

METRO plus

WHAT'S ON IN CHENNAI

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MISCELLANY

From a woman's perspective

"Feminism and 'theatre' are two distinct subjects: one, a form of cultural politics, the other a general category of art or performance. Yet each is political and each is performative. Indeed, most theatre can be analysed in terms of gender and power... But in feminist theatre, the politics is not just applied to the 'ready made' art, rather feminism informs the making of the theatre — the choice of working method, topic, form and style..."

Lizbeth Goodman

IN JANUARY this year, "Poorva", a festival of plays by Asian women theatre directors was organised at New Delhi by the Natarang Prathishtan and the National School of Drama in collaboration with the Indian Council of Cultural Relations. The eight-day event was followed by a four-day conference in which women theatre directors discussed their ideology and their work.

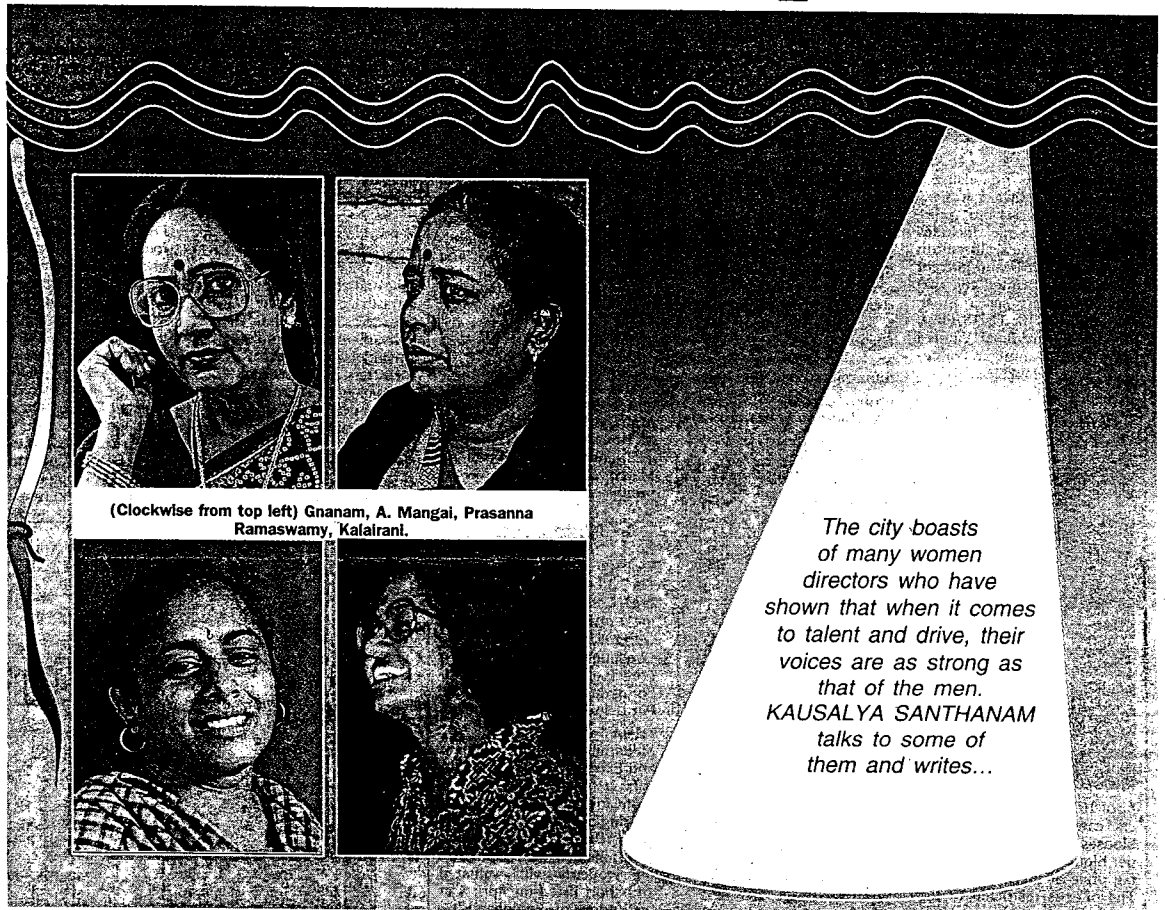
Chennai has its share of women theatre directors and they have become more visible over the years. Their number is also growing. Theatre events, such as the Kulavai festival conducted by the Voicing Silence unit of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, also contribute to highlighting the efforts of women artistes and directors.

This correspondent talks to some of the women directors in the city about their views on feminist theatre, the principle that informs their work, the methods that shape it, the receptivity of audiences, the reaction of men in the field, and the problems they encounter in making their ideas crystallise.

