

THEATER REVIEW

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'Women' tell their stories of suffering

By Tom Sime

Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Many voices are heard in Soul Rep's *Women in Exile*, but a quote attributed to Virginia Woolf cuts to the heart of this distillation of Mahnaz Afkhami's book. The play is made up of testimonials from a series of women who learned how right Woolf was when she said that as a woman, she had no country.

Women's rights, even their citizenship, seem always to be a luxury of politics, jettisoned under hardship. Tale after tale spotlights women who give all for revolution, fighting side by side with men for reforms then withheld from them once new leaders take power.

In *Women in Exile*, which opened Friday, a series of monologues and scenes show us women who have fled their homes — Malawi, Russia and El Salvador among them — to escape prison or execution, only to find

themselves homesick and grieving for those lost or left behind.

Adaptor Anyika E. McMillan and first-time director Billy Eugene Jones give *Women* a modest, stark structure and look — restrained, perhaps, to a fault. There are shudders enough, but little drama. None of the women surprises us; each is noble in her sorrow and blameless in her fate.

That makes the only woman suffering from guilt, a Vietnamese mother who blames herself for her child's death (Jessica Kang), stand out with especial poignancy.

Otherwise, it's the lives of the saints, a pageant of martyrdom as female activists find their humanity courted, then denied, with every revolutionary cycle. Fatima (Guinea Lada), a Sudanese activist, recalls her terrifying clitoridectomy at age 3, her election to a reformed Parliament, and her eventual betrayal and expulsion; the confluence of traditional, leftist and reactionary

oppression is staggering.

There are moments of visual excitement, including some uncredited choreography that calls us back from ideology to the senses, which are otherwise rather underserved by the rote testimonials. Acting is strong, drama not so much so. Ms. Afkhami's book is essentially a work of reportage, and Ms. McMillan's efforts do not quite dispel that functional feel, leaving *Women in Exile* stranded somewhere between theater and journalism.

Tom Sime writes about theater for The Dallas Morning News.

■ PERFORMANCE INFORMATION

Women in Exile presented by Soul Rep at the South Dallas Cultural Center, Fitzhugh at Robert B. Orlum Boulevard, Friday through Sunday. Adapted by Anyika E. McMillan from Mahnaz Afkhami's book. Direction and lighting by Billy Eugene Jones. Set by Rhonda Norton, Chris Herod and Stuart Litchfield. Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. For mature audiences only. Tickets \$10. Call (214) 565-9026, ext. 302.