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To Be or Not to Be an Actor

by James Koldenhoven
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A speech given before the assembly of the Christian Theatre Artist Guild, April 1, 1978, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Acting has not been widely accepted in the Christian community as an honest-to-goodness profession. This is especially true in the Reformed Christian community, but also true among Christians generally. Whenever

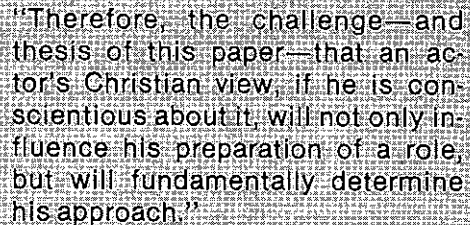
a young Christian attempts to explore the field of theatre and to contemplate acting as a profession, he meets a number of obstacles. Chief among these obstacles, is the implicit assumption that the Christian life and acting are in-

compatible.

In spite of this obstacle to acting, there are many young Christians now acting or preparing to be actors. Some of these Christians add substance to the assumption of incompatibility by adopting a very casual form of Christianity; some work hard at being Christians in their personal life and equally as hard at being professional actors, without a concern for integrating the two; and some find an acting outlet within the secluded safety of their churches. A significant number of theatre groups in North America have formed what are called "Christian theatres." They attract young would-be actors, and some of these groups are quite successful—within their own definition and purpose. The A.D. (After Dinner) Players of Houston do original pieces, much of it written and directed by Jeanette Clift George, in a dinner theatre setting. The Lamb's Players and the Covenant Players, both headquartered in California, provide troupes of touring players who do some standard morality plays and a variety of short pieces written as evangelical messages. Creation I.N.C. (In the Name of Christ), out of Ohio, does summer repertory theatre and also tours. In Seattle is Taproot Theatre Company which does "a repertoire of plays adapted from Scripture and from works generally regarded as secular," to quote the *Seattle Times* (October 1, 1977). There are any number of theatre groups associated with church-related colleges.

Almost every generalization about these groups, or about the actors in their "hire," fails to be consistent. One such generalization is that their purpose is to bring the Gospel to the public eye; however, there are too many exceptions in which the content of their repertoire is religiously secular. One might say that their expertise and training is haphazard and at best mediocre;

however, there are some (few) really talented directors in the "Christian theatre" world where an actor might receive good training.



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There are, however, two generalizations which can be made with some conviction: 1) that these "Christian theatre" groups do bring together people who are Christians, in the foundational sense of the word, to perform theatre; and 2) that none of the groups has, in a really challenging way, found out how to produce theatre and to be busy as actors out of a thoroughly religious (Christian) commitment. Therefore, the challenge—and thesis of this paper—that an actor's Christian view, if he is conscientious about it, will not only influence his preparation of a role, but will fundamentally determine his approach. The following, then, is an argument for shaping the approach to acting from a Christian point of view.

Foundations

Basic to this point of view is the Biblical idea of cultural responsibility. We are told in Colossians that through Christ all things were created, and "in

Him all things hold together.” “The earth is the Lord’s,” we are reminded in the Psalms. There is no theme in Scripture more pronounced than this: “In the beginning God created . . . and He saw that it was good.” Furthermore, there is a certainty about the creation. Even as the rainbow was for Noah and his family a symbol of God’s promise that season would follow season, that each living thing would produce after its kind, and that there is no mistaking art for economics, so also the rainbow is a guarantee that acting is serious business. Creational dependability makes cultural reality certain. And to this certainty, God calls man into responsibility. To those who would despise this responsibility, God’s response is “to laugh.” To the believer He says, “Ask of me, and I will make . . . the ends of the earth your possession.”

“Ask of me” is yet another theme found throughout Scripture. It is the covenanting relationship of God to man, and man to God. God says to man, this is my Word and my will for you and my creation. And man responds. He comes to all of mankind, whatever their calling and task, and demands a cultural product which is consistent with the intent of his creation: “that my name may be glorified.” God’s word came to Pharaoh, through Moses, demanding that Pharaoh’s slave laborers be released. “Let my people go,” was the command. It was God’s will to form a new nation. With his heart and mouth Pharaoh said “no.” Likewise, God came to the Israelites in the wilderness, again through Moses, demanding of them obedience. Repeatedly, they, too, said “no.” They, too, rebelled, and did their own thing. Culturally, they defied the living God. To the rebellion of Pharaoh and the Israelites, God responded, reciprocating, and allowed them to follow their own mischief. For their stiff-necked irresponsibility, they were

punished.

