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AMERICAN GIRL, RADICALIZED

Bit by bit, sweet Katie becomes hardened Karima

BY JENNY LOWER

In *All American Girl*, a world premiere from InterACT Theatre Company, radical Islam doesn't take hold of its main character's life all at once. For Katie, or Karima, as she comes to be known, Islam follows a conservative Christian upbringing, volunteer work in Boston's slum-poor Dorchester neighborhood and a stint at Fordham University. When she meets Iqbal, a brooding Indian immigrant, he educates her on the ways Muslims are brutalized by Hindus back home.

But he's no extremist — radicalism is something they find together. It gradually chokes them only after a series of disappointments and heartbreaks, a "tapeworm," Katie says, that consumes from within.

Written by Wendy Graf and directed by Anita Khanzadian, the one-woman play draws inspiration from recent accounts of teenagers and young women seduced online and radicalized into jihadist fighters. One such story — that of a 19-year-old

Colorado woman arrested as she prepared to fly to Syria — is detailed in the program, a faux newspaper detailing atrocities committed against Muslims, the kind that come to obsess Katie as she trembles on the cusp of extremism. Graf also was fascinated by the wife of Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev, whose friends expressed astonishment that this apparent girl-next-door could be mixed up in such an ugly business.

All American Girl is notable for taking the audience behind these bewildering headlines, crafting a layered narrative that traces Katie's progression, starting with her average childhood, entirely in her own voice. Katie is portrayed at alternating performances by Annika Marks and Jeanne Syquia (the latter performed on the night reviewed, but Marks takes over for the remainder of the run).

Katie's choices never stretch beyond the bounds of credulity. Only much later do they strain sympathy. We see Islam evolve from an initially positive force, whose modesty she finds "kind of hot," to a cultural badge. Katie's compassion, her most defining trait, begins to harden



Jeanne Syquia in *All American Girl*

PHOTO BY RICK FRIESEN

and mutate: Ironically, if she were less sensitive to injustice, she might be less prone to fanaticism. "Isn't doing nothing in the face of violence itself a form of violence?" she pleads with the audience on the eve of committing such an act.

One of Graf's most intriguing contentions is the play's implicit argument that America's terrorists, even those foreign-born, might be homemade. In

a post-9/11 world, Iqbal struggles to find work and keep housing, and sees his dreams quashed because of lack of citizenship. He's consistently other-ized. Treat aspiring Americans as outsiders long enough, the play warns, and they might prove you right.

ALL AMERICAN GIRL | InterACT Theatre Company Lounge Theatre, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood | Through Aug. 30 | (818) 765-6732 | interactla.org