A majority of them disclaim being "feminist" directors. But almost all of them agree that they are influenced by the fact that they are women while choosing their theme or giving it a form. Whether they dip into the vast storehouse of Indian epics and myths and subvert traditional ideas to put forth women's viewpoint, base their productions on modern scripts or combine a variety of sources to forge their work, they deal with women's concerns using the tools of theatre in exciting ways.

A. Mangai is one of the few who declares that her plays are feminist. "I consciously prefer a gendered perspective", says Mangai who came to the theatre as an activist. She was a member of the All India Democratic Women's Association and the Progressive Writers' Association before founding theatre groups along with others. "I am a feminist and I explore women's issues in my plays. Both gender and our native idiom — Tamil — are important to me. It was a conscious effort to take up women's issues and in Tamil to make the audience understand. Language became extended to idiom and questions of identity."

"Avvai" written by Inquilab and directed by Mangai, challenged "the garb of old age imposed on the great Tamil poet" and "here the female voice emerges loud and clear." "Avvai" is among my favourite plays," says the director. "After all, Avvai is our very own Sappho (the fiery ancient Greek



(Clockwise from top left) Gnanam, A. Mangai, Prasanna Ramaswamy, Kalairani.

The city boasts of many women directors who have shown that when it comes to talent and drive, their voices are as strong as that of the men.

KAUSALYA SANTHANAM talks to some of them and writes...

poet)."

Mangai has directed many of the plays of the Voicing Silence Theatre group — "Pacchai Mannu" (on female infanticide), "Manimekalai", (the heroine who becomes a Buddhist monk in the epic by Seethalai Sattanar), "Pani-t-thee" (on Amba who as Shikandi in the Mahabharata avenges her humiliation) among others. "My protagonists are always women but I don't believe in an all-woman troupe or in women who are "cry babies". She feels that as directors, it is difficult for women to sustain themselves in terms of energy and resources. But since none of the women directors depends on the theatre for a livelihood, they have the freedom to choose the themes. "If I'm not moved by a theme, I don't need to do the production."

As for the way in which women directors are regarded in a male world, she says, "In English theatre, the situation may be different but in Tamil theatre, the women directors' body of work itself is not recognised. The men act as if we don't exist. It is a very male way of thinking. It doesn't even deserve anger. Prasanna is very sensitive politically as her anti-war play "Meendum Meendum" produced soon after the Kargil war shows." It deserved more recognition.

Prasanna Ramaswamy says her

politics is against marginalisation of any kind and this includes women. "I don't claim to be a feminist director but all my works have a femaleness; my plays have strong women characters because I'm a woman. I wouldn't want to use the word "feminism" because when it manifests itself, most of the audience do not participate. The majority is comfortable when their identity is secure and their information tables are tallying."

Prasanna rates "Meendum Meendum", "Uyir Nizhal" and "Thirai-kadalodi" as very fulfilling productions. The traumatic effects of war on women and the agony of the homeless and bereaved are recurring themes in her plays and poetry readings.

As a woman director in a man's world, Prasanna says there were instances in her early years when the credit for her work in a production was taken by the men. But she finds it interesting that the "space is yielding". Not only are there a growing number of women directors but the audience for the plays has also grown even if "quite a good number come out of curiosity". However, finance remains a major problem and there are times when she is unable to take her productions elsewhere, even when invited, owing to financial constraints. In contrast to

many other States such as Karnataka where most of the work is modelled after major figures such as Karanth and Karnad, in Tamil theatre there are diverse aesthetics and discourses, she says. "My work is as good as somebody in Delhi. In Chennai if you are attached to an organisation, it makes you visible. We lack a system here and I'm not alone in this." Most of the women directors are in their forties and this is significant, for it is a time in life when they look back and introspect on what it means to be a woman.

"I don't want to blame men — I think society is responsible for the problems women face. I only want to express my pain and this is my voice", states A.S. Padmavathi who directed Ambai's "Bhayangal" for Bhoomika, the theatre group formed in 1994 by the three women artistes of Gnanam's Pareeksha. Sujatha's "Sarala" and the solo "Oruthi" based on Arnold Wesker's "Yardsale" were some of Padmavathi's other directorial efforts. She also writes plays and has made seven video films. She has just written a play on female infanticide, which will tour the villages of Tamil Nadu. "I don't use terms like "patriarchy" and "oppressed women". I don't want to antagonise the male. The lamenting type of feminism is not

my line," says the lecturer in communication who "doesn't breathe theatre." For her, theatre is only one of her communication mediums. "Plays only put forth an issue, not a solution."

