

English - Play Review

Post-Show Activity for Grades 6-12

Goals

- Students will analyze and reflect on the production of *English*.
- Students will evaluate theatrical elements and personal impact.
- Students will write or present a structured review.

NOTE: This activity has been aligned with TEKS and [Universal Design for Learning](#). TEKS can be found at the end of this document.

Materials Needed

- Paper and pen or laptops/tablets for writing.
- Whiteboard or digital board for group discussion.
- Story Outline (Characters and Themes), included in this file.
- Sample play review (a Houston Press review of *Pictures from Home* is included in this file).

Introduction- First Reactions

Ask:

- What moment resonated with you?
- Which character stayed with you?
- How would you rate this play?

Notes for UDL alignment: Encourage students to share in pairs, small groups, or through written reflection to offer varied ways of participating or give students who need it some additional processing time.

Example- What is a Review?

A review includes:

- Brief, spoiler-free summary
- Analysis of performances and design
- Discussion of themes
- Personal response

Discuss theatrical elements such as:

- Use of accents to convey the characters speaking English and Farsi.
- Use of silence.
- Classroom setting and repetition.

- Tone shifts between humor and tension

Guided Practice- Group Discussion

- Divide students into small groups; assign each a different aspect of the production to analyze:
 - Performances (Marjan, Elham, Omid, Roya, Goli).
 - Set and costume design (the classroom, outfits, the context of the time in 2008).
 - Emotional arc of the play.
 - Language as a theatrical device.

Develop possible thesis statements, such as:

“*English* uses a classroom to reveal how language shapes identity, power, and belonging.”

Notes for UDL alignment: To provide multiple ways of expressing understanding, consider letting students act or physicalize their responses. You can also utilize [Think-Pair-Share](#) to provide additional solo and partner processing time. Bridge student vocabulary with grade-level terminology.

Independent Practice | Writing Your Review

- Students draft a 500-word review of the *English* performance, using guided questions and the group’s observations:
 - What was the play about? (brief summary without spoilers)
 - Which performances stood out and why?
 - How did language function as a dramatic tool?
 - How did the play make you feel? Did it surprise or engage you?
 - What themes or messages did the play explore?
 - Would you recommend this play? Why or why not?
- Scaffold writing with sentence starters such as:
 - “The play *English* explores...”
 - “One of the most powerful performances was...”
 - “Language in this play functions as...”
 - “The play explores themes such as...”
 - “Overall, this play made me feel...”
- Encourage use of theatre vocabulary and examples from the play’s script or performance. Bridge language from student expression as needed.
- Optional extension: create a visual companion piece like a poster or digital presentation highlighting key points from their review.

Notes for UDL alignment: Students can record their reviews or present them as short videos. You can also allow alternative formats for students needing support: oral reviews, storyboards, or graphic organizers.

Reflection | Headlines

- Students write or brainstorm a headline that captures the essence of their review.
- Share headlines with a partner or small group.
- Discuss which headline best captures the core of the play and why.

Notes for UDL alignment: Encourage students to share in pairs, small groups, or through written reflection to offer varied ways of participating.

TEKS

Fine Arts- Theatre, Middle School 6-8, High School Levels I-IV

- (5) Critical evaluation and response. The student responds to and evaluates theatre and theatrical performances.

English Language Arts and Reading, Middle School 6-8

- 6(H): respond orally or in writing with appropriate register, vocabulary, tone, and voice;

English Language Arts and Reading, High School- English I-IV

- 5(C): use text evidence and original commentary to support a response;
- 5(H): respond orally or in writing with appropriate register, vocabulary, tone, and voice;

English - Story Outline

Outline

This outline is a reference to help you remember the play. Use it to notice connections between characters, setting, and themes. You do not need to add anything unless your teacher asks you to. Use the outline to support your analysis or creative response.

Basic Play Information

Title: English

Playwright: Sanaz Toossi

Genre: Contemporary drama

Setting: 2008, Karaj, Iran

Primary Location: An English-language classroom preparing students for the TOEFL exam

Central Point of View: Primarily Marjan, with shifting focus among the students

Setting as a Driving Force

- The classroom is a controlled space with strict language rules (“English Only”)
- It is a place of ambition, pressure, and vulnerability
- Language functions as both a tool for opportunity and a source of conflict
- The classroom becomes a site where identity is tested, reshaped, and revealed

Major Themes

- **Language and Identity** – The struggle to learn English is not just academic, and characters wrestle with how speaking English changes their sense of who they are.
- **Bias around Accents** – Characters in the play speak with varying degrees of fluency and accent, which impacts who is heard, valued, or dismissed based on how they speak.
- **Belonging and Cultural Identity** – The characters in this play are not only learning a different language, but are also exploring what it means to live in a different country where English is spoken.
- **Connection and Isolation** – Language is portrayed as a bridge — and sometimes a barrier — to intimacy.

