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College of St. Benedict and St. John's University

**The Craftsman Mirroring the Creator:
Explorations in Theatrical Theology**

Andrew Noah

May 3, 2018

“All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players...”¹ This famous line is spoken by the character, Jaques and comes from Shakespeare's comedy, *As You Like It*, a

¹ Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*, II.vii.6

tale of two women who dress up as men to flee persecution and end up finding love in the Forest of Arden. Though spoken in a light-hearted comedy, Jaques's observation reveals the radically transcendent nature of the theatre. John Haught states in his book, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*, that humanity is wrapped up in the drama of the cosmos – a drama that continues to be played out to this day.² In 1999, Pope John Paul II wrote his "Letter to Artists" in order to grow and strengthen the relationship between the Church and artists of the world. He states: "The opening page of the Bible presents God as a kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator."³ As Creator, God created the world *ex nihilo* and we as craftsmen are called to work with God's creation to give it form and meaning. Here is where John Paul II makes his appeal to artists. Artists are not creators, but rather craftsmen that take God's creation and bring life and meaning to it.

Every genuine art form in its own way is a path to the inmost reality of man and of the world. It is therefore a wholly valid approach to the realm of faith, which gives human experience its ultimate meaning. That is why the Gospel fullness was bound from the beginning to stir the interest of artists, who by their very nature are alert to every 'epiphany' of the inner beauty of things.⁴

To return to my reference to Jaques's line in *As You Like It*, I will argue that there exists an intrinsic parallel to the world as "stage" and humanity as "craftsmen" with God as "Creator". Theology, then, is a theatrical endeavor because it explores what God, in the persons of Father, Son and Spirit, does in the theatre⁵ of the world. When viewed in this lens, theologians are able to move past Anselm's "Faith seeking understanding" definition of theology to a definition that is more suited to the way God, as Creator, works in the world. "Theology is a response to and reflection on God's incarnate performance and his continual involvement in the world theatre as Spirit."⁶ In other words, theatrical theology looks at the theodrama, a term first coined by Swiss

² Haught, John. *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*. London: Bloomsbury Academic 2015. 35.

³ John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." Vatican. April 4, 1999. Accessed January 30, 2018. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ I will be using "theatre" to refer to the theatrical performance and "theater" to refer to the physical place the performance takes place.

⁶ Hart, Trevor "Introduction." In *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Trevor Hart and Wesley Vander Lugt, 30-43. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. Xii.

theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar⁷, or the interaction of God with the human drama. In this light, God becomes more than a divine designer. God also becomes the divine actor.

When doing theology in a theatrical mode, it becomes a way to focus on God working in the world and our call as the audience to take part in the performance. “The word ‘performance’ derives from the French *parfournir*, meaning... ‘to carry out thoroughly,’ as in an experience that is completed in its representation on the stage.”⁸ When speaking of theology, we refer to it as something that is to be done. Additionally, when doing theology and living the Christian life, there needs to be a careful balance of action and contemplation. The word “Drama” literally means “to do”⁹. The Christian Drama is first and foremost about God’s past, present, and future actions in our world. We see then, that both the Gospels and theology are dramatic because they both call for action on our part. Furthermore, “A drama is a script that is incomplete until performed in a theatrical production.”¹⁰ Theology, then, should mirror the theatrical process of doing--a process that necessitates incarnation, presence, and community—because it is this process that most closely resembles God’s continual action of divine revelation.

Theatre and Christianity—The History of a Symbiotic Relationship

Pope John Paul II, a playwright and artist himself, speaks of the long history that the Catholic Church has had with artists. He states: “The history of art, therefore, is not only a story of works produced but also a story of men and women.”¹¹ It is necessary, then, when speaking of the Christian Drama and the Theo-Drama to begin by looking at the history of Christianity’s

⁷ Balthasar, *Theodramatik*, 5 vols. (1973-83); translated into English as *Theo-Drama*, 5 vols. (1988-98).

⁸ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009. 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." 2.

relationship to the theatre. In their book, *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*, Todd Johnson, a theologian and minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church, and Dale Savidge, a professor of theatre and founding member of Christians in Theatre Arts (CITA), engage in a conversation about the intersection of theatre and theology. The first chapter in their book begins with the basic understanding that, at its essence, theatre is nothing more than an actor and someone to watch the performance.¹² While human beings have always told stories, it is largely held that formal theatre began in “the fifth century BCE in Greece, derived from the ritual worship of Greek gods, especially the god Dionysus.”¹³ Later, Christianity too uses theatre as a form of teaching and worship. This bond has never been as strong as it was in the medieval period. By the early Middle Ages,

The church calendar also provided an incentive toward dramatization because it commemorated particular biblical events on specific days of the year. By the tenth century a number of theatrical elements had been incorporated into these annual celebrations. For example, Palm Sunday was usually observed with an elaborate procession in which a figure representing Christ riding on an ass moved from outside the city to a church. On Good Friday, a cross was often wrapped in burial clothes and placed in a symbolic tomb, from which it was raised on Easter Sunday.¹⁴

