

ABSTRACT

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Meena's Dream is a one-woman play that portrays a young girl's epic conversation with God through the archetypal hero's journey, a metaphor for the universal battle to act with courage while coming face-to-face with our deepest fears. During the day, nine-year-old Meena wishes that her mother Aisha could get well; and by night, Hindu God Lord Krishna appears, entreating Meena's help in his war against the Worry Machine. *Meena's Dream* creates a fantastical world through storytelling and live music, from South Indian classical to indie folk, as Meena wrestles with life's unanswerable questions of mortality, suffering, and God's own existence.

MEENA'S DREAM: THEATRICAL PROCESS AND PRODUCTION

By

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Chapter 1: Vision and Context

Artistic Vision

Meena's Dream is a one-woman play that portrays a young girl's epic conversation with God through the archetypal hero's journey, a metaphor for the universal battle to act with courage while coming face-to-face with our deepest fears. During the day, nine-year-old Meena wishes that her mother Aisha could get well; and by night, Hindu God Lord Krishna appears, entreating Meena's help in his war against the Worry Machine. *Meena's Dream* creates a fantastical world through storytelling and live music, from South Indian classical to indie folk, as Meena wrestles with life's unanswerable questions of mortality, suffering, and God's own existence.

Origins

My thesis play, *Meena's Dream*, began three years ago when I auditioned for the University of Maryland MFA in Performance (MFAP) program. Our task was to answer the following question, through a three-minute performance: "Who are you as an artist and human being on this planet?" I told a story of my upbringing as a South Asian girl growing up in Iowa, and the need to create tradition in the absence of information. In the arduous process of my parents immigrating to the United States and raising a family, many stories and traditions were lost.

My theater background, prior to admission in the MFAP program, was primarily based on self-producing ethnographic, political theater. Although I experienced some success by juggling between teaching, writing, and performing, I had reached a point of exhaustion, with chronic vocal tension and back pain. I needed technique for the

longevity and health of my career as a performer. I craved fresh perspectives on my artistic trajectory. Most of all, I desired a reflective and artistic space to honestly answer the same question the audition posed: *Who am I as an artist and human being?* I set three goals for graduate school experience: (1) build a solid foundation of vocal, movement, and acting techniques; (2) explore different aesthetic approaches to break out of rewarded performance habits; (3) better understand myself as a South Asian American female and reconnect with my family through art. The development and thesis workshop production of *Meena's Dream* successfully met all three of my goals. Through the play, I applied performance techniques from the program, explored fiction-based writing instead of the more familiar ethnographic theater, and reflect deeply on my heritage and my family.

A Sense of History

Meena's Dream incorporates elements from my own cultural upbringing as a Hindu, Indian American female raised in the bible belt of the United States during the 1980s. The play takes place in the Midwestern United States in 1984, the same year Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. That key political event is the result of a larger history of violence that engulfed the Indian subcontinent and informs the backdrop to *Meena's Dream*.

In 1947, India and Pakistan gained independence from British rule. For 400 years prior, imperial interests drove all infrastructural development in the region exclusively for British profit, based on the exploitation land and resources, as well as the effective enslavement of most people in region (Misra 137). Viewing the local population as part of the “lower races,” the British used theories of scientific racism to justify economic

exploitation and systematically implemented a policy of divide and rule to maintain economic and political oppression (Misra 141). As a religious category, Hinduism was a British invention to label a disparate array of spiritual practices and ethnic groupings (Hawley *Naming* 21) propelled by the goal of enforcing “precise boundaries between South Asia’s Hindu and Muslim communities” (Misra 145). The British also began to deepen caste divisions, thereby reinforcing the distinct social identities and tensions between Hindu communities, as well as with Muslims that continue today. Colonial rule and violence did not end with independence (Kolsky 34).

Known as the Partition of India and Pakistan, the new national border resulted in an estimated 12 million fleeing their homes under threat of violent reprisal and at least one million people killed (Yusin 455). The effects of this brutal legacy continue to act as “indelible scars of trauma inscribed into the landscape of South Asian identity, both collective and individual” (Yusin 454), within the subcontinent and the diaspora abroad. Partition further solidified the “conditions for a long-standing antagonism between the two neighbouring states” (Kinnvall & Svensson 276) along religious lines. Nationalism, once a “distinctly European concept” (Majumder 207), had become part of the language of the Indian independence movement in its fight against British imperialism. A Hindu identity began to emerge as a means to support the independence movement.

The term *Hindutva*, coined in 1923, was an ideology influenced heavily by German fascism (Bhatt & Mukta 414) that advocated a mythic unity of Hindus as “originating from the ‘pure’ Aryan race” (Majumder 207), “invoking an ahistorical version of a glorious Hindu past and providing an imagined Hindu national identity” (Kinnvaal and Svensson 275). In reality, the term “Hindu” originated as a name the

Persians used to describe people who lived near the Indus River (Doniger 30). Post-independence, revisionist history and politics targeted India's non-Hindu populations, including its population of 130 million Muslims, the second largest Muslim population in the world. In reality, Hindu identity has been politically positioned to maintain state political and economic power. Muslims are seen as a political "threat to the Hindu majority as Muslims often tend to act as a vote bank" (Kinnvall and Svensson 283). This targeting of communities applied to other minority groups as well, such as the Sikh community.

Months prior to her 1984 assassination, Prime Minister Gandhi ordered a military attack on one of the Sikh faith's most revered holy sites, the Golden Temple, after reports of violence by Sikh separatists. Indian troops stormed the gates and at least 900 soldiers and civilians were killed in the aftermath of the hugely controversial attack (Magnier A6). Gandhi's assassination by her two Sikh bodyguards then sparked wide-scale retribution against the larger Sikh community. In Delhi alone, the murders of nearly 3,000 Sikhs were secretly supported and even orchestrated by the Delhi police and the central government (CNN-IBN news agency) (Human Rights Watch). Hindutva ideology continues to be connected to a number of human rights abuses targeting minority communities within India (Bose 17).

Hindu nationalist rhetoric permeated the bloody birth of a new nation in 1947, and repackaged colonial ideologies to justify maintaining state power in a continued legacy of violence. The politicized historical formation of a Hindu identity has influenced the discourse of Indian authenticity, belonging and even the right to exist. This history

shaped the identities and sense of home for many Hindu Indian immigrants to the United States, including my family.

Nostalgia for Homeland

Growing up in Iowa in the 1980s, I remained distantly aware of India's tumultuous history and the politics of Hindutva. During one Diwali celebration, my father even had me present a speech he wrote about the Hindu holiday, dressed up as the late Indira Gandhi. In the diaspora, or at least in our small community, her name was a proud symbol of Indian identity rather than representing the polarizing reality of her Draconian policies and marred legacy.

My world divided in two: "Indian" and "American." "Indian," in my mind, meant "Hindu," and people who spoke Hindi, even though I had Sikh, Muslim, Jain, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu aunts and uncles – the common terms of endearment for South Asian female and male elders. In retrospect, the larger history and politics of Hindu identity and Indian nationhood did limit my own sense of "Indianness" as connected to a packaged version of "Hinduness." In doing so, it rendered invisible the religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of not only India, but even my community in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

"American" equaled "white," based on a larger social message that I could not be 'American' because I did not look like the white children with whom I went to school. The constant curious refrain of "Where are you from?" implied we did not belong. We were visitors who would one day "go back home" as if we did not live across the street. Caring white Christian friends prayed for me, convinced I was going to hell. I grew to understand that our food, our habits and ways of being were viewed by white people as separate, foreign and, unfortunately, often something to fear. Unconsciously I learned to

‘translate’ myself for white people and their American culture so they would not feel threatened by my difference. I later understood this process as part of the larger legacy of racism shaped by shifting immigration policy and economic conditions in the United States.

Immigration to the U.S.

Indians began immigrating to the United States as early as 1790, but after the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the U.S. government began actively recruiting Indian males for work on the railroads and mills (Bhatia 90) (Bose 14). Indian women were not allowed entry, out of assumptions of women’s inferiority as workers and that without their families, male laborers would be “more efficient as a workforce” (Srinivasan 98). South Asian workers faced the confiscation of property, harassment, violence and imprisonment from whites who viewed South Asians as depriving them of employment and driving down wages (Jakobsh 102). Soon, what followed was a series of increasingly exclusionary and racist policies that ultimately barred Indians and other Asians from entering the country in 1924 through the introduction of racial quotas (Srinivasan 92). These policies would last until U.S. economic and military interests identified Asians as an asset during the Cold War.

The rapid expansion of the Medicare system and rising fears the USSR might overtake the United States in the science, technology, and arms race prompted a radical shift in immigration policy as an immediate solution (Prashad, *Probation* 363) (Lal 106-107). On the heels of two watershed victories, the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, the U.S. government passed the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965, abolishing racial quotas for the first time in nearly 41 years and instead administered “visas on the

basis of familial relationships or occupational skills” (Bose 14). My father was part of the first major wave of Indian immigrants to the United States post-1965. My family’s experience is indicative of the broader relationship of Indian immigration to the U.S.

In the last 120 years, Indians have been labeled as “white” or “Asian” (“South Asians In America Timeline”). The shifting racial categorization and inconsistent immigration policy are directly tied to the fluctuating needs of the U.S. labor market (Bhatia 90) and shifting military interests. Now, Indians and other Asians were no longer seen as a threat but lauded as a ‘model minority’ (Prashad, *Karma* 169), without regard to the artificial constructions of community that had been filtered by state education and immigration policies (Prashad, *Karma* 169), or the changing class dynamics that ignored the growing working class Indian population (Bose 14).

The position of Indian Americans offers a space for the Hindutva movement to profit from diasporic guilt, nostalgia and lack of information (Bhatia 79) (Mathew and Prasad 521). A number of U.S.-based Indian cultural organizations covertly fund right-wing Hindutva activity in India (Mathew and Prasad 524), while Hindutva advocates continue to rewrite history, with recent attempts to erase the caste system from California textbooks in 2006. Amartya Sen argues, such a narrow and inaccurate perspective of Indian history enters into a conflict with the larger reality of India’s pluralism by attempting to replace it with “the stamp of a small India, bundled around a drastically downsized version of Hinduism” (72).

