

WILDFIRE

**BY
LITVAN DELY**

PERFORMING ARTS IN THE INSTITUTE PROCESS

MUSIC



DRAMA

DANCE



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PERFORMING ARTS IN THE INSTITUTE PROCESS

A COURSE FOR TRAINING INSTITUTES

By Istvan Dely

“Through the mere revelation of the Word ‘Fashioner’, issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, that its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected.”

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings LXXIV*

Foreword

"In the Writings of our Faith the arts are described as a powerful instrument to move the spirit and serve the Cause. 'Abdu'l-Baha praised the arts and testified to their capacity to awaken and uplift the hearts. "Music," 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "has a great effect upon the human spirit," and drama "is of the utmost importance. It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again."

'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi encouraged many forms of art and at the same time extolled a special path of service for Bahá'í artists. 'Abdu'l-Baha proclaimed that "All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit.... These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God."

In a letter written on his behalf, the Guardian reinforces this sentiment with the following advice to an individual:

" the friends who feel they are gifted in such matters should endeavour to develop and cultivate their gifts and through their works to reflect, however inadequately, the Divine Spirit which Bahá'u'lláh has breathed into the world".

*Against this backdrop of inspiring guidance, the Universal House of Justice called on the believers at the outset of **the Four Year Plan***

" to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause. At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities".

Two years later the House of Justice released a compilation prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre, "The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith," which provides a rich source of excerpts from the Writings and enlarges our vision of the use of the arts for the work of the Cause.

The record of the past five years in promotion of the arts was outstanding on all continents. There has been a proliferation of artistic endeavours in the teaching field, most notably through youth dance workshops and musical groups, but also through choirs, drama, and folk art. These experiences have assisted the individuals involved to consolidate their own faith along with that of many friends in the communities they visited. The Counsellors, in collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and assisted by Continental Pioneer Committees, contributed significantly to the stimulus and support of many artistic endeavours.

Arts in the Five Year Plan

The Five Year Plan ushers in a new stage in our efforts to promote the arts in the life of the Cause. As with all other aspects of the expansion and consolidation work, the requirements of the time call on us to be more systematic in the use of the arts. They should not be considered simply an embellishment to our programs or an afterthought in our planning. Rather they must become an integral part of our teaching plans and community life. The arts have a vital role to play in the process of entry by troops.

*A natural channel through which the friends can express their artistic talents and sentiments is **the study circle**. At this critical juncture, when promotion of the arts needs to be more systematic in approach and more grassroots in its focus, we are fortunate to have the material presented on this subject in Book 7 of the Ruhi Institute curriculum. In this book, the unit "Promoting the Arts at the Grassroots" explains how an appreciation of beauty is one of the spiritual forces that lifts us to higher realms of existence. To strengthen this power of attraction it is beneficial for the friends to be exposed to various forms of art. Tutors are encouraged to integrate the arts into study circles so as to enhance the spiritual development of the friends and open avenues for meaningful service. By being a promoter of the arts at the grass roots, a tutor opens up "creative channels through which can flow inspiration and the force of attraction to beauty."*

***Devotional gatherings** can also be greatly enhanced if the arts are integrated into such programs. At the beginning of the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice stated that devotional gatherings are "essential to the spiritual life of the community"; they are also a measure "indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation." Virtually synonymous with devotions in many cultures is the chanting or singing of prayers and songs. 'Abdu'l-Baha said that music is "divine and effective," "the food of the soul and spirit." To an individual who was gifted in chanting, He wrote: "I pray to God that thou mayest employ this talent in prayer and supplication, in order that the souls may become quickened, the hearts may become attracted and all may become inflamed with the fire of the love of God!"*

***Children's classes** represent yet another aspect of community life in which the arts should be an essential element. Various forms of music, such as singing and playing traditional or contemporary instruments, as well as activities like storytelling, drama, dance, drawing, puppetry, and a wide range of crafts, can be introduced into classes at all levels. 'Abdu'l-Baha said that music "has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children.... The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music."*

*As activities begin to be organized at the level of clusters, yet another arena will present itself for utilizing the arts. Artistic expression, such as music and drama, in **reflection meetings, cultural events, and other gatherings** will quicken the hearts, enabling them, as 'Abdu'l-Baha wrote, to "become inflamed with the fire of the love of God." When non-Bahá'í artists are invited*

to share their talents at such events, they too come into contact with the compelling spirit of the Faith.”

THE INTERNATIONAL TEACHING CENTRE, 5 November 2001, to the Continental Boards of Counsellors

This course is by no means a rival effort to the Ruhi Book 7 chapter on the arts. It was written well before the latter was published. It was born out of the needs I perceived in the field during my travel teaching trips as a resource person by Bahá'u'lláh's grace and the International Teaching Centre's generous support, to Training Institutes in West Africa and the Circumcaribbean during the Four Year Plan and the Twelve Month Plan. The vibrant and creative local Bahá'í youth that were my trainees at those institutes are as much part of the authoring process of this course as is this lowly servant.

This course is designed to be used as a complementary resource material by Training Institutes in addition to the core material they teach, primarily in year of service youth, study circle tutor and children's class teacher trainings. It can be administered in whole or in part, in any sequence, as the specific needs and circumstances of the training situations require. Beyond this, any Bahá'í individual or institution concerned with the growing use of the arts in the main lines of action of the present and probably future plans can, hopefully, derive some benefit from perusing the guidance from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Abdu'l-Bahá and the authoritative directives of the Guardian, the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre on this subject of growing importance, gleaned and sequenced in the present work.

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MUSIC

LESSON ONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC

“In this Cause the art of music is of paramount importance.” Abdu’-Bahá (1)

1. For what Cause is music of paramount importance?
2. What does the expression *paramount importance* mean?
3. In your opinion, why is music so important for x bahá’ís?
4. In your community, do the friends use music? Yes No
In what ways?

Music has such a high rank in the Bahá’í Faith that **Bahá’u’lláh** Himself dedicates a whole paragraph to it in His Most Holy Book, The Kitab-I-Iqan, the Book of His Laws for no less than the next thousand years. Part of the paragraph defines for us the nature and purpose of music:

“We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion.” (2)

1. Who has made music as a ladder for our souls?
2. For what part of our being is music intended?
3. In your own words, what does it mean to *be lifted up unto the realm on high*?
4. What should be lifted up unto the realms on high by means of music?
5. On a ladder we can ascend or descend, go up or go down. If we choose bad music, to where will our souls descend?
6. What does the expression *wings to self and passion* mean?
7. What kind of music can give wings to self and passion?
8. Complete the quotation: We, verily, have made _____ as a _____
for your _____, a means whereby they may be _____ unto
the realm _____. Make it not, therefore, as _____ to
_____ and _____.

Memorize the quotation.

LESSON TWO: GOOD, NEUTRAL, AND BAD MUSIC

We have learned that music is a means that can be used for good as well as evil. It is like a ladder on which our souls may go upwards into light or descend into darkness.

Bahá'u'lláh expects x each of us to know the difference: ***“man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement...”*** (3) Today, in an age of advanced technology in telecommunications and x mass media, more than ever before, music of every variety is increasingly being showered upon us. It is our responsibility to be selective, to choose.

