

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Disgraced: The Dismaying Personal Face of Politics

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 22nd, 2016

Political plays have been illuminating politics for millennia, but recently the growing specter of worldwide terrorism — with its companion racism — has spawned a modern variety of the species. And I don't mean worldly political events, though that too, as in John Patrick Shanley's 2003 *Dirty Story*, Lee Blessing's *A Walk In the Woods* or the recent *Camp David* at the San Diego Old Globe. What I do mean is the *interior* effect of politics, found in the privacy of living rooms, intimate dinner parties and family conversations. Politics, in short, as they directly affect individuals, including, as in the case of *Disgraced*, the affective politics of the American workplace, often more cutthroat than any battlefield.

As the encroachment of terrorism keeps spreading, the attraction of the subject has only grown in the eyes and at the hands of playwrights, as well as the level of sophistication of their approach to it. Lisa Loomer's 2012 *Two Things You Don't Talk About At Dinner* may have started the ball rolling with its Judeo-Islamic conflict over a Passover Seder that devolves into disaster. Anthony Giardina's *The City of Conversation*, recently at the Wallis in Beverly Hills, took us into Georgetown's rarefied liberal vs. conservative attitudes, and Greg Kalleres' [splendid comic satire Honky](#) (now extended to July 17 at L.A.'s Rogue Machine Theatre) makes tasty mincemeat of politically correct speech and attitudes. But Ayad Akhtar's stunning *Disgraced*, which opened Sunday at the Mark Taper Forum, thrusts us from the frying pan right into the fire.

Disgraced is a big deal, a 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winner assessed as the most produced play of the current American theatre season. Akhtar warns that in performance the play should not sound like Big Ideas mouthed by actors, a common pitfall. Fortunately, Kimberly Senior, the production's sharp director who previously staged the piece at New York's Lincoln Center and on Broadway, has clearly heeded his advice. Rarely is the dialogue stilted, as if waiting to pounce. For the most part it comes from flesh and blood.

Things start out quietly enough. Amir Kapoor (Hari Dhillon), a confident New York attorney, is posing in his living room for his wife Emily (Emily Swallow), a rising star in New York's art world who is painting his portrait. What could look more like the picture of upper middle class success, comfort and bliss? The session is interrupted by the arrival of Amir's nephew (Behzad Dabu), an ardent young man who recently changed his name from Hussein Malik to Abe Jensen, yet in a spurt of identification with a jailed Imam that Abe/Hussein believes is innocent and deserves to be released, he's come to solicit his uncle's help.



Behzad Dabu in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*, at The Mark Taper Forum.

While Amir is American-born of Pakistani/Indian descent and was raised a Muslim, he is neither religious nor political and has a marked disdain for certain more virulent aspects of the Quran's

dictates. He also has no desire to get involved in the Imam's defense, since he knows the attorneys who are and deems them very capable.

From this point on, the play has too many spoilers for further description. Let's just say that, out of affection for his nephew and thanks to his wife's entreaties, Amir makes a small concession to Abe's request that alters the course of his life. One unintended thing leads to another leads to another, compounding damage at every turn. The end results are damning.

Even more than its topicality, what makes *Disgraced* so absorbing is that it rigorously adheres to the ancient Greek theatre's definition of tragedy — that time when events beyond one's control take over and there is no altering the course of destiny.

No one in *Disgraced* does or has done anything malevolent or intentionally wrong — no more than Oedipus did when he killed his father and married his mother. Some human frailty exists (doesn't it always?), but there are no villains and no frauds here. Seemingly independent events follow one another in an inexorable collision of fate and circumstance, multiplying and magnifying the problems and ultimately rendering them fatal.



Karen Pittman and Hari Dhillon in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* at The Mark Taper Forum.

Aside from Dhillon, Swallow and Dabu, the cast includes J Anthony Crane as Isaac, the curator and friend handling Emily's artwork, and his wife Jory (Karen Pittman), another upwardly mobile lawyer at Amir's firm. They all serve the play's requirements well (although Swallow could deliver more volume), but this is one case where the events become so dramatic that they overtake the individual roles. This is not what you'd call an ensemble performance in the traditional sense, but the overall effect of the interaction of these five people is what hits and hits hard. Audience gasps were audible on opening night.

John Lee Beatty's spacious single living/dining room set provides the affluent tone and serves the play well, as do Christine A. Binder's lighting and Jennifer von Meyerhaurser's costumes. But the sound design by Jill BC Du Boff is uneven. Granted that it is often impossible to tell if it's the sound editing or actors too accustomed to performing in television and film that constitute the problem. Whatever the reason, the sound levels could and should be better. On the other hand, the eerie Hitchcockian musical sounds that dot the blackouts between scenes are perfect punctuation for the ominous action.

That said, *Disgraced* remains an extremely potent theatrical event. Ever at the forefront of wisdom, in a world that has almost forgotten the meaning of the word, theatre raises the most persistently difficult questions; it is what it does best. In the case of *Disgraced*, the world remains far from coming up with any reliable answers.



L-R: J Anthony Crane, Karen Pittman and Emily Swallow in *Disgraced* at The Mark Taper Forum.

Top image: L-R: Hari Dhillon, Emily Swallow, Karen Pittman and J Anthony Crane in Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning play Disgraced at Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Disgraced*

WHERE: Mark Taper Forum, Music Center, 135 North Grand Avenue, Downtown Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesday-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends July 17.

HOW: Tickets \$25-\$85, available online at www.centertheatregroup.org or at 213.628.2772 or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box office at the Ahmanson Theatre.

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