

Behind THE SITAYANA • Get Ready For Sita's Mehndi Party



You're Invited to the Event of the Season!

Mehndi (henna) adorns her hands as the words adorn the script as the audience adorns the theater. The band is playing, the baarat (bridal procession) is dancing, and there are colors everywhere as the festivities commence.

You are invited to the event of the season – the wedding of Sita and Ram! (I'm sure Lady Whistledown would agree.)

With her expressive eyes and mesmerizing movements, Sheetal Gandhi portrays Sita on a journey that starts with marriage and ends with self-discovery. Gandhi transforms from one character to another, a process she was challenged by yet loved due to the mythical scale.



An experienced theater and dance artist, Gandhi said this show especially resonated with her as a way to step into the shoes of a woman who just wants to live but is tied with the chains of expectations.

“We’ve always heard Sita’s journey play out a certain way,” Gandhi said. “We get to hear Sita reflecting on these experiences and what it would have been like for a woman who is also a goddess and just wants to lead a normal life but in no way can. I liked the push and pull between a woman who wants to be everyday, but she has all these expectations around her, from her father and Ram who expects her to be beyond pure.”

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Reimagining Sita's story with her as the main point of view gives voice to the plethora of women's issues layered into the text. For Gandhi, women's issues are particularly important to her, especially as a South Asian who has seen the experiences of women in her family and in "societies where women are expected to adopt certain roles."

"When I was 17, I was very moved by what I realized was an unfair situation for a lot of women," she said. "I was thinking they're just like me. They want the same things. They grew up imagining that they would have a romantic loving husband, that they would be able to work, that they could wear what they want to wear."

Sita goes through a similar journey of heartbreak in more ways than one, betrayed by people, society and hopes. She is continuously tested, just as the cast and creative team of *The Sitayana* were by the pandemic. From rehearsing in their own homes to filming the first day they were in the space, Gandhi said the magic of the theater was down to her to create. With that pressure came questions like "Do I have room for this?" and "Will this work?"

"So much of the process was relying on this spontaneous make or break," Gandhi said. "I had to make quick choices. The first time using the props was the moment we filmed it. Those things give it a very alive feeling like 'I've got this bow, it's heavy, I'm going to put it here, and I hope it doesn't fall!'"

Not to mention that, as a one-woman show, there are five whole acts of lines to memorize! Gandhi said she hoped she was doing justice to the text. In a way, it felt like live theater with the absence of cuts, but it was also like film with positions to hit and camera angles to keep in mind.

“All I had was one time, but I’m proud of it,” she said. “It’s like you climbed to the top of a mountain and are like, ‘That was hard!’”

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Despite all of the challenges, Gandhi said the process and the play were inspiring, and she hopes it can inspire and move those who watch it. Given that it is a new take on an old story, she is curious what people will take away from it. For people who know the story, will it give them a new perspective? For those who are new to the story, what will they take away from it, and what kind of story is it to them?

“The conversation can often be so set in stone when it comes from mythology, that to then peel back a layer, even if just imagined, can be very interesting,” Gandhi said.

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