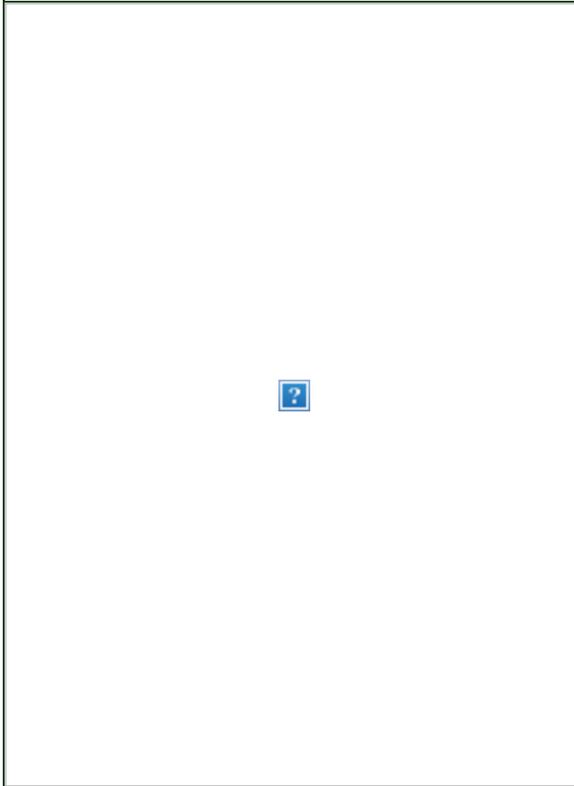


National Bahá'í Festival – 2003

Arts portray the life of the spirit



Shirin Youssefian-Maanian in "Pure"

FROM THE MOMENT the windblasted traveller reached the reception desk, the crucial first impressions gained from the beautiful, colourful, 22-page blue-bound brochure for A Change of Time III – The Life of the Spirit, and the one for "Pure", Annabel Knight's marvellous rendering of the life of Táhirih, set the tone of professionalism, artistic brilliance and total commitment that shone throughout the entire festival.

More than 1,200 people had poured into the Spa Centre, to be treated to a rich tapestry of music, movement, colour and sound. "The aim is to encourage people to reflect on their spiritual nature and its portrayal in dramatic and musical performances, audiovisual presentations and talks", said festival coordinator and National Assembly member Rob Weinberg. It was an aim superbly realised in a memorable weekend.

The spiritual realities that underpin human existence, the main theme of Book 1 of the

Ruhi Institute's series of courses, was the topic of an absorbing address by Mr Sohrab Youssefian, a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors. "Just as there are laws, such as gravity which govern our physical life, so there are spiritual laws which impact on the life of our souls", he said.

Allied to the theme of prayer was a wonderful exhibition showing the development of Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the world, with rare drawings and photographs being displayed alongside models and audiovisual presentations charting their evolution. There were also images and descriptions of the model of the next Temple, now at the planning stage, to be built near Santiago, Chile.

Arabella Velasco presented "A Light at the End of the Tunnel," her play based on firsthand accounts of near-death experiences. "These were true stories taken from over 200 testimonials that were studied in my writing of the play," said Arabella, who played all three characters.

Other themes, such as the status of women, were also creatively explored at the festival, and Athens-based actor Shirin Youssefian-Maanian achieved the remarkable feat of portraying all fourteen characters in 'Pure', which depicted the life and death of Táhirih.

Among the prominent musicians at the festival was Conrad Lambert, professionally known as Merz, performing solo. His debut album was in the UK Top 50 in 1999, and his performance at Glastonbury won him critical acclaim.

Making his UK debut was Tunisian born Hatef Sedkaoui, also known as Atef, whose Marseilles-based band “Soul Tunes” thrilled an exuberant Saturday night mass of dancers with an exciting blend of new soul and traditional Arabic music. The festival also included a creative description of aspects of the 1890 meeting between the distinguished Cambridge University orientalist Professor Edward Granville Browne, and Bahá’u’lláh. Documentary maker Peter Maguire screened his film about Professor Browne, which included footage shot in the professor’s rooms at Pembroke College. Festival participants could enter a detailed reconstruction of the room near Akká, in Israel where the meeting took place, and hear a recording of Professor Browne’s eloquent pen-portrait of Bahá’u’lláh. Another film shown at the festival charted the world-wide development of the Bahá’í community since 1890.

The National Spiritual Assembly presented a programme describing the Bahá’í social and community projects underway in Britain. Participants heard about the Bahá’í-sponsored Institute for Social Cohesion, which encourages government and civil society to promote unity and understanding between socially diverse groups within British society.

Heather O’Neill, coordinator of the Bahá’í-inspired Youth Empowerment Project of Swindon, described how many young people have transformed their lives by participating in programmes aimed at helping them develop a sense of purpose, personal responsibility and community service. Festival participants aged between 11 and 14 had sessions in which they explored issues affecting them at school, and in the wider society.

The event concluded with a devotional ceremony. Pauline Senior, 96, a Bahá’í for more than 80 years, led readers – from children to the elderly – in a tribute to the transforming power of the Bahá’í teachings in their lives.

One quote from someone attending “Scarborough 2003” seems appropriate to the whole experience : “The lights around the Spa, and the sea, yes the ocean, betoken allegorical soul food. Like the ‘path of God’, it speaks of mighty power and the pearls that lie hidden in the deep, if only we have the courage to plunge in and grasp them for ourselves”.

Arthur Kendall

