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The Theatrical Process As Priestly Oblation: Teaching and Doing Theatre "Christianly"

by

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At the beginning of this paper I offer the following caveat: I have framed the activity of doing theatre within a priestly framework. I believe the ideas expressed work, even if the implicit sacramentality of the "Priestly Oblationary" conceptualization is not an acceptable "framework" for many people. I find the less specialized first and third of the following definitions of "oblation" to be more helpful (in thinking about the oblationary conceptualization of theatre's process) than the more formal and functional focus of the second definition.

Oblation:

1. The act of offering something, such as worship or thanks, to a deity.
2. Oblation.
 - a. The act of offering the bread and wine of the Eucharist.
 - b. Something offered, especially the bread and wine of the Eucharist.
3. A charitable offering or gift.

I do not mean this paper to be prescriptive. I do mean it as an affirmation of what I try to do, and what I think we, as persons of faith who feel called to teaching and doing theatre, try to do. I have sought more to affirm than to criticize. I have also sought to affirm those who have gone before us and walked along side us, those who have lovingly tried to teach us by their work, by their vision, by their willingness to "dance in relationship" with us. They have done this while incarnationally going through the wonder-filled and horror-filled process of offering up all the persons involved in a production as would a priest, for the building up of the eventual Community of God.

The caveat is done. Thank you, Wayne and Anne, for doing this for those of us on this panel, and for those many others over the past 55 years whom we represent.

In this prologue there are just two principles which need to be stated. I quote from Wayne's book *Building the Bridge: Between Theater and Theology*: "One is a theological principle: Persons matter. The other is an artistic principle: artistic standards matter. Each serves the other. Each is operative all the time."¹ Put in my own slightly different phraseology it may be less directly stated, but is at least more verbose. In teaching and doing theatre religiously, or "Christianly" if you will, two principles are critically important. The first is that the artistic and personal process we go through with persons matters. And the second is like unto the first: the artistic and personal product we present through and for persons matters, and further; both will be significantly affected by the way we think and act about each, and by the way we are willing to work to accomplish each.

In light of these two principles I will explore some of the ramifications of:

The Theatrical Process as Priestly Oblation:
Teaching and Doing Theatre "Christianly"

The prologue is now history. The body begins. The Anglican theologian Robert Farrar Capon has, among his many books, written a theological trilogy *The Romance of the Word: One Man's Love Affair with Theology*. In the second book of this trilogy, *An Offering of Uncles: The Priesthood of Adam and the Shape of the World*, Father Capon suggests: "The placing of the first human being(s) in paradise (the word meant 'park,' and *Eden* meant 'pleasure') was the hint that Adam (and Eve) was (were) to be nothing less than the priest(s) of creation, the beholder(s)

¹ Unpublished manuscript. 1992, Berkeley, California.

and offerer(s) of its meaning." He further observes that: "History has been our glory, and history has been our shame, but the shaping of creation into the City of God remains our obsession. The Mystical Body is the point of our being."²

The Truth of Adam's and Eve's original calling -- their vocation was and is the same as ours today: to shape creation, or a theatrical imitation of that creation, into the City, or the Kingdom, or as I prefer to call it the "*Community of God*." Our progenitors' original "fall" removed them from the paradisiacal garden, (and we remain somewhat *East of Eden* still) but their calling and ours has remained the same: to be priests who reshape the world we find ourselves in into the Community of God, or to transform the world we receive into the eventual Paradisiacal Mystical Body, or community of God. The Hebrew call to "Repair the World" has been the watchword since that original refusal, and loss, of mutual relationship in the *illud tempus*, -- in that time of Genesis, that time of beginnings. In their own ways various theatre artists may be responding to the call to "repair", or *transform* the world through offering it up in oblation into becoming the *Community of God*.

