

WRITER/CO-DIRECTOR'S NOTE

S. SHAKTHIDHARAN

She's sitting on the banks of her river, deep in her valley, in the remote heart of India. She's staring at me. I'm brushing off her soil from my lenses, my tripod, my cables. I've just finished an interview with her. As I head back up the mountain, to where my Australian arts colleagues are waiting, she yells: 'make sure you get our story onto that TV!' It's not a request: it's an order. Her cow bellows his support. 'I'll try, aunty,' I feebly call back down the mountain.

Some twelve years later, I can still feel the force of her words. Partly because of the shame of being a lowly theatre maker, and not a famous TV presenter that can give her story the cultural power (although probably not the nuance) it deserves. But more so, because of the sophistication of her thinking. She has come to learn, in the most brutal way possible, that the fate of her home is intimately tied up with separate events happening elsewhere in her country, and indeed all over the world. She has learnt that she must now understand the power of some new gods, gods that have never entered her valley or felt her river before. But she is not facing this challenge with fear. She and her fellow community members have summoned the strength to face these new gods head on.

What will it take for us city folk to go through the same process? To question our own gods, and be prepared to meet new (or old) ones? We believe we have broken from the shackles of communal life and can be our full individual selves - but has there ever been a time in the history of our earth more culturally homogenous than now? We think we have become more secular, more accepting of multiple faiths - but has there ever been a religion humanity has more quickly and wholly accepted than the religion of progress?

We will soon be forced to grapple with the consequences of our most deeply held faiths - whether we like it or not. It might be in the wake of the next natural disaster, fascist leader or disruptive technology - or in some strange mix of all three. But it will come.

How will we gather the acuity to deal with what's heading towards us? How do we use the coming crises as opportunities for real change? Certainly, we will need to first appreciate how much power we all wield in the modern world, with every decision we make - financial, social, political, cultural. And we will need to seriously consider that maybe we are giving that power to the wrong people. We are putting our faith in the wrong ideas. The wrong systems. The wrong gods.

That woman, in the valley. Her gods and our gods are going to need to talk to each other. They are going to have to work together. It will take an openness on both sides. They are ready.

But are we?

CO-DIRECTOR'S NOTE



HANNAH GOODWIN

When I first read Shakthi's play I thrilled to a tension inside it, between the real-world points of inspiration and the form that the story took. I felt I had just read a new myth.

This new myth is set in an ancient place. In a clearing, alongside a mighty river in the Narmada Valley, India. Some of you might already be connecting the dots on some of the genesis points that I've alluded to. Still in the dark? Don't worry. If the only thing you do after this is go looking for the real stories that may have given birth to what we're doing here in Surry Hills, you will find that the events of this story have and are being replayed in many different cultures and contexts, all over the world. When I became truly cognizant of this, Shakthi's use of the mythic form took on even more meaning.

This is the myth of progress. It is the story of what we put our faith in today, about what we worship without question. It is about how the world is changing and how, sooner or later, we will be forced to change with it.

Over the course of this process, I have had the confronting pleasure of questioning my own faiths - social, political, spiritual, practical... One obvious, demonstrable faith I hold is my belief in the creation of new work. Making new plays is the thing I do in my life that I believe in more than nearly anything else. Since making new mythologies rarely excludes what has come before but almost always includes what has previously been excluded, new work can reflect a kind of progress in and of itself. As the globalised world continues to develop (more and more rapidly, more and more precariously) it is inevitable that many inherited myths lose their meaning. There are times when old myths seem too confined to address, let alone contain, the complexities of our ever-transforming, ever-expanding societies. I believe we are at one of those junctures. I think we have been stuck here for a while, and I believe that it is up to artists to articulate those new myths that can embody our experiences of the world, and provide frameworks for reason, ethics and values. New myths are needed to show us who we are becoming.

At the same time, I can also see that some of the old myths, the old ways, have lost their meaning not because they are wrong but because we are wrong. We are at risk of losing them entirely. So, in this world, perhaps the task of the new is to partner with the old? To forge an unlikely but essential alliance, in the mammoth, audacious hope of saving us all from the brink?

That is the scale of Shakthi's tale. It takes four characters and a situation that spans pre-industrialisation to now in just seven years and two scenes, to understand the globalised modern world in all its complexity. I am grateful to have been a small part of the making of it.

So here it is. A new myth, inspired by truth, that asks -

If we can accept that the world is changing and that we will have to change with it, who will we become?