

Dramaturgical Packet created by Production Dramaturg:
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Naghmeh Samini

Award-winning playwright, screenwriter, and scholar

- Born in Tehran, Iran in 1973
- B.A. In Drama and M.A. in Cinema at the University of Tehran
- Ph.D. in Art Studies at the University of Tarbiat Modares in Tehran with a thesis focused on Drama and Mythology
- Currently based in Seattle, WA and is an Affiliate Assistant Professor at the University of Washington in the department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization and the School of Drama



The Language of Wild Berries

- Premiered at Tamashakhaneh Payiz in Tehran in 2017.
- First published in 2019 in Persian by Nashr Ney.
- Translated from Persian into English by Torange Yeghiazarian in 2020.
- Radio play produced by Golden Thread Productions in 2020 (U.S. premiere).
Golden Thread's 2022 production of the play will be the U.S. premiere of its staged version.

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The Language of Wild Berries - Synopsis

Donya and Davood celebrate their wedding anniversary by traveling [from Tehran] to the same sea side town [on the Caspian Sea] where they spent their honeymoon. But on this trip, their 10th anniversary, a mysterious young man is following them. Who is he? What does he want? Trying to solve the mystery of the young man throws Donya and Davood into a time warp recalling their past nine anniversary trips. They remember what they have forgotten. But will that be enough to save their marriage? The past, present, and future collide in **Naghmeh Samini's** touching play, offering a rare glimpse into the lives of contemporary Iranians.

The Language of Wild Berries - Character synopsis

DONYA – 37-year-old Iranian woman, married to Davood. Teaches English as a foreign language in Iran. Contemporary, urban, and educated.

DAVOOD – 40-year-old Iranian man, married to Donya. A linguist researching ancient/lost languages. Contemporary, urban, and educated.

DANIAL – 18-year-old Iranian man, a man of mystery.

Tehran, Iran



With a population of around 8.7 million in the city and 15 million in the larger metropolitan area of greater Tehran, Tehran is the most populous city in Iran and Western Asia. It has the second-largest metropolitan area in the Middle East, after Cairo.

Tehran, Iran

(with views of the Alborz Mountains to the north)



Image source [here](#)

Tehran, Iran



Haft-e Tir square, Tehran, Iran

Click [here](#) for a 2022 walking tour of Haft-e Tir Square.

Image source [here](#)



Argentina square, Tehran, Iran

Click [here](#) for a 2021 walking tour of Argentina Square.

Image source [here](#)

Tehran, Iran – Cafes



Image source [here](#)

Further Reading:

- Mitra Amiri, February 16, 2011. ["Iran's youth culture revives coffee house tradition."](#) *Reuters*.
- Bahamin Azadi, September 29, 2012. ["Drinking Coffee in Tehran."](#) *PBS Tehran Bureau*.
- Siavash Saadlou, November 5, 2018. ["The Cult of Coffee Shops in Iran: Inside a Parallel Universe."](#) *Medium.com*.

Tehran, Iran – Theatre

Tehran has a robust theatre scene. In Golden Thread's 2020 episode of No Summary featuring a conversation between Naghmeh Samini and Torange Yeghiazarian, Samini explains: "Theatre is a very serious media in Iran. Every night [before the pandemic], you can find over 100 performances in a city like Tehran... Theatre audiences in Iran are also a phenomenon; attending theatre is both entertainment and social, cultural, and political activity, like old Greek theatre."



The **City Theatre (*Teatr-e Shahr*)** is a performing arts complex considered to be the hub of Tehran's theatre scene, and contains many performance spaces.

Click [here](#) for a 2022 walking tour outside of City Theatre in Tehran.

Image source [here](#)

Tehran, Iran – Theatre

Further Reading:

- Torange Yeghiazarian, 2012. “Dramatic Defiance in Tehran: Reflections on a Society of Contradictions.” *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 77-92.
- Ali Chenar, June 2, 2010. [“Iran’s Thriving Theater Scene.”](#), *PBS, Tehran Bureau*.
- Syed Zafar Mehdi, March 27, 2022. [“Tehran’s theatre scene dismal but show must go on.”](#) *Andalou Agency*.

