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SPECIAL FEATURES:

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An Editorial by Paul Johnson

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Connection & Inspiration

By Paul Johnson

As I reflect back on the 2001 CITA National Conference in Oakland, I realize that anyone and everyone's experience is quite personal. For me to give an overview or a synopsis is for me to tell of the conference from my eyes, ears, and heart. I could tell you of the "Shakespeare" Master Class I attended and was changed by; the prayer times I participated in; my impressions from the evening shows; the individual people I enjoyed time with; the long drive I took on Friday, and the California Shakespeare performance I saw; the classes I taught; the meetings I attended; the books I read. It was a full week, and as always, I came home tired and yet refreshed. I, like you I hope, thoroughly enjoyed myself and received from CITA what I hoped to receive, connection and inspiration.

It is what many of us long for -- connection and inspiration. And not just at a conference, but on a weekly basis, as we gather in our houses of worship, when we meet with friends and family, or when we pursue our craft and calling. I dare say that they are something we long for daily, hourly.

Because of our unique calling and design as dramatic artists, we have a way of participating in and reflecting connection and inspiration. Shakespeare spoke of this through Theseus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act 5, Scene 1):

The Poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And, as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

To give shape or a place to live or a name to something that previously was shapeless, homeless or nameless is a privilege and a unique power. And it is our gifting. But as believer artists, we attach to this naming truth. When Adam named the animals, he was speaking of their essence, their truth.

Frederick Buechner wrote, "What is truth? Life is truth, the life of the world, your own life, and the life inside the world you are. The task of the preacher [or artist] is to hold up life to us; by whatever gifts he or she has of imagination, eloquence, simple candor, to create images of life through which we can somehow see into the wordless truth of our lives" (16, parenthetical comments mine).

In the depth of connection and inspiration, I long for there to be truth. I have had the privilege of participating in a weekly men's group for the past two years. This has been a group where I have found connection and inspiration, but at the core of it, I have found truth, truth spoken boldly and lovingly that has shaped and reshaped the way in which I live and move in this world. They have given form to that which was formless in my heart and mind. And so that is what we do, as we prepare our sketches or plays to present to the audience or congregation, in hopes that we can put a name or an image to what has been desired but elusive within their souls.

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formless in my
heart and mind.

David McFadzean, whose keynote speech I thoroughly enjoyed this year, said, "Faith has an aspect of walking backwards into the future. Cautiously, so as not to stumble, and remembering all that God has done for you; walking and holding the hand of light. Behind us is a long and storied past -- that's our psalm, our mural." It is our art and it is what is our responsibility to proclaim through our performances -- that which was previously formless within us and now has been named.

Again, Buechner:

At the level of words, what do they say, these prophet-preachers? They say this and they say that. They say things that are relevant, lacerating, profound, beautiful, spine-chilling, and more besides. They put words to both the wonder and the horror of the world, and the words can be looked up in the dictionary or the biblical commentary and can be interpreted, passed on, understood, but because these words are poetry, are image and symbol as well as meaning, are sound and rhythm, maybe above all are passion, they set echoes going the way a choir in a great cathedral does, only it is we who become the cathedral and in us that the words echo. (21)

The echoes are what stir us, what moves us, what transform us as we are haunted by the sounds. Cold facts cannot produce this connection and inspiration. Only the living word, filled with life and image. If it is true what Aristotle said, that "poetry is truer than history," then let us continue to speak the truth through our craft, the truth that we experience and yearn for more of, and to facilitate connection and inspiration.

One final time, Buechner:

So let him use words, but, in addition to using them to explain, expound, exhort, let him use them to evoke, to set us dreaming as well as thinking, to use words as at their prophetic and truthful, the prophets used them to stir in us memories and longings and intuitions that we starve for without knowing that we starve. Let him use words which do not only try to give answers to the questions that we ask or ought to ask but which help us to hear the questions that we do not have words for asking and to hear the silence that those questions rise out of and the silence that is the answer to those questions. Drawing on nothing fancier than the poetry of his own life, let him use words and images that help make the surface of our lives transparent to the truth that lies deep within them, which is the wordless truth of who we are and who God is and the gospel of our meeting. (23)

If each time we gather or perform we can do that, then that would be a good thing.

See you next time.

(Quotes by Frederick Buechner from Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale. I recommend chapter one; okay, I also recommend chapters two, three, and four. It is an incredible book-- quite relevant, truthful, and deliciously scandalous.)

A NOTE FROM DEANNA:

I've been editor of this magazine since the fall of 1998, and am stepping down as editor with this issue. I want to thank all of the contributors to the magazine, and encourage all CITA members to think about writing for the magazine, or suggesting ideas for articles. This magazine is intended to serve its readers, to provide resources, encouragement, and fodder for thought. Our art lives in the moment; the words on the page stay for much longer. Take your time reading this issue, and re-reading it. There is much to digest. And if you are interested in editing the next issue of the magazine, contact Dale Savidge at Exec@cita.org, or me at djent@fontbonne.edu.

Peace, DJ

Paul Johnson is the chair of CITA's Board of Directors. He is a professional performer now working with Student Life in Birmingham, Alabama.

WHY KEEP WRITING FOR THE THEATRE?

by Buzz McLaughlin

Boarding a flight from Toronto to Vancouver for the opening of my play *Sister Calling My Name* at Pacific Theatre last October, I sat down next to a woman who within seconds managed to break through that uncomfortable stranger-sitting-next-to-you-on-the-plane syndrome and struck up a pleasant conversation. And although I had planned on doing some quiet reading and catching up on sleep during the long flight, instead I found myself engaged in a lively discussion before we even left the ground.

I quickly learned she lived on the sea coast somewhere near Vancouver, ran a successful gift shop, and was returning from a buying trip to Toronto. But she didn't want to talk about herself. She wanted to know about the playwright's life and about my play, especially with this current production being its Canadian premiere. By the time we'd taken off and headed west high over Ontario, the conversation had broadened. We began exploring the nature of the creative act, the writing process, the place of the artist in today's culture, the need for spiritual themes to be given their fair hearing in the marketplace of ideas, and on and on.

Although we never directly touched on our own personal faith walks, it became clear to me that this woman was a believer in things supernatural and that, for her, life was full of mystery and wonder. We tended to agree, at least in principle, with everything we discussed—especially on the need for more light in this dark age and that God, regardless of how he manifests himself for any person, needs to be embraced in a meaningful way if there is to be any real happiness in life.

When we arrived at the Vancouver airport and headed toward the baggage claim, we were still going at it. Then, suddenly, her bag came, we said our goodbyes, and she disappeared in the crowd. She'd try to catch the play, she'd said before leaving, and I hoped she'd follow through. I wanted to share this play with people like her. Of course, I also knew that life has a knack for getting in the way of good intentions and that she probably wouldn't get there. So I shrugged it off and started looking for my ride to the theatre.

...the need for
more light in this
dark age...

The next four days were exciting ones for me. I arrived for the final dress rehearsal so I could have at least a bit of time to work with director Morris Ertman, Artistic Director Ron Reed, and the rest of the fine company assembled at Pacific Theatre. The opening went beautifully and the mounting of the play was first-rate. But the conversation I'd had with my new and fleeting friend in the skies over Canada lingered in my mind. And as I watched the faces of audience members at the four performances I attended, I began thinking again about why I write plays and who I'm writing for.

For years, you see, my most difficult predicament as a playwright has been (and still is) that while a large majority of the people who come to see my plays generally like them, many or most of the critics are hostile to the “spiritual/religious” themes and values espoused. To their credit, the unfriendly reviewers often acknowledge the enthusiastic audience reception a play has received, but their singular goal seems clear: to do everything in their power to keep people away from the box office so the play will lose money and the theatre won't venture down that road again. The production values themselves—the acting, the directing, the design elements—are rarely attacked. It's the play itself. The story. What the play is trying to say. Theatrical critics are militant gatekeepers.

As it turned out, this was, again, the case with Pacific Theatre's production of *Sister Calling My Name* as well as a fine Orlando production which opened at Trilemma Productions a week later. Both were beautifully mounted shows and the companies were devoted to the work. The audiences who came loved the play, which follows the journey of a man from cynicism and near despair to a tentative but hopeful reconnection with his past, his true self, and with God. It's highly theatrical, shifting through the past and present, and at times blending the two together. Along the way *Sister* has won a number of major competitions, including the National Play Award, and has been produced seven times so far with a number of other productions still in the works. But with the exception of one large professional mounting at Charlotte Repertory Theatre (its LORT premiere), it hasn't gotten by the majority of the critics, especially the most powerful ones (and the rave review in the Charlotte Observer was written, as it turned out, by a critic who just happens to teach Sunday school—definitely an exception to the rule).

Because of the hostility of the general media to anything that portrays faith in a positive light, playwrights like me find themselves in a peculiar dilemma: how can we get professional theatres (any theatres—so-called “Christian” or “secular”) to do our work if the critical response is going to be predictably negative? And how do we keep ourselves from leaning more and

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more toward “less offensive” stories so that we can see our plays come to life more often? Let’s face it, these powerful gatekeepers largely determine what gets done.

The dilemma deepens when I ponder the fact that the people who do come to my plays seem genuinely to enjoy them. Even those who say they haven’t made any sort of faith journey themselves have told me in countless talkback sessions that the play they have just experienced has still worked for them on some meaningful level. So it seems clear that the solution is to coax people into the theatre in spite of the gatekeepers. Of course, easier said than done. Critics love to dictate what should and shouldn’t be seen. And although people don’t like to admit it, they are easily swayed; it doesn’t take much to tip the scales. Entertainment time is a precious commodity not to be wasted. So the public reads the critics like investors read stock analyses and make purchases based on “expert” advice.

An even more fundamental issue involving the critics is that producers, especially those who run theatres with some sort of faith-based mission (however hidden that might be), don’t want to be perceived by their peers in the secular theatre world as second-rate citizens because they’re driven by a religious “agenda.” They fear they’ll be labeled as a thinly disguised proselytizing machine and therefore summarily dismissed. I’ve talked to a number of artistic directors who consider this a significant issue. They want and need professional status to be taken seriously by the public, the press, and their colleagues in the business and, as a result, have to be forever on their guard to protect their “legitimate” image.

Of course there are those few artistic directors like Ron Reed and the Trilemma Productions partners of Heather Avery Clyde, Jim Morris, and Aaron Wiederspahn who don’t care what the critics say—at least now and then. On occasion, they can afford to do a show simply because they love it, critics be damned. But even these companies have to be careful. They’re running large operations with tight budgets and the margin of error is small from season to season. I know. I used to run a professional theatre.

