



Ram Leela Adds Complexity to Spectacular Stage Performances

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By Jawahar Malhotra

HOUSTON: Just like last year when the first ever production of Ram Lila – the story of Lord Ram, his wife Sita and brother Lakhsman – was staged in not a small, but a massive way, this year the play went out of its way to add degrees of complexity throughout the over three hour performance.

The show was held once again at the Cullen Auditorium on the University of Houston's Main Campus this past Sunday, November 13, eighteen days after Diwali due to availability of the hall as well as to avoid conflict with the other functions that fill out the community's calendar during the celebration of this important Hindu festival. And the show was much anticipated after its much heralded premier performance of last year, with capacity attendance once again this year.

Ram Lila (literally Ram's play) is a dramatic re-enactment of the life of Lord Ram and ends with the ten-day battle between Ram and Ravana as described in the Hindu religious epic, the Ramayana. The play is a tradition that is staged annually all over India, mostly in the north, over ten or more nights, during the auspicious period of Sharad Navraras which commemorate the commencement of autumn, starting with Dussehra. The performances culminate on Vijaydashami, which commemorates the victory of Lord Ram over the demon king Ravana. In India, the actors go out in procession to a mela or fair ground where giant effigies of the Ravana and his brother Kumbhakaran and son Meghanath are set on fire and the coronation of Ram takes place. One of the most well known productions is held at the Ram Lila grounds across the Red Fort in Old Delhi.

The Ramayana is based on the life and times of Ram, the 7th incarnation of the Lord Vishnu and the story is so popular and well-known that its values of devotion, loyalty, fidelity and righteousness are ingrained in the psyche and ethics of the Indian mainstream, irrespective of their religion.

Most Ramlilas in North India are based on the 16th century Avadhi version of the Ramayana, Ramcharitmanas, written by Gosvami Tulsidas entirely in verse around 1625 AD. The dialogues are used in most traditional versions, where open-air productions are staged by local Ramlila committees, and funded entirely by the local population, the audience. True to form, the characters in the Houston play do not speak, but mouth the lines to the dialogue from a CD of the Ramayana

played on the sound system. At one point, when Ravana's brother comes to seek shelter from Ram whom he worships, the CD missed its cue and went silent. Without missing a beat, several of the devotees in the front seats and the organizers went onstage and started to chant Sri Ram Jai Ram Jai Sri Ram to the accompaniment of a dholuk player until the CD was re-queued and picked up again.

This year's play was once again funded by the Shri Sita Ram Foundation, headed by Dr. Arun Verma, who envisioned bringing this event to the Houston community and whose vision was given shape by the creativity of Kusum Sharma, the Executive Director of the Shri Natraj School of Dance who brought together a cast of 120 people and numerous props and brilliant costumes for the production provide by Ketan Mistry and Anuradha of Mandap Creations. This year several complex elements were added to the play: dances to enhance the story; a narrative that was projected on a back screen to allow the audience to follow the story; and the use of two actors to portray the beloved monkey Lord Hanuman.

This stemmed from the desire to show how Hanuman went to Sri Lanka to find Sita and then wreaked havoc there when he set it on fire. The second actor (actually a professional female artist) "flew" across the stage (and back) in a harness to depict the journey to Sri Lanka, to the roar of appreciation from the audience. This Hanuman did somersaults and head stands to show his prankiness and then, with three other Anglo members of the troupe, performed dazzling acrobatics and dance juggling fire torches.

Abha Divedi and Gopal Aggrawal again emceed the show this year and Dr. Nik Nikam, a prominent cardiologist in the community, produced the short video that portrayed the highlights from last year's show. Verma spoke after the 20-minute intermission to show his appreciation for the support of the major sponsors whom he named, and personally went off stage to give a bouquet to Dr. Virendra Mathur. Verma also read the proclamations of support and appreciation sent in by Gov. Rick Perry, Senator John Cronyn and Congressman Pete Olson. Spriya Agarwal read the synopsis of the events that would unfold in the second half of the play.

Most of the major characters were played by the same actors as in last year's production – Kusum Sharma played Sita, her husband Vipin played Ram and Arun Manikantan once again played a strong and arrogant Ravana. The main Hanuman was played this year by an athletic Kalpesh Patel, befitting of the strong character but lacking of the playfulness (which was also a central element of Hanuman's personality) of last year's actor. The entire cast played their roles well, after three months of constant and strenuous rehearsals, and it's a pity that the show only has a one-night performance for such a stunning visual production.

During the intermission, snacks from Sankalp were available outside the auditorium, as well as balloon figures for the young and the young at heart. At the end of the play, those who wished to grace a visit with the main characters on stage did so, and the entire audience was offered prasad, along with a Hanuman Chalisa CD and agrabattis, in a gift bag as they left the auditorium plaza.



From left: Dr. Arun Verma with wife, Dr. Nik Nikam and Dr. Virendra Mathur Photo: Jawahar Malhotra