a Calling to the Stage

Performing with Excellence for the Lord

A His Company publication
Actor's Version

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preface

This book is not for everyone. A professional actor performing on the stages of the New York theatre would find its counsel to be rather insulting. *Church* theatre, however, is not typically peopled by professionals, but by dedicated amateurs willing to risk playing the fool because of their love for the Lord. They are motivated not by fame, the hope of adulation or wealth, but by a personal and corporate devotion to God.

The dedicated amateur's training—as well as the training for their directors—is often limited to that offered by their high school drama coach, and may have occurred ten or twenty years in the past. They are often not self-starters, but require constant coaching, direction, encouragement and prodding. They welcome generous, often meticulous instruction, and without it would probably run screaming from the stage—or never show up at all.

This book makes no claim of universal appeal, but has been written for the possibly experienced, but still amateur director and actor. It is based on practical methods that have been put into use many times—methods that work. This book has been written, most of all, for those who have accepted their talents as gifts from the Lord, to be used at *His* bidding, in *His* service, and to *His* glory alone.

For this reason, the reader will not find the word "volunteer"—not used in a kind way, that is—anywhere in the pages that follow.

Church drama ministries—indeed, churches in general—have been infected with a philosophy of volunteerism. This is revealed in remarks such as "What do you expect—they're only volunteers," or "You can't really demand much from volunteers." From the lips of committee chairpersons, to music and drama directors, these words are used repeatedly to excuse the shoddy behavior and performance of people under their direction. But no matter how you approach it, brothers and sisters, we are anything but volunteers.

You could approach it from the perspective of *return on one's efforts*. Volunteers work for free; they put nothing in the bank from their labors. But the faithful, humble, committed servant of God has a bank account filled with daily deposits. Whether washing dishes in the church kitchen, sweeping the front steps, balancing the church's books, reading Scripture in the Sunday morning service or singing the biggest solo in the Christmas musical, the believer who serves his or her God with excellence is the best-paid person around.

You could also approach it from the *servanthood* perspective, understanding that we were purchased by a Master whom we now must serve. We don't "volunteer" to serve Him; we serve out of obedience—no less an obedience than that which caused Abraham to lift the knife over the head of his only son.

> Or do you not know that…you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.
>
> *1 Corinthians 6:19-20*

The foundational philosophy of His Company—that out of which everything in the pages that follow derives—is that every child of God has, by the sacrificial blood of Christ, been purchased. He no longer belongs to himself. Every skill, every passion, every capability emanates from, belongs to, and is to be used in the service of God and His kingdom.

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11:36

Volunteers? Not a one of us. We all have been purchased—and some of us have been purchased for the stage.

Acknowledgements

Most things issued from this desk are proofed and edited by my good wife, Linda. I am dependent on her wisdom and common sense to catch my mistakes, polish my prose, and add her opinions throughout all stages of a project. And her contributions to this project have been even more extensive. I am deeply indebted to Linda for her editing skills, her consistent attention to detail—and for not abandoning me to my own curious tangents. This book is made better because of her.

I would also like to thank the many pastors who have permitted us the privilege of serving the Lord before their congregations—and who have, on occasion, served as this writer's "editors-at-large" when they have graciously corrected an errant snippet of theology.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of all those who, over the years, have been numbered among the members and supporters of His Company. They lived what you are reading in this book, and it was while working with them that I developed the techniques passed along here. I thank them all: for their help, for putting up with me, and for all the warming memories.

Winterset, Iowa
August 2011

introduction

This book is as much the journal of an odyssey as it is a how-to manual. His Company has plotted its own course, striving always to remain true to its calling, rather than following the vagaries of the times. It has been called to a specific purpose, fitted into the vast array of God's holdings alongside those that may have a different calling. We were called, from the beginning, not just to entertain, but to deepen believers' understanding of God's word and His ways by illustrating Scripture and its principles.

What This Book is Not

Our work has always been geared toward the adult member of the Body of Christ. For this reason, while some of what follows may inadvertently apply, the reader will not find here techniques for evangelism, street theatre, mime or puppetry. And while children have often benefited from our performances, and may even have had small parts

within larger productions, our work has ultimately been for the adult (or at least older teenage) cast, produced with the adult audience in mind. So the reader will not learn from this volume how to create a drama ministry with or for children.

In fact, this book does not tell *anyone* how to create a "ministry"—that ill-used, abused, and overworked word so effortlessly bandied about today. Our philosophy is clean, uncluttered, and direct: God has called us to this work; therefore, we must be about it. He moves us about; He assigns us tasks large and small; He brings joy and sorrow; He both supplies and removes fellow workers. Circumstances may change, but the task remains the same: Declare God's truth from the stage. So that is what we do. If you choose to call that a "ministry," then that is your privilege. We just call it, well, our *calling*.

What This Book Is

What does follow is a telling of our story—from idea to realization, mistakes along with brilliant triumphs—and a systematic, applicable guide to our methods. Our way is not the only way to successfully produce drama in the church, but it is one way that works—and our history will mirror the beginnings of many groups.

The advice in this book is short on organization, but long on practical doing. We do not believe in serving the Lord by committee or board. If you do, then that is your privilege. It is our position, however, that committees invariably gum up the works, sapping the vital energy and creative juices that bring essential life to a work such as this.

This book assumes that the "director"—the person in charge of moving people about on stage—is also the person in charge of the overall acting company. In most churches of small to moderate size, and in some smaller independent companies as well, there is one person who serves as director, producer, governing board and cheerleader. But terminology should not be an obstacle to the use of the information offered here. No matter your title, if you are in a role of leadership in Christian drama, then this book is for you.

Also in this book, more often than not the masculine pronoun is used. This traditional literary device is employed for brevity alone, and should not be interpreted as any slight of those of the female persuasion.

An Actor's Version

A Calling to the Stage is published in two versions: one for the director, and one for the individual actor—the latter a subset of the former. This version of *A Calling to the Stage* is for the actor.

The methods in this book are applicable to a wide range of group types, including a company of players within a church or school, a choir that periodically draws from its ranks for dramatic roles, or an independent troupe, such as His Company. The book can be taken as a whole, or portions gleaned for individual use. It makes a good book-

shelf reference, as well as an excellent curriculum for instruction.

Part One tells the His Company story, and describes our philosophy of service to the Lord.

Chapter One: "A Brief History"
Chapter Two: "Our Philosophy"

Part Three is a handbook for the amateur actor that takes him or her through the production process from receiving a new script through curtain call.

Chapter One: "The Script in Hand"
Chapter Two: "The Reading Session"
Chapter Three: "Blocking"
Chapter Four: "Regular Rehearsals"
Chapter Five: "The Technical Rehearsal"
Chapter Six: "Dress Rehearsal"
Chapter Seven: "Opening Night"
Chapter Eight: "Curtain Call"

Part Four includes important chapters that take the actor and director deeper into the craft of the stage, and are meant to be used in conjunction with earlier chapters.

Emphasis One: "Memorization"
Emphasis Two: "The Character"
Emphasis Three: "Rehearsing at Home"
Emphasis Four: "Being Something One is Not"
Emphasis Five: "The Adaptable Actor"
Emphasis Six: "Costuming the Biblical Character"
Emphasis Seven: "True to the Word: A Case Study"
Emphasis Eight: "First Time: A Case Study"
Emphasis Nine: "On Excellence"

However you use this book, use it to God's glory. Just because his is a public, charismatic craft, the Christian actor is not excused from an attitude and motive of servanthood. We mount the stage to serve our Lord: the gift came from Him; the gift belongs to Him; the gift is to be used for Him.

part 1

The His Company Way

chapter one

A Brief History

NOT EVERY CHURCH DRAMA GROUP can or should slavishly follow the His Company way. Our history was our own, and our people a unique set of individuals. The methods put down in this book are not intended as a guaranteed path to success (however one measures success) for every group of thespians. Nor will its history be a perfect match for the beginnings of similar companies of players.

But that is not to say that the reader will not benefit from the telling. Our history is recorded here so that the Christian dramatist, director or actor might glean valuable information to encourage, inspire, edify—and that they might benefit as well from our many mistakes.

In the Beginning...

The history of His Company begins, appropriately, with an idea for

a sketch, and the tale is a poetic illustration of how we who carry around in us the Spirit of God are intrinsically bound together, and thereby influence the work of Christ's Kingdom.

Just why I wrote the monologue for the apostle Peter, *The Scarred Rock*, back in the early months of 1985 I can't say. But once it was completed, I handed it to the pastor for his thoughts on using the seven-minute sketch in one of our Sunday morning services. His response was both understated and ambitious. He not only liked the idea, but suggested that I write eleven more—one for each disciple—and he would schedule a series of sermons to match: one per week for three months.

The Twelve

The idea was both exciting and frightening. As unofficial assistant to our Music Minister, I had been writing narration and dialogue for our musical productions for several years, but I quickly saw that this would be a challenge of a different stripe. Not only would I need to be doing a lot of writing, but I would also have to line up actors and schedule overlapping rehearsals for all the sketches.

