

ANITA RATNAM IN

*A Million
Sitas*



the idea

The Ramayana is echoed through the DNA of India and South East Asia, as an epic, a text, a sacred book, a bedtime story, an opera -- interpreted through painting, dance, theatre, song, animation, television and film. This Adi Kavya (eternal story) has seen more debate, discussion and discourse than any other writing in Indian society.

In A MILLION SITAS, the heroine of this time-honoured tale stands at the centre of a power tussle as two men battle with their egos and divergent ideas of duty and honour. It is SITA and the women in this re-telling who emerge from the shadows and pages of history to braid the multiple narratives of this riveting story.

the expression

Anita Ratnam uses every weapon in her creative arsenal. Voice, movement, song, dance, theatrical improvisations and storytelling to illuminate the character of SITA. Daughter of Janaka or Ravana? Princess of Mithila or Lanka? As bride of Rama, Queen of Ayodhya, mother of Lava and Kusa she reveals her many avatars and the numerous barriers she has to cross to finally become every woman and yet remain her true self. Admired, adored, pitied, invoked, worshipped, SITA is the four-letter word that shadows every Indian woman until today. A MILLION SITAS puts her in the front and at the centre of the ongoing debate for the recovery of a woman's voice in society.





the experience

Duration: 75 minutes (no intermission)

the team

Concept and Performance: Anita R Ratnam

Choreography: Hari Krishnan
in collaboration with Anita Ratnam

Research and Text: Rex and Anita Ratnam

Costumes: Sandhya Raman

Music & Sound Design: Vedanth Bharadwaj &
Bindhu Malini

Recorded music featuring:

NK Kesavan, Bindhu Malini, L Subhasri
Subhiksha Rangarajan and Viji Krishnan

DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA

Singer/Actor: Sharanya Krishnan

Drummers: Revash Dookhi (tabla) &
Mandla Matsha (djembe)

Stage Design: Reshma Chibba

Stage Manager: L Subhasri

DENVER AND NEW JERSEY, USA

Singer/Actor: Taniya Panda

CHICAGO AND TAMPA, USA

Singer/Actor: Snigdha Venkatramani

A Million Sitas

INTERVIEW WITH ANITA RATNAM



Could you tell us about the genesis of A MILLION SITAS?

How is it that four alphabets – SITA - contain so much history, myth, legend, story, power, vulnerability and an eternal fascination? When we say SITA, for anybody who is particularly Indian and perhaps even South-East Asian, the name, the word, automatically suggests a story, that we say, is a story for the ages.

Over the years, SITA's own character and personality have changed with each re-telling. The celebrated poet and translator, A K Ramanujan, has said that there are more than three thousand Ramayanas!

My SITA goes beyond the familiar versions of Valmiki, Kambar, Tulsi or the songs of Bhadrachala Ramdas and Annamacharya. As a woman and a performer, the question that arises for me is - how does this eternal story that needs the female characters to move the narrative, fail to recognise these pivotal people. Why do the women in the Ramayana remain mere voiceless silhouettes?

That has been my ongoing quest with A MILLION SITAS...

What has inspired the title of the production?

This story exists in so many avatars and across cultures. That idea inspired the title. In the current atmosphere, women are raising their voices across the globe. In today's milieu of the #metoo, #timesup, #walkforlife movements, the time is right to re-tell SITA's story, and place her front and centre as the absolute heroine of this epic. A MILLION SITAS speaks not

just for one remarkable woman but for all women and daughters, everywhere.

Why does SITA, as a character, continue to be relevant to the times we live in?

There are two moments in the Ramayana that are used in popular discourse and debate even today. They are the Lakshman Rekha (the line drawn by Rama's brother, Lakshman) and Agni Pareeksha (the test of fire). Both these moments belong to SITA. Even today, women are constantly being challenged and tested with lines of control drawn around them, constantly.

In today's world, women are tired of playing the victim. The female characters I explore in the production are Ahalya (the politics of desire), the hunchback Manthara (the politics of difference), the bold Surpanakha (the politics of feminism) and beautiful queen Mandodari (the politics of compromise).

I want to reclaim them from that victimhood. I want them each to have an identity of their own.

In my re-telling, I have drawn from folk and lesser-known narratives from Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Jain folktales, Thai, Cambodian and Indonesian versions of the Ramayana.

From a production point of view, how has the work evolved over the years?

Essentially, my SITA is a search, a quest and an investigation as to who the woman is. And in every performance, I'm still asking the question because my performance is changing, adapting and morphing. A MILLION SITAS first premiered in 2010, almost eight years ago, in a Chennai sabha, in the December season of music and dance. So its very first avatar was very much conformed to the conventional sabha framework. It had a live orchestra seated on the stage, with spoken word in between the dance sections.

From that, it has evolved to its current version as a storytelling, theatrical, one-woman show version with a dance, physical theatre and improvised movement. We've maintained the title and morphed the inside — re-working, disassembling, and re-assembling. Over the past five years, this work has been performed in theatre and literature festivals, universities and storytelling events to varied audiences. I'm aware of the changing dynamics of politics wherever I go, be it the United States, India or South Africa and incorporate local events and newspaper headlines into the narrative to keep the work both relevant and fresh.