So where does that leave playwrights like me whose faith informs their entire body of work? The honest answer is, for the most part, out in the cold. If the vast majority of secular theatres are uncomfortable with plays that deal with positive religious themes, given the general “anti-God” mentality within the arts community, and if most faith-driven theatres are afraid of negative reviews because of “God content” (often preferring “safe” comedies or plays and musicals that are critic and crowd pleasers but don’t have a whisper of Judeo-Christian theological underpinnings), then what other conclusion can be drawn? We’re caught

in a Catch 22 that's not of our making and there's nothing we can do about it.

As a result, I keep coming back to the same old question: Why do I keep writing for the theatre? And just as fast I come back to a two-part answer. One was supplied some years ago by Horton Foote when I talked with him at the Dramatists Guild during my interview series there in the early 1990's. Here's a man who couldn't get anything produced for over two decades right in the middle of his career. Among other things, he said the following when I asked him what keeps him going as a playwright:

My gut instinct tells me that the first person you have to please is yourself, and if you are passionate about it and can find a way to really relate to what you know and feel, then you will find an audience. Somehow your work will get done.

From the first moment I heard him say this, I knew it was a piece of wisdom for all us struggling to get our voices heard.

The second part of the answer comes directly from the people who have seen my plays and have sought me out through personal encounters, letters, phone calls, and emails to tell me how moved they were or what impact a play has had on them personally. That's what happened late last fall a few days after my Pacific Theatre production closed. The stack of hostile reviews were already filed away and I was checking my email before going back to work on my newest play—a piece that's so full of religious and Christian themes that I wondered each day as I was writing it why I was bothering because no one was going to touch it. And there in my Inbox was a long letter from my airplane friend telling me she had managed to catch the last performance of my play in Vancouver. She told me she had just lost a loved one and that the play was a powerful healing experience for her, that it changed her whole outlook about life and how to live it. The letter ended with "As I sat listening to the last ten minutes of the play, I was hearing stifled sobs, open weeping, and handkerchiefs blown. This play touched many people. Myself included."

These are the folks I write for and always will—the people who one way or another manage to find their way into a seat at a performance of one of my plays. What other reason to keep going does a playwright need?

Buzz McLaughlin's plays include *Sister Calling My Name*, *Leaving Jane*, *Traverse des Sioux*, *Spirit On The Plains*, and *Absent Without Leave*. He is also the author of [The Playwright's Process: Learning the Craft From Today's Leading Dramatists](#). The founder of Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, he teaches playwriting at Drew University.

The Production History of “When Scott Comes Home” An Angry Preacher, a Million Dollars, and *American Theatre Magazine*

by Jeff Barker

Summer, 1994 - I hear Mignon Zylstra tell the story of her family’s journey with the death of her son Scott. Mignon tells me that she’s writing a book, and I make the casual comment, “Maybe it could be adapted into a play.”

1995 - Mignon does some sleuthing behind my back. She decides that I’m up to snuff. She encourages me to consider writing the play, even though her book is not finished. I’m busy with another project, so I put Mignon off.

1996 - Mignon learns that I’ve completed the full-length I was working on (*Unspoken for Time*, which was showcased at CITA in 1996 and later premiered professionally at Saltworks in Pittsburgh). Mignon sends me some tapes and family documents. I respectfully reply that I cannot find enough conflict to turn the Zylstra family story into drama.

Summer, 1997 - Mignon finishes her book, *When AIDS Comes Home* (Thomas Nelson, Publishers). I read it and immediately secure permission to attempt an adaptation. But I know I’m taking a big risk, because I still can’t find a core conflict.

Fall, 1997 - I cast a group of student actors (Northwestern College’s touring company) and select a dramaturg. Because of the risky material, I appoint someone to pray with and for us through the entire process. Eventually, this person will travel with us and pray during set up and performance. Together we study Mignon’s book and improvise countless scenes. I still can’t find the elusive core conflict. I get this advice from the pastor who performed Scott Zylstra’s funeral: “Stick close to Mignon.” I decide that Mignon herself will house the central struggle of the play. I use a narrative device designed to function as a metaphor of this conflict.

January, 1998 - I finish a draft and fly to Seattle to go over the script with Mignon and Bob. Rehearsals begin with the first tour only weeks away.

March, 1998 - The ensemble tours the play throughout Florida. They get numerous invitations to perform it again. They decide to keep the play in their repertoire for a second year.

The Zylstra’s
local church
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April, 1998 - The play is performed for the annual board meeting of the college. Mignon and Bob are present, and it is a moving and important moment in the life of the college. As I sit in the back of the theatre, I finally relax enough to realize that I tackled something really dangerous because of the number of lives connected to this particular story.

January, 1999 - The play is invited to “The Lewis Event”, a national arts conference sponsored through the Harvard Veritas Forum. Author Daniel Taylor sees the play there and writes, “The performance of *When Scott Comes Home* was one of my most powerful theatrical experiences in a lifetime of going to plays. It brings a great deal of light to a subject that usually only produces heat.”

March, 1999 - The play tours to Scott Zylstra’s home town. After some struggle within the church board, the Zylstra’s local church does not permit a performance in their facility. But on the Sunday that the play is scheduled at the local community theatre, the pastor invites the congregation to a play “based on the book by our own Mignon Zylstra.” This is a significant milestone in Mignon’s own journey.

Fall, 1999 - An audience member offers a grant of \$35,000 to fund a national tour. The team decides to keep the play in current repertoire to prepare for a national tour the following summer.

March, 2000 - The ensemble begins to use wireless microphones which enables them to tour to several high school events with over 1000 students each.



Drama Ministries Ensemble 2001: Front - Matt Foss, Sara Larrabee, Corinne Fanning, Tim Schoenfeld; Middle - Leah Elder, Chris Anderson, Andrea Jo Brummel, Tonya Neufeld; Back - Jonathon Allsup, Sarah Kennedy, Steve Hydeen



Matt Foss as Scott, Sarah Kennedy as Mignon, Leah Elder as Storyteller.

Summer, 2000 - At the beginning of the national summer tour, a group of picketers arrive outside the theatre. They admit they have not seen the play. They send letters to the hosts of the entire summer tour asking that the play be cancelled. It is not cancelled. The college administration remains whole-heartedly supportive.

Fall, 2000 - The college board meets to approve a \$9 million theatre building. The picketers return. A retired businessman who saw the play's first tour in Florida announces that he is giving the first million to the fundraising for the new theatre. He is a consistent supporter of the college, but in the face of the protests, his gift is connected with the play. A reporter asks him about the play, and he acknowledges seeing it three times and appreciating it. The next day, the newspaper in Iowa's state capital carries the front page headline, "Play Angers Preacher, Inspires \$1 Million Gift."

December, 2000 - The attention surrounding the play has begun to die down, but American Theatre magazine prints a news item on the fall's events. Their story is based on the somewhat skewed headlines, but, as we say in the theatre, all press is good press.

December, 2000 - The chair of the Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival Region 5 calls me up to ask me about the article in American Theatre. I tell him it's, after all, just a little church play. "But is it any good?" he asks. I send him a script. The selection team reads the script and invites the play to the festival.

January, 2001 - We travel to the festival in Kansas City. *When Scott Comes Home* is the hit of the festival. It receives an immediate standing ovation. One of my students says that the national artistic director of KC/ACTF said it was one of the most painfully beautiful plays he's ever seen.

February, 2001 - Funding arrives to tour the play for another summer. The college decides to proceed. The protesters have not yet made their intentions known.

A copy of the script may be downloaded at:

<http://home.nwciowa.edu/dept/theatre/barkerplays.html>

Jeff Barker earned his MFA at the University of South Dakota. Since 1988, he and his wife, Karen, have held a joint professorship in acting and directing at Northwestern College, where he is also playwright in residence. He has over thirty produced plays to his credit, including *The Final approach of Flight 232*, *Unspoken for Time*, and *Cross Purposes*. Jeff and Karen have 3 children and live in Orange City, Iowa.

Why Live Theatre?

- or -

“Can’t We Just Watch the Movie?”

by George Halitzka

A few weeks ago, at the advice of a friend, I finally watched *The Big Kahuna*. As Roger Ebert points out, this character-driven, poignantly funny movie examines the two religions of America—the Sacred, represented by a sincere but naive Evangelical, and the Secular, seen in the life of a win-at-all-costs industrial lubricant salesman. It’s well worth the price of admission. While you may not find it at your local Lackluster Video, and a few parts will cause much head-wagging in fundamentalist circles, I found it to be worthwhile, enjoyable, and thought-provoking.

The Big Kahuna didn’t begin its life on celluloid, however, but as a stage play called *Hospitality Suite*. And as you watch the film, its theatrical origins are clearly evident. There’s nothing particularly “cinematic” about it—there are few changes in locale, no essential visual metaphors, and not a single eye-popping boom shot. In fact, other than a few crowd scenes not essential to the story, the whole thing could be played on stage “as is.” Sure, it’s very well-acted, by the trio of Kevin Spacey, Danny DeVito, and Peter Facinelli—but other than the big names, there’s no particular reason not to just watch it on stage.

A few days after my encounter with *The Big Kahuna*, I went to see *The Miracle Worker*, as performed by the Olde Towne Hall Theatre, a local community theatre group. It was my first time watching the play, and I was quite taken in by the story. Even my sister (who I dragged along) agreed that by community theatre standards, it was well-acted and directed.

Sure, the set, which crammed three rooms onto a tiny proscenium stage and looked a little flimsy, wasn’t on par with a flawless movie set. And unfortunately, the director cast an Annie Sullivan who, while not terrible, just couldn’t manage the protagonist’s role like a Hollywood star. And the scene changes were too slow, and the “lighting design” utilized a grand total of twelve fixtures, and the actor portraying Captain Keller sounded like he was in love with his own voice, and . . . but that’s okay. For what it was, it was an above-average production. It was a play of faith, of the human condition, of love and of triumph over odds. There were some moments of inspired act-

It was a play
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condition....

Is live theatre as worthwhile as cinema?

ing. Most importantly, the play transported me into its world, caused me to empathize with the characters, kept me wondering about the outcome, and even made me shed a few tears when Helen finally spoke her first word!

The Great Debate

But on the way home—after my sister and I completed the time-honored amateur-theatre-critics’ pastime of tearing apart the production—we took up the subject of whether film is superior to live theatre. Her contention is that while comedies and musicals are probably better seen live, dramas—like *The Miracle Worker*—might as well be watched on film. According to my sister, the camera’s abilities to use visual images more fully, show close-ups of pathos, and virtually engulf the viewer make for a more compelling experience than a live stage production can possibly deliver.

Apparently, judging from the theatre-going public’s tastes, many people agree with her. Artistic directors know that if they need to make some fast cash at the box office, they should produce a well-known musical comedy, and the world will beat a path to their door. As for dramas, it seems that most people are willing to wait for the video (if they watch them at all).

