

Disgraced touches all the emotional beats

Pulitzer Prize-winning play speaks to a post-9/11 United States, but is also relevant to Singapore on what it means to live in a multiracial and religiously diverse society

Shawn Hoo

THEATRE DISGRACED

Singapore Repertory Theatre
KC Arts Centre – Home of SRT
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What happens when four Americans – cutting across race, religion, gender and personal values – walk into a dinner party? In Singapore Repertory Theatre's latest rendition, it is a powerful emotional reckoning with the lure of identity.

Lawyer Amir Kapoor (Ghafir Akbar) was raised a Muslim, but has renounced his old name and origins in order to make it in the cut-throat legal world of New York. His wife, artist Emily (Simone Policano), finds her artistic rebirth in Islamic art traditions. The complicated knot of religion and spirituality binds and separates them.

When the couple hosts Isaac (Jeremy Rische) – Emily's art dealer and a Jewish man – and his wife Jory (Ebony Flowers), a black woman who works in the same law firm as Amir, the quartet's contested affiliations and allegiances start to simmer and reach a fever pitch.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning play is written by American playwright Ayad Akhtar and speaks to a post-9/11 United States. But there are many things that are resonant for a Singapore audience today – what it means to live in a multiracial and religiously diverse society and what it takes to have honest conversation about these fault lines.

Marshalled by director Daniel Jenkins, the stellar cast – which also includes Shrey Bhargava, who plays Amir's nephew Abe Jensen (born Hussein Malik) – brings together a compelling and complex emotional performance.

Amir and Isaac's exchange of barbs and calculated politeness are riveting. Amir's relationship with Abe – testy but also loving – is heartrending to watch, as Amir looks at and sees himself in the



younger man.

But there are no sides to take, only people with flaws – some monstrous – and scars that have thickened into an armour.

Under Jenkins' direction, *Disgraced* hits all the emotional beats.

The 90 minutes feel like one is witnessing a marvellous symphony being conducted. A slow-boil and intimate beginning between Amir and Emily soon cranks up in intensity as the quartet dine and debate. Before the audience knows

it, the dinner has dissipated and the house emptied, leaving in its wake a weighty silence.

Set designer Francis O'Connor has made a properly stylish and posh New York apartment out of the set. It is enhanced, quite remarkably, by lighting designer Yo Shao Ann's sharp yellows and melon blues that give the house a real personality. The lighting reveals the oscillation of moods in a tense household.

"It's tribal," says Amir at one

point, trying to explain – or explain away – his complicated feelings towards his Muslim upbringing.

These two words get to the heart of questions raised by the play: Can one abandon one's so-called tribe and find a new one? Are people only ever primed to respond emotionally to those like them? These questions linger, after a heated climax, in *Disgraced*'s quiet finale.

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The *Disgraced* cast includes (from left) Ghafir Akbar, Ebony Flowers, Simone Policano and Jeremy Rische. PHOTO: COURTESY OF SINGAPORE REPERTORY THEATRE

DISGRACED

WHERE KC Arts Centre – Home of SRT, 20 Merbau Road

WHEN Till Sept 7, 7.30pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 2pm (Sundays)

ADMISSION \$25 to \$78

INFO www.srt.com.sg/show/disgraced