At the rehearsal

Touch can speak more
than a thousand words

Aarthi Murali

In an age when we are pinned down to being a woman, a man, a homosexual, an Indian, a husband, or a refugee, how do we look beyond identities? For Preethi Athreya, a Chennai-based contemporary dancer, the moving body is the only recourse. "When you're moving, the body is reconstituting itself. It's never stable. So, it competes with the idea of identity that's fixed in a particular point in time," she says.

Preethi is a co-founder of Basement 21, a practice-based performance collective in Chennai. She performs, choreographs, and is a facilitator who uses dance as an agent of change, and her latest piece 'The Lost Wax project' is about exposing the fluidity in systems that appear to be organised and unchanging.

"The process began in February 2017. I was interested in how we become aware of each other when we reach out and touch somebody. Spaces between people changes a lot, it becomes very charged," she explains. "It is important to understand this today when we all lead individualised lives — isolated in both our living and thinking."

The idea began with the thought that physical contact with each other changes the environment around us. And since skin is the largest receptor of our intentions and feelings, Preethi believes that skin contact can speak more than words can. She says, "A series of experiments began. Avantika Bahl, Dipna Daryamani, and Sanchita Sharma, contemporary dancers from Mumbai, Jaipur, and New Delhi, who I've worked with in the past, came together for the piece. We met once every two months."

"This search in movement comes from the belief that words cannot express the full capacity of all that we think and see. "A word is a small and ineffective medium," she says. "It's only in the research of the body that you come across different worlds that you can create. For me, it has been a revelation to find that space with my co-dancers."

While the piece is a work for women, Preethi believes it is not restricted to them being women. "I made this choice consciously because of the female body's capacity for endurance that is remarkable and unique. If you're dealing with male body, there is a different way of understanding male psyche, and anatomy, and how the same set of thoughts can be expressed. But for this project, the movement vocabulary worked out for the female body.

The projects aim to create a space in which a body is able to have multiple relationships with different bodies, orientations, viewpoints, and even soundscapes that are created. "The potential identities created work as a metaphor to say that we exist in many parallels and dimensions, and can't be reduced to any definition," she says, adding that this is most relevant in an age that is hyper-sensitive where the artist's work is censored heavily."
pick of the week

On high notes
February 25 | Adyar
Curated by the students of G3 Studios, "The Little Pan - Indian Town" is a Western musical recital. Chennai-based pianist Arvind will be seen accompanying guitarist Kaiwin Raj. At Backyard. Entry free. 6 p.m. Details: 73584-58117

Dancing her way
February 23 | Palavakkam
Inko Centre in association with Goethe Institut, Mumbai and Alliance Française of Madras presents "The Lost Wax Project," a contemporary act choreographed by Chennai-based Preethi Athrey. She will be accompanied by Avantika Bahl Goyal, Dipna Daryanani, Kamakshi Saxena and Sanchita Sharma. At Cholamandal Artists Village. 7.15 pm. Entry free. Details: 2449-0092
The Lost Wax Project, Cholamandal Artists’ Village East Coast Road, Injambakkam, Palavakkam, from 10am to 7.15pm, till Feb 24; Choreographed by Chennai-based dancer, Preethi Athreya who will be accompanied by other dancers to create a presentation that is provocatively abstract, evocative and disruptive.