

## Performing Sarah Farmer at Chautauqua

Stepping into someone else's shoes to play a role can be a formidable challenge—one that is magnified when the person portrayed was a “spiritual giant.” Such was the case with Sarah Farmer. The only woman present at the historic event of the signing of the Portsmouth Peace Treaty of 1905 at the Portsmouth Navy Shipyard, negotiated to end the Russo-Japanese War by Japanese and Russian diplomats at the invitation of President Theodore Roosevelt, she is suddenly of interest to the people in the seacoast areas of New Hampshire and Maine as they prepare for the centennial celebrations.

I had long studied Sarah's life and had always had a far-off goal of writing some sort of monologue or play about her. Suddenly, the opportunity was here: the New Hampshire Chautauqua had as its theme for the 2005 season the Portsmouth Peace Treaty. The Humanities Council had never heard of her; in her lifetime she was far more famous than she is now. But they came through the snow to attend an audition at Green Acre and, amazingly, selected her as a character, along with Theodore Roosevelt, Ida B. Wells, Thomas Edison, Fred Harvey, and William Jennings Bryan.

The more I learned about Sarah Farmer, the more intimidated I was trying to step into her shoes. Many of the Chautauqua actors were regulars on that circuit; I was a novice. Yet step by step, it was as if I were assisted from all sides. The Sarah Farmer Women's Center donated funds for a costume; Laurie Eley, a Baha'i in Dallas, made the costume. Judith Partelow and Samantha French assisted with direction; many others helped with research and keyboarding letters, fragments of diaries, and so forth. A spiritual “committee” from the next world seemed to be hovering close to the whole process.

“Sarah” performed the first night of the series in Keene, NH, along with Theodore Roosevelt. “Teddy” was earthy and loud, funny, cantankerous. Sarah was so different in her demeanor—a devoutly inward soul. We had to attend a reception beforehand in our costumes; I could not eat a thing.

When Terry and John Weiss arrived with a portrait of Abdu'l-Baha for the stage, I began to relax. I was not alone. Somehow the performance unfolded well, and the questions were not too difficult. Jon Weiss later wrote:

The performance of Anne Perry portraying Sarah Farmer at Chautauqua in Keene, NH was thrilling. She enchanted the audience with the love and dedication she had for the Master and the Cause as they watched and listened to her every word and gazed at a well lit portrait of `Abdu'l-Baha.

“Sarah” offered her thoughts and feelings on the subjects of peace, the Oneness of Mankind and abolishment of prejudices of all kinds. She read from the letters assuring and confirming her in her work, addressed to her by the Master. The audience intently absorbed her convincing appeals for avoiding the pursuit of war and the promotion of the importance of women's rights. She introduced them to Green Acre and its early role in bringing together the diversity of the human family and piquing their interest in its current status. It was apparent that the issues we are still facing in this day are weighing heavily on the minds and in the hearts of those under the Chautauqua tent. Sarah's words were like fresh streams of pure water for the thirsty souls still concerned with war and injustice.

Questions from the audience to Sarah Farmer and then to Anne on her preparation for the role followed. Many questions illustrated the audience's intrigue for using consultative methods and diplomacy instead of warfare. Much interest was shown to know of the

ongoing role Green Acre has as a Baha'i School and that it is progressing towards its destiny of becoming a university.

Witnessing this performance and its potency for connecting the hearts to the Word of God was no less than exhilarating! The viewers' hearts became sympathetic to Sarah and her cause. The quotations below will encourage us again with understanding the synergy of what the arts and teaching will accomplish.

*"It is through such presentations that we can arouse the interest of the greatest number of peoples in the spirit of the Cause. That day will the Cause spread like wild fire 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."*

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated May, 1933, in Bahá'í News #73, p. 7)

*"We cannot possibly foresee, standing as we do on the threshold of Bahá'í culture, what forms and characteristics the arts of the future, inspired by this Mighty New Revelation, will have. All we can be sure of is that they will be wonderful; as every Faith has given rise to a culture which flowered in different forms, so too our beloved Faith may be expected to do the same thing."*

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, December 23, 1942)

It was as if it were simply Sarah's time to step forward, to speak to current audiences about concerns of peace, and all I had to do was to step out of the way. In my own research this year, I found a statement from one of Sarah's letters helpful in facing the fires of my own tests:

We have had from the beginning the best Green Acre of all in spite of all seeming disappointments and obstacles—perhaps I should say because of these events, for we gain the strength of all the obstacles overcome. A wise man said to me once—"In proportion to the greatness of the work committed to you, will be the obstacles that beset you, but when they come recognize them as friends in disguise, sent to call out the powers needed to carry you on to your goal and the disguise will drop away." (Sarah Farmer, in a letter to Emma Thursby, 8/8/1904)

In our work, great and small, perhaps we can develop the capacity to see obstacles as factors that can propel us through, around, and over the fire we encounter. At times, it helps to see through someone else's perspective.