

IS MIME THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE?

by *Julisa Rowe*
Artists in Christian Testimony

So you want to be a short-term missionary and communicate the Good News to a culture that you've never been to before. And you've chosen drama to be your vehicle. Your purpose is really that of communication, rather than art. Short-term mission dramas are basically messages given in a creative fashion. There's nothing wrong with that! Creative, dramatic messages are easier to show to a wide audience. It is more readily acceptable than, say, street preaching, because it arouses curiosity and it entertains—in short, it is an art form as well.

In your few short weeks you want to get the message across in the most effective, fastest means possible. A simple message has to be made as understandable as possible by the widest possible audience. Various theatrical practitioners have observed that basic communication can take place when the thing to be communicated is very, very simple and actions are very broad and generalized. So if your purpose is just to get a simple message across, look for the broadest, simplest gestures and ways of communicating. However, you must be aware that **art is an expression of a given worldview and is given its shape and substance by the history and environment of a culture**. That means that gestures, color, clothing, etc., all carry different meanings depending on the culture's worldview.

Communication takes place through verbal and nonverbal signals. Language is more than words - in fact, communication happens in twelve different ways. These are referred to as signal systems* (see *Creating Understanding* by Dr. Donald K. Smith) and can help you create relevant drama pieces, as well as give you a window into understanding other cultures.

THE TWELVE SIGNAL SYSTEMS

In this section we'll look at the twelve signal systems, a description of each and a discussion of how these apply to drama, and what implications there are for cross-cultural drama.

1. Verbal:

This is speech and language. The words we say. A script is spoken, a story is told. Hearing the words of the characters, as well as the variety given by different voices, reinforces everything else observed in the play.

When you go to a different country, the language is different. You can't understand the people and they can't understand you. So how can you help them to understand your message? Language is a major obstacle, and so it is easier to bypass the communication problems by presenting your message without words. However, even though speech is a major block in cross-cultural communication it is also a very important part of the heart of a people. There are ways of expressing ideas in another language that can't be translated effectively. Our first language is called our "mother tongue" probably because of the emotional attachment we have to it - much as a child has to its mother. It encompasses identity, security, expression, cultural pride,

understanding and a sense of family. Who I am is tied up with what language I speak.

Obviously you cannot learn a language intimately during a short-term mission let alone present a drama in it! It is indeed easier to try and communicate through other means—which is why mime is such a popular form of drama for cross-cultural missions. But getting rid of the spoken words will not automatically mean clear communication. Speech is only the most obvious form of communicating and most obviously different from people to people. When you realize that this principle applies right down through the signal systems, then you will begin to see the differences between your cultural signal systems and those of your target culture.

2. Written:

Language is written down. You are reading my writing right now. What does the written language of another culture tell you? Roman, Greek, Russian, Arabic, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu — these are just a few of the numerous current written systems in the world.

In drama, we use writing for scripts. It is interesting to note that even here, outside of the actual system of writing used, there is a cultural difference in scripting. The West, and those parts of societies that are focused on education, rely heavily on written scripts. In many other parts of the world, however, oral tradition is very strong and scripts come from known, even inherited, sources and troupes improvise from those sources according to the situation — or improvise from scratch.

Further application— perhaps you could have an outline for a script. Performance is divided between your drama troupe and the audience as a mutual improvisation. This type of drama is used frequently in community development.

3. Numeric:

This is the system of numbers, including mathematics. Numbers can be endowed with many meanings, such as the 666 of Revelations, 7 as the perfect number, 13 as unlucky. Numbers can be used to determine the appropriate time for certain actions or events.

You can use numbers in drama if you think about it — the number in the cast, the number of scenes or acts, and so on.

4. Pictorial:

“A picture says a thousand words.” What it says sometimes takes some deciphering! In drama, we use this signal system in the form of scenery and backdrops. Much information can be conveyed by the nature of the background—is it a home or a hospital? Is it contemporary or historical, China or America, abstract or realistic? Is it a utilitarian backdrop, used only for hiding characters? Perhaps there is a scene drawn on it that will give the first information as to what the play is about—a claw clutching a bleeding world, a cemetery, a rainbow, a cross. Here again, what is conveyed by the picture is different from culture to culture—Chinese paintings are sparse, showing man as small in comparison with the nature focus; many African paintings show elongated people as the main focus, which shows a different view of man. “American Gothic” is very different in style and content from an Indian painting of “Krishna and Radha.”

