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INSIDE OUT

A DEEP DIVE FOR PATRONS



Illustration by Kyle Malone

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INSIDE OUT

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Editor: Suzanne Yoe

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English

By **Sanaz Toossi**

Directed by **Hamid Dehghani**

APR 17 – MAY 31

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PLAY SYNOPSIS: *ENGLISH*

“English Only.” This one rule governs language instructor Marjan’s classroom, where she teaches four adult students outside of Tehran. Together, they leapfrog through a linguistic playground, chasing fluency through a maze of word games, listening exercises, and show-and-tell sessions.

They hope that one day English will make them whole. But it might be splitting each of them in half. Sanaz Toossi’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *English* is a disarmingly funny and tender play about the foibles of language and miscommunication.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

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

PLAYWRIGHT & DIRECTOR BIOS

Sanaz Toossi, Playwright

Sanaz Toossi is an Iranian-American playwright from Orange County, California. Her plays include the critically acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize-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), and *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, the 2022 recipient of The Horton Foote Award and, most recently, the 2023 recipient of the Best New American Play Obie Award. MFA: NYU Tisch

Hamid Dehghani, Director

Hamid Dehghani is an Iranian theatre director, playwright, and actor. Recent directing credits include *English* (Goodman Theatre, Guthrie Theater), *Selling Kabul* (Northlight Theatre), *The Life You Gave Me* (Boise Contemporary Theater), and *Baba* (Amphibian Stage). In Iran, he wrote and directed *From the Environs of Milad* and *Sohrab’s Transgression*, and directed *Nathan and Tableth* and *Leila*. During the pandemic, he co-founded Grass Studio Theatre, creating outdoor work for Chicago audiences. Awards/Training: Princess Grace Award in Theatre; directing and playwriting awards in Iran; MFA, Northwestern University; BA and MA, Tehran University of Art.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

by Hamid Dehghani for the Denver production

These days, Iran appears in the news mostly through the language of crisis: war, repression, destruction, and fear. We see distant images of cities, explosions, and uncertainty. We hear about lives interrupted or lost, about people struggling under forces far larger than themselves. But what we rarely see are the intimate human spaces inside those headlines: a classroom, a conversation, a private longing, a quiet act of reinvention.

English takes us into one of those spaces.

Set in a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) class in Iran, Sanaz Toossi's play invites us into a world that exists quietly inside the larger realities we hear about in the news: a classroom where people gather, speak, hesitate, and try to express themselves in a language that is not their own. But that journey is never simple. To learn a new language is not only to memorize words. It is to feel your sense of self begin to shift. It is to discover that your humor, your confidence, your intelligence, even your soul can feel harder to express. And yet many people choose that path because they are searching for a life that feels more possible.

That experience is deeply personal to me. I began learning English in Iran as part of my effort to come to America, study theatre, and build a new life. What I thought would take a short time became years of struggle. I built my days around English, and gradually I began to feel how profoundly language could reshape one's sense of self. In a new language, I often felt less articulate, less funny, and less fully myself than I was in Persian. At times, English no longer felt

like the solution; it felt like the problem. And yet, over time, I came to understand that this struggle was not separate from me, but part of who I was becoming: someone living between languages, between worlds, carrying one identity while slowly building another. Even my accent became part of that journey — not something to hide, but something that carried its own history, texture, and truth.

That is one of the reasons this play moves me so deeply. Although it is rooted in the lives of these Iranian characters and in the complicated relationship each of them has with language, it speaks to something universal: the desire to be seen, heard, understood, and accepted. It is about language, but also about belonging, identity, and the fragile, complicated process of finding and becoming oneself.

At this particular moment, that feels especially important. *English* offers American audiences a chance to encounter Iranian people not through politics, statistics, or distant images of crisis, but through their humanity — their humor, intelligence, insecurity, tenderness, and dreams. In the language of theatre, it creates a space of connection. It brings the lives of Iranian people close to an audience here in Denver and reminds us how much we share with one another.