But the commission was accepted, and a schedule quickly worked out. I cast *The Scarred Rock* and began an eight-week schedule of rehearsals for that play. I established a routine that had me continuing to write the succeeding plays in their order, while directing the next to be performed. In the middle of each play's rehearsal schedule, I would cast and begin rehearsals for the next. On Sunday morning, August 11, 1985, *The Scarred Rock* was performed, and for the next eleven weeks a new sketch was performed every Sunday morning. At the time that the first sketch was being performed, the last in the series had not even been written.

His Company

Meanwhile, the process of casting these twelve sketches and monologues sparked a second idea. To cast these plays I had drawn from the list of usual suspects—those who had taken roles in various musicals and cantatas, and the odd larger play I had written and staged, such as *The Surrender* (1984). But there was something about the process of casting this succession of smaller plays that produced

the idea of creating an autonomous company of players that would do this sort of thing on a continuing basis, at many churches, rather than just the one.

As a result, on the evening of April 26, 1985 a group of seven or eight people assembled in Linda's and my home in San Diego, California. They (and others who were unable to attend) had all been invited to participate in mapping out a new idea: the creation of a Christian drama group to be called His Company.

During the course of that first meeting several points were discussed and agreed upon, with one of the more important decisions being that His Company would always be autonomous. We would remain independent, not under the jurisdiction of any one church or organization. The first reason for this decision was to ensure our freedom to minister to any and all denominations professing Jesus Christ as Lord. The second reason was that His Company would then not be governed by committee or pastoral fiat, free from church politics and cumbersome organizational restraint.

For more on the His Company philosophy of autonomy, see Chapter Two, "Our Philosophy," in this part.

Responsibility

This autonomy placed a greater responsibility on His Company to stay true to its calling. Since it had no pastor, no Board of Deacons or Elders keeping the group in line, it was incumbent upon its leaders and members to zealously guard its integrity: Every script would be judged against the undiluted truth of Scripture; our methods would be continually judged against the life of Christ and the teachings of His apostles. Our "Board" would be the pastors and music ministers who reviewed each of our scripts before scheduling us to perform.

For more on script integrity, see Emphasis Seven, "True to the Word," in Part Four.

Even within the group, His Company was not organized by committee or run by consensus. We did assign responsibility for various departments to individuals, such as wardrobe, makeup, or props design. But the group was run, from the outset, as a benign dictatorship. It was even agreed that auditions for roles in new productions would be superfluous, since I already knew the strengths and limitations of each actor—and generally wrote each script with specific individuals already in mind. At one point I tried to delegate to a company manager responsibility for contacting churches for performances, but that

met with only limited success, since the pastor would invariably require a level of authority that could only come from the group's leader.

A Commission to Serve

So we were off and running. Over the next few years we gradually added more personnel, and performed around the San Diego area doing sketches and one-acts for worship services, and the occasional larger musical, three-act play, or evening of drama. By 1990 His Company consisted of seventeen people—including some who served not on stage, but only in roles of support, behind the scenes.

During this period, we

- never charged for any performance or service, nor asked for a donation—although we sometimes were given voluntary love offerings;
- never charged anyone to become a member of the group, nor "passed the hat" for expenses—although on a few occasions some members volunteered to cover some expenses for props, etc.;
- never had our own theatre or home base—although we accepted the gracious use of the facilities of our home church for most rehearsals;
- never held auditions—either for productions, or to join the group;
- never performed any script written by someone else.

Curtain

In the winter of 1990/91, Linda and I sold our house in San Diego, packed up all our earthly belongings and moved back to our home state of Iowa. Needless to say, at this point His Company—at least as it was originally conceived—ceased to exist. (Oddly enough, not one person of the company was willing to leave sunny Southern California to relocate with us to the Midwest. Funny, that.)

Some further explanation may be helpful regarding the last item in this list, referring to our script selection, which sounds frightfully self-serving. Certainly, since the one leading the group and directing most of the plays was, by trade, a writer, the natural process would be to perform his work. But beyond that, the Lord seemed to be telling us that, for whatever His reason, this was how He wanted it.

At one point we ordered a small booklet of three plays from the same house that had published several of my own scripts. But the period of several rehearsals held for two of these plays was so fraught with disaster and bizarre occurrences, that we could only conclude that we were not to be performing those plays.

From then on, we never even tried to use other scripts. Besides, most of our work was commissioned for a specific venue or occasion, and performed by a closed company (no open auditions). So it only made sense in these circumstances to write and perform our own work.

So at this point His Company became something different—in visible, human terms—from what it had been before. Now it would be smaller for a while, consisting of just two people: Linda and me. But this reduction in personnel in no way limited our work. Indeed, in some ways it freed it from many of the restraints imposed by working with a larger group.

For the next couple of years Linda and I performed in the local church we were attending (the congregation into which I had been born, lo so long ago), and I continued to fulfill commissions for new scripts. When we purchased our present home, and began searching God's will for a church home, He eventually drew us to a congregation in Des Moines. Once again, by talking to people and making ourselves available, we began again the process of taking Christian drama around to churches in the area. By the beginning of 1993 I had written a new Easter musical for our church (*Crown Him with Glory*), and Linda and I were performing sketches in the worship services.

Please Note: any reference in this book or at our web site to our "writing a musical" means that we compiled *existing music* and wrote new drama or narration to create a new package.

We do not compose or arrange music.

Through our work in the Easter musical, and through the gracious assistance of a member of the congregation in organizing a social evening in which we could present our credentials to a small group who might be interested, we brought into our work another couple—and set to performing some smaller pieces with them.

A Hard Lesson

Right about here, however, we—rather, I—made a fatal mistake.

The original incarnation of His Company, back in San Diego, had consisted of people who had worked with me for a number of years, in various capacities. I had sat next to them in choir; we had had them over for Bible Study, or dinner; and even before the creation of His Company, we had worked together with them in many other productions. They were friends, and out of this friendship grew a close bond that—without my realizing it at the time—was infused into His Company. I had become accustomed to their level of trust and respect, not realizing that that level of respect and trust was based on more than what we were doing at the time. They trusted me—not just because of my gifts, but because they knew me as a person.

None of this invaluable bond was transferred to Iowa. These were people to whom I was brand new, untried. Just maybe they could be impressed by my acting abilities or writing skills, but they didn't yet know me as a person. *They didn't yet know my heart.*

Regrettably, I forgot about this essential component and jumped in with both feet, expecting—no, *demanding* their respect and obeisance. I expected them immediately to share my level of dedication, my level of passion for the art; I expected servanthood where there was not yet even Lordship; I expected trust from individuals who as yet had no good reason to give it.

We continued to work as a team of four in and around the area, taking productions to several other churches, as well as continuing to perform in our own under the His Company name. In fact, we did some splendid work together. But there remained a fluctuating yet persistent level of tension in our midst—especially regarding what I saw as a proper level of commitment to rehearsals.

Meanwhile, my reputation in the congregation as a whole was deteriorating. Individuals in the music ministry, as well as others interested in drama, were pointedly rejecting my input and participation. Far from being respected, I was not even liked. I had bruised too many fragile sensibilities when I had pursued so strenuously my calling at the outset. I had pushed too hard, too fast, expected too much too soon. And it was eventually made clear to us that we were not to be forgiven these transgressions.

For these and other reasons, in January 1995 Linda and I left the church, and our ties to the other couple were severed. His Company was now back to just two.

But this was by no means the end of His Company. The Lord never promised anyone that the status quo would remain forever. He moves us about at will—*His* will—and often changes our job description at a moment when we are wallowing in what we believe to be defeat. God gifts us with certain abilities, and if we indeed call Him Lord and ourselves His servants, then we serve at His bidding, according to His desires.

> The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you."
>
> Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel.
>
> But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.
>
> Then the word of the Lord came to me saying,
>
> "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. "Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel."
>
> Jeremiah 18:1-6

Today—and Beyond?

In 1994 God began setting in place the necessary components for what His Company was to become. The list is too long (and potentially boring) to detail here, but by supplying the technology, the individuals, and the opportunity, the Lord changed His Company from a local performing group into a voice that could be heard around the world. Today, through technology as much His creation as the first man, we are able to continue writing, fulfilling commissions for new musicals and plays, and making all of these available to people and churches in all corners of the world.

A New Church

In 2006 the Lord brought to the church we were now attending a pastor who was eager to incorporate our abilities into the weekly services and seasonal productions. Since that time we have gradually—oh, so gradually—returned to serving on the stage in a local body.

The hard lessons learned the last time we tried to assimilate into a local church had not been forgotten. When we began attending this church we carefully, patiently waited for the Lord's leading, depending on Him to use us as He saw fit. For this reason, when we finally did take to the boards to perform (a Good Friday monologue by the apostle Peter), many in the congregation were shocked to discover we could do such a thing. Up to that point we had been so quiet and reserved, they had no clue that we possessed the requisite skills for performance.

Later we cautiously put another toe in the water by inviting anyone in the church interested in working with us to attend a series of training workshops. These would be based on the counsel contained in this book. Again, we remembered that one of the reasons our attempt to involve others at our previous church had ended so badly was that even those who were interested had no history with us. They not only didn't know us, and didn't know what would be expected of them, but they didn't know the important *why*. This time we would start from the ground up, ensuring that anyone working with us learned the essentials of the His Company way of doing things.

Response to the workshops was virtually nonexistent: only one person expressed a desire to perform with us. So, instead of holding workshops, we had our initiate read on her own the pertinent sections of this book. Before we took each incremental step in our first production together, we had her read the corresponding chapters in this book so she would know both the how and the why of the His Company process.

