

# Artsweek



## THEATER & DANCE

# “Om” Brings Ancient Indian Tale to the Lobero

BY NICO KIEFER  
Staff Writer

The BOXTALES Theatre Company, in association with the UCSB Theater & Dance Dept., opened its original show, “Om: An Indian Tale of Good and Evil,” to a full house at the Lobero Theatre last Thursday evening.

“Om,” an adaptation of the scriptural Indian epic, “The Ramayana,” is described by BOXTALES’ dramaturge as “a myth about overcoming fear in the face of adversity by summoning both courage and compassion.” Recent UCSB graduate and Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival award-winner Allison Menzimer was commissioned to write the script.

Indeed, UCSB’s Theater & Dance Dept. was well represented in this show. Seven of the actors are either current students or recent graduates of the BFA

program, and the director, Jeff Mills, is a current BFA professor.

The show itself was visually stunning, and it benefitted greatly from the lack of an extravagant set, drawing more attention to the actors. The costumes were beautiful, with masked demons (*rakshasas*), and monkey people, as well as spirits and gods all adding to the fantastical nature of this “tale of good and evil.”

“First we strive to ignite a childlike wonder in anyone who attends our performances,” Mills said. “Cultural myths and stories nearly always operate on this level, and this is one of the reasons we are committed to exploring them. Our aim is to enchant rather than deconstruct, and we encourage our audience not to suspend their disbelief, but to suspend their belief that life is anything but epic.”

The show certainly strove for the epic in every way it could. Music and lighting helped set the action in a timeless place,

freeing the action from the bonds of human possibility. Also, spectacle was a constant contribution to this atmosphere. The actors, many of whom played multiple roles, worked together to create new forms on stage through lifts and yogic partner poses. Characters were capable of flight, ropes hanging from the ceiling allowed characters to float down — presumably from some unearthly place — and move about the stage in an inhuman fashion.

Despite all the attention to a visually elegant performance, the details of the actual story were presented in an often opaque fashion, requiring the audience to make connections themselves in a story that many were likely unfamiliar with.

With regards to this component of the show, Mills explained that the ambiguities and mysteries are an essential part of this storytelling medium.

“Because we are theater artists, our most expressive medium is the imagination

of each audience member. Due to the limits of our particular artists’ canvas, we cannot supply every detail of every image, answer every question or resolve every dramatic situation. We can supply hints, shadows, essences and skeletons, and we invite the audience to ‘connect the dots’ and complete the images in their minds’ eye.”

Perhaps part of the message was lost due to the age and form that this story comes in, despite its adaptation for an American audience. Several theatric devices were employed in the telling of this tale. The narrator-like twins reciting “The Ramayana” aided the audience with expository speeches and scenes woven into the action. Coupled with shadow puppetry and dance, these scenes attempted to illuminate different aspects of the story. Again, these devices added to a sensory rich performance, which forgave some of the holes in the plot.

## THEATER & DANCE

# Schwartz Conjures Up “Séance,” Opera Style

BY KAREN URRUTIA  
Staff Writer

Opera, musical and theater fans, rejoice! Stephen and Scott Schwartz have together constructed a marvelous production which combines the most essential and beautiful elements of all three mediums to tell the tragic story of Myra Foster in “Séance on a Wet Afternoon.”

Presented by Opera Santa Barbara, the world premiere of Stephen Schwartz’s first opera ran for three shows at the Granada. The show’s premiere

also brought a special visit to UCSB as professor Simon Williams, chair of the Theater & Dance Dept., held a conversation with Stephen Schwartz last Friday afternoon.

At the meeting, Schwartz, composer and lyricist for many major musical theater works and films including “Wicked,” discussed his successful career and the new challenge of writing an opera.

“I did ‘Séance’ because I’ve always loved opera and thought I might write one,” Schwartz said. “There was a challenge of doing work of this size, but

we’ve seemed to come through it OK. My son directed it, and he directed it as a play. The acting is great. What was great about what Scott did for me was I felt that he realized what I wanted the piece to be and then he took it further, but I didn’t feel he took a whole left turn.”

This father-son collaboration showed clearly as Stephen Schwartz’s haunting-but-beautiful melodies and lyrics were carried out through Scott Schwartz’s direction of actors who consistently delivered scenes with a powerful and honest intensity. The large orchestra seemed to present life’s underlying

sinister qualities as the actor’s voices struggled to rise above it.

Based on a book and film of the same title, “Séance on a Wet Afternoon” opened with an eerie prelude which set a chilling and suspenseful tone for the entire opera’s action. The first scene then introduces us to the strange comedy of one of Myra’s séances, with four guests seated around a table with a single candle. Brilliant lighting design gave Myra a perfect medium’s glow as she went into a trance and gave way to a ghostly blue

>> See **Seance**, p. 5A

## The Lineup



Santa Barbara music lovers are in for a real treat this weekend: The New Noise SB Festival and Conference runs tomorrow through Sunday, and features performances by Michael Franti and Spearhead, The Mad Caddies and many other artists, in addition to panels of industry insiders. Visit [www.newnoisesb.com](http://www.newnoisesb.com) for more info.



Kill Rock Stars artist Thao Nguyen will bring her soft folk sound to SOhO next Thursday, playing tracks from her 2009 record, *Know Better Learn Faster*, which should make more than a couple top-10 lists by this year’s end. Nguyen will be accompanied by her band, The Get Down Stay Down.



The University Art Museum will open up its latest exhibit, “Holiday: 19th Century Travel Photography and Popular Tourism” Wednesday. Also featured will be “Jillian McDonald: Horror Make-Up,” a performance-based video that should appeal to all you zombie fetishists out there.

# Artsweek

OCTOBER 8, 2009

THEATER & DANCE: "Om: A Tale of Good and Evil"

LIVE MUSIC:  
Aimee Mann @  
Campbell Hall



FILM REVIEWS:  
"The Invention  
of Lying,"  
"Zombieland" &  
"Whip It"

ALBUM REVIEW:  
The Flaming  
Lips