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Making Connections: Preaching as Theatre

by

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Actors act and preachers preach. The words themselves are short and crisp, leaving little room for confusion: "act," "preach." Salt and pepper, bread and butter words - they are the kind that anybody might use. They are the kind of words that people do, in fact, use - everyday - confident that they will be understood.

On the street, in the studio, in the pews there is not much confusion. "Actors" pretend and "Preachers" scold. "Actors" mimic and "Preachers" rhapsodize. "Actors" deceive and "Preachers" lecture. And while the two activities may be perceived to share a bit of ground (there is, for example, the common wisdom that 'all preachers are frustrated actors'), the person in-the-pew does not want their preacher to act and the folks on the far side of the proscenium arch do not want the actors to preach. The words are held apart. We know what we mean by these words and we will brook no confusion.

The thesis of this paper is that a little confusion in this area might, in fact, be good for the souls of both preachers and actors. As artists who operate in the mimetic/nemetic world, they have much in common. And while the question of whether there is anything actors may wish to learn from preachers is an open one, it is clear that there is much preachers may learn from actors.

Common Misunderstandings

"Don't preach to me."

"He is merely acting."

"I don't need another sermon about this."

"It was all just a performance."

The words do not actually mean what they may appear to mean. Just as such fat, lovely words as "rhetoric," "unique," and "liberal" are diminished in everyday use, so the vocabularies of the theatre and the church suffer shrinkage and distortion. "Acting" is understood in terms of artifice and "preaching" is understood in terms of coercion. Both are commonly misunderstood. They are misunderstood in similar ways. It may even be that they are misunderstood for some of the same reasons.

At the root of the problem is the understanding of "art" itself and of preaching and theatre as separate-but-related art forms. Art, as M. James Young has said, "does not teach, it reveals . . . is not about entertainment, but pleasure . . . not about lessons, but illumination . . . not about persuasion or propaganda, but epiphanies . . . not about decision, but (self) discovery."¹ Art is an instrument for modifying human consciousness, which operates not through scolding or trickery, but through uncovering ambiguities in hopes of pointing to truth.

To this notion, Wayne Rood adds an emphasis on art as "active doing"² which works toward encounter. Art is "the completion of experience through imagination and expression to enable unhindered communication between man and man in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience."³

If this, or something like this, is what art is and if preaching and theatre are defined in these terms, then preaching cannot be about scolding or lecturing or even about persuasion in the Aristotelian sense of the word. (Nobody was ever argued into the kingdom of God.) Neither can acting be - ultimately - about deception.

¹ Young, M. James. *Theatre and the Church*. Wheaton, IL: Wheaton College, Spring 1975: 11.

² Rood, Wayne R. *The Art of Teaching Christianity*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968: 11.

³ *Ibid.* 31.

Common Ground

Being misunderstood by the person-on-the-street is not the only thing that theatre and preaching have in common, of course. They share the essential characteristics and qualities that can be said to be true of art in general: interest and integrity are requisite; distance plays a role; they are mimetic, usually nemetic and may be prophetic as well. In addition, like all performance arts, theatre and preaching are communal in nature and empathy-based.

Most importantly, drama and homiletics each have at their root the agonistic. The English words act, agitate, and agony are derived from the same Indo-European base ag-, 'to drive.' From this comes the Greek *agō*, "to lead," as well as the Latin *agere*, "to do." While theatre is widely understood as "imitation of action" (Aristotle), it may be surprising to some to hear that there is anything active - let alone agonistic - about the pulpit-bound act of preaching. However, preaching may be considered agonistic in at least two major respects.

(1) Preaching interprets conflict-laden texts and applies them to conflict-laden situations. The birth, death and resurrection narratives which are the focus of Christian preaching and which gave rise to the early medieval passion plays are every bit as 'conflictual' as the Dionysian dythrambs from which sprang Greek theatre. The cosmic struggle between life and death forms the spine of every Christian sermon; the personal struggle with good and evil fleshes out each moment in the pulpit. The point was made with more rhetorical flair (and a bit more malice) at the end of the second century by the early church father Tertullian.

If the literature of the stage delights you, we have literature in abundance of our own - plenty of verses, sentences, songs, proverbs; and these not fabulous, but true; not tricks of art, but plain realities. Would you have also fightings and

wrestlings? Well, of these there is no lacking, and they are not of slight account. Behold unchastity overcome by chastity, perfidy slain by faithfulness, cruelty stricken by compassion, impudence thrown into the shade by modesty: These are contests we have among us, and in these we win our crowns. But would you have something of blood, too? You have Christ's.⁴

(2) Increasingly, the shape of the modern sermon is a conflict-resolution format. The long reign of the 'three points and a poem' style of preaching has come to an end. The influence of narrative theology on Biblical Studies and the effect of recent trends in literary criticism on homiletics has resulted in a turn in the field. This turn in the field of homiletics is often identified as "toward narrative." The emphasis in the teaching and the practice of preaching has shifted away from the discursive style of preaching which dominated mid-twentieth century Christian worship, and toward something called "narrative preaching." While it is true that contemporary preaching makes greater use of narrative materials, it would be as accurate and perhaps more helpful to carry on discussion of sermonic form in terms of dramatic theory and criticism.

