The following essays appear as a feature item in On the Boards – the playbill for the ACT ONE theatre program at DeSales University.

- Lost in Yonkers
- The Trial of Scrooge
- The Diary of Anne Frank
- Dance Ensemble Concert
- The Music Man
Lost in Yonkers October 2-13, 2013

Thanks to GPS getting lost while driving is no longer the issue that it used to be. However, having a sense of loss of any other kind can still be a frightening and even traumatic experience. Such loss can be temporary as in the case of misplaced keys. Other losses can be more unsettling and affect others like the loss of employment. The loss of self-worth can tug at our heartstrings, while the loss of a loved one can cause us such great sadness and emptiness.

Fifteen year old Jay Kurnitz senses great loss in the unfamiliar environs of Yonkers and the even colder surroundings of his stern grandma’s house. With his mother recently deceased and his father forced to travel to pay off debts, young Jay struggles to find out where and to whom he should turn. Yet, in the struggle he learns great lessons about life, family and his faith. While we can resonate with him about learning from struggles or crosses carried, we are never alone. We never have to worry where or to whom we can turn.

We have a benevolent God who not only created us in His very image and likeness but through his providential love continues to care for us. We do not need to fear! In the deepest recesses of our soul, mind, and being, God is there. In both the beauty and in the shadows of our lives, God is there, loving and forgiving, understanding and recreating. Thus, St. Francis de Sales exhorts us to put aside anxiety and not to worry about tomorrow “for the same eternal Father who takes care of you today will look out for you tomorrow and always. Either he will keep you from evil or he will give you invincible courage to endure it.”

Like Jay who helps others as he finds a sense of home in Yonkers, we too need to assist others when lost, to invite them into our lives, so as to give them a sense of belonging or direction in the midst of their struggles. Hasn’t this been the constant refrain of Pope Francis’ preaching, to shake things up, to not only welcome, but also to embrace the poor, perhaps the most lost in our society? After all, they too are the image and likeness of God. Let us seek out the lost!

The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge December 4-15, 2013

Wasn’t it just last Christmas through the help of acquaintances and the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future that Scrooge experienced a change of heart moving from his stingy, miserly ways to a new found other-centeredness with a promise to live the “spirit of Christmas” every day? Now, he’s bringing to court Jacob Marley and the ghosts on charges of kidnapping, pain and suffering, slander, attempted murder and emotional distress among other things. What happened to Scrooge? Where’s the metanoia? What epiphany? Where’s the changed man?

Too often, we do a lot of finger pointing perhaps in an unconscious attempt to justify self. In so doing, we may not see that we are not the people we think we are or, more importantly, who we are called to be. Easily, we notice the speck in another’s eye while failing to recognize the plank in our own. Selfishness, self-centeredness, and a sense of entitlement impede our desire to live genuine lives. Authenticity is tough. Yet, St. Francis de Sales calls us to lead devout lives daily by being who we are called to be lovingly, promptly, cheerfully and willingly. “Doing the ordinary, extraordinarily well” can help us on this path of devotion and change our cold hearts into supple hearts full of love and concern for others. Knowing fully and honestly who we are before our God (Salesian humility), how loved, forgiven, and redeemed we are, can result in authentic
lives of caring for others (Salesian gentleness). People can help us see who we truly are, even a Scrooge! May we keep this wonderful spirit of Christmas every day to be the true person we are called to be, to be as Venerable Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis exhorted “other Christs walking the face of the Earth once again.” This world can certainly use a lot more love, gentleness, authenticity, and care for others! For what are we waiting? May the spirit of Christmas be with you and yours this Christmas and throughout the year!

The Diary of Anne Frank  February 19 to March 2, 2014

A worldview closed to the transcendent is rather sad. One such tradition, determinism, suggests that our choices are determined by our genetic makeup or the influences of our environment. Obviously, Anne Frank was not a determinist. Forced from her native homeland only to face more persecution by the Nazis in the Netherlands, Anne’s short life is one of resilience, self-awareness and determination to let her inner spirit of freedom guide her decisions and will. Definitively, she witnessed the anti-Semitic laws that were so confining. The delicate situation forced her family into hiding in an attic but it was still no escape from isolation, loneliness, confinement, and deprivation. Her diary becomes her trusted confidant. It is the most popular account of the Holocaust from the lens of a young person. It details her struggle to define herself in a climate of oppression. She notes a lack of strong love or intimacy from her mother. We get a glimpse of her struggles with the other adults with whom she is “held captive,” so as not to be captured definitively by the Nazis. As the entries progress, we see her maturing. Sadly, her diary has an abrupt and silent end, as Anne is found and escorted to the most horrific fate shared with over six million fellow Jews and an estimated five million more non-Jews.