5. Artifactual:

They are the things that surround you, that you use every day, that you decorate your house with, and that all tell stories about you, your interests, your history. In the theatre they are called properties and costumes. Each of these items consciously and unconsciously communicates a message about a character (e.g., the dress of a prostitute as opposed to the dress of a businesswoman). They can even display some of the character's values by looking at which objects are given prominence by the characters, or what kind of scenery and pictures are used. How do artifacts differ from your culture to the target culture? Does the prop you are using have a different meaning in another culture than you intend? Check it out.

Costumes fall under this system and they should take their cue from the clothing norms of the target country, though modified for theatrical purposes. In many countries it is considered indecent for women to show their legs, or shoulders, so shorts and tank tops are off-limits. In India this is evidenced by the dress/pantsuit worn by many women - everything is covered but the feet. Many men going overseas bring their shorts to keep cool in the hot weather - this may seem practical, but only little boys wear shorts! Grown men wouldn't dream of being seen in public wearing them!

How should your costumes look? What is appropriate wear for your characters in the country you are going to? Get information from the web, or from books and magazines. Even TV shows and movies will give you that information. In the theatre forms of the country, too, you will find elements of costume that are always used for a particular type of character, or to communicate a particular theme. Indian therukoothu has a clown character who serves as narrator and interacts with the various other characters. He is easily identified by his loud patchwork or mismatched clothes (but no big red nose!). An elaborate headdress sets apart the noble characters from the lowly characters.

6. Audio:

The audio system consists of all sound that is not words. This includes music, intonation, inflexion, pacing, sound effects and even silence. Tone of voice in delivering a line helps reveal mood or underlying meaning. Of course, when words are taken out of a drama, this effect is lost, but other sounds also carry meaning that contributes to the effect of a scene. Music is often used to heighten or interpret a moment (as in the use of violins at the romantic part of a movie), or as the background against which a mime is played out. What music to use is another of those highly-debated questions—American pop music is spreading throughout the globe certainly, but each country also has its own tradition of music and music style that we would do well to pay attention to. There is agreement that, even among the more Westernized youth of other cultures, use of fusion music (taking elements of, for example, Hindi music and Western music and blending them together) will result in greater impact than use of Western music alone. Even though the youth have accepted many Western things, their heart is still Indian and that is reflected in their tastes.

In setting up a mime, we might choose a piece that suits the mime well because of meaning of the original words; however, the original song may not be known to the intended audience. Further, the music style may be unfamiliar to them, or sound strange and quite unlike the music they are used to that is near and dear to their hearts. One drama troupe did a mime about

salvation and used as their background music the instrumental version of “Oh Happy Day.” Knowing the words gives great meaning to the mime, but for the audience, there was no connection, just a bouncy, unconnected soundtrack running through the mime. Music is one of those things that can be the most foreign element of a presentation or, if done culturally, be the element that connects most with the audience.

7. Kinesic:

Body language, movement and touch are a strong foundation of dramatic communication, and are more observable than some of the above-mentioned systems. In ordinary speech we use body language to express ourselves— adding emphasis, raising a hand in anger, hugging someone in love. Emotions are shown more in kinesics (movement) than in mere words, and using kinesics to its fullest advantage in a drama communicates emotion even more strongly to the audience.

Mime relies very heavily on kinesics to convey its message. But gestures are not universal. Each culture has different ways of gesturing the same message. Indians shake their heads side-to-side when they mean yes, Americans nod up and down. Africans shake hands coming and going, Indians put their own palms together in a salute. There is a famous anecdote about Richard Nixon who, upon leaving Brazil after a state visit, gave a two-handed “V” for Victory to the gathered crowds. He had just inadvertently made an obscene gesture to the entire country. In many countries, beckoning someone with your finger is extremely rude. It is more polite to call them with the palm facing down. In Kenya it is considered very rude to point with your finger - you should gesture with your chin.

Spend some time observing the body language of your target culture: how do they express things physically that is different than your way? Watch some of their dance - what can you learn from the way they choreograph certain emotions, or in how they interact with other characters on stage? Do they have specific hand gestures that have meaning? Bharatanatyam, the classical dance-drama form of South India, uses many “mudras,” or hand signs, to tell a story, not unlike sign language for the deaf. While the mudras are not understood by most people, the shape of the hands is a part of the cultural consciousness and affects the audience’s perception of beauty, emotion, etc.

8. Optical:

Lighting and color are a part of this system. also create moods, interpret scenes and make subtle points; for example, blue light may signal mystery, whereas red light suggests the wilder side of life. Light and color in appropriate places adds to the overall picture and flavor and makes a scene more memorable.