It was during the medieval period that liturgical dramas came into being. Liturgical dramas, performed within the church, were a means for the priest to illustrate the truths of scripture. Here, the choir stalls might symbolize Heaven while the church crypt would symbolize Hell.¹⁵ The liturgical drama, however, develops into reenactments of Biblical stories and that would be performed outside of the church by members of the congregation and townspeople.¹⁶ These became known as the mystery plays. “Mystery plays (also known as Corpus Christi plays)

¹² Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ Brockett, Oscar G., and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. 9th ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1991. 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 39.

gave way in time to ‘miracle plays’ (dramas based on the lives of saints) and later to morality plays (dramas intended to communicate moral choices through typological characters).”¹⁷ These types of plays, while still performed today, were very prevalent in the medieval period. These plays, then, were not simply dramatic reenactments of Biblical stories, but were a means of ministry and teaching of doctrine and tradition. By studying this history, it becomes clear that Christianity has used theatre as a tool to demonstrate what proper orthodoxy and orthopraxis ought to look like.

Rooted in the liturgy of the early Western Church, the drama of the Middle Ages provided a bridge between the ecclesiastical and secular elements of medieval life. “Miracle” and “morality” plays were performed on holidays and at festivals by guild craftsman or professional actors, hired by towns and villages for the occasion. The morality plays...were allegorical dramas featuring personifications of Mankind and various helps (Goodwill, Mercy, Perseverance, etc.) or hindrances (Vice, Imagination, Goods, etc.) he encountered on the road to salvation.¹⁸

Perhaps the most famous of the Morality plays to come out of the medieval period was *Everyman*. Having been approximately written in the year 1510, *Everyman* tells the story of the character, Everyman. Everyman, who represents every individual of mankind, has lived a wild, rich, and lavish lifestyle, but is told that he is going to die. As he makes his journey to the grave, he is abandoned by his friends, Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, Goods, Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell). In the end, Everyman has nothing but Good-Deeds to accompany him to the final judgement seat. The character, Doctor, then comes out to deliver the epilogue:

This moral men may have in mind; / Ye hearers, take it of worth, old and young, / And forsake pride, for he deceiveth you in the end, / And remember Beauty, Five-Wits, Strength, and Discretion, / They all at the last do Everyman forsake, / Save his Good-

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Everyman, and Other Miracle and Morality Plays*. New York: Dover Publications, 1995. iii.

Deeds, there doth he take. / But beware, and they be small / Before God, he that no help at all.¹⁹

It should be noted, however, that the use of allegorical figures in the Christian tradition was not a new concept. Written 1000 years before *Everyman* by the medieval philosopher, Boethius (480-524 AD) during his imprisonment, *The Consolation of Philosophy* observes the dialogue between Boethius and the allegorical figure, Lady Philosophy. In Book II, Boethius begins his discussion on happiness as he wrestles to understand his own misery. Here the character of Lady Fortune is introduced. Lady Fortune is an allegorical figure who is a single representative of all the characters who abandon *Everyman* in the aforementioned play. She is power, money, health, external beauty, reputation, intelligence, and relationships. For Boethius, happiness consists in the possession or being in accord with that which is most precious; additionally, whatever is most precious must be possessed with permanence and not be subject to being lost.²⁰ Lady Fortune is the embodiment of external goods and “Change is her normal behaviour, her true nature.”²¹ Using allegorical figures, both Boethius and *Everyman* draw the conclusion that external goods can bring neither happiness nor salvation because they cannot be possessed with permanence. *Everyman* serves, then, as the perfect example of bringing to life the theology and philosophy of Boethius to an audience who was widely illiterate.

When looking at the history of the relationship between theatre and Christianity, one cannot easily dismiss the writings of St. Augustine. In Book III of his *Confessions*, Augustine writes about how he used to enjoy attending the theater as a younger man because it held up a mirror to his own miseries and provided fuel for his emotions.²² What bothers Augustine about

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁰ Boethius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated by Victor E. Watts. New York: Penguin Books, 1969. 48.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Frank J. Sheed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006. 37.

theatre, and tragedy plays specifically, is that the spectator enjoys the sorrow that he/she experiences when witnessing the suffering of a character on stage. “The spectator is not moved to aid the sufferer but merely to be sorry for him; and the more the author of these fictions makes the audience grieve, the better they like him.”²³ Augustine did not like theatre because he believed people only came to feel sad for someone without feeling moved to act in order to help alleviate the suffering of that person.

Augustine raises the question as to why people enjoy watching tragedies and things that will make them sad on stage. Had Augustine been more familiar with the writings of Aristotle, he may have come to find the answer to his question. In the sixth chapter of his *Poetics*, the ancient Greek Philosopher, Aristotle, gives his famous definition of a tragedy:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.²⁴

The appeal of a tragedy, Aristotle wants to argue, is its cathartic nature -- a purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension.²⁵ Additionally, “Aristotle...first sets poetry...apart from philosophy, education, and politics by stating that the purpose of poetry is aesthetic. Art brings pleasure, first and only; if it teaches, that is incidental to its character.”²⁶ Aristotle makes the argument that people would not be drawn to tragedies and other forms of theatre if the plays did not provide an opportunity for catharsis, but he also recognizes that theatre brings pleasure and often the chance to teach the audience something.