We performed several times with this person and one other, but as of this writing His Company consists of two people: Linda and me. We are comfortable with this, as it is clear the Lord's hand is in it. Obedience to Him is of first importance, and we have no desire to pursue anything that is not part of His will. So we have continued to write and perform in our local church, as well as publish new scripts at our web site.

What awaits us in the future? We can say only: His will be done.

By God's Grace

Because of a simple request by a local pastor back in 1985, we began something that continues to evolve, yet remains true to our original call to glorify God through the medium of the stage. Through God's patient grace—and by the power of His Spirit—His Company continues to make a small contribution to the exposition of God's word through the dramatic arts.

chapter two

Our Philosophy

It should become apparent even to the most casual reader of this book that His Company follows its own path. We neither condemn those who take an alternate route, or apologize for ours. Rather, our position is that while others have been called to serve the Lord in *their* way, we have been called to serve Him in *this* way.

And what is this way? What is the His Company way?

Foundational Principles

The His Company philosophy rests on a three-legged stool of *Excellence, Scriptural Integrity*, and *Servanthood*.

Excellence

> Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.
>
> *1 Corinthians 15:58*

For more on the His Company philosophy of excellence, see Emphasis Eight, "On Excellence," in Part Four.

Every few years we marvel at the prowess of those athletes that participate in the Olympics. We applaud the successful athlete who dedicates him or her self to excellence—as well we should. It is a good and admirable thing to commit oneself to do something to the very best of one's ability. But then, why do we not likewise honor this same dedication to excellence when it comes to serving our God? If we admire this trait in athletes who pursue physical excellence for a medallion, why do we not pursue this same excellence as we serve our God for His eternal reward?

Why are we so casual with the things of God? Is it because He is so gracious, so forgiving, that we feel comfortable placing Him at the bottom of our list of priorities? Why do we work harder at our golf game than we do at being a deacon or an usher? Why do we spend more time sitting in front of the TV than we do kneeling in prayer? Why do we place soccer and Little League before choir practice? And where have we come up with this damnable "Sunday School skit" mentality that says it is all right to just haphazardly throw something together at the last minute, then excuse our bad manners with, "Oh well, God will bless."

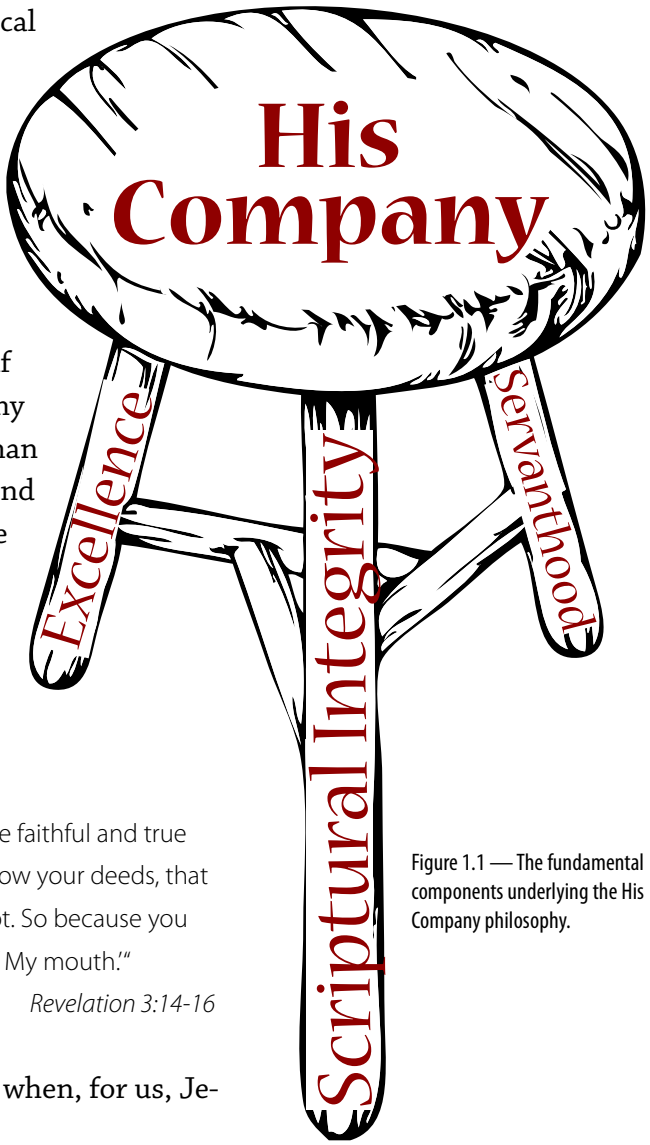


Figure 1.1 — The fundamental components underlying the His Company philosophy.

> "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.'"
>
> *Revelation 3:14-16*

Why is the demonstration of our faith so mediocre when, for us, Jesus Christ gave His very best?

The philosophy of His company is grounded in our pursuit of excellence. This should not be confused with the errant pursuit of perfection, which can be as insidious as its opposite. Excellence does not demand perfection, but honest effort. Neither should the pursuit of excellence be confused with the heretical buying of God's favor. We do not earn our way into salvation, or gain God's grace, by working harder. Our work in His name is rather an offering of praise for what He has already done.

> Though youths grow weary and tired,
> And vigorous young men stumble badly,
> Yet those who wait for the Lord
> Will gain new strength;
> They will mount up with wings like eagles,
> They will run and not get tired,
> They will walk and not become weary.
>
> *Isaiah 40:30-31*

Soaring does not happen accidentally. Excellence is not something that just springs from us unattended. We serve our Lord with excellence because we intend to, because we love Him so much that we are compelled to serve Him to the very best of our ability.

Excellence serves with the attitude "I will give the Lord my very best, because He gave His best for me."

Scriptural Integrity

> All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.
>
> *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

For an example of His Company's practical application of Scriptural integrity, see Emphasis Seven, "True to the Word," in Part Four.

God's word is our source. Our constant prayer is that every word written, every line of dialogue spoken, every intent of our heart will square with Scripture—and that anything that does not, will evaporate as quickly as it is uttered, forgotten in the mists of all error.

God's word is also our handbook, containing everything we need by way of principle, statute, guideline and truth to glorify Him in our work.

Servanthood

> Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.
>
> *1 Corinthians 6:19-20*

Servanthood is not something to be endured, but something to be embraced. Christians who struggle with their role under Christ imagine that becoming His servant means that they will have to go without something. They imagine certain rights and privileges will be removed when they submit to Him. But in fact, the opposite is true. When we release ourselves from those invisible bonds that hold us back from Christ, our world of possibilities actually widens. When we practice and live servanthood we gain freedoms never before imagined: freedom from worry, freedom from despair; freedom to rest in the arms of someone more wise, more experienced, more compassionate than anyone else we know.

Servanthood is an attitude, methodically nurtured, that changes our natural inclination toward selfish, protective behavior into a yearning to see and experience every moment of life from God's perspective. It doesn't come naturally; it must be practiced and developed.

Servanthood represents a conscious choice to submit to God's will, and in that, it has a close relationship with lordship. Acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord—confessing that He, and He alone, is the one in charge of our life—is the key to peace in the midst of a selfish, self-centered world.

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

1 Peter 4:10

In the Real World

How are these foundational principles played out in the setting of church drama? Here is where the His Company way may sharply veer off-course from the path taken by others, for His Company has never pretended to be an all-inclusive, egalitarian society; our goal has never been to make a place for everyone wishing to join. Rather, our goal has been to glorify God to the very best of our ability, and, by definition, not everyone will subscribe to that purpose.

Years ago a very talented woman expressed an interest in becoming a part of His Company. I knew her well; she was an excellent musician, accomplished vocalist, and could hold her own with any of us onstage. In terms of sheer talent, she would have made a substantial contribution to the whole.

But I never invited her to join.

From past experience with her (prior to the formation of His Company), I knew that she was a bit of a prima donna. She was often "under the weather" with something or other, and would crawl into rehearsals with a hang-dog look on her face—as if she were making the ultimate sacrifice to attend. On those rare occasions when she did show up strong and healthy, she generally showed up late, or at the very last moment, and whenever work needed to be done after rehearsal, mysteriously discovered some pressing matter that demanded her presence elsewhere.

In His Company, talent does not trump attitude.

In another instance, in which both talent and attitude were both present, a young woman joined through the auspices of another member of the group. She was immensely talented—as an actress, an artist, and makeup artist. She also had a healthy attitude about rehearsals, and I do not recall her ever giving problems in the area of pulling her load in the group.

Ultimately, however, she left, and I did not ask her to stay, for she was not a Christian. Because she was not a believer, she could not possibly participate in our purpose for existence. Her motives could never rise higher than a simple love for the craft. I came to learn, over time, that the possibility that we might witness to her for her own salvation was overwhelmed by the disruption she brought to the Spiritual integrity of the group. And from then on I determined only to include individuals that professed faith in Christ.

In His Company, talent does not trump motive.

If His Company had not been independent, and if either one of these

women had been the daughter of a church committee member—or worse, a daughter of the pastor—we would have been obliged to include her in the group.

