

Movie Review: 'The Kite Runner'

by David_Elliott

Afghanistan is a nation tortured by history, but the core feeling in "The Kite Runner" is heartburning love of the place, its proud people and dusty, rugged beauty.

'THE KITE RUNNER' - Hassan (Ahmad Khan Mahmoudzada) and Amir (Zekiria Ebrahmi) have no idea that their kite of dreams will be blown apart by Afghan history in the reality movie 'The Kite Runner.' CNS Photo courtesy of DreamWorks Pictures. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Marc Forster, best known for "Monster's Ball" and now doing the new James Bond whopper, directed with page-turning grace. The pages are David Benioff's script from the acclaimed novel by Khaled Hosseini. A touch slow, a tad long, a bit formal as it curls back to neatly (movingly) round the story, this could have been a library-loyal MGM or Paramount production of the 1930s.

Of course, they didn't have the swell digital effects that put us so vividly aloft with pretty kites above Kabul

in 1978. Nor such complexity of place. The "star" kite belongs to Amir, son of a rich, very moral but Western-minded (that is, not very Islamic) man, Baba. Amir's "runner" for the kiting contests is the top servant's son, Hassan.

The story, which often feels like a book breathing, centers on the bond between the upscale lad and the one from a poorly regarded minority. Devoted to each other, they are tested by bullies, and Amir does something that shames him, then resentfully compounds that with something just as shaming.

Destined to be a writer drawing upon not just roots but history, Amir is haunted by this past after he and his dad escape the Soviet invasion of 1980. They start a secure but far less bountiful life in the Bay Area. Amir grows up, meets the beautifully smiling refugee Soraya (Atossa Leoni), yet the film is essentially a story of men.

While Kahlid Abdalla is highly effective as grown Amir, it's the very adult, stately males who dominate with their sad-eyed, keenly proud speech, gazes and postures: superb Homayon Ershadi as the profoundly agonized Baba; Qadir Farookh as the exiled Gen. Taheri, a master who knows when to submit; above all, Shaun Toub as the marvelously caring and subtle best friend of the father. However modern their wardrobes and surface outlooks, they are like artful pillars from an Afghan museum of racial and masculine identity.

The plot demands circular closure. Amir must return to his homeland, under the feared Taliban rule, to honor the destiny of his lost friend, Hassan. His key encounter with the dismally reactionary regime involves a melodramatic event, but by then our emotions are so caught up in the tale that doubts seem immoral.

In its atmospherics and rich acting (including the boys, so tossed by fate), "The Kite Runner" is a very traditional grabber with modern fidelity to all the right, living details. It takes us far away, yet inside lives, so that the distant seems utterly present and personal.

A Paramount Classics release. Director: Marc Forster. Writer: David Benioff. Cast: Halid Abdalla, Homayon Ershadi, Shaun Toub, Abdu Qadir Farookh, Atossa Leoni. Running time: 2 hours. Rated PG-13. 3 stars.

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