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The Task and Role of Theatre



by Teresa TerHaar

Does Dordt want to be a “home” for theatre? This is not a question unique to Dordt College; many other Christian colleges have faced this same question and provided a variety of answers. Historically (as books like *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* show),¹ Christians, particularly Protestants, have viewed theatre with great skepticism. The Theatre Arts Department at Dordt faces a certain amount of skepticism. Some of it is healthy — it is good to ask hard questions about any art form. However, some of it is unhealthy and damaging. Some of this skepticism is the result of what some have called “questionable” production choices in the last several years. While many constituents would say yes to theatre at Dordt, I argue that they want a certain type of theatre: entertaining, safe, excellent. While I agree that our theatre should always be produced

with excellence, I do not agree that it should always be entertaining or safe. I have been called to an institution that says it is a Christian and Reformed institution. In my mind, a “reformed” theatre is sometimes neither entertaining nor safe. When I use the word “reformed,” I mean it in two different ways at the same time. First, I mean “reformed” in the theological tradition. Perhaps more significantly, I mean “reformed” as in a theatre that is trying to change for the better to become more penetrating, to become more true to what God calls theatre to be.

A “reformed” theatre is one that deals with every aspect of life, both the beautiful and the ugly. In particular, theatre at an educational institution like Dordt College has the responsibility to tell many different types of stories. At times, a reformed theatre doesn't just tell these stories; it interrogates these stories. It does not tell them easily, but it asks difficult questions about their truth, their message, and their impact on the world. “Every square inch” of the world includes stories about hope and stories about despair. It includes worldviews we support and worldviews we do not. It includes people we would want to meet and people we would not. It includes language we would use and language we would not. As a reformed theatre practitioner, I am called to tell everyone's stories, to give voice to the voiceless, and to do so responsibly and with excellence.

At times, theatre is called to be entertaining, to take our minds off of our troubles, or to enable us to laugh at ourselves. Many times, this laughter is self-revealing. We can learn as much from a good comedy as we can from a challenging drama — and

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we can laugh along the way. I worry, however, when the expectation is that the theatre produced needs to be entertaining in order to be good. I hear this judgment from many of our students: “Oh, I don’t want to go to that because it isn’t funny” or “I don’t want to go to the theatre and have to think.” These reactions are somewhat understandable. Many of our students simply haven’t had enough exposure to theatre to understand the many purposes theater can and should have. My work, in part, revolves around challenging these types of assumptions.

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At times, theatre is also called to be safe, to tell stories in a way that doesn’t make us feel uncomfortable or uneasy. But most often, a “reformed” theatre can and should reveal something about the world that makes us uneasy, that makes us leave the theatre, asking hard questions. In the past few years, this area has been a challenging one for my department. We discovered that we need to be more careful about how we communicate with our constituencies (both our students and audiences), about how and why we are choosing our productions. During our recent Program Review, we discovered that some of our students and audience members didn’t understand some of the challenging or “unsafe” productions we had done recently. I wrote the following lengthy section for our Program Review Report (2010). It is worth including here because it explains the challenge of doing “reformed” theatre at Dordt. In this section, I mention plays produced in the 2009/2010 school year (*Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Book of Days*) and allude to plays produced in the 2010/2011 school year (*The Secret Garden* and *Tartuffe*):

Some in both the college community and our constituency believe we have “sold out” to the culture at large in the last two years. They fear that we have become provocative for the sake of being provocative. One patron quoted Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,

whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things.” This patron doubted whether the Dordt Theatre Arts Department was following the guidance of this verse, in particular the ideas of “pure” and “lovely.” Our department believes we are trying to embody truth and be faithful servants through our work. This passage from Philippians calls us firstly to reflect the truth of the world. We often reflect theatrical truth in beautiful ways (as in a production like *As It Is In Heaven*). Sometimes we do so in comic ways (like in *Enchanted April*). At other times we feel called to illuminate a fallen world (as in *Book of Days*). Calvin Seerveld states in his article “Professional Giveaway Theatre in Babylon: a Christian Vocation” that “Christian theatre needs to speak Babylonian language with a christian (sic) accent, not just church-appropriate language” (14). Our department supports this statement. We must help our students and community engage in work that reflects the totality of creation: both its beauty and ugliness. In *Simply Christian*, N.T. Wright states that we honor and celebrate the tension within which we live as Christians by telling stories in which “the threads of love and pain, fear and faith, worship and doubt . . . and the promise and problem of human relationship” exist (49). The key is that we must do so responsibly.

