

performing the sacred

theology and theatre in dialogue

t o d d e . j o h n s o n
& d a l e s a v i d g e

foreword by robert smyth



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From Todd:

To the memory of my parents, Glenn Johnson and Helen Johnson, who taught me by their performance of the Christian faith how to behave and act as a disciple and schooled me in faith, hope, and love.

From Dale:

To my wife, Tammy, and my children, Tim, Trish, and Olivia, who have had a part in everything I have ever done of any value.

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foreword

I spend much of my life in a black box.

It is a magical place to be. Every few weeks there is a gathering. Someone will bring a Word, someone a Sound, someone Light, another Movement. There is a cascade of collaboration. Something new, something for the moment, is being born.

And then we hold our breath. For this thing is never complete until the audience arrives. And the conversation begins again.

That's the rhythm of my life.

So, it's encouraging when someone writes a good book about it. About the things you care about.

What you are holding is not another “how-to” book, or “let's all do Christian Art” pamphlet; rather, it is a fascinating exploration of the theological dynamics that make the theatre such a vibrant art form. An intriguing look at how the theatre often parallels the quests and questions of theology.

At its center are three lights that keep returning to illuminate the work—incarnation, community, and presence.

Incarnation—the story breathed to life, the word made flesh.

Community—the gathering of live artists, live audience.

Presence—the sense of the holy, the taste of grace. From its beginnings theatre has existed to invoke or examine the transcendent.

At the heart of the theatre is always a story. For people of faith it is also The Story. The Story that lays a foundation of meaning for all other stories.

Because you're reading this I would assume you're interested in the confluence of faith and the larger culture, in ideas and art, in the refreshing

impact of stories well told. That you are either a practitioner or an interested participant in the art form.

If you are a theatre artist it will remind you of the rich gift you share: a playground to explore both the hard questions and the immense joys of the human experience; to chart this unique place between angel and animal, the mix of real body and keen spiritual awareness.

If you are an audience member, it will open your eyes wider to the wonders and discoveries to be found in good theatre. Wet your appetite to find more.

It helps too, that both of the authors are invigorated by their faith and really love the theatre. Their excitement is palpable. For Dale and Todd this is a conversation, the sharing of an exploration together.

It's a joy to tag along.

Enjoy the journey.

Robert Smyth
Lamb's Players Theatre
San Diego, California

introduction

Todd and Dale Go to the Theatre

The preliminary work on this book began in June 2005 during a week we spent together in Chicago. That week, Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company premiered *Hillbilly Antigone*, a musical reworking of the Sophoclean tragedy. It utilized early country music and melodramatic stage conventions to relocate the ancient conflict between personal conscience and the rule of the state to the Appalachian Mountains and the Hatfield-McCoy feuds. We had the pleasure of attending this show together and reflecting on it over pizza later that night. It's always better to experience theatre with a friend than alone. Theatre is meant to be an experience in community, the community between actors and their audience as well as the community of audience members. Good theatre should be digested after the fact, discussed and reexperienced through conversation and reflection. Doing this is one way of obeying the admonition to "guard the heart": one doesn't avoid difficult subject matter but rather reflects and critiques it after the fact; and it never hurts to have a deep-dish pizza to lubricate the process.

Hillbilly was great fun, a great way to spend a couple of hours—in a beautiful theatre full of enthusiastic people experiencing a quality presentation marked with professionalism from conception to execution. We were reminded, again, how much the theatre experience differs from television or film. It matters greatly that you are in a room with other people, aware of the artists and the audience, fully alive together in both space and time, experiencing something together.

Purists might take exception to the liberties taken with Sophocles' plot in *Hillbilly Antigone*. Others might react to Appalachian stereotypes.¹ *Antigone*

is a monumental play, and the time-period relocation forces a reduction in the stature of the story and theme of the original. Nevertheless, Looking-glass Theatre created an entertaining and engaging experience. Generically it was a musical, with a comedic quality not unlike the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* another dramatic work derived from Greek mythology. A trio of bluegrass musicians took the role of a Greek chorus. The play read contemporary cultural themes into the Antigone story. Mountain religion (Creon was a Pentecostal preacher in the mountain community) and politics (Creon was played with the inflections of President George W. Bush) intermingled. *Hillbilly Antigone*, while not a perfect theatrical piece, provides a launching pad for introducing the important themes of our book.

