

Director's Note

This play was inspired by a handshake. In 2005, President Mohammed Khatami of Iran and President Moshe Katsav of Israel were seated near one another at the funeral of Pope John Paul II. Although the two countries had broken diplomatic relations in 1979, the two presidents appeared to shake hands and exchange a few words in Farsi, since they both had been born some 50 years earlier in the Iranian province of Yazd. The handshake story was widely publicized in the Israeli and American presses but adamantly denied in the Iranian press. A Syrian government official claimed to have witness the handshake between the two men, but stated that it was a formality of no political importance.

Our group of collaborators met for the first time on Siena's campus in August of 2005 to answer one question: could a group of theatre artists from Iran, Israel, and the U.S. work together to create a play about their three countries and cultures? After five days, it was the handshake story that captured everyone's interest: two men who grew up together, their lives separated by politics, instinctively reach out to one another when given the opportunity. Can the human desire to communicate overpower the political barriers that drive us to violence?

The characters Ali and Asher meet in a Benedictine monastery in Rome. We learned through our research that such a sanctuary for secret meetings does in fact exist, as a place where diplomacy can be sheltered from the pressures of politics and the media. This was the right setting for our central question: what happens at the intersection of the personal and the political?

Benedictues is an evolving collaborative effort to express, as truthfully as possible, today's Iran/Israel/U.S. dynamic as seen through the eyes and hearts of artists from those countries. This production is the first public viewing of their work. In October 2007, the play will have its professional premiere at the Golden Thread Theater in San Francisco. Siena College has been privileged to bring the production to life, and to host these artists who believe in the power of theatre as a catalyst for cultural understanding.