The Dordt Theatre Arts Department asks itself the following questions when selecting plays for our season:

- What is the purpose of the script?
- Does the script raise questions about where we are headed if we continue in this direction?
- Does the purpose of the script speak a prophetic word to our broken world?

In the past, we asked if a script had “redemptive” elements. Perhaps “prophetic” is a better description of what we hope our theatre at Dordt embodies. While a script or production might not contain explicitly “redemptive” elements, often it is our response that is redemptive. Other questions we consider in our discussions are these:

- Is the “evil” present in a script necessary or gratuitous?
- Is the language and/or actions spoken or done necessary?

- How would the language/action be “read” or understood by our audience?
- How would the audience respond to that play/language/action?

We remain committed to doing theatre that responsibly challenges our audiences. The issue of balance (for our students and our audiences) is always in our minds. We must balance elements like style, genre, and content. This past season (two mainstage productions in our blackbox) was intended as a “fringe” season given the limitations of the space. We programmed productions that we would not normally plan in our regular main stage season — very purposefully. Both productions pushed boundaries in terms of content and language — in ways we deemed necessary and not gratuitous. Our next season promises to be very different in tone, language, and style (a lovely musical and a classical comedy). Again, we do this purposefully in order to reveal other aspects of the world we live in. Our hope is that this process of program review will help us communicate with more clarity how and why we choose the material that we do.”

So, why is a Christian, reformed theatre necessary at Dordt College? What is the contribution of my discipline? There are many ways I could answer those questions. I choose in this paper to identify four key aspects of a Christian and reformed theatre that contribute greatly to our students, campus community, larger constituency, and even the professional theatre world: storytelling, incarnation, empathy, and prophecy.

First, theatre is a powerful form of storytelling. Because theatre is live, it creates a relationship between the actors and audience members. This relationship is what sets theatre apart from the medium of film. This relationship is also what, at times, can make theatre such an uncomfortable art form. Actors (on a college campus, often people we know) walk and talk and create characters. Yet, in telling stories on the stage, we follow the example of Christ, the ultimate storyteller. It is interesting that he often chose the medium of the parable rather than a sermon. These stories communicate his message of salvation in ways that capture the imagination and allow the mind and heart to follow. The characters in the parables reflect both the best and

worst of our world. The parables themselves are wonderfully complicated and can never be taken at face-value. Christ painted images with his words; today, one can only imagine what it would be like to hear him tell the stories in person. In some of the same ways, theatre today enables us to paint with words, to spark the imagination, and to communicate a message in an allusive way.

Today’s communication is often both image based (Internet) and completely non-image based (texting). Our students are well practiced at watching images but not necessarily at discerning them. Educational theatre can help students practice watching and then thinking about what they see on the stage. These lessons can then be transferred to other mediums (like television and film). One interesting example of this transference is last year’s spring production *Tartuffe*. Dr. Simon duToit⁴ chose to intercut some hymns and spirituals into Moliere’s classic comedy. At times jarring, this directorial decision sparked a great deal of discussion among audience members and several strongly analytical student reviews that revealed careful thinking about why he did this. Clearly, students were thinking about what they had seen. Another feature of today’s communication is that it is often completely divorced from image and sound. Our students spend a disproportionate amount of time texting. They never see a facial expression or hear tone of voice. As a result, communication loses a sense of humanity, of subtext, of feeling. Theatre makes this unarguably present. When one is attending theatre, everything depends on the presence of actors, of faces and bodies, of subtext, and of those sitting next to us in the audience. This, too, is good practice for our students, bringing them back in touch with those around them. Stories can teach us without our even realizing it.

