

Structure is its strength

The word 'Avvai' (in the traditional Tamil spelling with the O) conjures up the image of the old woman immortalised in a statue on the Marina.

The play "Avvai" written by Inquilab, directed by A. Mangai and presented by the Voicing Silence theatre group of the M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation at Thanjavur and Chennai recently, deals with the question of the real Avvai.

"The play Avvai, sheds the garb of old age imposed on the ancient poet," says the playwright. "It speaks loud and clear, the female voice which resists restrictions. Old age is a natural phenomenon; it has its own beauty. But since the male world sees it as its gospel, the play tries to expose the garb."

Were there many Avvais through the history? Did they enjoy life and give poetic interpretations in the female voice? Was the gray hair, bent back image with the walking stick, a convenient image for the chauvinistic male world. These are the questions asked in the play.

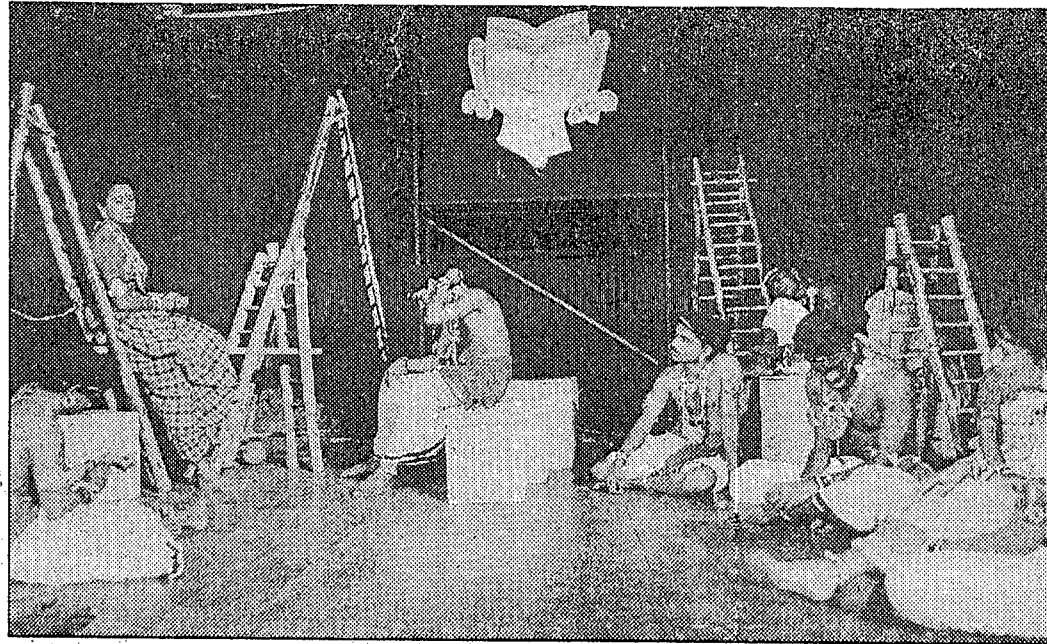
Inquilab says, "The play also attempts to reveal the perspectives of life in the Sangam age. Sangam literature which is less puranic and closer to the realities of life has not been explored enough."

It will be a great tool to help retrieve the Tamil mind steeped in exaggerated versions of imagination. This clarifies what is real and what is fictional. "Avvai" is symbol of that attempt."

Mangai has tried to bring the romance of Avvai's female voice in a burst of colour, rhythm and song. Music, movement, interesting stage props and simple costumes create an impact.

Mangai says, "A youthful, sensuous image of a woman fearless in expressing her emotions can be a threat to the patriarchal world view. The face of the chauvinistic world which portrayed Avvai as an old lady stands exposed in its ugliest form."

The play begins with the playful activities of young men and women and their learning



A scene from "Avvai."

the mores of living. The old Avvai and the young vivacious Avvai exchange notes about their poems and the play within play leads us on to the historical events of poet Avvai's visit to the Court of King Adhiyaman, telling him stories about the landscapes through depiction and Avvai's diplomatic visit to the King Thondaiman and cleverly making him withdraw from invading Adhiyaman.

The artistes depict these through singing of the appropriate poems and by symbolic change of backdrops by the artistes themselves. The five eco-zones of 'Kurinji', 'Mullai', 'Marudam', 'Neithal' and 'Palai' and the attendant lifestyle prescribed for each which are rooted in Tamil tradition come alive through colours and music.

Mangai has taken inspiration from traditional theatrical forms and their present modes of performance to create the ambience.

The rain, depicted through irregular clapping by the artists, the mood of the poem of the rain, the feudal look at the woman and the other woman Murudham very cleverly pictured through the bullock carts make every word of the poems used extremely contemporary.

But questions come up. The words of the war, are they really the words of the woman? Or a careful selection of a chauvinistic support for the war? At this point did the play not take a political turn and wean itself away from the woman's point of view? Lack of subtlety in the scene where the dead son's mother quietly views the sacrifice for the earth brought a dangerous tilt to the gender sensitivity to the play.

The entry of the young poet Avvai from Elam across the sea and the narration of her poem brought the climax away from gender

and stood it on a political ground. Mangai says that the play links itself to the lives of contemporary artistes since its structure is based on the bardic tradition.

The structure of the form is the best strength of the presentation. Careful thought has gone into the stringing of the poems into a kaleidoscope of colourful spectacles. Humour in its slapstick aspect which has been the hallmark of a villain by the traditional forms has been retained in the Thondaiman court scene where the King is depicted as an idiot.

An intimacy of touch between King Adhiyaman and Avvai, the playful manner of the young actors all bring a special charm. But the play should have begun its rehearsals with intense musical workshops for the artistes. Singing being the mainstay, the actors not being able to maintain sruti and the background music makers not helping in making it better, brought down the quality of the presentation.

All the actors need to improve their singing.

The striking performance was that of Archana as the young Avvai. The sparkle in her eyes, the understanding of the sensuousness of the young Avvai in her posture and the way her skin tingled, made one forget the jarring music. Amaidi Arasu as King Adhiyaman, Bhageerathi Narayanan as the old Avvai and the young Avvai Ponni captured attention.

Traditional theatrical forms always begin their presentation with an appeal to the audience to forgive their flaws in music, text and performance. Flaws in music and the tightness in presentation could easily be forgiven in this play which will in due course stand out as an important contribution to the Tamil contemporary theatre and will trigger many debates on content and form.

It definitely draws attention to the need for debate on image making.

