

# 'Kite Runner' comes home: San Jose Rep lands debut of stage adaptation

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Keep your eyes on the skies as "The Kite Runner" floats triumphantly back home to San Jose.

The world premiere stage adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's international bestseller flies into the San Jose Repertory Theatre on March 21. Steeped in the ritual of kite-running, which the cast has studied at a Bay Area park, the production hopes to capture the spirit of the craft through language and movement instead of spectacle.

For the author, this is a homecoming for the story that catapulted him out of obscurity.

"To see the name on the marquee at San Jose Rep is such an honor," the unassuming Hosseini says during a break from rehearsals. "It's almost surreal for me to think my family came here in 1980, a family of nine living on welfare in East San Jose, and now San Jose Rep is doing my story."

The 44-year-old author, whose wrenching tale of boyhood camaraderie, betrayal and atonement is rooted in his own memories of Kabul, still makes his home in San Jose. That's where his parents landed as political refugees from Afghanistan, toiling at meager jobs to keep the family afloat.

Hosseini was 15 and didn't speak English when he arrived. It took him only a year at Independence High School to be fluent, on his way to becoming a doctor and then an author. The 2003 novel is still a runaway hit — celebrated writer Isabelle Allende hailed the book as "so powerful that for a long time after, everything I read seemed bland." And it became a popular movie in 2007.

Hosseini kept his day job, as a physician at Kaiser Mountain View, at first. Now, he is a full-time writer and his second novel, "A Thousand Splendid Suns," has also made a splash.

He limited his contribution to the play (and the movie) to consultation. He and Matthew Spangler, who adapted the book for the theater, have discussed the text, but Hosseini does not want to get in the way. "I am the storyteller, but 'Kite Runner' has become such a big phenomenon that it has a life of its own," he says. "It's not just my story anymore; it belongs to many people all over the world," he adds with a generosity his collaborators say is characteristic.

For Spangler, one of those collaborators, transporting literature to the stage is a passion. In 2007, he developed this adaptation at San Jose State University, where he is an assistant professor, and then got the green light from DreamWorks, which holds the rights. The Rep gladly obliged when Spangler pitched the project.

"Khaled's brilliance is that he paints a picture of this very exotic universe and yet you look at the characters and you see yourself in them," director David Ira Goldstein says. The coming-of-age tale spins around two little boys, Amir and Hassan, one upper-class, the other a servant's son. They grow up in the same peaceful Kabul household in the 1970s, until war tears the city apart. Violence erupts throughout their lives. Amir remains plagued by guilt for a boyhood betrayal until he redeems himself as an adult.

"The story is driven by guilt," Hosseini says. "I too have a real sense of guilt for having been spared the suffering that so many people in Afghanistan have endured."

Spangler says he is freed from the more literal constraints of film. With a few sticks of furniture and a handful of props, the play can jet from a Kabul bazaar to a California freeway. "My impulse is always a minimalist aesthetic that suggests things instead of illustrating them — letting some things occur in the imagination," Spangler says. On stage, the kite-flying sequence, in which Amir wins the city's kite-running tournament, will not be a visual spectacle. Kites will be on stage, but not flown. Instead, the climactic moment will be left to words hitting the air, the dance of actors and the hypnotic percussion of the tabla (a type of Indian drum).

"'The Kite Runner' is really about the human relationships," Hosseini notes, "the arc of Amir's transformation, and maybe it makes sense not to diminish that with spectacle which would distract the eye."

Make no mistake, the spirit of kite-cutting, snipping your competitor's kite with a quick tug of a glass-encrusted string, still buoys the action. On field trips to Hayward's Garin Regional Park, where the Afghan community practices this ancient pastime, the cast has gotten the feel of the craft.

"You have to have felt the string in your hand to know what that means," the director says. Of course, kite strings are not the only kind pulled in the story. Heartstrings are also involved, but the director is determined that the production earns every tear. "It's big-hearted but it shouldn't be too sentimental," Goldstein says.

'Faithful to the novel'

For his part, Hosseini feels the play is more authentic than the film.

"It is a lot more faithful to the novel," he says. "It has also allowed me to do a little editing, things I wish I had done differently the first time." Small changes abound. The villainous Assef is no longer part German; the role of women has been amplified.

For the Rep, it's a heady time. Tickets are selling briskly, but there's more than the bottom line to celebrate. There's local pride. "With all the connections this story, and the people behind it, have with San Jose," managing director Nick Nichols says, "I am very happy San

Jose Rep will be doing this world premiere." From a wider lens, Spangler has high hopes that "Kite" can open minds, deepening the understanding of Afghanistan. "Afghanistan is not the Taliban," Spangler says. "This is an ancient and proud culture."

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