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# INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



AVAAZ آواز

Illustration by Kyle Malone

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# INSIDE OUT

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## ***Avaaz***

Written and Performed by **Michael Shayan**  
Directed by **Moritz von Stuelpnagel**

**OCT 4 – NOV 17**  
SINGLETON THEATRE

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# PLAY SYNOPSIS

Meet Roya, our fabulous hostess, as she welcomes you into her home to celebrate Nowruz, the Iranian New Year. She's preparing a feast, but the main attraction is Roya sharing her great American journey from Tehran to "Tehrangelles," California. Roya wants us to know how she got here—walking back through the most painful and poignant moments of her life, sorting through the good and the bad in honor of the season of reflection and rebirth. Get ready for the time of your life with this hilarious and deeply personal tribute to the playwright's mother, exquisitely portrayed by the person who knows her best — her son.

## CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Roya Navai: hostess extraordinaire, mama of an Ivy League alum, daughter of Tehran and Tehrangelles, and of course, star of the show. She'll be our guide through the traditions of Nowruz... and through any stories that might occur to her along the way.

## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Michael Shayan is an Emmy Award-nominated, Iranian-American writer, performer and illusionist from "Tehrangelles," CA. He was recently recognized on *Out Magazine's* prestigious OUT100 list of the "most impactful and influential LGBTQ+ people." Shayan makes his Denver Center debut with *Avaaz*, kicking off a national tour after a sold-out, record-breaking run at Olney Theatre Center.

Shayan's upcoming play *Cruising*, directed by Tony Award nominee Robert O'Hara, will premiere on Audible in 2025. His other plays have been produced and developed by The Geffen Playhouse, South Coast Repertory, La MaMa, New York Stage & Film, Ojai Playwrights Conference, Rattlestick, and The Lark, among others. He has received fellowships from the Sundance Institute, Sun Valley Writers Conference, Theatre Aspen and Lambda Literary, and held residencies with The New Harmony Project, SPACE on Ryder Farm and Stillwright. He was a writer and Consulting Producer on the Emmy-winning *The Book of Queer* (MAX). He studied playwriting at Harvard University and received a Masters in Playwriting from Brooklyn College. At thirteen, he was the youngest performer in the history of the Hollywood Magic Castle. @michaelshayan

In his interview with *Out Magazine*, Shayan remarked "I come from a culture where people like me can't exist, and art gave me a way to imagine new possibilities for myself, my family, and my intersectional communities... I hope that my queerness, my Iranianness, my Jewishness ripples out into the world with my work and helps empower others to make their own ripples."

## AS IT IS SUNG

Avaaz, also written *āvāz*, is a Farsi word for song. In the playwright's definition, *avaaz* means "a song as it is being sung." It is derived from a Farsi term meaning "to voice, utter, or speak."

Avaaz is often specifically used in reference to a classical Persian singing style, characterized by improvisational, non-metric verses. A traditional *avaaz*, therefore, requires its singer to exercise immense creativity and musical virtuosity, on the spot. The lyrics are often based on works by Rumi, Sa'di, and other classical Persian poets.

A traditional *avaaz* may proceed as follows:

1. An orchestral prelude, usually with a fixed meter
2. A section of instrumental improvisation that emphasizes the skill of the musician.
3. The main body of the performance: a solo singer improvising along predetermined melodic lines
4. A composed song with a fixed meter
5. A dance piece

Michael Shayan's play similarly moves between the planned and the unplanned; the steady and the syncopated. Roya has a straightforward plan (to introduce us to Nowruz, of course) but it is the improvisational rhythm of digression and discovery that guides the body of her story—her song. The nature of solo performance puts us (and Roya) entirely at the mercy of her thoughts, *as she thinks them*—of her memories, *as she remembers them*—and all we can do is trust that her virtuosity will carry us to the finale of the *avaaz*.

## THE MOTHER PLAY

In an interview with NPR last May, playwright Paula Vogel explained that her most recent work—a Broadway run of *Mother Play*—is "her homage to the many mother plays written by men." She was referring to *The Glass Menagerie*; *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; those classics of autobiographical dramatic fiction written by men

who felt, at least in part, that Mother was to blame. But where Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill found fuel for timeless tragedy, Vogel's take adds a layer of forgiveness: it is laced with empathy for the circumstances that made Mother *Mother* in the first place.

