



INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

CHRISTEL DEHAAN
STUDENT MATINEE PROGRAM
at the Indiana Repertory Theatre

STUDY GUIDE

ENGLISH

انگلیسی

BY
SANAZ TOOSI

DIRECTED BY
AZAR KAZEMI

MARCH 10 - APRIL 4

Original artwork by Jake Lebowitz.





Content Spotlight

Contains profanity and complex themes of cultural identity and emigration struggles.

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REPERTORY
THEATRE

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the power of language

“English only” is the mantra that rules a classroom in Iran where four adults prepare for an English language exam. But while a new language may represent a new life, how will it alter their identities? This inspirational Pulitzer Prize winner shows that there is more to life than can be spoken in mere words. A thoughtful and heartfelt exploration of the human desire to belong.

Recommended for students in grades 7-12

*The performance will last approximately
1 hour and 30 minutes, without intermission*

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PLANNING YOUR VISIT



You, the audience, are one of the most important parts of any performance. Experiencing the theatre is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better, and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make each theatre experience enjoyable for everyone:

Leave mobile phones, cameras, and other distracting and noise-making electronic devices at home or turned off.

You may think texting is private, but the light and the motion are very annoying to those around you and on stage. Do not text during the performance.

The house lights dimming and going out signal the audience to get quiet and settle in your seats: the play is about to begin.

Don't talk with your neighbors during the play. It distracts people around you and the actors on stage. Even if you think they can't hear you, they can.

Never throw anything onto the stage. People could be injured.

Remain in your seat during the play. Use the restroom before or after the show.

Focus all your attention on the play to best enjoy the experience. Listen closely to the dialogue and sound effects, and look at the scenery, lights, and costumes. These elements all help to tell the story.

Get involved in the story. Laugh, cry, sigh, gasp—whatever the story draws from you. The more emotionally involved you are, the more you will enjoy the play.

Remain at your seat and applaud during the curtain call; this is part of the performance too. It gives you a chance to recognize a job well done and the actors a moment to thank you for your attention.

STUDENT MATINEE ARRIVAL & PARKING INFORMATION

ARRIVAL & DISMISSAL

IRT is located one-half block west of Circle Centre Mall on Washington St., between north bound Illinois St. and southbound Capitol Ave.

- The physical address of IRT is 140 W. Washington Street, Indianapolis, IN 46204.
- Buses should unload and load directly in front of the theatre. (Do not block the entrance to Embassy Suites garage.) Please plan to arrive 20-30 minutes before your performance is scheduled to begin.
- You will be greeted at the curb by an IRT Staff Member and directed to the correct entrance.
- For shows on the Janet Allen Stage, students and teachers will take the stairs to the 4th floor.
- The teacher named on the reservation should check in with the IRT Education staff member stationed in the lobby.
- Your group will be ushered to your assigned seats.
- Students and chaperones should follow instructions of all IRT Staff for your safety.

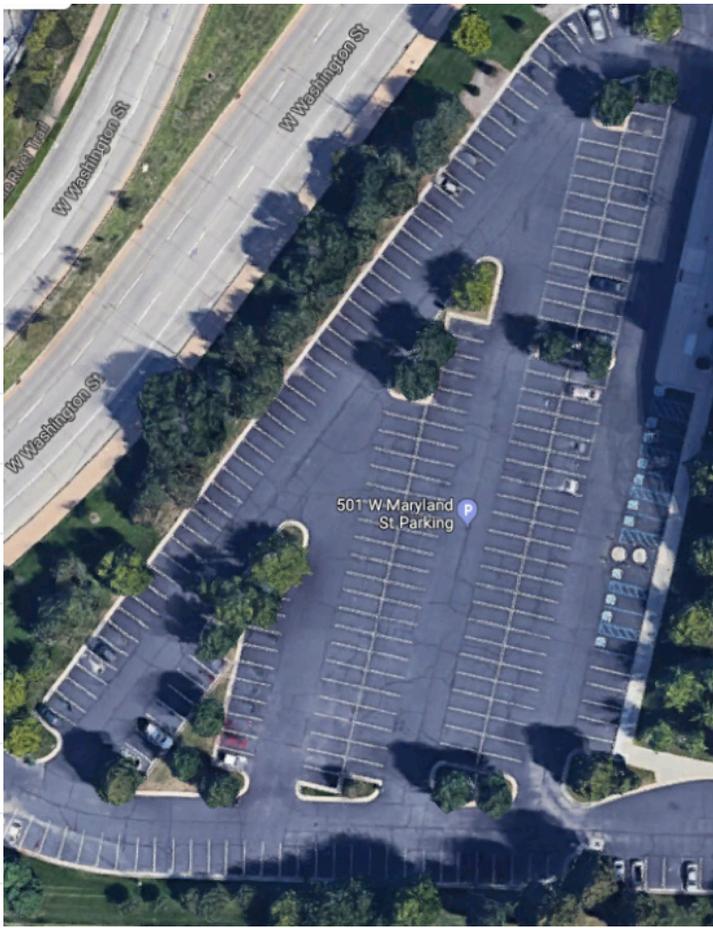
LATE ARRIVAL

If you believe that you are going to be late, please contact the IRT House Manager, Katy Thompson at 317.916.4803. Provide them with a phone number and the name of the school so that Education staff may be in contact with you.

- You can contact IRT Education (education@irtlive.com) with non-emergency information on the day of the show.

