

DRAMATURGY: ABOUT THE SHOW

One of the complications of “Disgraced” is that it can’t be witnessed in a vacuum. I’m writing about a community, a group of people who are struggling with many of the same sorts of things that anyone would struggle with, but it’s always politicized. This play would not be anywhere near as controversial if it were a Jewish character taking the Old Testament to task, which is basically all Amir is doing (with the Koran). But because we’re in a post-9/11 landscape where there is so much fear around Islam, it has to be read a certain way. ...

I may not believe the same things that other people in my family and community believe, but we all come from the same place, and there is a sense of belonging and identity that I cherish. And one of the things that I’ve always felt that an artist worth their salt does is to both celebrate and critique that which he and she has come into. As Czeslaw Milosz once said, “When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished.” And I think that that’s true of a community as well, in a sense.

All of my work is riding that line, and what’s complicated about it is that I’m doing it at a time when nobody’s quite sure what to make of any of it. So it’s not neutral. For me to celebrate Islam would not be neutral. It would be perceived as a PR project. For me to criticize Islam is not neutral. It’s seen as an act of self-loathing. It can’t just be an artistic endeavor. It has to have some psychologically thoroughgoing and political motivation, which it doesn’t have. That’s the curse of writing at a time like this, but it’s also the blessing because it also sparks the opportunity for a lot of dialogue.

— **Ayad Akhtar**

quoted in “Q&A ‘Disgraced’ playwright Ayad Akhtar on Islam in America (and Bill Maher)” by Kerry Lengel, *The (Arizona) Republic*, November 5, 2015

Art in the Islamic Tradition

The Quran forbids depicting Allah or the Prophets in art. Most interpret this prohibition to apply to depicting people in general. Idolatry, or the worship of religious objects, was common when Islam originated, and the restrictions on human representation in art relate to the prohibition against idol worship. Also, Allah is revered as the ultimate Creator - artists depicting people (who were created by Allah) is seen as competing with Allah or taking his role as Creator on oneself. As a result, art in the Islamic world focuses primarily on calligraphy and geometric design (though a tradition of portraiture does exist in some parts of the Islamic world). Calligraphy developed from a desire to write the Quran - the words of Allah - in the most beautiful way possible.

— Courtesy of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts Theatre Company

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What Story Does the Portrait of Juan de Pareja Truly Tell?

A story is often told in the word we write, the punctuation we choose, and the way we put the two together. But it can also be told with a paintbrush, a canvas, and a palette of colors. An artist is like an author in the sense that she or he holds the power to tell stories in a special and specific way. Artists utilize various elements such as color, shape, and texture to bring their works to life. When we look at a painting, we get a glimpse into the deep and personal relationship between painter and subject.

Disgraced begins with Emily, a white woman in her early 30s, studying her subject. Her subject is her husband Amir, a successful South Asian lawyer. After an incident they had in a restaurant, Emily is inspired to paint a portrait of Amir. She's determined to capture Amir's essence -- who he really is, not who people assume him to be. Emily's portrait of Amir is a study after another painting, "Portrait of Juan de Pareja," by Diego Velázquez.



Diego Velázquez was born in Seville, Andalusia, Spain on June 6, 1559. His father was a lawyer and understood the value of providing his son with an excellent education. Diego Velázquez showed an early gift for art and by the time he was twelve, he was an apprentice to some of the most prominent artists in Spain. His career took off and he eventually became the leading artist in the court of King Philip IV.

Velázquez was an individualistic artist of the contemporary Baroque period, most notable for his portraits. In addition to scenes of historical and cultural significance, he painted portraits of the Spanish royal family, other notable European figures, and commoners. One commoner whom Velázquez depicted in a stunning portrait was his slave, Juan de Pareja.

"The Portrait of Juan de Pareja" was painted in Rome and displayed publicly at the Pantheon in March 1650. At the time of its premiere, the piece was quite provocative. The artist used a form often employed to display the power and position of the wealthy, mostly kings and queens. Viewers were shocked to see Velázquez's slave as the subject of portrait. With this piece, he was hoping to impress his Italian colleagues: it's been noted that he achieved just that. The picture "gained such universal applause that in the opinion of all the painters of the different nations everything else seemed like painting but this alone like truth."

What truth is this piece of art conveying? The subject of the painting is Juan de Pareja, born to Moorish indentured servants and left to Diego Velázquez in a will as property. Juan de Pareja became Velázquez's assistant and was freed from slavery in 1654. When one observes this painting one sees in de Pareja an assistant, a slave. One cannot tell that Juan de Pareja was himself an extraordinary painter. What story might be told if he had created a self-portrait? How would he choose to represent himself? Would our perceptions of him be different or the same?

– Courtesy of Seattle Repertory Theatre