To see it graphically, draw a horizontal line which represents the floor. Then draw two ladders or two flights of stairs from that line: one going up, another going down.

Let's say that the dividing line, the ground floor, is neutral: 0

The steps going upward are increasingly positive: +

The steps leading downwards are increasingly negative: --

Any piece of music that we hear or perform falls within one of these areas of value: it is either good (+), that is, it uplifts our spirit, or neutral (0), it is neither harmful or beneficial; or it is bad, harmful (-) and can seriously endanger our spiritual health.

How can we tell the difference? Can we say that some specific musical forms in themselves are good or bad? Rock music? Salsa? Reggae? Romantic music? Pop music? Blues? Jazz? Our own music or imported music?

It is not the formal category that defines the spiritual value of a given art form. It is rather the artistic quality of the form and above all, the nature of its contents. In other words: what does it say? And how is it said? **Abdu'l-Bahá** gives us the clue, the standard:

“The song we have just listened to was very beautiful in melody and words.” (4)

So we have to pay close attention when we listen to music, and watch out for the beauty or lack of beauty of the form, and the message that the lyrics convey.

Group discussion: randomly tune to any radio station in your locality that plays music, choose a song, listen carefully, then reflect and analyze together: was the melody beautiful? What did the lyrics say? What was it about? Does it belong to the positive, the negative or the neutral range of our “musical ladder”?

Unfortunately, much of the music being poured out of the music industry and diffused by the mass media in many parts of the world today is of poor quality, both in form and message. **Bahá'u'lláh** made reference to this loss of people's sense of taste more than a hundred years ago:

“Methinks people’s sense of taste hath, alas, been sorely affected by the fever of negligence and folly, for they are found to be wholly unconscious and deprived of the sweetness of His utterance”.(5)

1. What is our sense of taste?
2. What has happened to most people’s sense of taste nowadays?
3. In Bahá’u’lláh’s words, what is the cause of people’s bad taste?
4. What does Bahá’u’lláh mean by the phrase *His utterance*?

In view of the prevailing bad taste and even prostitution in the arts, **Shoghi Effendi** warns x bahá’ís, and especially the youth, to be on guard: ***“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. ...It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature...”*** (6) The Universal House of Justice clarified that the phrase *prostitution of arts and literature* means *using the arts and literature for debased ends*.

Can you give a few examples of the prostitution of arts in our society today? Consult together.

In some religious communities, joy, exultation and music are considered ungodly and wayward. **Bahá’u’lláh** in His Book of Laws frees us from such fetters of fanaticism, but also exhorts us to moderation:

“We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity. Let your joy be the joy born of My Most Great Name, a Name that bringeth rapture to the heart, and filleth with ecstasy the minds of all who have drawn nigh unto God.” (7)

Complete the sentences:

1. God allows us to _____
2. We must be careful to preserve our _____ and _____ while listening to music.
3. We should be joyous and happy out of love for _____
4. When we offer up our hearts and minds wholly to God, we are filled with _____ and _____.

Memorize the quotation.

LESSON THREE: ¿BAHÁ'Í MUSIC?

Before we go into this lesson, consult together: Is there such a thing as Bahá'í Music? Yes _____

No _____

Let's hear what **Shoghi Effendi** has to say about this:

“Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of ‘Bahá'í Music’ any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents guide them. If music is written, incorporating the sacred writings, the friends are free to make use of it, but it should never be considered a requirement at Bahá'í meetings to have such music. The further away the friends keep from any set of forms, the better, for they must realize that the Cause is absolutely universal, and what might seem a beautiful addition to their mode of celebrating a Feast, etc., would perhaps fall on the ears of people of another country as unpleasant sounds, and vice versa. As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it Bahá'í music.”

(8)

“We believe that, in the future, when the Bahá'í spirit has permeated the world and profoundly changed society, music will be affected by it; but there is no such thing as Bahá'í music.” (9)

Complete the sentences:

1. Over the centuries, the diverse peoples and cultures of the world have developed a great diversity of musical forms and styles; this is the meaning of the phrase ‘music is a _____ .’
2. Bahá'u'lláh has come to unite all the peoples, races, nations of the earth; this is the meaning of the phrase *the Cause is* _____ .
3. We should have music for _____ in our meetings.
4. There is no such thing as _____ .

Consult together: what kind of music do the friends enjoy at Bahá'í meetings in your region, community, locality? What kind of music would they consider unpleasant?

LESSON FOUR: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Although, in Shoghi Effendi's words, the friends are free to compose music as their talents guide them, there are also strong indications in the Writings that the starting point, the first step on the positive side of the ladder, should be each region's own traditional music, its folklore or popular music:

"Music... has grown up as an expression of the people." Shoghi Effendi (10)

"At the level of folk art, this possibility can be pursued in every part of the world, whether it be in villages, towns or cities." The Universal House of Justice (11)

"It is there, in the very heart of their culture, that the process of transformation of a people begins." International Teaching Centre (12)

1. Make a list of the traditional and popular music forms of your region.
2. Sing together some of the folklore music of your region that you like best.
3. If you come from different regions of the country or from different countries, show and if possible, teach your traditional music one to another.

As Bahá'ís, we are called upon to appreciate and preserve our own cultural identity:

"Bahá'ís should obviously be encouraged to preserve their inherited cultural identities, as long as the activities involved do not contravene the principles of the Faith. The perpetuation of such cultural characteristics is an expression of unity in diversity." The Universal House of Justice (13)

1. What is meant by our *inherited cultural identity*?
2. When we become Bahá'ís, should we break with all the customs and traditions of our ancestors?
3. Are there some cultural practices of our ancestors that we should definitely NOT continue as Bahá'ís? _____ Give some examples.
4. To perpetuate means to _____

When we accept Bahá'u'lláh and become Bahá'ís, we enter into an all-embracing brotherhood with all peoples, races, kindred and nations. We must learn to respect and love the culture of others as we do our own, yet we still identify with our own kindred, race or nation and even acquire a greater respect and love for our cultural identity.

"The goal of every Bahá'í community is the preservation of ethnic cultural diversity in the context of a harmonious, equal interaction." Craig Loehle (14)

1. To preserve means to _____ .

2. The great variety of music of the different peoples and races is part of _____ diversity, and must be _____ .
3. Interaction is to give and receive. If we have nothing to give, how can we interact with others as equals?
4. The music of my people is better than that of another's. True ___ False _____
5. American music is superior to ours. True_____ False_____

LESSON FIVE: COMMUNAL MUSIC

In regardx to performing or creating music, there are two levels: **Communal music** in which all of us can participate without exception; and **The music of specialists** performed by artists with special musical gifts and studies.

Both levels x are equally important and necessary to the Bahá'í community. However, since (1) communal music is the soil out of which the artists grow, (2) universal participation is one of the principles of our Faith, and (3) we do not always have artists among us in our local communities, we will focus more on the communal level of music.

In order to make use of music in all our Bahá'í events and gatherings, we should not be dependent upon the presence or absence of artists among us. We are all artists, we are all musicians by birthright. Music is a gift from God to every human being and God has provided each of us with a natural musical instrument: our body, our voice, our hands and feet. Not only that, our environment, wherever we live, is full of all kinds of objects that can easily be used as improvised musical instruments, from a simple laurel leaf to plastic water tanks.

