

## The Art of Theatre vs. Religion and Science

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William Missouri Downs & Lou Anne Wright

Scientists and religious leaders occasionally attempt to find the missing link between their fields. “We need only to compare the two,” said critic and writer Joseph Wood Krutch, “to realize how irreconcilable they appear.”<sup>i</sup> But there is a link: both are committed to finding and expressing the structure of life. In this search, scientists and religious leaders could learn from theatre artists.

Our need for structure is really the need to simplify. At nearly fifteen hundred pages, *War and Peace* is a condensed version of the French invasion of Russia, *Long Day's Journey into Night* is an edited version of Eugene O'Neill's family traumas,  $E=MC^2$  is an abbreviated version of Einstein's insights, while the Ten Commandments are a paraphrased version of morals. Why do we need a simplified structure? Dostoyevsky said humans “crave miracles, mystery, and authority.” In other words, we crave a well-structured itinerary.

Our need for structure shows itself in common phrases like, “Everything happens for a reason,” “What goes around comes around,” or “God helps those who help themselves.” Each statement takes the raw data of nature, edits it, and adds structure. The result is theme. Theme comes when one begins to see patterns in nature and life (whether those patterns are imagined or real). Anthropologist Pascal Boyer called this “hypertrophy of social cognition,” which is our tendency to see purpose, intention and design where only randomness exists.

American poet and Oxford professor W. H. Auden wrote,

The subject and the methods of the scientist and the artist differ, but their impulse is the same, the impulse which is at work in anyone who, having taken the same walk several times, finds that the distance seem shorter; what has happened is that, consciously or unconsciously, he has divided the walk into stages, thus making a memorable structure out of what at first was a structureless flux of novelty.<sup>ii</sup>

The first day you walk to your new job, it is novel. Perhaps you pass a house with a red door, a tree shaped like a “Y”, and a park bench near a bus stop. At first the door, the tree and bench have no meaning. But as you walk to work the next day and the next, the walk takes on structure. The red door means you are at the beginning of your walk; the tree

denotes the midway point, while the bench signifies the end. If you begin to dislike your employment, the door, tree and bench can take on new significance. The red door symbolizes how you hate to leave your house, the tree the missed opportunity to take the “Y” in the road, and the park bench your desire to retire. Your walk now has structure, and, as a result, theme and meaning. Years later, long after you have left the job, when you see a similar door, tree, or bench you will read meaning into it even though no inherent meaning, theme, or structure exists.

Humans need structure and theme because the world in which we find ourselves appears to be disorganized or at least lacking in purposeful design. Nature, says Adam Phillips in his book Darwin’s Worms, does not, “have what we could call a mind of its own, something akin to human intelligence. Nor does nature have a project for us; it cannot tell us what to do; only we can. It doesn’t bear us in mind because it doesn’t have a mind...”<sup>iii</sup> Some argue that there is a chaos to nature, others that nature has too much structure. Either way we must simplify in order to find meaning.

Clayton Hamilton in The Theory of the Theatre states,

“It would be difficult to judge decisively whether Art or Nature is the greater teacher. Nature has more to tell us, but Art is better skilled for utterance. Nature has so much to say that she has no patience for articulation. She thrills us with a vague awareness of multitudinous indecipherable messages; but she speaks to us in whispers and in thunders – elusive, indeterminate, and discomfoting.

And so we must find, create or imagine structure in order to tidy nature into something we can recognize. Science, religion and art are the methods humans use to edit nature. Hamilton continues,

Art, with less to say, has more patience for the formulation of her message; she speaks to us in a voice that has been deliberately trained and her utterance is lucid and precise. She does not try, like Nature, to tell us everything at once. She selects, instead, some single definite and little truth to tell us at a time, and exerts herself to speak it clearly. We can never estimate precisely what it is that we have learned from Nature; but whatever Art has spoken to us, we know exactly what we have been told.<sup>iv</sup>

Religion is similar to art because when it speaks we know exactly what we have been told. Its themes are clear because it simplifies a complicated world. And as the world becomes more multifaceted more simplification is needed, so we have the growth of uncomplicated fundamentalist religions, as well as the demand for unsophisticated storytelling – as in most Hollywood blockbusters.

Artistic forms of theatre that do not simplify reality are not as popular, or perhaps we should say, are enjoyed by more sophisticated audiences. In the theatre the ism that attempts to imitate the complexities of nature is not realism or naturalism but absurdism. It could be argued that absurdism goes against human nature. Or perhaps it would be more precise to say it goes against human ways of understanding or human needs. For the majority of the world's populations choose, willfully or instinctively, to live a life steeped in romanticism, and, for simpler souls, melodrama. Perhaps this is why religion is larger than the arts. Because it consistently delivers the ideology of the ism the people want or need. No matter how complicated the rules of religions, seldom do any of the world's faiths rise above the techniques of melodrama.

