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A Visually Stunning Ram Leela Still Captivates Young Hearts and Minds

By Shivam and Tejas Dave

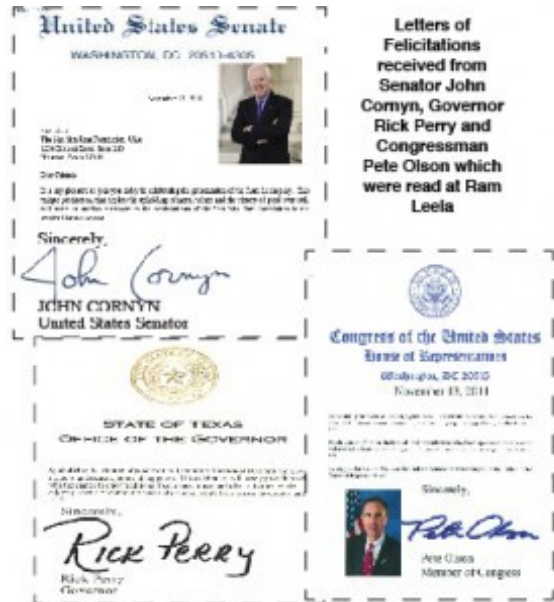
HOUSTON: Just as it did last year, this year's Ram Leela beautifully represented the eternal epic of Ramayana that has a special place in the hearts of over a billion Hindus all around the world. The program moved the audience of over one thousand at the Cullen Performance Hall to laughter, tears, and reflection throughout the course of the presentation.

The Ram Leela 2011 program performed a very important service by dramatizing and presenting central tenets of the Hindu religion that while coming from episodes occurring thousands of years ago, are still extremely relevant today. The program illustrated the eternal struggle between good and evil, and in the process highlighted characteristics, such as truthfulness, which transcend cultural, religious and ethnic lines and instruct man to follow moral and ethical guidelines.

Although some of the audience may have read the Ramayana, and others may have heard the story from their parents or Heritage class teachers, the actual play had an irreplaceable function. By giving a moving visual representation, Ram Leela added a realistic flair to the timeless tale.

This was especially effective for the youth, many of whom subscribe to a 'see it to believe it' concept. Sometimes, merely reading or listening to a text of such magnanimity will not be conducive to comprehending its brilliance. However, a concise yet comprehensive play such as this one not only told the story of Lord Rama but conveyed many of the deeper undertones implied by Sage Valmiki and Saint Tulasidas, the two foremost writers of Ramayana.

As youth ourselves, we found the play to be spectacular. On the surface, we saw special effects such as fire and flight which kept us, along with the rest of the audience, captivated for the whole duration of the play. Most importantly, we realized the devotion needed to put on such a program. The props and costumes were equally enchanting and worthy of bedecking Lord Rama's palace. Indeed, one could tell that no corner was cut in making this play what it was. The thought process behind it was clear. The whole play was a show of devotion to Mother Sita and Lord Rama. Just as during a pooja, the finest silk and thread is used to adorn the lord, so too during the play, only the finest apparel, stage design, and enthusiasm was utilized. To us, and to countless others we're sure, this was one of the most impressing of factors. In addition to being a youth, we were also participants in the play for the second time. From that angle, we could see the hard work put into this program. Countless individuals from all ages worked tirelessly to create a show that was as successful as possible. Especially memorable was the performance of the many toddlers and young kids in the Vanar Sena who, although tired from days of practice, performed to the utmost extent of their abilities



with a smile on their faces. The sparkle in the eyes of these children lit up the stage in a way that cannot be described in words.

The energy and excitement displayed by the participants and actors was one of the reasons the play was a success. Their energy permeated through the hall and gave the audience a memorable experience, transporting them to Ayodhya, Mithila, and all the other settings in which Lord Rama enacted his Leelas. Ram Leela was put together entirely by local artists and they deserve a lot of credit. Although it is not possible to thank the whole crew by name, it is important to thank Shrimati Kusum ji of Shri Nataraj School of Dance for choreography and direction, and Shri Arun Verma ji and Shrimati Vinni Verma ji of the Shri Sita Ram Foundation for their support.

All in all, the essence of the play lies in the fact that these actions which took place thousands of years ago have been preserved in words and enacted by various people in various places. This version of the Ram Leela took place in our locality and endeared itself to our hearts. Yet the enduring message of the timeless Ramayana remains the same: no matter the place or time; good has, and always will, emerge victorious over evil.

Shivam and Tejas Dave are the sons of Narayan and Chhaya Dave. Shivam, 15, a sophomore at Pearland High School, spoke at the 6th annual Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference in Columbus, Ohio and is an active participant in the Houston Hindu community. Tejas, 18, is a senior at Pearland High School. He is a winner of the Hindus of Greater Houston 2011 Youth Seva award and an active member of the Coalition of Hindu Youth. His works have been published in the Hinduism Today and the New Global Indian Knowledge Exchange magazines.