In his book *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Adib Taherzadeh tells the story of Mirzá Abbás, known as Qábil, one of the outstanding believers and teachers in the times of Bahá'u'lláh. "He was a zealous and enthusiastic man, a poet of remarkable talent, a teacher of wide repute and, above all, devoted to Bahá'u'lláh. His enthusiastic spirit, coupled with his deep love for Bahá'u'lláh, cheered and uplifted the believers whom he met on his way. They would gather to meet him and he would often request them, whenever circumstances permitted, to **chant in unison** certain Tablets or poems of Bahá'u'lláh which lent themselves to collective chanting, and he would teach them to **sing together**. ... Qábil had a certain genius for **clapping his hands** to accompany their songs of love and praise. Where greater freedom prevailed, a **homemade drum** was a welcome accompaniment to his chant of love for Bahá'u'lláh." (15)

1. In the above description of collective music, which component is the most important?
2. How did those friends accompany their collective singing?

For group discussion:

Make the following experiment.

Together choose any song that everybody knows.

First, play it on a recording (cassette, CD). Everybody listens, sitting in silence. Then, one person sings it, while the rest listen in silence.

Afterwards, everybody sings it in unison, but still sitting, with no accompaniment. Then, everybody stands up, sings together in unison, clapping hands to keep time and moving along with the natural rhythm of the song. Finally, the same is repeated, but adding one or two volunteers from the group to accompany the collective song with a drum (improvised if

necessary) and with some shaker (maracas or a small tambourine or a bottle or can filled with pebbles), or any other improvised percussion instrument. Now sit down, recall and talk about the feelings you experienced in each of these modes of relating to music. Which did you enjoy the most? Why?

LESSON SIX: SACRED MUSIC

The highest step on the ladder of music is sacred music, the music of worship where we **“try to bring the earthly music into harmony with the celestial melody.”**(*Abdu'l-Bahá*) The focal point of this “mystical link that unites man to God” is the Sacred Word, the Word of God, often compared to music, to melody, by Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá.

“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 beautiful Revelation. Say: These verses draw hearts that are pure unto those spiritual worlds that can neither be expressed in words nor intimated by allusion.” Bahá'u'lláh (16)

1. What are *the verses of the All-Merciful*?
2. Is it permissible to sing the prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh or Abdu'l-Bahá?
3. When we do this, what will we perceive in them?
4. What will we inhale from these prayers sung in the most melodious of tones?
5. None can _____ these worlds today except those who have been _____ with vision.
6. Who have been endowed with vision?
7. Do the verses of God attract every heart?
8. Singing these verses with the most melodious of tones allows us to feel the spiritual worlds better than through _____ or _____ alone.

The Word of God for today is Bahá'u'lláh. **Abdu'l-Bahá** x encouraged the friends to set His Father's Persian poems to music:

“The day is not far distant when these poems will be set to Western music and the sweet accents of these songs will reach the Abhá Kingdom with exceeding joy and gladness.”(17)

What emotions, then, should characterize our sacred music, our music for worship? Exceeding joy and gladness, joy and ecstasy! Our soul should leap for joy!:

“Strike up such a melody and tune as to cause the nightingales of divine mysteries to be filled with joy and ecstasy.” *Abdu'l-Bahá* (18)
“Wherefore... play and sing out the holy words of God with wondrous tones in the gatherings of the friends, that the listener may be freed

from chains of care and sorrow, and his soul may leap for joy and humble itself in prayer to the realm of Glory.” Abdu’l-Bahá (19)

Consult together about how we can make our worship (devotional meetings, devotional part of the 19 Feast, etc.) x conform more and more to these standards of exceeding joy, gladness and ecstasy set for us by Abdu’l-Bahá.

LESSON SEVEN: CULTURE AND RELIGION

The spiritual need to worship God is a universal characteristic of man, but the ways to give expression to this need vary greatly from culture to culture, from one spiritual tradition to another. Sometimes, unconsciously, we take it for granted that everybody should worship God in the same manner as we do.

“At the most profound depth of every culture lies veneration of the sacred. Efforts to advance the Faith in rural areas, then, are most successful when the sacred in the culture of the villagers is identified and they are assisted in transferring their loyalty and allegiance to the Faith, placing Bahá’u’lláh and His Covenant at that sanctified core of their universe. It is here, at the very heart of a culture, that the process of the transformation of a people begins.”

(Letter dated 21 August 1994 from the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors).”

1. What attitude should Bahá’ís take towards the culture of other peoples?
2. What do we find in the innermost heart of every culture?
3. What happens if we do not pay attention to the sacred within the culture of the people we are teaching?
4. When will the rural cultures feel deeply identified with and loyal to the Faith?
5. As Bahá’í teachers, why are we advised to take interest in the culture of the people we are called upon to serve?

Let us always bear in mind that Bahá’u’lláh has come to every nation, people, race and culture of the earth, to the followers of every religion, including the so called traditional or indigenous religions whose Founders appeared either in prehistoric times or among peoples that knew no writing. Each and all must be helped to feel and understand that the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is “the highest essence and most perfect expression” of their own spiritual tradition x:

“The highest essence and most perfect expression of whatsoever the peoples of old have either said or written hath, through this most potent Revelation, been sent down from the heaven of the Will of the All-Possessing, the Ever-Abiding God.” Bahá’u’lláh (21)

Complete the sentence:

The Bahá’í Faith is the highest _____ and most perfect _____ of whatsoever the peoples _____ have either _____ or _____ .

Among the followers of Traditional Religions who have no scriptures, the arts take on an added significance, being the only means of religious expression: music, dance, drama, tales and legends, proverbs, painting, sculpture embody their teachings and theology. Bahá’ís coming from this religious background should be encouraged to use their traditional religious art forms

to give beautiful and heart-felt expression to their new faith in, and love for, the Manifestation of God for this day. At the same time, however, they should come to understand and accept without compromise the implications of the fact that in our Faith there is no place for rituals, animal sacrifices, offerings, religious statues or images, ceremonial narcotic substances, that intervene between God and man.

1. Are you familiar with, or do you know of, any x Traditional Religion, different from the Major Religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Sikhism)? ____ Which?
2. Do you think it is appropriate to accompany Bahá'í prayers with African drums or Amerindian flutes? ____ Give your reasons.
3. Do you think dance can be part of a devotional meeting or the devotional part of a 19 Day Feast? ____ Give your reasons.

This is the guidance given to us by the Universal House of Justice: **“There is no objection to the interpretation of a prayer in the form of movement or dance if the spirit is properly reverential, but preferably this should not be accompanied by reading the words.” (22)**

In many cultures dance is inseparable from worship and is sometimes carried out in a highly emotionally charged atmosphere, in pursuit of rapture. The pursuit of rapture or ecstasy, a state of oblivion of oneself and of soaring on the wings of the spirit towards nearness to God, has an important place in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. His as well as Abdu'l-Bahá's repeated and explicit references to it should be taken more to heart as our new “Bahá'í culture” gradually evolves and finds new and higher levels of expression:

“Whosoever experienceth the holy ecstasy of worship will refuse to barter such an act or any praise of God for all that existeth in the world.” Bahá'u'lláh (23)

Consult together about the meaning of *the holy ecstasy of worship* and its implications for the way we conduct our Bahá'í worship (devotional meetings, devotional part of the 19 Day Feast).

