The World Onstage:

The Importance of Theatre to the Soul and to Society

Faith and Reason Honors Thesis

MEGAN DIEHL
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Art is the true reflection of a society. When defining an era, historians use examples of paintings, music, and theatre to reveal the true soul of that age. It is undeniable that humans communicate and learn through their senses, and art is an opportunity to please the senses and make them rejoice. Culture is centered on art in all its forms, and humans thrive on the perception of beauty. Perhaps one of the most complex and confusing parts of a culture, however, is the process, importance, and longevity of art.

Societies, no matter how primitive or complex, all manage to find truly unique ways of expressing themselves through varying media. The prehistoric humans had cave paintings, and in comparison to the modern digital processes, they may seem primal at best. But for those people, the process of representing their everyday lives in color and line on the surface of a rock was groundbreaking. Artistic expression like this throughout all of history is vital, and humans thrive on it. But what specifically causes the need in humans to create art and where does that urge come from? And why does artistic expression almost always represent real life? Theatre is the most life-like and representative of all of the arts, and the close examination of the act of theatre can uncover the importance of performance, and all art, to the soul.

When Shakespeare penned, “All the world’s a stage,” he was not simply drawing a basic metaphor. Rather, he was attempting to tap into a force located deep in the soul that attracts a human being to theatre. Shakespeare, being one of Western civilization’s most celebrated theatre artists, was constantly conscious throughout his long and perpetually influential career that he was creating his art for a public. In his gently satirical oration in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Jaques, the melancholy philosopher, identifies the true relation of life and theatre.

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts...(1)

In this way, Shakespeare put into words the deep desire that all humans are naturally endowed with. People all around the world recognize theatrical connections to life, but he had the skill to deliver his message to the audience in a meaningful, lasting expression of emotions.

It is easy to say, for those on the outside, that art is merely leisure or a pastime. To them, art is just a pretty landscape hanging in someone’s living room. Or it is “that classical song” that they recognize in a television commercial. But after deeper inspection, it is inescapable that art of all kinds can have a lasting and irreversible effect on those who perceive it. When an observer of any kind experiences great art, it stays with him and echoes in his soul. The impression will always be there for him to recall and experience again and again. Why else would historians discuss the mysterious quality behind Mona Lisa’s smile? Or why would the words “To be or no to be” exist as one of the most recognizable phrases in the English language? Because real art, that is art that reflects human nature, is memorable.

When it comes to contributing to the reflecting human nature, there is no other art form that can compete with the value of theatre. Literally bringing words and actions to life, theatre shows the existence of man in a live and intimate experience that is shared between the actors and audience. Rather than just observing a painting on a wall in a gallery, the audience watches Willy Loman struggle through his life in Death of a Salesman. As an alternative to listening to a symphony orchestra play through a great piece of music, theatergoers hang in the balance as they watch Jean Valjean battle for truth and grapple with the divine in Les Miserables.

Through its spectacle and stories, the stage has been a shining example of how a real experience of emotions and catharsis can be achieved in many different forms. Beginning with the act of God’s creation, artists are inspired by the entire universe and life on earth to reflect the beauty that was given to them by their Creator. This is the true intention of good art which has
solidified its valuable position in history. God created the universe as a display of His infinite love and wisdom. As an act of worship and imitation, humans create art.

The act of theatre, therefore, strives to mirror God’s creation by using civilization and its actions to form works of art. By tapping into human nature, reflecting the truth of humanity and creating something new and beautiful, theatre artists make art that is meaningful and edifying to the soul. They remind men that they are created in the image of God and should desire to seek His truth and beauty. In recent decades, theatre has become a business that has traveled in the opposite direction from that divine meaning. Film, as an extension of theatre, has gone even farther away from what beauty and art should encompass. Huge media corporations have sold the American public lies about sex, violence, and a twisted idea of freedom that have left the public craving more of what they have been given. Theatre has, in turn, become sensational, didactic, and spectacle-driven, making it virtually impossible to draw any kind of aesthetic pleasure from the experience.

It is only by returning to the original intention of art and theatre that the American culture can hope to regain a noble footing and rediscover a connection to the Eternal. Theatre, if used properly, can serve as an instrument to glorify God, magnify beauty in the world, and teach invaluable lessons through the intimate nature of performing and observing. Through this observing, the effect of art on a culture is surprisingly strong. Until the art of contemporary America is brought back to a state that glorifies God, then the entire culture has no hope of gathering inspiration from what is being produced in the art world.

In order to begin to understand the gravity of theatre as an event within a society, it is first necessary to try to understand man’s inclination towards the acting and production of theatre as a part of life. As always, there is no better place to begin than, “In the beginning.”
There are more things in heaven and earth…
than are dreamt of in your philosophy”

--- Hamlet I.v.166-167

Before God began His great work, nothing existed. In the first days of his process, he began to shape the universe from nothing but a swirling mass of materials. Because of His immeasurable power, God began the process of bringing about every small detail of the universe from this large expanse, one day at a time. After God put animals in the water, sky, and all over the ground, he made Adam, and later, as his companion, Eve. On the last day, according to the book of Genesis, the human species was created uniquely separate from all of the other animals and “in the image” of the Creator.(2) This Judeo Christian version of the beginning of existence was uniquely different from all others because of the clear distinction between Creator and creation. Nothing on earth was an “emanation” from God, but a clear product of his will. Everything, especially the humans, was placed into existence for a unique and special purpose.

As a completion to this loving act, God gave the new humans domain over all other species on earth and commanded them to work the land in order to survive. As stated in The Drama of Scripture, “The fashioning of humankind by God was intended to be the high point of all his work of making and forming. And God had in mind a very special relationship between himself and this last-formed of all his creatures.”(3) The uniqueness of their gifts compared to the other animals allows humans a number of privileges exclusive to them, including, most importantly, the ability to reason. Humans, unlike any other fish, bird, or mammal are completely aware of their own existence and its relation to the Creator. No other part of creation was given this privilege.

