

Theatre Is Religion

Written by
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At the beginning of a recent introduction to theatre course, one of my general education students posed the question, "Is theatre an art or is it just entertainment?" In its naïve way, this query raised a broader question, one that has been asked and answered repeatedly ever since Socrates: Just what is theatre, any way? How we answer this question impacts the way we think about theatre and the way we practice it. I'd like to propose an answer.

Before doing so, however, I'd like to point out that this question doesn't seem to trouble my colleagues in the "pure" arts—visual art and music. Oh, they may wonder where art ends and craft begins, but what art itself is doesn't come up. No one, for instance, asks if art is really a form of poetry or if it, instead, is a kind of music. At least not until words become a part of the visual or aural artifact. Then it becomes a problem. Which may suggest that theatre's constant identity crisis may come from theatre's hybrid nature.

Regardless of the reason for the persistent question which seems to side-step any permanent solution, I would like to argue that theatre is religion and that it is as religion—not as poetry, rhetoric, or entertainment but as religion—that theatre is best understood, practiced, and criticized.

Before developing this thesis, I'd like to survey, briefly, other answers that have been given to the question of theatre's identity. Aristotle, to begin with, considered theatre to be a form of poetry. Productive as this concept was for those of us who make it our business to analyze scripts, it led Aristotle (and his disciples) to separate the dramatic and theatrical elements of the art to the considerable disadvantage of the latter. His statement that "Spectacle . . . of all the parts [of drama] is the least artistic"¹ continues, understandably, to offend designers, technicians, directors, and actors and to embarrass those of us who otherwise admire Aristotle.

Horace further fouled the waters by his *utile dulce* formula that set theatre wobbling unsteadily on the two legs of rhetoric and entertainment, two legs that seem eternally bereft of a

¹ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 64.

unifying pelvis. The idea that theatre exists to teach and to please raises more problems than it solves: What does theatre teach, and how does it do so? Does a play exist for its themes? Because of them? And how does theatre entertain? And is entertainment—diversion—a worthy goal?

Medieval and early renaissance theorists, balancing precariously on one of Horace's legs, treated theatre as a subspecies of rhetoric. In this understanding, theatre's message was usually perceived in discursive, moralistic terms, and the message came to be valued over—and at the expense of—the medium. It would eventually become the fate of Thomas Rymer and his fellow neo-classicists to demonstrate—by their insistence upon the rhetorical nature of drama—how ridiculous this viewpoint could be.

The nineteenth-century realists reconceptualized theatre as science—a branch of sociology, medicine for human society. In their pursuit of medicinal theatre they attacked middle-class values and raised the fourth wall between the stage and the auditorium, with the result that they alienated their primary audience and drove them into the open arms of movie producers.

Meanwhile, Americans opted for Horace's other leg and pursued theatre as commercial entertainment. By so doing, we made escapism a virtue and treated theatre as a market commodity rather than an art form.

None of these understandings of theatre—as poetry, as rhetoric, as entertainment, education, scientific investigation, or industry—provided a suitable basis for the understanding, practice, and criticism of theatre. Realizing that theatre is actually religion does provide such a basis.

Let me explain what I mean by "religion." Simply defined, religion is the creation and reenactment of myth for the purpose of realizing—in both senses of that word as "perceiving" and "making actual"—and celebrating the relationship of human beings with supra-human, spiritual forces. In this sense, the human endeavor we call "religion" parallels two other major human endeavors—work and philosophy. Each of these three endeavors, philosophy, work, and religion, contribute importantly to human life. Philosophy (in both its pure form and its younger incarnation as science) understands and explains nature and human experience; work

manipulates nature and creates and distributes goods; and religion relates human beings to spiritual forces beyond their control.

A word about those super-human, spiritual forces: They certainly include the deity or deities, those spiritual personages or forces that transcend time and space. But they should also be understood as including more temporal and immanent entities such as the *Zeitgeist*, the organizational power we call natural law, the world-wide network of consciousness that Teilhard de Chardin called the *nousphere*, and perhaps even national and ethnic "spirits" such as "el Raza." These forces form the context for our lives, and from the beginning of human consciousness we have used religion to relate to them. For some two thousand years, we've used theatre as a tool in this religious endeavor.

