



Satyagraha

Philip Glass

Satyagraha is a Sanskrit word meaning 'powerful truth'. It was coined by Mohandas Gandhi to sum up his idea that truth is so powerful that, if it is offered to people, firmly and lovingly, it will eventually prevail. Of course you may get beaten up in the process...

Gandhi was the father of the Indian independence movement, and led his followers in a programme of non co-operation and disobedience to the British rulers of India, tempered by complete non violence. (In practise this often meant collapsing on the ground as you were arrested and forcing the police to carry you off). Other protest groups were inspired by him and, in England, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament brought London to a standstill in the 1960s, when they sat down (in their hundreds) across the traffic lanes. In spite of these tactics, the CND was never particularly successful, but Gandhi and his movement liberated India from British rule, and passed the torch of *satyagraha* on to Martin Luther King in America. King, in his turn, insisted that the fight for Civil Liberties in the USA should be waged without violence and, though he was eventually assassinated, his movement too prevailed.

Where did this idea come from? Well one line goes all the way back to Jesus Christ, who told His followers to 'love your enemies' and who allowed Himself to be arrested and murdered by the authorities. The Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, was convinced that Jesus called all Christians to be pacifists (people who will never fight, whatever the provocation) and you'll discover that Tolstoy turns up in the opera *Satyagraha*, along with Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and an Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore and Gandhi were fellow Hindus and, when Gandhi said, "There are many causes for which I am prepared to die, none for which I am prepared to kill," he spoke as a Hindu saint. However, for Gandhi, pacifism was a positive creed – he didn't fight because he *loved* his enemies.

South Africa

Gandhi hammered out this philosophy while working as a young barrister in South Africa. In one of his early cases he realised that, though his client was probably going to win, going to court would bankrupt both him and his opponent. He got the men to talk, compromise, make a deal – and they ended up friends for life. In the same way, while he was leading the movement to implement decent working conditions for Indian workers in South Africa, Gandhi refused to be implacable with the British authorities. His Indian supporters brought the mines to a standstill and the railwaymen (seeing their opportunity) went on strike as well. The country was threatened with total ruin, but Gandhi refused to back the railwaymen: he said it was wrong to bring an

enemy to his knees in that way. What both sides needed was self-respect, and a deal. He got it.

Philip Glass

The composer of *Satyagraha*, Philip Glass, is usually thought of as a 'minimalist' composer - somebody who weaves short tunes, arpeggios and tiny musical phrases into a musical whole by a series of seemingly endless repetitions. Glass himself hates the term 'minimalist', but he's probably too realistic to get bothered by the way his work is described. He started his professional career working as a plumber (in the daytime) and a cab driver (at night) to finance the ensemble of seven musicians who played his work. Their concerts were performed on the top floors of buildings in Manhattan's Soho district and Glass remembered how, "People would climb six flights of stairs for a concert. We'd be lucky if we attracted 25 people to one, luckier still if half of them remained..." But slowly people began to take to his music and Glass's opera, *Einstein on the Beach*, played to a crowded theatre for its two performances at New York's main opera house, The Met.

Minimalist Opera

Einstein was the first of Glass's operas about people who have changed the world: the other two are *Akhmaten* (an Egyptian pharaoh) and *Satyagraha*. All three operas present their story in a series of scenes. They are not always in chronological order, and often broken up with musical interludes or choruses in exotic languages (such as Ancient Egyptian or Sanskrit) but, like Glass's music, the whole mixture eventually begins to make sense.

The Opera deals with the time Gandhi spent in South Africa (from 1893 to 1914) and his fight to repeal the 'Black Act', a law that restricted the movement of non-Europeans from place to place and virtually enslaved the entire Indian community. The main characters are **Gandhi** (tenor), his wife **Kasturbai** (mezzo soprano), his secretary **Miss Schlesen** (soprano) and various colleagues. Amongst Gandhi's sympathisers **Mrs Alexander** (mezzo soprano) stands out: she saves him from a stone-throwing mob by protecting him under her umbrella and marching him back to her house. Watching events from above are two sacred characters from the Hindu scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Prince **Arjuna** (baritone) and Lord **Krishna** (bass) and three silent characters, **Tolstoy**, **Tagore** and **Martin Luther King**.