²³ Ibid., 38

²⁴ Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Ingram Bywater. New York: Random House, 1984. 230

²⁵ Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 16, 2018. www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/catharsis.

²⁶ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 33.

In their book, Todd Johnson and Dale Savidge continuously refer to theatre as a mimetic art. “The mode of performance in theatre is ‘mimesis.’ In theatrical performance, the actor who imitates, or takes on another character, is no longer speaking/acting as himself or herself.”²⁷ Though Augustine attacks the theatre and accuses this art form for corrupting his emotions, he uses the same mimetic mode as theatrical performance in many of his writings. Through his use of first person pronouns in his *Confessions*, Augustine’s readers imitate the prayerful writings of the author. Within this style of writing, the reader is drawn in and the author and reader are joined at a metaphysical level. What Augustine fails to realize is that theatre seeks to make the same connection that Augustine’s readers have with him.

The relationship between theatre and Christianity spans over a long and complex history. Unfortunately, Augustine was not the only Christian to condemn the world of theatre. The Trullan Synod of 692 sought to ban all theatrical performances and have professional actors and their spouses excommunicated.²⁸ Additionally, “Since Roman times actors had been forbidden the sacraments of the church, and Alfonso X (1221-1284) declared that all actors were to be branded infamous.”²⁹ While professional acting had been looked down upon by the Church throughout much of its history, this did not keep the Church from using theatre as means of teaching. During the 17th Century, many European schools, “both Protestant and Catholic, presented plays, since drama was thought effective not only for teaching doctrine but also for training students in speaking and deportment.”³⁰ It should also be noted that some of the most famous works of theatre during the 17th and 18th centuries came out of the Jesuit schools.³¹

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ Brockett, Oscar G., and Franklin J. Hildy. *History of the Theatre*. 67.

²⁹ Ibid., 146.

³⁰ Ibid., 267.

³¹ Ibid., 268.

Though many churchmen and theologians have looked with great disapproval, Christianity, through the use of liturgical drama, mystery plays, miracle plays, morality plays, and plays performed within Christian schools, has indeed had a long history of using theatre as a means of expressing truth. In his “Letter to Artists,” Pope John Paul II is looking to continue the relationship between the Church and artists. One way for the Church and artists to continue their partnership is to continue to use theatre as a means of expressing God’s truth and beauty. For it is through studying theology within this theatrical expression that the theologian can come to a better understanding of God’s divine revelation.

The Incarnation as a Theatrical Event

Because God does not just exist in the abstract, but makes Godself known through the senses, theatre, as a sensual art, becomes the perfect mode to explore and make relevant God’s divine revelation. In order for theatre to occur, the first step usually involves a playwright creating the world in which the play is to be set, the characters who will be interacting with the world, and the words that the characters will speak.³² However, a script does not become theatre until the words are embodied in a flesh and blood experience. In the Incarnation, God, *Logos*, becomes flesh and lives among humanity in a flesh and blood experience. Because theatre is anthropocentric, it necessarily deals with flesh and blood interaction. For this reason, theatre, which is described as “the one art form that imitates human action in the medium of human action”,³³ is bound up in the mystery of the Incarnation. Pope John Paul II also recognizes this,

³² I am referring here to a more classical sense of theatre. While improvisation is a form of theatre, it is not the focus of this paper.

³³ States, Bert. *Great reckonings in little rooms: On the phenomenology of theater*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 45.

stating that “on countless occasions the biblical word has become image, music and poetry, evoking the mystery of ‘the Word made flesh’ in the language of art.”³⁴ In his book, *Theater and Incarnation*, Max Harris explores the relationship between theatre and the Incarnation, and proposes using a “theatrical hermeneutic” when reading scripture.³⁵ He suggests that theatre is a powerful and more intimate way of doing theology. Harris states that the Incarnation is a theatrical event and that “the theatre, at its most joyous, occupies common ground with the Incarnation in its advocacy of what Karl Barth has called ‘the good gift of [our] humanity.’”³⁶ The Incarnation, when the Word became flesh, is a theatrical display of God appealing to our senses and taking part in the human experience.

In the first chapter of the book, entitled “Text and Performance”, Harris claims that dramatic texts, when left in their written form, are but incomplete works of art.³⁷ Dramatic texts are meant to be put to stage. The same could be said about scripture. The Bible is not just a book filled with theological facts; rather, it is a dramatic collection of texts filled with stories. It is a script written to be performed. “For God’s revelation is not an object to be looked at: it is an action in and upon the world, and the world can only respond, and hence understand through action on its part.”³⁸

In his essay, *Beyond Theatre and Incarnation*, Trevor Hart calls for further discussion on the significance of flesh. Words are but scribbles on paper until our human minds interact and interpret them. Hart claims that when interpreting the written Word of God (i.e., scripture), we

³⁴ John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." 3.

