THE NATURE OF INSPIRATION

Saphira Barbara Linden is the artistic director of the Theater Workshop Boston, Omega Arts Center, co-ordinator of the Arts Festivals for the World Symposium on Humanity, and a Sufi leader under Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan.

EWJ: Could you tell us about the Sufi musical tradition?
SL: The deepest metaphysics were understood in musical and vibratory terms. The nature of inspiration is opening to the divine within. I have here a passage from Pir O Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan which relates music to a larger cosmology. “What we call music in our everyday language,” he says, “is only a miniature which our intelligence has grasped from that music or harmony of the whole universe which is working behind everything and which is the source and origin of nature. It is because of this that the wise of all ages have considered music to be a sacred art, for in music the seer can see the picture of the whole universe, and the wise can interpret the secret and the nature of the working of the whole universe in the realm of music. All the religions have taught that the origin of the whole of creation is sound. No doubt the way in which this word is used in our everyday language is a limitation of that sound which is suggested by the scriptures. Language deals with comparative objects, but that which cannot be compared has no name. Truth is that which can never be spoken, and what the wise of all ages have spoken is what they have tried their best to express, little as they were able to do so. When we pay attention to nature’s music, we find that everything on the earth contributes to its harmony. The trees wave their branches in rhythm with the wind. The sound of the sea, the murmuring of the breeze, the whistling of the wind through the rocks, hills, and mountains, the flash of the lightning and the crash of the thunder, the harmony of the sun and moon, the movements of the stars and planets, the blooming of the flower, the fading of the leaf, the regular alternation of morning, evening, noon, and night, all reveal to the seer the music of nature. All forms of nature, the flowers, the planets and stars, the earth, all give the idea of harmony, of music, and then the whole nature is breathing. The music of the universe is the larger background of the small picture which we call ‘music’. Our sense of music and our attraction to music shows that there is music in the depth of our being. Music is behind the working of the whole universe. Music is life itself.”

Therefore by understanding music and vibration, one begins to appreciate sacred art as a whole. The translation of that essence into dance, theater, and poetry is the particular form which I personally have been working with, and it is very difficult. It’s easier to feel that directly through music.

EWJ: Tell us about the inspirational exercises at the recent World Symposium on Humanity.
SL: We organized something called Creation Circles, where artists came together to improvise and harmonize. We created a workshop called Ya Fattahl, which in Arabic means “God the Opener,” the opener of the Way. People would work with a mantra which resonates the heart with the “ah” sound.

During these workshops profound things start to come up. If we
work together as artists, we might offer words—if we’re writers—or we might begin to move, if we’re dancers. Or if we have our instrument there, we might begin to play music. We might see an image that we want to act out and help get other people to join in. It comes in many forms, but the amazing thing is that when we do a practice or meditate together, we often do all the same thing at the same time. That’s when we really know it’s working, when we go around and share the images that have come to us and see that they’re all part of the same thing. One then begins to think, “Now wait a minute, this didn’t come from me.”

You then begin to understand that there are things out there which need to be expressed through us at this time. It’s the same principal behind the phenomenon of inventors inventing the same things in two countries at the same moment. What is it? The real question is: who’s listening? What people have opened themselves to receive this idea? Who has asked what the world needs in a particular way, beyond self-expression, which is the narrow motivation that many artists and musicians use?

I had a similar experience several years ago before I was consciously aware of this principal. We thought we had evolved a new form of theater, something called “participation theater for children.” Children didn’t come into a theater event and sit down and watch a play happen but were brought immediately into the performance and became part of it. Yet the play was structured very tightly. They weren’t allowed to do just anything that they wanted. For instance, in this initial play, “Tribe,” the children were initiated into one of three Indian tribes before they entered. They actively experienced rather than just watched what happened. It broke down a lot of stereotypes of what Indians do and that kind of thing.

This play became a prototype in this country for a whole new kind of theater for children. We then discovered that exactly the same thing was happening in England at the same time, but nobody in our particular group had known about that. It was time for that form to emerge, and so we were doing it and didn’t even know about the English group.

I think that inspiration may often come that way yet people aren’t aware of the process at work. We’re trying to develop forms that help the artist to become conscious of the process so that it’s repeatable. This way you won’t have to wait another ten years until the next flash of insight appears.

EWJ: What about the relationship of music to healing?
SL: Let me tell you about one of our healing methods. We decided to create a piece for children, believing that if a four-year-old could appreciate it, we have really understood its quintessence. We created a piece called “Sunsong,” a people puppet pageant for children of all ages.

There were four people puppets in a family, and we saw all kinds of conflicts in that family. One would say they needed family therapy, or they needed some kind of healing. Then we had the children become one of the elements in nature (air, water, earth, or fire), which are basic healing vibrations. A lot of the healing work that Sufis and other people do is based on breath. In the play, each of the four groups guided maintained an inner concentration of that particular element: a certain breath, a certain mantra, a certain meditation. Then the children entered the atmosphere that was created through that inner concentration. They didn’t have to understand it intellectually. They saw beautiful things that represented the elements externally. The elements became something like huge environments or toys that they could move in and around. Through the course of this musical piece they became healers of this family of people puppets in trouble.

We initially designed this piece for children with special needs in the Boston schools. One illness we were dealing with was hyperactivity. We went on the theory that a little boy in the people puppet family who was very hyperactive was suffering from a problem in the air element. The air group then helped him see that his air was coming through distorted. They showed him that if he breathed a little differently, if he worked on a gentle breeze—for instance, they might create a dance that became like a gentle breeze all around him—his breath changed and then something also changed in his behavior. He was able to go back to his family and know that he could change his relationship with his parents through this change in his own behavior. We wanted the children to know that you can’t just wait for the adults to do things. You can make real changes in your own family simply by changing your own behavior. It was a very important message to give these children, many of whom were in chronic trouble and lacked confidence.

We have had excellent results with this technique. We have worked successfully with children who were retarded, orphanage groups, or underprivileged children who wouldn’t normally have a theater experience. For this method, we relied on the modern systems theory of psychology, which says that if one child in a family is disturbed you should look at the whole system—the parents and the mutual interactions, etc.—so the child who is able to make behavioral changes can change the whole system. The children were brought in initially through music which put them in harmony with a particular element. They began to feel the element inside themselves and then translated it outside into creating things themselves. For us theater is an embodiment of all the arts: breath and vibration are the soul of theater.

The important thing is always balance, to allow the creative process or inspiration to appear in a multitude of ways. If one isn’t in balance, one can’t listen for what’s needed and be an effective creative instrument. The purpose of music is to raise our vision to what could be and then to take responsibility for creating art forms which express the kind of world which we want.

The Omega Company is a group of professional artists dedicated to translating their spiritual ideas into theater and the creation of a network and ultimately an arts center where artists of all media can implement their ideals. This summer they will be in residence at Omega Institute at the Abode of the Message and will be operating a school in the fall. For further information contact Omega Arts Center, Elliot Hall, 7 Elliot St., Jamaica Plain, MA 02130 (617) 522-8300.