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Drama for the Church: the Soul Purpose Plays  
By John Steven Paul

Introduction

**IA. Who are you?**

This book is written for people who want to make drama a part of their church services. As I write this, I am thinking of the many people who have approached me over the years requesting resources to help them in launching, sustaining, or developing a church drama program. Among them have been ministers, members of worship committees or teams, youth leaders, and trained actors and directors. Sometimes they are people who have been asked by the pastor to begin or upgrade a drama program at their church.

The request for resources often comes in this form: “we would like to do *more* drama in our church.” The question indicates that they are doing some drama, perhaps the youth group does skits, the children perform a Christmas pageant or musical, or church members read the story of the Passion aloud on Palm Sunday. Whatever the specifics of their program now, they want to do more. Why? What is the special appeal of drama for and in the church?

In general, the value of drama for the church is that it brings people, people of all ages, into the life of the church. Like other group activities, the fun of putting on a play derives from fellowship, from working and playing with others. When the play being produced has religious meaning, the process of production is an edifying one; as the players delve more deeply into the play they gain a deeper understanding of its meaning. Play production also gives people whose special talents lie in the speech and theatre arts an opportunity to make an offering of their gifts to God and to the community.

If we take these general values apart and look at the nature of dramatic art itself, we see that

1. as a collective art, drama can *involve* more people in the essential mission of the Christian church, the preaching of God’s Word and the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. When dramatic art is integrated into a service, the performers take essential parts in the Church’s most definitive practice, the worship of God. The drama brings people to the heart of the church.
2. as a visual art,<sup>1</sup> drama can *connect* with our contemporary culture that privileges the visual above the verbal. We have become so used to watching television, films, and streaming video that listening to the spoken word takes extra work; work that many people are unwilling or unable to undertake in the course of a weekly hour or so of worship. For this reason, drama may be a more familiar and thus more *effective* form of communication to some people in the pews than single-voiced preaching.
3. as a collaborative art, drama can *draw* performers and other artists together into groups of mutual support as they work together to achieve their objectives of creative communication. Through the grace of God, support becomes friendship and friendship becomes love in the name of Christ.
4. as an art in service to the liturgy, drama can *offer* performers the opportunity to serve God and God’s people, the church. Actors, directors, and playwrights join musicians and visual artists in answering this call to put their *particular* talent, skills, imagination, and their joyful self-expression in the service of something greater than themselves.

Reasons for doing drama for the church are plentiful; resources are comparatively undeveloped. I say “undeveloped,” because I believe that there are such resources in every congregation awaiting the right person to discover, invite, and build them up into a God-pleasing form. This book of ideas and plays is directed to just that right person.

**IB. Who am I?**

I have had the opportunity to meet many people interested in drama for the church through my work as the director of Soul Purpose, a liturgical drama troupe made up of students at Valparaiso University, a Lutheran University, in Valparaiso, Indiana. At present, the troupe numbers thirty young people between the ages of 18 and 22. During the past fifteen years, Soul Purpose companies of 6-8 actors and a stage manager have traveled across the country presenting plays, inserted into church services in the place of sermons. The college students under my direction have developed the plays collaboratively in response to or based upon a Biblical text. The plays are brief but formally complex, theatrically rich, but minimalistically staged. The players are striving to tell a story with a theological point.

Congregations have gratefully received the Soul Purpose Plays partly because we have taken considerable time in developing and producing them. The presentations reflect the actors' Christian faith *and* their knowledge of and training in the theatre discipline. The Soul Purpose Plays have been developed and produced with the resources of a university theatre department. Most churches do not have these same resources available to them; some churches have even more plentiful resources than universities.

With this book, I seek to pass on some of what we have learned in fifteen years of work on the Soul Purpose project. In the introduction, I will explain Soul Purpose's method of composition, our approach to acting, and the way we stage the dramas for churches. I will always be thinking about you and your drama group, or the one you are about to start, and how you might benefit from what we have learned. I will try to remain practical. If I venture occasionally into theory, remember, there's nothing more practical than a good theory.

In the middle of the book is an anthology of plays. Soul Purpose has created approximately thirty five new plays. These illustrate our ideas about liturgical drama and they have proven popular with our actors and meaningful for our congregational audiences. In short, I recommend these plays to you for production in your church.

In an epilogue, I will return to ways of starting a drama group in your church. I believe that the place to start is not in the theatre but at the lectern; not with a play, but with the Bible.

## **II. Types of Drama**

Let's begin by defining our terms. We hear people speak about religious drama, chancel drama, church drama, biblical drama, etc., almost interchangeably. Since so much of the success of any effort, especially a new effort, depends on clear communication, it will be useful to know that we are referring to particular genres of drama.

### **IIA. Religious Drama**

One of my teachers once told me that all drama is religious drama. In the performance of drama, actors seek to make what is *invisible visible*, to bring their audiences into contact with a world that comes alive only as they perform peopled with beings who appear as the actors create them. For the actors to achieve their objective, the audience must be willing to join with them in a ritualized creation of this world through an act of belief.<sup>2</sup> When actors and audience believe together, in communion with one another, what has been unseen can be seen. Words such as *belief* and *communion* are, of course, words that we use in religious contexts and point to some fundamental similarities between the theatre and the church.<sup>3</sup> The shared effort among actors and audience to make the invisible visible is critical to all plays from *Agamemnon* to *Angels in America* and from *Rigoletto* to *Rent*. In this sense, all drama *is* religious.

An important dramatic genre in Western dramatic history has taken up religious questions explicitly. What is the nature of divinity? Has the universe a designer or is it ruled by chance? What do human beings owe God? Has there been a god incarnate on earth? From the hundreds of well-known plays in this category we might choose Euripides' *The Bacchae*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *The Second Shepherds' Pageant* by the

Wakefield Master, Henrik Ibsen's *Brand*, and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* <sup>4</sup> Webber and Rice's *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell*.

### **IIB. Chancel Drama: Physical context**

Some plays have been written to be performed in the church; that is, the church is the physical setting of the action of the play. The chancel refers to an architectural formula invented for monastic churches and cathedrals built in Europe in the Middle Ages. In these churches, the ordinary worshippers stood or sat in a long rectangular area called the *nave*; there was a section for the choir called *choir* beginning at the east of the nave. The high altar was situated in the *chancel* at the eastern end of the building.<sup>5</sup> In imitation of this formula, many Christian churches have divided their worship spaces into areas of nave for the congregation and chancel for the worship leaders. In the chancel there are various kinds of ecclesiastical furniture and decoration including, but not limited to, an altar, table, lectern, pulpit, various chairs, a water bowl for ritual ablutions, a focal cross, a Paschal candle, an eternal flame, and so forth.

Perhaps the most famous chancel drama in English is T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* where in Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury is killed by agents of King Henry II in the chancel area of the cathedral. Another influential play from the mid-twentieth century and written to be performed in the chancel is P.W. Turner's *Christ in the Concrete City*.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to plays written to be performed in the chancel there are plays written to be *appropriate* for the chancel; that is, plays which, in the name of reverence, studiously avoid offending the sensibilities of church-goers. In these plays, the chancel becomes less a setting than a censor. There are catalogues full of chancel dramas of this kind; they tend to be suspended in the temporal and social context in which they were written.

### **IIC. Liturgical Drama: Ritual context**

If the chancel becomes the physical context for the chancel drama, the liturgy becomes the ritual context for liturgical drama.<sup>7</sup> Liturgical drama is drama situated and integrated into a service (*ordo*). The subject of liturgy is far too large to take up at this time. I direct the reader to James F. White's *Introduction to Christian Worship* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Abingdon Press) a very good introduction and survey of the vast literature and quote him directly in saying that "for our present purpose, however, one thing we can say about Christian worship is that it is a type of worship that relies heavily on the structuring of time to help fulfill its purposes."<sup>8</sup> (The same can be said of Western drama and music.)<sup>9</sup> Liturgical drama finds its place in that structure.

