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WORSHIP AND SHOWBIZ THEOLOGY AND THEATRE

Here's an exercise I used to lay on my Seminary students with some regularity. You're attending a theatrical production and as the curtain opens, you see a group of actors standing together at Stage Right, while a single figure stands alone at Stage Left. Where will your eye be drawn?

Now in the next act the scene changes. The curtain rises to reveal a group of actors seated Centre Stage, while a single figure stands among them. Where will your eye be drawn this time?

The point of my exercise is simple: To illustrate how the principles of stage craft — theatre, drama, show biz — relate to the conduct of Christian worship.

An example: When I visit my daughter in New York City, I attend her parish church with her and her kids. It's a lively, vibrant, Episcopal parish, full of young families, with a sprinkling of black and brown faces among the people and a magnificent music program: a marvelous full time church musician, a splendid organ and a large and competent choir.

But every Sunday I'm dismayed and confused — “dazed and confused”? — during much of the Service of the Word. The worship area at 11:00 a.m. is an enormous and impressive Neo-Gothic nave-and-chancel space, and the voice of worship leaders addresses me from one of several speaker boxes mounted on the sides of stone piers in the nave. I'm often at a loss to discern where up front the voice is originating. For long minutes, I find it very unsettling, until I can locate the speaker. (I've learned to look first for a figure at a “Stage-Left” lectern.)

What that place needs, I find myself thinking, is a worship choreographer, or a production designer. Franco Zefferelli, where are you when we need you?

Hence these paragraphs on worship and show biz. If you prefer, Theology and Theatre. The relation between ritual and drama.

I hear you raising two objections. First I hear you saying, all this is mere *adiaphora*. All that's necessary is that you hear and receive the Word. And second, I hear you saying, by your own admission, Paul, Christian worship is un-compromisingly participatory. It's *the people* who are the actors in this drama. What worship *leaders* do is simply prompt the people's praise.

My rebuttal: Yesyesyes. *Adiaphora*? Of course. But nothing in worship is *mere adiaphora*. In worship, the arts of theatre — drama, show biz — are simply non-verbal expressions of the Word. They are languages by which human beings communicate, as surely as the language of speech, of verbalizing. We neglect these non-verbal "words" to our peril. See Essay # 112.

As for your second protest: Yesyesyes. The chief voice of praise belongs to the assembly, to the congregation. But worship leaders have an indispensable role to play in enabling that praise to be voiced. Christian worship employs a veritable Stratford Festival of functions and offices and roles and partnerships, each with its specific responsibility to ensure that the Word is indeed rightly proclaimed and enacted, and the human response of heartfelt praise is duly rendered. Presiding Minister, Assisting Minister, Preacher, Musician, Choir, Lector, Acolyte, Usher, Greeter: We'd be poorer without each of these. Christian worship would be poorer.

So let's look in these paragraphs at that Stratford Festival Company, using the very categories of roles and offices and services that a place like Stratford employs. It's something of a gimmick, sure. But hopefully a helpful one.

Before we begin, be certain our script is the Mass, the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. That's what we're enacting. We're meeting God the Ground of Being in this drama. In Speech and Action. In Word and Meal. Who will help us?

1) We need, first, a **Producer**. This is the person, or the group, which decides the time of production, the place of production (the worship space), and keeps an eye on the Big Picture including the budget. In most congregations this function is served by a Church Council working through a Worship Committee. Do we need two Services? Three? Is our Church building adequate to our needs?

2) It's the **Director** who arranges and moves the actors within their space. Does our worship area allow some variety in seating from Season to Season of the Church Year? Can we arrange the space for worshippers and the space for worship leaders so as not



to suggest hierarchy? How will worship leaders enter the space to do their service? Where will we position the worship leaders once they've entered? Where will they serve at the Gathering rite? At the Word portion of our worship? At the Meal? At the Sending? (My daughter's NYC parish needs some help here!) Will we insist on a confident, royal posture in worship leaders, not slouched, nor slovenly, nor stiff? Will worship leaders be trained in graceful and

natural-appearing gestures at Salutation? At Prayer (*orans*)? At Blessing? When at ease — what I call “Neutral”?

3) The **Production Designer** has both competence and concern to address the “look” of the whole event. The look of the worship spaces and of the people presiding and serving. Much more is at stake than simply arranging flowers at the altar. Is the Chancel area simple to the point of austerity, with only the absolutely necessary furniture and accoutrements? With all excess furniture and brick-a-brack removed or stored away out of



sight? Are flowers and greens scrupulously real and authentic: no silk or plastic? Are flowers or greens positioned so as not to obstruct or impede liturgical action? Are banners or paraments appropriate to the Day or Season? Can the East wall feature a supergraphic mural specially designed and installed and appropriate to the Season? Have worship leaders been trained to “preen” each other every Sunday before their entrance, to make certain stoles and albs hang straight, and hair is combed? (If I had to choose a role to serve in your church, it would

probably be that of Production Designer. Or Director.)