Human beings not only create simple structures from nature but also humanize it in what is commonly known as anthropomorphism or personification. In his book Faces in the Clouds, Stewart Guthrie points out that we see humanlike elements in everything “from gods, spirits, and demons to gremlins, abominable snowmen, HAL the computer, and Chiquita Banana.”<sup>v</sup> We call the stormy heavens above an “angry sky” or pray to a “jealous” or “loving” god, and in doing so bring nature and god down to our level (for we certainly can empathize with anger, jealousy, and love).

We might even say we know the mind of nature and the motivation of god. And in doing so the world becomes tinged with familiarity, less complicated, more comfortable, and comprehensible - whether that understanding has any basis in reality or not. According to Freud this is only the beginning of our personification, for our motivation is much deeper in that we childishly believe one way to influence events is to establish a personal relationship with nature. Freud wrote, “...It is in fact natural to man to personify everything that he wants to understand in order later to control it.”<sup>vi</sup>

Anthropomorphism has always been part of the theatre. Fragments of a lost play by Aeschylus (c. 525 BCE– c. 456 BCE) state that the earth “is filled with love” and that it, “longs for blissful union with the sky.”<sup>vii</sup> The Mystery plays of the middle ages personified death, beauty, good deeds, as well as winter, water and wine. Some critics degrade such anthropomorphism as “pathetic fallacy,” but it is at the heart of the theatre, for the theatre is the ultimate personification. We go beyond simple similes and metaphors to present characters, which might be thought of as walking, talking personifications.

The sciences, unlike the art of theatre and religion, are not skilled at anthropomorphism. It would be quite absurd if a cytologist said that a cell keeps its genomic information consistent when it replicates because it's lonely and wants more of its own kind to keep it company. Perhaps scientists would find greater success in our society (where according to the latest Gallup poll only 39 percent of Americans believe in the theory of evolution) if they did.

Yet the sciences, unlike religion, are unparalleled at discovering new structures. Except perhaps newly created religions, the vast majority of the world's faiths rely on revealed word, in other words ancient structures and themes. And although it can be argued that

religions do change, adapt and even evolve over time, (read Bart E. Ehrman's book Misquoting Jesus to learn how the Bible has been rewritten) their ability to do so is often held in check by the presumptive authority of the past – in other words, assumed structures and themes. These “primitive” structures, according to Milton Rokeach in the Three Christs of Ypsilanti, “are not open to discussion or controversy. Either they do not come up in conversation because everyone shares them or everyone takes them for granted.”<sup>viii</sup>

If science leads the way in human discovery of new structures but lacks the ability to humanize its findings, and religion humanizes almost everything but lags behind in the discovery of new structures, where do the arts and particularly the art of theatre stand? Art and theatre are the missing link, for they have both the ability to find new structures and the dexterity to humanize the results. For example, when scientists discover a combination of genes that results in a human being born homosexual, most religions are forced to embrace their fixed beliefs. On the other hand, the arts (if they are uncensored and funded) are free to take the information, give it a humanized structure, and broadcast it to the people. And if it is done well, perhaps change society's understanding of life.

Yet it must always be understood that the humanized structures, which the arts, including theatre, create, are only illusion. Writer, critic and biographer Joseph Wood Krutch wrote that structures like, “tragedy and comedy and farce do not represent life as it was ever lived by a group of people but only the various forms towards which various people or various societies have endeavored *unsuccessfully* to aspire.” (Italics added) He goes on to say, “Tragedy may exist in the pages of Racine and comedy may exist in the pages of Congreve, but neither can exist except upon premises invented by the author for the purpose of constructing a world far more *regular* and *simple* than the real one.”<sup>ix</sup> (Once again, italics added) For most of us existence is a poorly structured story full of sound, fury, and quiet desperation where we seldom defeat our antagonists, rarely achieve self-knowledge, or unearth beauty, happiness, and meaningful endings. We therefore flock to art, entertainment, and religion for another hit of illusion (i.e. structure).

Freud said that religion was not the “precipitates of experience or end-result of thinking” but an illusion that represents, “the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.” He goes on to say, “What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes. In this respect they come near to psychiatric delusions.”<sup>x</sup> It might be argued that theatre, being similar to religion, doesn't help our understanding of reality but in fact reduces it by presenting us with only dreams and illusions (For more read Why Literature is Bad for You by Peter Thorpe, Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts by Rousseau, Pensées by Pascal, or Republic by Plato). When we humanize, we are only making assumptions. This is what Herbert Marcuse in One Dimensional Man might call “linguistic abridgments”; he goes on to say that such abridgements, “indicate an abridgment of thought.”<sup>xi</sup>

Not only is there no empirical evidence that nature or the gods have human qualities, there is less evidence that our humanizing them deepens our understanding of their true nature (or of their existence). The same is true of the structures that are presented in art

and theatre. They are illusions. But illusions that are created in the arts differ from religion in one critical way, and that is in the arts the illusions (delusions) come to an end. It is sometimes said that the performing arts are different from other arts because they are limited by time - they have a beginning and end. But this is true of all the arts. The Mona Lisa begins when you look at her and ends when you divert your eyes - what is different about the performing arts is that *when* they begin and end is controlled by the artist.

