

## Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata: Storytelling Using Dance as a Prominent Motif

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Initially planned to be released in August 2020 at the Shaw Festival, the Why Not Theatre's mega production Mahabharata was almost ready to be launched, when Covid hit in March 2020 closing every rehearsal space and theatre venue in Canada for quite a long period. The play was finally premiered at the Shaw festival Theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, on March 9th 2023. Later that year, it was presented at the Barbican Theatre in London, England, in October. In 2025, after a stretch of rehearsals in January, the team presented an open rehearsal at the Banff Center for Arts and creativity in Alberta before flying to Australia. The play was presented in February at Perth Festival in Australia, in April in Toronto, in May in Ottawa and at the end of June in New York. The team is Directed by Ravi Jain with Associate Director Miriam Fernandes. Set design of the play are by Lorenzo Savoini, costumes by Gillian Gallow, lighting by Kevin Lamotte, projections by Hana S. Kim, with associate projections designer Ann Slote. The original music and sound are created by John Gzowski and Suba Sankaran, traditional music consultant Hasheel Lodhia. The dances are choreographed by Brandy Leary. Mahabharata Production Manager is Crystal Lee and Mahabharata Lead Producer is Kevin Matthew Wong.

Mahabharata has been familiar to me as I discovered the epic as a kathakali student in Kerala in the early 1980s. I have seen different scenes performed in the dance theatre form of Kerala from the disrobing of Draupadi to the fury of Raudra Bhima killing Dushasana and washing Draupadi's hair in blood, as promised earlier. I read and listen to different adaptations of the epic. I had seen Peter Brook's film and also his play Battlefield in Montreal in 2017.

Well known French director Ariane Mnouchkine in her play *Une chambre en Inde* created in 2016 integrated two scenes of Mahabharata performed by a Terukkuttu group: the disrobing of Draupadi with the divine intervention of Krishna and the death of Karna. Terukkuttu is a traditional folk dance and song theatre from Tamil Nadu.

In 2019, from the moment I heard about this ambitious Mahabharata project around the celebrated Indian epic, I was looking forward to seeing the production. In 2023, I was unable to assist in the March presentation. In October, as I was traveling to Europe, I had the chance to see the two performances and to participate in the community meal, at the Barbican Theatre in London, England. I was enthused by the production then and the way the team blended dance, acting and multimedia to make the ancient epic of actuality. I was looking forward to seeing it again in Toronto in April 2025. And I was not disappointed! The team had gained in fluidity and precision and it was flawless. Once again, I was mesmerized by the smooth integration of Indian dance movements to the theatricality of the performance and by the beauty of the Sanskrit opera. The visual set up was rich and elaborate use of multimedia made the whole performance quite interesting.

The co-writers and co-directors Ravi Jain and Miriam Fernandes offer their adaptation of the epic tale in three parts: *Karna, the life we inherit, Khana and Kahani*, a community meal and storytelling session, and *Dharma, the life we choose*. The authors drew inspiration for their adaptation of the epic from *Mahabharata, a modern retelling* by English poet Carole Satyamurti. Divided in three parts, the whole play lasts around 6 hours. With 18 actors on stage, 6 musicians and an impressive



**Figure 1** - The cast of Mahabharata (Shaw Festival, 2023). Photo by David Cooper.

technical support for video and projection, the production is a vibrant piece of hybridity, from the stage production to the artistic team.

With the multiplication of migratory routes, the mobility of artists, curiosity and openness to other cultures or to one's own roots, a new generation of hybrid artists is emerging. The artists of Why Not Theatre, many of whom come from the Indian diaspora, belong to a new generation of artists who are questioning their family heritage while seeking to create a theater to their own image, rooted both in modernity and in the traditions linked to their origins. The actual performing team is composed of artists who've grown up in India, Canada, the UK, Malaysia, Australia, and more.

The diversity of training of the artists is a rich aspect of this production. Coming from different artistic backgrounds, some actors have trained in Western acting schools and at the Paris based physical theatre school Jacques Lecoq, while some others have received traditional dance training in Odissi, Kathakali or Kalaripayattu, or both. Another interesting aspect of the play is the distribution of the roles. The theatricality allows a non-realistic approach to the distribution of roles. An actor can personify a diversity of characters regardless of his age and sex. The plurality of postures goes above the traditional genders. In this Mahabharata, some male characters are played by women, and vice versa. For example, Arjuna is interpreted by Anaka Maharaj-Sandhu, Karna by Navtej Sandhu, Bhishma by Sukania Venugopal when the character of Amba is performed by Emmanuel Jay.

In the first part, *Karna, the life we inherit*, the story starts around a circle of red dirt on the ground recalling the first ways humans shared stories around the fire. The storyteller, performed by Miriam Fernandes, brings the

audience to a key moment that triggers the whole way the epic is retold. As the story develops, traditional ways of storytelling merge with classical dance forms from India, as well as street theater, contemporary technique and cinematic images. The storyteller evolves from a narrative storytelling to embodying certain characters during the different scenes back to the narrator. She guides the audience through the complex timeline of the story. The epic is told in a variety of manners, from the telling around a circle in the night to the intimate acting demanded by the camera around the table, evolving through song, rhythms, dance, opera, martial arts and multimedia. The first part begins with the encounter of Arjuna and Agni, the fire god, and the destruction of the Khandava forest and the curse of the last snake. It then goes back in time with the origin of the Pandavas and the Kaurava. It ends with the game of dice between Duryodhana and Yudhisthira.