Act I.

A mythological battle is about to take place: above the earth Arjuna and Krishna look down to watch the struggle, while Tolstoy placidly works at his desk. As the light gets brighter we see the armies on stage are made up of ordinary Indians and Europeans: Gandhi walks between the troops, singing.

Tolstoy Farm 1910

The movement that supported Gandhi's resistance in South Africa was not a political party, but a commune. Gandhi encouraged his followers to work with their hands, build their own houses and do their own cooking. In this scene we watch him and his colleagues build a farm house.

The Satyagraha Vow 1906

The British Government proposed to pass the 'Black Act'. It demanded that all Indians (men, women and children) would have to have their finger prints taken and be prepared to be checked up on at any time by the police. 3,000 Indians vowed to resist the Act, by refusing to register, and to continue to resist even if it meant their death. Gandhi warned them that only a vow made to God Himself would enable the protestors to keep their word. One of Gandhi's colleagues, Rustomji (bass) speaks to the protestors – who raise their hands, one by one, as they take the *Satyagraha Vow*.

Act II

This act is watched over by Tagore.

Rescue 1896

Gandhi took six months off to go back to India and publicise the conditions under which the Indians in Africa worked. Needless to say, when he returned to Durban he found an angry and violent crowd ready to receive him... Mrs Alexander, the wife of the local police superintendent, rescues him.

Indian Opinion 1906

One of Gandhi's most useful aids to promoting *satyagraha* was *Indian Opinion*, a weekly newspaper. It was extremely honest, even pointing out the weaknesses of the *satyagraha* movement, but was trusted by everybody in consequence. As it took no advertising, the paper could only survive if its poverty stricken subscribers bought it regularly. This of course meant that everybody did their best to ensure that the paper got produced and distributed and, in this scene, we watch the settlers at Tolstoy farm set up and hand round the paper, supervised by Gandhi. The scene ends with a three minute orchestral interlude, as the printing press runs alone on stage.

Protest 1908

Indians who refused to register were threatened with deportation. However Gandhi and his followers swelled the ranks of the deportees, by defying the Government en masse. Gaols and court rooms were soon full to overflowing and the Government had to find a compromise. They said that if Indians voluntarily registered, they would not pass the Black Act. The Indians agreed – and were stunned to discover the Government intended to pass the Act anyway. The opera picks up from the moment when Gandhi calls a prayer meeting and the newly registered Indians burn their registration cards in a gigantic cauldron.

Act III

The last scene of the opera returns us to the mythological battlefield of the first: it is watched over by Martin Luther King.

The Newcastle March 1913.

Further outrages by the Government provoked the Newcastle strike. A deputation of *satyagraha* women journeyed to Newcastle (the South African town – not the English!) to encourage a strike amongst the mine workers and invite the miners and their families to join the *satyagraha* ‘army’. This force, armed only with clothes and blankets, would confront the army of police and politicians who would demand their registration papers as they marched across the Transvaal.

The chorus enter singing and are taken off, in groups, by policemen. Gandhi urges them to resist – non violently. Left with a few loyal supporters, Gandhi settles down for the night and, as they sleep, he studies his friends’ faces by the light of his lantern. In the starry sky behind, the *satyagraha* army reappears. We see them for about 15 seconds, in silence, as the stage lights fade out.

Sarah Lenton © 2007

Copyright ENO Baylis. These pages are for educational use only and may not be published in any form without permission from ENO Baylis.

ENO Baylis
London Coliseum, St Martin’s Lane, London WC2N 4ES
Telephone +44 (0)20 7632 8484 Fax +44 (0)20 7845 9443
email baylis@eno.org www.eno.org/baylis

eno baylis

creativity | access | participation

English National Opera's Education Team