Key Characters & Motivations

Marjan

- Teacher who believes deeply in English as a tool for self-expression
- Struggles with her own fractured identity between Farsi and English
- Values discipline, immersion, and emotional restraint

Elham

- Highly driven and academically gifted
- Frustrated by her accent and repeated TOEFL failures
- Sees English as an obstacle rather than a refuge

Omid

- Fluent and calm, with an American passport
- Hides his complicated relationship to English and belonging
- Ultimately chooses home over outward opportunity

Roya

- Older student motivated by family connection
- Wants English to connect with her granddaughter abroad
- Values heritage, memory, and emotional continuity

Goli

- Youngest student; imaginative and expressive
- Finds freedom and confidence in English
- Represents possibility, growth, and openness

Key Moments / Ideas

- Early classroom exercises reveal differences in fluency, confidence, and power
- Conflicts arise around accent, correction, and favoritism
- Elham's frustration builds through repeated testing pressure
- Omid reveals his American citizenship and chooses not to leave Iran
- Roya asserts the importance of native language and cultural memory
- Marjan confronts the emotional cost of living between languages
- The final scenes emphasize acceptance rather than mastery

Language as a Theatrical Device

- English and Farsi are both represented through English dialogue
- Accents signal identity, status, and emotional distance
- Silence, repetition, and correction shape the rhythm of scenes
- Language becomes action, conflict, and metaphor

Overall Impact

- *English* explores what is gained—and lost—when learning another language
- The play resists simple answers about success or assimilation
- It emphasizes emotional truth over linguistic perfection
- The ending centers growth, self-recognition, and coexistence of identities

Pictures From Home Looks At The Parent Behind The Photo

by Jessica Goldman, Houston Press



Todd Waite and Zachary Fine in Alley Theatre's production of Pictures from Home. Credit: Photo by Lynn Lane

Larry's favorite photograph of his dad is the one his father hates the most.

The shot, taken by Larry, a distinguished photographer, is a close-up of his father, Irv, sleeping peacefully on the family's California living room couch. Through Larry's eyes, the image captures the vulnerability his father masks in real life. A chance to see the real him without all the masculine confidence Irv swings around daily like his beloved golf club.

But for Irv, the shot is all wrong. He looks old, for one thing. He may be 70 but he sure doesn't feel it. Plus it's dimly lit. And who the hell would want to look at a sleeping man anyway, what's the point? Where's the rigor in that?

Images, how we see them, how we interpret them, the stories they tell about us and the slippery accuracy of those tales are at the center of Larry and Irv's prickly father/son relationship in Sharr White's, *Pictures From Home*, now getting a handsomely sensitive and whimsical production at the Alley.

Based on the acclaimed 1992 photo memoir of Larry Sultan, the show (developed at the 2020 Alley All New Festival) follows Larry (Zachary Fine) as he leaves his wife and children several times a month to fly to his aging parents' home for "the project". A loosely defined photo safari where Larry hopes to capture his parents' lives accurately through his lens. Certainly, more accurately than the family photos and Super 8 reels he's seen of them.

Retired executive salesman Irv (Todd Waite) and Larry's Real Estate Agent mum, Jean (Susan Koozin) may look like the definition of the perfectly successful American nuclear family in snapshot, but Larry doesn't want the perfect. He wants the people, warts and all. To understand his parents, to better understand himself. To keep his gaze on them, therefore keeping them present and alive.

Set mostly in the 1980s over eight years, we watch Larry drop in and photograph his parents mostly going about their lives, much to his father's piqued annoyance and mother's more measured acceptance. All the while, real photos of Larry's parents are seen projected on screens that drop in and out of the stage. A chance for the characters to discuss and disagree on them.

There's lots of humor to be mined in their encounters, parents bickering, Larry and Irv seemingly speaking different languages when it comes to expressing feelings and self-truths, Jean trying to keep the peace and her mind in the process.

Director Rob Melrose astutely never lets these funny moments fall prey to tropes. There's lots of room to laugh here at Irv's cuss-inflected exasperations, Larry's endlessly annoying probing questions and Jean's flappability. But we do so feeling the undercurrent of sadness throughout.

Funny as this family's miscommunications and inability to provide what the other wants is, we see the frustration underneath. Frustration that they can't quite be heard. Or access the tools to understand what to say. Or be respected for who they think they are. There's love there for sure though, otherwise, they wouldn't keep trying.

It could all be so sentimental, this dance they do. After all, at an hour and forty-five minutes with no intermission, we're held captive in father and son's endless and often repetitive arguments over Larry's work, all the while knowing that "the project" is a commercial success in the end.

What keeps the show fresh for us is the acting. This review could have easily been three words divided only by exclamation points. Zachary! Susan! Todd!

Returning to the Alley, this time without the lizard skin he so superbly sported in Edward Albee's *Seascape*, Zachary Fine gives an expressive sweetness to Larry that helps stretch our patience with his neediness and

intrusion. Not that what he's reaching for is wrong or unworthy, it's just selfish and a little annoying. Yet thanks to Fine's open-heartedness, we can't help but root for Larry.

It's hard to name a production that Susan Koozin doesn't make better and this is no exception. As Jean, Koozin gets to show off her impeccable comic timing, but it's her motherly, loving moments that really hit.

"You act as if you're the only child in the world and we're the only parents," she says to Larry trying to persuade him that all children yearn for the understanding he's desperate for. That Koozin can make this sound both admonishing and assuring is the work of an actor fully driving her character's emotional bus.

Finally, anyone waiting for Todd Waite to step out of the camp roles and into something meatier, more expansive and demanding - this is your chance and you will not be disappointed. As Irv, Waite is tasked with the heavy lifting in this show and he carries multitudes - abrasiveness, charm, disappointment, self-aggrandizement, self-doubt, jokester and, of course, fatherly judgment.

That we are utterly frustrated by Irv's immovability/refusal to admit to inner life/mistreatment of his wife and son and yet feel so protective of him is thanks to Waite's wonderfully nuanced performance.

As Larry's project winds up, we're not really sure what he discovered about his parents. That they're flawed people just like everyone else? Perhaps. There's no big aha moment here. No satisfying takeaway. Much like life itself, things just move on. The only difference is Larry had photographs to prove it.

Pictures From Home runs to February 11 at Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. For more information, call 713-220-5700 or visit alleytheatre.org. \$27-\$81.

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