The earliest form of drama to be termed "liturgical" was the musical dialogue sung in the services of monastic churches of the Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup> Called a "trope," these dialogues were elaborations on the Scripture readings appropriate to a particular day in the church year. For instance, in the Easter trope, *Quem Quaeritis*, three women go to the tomb of Christ and are asked by the young man seated there, "whom do you seek?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they say. "He is not here; he is risen," they are told. They exit in joyful song. Like the *Quem Quaeritis* at Easter, liturgical drama fits its ritual context. It is absurd to think that at Easter, the monks would have sung the trope called *Visitatio Pastores*, the visit of the Shepherds. That's the Christmas trope.

One of the most elemental structures of Christian worship identifies the four movements of the service as GATHERING, WORD, MEAL and SENDING. When Soul Purpose performs liturgical drama it nearly always performs as part of the second movement, WORD. Its plays usually follow, in order, the First Reading, the Psalm, the Second Reading, the Gospel Acclamation, and the reading of the Gospel. Following the play are the Hymn of the Day, the Creed, and the Prayers of the People. In so far as possible, Soul Purpose seeks to gather the thoughts and themes of the liturgy previous into its performance and requests that the subsequent parts of the liturgy be built from the play. The seamless flow of the liturgy is the goal, or perhaps we should say the ideal. [This will have serious implications for staging.]

### III. Four Touchstones of the Soul Purpose method

From the beginning of our work together in 1987, Soul Purpose has created its own plays. We adapted the first one of our plays, *The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God*, from a sermon with the same title preached by Pastor David H. Kehret at Valparaiso University's Chapel of the Resurrection. The Gospel reading for that Sunday was Mark 12: 28-34 in which a scribe comes to Jesus to ask him "Which commandment is the first of all?" In the second reading for the day, Hebrews 9: 11-14, the writer tells us that the sacrifice of Christ, the high priest, has brought us forgiveness. From those two texts, Pastor Kehret, invented and told the congregation a story about a young lawyer named Oscar Holtkamp. In the course of a very special day, Oscar meets Jesus and learns the difference between being *liked* for being good at what he does and being *loved* by God for the sake of Jesus.

#### IIIA. Faithfulness

Dave Kehret's "The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God" is a delightful story with a clear through-line of action and complex characters. It can be told in about fifteen minutes' time and makes a cogent point about the way in which God loves. The Markian Gospel text is embedded in the story and the exegesis is theologically sound. It is, to my mind, the ideal of the story-sermon. The choice to adapt this story into a play and to produce it established four principles that have been touchstones for our work in subsequent years.

In looking for subjects for its plays, Soul Purpose begins with texts designated to be read for the day of performance in the Revised Common Lectionary. The list of scripture readings in the Lectionary is based on the Christian year and it provides the most comprehensive method available for reading almost the entire Bible in worship within three years.<sup>11</sup> The Lectionary also serves as a basis for preaching in English-speaking Catholic and Protestant congregations around the world. In its use of the Lectionary, Soul Purpose commits itself to the observance of the church year, models its preparation on that of the preaching minister, and joins in reading the Bible aloud with Christians around the world.

In composing our plays, Soul Purpose strives to be faithful to the meaning of the biblical text to which we are responding or on which we are basing the play. In openness and humility, we read the text closely many times broadening our reading to the verses and chapters around the text sometimes expanding to the entire book of the bible in which the Lectionary text is situated. We consult commentaries and other collateral readings, and we often have a trained theologian or pastor sit with us to discuss the meaning of the text. If there is an interpretive choice to be made, we make it prayerfully seeking consensus among our actors. Following the performance of a new play we solicit responses from laypersons and clergy. Often these responses are reflected in the revision of a play prior to its next performance.

When we feel that we are getting into interpretative water that is over our heads our life preserver is the Bible story itself. Simply acting out the story, employing the words and actions given us by the author demonstrates the inherent theatricality of Bible narratives. And as Max Harris points out in his important book *Theatre and Incarnation*, it is stories of human beings in action that are God's chosen mode of self-revelation.<sup>12</sup> What could be more salutary for all concerned than acting out a Bible story in as faithful a way as possible.<sup>13</sup>

#### IIIB. Creativity

More in balance than in tension with faithfulness is *creativity*. The scribe who asked Jesus about the commandments is given no name by the author of Mark's Gospel. David Kehret called him "Oscar Holtkamp." Mark's scribe has no wife; Kehret's lawyer does. Her name is Marta. When Soul Purpose adapted Kehret's story into a play, we added a Chorus of four people and a Chorus Leader who also served as an on stage narrator as well as Oscar and Marta's next-door neighbor.

The creative process works its transformative ways differently on different materials, situations, and problems. Creativity and originality are not the thing. As we create new plays, we may invoke the name of

our Creator God who says “Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19), but the truly new is hard to find under the sun.

### The “Medieval spirit”

Much of Soul Purpose’s approach to drama can be traced to the Middle Ages. What seems a marvelous burst of theatrical creativity, born in the Christian church, was actually spread out over several hundred years (12<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries). There is a vast literature on the subject of Medieval drama and theatre, but *every producer of church plays* should read at least a synopsis of theatrical history in the English Middle Ages and at least a few of the many plays that survive. Medieval theatre practice can be an inspiration to those of us creating drama for the church today and the “Medieval Spirit” can guide us through a forest of thorny decisions.

I have spoken about the liturgical drama in monastic churches. Documents from the period suggest that these liturgical tropes were expanded into plays based on key stories and incidents from the Bible that were performed in specific areas within cathedrals and large churches. The audience may have moved from play to play in a fashion similar to the Stations of the Cross liturgy. Later, this same arrangement of plays performed in stations would appear in marketplaces and town squares. The Medieval Theatre was an occasional phenomenon; its performances were tied to seasons of the church and civic year rather than to waves of popularity. It was known that, on certain occasions, the community would come together to produce and watch plays.

Among the most characteristic of Medieval dramatic forms are the great cycles of “Mystery” plays. These cycles of between 35 and 50 plays were staged in connection with the Feast of Corpus Christi in such English cities as York, Chester, Coventry, and Wakefield. Historians differ on whether the plays were performed on fixed stages or on wagons that were pulled to an open area and pulled away when the play was finished giving place to the next wagon.

The first play of the cycle is a Creation play; the final play is the Last Judgment and in between are plays that dramatize the lives and actions of Patriarch, Prophets, and the life, ministry, passion, and death of Jesus. The individual plays of the cycle reflect a complex view of time. There is the time it takes to play out the events of that particular story, but that story is part of a much larger time frame. Human time is set into God’s time; God’s time is reenacted in the life and times of the community producing the play; the life and times of that community is in turn part of the time frame of the living God.

Historians term the Medieval approach to staging “simultaneous setting.” According to this convention, specific locations of dramatic action – which might include such cosmically separated places as Heaven, Earth, and Hell – would be represented by mansions, small roofed stages. These mansions would be set on a larger, generalized playing space. Once the locations had been established, actors could travel great distances, conceptually, while traversing across short spaces physically. For example, Abraham and Isaac make the three-days’ journey to the mountains in Moriah (Genesis 22:2) in a matter of moments. Pictures and diagrams from the period also demonstrate that the Medievals made use of natural and architectural features available to them, transforming cathedral galleries into heaven and the entrance to the crypt as the mouth of Hell, for example. (They bequeathed this creative use of architectural space to Shakespeare and his contemporaries.)

Documented expenses of the production of these cycle plays suggest that medieval theatre producers strove for a realistic presentation of the Bible stories and invented machines for the flying of angels and the generating of Hell’s fire. Other interpreters of the historical record envision the *emblematic* use of costumes, props, and even scenery in the Medieval Theatre. Thus, a crown is the identifying emblem of a king, a cross of a priest, a sword of a soldier, a nimbus of a holy being, and a trident of a demon.

