

*Alo Pal reports on the Tantidhatri Festival.*

For a few weeks in February, the buzz of an all woman's performing artists' festival in Pondicherry hovered around me like just that – a buzz, sometimes a continuous hum in the back ground at others a frenzy that approached me and passed me by fading as it did so. But the buzz was there, unmistakable and asserting itself with every encounter. Till I decided to learn, enjoy, absorb, educate and loose myself in the frenzy! This was the heady mix of powerful women, the performing arts, and an enriching experience that has been the Tantidhatri festival, in Pondicherry.

At the start it is a brochure, much like others, but not really! In systematic alphabetical order, page after page there unfolded abstracts of amazing personalities and performances. Almost all the artists had three decades or more of craft, career, creativity, struggle, collaboration, assertion and quest behind them. An even closer look revealed a network between them, a tapestry woven off a common underlying aim, in threads of many a hue and texture. And most important, almost every performer on the list was a woman. And what women!

As I began interacting with them it took me precisely 5 minutes to realise that the Tantidhatri festival in Pondicherry was inspired by and is a continuation of a movement born out of frustration and anger women felt in the realm of theatre. Jill Greenhalgh, a professional theatre maker, who was tired of women in her profession "playing nursemaids to men's ideas" founded "Magdalena Project" in 1986 as a much needed platform and network for women in contemporary theatre. The Magdalena Project has over the last 25 years helped women assume positions of power and decision making in this field it has also provided a platform for female artists the world over to present their work, interact with fellow artists and even nurture new talent.

Even a fleeting perception I may have harboured that such a universal predicament that was the plight of women in the theatre would have a concerted unified cohesive vision in the effort to change the state of things, was happily destroyed when I spoke to early collaborators of the "Project" Geddy Aniksdal, Julia Varley, Cristina Castrillo, Bruna Gusberti and Brigitte Cirla. Upon reflection, it is but natural that on an indefinable process that is art and creativity and the richly diverse debate that is feminism and its assertion a unified voice and action for assuming power, credibility and respect would necessarily be riddled with lacunae!

The Magdalena Project has inspired others to not only continue the movement 25 years on but in inspiring others to hold such projects and festivals of their own. The Transit international festival organised "as and when I see the need for it" by Julia Varley at Hostelbro, Denmark, and the "Magdalena Sin Fronteras", a triennial event organised by Roxana Pineda in a small provincial town in Cuba, are such examples. Parvathy Baul, who is at the heart and soul of the Tantidhatri festival in Pondicherry, was invited to the Transit International Festival in 2005, and has since attended the Magdalena Project as well as the Magdalena Sin Fronteras in Cuba. Such a festival in the Indian context has been a wish she has nurtured since.

As a female performing artist in the Baul tradition she has fought long and hard not only receive initiation and instruction by the masters in this form but also to assert herself as an artist and a serious practitioner of the tradition. Ownership is an instinct that goes against the very grain of everything she stands for, and the obstacles that crop up in a world where the traditional sponsors of art festivals, fettered sadly by prejudices that still strangle the perception of artists as women in India, impose their commercially driven vision and

propaganda. This made organisation and raising of funds for the Tantidhatri festival almost impossible.

Parvathy fought the system for three years and tried in vain to host the festival in Trivandrum and Bombay. By the end of 2011 when cancellation of the project was imminent, she turned to Lalit Verma of the Aurodhan Art Gallery in Pondicherry asking if him if he could use his resources, venues and contacts with like minded people in Pondicherry and Auroville and make this exceptional festival of the best women performers the world over present their work in a spirit and set up that was non commercial, devoid of a narrow vision that "ownership" would otherwise exact and in a spirit of constructive exchange in the form of talks, workshops and performances.

Where there is vision there forms a way, and the Divine helps. In the beginning despite the goodwill and enthusiasm of the likes of Lalit Verma, and Krishna Devanandan in Auroville, in Pondicherry too the doors seemed shut. Till the sheer conviction that this event was too important to be cancelled was slowly recognised and doors began to open and the vision began to take shape.

