

## THEATRE REVIEW

# Extremism Is Human In *All American Girl*

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Katie Mason is privileged, educated and idealistic. She's an all-American girl who dresses in skinny jeans and carries a Burberry satchel. But before our eyes, our Katie becomes Karima, veiled and cloaked, and begins a new life of righteousness.

In her new play, *All American Girl*, Wendy Graf explores the complicated and emotionally charged frontier between America's unfathomable power and democratic secularism, and strict religious orthodoxy.

Once again, the Mandeville Canyon resident tackles cultural and philosophical issues, which she softly wraps in beautifully crafted language.

In the 2010 *Behind the Gates*, Graf focused on the desperation of a mother and father as their American teenage daughter vanishes into the mysterious world of Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox haredi community.

In *No Word in Guyanese for Me* (2012), she traced the journey of Hanna from her childhood in Guyana to pre- and post-9/11 New York, and her struggles to come to terms with

her sexual identity and devotion to her faith.

InterACT Theatre's *All American Girl* follows Katie's path from earnest social activist to radicalized extremist.

Americans are often puzzled by news of Western young women and men who abandon the rule of democratic societies and embrace a strict, disciplined and often violent orthodoxy. Graf's exploration of this phenomenon was piqued by her fascination with the wife of the Boston Bomber, "a seemingly normal American girl from Rhode Island who converted to Islam," she explains.

"There seemed to be very little written about her. Nothing made sense. Was she involved? What did she know? How could this happen to an all-American girl?"

*All American Girl* offers a loose guide to Katie's life trajectory, but abstains from definitive cause and effects or judgment. In fact, the wonder of this play is how "Everyman" or woman Katie is.

The surprise is that this is a one-actor drama, starring in alternating performances Jeanne Syquia (whom I saw) and Annika Marks. The audience gets to know Katie through vignettes from her childhood. We



Jeanne Syquia stars in *All American Girl*.

Photo: Rich Friese

see her at 7 playing with her friends in the park. We see her at 9, when she is entranced by a charismatic evangelist whose power reduces her to ecstatic tears. "I feel that heat

of his hands protecting me. I feel the power of the Lord," Katie says.

We hear from her mother, whose presence  
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## *All American Girl*

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ence is seamlessly portrayed through the actor's quick-change voice and stance. Syquia manages a multiple cast with such skill and conviction you can almost see each character manifest on stage. Dialect coach Adam Michael assisted in helping the actor distinguish male and female characters and non-native English speakers.

From an early age, Katie is troubled by the disparity between her comfortable life and so many lives that are not. "I want to help people, just like you," she tells her mom, who worries about her daughter teaching in a rough part of Boston. "It's not fair I have so much and they don't because of an accident of birth."

She grows up and she's off to college, where she meets and is self-consciously aroused by Iqbal Ibrahim, an Indian Muslim with "skin the color of a macchiato." Their love "is a raging wave knocking us down, filling our ears and eyes with saltwater," she says.

Tethered together by their sense of justice, they begin to feel more and more helpless in the face of the injustices they see throughout the world. Katie is drawn to Islam, and to the appeal of this kind of piety. She believes the act of submission when chosen can feel empowering, and even politically empowering, free of the corruption of the West.

Syquia creates a young woman we learn to love and accept as authentic in her world even as the arc of the narrative takes a rad-

ical and irreversible trajectory. Graf offers fine details couched in a poetic rhythm that matches the sensibility of the character, expertly directed by InterACT Theatre member Anita Khanzadian.

The staging by Joel Daavid and graphic design by Olivia Weissblum provide a helpful timeline as Katie's life events unfold. The music contributes to the tone of the times, which span from 1996 to 2013.

*All American Girl* continues Wednesdays through Sundays at the Lounge Theatre in Hollywood through July 26. For tickets (\$30), call (818) 765-8732 or visit [InterACTla.org](http://InterACTla.org).