The Medieval Theatre was a *community theatre*, which employed not professional actors but people from every corner of the local economy and every vocation who played the various roles from time to time. Evidence shows that there was a fixed script for the cycle plays, but certainly the actors brought with them their ways of thinking about story, action, and character. This must have made for incoherence

occasionally, even within the individual plays not to mention the cycles as a whole. It must also, surely, have strengthened the bonds of ownership between the actor and the play that was flexible and open enough to incorporate a variety of talents.

There is much more to say about the Medieval religious theatre,<sup>14</sup> but what I carry with me as producer, director, and playwright is the seamless juxtaposition of humor and devotion in the Medieval plays. Undoubtedly their composition was supervised or even executed by the clergy so that the orthodox doctrine of the day was guarded and promulgated, but the humanity of the characters, including the divine characters, consistently transcends the playwrights' didactic agenda. This must have been joyous theatre at its irrepressible best.

### **“Those enticing gaps in the record”**

#### **What were those Shepherds thinking?**

At the beginning of *The Second Shepherds' Pageant* from the Wakefield cycle of Corpus Christi plays, three shepherds are keeping watch over their flocks by night. About thirty minutes of playing time later, an angel of the LORD stands before them and the glory of the LORD shines around them and they are terrified. *Those thirty minutes* are a window for creativity in which the Wakefield Master has created a hilarious physical farce. In that same region, it seems, there was a sheep thief named Mak and his wife Gil who conspire to steal a sheep from the Shepherds. The shepherds discover the theft and the responsible parties and exact a playful revenge on Mak. On their way back to their camp they encounter the heavenly host.

The Mak and Gil story itself is preceded by a series of monologues by each of the shepherds that might well be the answer to a simple question which might arise in connection with this famous story: What were those shepherds thinking? The Wakefield Master has put in thoughts of bad weather, mistreatment at the hands of the upper-class, unfair taxation, the burdens of wives and children, and the wisdom of avoiding marriage.

Bible stories are full of these enticing gaps in the record where questions like “what if?” “what more?” and “what now?” abound. The answers to those questions are the launching pads for creativity. In the story of the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-4), Jesus' mother tells him that the hosts have run out of wine. Jesus answers “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.” The next words in the story are “His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” What happened between Jesus and his mother between his dismissive remark “My hour has not yet come” and her orders to the servants? What might have happened between them? Could it be that Mary persuaded her son to do something? With words would she have persuaded him? Doesn't matter, some would say. How could it not, asks the story-teller or playwright. For the Soul Purpose answer to this question, see our play *The Wedding*.

#### **Improvisation and other creative processes**

Answering questions like these is the joy of creative writing and playmaking. The answering process, in the theatre, can be called improvisation. Viola Spolin wrote *the* book on this subject called *Improvisation for the Theatre*<sup>15</sup>. It is an indispensable resource for working with theatre. Through a series of theatre “games,” Spolin leads actors singly, in pairs, and in groups, to the imagination of objects, situations, actions, characters, dialogue, and even settings that become visible for them and consequently for those watching them.

One of Spolin's simplest theatre games is called tug-of-war. Two players are asked to pick up a rope that exists only in their imagination and the “memory” of their hands. As they pick up the rope, they are asked to let their hands remember the shape, texture, weight, and surface temperature of a rope and they are asked to make sure they are holding onto the *same* rope. They situate the rope between them and tug on it. While the rope may give some, the players cannot both be pulling the rope toward them at the same time so a sensitivity to the partner's actions emerges alongside the competition. Eventually, due to superior “strength” one contestant pulls the rope completely to her side and “wins,” which means that the collaborating partner must actively give in.

When Soul Purpose was developing a play based on Luke 5: 1-11, we were faced with the challenge of creating a miraculous catch of fish, so many fish “that they filled both boats, so that they began to sink.” To create the image of human beings struggling mightily against the natural elements, we used the tug-of-war improvisation. After pitting actor against actor for a while, we asked each actor to tug against the wind, the water, and the thousands of fish, to pull on the rope with all his or her might as if the integrity of the boat itself depended on it. The energy and the tension generated were...miraculous!

Improvisation may be verbal as well as physical. Try this: a woman’s husband is the chief tax collector in Jericho. A Jew, he is despised by his own people for working with the occupying Roman forces to exact ruinous taxes from them. The tax collector is diminutive. Now the woman, known by all to be the wife of the hated tax collector, comes home after a shopping trip to the market. Her husband is at home, seated comfortably in a chair, being waited on, hand and foot, by a servant. Improvise the conversation between the wife and her husband, Zacchaeus.

Here’s another improvisation technique: read Mark 1: 9-11 *very carefully*, phrase-by-phrase, word for word. It is the story of Jesus baptism by John. Now rewrite the story as if you were Elizabeth, John’s mother, or John himself, or one of John’s disciples, or a ten-year-old child brought to the river for baptism that day, or write the story as if you were Jesus.

### **III.C. Discipline**

Improvisation depends upon the spirit of play, but the creation of drama for the church depends on a particular kind of play. We are certainly not just playing around.<sup>16</sup> It is, as the theologian and student of ritual Tom F. Driver would say, “work done playfully.” Driver says, of rituals that “for the most part, there is no question of illusion. Gestures are actually performed, and these gestures have social, personal and religious consequences.”<sup>17</sup> Drama performed in a theatre may well have social, religious, and personal consequences as well, yet the excellent performance of a Gospel drama in the context of a church service can move mountains. I’ve seen it happen countless times and I will try to offer some explanations for it later in this introduction.

Excellence in the arts, as in other areas of life, is achieved through discipline. Once again to explain fully the discipline of theatre would be impossible here. Theatre artists spend a lifetime learning their discipline. But if we break the idea of discipline apart, we will find some simple imperatives that are essential for excellence at any level.

#### **An Offering of First Fruits**

Discipline begins with commitment to a project, to others working on that project, and, in the case of liturgical drama to God. Together, the participants in a liturgical drama project are making an offering to God, an offering of themselves, their time, and their possessions. A group of actors working on a project to be offered to God must commit to offering the first fruits of their labor. Theatre projects are created in rehearsal. The actors and their leader may begin their work together by deciding upon a project and then attempt to calculate how much rehearsal time will be required for the completion of that project. A *new company* will probably do better by deciding how many rehearsals they can have in a week and how long those rehearsals can be. Good things can be accomplished in 90 minutes per week and in nine hours per week. The group must decide together and then make the commitment. Rehearsals should begin on time and end on time. These seem like obvious matters, but they are the beginnings of common discipline.

The actor’s art is a product of the mind, the body, and the voice. A constructive rehearsal will challenge all three. The actors’ commitment to discipline includes their offering of mind, body, and voice for the benefit of the project. Being at rehearsal on time is important but not sufficient. Willingness and eagerness to contribute from their resources at rehearsal is critical.



A non-negotiable commitment, it seems to me, is that each actor must master his or her role. They must know their roles by heart.<sup>18</sup> If there are movements and gestures to be learned, they must be learned by heart. If there are lines, they must be learned by heart. For some people this will be difficult, but it is only in the mastering of the role that the embodiment of the role can begin. If the actor is thinking about when to move next or what to say next, the focus of her concentration remains in the thinking part of her; i.e. her head.

### **A word about leadership: the director**

While the theatre is a collective, collaborative art form, experience has shown that an acting company needs leadership. Even theatre groups deeply committed to group creation, such as the Group Theatre of the 1930's and the Steppenwolf Theatre working Chicago today, have designated someone as the director. The person directing may change from project to project (much good can come of this, actually), but on any given project someone is in charge.

In general, the director decides upon and leads the group in a mode of work. He or she makes decisions about the shape and look of a finished theatre project, the content and conduct of rehearsals, and the final distribution of roles. The director calculates the amount of time it will take to complete a project and sets the schedule for the work on the project. The director is responsible for drawing upon and drawing out the resources of the actors. The director articulates and leads the common discipline of vocal and physical warm-ups, relaxation and concentration exercises, theatre games, and so forth. If the director is able to teach acting technique, even in rudimentary form, all the better.