But why replicate in India an event already established elsewhere? Where would Tantidhatri find its own identity? As Parvathy points out, and a glance through the list of artists the unique flavour of this festival reveals itself, Tantidhatri, or the woman thread bearer in this festival is also as much the artist who expresses her creativity in experimental, avant garde theatre as much as the as the performers who perpetuate traditional art forms passed on from Master to disciple. Pondicherry may not have been the first choice of venue, but in Parvathy's experience Pondicherry is the only place she knows where experimental and traditional art find equal and enthusiastic acceptance. There is something special about the city, the people, its spiritual base that has brought here a certain type of audience that she finds in no place else.

Thus while we have artists like Helen Varley Jamieson, who uses theatre and the digital media to stage a performance that uses the internet as its venue, a concept that defies the definition of theatre even among the avant garde, there is Macheri Parambil Padmavathy, of the Pulluvan community in Kerala, steeped in the age old traditions of Naga Kolams and Pulluvan singing. A mix of art, song, tantra, healing and occultism that is a Snake worship tradition as old as the legends of the Mahabharata itself. Performances by Daniella Regnoli, founder member of the Teatro Poltach, way back in 1976 when one can only imagine the struggles of a woman trying to establish a theatre in the days when Italy faced internal terrorism by the red brigade. And Nathalie Mentha who evokes the period between the great wars with the songs of Edith Piaf. And none other than Margi Vijaykumar, without doubt the foremost artist of the Kathakali dance form, finding a place in this festival for his extraordinary streevesham (female characters) in the repertoire. Rwita Dutta Chakraborty, who is in the unique position of a disciple of legendary Tripti Mitra, a guru born in 1925, who had by her sheer genius already fought the battles and chartered the path in Bengal for feminine theatre artists. Rwita in her performance pays a tribute to her Guru by appropriating her iconic Aparajita is a production she calls Nibedone Aparajita, who, as says Rwita unlike her stage character in the original, remains indeed invincible.

Tantidhatri has widened our horizons, and the Pondicherry audience has been truly blessed to witness this unprecedented celebration of women in the performing arts. Had it not been for this festival where else would we have the opportunity to experience the magic that is the fourth voice that comes out of three voices singing a capella in traditional polyphony (three

different pitches within the same scale). Brigitte Cirila, Marianne Sunner and Tania Zloty with their “Black Sea Concert” performed at the Notredam Des Anges offered us just that.

Cristina Castrillo, who comes across as an extremely strong woman, gives us a performance that requires us to question our preconceived definitions of theatre and entertainment. Her character is androgynous, as a woman she does not find it necessary at all to make her productions woman centric. Bruna Gusberti on the other hand, who has worked with Cristina for 23 years, has a totally different approach to her work. She does not take her performance from venue to venue, instead, when invited, she performs what she likes to call her “act” – a one time only representation of something that she stages inspired by the specific event. Geddy Aniksdal, a soft spoken deceptively strong woman, inspires herself from a background she has lived, she chooses to make an autobiographical depiction through three distinct male characters. Her brand of feminism is not confrontational. She instead seeks a balance. She strives to strike a harmony. Julia Varley with whom Geddy works very closely on the Magdalena Project staged a performance that Odissi dancer Rekha Tandon found resonance with. Not only was the performance beautifully crafted, the creating of a character out of a figment of imagination in “The Castle of Hostelbro” by Julia allowed her to relate to the similar practice in Indian dance form where the performer has a dialogue with another character who is totally imaginary.

Last night the first act at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Theatre saw Keiin Yoshimura perform a traditional Kamigata Mai dance. This part dance, part medication chamber art form from the 17<sup>th</sup> century has a unique vocabulary. Silence, subtlety, lightness, soulful music, elaborate hand gestures, the traditional Kimono results in a hitherto inexperienced bubble of poise and collection. This was followed by Parvathy Baul depicting the Radha Bhav. True to her nature she has introduced a beautiful artistic dimension to her performance by painting tableaux depicting the songs. She sings, she acts, she dances, she recites, she incarnates, she soars and you soar with her. Even as I slowly descend from that space I prepare tonight for what I am sure will be another powerful experience as Aruna Sairam prepares to perform her classical vocal recital – Seeking the Divine in Music....