

PLAY REVIEW

A play in New York tells tales of two women from India that 'need to be told'

In 'Two Women Talking', the actors share memories, laughter, anxieties and their darker encounters with Indian culture.

Meera Nair

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Photo Credit: Two Women Talking

One rainy fall evening in Brooklyn, two women walk out onto a small stage and stare at the audience. They stand in comfortable silence for several minutes – until the short-

haired woman in the blue and white kurta begins to talk.

At her boarding school in Connecticut, she says, three of her suitemates held her down on the bathroom floor, and then proceeded to shave her arms and legs with a razor. They left her cut and bleeding on the tiles. She was 13.

Several members of the audience noticeably gasp.

On stage, the other woman does not react. She watches her fellow presenter, absorbs her words without comment, lets the silence expand.

The two actors are Monsoon Bissell and Benaifer Bhadha. And in *Two Women Talking*, they are playing roles they have trained for all their lives – themselves.

Piercing stories

For 75 minutes, we watch and listen as they roam across the landscapes of their lives spent in Mumbai, Hartford, London, New York, trading stories in a messy chronology. The stories are often harrowing, jagged with feeling, but the women inhabit them fully, letting the memories subsume them. “I try to hold my mother’s hand, she pulls away, I try to hold my mother’s hand, she pulls away,” Bhadha repeats in a small, bewildered voice, her feet twisting into the pigeon-toed stance of a child.

These stories are not safe for work – or for the drawing room for that matter. There are secrets here, the gut-

twisting anxieties and toxic self-loathing that we try not to think about. In one story, Bhadha rages in the bathroom, her hands twisting the roll of flesh at her waist as she shouts “I hate you, I hate you” at her image in the mirror. About to undergo an operation, Bissell begs her doctor: “Can I keep my nipples? I like my nipples.”

Every story cuts deep, all the more potent because it is true. What makes the performance astounding is that it is not a performance – not in the usual sense. This is semi-scripted storytelling, live, improvised every evening. We are watching minimalist theatre, drama pared down to its essence, intimate, unsparingly human. On display are fraught encounters with memory, sparked in the moment. The audience, recast as witnesses, are invited to listen, even if the illicit thrill of eavesdropping on secrets feels uncomfortable. As Bissell explains, “The listening shapes the telling, and the telling shapes the listening.”

Nowadays, distracted by our devices and schedules, we have forgotten how to listen. On stage, the actors revive this lost art. No one rushes to fill pauses in the monologues with advice or opinions. As one speaks, the other listens, never breaking eye contact.

Indian bond

When they talk, their stories shimmer with startling details. The critic James Wood’s phrase, “better noticers of life”, comes to mind. I feel the straight backs of chairs in prissy boarding schools against my neck, smell the camphor in the

depths of Bissell's grandfather's closet. When Bhadha describes her substance abuse, I feel the dry scrape of the pills in my throat.

Then there is India. The country binds the women together, and it is everywhere. In stories of cosy afternoons spent with tea and steaming samosas in the company of large, loving families, as well as in the darker encounters with a culture, where, as Bissell tells me later, "girls are often told to shut up". When they stray from culturally expected ways, there is a price to pay in guilt, in strained relationships. When Bissell comes out as a lesbian, her mother shuts her down and turns away, refuses to acknowledge or engage with her daughter's sexuality.

But, as Bissell says, "These are stories that no one tells, but need to be told."

Raw connections

Watching these stories spill out, it is easy to believe that Bissell and Bhadha are old friends, performing a comfortable friendship. At one point, Bhadha says, "I have never had a relationship like this." Watching the women interact, that sentiment is not hard to believe – not even when we learn that they met for the first time only a year ago. By the time they started, under Dan Milne's sympathetic, unobtrusive direction, to ready the piece for the stage, they had spent weeks in Manhattan coffee shops, telling each other stories.

Even after a year, there are surprises. Twice in the evening, Bissell exclaims: “Benaifer, you never told that story before.”

Like the stories, the relationship comes under scrutiny too. In a particularly tense moment, Bhadha accuses Bissell of hurting her, dismissing her as “not being Indian enough”. In one of the most moving moments of the play, Bissell struggles to apologise, at one point asking Bhadha: “Are you going to help me out here?” When she refuses, Bissell stumbles on alone. We watch the relationship evolve, experience their struggle to accept each other, warts and all.

The yearning to connect fully with another is one we all recognise. Yet the openness with which these actors deal with each other is almost painful.

Still, this is precisely why *Two Women Talking* succeeds. It urges audiences to reengage with listening. The reactions of the audience, their gasps of shock or laughter affect the telling. The safer the actors feel, the more they are willing to reveal.

What of audiences who might be more judgemental? Who might not approve of family laundry being so publicly aired? Would they ever take this show to India, I ask.

Bhadha concedes it might be difficult, that she is not sure if audiences in India are ready. She has already told the story about how her mother refuses to see the show or even

acknowledge her success-even though she lives a few hours away. Bissell is more hopeful: “More than any place else, India needs to have two women who are clearly whole and healed tell stories.”

“There is power in two women talking,” she says.

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