

'Disgraced' engages, provokes

By Jean Schiffman
Special to S.F. Examiner

With the Paris attacks on everybody's mind on Friday the 13th, it seemed an especially significant opening night for American playwright Ayad Akhtar's powerful, Pulitzer Prize winning drama "Disgraced" at Berkeley Repertory Theatre (in a co-production with Chicago's Goodman Theatre and Seattle Repertory Theatre).

REVIEW: Disgraced

Presented by Berkeley Repertory Theatre
Where: Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley **When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays and Fridays, 7 p.m. Wednesdays, 2 and 8 p.m. Thursdays and Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m. Sundays; closes Dec. 20 **Tickets:** \$29 to \$89 **Contact:** (510) 647-2949, www.berkeleyrep.org

The 80-minute play starts off with little indication of the considerable fireworks ahead. New York acquisitions and mergers lawyer Amir (a particularly potent Bernard White) is modeling in his living room, in a business suit and underpants, for his artist wife, Emily, who's painting a head-and-shoulders portrait of him after the 17th-century Spanish artist Velazquez.

Amir, it turns out, is a secular Muslim of Pakistani heritage (he calls



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himself an apostate) who tells everyone he's Indian in order to fit in to post-9/11 America and rise in his (Jewish-owned) law firm. Later on, others will call him a self-hating Muslim.

Equally ambitious Emily (played by blond, all-American-looking Nisi Sturgis) is hoping that her Islamic-influenced art will be accepted for an important exhibit curated by Isaac (an amiable J. Anthony Crane), who's Jewish.

There are red flags early on. Amir seems agitated; he's fielding too many calls on his cell phone. And conflict rises between the seemingly happy couple when Emily and Amir's nephew, Hussein (Behzad Dabu), tries

to persuade him to aid a local imam who's been arrested for terrorism but is presumably innocent. Amir wants nothing to do with the case.

And Isaac, when he shows up to evaluate Emily's art, worries that her work may be perceived as Orientalism.

Later, Isaac and his African-American wife, Jory (an especially magnetic Zakiya Young), who's Amir's law-firm colleague, arrive as dinner guests, and soon enough Amir gets drunk and truculent.

When he and Isaac begin to argue about Islam — the very word itself, says Amir, means "submission" — things get heated. Sensitive issues

that are on everyone's mind these days — terrorism, immigration, Islamophobia and more — rise to the surface, with results more disastrous than you'd imagine.

Director Kimberly Senior crafts the action with careful attention to the rhythm of continually rising tensions and to the nuances of interaction among the characters.

And playwright Akhtar examines the issues in ways that feel organic and authentic. No point of view feels right; no point of view feels wrong. This is a play in which the audience itself is likely to feel at times deeply implicated in ways that the very best theatre experience can provide.

From left, Nisi Sturgis, Bernard White, J. Anthony Crane and Zakiya Young are excellent in Berkeley Repertory Theatre's timely production of playwright Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Disgraced."

ON STAGE

America's Got Talent All-Stars Tour:

TV contestants Taylor Williamson, Emily West, The KriStef Brothers, Recycled Percussion, Blue Journey and Smoothini appear. 8 p.m. Saturday, \$39.50-\$60. Warfield, 982 Market St., S.F., (888) 929-7849, www.axs.com



Steve Cuiffo is Lenny Bruce:

Exactly 54 years after the famed comic appeared at the Curran, the one-man show brings him back from the dead in a set compiling his routines on still-hot topics including religion, race, drugs, sexual mores, obscenity and the Constitution. 8 p.m. today-Saturday, \$35-\$50. Curran Theater, 455 Geary St., S.F., www.sfcurren.com

Theatre Flamenco: Contemporary Spanish flamenco superstar Andrés Marín appears in the North American premiere of "Ad Libitum: Or how I freed myself from my chains." 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, \$40-\$75. Cowell Theater, Fort Mason, Marina Boulevard and Buchanan Street, S.F., www.fortmason.org/boxoffice.

Una Noche Tropical: The evening of Cuban cabaret (with dinner and a show) features Alayo Dance Company and live music by Patricio Angulo. 7:30 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 6:30 p.m. Sundays, through Dec. 5, \$30-\$65. Dance Mission Theater, 3316 24th St., S.F., (415) 826-4441, www.brownpapertickets.com

Bay Area Musicals! kicks off with 'How to Succeed'

By Leslie Katz
S.F. Examiner Staff Writer

Bay Area Musicals! founder and artistic director Matthew McCoy admits that he hasn't undertaken the sanest endeavor, but he's quite positive about the future of his new local theater troupe.

"You have to be a little crazy to be in the arts," says McCoy, but adds that so far the company, which presents its first San Francisco show next week, is in good financial shape, thanks to "a great team involved," varied donors and sponsorships (including funding from the tech sector), effective guerilla marketing and good ticket sales.

Appealing to a broad range of audi-



McCoy

IF YOU GO: How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying

Presented by Bay Area Musicals!
Where: Marines Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter St., S.F. **When:** Opens Nov. 28; 8 p.m. Thursdays-Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; closes Dec. 19 **Tickets:** \$35 to \$60 **Contact:** (415) 340-2207, www.bamsf.org

ences of all ages is primary goal of the nonprofit professional group, which opens "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" on Nov. 28 at Marines' Memorial Theatre and continues its inaugural season with "Hair" and "La Cage aux Folles" in 2016.

When McCoy (who got a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Coastal Carolina University in South Carolina and has worked nationally and internationally producing, choreographing and performing musicals, plays and magic productions) decided to set-



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tle, he came to San Francisco in 2012 because it has a vibrant theater scene.

"We have a ton of theater. I saw the number, and thought, 'This is the perfect place,'" says McCoy, who thinks BAM! will fill a niche by offering quality productions of new and old classics at an affordable price, and

new patrons can relate. "People came out of the woodwork, a great array of talent, came out to audition," adds McCoy who's directing the admittedly dated (particularly in its treatment of women) 1961 show. "It doesn't matter, because the cast is so good," McCoy adds. (Kyle Stoner plays the lead, who journeys from window washer to the executive suite, and Chloe Condon plays his secretary; both have extensive credits in local musicals.)

McCoy says no lyrics in Frank Loesser's "great" songs will be changed, but that the sexism in the show is being mitigated by blocking and choreography that gives the action a contemporary, feminist tone.

Another BAM! positive is the company's commitment to community. Grant money will enable 300 high school students to see the show free, in the hopes that, McCoy says, "We'll give them the bug, then, from that, they'll move on."