

Entertainment

Sheetal Gandhi celebrates India's culture on Bryn Mawr College stage

Tuesday, March 12, 2013

By Tara Lynn Johnson

Correspondent

Sheetal Gandhi, a 21st century California woman of Indian heritage, explores what that means in her one-woman show, "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" ("Daughter-in-law, Daughter, Wife"). She'll take the stage at Bryn Mawr College on Friday, March 22.

It's the culminating performance of the school's 2012-2013 Performing Arts Series, which aims to create an environment in which the value of the arts is recognized and celebrated.

Director, choreographer and performer Gandhi will focus on how her ethnicity and the traditions of her ancestors inspire and shape her life.

"The performance is not traditional, but draws on the traditional," she said. "I inhabit various characters ... in a journey across time and space. There's a feeling of the essence of one person, in different times, spaces, generations, environments, through the whole thing. It's not a linear journey."

Her contemporary and traditional movements, music, costumes and props honor and interpret characters inspired by women from her life. Throughout the show, audiences experience scenes of freedom and compromise, desire and longing, duty and love, according to a press release. In her own words from her website (sheetalgandhi.com), her work "references the past, grounds itself in the present, but comments on the possibilities of the future."

Gandhi has always loved being onstage. She started playing piano as a kid and then took dance classes. She said she's always enjoyed acting and imitating people, too. Performing is about expressing herself and that's what's most important, she said. Being able to combine these forms of expression keeps her from feeling "split."

Gandhi, who has worked as a creator and performer in Cirque du Soleil's "Dralion" and played a leading role in the Broadway production of "Bombay Dreams," among other endeavors, has performed "Bahu-Beti-Biwi" around the globe.

The college is excited she's bringing her performance to their stage.

"Gandhi is a mesmerizing performer who both entertains and addresses challenging issues," said Lisa Kraus, coordinator of the arts series.

Gandhi said she approaches difficult and heavy subjects, often with humor.

"It's a survival method for people. The North Indian women's songs make light and jest of the tragedies," she said. "At times, I draw out the tragedy from the jest and often reveal humor from the tragedy. It creates a lovely surprise for the audience."

One character in the middle of the piece is an old Indian woman talking with her American-born granddaughter. She bemoans the fact that the young woman wants to find her own husband. The grandmother says she can't imagine what modern women go through — falling in love, falling out of love. She suggests just having an arranged marriage, but that involves no choice and no way out.

At that point, the woman starts to hiccup, which, in Indian culture, means someone far away is thinking of you. The woman then remembers a boy she loved when she was young — one her parents wouldn't let her marry.

"It wasn't a right match [they said]. And that's very normal. It's normal for people to marry someone they don't love," Gandhi said. "Love comes after marriage."

So the woman, experiencing sentimental memories and the feelings that go with them, starts to sing and transforms into a young woman.

"It's showing two sides of the same person. We are complex," Gandhi said. "And I'm fascinated with the bittersweetness of life."

There's nothing bitter about getting onstage. Gandhi's happiest when sharing her gifts. And performing her show at a contemporary dance festival in India in 2012 was a dream come true. She said she was the most traditional of the contemporary dancers and was well-received.

"The seeds [of "Bahu-Beti-Biwi"] emerged out of my multiple visits to India throughout my childhood," she wrote on her Facebook page. "Now I've performed the full piece in Delhi, India. I've come full-circle."

And now, Gandhi will take the stage at Bryn Mawr. Her show, which she said is for all ages, focuses on expressing herself, honoring her heritage, and finding and showing our shared humanity.

"All the different people all over the world [are] more similar than different," she wrote on Facebook. "[It's] so amazing to have opportunities to cross and connect. I am a soul that loves other souls."

Sheetal Gandhi

will perform

"Bahu-Beti-Biwi"

at Bryn Mawr College,

McPherson Auditorium,

Goodhart Hall,

101 N. Merion Ave.,

Bryn Mawr, PA 19010,

Friday, March 22, 8 p.m.

Tickets: \$20; seniors, \$18;

students with ID, \$10;

children under 12, \$5.

Info: 610-526-5210 or

www.brynmawr.edu.

URL: <http://www.montgomerynews.com/articles/2013/03/12/entertainment/doc513f52fa4ca8f289568481.prt>

© 2014 Montgomery News, a **21st Century Media** Property