PARKING

- Buses may park for free at Victory Field unless they are having an event - we will inform you if that is the case. The House Manager will give you a parking pass for each bus when you arrive at the theatre. It should be displayed in the windshield.
- Continue east on Washington St. past the JW Marriott and turn left across Maryland St. into the Victory Field lot.
- **PLEASE NOTE that Victory Field no longer has public restroom spaces available. We apologize for any inconvenience.**
- See the map on the next page for full details.
- Additional parking options are located on the next page.
- **While IRT will make every effort to communicate parking information in advance, it is the responsibility of schools and drivers to make alternate arrangements.**



VICTORY FIELD PARKING MAP

Victory Field parking lot is located on the West side of the stadium. From IRT, continue west on Washington Street past the JW Marriott. Turn left on Schumacher Way, and cross Maryland Street into the Victory Field lot.

Some busses may need to double park in the lot. The image is of the Victory Field parking lot.

Thank you,
Indianapolis Indians and
Indiana Repertory Theatre

ADDITIONAL PARKING OPTIONS

In the event that Victory Field is unavailable for free parking, here are some other potential options. **While IRT will make every effort to communicate parking info in advance, it is the responsibility of schools and drivers to make alternate arrangements.**

402 Kentucky Avenue: This is an overflow lot for Victory Field and will be available to buses if the Victory Field Lot is full.

White River State Park: Paid surface parking is located on Washington Street, across from Victory Field. May require advance notice; event rates may apply. (*Approximately .6 mi from IRT.*)



Indianapolis Zoo: Paid parking is available on Washington Street, west of White River State Park. First come, first served. (*Approximately 1.2 mi from IRT.*)



Downtown Indy: Explore all available parking options at the Downtown Indy website. Buses are welcome to utilize street parking if all used spaces are paid.

CAR AND VAN PARKING OPTIONS

COURT STREET PARKING ENTRANCES

Court Street Garage (next to Embassy Suites)- 110 West Washington Street

Entrance on W. Washington St. headed west (turn right into garage). From Washington Street, you will turn right after Tony's and just before the IRT's marquee onto the Embassy Suites ramp.

CAPITOL STREET ENTRANCE

Court Street Garage: 33 North Capitol Avenue

Entrance on Capitol Avenue heading south (turn left into garage). From Capitol Avenue, you will turn left into the garage where the big red "PARKING" sign is. If you've passed Avis Car Rental, you've gone too far.

OPTION 1

Court Street Garage - \$12 Validation:

Ask a theatre employee for a parking voucher that will reduce your parking fee to \$12 for up to 6 hours.

Directions: When you arrive at the garage, pull a ticket, then park. Pick up a validation sticker from our Education or House Teams when entering the IRT. Upon exiting the garage, scan the original ticket you pulled when entering first; then scan the validation sticker for your discount. If an attendant is present, let the attendant know you were at IRT and show your ticket and validation sticker to receive the \$12 price.

Circle Block Garage Parking - \$12 Entrance

25 N. Illinois St.

Enter the Circle Block Garage at 25 N Illinois St. It is located on the East/Right-hand side of Illinois St (a one-way street) between Washington St and Market St.

\$12 starting 2 hours before the show and ending 2 hours after. Prepay Online - select your time and date and the system will automatically update to the \$12 rate.

Directions: The event rate for the garage starts 2 hours before the start of the show and ends 2 hours after. *(If your phone doesn't fit the paid pass code under the reader, take a screenshot of the pass and shift it around to fit the entire code under the scanner.)*

Scan here
to purchase:



OPTION 2

Court Street Garage - \$5 Prepay:

A select number of reserved spaces in the Court Street Garage may be purchased for \$5. **These spaces must be reserved and paid for more than 24 hours in advance. It will not be available on the day of the show.** First-come, first-served.

Directions: Upon entering the garage, pull a ticket, then **find a spot on level 5S in the reserved IRT spots marked as "Reserved: Permit Parking Only for IRT Premium Parkers"**. Before the show starts, find a member of our Education or House Team and tell them that you prepaid for parking and give them your name. They will provide you with a specialized validation sticker (rather than our \$12 Discount validation sticker), which you will use when exiting the garage. Upon exiting the garage, scan the original ticket you pulled when you first entered the garage; then scan the validation sticker to exit.

Note: Do not cover your garage ticket barcode with your validation sticker.

Scan here to pay
for a reserved space
for the date of your
student matinee:



**There is no parking available
at the Circle Center Red
Garage at this time.**

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

IndyGo's Red and Purple Line, the city's rapid bus transit system, connects Broad Ripple, Fountain Square, and the City of Lawrence to the heart of downtown and other neighborhoods in Indianapolis. With buses running every 10-20 minutes and a stop directly next to the IRT on Capitol Avenue, the Red and Purple Lines provide another convenient option for your transportation to the Theatre.

To plan your trip or for more information about the Red Line and other nearby routes, visit IndyGo.net or call IndyGo Customer Service at 317.635.3344.



INDIANA STATE STANDARDS

Seeing a performance of *English* at Indiana Repertory Theatre is a great way to help make connections for students and facilitate their understanding of a text. Some key academic standards to consider on your trip can be found by scanning this QR Code:



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

SANAZ TOOSI



Sanaz Toossi is an Iranian-American playwright from Orange County, California. Her plays include the critically acclaimed, award-winning *English* (co-production Atlantic Theater Company/Roundabout Theatre Company) and *Wish You Were Here* (Playwrights Horizons; Williamstown/Audible, released 2020). She is currently under commission at Atlantic Theater Company (Launch commission; Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation grant), Roundabout Theatre Company, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Manhattan Theatre Club, South Coast Repertory, and Oregon Shakespeare Festival (American Revolutions Cycle). In television, Sanaz recently staffed on *Invitation to a Bonfire* (AMC); *A League of Their Own* (Amazon); *Five Women* (Marielle Heller/ Big Beach); and sold an original idea, *The Persians*, to FX with Joe Weisberg & Joel Fields attached as Executive Producers. Sanaz is a member of Youngblood and the Middle Eastern American Writers Lab at the Lark, and an alum of Clubbed Thumb's Early Career Writers' Group. She was the 2019 P73 Playwriting Fellow, a recipient of the 2020 Steinberg Playwright Award, and the 2022 recipient of The Horton Foote Award. MFA: NYU Tisch.