I confess that I was a bit disturbed by the whole conversation with my sister. I have nothing against comedies—though I would like to see less Andrew Lloyd Webber spectacles occupying valuable theatre space. But for those of us serious about the art of theatre, it’s not pleasant to think that in the opinion of many, we could be relegated to the world of *Lend Me a Tenor* and *The Phantom of the Opera*!

If I can only produce laughs and show tunes on stage, I should dust off my black beret and go to film school. After all, I got into this business partly because it’s fun (and partly because I can’t do anything else). But mostly, I decided on a theatrical career because I’m passionate about creating art: expressing the wringings of my soul, the questions of my heart, and the sparks of the Divine in my life. I want to move people, to illuminate the human condition, to reveal the transcendent in life, to transform hearts and minds—not just to entertain!

Theatre vs. Film

I’m not here to bash the art of filmmaking. I enjoy sitting back and relaxing with a fun video as much as the next guy. I appreciate it even more when an excellent cinematic experience challenges me and makes me more fully human. But after the discussion with my sister, I honestly had to do some soul-searching. Is live theatre as worthwhile as cinema? Can it still “compete” in an intensely visual culture? Most importantly, does my medium of choice have any benefits that film does not offer?

While I’m a wee bit biased, I came to the conclusion that there is a strong case to be made for theatre as a distinctive and valuable art form. No, plays aren’t films minus the special effects. They aren’t just musical

eye candy, either. And—dare I say it? Perhaps the folks in Hollywood shouldn't have made the “definitive,” filmatic versions of *The Big Kahuna* or *The Miracle Worker* at all. Here's eight reasons why.

1. Theatre is Alive.

Film seems rather antiseptic at times. The actors are beautiful people; the lighting is sublime; the shot selection is carefully planned for maximum impact. Hollywood sets are perfect—perfectly realistic, but not often artistic statements in and of themselves. Despite its graphic depictions of sex, violence, and the rest of the Dirty Dozen, none of the events on celluloid are actually happening right before your eyes.

On the other hand, live theatre is three dimensional. It is there; it is current; it is life size; it is dirty and in your face—it is as close as you can get to real life in the arts.

For better and for worse, cinema is exactly the same every time you watch it. But in live theatre, one performance is never identical to the next. There is always a new audience, a new spark of creativity, a new energy, or—ahem—a new mistake. We create a living organism with a life of its own for each audience.

2. Theatre Requires an Act of the Will.

People are used to watching film, television, and video passively. They sit down, grab the popcorn, and wait to be entertained. Need a restroom break? Just press the “pause” button—or at worst, duck out of the theater and down the hall. Have some friends there? If you're in the living room, feel free to talk—nobody cares! (In the average Schwarzeneger flick, you won't miss much anyway.)

But in our passivity, we are conditioned against engaging our intellects. Thinking? Bah, humbug! Watching a film is an impersonal, inert activity—just me and the silver screen. There is rarely an expectation that the experience will change me, or cause me to think about anyone other than myself. I may not even discuss it afterwards, particularly if I'm at home. And at the movie theater—well, one fears being crushed in the melee if one doesn't leave the moment the credits start to roll! There isn't so much as an intermission to allow for discussion and contemplation.

Live theatre is different. It begins with an act of the will—that I will sit here and watch a performance from start to finish. I will be personally engaged, because they are living, breathing people on the stage in front of me. I will give my concentration to what is transpiring here; I will not be interrupted by the phone, the dog, or the kids; I cannot change the channel or dash to another theater in the cineplex. I may be practically forced to enter into the life of the characters, because they are literally standing before me. I probably don't care about the guy who got shot on the news last night; I may not feel much when yet another “hit” occurs in *The Godfather Part III*; but if someone is dying onstage, I must sit up and take notice!

**We create
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Plays often
cause me
to think in
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not.

3. Here and Now.

The Christian life and the theatre both happen in the now. We should remember our past; we should look forward to our future; but ultimately, the Christian life is a day-by-day, moment-by-moment journey. Film removes this connection in a subtle but real way.

4. People are Essential.

At the cineplex, the projector will roll whether the voyeurs are present or not; the cast and crew will never know the difference. But in live theatre, no one is merely a spectator. Audience and artists join to create the experience.

All of us have experienced “good” and “bad” crowds. Imagine any performance, but especially a comedy, without people in the seats. How ludicrous! Actors know what it is, even in a “serious” play, to feel that extra intensity from an empathetic audience. It makes our work a little easier—probably a little better, too—and both observers and performers feel like they have been a part of something special.

The audience can (and probably should) interact with the artists following a live theatre performance. The actors are not stars hiding behind bodyguards, nor are they even faraway unknowns living somewhere in southern California. They are on the scene—and ideally, may be available to talk, to answer questions, or to pray.

5. Pragmatically Speaking . . .

Woody Allen once said, “Money doesn’t fuel great art, but it makes pretty good kindling.” Except for a Broadway extravaganza, a live theatre performance will inevitably be cheaper than a film. Particularly for developing and avant-garde artists, theatre is indispensable!

On another very practical note, audience members love to see actors they know on stage—especially if those actors are making fools of themselves . . .

6. Theatre, as a Verbal Medium, is Thought-Provoking.

Plays often cause me to think in a way that films do not. I may feel more intensely when I go to a movie, but watching a play puts me in a more contemplative mood. Why?

Well, theatre is principally a verbal medium. No matter how stunning the sets and costumes, the playwright’s words remain the central focus. It is understood that the dialogue is “cast in concrete”; the directors and actors may not edit it to suit their whims; the words are accepted with almost a kind of reverence. That’s because words—not special effects, not emotionally-charged images, and not even the performances of the actors—play the chief role in transporting the audience to other realms. In film, on the other hand, the director is king. He

manipulates visual images to suit his purpose; the script is merely a tool in his hands.

While we may speak of “thinking” with our hearts, the logical discourse—and even rational thought—of human beings is better suited to verbal metaphors than visual. When we’re using our heads and not our instincts, we need words. Pictures hit us in the gut. Words engage our minds.

Neil Postman, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, notes that even God seems to make this point in the second commandment, where He forbids the making of images of Himself. Postman writes:

I wondered...why the God of these people would have included instructions on how they were to symbolize, or not symbolize, their experience. It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture. We may hazard a guess that a people who are being asked to embrace an abstract, universal deity would be rendered unfit to do so by the habit of drawing pictures or making statues or depicting their ideas in any concrete, iconographic forms. The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking (9).

Visual metaphors encourage us to focus on the specific. They often carry emotional baggage. They cannot communicate detailed, abstract information—like ideals, values, and complex thoughts. It is impossible for them to represent an omnipresent, omniscient, sovereign God.

As Postman points out, whatever messages our medium carries most easily and efficiently, will be the ones that it carries most often (3-15). Perhaps that explains the plethora of movies that rely on explosions, expletives, and erotica—all of which make cool pictures and pump up the adrenaline, but aren’t particularly thought-provoking. When you can generate interest that way, why bother with something dull like witty or illuminating dialogue?

7. Cinema Can Be Emotionally Overwhelming.

A play is less all-consuming than a film. There is a bit of aesthetic (and physical) distance between me and the stage. No matter how complete my “willing suspension of disbelief,” there is always an awareness that I’m not truly a part from what is occurring before me.

Particularly when seated in a small cinema with only a few others present, and nothing but a vast, ever-changing, glowing, en-

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...God didn't
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compassing sea of images in front of me, I can get too caught up in the movie-going experience to retain my powers of discernment and reason. I'm no Brecht fan, but he had a point when he suggested that audiences should disengage from the story and think, rather than just coming along for the ride.

Speaking for myself, I can easily get caught up in fiction to the point where I begin to take the first steps of dissociating fantasy from reality! It's not that I really think I'm sinking in the North Atlantic during Titanic, but if the story is compelling enough, I begin to feel an unfulfillable longing to enter that world; a discontent begins to breed in my soul.

Properly channeled, this God-given instinct to experience things impossible in earthly life is a blessing; it is a part of the "God-shaped vacuum." Authors like C. S. Lewis have made fabulous use of this longing in works of fantasy.

However, what I end up longing for in movies is not often wholesome or good; it is dangerous to my very soul. In fact, I think longings of that magnitude are probably best left to books and the theatre, where they are more easily discerned and controlled. Good stories in the wrong hands become dangerous weapons, and film is the most engulfing way of telling a story.

A couple of years ago, I watched *Titanic*, which—despite flaws in the plot and a hedonistic, existential worldview—is a wonderful piece of visual storytelling. However, I was so taken in that I found myself wishing—however ridiculous it might be—that I could be a part of the action; that I could live in the lives of the characters. It did not breed contentment and joy; rather, it caused me to wish for impossibilities. I found myself beginning to question, in a very visceral way, some of my long-held Christian convictions about purity, virtue, and even the "meaning of life"—simply because of a very intense emotional experience! No play has ever had that effect on me. It may be a less engulfing experience, but it's also a safer one, for my emotional and spiritual well-being!

8. Live Theatre is Incarnational.

With apologies to the folks at the Jesus Film Project, I must point out that God didn't send His Son on celluloid. Christ came in the flesh. God sent a Deliverer who could identify with every temptation, understand every painful experience, and accept humankind's death sentence as a mortal man. He lived and died as one of us.

Live theatre is also incarnational. The story and the characters are alive—but only when the actors take the words on the page and literally, at each performance, give them breath. Madeleine L'Engle points out that at their best, artists are vessels; they are quiet, they listen to what the characters are telling them, and mold to their form. It is when we lose our ability to listen—when we impose our own

ideas on the lives of our characters—that we begin to do bad art. As long as we are listening, we can hear the quiet voices of our characters (11-24). We can also hear the Still, Small Voice of the Spirit, and obey the Father in our act of incarnation, just as Christ did in His.

In every rehearsal and at each performance, the actor must vicariously experience his character's conflict (and often pain) in order to bring about a change—a redemption, if you will—in the audience. It is through our suffering that others may be healed. Theatre is incarnational because we live out a tiny part of the work of Christ in our work onstage.

In plays that are truthful about the human condition, God's Word becomes flesh. We, the artists, hear God's voice through the vessels of the written page, our fellow artists, and our audience—then we amplify it and embody it for the whole world to hear.

Some Final Thoughts

As I wrap up this article, I hear the voice of a reader crying in the wilderness: "Oh, come on! Just admit it—you don't like movies, do you?"

So, I'll say it again. I love movies. Some of the most intense feelings of my life have come from the silver screen. My life has been affected for the better. I've become a more compassionate Christian. I've met extraordinary people, traveled to exotic lands, gone on spectacular adventures, and even burned off stress. Hey, some of my best friends are movie actors! (Okay, not really. But it sounded good.)

