

## What's Mime Is Yours

# Honoring Akhi, a peaceful voice from the East

By Bob Kloos

Nearly 10 years have passed since readers began writing letters to Akhi, the wise sage who sits at the Damascus gates. Akhi offers wisdom



from the East, where light first greets the day. So this issue of *The Beacon* marks something of an anniversary for our beggar friend, whose wisdom is perhaps needed now more than ever.

I first encountered the character of Akhi in the video "Fools for Christ," which included a segment on Akhi's creator, Ken Feit. Feit, a former Jesuit, was a brilliant storyteller, clown, and proclaimer of the gospel. His resourcefulness enabled him to bring truth effectively to the eyes and ears of his often impromptu audience.

My exposure to Muslim culture is quite limited and was even more so when I first saw Ken Feit as Akhi. His engaging manner gave testimony to the integration of religion and dress in the manner and culture of the East. The encounter made me feel very Western and fairly introverted. But since that time I have shared that story often and in a variety of settings, so that I believe Akhi's message comes across loud and clear: "Know your path; learn the dance."

This, indeed, was Feit's message, which he conveyed in so many of his one-person monologues. While he has had a great impact on my technique, I knew this master storyteller only indirectly, through friends such as Tria Thompson and Margie Brown. He was their teacher and friend until his untimely death in 1981. They in turn introduced me to the

national arena of performing arts ministry in the early 80's.

Thankfully his work lives on in a book and a video and the storytelling of others. Joseph F. Martin details his life and ministry in, Foolish Wisdom: Stories, Activities, and Reflections from Ken Feit, I.F. (Itinerant Fool) [Resource Pub., San Jose CA 1990].

Seeing Ken Feit present Akhi on video gave me a remarkable vantage point from which I can retell the story of Akhi with some confidence. Even on film I was struck by the power of not only the telling but the teller. Because Feit's story worked for me, I hope my retelling works for somebody else.

In performance Akhi first makes his presence known by a call to prayer as he fills his lungs and sings out "A-l-l-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-h!"

Audience members are usually taken by surprise when I launch into the first-person story, told in a vaguely Eastern dialect. Some remain confused throughout the experience. Perhaps the thought that they alone must discover their path in life has never occurred to them. Perhaps they don't want to know it. Whatever the case, long after the story is told, the image of Akhi is easily recalled.

My rendition offended some listeners at a West Side church a couple of years ago. They were from Pakistan and apparently took offense at my accent and my effort to portray a character from the East. That wasn't the first (or the last) time someone took exception to part of a Beacon Street presentation. Unfortunately, the couple left shortly after I started the story; they did not stay long enough to catch the wisdom at the end

More often than not, however, Akhi merits admiration. A few years ago we received a kind note thanking us for the "Ask Akhi" column. It was

written by a *Beacon* reader who came from a religious tradition that was not Christian. She said she appreciated a perspective that drew from different imagery. Her words reminded us of the universality of the art that we present — how things that look and sound like the Christian gospel to us resonate with other faith traditions as well.

I honestly can't remember how the idea for the Ask Akhi column came about. Jim Pipik, a former office manager of our nonprofit ministry, created the illustration of Akhi that appears with the column. Jim is currently working with the Cleveland Diocesan Office on Ministry with Youth and Young Adults. His artistic touch is still finding expression in their newsletter.

Ultimately, the column provided a format that suited our need to connect with readers in a helpful way. And just as the beggar at the side of the road is often passed by, Beacon Street performers routinely find themselves looking for ways to share wisdom that is often overlooked. From his poverty, Akhi shares riches. With his cries, he speaks for the voiceless. He begs for our attention and takes what we have to offer.

According to the story, Akhi does not spend the money he receives, but instead offers it to the Holy Mountain and delights in the sounds it makes as it tumbles down. He is content simply to relieve us of our wealth. His hope is to make us "lighter," so it is easier for us to dance. Indeed, the face of the poor, no matter where we see it, invites us to do the same.

So the gospel and Akhi will chorus together in issues of *The Beacon* for the foreseeable future. Perhaps you will have a question for him down the road.