Finally, not only do theatre and preaching both deal with conflict, both reflect upon it. In Victor Turner's exploration of the "intensely reflexive" nature of theatre, it is not difficult to hear a description of the preacher's task.

If they (Greek tragedies) were "mirrors held up to nature" (or rather to society and culture) they were active (that propulsive word again!) mirrors, mirrors that probed and analyzed the axioms and assumptions of the social structure, isolated

⁴ Tertullian. "On the Spectacles." *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*. Ed. Bernard F. Dukore. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974. 85-93.

the building blocks of the culture, and sometimes used them to construct novel edifices, Cloud Cukoolands and Persian courts that never were on land or sea.⁵

While theatre's reflexive function is linked to what Turner calls its "doubleness" (theatre is 'twice-behaved' or rehearsed behavior, giving it the ideal amount of distance from life's conflicts), preaching's reflexive function may be seen to derive from its "tripleness" - or perhaps its "double doubleness." Preachers believe that distance is built in to both sides of their equation.

It is as if preachers hold one large mirror up to nature and a foggy, little pocket-sized one off at another angle, hoping for a glimpse of something Else. When such a glimpse is possible, Encounter is enabled and the sermon may achieve a nemetic as well as a mimetic function. That is to say that a directness or a dealing out (nemesis) or a dispensing (nemein) of something - as well as imitation of something - is achieved when both mirrors are co-operating. What is dispensed may not be namable. We may categorize it as "ineffable" or "Other." We may shorthand it as "life" as Ralph Waldo Emerson did in his Divinity School Address of 1838. It is the "capitol secret" of the preacher's profession, he said, this ability to "deal out" life.

Contemporary preachers may yearn to enable such an encounter, but it is not their province alone. In the late twentieth century it may well be the case that mimesis and nemesis come together more often in the theatre - especially in the theatres of the Grotowskis, Brooks, Schechners and Suzukis.

Common wealth

While it may be possible to demonstrate some overlap between the nature and purpose of preaching and the nature and purpose of theatre, what is more interesting to preachers and to

⁵ Turner, Victor. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1982. 104.

many teachers of preachers is the question of praxis. If preaching and theatre share some theoretical ground, it stands to reason that there may be some disciplines associated with the practice of theatre that will be helpful to the preacher. (There may also be disciplines associated with the practice of preaching that prove useful to the actor, though this is less obvious.)

The question of whether preachers and actors may learn from each other may turn, for any given actor or preacher, on his or her understanding of the use of the body. Those who share an incarnational approach, will surely be able to 'share' skills. Where preaching is understood as "making the word flesh," there is much room for discussion. In her book, *The Word's Body*, Alla Bozarth-Campbell draws out the implications of the incarnational approach for preachers and others. "In making the word to become flesh the interpreter makes herself or himself into The word, takes the word as poem into her or his body, continues the creation process begun by the poet."⁶ This act of allowing a text or a 'word' to achieve bodily entelechy is the common, crucial focus of the preacher's and the actor's skill.

The list of what preachers and actors might learn from each other may be broken down into three categories: skills, attitudes and what theologians call "habitus" or what Robert Bellah has called the "habits of the heart." Skills that build the use of concentration, imagination and observation (*a la* Stanislavsky, Boleslavsky, Viola Spolin, etc.) are of equal use to the preacher as the actor - both for the moments in the pulpit where the preacher operates as an actor (assuming a personae) and for the moments in the study where the preacher operates as playwright.

Attitudes of respect for space, audience, body, and the text's author which are common in the theatre, and especially important in the experimental theatre, may contain some answers for modern preaching's problems. Habits of the heart which are often cultivated by preachers,

⁶ Bozarth-Campbell, Alla. *The Word's Body: An Incarnational Aesthetic of Interpretation*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979. 52.

including faith (i.e., confidence in the Creative Power) and openness (i.e., toward reciprocity and the mutual transformation it implies) may be of interest to some actors.

No one is under any obligation, of course, to take up the opportunity for dialogue here. There is undoubtedly a case to be made for letting actors and preachers go on orbiting in their separate worlds. It is likely that people-on-the-street will go on misunderstanding both enterprises, no matter what course of action academicians take. However, if the Scottish personalist John MacMurray is correct and "all meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action; and all meaningful action is for the sake of friendship," there is a great deal to be lost by the turning of the back.

What shall we do? Shall we stay in what W. H. Auden calls the "endless safety" of our separate orbs? Or shall we take the "needless risk" (Auden) of acting and interacting?