The Actor

No actor was ever added to the His Company roster by sheer talent alone. No actor ever became a part of the company simply because he or she asked to be included. No auditions were held, since they would not have revealed the most important prerequisite for membership: the condition of the heart. For this reason, anyone wishing to join His Company was asked one question only: "Why?" Their response to that one question was a determining factor in their inclusion.

As the one in charge, I led His Company with the same philosophy I had used for years in other pursuits. To anyone expressing an interest in participating, I would

The His Company way is to choose quality over quantity. integrity over social order.

- give each person all the news up front, the good and the bad; tell them everything that would be expected from them;
- give them the opportunity to gracefully opt out;
- if they stayed, expect from them their very best; expect dedication, commitment, and excellence; expect them to work without pay, but as if they were getting rich.

This rather hard-edged philosophy was played out in the mechanics of production—both behind the scenes and in the lights. No actor that had failed to learn his lines ever heard the director say, "Oh, that's all right. Just try to have them down by dress rehearsal." No one showing up late for rehearsal ever heard their director say, with a smile, "I'm just pleased you were able to make it tonight." And no actor ever heard the director say, after a bad rehearsal, "Well, that's good enough. After all, you're just volunteers."

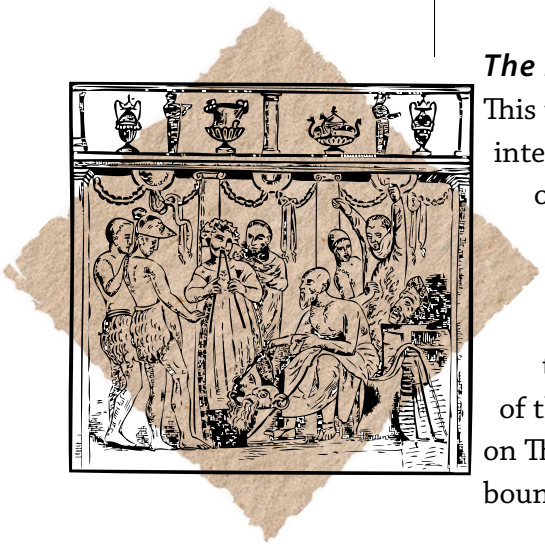
From the beginning of every project, all the actors were told what would be expected of them. As much as was humanly possible, they were given all the information about the production: the size and nature of their part, a general idea of the rehearsal schedule, and an idea

of the number of performances that would follow. Every possible bit of good and bad news about their participation was given them. They were then afforded the opportunity to check their calendar; their family, church, and work obligations; and their desire to take the part.

If the actor expressed a desire to proceed, they were given the script, and, at the earliest possible date, a detailed rehearsal calendar—which they were expected to immediately reconcile with their prior commitments. If conflicts were discovered, adjustments from either side were negotiated. Once any schedule conflicts were resolved, the actor was again given the opportunity to bow out of the production.

The actor who, at this point, agreed to take the role, would be expected to fulfill his or her commitment. As if they were a highly paid, professional actor signing a long-term Equity contract, they were held to their obligations to the production. They were expected to attend all rehearsals, showing up on time. They were expected to learn their lines, their blocking, and any other responsibilities assigned them. They were expected to behave as a professional, and cooperate with their fellow actors. In short, they were expected to be fully committed to the job set before them, and to perform their role with dedication and excellence.

Family emergencies could always occur; adjustments would have to be made for unexpected illness. But those who eventually demonstrated a disdain for this working philosophy were not asked to participate again.



The Director

This tough (by modern standards) philosophy of excellence, Scriptural integrity, and servanthood was not a one-way street: The same level of commitment and dedication to excellence was expected from the director and leaders as well.

As each production moved into the rehearsal process, it was up to the director to abide by the agreements worked out with each of the participants. If an actor had a regular obligation with family on Thursday nights, for example, then that evening would be out-of-bounds for calling a special rehearsal. If an actor or crew member had

given a future date at which they would not be available, performances would not be scheduled for that time.

Just as each actor was expected to arrive at the rehearsal prepared and ready to work, the director as well was expected to arrive prepared, ready to lead the others in a productive time of rehearsal. He would have organized his intentions, worked through each phase of the rehearsal so as to use the time efficiently. He would organize the time based on the premise of making it as convenient as possible for everyone involved: if someone wouldn't be needed until later in the rehearsal, they would be given a later call time.

In keeping with the aforementioned philosophy, the director worked everyone hard—but always respected the agreements made at the beginning of the process.

Independence

Once His Company was formed under that name, it remained autonomous—independent of any one church, denomination, or organization. This was the only way to ensure the standard of excellence and integrity on which the group had been established.

As it happened, most of our members were also members of the same church, but that was the result of our prior relationships—not a prerequisite for being a part of the group. As we operated under the His Company name, our common church was treated much the same as any other: it was offered our productions, and the pastor or music minister always reserved the right not to schedule any in which they weren't interested. We received no sanction or funds from them, but did gratefully accept their offer of rehearsal space (as we also did from other churches).

Finances

In churches and drama companies, just as in marriages, one of the most troublesome obstacles to harmony can be finances—and the lack thereof.

Here again it is necessary for me to reiterate that the purpose of the

following is not to find fault with the way others meet their financial needs, but to describe the His Company way and to explain the reasons behind our methods.

Going Out

I recently received the following note from a drama team leader at a church in the United States:

> Lastly, I wondered if you have any information on: how to prepare a budget for your drama team (including supplies, resources needed). We are preparing a three-year projection. Our immediate needs are for 5 wireless mics. Our venues are indoors and outdoors (both for our church and outreach to the community). Any help you can provide would be great. I've searched all over the web and can't find anyone who has a basic budget.

I was ill-equipped to answer her query, as His Company never operated under those terms. We were not a department of a church, but independent; we were never governed by committee or board, but operated under a "benign dictatorship"; we had no budget, since there was never any income (we never charged for performances), nor were we included in a church's budget; we never had our own facilities, but were utterly itinerant. Our expenses were nominal, but as they presented themselves for essentials such as fabric, makeup, props, printing expenses, etc., my wife and I bore the expense on our own. Only on rare occasions, such as with larger productions, did some members of our company voluntarily chip in on some expenses.

You see, God's calling is usually specific and personal. *My* calling was to write, direct, perform, and to create and lead a company of Christian players—but that was *not* the calling of the rest of those in the group. Their calling was, for example, to use their acting gifts in the Lord's name—not necessarily to lead or be financially responsible for a group.

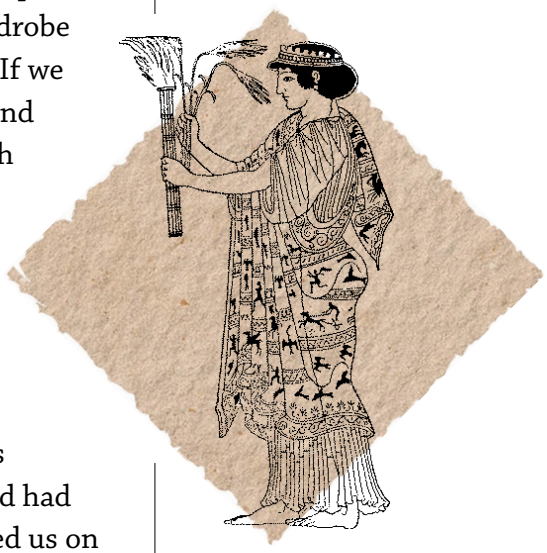
So our philosophy regarding the group's finances was that it was our responsibility. It was our calling (mine and my wife's), therefore the Lord would provide the means—which He always did. As a result, we never mapped out future plans based on our ability to raise

Many years ago I was introduced to a gentleman by a mutual friend and pastor. He was described as someone who was also in the process of putting together a Christian drama group. Upon meeting this person, I was primarily impressed by one thing: he wasn't yet doing it. Oh, he had a lot to say about it. He talked about forming committees, and forming a Board of Directors, and negotiating to rent a performance space. He spoke a lot about his "vision" for what he wanted to accomplish. But he wasn't actually doing it.

Having a vision is all well and good, but my advice to anyone who asks is to just get out there and do it. Don't wait for a larger group—just use what you have. Don't wait for a stage—perform wherever you can. Don't form a committee—call a church (or sit down with your own pastor) and schedule a performance. Don't wait until everything is all lined up perfectly—just get out there and do it!

Do what the Lord is calling you to do, and don't worry about what everyone else is doing.

funds. We worked with what we had, and when certain expenditures were necessary, we spent wisely and with frugality, always using our personal funds in conjunction with the God-given gifts of others. By this I mean that if we needed new costumes, our funds would purchase the fabric, but it then would be turned over to the wardrobe mistress, who had the God-given gift for sewing and design. If we needed light stands, my wife and I would buy the materials and hand them over to the one in the group gifted at making such things. When materials were needed for publicity purposes, we might ask one of the artists to design a logo, but would bear any expenses ourselves.



The philosophy of servanthood was—and of course remains—the determining factor. The company as a whole, as well as its individual members, had been gifted for the Lord's service. Those gifts did not belong to us, but to Him. The Lord had graciously given us the skills and abilities, then He had tapped us on the shoulder and said, "Now, this is what I'd like you to do with them." How could we, under these terms, expect someone else to pay the expenses of our assigned task? Since the individual actor had been called to serve on the stage, I could well expect him or her to serve with excellence and professionalism, since that was part of their calling. But I could not expect any of them to participate in *my* calling, by expecting them to foot the bill for the group as a whole.