You are gearing up for a tour of A MILLION SITAS in the United States. Are you excited about it?

I'm really excited about my US tour. I lived in the United States and worked as a television professional between 1975 and 1990; my children were born there... I feel so at home in the US.

I would like my A MILLION SITAS to get people, especially women and young girls, to start thinking again. I want them to be moved, weep, rejoice, laugh, applaud, and finally, have an experience that is timeless...



about Dr. Anita Ratnam

Dr Anita R Ratnam, based in Chennai (Madras), India, is highly respected as a performer, writer, speaker and arts entrepreneur and culture mentor. She has been described as an "intersectionist", whose work weaves the many disciplines of dance, theatre, spoken word, ritual, archaeology, dramaturgy and women's issues. For over 40 years now, her distinguished career has witnessed over 1000 performances in 27 countries. Her formal training in Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam and Kathakali has given Dr Ratnam a distinctive movement vocabulary that she has named NEO BHARATAM – a contemporary Indian kinetic situated on a mature body. Using voice, singing, Vedic hymns, drumming, contemporary mythology and devised movements, her acclaimed choreographies include SEVEN GRACES, MA3KA, A MILLION SITAS and NEELAM.

Dr Ratnam, recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Contemporary Dance in 2017, served as a member of the Executive Board of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's largest apex body for the performing arts, and the ICCR, India's Government panel to select performers for international tours, a fellow of the World Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a voting member of the Dance Critics Association, USA.

She has a PhD in Women's Studies from Mother Teresa University, and studied Dance History at Kalakshetra. She has been a visiting professor and artiste at Wesleyan University, University of California Irvine, Barnard College, Fordham University in the USA and Hope Liverpool University in the UK.

As a cultural entrepreneur, Ratnam has founded Narthaki.com, the largest portal on Indian dance on the world wide web. For her sterling contribution towards NARTHAKI.COM, a 18-year-old dance portal that has been chronicling, commenting and critiquing the many worlds of Indian dance practice, performance and presentation across the world, Dr Ratnam also received the first International Arts Award – Vishwa Kala Ratna – by UK-based Indian Arts Development Tryst, MilapFest.

Dr Ratnam restored the 15th century theatre ritual performance of KAISIKA NATAKAM in her ancestral village temple of Tirukurungudi in Tamilnadu. She has also conceived, produced and curated numerous conferences and dance festivals for 25 years; the most notable are THE OTHER FESTIVAL, India's first annual contemporary dance festival, and international dance and theatre seminars MAD AND DIVINE (2011), EPIC WOMEN (2012) AND PURUSH (2013).

Reviews & Responses



"It is a huge challenge for art to successfully mesh quality aesthetics and a compelling social or political message....it was such a joy to see this rare feat pulled off brilliantly..."

- The Asian Age

"... a radically alternate view of events, far removed from the master narrative of the Ramayana"

-The Statesman

"A Million Sitas epitomizes the continuous, exploratory and evolving civilization that is India. And through the prism of Indian art, Indian feminism comes of age..."

- Deccan Chronicle

"Ratnam's characterisation was excellent, delivery strong and her perfect execution with stunning visual sequences was an unforgettable aesthetic experience.."

-The Hindu

"Ratnam's stellar performance was not only for a sophisticated few who may have grasped the tensions, intrigues and subtleties of the epic tale of the Ramayana, but for young Southern African student audiences who were as riveted as I was by Ratnam's powerful execution and journey in contemporary dance..."

- Dr Gerard M Samuel, Chair of Confluences 9

Senior Lecturer, School of Dance, University of Cape Town

"As the story unfolded, the audience was awestruck by the visual character of the ambivalence between dramaturgy and theatre. Kalari, Kathakali, Qi Jong, yoga, meditation, including movements in silence, and Tai Chi all went into the choreography by Ratnam and Hari Krishnan..."

-The Statesman

"Art they say is a representation of our thoughts, desires the way we have experienced the world. So the world is an eye opener for us. Very few artists give us such unique experience. One such experience was watching A MILLION SITAS in many ways. All aspects of our classical dance Angika, Aharya, Vaachika and Satvika were beautifully brought out in this intelligently scripted production by Dr Anita Ratnam. With vast experience in varied art forms, travel and studying different countries cultures and traditions, one could see how an artist can intelligently put across a subject which is thought provoking & make us feel proud of our art."

-Praveen Kumar, Dancer/Choreographer

"A MILLION SITAS was a soul-searching moment for me"

- Guru Maya Rao, Natya Institute of Kathak, Bengaluru

"Anita Ratnam's breathtaking rendering of the story of Sita at the Provincetown Playhouse in NYC, brought beauty, humor, and a precise questioning of the role of women in history and myth. The audience, which included community members and NYU students, was swept away into both the ancient story and to this present moment in women's history. We loved it!"

- Regina Ress, Producer, Storytelling at the Provincetown Playhouse

"Ancient India is the origin of Sita's story but her voice echoes through centuries,
across the world. Listen, watch, experience
her extraordinary tale in A MILLION SITAS"
-Anita Ratnam

Travelling to the United States and South Africa
August-September 2018

If you'd like to have a conversation about A MILLION SITAS and support it,
write to us at anitaratnam@yahoo.com or call +91-9841026123

www.anitaratnam.com

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Thank You