As theatre artists, I believe one of the best ways we can transform our world is through the way we do our artistic work. As we go about our theatrical calling we must pay attention to the process as well as the product of that calling. Father Capon again states that

It is in the arts . . . that we most display our priestliness. . . . Each (artist) is engaged in an offering of things not simply for personal benefit but for the sake of other people. . . . All arts come from having open eyes; and all arts are performing arts. Even the solitary artist in the cave draws to be seen, offers up what he looks at as a priest for others. It is only in bad drawing, bad writing, and bad woodwork that motives other than priestly ones become primary. It is when we

² Lanham, Maryland: Sheed and Ward, 1967. 55.

stop loving what we do -- and stop caring whether others see -- that we become guilty of artistry that is not art and of craftsmanship that is only shoddy.³

An important place to begin thinking theologically through the process of doing theatre as oblation has to do with the way we approach the script. We must first recognize that any script we work with is itself a priestly offering, an act of oblation. In it the playwright has offered her vision of "truth" within a "reality" of living existence. We must recognize that the playwright takes the material of her reality and imitates its essence. In this imitative process she focuses, clarifies, elevates, and enhances that reality to reveal, and bring added meaning to it. In so doing the playwright reveals "truth" behind and within that "reality." In a very real way the playwright therefore sacralizes our existence, our being. She sacralizes our lives along the whole continuum of our experience; everything from the horrific to the glorious, from the tragic to the farcical, in her priestly offering up of the script.

Any time we choose to offer up a playwright's script in production we are offering up his vision of the way the world is, or the way he believes it ought to be. In our act of oblation we enter into a relationship, a sacred trust, with the playwright. That sacred trust is that we try, to the best of our ability, to do justice to his offering. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"⁴ "To do justice" is a significant phrase. "To do justice" (as Doug Adams at PSR has pointed out on numerous occasions) has juridical, ethical, religious, and aesthetic connotations. In our discussion I am more interested in the ethical/religious, and aesthetic connotations, than in the juridical ones. One way we can "do justice" to a playwright's creation ethically and aesthetically is to appreciate it by "giving appropriate attention" to it. Every script, as with every work of art, asks for its own degree of respect and attention. It sets out its own requirements, and by those requirements establishes its own amount of time and

³ Ibid. 91-92.

⁴ New International Version Bible: Micah 6:8.

energy needed to be able to do it justice in production. To spend 30 seconds looking at yet another slick poster of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge wrapped in fog may be doing that work justice. To spend only 30 seconds looking at an impressionist painting (a Gauguin, a Renoir, a Monet, or a Manet) may not be doing that work justice. To know the difference is important, whether in painting, playwriting or directing.

"To do justice" to any given script by lifting it into production in an act of oblation brings with it its own requirements of vision, energy, and care. It is also a very complex and time oriented process. This process is undertaken in order to understand and incarnate the Truth behind and within the vision of reality which the playwright has shaped and offered up as her imitative response to life.

This intensive time and person oriented process is undertaken in order to reveal in physical form and movement the shape and meaning of the playwright's vision. This process is undertaken for the sake of others: an audience. This process, though, also can be -- also should be -- a process of appreciation through oblation; a lifting, focusing, clarifying enhancement of the script.

We all know the phrase "Time is importance on stage." I want to consider, therefore, the meaning of time in our act of oblation -- in our process of "doing justice" to a playwright's vision. We all invest a great deal of time in the production process of any given play. It is one of the necessary elements we must be committed to in order to realize any significant quality in the production. But, as important as it is, it is not just a matter of total elapsed clock-time (Chronos) invested in a particular production that suggests we are "doing a show justice." It seems to me that we must invest sufficient Chronos to arrive at any quality artistic product. It is the Kairos, however -- the quality of time entered into during the Chronos -- that is much more important to "doing justice" to the play. And it is critical to the formation of the ensemble. It provides for justice being done both to the play being produced, and to those persons

involved in the process of producing it. It also can provide the basis for our offering the play as an incarnationally transformational work of theatre.

It is Kairos that tells us what the time we spend in the theatre is for: it is time "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." But what does that look like translated into more theatrical terms? It is in the quality of the time spent in the theatrical process that provides for how the theatre ensemble is formed. It seems to me that the formation of the ensemble is central to the process of theatre. It is the process of symbolically and practically transforming a group of individuals (I/Thous) into a cohesive, caring WE for the sake of others: each other and the audience. As such it is a transformation that in truly incarnationally ways can become a microcosm of the eventual macrocosmic "Community of God." It is in the intensive time of Kairos that TRUTH is explored: the truth about individual character's needs, their goals, their loves and hates. Kairos is the time we discover why and how characters experience, or refuse to experience grace. In the depths of time we also discover ourselves: our loves and hates, our needs and goals -- how and when we experience or refuse to experience grace in our lives. Kairos is also when and how we discover the relationships between those two worlds. In Kairos we bring the "truth" behind our "reality" and the "truth" behind a character's or play's "reality" together: to meld them together into one vital "truth-filled" performance.

