

Soulpepper

CENTRE
SEGAL
PERFORMING ARTS
ARTS DE LA SCÈNE

ENGLISH

BY SANAZ TOOSI

CO-PRODUCTION WITH THE SEGAL CENTRE FOR PERFORMING ARTS



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We are so happy to welcome you to our first production of 2023!

For this first play we have partnered with our friends at The Segal Centre in Montreal to bring the Canadian premiere of Sanaz Toossi's *English* to the stage. We simply couldn't imagine a better play to bring audiences back together this year.

English features an entirely Iranian cast, a first for a Soulpepper production. The story is both specific and universal and explores themes of language, identity, and belonging.

This production was originally planned for our 2020 season, but as we know, the world had other plans. We couldn't have anticipated the timeliness of sharing it with audiences now. It is our honour to stand in solidarity with the women and girls of Iran, and we are incredibly proud to have this production kick off our season.

Thank you for joining us for *English* and we hope to welcome you back soon.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

GIDEON ARTHURS
Executive Director,
Soulpepper Theatre Company

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, featuring a prominent, sweeping curve at the top and several smaller loops below.

WEYNI MENGESHA
Artistic Director,
Soulpepper Theatre Company





Every March, before Iranians celebrate the coming of spring*, they mark the past year by jumping over an open fire. The saying “*Let your redness be mine, my pallor yours*” is an exchange made with the fire, leaving behind the troubles and missed opportunities of the past year, preparing for renewal in the coming one. It is a ritual foremost about bravery: you jump over a lit fire into an uncertain future.

This is the work we find our characters, a wave of first generation immigrants, engaged in as they try to navigate the leap all migrants make to cross vast distances, leaving behind loved ones and beginning the process of reshaping their tongues and identities around foreign syllables.

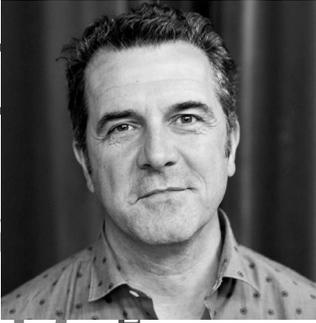
Migration may seem like an inevitability from the outside; who would not reach for a safer home? more freedom? greater financial opportunity? But only those of us who've packed these bags understand the cost of condensing lives into luggage- no matter the circumstances.

Sanaaz Toossi's play *English* was written and programmed for production at Soulpepper well before the murder of 22 year old Mahsa Amini by the Islamic Republic; the spark that touched off the massive protests currently burning across Iran. Inside the country, the people rise courageously, losing their lives and livelihoods while outside the Iranian diaspora oscillates between hope and despair. Who could not be inspired and moved by the protestors resisting Iran's repressive theocratic dictatorship? Who would not be appalled by the repression unleashed by the regime to enforce its illegitimate and crumbling authority?

Yet Sanaz's play is not one torn from the headlines. Instead, she presents a different glimpse of life in Iran: not a traumatic one, not a tragic one but one filled with hope, humour and longing.

English is a play for anyone who has experienced the rupture and liberation that a new language can offer, for anyone who has felt the ache of homesickness, for anyone who has leapt over the fire onto new and foreign lands.

Anahita Dehbonehie & Guillermo Verdecchia
Co-Directors, *English*



Timeline of political events in Iran

By Dr. Marjan Moosavi

1921

The Pahlavi monarchy comes to power and pursues an ambitious modernization campaign.

1951

Nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq nationalizes the British-owned oil industry and later is overthrown by a CIA/MI6 aided coup in 1953.

1971

Pahlavi organizes grand international festivals and festivities, including a decade of avant-garde theatre and music festivals of Shiraz (1967–1977).

1978-79

Iranian Revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini overthrows the Pahlavi monarchy and proclaims The Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result of the project of Islamization, Islamic dress code becomes compulsory.

1980-1988

Iraq invades Iran. This war of attrition ends in 1988.

1989

The new supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, is appointed. The post-war construction era starts.

1995

The United States places oil and trade sanctions on Iran. The economic sanctions get renewed repeatedly by the US and UN over the next two decades.