One may learn how to direct through training and experience. Very few directors are born with this knowledge and skill; they, like everyone, learn new things on every project. An experienced director, even for a simple project, is invaluable and all but necessary. Rarely would a church engage a choir conductor who had no training or experience. The same standard should apply for directors of liturgical drama troupes.

### **III D. Fun**

I have been talking about touchstones of the Soul Purpose method: faithfulness, creativity, and discipline. There is a fourth, the importance of which can hardly be overestimated. That is fun. We can take our cue for fun from Psalm One Hundred: "Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the lands. Serve the LORD with gladness." Some of the fun derives from the nature of drama itself. It is fun to be, share, and work with other people in pursuit of a common goal. Theatre activity leads to close friendships as actors share challenge, struggle, frustration, and growth. When the project is successful the shared sense of accomplishment enhances those friendships.

Some fun should be built into the operating procedure of the acting company. Soul Purpose begins its weekly Saturday morning rehearsals with prayer followed by breakfast – the nicest breakfast we can afford. At least once and usually more often over a four-month period, we will share a common meal. There will be no company agenda at these meals. There is something about sharing food together that nourishes *both* body *and* soul.

Members of Soul Purpose attend plays together. Play going is no longer a practice that can be taken for granted, even for actors. Still, there is nothing more beneficial to the development of one's own art than seeing it and preferably, seeing it done by masters of the craft, and, then, discussing the performance in detail.

There is a natural tendency in creating drama for the church to treat the entire enterprise with solemnity and earnestness. Whenever possible, Soul Purpose, and its director, have sought to balance those important qualities with laughter and self-deprecation. (See: *What Do You Think?*)

#### **IV. Theatre in Church?**

How does one approach the subject of producing drama in church and, if you follow the Soul Purpose model, in a worship service? First, know what you're up against. For many people theatre simply has no place in the church and there will be no further discussion. Why is this? Jonas Barash has traced what he calls "the anti-theatrical prejudice" since the time of Plato in a book by that title.<sup>19</sup> Several of the church fathers were opposed to the theatre, Augustine of Hippo in particular. Their arguments against theatre were variations on the assertion that theatre was a waste of time, energy, and money that should be devoted to religious observance. They were not commenting on liturgical drama.

Another theme of objection is that, since theatre is a visual art form, it distracts from the principal transaction in church between God and God's people. The theatre simply gets in the way. A variation on this objection is that actors draw attention to themselves and away from God. The attention of the worshiper of God should not be drawn toward a performer or a group of performers. Far from facilitating worship, this argument goes, theatre obstructs it.

I have heard people say similar things about certain preachers, or choirs or singers being an obstruction to worship. So, another kind of objection is that theatre in church is simply bad, amateurish, and inept. To this objection all of us who believe that drama can be a fitting form of liturgical art<sup>20</sup> must say that drama can be, should be, and must be salutary and beautiful and it can be neither of these if it is not well-executed. As our artistic offering to God, it must be the best we can do.

But, positive and negative attitudes toward the use of the performing arts in church are deeply rooted in religious culture and practice. For some people, liturgical drama and dance will never truly fit into a worship service.<sup>21</sup> As we try to establish a foundation for the use of liturgical drama, we must accept and honor many good Christians' distaste for the very idea.

#### **IV A. Acting in church: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord.**

One of my friends, a man with whom I've worked for a long time, said to me recently "You know, I don't *get* Soul Purpose."

"Do you mean," I responded, "you don't understand the plays?"

"No, I don't know how anyone can stand up in the middle of a church service and say [in so many words] 'look at me.'"

When you think about it, many people stand up in church. There are ushers, acolytes, crucifers, indeed the entire congregation stands up more than once in most Christian religious services. I suppose few of these people consciously invite, attention to themselves. In some Christian churches, the choir and its conductor stand and sing from the front of the church, but in others they are tucked up in a gallery behind the congregation. Of course, the minister or priest rises to address God and the congregation and probably waits until it is quiet and everyone is attending. But the minister is a *called* and *ordained* servant of the Word!

#### **The transformative experience of reading Scripture aloud in the assembly**

And [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach  
good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to  
the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

And he closed the book and gave it back to the attendant and sat down.  
Luke 4: 16-20<sup>a</sup>.

In many churches, laypersons are asked to read from the Scriptures in the worship services. Many of these readers mouth the words of the Scripture monotonously. If there is an amplification system, the words will, at a minimum, be heard; that is, the monotony and the aridity of the reading will be imposed upon every ear. Like the dry bones that the Lord showed Ezekiel in the valley, the words of God will remain lifeless.

We pray for lectors that the spirit of the Lord might be upon them as it was upon Jesus when he read in the synagogue that day. Through faith, and with some coaching and discipline, we might invite the Spirit, so that even the least experienced volunteer can imitate the God, breathing life into those same words to make them live. A reader can be taught to comfortably take her place at the lectern, then pause awaiting the attention of the congregation, then announce the Scripture loudly and clearly, then pause again to secure the listeners' attention, and then read aloud in such a way that the meaning of the text is successfully communicated. This series of steps is based on the assumption that the reader plays a crucial role in the communication of the Word to the people listening to it. The proclamation of God's Word in the assembly is an action. In this sense, every reader is an *actor*.

No responsible person takes on a public role without preparing for it in some way. No responsible reader of Scripture in church walks to the lectern to read aloud without having reviewed and even studied the text using some standard questions as a guide. Who was the human author of this Scripture? Who was the original audience? What was the writer's purpose in composing this text? What message did the author wish to deliver to his audience? How has the author structured the text? What is the larger context of this reading? Are there unfamiliar words that will have to be pronounced? (There almost always are.) How can I emphasize certain words to make the author's meaning and the structure clear for the listeners? There are many easily available aids to this kind of lectionary study.

Having thoughtfully prepared the text, the reader must now turn to preparation of the role she is about to play in the worship service. We can think of preparation as a series of concentric circles. The reader's outermost circle of preparation, furthest from the core, is getting up from a seated position and walking to the reading position. There is a moment of physical adjustment to the lectern and a good breath. The next circle inward is making eye contact with the words written on the page.

The next circle inward may seem mysterious, but it needn't be. The reader must now recall the human author's purpose in composing this text for its original audience. The author's purpose was not merely *to read* to his audience. Perhaps the author's purpose was to tell the listeners a story for their edification? Or, was the author prompting them to a particular course of action? Was the author reprimanding them? Bolstering their spirits? Consoling them? Admonishing them? Witnessing to them? The reader now joins with the spirit of the original human author and speaks for that author, assuming the author's purpose, to contemporary worshippers. In doing this, the reader has undergone a transformation; she has become the voice of the Word.

But not the voice only. Readers who genuinely pursue the original author's purpose will find that their bodies will become involved, if, in some cases, only slightly. There may be a tensing of the muscles, a physical inclination toward the congregation, a tilting of the head, perhaps a drying of the throat, and,

finally, a physical release and relief having fulfilled the original author's intention. If a conventional closing such as "The Word of the Lord follows the reading" the reader will join naturally in the response, "Thanks be to God!"

It is not unusual for people to limit themselves to using their heads, faces, and voices in their efforts to communicate. We hear the phrases "talking heads" in reference to anchorpersons on television news programs and to "neck-up actors," who do not use their bodies when they perform. While there is certainly no sin attached to being a talking head, it seems a shame not to employ all the physical gifts we have been granted. Recall Jesus' articulation of the first of the two great commandments, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with *all your strength*." I suggest that one can love the Word of the LORD with all one's strength, as well.

