

Prince Rama and the Monkey King
and
OM, an Indian Tale of Good and Evil

Teacher Guide
Grades K – 6

About the Artists

BOXTALES THEATRE COMPANY uses masks, movement, storytelling and live music to presents myths and folklore from around the world. The performers combine their diverse talents to create a professional, high energy, highly interactive theatrical experience for youth and family audiences.

About the Program

The *Rāmāyana* [*Rah-MY-annah*], meaning Rama’s journey, is one of India’s most important epics and sacred texts from the classical Sanskrit canon. It is an epic poem that tells the story of Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu.

The *Rāmāyana* is a story about overcoming fear in the face of adversity by summoning both courage and compassion. The very problematic side of the story on a literal level is the rationale for warfare and repression between opposing cultural groups. For example, the Lord of Darkness, Ravana, and his demons (the *rakshasas*) terrorize the holy sages (the *rishis*) while Rama, Lakshmana and the monkey army fight the dark forces. Yet, on a symbolic level even this aspect of the ancient saga is aligned with its very core, namely, the purification of the inner (and outer) being by following the righteous path of Dharma with the goal being to delineate the ideal of virtuous conduct.

Rama stands for the emblematic balance between god and man. As a sacred and mythic entity, part of his purpose is to inspire and nurture the human being in his or her striving toward such pristine levels of existence.

After the company’s staging of *The Odyssey* core members Mills, Andrews and Matt Tavianini felt an urge to continue their collaboration with Jenny Sauer-Klein who brought the technique of AcroYoga® to Boxtales. AcroYoga combines partner yoga, acrobatics and Thai-massage into a practice and when performed can be both visually very exciting and technically effective. This technique provides yet another tool for the company in their already recognized style of physically-based theatre.

Costume designer, Kira Jones and production designer Timo Beckwith have been working closely together with Mills and Andrews to develop a cohesive design. Their focus has been on different styles of the *Rāmāyana* produced in India, Thailand, Bali and

other areas with a strong Hindu cultural influence. Jones has shopped for exquisite silks of most beautiful hues, nuances and patterns. She attempts to develop a design based on a general Hindu style while somewhat toned down to fit this American staging. Beckwith has become deeply fascinated by the temple-looking crowns worn by Rama and Sita in certain Hindu paintings. He has adapted these images into sculptural head-pieces. As an overall approach the designers are inspired by various artistic styles of India. After bringing numerous elements together they have to simplify them for the stage. For example the head-dresses have only a few colors and there is limited, if any, use of decorations. The flat pieces of fabrics draped around the bodies (*saris* and *dhotis*) are smaller than they would be off stage due to the necessity for performers to be able to do quick costume changes. To Jones and Beckwith it has been exciting to connect with storekeepers of Indian descent when looking for materials in Little India in Artesia, California. They have been welcomed and assisted by these shop owners who have also expressed appreciation and interest in the theater company's choice to stage this important epic.

Objectives

- To introduce students to one of the world's greatest epic the *Rāmāyana*.
- To encourage students to seek out and read more mythology and sacred texts from all over the world.
- To help develop creative imagination.
- To introduce the importance of oral tradition and theatre as an educational tool.
- To present stories that will help raise self-esteem and teach important lessons.
- To encourage students to identify character traits, attitudes, and situations existing in the story as well as in our contemporary society.

Preparation of the Program

The rich web of cultures in the world offers us a wealth of mythological, sacred and even religious texts that can teach us about that it might be to human as well as to inspire us in our own lives so that we can create these lives beautifully and beneficially. Storytelling is an ancient art that allows for us to look back into time as well as into each culture. These stories formed as myths are windows into our own very humanity.

India

India, officially the Republic of India, is a country in South Asia. It is the seventh-largest country by geographical area, the second-most populous country, and the most populous democracy in the world.

Home to the Indus Valley Civilization and a region of historic trade routes and vast empires, the Indian subcontinent was identified with its commercial and cultural wealth for much of its long history. Four major religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism originated here, while Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam arrived in the first millennium CE and shaped the region's diverse culture. Gradually annexed by the British East India Company from the early eighteenth century and colonized by the United Kingdom from the mid-nineteenth century, India became an independent nation in 1947 after a struggle for independence that was marked by widespread non-violent resistance.

It has the world's twelfth largest economy at market exchange rates and the fourth largest in purchasing power. Economic reforms since 1991 have transformed it into one of the fastest growing economies; however, it still suffers from high levels of poverty, illiteracy, disease, and malnutrition. A pluralistic, multilingual, and multiethnic society, India is also home to a diversity of wildlife in a variety of protected habitats.

India is the most populous democracy in the world. With an estimated population of 1.2 billion, India is the world's second most populous country. Over 800 million Indians (80.5%) are Hindu. Other religious groups include Muslims (13.4%), Christians (2.3%), Sikhs (1.9%), Buddhists (0.8%), Jains (0.4%), Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís and others. Tribals constitute 8.1% of the population. India has the third-highest Muslim population in the world and has the highest population of Muslims for a non-Muslim majority country.

