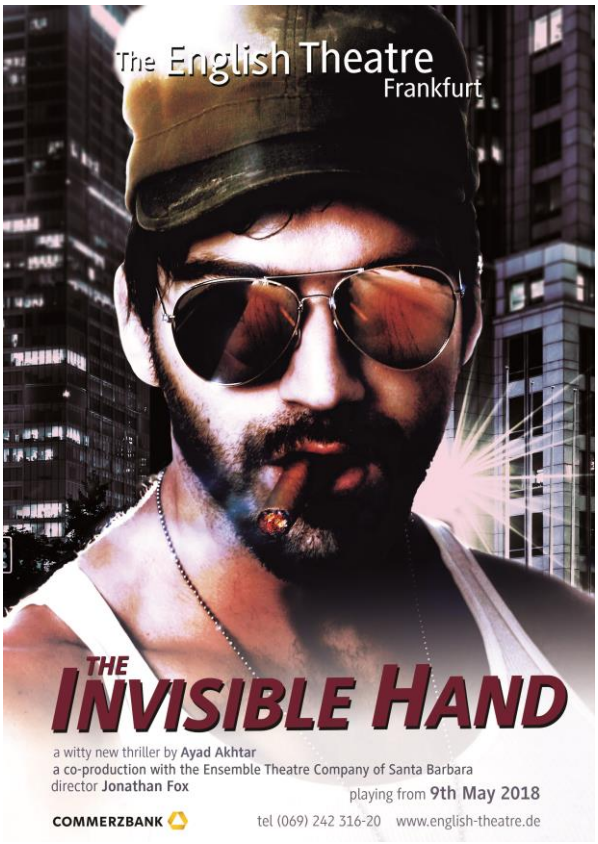
# *The Invisible Hand*

## A witty new thriller
## by Ayad Akhtar

## playing from 9th May 2018




This teachers' resource pack includes factual information as well as tasks and topics to be dealt with in the classroom. Cut and paste as you please, and please consult the official programme for additional information. Difficulty levels are graded for your convenience.

**English Theatre Frankfurt**
**Teachers' Resource Pack**

## Exercise: Analyzing a Scene

The following pages contain the first scene from *The Invisible Hand*. Have your students read it out loud. One student should read the stage direction (the parts in *italics*). The other students should just listen and try to imagine the parts they can't see.

Afterwards hold a discussion and try to find answers to the questions below. This can be done all together or in smaller groups.

Finally have the students (or different ones) read the scene aloud again. They should try to consider the answers they now have. Afterwards, ask the others if they were able to understand and imagine the scene more clearly.

Difficulty: **flexible**, based on ability

**Questions**

(*Answer these questions and explain what information tells you the answers*.)

Where are the characters? What is the time period (today, 1890s, WW2, Middle Ages)?

Who is Nick Bright? Why is he wearing handcuffs?

Who are Nick's captors? What do you learn about them?

What does the character of Nick want in this scene? What is he trying to do with Dar? What does he want from Bashir?

Who is Dar? What does he want in this scene?

Who is Bashir? What does he want in this scene?

*The Invisible Hand by Ayad Akhtar at New York Theatre Workshop. Photograph: Joan Marcus*

## Model Answers to "Analyzing a Scene" Exercise

*Students cannot be expected to have understood or known all of this information. If they are struggling to answer a question, you might give them hints to help them find it.*

***Where are the characters?*** The characters are at a holding facility somewhere in Pakistan. Dar is Pakistani and speaks Punjabi, there are bars on the windows, Nick is handcuffed, Dar mentions places in Pakistan.
***What is the time period?*** The time period is the present: First of all, Dar carries a Kalashnikov rifle, which was first manufactured in 1949 but is now widespread and the name Pakistan was first coined in 1933, so we know it can't be older than that. We also hear a car, Dar mentions trucks and Nick's wife sent a video. Nick also works for Citibank (founded in 1890s). Lastly, the Lashkar-e-Taibe terrorist group started operating in 1986 and they killed (beheaded) the journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. This means the events in the play cannot be older than 2002.

***Who is Nick Bright?*** Nick Bright is a rich American male; Bashir says he's a "Wealthy American looting our country". The stage direction says he is "intelligent and vital"; his name, Bright, is a synonym for these qualities, too. He works (or worked) at Citibank, which means he works in finance. This is supported by the fact that he explained to Dar how he and his cousin could earn more money trading in potatoes. He is married to a woman named Julie and has a young son named. He works for Citibank.
***Why is he wearing handcuffs?*** He has been abducted (or kidnapped) and his captors are holding him for ransom.

***Who are Nick's captors? What do you learn about them?*** Nick's captors appear to be Pakistani men and Muslim. They may be Islamic militants, but that is unclear. They resent the corruption in their country and the Americans' part in it. Bashir appears to be the jailor and Dar is his assistant. Dar treats Nick with kindness while Bashir seems to hate him because he's American. Bashir is not very nice to Dar either, hitting him at one point. They don't have a lot of money. Dar says that 75 US dollars is a lot of money for him.

***What does the character of Nick want in this scene?*** Although this is never said, Nick surely wants to be set free alive. This is probably his motivation for the entire play. Is this scene he is trying to do whatever he has to do to stay alive.
***What is he trying to do with Dar?*** For example, at the beginning it seems he is trying to make friends with Dar. Even when Dar seems distracted, Nick keeps asking him questions and probing for information. He also compliments and congratulates Dar.
***What does he want from Bashir?*** With Bashir he uses a different strategy; Bashir clearly doesn't want to be his friend, so Nick tries to understand what Bashir is angry about and

to distance himself from it. Bashir is angry about Nick's boss; Nick says he isn't his boss and he wasn't the intended target of the kidnapping. Bashir says he's angry about the government's attempts to privatize water; Nick says he never wanted that and he was vocal about it from the start.

***Who is Dar?*** Dar appears to be the lowest-ranking member of the group that has kidnapped Nick. He takes orders from Bashir. He acts as Nick's 'keeper', filling his water pitcher, clipping his fingernails, etc. As long as he can here his superiors speaking in the background, he is very nervous. Once they leave (or one of them leaves), he relaxes.
***What does he want in this scene?*** It isn't very clear what Dar wants; we know more about his desires from what he doesn't do than from what he does. It seems clear that Dar is not as militant about this kidnapping as the others. He admits that he has lied to his superiors and followed Nick's advice. He also removes Nick's handcuffs when the others aren't around. He is also willing to lie to his superiors to help himself and his cousin make money. Perhaps what Dar wants is to get ahead in life and make more money for himself and his family. It would be understandable that in Pakistan, more money = more security, more health, more food, more opportunities.

***Who is Bashir?*** We don't know a lot about Bashir from the first seen. He speaks perfect working-class British English, so he must have lived in the UK or has British parents. In the group that has kidnapped Nick, Bashir is higher in rank than Dar, because Dar pays respect to him, even though Bashir is mean to him.
***What does he want in this scene?*** Bashir has a very good reason for coming into the room in this scene: he has learned that Nick is making friends with Dar (so much that Dar has lied to them about visiting his sick mother), so comes in and first acts as though he is very concerned about Nick's welfare (Is he comfortable? Does he have enough to drink?). Then he reveals that they know about Dar's 'betrayal'. He basically tells Nick that his attempt to make friends so that he can escape has failed. He then puts pressure on Nick, telling him that his employer, Citibank, is not going to pay ransom so he'd better find another way to prove his value or they will give him to a known terrorist group: Lashkar-e-Taibe.

*Act One: Scene One*

*A holding room. Spare. In disrepair. A table center stage. Two chairs. Along the far left wall, a small cot. And above it, a window near the ceiling. Covered in bars.*
*There's a door stage right.*
*Sitting at the table is NICK BRIGHT. Intelligent and vital.*
*Across from him is DAR—early 20s—a rural Pakistani who speaks English with a thick accent. He wears a Kalashnikov over his shoulder.*
*Dar is leaning over Nick's handcuffed hands. It may take us a moment to realize:*
*Dar is cutting Nick's fingernails.*
*We hear male voices offstage talking in a foreign language—voices to which Dar appears to be listening.*

NICK: How's your mother, Dar?

