Letter to the Editor: A Response to Dr. Teresa TerHaar’s “The Task and Role of Theater”

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Dear Editor,

Thanks to you and to Dr. Teresa Ter Haar for publishing the article “The Task and Role of Theatre” (Pro Rege 42.3 [March, 2014]). The issues that Dr. TerHaar addresses are as ancient as Plato and Aristotle and as contemporary as yesterday’s mail (Pro Rege arrived yesterday). The issues have lasted so long and continue to hit with such insistence because they are important. I’m grateful for the discussion.

First of all, thanks to Dr. TerHaar for her thoughtful analysis of the role of theatre in the life of Dordt College. From the opening line, TerHaar, without flinching, takes on the questions with which James Koldenhoven, Verne Meyer, Michael Stair, Simon DeToit, John Hofland, Jerelyn Schelhaas (and doubtless several others) have struggled throughout Dordt’s history with theatre.

I’m writing from a distance and have not had the pleasure of being involved with Dordt’s theatre for many years. I also regret to say that I have not seen any of Dordt’s main stage or black box shows for a dozen years, so I really don’t have any worthy clout to bring to this discussion, other than being a “used to be” around Dordt’s theatre. I don’t know much about the current controversy that gave rise to Dr. TerHaar’s article, but I will endeavor to make a few general observations and then respond to some points in the article.

The article and the apparent controversy surrounding it are yet another chapter in Protestantism’s uneasy history with the theatre. If there is any comfort to be gained from being embroiled in a controversy that is several centuries old, let us have it here. Protestants—and especially we pietistic varieties of that movement—have been at this discussion for many, many years. Once we

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got over the idea that acting itself is a sin (I paraphrase the English Puritan Oliver Cromwell and later Reformed thinkers, even the CRC Synod of 1928, here)—“because one’s own sins are already quite enough to deal with, it is unthinkable to take on another’s guilt through play acting”—and now that we are largely comfortable with the possibility that art and entertainment might have a place (maybe not yet a respected place—we’re working on it) in the Christian life, we now at Dordt find ourselves in our fourth or fifth decade of dealing with the harder questions: play choice, rough and sometimes profane language, discomfiting actions, and the “in your face” (Dr. TerHaar got it exactly right) character of theatre as an art form. I say these more recent questions are harder because they, like so much of our Christian lives, involve making close calls, weighing worthy evidence, and making tough decisions that impact many people. The days of our solving these kinds of discussions by stopping by and mouthing a proof text (i.e. Philippians 4:8) are long over. By the way, if the person who delivered God’s Word to Dr. TerHaar in such a withering way is reading this letter, that person should read the book of Judges or the books of the Kings, or think on Jesus’ parable of The Good Samaritan and imagine those scenes with the violence and discomfiting material taken out!

That said, I hope Dr. TerHaar will forgive me for putting words in her mouth, but it seems that in her article she is asking such recurrent questions as,

- “Is there room in the kingdom of God for mere entertainment?” She answers, “No,” and I believe she is right. Without much thought, we in contemporary Western culture have allowed our entertainment to occupy an overriding place in our lives. We ignore the power of its various means of delivery and to our peril pretend that our shows and our diversions are merely ways to relax. Plato was right: careless indulgence of our whimsy can do us great damage.

- “How can actors possibly avoid adding to their own sin by trying to make believable someone else’s sin?” TerHaar nicely shows how Dordt, in its training of actors, helps them see that acting is not a matter of doing the impossible—“becoming” someone else—but is rather, through study and craft and imagination, the representation of another person—a character.

- “By staging an earnest telling of someone else’s troubled story, ‘warts and all,’ do we not give such a story public legitimacy? Doesn’t telling a tawdry tale somehow allow tawdry behavior?” Here, TerHaar shows that staging a story that features someone’s problems does not endorse the problem any more than reading about the troubles in the newspaper.

- And, she rightly shows that if Dordt is to be a liberal arts college that responsibly deals with the troubled world in which the electing God has placed us, then the classroom, the field, the court, the auditorium, and the stage are the venues in which we can (and must) examine such approaches to life from our Reformed and Christian point of view.

I am grateful. Dr. TerHaar shows that theatre is a wonderful, divine gift that has singular strengths for communication and meaningful (if not always so pleasant) engagement with the human story.

At risk of oversimplification of TerHaar’s fine essay, I will summarize my reaction to it as follows: Theatre at Dordt has a stormy past, a tension-filled present, and (as always) an uncertain future. TerHaar’s opening sentence, “Does Dordt want to be a ‘home’ for theatre?” alarmed me a little in that it sets a confrontational tone for the rest of the article. It is a good question, but I would prefer that she had asked it in a way that more relates to the title of her article. Perhaps something like this: “If there is a task and role for theatre at Dordt College, how might we describe it?”

