#### ABSTRACT

Title of Document:	READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN: AN OPERA BASED ON THE BOOK BY AZAR NAFISI
	Elisabeth Ann Mehl Greene, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2011

Directed By:

Associate Professor Mark Wilson, Music Theory & Composition

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* brings Azar Nafisi's bestselling memoir to the stage as a chamber opera, with a cast of eight singers, accompanied by flute, saxophone, piano, and cello. The libretto, co-written with Iranian-American poet Mitra Motlagh, retells Nafisi's experiences teaching Western literature after the Iranian Revolution, first in the classroom, and then in secret to a group of young women students. By reflecting the challenges of her reading group through the prism of Lolita, Gatsby, James, and Austen, Nafisi both paints a picture of the grim realities of Revolutionary Iran and shows how literature provides universal insights into the human condition. Through their experiences of love and loss, belonging and exile, Nafisi and her students find solace in literature; and through imagination the women create spaces denied to them by circumstances.

The opera score draws inspiration from a variety of sources, including both the popular and folk music traditions of Iran, as well as music of the literature of Reading Lolita in Tehran, from Jane Austen to The Great Gatsby. Like the blending of past and present literary work in the novel, the music melds sounds from diverse geography and history into the contemporary opera form. The opera focuses on the six students in particular as representatives of the countless kaleidoscope stories of Iranian women seeking freedom. Their songs remind us that the simple liberties of reading and thought, education and identity, are precious and worth fighting for. Though the events take place in Tehran, the truths transcend all boundaries of language and culture.

#### READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN: AN OPERA BASED ON THE BOOK BY AZAR NAFISI

By

Elisabeth Ann Mehl Greene

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts 2011

Advisory Committee: Associate Professor Mark Wilson, Chair Associate Professor James Fry Professor Robert Gibson Professor Leon Major Associate Professor Katherine McAdams © Copyright by Elisabeth Ann Mehl Greene 2011

### Acknowledgements

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Used with permission from Azar Nafisi.

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	Name	Voice type	Costume
Lead:	AZAR, professor, early 40's	Mezzo Soprano	White / chador
Young women students: (CHORUS)	AZIN, outspoken, vivacious, vain	Soprano	Red / chador
	MAHSHID, conservative, lady-like	Soprano	Navy /
	MITRA, soft-spoken, painter, poet	Soprano	chador Lilac / chador
	NASSRIN, sarcastic, rebellious	Mezzo Soprano	Pink / chador
	SANAZ, independent, dancer	Mezzo Soprano	Orange / chador
	YASSI, youngest, comedic	Soprano (Coloratura)	Yellow / chador
Male multiple role:	MAGICIAN, elderly liberal bookseller		
	NYAZI, conservative student	Baritone	
	GUARD, obstinate keeper of the gate		
	BAHRI, arrogant administrator		

## Characters & Instrumentation

### *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is scored for:

Flute

Saxophone – Soprano & Alto

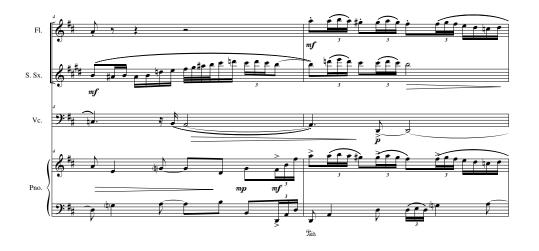
Piano

Cello

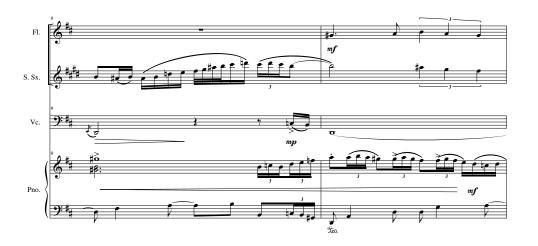
Full Score

# **Reading Lolita in Tehran**

















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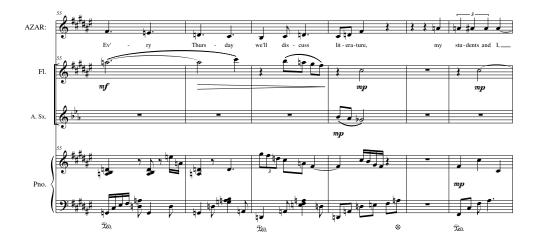








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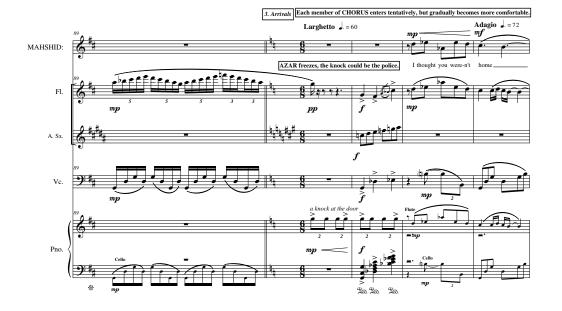














































