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Shadow puppets

The King of Shadows

By Maxwell McKee

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Homeless teenagers fill the streets of San Francisco. They are often pushed into prostitution or hard drug use. Where we walk, they call home. Their stories are rarely heard, but Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's new play, *The King of Shadows*, sets out to remedy this. Big Idea Theatre's production of *Shadows* is directed by Benjamin T. Ismail as a dark, adult fairy tale; it emboldens the issues with well-crafted storytelling.

The play centers around trust-fund-fueled Jessica (Gina Williams) as she attempts to give relevance to her somewhat pampered lifestyle through listening to the mystical story of 15-year-old Indian street urchin Nihar (Andrew Perez). She and her boyfriend, Eric (Brian Harrower), and self-deprecating teen sister Sarah (Josephine Longo) take in the boy and listen to his wild-eyed fantasy, a story that suggests the fate of William Shakespeare's changeling baby in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The boy tells a paranormal tale about escaping his foster parents, the "King of Shadows" and the "Green Lady," both references to Oberon and Titania. The plot weaves around whether his story is real or a fantasy concocted around why Nihar left home and eventually became a street rat.

The play itself teeters on the metaphysical, perhaps understandable since Aguirre-Sacasa is a Shakespearean scholar and a Marvel Comics author. Even the play's end leaves us with a less-than-resolute resolution that lets the audience believe what they wish. Layers of social commentary fill the script, and the program contains statistics on homeless youth that bring shocking reality to the problem.

Williams' performance as the careful grad student is potent; her Jessica is a scarred and vulnerable woman who has to decide both what is right and what is best. Harrower plays a convincing New York ex-cop who must decide the extent of his own moral obligations, while Longo delivers a character that makes anyone in the audience remember what it was like to be a misunderstood teenager. Perez's ragamuffin is a tour-de-force of conviction who brings the audience to a crossroads: Do we believe him or not?

The set is bedecked in Ismail and Harrower's vision of a malleable San Francisco with moveable art and panels to display different settings and moods. Scenic artists Vince and Sunny Natad provide dark interpretations of the play's themes in their artwork. Harrower's lighting compliments the script, with its dense amount of storytelling and memory monologues, using special spots that come up for isolated character development.

The San Francisco fog also has a place in the play, and the purple light cast through the low-rolling fog is enough to send the creeps up any audience member's back. Costume designer Kat Wolinski's purple threads make a wonderful addition to the twisted vision of royalty in the production as well.

The play is a haunting invocation to awareness of what is happening behind closed doors—or right in front of our eyes—and brings an audience to wonder if we can do more with what we have.



Sometimes home is much scarier than the streets. PHOTO BY TERRI BRINDISI

The King of Shadows plays at 8 p.m on Thursday, Friday and Saturday; and 2:30 p.m. Sunday at Big Idea Theatre, 1616 Del Paso Boulevard; \$10-\$15; (916) 960-3036; www.bigideatheatre.com. Through July 23.

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