

Joanna Sherman and Christina Gelsone

Out of the Blue

Anisa weighs about 62 lbs - we are amazed by her: she is like a little bird. How is it possible that she can play the drums so forcefully, so persistently even after everyone else is tired? Anisa is the only woman in theatre in all of Afghanistan as far as we can see. (Sixty students in the theatre department of Kabul University... all male.) Of course she can't be the only one, but now we are determined to find the women who are telling stories and writing plays - the women who are struggling to make theatre in ways that are acceptable in Afghanistan right now.

It is hard to imagine a country without art - no music (beautiful traditional instruments buried in back yards for safety), no dancing (even the National dance was banned), no visual arts (an occasional Pakistani bus painted lavishly with geometric designs might pass along). For eight long years under the extremely stringent Taliban rule, all creative expression - the very soul of the Afghan people - was strangled. Children under the age of ten have never seen a performance of any sort. Those under the age of twenty may only have vague childhood memories of a Soviet circus or foreign dance troupe.

We met Anisa last year when Bond Street Theatre went to northern Pakistan to entertain children in Afghan refugee camps. Having been in camps during the Kosovo war, with their neat rows of tents, here we were surprised to see small villages of mud buildings with narrow streets and high walls. These camps have been in existence for more than twenty years, first established when Afghans fled the Soviet occupation in 1979 and growing throughout the ensuing brutal civil war. During this chaos, the Taliban gained strength and even popularity, bringing discipline and order to besieged communities. As the Taliban grew bolder, their ruthlessness and extreme religious zeal sent thousands fleeing. The last wave of refugees arrived after September 11th during the US bombing in Afghanistan.

Anisa Wahab is Nuristan, one of the many ethnic varieties of Afghan people. Her family was among the educated

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Christina Gelsone (left) and Joanna Sherman (right) in traditional Afghan garments with Anisa Wahab (in between them) and her friend Farida. Photo: Gelsone-Sherman

classes during the Soviet era and she was a child star in the new Afghan television - tremendously well-loved - everyone knew her. As she entered her teens, the obvious dilemma loomed before her: in Afghan culture there is no possibility of being an entertainer - a public commodity - and having the traditional woman's role of mother and homemaker. Indeed, single women and even single men cannot get an apartment of their own. You live with your family until married and then you live with your husband or wife. Anisa made a very brave and radical choice to live a different life - to refuse marriage, to be an entertainer, an actress, and to give up the possibility of ever having children or a family life. Stronger than religion, tradition is the mantle that is hardest to cast aside.

When the Taliban arrived, Anisa fled Kabul with the other members of the theatre community. The university suffered extensive damage during this reign of terror since all institutions supporting inquiry and expression were deemed counter to Taliban religious teachings. The theatre buildings

were completely demolished. A few of the students at that time persisted in performing, presenting plays about the poverty, destruction and chaos of the age, working outside with the fallen buildings as their backdrop. Nearly every one of them was put in jail at some time during this period. A small contingent escaped and fled to Pakistan. After several years adjusting to the hardships of refugee life, this small group of actors, including Anisa, tentatively regrouped under the name Exile Theatre and attempted to perform in the refugee camps - a Taliban stronghold, of course, since the Taliban had also escaped to the very same camps during the US invasion.

During the spring of 2003, the group returned to Afghanistan along with two million other refugees who came back to find their homes and villages turned to rubble. Over the tumultuous year, Bond Street Theatre and Exile Theatre had kept contact by email, a rare commodity in northern Pakistan and even rarer in Kabul. Now four of us from Bond Street came to Afghanistan to meet these heroic actors: to work, play, discuss, teach and learn from each other "what is theatre?" and "what is its role now in Afghanistan?" These are new questions since theatre has to be reinvented and reintroduced to the population. The old framework left from the Soviet era looks outdated; the older traditions of poetry and song must be rekindled.

The university graciously and excitedly offers to host our collaboration. Lots of tea is consumed and teachers and students buzz around with curiosity, poking their heads in the door of the cramped office where we sit in awe listening to Najib play the Afghan harmonium with Anisa's intricate drumming. The freedom to play music openly gives them boundless joy and their faces glow with pleasure and pride as they sing.

There are two women and two men in the Bond Street group; Exile Theatre has four men and Anisa.

We immediately begin working, not by discussion, but on our feet. To our surprise and delight, after a short creative warm-up together, we immediately bounce from exercise to exercise as though we have been working together for years. We are amazed at their ease with our physical material and they are delighted at how quickly we learn the complicated rhythms of the famed *attan*, the National Dance of Afghanistan.

We spent ten days, the nine of us, creating a play that recounts the ordeal of the last twenty years of Afghan history: life under repressive Soviet rule, the chaos and brutality of the *mujahideen*, the extreme demands and punishments of the Taliban, and finally the tenuous condition of the current interim government. Exile Theatre had written the scenario and we didn't question their choice... it was obviously the tale that needed to be told.