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Reading Lolita in Tehran

















Reading Lolita in Tehran































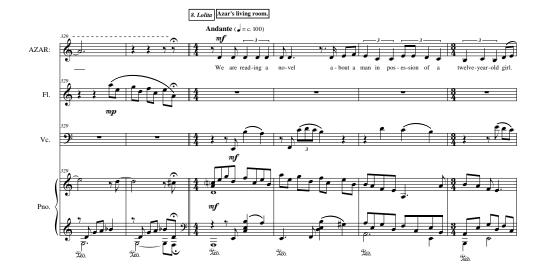
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Reading Lolita in Tehran



Reading Lolita in Tehran











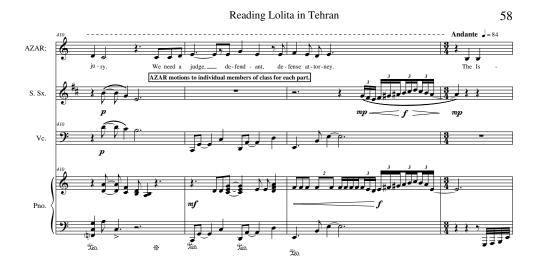




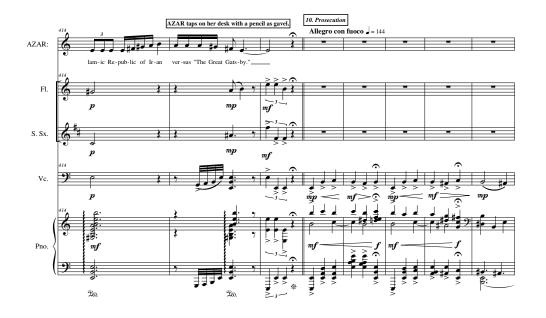
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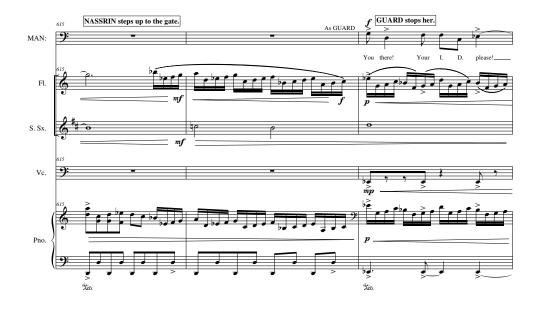












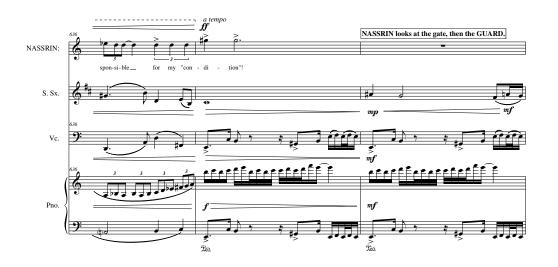




















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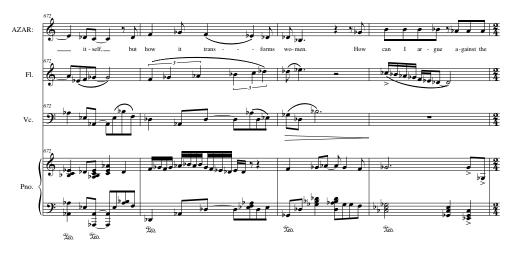
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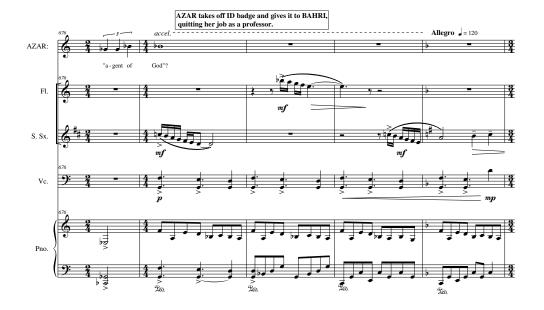
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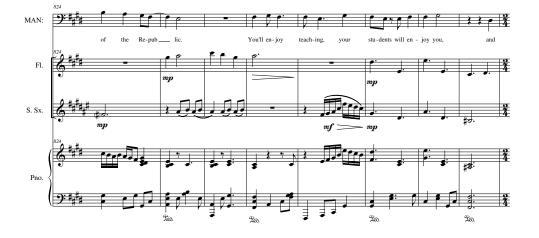
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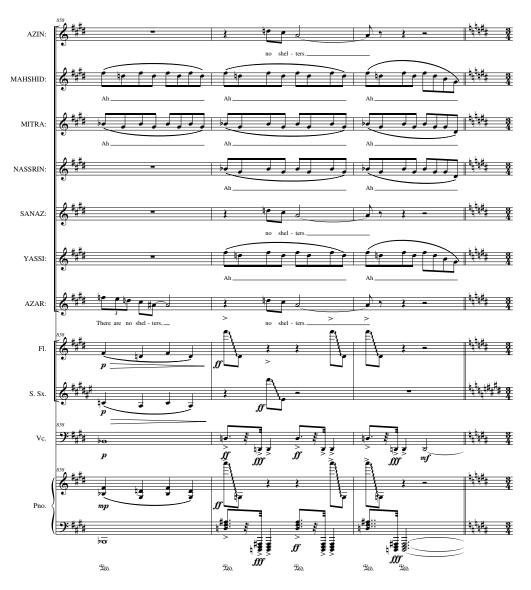