DAR: Good. Good.

NICK: That's good.

*Dar smiles, nervously.*
*Goes back to cutting.*

NICK: So she's not too sick?

DAR: What?

NICK: Your mother. She's not too sick?

DAR: She sick, Mr. Nick. She sick.
(*Beat*)
But she happy see her son.

NICK: That's good you went to see her, Dar.

*Dar forces a nervous smile, checking over his shoulder as… the voices diminish.*
*Dar stops—listening.*

*We hear the faint sound of a door closing. Then silence.*
*Dar gets up and goes to the door stage right—listening.*
*Then crosses to the window upstage center—listening.*
*In the distance, we hear a car engine start up. Then drive off.*
*Dar returns to the table. He rests the gun against the chair. He hands Nick the nail cutter as he pulls a key and undoes one of the cuffs.*

DAR: They go. You can cut. I know you don't like I cut for you.

NICK: Thank you, Dar.

*The shift is palpable. Dar is clearly more at ease.*

DAR: I not go my mother, Mr. Nick.
(*Explaining, off Nick's confusion*)
I not go see my mother. I had plan. I not tell you.

NICK: You had a plan?

DAR: Before I not tell you.
Now I tell you.
You remember my cousin, he have farm? Potato farm?

NICK: Changez, right?

DAR (*Smiling warmly*): You remember.

NICK: Of course I remember, Dar.

DAR: Ramzaam coming. Prices going up and up. Like I tell you.

NICK: Like they do every year.

DAR: Changez tell me good crop in Jhelum. Very good year for him.

NICK: I remember.

DAR: Changez is good man, Mr. Nick. People like him. He have respect.

NICK: Right.

DAR: I tell him what you tell me. Sell me all potato, all farmer he has friends. Give for me lowest price. I sell potato high price when Ramzaan come. I tell him, we all share money, together.

NICK: And?

DAR (*Nodding*): He talk to them. They don't sell potato to other. They give me.
(*Quietly*)
I tell here, I go my mother.
But I not go my mother.
I get trucks…

NICK: … Trucks?

DAR: Three trucks. Drive potato from Jhelum to Multan market, highest price.

NICK: How did you get trucks?

DAR: I pay.

NICK: With what?

DAR: Potato. I had so many! (*Laughs*)
After three days, potato gone.
(*Beat*)
Seven. Five.

NICK: Seven, five … what?

DAR: Dollar.

NICK: Seventy-five dollars.

DAR: I make.

NICK: You're kidding?

DAR: I change from rupee to dollar. Like you told me: Change all your saving to dollar, Dar. More… (*Speaking Punjabi*) …pucka.

NICK: Stable.

DAR (*Repeating*): Stable.

NICK: Dar, this is wonderful news.

DAR: A lot of money for me.
(*Beat*)
Thank you for give me help.

*Nick smiles, moved. They share a moment.*
*We hear sounds in the hall.*
*Nick quickly takes a seat.*
*Dar nervously takes the nail cutter, as Nick locks the cuff back onto his wrist.*
*Just as…*
*…we hear the lock of the stage right door opening.*
*Enter BASHIR—mid to late 20s—sinewy and intense. A human barracuda.*
*Both Dar and Nick visibly nervous by his sudden appearance. Dar stands. A sign of respect.*
*Bashir speaks English perfectly, with a working-class British accent.*

BASHIR: Mr. Bright?

NICK: Bashir.

BASHIR: Been a while.
Three weeks, innit?
(*Off Nick's silence*)
How've you been?

NICK: Fine.

BASHIR: No complaints?
Wouldn't want to be hearing anything about how you'd been mistreated or some such…
Want to make sure everything's up to your standards, then.

(*Nick's further silence*)
Dar taking good care of you?

NICK: Dar is fine.

BASHIR: He's a bit of an arse-licker, in't he?
But gets the job done sooner or later.
Whatever job that may be…
(*Patting Dar on the back*)
I mean he's a good lad.
Takes care of you.
Takes care of his mum.

*Bashir looks over and notices that a water pitcher on the table is empty.*

BASHIR: What's this? Pitcher's empty?
What if Mr. Bright needs a drink?
What's he gonna do then? Dar?

DAR: I'll get more water.

BASHIR: You gonna do that?

DAR: Yes.

BASHIR: When?

NICK: It's okay. I'm not thirsty.

BASHIR: Well, see, it's the principle now, isn't it?

DAR: You want me to do it now?

BASHIR: Yes, I think I do. I think I want you to do it now.

*As Dar approaches, Bashir suddenly strikes him. Viciously. And then again.*

BASHIR: Maybe you should go back to taking care of old ladies, you fucking dog!

NICK: It's okay. He didn't mean it. Leave him alone.

*Bashir turns on Nick. Just as vicious.*

BASHIR: Who asked you to open your fucking gob?!
Hmm?!
Did I?!!

*Nick looks down. Avoiding eye contact.*

BASHIR: That's right. Let's have a little respect around here.
(*Snickering*)
I'm guessing it's not going to come as a surprise to you then that our little pissant here did not visit his mum this week. Innit?

*Nick shrugs. Not making eye contact.*

BASHIR: You didn't know that?
Really?
You had no idea he was out gallivantin' through Multan flogging potatoes?
No idea at all?
Or how 'bout this: that he walked into a Citibank two days ago—
You heard of that, right?
Citibank?

NICK: You know I have.

BASHIR: That's right. I do. I may know a few things more, too. Get ready for it: Dar here walks into a Citibank the other day and opens an account that's got interest. Interest. Which he's been taught his whole life is against Allah's will?
You and your fucking interest eating up the world like cancer. You been teaching him about cancer, then?

NICK: I don't know what you're talking about.

BASHIR (*Screaming*): You're a liar!!

*Nick looks away.*
*Long silence.*

BASHIR: Citibank's gone cold—you better hope they're getting your ransom together…or else—

NICK: What?

BASHIR: Let's just say, might be something to be gained turning you into a political prisoner.

NICK: I have no importance.

BASHIR: Man working with Bilal Ansoor? On taking water away from the people?

NICK: That's not what—

BASHIR: The fuck it's not!

NICK: I've always thought the country's too unstable to privatize water.

BASHIR: You told Ansoor that?

NICK: A dozen times if I told him once. My boss knew how I felt.

BASHIR: Your boss, Carey Martin.

NICK. Yeah.

BASHIR: At Citibank.

NICK. Yes.

BASHIR: I think you're full of shit. (*Shifting*)
Wealthy American looting our country. Taking water from the people. Who knows? Might be something to be gained by giving you to Lashkar, innit?

NICK: Lashkar?

BASHIR: Blokes made the video of that journalist. Daniel Pearl.

NICK: Right.

BASHIR: Got his head cut off.

*Beat*.

BASHIR: You know your wife sent another one of those videos. Julie.

NICK: She did—

BASHIR: She keeps it together this time. I have to say, I was impressed. She's really a bit of a bird, isn't she? Cute kid, too. His hair all messed up, snot coming out his nose…

*Beat*.

NICK: I didn't do anything. I didn't do anything to you! It wasn't even supposed to be me in that goddamn car. You thought it was my boss. It wasn't. You don't want me.

BASHIR: A bit of bad luck—and not just yours, to be honest…

*Beat*.
*Bashir turns to Dar.*

BASHIR: (*in Punjabi*) Bastard!

*Bashir grabs Dar by the arm. And pulls him to his feet. Dragging him to the door…*
*Dar turns for a last lingering look at Nick before Bashir shoves him out.*
*Bashir follows.*
*Alone, Nick gets up. Pacing.*
*When he sees something on the ground.*
*Reaches down and picks it up.*
*The nail cutter.*
*Nick holds it in his fingers.*
*Lights Out.*

## Exercise: Personal Pronouns

A game to help actors locate the drama in a playwright's choice of vocabulary.
Difficulty: **easy-medium** (grammatical terms)

This is a simple game in which the text is broken up into its constituent parts and dramatized, in order to find detail in the language.

Arrange your class into groups of three. Everyone should have a copy of the scene printed on the last four pages. If they have not done the previous exercise, they should begin by acting the scene in the normal manner, to get the sense of the journey and establish the basics of the scene. This time, no one has to read the stage directions out loud, but they should be acted where appropriate.