Coming In

Expecting people to foot the bill is one thing, but graciously accepting what is voluntarily offered is another.

His Company never charged for anything we did. In conversation with churches, we never even brought up the subject; it simply was not part of the process. If the subject was raised by the person I was speaking with, I would restate our position that our service was being offered free of charge. If they pressed further about maybe giving us a love offering, I would let them know that we would gratefully accept their expression of thanksgiving, but that the offering of it would be left entirely to their discretion. After that, I would never raise the subject again—even if they subsequently did not give us a love offering.

So from time to time churches or other organizations would give us an expression of their appreciation in the form of cash. As these amounts never were more than our expenses, the funds were simply absorbed into the personal checking account from which our expenses were paid.

As stated earlier, we never passed the hat among the members of His Company. No one was expected to help with expenses. If they were asked to purchase items for the group, they presented us with the receipts and were reimbursed. But on a few occasions, such as when expenses rose higher than normal for a large production, a few voluntarily bore some of the production expense.

One instance in particular I recall fondly. During the first production of *The Essence of His Death*, our props and lighting man was asked to purchase materials to construct a fire ring, some fabric for painting and fashioning into "rocks," and wood to build two light stands. When he came to me with a fistful of receipts, he fanned them out like playing cards and, with a twinkle in his eye, told me to pick the one I would pay for; he would pay for the rest. The twinkle in his eye (I learned later) was from his knowing that I would try to select the most costly receipt, thus picking the longest in his hand—which I did. But only he knew that the longest receipt contained a long list of inexpensive nuts and bolts, while the shorter receipts contained just one or two more costly items.

Others in the group, as well, picked up the expense of items from time to time. And when people were asked to prepare food for longer rehearsals, rarely did they present receipts for their expenses. So we were blessed by working with individuals who shared the His Company philosophy of servanthood. And all was offered up to the Lord as an offering of praise.

Expressions of Thanksgiving

A humble spirit, however, when taken too far, can become an offense, as we learned at a number of churches we served.

It was our custom, when performing during the worship services at

churches, to pack up and leave immediately upon exiting the stage. This practice was based primarily on our desire to keep the focus on the *message* of what we had done, and to do nothing that would detract from the flow of the service as a whole. We also wished to avoid being the recipients of praise, preferring that any praise be directed upward to the Lord.

Leaders at more than one church, however, pointed out to us that to deprive their congregation of an opportunity to express its appreciation would be almost as bad as blatantly expecting it. It was important that they be given the chance to thank us for ministering to them.

At venues where this desire was expressed to us, we typically would change into our street clothes, then (depending on the physical design of the building) slip quietly into a seat at the back of the sanctuary. If the pastor or leader asked, we would stand and graciously receive their thanks. Once the service had ended, we would immediately pack up and leave. If someone chose to stop us and say something, we would respond with grace and courtesy, but we never stood around waiting for them to approach us. The His Company philosophy of service does not include taking bows for the work we have done. The pastor does not take a bow after he has delivered his message; the choir does not take a bow after the anthem. Likewise, those participating in the dramatic portion of God's worship do not take a bow after fulfilling their commission to serve.

On rare occasions, when the production design or venue virtually cried out for us to return to the stage for a curtain call, care was always taken by the use of remarks from the stage, or body language, to redirect the audience's praise from us up to the Lord.

The His Company Way

Put as succinctly as it can be stated, the His Company way is *God-oriented*. The vehicle is the stage, and there is a built-in passion for the craft. But the *purpose* is always to glorify God, which is accomplished, throughout, with an attitude of humility and servanthood.

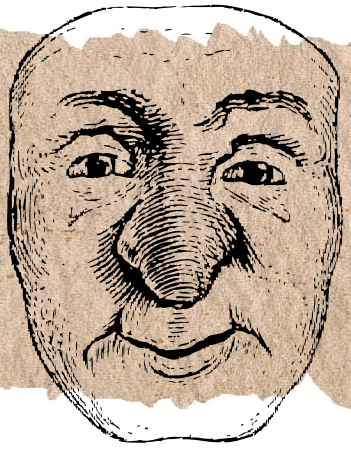
There is no higher calling than to serve the Lord; it is an extra joy to be given this privilege to serve from the stage. It is something to be embraced as a special reward, something heavenly that we are given to enjoy even before The Day.

May it be *His* name that is lifted up and glorified whenever you put on costume and greasepaint; may it be *His* Spirit that speaks through the lines you have memorized; and may every action and deed point the audience to Christ, the author and finisher of our faith.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:1-11

part 3



An Actor's Guide

chapter one

The Script in Hand

The Basics

- Highlight every line and stage direction for your character.
- Read to the point of understanding all Introductory Notes.
- In one sitting, read through the script several times, making sure that at least one of them is out loud.
- During your readings, write down any comments or questions you might have regarding your character, or the play in general.

Everything begins with the script. It is the foundation of every play. To be sure, the stage process is one of collaboration—every component from the director down to the stagehand is necessary. But it all begins with the script. Until humans are added, it *is* the play.

From the actor's perspective, the first step in the production of any new play is the moment at which the script is placed into his or her hand. And for many actors (both professional and amateur alike), the opening of a brand new script is a moment akin to Christmas morning for an eight-year-old. It is the beginning of something wonderful and rewarding—an almost mystical experience.

The actor's copy of the script is his guidebook, his road map, his sketchbook for the play or musical. Here he will chronicle his trek

through the mind of the author and the soul of the characters that inhabit the author's universe.

Approach every new script, in general, and your character, specifically, with an open mind—without any preconceived notions. Approach every new project with an attitude of discovery and an expectation of finding something new and fascinating.

Highlight

It seems a simple thing, too basic even to mention. But the simple practice of isolating your responsibilities from those of the other actors will go a long way toward smoothing the process for everyone.

One of the first things to do upon receiving your script is to sit down and highlight every one of your character's lines and every stage direction that refers to your character. This simple step will make it easier for you to learn your lines, make it easier for someone to *help* you learn your lines, and make it easier for you to quickly find your place when others are waiting.

Do not underline your lines; this will conflict with the underlining you will insert later for emphasis. Use a colored highlighter, instead, to mark your lines, or to mark the margin outside your lines of dialogue and directions.

Introductory Notes

If the play's author has included any descriptive notes on your character, they will usually be found either in a group with others near the beginning of the script—before the actual dialogue—or they will accompany your character's first entrance.

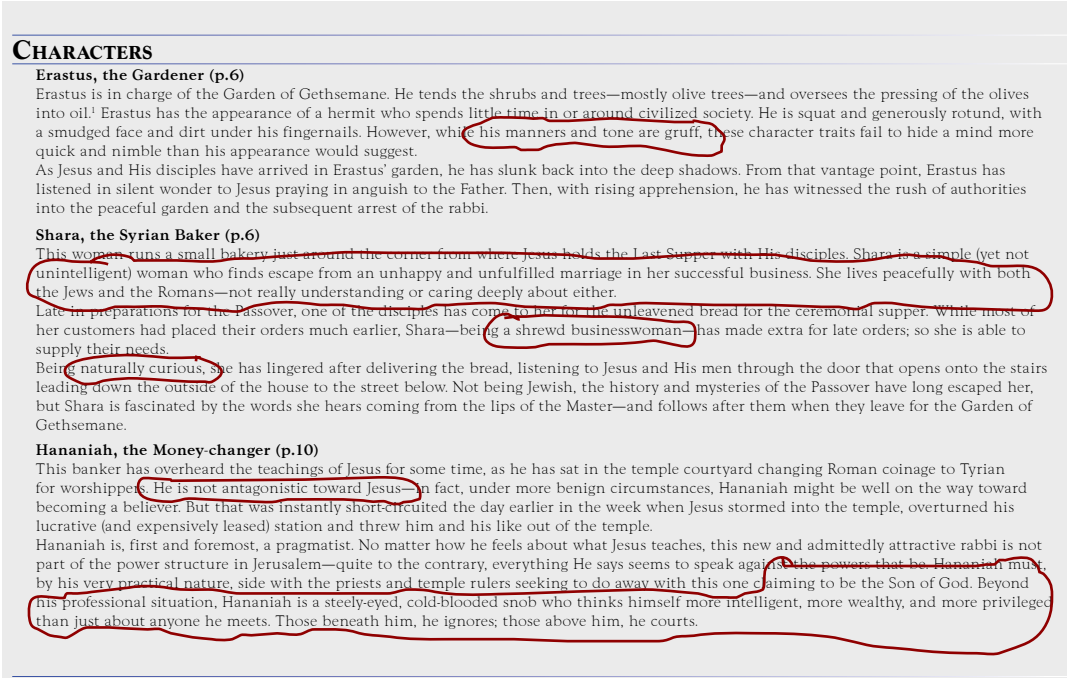
These notes by the author are the starting point for understanding your character. Any subsequent character development on your part should logically follow these.

Do not limit your reading to only those notes referring to your character. Read—and understand—everything about *every* character in

the play. You will soon be called upon to interact in a believable way with these other characters; it will be to your benefit—as well as the benefit of the other actors, and the play as a whole—to get to know these "people" as well as possible.