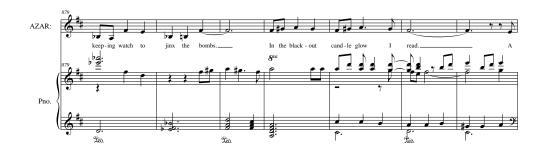
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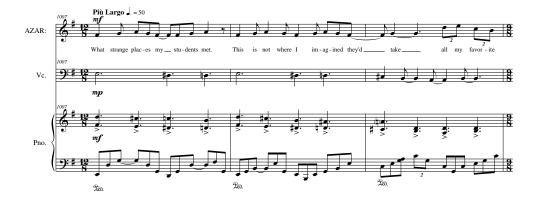




























































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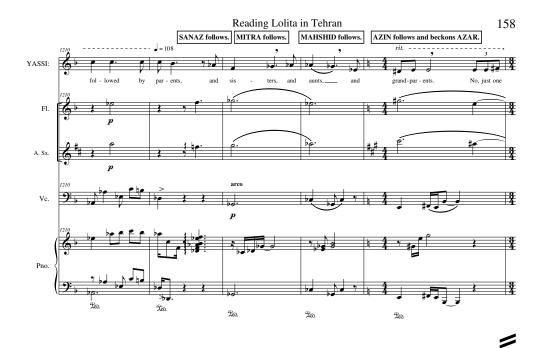
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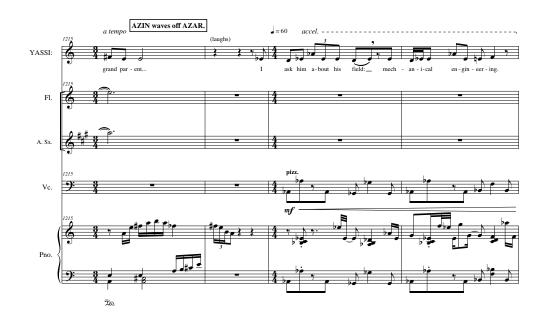
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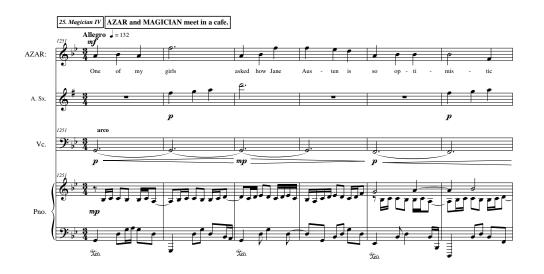


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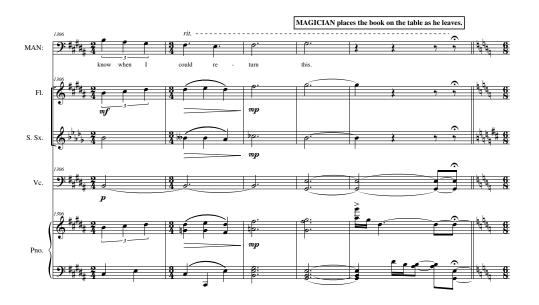












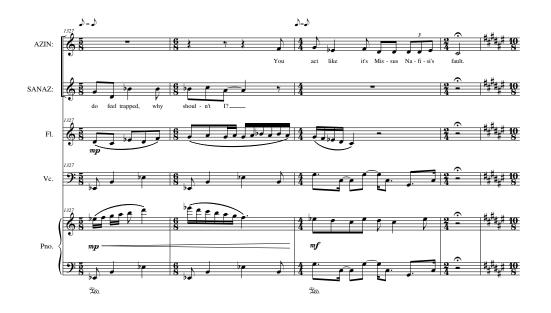


























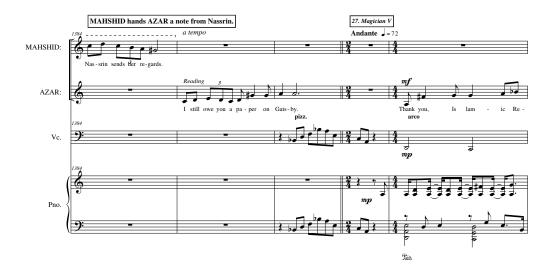








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Reading Lolita in Tehran



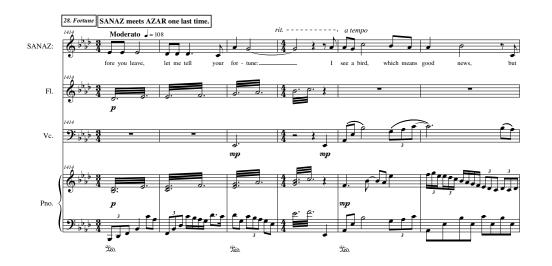
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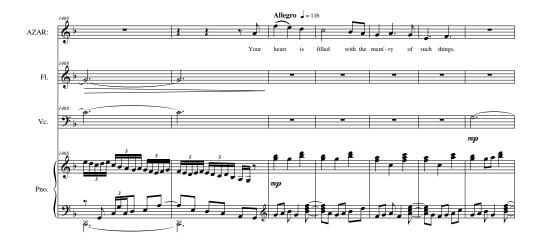




