

SHAKUNTALA 2012

A modern fairy tale

Characters

Shakuntala

Dushyanta

Mathavya

Time: the present

Place: India

Shakuntala 2012 was first produced by the Ganakrishti Theatre Company at Girish Manch in Kolkata, India, opening on December 19, 2012. It was directed by Amit Ganguly and Ankan Roy with the following cast:

Shakuntala
Dushyanta
Mathavya

Soma Dutta
Hillol Chakraborty
Depak Das



Depak Das, Hillol Chakraborty
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012



Hillol Chakraborty, Soma Dutta
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012



Hillol Chakraborty, Soma Dutta
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Soma Dutta, Hillol Chakraborty
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Depak Das
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012



Soma Dutta, Depak Das
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012



Soma Dutta, Hillol Chakraborty
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012



Hillol Chakraborty, Soma Dutta
Shakuntala, Ganakrishti Theatre Company, Kolkata, India, 2012

Act One

MATHAVYA: O, this cruel play of Fate: I am reduced to a state of complete exhaustion! And why? – because I am the friend and faithful companion of an oddball who is – to put it mildly – obsessed. Not with the chase of wild animals, like his namesake in the play by Kalidasa – chasing game I might even enjoy.

No, my friend Dushyanta is obsessed with looking for some holy man, some guru who five years ago smashed into his life like a bolt from the blue and handed him magical powers. His words, not mine – I find them embarrassing in this day and age, when we are so businesslike, practical, unpoetic, don't you agree? One would have thought that the time of gurus was over, at least for the more sober among us.

But no, my friend Dushyanta says that in the five years he has lost his magical powers, whittled them away like a gambler that could not stop in time.

And now he can no longer live in harmony with himself. Well, can you? I can't.

But my friend experiences this inner turbulence as the worst tragedy; only this hermit, this holy sage, he says, can reinstate his faith in the meaning of life.

Oh dear! And so we travel round this huge country by all possible means of transport – even on foot! – showing a faded photograph to complete strangers and asking them: have you seen this man, have you seen this man? O, misery upon misery!

The bones in my body are all out of joint,
I would like to lie down in the shade of the nearest tree
and fall asleep for a minimum of three months.
Not to mention the food we eat, the hotels we sleep in!
Comfort costs money, and we have been beggared
in the long months of traipsing around.
Sometimes I wish we would chance upon
a beautiful girl, some contemporary Shakuntala,
and that my friend Dushyanta, like his famous namesake,
would fall in love with her, so that love might accomplish
what I am unable to: turn him off this senseless vagabonding
in the worst summer heat. Of course, I could always
leave him alone and jump on the first flight home;
and I would, with great pleasure, believe me.
The only problem is that I would never forgive myself.
What are friends for, if not to stick together
through thick and thin? And so, God help me,
yet another journey by bus! – in the direction in which
we have traveled before, and not only once!
Dushyanta has gone to buy the tickets,
I'm going to wait for him here,
get some rest on the pavement, among the beggars.
He might feel sorry for me when he gets back,
and he might say: Mathavya, we're going home!
I would make an offering to every single one
of the three million Indian gods!

(Mathavya settles down and falls asleep.)

(At a travel agency. Shakuntala sits at her desk, speaking on the phone.)

SHAKUNTALA: No, we don't do reservations for hotels,
only trains, buses and planes. By all means,
call us when you are ready.

(She puts the phone down. It rings immediately.)

Sunshine Travel Agency... That won't be possible, I'm afraid.
 All trains on this line have been cancelled because of floods.
 There are planes, of course. Thank you.

*(She replaces receiver. Looks at her watch, stifles a yawn.
 Dushyanta enters and stops. They look at each other for some time.
 Shakuntala beckons him to sit down. Dushyanta removes his
 backpack and sits down on the chair in front of the desk.
 Shakuntala looks at him.)*

DUSHYANTA: Two bus tickets. *(Pause.)* Please.

SHAKUNTALA: Two bus tickets. *(Dushyanta nods.)*

Where to? Or do you want *me* to choose?

DUSHYANTA *(slaps his forehead)*: Haridwar.

SHAKUNTALA: Video bus to Haridwar.

DUSHYANTA: No! An ordinary express.

I hate noise when traveling.

SHAKUNTALA *(writing out the tickets)*:

First time in India?

DUSHYANTA: Yes. Except for the four times before.

SHAKUNTALA: No, really?!

DUSHYANTA *(shows her a photograph)*:

Do you know this man?

SHAKUNTALA *(looks at the photo, frowns)*:

Who is this man?

DUSHYANTA: My teacher.

SHAKUNTALA: A good teacher never abandons his pupil.

DUSHYANTA: No, but a bad pupil sometimes abandons his teacher.

SHAKUNTALA: Will a good teacher be glad to see a bad pupil return?

DUSHYANTA *(puts the photograph in his pocket)*:

I will know when I find him.

SHAKUNTALA: Sometimes I get really angry with you Europeans.

DUSHYANTA: Why?

SHAKUNTALA: First, you force your way of life upon us.

Then you have the nerve to come here seeking a cure
 for the pain caused by that way of life.

DUSHYANTA: Not all of us.

SHAKUNTALA: For centuries you've been coming!

Bearded hippies. Confused philosophers.

Disappointed believers. All nursing a great hope that here,
with little effort and for even less money, you will be blessed
with that great event: ENLIGHTENMENT.

Why are you so self-obsessed?

DUSHYANTA: Who?

SHAKUNTALA: All of you.

DUSHYANTA: You exaggerate.

SHAKUNTALA: Where you come from, isn't everything connected
with the self? Self-awareness? Self-respect? Self-realization?

Or with I? My higher I. My real I. Always I.

Never you, or yours, or for you.

DUSHYANTA: You're too critical.

SHAKUNTALA: Maybe you're not critical enough.

(Hands him the tickets.) Three hundred rupees.

DUSHYANTA *(takes the tickets, gives her the money)*:

Thanks for the lesson.

SHAKUNTALA: Anytime. And I hope you find what
you're looking for.

DUSHYANTA: Don't worry. *(Picks up his backpack to go.)*

SHAKUNTALA: Although... *(Dushyanta looks at her.)*

India has changed, you know. We have computers now,
and a nuclear bomb.

DUSHYANTA *(angrily)*: Oh really?! Computers
and a nuclear bomb are the answer to the question if there is
God? And what he expects from us? And how we are to live to be
happy? I didn't know that.

*(Head high, he turns to go. Shakuntala gets up and runs after
him. Takes his hand.)*

SHAKUNTALA: Please forgive me.

DUSHYANTA *(embarrassed)*: Oh, well...

SHAKUNTALA: Please.

DUSHYANTA: No, no. You must forgive me. I shouldn't have
shouted at you.

SHAKUNTALA: You had every right. My words were naive,
not yours.

DUSHYANTA: And now? Shall we continue quarreling?

SHAKUNTALA (*lets go of his hand*): It wasn't a quarrel.

I merely expressed my opinion.

DUSHYANTA: Am I allowed to express mine as well?

SHAKUNTALA: I'd be surprised if you didn't.

DUSHYANTA: My opinion is that you're working here part-time.

That you are in fact a student, a very capable,
a very knowledgeable one.

SHAKUNTALA: Really!

DUSHYANTA: My opinion is that we could
say to each other quite a bit more than what we've just
hurled in each other's face.

SHAKUNTALA: Why? Because you, too, are in fact a student,
a very capable, a very knowledgeable one?

DUSHYANTA: What time do you finish? I'd like to invite you for coffee.

SHAKUNTALA: Indian women don't drink coffee with strangers.

Besides, you are in a hurry to get to Haridwar.
With your girlfriend.

DUSHYANTA: I don't have a girlfriend.

SHAKUNTALA: You bought two tickets.

DUSHYANTA: I travel with a friend.

SHAKUNTALA (*visibly relieved*): And what could we say
to each other over coffee that can't be said here?

DUSHYANTA: Coffee was only an excuse.

SHAKUNTALA: You mean, we would have gone for coffee
and you'd start chatting me up?

DUSHYANTA: I wanted to know more about you.
You're interesting.

SHAKUNTALA: What do you expect me to say? That you're
interesting, too? I don't even know you.

DUSHYANTA: What do you want to know?

SHAKUNTALA: Who you are. What you do.

DUSHYANTA: I play my favorite game. It's called "I imagine."

SHAKUNTALA: And what do you imagine?

DUSYANTA: That I am Marco Polo, traveling across Asia
to the court of Kublai Khan.

SHAKUNTALA: Do you enjoy imagining that?

DUSHYANTA: Are we not, every one of us, looking for the court
of Kublai Khan, so we could serve him as bringers of news
from the distant parts of his empire?

SHAKUNTALA (*puzzled*): Are we?

DUSHYANTA: I speak of inner journeys, those that we make even
while we sleep.

SHAKUNTALA: And dream?

DUSHYANTA: Don't you feel that in each of us there is an empire
which is too large to exist in our daily awareness?
And that each of us has to become his own Marco Polo,
and travel to the extreme, the barely believable parts of his soul?

SHAKUNTALA: Nine out of ten people wouldn't have a clue
what you're talking about.

DUSHYANTA (*after pause*): What about you?

SHAKUNTALA: Me? I have traversed my inner kingdom
in all directions and found no trace of Kublai Khan to whom
I could report what I saw.

DUSHYANTA: No doubt you have seen only beautiful things.

SHAKUNTALA: There're are many beautiful things
in a woman's soul. Seen from afar. But a closer look
may reveal much that is ugly.

