

DAILY NEWS

Big Town Big Dreams

'Children can be the voice of positive change'

BY HALLEY BONDY

Mehr Mansuri believes that what children need is permission. Born in Tehran as a member of the Baha'i faith, a religion that has been systematically persecuted in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Mansuri grew intimately familiar with censorship and exclusivity in her childhood.

"The constitution of the revolutionary Islamic regime does not officially recognize the Baha'i faith therefore fundamental rights, such as identification cards, are not issued to Baha'is; Baha'i civil marriages are prohibited and therefore Baha'i children are denied basic access to education, and whole families are bullied and banished from their homes or randomly raided and placed in jail," says Mansuri, who was 11 years old when the revolution began. "It is so painful to see all the children so scared."

To disseminate a message of tolerance and creative freedom for children of all faiths, Mansuri co-founded eight years ago The Children's Theatre Company in the East Village. The E. 11th St. nonprofit theater offers low-income children and teens ages 5 to 18 the chance to perform in original plays and musicals that address global issues, including religious tolerance.

"The theater came from a belief that children can be the voice of positive change if you let them," says Mansuri, who lives in Greenwich Village. "It didn't come from the belief that children are being rescued from the inner city." Mansuri's interest in acting extends back to her life in Tehran, where she nurtured a tradition of storytelling. "People literally sit around and tell stories in Tehran," says Mansuri. "My parents have footage of me presenting poetry to a group of people when I was a little girl. It was very theatrical." During grade school, Mansuri traveled between Tehran and London, where she attended westernized schools and enrolled in theater programs. "Learning about plays in a western setting was a way of expanding my world," says Mansuri. "It expanded on the world of storytelling that I brought from my culture."

At the onset of the revolution however, her visits to Tehran stopped. What Mansuri remembered as a very "metropolitan" culture was about to change forever. "We heard Muslim prayers over speakers throughout the streets," says Mansuri. "There's nothing wrong with Muslim prayers, but in Tehran, we knew this meant that we had to escape."

Given her potential fate as a Baha'i in Tehran, which included torture and execution, Mansuri considers herself very lucky. Her father, a television producer, had enough money to relocate his wife and their five children to New York. Once in New York, the family worked hard to lose their English-Persian accents. "All we wanted to do was assimilate," says Mansuri, who now speaks with a northeast American accent. "We were willing to thunk down any tuition to look the part." But Mansuri did not settle into New York immediately. She first studied acting at the University of California-Irvine as an undergraduate and graduate student.

She landed independent and soap opera roles in Los Angeles, but soon realized that her acting career as an Arabic woman was limited. "I was invariably auditioning for the terrorist's wife," she says. Then in 1983, an event in the Iranian city of Shiraz altered the course of Mansuri's career. Ten Baha'i women were tortured and hanged by the government. One of the young women, a 16 year-old girl named Mona Mahmudnizhad, was punished for teaching children progressive religious ideas. "I was inspired by her zeal ... she was really articulate about her passion for children, and said that children could be the voice of positive change," says Mansuri. "And in the Baha'i Faith, we don't use these incidents as a catalyst for revenge or protest - we turn it into a positive service for our community."

Mansuri fully formed the The Children's Theatre Company in Los Angeles in 1989 - dedicating it to Mona - and featuring what she called "backyard productions for the underserved community." The theater was a huge success, but when Mansuri's father was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases in 1993, she returned to the city to take care of him, taking her



Inspired by abuses against Baha'i kids in Tehran, Mehr Mansuri founded The Children's Theatre Company. Mendez for News

burgeoning project with her. The nonprofit became fully formulated in 2000 and acquired its E. 11th St. space through a New York City Baha'i Center grant. Mansuri now works full-time for CTC.

The company has branches in Long Island and Peekskill, N.Y., and nationwide in five states including Boston, Chapel Hill, N.C.; and Chico, Calif. It is scheduled to add Los Angeles, London and Capetown, South Africa, in the next few months.

About 400 kids participate every day in the company's programs and rehearsals, both in the CTC's space and in public schools. Every season they participate in a musical production.

The programs include drama, music, ethical studies based on principles of tolerance and service through the arts, and choreography taught by Radio City Music Hall Rockettes member Karida Griffith, Alison Courter and French Caribbean Hip Hop dancer, Nathalie Dispagne, all of whom collaborate on making their choreography be 'about something'.

Led by Mansuri, the Company's resident composers, Frank Sanchez and Lory Lazarus have written over 12 musicals in collaboration with Mehr. Most recently, Jill Bolstridge, the New York chapter's Co-Artistic Director, staged the original musical "King Kunka Bunka and the Rotten Royal Rascals," praised by the New York Times for its blend of rap music and Russian-style music and dance.

The CTC is committed to teaching children, talented or not, to express themselves with confidence. Enrollment is based on an audition and there's a suggested donation. "I hear about children under 7 who can't get into acting class, so instead they're enrolled in programs where they're baby-sat with a couple of beachballs and a piano," says Mansuri. "I know that kids can speak at 5 and 4," she adds, "not having an educational degree did not limit me in terms of my expectations, so I have high ones."