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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**Three *Ramayanas* on the West Coast of the United States: Cross-Cultural Adaptation  
in American Theatre**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THEATRE ARTS

by Jenna Gerdsen

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is approved:

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## **Abstract**

Jenna Gerdson

Three *Ramayanas* on the West Coast of the United States: Cross-Cultural Adaptation in American Theatre

The United States of America built its diverse culture upon Benjamin's "triumphal procession" and sustained its apathetic views towards its diversity with Gómez-Peña's Culti-muralism. As a result of globalization cross-cultural adaptations have become increasingly popular in American theatres. American theatre artists should produce more cross-cultural adaptations of culturally unfamiliar texts— texts to which most Americans have not been exposed. If American theatre artists perform such texts with thorough research, respect, and humility, they can inform the American population about the various non-white cultures that make up the nation's diverse population. If American theatre artists do not perform such texts with research, respect and humility, serious misunderstandings will occur. I examined three United States productions of *Ramayana* and concluded that cross-cultural adaptations of culturally unfamiliar texts have a profound pedagogical and sociological impact.

*To Thomas Freeman*

*Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. -Walter Benjamin*

## **Introduction: Definitions and Methodology**

The United States of America has built its diverse culture upon such a “triumphal procession” as Benjamin describes in this quote. As the nation becomes more diverse, we must look for ways to mitigate the negative effects of this “triumphal procession.” An appropriate first step would be to understand the dangers of cultural appropriation in the theatre. Theatre artists need to develop a thoughtful approach to performing cross-cultural works that can assimilate the richness and uniqueness of the various cultures that make up the United States population without denying the complex history behind the development of the nation’s diversity. In the interest of space I must quarantine my inquiry to the United States and cross-cultural adaptations in the United States, although there remains much more to be said about the diversity of other nations and theatre outside the United States. I will be primarily focusing on three contemporary adaptations of the *Ramayana* in the West Coast of the United States because the productions highlight the rapidly increasing Indian and Southeast Asian populations and the story is still culturally relevant to these communities.<sup>1</sup> By examining three *Ramayana* productions alongside The Circle Theatre’s Bollywood inspired *Pippin* and Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata* I will address the ways we can celebrate the diversity of United States culture, specifically Indian and Southeast Asian culture, without denying the many fraught moments that shaped the nation’s diversity. Performing *Ramayan*s or Indian epics in America in the twenty-first century could be a

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<sup>1</sup> According to a study published in 2003 The Western region of the United States holds about half of the total population of Asian Indians. The San Francisco Bay Area has the highest percentage of Asian Indians in the Western region of the nation (Lai and Arguelles).

celebration of the nation's diversity and an opportunity for valuable education and conversation about Indian and Southeast Asian culture. However when theatre makers do not approach cross-cultural works in a thoughtful and respectful way it often results in misunderstandings and offenses taken.

I will discuss the *Ramayana* productions performed and produced by Mount Madonna School in Watsonville, California; the University of California Santa Cruz; and A.C.T: Seattle. These productions directly engage with the myth of the *Ramayana*, but in different ways. I examine the variety in each production's approach through interviews with individuals directly involved, and textual analysis of each script, as well as criticisms about the productions. By studying three *Ramayanas* performed in different settings and by people from kindergarten to adult age I will show how different generations of Americans interact with Indian and Southeast Asian performance traditions and culture. These three cross-cultural adaptations will show some cultural bridges between the West coast of the United States, India, and Southeast Asia. I believe we should continue building and crossing such bridges. These productions have brought their participants and audiences cultural awareness and have made the Indian and Southeast Asian communities in Seattle and Santa Clara County more visible to the public eye. I will argue that these three productions are models which can bring about sociological progress in the United States.

By avoiding what Guillermo Gómez-Peña calls Culti-Multuralism, cross-cultural works can be a honest celebration of United States culture. He defines Culti-Multuralism as "an esperantic Disney worldview in which all cultures, races, and sexes live happily together" (Gómez-Peña, 241). Culti-Multuralism homogenizes the population and bleaches out the rich color of our nation, meaning it renders our diversity comestible by the



dominant white majority. The perpetuation of this worldview has transformed the nation and its population into a real manifestation of Disney's "It's a Small World" ride. Many Americans have been conditioned to blindly and shallowly celebrate the nation's diversity and ignore the nation's complex past and present. By abandoning Culti-Multuralism and through cross-cultural work, I believe Americans will understand the history of their nation's diversity and how to appropriately showcase the nation's diversity today.

Before theatre artists engage in cross-cultural work, they must be able to define "cross-cultural adaptation." In recent years many theatre companies in the United States have produced "cross-cultural adaptations." Despite their noticeable presence in the United States theatre scene, many people are still unable to define "cross-cultural adaptations." American theatre artists' understanding of "cross-cultural adaptations" are comparable to United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous use of the phrase, in reference to pornography, "I know it when I see it."<sup>2</sup> Una Chaudhuri's definition of interculturalism and Julie Sanders' definition of adaptation are terms that bring some clarity to the term "cross-cultural adaptation." According to Chaudhuri, "The term interculturalism covers a whole spectrum of borrowings from foreign cultures, ranging from subject matter to texts to dramatic technique to theatrical style, even to performance venue" (Chaudhuri 78). Sanders defines adaptation as "... a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself...Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a sourcetext" (Sanders 18). From these definitions and my own research, I have developed my own definition of "cross-cultural adaptation" in the United States. I will be using this definition to discuss three cross-

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<sup>2</sup> In the 1964 court case *Jacobellis vs Ohio*, Justice Stewart used the phrase to simultaneously avoid defining pornography and to assure the court that the motion picture in question was not an example of pornography (Lattman).

cultural adaptations of the *Ramayana* in the West Coast. A “cross-cultural adaptation” is a theatrical production produced in the United States that engages with a “culturally unfamiliar” text and performance tradition and reconstructs the text and performance tradition to suit a United States audience.

I define “culturally unfamiliar” as a lack of cultural exposure. I use the term “culturally unfamiliar” to distinguish texts like *Ramayana* from Western classical texts in English that are a part of the national literature of United States audiences. Although I refer to Indian and Southeast Asian culture as “unfamiliar,” these cultures are part of the social and cultural fabric of America, but they are often overlooked by the dominant majority White Americans, who are not exposed to these other texts. American theatre artists need to understand how and why our culture has knowledge and experience of, for instance, Shakespeare’s work and not of *Ramayana*, as a first step in avoiding cross-cultural miscommunication and offense.

As an example, Lawrence W. Levine’s essay “William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation,” explains how Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn* shows Shakespeare’s immersion into nineteenth-century American culture. Levine describes the scene in the novel when two rogues pass themselves off as a duke and a king, invade the raft of Huck and Jim and perform scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*. According to Levine, Twain’s presentation of Shakespeare’s work on the Mississippi river alludes to America’s burlesques and parodies of Shakespeare work. Levine says,

*Hamlet* was a favorite target in numerous travesties imported from England...Audiences roared at the sight of Hamlet dressed in a fur cap and collar and snowshoes and mittens; they listened with amused surprise to his profanity when ordered by his father’s ghost to “swear” and to his commanding Ophelia, “Get thee

to a brewery”; they heard him recite his lines in a Black dialect or Irish brogue and sing his most famous soliloquy “To be, or not to be,” to the tune of “Three Blind Mice” (Levine 35).

The re-visioning of Shakespeare in 19th century United States culture led to the expansion of Shakespeare’s presence and influence in contemporary United States culture. In twentieth and twenty-first century American culture The Bard has been immersed in literature curriculums and professional theatres. Americans’ cultural familiarity with Shakespeare’s plays stems from our unchanging curriculums and from American theatres’ unwavering attachment to his plays. Shakespeare has had a long residence in United States history, education and theatre. The *Ramayana* was first introduced to the United States in the 19th and 20th century and its presence and visibility is still growing. Through education and theatre, the story can continue to grow and become a culturally familiar text in the United States. I believe our education system and professional theatres must be used to expose people to “culturally unfamiliar” stories like the *Ramayana* and to ultimately help people recognize the impact of globalization.

