

## Review of “Disgraced”

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by David Winkelstern

### *Culture shock*

#### *Peppermint Creek takes on racial tensions in ‘Disgraced’*

After observing the emotionally charged “Disgraced,” I asked one of its flushed and sweaty actors if the cast felt drained. “Yes, but in a good way” replied Zach Riley. “An artistic high.”



That mostly sums up how I felt after seeing the Peppermint Creek Theatre Co.’s latest production. The 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning “Disgraced,” by Ayad Akhtar, was an emotionally taxing show to endure, but it came with gratifying stimulation.

Riley convincingly played Isaac, a Jewish-American curator. Ja’Nay Duncan skillfully inhabited the character of his African-American lawyer wife, Jory. Isaac and Jory are friends of Caucasian artist Emily — masterfully portrayed by Sarah Lynn — and her Muslim lawyer husband, Amir — in a commanding performance by Zuwaib Razzaq. Brennan Hattaway completed the ensemble as Amir’s anguished nephew, turning in an impressive presence that was remarkably dissimilar from his notable performances in “The Little Mermaid,” “Rent” and “Rock of Ages.”

The racially driven storyline of “Disgraced” was full of shocks and surprises that sometimes made me bolt upright in my chair. Physical and verbal violence, relationship twists and didn’t-see-that-coming admissions made for a volatile show that kept me engaged, and the talented cast made unlikeable characters fascinating. Some minor opening night stumbles weren’t enough to mask the abilities of the actors, who reflected character frictions and abrasions like a well-oiled machine. They relayed authentic emotions around race, stereotypes, religion and collisions of cultures.

Not all of “Disgraced” will be agreeable to everyone. It is a sophisticated play with frequent profanity and artistic and literary references meant for an open-minded and well-read audience.

Written in 2012, “Disgraced” hasn’t lost any relevance in terms of American attitudes towards Muslims. If anything, it has become more relevant as the presidential race has stoked racial tensions. But don’t go in expecting clear answers or arguments to refute unfairness. “Disgraced” offers more questions than comforting solutions.

The aptly titled “Disgraced” provoked thought about the Americanizing of different ethnicities. It revealed the torment Muslims might endure in the process. The play is filled with honest dialogue that, honestly, wasn’t always easy to swallow, though it did manage to add lighthearted moments to its dark themes.

The extensive, two-level, lifelike set by Khamil Hendrickson put the audience inside Amir and Emily’s intimate apartment. The “fourth wall” almost felt behind me in a second row seat. Inharmonious art — hung in an artist’s home — that looked like bargain prints, a cheese tray never touched by guests and a candle that never stopped burning during the 100-minute, no intermission play were forgivable distractions.

It was easy to imagine director Gabriel Francisco precisely conducting the powerful and perfectly paced outpourings and spoken percolations like an impassioned maestro. His blood-boiling experiences with injustices in college, described in the program notes, obviously spilled into the tone of the production. I was certainly disturbed, jostled, surprised and drained by “Disgraced” — but in a good way.