

Inspiration for Sethu

By Raneer Ramaswamy

I visited Bali in 1998 and was blown away by the Kecak, a performance by a hundred men which is a vocal tradition of chanting the cak or monkey chant while seated in a circle and moving the upper body constantly. The Balinese dancers perform Ramayana inside the circle. This was the inspiration around Sethu commissioned by the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis in 2004. I wanted to work with a Balinese artist who would train the local Minnesotans to be the chorus around Ragamala dancers who perform the Ramayana for "Bhavayami Raguraman." I visited I. Deva Putu Berata from the Cudamani ensemble in Bali and invited him to Minneapolis with five cakkars. They trained forty American men for a month and the performance took place in the sculpture garden with an Indian orchestra, collaborating with a Javanese gammlon and thecak chorus. Deva played Hanuman, the monkey god. The five Indonesian performers performed as the Lakshman Rekha, the trees in Panchavati, the demons in Ravana's garden and the monkeys building the bridge. The musicians came walking across the bridge playing their instruments over the freeway to the sculpture garden, where a huge stage was erected and a large fire pit was lit. Sethu attracted 5000 audience members for over two nights.