

Madhavan sparkles in ongoing web series

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CONCERNED: Madhavan, left, in a scene from Amazon Prime live-action series, *Breathe*. He plays as a concerned father of a seriously ill son.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Many years ago a friend Hemu Subramaniam told me that unless one takes risks, one cannot hope to win. She went on to open one of the finest bookshops in Chennai, Landmark. It was modern and encouraged one to browse before buying. Of course, one could turn the pages, even read a full novel and walk out of the store without buying a copy. Landmark multiplied in Chennai, travelled to other Indian cities and became a huge success. The moral of the story is, fortune favours the courageous. Hemu was, but of course, having experiment with a brand new idea in bookshop culture.

I see the same kind of pluck in Tamil-speaking actor Madhavan — whose upbringing in Jamshedpur helped him master Hindi as well. After his initial foray into Tamil cinema with two very interesting Mani Ratnam creations, *Alaipayuthey* and *Kannathil Muthamittal*, he showed great promise in a couple of his early Hindi films, *Rang De Basanti* and *3 Idiots*. His later *Tanu Weds Manu* — playing a doctor from England who is smitten by a small town woman, *Kangana Ranaut* — was just riveting.

Now, Madhavan is being seen in an Amazon Prime live-action series, *Breathe*. I have seen five episodes, and despite my serious apprehension about the moral of the movie, I cannot but admit that it addresses a burning issue of the day, organ donation. In a country wracked by superstition and illogical religious beliefs, hundreds of men, women and children die, because there are not enough donors, not enough organs to be harvested and transplanted into the seriously sick.

In *Breathe*, little Josh, barely six years, needs a lung, because his is failing — and his father, Danny Mascarenhas, a devout Christian and widower, watches his son dying with no organ in sight. There are several people before Josh in the queue waiting for a transplant, and with the child's time ticking fast and furious, Danny knows that he has to do something drastic, something highly unethical. He — who runs a football academy by the day — turns sinister as night falls, and in the darkness of his desperation, he begins to plot the murder of four donors, one by one, so that Josh's turn will come quickly, and he can live.

The first of the four organ donors that Danny zeros in on is an elderly asthmatic man. Danny walks into his house, forces him on the thread-mill, empties his nebuliser and speeds up the machine. The man collapses and goes into a coma, but does not die.

Danny would return to this prey later and at tremendous risk to his own life, will kill the old man in the intensive care unit of a hospital.

Danny's second victim is a young man — all set to be married. Danny steals his helmet on a rainy night, and crashes his car into the motorbike the youth is riding. He is killed, and Josh's name on the list of recipients goes a step higher.

However, when Madhavan stalks his third victim, a young woman organ donor — who has just divorced her policeman husband, *Kabir Sawant* (a wonderful piece of acting here by *Amit Sadh*) — it looks like the start of a cat-and-mouse game. With *Kabir's* intuition pushing him, he soon realises that there is something fishy about the death of the motorcyclist (a sticker for safety who against all logic was riding without his helmet on a rain-drenched road) and the elderly man (also known to be extremely cautious about his health). *Kabir*, drowning himself in drink to get over the death of his baby girl, is sure that his former wife is the next target of the murderer on the prowl.

Madhavan is fascinating as a father deeply troubled by his boy's impending doom and terribly conflicted as a Christian pushed into committing such a devilish act. He portrays almost divine tenderness when he takes care of Josh, but turns into a monster as gets set to pounce on his next kill. The contrasting emotions — dilemma and paternal love — get you breathing heavy all right, nudging the serial into one pulsating episode after another.

I suppose anybody needs a little luck and success to experiment with something as different and radical as a web serial, and Madhavan's glorious run in recent times must have given him the fillip. His 2012 rank bad *Jodi Breakers* got him into a distressing patch of darkness, and it was director *Sudha Kongara* who spotted him, gauged his enormous talent and pulled him out and into the sets of her, *Irudhi Suttru* in Tamil — with a Hindi version, *Saala Khadoos*. The helmer drew a fine performance out of the fallen hero, a fallen boxer in the movie as

well.

Madhavan captivated critics and the ticket-paying crowds with extraordinary power and punch as a side-lined boxing champ-cum-coach, who finds a new meaning to his life when he chances upon a young firebrand of a fisher-girl on the sands of Chennai's Marina Beach. He coaches her to rule the ring, much like how Professor Higgins once taught a rustic flower-seller the art of sophistry in *My Fair Lady*.

Irudhi Suttru not only pulled Madhavan out of the shadows, but also seems to have got his creative juices flowing almost like a torrent. His next, Gayathri-Pushkar's *Vikram Vedha* (a take-off on the highly popular folklore, *Vikram and Vedhalam*) was brilliantly crafted and narrated in great style. The story of a cop (Vikram/Madhavan) who tries to pin down a don (Vedha/Sethupathi), but is frustrated at every meeting, the film was enthralling.

Madhavan's method acting translated into an admirable piece of performance. He did not have to take his shirt off or display his biceps; the firmness of his jaws said it all. His steely grit came through his arrogantly sarcastic sentences and tone. His condescending darts flung at what he called the roguish underdog ("You must have risen from the gutters...," policeman Vikram tells Vedha during their first encounter) were a marvel to watch from an actor whose range had swung from the chocolate-boy romantic hero in *Alaipayuthey* to the no-nonsense boxer in *Irudhi Suttru*.

And now, essaying a Dr Jekyll-Mr Hyde kind of character in *Breathe*, Madhavan sparkles.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran has been watching Madhavan for a long time, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com