

**Karen Libman (School of Communications/Theater)**

Fulbright to Dhaka, Bangladesh

AY 2015-16

My proposed Teaching/Research Project in Bangladesh focuses on intercultural dialogue through theatre teaching and production, specifically through staging a play by the most produced English-language playwright, William Shakespeare, in a south Asian context, by South Asian students, in Bangla. I will direct this play at the University of Dhaka; while in residence, I will teach and observe in their theatre program. I estimate that I will spend 40% of my time teaching and 60% on the research project.

The Teaching portion of my proposal includes teaching classes/workshops in acting and directing, observing curriculum and coursework at the University of Dhaka, and coaching students during rehearsals. I will adapt and refine my approach to teaching as I work. The students understand and speak English, but I will be provided with a translator as needed. After several weeks, I will begin my Research with the selection of a Shakespearean play (limited to plays translated into Bangla, and informed by the professors and students in the program). I will then undertake the process of auditions, designer meetings, rehearsals, teaching, coaching, promoting and producing the play. I will structure the rehearsal process to maximize the educational potential for student actors; as with my work in the US, the result will be a fully-mounted production (see attached syllabi). The production will be presented as part of The University of Dhaka Theatre Department's regular season, allowing for public response to the intercultural collaborative project. I have also been invited to work in Chittagong on a similar project with community actors.

**Genesis of Proposal:**

I had the good fortune to meet several Bangladeshi theatre educators and artists during my tenure as the Executive Secretary for the International Drama Education Association (IDEA) from 2010-2013. I subsequently visited to Bangladesh for five days in November 2013 and while there, I viewed a production at the University of Dhaka's Theatre Department. I also conducted workshops and met several theatre artists, all during a national strike. I was most impressed with the students I worked with and whose work I viewed. I admire the physicality that Bangladeshi training provides, which is quite different from standard American training. Shakespeare and other Western classics are included in their training (*Hamlet* was produced in July 2014), and my work with classical theatre and the Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival piqued the interest of the Chair of the Theatre Department, who invited me to direct a Shakespeare production for them. I am interested in merging the aesthetic I bring as a primarily conceptual American director to Bangladeshi theatre training and production. I am also quite interested in what happens for me as an English speaker when the Shakespearean prose and verse that we ground our productions in are taken away from the mix—the process of defamiliarization through translation. In the United States, substantial knowledge of the works of William Shakespeare is necessary for a theatre education to be considered complete and well rounded. I believe that all theatre artists, regardless of age, context, or background, deserve to experience Western classics, particularly Shakespeare. Bangladesh is an emerging independent country with a long theatrical tradition; the opportunity to combine my expertise and aesthetic with Bangladeshi traditions and aesthetics will result in a learning process that is valuable to me and the host institution, and a research product that explores global Shakespearean artistic collaborations.

**Timeline:**

Weeks 1-4: observe classes, meet with students and faculty, plan curriculum, begin teaching;  
Weeks 4-8: teach workshops/classes, plan production process; Week 8: hold auditions; Week 9: begin text and character work; Week 10: improvisation, movement work; Week 11: character work, scenework;  
Weeks 12-14: scenework, fine-tuning, discussions; Week 15: teach rehearsals; Weeks 16-18: Production;  
Week 19: discuss play reception in public forums. Additional Weeks (if possible): travel to Chittagong.

Learning Objectives include: To promote a cultural and educational dialogue in the theatre area with an international audience; to provide a meaningful experience that promotes enjoyment and social growth for the actors and the audiences alike; to foster a sense of global community and aesthetics; to promote a greater appreciation for the theatricality and beauty of Shakespeare and theatre in general; to learn more about creating theatre between cultures while actually doing just that!

