



DREXEL UNIVERSITY

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College of Media Arts & Design

Dean's Office of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Anti-Racism

SULTANS AND SOLDIERS

How Two Indian Muslim Kings Energized the Revolutionary War

A Global Theatre Project in collaboration with the [Bangalore Little Theatre](#) located in the city of Bangalore, state of Karnataka, India

Created by Prof. Jeffrey Stanley (jstanley@drexel.edu), Visiting Assistant Teaching Professor, Department of Cinema & Television, Screenwriting & Playwriting Program

SNAPSHOT OF THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The American Revolution began with skirmishes in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts in 1775. France entered the war on the American side three years later, making the conflict international in scale. The war effectively ended after the French army ensured our victory over General Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781, with formal surrender and the war's end coming in 1783.

Simultaneous to the Revolutionary War, the British East India Company was fighting the Anglo-Mysore Wars in southern India and had allied itself with native Maratha warriors. Together they fought against native forces led by the Sultan of Mysore **Hyder Ali**, and his son **Tipu Sultan**, aka "the Tiger of Mysore." Hyder Ali's aim was to expel the British from India and unite the Indian princely states into a single nation. In success, he would have dealt a death blow to British designs on the Indian subcontinent.

Indeed, one could make the case that the British didn't so much lose against the American colonists as realize they had bigger fish to fry by redirecting their military resources to taking over the vast wealth of the whole of India. Our 13 colonies seemed like small potatoes by comparison, as rival European empires were also setting their sights on India.

Here's where things get really cool, historically speaking: the father-son duo of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan were getting military assistance from the **French** at the same time that France was assisting **George Washington's** Continental Army. The Revolutionary War's leaders, our so-called Founding Fathers, knew about Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan and vice versa through this French connection. The letters among these three parties confirm the relationship. In 1775 when our war against the British was just getting started, these two Indian rulers had already beaten the British in the First Anglo-Mysore War. By the time the British surrendered to the US in 1783, the Second Anglo-Mysore War was underway and the British would again be defeated.

When the Revolutionary War ended, many celebrations were held throughout the colonies including one at a church in Trenton, New Jersey. This gathering saw 13 toasts being offered to the heroes who'd won the war, including one to Hyder Ali.

And in 1782, although the war was all but over the British Navy still ruled the seas, often seizing our ships and looting our goods. One such ship, the *George Washington*, was captured by the British, renamed the *General Monk*, and placed into action against American merchant ships. Commerce in Philadelphia was directly impacted by British looting of our freighters, so the state of Pennsylvania outfitted several fishing boats with cannons to patrol the rivers leading into the port of Philadelphia. One of these fishing boats was named the *USS Hyder Ally* (an anglicization of Hyder Ali). In recruiting his crew in Philadelphia, 23-year-old US Navy lieutenant **Joshua Barney** read a poem about his ship exalting the heroism of Hyder Ali, which contained the verse:

From an eastern prince she takes her name,
Who, smit with freedom's sacred flame,
Usurping Britons brought to shame,
His country's wrongs avenging.

Her first battle with the British occurred off the coast of Delaware against the *General Monk* in 1782. The *Hyder Ally* won, the *General Monk* lowered her sails in surrender and was escorted to Philadelphia by the *Hyder Ally*.

After **General Cornwallis** sailed from the US back to England in defeat, King George knighted him to thank him for his service. Cornwallis, not wanting his defeat in the US to mark the end of his military career, was granted command of the East India Company's forces in India.

In the end, Cornwallis finally succeeded in defeating Tipu Sultan and made his mark on India, including laying out the map for what would become the city of Bangalore. In the faraway British Indian capital of Calcutta a major street and a British-owned theatre were named after Cornwallis, providing yet another Indian historical connection to the US Revolutionary War. The Cornwallis names were not changed until after India's independence in 1947.

Side note: On May 23, 2023, one of Tipu Sultan's swords, looted by British troops after his defeat in 1799, sold at auction in London for \$1.2 million.

