

Play review: 'The Kite Runner' true to source

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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The Kite Runner: Drama. By Matthew Spangler, adapted from the novel by Khaled Hosseini. Directed by David Ira Goldstein. With Barzin Akhavan, Thomas Fiscella, Craig Piaget, Lowell Abellon, Rinabeth Apostol, Gregor Paslawsky, Demosthenes Chrysan et al. (Through April 19. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, 35 minutes. Tickets \$20-\$62. Call (408) 367-7255 or go to www.sjrep.com.)

The kites are glorious. The actors throw themselves into their many roles with impressive conviction. Matthew Spangler's adaptation is so faithful to the events, characters and spirit of Khaled Hosseini's best-selling novel that it's hard to imagine that fans of "The Kite Runner" will be disappointed in the play of the same name that opened Friday at San Jose Repertory Theatre.



"The Kite Runner" is being performed at the San Jose Repertory Theatre. (Kevin Berne)

The stage version has nothing to do with the film that came out two years ago, except for sharing the same source. Though San Jose Rep's show is a world premiere, Spangler wrote and staged an earlier version before the movie appeared, also in 2007, at San Jose State University where he teaches performance studies. His "Kite" may be 2 1/2 hours long, but it depicts most of what happens in the book at almost fast-forward speed.

That's both a plus and a minus. Though David Ira Goldstein stages the action with cinematic grace, using Vicki Smith's effortlessly sliding sets and lovely kite montages to create a seamless flow and some striking tableaux, there's little here of the immersion in Afghan sights and customs that is one of the novel's most fascinating aspects. The actors' mannerisms, Kish Finnegan's beautifully observed costumes and even the haunting, moody score of composer and tabla accompanist Salar Nader aren't enough to transport us into a foreign culture.

On the other hand, the play preserves the book's conflicted, guilt-ridden narrative voice, plunging in with its opening paragraphs. Barzin Akhavan establishes the rueful reminiscent tone as an older Amir, the Kabul-born San Francisco novelist haunted by his childhood betrayal of his best friend (and servant) Hassan.

The childhood flashback plays out in some striking scenes, with a resolute Thomas Fiscella's Baba embodying the impressive, highly principled but remote father the child desperately wants to impress. As in the book, Lowell Abellon's bright, earnest Hassan is more lovable than Craig Piaget's quirky, neurotic young Amir. It's only after the harrowing rape of Hassan by the insidious neighborhood psychopath played by Adam Yazbeck that Piaget's mannered performance settles into place, as young Amir, guilt-ridden over his inability to protect Hassan, connives to get rid of him.

Arkhavan's Amir, a somewhat distracting presence in the first act, takes command of the stage when the action moves to the Bay Area and he gets to be the protagonist. Arkhavan and Rinabeth Apostol depict the shy, circuitous courtship of Amir and Soraya with sweet, comic understatement as Fiscella's Baba shrinks with age and disease. Gregor Paslawsky and Demosthenes Chrysan contribute intense cameos when Amir returns to Afghanistan to pay his honor-debt to Hassan.

But Spangler has spent the whole first act on the first quarter of the novel, giving us the rest in a kind of CliffsNotes rush. Even the horrors of Taliban rule seem personified by comic book supervillains. Though Goldstein stages some terrific vignettes - the kite tournament, the culture-clash arrival in America, the wedding - and dwells on a few moments of extreme passion, "Kite" rarely settles long enough to register. Too often, it tells the story rather than immerse us in it.

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