The images of this atrocity still haunt us and cause us to ask how this could have ever happened. Would that we be able to say that this was in our past! But, we have had genocide in Cambodia in the late 70s (1.5-3 million people), Rwanda in the mid-90s (500,000-1,000,000) and Darfur in the 2000s (400,000 people with another 2.5 million displaced). Why? But surely this is over. Is it? There are estimates well over 55 million people whose lives were exterminated before taking a breath on their own through abortion. And, when millions die yearly due to poverty and its effects (homelessness, malnutrition, inadequate healthcare) and we remain silent, are we complicit?

Finally, though analogies limp, like Anne Frank and her family, many of us suffer from a sense of isolation, loneliness, deprivation, and inner confinement. Our diary becomes our relationship with our God who not only hears our pleas, shares our pain, but is intimately present in the midst of our struggles. We only have to recognize him in the silence of our longings and in the presence of others wanting to help. God is present! May we be that presence for those hurting from any misfortune!

Dance Ensemble Concert  March 14-16, 2014

I cannot touch my toes. My expanding waistline is not the issue. I never had the ability to do so. Thus, it fascinates me to see dancers put one leg behind their bodies touching the back of their necks with incredible ease and precision. To see two bodies contorting themselves as if they were one is an amazing feat, a spectacle to behold, a truly breathtaking display of art, athleticism, physics, and just pure beauty!
What our gifted dancers will display this evening is beauty. Their mission this evening, and every time they perform, is to echo Fr. Schubert’s often quoted refrain, “to give beauty back.” That is, they bring out the gifts and talents God has given to them to put them on display for all of us, not just to behold and to enjoy but to awaken in us our own inner sense of beauty. In appreciating their craft, gift, talent, and beauty, we recognize within ourselves that God has gifted us with other talents which we, too, must put on display for the benefit and service of others. God does not make junk! We have all been richly blessed and gifted. How could we not have been? After all, we are made in God’s image and likeness...made in beauty to be beauty for all, so as to give praise and glory to our Creator as our patron St. Francis de Sales reminds us.

Tonight, we will also enjoy the coordination or the integration of shared beauty as our dancers choreograph with each other every move with perfect timing and precision. Such integration is necessary or the dance has a glitch. This takes tremendous time and practice. Likewise, integration in the spirituality life does as well. It is necessary that we appreciate our whole selves working to see that each member of our body is working in harmony to give praise to God. We cannot compartmentalize or fracture ourselves into the “good” us and the “bad” us. God sees all and is present in all places perhaps most profoundly in the “shadows” that we often want to compartmentalize, hide, separate, and divide. To this place, God is understanding, compassionate, and forgiving. God is present without judgment. God cannot be anything else. This Lent affords us to “give our beauty back” not just some of it, but all of it, integrated in God’s care and protection. Let us seize the opportunity dancing in rhythm with God’s inspirations.

**The Music Man**  April 23 to May 4, 2014

We can easily recognize con men. Their charm does not fool us. We know their agenda and yet, their manner and style often entice us to buy what it is they’re selling. If this were not true, there would be a lot less infomercials on TV and more space in our houses where the ab busters and weight loss equipment gather dust. They just can’t automatically make us look like the people on the TV. How effective are the wrinkle-free creams and perfect whitening gels working for us? Oh, how they serve to offer a hope for feeling better about ourselves.

“Professor” Howard Hill was one of the best! While he doesn’t “know one note from another,” in his own way, he can “sell milk to a cow” only he’s selling instruments, band uniforms and hopes of molding dreams into fine performance bands. As he swindles many people along the way and never produces evidence for those demanding his credentials, he convinces those he meets to believe his message or rather to trust his “think system” and the melodies will flow. He even “breaks” an intelligent librarian who can expose a racket when she sees one. Slowly, she recognizes that his panache has not only given hope to the people but has changed the potential “trouble right here in River City” to working miracles not just in her own, shy and aloof brother, but in the vitality of the previously lifeless city of Iowa. Her change of heart propels her to withhold incriminating evidence that would expose him for the fraud he is, in favor of a chance at love which in turn changes Hill into an honest man. What love can do!

Off the stage, we have real con men and women offering us a way to happiness that only ends in disillusionment. They soon are exposed for the frauds they are while leaving us disappointed and alone. The only one offering real happiness, who sees into our hearts and changes them into a relationship of love, is GOD. And while Augustine reminds us that our hearts will always be restless until they ultimately rest in God, there is a daily offering, a gentle invitation to turn to and to trust in this life-giving love to help us on the
journey for that “final consummation.” God takes the initiative! God sees into our hearts our intentions and wants to bring them to the fore, so that they may transform into works of love and service for one another. There is nothing to “buy” but everything to “lose.” God works real miracles in changing cold, tortuous hearts into warm, love-producing hearts, so in our small way we can offer hope to others, be new music for a world tone-deaf of forgiveness, compassion, and love. How? Easy! All we need to do is trust, let go, give in, break down, fall into, give up, so as to be embraced for the wonderful creature we are! Living this relationship passionately well every day prepares us for the final symphony in which we take our part with the choirs of Heaven. What are you waiting for? Strike up the band!