Theatre has the ability to communicate multiple streams of content (political, social, religious, personal) on multiple levels (intellectual, emotional, kinesthetic). A multilayered theatre piece such as *Hillbilly Antigone* is challenging and thus richly rewarding. Audience members filter their experience in the theatre through their own political, religious, social, and personal worldviews. We responded, as Christians, to the use of a church as the setting for Pastor Creon's conflict with Antigone. We caught the subtle irony regarding Christianity but also the truth that religious people have been guilty of using religion as a weapon against individuals.

We were reminded again how pleasurable theatre is and also how very significant an experience in the theatre can be. Theatre audiences aren't lulled into being passive receptors; they are awakened and stimulated, made aware of their presence among the actors and other members of the audience. They are confronted with story, character, language, and ideas that engage the emotions and intellect together. Not just the content of the performance (the script, story, etc.) but the total experience can have a profound impact on audiences; for this reason theatre has endured for centuries and continues to thrive even with competition from its electronic offspring. Theatre, as interactive experience, connects with a deep human need for community and for interaction with other humans.

Theatre and Theology in Dialogue

This book began as a dialogue between theologian Todd Johnson and theatre artist Dale Savidge. As we grew in our friendship and as our conversations progressed, we realized that the dialogue wasn't just between us personally; it was between our disciplines. Not only do we have ideas to exchange as friends, but theology and theatre can also learn a great deal from each other.

In addition to speaking the language of our respective disciplines, we are conversant in each other's worlds. While in seminary in Chicago, Todd studied acting and worked as an actor in local theatre there. While an undergraduate, Dale studied theology and only took up theatre later, in graduate school. So part of the pleasure of our conversation is that we can understand and appreciate each other's worlds. We met during a two-year investigation into the role of theatre in contemporary worship, in a program called the Theatre in Worship Initiative, which was directed by Christians in Theatre Arts and funded in part by the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship.

Our starting point is that theatre has theological content: not just the content of the performance but as an art form, theatre uniquely reflects the *imago Dei*, the image of God imbued into humanity. We view theology as a way of knowing about God and as a way of knowing God as disciples and as God's children, and it is our premise that theology can be understood through the lens of theatre and that theatre can be understood through the lens of theology. We take into account the many, varied manifestations of theatre in culture, from script-based performances to improvisation to drama in worship. Neither theatre nor theology is static; both are dynamic, changing, living entities.

The theatre event, of all the arts, uniquely embodies the central tenets of the Christian faith. The fact that live human beings embody the characters of a play speaks of the *incarnate* nature of God in Christ. The fact that the actors perform for a live audience highlights the *communal* nature of theatre and reflects the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in relationship. The fact that the relationship between audience and performer allows for interaction and influence between the two speaks of the *presence* of God transforming the world through nature and grace. We will investigate these three categories and apply them to theatre throughout this book.

Theatre happens in the "here and now." By contrast, narrative forms (novels and stories) happen in the "there and then." Theatre is often a re-presentation of the past, but its essential character is in the present (temporally), and it is physically present to the audience (spatially). Christianity certainly involves the past; the history of our faith is rich with meaning for us. And the Christian faith is lived in the present and in the presence of God. As we progress through this book, we will find many such parallels between theology and theatre.

Theatre and the Christian church haven't always seen themselves as compatible—and that's the first of many understatements in our book. History is replete with examples of suspicion and outright hostility on both sides. Particularly in the West, Christianity has had difficulty with an art so closely tied to the human body. Theatre, for its part, has reacted by retreating from Christianity. We'll explore this antagonism and also examine some encouraging instances of church-theatre collaboration in the twenty-first century.

