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Soul Purpose: Making the Unseen Seen:

Some Comments on the Use of Drama for the Church

By John Steven Paul

Contemporary performance of drama in the context of a Christian worship service has its roots in tenth-century Europe. In about 970, Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester, composed a *Regularis Concordia*, a document memorializing agreement among England's leading bishops concerning liturgical practice. Among the many services or liturgical offices addressed in this document is the *Quem quaeritis*, an antiphonal chant sung as an introit (introduction) at the Easter mass.

The creative process that produced the *Quem quaeritis* has become known as "troping" (from the word "trope" meaning "added melody"). Glynne Wickham, the preeminent living scholar of the Medieval theatre, writes that the verbal trope developed from a desire to add text to the extra notes produced by the practice of melismatic chant; that is, elaborating the last note corresponding to the last syllable of a word used in the liturgy. For example, the word *Benedicamus* has five syllables, requiring the chanting of five notes. The practice of melismatic chant to the last syllable and ornamented it with a sequence of chanted notes. When liturgists looked for text to add to those notes, they turned to the Scripture, often the reading appointed for the day. Thus, according to Wickham and others, these troped sequences were born of a desire for ornamentation of the liturgy and the enhancement of the devotional experience.

The *Quem quaeritis* trope is derived from the Easter story of the three women who went in search of the tomb in which Jesus' body had been laid in order to dress the corpse for final burial. They meet an angel who tells them that Jesus has arisen from the dead and is no longer there. The actual text is exceedingly simple:

Quem quaeritis in sephulchro, Christocolae?

(Whom do you seek in this tomb, Christians?)

Jesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o coelicolae.

(Jesus of Nazareth, o angel.)

Non est hic, surrexit.

(He is not here, he has risen.)

In the *Regularis Concordia*, Ethelwold instructs four brethren in the performance of his Easter introit:

Let one of these [brethren], vested in an alb, enter as though to take part in the service, and let him approach the sepulcher without attracting attention and sit there quietly with a palm in his hand. While the third response is chanted, let the remaining three follow, and let them all, vested in copes bearing in their hands thuribles with incense, and stepping delicately as those who seek something, approach the sepulcher. These things are done in imitation of the angel sitting in the monument, and the women with spices coming to anoint the body of Jesus. (Wickham 38)

The rubric continues, but the most significant phrase for the drama is in this section; i.e. in imitation of. The conscious understanding of imitation links this liturgical office with the mimetic tradition dating to ancient Athens. While the tropes and the liturgical music drama that developed from them might be termed port-drama, several distinctions need to be kept in mind, among them the following: 1) the text was sung or chanted, rather than spoken, 2) the participants' costumes, props, and scenic environment were those originally created for the performance not of these dramas, but for the services of the worshipping community, and 3) the performers were priests or other religious whose responsibilities included the leading of worship services, rather than persons retained specifically for the performance of a drama.

Wickham traces the development of the early Medieval drama from officium (Office of Service) to Representatio to Ludus, play or game with the following implication:

I. The Making of a Play

The process by which *The First Witnesses* was created is an interesting example of how art can be created in community rather than by an author working independently and then seeking a production.

The drama company known as Soul Purpose had been functioning under my direction since the fall semester 1987. From that year until 1992, the company repertoire consisted entirely of plays based on sermons by David H. Kehret which I, in cooperation with members of the troupe, "dramatized." (This process is a story in itself.) In the spring semester of 1992, Soul Purpose consisted of more women than men – by a ratio of about 3-1 – and we were looking for projects that could provide challenges for the women actors in the troupe. We began with a simple process, entitling it "The Women's Project," wherein each person was instructed to choose a female character from the Bible, and, using the Bible as primary resource, write an extended monologue in which that woman, in effect, told her story. In addition, I asked several female theologians at VU to submit suggestions, advice, and counsel. Soul Purpose people wrote their monologues; we gathered two or three times to read, discuss, and critique them, and to talk a bit about dramatic form. Among these original monologues were Ruth, Esther, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of Jesus, and the woman who met Jesus and Jacob's well in Samaria. Professor Dorothy Bass came to speak with us on one occasion. As the semester drew to a close, other

responsibilities forced us to suspend the process, to file the monologues, and to allow the field to lie fallow for a time.

At about the same time, in what I thought was an unrelated process, Profs. Marin Jean and Walt Wangerin and I devoted an afternoon, at least, to discussing the idea of creating a “Mystery Play” (generically speaking) specifically for performance in the Chapel of the Resurrection. Two points of that discussion stayed in my mind: 1) that there should be an explicit link – a character, perhaps – between the scriptural story that would be the basis of this Mystery, and 2) that Holy Saturday would be a particularly interesting temporal context for the play. In fact, we adopted a provisional title for this project: “The Silence of Saturday.” Wangerin, as I remember, fired my imagination about the peculiar dynamism of the day between the crucifixion and resurrection. His is what playwriting teachers would call “the precipitating context.”

The summer of 92 passed and I was unable to return to either of these projects actively, at least. In the fall semester, 1992, Kari-Anne Blocher, a senior Theatre and Television Arts major, a three year member of Soul Purpose, and the leading actress in Athol Fugard’s *A Lesson from Aloes*, which I was directing for the University Theatre, took a course in the culture of the New Testament from Prof. Rick DeMaris in the Theology Department. Blocher became particularly interested in the status of women and the language used in reference to that status in New Testament times. She added another character to our store from the previous semester, Lydia the cloth merchant (Acts 16:14), and wrote a draft of a play using five of the monologues including Lydia’s. Blocher brought the draft to me and I could work on it further. She was determined to present a reading of the play as a final project for her New Testament culture class.