Iranian Youth

Donya and Davood were 27 and 30 years of age, respectively, when they were married in 2006, placing them within the demographic of Iranian youth (30 and under). Iran has a large youth population – **over 60% of the country's 80 million population is under 30 years old**. A baby boom following Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution almost doubled the population from 34 million to 62 million within the first decade. Youth have long been involved in political activism in Iran, from the political events following the 1953 coup d'état that ousted Prime Minister Mosaddegh, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the 2009 Green Movement, and beyond. Despite a large portion of youth holding university degrees, "the unemployment rate for young people aging 15-24 in Iran stood at 24.5 percent in the spring [of 2020], according to the latest statistics of the Statistical Center of Iran." (Bakhtiari 2020). Unemployment, social restrictions, and political unrest have contributed toward making Iran one of the world's largest brain drains, according to the International Monetary Fund. Youth in Iran nonetheless continue to redefine Iran's political, economic, and social agendas.

Sources:

Omid Memarian and Tara Nesvaderani, October 27, 2010. ["Iran Primer: The Youth."](#) *PBS Tehran Bureau*.

Faranak Bakhtiari, August 12, 2020. ["World Youth Day: can Iran meet growing youth population's needs?"](#) *Tehran Times*.



Image source [here](#)

Tehran Youth



Image source [here](#)



Image source [here](#)

Caspian Sea, northern Iran



The **Caspian Sea** in the north of Iran (*shomal*) is the world's largest inland body of water. The Caspian Sea is a popular vacation destination for families and young adults in Iran, particularly those from urban centers like Tehran.

Click [here](#) to take a stroll along the Caspian seaside.

Image (left) source [here](#)

Image (right) source [here](#)

Chaloos Road, Road 59

Chaloos Road, officially known as **Road 59**, is a busy, winding drive that passes through the Alborz Mountains from Karaj (west of Tehran) to the north of Iran and the Caspian Sea. Its spectacular scenery includes mountains, jagged cliffs, rivers, waterfalls, and old-growth beech forests.



Click [here](#) for a road trip on Chaloos Road.

Image (above) source: Google Maps screenshot

Image (left) source [here](#)

Chaloos Road



Image source [here](#)



Image source [here](#)

Chaloos Road



Image source [here](#)



Image source [here](#)

Chaloos Road

Referring to Chaloos Road, Danial tells Donya “These roads in the darkness kill their own, all those sharp bends, a thousand twists and turns. They say seven sisters turned into stone in awe of- ...” The photograph on the left shows the “seven sisters” (*haft dokhtar*) to which Danial refers.



Image source [here](#)



Image source [here](#)

Chaloos Road



Donya and Davood's wedding (and wedding anniversaries) take place in Autumn.

Click [here](#) for a road trip on Chaloos Road in Autumn.

Image source [here](#)

Chaloos Road – Cafes

Click [here](#) to experience a river-side café along Chaloos Road.



Image source [here](#)

Iranian Wedding Traditions – *Aghd*

The *aghd* is the ceremony portion of an Iranian wedding in which the bride and groom sit facing their guests in front of an assorted *sofreh* (or table spread) full of symbolic items. The *sofreh aghd* is an intricate spread that includes a mirror, candlesticks, nuts, eggs, honey, pastries, coins, and a holy book or book of poetry, among other symbolic and decorative items. *Sofreh aghd* can be simple or quite extravagant.



Iranian Wedding Traditions – *ghand sabi*

Kaleh ghand (sugar cones) are used in the wedding ceremony in a ritual called *ghand sabi*. During *ghand sabi*, happily married women and senior family members rub the sugar cones together over the couple's head and let the ground sugar fall onto a cloth held over the couple. This ritual symbolizes showering the newly wed couple's life with sweetness.



Photo credit: Brad Zweerink

Click [here](#) to view *ghand sabi* (starting at about 1 minute)

Iranian Wedding Traditions – *Mobarak Baad* (traditional wedding song)

Listen to traditional and contemporary versions of *Mobarak Baad*:

[Here](#)

[Here](#)

[Here](#)

[Here](#)

[Here](#)

Socio-political backdrop of Iran – brief overview

Donya and Davood were born roughly in the years 1979 and 1976, respectively.