Michael Shayan's *Avaaz* picks up Vogel's baton and runs. Shayan explores his relationship with his mother while embodying her, making his empathy physical, literal, and necessary. And his mother-character may criticize his body, but she does so while residing in it. The structure of the performance makes mother and son fundamentally inseparable, which means that any rift between the two is a devastating fracture, indeed.

But a tragedy Shayan's play is not. Here, *Avaaz* is a departure from the traditional mother play in genre as well as form. Roya is as dazzling as she is earnest, and Shayan hands her an entire evening to tell her story, her way, while he applies himself to the telling. If he dissents, he must do so through all her layers of charm. For the mother play, it is a new, loving evolution.

## NEW DAY, NEW YEAR: NOWRUZ

The Solar Hijri Calendar is one of the oldest solar calendars in use. It is also the most accurate. Unlike the rule-based Gregorian Calendar, popular across the U.S. and the globe, the Solar Hijri Calendar uses precise, ongoing astronomical observation—specifically, the number of days between equinoxes—to determine its distribution of leap years with impressive accuracy. It is the official calendar of Iran.

*Nowruz* is the Iranian New Year: the first day of spring in the northern hemisphere. It is a largely secular holiday in Iran today, though it has roots in a religion called Zoroastrianism and has been celebrated for over 3,000 years across the Middle East, Central Asia, and eastern Europe. Since 2009, *Nowruz* has been recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Festivities symbolize and celebrate reflection, renewal, and rebirth. In Farsi, *Nowruz* means “new day.”

Preparations for *Nowruz* begin weeks in advance with spring cleaning, described in Farsi as “shaking the house.” On the last Wednesday before the new year, during a celebration called *Chaharshanbe Suri*, people light firecrackers and fireworks, and participants leap over bonfires to symbolize cleansing misfortune and inviting light in before the new year. Then, families gather around the *Haftsin* table to await the moment of the equinox—*tahvil*—and the 13 days of *Nowruz* to follow.

### The Seven Ss of the Haftsin Table

The *Haftsin* table is traditionally laid with seven items—seven is a lucky number—each item symbolizing a hope for the new year:

1. *Sabzeh*: Sprouted wheat grass. For renewal and rebirth.
2. *Somagh*: Spice from a red berry. For sunrise and celebrating a new day.
3. *Serke*: Vinegar. For patience and wisdom.
4. *Seer*: Garlic. For good health.
5. *Samanu*: Sweet wheatgrass pudding. For fertility and affluence.
6. *Sib*: Apple. For beauty.
7. *Senjed*: Dried lotus tree fruit. For love.

Additional meaning may be added by personalizing the *Haftsin* table with any of these:

- A Mirror: for reflecting on the year passed
- A goldfish in a bowl: for new life
- An orange in a bowl of water: symbolizing the earth
- Decorated eggs: for fertility
- Coins: for prosperity
- Books of poetry or religious texts: for spirituality

Once the *Haftsin* table is laid, it is time to welcome in the spring and the new year with 13 days of feasts, music, dancing, poetry readings, and family gatherings. On the 13th day, *Sizdah Bedar*, people head outside to picnic, play pranks (similar to April Fools' Day), and toss out the *Sabzeh*—the sprouts from the *Haftsin* table that have been collecting all the bad luck in the house since day one—so that the new year may begin, in true *Nowruz* spirit, with renewal and rebirth.

## THE LEGACY OF PERSIA

At its largest, the Persian Empire—known, at the time, as the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BCE)—stretched from Libya to India. Encompassing approximately 44% of the global population, it was one of the world's first superpowers. The name “Persia” is an exonym (a name given to a group by an outside force), first used by the Greeks. Many dynasties and centuries later, in 1935, Reza Shah officially requested that foreign delegates refer to

the country of Persia—the direct descendent of the ancient empire—as Iran, which is its Farsi name. The legacy of the Persian Empire is tangible; here are just a few of its marvels that we encounter today:

**Air Conditioning:** Windcatchers—*bâdgir*—are tower-like structures built into the roof of a building, made to “catch” incoming wind and displace hot air with the cooler air that enters and sinks to the base of the tower. It’s possible the concept originated in Egypt, but it was notably improved in Persia when combined with the qanat irrigation system for additional cooling. Windcatchers have recently seen renewed interest as an emissions-free cooling mechanism.

