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THEATER REVIEW

Many Strands Make Up One Woman 'Shaheed,' About Benazir Bhutto, at the Culture Project



Maia Rosenfeld

Anna Khaja in "Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto."

By RACHEL SALTZ

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A modernizing democrat or a "kleptocrat in a Hermès scarf"? Pakistan's "daughter of destiny" (the title of her autobiography) or puppet of the West? That Benazir Bhutto, a two-time prime minister of Pakistan educated at Harvard and Oxford, contained not merely multitudes but multitudes of contradictions, would seem to be the premise of the uneven one-woman show "Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto," written and performed by Anna Khaja at the Culture Project.

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To unravel the many strands of Bhutto, you also have to unravel those of Pakistan, whose history has been a "60-year train wreck," according to Sara, one of eight characters, and men, Ms. Khaja brings to life as she bravely dives that wreck. Some of those characters are fictional, like Sara, an American student with a Pakistani father; some are not, like Condoleezza Rice, Fatima Bhutto (Benazir's niece) and Bhutto herself. She's like a screen onto which these others project their fantasies, schemes, hopes and hatreds. One of them even sees her face in the moon.

We don't meet Bhutto until the end of the show, which mostly takes place on the day of her death in 2007 in a bombing and shooting attack. By

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the time we do, she's so pregnant with conflicted meanings and unresolved mysteries that she seems to have already receded into myth.

This feels true. Like Indira Gandhi before her, Bhutto had to be an open-ended symbol to rule as a woman over a vast and varied population. And Ms. Khaja's slow burn to get to this point is nicely done. But "Shaheed" (it means martyr in Arabic) isn't as interesting as it reminds us that Bhutto was. The characters can seem neatly programmatic, and the mysteries seem less deep onstage than they did — and do — in life.

Ms. Khaja, is a gifted enough actress to rescue, at least part way, some of these characters and this 90-minute show, directed by Heather de Michele. She's fun to watch as she creates distinct personalities through body language, voice, accent and attitude (and a few minimal costume changes). Her Condoleezza Rice — leaning forward in her chair, brow furrowed, quietly discussing duty and sacrifice — is particularly good, even if her words sound too bluntly scripted. They may well be drawn from the historical record, but they feel a bit canned.

Which brings up another problem. The mix of fact and fiction too often makes you wonder what's true and what's imagined. That could be fitting in a show that has to take myth into account as much as history. But here it's more distracting than persuasive.

"Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto" continues through April 1 at the Culture Project, 45 Bleecker at Lafayette Street, East Village; (866) 811-4111, cultureproject.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on March 25, 2013, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: One Woman and Her Multitudes of Contradictions.

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Anna Khaja's play is moving, informative, and profound. Her performance is brilliant. Go see this show!

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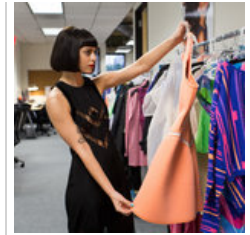
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