DUSHYANTA: Then it must have been Fate that brought us together.

SHAKUNTALA (*after pause*): Why?

DUSHYANTA: Because we are both equally sad.

SHAKUNTALA (*startled*): Does it show?

DUSHYANTA: It takes one to know one.

SHAKUNTALA: And what's causing the sadness?

DUSHYANTA: The world seems out of joint, don't you think?
Everywhere we are surrounded by emptiness, rudeness and
boredom. Dishonesty forms the basis of most of our interactions.
Fraud, half-truths and cynicism are the repertoire of the theater
which attracts the majority of people we know.

SHAKUNTALA: How terrible.

DUSHYANTA: In such a world it's hardly unusual for the soul
to get covered in the soot of the world's imperfections.

SHAKUNTALA: I bet you have a washing machine that can make
the soul clean again.

DUSHYANTA: Not me. The man whose photo I showed you.
Five years ago he gave me a program I could use
to clean my soul.

SHAKUNTALA: But it doesn't work anymore. Is that why you're
looking for him? To complain?

DUSHYANTA: The program is fine. But I've forgotten
how to switch it on.

SHAKUNTALA: No chance, then, of you cleaning my soul?

DUSYANTA: Souls can clean themselves.

SHAKUNTALA: How?

DUSHYANTA: By renewing themselves.

SHAKUNTALA: I knew you were going to say that!

And I know what you're going to say next: that souls can renew
themselves through love. How exactly I knew
where this sweet talk of yours was aiming to take us!

Well, I must admit that you almost swept me along

DUSHYANTA: You misunderstand me...

SHAKUNTALA: You walk in here, buy two bus tickets,
ogle me as if buying a horse at a fair, I'm surprised you haven't
with some excuse demanded to examine my teeth,
and now suddenly we shall both be saved by love!

(Dushyanta rises and reaches for his backpack.)

SHAKUNTALA: Where are you going?

DUSHYANTA: I'm not welcome here.

SHAKUNTALA: Don't be silly. Tell me your name.

DUSHYANTA: You won't believe me.

SHAKUNTALA: Tell me anyway.

DUSHYANTA: My name is Dushyanta.

SHAKUNTALA: I don't believe you.

DUSHYANTA: I told you so.

SHAKUNTALA: Dushyanta is the name of the king
in the best-known Indian drama, Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*.

And that, believe it or not, is my name.

DUSHYANTA: Shakuntala? I don't believe you.

SHAKUNTALA: There you are. And who gave *you* an Indian name?

DUSHYANTA: My grandmother, who was of Indian origin.

SHAKUNTALA: And why Dushyanta?

DUSHYANTA: Because my surname is King. So I am now
King Dushyanta. And who gave you your name?

SHAKUNTALA: Fate, evidently.

(She smiles and reaches out.)

DUSHYANTA *(taking her hand)*:

“Deeply loved, she is not easy to win;
But watching her ways, my heart is consoled;
Though love has not found fulfillment yet.
Mutual longing is itself a pleasure.”

SHAKUNTALA: You have excellent knowledge of Sanskrit drama.

DUSHYANTA: Thank you.

SHAKUNTALA: But you’re very impertinent.

(Shakuntala abruptly withdraws her hand and slaps his face.)

Blackout.

Act Two

MATHAVYA: Implausible as it is, the pretty young lady
from the travel agency has decided to join one of her clients
in traveling around India! Would you believe it?
And I? – well, I am traveling with them, of course.
Not only as the king’s jester, but also, increasingly so,
it would seem, as a servant of their many whims. O, misery!
It’s true that now I have a good enough reason to say good-bye
and treat myself to a much-needed holiday on a sandy beach.
But such irresponsibility is not in my nature,
in spite of my faulty character.
I mean, what are friends for, if not for standing by them
when they are facing an evil hour?
Because, just between you and me, my friend Dushyanta
has no idea what’s waiting for him.
He believes he is a source of fascination for the young lady
because his heart has become the nesting place
for the Pain of the Universe!
His words, not mine. *He* thinks of himself as a poet,
I keep my feet firmly on the ground.
He is convinced that Fate has intervened in his life.

And why? Because his parents found it amusing to adorn him
with the name of the hero of an ancient Indian play.
And because her parents found it equally amusing
to give her the name of the play's heroine!
Why do we allow our life to slip to the level of
a puppet play for small children? I could cry!
Of course, getting Dushyanta to change his mind
will be a bit like trying to persuade a cat to bark.
A big effort lies ahead.

(Enter Dushyanta.)

MATHAVYA (*bowing*): Dear friend, I am too tired
to stretch out my hand in greeting,
so I will welcome you with words only.

Your Majesty, may you remain victorious!

DUSHYANTA: Mathavya, you don't drink enough,
you're showing symptoms of dehydration.

MATHAVYA: How else am I to address your Majesty,
now that Dushyanta, king even by surname,
has fallen in love with Shakuntala?
Now that literary history, as is true of all history,
has begun to repeat itself – as a farce?

DUSHYANTA: Oh, shut up.

MATHAVYA: What if she isn't as innocent
as she looks? What if she merely saw an excellent opportunity
to see India at someone else's expense? What if her true aim
is to rob us in some God-forsaken place?

DUSHYANTA: The offer was mine.

MATHAVYA: Yes, she merely nodded a little too vigorously.

DUSHYANTA: Look, her delight, which she wasn't trying to hide,
was charming in its innocence.

MATHAVYA: Why are we suddenly traveling by train?
What's wrong with buses?

DUSHYANTA: Trains remind her of her childhood,
when she crisscrossed India many times with her father,
who is a snake charmer.
She would like to relive some of those moments.

MATHAVYA: I, too, would love to relive many moments,
if someone were kind enough to take care of the expense.

DUSHYANTA: This won't cost you a penny.

MATHAVYA: I'd like to remind your Majesty that the royal treasury
is all but empty. How are we going to fill it, considering
that your subjects refuse to pay taxes?

DUSHYANTA: I've e-mailed Mother, asking for a loan.

MATHAVYA: The Queen Mother is to finance her son's erotic
adventure? Why don't *I* have a mother like that?
Mine won't even help me with my business project.

DUSHYANTA (*suspicious*): What business project?

MATHAVYA: Let's leave that alone for now. The main thing is that
your Majesty's darling can continue to wallow
in the comfort to which she would like to become accustomed.
Even so, a little warning, if I may. Indian girls are not as easy
to lure into a horizontal position as is the custom
in our part of the world.

DUSHYANTA: What are you talking about?

MATHAVYA: That it would make sense to invest your Mother's loan
where dividends are assured in advance.

DUSHYANTA: Can't you imagine that there could be other things
that draw a man to a woman?

MATHAVYA: For example?

DUSHYANTA: For example a man's hope that
in the deaf universe someone is going to hear his cry for help?

MATHAVYA (*bowing*): Majesty is a king among poets
and a poet among kings.

DUSHYANTA: Didn't that happen as soon as I entered her office
and she was startled, because she experienced the cry for help
she saw in my eyes as the cry of a desperate wretch
carried away by the current?

MATHAVYA: But I must warn your Majesty that nowadays
not many prizes are offered for this kind of poetry.

DUSHYANTA: Why do you pretend you don't understand me?

MATHAVYA: On the contrary, Majesty:
since we started to crisscross this hot and dusty subcontinent
I have tried very hard to pretend that I *do* understand you.
Perhaps in the hope that some day I will.

DUSHYANTA: Excellent hope, for me, too.

MATHAVYA: But suppose that this girl, Shakuntala, isn't real?

DUSHYANTA: She touched my hand! I felt her skin, her blood,
her warmth! She angered me and she charmed me,
she excited me and she hurt me, and my delight was real,
as was my pain. But you're right, in spite of this...

MATHAVYA: Yes?

DUSHYANTA: In spite of this I often feel that she is not
present in the world as firmly as other people.
Everything that she does and says is suffused with some kind of...

MATHAVYA: As though you were dreaming her?

DUSHYANTA: As though I was dreaming her. (*Pause.*) Mathavya, may
I ask you something?

MATHAVYA: The king may ask his jester whatever he wants.

DUSHYANTA: My love for Shakuntala makes you unhappy,
that much is obvious.

MATHAVYA: You forget that in the person of your court jester
you have the sincerest of friends.

DUSHYANTA: Why do you stay with me, if you think
I regard you as no more than my jester?

MATHAVYA: Because I've chosen a part that amuses me,
and I play it with great delight.

DUSHYANTA: What do you feel when you look at Shakuntala?

MATHAVYA (*after pause*): Do you really want to know?

DUSHYANTA: Yes, I want to know.

MATHAVYA: Although her face is a baby face,
and although her hands with their long slim fingers,
adorned with an exquisite combination of jewels,
look like the hands of a fifteen-year old,
her self-possessed posture and the casual incline of her head
testify to the maturity of a woman who is not at a loss
as to where and how something should be squeezed.

DUSHYANTA: Your insinuation is vulgar.

MATHAVYA: How old is she? Twenty? Thirty? Impossible to say.
Is she a virgin? Or has she had a hundred lovers?
Either would not be surprising. Is she clever,
average, stupid?

DUSHYANTA: Stop it...

MATHAVYA: Is what her face is telling us a true picture
of her heart and mind? Or is it only an experienced mask,
borrowed from a heroine in a Bollywood movie?

DUSHYANTA: Why are you trying so hard to sow doubt
in my heart, turn me away from the feelings that
sprouted in me like fresh growth after a very long drought?

MATHAVYA: Then I should perhaps wish both of you
a lot of "fresh growth" and go my own way.

