

Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini

A Sun Rises in Afghanistan: An Actor's View

When Théâtre du Soleil went to Australia with *Tambours sur la digue*, Ariane was very touched and very moved by the situation of the refugees there. She had been to the Red Cross camp at Sangatte to speak with some refugees and to see what their situation was, so she already had these issues on her mind. But when she went to the detention centers in Australia, she was really shocked. She spoke to the Soleil company and said that's what our next research would be. After that everybody went to Sangatte individually.

We didn't know much about the situation beforehand, and of course being there changes your perception. The most important thing is how you see these refugees—you have a different vision now, you have a different approach. I was almost going to say a different judgment, but the difference is you don't have a *judgment*, you have an understanding. Of course, not everyone is nice among those who manage to escape, as you see in *Le dernier caravansérail*. But you do understand what drove them to this point—to pimp or participate in human trafficking—and you can imagine their families back home. At the same time, you can imagine the people they are pressuring here. It forces you to take a different view of the world, a more human confrontation with reality. These people are not just numbers that you see in the newspaper, and they are not just bad guys or good guys; they are human beings.

There is a history that brought these people here to Europe. And we make the history. What I think is very touching about *Le dernier caravansérail* is that we give the words to these people. It is they who speak. What you hear really clearly are *their* words, *their* voices. When we play these characters, the Soleil actors allow them a step beyond, a greater reach, and it gives these people a little bit of what they deserve.

A Théâtre du Soleil actor gets into costume in Afghanistan. Courtesy of Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini

The arts here in France can be bourgeois, but in Afghanistan it is completely different. There you go out and there is poverty and the roads are totally destroyed and

you have to ask yourself where the money should go. It's difficult to say. You ask for money to rebuild the national theater, which doesn't have a roof. And they say, "Well, how much money should we give to build the theater, and how much money should we give to build the road in front of the theater?" The situation is very difficult. The only money that they really produce in Afghanistan is from drugs. Otherwise the money is aid from foreign countries—from the United States and France and Italy. And then these are the forces in charge of the elections, in charge of getting rid of the arms, in charge of rebuilding. You have to rebuild everything—both the physical structures and the nation itself.

I've been to Afghanistan twice—the first time was with Théâtre du Soleil for three weeks, the second time was just Maurice and our translator Shasha and me. The first time Ariane and most of the company came, and I was able to take part in the workshops they were doing, as well as filming the workshops for the theater's own documentary. Three weeks is very little time in human history, but I think it was very important. You could see the evolution: the way people learned to hear, the way they related to us, and to the women among us. In Afghanistan there's a very long way to go in improving the situation for women, and that is very striking.

After we finished the workshop, Ariane selected seventeen people and said to them: "OK, what do you want to do now? We can help you, but you must do things on your own now. We can push you, we can surround you, but if it doesn't come from you . . . " She made this big, long speech, and then she left. The group stayed there for a couple of hours thinking about how to carry on with all the theatrical elements they had consumed for three weeks, and so they decided to form a troupe. They called it Theater Aftab—*aftab* means "sun"—after Théâtre du Soleil, and they elected a temporary director and decided to start working about three times a week. It was a big deal, and we were especially proud of that.

The passion with which these seventeen young aspiring actors worked was amazing. They worked the way we in the company do—they made the sets, the costumes, the music. That gives you some hope. When we left they had registered in the second Kabul Theater Festival. They decided to do *Romeo and Juliet* and asked for more help, and that's when Maurice and Shasha and I went to Afghanistan for the second time. In three weeks they created a *Romeo and Juliet*, and what resulted was, for me, a miracle.

We did encounter a problem in making the piece: There were only two women in the troupe, and the only acceptable way to play the parts of Romeo and Juliet was to have a brother and sister in the roles so that they would be allowed to touch or kiss each other's hands. We made an announcement at the beginning of the performance: "My brothers, my sisters, to do this play we have a brother and a sister playing the roles, so don't worry that something's wrong with what you see—nothing is wrong." People look at women doing theater as if it were the nineteenth century, as if the women were prostitutes. That element of their traditional culture is still there, and any sort of change will be a long time coming—these ideas are so deeply rooted.

But having hope for this company also means having hope for this culture. It's very moving. The stories are very deep. Everyone has someone in their family who was tortured or killed or this or that. One boy was actually banished for life by his father for doing theater—like in Molière! He was banished and is now forced to live in the women's part of the house, and his father doesn't speak to him.

My daughter asks me why I'm making these documentaries about the workshops. I'm doing it because I want people to see how in need of help these people are. Not only how much they need but *how* we can help them. And how we can help ourselves by doing it, of course. And I'm also doing it simply to share the emotion we experienced in Afghanistan. Before we left, everybody was telling us not to go—everybody, my entire family. I had to really put my foot down and say: "I want to go." For me, it answered the question of why I do theater. Of course I do it to create beautiful productions, as beautiful as *Tambours sur la digue* was, but I think I'm doing theater for *this*. That's the question I needed to answer for myself, and so that's what I would like to come out in the documentary.

Why am I in the Théâtre du Soleil? Recently we were looking at images of a meeting we had had in Kabul, and in the pictures we were all very tired because we had just come from doing the workshop, and from doing a tour—one week we worked night and day. Why? Because right now that's the only way we can afford to rehearse seven, eight, or twelve months on one piece. It's such a gift. No one pressures me to *find* something artistically; everyone in the company is instructed to explore but not to *do*. You don't automatically have to be something—"This is me, I'm like this." There's something more. And of course when you are looking for something, you become larger, you grow. It is true, though, that sometimes you cannot find the right door and so you hit a wall instead. But then when there *is* a door, a window, a little thing that opens, it is like you have the whole world. And that's why I've been with the Soleil company for eighteen years. It's the only way I would imagine doing theater.

As told to Tom Sellar (Paris, September 2005)

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