

Alliance Theatre

institute

Study Guide

ENGLISH

Created as part of the Dramaturgy by Students program
by: Liz Davis, Head of Secondary Curriculum & Partnerships



Obie Award Winner

2023 Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama

By: Sanaz Toossi

Directed by: Shadi Ghaheri

August 16 – September 17, 2023

Hertz Stage

Best enjoyed by audiences 14+

Recommended Grades: 9-12

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Georgia Standards of Excellence

English Language Arts

- ELAGSE9-10RL2: Determine a theme and/or central idea of text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- ELAGSE9-10RL3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- ELAGSE9-10RL4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone.)
- ELAGSE11-12RL1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- ELAGSE11-12RL3: Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

Theatre Art

- TAHSA.CN.2 Examine the role of theatre in a societal, cultural, and historical context.
 - a. Examine and apply theatrical theories, performances, and conventions from a variety of theatrical literature, historical periods, and cultures.

Dramatic Writing

- TAHSTL.RE.1 Evaluate various aspects of dramatic arts literature using appropriate supporting evidence.
 - a. Compare and summarize theatre literature from various historical periods, cultures, and styles.
 - b. Develop and apply a set of comprehensive criteria for theatre text analysis.
- TAHSTL.CN.1 Connect film, television, and theatre literature to its dramaturgical contexts and other disciplines.
 - a. Research and explain how cultural and historical factors have influenced playwrights and theatre literature.

Modern Languages (Level I)

- MLI.INT1 The students demonstrate understanding of simple spoken and written language presented through a variety of media in the target language and based on topics such as self, family, school, etc. The students:
 - A. Identify main ideas and some details when reading and listening.
 - B. Comprehend simple, culturally authentic announcements, messages, and advertisements.
- MLI.INT2 The students interpret verbal and non-verbal cues to understand simple spoken and written messages in the target language. The students:
 - A. Differentiate among statements, questions and exclamations.
 - B. Recognize basic gestures, body language, and intonation that clarify a message.

Synopsis

“English Only” is the mantra that rules one Iranian classroom where four adults are learning English in preparation for the TOEFL — the Test of English as a Foreign Language. Passing the test might be the key to better opportunities — a green card, medical school admission, or family reunification.

Playing out in awkward lessons of word games and mistranslations, *English* is both a comedy of miscommunication and a look at the ways speaking a new language can expand your world and limit your identity. A hit in its 2021 New York premiere, *English* was described as, “a rich new play, both contemplative and comic” by *The New York Times* and was awarded the 2023 Obie Award for Best New Play staged Off-Broadway over the last two years. *New York Theatre Guide* called it, “a buoyant comedy and probing exploration of what it means to speak and feel understood.”

Source: <https://www.alliancetheatre.org/production/2023-24/english>

About the Playwright: Sanaz Toosi



Sanaz Toosi 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.

Biography and Photo Source: <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/sanaz-toosi>

Learn More:

- [Playwright Sanaz Toosi Is Making Theater in Her Own Image](#) (Vogue; article by Marley Marius; April 29, 2022)
- [Sanaz Toosi on Her Pulitzer: ‘This Signals to Iranians Our Stories Matter’](#) (New York Times; article by Michael Paulson; May 9, 2023)

About the Director: Shadi Ghaheri



Shadi Ghaheri is a theatre and Film director, choreographer and writer from Tehran, Iran based in New York City. She graduated from Yale School of Drama with a MFA in Directing. She has directed *Tosca* (Heartbeat Opera), *Selling Kabul* (Signature Theatre), *Conduct of Life* (SUNY Purchase), *Threshold of Brightness* (BMP), *Memorial* (NYU Tisch), *Banned*, (*Broadway Bound*), *Glimpse* (Rattlestick), *Mother Courage* (Hunter College), *Tosca Tehran* (Rough Draft), *Fen* (Columbia University), *Untitled* (Rattlestick Theatre), *Lucretia* (HERE), *Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (Williams College), *Shahr-e-Farang* (Spectrum NYC), *The Girl is Chained*, *Death of Yazdgerd*, *Titus Andronicus*, and choreographed *Passion* (Yale School of Drama), *The Slow Sound of Snow* and a trio devised movement pieces named, فریادا, *Butterfly's Terror*, and *Post Scream and Terror* with all-female company (Yale Cabaret).

