
Pro Rege

Volume 4 | Number 1

Article 4

September 1975

Hold Hands and Run: Where a Christian Theatre Consortium Might Decide To Go (Part II)

James Koldenhoven
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Koldenhoven, James (1975) "Hold Hands and Run: Where a Christian Theatre Consortium Might Decide To Go (Part II)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 4: No. 1, 18 - 26.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol4/iss1/4

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Hold Hands and Run—Where a Christian Theatre Consortium Might Decide To Go (Part II)

by James Koldenhoven
Associate Professor of English



Mr. Koldenhoven has been a member of Dordt's English Department since 1963. He teaches Drama and directs the Theatre program. He holds a M.A. from the University of South Dakota and is studying in the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Minnesota. He has worked in summer stock theatre and served as a consultant for the new Te Paske Theatre in Sioux Center.

Refer to the June 1975 issue for Part I of "Hold Hands and Run."

The June issue of Pro Rege contains the first part of "Hold Hands and Run—Where a Christian Theatre Consortium Might Decide to Go." For those who might not have read Part I, or for a brief review of Part I, here is a summary.

The occasion for the address was the New World Theatre Consortium, Conference I, held at Dordt College on April 17, 1975. There were words of welcome, and a consideration of the dynamics behind the development of a theatre consortium. The statement of purpose makes

three points:

- 1) We do not by NEW WORLD mean to suggest, in name or in practice, that we will usher in a sudden and renewed form of theatre, or come to sudden and profoundly new insights regarding theatre as we know it, but that—
- 2) As a Consortium we mean to solicit each other's good will and sense of responsibility in theatre-related projections and problems, and, as Evangelical Christians renewed in Je-

sus Christ, consort for the effective renewal of our task in life; and that— 3) We should pledge ourselves to furthering, through scholarship, performance, and experiment in new forms of theatre, what we have rightfully taken as our responsibility and calling, namely theatre.

What follows is a discussion of the meaning of "religious motivations." The central argument is that all drama is religiously qualified, whether or not it is performed in church buildings or during church services. It is further argued that the essential quality of theatre, the thing that makes it theatrical, is creationally determined. In effect, the playwright-artist in responding to his calling or task brings to the final theatrical product a religious commitment which is conditioned by what he finds to exist in the universe, namely, theatrical law. The basic point to all of this is that theatre is no accident or the result of the curse on Adam and Eve; and parallel to that is the fact that theatre is serious business, coming from the heart as it does, and speaking to the heart of our humanity.

But there are problems. One of these problems is that we tend to confuse various kinds of judgement about theatre. There is the scientific judgement made largely by academicians. This judgement takes into account the history of theatre, the aesthetics of theatre, and the contemporary milieu which prompts the production of certain theatre. The popular judgement is second and refers to the critics' views on theatre as these views appear in the media. And finally, there is the judgement made by the general audience which tends to be quite pragmatic: what will the play do for me? The more pious audience asks that theatre edify, the less pious (and secular) audience that it entertain. All of these judgements and measurements for judgement are confusing, I contend, concluding Part I with a promise to sketch briefly how it is that Western society has become so confused on these questions

and so basically pragmatic. We will, therefore, proceed to the problem of confusing reality and stage illusion, and include a sketch of how things got so mixed up.

"In effect, the playwright-artist in responding to his calling or task brings to the final theatrical product a religious commitment which is conditioned by what he finds to exist in the universe, namely, theatrical law."

Both kinds of theatre (I am thinking of the Christian film for lack of examples from stage plays) depend on cliches and sensation. The entertainment theatre employs the triangular love affair, the unexpected caller, cuckolded husband or parent, unabashed young love, and a nagging wife. The edification theatre (film) employs a young Christian thrust into the world, befriending the unfriendly skeptic, illness unto death, and being alone with God. The entertainment theatre ends in a spectacle of embraces and grudging acquiescence, while the edification theatre specializes in conversion and suffering.

My point regarding the pragmatic judgement has been quite singular: that there is one audience which demands that the theatre entertain them, while the other demands that they be edified. A brief sketch of how Western society came by its pragmatic demands of theatre art will be taken up in connection with the next question regarding the confusion of reality and stage illusion.