LESSON EIGHT: IN ALL BAHÁ'Í GATHERINGS

On what occasions should we make use of music in the course of our Bahá'í life and work? **Shoghi Effendi** states:

“The element of music is, no doubt, an important feature of all Bahá'í gatherings.” (24)

1. What is music for all Bahá'í gatherings?
2. In what kind of Bahá'í gatherings have you participated?
3. In which of those gatherings have the friends made use of music, either recorded or live?

The Universal House of Justice also stresses:

“Inasmuch as the spirit of our gatherings is so much affected by the tone and quality of our worship, of our feeling and appreciation of the Word of God for this day, we would hope that you would encourage the most beautiful possible expression of the human spirits in your communities, through music among other modes of feeling.” (25)

1. What factors affect the spirit of our gatherings?
2. What do you understand by the tone and quality of worship?
3. By what means can we contribute to the most beautiful expression possible of the human spirit in our communities?

“In accordance with our Teachings, music and the arts are to be encouraged, and they add immeasurably to the vitality and spirit of the community.” **The Universal House of Justice** (26)

1. In accordance with the Bahá'í Teachings, what should we do with music and the arts?
2. How do music and the arts affect the vitality and spirit of our community?
3. If the vitality and spirit of our Bahá'í community is low, can we expect others to be attracted to Bahá'u'lláh?
4. Besides music, what other arts could be used to increase the vitality and spirit of our community, and in what ways?

The guidance given to us by the Universal House of Justice clearly shows that the music and arts we encourage within our community should grow out of our own cultural identity:

“The Faith seeks to maintain cultural diversity while promoting the unity of all peoples. ... The House of Justice supports the view that in every country the cultural traditions of the people should be observed within the Bahá'í community as long as they are not contrary to the Teachings.” (27)

LESSON NINE: MUSIC AS A TEACHING TOOL

“... the arts are powerful instruments to serve the Cause...” The Universal House of Justice (28)

“... the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts and literature have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause.” Ibid. (29)

1. What do the arts represent for those who are serving the Cause (year of service youth, tutors of Study Circles and junior youth groups, children’s class teachers, etc.)?
2. In what fields of teaching should we employ the arts?
3. What are the performing arts?
4. How can the use of arts affect the spread of our Cause?

As to **Proclamation**, Shoghi Effendi promised us:

“The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.” (30)

1. How does wildfire spread?
2. When will the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh spread like wildfire?
3. How can the arts accelerate the process of entry by troops?

To give the Message:

“It is the music which assists us to affect the human spirit; it is an important means which helps us to communicate with the soul. The Guardian hopes that through this assistance you will give the Message to the people, and will attract their hearts.” On behalf of Shoghi Effendi (31)

1. Music helps us to affect the human _____, to communicate with the _____ and to attract the _____.
2. Can only artists, musicians give the Message through music?
3. Consult together and rehearse a small presentation to teach the concept of the unity of the human race with the aid of music, dance, drama and recital of quotations.

Children’s classes:

“The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. ... It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for

their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect.” Abdu’l-Bahá (32)

1. The art of music is a gift from God: this is the meaning of the word _____
 2. The art of music gives good results: this is the meaning of the word _____
 3. It is the food of the _____ and _____ .
 4. Music helps develop the _____ talents with which the _____ of the children are _____ .
 5. Abdu’l-Bahá instructs the teachers of children’s classes and tutorial schools to _____
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JUNIOR YOUTH GROUPS AND STUDY CIRCLES:

It is also very important for us to use music, along with other arts, in our work with junior youth and Study Circles. The following are some of the benefits we can derive from using the arts:

- It enhances the sense of belonging and group cohesion;
- it strengthens identity, both Bahá’í and cultural;
- it brings down barriers and creates affection, unity, harmony;
- “the souls and the hearts of the pupils become vivified and exhilarated and their lives brightened with enjoyment” (Abdu’l-Bahá);
- this makes our junior youth and youth groups, including Study Circles, much more attractive to their peers and their numbers will not dwindle, but will grow;
- the medium of the arts, especially music and drama, is very effective in reinforcing the same topics, concepts, skills and capacities dealt with in the Institute course we are teaching;
- through the medium of the arts, the participants of the Study Circles not only learn more readily, but can also teach the Faith as one of their acts of service, giving public presentations of what they have learned, to their relatives, friends and neighbors;
- As with the children, music, traditional dance, drama and stories can work wonders in bringing out the talents and creativity latent within the hearts of the junior youth and youth. The tutor has only to encourage his or her students at every opportunity, with sincere love, interest and insistence, so that they participate in the collective composition of music, choreography and drama on the subjects and quotes they are learning. The results may surpass their wildest dreams!

Finally, may these words of **Abdu’l-Bahá** spur us on to give the arts, especially music, in our Bahá’í work and life the high rank and importance so explicitly accorded to them in our Teachings:

“The art of music must be brought to the highest stage of development, for this is one of the most wonderful arts and in this glorious age of the Lord of Unity it is highly essential to gain its mastery.” (33)

Notes

1. Bahá'í Writings on Music, The Bahá'í Publishing Trust, England, 1973, p.8
2. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-í-Aqdas, K51
3. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, p.35
4. In "The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith", a compilation of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, 1998, (UHJ), p.6, quote 21
5. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, pp.174-74
6. UHJ, p.7, quote 25
7. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-í-Aqdas, K51
8. UHJ, pp.10-11, quote 38
9. UHJ, p.11, quote 41
10. ibid.
11. UHJ, p.22, quote 69
12. International Teaching Centre, letter dated August 21 1994
13. Memorandum Concerning Cultural Practices, p.1
14. Craig Loehle, On the Shoulders of Giants
15. Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh
16. Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-í-Aqdas, K116
17. UHJ, p.3, quote 8
18. ibid., quote 11
19. ibid., p.4, quote 14
20. International Teaching Centre, letter dated August 21 1994
21. Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets, p.87
22. UHJ, p.20, quote 63
23. In "The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting" compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í World Centre, 2000, p.3, quote III.
24. UHJ, p.94, quote 34
25. Ibid., p.12, quote 44
26. Ibid., p.16, quote 58
27. The Universal House of Justice in "Concerning Cultural Practices", p.2, quote 2
28. UHJ, p.15, quote 53
29. Ibid., p.21, quote 69
30. Ibid., p.8, quote 30
31. Ibid., p.9, quote 31
32. Ibid. p.6, quote 21
33. Ibid., p.3, quote 9

DRAMA

LESSON ONE: A GREAT EDUCATIONAL POWER

“An actor once commented to Abdu’l-Bahá about the influence of drama. Abdu’l-Bahá replied: ***‘Drama is of the utmost importance. It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again.’*** He described how as a young boy He had witnessed the Mystery Play of Alí’s Betrayal and Passion, and how it had affected him so deeply that he wept and could not sleep for many nights.” (1)

Complete the sentence:

The _____ is of the utmost _____. It has been a great _____ in the past; it will be so again.

