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Reaching for Broadway Beneath the Banyan Tree by Lipi

Play: Beneath the Banyan Tree

Venue : Off Off Broadway in New York City, 432 W 42 St, 4th Floor (Apr 29-May 17)

Tickets: (646) 489-5322

There is an old Banyan tree with a generous canopy of leafy branches and thick hanging roots under which you once sat and dreamt of magical tales – of the evil monster whose life is trapped in the throat of a caged parrot, a snake who took human form, or a prince who had to cross seven rivers to regain his lost kingdom. If you too had forgotten such intricate non-judgmental tales that unfailingly start with "Once upon a time ..." you should see the two-act play "Beneath the Banyan Tree" that effortlessly and pleurably breaks the rules of mundane reality. The original play by Randall David Cook is based on a concept by Gurrat Kadwani and directed by Trisha Sandberg.

The story revolves around a magical tree that has previously transformed from a flowering tree into a sandalwood tree into a mango tree into its current banyan tree form. Behind these transformations are woven a myriad fantasy tales that form the content of the play. The script follows a narrative style with passages being recounted by a story-telling mystic with supernatural powers and flashbacks by the magical tree itself.



The first act creates a prelude to the following intrigue with a set of fantastical short stories.

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5/13/2003

One tells about two princesses who are assisted in their escape from a dangerous proposal by a sandalwood tree that magically carries them higher and higher towards the skies until they are out of reach. Another is about a workaholic genie who is floundered by the task of straightening out a curl.



The second act starts out as four independent threads that intertwine as the story unravels. A penniless denizen turns wisdom-seller turns cook turns prince. An ill-treated runaway stepdaughter finds unexpected love in the arms of a benign stranger. An evil chameleon witch meets her nemesis. And a helpless man caught in a cycle of nightly unconsciousness and consciousness is cured by a fateful sequence of events. The Banyan tree leads all who seek its advice to their interlinked destinies, ultimately revealing its own mysterious origin as a flowering tree followed by a final surprising transformation.

The sound (Eran Phillips) and light effects (Raquel Davis) effectively recreate the aura of that fairytale time at twilight when you listen to grandma's stories and sink into a world of wonder. It is easy to believe that the sounds of gushing water, rain, the nether creatures, rustling leaves, all emanate not from the stage but your own old town back home. Add to that the luminous glow of lanterns swaying or steady, and you have a nostalgically heady concoction.

The stage is designed as a banyan tree using appropriate leaf and root adornments (Ryan Scott). Tinkling of chimes to signal scene changes and echoing of fateful directives are an interesting revival of traditional Indian dramatic style. A notable scene where two sisters in silver-gold attire banter and play successfully recalls the memories of carefree childhood. A scene where a neglected stepdaughter swims her way through a magical pond to be transformed into a resplendent princess is captivating. The cry of a newborn sounds uncannily real. Appropriate classical renditions, folk music, and even Bollywood music step in to complete the picture, although Broadway fans would miss a live orchestra. The costumes are symbolic, with a multi-cultural English-speaking cast. The jewelry (Roderick A Gunsell) is adequately dazzling.

Rachel Wahl carries the play with a strong performance as the transforming tree, aptly assisted by Qurrat Kadwani as the neglected stepdaughter. Arthur Kwan is sprightly and dynamic on stage though a few more scare tactics as the hungry genie would have been in order. Keshav Murthy Wable in the penniless loafer's role and Obaid Kadwani in the mystic's role are adequate. Demigoddesses Julie Mehta and Sterie Verghese don't miss a step, though you wonder why they are wearing sandals. The rest of the cast make an effort to hold together but lose their form intermittently. Lines from one actor after another seem to jump in a tad too fast for the context. You miss the technique of deliberate pauses that could help the audience

absorb actor's statements. Characters need to be developed further to add to the impact and authenticity of the performance. The stage is many times too small for the number of occupants at any given time, and the script and act summary is missing from the program guide.

But then this play is about good old fashioned fun, and there is plenty of that to be had. The performance is sure to be an enjoyable evening for the entire family and a rare opportunity to children for a thrilling introduction to magical tales from India just the way they used to be told. With significant attention to mannerism, costume, and coordination, this show could potentially carry itself next door to Broadway. For a magical tale as fantastically Indian as this, that would be a first.



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About Lipi: I am a Software Engineer living and working in Manhattan, USA, for the past several years. I write to convey an idea, to start a conversation, to share a thought -- and I welcome the interested eyes' critique.

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