Then ask the students to play the scene again, but this time every time the actors hit a *personal pronoun*—for the purposes of the game that means any mention of a person or character, absent or present (I, you, he, she, they, we, Mr Spencer, Celia, the cow)—they must emphasize it and make a gesture to place the emphasis on that person, e.g.

'Gallop apace, *you* fiery-footed steeds'.

They can point to them if they are in the scene, or offstage to wherever they might be if they are not, whilst letting the rest of the line go; not so it's inaudible, of course, but so the emphasis is on these specific words. Observe whether the characters use a similar number of personal pronouns, and look specifically at what they are and what that tells us about them. If a character mentions him or herself in almost every sentence (look at Bottom in *A Midsummer Night' Dream* as an example), it can tell us an awful lot about their personality.

Now, repeat the exercise but this time, instead of personal pronouns, the actors emphasize all the *adjectives* and *adverbs* (descriptive words). Any descriptive language counts, no matter where it is used in the sentence, e.g.

'Gallop *apace*, you *fiery-footed* steeds'.

And, of course, mark each adjective with a gesture. This is where the game becomes dramatic. Look at the sort of language each character uses. Are they simple and to the point? Or flowery and gushing? How do they use description—and why? Are they trying to seduce, or impress, or rebuff? Perhaps they don't use any descriptive language at all. And if so, why not?

Finally, repeat the exercise but this time the students should emphasize all the *verbs* (doing words), marking each with a gesture:

*'Gallop* apace, you fiery-footed steeds'.

Encourage them to be bold and move with the gestures to capture the physical drama in the text. Each actor should observe how active their character is, and whether their language is exaggerated or simplistic.

A character's words are their tools. No one talks without an objective, so each actor should consider what their character intends to achieve by exploring how they speak. Over the three rounds of this exercise, the active, descriptive and personal language of each character will have come into focus. By the end, each actor should have a much better idea of how their character's mind works. They should continue to observe the frequency and style of these verbal characteristics throughout the text as they work on each scene. It will tell them a great deal about their character's personality.

from *Drama Games for Rehearsals* by Jessica Swale

## Exercise: Interpreting a Theater Review

In groups have your students read the following review of The Invisible Hand from the New York Times and answer the questions at the end.

Difficulty: **hard** (authentic language)

# A Hostage Bets on the Market for Survival

**By Charles Isherwood**

Dec. 8, 2014

The beheadings of journalists and aid workers that have become a grisly aspect of the tumult in the Middle East hover like ugly ghosts behind "The Invisible Hand," the latest play by Ayad Akhtar, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning "Disgraced" can currently be seen on Broadway. Like that sizzling drama, Mr. Akhtar's shrewd play, which opened on Monday night at New York Theater Workshop, raises probing questions about the roots of the Islamic terrorism that has rattled the world for the last decade and more.

The victim under threat here, Nick Bright, played by Justin Kirk, is neither a journalist nor a worker for a charitable organization. He's a high-level American employee of Citibank in Pakistan, being held by militants. Mr. Akhtar's intelligent if talky drama is less a suspenseful tale of Nick's endangerment than an investigation of the manipulation of global financial markets — by good guys or bad guys — and the power of the almighty dollar to shape or shake societies around the world.

Nick has already been socked away in a nondescript cell as the play opens, kept handcuffed and under supervision. It's fairly benign supervision, at first. Dar, one of his lower-level captors, is seen clipping Nick's fingernails while they discuss the profitable financial advice Nick had given him: to stockpile potatoes, wait until the price climbs, then sell at a great profit. Oh, and don't forget to transfer the takings from the unreliable Pakistani rupee into the dollar.

This doesn't sit well with Nick's more brutal captor, Bashir, who accuses him of corrupting Dar with his advice. He threatens that if Citibank doesn't pay the $10 million ransom they are asking for Nick's release, he will hand Nick over to Lashkar-e-Jhangvi — the violent Islamic terrorist organization centered in Pakistan that was involved in the infamous killing of the journalist Daniel Pearl.

Bashir, who speaks with a marked British accent (he later reveals he's from Hounslow, a London suburb), explains that because Imam Saleem, the apparent leader of the organization that has kidnapped Nick, has just been officially labeled a terrorist, the United States government has forbidden negotiations for Nick's release.

But Nick convinces Bashir and Imam Saleem that he's still an asset worth keeping. Nick has access to about $3 million in a personal account in the Cayman Islands. If his hands are untied and he's given access to a computer — or at least allowed to tell Bashir what trades to make — he's convinced he can turn that into a few million more.

Mr. Akhtar's grasp of the world of high finance is certainly assured, and there's some subterranean humor in watching as Nick plays mentor and teacher to Bashir and Imam Saleem about the futures markets, and how one can make money by betting both for and against the

potential price of a company's stock. But the play at times comes to resemble an economics seminar, with a sideline in global politics. The suspense surrounding Nick's fate feels like a mere pretext for a lesson in the workings of the markets.

Nonetheless, Mr. Akhtar draws his characters with nuance. Imam Saleem, played with a grave dignity and a frisson of dry humor, claims that his only purpose in agreeing to hold Nick for ransom is a noble one: to raise much-needed money for the people's welfare. A former journalist himself, whose father was killed after one of his investigative pieces, he has seen how deeply compromised the country's government is, and how money marked for public projects always seems to end up in officials' pockets.

"We are prisoners of a corrupt country of our own making," he says, in a tone more mournful than enraged, and tells Nick, with a smidgen of humor, that, yes, he's basically kidnapped him so that he can "fix roads."

Bashir, his angry eyebrows speaking volumes at times, is a much darker figure, animated by true faith and a burning contempt for the way American power has been wielded in the Middle East. (The buzzing of drones can be faintly heard throughout the play.) But Bashir also possesses a boyish swagger that suggests a more complicated man under the brutal facade, and under Nick's tutelage he begins to take natural pleasure in the thrill of making money in the market. In one lighthearted moment, he and Nick bond over their childhood love of Archie comic books, although they differ as to who was hotter, Betty or Veronica.

Nick is wryly funny as he gradually reveals his own layers of cynicism about how the American dollar has become the world currency. While Nick's desire for freedom is never in doubt, he knows his best hope for surviving is by reverting to his ruthless instincts as a businessman rather than attempting to play upon his captors' sympathy.

Although the play has its flaws — the conclusion is abrupt — this chilly cell, bristling with talk about "puts" and "options" and currency conversion, comes to resemble the similarly anonymous offices of a big global investment bank, where titans of industry make millions in minutes, capitalizing on the rise and fall of governments the world over.

This correspondence is funny and disturbing. Mr. Akhtar's play, while perhaps not as sensationally entertaining as "Disgraced," makes a forceful point about the seemingly ineradicable terrorism roiling the Middle East. Inspired though it may be by religious ideology, it is necessarily fueled, like most other movements that drive cultural change, by the brute power of money.

Questions

Group #1: The reviewer is Charles Isherwood. What are his main criticisms and praise of the play "The Invisible Hand". Does he like the play and/or the production?

Group #2: Who are the four characters in the play and what do they want? (This requires a little guessing because it isn't always stated clearly.)

## Exercise: Fill in the Gap

Have your students fill in the missing words from the choices given at the top. On the following page is an easier version of the exercise with hints about the meanings of the missing words.

Difficulty: **medium**

Fill in the gaps with the words below. All of the words are used and all are only used once.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ALLAH | FLOGGING | INTEREST | RANSOM |
| BIRD | GALLIVANTING | MISTREATED | RUPEE |
| CANCER | GOB | PRIVATIZE | SNOT |
| COMPLAINTS | IMPRESSED | RAMZAAM | UNSTABLE |

DAR: _____ coming. Prices going up and up. Like I tell you.

DAR: I change from _____ to dollar. Like you told me: Change all your saving to dollar, Dar. More… (*Speaking Punjabi*) …pucka.

BASHIR: No _____? Wouldn't want to be hearing anything about how you'd been _____ or some such… Want to make sure everything's up to your standards, then.