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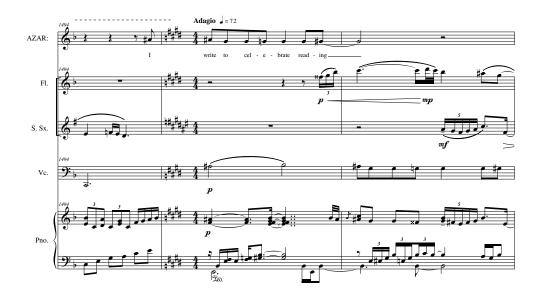




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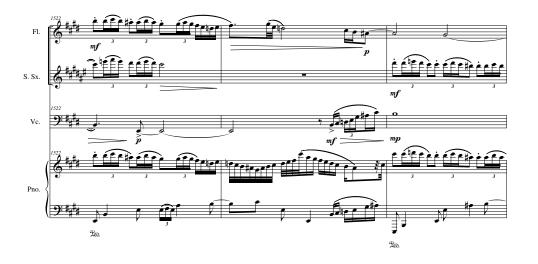




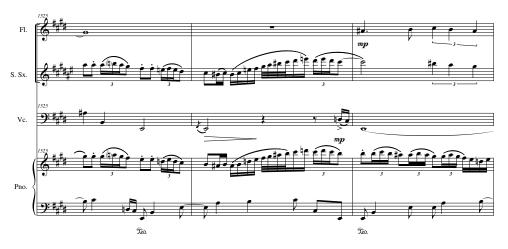
















## Appendix: Libretto

### I. Lolita

The stage is dark. AZAR starts at her desk alone, remembering.

#### AZAR

I need you to imagine us reading Lolita in Tehran. In a deceptively sunny room, we escape Iran and articulate in our own words ourselves listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets.

Then imagine all of this—taken away.

I write to celebrate reading.

AZAR moves to the living room, arranging things, closing windows, preparing for her secret literature class

#### AZAR

I awake, too excited to eat. Every Thursday we'll discuss literature, my students and I, secretly!

No interference from the Islamic Republic! We can do what we like without penalties for wearing, dare-I-say, make-up. No one sees. Freedoms I've been denied, colors I've only dreamed!

What if it doesn't work, if they don't come?

What if it works too well, and guards find out?

A knock at the door. AZAR freezes; the knock could be the police. Members of the CHORUS enter in rapid succession, their chatter overlapping. In their greetings some remove head coverings, too busy to completely divest themselves of darkcolored outwear. The windows are closed.

#### MAHSHID

I thought you weren't home.

AZAR No men in the house, you don't need your veil.

MAHSHID I'll get the door!

**AZIN** Orchids from Mitra and I.

**AZAR** Thank you, Azin.

**MITRA** Salām!

YASSI I am here too!

MITRA Yassi!

AZAR Welcome!

Sanaz!

### SANAZ Sorry I'm late,

my brother won't let me drive.

### AZAR

I worry about the trouble this class might cost you.

NASSRIN I mentioned it to Father, and surprise! he disapproved.

AZAR How did he let you come?

MAHSHID You lied!

NASSRIN What else can I do at this age? Father tries to control every move, every wish!

SANAZ What if he calls to check up on you?

NASSRIN Shh! We are translating Islamic texts into English.

Now the CHORUS becomes more comfortable. With the mention of colors, they begin to reveal colorful modern clothing, t-shirts, jeans, etc.

MITRA / YASSI Look at this place! Beautiful.

SANAZ / NASSRIN

Everywhere, colors.

AZAR I've always been obsessed with all kinds of colors.

NASSRIN I want to wear shocking pink, tomato red!

MAHSHID You're too greedy for colors!

**AZIN** I paint my nails the color of blood.

**MITRA** Why, Azin?

**AZIN** It takes my mind off things...

### AZAR

Scheherazade's dress, the magic lamp, colors of paradise.

### CHORUS

Green lush leaves, two red apples. A golden pear and blue, Persian blue.

### NASSRIN

My paradise is swimming-pool blue!

SANAZ My paradise is too!

### **CHORUS** (overlapping)

Cerulean, aqua, turquoise, denim, periwinkle. Cobalt, sky, sea, indigo. Aabi, lapis, sapphire, azure. Midnight, violet.

#### NASSRIN

Father was proud of his champion swimmer. My dream is at the bottom of that pool, like Gatsby.

#### MITRA

I once painted life, but now it's just rebellious color.

### CHORUS

Tangerine, saffron, plum, pomegranate, lime.

#### MITRA

Dark patches, droplets of blue. Reality is so bleak, all I can paint are the colors of my dreams.

CHORUS surrounds AZAR in the living room, picking up the varied books.

**YASSI** What will we study?

AZAR The first work will be... A Thousand and One Nights.

SANAZ Scheherazade!

MITRA Shahrzad!

### NASSRIN The king slays virgin wives as revenge for a queen's betrayal. Stories stay his hand.

### AZAR Three kinds of women are victims of the king's rule:

**YASSI / MAHSHID** Those who betray...

AZIN / MITRA / NASSRIN and are killed.