Source: [Pulitzer.org](https://www.pulitzer.org)

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Character descriptions and structure of the play

It's 2008 in Karaj, Iran, in a classroom, we meet the five characters.

THE TEACHER

MARJAN: 44 years old. She instructs adult students who intend to take the TOEFL, or Test of English as a Foreign Language. After living in Manchester, England for nine years, she is back in Iran to share her love of the English language. Her accent has traces of both American and British English.

THE STUDENTS

ELHAM: 28 years old. She is taking the TOEFL with hopes of attending medical school in Australia. Elham is preparing to take the exam for the sixth time. She prefers speaking in Farsi over English, and she has a very thick Iranian accent.

ROYA: 54 years old. A grandmother, Roya is preparing to visit her son and granddaughter in Canada. Her young granddaughter is being raised in an English-speaking household, and Roya is studying English in order to better communicate with her. She has a noticeable accent.

OMID: 29 years old. Omid is studying for a U.S. Permanent Resident (also known as a “Green Card”) interview. He grew up with American cousins and has knowledge of many English-speaking movies and celebrities. Of all the students in class, Omid has the broadest English vocabulary, and he has the lightest accent among the class.

GOLI: 18 years old. She is the youngest student in the class, and often the most enthusiastic. She has wanted to speak English since she was a child. Goli has a light and sweet accent.

Each scene of the play takes place on a different day throughout a six-week period. The breakdown of each week looks like this:

Scene One	Week 1: Monday
Scene Two	Week 1: Wednesday
Scene Three	Week 1: Friday
Scene Four	Week 1: Office Hours

The play's structure continues this way for six cycles, representing the six weeks of the course. Using vocabulary-building games, show-and-tell presentations, conversation drills, and practice exams, Marjan and her four students explore the pitfalls and possibilities of learning English. She encourages, challenges, and celebrates them as they reflect on language and culture in a country that remains misunderstood by many people across the globe.

A PEEK INSIDE THE SCRIPT

In the preface to her play, Sanaz Toossi writes:

“In the world of the play, when a character is speaking English, the audience will be hearing accented English. In the world of the play, when a character is speaking Farsi, the audience will be hearing unaccented English. [Dialogue in brackets] is to be communicated nonverbally, sometimes because the character does not know the word in English, but not always.”

In order to clearly tell this story to the audience, the script provides a roadmap for the lines of dialogue, dictating whether or not they should be spoken with an accent. In the script, spoken English is bolded, and an actor would use an accent. Text that is not bolded represents Farsi being spoken, so the actor would use no accent. For example:

GOLI. Okay, so I – English okay here I go –

(Holds up an eyebrow pencil.)

This is pencil

Pencil for eyebrow

I want [thick, glam] big eyebrow but I take too much hair when I am young

This pencil is for make not real hairs

You do like *(She haphazardly fills in one of her eyebrows.)*

Uh. Okay.

This is not good I need mirror

MARJAN. You need *a* mirror.

GOLI. I need a mirror oh my god this is super boring I’m so sorry

The stylistic choice, made by the playwright, clues the audience in on how each character feels about speaking English, and their comfort level with the language they are learning versus their native language.

PROVIDING CONTEXT: IRAN IN 2008



City of Karaj

The play takes place in Karaj, a large city in northern Iran, just outside of the country's capital, Tehran. At the time of the play, 2008, there is much political and socio-economic tension, mostly due to Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a right-wing president who is determined to uphold the values of previous conservative Supreme Leaders. Under Ahmadinejad's rule, it is considered threatening behavior to speak out against government oppression, and many politically minded citizens have fled the country in protest or in fear of retribution for voicing their opinions.

