

ABHIMANYU:**THE CHILD SOLDIER INDIAN EPICS AS CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL METAPHORS****CRAIG JENKINS**

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The death of Abhimanyu is arguably one of the most harrowing losses faced in the entire Mahabharatha epic. Killed in battle at the age of 16, the story is an upsetting and disturbing tale of a bright young life lost at the hands of war. But the figure of Abhimanyu is not only a character held within the mythological tale of the Mahabaratha. If we are to place the story in the world of today, and apply the life of this young warrior to a contemporary landscape, it can also be read as a heart breaking metaphor for the use of children in military combat across the globe.

In October 2011, I had the pleasure and the privilege of being invited to work with a group of young performers at the Kattaikkuttu Gurukulam, Tamil Nadu. I was asked by Dr Hanne.M. De Bruin and Mr P.Rajagopal to lead a creative research and development project, exploring the Abhimanyu story as a means of addressing the controversial issue of child soldiers. The intention of the project was to create a piece of storytelling theatre that would engage young performers (and an audience) in understanding the psychological and emotional trauma of children in war. It would also be used to help raise awareness of the global issue.

The first assignment for the group was to research the facts, figures and stories of children involved in contemporary war and to prepare a 45 minute presentation to share with the rest of their school. The world they discovered through websites such as WarChild, Amnesty International and UNICEF uncovered a terrifying reality in which children as young as seven were fighting in wars against full-grown men.



Craig Jenkins in discussion with the cast of 'Shadows'

In creative classes, the group examined the various sides of Abhimanyu's emotional psyche. They explored his bravery, his loyalty and his trust. They also placed him within the world we had discovered through our online research and reimagined him with contrasting emotions. Abhimanyu was now scared, lost, angry and confused. Abhimanyu was now a child.

The group entered an all-night rehearsal and worked from 10.00pm-6:00am in creating a contemporary response to 'Abhimanyu as a child soldier'. At 6:00am, with the sun beginning to rise and the space transformed, an audience of twenty of their fellow performers entered an 'underground army camp'... and *Shadows* was born...

The outcome was a 90minute tour-de-force of emotion that literally dragged the audience kicking and screaming into the terrifying world of child soldiers. From the moment the

audience arrived they were immediately instructed to line up outside and where then searched and interrogated by two older members of the child military group. From all sides, cast members were thrown into the line-up, where they gripped the arms of audience members and pleaded with eyes full of fear:



'Please don't let me die. Please don't let me die'. Inside the room, doors were locked and windows were blackened. The audience were forced into a tight and cramped space, decorated with broken furniture, guns and bloodied, soiled pieces of material. For the next one and a half hours, the audience watched as the children were beaten, abused and forced to fight and even murder other members of the group. All in the name of 'war'.

P.Moorthy preparing for battle in 'Shadows'

In one particularly harrowing scene one of the child soldiers sits alone, under a soft blue spotlight and prays to God. He questions God about the loss of his young friend on the battlefield, and the millions of children (like Abhimanyu) dying in war:

Dear God, Is my friend happy in his heaven? Why did you let him die like that? He is only a baby. Please look after him for me. If he does anything naughty, please don't hit him, he is only a baby, and at night he misses his mum, so give him a hug and make him feel safe and that somebody loves him.

Dear God, Why do these things happen? Why do children like my friend and Abhimanyu have to die in the war? They haven't done anything wrong. Why do they have to die?

The question and answer session that followed, ignited fiery debates surrounding society's definitions of 'the hero' and what we mean exactly when we use the term soldier. Debate ran on for many hours with heated disagreements and questions being fired like arrows onto the bloodied battlefield of Kurukshetra.



P.Thilagavathi, child soldier, moments before taking her own life in 'Shadows'

They are KNOWN LANDSCAPES....

For me, the Indian epics are the most effective texts in allowing Indian audiences to reflect on

contemporary world issues, because they are known landscapes. The stories of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are familiar narratives that ignite memories of personal and national identity within the majority of Indian audiences. The mere mention of the name, Rama, Sita, Arjuna or Draupadi, immediately conjures an image within the audience, and connects them to the material presented. They are reminded of hearing these stories in their own past, at festivals, at school, at temples, at home, at Grandma's knee.

...Which provoke DEBATE and DISCUSSION...

As the stories are so well known to audiences however, resistance can be faced when listeners comment that their image of the character or the situation presented is not the same as the one they remember.

... 'But Abhimanyu is not like that' ... 'He wasn't scared, he was brave' ... 'You have this wrong' ... 'My Grandmother told me it was like this...'

It is within these conflicts that the debate about contemporary social issues exists. The contrast of opinion forces people to question each other and to engage in discussion about the how and why they think the way they do about the epic character and story. It is through these discussions that one is able to reflect on their own understandings of both the epic stories as well as their own social ideologies in a much wider sense.

... And connect us with the THEN and the NOW...

Narratives of the past are able to tell us about the issues of today, because they connect with our inner-consciousness-that which is timeless. The stories of the Mahabharata (and the Ramayana) resonate within the inherent human emotions and experiences that exist within our everyday lives and within the world around us. They speak of the truth of human life and behaviour, both then (in the past) and now (in the present). It is the essence as to why Indian oral traditions of storytelling are kept alive today