CLASS OF 2020

Faith and Theatre

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Many consider Faith and Theatre to be two very different subjects. This is not surprising as the church and theatre have had a tenuous bond throughout history. Oftentimes the church considered theatre offensive and preferred to stay away. In the same vein, theatre has often chosen not to focus on religion in its shows. While on the outside, these two have not always seemed to have a strong bond, they are inherently connected. Faith and theatre actually have a deep inseparable bond to one another. In fact, Tirrell (2018) said, “The intersection of Christianity and theatre is not simply two roads meeting, but rather like a roundabout where several roads converge and flow together for a small period of time and space” (p. 9). Faith utilizes theatre especially in religious celebrations and teachings. In a similar way, the act of theatre itself can help us to create a deeper connection to God and to our faith. Both faith and theatre are able to connect large communities of people and aid them in understanding the larger wonders of life.

As a theatre student at a Catholic university, I have witnessed and experienced the strong connection between faith and theatre. While I believe there is a constant understanding or reflection of faith in everyday life, I have felt a deeper connection especially in terms of the theatre. This unique encounter has occurred both as an actor on stage as well as an audience member watching a performance. I also know I am not the only one who sees this strong connection between the two. DeSales University focuses on the connection to faith in every field, including theatre and performing arts. Faith has been a key aspect in many of my performing arts classes and Father Schubert himself created the Performing Arts Division at DeSales University with the goal of encouraging performing arts students as well as the community to seek this experience.

As mentioned in the abstract, many people do not see the strong association between faith and theatre at first glance. In fact, many may not see it unless both theatre and faith are prevalent in their lives or they are actively searching for the deeper link. Sachs (2016) understands that many may not easily identify a connection, but says, “…If one studies any amount of theatre history, it will become evident that from City Dionysia to church-sponsored passion plays, theatre and religion have had a more dynamic, reciprocal relationship” (para. 2). While it may take a bit of effort, once researched, it becomes clear that there is a strong link between faith and theatre.

The intention of this paper is to demonstrate not only the similarities and resilient relationship between faith and theatre, but also the deeper emotional tie. In order to do that, this paper will discuss the definition of faith in the sense of trust or hope and in the sense of religion. Early forms of theatre and religion will be taken into account, as will the long and often strenuous history between the church and theatre. The parallels of theatre and faith will be covered as well as theatre’s larger connection to faith and the overall human experience. Lastly, the paper will look at the way DeSales University, specifically the theatre department, understands and communicates this strong and beautiful connection. This appreciation of faith through theatre is shown through both the creation of the program itself and its objectives in teaching future students.

**Faith by Definition**

**Faith as in Trust/Hope**

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, there are two central definitions of the word “faith”. The first definition listed is, “Allegiance to duty or a person,” with an accompanying explanation of, “Sincerity of intentions acted in good faith” (“Faith,” n.d.). This first interpretation relates closely to the concept of “Trust” or “Hope.” This particular meaning of faith may not be the focal point of this paper, but it is still plays an important role in the overall connection of faith and theatre. Furthermore, it is an unquestionable part of theatre and it is what makes theatre so enchanting, uplifting, and a community experience. Therefore, this definition must also be contemplated.

When considering theatre and faith under the context of trust, there are various routes one can take. Every show that is produced requires an incredible amount of faith, or trust, between various group members such as cast, crew, and even the audience. From the production standpoint, as well as an actor’s viewpoint, there should be faith that every actor will memorize their lines and blocking accordingly. There must be faith that the run crew is knowledgeable and prepared for any situation that may occur. For example, if an actor splits their pants just before walking on stage, the wardrobe crew must be able to address the problem quickly and efficiently and yes, this example comes from real-life experience on wardrobe for a DeSales University production.

There must be faith in all aspects of a theatrical production, such as lighting, costuming, and set and faith that those facets will not only be completed by show time, but that they will all come together to tell one incredible story. There must also be faith that there will in fact be an audience. These and so many more situations within theatre require trust or faith. This example of trust could go on and on as each individual in a production must have faith in so many others and, in general, they must have hope that the entire process will come together in the end. In the same way that someone may have faith that because of God’s influence they are on the right path in life or that God will guide them, those within a theatre production must have faith that the production will be ready by opening night. It is not uncommon for it to feel like a miracle when a production pulls together just in time for opening. One can see that faith, or trust, is an irrefutable and integral element of theatre.

Every time an actor goes on stage, they put their faith into action. It is this faith or trust that helps in the creation of a large and strong community, not just between the cast and crew, but also within the audience. This feeling of community aids in connecting the theatre-goers and theatre-doers to the understanding of the human experience and a stronger sense of “religious” faith, which will be discussed next.

**Faith as Religion.**

The second definition of faith listed by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “Belief and trust in and loyalty to God” (“Faith,” n.d.). The remainder of this paper will predominantly focus on this meaning of faith, which is regularly thought of synonymously with the term “religion.” Religion is considered “The service and worship of God or the supernatural” (“Religion,” n.d.). While these are the literal definitions of both faith and religion given by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, each individual has their own personalized definition or association with those terms. These personal meanings or understandings may be more or less complex than the definition provided and a few of these more personal definitions will be shared and applied to both faith and theatre throughout the paper.

