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COMMUNITY

India Abroad
June 27, 2014

The Mount Madonna School Ramayana continues

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Ramayana is not just an annual graduation event but a tradition that has been going on for generations, said Lara Kilpatrick, director of advancement, Mount Madonna School, Watsonville, California.

For the past 36 years, the 200-odd student cast members from the school travel to the San Francisco Bay Area with their parents and huge sets to host a three-day grand production of the Indian epic. The play is a school yearend staple, and is billed as 'the longest running Western production of the Indian classic epic.'

This year the show was held June 6-8 at the School of Arts and Culture at Mexican Heritage Plaza, San Jose.

Kilpatrick herself played Rama for two years, Mandodari for one year, and Ravana for five years in the 1970s when she was a student at the school. Last year, her daughter played Parvati.

"We definitely live it," Kilpatrick told *India Abroad*. "It's so embedded that when I have nightmares, if I am stressed, even as grown up I see myself running on stage. Now, women do not play the part of Ravana but it's great to have a woman be able to feel that powerful. That first scene, when he comes on the stage with music playing the

Ravana songs, was empowering."

Playing the demon king was her favorite. Pointing to the mask of Ravana, she said, "It was modeled on my face, the 10 heads!"

She added, "We studied a lot the deeper meaning of Ramayana at school. His (*Ravana's*) ego became so high that it led to his death."

She said the children "look forward" to the annual production, and most girls want to play Mandodari or Sita.

The three-hour production of Ramayana is



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Lara Kilpatrick shows off the Ravana mask

based on Shiva narrating the Ramayana's tale to Parvati, interspersed with songs.

"The script has changed a little over the years," Kilpatrick said. "Sita this year had a great voice, and she sung the song *Tears* that was performed years and years ago when I was a child."

Auditions for the production begin in March, and the cast invests time and mental space in becoming the characters they play.

Daniel Clifton, 18, who played Rama this year, told *India Abroad*, "I have been in the Ramayana since pre-school, and this is my 15th year in the production."

He said there was a lot of competition for the coveted role. "Everyone wants to be Rama... It was a dream role because my brother James played the role of Rama four years ago. He (*Rama*) is definitely a God who is down to earth... A perfect human, basically, and I tried to capture that character. We practiced everyday after school since March."

Daniel, who wants to be a mechanical engineer, said participating in the production "gives you confidence in yourself. Now I don't feel uncomfortable going out and speaking in public."

Kimberlee Heldt, mother of Bri Heldt who played Sita, said, "My

daughter's first character was (*as a member of the*) the Bhil tribe. Last year she was Surpanakha. This year she is Sita. She is not as submissive; she is strong and independent! It's an exhilarating production, and I just love the tradition, the fact that the whole school participates in it, and it's a very close knit community. I have had her (*Bri*) go to Mount Madonna since she was in fifth grade because I wanted her to be in a school that had a true sense of community."

Sage Buzzin, 16, has been part of the production since second grade. This year he played Bharata.

"I am feeling very scared," he said. "Bharata has a very big role in the Ramayana, and he has the duty of bringing the news of father's death. The role is so big you can't help feel scared. It's not the biggest role but it's important."



Sage Buzzin, left, gears up for his role as Bharata



The three-hour production is based on Shiva narrating the Ramayana's tale to Parvati.