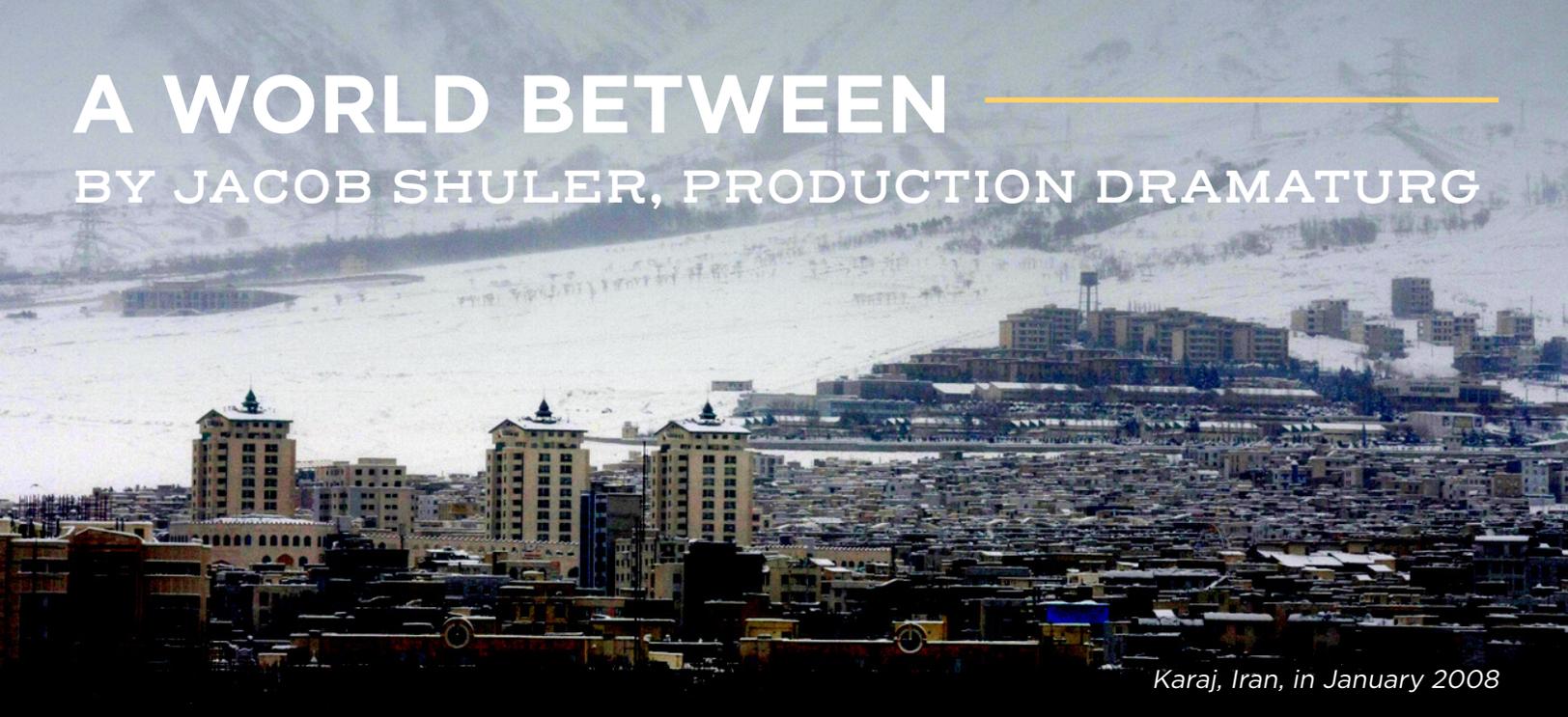
Around the same time, the United Nations Security Council, with leadership from the US Government, has placed economic sanctions on oil production in Iran amid rumors of the country developing nuclear weapons with its natural resources. This leads to several years of economic turmoil: inflation, unemployment, and continued political unrest.

In Toossi's *English*, it's possible that the friction in 2008's Iran may influence the learning goals of some of the characters—and it may not. What is happening outside of Marjan's classroom doors affects the students' lives contextually; however, in the world of the play, each character has their own reason for learning English and using it as an access point to a personal goal.



A WORLD BETWEEN

BY JACOB SHULER, PRODUCTION DRAMATURG



Karaj, Iran, in January 2008

English is a play that exists in a world between. The play exists in a world between languages; English and Farsi. It exists in a world between lands; Iran and... somewhere else. And the play exists in a world between times.

2008 in Iran was a time between elections. In September, when we set our start, the March 2008 parliamentary elections had just passed and the June 2009 presidential elections were on the horizon. That latter, looming vote will spark a movement in the country that illuminates a lot about the time of the play (and what's happening today).

But before we get into it, do we need to get into it? It's easy to understand and enjoy *English* without the political context. A part of the brilliance of Sanaz Toossi's work is the humanity of her characters, whose relationships and responses to the circumstances around them tell you everything you need to know about their world. So why get into it?



Sanaz Toossi by Tori Ferenc
for the Financial Times

IS SANAZ TOOSI A “POLITICAL WRITER?”

In a podcast interview with fellow Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lynne Nottage, Sanaz Toossi reflected on the label:

“I would say, no, why am I a political writer? And why aren't white writers political writers? Why do they get to just write about the small, specific thing that is the human experience? Why do you need to talk about the Green Revolution in Iran in the program for my play? Even though I do think you should. [...] In terms of content of the play, yes, in some way, the political circumstances are dictating the action in the room so it – yes, it must be a political play. And by that criteria, are not most plays political as well? That's where I find the tension. And that's why I don't know that I can give an answer.”

So because Sanaz Toossi said we should talk about the Green Revolution, let's talk about the Green Revolution:

WHAT WAS THE GREEN REVOLUTION?

Within Iran's theocratic republic, democratic process has existed and been exercised (within limits). At the time of the 2009 election, Iranians had voted an average of once per year since the Islamic Republic was established 30 years prior—more frequently than any other country. And reformist opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi was looking primed to overtake incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in June.

But when the outcome of the election favored Ahmadinejad by 63%, Mousavi and fellow opposition candidates called for their supporters to protest the result. Many did, and wore green; the color of the Mousavi campaign. This movement grew into the Green Revolution.

And the republic responded with brutality. Thousands were imprisoned and dozens killed in the suppression of the protests. Included in these casualties was 26-year old Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot in the street by the state one week after the election results. Her death was caught on film and the graphic video circulated via social media as “a symbol of dissent against the regime.” Of Soltan, family said that she was taking “private classes to



2009 by Behrouz Mehri—AFP/Getty Images

become a tour guide, including Turkish-language courses [...] She also loved music, especially Persian pop, and was taking piano lessons.”

The Green Revolution changed something in the chemistry of Iran. Although state violence quelled much of the movement on the surface, the spirit of revolution remained an undercurrent throughout the years that followed. So, too, remained the systems of suppression, censorship, and control by the Islamic Republic.

But at the time of *English*, the Green Revolution is yet to come. Before President Ahmadinejad was re-elected, Iran had already been under his administration for four years. And socio-economic pressures from his presidency were prompting many to hope (and vote) for change.

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN AHMADINEJAD'S IRAN IN 2008?

First elected in 2005, ultra-conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad imposed a hard-liner era for education and a recommitment to the original vision of the Islamic Revolution. His presidency pushed back on freedoms that had expanded (within limits) during the previous administration.

