

TALKING POINTS

This document is a resource for you to be armed with stories when you talk to anyone. I find that most people want to know “Why Theatre?”

Here are some answers followed by a few stories so you can pick your favorite, the one that resonates with you the most. There are more tales from the field on the [Bond Street On the Road Blog](#) and continual updates on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) (Bond_St_Theatre).

TALKING POINTS:

Founded in 1978, and active for more than 35 years creating socially significant theatre around the world. Currently: Afghanistan, Myanmar, Azerbaijan, Lebanon, Malaysia

All arts are communication – we focus on effective Cultural Diplomacy in critical regions – “winning the hearts and minds”.

13 years in Afghanistan, 8 years in the Balkans (Bosnia, Kosovo, Serbia, etc.), 5 in Myanmar, 3 in Haiti, and new projects planned for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and through the Balkan countries, refugees from South Sudan and Somalia in Kenya, and looking at other key locations.

Performances and projects in 40 countries around the world, including Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, Pakistan, India, Israel, Palestine, China, Indonesia, Japan, Kosovo, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Romania, and more.

- We collaborate with local artists to create relevant projects in each community.
- We provide business as well as creative training to help growing theatre groups.
- We get consistent funding from the US Embassies all over the world who recognize our value.
- A MacArthur Award for our creative interdisciplinary programming.

HOW WE USE THEATRE IN COMMUNITIES... *Why Theatre?*

Many people are not aware that theatre can be more than just entertainment. My typical lecture describes how theatre is being used in *practical* ways to bring information to communities, and *how* we work with different groups: street children, rural women, traumatized populations, refugees, etc.

For example, the idea of presenting theatre in a refugee camp usually conjures up an image of doing Shakespeare for people who don't speak English and could care less. So what do we actually do?

In **refugee camps**, UNICEF stressed to us the importance of day-to-day activities – normalcy – to keep kids grounded. So we do a huge mime *follow-the-leader* with the groups of hundreds of children who gather around us: getting up in the morning, brushing teeth, washing, stretching, etc.

Working with **street children** who missed the basic “socialization” skills we learn in school, we introduce structured games where following rules is a new and fun idea! “Let’s make a circle, let’s all sit down, I’ll give these pencils one at a time” – no one ever asked these kids to do this.

For **rural women and girls** who never had a voice, getting them to hold their head up and speak out loud is a huge step. We have theatre exercises for this. See story “Yes, I Am Marzia”

For **young adults** just entering the world, we work on body language, how to express yourself, or speak to a group. These are all *theatre-based* skills.

The basics of theatre training have everything to do with the essentials of life: sensitivity to others, observation, teamwork, presentation skills, body language, developing the imagination, improvisation, expressing yourself -- skills useful to us all.

Our **strategy** for working in communities has four parts --

1. We present performances as a “**calling card**” when we come into a new community. Our shows are lively with attractive skills like comedy, stilts and music. They are a way to dissipate the idea of us as “foreigners,” so the audience sees that we are friendly people, they are happy to meet us, and generally want to learn what they saw in the show.
2. Next we collaborate with **local artists**, working together as peers, learning from each other. Then when we perform in the community, we are a team, a cooperative team.
3. **Training trainers** – we train educators and NGO staff to use theatre-based techniques. That way our programs are sustainable after we leave. Trainers can also include health workers, parents, police, aid workers. Anyone working with a specific population can be a trainer.
4. Our **workshops** are targeted to be relevant to each group – children, women, police, etc.

GOOD STORIES:

[**Afghan Women Speak Out Through Theatre – A Girl Named Farahnaz**](#) (from the Classy Awards):

Problem:

Women across Afghanistan are undereducated, isolated, and without information about their rights. Under tribal law, women face violent consequences for breaking traditions. Despite the 2011 Violence Against Women Act, women continue to face abuse, with no way to speak out and little access to justice.

Solution:

Bond Street's Theatre for Social Development project has responded to Afghan women's isolation by forming all-female theatre troupes that reach women in villages, prisons and shelters.

Women in Afghanistan are heavily restricted in their activities and excluded from access to essential information. Even TV and radio are considered men's domain.

Our project builds the capacity of local theatre companies to reach out and educate both men and women in their communities by carrying crucial information about health, civic issues and women's rights to isolated areas. By forming all-female troupes within each company, the groups can reach all-female audiences for the first time, especially women in rural areas.

In the spring of 2012, we worked with the Nangarhar Theatre in Jalalabad. This theatre troupe is well respected, yet all its members were all male and played the female roles dressed as women. Our project brought women into their group for the first time, thanks to Farahnaz.

Farahnaz was a 19-year-old woman who had been supporting her family since she was 13 following her father's death. She managed to attend school and ensured that her sisters did too. When we met her, Farahnaz was thrilled to join our project and gathered 15 women for the program, going to each girl's house to convince their fathers that this opportunity would benefit their family and community – no small feat!

Theatre is hardly known in Afghanistan after 30 years of war and Taliban rule. It is often confused with TV and film that do not present a traditional view of women's dress and behavior. However, women are eager to speak out about their lives and problems. Our strategy allows women to create performances about their concerns and speak directly to other women in a safe environment through theatre.

Most of the women we trained were taking to the stage for the first time. The Nangarhar group is our fourth all-women's theatre group in Afghanistan. The young women were shy during the first days of the workshops with almost inaudible voices, but they quickly blossomed, shouting their names out loud, telling stories, standing tall, and speaking out with poise and determination.

