

India's Most Epic Tale Comes to Life

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Collaboration: that has been the foundation of ACT Theatre's World Premiere production of *Ramayana*.

Two years ago, Artistic Director Kurt Beattie shared his vision for adapting this Indian epic for the stage, and set about assembling a team of Artist Affiliates to develop the script and production. That team includes playwrights Yussef El Guindi and Stephanie Timm and actors Khanh Doan and Ray Tagavilla.

"I happened to be playwright-in-residence at the time," Timm says, "so I was lucky enough to be brought in on the project."

El Guindi was also enthusiastic. "I was delighted to be brought on to help adapt this sweeping tale to the stage," he says. "I think it's also a good idea for writers to step outside their comfort zones and work on projects they might not otherwise take on."

Timm and El Guindi found theirs a productive writing team. Timm says, "I was thrilled that Kurt had asked Yussef too, because I have long admired his work."

El Guindi concurs. "I love Stephanie's strong lyricism and poetic take. Watching her flex her dramatic muscles the way she did was one of the delights of working on this project."

The project has moved through multiple phases. The initial step, Timm and El Guindi say, was to create a first draft of the script. “Some sections of the story we were assigned, others we chose,” El Guindi says. “We each went off and adapted our particular sections, then met every few weeks with the directors and others for a table read.”

Then other artists were brought in. “What audiences will see is the product of a year-long process in which many groups of artists workshoped various pieces of the initial script,” says Timm.

Actor Khanh Doan describes the workshop sessions as very active. “There were various workshops of the script as it was being written, including a fun battle workshop, where we got to play with sticks, swords, and shields,” she says. “I was very sore for days after the workshop, but it was exhilarating.”

The rehearsal process has also been one of discovery. “Everyone in India has heard, seen, or read the story in its various formats,” Doan says.

Actor Ray Tagavilla adds, “There’s a large contingent of other Asian countries that have different versions of this story. I find it amazing that the Ramayana has spread throughout so many Asiatic countries.” But this has not been true in the U.S.

The task of the artistic team was to distill and present compelling drama for ACT Theatre’s Seattle audience. “It’s an ancient story, but is still extremely relevant to Indian society today,” Doan says. “Kids watch cartoons of it, and adults have heated debates over the dinner table about the actions of the characters. It’s interesting how this very fun and dynamic story about the coming of age of a young hero has become a way to illustrate a code of morality, and more specifically, who succeeds and who doesn’t.”

While ACT Theatre is striving to tell an epic story, rather than to teach morality, the religious element of Ramayana is inescapable. “I found it surprising to learn that the Ramayana was originally a secular hero epic that over the centuries became like a religious text,” says Doan.

“The reverence that people have for the story—it’s the Bible, it’s their culture,” says Tagavilla.

“As well as being a sacred text to many,” adds El Guindi, “it is also just a really good story, one that makes you want to turn the page and find out what happens next. As a playwright, this made the job of adaptation a lot easier than it might have been.”

And yet, this combination of dramatic and moral elements also added to the challenge of creating a cohesive script. “The Ramayana lends itself well to the kind of whimsy and theatricality that I can bring to it,” Timm says, “but the story demands something far deeper than that.”

El Guindi agrees. “There are sections that tempt one onto the precipitous path of broad comedy, even slap-stick comedy,” he says. But other passages are much more serious.

“As a playwright, I was trying to find cracks in Rama’s divine nature in order to make him more dramatically interesting,” El Guindi says. “Flaws humanize, create empathy. I felt like a muckraker at times!”

Equally important were the dramatic elements that Timm and El Guindi did not elaborate in the script, such as the wedding dance. “Sometimes, as a playwright,” Timm says, “my job is to leave spaces in the script for other artists to make something astonishing, trusting that another artist may fill that space with something better than I could have imagined or dictated on paper.”

The intent is that this heroic quest will carry its audience along, while also exploring the heart of the human condition. “Just following the actions of Rama as he tries to do the right thing in the face of some dire situations was very instructive,” El Guindi says. “Rama embodies compassion, but that compassion is put to the test over and over again.”

“How do you lead with your heart when the violent world around you tests that resolve?”

Ramayana runs October 12 to November 11, at ACT Theatre, 700 Union Street, Seattle.