In November 2008, a group of 60 Iranian economists penned an open letter that was shared online and on state television. The letter cited:

“Meager economic growth, widespread jobless rate, chronic and double-digit inflation, crisis in capital markets, government’s expansionary budget, disturbed interaction with the world, inequity and poverty have combined with the global economic downturn.”



Tehran 2009 (Associated Press / The Spokesman-Review)

The upcoming election offered an opportunity to address these issues. And that potential prompted repression, that prompted protest, that prompted further repression from the state. A report from Amnesty International represents this this time:

“In common with previous elections, especially in recent years, the months preceding the vote saw increased repression, particularly against members of Iran’s religious and ethnic minorities, students, trade unionists and women’s rights activists. The lack of freedoms in the lead-up to the poll cast a shadow on the presidential election itself. Until the broadcast of televised debates between presidential candidates, debate was restricted in state media – as was the free exchange of information, both essential conditions for the exercise of the right to vote.

Most candidates were disqualified, including all women, leaving just four to contest for the presidency [...] Despite the crackdown, millions of Iranians, especially the young who make up the majority of the population, exercised their right to vote. The live televised debates between the candidates had sparked interest in the election and mobilized many thousands to peaceful rallies, which saw young people dancing in the streets. People also found new ways of exchanging ideas and organizing activities to circumnavigate the restrictions, turning to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and using SMS messaging.”

Then one month before the election, Facebook was banned by the state and a text-message system the Mousavi campaign developed to verify the vote was shut down. This crackdown on communication fueled suspicion in the lead-up to the election in June.

But 2008 doesn't only exist between these two elections. The world of *English* is the product of a deeper history. 2008 in Iran also exists, for us the audience, as a point in time between the 1979 Revolution and today.

HOW DID THE 1979 ISLAMIC REVOLUTION CHANGE IRAN?

Before the Revolution, Iran had been a monarchy since the American-backed coup of democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 (a history, itself, worth examining). The monarch of the monarchy was the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. And in the late 1970s, Pahlavi was facing pushback on his social and economic policies. An international oil crisis exacerbated the administration's already-inequitable financial management. And some blamed the Shah's social modernization and western influence.

People protested peacefully, but an escalating series of violent clashes with Pahlavi's police ended up pushing him out of Iran and into exile. In, then, came Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini was a cleric who had been exiled himself for speaking out against the Shah in 1964. But in 1979, he returned to Iran where he claimed the title of Supreme Leader of the new Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini imposed an immediate veiling law and bans on music, alcohol, and other social freedoms. Schools and universities were shut down for years to undergo an Islamization of the curriculum and the gendered segregation of spaces.

And while Iran's people had asked for change, this wasn't what many had in mind. Emigration from Iran to the United States spiked in 1978 and 1979; 10% of the entire diaspora in the 50 years between 1969 and 2019. Sanaz Toossi's second play, *Wish You Were Here*, documents this time through the complex experiences of 5 women who question staying or leaving Iran over the years. Of the play's characters and the real women who inspired them, Toossi said:

“I hear obnoxious, cacophonous laughter. The decrescendo of that laughter is the central loss of this play. But it does not define the play. These women do not need your pity, nor do they want it. But they demand to be seen in their full humanity, as do all refugees, immigrants, and almost-migrants, no matter what part of the world they're from. People everywhere — beautifully, tragically, obviously — strive for normalcy?”

The play bridges the Revolution and the war that followed. In 1981, Iraq's president Sadaam Hussein invaded the country's western border. The War was waged, on paper, to suppress the threat of a similar uprising in Iraq. But the perceived weakness of a country experiencing revolution and oil fields along the western border also presented an enticing opportunity. The War lasted until 1988 and escalated to missile attacks in the cities and the use of chemical weapons that lingered long after the ceaseful was signed.

By the end of the decade, the Revolution and War had radically transformed the country; socially and economically—on the inside, and on the world's stage.



And because we're talking about a world between, the play prompts us to consider current events along this continuum of history; from 1979, to 2008, to today:

HOW DO THESE HISTORIES RELATE TO WHAT'S HAPPENING TODAY?

Sanaz Toossi was compelled to write *English* as a response to the 2017 travel ban. The ban prohibited entry to the United States to visitors from 7 muslim-majority countries. Beyond the direct impact of this order, it also endorsed and encouraged discrimination and xenophobia against people from these places. And in 2026, a more restrictive ban now at least partially-prohibits travel from 40 countries and territories including Iran.

