

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA
English by Sanaz Toossi; Directed by Knud Adams.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“I know what perfect English sounds like, but this isn’t perfect English.”

Barrington Stage is presenting the 2023 Pulitzer Prize winning play, “English” as its final main-stage work for the current season. While the play is excellent and the performances superb, I do not understand its award. According to the stated rules of the Pulitzer, the award for Drama calls “for a distinguished play by an American playwright, preferably original in its source and dealing with American life.” This play is distinguished and original but it does not deal with anything concerning American life. Rather it is about the dreams of having a life in America at some future date. Three women and a man, all Iranian, in Karaj, Iran in 2008, are taking an advanced class in the language to be able to qualify for a green card and an opportunity in the western world. Each one has valid reasons for study and the play takes us through a term of classes in preparation for the national exam. Interesting stuff.



Narges Kalogli, Pooya Mohseni, Nazanin Nour, Sanaz Toossi and Babak Tafti;
Photo: Daniel Rader

Marjan, their teacher, has lived in England and has returned to Iran for reasons we only learn late in the play. She runs English Only sessions and so in the play both the English and the

Fārsī are heard in English. We can distinguish the two languages easily - Line in Fārsī are always well spoken, the ones in English are pained and difficult. It is both brilliant writing and brilliant acting. Marjan is being played by Nazanin Nour. She is both beautiful and well spoken, ideal for the teacher whose understanding of reality is tempered by sensual interest in her one male student and her equal involvement with her female students who present more of a challenge for her. Nour hides the sensual part of her performance behind an intellectual expression but the physical attraction comes through with every gesture she makes in his direction.



Nazanin Nour;
Photo: Daniel Rader



Babak Tafti; Photo: Knud Adams

He, Omid, is played by Babak Tafti, the only actor in the play returning to Barrington Stage. He manages to play this role without ever over-stepping the social boundaries of his Iranian culture and still presents a sexuality that is unmistakable. When the truths behind his excellent command of English come out the result is a distancing for Marjan which is one of the more dramatic elements of the play.

Theirs is not the only sensual relationship in the play, however. Games are played several times in the play when a person a ball is thrown to must respond with a word on a specific, preassigned topic. A missed response results in a removal from the circle. Each time a woman misses a word and is forced to leave, the group reaction has a definitely sensual aspect. These students, all adults, are definitely tied into one another's possibilities and achievements. The playing of this aspect is generous and genuine.

Due to a casting difficulty the playwright, Sanaz Toossi, stepped into the role and appears in the play as Elham, a girl eager to pass the state examination. So eager in fact that she has already taken it and failed more than once. A multiple award winning author she is also, it would appear, a fine actress who makes her character into a one-woman show without even half-trying. As good as her play is, she is more than fine in this role. In fact, she would make any of

the women's roles exciting and perfect if she chose to play them. Her final scene with Nour is a surprise and a delight.

Narges Kalogli plays the over-eager Goli, a student who demands of herself the best possible work even when she stresses about certain words. Much of the humor in this play comes from Goli and Kalogli knows how to handle the comedy. She delivers admirably in all of her moments and it is difficult to not fall in love with her.



Narges Kalogli, Sanaz Toossi;
Photo: Daniel Rader

The most tortured student in this class is Roya, played by Pooya Mohseni. She is the mother of a man who has already emigrated to America and married and had a child. Roya is constantly on the telephone trying to reach her son to arrange for her own emigration but he is rarely available. As her frustration grows Mohseni becomes an actress with a mission that can never be achieved. Roya ultimately learns of her son's intentions and her pain causes her to leave the class. It is a moment that will stay with me for a long, long time.



Narges Kalogli, Pooya Mohseni; Photo: Daniel Rader

Director Knud Adams has directed this play before and brings to it his experiences. The result is a fine production with dozens of little touches that almost pass unseen. His creative team here has worked to continue his process of presenting an excellent play in a perfect way. Scenic Designer Afsoon Pajoufar has created an environment rather than a set and it lends credence to the play. Dina El-Aziz has created excellent costumes that span the gaps between two cultures. Masha Tsimring has given the classroom a stark, bright look which disturbed a friend of mine but which seemed quite right to me. Sound Designer Kenny Neal worked his professional magic with this script.

It is a play I urge you to see. The playwright's work is delicate and delectable and her acting is simply super. She joins an excellent company and the result is a very winning play, beyond just the Pulitzer.

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English plays on the Boyd-Quinson State at Barrington Stage Company, 30 Union Street, Pittsfield, MA through October 15. For information and tickets go to barringtonstageco.org or call 413-236-8888.