All notations you make in the script should be in pencil only.

During your reading of the introductory notes and character descriptions, circle or highlight the key words or phrases that describe each character, as in the following character descriptions from the His Company one-act, *Who do you say that I Am?*.



CHARACTERS

Erastus, the Gardener (p.6)
Erastus is in charge of the Garden of Gethsemane. He tends the shrubs and trees—mostly olive trees—and oversees the pressing of the olives into oil.[1] Erastus has the appearance of a hermit who spends little time in or around civilized society. He is squat and generously rotund, with a smudged face and dirt under his fingernails. However, while his manners and tone are gruff, these character traits fail to hide a mind more quick and nimble than his appearance would suggest.
As Jesus and His disciples have arrived in Erastus' garden, he has slunk back into the deep shadows. From that vantage point, Erastus has listened in silent wonder to Jesus praying in anguish to the Father. Then, with rising apprehension, he has witnessed the rush of authorities into the peaceful garden and the subsequent arrest of the rabbi.

Shara, the Syrian Baker (p.6)
This woman runs a small bakery just around the corner from where Jesus holds the Last Supper with His disciples. Shara is a simple (yet not unintelligent) woman who finds escape from an unhappy and unfulfilled marriage in her successful business. She lives peacefully with both the Jews and the Romans—not really understanding or caring deeply about either.
Late in preparations for the Passover, one of the disciples has come to her for the unleavened bread for the ceremonial supper. While most of her customers had placed their orders much earlier, Shara—being a shrewd businesswoman—has made extra for late orders; so she is able to supply their needs.
Being naturally curious, she has lingered after delivering the bread, listening to Jesus and His men through the door that opens onto the stairs leading down the outside of the house to the street below. Not being Jewish, the history and mysteries of the Passover have long escaped her, but Shara is fascinated by the words she hears coming from the lips of the Master—and follows after them when they leave for the Garden of Gethsemane.

Hananiah, the Money-changer (p.10)
This banker has overheard the teachings of Jesus for some time, as he has sat in the temple courtyard changing Roman coinage to Tyrian for worshippers. He is not antagonistic toward Jesus—in fact, under more benign circumstances, Hananiah might be well on the way toward becoming a believer. But that was instantly short-circuited the day earlier in the week when Jesus stormed into the temple, overturned his lucrative (and expensively leased) station and threw him and his like out of the temple.
Hananiah is, first and foremost, a pragmatist. No matter how he feels about what Jesus teaches, this new and admittedly attractive rabbi is not part of the power structure in Jerusalem—quite to the contrary, everything He says seems to speak against the powers that be. Hananiah must, by his very practical nature, side with the priests and temple rulers seeking to do away with this one claiming to be the Son of God. Beyond his professional situation, Hananiah is a steely-eyed, cold-blooded snob who thinks himself more intelligent, more wealthy, and more privileged than just about anyone he meets. Those beneath him, he ignores; those above him, he courts.

Reading the Script

Your first job, as an actor, is to thoroughly familiarize yourself with the play and your character as quickly as possible. Your earliest source for this is the script itself. Later the director—and even you yourself—will contribute facets and nuances to your character, but the place where it all begins is the script.

You cannot read through the script too many times! The first few times, read it all the way through as you might a novel, taking no particular interest in your character over the rest. Consider the script as a whole: Note the statement it is making. Get a feeling for the pace and

flow of the story, the emotional rise and fall.

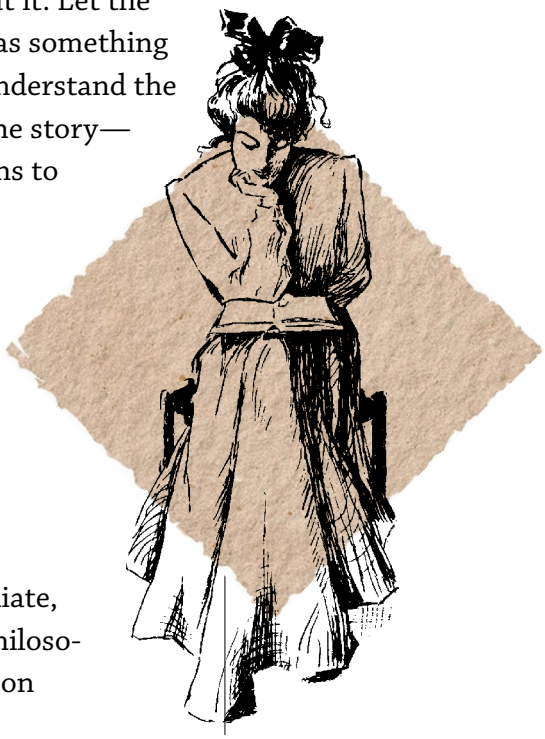
Integrity

As a Christian, you should also consider the *scriptural integrity* of the script. Does it square not only with what is written in the Bible, but also with the *spirit* and *intent* of God's word? It is not heresy to attempt a respectful "filling in the blanks" of Scripture; we do not have, for example, every last word uttered by Jesus or the apostle Paul. But it can be heresy to violate the *nature* of God's word, or the purpose of its characters.

Ideally the script will have already passed this muster with the director. This is primarily his or her responsibility. But before continuing, make sure you are comfortable with the attitude or point of view of the play or musical. If not, bring your concerns to the director—in private.

Character

Then read the script paying closer attention to your character, and how he or she interacts with the other characters. *Read it out loud!* Carry it with you to work, read it during your lunch hour. Take it to the park, keep it by your favorite easy chair. Think about it. Let the story roll around in your head. Imagine each character as something more than just words on a page. Listen to the voices. Understand the story through the eyes of each character. Understand the story—and where you don't, make a note to raise your questions to the director.



One way to do this is to jot down your thoughts in the margins of your printed script, as in the following script segment from the His Company sketch, *A Greater Love*.

Memorization

There is no greater advocate than this writer for immediate, timely memorization of the script. The His Company philosophy has from the beginning done battle with the common

KEREN

(mockingly)

Oh, sure. And did He? Did this—magician raise Himself out of His tomb?

(pause; drilling into Thaddaeus)

Well, did He?

Who is "we"?

THADDAEUS

(innocently)

You know, we all scattered so fast, I really don't know.

KEREN

(sarcastically)

What a coincidence! Oh, He was a smoothie, all right.

(contemptuously)

He had you all fooled.

THADDAEUS

(firmly; as much to himself as to Keren)

I know He was the Son of God. I know it in my heart.

What "truth" is he talking about? And where is Thad going back to?

(the light bulb is glowing brighter)

Even before I admitted the truth to myself, I knew it in my heart.

(pause; turning to go)

I have to go back.

KEREN

(stopping him by grabbing his arms; frantically; for the first time Keren sees that she may have lost the argument)

Give it up! It was a strange faith.

(heavily)

And now it's dead.

THADDAEUS

(tenderly)

The faith will live on.

(sadly)

It's you who are dead.

"It's you who are dead" seems awkward—maybe even unduly cruel.

(pause)

No one but the Son of God could have given health to the sick, sight to the blind—raised the dead.

(still in the process of convincing himself)

He did it for others why not for Himself.

misconception that lazy preparation is sufficient for stagecraft within the church. Under the His Company method, the Christian actor serving the Lord and His church is expected to serve them both with excellence—and an important component of this excellence is for each actor to learn the script, accurately, as soon as possible.

That having been said, it is generally *not* a good idea to begin memorizing lines before the Reading Session with the director and full cast. Invariably, changes to the script are made at this meeting, and the only thing harder than learning lines, is *unlearning* changed lines.

Unless there is to be a protracted period of time between receiving the script and the Reading Session, you should wait until then to begin memorizing your script.

For a more in-depth discussion of the His Company philosophy of Excellence, see Emphasis Eight, "On Excellence," in Part Four.

For a more in-depth discussion of the memorization process, see Emphasis One, "Memorization," in Part Four.

The Script in Hand: *Review*

- Highlight every line and stage direction for your character.
- Read and understand all descriptive notes about your character.
- Read through the script several times, making sure that at least one of them is out loud.
- Write down any comments or questions you might have regarding your character, or the play in general.

Your Primary Goal

To understand your character, the play, and prepare any questions you might have regarding either.

chapter two

The Reading Session

The Basics

- Read your lines to the best of your ability.
- Do not try to recite during this session, but *read*.
- Remain flexible in your interpretation; permit the director to begin influencing the shape of your character.
- Make sure you understand what the director is saying about your character and the way you are interpreting your lines.
- Take lots of notes; do not assume that you will remember what has been said.
- Listen carefully to how your lines work with those of the other characters.

Your first chance to hear your lines within the context of the overall play will typically be at the reading session. This is the first opportunity to actually *hear* how your character will fit into the play's dialogue—and your first opportunity to hear how the director plans to mold the various elements together into a cohesive, dramatic statement.

Being Brave

The reading session is the time to present for public notice the homework you've done on your part. But, equally, it is also the time for you to hear the director's ideas for how your character will blend into the whole.

Both must take place. Both are important.

Your Preparation

One of the charter members of His Company (a semi-professional actor), while preparing for his role of the apostle Peter, said to me early on in the rehearsal process: "I want to do the very best I can with this part. I want to set an example for the rest." He had the right attitude. He was right, and he *did* do his very best, turning in an excellent performance of real texture and depth.