In reality, Hinduism is a mass of “literature composed in more than twenty languages,” orally communicated for centuries prior to their transcriptions (Majumder 208). Complications arise in attempting to singularly define Hinduism as there is no one

founder or institution (Doniger 25). Atheism and agnosticism even legitimately fall within the umbrella of Hinduism (Sen 23). Author Amartya Sen references the last verse in the Song of Creation from the *Rig Veda*, a Sanskrit collection of prayers:

Who really knows? Who here proclaims it? Whence was it produced? The gods came afterwards. Who then knows whence it has a reason. Perhaps it formed itself or perhaps it did not. The One who looks down upon it in highest heaven, only he knows, or perhaps he does not know? (22)

Meena's Dream indirectly sits in the battleground for authenticity of “Indianness” and Hindu identity. However even in such contested territory, Hindu thought and story still inform the foundation of *Meena's Dream*, particularly through the character of God – Lord Krishna.

Lord Krishna: Lover, Philosopher, and Thief

Lord Krishna is one of the most recognized deities within the Hindu religion today and a significant influence in my childhood. My surname, Yadav, is historically connected to Krishna, referring to the lineage of cattle-raising in Uttar Pradesh, the state of my father's ancestral home, and Krishna's own cowherd stories (Michelutti 43). In Hindu narratives, Krishna is the child stealing butter from his mother's kitchen (Hawley, *Thief* 203) (see fig. 1). As a child, I used Krishna's thievery as a way to justify my own spate of shoplifting. Yet, Krishna is also the ultimate lover, featured with his true love and main consort Radha (see fig. 2). Though in a patriarchal show of dominance and logistical awe, he was also married to thousands of other maidens by the age of 9 (Chivbhavananda 5). However, Krishna is most known for his role as spiritual advisor to the great warrior Arjun in the classic Sanskrit treatise, *The Bhagavad Gita*, or “Song of the Lord.”

Hiding his true identity, Lord Krishna is Arjun's most trusted friend and charioteer as they ride to the center of the battlefield at Kurukshetra where Arjun must throw the first arrow between two opposing armies who await his call in this epic war (see fig. 3). Instead, Arjun suddenly breaks down, plagued by doubt and trembling with fear. The ensuing conversation, as Krishna counsels Arjun in his greatest hour of need, is *The Bhagavad Gita*, which remains among the principal stories within the epic *Mahabharata*. Ultimately, Krishna reveals his true nature as God. For one brief moment, Arjun witnesses the totality of the divine, as described in fifty-five poetic verses of "Visvarupa-Darshan Yoga," or the Yoga of the Vision of the Cosmic Form (*Bhagavad-Gita* 579) (see fig. 4). Too much for the eyes of any human to bear, Krishna quickly reassumes human form. In *Meena's Dream*, Meena, too, is at a defining moment and embarks on her own epic hero's journey in a contemporary conversation with God, in the form of Lord Krishna. As she arrives at the pivotal moment of facing the "worry machine," she must confront her own fear of her mother's impending death.

All of these various strands of experience, politics, history and philosophy inform the background of *Meena's Dream*. The three main characters of *Meena's Dream*, relate to or disrupt concepts of "Hinduness" and Indian identity each in different ways, while offering a platform to provoke conversation about childhood, identity, belonging, faith, family and fear.

Chapter 2: The Writing Process

Methods

My writing process was informed by my experience in a number of fields and practices: courses and mentorship from the MFA in Performance program, a methodology of peer listening, political and street theater, and community organizing. The MFAP course in the 2011 Winter semester with Obie award-winning playwright Dael Orlaendersmith acted as the first phase of writing, focusing on autobiographical themes of migration and diaspora. Professor Walter Dallas's Solo Performance course in the 2011 Fall semester offered the opportunity to develop the piece into a work of fiction. I began incorporating Hindu mythology from a young girl's perspective, introducing God as a character in the form of Lord Krishna. I had concerns of either offending other Hindus, or, out of ignorance, colluding with U.S. stereotypes of "Indianness" and Hinduism. At times, this concern interrupted the writing process.

I also utilized peer listening to assist in any writing blocks, particularly since this piece touched on deeply personal events in my own life, in particular, the death of a parent at a young age. It helped deepen my understanding of character development as playwright and actress. It also offered a place to reflect on my own personal experience as an Indian heritage female, thereby directly informing my research, writing, and performance process. By grounding in my own childhood memories, I gave each main character authentic views on the world, including the Krishna who, from my religious texts and comic books, was also my invisible friend. The real test of this approach,

however, came when presenting the play in India as part of my political theater internship.

Influenced by participatory, political theater models, I include my audience in the development of my new work. The late Brazilian director Augusto Boal led theater workshops of everyday people to create personal stories they would, in turn, perform. By privileging stories of communities and people whose experiences are systematically marginalized from the center of public discourse, well-developed theatrical characters can break stereotypes rather than perpetuate them. Similarly, I researched and shared works-in-progress with Indian and Indian American constituencies to craft *Meena's Dream*.

The solo form offered a practical, highly mobile vehicle, as well as being an aesthetic form I have honed over the years. It allowed me to perform a staged reading of *Meena's Dream*, directed by Walter Dallas, at Studio Safdar in Delhi, India January 2012 for street theater artists. I also performed for family I had not seen in ten years (see fig. 5). Allaying any fears that I had unfairly transgressed social boundaries in my unorthodox depictions of Lord Krishna, I was told I had not gone far enough past the standard interpretations of the *Gita*. Another audience member said, to his own surprise, “it was also my story,” even though it was a story introduced as “American” and therefore foreign. Other audience members agreed they too identified with Meena. One woman who only saw the last five minutes of the play, later remarked that she began weeping without knowing why. She said, “I felt like I knew this character personally.” My play was about a young child dealing with fear – a universally human experience.

However, the specific cultural context of a raised Hindu, Indian American girl offered an opportunity to gather feedback from specific audiences towards script completion.

After performing in Delhi, I continued to arrange other public readings throughout the writing process with: South Asian arts group Subcontinental Drift (May 2012), Indian American charity Upakar Foundation (October 2012), and again through Subcontinental Drift's event at the Arena Stage's Kogod Cradle Theater (December 2012) (see fig. 6). Each reading invited different audiences into my artistic process, gathered input, and advertised for the full production. The readings became short 'listening projects' where audiences shared their own stories afterwards.

I enlisted undergraduate student and accomplished artist Anjna Swaminathan as research dramaturg beginning in the summer of 2012. Later that fall, Professor Caleen Sinnette Jennings served as development dramaturg and director for the Subcontinental Drift reading. Dr. Jennings also introduced me to the 'clustering' exercises of writer Gabrielle Rico, based on a non-linear method of brainstorming, which served as another way to move past writing blocks and sharpen plot structure (Rico 20).

Storytelling Motif and Hindu Narrative

Stronger connections began to emerge between Hindu stories and the storytelling motif in the play. I began with the idea of a "worry machine" to represent Meena's childhood battle with fear, referring to Arjun's crisis in the *Gita*. Instead of Lord Krishna offering advice to an adult male warrior (Arjun), he seeks the advice of a young female child (Meena).

Near the beginning of the play, Meena's mother, Aisha, tells a story of defeating and befriending a thousand-headed snake and later that night, Meena dreams of entering

an ‘ocean of sadness’ and meeting a serpent. This refers indirectly to a story of a young Krishna’s battle with the multi-headed serpent, Kaliya, whom he then befriends.

However, Ms. Swaminathan explained that the original story recounts one of Lord Krishna’s first realizations of his divinity. After he defeats the snake, Krishna eventually dances for the entire community on Kaliya’s many heads (Sanford and Shiva 71) (see fig. 7). This story is from the *Bhagavata-Purana*, an ancient Sanskrit text dating back to the first century CE that led to the development of theater as a means to demonstrate one’s faith in the divine (Varadpande 3), particularly to Krishna. Krishna’s dance is known as the “Tandava,” also popularly connected to Lord Shiva, and symbolized the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe. Tandava formed the early influences to later classical Indian dance forms such as Bharatanatyam (Varadpande 5), a dance style also influencing *Meena’s Dream* (see “Performance Process”).

There were other surprising narrative threads throughout the piece. After Meena imagines rocketing into space to discover the end of the universe, she encounters Krishna leaning against her bookcase. I intended to associate Krishna’s entrance to the prior reference of the universe. However, I later learned of one story where Krishna’s mother Yashoda commands he open his mouth after discovering the boy had eaten dirt. Yashoda peers inside his mouth and sees the entire universe, “the wind, moon, stars, mountains, islands, all the elements and creatures within the known world” (Patton 223) (see fig. 8). Patton concludes, “indeed the creation of the entire universe is frequently likened to the childlike play of Krishna” (223). Krishna’s divinity is associated with the universe and with the playful imagination of Meena’s own youth, both creators in their own right.

Meena's dreaming parallels another aspect of Krishna's youth when, in a dream state, he speaks to deities Brahma and Shiva as if they are at either side of him, much to his mother's surprise. This action implies his central place as the third deity, Vishnu, completing the divine trinity of creation, preservation and destruction (Hawley, *Thief* 207). Like Krishna, Meena too enters into a peer conversation with God through her dreams, and must fight to remember her own power and continue in the face of her mother's decline.

In the play, Krishna reveals himself to Meena as the school teacher, a tatertot, her favorite pencil, and even as the bottom of the toilet bowl. "What do you do when God is everywhere?" My intention was to make concrete a major tenet of Hinduism as I understood it from my upbringing: we all are powerful and divine. God, however one may define that force or energy, is within and surrounding us all.

I sought to subvert Hindutva notions, which rely on patriarchal and elitist notions of God and power, by portraying Krishna as seeking Meena's help and learning from her. In my research, I learned the broom symbolized the annihilation of caste discrimination during the Indian independence movement (Dharmadhikari interview). The caste system in India is an ancient, entrenched and oppressive system of labor and social order reinforced through British imperialism and connected to Hinduism today. It inspired the scene in which Krishna breaks a plate, and Meena insists he clean up his own mess. He admits he does not know how to sweep, so she teaches him. Such a depiction of God is political, given the social stigma of sweeping as an occupation associated with Dalit castes who tend to comprise the poorest segments of society. The act of God learning

how to sweep from a young girl is at once a powerful statement against caste discrimination, colonization, and patriarchy for those aware of its context.