However, I don't want us, as theatre artists, to fall prey to any little voices in our heads (or our constituencies) that tell us live theatre is a medium only for comedies and musicals. If you work in the church, don't be ensnared by the temptation of showing a film clip or a video segment when a live sketch would be better! If you teach, don't send the subtle message to your students that we are only the film industry's poor country cousin. Wherever you are, don't let anyone say that movies are more important than what we do, or that live performance has outlived its usefulness.

Theatre is too important—and has too much potential to be used of God—to abandon all the "important stuff" to the movies. Let's not be content with musicals and silly comedies. Let's not become filmmaker-wannabees. Instead, let us remember the power of live performance, then challenge our audiences with good drama. It's the very stuff that life is made of.

George Halitzka is a mild-mannered director and playwright, cleverly masquerading as a Substitute Teacher. However, when not dodging spitballs, he slips into a telephone booth, dons a black cape and tights, and fights for Truth, Justice, and Better Christian Theatre as "Starving Artist Man"! He is currently seeking a Church Drama Director position to better pursue his super-heroic goals, and to get a cooler job title. You can contact him at ghalitzka@yahoo.com.

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Forum theatre at Whitworth

by Diana Trotter

...open dialogue about uncomfortable subjects is often difficult to achieve, yet desperately needed.

In the spring of 1999, Whitworth College hosted a weeklong Forum Theatre event led by guest artists from Alabama's STOP Theatre. Forum Theatre derives from the work of Augusto Boal, and is based on the premise that theatre can facilitate social and political change by offering people the opportunity to put ideas into literal actions. In a Forum Theatre event, the participants develop a scene in which a protagonist is caught in some kind of conflict that reflects an actual predicament within the community. The players perform the scene and audience members think of actions, responses, or solutions the protagonist might take. They then stop the scene, step into the role of the protagonist, and act out their ideas, thus rehearsing viable resolutions to the actual conflict within the community.

The theory behind Forum Theatre is that if people can practice different actions in "play," then they will be able to take different actions in "real" life. Unfortunately, one experience with Forum Theatre over the course of a single week is too limited to bring about this kind of radical behavioral change. However, even a brief experience with Forum Theatre can have significant impact because it opens to public dialogue issues that were previously confined to the secrecy of whispered comments and late-night gossip. In our Christian institutions, open dialogue about uncomfortable subjects is often difficult to achieve, yet desperately needed. Forum Theatre's ability to address issues in a safe, fun, creative manner can be invaluable.

The set-up of STOP's visit to Whitworth was simple: On Monday, they introduced the practice of Forum Theatre during the college's regular, required student assembly. At the end of the hour they asked for volunteers who would agree to meet daily for the rest of the week to create a simple sketch. About 30 students volunteered - enough for two different sketches. While there were a few theatre students involved, the majority of volunteers came from a wide range of disciplines. The volunteers were split into two groups, each choosing its own idea for a sketch based on perceptions of what was going on in the community at the time. The two groups spent the week developing their sketches with the help of the STOP members, and on Friday morning they presented their sketches at another required student assembly.

As the first group presented their short sketch, a wave of recognition and tension swept the audience made up of about 1,000 students as well as several faculty and staff members. For

its subject, the first group had chosen to portray a student torn between accompanying his roommate to the weekly Hosanna worship service, or joining his other friends for “Taco Tuesday” at a local restaurant - a popular social occasion for Spokane college students. To an outsider, this particular conflict might seem unimportant, but to Whitworth students it touched on a deeply disturbing and pervasive campus problem: that of students judging and sometimes condemning other students over how they practice their faith. Some students feel pressured to conform to a narrow definition of Christianity and worship, or risk being ostracized as not “real” Christians. Hosanna, a popular, weekly, student-led contemporary worship service draws large crowds. As students urge others to attend, and judge their faith based on whether or not they do, Hosanna has come to represent the problem of Christian intolerance on the Whitworth campus.

With the encouragement of the STOP members, students from the audience replaced the hapless protagonist and acted out their ideas about how to solve the conflict. Instead of merely expressing their opinions from the sidelines, the onlookers had to become participants, helping to change the situation for themselves. None of the proposed solutions were very successful, demonstrating the reality that this is a complex situation with no easy answers.

The second group’s sketch drew a loud gasp of disbelief from the audience. Not because of the situation, but the audacity of the group in addressing it openly. As a school with an almost exclusively white population, Whitworth struggles with issues of race and diversity. And despite the fact that there are numerous programs, workshops, and formal discussions designed to address these issues, somehow getting to the true feelings beneath the rhetoric is difficult. People, especially students, shut down. They don’t want to talk about race for fear of saying the wrong thing, or revealing socially unacceptable thoughts and feelings. Anger, resentment, fear, and other “negative” emotions remain unspoken except in private conversation. One example of the tension is found in the relationship between white students and Hawaiian students.

Whitworth has a fairly large population of students from Hawaii. These students are far from home, trying to adapt to a different lifestyle where they are suddenly a distinct minority. Many of them knew each other in high school. Therefore, it is no wonder that they spend a lot of time together. The Hawaiian club is one of the largest and most active student clubs on campus, and, sadly, a kind of “us and them” mentality develops among both Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian students. While that attitude is certainly not that of the majority of students, there isn’t a student on campus who isn’t aware of it. Comments, complaints,

The second group’s sketch drew a loud gasp of disbelief from the audience.

The conversations, some quite heated, spilled out of the auditorium and into the dining halls, classrooms, and dorm lounges.

and jokes are not uncommon, yet they are part of the campus' "hidden" culture - the one no one wants to acknowledge in public.

But by staging a simple sketch in which one group of students takes over a section of the student union and refuses to let "outsiders" join them, the students had put the issue front and center. While the sketch didn't identify either group, everyone in the auditorium recognized the situation instantly. The first response was silence except for a few scattered murmurs - mirroring exactly the dynamic that surrounded this particular issue. With STOP's gentle coaching, students from the audience gradually came forward to try solving the problem. The process became a forum in the best sense of the word as students in the sketch gave voice to pain, bewilderment, and anger. As the sketch continued, students chose actions of understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Both sketches succeeded in bringing underground issues into the open. The conversations, some quite heated, spilled out of the auditorium and into the dining halls, classrooms, and dorm lounges. It was as if a dam had broken and students were able to talk about what they were really thinking and feeling without the usual sense of taboo. As one student in the audience commented, "It felt like a real, good conversation about what's really going on at Whitworth." Other students agreed, "It was one of the best ways we have ever discussed an issue on this campus." As a result of these conversations, a new sense of community developed as people shared honestly with each other and realized that they were not alone in their feelings and experiences.

Another positive development was a heightened awareness of the feelings of others. In dorm Bible studies and fellowship groups, students addressed the ways they could learn to be more sensitive to the differences among them. One student admitted, "I learned that people have issues I might not know about. I thought of what I've been doing that inadvertently contributes to other people's discomfort." Another student shared how she had stopped "bugging" people to attend Hosanna with her and was now interested in learning more about the worship traditions of churches different from her own.

The Forum Theatre presentation was not the first time issues of acceptance, faith, and race had been addressed at Whitworth. What made the difference was that these presentations were student-driven. Since students chose the issues and the manner in which they would be represented, the sketches were far more likely to be relevant to the larger student-body than anything created by faculty or staff. And because the students themselves created the sketches based on experiences specific to Whitworth, both participants and audience members had a personal stake in the event.

The most powerful aspect of Forum Theatre lies in the fact that the audience is not passive. Instead, they are asked to take an active role in solving the problems that are specific to their community. As one student said, "It was effective because we actually put ourselves in another person's place and tried to DO something about the problem." Because it is theatre, and therefore not "real," Forum Theatre provides a safe place to explore difficult issues. The process is entertaining, with no actual consequences, so participants are free to say or do absolutely anything that comes to mind. At the same time, while Forum Theatre is not "real," it is created from truth. Therefore what happens on stage has the power to transform what happens in real life in a very significant way.

Diana Trotter is an Associate Professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington. She received her MA and Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, and has published other articles on the role of theatre in the Christian Community. In addition to directing plays at Whitworth, she has also directed for Portland's Tapestry Theatre and the Spokane Civic Theatre.

An Unveiling: A Response to the Whitworth Forum Experience

by Rhett Luedtke

I must admit I felt a great sense of relief when I read Diana Trotter's article about the Spring 1999 Forum Theatre event at Whitworth College. As the leader of the weeklong event I was unsure how effective our work had been. As Trotter mentions, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre technique is a great tool for any community as Forum Theatre brings underlying, unspoken and hidden issues to light through a dramatic presentation of those issues. However, the dramatic presentation is not enough. The audience must interact and discuss the issues at hand - both on the stage and off - for Forum Theatre to be effective. Within hours after the final presentation I was on a plane back to Alabama and therefore didn't have the chance to follow up the event with post-show discussions. We had presented the community's issues and facilitated the response on the stage, but didn't have the opportunity to dig any deeper through discussion. The busyness of running my theatre in Alabama soon swept the Whitworth Forum Theatre event into the background and I didn't start thinking about potential student reactions until reading the above article. Needless to say, I am delighted the event provoked such a

...it was as if a veil had been lifted off the heart of the community....

strong response from the students of Whitworth College.

One of the reasons I was unsure that we had been effective facilitators of the event was due to (as Trotter mentions in her article) the inability of the Whitworth audience members to come up with effective solutions to the problems presented in the "Hosanna Christian" sketch. I must admit that part of the problem with the "Hosanna Christian" sketch was that the structure of the piece didn't create a strong enough predicament for the protagonist. Therefore each audience member who tried to solve the problem resorted to talking and debating her way out of the situation. While talking your way out of a situation is certainly a positive reaction to most events, in this case it wasn't. Talking about the situation did nothing to change the hostility between the protagonist's non-hosanna and hosanna friends. Most audience participants chose to either placate their friends (whichever side of the issue they were on) or bully their opposition into submission. Neither of these tactics did anything to change the protagonist's predicament or the antagonist's rage. Therefore the forum became somewhat rhetorical and not action driven as each new audience participant tried to find a better argument than the last. The result was a competition of wit and manipulation of language that in turn created uproars from the audience and more anger on the stage. While the arguments were never out of control, they certainly created a lot of heat in the auditorium - heat that I felt was not necessarily conducive to creating change in the community. Since I didn't have the opportunity to facilitate post-show discussions in order to talk about what did not happen on the stage, I was unable to determine just how successful we had been in creating an environment for discussion and ultimately community healing. Needless to say, this left me in quite a quandary on the plane ride home. You can imagine my joy when hearing that the students of Whitworth continued to discuss the issues long after the event had concluded. I am pleased that we were able to bring the issue of Christian intolerance to the fore of the community's psyche and that members of the audience were enticed to rethink their actions.