Let me propose a new way of thinking about reading the Scripture aloud in the assembly that takes us beyond our image of the reader. What if we began to think of our task as not only to read, say, the first lesson on a given Sunday, but to *embody the Word* from the book of Genesis, or Isaiah, or Ezekiel. This is not to suggest that we impersonate any particular character from those books, but that we communicate the Word with our entire bodies. I don't expect the language of the church to change; I expect never to hear someone to be asked to "embody the New Testament lesson on Sunday." Still, I propose this language as a way of shifting our paradigm and, thus, our practice.<sup>22</sup>

An effective oral interpretation of the Scripture may well stand out in comparison with other readings and some people will say that the well-prepared reader seeks attention for herself. I disagree. A reading prepared in this manner does not draw attention to the reader, but to the text and the purpose of its original author. It proceeds from a belief that God's Word is as relevant for today's hearer as it was for the first hearers. I am reminded of the great crowds that gathered around Jesus such that he had to get into a boat and push back from the shore. From that boat he taught the throng of people. Imagine the sheer power of Jesus' voice!

### **The Method of Physical Actions: Embodying the Word<sup>23</sup>**

#### **INCARNATIONAL: THE WORD BECAME FLESH**

I have considered reading aloud in the assembly at some length because I think that this approach to reading in church establishes a good foundation for acting in church. First, let me remind you that what we have learned about acting in Soul Purpose relates not to the actor who is a practicing Christian, but to a liturgical actor; that is, an actor who performs in plays as parts of church services. There may be overlap here, but I know many Christian actors who would never act as part of a service of worship. Conversely, the skills of many liturgical actors may not be adequate for performance on the public stage. I will once again use the phrase *embody the Word* to define the mission of the liturgical actor.

The most famous acting teacher of the twentieth century, Konstantin Stanislavski founded his method of achieving psychological truth on stage in the physical action. Most professional actors trained in the US are trained according to some version of Stanislavski's principles. He taught his beginning acting students not to try to *be* or to impersonate a character in a play, but to *do* something specific that the character would do, usually something very simple. The playing of the physical action became the actor's objective and, Stanislavski believed, the actor's psyche would follow the body naturally. The method of physical actions diverts the consciousness of the actor from the self to the action. The actor playing Jesus, for example, in a liturgical drama does not think about what it would be like to *be* Jesus, but what did Jesus *do* in this situation. And, from what *did* Jesus do, as recorded in Scripture, to what *would* Jesus do in those gaps in the stories that were not recorded.<sup>24</sup>

Actions can be discovered in speeches. In the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10) Jesus says to Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." What is the action of this speech? Does Jesus *demand* that Zacchaeus come down? Does he *order* him down? Or does he *invite* Zacchaeus to come down? The actor's choice of action will tell us a great deal

about his (or her) view of the character of Jesus. Which is it? What physical movements and gestures would proceed from your choice? How exactly will one *embody the Word* in the playing of Jesus?

Stanislavski's method of physical action required the actor "to banish all his own personal thoughts and feelings during the performance."<sup>25</sup> Only in the emptying of the self in this way, could the actor begin to focus on the soul of the character. This systematic effort at selflessness seems to contradict the widely-repeated criticism that actors believe the play is "all about them."

### **Being Present to the Moment**

Before we become fixated on the ideal of the actor as humble servant, we must lift up the actor's peculiar gift of *presence*. We can assert with St. Paul that "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor. 12: 1-7). Presence is as much the actor's gift as musicality is the musician's. Presence is difficult if not impossible to teach. It is a gift to be treasured and it is why excellent actors are treasures.

Sometimes, however, an actor's presence can feel like a selfish appropriation of all the available energy, air, or space in a room. One can feel suffocated, even violated by presence. The theatre historian and anthropologist Richard Southern has pointed to a paradox in the actor's personality. In the same moment, the actor takes to himself all the energy and attention of a crowd of people *and* gives himself back to the crowd with an enormous and uncommon generosity.<sup>26</sup> It is the selfishness that makes the generosity possible.

Presence is a combination of concentration and alertness to surroundings. It is manifest in a two movements: centering and projection. Centering is focusing all one's energy to the center of one's being. It is an inward, introspective searching movement. Projection is the opposite. The actor emerges from her center into the space and radiates her spirit outward. The first movement is quietness, even in the midst of noise. The second is boldness at the center of attention.

### **Acting and confessing**

*Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Christ,  
The Son of God who has come into the world.*

These are the lyrics of verse five of the familiar song "I Am the Bread of Life." Soul Purpose leads congregations in this song following a play that it performs more often than any other, *And They Danced*. When the troupe sings this verse, they are in the confessional mode of performance.<sup>27</sup> Certainly acting is not identical with confession even in church; there is finally always a difference between the actor and the character. An actress does not "confess" that she is Lady Macbeth or Hedda Gabler though some people fear that actors, especially young actors, may lose their own identities to the roles they play.

Actors trained in the Stanislavski method, however, do seek to believe in the truth of their roles as well as those played by the other members of their ensemble, and in the details of the world in which the action of the play takes place.<sup>28</sup> When actors believe in the truth of a Gospel play their acting out of that belief has the resonance of confession. The physical and liturgical context completes the transformation of the acting performance into confession.

What if, on a given day, the actor in a liturgical drama is unable to believe in the truth of his role? Isn't he, then, making a false confession and acting in bad faith? Of a weak performance in a play on the public stage of a theatre, we might say that the actor "wasn't on" tonight, "wasn't into it." A trained actor can revert to technique when his heart isn't in it. The liturgical actor may not have as much technique at his disposal as the fully trained, professional actor. Yet, even at those times when he cannot believe in the character completely or be in full communion with other members of the ensemble, for his audience of worshippers he will continue to embody the Word.

Besides, the actor in a liturgical drama, indeed the confessing Christian in any moment or situation, knows that he is far from immune to doubt. Doubt is part of belief. The search for and commitment to the truth of Jesus Christ is a continual struggle. It is only by God's grace through faith that we are able to believe in the truth. A prayer for God's grace precedes every Soul Purpose performance.

### **“Off-stage” behavior**

*Let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ.  
Strive side by side for the faith of the Gospel.*

Before leaving out discussion of acting in church, we have to turn to the delicate matter of off-stage behavior. There is no question that actors whose performances in church have served to proclaim the Word of God and whose plays have taken the place of preaching, and whose acting has had the effect of confession will be more vulnerable to the charge of hypocrisy than actors in the secular theatre. If actors freely choose to serve in the roles of ministers or priests, they should not be surprised when their behavior is judged at the same standard reserved for ministers of the Gospel. At minimum, liturgical actors' vices, use of profane language, and licentious behavior will be confusing to their audiences. At worst, this off-stage behavior will inhibit their ability to communicate their belief in the truth of the Gospel.

Prescriptions for off-stage behavior are very hard for actors to accept. Puritanical objections to actors pre-date the English Puritans by at least a millennium. Who can forget Shakespeare's diatribes against the puritanical Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*? There is something about the actor that, when the curtain goes down, wants to let go all manner of discipline. Maybe it goes back to the servants of Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility, wine, and theatre. Besides, consistent sobriety in all things threatens to squash the spirit of fun, play, and freedom that draws people to the actor's art in the first place.

So it's not easy. The liturgical actor's prayer is "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord." Our Creator made us and loves us in all our aspects, light, dark, serious, frivolous, saddened, and joyful. We pray that our God accepts us as we are and as we try to be, for, failing God's extravagant grace, there is nothing more that we can possibly be.

## **V. Staging in church (the ecclesiastical setting)**

### **Composition: the ecclesiastical mise-en-scène**

For most of its history, Soul Purpose has been, principally, a touring troupe. We almost never arrive at a church more than twenty-four hours in advance of our performance and sometimes much less than that. In the early years, we would enter the sanctuary of the church, perform our arrival ritual (see appendix), and immediately begin looking at which pieces of chancel furniture could be moved out of the way of our performance. Could the communion rails be moved? The lectern? And how about this baptismal font right in the middle of everything? I shudder to think about questions like those because I'm sure they led to some hard feelings even between people at the church. I remember a pastor who was quite willing to move the font but one of the elders refused. It was awkward.

Now we design our plays in such a way that chancel furnishings, symbols, and décor reinforce their meanings. The baptismal font is a key set piece in the play, *The Hard Part*. The entire action of some of our plays is set in church. We look for ways to strengthen the connection between the play and its physical and ritual contexts.