BASHIR: Who asked you to open your fucking _____?! Hmm?! Did I?!!

BASHIR: You didn't know that? Really? You had no idea he was out _____ through Multan _____ potatoes? No idea at all?

BASHIR: I may know a few things more, too. Get ready for it: Dar here walks into a Citibank the other day and opens an account that's got _____. Which he's been taught his whole life is against _____'s will? You and your fucking xxxxxxxx eating up the world like _____. You been teaching him about xxxxxx, then?

BASHIR: Citibank's gone cold—you better hope they're getting your _____ together…or else—

NICK: I've always thought the country's too _____ to _____ water.

BASHIR: She keeps it together this time. I have to say, I was _____. She's really a bit of a _____, isn't she? Cute kid, too. His hair all messed up, _____ coming out his nose…

VERSION WITH HINTS

Fill in the gaps with the words below. All of the words are used and all are only used once.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ALLAH | FLOGGING | INTEREST | RANSOM |
| BIRD | GALLIVANTING | MISTREATED | RUPEE |
| CANCER | GOB | PRIVATIZE | SNOT |
| COMPLAINTS | IMPRESSED | RAMZAAM | UNSTABLE |

DAR: _____ [*Muslim holiday*] coming. Prices going up and up. Like I tell you.

DAR: I change from _____ [*currency in Pakistan and India*] to dollar. Like you told me: Change all your saving to dollar, Dar. More… (*Speaking Punjabi*) …pucka.

BASHIR: No _____ [*objection, what you do when you're unhappy about situation*]? Wouldn't want to be hearing anything about how you'd been _____ [*abused, handled poorly*] or some such… Want to make sure everything's up to your standards, then.

BASHIR: Who asked you to open your fucking _____ [*mouth*]?! Hmm?! Did I?!!

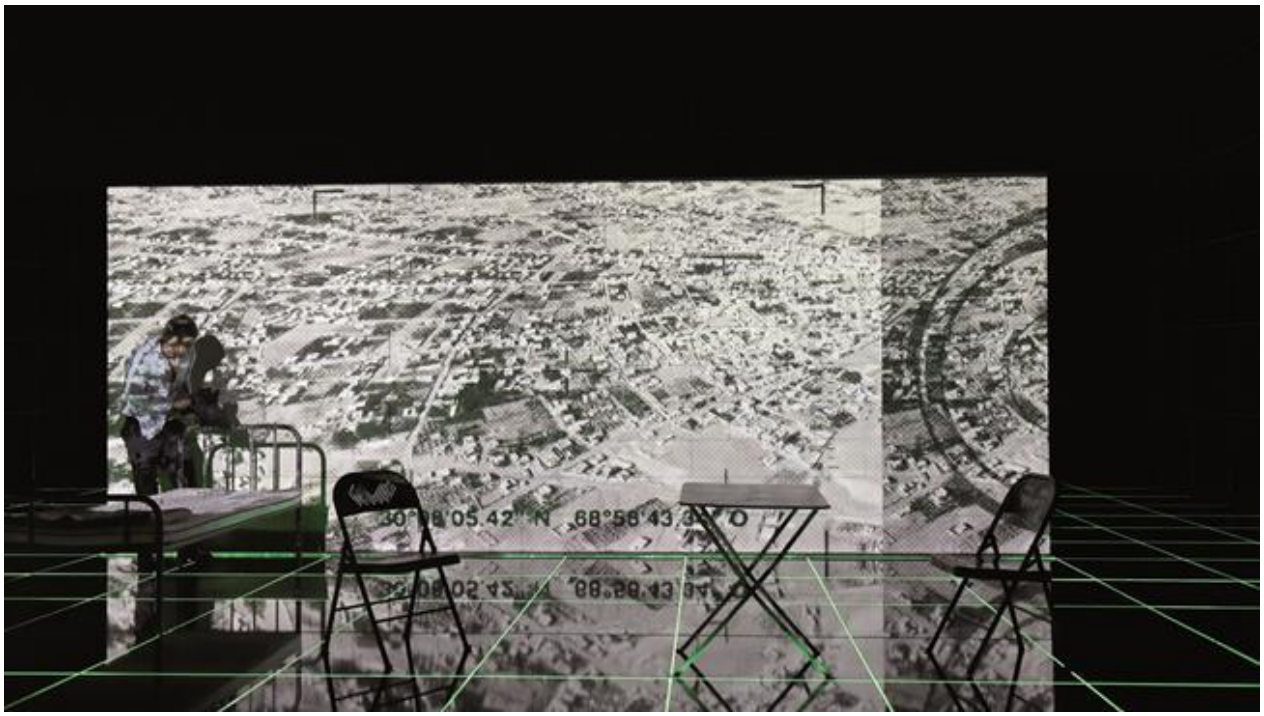
BASHIR: You didn't know that? Really? You had no idea he was out _____ [*wandering, walking*] through Multan _____ [*selling, hawking*] potatoes? No idea at all?

BASHIR: I may know a few things more, too. Get ready for it: Dar here walks into a Citibank the other day and opens an account that's got _____ [*money you earn on savings*]. Which he's been taught his whole life is against _____'s [*Muslim name for God*] will? You and your fucking xxxxxxxx eating up the world like _____ [*dangerous disease*]. You been teaching him about xxxxxx, then?

BASHIR: Citibank's gone cold—you better hope they're getting your _____ [*money to save someone who's kidnapped*] together…or else—

NICK: I've always thought the country's too _____ [*volatile, shaky*] to _____ [*change from governmental control*] water.

BASHIR: She keeps it together this time. I have to say, I was _____ [*positively surprised*]. She's really a bit of a _____ [*good-looking female*], isn't she? Cute kid, too. His hair all messed up, _____ [*mucus*] coming out his nose…



**Answers to Fill in the Gap**

Fill in the gaps with the words below. All of the words are used and all are only used once.

DAR: RAMZAAM coming. Prices going up and up. Like I tell you.

DAR: I change from rupee to dollar. Like you told me: Change all your saving to dollar, Dar. More… (*Speaking Punjabi*) …pucka.

BASHIR: No complaints? Wouldn't want to be hearing anything about how you'd been mistreated or some such… Want to make sure everything's up to your standards, then.

BASHIR: Who asked you to open your fucking gob?! Hmm?! Did I?!!

BASHIR: You didn't know that? Really? You had no idea he was out gallivanting through Multan flogging potatoes? No idea at all?

BASHIR: I may know a few things more, too. Get ready for it: Dar here walks into a Citibank the other day and opens an account that's got interest. Which he's been taught his whole life is against Allah's will? You and your fucking xxxxxxxx eating up the world like cancer. You been teaching him about xxxxxx, then?

BASHIR: Citibank's gone cold—you better hope they're getting your ransom together…or else—

NICK: I've always thought the country's too unstable to privatize water.

BASHIR: She keeps it together this time. I have to say, I was impressed. She's really a bit of a bird, isn't she? Cute kid, too. His hair all messed up, snot coming out his nose…

## Exercise: Writing your own theatre review

Have your students read the following instructions and write their own review of The Invisible Hand at the English Theatre Frankfurt. Submit the reviews to our Education department at education@english-theatre.de for a chance to have their reviews recognized and shared.

Difficulty: **medium**

### How to Write Your Own Theater Review

It's not as hard as you might think. Just keep the following ideas in mind:

**Purpose**

The purpose of a theatre review is two-fold:
(1) to give the reader a sense of the play and
(2) to let them know what you liked or didn't like about the production.