I introduced the two ideas from the Jean-Wangerin discussion mentioned before. First, I created the character of a contemporary woman – the link to the present. Knowing that many of Soul Purpose’s performances were done in Lutheran churches where the vast majority in the audience were middle class adults, I created the character of a woman about thirty-five years old, trying to balance the responsibilities of family, work, and church with little time to reflect about the intersections of these responsibilities and practically no time to think about matters of faith. And, of course, this is how the character got her name, “Faith,” an echo of the Medieval convention of incarnating abstractions and giving them names.

Secondly, I proposed to set the action of the play on Holy Saturday in a church sanctuary that had been prepared for the Easter Festival by members of the altar guild, a particularly “Lutheran” institution, so I am told by my Catholic students.

Kari-Anne Blocher’s draft brought together Martha of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, Mary the Mother of Jesus, the woman at Jacob’s Well, and Lydia, the cloth merchant from Philippi. How could we honor the process which gave birth to these characters while respecting the conventions of time and place? We couldn’t so we didn’t. Taking our cue from Luigi Pirandello, whose six characters come from no other place than their author’s imagination to a stage where they

encounter “real” people, we decided to attribute their illogical presence to the irresistible call of the Spirit. Or, we could justify their presence by medieval dramatic precedent. The Medieval dramatists, whoever they were, were always bringing together God’s universal time with the humanly devised chronological time in order to form ritual time. Finally, I liked the idea that Faith is at once in the presence of all the people she expected to see at the altar guilt meeting: Martha, Rebecca, Mary, and Lydia. But who are they really? Is this really God coming to Faith in a different form? Is this really a sacramental pageant? A gift from God to Faith, in the way Prospero’s pageant is a gift to Ferdinand and Miranda in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*? The truth that we meet God in the form of other people and when we least expect is one of the most important things I have learned from the preaching of David Kehret.

Another development now ensued. In the previous spring, Soul Purpose had joined the University Concert Choir in a tour of churches. At one point in the program, the choir served as a chorus for a short play presented by Soul Purpose. This experiment had been successful and we were looking for a way to do it again. This year, it was the Kantorei’s turn to tour, their practice being to lead the concert audience through a choral liturgy. Fred Telschow and I determined that Soul Purpose would present a play in the place where a homily might come in the liturgy. At that point, Soul Purpose had no play. For some reason, I check the lectionary for the week that the ensembles would be on tour and the Gospel for the first Sunday of the tour was the story of the meeting between Jesus and the woman at the well. The play could be linked to the lectionary reading, in effect, it would be a trope.

The emergence of the woman at the well, to whom I gave the name Rebecca, was an important piece in the dramaturgical puzzle for now our first character, Faith, had an antagonist. Now we began to think as if we were the character... what would be the feelings of the Samaritan woman when she heard the news that Jesus had been crucified?

At this point in my career, I am still more of a playwriting teacher than a playwright, and I know that one of the devices that makes a play “work” is the posing of a specific central question at the early point of a play, thereby piquing the audience’s attention, that is not answered until the end of the play. What could that question be? What might have been the question of the day, Holy Saturday, for the women friends of Jesus who must have, like their male counterparts, felt afraid of the Roman authorities? Will you come to the tomb to finish the preparations of Jesus’ body for final burial? This question would be posed by Martha, a woman we had come, rightly or wrongly, to associate with the logistics, the details of life – now there was a “reason” for Martha. The question would be put to Faith and her answer would be a test of whether or not she would be an active follower of Christ.

At this point, we had no reason for Lydia to be there, other than Kari-Anne Blocher’s attraction to the character. As a scholar, Blocher was interested in two things: 1) the question of whether male-gender references such as “brother” were a true indication of the makeup of the early Christian church and its hierarchies and 2) the status of women in the church, generally, and in

early Christian communities in particular. When you hear the play, you will hear those concerns in the character of Lydia. But what would the Lydia character's relationship to the action of the play be? Lydia's story in Acts 16 relates that the Lord had opened her heart to the Gospel preaching of Paul and subsequently she and her household were baptized. She must have gone back to her home, in Thyatira, and witnessed to what she had heard from Paul. In the same way, the woman at the well went back into her village and told everyone about the prophet who knew all about her; she too had witnessed. This would be the link with the visit to the tomb: the women, not Peter and John, were "the first witnesses" to the resurrection. Hence the name of the play and also the admonition to the audience to be witnesses.

We are left, then, with Mary the mother of Jesus, a character which I have proposed to cut because I have the most trouble with its dramatic purpose and link. As a director and ensemble we have come to some conclusions about how this character fits in. See if you can discern the connections.

It would have been impossible to create a play with a group of women at Valparaiso University in the 1990's, about women in the church, without there being a political agenda. The question of who is more equal, men or women, comes through in the dialogue of the play. It is the part of the play that I like least, at this point, principally for aesthetic reasons. I have come to accept the play as written, however, with these thoughts: if the question of status was so important to the male disciples, especially the sons of Zebedee, why would it not be important to these women? The politics represented here, as simplistic, even naïve, as they are, make for an interesting point of discussion.

The play went through about six drafts as we "workshopped it" in our Saturday morning (and whatever ungodly hours we could find) Soul Purpose meetings. Several things happened in workshop: Faith got more comic, Lydia became less verbose, and the ritual of baptism grew more prominent in the staging and the dialogue. When we took the play on tour with the Kantorei, we found ways to shorten and clarify and to free the staging from the chancel and to involve the entire church sanctuary. The play is not and will never be finished – no plays ever are. We still consider it our most problematic script for all sorts of reasons which you will undoubtedly notice as you watch the performance. But I bring it to you today as an illustration of a process that brought university and church together under the auspices of drama.