



Hassan (Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada) and Amir (Zekiria Ebrahimi) go fly a kite in *The Kite Runner*

Parallel Lines

Kite Runner a bit too neat

THE KITE RUNNER: Directed by Marc Forster. Written by David Benioff, based on the book by Khaled Hosseini. Cinematography, Roberto Schaefer. Music, Alberto Iglesias. Starring Khalid Abdalla, Atossa Leoni, Shaun Toub, Zekiria Ebrahimi, Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada and Homayoun Ershadi. Paramount Classics, 2007. PG-13. 122 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

If you saw the preview for Marc Forster's (*Monster's Ball*) adaptation of *The Kite Runner* and thought the overblown voiceover and tacky gold title made the movie look like a bit of a chore to watch, you're not alone. Little about the preview looked appealing beyond the dark eyes of Khalid Abdalla, who stars as Amir, a writer living in the Bay Area in 2000. A phone call from an old family friend who speaks meaningfully of "a way to be good again" sends Amir home to Afghanistan, but not before Forster treats us to a lengthy, languid flashback that explains some of the caller's mysterious offer.

Amir's complex history encompasses friendship, betrayal, class, family, secrets and the flying of kites (and what flying it is). In flashback, Amir (played as boy by Zekiria Ebrahimi) is best friends with his father's servant's son, Hassan (Ahmad Khan Mahmoodzada), a solid, warm boy. Hassan and Amir fly kites, run through marketplaces or sit in a pomegranate grove together as equals though they're aware of the differences in their social status. Amir is a reticent child who writes stories and hangs back from conflict, even when his fear has terrible consequences for Hassan — and ultimately for their friendship, which Amir, guilt-ridden, can't maintain. When the Russians arrive in Afghanistan, they're not the only thing dividing the former friends. The tanks rolling down the street are just the most concrete division as Amir and his Baba flee the country without knowing what's become of Hassan and his father.

Amir grows up in America; his father (Homayoun Ershadi, steely but warm), previously wealthy, works in a gas station. College graduation, a wedding, a published novel: All is well for Amir until the fateful

call comes, drawing him back to a homeland that isn't at all like he remembers. What happens there is the result of a tangle of secrets and horrors; what follows is the result of Amir's quiet desire to make up for his failings as a child (which is rather like *Atonement*, really).

The Kite Runner is a better film than the previews led me to expect, but it's far from perfect. Its adult star is so self-contained as to sometimes be unreadable, though Abdalla rises to the challenge of subtly expressing Amir's feelings for Soraya (Atossa Leoni). The boys who play young Hassan and Amir, on the other hand, are wonderful, guileless and sweet in the certainty of their friendship, withdrawn and quiet once that friendship shatters. As he did with Freddie Highmore in *Finding Neverland*, Forster draws the most moving performances from his youngest actors, which becomes a weakness when the film returns to Amir's adulthood. What happens when Amir returns to his homeland is more traditionally exciting, sure, but it's all too neatly lined up. Too much hinges on a knot of coincidences that stretches the viewer's disbelief until, with the release of a sling-shot, it snaps.

Melodramatic weakness aside, *The Kite Runner*'s strengths are just enough to carry it. The film doesn't go into great depth about Afghan culture, but what it does show, from a lively Kabul (though the Kabul-set scenes were filmed in China) to Amir and Soraya's wedding, is layered and welcome. Forster doesn't entirely shy away from the atrocities in the story, settling just long enough for the most horrific scenes to leave a mark, then carrying on — a tactic which feels both shallow and compassionate at once. If it feels as if there are pieces of reality missing from this story, shadings of politics and history that never come into sharp focus, the film's first half is nonetheless engaging enough that it's not until later that something seems absent, as if Amir's story ran parallel, never truly connecting, to a larger tale we can't see.

The Kite Runner opens Friday, Jan. 11, at the Bijou.

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