1997

- ▶ Reformist era starts with Mohammad Khatami's presidency starts. New democratic discourses and practices about civil rights, freedom of expression, and women's rights grow.

1999

- ▶ Pro-democracy protests by university students last for six days. Recurrent arrests of students, activists, journalists, and intellectuals continue.

2009

- ▶ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wins re-election, defeating the reformist Mousavi. A series of protests known as the Green Movement starts and becomes a major event in Iran's modern political history. The state responds with a brutal crackdown on protestors.

*** The events of *English*, the play by Sanaz Toossi, are set in Spring of 2009, right after the election.**

2013

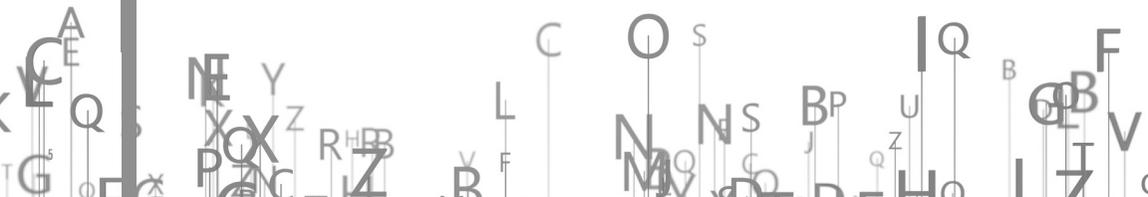
- ▶ Reformist-backed cleric Hassan Rouhani wins the presidential election. Under his presidency, Iran begins Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations with P5+1 over the nuclear program.

2017

- ▶ Women begin a series of anti-hijab protests, protesting compulsory hijab by unveiling in public and sharing their selfies on social media.

2019

- ▶ Fuel price hike prompts mass protests nationwide. Over 100 people are reported dead in the police crackdown.



2019

- ▶ Nasrin Sotoudeh, Iran's most prominent human rights lawyer, is sentenced to 38 years in prison. She represented a woman who was arrested for peacefully protesting the compulsory hijab.

2021

- ▶ The hardliner cleric Ebrahim Raisi is elected to presidency. The new minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance issues a new "program" for revamping MCIG's rubrics to further "Islamize" the arts. The government's censorial intervention in art and culture escalates.

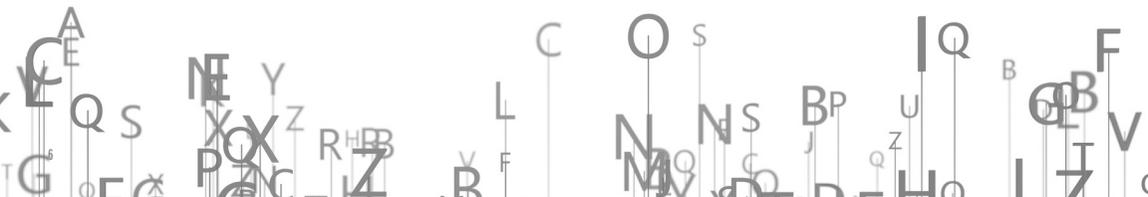
2022

- ▶ Starting in September, the largest civil uprising since the 1979 revolution, led by women and students, is unfolding. With the slogan Women, Life, Freedom, this intersectional movement is a fight for a democratic, secular government, freedom of expression, and equality for religious, ethnic, and gender minorities. Over 17000 protestors are arrested, and four are executed.

2023

- ▶ The Women, Life, Freedom movement continues to evolve.

BIO: **Marjan Moosavi** is an educator, researcher, digital curator, and dramaturg. She holds a Ph.D. in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Toronto. She is the Roshan Lecturer in Persian Studies and Performing Arts at the University of Maryland-College Park where she designs curriculum, mentors graduate students, and pursues her transnational projects at the intersection of Theatre Studies and Digital Humanities. Marjan's digital and curatorial collaborations include two pioneering and transnational digital projects: Digital Guide to Theater of the Middle East and the Digital Photo Exhibit on the Middle Eastern Theatre. Her research has been published in venues including The Drama Review (TDR), New Theatre Quarterly, Asian Theatre Journal, Critical Stages, and Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy. She is a longstanding Regional Managing Editor for TheTheatreTimes.com.



CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Cast

Ghazal Azarbad
Elham

Sepehr Reybod
Omid

Banafsheh Taherian
Roya

Ghazal Partou
Marjan

Aylin Oyan Salahshoor
Goli

Sina Suren
Nader (Voice)

Creative Team

Sanaz Toossi
Playwright

Rob Denton
Sound Designer

Diane Pitblado
Dialect Coach

Anahita Dehbonehie
Co-Director & Set Designer

Tim Rodrigues
Lighting Designer

Tracy Lynne Cann
Stage Manager

Guillermo Verdecchia
Co-Director

Aurora Torok
Assistant Lighting Designer

Farnoosh Talebpour
Assistant Stage Manager

Niloufar Ziaee
Costume Designer

Samay Arcentales Cajas
Video Support

Production

Chris Blanchenet
Scenic Painter

Erin Halls
Wardrobe Assistant

Ethan Robinson
Lighting Operator

Paul Boddum
Head Scenic Painter

Ellie Koffman
Head of Wardrobe

Bill Stahl
1st Carpenter

Valerie Cameron
Costume Stitcher

Seren Brooke Lannon
Production Administrator

Dalton Villeneuve-Marini
Deck Operator

Greg Chambers
Props Builder

Lisa Nighswander
Head of Props

Celina Westlake
Dresser

Andy DeVries
Head Carpenter

Danny Robertson
Scenic Painter

Segal Centre for Performing Arts

Lisa Rubin
Artistic & Executive Director

Jon Rondeau
General Manager

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is generously supported by



Running Time:
90 minutes
no intermission.

“English” is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals on behalf of Samuel French, Inc. www.concordtheatricals.com

World Premiere Presented By Atlantic Theater Company and Roundabout theatre Company New York City, 2022

In 2020, ENGLISH received the L. Arnold Weissberger Award for Playwrighting, jointly administered by the Anna L. Weissberger Foundations and Williamstown Theatre Festival

Background Notes

“You go years without making anyone laugh.”

— Marjan

Our mother tongue is at the heart of who we are, central to the creation of our identities. The rhythm and music of our original language frames the world for us, braids us into the person we become. This play examines what happens when we step out of the language that has built us word by word, phrase by phrase. It asks: what happens when we are not speaking in our own words? Are we still ourselves? If a new language is an opportunity for reinvention, what do we have to give up in exchange? Are we lost or found when our mouth speaks words that our ancestors never knew?

“Sometimes I think you can only speak one language. You can know two but ...”

— Marjan

English takes place over a period of weeks in an English language class in Karaj, Iran. Farsi is everyone’s mother tongue. All the characters are at various stages of proficiency in this new language. Playwright Sanaz Toossi found a wonderfully theatrical way to convey the two linguistic worlds the characters inhabit: when the actors’ English is fluent and accent-free, they are speaking in Farsi. When they speak with a strong accent, they are speaking in English.

Middle Eastern people, Toossi says, do not grace our stages often. For many cast and creative team members, this is the first time they have been in a room with so many other Iranian artists. The experience, the connection, the discoveries go beyond words. Like so many things, they can only be felt. The beauty of this broken-hearted comedy is that, in Marjan’s words, ‘it brings the inside to the outside and allows us to listen to the insides of others.’ As they say in Farsi, *Khosh-amadeed*.

Playwright Bio

Sanaz Toossi grew up in California, the only child of Iranian immigrants, “naturally bilingual” in English and Farsi. A strong student, she chose not to go to law school, but instead did her MFA at New York University; *English* was her thesis project. The play won Williamstown Theatre Festival’s 2020 L. Arnold Weissberger New Play Award, went on to an off-Broadway production, and a Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Play in 2022. Her second play, *Wish You Were Here*, about a group of Iranian women friends in the years of the Iran-Iraq war, was produced in New York in 2022.