Directors, artists, actors, playwrights, dancers, musicians and designers are perhaps more honest for they are never so bold (as is religion) to insist that you carry the illusions into the outside world – into reality. What is reality? “Reality,” said science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, “is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away.”<sup>xii</sup> And the theatre is perhaps the most honest, for we always admit that the “traffic of our stage” is in fact a false impression.

As we leave a performance we know that we are entering a world that is less structured (or too structured), and perhaps, once the rush of a good play wears off, that is the reason a light melancholia comes over us. We know that real life will never measure up. Saint John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) the Archbishop of Constantinople who preached the destruction of the theatre, said, “Returning home from the theatre, your house seems to you to be plain, your wife ceases to be attractive, since she is not as beautiful as the actress whom you applauded, and you take out your ill humor on your immediate family.”<sup>xiii</sup>

This honesty is perhaps the theatre’s strength. For the illusion ends as the house lights rise and the congregation leaves the place of false impressions and enters the real world. The stark contrast between illusion and reality, between gelled lights and moonlight (or sunlight if it is a matinee), can lead to self-awareness. Unlike religion that demands that one live, believe, or have faith in the illusion, artists ask, often demand, that the audience give up the illusion of what *might be* and face what *is*. In short, all theatre, all art, unlike religion, is to a certain extent, Brechtian.

The shattering of theatrical illusion can only happen if there is dramatic a difference between what is staged and what the people commonly believe. Too often theatres today produce comfortable plays made to reinforce the audience’s values. Driven by box office, or community standards, or the fear of lost patrons, we fill our seasons with *Tuna Christmas* and *Nutcracker* instead of plays that promote criticism, thought, or political discernment. Jerry Mander in his book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* wrote that without, “alienation” the audience’s “involvement is at an unconscious level, the theatergoer absorbing rather than reflecting and reacting. Brecht argued that becoming lost or immersed in the words, fantasies and entertainments of theatre was preparation for similar immersion in words and fantasies of theatrical leadership: Hitler.”<sup>xiv</sup>

This is not to say that all theatres should produce Brecht’s plays, but that we need to question what separates the theatre from religion. How can we as artists wake the audience and make them think? Using Brecht’s staging techniques is one method, but we

can also choose plays that do not merely mirror the audience's values – in other words, plays that help make what is familiar to the audience, unfamiliar, and what is unfamiliar, familiar. Today in America many theatres pay their bills by immersing the audience in entertainment rather than making them reflect and react. This compromise is perhaps forgivable and unavoidable in the world of non-profit theatre where funding is inconsistent and fragile, but it is a transgression when it is done, semester after semester, by tenured college professors who have fixed budgets and low production costs.

The audience who is even moderately aware of the juxtaposition between theatrical fantasy and reality is forced to ask questions that have no easy answers. Instead of predetermined answers based on predetermined questions (as so many of our children experience with No Child Left Behind and Sunday School activities) theatre audiences can be exposed to questions that have no fixed answers. This happens because, like scientists, artists have the ability to test their themes, rewrite, restage, and rethink as new testable observations about the world are revealed (assuming the arts and the theatre are free of censorship). But the testable nature of art does not end with the artist for once art is presented, not only do scholars, critics and reviewers analyze the results but so do the audience. Art, like science, is always being assembled and disassembled as new ideas are tried, tested, and abandoned. Doubt, the keystone of the sciences, is also the keystone of the arts. And only a few structures stand the test of time.

The sciences have advanced human understanding of nature, thousands of different religions have projected a human face on to god (and pursued our need for “miracles, mystery, and authority”) but it is the arts that allow us to both find updated structures and humanize the changing world by showing us fleeting illusions and then forcing us to wake up to reality.

The art of theatre, like science, leads to a sense of reality, which can stimulate the rational operation of the intellect and imagination (not illusion). Intellectual imagination can lead to new answers to the problems of life, which in turn lead to ethics - not predetermined morals based on the presumptive authority of ancient people, but new principles that help us deal with our perception of reality, as we perceive it today.

Perhaps the arts are an “abridgment of thought” or a “pathetic fallacy” and nature has no purpose, intention or design. But if we set all of nature to zero, in other words if we assume that nihilism or H. P. Lovecraft's Cosmicism (A philosophy that states that there are no divine presences and we humans are completely insignificant in the vast cosmos) as the standard, then art and in particular the art of theatre, shows itself as the missing link which can lead us to understand new, (real or imagined) structures, themes and morals.

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Bios

Lou Anne Wright is an actor and certified teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework and William Missouri Downs a playwright who's plays have been produced all over the world and published by Samuel French. Together they wrote the books *The Art Of Theatre* published by Wadsworth (an introduction to theatre book used at over 120 universities) and *Playwriting From Formula To Form* published by Harcourt Brace. Both are professors of theatre at the University of Wyoming.

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