Reality and Stage Illusion Confused

The history of this problem is a long and intriguing one, from the rise of the neo-classical ideals in theatre, to the

height of realism perhaps culminating in the French theatre of André Antoine.⁵ The development of the problem began with the reinterpretations of Aristotle's aesthetic for theatre. These reinterpretations, beginning in the Italian Renaissance and carried to the English-speaking world by Philip Sidney in the late sixteenth century, assumed and demanded of theatre a condition of verisimilitude. That is, it was assumed that what happened on the stage should look like what happened in everyday life. The "unities" of time, place, and action became theatrical dogmas, affecting almost all of Shakespeare's contemporaries, and almost all European playwrights until the nineteenth century, except Shakespeare himself. The "unity" of place, for example, demanded that there be represented on the stage a single setting, for, as the argument went, it is illogical to assume that a person can travel between countries, or cities, or even places within a city, and have an audience believe space to be so contracted.

An integrally related concept, which also underwent redefinition, was that of decorum. In its original use, decorum meant simply that material should be appropriate to the integrity of a play. For example, Horace, who first made extended use of the term, said that the role of a boy should be played by a young actor. Notice how closely this meaning of decorum is related to the consideration of verisimilitude. However, the word slowly took on moral connotations. By the time that the word decorum was used in the English-speaking world, it meant that a play should teach, that is, have an appropriate moral. As a result, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aestheticians worked out of these two concepts: verisimilitude and moral decorum. The former, it was thought, provided theatre with its ability to "delight," the latter with its ability to "instruct." This dual purpose of theatre, pragmatic as it is, and founded on the concept of verisimilitude, controlled theatre through the nineteenth century, or at least until 1850, when Richard

Wagner introduced his "Art Work of the Future," a new aesthetic. Even so, and as I have proposed earlier, the concept of entertainment vs. edification prevailed into the twentieth century and is still with us.

Several misunderstandings arise as a result of this historical development.

First, there is the notion that an audience is made up of rational and moral invalids. These invalids' sense of order and logic may be restored or improved by way of logical (realistic) theatre. Flights of fancy or disregard of the unities, it was thought, would only impair further this sickly species. With wit, therefore, and rigid application of the rules of verisimilitude, the theatre could satisfy a failing patient. His renewal was witnessed in bursts of delight. Rationality is restored! As a moral invalid, the audience had to be sheltered from bad example, while good example in theatre provided the elixir for moral health. Theatre is a teacher. Morality is secured! Writing about "sentimental comedy" of the eighteenth century, Oscar G. Brockett says: "...it was thought possible to reclaim men from vice by appealing to those virtuous human feelings that had been glossed over by thoughtless or callous behavior."⁶ Whether to delight or to teach, the assumption was that an audience is to be acted upon, changed, modified, persuaded, or convinced of something, but of nothing more than that audience already knows instinctively or rationally. People are innately good, but conditioned for evil.

A second misunderstanding, quite justifiably derived from the historical development of verisimilitude, is that what happens on stage is real life. Verisimilitude aesthetics fosters a certain wariness among theatregoers that what they see on the stage is also going on backstage. Those who misunderstand the theatre, get caught up in the myth, a by-product of realism, that all actors are fornicators and sacrilegious people. Drinking on stage means, in this view, that drinking and drunkenness are common backstage. An actor and actress who physicalize a passionate em-

brace certainly must go further when there are no eyes to see them, when there is no audience. And, finally, an actor, who, in the performance of his role, expresses his character's emotions with the enforcements of profanity and vulgarity, certainly must keep company, at least, with such

is the only way, as I see it, to avoid problems that adhere to positions of theatre-as-teacher, theatre-as-delighter, and theatre-for-the-sake-of-theatre—that theatre takes its meaning from a referential relationship to the rest of reality. Allow me to explain further.

"When one says, as I am saying, that theatre (drama) is a closed system, that it has its own government, one need not mean that theatre is an absolute sovereignty. No. There are all sorts of other systems which help to inform the progress and meaning of a given play."

vulgar and defaming people. I say there is a kind of mind set here, usually not articulated in this way, and not intellectualized. Real life is confused with the stage illusion.

