Theatre Brings Joy to Afghanistan and India

All-Girls Theatre Company in Kunduz

“Our youth are in soul needing such training and are deprived of such skills,” Bibimah wrote to us when she heard we would come to Kunduz to teach her young theatre group. We taught them everything we could in two weeks! At left, Raghia & Gulnaz burqa up to go home.

Since our last newsletter, 3 company members traveled to Afghanistan to work with an all-girls theatre group in the small city of Kunduz. A prop plane flies us up north, the pilot weighing each of us and our gear to assess if we can stay aloft. The jagged mountains below are always awe-inspiring, as is the barren airport littered with the rusty remains of tanks. Children abound in Kunduz, at play, but more often at work—lugging wheelbarrows, stacking bricks, and tending shops. In the center of town is Mediothek.

Bibimah Arabzada, at 17, directs the Mediothek Theatre, a group of 12 young women, ages 15-18, plus a few boys. A brilliant comedienne, Bibimah keeps everyone in line with a tight hand quickly followed by some funny imitation that has everyone laughing. We met the group at the Kabul Theatre Festival in 2005. Despite having no formal training, the girls were focused, skilled, and outshone many of the other groups. The difficulties for women on stage in Afghanistan are huge—they face derision, disownment, and even physical assault. And here was an all-girls theatre group.

Everyday we work with the group, teaching them a bit of everything—a crash course in physical theatre, from the essentials of body language to physicalizing text, plus mask-making, puppetry, commedia, martial arts, acrobatics, vocal techniques, and other essentials. They love it all!

Over the weeks, we are getting to know the girls’ aspirations and dreams. They want to become astronauts, teachers,

(Cont’d on back)

Check out...

- Our website: www.bondst.org
- See more photos on Flickr.com
- Follow our global projects with Bond Street’s ON THE ROAD BLOG: www.bondstreetblog.blogspot.com
- Join us on MySpace and Facebook

Working in Lucknow & Kashmir

We have so many stories...such as the time our show was interrupted by a small herd of goats crossing the stage followed by an old woman who looked miffed that we were playing in her goat path. The goats were nonchalant.

Sarah has the kids laughing even before the show starts.

Our two-year project in India has been a fruitful and moving experience. As an 8-actor team of 3 Americans, 3 Afghans and 2 Indians performing and teaching together, we are a model of cultural diplomacy!

Our goal is to create theatre-based programs to improve lives and to train others in our methods. We worked with university students and street children, with women from the smallest villages as well as aspiring young actors. One recurring theme this time was the status of women. We were surprised to encounter such stark inequities.

In Palta, a small village near Lucknow, 30 young women arrive daily to take our workshops. Of these girls, only three have permission from their fathers to attend. The mothers support their studies, recognizing the potential for self-improvement, but the fathers view women’s education as useless. Yet the girls in Palta were bright and open. And what did they learn? How to express themselves with confidence without shyly covering their mouths or bowing their heads. To stand up straight and make a statement, or even say their name out loud. ➜

NEW show: The Mechanical premieres

The Mechanical takes the outcast creature from Mary Shelley’s novel “Frankenstein” into the true story of a sensational chess-playing robot built in 1775, a novelty that foreshadowed computers. Using multi-media and the physical agility of the actors, the production explores an age of revolutions and the interconnections of science, art and religion. Coming this March-May ’09. Sneak preview and full schedule at www.bondst.org.
All-Girls Theatre cont’d

and politicians. The theatre training is a good preparation for their careers and their self-confidence grows daily. Yet each day they slip beneath the veil as they step out the door. "In a few years things will be different," says Bibimah. "We don't mind it, but it is too bad that it covers the whole face," says another. There is also a little mystique to the burqa, a right of passage into womanhood for Afghan girls.

Stepping outside the calm Mediothek walls, the city is a sensory overload of colorfully decorated horse drawn carts, and metal shops next to fruit stands next to water pumps. There are few foreign women in Kunduz and the attention we get when we step out on the street actually stops traffic. It's hard to take everything in and yet not create a stir.

There was a suicide bombing in the next province, and then another within earshot several days later that made us all freeze in our tracks. Suicide attacks are a recent phenomenon here and bring a new air of apprehension to Kunduz.

At the end, the girls presented a demonstration of the techniques they learned in the workshops. The Mediothek staff took care to invite only those guests with a willingness to accept women on the stage. Bibimah spoke prior to the show about the relevance of theatre in Afghan culture and why women's presence on the stage is not un-Islamic.

As the audience began filing into the courtyard, the girls' confidence began to falter. They were eager to display their new skills but when confronted with a live audience of mostly men, many of whom they knew or might marry, they asked if they could wear their masks for the whole show.

In the end, the girls did perform with much fervor and skill, and the audience response was superlative! If they noticed the girls' timidity, they didn't mention it, and the girls were proud of their achievements. Considering the obstacles, it is remarkable that these young women have decided, on their own, to create theatre. We have a deep appreciation for the daring choices they have made against all odds.

Please CONTRIBUTE to our work for peace through cultural exchange! Thanks to our dedicated donors! Please DONATE by mail or www.bondst.org

Lucknow and Kashmir cont’d

In the evenings, we give workshops for a local theatre group, Nisarg. Out of their 40 actors, only 3 are women. The men explain to us that they are hesitant to allow their sisters on stage seeing it as unladylike.

Despite these realities, women have amazing determination. The girls from Prerna School, a school for the daughters of rickshaw drivers, beggars and ragpickers, at ages 7 to 14, joined the school with no support from their families, and hold 3 or 4 jobs as well. Despite tragic stories of forced marriages and domestic abuse, the graduates told us that their parents treat them differently now and listen to their opinions.

Over the weeks, we gave many performances; the most memorable was Balu Adda. The day was thick and humid as we turned off the highway into a vast landscape of garbage with huts built from tarps, rags, and plastic amidst mounds of refuse. This is the dirtiest place we've ever been. A huge crowd gathers immediately and we give them our best – an hour of laughter, music and surprises. But to see that without fresh water and basic hygiene, a simple cut on a child's eye festers and an easily treatable condition worsens, we are reminded of our limits. Yet doctors always remind us that our work is also healing and they count on our visits.

We end our journey in Kashmir, a Himalayan paradise. Once a place where all faiths lived in peace, it is now fractured by ongoing strife. Not even UNICEF is here, and our presence is a rare event indeed. Seeing women in burqas and men in beards, it's hard to remember we are in India. We are off to a Sikh village to present our final show in Chatti Singhpura, a place that had witnessed great violence. By sheer chance, we arrive on the very anniversary of the infamous temple massacre by local militants. Our presence was a surprise and a gift, as was their gracious response to us.

In the next newsletter, we continue our stories, and note our plans for Africa, Mid-East & South Asia. Please support us!

Grants this year from...
ART/NY for organizational support; NEA, Ford Foundation, Association for Performing Arts Presenters to bring Exile Theatre (Afghanistan) to California; NYSCA, NYC Dept. of Cultural Affairs, US Bureau of Education & Cultural Affairs, Profiles In Caring, Tobin Fdn., Bel Geddes Fdn., Baroness Fdn., Puffin Fdn. and an APAP Travel Grant.