In the interview *Reimagining 'Mahabharata'*: Fernandes explains:

"We weave various storytelling forms, from ancient traditions of gathering around a fire to share tales, to contemporary methods. Four thousand years ago, our ancestors passed down stories around a fire, a practice we celebrate today. Our Mahabharata begins with a storyteller and an audience, where actors create a circle, and I transform into the king with a stool and the queen with a scarf. These street-style techniques are still seen in India, where a simple circle in the sand can become a powerful narrative" (Kapoor).

The first part is followed by *Khana and Kahana*, *Khana* meaning food, and *Kahani*, storytelling. The community meal presents another aspect of the storytelling. It evokes the way in which Jain and many other members of the cast first started to know about the epic with an elder talking through one of the stories over a meal.



The community meal tries to recreate this other way of telling stories around the table with the audience. In the middle of the tables where guests are eating, Miriam and Sharada discuss storytelling and eventually Sharada retells one of the numerous stories of Mahabharata which is not included in the play. In the Yaksha story, the thirsty Pandavas encounter a strange lord of the lake that questions them. In their hurry to drink, they don't answer his question and die. Only Yudhishtira resisted his thirst and answered the Yaksha lord successfully. Yama, the death god in disguise, reveals his true identity to him. The story stirs up a whole discussion around *Dharma*, that provides a segue into introducing the second part of the production.

*Dharma*, the life we choose, plunges the audience in a totally different experience. It begins with a modified set. A table is set on the left side of the stage with cameras that enable us to follow the action with cinematic close up broadcasted on a wall of 24 television screens. With the support of splitters and computers, manipulated by the character of Sanjaya, the images of the actors are redistributed in various manners, reproducing the images in numerous ways. The discussion between Krishna and the Kauravas is presented almost like a reality show. The way images are manipulated recalls propaganda mediatic strategies. The acting is realistic. The use of both black and white and color add to the manipulation of the images. The naturalistic interpretation style goes along with the situation: a discussion around the table. The realistic acting, technological effects, cinematography approach, contemporary set up contrast with the storyteller approach and the more evocative acting of the scenes around the fire. Soon after, on the battlefield, Arjuna refuses to fight his masters and cousins in the opposite clan and thereby starts a philosophical discussion between him and Krishna, his charioteer. This conversation

between a human and a god results in the Bhagavad Gita, the song of God, a sacred book of Hinduism, one chapter of Mahabharata. The voice of Krishna is sung beautifully by opera singer Meher Parvi.

In the video *Bhagavad Gita Opera* Jain explains that he questioned himself on how to present such a conversation theatrically and select "the most epic form of storytelling that we have" which is for him opera. The selected verses of the Sanskrit text have been adapted to music by John Gzowski and Subha Sankaran who blend beautifully western classical colors with Indian classical music. When the war explodes, Sanjaya describes to blind Dhritarashtra the battlefield where destruction is happening. As in the first part, Jay Emmanuel's dance expresses fight and destruction using the gestural language and steps of Kathakali and Kalaripayattu, this time through the character of Śiva. Śiva, becomes the fury of the battle, describing with *mudras* the clashing of the armies, the arrows flying and the Earth covered with blood.

### **The role of dance**

In the short video *Movement*, Jain explains that because the production explores the evolution of storytelling. He absolutely needed to go back to the original way stories were told through dance in the temples of India. For him dance expresses how humans do astonishing things and become like gods. In an interview with Devdutt Pattanaik on JLF Toronto 2020, Jain explains that one of performers, the actor and dancer Jay Emmanuel, who initially trained in Kathakali and Kalaripayattu, has also studied theater in Australia and then theater of the body in Paris. Assisted by Kathakali artist Kalamandalam Thulasi Kumar, Jay choreographed several elements of the show and introduced his acting partners to certain gestural elements of Kathakali. In *Karma*, he



**Figure 2** - Krishna, by Neil D'Souza, and Arjuna, Anaka Maharaj-Sandhu, with the opera singer Meher Pavri, embodying the voice of Krishna. Photo by David Cooper.



**Figure 3** - The training of the Pandava and the Kaurava. The cast of Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata (Shaw Festival, 2023). Photo by Michael Cooper.

plays several characters, including Drupada, for whom he uses Kathakali gestures. In *Dharma*, he plays Śiva, the god of dance, who describes the fury of combats on the battlefield in a choreography rooted in the fundamentals of Kathakali and enriched with choreographic elements inspired by the tricks and jumps of Kalaripayattu.