Globalization has increased and it has made the world even smaller and more connected. Chaudhuri illustrates the effects globalization has had on theatre and on the world. In the context of this essay, I will be using the term “globalization” as a way of discussing the phenomenon of rapid, connection and integration of people, cultures, and ideas from around the world. She states, “The conceptual and practical development of intercultural theater ... in the last two decades both reflects and is part of the change that have swept this century and includes unprecedented movements and interactions of population. Such immense social transformations have left their mark on all cultural activity, so that today not only theater but social life itself is increasingly intercultural, transcultural, multicultural” (Chaudhuri 79). As Chaudhuri says, intercultural theatre is a

result of globalization, a phenomenon that has put culture in circulation. If theatre companies are going to continue to produce intercultural shows, especially a show dealing with Indian or Southeast Asian performance traditions, they must be willing to answer the following questions: As globalization continues to increase, how should American theatre artists go about understanding and interacting with different cultures on and off stage? How should American theatre artists go about finding the balance between cultural fusion and cultural preservation in intercultural performance? How should American theatre artists go about building and crossing the many cultural bridges between the United States, India, and Southeast Asia?

### **What is the *Ramayana*?**

In Sanskrit the *Ramayana* means ‘story of Rama.’ Rama’s journey usually signifies a spiritual process. The *Ramayana* is a Hindu epic poem commonly attributed to Valmiki, a great Indian sage and poet who lived (roughly) in the fifth century BCE. The *Ramayana* is an epic poem that contains 24,000 verses and it is a story that is retold all over India and Southeast Asia. The central story details the life of Prince Rama who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu from being a child educated in scriptures and warfare. As a young adult he wins Sita’s heart because he is the only one who can lift Vishnu’s bow. Rama and Sita live happily together in his kingdom as the future king and queen of Ayodhya, until Queen Kaikeyi manipulates King Dasaratha to exile Rama and crown his brother Bharata king. Exiled for fourteen years with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana, Rama fights the evil demon king Ravana and his forces, rescuing Sita from Ravana only to doubt her fidelity and disown her for many years. When Rama banishes Sita he is unaware that she is

pregnant. Many years after Sita's banishment, Lakshmana struggles to defeat Kusa and Lava in battle only to realize that they are Rama's sons (Narayan).

Like many myths the *Ramayana* is polymorphous. William G. Doty states: "One of the major characteristics of myth[s] worldwide is their polyfunctionality. That is, a mythic narrative can be read in many different ways and at several levels" (Doty 31). Doty's statement on the polyfunctionality of myths directly applies to the *Ramayana* in the context of my essay. The *Ramayana* tradition is thousands of years of Indian and Southeast Asian history, culture, languages, and an infinite amount of re-tellings, counter-tellings, and sub-tellings. The *Ramayana*'s vastness and adaptability comes from its long history and popularity across India, Southeast Asia, reflecting or contesting the varied ethnic-religious groups. The *Ramayana* is a product of centuries of oral stories across India and Southeast Asia. Tellings of the *Ramayana* spread outside of India and into Southeast Asia through maritime trade during (roughly) the first millennium CE (Aragon). The *Ramayana* has been deeply engrained into the culture and history of Southeast Asia. A.K Ramanujan's essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations" illustrates the story's vastness and popularity across South and Southeast Asia. He says:

The numbers of *Ramayanas* and their range of influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. Just a list of languages in which the Rama story is found makes one gasp: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tibetan...Through the centuries, some of these languages have hosted more than one telling of the Rama story. Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings belonging to various narrative genres...If we add plays, dance-dramas, and other performances, in both the classical and folk traditions, the number of *Ramayanas* grows even larger. To these must be added sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays, and shadow plays, in all the many South and Southeast Asian cultures (Ramanujan 133-134).

Ramanujan's statement provides a clear understanding of how widespread and prolific the story is. For people living in South and Southeast Asia *Ramayana* is a part of their daily reality. Generations of people have seen the story in a variety of artistic mediums.

Ramanujan first presented his essay in 1987 at a University of Pittsburgh conference. Twenty-four years after the conference, the essay triggered controversy between Delhi University and conservative Hindus groups. In 2011 a history professor there added Ramanujan's essay to the course syllabus. Conservative Hindu groups in India were offended by the many versions of *Ramayana* that were recounted in Ramanujan's essay. The conservative Hindu groups were also offended by the pedagogical decision to include Ramanujan's essay in a history course (Biswas). Literary critic Nilanjana S. Ray says that the Hindu groups' reaction to the inclusion of Ramanujan's essay in the university curriculum is "...a part of the general climate of intolerance and the battle over who had the right to tell the country's history and its myths" (Biswas). Like all myths, the *Ramayana* does not have one, authoritative source text. As Ramanujan's essay illustrates, there are many different "authoritative texts" of the *Ramayana*. Many different kinds of artists have told the *Ramayana* for centuries. Because of myths' polymorphous nature many different people have the right to tell the myth in a way that suits the culture's history and values. The *Ramayana* is a unique myth because it is an ancient text with an active, on-going history. The story's influence has not diminished and it is still a prominent aspect of societies throughout Asia and more recently in England and the United States. In the 19th and 20th century the *Ramayana* began to be told and retold in England and the United States. The story's popularity and adaptability has allowed it to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

### **Case Study One: Mount Madonna School *Ramayana***

According to alumnus and Mount Madonna community member, Rajesh Westerberg Mount Madonna is a school, a spiritual retreat center and a Hindu community founded by Babi Hari Dass, (a yoga master and silent monk), and his disciples in 1970. The school was founded in 1978 and was developed as a result of the disciples needing a place to educate their children. Mount Madonna School is a private school that educates students ranging from Pre-Kindergarten to twelfth grade. Since the founding of the school the entire student body performs in the school's annual production of the *Ramayana*. However the school's production history of the *Ramayana* actually goes back to 1970, when the adults of the spiritual community would perform an annual *Ramayana*. So 2015 marks the thirty-seventh year of Mount Madonna School's *Ramayana*. The production is interpreted through a Hindu framework and a fusion of Indian and American performance traditions. The play is more of a community event and a ceremony than it is a secular entertainment. The show has not changed dramatically throughout its thirty-seventh year history. Sampad Martin Kachuck wrote the script in 1978 and has been directing the show annually, except for 2014 when he took a sabbatical. The students learn the story and perform the show as they grow up. The older kids become leaders and assistant choreographers because they know the show backwards and forwards. Mounting the production is mechanical because every part of it is ingrained in the school community and curriculum (Westerberg). According to former Mount Madonna teacher and parent Melissa Sanders-Self the school forces parents and students to be directly involved in the production and if any parent refuses to participate the school asks that they pay a fine. The production reinforces the Hindu ideals of the community and unifies both the school and the spiritual community

(Sanders-Self). The school's production of the *Ramayana* is similar to Ramlila, a ten to twelve day performance in Indian villages in the area around Benares that dramatize Rama's life, as both Ramlila participants and Mount Madonna School use performance to unify their respective communities and reinforce the principles of Hinduism. Both traditional north Indian Ramlila and the Mount Madonna School's production incorporate song, narration, music, and dialogue and strongly encourage every member of their community to participate in the development of a show that is full of spectacle and spiritual guidance.

