The Kite Runner

**by Matthew Spangler (adapted from the novel by Khaled Hosseini)
at The Lowry
Reviewed by John Waterhouse October 2017**

The Kite Runner tells the dramatic story of two boys growing up in Kabul before and during the

time of the Taliban. It is a love story, a tale of betrayal and about the universal relationship between father and son. *The Kite Runner* is also a tale of two worlds; life in Afghanistan's ancient culture contrasted with modern, glitzy America, as one of the friends attempts to live in a very different society. It is no co-incidence the author of the original novel, published in 2003, Khaled Hosseini is himself an Afghan/American.

The story is probably best known through the film version, the premiere of which scheduled for November 2006 had to be put back six weeks in order to get child stars out of Afghanistan after they received death threats. Whilst well-received in the West, being put forward for several awards, the film drew outrage in Afghanistan itself because of the depiction of ethnic tensions, with accusations the lives and security of the people had been 'played around with'.

The stage version, in developmental format, was first produced only a few weeks after the film's premiere, with the writer **Matthew Spangler** having grown up in San Francisco at the same time as Hosseini, meeting him for the first time through a mutual friend in March 2006. After reading the book, Spangler felt inspired to dramatize it because there was just so much to the story, both in terms of people and themes. He is now a professor of Performance Studies at San Hose University.

The work in bringing a play of this magnitude to life is immense, with a cast of thirteen and a lot of action in the story plus a range of challenging back-drops. The Director **Giles Croft** uses a stylised mix of lighting, backdrops and huge canopies representing kites and frequently changing shape, to create powerful images which do full justice to the settings, allowing us to concentrate on the actors as they collectively take us through various aspects of Afghan life. The sound of ethnic drumming, played superbly on stage by
Hanif Khan
, adds considerably to the atmosphere and a range of changing moods, keeping the audience constantly in rapt attention. If you don't think a drum can add considerably to creating a range of

moods, come see this show.

The initial kite running scenes provide a playful pretext to the drama about to unfold, showing community life as two friends indulge in a centuries-old pastime which was to be eventually banned by the Taliban as a distraction from Islam. There is a genuine warmth between Amir played by **David Ahmad** and Hassan played **Jo Ben Ayed**. There is also a real sense of another world being created on the stage as we are introduced to a wealth of characters. A stand-out performance for me was given by

Emilio Doorgasingh

as Amir's father Baba, who perhaps understandably cannot let of go of his prejudices against Russians even if they are emigres like himself in the USA.

There are also some charming scenes between Amir and Soraya played by **Amiera Darwish**, who blossoms with the freedoms enjoyed by women in the West after they arrive in the USA. Credit must also be given to

Karl Seth

who portrays six different characters, each with a distinct identity and providing some of the few lighter elements in the story. A personal favourite was the friendly Russo/American Dr Scheider; US-born but unfortunately still too Russian for Baba. The only bit which did not quite work for me was the transformation of Assef, well played by

Bhavin Bhatt

as the childhood bully but as a Taliban leader in sunglasses, where there were echoes of a pantomime villain (but that is a minor point).

Overall, a very thought-provoking production, excellently staged and performed with passion and feeling.

The Kite Runner continues on a national tour until June 2018. For further details, see the schedule at http://www.ukproductions.co.uk/theatre-productions/the-kite-runner/