

## Ambassadors for Peace, Armed With Slapstick

### All the World's An Audience

By DANIEL SIMPSON

ELBASAN, Albania — When Joanna Sherman took her alternative theater company to Pakistan this spring to entertain Afghan refugees by dancing on stilts, one young boy in the crowd was not amused. “He stared at us earnestly and asked, ‘What is the meaning of this?’” she recalled.

Ms. Sherman reflected upon this incident as she embarked on her latest tour, dubbed the Balkan Peace Project. “I gave him some glib response, but the question stuck in my mind,” she said. “It’s a tough one to answer.”

Since 1976, when she founded Bond Street Theater in New York, her troupe has traveled through Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America, seeking what she calls a “universal physical language” to amuse and enlighten.

But her experience in Pakistan was a reminder that not everyone gets it. “Sometimes it’s such a dire situation that you just want to go in and make a gesture, to give people some simple pleasure,” she said. “These kids didn’t have access to anything fun, anything that would make them laugh. So we tried to offer them something.”

Trained as a dancer, Ms. Sherman, 48, has created a performance style that incorporates elements of mime, martial arts, juggling and acrobatics. To her, Bond Street Theater is a “cultural Peace Corps” conveying a message of tolerance.

It has traveled to Israel to train a street theater company of both Arabs and Jews, to Northern Ireland for workshops with Catholic and Protestant children, and most recently to the Balkans.

Theater critics might question the merits of the play Ms. Sherman has brought to Albania: a circus-style production of “Romeo and Juliet,” stripped of Shakespeare’s poetic dialogue.

But the result was an instant hit at the Fourth International Theater Festival in Elbasan, largely because everybody could understand it.

“We have always tried to reach



Kael Alford

A scene from Bond Street Theater’s production of “Romeo and Juliet” in Elbasan, Albania. The troupe has traveled through much of the world, seeking a “universal physical language” to amuse and enlighten.

the broadest and most diverse audience possible,” Ms. Sherman explained. “Originally, this meant a local audience across the United States, but over the years we’ve become more interested in going to areas of conflict or recent conflict.”

Bond Street’s version of “Romeo and Juliet” reduces the play’s multiple themes to a simple core.

“We’re coming with a message that you can have peace if you choose,” Ms. Sherman said. “All the deaths in ‘Romeo and Juliet’ are unnecessary, even the suicides. Nothing is inevitable unless you make it so.”

The slapstick comedy and rhythm of her production, reinforced by a live percussion accompaniment throughout the show, struck a chord with her audience of several hundred Albanians in Elbasan.

Laughter and applause punctuated the performance. “People are almost more impressed by the fact that we’re there, trying to help, than they are by the product or its message,” she conceded. “We’re

the outsiders. We’re Americans. But we can facilitate, stimulate and encourage, even if we can’t change things.”

The desire to become a catalyst for action has brought her back to the Balkans three times since her first visit in 1999, when she sought to distract Kosovo Albanian children from the squalor of Macedonia’s refugee camps with a circus performance.

Bond Street Theater has now performed in every country in southeastern Europe. It has a partnership with Theater Tsvete of Bulgaria, just one of many, which helped with the puppetry in “Romeo and Juliet.”

“Artists’ power to communicate on many levels has been put to the test in the field,” Ms. Sherman said, “and proven to be an essential component of any strategy to rebuild morale, re-establish cultural connections and heal the psyche of a society.”

Bond Street Theater’s commitment to humanitarian work has won it a MacArthur Foundation

award and financing from the Trust for Mutual Understanding.

Although the company gave up its original theater in Lower Manhattan 20 years ago, it has not turned its back on the United States. It regularly performs plays with strong social themes, like the provocatively titled “Nightmare on Wall Street,” and Ms. Sherman plans to take “Romeo and Juliet” on a nationwide tour next year.

“It’s been a tremendous learning process for me, because in the United States we’re really quite closed off from international news,” she said. “People in America need to learn more about the rest of the world. And they need to think more about why the rest of the world perceives us the way they do.”

But Ms. Sherman has few illusions about her power to do much to change that.

“It’s a very humbling experience doing this work,” she said. “You see the limitations of what you’re doing very clearly, that you can only go so far. But it’s a lot more than nothing.”