Ms. Swaminathan later revealed another connection in the play to the female deity Durga, a warrior goddess in Hinduism. In one part of the play, Aisha tells Meena the story of a lion chasing her in her nightmares until one day she decided she can change her dreams, thereby taming the lion so it was no longer a threat. “You can do anything you want,” she tells Meena. Without intending, this story also connects with a popular image of Goddess Durga, a principal female deity seen to have tamed a lion (sometimes depicted also as a tiger), by resting comfortably on its back (see fig. 9). Durga demonstrates Shakti, or female power, as does Aisha by ‘taming’ the lion in her dreams. It further encourages Meena to draw on her inner power when she ultimately fights her own fears.

My writing process utilized community engagement, performance, and dramaturgy over the course of two years. I organized an artistic team of support, workshopped the play in Delhi and DC, and drew from my various strands of experience with political theater, organizing and listening tools. In the end, this writing process revealed a surprising synchronicity of references to Hindu narratives through dramaturgical research and demonstrated the value of approaching writing as a community-based ‘listening project’ throughout play development.

Chapter 3: The Performance Process

Acting Technique: Targets, Objectives, and Rasas

Starting with the January 2013 rehearsals I shifted my focus from playwriting to performance. My acting approach to *Meena's Dream* drew from the acting courses in the MFAP program. I needed to chart the course of each character's desire that drives her towards action at every point of the script, and I used the concepts of 'targets' and 'objectives' to do so. For acclaimed director Declan Donnellan, the definition of a target is the subject of at least an entire book, but in short, it is a verb in relation to an object. 'I warn Romeo.' It is always specific, active, external and shifting (Donnellan 24). While Donnellan insists a target is not an objective, Stanislavski also writes of objectives as verbs that "provoked thoughts and feelings which were, in turn, inner challenges to action (119)."

After the Subcontinental Drift reading December 2012, Professor Smith noted a generalized depiction of Meena's pain in my performance, encouraging me to review Meena's specific actions and needs rather than simply how she felt. Rehearsing with this in mind, I noticed it activated and enlivened her journey onstage.

The first few days of rehearsal January 2013, I began tablework with my director Paige Hernandez. She introduced to me another approach to consider: acting concepts from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, an ancient Sanskrit treatise on the theory and practical instruction of music, theater and dance (Kirkwood 93). *Rasas* are a fundamental concept of acting theory within the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, denoting emotional states embodied by the performer and performance and received by the audience in a transcendent, religious experience

(Schwartz 19). Not defined as the audience’s literal reaction to a work, per say, which could vary greatly among individuals, Kirkwood explains the *Nāṭyaśāstra* teaches how to skillfully combine dramatic elements “to suggest a mood” (95), and that reaching a divine experience is goal and responsibility of performers and audience members who “must themselves be prepared to play their vital role in ‘savoring’ a work” (95). By the tenth century, scholars agree there were a total of nine basic *rasas*: Śṛṅgāram (love), Hāsyam (laughter), Raudram (fury), Kāruṇyam (compassion), disgust (Bībhatsam), Bhayānakam (horror), Vīram (pride), Adbhutam (wonder and peace) (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 96).

We began our table work using these *rasas* as a way to identify, deepen, and specify the life of each character’s desire throughout the script. Dramaturg and music director, Anjna Swaminathan, through her years of Indian classical dance training, was able to provide further guidance in how to translate *rasas* to apply more directly to our rehearsal process. While *rasa* work differs greatly from the objectives and target work, all greatly aided my artistic exploration in complementary ways. I ‘scored’ the play according to *rasas*, then used the concepts of objectives and targets as ways to transition between *rasas*, or further define actions within the *rasa*.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe cautions that “the majority of current attempts at making sense of *rasa* are based on Western concepts of the mind” (99), which can lead to a misuse that is grossly misinformed and unfaithful to its original context. Yet British director John Russell Brown explored the application of *rasas* to studio work with Shakespeare’s plays in India and Great Britain. Brown proposes *rasas* are similar to concept of Elizabethan states of being, known as “humours” (9), and found work with *rasas* breaks down obstacles to communication, “frees an actor’s imagination, and acts as a spur to invention

in every aspect of performance (9).” The application of *rasas* to English-language theater is deserving of more study than the limits of this thesis and offers great potential. In my limited experience, using *rasas* opened up another range of perspective on understanding the characters’ motivations and activated my imagination. As an actress, it was exciting to integrate aesthetic approaches that inform my own experience and heritage.

Movement

Ms. Anjna Swaminathan also trained extensively in Bharatanatyam classical dance. This greatly enhanced our creative inquiry with tablework and movement. Bharatanatyam is a classical dance form dating back 2,000 years to the *Nātyasāstras*. In ancient times Bharatanatyam originated as a solo dance form performed by women in temples who danced as an act of devotion to God (Schwartz 37). Bharatanatyam is a form that requires at least twenty to thirty years of training for any level of mastery. Similar to Bharatanatyam’s origins, *Meena’s Dream* in its current state tells the story of multiple characters through the body of a solo performer. As a child I trained in Bharatanatyam for only six years, but my own movement vocabulary is still informed by the technique.

I incorporated influences of Bharatanatyam within Aisha’s bedtime stories through heightened hand movement. When I performed as Meena hurtling through space in her imagination, I used Bharatanatyam-styled movement to transform into Krishna, unconsciously pivoting in traditional ‘aramandi’ form and, with Ms. Swaminathan’s guidance, used specific hand gestures to signify Lord Krishna bestowing divine blessing. The most significant reference comes later in the play, when Lord Krishna proceeds to lift up Aisha and keep her hovering in unconscious stasis with only his pinky finger. This

specific hand gesture, or mudra, references when Krishna holds up Govardhan Mountain with his pinky finger to shield local people and animals from heavy flooding (see fig. 10). Just as he saves the community from drowning in the floods, there is hope he can save Aisha too from drowning in her ocean of sadness, a metaphor for her sickness.

I continued to explore each character's movement and gestures. Ms. Hernandez directed me to fully use stage and create a series of tableaux, or frozen sculptures, to correspond with musical sections, as well as transition between characters at different tempos. She brought an expertise in movement as well as understanding of how to direct a team of musicians for theater, which allowed for more guided creative exploration between music and text onstage.

Voice

Until my rehearsals in January 2013, performance acted more as a device for developing and informing the writing process. While performing the staged reading in Delhi December 2011, I experienced tremendous vocal tension. In preparation for the Subcontinental Drift performance a year later, I incorporated more voice work with the guidance of Dr. Jennings, a certified Linklater voice teacher. At the end of the reading, I realized I did not experience the vocal tension as I had in previous solo performances. The transformation was dramatic, and underscored the value of systematic vocal training from the MFAP program, in addition to incorporating it more directly in my rehearsal process. I also explored a range of vocal resonance for each character (Linklater 187).

The Solo Aesthetic

The solo performance aesthetic offered particular challenges of creating and inhabiting multiple characters as a single actor. I relied heavily on visualization, scoring the script with beats using both targets as well as *rasas*. At times I experienced the challenge of determining my point of focus for each character. I visualized the room from each character's perspective. Ms. Hernandez soon absolved me of this rigid adherence to accuracy for the sake of simple and effective communication with the audience. After the Subcontinental Drift reading, Professor Smith suggested I adjust the script to allow more text for each character. In so doing, I found it interesting as an actor to more fully inhabit each character.

Chapter 4: Collaboration and Production

Collaboration with artists, organizers, and audiences was key to the development and production of *Meena's Dream*. The writing process, as described earlier, relied on dramaturgy and audience engagement. Another significant element to *Meena's Dream* was music.

Music

Beginning March 2012, I enlisted a team of three musicians who composed music for the play. I had worked with two musicians, Anjna and Rajna Swaminathan, for a movement piece as part of the MFAP program's "Mendacity project" in the 2010 fall semester that incorporated Bharatanatyam influences and musical improvisation. With *Meena's Dream*, we use a similar rehearsal process, adding another musician, Sam McCormally. The musicians met separately a few times. However for most group rehearsals they composed while I wrote, with some conversation and questions to me as writer, since the music was driven by the text. Following the Subcontinental Drift reading December 2012, the script changed slightly with two new scenes, prompting the musicians to create additional compositions. The process was incredibly fast and effective, enriched by constant engagement between the musicians and myself. With Ms. Hernandez's direction during the thesis production rehearsals, the musicians also clarified musical themes for each character.

For the thesis workshop production Ms. Hernandez and I decided, in discussion with the musicians, to begin the evening with music evoking the landscape of the play and honoring the role of the musicians (see fig. 11-12). Originally inspired by the

overture in opera, in which music begins before the curtain rises, it also references a similar ‘overture’ role of music within Bharatanatyam before the dancer enters the stage (Schwartz 42). Feedback I received from various audience members was, overall, wholeheartedly positive. However, a few felt very strongly that the play should simply begin without a concert. There is more to explore regarding the rules of agreement between performer and audience, influenced also by an audience member’s occupation, culture, and class.

I began *Meena’s Dream* with the concept of music acting as a background to the piece. With Ms. Hernandez’s direction to incorporate more choreography, I began to time my movement and words with some musical sequences, listening more to the musicians than I had originally anticipated.

Working with a director was instrumental in bringing together all the elements of the production into a more cohesive whole. Both Ms. Hernandez, for the thesis workshop production, and Dr. Jennings, for the Subcontinental Drift reading, provided strong leadership and allowed me space to focus on the performance.

Design Team

As a solo performer open to the design team’s ideas, but unfamiliar with their processes and benefits, this collaboration was exciting and challenging. I remained open and worked with director Ms. Hernandez as a collaborator in decision-making for technical elements. The costume worked very well, offering up a blank canvas for projection, and symbolizing the hybrid space of Meena’s own cultural upbringing (see fig.13). There were significant challenges during technical rehearsals because of the limitations in the space. Decisions had to be made quickly with regard to lighting,

projection and sound. Due to the unprecedented scale of the festival, we were learning tremendously from the process. Forty-five minutes before the house opened for Friday's opening night, we completely reworked the entire lighting plot of the show. This was extremely stressful, and though the production was a great success, I am positive this could be avoided for the next festival, with planning.

As creator and performer, I was unsure how to make use of the set. Ms. Hernandez offered direction that better utilized the set in the end. The projection designer ideas were incorporated rather freely into the thesis workshop production. The coordination amongst the various designers was also challenging with the time constraints. Projection, lighting, sound, costume, and set design, in the end, offered excellent ideas worth exploring more fully in a later production of *Meena's Dream* (see fig. 14-16).