³⁵ Harris, Max. *Theater and incarnation*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005. Viii.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ Balthasar, *Theodramatik*. 1:15.

ought to encounter it in the form of flesh—the form in which the Word interacted with the world in and through the Incarnation.

That is to say, might its meanings be accessed most fully and powerfully when we read it in a manner that seeks ever to clothe it again with flesh, rather than abstracting from it principles, facts, ideas, and other more intellectually ‘hard-edged’ bits and pieces readily systematized into our bodies of doctrine, moral teaching, and the like?³⁹

God became flesh so that God and human beings might enter into a deeper relationship. When viewing salvation history in the flesh, we as human beings are able to relate to the texts in a much deeper and intimate way. When viewing scriptural passages on stage, the audience may gain further insight into theological practices, beliefs, and moral teachings.

In his essay, “The Intractable Sense of an Ending: Gethsemane’s Prayer on the Tragic Stage” Ivan Patricio Khovacs suggests bringing Christ’s prayer before God in the Garden of Gethsemane to life in the tragic theatre. In the garden, Jesus prays “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.” Here Jesus’ audience sees a clash between His two natures. While being fully divine, Christ is perfectly ordered to the will of the Father. However, Christ’s humanity agonizes over the thought of death. Khovacs states that “relating Christ’s agonizing prayer in Gethsemane to the tragic performance presumes the inclusivity of questions about suffering and its ultimate consequences in the drama of life.”⁴⁰ Additionally, as Christ is a model to our humanity, we too are called to share in the suffering of this life as we strive to do the will of God.

³⁹ Hart, Trevor "Beyond Theatre and Incarnation." In *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Trevor Hart and Wesley Vander Lugt, 30-43. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. 39.

⁴⁰ Khovacs, Ivan Patricio. "The Intractable Sense of an Ending: Gethsemane’s Prayer on the Tragic Stage." In *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Lugt Wesley Vander and Hart Trevor, 44-72. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. 50.

The Transcendent Nature of Theatre

While theatre can easily set a play during the time for which it was written, it is also able to provide modern interpretations of old works. Harris argues that “Such contemporaneity is...inherent to the theater”, and claims that members of the church congregation, like theater audiences, “demand that the text speak today.”⁴¹ Similar to taking Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and placing it in a different setting such as WWII Soviet Union, a director could easily take stories of scripture and place them in a different setting in an effort to make it more applicable to today’s society. Take for example, the story of *The Good Samaritan*. In the classic biblical story a man is beaten up, robbed, and then left for dead on the side of a road. A priest and Levite see the man but continue to walk past. These men are religious representatives of the Jewish culture and would have been expected to play the role of the good neighbor. Instead, a Samaritan traveler, who would have been seen as an enemy to the Jewish culture, was moved with compassion, cleaned his wounds, lifted him onto his own animal, and brought him to an inn where he cared for him.⁴²

To frame this story in a context that would speak to an audience today, one must look at who is seen as the “enemy” and who would be seen as a “good neighbor”. For this example, let us use a blue-collared, white man as the unfortunate traveler. After he is beaten and robbed, a priest walks by, but refuses to help. The priest is followed by a police officer. But hot on the trail of the group of thugs that beat the man up, the officer fails to save the man and continues past. Thirdly, there appears a Somalian immigrant—who unfortunately is seen as an enemy in the eyes

⁴¹ Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, 13.

⁴² Luke 10: 29-37. I will be using the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE) throughout the course of this paper.

of far too many Americans. The Muslim man gets down on his knees and upon mending the wounds of the injured man, carries him to a nearby hospital.

While I readily admit that this may be no perfect adaptation of *The Good Samaritan* story, I believe that it puts the parable into a context that could be easily understood by a modern audience. However, this production of *The Good Samaritan* goes beyond just adapting the story so that it can be understood by today's audience. Instead, "it changes the reality around it and changes the way everyone involved will read the parable for the rest of their lives."⁴³ It also calls for audience members to decide and assume their own roles in the story. Will they walk past the suffering man or woman on the street, or will they assume the role of the good Samaritan and work to alleviate the suffering of the world? In their article, "Holy Theatre: Enfleshing the Word", Richard Carter and Samuel Wells state:

We will never be able to create dramas as timeless and as powerful as Christ's own, but each time we enter their mystery there is the potential to make all things new and to discover again the revelation that has forever changed our lives.⁴⁴

Cardinal Avery Dulles is a well-known Catholic theologian, recognized for his book on the different models of the Church. Because the Church is something to be lived, people can assess models based on personal experience. Though Dulles encourages the use of models, he recognizes that individual models are necessarily inadequate and cannot shed light on all areas of the church.⁴⁵ In response, a theologian must use a combination of different models to have a fuller understanding of the Church. This idea of using different models no doubt also causes tension. However, seemingly contrasting models do not contradict, but rather complement one

⁴³ Carter, Richard, and Samuel Wells. "Holy Theatre: Enfleshing the Word." In *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Lugt Wesley Vander and Hart Trevor, 224-40. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. 239.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴⁵ Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. New York: Image, 2014. 181.

another.⁴⁶ Dulles warns that theologians must exercise tolerance and acceptance of pluralism because no one model is dominant over others and any argument for one model over others is generally circular.⁴⁷ Though Dulles is speaking on the church, I believe his insights also provide an explanation about how both the Church is to hold different interpretations of scripture in tension and how the audience is to hold different productions of the same play in tension in order to shine a fuller light on the truth being conveyed.

