

ATHE Religious Panel Text-Script

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Abstract

The following is the text and transcript (text-script) from the *Association of Theatre in Higher Education* (ATHE) Religious Scholars Panel, whose conference theme for 2019 was Scene Changes. Drawing upon the arts-based approach of A/r/tography for qualitative inquiry, the author theorizes the metaphorical imagery of scene changes as it relates to spiritual teleportation. Spiritual teleportation uses material means to help an audience member see the immaterial through their imaginative Theo-logos (the conceptual imagery one uses to discuss the incommunicable attributes of God). The magic of a well-crafted scene change is not necessarily in the setting it creates, but the interlude between-the-scenes that illuminates the spectator's ability to see a reality they have never realized.

Keywords: Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Christianity, Living Inquiry, Metaphor, Scene Changes, Qualitative Research

Scene Change as a Means of Spiritual Teleportation

I want to thank ATHE and my fellow panelists. While I do not have an MFA, I do consider myself to be an A/r/tographer, which stands for artist, researcher, and teacher, and I always try to conduct living inquiry from various shows that I have been a part of producing. Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) wrote “A substantial body of literature on arts-based forms of research demonstrates scholars’ recent endeavors to theorize the production of the arts as a mode of scholarly inquiry” (p. 897). So, I am going to talk about a time when I was the Production Manager for a high school musical. Gassner (1953) wrote:

It is in the matter of shifting that ingenuity is taxed to the utmost... Methods of scene shifting must be reliable, labor-saving, and swift... With proper planning and a properly rehearsed crew, the most complex scene shifts can be executed in one minute or less. (pp. 321, 815)

That was the standard I used when I was producing the high school musicals; scene changes must happen in under a minute. If anyone has watched a high school musical, one knows just how discombobulated their scene changes can be. There are loud noises of set pieces banging into things, someone getting scolded in a very loud whisper voice, and overall alarums and excursions abound. Meanwhile, the audience is just sitting there in the dark being taken entirely out of the show. The synchronization of a well-executed scene change can add so much momentum to any show giving the audience a seamless transition into an imaginary reality. However, as Gassner noted, it is very taxing.

It started with contracting a professional to train our set builders in the faux reality of stage design. Having construction workers volunteer their time building each set piece was nice, except many of the sets were built to code, so to speak, and were not functional for moving

swiftly — this was the one time I wanted construction workers to literally cut corners to make everything run faster. The sets were intentionally redesigned to be smaller and modular in order to link up with additional pieces flown in from above. What expedited the process was adding push poles and handles at just the right ergonomic spots, so students could quickly move bulky items in and out of the wings and onto their marks.

This presented another challenge because the same students moving the pieces were also acting in the show, so only the stage manager on stage right and assistant stage manager on stage left were on comms. The cue-to-cue rehearsals were chaotic. There were collisions and confusion, not to mention, the batten boys pulling ropes as fast as they could, made everyone feel as if they were under a guillotine because the curtain was coming down no matter what. The most frustrating part was that the transitions were still not happening fast enough. The biggest issue was the delay in the relay of the cue from stage right to stage left, while only a split second, it would throw off the entire synchronization of the show. To remedy this situation, we installed LED cue lights on stage right and stage left. Now the stage manager could sit at her station and cycle through three colors: Red for when the scene was up, Yellow for standby, and Green for go. Everyone could see the lights and moved precisely at the flick of a switch. The scene changes ran efficiently and added amazing energy to the show.

I realized scene changes are not just a mechanism to move the show along but also means to move the audience along with it. I will never forget being at the Pantages Theatre in Toronto and watching the first scene change in *Phantom* where the chandelier lifted over my head as the drapes were pulled away to reveal the angelic proscenium and I was teleported to a new time and place in that space. Chambers (2018) in *Theatre Journal* wrote, “Scenic transitions are a dynamic dance, and all the rehearsal and repetition, creativity and tradition, expectation and

experimentation can help to create the conditions in which we might perceive the invisible-made-visible (para. 8).