After many years Abdu’l-Bahá remembered an experience He had had as a young boy with a drama performance. What effects did it have on Him?

Consult together: why and how is drama a great educational power?

In the above passage Abdu’l-Bahá says that x drama has been a great educational power in the past and it will be so again in the future. This means it is not so today. Drama, together with all other art forms, is now in a state of deep crisis and decadence:

“Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquility for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age.” The Universal House of Justice (2)

What purpose should the arts (music, drama, visual arts, literature, etc.) serve?

What have they become today?

Explain in your own words the meaning of “this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age”.

Consult together: what forms of drama do you get to see more often?: theatre? The movies? Television? TV dramatizations? Pictures? What do you think of these presentations: are they “a great educational power” or “mirrors of soiled hearts”? Give your reasons.

Just as we have to be critical and careful about the music we choose to listen to, we must also screen and select from the dramatic presentations offered by the media, to protect our hearts from becoming inadvertently soiled, as well.

“The standard of dignity and reverence set by the beloved Guardian should always be upheld, particularly in musical and dramatic items...”
The Universal House of Justice (3)

LESSON TWO: THE TEACHINGS ON THE STAGE

Besides being more critical and careful as bahá'ís with what we “consume” from the menu of dramatic items our environment has to offer, how do the performing arts concern us as tutors of the Institute process? Since x drama has a great educational power, we should make an active use of it as one of our working tools.

In its Ridvan Messages the Universal House of Justice has time and again exhorted us to make use of the tremendous potentialities of the arts, in particular the performing arts (music, drama, dance):

“Expand the use of music and drama in your proclamation and teaching work...” (4)

“... the friends are also asked to give greater attention to the use of the arts, not only for proclamation, but also for the work in expansion and consolidation. The graphic and performing arts ... have played, and can play, a major role in extending the influence of the Cause.” (5)

How can the performing arts help extend the influence of the Cause? Just imagine: if the most famous singers, musicians and songwriters, the movie and TV stars and scriptwriters were Bahá'ís, how many people could they reach with the Message?

It is not our job to take by assault the bastions of x show business, the music industry, MTV and Hollywood. These are but superstructures of the old world order and will fall and disintegrate together with it. Our task is to build “the new house for all mankind” from the ground, laying its very foundations. This is what the hundreds and thousands of Study Circles are doing around the world. And it is precisely here that we must “expand the use of music and drama”.

Shoghi Effendi promised us many decades ago:

“The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented from the stage... Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.” (6)

Complete the passage:

The day will come when the _____ will _____ like _____ when its _____ and _____ will be presented from the _____ ... Art can better awaken such _____ than _____ rationalizing, especially among the _____ of the _____ .

Consult together: why do you think the arts can influence people's hearts better than cold rationalizing? Give examples.

LESSON THREE: THE PROHIBITION OF REPRESENTING THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD

“As to your question concerning the advisability of dramatizing Bahá’í historic episodes: the Guardian would certainly approve, and even encourage x the friends to engage in such literary pursuits which, no doubt, can be of immense teaching value. *What he wishes the believers to avoid is dramatizing the personages of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá, that is to say treating them as dramatic figures, as characters appearing on the stage. This, he feels, would be quite disrespectful. The mere fact that they appear on the scene constitutes an act of discourtesy which can in no way be reconciled with their highly exalted station. Their message, or actual words, should be preferably reported and conveyed by their disciples appearing on the stage.*” On behalf of Shoghi Effendi (7)

Is it permissible to represent the History of the Faith on the stage?

What personages of the Faith cannot be represented on the stage?

Why?

Can personages like Quddús, Mullá Husayn or Táhirih appear on the scene?

What do you think: would it be advisable to represent Shoghi Effendi?

Many Christians represent each year the Passion of Jesus Christ at Easter, with actors in the role of Jesus. Are Bahá’ís allowed to do that?

“Your understanding that the portrayal of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh in works of art is forbidden is correct. The Guardian made it clear that this prohibition refers to all the Manifestations of God... However, there can be no objection to symbolic representation of such Holy Figures, provided it does not become a ritual and that the symbol used is not irreverent.” The Universal House of Justice (8)

In addition to the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá, who else should we avoid representing either by images or by actors on the stage? Give at least five names.

If we want to dramatize the concept of Progressive Revelation, how could we represent the Holy Figures of Past Dispensations?

What is meant by “symbolic representation”?

“Regarding the use of symbolism in art, the following extract from letters written to individuals by the House of Justice may provide the answer you seek: *‘We see no objection to the use of natural phenomena as symbols to illustrate the significance of the three Central Figures, Bahá’í Laws, and Bahá’í Administration; and we also appreciate the suitability of using visual symbols to express abstract concepts.’*” The Universal House of Justice (10)

Here is a beautiful example of the rich symbolism that **Bahá’u’lláh** so often uses to hint at the mysteries of Progressive Revelation:

“This is the Ocean out of which all seas have proceeded, and with which every one of them will ultimately be united. From Him all the

Suns have been generated, and unto Him they will all return. Through His potency the Trees of Divine Revelation have yielded their fruits, every one of which hath been sent down in the form of a Prophet, bearing a Message to God's creatures in each of the worlds whose number God, alone, in His all-encompassing Knowledge, can reckon.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 104)

Bahá'u'lláh uses a language very rich in metaphors and symbols taken from the world of Nature to describe spiritual realities. The Manifestations of God are frequently referred to as the Sun of Reality, Luminary, Tree of Life, Divine Lote Tree, Nightingale of Paradise, Royal Falcon, etc.

The question in point is no less than that of respect for the sacred which, while still very much alive in many traditional societies wrongly called "primitive", has all but disappeared from our modern "civilized" world. X Analyze and consult together on the following passage from the Universal House of Justice:

"... the House of Justice feels that one of the great challenges facing Bahá'ís everywhere is that of restoring to the peoples of the world an awareness of spiritual reality. Our view of the world is markedly different from that of the mass of mankind, in that we perceive creation to encompass spiritual as well as physical entities, and we regard the purpose of the world in which we now find ourselves to be a vehicle for our spiritual progress.

*... One of the distinctive virtues given emphasis in the Bahá'í Writings is **respect for that which is sacred**. Such behaviour has no meaning for those whose perspective on the world is entirely materialistic, while many followers of the established religions have debased it into a set of rituals devoid of true spiritual feeling.*

... Bahá'ís endowed with artistic talent are in a unique position to use their abilities, when treating Bahá'í themes, in such a way as to disclose to mankind evidence of the spiritual renewal the Bahá'í Faith has brought to humanity through its revitalization of the concept of reverence.

Questions of artistic freedom are not germane to the issues raised here. Bahá'í artists are free to apply their talents to whatever subject is of interest to them. However, it is hoped that they will exercise a leadership role in restoring to a materialistic society an appreciation of reverence as a vital element in the achievement of true liberty and abiding happiness." The Universal House of Justice (10)

In our treatment and use of the arts within Study Circles, how can we balance and harmonize respect for the sacred, the concept of reverence, and artistic freedom? Consult together.

LESSON FOUR: TWO WAYS OF MAKING THEATRE

“To make theatre, all that is required is someone to do it and someone to watch it.” (11) The stage is any space that these two parties tacitly assign for the dramatic event to take place.

