



ARTS

Walking in the Shoes of a Muslim in New York

Hannah Rubenstein

NEW YORK, Aug 7 (IPS) - A woman waits on a subway platform, head bowed, pretending to ignore the insults. Perched on bar stools, a group of friends listen to racist jokes, suppressing giggles. Kneeling, a young war veteran tells his fiancée of his decision to return to combat. Two men wait expectantly at a job interview. An old man and a young graffiti artist sit together on a bench, discussing the power of language.

All of these scenes are woven together with a common thread: what it means to be Muslim in New York, nine years after the events of Sep. 11, 2001.

The performance, which has been staged in churches, schools, and community centres more than a dozen times throughout the city, is called "Under the Veil: Being Muslim (and Non-Muslim) in America, post 9/11." It is the creation of the TE'A Project, a collaborative undertaking that combines storytelling, theatrical performance, and facilitated dialogue in an effort to create shared understanding and lasting social change.

TE'A, which stands for Theatre, Engagement, and Action, is the brainchild of Radha Kramer, an indefatigable woman whose eyes sparkle when she speaks of the philosophy behind the project: an academic theory called the Insight Approach, pioneered by the twentieth-century philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan.

Lonergan's theory, Kramer told IPS, is based on an idea essential to conflict resolution techniques: that by achieving insight into the experience of others, we can learn to empathise and thereby create opportunities for relating to one another that transcend social and cultural boundaries.

"The insight is where the conversation begins," Kramer told IPS, "because once you have an insight into yourself, or someone else, you're forever changed."

"The entire TE'A process itself is an insight-generating mechanism," she said. In fact, performances like "Under the Veil" are the culmination of a months-long process that begins and ends not in the mind of a director or playwright, but in the surrounding community.

The TE'A process begins by gathering a group of artists together to discuss what social issues are most important to them. When a consensus on one topic is reached, the company goes into their community to speak to people about their thoughts on and experiences with the issue.

After several months and dozens of interviews and discussions, the artists come together to create a theatrical performance representing the voices of those they have spoken with. The piece is then presented to the community, after which a facilitated dialogue begins.

The idea, Kramer explained, is about presenting complicated social issues in a protected, non-threatening space.

"You take this theatrical performance piece that's ripe with all these issues - conflicts, complex relationships - and you put it on stage so the audience can be part of that world and engaged in those relationships without being threatened by it," she said.

By engaging the audience in this way, she explained, the opportunity for insight is created. "When you have a significant insight, like 'oh, the woman who's wearing that hijab over there might not be the person I've assumed her to be,' it opens up a new realm of curiosity: who is she?"

The flagship TE'A production of "Under the Veil" began development last January and was first presented in May of 2009. The topic of being Muslim in a post-9/11 environment was unanimously chosen by TE'A company members.

"There's all this stuff being churned out, and no one is talking about it," Kramer said, remembering the impetus for the choice, "No one's asking Muslims in New York, 'What's going on? How are you feeling? What decisions have you made since 9/11? Who have you become? Who do you wish you could be?'"

The result of asking these questions, Kramer said, was a portrait of diverse voices within the Muslim community.

Interestingly enough, none of the five TE'A Project cast members currently performing "Under the Veil" are themselves Muslim. When asked about this seeming discrepancy between subject and presenter, Kramer responded thoughtfully.

"That's the beauty of art and theatre," she explained. "We can tell each others' stories. If only Jews can tell Jewish stories, and only African-Americans can tell African- American stories, then where are we? The whole point of TE'A is to say 'I care about your story.' And it's not just your story; it's our story."

In addition to ongoing performances of "Under the Veil", TE'A is working with university students in Washington, D.C., to create a theatrical piece about the experiences of young, female, Muslim college students in the nation's capitol that will be presented to universities during a winter tour.

Kramer urged communities to participate in the process of sharing dialogue about sensitive issues.

"We live in a world of meaning," she said. "We're always making decisions, not only about our actions, but about who we are... It happens so quickly that we barely ever get time to stop and think about the decisions we're making."

Engaging in the collaborative TE'A process, she explained, is crucial to affecting positive social change. "Coming to a performance gives you breathing room, time to sit back and reflect on the ways in which we've all been making decisions and if that's how we want to continue," she said. "The resounding thing that audiences say is 'People should see this play.'"

(END/2010)