Iran 1979 - 2006

Iran's tumultuous 1979 Revolution overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and installed an Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and based on the principle of rule by Islamic jurists (*velayat-e faqih*). Shortly after the drafting of the Republic's new constitution in October 1979, Iranian students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran that November, resulting in a 444-day hostage crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the Islamic Republic engaged in an 8-year war with Iraq (1980-1988), which resulted in more massive loss of life. Starting with the 1979 Revolution and continuing through the Iran-Iraq war, hundreds of thousands of Iranians left Iran. At the same time, Iran experienced a baby boom in the 1980s, and the population almost doubled from 34 million to 62 million within the first decade of the Revolution (today, over 60% of Iran's population is under the age of 30). Between Revolutionary ideology, Islamic law, and the trauma of the Iran-Iraq war, the 1980s were an intense time of austerity, political repression, and prohibitions in the cultural sphere.

The late 1980s and the 1990s showed subtle changes in the cultural domain for the first time since the Revolution, albeit limited ones. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, institutions, especially those dealing with culture, began to exhibit signs of relaxation on restrictions. President Mohammad Khatami - in office from 1997 to 2005 - initiated a number of reforms in which the most significant had been in the cultural domain, such as freedom of expression and tolerance in civil society. Books, newspapers, and journal publications expressing a variety of views began to flourish. (Nooshin 2005)

Socio-political backdrop of Iran – brief overview

Iran 1979 - 2006 continued...

It was also during this 'cultural thaw' in the late 1990's that the use of the Internet began to emerge in the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly in the lives of middle-class Iranians. During the Internet's initial stages, the Iranian government supported the expansion and actively participated in the development of the Internet. This new media source played a vital role in Iran's 1997 presidential election when leading candidates Mohammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Nategh Nuri were the first to form presidential campaign websites. 2001 marked the year when Unicode systems made typing in Persian font possible and three students - Salman Jariri, Hossein Derakhshan and Nima Afshar Naderi - published the first three Persian weblogs. When waves of crackdowns on more than fifty-seven local pro-reform newspapers and publications occurred in 2000 - 2001 during Khatami's second term, thousands of Iranian journalists and writers joined the cyber-sphere, which would become known as 'Weblogistan.' (Rahimi 2003; Hendelman-Baavur 2007)

[Donya and Davood were university students - undergraduate and graduate - during the Khatami era.]

While many Iranians felt Khatami failed to initiate many of the reforms he had promised, his presidency nonetheless shifted the center of political gravity in post-Revolution Iran.

Socio-political backdrop of Iran – brief overview

Iran 2006 (Donya and Davood get married)

In 2005, Iran held presidential elections to choose Khatami's successor, and the election of conservative candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad tipped Iran's political balance toward conservatism. With his election, Ahmadinejad purged the government ministries of reform-minded officials and replaced them with former military commanders and religious hardliners. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), "Respect for basic human rights in Iran, especially freedom of expression and opinion, deteriorated considerably in 2005," which materialized in the increased persecution of intellectual dissidents. Also shortly after his election, Ahmadinejad lifted the suspension of uranium enrichment, which was non-compliant with safeguarding agreements with the UN Security Council. As a result, the United States President George Bush's administration issued Executive Orders that strengthened U.S. sanctions (which had already existed in various forms since 1979), which continue to cripple Iran's economy until today (with Iran's civilian population bearing the brunt).

Socio-political backdrop of Iran – brief overview

Iran 2009

Presidential elections and the Green Movement protests

2009 was a pivotal year in contemporary socio-politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sought to secure another term while his opponent, reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, provided particularly young people hope for change in the Republic. Mousavi's supporters became known as the "Green Movement," which took its name from a green sash given to Mir Hossein Mousavi by Mohammad Khatami. (Milani 2010).

When Ahmadinejad was announced as victor, there were accusations of election fraud and the Green Movement protested with the rally call, "Where is my Vote?" However, as time has continued and after the arrests and killings of hundreds of protestors and other political activists, the Green Movement has grown to symbolize a larger desire for civil rights in Iran.