One of the most memorable events of my week at Whitworth took place during the first day of the rehearsal process. As I mentioned before, the goal of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre is to help a community come to terms with its unspoken rules by presenting the hidden reality of the community as clearly as possible. In order to do that Forum Theatre requires a group of community members who are willing to break the unspoken rules by bringing the issues up in a public forum. Needless to say, this takes a lot of courage. The students who volunteered to work with us during the week came from a wide range of academic disciplines and only a few theatre students were involved. Each of the participating volunteers had to dig deep and re-think some

of their priorities in order to effective on the stage. On the first night of rehearsal the thirty student volunteers were broken into five groups and were asked to present a still life tableau of the Whitworth community. Using their bodies as their only instruments of expression each group came up with what they thought was the quintessential image of their community. As expected, the tableaus produced from this exercise were rather shallow. The tableaus depicted students studying in the library, eating in the cafeteria, or having fun in the dorms. Each tableau was positive, delightful and filled with the fun experiences of college life. After the tableaus were presented we sat down and talked about what we saw. After a brief discussion, everybody in the room agreed that the tableaus were merely superficial constructs about what college should be and had nothing to do with the Whitworth reality. The students were then asked to go back into their groups and try again. When the second tableaus were presented it was as if a veil had been lifted off the heart of the community. The tableaus presented despair at the loss of friendships, the anguish of failing at a subject, the hurt involved when ostracized for alternative lifestyles, the fear of being alone in a new world, and the necessity for prayer in the midst of chaos. Through this simple exercise, these actors had been able to uncover the collective secrets of their community - secrets that they all shared. In short, the students began to see their community in a light in which they had never imagined - their personal fears had now become the collective fear of the community. The result was a renewed energy in finding a way to present these ideas to the entire community so that everybody could begin to see the world in this new light. The ideas for the "Hosanna Christian" and the "Hawaiian Issue" sketches came out of this simple exercise. It was our attempt over the week to bring those issues and the pain they cause to life in our final forum presentation.

It is my personal belief that all theatre should be all about the unveiling of secrets - personal and collective - so that a community can begin to heal. You can only heal what you know is broken and sometimes it takes an art form to reveal that brokenness. This should be our single goal as Christian artists in the theatre, and all of our productions (whether traditional or alternative) should be guided by the desire to confess our collective sins so that true community healing can begin. Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre is a wonderful tool to jump-start that process.

Rhett Luedtke was the Artistic Director of Small Time Outreach Productions, Inc. (STOP) in Auburn, Alabama from 1995-2000. He is currently pursuing his MFA-Directing at Illinois State University. You can reach him for further comment at rhett@rhett.com.

You can only
heal what
you know is
broken....

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Adapting *The Hiding Place* for the Stage: An Odyssey

by Herbert Sennett

In the late 1980's, I was teaching at Palm Beach Atlantic College in West Palm Beach, Florida. In my desire to expose both my theatre students and the public to more than just the standard college theatre fare for that day, I wanted to present plays that were challenging and religiously oriented. A few years before that, I had read the book by Corrie ten Boom called The Hiding Place. Soon after reading the book, I saw the movie version. Even at that time, I recognized the theatrical potential for the novel. The idea to do a staged version of the book struck me as just the right kind of thing to do. So, I set out to find the script.

To my surprise, I discovered that there was no commercial adaptation of the book available for the stage. A friend informed me of a musical that had been written but had never been commercialized. I contacted Russell House Publishing, the publishers of the musical, who gave me permission to do the play without music. Then they informed me that Brian Maxwell had written a non-musical version utilizing portions of their libretto. So I contacted him to see his script.

With the musical libretto and the second unpublished script in my hands, I began to work on deciding how I would adapt the scripts for the problems unique at the college auditorium. I decided to try Mr. Maxwell's script. However, I was disappointed in the results. I spent the next ten years (off and on) analyzing just what had gone wrong. What I discovered was that the dialogue in several scenes of the first act were lifeless and pedantic. I knew that I would need to look more closely at the dialogue in the book to see if the information contained in first act could be made more exciting and interesting. Another reason for my disappointment lay in the set design for the first production—the shape and size of the stage at Palm Beach Atlantic constrained on us. So, I committed to finding a designer who could create a much better space the next time. Another problem I had with the script was that the second act of the script seemed at times to move too slowly. And the ending did not work for me at all. The original script called for a fading light on the corpses in a pile as Corrie and her brother walked off. What I wanted was a stronger message of hope and a brighter tomorrow.

In 1996, I moved to Louisiana College to become head of the department of Communication Arts. In the spring of 1998, I was told by the artistic director that he had decided to resign. At that point, I

What I
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In the ten Boom home in Haarlem, Holland. Louisiana College Production.

decided that for one year, I would be artistic director and develop the script I had always wanted to develop. I made out the schedule for the next school year and placed *The Hiding Place* in the spring line-up in order to give myself the time to develop the script and to make necessary arrangement to produce the play.

Adapting a book for the stage is not an easy task. There were several major problems with which to deal. First, I wanted to preserve the original story as closely as possible. But, the book is in first person narrative, a style that does not lend itself well to the stage. Also, I

wanted to preserve as much of the original dialogue from the book as possible. And yet, I did not want to simply copy the dialogue and story movement in the same way that the first two manuscripts had done. I wanted to make this adaptation mine. So, during the summer of 1998, I scheduled myself not to teach, took the book and the two scripts that I had obtained some ten years before and began the work of putting on paper an adaptation that I could be proud to produce on stage.

Act One had to take place in the ten Boom home in Haarlem, Holland. In reading the book, I saw the vast numbers of people mentioned who passed through that house. So, I chose several of the more “interesting” persons to characterize on the stage. I also was able to incorporate the dialogue and personalities of other people into one person. In this way, I was able to keep key information without having a cast too large to handle.

From the beginning, I did not want to simply be seen as taking another person’s adaptation and calling it mine. Upon comparison of my script with the other two, I became concerned that much of what I was doing coincided or appeared to be copied directly from the other two scripts. So, I began comparing the scripts directly to the book. I knew that I had taken the dialogue from the book. I realized that the writers of the other adaptations had done the same thing I did. We could not help but to have dialogue that matched. Corrie’s original narrative and memories were what we were all copying. I could accept that explanation and live with the similarities. What I did find in the book were solutions to an earlier problem with slow moving dialogue. I was able correct that by making several of the longer, “talky” scenes shorter by condensing the dialogue. I added several shorter scenes with more action and less dialogue and I was able to get into the first act all of the information necessary for the audience to fully

understand what was happening.

Where Palm Beach Atlantic's stage offered many obstacles to production, Louisiana College's Martin Performing Arts Center offered almost unlimited possibilities for production techniques. At this point I must admit that I "stole" some of the good ideas from the two scripts. Why re-invent the wheel? I kept the basic scenic break downs. Act one would take place in the ten Boom home in Holland and would end with the family's capture by the Nazis. That event is a natural break in the book and made an excellent climax to the first act. That part was easy. Act Two was a problem since Corrie chronicles in her book their being moved from place to place before finally being settled at Ravensbruck, the German concentration camp.

My solution to the challenges presented by the original Act Two was to utilize some of the decisions that the other two playwrights had done. They used narration to explain the movement from place to place. I felt that the other scripts did not make an effective transition from the third person perspective of Act One to the second person perspective of Act Two. So, I recast the second act into a quasi-surreal, dream-like sequence of events beginning with the voice of Corrie intruding in the total blackness of the beginning of the act followed by a series of pictures and video projected on a large screen depicting the movement of Holocaust victims from place to place. I used very few scenic elements throughout the act in order to make transitions quick and easy. In my depiction, Corrie would have to deal with a rapid-fire movement showing her attempts to deal with something she had never had to face before. The pace of the dialogue and the time of each scene depicted a whirlwind movement from the horror of storm troopers entering her house to her dealing with her own sister's

We then added actors in Nazi uniforms as ushers.



The induction center at Ravensbruck. Louisiana College Production.

death events that took place over several years in real life. It was my intent to show that only her faith in God could have sustained her sanity when all around her people were giving up and either dying or going insane.

My designer came up with a unit set that would accommodate the house in Act One and the rapid changes of Act Two. Tammy Killian-Bush had only recently returned to Louisiana College after a two year absence to do her M.F.A. I was amazed to watch her develop such a unique and exciting space in which to work (and she also completed her thesis for her master's degree at the same time!). She suggested that we add a Brechtian feel to the set through the use of open platforms with the steel superstructure left revealed. She then added lighting instruments under the floor that were visible to the audience. The area was obviously a stage, in the Brechtian sense. But, the concentration camp elements helped to create the time/space issues we needed for the play.

Her creativity made the adaption not only possible but feasible. She placed the set in the corner of the flexible main stage theatre in the Martin Performing Arts Center. She then installed the seating on two sides of the acting area. She separated the audience from the stage with a kind of "moat" with barbed wire and the "feel" of search lights. We then added actors in Nazi uniforms as ushers. The whole ambience was frightening.

Adapting and performing a play entails more than the writing and production phases. I found myself engrossed in researching the events of World War II Germany and the Nazi Regime. I was able to incorporate the research into the adaptation and to share much of that information with the cast and crew. Yet I believed



The ten Boom family is taken prisoner for hiding Jews. Louisiana College Production.

that they needed to have the information made more “real” to them. I invited a local Jewish leader, Rabbi Trask, who also happened to be an expert in the history of the Holocaust to meet with the actors and crew. His riveting presentation touched every student (and faculty/staff) in attendance. He was able to personalize the tragedy.

The usual practice of the theatre at Louisiana College was to present eight performances on two weekends. I scheduled twelve performances on three weekends. I knew I was taking a chance, but I believed that the play would be successful. I was right. The opening night was small, but each night drew larger crowds. By the end of the second week, the show began to sell out. The third weekend saw many returns and packed houses. Somehow, the production had struck a major chord with the community. People could not get over the power of the production. But it was not the scenes of Nazi prison camp life that struck people—it was the way the play ended.

Here I must take some credit, because I chose to rewrite the ending from that used by the other two adapters. The theatre at LC is connected to the shop by two large overhead doors. We opened both doors as part of the set. At the end, Corrie’s brother is seen outlined in the cavernous mouth of the door with a strong back light shining. In that moment, he becomes almost a Christ-like figure. As Corrie starts to leave, she stops to look at her sister’s grave. At this point, I chose to recreate the picture described in the book of her sister Betsie being thrown on a pile of corpses. All the women in the play took their place in a pile during the blackout. As Corrie turned, a dim down-light created an eerie effect on the pile of bodies. That light then faded back to black and the bodies literally disappeared into the blackness of the set. Then Corrie and her brother disappeared into the back-light of the tunnel, giving the impression of a movement into heaven. As that light faded to black, a picture of Corrie ten Boom was projected onto the screen with the words, “In Memoriam.” Almost every night there was at least five seconds of stunned silence before a few people started the applause.