As Co-Artistic Director of the 2017 Yale Summer Cabaret, Shadi co-curated a four-play season entitled *Canon Balle*, directing Ellen McLaughlin's *Trojan Women*, and *LEAR* by Young Jean Lee. As an assistant director, Shadi has worked with Evan Yionoulis at Yale Repertory Theatre on *Cymbeline*.

In 2019, Shadi co-founded [Emruz Festival](#). She co-curated a six-day Festival of Theatre, Music and short film created by Iranian artists. Later, in summer of 2019 Shadi co-curated a series of play reading written by Immigrant playwrights named, *Immigrant MixFest* at Atlantic Theatre Company. Her new play, *TOSCA TEHRAN* was one of five plays at the festival.

She is one of the co-founders of [Peydah Theatre Company](#)

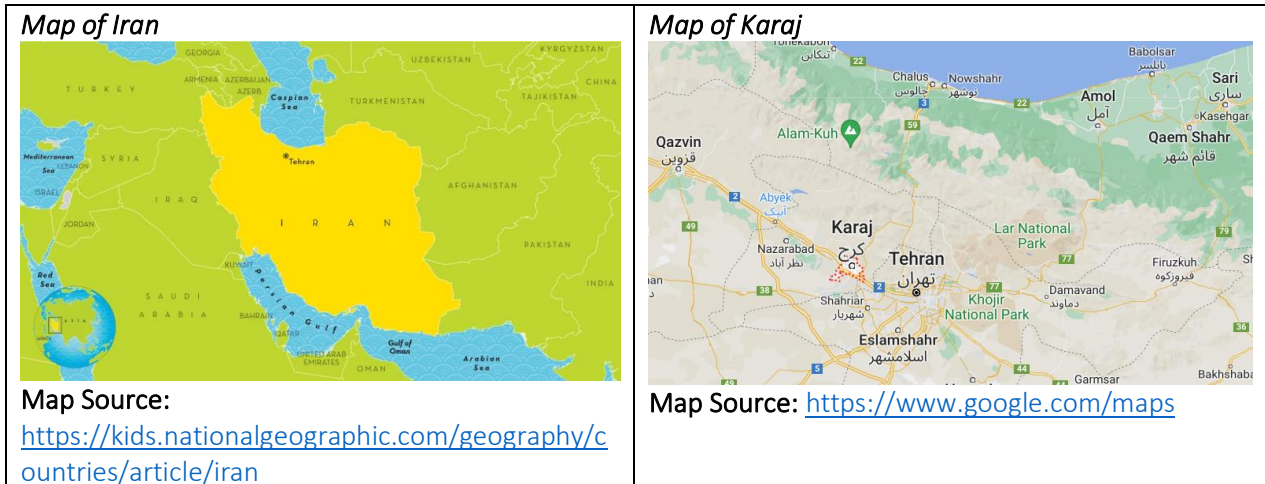
Shadi received her BA from Shahid Beheshti University in Business Administration, where she ran its Theatre Club as the first female president and produced *Art*, by Yasmina Reza and *A Stranger Walking in My Room*, a collage of three monologues by August Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, and Harold Pinter. She originated an adaptation of *The House of Bernarda Alba* in 2011 in Tehran that was banned due to censorship. For several years, Shadi has been doing theatre workshops with children refugees under age of 18 from Afghanistan who are working under terrible conditions in Iran.

Shadi is a 2016 Paul and Daisy Soros Fellow . She was recognized as SDC Student Director Initiative Honorable Mention in the 2013 Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. Shadi was the directing fellow 2018-2019 at Rattlestick Playwright Theatre and the winner of Robert L.B. Tobin Director-Designer Showcase, Opera America 2019.