Bert (2002) has a differing interpretation of the term “religion.” “Simply defined, religion is the creation and reenactment of myth for the purpose of realizing- in both senses of that word as ‘perceiving’ and ‘making actual’- and celebrating the relationship of human beings with supra-human, spiritual forces” (Bert, 2002, p. 2). It is within this perception of religion utilizing myth, that one recognizes the application of theatrical conventions with the intention of religious or spiritual education. Theatre is applied by faith to explain and further discuss its moral teachings and spiritual realities. Theoretically, theatre could be used as a gateway to better experiencing or understanding faith.

**Early Origins and History**

Ritual is a fundamental link between faith and religion. Many have theorized that theatre is presently rooted in ritual and that ritual is one of the origins of theatre. In a similar way, ritual is a necessary aspect of faith and its various religious ceremonies.

Wayne Turney, a professor of Theatre at DeSales University, teaches a two-semester Theatre History class. It is within this unique and knowledge-packed course that Wayne Turney discusses the four origins of theatre which are Ritual, Storytelling, Instinct for Fantasy, and Imitation (2017). The definition used for “Ritual” is, “the established form for a ceremony; specifically: the order of words prescribed for a religious ceremony” (2017). In this understanding, many early rituals, especially religious rituals were performed out of spiritual or mythological beliefs of how the world worked. Much of the time, these rituals were performed as an attempt to change the outcomes of outside forces such as weather or other life events. For instance, one might perform the ritual of a rain dance in an attempt to regulate the weather or perform a fertility ritual in order to control or guide the reproduction of life. It is within these parameters that ritual eventually gave way to early theatre and eventually led to the theatre we see today.

Johnson & Savidge (2009) give a slightly different definition of ritual that may be more commonly observed or executed in everyday life. “Rituals are predefined patterns of behavior appropriate for given people in given circumstances” (p. 14). Under this description, rituals are used or performed in daily life and simply illustrate how various groups of people act under a multitude of circumstances. Johnson & Savidge (2009) also gave the example of ritual being what one does when they wake up in the morning or how one acts at a fast food restaurant in comparison to a five-star restaurant. Therefore, under this context, a ritual may be something as simple as always having tea with breakfast or listening to the same radio station on the commute to work.

While there are varying meanings behind the word “ritual”, one can recognize the connection of theatre and ritual in all connotations of the term. It is said that theatre was born out of these more sacred rituals and theatre continues to resemble rituals of daily life. In fact, one aspect of theatre that connects it to faith is the human connection and resemblance of the human experience. This understanding of the everyday life is mainly seen through the second meaning of the word “Ritual.” This experience will be discussed in further detail, but religion and its unique relationship to ritual must be considered.

When looking at rituals from a religious standpoint, the first definition given for rituals must be considered and the perception of myths must be brought back into the equation. According to Bert (2002),

Religion works by creating and reenacting myths. Myths, very simply, are the complex of what we know and believe about ourselves and our world, perceived and expressed as stories. Because they capsulize our understanding of ultimate reality, myths – far from being untrue fables – are essentially true (p. 3).

Myths are portrayed continually within religion and religious ceremonies. Sometimes these myths are written about, but more commonly they are then read out loud. An example of spoken myths in faith are the readings of the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Gospel at Catholic masses. The Catholic faith also utilizes spoken myth in the form of homilies, in which the priest attempts to impart a deeper knowledge or understanding about the readings (myths) to its parishioners and how this understanding could help them become better Catholics and better people in general.

While faith commonly uses spoken myths, it also utilizes rituals, or perhaps a better term would be “active myth”, in order to connect to parishioners. Sunday school is a great example of the ways rituals or theatrical conventions are utilized to develop, explain, and celebrate faith. The act of receiving communion, the Stations of the Cross, the receiving of ashes on Ash Wednesday, and performances of the living nativity at Christmastime are also all examples of the ways in which theatre utilizes ritual to teach faith and myths. In fact, Catholic mass, as a whole, may be considered a ritual. The continuous use of ritual in faith shows that religion has an underlying dramatic nature to it and is therefore naturally connected to theatre (Bert, 2002).

Both theatre and faith are undeniably joined through mythical ritual, but the connection has not always been acknowledged. Consistently, the church and the theatre have not gotten along or understood the deeper connection and unbreakable bond. There were many times when the relationship between the church and theatre seemed completely shattered or even nonexistent.

There are various accounts of how the theatre and the church interacted at different points in history. Oftentimes, the two avoided each other completely or acted with great hostility. Despite the fact that the church continued to use theatrical techniques and conventions to facilitate their educational and spiritual teachings, they repeatedly had a poor relationship with the theatre. Many times throughout history, the church publicly considered theatre sacrilegious, excommunicated all those associated with the theatre, and refused to meet theatre halfway. Similarly, the theatre stayed as far away from the church as possible and avoided the production of religious plays.

Although there were several times when the church and theatre had a pitiful relationship, there were also times when the relationship was fairly strong. Additionally, even when the connection between the church and the theatre was weak, there were a number of efforts made to repair the splintered connection.

In Theatre History, Wayne Turney taught of fifth Century BCE as a time of acceptance between theatre and faith (2017). This is likely because both theatre and faith were primarily focused on the Greek gods and their experiences and interactions with one another as well as their interactions with or impact on human beings. At this time, much of religion fixated on the myths associated with these gods and goddesses. Rituals and festivals were regularly held as a way to connect to or honor and praise these various gods and goddesses. Dionysus, for instance, was a predominant god of the time and various theatre festivals were held in celebration of him (Turney, 2017).

