



0 COMMENTS



DANCE REVIEW: The miraculous and multiple personalities of Sheetal Gandhi

By Carrie Seidman , Herald-Tribune / Thursday, June 20, 2013

To hold the attention and interest of an audience as a solo performer is the ultimate challenge for any artist. To do so while simultaneously singing, dancing, acting and incorporating character, costume and genre changes ups the ante even higher.

So the fact that I was completely mesmerized for the 50 minutes of Sheetal Gandhi's "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" ("Daughter-in-law, Daughter, Wife") at the Florida Dance Festival in Tampa is a tribute to the power and ingenuity of this physically diminutive but artistically oversized talent.

The Los Angeles-based Gandhi, best known for her work as a creator and performer in Cirque du Soleil's "Dralion" and her leading role in Broadway's "Bombay Dreams," was born in America to parents from India and has long had ties with relatives in that country. This piece, which began as a master's project, combines elements of the classical Kathak dance and music traditions of India's northern desert with percussive text (in both English and Indian dialect) and contemporary song and movement.



Sheetal Gandhi in "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" at the Florida Dance Festival. / Photo by Cedar Bough T. Saeji

On a stage set and lit starkly, with a clothesline to the left and a stream of scattered white feathers on the floor to the right, Gandhi embodies multiple generations of Indian women — from a hunched grandmother denigrating the morals of the younger generations, to a pre-teen protesting her arranged marriage. Each transformation is utterly believable and engaging, capitalizing on humor and irony, while still making a profound statement on the theme of societal restrictions on women.

Here is a young Indian wife, dutifully rolling out thousands of roti while simultaneously chaffing at her restrictions; there is an elder chastising her grandson for wearing short shorts ("Underwear boy!") and her granddaughter for revealing her arm pits in a tank top. Incorporating the genre called giddha (satirical songs of

resistance), Gandhi chants over and over "I will grind red chiles fine with my new pestle and throw them in my father-in-law's eyes to blind him so I won't have to cover my face" even as her head is shrouded in a black cloth.

So adept is Gandhi at capturing the distinctive physical characteristics of each embodiment, she seems to literally morph from one to the next, as if there were a cast of dozens of her Indian relatives populating the stage. And so humane is each gesture, even when the language is not English, there is no need for translation.

Sporadically throughout there are costume changes that are more than just window dressing — when Gandhi slips on a red dress it signifies a grandmother's memory of a young love she could not pursue; when she wraps herself in yards of cloth, it is a metaphorically binding sari; when she swaddles herself in the train of her dress, it binds her legs and forces her to take tiny steps of subservience.

In an indelible final image, Gandhi, seated on the floor in a single spotlight with feathers floating down from above, allows one hand to flutter up like a bird taking flight before the other hand snatches it and strangles its movement as the lights dim.

The poignancy of this performance was indelible, but sadder still was the paucity of the audience, which numbered less than 50. Given that we in the United States have not only the freedom but the easy and affordable (\$20) access to see an artist of this caliber and creativity, what a shame to see so many did not avail themselves of the opportunity.

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BAHU-BETI-BIWI (DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, DAUGHTER, WIFE), Sheetal Gandhi, part of the Florida Dance Festival performance series at the University of South Florida, Tampa. Reviewed June 19; no additional performance. For other series offerings through June 29, go to www.floridadanceassociation.org or call (800) 982-2787.

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