Makeup is an element of drama that incorporates a number of signal systems (such as pictorial) but I will place it here because of the messages given by the colors used. Have you made a study of theatrical makeup in your target country? Is there a history of theatre there? If so, then there is probably also a history of makeup. India has a tremendously rich range of character makeup in its many regional folk theatre styles. Green faces are found on heroes, kings and divinity in Kathakali theatre, whereas gentle, spiritual characters have a yellow tint. Then there are evil

characters that also have green faces, but broken up by red marks on the cheek and white knobs on the noses and foreheads to show their evilness.

Color in makeup (and costumes and sets) needs to be given attention so that the wrong message is not given. One missionary recounts an experience with a mime team that came to his area in Mexico. They came to a church to present a mime on the life of Christ. They were dressed in standard mime outfit, all black with white painted faces. The church people looked at them and walked out. They were horrified that this group would bring a representation of the Day of the Dead into their church! In Mexico, the Day of the Dead is celebrated outside the church by painting faces white and portraying the spirits. By not understanding the cultural nuances of makeup and color the well-intentioned mime team greatly offended the people they were trying to serve.

White is the color of purity, weddings, holiness in the United States and Europe. But the color for this in China is red! Black is a basic theatrical color in the U.S. (and particularly with mime teams), but it is a color traditionally to be avoided in India unless in mourning. The color worn by holy men in India is saffron. In this last case, it is interesting to note that some artists in India have depicted Christ in saffron robes with mixed reactions—some accept it, but others (both Christian and Hindu) find that a historical portrayal of Christ is proper because of the strong tradition of showing Christ this way. An attempt to contextualize Christ's costume is not always viewed favorably. Know the history of your target culture.

9. Tactile:

This is similar to kinesics but is limited to the area of touch. What does touch say about the culture? How is the use of touch different? Many times touch between men and women is taboo. To see a man and woman walking down the street hand in hand, or arms around each other, can be quite scandalous. Two men walking hand in hand also triggers different responses—in Africa, it is a sign of friendship, but in America it is a sign that they are gay. What completely opposite messages are conveyed!

The best way to show love and respect in India is to bend over and touch someone's feet, or prostrate yourself (a combination of kinesic and tactile). Among the Maasai of Kenya, younger women offer the tops of their heads to the elders for blessing. To kneel before someone for a hand of blessing is a great sign of respect.

10. Spatial:

The use of space creates subtle messages and visualizes undercurrents of feeling. In Western culture a great distance indicates coldness, whereas extreme closeness is interpreted as aggressiveness. Space can also be used to show power. Ever noticed how the CEO of a corporation has a huge office, with lots of floor space, spaciouly arranged furniture, big windows, whereas an entry-level secretary has a small cubicle filled up by her desk? You can tell who's who just by their office space. Paying attention to the use of space helps give further clarification to the message you are trying to portray.

Use of levels, integral to dramatic visualization, is also use of space. Higher levels on stage, or of characters in relation to each other, can indicate many things—heaven, strength, superiority, whereas lower levels by contrast are often used to indicate hell, weakness, inferiority.

11. Temporal:

How is time viewed? Westerners going to an African country often complain about how slow everything is and how long things take. If they are invited to dinner at 6 pm, dinner won't be ready until 7:30! This is not a sign of disorganization, rather, it shows a culture that is event-oriented. A church service may get going around 10 am and last until 4 pm, with people coming and going at will. The important thing is being at the event at some time, not planning your day by the second-hand of your watch. Westerners are often viewed as pushy because of this tendency - they are rude to show up right at 6 for a dinner invitation! Don't they know that important guests don't arrive until later?

Time also comes to play in the length of a drama. Many oral cultures are used to dramas that last all night, or even all night, every night for 7 days! An interesting comment was given by an audience member after watching a 3-minute mime: "Good drama, but it was too short!" A time-oriented person values the brevity as an efficient use of time, getting to the "punchline" quickly, but other audiences will feel cheated of their drama experience!

12. Olfactory:

This is the sense of smell and taste - a very powerful evocative signal system, one that we are least aware of and yet which we believe most in. You can't argue with what my nose says! If you tell me that there is no popcorn in the house but I smell that fragrant, hot, buttery smell, I will know that you are not telling the truth!

Smell is used a great deal in Indian folk theatre - usually in the form of incense or offerings to the gods. But the olfactory is also used a great deal in the U.S. in the form of dinner theatre. This is a creative combination of taste and smell with theatre - good food and good smells help create a good feeling towards the drama presentation. The film industry knows this as well, which is why they boost the fragrant popcorn smell at the cinema! Besides selling more popcorn, who doesn't have a warm feeling when thinking of popcorn and movies?

