

Landing *The Kite Runner* by Sam Hurwitt, Associate Editor

The Kite Runner became inescapable a few years ago in book clubs around the country. The 2003 novel by San Jose author Khaled Hosseini became a huge best-seller. The fact that its timing was impeccable certainly didn't hurt. Although the tale of family, friendship, guilt and redemption would have resonated with readers at any time, a story about a boy growing up in Afghanistan, fleeing to the Bay Area when the Russians invaded and returning as an adult during the Taliban regime was more likely to find its way into an American reader's hands after a country that had been relatively obscure to most Americans had suddenly become a place they were hearing a lot about.

Matthew Spangler, the San Jose playwright whose stage adaptation of the novel is now in a world premiere production at San Jose Repertory Theatre, originally came across the book more or less the way everybody else did.

"San Jose State chose it as its campus reading selection," says Spangler, who teaches at the university. "Every year the university chooses a book that the incoming class is supposed to read, and there are various things on campus built around that. So I read it, just really to stay up on things that are happening on campus. But as soon as I read it I thought this would make a great piece of theatre. I suppose too one of the things that influenced me in really wanting to do this project is how much my students liked it. My students overwhelmingly loved this book and were kind of thrilled by the idea of putting it on stage."

Literary adaptation for the stage happened to be Spangler's specialty. A former student of Mary Zimmerman and Frank Galati at Northwestern University, he's gone on to adapt stories by John Cheever, James Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, Jack London and Ernest Hemingway as the cofounding artistic director of Wordshed Productions.

"I was intrigued to put it on stage, so I contacted Khaled Hosseini in 2005 and asked what he would think of that," Spangler says. "We met, and I shared my ideas with him and eventually got permission from him and his agent."

The tricky part was that Hosseini had already signed the rights to DreamWorks for the film adaptation that would premiere in 2007, but that turned out not to be so tricky after all. Spangler got permission from the studio too, with certain conditions (they get a small percentage of the box office for each show), and started writing the play in 2006. He then directed a workshop production of the play with students at San Jose State, which Hosseini came to see.

"I guess the developmental show was in March of '07, and the movie was released that fall," Spangler says. "I thought it was remarkable that they allowed even a small campus show to come out six months before their film, but they did. After that Khaled and I decided to send the script out to see if some professional theatres would be interested in doing it. But the Rep was always my top choice, because it's local. My office is literally two blocks away from the theatre."

Of course it's never as simple as just taking a novel and putting it on stage. Unless the audience has an entire weekend to spare, any adapter has to pick and choose which scenes, characters and subplots to whittle down or omit entirely.

"I think there's two big challenges," Spangler says. "The first one is the length of the novel. In my paperback edition it's about 370 pages long. You're looking at about 18 or 19 hours of spoken text, so one challenge is just boiling that down to two hours for a stage production. You need to take out huge chunks of the novel, so you're always operating with sort of two instruments. One is a blunt instrument, so you're just cutting away sections, and another is a much more delicate instrument, where you're carving and fine-tuning and finding ways to work ideas in from one scene that you've cut into other scenes so you can keep the thought. But that's all part of the art of adaptation, really, which I enjoy very much."

But that's just the usual challenge of tackling a novel rather than something of a more easily stageable length such a short story. A more specific conundrum with *The Kite Runner* is how to capture on stage the world of a novel that spans 30 years and jumps continents between Kabul and Fremont, Islamabad and San Jose.

"It takes some thinking outside the box of naturalistic theatre to be able to pull that off," Spangler says.

"I was at first dubious how you would put this novel on stage, but what I quickly realized in reading the play is that the book is written in first person, so it's actually an intimate story," says director David Ira Goldstein, who's also the artistic director of Arizona Theatre Company and says he hopes to open his season there with the play if the rights work out. "It really is all taking place through Amir's eyes and through Amir's experience. We decided that we would try to make it just very theatrical. It's going to be an ensemble of 12, plus a tabla player, embodying 50 characters. The only person who is a constant is Amir, who's the narrator of the play just as he is the first-person narrator of the book."

Of course, audience members may also be familiar with the aforementioned film adaptation, one that generated controversy when Paramount had to permanently relocate the Afghan child actors to Saudi Arabia because a rape scene vital to the narrative arc of the story led to fear for their safety when the film came out. (The movie's been banned in Afghanistan.) But both the playwright and stage director attest that the existence of an unrelated movie version out there in the world is

neither here nor there as far as what they're doing.

"I watched the movie once, and I enjoyed the movie, but what we're doing is just by its very nature so different," Goldstein says. "The movie barely pauses for an intimate scene because it is covering so much territory, whereas most of the play is actually intimate scenes, as a lot of the book is. I do know that we did decide early on to not cast 13-year-old kids, to have kids that were a little older as part of the ensemble, because they did have a lot of problems with the movie, as you know, with the children and the rape scene."

Because Hosseini's local and has been watching the piece evolve from the very beginning, they've also had the author's advice to draw upon when necessary.

"He's read drafts of the script and makes comments on them," Spangler says. "But really he's extremely generous and hands-off. To both me and the director he's said, 'You guys are the experts in this. I trust you.' Most of his comments on the script are along the lines of things that he himself would have wanted to rewrite if he could rewrite the book again."

Goldstein and Spangler both describe themselves as people who constantly tweak and revise, and the director says he'd be perfectly content to rehearse forever and never open a show if he could get away with it. At the end of the day, however, it's what ultimately takes shape on that stage that counts.

"People have a very, very deep love and passion for this story, and you want to make sure that that is honored at the same time that you're creating a piece of art that has to live on its own whether people have read the book or not," Goldstein says. "Even though I've done a ton of research, now's the time to leave that all behind and see how this story translates into a live event. You start right off with a book called *The Kite Runner*, and one thing you can't do in the theatre is fly a kite."

The Kite Runner continues through April 19 at San Jose Repertory Theatre. Call (408) 367-7255, or visit sjrep.com.