



The Kite Runner

By DENNIS HARVEY

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(San Jose Rep; 525 seats; \$62 top) A San Jose Rep presentation, in association with Hitachi Data Systems, of a play in two acts by Matthew Spangler, adapted from the novel by Khaled Hosseini. Directed by David Ira Goldstein.

With: Barzin Akhavan, Gregor Paslawsky, Craig Piaget, Lowell Abellon, James Saba, Thomas Fiscella, Adam Yazbeck, Demosthenes Chrysan, Rinabeth Apostol, Zarif Kabier Sadiqi, Wahab Shayek, Lani Carissa Wong.

The bestsellerdom of Khaled Hosseini's "The Kite Runner" couldn't make a Stateside hit of the 2007 film version, but it should provide ample subscription bait for regional theaters via Matthew Spangler's sturdy stage adaptation. World-premiering in David Ira Goldstein's solid San Jose Rep staging, the show trips up precisely where both book and movie did -- in the story's last chapters, when an excess of heavy-handed contrivance pushes melodrama to the brink of silliness. Nonetheless, the generally involving play should appeal to the novel's many fans, plus those few whose book clubs still haven't gotten around to it.

While Marc Forster's film improved upon the novel by downplaying its broad strokes with judicious naturalism, Spangler and Goldstein do likewise by using the pared-down sources of live theater to emphasize the tale's larger-than-life, fable-like qualities.

With composer Salar Nader playing his original tabla score on a corner of the stage, visible throughout, the sprawl of shifting time, locations and political climates works quite well in this text's distilled narrative outline. Spangler does pause for some quietly nuanced scenes, like the protag's childhood eavesdropping on his father's disapproving thoughts about him and, much later, his courtship of his future wife. But mostly the playwright and director hit the highlights in a well-paced condensation of a very busy book.

Amir (Barzin Akhavan, onstage pretty much throughout) narrates his story as an adult, taking over his own role after intermission from the excellent Craig Piaget. Latter's young Amir, son of wealthy and worldly Kabul merchant Baba (Thomas Fiscella), is raised after his mother's death alongside same-aged, also motherless Hassan (Lowell Abellon), only child to Baba's lifelong servant Ali (James Saba).

Despite insuperable divisions of class and position, the two boys are inseparable until Amir witnesses a terrible brutality visited on Hassan by neighborhood bully Assef (Adam Yazbeck) and his cronies. Feeling somewhat at fault and lacking courage to stop or report the assault, Amir is tortured by guilt until he can no longer bear to be around Hassan. He orchestrates a further betrayal that sends both servant father and son packing.

Larger events soon impact all their fates, as Afghanistan endures rough transitions from monarchy to republic, then Soviet invasion, then Taliban rule. The play's longer second half finds refugees Baba and Amir relocating to Fremont, California's expat Afghani community, among other onetime notables now reduced to pumping gas and minding flea market stalls. Happier in this new environ than his homesick father, Amir is finally forced back to his drastically changed, war-torn native land on a mission that will ultimately settle both his debt to Hassan and score with Assef.

It's in this climactic journey that "Kite Runner" begins to overplay its hand, lobbing too many shocking-revelation grenades at a story already explosive enough. The turn toward hamfistedness isn't helped by principal thesp Akhavan, who's already tended toward bug-eyes and excess gesticulation when playing Amir as a late teen and young adult; he really starts chewing scenery once our hero makes the perilous return to his roots. Such histrionics stick out against the other performers' pleasingly natural styles (Fiscella and Abellon, as well as Piaget, are outstanding).

These latter scenes also require too much expositional dialogue. Until then, adaptor, director, designers and ensemble use energetic yet agreeably unflashy means to convey a complicated saga via more showing than telling. Still, this "Kite Runner" impresses overall.

Set, Vicki Smith; costumes, Kish Finnegan; lighting, David Lee Cuthbert; original music, Salar Nader; sound, Scott Edwards; fight direction, Ken Merckx; production stage manager, Laxmi Kumaran. Opened, reviewed March 27, 2009. Running time: 2 HOURS, 40 MIN.