Religion works by creating and reenacting myths. Myths, very simply, are the complex of what we know and believe about ourselves and our world, perceived and expressed as stories. Because they capsule our understanding of ultimate reality, myths—far from being untrue fables—are essentially true. As Christopher Vogler put it in his *Writer's Journey*, "A myth, as Joseph Campbell was fond of saying, is a metaphor for a mystery beyond human comprehension. It is a comparison that helps us understand, by analogy, some aspect of our mysterious selves. A myth, in this way of thinking, is not an untruth but a way of reaching profound truth".²

We honor the level of truth in myths by calling them "sacred"—not because they are connected with any specific, formal religion, because they need not be so connected, but because they penetrate to the heart of what we know and believe. As philosopher of religion Mircea Eliade wrote, "Myth narrates a sacred history [M]yth . . . becomes the exemplary model for all significant human activities The myth is regarded as a sacred story, and hence a 'true history,' because it always deals with realities".³

And while myths may be communicated through narration, formal religions have typically communicated them most characteristically by reenacting them. Whether these reenactments are as simple as a Baptist communion service, as stylized as a Catholic high mass, as imitative as a Native American hunting dance, as sensuous as a Canaanite fertility ceremony,

² Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese, 1992) vii.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 5, 6.

or as violent as a Santeria sacrifice, they underline the basic dramatic nature of myth. Judaistic scholar Raphael Patai wrote: "Myths are *dramatic* stories that form a sacred charter either authorizing the continuance of ancient institutions, customs, rites, and beliefs . . . or approving alterations".⁴ (Emphasis added.)

So, to recapitulate: Religion relates us to the supra-human forces that surround us by creating and reenacting myths. Theatre, no matter how "secular" its content, is in this sense of the word, religion.

The many parallels that exist between theatre and formally practiced religion justify considering theatre as religion. To begin with, theatre has all the parts of religion. At the core of formal religions lies the cultus, the system of religious performance. The cultus reenacts the myth through words or *liturgy* and actions or *ritual*. The personnel who execute the cultus, the *clergy* or *priests*, frequently wear specific clothing to emphasize their function (*vestments*), and use various objects to perform the rituals—vessels, symbolic weapons, wands, censers, candles, and the like. The priests execute the cultus on behalf of, and frequently in the presence of members of the community, the *worshippers*. And the cultus typically takes place in a sacred space constructed or at least enhanced for the purpose, the *temple*.

It takes no mental leap to find each of these elements present also in theatre. The myths executed in the theatre take the form of plays, and they are performed through spoken word and action—dialogue and business—,which parallel religious liturgy and ritual. In place of clergy, the theatre uses actors who wear the vestments we call costumes and utilize props in place of the tools of religious ritual. The whole performance takes place in the presence of, and on behalf of a community, the audience, and typically occurs in a theatre specifically constructed for the purpose—the temple of this religious endeavor.

As the myths are central to religion, so plays are central to theatre, and further, the manner in which plays come into being parallels the creation of myth in religion. Religious myths—as well as liturgy and rituals—are created, imported, lost, phased in and out, and modified. While this mobility of myth may be less apparent in religions of the book like Judaism, Islam, and Christianity it nevertheless functioned in them at pre-written stages. And even these religions whose basic myths are frozen in scriptures constantly reinterpret them in

⁴ Raphael Patai, *Myth and Modern Man* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972) 2.

the oral retelling. In a similar manner, each season of theatre creates new plays while borrowing, reviving, reinterpreting, and laying aside others. In both theatre and religion, the principles that govern the interplay of inertia and change in material are the same—the received tradition and the current needs of the community.

Which brings us to the matter of the community: Like religion, theatre is practiced in a community for a community. Rarely in either religion or theatre does the entire population of an area attend the reenacted event; but those who do attend come out of the larger community, bring with them a consciousness of the larger community, and return to the larger community where, subtly or overtly, they share the effect of their participation in the cultic event. Just as religion typically requires or implies the presence of worshippers, so theatre requires the simultaneous presence of performer and audience.

The degree to which the laity actually participates in the cultic event—whether in formal religion or in theatre—shifts depending on the time, the place, and the culture. Worshippers in present day charismatic, African-American congregations contribute significantly to their services both vocally and physically, while medieval Catholics might step into the church only momentarily to observe the Elevation of the Host before going on about their business. Elizabethan audiences participated enthusiastically in the presentational plays they attended, but neoclassicism and realism diminished audience participation by eliminating asides and soliloquies and by establishing the fourth wall convention. But regardless of the nature of lay participation, theatre parallels religion in the importance the community plays in the artistic event.

