

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

ONSTAGE : Rama Chameleon - Boxtales compacts a Hindu epic into one hour for all the family

By Ted Mills, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

May 14, 2010 12:00 AM

BOXTALES presents 'Prince Rama'

When: 11 a.m. and 7 p.m. Saturday

Where: La Colina Jr. High, 4025 Foothill Road

Cost: \$20 adults, \$10 children

Information: 962-1142, boxtales.org

“We don’t have a dramaturge, we are more like social anthropologists,” says Michael Andrews, one of the two founding members of Boxtales, the postmodern-myth clash of a theater company. “We study a lot about the cultures that we get our myths and folktales from.”

Their most recent journey to India a few years back resulted in Om, a “first iteration” that has now returned in a different form as "Prince Rama and the Monkey King." The performance, which is a fundraiser for Boxtales itself and their youth outreach, opens Saturday at La Colina Jr. High.

Based on the epic Hindu poem the Ramayana, “Prince Rama and the Monkey King” follows the prince and Hanuman the Monkey King as they journey to free Sita, Rama's wife, from the evil demon King Ravana. The story is a classic tale of duty, courage and compassion.

The group lost their original venue, Victoria Hall, when the building shut down over structural issues two weeks ago, a move that affected several other companies. La Colina promises more seats, but Andrews also knows that it’s more out of the way than the coffee-drink-and-meal options of a State Street theater. But they’ve built up a devoted following of both children and adults over the years, all who are attracted to the company’s combination of storytelling, puppetry, masks, dance, circus arts and acrobatics.

They’ve tried to appeal to both groups, which also explains the mission of “Prince Rama.” “Om: An Indian Tale of Good and Evil” tackled the original with a full cast and did not shy away from its downbeat ending, a minefield of gender and class/caste issues.

“Prince Rama” is more appropriate for kids and has a happier Hollywood ending. Boxtales has explored all points on the spectrum from traditional to experimental.

“After that run was done, we went right back into the studio and made it suitable for touring.” Out went the large cast and the length (two-and-a-half hours); family shows like “Prince Rama” run about an hour.

“This is much more streamlined and edited,” says Andrews. “It’s not as lavish, but it’s also not as indulgent. It’s packed with good stuff.”

But the Ramayana is so sprawling and so beloved that it can handle anything thrown at it. There are already several versions of the original text, which is stitched together from anonymous sources. As the poem spread across the continent, it was adapted by each culture, including Thailand, Burma, Malaysia and beyond. It has long been a part of each culture’s DNA, like the Bible in the West.

This production marks the introduction of a new member to Boxtales, Bryan West. Andrews says that West wowed both Matt Taviani and himself in audition, one of the rare cases where they cast about for a new member, and only because they heard West had also studied under one of their mentors, James Donelan. (Former member Jeff Mills now teaches at UCSB and incorporates much of the Boxtales/Donelan “method” into his instruction.)

This current incarnation of the Ramayana will tour, with stops planned at the Ford Amphitheatre in August and other schools before that. But Saturday’s two shows will give everybody a chance. Andrews guarantees the show will evolve.

“Artistically, they keep growing and keep getting better,” he says. “Prince Rama will live a long time. These productions tend to get ... juicy over time.”