Chapter 5: Future

Performance

In this process, I realized to what extent the performance embodied aspects of my heritage, history, and early childhood learning. Though movement and dance had been a large part of my training and life as a child, years of chronic tension and knee pain had closed off the possibility of integrating movement into my theater work. Through the MFA in Performance training as well as shifting personal habits, I discovered I could move with ease and wide, pain-free range of motion in my knees. With *Meena's Dream* and specifically Ms. Hernandez's direction, I rediscovered my creative impulse for movement and tools for more directly incorporating Bharatanatyam within choreography and character movement. I plan to continue my vocal training and further explore the integration of *rasas* with acting techniques of beats, objectives and targets.

After the play ended, usually there was a brief pause which to me signaled confusion the performance was over. Audiences were unsatisfied the play did not end. I learned the stakes of each obstacle Meena confronts also need to be much higher. How does each obstacle serve as a real danger to Meena? In the next phase of *Meena's Dream*, I plan to address these questions within the writing.

Playwriting

I want audiences unfamiliar with the cultural context to better understand the play's references to Hindu stories. This can be done through Aisha's bedtime stories that serve to pass down cultural legacy and can strengthen the play's ending.

I also plan to develop Aisha's relationship to Krishna. She tells Meena stories as a way of maintaining culture, yet she does not believe in God. I plan to explore more directly Aisha's own experience bearing witness to violence perpetrated across religious lines. I also plan to address why Krishna is prone to suffering, as well as continue to develop connections between the real and the dream worlds. I plan to further challenge the depiction of Meena as torn between "saving" her mother or Krishna by writing an ending. How can her battle with fear become her own journey?

Music

With regard to music, I plan to clarify the role of musical director, as well as my own artistic leadership and practice in the next phase of *Meena's Dream*. There were great successes incorporating music, and there is room for deeper exploration ensuring the music supports the story and performance, as well as finding more ways to consciously interact with the music as an actress.

Production

Meena's Dream will be staged as a full production January 2014 as part of Forum Theater Company's next season, using the format of a solo actress with musicians. I plan to further explore how the material can provoke and guide public dialogue through discussions and workshops exploring various themes such as: immigration, heritage, childhood, trauma, the female voice, and fear.

Legacy of my Heritage

Throughout this process, I discovered that the legacy of my heritage, which I thought was lost through assimilation, was, in fact, within me all along. I had become

convinced I had no stories to pass on. But as I continued to reflect upon my own childhood for reflections and memory, I began to trust my own creative impulses throughout the process of both writing and performance. In so doing, I realized forgotten influences were informing my creative journey, such as my prior Bharatanatyam dance training, my childhood invisible friend of Krishna, my close and connected South Asian community growing up, playground experiences and my own dreams. After I had written scenes, I discovered an incredible synchronicity of unintended connections to Hindu stories, or in some cases, even deeper layers of meaning than I had originally anticipated. In writing this thesis, I learned about the context of Indian immigration to the United States, and how my childhood confusions about race and belonging directly mirrored the confusions of racism in U.S. immigration policy. A defining moment for me was performing *Meena's Dream* in Delhi for theater artists I have known for 10 years, and family I had not seen for over a decade. The last thesis performance, I held back tears before I went onstage, when I realized in the audience sat a number of my closest friends and family that had not been in the same room for years.

Through the development of this play, I discovered more about my heritage and the history of my people. I have begun to use my art as a bridge for not just my community, but within my own family. I realized I have started to answer the fundamental question I began three years ago: *Who am I as an artist and a human being in this world?* *Meena's Dream* is one significant step toward an answer.

Chapter 6: *Meena's Dream*, Thesis Performance Script

MEENA'S DREAM
by Anu Yadav

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“Who really knows? Who here proclaims it? Whence was it produced? The gods came afterwards. Who then knows whence it has a reason. Perhaps it formed itself or perhaps it did not. The One who looks down upon it in highest heaven, only he knows, or perhaps he does not know?”

Song of Creation, Rig Veda
The Argumentative Indian by Amartya Sen

CHARACTERS

MEENA: 7 year-old Indian American girl, raised Hindu.

AISHA: Meena's mother, 35 years-old, factory worker.

LORD KRISHNA: Supreme Godhead, ageless.

JUDY: 8 year-old bully at school.

SETTING

A solidly working-class home in Midwestern United States of America.

TIME

1984.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: Meena's Dream

(It is nighttime. MEENA, 9, is in her bed while her mother AISHA, 34, tucks her in before getting up to leave.)

MEENA

Mummi, tell me a bedtime story. Please?

AISHA

Which one this time?

MEENA

The one when God created the world.

AISHA

Meena, why all this talk about God? These are stories, nothing more. Nobody was around before the world was created, so we don't know what happened. And who created God, even if there is one? Nobody knows these things.

MEENA

In the beginning - then what?

AISHA

You are a stubborn girl. (sigh) The story goes, that... in the beginning, God is... there. And God is incredibly... bored. Wouldn't you be if there was no one else to play with? There isn't anything to do, just nothing. So God lets out this huge yawn. And in this yawn, comes the stars, the planets, and the earth. And with the earth, comes all sorts of creatures, kangaroos, lions and snakes and...? Hain, humans. And parents tell their children good bedtime stories, and children sleep well and have good dreams. And God is happy. At first. But over time, things change. And then one night, for the first time in all of existence and non-existence, God is worried. So God starts running and running and -

(AISHA starts having trouble breathing.)

MEENA

Mummi? Mummi? You want me to call 9-1-1? 9-1-1. Ok, ok.

(MEENA calls 9-1-1)

Hello? My mom can't breathe. Meena Natrajan. She's having an episode. She has mesothelioma 5740 Cherrywood Court, white lake. Apartment 301. Please hurry!

(MEENA hangs up the phone.)

MEENA

Mummi? They are coming soon. Tell me the story. Finish the story, just finish the story!

(Sound of ambulance draws closer.)

MEENA (to the audience)

I hear the ambulance pull up and people come in and put her on the bed with wheels. But I don't want them to leave. (to the paramedics) Don't go. (pause) I said, don't go! (to audience) That's when everything stops. The people stop. My mummi stops, the bed stops, and the wheels start to turn backward. And everything starts to go in reverse and in reverse and in reverse and in reverse until I'm back in my bed and --

MEENA (waking up)

Mummi!

AISHA

Shh... Breathe. Just a bad dream. You kick very well when you are asleep, did you know this? What battle were you fighting tonight, beti?

MEENA

They tried to take you away in the ambulance. But I took back time. I took back time!

AISHA

Thank you! You need to teach me how to do this. These are very practical skills.

(MEENA sees Aisha's scar, a lesion on her forearm.)

MEENA

Mummi, your arm. Does it hurt?

AISHA

Oh this? It's nothing, beti.

MEENA

No, do you have to go the hospital again?

AISHA

I was just fighting off a thousand-headed snake. That's all. And then after I defeated this snake, he was my friend. He said to me, "I just wanted to see if you were as tough as everyone said. And you are. So that's it." And then he left.

MEENA

How did you know it was a thousand heads? Did you count them all?

AISHA

No, I just knew.

MEENA

Yeah! If the snake comes after me I'll be like -

(MEENA makes kicks and jumps off the bed doing some frantic limb askew dance of defense)

AISHA

That was supposed to be a bedtime story, not a jump up and fight and kick and scream story. But I suppose Mummi will have to remember to tell real bedtime sleep stories next time.

MEENA

Noooo, I like jump up and fight and kick and scream stories, I'm in bed, I'm in bed, see? You can tell me more of those stories. Sing me a song. Please?

AISHA

Meena, I'm too tired tonight.

MEENA

Please?

AISHA

Ok, but you will sleep. Badmash!

(AISHA gives her a stern look, then softens and begins singing.)

AISHA (cont'd)

Chanda Mama door ke, puye pakaayen boor ke. Chandaa maama door ke, puye pakaayen boor ke. Aap khaayen thaali mein, meena ko den pyaali mein.

(AISHA notices MEENA is asleep. She continues humming, notices a cough is about to come and turns away and coughs, so she doesn't wake up MEENA.)

(MUSIC CUE: That cough and breath blurs into a landscape that becomes Meena's dream. It becomes the sea. The following segment is a dance between music and spoken text, alternating , with pauses in key moments.)

MEENA (coughs)

I fall asleep and I dream I am underwater in a big ocean. I can't see anything except my own hair around me, until finally I see a big ugly snake with 10 - no a thousand heads coming towards me. It coils its tail around me. And we go deeper and deeper into the ocean. I can't breathe. One of the heads turns to look at me and says,

"I know."

(to the audience)

I wake up. I actually wake up. It's just a dream. I'm not scared of a snake. I'm not in the ocean. I'm even not on my bed. I'm in a space rocket on a mission, sent by the president of the United States to discover the end of the universe. All I have with me are my space instruments, my space granola bars, and my space puppy named Spot that mummy said I couldn't have because she has bad allergies but there are no allergies in space. Spot? Ruff. Check. And we are ready for blast off, 3-2-1

(makes blast sound)

And we are reaching the upper stratosphere of the earth and we are almost in space and we are in space and it's awesome. But we are still on a mission. And we are flying past the stars, and the moon. Woo hooo!!!!!!

(Meena feels a rumble as the bed shakes.)

What was that? And that's when I see Lord Krishna, Supreme Godhead, King of the Universe, leaning against my bookcase. He looks at me and says -

LORD KRISHNA (out of breath)
You, I've been looking for you.

MEENA
Mummi!

LORD KRISHNA
No, no, no, wait, just listen.

MEENA
Krishna puts a light bulb in his mouth right as my mummi comes into my room.

(AISHA enters the room and LORD KRISHNA immediately becomes the lamp to hide from her.)

AISHA
Meena, kya hua?!

MEENA
The lamp it's not - look, the lamp -

AISHA
Areh, pagal hei? I hear you screaming and then you want to talk about the lamp?

MEENA
But Krishna is pretending to be --

AISHA
Meena, go to bed!

MEENA
Just as she leaves, Krishna's light bulb disappears.

LORD KRISHNA
The worry machine is coming. I don't have time to explain.
It's getting closer. It's a bad thing. The universe is under attack. And I need you to help me fight it. I know, I know, I'm God. I can do anything. No, actually I can't. I wish I could. You humans made it. It's got

to take a human to destroy it. And you are the one to do it.

MEENA

I'm a kid!

