



Afghanistan's Aftaab Theatre performs *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in Kabul.

COMPILED BY NICOLE ESTVANIK TAYLOR

Various Cities, Afghanistan

"When I'm performing on stage and singing for the people, the feeling of freedom comes to my soul." These are the words of Setara Hussainzada, one of four contestants profiled in the 2009 documentary *Afghan Star*, about a wildly popular televised singing competition. While many in Afghanistan shared Setara's exhilaration, others took a harsh view, especially of the female participants. Setara now lives under the shadow of death threats, and the host of the "Afghan Star" TV program has sought political asylum in the United States.

Imagine working as a theatre artist within this complicated cultural fabric. Like music, dancing and television, theatre was forbidden under Taliban rule as contrary to Islamic law, and in parts of the country, this attitude persists. However, since the Taliban's fall in 2001, theatre has begun to reestablish its place. **Kabul Theatre**, the foremost state theatre established in 1973, reopened its bomb-scarred venue at the start of 2002, and is currently moving forward under a young new director, Shahpoor Sidaqat. Each year since 2004 Kabul Theatre and **Kabul University** have hosted a national Afghan Theatre Festival, organized in collaboration with the country's Ministry of Culture and various international cultural entities. While the event showcases native work, it also creates an opportunity for Afghans to train with visitors from outside its borders. "Afghanistan has a century-long tradition of involvement in the theatre arts that, now, after the recent difficult period, strictly requires a reinvestigation," wrote minister of information and culture Sayed Makhdoom Raheem in the 2005 festival's program. "Workshops and gatherings of this sort will surely pave the road to the restoration of this form in our country." Nurturing international relationships has been a key ingredient of this restoration; in 2006, for example, staff from Kabul Theatre spent six months at Norway's Den Nationale Scene in Bergen.

New York-based Bond Street Theatre has been working in Afghanistan since 2002, and created the play *Beyond the Mirror* with Afghanistan's Exile Theatre, a group that dissolved in 2009 after two tours to the U.S. According to Bond Street's artistic director, Joanna Sherman, longevity is an all-too-common challenge for Afghan theatres. "Some

groups grow out of the provinces and then quickly disappear," Sherman says. "It's hard to stay afloat as a theatre group in Afghanistan, and our goal is to help these struggling groups survive." To that end, Bond Street is in the middle of a two-year Theatre for Social Development project (supported by the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and the United States Institute of Peace) providing sustained support and training for selected groups. Among them is the extraordinary **Mediothek Girls' Theatre of Kunduz**—founded by a 15-year-old aspiring female playwright named Naseeba Holgar, and comprised entirely of teenagers—which caught Bond Street's eye at the 2005 national festival. Bond Street's Afghan partners also include **White Star Theatre Company**, which Bond Street created to be Kabul's first professional all-women's theatre group. The rise of gender-specific companies is one way to mitigate potential dangers to both performers and audiences, who might be reluctant or even forbidden to take part in co-ed performances. For example, because there is an unusually high number of women in Herat's **Simorgh Film and Theatre**—another Bond Street collaborator—the company was able to create a team of female-only actors that was allowed to enter a women's prison to stage a play about family conflict.

Another international connection was forged during the second Afghan Theatre Festival in 2005 by French auteur Ariane Mnouchkine. She encouraged 20 of her workshop participants to form **Aftaab Theatre** (Aftaab means "sun," a nod to Mnouchkine's own Théâtre du Soleil). Aftaab continues to operate with the help of the French Cultural Center in Kabul and has staged such Western classics as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tartuffe*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Miser*, as well as two pieces about Afghanistan based on the company's improv sessions: *Sag Ha (The Dogs)* and *Dar Aan Roz (On That Day)*. Its most recent show is *Oedipus the King*. According to a spokesperson from the group, Aftaab begins work next month on a new staging of Brecht's version of *Antigone* with European director Matthias Langhoff. Aftaab previously has toured to Tajikistan, France, India and Pakistan, and for 2012 it has received invitations to perform *Oedipus* and *Antigone* at festivals in Dijon, France, and São Paulo, Brazil. It also hopes to receive funding for more performances of its repertoire in Kabul this year, as well as to create an Afghan television program about theatre.