The actor who is a member of a company must always remember that he does not work in a vacuum. Along with every other player, he must contribute his equal share. This includes being an example of excellence for every other actor. When every actor carries this attitude into every rehearsal, the play will sing out, and soar far above the typical level of mediocrity so common in church drama today.

By the time of the reading session, you will not have memorized your lines, but you should be *comfortable* with them. Awkward words that you may have stumbled over during the first time through will have been practiced so they can be spoken with fluid confidence. You will be prepared to inject some of your interpretation of the character, as well as the voice.

While preparing for and approaching the reading session, take hold of your character—but hold it lightly; take possession of your character and call it your own—but understand that it will be a joint-ownership. In an amateur production, especially, your director will have something to say about the ultimate composite that becomes your character. It will be a joint effort.

Your Flexibility

The director is responsible for the look and feel—and ultimate impact—of the overall production. He will be the one with the earliest vision of the production as a whole. He will have an idea of how the scenes will be blocked, how the lighting will be designed, how the costumes will look, and how the play will look and sound.

Most (but certainly not all) Christian drama groups play by different rules than more commercial or secular companies. If the director of a typical church production adopted the hands-off method common

Laurence Olivier on experimentation…

"If you are frightened of making a fool of yourself, if you start too subtly, too cozily, giving just little glimpses of what the part might become, you create huge barriers for yourself later on. You must be open, naive, prepared to charge down every alley that presents itself, until you lock into the ones that you and your character need."

This writer has a profound respect for the traditions of the British theatre—both as an institution, and as evidenced in its individual actors.

Watch anything, from the lowest British sitcom to film or the stage, and you will see actors and actresses wholeheartedly committed to their craft, willing to make complete fools out of themselves to sell a character or a story. And, invariably, the result is not foolishness, but an utterly believable character.

An example? Watch Dame Judi Dench in *anything*—from her role as Jean in the long-running sitcom, *As Time Goes By*, to her stern, unflinching treatment of "M" in the James Bond films, to the sweetness of Miss Matty Jenkyns in *Return to Cranford*, to her breathtaking interpretation of Iris Murdoch, the writer with Alzheimer's disease, in the film *Iris*. Every one of her roles, no matter how different from the previous, is utterly and authentically believable.

with actors in the legitimate theatre, very little would ever be accomplished. Church drama is filled with good-hearted people who are willing to serve, but who have very little or no experience at the craft. They need help—and very often much hand-holding and encouragement—to do their job.

In His Company productions, the director very often had an even greater responsibility than would a director of a professional company. With a professional cast, the director may only offer the merest motivational prodding of the individual actor to accomplish the approximate "what." In contrast, with the typical church production the director will need to be not just more explicit in describing the "what," but in addition have to deal with the "how" and even the "why"—that is, *why* and *how* to accomplish the *what*.

Most rehearsals usually allow for a certain amount of give and take between director and actor. The reading session, however, is not a typical rehearsal. Everything is new; the wrapper has barely been taken off the new script.

Don't get into an argument with the director—or, heaven forbid, with another actor. If you have a question about interpretation, ask it—this is the time. But if you *disagree* about a point of interpretation, this is not the time or place to raise your objection; make a note, and discuss it later with the director in private—preferably before the next rehearsal.

Taking Notes

Acting is a curious occupation that combines the printed word with the spoken. The printed script gives everyone involved in the play a common foundation from which to build and present the spoken production.

Elsewhere in this book it is stated that the characters described in the script—as delivered by the author—are only the framework for what they will eventually become. The same can be said for the script as a whole. It is not a novel. By itself, the script is incomplete. This printed framework of the play must be finished—it must be brought to life,

For more on the "building" of one's character, see Emphasis Two, "The Character," in Part Four.

so to speak—by the actors, under the guidance of the director.

During the first few weeks of the rehearsal process, the script will be your constant companion. Later you may not refer to it at all. This evolving relationship is illustrated in Figure 3-1.

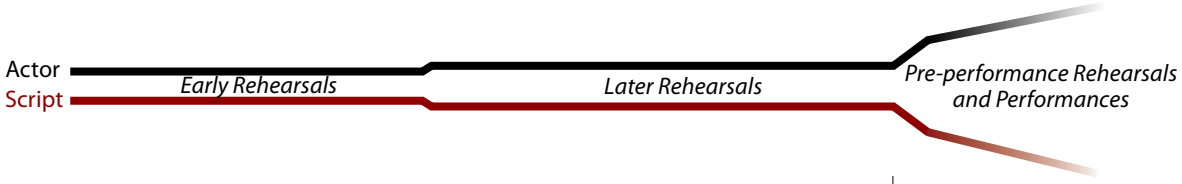


Figure 3.1 — The changing relationship between actor and the written script over the course of rehearsals.

In the beginning of the rehearsal process, the actor's dependency on a reliable script is great. Because of this, it is of critical importance—not only to you, but to everyone else involved in rehearsals—that you take exhaustive notes. The development of your character—as well as the development of the entire play—will be a process that takes place both in formal rehearsals, with the group, and at home, by yourself. Accurate, reliable notes in your script ensure that time will not be wasted by you and the director trying to remember those things that were settled in earlier rehearsals.

This point must be emphasized: ***Take notes!*** Too many rehearsal hours are unnecessarily wasted because directions given early on were never written down for future reference.

You will not remember. *Write it down!*

Literally

So here we all are. A few days earlier the scripts were distributed, and now you've shown up with the others in the cast to take your place around the table—already dog-eared script and two #2 pencils in hand. After a few preliminary remarks from the director, everyone turns to page one, and the reading begins.

During the reading session, the director (depending on his or her style) will often interrupt and supply his thoughts on interpretation. He or she might go so far as to offer a specific word that should be written in the margins of your script. For example, he might say

something like, "She's very confused at this point. We need to *hear* that uncertainty in her voice." The actor would then write the words "confused" and "uncertain" in the margin of the script next to the associated line.

This simple (and obvious) technique might be referred to as the *literal* method; the word or words used by the director—or offered by the actor, and approved by the director—are written in the script. Where the direction is meant to be applied to only a portion of the dialogue, a line is drawn to the precise spot—as as in the following script segment from the His Company sketch, *Closets*.

The WAITER *exits.*

Still silent, the women begin eating. Finally, it is BETTY *who speaks first.* BETTY *begins telling her story matter-of-factly, as if she really is talking about somebody else. But gradually, as she relives in her mind those events being described, it becomes clear—by the end of the speech—that she is really telling her own story.*

BETTY

warmer here

with more pride here

Let me tell you about a friend of mine.

(pause)

She had a wonderful marriage to a wonderful man—a kind, thoughtful man. They had a son who excelled in sports and made the Honor Roll, to boot. They weren't rich, but they were comfortable—a nice home in the suburbs. She was happy. More than that, she knew she was happy.

(pause)

One day she ran into an old flame from college—a man she had almost married. They spent hours talking over old times: Saturday football games, building a snowman, walks together through fallen leaves…

Using Imagery

A different method—one which could be used in place of, or in conjunction with, the literal method—might be called the *imagery* method.

Using imagery in your script notes is similar to the transference method of acting espoused by Uta Hagen, in which memories and experiences from your past are employed to bring the character to life. Using imagery in your notes means that instead of writing down a specific word (such as happy, confused, innocently) you would jot down a brief phrase that would describe a situation in which the desired emotion is created.

Uta Hagen on memories…

"The recall of the visions, sounds, smells, and textures of my childhood serves my acting to this day."

Here are some examples:

Instead of...	***you might write...***
longingly	like a child looking into a toy store window
great sadness	just as when my grandmother died
unabashed joy	when told my wife was pregnant
peace	the way I feel when watching a beautiful sunset

The imagery method of script notation requires a little more time and imagination than the literal method, but for many people it can be well worth the effort. The imagery note written in the working script becomes an instant trigger for the correct emotion or action—becoming not only a reminder for what the director wants at that point, but *the means by which it is accomplished*.

In practical terms, during the reading session and subsequent early rehearsals, the actor would surely use a combination of both literal and imagery methods. So as not to take up valuable rehearsal time, he would quickly jot down the literal word suggested by the director; then later, on his own time, he would come up with just the right image that produces that emotion or mood, and write that image in the script alongside the earlier literal word from the director.

It is important to remember that the emotions produced by images are not universal, but quite personal. It would be possible to reuse the previous examples with entirely different results.

The original image...	***that produced...***	***could also produce...***
like a child looking into a toy store window	longing	giddiness
just as when my grandmother died	great sadness	relief
when told my wife was pregnant	unabashed joy	sheer terror
the way I feel when watching a beautiful sunset	peace	profound melancholy

So while the actual image can be shared, the emotion it produces cannot. It will be to the actor's benefit to have a ready supply of such personal imagery from which to draw moods and emotions—even in the notes he or she makes in the script.

