

## An Indian Epic Comes to Life

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Prior to the start of the latest production from BOXTALES Theatre Company, audiences could already tell they were attending a unique performance. After all, not many Lobero events are subject to general admission seating. With just about every seat full, the warm resonance of the word "om" entered the group consciousness. The piercing cry of drums rang forth as processions of cast members made their way down each aisle.

Waiting for them on a platform at the back of the stage was the production's musician-in-residence, Montino Bourbon. Wearing a turban and dressed in flowing white robes, he played a stringed instrument called a sarod over pre-recorded Indian music. His accompaniment throughout the performance enhanced the sacred tone of the story. Once onstage, the cast dove right into the deep end. A perfectly choreographed dance routine effortlessly flowed into AcroYoga poses, using each other's bodies for support while in graceful configurations. In unison, they peeled away to form a human lotus flower. Amplified with intensity by the music, it was a moment of breathtaking beauty which would not be equaled.

Each BOXTALES production focuses on folklore from different cultures used to express moral and ethical issues. "OM Oxd0 An Indian Tale of Good and Evil," as this one was called, explored the epic Indian text of the Ramayana. The entire production was constructed from scratch, which accentuated what an achievement it was. The first part of the story introduced the hero, Rama, and painted the conflict to be overcome. After being chosen as the next king, the young man was suddenly banished to the jungle by one of his father's wives. This wasn't such an undesirable fate considering he still had the company of his brother, Lakshmana and the love of his life, Sita. Her kidnapping by the demon king, Ravanna, sends Rama on his hero's quest.

The first part of the story proved to be a little difficult to follow due to some complex passages and characters weaving in and out of scenes. The script, written by recent UCSB grad Allison Menzimer (who also played four roles), was peppered with pearls of prose which carried a strong impact even when elements were left to question. "I can feel the life seeping from my body each hour," bemoans Rama's father, Dasaratha, after his son is exiled.

Even when the dialogue was at its best, it was the expression of form which was truly captivating. In between lines, an actress would suddenly do a back flip, using someone else's body as a prop. On a few occasions, long, flowing fabric would emerge from the ceiling with actors climbing up or down while holding a conversation. Lacking any real set, the production demanded a lot from its cast in evoking the flavor of each scene. A savvy use of back-lighting and negative space created a mood like a living painting. Shadow puppetry was a powerful tool that enhanced many scenes. This was one of several sources of humor.

The masks and attire tapped into the mystical spirit of the story. Ravanna received the most attention to detail, wearing an elaborate dress and mask. In seeking to conquer him, Rama sought the help of the monkey people, led by the god Hanuman. Played by resident acro-yogi, Jenny Sauer-Klein, she drew the crowd's adoration with her accent, attitude and willingness to help the hero.



Ravana (on platform) played by Michael Andrews and two demons  
Photo: Isaac Hernandez

Along with her monkey subjects, she seemed completely attuned to the intricacies of primate posture and verbalization.

While the production wasn't religious, every component was infused with a spirit of divinity and the supernatural. In acknowledging her connection to the Earth, Sita declares, "My mother's heartbeat is the only thing that keeps me comfort at this time."

Bryan West plays young Rama with a raw sense of passion. His pain in being separated from his love was palpable. In fact, much of the performance was filled with heavy emotions and scary sequences which may have been challenging for youngsters.

Building up towards Rama's ultimate decision, the audience is met with a somewhat confounding conclusion that seems to send mixed signals. Whatever message people did take away, at the very least they were treated to an organic embodiment of theatre and the aesthetic beauty of human movement.

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