Germany is another nation lending considerable support to an Afghan group. **Parwaz Puppet Theatre** was formed by Kabul University fine arts graduates in 2009 out of work-



Parwaz Puppet Theatre's *Adventure of Ramin and Roya*.

shops with Berlin-based puppeteer Wieland Jagodzinski. The group operates under the wing of the Goethe-Institut in Kabul and lists as its goals “the revival of Afghan puppet theatre traditions, as well as the development of a modern Afghan puppet theatre.” Parwaz tours to Afghan regions whose populations usually have had little or no exposure to theatre, using puppetry to entertain and instruct. Topics include the importance of good hygiene and sanitation (in *Why Do You Escape, Cow?*, a mosquito exults in the “delicious” dirty water, while a distressed cow has nothing to drink); and the fair treatment of others (as illustrated by the folk tale *Bozake-chini*). Another play, the UNICEF-funded *The Adventure of Ramin and Roya*, informs kids of their rights to education, identity, health, participation and protection. This year Parwaz will debut *The Lion Couldn't Read* in schools in Mazar-e-Sharif Province.

Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organization (AHRDO), an Afghan-led group, favors Playback Theatre and documentary theatre techniques to draw attention to human rights violations. AHRDO performed its original play *Infinite Incompleteness* in New York City and Washington, D.C., this past November with the sponsorship of the International Center for Transitional Justice. The play uses three languages—Dari, Pashto and Hazaragi—to dramatize 10 true-life stories of conflict in Afghanistan, chosen from more than 100 tales the group collected in its travels around the country. (Members of what became AHRDO also toured Afghanistan in 2008 with *AH 7808*, an adaptation of a Northern Irish play about war crimes by Dave Duggan.) *Infinite Incompleteness* was designed for travel, with natural lighting and simple sets, and this year AHRDO plans to continue touring the piece in its own country.

In giving an artistic outlet to this embattled country's citizens, the **Afghan Women's Writing Project** has intersected frequently with performing arts groups. The volunteer-run AWWP, which sprouted from novelist Masha Hamilton's trip to the country in 2008, supplies Afghan women with the technology and mentorship to pen their personal stories in English and share them (usually anonymously, or with first name only) on www.awwpproject.org. Dramatic presentations of the material on the site have taken place at such locales as L.A.'s Museum of Tolerance and Washington, D.C.'s Theater J, as well as Purdue University and Arizona State University.

Last month, female improv comedians, including Rachel Dratch, appeared at Brooklyn's Magic Futurebox for a reading of the project participants' words. If comedians seem like an odd choice for dramatizing the often harrowing experiences of women in Afghanistan, AWWP executive director Elizabeth Lehr explains the reasoning: “Women writers in Afghanistan and female improv comics in New York have not necessarily shared the same set of challenges. But they are all women who by definition go against the grain, forge creative connections with others, and speak with candor, courage and humor.” In March, Cincinnati's Know Theatre stages the next AWWP production, adapted by playwrighting team Lauren Hynek and Elizabeth Martin.

According to Know's producing artistic director Eric Vosmeier, “We've been trying to focus a lot in the last two years on high-

lighting the work of female writers in general, and these are female writers who don't really have a voice in their own country.” With the ground rule that no texts could be edited or trimmed, the adaptors focused on choosing poetry and prose selections from the site that illuminated various “archetypes” of the Afghan female experience. “We wanted to make sure we covered the school experience, the marriage experience, the difficult husband experience...there were common themes,” Martin explains. Hynek adds, “It was also important to us to include pieces about joy—sometimes the unexpected joy in everyday life—to point out the universal experience of being a woman. There are things that are hard for us as Westerners to understand; there are also things that are the same for everyone, wherever you live.” (For more information and links for many of these groups, visit www.afghanistan.culturalprofiles.net.)



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