Linked with the idea of storytelling is the second key idea of theatre — that it is in a sense incarnational. Christ became flesh and lived among us as man; in essence he lived our story for a time in order to bear our sin. Similarly, onstage live actors (our students) take on voices and bodies of others and live their stories for a time. This embodiment is powerful and can be frightening not only for audience members but also for the student actors at times. As a Christian theatre practitioner who

works with student actors on productions, I have a responsibility to my actors not only as students but more importantly as children of God. When I ask them to be involved in a production, I need to consider the effect of that production on the actors themselves. There are certainly shows I would not choose to produce, simply because they would not be healthy or appropriate choices for the students I work with. During the Program Review process, we discovered that we need to be clearer and explicit with our students about why we choose the shows we do and how the way we are doing them is distinctive. We are always careful to encourage prospective actors to read every show for which they audition. We also make clear before and during the audition process (for those who don't read the script) if there is anything challenging involved in the show, such as stage kisses, vulgar language, accent work, etc. On audition forms we always include a section where students can clarify what they will or will not do. For example, in a production with an onstage kiss, I asked the students to indicate if they would kiss onstage or not. I honor those decisions, even when that means not casting the best person for a particular role. We also support our students by teaching an acting theory that respects the integrity of the individual. Our students do not "become" another character; rather, they act *as if* they were another character. This distinction is often hard for audience members to understand. Too often, they criticize actors for portraying characters they find unseemly — conflating the actor with the role. We need to do more to help our actors and audience members understand the difference between the two. We have also instituted a postmortem discussion that happens soon after the production has closed. This discussion provides an important time for cast and crew to talk about the positive aspects of the production process as well as the negative. It also provides an important time of guided closure (outside of the usual cast/crew party), where actors and crew members can give input that will help the next production run more smoothly.

The incarnational aspect of theatre can be a challenge for our audiences as well. It can be challenging to separate actor from character, but the true challenge is even more fundamental than that. An audience member needs assistance even before

she/he purchases tickets about the nature of the story being told. Is this a play that is appropriate for him/her to experience in such an "in your face" medium? With a film, a viewer can more easily leave the movie theatre or turn off the television. That is more difficult to do when attending live theatre. So, our audiences need a clearer understanding of how and why we choose to embody certain stories. Our season selection process needs to be made more explicit for our audiences as well as our students. We attempt to balance our seasons according to many different criteria (what our theatre students need, style, theme, time period, genre, what our audience needs, past productions, etc.) — we need to make this thoughtful process even clearer to our constituencies.

Also, we need to make these decisions more explicit in our publicity for productions. Our department tries to communicate when a particular production contains themes or language that is challenging, but we could do more to make our prospective audience members aware of challenges. Perhaps an article or two that appears on the website and in the student newspaper before tickets

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go on sale would be helpful. We would also like to provide a "white paper" for audience members to read either before or after they attend certain productions. This short essay would develop ideas that may appear in brief in the Director's Notes in the program.

Most importantly, the embodied format of live theatre means I have to pay particular care to how I direct a production. My responsibility as a director is twofold. First, it is my responsibility to make appropriate choices for the script, actors, and audience. Last year's production of *Tartuffe* provides a clear example of the responsibility we bear as directors. One specific scene is a seduction scene

between the villain and the wife of the main character, and there are endless opportunities for how to direct it. Many productions choose to go “all out” — with overt action, actors removing clothes, and nothing left to the imagination. Dr. duToit, however, crafted the scene carefully in order to be respectful of the actors, the audience, and the intent of the script. The seduction Moliere called for was there, just in a more appropriate form. However, there is a second level of responsibility that may be even more profound. It links with the idea of a “reformed” theatre being prophetic in nature. The choices a Christian director (or actor) makes to interpret a script potentially convey a critique of the worldview of the playwright. The playwright may have intended one thing, but the choices made in production could illuminate the unintended (and undesirable) implications of that worldview. This ability is one of the ways Dordt theatre can speak distinctively about the world.

