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Big Hopes for a Slow Opera:

by Nathan Schneider

Restoring Virtue to Its Feet with the Met's Satyagraha

"No, not satya-graha," whispered one of them, rolling her eyes again. "Satya-agraha!" The handful of adult students from the American Sanskrit Institute in New Jersey were having a visibly great time, even though Philip Glass mispronounced the name of his own opera. They had come from around the Northeast for a weekend of grammar and pilgrimage. Its climax on Monday night was attending the Metropolitan Opera's *Satyagraha*, which recounts Mohandas Gandhi's early years in South Africa.



Photos by Nathan Schneider.

For weeks, the students had been preparing passages from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the ancient Sanskrit text from which the opera draws its libretto. The afternoon before the show, they talked with an Indian swami about satyagraha—literally “truth-force”—Gandhi’s method of nonviolent resistance that depends on a rigorous spirituality of self-surrender. The project was the students’ idea, and they treated their teacher, Vyaas Houston, to the trip as well. They carried with them the sense of being present for something great, hidden among whispers to one another about pronunciation.

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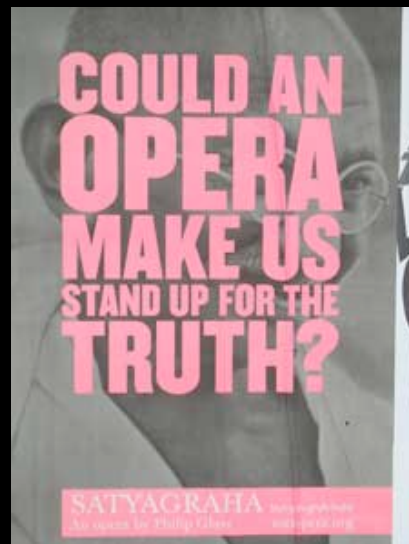


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If you looked at it with a certain kind of eye, for the past month New York was preparing to be transfigured. On the one hand, putting on Glass's *Satyagraha* is yet another step on the Met's bold march into twenty-first century worldliness, joining its ambitious forays into broadcast media and plentiful cheap tickets for hipsters willing to wait in line. On the other, it is a giant leap into the spiritual-but-not-religious groundwater that lies beneath the surface of these secular city streets.

In neon colors, plastered on plywood boards alongside posters for rap albums and the Freelancers' Union, the Met's advertising campaign begged formidable questions: "Could an opera make us stand up for truth?" Or "put virtue back on its feet," or "make us warriors for peace?" It called to mind John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "War is over (if you want it)" billboards, which got passers-by stopping and thinking during the 1969 winter holidays. The Met campaign, bankrolled by elder activist and generic-drug executive Agnes Varis, journeyed far from Lincoln Center, sharing its hopes across the Lower East Side and parts of Brooklyn. It was accompanied by direct marketing to yoga gurus, who joined the press corps at dress rehearsal.

Groups across the city took a crack at the posters' challenge. Coordinating their efforts was the Satya Graha Forum, directed by *Buddhist* magazine editor Helen Tworikov. On April 6, there was a "Be the Change Walk" that ended at Gandhi's statue in Union Square. As the month went on, so did more than a dozen events around the city, each trying to bring the Gandhian legacy to bear on our present moment. The Nation Institute hosted a conversation with civil rights historian Taylor Branch, while Judson Memorial Church in the Village preached debt relief for poor countries.



From a dozen pulpits, phrased as positively as possible, came a common quandary: more than a century after Gandhi's discovery of satyagraha, all the examples of its effectiveness haven't swayed a world that still lives so much by the rule of violence.

The most ambitious of the Forum's program was a Sunday evening at the hallowed cathedral of St. John the Divine, still cut in half by renovations. The Sanskrit students seated themselves in the row directly behind the speakers' podium, only a few feet away.

The event was hosted by the Garrison Institute, a five-year-old center for "contemplation-inspired activism" housed in a former monastery up the Hudson River. After seeing *Satyagraha* on Friday night, a group of spiritual and environmental leaders spent the weekend in retreat at Garrison's monastery, grappling with today's ecological crisis in terms of Gandhian spirituality. Glen Lauder, who came from New Zealand to facilitate the weekend, told me that weaving the opera's libretto into the retreat served as a bulwark against "shallow commitment" while pointing to "the deeper source of truth in human affairs." Its selections from the Gita exemplify how to act. And, added another participant, "the sound is transformative."