**Algebra:** Improved and modernized by Persian mathematician Muhammad Ibn Musa al-Khwārizmī. His book, *The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing*, systematically explained linear and quadratic formulas for the first time, put forth a series of algorithms that contributed to the creation of modern computers, and was the unification of thought that algebra needed to become a widely used—and understood—branch of mathematics.

**Backgammon:** Its Persian name is *nard*, and while the origins of the game remain fuzzy, the basic characteristics of the modern game board were around in Persia as early as 2000 BCE. It is one of the oldest board games still played today.

**Guitar:** Medieval Spain’s *guitarra latina* is often credited as the predecessor of the modern Guitar. The *guitarra latina* is believed to have evolved when the Persian *chartar*—a four-stringed, waisted instrument—arrived in Spain.

**Highways:** Emperor Darius the Great ordered the construction of the Persian Royal Road, building on and connecting road networks from previous civilizations, and establishing a continuous highway from Susa to Sardis; that is, from western Iran to western Turkey (around 1,500 miles). The highway was later used and expanded upon by the Roman Empire.

**Human Rights:** The Cyrus Cylinder, an inscribed clay document of royal propaganda, describes the rule of Cyrus the Great, who, by his own account, peacefully conquered Babylon, liberated slaves, established religious freedom, and expanded the rights of all his subjects. It is the first (known) recorded charter on human rights.

**Large-Scale Postal Service:** Once the Royal Road was operational, the empire developed a horseback-relay messenger system on an unprecedented scale, able to transport mail to and from opposite sides of the empire in nine days, rather than the three or so months it would take on foot. The unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service—*Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds*—is based on a description of the Persian postal system.

**Monotheism:** Evidence of the belief in a single, universal deity goes back at least as far as Egypt in the 1350’s BCE, but Zoroastrianism, beginning in Persia around 4,000 years ago, is often credited as the first *fully established* monotheistic religion, and is one of the oldest religions still practiced today.

**Refrigeration:** A clay dome called a *yakhchal*—ice pit, in Farsi—stored ice and preserved food at low temperatures using evaporative cooling. This allowed frozen desserts, like predecessors of sorbet and *fāloodeh*, to be served year-round in Persia, as early as 550 BCE.

## JEWS IN IRAN, THE PERSIAN DIASPORA, AND “TEHRAN-GELES”

The history of the Jews in what is modern-day Iran goes back 2700 years to Biblical times, traversing periods of exile and oppression (the Jewish holiday of *Purim*, for example, celebrates Queen Esther’s efforts to foil a plot to murder all the Persian Jews in the 6th Century BCE). More recently, pre-Revolution Iran was the most prosperous and open era for the country’s Jewish population. As many as 150,000 Jews lived in Iran during the Shah’s reign. After the 1979 Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the vast majority of the country’s remaining Jews fled Iran; today, fewer than 10,000 Jews live there.

Millions of non-Jewish Iranians left the country in the wake of the Revolution as well, immigrating to a variety of countries. Of an estimated 4 million Iranians living abroad, the United States is home to the largest diaspora population.

### Tehrangelles

Welcome to Tehrangelles! Tehran? Los Angeles? ...You get it? This neighborhood used to be known as Westwood, LA, but since it’s home to the largest Iranian community outside Iran, “Tehrangelles” has been a better fit since the 80’s. Now, one in ten Iranian immigrants around the world lives in southern California.

According to research by UCLA, the Iranian immigrant population that began forming in LA in the 1970’s was mostly made up of Iranian religious minorities, including Baha’is, Armenian Christians, and Jews. The United States at the time was also a popular study-abroad destination for Iranian higher-education students, especially engineers. During and after the revolution in 1978-79, many students chose to remain in the U.S., and many of their families chose to join them, often settling in already-established Iranian communities... like Westwood, LA.

Now, Tehrangelles is a hub of Iranian American culture. Signs are written in both English and Farsi. Restaurants serve kabobs, fresh baked flatbread, *reshteh* soup, *shirazi* salad, eggplant dip, cucumber yogurt, hot tea, white

rose ice cream, saffron pistachio ice cream, *fāloodeh* (a noodle dessert, similar to sorbet), *bomeeyeh* (a Persian donut), and more.

