersed in bhakti rasa while watching the dancer perform with energy and vigour. The costume, performance, open-air setting in the night and lighting come together to make it an enchanting experience.

There are more than 400 styles of theyyam. “This tribe’s theyyam is different and difficult. Our lead actor, Sudheer, trained in it for six months,” says Unni.

The film’s catalogue gives a holistic description of the role theyyam practitioners play in the Mavilan community. It says: “Theyyam artistes



in the community create wonders and are deemed to possess all-encompassing knowledge. They leave their homes and loved ones to take up residence in the jungle and perform miracles. Their abode, known as ‘Pathee’ is sought out by people who want guidance in life. Their visions of the future set a rhythm to Mavilan life.”

Apart from theyyam, the film also throws light on other folk songs and dance forms like Mangalamkali (wedding dance ritual) and Eruthkali of the Mavilan tribe. The film documents their musical instruments such as thudi and bamboo drums.

While the film was shot in forests over a period of 30 days, the research by Unni KR and Rajesh Thillenkeri, who has written the story, screenplay and dialogue, took three years. “The tribals have a difficult life but they don’t complain. They want to live like free birds. Onkara is an effort to capture the unique lifestyle and culture of the Mavilans,” says Unni.

Realistic portrayal
Sudheer Karamana in Onkara PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Guided listening session

Ganakaladhara Madurai Mani Iyer Rasikas Association presents the guided listening session of the legendary musician on March 30, 4 p.m. Titled ‘Celebrating Ramanavami with Madurai Mani Iyer’ it will feature excerpts from the recordings of the maestro’s Ramanavami concerts. Venue: Vivekananda Hall, P.S. High School, Mylapore.

Vocal and violin concerts

Madhuradhwani’s concert line-up from March 29 to 31 and to be held at Arkay Convention Center. Today, 6.15 p.m.: Savita Sreeram accompanied by Bombay R. Madhavan (violin), Melakaveri Balaji (mridangam) and Madippakkam Murali (ghatam). March 30, 6.15 p.m.: Charumathi Raghuraman (violin solo) with Sai Giridhar (mridangam) and S. Krishna (ghatam). March 31, 6.15 p.m.: Pattabhirama Pandit (vocal), R. Hemalatha (violin), Bangalore V. Praveen (mridangam) and B.S. Purusotham (kanjira). A special music ensemble ‘Indhra Dhanush’ by mridangist Vaidya Rajasekar will take place on April 4 at 6.15 p.m. The team will also comprise musicians Meera Sivaramakrishnan, Pazhayaseevaram G. Kalidass, Thiruneermalai B. Mani, Pathangi Brothers and R. Arujun Sambasivan.



Movement therapy

‘Bharatambe’ showcased the healing power of music and dance

V.V. Ramani

It was an evening to celebrate the art and culture. Over 240 differently-abled children came together under the ‘Rasa-Ramana Sunritya Aalaya’ umbrella for a dance theatre presentation titled ‘Bharatambe - Harmony in diversity’. Directed and choreographed by Ambika Kameshwar, it showcased how movement and melody are great healers. Ambika, a pioneer in using theatre arts as a tool for holistic development of physically-challenged children, chose to channelise her passion and experience as a Bharatanatyam dancer to lend colour to the lives of those with special needs by establishing the Rasa-Ramana Sunritya Aalaya in 1989. “I realised that these children responded well to a teaching methodology that included music, dance, acting and story telling. Seeing the outcome of these exercises, I began an annual presentation, where the children



For a cause Students of Rasa-Ramana Sunritya Aalaya at the annual event. PHOTOS: M. SRINATH

displayed their talent in a theme-based programme. The immense effort that the teachers and volunteers put in to make this a reality comes through in the presentation,” says Ambika. The show began with the depiction of Bharatmata surrounded by a group of kids

hailing her. Children dressed in regional costumes performed the songs and dances of those regions. The entries, exits and formations were executed in a seamless manner as children presented life stories of popular saints. The sequence that paid homage to goddess was aesthetically conceived. Another visually appealing sequence was the projection of lotuses on a screen in the backdrop with children holding up stalks of the flower and swaying them in rhythm. The other moments of significance were the creation of a setting of a banyan tree and ashrama, the props used to depict the lions on the Asoka Pillar, and serene visuals of moving clouds and sunset. The concept, music, choreography and direction were by Ambika Kameshwar. Multimedia visuals were by Vaishnavi Poorna and camera by Francis. The choreography team consisted of Vaishnavi Poorna, Anandi Chandrasekharan, Meghna Venkat, Kavita Sureshkumar and Lakshmi Shivashankar.





SATHYAM | ESCAPE | INOX | DEVI | SANGAM | WOODLANDS | ANNA | EGA | PVR - AMPA | PALAZZO | KAMALA | TNAGAR AGS | S2 PERAMBUR | KASI TALKIES | INOX LUX | PVR GRAND - VELACHERY | PVR - PALAVARAM | ECR - PVR | VR MALL PVR - ANNANAGAR
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CHORMPET - VETRI | KOLATHUR - GANGA CINEMAS PADI - GREEN CINEMAS & SIVA SAKTHI & LAXMI BALA | CHENGALPET - SRK & LATHA | KANCHIPURAM - BABU & KARTHIKEYAN | CITLAPAKKAM - VARDHARAJA | VIRUGAMBAKKAM - DEVI KARUMARI | MAPPEDUI - AVK | THIRUVALLUR - RAKI
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