Biography and Photo Source: <https://www.shadighaheri.com/about>

Setting

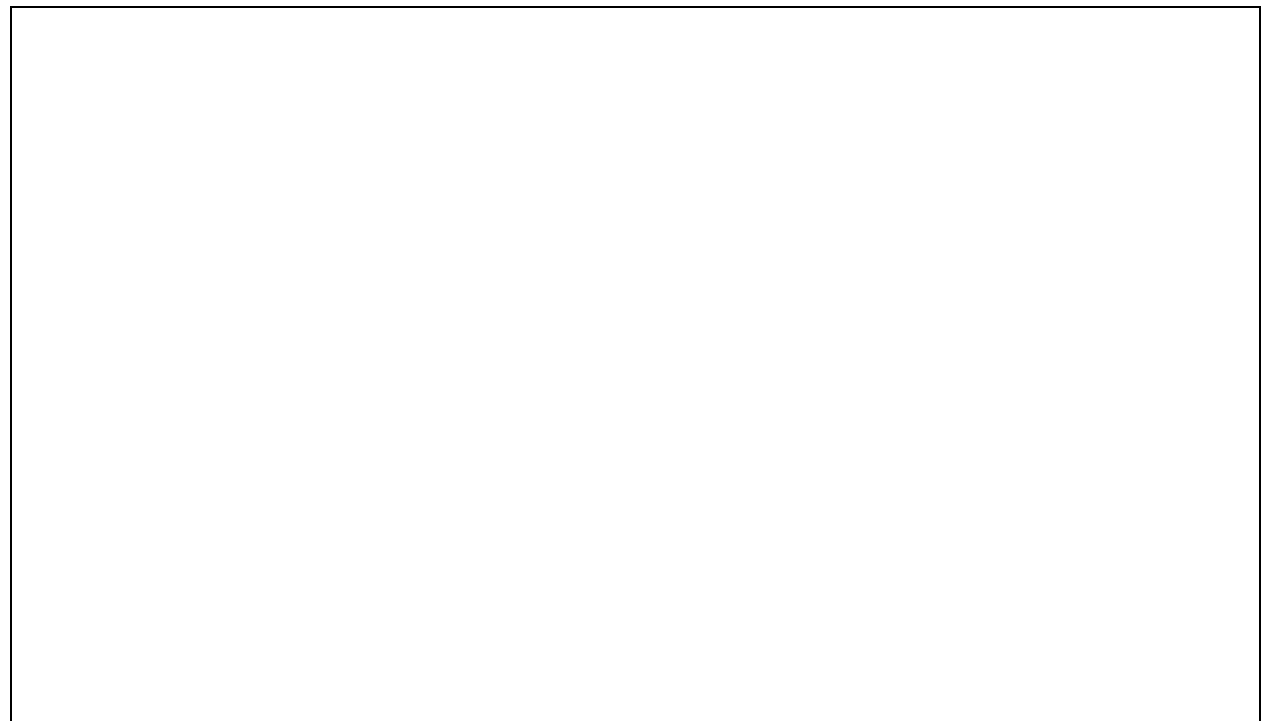
ENGLISH is set in Karaj, Iran in 2008.



Set Rendering:

Illustrate a set rendering based on the information we encounter in the Prologue:

“(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.)”



Vocabulary

Word (Part of Speech)	Used in Context	Definition
Dispersed (verb)	"Skill level needs to be dispersed evenly in a classroom." (page 10)	to separate and move apart in different directions without order or regularity; become scattered
Discreet (adjective)	"I should have been more discreet." (page 12)	respecting privacy or maintaining silence about something of a delicate nature
Bootleg (noun)	"If you want a newer video, I can find a bootleg for you." (page 14)	something, as a recording, made, reproduced, or sold illegally or without authorization
Alleviate (verb)	"Yes I want to help to alleviate! To alleviate... pain." (page 22)	to make easier to endure; lessen; mitigate
Native (adjective)	"In this room, we are native speakers." (page 31)	belonging to a person by birth or to a thing by nature
Prickly (adjective)	"He's getting prickly about it." (page 35)	full of troublesome points
Vigorous (adjective)	"I won't apologize for my displays of affection, however vigorous." (page 36)	energetic, forceful
Redeeming (adjective)	"Because in English, you won't have redeeming qualities." (page 36)	offsetting or counterbalancing some fault, defect
Repulsive (adjective)	"Tell me, Marjan, what is it about where we're from that you find so repulsive?" (page 44)	causing repugnance or aversion
Relents (verb)	"The class relents. The song is unapologetically Iranian." (page 45)	to soften; become more mild, compassionate, or forgiving
Depleted (adjective)	"I'm depleted. This is coming from a person who's taken the MCAT." (page 52)	Exhausted
Prosperity (noun)	"May you live a thousand years of prosperity!" (page 58)	a successful, flourishing, or thriving condition
Rigorous (adjective)	"The test is more rigorous some years." (page 73)	rigidly severe or harsh, as people, rules, or discipline
Proficient (adjective)	"I am more than proficient. I am it says superior." (page 75)	well-advanced or competent

