



Qurrat Kadwani - Beneath the Banyan Tree

Kadwani takes me under the "Banyan Tree" to share her thoughts and ideas on folktales.

by Peta Cooper



While Greek Mythology is well known throughout mainstream productions, Indian folktales have yet to be tapped - until now that is. Meet Qurrat Kadwani, a 21-year old woman with lots of vibrant drive and a willing to give it her all when it comes to her passion. Kadwani believes it's high time that Indian folktales get the recognition they so rightfully deserve. She worked hand and hand with renowned playwright Randall David Cook who beautifully entwined them into a play called "Beneath the Banyan

Tree."

Peta Cooper: The collections of folktales audience members will see in your play, what's the basic moral they will learn?

Qurrat Kadwani: The basic moral of the folktales is that life is not always happy. Most of the time we're unhappy, but we have to cherish the few moments of happiness that we have so that the "grand happiness" that we strive for is truly special. We can also learn that people and nature affect us in so many ways. One moment with someone can change us forever.

PC: Coming as a Mumbai transplant, what's the difference between youth growing up in America and youth growing up in Mumbai?

QK: I came to America when I was three years old. However, I do know that there is more of an opportunity here to be an individual, to experiment, and then to claim your space in life. My parents brought us here for a better life, and I feel that I have been blessed and fortunate to be doing everything that I'm doing today.

PC: Can audiences from all ages and ethnicities enjoy "Beneath the Banyan Tree?"

QK: The beauty of this play is that it will appeal to a younger audience through the magical folktales. Yet, an older audience will appreciate it too because there are deeper lessons to be learned. Globally, I am definitely claiming that the American education that I have received, while broadening my knowledge about Greek theatre and the origins of theatre, has at the same time, deprived me of the rich literature and culture that is prevalent in other parts of the world, specifically India. I don't want these stories to sit on a shelf in the back on the fourth floor of a library. We have to keep our culture alive and as Brecht stated, educate as well as entertain.

PC: Has theater arts always been in your blood?

QK: No, actually, I started off with music. I used to play the violin and the piano. I stopped that when I was about 12, and realized that dramatics was more fun for me. I was on the Speech Team at the Bronx High School of Science. In college, I started off as a communications major, but since I was taking so many classes in theatre and acting in plays, I decided to change my major to theatre. I was able to graduate from SUNY Genseo in 3 years with a BA in theatre. I feel lucky to be 21 and to be able to produce such a great show.

"We also tried to challenge the notions of age, beauty and race."

PC: Why should we treasure the folktales "Beneath the Banyan Tree?"

QK: There are so many reasons. First, no other play like this exists that incorporates Indian folktales. Secondly, Randall David Cook, the writer, and I tried to stay away from stereotypical images. I have always felt that the reason South Asian actors keep getting stereotypical roles is because we're not promoting ourselves enough. More South Asian plays need to be done that show the culture in a positive light. "Beneath the Banyan Tree" is magical because it's so simple, so honest. Here are some homeless kids who want a better life, and they find this tree who, through her own sadness, helps them. We also tried to challenge the notions of age, beauty and race. The fact that there is a multicultural cast was part of the play from the very beginning. We have to assert that South Asians and non-South Asians can work together in theatre, be a part of a family with ethnicity playing a positive role. It doesn't matter if the mother is white and the father is Hispanic and the child is Indian. This is about characters and the folktales and being honest.

PC: What's your favorite folktale?

QK: I have so many! The top two are Sona and Rupa, a tale about two princesses who are forced to marry their brother, but they escape somehow. I also like the actual oral version of The Flowering Tree, which is a love story and I get very emotional every time I read it.

PC: You have taken folktales that have already been written, and had playwright Randall David Cook write them into a play, how does this make it original?

QK: This play is an adaptation of Indian folktales. Randall took the folktales and arranged them so that the play is not just a bunch of stories back to back. There is a plotline through the stories. He also added his own writing in so that the play could be theatrical. The play is original because we have taken the folktales and then added characters in some places where there were no names, added more exposition, more of a climax in the arc of the play while still including the climax' within each story. It's such a magical experience, unlike anything I've read before, that you just have to see it to understand it.

PC: Would you like the mainstream audience to embrace these tales like they have embraced Greek Mythology over the years?

QK: Most definitely! I got most of my inspiration from Metamorphoses by Mary Zimmerman. I want these folktales to be alive because these tales resonate within me and I know that they are just as rich as Greek mythology, if not more. Indian culture has been around, some people would argue, far before Greek culture, and it's unfortunate that we don't learn that.

PC: Can you give our readers a hint on the next play you will be working on?

QK: I am currently working on a one-woman show, which will tackle the issues of ethnicity and our perception of what that means. It will include monologues from characters of all races. I grew up in the Bronx, so I have had friends of all races, ethnicities, and economic background. I'm excited about that project. I'm also trying to move "Beneath the Banyan Tree" to a larger venue.

PC: What would you like to say to the DesiClub.com readers?

QK: South Asian culture is important. We have a responsibility to assert our space

in society and also to help our culture progress. So, support this project and reserve tickets now. The dates are April 29th-May 17th, Tuesday-Saturday at 8PM, Sat and Sun at 2PM at 432 West 42nd St, 4th floor. Between 9th and 10th Avenue, Reserve tickets at: 212-696-7980 \$15 cash, \$12 students.

Do you have any thoughts on this? Feel free to send Peta an e-mail @ Peta Cooper.