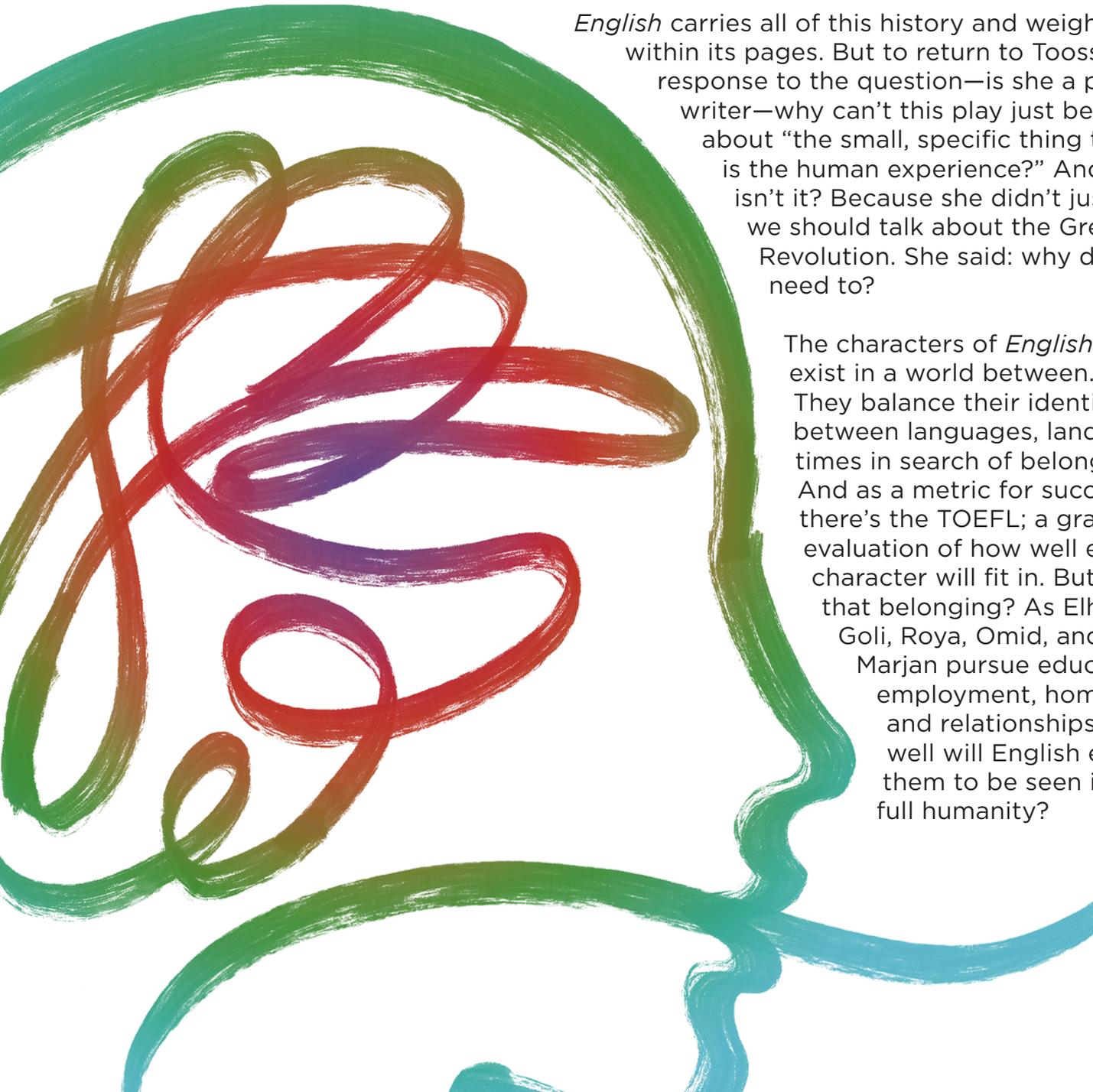
At the same time, the United States increased sanctions against many of the same countries. In a new book, *How Sanctions Work: Iran and the Impact of Economic Warfare*, Iranian-American anthropologist Narges Bajoghli and her co-authors write:

“Consider Iran, the most sanctioned country in the world. Comprehensive sanctions are meant to induce uprisings or instigate pressure that leads to a change in the behavior of the ruling establishment, or a lessening of its hold on power. But after four decades, Iran has shown the opposite to be true. In fact, despite periodic protests, sanctions have strengthened the Islamic Republic, weakened and impoverished its population, and increased Iran’s military posture vis-à-vis the US and its allies in the region. It is not only that the Islamic Republic is still around despite harsh sanctions; most importantly, Iran has become a more belligerent state as a result of increased American sanctions.”

In Iran, the realities of these external sanctions mixed with an internal mismanagement of funds once again pushed people out to the streets to make their voices heard. And those voices were once again met with brutality by the state. This time, however, the severity of that brutality has been both underreported and unprecedented. Greater than the Green Revolution and even the Islamic Revolution have been the casualties of these past months.

And while the Green Revolution was largely a movement for change within the system, a wider populace is now asking for an end to the Islamic Republic itself. But while many (though not all) are critical of the current regime, there are varied visions for what should come next. And decades of western interference echo through many of the potential outcomes.

Today, as war unfolds in the region and the regime as we've known it unravels, the people and their lived experiences hang in the balance. In Iran and across the globe, the destabilization of foreign governments stands in contrast to the dehumanization of the people who leave their countries in exile or to find other opportunities in America and elsewhere.



English carries all of this history and weight within its pages. But to return to Toossi's response to the question—is she a political writer—why can't this play just be about “the small, specific thing that is the human experience?” And isn't it? Because she didn't just say we should talk about the Green Revolution. She said: why do we need to?

The characters of *English* exist in a world between. They balance their identities between languages, lands, and times in search of belonging. And as a metric for success, there's the TOEFL; a graded evaluation of how well each character will fit in. But is that belonging? As Elham, Goli, Roya, Omid, and Marjan pursue education, employment, homes, and relationships; how well will English enable them to be seen in their full humanity?

PERSIAN: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

ENDONYM

a common, native name or term for a person, group of people, geographical location, dialect, or language used inside or among a particular group; it is how they identify or designate themselves or a place of origin, or a language.

At the center of *English* lies another language—Persian, also known by its endonym, Farsi, by native speakers. While Persian may be simple to define, under its etymology lies a story of survival—a vestige of an ancient empire that has persisted through fragmentation and conquest to continue to be spoken to this day. There is a deep connection between Persian and Iranian pride; the language in its way is synonymous with Iranian identity. By exploring Persian’s history and character, a clearer picture emerges of the ties between a language and its people.