Along with the power of reason and the freedom to question existence, man was endowed with a host of other emotional, instinctual experiences such as jealousy, joy, loneliness, companionship, etc. Among the first of these that are felt is the love of God and the need, yet
inability, to return God’s love as it was experienced. God’s love towards humans is perfect. He unconditionally cares for each and every person that he uniquely shapes into being, and has a specific purpose planned out for them. Humans can not return this type of love to God. They are flawed beings who are unable to love unconditionally in the same manner as their Creator. The cause of this gap in returning love to God is one of the strongest emotions in humanity: pride.

From the very beginning, humans have experienced pride, and, as a result, the need to control their surroundings. By believing in the ability to control, early humans recognized that they had basic needs and sought a metaphysical way of achieving them outside of their earthly efforts. In the effort to tap into a higher power of controlling their environment, cultures developed certain rituals. “Ritual creativity becomes evident when the great variety of rituals throughout the world is considered, and when one understands how frequently rituals change and how great is the role they play in social transformations…”(4) Even in the earliest societies, rituals of all kinds were employed with the belief that they could in some way cause certain events to happen, such as finding food or providing protection from the surroundings. For example, if a certain dance was done, the rain would nourish the land and make a good crop. Or if a specific sacrifice was made, protection while hunting would be achieved.

If one of the members of the early culture attempted these kinds of rituals and found success, it easily spread throughout the tribe. The performative nature of these rituals is believed by some anthropologists to be the beginning of theatre. Theory of this kind, however, is still based on speculation, since very little evidence exists on the topic. There are no scripts to find or sketches to interpret because the nature of the art was still in its absolutely earliest stage.

Within this school of thought, it is believed that the first step toward performance occurred when a culture discovered the connection between the forces of nature and their
performative rituals. Such events are believed to have had elements of costumes, music, and mythical god-like characters that became more and more sophisticated as the cultures progressed. As illustrated in The Magic of Ritual, “One of the most important aspects of performance in the ritual mode is display. We have noticed that a performance is an action meant to be observed, even if in some cases the observer is invisible or is the performer herself... In the animal world, ritualized display is almost universal. It is no less common and no less important in the human.” (5)

As stories of these various rites developed, the events changed into different kinds of traditions. Word spread quickly about the performing and the success of the rituals, so they were soon observed by the rest of the tribe as well. The rituals were repeated then, not only with the intent to control nature, but also to be viewed as entertainment. This, according to the theory, was the first step towards theater as an activity. Though the theory seems logical, it is important to consider the context in which this theory was developed. At the time, the anthropologists were functioning in the trend of cultural Darwinism, in which Darwin’s biological theory of evolution was applied to other societal institutions with the purpose of seeking out theories of how they could have evolved.

Simplistic and flawed as it may be, the theory of ritual as the origin of theatre is still the most widely accepted. The difference between ritual and theater is definite but it is the separation that is unclear. Theatre historian Oscar Brockett states, “The recognition of specialized function seems a necessary condition for the separation of ritual and theatre, but where the line between them is to be drawn is difficult to specify since it depends primarily on our perception of the function of an event or activity.”(6) Ritual is not the only theory that exists to explain the evolution of early theatre, but the other known possibilities are just as speculative as, and even
less accepted than, the ritual theory. The first was formed by Aristotle. Those who studied his works concluded that his philosophy proposed the importance of imitation as the root of man’s desire for theatre. Humans take pleasure in imitating events, persons, gods, and ideas which provides the basis for the beginning of theatre as an imitation of life. Although imitation is an important piece of the theatre puzzle, as will be discussed later, it is not reasonable that the entire institution of organized performance hinged on man’s desire to imitate.

The second alternative theory is that humans have an instinct towards fantasy. Man craves the ability to objectify his situation and create some kind of alternate reality that is ultimately more pleasing and comforting. Theater would exist, then, to fulfill the hope of a fictional version of existence. Neither of these alternatives, however, do a better job of compensating for those mysteries that still exist around the eventual organization that brought about the modern version of theatre. These developmental conditions that remain mysterious include the aesthetic sense or artistic qualities, the introduction of the organizational leaders that make theatre happen, and finally, the acknowledgement of theatre as an autonomous activity by so many different cultures in such varying forms. Needless to say, the origins of theatre are still less than explicit to all parties concerned. The discovery of concrete evidence that may lead to a more definitive version of any of the existing theories is unlikely at best.

Although they are important to the origin theory the very first rituals were only the roots of the theatre. They are buried under the ground providing the nutrients, but cease to capture the real essence of the act. The true history of theatre occurred much later than when these rituals were first performed. Over the next centuries, theatre was stretched and shaped into a much more organized and meaningful activity.
As theatre progressed from its most primitive roots, it took on many different forms throughout history. The ancient Greeks, the forefathers of theatre as it is known in modern society, used theatre as a religious glorification to their many gods, the best example being the festival of Dionysus. While written records become more common in the Greek era, facts about Greek theatre are still rare. A state-sponsored festival aimed at worshipping Dionysus, the God of fertility and wine, serves as the first real example of tragedy and theatre in its recognizable form. “Through their rites, Dionysian worshippers sought a mystical union with the primal creative urge.”(7) Thespis, thought to be the first contest winner at the festival Dionysus, lends his name to all theatre participants even today: thespians.

One of the earliest accounts of tragedy being performed leads historians to believe that it emerged from the leaders of dithyrambs, in other words, “organized choral improvisations.”(8) The importance of this era in theatre lies in the significance of the gods that they worshipped. Dionysus, according to legend, was the son of Zeus, the most powerful of all gods, and Semele, a mere mortal. He was killed, dismembered, and resurrected, which led to his association with the idea of a year-spirit which controlled the changing of seasons and the aspects of life from birth through maturity, death, and resurrection. Through this, he was then linked to the concepts of fertility, wine, and revelry still see in tragedy today. “While the content has strayed far from Dionysus, the forms of tragedy retain clear traces of the original drama of the Death and Rebirth of the Year Spirit.”(9)

The Greeks, wise as they were for their time, chose Dionysus because he was a god that embodied Zeus, the greatest and most revered god that they knew. Yet he also retained aspects of humanity from his mother, just like them. They were attempting, in this act, to bring together the
human and supernatural aspects of creation that they were well aware of. They did not need to be told in a church that there was a being and power greater than them. Their own human instinct and recognition of the magnitude of the universe allowed them to discover the idea of an inspired ruler. They also used their god, Dionysus, to represent the life force that they wrestled with. By celebrating the cycle of life, they were glorifying their creator in whatever form that they understood it to be.