### **Teaching and Research in Theatre:**

Because theatre artists and educators engage in research and scholarship that is substantially different than others in academia, the Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) issued a White Paper to help define scholarship in our field. In 2001, ATHE received a Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning grant to revise its original 1998 “Scholarship for the Discipline of Theatre: An Association for Theatre in Higher Education White Paper.” The revised document affirms creative activity, such as rehearsal and directing, as a form of scholarship. The Carnegie Foundation categorizes creative work within Ernest Boyer’s “scholarship of discovery.” They write that scholarship of discovery “comes closest to what academics mean when they speak of research, although we intend that this type of scholarship also include the creative work of faculty in the literary, visual, and performing arts” (Glassick et al. 9). ATHE posits that creative work, including directing, might fit into any of Boyer’s categories: Scholarship of Discovery (e.g., re-conceptualizing and directing a “classic” play); Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (e.g., directing a production to teach a different acting technique); Scholarship of Engagement (e.g., using a production to make connections with the community, directing as an application of the skills of the theatre artist); and Scholarship of Integration (e.g., applying theories of cultural relevance to work in a production). Production or performance must also:

1. Be presented publicly or published,
2. be peer-evaluated, and
3. have impact on the field.

My proposal fulfills all Boyer Scholarship categories and will be publicly presented, evaluated by theatre professionals in Bangladesh, and, through my continued work at my home institution and Bangladeshi students’ continued work as theatre artists, will continue to impact the field beyond the initial project. Research Significance: In his seminal 1993 work, *Foreign Shakespeare*, Dennis Kennedy asserted that Shakespeare “regularly crosses national and linguistic boundaries with apparent ease” (2). In 2012 Kennedy further posited that it is not so much the universality of his plays that underscores his global popularity, but the flexibility of the texts themselves (*Globe to Globe* program 3). The 2012 Globe to Globe Festival produced the complete canon, bringing 38 non-English international productions of Shakespeare to London’s Globe Theatre. The Festival challenged familiar and “fiercely held” assumptions by asking if global production of Shakespeare might measure the plurality of cultural expression in our own time (Bennett and Carson 6). My project skews the practice of a non-Western company exploring Shakespeare through their own culture by addressing a different plurality of cultural expression: in blending a Western culture director with South Asian actors, designers, and audiences, what can emerge is Shakespeare with a contemporary global resonance for theatre makers, theatre pedagogy, and theatre audiences. We have entered an age of “post-textual Shakespeare” that relies not only on text, but also on a visual and cultural frame of reference (Lanier, Pavis). My artistic focus has always been on interpreting dramatic work from the text *through* theatrical concept; thus my work with classical theatre is more conceptual than textual. My project’s incorporation of Shakespearean text in Bangla and production in Bangladesh obliges me to examine the flexible, universal, and global natures of Shakespeare. By embracing the tensions created by intercultural experimentations with theatrical production, I hope to innovate Shakespeare in ways that are more exciting and educational for participants and spectators. John Russell Brown considers Shakespeare’s plays “a site for collusion and remaking” (*New Sites* 15). Intercultural endeavor in general is governed by the tension between innovation and tradition, and Shakespeare has proven a potential mediator for this kind of cultural production (Linneman

17). Since “cultural assumptions affect performance, and performance rewrites cultural assumptions” (Bennett 1997 2), foregrounding Shakespeare’s ability to tell stories and entertain audiences can avoid the unsatisfactory dilution of theatricalized ritual and Western performance conventions (Linneman, Bharucha). Audience and performers can collude to re-make meaning and negotiate Shakespeare’s cultural impact. Shakespeare’s theatricality is reaffirmed and reinvigorated through the process of performance (Linneman 22).

### **Project Application beyond the Fulbright:**

If Shakespeare is truly cultural capital, a “valuable resource” for all, then the limitations of English text and Western perspective merit investigation and continued application. I believe strongly that what I would learn from the other artists, students, teachers, and scholars during my Fulbright would help me to be a better director and teacher. Every year, I am involved with the Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival, an Equity guest artist Shakespeare Festival in residence at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Allendale, Michigan, since 1994. My Fulbright will have a direct impact on my understanding of Shakespeare, my directing of students in GVSU productions, and my professional directing and teaching. The Fulbright would enhance my performance-based teaching by allowing me to develop new ideas and inspiration and connect this work to a global context, and to assist the Grand Valley Festival in running more efficiently and smoothly, thus better serving GVSU and the community at large.

### **Opportunity Agenda for the Project**

1. The opportunity to collaborate with artists from other cultures in order to create new forms of theatre. The process of artistic creation is so exhilarating and fruitful, and the opportunity to do this with Bangladeshi artists and students will surely result in a production that is invigorating, enlightening, and aesthetically new and pleasing. And I am sure that I will learn as much as the students I work with.