“In this show, we are using Kathakali language, but also combining it with Kalari, which is a martial arts affiliate, and using both to create a new language for this show” explains Emmanuel in a short interview posted on the Instagram account of the company. “How we tell this story most efficiently has been the major driver for what movement we choose. And in the process, we’ve tried to use gestures and emotion that people can come into. When you perform such a form outside of India, I felt that we needed to find a way to let our audiences in from around the world.”

Major dance elements are found in both parts of the production. Dance movements enable the team to perform poetically non-realistic scenes and to give life to mythological figures. Here are the most explicit moments of dance use in the show.

King Pandu loved hunting. As he walks in the forest, he sees two deer making love. The actors enact the deer by using *mudras*. When the arrows of Pandu hit them, they curse him that the moment the king will take his wife in his arms, he will die immediately. Unable to father children to his wives, he abandons the throne to his blind brother and goes into the forest.

Kunti, performed by Ellora Patnaik, reveals to Pandu that as a young woman she received a mantra from the gods which can be used to have children. Through Odissi dance movements, Patnaik expresses the way Kunti invokes the gods Dharma, Vayu, Indra to give

birth to Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna. She shares the mantra with Madri who calls the Ashwini twins and becomes the mother of twin brothers. The princes Yudhishtira, Bhima and Arjuna become young men and train with their cousin Duryodhana under the supervision of their masters Drona and Bhishma, Kalaripayattu movements are used to perform battle movements, fights and the use of armaments.

Emmanuel interprets two choreographies combining Kathakali and Kalaripayattu movements. As Drupada, at the end of the first half of *Karma*, he moves around the red circle destroying the perimeter and scattering the red dirt in all directions. His three children rise through the dance. As the circle is getting erased, he invokes Siva.

In *Dharma*, after the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna portrayed through Opera, Krishna gives universal sight to Sanjaya to enable him to describe the battlefield to the blind king Dhitharashtra. As he describes the battle, Siva, embodied by Emmanuel, appears on stage. With the support of Kathakali *mudras*, he gives another dimension to the text.

One of the great qualities of this production is how the team blends harmoniously the different styles of dance and brings together techniques of acting. In addition to the vision and hard work of Jain and Fernandes, such a consummate performance is only possible with the team’s dedication and the high quality of the actors’ training. To achieve such a production that awes everyone, it is important to understand the quality and the diversity of the training of the interpreters of the story. Each artist makes good use of their talents and is presented with his full capacities. The dance aspect is supported by three artists who hold a dual training both in Indian classical dance and western acting or contemporary dance.





**Figure 4** - Ellora Patnaik as Kunti with Jay Emmanuel as Pandu. Photo by David Cooper.



**Figure 5** - Emmanuel Jay as Shiva. Photo by David Cooper.



Led by Brandy Leary, the choreography team was composed by her, both Jay Emmanuel and Ellora Patnaik who largely contributed to the research and the creative process.

Jay Emmanuel has trained in kathakali at Kerala Kalamandalam, the prestigious art academy of Kerala, in south India. He also trained in Kalaripayattu the ancient martial art of Kerala. He has also studied theater at Edith Cowan University (2010-2012) in Australia and then theater of the body at Lecoq (2013-2015) in Paris. He performs Amba, Drupada, Pandu and Siva.

Canadian born actress and dancer, Ellora Patnaik started Odissi dance in the early seventies. She received teaching from her mother who was her first dance guru. She has taught Odissi dance since the mid-1980s. In 1986, she was selected to study at the Odissi Research Centre in Orissa, India. In the early 1990s, she took over as the executive director of the Chitrlekha Dance Academy in Toronto. She attended the American Academy of Dramatic Art (1992-1994) in New York. In Mahabharata, she performs Kunti and Drona.

Brandy Leary is a contemporary dance choreographer from Toronto. Her artistic journey includes two decades of practice of Kalaripayattu, the south Indian martial art, and Chhau, a dance theatre of from East India.

With the 2025 production, the play has reached full maturity as evidenced by the awards and nominations received this spring. In May, the 12th edition of Toronto Theatre Critics proposed 17 categories for which there were 22 winners. Mahabharata received 3 awards: Best New Canadian work, shared with another production, Best production of the play, and Best sound design and music.

Toronto Alliance for Performing arts (TAPA) presents every year the Dora Mavor Moore Awards which celebrates excellence on the Toronto stage. It is the oldest and largest professional theatre, dance and opera awards program in Canada. For 2025, there are 225 nominees for 43 categories. Mahabharata has received 15 nominations in 9 different categories. On June 30th 2025, the Dora recipients were announced. Mahabharata: Karma (Part 1) won five awards in the General Theatre Division: Outstanding Production; Outstanding New Play by Miriam Fernandes and Ravi Jain; Outstanding Direction by Ravi Jain; Outstanding Performance by an Individual for Miriam Fernandes and Outstanding Sound Design / Composition by John Gzowski and Suba Sankaran.

Hopefully, these awards and nominations from the Canadian performing arts critics will encourage the producers of the world to present Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata again and again and to give it a long life. With the rich vision of this new generation of artists, we can hope for other very interesting productions where East meets West. A third path of creation emerges in the respect of the traditional art forms and the creativity of contemporary media.

## | WORKS CITED

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