DUSHYANTA: You're joking.

MATHAVYA: Haven't we promised each other that either of us
could split anytime without giving a reason?

DUSHYANTA: Yes, but... we are like hand and glove.
I can't imagine what I would do without you.

MATHAVYA: Isn't that the name of your favorite game?
"I imagine?"

DUSHYANTA: More to the point, what would *you* do without *me*?
Go back home? Find a job?

MATHAVYA: No, I'll stay in India to launch
an ambitious business project.

DUSHYANTA: Oh my God.

MATHAVYA: I knew you wouldn't be interested.

DUSHYANTA: I *am* interested!

MATHAVYA: But you won't like the idea.
Especially because there isn't the slightest chance
that it'll fail. In your eyes any success of mine
would amount to treason.

DUSHYANTA: I'd have no problem living
with *one* success of yours,
as long as it wasn't too big.

MATHAVYA: This one would be mega.

DUSHYANTA: You're not known for having mega ideas.

MATHAVYA: I'm talking about mega success.
The idea itself is simple, so much so that I'm surprised
no one has stumbled upon it before.

DUSHYANTA: Yet you find it too risky to disclose it
to a friend.

MATHAVYA: Do you realize how many expatriate Hindus
live in England, America and the rest of the world?

DUSHYANTA: A million?

MATHAVYA: Twice as many. And what is the only thing
they miss in the good life they have secured for themselves?
DUSHYANTA: No idea.
MATHAVYA: Holy water from the River Ganges.
Which retains its magical powers even in a plastic bottle
thousands of miles from its source. One drop before death
is enough to secure a smooth passage to nirvana.
DUSHYANTA: And you're going to...
MATHAVYA: Yes. I'm going to export to Europe and America
a million bottles of holy water a year.
DUSHYANTA: An excellent joke.
MATHAVYA: I've never been more serious in my life.
DUSHYANTA: Oh well... I was hoping you would do me a favor,
but obviously profit comes before friendship.
MATHAVYA: Wait a minute...
What have I been doing for the last six months
apart from doing you favors? One more isn't going to kill me.
DUSHYANTA: I don't want you to sacrifice your future for me.
MATHAVYA: Look, making sacrifices for you
has become a habit. What's the matter with you?
DUSHYANTA: You'll miss the opportunity for successfully
launching your project.
MATHAVYA: I was told be a fortune-teller to wait until
after the full moon.
DUSHYANTA: Then listen carefully.
Once a year around the time of the third full moon
saddhus and gurus from all over India gather at
Khandagiri caves in Orissa to recite verses
from the Bhagavad Gita.
MATHAVYA: Must be hard on their vocal chords.
DUSHYANTA: One of them could be the man I'm looking for,
the greatest sage of all times, my teacher.
MATHAVYA: We should get on the first available train!
DUSHYANTA: That's the problem.
MATHAVYA: Oh?
DUSHYANTA: During the full moon another gathering will take place.
A congregation of snake charmers on a beach in Goa.
MATHAVYA: So?

DUSHYANTA: Shakuntala's father is an itinerant
snake charmer, and the gathering in Goa gives us
the best chance to find him.

MATHAVYA: And when you find him?

DUSHYANTA: When we find him, I will ask his permission
to marry Shakuntala.

MATHAVYA: Is that necessary? I mean,
is that the only way that she will...? I mean,
do you know what I mean?

DUSHYANTA: I know what you're hinting at,
and I'm heartbroken that my best friend is capable
of such vulgar thoughts.

MATHAVYA: Oh come on!

Why don't you step out of this role of an ancient king,
in which you're becoming more ridiculous by the minute,
and admit plainly that you're planning to buy sex
with a wedding ring?

DUSHYANTA: It's not a question of buying anything,
who do you take me for?

MATHAVYA: For someone whose judgment doesn't sink
to his trousers at the first flutter of beautiful eyelashes.

DUSHYANTA: Promise you'll go to the gathering
of holy men in Orissa. Promise you'll find my teacher
and tell him I must see him. (*He passes Mathavya a photograph.*)
It won't be hard to recognize him.

MATHAVYA: Do you still need him, now that you'll be
drinking honey from Shakuntala's lips?

DUSHYANTA: Trust me at least once in your life.

MATHAVYA: And you listen to my *advice* at least once in your life:
never trust a woman who isn't old enough to be your
grandmother.

DUSHYANTA: Don't let me down.

Of course, the time of the full moon
is also the best time to launch your business...

MATHAVYA: Any time *after* the full moon, I was told.
My partner will just have to wait.

(*Pulls out a cell phone.*)

DUSHYANTA: It's not a joke, then?

MATHAVYA: My business project? As far from it as you can imagine.
But isn't a favor done to a friend worth more than
half a million dollars?

DUSHYANTA (*smiling*): I wish you a safe journey.

MATHAVYA: And I wish you a touch of common sense. (*Into the phone.*) Hello...

Blackout.

Act Three

MATHAVYA (*rubbing his tummy, plastic bottle of water in hand*):

O, misery!... Risky stuff, this holy water!
To make matters worse this always happens in a good restaurant,
where you have to leave the table as fast as if accidentally
stepping onto a catapult. Believe me, to reach a toilet
before the crisis involves your trousers often becomes
such an important priority that even the loftiest things pale
in comparison. The Dalai Lama is waiting to discuss
the shortest path to nirvana? Let him. Candidates for the title
of Miss India are queuing up to test your knowledge of Kamasutra?
Sorry, some other time. God is waiting to hand you a token
for an automatic entry to heaven whenever you get tired of life?
Even God has to wait. Such can be the consequences
of tasting a drop of holy water from the River Ganges.
O, everything has joined forces to conspire against me!
To make matters worse: this holy man, this guru that
Dushyanta and I have been chasing around India,
how can I find him? There are two hundred of them sitting
just round the corner, reciting verses from the Bhagavad Gita
so beautifully that shivers run up the spine of anyone
who hasn't lost the feeling for transcendence and beauty.
I have shown this photo to more than thirty
of these holy men, and asked them: is this you?
And they all said yes! What am I supposed to do?
In any case, right now Dushyanta needs his guru about

as urgently as I need another sip from this bottle.
Right now, if you ask me, Dushyanta has his hands full
with things far removed from self-knowledge,
self-realization and similar lofty ideals.
Right now he is trying to charm the snake-charmer's daughter!
O, what I would give to be able to buzz
around them as a fly for five minutes,
wherever they are.

*(Shakuntala and Dushyanta on the beach in Goa.
Palms and clouds in the background.)*

SHAKUNTALA: Why in such a bad mood?

DUSHYANTA: You refuse to go for a swim, you won't
put on your bathing suit, we have walked up and down
the beach eleven times, what shall we do now?

SHAKUNTALA: Wait for my father.

DUSHYANTA: Look, I will go on my knees before you father,
if that will help, but we've been here for three days
and there is no sign of any gathering of snake charmers.

SHAKUNTALA: They'll come.

DUSHYANTA: We must do something, I can't stand inaction.

SHAKUNTALA: Let's walk along the edge of the shadow
thrown on the sand by the palms.

DUSHYANTA: Why?

SHAKUNTALA: Let's just do it. I'll be in the shade,
and you in the sun.

(They join hands and walk along the twisted edge of the shadow.)

And now we change places.

*(They turn, change places and walk back, with Shakuntala in the
sun.)*

DUSHYANTA: And now?

SHAKUNTALA: Now tell me on which side you felt
a lesser burden.

DUSHYANTA: In the shade it's cooler, in the sun hotter, that's all.

SHAKUNTALA: No, there *is* a difference, a big one.

If you walk along the edge long enough you'll feel it.

And then you'll know.

DUSHYANTA: What?

SHAKUNTALA: Whether you're my shadow. Or whether I am
your shadow. Or whether we are shadows of someone else.

DUSHYANTA: We may each be a shadow of the world
from which we come.

SHAKUNTALA: That we certainly are. The question is,
can the shadows overlap? Join into one?

DUSHYANTA: Let's try.

(They try to join their shadows in the sand.)

SHAKUNTALA: Impossible. Because your shadow is bigger than mine,
even my shadow remains in your shadow, not only I.

The same goes for the worlds from which we come.

DUSHYANTA: Your world is rigid, mine is flexible, I will adapt.

SHAKUNTALA: But your world adapts only as long
as it stands to gain some advantage, then it forgets its promises,
cancels the contracts. Sometimes it admits it made a mistake,
and if necessary even apologizes. But that, as far as
your world is concerned, is that.

DUSHYANTA: We are not all the same.

SHAKUNTALA: What do you see in me, apart from the body
you'd like to possess and then most likely discard?

DUSHYANTA *(takes her hand)*: "However far you may go from me,

You shall never go from my heart,

As the shadow of the tree at evening

Never leaves its base on the eastern side."

SHAKUNTALA: The beauty of words is no proof
that they are sincere.

DUSHYANTA: How can I defend myself if your fears
continue to turn into reproaches?

SHAKUNTALA: Insofar as my reproaches are unjust I apologize.

But insofar as my fears are well-grounded,

you alone can help me abandon them.

DUSHYANTA: I'll do what I can.

SHAKUNTALA: Tell me, then: what do you see in me?

DUSHYANTA: You are a drop of water in a huge river

that has its source in the distant past and flows through time
as a chaotic incomprehensible power, unknown to itself,
unknown to others, arrogant and humble at the same time,
spiritual yet unstoppably sensual, a vortex of contrasts
in which the incredible number of gods is
the least surprising thing.

SHAKUNTALA: That's what you see in me?