Taking this minimal definition as a starting point, there are two ways for us to make theatre as part of our teaching and consolidation work in the Faith:

Stable theatre group (Drama workshop)

This mode, similar in structure to the popular Dance Workshops, has for its manifest aim the setting up and running of a stable company of actors (amateurs in most cases), working out a repertory of stage plays and making public presentations to proclaim the teachings and principles of the Faith. Its other goal, not necessarily expressed but no less important, is the collective study of the Sacred Word as an integral part of the training of the group. This mode of making theatre requires persons with a calling for the dramatic arts, to become directors and actors. The director and his actors must aspire to achieve a fairly high standard of technical and artistic perfection, and need to work hard and for a sustained length of time toward this goal.

Drama workshops, if you have the somewhat specialized human resources to establish them, can prove to be an extremely useful and attractive strategy for teaching the Faith especially among city youth: in schools and universities.

Community theatre

This mode simply means the use of drama in and by the community as a whole, with universal participation of all its members, as another means among several others, to enhance the tutor's work with his Study Circle (children, junior youth and youth, women group, etc.). Here we are more concerned with the learning process than with artistic quality, and neither the tutor nor the participants need any special stage experience, calling or interest. This strategy aims more at teaching and consolidation than proclamation.

The benefits of working with drama, at any level and in any mode, are many, and flow as much from the group to the outside as within the interior of the group itself. Its effects on the outside world are those that Shoghi Effendi has pointed out: by the means of the arts we can reach the hearts of our audiences better than with cold rationalizing. A dramatic performance, an artistic event draw more people than a talk.

On the other hand, participation in activities of performing arts, which are collective by nature, exert a powerful effect on character building and individual and collective transformation. ***“The skills that will be developed by an individual working as a member of such a group will include creativity, cooperation, communication and concentration, as well as the ability to listen, compromise, contribute and take initiative. Making theatre at whatever level is a terrific learning tool for anyone who works or lives as part of a team, which includes most of us.”*** Hahlo-Reynolds (12)

LESSON FIVE: DRAMA IN STUDY CIRCLES

Of the two ways of making theatre described in the previous chapter, it is the communal theatre with universal participation that is of interest to us here.

Again, there are two levels on which we can use this form of drama in our work:

- **Dramatization as a learning strategy of the Institute Courses being studied by the group;**
- **Drama pieces to be presented by the group to outside audiences.**

Dramatization as a learning tool:

An ancient Chinese proverb says: I hear and I forget.

I see and I remember.

I do and I understand.

Suppose your Study Circle is studying Ruhí Book One. Take the very first quote by Bahá'u'lláh:

“The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct....”

You study this quote with your group in the established manner: explaining the meaning of the words, consulting and reflecting together, completing the exercises in the book, after which you ask the participants to memorize the quote. When this step is reached, you tap the latent reservoir of artistic creativity in the group by leading and organizing them to set music to this same quote (collective composition). One way to proceed is this:

You write the quote on the board broken down into phrases like poetry. For example:

The betterment of the world
 Can be accomplished
 Through pure and goodly deeds,
 Through commendable
 And seemly conduct.

Now have your group all stand up, establish a steady tempo by marching in place and clapping hands on the beat. When that is clear and firm and precise, have them repeat in chorus the above quote phrasing it like poetry, making pauses when the rhythm requires. If you wish you can repeat a phrase twice to make it more musical. While repeating over and over again, start raising the pitch of your voices above the level of ordinary speech, to the stage of chanting. At this point – without ever stopping the process – encourage anyone in the group to come up with a melody to the rhythmically chanted poem. The best melody that emerges from this collective creation is adopted and learned by the group, adding it to their repertory of songs of Bahá'í identity. Besides enriching the growing body of community music available to the group, this method also serves to reinforce memorization of the words at a deeper, easier and more lasting level.

Now, after seeing and hearing, let us raise the learning process to the stage of doing: play acting.

Divide your Study Circles in smaller groups, of three to four participants each. Before breaking up into teams you explain to them that they have to work out a drama skit about the verities enshrined in the above quote: that is, how can the betterment of the world be accomplished? Why does the world need betterment at all? What kind of deeds and conduct do we, here and now, have to show so that the world around us (our family, our school, our neighborhood, our community) becomes better? Make clear that they have to start out from their concrete, familiar, everyday experiences. Also recommend that they avoid simplistic, “Deus ex machina” solutions, where at the critical moment one of the actors would say: Bahá'u'lláh says that... and by an act of instant miracle everybody and everything becomes perfect. Tell them to think in terms of real life. Now you give a definite time limit (fifteen minutes, half an hour) for the teams to prepare their improvisations (avoid writing down their lines). Then you reassemble your Circle and have each team present their performance. Each skit should be analyzed by the whole group in loving consultation, but never criticized, belittled or ridiculed. Our aim here is collective learning.

This kind of exercise in drama improvisation allows the participants to relate the universal, abstract concepts of the quote they have been studying, to the concrete and particular circumstances of their everyday lives, and see the practical relevance of the Teachings. On the other hand, this kind of activity is thrilling, challenging, amusing and greatly contributes to strengthening the bonds of fellowship and harmony within the group. As dramatization becomes a regular feature of the Study Circle sessions, the self esteem and self confidence of the participants will increase by discovering the creative talents latent within themselves.

Plays for public presentation

At a later, more consolidated stage of our Study Circle we can prompt the participants to accomplish more complex challenges of drama improvisation: the group as whole may be guided to create, in joint consultation with the tutor, a more demanding piece of drama about aspects of the Teachings: a quality like truthfulness, a principle like the equality of men and women or unity in diversity. After rehearsing it, they may want to present it at some public event or offer it to parents and friends, to a school, at a gathering of Study Circles, at a 19 Feast, or as part of a teaching activity the group may undertake as an act of service to the community. Such a collective enterprise and the unfailingly positive response to it by outsiders, will do much to enhance the sense of group identity. Moreover, it is a powerful tool for proclamation, teaching and consolidation.

Practice : Together with those participating in your training course x, practice the two strategies of using drama in Study Circles:

1. In small teams of three or four friends, choose a quote x from the material you are studying, dramatize it and then take turns presenting your skits to the rest of the group. Analyze the results in a plenary session.

2. Create, rehearse and present for the closing event of your training course a play about any topic related to the training you are receiving. Everybody should participate in some capacity!

Notes:

1. Published in Abdu'l-Bahá in London (Oakham Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987, p. 93)
2. The Universal House of Justice, compilation "The Importance of the Arts In Promoting The Faith (referred to as UHJ henceforth), 1998, N° 50, p. 14
3. UHJ, N° 43, p 12
4. Ridvan Message to Africa, 1996, paragraph 13
5. UHJ, N° 69, pp. 21-22
6. *ibid.*
7. UHJ, N° 35, p. 10
8. UHJ, N° 45, p. 12
9. UHJ, N° 59, p. 17
10. UHJ, N° 60, p. 18
11. R. Hahlo– P. Reynolds: Dramatic Events, p. 21
12. *ibid.*, p. 20

DANCE

“DANCE WITH OVERFLOWING EMOTIONS”

“Lo, the Nightingale of Paradise singeth upon the twigs of the Trees of Eternity, with holy and sweet melodies, proclaiming to the sincere ones the glad tidings of the nearness of God...” Bahá’u’lláh (1)

If the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is music, the response of the contingent world to it is dance:

“In the Holy Books a promise is given that the springtime of God shall make itself manifest; Jerusalem, the Holy City, shall descend from heaven; **Zion shall leap forth and dance**; and the Holy Land shall be submerged in the ocean of divine effulgence.” **Abdu’l-Bahá (2)**

Answer these questions:

1. In the above quote by Bahá’u’lláh, who is the “Nightingale of Paradise”?
2. What are those “holy and sweet melodies”?
3. In Abdu’l-Bahá’s words, how will Zion receive the glad tidings of the nearness of God?
4. What emotion is expressed by the metaphor “Zion shall leap and dance”?