Later in 2011, the first mass anti-government demonstrations in a year took place following uprisings throughout the Arab world. The government placed reformist leaders Mir-Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi under house arrest for supporting the widespread demonstrations (they remain in house arrest still today.) [\[See following slides for a more elaborate discussion on the Green Movement\]](#)

Socio-political backdrop of Iran – brief overview

Iran 2012

Societal tensions continued through 2012. Ahmadinejad was still Iran's President. United States President Barack Obama announced additional sanctions against Iran for its nuclear program. Iran's currency, the rial, plummets in value, resulting in demonstrations at a major bazaar in Tehran.

Iran 2016

Iran's 2013 presidential elections and the election of Hassan Rouhani - who is frequently described as a centrist and reformist - marked the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Rouhani ran for office on an agenda of civil rights, personal freedom, free access to information, and improved women's rights. However, critics say that Rouhani's presidency did little to change Iran's domestic policies: the internet remained highly censored, and there were more state-imposed executions during Rouhani's first 14 months in power than there were during the last year in office of his predecessor, Ahmadinejad.

Socio-political backdrop of Iran – brief overview

Sources:

Liora Hendelman-Baavur, 2007. “Promises and Perils of Weblogistan: Online Personal Journals and the Islamic Republic of Iran.” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no 2: 77 - 93.

Laudan Nooshin, 2005. “Subversion and Countersubversion: Power, Control, and Meaning in the New Iranian Pop Music.” In *Music, Power, and Politics*, edited by Annie J. Randall, 231 –272. New York, London: Routledge Press.

Abbas Milani, October 6, 2010. “The Green Movement.” United States Institute of Peace, *The Iran Primer*.

Babak Rahimi, 2003. “Cyberdissident: The Internet in Revolutionary Iran.” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs*. 7, no. 3: 101 - 115.

<https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-irans-political-events>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iran-in-2006-A-Country-at-a-Crossroads-1733554/A-global-crisis>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Iraq_War

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2006/country-chapters/iran>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Khatami

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud_Ahmadinejad

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassan_Rouhani

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement

Donya and Davood are part of the generation of young Iranians whose lives have been greatly impacted by the aftermath of the Green Movement protests surrounding Iran's contested 2009 presidential election. In the weeks leading up to Iran's Election Day on June 12, 2009, the Green Movement emerged composed of Iranians in support of the reformist presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Iranians from all walks of life, particularly youth and young adults, sought to oust incumbent President Mahmood Ahmadinejad. Within a few hours at the end of Election Day, authorities claimed to have hand-counted millions of votes and announced Ahmadinejad's victory by a two-third majority. Because of these results, many Iranians believed the election had been rigged, questioning the legitimacy of democracy in Iran.



Image source [here](#)

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement

In the weeks that followed, thousands of Iranians defied official bans on demonstrations as protestors peacefully rallied in city centers across Iran in order to demand, "*Rai-e man kojast?*" or "Where is my vote?" As part of government crackdowns, protesters faced extreme brutality at the hands of official military forces and quasi-official militia groups, and thousands were arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned. Not since the 1979 Islamic Revolution had such large-scale demonstrations taken place in Iran, and large protests also occurred throughout major cities in the Iranian diaspora. Iranian Studies scholar Hamid Dabashi refers to the Green Movement as a "grassroot struggle of Iranians in attaining democracy, civil rights, freedom, and accountability of the government." (Nikzadfar 2011, 15) Although protests in Iran decreased in the months following the election, in large part because of the state's violent repression, the Green Movement continues to reverberate as a pivotal moment in the lives and psyches of especially young Iranians. Iranians persist in demanding their civil and human rights, as demonstrated by the current women-led protests chanting in Iran following the recent death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who died while in police custody in Tehran.

Reference: Navid Nikzadfar. 2011. "Introduction." In *The Green Movement in Iran* by Hamid Dabashi. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement cont'd...



Image source [here](#)

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement cont'd...