These misunderstandings hardly need a full response. Once the examples are cited, there is a natural response which says that this view of the theatre is unjustified. But there is one response which I would like to detail in order to give a proper perspective in which to understand better the relationship of reality and the stage.

Bear in mind what I said earlier about theatre being distinctly theatre—like trees, rocks, and the "gameness" games—a created reality which can not be confused with anything else. It has its own organic life, ordered by the laws for theatre, which if obeyed, will be an independent, living, and artistic statement. Whatever it is that makes theatre distinctly theatre is as rightfully recognized as any other aspect of reality. Then, however, I add with great haste—and this

When one says, as I am saying, that theatre (drama) is a closed system, that it has its own government, one need not mean that theatre is an absolute sovereignty. No. There are all sorts of other systems which help to inform the progress and meaning of a given play. The system of political divine right informs Shakespeare's Richard II. The system of public opinion (news media, town meetings, and gossip) informs Ibsen's The Enemy of the People. The economic system of consumer credit informs Duerrenmatt's The Visit. And even a more abstract play, such as Beckett's Endgame, is informed by a system outside of itself as a play, namely, the system of historiography, for Hamm's sense of order centers around his desperate need to relate his "chronicle." Our experience in other created systems inform our experience in theatre, without ever becoming substitute experience for theatre.

I am always mildly disturbed when I am confronted with only these two critical questions: 1) Is an art form autonomous

(art-for-art's sake)—that is, is there an autonomous government within the way a particular play works itself out from beginning to end; and 2) Is an art form servant to our more commercial and utilitarian life systems (teach and/or delight)—that is, is a play expected to meet certain standards measurable by rules and systems outside of itself?

The theatre, it seems to me, can create a reality of its own which corresponds tenuously, though referentially, to our day-by-day world; or it can seem to be more adapting as it creates a reality which purports to be realistic. When it confuses these two (as in "Sound of Music"), or purports to be realistic when its referential system is conditioned mainly by accident and circumstance (as in most television fare), then it fails. Alexander Leggatt makes a point about the aesthetics of farce which seems apropos here, when he says that farce depends on and needs a "material half-life" and can use coincidence as its basis to produce "a level of unreality we would relish." Then he goes on to observe that as a play takes on a social seriousness it can not sustain chance and coincidence, for such an aesthetic weakens the emotional seriousness of the play.⁷

I do not mean to say that the referential relationship of theatre to day-by-day living is unimportant or that it can be dismissed. I think that it is here that my position becomes most peculiar, and I would like to think, most complementary to my Christian confession. The aesthetic system of theatre depends for its existence on the content and nature of everyday living, but its existence may not be defined in terms of living reality. I'll put it a different way: there is about theatre an organic unity which for its definition defies anything else in the creation, while theatre depends on the entire creation for its existence.

My basic plea, then, is that theatre be viewed and criticized as theatre, and that theatre receive the same creational respect that (say) chemistry gets. My

plea is that we do not let theological systems, political systems, systems of piety, economic systems, or even literary systems become the norms by which theatre is criticized or evaluated. To do differently is to dismiss Brecht's Mother Courage because our democratic political system does not approve of Brecht's referential use of a Marxist political system. To do differently is to dismiss Sartre's No Exit, because of our theological belief in the actuality of hell which Sartre uses metaphorically, mythologically, and referentially. To do differently is to leave Death of a Salesman unperformed because our personal system of piety does not allow for, even referentially, the use of profanity.

It seems to me that the neo-classical ideals based on verisimilitude, as well as a wrong concept of man and creation, have been inherited by us, probably because we failed to be good stewards and good scholars of theatre. Our public, at least, has been led to believe, probably by our own way of putting things, that theatre is a bastard art without a life of its own and a vehicle at best for instruction or entertainment. When I hear someone ask, Is it a true story? or Is the play wholesome?, I cringe, for I hear tucked away in those questions voices from the eighteenth century whose epistemology assumes a chaotic creation, and whose anthropology is built on the notion of a tabula rasa. I believe that the very order of theatre is creationally conditioned, though each play and each performance is qualified by the religious heart of the playwright and the performers and technicians who mount it. I believe that good theatre is first art and second a reflection of prevailing cultural conditions. It is not a vehicle for instruction or for entertainment, though it can probe and question certain aspects of man and his creaturely relationship to the rest of reality. I believe that we should weep for a society whose religious, moral, social, political, and economic values are in disarray, and that we should pray for those who need prayer, but I can not recommend these

