

A Few Thoughts on the Ministry of Drama

By
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In 1971 I was a non-Mormon Christian attending graduate school at Brigham Young University. I was there seeking means to extend my abilities in the areas of play writing, acting and directing, with an eye to either teaching in a Christian College or perhaps getting involved in Christian drama. The Mormons are noted for their involvement in the fine arts and I was there to study drama under some of their best directors.

As I attended classes I would wander through the various theaters and watch as the designer's sketches made their way to the wood shop and from there to the actual construction of sets. I visited the costume shop and saw skilled seamstresses fashioning period costumes that were as exacting and realistic as research and diligence could make them. I watched rehearsals that would continue long after I had headed home for bed. Come opening night there would be university and city news people to document the glory. Everyone waited eagerly to see if some new playwright, actor, or director would make a big enough impact to be noticed by someone important.

There were the practiced sword fights, with each thrust and parry planned out weeks ahead: the arguments: the tears real or onion induced etc. The play would run its course and within minutes of closing curtain there would be the sound of hammers as the set was being struck in preparation for the next extravaganza.

As I watched it all I questioned with myself, "Is this God's way?" "Was He pleased with so many thousands of man hours and as many dollars spent for such a brief burst of glory?"

Today I ask the same questions about the cinema - the most powerful medium of communication ever devised by man. But to what purpose?

In my course of study I came to some conclusions about the dramatic method, which I will attempt to distill in these few words:

1. It is powerful! You feel as if eavesdropping on the private thoughts and actions of others from the platform of Omnipresence. Your feelings are aroused to a high pitch and you feel as if you had been a participant in another life. Indeed, the memories you carry away can be more real than your own experiences.
2. It is popular! And, if your talent and dedication blossom in front of the right people you can become popular too.
3. But, The cost is high in terms of time, money, energy and ruined lives.
4. The effects correspond to motivation. A brief perusal of "People Magazine" will show that in general the stage/cinema is a corrupting agency on both sides of the footlights. Most performers & producers are there for the power and the glory and ill-gotten power destroys.

In my Master's thesis I questioned with myself as to whether the good effects of powerful communication could be maintained without the harmful side effects as seen in nearly all drama. My conclusions were as follows:

1. The essence of good drama is the story. Do Christians have a good story to tell? If so then they can offer the best drama ever.
2. Just because it moves doesn't make it interesting. Ever been to a boring movie or play?
3. Just because it doesn't move doesn't make it boring. Ever been stirred to your depths by a preacher or storyteller?

I early decided that sets, props, actors, cameras, lights, action, etc. were only aids to drama. They were not drama themselves and could not create it where there was none. I also decided that drama could live and breathe in a listener's soul sparked merely by the skill of the good storyteller. Jesus did not hold thousands of people captive against their hunger pangs by reciting pages from rabbinical writings. He told stories! In prayer He received insights into the kingdom of God that He delivered to the people in the form of stories. Exciting stories about Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joseph, etc. And lives were changed! The entire world was changed!

And why? Because Jesus' stories taught truth. God is truth and when we imbibe truth we absorb energy from the life that walks the starry corridors of eternity. When we teach truth we give out sips from the cup that never runs dry.

My final thoughts on drama are these:

1. If you are interested in using some form of drama be very sure as to your motivations. If you are in it for your own glory it will prove to be at best a waste of time or, at worst a curse upon your life.
2. However, if you love God with all your heart and if you have the burden and talent to use the dramatic method for God's glory you may proceed with the assurance that He will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go.
3. Simplicity allows God to assume a more active roll. Early on, I settled upon "Reader's Theater" (also available online) as the most portable and powerful dramatic tool I could use. There were no sets, no props, often no lights or even sound system. Yet my group and I could walk into a church or school and touch hearts to their core with messages born of heaven. And why? Because the story was a vehicle that taught truth about God.
4. Drama, from the single storyteller to the multi-million dollar movie can do good only as it teaches a truth that moves the audience closer to God. To that end I have devoted my writing and directing talents. If you are blessed with talents in these areas I invite you to join me in praising God through the arts.

Sincerely, Jim Pappas

P.S. Although I was treated very well by my Mormon professors & fellow students I found their Biblical base rather unconvincing. Therefore I remain a Christian still.
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