As I stated earlier, Babi Hari Dass founded the Mount Madonna organization in 1970 and initiated adult performances of *Ramayana* to reinforce his spiritual teachings. When the school opened in 1978 the *Ramayana* productions were mostly reserved for the students. In a recent interview Westerberg informed that adults sometimes put on small, staged readings of *Ramayana*. Although not everyone in the Mount Madonna community and school today identifies as Hindu, the kids' production of *Ramayana* is a diluted version of Babi Hari Dass' teachings. Kachuck does not identify as Hindu, however he is an active member of the Mount Madonna community and tries to strike a balance between making interesting aesthetic choices and respecting Babi Hari Dass' spiritual teachings and the Indian *Ramayana* tradition (Kachuck). Sampad Martin Kechak wrote for Mount Madonna School's first production and since 1978 the script has not changed dramatically. The longevity of the script is a direct result of the long established *Ramayana* performance tradition in the Mount Madonna community.<sup>3</sup> The whole show stems from Indian tellings and interpretations of *Ramayana*. The Prologue invocation scene is a discussion between

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<sup>3</sup> Each production's script and writer strongly represents the production's intentions as well as the mission of the organization that produced the production. The opening scenes of each script succinctly characterizes each production.



Parvati the Hindu goddess of love, fertility and devotion and Shiva the Hindu god of destruction. The conversation between Parvati and Shiva highlights the production's spiritual influence:

Parvati: Yet, once born, why was Ram subject to the same ignorance and confusions as any human?

Shiva: Human birth is for experience and liberation. Once born, Ram fights with demons both inside and out to liberate himself and others from the obstacles to living a spiritual life.

Parvati: That is why I want to hear the story of Prince Ram again, to understand the aim of human existence. (Act I, Sc i)

This highly spiritual and philosophical conversation reflects the production's intentions of reinforcing Hindu principles of Itihasa and its connection to the Mount Madonna Spiritual center. Parvati's second line exemplifies the main intention of the show. She asks to hear the story of Prince Ram again to understand the aim of human existence. By hearing the story of Ram, repeatedly, one can understand the aim of human existence, which is to liberate oneself of internal demons to ultimately live an honorable life. According to Kachuck the production promotes this list of values:

Kindness and compassion to others, service to community, giving without demanding reward and recognition, thinking of the larger whole rather than just the individual within the circle, understanding and accepting of duty, honoring of parents and family, commitment to our virtues and disciplines that help us lead a fulfilling life, [and lastly] a bravery to face and vanquish our internal 'demons' that prevent us from leading an honorable life." (Kachuck)

The frequency of the show helps reinforce these spiritual ideas and helps the community at large begin to understand how to lead an honorable life.

The principles of Itihasa are presented through spectacle. In a recent interview Mount Madonna School parent and former teacher Melissa Sanders-Self describes the

school's production as a "pageant and a festival glitter" (Sanders-Self). Mount Madonna School alumnus and community member Rajesh Westerberg said the school's production is "...a big spectacle—you are meant to just get swept away by it and look at it" (Westerberg). For three and half hours audiences see two hundred children ranging from preschool to twelfth grade dressed in vibrant, Indian style makeup, ornate and bejeweled Indian wear, with tall, ornate headdresses or crowns, playing gods, demons, demi-gods, ogres, birds, monkeys, and an assortment of forest animals. The show is performed in the five hundred seat theatre at the Mexican Heritage Plaza with a large and elaborate set and props designed by Westerberg. The foundation of the set is a ramp platform backed by a projection screen that shows various colors, like pink, royal blue, red, and purple to change the mood. The first of the three "looks" features a pink projection, three Indian arches that stand in front of the projection and a ramp platform that sits in front of these arches. The second "look" features a blue projection accented with leafy gobos and fabric manipulated to look like plants and vines that dangle in front of the screen. The last major "look" is a brick archway with a red projection in the background. Large set pieces, like Indian style columns, as well as a giant dragon and ogre puppets are gracefully and swiftly moved on and off stage. In addition to Westerberg's impressive set, the elaborate costumes, the numerous musical and dance numbers that blend traditional Indian music and American disco-esque music gives the production a Broadway quality. Westerberg informed me that the school has "—this incredible storage which...makes [the production] look like a Broadway production," (Westerberg) and Mount Madonna School parent Sahana Lakka said in "A Parent's Perspective" article that "*Ramayana* at Mount Madonna School...has its roots from the Ramlila tradition but has evolved into its own unique blend of the traditions

of India and the western Broadway appeal to the audience” (Kilpatrick). The production is more than a typical school play; its long run of thirty some years and spectacle which is a fusion of music and dance traditions of Indian and the Broadway musical traditions make it an extraordinary school production.

### **Case Study Two: ACT: Seattle’s *Ramayana***

ACT: Seattle announced their production of the *Ramayana* as a world premiere in November of 2012. In a recent interview, Kurt Beattie, artistic director of ACT: Seattle and co-director of the *Ramayana* said he felt compelled to produce and direct the *Ramayana* because most people in Seattle are not aware of the story. He said he wanted to use the show to highlight the ethnic diversity in Seattle and to educate people in Seattle about *the Ramayana* and its cultural significance. He said,

...We have a lot of Indians living in our community... and it was a community of people who had never been to this theatre. It was a great cultural investigation for us....Americans don’t know a thing about [*the Ramayana*]. So I think it’s important for our audiences to be exposed to a very interesting, powerful, cultural tradition, that surrounds these works, and to start thinking about it. Today *Ramayan* has a great deal of significance throughout Asia and Southeast Asia, it has political significance, and a whole lot of other things, and it was a way to begin to have a conversation with our audiences about these values (Beattie).

ACT: Seattle used the production to bring cultural awareness to the Seattle community and connect itself and its audience with the Indian, Indonesian, Thai and Cambodian communities. As Beattie says in his statement, the show was a cultural investigation for the company. Producing the *Ramayana* allowed the company to learn about the story, its history and cultural significance, and it allowed the company to educate thousands of Seattle citizens on the story, its historical and cultural significance and create a bridge between the company, the company’s audience and the various Asian and Southeast Asian communities in Seattle. To educate themselves on the *Ramayana* the company spent

50,000 dollars on developing workshops that occurred four years prior to the company's first rehearsal. These workshops allowed the actors to become familiar with the story and with a mixture of contemporary movement, Indian *mudras* (hand gestures), Indian classical dance and Bollywood dance (Beattie).

Like adaptors in many cultures in India and Southeast Asia, the adaptors, Yusef El Guindi and Stephanie Timm, modernized and shortened the story, to produce a more manageable production. The traditional Indian Ramlila is a performance of Rama's life that can last for a whole month. Not all *Ramayanas* performed in Asia and Southeast Asia are as long as the Ramlila. The story is often shortened and modernized to address current socio-political issues. But ACT: Seattle wanted to produce a *Ramayana* that would engage with the Indian and Southeast Asian communities in Seattle, entertain and educate its audience about the *Ramayana* and educate its audience about Indian and Southeast Asian culture. Tikka Sears, a cultural consultant and ensemble member of ACT: Seattle's production said in recent interview that the company initially intended the production to be like a Ramlila performance. She said, "Early on there was discussion to make it a two night event or a longer event, but just the realities and logistics of that became too much" (Sears). The company then decided to make the show three and half hours with an intermission to strike a balance between showcasing the story's vastness and producing a manageable and digestible show.

Acclaimed playwrights in the Seattle area Yusef El Guindi and Stephanie Timm co-adapted the *Ramayana* for ACT: Seattle. The writing team of Guindi and Timm reflects artistic director Kurt Beattie's intent to include a variety of perspectives on the show. Timm teaches playwriting at Cornish College and ACT theatre and she recently received a

Elizabeth George commission from South Coast Repertory Theatre. Her play *Sweet Nothing: A Grim(Fairy)Tale* was nominated for a Gregory Award in 2012 for Best New Play and she has been a three time finalist for the Heideman Award at the Actors Theatre in Louisville (“Stephanie Timm”). Guindi’s most recent play *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* won the Steinberg/American Theater Critics Association’s New Plays Award in 2012, the Gregory Award in 2011, and Seattle Times’ Footlight Award for Best World Premiere Play and he is the recipient of the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award (“About Yussef El Guindi”). Beattie also co-directed with critically acclaimed director Sheila Daniels who teaches at Cornish College and has directed numerous shows at the Intiman Theatre, Seattle Public Theater, Seattle Repertory Theatre, and Seattle Shakespeare Company (“Sheila Daniels”). Guindi and Timm’s task was to shorten and modernize the story to make it accessible to Seattle citizens.