Adapting a book or story to the stage is not an easy task. This was my first experience, and probably will be my last. The work was overwhelming. I have written several full length and one-act



The women’s work yard at Ravensbruck. Louisiana College Production.

The production had struck a major chord with the community

plays as well as numerous short sketches. Those projects are difficult in themselves. But, an even more difficult task is taking someone else's work, such as a novel or a short story or a poem, and making it your own while keeping it true to the original work. For me the challenge was both exhausting and exhilarating.

Let me say that had I not had a minor in playwriting from LSU or had not had experience writing and producing plays, the task would have been much harder. My advice to someone interested in adapting a book for the stage would be to think twice. The second thought may lead you in another direction. But, if you're determined, collaborate with people who can help you develop a clear vision, give advice on staging techniques and work with you on the dialogue. If you do everything well, get some really terrific actors to portray the play, use some talented people working with the backstage efforts and then work hard with focused determination, then if you're lucky, you may have a successful production. Or not. Sometimes just the effort is a reward in itself.

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TRANSFIGURATION

According to the Gospels and Brian Friel: *Wonderful Tennessee*

by Fred Tollini S.J.

Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*, written in 1993, shows traces of diverse religious roots more intricate than those in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, composed two years before. The earlier play portrays the confrontation of Irish Catholic, ancient Celtic and African religion. *Wonderful Tennessee* dramatizes a "revelation" in which images of Christianity, Greek mythology and Celtic ritual coalesce to enlighten "pilgrims" headed for an Island off the Northwest coast of Ireland.

In the course of their journey, Friel drops several hints relating his characters' experience to the gospel account of Christ's Transfiguration—or more precisely, to the narrative of that mysterious event as painted by Raphael. The Renaissance painting actually combines two events narrated consecutively in the synoptic gospels: the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the healing of the possessed boy. In keeping with the unified perspective of the Renaissance painting, Raphael seems to present the two acts as simultaneous, implying their relation as cause and effect; i.e., the revelation on the mountain heals the boy down below.

A similar pattern of revelation and healing informs the plot of Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee*; and the author's use of the phrase, "It is good for us to be here," invites comparison with the same words uttered by the Apostle Peter. Along with James and John, he had been taken up into a cloud to witness a glorified Christ conversing with the prophets Moses and Elias. The same words are repeated three times at points in the play where Friel calls to attention the ambience of mystery surrounding the characters. Like the gospel characters, they are then bid return to the everyday world, where both the cure for the demonic and healing conversations by Friel's characters will take effect.

Several of Brian Friel's plays involve encountering the "mysterious," often with tragic consequences. In at least three plays, the mysterious is embodied in encounter with an outsider, whose presence causes disruption in communities sustained by tradition. In *Translations* (1979), the English soldier, Owen, is an outsider, who threatens the community with the Anglicization of Irish topographical names. This threat, added to his falling in love with a local girl, makes his death at the hands of the villag-

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ers inescapably tragic. In *The Faith Healer* (1980), an exiled preacher's side-show chicanery paradoxically accompanies a power for miraculous cures. When he returns to his native Ballybeg and confronts the folk with his mysterious charism, they kill him because he threatens their day-to-day existence. In *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Father Jack's return from Africa alarms his sisters with the effect African religion has had on him, and how it threatens their own lives. The African harvest rituals are dangerously similar to the ancient Celtic rites that disrupt the youth of Northwest Ireland during the month of Lughnasa. With dionysian force, dancing releases emotions in the priest's five sisters, destroying the secure life they blindly clung to. These plays, by showing the sad effects of isolationism, also dramatize the need for exposure and release from isolation and drudgery.

Rather than stress the ill effects of cultural encounter with the unknown, *Wonderful Tennessee* focuses on the nature of the mysterious encounter itself. In his journal, Friel remarked that, "If *Dancing at Lughnasa* was about the necessity of paganism, his next play would deal with the necessity of Mystery." (Brian Friel: *Essays, Diaries, Interviews: 1964-1999*, 155). The earlier plays ended with death, or the sad acceptance of its inevitability. This play ends on a more positive note; the acceptance of death is enlivened with joy that is, in some way, created by the encounter with Mystery. While preparing this play, Friel touched upon the concept of "the mysterious" as defined by Carl Jung, and then related it to his own work: "The unexpected and the incredible belong in this world. Only then is life whole. For me the world has from the beginning been infinite and ungraspable" (Journal, 155).

In its most prosaic sense, the "mysterious" is merely, one could argue, our experience of chance with its unanswered questions. But Friel rather points to a different reality. In his plays, mystery takes place in human encounters which change things irretrievably. In *Wonderful Tennessee*, a projected journey to a distant Isle of mystery forms the basis for the plot. Though the trip is aborted, the attempt becomes an enriching experience that strengthens its participants to return homeward and resume daily life with courage. One might define mystery, in this case, as a moment of illumination marking a release from the enshrouding awareness of mortality. One cannot explain the why, how or wherefrom, but the mystery enlightens us to accept with hope a world which remains obscure. These are moments of rapture in which we say, "It is good for us to be here."

Friel's play cannot be described as an apology for Christian faith or any other religion; but it does say that initiation to mystery remains essential for life. In the motley fabric of Irish culture, contradictory traditions coexist with invigorating tension and we must keep in mind Friel's assertion that, "two allegiances

have bound the Irish Imagination —loyalty to the most authoritarian Church in the world and devotion to a Romantic Ideal we call Kathleen.” *Wonderful Tennessee* gets its name from one of several songs that complement the action. It signifies a place of enchantment, of a pastoral America to which many Irish have immigrated and for whom its promise held out a paradisaical ideal —another form of “Kathleen,” if you will. The song’s lyrics are fully enunciated only twice: in scene two, and at the end of the play, when it is sung in a “sacred style”:

*Come my love, come, my boat lies low
She lies high and dry on the Oh-hi-o,
Come, my love, and come along with me
And I’ll take you back to Tennessee.*

The plot involves three “thirty-something” couples. They are interrelated as siblings and through marriage, but also by a professional past as musicians and performers. Their erstwhile bandleader, Terry, has recently purchased an island off the coast of Donegal and has organized an overnight adventure there for them. As they wait for a ferry huddled on a pier that juts into the Northwest Sea, each character defines his or her unique role. Terry’s sister Trish claims to be lost and is full of questions. Her husband George expresses his presence mostly through playing the accordion, mutely bearing the reality that he is fatally ill with cancer. Berna and Angela are sisters. The first, quite practical and almost cynical in her comments, is married to Terry. Angela is paired with Frank, who proves a wise observer (and photographer) of events. Angela, somewhat philosophical, periodically stands aside from the crowd. The three couples gaze seaward to the island, and a rhythmic dialogue wraps them in wonder:

TERRY: Straight out there. That island. That’s where we’re going.

FRANK: Yes....

TRISH: I’m lost --where? --is it--?

FRANK: Wonderful.

TERRY: (to Trish) Directly in front of you.

FRANK: Further left, Trish.

TERRY: (to Berna) Straight out there.

BERNA: I see it, Terry.

FRANK: (to Trish) Got it?

TRISH: Think so...

TERRY: George?

GEORGE: See it.

TERRY: See it, Angela? Our destination? (She does not answer).

Angela reflects on the significance of the title, “destination” and then asks the island’s name. Berna explains, the name, Oilean Braoichta, means, “Island of Mystery...not in any spooky

In the motley fabric of Irish culture, contradictory traditions coexist with invigorating tension....

...all still await
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sense, but because it is wonderful and sacred.” The island’s mystery increases when Terry relates it to the floating, Eden-like islands of pre-Christian Celtic mythology. The island was also home to Christian monks, led by the Medieval Abbot St. Connal. In recent times, ritual practices on the island degenerated into drunken orgies and, in one strange case, the murder of a young man. The territory thus embodies a turbulent fusion of several religious traditions, of diverse strands of ritual. Terry then admonishes all to take off their shoes in reverence. The action evokes Moses removing his sandals before the burning bush and is emphasized as such by the ensuing dialogue:

TRISH. Why barefoot?

TERRY. Don’t ask me. That’s the custom. That’s what people used to do long ago.

(They slip out of their shoes. And again they gaze out to sea.)

BERNA. There are bushes on it.

When Angela hears Trish say their purpose of going to the island is, “to attest to the mystery,” she relates their destination to the worship of Dionysus, who was accompanied by dolphins in his journey from Naxos to Delphi. She then leads all in a climactic choric dance, “like an American Evangelist,” singing:

Heavenly sunshine, heavenly sunshine,
Flooding my soul with glory divine...
Allelliu, Jesus is mine.

Then Terry, the leader, takes Angela, Berna and Trish aside—a threesome like the disciples in the gospel story. Since, in the “real world,” Terry divides his time between musical performance and acting as a horsetrack bookie, Angela quips about this new guru status in strictly commercial terms:

Terry Martin Productions...Dionysian Nights on Oilean
Draoichta!...Celebrate the passions that refuse to be
Domesticated..Nature over Culture! Instinct Over
Management...A Hymn to the Forces That Defy
Civilizations!

Here Berna proclaims, “Lord, it is good for us to be here” and Angela responds, “Amen to that sister.” The first act concludes as the three women, drawing on a heritage of parochial hymns, belt out a song to the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

When the play resumes, it’s doubtful the group will ever get to the island. It is twelve hours later, three in the morning, and all still await the boatman Carlin, whose name reminds us of Charon, ferryman to the underworld. To fill the time, Terry surveys his assortment of untouched gourmet foods. Frank takes photographs and the women play games. Eventually, all fall to telling tales. The meaning of time becomes a motif in each story. We learn that Frank is writing a book, The Measurement of Time

and its Effect on European Civilization, whose thesis is that we regulate our lives by time, much as the monks did on the island, to keep mystery at bay, and to avoid facing the wonderful.

Similarly, the treatment of time in story-telling reflects one's ability to cope with mystery. Berna's remembrance of time indicates that religious legend can assume more reality in our imaginations than real events. She insists that her story—the miraculous air-borne translation of the House of Loreto from Nazareth to Italy—is not just a “once upon a time” fairy tale, but has a precise date: 1294. Trish's story, on the other hand, narrates an event that really happened, “a long time ago.” She cannot say exactly when, even though it has permanently scarred her emotionally. Yet, in the process of story-telling, in the juxtaposition of the miraculous and the prosaic, the time becomes clear. On her wedding day, her husband, George was ten minutes late for the ceremony—a hurt she has felt for years and, presumably, never voiced till now.