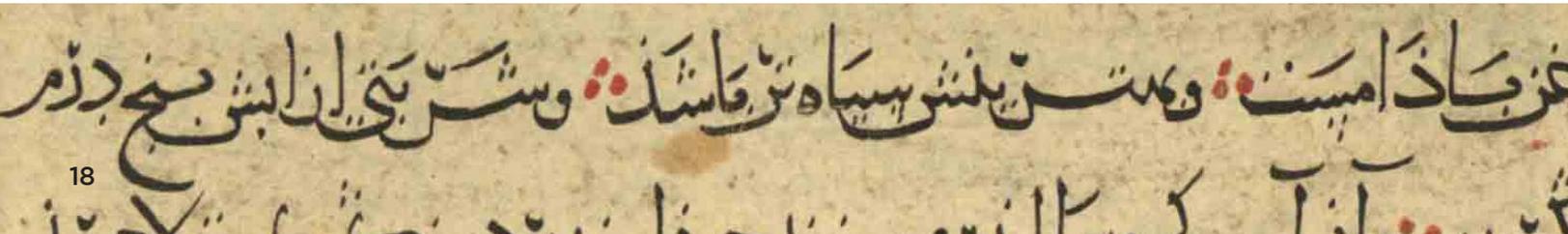
Persian is an ancient language, dating back 3000 years to the Achaemenid Dynasty in present-day Iran. With the rise and fall of each empire in the region, its written form evolved until the Muslim conquest in the late ninth century, at which point the language took on some Arabic words and, more notably, an adapted Arabic script to become the Persian used today.

This shared script, however, is where the similarities between Arabic and Persian end. Arabic is an Afroasiatic language, a member of the group of languages covering North Africa and the Middle East, while Persian is Indo-European, part of the family of languages covering South Asia and Europe.

PERSIAN ALPHABET

ا / آ	alef	ā, a, e, o	ص	sād	s
ب	be	b	ض	zād	z
پ	pe	p	ط	tā	t
ت	te	t	ظ	zā	z
ث	se	s	ع	'ayn	'
ج	jim	j	غ	ḡayn	ḡ(gh)
چ	če	č (ch)	ف	fe	f
ح	he	h	ق	qāf	q
خ	xe	x (kh)	ک	kāf	k
د	dāl	d	گ	gāf	g
ذ	zāl	z	ل	lām	l
ر	re	r	م	mim	m
ز	ze	z	ن	nun	n
ژ	že	ž (zh)	و	vāv	v, u
س	sin	s	ه	he	h
ش	šin	š (sh)	ی	ye	y, i

*Letters that are not found in the Arabic alphabet are marked in red.





Persian as spoken in Iran today is a simpler, more homogenized form of its ancient predecessor. Persian is also quite simple grammatically compared to other languages. For instance, there are no pronouns used in the language, which could explain why characters in the play may be corrected when using “he/she” in English. To say it another way, Persian as a language is functional and uncomplicated by design.

The language’s logical structure has also led to its preservation. Ancient Persian empires, namely the Sassanid kingdom, covered a vast amount of land with many different ethnogroups and cultures. Learning Persian was relatively quick and became one of the few characteristics that united these groups under a Persian identity, which remained during the Arab takeover (the 7th century expansion of Islam into the region.) Without this language, the Persian identity

would have split across tribal and cultural lines, and the newly in-charge Rashidun Caliphate would have been left without a kingdom to control. To this day, most of the various tribal clans of the Sassanid kingdom consider themselves Persian, and the language is a major contributor to that nationalistic sentiment.

Persian has lasted millennia across other kingdoms, dynasties, and religions. It has united multiple groups and created a unique identity in the Middle East that is intentionally and defiantly not Arab, which is a separate ethnic identity referring to people from the Arabian peninsula and surrounding regions. Persian identity is deeply tied to language. The character journeys in *English* are given additional weight as students are not just gaining a new language, but a new identity.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

TOEFL – (pronounced “toe-ful” or “taw-ful”) - an abbreviation for “Test of English as a Foreign Language.” It’s a standardized test that measures proficiency in the English language for non-English speakers. While primarily used by prospective international students aiming for admission to English-speaking universities, it is also taken by learners whose goal is citizenship in English-speaking countries, those looking to expand job opportunities, and more. Students are tested on reading, speaking, listening, and writing in English. Originally created as a paper test in 1964, nearly all TOEFLs are now administered and taken online. In 2024, the average score for the TOEFL was 86 out of 120.

Farsi – the most widely-spoken language of Iran. Farsi is also commonly known as Persian language. (see article on page 8)

Green card – an immigration document also known as a Permanent Resident Card. Green cards grant holders the opportunity to live and work in the US indefinitely. Some cards have no expiration date, while some require renewal after 10 years.

Visa – an immigration document that is used in tandem with a passport that allows travelers to enter another country for a specific purpose, such as work, travel, or study. In the US, visas have stricter duration and activity limitations on the holder’s time than green cards.

Manchester – a large city in the Northwest region of the United Kingdom with a population of about 550,000 residents.

Dual citizen – a person who is recognized by governments as a citizen of two different countries at the same time.

MCAT - The Medical College Admission Test, a standardized exam required for admission to many medical schools in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Caribbean Islands. It assesses problem-solving, critical thinking, and scientific knowledge relevant to the study of medicine.

Persian Empire – refers to a series of empires centered in modern-day Iran, spanning from the 6th century BCE to the 20th century CE.

Cyrus the Great - the founder of the Achaemenid Empire in 550 BCE, which is considered the establishment of the Persian Empire.

Tehran – the capital of Iran with 15 million people living in the larger metro area.

Karaj – a city in Iran with a population of 1.6 million people.

City of Tehran



POP CULTURE AND MEDIA

Christiane Amanpour

a British-Iranian journalist and television host. She is the Chief International Anchor for CNN, and in 2007, she was named Persian Woman of the Year.