DUSHYANTA: My desire to get close to you, marry you,
have you, subdue you is really an urge to subdue India,
where I have been coming for so many years
without being able to find it, because it is forever different,
forever more of everyone else than mine,
but also forever promising that some day
it will allow itself to be conquered and understood.

SHAKUNTALA: And I was hoping that I excite
the masculine part of your soul!

DUSHYANTA: O, Shakuntala, if only you knew!

SHAKUNTALA: I know very little, and I know even less about you.

DUSHYANTA: Quite often I wish that I were put together
more simply, closer to the standard human machine
for processing food into excrement; a man who likes eating
and drinking, and for whom every day turns
into a faithful copy of the previous day.

SHAKUNTALA: Careful – strong wishes have a habit
of coming true.

DUSHYANTA: And quite often I feel that my longing for a descent
onto the lower levels of feeling is really a hint from God
that obsessive wandering through a maze of doubts
is not the only way to enter his kingdom.
That there exists a special entrance for those
whose only concern are unimportant, trivial things.
A side entrance for servants.

SHAKUNTALA: And I should show you that entrance?
Is that what you want from me?

DUSHYANTA (*upset*): Why do you keep
accusing me of thoughts that my heart and mind –
as you well know – could never even conceive?

SHAKUNTALA: Because my love for you is so great,
my fear that you will take advantage of it is equally great,
perhaps too much so. You must help me.

DUSHYANTA: I'm trying! I'm trying to free you
of the ties that bind you to the ground,
so you can lift off. So we can fly together.

SHAKUNTALA: Your Majesty speaks as only kings do:
bewitchingly, using words that no woman could resist.
(*As an afterthought.*) Let alone understand.

DUSHYANTA: I've bought you a present.

(*Hands her a small paper-wrapped parcel.*)

SHAKUNTALA (*unwraps the parcel*):

Oh! Shakunta. A clay bird.

DUSHYANTA: A clay bird from which you can lure a song.

SHAKUNTALA (*hands him the bird*):

Do that for me, so I'll see how you will caress me
when I become a real bird.

(*Dushyanta takes the clay bird, which is really a flute,
and plays a gentle melody. He is joined by an invisible orchestra.
Shakuntala rises and dances. The music stops; she stops.*)

DUSHYANTA: Will you be happy if I caress you like that?

SHAKUNTALA: If you will caress me like that I will start counting
the weeks that separate us from our wedding day.

DUSHYANTA (*rises*): Weeks?!

SHAKUNTALA: Is the King impatient?

DUSHYANTA: No, but is it necessary to get your father's
permission first? Wouldn't he bless our union,
even if he heard of it later?

SHAKUNTALA: Snake-charmers are a caste with very strict rules.
Although my father has been better at taming cobras
than his daughter, I wouldn't dream of risking his anger.
And you, do you really want to be chased around India
by two thousand snake-charmers? In matters of honor
they act like one.

DUSHYANTA: Then we must find your father.

SHAKUNTALA: He'll come when Fate chooses
the appropriate moment.

DUSHYANTA: But don't forget that in Kalidasa's play,
Shakuntala and Dushyanta also married without the blessing
of her guardian Kanva.

SHAKUNTALA: Yes, and what happened? She got pregnant,
and he forgot her. It's not a good idea to repeat old stories
too closely; it's better to add a touch of originality.

DUSHYANTA (*looks at his watch*): The problem is that I should
already be somewhere else.

SHAKUNTALA: Oh? The king should be back at his court?

DUSHYANTA: I have sent Mathavya to the gathering
of holy men in Orissa where he might find my guru.
But you know how irresponsible Mathavya can be,
and this gathering could be my only chance.

SHAKUNTALA: Still looking for him, then?

DUSHYANTA: How could I not?

SHAKUNTALA: I cannot replace him?

DUSHYANTA: How can love replace wisdom?

SHAKUNTALA: You want both.

DUSHYANTA: Who does not?

SHAKUNTALA: Haven't you noticed that wisdom
has ceased to be a currency worth pursuing?

DUSHYANTA: Not for me.

SHAKUNTALA: Haven't you noticed that today's gurus
are really travel agents who know how to take
wisdom seekers thirsty across shallow waters?
Do you know that my uncle the travel agent
also has Wisdom Tour in his program?

DUSHYANTA: Why are you trying so hard to reduce my urge
to find the truth about myself and the world
to a fashionable whim whose sell-by-date is supposed to have
run out in the seventies?

SHAKUNTALA: I fear that the India you're in love with does not exist.
At least not any longer. And that you're in love with
a self-created illusion. And because I know that is so,
I fear that I may be such an illusion myself.

DUSHYANTA: You have too many fears.

SHAKUNTALA: You're leaving, then? Because I didn't instantly
fulfill your desires, you're in a hurry to be
somewhere else?

DUSHYANTA: It is true that I can't neglect my duties for long.
And because the king's duty is to rule – in my case to rule
over myself – I'll have to, in a day or two, say good-bye,
with the bitter thought that your insistence on your father's
blessing is too big an obstacle for our love
to ever come to fruition.

SHAKUNTALA: If I could be sure that this was not merely
a clever game of blackmail which men from your part of the world
are so good at playing; if I could be sure that this really *is*
the despair of love you can no longer control,
then, perhaps, I would relent.

DUSHYANTA: If the despair of love can so casually be compared
to a game of blackmail, then let it be blackmail.

SHAKUNTALA: The King is offended?

DUSHYANTA: The King is never offended, that's not in his nature.

SHAKUNTALA: Do you find my stubbornness too old-fashioned?

DUSHYANTA: Maybe so, but why not turn this on its head
and accuse me of insufferable impatience?

SHAKUNTALA (*after a pause*): Look at the waves!

Shall we go for a swim?

DUSHYANTA: Now? These waves can be dangerous, the current is
very strong. Besides, we left our swimming gear in the hotel.

SHAKUNTALA: Do we need it?

DUSHYANTA (*after pause*): What about fishermen, villagers?

SHAKUNTALA: Let's walk along the beach until we are alone.

DUSHYANTA (*looking at her*): You can't be serious.

SHAKUNTALA: The King enjoys the chase,
but when the antelope stops in flight to expose her flank
to his arrow, the King gets cold feet?

(*Blackout.*)

Act Four

MATHAVYA: If I added up all the distances we have covered so far by train, juddering south and then north again, first to the Malabar and then Coromandel coast, the final figure would represent a journey around the world. And that's not mentioning discomfort and danger! Thieves and murderers also travel by train, but can you spot them before it's too late? It would be much easier to spot the two lovers – if they still traveled on the same train, of course, which they are not, surprise, surprise! Dushyanta is on a God-knows-what train, while Shakuntala is on the same train as I. What has gone wrong? Has the king, after catching his game, simply vanished? He has, actually, I'm sorry to say. Not without an excuse, of course. Kings have their duties, and Dushyanta's duty is to find his sage. Only then will he return to claim Shakuntala. Or, as he put it, as soon as she gets her father's blessing for the marriage they contracted on a beach in Goa, he will send his friend Mathavya to fetch her. Can you imagine? That he trusts me so! Still, as we were making plans, Fate decided to arrange things somewhat differently: just as Dushyanta left for Orissa to catch up with the holy men among whom even I couldn't find his guru, I left Orissa for Goa to persuade him to give up his chase of exotic animals such as wisdom and embrace his lovely Shakuntala instead. And we missed each other. A thief on the train stole my mobile, while Dushyanta's mobile probably ran out of batteries. So we are now faced with a situation that beggars belief: he is traveling around India with a photo of his guru, asking complete strangers: have you seen this man? while Shakuntala and I are traveling around India with a photo of Dushyanta, asking people: have you seen this boy? How can things get into such a muddle?

And when I think that I will again have to postpone the launch
of my business project... (*Turns his trouser pockets inside out.*)
If you have never seen a man facing ruin, take a good look...
(*Checks himself.*) Hush, here comes Shakuntala...

Enter Shakuntala.

MATHAVYA: You look tired, my dear lady.

SHAKUNTALA: Stop calling me my dear lady,
we're the same age, more or less.

MATHAVYA: It's not age that matters: you're married to the person
for whom I would gladly perform a thousand somersaults
if that would make him a touch less unhappy.

SHAKUNTALA: He doesn't remember me any more.

MATHAVYA: You don't know that.

SHAKUNTALA: It was foretold. I offended a haughty snake charmer,
a friend of my father's, and he placed a curse on me.

MATHAVYA: How does one offend a snake charmer?

SHAKUNTALA: He walked into the travel agency where I worked
with a cobra round his neck, scaring away ten clients.
I got angry and told him to leave his snake outside.

MATHAVYA: And quite right, too.

SHAKUNTALA (*produces a handkerchief, wipes her eyes*):

"You'll see, you insolent girl," he said, "the man to whom you will
offer yourself will forget about you and go his way."

I found his words laughable at the time.

But now they've come true, don't you see?

MATHAVYA: There is no proof of that. Besides, such a curse
was a twist in the plot of Kalidasa's Shakuntala;
it's impossible for a love story to repeat itself
in every detail two thousand years later.

SHAKUNTALA: All great stories are eternal, and they're all
happening now.

MATHAVYA: What vengeful deity would condemn us
to repeating stories from the beginning of time?

SHAKUNTALA: I envy you for knowing Dushyanta
so much better than I do. Our love was too sudden, too violent
to allow us to get to know each other in the whirl of emotions.
What is he really like, can you tell me?

MATHAVYA: Unusual.

SHAKUNTALA: Don't be evasive. If you're his friend,
be mine as well.