The very first line of the show smoothly transitions the audience into the story and it showcases the story’s mythic themes of heroes, love and adventure. The show opens with the lone singer, Sage Viswamitra, and he says:

The Ramayana. Never greater an adventure told, never a greater love story. A while back, back when Time could look back and point to its beginnings, when Time could count a thousand years as a minute in the lives of mortals. When a sage could meditate on a question for hundreds of years and then be told by the gods to go back and meditate some more, and do so willingly, somewhere between that time and the time when stories started being recorded, there lived a king. King Dasartha. Who had everything he could ever want except one thing (Prologue).

The second sentence of the line “Never greater an adventure told, never a greater love story” exemplifies how ACT: Seattle made the story accessible to United States audiences. They made the story a love and adventure story. The phrase, “there lived a king” resembles the language of epics and fairy tales. The abstractness and vagueness of the Sage’s passage

resembles the opening of epics and fairy tales because it transports the audience to a fictional world, a whole new time and space, and distances the audience from their reality. This passage immediately informs a mostly unfamiliar audience that the *Ramayana* is just another tale of adventure and romance. The bridging of *Ramayana* to epics and fairy tales makes the story familiar to United States viewers. The intent to make *Ramayana* accessible to these audiences is a part of the organization's mission to use theatre to “—present contemporary struggles, issues, [and] ideas” (“Mission Statement: ACT”). A large part of Beattie's impulse to produce and direct *Ramayana* came from the assumption that most people in the United States are unfamiliar with the story. The opening of the show acts as a bridge that invites people into unfamiliar territory. Once they cross the bridge, Beattie hopes they learn about an incredible story and its cultural significance.

When audiences first walked into the theatre, they saw Matthew Smucker's set, the focal point his design was the vibrant, turquoise floor with a large, white mandala on it. As the show progressed they witnessed large bamboo structures such as a bamboo cantilever ladders, and bamboo archways that doubled as platforms on which the actors stood. The bamboo was also used as weaponry for some of the elaborate battle sequences. The set also included white, silk-like fabric that was draped from the rafters down to the stage floor and was used to signify a wide variety of things like rooms and trees. The actors playing human characters were wrapped and draped in vibrant, colorful, vaguely Indian style fabrics and the actors playing monkey characters wore thatch based outfits. The three hour performance was carried by Maureen Whiting's choreography, which was a fusion of contemporary movement, Indian *mudras* (hand gestures), Indian classical dance and

Bollywood dance. Aesthetically, between the set, the costumes, and the choreography the production was a fusion of West and East.

### **Case Study Three: University of California Santa Cruz *Ramayana: Of Monkeys and Men***

The central production of the essay is the University of California Santa Cruz's 2014 production of the *Ramayana*. This is not Kathy Foley's first *Ramayana* production at UC Santa Cruz, but one of a number since the 1980's. Her productions usually showcase Sundanese tellings of the *Ramayana* from West Java, and her productions are usually performed with Sundanese dance style. Her 2014 production primarily showcased Wayang Wong theatre from Sunda, which in this version employs a great deal of puppet and mask theatre. Some significant forms of Wayang include: Wayang Kulit (flat, leather, shadow puppets) and Wayang Golek (three dimensional, wooden puppets). Foley's goal with the 2014 production was to make the UCSC campus community aware of Indonesian performance traditions from Sunda and Bali and Sundanese and Thai-Malay tellings of the *Ramayana*. In the program notes, Foley writes

This performance combines performance elements from Sunda (West Java) and Bali and puppets from Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand to tell some selected Southeast Asian versions of a story that has spread around the world. We focus on Southeast Asian versions, which differ considerably from the Indian antecedents and use the production as a tool of celebrating our local version of *wayang* theatre, a genre of Indonesia which combines music, dance, and storytelling. We apologize in advance to those who may be more accustomed to the Valmiki rendering and hope to promote recognition that there are many *Ramayana's* [sic] of which this is only one (Program Notes).

The Americans who are familiar with *Ramayana* are most likely familiar with either the Valmiki or the Tulsidas telling which are two most common and popular tellings of

*Ramayana* in India and are somewhat known because of the significant Indian community in the Bay area, the coverage of the *Ramayana* in world literature in some schools and Indian studies classes in the academy. For people that are completely unfamiliar with *Ramayana* Foley's production shows them various Southeast Asian tellings of the story and Sundanese and Balinese performance traditions. For people that are only familiar with the Valmiki or Tulsidas telling, Foley's production informs them that there are other *Ramayanas* across Asia and ultimately gives the whole audience a beginning sampling of the various tellings and performance traditions of Southeast Asia. Within this Southeast Asian framework, Foley focuses on the character Hanuman who is variously depicted across the South and Southeast Asia region.

Hanuman is Rama's strongest and most loyal ally. Some Thai and Malay tellings dramaticize Hanuman's origins and backstory. In some Thai and Malay tellings Hanuman often has offspring, but in Indian fundamentalist tellings he is celibate. Foley's production features Hanuman's birth, his encounter with his father Batara Guru (India, Shiva) and his sexual encounter with the fish princess Sovanna Macha, as well as his son Hanuman Ikan ("Fish Hanuman"). To make these Thai and Malay tellings of the Hanuman more accessible to the UC Santa Cruz campus, Foley made parallels between Hanuman and a youthful individual who is trying to find his or her path in the world. Hanuman says to Batara Guru, the great god of the universe,

...I am sort of a wanderer...But that is why I came to heaven. I may only be a monkey, but I like want to know the secret of my birth. What the heck I am doing in the world? If you know where you come from, it is easier to find where you are going to...Maybe you could point me in the right direction. Like, who is my Dad and what am I supposed to be doing here? (Act I scene vi).



Many college-aged students question their place and direction in the world. Kristopher Bumanlag's lively portrayal of Hanuman and Foley's colloquially written text reinforces the parallels between Hanuman and a youthful individual striving to find his or place in the world. When Kristopher performed Act I scene vi many of the UCSC students responded well to Kristopher's casual yet lively portrayal of Hanuman. Because of this scene and of *Ramayana's* immense adaptability the UCSC community and the Santa Cruz community were able to understand and relate to the story in some capacity.

In terms of content and presentation *Ramayana: Of Monkeys and Men* took the greatest liberties with the traditional source material of the three productions, although there are many Indonesian productions that are far bawdier and contemporized. The passage below succinctly captures the plot and intentions of the production.

Semar: We start off in heaven.

Togog: Some god's wet dream.

Semar: We end up on earth.

Togog: Going in between.

(Prologue)

The show begins with a common Islamic, Chinese, and Sufi interpretation of the beginnings of the universe which says a cosmic egg cracked and created one god. The line "some god's wet dream" refers to moments later in the show as with Batara Guru's attraction to Lady Anjani. His ejaculation flows into the river where Anjani is meditating and it results in her immaculate conception of a child resulting in the virgin birth of Hanuman. The show ultimately juxtaposes heaven and earth with purity and bodily sin as well as the gods, humans and animals to show a large, cosmic scale. These four lines tell

the audience the cosmic geography of the show and clues them into the sexual content. The directness and simplicity of the dialogue makes Foley's complex, fusion of Southeast Asian tellings Ramayana, Southeast Asian performance traditions, and Islamic concepts accessible to United States college students.