A transformation happens in this juxtaposition of the legendary and the factual. The marvellous enfold the prosaic and releases its meaning; what was before a problem is now seen as a mystery, involving deeper understanding and love. Only now, in the shared context of miraculous legend and factual story, does Trish realize that George's failure on their wedding day was not his fault. He was hard pressed by the demands of his professional life with Terry, and was late not for any lack of love. Retelling the story becomes a shared religious experience that Frank compares to the Garden of Eden. It does not simply recall pain; it enables pain being understood and transformed.

Healing through narrative goes beyond pop psychology and group therapy; it continues Friel's analogy with the biblical text. The three synoptic evangelists tell how Christ, after coming down from the mountain, cured the young man possessed by a demon. The group in Friel's play tell healing stories after the epiphany of the island, juxtaposing the sacred and the secular, the supernal and the personal. Their exercise of remembrance and acknowledgement is a process of healing.

This episode illustrates the play's thesis that ecstatic experience enables us to bear life's burdens. Frank's story, which tells about the founding of the monastery, paradoxically concludes by hinting that the Abbot Conall perhaps considered life in the world, not the monastery, the real paradise:

Maybe Saint Conall stood on the shores of that island there and gazed across here at Ballybeg and said to his monks, ‘Oh, lads, lads, there is the end of desire. Whoever lives there lives at the still core of it all. Happy, happy, lucky people.’

As if confirming the abbot's words, Frank looks upon his wife, Angela, and exclaims, “Look at her. Now there's an

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apparition. She's miraculous in that light, isn't she?" He then repeats the biblical phrase, "Lord it is good for us to be here!" The stage directions for the opening of the final act indicate an atmosphere of renewal, of spiritual rebirth:

A new day has opened. A high sky. A pristine and brilliant morning sunlight that enfolds the pier like an aureole and renovates everything it touches.

It is now clear the group is not going to reach the island. Instead they set about doing "clean-up" tasks as they wait for the bus to take them back to civilization. [Significantly, the driver's name is not a poetic evocation of Charon, but the more prosaic, everyday, "Charlie."] At this point, Frank interrupts them with a description of what he calls his "Ballybeg epiphany." At dawn he saw a dolphin rise out of the sea:

And for thirty seconds, maybe a minute, it danced for me. Like a faun, a satyr; with its manic, leering face...A performance — that's what it was. A performance so considered, so aware, that you knew it knew it was being witnessed, wanted to be witnessed. Thrilling; and wonderful; and at the same time —I don't know why—at the same time...with that manic, leering face...somehow very disturbing.

The rising dolphin is associated with the cult of Dionysus, both because of the description of the faun's leering face, but also because of the legend earlier mentioned by Angela. This prompts Terry to reveal the secret of the island; namely, that a young man, Sean O'Boyle, was sacrificed there, torn to bits, much as the god Dionysus was torn apart according to the ancient myths. There were thirteen worshipers, in Terry's account, and this number —exactly the same as that of Christ and his apostles— then leads him to reflect upon the Eucharistic Congress held in Dublin on the night of June 26, 1932. On that occasion, the festival that celebrates the Body of Christ under the form of bread and wine degenerated into an orgy, after which the thirteen came to the island and sacrificed Sean O'Boyle. Later, the local bishop established an annual pilgrimage to the place on August 15, the feast of the Assumption of Mary.

The six characters eventually perform ritual actions, placing mementos and votive offerings on a cruciform life-preserver station that juts up atop the pier. Demanding that Terry leave his shirt there as a "sacrifice," they proceed to strip it off his back. Frank gives him a new one, while Trish exclaims, "You look wonderful, Terry. Doesn't he?" This enforced "transfiguration" provokes Terry's grudging acceptance: "I like this now. I'm not going to part with it. Bastards..." Angela complements the mockery more seriously. As if reminding them of the mystery they

have experienced, she describes ceremonies in honor of Demeter, the harvest goddess, at Eleusis in ancient Greece -- a dismissal recalling the cycle of life and death.

The play ends with no tragic shroud, however. George, who knows he will die soon, tells Angela that she must return to the island in remembrance of him, She kisses him and rushes to the cross-like life-belt stand. She sets her hat atop the other "sacrifices," and defiantly cries, "For you, George! For both of us!" Both exit joyfully, happily, singing with brio, the final stanzas of *Wonderful Tennessee*. Mystery is not only necessary for life, but beneficial. Friel's earlier "mystery" plays end in tragedy, or at least in a twilight of melancholy. This play affirms mystery as complementing patient struggle in life.

Besides lecturing on Brian Friel, **Fred Tollini S.J.**, Associate Professor of Theatre at Santa Clara University, has acted the part of Father Jack in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. His articles have appeared in *American Magazine* and *The Journal for East-European Drama*

INSERT 1/2 PAGE
AD - DAVID THE KING

I Was The More Deceived -- Misadventures in Faith-Oriented Theatre

by Owen D. Robertson

HAMLET: I did love you once.

*OPHELIA: Indeed, my lord,
you made me believe so.*

*HAMLET: You should not have
believ'd me, for virtue cannot
so inoculate our old stock but
we shall relish of it. I lov'd you
not.*

*OPHELIA: I was the more
deceiv'd.*

*HAMLET: Get thee to a
nunn'ry, why would'st thou be
a breeder of sinners?
(Hamlet, III.1, 114-121)*

I have a deep love for the theatre. Yet love is funny. So often, we take it for granted. We fail to plumb its mysteries, to understand it, to nurture it. People will say, How do you know you're in love (with the theatre)? I don't know; I just know-and because I love it so intensely, I don't understand why everyone doesn't feel the same.

Hard To Believe

I couldn't believe what I was reading. I was well into researching my dissertation, when I came across Jonas Barish's, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*, an historical examination of the many fears, prejudices, and misconceptions concerning theatre.

For when a player has given over his consciousness to some form of identification with a character, or when a spectator, identifying with that character, has done the same, what happens to his own self? Is it suspended somehow for the duration of the performance? And if so, is this not a spiritually dangerous state of affairs? Does it not in fact resemble demonic possession? (Barish 1985, 76)

Demonic possession? Oh, come on. Give me a break. People have actually believed that? Well, maybe in the past-during the Dark Ages maybe. No one would ever think that today.

A few days after reading Barish's book, I was watching a television program where an actress was attempting to articulate what happened in that "magical moment" when the "character came to life." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She spoke of the difficulty in expressing what had actually occurred, how she had "ceased to exist" and how the character had just "taken over." It sounded a heck of a lot like demon possession. I am not postulating that this woman was possessed -- I'm simply stating that folks who don't know a lot about the theatre might be confused by her discourse -- she certainly created cause to wonder. Now, I understood exactly what she was trying to say; it is difficult to articulate what happens in that special moment when something "clicks" between actor, audience, and character. Stanislavski called it the "creative mood" (or creative moment when one acts "as if" he is, in the given circumstances and with both sensory and emotional recalls working, attempting to obtain an objective through a specific line of

action). Meisner would have said that the actress was "living believably in the imaginary circumstances" -- listening to her partner, taking what was given, and giving in return. I understand the desire of the actor or actress who wants to make what happens on stage sound mysterious and elusive -- which makes the event, and the person, seemingly exceptional. But instead of weaving mystical fantasies, one might be better advised to allude to the exceptional amount of work that went into the performance and the keen insight one had into the production.

The truth of the matter is that spiritual possession is a specific belief and desired outcome in much world theatre. The masked theatre of Bali consists of masked dancers who offer themselves as conduits for spirits. The same is true of tribesmen in Papua, New Guinea. The intricate transformation masks typical of the American Northwest Coast involve level upon level of wood which, when opened, reveal the animal spirit within. And in fact, don't dramatists in the church, to some degree, believe in divine possession, offering themselves as earthly vessels for the Spirit of God to incarnate? "Father in Heaven, I offer myself to you as a vessel to be used by God. Speak through me. When the audience looks at me, let them see only you."

So, what are we to say to these things? I'm not sure; but I do know that we must say something. After all, there are those who are outside and inside the theatre who are very confused about what happens in the dramatic process. And people fear or mistrust what they don't understand. All many people know about theatre is what they see on television. (A few years ago I went on mission to Argentina. The Argentines expected all Americans to be like the people they saw on Beverly Hills: 90210. That's all they knew.) And what does television tell people about dramatists? That there's a lot of promiscuity and homosexuality in the theatre. That most actors have alcohol and drug problems because they can't cope with fame or they can't cope with not having a job. That you have to compromise your morals and accept things, do things, that should never be done. They'll teach you Yoga and all kinds of New Age incense sniffing, crystal toting religions. Sheesh, no wonder many parents don't want their kids to enter the field of theatre. Obviously, some of these fears and misconceptions are based on truth. But we know that what is seen on television (or on-stage) is "based" on a true story, but in and of itself is untrue -- designed for dramatic effect. But as DeNiro's character ludicrously postulates on *Wag The Dog*, "I saw it on television; it must be true!"

Is theatre a form of lying (another prejudice pointed out by Barish)? What is acting? What does an actor do in creating a character? In performing that character? Tertullian seems to think of acting as involving an escalating sequence of falsehoods.

First the actor falsifies his identity, and so commits a deadly sin. If he impersonates someone vicious, he

...spiritual possession is a specific belief and desired outcome in much world theatre.

compounds the sin. If he happens to impersonate a noble soul he is aggravating the crime another way, by pretending to be someone so unlike himself. Finally, he must necessarily work out his portrayal with a variety of mimetic details-sighs, groans, and tears -- but each of these, far from validating the make-believe character of the whole by lending it inner consistency, simply multiplies its fraudulence. (Barish 1985, 46-47)

But Jesus never pretended to be something he wasn't.

Should acting be equated with lying? Is acting a deliberate attempt to deceive someone? Stop to ponder that question, Is acting a deliberate attempt to deceive someone? My first instinct is to say, No, of course not! How do I know? I don't know; I just know. Acting is not.... Lying is.... Acting.... My goodness, now even I'm confused, much less someone who knows next to nothing about theatre. Theatre is an enactment of a story, which reveals something of the truth. In essence, a fictitious story (a falsehood?) in the service of truth -- requiring the technique of an actor to create believable characters as well as the willingness of an audience to suspend their disbelief. So you have someone who is willing to tell the lie and someone else who is willing to hear and believe it? If this is so, what are we to make of Jesus' parables? Parables are stories that reveal truth -- they are not necessarily true stories of actual events, but they reveal truth about life and the kingdom of God. The telling of parables and the enacting of stories in dramatic form have long been compared to one another. But Jesus never pretended to be something that he wasn't. Some believe, as Barish points out, that "In each case [actors] are usurping the functions of their creator, tampering with an identity that has been entrusted to them for safe-keeping, but is not theirs to alter" (Barish 1985, 49). In fact, actors have not only been accused of pretending to be something that they're not, but of making spectators believe that humankind is capable of aspiring to more than is humanly possible -- in essence, lying to them about what they can accomplish or expect out of life.

