

AN INTERVIEW WITH **AYAD AKHTAR**

A conversation between playwright Ayad Akhtar
and Anita Montgomery



Literary Manager, Director of Education



AM: *I read somewhere that you grew up in Milwaukee and that yours was one of the only Muslim families in your community.*

AA: On the west side, in the suburbs, yeah. When we moved there, I don't believe there was anybody else, as far as I know. We certainly didn't meet anybody. We were the first.

AM: *I wonder whether that caused you to run toward or away from your religious identity as a child.*

AA: I think as a kid it probably made me run toward it, in a way, because there was a recognition, or I understood that in some way I was different. I think that the way that I came to formulate and understand what that difference meant was through religion. And that the difference was not necessarily a bad thing, that in its own way it was good because my religion was good. That was the sort of child logic, if you will. I think something that you see in a lot of young, early pre-pubescents is a kind of flowering of the devotional, of a pre-occupation that seems to either pre-figure or coincide with the development—the hormonal changes—that are happening in the body. I went through a very strong interest in the Quran and in tradition, to the confusion of my parents, who were not particularly religious at all, in any way. I had to seek that information out elsewhere because they didn't really care or know much about it.

AM: *I just finished reading your novel American Dervish a little while ago, and it sounds very much like your young protagonist Hayat's dilemma.*

AA: Absolutely. Hayat's trajectory is something that is patterned on my own. We're not the same person but I am certainly taking elements of my own experience and using them to give Hayat's journey life and authenticity.

AM: *Did your parents take you to the mosque?*

AA: Sometimes. I had to pester my dad. He would take me every now and then but I really had to pester him to do it. It was kind of an inconvenience and didn't happen very often, so it ended up being a special thing. Sometimes my dad would go and sit with me, but he couldn't tolerate any of the stuff that was being said. I remember, he and I would get into arguments and I would say, "Why aren't you a good Muslim?" and "Why don't you listen? And he to this day, has never let me live that down. He's like: "You know, you were so preoccupied by that stuff. You know what you used to make me do at the mosque?" I say: "Dad, dad, I know, you told me a bazillion times already. Please, forgive me."

AM: [laughs]

AA: [laughs]

AM: *Well there's something very theatrical about a mosque, or a church, you know?*

AA: Absolutely. Absolutely. And, you know, I really think that the attention to the living word spoken in public, which, to me, is what theatre is, began there. It began with my rapt attention to whatever was being said to this group of people. There's a pageantry, a theatricality to it and, interestingly enough, in Muslim tradition there's a kind of soberness to that. I think that also informs my aesthetic— you're really the first person to even bring this up—I think that there is some very deep source of what my own sense of theatricality is about that goes back to my experiences as a young boy in the mosque.

AM: *Did you find with your friends as a young person that this somehow separated you, or did you feel as though there was a place you could put your faith and then there was your other life? How did you incorporate the two?*

AA: My experience was that it brought me closer to others. And that's because I understood what kids were doing when they were going away on retreats with the Catholic Church or Lutheran Church or when kids were talking about Sunday school. It was a shared universe. In Islam and Christianity there are a lot of figures that overlap. But there was something about the devotional mindset of religion being important. I think it was innate to me, you know what I mean? There's a love of a kind that shows up in my book, *American Dervish*—that very pure love of whatever the mystery is that the divine stands in for— that was always first and foremost with me.

AM: *You've referred to yourself as a cultural Muslim, is that what you mean?*

AA: Well, no, I think what I mean when I say that is ...You know, a lot of Muslims and non-Muslims wonder: “Well, so, do you pray five times a day? Do you do the fast thing? Do you do this? Do you do that?” and whatever, and at the end of the day: no. My childhood faith, my literalist belief in the childhood version of my faith died in my late adolescence. And with that died any pretension of exclusivity on the truth. It came to feel increasingly absurd to me that who you were born to and what part of the planet you were born to somehow was responsible for your so-called ‘salvation’. It just seemed patently absurd. I went through that traditional awakening from the slumber of childhood faith, if you will, that so many thinking individuals go through. And I was a militant agnostic for some years in college. And then, on the other side of that, my essential devotional nature re-emerged. But this time it emerged in a non-denominational form and the practice of particular rites and rituals was not meaningful to me because it was not about my experience, it was really more about the performance of those things.