Kalairani agrees with Padmavathi's views that there is no point in depicting men as prone to violence. "We should win the audience including the men. We all have the Ardhanareswarar quality," she says. Being a woman or a Dalit places one in a similar situation for both have to fight for their freedom. Kalairani's solo on Nandanar which movingly depicted the anguish of this "low-born" devotee at the temple of Chidambaram has been performed in the marketplace, in the countryside and even in quarries. One of the powerful actors in the Koothu-p-Pattarai repertory, Kalairani has performed in 35 plays and quite a few films. Her one-woman presentation "Penn" which drew on the martial arts, was a salutation to women and her latest solo "Mazhai" was a highly abstract presentation of a female response to rain.

"I believe I work as a director, not as a woman," says N.S. Yamuna, the director of a number of plays over the years for the

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Madras Players. "My cast does not look upon me as a woman director but as a professional and as strong director. If there is any nickname for me, it is "Hitler". My job is to see that no actor makes a fool of himself at any stage. I'd rather be hated than be ridiculed."

Yamuna says she owes her theatre discipline to the rigorous training during her school years when she received a thorough grounding in production aspects. Her father was a regular at the Suguna Vilas Sabha and much of this enthusiasm rubbed off on Yamuna who has directed plays by Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Elkunchwar. Among her spectacular productions have been, "The King and I", Lewis Carroll's "Alice In Wonderland" and more recently "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan". Is it difficult for a woman director to manage home and family? This has never bothered her, she says "From the late 1960s, I've had a demanding career and as I was a single mother, I've had to balance both."

"Agitprop theatre is the right medium for women's issues," underscores

Bhagirathi Narayanan of the Madras Players. The Madras Players had women directors simply because "they had more time," she says. "Thus Spake Soorpanaka", "Slow Dissolve" and "Scenes from a Marriage" are some of the plays she has directed. She doesn't know the number because she doesn't keep track. "Men see plays differently from women. There seems to be a certain impatience to seeing their problems portrayed through a cathartic structure rather than a linear one. And working with male actors is different because their egos are more fragile."

K.R. Usha put in a stint as a director when she had to complete a project, which Prof. Ramanujam and S.P. Srinivasan could not for the Indian Council of Child Welfare. She co-directed African poet Okot P. Bitek's "The Song of Lowino" for Ethiraj College along with Harini Sankaranarayan but with "regular theatre people and not with the college students." Usha has also worked on a project on drama for schools with the NSD. This included the play

From a...

"Mala" based on Chandrasekhar Kambar's story, which had to do with gender. "I have never really called what I directed as women's theatre. But since what I direct is an expression of what I am, it has to do with gender." She directed a reading for The Madras Players of her own play "Endless Pathways" produced during a workshop conducted by Mahesh Dattani. It dealt with the life of a woman sculptor juxtaposed with scenes from the poems of Kamala Das. "As for the receptivity of the audience, there is no problem. But in certain groups, it is difficult for women to emerge as directors especially if they are not strident or aggressive. There are problems when people have to take instructions from you." She points out that there is a rise in the number of women on the technical side as well — lighting, scripting and sets.

Renuka Rajaratnam, who directs poetry readings, has focussed on women centric themes, as in "Her Story" and "Woman Matters - for

Better or for Worse." But she finds separatism, a world devoid of men, 'boring.' Instead of feminising poetry, you have to humanise it, she says. This freelance lecturer in English, poetry programmer and resource person for the BBC's educational programme, has directed nearly 30 readings for the Culture Café of the British Council.

"Poetry matters a lot," she says with passion. "There is need for poetry especially in an age of communication." Intellectual rapport is of special interest to Renuka, who finds it exciting to restore life to words through poetry reading. The difference between directing plays and poetry is that the artiste is "showing off in theatre where as in poetry reading, it is just the opposite." Whenever she is struck by the woman's angle she brings it out in the poems. In modern times there is a plethora of women writers so it is exciting to deal with their work, she says.

Pritham Chakravarthy has taken her intense one-woman narration on the life

of the hijras (eunuchs) to the Edinburgh festival 2002 while **Sushma Ahuja** has directed a number of plays in Hindi and English.

In the mainstream theatre, **Gnanam Balasubramaniam** — 'Bombay' Gnanam — has taken the sabha scene by storm with her all-women troupe. The plays presented by the group are written and directed by Gnanam and they all deal with issues affecting women, both traditional and modern. Far from the viewers being turned off by women playing the male roles attired as men, the troupe has received a rousing welcome and represents women's power in greasepaint and the greenroom.

Women directors in the city have shown that when it comes to talent and drive, their voices are as strong and resonant as the men. Many more of them are perhaps waiting in the wings to project women's viewpoint and concerns. And definitely, many more viewers, both men and women, are now receptive to hearing them and applauding their vision. There are quite a few men too who are presenting feminist theatre. But then that calls for a story on its own. ■