Act II scene i and Act II scene iii were two of the most memorable scenes in the show and were widely appreciated by audiences. Act II scene i and Act II scene iii featured long, blue silks that signified ocean waves, and a chorus of performers that chanted two part vocal interlock chant of Balinese Kecak's "chach-cha chach-cha" and "cha-cha-cha." The silks and the chanting marked the entrance for the beautiful fish-tailed queen Sovanna Macha (Sara Moon). She glided onto the stage in a traditional Balinese costume and was wrapped tightly in ornate, gold fabric, donned a tall headdress and fish tail that was attached to her waist. The choral performers sitting with the gamelan stage left are chanting in between her dialogue with her son Hanuman Ikan. As each new choral vocalization begins the gamelan and the chorus elevate their arms and wave them enthusiastically. The performers' costumes are equally ornate and beautiful, as they are dressed in mostly Sundanese inspired costumes. Actors who played higher status characters like gods wore vibrant and bejeweled costumes, while the actors who played lower status characters like clowns wore colorful and minimally bejeweled costumes. The action takes place on Kate Edmunds' set that features a red, white, and yellow colored mandala on the stage floor, three entrances/exits upstage center, a raised platform to highlight the god character Batara Guru, and three cotton screens upstage center to feature shadow puppetry.

The screens are most effectively used in the Prologue Puppet scene. The Prologue Puppet scene introduces the characters Rama and Sita and briefly summarizes each

character's backstory. As the actors who play Rama and Sita emerge from upstage center, their shadow puppet equivalents emerge on the screens. This short scene allows the audience to get a taste of traditional shadow puppetry and a brief introduction to the central characters of the story. Act II Scene ii, Act II scene iii and the Prologue Puppet scene all highlight the success of Foley's fusion of Southeast Asian performance traditions. These three scenes in particular are the productions most visually and aesthetically staged scenes and they are the most effective examples to illustrate Foley's use of Southeast Asian performance traditions.

### **Critical Reception**

There are not many critical reviews for Mount Madonna school's production. The lack of critical reviews emphasize the production's cast of school children as well as its communal and pedagogical purpose. Typically most school productions are not reviewed because the youth performers are not skilled, professionals, and criticism would be unnecessary for kids that are involved in the production as an extracurricular activity. But the few reviews that are accessible glorify the production's spectacle and youth performers. Nandita Verma of *IndiaWest* and Phillip Pearce of *Performing Arts Monterey Bay* both state in the opening paragraphs of their reviews that Mount Madonna school's production is not an average school play. The production's direction by Kachuck and its Broadway-like spectacle and longevity separates it from typical school plays. Verma says,

Director Sampad Martin Kachuck grips his audience from the very onset as the beautiful cast opens the show with a traditional invocation to the gods... that...firmly establishes his grasp of the epic tale's deep didactic roots, a subtle hint that this is no run of the mill director and this is no run of the mill adaptation (Verma).

Verma's comment illustrates the impressive spectacle of the production as well as its traditional roots, strong direction and writing. Her comment explains why this production is successful and why it is more than just a typical school play. It is widely known and recognized throughout the Santa Clara County. Since it is more of a community event, than it is a production, perhaps the criticism is internal. In a recent interview with one of the main choreographers Mayana Lisboa she said that some of the dances have been passed down from Babaji to the choreographers to the Mount Madonna School students. The older, high school students become choreographers and teach the younger students some of the production's choreography (Lisboa). Kachuck affirmed Lisboa's comment in a recent interview and said "There is a community around the production, the production is bigger than us, the kids take on roles that they know about for years" (Kachuck). Practically every aspect of this production is shared, common knowledge in the campus community. This constant exchange of knowledge must trigger improvement. Another reason for the lack of critical reviews is the productions' audience. Kachuck said that the audience "...is primarily Indian, Indian people from San Jose, since the performance venue is in San Jose" (Kachuck). Since the production follows traditional Indian tellings of the *Ramayana* and Indian performance aesthetics the Indian community has no serious criticism against the show. The other half of the audience are parents merely there to support their children and would probably have nothing bad to say about the show. Mount Madonna's production is the most unique out of the three productions because of its longevity, its specific audience and local acclaim (Kachuck).

ACT: Seattle's *Ramayana* was also locally acclaimed in Seattle, but because of its professional status, there were many reviews. The majority of reviewers liked the show; the

production did not receive any major criticism from the Indian or Southeast Asian community in Seattle. In the initial stages of the artistic process, Beattie reached out to the Indian, Indonesian, Cambodian communities in Seattle and informed them about the show. Therefore, these communities were enthusiastic about the show and were delighted to see the final product. The company's collaboration also led to more than thirty production "ambassadors" from Seattle's South Asian and Southeast Asian communities and outreach events like lectures at the University of Washington and a pre show Indian bazaar in the theatre lobby. I will focus on reviews from the Seattle Times critic Misha Berson who wrote one preview and one review entitled "ACT gambles big on 'The *Ramayana*, a Hindu Epic cherished by millions." Her review reads like a dramaturgical note as it provides insight into the making of the production, the significance of the story as well as direct quotes from Beattie and other advisors to the production, such as retired University of Puget Sound professor Mott Greene. The preview is entitled "Ramayana at ACT: vivid dramatization of the Hindu epic" and ultimately concludes that the show is a success. Berson's preview and review were published just days apart, October 14th and October 19th of 2012. The show opened October 12 and ran till November 11, 2012. Berson's review came out two days after the show opened. If an individual who was unfamiliar with the Ramayana read Berson's first review before seeing the show, this individual would have been informed about the show's artistic process, the directors' attraction to the story, a professor's thoughts on the show, and the surface level parallels between Shakespeare, and Greek myths and the *Ramayana*.

In the preview Berson summarizes the production by saying "The artistic team... has been scrupulous in crafting the narrative into an essential heroic quest for love, honor,

goodness... What emerges is suitable for all ages, and is a drama of family and dynastic clashes and unifications, similar to the goings-on in Shakespeare's plays, the Old Testament and Greek myths" (Berson). Her comment alludes to her review in which she gives background information on the production and the larger, broader story of the *Ramayana*. Retired professor Mott Greene supports the comment in Berson's first review. He says, "Anyone who has read 'The Iliad' or 'The Odyssey' will get this show" (Berson). Their comments acts as bridge that makes this story seem familiar and accessible to an audience that is mostly unaware of the *Ramayana*. Berson features this comparison between Shakespeare, Greek myth and the *Ramayana* as an advertising device. The only major piece of criticism Berson gives, aside from the slow pacing in some parts of the show, Rama's bombastic rages, and the monkey characters' backstory, is, "It would have been great to see more professional artists of Indian background involved" (Berson).

I would like to address two aspects of the Berson's reviews. The first is the use of the shallow parallels between Shakespeare and Greek myth and the *Ramayana* and the second aspect is the lack of Indian performers in the cast. The only shared quality Shakespeare's plays, Greek myths, and the *Ramayana* have is that they are all culturally recognized and admired stories. The *Ramayana* is more in that it also has a highly religious, political, and social role across Asia. A more appropriate West to East comparison would be to compare the Bible to the *Ramayana*. They are both a collection of stories multiple cultures know and interpret and perform differently. Berson's choice to make a more shallow comparison suited a wide audience that might be alienated by a religious parallel and ultimately the comparison to "classic" theatre may have made the show financially successful. Berson notes that there was a lack of Indian performers, aside

from a child performer, and that the production would have benefited from more professional Indian performers. Her remark on the lack of Indian actors in the show is puzzling because the *Ramayana* is not exclusively Indian; the story is quite widespread, and the diverse casting highlights the ubiquity of the story. In an interview with Kurt Beattie and ACT: Seattle technical director Steve Coulter, I learned the actress that played Sita, Khanh Doan is Vietnamese, the actor that played Rama, Raphael Untalan is Filipino American and Brandon O'Neill, who played Hanuman, is of Polynesian and Irish descent. Between the Indian, child performer Aki Vadari, Raphael Untalan, Khanh Doan, and Brandon O'Neill, co-directors Beattie and Daniels used the casting to showcase the ethnic diversity in Seattle and cultural ubiquity of the *Ramayana*. ACT: Seattle received a diverse audience, a combination of the Indians, Thais, Indonesians, University of Washington students, University of Puget Sound theatre students, as well as the company's regular patrons.