### SANAZ Those who die for the king.

**MAHSHID** Those killed before they can betray.

### MITRA

The virgins have no voice but their silence.

### AZIN

Shahrzad chooses different terms. She fashions her own universe, making words.

**SANAZ** Courage to risk her life

# **MAHSHID** sets her apart from the others.

AZAR passes out copies of Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading.

### **CHORUS**

Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

### AZAR

Nabokov writes of being trapped without fresh language. No upsilamba letters to catapult and take flight.

**CHORUS** Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

**YASSI** Upsilon and lambda, what does it mean?

**CHORUS** Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

**AZIN** A sound, a melody.

**SANAZ** A small African boy's secret name.

### MITRA

A small silver fish leaping in and out of a moon-lit lake.

AZAR The impossible joy of a suspended leap!

**YASSI** It's a dance, c'mon baby...

AZAR / YASSI ...do the upsilamba with me!

**CHORUS** Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

**MAHSHID** Three girls jumping rope, shouting upsilamba!

MITRA

The paradox of a blissful sigh.

**SANAZ** A little bird.

**AZIN** An upsilamba to you, too!

NASSRIN A magic code opens the door to a vast treasure...

AZAR of remembrance.

Bookshop. MAGICIAN organizes books as AZAR tries to find the titles she wants.

AZAR I searched for books, books impossible to find only months later.

MAGICIAN If you're interested in those...

AZAR

I am.

MAGICIAN

...buy them now, too much demand. They can't do anything about that, can they?

AZAR and MAGICIAN move to a café where she has brought her students' pictures, papers, and projects.

### AZAR

What do you see in my girls? Read their writing, look at their drawings.

**MAGICIAN** They are fine people. AZAR They're geniuses! Will you meet with them?

**MAGICIAN** No, I'm trying not to add to my acquaintances,

AZAR / MAGICIAN too many people to worry over.

AZAR Did I choose them? Or did they choose me?

Back at the house, all the women are present, Xerox copies of Lolita in hand, tea cups all around.

### AZAR

We are reading a novel about a man in possession of a twelve-year-old girl. Why Lolita? Why in Tehran?

### YASSI

Why does reading Lolita, so tragic, make us happy?

#### MITRA

If we write about life in Iran, should we make readers happy?

### NASSRIN / SANAZ

What bothers us most is not her utter helplessness, but the robbery of her childhood.

# AZIN

The pinned butterfly.

NASSRIN / SANAZ Humbert stole her innocence.

**CHORUS** Lolita, I see myself in you. Lolita, I see your captivity in my own life.

### II. Gatsby

Students redress for the outside world. Change to university setting. NYAZI stomps down the hall to AZAR's office after seeing the assigned reading list posted. MITRA, NASSRIN, and SANAZ follow.

### NYAZI

How could this happen? Scott Fitzgerald! The novel is immoral, it's poison,

### MITRA / NASSRIN / SANAZ

No, it's not!

#### NYAZI

corrupting innocent minds who read it as truth.

#### MITRA / NASSRIN / SANAZ

How can he say these things?

#### AZAR

Do you know this is fiction, not how-to?

#### NYAZI

Maybe Gatsby is fine for America, but not *our* youth. The "Great" Gatsby represents all things America. We should fight against this immorality, this evil.

### AZAR

In these days of public prosecutions, put Gatsby on trial. You can be prosecutor, the class can be jury. We need a judge, defendant, defense attorney. The Islamic Republic of Iran versus *The Great Gatsby*. AZAR taps her pencil on the desk as a gavel. NYAZI makes his way to the front of the classroom for opening statements.

### NYAZI

Our writers have a sacred mission. Our poets battle against the Great Satan. Faithful soldiers,

### AZAR

The students?

### NYAZI

purge Western culture....

As a Muslim, I cannot accept *Gatsby*. Every single page condemns itself. The hero cheats! and destroys homes! He earns money illegally, buys a married woman's love, lies and shamelessly deceives. What sort of American dream is this?

SANAZ moves to the front of the classroom.

#### SANAZ

Our prosecutor can no longer distinguish fiction from reality. Novels must be read on their own terms. Is a story good if the heroine is good? Is it bad if the characters stray? It is moral when it makes us confront our beliefs?

This is the first book to succeed so brilliantly. Gatsby disturbs us, and awakens minds from sleep. Judged by their honesty, the rich fail. How can you claim the author would approve? They are careless, counting on others to be careful. This book *condemns* the wealthy more than your revolutionaries!

### AZAR

Don't read Gatsby to learn good and evil. Both are complicated.

### NYAZI

There is nothing complicated about an affair. Gatsby, get your own wife!

#### MAHSHID

Write your own novel!

#### NASSRIN

I don't approve of Gatsby, but he would die for love.

### NYAZI

This is an Islamic country and this is the law.

SANAZ regains the floor.

### SANAZ

Why major in literature? Does it mean anything? The novel is its own defense. We all have things to learn from Gatsby. Not that adultery is good, or that to swindle is right, but we should value our dreams, and take care where they alight. And the joy of reading, that counts too, see?

