“On a Spiritual Note”

2014-2015 edition

by

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

Harvey

Little Women

Dancing at Lughnasa

How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying
We don’t have a football team in Center Valley, but we do have a great rivalry: DSU vs. MSU.

MSU is not another team, nor even another school. But it does offer competition in the world of learning. “MSU” is short for “making stuff up.” It’s what we all do whenever we wish for something else or suppose things should be other than they are. How many times have we said or heard “if only ...”? How often do we lament that we “could have” or “should have” or “would have”?

But we didn’t. Things are the way they are because of what we actually said or did. Thinking otherwise doesn’t change reality. The colloquialism rings true: it is what it is.

That’s why at DSU we compete against “MSU” by emphasizing a virtue near and dear to our patron saint: HUMILITY. For St. Francis de Sales, humility is nothing other than honesty, especially when it comes to how we see ourselves. For this saint, humility enables an honest appraisal of what is good (calling forth gratitude) and what is bad (calling for conversion).

An image he used in his letters pre-dates air travel, but it makes his point clear: “We can’t go anywhere without having our feet on the ground.” This is a realistic rather than an imaginary vision. It focuses our attention on what actually is. It provides a perspective that is “neither otherworldly nor world-denying” (to quote Wendy Wright and Joseph Power) but thoroughly normal and entirely human.

Humility remains a strategic element in the Salesian game plan for life. With that in mind, our first production in this year’s ACT ONE season offers a light-hearted look at making stuff up. Let the dramatic competition begin … and enjoy the show!

‘Tis the season of Joy!

Our ACT ONE production of *Little Women* offers a musical exploration of the pursuit of happiness in the movement from an operatic tragedy to a relational possibility. Could it possibly work?

The Christian faith says it can … and it already has! The celebration of this Christmas season recalls the indwelling of God’s Son in the midst of human miseries. With that miraculous birth of the Redeemer, life in this world has changed forever. In the God-made-man our world, our life is never again bereft of joy.

One of our Salesian women – ST. JANE DE CHANTAL (1572-1641) – speaks of this to another, her daughter, in this personal advice:

I know very well, darling, of course, that we can’t live in this world without enjoying some of its pleasures, but take my word for it, dearest, you won’t find any really lasting joys except in God, in living virtuously, raising your children well, looking after their affairs and managing your household. If you seek happiness elsewhere, you will experience much anguish, as I well know.

Still today, the lasting character of joy supports even those who find themselves “strangers in a strange land.” That’s the title of the recent Erasmus Lecture given by the Archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles
Chaput. In the conclusion to his cultural analysis, he writes: “the discipline of joy – the conscious choice to be grateful, to be joyful, no matter what the setback or suffering – sustains the virtue of hope. Melancholy kills. Hope gives life. Hope keeps the human heart beating.”

These Little Women on stage will speak to our hearts about the power of this personal choice. With song and drama, with faith and discipline, we, too, can experience hope and once again bring joy to our world.

Enjoy the show!

Dancing at Lughnasa  February 18 to March 1, 2015

When it comes to family, potential problems abound. Financial insecurities, legal re-definitions, relational conflicts, even an “ideological colonization” (Pope Francis) – these and other factors are putting enormous pressure on the fundamental building block of society.

Seen in that light, an unfulfilled future appears to loom on the horizon. There seems to be little reason to dance. Yet the radio plays on.

Nevertheless, we believe that here today, as in Ireland at the time of industrialization, a faith-filled family remains the sanctuary of love and life. It may, indeed, require “more virtue and constancy than any other” state-in-life, as our patron saint suggests (in a letter to a woman contemplating marriage – Thy Will Be Done, p. 44). But the family is where we become fully alive.

That is the message to be celebrated later this year, when the Archdiocese of Philadelphia hosts the World Meeting of Families and a visit by Pope Francis. The festival with which that meeting concludes will certainly differ from the wild gyrations of Celts assembled around the fire to appease a pagan god of light!

Still, this production of Dancing at Lughnasa offers a dramatic opportunity to ponder the prospects of family life and – hopefully – to recommit ourselves to supporting that all-important social reality through which, as St. John Paul II once said, the future of humanity passes. Enjoy the show!


In a series of essays recently published by BBC News, famed philosopher Roger Scruton decries the pervasive fakes in the world of art: “fake originality, fake emotion, and the fake expertise of critics.” Instead, he posits that true art exhibits three characteristics: beauty, form, and redemption.

“But beauty is an end in itself,” according to Scruton. “We reach beauty through setting our interests aside and letting the world dawn on us.” See for yourself in this concert! Put the world of work and worry out of your mind for this short time. Don’t try to figure out the dances; just let their beauty dawn on you.

But this dawn of beauty demands discipline. Scruton reminds us that beauty “is a consciously created thing, in which the human need for form triumphs over the randomness of objects.” The choreographers have
worked diligently to aid us in this triumph, which is shown now on stage through the long and hard work of our dancers.

That work, that art of dance, points to a powerful presence in our lives. “We look to art for the proof that life in this world is meaningful,” says Scruton, “and that suffering is not the pointless thing that it so often appears to be, but the necessary part of a larger and redeeming whole.” In a Salesian Christian Humanism, the meaningfulness of artistic expression goes hand-in-hand with the redeeming presence of the divine.

DSU dancers learn their discipline well. But they also study philosophy! That combination makes this ensemble the real deal when it comes to beauty.

*Enjoy the concert!*

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**How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying**

April 22 to May 3, 2015

The title belongs to the “how to” genre. The show purports to offer a manual for effortless success. The effect: a fast and funny romp through the imaginative excesses of power, ambition, and greed, where entertainment, rather than exemplarity, is the goal.

Still, drama does educate. This one’s Pulitzer prize popularity may reflect the appeal of “mad men.” But it suggests, too, that the corporate world could use more moral men (and women!).

**St. Francis de Sales** (1567-1622), the university’s patron, expressed well how we cannot really succeed in life without trying. In the enterprise of personal growth and development, he encourages us to patience not power, to humility not ambition, and to honesty not greed. He wisely writes:

> We must not be disturbed at our imperfections since for us perfection consists in fighting against them. How can we fight against them unless we see them, or overcome them unless we face them? ... Fortunately for us, in this battle we are always victorious provided that we are willing to fight *(Introduction to the Devout Life, I:5)*.

That struggle – born of awareness, strengthened by resolve, and victorious through grace – is our business as human beings in this world. It’s our way to succeed in what matters most. And, as believers in the risen Christ, celebrating now the Easter season, our triumph has been assured.

*Enjoy the show!*

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