By skipping forward a few hundred years, another example of theatre’s integral place in a society can be found. Europe in the middle ages was a culture in transition. The constant struggle of power between government, the church, and the papacy lead to nothing more than inconsistencies and corruption. By trying to reconcile the differences between the strong forces, the church attempted to use the performative rituals of the pagan society and incorporate them into the Christian mentality. The date of Christ’s birth, much like the Resurrection, was assigned to replace an already existing pagan festival consisting of acts much like the ones found in the Ancient Greek festivities. Liturgical drama was also quite common at this time as it served to vivify the holy days set out in the church calendar. For example, great processions were held on Palm Sunday while other symbolic actions took place during differing seasons thus capturing “the tensions peculiar to the experience of God, the mystery both ‘awesome’ and ‘alluring’.”

In this period, the only form of education that truly existed was in monasteries, with the slow rise of Universities on its way. The mass was still performed in Latin, so it was rare that the common citizen actually understood the intricacies of the Christian faith. In the late Middle Ages, guilds of men banded together and brought theatre from the sanctuary out into the streets and revived it as a public activity. Ronald Vince expresses in *Ancient and Medieval Theatre*, “The principles of dramaturgy, the patterns of symbolism, the habits of conceptualization, and
the techniques of emblematic representation, devised and perfected within the church building – these continued to inform the theatre during the Middle Ages…” (11) Along with the rise of outdoor drama came the popularity of cycle plays, which were collections of short vignettes depicting different religious and moral messages. These served as accessible ways for the citizens to learn about their faith in their own vernacular and in a casual setting. While intended to be mainly religious and educational in purpose, many of the plays contained comic scenes depicting a fool, a villain, or the devil. “Most of the comic episodes show human failings set against the larger framework of divine commandments, and thus they reinforce rather than distract from the plays’ didactic purposes, just as they help to make the productions highly effective theatrical entertainments.” (12)

While the Greeks and Medievals are only two broad examples of theatre within a historical context, they provide basic springboards for a discussion on the two most basic functions of not just theatre, but art in general: worship and instruction. At the root of all art, whether it is musical, literary, or visual, is an examination of the relationship between humankind, the universe, and therefore God.

---“What a piece of work is a man!”--- Hamlet II.ii.312

Man has always struggled with his existence and his place within the entirety of creation. The truly great works of art are those that make some kind of intimate contact with human nature and man’s struggle. The reason that those works are so lasting is that the audience finds the recognition of the truth aesthetically pleasing and beautiful in some way. The beauty that they perceive is pleasing because the content of the piece of art is woven from the truths of human nature. Works of art are not only identifiable because of their content, but because there is some
level of the artist’s intention that shines through. Whether it is Greek or medieval, Shakespeare or Shaw, there is an attitude that defines the great works and makes them legendary. It is quite common to arrange sounds, words, or colors in a way that is somewhat attractive, but a true artist is one who, with an attitude of worship and a faithful obedience, attempts to return the act of creation to God. “Thus, a better way of expressing the concept of humankind’s ‘dominion’ over creation may be to say that we are God’s royal stewards, put here to develop the hidden potentials in God’s creation so that the whole of it may celebrate his glory.”(13)

In Genesis, God provides the ultimate account of creation with the story of His seven-day-long labor of love. And at the end of His process He viewed everything as good. All the animals from the fish to the birds were satisfactory in His eyes. But to perfect his creation he added his greatest work of all, the human.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.(14)

He did not form these specific beings like the rest of the species. Genesis is very clear in stating that Adam was created in God’s image. In this way, mankind is inherently included in the most intimate act of creation, and the most important. Humans share the experience of creation with God and inherit part of his creative will. Because of this shared experience, it can therefore be concluded that the actual motivation behind theatre, and art of all kinds, is to tap into the act of creative intuition that is born into all artists.

In his letter to the artists, Pope John Paul II ventures, “captivated by the hidden power of sounds and words, colours and shapes, you have admired the work of your inspiration, sensing in it some echo of the mystery of creation with which God the sole creator of all things, has wished in some way to associate you.”(15) He goes on to say that all humans, and especially artists,
possess part of the spark of God’s wisdom and the desire to share in the creative intuition. All of this, in turn, is incorporated in the exercise of dominion over the earth just as God commanded. Does this mean that everyone is obligated to participate in art? Of course not; at least not in the conventional manner that has been recognized by the modern conception of the term. Everyone is called in some way to master the task of using the wondrous “material” given to them by God and shape it into the masterpiece that forms their life. But it is the artists that God has truly gifted with the echo of His creative intention and chosen to honor Him by reflecting that very nature. He gave man “the visible world as a vast field in which human inventiveness might assert itself.”(16) Just as God first showed His love through forming something out of nothing, artists are also called to express love through that same kind of invention. Although man will never achieve the same level of creation, making something out of nothing, the shaping of materials into a completely new whole shows just as much love as the Maker Himself.

The first recognition that must be made when examining the idea of art in any form is the Artist who formed the entire universe. He first gave the world the blessing of art. Everything seen on earth is God’s achievement and His great masterpiece. The splendor of nature and the aesthetic pleasure that it evokes is testament to the love with which He created and the pride that He must take in the work. The vision of a sunset, the shape of a rose, and the movement of a river are all elements of God’s infinitely detailed design. To try to deny the power of the God behind all of creation makes the universe devoid of any meaning, and therefore leaves nothing for art to imitate. For theatre artists, the main subject of imitation is man himself, one part of creation that God is most intimately linked to.

