

Echo Magazine (Phoenix, Arizona)

October 2009

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<http://moviedearest.blogspot.com/2009/10/reel-thoughts-interview-playwright.html>

Playwright Matthew Spangler brings *The Kite Runner* to the stage

It's either brilliant or foolhardy to adapt a beloved novel like Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* to the stage.

Playwright Matthew Spangler couldn't resist the challenge, and the results have been a critical smash for the California professor.

Co-produced with the San Jose Repertory Company, *The Kite Runner* is the story of an Afghan man who betrayed his best friend as a boy, then gets the chance "to be good again" years later by rescuing his former friend's son.

The script was completed before the film was released in 2007.

"It's a story of immigration, and there aren't a lot of those stories on the American stage," Spangler said. "This one, of course, focuses on Afghan immigration to the California/San Francisco Bay area, but in a lot of ways, that story is universal no matter where you're immigrating from.

"I think this book is well positioned to counter some of the stereotypes that we might have of Afghanistan as Americans. Specifically the stereotype of Afghanistan as a war-torn land of poverty and terrorists," he added.

Spangler said the book shows Afghanistan with a pretty solid middle class, which has respect for education and egalitarian values.

Many of these people immigrated during the Afghan war with the Soviet Union .

"That was one thing that drew me to this," Spangler said. "The other thing, on even a more basic level, is that this is a beautiful story of redemption. I found the book very moving. The main character does something at an early age that is horrible, and he regrets it, and the rest of his life is conditioned by that thing that he did when he was young, and then as an adult, he tried to set it right."

In the story, the protagonist fails to intervene when his young friend is raped by the neighborhood bully, then conspires to get the boy removed from his house (where the boy's father works as a servant) to assuage his guilt.

Spangler conceded that it's a risk to adapt a piece where the protagonist behaves so badly. "The narrator is that protagonist, and he's on stage for the full two and a half hours of the performance, so if the audience doesn't go along with him, that's a problem."

Spangler said the director, the actor and the writer worked together to find ways to allow the audience to empathize with him, even though in some ways he's a despicable character for abandoning his friend. The challenge is to find ways to keep the audience on the character's side.

It helps that the narrator plays the character's older self looking back, asking the audience's forgiveness.

"There's something powerfully dramatic about that," Spangler said.

He praised Barzin Akhavan, who plays the older Amir, saying how lucky he and director David Ira Goldstein were to get him.

Spangler said he is gratified to see how warmly audiences are responding to the piece, which he worried might be too dark.

The film did court controversy with some LGBT audiences that felt that the villain was a stereotypical predatory gay man, but Spangler did not portray the character that way. The same-sex violation is shown to be a by-product of prejudice and an act intended to humiliate.

Despite its dark subject matter, the story's main theme is Amir's path to redemption. Audiences in Tucson and San Jose embraced the show, and given the timely nature of its setting, theatergoers here are sure to be enthralled as well.

VITAL STATISTICS

The Kite Runner

Oct. 8-25

Herberger Theater Center , 222 E. Monroe , Phoenix .

Tickets: \$26-\$59.

602-256-6995 or www.arizonatheatre.org