

# CHARACTER



# STUDY

By LINDSEY ANDERSON

With his play *Junk* up and running  
at the Rep, Pulitzer Prize winner

# AYAD AKHTAR

reflects on his  
Milwaukee roots.

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# LATE AFTERNOON SUNLIGHT SLANTS THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF THE MILWAUKEE REPERTORY THEATER'S WELLS STREET OFFICES, LIGHTING UP THE LONG TABLE THAT DOMINATES ITS CONFERENCE ROOM.

**AYAD AKHTAR IS** leaning over the table, surveying dozens of printout pages – some in English, some in German, all from his play *Junk: The Golden Age of Debt* – that have been laid out along the perimeter. Dressed simply, in a black hoodie and jeans, he could be a broke graduate student or a tech billionaire. Or a famous writer and actor.

Mark Clements, the Rep's artistic director, is standing beside him, frowning at the German text. The company's literary associate, Deanie Vallone, is doing the same. Together, they're trying to perform a theatrical autopsy of sorts, dissecting and analyzing different versions of the script.

*Junk*, a Wall Street drama set in the 1980s, premiered at



California's La Jolla Playhouse in July 2016. It went on to make its Broadway debut at the Lincoln Center in November 2017 and closed in January 2018, after 77 performances.

The man who directed both U.S. productions staged them dutifully, staying true to Akhtar's script. But the director who handled the play's German-language premiere took some liberties when translating the text, trimming down dialogue and doing away with the show's intermission entirely. The change surprised, and delighted, Akhtar.

"Damn," he mutters, picking up one of the German pages, seemingly at random. "I really wish we could have figured out a way to do that in New York."

The New York production clocked in at two and a half hours. And though it received many positive reviews, and two Tony nominations, Akhtar's open to revisions. He and Clements have discussed tightening up the script for *Junk*'s Midwestern premiere, which will open at the Rep on Jan. 15.

"Is there texture that you lose?" Clements wonders. He's the one who'll be making the first round of edits to the script. And though he's eager to get to work, he's also understandably hesitant. Playwrights have been known to quibble with directors over even the most minor changes.

Akhtar, who's been slowly circling the table, shrugs. "There's

so much going on in the play, though. How much texture do you need?" He doesn't seem at all perturbed by the idea of a director digging into the guts of his play, cutting out dialogue, stitching scenes together in new ways.

His openness is surprising given his staggering degree of success. He's been attached to a steady stream of high-profile projects since 2005, when he co-wrote and starred in *The War Within*, a film about a Muslim man propelled to extremism. In 2012, he published his first novel, *American Dervish*, to widespread critical acclaim. That same year, he wrote *Disgraced*, a tense play about simmering religious and racial prejudices that won him a Pulitzer Prize.

He could have sold the Rep the rights to *Junk*'s script and continued working on his second novel from the comfort of his Manhattan apartment. But he seems genuinely excited by what Clements has planned for the production.

And he and Clements – who was instrumental in bringing Akhtar's other plays to the Rep, and in convincing Akhtar to join the theater's Board of Trustees – have already announced plans to continue working together after *Junk* premieres, on a theatrical adaptation of *American Dervish*.

First, though, they've got to finish fine-tuning *Junk*.

"You're giving me the leeway to run with it a bit," Clements



Clements and Akhtar  
with the script of  
*Junk: The Golden  
Age of Debt*

says. He's rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to the elbows, seemingly ready to pull out a red pen and get to work immediately.

"I hope you run with it more than a bit, actually," Akhtar says.

# MILWAUKEE RENAISSANCE MAN

**BEFORE HE WON** a Pulitzer for one of his plays, before he received a six-figure advance for his novel, before he co-wrote and starred in a film that was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, Akhtar was just a precocious kid growing up in the Milwaukee suburbs.

Born in Pakistan, Akhtar's parents – Masood and Khurshid – moved to the United States to pursue careers in medicine. Initially they settled in New York City, but when Akhtar's father, Masood, was invited to launch a cardiology lab (now part of Aurora Sinai Medical Center), they packed their bags and headed westward, landing first in Brown Deer, then Brookfield and eventually Elm Grove.

"It was very white bread," Akhtar says, acknowledging that he didn't see many other people of color, or other Muslim families, in the suburb. "But I never felt like an outsider."

At Brookfield Central High School, Akhtar found ready encouragement from his literature teacher, Diane Doerfler. She introduced Akhtar to European modernists such as Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka, and he credits his interest in writing to her. "It became clear to me at 15 that that's what I wanted to do. That's all I wanted to do."