I hope that when audiences leave the theatre and later hear news about Iran, they carry with them not only images of conflict, but a deeper sense of the people living inside those headlines — who they are, what they hope for, and what they are struggling to protect within themselves.

A Q&A WITH THE PLAYWRITER

*Roundabout Theatre Company Teaching Artist Leah Reddy spoke with playwright Sanaz Toossi about her work on *English*.*

LEAH REDDY (LR): What is your theatre origin story? How did you come to playwriting?

SANAZ TOOSI (ST): I was a weird theatre kid, so I had always loved and gravitated to theatre. After I graduated college, I had a bit of a meltdown; I felt my life going in a direction that scared me. So I decided to take a leap.

LR: What inspired you to write *English*?

ST: A lot: the disrespect for immigrants, my own insecurities over my English and Farsi-speaking abilities, how devastating it is not to be understood.

LR: I'm struck by the approach you took to having the characters - all of whom are native Farsi-speakers - speak unaccented English to indicate that they're speaking Farsi, and accented English when they're speaking English in the play. Can you tell us how you landed on this approach?

ST: I'd played with this conceit before when trying to write a family drama. I grew up in a bilingual household, and I felt that for an audience to truly empathize with my (native Farsi-speaking) characters, I couldn't actually write dialogue in Farsi, because the Farsi would act as a barrier to understanding the characters' inner lives. I've changed my mind about this. I love hearing different languages onstage. It certainly does not keep me from engaging. And in a way, I was reinforcing the notion of non-English as "other." Still, this conceit works for *English*, because to understand the difficulty of the English, you really have to understand the comfort of the Farsi and thus the tragedy of being robbed of your mother tongue.

LR: What advice do you have for young people who want to write for the theatre?

ST: Write a lot! Don't be afraid of the first pancake. Overcome your fear of writing trash. Be kind to yourself as you find your voice.

LANGUAGE ON STAGE

Sanaz Toossi's *English* takes place in an English language learning classroom in Iran. It is part of a lineage of plays that explored language barriers, creatively finding ways to either remove or emphasize the language barrier for the audience. In the play, the teacher, Marjan, requires her students to speak English in the classroom for proper immersion, so the audience usually hears the characters speaking a language in which they have varying degrees of proficiency. In a note prefacing the published script, 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.

In the script, spoken English is bolded, whereas Farsi is unbolded. Additionally, the use of brackets indicates what words the character is looking for but might not have in their new vocabulary. For instance, in the opening scene:

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.

This stylistic choice accentuates how comfortable the play's characters feel when speaking in their native language, as opposed to the language they are in the process of learning. In this way, *English* is in conversation (so to speak) with a host of plays that engage with language barriers as subject matter.

FARSI: LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Editor's note: This article was slightly edited from the original.

At the center of *English* lies another language — Farsi, also known as Persian by non-native speakers. While it may be simple to define, under the 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.

Farsi 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-9th century, at which point the language took on some Arabic words and, more notably, an adapted Arabic script to become the Farsi used today.

This shared script, however, is where the similarities between Arabic and Farsi end. Arabic is a Afroasiatic language, a member of the group of languages covering North Africa and the Middle East, while Farsi is Indo-European, part of the family of languages covering South Asia and Europe. Ancient Persia's wide vast borders have left the influence of the Farsi language on many others, namely Hindi and Urdu, spoken primarily in India and Pakistan respectively. In fact, because

of how many similarities it shared with nearby languages, Farsi was considered the common language, or lingua franca, of South Asia up until a century ago.

Farsi, as spoken in Iran today, is a simpler, more homogenized form of its ancient predecessor. Much like other Indo-Iranian languages, it has a subject-object-verb sentence structure, with adjectives following nouns; for example, rather than "Omid recites a beautiful poem," the structure would be "Omid a poem beautiful recites." Farsi is also quite simple grammatically compared to other languages. Nouns and verbs are the same regardless of gender, and articles aren't necessary. Plurality is denoted using suffixes and does not require changes in articles or verbs. To say it another way, Farsi as a language is functional and uncomplicated by design.