The production mostly received positive feedback, aside from a couple Indian conservatives in the United States who heard about the show and sent the company aggressive emails. According to Beattie the company received "prohibitive emails" that accused the company of exploiting the *Ramayana* for monetary gain. When I asked Beattie about these prohibitive emails in a recent interview he said, "I think there were two [emails]—at least two that I saw. One was from an Indian man in Arizona who sort of implied we were doing this to make money off Ram. He clearly didn't know the economics of the not for profit theatre! I don't remember the content of the other. I didn't keep them" (Beattie). Despite these aggressive emails, the company accomplished their goal of making

a massive cultural story accessible to people that have little to no knowledge of the *Ramayana* and still highlighted the cultural significance of the story.

Out of the three productions, Kathy Foley's 2014 production of the *Ramayana* had no reviews. The only published piece of the show was featured in the University of California Santa Cruz student run newspaper City on the Hill. Gabrielle Garcia's City on the Hill article covers basic production information (who, when, where, what), and quotes from one of the gamelan musicians Zeki Schwartz and actor and international student Ayako Karasawa on their experiences working on the show. The article also featured Kathy Foley's perspective on the show and the significance of featuring Thai and Malay tellings of the *Ramayana* in the production. In addition to Garcia's article, Dr. Aimee Zygmanski's theatre history students wrote responses to the production. I examined dozens of written responses from undergraduate students. Most of the students said they liked the show; they specifically enjoyed the set, the costumes, and the Sundanese and Balinese dancing. But they could not understand some of the plot, especially in the first act, or the cultural significance of the story. Unlike ACT: Seattle's the *Ramayana*, Kathy Foley's production was apparently not nearly as accessible. It was difficult for students to get a strong grasp on the story. They also had a difficult time recognizing the Sundanese and Balinese performance traditions and the distinctions between them.

The students' biggest piece of criticism was that there were too many jokes. The majority of students felt that the excess of jokes was distracting. Even two of the actors in the show felt the jokes about UCSC made it difficult to understand the story. Prior to working on this production, these two actors V.Y and G.P, were not familiar with the *Ramayana*. V.Y said, "I think [the jokes] took away from the context of the message of the



show and confused the audience members,” (“V.Y”) and G.P said, “I don't think they really helped me understand the story, in a way, they kind of cheapened the story a little bit” (“G.P”). Interestingly, the jokes were there to replicate a traditional, Indonesian village performance and to connect the UCSC campus to the story and to the performance traditions. During one of the two post-show talkbacks, Foley was asked by someone in the audience if a traditional Indonesian performance of the *Ramayana* would have less comedy than ours had. Foley enthusiastically said “No! More!” The clown characters are often distressing to Indonesian audiences because they engage with people non-stop and often call people out by their name. The clown characters also discuss local politics and current events. Foley used the clown characters to make jokes about Santa Cruz, the UCSC student body, and to pick on a random student in the house every performance to come up with a term to describe the biological makeup of Hanuman Ikan’s (the half mermaid, half monkey character). While Sugriwa’s line “Pure vegan, sustainable, eco-conscious of space ship earth. In trying to save myself, I’ll go glocal, I’ll fit right in at UCSC” (Act I sc ii) makes fun of the campus and city’s embrace of organic food and environmental issues. Subali’s line “Never could make a class before 5 pm!” addresses most American college students’ struggle to attend an early class and their reluctance to go to class. Sugriwa and Subali’s lines offer a slice of college life and Santa Cruz life as well as a slice of traditional Indonesian performance.

When I interviewed Rajesh Westerberg, Mount Madonna school alumus, community member and UCSC master carpenter we discussed Foley’s *Ramayana*. Westerberg felt that Foley’s production had a “Brechtian self-consciousness” (Westerberg). He felt the Indonesian Wayang puppet theatre had Brechtian qualities because it transforms

the actors into self-conscious puppet that is aware of its state of being both a puppeteer and a puppet. Westerberg said that this idea of the actor being a self-conscious puppet was very obvious to the audience. Westerberg's comparison between Foley's production and Brechtian principles showcases the didactic nature of Foley's production. Through this production of the *Ramayana*, Foley said she wanted to expose the UCSC campus community to a wide variety of Southeast Asian performance traditions and tellings of the *Ramayana*, like Sundanese dance, Balinese dance and Balinese chant, as well as featuring Thai and Malay tellings of the *Ramayana*. Through Foley the UCSC theatre arts department has some exposure to non-Western theatre. Even though most students who saw Foley's productions, did not fully understand the significance of the story or the performance traditions, the production at least left some imprint on their consciousness.

### **Larger Issues: Ownership, Adaptation and Appropriation**

On November 14, 2014 at 5:30 pm Foley sent an email to the UCSC student group Indian Student Association to invite students to see her production. Her email contained the production dates and times, the location of performance venue, ticket information, the names of the music director (Undang Sumarna) and co-choreographers (I Gede Oka and Irawati Durban) as well a promotional photograph. The promotional photograph features the three actors that played Rama (Ayako Karasawa) Hanuman (Kristopher Bumanlag) and Ravana (Devon Yaffe) in their full production costumes. On the same day, at 8:05 pm an executive leadership member of the Indian Student Association replied to Foley's email. The reply stated:

Dear Ms. Foley,

As ISA CORE we were delighted when we heard that the Ramayana was being reenacted and performed by our very own theater arts department. However we would like to voice our concern about the title; Ramayana: Of Monkeys and Men, since it is comparing monkey's to our gods which is seen as disrespectful to some of our members. While we know that you did not mean any disrespect, if in the future there are more productions based around Hindu mythology we would appreciate if ISA is consulted about the title since Hindu mythology is deeply tied to Hinduism and it is easy for people to feel offended.

Best of luck for the show!

ISA CORE

Foley forwarded this email exchange to me on December 23, 2014 and I interviewed the individual who replied to Foley's email as well as another executive leadership member of the Indian Student Association. I started the conversation by asking them to tell me what their concerns were with the show. M and S stated that their primary concern was the addition of "of Monkey and Men." They explained the meaning and significance of the monkey in Indian culture by explaining the spiritual importance of the monkey-god Hanuman in Hindu theology. The Indian word "Bundar" means monkey on a literal level but on a social level means fool. The title of the show, therefore, would be offensive to most Indian people. M and S assumed that Foley's production was comparing men to monkeys and demeaning the monkey-God Hanuman. M and S also noted the presence and influence the *Ramayana* has had in their life. Their knowledge about the *Ramayana* and the Indian tellings of the story stem from their lived, cultural experience. After describing their concerns they asked me to give them some insight into Foley's reputation and insight into the production. M was not completely aware of Kathy's reputation and before we talked both M and D were not aware that Foley's production was not based upon traditional Indian *Ramayanas*. First I told M that Kathy Foley is the editor of *Asian Theatre Journal* and briefly discussed her reputation as one of the most prominent scholars of Asian

performance in the nation. From there I told them that the addition “Of Monkey and Men” was there to highlight Hanuman. I also informed them of *Ramayana*’s long literary and performance history by summarizing Foley’s program note that said,

The story focuses on monkey business, telling of how the monkeys that assisted Rama in the war against the demon came to be and how the tale weaves the worlds of animals, gods, and men together to give us a philosophy of being. We know that our version is only one and tells only small parts of a story that has fascinated humans for at least 2000 years.