One final element that can't be fully categorized under any one signal system is that of emotions. The current school of Western acting (internal reality, psychological realism) is not always the best way to go. American acting often seems too flat to Indians. Emotions need to be played out where all can see and participate in them, say the Indians! Western internalization is just not satisfying to them. On the other hand, Indian acting often seems overly melodramatic to Western sensibilities. Do what will communicate to your audience.

WHAT STORY DO YOU TELL?

It seems simple - just present Jesus and the gift of salvation and people will respond. Not so. People respond when you touch on their personal experiences, and those are as varied as the individual. Stories come from a shared history and address common current situations. Americans think that an individual decision for Christ is what's important - but in many community-oriented cultures it's not that simple. What will the family say? What will the society think? What about friends? Maybe they will be killed if they change religions, or

ostracized from the family and community. Perhaps the message you are presenting is not the message that they need to hear: “salvation” is an isolated term unless it is applied to felt needs. In Kenya the need is to survive economically and to overcome rampant corruption. In a country that claims to be over 80% Christian, corruption is one of the highest in the world. Perhaps the message needs to be how Christ is lived out in all aspects of life - how He overcomes, and helps us overcome, corruption.

What you intend to say with your drama may not be the same message that is heard by the audience, because their point of reference is different from yours. Their assumptions are different. They may get close in their interpretation but not as close as you'd like! For instance, an Indian group watched an evangelistic mime being performed. They enjoyed the presentation, although some were amused by the “missionary play.” The mime presented a young man searching after wealth and happiness. He offers himself to Christ, but the Devil tempts him away by promising everything he wants if he'll take the drugs and alcohol he is offering. Christ rescues the boy each time until, in the end, the boy chooses Christ over the Devil. To Christian audiences, this seems like a clear picture of salvation from sin. The Indian audience, however, did not quite get that message. They instead saw it as a play about substance abuse, social evils, the struggle between good and evil (certainly), with the final message being “stick with God and do good.” The message they received was good, and close to the intent, but their point of reference on salvation was different and so the interpretation was not complete.

Understand the context because context informs content. There was a woman, a cleaning lady, who was sexually harrassed by her supervisor. Both were married and their families were friends, yet the supervisor (who, incidentally, is a clergyman and preaches regularly) threatened her job if she did not give in to him. What should she do? She did not want to threaten the relationship between the families or incur the wrath of her husband, who would view the advances as her fault. Cultural values determine different courses of action and view the problem in different ways. For Americans, the cardinal sin has been committed - sexual impropriety - and should be dealt with. For the African woman, however, the greater sin was the threat to the relationship. She chose avoiding the man, ignoring, even rebuking in private, before threatening him with the ultimate relationship problem - she would tell his wife unless he gave up his pursuit, and the relationship between the families would also be broken. It worked.

The point is, if you were to present a drama on this issue, what approach would you take? Sexual immorality is the great sin? Or jeopardising a relationship is the great sin? Same situation, two different interpretations. Both approaches may be understood, but in the African context, the second approach will strike closer to the heart and be more relevant to them. So try looking at the situations for the felt need - not what you think is needed.

Where and when are you performing? Is it an appropriate time and place for religious dialogue? In Indian villages, most religious dramas are done during the time of harvest or during the many festivals. But that may not necessarily be the best time and place to introduce an opposing religion; it could be accepted magnaminously, but it could also cause resentment at the perceived threat to their ingrained beliefs and traditions. On the other hand, that is the time that an agricultural-oriented society has the free time to watch an “entertainment.”

What is the makeup of your audience? Are they young “Generation Xers?” The young people of the world are moving increasingly towards Western ways and are very open to Western styles of music, dance and drama. Eventually, however, it is most likely that they will return, in part at least, to their cultural roots. Even in their Westernization, they still have strong ties to their traditional culture and it would be good to be aware of what that culture looks like and how it can flavor your presentations. Japanese pop bands have a definite Japanese look - and it looks different than an American pop band! This shows not only in outward style and choreography, but in the values and content presented.

Are you performing in a city or a village? The rural cultures are much more strongly tied to their historic roots and culture and will be less likely to truly understand and appreciate a foreign form of theatre - it might cause interest and curiosity, but probably won't truly communicate to the heart.