Image source [here](#)

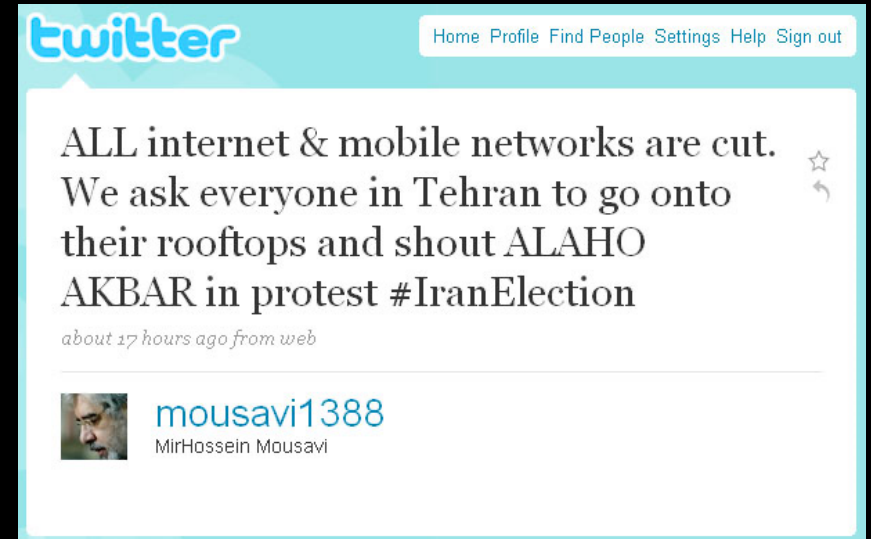


Image source [here](#)

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement cont'd...

The following Saadi (b. 1210 BCE) poem became frequently cited across social media during the Green Movement protests:

“Human beings are members of a whole,
In creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain,
Other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain,
The name of human you cannot retain.”



Click to watch/listen to:

- [Poem for the Rooftops of Iran: "Defenseless People" - June 16 2009](#)
- [Poem for the Rooftops of Iran: "Where is this Place" - June 19th, 2009](#)
- [Poem for the Rooftops of Iran: "Listen Closely" - June 20, 2009](#)
- [Poem for the Rooftops of Iran: "Let Us Not Forget" - June 21, 2009](#)

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement cont'd...

The song *[Yar-e Dabestani Man](#)* (“My School Friend”), originally by Fereydoon Forooghi, became a popular song of protest during the Green Movement. (See translated lyrics [here](#)).

Click [here](#) to listen to another rendition by Iranian American musician, Fared Shafinury (with subtitles), who released this video in the wake of the Green Movement protests.

Click [here](#) for another musical response to the Green Movement, Hamed Nikpay " The Owner of This Land " (Maalek-e Een Khaak) مالک این خاک, which Nikpay composed in response to Ahmadinejad calling protestors “dirt and dust.”

Iran's 2009 Presidential Election & the Green Movement cont'd...

Further Reading:

Hamid Dabashi, 2011. *The Green Movement in Iran*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.

Maral Karimi. 2018. *The Iranian Green Movement of 2009: Reverberating Echoes of Resistance*. New York and London: Lexington Books.

Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, Eds. 2011. *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Iran's Future*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Books.

Parisa Farhadi and Arash Reisinezhad, 2016. "Cultural Opportunity and Social Movements: The Iranian Green Movement and the Egyptian Tahrir Revolution." In *Sociology of Islam*.

Pedram Khosronejad, 2013. "Digital Art, Political Aesthetic, and Social Media: Case Study of the Iranian Presidential Election 2009." In *International Journal of Communication* No. 7, 1298 – 1315.

Babak Rahimi, 2011. "Affinities of Dissent: Cyberspace, Performative Networks and the Iranian Green Movement." In *CyberOrient* No. 5:3, 4 – 23.