Hart concludes his essay by discussing the acceptance of multiple interpretations of scripture. He states that the belief that there can only be one authoritative interpretation of scripture “fails to celebrate the richness and depth of meaning invested by God through the imaginative labors of authors and readers alike.”⁴⁸ When looking at a single text in the Bible, it is inevitable that multiple interpretations will arise. But this is no different than the theatre.

After all, the acknowledgment that several different ways of ‘playing’ *King Lear* or *Measure for Measure* are possible and equally rich in their exploration of the territories of human meaning does not lead inexorably into the quagmire of critical relativism. It is still perfectly possible to prefer one ‘reading’ of these plays to others...and, more to the point, to make the judgement...that a particular rendition is not just ‘different,’ but badly done or unfaithful to the relevant traditions of performance.⁴⁹

So while it is important to hold multiple interpretations of scripture and productions of theatre in tension with one another, it is also important to recognize that just as there are poor productions of *King Lear*, there are poor interpretations of *The Good Samaritan* and other scriptural stories. However, regardless of the quality of the interpretation, the Incarnation makes clear that these stories are meant to become more than words on a page. God became flesh to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 182.

⁴⁸ Hart, “Beyond Theatre and Incarnation”, 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

make Godself better known to us. The best way to engage God is through the same method—encounter through flesh and blood performance.

Theatre, Presence, and Community

When interacting with the drama of salvation history, one is invited to participate in the same redeeming story. While God came to live amongst us, God’s audience, and show us how we are to live, we too are called to perform our roles for God the Creator. This begs the question: “Who is performing for whom?”⁵⁰ Moreover, theatre not only invites people to a deeper encounter with theological, philosophical, and moral questions, but it also forces people to engage with the performance that is immediately present to them within a community that is sharing in the experience.

In Elie Wiesel’s *The Trial of God: (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)*, Wiesel tells the story of three Jewish minstrels, an innkeeper and his servant, and Sam (who is later to be revealed as Satan) who, after seeing their people massacred by an unnamed hostile force, decide to put God on trial for allowing such an atrocity to occur. Wiesel found inspiration for his play from his own personal encounter in a Nazi concentration camp.

Inside the kingdom of night, I witnessed a strange trial. Three rabbis—all erudite and pious men—decided one winter evening to indict God for allowing his children to be massacred. I remember: I was there, and I felt like crying. But there nobody cried.⁵¹

Within this play, the audience too takes part in this trial of God. While it becomes easy to remove oneself from worldly situations and contemplate the Problem of Evil within a safe classroom environment, theatre forces the audience into a true-to-life scenario that reflects events

⁵⁰ Wiesel, Elie. *The trial of God: (as it was held on February 25, 1649, in Shamgorod)*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1979. 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

during the Holocaust in which millions of people were asking: “How a good and just God could allow millions of God’s children to be brutally slaughtered at the hands of the Nazi regime?” Each audience member is then able to come to a conclusion on their own, based on their shared communal experience. “Shared common experiences and the relationships that they create are vitally important to the Christian understanding of what it means to be human.”⁵² This emphasizes that both theatre and theology need community. Additionally, theatre is able to show how theology is relevant today. It is theatre’s power to put people into exceptionally difficult situations that leads David Cunningham to state that ethical, philosophical, and theological claims “that are produced with an encounter with Christianity should look less like those produced by the study of law or logic, and more like those evoked by the experiences of theatre.”⁵³

In his article, “‘And That’s True Too’: Revelation, Drama, and the Shape of Christian Ethics”, Cunningham recognizes that while Christianity is a way of life and not just a set of rules, it offers insight on how to live according to a right set of ethics and moral principles.⁵⁴ However, these insights do not manifest themselves as hard and unchanging laws. Rather, Christian ethics ought to be viewed not in terms of the individual acts of a person, but over the course of that person’s life time. This is another reason why the theatre is such an effective tool of storytelling. Theatre is not restricted to keeping events within the story of the play within a two to three hour time limit; rather, theatrical performance can both jump ahead and backwards through time in a flawless manner in order to tell a more rich and complex story.

⁵² Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 61.

