

Theater: Off-Off-Broadway

Review

Beyond the Mirror

By Bond Street Theatre and Exile Theatre. Dirs. Mahmoud Shah Salimi and Joanna Sherman. With ensemble cast. Theater for the New City.



WINDS OF WAR Salimi gets swept away.
Photo: Bond Street Theater

Beyond the Mirror, a sharply observed and heart-wrenching portrayal of Afghanistan's recent history – from the Soviet invasion to the American "liberation" of 2001 – is the result of the first collaboration between U.S. and Afghan theater companies. Though the production is nearly wordless, its meaning is always apparent; in addition to offering powerful acting by a six-member ensemble, the story is told through a compelling mix of music, photos, video, dance and puppetry.

The troupe's inventiveness makes the effects of war viscerally clear. As the world of Afghan civilians is thrown into the air, performers pick up and swirl each other – along with their belongings – around the stage. During the part of the show that deals with the Soviet occupation, one actor playing an Afghan treats others dressed as Soviet soldiers as puppets, only to find herself frog-marched offstage by them as the war turns.

This approach is particularly effective at depicting the increasing chaos in which Afghans lived, from the men who fight to the death over what they think is a bag of food, but turns out to be books, to the family persecuted by the Taliban because the wife showed her face in public. Despite abundant horrors, there is a fragile hope in the end: Actors recount a parable in which a man discovers that his village and a mythical hamlet where everyone is happy are reflections of one another. The story may be slight, but it offers more insight into what people really want than any politician's speech. –
Josselyn Simpson