LORD KRISHNA

Exactly! Meena, you are a human child.

MEENA

There are lots of children in the world.

LORD KRISHNA

But you are the only one left who still dreams.

MEENA

(to the audience)

Then this is a dream too! Good night!

(shuts her eyes tightly, then opens one slowly).

The next morning, my mummi walks me to the bus stop, waving goodbye before she heads off to work. I step onto the bus and take my seat. Judy Daly leans across the aisle to start our morning ritual.

JUDY

Hey Meena, where'd you get your shirt? Kmart? Phew! What's that smell? Oh it's Meena.

MEENA

Every time she talks to me, I never know what to say, so I just stay quiet, wait til it ends.

JUDY

You scared, Meena? You're such a chicken. Aren't you going to talk? Talk, go ahead.

MEENA

I am not on the bus. I am not on the bus. I am not on the bus. I am back on the rocket. Judy's voice gets lost in the rocket blast.

(space sounds. Space storm approaching on the radar.)

Buckle up, Spot, looks like a space storm ahead.

(Meena is on the headset. She receives a call.)

Just then I get a call on the headset. Frank, what is it? The president is on the line? The President of the United States? Put her on. Hello, Mrs. President. No, I can't. I can't go back. I know, I may die. But the world needs to know. And I am the last hope. Thank you for believing in me. And tell America I said hello. Just then, I see the biggest asteroid of all headed straight for me and - ohh!

(MEENA is hit in the stomach with a ball)

Ow. Tetherball. I daydreamed my way from the bus to the playground, I didn't see the ball come flying. It's still morning. School hasn't started yet.

JUDY

Meena, watch where you're going. You're running around like a chicken with its head cut off! Chick-chick-chicken. Hey, why don't you cluck? Go ahead, come on, cluck. Cluck!

MEENA

(under her breath)

Why don't you cluck?

(JUDY begins to laugh, then spasms into clucking and flapping her arms like wings.)

MEENA (cont'd)

What's happening? I didn't even say that out loud.

(Suddenly, Judy stops, and swats herself and grabs Meena by the collar.)

JUDY

What are you looking at?

MEENA

Just then, Mrs. Henline walks by with her whistle.

MRS. HENLINE

(blowing whistle)

Judy! Line up! Children, line up, time for school.
Judy!

(Mrs. Henline eyes Judy suspiciously until she is satisfied Judy is far enough away.)

MRS. HENLINE (cont'd)
Meena, we need to talk.

MEENA
Krishna?

MRS. HENLINE/LORD KRISHNA
Meena! I saw what you did! The chicken thing? I know it scares you but you don't have to avoid it. Where are you going? Hey, I'm your teacher here.

MEENA
No you're not, you're Krishna!

LORD KRISHNA
No one else knows that! And so what if I am? (as MRS. HENLINE, blowing whistle) Line up, folks! (to MEENA) Don't walk away!

MEENA
Gotta get to class! I get to the classroom, sit at my desk, take out my favorite pencil and then... Krishna is my favorite pencil! Lunchtime, I've got my tray, it's Taco Tuesday, I got my peach halves, and I reach for my tatertot - Krishna is my tatertot! I run to the bathroom, the girls bathroom, he can't follow me there.

(MEENA reaches the stall and sits at the toilet in relief.)

Then I hear this, "Meena?"

(MEENA lunges up, gathering her pants up in shock.)

MEENA
Aw, Krishna! The toilet bowl? (Pause) Um... I have to flush, ok?

LORD KRISHNA
Not a problem!

MEENA

What do you do when God is everywhere? Afterschool, he follows me back home. I eat the dinner Mummi left for me.

LORD KRISHNA

That looks good.

MEENA

I clean up.

LORD KRISHNA

Nice plate. I like the blue.

(LORD KRISHNA drops the plate.)

LORD KRISHNA

Whoa. Sorry.

MEENA

Do you always break other people's stuff?

LORD KRISHNA

Well, it's mine too. In a way. Sorry.

MEENA

You're going to have to sweep that up.

(MEENA hands LORD KRISHNA a broom and LORD KRISHNA doesn't know what to do with it.)

LORD KRISHNA

Ok.

MEENA

You don't know how to sweep, do you?

LORD KRISHNA

I know how-- well. No.

MEENA

Okay well you just take this and you go like that.

(MEENA holds up a broom and begins to teach KRISHNA how to sweep.)

I hold this picker upper, and you sweep it in there.
Yeah, see? You got it.

(LORD KRISHNA stiffly mimicks MEENA's
movement.)

LORD KRISHNA

Oh, hips! That makes sense. Yes. I like this. What?

MEENA

I just thought you knew how to do everything, since
you're God.

LORD KRISHNA

You shouldn't make assumptions. It's been awhile since I
had to. Just gotta dust that memory off.

(AISHA enters, and sees MEENA talking to a
broom, sweeping. She is concerned.)

AISHA

Meena, who are you talking to?

MEENA

It's just Krishna. He broke a plate. I made him clean it
up.

LORD KRISHNA

Aisha!

MEENA

You know my mother's name? She can't see you.

LORD KRISHNA

We used to be friends when she was your age.

MEENA

Krishna says he knows you from when you were little.

AISHA

Krishna is not real! You are a big girl, Meena. There is
no Krishna here, ok? It's just a story. Make-believe. I
tell you stories because sometimes you are so worried and
I just want to see you smile. Mummi is sick and I won't
always be -. You will have to learn to go to bed without
stories, okay, Meena? Do you understand? No stories
tonight.

MEENA

Mummi leaves. I am a big girl. Soon, I sleep and then springing from my dream, I hear this --

(KNIGHT OF ANXIETY dusts himself off, sputtering and coughing)

KNIGHT

What here? Where am I, I just don't understand this confound -

(The Knight stops and stares at Meena who is peering out from her bedspread.)

KNIGHT

Intruder, you are trespassing onto the Forest of Deception, which is under my protection. Name yourself!

MEENA

My name is Meena and this is my bedroom.

KNIGHT

Your bedroom? And I suppose, in this "bedroom" you are sitting on a bed not a tuffet.

MEENA

Yes, I am.

KNIGHT

Blasphemy! How dare you insult me with this slander! I am a Knight, the Knight of Anxiety, under command of The Worry Machine. On guard. On guard. On guard I say!

(MEENA is still.)

You're supposed to pull out your sword when I do that.

MEENA

I don't have a sword.

KNIGHT

What? Are you mad? How am I supposed to do battle? Then I have no choice. I beg your forgiveness but duty calls. Tally ho!

(KNIGHT starts to charge at Meena)

MEENA

You are just make-believe.

KNIGHT

What?

MEENA

I'm a big girl and I don't believe you.

(The KNIGHT visibly shudders and his voice starts to squeak.)

KNIGHT

Don't say that.

MEENA

What? I don't believe you?

KNIGHT

Ah!

MEENA

I don't believe you.

KNIGHT

Eee!

MEENA

I don't believe you, I don't believe you, I don't believe you, I don't believe you!

KNIGHT

Stop it. Stop it! Just stop it!

MEENA

(to audience) The knight of anxiety begins to grow smaller and smaller until he is a speck bouncing around the room and then he completely disappears. Just then Krishna comes rushing in.

LORD KRISHNA

Meena! The Knight of Anxiety, he's coming and we—

MEENA

He's gone.

LORD KRISHNA

No, I don't think you understand. The Knight of Anxiety is coming and once the Knight of Anxiety comes, he never goes away.

MEENA

Well, he didn't at first. Then I just told him I don't believe you. So he left.

LORD KRISHNA

Meena, the knight thing. That's brilliant!

MEENA

But no more dreams. No more make-believe.

LORD KRISHNA

This is massive, Meena. You have to use your power for something worth changing.

(Rumbling is heard in the background. MEENA's bed starts to shake.)

The Worry Machine. Come fight it.

MEENA

No. I'm a big girl. I don't have time for dreams! This isn't real and you're just a story!

(to the audience)

LORD KRISHNA

You have power, you just don't know how to use it yet.

MEENA

In that moment, I hear mummi coughing. I climb out of the bed, and stand in the doorway. If he says I do have the power. Then... sickness go away. Go away. Mummi floats from the bed and she says "shall we dance?"

(MEENA and AISHA begin to dance to the song "Chanda Mama Door Ke." The music suddenly stops and MEENA is back at the doorway when AISHA wakes up.)

AISHA (coughing)

Meena, what are you doing?

MEENA

Nothing, mummi. Did you take your dava?

AISHA

Hai bhagavan. Hand me dava, on the table there.

MEENA

I reach for the dava. Krishna hands it to me. I can't look at him.

(AISHA takes the water and medicine. AISHA winces in pain and begins coughing violently. She stops, and looks at MEENA.)

MEENA

Mummi, should I call the ambulance?

AISHA

Oh meri beti. It was just a dream, huh? I'm here, no problem, I'm fine. Please don't worry. Now that *will* make you sick.

MEENA

Because I can call -

AISHA

Look I'll tell you a story, huh? Raj Kumari. You know what? When I was about your age, every night I had this dream that a lion was chasing me. Each night, the lion would run after me, growling, and I would run through the forest, scared like anything. And each night, the lion would corner me up against a tree, open his jaws and right before he would eat me, I would wake up. Sweating, crying, my heart beating, boom boom boom. Then one day I said, hey wait a minute, this is my dream, I can do anything I want! So that night, I had the same dream, lion chasing me right up against a tree, and the lion opening his mouth wide. His teeth were above my head, I could see into his mouth. I could feel his hot breath against my neck. I was so scared. And then I shouted, "Hey, Mr. Lion! This is my dream! And you, sir, will not eat me today!" This lion just looked at me. He was absolutely confused. This had never happened before. So he closed his mouth and we stared at each other. And then he turned and walked away. His tail, swish, swish, swish, disappearing into the forest. Your dreams are so

powerful , but only because you are even more powerful.
You are my strong warrior. You can do anything you want.
There is nothing to be worried about. Now, come. You
sleep here with me tonight.

(MEENA climbs into bed with her.)

You remember our song? Chanda mama door ke..

(AISHA begins singing, and notices MEENA is asleep
now. AISHA begins coughing violently again, but
doesn't stop.)

MEENA

Mummi? Shh, it's okay, breathe. Breathe. Should I call
the ambulance, mummi? I -- Krishna! Where are you?
Please come back, help her! Just make it stop. I turn my
head, and there he is.

