

Spiritual Transformation and the Art of Drama

By Janet Sono

The second play I was in high school was in my junior year. I had a small part in a quasi-comedy and was quite contented. At the first rehearsal, I noticed one of the cast members was wearing jeans and a leather jacket—in those days a sign of rebellion or an attitude bordering on juvenile delinquency. His name was Mike. His part wasn't that big and he seemed uncomfortable, shy and awkward at first. There was one very dramatic scene where Mike had an important role to play. Just one scene, but it was an important one. Mike had never acted before. The director took time with Mike and was patient with him. Soon, the scene started to become exciting because Mike put all of the negative energy that he had—his anger at the world, dislike of school, etc., into this one scene and the negative energy changed into positive energy. He was very dynamic on the stage, and after the performance, everyone praised him. Mike gradually left his gang and joined the theater club. He became one of our best actors; his grades improved. In other words, he was transformed, not only in his role on the stage, but in his personal life as well.

About 20 years ago, I had a student at the women's college who kind of scared me. She looked angry and revengeful. She was in a regular class, and I feared her eyes. I didn't know what she was thinking. In those days, most of the students were eager to learn and their faces were bright, but this girl was unusual. In the class, we acted out a short scene from history. I could tell it interested her. The next year, she took my drama class, and we performed Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*. She was cast in a small but important role. At first, she seemed uncomfortable, angry and short-tempered. But gradually, she started to change. She tried her best at acting. She made friends with the other students in the play. She helped make the costumes. After the performance, her face was shining like a brilliant light in the darkness. She was a different person: smiling from ear to ear—the first time I ever saw her smile. In other words, she was transformed. The negative energy she had had was changed into positive energy. She was a different person.

Last year, I directed Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* at my college. All the students in the play are seniors, and it's an all-women production. After the parts were cast, I found out that the student we cast as Shylock had missed almost all of her classes the year before. In other words, she had dropped out of college for a year. She came to see me privately. Basically, she seemed very depressed. She loved drama, but suffered from an extremely shy personality. She was a person of low self-esteem. And she had failed all of her classes her junior year, so now as a senior, she had a double load of classes—plus she had one of the most important roles in *The Merchant of Venice*. I was shocked and overwhelmed. Could she do the part? Was she seriously depressed? Was she suicidal? But she wanted to play Shylock. She was eager to try. She dropped half her classes and decided not to graduate that year. She would do Shylock and then take a fifth year of college. Well, what can I say? At the audition, she had been dynamic, but now in the early rehearsals, she was so shy, so lacking in confidence, so tired. Slowly, slowly, but steadily, however, she began to change. She started to use larger movements and her voice gradually became bigger and more resonant. Her acting became inventive. She had many interesting, intriguing ideas for Shylock. After many months of rehearsal, the play was performed. Altogether, nearly 2,000 people came to see *The Merchant of Venice*. And her performance was way beyond excellent. She was funny, scary, dynamic, pitiful. In other words, she **was** Shylock. She received thunderous applause at her curtain call. Virtually every audience member wrote in the *Ankeito* that Shylock's performance was amazing, brilliant, fantastic. All the sadness, depression, shyness, low self-esteem—all the negative

energy this student had was changed into positive energy. She was completely transformed. Now she is a senior for the second time, and she's doing very well in all her classes. She told me Shylock changed her life. She is poised and self-confident now. Her face is always shining even now—nearly one year after she played Shylock. She was transformed.

Well, these are only three examples, and I could go on and on. But I think you understand what I'm saying. The power of drama is an amazing thing. It changes people. It transforms people. And this transformation is a spiritual one. It's mysterious. You can't touch it. You can't feel it. But it is a true and real experience. And of course, I can say the same for myself. In high school, drama changed my life. Then, twenty years later, the Baha'i Faith gave the spiritual transformation a meaning, a name, a direction and a goal. So, like all other artists who are Baha'is, I think the combination of art and the Baha'i Faith is "light upon light".

The Art of Drama in the Western World started with Greek civilization way before the 5th century B.C. It is said that at the temple for the god Dionysus, at a religious ceremony, a man named Thespis stepped out of the Chorus and began saying lines on his own—started acting. And so, the first actor was born. As you know, even today, we refer to drama people as "Thespians".

The story is different in Japan, and yet the same. The Drama of the common people started some time before the 10th century as a way of showing thankfulness to the gods for their harvest through a form of outdoor theater, which, like the Greek plays, incorporated much music and dance. This form of theater was called "Sarugaki". Sarugaki players, in later years, came to belong to large temples. Then eventually, Sarugaki evolved into Noh Theater. It seems that Noh Theater was originally presented in the open air, as were other public shows of the 12th to 14th centuries. The Noh troops were attached to, and under the protection of, large Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.

