

Last Weekend of Shunya's *NagaMandala*

The spirited Houston-based South Asian theatre troupe, Shunya, concludes with its current production of *NagaMandala* this weekend, Friday through Saturday, February 23-25, at Stages Repertory Theatre.

NagaMandala is written by Girish Karnad, well-reputed as one of India's most innovative and thought provoking playwrights. On the surface *NagaMandala* (Play with a Cobra) might seem like a fantastical and outdated folk tale with an unsubstantial plot. There are characters in the forms of inanimate objects such as "The Flames," "The Story," and Naga, the snake. A snake takes the form of a human and falls in love. And then there are the love potions. All this might lead one to believe that *NagaMandala* will be a silly play with little relevance to modern life. But Shunya's *NagaMandala* is anything but silly and irrelevant. The play dances, cries, entertains, questions, and challenges.

The play begins as a story within a story. The character of "The Man," convincingly played by Rishi Goswami, has to stay up all night to avoid a death curse. In the forest he comes upon the character of "The Story" (played by the gifted Angelica Shah) who agrees to tell him the heartbreaking tale of Rani as a means to keep him awake and as a means of keeping Rani's story alive. As Rani's story unfolds, the crux of the play is revealed. Rani, brought up by very doting parents, is married off to Appanna, who, before marriage, promises her the world. As she begins her new life with him in their new home, she is shockingly exposed to a harsh new reality. How she copes with this reality and empowers herself to face the scrutiny of not only her husband, but also society, shapes the themes of this play.

The play focuses on the universal themes facing individuals from every society today: marriage, family, fidelity, and societal scrutiny. In addition though, *NagaMandala* focuses on issues that continue to deserve further exploration, such as societal preoccupation with women's chastity, how to cope with a spouse who cycles in and out of abusive behavior, and at what cost should one stand up for what one believes in.

Sara Kumar, artistic director of Shunya said that the play's characters are grappling with making decisions. "Sometimes what we choose is good and sometimes what we choose is not the best for us. The play focuses on how we make those decisions."

Shunya's production of *NagaMandala* excels on many levels. The acting is phenomenal. Arzan Gonda steals the show by giving a stellar performance as an isolated and frustrated Rani. "This is one of the hardest characters I have ever had to play," she says.

Amit Patel proves his versatility as an actor by taking on the role of both the evil Appanna and loving Naga (human form). His ability to move in and out of character so quickly is remarkable. Yaksha Bhatt, who plays the role of the elder and blind Kurudavva, becomes an audience favorite. She gives a memorable performance with her perfectly calculated gestures and her piercing voice. Karthik Chander, who plays Kappanna, masterfully provides comic relief as Kurudavva's begrudgingly devoted son.

Shunya also does an excellent job at giving depth, humor, and humanity to the play's characters that were inanimate objects. "One of the hardest parts about this play was creating the written text's magical feeling on the stage, bringing 'The Flames,' 'The Story,' and 'Naga' to life," says Kumar.

The costumes are creative, fun, and appropriately designed. The stage set and lighting is simple and meaningful. The music, originally composed by Shunya musicians, create the perfect tone for each scene. The added bonus in the production is the dance scenes that are sprinkled throughout the play. The Shunya troupe worked with Mahira Dance Company to choreograph the scenes and as a result, the audience gets to see the work of some truly talented dancers.

NagaMandala is directed by Shunya's founding artistic director Soham Mehta and current artistic director Sara Kumar. For tickets and details, visit www.shunyatheatre.org.

by Krupa Parikh

Krupa Parikh is marketing/outreach director for Inprint, a Houston based literary arts organization.