The most direct, contagious and evident physical expression of the emotions of extreme happiness, joy, exultation, ecstasy, and celebration is dancing:

“Take the cup of the Testament in thy hand; leap and dance with ecstasy in the triumphal procession of the Covenant!” Abdu’l-Bahá (3)

“Today, to this melody of the Company on high, the world will leap and dance: ‘Glory be to my Lord, the All-Glorious!’” Abdu’l-Bahá (4)

1. What emotion should fill the hearts of those who have the privilege of having recognized Bahá’u’lláh?
2. According to Abdu’l-Bahá’s words above, what is the source of our ecstasy and overflowing joy?

Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá exhort us to convey this same overflowing joy to our hearers when we teach the Cause, share its Teachings and give the Message:

“Indeed expositions and discourses in explanation of such things cause the spirits to be chilled. It behoveth thee to speak forth in such wise as to set the hearts of true believers ablaze and cause their bodies to soar.” Bahá’u’lláh (5)

“I ask and supplicate God to make you two convinced souls, to bring you forth with such a steadfastness that each of you may withstand the people of a country, and to intoxicate you with the wine of the love of God so that you may cause your hearers to dance, to be joyful and to exult.” Abdu’l-Bahá (6)

1. Bahá’u’lláh warns us that if we speak only to the rational mind of our hearers when we teach, their _____ will be chilled.

2. The words of a Bahá'í teacher should affect the heart as well as the body of his hearer. How?
3. One condition of effective teaching is for us to be intoxicated with the love of God. What does that mean?
4. When we are intoxicated with the love of God, how will our words affect our hearers?

In summary: in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá, dance is associated with the expression of emotions of overflowing happiness and joy, of ecstasy and intoxication with the love of God, with His Word. Dance is a universal human manifestation of celebration:

“...celebrate ye in joy, dance with overflowing emotions...” Abdu'l-Bahá (7)

TO DANCE OR NOT TO DANCE?

In stark contrast to the spiritual and sacred nature assigned to dance in the Writings of the Faith, dancing in our modern materialistic and decadent culture has gradually degenerated into a socially accepted form of sexual promiscuity, vulgarity and pornography, closely linked to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. The practice of this kind of dancing has no place in our lives as bahá'ís:

“In the teachings there is nothing against dancing, but the friends should remember that the standard of Bahá'u'lláh is modesty and chastity. The atmosphere of modern dance halls, where so much smoking and drinking and promiscuity goes on, is very bad, but decent dances are not harmful in themselves. There is certainly no harm in classical dancing or learning dancing in school... The harmful thing, nowadays, is not the art itself but the unfortunate corruption which often surrounds these arts. As Bahá'ís we need avoid none of the arts, but acts and the atmosphere that sometimes go with these professions we should avoid.” Shoghi Effendi (8)

1. Is dancing permissible for Bahá'í youth?
2. Is it appropriate for Bahá'í youth to go to discotheques? Give your reasons.
3. What does “promiscuity” mean?
4. Is it permissible for Bahá'í youth to have a dance party let us say for someone's birthday?
5. What do “modesty and chastity” mean when applied to our manner of dancing?

6. Consult together: what would you consider indecent dancing? What is decent dancing? What is the difference between them?
7. Analyze together: what kind of dancing is propagated in the media – television, video clips, musical shows)? Decent or indecent? Edifying? Harmless? Harmful?

Dance has been a very popular form of entertainment in our Western culture for many centuries, an integral part of every festive meeting or social gathering. There is no reason for Bahá'í youth to be deprived of wholesome entertainment and diversion as long as they heed the Guardian's words of caution:

“Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. It demands daily vigilance in the control of one's carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures.” Shoghi Effendi (9)

DANCE AS AN ART FORM

Dance is far more than a mere pastime or entertainment. It is a form of art. It is deeply imbedded in people's culture and their expression of the sacred.

Traditional dances (folklore)

“...traditional dances associated with the expression of a culture are permissible in Bahá'í Centres. However, it should be borne in mind that such traditional dances generally have an underlying theme or a story being represented. Care must be exercised to ensure that the themes of such dances are in harmony with the high ethical standards of the Cause and are not portrayals that would arouse base instincts and unworthy passions....” The Universal House of Justice (10)

True or false?:

It is not permissible to dance in Bahá'í Centres. T__ F__

It is permissible to perform traditional dances in Bahá'í Centres. T__ F__

Traditional dances are an expression of a culture. T__ F__

All traditional dances are appropriate in a Bahá'í Centre. T__ F__

Some folklore dances, in their present form, arouse base instincts and unworthy passions. T__ F__

We have to select carefully what aspects of our own cultural traditions deserve protection and preservation. T__ F__

Consult together: What traditional dances are there in your region? What is the underlying theme or story in each of them?

The protection and promotion of the cultural identity of every people is one of the principles of our Faith, so as Bahá'í teachers or tutors we must take this into account.

“Much like the role played by the gene pool in the biological life of humankind and its environment, the immense wealth of cultural diversity achieved over thousands of years is vital to the development of the human race which is experiencing its collective coming of age. It represents a heritage that enriches us all and that must be permitted to bear its fruit in a global civilization.” Bahá'í International Community (11)

Consult together: why is it important to preserve cultural diversity? Is the “modern culture” of globalization, offered through the media, enough for the future?

Folklore – says Shoghi Effendi – is the expression of a people. Peoples do not stand still: they evolve, change, progress. So does their expression. The “people of Bahá” must x become a new people; our cultural expression must also be something new. Bahá'ís should go beyond the mere preservation of the cultural traditions of our inherited identities, and undertake **a process of selection, adaptation, and synthesis**. The process of transformation of a people, released and fueled by the Creative Word of God for our age –x the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh -, begins in the very heart of its culture. The

Teachings and Words of Bahá'u'lláh, in turn, transform this same culture, by purifying it, strengthening it, and making it grow. Each and every people will take upon themselves, as they become more and more deepened in the Faith, the task of selection, adaptation and synthesis of the best and most progressive features of their culture. This process will yield in time a new folklore: a new expression of a transformed people.

Bahá'í tutors and teachers can do much to start and accelerate this process. On the one hand they can and should encourage their Study Circles to cultivate their own cultural traditions, to learn and perform the traditional dances of their region. On the other hand, through collective reflection, analysis and consultation among their groups, they can identify and modify those negative contents and forms of dance that are at variance with the high moral standards of our Cause. We have to bear in mind that the general prostitution of the arts so characteristic of our modern societies has not left the traditional dances unaffected, especially where these have been adapted to the tourist entertainment industry.

