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## In the Trenches: Actress and Writer Anna Khaja

by LAUREN ROSENFELD



Among the trends worth noting in this year's [NY Fringe Festival](#), there's an interesting coincidence: three solo plays by Pakistani women. In an industry where female playwrights and solo artists are hard to come by, and where Pakistani performers and stories are even fewer and far between, the appearance of these women at the festival is an important presence to recognize.

And while each woman addresses the complex facets of Pakistani identity, they do so in decidedly different ways: in [For Kingdom and Fatherland](#), Shabana Rehman comically tells the story of her life as a Muslim stand-up comedian in Norway; Zehra Fazal, based out of Washington, D.C., performs in a comic semi-musical called [Headscarf and the Angry Bitch](#), in which she recounts her experience as a Pakistani Muslim growing up in an American suburb; and Anna Khaja crafts a picture and story of Pakistan's first female prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, through the eyes of numerous characters in [SHAHEED: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto](#).

I caught up with Anna Khaja to talk about her show and about the important role that she, Shabana and Zehra serve in the theatre community.

### What was the inspiration for this piece?

I am half-Pakistani, raised by my Pakistani father and Irish-Catholic mother. Growing up, the lens through which I viewed Pakistan was, for the most part, very American. Benazir's assassination filled me with questions about the world, about Pakistan, about myself. *SHAHEED* was born out of my personal journey to answer these questions.

### In attempting to answer these questions and to piece together the show, how did you go about researching and choosing your eight characters?

I read everything by Benazir and about her. I studied her speeches and interviews. I also read a lot about her father, Zulfikar, because he was the most important figure in her life. But I found my play, which takes place in the last moments of Bhutto's life, when I read *The Way of the World* by Ron Suskind. It follows the changes that occurred within Benazir's psyche in the last days of her life, and how her story is intricately entwined with that of the Bush Administration and global politics in general.

Initially I thought this play would only have the sole character, Benazir Bhutto. But as I tried to grasp who Benazir was, I realized that the only way to understand her was to understand who she was to others. People's perceptions of her were and remain varied and incredibly contradictory. She was despised and revered to degrees that Americans may find difficult to comprehend. Politics is extremely personal in Pakistan; it is life or death. I decided the only way I knew how to show the depth and complexity of this woman was to tell the story through multiple perspectives—and finally Benazir's. I suppose there is a level on which each character in the play is an aspect of her psyche.

### What was your perception of Bhutto before you began work on the piece, and how did working on the show change your understanding of her?

Benazir was a hero of mine growing up—a larger-than-life figure who existed only to bring the Pakistani people democracy. I still see her as a hero, but my definition of her heroism transformed through the process of creating this piece. It came from the struggle between the disparate parts of her nature and the manner in which she faced constant threats against her life. In my research, I found a human full of frailties, failures and fears, who struggled with temptation and ego—and yet, who, in spite of that, managed at times to transcend her limitations and take extraordinary actions for the country she loved.

### Is that what you hope the audience takes away from the performance, as well?

I don't want them to walk out feeling that they know everything about Benazir Bhutto or that they have been weighed down by facts. I simply want them to feel that they have had an experience that compels them to want to know more about the Bhuttos and the chorus of unheard voices within Pakistan.

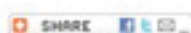
### And exposing the unheard voices of Pakistan is exactly what you, Shabana and Zehra are doing at the NY Fringe Festival.

Yes, I think we're offering an alternative to the continuous stream of images and sound bites of Pakistan in American media that depict villages in conservative tribal areas and women in burkhas. In the West, we often judge how oppressive a country is by the independence of its women, and this often translates to how "covered up" the country's women are. The truth, of course, is that there are all types of people in Pakistan who span the spectrum from very secular to staunchly religious, and everything in between. Shabana, Zehra and I are all defying these stereotypes, showing people another side. I think that is very exciting. The Pakistani painter, Salima Hashmi said, "Though artists cannot change the world, they can, through their work...give you the direction." Perhaps, whether we are conscious of it or not, that is what we are trying to do.

*SHAHEED: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto, Headscarf and the Angry Bitch, and For Kingdom and Fatherland* are all currently showing at the NY Fringe Festival. For more details and show times, go to <http://www.fringenyc.org>.

—Lauren

Lauren Rosenfeld is the American Theatre magazine intern. She is about to enter her senior year at Pomona College to finish off her English and philosophy degrees. Hailing from Northern California, she has thoroughly enjoyed being in New York for the summer writing for American Theatre magazine and attempting to see as many shows as she possibly can.



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