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### Why Do We Talk?

I ask: What is the most effective medium for conveying a message? In the evening that I attended Long Wharf Theatre's production of *Disgraced*, the performance played to a predominately elderly white male audience. The play, which was particularly effective at opening sensitive questions about Islamophobia, may have fallen on deaf ears. *Disgraced's* audience did not arrive at the theater with open minds. It counted on a minority of individuals who were young or diverse enough to have experiences that could warrant them to truthfully listen and weigh their preexisting morals with the play's controversial but logical ones. Nevertheless, everyone who enters the theater watches the performance, and even those who disagree with the play's ideas have undeniably been exposed to them. *Disgraced* is a play, and Ayad Akhtar consciously chose this medium because of how plays interact with their audiences. *Disgraced* effectively utilizes theater to incite emotion and arouse moral quandaries in its audience members, even if many of those watching choose not to listen or simply are unable to recognize where the tension directs them.

*Disgraced* finds every character in an aroused mood. Off the bat, Amir and Emily's relationship is strained, as Emily admires and almost fetishizes Islamic culture whilst Amir condemns it due to his violent interpretation of the religion. The dispute of whether Islam is either violent or peaceful is never resolved, providing the core point of tension for the ongoing events. Yet, what transpires is a simultaneous discussion of what Islam can mean for an

individual and what it can mean for a culture. The fundamental question of the play—whether one has control over who they are in regards to their background—is one Amir wrestles with and tries to get his companions to wrestle with, but leads to a dissolution of Amir’s entire life.

Once we deviate from the play’s structure, nothing is simple or resolved. If we are meant to leave with any cohesive theme understanding about identity, it may be that we are unable to completely separate ourselves from the roots of our cultures. But this theme is contradicted within the play; for instance, in moments when Isaac insists that Amir’s rejection of Islam is actually self-loathing, and suggests that Amir alone is in control of how he feels or acts. Rather than recognizing a theme, we are more importantly ushered to listen to others and never settle for a point of view that may bring resolution. *Disgraced* offers us with weights that elevate and lower the moral integrities of individuals in the efforts of creating a nuanced world that focuses on always questioning what we know, especially if we are comfortable with what we know. Interestingly, playwrights have a proven fascination with questioning things we consider “normal” at times of racial, religious, or cultural strain. Such can be seen in Bertolt Brecht’s work, where in the Prologue to *The Exception and The Rule* he states that there are aspects of society that are generally accepted by the public but are in need of scrutiny.<sup>1</sup> *Disgraced* makes an effort to open a conversation about norms we take for granted, thus opening up dialogues that allow us to better acquaint ourselves with the discriminatory (or identity) issues we face today in society.

*Disgraced* uses tension to complicate polemic arguments, which are met with tensions that further complicate the argument. The process of “complicating” ideas and subjects most often leads to intellectual debate, but in theater spectators are silent observers. Any

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<sup>1</sup> See Bertolt Brecht’s Prologue to *The Exception and the Rule*.

counterarguments or contributions we can submit must be tacit. *Disgraced* therefore uses the live medium of theater to disallow immediate discussion because the only people invited to speak are those speaking lines onstage. As certain incisive moments arise, such as when Amir admits he feels pride for the attacks during September 11, audience members instinctively feel an emotional tug—but cannot voice opposition. It is completely natural to feel a nationalistic urge when someone reveals a sympathy for major terror attacks, even if the sympathy is known to be specious. *Disgraced* even seems to borrow elements from Futurism, in that the play appeals to the viewer's senses in order to incite emotion, particularly feelings related to nationalism.<sup>2</sup> There is enough power in the coexistence of the words “pride” and “9/11” in one sentence to shut off a viewer from respecting any further argument. Unlike Futurist Synthetic Theater, *Disgraced* is not brief; after we are riled by statements regarding 9/11, we are meant to listen to a justification of the ideas presented. It is difficult to separate ourselves from our initial negative response, but we are challenged to succeed and question primal reactions we are comfortably acquainted with.

Uniquely, Long Wharf Theatre's *Disgraced* offered an unorthodox talkback segment, in which audience members could say what they thought about the performance. Yet, this concluding discussion failed to provide the necessary dialogues that would make the play seem effective. For instance, since a large portion of the audience was Jewish, these members sympathized completely with Isaac, going as far to disregard his wrongdoings and hold him on a moral high ground. To hold this viewpoint would be to disregard pivotal details that humanize Isaac. Most importantly, Isaac cheated on his wife with Emily, and he expressed a racially insensitive sentiment to Emily towards the play's conclusion. Isaac informed her that even if she had not cheated on Amir with him, she would have eventually cheated on her husband because

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<sup>2</sup> See Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*, specifically “The Futurist Synthetic Theater, 1915”.

of his race and ethnic background. In a sense, Emily could not be satisfied or settled with Amir because of who he is. The grounds of this statement were purely about race and culture, purposefully ignoring Amir's nuances as an individual. But the audience remained sympathetic with Isaac, beckoning the question if the production failed to adequately represent the text, or if the text was inadequate to challenge the viewers' biases.

In my experience, it was physically impossible to ignore the tension on stage, even if much of the audience was ignorant to the challenges imposed by the drama. *Disgraced's* existence as a physical presence allowed for the least enthralled audience members to still feel the anger and confusion in front of them. Although an individual may not empathize with Amir's struggle to be understood, he or she could at least feel the strength in Amir's moments of pure invigoration. For instance, when Amir shattered a glass to vent his anger, a gesture that produced a harsh noise that startled the audience; or, when he lashed out at Jori and Isaac in such a violent tone that the room instantly felt quiet. These shrill moments have a familiar quality to film, wherein incidental sound effects, such as the clinks of a pickaxe or the whistle of a train, can physically startle a viewer and make them actually *feel* discomfort by putting them in an uncomfortable situation. In theater, incidental effects are mostly nonexistent, replaced by sparse moments that usually consist of physical violence. *Disgraced* as a whole is uncomfortable, but the production's tense environment can best be felt when the audience is made to *feel* something, either by action or sound.

Perhaps the production anticipated its mostly homogeneous audience. *Disgraced* is not an easy text, as even a well informed audience member can lose track of details regarding characters' flaws and strengths. Regardless, the audience as a whole cannot deny the power of certain statements and actions within the production. The text is challenging, but keeps everyone

engaged. Although *Disgraced* may be unable to broaden everyone's perspectives, it gives an admirable and uncensored attempt.