

## DANCING STORYTELLERS—Indian Mythology and Me

**ART FORM:** Dance and Storytelling/Theater

**STYLE:** Contemporary

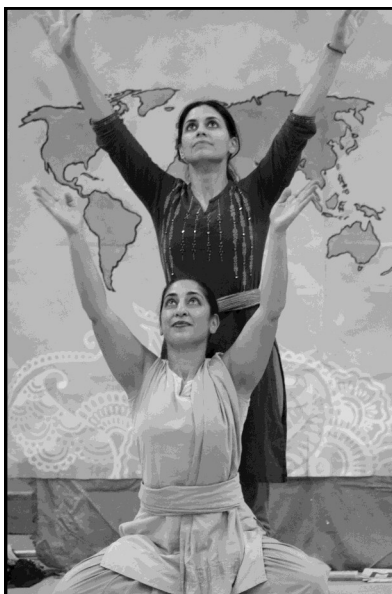
**CULTURE:** Indian

### MEET THE ARTIST:

Dancing Storytellers performances offer contemporary interpretations of South Asian stories, dance and music. The collective includes Sheetal Gandhi, Shyamala Moorthy and Ulka Simone Mohanty—artists that inspire youth through artistic innovation, personal transformation and social change. Sheetal Gandhi is a multi-talented artist: choreographer, singer, dancer, actor, and percussionist, formerly with Cirque du Soleil. Her solo and group choreography has toured to over 16 countries. Shyamala Moorthy has toured her dance and theater work internationally with TeAda Productions and the Post Natyam Collective. She also teaches yoga and dance and is a dance education curriculum writer and consultant. Ulka Simone Mohanty is an actor, dancer and choreographer who has performed internationally and has choreographed multiple shows for Disney's Animal Kingdom. She also voices the role of Dr. Kapur on the NBC Universal's kids' animation show Nina's World.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Indian Mythology and Me offers innovative and contemporary interpretations of traditional texts that reinforce human compassion and celebrate our differences. The collective performs as a dynamic duet, artfully weaving foot rhythms, hand gestures and facial expressions into an interactive exploration of Indian mythology and its connections to our world today. Audience members are playfully integrated into the performance as each story emphasizes empathy and the power of expression in Indian dance forms. The stories include "Bheema Meets Hanuman" from the epic Mahabharata in which Hanuman teaches Bheema the folly of judging an individual based on their appearance; "The Mice That Set Elephants Free" from the Panchatantra Folktales tells the story of a small mouse who proves his worth to a doubting elephant; and "Durga and Mahishasura," a mythological story connected to the festival of Navaratri, in which the equality of genders is celebrated. These stories are expressed through theater and contemporary Indian dance movement based on the North and South Indian classical dances, Kathak and Bharatanatyam, as well as the Gujarati folk dance Garba Raas.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

There are several forms of Indian Classical Dance and two of these forms are highlighted in this production: Bharata Natyam and Kathak. Both dance styles were traditionally solo dance forms performed by women, either within the temple precincts as a part of the daily ritual or in courts as entertainment for kings and courtiers.

The roots of the word Bharata in "Bharata Natyam" are bhavam, which means expression and ragam, meaning music, Thalam means rhythm and natyam means dance. The name "Kathak" is derived from the Sanskrit word katha meaning story, and kattrhaka in Sanskrit means "he who tells a story," or "to do with stories." Both dance forms have two main components: Nritya, or "pure dance" and Nritya, or "expressive dance." The coming together of both the technical aspects of dancing (nritya) and the expressive aspects of dancing (nritya) create Natya which is the full performance of dance, theater and music.

In most solo performances, "Bharata Natyam" and "Kathak" involve many split characters that are depicted by the dancer. The dancer will take on numerous characters by switching roles, creating a story-line that can be easily followed by the skill of one individual performer.

"Navratri" means nine nights, and is a festival that celebrates the Goddess Durga. It is associated with one of the stories that tell of Durga's victory after battling the evil demon king Mahishasura for nine days and nine nights. The festival is celebrated in India from late September through early October. Many Indian communities around the world, including Southern California, also celebrate it.

