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**“God in Three Personae, Blessed Trinity”:
Theatre Education to Subvert the Puritan Antitheatrical Prejudice**

by

Reverend Lee Krahenbuhl, Ph.D.

It is my great pleasure to make this presentation in honor of Wayne Rood, who has mentored or influenced the performing, directing, scholarship and teaching of several in this room and so many beyond it. In a real sense, if a student has studied with any of us, they have also studied with Wayne. We are in his debt.

“Nurture” is a word that pervades Wayne's writing. When we as students and colleagues are at our best, our most “Roodian,” our work is nurturing work. So, to hijack another phrase of Wayne's, let me “pierce to the root” of a challenge to nurture in theatre education: namely, teaching theatre effectively in sectarian religious situations which have an antitheatrical tradition, or which are without a theatrical tradition altogether.

The challenge of which I speak is a pesky one. For one thing, not everyone feels its pressure. People who are trained within a sectarian framework and spend their careers within its boundaries may have few, if any, adjustments to make; they may even reinforce the antitheatrical prejudice at the same time that they teach theatre. Others have no interest in teaching at a religious school, and wonder why anyone would want to. It is as if the two groups were speaking completely different languages. The challenge of teaching in the sectarian school is felt most acutely by those of us who are “bilingual” and move freely between both worlds.

Not all religious schools have a problem with the theatre. For educators who teach at schools that do, however, the challenge is like a low-grade fever: not serious enough to keep one from working, but uncomfortable enough to make life downright miserable. People who are

miserable are neither good students nor good teachers. I assume that reducing unnecessary misery, and thereby making people better students and better teachers, is a concern we all share. I will also assume that anyone who takes a job in a sectarian situation genuinely cares for the students and thinks they're worth nurturing, regardless of one's philosophical differences with the sponsoring institution. And although I will be concentrating on my experience among conservative evangelicals, I believe the basic ideas that follow are applicable to any religious tradition that regards theatre with suspicion.

Many of us have worked for sectarian schools with an antitheatrical tradition. How curious, then, that the challenge of teaching theatre in such a situation is not taken seriously or, if it is taken seriously, it is taken seriously for what I believe are the wrong reasons. Let me explain. Many of us come to ATHE every year with our own horror story *du jour*: how this student or that administrator or another colleague or the trustees or an entire audience reacted to this or that production or class. We laugh and share outrage over how they conflated some seemingly minor matter into a major conflict of values. We widen our repertoire of professional anecdotes and come away comforted by the fact that others have endured nightmares similar to ours. We are pleased with ourselves and with each other at having championed the forces of enlightenment in our own valiant, yet humble, attempts to illuminate the darkness of ignorance. We are comrades under siege, and we have survived.

Now, it is important to commiserate after a hard year in the field: indeed, sometimes the camaraderie of sympathetic colleagues can be one of the few bright spots in a dismal situation. But let us not overlook the drawbacks of the siege mentality. We are not only in danger of indulging our own "messiah complexes;" we also risk overlooking opportunities for nurture. We would do well to remind ourselves of something: most of the difficult situations we face every year are not cut and dried battles of knowledge against ignorance. They are *values conflicts*, the result of differing views of how the universe works. A world view cannot be changed like a pair of socks. Values are part of personality, and any meaningful change in

values happens slowly. The teacher's task is not to force upon students or audiences some superficial attitude adjustment, but to assist them in analyzing and clarifying their values.

In sectarian religious situations with an antitheatrical or atheatrical tradition, how do we teach theatre in a way that nurtures student, professor, and community? How do we subvert the Puritan antitheatrical prejudice and yet respect everyone's right to their values -- and keep our jobs in the process? Some situations are so precarious, so ridiculously designed for failure, that one needs to ask whether the job is worth keeping in the first place. But let us assume for the time being that it is.