Wayne also taught of the unfavorable viewpoints of Tertullian and St. John Chrysostom. According to Wayne Turney, Tertullian was an early Christian author who believed that spectacles, in reference to the theatre and its performances, were inherently idolatrous (2017). He believed that any location where a spectacle, or show, had been performed would always be dishonored, and that Christians, as a whole, renounced theatre at baptism (Turney, 2017). Likewise, St. John Chrysostom, bishop of Constantinople, widely disapproved of the theatre. He believed that Christians should not be actors themselves or be married to an actor. He went as far as saying that an actor could not be baptized under the Catholic faith until they rejected the theatre altogether (Turney, 2017).

As mentioned, throughout history there were times when theatre was forbidden under the religious perspective. Nevertheless, there were various organizations established with the intention of reconnecting faith and theatre and eliminating these problematic beliefs. For example, in 1879 the Church and Stage Guild was originated in England by Stewart Headlam, an Anglican priest (Berry & Panchok, 1987). This institution acted as a society for members from both the dramatic profession as well as clergymen and worshippers who wanted to aid in the connection of faith and theatre. By 1900, Headlam had believed his organization had fulfilled its obligation in repairing the broken connection between church and stage. This success caused the organization to fade away (Berry & Panchok, 1987).

Additional organizations were established under the same objective. In 1898, Reverend Donald Hole (an Anglican Priest) founded the Actors’ Church Union and Walter Edmund Bentley organized the Actors’ Church Alliance in the United States in 1899 (Berry & Panchok 1987). Bentley founded the Actors’ Church Alliance because he believed Christians were unfairly condemning the theatre and its actors. He considered this condemnation to be determined by personal Puritan frameworks, rather than Christian teachings and ideologies (Berry & Panchok, 1987).

According to Berry & Panchok (1987), by 1904 the relationship between the church and the theatre was considerably healthier. Some religious members were now not only attending theatre productions, but were also praising them to their congregations and discussing these productions in their homilies (Berry & Panchok, 1987). There was a more productive conversation of theatre in connection to faith across the country. In fact, some religious services were now being held in theatres. Berry & Panchok (1987), considered this relatively quick change in perspective and relationship to largely have been made possible due to the work of the Actors’ Church Alliance. In 1914, John Talbot Smith created what was known as The Catholic Actors’ Guild (Berry & Panchok, 1987). This organization was instituted as an offspring of Bentley’s Actors’ Church Alliance. Similar to the various other organizations, The Catholic Actors’ Guild’s main objective was to connect the Roman Catholic Church and religion in general to the theatrical world (Berry & Panchok, 1987).

One can appreciate, through this incredibly shortened glimpse of the history between theatre and religion, that there has consistently been an attraction between faith and theatre. This gravitation has persisted even when members of the church and members of the theatre chose to ignore or avoid it. Perhaps, Shea (2014) illustrates this relationship between faith and theatre best in that it was practically inevitable that the church would eventually accept theatre and drama due to the fact that they are both grounded in spiritual and mystical experiences.

**Similarities of Faith and Theatre**

The profound connection of both faith and theatre to ritual and myth was already discussed, though there are numerous other comparisons and connections between faith and theatre, specifically in terms of religion. The subsequent quote may be incredibly long, but it also an extremely eye-opening explanation of the relatively unknown similarities of religion and theatre. Shea (2014) wrote the following:

You enter a ritual space and take your seat in the midst of a large audience. At the front or perhaps the middle of the hall (often a vast and airy one, but sometimes a small and intimate one) is another part of the ritual space that is marked off from the area you and your fellow audience members occupy. In that ritual space are various pieces of furniture and props for use during the public act that is about to occur. Music sounds. A chorus and a cast of ritually costumed figures appear and begin to go through a set of carefully scripted words and physical actions. There is a place in the script for audience involvement, with call and response between the figures in the ritual space and the audience. Various cast members recite words of poetry and prose and sometimes burst into song. One player in particular portrays, in a stylized form, the central hero of the drama, the tale of a conflict in which the hero passes through all the trials of life with which we ourselves are familiar: poverty, hunger, friendship, love, betrayal, suffering and death—and comes at last to a glorious and moving triumph. It is a tale in which, after a struggle and a grand act of self-sacrifice, the hero saves his friends from the powers of evil, the humble are exalted, the bad guys get their comeuppance or are themselves so changed by the conflict that they are reconciled with the hero in friendship and love. In the end, the hero receives his reward and the acclaim of great and small. Through participation in this drama, all involved have offered to them a chance at catharsis—purging—from the ills, spiritual and physical, which burden them as human beings. The audience members become participants in mysterious realities revealed in and through words that are made flesh before their eyes, and they experience a sense of contact with something transcendent. At the conclusion, there is an exeunt omnes (all depart), and the stylized ritual concludes. So here’s a pop quiz: are you at a production of a play by Sophocles, or at Mass? (paras. 1-3).

This excerpt eloquently highlights the various aspects of theatre that are also utilized at a religious ceremony or mass. The similarities are so abundant that when stripped down to the basic aspects of theatre or a religious ceremony, they are seemingly indistinguishable. Some examples of the copious parallels found between religious ceremonies and theatrical productions are space or set, use of costumes or specific clothing, use of props, connection of community, use of music and memorized word, etc.

In both theatre and religious ceremonies, music and song are utilized to heighten the spiritual or emotional participation of its audience members. Typically, musicals begin with a large opening number and conclude with an even more impactful closing number. Similarly, a Catholic mass usually begins with an opening song during which the priest and altar servers proceed down the aisle and onto the altar. Furthermore, the ending of the mass is usually signified with a closing song or hymn. It is during this closing hymn that the priest and altar servers generally exit the altar and proceed back down the aisle. In this way, both theatre and faith generally utilize music in order to begin and conclude their productions or religious ceremonies.