The Tower of Babel + the Confusion of Tongues

Throughout *The Language of Wild Berries*, you will hear multiple references to the mythical Tower of Babel. Best known in the U.S. for the Biblical story in Genesis 11:1–9, this myth provides an explanation as to why the world's people speak diverse languages. According to this story, members of the world's unified human race, which spoke a single language, came to the land of Shinar in Babylonia sometime after the Great Flood described in Genesis chapters 6 - 9. In order to “make a name” for themselves, they collaborated in building a city with a tower so tall it nearly touched Heaven. Eventually, it is theorized that God considers the tower a threat to His kingdom and, as punishment, He scatters the people throughout the world and confounds their speech so that they can no longer understand each other.

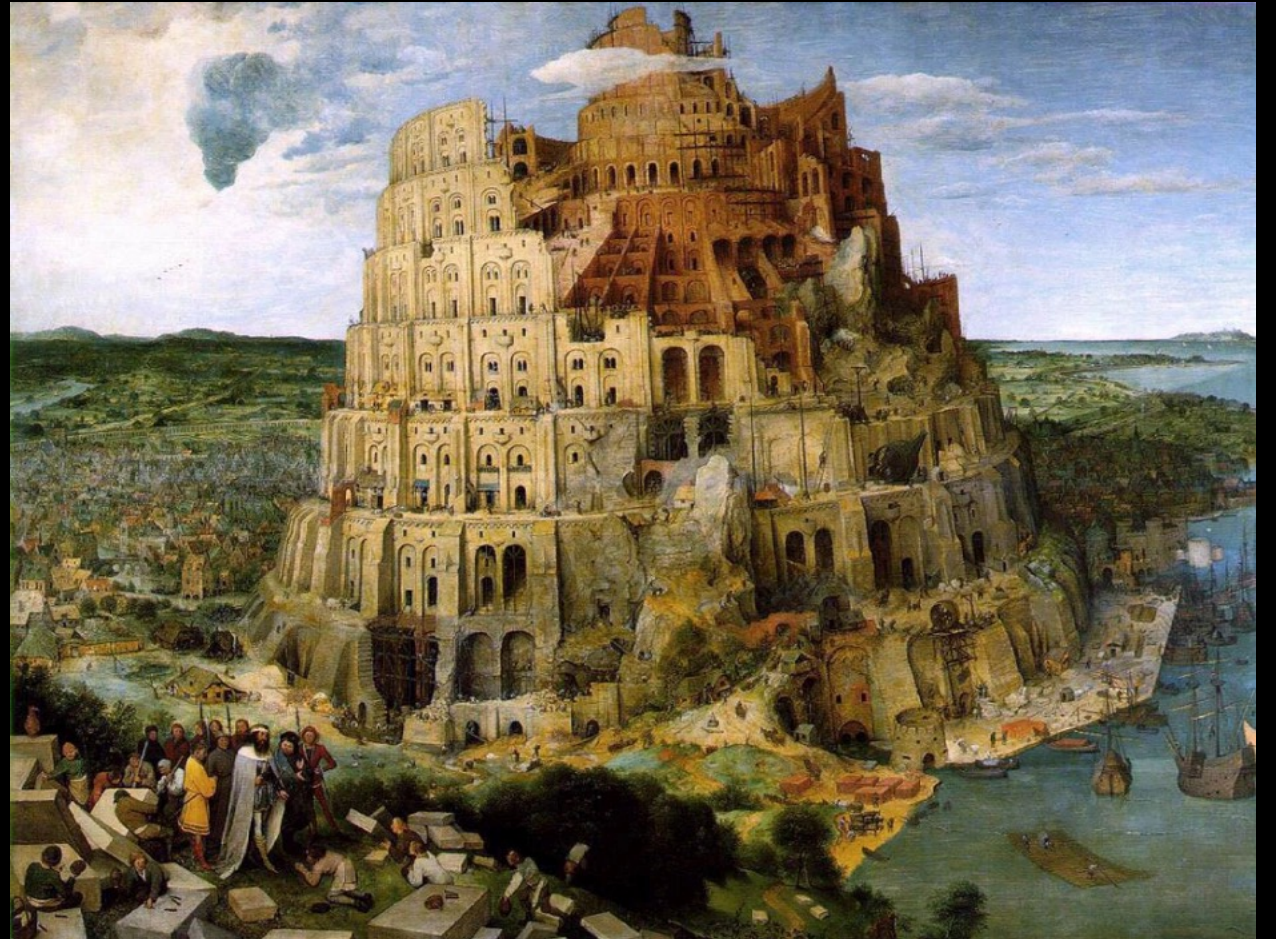


Image source [here](#)