Background Notes by Paula Wing





GHAZAL AZARBAD (دوب‌زبان) was born in Mashhad, Iran and raised in Vancouver, BC. SOULPEPPER 2023: English FOR SOULPEPPER: La Bête, Innocence Lost (2018), Wedding at Aulis (2019), The Seagull (2020) OTHER THEATRE: East Van Panto: Little Mermaid and Alice in Wonderland (Theatre Replacement); Romeo and Juliet (Bard); Bunny (Search Party); Being Here: The Refugee Story (Belfry); Shakespeare in Love (Bard); and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (Arts Club). FILM & TELEVISION: Float (Lionsgate), Charmed (CW), Kim's Convenience, The Slowest Show (CBC) OTHER: Writer and creator of Tārof (فرافقت): a Persian Comedy, Dear Konstantin (Spotify), and REAL. Two-time Jessie Awards nominee, recipient of the Hnatyshyn Foundation Award for Acting



TRACY LYNNE CANN was born and raised in Toronto, ON. SOULPEPPER 2023: English. FOR SOULPEPPER : Bad Parent (2022). OTHER THEATRE: Menopause The Musical (ShaggyPup Productions);The 39 Steps (The Grove Theatre); Passport to Madness (Workman Arts); Rinaldo (The Royal Conservatory of Music). OTHER: Tracy's dog, Max, has a career unto himself as a professional model and social influencer. Jokingly called "Side Hustle", Max can often be found traveling and working alongside Tracy.



SAMAY ARCENTALES CAJAS was born in Toronto and raised on the west coast and in her home country, Ecuador. SOULPEPPER 2022: Where the Blood Mixes OTHER THEATRE: Mischief (Roseneath Theatre); Reverence | Rage (Peñasco Theatre, NM); Kisâkihitin/Gizaagin (Paprika Festival), Izzie M.: The Alchemy of Enfreakment (Chocolate Woman Collective). FILM & TELEVISION: Solar Lodge, Toe the Line, Paladin, The Story of the Dancing Heart, In Moment. OTHER: Samay Arcentales Cajas is a queer (Kichwa) digital media artist and filmmaker based in Toronto. In her work she explores human-land relationships, the new media dimensions of indigenous cosmology, and immersive art as a site of liberation.



ANAHITA DEHBONEHIE Born in Tehran and based in Toronto since 2013. SOULPEPPER 2023: English FOR SOULPEPPER: Design: Marat/Sade, Blood Wedding, The Dead, Soulpepper Concert Series. Assistant Director: Jesus Hopped the A Train OTHER THEATRE: The Flick, Trojan Girls and the Outhouse of Atreus, Dr. Silver, TomorrowLove, The Tape Escape, Vitals (Outside the March), Chitra (The Shaw Festival), Jane Eyre (The Citadel Theatre), Hand to God, The Aliens (Coalmine Theatre) The Little Prince (Puzzle Piece), Take D Milk N'ah, Shove It Down My Throat (Pandemic Theatre) Bloom, The Lesson (Modern Time Theatre) FILM & TELEVISION: The Young Arsonists, The Players, Salome Learns to Dance, Spaceman OTHER: Recipient of 2 Dora awards, 2 theatre critics awards. Graduate of the Soulpepper Academy, Concordia university and Calarts.



ROB DENTON was born and raised in Montreal, QC. Soulpepper 2023: English, Other theatre (recent): Small Mouth Sounds (Segal 2020), Camille:The Story (Au Dela du Visuel 2022), Meet Me (Live Action Theatre Project 2022) TV + Film: King of the River (Roi de la riviere), Grey Roads, Fuego. Other: MECCA Sound Design - Satchmo' Suite (2007), META Sound Design - Another Home Invasion (2016).



