

‘In the Book Of’ Explores Challenges of Afghan People

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The U.S. war in Afghanistan has wound down, but the challenges facing the Afghan people continue. Taproot Theatre is currently presenting a play, *In the Book Of*, by John Walch, that deals with some of these ongoing challenges.

In the play, the character of Anisah has served as a translator for the U.S. military and now fears reprisals from some of her fellow countrymen as the U.S. military departs from Afghanistan. So she follows a sympathetic lieutenant home to a small town in the United States.

“I wanted to write about immigration in contemporary America, but didn’t just want to write an ‘issue play,’” playwright Walch said. “I wanted the play to be in conversation with the larger, historical discussion.”

Walch pulled from both the past and the present. Inspired by the biblical Book of Ruth, Walch sought to explore the issue of immigration from a more contemporary perspective. “Ruth is one of the earlier narratives about immigration as it is set in a time when trade is increasing mobility and people had to begin to deal with the reality that we don’t live in a bubble,” he said.

Walch said that the Book of Ruth provides an example for people to follow. “Boundaries will eventually be crossed, the challenge is how we deal with it—either we open our arms to them or we slam the door shut,” he said. “The Book of Ruth is an example of meeting the stranger with kindness and respect, giving

them the dignity to work without harassment.”

Anisah, however, does not receive quite so warm of a welcome and must struggle with the challenges of integrating into a new community.

Despite these differences, Walch feels that both stories foreground the strength of women. “Like Ruth, Anisah is strong, determined, and coming into her independence,” he said.

“I wouldn’t say this is what interests me most about Afghanistan,” Walch added, “but in working on the play, I became fascinated with how women are becoming more and more empowered and shaping the cultural conversation. Look at someone like Malala Yousafzai, (the Pakistani 15-year-old shot for advocating education): it’s just incredible.”

Walch expects to continue drawing upon historical sources for pathways into presenting dramatic work about contemporary issues. “It kind of goes back to my first thoughts, when you put something contemporary against something historical,” he said. “It lets the contemporary story be bigger because it’s in conversation with timeless themes, events, characters.”

While this production is Walch’s Seattle premiere, he hopes to connect with our region more in the future.

Although he was not involved in the selection of this play by Taproot, or in the initial casting or directorial process, Walch did join the Taproot team for the final week of rehearsals and for opening night, and looks forward to his next visit to the Pacific Northwest.

“It’s part of why I wanted to come and work with Taproot: they are new to me,” Walch said.

In the Book Of will be performed through April 26 at Taproot Theatre, 204 North 85th Street, Seattle. For more information, visit taproottheatre.org.