Every spring, Nowruz celebrations color the town with flowers, and many businesses set up their own Haftsin tables. The Farhang Foundation partners with UCLA to host a massive Nowruz celebration: “It is the most colorful and lively Iranian event of the year. Picture horns blaring, dancers twirling, bright silk garments, and friends and families rejoicing.”

#### **Iranian American Community Data**

##### **Farsi and English:**

Farsi-speakers in the United States: approx. 1,000,000

English-*only*-speakers in the United States: approx. 241,000,000

Total U.S. population: approx. 337,000,000

*In other words, about 71.5% of the U.S. population only speaks English, and 0.3% (at most) speak Farsi.*

Farsi-speakers in Los Angeles: approx. 50,000

Total Los Angeles population: approx. 3,820,000

*In other words, about 1.3% of people in Los Angeles speak Farsi.*

##### **Education:**

Iranian immigrants, 25+, with bachelor’s degree or higher: 59%

U.S. born citizens, 25+, with bachelor’s degree or higher: 33%

##### **U.S. Immigration:**

Iranian immigrants who entered U.S. before 2000: 57%

Iranian Americans with immediate family in Iran: 47%

Iranian Americans concerned for the safety of family in Iran: 90%

## HAYEDEH

Roya’s favorite singer, Hayedeh, was in London when the Revolution began and did not realize that she would never make it home to Iran. Hayedeh was one of the most popular singers in Iran in the 1970’s. She was featured on Radio Tehran and performed live and on National Iranian Television, singing traditional Persian music and songs with more modern and international influences. She was invited to perform in France and in London, and Frank Sinatra described her voice as “magical.” After the revolution, since women were no longer allowed to sing in public, Hayedeh remained in the U.K., and then moved to the U.S. to continue her singing career. She landed in Los Angeles in 1982 and began performing at the Tehran Cabaret. She soared in popularity with the immigrant community in LA, in part because she produced up-beat, celebratory dance songs in Farsi, and in part because her more somber works expressed a common grief over leaving Iran.

An excerpt from *Ashiyuneh* (“Home”), translated from Farsi to English:

I came from the other side of the world to this place  
Don't tell me the world is beautiful, I don't see that  
Still, there is sorrow in my heart, it is a strong torment  
Don't tell me not to cry  
Don't tell me life is short  
  
Which nocturnal mourn? Which nightly summon?  
Which spell and magic? Which romantic prayer?  
From this side of the world to that side of the world  
Would lead me to my home, would lead me to my beloved  
Would lead me to me to me beloved, would lead me to my beloved

The Iran-Iraq War delayed many expat Iranians who’d hoped to return home after the revolutionary dust had settled—including Hayedeh. She continued to perform abroad, in Tel Aviv, at the Royal Albert Hall (for Nowruz!), on stages and television networks in southern California. Her music videos made their way, illegally, into Iran, and passed hand to hand between fans. Twenty-nine years after Hayedeh died, the LA City Council formally honored her, and every April—around her birthday—people gather in LA to celebrate her life and music.

# AVAAZ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Pre-Performance Questions

1. What does the term “American Dream” mean to you? Has the definition of the American Dream changed from generation to generation; from culture to culture; or is it the same for everyone? Is the American Dream attainable? Why or why not?
2. How do the choices we make influence our lives? Which moments become more important and do their importance change over time?

## Post-Performance Questions

1. How do the scenic elements of set design, costuming, lighting, and sound help tell the story? Which element left the most significant impression on you and why?
2. How would you describe the relationship between the playwright and his mother? How does the performance of the actor as his mother enhance the story being told?
3. How would you describe the different stages of Roya’s life? What obstacles did she encounter and how did she navigate them?
4. What are Roya’s expectations about her arrival in the United States? In what ways does her perception change?
5. How is the celebration of Nowruz used by the playwright to help tell the story? How are the Haftsin table and its items utilized in the telling of the story?
6. In what ways do we continue to celebrate our cultural heritage through rituals and traditions when we’re in a new country?

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First two paragraphs courtesy of Olney Theatre

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