



Anna Khaja's Personal Journey to Shaheed

FEATURES by [Lee Melville](#) | May 24, 2010

***Shaheed: The Dream and Death of Benazir Bhutto*, produced by Luis Reyes in association with Off-Chance Productions, continues Fri.-Sat., May 28-29, at 8 pm. Tickets: \$18-\$22. Stephanie Feury Studio Theater, 5636 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles; 951.262.3348. Then as part of Hollywood Fringe Festival, it plays Mon., June 21 at 9:15 pm; Tues., June 22 at 7:30 pm and Sun., June 27 at 2 pm. Tickets: \$15. Open Fist Theater, 6209 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles; 323.882.6912. For further information, go to shaheedtheplay.com.**

Anna Khaja makes an impressive figure as she walks on stage from the back of the intimate Stephanie Feury Studio Theatre and begins her journey recounting events just prior to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on Dec. 27, 2007. For the next 80 minutes she mesmerizes her audience as she tells this tragic story. Before imparting words of the former Pakistani Prime Minister, Khaja becomes seven other characters, including U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Benazir's niece Fatima Bhutto, who were affected by this inspiring world leader.

Khaja was part of the Ovation Award-nominated acting ensemble in David Hare's *Stuff Happens* at the Mark Taper Forum, then in 2007 received her own Ovation nomination for Lead Actress when she originated the role of an Iraqi mother in Judith Thompson's *Palace of the End* which also gained her an *LA Weekly* Award for Solo Performance. She has written *Shaheed* as well, which has been running since the end of April and is directed by Heather de Michele.

LA Stage blog talked with Khaja following a performance last week.

LAS: What inspired you to write this account of Benazir Bhutto?



Anna Khaja as Sara

KHAJA: I am half-Pakistani, raised by my Pakistani father. Despite this, the lens through which I view Pakistan has, for the most part, been inevitably 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.

And as I learned more about Benazir's life, I discovered an incredibly complex woman who also happened to be a world leader. She had so much conflict inside her, as an educated woman in an Islamic society, a person of privilege in a desperately poor country, a member of a family that was adored and feared and a human being tempted by corruption and excess. I found myself at once deeply admiring her and at the same time, doubting her motives. I asked myself, who was this woman? And why in the face of certain danger, did she go out in public on December 27, 2007 in Rawalpindi, of all places, the very spot her father had been hanged. Was it an act of great courage? An ego-driven addiction to adoration? An attempt to continue the work of her father? Or a conscious

sacrifice in her political mission? In the end, I think, it was all of those things.

From the perspective of language, through the lens of Bhutto's life, I wanted to explore the Islamic concepts of the "Shaheed" (martyr) and "Jihad" (struggle). Both of these Arabic terms have rich and beautiful definitions in Islam, and yet have also been appropriated by radicals for their own ends. A "Shaheed" for instance is what suicide bombers often call themselves. In my play, I attempt to show that perhaps Benazir best incarnated that term as one who died for a cause in true sacrifice for others. Similarly, "Jihad" is a word that invokes fear in many Americans. In my play, I attempt to reclaim the word, hopefully explaining that Benazir's mission to unite Islam and democracy was itself a "Jihad."

LAS: How much research did you do?

KHAJA: I read everything by Benazir and about her. I spoke a lot with my own father, of course, and with family in Pakistan. I've been speaking with an Australian woman in Pakistan who married a Pakistani and converted to Islam. Her unique perspective as an assimilated foreigner is fascinating as is her blog: dalisah.wordpress.com. Her in-laws were and continue to be big Bhutto supporters. Her father-in-law was present and working with Bhutto's security team the day she died. The information the members of this family have provided for me is invaluable. I really found my play, which takes place in the last moments of Bhutto's life, when I read *The Way of the World* by Pulitzer Prize winner Ron Suskind. It provides a bird's eye view of the changes occurring 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.

LAS: How did you decide on the seven other characters you portray?



Anna Khaja as Shamsheer

KHAJA: While I had initially thought this play would only have the sole character, Benazir Bhutto, my research led me to the conclusion that the only way to understand Benazir is to understand who she was to others. People's perceptions of her were and remain varied and contradictory. She was despised and adored to degrees that we as Americans find difficult to comprehend. Politics, I've learned, is extremely personal in Pakistan. It is life or death. I decided the only way I knew how to tell this story was through multiple perspectives.

Four of my characters are fictional, drawn to illustrate the humanity of Pakistan: Sara, an American college student in Rawalpindi; Cuseem, a former democratic revolutionary turned Yale professor; Shamsheer, a street vendor ecstatic at his precious Bibi's return as she will mean a way to be reunited with his daughter; and the daughter herself, Afshan, a teenage Muslim fanatic who was sent to a Madrassa rather than to starve on the street.

The other four characters are real people: Condoleezza Rice, who conceived of the power-sharing arrangement with Musharraf that drew Benazir back to Pakistan; CNN interviewer Daphne Barak, who considered Benazir a close personal friend; Fatima Bhutto, Benazir's estranged niece and journalist who is highly critical of not only her aunt Benazir but also of Pakistani politics in general; and of course Benazir herself.

LAS: Why did you decide to do the play at Stephanie Feury's studio?

KHAJA: Stephanie and my husband studied acting together in New York and remained friends. Though I do not study with her, I esteem Stephanie greatly as an actress, friend and teacher. It is clear she has inherited her parents' legendary gift for nurturing actors. I also respect her dedication to creating an artistic community in Los Angeles. I love the intimacy and elegance of Stephanie's theatre which is why I chose to have this run of *Shaheed* there.

LAS: Describe your working relationship with Heather de Michele. Did she ask you to make changes in the script?

KHAJA: I had only worked with Heather for a single day on the web series *The Real Girls Guide to Everything Else*, another Off-Chance Production she directed. But, I was sold immediately. Heather is a highly collaborative, open-minded and committed director which I knew was essential for this work in progress. And, indeed, we worked together to make necessary adjustments to the script throughout the rehearsal process. Heather strikes for the actor the perfect balance between space and a firm guiding hand. I believe most actors are in search of a director with this magical balance. It is truly a gift.

LAS: What has Off-Chance Productions presented previously?

KHAJA: Off-Chance produced *Anatomy of a Slap* at Son of Semele theatre in 2008 (Flavor Pill's Theater Pick). In February 2010, Off-Chance premiered *The Real Girls Guide to Everything Else* (a web-series distributed by Strike TV and After Ellen). And, this fall, a new Off-Chance play *Limitations of Genetic Technology* premieres at Theatre of NOTE. The entire company, especially co-artistic director Luis Reyes, has contributed enormously to *Shaheed's* evolution.

LAS: What are the future plans for *Shaheed*?

KHAJA: *Shaheed* will participate in the Hollywood Fringe Festival at the Open Fist theatre in June. Then we are off to the New York Fringe Festival in August. From there, the moon!

Production photos by Maia Rosenfeld.
Anna Khaja's headshot by Dana Patrick.

Article by Lee Melville

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One Response to "Anna Khaja's Personal Journey to Shaheed"

1.  [Richard Martin Hirsch](#) says:
[May 24, 2010 at 1:58 pm](#)

About twelve years ago I was in London with my wife and we decided to have dinner at Mister Chow's in Knightsbridge. At the very next table, holding court with about 6 or 7 others was Benazir Bhutto. She was very down to earth...smoking, drinking wine, joking with her companions, generally having a good time. At one point our eyes met and she smiled. This image of her stuck with me when I heard of her return to Pakistan...and then when she was killed, which to me seemed sadly scriptlike and predictable. Such a shame.

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