

Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto

Off-Chance Productions at the Stephanie Feury Studio Theater

Reviewed by Hoyt Hilsman

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Actor-playwright Anna Khaja crafts a powerful portrayal of the life and tragic death of Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan, assassinated only two months after her return from an eight-year exile. In her performance and in her insightful script, Khaja masters the challenging solo-performance format to paint a riveting portrait of a leader who was both inspiring and flawed.

Shaheed is the Arabic word for witness but is more commonly used to mean a martyr. More important, *shaheed* refers to the struggle, whether internal for the betterment of one's self, or external, for the improvement of society. Bhutto's life exemplifies both struggles. Khaja approaches this complex subject with great skill and acuity. She tells the story of Bhutto through the eyes of her friends and colleagues, her adversaries, and the ordinary people of Pakistan. These include a journalist pal, an exiled comrade from her early days, and her firebrand niece, as well as a cab driver, a madrasah (Muslim school) student, and Condoleezza Rice. In each of these characters, Khaja finds the essential threads that knit them to Bhutto the human being, as well as Bhutto the political leader. Khaja is a fearsome actor, with a powerful focus and sturdy talent, but she is also a gifted writer, weaving this complicated, multifaceted drama into an emotional tapestry. Direction by Heather de Michele, sets by Maureen Weiss, lighting by Carrie LaFerle, and sound by Sharif Khan provide an evocative foundation for the piece.

Presented by Off-Chance Productions at the Stephanie Feury Studio Theater, 5636 Melrose Ave., L.A. April 31-May 22. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m. www.shaheedtheplay.com.