Choreographed dances

Choreography is the art of creating and arranging ballet and dances with a specific theme or story.

“As for choreographed dances whose purpose is to reinforce and proclaim Bahá'í principles, if they can be performed in a manner which portrays the nobility of such principles and invokes appropriate attitudes of respect or reverence, there is no objection to dances which are meant to interpret passages from the Writings; however, it is preferable that the motions of a dance not be accompanied by the reading of the words.

The principle which must guide the friends in their consideration of these questions is the observance of "moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations".

The Universal House of Justice (12)

Consult together: how can we observe moderation in the way we dress? In our language? In the way we have fun? In the way we make theatre, music, and dance? Give concrete examples.

In recent years a new modality of proclamation and teaching has emerged and spread like wildfire among the youth of many parts of the world:

Dance Workshops. Originating in the United States and Canada, these dance Workshops proclaim Bahá'í principles through choreographed dances. The **Universal House of Justice** acknowledged with satisfaction this new development: **“involvement of youth in music and the arts as a means of proclaiming and teaching the Cause distinguished their exertions in many places; the spread of dance and drama workshops was particularly effective...” (13)**

Forming drama and dance groups or workshops to “represent the spirit and the teachings of the Cause from the stage” requires a group of young people with special interest in and calling for these art forms. In other words, we need “specialists” to some degree. Nevertheless they are very attractive modes of action for the Bahá’í youth, especially in the cities, to draw their peers into the youth movement. However, care should be taken that these newly formed dance workshops are not mere carbon copies of their North American models. While emulating the original method, discipline, concepts of organization, they should create their own choreographies based on the music and dances of their region, and addressing social and moral problems that are relevant to their own people. Otherwise, we would be adding to the already massive cultural erosion taking place in the modern world, which would be contrary to our principle of Unity in Diversity.

It is not necessary to have major artistic objectives or specialized skills for a Study Circle tutor to initiate the first steps towards simple choreographies. Based on the “motion vocabulary” of the traditional dances of the region, Bahá’í principles, like equality of men and women, unity in diversity, elimination of extremes of poverty and wealth, racism, etc. can be expressed. As with the creation of community music and drama, here, too, we can safely rely on the latent creativity of our Study Circle participants and the liberating bounties conferred by consultation.

Along with music and drama, dance can be a very useful tool for proclamation, teaching and consolidation, as the following report by the **Bahá’í International Community** points out:

“One noteworthy example is the collaboration between UNIFEM and Bahá’í communities in Bolivia, Cameroon and Malaysia, aimed at improving the status of rural women by using traditional media, such as music and dance, to stimulate village-wide discussion of women’s roles. Messages communicated in this way are taken very seriously in non-literate communities, and they provide a non-threatening opening for dialogue with the whole community.” (14)

Practice: team up in couples. Each couple will, independently from the others, create a simple choreography about the equality of men and women, using instrumental music (live or recorded). A good idea is to first show how women are traditionally treated in your society, and then how both sexes should relate according to Bahá’í teachings. No spoken words should be used. Then reassemble and each couple presents their dance. Reflect on and analyze together the performances. Then, as a second step, if time and circumstances allow, make a more complex dance-drama together, using the ideas and insights gained in the first exercise on the same topic and present it at your closing celebration.

DANCE AND WORSHIP

In many cultures dance is synonymous with worship, with the expression of reverence for the sacred. In the history of the Heroic Age of our Faith one finds many x examples of this devotional use of dance:

“When one of the victims fell to the ground and they prodded him up with bayonets, if the loss of blood which dripped from his wounds had left him any strength, he would begin to dance and to cry out with even greater enthusiasm: 'In truth, we come from God and unto Him do we return!' "Some of the children expired on the way.” Shoghi Effendi (15)

Even Siyyid Muhammad-Isfahani, this “Antichrist of the Bahá’í Revelation”, took recourse to dancing as the ultimate sign of his devotion, while trying to disguise his real sentiments:

“Although embarrassed, he arose, and to the amusement of some and the amazement of others, performed a dance of rapture in an attempt to dispel their suspicion.” Adib Taherzadeh (16)

In the above descriptions, dance is performed as a public demonstration of what?

For a great segment of mankind, dance is the primary expression of religious feeling, of reverence before the sacred, of devotion and worship. In this context, “dance is the meditation of the body”. In the authoritative Writings of the Bahá’í Faith this dimension of dance is also recognized as legitimate, along with other means and forms of giving expression to our worship, like reading prayers, chanting prayers, singing prayers or playing an instrument in prayer:

“There is no objection to the interpretation of a prayer in the form of movement or dance if the spirit is properly reverential, but preferably this should not be accompanied by reading the words.” The Universal House of Justice (17)

What do you think:

1. what makes a dance acceptable as “the interpretation of a prayer”?
2. would it be appropriate for someone to read a prayer while another is interpreting it through dancing?

“It is perfectly acceptable for a prayer to be interpreted in the form of movement or dance. As you know, in many parts of the world there are certain tribal and traditional dances which are performed in glorification of God. Just as a composer can create a piece of music as a result of inspiration by some passage in the Writings, so can a person perform a reverential dance, which is another form of art, to interpret a passage from a prayer or from the Writings. However, to avoid that such expressions of prayer become gradually ritualized, it is preferable that they not be accompanied by reading the words of the prayers.”

(Letters of The Universal House of Justice, 1994 Mar, Dancing at Feast)

In secular materialistic Western culture this dimension of the sacred dance has been lost. It will take time for us to recover it. No doubt, the so-called “primitive” societies, where the reverence of the sacred permeates all moments of life, have a lot to teach us in this respect.

Notes

1. Tablet of Ahmad, Bahá'í prayers
2. Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 38
3. Abdu'l-Bahá in Bahá'í World Faith, p. 351
4. Selection from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 93
5. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142
6. Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá, vol. 2, p. 320
7. *ibid.*, p. 361
8. Compilation by the Universal House of Justice “The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith”, 1998 (henceforth UHJ), N° 42
9. UHJ, N° 25
10. UHJ, N° 66
11. Bahá'í International Community (BIC): Valuing Spirituality in Development, p. 15
12. UHJ, N° 66
13. The Universal House of Justice, Ridvan Message 1996
14. BIC: Protection of Women's Rights
15. Shoghi Effendi, in Dawn Breakers
16. Adib Taherzadeh: Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol. 1, p. 220
17. UHJ, N° 63
18. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 143

CONCLUSION

Dance is a form of language. Body language often tells more than the spoken one. It is culturally determined. A gesture that in one culture means “yes” may mean “no” in another. A movement which in one culture expresses respect and good manners, may be interpreted by another as irreverent and offensive. We have to be very careful about the message that our bodies convey when dancing, often on a subconscious level.

On the other hand, dance, music and drama are channels of human utterance. **Bahá'u'lláh** gives us the guidelines as to how to use them to good effect:

“Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets.”(18)

Refinement, hearts which are detached and pure, moderation, tact and wisdom – these are the main requirements to make our use of the Performing Arts a worthy and fruitful tool for the Cause of God.