Why then has a grammatically practical and economical language like Farsi been so deeply associated with poeticism? The answer may not be linguistic after all, but rather historical. In the 5th century, a collection of poems was written by Adbul-Qasem Ferdowsi called *Shahnameh*, or the *Book of Kings*. It is fantastical and magical, with genies and serpent kings, but many Persians consider it to be one of the few accounts of Persian history before Islamic rule. When Persia fell to the Rashidun Caliphate in the 7th century and pressure mounted to integrate Arabic as the new national

language, the desire to preserve knowledge of Shahnameh and Persian history kept the language alive. Without poetry, Farsi would have long been lost. The language as we know it today owes its survival and foundation to poetry.

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 Farsi was relatively quick and became one of the few characteristics that united these groups under a Persian identity, which remained during the Arab takeover. Without the 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 was a major contributor to that nationalistic sentiment.

Farsi has lasted millennia across other kingdoms, dynasties, and religions. It has united multiple groups and created a unique identity in the Middle East. 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.

TOEFL

The TOEFL iBT® (Test of English as a Foreign Language, internet-Based Test) is a language assessment required for admission to universities in more than 130 countries, including the U.S. The test is administered via computer; test takers wear noise-reducing headphones, speak into a microphone to record responses to speaking tasks, and type responses to writing tasks. The worldwide recognition of the TOEFL means that any international student who wishes to study abroad, especially in English-speaking countries, must take the TOEFL to be considered for admission. The test was initially launched in 1964 and has had several major revisions since then. The first computer-based version was introduced in 1998, and in 2005, the TOEFL became entirely internet-based.

CHANGES TO THE TEST

The 2005 revision made significant changes: eliminating a multiple-choice grammar section and emphasizing use of English in an academic context. The changes came in response to complaints by American students and parents that many foreign teaching assistants did not have adequate English skills to communicate with students, culminating in a widely read [New York Times article in 2004](#)

A FAIR TEST

Educational Testing Service, the company that administers the test, asserts that they have a rigorous evaluation process to maintain the

fairness of the exam. However, there have been extensive critiques of the TOEFL-iBT over the years. They include:

“The topic effect”: Selections in the reading section focus on technical, detailed writings from specific academic disciplines, such as science, architecture, or history. Since reading sections are timed, someone familiar with the particular topic may find it much easier to read the selection than someone with no background on the topic, thus providing advantage to those test takers with prior knowledge of the reading topic.

Cultural bias: The 2005 changes placed emphasis on how English is used in the Western academic setting, especially the ability to construct an argument supported by logic, evidence, and rhetorical devices. Bruce Stirling, an American university professor and author of *TOEFL STRATEGIES: A Complete Guide to the iBT* asserts, “The TOEFL iBT is an excellent test, not of English but of basic Aristotelian logic and rhetoric at the first-year college level.” This means that students who have perfect English skills, but lack an understanding of Western academia and the Socratic method, may find themselves at a disadvantage without preparation in these academic practices.

HOW WOULD YOU FARE ON THE TOEFL?

Want to experience what it's like to take the TOEFL? Take the sample [TOEFL iBT Test](#).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

ENGLISH EVERYWHERE

According to global business data platform Statista, 1.35 billion people worldwide use English, either natively or as a second language, in 2021. English is considered the lingua franca (a shared, bridge language) for global business and for many other industries including science, medicine, law, technology, and tourism. Statistics suggest the strength of a nation's economy is related to its number of English speakers, so governments around the world are driving the demand for quality English language teaching (ELT). Over the past decade, ELT has become a booming growth industry valued at \$33.5 billion in 2018 and was expected to be a nearly \$112.7-billion industry by 2030 ([according to The Business Research Company](#)).

