

THE KITE RUNNER
POST-SHOW TALK, OXFORD PLAYHOUSE
WEDNESDAY 7TH FEBRUARY 2018

Host: Good evening to those of you that stayed, thank you so much for joining us. On behalf of Oxford Playhouse, thank you very much for bringing this production to us. It pulls at the heart strings doesn't it? Let's introduce these wonderful people...at the far end we're joined by the director of the piece...

Giles: Hello, I'm Giles Croft. Yes, I'm the director.

Raj: I'm Raj Ghatak and I played Amir.

Ollie: I'm Ollie and I'm the understudy.

Joe: Hi, I'm Joe Ben Ayed and I played Hassan.

Helen: Hi, I'm Helen and I'm the Deputy Stage Manager.

Host: This is a performance that requires a lot of you on stage a lot of the time to really build this world.

Raj: Yeah...

Host: Especially for Amir, who I don't think ever leaves the stage!

I'd like to direct this first question to Giles. What is it about this story do you think that really transcends so many different cultures and audiences? It's been a book, it's been a film and it's been a play now- what is it about this story that touches so many hearts?

Giles: Well, I suppose, on one very simple level, it's a play about guilt, forgiveness, redemption. All those sorts of things we've had to deal with. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, we've all done things we're ashamed of, we all want forgiveness of some sort, we all look for redemption. That's a common thing, that's not culturally specific in any sense. I also think then there are stories within the Kite Runner about immigration and about prejudice; which again are stories that either we've experienced or we're aware of. We're so culturally complex now, we can all make direct connectational references to the experiences of the characters. So again it extends far beyond the specifics of Afghanistan. And then there's something else. Well, I'm sure there are plenty of other things. But, one of the things I felt very strongly about it on reading it is that it provides a much more complex, dignified portrait of Muslim culture than actually you find in many other situations- certainly in drama or on the news. It's a play about people, relationships and of course it touches on other things we might hear about...the Taliban being the obvious one, but it's not about that. It's about the people, the stories, the richness, the culture and as I say...the sort of beauty and integrity of it as well...the prayer, the wedding. All those things are shown and I think those things are very, very important.

Host: Absolutely! One thing that really touches me about the story...no matter which format I engage with the story in...is that we really get to experience the rich beauty of what Afghanistan

actually is and of what Muslim culture actually is. As you say, we're witness to such negativity in the press and various representations in the media. We're able to be a part of the ritual of the marriage, the prayer and Baba's death....all these separate moments in Amir's life, and feel like it's our culture in a way. We're following such a detailed story!

I was wondering if I could open it up to the rest of the cast...obviously the set is beautiful. The design of this piece really does allow us to go on this journey with you. But it does rely on a lot of you moving set around the stage and portraying multiple characters. How has this process been for you and what is this performance for you?

Raj: Well, I'm new to the cast so I've had about two and a half weeks to rehearse this. Maybe three weeks total rehearsals and then we've opened, so it's been a gargantuan journey to get here. You know, you read the book and you do your research and things like that because this is an exciting production. However, it is quite peculiar. You slot into a very well-oiled machine. Yet, we work together in certain scenes to try and make it my own version of Amir as much as my predecessors have gone before me. That's not to disrespect what they did because I thought they were great. We're just different people so we bring different qualities. And then it's just the interaction of 'Okay, let's go!'. Once it starts you can't get off.

Host: You really can't get off, can you?

Ollie: I think the show is just so massively about the ensemble, and without everyone doing their part there's no show. Giles to his credit is fantastic at piecing together an amazing team that just work together, because if one person's out, it will crumble.

Joe: The process is actually quite interesting. I joined for the first leg of the tour, back in end of August, last year. Jumping into this role, Hassan and also Sohrab, I was quite worried and really quite scared of jumping straight into the first ever job. However, it was quite relaxing because all of the other actors had been on the show for a while. The whole process was quite fun. Joining *The Kite Runner*, doing the show with that cast and then to have a new cast come in. When that happened I was in on the other side, finding different relationships, different moments with different people. Your Amir is very different to the Amir we had, though still similar. But the relationships in some scenes are...it brings something new. I can still hear the old actors in my head, the voices, but hearing the new actor kind of refreshes you. After a while you can get into the same complacent thing and you're going, okay, I know this is my line coming up and I'm going to say it this way...but once you get a bunch of actors that are coming it kind of lightens it up and freshens it up.