Furthermore, theatre, like religious cultus, always takes place in the present. In religious worship, the point of the liturgy and ritual is to reenact the myth in such a way that it becomes part of the worshippers' current experience. In similar fashion, regardless of the time frame of the events portrayed on stage, the audience perceives them as occurring in the present. As Susanne Langer pointed out, theatre differs in this respect from fiction: In reading a novel—even one written in the present tense—we perceive the events as having taken place in the past.⁵ Theatre has a religious immediacy. It should not be surprising, then, when plays that

⁵ Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribner's, 1953) 306-325.

deal with formal religious content, such as the medieval cycle plays, use anachronism to reinforce the audience's experience of the myth as current event.

Of course, theatre often protests against community standards, the status quo, and the gods themselves. This antagonistic stance, particularly evident over the past hundred and fifty years, might lead some to question the idea that theatre serves religion's purpose of relating human beings to superhuman forces. In fact, however, the range of attitudes in theatre from celebratory joy to hostility are also found in formal, sectarian religions. Just as in religion, relating doesn't necessarily mean pious resignation, so in theatre the relationships fostered may have considerable variety. Relationships with God validated by religion include protests against the divine and attempts to manipulate God. To take just two samples from the Judeo-Christian tradition with which I'm most familiar: Job protests against God, "What do I do to you, you watcher of humanity? Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you?"⁶ And Jesus cries out from the cross in the words of the Psalmist, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"⁷ So Gloucester's declaration, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods/They kill us for their sport"⁸ sets Shakespeare's *King Lear* squarely in the tradition of religion's dialogue with the divine.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly of all these observations of theatre's religious characteristics, the experience of theatre is similar to the mystical experience of religion. The practice of religion may result for the worshipper in ecstasy, insight (epiphany), inspiration, attachment to the community, or a sense of apotheosis. Or as Stanley Kauffmann said in a recent cinema review, sometimes religion simply comforts the worshiper: "As writers on religion have often noted, the very form of religion itself, apart from its content, is a solace, a surety".⁹

In theatre, we bundle together all of those same psycho-emotional impacts under the word we borrow from Aristotle, "catharsis." Theatrical catharsis and the mystic experience of

⁶ Job 7:20.

⁷ Matthew 27:46.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV,1.

⁹ Stanley Kauffmann, "Profane Rites," *The New Republic* December 11, 2000: 24.

religion are practically indistinguishable. Perhaps Lenora Inez Brown put it best in an article in *American Theatre*:

"I've always believed that religion and theatre have an almost interchangeable effect on the soul. When a play or production works, and I mean *really* works, one's spirit is uplifted and all that is confused seems clearer. Call it a cliché, but the experience of great theatre is religious. Characters speak to you—to the deepest part of your soul—and somehow the words make it easier to face the troubles of life and appreciate the happy moments more deeply."¹⁰

To summarize, then, theatre shares with religion the same kinds of accoutrements, the same approach to the creation and modification of myth, an identical setting in community, a similar immediacy, a parallel scope of attitudes toward superhuman forces, and an identical effect on its devotees. It is time we acknowledge the breadth and depth of these similarities by declaring, yes, theatre *is* religion.

Viewing theatre as religion will affect the way we think about theatre, the way we practice it, and the way we evaluate it. This viewpoint calls for a more holistic theory, practice, and criticism of theatrical art.

To begin with, accepting theatre as religion can enliven theatre theory. The pursuit of cross-disciplinary studies of theatre and religion will stimulate clearer understandings of both partners in the endeavor. For instance, the mystical experience in religion and the artistic experience in theatre may help explicate each other. Aristotle's *katharsis*, Abinavagupta's *rasa*, and Zeami's *yugen* each have both theatrical and religious overtones that would best be investigated by scholars conversant with both the art form and theology.

Furthermore, attention to the formal study of religion can help explicate theatre. Some aspects of theology that might be especially productive to apply to theatre include the theory of myth, the study of religious ceremony or "liturgics," and psychology and sociology of religion. In particular, theatrical design, an area which theorists have been all too willing to delegate to

¹⁰ Lenora Inez Brown, "Writing Religion: Is God a Character in Your Plays?" *American Theatre* 17:9 (November 2000): 29.

practitioners, might become an exciting area for theoretical investigation if studied in combination with religious iconography.

Another area of fruitful interdisciplinary enquiry would be the comparative study of formal religions and their related theatrical expressions. A fair amount of this has already been done—such as V. A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi*—but scholars able to combine theatrical acumen with a theological depth will find much left to be accomplished.