same exercises for a stage play, which is first and foremost a theatrical illusion, symptomatically and referentially related to society only second, and whose fictive characters can neither sin in reality nor be redeemed in reality. To respond as if the illusion were reality would be in Hamlet's words "...all for nothing! For Hecuba" (II, ii).

There may be reasons for not performing Mother Courage, No Exit, and Death of a Salesman in a Christian community, or in a Christian college, but we have got to reject the reasons which are rooted in confusions about verisimilitude and decorum, and confusions about reality and stage illusion.

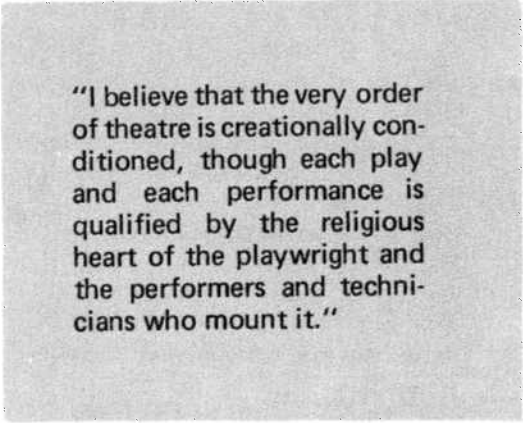
Confusions about Language, Literature, and Theatre

There have always been two extremes in theatre, theatre which is highly literary, and theatre which is mainly environment. The Greek theatre is remembered for its poetry, while the Roman theatre is remembered for its spectacle. Literary theatre tends to be contemplative and reflective; environmental theatre tends toward sensation. Caligula, a Roman emperor (12-41 A.D.), it is reported, had a play produced in which someone was actually stabbed to death, and the victim (actor) was trained to look surprised at the occasion.

In the Renaissance, liturgical plays and cycles were meant to provide visual meaning where words (Latin, e.g., in the English church) failed, while Shakespeare created some of the finest literature of all time. Throughout theatre history the mime and pantomime challenged the literary plays, and often the former were more popularly attended. An unreflecting inquirer on this point might ask why it is that only Shakespeare, Sophocles, Moliere, and Lope de Vega are remembered—all playwrights of literary skill? The answer is that records of actions and technical environment until the advent of film and video tape, have been lost, while scripted

records of theatre have been preserved. No doubt some first-rate mime groups, pantomimists, and commedia dell'arte troupes provided exquisite theatre throughout history, but we are left only with examples of literary theatre.

The caution is obvious: we should not conclude that theatre is without question propelled by language, or that language is theatre's "voice." While language is capable of providing theatre with its



"I believe that the very order of theatre is creationally conditioned, though each play and each performance is qualified by the religious heart of the playwright and the performers and technicians who mount it."

most delicate shades of referential meaning, a mime depends, referentially, on our most elementary experience. A mimist communicates effectively on two levels. At one level are the very basic life support (biotic need) reference points: eating, drinking, urinating, sleeping and dying. At the other level are common everyday (response experience) reference points which an audience understands equally well: threading a needle, picking a flower, changing a diaper, and climbing a ladder. By stringing together a combination of these, from both levels, a mimist is able to be theatrical without uttering a word. Such theatre will be rather simple, however, and remain simple, until added to it are costumes, stage setting, another actor, properties, color and lighting effects, music and sound, and finally words. When all of these are brought together, the relationships are potentially more and more involved, detailed, and subtle.

The debate over which is preminent in theatre, the words or the movement (and environment), is very old. Ben Jonson parted company with Inigo Jones when Jones' stage designs spectacularly overpowered the words of Jonson's masques. Jonson was a playwright, Jones an environmentalist. A similar separation of partners occurred in the Moscow Art Theatre (c. 1905) over a similar issue. In this instance Vsevolod Meyerhold defended the notion that the theatre should be "dematerialized" while Stanislavsky wanted the theatre to be naturalistic.

