

# An Interview with Playwright Geetha Reddy about MAHĀBHĀRATA

**Playwrights Foundation: *When did you first encounter the Mahabharata?***

**Geetha Reddy:** I spent every summer growing up in India and lived there for a few years as a child. India back then had almost no Television except in the evening so the only entertainment to be found in the villages was reading. Back then all my relatives had these bound versions of comic books that I would read compulsively. Aside from the endless series from Archie Comics there were these bound comics about Indian myths and history by [Amar Chitra Katha](#). Reading them was my first exposure to canonical Mahābhārata. It wasn't until I was a little older that I realized the stories and arguments I would hear discussed among my family members were also versions of the same legends. Later when I was in my tweens I read a condensed version that had been published. And because of my name I would always try to pick up translations of The Bhagavad Gita (which is the religious text at the heart of Mahābhārata), but it wasn't until I was an adult I could begin to understand it.

**PF: *What was the impetus to write the draft you premiered at Oakland Theatre project?***

**GR:** Michael Moran, director and Artistic Director of Oakland Theatre Project, dreamt up the idea of a one person version of Mahābhārata after teaching a class with J Jha at Oakland School of the Arts. I believe they worked on it for a while and then J asked me to think about writing it. Even though I really didn't want to, I felt a responsibility to consider it because I feel like I uniquely understand how to write for J and if I didn't do it, who would? Then I had one of those lightning bolt ideas that broke the play open for me, so I was like: sigh, now I have to do it.

**PF: *How did J Jha as a performer help shape your wrangling of such a large narrative?***

**GR:** J's perspective as a trans-asylee was central to filtering the epic into the play it is now. J's interest and knowledge about some of the lesser known/told characters and episodes focussed me while deciding what to include and exclude from the massive text. Our mutual interest in unearthing stories of oppressed or forgotten characters was something we bonded over in our workshops. Also we both think a lot about belonging and non-belonging and how it relates to what stories we have permission to tell. Also J is an amazingly facile actor and knowing I could

lean on their inherent fluidity opened up a lot of possibilities for the characters we could include and the complexity of scenes.

**PF: *It's been over three and a half years since the world premiere, what makes you want to revisit this piece now?***

**GR:** People have been telling the Mahābhārata for 2000 years so I just see this play as another iteration of that timeless oral tradition. But looking at the play through the post-pandemic-rising-authoritarianism lens I do find myself thinking more about interconnectedness of individual stories, and of course trying to make sense of the loss of life and dignity. The act of telling the Mahābhārata is supposed to be a clarifying process itself so I anticipate that the workshop will surface something new and interesting about 'why now?'

**PF: *What are the goals of this workshop and what can audiences expect?***

**GR:** My goal is to make it shorter, tighter and more satisfying without losing the wild magic it had in the first production. Artistically the whole team really wants to push the piece and dig into the meatiness of it. We are remounting the production in August 2023 at Zspace and this workshop is about firing the rockets toward that goal.