

British Theatre Guide

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Mahabharata

Stephen Clark, music by Nitin Sawhney
Edinburgh Festival Theatre and touring
(2007)

After hearing the urban legend of Peter Brook's nine-hour long *Mahabharata* being bandied about like some fat theatrical threat, I'm a bit apprehensive about seeing this show, especially given the rapturous press reception the production has seen in London. It seems that not enjoying a 100,000 verse piece of epic religious poetry after a 12-hour day at work is not an option, and artistic endurance is somehow a measure of one's inner passion.

I needn't have worried, because Stuart Wood's pared down version barely scrapes three hours (not that I'm counting by the time the dancing has begun), and the 21-strong cast encompasses a range of talents to bring the story to life.

Famed for being one of the world's longest poems, the Hindu text claims to depict almost everything present in the world. Writer Stephen Clark however, has chosen just one of the many threads to form the basis of his narrative; the story of Princess Draupadi, played with grace by Natasha Jayetileke. Won by Arjuna in a game of archery, Draupadi is forced by her mother-in-law to be shared between him and his four brothers, one of whom happens to have a penchant for gambling, and loses everything (including the Princess) in a game of dice with his enemy, Duryodhana. Shamed by her husbands and narrowly saved from Duryodhana's attempted rape by Lord Krishna, she implores the brothers to start a brutal war. Twists, turns and morals take the plot from a love story to allegory and battle epic, and given the Bible's track record of female representation, it's inspiring to see a religious story with a compassionate warrior woman at its heart.

In one sense Mahabharata is a totally successful piece of total theatre, using every medium available to enhance the storytelling: make-up, puppetry, lighting, gorgeous set and costumes, music, dance, song, text, movement. Gary Pillai is spectacular as the omnipresent Lord Krishna, painted from head to toe in a rich powdery blue, with a constant air of spiritual command. Angela Davies's simple beaten metal set picks up the vivid auras of lighting beautifully, and the limitless swathes of coloured fabric douse the stage with colour and texture, giving rise to innovative effects such as Draupadi's never-ending white Sari.

Traditional Kathak choreography by Gauri Sharma Tripathi roots the play in its Indian origins, and some Hindi passages, especially in Medha Divekar's final song give a sense of the beauty of the original poetry. However the blend between Indian and English disciplines was sometimes stacked a little too heavily on the English side, and although this made the storyline easy to follow, with Clark's elegant verse translation, the score could have done without its warbling showbiz numbers. It's also shame that the musicians and singers were banished to the pit as being able to see their rapport with the dancers might have added to the spirit of the production.

In this sense the whole play was a bit of a tease, and I was left wanting to see more than the few flashes of ensemble dancing, hear more Indian music, and know more about the various branches of the story. The old adage of leave them wanting more didn't really work here, and by the end I was yearning for something more traditional and more ambitious. Maybe I'd be ready to tackle Brook's one after all.

Andrew Edwards [reviewed](#) this production in Manchester

Reviewer: [Lucy Ribchester](#)