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For, of and by women

Giving traditional performers a platform while highlighting women's issues and concerns is not easy. But, writes KAUSALYA SANTHANAM, 'Mouna Kural' (Voicing Silence), a Chennai-based group, shows how the two can be combined effectively.



Theatre from a woman's perspective ... a scene from "Manimegalai".

SHE is a bold and unusual heroine, one who — though the daughter of a courtesan — chooses the unconventional path of renunciation and service. What made her decision even more remarkable was that she belonged to an age where it needed immense courage to break free from caste and calling.

The young and beautiful Manimegalai, the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi, is the protagonist of the literary classic named after her. In the epic by Seethalai Sattanar, which is not as popular as the "Silappadhikaram", the heroine becomes a Buddhist nun, preferring to tread an arduous and lonely path dedicated to alleviating the hunger of the poor and the wretched.

A tale that lends itself to a contemporary feminist interpretation, "Manimegalai" will be presented by Mouna Kural (Voicing Silence), the women's theatre project of the M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation at "Kulavai 2002 — Women's Theatre Festival". "Manimegalai" directed by A. Mangai is based on poet Inquilab's text; the stage script is by A.K. Selvadurai.

"This year our focus in Kulavai, which is being held once in two years since 1996, is on women directors," says Mina Swaminathan, Hon. Director of Voicing Silence. "We want to reach out to mainstream audiences through the three plays which will be staged on February 9 and 10 at Chennai." On the first day, The Company will stage "Kitchen Katha" (Punjabi) directed by Neelam Man Singh Chowdry. On the second day, the Adishakti production "Ganapathi" (Rhythmic Text) directed by Veena Pani Chawla will be presented followed by Voicing Silence's "Manimegalai" (Tamil). A seminar on "What is feminist theatre" will also be held (not open to the public) as part of Kulavai — 2002.

Voicing Silence's commitment to taking forward women's issues and concerns through theatre is evident in the numerous plays produced and staged all over Tamil Nadu by the organisation since its inception in 1992. The group has been consistently focussing on its three major

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concerns of gender, culture and social activism. "Both activist theatre and theatre activism have become important in the work of Voicing Silence," says Mina Swaminathan. "We bring together theatre people and those working in the social sphere and try to bridge the gulf between the two. The emphasis of the organisation is on gendered theatre/theatre from a feminist/gendered perspective and it hopes to act as a catalyst in the process of women's awareness and empowerment."

Kulavai, (the Tamil word for ululation by women) was born in 1996. It was triggered off by the coming together of fellow theatre workers who concentrate on gender-centred themes and presentations. This has become an important event providing a platform for views and performances. Quite a few of the plays produced by Voicing Silence are the result of a collective process involving different theatre groups. Traditional beliefs and views are subverted as a searching look is directed at figures and heroines from our epics, myths and legends. Since the themes are based on familiar stories, women both in the rural and urban areas are able to identify with them and obtain a fresh perspective on the position assigned to them in a male-dominated society.

In 1996, the Koothu artist P. Rajagopal, identified and brought together women working in various traditional drama companies in Tamil Nadu to perform the all woman Theru-k-koothu "Vilvalai". Theru-k-koothu, the centuries-old folk performing art form of Tamil Nadu, is traditionally a male preserve but the convention was broken through the brilliantly performed "Vilvalai". This marked the beginning of a rewarding and creative association between this group of women and Voicing Silence.

"These women artistes who are engaged by different drama companies are busy performing for eight months in a year though the roles given to them are generally minor or stereotyped. Their off season is from October to January and, during this short period, Voicing Silence works with them to create plays. "Manimegalai" is the fourth production in this continuing interaction." A number of questions and issues relating to theatre, gender and women theatre artists have been addressed in the three Kulavai festivals. Voicing Silence has also regularly conducted workshops with Dalit women, women quarry and beedi workers, and college students enabling them to use theatre as a medium to express their views and perceptions.

Voicing Silence has performed extensively in the villages of Tamil Nadu with plays such as "Pacha Mannu" and "Avvai" receiving very good response from the perceptive rural women.

The all-woman theatre group of Voicing Silence may not be literate, especially the older ones but they have a remarkable ability to memorise songs and know more than 500.

This is made use of in the plays, says the honorary director whose dream is to build a permanent all-woman company equipped with a rich repertoire of plays that it can stage all night long if needed.

As the strong voices of these performers break out in song and dialogue on February 10 and the dilemma of "Manimegalai" tugged by the temptation of sensual pleasures and the call of service is played out, Voicing Silence,

will once again show how effectively theatre and its traditional practitioners and forms can score a positive stroke for women.

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