This is true all over the world. Drama was born out of a desire to please God or please the gods—a way for mankind—humankind—to express praise and gratitude. And the players were under the protection of temples the world over. So it is very fitting and very wonderful that we now are at the early stages of this in the Baha'i Faith—the embryonic stage of what will become Baha'i theater. In the year 2003, the Baha'is are writing plays, performing them, being transformed, and transforming others.

When we watch a play as members of the audience, there is a kind of electricity that exists between the actors and the audience: a kind of chemistry—a magic, sacred circle, if you will. When the actors are concentrating 100% on their roles and the audience is concentrating 100% on the play, something happens. And if the play is a good one, audience members are transformed. If the play is a play with a Baha'i theme this is light upon light.

'Abdu'l-Baha encouraged us to write and perform plays. He himself gave an idea and an outline for a play called "The Drama of the Kingdom". "The Drama of the Kingdom" was written up as a play by Lady Blomfield's daughter, Mary, and published in 1933. Light upon light, indeed.

Although I'm shy about showing my own work, if I may, I'd like to talk a little more about the production of *The Merchant of Venice* that we produced last year at my college, Doshisha Women's College of Liberal Arts. Students and faculty started producing plays by William Shakespeare at my college in 1951. These are two-hour productions performed in English by an all-woman cast and crew from the Department of English. I have brought some pamphlets of several plays and a book about our Shakespeare Production that was published in 2000. There are lots of pictures of productions at the front of the book. Please take a look later, if you'd like to.

In my work as a director, I'm not able to direct Baha'i plays or plays based on Baha'i themes. Although I teach other courses, my main job these past twenty years has been to take a play by Shakespeare, read and study it with the students in the junior year. Then, in

their senior year, 40 – 50 students choose the course called Shakespeare Production. The purpose of this course is to produce the play. The students do everything: they make the costumes and properties, design the set, and create the lighting plan, make-up and sound. Four years ago, my students on the sound crew were musically talented, and they took lessons on the lute, recorder, and other instruments of the Shakespearean era. The play we were performing that year was *As You Like It*, which has many songs in it. Fortunately, we had several students in the cast who had beautiful singing voices, so we did all of the music live. The student-musicians sat down stage right, dressed in Elizabethan costumes, and accompanied the songs throughout the play. Doshisha Women's College started doing Shakespeare in English in 1951, so we have a 50-year history of doing all-women productions of Shakespeare in English. Since 1994, we have added Japanese subtitles—all translated, mounted and executed by the students—so people who don't understand the Elizabethan English can enjoy the play, too. As mentioned, we greet nearly 2,000 audience members every year.

As a Baha'i doing Shakespeare at a Christian college, how can I communicate my faith to my students? Without really being conscious of it, over the years I have developed several habits or ways of communicating my heart to them. Here I'll pick up three examples.

- 1) In the early rehearsals, after all the physical and vocal warm-ups have been done, I have everyone sit in a circle on the stage floor, take several deep breaths, and ask them to close their eyes and concentrate on unity of purpose and good relations between us. We then pause, close our eyes, and concentrate for a full minute. This isn't exactly prayer, but it is of course very close to it, and after one minute, the students are calm, and you can see that they feel good. Positive vibrations abound! They are ready to do their best!
- 2) Another way that I show my faith I think is during the acting rehearsals and the many meetings I have with the lighting, setting, costume, make-up, properties, sound and subtitle crews and the production committee. I try to see that every student gets a chance to express her opinion or try out whatever idea she wants to. This is a kind of consultation—the creative process at its best--and I think it is a very spiritual process. I try to place myself beneath the students and try to support them from below; I don't lead them, but try to help them take the lead.
- 3) I also try to show my faith through the theme of the play. Each year we discuss the theme of the play over and over. How can this character express the theme? How can the theme be expressed through the lighting, setting, color and so on? Last year, during this process, I suddenly realized, for example, that *The Merchant of Venice* is alive with references to virtue. We talked about the various virtues expressed in *The Merchant of Venice* and this seemed to really help give the actors focus for their characters. It was very exciting to see the students' faces light up as they pursued this train of thought.

In the program for every play I direct, I'm asked to write a message. The following is part of my message for the 2002 production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

THE BEAUTY OF VIRTUE

Shakespeare's time could be called The Age of Virtue: kindness, honesty, and patience were all highly treasured by the Elizabethans. *The Merchant of Venice*, also, is rich in gems of virtue. Portia's father was "ever virtuous", Antonio is an "honorable gentleman", Bassanio is "noble", Portia, modest, obedient and chaste. As the lily was a symbol of purity in the Elizabethan Age, the students have chosen this stately flower as Portia's symbol. And although Shylock's revenge is central to the plot, the play also emphasizes the virtues of mercy,

justice, and love.