When God created the man, he was taking some of Himself and creating something new. Man had never existed before he was a glimmer in God’s eye. Out of love and generosity, God
breathed life into the man to give him not only life, but also a taste of the eternal nature of his Creator. Throughout the ages, it has been evident to centuries of different cultures that they owe their presence on earth to a greater power than themselves. This shared undercurrent was placed in humans for a reason. To realize their place compared to their Creator, they realize the act of creation and its importance. Simply by being and possessing logic and reason, humans are aware not just of their own humanity, but also of the spark of Creation that God innately planted within them. Because of the awareness of God’s art, humans are able to tap intuitively into the whole of creation. “Always informing our practice of artistic form is our sense of the formality of creation. This ‘sense’ is not knowledge of the empirical or scientific sort. It does not tend toward any sort of description. It is the perfectly assimilated, perfectly forgotten knowledge by which all creatures live in their places.”(17) The ability to recognize the craft and design of God is one that is given to everyone.

After the whole of His creation was finished, He gave man the privilege of dominion over it. He very well could have abandoned man as just another animal, but because he was created in the image of God, he was set apart. No human is created above another, yet God gifts some with an increased clarity for the nature of creation. These artists, as they are called, tap into what God did at one time. They reflect His action as they were called to when God reflected Himself in the creation of man. According to John Paul II “With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power.”(18) Artists know further and more intimately that which makes humans part of humanity, not because they possess nobler characteristics, but because they are deeply connected to them.
In a truly self-focused society such as America, it is easy to adopt the idea that the whole of creation is in fact not a creation at all, but rather merely an accident. Modern attitudes point more and more towards the belief that millions and millions of years ago, a small speck suddenly exploded into what is now known as our universe. Perhaps that is a less risky point of view because it does not attempt to assign a single deity to the responsibility of beginning everything as it is known. In reality, the real risk lies in the failure to acknowledge that all-powerful God who, with a true artist’s intention, formed every inch of not just the earth, but the universe.

Yet it is almost impossible to begin to understand the magnitude and beauty of just one solar system. The designer’s hand wanted a specific number of planets, each with its own temperature, size, moons, etc. And while deciding which was which, He picked out one planet, out of all of them, to have an atmosphere that could sustain carbon-based life. Out of the swirling formless infinity, He mixed together elements, matter, gravity, and scores of other materials to form a home for animals and plants of all kinds. Before the touch of God’s hand, none of these differing entities came together, and would not until he used them to realize His vision.

It is in this action that humans take another lesson from God towards the inspiration of art. Just as God created something out of nothing, the artist mixes materials and supplies to form a brand new creation that never existed before. Because of the vision and skill that this act entails, the artist is creating a new kind of order from the chaos just as God did. Imagine a painter sitting down to paint a new work. In front of him is a canvas on a stand. A blank piece of cloth, stretched and treated, but uncolored and uninspired. Next to him sits a myriad of paint colors. Green separate from blue, red separate from white, and all in their own containers. In his hand rests a few brushes and a palette. Simply a few pieces of wood and small hairs bound
together. Individually, these materials have virtually nothing in common with the exception of possibly all coming from the same art store. It is not until they are placed in the hands of the painter and used for his purposes that they become a work of art. The green and blue mix together on the palette. The brush adds a touch of water and sweeps them onto the blank canvas. None of this is possible, however, without the vision and skill of the artist. The painter knows what he wants to create and goes about it by utilizing the supplies that surround him. In this, he is bringing together unrelated objects (the chaos) and creating something that makes sense and is beautiful (the order).

While it is difficult to claim that one art form is greater or nobler than any other, the task of being an actor in theatre or film is one that is definitively unique from all others. Theatre, in its greatest intention, is meant to imitate real life and put it into a universal that every human recognizes. “Dramatic theater that satisfies our yearning for true information, leading to survival and reproduction, makes us happy.”(19) A painting, while also imitating real life in some cases, captures one image or point of view. Theatre, differing from film, is especially dynamic because it is performed within an audience/performer relationship. Acting also differs from other art forms because while a painter has his colors, brushes, and canvas, the actor has only himself and the words that he is given. An actor can be seen as the painter, who has the vision of who the character should be and the vision of what the performance should look like. He is also the paint and brush because he is utilizing his own voice, body, and presence to express his work of art. In the end he is also the painting itself because he becomes the work of art that fits into the rest of the performance. The actor, then, takes part in every step of the process of creation in order to create something beautiful that can touch the audience.
But why is it that humans crave beauty and art as much as they do? Is aesthetic pleasure actually essential to the human condition? Jacques Maritain, one of the greatest aesthetic philosophers of all time, describes beauty as “that which being seen, pleases.” Humans yearn for what is beautiful for a few reasons. First of all, just like the act of creation, perceiving that which was created and beautiful brings the audience closer to God. By creating art that is pleasurable to perceive, the artist is magnifying the beauty of what the Lord has created. Theatre allows an audience to share the exaltation of God’s work in humans by displaying the twists and turns of the human psyche. Art, in its purest form, extends an attitude of worship to God with gratitude for the blessings here on earth. “Every film and play has the same purpose as all of creation – to glorify God by redeeming His children by leading them to His kingdom.”(20) Just as the Greeks used their dithyrambs to worship Dionysus, theatre can be used to rejoice in God’s great works. Instead of claiming power or falsely believing they are in control, humans can give God the credit for the magnitude of the universe and that which is pleasing within it. The recognition of God’s craftsmanship is one of the most important acts in gaining intimacy with the Creator.

Another reason that humans need to experience and recognize beauty is that it allows them to see the possibility of goodness and truth in life. Part of the act of imitating in theatre is showing humans as better than what they already are. Of course, this does not apply in all cases, but when the audience sees a noble character on stage, they are inspired toward the same type of nobility. As Maritain would phrase it, “The virtuous man is not infallible, because often, while acting, he does not use his virtue; but virtue, of itself, is never wrong.”(21) The events onstage, whether good or bad, create an ideal of some kind that they would like to live up to. Thus the reason that perceiving beauty is so important. By seeing beauty in the world all around them,
people are compelled to see more beauty in their lives and, in turn, create beauty. While taking a lesson from the characters on stage, they can apply the truths of the artful expression to their own reality. In this way, what was once an imitation of reality is now a reality fueled by an imitation.