AM: *It sounds as though you are still a deeply religious person.*

AA: I do consider myself a very religious person, actually, but I have my own relationship to it. It’s not about the prophet, or what language you speak when you speak to the Lord, or whatever it is. And that’s why I call myself a cultural Muslim in the sense that I’m not disavowing my Islamic origins; I’m not disavowing the way in which it has been an important foundation for my life. I consider myself to be part of the community. But I’m not...well...Muslims will sometimes write to me and say: “You know, you’re a wonderful writer, why don’t you write something that makes people want to become Muslims.” And I don’t even know how to begin talking or explaining to them that my fidelity is not to the Quran, my fidelity is to the truth. The practice of questioning the truth— that’s the only religion that I have at this point.

AM: *The characters in your plays and in American Dervish really struggle with attempting to reconcile contemporary life with traditional Islamic culture. Do you find this to be a fairly common experience for Muslims in America?*

AA: I think it’s a fairly common experience for Muslims around the world, actually. I think that the advent of modernity has been the big question in the Muslim world for well near a hundred years. And, I think much of what we are still seeing happening in the world is a result of that concept. I think every immigrant community, whether they’re defined by their faith (as Jewish Americans are) or by their national identity (as the Italian Americans or Irish Americans would be), I think they all go through this process of wrestling with what to hold on to and what to leave behind. And I think that can become all the more pungent for a community when the issues are not just about national identity but they really do touch more on a question of faith. Chaim Potok famously in *The Chosen* wrote a beautiful story about that dilemma for the Hasidic Jewish community. So, I think these are deep, enduring, American preoccupations and themes, but I’m expressing them in the idiom of the community I grew up in, which is the Muslim community.

AM: *What drew you to the theatre and then to writing for the theatre? When did that shift begin to happen?*

AA: Up until high school there'd always been an assumption that I would just become a doctor. You know, both my parents are doctors. But I had a teacher when I was fifteen who really changed my life when she exposed me to literature and made me read all kinds of stuff. She was the first person that ever got me reading plays. She made me read Beckett and Ionesco and Durrenmatt and Jean Anouilh and Jean-Paul Sartre. It was my inculcation to world literature. I spent two years reading everything on her shelf, and I got fascinated with the theatre, I went to the Milwaukee Rep and saw some great shows, and I watched films. Something about it felt natural. I feel like I've always been sensitive to certain kinds of aesthetic principles or aesthetic experiences that seem to lend themselves to theatre.

AM: *And then you really dove into the theatre in college?*

AA: In college I started acting. I had a friend who was a director and he made me audition for a play, and it turned out I had a knack for it. I got really interested in Jerzy Grotowski and Andre Gregory after seeing *My Dinner with Andre*. Then I found myself, crazily enough, working with Grotowski as his assistant for a year right out of college. Then came back to New York and started working with Andre Gregory! I was just very fortunate to meet these very, very central, pivotal people along the path. My path into theatre, oddly, has been very blessed, even though it hasn't been public for most of my life. I've been around theatre since just after high school. Taught acting for ten years in New York; worked with a lot of wonderful actors; continued to teach acting in Europe. And though I was writing novels and writing screenplays, I always knew I would write a play someday, but I was gathering kindling and the igniting spark hadn't come along yet. And then it did, and I was in my very late thirties at that point.

AM: *And the spark really ignited.*

AA: Yes. I wrote drafts of four plays back-to-back in somewhere between eight and ten months. *The Invisible Hand* was the second one. *Disgraced* was the first.

AM: *And then The Who and the What?*

AA: Then *The Who and the What*. And then a fourth play which I don't really show anybody, or I haven't shown anybody yet, so.

AM: [laughs] *Eight months! And this enormous creative outpouring.* –

AA: Yeah. They'd been gathering in me for a long time, I think.

AM: *Do you see these plays as a kind of a progression?*

- AA:** Yeah, absolutely. You can actually see *American Dervish*, *Disgraced*, *The Who and the What*, and *The Invisible Hand* all as movements, parts of the same gesture. And I have three more works that come from this vein of inspiration. So when I finally get through them it'll be seven pieces.
- AM:** *That's an extraordinary ambitious output, and a sort of August Wilson-like trajectory of interconnected stories.*
- AA:** Yeah. I think it's going be three books, three plays, and a film. But that will be the body of work that sort of tries to give voice to this question of Western identity and Muslim identity for people who are living here.
- AM:** *Let's talk about The Invisible Hand a little more. This play is certainly your most overtly political.*
- AA:** Yeah.
- AM:** *I read somewhere that you wrote a novel—or, you were writing one for about seven years—about a poet working at Goldman Sachs.*
- AA:** [laughs] Yes. Yes.
- AM:** *It would seem that you've had a long-time fascination with Wall Street and the effects of the market.*
- AA:** Absolutely. As somebody who wishes to sort of understand the world better, I think that, in our day and age, not to understand how deeply finance has informed and defined our relationships—not only to each other, but to ourselves—is to miss an important part of what it means to be alive right now, in this civilization. So that's been a longstanding preoccupation for me. I have various zones of obsession and interest: psychoanalysis has long been one of them, religious traditions have been another, finance has been another. And all of these are just modalities of trying to understand what it means to be human at this particular moment in our evolution or being as a civilization, as a species. So, to me the play emerges, along with one of the two novels that I am in the process of writing, as a part of this larger inspiration, all set in the financial world that deals with the second generation immigrant community—Pakistani, Muslim immigrant community—and somebody who grows up to make a tremendous amount of money in the world of finance and lives out that sort of American paradigm of self-made. But it turns out that this very new American phenomenon of widespread cheating to get ahead is part and parcel of what is actually behind this guy's lies. That's an important issue. Power and money are an important American obsession. You go back to de Tocqueville and see that that's at the heart of whatever our national identity really is. And, so being interested in that is just, I think, de rigueur for somebody who's interested in understanding America.
- AM:** *Well, in this play you give, in a wonderfully compelling, active fashion, a real lesson into how the market works. I think that a lot of people do not understand the market in*

