

Am I not destroying my enemies when I make friends of them?
- Abraham Lincoln

History has proven that artistic exchange and collaboration is an effective way to overcome fear and gain insight into other cultures. The Soviet-American cultural exchanges that began after Stalin died in 1953 helped to break down barriers of xenophobia and ignorance, at a time when many felt the Cold War was freezing all contact. These cultural exchanges involved books, movies, writers, performing artists, scientists, technologists, think tanks, politicians, and scholars. At a time of increased restrictions to those who could enter the United States, thousands of Russians and Americans participated in these exchanges, demonstrating that the best policy to pursue with countries with whom we disagree is not isolation but engagement.

Since the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the resulting 'War on Terrorism' international exchanges, trust, and peace making initiatives have been compromised. The 'terror' agenda permeates international relations, creates enemies and divides cultures. Like the Cold War, and perhaps more urgently, now is the time to reach our hands across our divide with the Middle East through a neutral, non-political cultural exchange. Seattle Children's Theatre (SCT) is very proud to be a leader in convening the international collaboration, *Connecting Stories*, as a way to reach out to our communities at a time when the need for mutual understanding of other cultures is a priority.

Connecting Stories is an international collaboration of artists in the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) from the United States, the Netherlands, and Iran. The purpose of this collaboration is to use the arts to understand, appreciate, and respect others' culture and perspective. The project is being developed by theatre professionals, and will focus on the human and artistic elements that shape who we are as people and as specific cultures. Each country has committed to hosting a performance from different directors/actors for four consecutive years (2009-2012). Each year would follow the same structure of using artists from all three countries to produce meaningful work with corresponding outreach events. It is our intention to develop a body of work that connects the participating artists through their collaborations and intrigues the audience to return each year for this continuing cultural dialogue.

Connecting Stories has had three planning sessions: December 2007 in Seattle, June 2008 in Amsterdam, and February 2009 in Iran. These meetings served as a unique opportunity to visit and experience the work of established theatres in their native settings, with their audiences while laying important groundwork for creating a foundation of trust.

While in Iran, the group of *Connecting Stories* artists (four Iranian Artists, three American Theatres, and five Dutch Companies) had extensive meetings on how to continue to develop the project and discuss the next steps. Being in Iran was integral to the development of this project, as it gave the American and Dutch artists a better understanding of how theatre works in Iran and how those differences can be incorporated into the project. Since then, various members of the group have participated in three additional trips to Iran to see the work and to meet Iranian artists. There already exists a strong relationship between the Dutch and American artists, and we are beginning the process of reaching out to our Middle Eastern counterparts.

In September of 2009, *Connecting Stories* will be launched at SCT with the performance *Mysterious Gifts: Theatre of Iran*. Iranian artist Yaser Khaseb has crafted a show devised of several movement-based pieces that will make any language barrier inconsequential, and thus provide an easy entry into his world. In conjunction with his performances, three Iranian directors will come to the United States and visit all three participating cities (Seattle, Tempe, and Minneapolis). The Iranians will have a chance to learn the American production process, while connecting with artists, staff, and trustees at each theater. Through a series of meetings and forums, the Iranian artists will be introduced to our communities and our communities to the Iranian artists. Farin Zahedi, Ph.D. from the University of Tehran School of Drama and Music, has been a part of the project since the second meeting. She brings a wealth of artistic organizational and multiple language fluencies to the project. She will be a key member of the community activities planned in Seattle. The community outreach opportunities are already in demand from universities, Rotary and local business groups. As the performance piece of the project launches, the Cultural attaché for the Netherlands along with the Dutch artists plan to visit Seattle.

The second phase will be in the fall of 2010. The four Iranian artists will return to the United States to present their own performances in each of the three participating cities. Dutch artists, such as composers and designers, will be integrated into the cross-cultural team. One project might use professional actors while another might focus on using drama students. One project might take advantage of American theater technology and equipment, while another project would demonstrate the site specific work some Iranians are known for. Once again, there will be community involvement activities during their visit in order to introduce the artists to their audiences and local communities.

The third phase will be in 2011. The Dutch directors will be the starting point for the work using Dutch, Iranian, and American performers. The project will grow, mature, and continue to involve all cultures. The fourth phase in 2012 will invite some of the participants to perform at the Fadir Festival in Iran to connect all of the stories and lessons learned during the four year cultural exchange.

Travel costs and translation fees, necessary elements for the collaboration, are financially challenging aspects of this ambitious project. All three participating countries will share in the financial support of this project with the hope that each country of origin will cover travel costs while each host country will provide housing and meal expenses for guests. *Connecting Stories* will be performed in English and the Dutch government is assisting to provide English lessons to the Iranian artists.

Just like the Soviet-American cultural exchange, our desired outcome of this project is to open the borders between the United States, Europe, and the Middle East through the power of theatre. In our ever-shrinking global community, we need now more than ever, a way to reach out to each other at the most basic level – as people. A face-to-face interaction with people from other cultures is the best way to break down our fears and gain appreciation and respect for our cultural differences. *Connecting Stories* is a unique opportunity to introduce our young patrons to a new culture and connect with people from around the world.