TerHaar is right when she claims divine calling to practice the theatrical arts. In some previous times, the Christian church and God’s people have decreed that theatre and film and visual storytelling are so beyond the capabilities of God’s renewing power that we’d do best just to leave them to the devil. But TerHaar, along with Calvin Seerveld, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Cornelius Plantinga, N. T. Wright, and many other Christian thinkers, insist that even this dangerous and always fractious area
of the creation needs loving, courageous, and careful attention.

A point that calls me to challenge Dr. TerHaar is her assertion that this divine calling insists that she “… tell everyone’s stories, to give voice to the voiceless ….” My response to this point at first seems frivolous and springs entirely out of the bald pragmatics of the thing. Truthfully, there are not enough minutes or weeks or years in a series of lifetimes to tell everyone’s stories. Setting that obvious impossibility aside, my problem with the statement relates to more than the blatant surface of the claim. The social worker or the public defender or the political scientist might be called to tell such comprehensive stories, but really such telling is the calling of the very few. The artist who tells stories is rather called to tell stories. Whether one is Jane Austen telling the stories of the aristocracy of 18th-century England or Bob Dylan telling the story of the forgotten Rubin Hurricane Carter, artists who tell stories tell them because they are good stories, with maybe a handful of interesting characters, not because there are voiceless people who have no one to be their teller.

Dr. TerHaar sounds as if she disparages “safe” choices in play and artistic selection. Again, let me nudge a historical perspective on this. Dr. TerHaar is a historian of the theatre and knows better than most Pro Rege readers that the relative safety of a story has always been an important question in every context in which stories are told. Some stories are so safe that they fail to lay claim to our attention. A story with no risk bores us and cannot even be called a story. A story must have conflict, and conflict—when truly considered—is not safe; whether comedy or tragedy, every story tells of someone getting damaged.

Story and theatre also run the risk that troubled Plato and a lot of theatre censors since him. Plato thought poetry and theatre would bring the end to seriousness, to piety, and to fruitful debate and conversation. Nearly the same sort of thing has happened throughout history up until the present day. I confess that I’ve been known to sometimes join in the fretting about where the world is heading. Largely that is because safety (as in conventional morality) is still a big issue in the art and entertainment world, but now it is seen as a standard to avoid. “More danger—more better,” almost always wins the gig and the contract.

As in other periods of history, we are in a protracted phase when pushing the lines of safety and comfort ever outward to the ever more disturbing reaches has become the artist’s chief task, rather than creating art that blesses through beauty or through honesty or through confrontation. If something is not nouveau or edgy or doesn’t force the viewer to pull back a corner and peer into the dark recesses of the psyche, it gains little respect from the critics, the academy, or the market place.

What I am seeing too much of in Dr. TerHaar’s article is high regard for that edgy and provocative task of theatre (she calls it “prophetic”). While the article leaves room for some light and winsome theatrical fare, it seems to be most intent on building a case for edging ever closer to ponder the dark recesses rather than to a sense of service for the purpose of blessing. Blessing is one thing that I am missing in the article. Granted, apart from the Bible, “blessing” is a smarmy-sounding word, but when we see it in the light of God’s blessing in Genesis 1:28, “blessing” becomes nothing less than the Umbilicus Urbis Deo, by which the nurture of the Lord of heaven and earth is transferred to the city of God’s people.

Dr. TerHaar’s article also contains a good deal about the responsibility she feels as a practitioner of theatre, as an artist, and as an educator. She writes, “Finally, the idea of responsibility is a resounding one to me, the lynch pin on which all my work rests.” [my emphasis]. She feels this responsibility to the students, the audience, the art form, the college, herself, and God. This sense of duty is—of course—laudable; it is hard for a Calvinist to take issue with such a thing! However, I see Dr. TerHaar adopting—in this pivotal sense of responsibility and in the middle of a clearly controversial context—a stance that seems more inward and
personally driven than what I hope to see in such a critical role as hers. She seems to me to be defending turf rather than seeking serviceable insight. From the way Dr. TerHaar writes the whole of the rest of this article and the wisdom she brings to the enterprise of theatre in such a setting as Sioux Center and Dordt College, I think the more expansive and visionary notions of theatre for God’s kingdom and his people’s blessing will prove more fruitful. Obviously, serviceable insight and a high sense of personal responsibility are not mutually exclusive. The matter is more one of degree and emphasis.

