

[New York Loves Ganesha](#)

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## New York Loves Ganesha

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Devotees of Ganesha have long known of his felicitous powers, that is why his ever-smiling rotund image is found in every Hindu home, on the dashboard of taxis and on the desks of business offices in India. Now, thanks to award-winning playwright Terrence McNally, Lord Ganesha can be seen in one more spot: holding center stage in an off-Broadway theater in New York.

With his magnificent elephant head, four arms and roly-poly belly, all dipped in gold, the bejeweled Lord Ganesha is the narrator and all-knowing, all-pervading force in Manhattan Theater Club's presentation of McNally's new play "A Perfect Ganesh." In his introductory monologue, Ganesha describes his divine powers adroitly: "I am in your mind and in the thoughts you think, in your heart, whether full or broken, in your face and in the very air you breathe. Inhale, c'est moi, Ganesha. Exhale, yo soy, Ganesha. Ich bin; io sono. Toujours, Ganesha! I am in what you eat and what you evacuate. I am sunlight, moonlight, dawn and dusk. I am stool. I am in your kiss. I am in your cancer. I am in the smallest insect that crawls across your picnic blanket towards the potato salad. I am in your hand that squashes it. I am everywhere."

"A Perfect Ganesh" was supposed to run only during August, but was so favorably received that it was extended for another month at The Manhattan Theater Club. American audiences and media have been fascinated by this world of random events controlled by the benevolent Ganesha, a departure from the godless themes

in entertainment in America. USA Today wrote: "Playwright Terrence McNally has long been a master of exciting, provoking and all-around manipulating audiences without always a higher purpose in mind. Though he pushes the audience's buttons as feverishly as ever, the whole story is bathed in a beatific glow that gives the play a wisdom and perhaps a lasting value that his previous work has lacked." McNally also wrote the book for "Kiss of the Spiderwoman" which won the 1993 Tony Award for best musical on Broadway.

## Passage to India

"A Perfect Ganesh" follows two upperclass middle-aged women from Connecticut in their passage to India to heal and to find themselves. Katherine Brynne (Zoe Caldwell) needs to forgive herself for never accepting her homosexual son who was finally bludgeoned to death by gay bashers. Margaret Civil (Frances Sternhagen) has her own problems including a slowly-enlarging lump in her right breast. She too has lost a son in childhood, but this secret is buried so deep that she has told no one about it. The two women are off to a prickly start, one pure sunshine, the other cautious and cranky. Yet by the end of the journey, they have forged a solid friendship and perhaps understood each other and life a bit better. Throughout, Ganesha is a cheery presence and involved bystander. "A Perfect Ganesh" evolved from McNally's visit to India where a chance encounter with two middle-aged American women on a train was the starting point for this drama of lost love and redemption. The rotund, ever cheerful deity is central to the story and a force for good. As played by actor Dominic Cuskern, Ganesha is a merry God, full of humor and surprising grace when he dances, and chock full with much wisdom. He has undertaken the task of looking after the two Yankee women and benignly follows the trail of what he calls "these two insignificant, magnificent lives" as they board an Air-

India flight for Bombay, visit Udaipur, Agra and even the burning ghats of Benares. The play takes its title from the "Perfect Ganesh" statue that Katherine is searching for to take back as a souvenir. She never does find the perfect Ganesh, nor does she stumble on easy answers to her many agonizing questions.

"A Perfect Ganesh" has been skillfully directed by John Tillinger. It is a pleasure to watch the topnotch performances from the cast of four. Zoe Caldwell and Frances Sternhagen, both Tony Award winners (New York's highest Broadway honor), are superb as Katherine and Margaret, fleshing out their characters to the last detail.

Fisher Stevens adroitly plays the manifestations of Man, while Dominic Cuskern plays not only Ganesha but all manifestations of God including a concerned Japanese tourist and a kindly concierge. As Ganesha he exudes a child-like exuberance and beauty of spirit. Visually he is a delight, a temple carving come to life, with a skillfully articulated rotund body and fabulous elephant mask created by Tony and Academy award-winning artist Santo Loquasto.

The minimal stunning white sets by Ming Cho Lee add greatly to the atmosphere of the play, achieving maximum drama through sound and light. "A Perfect Ganesh" is once again a search for India's spiritual wealth through Western eyes. As the Washington Times described it: "This mystical journey into the far reaches of hatred and guilt masquerades as a travelogue of India. At the play's core, Mr. McNally is exploring the limits of grief and also the parameters of bigotry."

The review in Newsday noted that "McNally calculatedly links the awful fates of Margaret and Katharine's sons to the saga of Ganesha, suggesting that every tragedy carries with it the potential for transcendence. It's a venturesome message for such jaded armchair travelers as New York theater audiences, but McNally carries it off. For all its flaws, 'A Perfect Ganesh' is a perfect anodyne for an ailing time."

Indeed, in spite of the pain of loss, and the horrors of poverty, bigotry, AIDS, cancer and death, the presence of Ganesha gives the play optimism, a kind of order amidst the random chaos and inexplicable tragedies of life. The New York Times described it aptly: "If, on one level, the title refers to Katharine's search for the perfect statuette in the God's likeness, on another it refers to the God Himself—a spirit of pure benevolence and 'queller of obstacles,' who counters the world's pain with the sweetness of his rippling laughter. While he cares deeply, he knows that caring can't keep tragedy at bay, just as he understands that Katharine and Margaret count for nothing—and for everything—in the scheme of things."

One can't help wishing that there had been more depth to Ganesha's character, some godly actions that would have helped the pitiful humans understand and make peace with the demons of their griefs. Instead, he seems to be more of a benevolent bystander, but then this too may have been intentional, a recognition of the power of karma. After all, as Ganesha says in the play: "We are the ones who are powerless. We can only sigh and shake our heads. There's a serenity in being a God but very little power. We give it all to you."

"A Perfect Ganesh" though disguised as a comic drama, is not forgotten easily and it provokes one to think. Almost two months after seeing it, scenes continue to flash through the mind, and new questions continue to arise: the griefs we humans bear-how much are they due to our own karma and how much the will of God? Is there such a thing as divine intervention? n