When over forty young women work intensely for several months on a project such as *The Merchant of Venice*, many things happen. There are lots of difficulties. But the students of Shakespeare Production have shown many virtues in bringing forth this production tonight, for example: caring, enthusiasm, creativity, determination, helpfulness, responsibility, and forgiveness. It has been a pleasure working with them and I pray that the virtues they have encountered in this process will stay with them after graduation and all the days of their lives.

If I may, I'd like to return to my high school days and that rebellious teenager Mike. As a student, as a former high school teacher, and as a parent, I've observed something about teenagers and students like Mike. Not everyone is an athlete. Of course, it is good and proper and necessary to have physical exercise classes in junior and senior high, but I think we, as teachers, parents, and concerned adults, need to face the fact that not every teenager is mad about sports, is good at sports, or benefits from excessive competition. A certain amount of exercise is absolutely essential. Beyond that, it bursts the bounds of moderation.

On the other hand, the teenage years are difficult ones for every teenager. All teenagers experience anxiety about themselves, their family, their friends, the world. And they need to express this. They need an outlet for all these stormy and volcanic feelings that are going on inside them. Some students need to express themselves beyond the physical. Running and sports are healthy, but few people can express their inner thoughts through sports. They need a creative outlet. And something like putting on a play gives every student a chance to express him or herself, be on the stage, excel, work cooperatively with others, experience the excitement of Performance Day and the enthusiasm of the audience.

My younger son went to a Christian junior high school in Shiga Prefecture, Japan. It was a Japanese school that had connections with schools in other countries, exchange students from other countries, and an emphasis on English. But the absolutely best part of this junior high school was that every year they had a drama festival. Every *kumi*—every homeroom class—from the 7th through 9th grades had to write their own play, cast it, rehearse it, make all the costumes, decide about the lighting, makeup, the set, properties, sound and music by themselves—as a group. Then, at the festival (which lasted two days), the entire school watched every play. The 7th grade plays were about 10 – 15 minutes, while the 9th grade plays were over 40 minutes in length. Some of them were straight plays and some were musicals. I went to see the festival and it was so exciting. Every student in that school was alive, eager—eager to do well in their own play and eager to cheer on the other students in the other plays. Talk about electricity between actors and audience! I thought the whole roof was going to lift off the building they were so excited! At the end of the two days, awards were given: the best play by 7th Graders, the best play by 8th graders, the runner-up play, the best sound, the best lighting, the best costumes, the best director, the best actor and actress. And oh—was the audience delighted! And the performers and staff were ecstatic. Tears rolled down their cheeks. Tears of joy. They hugged each other. They had worked hard to present their play. To do their absolute best. And prize or no prize, they had done their best. They had had good times and hard times working on this play. Co-operation, arguments, moments of anger, moments of glory. Now, it was over. They hugged each other and pledged to be friends forever. And that, my friends, is the power of drama. It brings out everything in every person involved. It transforms people. It gives everyone a chance to express themselves. It gives everyone a chance to excel.

And they never forget this experience. Students I've known who have had the drama experience in junior high, high school, or college absolutely never forget it. They carry the experience with them for the rest of their lives. Many say it was the highlight of their school

or college life.

This is my hope for junior and senior high schools in Japan: a drama festival in every school. Every year. Give the students a chance to express their emotions and the artistic side of their nature. A chance to learn true cooperation, true communication, and to be transformed. This is my dream for every school in Japan. And who knows? In later years the students might encounter the Baha'i Faith, like I did, and this will give their spiritual transformation a meaning, a name, a direction, and a goal. And this will be light upon light. And this will help turn Japan ablaze.

We have been talking about Spiritual Transformation and the Art of Drama. So if I may, I'd like to close with a mini demonstration. The text is from *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, with music created by Caroline McKay. When Caroline MacKay sings this piece, entitled "The Most Melodious of Tones", she accompanies herself on the Celtic harp. Since imagination is such an important part of theater, today, kindly imagine the Celtic harp accompanying these words from *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*. Also, kindly imagine that we are in a Baha'i temple somewhere with high ceilings, with lots and lots of glorious sunlight. When I finish, kindly commune with me by refraining from applause. I pray that our souls can commingle and communicate together through the sacred words of Baha'u'llah.

THE MOST MELODIOUS OF TONES

Music: Caroline Mackay

They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful
In the most melodious of tones
Will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty
Of earth and heaven can never be compared.
From them they will inhale the divine fragrance of My worlds—
Worlds which today none can discern
Save those who have been endowed with vision
Through this sublime, this beauteous Revelation.
Say: these verses draw hearts that are pure
Unto those spiritual worlds
That can neither be expressed in words
Nor intimated by allusion
Blessed by those who hearken.

References

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