In the Indian state of Gujarat, the festival activities feature two folk dances, "Garba" and "Raas." The dance "Raas" (also called "Dandiya-Raas") imitates the fight between the goddess Durga and the demon Mahishasura, and uses dandiya sticks to represent the sword of Durga. "Garba Raas" is also performed at harvest celebrations, weddings, and dance competitions. Watch for the moment when the dancers in the show use the dandiya sticks in the battle.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- If you could meet one of the characters from one of the three the stories, which character would you choose? Why? If you could ask them anything, what would it be? What do you think their answer might be?
- What were the external obstacles that the Mouse King was facing? What were the internal obstacles that the Mouse King was facing? Did he overcome those obstacles? How?
- The ability and power of the mouse king was underestimated by the elephant queen because of his small size, and Durga was underestimated by Mahishasura because she was a woman. Bheema thought the old monkey wasn't strong because he was old, the elephant queen thought the mouse king wasn't useful because he was small. Have you ever had to prove your worth despite what other people thought? Have you ever assumed something about someone only to discover that you were mistaken?
- How do you use gestures to communicate in your everyday life? Show examples like waving hello, pointing, etc.
- How many different emotions can you portray just in your face?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS—LANGUAGE ARTS:

Have students select a poem they know (or write their own) that has words and images and can be expressed through hand gestures. Then, have them create their own hand-gesture vocabulary to go with the poem. Each student will practice his/her dancing story and perform it for the class.

### California Arts Standards: Artistic Processes

- Cr** Creating  
**Pr** Performing/Producing/Presenting  
**Re** Responding  
**Cn** Connecting

Learn more at:

<https://tinyurl.com/ArtsStandardsCA>

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

**Cn** Define "gesture" and then explore everyday hand gestures. Collect these gestures (such as the sign for "okay," or "thumbs up," or "stop," "come here," or "I don't know"). Compare these to the gestures you learned in the show. Discuss how the Indian dance mudras (gestures) could also have been created out of everyday gestures and then stylized for performance.

**Pr** Explore facial expressions. Put students in teams, and play a game like charades or Pictionary, but using only facial expressions. The class should make a list of all the emotions that they can convey through their face. Each emotion can be written on a different sheet of paper and all put in a box or bowl so students can draw one to show.

**Re** Most cultural stories were originally passed on through oral tradition. As they were told over and over, they were often changed and embellished. Although many of these stories are now written down, many variations still exist. Divide students into storytelling teams. Using books or the internet, have students research stories and then select one to learn and tell. There are many more animal stories like *The Mice That Set Elephants Free* in the Panchatantra, a collection of folktales from India, or students can research myths and legends from other cultures. Encourage students to think of the beginning, middle and end, as well as the key characters, main problem, resolution and sequence. They can use the "Four W's (When? Where? Who? Why?)."

**Pr** When you pair gesture to language, the memorization (of a poem, text or list) comes more easily. How can gesture be used as a tool to aid in the memorization of other subjects, such as history? Teachers can pick the subject of their choosing, and pull the most pertinent information that they want students to learn and remember. Then, as a class, create and decide upon a gestural language that "narrates" the event, problem, list or fact.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Jagadiswarananda, Swami *Devi Mahatmyam, 700 Mantras on Sri Durga*. Sri Ramakristina Math, Mylapore, 1953.

Pai, Anant. *Tales of Durga*. Katha Amar Chitra, Bombay, 2008.

Chandrakant, Kamala. *Bheema and Hanuman*. Amar Chitra Katha, Bombay, 1980.

"The Little Mice and the Big Elephants Story." *Agra India – History, Architecture, Facts, Myths, Visit Timing & Entry Fee*, Cultural India, [www.culturalindia.net/indian-folktales/panchatantra-tales/little-mice-big-elephants.html](http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-folktales/panchatantra-tales/little-mice-big-elephants.html).

"Durga and Mahishasura." *The Birth of Garuda - Indian Mythology*, Apam Napat, [www.apamnapat.com/articles/Devibhagavata030.html](http://www.apamnapat.com/articles/Devibhagavata030.html).