How can I, as a Christian teleport my audience? My class in higher ed and my congregants of the house church I lead. How can I use the materials of this earth to display something spiritual and eternal? In a flash, in a moments time, give my audience a glimpse of the divine. Pastor Eugene Peterson (2011) averred:

The artist has eyes to connect the visible and the invisible... doing what art does – using the sensory (material, sound, texture) to give access to mystery... to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the vast world of beauty that inhabits, underlies, and permeates space and time, place and each person. The Holy. (pp. 164, 176)

I have a friend who is a painter, and she tells prospective students that she does not just teach you to paint the tree but to paint the air in the tree. That is what I am after. A veritable visualization. An ontological orientation, as Buber (1999) would call it. A bricolage of something beatific.

Yet, I am well aware of the incommunicable attributes of God. How can finite human beings describe the infinitely indescribable (Grudem, 1994)? I suggest one way is through what I call Imaginative Theo-logos. Tolkien said, “Slipping into an imaginary world shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives” (as cited in Burson & Walls, 1998, p. 167). Lewis (1980) said, “What you think is one thing; what you imagine while you are thinking is another... We are invited to restate our belief in a form free from metaphor and symbol. The reason we don’t is that we can’t” (p. 133). Interestingly, those two met at a faculty meeting and spent the entire night talking. Around 4 am when Lewis returned home, he wrote this to his friend, “We began on metaphor and myth... [Continued] on Christianity: a good long, satisfying talk in

which I learned a lot... Then finally drifted back to poetry and books” (as cited in Taylor, 2016, para. 8 & 9). In my opinion, that is the compilation of the Bible, this Holy Library containing myth, metaphor, poetry, and the history of Jesus Christ.

The scene shifted for Lewis. He went from atheist to theist, theist to Christian, Christian to Christian Apologist because I believe he saw Jesus mastering the power of the metaphor better than anyone else. That was the method he used to teleport his audience. In Matthew 13, Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like... is like... is like... he used earthly materials: a mustard seed, yeast, and some pearls, to describe the spiritual. I believe this method fits with conceptual metaphorical theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Jesus used familiar frameworks his followers would have recognized. Many of his followers were fishermen, so when Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a net, these were materials they interacted with every day now imbued with spiritual symbolism. The disciple's touch and taste could transcend the temporal. Allowing the audience to use their imagination to see a reality they never realized. In that brief moment, they were teleported. A scene had changed. Cambridge theologian Janet Soskice (1985) opined:

Christian theology has suffered in modern times from an inability to explain its traditional reliance on metaphor to an audience intellectually formed by empiricism... Metaphor is a unity of subject-matter, and a plurality of associative networks [that] generate new perspectives... In our stammering after a transcendent God, we must speak metaphorically or not at all. (p. 140)

To summarize, there is no doubt that metaphors move us; it is where I get the term teleportation. The audience sits stagnant, while their entire being is transported to another dimension. Dramaturgs will say this is due to the setting of the drama, but I suggest it is also what happens in between-the-scenes. Secondly, materials matter. I tell my house church all the

time that we will never, ever, ever build a building. I want to use our homes as the primary means of displaying this incorporeal reality. No more fellowship halls, but family dining rooms where communion in community can take place. Lastly, it is challenging to shift someone's perspective. At the time, parents could not understand 10-hour rehearsals that interfered with AP classes and midterms and extracurriculars on the weekend, but when they saw the show, their attitudes changed. During this entire process, I tried to communicate our vision. The vision was love for our audience member. If we genuinely love them, we do not want them sitting too long in the dark.

In closing, Jesus illuminates the interlude as we oscillate between the temporary and the timeless. It is like having cue lights in the wings of this world's stage. Matthew 4:16-17 said:

The people living in darkness have seen a great light, and for those living in the shadowland of death, light has dawned. From then on, Jesus began to preach, repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near! (Homan Christian Standard Bible)

The word repent is metanoia, a scene shift of the mind (Senge, 2006). Also notice, that the kingdom of heaven is near, not here. It is not fully actualized. There is still a gap in between. Oh, how glorious are the gaps! In order to fully realize it we need the imaginative Theo-Logos of a child or as Kierkegaard put it, "As long as one child has enough imagination, even if waiting in a dark room lasts an hour [he will] be able to keep [his] soul at a high level, at the peak of anticipation" (as cited in Hong & Hong, 2000, p. 177).

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