Source: <https://www.dictionary.com/>

Allusions


Key Concepts

Word or Phrase	Description
TOEFL	Administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test to measure English language ability. The test has four sections — Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking — plus a 5-minute, unscored Personal Video Statement. It takes about 1.5 hours to complete. Source: https://www.ets.org/toefl/test-takers/essentials/content.html
Visa	“A citizen of a foreign country who seeks to enter the United States generally must first obtain a U.S. visa, which is placed in the traveler’s passport, a travel document issued by the traveler’s country of citizenship.” Source: https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/visa-information-resources/frequently-asked-questions/what-is-us-visa.html
Green Card	“Having a Green Card (officially known as a Permanent Resident Card (PDF, 1.69 MB)) allows you to live and work permanently in the United States. The steps you must take to apply for a Green Card will vary depending on your individual situation.” Source: https://www.uscis.gov/green-card
Farsi	“Persian is an important language of the Middle East and Central Asia. It is known as Farsi in Iran, Dari in Afghanistan and Tajik in Tajikistan. It has about 62 million native speakers, ranking it among the world’s 20 most widely spoken first languages; another 50 million or more speak it as a second language.” Source: https://www.bu.edu/wll/home/why-study-persian/
MCAT	“The Medical College Admission Test® (MCAT®) is a standardized, multiple-choice examination designed to assess your problem-solving, critical thinking, and knowledge of natural, behavioral, and social science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.” Source: https://students-residents.aamc.org/about-mcat-exam/about-mcat-exam
Dual Citizen	“Having dual citizenship, also known as dual nationality, means being a citizen of the United States and another country at the same time.” Source: https://www.usa.gov/dual-citizenship



Photo Source: <https://blog.edpuzzle.com/teaching-today/prepare-students-for-standardized-testing/>

Technology

Word or Phrase	Description
VCR	<p>“video cassette recorder (VCR), electromechanical device that records, stores, and plays back television programs on a television set by means of a cassette of magnetic tape.”</p> <p>Source: https://www.britannica.com/technology/videocassette-recorder</p>
CD	<p>“compact disc (CD), a molded plastic disc containing digital data that is scanned by a laser beam for the reproduction of recorded sound and other information.”</p> <p>Source: https://www.britannica.com/technology/compact-disc</p>
Boombox	 <p>“a usually large portable stereophonic radio and tape or CD player”</p> <p>Source: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/boom%20box Photo Source: https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2413481/say-anythings-boombox-scene-almost-featured-a-very-different-song</p>





Fictional Movies & Characters

<i>Indiana Jones</i>	<i>Muriel's Wedding</i>	<i>Love Actually</i>	Willy Wonka	Borat
American Film 1981	Australian Film 1994	British Film 2003	Title Character from Roald Dahl Book 1964 & Film 1971	Title Character from Film 2006
				



Source: imdb.com

- Indiana Jones – Raiders of the Lost Ark: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082971/>
- Muriel's Wedding: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0110598/?ref=fn_al_tt_1
- Love Actually:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0314331/?ref=nv_sr_srsrg_0_tt_8_nm_0_q_love%2520actua
- Willy Wonka:
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067992/?ref=nv_sr_srsrg_0_tt_7_nm_1_q_willy%2520wo
- Borat: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443453/?ref=fn_al_tt_1