Also, I don’t share Dr. TerHaar’s preference for the word “prophetic,” as opposed to “redemptive,” to best describe the role and task of theatre at Dordt College. If redemptive insists on a happy or hopeful ending with all the questions neatly tied up so that we can go home feeling safe, then I do believe that what Dr. TerHaar says is right. But that is hardly what “redemptive” means. I look at the entire Bible, “warts and all,” as redemptive. The Bible is the history of redemption. The aforementioned books of Judges and the books of the Kings and every other jot and tittle of the Scriptures are redemptive. Each bit shows us our need of the new creation. Often—but not nearly so often as we like to think—the Bible does answer questions and point forward with joy and eager anticipation to the greatness beyond. But that joy and blessed hope—all of it—happens in the context of our great need for it. Exposing that great need of ours is where storytelling best serves us. Whether it be farcical or witty comedy, sentimental melodrama, or Willy Loman’s tragic howl and act of despair at the end of The Death of a Salesman, theatre that shows us that our present state of being is simply not enough and cannot sustain us is, in every sense of the word, “redemptive.”

I have one last challenge to pose to Dr. TerHaar and The Task and Role of Theatre. Her penultimate paragraph seems to build a case suggesting that it serves the task and role of theatre to deliberately choose “flawed” material for production. I assume this means only on relatively rare occasions. But even so, how can this be? I do not understand the point. She writes, “We sometimes learn best from our mistakes, and I believe that this principle holds true in the theatre as well.” My experience with theatre has been that even in the very best of material, there will be more than enough mistakes and flaws to satisfy all who are on the lookout for flaws (Ah, critics!). The problems of staging a play, whether a timeless classic or a contemporary splash, are so great that our actors, our audiences, and all others concerned will have little trouble finding the imperfect to ponder.

Perhaps this openness to “flawed material” indicates that Dordt’s theatre department is open to providing a venue, or assistance, or even full partnership in which new and untested material is given a platform. I fully endorse this position. A theatre department with a Reformed vision such as the one at Dordt ought to solicit and then provide an eager welcome to all who would dare to submit new material. Such a thing involves notes saying, “Thank you for the submission of _______ for our consideration. We are blessed that you are writing and seeking partnership in furthering God’s kingdom through our unique way of telling stories. At present, we cannot produce your play. We find ______ and ______ as problems with your script, and so we must decline. We are grateful for the obvious effort you put into this play. Feel free to try us again.”

In summation, I am a preacher as well as a person of the theatre, and I draw a hard line between sermons and plays. A hopeful ending to a play is a delight when it is done well. But a play does not have to be like a sermon in that all ends well. In my mind and by my training, a sermon is a proclamation of the gospel and thus must nearly always end with the hopeful notes of Christ’s present all-sufficiency, his imminent return, or the eventual fullness of his new creation. Even when such precious things make it into a sermon only as a postscript, they ought to be there. The calling of sermons is to tell the good news. God gives sermons to us to answer our deepest questions and to give hope to our deepest longings. (It’s Jesus.)

Plays and other efforts of artistic storytelling have a different—and similarly lofty—calling. Dramatists (and their audiences) have the rigorous task of insisting that their mediums ask the important hard questions so that we might struggle with them in the immediate ways that few other telling
modes can provide. The best plays and movies that I have seen are the ones that kept me guessing and probing for days. I wish it happened at the closing credits of every film or after the curtain call of every play (it hasn't), but sometimes I have sat in a theater or a movie house and scarcely dared to breathe, lest I lose the importance of what just happened. I think it is to such theatre that Dr. TerHaar aspires, as have many other Christian theatre directors and educators. Sometimes these sorts of epiphanies happen elsewhere, but the “in your face” character of visual storytelling in film and especially in theatre so frequently puts me in such a hush that I join the stubborn advocates calling for fearless, earthy, full, and God-glorifying theatre at Dordt College.

Finally, this sort of struggle, this searching, is the reason that I believe God calls us to be where we are. As Dr. TerHaar has shown in her article, this way is full of peril and controversy but is also full of promise and hope. For directors and actors and technicians and audience members, our love of the search in spite of the unknowable matters, and the frequent discomfort of recognizing ourselves in some unsavory characters is why God has placed us, too, within The Story.

Again, thank you to Dr. TerHaar. In her article she voices several times a willingness to grow and a recognition of things that can be done to help the entire process of producing important theatre for the Dordt community (white papers for the audience, good articles on web pages, better communication with prospective student actors, etc.). Such openness is a wonderful sign of the sort of servant leader that makes Dordt a great college.