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## FringeNYC 2010 Festival Review

### SHAHEED: THE DREAM AND DEATH OF BENAZIR BHUTTO

**nytheatre.com review**

**Amy Lee Pearsall** · August 21, 2010

*Shaheed* is an Islam term meaning "martyr," but that only scratches the surface of its definition. It is indicative of a person who has given up his or her life for a greater purpose and has died unjustly at the hands of others. It is a word, like *Jihad* ("struggle") that is often misinterpreted by Western ears and sensibilities. In Anna Khaja's one-woman show *Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto*, we learn much about both the woman and Pakistan, the country to which she was ultimately beholden. The most poignant realization amidst the facts, however, is that nothing about Bhutto, her struggles, or the land she ultimately gave her life for is as clear-cut as it might seem.



Under the steady guidance of director Heather de Michele, Khaja's embodiment of each of her characters is clean, fully-realized, and a joy to watch. Her first character, Sara, seems to be a younger version of herself—a Pakistani American student raised by a single parent and trying to sort out her personal identity. During the course of the performance, we are introduced to two old friends of Bhutto's: international journalist Daphne Barak, and Boston University professor Cuseem who was tortured at the hands of Bhutto's political rivals. Bhutto's furious niece Fatima arrives to point an accusing finger at her aunt, blaming her for bloody land deals, hypocrisy, corruption, and the assassination of her own brother.

We meet a cab driver in Rawalpindi by the name of Shamsheer who celebrates the return of Bhutto to Pakistan. Soon afterwards, we find his daughter, a student entrusted to a local cleric who impregnated her and then used the resulting child as a vessel for explosives. We are visited by Condoleezza Rice, her every word to Bhutto measured and rehearsed behind a pleasant countenance. Finally, we encounter Bhutto herself on the eve of her death, well aware that to meet the crowd is to welcome her own destruction, but to stay carefully sequestered would mean the end of the dream of Pakistani democracy.

Maureen Weiss's set design is both spartan and well-executed. The stage features a clothesline suspended across the upstage area upon which multiple scarves in shades of yellow, cream, and saffron act as set dressing, quick change costume pieces, and an area where Khaja can briefly retire to prep for her next character. Upstage projections designed by Sam Saldivar help to set the scene, featuring the crowded streets of Pakistan, air strips, and even press rooms from the White House. The sound—from the design by Sharif Khan and John Zalewski to original composition by Colyn Emery and Phil Young—is entrancing and culturally appropriate. Lighting designer Kate Ashton bathes the set in gentle illumination that often feels as warm as a courtyard in South Asia.

Through it all, Khaja gives a masterful, compelling performance, allowing the complex portrait of a woman who was both loved and reviled to bloom through the words of those who knew her. I very much recommend *Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto*. It is a solid offering at FringeNYC 2010, and it is also a powerful piece of theatre that casts an artful light on the conflict in this region—not just on the struggle in Pakistan, but also the *Jihad* often present in the hearts and minds of its people.

*Pictured: Anna Khaja (photo © Mala Rosenfeld)*

**Venue:** Dixon Place

**Price:** \$15 - \$18

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