MATHAVYA: It may seem that he has devoted his life to suffering.
But it only appears to be so. In fact he is ravaged by nothing less
than too great an urge to live.

SHAKUNTALA: He is afraid of something.

MATHAVYA: This may sound pompous, but yes, he *is* afraid.
Of death.

SHAKUNTALA: It is death that makes life possible!

MATHAVYA: I think that rationally he is aware of that.

SHAKUNTALA: Then why suffer because he'll have to die?
Why not be joyful because he's alive?

MATHAVYA: Fear is greater.

SHAKUNTALA: Let him increase the joy and there will be
less room for fear.

MATHAVYA: Nothing in the world will drown his fear of death.
Not the false joy of fools who make a racket to distract
themselves, nor the false courage of those who say
that death is merely a part of life.

SHAKUNTALA: Oh, Mathavya, what am I to do?

MATHAVYA: Let me exercise my brain a little
and offer a few suggestions.

SHAKUNTALA: Do that, please.

MATHAVYA: I'll start with the most stupid one,
and then continue with more sensible ones.
But it may turn out that the most stupid suggestion
is the *only* sensible one.

SHAKUNTALA: You're not exercising your brain,
you're playing word games.

MATHAVYA: My first suggestion is that we forget
about Dushyanta and catch the first train to Varanasi.

SHAKUNTALA: What for?

MATHAVYA: As business partners in a project that will
turn us into millionaires in less than a year.

SHAKUNTALA: I don't want to be a millionaire,
I want to be happy in love!

MATHAVYA: I want to be both. So why am I neither?

SHAKUNTALA: Which of your suggestions was this:
the stupid or the sensible one?

MATHAVYA: I'm pretty sure that Dushyanta –
when we catch up with him – would be softened by the news
that your esteemed father had blessed your union
and that, in his eyes, you had committed no sin.
Dushyanta may have vanished for fear that your father
might order his cobra to bite him.

SHAKUNTALA: O, you're no help at all!

MATHAVYA: I'm serious; he even mentioned something
to that effect.

SHAKUNTALA: Mathavya, my father *has* blessed our union.
It's true that he wasn't the happiest man alive,
but he did admit that I had chosen a man who is worthy of me.
He said he had been dreaming I was going to marry a real king,
but that someone whose name is King
is not a bad substitute.

MATHAVYA: Then the matter is settled and I see no reason
for grief, let alone panic.

SHAKUNTALA: The reason for grief, *and* panic, is here, Mathavya.
(*She places her hands on her tummy.*)

MATHAVYA: That I believe. The curry we had for lunch
must have been at least two weeks old.

SHAKUNTALA: Oh, can't you be serious for at least two seconds?

MATHAVYA (*dawning on him*):

Wait a minute... NO! Please tell me that my thoughts
are traveling in the wrong direction. Because if I follow them
I'll have to announce to the world that my friend Dushyanta
has fathered a son who will rule the world!

SHAKUNTALA: He won't, he'll be a beggar if his father
refuses to acknowledge him.

MATHAVYA: He'll be a beggar in any case, for money means
nothing in the kingdom Dushyanta inhabits.
That's why I'm hoping that this is a joke.

SHAKUNTALA: No, Mathavya, the child is growing inside me,
and his father would be the happiest man alive if he knew.

MATHAVYA: Would he? Oh, well, he may yet surprise me,
and himself in no smaller measure.

SHAKUNTALA: In short, Mathavya, where and how are we going to find the father of this baby before it is born?

MATHAVYA: I had his e-mail address. I can't remember it, but if I check my Yahoo I may still find it. And then let's hope that the magnificent king occasionally opens his Hotmail account.

SHAKUNTALA: And why haven't you thought of that before?

MATHAVYA: The usual brain fog, my lady.

SHAKUNTALA: In other words...

MATHAVYA: In other words: to the nearest internet cafe!

(Looks around.) There it is.

Blackout.

Act Five

MATHAVYA: When we in Europe run out of ideas we invent a machine. We have invented... I'll spare you the list. When Indians run out of ideas they invent a new god. That's why they have thousands, millions of them. But consider this: in spite of all that inventiveness, we have in the last two thousand years invented nothing, absolutely nothing in the field of love! What's wrong with us? Imagination fails us precisely where we need it most. As though it were possible to love, to pine, to be unhappy in one way alone. At the same time each and every one of us is convinced that his or her love is unique, exceptional and divine! And this, if Fate is sufficiently generous, a number of times! What are we made of? The only difference is that we used to write letters which were delivered by postmen, couriers and pigeons, while today we text messages and send e-mails. Faster, more economical, no room for purple prose. But emotions are exactly the same as when Kalidasa wrote

his Shakuntala: "You gave me your word, you broke your promise, I shouldn't have trusted you. You tried to create an impression that you are a king, but in fact you're a liar and a cheat." Really, I would give a few years of my life to understand this reduction of love to a few elementary feelings! Of course, considering that I'm wrong about almost everything that becomes the subject of my speculation, I could well be wrong about this as well. And heaven be praised if I am! After all even rain has been wet in the same way for the last two thousand years, yet all forms of life delight in it's freshness every time anew. And the blue sky after the rain – isn't it always the same, yet our feelings while looking at it are fresh every time? Anyway, Yahoo and Hotmail have done their bit, even hardware and software can be romantic, we have found the fugitive king, and I have brought him unhappy Shakuntala to remind him of his husbandly duties. There he sits in some curious yogic pose, absorbed in his splendor on the throne of his inner kingdom. Shakuntala has sent me ahead to make a preliminary inspection. I almost dare not speak to him...

DUSHYANTA: Come closer, Mathavya, I'm not a statue, I'm still made of flesh and blood.

MATHAVYA (*approaching*): I'm glad to hear that.

In my experience talking to statues is a pretty one-sided affair.

DUSHYANTA: I'm glad you took the trouble to look for me.

I lost my mobile, I couldn't call you.

MATHAVYA (*sits and assumes a similar posture*):

How long has your Majesty been twisting his muscles in this excruciating manner?

DUSHYANTA: Three hours a day.

MATHAVYA: Three hours a day?! And what does your Majesty want to achieve with this vengeful self-torture?

Clean conscience, perhaps?

DUSHYANTA: When will you stop playing the fool?

MATHAVYA: Isn't that why you took me along as your companion?

DUSHYANTA: Listen, Mathavya, there's something I want to tell you.
Once, in Varanasi, from where you intend to export holy water,
I looked across the Ganges to the opposite shore.
There's nothing there, you know, not even trees.
Everything's empty.

MATHAVYA: I know. On one side a vibrant city, excess of life,
and on the other hollow emptiness. And I asked myself:
why is on the other side nothing there?
Because there *is* nothing on the other side?

DUSHYANTA: Could that be the source of this gnawing fear,
this feeling of being lost in the universe?
This painful longing for a closeness which in the end always
turns into something that's not enough, because it isn't One,
because it's only a closeness between two people?

MATHAVYA: But Your Majesty, occasionally things happen
that make this chilly world slightly warmer.
Occasionally the consequences of our actions remind us
that we are very much at home in this world.

DUSHYANTA: What are you talking about?

*(In the background, Shakuntala begins to sing a mournful song,
accompanied by the flute. Dushyanta and Mathavya attentively
listen. The singing stops.)*

MATHAVYA: Ah... Even my heart, made of stone,
has been reduced to a flutter. Didn't you understand the words?

DUSHYANTA: Not entirely.

MATHAVYA (*reciting*):

“Thirsty bee, remembering
The mango's kiss of fire,
Can the simple lotus
Placate your desire?”

DUSHYANTA: I must admit that the song has touched me deeply.
Who could have sung it?

MATHAVYA: Your queen, Majesty.

DUSHYANTA: Mathavya, enough of this nonsense.

MATHAVYA: My dear friend, don't you remember the love ritual
on a beach in Goa with which you married her in all ways
except the official one? And promised you'd send for her
as soon as she obtained a blessing from her father?

DUSHYANTA: Vaguely.

MATHAVYA: Well, to save your Majesty the trouble of looking
for her all over India, your faithful friend has brought her to you.
There she waits, round the corner. May she approach?

DUSHYANTA: You should have consulted me about this.

MATHAVYA: Majesty, by agreeing to play a fool I did not
give up my right to think for myself.

DUSHYANTA: I, too, have that right, do I not?

And this concerns me. You're forcing me to face something
for which I may not be ready.

MATHAVYA: There are things which a man, especially if he
is a king, must face without being ready, otherwise he is
a king in name only.

DUSHYANTA (*after pause*): All right. Let her come.

*(He lowers his head, lost in thought. Mathavya brings
Shakuntala. They stop next to Dushyanta. Mathavya moves away.
A moment of silence.)*

SHAKUNTALA: Remember me?

DUSHYANTA (*looks at her briefly*):

Much has happened since we last saw each other.

SHAKUNTALA: More than you can imagine.

DUSHYANTA: What do you mean?

SHAKUNTALA: I've brought you a present.

DUSHYANTA: I may not deserve it. (*Shakuntala hands him
a clay bird.*) What is this?

SHAKUNTALA: The clay bird you gave me on a beach in Goa.

The sand was soft, and the moon was hanging above the sea.

DUSHYANTA: You're giving it back to me?

SHAKUNTALA: No, I want you to play on it as hauntingly
as you did on that beach.

DUSHYANTA: I can't, not any more. I have changed.

(Hands her the bird.)

SHAKUNTALA: Keep it.

DUSHYANTA: To return a present would be an insult.

You keep it.

