

Can Theatre be More?

by Grace A. Capobianco | Sep 13, 2017



Bond Street Theatre: New York's Cultural Ambassadors

“What exactly does theatre have to do with conflict resolution?” That’s a question that’s sure to get Joanna Sherman talking. “Theatre *is* conflict resolution,” explains Sherman, a long-time NoHo resident and Artistic Director of Bond Street Theatre. “Any play you see, any story, it’s always about conflict, and how it does or doesn’t get resolved.”



Bond Street

Sherman founded **Bond Street Theatre** (BST for short) back in 1976, along with a group of physical theatre performers who aspired to make a difference in the world. They toured across New York State, presenting plays about corporate greed, the environment, and just about any other social issue you can think of. They might have continued on like this, had it not been for 1982’s **Israel Festival**, where Sherman and fellow company members, including current **Managing Director Michael McGuigan**, were invited to create a street theatre performance working with participants of all different faiths, backgrounds, and ethnicities, including Palestinians and Israelis.

The early days of Bond Street Theatre – a fixture in the East Village performing arts scene.

“That was the moment that really crystalized for us all the things that theatre can achieve,” explains Sherman.



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Since then, the company has grown to reach over 40 countries and has received a MacArthur award for its work. In fact, the company is now a registered non-profit in Afghanistan, where a part-time staff runs year-round theatre programming working with students and youth.

Girls in Afghanistan attend a Bond Street Theatre workshop.

“Theatre is engaging, it’s entertaining, it can spark discussion, it can be used for advocacy, the list goes on and on,” says Sherman. As one participant from an all-female workshop in central Afghanistan explained, “Theatre is like a guiding light. If we use it correctly it will shine good results on our society.”

Now entering its 41st year of work, BST is in the midst of launching a new program in Malaysia working with refugees and legal advocates. Over 150,000 refugees live in the country, and yet Malaysia is not a signatory of the United Nations Refugee Convention, meaning that refugees have a hard time accessing or defending their rights. BST is working with advocacy groups in the country to teach theatre as a way to share information.

Many of the refugees hail from Myanmar, and are members of the nation’s persecuted Rohingya minority, where BST has worked since 2009. In Myanmar, the Rohingya are not considered legal citizens, and are instead most often seen as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Despite having lived in the country for generations, they are subjected to a state-sanctioned campaign of terror, which has led to widespread condemnation.



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Sherman, above right, working with the Rohingya Women's Development Network in Malaysia.

The company is also working with **Masakini Theatre**, a local arts group, to share techniques and develop an original play covering refugee legal issues, healthcare, education and more. Just last week, the BST staff discovered that Masakini Theatre has in fact worked with another past BST partner group from all the way in Denmark.

But this is all par for the course for Sherman. "No matter where we go," she says, "we never fail to be surprised by what a small world it truly is."



Bond Street

Smiles all around at a Bond Street workshop in Malaysia.

Bond Street Theatre is a proud resident of downtown Manhattan, and frequently performs in schools around the city. You can learn more about their work at www.bondst.org