India's culture is marked by a high degree of syncretism and cultural pluralism. It has managed to preserve established traditions while absorbing new customs, traditions, and ideas from invaders and immigrants and spreading its cultural influence to other parts of Asia, mainly South East and East Asia. Traditional Indian society is defined by relatively strict social hierarchy in the form of a cast system.

The first known permanent settlements in India appeared over 9,000 years ago and gradually developed into the Indus Valley Civilization, dating back to 3300 BCE in western India. It was followed by the Vedic period, which laid the foundations of Hinduism and other cultural aspects of early Indian society, and ended in the 500s BCE. From around 550 BCE, many independent kingdoms and republics known as the Mahajanapadas were established across the country. It is to the period of 800-300 BCE that the first written account of the *Rāmāyana* is dated.

About the *Rāmāyana* and Valmiki

The *Rāmāyana* [*Rah-MY-anah*], meaning Rama's journey, is one of India's most important epics and sacred texts from the classical Sanskrit canon. Its actual date of composition is unknown, but is traditionally dated to sometime between the second to eighth centuries BCE. Valmiki wrote this epic in a unique and complex 32-syllable meter called *anushtubh* (or *anustubh*). The *Rāmāyana* is 24,000 verses (slokas) long, divided

into seven books. Traditionally, storytellers recite the *Rāmāyana* for their audience in sessions lasting up to nine days. Normally, the audience comes and goes while the devoted storyteller recites the epic from beginning to end without sleep.

Valmiki was the first person to write down the story about Rama. Valmiki himself relates in his account that one day he was blissfully observing birds in the forest when suddenly a hunter appeared and killed one of the birds with his bow and arrow. Valmiki became so upset that he cursed the hunter with a spell. As he uttered this magic spell it came out in a very unusual way. He was later told by the god Indra that the gods had now inspired the poet with a new style of writing. Valmiki also said that those who regularly read the *Rāmāyana* will experience deep joy. It is also said that those who listen to the telling of the *Rāmāyana* will be not only cleansed of their transgressions but also healed and live a long, prolific life. Those who recite the *Rāmāyana* are further blessed with divine honor. We have thus been encouraged to engage with Rama's story with pure hearts and as if our very existence depended on it, because if we follow suit, our lives will surely become more sanctified. Maybe Valmiki said this for more people to read his story or he said this because he knew it to be true. (This is an aspect that the teacher also can address with his or her students.)

Synopsis of the *Rāmāyana*

As a young prince Rama is about to take over his father's crown to become king but destiny wills it otherwise: he is banned from his rightful kingdom for fourteen years. Rama, his wife Sita (the reincarnation of the Goddess Lakshmi) and his brother Lakshmana leave together and enter the wilderness of the jungle. During their pilgrimage they meet many *rishis* (the holy men and women who live in simple temples throughout the jungle). The trio absorbs deep wisdom from the *rishis*. At the same time Rama and his brother are bound to protect the sages from the demons (*rakshasas*) who are ravaging the otherwise blissful, wilderness. Rama's destiny is anchored to his mission to destroy darkness and illusion. Rama is the idealized man and he is a master of Dharma (the virtuous path of righteous duty). At the core of this classic story is also the intense love-based relationship between Rama and Sita: the god and the goddess incarnated and embodied.

Synopsis of our Play

The twin brothers, Kusha and Lava capture King Rama's horse which he has sent out as a special sacrifice (*yagna*). This action leads to a long awaited meeting with their estranged father, Rama himself. Growing up with their mother Sita and the sage and poet Valmiki, the boys have learned the entire *Rāmāyana* by heart, which they wish to recite for Rama. And so it happens.

Once upon a time, Rama's father, King Dasaratha, is childless. He performs a horse sacrifice with the result that his three wives are able to bear him a total of four sons. When the brothers reach young manhood the famous sage Visvamitra arrives at the palace demanding that Rama and Lakshmana join him with the purpose of slaying a

demoness (*rakshasi*) who is disrupting the rituals conducted by holy men and women in the forest. The two brothers follow suit. During this initial journey they reach a neighboring kingdom where Rama is able to string Indra's Bow and thus, he wins the love and hand-in-marriage of Sita.

After the wedding Rama is set to be crowned King, but is instead banned from Kosala for fourteen years. Sita and Lakshmana join Rama's exile. In the jungle the trio meets many rishis who follow the path of dharma as well as rakshasas who are on the path of adharma. Rama also befriends the legendary Hanuman, a great leader of an ancient and magic race of monkeys. Ultimately a massive battle takes place between good and evil.

Character List

Dasaratha King of Kosala, Rama's father

Kaikeyi Dasaratha's favorite wife, who later is a instrument of destiny and causes Rama's being banned. Mother of Bharata

Kausalya Dasartha's first wife mother of Rama and Lakshmana

Sumitra Dasaratha's wife, Lakshmana's mother

Lakshmana Rama's brother

Rama Incarnation of God Vishnu, hero of the Ramayana

Sita Incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, Rama's wife

Janaka Another king and Sita's "father."

