

Theater: Plays With Prisoners, Prestidigitation and Puppets

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THE INVISIBLE HAND ** out of ****

THE ILLUSIONISTS ** out of ****

SWAMP JUICE ** 1/2 out of ****

THE INVISIBLE HAND ** out of ****

NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP

I have the sinking feeling I will remain in the minority on playwright Ayad Akhtar. He won the Pulitzer Prize for *Disgraced*, a show I didn't like in its original production and [continued to not like when it debuted on Broadway recently](#). Now his new drama is at the New York Theatre Workshop in a cast led by Justin Kirk. *The Invisible Hand* has a terrific hook of a premise and its message is very baldly stated. But unlike *Disgraced*, this show can't even boast of a production that offers it up with care.

The premise is indeed arresting: Nick Bright (Justin Kirk) is some sort of US hotshot, a Wall Street whiz kid who works for a major financial firm (CitiBank) and has been advising the Pakistani government on investments or its country's financial structure or some such things. When the play begins, he has been kidnapped and is being held for ransom. His wife and child post pleading videos online but not much else seems to be happening. Why? Well, it was all a mistake: the terrorists (or freedom fighters, if you're on their side) were hoping to snag a corrupt government official using Nick's know-how to privatize the water supply and profit from it. They got Nick instead.

Now he's their captive, a not very valuable asset who can't even command much attention from the outside world. Their leader the Imam (Dariush Kashani) was hoping to raise \$10 million. Nick is a realist: he can raise \$2 million, maybe \$3 million at the most. He's not worth \$10 million to anyone. That raises another possibility; they might hand Nick over to a third party terrorist group, out-sourcing his execution to create a stir in the media.

With no real leverage, Nick is buddying up to his captors. First he convinces the sheepish Dar (Jameal Ali) to take a chance on buying potatoes and serving as a middle man; Dar happily tells Nick he made \$75 in profit based on this advice. Then there's Bashir (Usman Ally). He too is rather sheepish, lowering his head like a little boy when the Imam chides him for his mistake in grabbing Nick.

But Bashir has a yen to learn more about finance. And maybe Nick's skills aren't so useless after all. Nick takes the money he can raise on his own and uses it to make various plays in the market. If he can triple his money, Nick will have raised his own ransom, taught Bashir some valuable skills and gained his freedom. Assuming, that is, the Imam keeps his word, doesn't decide Nick is too valuable to let go if he can generate cash like that or discover that Nick spends his nights trying to scrape out an escape in the air duct behind his bed.

Here's video of playwright Ayad Akhtar praising New York Theatre Workshop (the springboard for shows like *Once* and *Peter and the Starcatcher*) and rightly urging your support of its work.

The scenic design by Riccardo Hernandez for the first act is suitably grim: it's sheet metal of the tin shack variety stretching out over the audience and giving a sense of grey despair, aided by the dirty grey walls and the depressing florescent lights of Tyler Micoleau.

The ensemble is ok, including Justin Kirk, an actor I like very much. But they're all playing types. The premise of *The Invisible Hand* might have gone in many directions: black comedy, scathing satire, absurdist, bitterly real. But Akhtar has again landed on dully earnest. Not a single character convinces as a living, breathing person and genuine tension over Nick's fate is nonexistent. The politics never advance beyond the most banal pronouncements and when they do it beggars belief. Nick, who is working in Pakistan and advising that country's corrupt military government, truly thinks the US government always tries to do good? Even if he ignored recent history (like the US overthrow of democracy in Iran to install a brutal dictator or its support of the corrupt Saudi royals because of oil) surely he's at least familiar with the present.

Nick remains an enigma, and not in an interesting, playing his cards close to his vest sort of way. He's just an idea meant to illustrate a point. Investment banks may not be firing weapons but their hands aren't "clean." Indeed, all citizens are complicit in the actions of their government; our hands aren't "clean" either. That's the thudding message we're meant to absorb, one that most any audience -- and certainly ones in New York City -- would have embraced even before the show began. Whether proud or angry, most people understand people in a democracy must take moral responsibility for the actions of its government. Other ideas -- that money is the true god of all involved, even the terrorists claiming Allah is on their side -- prove equally banal.