### **Proscenium v. environmental staging**

For many people, a play is a kind of a live, moving picture that takes place in the front of a room while the audience looks on. The French term for this picture is *mise-en-scène*. In church, the actors move within a picture that probably also contains an altar or table, a lectern for reading, a pulpit for preaching, a large

cross, a font, as well as banners, and colored cloths (paraments) draped over some pieces of furniture. There is also, no doubt, a Bible or Lectionary book, and perhaps, a baptismal font. The area may be decorated with fresh flower arrangements and candles. There may be a door leading off to a sacristy and another leading to a supply and preparation room. There may be steps leading up to a platform on which the altar or table sits and a *reredos* or decorated screen at the back of the platform. Indeed, such an arrangement will look not unlike a proscenium stage<sup>29</sup>, with those presiding and serving “on stage” and the worshipers in the audience chamber.

The place where the worshipers sit may be long and narrow like the Medieval nave. It may have a pair of transepts extending from the sides of the nave to create a floor plan in the shape of a cross. Or, the place where the worshipers sit may be more fan-shaped like the ancient Greek amphitheatre. The altar platform may reach out into the midst of the worshipers who sit on three sides of it. (In the theatre, this would be called the “thrust” arrangement). Or, in some churches, the altar platform is in the middle with the worshipers completely surrounding it (like an arena). Each of these arrangements presents the liturgical drama director and actors with different challenges and different opportunities.

The Soul Purpose plays have been designed to be staged in the shape of a cross. This *cruciform staging* establishes the principal playing area at the point where the vertical and horizontal arms of the cross intersect. We can call this area stage center. Stage left, from the actor’s point of view, extends along one arm of the cross to the end of the area visible to the audience. Stage right extends along the opposite arm of the cross. Below the crossing, the vertical line of the cross extends down the center aisle of the area where the congregation sits. Above the crossing is a comparatively shallow area extending to the top of the vertical line of the cross.

Is the goal of a staging plan to assure that *everyone* can see and hear *everything* that happens in every moment of the liturgical drama? I can tell you from experience that that is a nearly impossible goal to achieve. While the interior arrangements of churches is similar in some ways to the arrangements of theatres, church architects have been less concerned with “sight lines” and acoustics than theatre architects.

A more achievable goal and also, I think, a more appropriate goal for a staging plan is that it bring the worshipers into the world of the drama, into the middle of the story. To achieve this goal, the director would do best to adopt an environmental staging plan. Among the most important decisions a director makes is how actors will make their appearances on stage. In proscenium staging, the actors often come from off-stage left or off-stage right or sometimes through a door or scenic archway at the back of the stage picture. They come, in other words, from out of the audience’s line of sight into the audience’s sight.

In environmental staging, actors can enter the audience’s awareness from many different locations. There is really no “off-stage,” only areas and positions out of the sightlines of the audience. The actor may enter the audience’s awareness by rising from the pew or chair where she has been sitting right next to a parishioner. Or an actor may proceed up an aisle playing to the backs of the congregation or from above, in a gallery; or from the lectern where she has been reading a lesson. The actors may play their parts from those locations or they may move from those locations to another centralized playing space. Part of the fun of this kind of staging is exploring and discovering spaces in the sanctuary from which the embodied Word might appear. A word of caution may be in order: worshippers who are used to having the action of a service played out in chancel may be startled or irritated by actors “parading around the church.” Like anything new, it takes some getting used to.

### **Movement**

Directors sometimes refer to three categories of movement. The first, *playwright’s movement*, is that kind of movement required for the play to work. In this category are entrances and exits, certain transactions between characters, actors crossing the stage to pick up a particular object. For example, in *Locusts & Wild Honey*, ANDREA moves to pick up the walking stick formerly carried by JOHN. This move is indicated by the playwright; the actor playing ANDREA must make this move for the play to make sense.

The second category of movement is called *technical movement*. We might also call this *director's movement*. In this kind of movement the director moves the actors into a particular configuration to 1) create a particular picture for the audience or 2) to make sure all the actors can be seen by the audience. In the Soul Purpose staging of *Locusts & Wild Honey*, five of the actors are arranged quite formally with three men in the back and one level up and two women in the front. Early in the play, these five actors are the voice of Luke, chapter three. The sixth actor is separate from this formal arrangement. She begins to establish the character of ANDREA from the beginning of the play. Another director of *Locusts & Wild Honey* may choose another arrangement of the actors for the beginning of the play.

A third kind of movement called *movement derived from dramatic action* arises from a conversation between the director and the actor in response to the actor's question, "how must I move to illustrate the action of this speech or line." In *Zacchaeus*, Jesus wants to invite Zacchaeus to share a meal with him. How would the actor playing Jesus move in order communicate the dramatic action *invite*? The director should always hope that the answer to that question comes in the form of a creative contribution from the actor.

### **Processional movement**

One kind of technical movement, which we will call *processional*, is congruent with traditional liturgical movement in the church. In the typical liturgical procession, a crucifer, bearing a cross, moves from the west door of the church (if not geographical west, then "liturgical west") eastward toward the altar. Ministers and attendants, one of whom bears the Bible, follow the crucifer. In many churches, the reverse of this procession happens in a recession at the end of the service. A center aisle often divides the section of the church in which worshipers sit. Processions proceed in that aisle.<sup>30</sup> Using the central aisle for entrances and exits in liturgical drama recapitulates processional movement.

### **Speech, aural images, and sound**

It is late in this discussion to be considering speech for the first time. Earlier, I focused on embodying the Word because I suspect that is a new idea for lectors and actors of liturgical drama. The importance of audible and intelligible speech is probably assumed even by people who are unable to speak audibly and intelligibly in public assemblies. In fact, clear speaking is so crucial to this enterprise that it is hard to know where to start or how to distill an entire field of study into a paragraph or two. However, liturgical drama cannot be well-executed unless the actors give continuous and systematic attention to the development of their speaking voices. If the people in the pews can't hear and understand you, it might be better for your group to perform as *mimes*.

What I have said about the value of experience in other areas such as acting and directing also applies in regard to speech. An accomplished speaker or a trained speech teacher will have much to offer your group. There are accessible resources for the inexperienced. The book I use is *Speech for the Stage*<sup>31</sup> by Evangeline Machlin. Machlin has divided vocal development into several extended lessons concerning various skills: inflection, articulation, projection, etc. In addition, she provides a convenient vocal warm-up for use immediately before performance.

By making a vocal lesson part of each rehearsal and a vocal warm-up part of your pre-performance ritual you will come to be familiar with the acoustic environment of your church. You can make some initial calculations by looking around at the surfaces in your sanctuary: floor, chairs or pews, walls, ceiling. What percentage of these surfaces are covered by absorptive material such as carpet, cushions, and fabric? If more than 75% are covered your speech will probably be intelligible at nearly normal speaking rates though you will have to put extra energy into sound projection. If more than 75% of the surfaces are hard wood, concrete, tile, slate, or brick, you will have to slow down your speech considerably and carefully and crisply enunciate the final consonant in each word. The benefit of an acoustically live environment is that it will give your voices some lift and may not require as much volume and projection as the comparatively quiet or "dead" acoustic.



If everyone agrees that the *only* way the actors can be heard and understood in your church is with the use of “wireless” microphones, consider finding another performance venue. I’m serious. The problems presented by even an expensive (\$100,000<sup>00</sup>) wireless system can be quite discouraging to everyone involved in drama.

Beyond speech, the discovery and presentation of **aural imagery** as part of your liturgical drama can be an exciting way of bringing the congregation into your story. As you will see in our play *Zacchaeus*, the scenes change rapidly from Zacchaeus’ house in Jericho, to the route of Jesus’ triumphal entrance into Jerusalem, and finally to the hill of Golgotha. The procession to the cross is a solemn one made more impressive by the rhythmic pounding of a nail into a 2x4” board out of sight of the audience. In *Ready?*, the actors and audience hear the repeated and vaguely disturbing rapping on a door. Later, that door will actually make an appearance when it closes in the faces of the Foolish Virgins. The Scripture is full of aural imagery awaiting only the creative presenter to bring those images to those who have ears to hear.