The Tower of Babel + the Confusion of Tongues

In our dramaturgical interview, the play's playwright Naghmeh Samini explained that her specific inspiration for the play's conceptual engagement with language and the Tower of Babel comes from an older Sumerian story, *Enmerkar and the Lord Aratta*. This legendary account (composed in the Neo-Sumerian period, ca. 21st century BC) similarly describes a "confusion of tongues." Samini further explains why these myths resonated with her: "Everything started from that mythical moment, when God punished us by not letting us understand each other. God didn't kill people or cut their hands; God just didn't let them communicate with each other. I thought, what a very horrible punishment for human beings!" (2022)

Reference: Naghmeh Samini. July 9, 2022.
Interview with Production Dramaturg
Heather Rastovac Akbarzadeh.

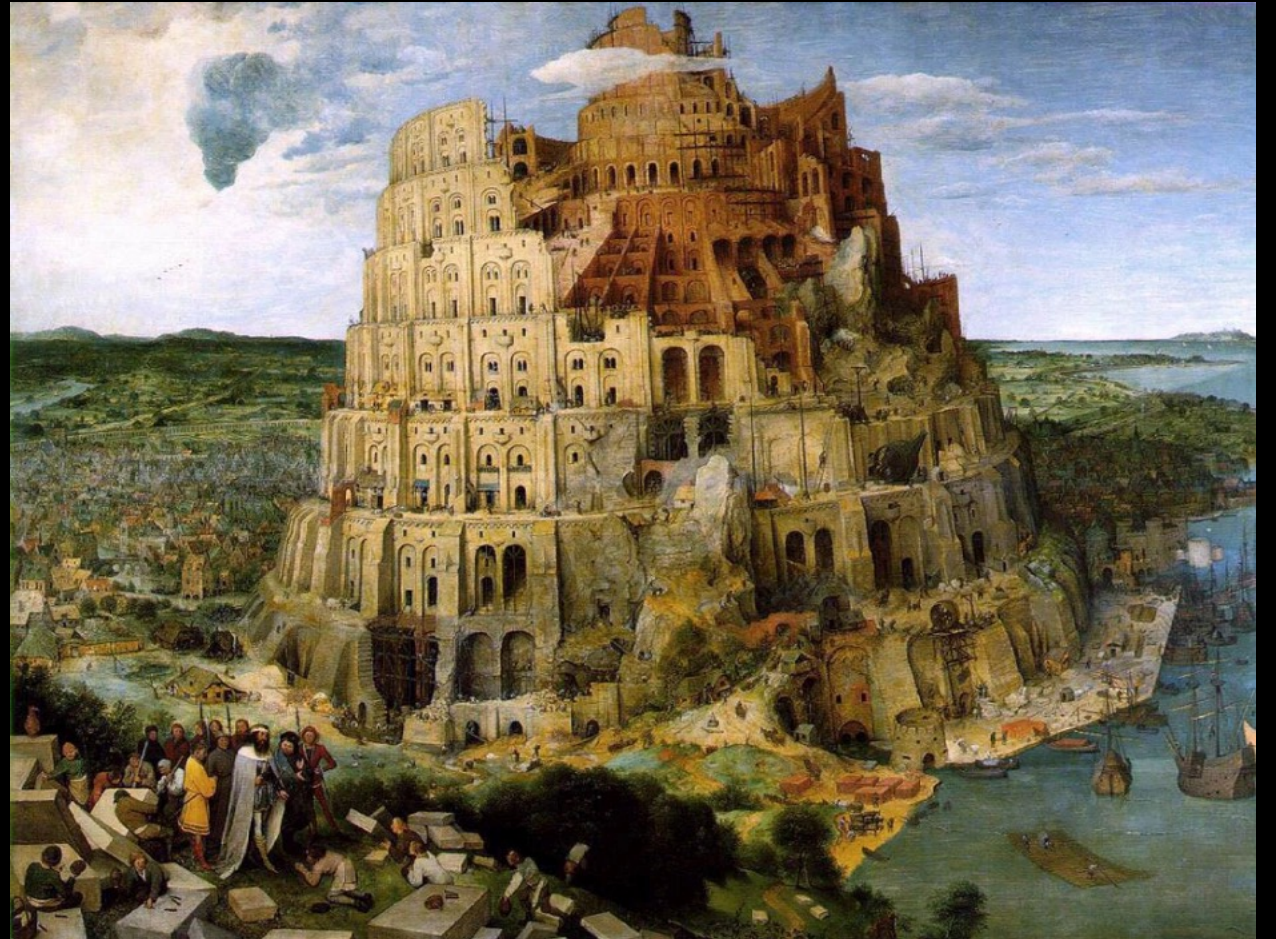


Image source [here](#)

Glossary (words in the play)

Word	Definition
Alborz mountains	A major mountain range in northern Iran, 560 miles (900 km) long
Argentina Square	A square in north central Tehran
Atlantis	A fictional island mentioned in an allegory on the hubris of nations in Plato's works <i>Timaeus</i> and <i>Critias</i>
Bijan Elahi	An Iranian modernist poet and translator (b. 1945 d. 2010)
Breaking Bad	An American crime drama television series
Caspian Sea	The world's largest body of inland water, located at the north of Iran
Chaloos Road	Also known as Kandovan Road or Road 59, Chaloos is an important road for people of Tehran, many of whom drive to popular tourist attractions in the north of Iran on weekends and for holidays
Che Guevara	An Argentine Marxist revolutionary, physician, writer, and guerrilla leader who was a major figure of the Cuban Revolution. (b. 1928 d. 1967)
David and Goliath	While Goliath is a Biblical character, the phrase "David and Goliath" has taken on a more popular meaning denoting an underdog scenario, a contest wherein a smaller, weaker opponent faces a much bigger, stronger adversary.
Dey Hospital	A private hospital in Tehran
Dowry	In Iran, a sum of money, gold, or other valuable currency that is paid by the groom or his father to the bride's family.