The call of Scripture, to come out and be a separate nation in theatre, is as strong now as it ever was. And to the Pharaohs of modern secular theatre, God says, “Let my people go.” God made it possible, through the creation, to do theatre, to act, to be artistic, and now he comes with his Word of expectation, his call to be busy in the world he made. He extends his covenanting love to the talented and demands of them their all, in His name. Yet, there is that gnawing suspicion among the actor’s own people, that what he does is at best play (not serious work) and at worst a violation of God’s law to man. He is caught between the Pharaohs of secularism and the Pharisees of his own community.

Against this background, magnified by a long history of secularization of theatre and acting, and a history of compromise by actors who are Christian, let us take a look at what can be done now to change the drift of things. And let us look at it from the actor’s point of view.

The Christian Actor Prepares

The most important preparation for an actor who wishes to be obedient to the call of the Lord is to become completely grounded in the meaning of cultural responsibility as found in Biblical foundations. This means, too, that he will exercise himself in a personal piety and morality; that is, he will work out a life-style which is in harmony with Scripture. He will develop his relationship with Christ as a responsible cultural agent and person, using the Scripture as his lamp, not a prop.

A second important preparation for the actor is to know where modern theatre has come from, how it was secularized while it was specialized. In

pursuit of this background, the actor will discover that theatre in the West grew up with the notion that the nearer an enactment could come to identification with actual day-to-day experience, the nearer it came to artistic perfection. This mistaken idea, about art generally and acting in particular, produced a number of unhealthy results

certain enactments of "realism" though they know such things happen daily. They have greater belief in historical fact (up to a point) than in artistic fiction. The problem does not lie with knowing at what point something may or may not be enacted on stage, but knowing whether or not one is arguing from the false premise of "realism."

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which we have loosely dubbed "realism."

Realism assumes that science and a scientific analysis of life, reproduced . . . "faithfully" in art (acting) is the foundation of art (acting). This view, rooted in Positivism, leads to all kinds of ugly and reprehensible demonstrations of gutter life and depictions of immorality. But even when the "acceptable" life is depicted, the theory about acting is still false. Acting a scene of violence or lust is no worse than acting a scene of piety or sentimentality if either of these is acted for the sake of being "faithful" to "life." The root of art and of acting is not photographic duplication, as realism would suggest. It is, on this point, interesting that many Christians will endorse the premise of realism by recommending a good story because "it really happened," while condemning

The third preparation for an actor is to become fully aware of what has happened to theatre since the rejection of realism, dating from about 1920. In this modern era of theatre, new theories have been advanced about acting by such proponents as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Julian Beck, and Jerzy Grotowski. But the grandfather of all these is Constantin Stanislavski whose influence on acting is pivotal, since all who followed him either revised or rejected his theories. And Stanislavski himself was in opposition to realism as it was known before the turn of the century.

Stanislavski objected to formula acting. Realism had come to its own in acting when Francois Delsarte, a French director, divided human experience and behavior into the physical, mental, and emotional-spiritual, and related these to

a scheme whereby he "sought to describe how the feet, legs, arms, torso, head, and every part of the body are used in communicating particular emotions, attitudes, or ideas."¹ The central difference between the approach of Delsarte and Stanislavski lies in the origin of an actor's motivation. With the formula of Delsarte the origin was external. All of it was calculation, derived from pre-digested, prescribed actions to fit categories of emotions and ideas. The actor simply matched the scene of the play to a catalogue of actions, then practiced these and committed them to memory. Stanislavski, in what has become known as "the method," put the actor in search of an "inner justification." the actor was instructed by Stanislavski to recall a personal, emotional experience which was similar to the experience of his character role in the play and then, while acting, to relive the emotional memory on stage; "He weaves the soul of the person he is to portray out of emotions that are dearer to him than his everyday sensations,"² says Stanislavski. Several of his other tenets relate to "inner justification," but he never abandoned externals entirely.