Giles: In the show we've got four generations of people. We lost the last of the first acting company just before Christmas. And actually just on the point that was just made...every time somebody new comes into it I have to stop myself from being..."but the last person, I want you to be the last person". It's a discipline I have to have. That's not what it should be. There are some things which have to be common for every show, they have to be achieved in order for the next thing to happen. However, within that you have to try to find and encourage the personality of the actors.

Raj: There are things in this show that I have to do because on this line the lights change, or there is a sound cue. So that's fixed, it's not going to change. It's in the bible so that's what's going to

happen. However, once you're in the scene, there's some of the movement, or the blocking or some of the intentions that you can play with. It's finding a happy medium between the two.

Giles: It's going to take you two or three weeks of playing to really find your level in it. It will continue to grow over the coming weeks. That's going to be a very exciting process for all of us- you're going to find new breaths and opportunities and I'll come in and say "no, don't do that" *[laughter]*. It's going to be a very exciting few weeks I think.

Audience Member: You were fantastic...wonderful. Such an emotional thing for us to watch but also we could see how emotional it was for you, we could really see how much you were in the moment. It must have been so draining for you, doing it every night, going through those huge emotions.

Raj: Tomorrow I get to do it twice. And on Saturday....and actually on Monday we did it twice. This is our opening venue for the new leg of the tour so we did a dress rehearsal on Monday.

Audience Member: Well lucky us for seeing you.

Raj: Thank you very much...that's a really lovely thing to say.

Audience Member: And what a team you are! So much emotion just pouring off the stage...we could feel it.

Raj: That's a really lovely thing to say because, as Ollie was saying, this is a complete team effort. And at any given time the ball is being thrown to somebody- even though, as an audience member, because there's so much going on on stage you may not know. And it's a complete machine that happens and that's down to everybody's strength.

Audience Member: On stage maybe you're not aware of the emotional impact you're having but I could hear a lot of snuffling.

Host: Do we have another question?

Audience Member: It was wonderful and I've read the book and seen the film and this moved me terribly. Have you had any feedback from any people who were in the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, who have seen it, who have suffered the same experience perhaps, or similar?

Giles: We've done the show since 2013. It wasn't performed at all in '15, but we did it in '14, '16, '17 and now in '18. I worked a lot at the Nottingham Playhouse so I was there for both...actually three times it's been at the Playhouse. I was on the staff at the Playhouse as well and saw that a lot of refugee groups would come in to see it there and that happened all around the country. So yes, absolutely. In the very first production we had the guy who played Hassan who was himself an Afghan refugee who had been smuggled out of Afghanistan under his mother's book, so he'd had that experience. So he contributed a lot. That was very important about establishing some of the rules for the production.

Audience Member: Only just that I lived in Afghanistan at this time, in the early 70s, and my brother was out there flying a kite and I was holding the string. It just absolutely took me right back. When I read the book I loved it so much and I just loved tonight because it was completely authentic and real and exactly as I remembered it. It was very emotional for me to see this.

Cast: How wonderful/Ah fantastic!

Host: I think it's a real credit to the innocence that certainly we see in Hassan and Sohrab in those moments.. Have we got any further questions?

Audience Member: I was curious about how...obviously certain aspects of the book are incredibly graphic, and it's very much alluded to. The shadow thing was incredible, where you see the shooting. That's just....really strong. I wanted to know how the decisions are made because when Hassan is about to be raped, you sort of see the beginning of that scene and then it vanishes. I wanted to know how it was chosen.

Giles: I can answer that partly. In the writing of the version the adaptor, Matthew, worked a little bit with Hosseini about the choices. Matthew is a professor at the San Jose University that gets referenced in the play. He teaches drama and specifically he teaches adaptation- his specialist area is immigration. Hosseini also lives in the Bay area so they were able to meet. Matthew spent a lot of time also with Hosseini's father in law who was more available to talk, so he checked lots of things with him, the stories of Afghanistan and authenticity etc. Along the way they made lots of choices about how elements of the book should be portrayed or not. By the time it got to the stage he was doing it with his students originally. I read it, first, and saw it in a production in Boston. It was very, very different from this. I met with Matthew afterwards and we talked about it, I made some suggestions. What I felt very strongly was that what we needed to do was allow two things (and I can't remember if this was present in the original production). We had to allow the audiences' imagination to work. And the other...we had to allow the narrator's imagination to work. If you combine those two things then you get a very powerful experience. The shooting is written in the script as a very live action thing and in our very first production we did it as a shadow play which never quite worked. Before we went to Wyndham we talked about the idea of how we might do it and we came up with this which was much more effective. In the end it's about the power of the imagination. This is storytelling and that's what's so potent. It has to be accessible. You don't want to frighten people off.