Within a theatrical or musical production, the characters repeatedly burst into songs, which are occasionally accompanied with dancing. The most common explanation of this fairly unrealistic, but not impossible, action is that the character is so overcome by their intense emotions, feelings, or circumstances that spoken word is simply not sufficient. Therefore, it is necessary for the character to use this elevated form of communication, or song, in order for their current situation and feelings to be properly processed and expressed. While in “real life” when someone is upset, they may choose to go for a run or listen to sappy music in order to manage their feelings, characters perform song and dance in order to control and express them. In a similar way, religious ceremonies utilize songs or hymns in order to properly praise God and thank him for his countless blessings.

Just as Shea (2014) does, one could argue that costumes are also applied in both theatre and faith. In any show or production, actors are expected to wear costumes. These costumes are worn in order to represent the character they are portraying, to show time period and location, and to pull the audience into the story. If someone was going to see a production of *The Jungle Book,* they would expect to see the actor portraying Shere Khan to wear a costume that resembles a tiger rather than see the actor in their everyday clothes. Similarly, an audience member would not expect to see an actor wearing jeans and a t-shirt for a performance of *Hamilton,* as the audience would immediately be taken out of the world of the production.In a comparable way, a religious ceremony requires specific dress for religious leaders.

Catholic religious leaders such as Bishops, Priests, and Deacons all wear different styles of clothing for religious ceremonies, which represent who they are and often the time of year. Priests wear varied vestments, or robes, for religious ceremonies, including weekly masses. Just as an actor’s costume reflects their character, the color of vestment worn reflects what time it is within the Catholic Liturgical year. For example, green vestments are worn during ordinary time, while white and gold vestments are usually worn for Christmas and Easter. In either sense, both theatre and religious instances, these differing articles of clothing are meant to express a deeper meaning. A costume is worn as a representation of the character and often the character’s lifestyle or history. Oftentimes there will be deeper connections or insinuations based on the colors or styles used. For example, a family in a show may have their connection highlighted by all of their costumes having a purple element. In a similar way, the color of a vestment has a specific significance. For instance, white and gold, worn around Christmas and Easter time, are meant to represent purity, joy, light, and glory (Scott, 2014).

Another comparison of theatre and faith, made by the aforementioned quote, was the use of props. In theatre, almost every object on the stage is considered a prop. For instance, if an actor walks on stage with a cane, a book, a glass, etc. it is a prop and must be handled with care. Props are used to enhance the storytelling of not just theatre, but perhaps also in faith and religious functions. For example, in a Catholic mass, the gifts of bread and wine, are walked down the aisle and presented to the priest by one or a few parishioners. These gifts may be considered, in a basic sense, props. Props help attract audience members to the story of a show and its messages, just as they are an important aspect of religious ceremonies.

Both theatre and practiced faith use scripted words. Theatre utilizes a script, which is the written version of a show line by line, and religion uses scriptures, which are sacred writings. Before theatre can come to life, the actors must memorize this script or their lines and their blocking or actions. The script itself is the guideline and storyline of a show. However, the living, breathing actors are the ones that bring the script to life. It is in this live performance with human interaction and live audience that the script is elevated in a sense. For instance, *Into the Woods* has one script that is used every time it is performed, but it may be interpreted in many different ways and each performance will be different in some way.

One could say that Religious ceremonies also use a type of script. Besides the idea of scriptures never changing, each religious ceremony or mass follows a specific guideline including the readings, homily, and communion. In every Catholic mass there are also prayers or responses that have been written down, memorized, and are repeated. In many cases these religious recitations are not only spoken by the priest or clergy, oftentimes the congregations are meant to recite them as well. For example, the Nicene Creed and the Our Father are recited by parishioners during a Catholic mass. One could understand this alternating speech as dialogue, which similarly represents a script from a show or production. Just as theatre follows a script, mass follows the same general order each time, but neither will ever be performed in exactly the same way as they are both live events.

Although theatre relies on a script, the essence of theatre is the connection of the actors to the audience members. In this sense, the script may be a necessary part of creating an incredible and interesting story, but the live onstage performance is what makes it actually come to life. The aspect of live theatre can make the story more effective for those viewing the production.

In fact, seeing a live performance of a show customarily makes the writing of the script easier to understand. Instead of simply reading the script, the audience is now able to watch as the story unfolds and the actors are also able to experience it. For example, Shakespeare and Chekhov are commonly difficult to understand based off of the script alone, but it all comes to life and makes more sense when it is put on stage. This is because the audience can now rely on the actor’s emotions, facial expressions, actions, interactions with one another, as well as the words themselves to understand the storyline.

Presumably, this is why people say Shakespeare was meant to be seen, not read. It is when the audience sees characters physically interacting with one another that the script makes sense and perhaps has a deeper meaning than the original read through. Because of the often challenging language of playwrights such as Shakespeare or Chekhov, it tends to be easier to pay attention to and easier to understand in a live performance. Live performance also allows for various nuances and comedic moments, which may not have been noticed in a read-through of the script itself, to be highlighted in a live production. This helps both the audience and the actor connect to one another and to the story more efficiently which gives them both a better opportunity for connection to the emotional experience and perhaps spiritual experience of the theatre.