A special category of sound is **song**. It has been the practice of Soul Purpose to choose a song that echoes the themes of the play for the congregation to sing as the Hymn of the Day immediately following the end of the play. Members of Soul Purpose lead the hymn from the place where they have just performed the play. Any drama, including liturgical drama, tends to divide actors from audience. In addition to the many good reasons to sing a hymn, we find that when the actors visibly join the congregation in singing some of the dividedness between “us” and “them” is bridged.

### Costumes and Properties

Soul Purpose **costumes** are designed with three objectives in mind 1) identification, 2) emblematic symbolism, and 3) fittingness.<sup>32</sup> The actors wear costumes that identify them, variously, as a) members of the same community of which the congregation is a part (we call these costumes “church clothes”), b) themselves; i.e., college students at Valparaiso University, and c) as members of a unified chorus or ensemble. In this last instance, we normally choose black, white, or colored cotton turtleneck shirts of the same design, black trousers, or black skirts, and black shoes.

In some plays we will add emblematic costume parts to the neutral costume to identify a particular character. In *Zacchaeus*, Jesus wears a stole with crosses; the widow wears a black wimple; the beggar wears a shredded suit coat; Zacchaeus is laden with jeweled necklaces, a gown, a robe, gloves, and a hat. He gives these items away, serially, to the needy people who visit his house.

We try to fit our plays into the liturgy by building verbal and visual references to the ritual context into the play. In Lutheran and Catholic worship practice, the ministers and priests wear vestments that reflect tradition and relate, symbolically, to the calendar of the Church Year. The color for the season of Advent is blue or purple, for Epiphany is white, for Lent is purple, for the season of Pentecost green. On feast days, the vestment color may be red or white. Thus, when we are able, we dress our actors in robes that echo liturgical vestments in shape and colors that reflect the season of the Church Year.

One of the most important features of a costume in liturgical drama is that it may be put on or changed in a matter of seconds in front of an audience of hundreds. As the Soul Purpose actors say, “there is no off-stage in Soul Purpose.” We want to take no more time in positioning ourselves than it would take a lector to approach the lectern or a preacher to ascend the pulpit.

As with costumes, so with **props**. Props are not absent from Soul Purpose plays but they are few, absolutely essential, and highly theatrical. The general rule for the troupe is that the entire prop inventory for a play must be capable of being transported, in one trip, by the actors in that play.

It is in its use of props, that Soul Purpose locates itself squarely in the presentational mode of theatre. In the Realistic (sometimes called the “Naturalistic”) style, an environment is built incrementally by the addition of physical objects: hand props, set pieces, and set dressing. In presentational style, one prop can create a world. So in our play *The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God*, two metal folding chairs represent Oscar and Marta’s life together; in *Zacchaeus*, an ordinary six-foot stepladder serves as the

sycamore tree from which Zacchaeus sees Jesus and, later, that same ladder becomes the cross from which Jesus sees Zacchaeus below him. In *Ready?*, an ordinary six-panel door is the threshold of heaven. In *The Hard Part*, a single latex glove is the sign of leprosy and the world of disease. In *Locusts & Wild Honey*, a gnarled walking stick is the symbol of vocation. It's hard to bring six stone water jars holding thirty gallons each into the playing area for *The Wedding*, so six slate-colored eight-ounce crockery bowls held by six actors do the trick.

Why not mime everything? Good question. We are trying to call forth the invisible in our plays. Perhaps the invisible needs an assist from the visible, finally. The prop that can be seen, touched, lifted, dropped, and picked up again becomes the actor's instrument in the performance of her ritual and the audience's reference point that the Spirit is immanent in the things of this world.

Just as in every other element in liturgical drama, properties must be chosen or constructed with care so that they will be visible and intelligible even in a large room where sightlines may not be the best. If we depend on a prop to create a world, then everyone must be able to see the object and understand it.

### **A Word About Lighting**

In general, Soul Purpose prefers to make its presentations in the same level and color of light as that which illuminates the worshippers. Spotting the actors and putting the congregation in the dark creates the kind of division that our troupe seeks expressly to avoid. Spotlights on the actors *in addition* to the full lighting in the church helps to give definition to the actors' faces and bodies in performance. It has been our experience that, in a nave and chancel floor plan the one area of the room that is *not* well illuminated is the area between the front pew or row of chairs and the chancel steps. In our staging plans, it is in this area that our actors do a lot of their work. In this case, we ask, if possible, that chancel lights (behind the actors) be lowered and nave lights be brought up full.

### **The Value Of A Stage Manager**

A stage manager is a member of a theatre company who does not perform in plays. The stage manager helps the company to operate smoothly by assuming the many managerial, organizational, and backstage tasks associated with theatre production. A stage manager 1) serves as the communication link among members of the company, the director, and other members of the staff; 2) maintains the company rehearsal schedule; 3) keeps inventories and manages storage of all props and costumes; 4) notates the staging of actors and subsequently checks their movement, and, most importantly; 5) keeps rehearsals running smoothly by cueing lines and movement so that the director can stand back and look at the work as a whole.

It is possible to assign some of these tasks to actors in the company and, in some cases, the director may have to do it herself. That doesn't mean you don't have a stage manager, it means that you've got a fragmented stage manager – not the best situation. Besides, stage managers usually have different gifts to offer than do actors. Why not give someone else a chance?

## **VI. The Soul Purpose Plays**

From its inception, Soul Purpose has performed new plays that the troupe has adapted or composed. As important to the troupe's performances have been to its identity nothing speaks more clearly of its purposes than its plays. Soul Purpose seeks to proclaim the Word of God. Its proclamations are as faithful to the Holy Scripture as they can be. The particular plots, characters, ideas, language, and settings have resulted from their authors' discovery of links between the Bible and their own lives. In other words, the plays reflect an ongoing conversation between the Bible's stories and the authors' stories.

### **VI A. Dramaturgical philosophy**

Certain characteristics in the Soul Purpose plays, when taken together, comprise a dramaturgical philosophy, an approach to playwriting. In most of the plays, the Soul Purpose actors begin as members of

a community that includes both actors and audience. Often the actors, first positions in staging plan of the play are in the pews or chairs where the audience is seated. In the traditions of both the Ancient Greek and the Medieval Theatres, the actors emerge from the community *on occasion*. In the first moments of the play, the actors move from members of the community to the role of collective narrator. As the players move more fully into the story, they maintain a presence in contemporary life, in the community from which they came. In the play *The Wedding* (John 2: 1-11), the actors announce that they have two stories to tell, one about a wedding in Michigan in the summer of 2002 and the other about a wedding in Cana of Galilee in the first third of the first century.

Even while the actors are entirely engaged in the story, at least one character continues to serve as a “bridge” for the audience. In *The Wedding* that character is Nathaniel, the friend whom Philip brought to meet Jesus. In *The Hard Part* (2 Kings 5: 1-14; Mark 1: 40-45), that character is Hannah, brother of the leper, Thomas. In *Forty Days* (Luke 4: 1-20), that character is Janet, the main character in the play. These bridge characters address the audience directly and they ask the kinds of questions of the story and its characters that members of the audience, that is people on the outside of the story, might ask of the players. Often it is these characters who learn the most from the telling of the story.

The plays fluctuate between presentational and representational style. In presentational style, the actors continually remind the audience that they are watching a play and that actors are *presenting* the story to them. In representational style, the actors work to create an environment of believability that has been called a slice of life. Actors behave and respond to one another, as we would expect people to do; their actions are motivated. Their dialogue sounds like what we would hear in the street or in schools, houses, or stores. The audience may believe for periods of time that what is happening in front of them is really happening.

Representationalism, sometimes call “realism,” ruled the American stage from the about 1920 to 1960. There are still realistic plays being written, but, for the most part, they are plays for film and television. Theatre artists have embraced the style that they do best, bringing to the stage not the conversations of the sit-com and the soap opera, but poetic language, heightened speech, movement, gesture, dance, song, color, texture, mask, and mime.

