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The Women of Mahabharata

Adaptation by Wallace Dorian
Directed by Jonathan Warman
Roy Arias Theatre 2
616 Ninth Avenue
212-799-3753

Review by Amber Silverman

Set 5,000 years ago in India, *The Women of Mahabharata* is the story of a mythological war fought between two sets of cousins, told from the perspective of the warriors' mothers and wives. Positioned on opposing sides of the rivalry, the hatred these women feel for one another is matched only by their grief.

Qurrat Ann Kadwani and Kathryn Neville Browne play Draupadi and Gandhari, and they do so with all the emotional intensity demanded by the subject matter. Their dialogue is dramatic; the events leading up to the war are relayed through recollections, so their bitter and accusatory conversation with one another does more than reveal animosity, it relates the entire history of the war. The actors must alternate between a passionate discourse and scenes of violent and sad incidents from the past.

Following the chronology of the story is at times difficult, as the actors go from playing women to men with no changes in costume and only slight changes in demeanor. The one exception is Victoria Guthrie, who is able to clearly shift from Queen Kunti to one of her sons by altering her stance and voice.

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War of the Girls: Kathryn Neville Browne and Qurrat Ann Kadwani are caught in a conflict in *The Women of Mahabharata*.

Dance is incorporated throughout the story, and there is one scene where its integration is particularly effective. As Draupadi tells the story of being humiliated by Gandhari's son, who orders her to remove her sari, three dancers appear with seemingly endless red cloth with which they artfully wrap her. The dancing enhances the story when it serves a symbolic purpose, but when the dancers are meant to represent deceased characters, it contributes to the lack of clarity in the story's sequence.

Egemen Sanli's sitar playing sets a mystical tone at the beginning of the show and is a unifying element among the jumps from present to past and figurative to literal. The stage design synthesizes these contrasting components through the use of a projection screen in the middle of the arrow-strewn battlefield. Like the dances, the screen is most effective as a vehicle for symbolism. Colors and patterns projected on the screen complement tones of anger and fear, while silhouettes of moving warrior figurines feel contrived.

The Women of Mahabharata reveals the unseen side of an ancient myth and infuses it with emotion. Many contrasting elements are brought together for this purpose, and some work better than others, but the overall message of a common humanity holds the story together.



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