At the extreme of modern theory about acting—which, incidentally, is rooted in existential philosophy—is a theorist such as Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski's radical approach eliminates all technical-media aspects of theatre. There is no makeup, no change of costumes, no scenery, no proscenium arch, and the actors perform everything, including the music. Where Stanislavski said the actor must concentrate so as to give the "illusion of the first time," Grotowski believed it was necessary "To lead participants back into the elemental connection between man and his body, his imagination, the natural world, and the human being."³ In his own words:

One might compare this theatre to a veritable anthropological expedition. It leaves civilized territories and digs deep into the heart of the virgin forest. It renounces the clearly defined values of reason to confront the shadow of the collective unconscious. For it is in these shadows that our culture, our language, and our imagination are rooted.⁴

"Finally, when the Christian prepares as an actor, he must come to grips with the fact that his body is his instrument. Unlike the painter who uses the brush, canvas, and paint as instruments in creating a work of art, the actor uses his own body."

Actors and audience become identified as one group and together they search their inner beings for authenticity, humanity, and truth. For Grotowski there is no "as if," no illusion. Art and acting is "primal urge."

The beginning Christian actor today, unless he has prepared well, will be trained in this kind of philosophy about acting and never know its roots. He will have missed out on knowing why he is about what he is doing. And he will easily fall into one of the patterns described earlier: 1) adopt a casual, indifferent attitude towards his Christianity and pursue acting secularly; 2) work at his Christianity privately, but never let it interfere with his acting profession; or 3) find an act-

ing outlet in the security of his church.

Finally, when the Christian prepares as an actor, he must come to grips with the fact that his body is his instrument. Unlike the painter who uses the brush, canvas, and paint as instruments in creating a work of art, the actor uses his own body. Not that the actor has to be more responsible than the painter for his product. Both are accountable, and both prepare their instrument(s) well. For the actor the difference is that he cannot put his easel down at the end of a day, or like the violinist, put the instrument in its case. The actor carries his instrument with him wherever he goes.

Therefore, the actor has to prepare in a special way. He has to maintain his own identity. His research and observation for preparing a great variety of roles can easily result in role-playing off-stage, especially if he is not in the first place fully aware of who he is as a person in relationship to all aspects of living: as a parent or family member, as a church member, as a consumer. He has to know himself politically, environmentally, psychologically, emotionally, and morally. For this assurance, the Christian aspirant to acting should seek a community where these aspects of his life can be supported. It would be ideal, of course, if his professional life could also be supported by the same community.

This means, too, that the Christian actor must retain his identity on stage. With a healthy preparation of his own identity, and community support, there is no difficulty in retaining what I have called in another publication, an actor ego. This actor ego is the self which can extend itself outside of the role being played and be critical of what it sees. It not only looks at the body stance and listens to the body voice, but it views, perhaps negatively, even with disgust, the character role being played.⁵ This

dual capacity of an actor, to be both an integrated person, with his own identity, and a culprit on stage, is not only possible but necessary. The only person who can argue against such a human capacity is one who has accommodated himself to the false premises of realism, believing that what he sees on stage is the same as what he sees about him in day-to-day living.

Conclusion

Nothing has been said about the actor's hard work, the discipline of day-to-day practices in movement, voice, and interpretation. It goes without saying that these are important as an actor prepares. Nor does this presentation provide advice to the actor on how to prepare for a less-than-receptive Christian community, the very community from which he should also draw his support. My advice to a Christian actor would be: "to believe that if God has called you to be an actor, believe that he will also make it possible to be one. Perhaps you are called to be part of a new nation, as Israel was, a cultural order in which the Lord's name will be praised in theatre. It is dangerous to rebel, for you or your Christian community. But remember that you are without excuse if you have not prepared well."

Footnotes

1. Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre* (Boston, 1977), p. 422.
2. Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (New York, 1970), p. 166.
3. Brockett, p. 580.
4. Raymonde Temkine, *Grotowski* (New York, 1972), p. 78.
5. James Koldenhoven, "Actors Do Not Become Characters," *Christian Educator's Journal* (Fall, 1965), II.