2. The opportunity to explore Shakespeare in new and different ways. By working with Shakespeare in a different culture and in a different language, I can defamiliarize it for myself. I can see these stories and explore these themes afresh, which will enable me to grow as an artist. “The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky 16). My Fulbright project gives me the means to immerse myself in these ideas and to see the results in production.

3. The opportunity to share my expertise with Bangladeshi students, educators, and artists. As a theatre professional and educator from a completely different cultural background, I can explore boundaries, forge friendships, and ultimately work for intercultural understanding.

4. The opportunity to direct a play, originally written in English, in another language. Again, this is a defamiliarization process that will allow me to explore translation and reception in another way, one that I find exciting and stimulating. The process of translation and production is one that I have been working with for many years. Classics scholar Dr. Diane Rayor has been translating classical dramas from the ancient Greek, and I have been directing her translations, and then she has been revising and working with the production to provide an accurate and playable translation. So far, we have collaborated on two plays, both of which had fully mounted productions and were subsequently published by Cambridge University Press. We currently are collaborating on a third upcoming work. In 2011 I worked with GVSU Professors Dr. James Bell and Dr. Jason Yancey on an English translation of the classic Spanish Golden Age play *Antona Garcia*. Again, I directed the play as they edited and revised the translation. This production was presented at the Siglo de Oro Festival, the foremost Spanish Golden Age venue in the Americas, in 2011.

5. The opportunity to extend my commitment to the idea of Shakespeare as a cultural connector. I have

been exploring global Shakespeare since 2005, when I began a Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival project which tours our Bard to Go (BTG) production (designed for Michigan high school audiences) to international locales. I wanted to see if the success we had with secondary English speaking students in connecting them to Shakespeare could be replicated in other cultures and countries, even if the countries were non-English speaking ones. Because these productions were compilations of scenes from Shakespeare (as opposed to full-length plays) and designed for high school audiences, they were quite physical, often comedic, and the purpose was to excite students about Shakespeare (as opposed to imparting a narrative). These tours have been successful, and thus far BTG has traveled to Jamaica, China, Canada, Italy, The Czech Republic and The Bahamas, partnering with other institutions or performing as part of international theatre festivals. One such endeavor, with East China Normal University, was a true exchange, with our production traveling to Shanghai and then a cadre of Chinese university students traveling to the US to perform Shakespeare in Chinese. As an English speaker, Shakespeare is important to me because he is the foremost English-language playwright. I believe that his importance in the canon of world literature cannot be underestimated, and indeed, the current vogue for global Shakespeare, as exhibited in the 2012 Globe Theatre Project, which invited theatre companies from different countries to perform as part of a Globe to Globe celebration of Shakespeare, affirmed this. I hope that I have something to offer the University of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi students and Dhaka public that adds to this global conversation.

6. The opportunity to develop myself further as an artist committed to intercultural respect and understanding. By working in Bangladesh, where citizens are continuously exploring social and political issues through active public contention and discourse, I can contribute to the conversation as an artistic ambassador. The world that we are living in is a world that is in desperate need of people who are willing to truly examine possibilities. Because of its rich, varied history and canon of literature, and especially because of its ability to empower people to express themselves creatively, reflect honestly, and think critically, theatre is an important, if not vital, area of study. My artistic philosophy embraces the exploration of the relationships between theatre and society in order to reflect on the potential for such endeavors to successfully promote such goals as a heightened sense of aesthetics, cultural awareness, and social justice, and I bring this philosophy to Shakespeare. Assisting students in seeing diverse viewpoints is critically important to helping students live and learn in our changing world.

### **Applicant Experience, Previous Preparation, Teaching Philosophy**

I am an artist and teacher of theatre, primarily of performance techniques in acting and directing. My professorial duties include teaching acting, directing, theatre history, and theatre education/theatre for young audiences courses; directing productions; supervising student-directed productions; advising undergraduate theatre majors; serving on thesis committees; supervising independent studies; producing events and plays; and developing curriculum. Part of my ability to be effective as an educator comes from my commitment to open mindedness, inclusiveness, and possibility. Between 2005-2009 I worked in a variety of interim administrative positions at GVSU, and in 2012 I was nominated and funded by GVSU to attend the Higher Education Research Services (HERS) Institute, which advances women leaders in higher education administration. These experiences have equipped me to deal with the many challenges facing institutions in higher education in the 21st century and to develop an administrative style that is flexible, assertive, and proactive.