The Soul Purpose plays make ample use of presentational devices. You will frequently be addressed directly by a narrator and a chorus, or both, as in *The Man Who Was Not Far from the Kingdom of God*. One actor may play two or three roles in the same play and role assignments will be fluid. Sometimes a woman will play a role that you’d expect a man to play, and *vice-versa*. A hat or a gown or a prop will be used to indicate when the actor is playing a particular role. The audience will find itself in different time frames sometimes simultaneously. Gestures communicate with as much power as words. Scenes change quickly. Just about anything can happen because it’s a play and also because it’s *only* a play.

Yet the characters in these plays are not theatricalized out of reality, either. In *Forty Days*, Janet’s husband has first deserted her for a younger woman and now wants to return at his convenience; Oscar Holtkamp, the man who was not far from the kingdom of God, is deeply confused about the difference between being liked and being loved; the story-tellers in *Ready?* are appalled by the implications of the very story they are telling; Hannah’s brother, in *The Hard Part*, is suffering an incurable illness. These are genuine maladies; some of them we know personally.

In the Soul Purpose plays, the central characters move through phases of complication, conflict, and crisis. As the philosopher Aristotle observed, dramas (“tragedies”) have beginnings, middles, and *ends*. It is difficult for a playwright to tie things up in a tidy resolution. Happy endings are contrary to life experience and we do want to be true to life, don’t we? As you read the plays, you will see that they all end with the Gospel, the Good News. Sometimes the Good News is not so obviously happy; sometimes it comes only in the form of a promise. But there *is* always the Gospel, alpha *and* omega.

The Wedding  
John 2: 1-11  
Epiphany 2 Year C

Introduction

Church Year

*The Wedding* is based on John 2: 1-11, the Gospel designated to be read on the second Sunday after Epiphany in the third year of the three-year cycle of readings in the Revised Common Lectionary. Thus, *The Wedding* is a play for the Epiphany season, the season of manifestation.<sup>33</sup> The readings for Epiphany and subsequent Sundays tell the story of God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus. From "The Visit of the Magi" to the "Transfiguration," the Epiphany stories are about God's showing the divine incarnation to humans. Liturgical theatre artists might take heart at the idea that God presented Jesus Christ to the world through this series of salutary shows! Conversely, the dramatic question for Epiphany plays is whether human beings will be able to see what God is manifesting to them.

The Source

The first performance of *The Wedding* was not in the Epiphany season, but the marriage ceremony of one of our actors, which took place on June 7, 2002. I had originally thought that John and Mary wanted to Soul Purpose to perform for their wedding reception. We had several plays, already in the repertoire, which would have been appropriate for such an occasion. When they asked us to perform for the marriage ceremony, I knew that we would want to create a new play. What more perfect New Testament story to bring to a Christian wedding could there be than "The Wedding at Cana"?

A wedding sermon, and a play that serves as the sermon, must establish Jesus Christ's presence in the midst of the assembly and it must also lift this personal event up for recognition and affirmation by the Christian community.

But a wedding play must also bless and address this most personal of commitments *personally*. So *The Wedding* is a play for John Lofgren and Mary Boeger's wedding. As such, there are some very personal references in the play. For example, John and Mary wanted breakfast food at their wedding reception – eggs, bacon, cinnamon rolls, etc. For John and Mary breakfast represents beginnings: the beginning of a new day, of a new family, of a new life in Christ. The references to breakfast may make this play too particular to use for a general congregational audience. On the other hand, the symbolism is not so personal that it is obscure or mysterious, especially if you insert some of the lines given lines given to JOHN in this edition of the play. You can further generalize by using more common last names, such as Johnson or Schmidt, or you might omit the family names completely.

Biblical Connections

Staging

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<sup>1</sup> The Ancient Greeks called the places for producing a play a *theatron* or seeing place.

<sup>2</sup> This audience effort has been called, negatively, "the willing suspension of disbelief."

<sup>3</sup> "I believe in all things both seen and unseen" are the words of the Nicene creed as it appears in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*

<sup>4</sup> See the listing of important religious dramas in *Radius* magazine. RDSGB

<sup>5</sup> James F. White, 96-97

<sup>6</sup> see Gerald Weales

<sup>7</sup> "... all *aesthetica* have a context which in part determines their meaning and significance. For Burch Brown, this milieu itself is not primarily aesthetic, but is of inestimable consequence for the perception of the work. Or every aesthetic object is 'transformed in the aesthetic milieu.' (Witvliet quoting Frank Burch Brown, *RA*, 44)

<sup>8</sup> White, 20.

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<sup>9</sup> *With One Voice* 6-9.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*

<sup>11</sup> White 75-76; see also Martin Connell, *Guide to the Revised Common Lectionary*, (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Max Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) 1-19.

<sup>13</sup> Two points need to be made here: 1) acting is interpretation, there are always many ways to tell or to act out the same story; 2) sometimes the Lectionary reading is, apparently, not a story but a teaching, e.g. Matthew 5: 1-12, commonly called "The Beatitudes." In these cases, the playwright must "pull back" as far as is necessary to set this teaching act into the story of Jesus' ministry (see *Dear Matthew*, by Soul Purpose.)

<sup>14</sup> See some of the many excellent studies of the period such as *The Play Called Corpus Christi* and Eleanor Prosser's *Drama and Religion in the Middle Ages*.

<sup>15</sup> Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press,

<sup>16</sup> For a review of the idea of play and its relationship with biblical narratives, see Björn Krondorfer, "The Whole Gamut of Experience: Historical and Theoretical Reflections on Play," in *Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992) 5-26.

<sup>17</sup> Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 98.

<sup>18</sup> I am in debt to Dennis Dewey of the Network of Bible Storytellers (NOBS) for reminding me that *memorizing lines* might better be called "learning by heart."

<sup>19</sup> Barash, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice*

<sup>20</sup> transformative, enlightening, truthful, and beautiful

<sup>21</sup> see Nicholas Wolterstorff's discussion of "fittingness" in *Art in Action*

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Laeuchili would refer to this as *somatization* in "The Expulsion from the Garden and the Hermeneutics of Play" in *Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives*, ed. Björn Krondorfer (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992) 46.

<sup>23</sup> Much of the appeal of the theatre and other forms of dramatic art such as films and television drama is the empathic connection that the audience develops for one or more of the characters. Empathy means that the audience is able to "feels itself into" the story being acted out on stage or screen. The more deeply into psychological truth that the actor can delve, the more likely it is that the audience will believe in and empathize with him. The twentieth-century Russian acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavski, developed a method whereby an acting ensemble can create an entire environment of believability. The audience looks into this environment through an invisible "fourth wall." The power of this approach to drama is undeniable and the emotional connection that an audience can feel to skilled actors is well-known.

<sup>24</sup> Stanislavski called this the "magic if." *If I were Jesus passing through Jericho, what would I do upon seeing the diminutive tax collector up in the sycamore tree?*

<sup>25</sup> Magarshack, David, Introduction to *Stanislavski on the Art of the Stage*, Dramabook edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 59.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Southern, *The Seven Age of the Theatre*.

<sup>27</sup> Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual*, 107-114.

<sup>28</sup> Magarshack 48.

<sup>29</sup> The term "proscenium" comes from late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy; *pro* meaning "in front of" and *scenium* meaning that part of the stage where the scenery was placed. Usually an arch framed the entire stage; it was called a proscenium arch.

<sup>30</sup> See Richard Schechner on processions in "Toward a Poetics of Performance," in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970-1976* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1977) 112-114.

<sup>31</sup> Evangeline Machlin, *Speech for the Stage*. Certainly not the most sophisticated method available, but one that is accessible to amateurs.

<sup>32</sup> Once again, I borrow this term from Nick Wolterstorff. It is quite different from "fit."

<sup>33</sup> James F. White, op cit pp. 61-62, 69.