SHAKUNTALA (*takes the bird*):

I didn't want to offend you. I was hoping you'd remember what you promised when you gave it to me.

DUSHYANTA: Wouldn't life be unbearable if we remembered everything that we promised on the spur of a moment?

SHAKUNTALA: What for you was a spur of the moment will accompany me all my life. That's why you should accept my present as a gift from God, not as punishment for a moment of pleasure.

MATHAVYA: The gods are not kind to me. Their only presents are trials.

SHAKUNTALA: Then they are kinder to you than to most people.

Trials enable us to grow. And you will grow most, not only in mine, but in the eyes of the world as well, through the trial presented to you by one of your spurs of the moment.

Still don't know what I'm talking about?

MATHAVYA: He does, he just doesn't know how to respond.

DUSHYANTA: Don't meddle in things that are none of your business.

MATHAVYA: Is your Majesty's fool not allowed to express an opinion?

SHAKUNTALA: Not only his fool, even the wife of this so-called king is allowed to express only opinions that the king, so-called, may approve of. God forbid that anyone should think differently than him.

DUSHYANTA: I feel I'm being attacked.

SHAKUNTALA: And I feel I've been abused for a fleeting moment of pleasure.

DUSHYANTA: I did not force you. In fact you were the one who lured me into the act I'm being accused of.

SHAKUNTALA: Me?

DUSHYANTA: I surrendered because the temptation was simply too great. But I made no promises, certainly not of the kind that should be honored.

SHAKUNTALA: Must you judge everyone by your own selfish heart?

You are like a well that grass has grown over, and your search
is no more than a mask to disguise the villainy
that guides you through life.

MATHAVYA: Majesty, can't you see how sincere her anger is?

SHAKUNTALA: Shut up, Mathavya, her anger is fake.

She needs a father for her illegitimate child.

SHAKUNTALA: I surrendered my virginity to you,
and now I'm the mother of an illegitimate child?

What is your son going to say when I tell him that his father
regards his mother as a slut?

MATHAVYA: I'm sorry, my friend, but if this is the enlightenment
you've been seeking, then the greatest blessing must surely be
to remain unenlightened.

DUSHYANTA: That's what you are, and that's what you will remain,
Mathavya; together with some others, here present.

SHAKUNTALA: I will not allow myself to be so humiliated.

The only reason I still haven't left is my stubborn hope
that there is something wrong with my hearing,
or that any time now I will awake from this bad dream.

DUSHYANTA: Why must I listen to these indignities?

SHAKUNTALA: How could I have been so naive?

I'm leaving. (*Turns to go.*)

DUSHYANTA: Shakuntala... (*Shakuntala turns.*)

I'll try to explain. And please don't bite my head off
as soon as I open my mouth, allow me to finish.

SHAKUNTALA: Then speak up and finish.

DUSHYANTA: Remember how on that beach in Goa
you suggested we walk along the border of the shadow
thrown on the sand by the palms?

SHAKUNTALA: Yes.

DUSHYANTA: It was then that I realized for the first time
that we come from irreconcilable worlds and are naive
to think that this can't affect our union.

SHAKUNTALA: What else am I going to hear?

DUSHYANTA: Although I'm delving deep into the spiritual
mysteries of the world in which you've grown up,
and although my understanding of these mysteries
is helping me to discover – and nurture – what is best in me,

which brings me inner peace and self-confidence,
I still belong, and always will, to a different world.
To the world that has other dispositions for feeling,
thinking and acting. In spite of the attraction we felt
for each other at a given moment we are divided by
two thousand years of history, and any attempt to bridge
this gap would only make matters worse:
what is now disappointment, perhaps even pain,
would later turn into despair. Should we not save
ourselves such a fate?

SHAKUNTALA: Thank you, Professor. An excellent lecture.
Coming with me, Mathavya, or staying?

(Mathavya looks at Dushyanta, hesitates.)

MATHAVYA: Coming. And staying. Both.

Is that possible? I think not. So I have to decide.
And if I can't? O, misery, if only I knew what I want
at least once in life! But I don't. What am I to do?

*(Shakuntala gives Dushyanta one last look, turns and leaves.
Mathavya hurries after her, stops, follows her with his gaze.
Turns and comes back.)*

DUSHYANTA: Tell me something, my friend.
Are you the father of this child?

*(Mathavya approaches Dushyanta and slaps his face.
They stand, looking at each other.)*

Blackout.

Act Six

MATHAVYA: Time, how it flies! Don't you feel it was only half a minute ago that the court jester slapped the King's face? I'm sure you do. But in actual fact that incident took place a year and a half ago! Who could understand the enigma of stage illusion? And nothing much happened in between! Well, I did actually launch my business project and started to export holy water from the River Ganges to Britain and the U. S. With the help of greedy local and overseas merchants I managed to cast my net so far and wide that the business runs smoothly, more smoothly even than the holy river itself. We fill the bottles, plastic of course, near Rishikesh, at the foot of the Himalayas, where the water is still unblemished by human excrement. And who would have thought that the business would be such a success! If I didn't know myself as well as I do, I would now be a proud man indeed! And what of Shakuntala, you'll want to know, and of her lover Dushyanta? Well, some women, when they decide to vanish, vanish completely, and that's what she did. Dushyanta, meanwhile, is traveling around India looking for his guru, surprise, surprise. At least he is not short of endurance, if completely lacking in common sense. It's true that I'm partly responsible, because I keep sending him money that makes his wandering possible, but what are friends for? Besides, I'm ashamed of myself for losing my calm and slapping him in a public place. By sending him money I'm trying to lessen the burden of guilt. I think he has figured that out and has become quite adept at extracting more than I'm willing to give.

But the main thing is that we are still friends.
And everything would have remained like that if yesterday,
here, in Varanasi, where I have the seat of my company,
I hadn't come across a scene that blew me off my feet.
I didn't dare approach, I discreetly snapped
a few pictures from behind a pillar.
One of the photos (*pulls a photograph from his pocket*)
I carry with me, for the image is out of this world.
I sent a message to Dushyanta, asking him to come
here immediately. When he sees this photograph...

(*Dushyanta approaches, Mathavya hides the photograph.*)

DUSHYANTA: What happened, Mathavya? Have you had
an accident? Were you robbed, have you gone bankrupt?
MATHAVYA: I've gone bankrupt. Can you lend me some money?
DUSHYANTA (*confused, reaches inside his pocket*):
I can give you back some of the money you lent me.
MATHAVYA: No, I need *your* money, the more the better.
DUSHYANTA: But where can I get it?
My uncle has stopped sending checks, my aunt has died,
my mother has lost her job, my father has taken to drinking.
As for friends, I have only one, and to this one I would give
all I have, but I haven't got what he needs.
MATHAVYA: Come here and let me give you a hug.

(*Dushyanta advances, they embrace.*)

DUSHYANTA: Can't tell you how sorry I am.
Has the business collapsed?
MATHAVYA: Business is booming. I asked you to come
because I want to show you something.
(*Hands him the photograph.*)
DUSHYANTA (*stares at the photo, hands it back to Mathavya*):
Excellent photomontage.
MATHAVYA (*presses the photo back in Dushyanta's hand*):
Don't disappoint me, my friend, otherwise I *will* stop
sending you money. I took this picture yesterday.

DUSHYANTA: I'm sorry, but such a scene is impossible.

MATHAVYA: Of course it's impossible! That's why it's true!

Look: a baby boy in a wicker basket,
a cobra's head moving from left to right above his head,
the cobra's eyes fixed on the boy's mother
who sits in front of the basket,
playing a tune on the flute in the shape of a clay bird, shakunta.
Does she remind you of anyone?

DUSHYANTA: Maybe...

MATHAVYA: Maybe?! And the baby boy, does *he* remind you
of anyone?

DUSHYANTA: A little baby resembles everyone.

MATHAVYA: Don't you care how your wife makes a living
to keep your son alive?

DUSHYANTA: We are not married.

MATHAVYA: Marriage is not a piece of paper. Marriage is an act
that creates new life.

DUSHYANTA: Stop moralizing.

MATHAVYA: Look, the boy is embracing the cobra and smiling.
Even I am proud of him, although I'm only his father's friend.

DUSHYANTA: How do you know she makes a living like that?

MATHAVYA: I have seen passersby throwing coins in her basket,
I have seen tourists being photographed with the boy,
handing his mother banknotes.

DUSHYANTA (*placing his hands on his head*):

Mathavya, I'm confused, I need a moment to pull myself together.

MATHAVYA: So would I, if this happened to me.

DUSHYANTA (*looking at the photo*):

How sweet, how warm her smile is!

MATHAVYA (*aside*): Something has moved inside this piece of wood.

DUSHYANTA: You simply have no idea how it was.

How even at the beginning there was no doubt that we were
not meant for each other. How the jealous gods actually
killed us on that beach.

MATHAVYA: Sounds too poetic for a hard-faced businessman
like myself; but I will listen.

DUSHYANTA: When she suggested that we go swimming
in the nude I noticed a strange quiver in her voice:

the tense anticipation of someone waiting in the corridor
to be wheeled into the operating room.

MATHAVYA: More clinical than poetic, but never mind.

DUSHYANTA: Although it was I who was in desperate need
of anesthesia. On the way to the part of the beach where
it would be safe to swim in the nude, my feet got into
such a muddle that I nearly stumbled and fell.

MATHAVYA: And then?

(Steals a glance at his watch.)

DUSHYANTA: And then we went swimming.

MATHAVYA: Good.

DUSHYANTA: The sun was dancing on the crests of the waves.

