

# Tucson Weekly

ARTS » REVIEW

September 24, 2009

## Soaring Success

Arizona Theatre Company's season opener flies as high as theater can go

by [Sherilyn Forrester](#)

This is something special.

Arizona Theatre Company's stage adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* is so moving, so well-crafted and so visually stunning that it's hard to imagine how the rest of the ATC season can follow this act.

Theater combines story and language with visuals and performance. It has music, movement and dance. In ATC's version of *The Kite Runner*, each of these elements is executed so expertly and combined so skillfully that we are utterly captivated, heart and soul. This is the power of theater.

Matthew Spangler, an assistant professor of performance studies at San José State University, read the novel just after its publication in 2003 and recognized that it could work as a piece of theater. Several years later, he met with Hosseini to discuss the possibility of an adaptation, and the author was enthusiastic.

Spangler's stage adaptation was mounted by San José Repertory Theatre last spring. ATC artistic director David Ira Goldstein was enlisted to direct, and it's the San José production that has been remounted here, under his direction, with very little change.

It's always dicey, this adaptation thing, especially when the book has found such a devoted audience. (The book was made into a movie in 2007.) Fear not. As a play, *The Kite Runner* is fully respectful of the book. As a piece of theater, it soars like the kites so central to the novel.

The staged version is surely as involving, disturbing and expansive as the book. But theater provides elements unavailable on the written page, or even in a cinematic rendering. There is a sense of immediacy, of transparency. The interaction of live actors and audience builds something together. As staged, this prism of a story catches and reflects the brilliance unique to the theater.

At the center of this story is the friendship of two Afghani boys, who have grown up together in the same home in Kabul. They are of different Muslim sects, and of different classes. Amir, through whose eyes the story is told, and his father, Baba, are the privileged ones; Hassan and his father, Ali, are their servants.

Amir cowardly betrays his best friend. He projects his shame so maliciously onto Hassan that the boy and his father leave Baba's home, after 40 years of service.

Years later, after Amir and Baba have moved to California and re-established their lives there, Amir receives a telephone call from an old and trusted friend. He claims there is a way for Amir to "be good again," but Amir must return to the home of his childhood. He does so, but only reluctantly. Then his journey spins and plunges and catapults him in ways he could never have imagined and for which he is woefully unprepared. It is heartbreaking. But, then, the road to redemption usually is.

Director Goldstein manages this epic story with a sure hand and a light touch. He has assembled a uniformly skillful cast; most of the actors play numerous roles.

But the guide through this tale of friendship, betrayal and the possibility of redemption is Barzin Akhavan as Amir. He is totally committed to this hugely demanding role, in which he is both narrator and character. He demonstrates great skill in his transformation from one to the other, and he never leaves the stage.

However, Akhavan's performance takes a bit of getting used to. Initially, he overreaches; he is too broad. But in the second act, he is more character than narrator, and as he settles into grown-up Amir, he feels much more real.

[click to enlarge](#)



Craig Piaget (young Amir) and Barzin Akhavan (adult Amir) in Arizona Theatre Company's *The Kite Runner*.

### The Kite Runner

Presented by the Arizona Theatre Company

Various times, Wednesday through Sunday, through Saturday, Oct. 3

Temple of Music and Art

330 S. Scott Ave.

\$26 to \$50

622-2823;

[www.aztheatreco.org](http://www.aztheatreco.org)

Ultimately, he wins our hearts.

Visually, this production is a treasure, thanks to scenic designer Vicki Smith and lighting/projection designer David Lee Cuthbert. From the blue sky and patchwork of colorful kites in the opening to the freeway signs that put us undeniably in California, to the projections of a savaged land when Amir returns home to Afghanistan, the settings are like a gently rotating kaleidoscope. They not only support the story; they are a crucial element in the telling of it.

Kish Finnegan's costumes, which range from traditional dress reproduced with great authenticity to the jeans and T-shirts of the 1980s, do more than help define the characters. They contribute to the production's visual impact.

*The Kite Runner* would be so much less without composer Salar Nader's percussive accompaniment on the tabla drum. He sits on the apron of the stage, responding to the action, sometimes seeming to direct it. Never intrusive, his playing is a perfect soundtrack.

The entire production is carefully choreographed. Set pieces and props for numerous scenes glide into place and out again without ever interrupting the flow of the action. Sets appear and disappear unobtrusively. We see it all, but everything appears seamless—even as we see the seams. This is theater magic, and we rarely see it executed so artfully.

*The Kite Runner* is heartfelt and stunning, a sensuous piece of alchemy put together by collaborators who understand the formula for great theater.

It is something special.

[Review archives »](#)

#### Related Events

[Arizona Theatre Company](#) @ Temple of Music and Art

Tue., Sept. 15, 7:30 p.m., Wed., Sept. 16, 7:30 p.m., Thu., Sept. 17, 7:30 p.m., Sat., Sept. 19, 8 p.m., Sun., Sept. 20, 2 & 7 p.m., Tue., Sept. 22, 7:30 p.m., Wed., Sept. 23, 2 & 7:30 p.m., Thu., Sept. 24, 7:30 p.m., Fri., Sept. 25, 7:30 p.m., Sat., Sept. 26, 4 & 8 p.m., Sun., Sept. 27, 2 p.m., Wed., Sept. 30, 2 & 7:30 p.m., Thu., Oct. 1, 2 & 7:30 p.m., Fri., Oct. 2, 7:30 p.m. and Sat., Oct. 3, 1 & 6 p.m.

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