

# 'Kite Runner' stages riveting return

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"The Kite Runner" soared back to San Jose on Friday night on the wings of great expectations.

Almost 30 years after Khaled Hosseini's family immigrated to America, penniless refugees from war-torn Afghanistan struggling to carve out a new life in San Jose, his blockbuster tale of tragedy and atonement has come home. First a bestselling 2003 novel and then a big-budget 2007 movie, "The Kite Runner" glides gracefully in its world premiere stage adaptation at San Jose Repertory Theatre.

Matthew Spangler's exquisitely chiseled adaptation summons up the spirit of the novel while distilling the sweeping story into a seamless 2 hours and 40 minutes. If the narration seems a tad monochromatic at first, David Ira Goldstein's elegant production soon thrums with a kaleidoscopic sense of nuance that's far more faithful to the book than the movie, especially in its clear-eyed embrace of life's shadows. Shot through with shimmering details and understated performances, "Kite Runner" flies straight and true.

In the play's opening scenes, two little boys, Amir (Craig Piaget) and Hassan (Lowell Abellon), frolic down dusty streets chasing after kites to the mesmerizing percussion of tabla drums (played by Salar Nader). Goldstein's starkly modern staging vividly evokes the character and mystery of 1975 Kabul with minimal sets, costumes and props.

Piaget and Abellon perfectly capture the blissful self-absorption of childhood, the luxury of summer afternoons that seem to go on forever and the innocent belief that nothing can disturb their days of storytelling and kite-fighting, bringing down your competitor's kite with a quick tug of a glass-coated string. Goldstein choreographs the kite-running tournament like a ballet, with a chorus of actors flinging their limbs in jubilant abandon as the last kite flutters to earth.

Peace soon proves as fragile as those kites. Violence explodes outside the gates of the boys' home. Inside its doors, there is another kind of uprising. An act of betrayal wrenches Amir and Hassan apart, setting the stage for the rest of their lives. Hosseini deftly suggests that the unjust balance of power between master and servant may stain both parties.

Goldstein wisely keeps the play's most atrocious acts offstage. We don't see what Amir sees as he watches the bully Assef (Adam Yazbeck) assault Hassan, but we see the gnarled terror on Amir's face, and that is harrowing enough. Piaget nails the paralysis of succumbing to cowardice. Abellon captures the depth of Hassan's sacrifice, his perpetually downcast eyes shuddering with pain.



Khaled Hosseini author of "The Kite Runner", at San Jose Rep Friday Mar. 6, 2009. The play, based on the blockbuster book, "The Kite Runner" soars into San Jose Rep for its world premiere theatrical adaptation. Novelist Khaled Hosseini hails from the Afghani community in Fremont. (Patrick Tehan/Mercury News)

Barzin Akhavan anchors this epic production with his sensitive turn as the adult Amir, looking back on his boyhood through haunted eyes. The actor carries the weight of the narrative, leading us through 30 years of history, memory and regret with nary a false note.

The connection between the past and the present burns most brightly as Baba (Thomas Fiscella), Amir's formidable father, takes center stage. The actor imbues Baba with an austerity and gravitas that doesn't diminish as the prosperous businessman loses everything, coming to America to toil at a gas station and pin all his hopes on his son.

Goldstein frames the transitions deftly, signaling shifts in time and place with the magic of music and movement. The sound design plays a key role in exposing the intensity of the narrative, from the meditative beating of the tabla to the throbbing '80s pop that blasts in Amir's ear as he lands in Fremont. A giddy teenager, he is eager to forget his past in a country that keeps its eyes firmly on the future.

Akhavan shines during Amir's years in California, working the stalls at the San Jose flea market and pitching woo at the shy Soraya (Rinabeth Apostol). His later return to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, seeking redemption amid the rubble, however, needs more definition.

Akhavan channels the alienation of a man who feels like a tourist in his own homeland, but the depth of the country's grief and loss only fitfully comes across, notably in the grim fatalism of the smuggler Farid (Demosthenes Chrysan), who lost his family to the land mines. The background projections lack visceral impact.

While the production edges into melodrama here and there, there's no denying the raw emotional charge of the story. Sentiment overwhelms us when Abellon returns as Hassan's young son, now an orphan, fending for himself among the predators and lowlifes whose vicious crimes are cloaked by the chaos of war.

Again, the director handles highly disturbing images with great delicacy but even so, if you aren't beating back the tears by the final tableau, you had better see a doctor because there may be something wrong with your heart.

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"The Kite runner"

Based on the novel by Khaled Hosseini, adapted for the stage by Matthew Spangler

The upshot: A blockbuster epic floats back to San Jose in an elegant new stage adaptation buoyed by shimmering details and understated performances.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes (one intermission)

Through: April 19

Tickets: \$33-\$62; (408) 367-7255; [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com)