



FEATURES

New York Theater Troupe Tours Afghanistan To Entertain, Inform, And Allay Fears



An actress from the Bond Street Theatre teaches pantomime to Afghan girls.

By Nikola Krastev
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NEW YORK – New York City is some 10,000 kilometers from Afghanistan, but a small Manhattan-based theater company has made the trip several times over the last decade as part of a mission to bridge cultural divides and bring a taste of the arts to the war-ravaged country.

This spring, the tiny [Bond Street Theatre](#) is touring Afghanistan for several weeks with a program of workshops focusing on how performances of music, plays, and puppetry can bring important messages to communities. It's called "informational theater."

Bond Street has teamed up with local theaters in Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar provinces and is training them in techniques it has already used successfully in rural India and Africa. Its current tour in Afghanistan is being sponsored by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Institute For Peace.

Artistic Director Joanna Sherman says the goal is to teach Afghan artists how they can provide educational services and bring information to isolated areas, especially those with large populations of women and children.

"This is specifically to work with theater companies to build their capacity to create this kind of informational theater," Sherman says. "Around the world I've seen this kind of informational theater used to carry specific news to areas of high illiteracy."

Take the issue of vaccinating children against polio. Parents who are illiterate don't know about the benefits of such a vaccine because they haven't read brochures or health information sheets, Sherman says. That ignorance may mean they won't allow their children to be inoculated.



NIKOLA KRASTEV (RFE/RL)
Joanna Sherman:

Important to reach the women

Health organizations that want to bring polio vaccines to a rural community often must first dispel people's fears about using foreign medicine. A local theater group trained to do just that -- through sketches, songs, or a play -- can explain the benefits and allay fears.

When the medical team arrives, Sherman says, the village is prepared.

"[Theater] gives them a safe area to be able to express themselves," she says. "And if something is really, really difficult to express, we have different techniques theater affords them to be able to express it -- maybe through puppetry or maybe through pantomime. Without using words, sometimes it's easier."



A puppetry workshop in rural Afghanistan conducted by the Bond Street Theatre

Bond Street first traveled to Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent U.S.-led military response in Afghanistan. A team from the theater company arrived in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan to entertain and comfort the children living there.

While there, the New York actors met members of Exile Theatre, a group of Afghanistan's finest actors who had fled the Taliban. The two groups forged a partnership that led to a critically acclaimed joint production called "Beyond The Mirror," which depicts Afghan life in wartime as told through first-hand stories.

The production has been performed in Japan, Afghanistan, and the United States.

The gap in access to information is particularly acute in poor and rural communities in Afghanistan and especially among women who are illiterate and isolated from news sources, Sherman says.

"It's a very mountainous region. There's not much communication between villages. They don't have access to information in very many ways," she says. "Many people don't have electricity. You may have radio, maybe you don't. You hear your news going to the market. It's really important especially to reach the women because women don't get the chance to get out very much."

She says theater is an effective way to present information because it is both visual and verbal, as well as entertaining.

According to the United Nations, the illiteracy rate in rural parts of Afghanistan is as high as 90 percent for women and 63 percent for men.

But it is children, Sherman says, who are the most rewarding audience. Most have grown up around war and most have never seen a play or stage performance. The emotions and reactions they experience while watching theater, she says, can go a long way toward healing the psychological trauma they've been through.

"Children have been brought up [in an environment] where violence is the solution to everything," she says. "You want to teach them that there's another way. Violence doesn't have to be the solution to everything."

In other words, sometimes the play's the thing.