

Review: Princess Suffragette at Vault festival 2017

THE VAULTS ♦ 22 - 26 FEBRUARY 2017

Becoming an activist: B. L. Sherrington reviews a new play based on the true story of the first British-Asian Suffragette.

B. L. SHERRINGTON



Princess Suffragette at Vault festival 2017. Photo: Talissa Makdessi.

The journey to becoming your own woman is never smooth sailing. For Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, that is the understatement of a century or two. *Princess Suffragette*, a new play by Subika Anwar-Khan, is described as ‘a contemporary retelling of Princess Sophia’s journey entailing personal transformation, collective bravery and political defiance in the early 20th century’. The play depicts the experiences of a woman from a minority fighting for equal rights at the height of a difficult political era. It also relays some of the defining moments of British and Indian history while questioning what have been construed as the defining characteristics of feminism.

Under Charlie Ely’s direction, the play opens with the marital discord of Maharajah Duleep Singh (Navinder Bhatti) and his first wife, Bamba. Duleep is drunk and appears to be someone whose best years are behind them. His wife, who’s just been abandoned by him, is desperate for a strong drink to help with the pain. This introduction shows that despite the status and titles the couple hold, this is not a contented home life. Money, as they say, cannot buy you happiness.

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Princess Sophia (Jessica Andrade), meanwhile, is preparing to come out to society with the help of her sisters. Andrade presents her as a privileged young woman, sheltered from worries and, as a result, optimistic. Princess Sophia’s level of optimism can only come from sheer naivety to

the world. Interestingly, much of what we discover about the character comes through the words of her sister (Avita Jay). The sister feels loyalty towards their mother who raised them in England, but bitterness towards their father for abandoning his family for his mistress. When he dies, she tears apart the flower provided.

Following her father's death, Princess Sophia visits his former Indian kingdom, where she discovers a family secret. With Queen Victoria as her godmother and a youth growing up within the British aristocracy, Sophia is the definition of the elegant lady, right down to the manner in which she bows. However, when she journeys to her father's world, she discovers how different the two worlds are. Upon returning to England she questions what she believes and what she stands for. She becomes an activist fighting against British Imperialism and the first British-Asian Suffragette with Emmeline Pankhurst as a guide.

The small space allows for minimal movement of the actors, but Emily Bestow's use of an antique clock with years in place instead of hours clearly signposts which year the action is taking place in, as the narrative frequently goes back in time to reveal secret conversations and events that effect Princess Sophia's life. Bearing in mind the size of the Cage room at The Vaults, Bestow cleverly and economically embodies the glamour of Princess Sophia's surroundings both in England and India.

Her use of costume design ties in well to this. Princess Sophia is dressed in pearls and a fur when preparing for her coming out. Surrounded by her fellow suffragettes, she stands out like a sore thumb, but at the same time it draws attention to how their desire for votes for women transcended these class divisions.

Princess Suffragette is a play that shows us how far we have come politically, whilst also offering a timely reminder of Pankhurst's famous words: "never give up the fight".

Princess Suffragette was on at Vault festival 2017. Click [here](#) for more details.

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B. L. SHERRINGTON is a contributor to Exeunt Magazine