There are many dynamics that can affect the receptivity of the audience: one of the strongest factors in India is caste. Different castes have different forms of traditional theatre. The higher castes in Tamil Nadu claim Bharatanatyam, a classical dance-drama form, as their art form and appreciate it greatly. The Dalits (Untouchables), however, have received poor treatment, oppression, from those castes and therefore tend to associate Bharatanatyam with them and do not view it as favorably. On the other hand, the art form of the rural areas, therukoothu, is extremely popular outside the city and has a long history. The upper castes of the city, however, view it with contempt as “not real theatre.” Some of these differing viewpoints may be overcome by an art form outside the system - such as a foreign visiting mime team, but it is good to be aware that there is no universal drama form that speaks to hearts.

So, is mime the universal language? I have to say “no.” There is no such thing as a universal language, but with careful attention to culturally-based signal systems, you can get closer to a more universal understanding of your message.

*(Donald K. Smith, *Creating Understanding*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House. 1992. p. 146)

GO ABROAD AND WIN SOULS IN 6 WEEKS!

(Pitfalls and pointers on how short-termers can be a help, and not a hindrance, to missionaries and local Christian workers)

It is every missionary's dream to win people to the Lord right away. The reality is that it takes years of culture-learning, prayer, and hard work. It is rare for conversions to happen “en masse,” especially at the beginning. So don't expect that your 3 weeks in a country will be characterized by crowds of converts, no matter how good a job you do with your drama!

I never discount the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people to Himself at any time and in any way He chooses - including first-time film showings and dramas and other short-term methods that are culturally flawed! God uses willing avenues to work. Just be careful about assuming

that God's power can make up for lack of preparation and cultural sensitivity on our part.

Much has been said about dramas or films that are presented with crowds responding to the call for "decision." This has been used as justification for drama and films being the best way to evangelize because hundreds will respond at the first showing! Further research has pointed out that these results are often flawed. There are many other factors influencing that show of hands, such as the desire to be hospitable to the visitors, not wanting to make them feel bad by having no response. Some people have shared how the village would get together beforehand and decide which people would raise their hands at the invitation time so there would be a good showing from that village. Some people raise their hands for any kind of invitation. Some are overwhelmed by the technology shown and the wealth implied and respond because they want that lifestyle and you seem the best avenue of getting closer to obtaining it. Just the fact that you have come from outside, most probably from the wealthy European nations, means (particularly in their eyes) that you have a lot of money. And by comparison with the majority of developing countries, you do. So there is already the barrier of perceived wealth to overcome.

Creating dependency is another possible pitfall. Mexico has, fortunately and unfortunately, been the recipient of hundreds of short-term missions groups from the United States. There have been many good works done, VBS schools conducted, people saved, and so on. Unfortunately, there has also been damage done in the creation of dependency upon outside groups. One missionary shared several stories of his experience with short-term groups. They came to his area to help build churches and other buildings. They brought in all the materials and tools and worked hard while they were there to get the structures up. Things were not quite finished when they left, but they left the tools and materials and instructions on how to finish up. They returned a year later and found everything exactly as it was, including the ladder still propped up against the wall where it was left. When asked why they had not finished the work the Mexicans were surprised: "we didn't want to interfere with your work! This is, after all, your project, not ours." The people had been left out of the decision-making and had no ownership over this "foreign project," even though it was meant to benefit the Mexican people.

Some pointers:

1. Attitude, attitude, attitude. Americans are viewed with suspicion in most countries overseas and viewed as obnoxious, self-important know-it alls. Don't contribute to this stereotype! "For Jesus there was only one way of incarnation - a man must make himself one with those whom he wishes to serve." This applies to our drama as well as all actions overseas.
2. Look for how you can serve, not be served. Realize that at best you can serve as a crowd-gatherer or attention-getter. Missionaries have spent years learning their host culture, and national workers are often in sensitive/precarious situations. They know the audience better than you, and they are left with the consequences of your visit (including any problems created as well as successes). Don't view your trip as a glorified holiday. This creates work for your hosts.
3. Don't expect that your mimes, or dramas, or other work will immediately impact people and cause them to turn their lives over to Christ. It is more helpful to view your drama as a crowd-puller for the missionary or national worker to do the work he/she has been trained to do and is better situated to do.

4. Be flexible! Schedules are readily broken, rearranged or non-existent when you're abroad. Be prepared for anything and nothing to happen. Conveniences you are used to (like hot, running water, flush toilets, orderly traffic, electricity, hygiene) will not always be there. Be prepared for the worst and enjoy the little blessings you get!

All this said, the best result of your short-term mission trip will be its impact on you. You will see new places, different beliefs, different lifestyles, great poverty, great wealth, and many other things that have so far been out of your experience. Use the time to sharpen your prayers for the world and to gather as much information as possible on other cultures and beliefs so that you can continue to prepare for effective ministry in the future.

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