It's not a complete answer but it's part of an answer. One thing I'll add actually- in the adaption as it was written, there's a narrator in the first act and a young Amir. Then in the second act the narrator becomes Amir. I said to Matthew that I thought it would be more powerful if the narrator moved between the two- that's a much more complex thing. And Matthew said, okay, let's do it! Let's give it a go. And he's gone with it and that's pretty much how it exists now as a version and I think that really works as an idea.

Joe: I think these days we're so numb to what we see in social media, things that happen everywhere. You end up just going 'oh, okay', 'oh, okay'. So, for us to sort of, show you the rape and stage it right in front of you...I don't think....I think it's much more powerful to let you guys imagine it. The most powerful, most graphic thing, is your imagination. These days we're so numb to everything the last thing you want is to...see it.

Raj: Personally I think it's stronger that it isn't seen because it just allows you to jump forward.

Ollie: It also kind of means that your worst idea of what it is is what you see, and what everyone sees is different. That's a horrible thought but if you're not shown it you imagine the worst thing you can.

Raj: Also, that little description that I say when the kite's come down is very powerful ...again less is more.

Host: Sorry, it's getting quite late in the evening and I'm aware that the cast have two shows tomorrow! Any final questions for the company?

Audience Member: I wanted to ask the stage manager. Obviously you're a massive part of running the show...

Helen: There's three of us...

Audience Member: The whole team. But you're not ever seen from the audience's perspective. How do you feel involved in the story and in the energy of the ensemble and the intensity on stage. How do you feel that experience as you're running things behind the scenes?

Helen: That's a very good question. I'm the show caller and there are two people who run each wing. So that's the stage manager and the assistant stage manager. The DSM is the show caller so I conduct everything technically. What I have to do is read the actor's body language and get to know how they literally breathe and blink. Since we've had four new principles join us it's been very interesting for me lately. When we get to know each other everything does kind of fall into a place and my ears will prick up if somebody says something maybe one syllable different as I know that something might not be right. That's how you get to know a show and get to know how to work with actors. Certainly, the past few weeks has been a new challenge for me, as previously said, the show now has a new energy and a new sense of how things can be done differently. There's no better or worse way, it's just different. I think that's great. I think as the show caller I have to be very much more aware of that. It's like Giles says...I keep remembering what the previous cast members might have said and I keep thinking "oh, that's different!". It will take a few weeks to embed what the show is now.

Joe: I think it's fair to say that Helen is one of the most important people in the team. Without Helen this show doesn't happen.

Raj: It's us on a dark stage, basically. That's what happens. There's no lights, there's no sound, nothing, unless Helen calls it.

It's also so...we get a half hour call before the show...a quarter...a five....beginners. The same at the interval. Helen keeps us to time.

Helen: Some people have said that being a show caller is like being an air pilot. I've got a lot of buttons in front of me to conduct all the elements of the show. A bit like travel lights- red to get ready, orange to stand-by, green to go. I have monitors on the stage. Sometimes in a musical I have a monitor of the MD or I have an overhead monitor which is a bird's eye view of the stage. I have infrared monitors so I can see in blackouts. Each venue is different, I have different facilities.

Sometimes we would tour these facilities. Here, I have a screen here, it's at a funny angle, I have to slouch to watch, so I look very relaxed, but I'm not!

Giles: Just one thing to add just about DSM's generally. You're a very good DSM. The other thing is on your point about sensing. A good DSM is part of the show- they are sensing a moment and making a judgement, they know when to go, they sense a shift, they have to make a call about what to do and when to do it. So they really have to be in tune with their actors and the process- I think that's really important.

Audience Member: I had one more question, sorry! My question is for Joe. You mentioned this is your first professional show...I'm assuming after drama school?

Joe: Yes.

Audience Member: So, how are you finding the transition from training? Are you coming from a bachelors or a masters?

Joe: Bachelors, from East 15.

Audience Member: Oh nice, so how are you finding the transition between being a drama student and doing the real thing?

Joe: Well, you're ruled for three years and broken down to bits and so on and so forth. You're not guaranteed anything- when you come out, you're hoping that you will get something. Once this came along I couldn't believe it, I really couldn't. So you try to step up to the job and make a good impression. Not just to the director but to the other actors too. I'm here to do a job and I will satisfy as much as I can. I was scared and I was worried but ensemble people are a massive family. I was worried going to the West End to rehearse- it felt unbelievable. My password for everything was 'West End.' It's been fantastic. Assef has also just graduated so it was nice to have somebody on the same boat- to see him flourish has been great.

Host: It was great to see the production and to see this wonderful company. Thank you very much!