### III. James

Without a headscarf, NASSRIN tries to walk past the GUARD who blocks her path to the University gate.

### GUARD

You there! Your I.D. please! You know you can't go in like this.

#### NASSRIN

I've been going in like this for years!

GUARD No! Cover your head! New orders!

### NASSRIN

My problem, not yours!

**GUARD** I'm to stop any woman...

NASSRIN I'm not ANY woman!

**GUARD** Signed by the president: No GIRL passes in your condition.

**NASSRIN** In my condition?

**GUARD** You can't go through, I will be held responsible.

### NASSRIN

Last time I checked, I was the one responsible for my "condition"!

NASSRIN looks at the gate, then at the GUARD, and breaks into a run. As NASSRIN reaches inside the University, she is seized. AZAR and NASSRIN make eye contact as NASSRIN is led away. AZAR continues toward administrator BAHRI's office for a meeting about the veil policy.

### BAHRI

Before the revolution, why did Nassrin wear the veil in the poorer, more traditional parts of town?

### AZAR

It was out of respect for those people's faith!

### BAHRI

It's just a piece of cloth, so much more is at stake. The Imperial West corrupts us, while your "preference" divides us.

### AZAR

"Defender of the faith" we have more respect for that "piece of cloth" than to force it on anyone. It is not the veil itself, but how it transforms women. How *can* I argue against the "agent of God"? AZAR hands over ID, quitting her teaching job at the university. She moves toward the bookstore, running into her friend, the MAGICIAN.

### AZAR

I will pick up all the Jameses, all six novels by Austen, *Howard's End, Vanity Fair*, some Nabokov, Fanny Hill? Not enough money.

### MAGICIAN

Don't worry, no one knows who they are anymore. And who wants to read them now, anyway?

### AZAR

Who indeed? People like me, irrelevant.

Bearing signs with slogans, CHORUS pursues AZAR as she makes her way home through the streets.

### **CHORUS**

New regulations! Chador, long robe and scarf! New rules to enforce! Unveiled women will not be served! Disobedience will be punished! Seventy six lashes! Jail! Morality squads patrol the streets.

After slamming the door on the CHORUS, AZAR dramatically throws scarf and long over-robes to the floor in anger, looking in the mirror.

#### AZAR

Now that I cannot call myself teacher, writer, now that I can't wear my own clothes, walk to my own beat, shout, pat a colleague on the back, now that this is illegal, I feel fictional and light, walking on air, as if I was written, then erased. Invisible.

I invent new games for myself. In a robe to my ankles, I withdraw my hands. See? I have none. My body disappears. Only a piece of cloth moves here and there, I'm something invisible.

One day the female guard objects, "Rub that muck off!" Though I wore no make-up, my skin burns from her scrubbing.

Where to escape? We turn to our private sanctuaries. Reading indiscriminately, every book I can find, is mine.

In a café. Sign: Armenian Café RELIGIOUS MINORITY.

#### AZAR

Emergency!

#### MAGICIAN

Whatever can you mean?

### AZAR

I've been asked to teach again.

### MAGICIAN

Is this new?

### AZAR

No, but this time I'm wavering.

#### MAGICIAN

"When you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you." Lady professor, you want to return. What do you prove by refusing?

# AZAR

I'm a traitor either way.

**MAGICIAN** Aren't you going to be late?

AZAR What about my answer?

MAGICIAN Obviously, you must teach.

AZAR What about taking a stand?

### MAGICIAN

None of us can drink water without the grace of the Republic. You'll enjoy teaching, your students will enjoy you, and probably learn something. Make your deals, but don't compromise your soul. Seriously, this won't last forever.

Hallway of Azar's home. Lights low.

### CHORUS

Sirens, sirens. Attention, attention! This is the danger signal. Red alert, go to shelter! Sirens, sirens. Danger, danger.

Red siren: danger. Yellow: possible danger. White: danger has stopped, you can come out. Red siren sounds too late. There are no shelters.

Dinner guests stay for sleepless nights of sirens.

### MAHSHID / MITRA

Thanks for letting us stay.

### AZAR

In the hallway I stay up with books, sharing the wall with my children, keeping watch to jinx the bombs. In the blackout candle glow I read. A sudden explosion rends my ribs! My eyes pretend that nothing happened, and rest on a page of Daisy Miller.

### CHORUS

By Henry James.

Lights up. Classroom. All the women are veiled. NASSRIN is still absent until the next scene. AZAR lectures to her class at Allameh.

### AZAR

Henry James changed attitudes about relationships and duties. Daisy Miller defied conventions. Elizabeth Bennett and Jane Eyre refuse to comply, but do not claim to be radical.

### NYAZI

Daisy is obviously a bad girl. She's flirtatious, making eyes at men. If you want revolution, try being modest. Daisy is evil and deserves to die!

### MAHSHID

Tell me he's not serious.

### NYAZI

Why does *she* disagree? We are at war both home and abroad. We are moral, we fight against evil.

### MAHSHID

If you remember, James lived through wars: the Civil War, and the First World War.

SANAZ What I'd say if he'd let me!

MITRA Shh! He'll report you! **NYAZI** Perhaps these wars were not the righteous ones.