LORD KRISHNA

Meena, I can't stop this.

MEENA

Why not?! You are God. Save her!

LORD KRISHNA

I can't! I told you this worry machine is too strong.
If you fight it, then there's hope.

MEENA

What do I have to do? I'll do it. Please, she can't
breathe.

LORD KRISHNA

Three dreams. You have to go back into three dreams and
conquer each of them.

MEENA

There's no time. She needs you now! Then Krishna waves
his hand and suddenly my mother stops coughing, drifts
into sleep, floats from her bed and just hovers.

LORD KRISHNA

This is as much as I can do. She's fine. But I can't
hold it for long, Meena. Go to the Ocean of Sadness.
Defeat the snake and you will reach the Forest of

Deception. Make it past the trees and you will be ready for the battlefield of fear. Where the worry machine is.

MEENA

But what do I have to do, tell me what to do.

LORD KRISHNA

You will know. Go!

MEENA

I dive headfirst into the ocean of sadness. I feel something holding me, pulling me down, deeper into the ocean. The snake's got me, wrapping itself around me. He says,

SNAKE

It's safer down here. There isn't anyone else. No one cares anyway.

MEENA

No one? There is no one else here?

(The strain of 'Chanda Mama Door ke' begins to play faintly.)

No, I have a mother. She cares.

SNAKE

What's 'a mother?'

MEENA

You don't know what a mother is? A mother is someone who loves you, helps you, takes care of you, hugs you.

SNAKE

What's 'hugs?'

MEENA

You have to let me go to find out. It's this --

(As the snake slowly releases its coils, Meena hugs the snake.)

MEENA

And soon the snake begins to quiver and shake, and quiver and shake until soon the eyes of all thousand heads are springing with tears. The snake is crying. And then

soon I'm crying too and our tears are flowing faster than the water around us, and I say, I have to go, snake, you can't keep me here anymore. The snake is crying so hard his coils release me and through our tears I start to swim, kicking and pushing higher and higher and I start to feel lighter, and lighter, until I can see the surface of the ocean. (takes a breath) I make it to shore and I am surrounded by trees.

TREE ONE (like MRS. HENLINE)
Welcome to the Forest of Truth. We tell it like it is.
(to another tree) Pretty girl, except for that nose.

TREE TWO (like AISHA)
A little too dark for me. Ugly duckling. Hope she turns into a swan.

TREE THREE (like JUDY)
Where do you think you are going?

MEENA
To the battlefield. To stop the Worry Machine.

TREE ONE
What?

MEENA
To stop the Worry Machine

TREE ONE
Not so loud! A lady always speaks softly.

(The trees begin to poke MEENA with their branches.)

TREE THREE
Those skinny legs. And that face.

TREE TWO
Straighten that hair and then let's talk.

TREE ONE
Smile! It makes you look not so ugly.

TREE THREE
Who raised you?

TREE TWO

Your mother must be a dirty little monkey. Dirty little monkey!

MEENA

She's not a monkey! A branch pokes me and sticks in my hair, ow! It turns into a tongue that slithers out of my hand. My hand touches a tree bark, that peels away *rip at a tree's bark, its rotten teeth. You're not trees. This is the forest of deception.

You are lies. What else are you, really? Nothing here is real here, You can't make me feel bad! Shut up! I start to kick and tug and smash and sweat and rage! Pulling at leaves that disappear like bad breath, sticks, bark, anything and everything I can grab. There is nothing wrong with me!

Stop your lies!

(The sounds stop. Meena starts to hear breath and sadness.)

MEENA

Mummi! I wake up. And a hand pats me gently, it's blue.

MEENA

The forest. It's gone. They called it truth. But they were lies. The snake cried. And the tears lifted me out of the ocean. And then, in the forest I just got really mad and I kicked and I pulled, --- Krishna, you're bleeding.

LORD KRISHNA

What?

(LORD KRISHNA notices the blood near his heart and stares at it, then looks at the mother whom he is holding up.)

This is hard.

MEENA

Do you want a bandaid?

(MEENA gets the bandaid and places it gently on him.)

There, you can't even see it. Well, the flesh colored ones don't really come in blue. But -

(MEENA puts on a bandaid in the same place on her chest.)

They don't come in brown either. Now we can both be twins. See?

(LORD KRISHNA winces in pain.)

LORD KRISHNA

Suffering. This is what it feels like.

MEENA

I grab his hand, then Krishna says

LORD KRISHNA

Don't get distracted. You're almost there. If you wait any longer, your mother will...

MEENA

My mother will what? What?

LORD KRISHNA

The battlefield. Go. You'll reach a clearing. You'll see the warriors.

MEENA

But what do I do?

KRISHNA

Just go!

(MEENA is in the middle of a battlefield. She turns with her back to the audience, and begins walking towards the WORRY MACHINE, as lights fade to black.)

THE END

Appendices

Appendix A: Images



Fig. 1. Stories about Krishna, as a child, stealing butter from his mother and local *gopis*, or milkmaids.
http://www.auroville.org/environment/villages/images/krishna_3.jpg.



Fig. 2. Lord Krishna's love with one *gopi*, Radha, represents the divine love between God and humanity.
http://templeofspirit.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/radha_krishna.jpg.



Fig. 3. Lord Krishna and warrior Arjun on the battlefield in the classic treatise *The Bhagavad-Gita*.

<http://saveshreekrishnatemples.wordpress.com/2011/05/02/krishna-ales-lord-krishna-and-the-lapwings-nest/>.

Fig. 4. Lord Krishna reveals his divinity to Arjun in crisis.
<http://culture.jiva.com/philosophy/herhour12.asp>.





Fig. 5. Staged reading of *Meena's Dream* at Studio Safdar in Delhi, India, January 2012. Directed by Professor Walter Dallas. Photo by Komita Dhanda. Used with permission.



Fig. 6. Staged reading of *Meena's Dream* at Arena Stage's Kogod Cradle with Anu Yadav, Anjna Swaminathan, Rajna Swaminathan and Sam McCormally, December 1, 2012. Directed by Caleen Jennings. Photo by Rishi Das. Reprinted with permission.



Fig. 7. Lord Krishna in his adolescence, defeats the sea snake Kaliya and dances on top of Kaliya's many heads, a story which later influenced the development of classical dance forms to demonstrate one's faith in the divine. Painting by Sanjib K. Pani. © 2012. Reprinted with permission.

Fig. 8. Yashoda peers into the mouth of her son, Lord Krishna, and to her surprise, finds a vision of the entire universe.
<http://www.harekrnsna.de/artikel/krishnas-mouth.htm>.



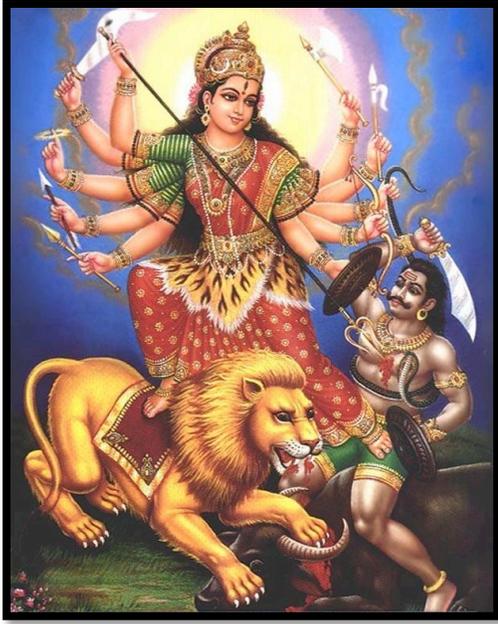


Fig. 9. Goddess Durga, known as “divine mother,” is said to be the power behind the trinity of creation, preservation and destruction of the world.

<http://www.rudraksha-ratna.com/gayatri.html>.

Fig. 10. Lord Krishna lifts Govardhan Mountain to protect local villagers from floods.

<http://iskconklang.wordpress.com/2008/10/28/govardhan-puja-in-kajang-malaysia/>.

