Sanskrit Opera Tackles Gandhi
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Peruman, Ravi My assignment is Satyagraha at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. Someone said it's a "Hindu opera." What on earth is a Hindu opera? I get ready to witness a spectacular collision between medium and message. Opera is European and very Christian and satyagraha (Gandhian civil disobedience) is Indian and Hindu. Hoping for the best, but prepared for the worst, I head off with my wife Anjali, who, unlike myself, is opera literate.

On our way, she tells me, "The composer Philip Glass is a 'minimalist;' he uses a very few notes over and over. The opera is three hours long, in Sanskrit and the text is entirely from the Bhagavad Gita." We park and walk toward the Opera House, passing the city's homeless bedding down for the night under some trees. A few of society's upper crust, dressed in tuxedos and jewels, glide past them unaware. Ironically, within the hour, they will be outraged by the social inequalities they see - on stage.

Outside the theater, hundreds of people mill about - young and old, in jeans and in tuxedos, in leather and in gowns - typical San Francisco. The little Opera Store has a Satyagraha T-shirt on display. It's an image of Siva Nataraja. I buy one, but wonder why it isn't Gandhi's beloved Lord Rama. Tickets in hand, we find the press room and make arrangements to meet a cast member during intermission. We pass through the cafeteria where a buffet dinner of beef teriyaki and sesame chicken was served earlier. I can see Gandhiji shaking his head. We hike up to our seats in the very last row of the house.

The orchestra enters and tunes. The lights go up. I am enraptured by the stark set, vivid lighting, full, rich - yes, minimalist - music, syllable by syllable Sanskrit singing, even the bland costuming. Lord Krishna and Prince Arjuna majestically tower on chariots at right and left. Above the stage we see Leo Tolstoy, one of three figures who witness the drama unfolding below. The others are Rabindranath Tagore in Act 2 and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Act 3, representing the influences on

Gandhi and those he influenced. My first yawn unfairly comes after 25 minutes. Then suddenly a beautiful Lord Ganesha is lowered into view. I smile and knock my temples.

At first intermission, we hurry downstairs and into the dressing room of Miss Claudia Cummings, one of two original cast members from the first production of Satyagraha in Rotterdam, in 1980. Her role is Miss Schlesen, the Western woman who devotedly followed Gandhi and the satyagraha movement of the early 20th century in South Africa. I ask, "What's it like singing in Sanskrit?" "Well, Sanskrit is a perfectly delightful language to sing in," she replies. "It's not a language that you study as you do other languages for the opera business but, as you know, it has these wonderful open and neutral vowels. Sanskrit is a very vital, spiritual language - uplifting, almost other-worldly."

Back to our seats for Act 2. The lighting and tempo are both bright, the pace exciting. But I find myself pitying the poor piccoloists who repeat exhausting triplets for minutes at a time. On stage, spokes of a printing press flywheel spin in stark beauty. I drift off a bit and visualize the wiry Gandhi feeding sheets of paper into his own battered press, like a brave artilleryman loading a small canon, fighting the prejudice of a whole country. I reflect on the rage he felt when the white-only government dissolved the legal status of Indian marriages - reducing brides to concubines overnight. But the Mahatma ("Great Soul") was a fighter and finally intimidated the British to repeal that marriage law and yield to most of his other demands.

Forty-five minutes fly by, and again we are guests of Miss Cummings. "When we first began, the production involved enormous amounts of study. The Bhagavad Gita was always with us." She said someone always had a book on Gandhi or the Gita or a God and that, as one would discover some insight, they would share it with the rest of the cast. And of the reception by the Hindu community? "I am afraid there hasn't been much of one, except in Chicago." I did hear Nandini Iyer, a Sanskrit teacher at the University of California, saw it and remarked, "It was a brave cross-cultural attempt, but I don't think the full force of Gandhi's message came out."

We arrive for Act 3 with a minute to spare. This is where I begin to drift. The tempo has slowed to glacial speeds. When the last solo note fades into an echo and the curtain falls, I silently celebrate. But curiously, weeks later, I hear myself telling

people, "I liked it." Was it an East/West collision? Not really. But while Satyagraha forcefully showed me how eagerly and profoundly East and West are now cross-pollinating - in religion, business and the arts - I still wait to see a truly beautiful hybrid flower born from the process.

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