His parents were at first mystified by his obsession with books and plays. They'd hoped that he would follow in their footsteps and become a doctor – when Ayad was 3 or 4, Masood handed him a syringe and ordered his son to give him a shot in the arm, to start preparing him for medical school – but Ayad devoted himself so fully to the pet projects he took on that his parents eventually resigned themselves to the idea of raising a writer. Their acceptance of his literary aspirations was probably helped along by the fact that Ayad earned stellar grades in his English classes – and that he fainted when he gave Masood that shot.

After graduating from Brookfield Central in 1988, Akhtar enrolled at Brown University, where he majored in theater, acted and wrote student plays.

Whenever he returned to Milwaukee for summer breaks or holidays, he kept working. He'd eat dinner with his parents, then head to a Greek diner on Bluemound Road, where he'd stay until 3 or 4 in the morning, hunched over a notebook or book. "They called me 'Professor,'" Akhtar remembers, "because I was always reading."

After graduating from Brown, Akhtar spent a stint studying acting in Italy, under the tutelage of theatrical director Jerzy Grotowski. Eventually he enrolled in a master's program at Columbia University to study directing. There, he and a few friends came up with the idea for *The War Within*.

All the while, Akhtar was working on personal writing projects, too. But he says he didn't find his creative footing until

# WISCO WINNERS

**AKHTAR ISN'T THE ONLY WRITER WITH A WISCONSIN CONNECTION TO WIN A LITERARY PULITZER PRIZE.**



While attending UW-Madison, **MARJORIE KINNAN RAWLINGS** wrote for the school's literary magazine. Her early experiences there must have paid off, because in 1939 her novel *The Yearling* earned her the Pulitzer for fiction.

# POLITICS, RELIGION AND THE POLITICS OF RELIGION

he was in his mid-30s and realized that, if he wanted his stories to feel relatable, he needed to draw on his own life and his own specific set of circumstances. “I couldn’t just run from my past, my personal entanglements, my cultural entanglements,” he says. “And when I realized that, I experienced a bout of staggering creativity. It was almost like stories poured forth fully formed, that I had spent so many years practicing the craft that the sublimation of all that stuff into narrative just kind of happened, effortlessly. For the first time, I had no question about what to write about or how to write.”

With that eureka moment in mind, he began writing his most unflinchingly personal work to date, *American Dervish*. The novel tells the story of a boy – whose personality and life experiences bear more than a passing resemblance to Akhtar’s own – growing up in Milwaukee, struggling to make sense of his place in the world and his own Muslim heritage.

While working on his novel, he landed a supporting role in *Too Big to Fail*, a film adaptation of Andrew Ross Sorkin’s best-selling book about the 2008 financial crisis. “I remember being struck by how different Ayad was from other actors I knew,” Sorkin says. “He would talk in fully formed paragraphs with the most thoughtful and provocative ideas about what happened. He mentioned to me that he was writing a book. A lot of actors say they are writing books or plays, but then he sent me *American Dervish*. And, well, wow.”

Soon after finishing *American Dervish*, Akhtar began writing *Disgraced*. The play, set in a successful Pakistani-American man’s New York City apartment, offers up a sobering, almost confessional take on race, class and religion in the United States. The committee that awarded *Disgraced* the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for drama called it “a moving play that depicts a successful corporate lawyer painfully forced to consider why he has for so long camouflaged his Pakistani Muslim heritage.”

**AKHTAR, 48, IDENTIFIES** as a “cultural Muslim” and peoples his work with many Muslim characters. Some are devout. Some, like the protagonist of *Disgraced*, aren’t.

“There’s a result to believing that a book written about life in a specific society 1,500 years ago is the word of God: You start wanting to recreate that society,” the character, Amir, says near the end of the play. “After all, it’s the only one in which the Quran makes any literal sense. That’s why you have people like the Taliban.”

By plumbing his past experiences and his own conflicted relationship with Islam, Akhtar became an almost overnight literary and theatrical sensation. But not everyone loves what he’s written. “I’m persona non grata to many Muslims,” he says, “especially in Milwaukee.”

In January 2017, when the Rep mounted a production of *Disgraced*, some questioned the play’s popularity. Janan Najeib, president of the Milwaukee Muslim Women’s Coalition, suggested some Muslims worried that the play may have appealed to audiences in part because it validated their feelings of Islamophobia.