---“To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature”--- Hamlet III.i.22-23

Art is not only important to humans, it is incredibly influential. Because the elements of truth and beauty are so important, it is essential that art reflects the true nature of humanity. This can therefore help the audience members examine their own human nature as a result of observing what is beautiful. Part of this concept of self-reflection hinges on what is recognized as beautiful. The modern American culture has brainwashed the society into thinking that beautiful is something that is simply pleasing to the eye or fitting into some kind of twisted stereotype of what is acceptable. Alternatives for beauty are becoming more and more popular. Movie stars, technology, and anything money can buy, are now pacifiers for the American public. Every human wants to experience something beautiful, but it is more and more common that people find it in empty idols. Beauty, in reality, goes much deeper than that which is perceived by the eye. Art that is truly pleasing contacts a place in the soul where the message or intention of the piece resonates in an inexplicable way. It is this kind of art that does not force, but rather allows the perceivers to take the emotion that they are experiencing and apply it to their own lives.

Aristotle mentions in his Poetics that, at its core, tragedy should inspire versions of “pity and fear” in the spectators.(22) Oedipus, for example, seems like a complete stranger to the audience. First of all, he is royalty, which very few theatergoers are. They will never be able to identify with that part of his character. Secondly, Oedipus, as the king, has managed to unknowingly sustain an intimate relationship with his biological mother, another situation with
which, hopefully, very few audience members can identify. How then is it possible, hundreds of years later, for audiences to still identify with the king’s trials and tribulations?

Simply put, it is because they see themselves in him. Of course, it is not in his royalty or his scandalous relationship that the audience members see themselves. It is his tragic flaw - pride to be exact - that others can stand back from the story and recognize their own flaws. Throughout his life, Oedipus tries to strive for what is good and right. He wants to be a good leader by helping his country and solving their problems. But what goes wrong? As a young man, Oedipus was warned by the oracle that he would marry his mother and kill his father. By trying to avoid his destiny and ignore the divine prophecy he fulfills exactly what was foretold to him. It is because of his pride and his desire to control his own life that he walks right into his problems. This is an aspect of his character that the audience can identify with.

The audience, through this identification, turns the moral examination from the character in the play to themselves. In this way, the observer is more aware of his own flaws and emotions in a way that he never was before. The work of art has opened in him a door to self-recognition. A properly built tragedy, like *Oedipus*, should “be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place.”(23) The pity and fear that were inspired by the story of Oedipus cause the audience member to not just pity the character they are seeing onstage, but also fear the possibility of those tragic events in his own life. It is through this inspired reflection that humans can attempt to identify beauty, emotions, and flaws in their existence and therefore move towards the improvement of their lives. True art, then, is not an end in itself, but rather a vehicle for expression and a tool for inspiration. It is only when art becomes indulgent and uninventive, that it strays away from the purpose of inspiration. The 20th century has brought just this kind of change.
Just like most of the entertainment industries in America in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century, theatre began a trend of lacking true art and inventiveness. By twisting the idea of freedom of speech, theatre artists have taken expression over the top to create uninspiring and selfish art. Year after year plays are being written that examine what are cloaked as new ideas in new ways. For hundreds of years, there have been basically no new ideas. The good works of art examine the same basic principles of the human condition. To try to reinvent what is already known is almost impossible. Playwrights can introduce new productive ways of looking at classic ideas, but they seem to believe that new plays need to be pessimistic and hopeless about life. Brooke Allen comments, “In the hands of a less than subtle director or writer, the audience members’ experience is too often that of being lectured to, even pummeled, for his own racism, sexism, hawkishness, or bourgeois values.”\textsuperscript{(24)} The contemporary theatre has been taken over by an aggressiveness that provides unidentifiable art, which does nothing but alienate the audience.

---“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action”--- \textit{Hamlet III.ii.18-19}

By alienating the theatre audience, the true meaning of performing arts is abandoned. The act of not just performing but also attending theatre is one of a communal nature. This experience has been lost in the recent century because there is not one ultimate goal that the audience is coming together for. The audience still gathers in one physical place, but their mindset is not shared with one another. The Greeks grouped together by the thousands at theatre festivals that lasted for hours or days at a time. They shared the common intention of worshipping their god. They wanted to admit inadequacy within the realm of the universe and share the experience of uplifting art. Theatergoers sought not only to experience the emotion and
More and more, the intentions of audiences are differing in the outcome that they are looking for in the theatre experience. Some come to the theatre looking for mindless entertainment. Some seek to be dazzled by elaborate sets and shiny costumes. Others crave the excitement of lewd acts or foul language. Playwrights, as they always have, want to please their audience, so they feed them exactly what they want. They give them the sets, costumes, excitement, and any other experience that they may be searching for. “We want a picture of ourselves that renders us whole, with all of the violent contraries and inexplicable self-betrayals locked in. Not and explanation but an intuition become flesh; not thinking, seeing.” (25) The recognition between Creator and creation is lost when art and theatre are geared toward preaching, shock-value, or pushing the limits of what people actually want to see. In this theory, two kinds of art exist. One type inspires the observer and glorifies creation through reflecting human nature. The other type is secretly damaging by giving in to the audiences’ baser instincts that disregard the Creator’s act of artful and loving creation. The clearest understanding of these two types of theatre can be reached through two contemporary examples.

In the late 1980s and all through the 1990s, America was hit with a wave of shocking trends that are still continuing today. While it had always existed, homosexuality as a lifestyle was really beginning to flourish and become part of the American culture. More than ever, gay men and women were being open about their homosexual preferences and demanding that they be afforded the same rights and privileges as all other American citizens. At the same time, the outbreak of AIDS was taking over America, which was intimately tied, at the time, to the gay community. Theatre has never been more reflective of cultural situations than it was at this point.
in history. Dozens and dozens of plays were written during these years concerning homosexual characters, their persecution, and the gay community’s struggle with the AIDS virus. By looking at one play from this era, the deceitful and damaging type of art can clearly be seen.

