

Dead Woman Home

Also: Big Red Dance Company.

September 22, 2004

PICK Dead Woman Home
East Hall Theater; ends
Sun., Oct. 3

May Nazareno isn't yet Anna Deveare Smith, but all evidence suggests she's on her way. Like Smith, whose searing one-woman re-creations of complex social upheavals successfully challenge the popular media perceptions of such events, Nazareno here uses lucid solo performance to convey the private toll of a public tragedy.

On Aug. 19, 2003, a truck loaded with explosives drove into U.N. headquarters in Baghdad, killing 21 staff members and Sergio Vieira de Mello, the gentlemanly U.N. high commissioner for human rights who was in Iraq as secretary-general special representative. While de Mello's dignified presence is felt in news clips (through judicious video design by Mark Ramquist), the focus in *Dead Woman Home* is not on him but on an ingenuous Filipina woman he inspired: 53-year-old Marilyn Manuel was de Mello's devoted aide who, due to a bureaucratic error, was listed as a casualty in the bombing. Her mourning family in Queens, N.Y., assumed she was dead until, dazed, blinded, and in a hospital, she borrowed a nurse's cell phone and called home to let them know she was, in fact, alive.

The incident, Nazareno knows, is an apt metaphor for the depersonalizing chaos endemic to the situation in Iraq, but she's too smart to let any of it become simple agitprop; she's determined to give the political circumstance human dimensions. Using various news reports and interviews she conducted as text, Nazareno inhabits each of the stunned participants—most effectively Marilyn's shell-shocked son, Rick, and Lola, her baffled, angry, elderly mother—and diligently outlines their bewilderment, dovetailing it with the confusion Marilyn feels overseas. Better, Nazareno takes the time not only to illuminate the humanitarian reasons that would send a fiftysomething woman into the heart of international unrest, but to contemplate even the most violent insurgency from every angle. ("Wouldn't *you* go to an uprising?" Marilyn asks us, after recounting the appalling living conditions in Baghdad. "I think you would.") Nazareno and her dexterous director, Teresa Thuman, have been remarkably scrupulous in keeping every tiny moment of the production working toward shaping our understanding of the bigger picture.

They're so scrupulous, in fact, that the piece can be a tad clinical. Only when Lola's voice rises in horrified intensity after first hearing about the bombing does the production ever approach the sudden, unplanned urgency of real life. The show is completely professional but not as visceral as it perhaps needs to be; you end up admiring it more than you feel touched by it.

Still, you *do* admire it, and find yourself invested in its people—no small feat when a lot of artists think they have something to say about the war yet end up conveying nothing but earnest intellect. This is an adroit, accomplished plea for us to remember that inside every major tragedy are a million other dashed ambitions. STEVE WIECKING



ANDREW REES

Nazareno heads Home.