Providing details about Foley’s reputation, her production and an explanation for Foley’s intentions with the title alleviated M and S’s concerns around the production’s title. After our exchange of perspectives, M said, “We [The I.S.A] want to apologize for [our concern] ... We got clarification and we really appreciate the clarification because not only is [*Ramayana*] a touchy subject in Indian culture, but its also a touchy subject for all of us, as Hindus, being grown up in India and learning about the mythology and the story.”

Shortly after M’s statement D mentioned Foley’s 2013 production of *Mughal Miniatures: Tales of Love* and said, “I’ve taken Kathy’s class and seen her production. When I knew about it [*Ramayana*] I wasn’t too concerned because I know how she does things. She brings people in who are experts, so it is authentic. I didn’t have an issue with it, except for the title.” Ultimately our conversation was fruitful and productive as M and D had the opportunity to verbalize their concerns and I got to resolve their concerns by giving them the clarity they did not have.

M and S’s concern addresses the large issue of ownership and cultural appropriation. Their concern with the production indicates their sensitivity around cultural appropriation. M and S were responding to a perceived, potential threat to their culture. Although they did not investigate the intentions of Foley’s production, M and S’s concerns

were valid. Concerns like M and S's are not rare, in fact, concerns like theirs are common responses from minority cultures. Susan Scafidi author of *Who Owns Culture?*

*Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* defines cultural appropriation as,

“Taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture’s dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols etc. It’s most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive” (Scafidi).

Over the course of United States history the white dominant culture has appropriated various aspects of non-white minority cultures. Although I do not have space to list and describe specific examples of the white dominant culture appropriating aspects of other non-white cultures, I do want to use this historical trend of appropriation to support Scafidi’s statement and to reinforce M and S’s concerns. M and S’s concerns with the show are directly linked to repetition of cultural appropriation. Walter Benjamin says “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another” (Benjamin). M and S’s sensitivity stems from this inevitable barbarism and the repetition of cultural appropriation. Since M and S’s response is a common response to many cross-cultural adaptations produced in the United States, it is important for theatre artists to understand the nation’s complex history and the consequences of cultural appropriation.

Cross-cultural adaptations can become an opportunity to showcase the many cultures within the United States instead of a perpetuation of oppression and marginalization. Sun Huizhou, also known as William Sun, vice president of the Shanghai Theatre Academy and contributing editor of *The Drama Review* says (“Shanghai Faculty”),

I would like to call on artists to pay more attention to an increasingly important reality. More and more people of different cultures are interacting and having problems in their interactions. As intercultural artists—often as ambassadors to other cultures—can we artists do something to address this issue and help solve some of those problems? (Schechner 10)

Sun's statement calls our attention to the intense circulation of cultures and the conflicts that arise in cultural interactions. He summons theatre artists and asks them to mitigate the negative effects of globalization. I support Sun's call to action and agree that theatre artists should act as cultural ambassadors and work on addressing decreasing intercultural tension. Theatre artists need to produce more cross-cultural adaptations and use the production experience as a learning tool. Theatre artists should address the following questions: What is the purpose of telling this specific story? Why this story now? How will this story be told? What kind of research and information will inform the production? Where is the information coming from? From lived experience or academic expertise or from cultural consultants or scholarly research and work? Issues arise when artists tell culturally unfamiliar stories with the intentions of exotifying a minority culture and its story. When the questions listed above are not thoroughly addressed, theatre artists run the risk of producing cultural appropriation and triggering negative feedback from many minority cultures.

Ultimately any artist has the freedom to tell any story he or she wishes to tell, however the artist must invest time researching a story's historical and cultural context to avoid major backlash and controversy in a diverse, polyphonic society. The idea that certain, minority cultures "own" a story is a result of centuries worth of cultural appropriation. The idea of "ownership" is a way for minority cultures to reclaim aspects of their culture. Because of our nation's complex history and our nation's ever-growing

diversity, theatre artists should be producing thoughtful, responsible, and inclusive cross-cultural works. The power of artistic freedom should not be abused, it should be used wisely.

On November 10, 2012 The Circle Theatre in Chicago debuted its Bollywood inspired adaptation of *Pippin*. Kerry Reid's review entitled "Bollywood Style Puts Cultural Complications in 'Pippin'" articulates why the production was problematic. She says, "...It's undeniably disconcerting to see a lot of white actors in Indian garb as they deliver their version of Bollywood dance moves. There is a degree of cultural misappropriation at work...One wonders how much better it would have been without the necessary importation of a style that fails to enhance the original material" (Reid). Chicago based director Lavina Jadhvani saw the production and her opinion of the show supports Reid's review. Jadhvani described the production as "unusual, rude, inauthentic, insensitive and a disservice to religion." From Reid's review and an interview with Jadhvani I learned that the cast was entirely composed of white actors in brownface.

The issue with this production is that the Circle Theatre ignored the cultural contexts with which they were engaging. Bollywood and the story of *Pippin* have completely different, and uncomplimentary, cultural contexts. The Circle Theatre exploited and exoticized the festive and colorful nature of Bollywood and did not seem to produce any research on either the history of Bollywood or on *Pippin's* own original historical context. The only comments I could find from Kevin Bellie, Artistic director of The Circle Theatre and director of *Pippin* was the following statement: "Our production is a bit different in that it is not set in India, rather it is inspired by Bollywood filmmaking" (Bernardo). Bellie also said,

Much like adapting Shakespeare to a different time or place, this production uses the Bollywood film storytelling style to amplify the original *Pippin* story in its original form. Therefore, ethnicity is not the focus of the production, rather the design, story-telling style, dance and music. The casting for the production is multi-cultural rather than solely South Asian. We did not have a very large turnout of Asian actors for the show, but again, our idea was color blind rather than focused on South Asians only (Bernardo).

Bellie's statements suggests that he failed to complete thorough research on the cultural and historical contexts of *Pippin* or on the Bollywood tradition. Bellie seemed to only focus on the Bollywood film style that is characterized by musical song and dance numbers, melodramatic plots and character types such as star-crossed lovers, courtesans, and villains. Because the production was specifically based upon the Bollywood film style, this suggests that Bellie never intended to make the production culturally profound. He claims that putting *Pippin* into a Bollywood film framework will amplify the original story, but never explains how the framework amplifies the story. It seems that Bellie wanted to produce a crowd-pleasing musical at the expense of Indian culture. Even when artists adapt Shakespeare's work they must consider multiple cultures. Bellie does not seem to understand that adaptation is the process of tracking where the text originally came from and where the text is going. The second, most important part of the adaptation is tracking the cultural change when moving a text between various times and places. Bellie's failure to engage in this cultural tracking is also seen in his casting choices. Bellie claims that the cast was multicultural, however, Reid observed "... a lot of white actors in Indian garb." Color-blind casting is the American theatre community's implementation of Culturalism, the worldview that bleaches out the various color in United States society. His lack of effort to assemble a ethnically diverse cast also affirms that the production was never intended to be well-researched or culturally profound. Bellie's statement ultimately



exposes his cultural negligence and it affirms Reid's and Jadhvani's critical opinion of the production.

Coincidentally the Circle Theatre's production premiered in the same month and year as ACT: Seattle's adaptation of *Ramayana*. Unlike the Circle Theatre, ACT: Seattle produced *Ramayana* to inform Seattle audiences about the *Ramayana* and they sought cultural consultants, conducted extensive research on the story, the various tellings of *Ramayana* across Asia, and its cultural significance, and they collaborated with Indian and Southeast Asian communities in the area. ACT: Seattle had productive intentions and an appropriate amount of information to successfully tell the *Ramayana*. This coincidental timing of two productions based upon an Indian performance traditions debuting in the same month and year indicates that Americans' have an interest in Indian culture and art. Americans' interest in Indian culture and art could be an optimistic sign that Americans are appreciating the various cultures in the nation, however Americans must be mindful of how they are appreciating various cultures.