*Pterodactyls* is a play typical of this time period which deals with the same topics as all of the others. The sparse plot centers around a high-brow family made up of dysfunctional and unlovable characters. Todd, the gay son, has contracted AIDS and exists almost in a different world from his family. He spends the play mostly uttering the words “I have AIDS,” only to be ignored by the family. There are other closeted gay characters that perform almost like clowns and the whole family is presented as a satirical joke gone wrong. In the end, nothing is really gained except the mass destruction of the entire family and the lingering message of “AIDS is bad” communicated unceasingly by the playwright Nicky Silver.

Not only is the humanity stripped from all of the characters, but the focus on AIDS and homosexuality makes it into either a running joke or a troubling annoyance in the script. The author does nothing to allow the audience to identify with the characters, but rather creates highly emphasized versions of people he obviously finds disgusting. While trying to deliver a message and teach a lesson, the play goes too far and alienates those who are watching. Aside from forcing the concept of homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle, the author is asserting it as a privilege. There is a hidden lie behind all of the exaggerations that everything going on onstage should not only be accepted, encouraged to thrive. The audience is forced to feel guilty if they have enough conviction to stand up to the deceit that is being sold to the public every day. In the disguise of new-age and healthily progressive thinking, the sinful behavior and tearing down of morals is being spoon fed to an audience who is more than ready to listen.
To contrast that method of playwriting, a brief examination of John Patrick Shanley’s brilliant play *Doubt* can illuminate the nobler version of contemporary writing for the theatre. He presents an issue that is just as sensational as the gay rights movement but not as widely acknowledged. Since the 1960s, an increasing number of cases have been publicized of Catholic priests who have sexually molested young boys that served in their parishes. The media elevated this issue to a level that caused panic throughout the country and criminalized the clergy as a whole. By exaggerating the claims (which were completely false in some cases), the Catholic Church was turned into an enemy that harbored pedophiles and child molesters, and knowingly hid their crimes. While, in some instances, the claims against the priests and the church were substantiated, the issue was an opportunity for the media to work their magic and point fingers where they did not belong.

In *Doubt*, Shanley sets up a situation much like those news stories, where a claim of inappropriate behavior has been brought against a Catholic priest by a boy at the private school where he teaches. By expertly crafting believable and truthful characters, Shanley uses the literary form of a parable to present not only the issue of child molestation, but also raises questions about race, teaching methods, faith, and retribution. Like real life, there are constantly multiple layers that motivate the actions of each character that both absolve and incriminate all of the characters at one time or another. While the play’s action is focused on the investigation of the alleged inappropriate action, the truth is never revealed whether the claims are true or not. This encourages the audience to reexamine the actions, attitudes, and accountability of each person involved and draw their own conclusion. The playwright himself states that the play is not really meant to be only about the issue of child molestation. Rather, the point of him writing the play was to examine the idea of the strength of doubt as opposed to absolute certainty, and how
doubt is not necessarily a weakness when it is founded. In this way, he has challenged the audience by using what he observed in humanity to illustrate a situation and make them wonder how they would react. Their faith (and doubt) in the truth of human nature is called into question and therefore reexamined in a productive manner.

These contemporary examples can be used to inform theatergoers and playwrights about the most effective and edifying methods for theatre writing, but there is an even more powerful media structure that must be addressed, if only briefly, when talking about the viewing of good and bad art. As the Western culture was being redefined in the early parts of the twentieth century through the industrial revolution, the art community was also being reshaped. Technology was advancing quickly and new methods of creating art were being discovered and immediately put to work, such as the newly invented moving pictures. Movies were a novelty at that time, but would grow to become one of the largest and most powerful “artistic” industries, second only to its close relative, television. Films were short and silent at their conception, but still revolutionized the delivery of art to the masses. The great works of art that were taking place in the play houses could now be experienced all over the country. Actors grew more famous, and titles became more popular. Acting and storytelling were no longer shared experiences between an audience and a performer. Now, the performer was no longer present, but his image was. His performance was locked in time and playable at any moment. While it did take some of the magic away from the performances, film was able to accomplish effects that were never before possible in the theatre. If anything, the imitation was more real than ever and the observer was brought closer and closer to the action. The willing suspension of disbelief that was always essential in the theatre was rendered almost useless with the ongoing advances that brought more and more believability to film.
In this age of media-focused life and extraordinarily shortened attention spans, it is not hard to see the effect that the huge media corporations are having on the American public. The business of multimedia has become increasingly huge by the year. Billions of dollars are spent by one studio alone and they easily earn billions more in profits without even batting an eye. Thousands of films of all kinds are made every year, but only a handful ever get to the eyes of the public. These chosen few are those with the right names, producers, and marketing tools behind them. Actors make ridiculous salaries numbering in the billions per movie. But why does the public pay the increasingly high prices to go to the movie theatres and spend hours participating in this industry. “While some films clearly aim at nothing more lofty than exploitation and titillation, others set audiences debating whether sex, violence, and other illicit behaviors have a place on movie screens…”(26) Are there lessons to be learned from these films? Do they improve the quality of life somehow that they become so addicting?

What really is so attractive about these films and the ideals of Hollywood is that they create an idea of a life for normal citizens to strive for. In the movies, love is always romantic and passionate, violence flows freely, and money is the highest motivation and justification for any action. Whatever race, gender, or religion the audience member happens to be, there is a fantasy that appeals to him in some way. And what is behind those fantasies? Another completely imaginary world of fabricated heroes living unrealistic lives. The stars of these films are painted in a picture of glitz and glamour where they float from party to party and spend their millions frivolously. What is ultimately wrong with this entire charade is that it is completely fake. The media is lying to the American public and the public is enjoying being lied to. “The plain truth is, within the space of our lifetimes, much of what Americans once almost universally abhorred has been packaged, perfumed, gift-wrapped, and sold to us as though it had great
value.”(27) The Hollywood culture is one of false idols and empty, disappointing personalities. Instead of striving for what is ultimately good and truthful, as in art that is directed towards the Divine, the public is striving for a fabrication of life that is either self-focused or money-focused.