It is in the Kairos of time we find the depth and why of ourselves and our characters. In so doing we appreciate -- we "add value to" them. We enter into "Kairotic" time in order to transform ourselves into our characters, (or help our students we direct do so). We enter Kairos in order to incarnate them more truthfully, to offer them up as oblation more fully -- not for our own sakes, but for the sakes of others. These incarnations are then offered for the sake of the rest of the ensemble, that community which eventually includes the audience as well. It is in Kairos, in the depth and why of time, that we also experience the support-net of the forming community -- the ensemble. These depth-times in the rehearsal process allow artistic,

and at times personal, depth of revelation to be experienced. It allows time for them to be revealed, shared, and then tried out physically and emotionally. It allows these revelations then to be either accepted and incorporated into the character, or rejected as "not right" for the character. Because of the quality of time spent there can be a "safe" accepting environment established in the ensemble in which personal and artistic risk is seen as necessary to the truthful artistic process. During these depth-times of risk and acceptance the characterizations into which they are incorporated can become a transforming artistic and transforming personal experience for the performer. It is often an experience of healing. Certainly it is an experience of growth toward wholeness. In this way they also can be offered up to become a personal and transforming experience for the audience.

Chronos asks "what time is it?" "How many hours have we rehearsed?" "How many hours do we need to rehearse?" Kairos asks "what is this time for?" "What is this rehearsal time for?" It is time "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God," in relation to the script, to the persons involved, and to the created characters. It is time for exploration, for play, for celebrating each other, for offering each other up as oblation. It is time for work, for decision making, for risking ourselves within an ensemble of persons who will not violate us, who will not seek to harm or destroy us because we have risked our artistic or personal souls in their presence. It is, after all, always our body, our blood, our psyches, our emotions that we are working with to create the truthfulness of our characters' lives. Either that or it is our students' bodies, . . . and we must "love them as we love ourselves." We must be as careful, as "full of care," for them as we would be for ourselves. It is time for building trusting relationships among a group of persons who need to become an ensemble in order to offer up the production as an oblation that does justice to the script. They need to become an ensemble for the sake of a common goal: doing justice in their offering up of a playwright's oblation. They need to become an ensemble investing themselves in a common task: the offering up of these characters in this current production. They need to become an ensemble for the sake of a common group: others -- everyone but their own individual selves.

What is this time for? It is time for transformation. (Now transformation is another of those multivalent words that have religious, aesthetic, theatrical connotations which should be listened to on each level of its meaning. The life of faith can transform life so that one hears the "truth" that lies behind, below, and within the "reality" of our daily existence. Quality theatre sets up sympathetic vibrations along similar strings.) It is time to live in the depth of the moment for the sake of each other and for the sake of the audience that will come to experience this depth of truthful reality. It is transformational time, personally and artistically so that the production will be able to transform the playwright's characters, actions, and idea content into a meaningful relational dance. It is a time to transform the page to the stage: a time to transform the words into a song, the rhythms and ideas into pictures, and the actions into dancing. The transformational aspects of the theatrical process are enhanced by the quality of time spent consciously building an ensemble. In such a construct it is a transformation that in truly incarnational ways can become a microcosm of what Capon suggests is the eventual goal of the macrocosm: the loving community of God, which is both "with us" and "not yet with us" in its fullness.

What is this time for? It is not only a time for Transformation, but also a time for Incarnation: a time when the word becomes flesh. It is a time to learn to "sing the song, dance the dance, and live in the depth of the Truth of the mystery of Being," and to do so with joy and grace and justice. All this intensive depth-time is entered into so that we, as priests for each other, can better serve the audience. And hopefully that audience will be caught up into this mysterious incarnational and transformational form of truth called theatre performance. The intensive time oriented theatrical process that does justice to a script is a process by which we treat an "object" -- the script -- as "subject" -- as a living Being. It is to treat it with the respect that is its due, in order to transform that original "imitative transformation of life" into the fully living, breathing Being, (the "subject"), which it was conceived to become. The theatre process

can be a transformational process of "breathing into the scripted Being the breath of life," so that, in its performance, it has the semblance of becoming "a living soul."

The offering of our art as an oblation that moves us toward doing justice, is a process of lifting the script into the realm of a living breathing production, and is an important element in doing theatre religiously, or even "Christianly," if you will.