GHAZAL PARTOU is an Iranian-Canadian actress and multidisciplinary artist. Ghazal is the recipient of the “Lead Actress” Special Mention from the Five Continents International Film Festival, the Best Acting award from the Ark Gate International Film Festival, the Toronto Arts Foundation/TELUS “Newcomer Artist” award, the Persbook Contemporary Art award, and the National Sculpture Biennial award in Tehran. She received her B.A. and acting degree in Iran and continued her education at the Toronto Film School. Her combined knowledge of visual art and drama has allowed her to expand her world of creation. She seeks to establish an interactive relationship with the audience and to raise fresh questions in their minds. With the revision and redesign of familiar concepts, she makes of them a means for fresh expression, an expression whose elements are rooted in daily life but which ultimately creates and narrates what has been hidden underneath those familiar forms. Since landing in Canada, Ghazal has been active in a diverse range of thought-provoking artistic projects as an actor, performance artist, creative director, singer and designer. Her overarching goal is to make the most out of the multicultural potential of Toronto, find an international language as an artist and connect with the core of humanity beyond race, language, nationality, and ethnicity.



DIANE PITBLADO was born in Toronto. She has lived in Toronto, Montreal, and London, UK. SOULPEPPER 2023: English FOR SOULPEPPER: over seventy productions since the inaugural season. OTHER THEATRE: National Arts Centre, Canadian Stage, Tarragon Theatre, Buddies in Bad Times, Studio 180, Mirvish Productions, Royal Manitoba Theatre, among others. FILM & TELEVISION: select credits include Emilia Jones in ‘Locke and Key’, Tom Hopper and Robert Sheehan in ‘Umbrella Academy’, Margot Robbie in ‘Suicide Squad’, Mads Mikkelsen in ‘Hannibal’, Kristen Stewart in ‘On the Road’, and Julie Christie in ‘Away from Her’.



SEPEHR REYBOD is an Iranian-Canadian actor, playwright, and creator based in Toronto. SOULPEPPER 2023: ENGLISH. OTHER THEATRE: Richard III, All’s Well That Ends Well (Stratford Festival); R+J (WhytNot Theatre & Stratford Festival); The In-Between (Geordie Theatre). OTHER: Sepehr’s first play Saffron & Caviar was publicly presented in the Parkdale New Works Theatre Festival in 2019. His current work-in-development, The Karkhaneh, was developed through Factory Theatre’s Foundry unit (2019-2020) and Factory’s initial Bedrock Creators’ Initiative.



TIM RODRIGUES A former dancer/choreographer turned lighting designer, Tim Rodrigues has worked with an array of companies on creation-based projects and international tours. SOULPEPPER 2023: English OTHER THEATRE: Serving Elizabeth (Theatre Aquarius); Celestial Bodies, From The Stars In The Sky To The Fish In The Sea (Geordie Theatre); Pipeline, How Black Mothers Say I Love You (Black Theatre Workshop); This Is How We Got Here (Magnus Theatre); Marjorie Prime (Segal Centre) OTHER: A three time Montreal English Theatre Award Nominee for Outstanding Lighting Design, for more info visit timrodrigues.com





AYLIN OYAN SALAHSHOOR is a bilingual (English-Farsi) Toronto-based performer. SOULPEPPER 2023: ENGLISH, OTHER THEATRE: In English: 9428 (Toronto Fringe Festival – July 2022), Heart of a Dog (Next Stage – Toronto Fringe Festival, January 2022), The Monster I learned to Love (Toronto Fringe Theatre Festival 2020), Swim Team (Theatre Centre, November 2019), and Sisyphus and Death (Alumnae Theatre, May 2019). In Farsi: The Dance of Torn Papers (Dance Maker, November 2018) and The Only Way Possible (Ignatieff Theatre, June 2018). OTHER: The first prize winner of the Norma Epstein Foundation Awards in Creative Writing for her play Minor Punctuations.



SINA A. SUREN is a multidisciplinary performance artist, specializing in writing, directing and acting. Born in Iran, he currently leads the Rise Theatre Collective in Montreal & Toronto Directed work: Rise Theatre Collective: Gracchi, 2022 Arash 2021, Little Black Fish 2020 Selected Acting Credit: Fifteen Dogs, (dir Zach Fraser) The Crucible (dir Terry Donald) Authored Plays: The Keeper 2020 Gracchi 2019

Novus 2017.