**YASSI** Not righteous?

**SANAZ** When is war righteous?

**NYAZI** "A woman in a veil is protected like a pearl in an oyster shell."

**AZIN / MITRA** We should all be less silent.

MAHSHID I envy Daisy's courage.

The CHORUS restrain each other from engaging NYAZI. AZAR moves to her office where NASSRIN appears.

### AZAR

I've wondered about you! Where on earth have you been? You still owe me a paper on Gatsby.

### NASSRIN

You were there when I was arrested.

AZAR Yes, but I thought...

**NASSRIN** I was lucky, they only gave me ten years.

AZAR Nassrin, all this time?

### NASSRIN

I thought of you and our classes in a cell with fifteen others, like Razieh. She talked about Hemingway,

### AZAR

Razieh, what was she doing there?

#### NASSRIN

And I shared the Gatsby trial. We laughed a lot.

AZAR Of course you did.

NASSRIN She wrote this:

She wrote this

(Reading)

"All my life I lived in poverty, had to steal books, sneak into theaters, but how those times brought me joy. Rich kids don't cherish their *Gone With the Wind*. James is so different from other writers, I think I'm in love."

AZAR

She really says that?

NASSRIN

You know that she's dead?

Gatsby was so beautiful, Gatsby and his love reunite in the rain, after five long years. Do you remember the twelve-year-old girl shot looking for her mom? But my father had high-ranking friends, so I'm finally here.

#### AZAR

You still owe me a paper.

What strange places my students met. This is not where I imagined they'd take all my favorite novels. The joy of Gatsby's now locked in a jail. Nassrin was lucky, what kind of lucky? And Razieh's dead.

### IV. Austen

Azar's living room. The women have discarded their chadors and are dressed in colorful modern clothing. AZAR and CHORUS pantomime proper British tea time. AZIN is absent.

### YASSI

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of fortune, must be in want of a virginal nine-year-old wife.

### MITRA

Or not just one?

### **CHORUS**

We're back to Jane Austen here in Iran, no one marries for love. Girls marry for green cards, money, and their families, yet almost never with their heart.

### MAHSHID

Here we go again...

**YASSI** These are college educated girls like us!

### CHORUS

Like Darya, Sholeh, Parvin.

#### MAHSHID

Many women live alone by their own choice.

### NASSRIN

Who's doing that?

### CHORUS

None of us are. Most don't have that choice. We're *behind* Jane Austen's times.

#### NASSRIN

A man can have unlimited temporary wives,

### CHORUS

As many as he wishes.

### MAHSHID

Men have more needs! And it's still the girl's choice.

### NASSRIN

What funny notions you must have of choice!

CHORUS and AZAR arrange themselves in the living room for Austen-style dancing.

### **CHORUS / AZAR**

*Pride and Prejudice* is like eighteenth century dancing. Lizzie and Darcy move toward and away from each other Moving backward reappraises formers moves in the dance and conversation. The best dancers match their partner's steps. Imagine that Mister Darcy stands opposite you.

MITRA I'll be Elizabeth!

**YASSI** No, that would be me.

#### NASSRIN

I'll play Jane! She's the most beautiful.

#### AZAR

Come on, Mahshid, we need Mister Collins. Enjoy stepping on my toes.

#### MAHSHID

I've never danced all my life.

AZAR Consider this homework.

**CHORUS / AZAR** Forward, backward, pause.

AZAR Harmonize your steps.

**CHORUS / AZAR** Turn, turn, turn.

### AZAR

Keep with the rest of the set.

Who can dance Persian style?

### MITRA / YASSI

Sanaz can dance. / Come on, Sanaz.

SANAZ dances.

### SANAZ

Subtlety, brazenness. A hazy, lazy flirtation. *Naz* and *eshveh* and *kereshmeh*. I am elusive, sinewy, tactile. Twist and twirl, wind and unwind. Hands curl and uncurl, coil and always recoil. Each step predicts its own effect, before the next step. Openly seductive, yet unsurrendering! Daisy Miller could never dream of being *me*.

The dance finishes just as AZIN abruptly rushes in, visibly bruised and beaten.

### YASSI

What happened to you?

#### MITRA

What did he do?

#### AZIN

My husband hates my every joy, jealous of my books, my computer, my Thursday mornings. Humiliated by my independence, he...beats me, then swears undying love. More than this, he taunts that no one else could ever love me. I am used, secondhand. He could marry an eighteen-year-old, and start new. AZAR and the MAGICIAN meet for coffee discussing SANAZ' broken engagement, while SANAZ, MITRA, and YASSI go shopping and talk about the same event.

### MAGICIAN

Stop blaming the Islamic Republic of Iran.

AZAR But they cause my girls trials and tribulations.

MAGICIAN Tell me.

SANAZ / AZAR My engagement is off. / Sanaz' engagement is off.

MITRA / YASSI What did he say to you?

SANAZ / AZAR He was still a student.

MITRA / YASSI Excuses!

# SANAZ / AZAR

How could we be happy? / How could they be happy? He would always love me / He would always love her.

**MITRA / YASSI** Does he know what love is?

AZAR Bloody coward!