But there are many more problems than this. [SPOILER ALERT] Act One ends with Nick attempting escape. It's no surprise to discover he doesn't get away. But his attempt is badly staged, with Nick slipping through that grating...into a pool of light on the other side of his prison's wall. Surely he should disappear into inky blackness. Even worse, act two begins with a very dramatic set alteration. The roof of his prison rises and rises and rises. The one desk has been joined by another one. All of it portends big changes. Is his prison going to look more like a trading floor? Will Nick -- the nominal prisoner -- start acting more like a boss since they're dealing with finance, the world he knows best? Nope. And that dramatic change in the set has absolutely no payoff; no reason for being.

It really is a good premise that Akhtar has squandered here. As is illustrated in act one, knowledge is power. When they know of a terrorist act about to take place, they almost unwittingly take advantage of it to make money. That's pushed to its logical extremes in act two, but not in a way that challenges Nick or reveals his generally rapacious nature or causes him to push back or do anything that might involve actual drama and character development.

Finally, there are office politics to deal with, a struggle for power in the world of Nick's hostage takers. He gains a smidge of a hint of information and is confronted late at night by the Imam. They are alone and this is the key moment for Nick, a guy who bets on futures, a guy who uses information to gain an edge. Will he reveal all to the Imam or is the smarter move to remain silent and place his bets on the upstart? Tellingly, at this pivotal moment, the one that will define Nick's moral dilemma in starkly personal terms, Akhtar looks away. He ends the scene before the actual moment of high drama the play has (almost unwittingly, it seems) been building to. It's almost shockingly undramatic. To cap it off, that choice doesn't seem to matter in the least. We don't feel it affected Nick's fate one way or the other.

The Invisible Hand has the kernel of a good play and a decent ensemble (especially Kirk and Kashani). But it also has an all too visible hand, the hand of a playwright who is manipulating cardboard characters to make a not very interesting point.

THE ILLUSIONISTS ** out of ****
MARQUIS THEATRE

A magic show on Broadway? Fun! It's been a long time since Doug Henning stormed onto the Great White Way in the mid-1970s with *The Magic Show*, a one act musical with his illusions peppered throughout. It became one of the biggest hits in history. Any parents uninterested in taking their kids to *Wicked* (again) might opt for this

harmless night of pleasure. As long as they expect Vegas-style cheesiness and some genial acts, they'll be fine. Here's their trailer and then a guest performance on America's Got Talent.

These acts -- any of which would be better in a smaller, less lavish setting -- are not done any favors by director/choreographer Neil Dorward. They pose on stage like superheroes about to defeat an arch enemy. They are surrounded by assistants wearing costumes by Angela Aaron that make them look like escapees from The Road Warrior (not her fault; it's undoubtedly exactly what she was asked to do). Said assistants must repeatedly pose in positions making them look like some combination of denizens of a haunted mansion with those of a fashion runway. And the music of the house band (composed by Evan Jolly) underlines every moment of action to the nth degree.

It's curious. You get the sense watching kids that our age of endless digital special effects has made them blasé about magic done in person. On TV, narrators or the host used to emphasize -- hey, this is magic being done on our set; no camera tricks are involved. Now they have to do the same thing live in person -- once or twice one of the cast members exhorts the passive crowd, hey, that was a magic trick there! Applaud! Indeed, when The Inventor aka Kevin James (not that one) rubs his hands together and sends snow cascading out over the crowd, people don't even seem to be wondering how he did it or really acknowledge the spectacle of snow falling indoors. Maybe they were waiting to see it in 3-D?