Following a haunting Vespers service, the event at the cathedral began half an hour late to a packed audience. The sequence of all-star speakers took their turns giving brief talks, which the stone walls vaulted into commanding echoes. Gandhi's grandson and biographer, Rajmohan Gandhi, called for "satyagraha against ourselves," and a pair of elderly Buddhists from South Asia identified "thinking" as "the root of all evil." Odetta, no less, sang from her wheelchair. John Francis, an environmentalist with a 17-year vow of silence behind him, warned with apocalyptic fervor, "Your moment of obligation is coming!"

Mixed in all of this were two performances with Philip Glass on the piano. There was "Mad Rush," a piece dedicated to the Dalai Lama that was first performed in the same cathedral almost 30 years ago. And later, joined by tenor Tony Boutte, he played the final movement of *Satyagraha*.

Finally that evening's "moment of obligation" came. Like the altar call of an old-fashioned revival, conservationist Peter Forbes took the microphone and began striding around the stage. Little strips of hand-spun white cloth from Gandhi's ashram in India were handed out to the audience. "Hold it in your hand!" encouraged Forbes. "We want to hear your declarations. What calls you?" He asked the audience to spend a few minutes sharing with strangers around them. What will you do? How will you begin to act?

The result was heartfelt, if familiar. Asked to tell the microphone not of themselves but of their neighbors, people spoke of hopes for a website with solutions to global problems, for distributing a sheet of paper listing public resources among the homeless, and for finally ending the city's use of rainforest hardwoods. These little ideas were striking in their concreteness but revealed a paralysis in the rest of the event. Although inspired in its desire to motivate the world politically, ecologically, and spiritually, the event left that desire unsatisfied. It suggested another quandary: If a crisis is really upon us, why is it so difficult for people to act? Why is a cathedral necessary? Or an opera?

According to its (generally favorable) reviews, seeing *Satyagraha* requires preparation. The *New York Times* suggests that it “demands a different sort of attention of audiences,” a state of meditation. The *New York Sun* elaborates: “The listener hopes to surrender to a minimalist score. If he can, he is happy—even ‘blissed out.’ If he cannot, he is miserable and trapped. The musical drug has to take effect. If it does not, woe to the listener.”

Each of the Sanskrit students came to New York having prepared translations of six or seven verses of the *Bhagavad Gita*. On Sunday and Monday afternoons, they spent several hours sharing what they had learned. Between these, the Garrison Institute event, chats with the swami, and an interview with Glass at the Met before the opera on Monday, they had prepared.

Satyagraha recounts Gandhi's own preparation for a life of struggle. It revolves around the moment of his calling, which, according to Glass, begins after being thrown from a train in South Africa, a Rosa Parks-style encounter with the racism of English rule. There is no mention of Gandhi's later campaigns in India or the triumph of independence. Sung entirely in Sanskrit, an ancient language understood by few, the opera claims the moment of calling as removed from ordinary comprehension.

The production, which comes to the Met from London, is a dazzling, slow-motion dance of newsprint and puppetry. Even when the tempo of the music gallops, the performers amble. If *Satyagraha* is about preparing to act, as Gary Lauder said, any action to speak of in the staging happens too slowly to have happened at all.

The sublime final aria, which Glass had performed at the Garrison event, arrived around midnight. With Martin Luther King Jr. preaching to a cloudscape behind him, Gandhi sang the tenor passage ascending from E to E through the key of C. It is a Phrygian scale, which medieval theorists described as “mystic” or “vehement.” There, the libretto speaks of an

apotheosis. In times of crisis, the god Krishna promises, he will return as “a man with men for the protection of good, thrusting the evil back and setting virtue on her seat again.”

Steve Kent, communications liaison for the Garrison Institute, suggests that such a time may be upon us. This year is the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination and the 60th of Gandhi’s. The climate crisis is undeniable. Tibet rises against China while the Dalai Lama preaches nonviolence. For what else could a god’s return be waiting? At St. John, Rajmohan Gandhi predicted of his grandfather’s idea, “The impact in history of satyagraha is still going to be seen in the years to come.”

For now, though, the performances and events are over, the posters are down, and most people are still mispronouncing the opera’s name. Semantically, passing over the long “a” has consequences. “When people say ‘satya-graha,’” explained Jo Brill, one of the Sanskrit students, “they are leaving out the strength of it, the I-am-going-to-make-this-happen.”

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