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Treading water

Dragon offers a tense, well-acted production of 'The North Pool'

by Karla Kane / Palo Alto Weekly

A high-school student and his vice principal engage in an escalating game of cat-and-mouse in Rajiv Joseph's "The North Pool," currently presented at the Dragon Theatre.

In this two-man show, set in 2007, it's a battle of wills at the start of spring break between Sheffield High administrator Dr. Danielson (Edward Hightower) and Syrian-born, internationally raised Khadim (Salim Razawi), an 18-year-old senior who transferred in mid-September from an elite prep school under mysterious circumstances. Danielson calls him into his office for equally vague reasons, at first jovially grilling him on how he's getting along, academically and socially, acting all buddy-buddy and playing the fool. Khadim, for his part, plays dumb, too, giving typical surly-teen shrugs and eye rolls to Danielson's questioning and attempts at establishing trust.

As the one-act, one-room play rolls on, Danielson and Khadim's interactions intensify, and they attempt to outsmart, outmaneuver and one-up each other, ramping up the accusations and revealing that they both know a lot more than either one was at first willing to admit.

Was Khadim called into the office simply for ditching class? Perhaps he's under suspicion in connection with a string of pranks and vandalism? Or is he connected to on-campus drug dealing? Could there be something even darker at stake, something related to the sex scandal and resulting suicide of another student who has ties to both characters?

Fans of the classic play and film "Sleuth" (or, for more modern audiences, of the television show "13 Reasons Why") will find a similar squirmy pleasure in watching the unraveling mysteries of "The North Pool" and feeling the tension crackling between the leads.

While this may not be his all-time finest work (he was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 2010 for "Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo"), Joseph's masterful skill in crafting realistic dialogue and building suspense is on display in this psychological thriller.

A two-person show relies, of course, heavily on the chemistry and skill of the two actors, and Hightower and Razawi, along with Joseph's script and director Jacquelyn Montellato's brisk pacing, do not disappoint. Hightower is particularly excellent in the surprisingly complex character of Danielson, who at first appears to be a swaggering buffoon, a clueless, cringeworthy adult who still clings to his own high-school glory days while wanting desperately to be liked and respected. His students, he says, are the lost sheep to his benevolent shepherd. And peppered in to his persona are unpleasant undertones of racism and misogyny, and even accusations of sexual misconduct.

It's easy, initially, to root for Khadim in this standoff: the victimized minority student being bullied by a power-hungry, petty dictator in a post-911 world where Muslim-Americans are under unfair persecution.



Edward Hightower and Salim Razawi play a vice principal and a high-schooler engaged in mental warfare in the Dragon Theatre's production of "The North Pool." Photo by Lance Huntley



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But it becomes clear that Khadim is more of a wolf in sheep's clothing. He's smug and arrogant, used to getting what he wants thanks to his parents' wealth and worldly connections. And he has seemingly little remorse for some of the disgusting acts in which he's allegedly become entangled. On the other hand, maybe he is just a kid, trying to find a place for himself in a cut-throat world.

The audience is continually torn, pulled between sympathy and suspicion for both characters as the interrogation develops (ultimately, though, after some revelations about animal cruelty, I was not left with many kind feelings toward Khadim). A third character, the deceased student, Lia, is often mentioned but, despite her importance to the plot, not sufficiently fleshed out in order to give a sense of who she really was.

The play, it should be noted, has local roots: It made its premiere with TheatreWorks in 2011 (TheatreWorks has produced a number of other Joseph works as well). According to Dragon's artistic director Meredith Hagedorn, "North Pool" director Montellato and star Razawi both, separately, presented the idea to produce a version through Dragon's Second Stage program, which supports the passion projects of emerging artists in the community. Their eventual collaboration has proved highly successful. This production is well-crafted and riveting, even as the plot itself continues to deal in ambiguities, leaving the audience with more questions than answers. Dragon's version of "The North Pool" is a captivating look at two characters who are treading water, trying to keep from drowning in the deep end.

What: "The North Pool"

Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

When: Through July 16, Thursdays-Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m.

Cost: \$27-\$35

Info: Go to [Dragon Productions Theatre Company](#).

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