**Structure**

Follow this clear structure to write your first theatre review (the basic examples are from *Jekyll & Hyde*):

**Paragraph 1** Introduce the production: What did you see? Where did you see it?

*Last Thursday I saw Jekyll & Hyde at the English Theatre Frankfurt. It's a musical thriller with music by Frank Wildhorn and a book and song lyrics by Leslie Bricusse, who has written songs for many famous movies. The production has a small cast of very powerful singers and talented musicians.*

**Paragraph 2** Give a short summary of the plot: What happens when or how?

*The story is based on the novel "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson. It's about a scientist who uses chemistry to separate the "evil" and the "good" within humankind. The evil side takes control of him and destroys him. It takes place in London during the Victorian era, when people were focused more on appearing respectable than actually behaving that way. It's a warning to us that, if we do not pay more attention to our real feelings, we could allow darkness to grow within us until it takes control. That's very relevant today when many of us use social media to create a false image of our lives as happy, lucky, beautiful people and do not accept that sometimes we are sad or angry, unlucky and unattractive.*

**Paragraph 3** Discuss the acting and directing: How were the performances?

*First I have to say that the cast is full of very strong singers. I was especially impressed by John Addison in the lead roles of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Matt Bond as Spyder and Lord Savage. The two female leads, Clodagh Long and Samantha Dorsey, sounded best when they were singing duets with the Dr. Jekyll. The action was sexy and moved quickly but it was sometimes funny when it should have been serious. It was an odd choice to have the murdered priest walk back onstage and lie down after the interval.*

**Paragraph 4** What did you think of the lighting, costumes, set, sound, music?

*The set was very impressive. It made Dr. Jekyll look like he was an experiment of all the others, who looked down onto him. The lighting was good for setting the right mood: dark, erotic, scary. There's a good lighting effect when Hyde takes control, but I won't give it away. The costumes made it clear who was part of the upper class and the lower class and this was important information to the story.*

**Paragraph 5** Summarize your overall impression of the experience, maybe giving it a star rating.

*This show does not have any songs that get stuck in your head like some shows (Hamilton, Tanz der Vampire). However, the atmosphere is good, the story moves along quickly and the performers are all very strong singers. I would therefore recommend the show and give it three stars out of five.*
(★★★ - -)

Now you've read a complete sample review. After you see *The Invisible Hand*, write your own review of the show. But don't wait too long; it's much easier to do when the impressions are all fresh in your minds!

*For your information… (not an exercise)*

**'A sickness in this country': Pulitzer winner Ayad Akhtar on politics, Muslim life in the West, capitalism's cruelties**, by Jeffrey Fleishman, from the *Los Angeles Times*, Jun 15, 2016

*Pulitzer-prize-winning playwright Ayad Akhtar. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)*

The nation is in a strange and angry state, a bruising time of rising populism, anti-immigrant fervor and a searing gap between the rich and everyone else. The drama of real life seems to have eclipsed the potency of art unless you're Ayad Akhtar, a playwright whose work speaks to the brokenness and rage that spring from fresh demons and troubling headlines.

Akhtar, a Pakistani American who grew up outside Milwaukee, sees a land in distress: terror, right-wing extremism, gun violence, consuming capitalism and a backlash against traditional politics that have given rise to Donald Trump, a showman and presumptive Republican presidential nominee who epitomizes the collision of social media, celebrity and spectacle.

"There's a sickness in this country," Akhtar said in the half-lit lobby at the Mark Taper Forum, days before Sunday's carnage in a gay nightclub in Orlando that left the lone gunman and 49 victims dead. "I'm not interested in traditionally what Western-style art has embraced as its higher embodiment: This refinement of the self and the illumination of the mysteries of the human interior. I'm much more preoccupied with what's happening out in the world." He paused and added: "That's the ground where the audience is right now."

Between the body counts of mass shootings and the nastiness of our public debate, America at times resembles a coast-to-coast reality show. To many, we have become a map of vigil candles and tears, a land of suspicion and challenged identities.

Akhtar's Pulitzer-Prize winning play, "Disgraced," about a Pakistani American lawyer tormented by the pressures of the Muslim world and the West, is in previews and opens at the Taper on Sunday. Set in post-9/11 New York, the story of Amir Kapoor is a combustible meditation on identity and reinvention. It echoes with the immigrant dilemma: Can we cut away the kernel of who we are to be

reborn as someone else in a distant place? And at what cost, especially after terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino and Orlando have rekindled mistrust for many over citizens and immigrants of Muslim heritage.

The American immigrant tale is "rupture from the old world and renewal of the self in the new world," said Akhtar. "We celebrate the renewal. We fail to mourn the rupture. This failure speaks to the great loneliness of American life." In the play, an enraged Amir, who turns a dinner party into a battlefield, "is caught in this mournful place" of not reconciling what he has broken with while not feeling accepted by the dream he has embraced.

*A dress rehearsal for "Disgraced" at the Mark Taper Forum, with cast members, left to right, J Anthony Crane (Isaac), Hari Dillon (Amir), Emily Swallow (Emily) and Karen Pittman (Jory). (Ivan Kashinsky / For The Times)*

The son of doctors, Akhtar, who has described himself as religious but nondenominational, has explored not only the wider Muslim immigrant themes depicted in "Disgraced" but also the tension between young and older generations over the meaning of Islam. His novel "American Dervish" is a lesson in faith and assimilation, similar to his play "The Who & the What," about a daughter's disagreement with her conservative father over the prophet Muhammad and women in Islam.

These days Akhtar, 45, who lived for a while in Italy and France working as an assistant director, is intrigued by globalization, extremism and the way money moves. In August, the La Jolla Playhouse will premiere his new work "Junk: The Golden Age of Debt," a treatise on debt financing, deal-making and how a "rapacious accumulation of wealth" has dominated American life since the 1980s. His play "The Invisible Hand," which was recently staged in London, is a study of Islamic radicalism and the force and shadowy designs of global financial markets.

Writing in the New York Times, critic Charles Isherwood said of "The Invisible Hand": "Mr. Akhtar's play, while perhaps not as sensationally entertaining as 'Disgraced,' makes a forceful point about the seemingly ineradicable terrorism roiling the Middle East. Inspired though it may be by religious ideology, it is necessarily fueled, like most other movements that drive cultural change, by the brute power of money."

Capitalism and its insinuations are "certainly fueling my work," he said. "America is at a crossroads not because of its inability to digest immigrants. There's something else afoot. … Nobody can subsist in a country that has legislated and has idealized the accumulation of personal wealth. And if anybody tries to have a conversation about anything that reeks in any way of possibly rethinking this, they're tagged socialists or communists."

Akhtar would get along well with Oliver Stone, Neil Young and Don DeLillo. And, perhaps, Bernie Sanders. Dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt, the playwright was more animated and unabashed than he was in an interview two years ago. The gears that spin the world have sparked a creative need to explore the perniciousness beneath. In conversation, his scenarios unfolded like thrillers recounted by a linguistically clever intelligence operative fretting over the seething tenor of politics and the trappings of social media that have turned us into mean-spirited voyeurs with ever-shrinking attention spans.

He apologized for being "so intense," but like many he is at once fascinated and repelled by what clamors through 24-hour news cycles. He settled back into his seat in the lobby, which had the air of ghosts and spilled gin. He mentioned that America never really mourned after 9/11; instead it veered into two wars, a recession and electing its first black president. Political divisions and racism persist. He said members of his family "won't leave the house for days" after a terrorist attack for fear of reprisals. Obama's presidency, he said, "has outed the reality of what was under the surface."

With its mastery of tweets and sound bites, the Trump campaign has blurred the lines between politics and entertainment. This is fascinating terrain for Akhtar.

"We have these cyclical eruptions of irrationality in our national history," he said. "Trump is a new embodiment of an eternal American phenomenon. ... Isaac Asimov said perhaps the greatest thing about America and the deep strain of anti-intellectualism in American life: 'My ignorance is as good as your knowledge.'"

What passes for meaningful commentary "is simply the expression of somebody's interiority," he said. "People feel their authentic self is somehow articulated through their expression of resentment and anger."

Anger over displacement and conflicting identities is palpable in "Disgraced." The play is a variation on Akhtar's work to examine, much like James Baldwin did for African Americans, the experiences, betrayals and hopes of Muslim immigrants. He does not pretend to be the voice of such a diverse group – some conservative Muslims have criticized him for negative characterizations – but he is shrewd and compassionate and understands the incendiary power of language both on- and offstage.

"I wrote the play in 2010 and I didn't think that that kind of degradation of rhetoric could exist anywhere but the theater," he said. "But now we're living in a world where what's happening on stage is not all that controversial. It's happening everywhere, all the time, about shifts in American life."