**MAGICIAN** How does the jilting of a beautiful girl relate to the Islamic Republic?

### MITRA / SANAZ / YASSI

How can he leave his love? Can't he be brave for once? What does this mean for us? Every part of life is touched. The regime's not kind to us.

### AZAR

My girls feel doomed to be unhappy here.

#### MAGICIAN

They need to learn to fight for happiness.

### AZAR

Magician, am I doing more harm than good? The stories of my past create a glowing picture of that other world, of the West.

### MITRA / SANAZ / YASSI

She tells us stories, abroad adventures, American college.

Maybe we should escape, to Syria, England, Oklahoma.

### MAGICIAN

We each create our own paradise.

### AZAR

Rub your magic lamp, make the revolutionary guards vanish, along with Azin's husband and the mandatory veil.

AZAR and CHORUS gather around YASSI for story time in the living room.

### YASSI

My "Gentleman Caller:" Before any decisions are made, we should get to know each other, we'd be modern about it.

So, we go to a park, he and I, followed by parents and sisters, and aunts, and grandparents. No, just *one* grandparent... I ask him about his field: mechanical engineering. Reading anything interesting? Doesn't have time to read!

Suddenly, I get a brilliant idea!

I start to walk faster. He starts to walk faster. The family behind adjusts to my pace. I come to a sudden halt. They run into us!

If he gets it and laughs, I'll give it a chance. If he doesn't, that's it, I won't waste my time.

I won't waste my time.

AZAR and MAGICIAN meet in a café.

### AZAR

One of my girls asked how Jane Austen is so optimistic about the world.

#### MAGICIAN

Most people make that mistake, they should read her more carefully.

#### AZAR

Austen writes on cruelty under everyday circumstances by people like us, isn't that frightening?

### MAGICIAN

It's frightening to be free, to take responsibility, to have no Islamic Republic to blame. I'm not saying they're blameless.

Guards outside! Since we're not related, I should go.

#### AZAR

We're not doing anything wrong.

MAGICIAN Don't be stupid, you don't want scandal. AZAR hands MAGICIAN A Thousand and One Nights.

### MAGICIAN

I don't know when I could return this.

MAGICIAN places the book on the table as he leaves. Change to Azar's house. The CHORUS gathers in the living room for one last meeting.

### MAHSHID

Nassrin left for the border. By next week she should be riding a camel or donkey or jeep across the desert.

### SANAZ

We should be happy for her. Nassrin got the message from Dr. Nafisi.

### AZIN

It isn't her fault you feel trapped here.

SANAZ I do feel trapped, why shouldn't I?

### AZIN

You act like it's Mrs. Nafisi's fault.

### SANAZ

You have shown us staying here is useless. We should all leave if we want to succeed.

MAHSHID

Where's your loyalty?

### AZAR

You can't follow me in everything.

### SANAZ

I'm not like Mahshid, I don't think that anyone has the duty to stay, we have only one life to live.

### MITRA

In Damascus I could walk freely, wearing t-shirt and jeans,

feeling the sun and the air, on my skin, on my hair. I'm angry for my lost portion of wind.

#### MAHSHID

You know the laws.

### SANAZ

At least for you the veil is natural.

#### MITRA

It's your religion, your choice.

#### MAHSHID

But if I lose that?

#### YASSI

If one day I lose my faith, it will be like dying, starting again in a world without guarantees.

### MAHSHID

During the Shah's time, I had to guard my faith. I was in the minority. Now that my religion is in power, I feel more helpless, more alienated.

Nassrin sends her regards.

MAHSHID hands AZAR a note from Nassrin.

### AZAR

*(Reading)* I still owe you a paper on Gatsby.

Magician's house, he brings two mugs of tea.

### AZAR

Thank you, Islamic Republic of Iran, for all the things you've taught me, to love Austen and James, ice cream and freedom.

#### **AZAR / MAGICIAN**

The Austen we know is forever linked to this place, This land, these trees, those long streets' warm embrace. Where the film censor is blind, where they hang girls in those streets, and segregate men from women by hanging curtains.

#### AZAR

Perhaps by writing I'll become more generous, less angry.

SANAZ meets AZAR one last time. SANAZ reads the remains of tea leaves in Azar's cup.

### SANAZ

Before you leave, let me tell your fortune: I see a bird, which means good news, but you are agitated. A road that looks bright, you are on the first step. You are thinking of a thousand things At the same time. There is a key, a problem to be solved. A small ship still in the harbor has not yet set sail.

Packed and ready to go, AZAR envisions herself as a bird about to take flight. After AZAR moves to the other side of the stage, she can strip off the veil and chador, becoming herself again.

### AZAR

Little bird, I know that you prefer death to this emptiness you feel. Each day, you wonder if you'll ever return to the land that will accept you, where you will be free and happy blessing the air with your song until the day is done.

Your heart is filled with the memory of such things.

Little bird, I'd turn your bright wings to laughter, and your silence into everlasting music.

Your little form is on the bare branches now. In the twilight shadows you sing for the last light of day.

I write to celebrate reading Nabokov, James, Fitzgerald, and Austen against all odds. So many memories connect Lolita and the city: Listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets.

The novel colors Tehran. Tehran redefines the novel, turning it into our Lolita.