

A world premiere from another world

SJSU assistant professor Matthew Spangler's adaptation reels in the soaring plot of this Afghan story

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Issue date: 4/15/09 Section: [Arts & Entertainment](#)

The bestselling novel, "The Kite Runner," was shown in a new theatrical production at the San Jose Repertory Theatre on Saturday to a buzzing, full house.

The novel by author Khaled Hosseini was adapted by SJSU Assistant Professor Matthew Spangler for a theater production after it was selected by the SJSU Campus Reading Program as the campus book for 2006.

Spanning the years 1973 to 2003, the play is a heart-breaking story of a man and his sad childhood. It unveils a deep tragedy in his native country of Afghanistan.

Amir, the hero, comes from an affluent family while his best friend, Hassan, is the son of their servant. The boys' relationship tells a story of discrimination, immigration and redemption.

"Its powerful moments of high drama, and its engaging characters, make this an ideal story for live performance," Spangler said in a media release. "I fell in love with the book and knew right away that it would make an excellent play."

Spangler originally adapted the book for an SJSU student production, which premiered in Spring 2007. The script took about a month to write and over a year to revise, Spangler said.

"SJSU is a wonderful environment for creating projects and developing ideas," Spangler said. "The students had a great learning experience, immersing themselves in Afghan culture for over a year."

Lani Wong, an advertising graduate student, played Hassan in the student production and now plays ensemble roles in the professional production.

"To play Hassan, I had to hack off all of my hair to look like a boy," Wong said. "But I'm so grateful Matthew (Spangler) had faith in me and gave me the opportunity to play Hassan."

Dramatic playing of tabla drums by Salar Nader added to the anticipation and mystery of a blacked-out stage. An abrupt end to the music brought out about a dozen characters, each carrying a vibrant and colorful kite and running in frantic circles.

Then the scene became still and the main character, Amir, played by Barzin Akhavan, entered the scene, weaving between the other characters. He headed right to the front of the stage and began to tell his story.

Amir's monologue is the first of many. Each has the advantage of revealing his thoughts to the audience, unlike a movie, which usually depends on dialogue and images. The emotions are strong and heavy for these complex characters and their even more complicated country.

"We have a stereotype of what Afghanistan is today," Spangler said. "Before the war, they had a middle-class structure and there were divisions of Afghan culture."

During an interview on radio station KCBS, Hosseini said a goal of the story was to humanize Afghanistan and to show its culture and people.



Media Credit: Courtesy of Kevin Berne
Amir, played by Barzin Akhavan, joyfully flies a kite.

The rest of the play is heavy and not for the faint of heart.

Stories about Amir's childhood, and the best friend he betrays, have Amir guilt-ridden and ashamed throughout most of the story.

While adapting the play, Spangler aimed to imitate the author's poetic voice with repetition of certain phrases.

"In the beginning, Amir uses the phrase 'I ran' when talking about his cowardly interactions with his father and himself," Spangler said. "But at the end, 'I ran' takes on a completely different meaning, with the character finally able to redeem himself."

The play will be at the San Jose Repertory Theatre until Sunday.