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Afghan Women Speak Out Through Theatre

Bond Street Theatre, New York's Pioneer Artistic-Humanitarian Theatre Company, Creates All-Female Theatre Troupes in Afghanistan

New York, NY, September 3, 2012 - Live theatre is an excellent way to bring information to isolated areas of Afghanistan. [Bond Street Theatre](#) has been working with theatre companies throughout Afghanistan to promote theatre as a means to carry specific news about women's rights, civic issues, health and other issues to areas with high illiteracy (90% for women, 63% for men, UN Report). The company leaves this week to continue its mission to revitalize the theatrical arts and especially, to train more women to take the stage so they can reach all-female audiences.

On September 3, two Bond Street actor-educators begin working with the **Kandahar Theatre** in the fourth phase of its **Theatre for Social Development** project. The two-year project, supported by the **US Embassy in Afghanistan** and the **United States Institute for Peace**, involves month-long training sessions with four select theatre groups in Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar in theatre methods and business skills. The goal is to build the capacity of local theatre organizations to provide ongoing educational services to their communities, with a special focus on women and youth.

The Kandahar group will be bringing female actors into their company *for the first time*. Due to security concerns, the actors and actresses will travel to Jalalabad to work with Bond Street artists.

Reviving Theatre



The new all-female team of White Star Company performs about women's education in Kabul, 2011.

Theatre in Afghanistan was all but decimated after decades of war and Taliban rule. The gap in access to information is particularly acute in poor and rural communities. **Kandahar**, on the border with Pakistan's tribal area, is rife with inter-ethnic and political violence. Most people are not familiar with theatre. But when a theatre group brings an entertaining performance with interesting new ideas, audiences are delighted. The process is both educational and healing.

BST Artistic Director **Joanna Sherman** says, *"If you want to get information to areas of high illiteracy, you can't just hand out a flyer. We are bringing crucial information to life."*

Engaging Women

The Kandahar Theatre Company, like many companies in conservative areas, has no women in their group; rather, men dress up as women to play female parts. Bond Street Theatre will initiate an all-women's component to the theatre company, allowing the company to perform in locations only open to women, such as the women's prison, shelters, and women's shuras in the villages.

Similarly, the men's team will perform in locations where the presence of women on stage would be inappropriate, such as for the Afghan military police and other all-male audiences.

Women in many areas are unaware of the rights granted them by the Afghan Constitution and are subject to a range of harmful traditions that legitimize violence or marriage for girls far too young. Women have few outlets to engage with each other outside the home.

Bond Street Theatre will introduce new styles of theatre and methods of educational theatre for youth to the Kandahar company, and create original performances with an accent on viable solutions.

The two companies will work together in Jalalabad, a calm and relatively safe city in Nangarhar province, to create two topical performances - one just for women, one for men. The Kandahar actors will bring the shows back to their province to present for local police, legal aid centers, prisons, correctional centers for youth, shelters, schools, and other key locations. The performances are followed by an interactive session inviting the audience to engage with the characters and issues presented in the plays.



A girl volunteers to come on stage during a post-show session at a school in Kabul.

The **Theatre for Social Development** project also creates partnerships between theatre groups and aid organizations in need of their services to ensure sustainability. To date, Bond Street Theatre has conducted this model project with **White Star Company** in Kabul, **Simorgh Theatre** in Herat, and **Nangarhar Provincial Theatre** in Jalalabad.

Integral to the project, Bond Street Theatre is creating a **Training Manual** that will give artists and aid organizations a wide range of theatre-based methods applicable to development programs.

The program is funded by the **US Embassy in Afghanistan** and the **United States Institute for Peace**. Active in Afghanistan since 2003, Bond Street Theatre stands out as committed cultural ambassadors.

Bond Street Theatre's History in Afghanistan

Following September 11th, Bond Street Theatre headed to the Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan to work with children affected by the conflicts. There, they met Exile Theatre and began an 8-year relationship that led to their acclaimed production, ***Beyond the Mirror***, depicting Afghan life in wartime as told through first-hand stories. The performance toured in Japan, Afghanistan and the USA (2005 and 2009).

"The first collaboration between an Afghan and an American theater company, it has a quiet authority, even delicacy, that is truly powerful," stated Margo Jefferson in [The New York Times](#).

Bond Street Theatre's artistic-humanitarian relief work in Afghanistan since 2003 demonstrates a firm commitment to the Afghan people and their future. BST's work has included programs for women, men, children, and teachers in Afghan schools and orphanages, training for Kabul University students, and educational programs for over 10,000 children in villages in northern Afghanistan. The current Theatre for Social Development project builds the capacity of local theatre organizations to continue this work.

For more information or to schedule an interview in Afghanistan, please contact:
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Bond Street Theatre, founded in 1978, creates theatre that crosses cultural borders and initiates theatre-based projects for education, conflict resolution and healing in areas of conflict and poverty globally. The company collaborates with local artists to enjoy the benefits of artistic exchange and

promotes the value of the arts in shaping a peaceful future. Recipient of a MacArthur Award, the company has also received support from the Trust for Mutual Understanding, ArtsLink, the Theatre Communications Group, Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, Association for Performing Arts Presenters, Asian Cultural Council, US Institute for Peace, US Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs, NEA, US Embassies, and others, and performs in theatres and festivals worldwide.

Bond Street Theatre is a non-profit organization, and an NGO in association with the UN-DPI.

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[American Theatre](#) article about Burma: "Can Laughter Set You Free?" by Michael McGuigan

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