

Director guides exceptional cast in sharply performed 'Invisible Hand'

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar brings his considerable knowledge of the world of finance to the fore in “The Invisible Hand,” on stage through April 29 at Ensemble Theatre Company in Santa Barbara.

Akhtar seizes on the inevitable conflict between traditional religion and the “church of finance.” The New York-born playwright’s father insisted his son be well-versed in money matters by following his dictum to read the Wall Street Journal daily. Alert and impressionable, Akhtar immersed himself in the field of finance, which is a central player in his drama.

Set in Pakistan “in the very near future,” the jarring play masterfully builds upon the wary Pakistanis who have imprisoned Nick Bright, a financial expert who was captured while doing his complex but profitable work, harvesting bonanzas from shaky economic situations. The captive uses his well-honed capitalist smarts to lead his captors, the quick-tempered Bashir eager to make his own mark in the world, the more imperial Imam Saleem, and even the relative peon at the rough detention site, Dar, into the world of making money with a combination of expertise and a modicum of financial sleight-of-hand.

Dennis Miller:[Comedian will perform at Levity Live in Oxnard](#)

“Sylvia”:[Winning cast romps into theatergoers’ hearts in Camarillo](#)

Coming soon:[Koalas will be on view at Santa Barbara Zoo starting April 28](#)

It’s not a simple journey for any of them, but Bashir is outwardly the most intense, as well as the most likely to react if Bright’s guidance turns out to be

not so bright. As for the captive himself, he hopes to be released to the U.S. both because he has been an amenable prisoner and a willing teacher of ways in which the Pakistani men might become wealthy, either for their own good or for what Abdul-Rashid mentions as helping fellow countrymen and needy children.

What could possibly go wrong? Unfortunately for Bright, lots of things, including equipment failure, vying interests and simple greed.



From left, Jameal Ali, Mujahid Abdul-Rashid, Sarang Sharma and John Tufts star in the Ensemble Theatre Company's production of "The Invisible Hand," on stage through April 29 at The New Vic Theatre in Santa Barbara. (Photo: CONTRIBUTED PHOTO/DAVID BAZEMORE)

In the sharply defined and performed play, director Jonathan Fox guides an exceptional cast. John Tufts is the initially hopeful Nick Bright, employing his wiles and financial savvy to earn his release and return to his wife and children in the U.S. Jameal Ali, who starred in the play's original New York

production, is the unpredictable kidnapper Bashir. Mujahid Abdul-Rashid repeats his role as Imam Saleem, which he played in a Florida production, and Sarang Sharma is the timid young Dar, who figures in some of the drama's occasional humor.

“The Invisible Hand” is staged in bold, and occasionally bloody, scenes in which the captive is gradually worn down, often brutally, because he cannot calm the men who keep him tethered, and the others, except Dar, also take out their frustrations on the closest mark.

The scenes are separated by thunderous bursts of sound and blackouts, as Bright realizes his willing learners are just as likely to take out their frustrations on him as anybody as they gradually evolve into ever more desperate men.

Members of the audiences with a sound grasp of upscale financial transactions will probably best understand the intricacies of what Bright is desperately trying to teach his captors. But even the uninitiated in that area of expertise will connect with the terror and brutality of deeply frustrated men.

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If you go

What: Ensemble Theatre Company's production of “The Invisible Hand,” Ayad Akhtar's contemporary thriller set in Pakistan

When: 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays through April 29; also 7 p.m. April 17 and 4 p.m. April 21

Where: The New Vic Theatre, [33 W. Victoria St., Santa Barbara](#)

Cost: \$20-\$70

Information and tickets: 805-965-5400 or www.etsb.org

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