

## Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto

nytheatre.com review by Ed Malin

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"Shaheed" means witness to the truth, as used in the central creed of Islam, the Shahada. "Shaheed" also means martyr, and it is the plurality of meanings and viewpoints that makes Anna Khaja's play about slain Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto so unforgettable and disturbing. Under the skillful direction of Heather de Michele, Ms. Khaja plays eight different characters in different countries on December 27, 2007, the day Benazir Bhutto was assassinated while campaigning for a third term. This show previously appeared in FringeNYC 2010 and is back from Los Angeles thanks to that wonder of socially-relevant theater, the Culture Project, so now's your chance to learn why this story is really about you and of concern to all Americans.

Sara, an American college student with an estranged Pakistani father, begins and ends the narrative by wondering about her heritage. Why does the world tolerate the existence of Pakistan, land of failed Democratic experiments? Sure, the prophet Muhammad ruled by consensus, and perhaps true Islam can only be found in democracy, but ever since Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding leader of Pakistan died a few months into the country's existence, there has been turmoil. Sara's only memory of her father is a song he used to sing, which she eventually asks a professor to translate. Was her father an extremist or on the side of Benazir Bhutto, the charismatic, slightly corrupt woman who followed in the footsteps of her murdered father to be the voice of the people? Upon hearing of her father's death, Sara goes to Pakistan when Bhutto has returned with the blessing of the US (after being removed from office twice by the military) to make another bid for Prime Minister. Soon after she landed, someone had already tried to hand Bhutto a baby with a bomb in its diaper. If this doesn't disturb you, what follows should.

Monologues follow from Condoleeza Rice, who assures Bhutto that the US wants a better partner in Pakistan than Musharraf, the dictator we have backed for some time. Daphne Barak, an international journalist who knows the real "Bibi" Bhutto as a "girly girl" who only wears a headscarf when being photographed in Pakistan, is hopeful that the Harvard and Oxford-educated Bhutto will be successful on her mission. Fatima, a niece of Benazir, complicates the recollection by wondering if her aunt had any opponents/relatives killed during her previous terms. But the most distressing story comes from a Rawalpindi cab driver who could not feed his daughter and put her in a fundamentalist girl's school (the implication is that such schools are funded indirectly by the US), where she mysteriously gives birth at age 12 and offers her daughter up to people who might be inclined to attach a bomb to her.

This story of Bhutto is both sad and inspirational. Compare her with Martin Luther King, Jr., another leader who refused to let assassination attempts keep him from the path of truth. What this story is not is one-sided and unrelated to daily life in America. I am still in shock at Anna Khaja's beautiful, understated, positively ambiguous performance. On a stage which is bare except for Maureen Weiss's multi-purpose lattice set, Sam Saldivar adds in projections of the huge crowds that gathered for Bhutto's return. Will Hansen's lighting and John Zalewski's sound effects help show both the very isolating experience of taking on the status quo and the great noise of being accepted by the people.



Anna Khaja in a scene from *Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto* | Hunter Canning