Ghand Sabi	A tradition within the Iranian wedding ceremony (<i>aghd</i>) where happily married women or relatives rub sugar cones (<i>kaleh ghand</i>) over a sheet above the seated bride and groom. The act represents endowing the couple with sweetness.

Glossary (words in the play)

Word	Definition
Griffin in <i>The Invisible Man</i>	Griffin, also known as the Invisible Man, is a fictional character who first appeared as the protagonist of H. G. Wells' 1897 science fiction novel <i>The Invisible Man</i> .
Haft-e-Teer Square	A central cross section in Tehran's central business district.
Hijab	Headcovering worn by Muslim women and women in Muslim societies. It covers the hair but leaves the face exposed. Since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, women are mandated to wear hijab in public.
Hitchcock's <i>Psycho</i>	A 1960 American psychological horror thriller film produced and directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
Hurricane Matthew	A Category 5 Atlantic hurricane that caused catastrophic damage and a humanitarian crisis in Haiti, as well as widespread devastation in the southeastern United States.
Last Supper	The Last Supper is the final meal that, in the Gospel accounts, Jesus shared with his apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion.
Maman	Persian word for “mother.”
Mobarak Baad	A traditional Iranian wedding song.
Nagasaki bomb	The United States detonated two atomic bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945, respectively. The two bombings killed between 129,000 and 226,000 people, most of whom were civilians.
Pride car	A common brand of car in Iran, which implies working class.
Seven sisters	A series of tall rock formations along Chaloos Road in Iran.
Tehran	The capitol city of Iran.
Tohoku Tsunami	An earthquake and tsunami that occurred in Japan in 2011. The earthquake was a magnitude of 9.0-9.1 and lasted about 6 minutes, which caused the tsunami.

Glossary (words in the play)

Word	Definition
Tower of Babel	A Biblical origin myth meant to explain why the world's people speak diverse languages.
Ziggurat	A type of massive structure built in ancient Mesopotamia, often for religious purposes.

Questions or comments? Please feel free to email
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