This live element also means that actors are constantly developing and learning about the characters they are playing. Because the actors are able to play around with meanings and intentions of each moment, their performance often leads to a deeper understanding of the characters and show itself. This is especially true when it comes to works of Shakespeare or Chekhov. According to Johnson and Savidge (2009),

When you end the run of a Shakespeare play, you feel as if you’ve just begun to understand something of that play, and you are ready to start from the beginning again. The great texts are that way. In some profound ways theatre is a metaphor for discipleship: you’re never done (p. 144).

In this perception, actors have the opportunity to discover a deeper connection and awareness of not only the show, but of the human experience and their faith. Actors better understand the idea of continual growth, empathy, and open-mindedness because of their participation in the theatre.

Another fundamental parallel between theatre and faith is that they are both strongly reliant on community. Theatre has a large community in the assumption that when there is a performance, an audience is understood to be in attendance. Faith has a large community as well. When one contemplates faith itself, believers of that faith are assumed. More specifically, when one thinks about a Catholic mass or religious ceremony, parishioners are understood as being in attendance, even if that community is currently online due to the coronavirus. There is an understanding that both theatre and faith require a community, often in the form of a live audience. Just as a religious community may rely on each other in challenging times, a theatre community may do the same. Both of these communities have the ability to help one another understand and face not only the challenging moments in life, but also the joyful, hopeful, uplifting, and perhaps simply spiritual moments of life.

Additionally, this live community permits both theatre and faith, mainly through religious functions, the unique ability to be impacted by the community around them. Masses may always follow the same outline, but they are never the same. Even if the readings, homilies, hymns, etc. were all the same, the experience would be different. This is true for a few reasons. First, mass is a live event and anything can happen. Secondly, because the mass is live, the congregation has the ability to impact the experience of the mass itself. No matter how many similarities, every mass is different than the one before because it is a live event.

This is also true for theatre. Each performance of a production may follow the same script with the same actors, but the experience itself will never be the same. No matter how practiced a production is, each performance will be slightly different. This live aspect also allows for some larger distinctions to occur between shows, which is often more exciting for the audience members. Again, one reason for this unique experience is that each performance is live and there are various uncertainties in doing a live performance. One night an actor might drop a line or enter the stage a little earlier than usual. In addition, the audience also impacts the performance due to them being conscious and living beings with the ability to react. For instance, the actors might have a renewed sense of energy if they have a very responsive audience. The act of having an audience helps to bring a production to life. There is often a difference in adrenaline when an audience is present versus rehearsals without an audience. This spiked adrenaline can lead to a more connected and intriguing performance. In both theatre and faith, this live element creates a unique experience every time.

In yet another similarity between theatrical and religious audiences, both communities are also asked to place their immediate attention on those “performing” in front of them. Theatre utilizes a stage placed in front of their audience and requests that the audience, for a short time, places their focus solely on the stage. Therefore, their immediate concentration is on the performers and the stories, morals, and life lessons that are being shared for the duration of the performance. Whether or not the show itself is set in the 1950s, 2030s, or an unknown time, the audience always witnesses the action as though it is currently happening, because for them it is. An audience member must be able to put their attention on the stage or they will not have the same immersive experience.

Faith seeks the same captivation and thoughtfulness from its “audience” or worshippers. Catholic masses ask the congregation to establish their focus on the altar, which may be compared to the stage in theatre, and the word of the lord which is presented on the altar. The readings and homilies of mass reiterate myth and religious teachings in a way that it becomes a current experience and lesson for the congregation. Even though many of these teachings have been presented to churchgoers previously, they are taught again and again. Each time, they are viewed and understood as current and prominent lessons or instructions of God. Both theatre and faith share morals or stories that are continuously appropriate and applicable to everyday life. While the stories themselves may not have a direct link to each individual, they usually connect to the joys and challenges of life. Oftentimes, this concentrated outward focus, whether it be on the stage or the altar, leads to internal contemplation and at times deep appreciation, delight, or peace.

Suspension of disbelief is yet another one of the many shared experiences and strategies of theatre and faith. When theatre-goers enter the theatre, they understand that what they are about to witness is merely a representation of reality and not reality itself. They know that the story is predetermined, but willingly suspend their disbelief in order to get the one-of-a-kind experience of theatre. The audience knows that the characters onstage are actually actors who have memorized the words, songs, and movements they are about to perform. They also understand that behind the stage there are ropes, pulleys, and countless other contraptions and people all working diligently to present the show as planned.

If audience members constantly thought about all of those external forces while watching the show, though, it would not have the same impact on the audience. The audience would likely not have the same level of investment and concentration for each moment of the show. Instead, all audience members are asked to “suspend their disbelief” when watching or experiencing a theatrical performance. This means that the audience members must cease their logical way of thinking in order to believe in the characters, their relationships, the passages of time (as the stories often cover days, months or years in a period of a few hours), and the set as they pertain to the story of the show.

This idea of suspension of disbelief could also, in a much smaller way, be reflective of faith and mass or religious ceremonies. Fraser (n.d.) suggests that while it is not to the same degree and should not be viewed as equal experiences, this notion is slightly representative of communion during mass. During communion, Christians accept the provided wafers and wine as the body and blood of Christ. In this way, both religion and theatre dismiss “immediate sensory perception in favor of psychic conviction” (Fraser, n.d.).