In the context of the film industry, how is theatre supposed to compete with the entertainment that is now offered to the masses? They have no choice but to supply the audiences with the same breed of art that they are getting in the movie theatres, or at least as close as they can get. This ideal has fueled the stunted version of commercial theatre that can be seen in New York City. In a select number of theatres in a small area of the city, millions of dollars are spent to produce spectacle-driven shows, half of which are revivals of shows that have been performed thousands of times before. Because the public is so used to the realism in movies, theatres try to get closer and closer to those film effects with all kinds of new technology aimed only at bringing in more audience members with no regard to the cost of a ticket.

So where is the issue? The theatres are full and the shows are giving the audiences what they want. The issue lies in the dismissal of the original intention of theatre. Where is the glorification of creation and the worship directed at God who first designed the whole universe? The American audience no longer achieves closeness with the Creator by watching a great work of art. Instead, they are pacified by large effects and playwrights on soap-boxes that make them think they are participating in something meaningful.

As usual, the stigma of the billion-dollar film industry does not apply to all who are involved. Occasionally a studio will produce a movie that is artistic and meaningful. Every once in a while a truly good play will appear on the scene with a true agenda aimed at change in the corrupt industry. But why are these such rare commodities? Why does the public so easily buy what Hollywood is selling them? “After all, if we don’t understand what the marketers of evil in
this world are doing – especially if we don’t comprehend our own inherent flaws that allow us to be conned – our fate is already sealed.”(28) It seems as if Americans enjoy this fantasy life that Hollywood has set up for them, and they are, in a way, addicted to it. For example, the more gossip they hear, the more they rely on hearing it every day. Logically, they become so entranced by the lies that they are being told because they satisfy the same human instincts that bring them farther away from God. The pride and false sense of self-sufficiency that stop them from returning God’s unconditional love are the same flaws that allow them to subscribe to the attractive untruths. They feel like the theatre and movies are giving them what they want, which they very well may be. The real question turns out to be, if it is the kind of entertainment they want, is it the kind of entertainment that they should be given? Someone needs to be held responsible for the condition that the theatre and film industries are in. But does the blame get placed on only one party?

On one hand, the producers are the ones funding the art that is being presented for the public. They are finding the millions of dollars to invest in these movies and pay the untalented and uncreative moviemakers. G.K. Chesterton states, “The artist is a person who communicates something… but it is a question of communication and not merely expression. Or rather, strictly speaking, unless it is communication it is not expression.”(29) On the other hand, the artists involved are strapping themselves to projects that cannot possibly fulfill any kind of creative yearning that they have. They are taking part in, and therefore endorsing, damaging messages that are fed to the public. The films are increasingly more violent, sex-focused, and unimaginative. R ratings are more common than ever, and PG-13 movies are pushing their ratings as far as possible. The public is given indulgent works of art to satisfy their lust for
ignoble ideas, and they become so desensitized that they crave movies that take these themes farther and farther. So how responsible is the public for this large charade?

Those who are making the movies claim that they are just giving their audience “what they are looking for.” But if the damaging ideas were not first put in their heads by other films or plays, is that truly what the audience would want? Is the public actually convinced that this is the kind of entertainment that they should be filling their lives with? Do they, deep down, really think that they are getting something out of it? Quite possibly. It is hard to say without some uncertainty who is completely to blame for the public’s addiction to poorly structured art. It may well be that there is not only one party to blame in all of this, but rather a chemistry of supply and demand that caused art to gravitate in a direction that was damaging rather than edifying. If there is no one to blame, then it makes it that much more difficult to cure the situation.

---“Angels and ministers of grace defend us!”--- Hamlet I.iv.39

Is the situation of contemporary theatre and performing arts hopeless? Of course not. It is by far one of the smaller problems on the American mind these days. But citizens of this country are fooling themselves if they try to believe that the type of entertainment that they are allowing themselves to be entertained by is not affecting the state of the country. Pope John Paul II writes, “There is therefore an ethic, even a ‘spirituality’ of artistic service, which contributes in its way to the life and renewal of a people.”(30) Denying that art has anything to do with the dignity and moral fiber of a community is just foolish. As was established earlier, theatre and art of all kinds tap into the very depths of the soul and allow, or disable, the ability to seek out what is truly good and beautiful in the short amount of time that a human spends here on earth. So while the problem of American theatre may seem small at this time, the impact that it could have on the
American community could be increasingly more vast as the problem is allowed to perpetuate. “Obedient to their inspiration in creating works both worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favour of the common good.”(31) By encouraging these trends of artless art and irresponsibility in expression, morality is taking a backseat to overly didactic works and deceivingly veiled money-making schemes. A solution to this problem can be found as far back in history as the Greek thespians that provided examples so early on.

Plato, one of the greatest literary craftsmen of all time and the founding father of philosophical aesthetic discussion, provides an essential dialogue about the relationship between art and the state in his writings in *The Republic*. In one of his later writings, the term censorship is used many times, which can be intimidating when talking about art in any form. Censorship is a word that is deeply feared in the artistic community. If taken too far, censorship can indeed present problems. But in the American society, the pendulum has swung so far away from making judgments about art that nothing is perceived as unacceptable any more. Without a standard of what is right and wrong, everything is right, and that is the exact place that the art community has brought itself to. Plato would argue that in order to achieve a truly good society, there needs to be some kind of judgment made between right and wrong in the context of art. The intent of his censoring was to prevent the distortion of the minds of a nation, that they may truly flourish and celebrate what is good, beautiful, and true.

