

G FORCE | OLIVIA SPALLETTA

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Connecting cultures

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff | November 3, 2009

During a visit to Boston two years ago, King Abdullah of Jordan heard the Boston Children's Chorus perform at the Harvard Club and was bowled over.

The king told chorus executive director David Howse to let him know if there was anything he could do for the chorus in the future. Howse had an idea: Why not bring the chorus to Jordan? After all, part of the mission statement for the multiracial ensemble, founded six years ago by Hubie Jones, is that the singers "proudly represent the city of Boston as ambassadors of harmony."

Working with the Royal Court in Jordan, the US State Department, and cultural organizations in Jordan, Howse laid the groundwork for what eventually became a two-week visit to Jordan in July by 65 members of the chorus.

Ranging in age from 11 to 18, the chorus members gave a total of seven performances in the city of Amman and in rural towns. Call it cultural diplomacy, chorus-style.

The visit was chronicled by 25-year-old filmmaker Olivia Spalletta in "This Is the Sound of Harmony," a documentary that will be screened at the Boston Public Library on Thursday at 6 p.m. (the screening is open to the public). We spoke with Spalletta recently about the film.

Q. What do you see as the overarching story of your documentary?

A. We focus on the stories of five very different children within the chorus. You see Jordanian children interacting with American children, one-on-one. We've come to see this film as an opportunity for children and adults to revisit the stereotypes that they may have about Middle Eastern culture. The story that we're telling is about the potential that we have to connect with people even when we have stereotypes about what their culture is like.

Q. Does this say something about the power of song to build bridges?

A. Oh yeah, absolutely. There was a South African song called "Tshotsholoza" that they sang at almost every performance. It's really catchy. After the performance a lot of the little Jordanian kids picked it up and were singing it, even though they didn't understand the words. Music is a language that almost every single human being understands.

Q. When the Jordanian kids and the American kids interacted, was it mostly through music?

A. For some of them it was, but they talked about everything. . . . For adults, there's a barrier. But the kids would talk about baseball, about "Hannah Montana." They bonded over *everything*.

Q. Did you begin to see the country through the kids' eyes?

A. I thought it would be a challenge, that there would be less ground for connection. I'm still thinking about how easily these kids were able to connect, and what that means for the future. These kids are going forward with a personal connection to many children in the Middle East. I wonder how that will change their point of view and perspective as they become adults.

Interview was condensed and edited. ■