

TREE FESTIVAL BRANCHES OUT TO ALL RELIGIONS

LEADERS from a number of different religious communities came together to celebrate the Jewish New Year for Trees in St John's Wood last week.

Representatives from the Jewish, Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Zoroastrian communities attended the special Seder service at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue on St John's Wood Road on Wednesday.

The New Year for Trees, or Tu Bi-Sh'vat, is traditionally the anniversary for deciding when fruit could be harvested from trees. Its celebrations mark a renewal of the

obligation for Jews to cherish nature and be faithful to their responsibility for the earth and its resources.

Ninety people joined in the celebrations where they were served different varieties of fruit and nuts as part of the annual festivities.

The synagogue's Senior Rabbi Alexandra Wright said the event was "a marvellous celebration of faiths in Britain today".

The synagogue, which is the oldest and largest Liberal Jewish community in the UK, is starting its centenary celebrations in February.



Left, Rajinder Singh Bhasin, Jehangir Sarosh, Madhava Turumella, Revd. Dr Anders Berquist, Diana Eyre, Revd. Deacon Meliton and Rabbi Alexandra Wright; Above, the festival gets into full swing.

Pictures by Jonathan Goldberg

Actress set to shine in gig for Pentagon crowd

US officials to watch play on Afghanistan's history

Ben Bloom

A MARYLEBONE law-graduate-turned-actor is to star in a play about Afghanistan in front of key US government and military officials from the Pentagon next month.

Sheena Bhattessa, 27, who has lived off Marylebone High Street for 12 years, studied for a law degree at King's College London before turning her attention to acting.

Now, just a few years into the acting world, she is set to take part in the biggest performances of her short career when she stars in the Washington performances of *The Great Game: Afghanistan* at the Shakespeare Theatre, Harman Hall, on February 11 and 12.

"It's great to be involved in it," she said.

"I've been doing the play for two years now and the climax is performing for the Pentagon because you are performing to people who are actually making the decisions on Afghanistan."

Such a high-profile performance is a far stretch from Ms Bhattessa's original aspirations growing up, when her parents expected her to become a lawyer.

"I starting doing drama classes when I was about four because my parents wanted me to have confidence and be good at public speaking," she said.

"Then when I decided I wanted to be a lawyer it was clear it would help if I was good at public speaking. In any case I think there's a good parallel between being a lawyer and an actor.

"Acting was very much just a hobby, which was great because I don't regret my studying, but after university the idea of sitting behind a desk didn't appeal to me."

With her focus turned to acting, she then spent a year training in New York at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute following in the footsteps of Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman and Marilyn Monroe.



HIGH-PROFILE: Sheena Bhattessa as Gohar-Shad, the Queen of Herat, in *The Great Game: Afghanistan*.

After a stint in an online interactive BBC drama and performances in three Bollywood films, she landed the part in *The Great Game: Afghanistan* in 2009.

The show, which consists of 12 half-hour plays, is split into three parts covering Afghanistan's history from 1842-1930, 1979-1996 and 1996-2010.

After two runs at the Tricycle Theatre on Kilburn High Road in 2009 and 2010, the play went on a 14-week tour to America at the end of last year.

"This play is the biggest thing I've done to date," she said.

"Before I started I had little to no knowledge of Afghanistan or anything about its history. You only get to see a very biased view on the news.

"The play shows that history has

repeated itself many times over the past few centuries but it doesn't take a particular viewpoint.

"I play two main characters in the show. The first is a 16-year-old girl who earns \$5,000 a year growing and picking opium and my father has to decide whether to send me to get an education instead.

"The other is Gohar-Shad, the Queen of Herat, who was quite a significant female in Afghanistan. She encouraged creativity and education for girls."

Having been bitten by the Afghanistan bug she says she is currently working on turning the international bestselling book *Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep*, into a film.

"Hopefully the interest is there," she says.



AT SPECSAVERS YOU CAN GET A HEARING AID NOBODY WILL NOTICE EVEN YOUR BANK MANAGER

Most people who need a hearing aid worry about how it will look, and how much it will cost. At Specsavers, the latest miniature technology means that even those closest to you will notice the improvement in your hearing, but not your hearing aid. As for the cost, we offer outstanding value for money, with our complete digital hearing package from just £495.

Book a free hearing test on 0800 731 8420 or visit specsavers.co.uk/hearing



Applies to Specsavers' advance range. Both hearing aids for customer's sole use. Excludes other offers and discount vouchers.

The following are registered trademarks of the Specsavers Group of Companies - advance, the Specsavers logo, Specsavers. ©2010 Specsavers Hearcare Group Limited. All rights reserved.