Some Definitions

Theatre is a branch of the performing arts; as such it is referred to as one of the interpretative (as opposed to creative) arts. Live theatre is a hybrid art form combining the literary arts (scripts) with the plastic arts (physical realities in space and time). We prefer to use the category of narrative art rather than literary art, since theatre may have a narrative without having a script, as in improvisation.²

The word “theatre” derives from the Greek *theatron*, which is literally “seeing place.” Theatre generally refers to the performance or production aspects of the art. “Drama” derives from the Greek *dromenon*, which is literally “a thing done.” It refers to the genre of literature that is written in dialogue (or monologue), is intended for public performance, and is driven by the imitation of an action. A drama is a script that is incomplete until performed in a theatrical production. We use the terms “drama” and “theatre” in these senses throughout this book.

The mode of performance in theatre is “mimesis.” In a theatrical performance, the actor who imitates, or takes on another character, is no longer speaking/acting as himself or herself. This is a critical distinction. Jesus told stories, and quite dramatic stories, but we have no indication he ever enacted them. He chose not to assume the role of the characters in his stories, their physical and vocal mannerisms, but rather to speak as himself. Did he use inflections or gestures to heighten the imaginative context of a parable? Possibly, though we have no way of knowing since there is no record of how he spoke, only of what he spoke. But in a theatrical performance we are in the presence of mimesis, the imitation of another reality, and the personality of the actor is subordinated to or subsumed in the character being portrayed.

Further, theatre presupposes a physical reality, the physical presence of actor and audience. We cannot divorce ourselves from our bodies and still remain human. Theatre cannot happen without living bodies sharing time and space together. Theatre, unlike film and television, creates a space for humans to interact in person, in real time, with a circular communication from stage to audience and back to stage. It creates, either for a night or for a season of plays, a community.

Christianity is perhaps harder to define. It is a religion, a way of life, a commitment, a relationship. We use the word “Christian” as a noun, not as an adjective. Christians are people who have entered into a relationship with Christ and have made a commitment to be his disciples. The earliest Christian creed is “Jesus Christ is Lord,” and Christians affirm this belief with integrity. Christians believe certain things: that God is triune; that God

was revealed in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and that God remains present in this world through the Holy Spirit.

Many kinds of Christians participate in the theatrical community. We do not presuppose any particular type of Christian, by either denomination, worship style, or other expression of Christian belief. Rather, we define Christianity writ large. We are concerned with the inner hub of the faith. Some things in this book will not resonate with all Christians, and we omit some elements of faith-theatre interaction that are peculiar to particular groups of Christians. Our goal is to provide a resource that all Christian disciples will find beneficial; building on the center, we hope that Christians in all corners of Christ's church will find this book useful.

Theatre and Christianity: Intersecting and Integrating

Christianity and theatre have frequently intersected in history. In our own time, Christians are involved in theatre at every level: as academics; as theatre professionals; in ministry; as participants in touring or resident repertory companies, missions, or community theatre, and so on. Ours is a time of harmony between theatre and church, at least to the extent that the church enthusiastically uses theatre for its own ends. However, like much that is produced by the Christian subculture, theatre in church is often drastically different from “the theatre” as a mainstream cultural institution. We will examine how the church handles theatre and how the theatre reflects on the Christian faith.

We speak of theatre and Christianity intersecting, interacting, and integrating. Sometimes a theatrical piece includes all three. Sometimes they intersect; often they collide! Sometimes the theatre integrates Christianity or Christians as subject matter. Christianity is a dominant cultural force in America and in Western culture, and as a cultural activity, the theatre connects with Christianity quite frequently.

The theatre deals with issues of faith, and of Christian faith, far more often and far more seriously than do film or television. A quick search of theatre reviews on the *New York Times* Web site or a glance at the last several issues of *American Theatre* magazine will reveal numerous professional productions of works that engage spirituality and Christianity. Some are attacks on the Christian faith; most are explorations—honest explorations—of faith. This is in contrast to the frequent stereotypical representations of Christians in the electronic media. One need only remember the film *Saved* to see what an easy target conservative Christians make and how superficially a filmmaker can present Christianity.