The third key idea that makes theatre necessary on a college campus like Dordt is that of empathy. I owe a great deal to Paul Woodruff’s book *The Necessity of Theater*⁵ for this point. In this book, he identifies how theatre enables us to practice empathy in unique ways. Both actors and audience members do this as a result of the theatrical experience. In order to honestly portray a character, an actor must empathize with that character. Empathy doesn’t mean that the actor must agree with that character’s decisions or actions, but it does mean that the actor must at least try to understand where the character is coming from. This “walking in another’s shoes” is excellent practice for life. Audience members are also called upon to journey with the characters. They don’t have to agree with what happens, but they should at least try to understand why it happens the way it does in a play. In our increasingly distanced world, where empathy is a skill and characteristic that is important for us to have, theatre can help us practice feeling with and for another human being.

Lastly, the idea of a “prophetic” theatre is intriguing to me and offers many possibilities for theatre on our campus and in the professional world. When I arrived at Dordt, one of the questions members of the department asked in the season selection process was, “Is this script redemptive?”

However, over the past several years, I have come to see that that question doesn’t go far enough. It is almost too narrow. Instead, I’ve begun asking myself if a particular script is “prophetic.” This question was suggested to us by our external reviewer for our recent program review, Don Yanik from Seattle Pacific University.⁵ It is one of the questions his department uses during their season selection process. A script that is “redemptive” suggests a clear response on the part of the script itself. In some ways, perhaps these kind of scripts might answer (or attempt to answer) the questions they pose. However, a script that is “prophetic” seems to allow questions to remain at the end of a production. It says something true about our broken world without needing to provide a hopeful solution. As I mentioned earlier, it is the audience’s response that provides an aspect of “redemption.” A prophetic script might not answer questions raised, might sit more uneasily, might be more of a challenge to audience members. But in the end it will provide even more possibilities for audience members to reflect and respond in varied ways. Of course, one person’s prophetic script could be redemptive to another person. One example of a script that is more prophetic than redemptive in my mind is Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*. At the end of the play, the main character Tom seems to be in the same place he was at the beginning of the play. His life seems meaningless, empty, devoid of love. Yet, as audience members reflect on the play, they can see missed chances for love along way, moments when Tom and his family could have reacted differently to each other and the world. Perhaps seeing these missed opportunities played out onstage will enable audience members to reflect on their own lives and make different choices as a result.

At several points during this section, I’ve mentioned the ideas of excellence and responsibility. Most everyone would agree that whatever work we are called to do must be done with excellence. After all, it isn’t for our glory but for our Father’s glory that we do it. I argue that the idea of excellence has another facet when it comes to theatre (and possibly other art forms as well). Frequently, I come across the idea in academic theatre that only excellent scripts must be produced (or studied). This excellence could mean that the script is particularly well-

written, achieves its purpose in outstanding ways, or captures an audience's attention particularly well. There could be lots of ways a script could be considered excellent. However, I do not agree with this idea. I argue that a script that is "flawed" in some way can be just as significant a learning experience for students, actors, and audience as one that is excellent. We sometimes learn best from our mistakes, and I believe that this principle holds true in the theatre as well. Working on a production that has structural, thematic, or characterization flaws can enable the creative team to practice creative problem-solving and come up with wonderful solutions that make a show stronger. An audience can take away something valuable from a production that contains flaws, and this helps them practice their analytical skills.

Finally, the idea of responsibility is a resounding one to me, the lynch pin on which all my work rests. I need to keep my responsibility to my students and potential audience members at the forefront of my mind. But in even larger ways, I need to remember that I am ultimately responsible to God for my work. He has called me to this profession. This profession asks me to tell stories in a powerful

way — through voices and bodies onstage, a process that carries great responsibility. I need to tell the stories responsibly, consider my audience with great thought, work carefully with my actors, and craft lesson plans thoughtfully. Such communicating takes great work, an area in which I can continue to develop.

Endnotes

1. See Jonas Barrish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981).
2. Calvin Seerveld, "Professional Giveaway Theatre in Babylon: a Christian Vocation," Keynote Address for Christians in the Theatre Arts Conference (Chicago, Illinois, June 2007), 14.
3. N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 49.
4. Dr. Simon duToit, Outstanding Scholars Advisor and Sessional Instructor in the School of Dramatic Art, University of Windsor, was Visiting Professor of Theater Arts at Dordt College, 2010-2011. He was formerly Professor of Theater Arts at Dordt College.
5. Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).