My own experience, and ten years of conversation with colleagues, suggest to me at least three things to avoid and three things to pursue. *Avoid* any attempts at ignoring values conflicts; they will not go away by themselves. *Avoid* trivializing such conflicts; they are important to the parties involved. *Avoid* the temptation to enforce consensus or try and "convert" others to your point of view (no matter how much those around you try to coerce you in *their* direction). On the other hand, *pursue* a respect for unresolvable tension between values systems; it's a healthy part of theatrical dialogue. *Pursue* knowledge of the real issues of the conflict, which may be quite different from what the disputants think they are. Finally, *pursue* an approach that translates those issues from one vision of reality to another. I think this latter point is most important and most ignored. To undermine the Puritan hangover of the antitheatrical prejudice, we need to learn the language of the sectarian culture. We need to begin to think *hermeneutically* about theatre education.

Simply put, the discipline of hermeneutics deals with meaning. The hermeneut translates cultural expression into terms understandable to other cultures. Hermeneutics goes beyond the literal and concrete to uncover layers of implied meaning. It adds context to text. Applied to the translation of ancient Hebrew texts, for example, we employ hermeneutics to explain that the term literally rendered "to know" in English has a sexual as well as in

intellectual connotation; that reference to "feet" often has to do with bodily functions; that frequently appearing numbers such as three, seven, twelve and forty are more symbolic than specific, etc.. To understand ancient Hebrew texts, we have to understand ancient Hebrew culture. *It has its own rules, and many of those rules are not our rules.*

The same goes for each school, each production, each classroom. It is particularly important for teaching theatre in a sectarian college. *Religious communities have their own rules, and many of those rules are not your rules.* Some of these rules are overt, even to the extent that they are built into your teaching contract. Many more of them are unspoken, even unconscious. If you stay in the situation long enough, all of these rules will come into play in the classroom and in production -- not to mention in promotion and tenure. These rules build systems, set patterns of thinking, *models* for confronting life's problems. Such models dictate how students think about themselves as scholars and practitioners of the theatre.

Perhaps all of this is obvious to anyone in theatre education, but it begs a question: if we are aware that sectarian communities come with their own values and cultural models, why do we often do such a poor job of mediating values conflicts when they arise? Sometimes all parties involved in a controversy are so deeply offended by each others' values that the atmosphere is almost immediately poisoned. We simply do not listen to one another very well. I think we might listen better, and better address many seemingly intractable situations, by thinking hermeneutically rather than confrontationally. We need to speak the language of the culture, and in turn, we need to teach our language within it.

Let me offer an example. Many of us with experience in sectarian schools have encountered an attitude common in evangelical Protestantism that is downright hostile to the theatre -- and yet these schools continue to have theatre programs. Many grew out of English departments or departments of speech while no one was looking. Their concerns are rhetorical rather than theatrical. However, putting on plays has proven to be a popular campus diversion,

and so the school tolerates a modest theatre program. Perhaps that program has even enjoyed a modicum of success.

Even so, there is an air of uneasiness among the students in acting classes and in rehearsal. There is a hint of embarrassment among students who make bold choices in their performing and do good work on stage. The more positive feedback they receive, the more flustered they become. Some even regress as they receive more encouragement. The whole thing is bewildering to the professor, who seems to be doing the right things in the right order.

A pattern then becomes clear. When the professor asks students what they like about acting and the theatre, there is a sense of restraint, of hesitation, a desire to say and to feel the "right" thing -- if you will, the "religiously correct" thing. I am not talking about that inevitable part of the sectarian student body that can only justify love for the theatre in terms of proselytizing. I am talking about the most sophisticated students, who seem merely to talk around the question. "Acting and theatre should be a way of glorifying God," they will say; or "my talent is a gift from God, and I'm just trying to give something back." It is at this point that the professor needs to start translating the language of the culture, which is trying to express there is a deep-seated conservative evangelical conviction that theatre is a self-centered activity that hinders students from devotion to God.