When first speaking of establishing a form of censorship, he urges a country to find value in the mind. “Let them fashion the mind with such tales, even more fondly than they mould the body with their hands; but most of those which are now in use must be discarded.”(32) He goes on to express how the tales, myths, and poetry of a society can greatly effect how the minds of
the citizens are formed. Plato knew, even then, that every kind of art had its consequence. The American culture likes to claim every kind of freedom available to them, but rejects all of the responsibility for their actions. In Plato’s view, the youth of a culture is most susceptible to the damages of destructive art, which can be seen more and more as the decades pass in America. “For a young person cannot judge what is allegorical and what is literal; anything that he receives into his mind at that age is likely to become indelible and unalterable; and therefore it is most important that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts.”(33)

Perhaps some statistics can help to illustrate just how important meaningful and truthful entertainment can be. In a study done by the A.C. Nielsen Co., the average American tends to watch more than four hours of television per day. This equates, in a sixty-five-year lifespan, to a total of nine years that a person will have spent watching television out of his entire life. Surely some entertainment can be considered recreational, but when more than ten percent of a person’s lifetime is spent at one activity, one would hope that it is in some way productive to his experience as a human being. It is more than difficult to use the term productive in respect to most of the programming on television currently. So when a child is spending about twenty-eight hours each week watching television and the remaining hours, eating, sleeping, playing video games, and listening to whatever kind of music is popular at the time, is it so hard to deduce that American culture has developed the way that it has? Plato is right in blaming the entertainment industry, nonexistent in his day, for the molding and shaping of the youthful minds in a culture.

So where is the example of good art to be taken from? How can a society tell what is noble from what is not? If anyone can give a definitive answer to that, they are getting their answers from a higher authority. Of course God can serve as a moral compass when observing
and creating any kind of art. But it is back to the Greeks for the best advice on structure and intention of art. Not too far from Plato’s time, Aristotle penned the everlasting work called *Poetics* which has served as a stencil for a great number of theatre artists since it was written. This guidebook for good art gives a specific outline for how to build a meaningful play. It is through these simple instructions that a true work of art in the theatre can be constructed.

Aristotle gives a clear and complete overview of what is needed to achieve the true potential of theatre.

In the bulk of his discussion, Aristotle addresses the topic of tragedy even though the rest of his analysis includes the topics of comedy, epic poetry, and dithyrambic poetry. Most importantly, Aristotle establishes the roots of tragedy in the “imitation of an action.” According to his theory, humans find viewing a reproduction of life pleasing. They attend the theatre and see a different version of existence, and gain a kind of contentment from it. “Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring… For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.” Aristotle proposes that it is beautiful to imitate life and, therefore, humans. Aristotle supports the idea of using men as created in God’s image as inspiration for art rather than just a large concept or idea.

After that, he sets up the six essential aspects of tragedy in the order of their importance: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. For him, the structure of the incidents in the tragedy is more important than any other aspect of the play. By correctly aligning the action of the play, life is then imitated correctly because “life consists in action.” After that, it is these actions that define who the character is, and not some universal ideal of who he should be. Just like in true existence, it is the actions that a man takes that speaks to his character and who he
becomes throughout his life. Aristotle set up the elements of tragedy in that order for a reason. He knew what it truly took to make a great and meaningful piece of art that could truly show the nature of a man. By following his advice and subscribing to the mentality that art is meant to worship the Creator, then the exact kind of art that America needs will be forthcoming. If the artistic community could take an example from these principles, the climate of art could change radically for the better.

How then can the art industry get from where it is today to where it needs to be? The true goal is to return to the idea that art is focused on the creation of God rather than the fulfillment of man. The producers, the actors, and the audience all must come together with the idea that art should no longer be self-focused. To effect a change in what they see, the public has a huge amount of power behind them. If they do not spend their money to see something it will not be successful. In theory, the producers will get the message and begin the work that really needs to be done: to find art that shows the truth about the universe and man’s inadequacy in comparison to God, the ultimate creator.

Through the presentation of the lives of men and the action that is imitated, artists can truly bring the complexities of humanity into focus. The only way to be able to shed light on the human condition through art is to be truthful about the emotion that is expressed through the medium that is used. The truth, especially in regards to life lessons, is not always pretty. In fact, it takes some people years and years of self-examination (and hundreds of dollars paid to a psychoanalyst) to find and then face the truth about their own lives. It is art, in its best form, that can answer the deepest questions about humanity and life on earth in its relation to God. Tony Hendra
The work itself is prayer. Work done as well as possible. Work done for others first and yourself second. Work you are thankful for. Work you enjoy, that uplifts you. Work that celebrates existence, whether its growing grain in the fields or using God-given skills like yours. All this is prayer that bonds us together and therefore to god. (37)

Through art and theatre it is possible to help others discover the hidden truth in their lives, but only through the truly noble and productive art that is built on the sound advice of the ancient experts. And by discovering the truth about their lives, theatergoers and art spectators can achieve a level of peace that can not be known without self-reflection. Being able to see what is real in their psyche, brings about a contentment that will, in turn, help humans to open themselves up to recognize the beauty that is all around them. The beauty of God’s creation, for example, is all around, but cannot be truly seen without peace in the soul. Americans have been conditioned in this society to expect everything from their so-called “freedom” and accept nothing other than what they are entitled to. This attitude has led to an overwhelming discontentment with everything in their surroundings. Every other car on the road is meant to get in their way. The line for coffee in the morning never moves fast enough. Their paycheck, no matter how large it grows, always seems to be too small to sustain their extravagant tastes. This is not to say at all that life should be lived without expectations of any kind, but the recognition of the beauty and blessings in the world brings about an attitude that could overflow into all areas of life. Happiness is not a guarantee, but the distribution of God’s blessings throughout the world will always exist as the inspiration for the nourishing of life.
Endnotes

1 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*. II.vii.139-142


3 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004) 32.


5 Driver, 85


7 Brockett and Hildy, 14

8 Brockett and Hildy, 13


11 Vince, 109

12 Brockett and Hildy, 86

13 Bartholomew and Goheen, 37.


15 Pope John Paul II, 1

16 Pope John Paul II, 2


18 Pope John Paul II, 2

20 Kuritz, 140


   <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1974>, 9

23 Aristotle, 9


28 Kupelian, 13

29 Kuritz, 66

30 Pope John Paul II, 3

31 Pope John Paul II, 3


33 Hofstadter and Kuhns, 17

34 Aristotle, 5

35 Aristotle, 3

36 Aristotle, 3

37 Kuritz, 146
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