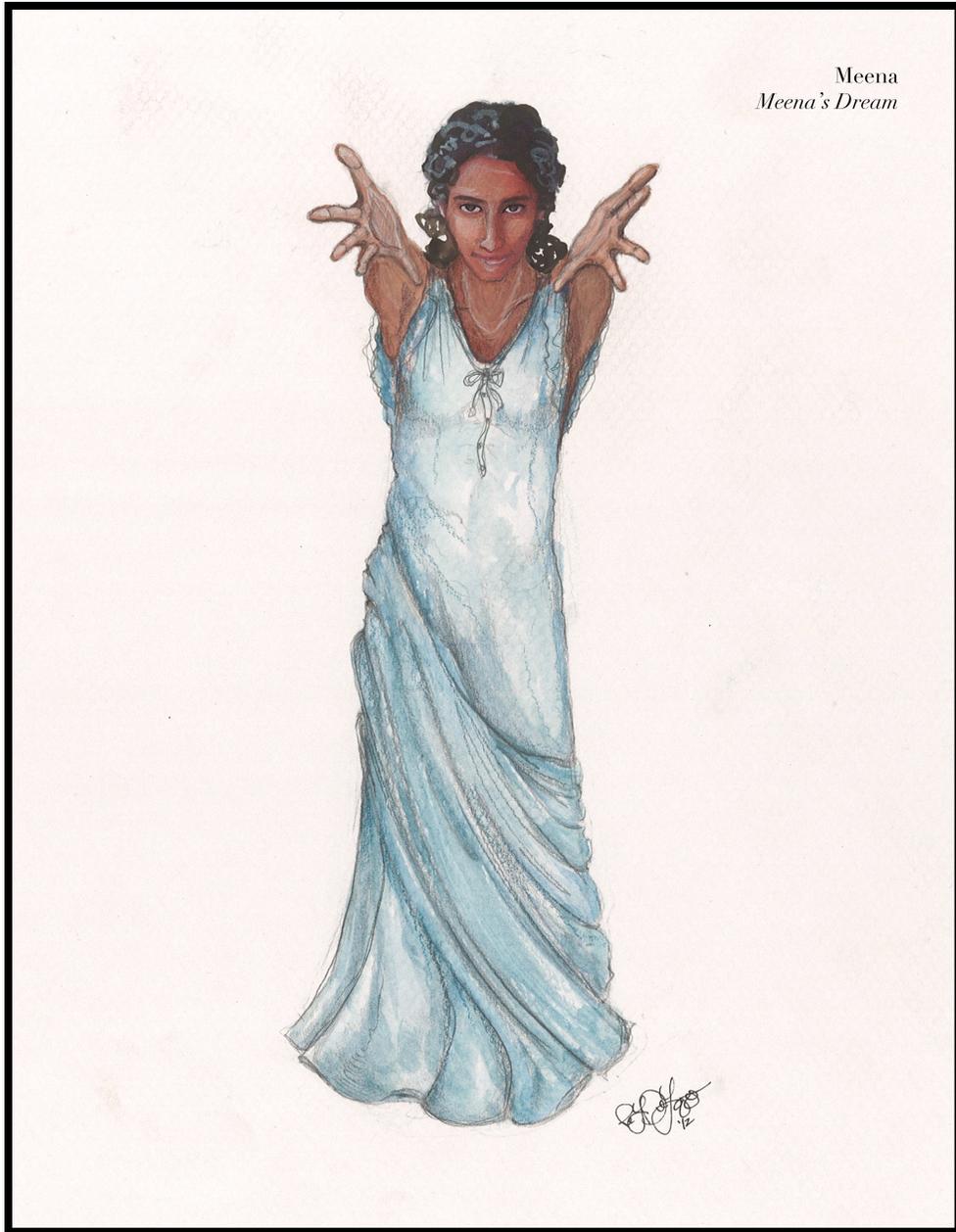




Fig. 11. Musicians Rajna (*left*) and Anjna (*right*) Swaminathan, play mridangam, south Indian classical drum, and violin, respectively, during *Meena's Dream* at the Kogod Theatre, February 2013. Photo by C. Stanley Photography. Used with permission.

Fig. 12. Musician Sam McCormally plays guitar during a rehearsal of *Meena's Dream*. Photo by Q. Terah Jackson. Used with permission.





Meena
Meena's Dream

Fig. 13. Costume rendering for *Meena's Dream*. Designed by Rebecca DeLapp, 2013. Used with permission.



Fig. 14. Production still from *Meena's Dream*, produced at the Kogod Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, February 2013. Meena fights the thousand-headed snake in the 'ocean of sadness.' Photo by C. Stanley Photography. Used with permission.

Fig. 15. Production still from *Meena's Dream*, produced at the Kogod Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, February 2013. Meena arrives in the 'forest of deception.' Photo by C. Stanley Photography. Used with permission.





Fig. 16. Production still from *Meena's Dream*, produced at the Kogod Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, February 2013. Meena confronts the final obstacle, 'the worry machine.' Costume design by Rebecca DeLapp. Set and projection design by Andrew Cohen. Lighting design by Andrew Kaufman. Sound design by Jeff Dorfman. Projection programming by Jeff Wood. Photo by C. Stanley Photography. Used with permission.

Appendix B: Rasas

The following is text presented by director Paige Hernandez during rehearsals for *Meena's Dream*, introducing the concept of *rasas*, or *navarasas* (*nava* meaning 'nine'). We relied on this as a basis for tablework. Information from Manmohan Ghosh's *Natyashastra*, 2002 and <http://www.ee.caltech.edu/~gowaikar/rand/navaras.html>

Navarasas

Human life is a rich fabric that is given colour and texture by the many happenings that shape it. The mundane actions that characterize every day as well as the extraordinary happenings that make and keep our lives interesting are all threads that get woven together to form this tapestry. The one thing that is common to all these threads is the fact that they evoke feelings in us, we respond to them with our emotions before they can become a part of our internal life. Indeed, life can be thought of as a continuous sequence of emotions that arise in various contexts and circumstances. These emotions, or *rasas*, are what give life different hues, shades and colours.

Thus it is not surprising that most performing art, which tries to present to the viewer a slice of human life focuses precisely on these *rasas*, or emotions in order to appeal to the audience. That *rasas* are the mainstay of performing art, or *natya*, is a fact that has been well-recognised for centuries now. The *NatyaShastra* is an ancient Indian text dated between 2nd century BC and 2nd century AD which analyses all aspects of performing art. It is often called the fifth veda because of its importance. In it one finds a thorough exposition on the *rasas*, or emotions that characterise Life as well as Art. The *NatyaShastra* describes nine *rasas* or *NavaRasas* that are the basis of all human emotion. Each is commented upon in detail. It is useful to keep in mind that a *rasa* encompasses not just the emotion, but also the various things that cause that emotion. These two things go hand in hand and are impossible to treat separately. This duality is part of every *rasa* to varying degrees. Today we try to bring to you a flavour of each of these nine *rasas*, explaining what each one means and presenting it to you through some Indian art form.

शृङ्गारं, Shringara. Love, Attractiveness. Presiding deity: Vishnu. Color: light green. Shringara means love and beauty. This is the emotion used to represent that which appeals to the human mind, that which one finds beautiful, that which evokes love. This is indeed the king of all *rasas* and the one that finds the most frequent portrayal in art. It can be used for the love between friends, the love between a mother and her child, the love for god or the love between a teacher and his disciples. But the Shringara or love between a man and a woman is easily the most popular form of this *rasa*. Rich imagery is associated with this love and it gets portrayed at many different intensities esp in Classical Indian dance. The sweet anticipation of a woman as she waits for her lover is as much Shringara as the passion she feels for her first love, a passion that so heightens her sensitivity that even the moonbeams scorch her skin. In Indian music too this *rasa* finds wide portrayal through beautiful melodies.

हास्यं Hasya. Laughter, Mirth, Comedy. Presiding deity: Pramata. Colour: white.

Hasya is the rasa used to express joy or mirth. It can be used to depict simple lightheartedness or riotous laughter and everything in between. Teasing and laughing with a friend, being amused and carefree or simply feeling frivolous and naughty -- these are all facets of hasya. Lord Krishna's childhood, when he was the darling of all Gokul is filled with many stories of his naughty activities. This mirth, which endeared him to all, is one of the common sources of hasya in all ancient Indian art forms. Clearly, where there is hasya, all is well with the world, there is joy all around and all are of good cheer.

बीभत्सं, Bhibatsya. Disgust, Aversion. Presiding deity: Shiva. Color: blue.

Bhibatsya is disgust. The emotion evoked by anything that nauseates us, that revolts or sickens us is Bhibatsya. When something comes to our notice that is coarse and graceless, beneath human dignity, something which revolts or sickens us it is Bhibatsya that we feel. When Prince Siddhartha, as a young nobleman, saw for the first time sickness, old age and death, he was moved to disgust which later metamorphosed into sorrow, deep introspection and peace, as he transformed into Gautama, the Buddha -- or the Enlightened one. Not surprisingly, this emotion is usually represented fleetingly. It usually acts as a catalyst for higher and more pleasant emotions.

रौद्रं, Rowdra. Fury. Presiding deity: Rudra. Color: red. Rowdra is anger and all its forms. The self-righteous wrath of kings, outrage over audacious behaviour and disobedience, the fury caused by an offense, the rage evoked by disrespect and anger over injustice are all forms of Rowdra, probably the most violent of rasas. Rowdra also encompasses divine fury and the fury of nature which is used to explain unexpected calamities and natural disasters. In Indian mythology, Lord Shiva, the Destroyer, is thought of as the master of all disharmony and discord. Shiva performing the tandav -- a violent dance -- is what creates havoc in the three worlds namely the sky, the earth and the nether world.

Śāntam , Shanta. *(the ninth rasa, not included in the original text, but gained acceptance between the sixth and tenth centuries).* Shanta is serenity and peace. It represents the state of calm and unruffled repose that is marked simply by the lack of all other rasas. Because all emotions are absent in Shanta there is controversy whether it is a rasa at all. According to Bharata, the author of NatyaShastra, the other eight rasas are as proposed originally by Brahma, and the ninth, Shanta, is his contribution. Shanta is what the Buddha felt when he was enlightened, when he reached the higher spiritual plane that led him to salvation or nirvana and freed him from the cycle of life and death. Shanta represents complete harmony between the mind, body and the universe. Sages in India meditate for entire lifetimes to attain this state. In music it is often represented through a steady and slow tempo. Shanta is a clear and cloudless state. Shanta is untroubled steadiness. Shanta is the key to eternity.

वीरं, Veera. Heroic mood. Presiding deity: Indra. Color: yellowish.

Veera is heroism. It represents bravery and self-confidence. Manliness and valiance are the trademarks of a Veer or a fearless person. Courage and intrepidity in the face of daunting odds is heroism. Boldness in battle, the attitude with which martyrs go to war, and the valour with which they die are all aspects of heroism. Rama, the hero of the Ramayan, is typically the model for this Rasa. His confidence and heroism while facing the mighty ten-headed demon king Ravana is part of Indian legend, folklore and mythology. A somewhat different type of heroism is displayed by characters like Abhimanyu, who went to war knowing fully that he would be severely outnumbered and almost certainly die and yet fought so bravely as to earn accolades even from his enemies. In Indian music this rasa is represented by a lively tempo and percussive sounds.

भयानकं, Bhaya. Horror, Terror. Presiding deity: Kala. Color: black.

Bhaya is fear. The subtle and nameless anxiety caused by a presentiment of evil, the feelings of helplessness evoked by a mighty and cruel ruler, and the terror felt while facing certain death are all aspects of bhaya. The fear for one's well being and safety is supposed to be the most primitive feeling known to man. Bhaya is the feeling evoked while facing something that is far bigger and more powerful than oneself and which is dead set on one's destruction. Bhaya is the feeling of being overwhelmed and helpless. Dread, cowardice, agitation, discomposure, panic and timidity are all aspects of the emotion of fear. Bhaya is also used to characterize that which causes fear. People and circumstances that cause others to cower in terror before them are as central to portrayal of this rasa as those feeling the fear.

कारुण्यं, Karuna. Compassion, Tragedy. Presiding deity: Yama. Color: grey.

Karuna is grief and compassion. The feelings of unspeakable tragedy and despair, utter hopelessness and heartbreak, the sorrow caused by parting with a lover, the anguish caused by the death of a loved one are all Karuna. So also, the compassion and empathy aroused by seeing someone wretched and afflicted is Karuna. The sympathy and fellow feeling that sorrow engenders in the viewer is also karuna. Karuna can be of a personal nature as when one finds oneself depressed, melancholy and distressed. More impersonal sorrows relate to the despair regarding the human condition in general, the feeling that all human life is grief and suffering. It is Karuna of this sort that the Buddha was trying to overcome on his path to salvation.

