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Performance Review: The Tutor

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The Tutor by Torange Yeghiazarian. Cast, Left-to-Right: Lawrence Radecker (Kayvon), Debórah Elizer (Azar) & Maya Nazzal (Baran). Photo by Lois Tema.

THE TUTOR. By Torange Yeghiazarian. Directed by Sahar Assaf. New Conservatory Theatre Center, San Francisco. 5 May 2024.
Reviewed by Hala Baki, California Polytechnic State University

In this refreshingly raw three-hander, playwright Torange Yeghiazarian challenges American audiences — including those who may identify as Iranian—to acknowledge their deeply problematic biases about Iranian culture, sexualities, and women. *The Tutor*, which was commissioned by San Francisco's New Conservatory Theatre Center in association with Golden Thread Productions and directed by Sahar Assaf, takes a magnifying lens to prejudice and vulnerability in the diaspora. Through a painfully dramatic love triangle, it demonstrates the costs that people must pay for revealing and owning their truth to others.

The Tutor follows the story of Baran, a young Iranian woman recently immigrated to the United States amidst the Woman, Life, Freedom protest movement in Iran in 2022. Her home away from home is defined by two people: her arranged Iranian-American husband Kayvon, 25 years her senior; and Azar, an Iranian-American woman who is Kayvon's lifelong friend. This relationship triangles when Kayvon asks Azar to become Baran's tutor upon her arrival and help her settle into her new life. Little did anyone know that the two women would end up falling madly in love, complicating the threesome's relationship along with a dash of bad luck and worse choices.

The play contained several excellent moments of emotional tension, helped by Assaf's masterful staging. From the beginning, the newlyweds Baran (Maya Nazzal) and Kayvon (Lawrence Radecker) crack the facade of a picture-perfect couple with their backgammon competitiveness laced with hints of sexual dissatisfaction. They dance around each other in their own home, staged intimately in the round at the Walker Theater with a backgammon board patterned on the floor. The actors frequently break through the. Thus, from the beginning, *The Tutor* implicates the audience as participants in the intimacy of the space and its unfolding drama. The first scene hints at the intense cat and mouse game to come, punctuated at the end with the shocking discovery of Kayvon's mother dead on the floor of her room next door.

The following scene complicates the situation by revealing the affair between Baran and Azar (Deborah Eliezer) as well as its unexpected connection to the mother's death— at the deceased woman's memorial, no less. The scene opens on the modular set transformed into the home's kitchen. The space teems with unspoken tension as Baran busies herself with preparing food for mourners and Azar nervously fidgets nearby. Just when the silent and heavy air becomes unbearable, the two snap into action. They berate one another for their conduct after the mother's death and ultimately let their pent-up sexual frustration result in oral sex under the kitchen table. Of course, Kayvon walks into the room just then, and the women tactfully play off the tableau as a "dropped spoon" scenario. The whiplash of emotion and tone in this scene, from heated pain and frustration to sitcom-style humor and back, does not always flow smoothly or land on its mark. However, it does force the audience to sit in the discomfort of the situation, not quite sure how or with whom to sympathize.

The more successful examples of this delicate balance are in the penultimate scenes of the play, where truths finally come out and the characters must face each other's violations head on. Kayvon grapples with the affair between his queer wife and best friend, as well as his retaliatory one-night stand with Azar. Azar feels torn between her lover and her best friend, as well as the guilt implicating her in Kayvon's mother's death and Baran's heartbreak. Meanwhile, Baran struggles with the betrayal she feels from both and the unraveling life she has barely started making for herself as a recent immigrant in the US. All of this complexity manifests with beautiful and volatile staging that leaves the audience feeling like an intruding guest witnessing some sacred reckoning, wishing to disappear into their seats instead.

All three characters, like backgammon players, navigate their love triangle disaster with calculated strategy, tactics, and a dash of helplessness in the face of chance. Baran is viewed as a pawn in the game by the other two, who are more interested in competing with each other than facing their own poor judgments. These diasporic individuals project their prejudices and political lenses onto Baran, pigeonholing her as an impressionable young Iranian woman who is confused and in need of rescuing by older, more "liberated" Iranians. Yet Baran ultimately takes matters into her own hands and frees herself of both of their grips. Her actions assert that she is neither victim nor pawn and that she is comfortable enough with her own vulnerability to burn familiar bridges and boldly seek the unknown. In doing so, she disrupts the others' outdated expectations of Iranian culture and gender norms, as well as any romanticized notions they may have had about rebellious Iranian youth.