Seven women are now in Nangarhar Women's Theatre, with Farahnaz as their fearless leader. The troupe's first shows confronted issues of early marriage, girls' education, and the debilitating effects of local gossip which maintains the status quo.

After each performance, the women facilitated a talk-back session in which the audience is invited on stage to speak directly to the characters in the play. The troupe reached 1300 women and children in one week, continues to perform, and has begun teaching theatre to girls at the local high school. At the end of the project, Farahnaz told us,

“The performances were the greatest experiences for us. Theatre is like a guiding light shining on our society, and all that I learned here I will teach other girls as well.”

Standing Tall in Haiti

On the first day of our 2011 workshops with FAVILEK, a women's theatre group in Port-au-Prince, Sylvie came right up to Anna and kissed her on the cheek. Such spirit and love! These are women who survived political and sexual violence, a devastating earthquake, and have come out the other side impassioned to talk about their experiences, stand up for their rights, and heal their nation.

Sometimes it was easy to forget their violent histories because the women of FAVILEK are just so open, loving and willing to try what we presented...until one woman asked Christina if it was ok to sit out an exercise because she had bullets lodged in her knee and hip from the 1994 coup. That was a pretty sobering reminder.

Maricia, one of the founders, was having trouble with the acrobatics, though. She could not extend her arms all the way because she is missing her left bicep from being under a house for a week after the earthquake. But when the artists introduced partner stands, with one woman standing atop the thighs of two others, Maricia jumped right up there and threw out her arms as far as they would go. She was beaming!

At the end of our week of workshops, the ensemble sat down together in a circle to talk about the experience. How do you feel now, what did you gain, what did you enjoy? The women exclaimed: *"We feel so much stronger now!"*

Individually and as an ensemble. Merina, who's quite the spitfire, tells us how *"Here in Haiti things can get dangerous, there are demonstrations and violence, but now I feel strong enough to run and to fight!"* Wow.

Grandma Sylvie, the eldest, who kissed Anna at the beginning, walked up to her at the end of the workshops and put her arms around her hips to lift Anna up, as if to demonstrate her newfound strength. And she did lift her! And then she cradled her like a baby and sang to her. She then went to Josh to lift him (and Josh is a big guy), and she probably would have done it, but Josh preempted her action by swinging her up in his arms instead. And after that they danced.

Visiting the Neighbors in Myanmar (Burma):

Since 2009, we have been working with *Thukhuma Khayeethe* (Arts Travelers), one of the few theatre groups in Burma that dare to do contemporary theatre, even though they must present their plays in secret. This year, our two companies collaborated on an adaptation of Ben Johnson's *Volpone*, in both English and Burmese, with each actor speaking in his own language.

The rehearsal studio was a rented, empty house in a suburban area in north Yangon called Insein. Although it is pronounced "insane," it carries another meaning: it is home to the infamous Insein prison where two of the TK actors had been incarcerated for several years for "political activities."

The group was doing an exercise we call “Visiting the Neighbors”. It’s a circle exercise for the group to build ensemble unity and explore characters. It encourages the actors to enjoy freedom of physical and vocal expression.

Apparently, this neighborhood is not used to such freedom because, after about 10 minutes of what must have sounded like bedlam, the ensemble was visited by the actual neighbors, who demanded to know what the hell we were doing.

The offending character might have been Michael, who at the time was grabbing one of the actors by the shirt and shouting "*Whaaaaat?!?! He gave my money to WHOOOOO?!!!!*" (Part of the exercise, of course.) Clearly our theatre pals hadn't introduced themselves to the community yet or given them a "heads up" about what might go on.

In the new political and social climate of Burma, nobody has yet determined how neighbors and neighborhoods work now. There are still neighborhood spies who are paid by the government to watch for anti-government activities, and there is still paranoia about what neighbors may be doing or saying.

The TK actors talked to the startled neighbors and explained what we were doing in the rehearsal room. We all promised to be more respectful. The arts are very well appreciated in Burma and we only got smiles from the neighbors after that. Most important, we didn't get our friends in trouble!

[Yes, I Am Marzia!](#)

Women in Afghanistan are taught from an early age to be invisible. Under the Taliban, not only were women not allowed to be seen in public (hence, the burqa), but were also fined or beaten for being too loud in their footsteps or voices. This trait ran deep in the young woman in our workshop in Herat.

After years of working with women in similar circumstances (rural women in India, Pakistan and elsewhere), we have developed gentle and enjoyable ways to open their voices... the most effective is “Throwing Your Name Over the Mountain.”

The group lines up on one side of the room and imagines a tall mountain rising up in front of them. All together as one voice, we call out our names loudly over the mountain. Calling out together is easy. Next, each person calls out her name over the imaginary mountain, one by one down the line. Each time, the mountain (all the other students in the room) echoes her name back.

It’s a surprising feeling to hear your name yelled loudly from your own throat, and even more surprising to hear your name called back to you! Especially if you have never raised your voice.

Next, and most daring, each girl goes to the opposite side of the room and calls her name loudly over the mountain as though we on the other side are, in fact, the mountain. Again, the mountain

echoes back as loudly. The girl is encouraged to stay until the echo has died out, and then return to join the others.

Everyone responds to this exercise with an amazing feeling of confirmation. One girl, Marzia, a girl who grew up in a small village outside Herat, expressed it well. She said it was the first time she really felt like a whole person. She said, *“Yes, I am MARZIA!”*