Before **SAUL BELLOW** won a Pulitzer for fiction in 1976, he was a graduate student at UW-Madison. Surprisingly, he hadn’t enrolled to study literature or writing, but anthropology.



**CARL SANDBURG** lived in Milwaukee for years, where he served as a secretary to Emil Seidel, the city’s first Socialist mayor. Later, he went on to win three Pulitzers, two for poetry and one for history.



Another three-time Pulitzer recipient, **THORNTON WILDER** was born in Madison. But make no mistake: Grover’s Corners – the real star of his best-known play, *Our Town* – is not based on Madtown.



The first woman to win the Pulitzer for drama, **ZONA GALE** (*Miss Lulu Bett*, 1921), spent most of her life in Wisconsin. She was born in Portage and earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in literature from UW-Madison.



# NOTABLY QUOTABLE

**AYAD AKHTAR HAS STRONG OPINIONS AND DOESN'T SHY AWAY FROM SHARING THEM. HERE'S HOW HE FEELS ABOUT ...**

## **POLITICS:**

"Yes, we're the birthplace of the Republican Party and McCarthyism, but there's this very strong salt-of-the-earth, American progressiveness that's really a part of our state's history. Which is why what's happening in Wisconsin now, politically, is so astonishing to me. It feels like so much of our history is being erased."

## **DEBT:**

"The most interesting story of this era is the economic story of debt. The gap between perceived value and real value is the gap between appearance and reality. There's \$240 trillion in corporate debt out there. We're creating shit that doesn't exist, and in doing that we create a world that isn't real. We live in a society addicted to unreality."

## **WRITING:**

"I never had anything else I wanted to do. I remember reading what John Lennon said about life being what happens when you make other plans. And I thought: 'I'm not going to make other plans.' I didn't. I didn't waver. And it's not even because I was so good at it. I had to work really hard. It's been a labor of love."

## **MONEY:**

"I know lots of very rich people now, and I can say that money tends to make you less sensitive to the pain of others, and less able to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Christ said poverty is a great blessing, but that God shouldn't give it those who can't handle it."

## **THEATER:**

"Our best writers don't go into the theater. I think, had Shakespeare been alive today, he would have been writing for television. He wanted to change his station in life."





To date, the Rep has staged Ayad Akhtar's first three plays: *The Invisible Hand* (bottom right), *Disgraced* (top) and *The Who & The What* (bottom left). When *Junk* debuts on Jan. 15, the theater will have shown Akhtar's full catalog of plays.



Najeeb thinks that, through his work, Akhtar paints a population of nearly 2 billion people with too broad a brush, and that he could put his talents to better use. "I do believe that artists from marginalized and targeted communities who have been given a pulpit should try and ameliorate the harm coming to their communities," she says. "But not everyone chooses to be a James Baldwin."

Lopamudra Basu, an English professor at UW-Stout who teaches classes on post-9/11 literature and recently published a scholarly book about Akhtar, says that she understands but disagrees with that sentiment. "I can empathize with a group that's seen few representations, or only skewed representations, of itself in mainstream media," she says. "But I believe that a writer's only real responsibility is to his or her art."

## THE CURTAIN CALL

**NOT LONG BEFORE** the opening night of *Junk* at the Rep, Mark Clements is sitting in his office, staring at a revised version of the script. He's managed to cut out the intermission and bring the show's running time down to two hours. Now he just needs to figure out how to stage the play – no small feat considering it features 23 characters.

*Junk* tells the story of an ambitious financier named Robert Merkin who hatches a plan to orchestrate a very hostile takeover of a major American manufacturing firm. The play's subject – the relentless pursuit of wealth, at the expense of everything else – doesn't at first blush have much to do with most of Akhtar's work.

But money, like politics and religion, remains one of those topics people are told to avoid during polite dinner conversation. And Clements thinks that makes it fertile ground for drama. "All of those areas carry more gray than black or white," he says. "Whenever you try to address a polarizing topic in this country, creating a forum for conversation has value. The theater can present a safe environment to talk about those issues."

Gregory Linington, the Chicago-based actor who will be playing Merkin, agrees. "There's a lot of emotion in this seemingly unemotional topic. It's a bit Shakespearean, actually."

Akhtar says that the plot of the play is, in fact, loosely based on *Henry IV*. He's eager to see how Clements chooses to direct the show, and how audiences here respond to it.

"I'm not always writing about Milwaukee, but I consider myself a Milwaukee artist," he says. "It brings me great joy to know that people in my hometown care and appreciate my participation in the life of the city." ●