BANAFSHEH TAHERIAN was born in Tehran/Iran and immigrated to Canada. THEATRE: Distorted (Small World music); Swim Team (Theatre Centre); The Only Possible Way (Canadian stage); Dance of Torn Papers(Dancemakers); Sleeping In an Empty cup(Fairview library theatre); The cripple Of Inishmaan (Glendon Theatre); Untuned(Digital Fringe) Film & Television: 16 Hudson; LiLi & LoLa;

Simurgh OTHER: In 2019, she published her podcast “Chai With Banafsheh” that recounts ancient Iranian tales from significant literary figures. She is currently the 2021-22 artist in residence with Canadian Stage.



FARNOOSH TALEBPOUR was born in Tehran, Iran but has now spent most of her life in Toronto. SOULPEPPER 2022: Queen Goneril, King Lear OTHER THEATRE: Dixon Road (Musical Stage Company/Obsidian Theatre company), Through the Bamboo (Uwi Collective/Toronto Fringe). Apprentice SM:, Orphans for the Czar (Crow’s), Serving Elizabeth (Stratford Festival) Angel, The Resurrection (Opera Atelier);

Angelique (BTW/Factory Theatre). SM: Iphigenia and The Furies (Saga Collectif/Theatre Passe Muraille) FILM: Assistant Production Design for One Small Visit, Lune. Costume design for Tête à Tête, Queen of the Morning Calm. OTHER: She would like to thank all the people around her who have helped keep her feet grounded, joined in laughter, and kept her heart safe.

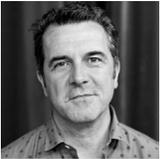




SANAZ TOOSSI is an Iranian-American playwright from Orange County, California. Her plays include *English* (co-production Atlantic Theater Company/Roundabout Theatre Company; NYT Critics Pick; Weissberger New Play Award) and *Wish You Were Here* (Playwrights Horizons; Williamstown/Audible, released 2020). *Novus* 2017. 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 and a recipient of the 2020 Steinberg Playwright Award. MFA: NYU Tisch.



AURORA TOROK has origins in Ontario, but now calls Montreal (Tio'Tia: Ke) her home base for freelance work across the country. *SOULPEPPER 2023: ENGLISH*, and she is excited to work on her first production with *SOULPEPPER*. *OTHER THEATRE*: *Celestial Bodies* (Geordie Theatre/YPT); *Heartbeat Reverie* (Youtheatre); *Pipeline* (Black Theatre Workshop); *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* (Geordie Theatre) *OTHER*: Nominee for the *META* (Montreal English Theatre Awards) for Outstanding Contribution to Theatre.



GUILLERMO VERDECCHIA was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Soulpepper 2022: English For Soulpepper: Fronteras Americanas*; *Animal Farm*; *Of Human Bomdage* (dramaturg); *Queen Goneril* (Dramaturg); *The Parliament of the Birds* (playwright; *Around the World in 80 plays*) *Other Theatre*: *King Gilgamesh* and *The Man of the Wild* (dramaturg; *Jungle Theatre*); *The Jungle* (director: *Tarragon Theatre*); *The Orchard* (dramaturg; *Shaw Festival*); *The Art of Building a Bunker* (co-creator: *Quiptake/Factory Theatre*) *Other*: A recipient of the Governor-General's Award for Drama for his play *Fronteras Americanas*., his newest play. *Feast*, will premiere in the fall of 2023. He is the Jury Chair of the *Siminovitch Prize in Theatre*. He teaches at the University of Toronto.



NILOUFAR ZIAEE is a filmmaker and multidisciplinary artist from Iran who has made Canada her home since 2016. *Soulpepper 2023: English Other theatres: The Death of The King* (Humber College, Faculty of Media & Creative Arts); *Trojan girls & The Outhouse of Atreus* (Factory Theatre); *Children of Fire* (Nightwood Theatre); *1184* (theatre passe muraille); *The Sylvia Effect* (Theatre Kingston) *Film & Television: The Players*; *The Young Arsonists*; *Salome*; *Three Fellows*; *The Creation*.

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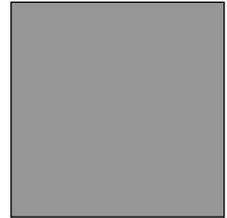
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