

The Chennai Margazhi Festival

Sooraj Subramaniam experiences the **Chennai Season**, with its dust and its sensory delights.

Photo: Simon Richardson

The Chennai Margazhi Festival

I would be exaggerating just slightly if I said that I'd been holding my breath since 1996 to experience again the **Margazhi music and dance festival**. In 2013, the Chennai air is dust-kissed, so that one can't help holding one's breath, even as one takes in the bustling city. From fare-haggling with auto-rickshaw drivers, and daily jasmine purchases from the sisters three (muses who have lived forty years in a colonial Royapettah bungalow), to joining the tail-end of the seven-a.m. queue for show tickets, there is a real sensory overload. Affecting as all this is, it comes as a tingling relief to part the drapes and walk through to the *nātya mandapa* to witness goddesses frolic and gods favour.

Yes, it is unabashedly escapist to dust one's feet before floating away on the *puspa-vimāna* (flight of flowers) of dance. If I'd followed my colour-coded timetable, I'd have been blurry-eyed through morning sittings of conference lectures, perky during post-*chai katchéris* (nothing like *chai* to whet your appetite for a mid-afternoon concert) and positively razor-sharp for evening *bharatanātyam*. It is easily forgotten that Christmas and New Year eat up the rest of the world while one decides between the compositions of Thyagaraja and the Tanjore quartet.

Bharatanatyam is ubiquitous in Chennai; yet one is still bathed in the glow of veteran performers and the brilliance of the newcomers. There is glamour in the bangled wrists of **Alarmel Valli's** *khandita nāyika* (annoyed with her lover) and coquetry in **Malavika Sarukkai's** heroine carrying her parakeet in a gilded cage whilst demanding release from her beleaguered lover. Sometimes, however, the individuality of the dancer can be so conspicuous as to mar the supposed philosophical dancer-dance indivisibility. In the flourish of the grand personalities on stage I was not transported to the *paramātma* (absolute). Perhaps all this transcendence-talk in Indian classical dance is a bit tiresome, I thought, simply because it hangs off a bough just out of reach. Perhaps I am like the fox in the fable. I don't think I saw any transcendence reflected outside the dance halls: as the traffic danced up dirt-storms around her the soliloquy of a glinting nose-ring had to suffice the *pūkāri-amma* (flower vendor).

I am quite content seeing Rāma not-so-chivalrous or Krishna not-so-chiding; more of honesty than righteousness is revealed in those reflective moments; and devilishly, I'd rather question the dubious parentage of a certain Lord Ayyappa than question the dancers' personae because, for example, of their sexualities. For as long as I can remember, I have been troubled attempting to reconcile my sentiment for the traditional and my awe for classicism with the disparate revelations of modernity, such as our non-nuclear, non-obedient, non-standard lifestyles. Having said that, the not-so-coy **Rama Vaidyanathan** presented a credible performance, never shying from her own personality, never pretending to be more than the *nāyika* (heroine) she herself embodied. While Rama's own presence never faded, the honesty in her performance (and humour in that wicked Mona Lisa smile) helped serve transcendence. Another such was **Navia Natarajan**, whose *jati* mathematics, daring and different, belied all the usual algorithms. While her pieces remained earnestly obedient to the time-honoured repertoire, so beautiful was her dancing that I completely forgot to see her, and only remember how refreshed I felt. Exquisite dancing couple **Renjith Babu** and **Vijna Vasudevan**, and ethereal **Meenakshi Sreenivasan**, were likewise credible in their performances.

Odissi, while not vastly represented here in the south, had supreme ambassadors at the festival: **Lingaraj Pradhan's** portrayal of Karna left me in tears; **Sujata Mohapatra's** *vipralabdha nāyika* (deceived by her lover) was replete with goosebumpery; and the glory that is **Nrityagram** stretched my expectations of physicality and dynamism in Indian dance, the spells of their illusion so complete.

In the shadow of the Kapālīshwar *gopuram*, under the auspices of the **Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan** in **Mylapore**, **Anita Ratnam's** five-day **Purush Festival** celebrated the global dancing male, overseeing the likes of *therukūthu* (village street theatre), *strīvésham* (female impersonation), and contemporary dance, to investigate the viability and veracity of men in the female-dominated dance world.

As male gurus were felicitated for their contributions, I sat wondering if traditional repertory has left the skirting boards un-dusted for the last little while. There seems a gossamer of hypocrisy in the acceptance of the casual gender-twisting that happens in Indian dance while little is done to address the gross disparity with which dancers, as people (whether male, old, homosexual, left-handed, political, etc.), are perceived. Understanding the *bhāva* (state of being) of the courtesan *nāyika* from beneath her historical dupatta is one thing; reconciling that with a modern treatment of personalities is more problematic. The aim of **Purush** was to brush away some of these cobwebs; I was privileged to have added my tuppenceworth, hopefully having remained careful not to disturb any critters.

The **Margazhi** season would feel incomplete without a venture south of the Adyar River to the bountiful gardens of **Kalakshetra**. Its



Photo: Simon Richardson
The Avatara Project

conscientious departure from plastic glamour fosters feelings of endurance that 'classicism' might demand: neem leaves slow roasted over frankincense stay the mosquitoes; a thatched ceiling is held up by cedar-hued beams; and wicker chairs in their scores are filled by eager *rasikas* (connoisseurs) who come to watch the gods, claiming stage space, as opposed to the cheapest seats.

And then, of course, there are the impeccably conceived and choreographed dramas where hand-made papier-mâché headsets from forty years ago are still crowningly glorious. Did I mention that filigreed-leather chappals are eagerly kicked off so the feet might taste the cool, dry sand before stepping into this *ambalam* (temple)?

That a seasoned artist from a non-conforming *bāni* (school/style) is now steering this ship is testament that pride and professionalism in the integrity of one's art form has, thankfully, nothing to do with personal tastes and idiosyncrasies. (Even dance is political in Chennai, in ways I didn't imagine could bother mid-afternoon home-makers.) So, as **Priyadarshini Govind** takes on directorship of the institution, and the dust between the print settles, everyone clamours to see the class-act that is Kalakshetra. In this totality dance is received gracefully, even among the greedy, like *prasād*.

If one can reveal transcendence through one's professionalism, the road to the *paramātma* is shorter than imagined. Laughably, I contradict myself by insisting that it is the affecting personalities that make **Margazhi** the red carpet event of the Indian dance world. (I'd heard of a commentary that made it to journalistic planes, on vocalist **Sudha Ragunathan's** latest choice of gleaming Kanchipuram silks and the matching gemstones in her earlobes; and which cast of lily might grace the coiffure of dancer **Malavika Sarukkai** as she casually glides across guest lists). Then again, I am glad for the bevy of dance lovers who would earnestly discuss the variations on the *hamsāsya mudra* while traipsing the streets of Chennai on a post-coffee midnight.

And there's certainly no parallel to sitting in a verandah-lounge, hearing **Birju Maharaj-ji** share tales of his long-ago Russian tour, of translations that were lost even beyond dance when *atta* flour couldn't be obtained for the *pakhavāj*, with hilarious and disastrous results during the performance (you have to hear the details of that tale in person). The **Margazhi** season is simply such a sensory feast, such a full menu, that the time given serves it an injustice. I felt I'd suffered a serious dose of "shopping while you're hungry". But already I am planning my next trip.

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February 2014

kadam connecting
asian dance and music communities.

Published by Kadam Asian Dance and Music
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