Making Sense

What are we to say to these things? Obviously, theatre can misinforming people, by mistake or by design. Lies, or untruth, can be disseminated as easily as truth. And people can read different things into an enacted story other than what was intended, whether they're confused, delusional, or wantonly destructive. I have been accused of false teaching: people have written me off as "being turned over to a depraved spirit" because someone misread one of my scripts as being sympathetic to gays or sympathetic to women in the church -- when the script was about "not hating others." Actor friends of mine have told me stories about portraying Jesus and having audience members bring their sick children to be healed -- mistakenly thinking that the actor really was Jesus. I've had life-

time friends blur the line and believe that the events in the life of the character I'm playing really happened to me. The difference between fact and fiction can be a fine line that we tread upon in the theatre. That's one of the reasons why I refuse, while performing in a church, to offer an invitation myself. At the end of the performance, I turn the program over to the pastor so the line between fact and fiction doesn't blur - Is this still part of the show?

As an act of creation, theatre allows man to experience something of God's original creative act. "As part of the evangelical community's symbolic practice, theatre can be a means for affirming identity, constructing meaning, challenging beliefs and practices, and exploring new possibilities" (Trotter, 159.) God can make himself known through incarnating the dramatic processes of writing, rehearsing, and production. God's truth can be revealed through these same processes. Theatre can be used for good. And, yes, theatre can be used for evil. Both good and evil by design and/or by accident. I am not purporting that theatre which doesn't mention God or have Christ-centered or faith-based values is evil. I am certainly not purporting that theatre which does is good.

I don't discount the possibility that demon possession might occur in the theatre with some thespian version of Faustus. Personally, I understand acting to be a series of choices and when the actor's choices become second nature, something wonderful can happen on stage (but not possession -- I don't cease to be; I don't lose control). And I don't think that God "possesses" us. This would go against the divine provision of "free choice" (Dt. 30:19; Jos. 24:15; 1 Ki. 18:21; Ps. 119:30; Lk. 10:42). I do, however, believe that God incarnates himself in the creative process. I do believe that the Spirit of God counsels with and gives direction to my spirit as I watch a play, write a script, or act a part. And so, I do believe that artists are used of God, but not possessed by him. Theatre is a means of creating personal, social, and sacred images. If these images contain the truth, then God must be at work in the process.

The Role of the Theatre

In drama, the artist presents perceptions of reality through story. This storying of experience and understanding seems to be inherent in human beings -- being created in the image of God (a part of the divine story) and therefore a creator of story, art, and inventions. Drama can serve as an outlet of expression for one's experience, understanding, and faith -- presenting an accurate view of the reality of existence and the human condition in as far as the artist's perceptions allow. Therefore, those perceptions can be accurate or inaccurate reflections of reality. "Great drama is never a record or photograph of ourselves but a re-creation of ourselves by way of the mind of the dramatist. This allows us to see ourselves from his point of view" (Ehrensperger 1962, 16). Dramatic productions provide opportunities to see the world through the Believer-Artist's eyes --

...artists are used of God, but not possessed by him.

Conflicts deal with both the beautiful and the grotesque.

especially when challenging current views by presenting thought-provoking, new ideas. Drama informs, educates, and entertains by providing vicarious experiences -- inviting the audience to live for a moment in the reality created on stage (a drama world). Though this staged reality is *fictitious*, the experience itself is *real*. Therefore, one's faith can be evoked by the theatrical experience -- especially if God chooses the dramatic medium as a means of revelation. Incarnation can provide artist and audience a communion with the divine.

If indeed all truth is God's truth, faith-oriented dramas are not limited to what might be typically thought of as "religious" subjects. Theatre explores truth about the divine, the perverse, and the human condition through a variety of genres, styles, and techniques. Unfortunately, truth, as revealed by the artist, can be skewed. Of course divine initiatives supercede sin-skewed perspectives; however, the highest possible standard of truthfulness needs to be sought in production. Purposefully misleading an audience is unethical; however, the creative nature of drama often examines truth through seemingly deceitful means -- addressing truth through what might be considered falsehood. Artists and audiences are capable of blurring the lines between truth and reality, since drama attempts to fabricate an appearance of truth in order to reveal and/or explore truth-revealing truth through fabrication.

Theatre possesses tremendous inherent value in providing opportunities for community discussions concerning preferred behavior and social identity through exploring conflicts in the human experience. Conflicts deal with both the beautiful and the grotesque -- as informed by individual values. Though absolute values exist (as determined by God), the state of humanity's sinfulness distorts the capacity to see, understand, or value in true accordance with reality. Each individual determines the beauty or ugliness, appropriateness or inappropriateness of the dramatic content. Both artist and audience vitally participate in the dramatic event by ascribing value, exploring the truth of the human condition, and creating the reality of the drama world. One's faith is key in interpreting and understanding the theatrical event.

The Role of the Believer-Artist

An artist, as defined by Howard Gardner, is one who has mastered the skills of a certain medium and is able to communicate through the creation of symbolic objects (Gardner 1994, 25). The purpose, therefore, of the Believer-Artist would be to create symbols and metaphors, through the dramatic arts, which serve as a redemptive agent and source of truth in expressing experience and knowledge (including acting, directing, writing, costuming, set design and construction, etc). The Believer-Artist needs to be held

accountable as a life-long learner who understands dramatic functions and audience-stage interactions in order to find/create symbols and conventions which accurately communicate and express ideas. Believer-Artists are equipped by God and are called to express faith in unique ways, stimulating the faith of the community of believers as well as those outside the faith community.

No one person can know all truth -- therefore, some aspects of the drama world might be imaginary or speculative. Believer-Artists are capable of discerning truth and should be dedicated to telling the truth; however, artists, being fallible, are not always privy to true perceptions. Artists take risks and push boundaries in efforts to explore the truth of the human condition and the life of faith. Drama speaks from the heart of the artist as nothing else can -- offering unique, valuable perspectives and insights to the faith community -- directing the community of faith to that which is preferred and valued in the theatre of God. Understanding the true nature, motivations, and intentions of the dramatic process is key; otherwise, one might disseminate misinformation. Unfortunately, even with the best performance, motivation, and intentions, the Believer-Artist stands to be misunderstood by some.

The Role of the Audience

Audiences need to develop an appreciation for good theatre as well as an ability to discern Godly and ungodly content and intent. Drama's influence is determined by the extent to which the audience chooses to be influenced; therefore, the audience is challenged to critically reflect on issues brought about by the production -- changing perceptions, beliefs, and actions as appropriate. Audiences need to develop well-rounded, well-informed attitudes toward education and entertainment through theatre and open-mindedly anticipate playing a vital role in the theatrical event. Part of the artist's role is to help facilitate the education of the audience, as well as aspiring artists. Therefore, the audience serves in the role of student or co-learner.

The ability to differentiate between truth and fiction in dramatic production and content is crucial. Truth is often painful and can at times demand change. Theatre feeds on conflict and provokes reflection and change by holding a mirror up to human nature. Therefore, sensitivity is necessary in leading people through conflict and change in God's timing. An audience which remains open-minded about exploring situations of faith in which moral and ethical dilemmas are presented are more apt to grow -- intellectually, socially, and spiritually. One of the true beauties of theatre rests within its capacity to make beautiful transformations in both performers and audiences.

The Believer-Artist needs to be held accountable as a life-long learner....

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The Nature of the Theatrical Process and Environment

We all possess an innate need for fellowship and socialization. The theatrical process is a social sharing of story through realistic characters, willing suspension of disbelief, empathy, dramatic irony, and catharsis brought about through circumstance, objectives, and conflict. Theatre takes place at a particular time in a particular place before a particular group of people. No production is ever performed exactly the same due to the unique makeup of performers, audience, and circumstances. Costumes, lighting, and set may augment or detract from the performance. Essential to drama are human (and divine) interactions. Theatre generally needs to be rehearsed -- though some forms exist without rehearsal. Theatre can occur at any time and in any place -- though some forms require specific locals and equipment. Theatre usually relies on the collaboration of different artists working together. Though often referred to as play, the process is work.

One of the greatest values of the dramatic process lies in exploring human experience and dimension. The theatrical environment needs to be conducive to relational storying and needs to adhere to the technical constructs of the production. Some productions require traditional and/or non-traditional staging. Other forms, such as Environmental Theatre, use whatever space is available. Whatever the environment, distractions should be minimized and audience/artist readiness maximized. Environment is created not only by the physical setting, but also by the audience and performers -- both helping to create an atmosphere of dialogue, learning, and willingness to change. Our sinful natures may make us resistant to change; however, God's presence in the environment allows for change to occur more readily.

Most essential to drama, and often to learning, is conflict. Unfortunately, many churches and para-church organizations seek to avoid conflict at all costs. Dealing with problem issues and exploring conflicting human natures should not be viewed as glorifying the effects of sin or diminishing the works of the Spirit and the power of scripture. Rather, dramatic conflict should be embraced as a means of exploring, learning, and growing -- for human beings are constantly in conflict with self, others, nature, society, and God.

The Holy Spirit can work by guiding the writing of scripts and/or the production of plays. Therefore, scripts and productions have a moral, ethical, and spiritual obligation to treat people with value and dignity. Wasting time, leading people down wrong paths, or further distorting God's image might indicate the absence of the divine in the theatrical process; however, the Spirit can use whatever material is presented to reveal truth. The nature of theatre is to explore, to present new possibilities, and to question. Though new visions may seem to go against scriptural teaching, one must real-

ize that theatre often seeks to reveal truth about life and how it should be lived by showing the ridiculousness and/or destructiveness of different social structures and should not, therefore, be necessarily written off as being "of the devil." Believer-Artists should ultimately point to what is best and highest. Two methods exist in dealing with the human condition and the call of the divine: inspiration (depending on revelation) and insight (depending on honest vision) (Brook 1996, 58). These methods allow Believer-Artists the means of scripting stories of human experience, truth, and faith.

Conclusion

Those of us who love the theatre, who have been equipped and called to live and work on the stage, must foster that love. There are strange, mysterious, wonderful, sometimes inexplicable things that happen in the theatre and though we do not wish to remove the mystery, to lessen the experience, to explain away the art, we must be accountable for understanding our love; accountable for educating ourselves and others as to the true nature of theatre; accountable for allaying their fears and false accusations. I would not be a breeder of sinners; however, if I believe that these troubles are non-existent, that these issues will take care of themselves, that some people are just theatre-illiterate, willingly gullible, or seriously misinformed and there's nothing I can do about it -- I may be the more deceived.

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