

# ACCENT

## ATC production of 'Kite Runner' packs emotional wallop

By Kathleen Allen

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Whew.

After 2 1/2 hours of the Arizona Theatre Company's production of "The Kite Runner," of intense emotions, globe-trotting, politics, racism, classism, evil and good, "whew" is about all that one has the breath to say.

The play, adapted by Matthew Spangler from Khaled Hosseini's best-selling novel, is true to the book's emotional highs and lows, triumphs and outrages. While it might miss some action, it hasn't missed the intent or heart of the story of guilt and forgiveness.

David Ira Goldstein directed this epic tale with an eye toward authenticity and storytelling, and his efforts have paid off beautifully.

But he had some help from a magical tabla player, Salar Nader, who added ambience and texture with his original music; a costume designer, Kish Finnegan, who designed more than 400 authentic costume pieces; and, most of all, a cast that is deeply committed to the characters and the story.

Barzin Akhavan had a gargantuan task in the role of Amir, the narrator of the tale. The first act covers much of Amir's childhood in Kabul and his deep friendship with Hassan, the son of his father's servant.

As Craig Piaget and Lowell Abellon portrayed young Amir and Hassan, respectively, Akhavan hovered over them, narrating the tale and relaying the intense emotions he experienced as a youngster who felt rejected by his father, bullied by the neighborhood kids and a bully himself to Hassan.

There were times that Akhavan was a bit too intense, moments where the acting showed, during this first act. But this play quickly sweeps you away, and it was easy to forget the affectations.

By the second act, when Amir is a grown man and living in Northern California, Akhavan seemed to slip more comfortably into the role. Piaget and Abellon, both young men, had no trouble making us believe they were young boys who were carefree in an at-peace Afghanistan, where they re-enacted their beloved Western movies, climbed trees and read books.

The second act opened with the adult Amir and his father, Baba (a strong and stately James Saba), huddled in a fuel tank as they were being smuggled to Pakistan after the Russians had invaded Afghanistan.

It was one of the many, many moments that the playwright Spangler honored Hosseini's beautiful text.

"

The air was thick, almost solid," Amir says in that potent scene. "You couldn't breathe. You open your mouth and order your lungs to draw air. Now, you need air, need it now, but your lungs, they ignore you. They collapse, tighten, squeeze, and suddenly you're breathing through a straw."

The scene of people packed together conveyed the desperation; Hosseini's words made it palpable.

There are so many levels to this story. It spans almost 30 years, goes through three countries and touches on responsibility, redemption, forgiveness of yourself and others, immigration, family — so much to take in, to roam around in your head, to touch your heart.

When a book is as powerful as "The Kite Runner," there's a certain fear that its punch will be lost in translation to the stage.

Not in this Spangler adaptation, not in this Goldstein production, not in the hands of this cast.

ATC's "Kite Runner" is packed with emotion, integrity and, most of all, enormous heart.

As we said, whew.

## **REVIEW**

"The Kite Runner"

- Presented by: Arizona Theatre Company.
- Playwright: Matthew Spangler, based on the book by Khaled Hosseini.
- Director: David Ira Goldstein.
- When: Various times through Oct. 3.
- Where: Temple of Music and Art, 330 S. Scott Ave.
- Tickets: \$26-\$50.
- Reservations/information: 622-2823.

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