Gerald D. Parker, in my opinion, provides one of the most insightful essays on this problem in a recent issue of Modern Drama.⁸ The central argument of his essay rests on the following quotation from Hegel:

The demand of the drama, in the widest sense, is the presentation of human actions and relations in their actually visible form to the imaginative consciousness, that is to say, in the uttered speech of living persons, who in this way give expression to their action.

Parker then defends inclusion of Samuel Beckett's Endgame and Eugene Ionesco's The Chairs as being dependent upon speech, along with more conventional theatre like that of Ibsen and Chekhov. Parker's inclusion of especially The Chairs is surprising, when one examines that script. The production depends more on following stage directions than on making any kind of articulate verbal statement. The logic of language is completely abandoned by Ionesco. To this Parker says, "Ionesco's assemblages of words, his apportionment of 'speeches' governs the actor, and the overall rhythm of the play-performance, just as Ibsen's words govern his actor and the rhythm of, say Ghosts."

What Parker is doing is preparing his reader for a review of environmental theatre, from Richard Wagner to Jerzy Grotowski and his Opole Theatre Laboratory. He shows a line of development from

Wagner's aesthetics for theatre (c. 1850) to the Happening and Theatre of Celebration of today (c. 1965). The environmental theatre liberates itself from what Hegel called the "exclusive precedence of articulate poetry." As an alternative to literary theatre which finds its referential meaning in systems of conventional social identity there is offered a new kind of non-literary theatre with its manufactured environment. In modern environment theatre the aesthetic distance which normally accompanies literary theatre is diminished, even deliberately destroyed, so that communication between performers and audience is by sensation rather than words. The objective, finally, is to minimize differences between performer and audience, so that their experience will be simultaneous and communal.

Parker concludes with this warning:

Although perhaps ostensibly harmless, and aesthetically exciting, such a tendency environmental theatre has nevertheless demonstrated through history... that an aesthetic founded upon anti-intellectualism and given to the overt exploitation of sensation quite often gathers into a sinister alliance those who would genuinely experiment with art-form as artists, and those who would experiment with human nature as demagogues. Even though Grotowski, and to a lesser extent the Becks, reject much of the technologically manufactured environment, yet they too attempt, in such productions as Kordian, The Constant Prince (where the audience surrounds the action) and Mysteries and Smaller Pieces, an elimination of distance and an exploitation of bodily sensation which can come precariously close to what Northrop Fry identifies as "savagery."

I have purposely minimized references to films up to this point in my presentation,

but perhaps we can identify the kind of thing talked of here by calling attention to what film artists are attempting to do to audiences by way of mechanized environment. The recent disaster films, like Earthquake, are examples, as well as The Exorcist. Ken Russell's recent Tommy is without dialogue (all music), but propelled by scenes of "sardonic electronic nightmare" and "contemporary celebration."⁹ These films are manipulative and smack of demagoguery. I, for one, at least, feel put upon by these technical shock treatments.

This discussion of literary *vs.* environmental theatre is not intended, however, to advocate one over the other, but to establish that language is not necessarily the principal agent of action in theatre, that theatrical environment can itself be poetry, when it employs symbols, myth, rhythmic movement, repetitive sounds, the graphic arts, and other environmental elements. And this point is significant to the Christian apologist of theatre when he

"A hellish situation for the lives of the characters need not be reinforced verbally... if those working the production have provided an appropriate environment which communicates the same effect."

tries to relate his profession to his confession, his calling in life to his commitment. Perhaps the following tentative conclusions follow from this:

In the sense that stage directions and dialogue, along with decisions made by directors, producers, actors, and technicians combine for a total effect called theatre, whether of the literary or environmental tradition, we should be cautious about how much weight we give to any single aspect of a production when

referentially theatricalizing reality. Though the words of a dramatic script dictate certain inescapable actions to be enacted, meaning accrues from many other sources in the theatre. Without sacrificing artistic integrity, it seems to me, a director can have the drunken porter in Macbeth played without erotic gestures (a form of environmental savagery), while keeping the lines intact. With lighting, music, and costuming, the essential erotic mood of Desire Under the Elms might be portrayed without fondling genitals. Verbal profanity, on the other hand, and obscenities, in most cases, even in Death of a Salesman, can be excised to some degree, if the environment provides sufficient power to communicate what is cut. A hellish situation for the lives of the characters need not be reinforced verbally at every turn of events or at every whim of the playwright, if those working the production have provided an appropriate environment which communicates the same effect.