4) **Costume Designer** and Wardrobe personnel work closely with the Director and Production Designer to ensure that costumes — Yes, vestments, paraments and banners constitute our “costumes” in worship, for the people and for the space — all contribute to the Director’s and Designer’s vision. I’ve noted before in these postings the unfortunate experience I’ve had in attending a Reformation Day liturgy where a banner featuring the Luther seal — that cross within a heart within a rose within a circle — was painstakingly and beautifully rendered in applique and embroidery — on a fabric field of *baby blue*! Blue, alas, is not the colour for that Festival; *red* is. All that magnificent handwork, without respect for the traditions of the colour code of the Church Year! Pity. Are vestments, paraments, and banners for the Day’s worship selected as much for their texture and drape and “hand” as for their colour? Polyesters can be found today in a dazzling array of colours, but often their textures leave much to be desired.



Aside: At an Anglican parish of my acquaintance, all worshippers were invited, the Sunday before, to wear *red* somewhere in their clothing, for the coming Sunday, the Day of Pentecost. It was glorious on that day to watch the people file out of the sanctuary on a lovely Spring morning, with red dresses and red jackets and red hats and red neckties and red sweaters — almost everyone “in costume” to suggest Pentecost fire and Spirit’s flame! Every worshipper an “actor” indeed!

5) **Props personnel** are assigned the task of finding and employing the artifacts the actors will be handling, in our case, bread and cup, Altar Book and Bible, and the linens that dress the Table. Are these of worthy fabric, worthy design, and worthy workmanship? Is the bread a real loaf? Do worship leaders conduct worship and read Scripture from an Altar Book and Bible that are substantial, handsome volumes? It is unbearably discouraging to attend worship where leaders read from throw-away paper pamphlets. A bound book is one of the gifts and glories from our civilized past. Let’s have Christian worship that





respects that past, and honours it, in all the stuff we handle in the chancel. Not excluding the texts we read from. I'll include a photo of the kind of Seasonal three-ring worship binders I've provided for favoured Seminarians as a graduation gift. You can buy one these days at Augsburg-Fortress with the new *ELW* logo printed on the cover. Mine are cheaper. But equally handsome, I'll argue.



6) The **Lighting Designer** at Stratford is one of the key members of the Company, and can manipulate audience perceptions of what's happening on stage with the touch of a dimmer switch. Most church buildings do not have the resources in lighting that Stratford has — I'm not arguing they should. But you've experienced the effectiveness of a Candlelight Christmas Eve Service. Or the drama of the Service of Light in Evening Prayer — or in the great Easter Vigil! — that can take your breath away. Remember the original functional purpose for candles: To illuminate the leaders' tasks. Candles in a worship space should be scaled and positioned — placed — so as to be able to do that. The consideration can be crucial in an electric power failure. For more on candles, see [Essay 51](#).

7) The **Music Director** has met with the Pastor or Worship Committee or both to ensure that all music for the Day is appropriate and heart-lifting. Do pastors and musicians agree that the most important "choir" will be the people themselves? Will a psalm be sung involving people as well as cantors or choir? Will at least one congregational hymn each week be sung in alternation? Will an effort be made to teach the assembly new hymns? To teach them simple harmonies on appropriate hymns? Will other instruments, along with organ or piano, enrich congregational song?

Aside: At the final Service of an interim pastorate after my retirement some years ago, the church musician had arranged to sing several of the selected hymns to the accompaniment of — a snare drum! It was marvelous!

And have you heard the CD entitled *Sing Lustily and With Good Courage* that features familiar congregational hymns sung by Maddy Prior with the Carnival Band? It's magical! No organ, but a "gallery band" of half a dozen instruments. Including a snare drum!! The CD's title is a quote from John Wesley's instructions to his people about hymn-singing.

8) The **Actors** of course include ALL present, people and leaders. Will Worship Leaders and Lectors be trained to project their voices, even when the space requires an

electronic sound system? Will worshippers be encouraged to take up their responsibilities in worship with an evidence of joy in being privileged to praise? Will worshippers be trained to spend the moments before worship actually preparing for the event? Meditating or praying in an expectant mood? Locating in the hymnal the hymns to be sung, and marking them with ribbons or bookmarks? Can worshippers be trained to be fully present and engaged at every moment in worship, eyes alert to the action up front? To read beforehand the Lections to be proclaimed in worship today? (Not reading silently to themselves, that is, as the Lector proclaims the Lections, but watching and encouraging the Lector with full attention?) Can worshippers be trained to turn, even if they're standing in pews, to face the liturgical action at the moment, wherever it is in the space? Watching with an expression of anticipation as the Sermon is preached? (If the sermon is a dud, it will be at least partly your fault.)



Well, these are some thoughts as I reflect on how magnificent most Stratford productions are in their planning and presentation. In the imagination and integrity invested in each moment.

And, alas, how shoddy and uninspiring much Christian worship tends to be.