MATHAVYA: How romantic! East meets West in the warm
waters of the Arabian Sea.

DUSHYANTA: And when we came out... we just stood there,
in the sand. Caressed by the sun. Surrounded by the sounds
of the ocean. Loved by the stormy wind. Wet.

MATHAVYA: Yes, how unusual.

DUSHYANTA: Frightened. And we looked at each other.
Only in the eyes.

MATHAVYA: Only in the eyes?

DUSHYANTA: As if an invisible force had glued them together
and we could not lower them. As if there was a world
below our shoulders that didn't belong to us. As if all that
had been taken from us two thousand years ago
and chiseled in hundreds of poses of shameless passion
into the walls of temples at Khajuraho.

MATHAVYA: Frozen in stone for eternity.

DUSHYANTA: As if our love was only a shadow, a pale shadow
of that first, unique and only true passion in the universe:
between Shiva and Shakti. As if we were condemned to
a mere repetition of it, to a replay that would satisfy
neither us nor the gods watching over us.

MATHAVYA: And then?

DUSHYANTA: We sat down in the sand. Staring across the sea.
Then we lay on our backs, staring at the emptiness of the sky.
Our movements were synchronized – as if our souls had joined
because our bodies could not.

MATHAVYA: And then?

DUSHYANTA: Then we turned toward each other, eyes closed.
Then, slowly, both at the same time, we opened them to look
at each other. And we did. For millions of years.
We just looked at each other, exchanging gifts of our
immense sorrow.

MATHAVYA: But in spite of that sorrow the boy, conceived
no doubt by the Holy Ghost, appears to be
a cheerful little fellow.

DUSHYANTA: Mathavya, you don't understand me.

MATHAVYA: Maybe I don't.

DUSHYANTA: Whatever happened after that, happened as if
by itself. We just felt that there was no better way
of saying good-bye to each other. *(Pause.)*

DUSHYANTA: You don't believe me? I have her letters. Here...
(Pulls some letters from his shoulder bag.)
I carry them with me day and night. I often read them
until I fall asleep. *(Hands the letters to Mathavya.)*

MATHAVYA *(unfolds the first letter and reads)*:

"My dear... Forgive me, but I can't go on. I must, I simply
must hand you over to India which my presence has obscured
like a mist through which you cannot see... One night,
when you're asleep, I shall silently kiss you on the forehead,
gather my things and disappear... Please don't look for me."

DUSHYANTA: Well?

MATHAVYA *(reads another letter)*:

"I was attracted by the wound in your soul,
which is the wound of all the people in this godless world,
although few are brave enough to show it... You are...
I felt it was my duty to help you heal it."

DUSHYANTA: Do you understand now?

MATHAVYA *(reads another letter)*:

"My dear stranger, my own heart which has become
a stranger to me... We come from different worlds,

and ever since meeting we walk on the edge of a precipice
we both fear, although the world lies hidden in its depths
may well be the one in which we could live as one...”

DUSHYANTA: There is no such world, and we can't live as one.

MATHAVYA (*reads one more letter*):

“I fear that what you're looking for isn't accessible,
however closely it may be staring you in the face...”
(*Folds the letters and hands them back to Dushyanta.*)
The girl is wrong. And you even more so. What you're
looking for is accessible and will be knocking at the door
of your conscience until it breaks the last of the hundred
security locks you have placed on it.

DUSHYANTA: That's not true, Mathavya!

(*He buries his face in his hands, shivering.*)

MATHAVYA (*kneels beside him, puts his arm round his shoulder*):

What's wrong, my friend?

DUSHYANTA: Can't you see?

MATHAVYA: There are things that remain hidden even to
royal fools.

DUSHYANTA: If I had half the power of Dushyanta
in Kalidasa's play, I would forbid the celebration of spring.
I would forbid the flowers to bloom, and trees to turn buds
into leaves, and birds to disturb my sorrow by singing.
Can't you understand how I miss her, how ashamed I am
for not believing her when she came looking for me?
How ashamed that this golden boy must go around
begging to survive, while his mother... Oh!

(*He buries his face in his hands and cries.*)

MATHAVYA: My dearest friend, a man is never greater
than when he admits he is ashamed.

Once again you're a king. I pay my respects. (*He bows.*)

DUSHYANTA: Don't be silly, Mathavya.

MATHAVYA: Would your Majesty prefer a fool
who is deadly serious?

DUSHYANTA: At least for a moment.

MATHAVYA: Then I will be.

(Assumes an expression of dead seriousness.)

And I seriously tell you with all the responsibility
of a serious man who is aware of the seriousness of the
situation that there exists a remedy for your sorrow.

(Dushyanta looks at him.)

(Blackout.)

Act Seven

MATHAVYA: And so here we go again,
crisscrossing India from left to right and upside down.
In much greater comfort, of course: now we have money!
Amazing, the things that the holy water can finance!
Well, to be honest, and no offence, this Indian Ambassador
is not really a Mercedes. And even it were, there are
Indian roads, of which I shall speak in more detail
when I come to write my memoirs from hell.
As for my friend Dushyanta – well, hard to believe,
but he has become immune to heat, dust and pain.
He wouldn't object if a tired elephant decided to rest
on top of him. His eyes are ablaze as never before,
and he is in the grip of an obsession again,
only this time he calls it love.
And not just love as any love, but real love!
Still, I know him only too well: his every passion
is a fanatical fire that consumes itself because it can't
find a direction. Dushyanta is at odds with himself.
How could he not be, since he is not one, but two?
The first one would like to be a dignified academic,
telling us all what to do. The second one would like to

quarrel with the first one, make fun of his pompous manner,
show him up for a liar. The first one would like to
bang on the table, and judge, and be always right.
He is happiest in a safe ring of abstract ideas,
mixed together from pieces of other abstract ideas.
The second one would prefer to dance and ignore
other people's ideas. He would just like to play.
He would like to experience life, not lecture about it.
Such is my friend Dushyanta; much more complicated
than I, who, as you may have noticed, am so transparent
that on a clear day you can see through me from afar.
But still everything turns out to be my fault...
There he comes, you'll see...

(Dushyanta approaches, gazing at the photograph.)

DUSHYANTA *(to himself)*:

Surely the god of my journey didn't make our paths cross
so that we could give each other false pleasures:
sweet sexual bonbons that disappear so quickly,
leaving an aftertaste reminiscent of nothing.
Surely she came into my life to guide me towards the edge
of the precipice from which I could throw myself
into the abyss – and float. *(Stares into distance.)*
And now she isn't there.

MATHAVYA *(coughing to attract Dushyanta's attention)*:

Your Majesty, I know that the opinion of your jester is not
all that important, but still, I would venture to say that we could
do what we're doing in a more sensible manner.

DUSHYANTA: What's that, Mathavya?

MATHAVYA: Recently I read somewhere that the snake charmers
of India are a dying breed; according to some sources
their numbers are down to a million.

DUSHYANTA: Are you joking?

MATHAVYA: No, only a million of them left. That means that
in a hundred, two hundred years there won't be any.

DUSHYANTA: I'd have been surprised to hear that there were
a thousand of them!

MATHAVYA: There may be a thousand gurus who are not frauds.

Does your Majesty remember how difficult it was, and still is,
to find one among the thousand? Now try to imagine how easy
it will be to find one person among a million snake charmers.

DUSHYANTA: That certain person is a woman, Mathavya,
and she carries in her basket a cobra and a child.

No one who sees them will ever forget them.

MATHAVYA: I certainly won't.

DUSHYANTA: How could you... just take their picture from
behind a pillar? Why didn't you walk up to her, ask her how
she found herself in such a predicament?

MATHAVYA: Majesty, how could a court jester approach a woman
that his king rejected, sent off, turned his back on –
what news could I give her? That I bring no hope?

DUSHYANTA: Oh, Mathavya, what am I to do?

(Drops to his knees, stares at the photograph.)

I wish this cobra would sink its fangs in my heart.

MATHAVYA *(patting his shoulder)*:

Now, now, the king must create the impression of being in charge.

DUSHYANTA: From the moment we met

she has acted on me like a light, guiding and leading
me astray at the same time. But finally I have ceased to believe
that my salvation lies with my guru. I simply must agree with her
that my true goal is not the teacher from five years ago.

My true goal is God. Who is in me. Who is I.

MATHAVYA *(alarmed)*: Does your Majesty intend to change
his surname to God?

DUSHYANTA: I must wash my soul, which the world has
made dirty, I told her right at the beginning. I must recharge
my life's battery. Mathavya, all those feeble-minded metaphors
contain a shocking measure of truth. I must, I simply must
chisel the image of god from the piece of wood that I am,
because the time's not standing still, the sun is sinking,
soon there will be night, and then it will be too late.

MATHAVYA: Which is the reason I want you to listen to me.

DUSHYANTA *(stares at the photograph)*:

Oh, I have smudged her beautiful face with my sweaty fingers!

Why must I destroy the greatest gift ever received from the gods?

MATHAVYA: Majesty, it's only a photograph.

DUSHYANTA: My memory is filled with millions of her smiles,
thousands of her seductive looks, hundreds of her faces,
all of them merging into one desire: that we could bring up
our son together, making sure he would turn into the sort
of man his father tried to become but failed.
She is what I have been looking for.
Why do I know that only now
when she isn't here?

MATHAVYA: Have you considered the possibility that,
after all the injustices suffered, Shakuntala may not want to
bring up the boy with someone
who has been claiming that he isn't his father?

DUSHYANTA: But what is there left for me if that happens?

