



A PROPHET IN HIS TIME

Premonition and reality in Tony Kushner's **HOMEBOODY/KABUL**

BY JAMES RESTON JR.

EARLY IN THE SECOND ACT OF 'HOMEBOODY/KABUL', Tony Kushner's brilliant play about Afghanistan, I gave up on my quest for a purely artistic evening. Foolishly, I had tried to imagine what this theatrical experience might have been if Sept. 11 had never happened; if America had not gone to Afghanistan—in truth and in its mind—through the fall of 2001; if I personally had not been so transfixed and paralyzed and fascinated by the faraway events, so that nothing else from September to January had seemed so important as to read every story about “the war,” every profile about the innocent, vaporized victims, every new attempt to explain the mind of Osama bin Laden and the wrath of Islamic radicals against the West.

But it was no use. The connection of this play to the Recent Past (to borrow one of its early lines), was too intense, too immediate. Neither Kushner nor his audience could escape reality. There was no way to move back into the mind-set of just another evening out at the theatre. Much more than mere art was in play here.

“The Present is always an awful place to be,” the loquacious British woman of a certain age known as the Homebody says at the play's beginning. And so it was: In early January, as *Homebody/Kabul* had just opened, Osama bin Laden and Mul-

lah Omar were still at large. The flag-draped caskets of the first American casualties of war were coming home. The warlords and the thieves had taken over again, and the poppy fields were back in business, foreshadowing a flood of cheap Afghan heroin on the American streets next year. The calls for more American troops to engage in more dangerous operations, over a longer period of time, were growing more persistent, and the White House was talking about building permanent bases in central Asia.

No exit from this dreadful place is in sight.

The barren landscape of that tortured land had begun to look more and more like the quagmire that I had expected it would become from the beginning. Afghanistan was, had been, is and would always be in the future, “a populated disaster.” But we were there, and it was here, everywhere. We could not avoid it.

“We shudder to recall the times through which we have lived,” the wonderful, frumpy Homebody says as she sits next to her frilly lampshade, “the Recent Past, about which no one wants to think.” We did not want to think about it, but we could think of nothing else. The blow had sucked all the wind out of us, and we were still gasping for breath months later. It had been hard to reach out for entertainment. Escapist distractions had seemed

too trivial, and until this play, there had been few connections, few insights to this benighted, corrupt place halfway round the world with which suddenly our immediate destiny seemed intertwined.

To write so many prescient lines completely out of one's imagination, and then for colossal, unforeseen world events to impart such resonance to them...what an accomplishment! My admiration for the playwright soars. I am envious.

The day before my night at the theatre, I had contributed further to undermining my artistic evening. I thought it would be good preparation to see Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film *Kandahar*. There on the big screen was the real Afghanistan of sand dunes and jagged, desolate mountains, of chaos and thievery, of bird-like women behind their blue pleated bird-cage costumes, of primitive mullahs and hate-filled *madrassases*, of transportation by horse cart and bare feet, of bewildering, unfathomable, warring tribes—Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Pashtunes—of ever-shifting loyalties, of mines and Mujahadeen, of bombed-out towns whose mud brick ruins are only suggested by the set of *Homebody/Kabul*.

So I bring the baggage of reality to the theatre on West 4th

Street; but who in this theatre can leave that baggage at home? Toward the end of the play when the corrupted diplomat Quango says, “Have you noticed, nearly every other man you meet here is missing pieces?”, the vision of the stumps of mine-shattered legs and arms that I had seen in *Kandahar* flashed into my mind.

And it is this populated disaster, this mutilated hand of a country that America has committed itself to embrace and to civilize and (could it really be?) to democratize. The Homebody uses the wonderful phrase “Universal Drift.” But this is more about the American Drift. And our open-ended commitment as a nation to this terrible place is made by a president who had been elected on the platform that we could *not* go everywhere in the world as its policeman.

“I hold on tight to his ruined right hand,” the Homebody says in her fantasy, “and he leads me on a guided tour through his city.” And then a few lines later, once you understand the metaphor of the grossly dismembered hand, she says, “Would you make love to a stranger with a mutilated hand if the opportunity was offered to you?” And then, as if it were Bush or Rumsfeld answering: “Might do.”

Trying to comprehend the incomprehensible: Firdous Bamji, left, and Dylan Baker discuss the fate of the Homebody in Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*, directed by Declan Donnellan at the New York Theatre Workshop.

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The madness of oppression: Kelly Hutchinson, left, and Rita Wolf discuss the position of women in Afghan society in *Homebody/Kabul*.