अद्भुतं, Adbhuta. Wonder, Amazement. Presiding deity: Brahma. Color: yellow.

Adbhuta is wonder and curiosity. The awe that one feels when one comes across something divine and supernatural, some power or beauty that is remarkable and never seen or imagined before is Adbhuta. Adbhuta is the curiosity of man regarding the creation of the world and all its wonders, the astonishment caused by seeing something unusual and magical. The appreciation of a marvel that goes beyond the routine and the mundane is Adbhuta. The glory of a king returning from a successful battle, the magical feats of a god are both adbhuta to a common man. Adbhuta is when divinity makes a surprise appearance in the world of men.

Appendix C: Feedback

Audience Responses to *Meena's Dream*

“... I was transported by the story, your performance, and the production. What a beautiful and moving evening you created for us. Thank you so much for your hard work and your generosity.”

– Susan Farr, Executive Director
Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center

“While watching *Meena's Dream*, I experienced so many emotions that I needed to spend some moments in silence, catching my breath afterwards. I'm sure that had it been a finished piece, I wouldn't have felt leaving “raw.” I related to so many things: the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship, especially in a history of immigration, being an immigrant child in an American school, worrying about my mother's health and ultimately her passing away, wishing for things so much in order to affect the outcomes, being a crazy and creative dreamer. I was just amazed at the wide roller-coaster of emotions that you (Anu) were able to capture - and evoke. Amazing. And I LOVED the live music – it blended perfectly and undoubtedly heightened the emotional experience. I definitely think that this play could serve as a platform for dialogue, especially if parents and children are watching it together. But some of the material may be too much for young children.”

– Masum Momaya, Curator
Indian American Exhibition, Smithsonian Institute

Primarily, the movement and distinction of characterization was remarkable. So clear, so exciting. I took much delight in how they changed and that you committed so fully to each and every one. The music was FANTASTIC--such a great element to the story and set a wonderful tone. I thought that while much of the video work was visually interesting, I didn't always feel that it meshed with the text. Or, to say, it felt like it had different rules, throughout. After letting the audience use their imagination so much early on, it then felt like it limited things later in the piece instead of adding. It did make the world feel expanded, however, so by no means a total loss. I would love to see the video and projections explored further. They were exciting but didn't feel as integrated as other elements. I would say that even without an ending, I wasn't sure where in the story you ended. Not a criticism, but just as observation--I'm not sure if it felt close to an end or halfway through the story! So, a curiosity, is all.

– Michael Dove, Artistic Director
Forum Theatre

Sampling of Audience Survey Responses

What did you appreciate?

“Deeply engaging. Touching. Terrifying.”

“Creativity, humorous, lovable.”

“Appreciated everything. She did a fabulous job and she was very funny. She is a very good storyteller.”

“I loved the moments of humor. It really balanced out the piece and helped emphasize the overall tone of optimism. Beautiful, beautiful work of art. Definitely teared [sic] up out of both joy and sadness!”

What did the piece inspire you to think about and/or feel?

“The power of the mind and imagination to direct one’s life.”

“The power of our minds to get us through the darkest times of our lives, and even leave us with hope and happiness and strength.”

“Immigrant experiences, chronic illness, shitty healthcare, bullying, kids power/lessness.”

“What effect my behavior has upon flourishing my daughter’s imagination. Also thinking of the eventuality of my parent’s passing (and my own).”

Were there any moments that were confusing to you? What were they?

“Some moments distinguishing characters was confusing.”

“Not really confusing. Some projections were questionable.”

“How can Meena see tears underwater?”

“I did not understand the meaning of the ending. Was she engulfed by the “worry machine” or was she sacrificing herself to save her mother? I enjoyed the performance profusely and became very invested in the story, so I was disappointed that it ended so ambiguously. I wanted to know what happened to her and her mother. Did she face reality? Did she use her imagination to somehow transcend the rules of reality and save her mother?”

What moments of the piece continue to resonate with you?

“The various movements and the musical accompaniment. Aptly conveyed the moods of the play. The school yard and forest of deception were especially touching.”

“The dance with the mother.”

“The water.”

“The trees.”

“Everything soaked with me. Especially each dream the character had.”

Other feedback:

“Gorgeous! I loved it!”

“I’m not sure if the projections were so effective. After asking us to use our imaginations so heavily to piece together the blocking, the use of specific imagery, given to us, was a let-down. I also think there might have been one to many segments. I got a little exhausted after awhile.”

“Even though it was a story about a specific God, this story is so relatable.”

“It is a piece that will make a person want to face their fears.”

Glossary

Bhagavad-Gita, literally translating to “Song of the Lord,” is an episode recorded in the great Sanskrit poem, the *Mahabharata*, composed of the dialogue between Prince Arjun and Lord Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu in the Hindu religion. It dates back to the first or second century CE and is also known as the *Gita*.

Bhagavata-Purana, Sanskrit for “Ancient Stories of the Lord,” is one of the most well-known texts of the *Puranas*, a particular volume of Sanskrit literature. Likely composed in the tenth century AD, it encourages the expression of *bhakti*, a particular tradition that emphasizes an ecstatic quality of religious devotion.

Bharatanatyam is a classical dance form of South India, originally performed by Devadasis, women ‘married’ to God, first in temples as an act of devotion, and then for royalty. During British imperialism, it came into decline and stigma as royalty could no longer support the Devadasi tradition and it became associated with sex work. The dance form soon experienced a new life through artists like Rukmini Devi Arundale, associated with a burgeoning Indian national identity and washed of its sundry implications. Now it is a dance well-known in the Indian diaspora as cultural symbol and heritage art form.

Brahma is of the major gods of Hinduism, popular from about 500 BCE to 500 CE and the Creator aspect of the divine trinity that includes, Vishnu (preservation of life) and Shiva (the destroyer).

Caste System is an ancient system of classifying people into historical occupations, associated with Hinduism as a means of the delegation of labor. Over time it has come to signify an entrenched hierarchical system of social segregation that, while technically outlawed within India today, still affects employment, education, and other opportunities. It divides into four basic categories, though there are hundreds of subclassifications: Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (farmer/merchant), Dalit (the most historically marginalized caste also known by the perjorative term ‘untouchable’ due to their extreme social and economic exclusion.)

Durga is a principal form of the Goddess also known as Devi and Shakti. She was created by the divine trinity of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. Embodying their collective energy (shakti), she is the true source of their inner power and greater than any of them. She is the protector of humanity and the destroyer of evil. Born fully grown and beautiful, Durga presents a fierce menacing form to her enemies and rides a lion, representing her strength and power.

Gopi in the original Sanskrit translates to “cowherd girl” or “milkmaid.” In Hinduism it is used commonly to refer to the group of cowherd girls famous for their unconditional devotion or, *bhakti*, to Krishna as described in the stories of the *Bhagavata-Purana* and other Puranic literatures.

Govardhan Mountain is a hill near the town of Vrindavan, in Uttar Pradesh, India, where Lord Krishna is said to have spent his childhood years. It is considered sacred especially in the Vaishnava traditions within Hinduism, and was the mountain Krishna lifted to protect villagers from flooding.

Hindutva is a political ideology that traces its origins to the Indian movement for independent from British imperialism. It is based on the formation of a Hindu identity and culture as connected to Indian nationalism and is particularly espoused by militant groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or the National Volunteers Corps, who call for the organization of the country in accordance with a particular idea of Hindu culture that has often resulted in exclusionary social and economic policies, and been connected to acts of communal or interethnic violence.

Lord Krishna is one of the most widely revered Hindu deities, worshipped as the eighth incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu and often diversely portrayed as a child, a flirtatious lover or spiritual advisor. Krishna became the focus of numerous *bhakti* (devotional) cults, which over the centuries have produced a wealth of religious poetry, music, and painting. Narratives depicting Krishna are located in Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Harivamsha*, and the *Puranas*, and the *Bhagavata-Purana*.

Kaliya refers to the name of a terrifying sea serpent in the Yamuna River who was subdued and then befriended by a young Lord Krishna who danced on the serpent’s many heads, as recounted in the *Bhagavata-Purana*.

Mahabharata translates to “Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty” in Sanskrit. It is one of the two epic Sanskrit poems of ancient India, the other being the *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata* is a significant body of literature dated between 400BCE to 200BCE, on topics of dharm, or moral law, and history. It centers on a hero’s journey detailing the struggle for power between two vast kingdoms over the course of many ages.

Nāṭyaśāstras, also referred to as “Bharata Natyashastra,” is a detailed treatise that covers the theory and practice of all aspects of classical Sanskrit theatre, dance and music. It is believed to have been written by the Brahman sage and priest Bharata Muni between the first century BCE and third century CE. It proposes the performing arts are a means of reaching divine enlightenment.

Partition of India was a series of historical events leading up to and including the aftermath of the 1947 independence of India from British colonial rule and the creation of the sovereign states of the Dominion of Pakistan, which later split into the countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh. It resulted in tensions between the two countries, the displacement of millions of families, the loss of several hundred thousand to one million lives, and continues to affect conflict within the region today.

Rasa translates into “flavor,” “taste,” or “juice” in Sanskrit, denoting a concept of the essential element of any work of visual, literary, or performing art referring to the mood that a performer creates and the spectator beholds. It is a main theoretical concept in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a classical treatise on the performing arts, attributed to sage-priest Bharata Muni, and later developed by philosopher Abhinavagupta (c. 1020 AD), who applied it to all forms of theatre and poetry.

Rig Veda is an ancient sacred collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns, one of four texts known together as the Vedas. Some of its verses are still used as Hindu prayers today and it contains poetic accounts of the creation of the universe, hymns in praise of the divine, and prayers for health and well-being.

Vedas, Sanskrit for “Knowledge,” are a collection of hymns possibly dating back to 1200 BCE that are recited during Hindu rituals today.

Tandava is a violent dance performed by Lord Krishna on top of the sea serpent Kaliya’s many heads, according to the *Bhagavata-Purana*, and also attributed to Lord Shiva. It symbolizes ferocious energy as well as tenderness and grace, and is a major aspect of the classical dance Kathak, as well as referenced in classical dances such as Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi.

Vishnu is one of the principal Hindu deities who represents life preservation, and makes up one aspect of the divine trinity of preservation, creation (Brahma) and destruction (Shiva). Lord Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu.

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