Celebrities

Name	Photo	Description
Julia Roberts		<p>Popular American actress from Smyrna, GA. Well-known for her roles in <i>Pretty Woman</i> (1990), <i>My Best Friend's Wedding</i> (1997), <i>Notting Hill</i> (1999), <i>Erin Brockovich</i> (2000), and many other beloved films.</p> <p>Source: Julia Roberts: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000210/?ref=fn_al_nm_1</p>
Hugh Grant		<p>Popular British actor well-known for his roles in <i>Four Weddings and a Funeral</i> (1994), <i>Notting Hill</i> (1999), <i>Music and Lyrics</i> (2007).</p> <p>Source: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000424/?ref=nv_sr_srsrg_0_tt_0_nm_8_q_hugh%2520</p>
Ricky Martin		<p>Musician and actor from Puerto Rico. His singing career started with the boy-band group Menudo, and he became an international superstar with the release of his self-titled album in 1996.</p> <p>Source: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005193/?ref=nv_sr_srsrg_0_tt_4_nm_4_q_ricky%2520martin</p>
Fergie		<p>Musician and actress from Hacienda Heights, CA. Born Stacey Ann Ferguson, she was a child star on the television show <i>Kids Incorporated</i> and later joined the band The Black Eyed Peas.</p> <p>Source: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0004914/?ref=nv_sr_srsrg_0_tt_3_nm_5_q_fergie</p>

Political & Historical Figures

Name	Photo	Description
George W. Bush		<p>"George W. Bush, America's 43rd President (2001-2009), was transformed into a wartime President in the aftermath of the airborne terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001."</p> <p>Source: https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/george-w-bush/</p>
Cyrus the Great		<p>"Like many ancient rulers, the Persian conqueror Cyrus the Great (ca 590– ca 529 B.C.), also known as Cyrus II, was born of royalty... Cyrus ruled the Achaemenid dynasty and expanded his ancestral realm into a mighty empire. He triumphed not just through conquest, but also by showing singular tolerance and mercy to those he defeated."</p> <p>Source: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/cyrus-the-great</p>

Character Analysis

ENGLISH features the following characters:

MARJAN – the teacher; 44; light accent; was taught American English

ELHAM – a student; 28; very thick accent; bulldozes through English

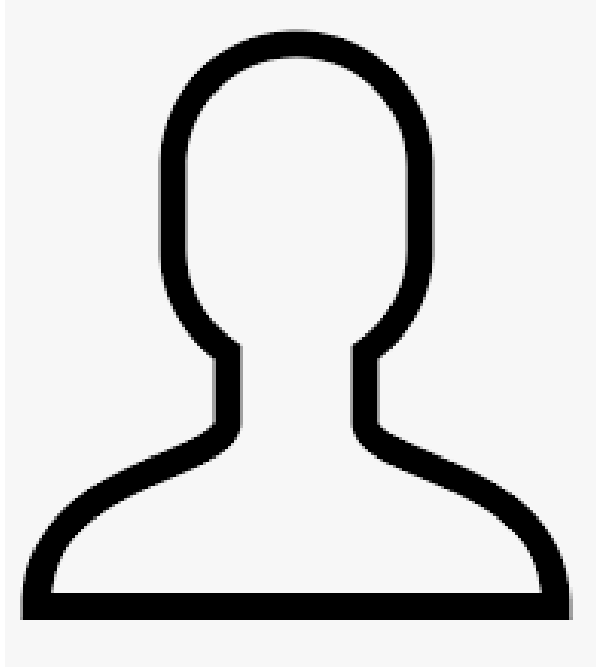
ROYA – a student; 54; thick accent

OMID – a student; 29; barely detectable accent

GOLI – a student; 18; light, sweet accent

Analyze one of those characters, below.

Character Name: _____

 <p>Source: https://www.visualpharm.com/free-icons/gender%20neutral%20user-595b40b85ba036ed117dd34c</p>	Motivation <i>Describe the character's multiple or conflicting motivations – what do they want?</i>
	Development <i>How does the character grow or change throughout the play?</i>
	Relationships <i>How does the character interact with other characters?</i>
	Plot or Theme <i>How does the character advance the plot or develop a specific theme?</i>

Pre-Show Discussion Questions



Photo Source: <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/brain-wires-native-language-neurons>

1. How many languages do you speak?
 - Do you have an accent?
 - If so, how would you describe it?
2. Which language(s) would you like to learn?
 - How would proficiency in reading, writing, and/or speaking a new language impact your life?
3. Have you ever ignored a phone call from a family member (such as a parent or caregiver)?
 - Why did you ignore the call?
 - Do you routinely ignore that person's calls, or was it a one-time exception?
 - How do you think that person would feel if they knew you had ignored the call?
4. Have you ever quit (a club, an activity, learning something new)?
 - Why did you start that activity?
 - What made you decide to stop?
5. Where do you feel you most belong?
 - Describe a moment or situation in which you felt you truly "belonged."

