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The North Pool

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Edward Hightower, left, and Salim Razawi

In "**The North Pool**," a two-man drama at Redwood City's Dragon Theater, high school transfer student Khadim (Salim Razawi, who just finished a particularly strong turn as the troubled nephew in "Disgraced" at San Jose Stage) is stuck in an impromptu, habeus corpus detention session with only his watchful and weird vice principal.

The veep (Edward Hightower, from "The 39 Steps" at SJ Stage, here looking a bit like a graying Orson Welles) hauls Khadim in on a minor complaint, then proceeds to grill him with a one-man good cop/bad cop routine. But what is Dr. Danielson trying to nail Khadim on?

Drug charges? Vandalism? Bomb threat? Is it just racial profiling? All of these references come and go, but nothing sticks.

Hightower's veep seems pompous and preening, but also

broadcasts insecurity on the widest possible band.

He's got a PhD but settled for a disciplinary job at his own old high school. He's patronizing and strange, but both smarter and less personally naïve than we'd initially like to think. (Which is perhaps even more annoying than his first impression.)

And then there's Razawi. Is there a less enviable acting gig than having to play a high school student? So many of the earmarks of actual adolescence seem elusive or unflattering onstage.

But like in "Disgraced" earlier this year, Razawi seems to thrive on that guardedness. And there is a tailored authenticity to his teenage vibes, right down to the faded Batman t-shirt he wears, which is noticeably the bestselling design from the 1989 movie.

Somehow, the dated but enduring topicality of that particular shirt in that particular state of wear clicks in the scene. We may never know how director Jacquelyn Montellato knew that was the perfect faded t-shirt to make this character appear authentic, but here it is.

And that's how most of "The North Pool" goes; this is one of those productions where almost everything falls right into place. Hightower and Razawi have the ideal push and pull; one degree more in any direction might not work so well, but each one is instead exactly as aggressive or passive as needed.

The bland industrial look of Karl Haller's set does put us in mind of school days, but it's also creepily reminiscent of colorless government facilities in unnamed areas where kids who are in a few ways very like Khadim may brook even more intensive questioning. "The banality of evil" is rarely this literal.

Razawi spends nearly half the play more or less stationary in a single chair. After all, it's detention. Rather than making the scene appear static, this becomes a source of tension.

When he finally does stand, it seems the show has crossed a boundary, and we're rewarded when the play follows through on that impression. It's these things that let you know a director is really paying attention.

The show's biggest flaw is actually the script itself, by Rajiv Joseph of "A Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo." Although it's a fairly tight show, "The North Pool" still spends much too long beating around the bush and dropping red herrings about what Khadim is in trouble for.

When Danielson keeps producing new and increasingly elaborate bits of damning evidence from his desk over and over, it starts to seem funny. And the implications of the eventual reveal are troubling for reasons other than the play intends.

Without indulging in spoilers, the resolution involves a third character who for practical reasons never appears onstage. And yet the possibility that she's been exploited drives the conflict.

In this day and age, it's difficult to entirely reconcile a play about two men addressing what the victimization of a woman means to them, and yet affords her no presence or agency. She's shunted into the background in favor of their feelings.

Again, this is a practical consideration. But it still leaves "The North Pool" with an elephant in the room.

(And yes, Dragon did just finished an entire play about women's agency, which we criticized for entirely different reasons. Art is complicated...)

"The North Pool" itself needs more measured consideration in the writing room. But Dragon presses probably the best possible show out of the material, and also one of their own best shows in years.

"The North Pool" plays through July 16 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit DragonProductions.net

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