Every day at rehearsal, Anisa comes fluttering in, always a bit late from her work at the television station. She is a regular on the soap operas, the first performing art to emerge after the Taliban era, followed quickly by a rush of Bollywood films (attended only by men, of course). We never see Anisa in a *burqa*, although most women don this blue garment every day. And even though eight long years have passed, she is still lovingly recognised and cherished everywhere she goes. Anisa always has a friend or two with her... a woman never travels alone. Today she announces that she and her friend Farida are thinking of getting an apartment together. They tell us this with breathless excitement knowing that the very concept pushes the bounds of propriety beyond the imagination and could be downright dangerous. A western woman might get away with it, but an Afghan woman knows

her place. Christina and I look at them with beaming admiration. Farida still wears a *burqa* and stuffs it in her bag when she gets to school, but she and Anisa will be daring partners in crime.

We always have watchers at our rehearsals. Men who stare... amused, accusing, curious, lustful? We can never tell. They slouch in the seats of the theatre as we work on stage - without our head-scarves - and slink away when we finish. They peer in from the doorway and giggle and whisper. They stand in the wings and watch with amazement and admiration. The fact is that, as foreigners, we are always an attraction and, in town, small groups of children and men frequently gather around us in the street to stare. We women particularly present a sensation, not so much because our faces are showing while most women are completely covered, but because we are walking about freely - laughing and talking with a casual air - in the company of men. The two groups had seriously considered the idea of performing outside but, with due warning from the Embassy, we realise that any public theatrical activities have the potential to cause panic, violence, applause, appreciation, a riot, chaos or gunfire - there is no way to know what the response will be and guessing is far too risky.

We know there are violent incidents in Kabul regularly; kidnappings are a viable threat and, as Americans, there is reward money on our heads. Al Qaeda is still widely functioning in Afghanistan and the Taliban make up a sizeable percentage of Kabul's population. Further, there is a growing resentment against foreign humanitarian aid workers who, despite their good intentions, are perceived as living too lavishly in contrast to the dire situation of the Afghans.

But who is Taliban? What is Al Qaeda? It is not like a club that you join - the situation in Afghanistan is fluid. A generation of

young men received only the most rudimentary schooling centred around a fundamental religious core. These young men, mostly from the poorest areas, may be Al Qaeda one day and not the next. Here in the struggling ruins of Kabul, and even more so in the remote areas of Afghanistan, the primary issue for everyone is survival: feeding your family, securing shelter, a home, and daily security in your travels. So we try to figure out who amid the sea of men we pass in the streets and markets are "Taliban" or "Al Qaeda"... but it doesn't matter. Occasionally, our companions point to one fellow or another and say: "Watch out for him - he is one of the very religious ones" and we adjust our head-scarves automatically. Did we feel safe? Yes... but vigilant always.

Security is not the most difficult phenomenon to handle, and it isn't the idea of women all hidden in their *burqas*. They are a shock at first, then they disappear after a while like so many billowy blue ghosts; if you stop believing in them... they cease to be. And that is what is so difficult to handle - we feel an actual physical longing to see another woman, another woman's face and smile, someone like us. "Thank god you're here," Christina and I assure each other; at least we can look at each other. A constant battle plagues us every day as we are torn between the immediate anger of injustice and the need to understand honest cultural differences.

Exile Theatre and Bond Street Theatre made their debut in the raw half-built theatre at Kabul University, presenting our short play, *In the Mirror*, to a small crowd of excited students. Here was something very new - a new vision of how theatre can be: wordless, physical and stylised, with the torturous events resonating through symbolism rather than realism.

Now we are off to the most northern region

of Afghanistan with Salimi, the Director of Exile Theatre, bouncing along the rutted desert roads with us. He, as a single male, was the only one of the group who could leave Kabul for an extended period of time: Anisa had her television commitments and the others their wives and small children. In contrast to Kabul, we feel safer in the countryside where our presence is even more of an oddity but the religious factions are not as dense or potentially well-organised; where custom rather than fundamentalism reigns. Whereas the cities buzz with poverty and danger, the country towns are as languid as the camels loping along in the sun.

In the small towns, word travels fast that foreigners are here doing something amazing at the schools - even the Taliban would want to have a look. (And indeed, we saw the "religious ones" in the audiences laughing along with the others.) We are invited to lunch at the headmaster's home: a complex of two mud buildings with a large courtyard enclosed by a high wall, housing the extended family. As we enter, the women quickly hide themselves from Robert and Michael, our theatrical partners. We sit on red cushions on the beautifully carpeted floor, hand-woven by the women of this family. Our host's three-year-old daughter is the only female allowed to be amongst these strange men and she nestles in her father's lap.