Peter Brook's production of the *Mahabharata* is the grandfather of cross-cultural adaptations. Peter Brooks debuted his theatrical production of *Mahabharata* 1985 and it generated a tremendous amount of praise and criticism. In her 1985 New York Times review of Brooks' *Mahabharata* critic Margaret Croyden says that the production "— suggested both the timelessness of the universal and the presence of India," and concludes her review by saying, "At the end of the performance, many in the audience ... were full of wonderment and awe at what they had seen" (Croydon). His production was one of the first major cross cultural adaptations in the Western theatre world. Prior to Brook's epic production most United States audiences had never seen anything as long, and as culturally

unfamiliar as the *Mahabharata*. Kurt Beattie was one of many individuals who appreciated Brook's production. In a recent interview Beattie said that Brook's production inspired a significant portion of Beattie's direction for *Ramayana*. When asked about his awareness of the intense criticism surrounding Brook's production and how the criticism affected his *Ramayana* production, Beattie said:

I did read some negative responses to his production. But I think the thing that impressed me was about it was its difference, its newness, the scope of it, and the fact that he wanted to say that it was a world story. He cast it diversely, specifically for that reason. I began to realize in the course of doing this [*Ramayana*] that there was never going to be any way to satisfy everybody about this. Fundamentally my response to this piece, the way Brook was to the *Mahabharata*, will be exceptionally personal, it will be unique, and it won't be profound culturally in terms of the originating cultures, but its getting to be a smaller world and you're going to live in your little silos and not attempt to reach across the border, you're never going to get anywhere and it seemed to me that Brook actually made fundamentally some very compelling theatre whether or not it was cultural tourism. For somebody not knowing the and watching this unfold for the first time it was really interesting from beginning to end and it was simply an effective piece of theatre (Beattie).

As Beattie mentions in his statement above, Brook's production was a departure and inspired other mainstream Western theatre makers to step outside of their familiar tradition of Western classical bubble. In mainstream Western theatre, Brook's production was the seed that sprouted more professionally funded intercultural productions that blend elements of Western and Indian theatre traditions.

However Chaudhuri and many other scholars and critics felt that the production was problematic. She argued that Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* ignored the deeply rooted Indian culture and promoted the story as a "universal" story. Chaudhuri summarizes the problem with Brook's "universal" *Mahabharata*, she says, "a self-appointed representative of 'universal' culture, [who] had pillaged world culture in search of new territories, then

planted his own Imperialist flag in the flank of this quintessential Hindu work” (Chaudhuri 77). Brook is using ‘universal’ as a blanket term that masks the *Mahabharata*’s Indian context and as a way of saying the story is accessible for a Western audience.

Unlike Bellie and Brook, Beattie and Foley’s productions did not commit cultural appropriation and Culti-multiculturalism. However both Beattie and Foley faced minor backlash from Indian individuals. Because the *Ramayana* still holds religious significance to many people in India and Southeast Asia, even well researched productions like Beattie’s and Foley’s are still at risk for receiving some pushback. However the backlash for *Pippin* was appropriate and necessary because the production committed brownface, ignored *Pippin*’s historical context and Bollywood’s historical context and ultimately created an uninformed mashup of a story and performance tradition. Despite the popularity of Brook’s production, it blanketed Indian culture. The controversy surrounding Brook’s production should signal other theatre artists to produce cross-cultural adaptations with cultural sensitivity. The pushback that Bellie, Brook, Beattie and Foley received signifies *Ramayana*’s immeasurable significance in India and Indians’ insecurities and anxieties around a non-Indian artist adapting a sacred text.

These controversial productions, *Pippin* and *Mahabharata*, are examples of cross-cultural adaptations that failed to deeply consider the various historical contexts of their source texts while the three productions of the *Ramayanas* are cross-cultural adaptations are productions that are adequately considering the *Ramayana*’s various historical and cultural contexts. The difference between these two sets of productions is how they walked the artistic tightrope that all artists are faced with when producing a cross-cultural adaptation. When producing a cross-cultural adaptation American theatre artists must walk

a fine line between preserving the source-text's original historical and cultural context and incorporating their own cultural context. Western theatre artists should learn how to walk this line with respect, knowledge and humility as the number of cross-cultural adaptations produced in American theatres are rapidly increasing.

## **Conclusions**

Mount Madonna School's *Ramayana*, ACT: Seattle's *Ramayana*, and UC Santa Cruz's *Ramayana* are important to examine for several reasons. Firstly, the participants involved in the three productions range from the ages of 4 years old to about 60 years old. This range of ages is an all-encompassing representation of society. Secondly all of the participants involved in each production are either learning about or engaging with a culturally unfamiliar story and they are passing their knowledge to their curious audience. Thirdly, each production uses theatre's didactic nature to educate its participants and audience on *the Ramayana* and its cultural significance. Each production explicitly attempted to convey cultural awareness within the casts and their community. The productions reflect the diversity of the West Coast community and initiated relationships with Indian and Southeast Asian communities, which made these communities more visible to the public eye. When non-Indian students begin their schooling at Mount Madonna School they know little to nothing about the *Ramayana* and by the time they graduate, they know the whole story backwards and forwards, and are familiar with some fundamental Hindu values. Through the production and the school, Mount Madonna students have access to the Mount Madonna spiritual center. The center, founded by Babi Hari Dass and his disciples, still informs the production. Most of the actors in Foley's production were not familiar with *the Ramayana*, or Southeast Asian performance traditions. Through Foley and

Irawati Durban (co-choreographer) I Gede Oka (co-choreographer), and Undang Sumarna (music director) the actors were able to familiarize themselves with the story and learn the beginnings of Balinese and Sundanese dance. Most of the ACT: Seattle cast, aside from Tikka Sears, were not familiar with the story and through the four year development workshop process they were able to learn about story and its cultural significance. The wide range of participants in each production interacted with a culturally unfamiliar story and performance traditions. Their interactions with the story and various performance traditions were informed by the knowledge of their directors and other cultural consultants.

The process and the positive impact of these three productions have sociological importance. Cross-cultural adaptations should serve as a guide for how we should build and cross bridges outside of the theatre. The process of making cross-cultural adaptations can teach us how to productively engage with other cultures as the social and cultural fabric of the United States is becoming more intricate and diverse. We should be interacting more with Indian and Southeast Asian cultures, because they are essentially one thread in the greater social and cultural fabric in America. It is important to know how to appropriately and effectively produce a cross-cultural adaption because it will ultimately help us better interact with the various cultures around us. United States theatres should produce less culturally familiar texts and more culturally unfamiliar texts because it is important to showcase the various cultures that make up the nation. Through cross-cultural adaptations we can use theatre to educate and inform people about our culture. However we need to produce more well-informed cross cultural work in order for theatre to be an educational tool. When we produce cross-cultural adaptations we must avoid what Guillermo Gómez-Peña, calls, Culti-Multuralism. The problem with this worldview is that it dilutes various

world cultures assimilates them into a white world. This worldview celebrates America's diversity but discourages Americans to learn the complex history that lead us to this diversity and to make an effort to learn about the various minority cultures that make up the nation. We need to highlight the differences between cultures and showcase the uniqueness of the various cultures that make up the cultural fabric of the United States. We must ask ourselves the question Gómez-Peña's poses in the introduction of his book *The New World Border*. Gómez-Peña asks "...ultimately, how to understand to the perils and advantages of living in a country that speaks at least ninety different languages and—unwillingly—hosts peoples from practically every nation, race, and religious creed on earth? (Gómez-Peña, i). We need begin to recognize this fact if we want to learn how to successfully navigate our culturally diverse and complex world. United States theatre artists must not be afraid or skeptical about producing cross-cultural adaptations. The stage is best used as a platform for showcasing the intricate cultural fabric of the United States and as a cultural bridge to help us understand and interact with the various cultures that exist in the United States. Producing cross-cultural adaptations can initiate cultural understanding in a nation that has a long history of being apathetic towards its cultural diversity.

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