

Bhagavad Gita: Star of Film & Stage

The ancient Sanskrit text about the art of life gives life to contemporary art.

By Anna Dubrovsky

One Monday evening, instead of poring over books, my *Bhagavad Gita* study group gathered around a television. We'd rented *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, a 2000 film starring Matt Damon and Will Smith. *Bagger Vance* is about golf. It's also about the *Gita*.

It takes a lifetime—many lifetimes—to understand the *Bhagavad Gita*, or “Song of God.” The Hindu scripture has but 700 verses, many no longer than a dozen words, but its subject matter makes it a slow read. The *Gita* is a multi-layered manual for living—the ultimate self-help book. “How do we act in a world of conflict and suffering? That’s the question that the *Gita* answers,” says Graham Schweig, a religious studies professor who has written an English translation and interpretation of the thousands-year-old Sanskrit text.

Many hundreds of scholars and spiritual teachers have offered interpretations of the *Gita*. Occasionally, an artist takes a stab at it. The text or its essence has found its way into contemporary music, literature, drama, and other creative works. The following artistic treatments can make fine points of entry for anyone new to the *Gita*, or provide fresh insights for the longtime student.

The Legend of Bagger Vance

The *Bhagavad Gita* unfolds on a battlefield, on the eve of a violent clash between two factions of a royal family. The hero is the young warrior prince Arjuna, who becomes paralyzed with doubt as he looks across the field at his estranged cousins and onetime teachers. In the ensuing conversation with his charioteer, Arjuna comes to understand the meaning of dharma, the paths of yoga, and the very purpose of life. His charioteer, not incidentally, is the supreme Hindu deity Krishna, aka Bhagavan.

The movie *Bagger Vance* (note the play on words) is based on a 1995 novel of the same name, set in Depression-era Georgia. The protagonist is one Ranulph Junah (R. Junah), a troubled World War I hero who reluctantly

agrees to represent his native Savannah in a 36-hole showdown against the two greatest golfers of the day. On the eve of the match, he becomes paralyzed with doubt. “This whole endeavor is a freak show. A joke. What good will any of it do me, or anyone attached to it?” he says to his caddie, Bagger Vance, who responds that “life is action.”

Author Steven Pressfield has read the *Gita* about 10 times; several *Gita* translations are scattered throughout his California home. “I’ve read it multiple times partly because I’m trying to understand it, and I don’t claim that I do,” says Pressfield, a former marine and longtime screenwriter. But the lessons contained

▶ Listen to clips from the opera *Arjuna's Dilemma* online at yogaplus.org/arjuna.



John Kelly as Samjaya in *Arjuna's Dilemma*; Paul Godwin / paugodwin.com

in the *Gita* are “touchstones” in his life. “Its concept of discipline rings a lot of bells, but also the idea that following a path—with full devotion and concentration—is a form of meditation, a form of spiritual practice. I believe that about writing. To me, it’s a spiritual practice as much as it is, say, a commercial venture.”

Arjuna’s Dilemma

Composer Douglas Cuomo is better known for creating the salsa-flavored theme music to *Sex and the City* than for his latest project: a *Gita*-inspired chamber opera. That may change when *Arjuna’s Dilemma* reaches a wider audience. The 70-minute composition premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music last November, after eight years of gestation.

Cuomo didn’t set out to write an opera about the great Sanskrit poem. He wanted to write a piece of music for Indian vocalist Amit Chatterjee. It was Chatterjee who suggested the *Gita*, which Cuomo had encountered in college. “When I looked at it again, I immediately knew this was the text I wanted to use because of its philosophical teachings and also because it had a lot of dramatic potential,” Cuomo says.

Arjuna’s Dilemma is a musical marriage of East and West. Arjuna is played by an American tenor who sings in Sanskrit. The role of Krishna, written for Chatterjee, calls for improvisation in raga style, an Indian idiom akin to scat singing. A four-member female chorus rounds out the vocal cast, singing almost exclusively in English. The 12 instrumentalists include a jazz saxophonist and a tabla drummer. The sound, like the *Gita*, transcends time and place.

“The part of the *Gita* that appealed to me the most is the idea of understanding the true nature of reality,” says Cuomo. “Essentially, that’s what Arjuna is looking to understand. He begs Krishna for that vision, and Krishna eventually grants him that vision, which is more wonderful than he could have imagined and more horrible than he could have imagined. The idea of seeing ‘what really

is’ is such a simple idea but also such an incredibly profound idea. It’s almost an impossible goal—in a sense, it’s a flash of cosmic insight—but it’s something I think about and strive toward.”

Satyagraha and Doctor Atomic

Two legendary composers have also mined the *Gita* for material. Philip Glass’s opera *Satyagraha* is a dramatization of Mahatma Gandhi’s years in South Africa, where “the father of India” developed his strategy of passive resistance. The libretto consists of passages from the *Gita*, which Gandhi studied daily, and is performed in Sanskrit.

John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* tells the story of a different historic figure who was deeply influenced by the *Gita*: J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who came to be known as “the father of the atomic bomb.” Oppenheimer, who learned Sanskrit to better understand the scripture, revealed in interviews that upon witnessing the first test of an atomic bomb, he recalled the climactic scene in which Krishna reveals himself as “the destroyer of worlds.” The pertinent passage plays a part in the climax of *Doctor Atomic*.

The Metropolitan Opera in New York hosted both operas last year. *Doctor Atomic* was also staged at the English National Opera in London earlier this year. Can’t wait for a staging near you? Pick up a DVD of the *Mahabharata*, a three-hour screen version of a nine-hour stage production. The *Mahabharata* is the epic poem of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a small part.

And Maybe...

People have told me they see the *Gita* in *The Wizard of Oz*, in the Disney animated film *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, and in other popular works. I can’t say if the parallels were intended. But it shouldn’t surprise anyone to find expressions of the *Gita*’s themes throughout the arts. If it’s about life, chances are it’s about the *Gita*. ■

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The Gita in Print

First translated into English in 1785, the Bhagavad Gita has been printed in numerous editions and languages. Here are some suggestions to help you choose the right text...or start a personal Gita library. —Rolf Sovik

Clearer English Translation

- ***Bhagavad Gita* by Graham M. Schweig**

This text comes with informative chapters on the philosophy of the *Gita* and excels in its simple and eloquent translation.

Best Contemporary Commentaries

- ***The Bhagavad Gita for Daily Living (3 Vols.)* by Eknath Easwaran**

Easwaran’s popular and insightful everyday commentary is available in either three volumes or as a single-volume condensation.

- ***Perennial Psychology of the Bhagavad Gita* by Swami Rama**

Drawn from the inner logic of a master yogi, this version is excellent for practitioners of yoga meditation.

Traditional Philosophical Commentary

- ***The Bhagavad Gita with commentary of Shri Shankaracharya***

Shri Shankara was the great 9th century exponent of Vedantic philosophy. His commentary is technical and unflinching in its support of non-dualism.

Practical Application

- ***An Ordinary Life Transformed* by Rev. Stephanie Rutt**

Rutt’s simple modern edition of the *Gita* sheds psychological and spiritual light on how the text might be applied in daily life.

Spiritually Inspiring

- ***The Bhagavad Gita* by Juan Mascaro**

This lyrical text includes a marvelous introduction to the *Gita*’s parallels with Christian mysticism.

For the Sanskrit Student

- ***The Bhagavad Gita: 25th Anniversary Edition* by Winthrop Sargeant**

In his verse-by-verse presentation of the *Gita*, Sargeant shows the Devanagari script, the transliteration, a grammatical analysis of each word, and a translation.