

In 'The Invisible Hand,' a kidnapped American banker strikes a deal for survival

By Philip Brandes



A kidnapped banker (John Tufts, right) strikes a devil's bargain with his captors in "The Invisible Hand." (David Bazemore)

The color of money runs blood red in the Southern California premiere of Ayad Akhtar's riveting hostage thriller, "The Invisible Hand." A superbly cast staging by Santa Barbara's Ensemble Theatre Company further validates Akhtar's reputation for storytelling that both engages and informs as it explores our complicated world.

As in Akhtar's 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, "[Disgraced](#)," the Pakistani American playwright has an overarching theme here: the divisive, factional

loyalties on all sides of the collision between Western and Islamic civilizations. Although "The Invisible Hand" is more explicitly political, its characters and moral shadings are every bit as complex and nuanced.

The drama plunges us immediately into the plight of an American banker, Nick Bright (John Tufts), kidnapped by Islamic militants and held captive in a turbulent Pakistan border town. A towering, meticulously detailed dilapidated scenic design by Charlie Corcoran evokes a suitably squalid ambience for Nick's confinement.

Tufts (who starred recently in the well-regarded revival of the Holocaust-themed "I Am My Own Wife" that originated at this same venue and transferred to the Laguna Playhouse in January) brings compelling fear and desperation to the very different kind of survivalist challenge his character faces here. He knows his captors won't get the \$10 million ransom for his release, so they will see no value in keeping him alive.

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But Nick has a card to play: He offers to use his financial expertise to raise the money through strategic investments in the commodities market.

Thus begins his devil's bargain with the dignified, quietly menacing Imam Saleem (Mujahid Abdul-Rashid) and his volatile lieutenant, a London-born repatriated jihadist named Bashir (Jameal Ali). Both Ali and Abdul-Rashid have played these roles in previous productions; their crystal-clear motivations drive the shifting power dynamics that make futures trading a matter of life and death. Sarang Sharma rounds out the cast as an amiable guard at the lowest rung of a system he can't control.

Precise direction by Jonathan Fox seamlessly integrates Akhtar's lucid tutorials on the hidden links between terrorism and global finance without

blunting the dramatic momentum. Perhaps the greatest possible compliment came in a comment overheard at intermission: "I can't wait to find out if they cut his head off!"

A series of unexpected but thoroughly logical twists keeps us guessing until the very end, and the compromised morality on all sides offers a sobering lesson in the universal currency of self-interest and greed.

Where: The New Vic, 33 W. Victoria St., Santa Barbara

When: 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays (see website for additional performances); ends April 29.

Info: (805) 965-5400 or www.etscb.org

Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes

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