EXAMPLE PLAY TOPICS

Short plays of 10 to 30 pages inspired by some aspect of the above-described historical events. Plays can be in any style or genre (comedies, dramas, dark comedies, satires, parodies) and include traditional linear storytelling or more nontraditional treatments of the material such as a modern dance or ballet component. Participants will be provided some basic research resources but are free to do their own research as needed given their interest in a particular facet of this time period. Example subjects for short plays might be:

- a drama exploring the **hypocrisy of slavery** and the complexities presented by an England that has promised to free American slaves if they defeat the colonists while at the same time trying to colonize the brown nation of India by force of arms, dramatized in the form of pro-colonial, biracial Black and Native American whaler **Crispus Attucks** (the first colonist killed in the Boston Massacre) trying to convince a runaway slave not to become a spy for the British army currently occupying Boston; such a play could explore the question of whether King George is an angel, a devil, or something in between

- an expressionistic dream involving dance and nonlinear storytelling about **Deborah Sampson** who dressed as a man and fought in the Revolutionary War, having an imagined interaction with **Velu Nachiyar**, the Queen of Sivaganga known as the first female freedom fighter against the British in India, who joined up with Hyder Ali after the British killed her husband and who, after her daughter was also killed, formed a women's regiment named after her daughter; and they didn't even have to dress as men to do it, unlike in the US
- a documentary theatre piece in which all dialogue is intercut using original source material such as letters and newspaper articles from the period, including the points of view of slaves and recently freed slaves on whether to support the colonies or King George
- a dark comedy inspired by the **Daughters of Liberty**, a female-led group which organized a boycott of British goods as a form of resistance; this might especially resonate with Indian audiences, for women there organized the same kind of movement, aka the **Swadeshi movement**, over a century later in India to protest British rule
- a satire about **institutionalized homophobia** in 18th century colonial America and how Founding Father **Baron von Steuben**, a Prussian military hero, was hired by George Washington to whip the Continental Army into shape despite the fact that von Steuben was openly gay during a time when homosexuality was a criminal offense in the colonies; among his many wartime experiences during the Revolutionary War, he fought in the Battle of Yorktown and saw Cornwallis' defeat; meanwhile in India homosexuality was never illegal until the British Raj outlawed it in the 19th century
- an examination of the thoughts and actions of **Harry** (no last name), one of George Washington's slaves who escaped twice and ultimately fought for the British army against his former enslavers.

Your turn. Well, what are you waiting for? Oh, the contest details, right. Here they are:



Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan and...George Washington??

Like to write? Like history? Ever thought about dramatizing history in the form of a short stage play? *No?* Give us a chance to entice you.

CONTEST ENTRY RULES

- Open to all current Drexel undergraduate students
- Only original plays, never before produced, are eligible
- Plays must be properly formatted.*
- Plays, exclusive of title and cast pages, may be no less than 10 and no more than 30 properly formatted pages.
- Plays should have 1 to 4 characters and minimal props and costumes.
- All playwrights agree to permit Drexel University faculty in cooperation with the **Bangalore Little Theatre** to work with winning playwrights to develop the play with a view to future production.
- Playwrights retain copyright and full ownership of their plays at all times.
- **Deadline: February 15, 2024**
- Winners announced: March 23, 2024

*All plays must be properly formatted in accordance with [Dramatists Guild of America guidelines](#). Software such as [Final Draft](#) will do the heavy lifting for you, or you can set up the tabs manually in Word. Contact Prof. Jeffrey Stanley at jstanley@drexel.edu for further information and assistance.

PRIZES

- 1st Prize: \$200 gift certificate to the Drexel Bookstore
- 2nd Prize: \$100 gift certificate to the Drexel Bookstore
- 3rd Prize: \$50 gift certificate to the Drexel Bookstore

But those aren't the real prizes. **The real prize is these plays moving on to the development stage for possible future production in India and the US as a collaboration between Drexel University and the Bangalore Little Theatre.**



Velu Nachiyar



Molly Pitcher

WHAT'S THE CATCH?

Oh yeah, your play needs to address the Revolutionary War's connection to India. This project is a theatrical collaboration between Drexel University and the Bangalore Little Theatre (affectionately known as BLT), intended to result in an evening of English language short plays inspired by the little-known role India played in the Revolutionary War.

BUT I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT

Neither do most people, and that's okay because you're going to help change that.

HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO WRITE A SHORT PLAY ABOUT ALL THAT?

Not all of it, just a slice of your choosing. Plays can be in any style or genre (comedies, dramas, dark comedies, satires, parodies) and include traditional linear storytelling or more nontraditional treatments of the material such as a modern dance or ballet component. Participants will be provided some basic research resources but are free to do their own research as needed given their interest in a particular facet of this era.



The French meet Hyder Ali



The French meet Washington

WHO PICKS THE WINNERS?

Plays will be judged by Prof. Stanley and Prof. Vijay Padaki of the Bangalore Little Theatre. Prof. Stanley also serves as mentor to student applicants who have creative or research questions about their works-in-progress, and to ensure that all submissions are properly formatted according to US professional standards.



Crispus Attucks



Baron von Steuben

The plan is for the winning plays to make up an evening of Drexel students' short plays that will first go through a development process in which each winning playwright works via Zoom with directors and actors at BLT. For those not familiar, "development" is what any theatre does with a new play that has never been produced.

During the development stage, BLT personnel will work closely with the playwrights through conversations and Zoom readings of the play with a view toward final editing and revisions by

the playwright in order to make the plays ready for the stage. The development of the winning plays will continue through Summer '24 as needed.

During Fall '24, these works-in-progress will be presented online via Zoom as a private rehearsed reading for an invited audience of guests from Drexel and Bangalore, followed by a Q&A with the playwrights for further feedback, with the goal of getting the plays production-ready.

WHO'S RUNNING THIS THING?

The key administrator of this global, cross-departmental project is Screenwriting & Playwriting Professor Jeffrey Stanley who works closely with Prof. Vijay Padaki of the Bangalore Little Theatre.

Prof. Stanley is a screenwriter, playwright, performance artist, filmmaker, director, and 2022-24 Fulbright Alumni Ambassador. He was a 2018-19 Fulbright-Nehru Scholar in India where he researched theatre and film history. He is a playwright, screenwriter, filmmaker, performance artist and essayist. His award-winning short film *Lady in a Box* starring Sarita Choudhury has been licensed numerous times for international broadcast and distribution. Stanley's stage play *Tesla's Letters* (Concord Theatricals, 2000) premiered to rave reviews Off Broadway in 1999 and went on to national and international productions including the Edinburgh Fringe. He is a past president of the board of directors of the legendary *New York Neo-Futurists* experimental theatre ensemble, he has been a fellow at Yaddo, a Copeland Fellow at Amherst College, and a guest screenwriting lecturer at the Imaginary Academy summer film and theatre workshop in Croatia sponsored by the Soros Foundation. He was one of 24 writers chosen from over 16,000 entrants for the first Amtrak Writers Residency in 2014-15, and served as a residency judge for the 2015-16 competition. Stanley has appeared as a guest writer in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Time Out New York*, *New York Press*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Contingent Magazine* and the peer-reviewed scholarly journal *Democratic Communiqué*. He was a senior editorial adviser to Boston University's Center for Millennial Studies' book on apocalypse movements *The End That Does* (Routledge Books, 2006), and he is a member playwright of the International Theatre Initiative (ITI), a UNESCO-sponsored world theatre education program. He holds an MFA in Dramatic Writing from New York University Tisch School of the Arts where he studied under playwrights David Ives and Tony Kushner, and a BFA from Tisch in Film & Television Production. He has taught a course he created, Theatre History for Actors, at the Lee Strasberg Film & Theatre Institute. In addition to teaching at Drexel, he is an Adjunct Associate Professor at NYU Tisch.

CURIOUS TO KNOW MORE?

Email Prof. Stanley at jstanley@drexel.edu.

Sultans and Soldiers has received an IDEA Development, Education, and Cultivation Project Mini-Grant to support Westphal's efforts in achieving the university's goals for greater inclusion, diversity, equity, and anti-racism. Westphal's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council determined that this project will positively contribute to, and have a notable impact on, advancing our goals of becoming a more diverse, equitable, inclusive and anti-racist college within Drexel University. This project was made possible due in part to the generous support of the [Philadelphia Foundation](#), the Westphal Dean's Office of I.D.E.A., and the Westphal DEIC.