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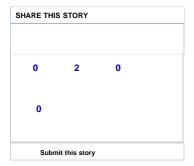
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# **Disgraced** Tries to Provoke But Only Puzzles

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## **DISGRACED**LCT3 AT CLAIRE TOW THEATER

Disgraced hopes to be a provocative drama, the sort of entertainment that pushes a few buttons while portraying characters who have a veneer of civility but underneath embody the darkest urges of us all. Think Neil LaBute or Yasmina Reza.

While those two can excel at high concept but sometimes stumble on believable characters, playwright Ayad Akhtar has a promising talent for real characters but their disagreements are too polite and the hoped-for

shock when ugly prejudice is bared simply leaves us wondering if these are the same characters we've been watching for the past hour.

Aasif Mandvi of *The Daily Show* is solid as Amir Kapoor, an American lawyer of Pakistani origin who has allowed his bosses to believe he's Indian. One gives him a Hindu statue for a gift even though he was raised Muslim and is a strident non-believer. He lives on the Upper East Side with his beautiful wife Emily (a fine Heidi Armbruster) and the possibility of a partnership down the road.

Amir's nephew (an appealing Omar Maskati) wears a baseball cap and now goes by the name of "Abe" but the teenager's assimilation hasn't kept him from finding strength in Islam. He begs his uncle to represent a religious leader who has been accused (wrongly, the boy believes) of links to terrorism. Amir wants nothing to do with it; he paid a visit to the imam who spent their entire time together trying to get Amir to pray. But his nephew keeps insisting and Emily (a painter who has found intense inspiration in Persian art) adds her voice.

Reluctantly, unhappily, he becomes more involved. But not before the show's most convincing and memorable moment. Amir pins down his nephew into admitting that many of the adults in their circle disdain Western women and consider them whores for the way they dress. He tells Emily that his mother feels the same ("I thought she liked me," Emily murmurs) and then delivers the knock-out blow: a tale of childhood romance in which Amir had a crush on a Jewish girl in his class. When his mother discovers this, she angrily insists he never speak to the girl again; if he does, she'll break his bones. And so he'd

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never forget, his mother spat in Amir's face. At school the next day, he spat in the girl's face himself. That's the ugliness that Amir rejects, the narrow-mindedness he faced and wants no part of from his

Amir doesn't mock his nephew for practicing. In fact, he gently mocks the kid for adopting such a Western name as "Abe" and refuses to use it. But he's a corporate lawyer and loves America and if Islam has no appeal to him, he has personal and intellectual reasons that resonate strongly and convincingly. Yet he is a lawyer and injustice is wrong, even for a religious leader he has no patience for. Amir is dragged back into the case.

That sets off a chain of events that include a quote from Amir in *The New York Times* where it might seem to readers that he and his law firm are representing the accused terrorist and ultimately a dinner party where Emily is going to discover if her Persian-inspired artwork will be accepted for a big show.

To this point, Disgraced has been a rather placid evening with modest disagreements expressed in the most polite of manners. It's when the playwright tries to push our buttons too readily that the show goes off the rails. It's easy to disguise a person's prejudice with social niceties and then reveal with coded words and increasingly brutal language the prejudice that simmers underneath.

Disgraced doesn't do that. Instead, our main character is set up quite believably as one sort of man shaped by his family and intellectual growth (not to mention the Western culture he lives in and fully embraces) only to have him do a 180 and prove to be the exact opposite of what he's been shown to be. Amir rejects his family's faith because of its anti-Semitism and backwardness towards women. Then suddenly we're told in fact he gets a warm feeling when world leaders discuss wiping Israel off the face of the earth and 9/11 was wrong (of course they brought up 9/11) but yeah, he felt a little pride that Muslims were fighting back. And if his wife cheats on him, why he's just a moment away from the Quran's imperative to beat her silly.

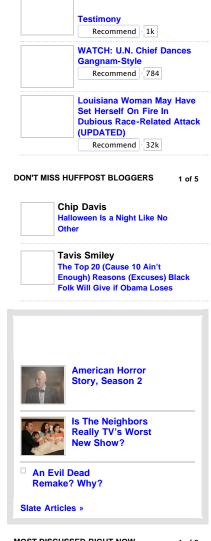
Similarly, the liberal-minded Jewish art dealer (Erik Jensen) is soon insisting that he knows why Muslims are called animals. The nephew reverts from an assimilated kid to an ascetic who dons traditional garb and hangs out with guys in Starbucks who tell people the West got what it deserved. And most confusingly and pointlessly of all, Emily's artistic breakthrough by drawing upon Persian imagery is rejected by Emily herself as naive. Huh?

This all explodes thanks to plot twists that pile onto each other in an especially awkward manner, each one less convincing than the last, or rather, less interesting. There's nothing unconvincing about marital infidelity or having a co-worker leap you on the corporate ladder. But none of it has any bearing on the weighty religious and cultural topics that Disgraced clumsily raises. It certainly isn't the fault of the cast, which is fine throughout, with Karen Pittman especially good as that co-worker of Amir's, probably because she's the most internally consistent character on the stage and isn't asked to suddenly turn into someone entirely different. Pittman also has an appealing warmth and intelligence.

It's only 90 minutes but Disgraced felt much longer. Perhaps when Akhtar listens to the vivid characters he can create rather than jumping them through hoops he'll deliver a longer play that feels shorter.

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