Pre-Show Journal Prompt



Photo Source: <https://www.mk3creative.com/blog/show-and-tell/>

In *ENGLISH*, the characters utilize "Show and Tell" to practice speaking English. Imagine you are learning a new language, and you have been given this assignment.

- What object or item would you bring from home to "Show and Tell"?
- What would you share about that object or item? (At least 3-5 sentences).
- Which 3-5 vocabulary words from your description might be challenging in a new language?

Post-Show Discussion Questions

1. As an audience member, describe your experience/response to Sanaz Toossi’s creative approach to language:

“This play, with a brief noted exception, will be heard in English.

Bolded dialogue signifies that a character is speaking English.

Nonbolded dialogue signifies that a character is speaking Farsi.”

2. How important is an individual’s name, and who gets to decide on one’s name?

- Consider: the characters.
 - Marjan, who Americans called “Mary.”
 - Consider Roya’s son, Nader, who goes by “Nate” in his voicemail greeting.
 - Consider Roya’s granddaughter, Claire (a name she cannot pronounce).
- Consider: your own name.
 - What is your full name, and what does it mean?
 - What do you like to be called, and why?

3. Return to page 18 – specifically, Goli’s analysis of Ricky Martin’s song, “She Bangs.”

- What makes this moment so poetic and beautiful?
- Compose an additional, metaphorical description of being in love.

4. What does Omid mean when he confesses, “All my life, I’ve felt half a thing?” (page 68).

5. Respond to the conclusion of the play – how does it end for Marjan, and what can we learn from her character arc?

Post-Show Journal Prompt

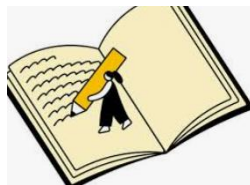



Photo Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/29/at-home/now-is-the-time-to-start-keeping-a-journal.html>

A teaching philosophy is a statement that explains an educator's perspective on teaching and how they will apply that perspective to their practice and classroom. Compose a teaching philosophy statement (1-3 paragraphs) from the point of view of Marjan.

Consider:

- What motivates her to teach English?
- Which life experiences inform her teaching most?
- What does she value?
- What does she reject?
- How does she view her relationship with students?

Costume Design

	<p>About the Costume Designer Afsaneh Aayani is an Iranian/American multidisciplinary artist. She graduated with her MFA in Scenic Design from University of Houston in 2020 and her BFA from Art University Of Tehran in 2010. She has created work around the United States, Iran, China, Poland, Sri Lanka, and Germany. She has received multiple national/international awards for design, puppeteering, puppetmaking, and directing.</p> <p>To learn more, visit: www.afsanehaayani.com.</p>
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Renderings:



▲ Renderings for Elham's costume, created by and courtesy of Afsaneh Aayani.

Questions & Answers

1. How has it been to work on a story so close to your own lived experience? How has that informed your design process?

I've honestly really been enjoying the process. I was in Iran in 2008, so it's not just doing online research or finding photos of random people, but also going back through pictures of myself, my family, and my friends. It's been a really nostalgic experience that has also resulted in an authentic design for the show. In fact, one of the characters is styled similarly to my mom — you can see a bit of her in the final production onstage. Generally, all of the costumes you will see are reminiscent of the people I was surrounded by at that time in my life. To me these aren't just fictional characters, these are people I know and have lived with.

2. Is there one thing — a special detail or exciting nuance — that you are hoping audiences will notice in your design?

"As the show progresses, the colors, patterns, and styles change with each of the characters as we unravel their story, their truth. I hope the audience notices or at least can feel this transformation for each of the characters and can enjoy the story within the story we are trying to tell."

Source:

"SEAMS LIKE DESTINY: A Conversation with Costume Designer Afsaneh Aayani" by Assata Amankeechi, Spelman Leadership Fellow

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