this country. I read an article a little while ago about high-speed trading. I had no idea that that was happening. And I think the first time I heard about 'futures,' I thought: what the heck is that? It's all smoke and mirrors, you know?

AA: Yeah. It's true, it's true. And I think that I'm an artist who definitely takes very seriously that dictum in Horace's "Ars Poetica", that the purpose of art is to delight as well as to instruct. And I think that is the deepest plight our audiences experience. You see this now with cable TV, where you have these long-form series that are often set in these interesting worlds and part of the pleasure of the series is seeing and understanding and learning about a whole swathe of American activity. Whether it's *Mad Men* or *The Wire* or whatever it may be, it's this aspect of instructing in the work, which isn't about anything didactic. It's about opening horizons of consciousness for the audience, which is what art is ultimately supposed to do. And I think it scares a lot of writers to do that, because there's a prevailing prejudice against being perceived as somehow didactic. You know? And look, it is what it is. I think there will be some people who will come to the play...it's always those people who don't identify themselves as members of the audience, and those people are usually people who call themselves critics— [laughs]

AM: [laughs]

AA: That, you know, their job is to sort of imagine themselves as not being the audience but better than or smarter than or ahead of the audience. But audiences love to learn new things. They do. They just love it. And if you can do it in a delightful way, it leads to some very, very, profoundly satisfying theatrical experiences.

AM: *Who do you write for? Who's your audience?*

AA: My audience is... it's a very simple thing that I've come to over many, many years of working as a writer and many years of growing as a person and really, to be honest, a lot of the travails and troubles that I've had in the business, that have not only informed my life, has led me to a kind of simpler and more clear sense of what it means to be human. And less identified with the trappings of intellect or taste. And I think that as a narrative artist, the way that I articulate this simple sense of being human is...When an audience begins to sense that they're being told a story there is a kind of a waking up that happens, a very simple kind of 'Oh, what's gonna happen next?' feeling. And that feeling is very similar to the feeling that I think children have when they're hearing a story. It's very clear when a child gets bored that he or she has lost confidence that what happens next is interesting, or is going to be delivered, or is plausible. So there's a sacred trust built on a narrative bond between the audience and the writer and the artist. It's something I can track in myself by seeing if I am paying attention. And, so, in a way, I'm writing with an almost child-like openness in myself to the question of: Do I care what happens next?

AM: *The Invisible Hand is undergoing an incredible journey. It's had a workshop and is working its way toward New York, so this is very much a living, breathing changing*

piece right now. I'm wondering how the piece is changing for you? What are the questions you want answered in the journey of The Invisible Hand?

AA: They're really narrative questions, for me. I really want to make sure that I fully bring home the important reversals that unfold over the course of the play. You know, the structural conceit is we want to see a man escape. At the end of the first act he escapes, but his escape is ineffective. At the end of the second act he escapes, but by the most unusual means, which is that he is released in accordance with the very agreement that we were led to believe would not be honored in the very beginning. So there, already, you have two reversals. Those are two narrative reversals. The other important reversal is Bashir and Imam Saleem's relationship, and all of these reversals are operating around the principle of money. Money is the thing that moves all of these changes. For me it's just a matter of fully fleshing out those movements. That's what I'm really trying to get right. And I want to make sure that I give each of them the right amount of space, which sometimes means more or less. I'm very eager to see how the show comes together in Seattle. It will be very helpful to be present to see it come together and see how the audience responds to it. That's important information for me to take to the next process.

AM: *Absolutely. We can't wait to have you here. It has been a complete pleasure, for me to get to talk to you.*

AA: I'm looking forward to it. And thank you.