

Review: ‘Disgraced’ at NextStop Theatre Company

By David Siegel - September 12, 2017

What a combustible evening at NextStop’s production of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar. Under Thembi Duncan’s adroit direction and with fascinating casting, this in-your-face drama aims to stimulate, challenge, and yes, even chafe audiences. And does it ever. It is right for these messy times in America.

There is nothing timid about Duncan’s take on *Disgraced*. The production succeeds forthrightly as a rich, complex, and ultimately fiery drama about the fluid nature of a person’s identity and how easily identity can shift under the harsh gaze of society, supposed best friends, and even marital partners. What was once thought solid becomes quicksand. With Duncan’s invigorating, subversive touch, *Disgraced* aims directly for the brain of those of us who consider ourselves card-carrying progressives who are, therefore, above it all.



Thembi Duncan, director of *Disgraced*, playing at NextStop Theatre through October 1.

Nor does playwright Akhtar not shy away one iota from exposing the ugly parts of characters who represent the polite, liberal “smart-set” of society. Those who hide behind a thin veneer of social acceptance of one and all into the American Dream, but, in the privacy of their own bedrooms, might say otherwise.

Oh, and these supposed “good people” try to conceal many a personal flaw that will lead to the betrayal of even those they say they love.



Jesse Bhamrah and Jenna Rossman as Amir and Emily. Photo by Lock & Company.

So what is *Disgraced* specifically about? It centers upon Amir (played by the physically-slight Jesse Bhamrah with a tormented demeanor, fragile bearing, and increasingly bewildered stance) – an American-born, Pakistani-American Muslim who is an up-and-coming New York City mergers and acquisitions lawyer. Dressing in expensive, high-thread-count white cotton shirts, he thinks himself on the cusp of being named partner in a major law firm.

Amir is married to Emily (portrayed by Jenna Rossman as an ambitious, dominant protagonist and sensual presence), a Western Christian woman who is a painter hoping to get her big break with her works based upon Islamic traditions and representations. When we first meet the married couple, Amir is too easily lost in his work and his cell phone. Emily wants intimacy and attention, even as she attempts to paint his portrait – a portrait based upon a centuries-old work of Velasquez, his **portrait of Juan de Pareja**, his “slave” of Moorish decent.

As the play progresses, there are plenty of hints of trouble and instability ahead for Amir and Emily, even before a dinner party becomes the production’s centerpiece of verbal and then physical altercations.

Beyond Amir and Emily, playwright Akhtar introduces three other characters. One is Jory (Chaela Phillips, as a no-nonsense, straight-talking, stately presence). Jory is an African-American woman at the same law firm as Amir. She is also seeking to make partner. Jory relishes a saying by Henry Kissinger that she keeps on her desk: “If faced with choosing justice or order, I’ll always choose order.” Her husband, Isaac (Jordan Friend as a blustery, overbearing, thin-skinned know-it-all), is a Jewish arts dealer who likes Emily’s Islamic-themed works – or perhaps more than merely her art.



Nahm Darr as Abe and Jesse Bhamrah as Amir. Photo by Lock & Company

The final, very key character is Abe (Nahm Darr in a strong performance in arc to a politically militant persona). Abe is the nephew of Amir. He is a Pakistani immigrant who changed his given name, hoping it would be better for his assimilation into American society. As portrayed by Darr and as directed by Duncan, Abe is no secondary character. He is a critical figure to what triggers the heat in the drama when a local imam is arrested on flimsy evidence that he is friends with those trying to do harm to America. Additionally, Abe is the key to understanding the play’s title, *Disgraced*.

The play turns at a small, celebratory dinner party that brings together some bright, passionate, well-educated folk of diverse backgrounds. The affair takes place in Amir and Emily’s Manhattan apartment, appropriately depicted by Set Designer Jack Golden to include comfortable furnishings and a balcony overlooking New York City’s splendor, with lighting design by Jonathan Alexander.

At the dinner party, the characters question not only what is permissible to think, but what thoughts are acceptable to say out loud. Does one's appearance define who they are? What was the meaning of the events of 9-11 to each of them? Are feelings of pride for a horrible tragedy appropriate? Does Israel have a right to exist? And this: who, exactly, are America's true underdogs in contemporary times?

From all of these tormenting questions, a powder keg explodes as *Disgraced* moves to its wrenching, explosive conclusion – one that must be witnessed. My jaw dropped and it left me leaning forward not to miss anything seen or said.



(L-R) Jordan Friend, Chaela Phillips, Jenna Rossman, and Jesse Bhamrah. Photo by Lock & Company.

The production of *Disgraced* has added vitality with Costume Designer Kristina Martin defining outfits for each of the characters. The outfits “say” plenty about each character and their journey through the play. Martin’s costumes accentuate a character’s changes. They also easily depict power and powerlessness if one looks closely, rather than just at the mere beauty of things.

Disgraced is a play of this very moment, about betrayal. About race and religion. And even about the flimsy nature of upward mobility and what it takes to be a success. There are no simple answers or responses to *Disgraced* as it moves through the torment of its characters. With the knotty, very real-life script by Akhtar, and the fine hand of director Duncan, *Disgraced* is a riveting production.

Let me confess this: NextStop’s production of *Disgraced* left me examining my own life experiences and my own long-time, deeply-held progressive values and beliefs. Go and see this one for yourself.

Running Time: 90 minutes, with no intermission.



Disgraced plays through October 1, 2017 at NextStop Theatre Company – 269 Sunset Park Drive, in Herndon, VA. For tickets, call the box office at (866) 811-4111, or purchase them **online**.

NOTE: For more about playwright Ayad Akhtar, let me point you to **this article** from the Sunday *New York Times*.

David Siegel

David Siegel is a freelance theater reviewer and features writer whose work appears on DC Metro Theater Arts, ShowBiz Radio, in the Connection Newspapers and the Fairfax Times. He is a judge in the Helen Hayes Awards program. He is a member of the American Theatre Critics Association and volunteers with the Arts Council of Fairfax County. David has been associated with theater in the Washington, DC area for nearly 30 years. He served as Board President, American Showcase Theater Company (now Metro Stage) and later with the American Century Theater as both a member of the Executive Board and as Marketing Director. You can follow David's musings on Twitter @pettynibbler.