



AFGHAN GIRLS FIND THEIR VOICE



by Joanna Sherman

LATIFA stepped in front of the row of girls. She fidgeted a little, then lifted her head and opened her mouth. A small sound came out... "Latifa." Admittedly, it's hard to declare your name loudly to the world. It was almost impossible for Latifa, and yet she ended up playing the raucous and rude husband in our play about educating girls.

We have been creating all-women's theatre groups in Afghanistan since 2003, training young women to perform before crowds of women who have never before seen a play or a woman on stage. Donning the garb and demeanor of a man, Latifa portrays the abusive husband. The women in the audience know this scene all too well and cheer at the end in recognition. The message is clear: girls are kept from their dreams at the whim of uneducated fathers or families.

It's taboo for women to appear on stage in Afghanistan but they can perform for other women—and now they are reaching women in prisons and shelters where the women have little access to news about their rights.

Bond Street has been using theatre as a voice for social justice for more than 30 years. Just after September 11th, 2001, we went to Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan to entertain children. There we met a theatre group, Exile Theatre, comprised of the best actors, playwrights and directors from Afghanistan who had fled over decades of war and Taliban rule. We worked with this talented group for eight years, the first-ever US-Afghan professional theatre collaboration.

After the Taliban, dozens of theatre groups sprang up in towns and villages all over Afghanistan, yet most of these actors had never seen theatre before. What inspired them? They had no model. To me, this verifies that theatre is intrinsic to human nature. We can't help ourselves – humans make theatre.

We also couldn't help but notice that there were no women in these groups. Men were playing all the roles, often laughably. Put on a burqa and *voila*, you're a woman, even if you walk like a linebacker. In the 60's and 70's, the golden age of Afghan theatre, women had excelled on stage. We were determined to return women to their rightful role!

The women we gathered for our theatre groups had absolutely no training to start and, like Latifa, they had to learn to be brave, to hold their heads up and to speak out with passion. Now they play their parts boldly, and the male roles with scary accuracy. They write their own plays based on their issues: they know what an abusive husband is like. They know the dismissive policeman. It's all very real.

The first time they present their plays in public and see the impact they have on the audience of women, they are forever changed. Once they find their power, there's no going back.

In one of their plays, a 13-year old girl from a poor family is happily going to school until her father decides to give her away to an older man for \$10,000, an enormous sum for a poor family. The girl's teacher entreats the father to no avail. The mother, desperate, goes to the mullah to plead for the young girl. The mullah is moved and informs the husband that it is forbidden in Islam to sell your daughter. She must agree to marry. The father didn't know this. How would he know? Even if he could read, he couldn't read the Quran. It's in Arabic, not his language. Through the play, the audience learns that their religion forbids forced marriage – that is crucial information in a country where religion is the primary guide.

In fact, we invite the mullahs to see the plays first to gain their approval. When they see the plays have a good message, they encourage the girls to continue. One even invited them to present their play for women in the mosque.

After each performance, the actors interact with the audience so that audience members can come on stage and act out their solutions to the issues. In one case, a woman immediately countered, "The mullah would never say don't sell your daughter. He'd say \$10,000 is a lot of money and you can always get another daughter."

Most important, these plays are initiating discussions about topics that perhaps have never before been discussed in certain communities. As a result, Afghan women and girls are discovering that theatre can be a powerful yet socially acceptable means of exploring questions of social justice and women's rights. 