Lava & Kusha Rama's and Sita's twin sons.

Valmiki sage and writer of the first written version of the *Ramayana*.

Visvamisra A famous sage who is Rama's and Lakshmana's guru

Hanuman King of monkeys and Rama's devoted friend

Jatayu A great vulture, friend of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana

Ravana The Lord of darkness and chief of demons.

Surpanaka Ravana's rakshasi sister

Tataka Rakshasa, female demon.

Indrajit Son of Ravana, master of Maya

Kumbhakarna Ravana's brother, sleeping giant who eats everything and anything with insatiable hunger.

Vibheeshana Ravana's brother who aligns with Rama's and later takes over the rule at Lanka after Ravana.

Locations, Vocabulary and Key Concepts

Adharma *opposite to dharma. That which is not in accordance with human and divine law.*

Agni *the fire god.*

Agnihorta *The fire ritual.*

Agni pariksha *Trial by fire.*

Astra *magic, supernatural weapon. When these mythic weapons were empowered by specific and special spells they turned into magic weapons with super powers such as causing flood, thunder, lightning, or becoming a thousand venomous snakes or daggers.*

AUM, OM *A holy syllable that represents the ultimate reality.*
Ayodya *the capital city of Northern Kingdom (Kosala) from which Rama comes.*
Bhakti *Devotion, worship*
Brahma *A God of the Hindu Trinity; the creator*
Dandaka *The forest (jungle) where Rama spends his exile.*
Deva *Celestial elemental beings; God; Being of Light*
Dharma *Hindu/vedic term for the righteous and virtuous path.*
Guru *Spiritual teacher; master*
Kishkinda *The Kingdom of monkeys*
Kodanda *Rama's bow*
Lakshmi *The Goddess of Fortune; female divine principle and consort of Vishnu.*
Lanka *The island where Ravana lives (of the same location as contemporary Sri Lanka)*
Mantra *Sacred incantation.*
Maya *Illusion; Goddess of Illusion*
Prana *Life breath*
Rakshasas *demons*
Rishis *holy men and women who are deeply entrenched in the ancient Vedic scriptures and who live austere and simple lives in the jungle.*
Siva (Shiva) *A God of the Hindu Trinity: the Destroyer*
Veda *Any of the four ancient collections of sacred Hindu prayers and hymns.*
Vishnu *A god of the Hindu Trinity: the Preserver*
Yagna *sacrifice, such as the famous horse sacrifice done by both Dasaratha and Rama*
Yoga *“Union;” union with the Self, with God.*
Yuga *an age, era (there are four of them)*

Pre-Performance Activities

Read all or parts of the *Rāmāyana*. A wonderful translation is done by Ramesh Menon.

Discuss why the *Rāmāyana* is such an important text? Why might it be considered sacred? Why might it be that it is part of the Hindu religion? What does it illuminate about the human condition? What makes it such a great story?

Discuss the ideas of gods, gods incarnated as humans and super humans. Why is the story about elevated beings? Do they reflect something in us? Why do we have stories about gods? What do we lose by losing gods? Can they be replaced? If, so how?

What are a hero and a heroine? What is a demon? What is a holy person? What is heroic about Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman and even Ravana? What is unheroic about them?

Discuss the role of Sita. Is she a positive or negative role model for women? What does Sita have to teach others, such as Rama, Lakshmana and Ravana? Why does she choose to return to Mother Earth?

If the teacher reads passages from the text the students can draw and write any impressions that stir in their imagination. How do they imagine these characters and these events? If they created a play of this story how do they imagine it? Are they able to draw any parallels between the *Rāmāyana* and their own lives and culture?

Follow-Up Ideas and Activities

These topics can either be discussed as a class or used as essay topics.

How was the theatrical version of the story different from the read/heard/imagine story? How did that change the experience of it? Were there aspects of the staged version that captured the story and its characters similar to what you had imagined? What was different? Did anything surprise you? What were the various feelings you experienced inside your own heart while watching it and why?

If you were going to stage this play how would you do it? What types of costumes, props, set? How many performers? What type of music, if any? How long would it be? What scenes would you choose to include?

How do the masks, stilts, costumes and shadow play affect the telling of the story on stage?

What might old Rama experience when he gets to hear the whole story about his life? How might it have been for Lava and Kusha to know of their father's whole life – past, present and future, while not yet having met him?

What was it like for Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to give up all their worldly riches and live an austere and humble life deep in the forest? What did they learn from this experience?

How is Rama able to forgive his “step-mother” Kaikei's unkind way of treating him? What does he forgive her? Why do you think she acted as she did and forces her husband, the King Dasharata, to banish from the kingdom of Ayodya his favorite and divine son?

What is good and evil? What is a righteous and noble way of living? Is Rama only good and is Ravana only evil? Is it right for Rama and Hanuman's army to kill almost the entire race of *rakshasas*? Would there have been other ways for both of them to deal with their conflict?

Write a review of BOXTALES' performance.