Jonas Barish has traced the historical roots of this attitude in depth in his massive book *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (University of California, 1980). I don't intend to paraphrase his work here, but one conceptual model Barish examines is especially worth mentioning. It is the model of the actor-as-Proteus, that mythical figure who changes form at will.

The Protean being has no shape of its own, no form, no true self. All is falsehood and deceit with the actor who wears the Protean mask. Behind the mask is a soul of self-indulgence, incapable of love or virtue, let alone religious feeling. Whether overt or subconscious, the actor

as Proteus is the dominant model in the conservative evangelical mind. Proteus vies with God for the soul of the student. Even successful theatre programs are monitored by the administration for fear that Proteus will win, and the attention of the students will be diverted from the true goal of religious devotion.

Of course, the suspicion that theatre is idolatry is nothing new; we need only look to Tertullian's *On the Spectacles*. But, for reasons that remain obscure to me, models such as the actor as Proteus go undetected and unchallenged in many sectarian theatre programs. Precious few alternative models are presented.

Antitheatrical models are not easy to challenge because students are so seldom aware of their influence. Theatre educators should be alert to their presence, and we cannot afford to treat these models as if they were unimportant. Don't forget that some students genuinely agonize over things like this. If students are in a crisis over the battle of God and Proteus, the last thing they need to hear is that they're just being silly and they should get over it. We need to speak the language of such students. We need to help them find a real alternative to the Protean model, and that is where hermeneutics will be useful to theatre education.

The problem is this: no model is going to challenge Proteus effectively *unless it is a model already present in sectarian culture*. If he is not put in context with community piety and tradition, Stanislavski will be powerless against Proteus. Sometimes the Medieval theatre is promoted as an alternate model, but the limitations of that model are clear when we are dealing with the contemporary arts. Besides, the Medieval model is suspect to conservative evangelicals because it is historically both too early and too late. It is in that twilight zone between the two eras they really trust: the primitive Christian community and the Protestant Reformation. Most students are not conscious of this, but it affects their attitudes. The Medieval theatre does not reflect either the doctrinal purges of Luther and Calvin or the spiritual purity of the early church, and so is not trustworthy in their minds.

But here's the good news for theatre artists: *other models are possible*. If we do our hermeneutics well and speak the language of the sectarian culture, these models can succeed in undermining the antitheatrical prejudice where confrontive tactics fail.

Let me offer one example of how hermeneutics can work in favor of theatre education. Again, I am writing from my own experience among conservative evangelical Christians when I suggest challenging the model of Proteus with the model of the *persona*.

"Persona" is, of course, the Latin word for a stage actor's mask. The word has a lesser known meaning in Christian theology, however. Ironically enough, the first writer to use the word in this way was that old nemesis of the theatre, Tertullian. In the creedal controversies of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries CE, the church appropriated Tertullian's use of "persona" as it attempted to define once and for all the nature of God. Were Father, Son and Holy Spirit one God or three? Was Christ fully human, fully divine, or some mixture of the two? Inquiring minds wanted to know.

The creeds that resulted from the Council of Chalcedon (451) and the second council of Constantinople (553) were written in two languages. In Greek Christendom, God was understood as being one *ousia*, yet at the same time three *hypostaseis*. The Latin speaking Western church described God as one *substantia*, yet at the same time three -- you guessed it *personae*. "God in three *persons*" is a familiar phrase to church communities, but it might as easily be translated "God in three *masks*" or, if you will, "God in three *actor's roles*."

The Christian God . . . as an *actor*? The concept would have been outrageous to Tertullian, and yet we have it from his own poisoned pen. While all the early Christian writers condemned the Roman spectacles, the metaphor of the Christian deity as an actor is not entirely

unknown. One of Tertullian's contemporaries, Clement of Alexandria, went so far as to call Christ the main *actor* in the *drama* of salvation and the words in Greek are quite unmistakable.¹ When Proteus is the model of the actor that confronts conservative students, it is easy to see why they would shy away, given their cultural milieu. They are not about to choose Proteus over God. But it is another matter for *God*, not Proteus, to be the one who assumes different roles. When Christ himself is actor in a universal drama, it is less difficult for the evangelical student to follow suit.