⁵³ Cunningham, David. “‘And That’s True Too’: Revelation, Drama, and the Shape of Christian Ethics.” In *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Lugt, Wesley Vander and Hart, Trevor, 178-202. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. 181.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

In the musical *Les Miserables*, based on the novel written by Victor Hugo, the character Jean Valjean steals a loaf of bread in order to save his dying nephew. In answer for his “crime”, Valjean is forced to serve 19 years in prison. While the audience would likely not deem Valjean’s actions as morally wrong, he is violating the law given to Moses by God: “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). Throughout the musical, the audience witnesses Valjean repent for his wrong deeds of the past and strive to show mercy and compassion to those he comes across. He cares for a poor woman who has been forced to live a life of prostitution, raises this poor woman’s daughter upon her death, risks his life to save a member of a French rebellion, and spares the life of the man who has persecuted him throughout his life. “He is a good man, in spite of his crimes and misdemeanors. Our universe expands, beyond questions about theft and truth-telling and resisting arrest, to take the picture of an entire life.”⁵⁵

Les Miserables would hardly be considered a musical about morals and ethics; however, in his book, *Theatre and Ethics*, Nicholas Ridout suggests that this may be the reason why an audience can find ethical value within the story of Jean Valjean. He suggests that “an ethical work or event of art would be one which demanded a labour of critical thought for its ethical potential to be realized rather than offering within itself anything of the ethical.”⁵⁶ Stated differently, theatre can reach its highest ethical potential by abandoning ethics. Indeed, while good theatre provides a space for many voices to be heard, it does not tell the audience which voice is the morally correct one to listen to. This decision is left to the audience. Moreover,

Instead of evaluating discrete acts as to their moral character, we are asked to inhabit the roles that these characters represent, and to think about the kind of moral training that is required in order to judge rightly.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Cunningham, “And That’s True Too”: Revelation, Drama, and the Shape of Christian Ethics.” 189.

⁵⁶ Ridout, Nicholas. *Theatre & Ethics*. New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 69.

⁵⁷ Cunningham, “And That’s True Too”: Revelation, Drama, and the Shape of Christian Ethics.” 200.

Through the Incarnation, God displays to humanity what it means to be fully human. Christ came to show us how to live rightly so that we might come to imitate Him. So while God set the stage for right moral and ethical living, God has called humanity to assume its role and live out those practices in community. However, because God continues to reveal Godself today, it can be said that while we, God's audience, are performing for God, God is also performing for us. "Theatrical theology indeed!"⁵⁸

Human beings are meant to live in community, and this is the mode of communication through which God reveals Godself. "Sacraments are events that occur within a community and are done by the community."⁵⁹ Similarly, theatre occurs within and is done by members of the community. Johnson and Savidge state:

...theatre is much more than just actors putting words on a stage; it's about the relationships it creates. It's about their relationship with the audience; they are entering into a community, and they're entering into a dialogue with people not only on stage but in the audience.⁶⁰

Theatre necessitates community and demands immediate presence that film and literature cannot provide. An actor that is physically present to the audience is able to communicate in a more intimate way than an actor on screen because the actor and audience can engage all of their senses.

This is simply the way humans communicate and therefore are present to one another. And this is what gives live theatre a sacramental quality, for the actors are present in an intimate way because of the immediate use of signs, words, and gestures offered with the intention of communicating to a particular group of people.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, Kevin J. "At Play in the Theodrama of the Lord: The Triune God of the Gospel." In *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith*, edited by Lugt, Wesley Vander and Hart, Trevor, 1-29. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. 5.

⁵⁹ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 69.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

Through its use of presence and community, theatre allows audience members and theologians alike to engage with difficult moral, theological, and philosophical questions. Theology is not something that is to be confined to a classroom experience; rather, theology demands to be put into practice and lived out within the community of God's people. It is through this theatrical method that we might come to a fuller understanding of God's divine revelation and the roles that we are called to play in this lifetime.

The celebration of the liturgy is itself a theatrical event because it calls the community of God's people together to actively worship and contemplate God's role within the history of revelation. Additionally, both theatre and the liturgy are tied up in ritual. "Ritual is the appropriate use of signs, words, and gestures in specific situations."⁶² Both liturgy and theatre use sign, word, and gesture to tell a story and draw the gathered community into the performance or act of worship. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Vatican II bishops state:

To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.⁶³

Sacrosanctum Concilium emphasizes that the people need to engage more fully in worship by using body and voice through the rituals and prayers of the liturgy. When participating in the liturgy, people are engaging in the communication of God's revelation through ritualistic acts and prayers that require the active use of body and voice. When doing theology, theologians, too,

⁶² Ibid., 14.

⁶³ Paul VI. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. December 4, 1963. Papal Archive. The Holy See. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

ought to engage in the exploration of God's revelation through the use of not only contemplation, but through their whole bodies as well.

Theology Mirroring the Theatrical Process

In his book, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*, John Haught states that creation was not an event that happened at one particular point in time; rather, creation continues to unfold to this day.⁶⁴ From this scientific claim, Haught goes on to argue that the universe and life itself is not based on intelligent design; rather, the story of the universe and life itself is tied up in the great cosmic drama.⁶⁵ Haught raises the important point that life is a continuing story. Our goal in this life is to reach our *telos*, to come into full communion with God. Boethius and *Everyman*, as previously explored, show that we cannot reach happiness/unity with God in this life. Rather, we are tied up in the unfolding story of God's continued creation. "Unlike design, the drama of life demands that observers *wait* until an entire series of events has played out before deciding whether or not it makes any sense."⁶⁶ Earlier in this paper, I argued that, like dramatic scripts, the stories of scripture are incomplete until performed by God's people. But just as the drama of life has been unfolding for millions of years, so too our part in the Christian drama is continually unfolding. This revelation makes clear the fact that theatre is not simply the single performance of a company; rather, theatre, like life, is a process and demands rehearsal.

