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Theatre Promotes Alternatives to Violence in Afghanistan

Bond Street Theatre's Social Development Project Uses Theatre as a Means to Reach Afghanistan's Most Isolated and Troubled Communities

New York, NY, September 1, 2011 - **Bond Street Theatre** returns to Afghanistan this month for the second phase of their four-part **Theatre for Social Development** project. The program builds the capacity of local theatre groups to bring entertaining and informative performances about health, women's rights, and other crucial issues to isolated communities and areas of high illiteracy (88% for women, 57% for men, with rural illiteracy higher - UN Report).

From September 24 to November 2, Bond Street Theatre actor-educators will collaborate with **White Star Theatre Company** in Kabul to create short performances that illustrate alternatives to family conflicts, inter-ethnic violence, and local insurgencies, and address pressing issues of corruption, women's rights, and access to justice.

Bringing Theatre to Women

Building on a decade of working in Afghanistan and revitalizing the country's theatrical arts, team members *Joanna Sherman, Michael McGuigan, Kayhan Irani,* and guest artist *Monireh Hashemi* recognize the special challenges of reaching women who still cope with limited mobility and access to information.

In response, Bond Street Theatre is training two teams within **White Star Company** - a female troupe to perform solely for women and a male troupe to perform for men - allowing performances for the first time in locations only open to women, such as women's prisons and shelters, as well as for all-male audiences such as the Afghan Army and National Police.

The Company, founded by graduates of the Kabul University Theatre Program and previously all male, finds that this option is attracting women to join the company. The security risk for the actresses is greatly reduced if performing for other women -- in Afghanistan, the idea of women on stage is still considered taboo. The actresses also appreciate the chance to bring creative and educational performances to women who have never before seen live theatre.

Afghan's brief cultural renaissance post-2001 has since regressed due to violence and instability. The **Theatre for Social Development** project, supported by the **US Embassy in Kabul** and the **US Institute for Peace**, will provide month-long training sessions in artistic and administrative skills for four select theatre groups across Afghanistan. The goal is to build the capacity of local theatre organizations to provide educational services on an ongoing basis to their communities and surrounding rural areas.

Performing in Herat - from Prisons to Police



Simorgh Theatre in Herat performs for the Afghan National Paramilitary Police (ANCOP).

This spring, Bond Street conducted the first phase of the project with **Simorgh Film and Theatre** in Herat, creating two performances that address violence within the family. The actors chose this topic as the most relevant to their community based on the view that family violence is the single most influential factor in determining an individual's future propensity for violent solutions to problems.

The male and female teams performed in locations where family violence has left scars and for those who deal directly with justice and security: the Herat Women's Prison, the Juvenile Correction Center, women's shelters and legal aid centers, the National and local Police, the Drug-Addicted Youth Center, boys and girls high schools, and elsewhere. (See [video](#).)



Simorgh Theatre actresses perform in Herat Women's Prison.

Live theatre is an effective platform to promote a public understanding of human rights under Afghan law, a vehicle for community dialogue, and a means to ease the effects of war and poverty by giving voice to the voiceless. Theatre is a motivation for youth who are poised to bring positive change to Afghanistan in the future.

In addition to working with **White Star Company**, Bond Street Theatre will also present a workshop on physical theatre techniques, titled *The Impact of Gesture*, as part of the **7th Annual National Theatre Festival** in Kabul from September 24-29, 2011. Theatre groups from the provinces come to Kabul for the Festival to compete for Best Actor, Best Actress, and other honors. International guests, such as Bond Street Theatre, offer these artists an opportunity to learn new theatre methods.

Bond Street Theatre's History in Afghanistan

Following September 11th, Bond Street Theatre members headed to the Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan to work with children affected by the conflicts. While working in the camps, they met Exile Theatre, a group of Afghanistan's finest actors who had fled the Taliban. The two groups began an 8-year relationship that led to their acclaimed production, *Beyond the Mirror*, which depicted Afghan life in wartime as told through first-hand stories. The performance toured in Japan, Afghanistan and the USA (2005 and 2009). Since 2003, Bond Street Theatre's artistic-humanitarian relief work has include programs for women, men, children, and teachers in Afghan schools and orphanages, University students, and others.

Bond Street Theatre, founded in 1978, is dedicated to theatre that crosses borders and bringing theatre to areas of conflict, crisis and poverty. Recipient of a MacArthur Award, the company receives government and foundation support, and has performed in major theatres and festivals worldwide.

For more information, or to schedule an interview in the US or Afghanistan, please contact Olivia Harris at 212-254-4614 or olivia@bondst.org.

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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