Some situations have less to do with paradigms than with cultural fads based on stubborn xenophobia. I have found this to be more true of conservative religious students who band together *outside* of sectarian schools. While teaching acting at a large state university, I noticed that a small knot of evangelical students were refraining from vocal warm-up exercises. I asked why they were not taking part. After much discomfort and beating around the bush, one of the students confided to me that she objected to the exercise because it "sounded Eastern." The vocal exercise sounded too much like the Hindu chant "OM" to these students. Not wanting to fall prey to an insidious temptation away from Christianity, they simply refused to do the exercise. A handwritten note on an evaluation of my beginning acting course read, "I would think that there would be a clearer distinction between the [mental warmups] and Eastern thought. I think a thorough explanation of this to the class would be in line." I had discovered, to my surprise, the minority of sectarian students who are suspicious of any activity that bears even the slightest resemblance to something they perceive to be leading them into spiritual danger.

I was further surprised by the fact that no amount of discussion about the function and intent of the exercises could sway these students. I had thought it would be somewhat convincing that I, their teacher, was a religious person; I was wrong. The students left a strong

¹ See Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, trans. G. W. Butterworth. Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library 1982 [1919], 236f.

impression that even though I was Christian, I was certainly not *their* kind of Christian. I was simply a dupe of the New Age/secular humanist conspiracy, or at best naive, and their superior knowledge about the movement discredited anything I might have to say about the subject. I was reminded of the essay "Contemplation and Dialogue," in which the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton commented on spiritual xenophobia:

We must . . . admit with regret that, in the past, the tendency of Christians has been to regard all non-Christian religious experience as so obviously suspect as to be either too dangerous to study or else not worth the trouble of being studied. Indeed, the characteristic "Protestant" reaction to mysticism has been a basic repugnance . . . *all* forms of mysticism other than those encountered within the fold . . . are sometimes supposed . . . to be due to the direct or indirect intervention of Satan.²

Such attitudes certainly complicate the teaching of theatre, but complication is no reason for despair. We cannot rewrite the history of religious antitheatricalism, and as long as we are honest about history, we're going to be stuck with Tertullian. But for every Tertullian there is a Clement of Alexandria or a Hrosvitha of Gandersheim waiting in the wings to be noticed. The loudest voices in a tradition are not the *only* voices, or even the most important voices.

Learn the language of your sectarian culture, be it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, or any other outlook. Get comfortable with the fact that you will need to take extra time in all processes just to translate each others' ideas. Take encouragement from colleagues who teach public speaking: in every situation there will be people who have made up their minds never to be convinced by anything you say, along with people who have made up their minds to agree with you. Go for the "target audience" of the undecided.

² Merton, Thomas. "Contemplation and Dialogue." *Mystics and Zen Masters*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1967. 205-206.

Get troublesome subjects out in the open as soon as possible, and insist that students state clearly the reason that they object to, or are uncomfortable with, a given activity. Be quick to listen, slow to judge the quality of their reasoning until they feel have been heard. Often students are reluctant to voice such concerns in a group; meet with them individually. Avoid at all costs public humiliation, which only increases paranoia.

Be clear and firm about the pragmatic intention behind each exercise. If you are less than familiar with the favorite parts of sacred text in your sectarian community, brush up. Use texts with integrity -- if you do not already know how, learn. Encourage your students not to bend their scripture to match their cultural ideology and the popular demonizing of theatre. As in most interactions in the classroom, you may find that you are learning more from your discussion than your students were learning from the original assignment.

The presence of Tertullian is not the problem. The problem is our own complacency in developing alternate models to undermine the antitheatrical prejudice and to nurture sectarian students. The pressures of the sectarian community are not a suitable environment for everyone in theatre education, but that only makes the work of speaking the language of our students that much more vital. Let us get on with it.

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