⁶⁴ Haught, John F. *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*. 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

In their book, Johnson and Savidge state: “It is in the doing of the text that one comes to know, not in the knowing of the text that one comes to do.”⁶⁷ Human beings are not born with the knowledge and wisdom that scripture offers. Instead, humans are called to read scripture and act out the commands and teachings that God has offered. It is by doing what God asks, that human beings come to know God. Similarly, an actor or director does not truly know the script that he/she has been given right away. It does not work for an actor to perform a play and then decide to read the script and analyze his/her character. This is where theologian, Shannon Craigo-Snell, will argue that the rehearsal process comes into play. It is through the rehearsal process that the actor comes to know and understand the text.⁶⁸ In summarizing Craigo-Snell’s work, Ivan Khovacs states:

Taking the performance rehearsal for our metaphor sheds some light on the temporal location of the Christian between Scripture and the eschatological performance yet to come. To say that our Christian situation is an ongoing rehearsal that anticipates performance in the resurrection has nothing to do with the attitude that ‘this world is not my home, I’m only passing through’ as the revival hymn goes: it has everything to do with recognition that what we do here and now defines the shape of eschatological performance. It is also highly valuing of the time and space as our cosmic stage as well as the incarnate means we are given to act in it.⁶⁹

Khovacs’ writings on how the Christian ought to view his/her life as a rehearsal for the divine performance that has yet to come very closely resembles the writings of Haught. Both theologians recognize the importance that life is an unfolding drama and that our lives are but a rehearsal for the final performance that can only come when human beings are fully united to God. The rehearsal process is the perfect model, Khovacs and Haught would agree, because it simultaneously holds an anticipatory view of the world while also recognizing that what human

⁶⁷ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 55.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Khovacs, Ivan. “A Cautionary Note on the Use of Theatre for Theology.” In *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition*, edited by Guthrie, Steven and Hart, Trevor, 33-50. Ashgate Publishing, 2007. 47.

beings do in this life matters. When one comes to this understanding, one will recognize that “the artistic process of theatre, not the theatrical performance alone is the appropriate analogue for Christian theology and its relationship to the life of faith.”⁷⁰

It is through the rehearsal period that actors are able to explore their character, decide upon specific choices, and make mistakes before they perform in front of an audience. Similarly, when doing theology, theologians are free to explore new ideas about God’s divine revelation, draw certain conclusions, and are subject to making mistakes. God is a mystery that cannot be fully understood until a person is fully united to God in the ‘final performance.’ “Our life as disciples is an ongoing rehearsal of our faith, constantly reinterpreting the Scriptures in our lives as a part of the community of faith to which we belong.”⁷¹

Every human person has lived a life of different experiences. These experiences shape their perspective which in turn shape their interpretation. When doing theology, the theologian brings with him/her his/her own life experiences; therefore, each theologian can offer a unique and valuable insight to and interpretation of God’s divine revelation. Similarly, “In producing a work, artists express themselves to the point where their work becomes a unique disclosure of their own being, of what they are and of how they are what they are.”⁷² In the world of theatre, the actor brings with him/her his/her own ways of expressing a character. The actor must look within to “know” the character that he/she is to perform. Naturally, the experiences that the actor has had in his/her life will ultimately shape his/her interpretation of the script and ultimately his/her performance. The theologian, like the actor, engages with an interpretation of the world shaped by his/her own experiences. The rehearsal period is not only a time of action, but it also

⁷⁰ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 55.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷² John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." 2.

allows the actor and theologian to look within and discover the truth found in contemplation. “Theatre is an art form that, even when performed at a crisp pace, allows for reflection and contemplation. It slows down life. It isn’t a loud assault on the senses.”⁷³ Through the contemplation offered in the rehearsal process, the actor comes to find truth in his/her character, and the theologian comes to a greater understanding of God’s divine revelation.

Ultimately, contemplation should lead to a life of action in the Christian community. As Carter and Wells state, the purpose of the actor and theologian “is to be instruments that transmit truths that otherwise remain out of sight.”⁷⁴ Upon discovering truths in contemplation, the actor and theologian ought to share these truths with those of the community. Peter Brook, a world-renowned theatre and film director, refers to this type of theatre as “Holy Theatre.” He states:

I am calling it the Holy Theatre for short, but it could be called The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear has a deep hold on our thoughts.⁷⁵

In the end, the purpose of the theatrical process is to allow the actor to contemplate his/her character so that he/she might be able to express that which is invisible on stage in front of an audience. Here the actor’s performance seeks to transcend the experiences of the audience members. Similarly, the theologian ought to contemplate the truths of God’s divine revelation and then share these truths with God’s people so that the community might live these truths out in the continuously unfolding cosmic drama.

Conclusion: Practical Theology and the Dramaturg

⁷³ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 15.

⁷⁴ Carter and Wells. "Holy Theatre: Enfleshing the Word." 227.

⁷⁵ Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin Books, 2008. 42.

