



The Performant: More than words

09.21.12 | Nicole Gluckstern



Sheetal Gandhi and Ragged Wing Ensemble stretch their forms

If an image is worth a thousand words, how much dialogue does the art of dance encompass, when every flick of the wrist can denote whole unspoken volumes? As dance in the Bay Area moves ever further into hybrid territories, where language and limbs combine to stretch the parameters of storytelling, patrons of more traditional theatrical fare may find familiarity in the broadened scope of this increasingly amalgamated artform.

Sheetal Gandhi's "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" at [ODC](#) is a great example of this heterogeneity, bringing to life a series of characters who speak as much in gesture as with words on an almost ascetically bare stage.

When Gandhi does speak it is often in song, and just as frequently in Marwadi, a dialect of Rajasthani, a language obscure enough that it's guaranteed to be unfamiliar to a large portion of her audiences. Which means it's through her nuanced physicality that she connects best, blending traditional dance forms such as Kathak with the modern, inhabiting the skin of each of her creations as easily as she wraps herself in a length of striped fabric which serves sometimes as a sari, sometimes a veil, and sometimes as an evocative hobble.

Ghandi is light on her feet, even when she portrays the hunched figure of a family elder, but many of her characters do bear an internal weight—from the smiling auntie who serves the multitudes with a stretched smile to the veiled woman threatening to throw pepper in the eyes of her father-in-law to blind him, a regretful groom on the other side of an arranged marriage to the young girl being wrapped in a length of golden satin in preparation for her own wedding day. Alone and onstage for the entire piece, Gandhi's more dramatic shifts of scene are expertly heralded by Tony Shayne's lighting design, which expands and contracts according to the limits of her characters' perspectives while the elegant compositions by

Joseph Trapanese that frame each portion of her performance are equally atmospheric, mixing electronica and field recorded samples with the distinctive tones of the sitar, the insistent rhythm of the tabla.

Across the Bay Bridge, in a vaulted room dubbed “The Sanctuary,” **Ragged Wing Ensemble** debuts a new play written and directed by Artistic Director Amy Sass called "Time Sensitive." Just as dancers such as Sheetal Gandhi are experimenting with theatrical techniques within a dance context, so are collaborative arts ensembles such as Ragged Wing creating works of theatre that incorporate far more than the spoken word as the building blocks of narrative.

In "Time Sensitive," ensemble members don featherlight robes and enter singing “Da Pacem Cordium” (“Give Peace to Every Heart”) before morphing abruptly into suited, scowling business-persons who scuttle back and forth across the stage chanting “gotta GO GO GO” and position themselves in the manner of a flock of early birds demanding worms. In two of several alternating storylines an old clockmaker and his faithful automaton (Addie Ulrey and Keith C. Davis) travel beneath the cracks of the known world on an existential quest, while an adrenaline-seeking elevator-repair guy (Soren Santos) hurls himself from the top of the city’s tallest building and hopes his parachute (artfully rendered with a bobbing line of umbrellas) doesn’t fail. At two hours plus intermission, punctuated by a series of choppy transitions, the ambitious piece does lose some of its initial ballistic momentum, but none of the curious beauty of its dialogue-defying, sumptuously-devised ritual.

"Time Sensitive"

Through May 18, \$25-\$40

The Sanctuary

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