Indiana Jones

Famously portrayed by Harrison Ford, Indiana Jones is a fictional archaeologist featured in a series of films of the same name, highlighting Jones's passion for history, action, and adventure.

Muriel's Wedding

a 1994 romantic comedy film starring Toni Collette.

Love Actually

a 2003 romantic comedy film starring Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, and many other well-known British actors.

Fergie

pop singer made famous by her hits "Fergalicious" and "London Bridge" as well as her time with the pop group the Black-Eyed Peas.

Julia Roberts

American actress who has starred in such films as *Pretty Woman*, *Erin Brockovich*, and *Notting Hill* (alongside Hugh Grant).

Hugh Grant

British actor who starred in such films as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Love Actually*, and *Notting Hill* (with Julia Roberts).

Willy Wonka

a character from a fantasy story written by Roald Dahl about a child's visit to a chocolate factory, later made into two popular films, one starring Gene Wilder and one starring Johnny Depp.

Ricky Martin

Latin pop singer made famous by hits "Livin' la Vida Loca," "Cup of Life," and "She Bangs".

Borat

a fictional reporter from Kazakhstan played by British actor Sacha Baron Cohen.

George W. Bush

The 43rd President of the United States, in office from 2001-2009.

BBC America

An American basic cable network that broadcasts TV series, films, and news.

Al Jazeera

a 24-hour news channel that is headquartered in the Middle East and broadcasts in both Arabic and English.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, WR

1. This play explores characters' relationships to their language. Do you have a relationship with another language besides English? How did you learn that language? What were some challenges that came with learning it?
2. Using Toossi's stage directions of the setting, draw/design your own version of the set for this play: *"a windowed classroom with a whiteboard, TV, and a desk on which a boombox sits. On the chalkboard, in lovely handwriting, is written: TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language."*
3. *English* takes place over 6 weeks. Besides dialogue, how does the audience know time has passed? What are the clues from the costumes, props, and set that show a week has gone by?
4. Think about one of the classrooms at your school. What is in that room to help you learn? Is there anything extra that isn't necessary? What is missing that would help you do your best work?
5. How important is an individual's name, and who gets to decide on one's name? What is YOUR full name? What do you like to be called? How important is it to you?

For example:

Marjan, who was called "Mary" by people in Manchester.

Roya's son, Nader, who goes by "Nate" in his voicemail greeting.

Roya's granddaughter, Claire (a name Roya cannot pronounce).

6. Imagine you are learning another language. What item would you use for Show-and-Tell? What English vocabulary words might be difficult to explain about this item in another language?
7. Do you have an accent? Have you been told that you have one? How does that accent affect your speech, your self-expression, or even the way that others might perceive you?

WRITING PROMPTS, & ACTIVITIES

8. Playwright Sanaz Toossi says that writing plays is her way to “bridge a gap between my Iranian-ness and my American-ness.” Why might it be important to bridge gaps in knowledge, culture, or identity? Do you identify with two different cultures that you could bridge?
9. The characters often talk about a sense of belonging. Where do you feel you most belong?
10. *English* takes place 18 years ago. Research the social and political climate in Iran and its relationships to other parts of the world in 2008 and today. Report how things have or have not changed.
11. Farsi is often written as a part of Persian art. Study Persian calligraphy and try your hand at writing your name.
12. Write a review of the play. A well-rounded review includes your opinion of the theatrical aspects—scenery, lights, costumes, sound, direction, acting—as well as your impressions of the script and the impact of the story and/or themes and the overall production. What moments made an impression? How do the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound work with the actors’ performances of the text to tell the story? What ideas or themes did the play make you think about? How did it make you feel? Did you notice the reactions of the audience as a whole? Would you recommend this play to others? Why or why not? To share your reviews with others, send to: education@irtlive.com

RESOURCES

WATCH

[Language and Identity: *English* by Sanaz Toossi](#)

[Sanaz Toossi, Tala Ashe, and More Discuss “English” on Broadway](#)

[What is life really like in Iran? | 60 Minutes Australia](#)

READ

[The Complete Guide to the TOEFL Test](#)

[Iranian Revolution | Summary, Causes, Effects, & Facts | Britannica](#)

[Myth vs. Fact — American Iranian Council](#)

[Sanaz Toossi on Bringing Her Pulitzer Prize-Winning Play ‘English’ to Broadway | Vogue](#)

[AMERICAN THEATRE | Sanaz Toossi: Can We Talk?](#)

The Lion Women of Tehran, by Marjan Kamali

Reading Lolita in Tehran, by Azar Nafisi

Funny in Farsi, by Firoozeh Dumas

Wish You Were Here, by Sanaz Toossi

Americanized: Rebel without a Green Card, by Sara Saedi

LISTEN

[How The 1979 Revolution Transformed Iran : Fresh Air : NPR](#)

[Sanaz Toossi and Lynn Nottage: The Politics of Playwriting | Pulitzer on the Road](#)

[One’s Personality Dissolves in a New Language Like a Sugar Cube in Tea —
from *A Way with Words*](#)

[Speaking ‘English’ With Sanaz ... - Stagecraft with Gordon Cox - Apple Podcasts](#)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[Pulitzer on the Road Podcast: Season Two, Episode Four: Sanaz Toossi and Lynn Nottage: The Politics of Playwriting](#)

[Neda Agha Soltan 1983 - a symbol of Iranian dissent](#)

[From the archives: Family, friends mourn 'Neda,' Iranian woman who died on video](#)

[Iran: Election contested, repression compounded - Amnesty International](#)

[Playwright's Perspective: Sanaz Toossi](#)

[Economists in Iran criticize Ahmadinejad - Los Angeles Times](#)