

'Beneath the Banyan Tree'

BY SARAH LAKHANI

A girl transforms into a flowering tree with help from her sister. A greedy landlord conjures up a demon who must always work or else there is trouble.

These were just two of the stories in Qurrat Kadwani and Kesav Murthy Wable's play, "Beneath the Banyan Tree," which ran at the Gene Frankel Theatre, NYC, from February 11 to February 15th.

The play was an artistic interpretation of several folktales from South Asia, which are a part of its oral literature and culture.

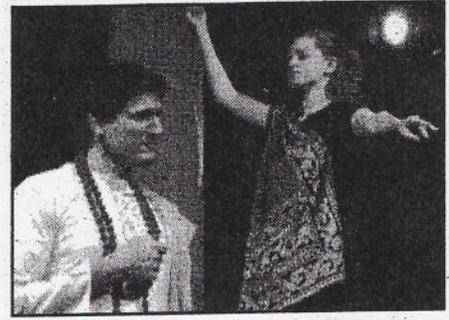
How had Kadwani compressed the tales into an energetic 90-minute play? By focusing on some of its largest themes: greed, sacrifice and love, and weaving the illustrative tales into a web of tragedy and laughs. In the play, a magical tree with the help of a mystic, helps people with pure hearts. Among those helped a pair of orphans and the audience is swept along on a journey of intrigue, excitement and laughs. Rachel Wahl and Obaid Kadwani, as the Tree and the Mystic, gave masterful performances. Qurrat Kadwani and Kesav Wable were endearing and captivating as the orphans.

Visually, the play was stunning. With large pieces of fabrics draped around to double as trees or columns, the stage effortlessly transported us to a forest or to a palace with the help of some creative lighting. There were also two sets of combat scenes choreographed by Ishrat Hoque, based on Kathak dance style. The combat sequences had heart-pounding music that added to the wonderful movement aspects of the play. In one dance-combat sequence, Raj, an orphan, fights the Demon, who is sent by the evil queen to kill Raj. Dukhu, the other orphan, must battle the Ogress Queen herself, in the other fight that had me on the edge of my seat. It was refreshing to see a play where the heroine does not simply wait for the hero to save her. Dukhu grabs a stick and, in the athletic fight sequence, goes at it with the Ogress Queen. Masks, created by Antoine Williams, worn by the Demon and the Ogress, add to the great visual component.

Actors and audience alike participated in suspending

visual and narrative conventions. One of the tales, that of the Flowering Tree, is told by the Mystic while the characters, Yamini and Kavita, act it out using different mediums. Elements of dance are used to portray violence, passion and metamorphosis.

"Beneath the Banyan Tree," originally developed in April of 2003, was a popular and critical hit. The production team and the writers refused



The magical Banyan Tree and the Mystic contemplate.

to be satisfied. The result is that 10 months later, with major revisions that include additional scenes, combat, and complex character relationships, the play now stands to be stronger and contains a depth that most plays do not have. I was moved by the performance. The magical quality that is inherent in this play will inevitably move this play to a larger venue and will most definitely bring it and its creators huge success. Obaid Kadwani, host of Namaste America and star of several television commercials, said: "The play deserves a longer run on an off-Broadway stage. We invite and welcome investors and donors to contact us in promoting South Asian culture by supporting this play. Our goal is to take the play off-Broadway and we need the South Asian community's help."

"Beneath the Banyan Tree" invited us to take these stories as seriously as the performers did, and thereby regain something, even for just an hour, that most of us lost when we started getting caught up with computers and other technology. With this play, we were going back to our homeland; we were urged to cherish our culture and celebrate the rich, vibrant oral folklore that was part of it. Not all these stories concluded satisfactorily and happily as most fairytales do, but the play did leave me with the sense to go to the library and read up on more tales and maybe even watch the show again, which is all a good piece of theatre should do.