ESL TEACHERS WANTED

"Yes, I am a TOEFL instructor, but more importantly, I am a coach, a cheerleader, a friend, a shoulder to cry on, and a source of inspiration for my students. In short, their futures are in my hands. I cannot make this claim about any other course I have taught ... nothing has brought me greater joy than helping my TOEFL students actualize their dreams." —Bruce Stirling, TOEFL Instructor

Approximately 250,000 English speakers now teach English in non-English-speaking countries each year. While a teaching background is usually not required, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, most overseas employers require certification of some kind for their English teachers. Such certificates include:

- Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL): qualifies you to teach in foreign countries, formal schools, private organizations/companies, and private tutoring.
- Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA): a widely respected TEFL certification, awarded by the University of Cambridge.
- Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL): qualifies you to teach students who recently emigrated to an English-speaking country and also qualifies you for many online teaching jobs.
- Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL): a general certification to teach both EFL and ESL, both at home and abroad.
- The Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) certificate, combined with one of the above certificates, allows you to teach students to take the TOEFL exam.

Besides teaching, the growing ELT industry also offers a range of career opportunities, including owning or directing an English school; writing and publishing; and curriculum design and tech jobs in the expanding online instruction field.

ELT IN IRAN

Like the rest of the world, Iran has seen a rise in ELT and teacher training over the past two decades, but Iran's relationship to English remains fraught. [A 2019 study](#) by Aman Rassouli and Nedet Osam (Eastern Mediterranean University) investigated two different positions on the teaching of English in Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), while under the direction of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, set official policy on how English should be taught and used. From the government's position, English is perceived as "the language of enemies" — referring specifically to the U.S. and the U.K. The IRI has screened ELT training programs, dismissed all native speakers of English from the system, censored hints of Western culture from teaching materials, and banned the teaching of English in primary schools.

The study suggested a contrasting view of ELT in Iranian society. A majority of the 472 undergraduate students surveyed by Rassouli and Osam believed that learning English was advantageous for them personally. They viewed knowledge of English as a mark of social prestige and literacy. Because English is perceived as an important element of social status, many Iranian families are willing to invest financially in their children learning English to help improve their position in society.

Notably, the study found that although individuals hold positive attitudes about learning English to meet their own needs, the IRI's policies have succeeded in limiting the influence of English language culture in Iran and in preventing individual Iranians from developing favorable perceptions of the West.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Article provided for the Denver production

If you or someone you know is seeking courses in English or Farsi or would like help prepping for the TOEFL exam, here are some programs in the Denver area.

LEARN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Bridge Education Group

225 E. 16th Ave., Ste. 120, Denver

bridge.edu

303.785.8875

Ages: Primarily adults, including professionals and university-level students

Bridge offers a variety of English courses tailored to students, business professionals, and tourists. With over 25 years of experience, they focus on cross-cultural communication and language competency.

Colorado School of English

1888 N. Sherman St., Ste. 200, Denver.

englishamerica.com

720.932.8900

Ages: Individuals ages 15+

Colorado School of English was established in 1992 to provide students with a full range of curriculums designed for a variety of visa types and study goals. Accredited by ACCET, this program is available to US and international students.

New America College

12200 E. Iliff Ave., Ste. 208, Aurora

newamericacollege.edu

720.932.8900

Ages: Adults, typically post-secondary and professional learners

New America College is a post-secondary ESL institute welcoming students from over 50 countries. The non-profit school focuses on preparing students for academic and professional success in English-speaking environments.

University of Colorado Denver – ESL Academy

1100 Lawrence St., #014, Denver

clas.ucdenver.edu/esl

303.315.2383

Ages: Adults ages 18+, especially those preparing for or enrolled in university programs

University of Colorado/Denver's ESL Academy offers immersive English instruction and academic support for international students preparing for university-level study.

LEARN FARSI AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Language Trainers – Denver Farsi Courses

Primary Course Venue: Flexible – home, office, or public location in Denver

languagetrainers.com/denver

1.866.85.LINGO (1.866.855.4646)

Ages: Adults

Language Trainers offers customized Farsi lessons for individuals or small groups. Lessons are taught by native speakers and tailored to personal, travel, or business needs. Both online and in-person formats are available.

Listen & Learn USA – Denver Farsi Lessons

Primary Course Venue: Online or in-person at your chosen location in Denver

listenandlearnusa.com

1.877.566.9299

Ages: Adults

Listen & Learn provides personalized Farsi instruction for general or business purposes. Lessons are available for individuals or groups and can be held at home, office, or online. Programs are tailored to learners' goals and schedules.