I direct frequently for the Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival. Previous credits include *Richard III*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Macbeth*, *A Comedy of Errors*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. I also direct university productions at GVSU, including *Oedipus*, *Big Love*, *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and *Angels in America, Part 1*. I helped to conceive the Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival's Bard to Go (BTG) touring program, which takes 50-minute compilations of Shakespearean scenes to Michigan secondary schools, helping over 15,000 students be introduced to Shakespeare. My directing work has been seen in Michigan at Aquinas College, Heritage Theatre Group, Grand Rapids

Civic Theatre, and The Grand Rapids Jewish Theatre, and nationally in Texas, New York, Nebraska, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. International directing experiences include tours to Jamaica, The Bahamas, and China; workshops and presentations in Bangladesh, Brazil, Wales, Hong Kong and Norway. I have written successful grants at national, state, and regional levels, and have served as a grants reviewer on several occasions. Scholarly writing is part of my skill set as well, and I have authored articles on arts advocacy, directing, the teaching of theatre, community outreach, and feminist theatre-for-youth practices. For example, my essay on directing *Medea* in translation was published by Cambridge University Press in 2013, and I served as editor of the quarterly professional journal *STAGE of the Art* (1998-2001).

During my service as the elected Executive Secretary of IDEA, I worked with educators and artists from across the globe. My experiences enhanced my sense of global collegiality, adaptability, cultural sensitivity, and organization. I believe strongly that part of cross-cultural understanding and respect comes through a person-to-person exchange of ideas and stories. To this end, I frequently travel internationally. I recently returned from India, where I spoke at a conference and worked with local theatre groups. I have pioneered several multicultural and outreach partnerships at GVSU, including the international tours of the Grand Valley Shakespeare Festival's "Bard to Go" program. I produced the GVSU residency of Bahamian director Philip Burrows; worked with the Office of Multicultural Affairs to facilitate discussions on religious intolerance in *The Merchant of Venice*, and co-founded the Grand Valley V-Day celebration, which produced *The Vagina Monologues* at GVSU for 10 years. In 2013, as part of an interfaith contingent, I traveled with the Niagara Foundation to Turkey. This trip provided me with a way to become more familiar with Islam, and I was able to meet and dialogue with Turkish Muslims. As a result of this experience, I was invited to speak at a Niagara Foundation's Abrahamic dinner in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2014.

In my teaching I attempt to draw out my students (as the root of the word education implies) by encouraging them to find their voices through experimentation and direct engagement with materials. I facilitate their growth with my knowledge and experience. I emphatically support each student's proficiency with a topic or skill and then challenge her to think more deeply and risk more freely. My standards are high and fair. I believe that education, to paraphrase Paulo Freire, can be joyful *and* rigorous. I believe that I am responsible for teaching in way that doesn't shy away from risk, but confronts reality and cultivates the deep possibilities that live in every person to dare, learn, and grow. While I know that the choice to learn ultimately rests with my students, I also know that I can sometimes "open a door" that will assist students on their journey to achieve their full potentials. As an educator, scholar, and artist, I honor both the process of learning through creation *and* the product that is created; the importance of this dual emphasis in education of any kind cannot be underestimated. I do not believe in sacrificing process for product or vice versa. A learning environment can be humane, supportive, exciting, and demanding. I endeavor to create this type of atmosphere. As trite as it sounds, I love what I do. People learn in many ways, and I utilize different methodologies in my teaching in order to address multiple learning styles. I am particularly interested in interrelated/integrated approaches to learning. My current teaching assignments allow me to combine many art forms and academic areas as I teach; I also help my students to see and seek out these relationships. In a recent acting class, for example, students worked with a play (writing and dramatic literature), enacted images from that play (movement), discussed theme and context (critical theory), explored language (vocal performance), performed a finished product (acting), and finally assessed their experience (critical thinking). This kind of approach excites me because it addresses the whole learning experience and helps students connect their education, both discipline to discipline, and discipline to real life. Ultimately, I believe that a teacher should encourage her students to develop an independence of thought and expression that will carry over into all aspects of their lives. As an educator, I strive to enact that ideal.