

From Page to Stage

The acclaimed novel *The Kite Runner* comes to life at San Jose Rep this month.

By Mitchell Alan Parker

The local theatre world is all abuzz over Matthew Spangler's adaptation of *The Kite Runner*, now on stage at the San Jose Repertory Theatre thru April 19. Based on the best-selling novel by Bay Area author Khaled Hosseini, the story follows Amir, a young Afghan boy who harbors the burden of betraying his best friend at an early age, and seeks redemption throughout his life amid civil war in his native Afghanistan, a Soviet invasion, and his family's immigration to Fremont, Calif.

Spangler, who is the assistant professor of performance studies at San Jose State University, has adapted more than 30 works of literature into stage plays, mostly from the likes of James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London and John Cheever. But he was drawn to *The Kite Runner* because it was "such a fantastic story." "It has engaging characters and a wonderful narrative," says Spangler of Hosseini's novel, which he originally adapted for his SJSU students. "Just the way it's written, it's like peeling an onion: Little things happen and you think, 'Oh, I want to know what happens next.'"

The complexities of Afghan culture, the Hassara/Pashtun conflict, and the history of the Afghan middle class also intrigued Spangler. "We think of Afghanistan as sort of huts and bombs, but that's not what it's been its whole history. There was a whole segment of Afghan society that embraced women's rights and education, who knew how to speak English. Of course, the Russian invasion in the late '70s, followed by the civil war, followed by the Taliban, has forced many of those people to leave. A lot of them have come here to the Bay Area."

David Ira Goldstein, who has been the artistic director for the Arizona Theatre Company for 18 years, directs the play, his second for SJ Rep. Like Spangler, he was also fascinated by Afghan culture. He spent time visiting Fremont, which has an area often dubbed Little Kabul (it's home to the largest Afghan community in North America), and is featured prominently in Hosseini's novel. Goldstein also attended kite-flying events at Garin Park in Hayward and visited the San Jose flea markets, both of which are featured in Hosseini's story. "I worked very hard to learn about Afghan culture," he says. "People say write what you know. I like to direct what I don't know."

As for the play, Goldstein has spent the past 10 months preparing the work for production, only recently beginning rehearsals. The cast includes an ensemble of nine actors (about half of whom are local) that play 40 to 50 characters. "I'm really thrilled," Goldstein says. "Matthew [Spangler] wrote an incredible script – it's theatrical but deeply honors the book, which is hard for a story that is beloved by so many people."

As for kite fighting on stage, don't get your hopes up. Both Spangler and Goldstein note that the importance of those scenes isn't about the kites, but about the characters and what they're going through. Apart from the costly expense of mimicking kite flying indoors, Goldstein asserts that it would be too much of a distraction from the story.



The Kite Runner thru Apr. 19 at the San Jose Repertory Theatre. For tickets, go to www.sjrep.com.

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