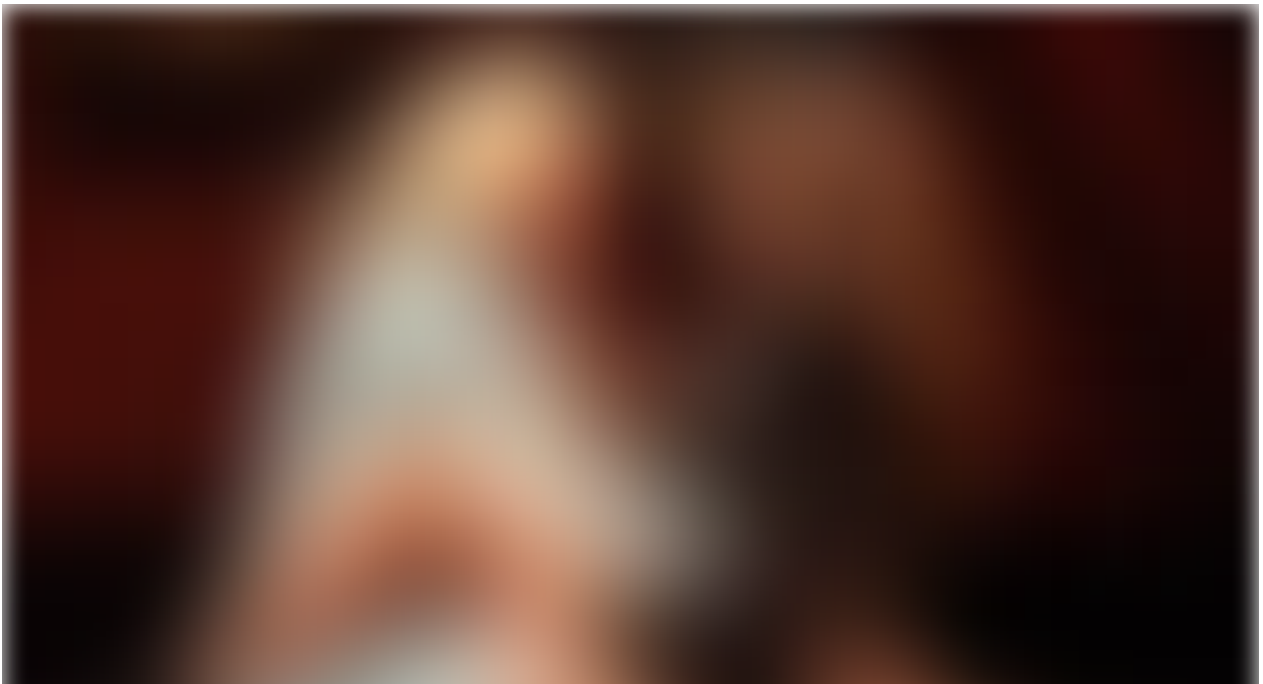
The Tutor challenges audiences to disrupt similar biases within themselves. It displays the diversity of the global Iranian population and their worldviews, especially as it pertains to the ideas of freedom and owning one's truth in the face of judgment or suppression. The production's dramaturgical note, penned by the playwright, brings direct attention to the little-known activist history of the Iranian diaspora from the days of the 1979 Revolution to the Woman, Life, Freedom uprisings. It particularly highlights the progressive Iranian American community in Berkeley, CA that serves as the inspiration for the characters of Kayvon and Azar. Yeghiazarian thus draws attention to the disconnect and misconceptions that can exist both within and between global communities.

Through painfully raw emotion and discomforting intimacy, *The Tutor* draws audiences into a heated game in which, arguably, everyone ends up a loser. It's an example of diasporic theater that takes for granted the ignorance and biases of its audiences, whether or not they share the playwright or characters' cultural background. It strategically plays with them, pushing them to consider how one's path can be determined by a combination of fate and agency. In some ways, this idea is a quintessentially immigrant one in that all who seek a new start, or some form of liberation, have to contend with both of these factors. Regardless of how they relate to the play, *The Tutor* reminds audiences to be self-critical and aware lest they themselves make a move that can cost them the game.

PHOTOS



The Tutor by Torange Yeghiazarian. Cast, Left-to-Right: Maya Nazzal (Baran) & Lawrence Radecker (Kayvon). Photo by Lois Tema.



About The Author(s)

Hala Baki (she/her) is a lecturer in the Theatre and Dance Department at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. She earned her PhD in Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests include Arab and MENA American theater, conditions of theatrical production, and diaspora theories. She has presented her work at IFTR, ASTR, and ATHE, and has published in *Modern Drama*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Asian Theatre Journal*. She co-edited *The Vagrant Trilogy: Three Plays by Mona Mansour* (Methuen Drama) and authored a chapter in the volume *Arabs, Politics, and Performance* (Routledge). She is also a director and dramaturg whose recent credits include Raeda Taha's *Where Can I find Someone Like You, Ali?* (2024), Yussef El Guindi's *Wife of Headless Man Investigates Her Own Disappearance* (2023), Mona Mansour's *unseen* (OSF 2022), the devised ensemble play *Writer's Block* (2021), and Kareem Fahmy's *American Fast* (2021).

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Arab Stages is devoted to broadening international awareness and understanding of the theatre and performance cultures of the Arab-Islamic world and of its diaspora.

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