Under religious circumstances it is less about suspension of disbelief and more about enhanced belief. Following the example above, given by Fraser (n.d.), the immediate response to seeing wafers and wine, outside of the religious context, would be that they are simply wafers and wine. Catholics, however have a distinct and deeper understanding through their faith. When attending mass, they understand that the wafers and wine, given during communion, are blessed and that they are the body and blood of Christ. People who follow the Catholic faith understand that through the lens of their faith, what seems impossible is not always impossible. While the beliefs in this religious example and in theatre probably should not be compared, as they are not on the same level, it is a decent explanation of how theatre, even in the smallest way, utilizes the strong belief and trust that is expected and necessary for the fullness of faith or religion.

Theatre and Faith share another connection in the act of storytelling. Theatre brings a new story to life with every show that is performed. There is usually some moral or more complex meaning behind the story being presented and it is meant to impact or enrich the lives of those in attendance. As previously stated, a Catholic mass uses readings, scriptures, and homilies to tell specific religious stories, teachings, or myths. These stories are shared as a way to remind their parishioners of specific and meaningful lessons. In both instances, the “stories” that are told are usually meant to reflect aspects of everyday life and provide a connection to humanity. In the same way, theatre tells various tales and lessons of everyday life. In fact, sometimes these teachings are the same, such as in the show *Godspell.* These stories or lessons are meant to impact the audience or congregation in an engaging, thoughtful, and reasonably self-reflective way.

Whether a Catholic is worshipping on their own in their house or with a large community during a religious ceremony, they may encounter feelings of delight, inspiration, sadness, optimism, connection to community, and deeper awareness through the practicing of their faith. These are varying and powerful emotions that may also be compared to or summarized by a term often mentioned in theatre, “catharsis.” Catharsis is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the purging of the emotions or relieving of emotional tensions, especially through certain kinds of art, as tragedy or music” (“Catharsis”, n.d.)

The range of emotions previously mentioned may also be experienced by actors and audience members after viewing an especially emotional scene or show. Bert (2002) compares these powerful emotions caused by both theatre and faith by saying, “Theatrical catharsis and the mystic experience of religion are practically indistinguishable” (pp. 6-7). Both faith and theatre have the ability to largely impact the emotions of those participating in it.

Thus far, the physical and practical similarities between faith and theatre have been discussed in detail. They include shared or similar interpretations and practices of ritual, myth, storytelling, community.. Perhaps it is now time to investigate theatre more specifically. This discussion will take a closer inspection of how theatre is connected to faith on a more spiritual and emotional level rather than a mostly materialistic manner, such as the similarities in scripts, props, and costumes.

**Faith within Theatre**

Both faith and religion have deep ties to humanity and community as a whole. Yes, theatre and faith are undeniable linked through their more tangible similarities and shared applications. Again, the use of script, song, and the experience of community, are only some of the numerous physical connections and shared practices of faith or religion and theatre. However, it is truly in the emotional and experiential sense that faith and theatre have the deepest and most powerful connection to one another. Unfortunately, this connection is also the most challenging to describe as it is one that must be felt or experienced in order to gain true understanding.

In an attempt to explain this more emotional connection adequately, theatre itself must be inspected more closely. Many have debated over what theatre itself should be considered. Aristotle decided to look at theatre as a form of poetry. He also felt it necessary to separate out the dramatic and theatrical elements of art (Bert, 2002, p.1). For obvious reasons, many people, especially those who worked within the designing fields of theatre, thought this idea of separating the theatrical elements out of theatre to be ludicrous and seemingly impossible (Bert, 2002, p.1).

Nineteenth century realists continued the search of a category for theatre and settled on the explanation of theatre being a science. They considered theatre to be, “a branch of sociology, medicine for the human society” (Bert, 2002, p. 2). Bert (2002) went as far as to say that they perceive theatre to be a religion in and of itself. Perhaps this is due in part to the strong physical similarities in addition to the deeper emotional connections. While many may consider this interpretation a stretch, there is an undeniable connection and similarity in the practices of theatre and religion. Clearly theatre itself has had a large impact on society as so much effort was put into finding a specific distinction for it.

Despite the aforementioned attempt at distinctions, it is probable that theatre should be considered its own category altogether. Theatre is meant to be a communal and shared experience that engages its audience members and impacts their lives, hopefully for the better. Lenora Inez Brown gives a wonderful explanation or description of these emotional experiences in an article from American Theatre (2000), “I've always believed that religion and theatre have an almost interchangeable effect on the soul. When a play or production works, and I mean really works, one's spirit is uplifted and all that is confused seems clearer. Call it a cliché, but the experience of great theatre is religious. Characters speak to you—to the deepest part of your soul—and somehow the words make it easier to face the troubles of life and appreciate the happy moments more deeply” (p. 29). Evidently, theatre understands just as faith does, that oftentimes theatrical outlets are needed in order to comprehend the deeper reality and truths, whether painful or joyful, of life. Therefore, it could be said that the best type of theatre is the kind that shares stories that relate an audience member to their faith, no matter what that might be for them individually.

This is the type of theatre that leaves the audience in introspection and deeper understanding, or attempt of understanding, their relationship with God, the world, and the reason why things happen within the world. Sachs (2016) said, “Theatrical experiences that encourage honest communication and engaged presence remind me of my best experiences in faith communities” (para. 11). Theatre is meant to allow audience members to feel a deeper connection to themselves, those around them, and the larger forces at work in the world.

