

Even before he delivered his famous words proclaiming the oneness of the world's religions, Swami Vivekananda had roused seven thousand people to their feet at the first Parliament of the World's Religions by greeting them as 'Sisters and Brothers of America.'

The young turbaned Hindu with the legendary voice and poetic turn of phrase was just 30 years old when he arrived in America to address the august meeting of religious leaders and scholars who gathered at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893.

But the Hindu philosopher managed to steal the show from the local speakers, according to Robert Grant of the Ramakrishna Society.

'All the other speakers that day were quite formal, the sort of "Ladies and Gentleman" approach. Whereas when he got up they felt this is coming from deep within his heart, he is greeting us and showing his oneness with us... The audience could sense that here was a person who wasn't just speaking from a book, he was speaking from his own experience, from deep within his heart, within his soul.'

I worship him, I have his photo in my car, on my desk top, almost everywhere in my house...

I've been to the Ramakrishna Mission several times as a child... I'm doing it because

I want it from the deepest core of my heart. **SHAHEB CHATTERJEE, INDIAN ACTOR**

Swami Vivekananda was at the World's Fair to promote the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta and Yoga, which was taught to him by the living Hindu saint, Ramakrishna. It was a message of universality that spoke of God as both form and formless and of the world's religions as equally valid manifestations of the one God. It was also a plea for tolerance and mutual respect, which Vivekananda was certain the West needed to hear.

He was proven right as people all over America and England clamoured to hear him speak, including 1500 people at Madison Square Garden.

Alex Broun, the Australian playwright behind *Oneness - Voice without form*, which tells Swami Vivekananda's story and runs at the Sydney Opera House in September, says his fame as a speaker elevated him to celebrity status at the time. 'He was like the Justin Timberlake of his time if you like...he was a pop star of his time. He then went on this tour around America where there were signs put

up, "Come Hear the Swami Speak", "Come hear the Hindu Monk", and people would go and listen to him... He went to Iowa, to Chicago, the Mid West... Women loved him, he was so handsome...He had a wonderful wit and charm and exuberance.'

The industrialist John D. Rockefeller met the swami who encouraged him to devote more of his wealth to philanthropy, while the scientist, Nikola Tesla became interested in Vedanta philosophy's teachings on matter and energy. Even the reclusive American author, J.D. Salinger, would become intimately acquainted with the Ramakrishna order of monks that were established in New York City as a result of Vivekananda's American tour.

To mark the 150th anniversary of Vivekananda's birth, Broun was commissioned by the Ramakrishna Society of Sydney to bring the young Hindu swami's story to the Sydney Opera House stage in a way that symbolises the universality of his message. African, Indian, Asian, Anglo-Celtic, and Arabic actors all play significant roles but the part of Vivekananda is particularly demanding, since the charismatic swami possessed a marvellous singing voice and had especially distinctive looks.

Save for his large blue eyes, Indian actor Shaheb Chatterjee is a mesmerising look-alike from Bengal, the home of Vivekananda. Well known as a singer and TV star in India, Shaheb was a natural choice. But it is his personal devotion to Vivekananda that marks him out as particularly suited for the role.

‘I worship him, I have his photo in my car, on my desk top, almost everywhere in my house...I’ve been to the Ramakrishna Mission several times as a child...I’m doing it because I want it from the deepest core of my heart, I’m doing this because my father wants it from the deepest core of his heart, I’m doing it because my God wants it from the deepest core of His heart.’

Swami Vivekananda’s passionate search for personal spiritual enlightenment and his conviction that peaceful relations between nations could be accomplished by recognising their essential religious unity may seem hopelessly out of touch with our sceptical secular age. But for Broun nothing could be more urgent.

‘The really strong message that comes through is the oneness of all beings, but apart from that is that "all paths lead to thee", that all paths lead to the same goal

of enlightenment. So it's the *idea* of religion that is important rather than *the* religion. We see in our world so much tension due to religions: this religious belief versus that religious belief. This is a desperately important message: to put aside our religious differences and realise that in the end we are all searching for Enlightenment. Whether its Kirshna or Buddha or Jesus or Allah, it doesn't matter, we are all on the same path.'



Swami Vivekananda

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Dana Dajani who travelled from Dubai to play Vivekananda's close friend and follower, Sister Nivedita, is Muslim. For her the message of peaceful relations between peoples of different religious backgrounds is the overwhelming reason she wanted to do this play.

'I would really like to see the people all around the world start accepting each other and really practising what Swami Vivekananda preaches about. He's not trying to convert anyone. He says, let the Christian be the best Christian, let the Muslim be the best Muslim, let the Buddhist be the best Buddhist.'

'But love each other, love yourselves and serve each other.'

*Find out more on **The Spirit of Things. Oneness: Voice without Form, the Extraordinary Life of Swami Vivekananda** is at the Sydney Opera House, 17 & 18 September, and in Brisbane's Queensland Multicultural Centre, Kangaroo point, on 22 Sunday.*