MATHAVYA: Surely there is a village somewhere in the world
where you could be the leader of the local council,
or even a smaller town where you could be mayor.

DUSHYANTA: Then my urge to find meaning in the world
will become quite unbearable.

MATHAVYA: I would advise Your Majesty against that.
Why go on serving this terrible fire in your mind
which continues to force you into the deserts of the spirit
where vociferous battles are fought for very modest gains:
for the understanding of oneself, for a hint of some
transcendental meaning that may or may not be present
beyond the emptiness of the world?

DUSHYANTA: Sometimes I ask myself which of us is the king,
and which the fool.

MATHAVYA: We may be both, although right now
more fools than kings, because what we are doing
is taking us nowhere.

DUSHYANTA: What do you suggest?

MATHAVYA: Where have we seen the greatest number
of snake charmers? Near the temples. When?
During religious festivals. Surely there must be a list
of these festivals on the internet, together with a list
of temples at which they are celebrated.

Once we have that information we can hire ten detectives,
lie down in the shade of a tree and wait for their call.

DUSHYANTA: Sherlock Holmes looking for Shakuntala?

MATHAVYA: Anything wrong with that?

DUSHYANTA: I will not look for my love, let alone son,
with the help of detectives. I will trust intuition and Fate.
One day soon I will hear the gentle sound of the clay bird,
and then I will know that my life has begun.

MATHAVYA: And what shall we do in the meantime?

DUSHYANTA: Carry on looking.

From temple to temple, as you suggested.

MATHAVYA: Does your Majesty realize how many temples
there are in India? The chance that all four of us would
find ourselves in front of the same temple on the same day
is one in a million.

DUSHYANTA: If we are repeating the story of an ancient drama,
are we not entitled to as many coincidences
as the original characters?

MATHAVYA: That play has too many coincidences!

It's also full of gods who are putting things right.
Nowadays gods no longer have any influence. Besides,
if they wanted to help us they would've done so already.

DUSHYANTA: Mathavya, go and return to your business.

*I made a mistake, I must put it right, I am the one
who mustn't evade his duty. You are free.*

MATHAVYA: Exactly, Your Majesty: I am free to serve you.

And also to give you a piece of advice when you are
deserted by common sense.

DUSHYANTA: If common sense ruled our lives
we would never fall in love, we would never have children;
we would die out. Stay with me if you want to,
but stop badgering me.

MATHAVYA: Should I stop doing something that gives me
pleasure? I won't. And I'll stay, to see how the story ends.

DUSHYANTA: Happily.

MATHAVYA: I'm not sure. I believe it's all part of
your favorite game "I imagine". We are so immersed in it
that we can no longer tell a dream from reality.

DUSHYANTA: Maybe so.

MATHAVYA: Then why not imagine that any time now
we shall hear the soft whistle of the clay bird and
the sweet voice of your dear Shakuntala?

DUSHYANTA: I'm not sure.

MATHAVYA: What can we lose by trying?

Shall we close our eyes?

(They close their eyes and "imagine." Suddenly we hear the sound of the clay bird and Shakuntala's voice, singing a mournful song. Dushyanta and Mathavya open their eyes and exchange astonished glances. The song continues, then stops.)

DUSHYANTA: Do me a favor, Mathavya. Slap my face.

MATHAVYA: On one condition. That you slap mine equally hard.

(They face each other and slap each other's face.)

DUSHYANTA: We do not appear to be dreaming.

MATHAVYA *(rubbing his face)*: It certainly doesn't feel like that.

DUSHYANTA: Would you do me another favor, Mathavya?

Would you step round the corner and check if you're going to see what we think you're going to see?

MATHAVYA: And if I do?

DUSHYANTA: Then bring me my wife and child so I can ask their forgiveness.

(Mathavya goes off. Dushyanta sinks to his knees, raises his hands and prays.)

DUSHYANTA: "Why does my arm throb? I desire no one.

I am alone and sad: my joys have left me."

(Mathavya returns; he looks uncertain and worried.)

DUSHYANTA: Tell me the truth.

MATHAVYA: The news is not good.

Is your Majesty strong enough to survive it?

DUSHYANTA: She doesn't want to see me.

MATHAVYA: Worse than that. I have no courage to tell you.

DUSHYANTA: You have no right to remain silent about things that concern me!

MATHAVYA: Your little son, of whom you have seen
only a photograph, is no longer with us.
He was bitten by the cobra with which his mother
carried him around in a basket.

DUSHYANTA (*recovering from the shock*):
I knew, oh, how I knew that she should not have been
doing that! What on earth had gotten into her head, stupid
woman...
Oh, I can't believe it! (*Sinks to his knees.*)

MATHAVYA: Majesty...

DUSHYANTA: Leave me alone, Mathavya, because I, too,
want to die.

MATHAVYA: As an enlightened person –

DUSHYANTA: To hell with enlightenment! You were right.
In truth I have always wanted only what I have now lost.
I want to die.

*(Shakuntala appears in the background.
Mathavya sees her, Dushyanta doesn't.)*

MATHAVYA: There is always Shakuntala, who needs you
more than ever...

DUSHYANTA: What can she possibly mean to me,
now that there is no child? She would always remind me
of him, we would both be unhappy.

(Shakuntala lowers her head and withdraws.)

MATHAVYA: You will live to regret your hasty words.

DUSHYANTA (*rising*): To regret, yes...
To regret all the mistakes a man is capable of making
in his short life, all stupid thoughts he is capable of
mistaking for eternal truths, all the wrong moves in which
he is capable of seeing the fruits of maturity –

MATHAVYA: Of which the move you're contemplating
would be the least mature of all.

DUSHYANTA: How can you know, Mathavya?
How can you know, since you have never experienced
infinite love? How can you know what a sea of

contradictions it is? How you are no more than a cork
on the crest of an ocean wave, thrown this way and that,
thrown at your own face, at your eyes, at your teeth?

MATHAVYA: Yes, all that is alien o me...

DUSHYANTA: Mathavya, go. Go and tell her that

I forgive her for carrying my son around with a snake
in the basket; tell her that only together can we forgive
each other all the stupid mistakes we made.

(Mathavya leaves, Dushyanta sinks to his knees.)

Oh God! What is happening?

(Mathavya returns, this time really shocked.)

MATHAVYA: Your Majesty... I don't know how to tell you...

Shakuntala must have overheard your words:
that she means nothing to you now that the child is dead.
She has, in utter despair, pressed the cobra to her heart
and died of its bite.

DUSHYANTA *(rising)*:

Then it's over. Then I, too, must press the snake to my heart.

(Walks off.)

MATHAVYA: Your Majesty, no!

*(Mathavya remains standing. The concluding music starts.
It remains in the background.)*

MATHAVYA: According to the rules of Sanskrit drama,
this story should have a happy ending. But wherever we go,
we Europeans, we bring with us our own motivations,
our own plots, which overrule local stories.
I shall probably never know how great my own contribution is
to the fact that a classical Indian play is ending
with a Shakespearean muddle. I just tried to help.
Shakuntala – that's women for you – wanted to know
if Dushyanta would love her even if there was no child.
So she asked me to tell him a lie:
that the boy had been bitten by the snake.
The result you know. Both parents dead, the child alive.
(Pause.) How stupid great tragedies really are, don't you agree?

I don't want to sound clever, but I think it could
all be different. Maybe little Dushyanta –
for such is the name given to him by his mother –
will one day realize that we all live under the same sky,
and that differences among us are as unimportant
as dandruff on the head of a bedbug.

(Pause.) I never imagined I'd be taking care
of an infant who survived the death
of his over-passionate parents. But who else will
look after him? What are friends for?

Besides, one never knows:
the boy may teach me a thing or two.

(The concluding music surges into the foreground.

Mathavya picks up his backpack and leaves.

*On the screen we see him put a little baby boy on his shoulder
and walk down a deserted street.*

Lights slowly fade into darkness. The music stops.)

The Play

Shakuntala 2012 is not a realistic play, but it does have realistic touches and ironic inserts that make it accessible to today's viewers. It is conceived as a series of stylized interchanges. The work is written in free verse and takes the form of a modern tragicomedy. It is a plea for tolerant coexistence between different nations and cultures, but it is also a veiled condemnation of the global cultural imperialism that subjugates everything that is "other" and "different" to its own interpretation. On the other hand, it tries to reinterpret and understand the meaning of "love." The reinterpretation of the play, loosely based on *The Recognition of Shakuntala* by Kalidasa, is two-fold. On the external level, it is a contemporary attempt to replay the best-known love story of classical India in the framework of our present-day reality, with the characteristics of the original characters transposed into three rather ordinary people of today with all the paraphernalia of everyday life. On the level of the plot, the classical story is reinterpreted, at first half-jokingly and then for real, by the two leading characters because they happen to have the same names as the original characters, each with their own cultural references.

Playwright's note

I believe that the past (as we interpret it) and the present (as we experience it) are mysteriously intertwined, presenting a continuous picture of our human concerns. That is why, in my plays, I tend to draw on literary tradition as much as on my own feelings and thoughts about our contemporary dilemmas. I did that with my previous play, *Antigone Now*, where I reworked the best-known Western classical play, *Antigone* by Sophocles, in the light of the prevalent neoliberal capitalist reality to show how political power (and its abuse) and individual will (or its abuse) have changed in the last two thousand years. In the same way I have used *Shakuntala*, essentially a story about love between two people who are not perceived to be equals, to show the misunderstandings between East and West, two cultures that still fail to achieve a fruitful symbiosis. In the final analysis, *Shakuntala 2012* is a condemnation of blind Western superiority.

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