Turning from interdisciplinary endeavors to focus solely on the art form, the religious identification of theatre should impact the way theatre theory is pursued. For instance, just as religion ought not be studied in isolation from its worshippers, so theatre theory must include theatre participants including both producers and audience members. This viewpoint calls into question the limited internal dramatic focus advocated by the New Criticism and radical "Aristotelians." In particular, the community in which theatre is practiced, its relationship to its theatre, and what it stands to get from a given play—these are valid and necessary areas of inquiry.

Considering theatre as religion adds support to the openness theatre theorists have evidenced toward new theatrical modes. Just as religions must tolerate and dialogue with their heresies or atrophy, so must theatrical orthodoxy accept and dialogue with new artistic perspectives and approaches such as postmodernism, feminism, and performance art.

Furthermore, theatre theorists should seek models for dramatic theory in religion. Just as the poetic identification of theatre led theorists to focus on internal dramatic structures, and just as the rhetorical concept of theatre focused on effectiveness of message conveyance, so the religious nature of theatre should yield productive models for understanding the nature of dramatic art.

Finally, realizing theatre's identification with religion may provide insights into other art forms and their relationship to theatre. For instance, does this religious connection also apply to cognate arts such as dance and film? Is music religion in the same sense as theatre? What about visual art? In my viewpoint, the idea "theatre is religion" doesn't necessarily transfer to "cinema is religion." This observation suggests that understanding theatre as religion may help further clarify theatre's essence and relation to cinema. It may, for instance, give new overtones to Grotowski's idea that the essence of theatre lies in the actor-audience connection.

In addition to having implications for theory, understanding theatre as religion can have an impact on the practice of the art. For instance, this viewpoint suggests that theatre practitioners are priests. In European theatre, consciousness of the sacral nature of acting pretty well vanished with the demise of Servants of Dionysus. Recapturing this concept would bring a new element to actors' self-concepts, to their understanding of their relationship to their audience, and to their perception of their art form. It seems to me that these shifts might in turn result in new ways of approaching the actor's self-development, techniques of characterization, management of the performer-audience connection, and even career building. I believe the concept of acting as a vocation—a calling—differs significantly and positively from thinking of acting as a passion or obsession, trade or way of making a living. And what applies to actors in this regard also fits their fellow artists from designer to director to technician.

Furthermore, just as liturgy, ritual, architecture, visual and aural elements, priest, and laity are inseparable and equally validated in religious practice, so the work of playwright, director, actor, designer, and technician become equally important in theatre practiced as religion. This viewpoint brings a new holistic vision to all elements of theatre praxis.

The concept of theatre as religion also can impact the work of theatre's front-of-house personnel. Just as formal religion seeks to incorporate all members of the community where it is practiced, so it becomes crucial to bring marginalized segments of society into the theatre partly in order to enrich the participating community and art form and partly in order to extend the benefits of theatre to new audiences.

And finally, in addition to theory and practice, the concept of theatre as religion has implications for criticism. What makes a good play? To begin with, a play is better when it eschews diversion and instead pursues its true purpose. The best theatre is not escapism any more than the best religion is an opiate. Instead, the best theatre is a tool for introspection, for relating the audience member to a community, for clarifying for audiences their relationship to God, the world, the way things are. And the best critic doesn't just ask if the script was well constructed, the directorial concept inventive, the acting believable, or the design coordinated but rather did the play serve its proper religious purpose of relating human beings to themselves, their community, their culture, and the forces beyond their control.

Specifically, it seems to me that critics should ask if a play uses ritual effectively. If theatre is religion, if scripts are myths, if a production is cultic, an act of worship, then the best

plays embody and use ritual. The point of ritual is to involve the audience at a level beyond rationalization, a level that involves cognition, rational processes, feelings, lusts, and needs but that engages all of these in an experience that can best be described as spiritual. A good play arouses reason, emotion, and hunger in a manner that causes these faculties to transcend themselves. Indeed, a play may arouse reason, emotion, and hunger only to frustrate them and deny their fulfillment in order to tease and drive them into the realm of the ineffable, into a truly spiritual experience, the ultimate goal of art. Does the play transcend commonplace imitation in such a way that raises the experience to the level of the spiritual? The best critics address this question.

To conclude: Unlike its sister "pure" arts such as music, painting, and sculpture, theatre has usually been considered as poetry, rhetoric, or entertainment. None of these analogous disciplines adequately, holistically deal with theatre. Religion provides the best system for understanding, practicing, and responding to theatre.

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