In the winter of 2008, as we completed this book, we could refer to dozens of reviews of theatrical performances that treat the faith, in this decade alone. There is Robert Wilson's *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a multifaceted adaptation of Gustave Flaubert's novel of the same name, which was part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival in the fall of 2004. That same season saw the appearance of Val Kilmer in *The Ten Commandments* in Los Angeles. In the spring of 2005, *Doubt, a Parable* opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club with Cherry Jones and Brian F. O'Byrne taking the stage in a John Patrick Shanley piece "written with an uncanny blend of compassion and detachment."³ David Rambo's *God's Man in Texas* is frequently produced across the United States, and Tracy Lett's *Man from Nebraska*, a play that continues to be presented in prestigious regional theatres, not only dramatizes its central character's crisis of faith but also suggests a positive resolution to that crisis. Throughout the book we offer many other examples of how the theatre is tackling issues of faith and Christianity.

"Ritual" is another term that occurs frequently in our study. Rituals are predefined patterns of behavior appropriate for given people in given circumstances. For example, one would eat differently at McDonalds than one would at a five-star restaurant. Patterns of dress and behavior are different, though the ritual of eating the meal is similar. A "rite" is a type of ritual performed in a specific time and place, by specific people, and in which the type of behavior is clearly and intentionally different from ordinary behavior. A rite can usually be named: a wedding, a baptism, a funeral.⁴ Ritual is the appropriate use of signs, words, and gestures in specific situations. You kiss your aunt; you don't kiss a stranger on the street, even though you might say "hello" to both of them. Theatre uses sign, word, and gesture to tell a story; it is a specific rite, a rite of storytelling, a rite of entertainment. Through signs, words, and gestures, we tell a story by becoming a story.

The Context for This Book

Performing the Sacred is not the first book to address the relationship between theatre and faith. Previous treatments have taken either historical or practical approaches. Some begin with the relationship between theatre and religion in ancient Greece or Egypt, follow that thread to medieval Europe and the Church's use of theatre to illustrate biblical stories, on to various antitheatrical attitudes among the Reformers and the Puritans, into the twentieth century and the new medievalism of the contemporary church and the embrace of theatre as one way among many to connect with culturally savvy congregants. History is a good teacher. It is also a humbling teacher,

because there really is “nothing new under the sun.” Any application of theatre in worship today is derived, consciously or not, from something tried by the church in earlier years.

Practical books about theatre and Christianity sometimes take a “how to” approach, which is often nothing more than adding Christian language to chapters found in any theatre appreciation text. Techniques for directing or lighting are pretty much the same whether they are used in a church, a community theatre, or a school. Certainly there are ethical/moral dimensions to the actor-director relationship that the Christian faith can illuminate. Often these are accepted in mainstream theatre practice because they work, not because they derive from an authoritative text, such as the Bible. Other practical books identify various applications of theatre to the practice of Christianity. Some create taxonomies of religious drama; others lay out methods for using theatre in worship. You can peruse the bibliography for examples of these books.

Most of these historical and practical books treat the relationship between Christianity and theatre on a superficial level. Rarely do they probe below the surface. We should not be surprised. It is a characteristic of contemporary (early twenty-first-century) Western Christians to be utilitarian and pragmatic—indeed, this is a characteristic of the culture in which we live and to which we minister. No argument is necessary; evidence of our infatuation with quick solutions and shortcuts abounds. People can live their entire lives on the fast track, never taking time to reflect on what it means to live. People can live their Christian faith in the same way, quickly and efficiently, but deaf and blind to the movement of the Spirit around them.

Be Still, and Know That I Am God

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.⁵ This may explain why many theatre artists are also baseball fans, a sport said to compress twenty minutes of excitement into three hours of playing time. The ability to sit still and be quiet for theatre (and to a greater degree for grand opera) is militated against by a culture that rewards speed and volubility. Baseball games now feature inter-inning extravaganzas and pulsing rock music to keep the fans from becoming restless. Likewise, rock music tributes are some of the most popular shows on Broadway, season after season.

Case in point: the recent Broadway production of *Faith Healer*, by Brian Friel, is a two-hour-plus series of four, thirty-five-minute monologues. None of the three characters speaks to the others; they talk directly to the audience

for thirty-five minutes at a time. The original cast—Ralph Fiennes, Cherry Jones, and Ian McDiarmid—was spectacular, but the required stillness was, even for a theatre lover, an exercise in discipline. The play will likely never, in its current form, be made into a movie. The experience of theatre, like the experience of God, invites stillness and quietness.