To offer this "object" (the script) which we treat as a "subject," however, is a comparatively simple oblation. It is only "simple" however when compared to the mind-boggling process of offering it by way of the complex, and ever moving I/Thou, Subject/Subject, person to person interconnected relational dance required in the process of Theatre production. This process of oblation includes every aspect of the enterprise that involves personal interaction -- which is all of them. It is perhaps most intensely experienced in that wonderful, and at times terrifying, interpersonal dance called the rehearsal process. It is, therefore, to this interpersonal dance that we now turn. Capon states:

No truly personal relationship can be left to fend for itself. It must be seen, in advance, as an imminent oblation, and it must be shaped accordingly. The approach of person to person is precisely a dance, and a courting dance at that. None of my meetings with human beings is a mere event, either in their lives or in mine. Every introduction is an invitation into each other's meaning, a *terrible* opening of one history to another.⁵

To take the step from offering "objects," (scripts and productions) even when treated as "subjects," to the mutual offering of "subjects" (persons) in the various processes of doing theatre is to take a very large step indeed. It is perhaps the difference between walking down a one-

⁵ Ibid. 117.

way street in your own neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon in the one instance, and trying to cross all the Eastbay freeways just as they merge onto the Bay bridge during rush hour -- while on foot -- with blinders on, in the other.

The mysterious theological truth about persons is that none of us were meant to exist for our own sakes. We, as priests, are supposed to serve each other, to offer each other up, in mutual acts of oblation. "Pride, self-love, egotism are only -- are precisely -- the right oblation offered by the wrong priest."⁶ To be candid, I am the last person that should be concerned for my own welfare. It is precisely when I do offer me up in an act of oblation that I cause alienation, and threaten the tearing apart, or rending the fabric of the ensemble. I am being rightly offered, but by the wrong priest. I, as a director, am to be concerned with others, to be concerned with offering them up in acts of oblation. Others in the ensemble, in like manner are to be offering up everyone else in the company except themselves in acts of oblation. If we are all doing our correct theological, and personal jobs we will all get offered, but I am the last person who should be concerned with me in this regard.

The truth of our situation, mysteriously enough, is that we are meant to enter into a mutual dance of oblation, "a simultaneous offering of each other."⁷ Such is the stuff of the Community of God. This dance of mutual reciprocity by its very nature moves us as an ensemble toward becoming an adumbration in microcosm of the eventual mysterious community of God, toward which we are called to work. Such mutuality cannot be dictated, but can be cultivated consciously, can be striven for in the ways we work with each other, and can be found most often in the best theatre ensembles, and in the best productions.

⁶ Ibid. 119.

⁷ Ibid.

When such "community" happens it can establish an environment that allows persons to risk artistically and personally. In such an ensemble each member supports and offers up the others as priests. Such mutuality in an ensemble can be experienced as a present enfleshment of the eventual "Community of God."

Chronos calls, so I must draw to a close my ruminations on some of the ramifications of considering the Theatrical Process as Priestly Oblation, or Teaching and Doing Theatre "Christianly." The body is finished.

There is however a short epilogue. Given this theoretical and theological look at the positive process of theatre what are a few of its practical ramifications? It seems to me there is no need, or at least less, "need" for "ego-trips" by individuals in the company, including ourselves, if we are all doing our priestly office for each other. "Looking out for old number one" may be perceived as the law of the streets, the law of cattle-calls, the law in those old fear-instilling auditions, the law that abounds in rehearsal practices that treat performers as marionettes only to be moved, prodded, and goaded for my vision, for my production, for my self. But only the mutuality of priestly oblation, the kind found in a good theatre ensemble can build the "Community of God."

On the negative side of this formulation is the assumption that following a process of production that "uses," or manipulates, or abuses persons, that is destructive of relationship, of creativity, that "burns people out," rather than respecting them as artists and as persons is a form of alienation --or to use the old word-- sin. To follow such a pattern by organizational design, is evil. It is organizationally to be guilty of the "Theatre of human sacrifice" of which we have been reminded by Mark Pilkington and his colleagues at Notre Dame. (It includes such simple attitudes inadvertently "shared" with the cast about how the technicians, or designers, or publicity people are "doing," or not doing their jobs. Unconsciously tearing down others while

consciously trying to build a production, and a microcosm of the community of God, is destructive to the whole enterprise, artistic and theological.) The epilogue is ended . . . as am I.

Thank you Wayne and Anne for your 55 years of teaching and doing theatre "Christianly." We your former students present these papers to honor you and celebrate your work with us.

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