To be fair to the audience, many of the elaborate stunts on display ultimately depend on banal bits of misdirection or the rather obvious substitution of a stand-in. At the low point of such shenanigans, The Inventor has seemingly chopped a man in half and we see the man on a short rolling platform and James literally shoves the man offstage so that we can't see what happens to him next. A minute later he is rolled out and "put back together." Leading everyone in the audience to rightly think about what exactly happened while he was out of view. In that case, they didn't even attempt misdirection or a bald-faced substitution; they just went backstage to set up the "magic" where we couldn't see.

I'm being mean, perhaps because I was so close to the stage and on one side that I literally could see exactly what they were doing most of the time. (Neil Patrick Harris says we shouldn't try to figure magic out; is he out of his mind? Of course you try to figure it out!) Despite the silly trappings surrounding them, I found most of the acts pretty amiable. Andrew Basso aka The Escapologist does a Houdini stunt and there's something refreshing about having a stunt explained and seeing it done right in front of us. (Houdini secreted a pick in his mouth or elsewhere on his person; Basso just tells us he's got a bit of metal to fiddle with.) Adam Trent as The Futurist had a pleasant patter going as one of the two hosts. Dan Sperry as The Anti-Conjuror was genuinely funny with his sardonic demeanor, especially when he was blessed with a very cranky audience member as his "volunteer." Sperry made the most of it. Jeff Hobson as The Trickster -- imagine Charles Nelson Reilly as a magician/con artist -- was even better. On the down side, both James and Aaron Crow as The Warrior fit right in with the Vegas aesthetic: all flash and no substance.

But there's something wrong with a show of illusions where the one-liners are more memorable than the actual magic. Luckily, their ace in the hole was Yu Ho-Jin as The Manipulator. Essentially, he just manipulates cards but his skills of dexterity are obvious. More to the point, his flair and presentation was elegance and simplicity itself, the opposite of the rest of the show as envisioned by Dorward. Yu Ho-Jin presumably does some modest variations that escaped me but by and large it's a very simple act built around cards with some standard misdirection at work. But it's the way he does those classic moves, the beauty and control he displays which makes this act a pleasure to watch, even if you sort of think you know how he does it. None of that matters when the real magic is on display: talent.

SWAMP JUICE ** 1/2 out of ****
BARROW STREET THEATRE

Swamp Juice is Jeff Achtem's one man show, an ode to shadow puppetry. He recycles a bunch of familiar objects around the house and sets up several lights to cast shadows on a screen. Half the time, you're watching the shadow play on the wall; the other half of the time you're looking at Achtem to appreciate and marvel how he manages to make those illusions appear. (Oh, he's doing that? you might wonder over some crazily convincing illusion with a simple technique behind it. Neat!)

It lasts 60 minutes and if you bring a kid and get lucky, they might pester you to buy them their own starter kit in the lobby. Of course, being kids today, they'll then record their own shadow plays on an iPhone and post it on YouTube, but hey, that's being creative too! Here's a glimpse of Achtem's work.

I feel disposed to be kind towards this show. But the truth is that it would have been a lot more fun at 15 minutes, maybe as one part of an evening of vaudeville. (In its heyday, he could have toured the country and done this act again and again.) Though he tries, Achtem hasn't really developed a feature length story out of his characters. He'd be better off shortening this one drastically and coming up with two other very different tales, though even "tale" is a strong word for the episodic-like doings on display here. Perhaps a pre-existing myth or story would helpfully ground his creativity in character and story.

The finale involves 3-D (ooh!) and in truth it's the most enjoyably silly 3-D I've seen in a long while because it's just a gimmick, he knows it and we don't have to wear those glasses for more than 5 or so minutes. A bit of silliness where everyone had to hold various implements over their heads and puppets from the show flew over them probably works better in a room of kids. But even then it was a lot of bother just to create some audience participation.

Achtem, to be clear, held my attention with his personality and skill. He's got an engagingly quirky sensibility and the talent to bring images to life in a way we rarely see. Here's hoping the success he's enjoyed with this act spurs him on to create a real story, one that can hold our imagination no matter how it's told. Because other than his shadow puppetry, there's almost nothing to take away from Swamp Juice. And the way a story is told should never be more important than the story itself.

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