Near the end of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Emily Webb, the young girl at the center of the story, asks: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?—every, every minute?" The Stage Manager answers immediately, "No," and then pauses before he continues: "The saints and poets, maybe—they do some."⁶ Emily has died; she has been allowed to revisit a day in her life and is now returning to the grave. From her new perspective she recognizes the significance of life, and she longs for the living to see it with her. Art and religion are the activities that give humans that perspective: "saints and poets" provide the path. When theatre and Christianity intersect, the potential for spiritual insight coupled with Truth is formidable.

The distinction of this book is its attempt to view the theatre experience in light of Christian theology and to examine the central tenets of Christian theology through the lens of the theatre. We suggest a symbiotic connection between theatre and Christianity: they are not just similar; rather they share major commonalities at the core of their existences. The essential elements of theatre and the essential elements of Christianity—incarnation, community, and presence—are congruent. We confirm these similarities throughout this book, and at the end we explore the significance of this fact.

This book is written for people who make theatre (actors, directors, designers, ministers, liturgists, etc.) and for people who experience theatre (audiences and congregations). It is also an appeal to Christians who are not artists or audiences to return to this ancient art that so closely models the Christian faith. It is an appeal to Christians who aren't artists to benefit from the contemplative life of the artist, to slow down, lower the volume, and experience what life and faith consist of below the surface. It is not a call to the life of an ascetic, one withdrawn from the life of the senses; the purpose of contemplation and reflection is to strengthen us for a productive life in society and culture. Theatre as an endeavor and an experience teaches us vital attributes of the Christian faith and what it means to be fully human, fully alive and present, and created in the image of God, who is always present.

Hillbilly Antigone 2005

Earlier we commented on the multiple levels on which theatre affects an audience: political, social, religious, personal. *Hillbilly Antigone* worked on

all these levels. The politics of dictatorial power mingled with the politics of mountain families and with authoritarianism in primitive religious sects. Creon was cast as a power-hungry megalomaniac at every level of life in the village. As audience members, we not only observed these various communities on stage (the families, the village); we became our own community (the audience—mingling at intermission), and we entered into a relationship with the actors, forming a community in the theatre. There was a sense that we were contributing, that the performance was relying on our attention and reaction, that how we received it *mattered*. We were in community at every level.

This production combined a historically significant piece of literature from fifth-century-BCE Greece with a familiar American cultural context, that of early twentieth-century Appalachia, staged with conventions derived from nineteenth-century melodrama and experienced by an audience removed in space and time from all three of those cultures. And yet it worked! We had both seen the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and the similarities with *Hillbilly Antigone* were immediately apparent. So were the differences. We were within a few feet of living human characters, with guns and knives so close we could have been threatened by them. The sound of the gunshots had a physical presence, and the violence and affection between the characters was palpable. There was a distinct and appropriate absence of special effects or realistic spectacle. The show was homespun and earthy, not virtual or prepackaged. It incarnated the story. We were present to the story, and the storytellers were present to us.

Good theatre addresses issues of ultimate concern: life and death, relationships, family, survival. There is a sense that what is happening matters, that our lives depend on it and we'd better pay attention. This was certainly the case with *Hillbilly Antigone*. The show was enacted with certain rituals front and center: the staging of church, the routines associated with Pentecostal worship, a funeral service, primitive snake handling and strychnine drinking, and so on. There were also the familiar rituals of family: meals, courtship, birth, and death. By enacting these rituals in our presence, in the community established with the audience, the actors drew us into the story empathetically and kinesthetically, as well as intellectually and emotionally.

We have begun a conversation, and now we invite you into our conversation. You'll "hear" us speak separately (Todd wrote chapters 2 and 3, and Dale wrote chapters 1, 4, and 5), and you'll "hear" us dialogue in the conclusion. Enjoy the conversation: agree, disagree, but by all means please join in. It is our hope that people of faith and people of the theatre will engage in a rich and fruitful dialogue—because we really do have something to learn from each other.