



Theatre Brings Information to Rural Women in Afghanistan

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Afghan youth learning puppetry in Kunduz in 2007

Bond Street Theatre returns to Afghanistan this month to help revitalize Afghanistan's theatrical arts, and promote the use of theatre to bring information on health, civic rights, and other issues to areas of high illiteracy (90% for women, 63% for men, UN Report).

The 18-month Theatre for Social Development Project, supported by the US Embassy in Afghanistan and the US Institute for Peace, involves month-long training sessions with four select theatre groups in Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad and Kandahar in creative and administrative skills. The goal is to build the capacity of local theatre organizations to provide educational services on an ongoing basis to their communities, and carry information to isolated areas, with special focus on women and children.

The gap in access to information is particularly acute in poor and rural communities, and among women who are more apt to be illiterate and isolated from news. Theatre is a lively and effective means to present information in an understandable visual and verbal manner.

"If you want to get information to an area of high illiteracy, you can't hand out a flyer," explains Artistic Director Joanna Sherman when asked about the use of theatre in communities in crisis. "If a health organization plans to bring polio vaccines to a rural community, they may have to first dispel local fears about foreign medicine. A local theatre group can quickly create a show that explains the issue. Then when the medical team arrives, the village is prepared." To ensure each theatre company's sustainability, the program also partners the groups with governmental and non-governmental organizations in need of their services.

The Bond Street Theatre team - Joanna Sherman, [Michael McGuigan](#), and [Anna Zastrow](#) - departs March 27 to begin work with Simorgh Theatre in Herat and returns May 9th. Having conducted arts-based programs in Afghanistan since 2003, the New York-based theatre company stands out amidst the country's most committed cultural ambassadors.

The Theatre for Social Development program will bring mobile theatre performances to some of Afghanistan's most isolated regions, and provide creative and motivational training for women and youth, and a platform for public understanding of crucial social issues.

The theatre arts also serve as an effective means to ease the traumatic effects of war and poverty by providing a voice to the voiceless, a safe space to explore the issues, and the mouthpiece to share information and personal stories. Programs that stimulate creative problem solving and self-expression are scarce at a time when the country most needs a visionary new generation.

Integral to the project, Bond Street Theatre is creating a Training Manual to be published in 2012 that will offer artists and aid organizations a wide range of theatre-based methods applicable to development programs.

This program is made possible by a generous grant from the US Embassy in Afghanistan (Department of State) and the United States Institute for Peace, an organization dedicated to preventing and ending international conflict and promoting the field of peacebuilding.

Bond Street Theatre's History in Afghanistan

Immediately following September 11th, a Bond Street team headed to the Afghan refugee areas in Pakistan to entertain and uplift children in the refugee schools.

While in camps, Bond Street met Exile Theatre, a group of Afghanistan's finest actors who had fled the Taliban. The two groups began an eight-year mutually beneficial relationship that led to their critically acclaimed production, *Beyond the Mirror*, depicting Afghan life in wartime as told through first-hand stories. The performance was presented in Japan, Afghanistan and 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's Artistic-Humanitarian Relief Work since 2003 has demonstrated a firm commitment to the Afghan people and their future. Their work has included programs for girls, women, children and teachers in Afghan schools and orphanages, work with Kabul University theatre students, and educational programs for over 10,000 children in remote villages in northern Afghanistan.

Bond Street Theatre, founded in 1978, draws on the physical performance styles from many cultures to create its original theatre works. Recipient of a MacArthur Award, the company also receives governmental and foundation support, and has performed in major theatres and festivals worldwide. The company is dedicated to theatre that crosses borders and bringing theatre to areas of conflict, crisis and poverty.