Johnson & Savidge (2009) reminds us of theatre’s unique live performances in which audience members are reminded of the “transient, mortal, and finite qualities of our human existence, because one is in the presence of living human beings” (p. 96). This same experience cannot be felt through recorded performances, movies, or television shows. Television and movies are perfected reflections of the world. Various takes of each scene are recorded and then pieced together, often with other graphics and other sounds added in. An editor takes these various aspects and creates an illusion of perfection. Oftentimes, television also creates a misconception of immortality (Johnson & Savidge, 2009, p. 96). When looking particularly at crime shows, various criminals or background characters may pass away, but the main characters of a show rarely do. In fact, many of these television shows, show police officers, or the main characters, surviving nearly impossible situations constantly.

For this reason, television and movies are not as effective at relating to the uniquely human experience. While television may try to create the same impact on its viewers it is harder to reach these various feelings or cathartic moments as the screen is not the same as physical actors currently living and acting in front of the audience.

As all theatre is in some way, shape, or form a representation of or commentary on human existence and everyday life, it always shows a connection to faith and our personal connections to God, just as every experience in life connects or in some way represents God. Johnson & Savidge (2009) delves farther into the understanding of how theatre creates a deep feeling of connection to faith with the following:

The theatre event, of all the arts, uniquely embodies the central tenets of the Christian faith. The fact that live human beings embody the characters of a play speaks of the incarnate nature of God in Christ. The fact that the actors perform for a live audience highlights the communal nature of theatre and reflects the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in relationship. The fact that the relationship between audience and performer allows for interaction and influence between the two speaks of the presence of God transforming the world through nature and grace (p. 11).

Because of this unique art form and live performance, actors may experience a fulfilling feeling of the spirit within them when they are performing. Perhaps this is better explained as an overwhelming feeling of exhilaration or bliss. Similarly, an audience member may have an epiphany or a new understanding of life. Johnson & Savidge (2009) also said, “God’s Spirit enters our lives in the most surprising of places- even in the theatre” (p. 50). It could be argued that God’s Spirit is present in our lives, especially in the theatre.

Perhaps this entire argument and connection is best described as an inflated feeling of catharsis and connection to life through the viewing or performance of theatre. Theatre, similarly to faith, has the unique ability to help human beings feel necessary emotions and perhaps heal the soul from the grind and often painful events of everyday life. DeSales University understands this impact of theatre on humanity and faith. The Division of Performing Arts (n.d.) wrote the following on their page of the DeSales University website:

We have always believed that the beauty of music, dance, theatre, and film hold the power to sooth the wounds of an increasingly abrasive society. Therefore, we believe it is our mission to shape pathways of discovery for our students, helping them see that creativity holds the power to illuminate truth and elevate the human spirit.

DeSales not only understands this important, and perhaps difficult to explain, connection of theatre to faith and the way it can uplift the human soul, but tries to impart this understanding on to its students. Faith has an underlying connection to all majors at DeSales University and students’ lives in general, but the theatre department pays special attention to the cultivation of and reliance on this strong connection.

**Connection to DeSales**

As a Musical Theatre major at DeSales University, a Catholic University, I find it imperative to examine this topic of the relationship or connection of faith and theatre through the lens and experiences of a theatre student at DeSales University. DeSales University promotes faith in all aspects of life, both in college courses and beyond. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the connection of faith to the Performing Arts Division and to understand how and why the division was created in the first place.

Reverend Gerard J. Schubert, who was born on November 21st 1929, understood and appreciated the strong, essential, and ever-present connection between theatre and faith (Willistein, 2015, para. 5). Father Schubert worked hard to ensure that individuals in the Lehigh Valley and especially those at DeSales University would recognize and appreciate the profound impact that theatre could have on one’s faith and life in general. He was an oblate of St. Francis de Sales and established the Performing and Fine Arts Department at DeSales University. When Father Schubert embarked on this challenging theatrical endeavor, The University was still known as Allentown College, was fairly new, had no theater or even a stage to perform on, no costume shop or scene shop, and no females (Lauer-Williams, 2016, para. 3). It was certainly a large undertaking, but one that Father Schubert was definitely ready and able to take on.

Father Schubert persisted and eventually reached his goal of getting the theatre program up and running at DeSales University. However, he did not stop there. Instead, he continued to actualize further dreams of a dance program, and a television/film program which would round out the Performing Arts Division. Additionally, Father Schubert instituted the Shakespeare Festival as he wanted to create a thriving theatre scene for the Lehigh Valley community as well as the students at DeSales University that would last for years to come (Willistein, 2015, para. 6).

DeSales University, more specifically the Theatre Department, places a high importance on faith within its program. For example, it is not uncommon for a theatre course to begin with a prayer before class begins. For every opening of a university show, a specific mass is held on campus. This continued focus on faith was likely sparked by Father Schubert.

Father Schubert was “a mover and a shaker not only in the region’s theater scene and beyond, but in the greater Lehigh Valley arts community” (Willistein, 2015, para. 5). He directed numerous productions and was an indispensable and integral part of the building of the theatre program at DeSales. He was also an essential part of the long-lasting impact the department would have on every student that would graduate from DeSales University’s Theatre Program and the community abroad who would attend its various performances.

It seems that Father Schubert left behind more than a strong and long-lasting Theatre Department. He will always be remembered and loved for his support and effort to create the theatre, but he will also be remembered for the way he inspired those around him. Father Schubert had an abundance of greatness and knowledge inside him that he instilled in so many others, especially in fellow artists.