Later, we are the lucky ones, brought to the weaving room, a domain solely for women. The weaving is astonishing; deeply dyed wool is knotted in painstaking designs on huge wooden looms. Every inch takes a week to complete, months for an entire carpet. While weaving, the eldest daughter, in her twenties, tells us how she was forced to miss school while the Taliban was in power, and now she must study at an 8th grade level, picking up where she left off. Undeterred, she wants to become a doctor.

Her eyes betray no doubt, she speaks about her plan with calm resolve.

How different these girls are from their Kabul counterparts. The city girls wore jeans, tight shirts, and make-up (under their *burqas*). This family in Andkhai wore home-made dresses cut of the same cloth and their elder daughters were betrothed to cousins, the most common marriage arrangement in Afghanistan. The Kabul girls (Anisa's nieces, for example) had met their Afghan fiancés only once. One girl's betrothed lives in the Netherlands and came to Kabul only for the engagement, a celebration as ornate as a wedding. The other niece married: she resplendent in her white wedding gown, and he, still in Germany, pledging his troth by cell phone. Two years have passed since they wed, she still in Kabul, he in Germany.

Joanna and I have spent almost an hour amongst these many women, and we are loath to go. We invite them to see our show at the school. As the men come downstairs, the women again disappear, but one girl peeks out of a window and waves.

Hundreds of applauding children greet us in the school-yard, six rows deep; they surround us and the local men clap behind them. A hundred metres away, standing on a low mud mound, is a small flock of flowing white *burqas*. We asked, even demanded, that women be allowed to watch the shows. So there they stand... too far away to hear or see the show, but perhaps close enough to catch a glimpse through the mesh.

Joanna and I wave to them and, following the performance, make a beeline for their huddle. One woman beckons me with an unmistakable "come here" gesture. I hop over the small gully that separates us and am caught by her strong arms. She lifts her *burqa*, embracing me, kissing my cheeks, and laughing. Two other women in this tight bundle of fifteen now shyly raise their *burqas*.

Close by is a mesh-covered face. "*Salaam alaikum*," I say, and she, shocked by my attention, ducks her head but waves back. I greet the others and soon another lifts her veil. Her face is beaming; she signals that she liked the show. Soon I am passed from hug to hug, warm faces appearing, eyes dancing, and white teeth smiling. One woman clasps me with only one arm. As we part, I see the baby nursing.

The first woman removes a ring from her hand and presses it into mine. I try to let her know that her laughter is enough, that I need no gift. I look for our Afghan translator but he refuses to go with me to the women's cluster. "I cannot do such a thing," he says emphatically, "This is a small village and they do not know me." But Salimi, surrounded by a sea of giggling children, is pleased to translate and the words come flying from her mouth - so much to say in so little time. "She is happy to see you and wishes you to stay with her tonight." The woman grips my hand tightly. I ask about the ring and Salimi understands that I am hesitant to accept such a gift. "She wants you to



Rehearsal for *In the Mirror* with Exile Theatre and Bond Street Theatre on the half-built stage at Kabul University. Photo: Salimi



Bond Street Theatre in a children's performance at a school in the Andkhoi District in northern Afghanistan. Photo: Faqir

have it; it is given in thanks for your big heart. You must keep it." I politely refuse her offer of tea and hospitality though my impulse is to follow her home. Upon leaving, I finally look at the ring more closely. It is a wide silver band and in the middle is a large blue heart.

If the women break our hearts, the children give us hope for the future. The literacy rate for men is barely 50% and only 21% for women; both men and women can expect to live only to age forty-seven; and Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world. Families frequently have ten to fifteen children. Standing there in the school-yards, surrounded by waves of laughing children who have just seen their very first "performance", we are as delirious with joy as they are. The idea of a school-yard or a performance was not possible a few short years ago... some places never had a school, and

still do not have electricity or running water. After all the misery that the Afghan people have suffered - wars, displacement, poverty, repression, occupation, corruption... new options for women are emerging and this next generation looks forward to peace.

JOANNA SHERMAN is the co-founder and artistic director of Bond Street Theatre, and has performed in or directed the company productions throughout the world. Joanna, who has an MA in Theatre and International Studies from New York University, has been a speaker on the role of the arts in areas of conflict at the United Nations, the National Council of Women, the UN conference on Women in China, universities and arts-in-education forums.

CHRISTINA GELSONE is an actor and choreographer. She studied at the Boston Ballet Conservatory, Hartford Ballet and Princeton University and has been an ensemble member of Bond Street Theatre since 2001. Recently she collaborated on the creation of *Beyond the Mirror*, a short history of Afghanistan, with Exile Theatre in Kabul and toured with the production throughout the country.