When doing theology, the theologian looks at what God's self-presentation on the world's stage means for the part that humanity is to play in the Christian drama – a drama that is intrinsically tied up with what God has done, is doing and will do. In his lecture at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, Kevin Vanhoozer expands on the definition of theology as “Faith seeking understanding” by stating that theology is instead “Faith seeking and showing understanding.”⁷⁶ Just as the word “drama” means “to do”, so too is the Christian faith something that is to be done. We cannot just believe in the teachings of the Bible and the doctrines that we profess; rather, we must respond with action.

Within this Christian drama, members of the Church community are the company of actors with speaking and acting parts to play. Vanhoozer, then, suggests that the theologian is the dramaturg – the advisor to the director and company alike. In the professional theatre, the role of the dramaturg is to rightly interpret the play. This is done through discovering what the playwright's intention was, researching the background of the play and the playwright, examining the different interpretations that other productions have made when doing the same play, and providing an analysis and bibliography of useful sources.⁷⁷ Perhaps the most important question that the dramaturg asks is “why?”. When choosing to produce a certain play, the theatre company needs to know the play's public significance. The information provided by the dramaturg helps to answer the question of whether or not a play is relevant to a modern audience and, if so, what relevant themes exist. Through the advising of the dramaturg, the director may

⁷⁶ Vanhoozer, Kevin. "The Theater of the Gospel: The Stage, the Script, and the Director." Lecture, Southeastern Seminary, Wake Forest, NC. August 31, 2010. <http://marccortez.com/2010/08/31/kevin-vanhoozer-on-redramatizing-theology/>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

choose to interpret the play in a way that is sure to connect the themes of the play to its modern audience.

Similar to the role of the dramaturg, the theologian is responsible for serving as an advisor to the secular clergy, religious orders, and the wider Christian community. The theologian is called to rightly interpret scripture, Church doctrine, and God's divine revelation, ask difficult questions, provide a background on moral and ethical decision making, understand the work and background of other theologians, question accepted ideas, and provide insight as to why Christianity is relevant today. Additionally, the work of the theologian helps members of the community to discern their vocation/role in the Christian drama. The theologian, like the dramaturg, should seek to bring the teachings of the Church into the modern world and show that the Church has something to offer the world.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council states: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."⁷⁸ The second Vatican Council recognizes that suffering exists, and that it is the role of the Church and its people to be in solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Theatre has always been a tool that is capable of telling the story of the "other" in society. Whether a play is directly associated within the context of faith, it is capable of illuminating truths about the world – a world marked with poverty, disease, hatred, and violence. But theatre also calls people to action. Though he recognizes that in the modern day, art is generally marked by an absence of God, John Paul II remains firm in his belief that "art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience" because it "is by its nature a

⁷⁸ Paul VI. *Gaudium et Spes*. December 7, 1965. Papal Archive. The Holy See. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

kind of appeal to the mystery.”⁷⁹ Though art can often depict the darker side of human nature John Paul II is unmoved in his belief. He states: “Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice to the universal desire for redemption.”⁸⁰ When searching to find meaning in the human need for redemption, the theatre, through its use of incarnation, community, and presence, is the perfect mode to explore this theological question.

Theatre invites individuals to live both an active and contemplative life style. While it is important to explore the idea of suffering and need for redemption in our world through the use of contemplation, we are ultimately called to action and to stand in solidarity with the marginalized of our society. Theatre calls for this and our Christian faith demands it. Johnson and Savidge expand on this notion when they state:

“Truly Christian theology has to be embodied belief; you just can’t believe something and not have it impact your behavior. And that necessarily invites us to consider how we can enact, embody, and perform those things we believe. So in some ways it has reinforced a current theme in practical theology, where you just can’t stay with theory; you have to put it into practice. Just as theatre does not exist outside of practice, ...Christian theology does not exist outside of practice.”⁸¹

Theology at its best ought to reflect theatre at its best. When doing theology that mirrors the theatrical process, it becomes a way to focus on God working in the world and our call as the audience to take part in the performance. Just as a theatrical script is incomplete until put to stage in theatrical performance, so too are the biblical stories a script that demand action from the Christian community. Both theology and theatre are tied up with the process of doing. Theology, then, should mirror the theatrical process of doing—a process that necessitates incarnation,

⁷⁹ John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Johnson, Todd, and Dale Savidge. *Performing the Sacred: Theology and Theatre in Dialogue*. 138.

presence, and community. Because God is continuously making Godself known through the action of divine revelation, God's actions ought to be viewed through the lens of theatre because it is the theatrical process that most closely represents how God acts in the great cosmic drama. The history of theatre and Christianity is both long and complicated. However, it is vital that theology continue to utilize and embrace theatre because of its unique way of expressing Incarnation, presence, and community in a way that no other art form can. Theatre is able to transcend and touch the human spirit in an altogether unique way. It is my hope, then, that theatre may "help to affirm that true beauty which, as a glimmer of the Spirit of God, will transfigure matter, opening the human soul to the sense of the eternal."⁸²

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⁸² John Paul II. "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists." 9.

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