I realize that what I am suggesting here, without elaboration, is in response to certain pious sensitivities that are residual in the Christian audience and the Christian actor and actress. I do not make these suggestions, however, as I have reiterated, because acting drunkenness, physicalizing sexuality, or vocalizing profanity on stage are reality. They continue to be stage illusions. We must not confuse that issue again. I realize that I am applying an external system to the theatre, a system of piety, to condition a performance. This is not the same as judging a performance from a standard of piety. Here, then, is where I am at: 1) a theatrical performance must be organically and artistically integral, which speaks against cutting entire scenes and all "offensive language" (both outright acts of deception); 2) since theatre is an interpretive art, always reinterpreted with each new production, the religious bias of a Christian production staff has as much right to condition the interpretation as any other religious point of view does; and 3) environmental management can as effectively

as language, control the theatrical result, without changing the religious direction of the dramatic script.

Conclusions

This presentation is of necessity sketchy, touching briefly on points which I think we might want to explore over the coming years. Any one point touched on might well have become a lecture complete in itself. And, as you might have gathered, I am convinced that one of the basic points we need to explore is that regarding realism. I believe that if we can come to grips with the meaning of this mode of theatre, and what realism in theatre means, we will be better equipped to answer many questions which face us. We look to Dr. J. D. Hurrell for putting us onto the nature of this question in tomorrow's lectures.

Now as I conclude, I would like to pose the following questions. Perhaps these questions can be explored in subsequent meetings of our Consortium. The questions are:

1) If a playwright makes only referential use of our life experiences and our social systems as the substance for theatre, what are his responsibilities towards such material? Is he responsible for "realistic" use of such materials? What about sexuality, for example, which is a part of his referential experience? May he use that? How far can he go to serve his theatrical conception?

2) If a Christian argues that profane and sacrilegious language is necessary in a play because such language is "realistic," is he not arguing from a false premise? What arguments are viable for retaining profanity or obscenities in a play, or for cutting them, other than expediencies?

3) Northrop Fry says that the only thing which keeps theatre from savagery is that it is "play." If his idea of "play" is essentially the same as my idea that theatre is, at its very center, created reality (like game), does it matter so much what kind of referential materials are used to

make theatre work aesthetically? Or is nudity, for example, never available to the playwright or director as referential materials? Is there something about nudity, the sex act, and perhaps sudden conversion which are too personal to be appropriated into a living public enactment? Is there a principal here, perhaps related to the nature of privacy, which prohibits such materials from use on the public stage? Are blasphemous acts, like Foustus' pact with Mephistopheles, and blasphemous language of a similar nature theatrically?

4) How much distance is an actor or actress able to keep between his or her own life and the life or role they are to enact? Does this vary with personalities? Can acting be psychologically or confessionally damaging? Would anyone who is a Christian ever venture into environmental theatre where "aesthetic distance" is eliminated between performance and audience and between actor and performance?

5) What constitutes a good balanced program of theatre in a Christian educational institution? Are the classics still relevant? Should we disregard the current distaste for poetic and literary theatre, or include in our programs materials which cater to sensation and machine-made environments?

Footnotes

5. André Antoine in 1888 produced his own play, "The Butchers," in which real beef carcasses were hung on stage. Antoine wanted to reproduce environment in every detail in an effort to be realistically faithful.

6. Oscar G. Brockett, History of the Theatre, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Indiana, 1974), p. 224.

7. Alexander Leggatt, "Pinero: From Farce to Social Drama," Modern Drama, XVII, (September, 1974), 334.

8. Gerald D. Parker, "The Modern Theatre as Autonomous Vehicle," Modern Drama, XVI, (December, 1973), 373-391.

9. Time, March 31, 1975, p. 56.