## The subjectivity of good: Ayad Ahktar's The Invisible Hand
## by Kevin Armento in Interviews, Dec 19, 2014

Playwrights Kevin Armento and Jerry Lieblich recently saw Disgraced on Broadway together and totally disagreed about it. So last weekend they went out for a second helping of Pulitzer Prize-winner Ayad Ahktar, seeing his new play The Invisible Hand at New York Theatre Workshop and then talking about it at a coffee shop.

Here's some plot info on the show, but basically it's about an American investor named Nick (Justin Kirk) who's held for ransom in Pakistan by Islamic extremists, led by Bashir (Usman Ally). Nick has to earn his own ransom by teaching Bashir the basics of capitalist trading, and it goes from there.

This is an edited and pretty majorly cut-down transcript of their conversation.

Kevin: Did you feel like the moments of really heady conversation — did that take you out of it at all? Or did it kind of drift in and out enough…?

Jerry: I had a weird experience. I kind of expected it to, I went in being like, I'm going to hear a lot of stuff about economics and I'm going to think it's stupid.

K: Adam Smith, and —

J: Yeah. And actually, those were my favorite moments of the play. Cause I was like, oh you've really done your homework. And there's something really exciting about getting to hear that stuff.

K: Yeah. The scenes with Nick and Bashir in the first half – I had this weird experience of like, am I watching The Social Network or Moneyball right now? It had a very clear, conceptual drive that felt like a movie. But then it would break off into these long, I agree, very engaging sections about theory — I was surprised as well.

J: Yeah, and there's stakes there. Here's what I'm trying to figure out: you have the narrative stakes, which are so high, and the conceptual stakes, which are so high, but I'm trying to figure out how they actually talked to each other. Like this idea of the American being captive in Pakistan, like captive to this terrorist organization…

K: Yeah they did a couple things that kind of went against the grain on that that I enjoyed. Some of it was the writing, and some of it was Justin Kirk. There was that moment where Bashir is playing him video of his wife, and they avoided all the things I've always seen in a version of that scene. Which is, the prisoner having some kind of freak-out, or pleading, or weeping, or lying desperately, but he sat there and they were like very casually talking about his wife. And I was really surprised by a couple moments like that, that felt truer to what must be monotonous and mundane components of a prisoner being held captive like that.

J: I guess I'm trying to see the synthesis between like, the narrative situation, which is "I have to win my ransom money," and what it's talking about, about like global markets. And it seems like the really unsympathetic way to talk about that is like, the play has put us in a prison where we can't do anything but think about the effects of the global market. And I feel like there must be something else there that we can find. But I'm not sure what it is.

K: I think the economics of terrorism is something I never hear talked about. I know very little about it, so I don't have much to say about it – but we know it factors into things like the Arab Spring, things like the cyclical nature of the War on Terror that we've seen for over a decade. And it was interesting and pleasurable for me to hear those specific two characters talking about economic theory, because it felt put

through a prism of, why are we fighting each other for over a decade, and blowing each other up?

J: And I guess that's why I loved that first scene in act two so much, is it felt like that was when we really got to the juice of it. And that was the kind of purest dialectic of the play, where Justin Kirk was saying the Bretton Woods thing, of like America anchoring the dollar as the global currency essentially, was kind of — somebody had to do it, and power's got to be somewhere.

K: Why do you think they talked about that so much, and World War Two so much?

J: I think they wanted to trace the history, or like how did we get to this point where the dollar is king. And I thought what he said was really interesting. There was that line, something like, power's gotta be concentrated somewhere, so you just have to hope it's in the hands of somebody who uses it well. Which I guess, now that I'm saying that, is what happens in the play. Bashir ends up with all the money at the end, and says we're going to do something good with this.

K: That was a great moment.

J: Yeah.

K: That was maybe my favorite moment. There were laughs at that moment.

J: (laughter) But like of course, who says we're going to do so much evil with all this money we just got?

K: Well but it's the subjectivity of good, right? I mean that's a very broad thing to say, but this notion that we're sitting in a lower Manhattan theatre hearing an essentially terrorist character, an American just made him a shit ton of money, and he says we're going to do a lot of good with this.

J: So I wonder if this is the connection, then, to draw with that. That thing about, you hope the power ends up in good hands, the play is basically saying power equals money, so you hope the money ends up in good hands. And so then Bashir ends up in that position of America after World War Two basically, of like, I'm kind of the only guy standing, the earlier guy was a piece of shit. I got rid of him, I have all the money now. I'm going to do the right thing with it, and like immediately, the right thing is the guy comes in covered in bullets, and like we hear gunfire everywhere.

K: Yeah, and that's what it felt to me like it was nodding to. It's hard to extrapolate that to any kind of political meaning. I'm not sure that we're meant to. It feels so much more thematic — I guess what I'm saying is it feels so outside any specifics of the current War on Terror, or whatever you want to call it.

J: Sure. I think that doesn't speak so much to the War on Terror as it does like, American hegemony. And it's almost, maybe this is a weird reading of the play, but the whole thing could be looked at as an explanation and almost apology for American hegemony. And like basically probelmatizing it, and saying like, there kind of was no other way, it's going to end up somewhere, and if America ended up with all the money and the power, like you're fucked if you're in that situation. You can't do it right. So we kind of get to see that happen on a smaller scale.

K: It's funny that we're talking so much about that when the American character is sort of on paper the protagonist, but not at all the protagonist. Bashir's the protagonist, Bashir goes through by far —

J: He's the only one who does stuff.

K: And that was interesting to me because – I mean he's passive because he's a prisoner – but the most passive character in a way is this American guy whose eyes we're seeing

the show through, and he kind of just does his work. And I was kind of surprised he never defected. There was that kind of – I think weak – moment of him running away but not really running away, cause two seconds into act two it's cleared up.

J: He's still there!

K: Ok, that big dramatic action meant nothing.

J: Remember when you caught me three weeks ago?

K: Yeah. It made a really cool end of act one, but then it's like two minutes into act two it's all over. But besides that, he doesn't defect at all. It's not about the American like, outsmarting the terrorist and getting out of there —

J: He's not John Wayne.

K: Yeah. It's about the terrorist rising up and becoming a terrorist.

J: And really becoming American. Saying like, I'm going to win by —

K: Cherry-picking American values…

J: Totally.

K: …and infusing it with his ideology.

J: For sure. Which I guess is like a really — I don't know, it seems like then what it's saying is so grim, about power. It seems like what it's saying is like terrorists who are so distinctly anti-American are doomed to fall into the exact same traps that they hate about America. Bashir says interest is evil, but then builds this empire on shorting the Rupee. Which I guess is to say that an anti-American sentiment is really an anti-power sentiment. You have the power and I don't. Which I guess a really unsympathetic way of reading that is that it's an extremely conservative pro-American-hegemony play.

K: (laughter) That might be a good time to segue into thematic exploration. We saw Disgraced together. We've now seen this together. One of my favorite sections in Disgraced is a line that invokes and involves 9/11, and one of my favorite lines in this play was a section that invoked 9/11, where the Imam sort of explodes on the American character and says, you guys lost three thousand people in one day and you've had to kill hundreds of thousands in the following ten years. And sort of says, you couldn't just get over it.

J: Right. I think what was exciting about it – and I think this is what you were saying was exciting about Disgraced – was it's phrased as, somebody kills three thousand of your people and you can kill thousands of our people. And that it's in that voice. That the Pakistani is the first person there, there's something so exciting about that perspective.

K: Agreed, agreed.

J: Which I think is what's exciting about Ayad Akhtar.

K: I think one of the things that's exciting to me – I'll just say thematically for this play – is I feel like since 9/11, collectively we've learned so little about why people want to kill us. And I feel like individually we probably care, but collectively we haven't spent nearly as much time investigating why this specific region of the world so badly wants us to fail, and has spent much more time just trying to stop them from doing it.

J: Yes.

K: And that's always kind of bewildered me a little bit.

J: I wonder how much of that — You know, all of the ideology after 9/11 was Bush's, like…they're evil.

K: They hate our freedom.

J: Right.

K: I guess that's why I say I'm so excited to see economics be talked about. Things that are highly intellectual, and political, and go back centuries, and I think we have a tendency because they wear the clothes they do, and live in the places they live, that they are unsophisticated. They being members of al Qaeda, members of ISIL.

