Excerpts from the article

SANJAY'S SUPER TEAM: Reconciliation Through Art
by Siddhant Adlakha Nov. 02, 2015

What was your first introduction to the Vedas and the Hindu epics?

Sanjay: Well, it was very much what this little boy was going through. There was no introduction whatsoever, it was literally like 'Sit down, dad's doing this, and you need to join me.' You know, I could recite the Gayatri Mantra to you; it's in Sanskrit, I have no idea what it means. There were pictures of all these deities, there was no explanation. There was just 'We're going to sit here, this is what we're doing' just like I was sitting in the car and we would drive to some place. It was just that.

Nicole: Because you were in San Bernardino.

Sanjay: Yeah, and there was nothing in the culture! I didn't have to go to a Christian church, but there was so much culture that would explain Christianity to me. So much. So. Much. Believe you me. I could look at my dollar bill and get a little bit of an idea of what Christian traditions were.

I know what you mean, I went to a Christian school but had a Hindu upbringing, so there was kind of a disconnect there. Also, there are a lot of similarities between our modern superheroes and these kinds of characters that in a way draw from central Asian mythology. As kids we're obviously not consciously aware of it, but is that something you found playing in to the creation of the looks of the characters now?

Sanjay: Yeah, big time. I'm a big fan of Joseph Campbell - he has this great book called **The Hero With A Thousand Faces**, and he sort of points out these archetypes specifically. And he starts from these root mythologies and cultures and stories about these deities, and how that's sort of led to The Hero's Journey and what constitutes a hero, be it a superhero or any other protagonist. Anyway, absolutely, I was very much trying to be as specific and as mindful of how to depict these deities with as much reverence and respect as possible. I felt like so long as we educate ourselves about it, I had done so much of it., then I feel like we could break those rules. First I sort of forced my team to be like 'We need to know at least those rules before we start monkeying with them.'

*The team's regard for the rules before then breaking them isn't limited to the nature of the deities. There's a departure from the Pixar norm at every stage, especially when young Sanjay is magically transported to another realm, where he's confronted by a demon in an ancient temple, and the Gods in his father's shrine come to life to save him. Vishnu, the God of preservation, Hanuman, the ape-like devotee of Lord Rama, and Durga, the Goddess of power. Interestingly enough, their designs (which feel like something out of **Tron: Legacy**) already stem from an origin that's a cultural hybrid: Goa Trance album covers. The low horizon lines and simulations of wide lenses make them feel like giants towering over this young boy, and the enclosed environment start to feel absolutely massive. Each character was designated a specific style of classical Indian dance (which the animators also learned first hand!) and their movements follow the rules of their respective form.*

Something I found interesting was the placement of the superhero toy in the shrine.

Sanjay: Yeah!

That was something I feel like would've been a very, very conscious choice.

Nicole: I'm so glad you asked that.

Sanjay: Well, you know it was a very conscious choice to have the boy have an idol. And then to have that idol be taken by his father and placed in the shrine was always the choice that we wanted. I always wanted to have this tension between 'MY Gods' versus 'YOUR Gods,' that was exactly what was at stake growing up for me, between me and my dad. 'YOUR Gods are stupid, MY Gods are important!' That's how I felt. And it was very much a clash of wills, that's all it was. And I really wanted this moment when the boy has to shatter his idol to ring this diya [oil lamp], and that's what dispels or vanquishes this malevolent force. And then the boy's idol is returned back to him from Vishnu himself, and that was an important gesture as well for us.

Nicole: Because you can have both.

That was another thing I wanted to ask you about, because the story is about reconciliation of different cultures, but in a way that particular moment almost feels like a re-reconciliation of the old and the new, the modern superhero literally being passed down to us by the mythology.

Sanjay: I like that one. Absolutely. That's great, the ancient mythology, the first superhero passing on the modern tradition.

It's so specific, but it's so universal at the same time. I know it's specific to my experience and to [Sanjay's], but I feel like anyone could be able to relate to something like this.

Sanjay: Luckily, lots of people have reflected that back to us.

Nicole: Within the studio we represent a lot of different traditions, and people will say 'That was my experience with Judiasm' or 'That was my experience with Buddhism.'

So what's your relationship with Indian and Hindu culture now that you've done all this digging?

Sanjay: It's always been impossible for me to connect to it, and it's because I'm such a product of the West. And so it never felt like I had a way to inhabit this skin or my identity or my name until I found the art. And once I found the art, that's the badge I wear now. I love my Indian food just like anybody else, but I love the art, and I love the myths, and I love the history, so I found my place. And again, it's all in service of the art. I love the philosophy as interpreted through the miniature paintings, I love the history as interpreted through the art. That's the badge of Indian identity that I feel satisfied to wear.

Sanjay's Super Team opened in front of *The Good Dinosaur* on November 25, 2015.