

Theatre Planting

by Gillette Elvgren, Ph.D.

We've all heard of church planting—but have you heard of *theatre* planting? Over the last ten years I've been a board member and resident artist with a local theatre company that is doing just that. The Man Called Jesus (TMCJ) is primarily known in the Hampton Roads area for its professional-quality passion show that is performed during the Easter season with a cast of hundreds to an audience of thousands. Though certainly credible in its own right, that's not the theatre arm of the company I refer to. Working with a greatly shortened and modified version of the larger play, TMCJ International launched an adaptation several years ago titled *The Story*. It is 40 minutes long, utilizes six actors and is being used as a bridge.

Theatre is one of many art forms that can serve as a bridge to communicate important messages, regardless of the language, culture or geographic location of the audience receiving the message.

I designed *The Story* to be performed in the language of the host country, to be mobile, highly theatrical and to use masks. It is rooted visually in the folk tradition of the country in which it is being planted. By “planted” I mean, the TMCJ headquarters sends out a team of actors to, let's say, Cuba. Working out of a local church they will train the performers in the dance and mask techniques used, supply them with props and costumes and other accoutrements, basically equipping them to carry the gospel message to the indigenous population.

Thanks to the capable leadership of Marie Umidi, TMCJ company founder and producing artistic director, *The Story* has been planted in Cuba, Nepal, India, Siberia, Kosovo and Romania by indigenous believers who were trained by TMCJ International. Future training events are planned for Korea, Fiji, China, Albania, Israel, India and the Philippines.

Recently, a church in Nepal made known to Umidi its need for a “dramatic vehicle” that would deal with the idea of abstinence as the primary preventative to address the problem of the epidemic spread of AIDS in Southern Nepal and Northern India (caused primarily by the commercial sex exploitation/trade of young women who are sold into slavery).

After researching Nepalese folk stories, I created a 45-minute play based on the allegorical characters that people these tales called *The Quest*. The play incorporates humor, primarily through the Asian tradition of the Monkey King character, utilizes masks and dance, and follows the quest of two competing brothers who are taxed with first finding out what it is to be a “real” man, and second finding a way to combat the “wasting disease” that is ravaging the country. Whoever is successful will be rewarded with the princesses' hand

in marriage.

The play is designed for the family with a special emphasis on young people between ages 10 and 19. It involves audience participation, and at the conclusion a narrator sage figure takes them through the “meaning” of the folk tale figures and actions as to how they reflect the do's and don'ts of the kind of human behavior that can lead to HIV/AIDS contamination. It also touches on the necessity of humanitarian behavior while dealing with AIDS victims.

The play premiered at Kempsville Presbyterian Church in Virginia Beach in April 2008 and was videotaped for international distribution. Teams planted this theatre event in Southern Nepal during the summer of 2008.

TMCJ's vision for theatre as not just entertainment but as a vehicle that can also wear the education and the social action hats has great potential. For example, a country that might be reticent to allow a faith-based company to perform only the gospel story, might welcome an AIDS-prevention, live dramatic presentation. It's an opportunity to establish a track record even in Islamic countries.

In addition, the indigenous company members are all Christians, so the opportunities to personally witness in the talk-back sessions after *The Quest* are very real and offer an excellent opportunity for audiences to interact with believing actors at the site of the performance

Though unable to realize the media sized audiences that *The Passion of the Christ* film is noted for, *The Quest*, as live entertainment, has the advantages of being performed and toured by local

performers in traditional costumes using the folk music, song and dance of the local culture, along with a witness/talk-back session between countrymen. Bridges are being built.

The theatre planting concept as it is being implemented is a unique and exciting idea. As an arts ministry tool, it is anticipated that it will also provide for Regent theatre undergraduate and theatre ministry graduate students a range of part-time job and internship possibilities. In the Theatre and Cinema-Television Departments at Regent, one of our primary missions is to explore ways of integrating our faith and our discipline. The theatre planting movement represents an effective bridge that can be established between the arts/ministry instruction we provide at Regent and its practical application in countries hungry for the gospel around the world. —

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