J: Somehow backwards, they hate our culture.

K: Primitive.

J: Which I mean like, our culture's pretty abhorrent…to me.

K: Right. But as though they haven't studied Adam Smith, or Keynes, or aren't aspiring to political ideals that are sophisticated, that are interesting. We do ourselves a strategic disservice by belittling them, I think.

J: So after we saw Disgraced, one thing I was thinking about a lot is this concept of the play of ideas. And Sarah Ruhl, again she shows up tonight, one of her essays is about plays of ideas. And she argues in like two pages, beautifully, that we confuse that term, that we say the play of ideas is a play where people are saying a lot of ideas, a play where people give long speeches about economics. Whereas she says a play of ideas is one in which the form makes you think about something.

I'm inclined to agree with her, but, given what The Invisible Hand was, and what Disgraced was, I was trying to think – what is that form?

And, he says pretentiously, that made me think a lot about Plato, and the Socratic dialogues as this dialectic form where you literally make different people speak different sides of an issue. And there's something really exciting about that.

And I guess the theater that I write is so different than that, so I'm always going to be biased against it. But I'm interested in it's function and it's value. Because it is so nice to get to hear hear smart people talk about smart stuff. It's really great.

K: Doesn't it seem like what makes idea plays being good such a rarity that seems to me like that it's so difficult to maintain intellectual honesty on multiple sides of an idea or of an issue?

J: Uh huh.

K: And I feel like the idea plays that drive me nuts are probably like 90% of them, like I'm sure for you, but I feel like most of the time that's because I don't feel like an idea is being explored so much as an idea is being explained.

J: Yeah. And it's like the writer gives the dialectic but one side is clearly the straw man, it's like you know what they think but they try to make it seem like they've problematized it.

K: Yeah. That kind of reminds me of that play Tea Party [a pretty remarkable, very political play by Gordon Dalquist], that opening monologue that sort of breaks down that whole idea. If I remember right that was specifically about liberal theater trying to talk about politics.

J: Right and the whole thing is like – making it about the people in it is fucked up, because that subsumes the politics into individual psychology, which is lame. I'm thinking a lot about this reading of Alex Borinsky's that I saw today [Brief Chronicle Books 6-9, which was freaking amazing.], which was so good, you guys!

[Laughter]

J: Where at some point two thirds through the play they say something along the lines of "don't let the increased complexity of what's going on here make us narrow our

scope. Make it broaden our scope." And instead, this play which been getting really juicy about character's relationships to each other, for a while talks about sea turtles. And basically it reminds you that there are other living things in this earth that we're fucking up by being here, and your compassion needs to extend to those too, and it needs to extend to the world at large.

The idea play that's only about these individual people ends up being just about those people, and the worst version of that is you end up leaving the theater thinking "wow, I saw a really smart play, because the people were smart." But really I wasn't thinking about those things, I was thinking about, like "oh he cheated on her!"

K: Tell me if you disagree, but I almost feel like we're talking about these two main characters, Nick and Bashir, as if they are stand-ins for their respective countries, especially in those moments of discourse. And to me that's a kind of nice thing to think about, especially because I right now I'm thinking about what a complacent hostage Nick is. He almost sort of shrugs and says "take my money." And if I think of him as America as a country it's a sort of passing off of the power almost.

J: Right he's sort of morally cynical from the start.

K: Yes. Yes.

J: Or at least, he's not immoral, he's amoral. He's like "I don't care. You have me. I need to be saved. Of course I'll help you."

K: "I will do what it takes. Take all the money."

And I don't know what Ayad Akhtar was thinking about when he was writing the play, but we are doing nothing but bleeding billions of dollars into supplying arms into Syria, supplying arms into – pick your place.

J: Right, and there's that moment in the play where he talks about the Taliban coming to Ronald Reagan.

K: That's exactly right. For thirty years we've been doing it and continue to do it. And it sort of feels about right, that this isn't a hostage who's desperately fighting to win this thing.

J: Which is the image we want to have of ourselves.

K: Exactly. And always do have of ourselves.

Did you ever see or read the Caryl Churchill play Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?

J: No.

K: She literally – it's a two hander and it's literally a play where one character is named Sam like Uncle Sam and the other one is Jack like Union Jack. And she's just like the most doesn't give a fuck, because they're literally representative of a country and culture or whatever, just talking through ideas. And The Invisible Hand felt not nearly as explicit as that, but it certainly didn't feel like a specific hostage with a specific personal motivation and specific wife and family. It felt much more a stand-in to talk about these ideas.

J: It felt actually like a nice middle ground. There's narrative pull keeping me interested, but also it's not like I knew that much about these people. We didn't end up doing that thing about only caring about who's sleeping with who instead of the politics.

K: Right. We learn just about nothing about the characters as the play goes on, except very little bits of backstory.

J: But also it's not like they feel totally empty, because I cared about what was happening.

K: Right.

J: Because the narrative thrust was so strong.

That seems like a very hard tight-rope act. I think it's really easy to dismiss a play that looks like The Invisible Hand, but I imagine it's incredibly difficult to write.

K: I think especially if you're, frankly, a writer named Ayad Akhtar writing about these subjects, I bet it's especially hard.

J: Sure.

[Beat.]

J: I don't know about you, but I was disappointed that we had a white guy as our protagonist.

K: I was too.

J: I was like, why do I need this white American guy here to be my in on this world?

K: Mmhmm. To me it was a play about a Pakistani ideologue rising up to an extremist, but through the eyes of a passive American hostage.

J: And at the end Bashir [the Pakistani] says [to Nick] "The blood is not on your hands." But the blood is totally on his hands by his lack of moral center that – well maybe we couldn't expect anybody to have.

K: Well that's a great question, isn't it.

J: Is that even possible?

K: Yeah.

J: But I mean it's like, he's sort of indicting American's complicity in the rise of these kinds of terrorist organizations while also saying like "well what the fuck else would you do?"

[The two writers take a long, thoughtful pause. "Shake It Off' plays loudly, perhaps auspiciously in the background.]

K: Why do you think Ayad Akhtar is sort of the playwright du jour right now?

J: I think we really want a Muslim-American voice. Is he Muslim? I don't actually know.

K: He's of Pakistani descent. I think he was raised Muslim, I don't actually know if he is practicing.

J: Well I think we're really hungry, and I say "we" as especially the sliver of creative class who lives in New York who have generally left-leaning political views, to really hear from the people who are so often villainized in our world right now. And to hear from that really complicated position he's in of being of Pakistani descent but living in America. That seems like a really necessary voice. And it's exciting, and it makes me feel good that that voice is being recognized. I mean, that's really cool.

K: It is.

J: In a beautiful world there'd be a lot of those voices.

K: Yeah.

J: And hopefully there are. I don't know, why do you think?

K: I think that's probably right. I think this is a minor point, but I think he has a really smart sense of how much humor to put in his plays – not in a way that seems like anticipating his audience, but in a way that suggest he's probably had to live his whole life having an acute sense of how much humor to inject around white people or white audiences. There's a sort of ice-breaking thing that it feels like to me, that allows him to go into such depths. I think audiences are willing to go there, but I think there's a certain charm that happens, for New Yorker audiences in two different

shows that I've seen in New York, to hear pretty fire-throwing lines about 9/11 and to not hear hisses. I feel like any other time I hear 9/11 mentioned on stage I hear hisses. In any context. In any show.

J: Yeah.

K: And in a way that doesn't compromise any of the shit that he's writing. I think this is why I admire him so much. It's not like he's playing charming to the New York theater crowd to win them over. It seems more like he is smartly seducing an audience that doesn't usually deal with these topics, and then getting them to stare right into the face of these topics in their darkest colors and loudest voices. And then it becomes shocking to hear it and to see it, but you don't feel like you've been slapped in the face with it.

J: Right. Which I think also in this play, like, take away all of the ideas of it, and it's still a really tense thriller!

K: Yes.

J: He has chops. Chops coming out of his – everything.

