

## THEATER REVIEW

### Stark images of a war-torn country

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

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**Beyond the Mirror:** Drama. Created and performed by Exile Theatre of Afghanistan and New York's Bond Street Theatre. (Repeats June 11, 12 and 18 in Fury Factory festival, Traveling Jewish Theatre, 470 Florida St., San Francisco. 70 minutes. Tickets \$12-\$15. Call (800) 838-3006, [www.foolsfury.org](http://www.foolsfury.org).)

The war on the other side of the world comes home in striking images - a beheading at a checkpoint, a stadium execution, a babbling infant puppet crawling toward a land mine. What makes the lives portrayed in "Beyond the Mirror" seem even more immediate is that this is the first Afghan production to play the Bay Area.

"Mirror," which opened Friday at the Cowell Theater in the San Francisco International Arts Festival, was created in Kabul four years ago as a collaboration between Exile Theatre of Afghanistan and New York's Bond Street Theatre. The groups had met in 2002 when both were touring refugee camps in northwest Pakistan, where the actors who founded Exile had taken refuge from the Taliban.

Anisa Wahab, who anchors the small ensemble, works in both large gestures and the intimate facial expressions of her film and TV career (before the Taliban made war on the arts along with women's rights). Exile's Wahab, the surprisingly acrobatic Najibullah Qiam and Jamil Royesh interact with Bond Street's Meghan Frank and Matthew Schmidt in uneven but often starkly expressive scenes of three decades of life in a war-torn country.

It isn't didactic. As staged by Bond's Joanna Sherman and Exile's Mahmoud Shah Salimi, "Mirror" is a collage of acting, slides, shadow and found-object puppetry, newsreel footage and video interviews (with projected translations), supported by hypnotic accompaniment by composer Quraishi on the ancient lute-like *rubab*.

Episodes from the Soviet occupation and ensuing civil war give way to scenes from the bloody oppression of the Taliban.

"Mirror" doesn't attempt a cohesive history of the last 30 years. There's virtually nothing about the politics behind the fighting or the eight years of American intervention. But what's there is rarer and perhaps more important, an up-close visit with the people trapped in the horrors that have spread to the areas where Exile's actors found refuge. As the fable with which Qiam and Frank conclude says, "We are merely reflections of each other."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/06/01/DDIK17S7TF.DTL>

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