In 2016, the Minstrel interviewed a few students of Father Schubert’s and they all expressed how much Father Schubert had helped them and guided them in both theatre and faith. They quoted one of his students saying, “He taught me that artists have a spiritual mission and a responsibility to a world that hungered for an understanding of the human experience and our place in the universe. Jerry believed with his entire being that quality theatre did just that” (“DeSales Community…,” 2016). Anne Lewis, now the Head of the Theatre Department at DeSales University was also quoted as saying, “Essentially, what I think he believed was that theater was the heartbeat of a society” (“DeSales Community…,” 2016). Clearly, Father Schubert had an extensive impact on his students.

Father Schubert passed away on December 6th, 2015. In his obituary he was quoted as having said, “Theater is like a religious experience” (“Gerard Schubert,” 2015). It is easy to see that he was not only convinced of the rich relationship between theatre and faith, but that he taught it to as many as possible and lived this connection daily.

Father Schubert was also known for his objective of “giving beauty back”, which was likely his way of expressing the connection between theatre and faith. Originally, the theatre productions were performed at Cedar Crest College until DeSales created its own theatre, which was located in the basement of Dooling Hall (Willistein, 2015, para. 29). Now, there is an entire building, “Labuda,” that encourages the goal of giving the beauty of art back to the community. Labuda is home to a Studio Theatre, the Schubert Theatre, and the Mainstage Theatre. Each school year, the school puts on five Act 1 productions as well as a children’s show which is produced by the Senior Class.

Undoubtedly, the theatre program has continued to flourish since Father Schubert created it and has only continued to thrive since his death. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Division of the Performing Arts and with any luck the Theatre Department will continue to thrive for years to come.

In Wayne Turney’s class he expressed the beliefs of the Division of Performing Arts at that time and utilized the following quote as an introduction to the Theatre History course:

The Division of Performing Arts was founded on the notion that creativity is a gift from God. We strive to educate students according to the philosophy of St. Francis de Sales, using our talents in celebration of beauty and the quest for truth. By modeling excellence in the classroom and production, and by providing thorough foundational training, we aim to develop artists who contribute to the enrichment of the human community (2017).

This quotation makes it apparent that DeSales University took Father Schubert’s notion of “giving beauty back” to heart (Willistein, 2015, para.35). Students are encouraged to actualize their creative talents, which were gifted to them by God, and to give them back by sharing them with the community and the world around them. Even now, when DeSales has switched to online learning, various classes are encouraging students to seek opportunities to share their art on social media and therefore, with the world around them in the hopes that someone’s day or perhaps even their soul might be brightened during this challenging time.

The idea of giving beauty back highlights the experiential connection of theatre and faith and has been the reason many theatre artists have thrived at DeSales University. This idea of being given a gift from God and having the responsibility to share it brings about the idea or image of life as a large stage. This idea of the whole world and life itself representing a stage, shows the unique quality of human lives and that of the theatre. One could see this connection especially in the understanding or perspective that each individual person is given their part in the world and that it is their individual duty to live their life, and perhaps do their job, the best they possibly can.

DeSales University often relies on the phrase “Be who you are and be that well,” as a motto and explanation for its goal in not only helping students find their specific and unique paths in life, but also helping them to follow and perform those career choices to the best of their abilities. This shortened phrase comes from the larger quote by St. Francis DeSales which states, “Be what you are and be that well, to give honor to the Master Craftsman whose handiwork you are” (“Salesian Spirituality,” n.d.). In this way, DeSales University as a whole acknowledges the representation of life and God’s mission or teachings in theatre.

Life is a stage. Each person was given, by God, a specific gift to pursue and perhaps path to follow. In this way, each person is an actor with a specific role to play and in life it is our responsibility to share these gifts as best as we can or to be the best version of ourselves that we can be. Perhaps theatre creates such a deep connection to faith because of its ability to reflect life on stage.

**Conclusion**

It is undeniable that there is a strong and permanent connection between faith and theatre. This connection goes beyond the relationship of theatre-goers/theatre-doers and church-goers/clergymen. It is not reliant on the whims or beliefs of those within the church or the theatre. If this connection was merely based on the connection of groups of people, then there would have been times without any connection at all.

Instead, this powerful and fundamental connection is clearly seen in the many similarities of devices or conventions utilized in both religious ceremonies and theatrical performances. These include scripts, music, set or stage, costumes, rituals, props, and so many more. Both theatre and religion are reliant on these practices or traditions in order to teach lessons and tell stories of human existence. However, the deepest connection is brought upon by the experience of both theatre and faith.

While this connection is far more challenging to put into words, and may not be experienced or understood as clearly by individuals, it is the most important and spiritual connection. Theatre has the ability to aid in one’s connection to faith and to their own overwhelming emotions and thoughts of how the world works and why certain, unexplainable things happen. Perhaps a good example of a show that creates these strong feelings is *Come From Away,* which tells of the joy, friendship, love, and care that occurred when thirty-eight planes were grounded in the small town of Gander due to the attack on 9/11. After one sees this show or other poignant works, they may be able to understand how theatre can evoke the same cathartic feelings that faith can create and how theatre can help one examine their own faith

Perchance we all find our own form of faith within our everyday lives and are meant to live truthfully and in the likeness of God. In that sense, we are meant to be true to ourselves, to follow our passions and our talents, but also are meant to utilize our talents in ways that support and instill joy or love in the community around us. We are meant to experience life with the community of friends, family, and even strangers around us and to all share our gifts with one another. Theatre aids as a way to connect with those around us as well as to connect with God and our faith in general.

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