K: Totally. Totally. And the reason I say humor specifically is that I remember not that long ago when, again, Caryl Churchill wrote that play…

J: Seven Jewish Children

K: About then the most recent war in Gaza. And again – huge controversy, major problems, shut it down, didn't even play. And that was coming off the heels of My Name is Rachel Corrie which wasn't allowed to have a performance here. And neither of those were from an Arab writer, or a Muslim.

J: I think people are a little bit more like – "I trust your opinion about this!"

K: Yes.

J: Whether that's fair or not.

K: Yes. I mean, how weird did it feel to see them on stage talking about how that noise outside is drones. I've never heard or seen a setting where that can even possibly be happening.

J: Yes. And that feels very vital.

K: Yes. That that is just a part of daily life to hear drones behind you.

There's a really cute dog behind you right now.

[Pause for cute dog petting.]

J: I guess this makes me wonder about – something I've been wondering a lot about myself – is the responsibility of being a political voice. And I say that partly because I know that's something I really fail at in my writing, in that I don't engage with it. And partly that's because it seems so terrifying to me, and I feel like there must be people better equipped to talk about these things than me.

So there's a part of me that feels bad for Ayad Akhtar, in that there's so much weight if you're the guy who is that guy, you have to be writing plays like this. There's such a responsibility there.

K: There's such a difference in British theater, where, to me there's sort of an expectation for your writing to have some political or socially conscious component.

J: Right. Which I'm not sure that's always the function of art.

K: Of course not.

J: But, and maybe this is just me pointing to something of my own white privilege, of having the luxury to choose what I write about, in a way.

K: I would love to see more American political theater, specifically ultra-current, sparkling political drama. Since we're in this niche art form, we should use the things that make it unique, and to me one of those things is immediacy, that we can write and put up a play so quickly to engage a topic or idea or person that's divisive or interesting or controversial. And I think that's something Ayad Akhtar does that I'd like to see more of, playing on that immediacy of theater and using it as it can be used.

J: One thing that prevents me from writing political stuff is that, like I said, I don't feel equipped to do it. And there's a part of me that's often like "Playwrights, let's leave talking about politics to political scientists and historians and stuff, because they do this."

K: I think that's totally valid.

J: Absolutely. But then you look at something like Serial, which I think part of its success is that Sarah Koenig is totally not a detective. So it's like she kind of gives us this everyman's view of the justice system – "I will work really hard to understand this."

K: There's something so accessible about that.

J: Absolutely. And also, to pull this back to something you were saying earlier about the really bad political plays where it feels like they're telling us something rather than exploring something, I wish – and this is a call maybe to myself or maybe to all writers – to be ok with not understanding something.

K: Or using it as an aspect.

J: Absolutely. And now I'm quoting Alex Borinsky and his beautiful play once again, this is something he said after the reading, that he tries to find something that confuses him and confuses his characters and lets it be confusing to both of them. It's not like he tries to say "here's the confusing thing, let me figure it out and write about it." It's more like "let me confuse myself even more and just articulate that confusion." Which seems very doable in a political context – that's very human.

K: When I was 18 I saw I Am My Own Wife. And I had just wanted to write theater, and the play just bowled me over – I had never seen anything like that. And I got in touch with Doug Wright, I wrote him an e-mail, and just asked something like "do you have any advice for a young playwright" or whatever. And one of the things he said was "whatever you do, don't write what you know. Write what terrifies you, what vexes you, what perplexes you. That'll get you to places you never thought you'd be able to get to."

And I actually totally agree with what you were saying before – art does not have to be political. Some of the very best work I've seen is someone tapping into something that is very familiar to them and trying to articulate the truth of it. But I do think there is tremendous value in trying to dig into areas that we are terrified of or totally angry or confused about, or like you were saying you feel like you are not the person who should write it – does that not make it more interesting or more accessible for you to be the one who digs into it and writes it? And is the recognition of that what makes it so good?

K: Right.

J: I guess we need to write really political plays now, don't we.

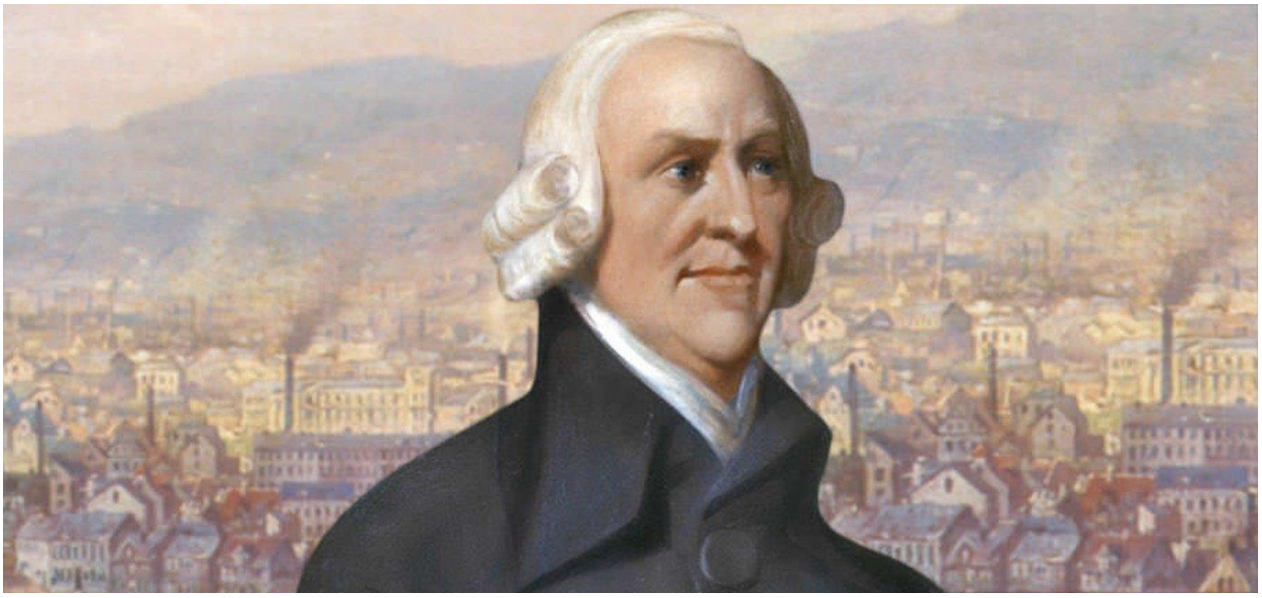
K: Alright. Let's go do it.

**********

*Jerry Lieblich is a Brooklyn-based playwright. He is an alum of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and Smith + Tinker (HERE Arts Center), is an Edward F. Albee Foundation Fellow, and is the writerly half of the devising team Tiny Little Band. His plays*

*include D Deb Debbie Deborah (Playwrights Horizons / Clubbed Thumb Superlab, Soho Rep W/D Lab),Ghost Stories (PRELUDE 2014), Untitled Tech Startup CEO Piece (THROW at The Chocolate Factory), Nostalgia is a Mild Form of Grief (|the claque| Reads, Pipeline Theater Company), Eudaemonia (not just 3 New Plays), and 1927 (Ars Nova ANT Fest). He is also a published scientist, and used to work at a zoo. www.tinylittleband.com*

*Kevin Armento is a Brooklyn-based writer originally from San Diego. His plays include Companion Piece (Pleasance Theatre, London), killers (Tom Noonan's Paradise Factory), a way to reach me, and Good Men Wanted, which premiered at Ars Nova's ANT Fest in 2014 and was the fastest show to sell out in the festival's history. His work has also been performed with Naked Angels, Seattle Repertory Theatre, the New Ohio, INTAR, Last Frontier Theatre Conference, Theatre503, Rogue Machine Theatre, Hollywood Fringe Festival, and the GYM at Judson. He was an inaugural member of Fresh Ground Pepper's PlayGroup, a finalist for TerraNOVA's Groundbreakers, is the recipient of a commission from the Abingdon Theatre, and is currently working on a commission from One Year Lease. His screenplays have received honors from Slamdance, Action on Film Festival, New York City Horror Film Festival, and Los Angeles International Film Festival, and his work has also been featured on Glamour, Yahoo, and The Huffington Post.*



*Adam Smith, philosopher who coined the term, "the invisible hand".*