MTO International Persian School

Primary Course Venue: Online and in-person options available in Denver: mtopersianschool.com

Ages: 6+

MTO International Persian School offers immersive Farsi language and cultural education, including poetry, music, and dance. The school provides beginner to advanced classes both online and in-person, with a focus on heritage learners and cultural enrichment.

University of Denver – “Farsi for You!” Program

Primary Course Venue: University of Denver, 2199 S University Blvd, Denver

du.edu/continuing-education

303.871.2291

Ages: Adults

“Farsi for You!” is a non-credit, self-directed program designed for motivated learners interested in less-commonly taught languages. It offers resources and guidance for independent study, ideal for those seeking flexible learning.

TOEFL PREPERATORY CLASSES

The Knowledge Academy

Primary Course Venue: Online and in-person options in Denver

theknowledgeacademy.com

Ages: Adults

The Knowledge Academy offers TOEFL training focused on reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Courses include live sessions with expert trainers, self-paced modules, and access to course materials for continued learning.

Manhattan Elite Prep

Primary Course Venue: Online and in-person options available in Denver

manhattaneliteprep.com

(888) 937-8047

Ages: Young adults and adults

Manhattan Elite Prep offers TOEFL prep courses taught by experienced instructors with backgrounds in ESL and education. Programs include long-format, intensive, and crash courses, available both in-person and online. Students receive access to official TOEFL guides, digital materials, and live class recordings.

Manhattan Review

Primary Course Venue: Denver Teaching Center at the Hyatt, 650 15th St., Denver

manhattanreview.com/Denver

303.309.4028

Ages: Young adults and adults

Manhattan Review is an international educational services company that prepares students for many standardized tests including Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The company offers on-site courses, online classes, private tutoring, and practice tests.

TestMasters

Primary Course Venue: Online with Denver-based support

testmasters.com

1-800-910-3926

Ages: Young adults and adults

TestMasters provides high-definition streaming TOEFL prep courses that adapt to your internet speed. The program includes flexible scheduling and comprehensive materials designed to improve scores in all TOEFL sections.

TOEFL Tutor

Primary Course Venue: Online and local tutoring in Denver

toefltutor.com

Ages: Adults

TOEFL Tutor connects students with local and online instructors for personalized TOEFL prep. The platform helps learners prepare for MBA admissions and other academic goals through tailored tutoring and small group classes.

List generated by Microsoft Co-Pilot.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ENGLISH

1. Language and Identity

How does the play explore the relationship between language and personal identity? In what ways do the characters' perceptions of themselves shift when speaking English versus Farsi?

2. Accent as a Barrier or Badge

Elham expresses deep frustration with her accent. What does her struggle reveal about societal attitudes toward non-native speakers? How do other characters respond to their own accents?

3. Power Dynamics in the Classroom

How does Marjan's role as a teacher evolve throughout the play? Do you think she maintains a fair and supportive environment for all her students?

4. Cultural Displacement and Belonging

Omid says, "I live there: in that gap." What does he mean by this? How does the play portray the experience of being caught between two cultures?

5. The Role of Humor and Miscommunication

How does humor — both intentional and unintentional — function in the play? What does it reveal about the characters' relationships and their attempts to connect?

6. Generational and Gender Perspectives

How do age and gender influence the characters' motivations for learning English? Consider Roya's desire to connect with her granddaughter and Elham's academic ambitions.

7. The Politics of Language

What does the play suggest about the socio-political implications of learning English in Iran? How do the characters navigate the tension between assimilation and cultural preservation?

8. Marjan's Internal Conflict

Marjan says, "When I speak English. My ears ring." What do you think this line signifies about her emotional and linguistic journey?

9. The Classroom as a Microcosm

How does the classroom setting serve as a metaphor for broader societal issues? What does the play suggest about inclusion, exclusion, and the rules we live by?

Select questions generated by Microsoft Co-Pilot

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