The Reading Session: *Review*

- Read your lines to the very best of your ability, using the practice and insight gained from reading and rereading the script prior to this session.
- Even though you may have begun memorizing your lines, do not try to recite during the reading session, but *read*.
- It is good to come to this session with a certain perspective on your character in mind, but remain flexible; permit the director to begin influencing the shape of your character.
- During the reading session, make sure you understand what the director is saying about your character and the way you are to interpret your lines.
- Take lots of notes; do not assume that you will remember what has been said. *Write it down!*
- Listen carefully to how your lines work with those of the other characters, paying particular attention to pacing and rhythm.

Your Primary Goal

To come away with a clear understanding of how the director wants your character to be played and fitted into the overall production.

chapter three

Blocking

The Basics

- Be prepared with pencils, ready to take notes.
- Record every detail of blocking given by the director.
- Familiarize yourself with common blocking vernacular.
- Be patient.
- Add more details to help you duplicate the blocking instructions.
- Review your blocking shortly after it has been given.

Blocking is the process during which the actor learns what his or her character will be doing physically on stage. The reading session establishes *who the character is and how he will sound*, while the blocking rehearsal establishes *what the character will be doing where and when*. Put another way, the blocking rehearsal is the *physical* equivalent of the reading session.

Methods

There are almost as many ways to block a scene as there are directors. Some will be so casual as to say to the actor, "Go stand over in that general area." Some will go a little further, directing the actor when to look out at the audience, or when to turn away. Others will direct, "On the second syllable of the third word of that line I want your left index finger to fold over at the second knuckle."

The His Company method takes a more moderate approach to blocking. Amateur actors will benefit from rather specific blocking directions; they are eager for help, for suggestions, for specifics that will fill in where their lack of experience fails them. But instructions that are too meticulous can stifle the creative spark brought to the moment by the actor himself. (They also shroud in minutia the creativity of the director, when he should be concentrating on the overall package.)

In any case, it is the responsibility of the director (not the play's author) to block the scenes in a play—and it is the responsibility of the actor to record, then carry out that blocking. As stated in the previous chapter, the director is the one with the overall vision of the production; the blocking instructions he or she gives comprise and important component of that vision.

The Dance

What *composition* is to the photographer, blocking is to the stage director. And although it may not seem so to the actor being mechanically moved about from place to place during the rehearsal, blocking is really the play's *choreography*. It is the fluid dance that gives pace, rhythm, and physical tension to the scene being played out before the audience. When a scene is artfully blocked, one can stand at the back of the theatre, squint the eyes, and see the poetry of ballet being performed upon the stage. Each entrance or exit adds or subtracts dramatic tension to the scene; movement flows from actor to actor like a Rembrandt come to life. It is art, and it can be beautiful.

It all begins, for the actor, at the blocking rehearsal, where the director's instructions are recorded in each player's script, then physically played out across the stage. Longer productions may split the blocking process over several rehearsals, while a short sketch may be blocked and walked through several times in just one rehearsal.

Blocking Vernacular

The most important requirement of the actor's blocking process is that the instructions from the director be noted in his script in such

The play's blocking works with line memorization in a symbiotic fashion: each makes learning the other easier.

Blocking supports the memorizing of lines; by associating the two, the actor knows that when he is standing *here*, he is to be saying *this*.

Likewise an actor's lines make learning blocking easier; again, by associating the two, the actor knows that when he is saying *this*, he is supposed to be standing *here*.

The actor who learns *both* early on in the process, will have a distinct advantage at remembering both his lines *and* his blocking.

a way that they can be easily retrieved and put into practice. *How the individual actor chooses to accomplish this is secondary to his ability to duplicate what he has been told*.

For making notes in your script, *always use a pencil*. Things change, and over the course of a rehearsal schedule that "cross from down right to up left" that the director was so confident about, may change to a "cross from center to up right."

Never use a pen.

So the scratchings that the actor uses to record the blocking in his or her script may certainly be personalized and unique—so long as they accomplish the desired result. It never hurts, however, to begin with some basic conventions that have been used on the stage for a very long time.

Stage Locations

The modern theatre is usually configured with a flat stage and the audience seated on a slope, as seen in Figure 3.2. In the early theatre, however, this was typically reversed, with the audience seated or standing on a flat surface, and the stage constructed with a slight incline from front to back, as seen in Figure 3.3. From this early configuration of a sloped stage we get our terminology for stage locations.

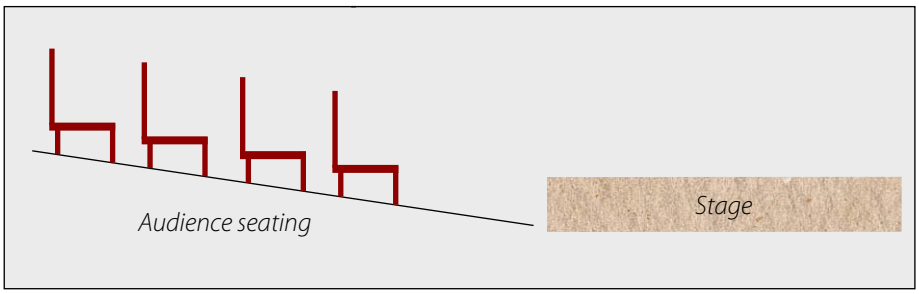


Figure 3.2 — Modern theatre design.

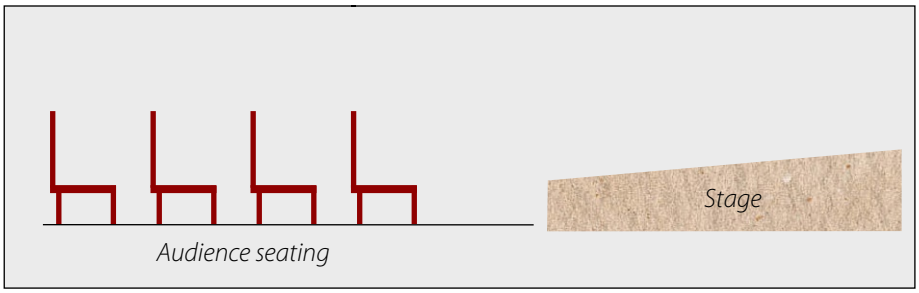


Figure 3.3 — Early theatre design.

The front edge of the early stage (that which was closest to the audience), was literally lower than the back of the stage. So the front of the stage (or apron) was referred to as *down* stage, and the back was *up* stage. And though our stages today are flat, we still use these same conventions when blocking.

Blocking notations are always from the *actor's* point of view; it is the director who must transpose. So, for example, when the direction "stage right" is given, it refers to the actor's right, as he stands on the stage facing the audience.

Figure 3.4 combines these designations—along with the standard abbreviations in bold caps—into a handy chart.

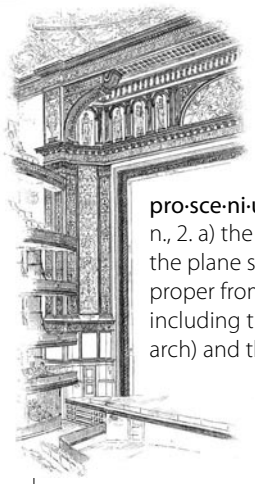
Audience

Down **L**eft	**D**own **C**enter	**D**own **R**ight
Left	**C**enter	**R**ight
Up **L**eft	**U**p **C**enter	**U**p **R**ight

Figure 3.4 — Established blocking conventions to designate areas of the stage.

Relativism

Blocking directions are generally considered to be relative. Directors will sometimes define small areas of the larger stage for a "scene within a scene," or—as often happens with church musicals, when the choir has taken over the majority of the stage—a smaller area, off to the side, will be designated for the dramatic component. In these instances, "stage left" may not be referring to some spot all the way across the proscenium, but only to the left portion of the smaller area.



pro·sce·ni·um (pro see' nee um) n., 2. a) the apron of a stage b) the plane separating the stage proper from the audience and including the arch (proscenium arch) and the curtain within it.

Common Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are accepted standards for blocking notation in the script.

Areas of the Stage

C	Center (stage)
UC	Up Center
DC	Down Center
L	Left
UL	Up Left
DL	Down Left
R	Right
UR	Up Right
DR	Down Right

Movement

TL	Turn Left
TR	Turn Right
Out	Turn out to face the audience
Back	Turn back away from audience
1/4	One-quarter turn of body or head
1/2	Profile
PRO	Profile
3/4	Three-quarter turn of body or head
FF	Full front (toward audience)
FB	Full Back (away from audience)
SL	Step Left
SR	Step Right
xSL	Number of Steps Left
xSR	Number of Steps Right
Step	Take one step
X	Cross (move to another area of the stage)
XL	Cross Left
XR	Cross Right
XD	Cross Down
XU	Cross Up
X to _	Cross to a character or set piece
CX	Counter Cross (movement of one character in opposition to, or at the same time as, that of another)

All of the blocking abbreviations that are associated with your movement onstage can be modified with the name of another actor onstage, a set piece or prop—or even a landmark in the auditorium. For example, instead of the slightly ambiguous "XL," you might write in the margin of your script "XL Harry," or "XL table." Instead of writing only "Out," use the more descriptive "Out Clock," which could mean, "turn out to the audience and look in the direction of the clock on the wall."

The Real World

The director, whose responsibility it is to create and assign the blocking for the entire cast, may provide you with only the mere skeleton of your instructions. Since there is typically a lot of standing around during a blocking rehearsal—especially with a larger cast—use the waiting time constructively to modify what you've been told.

For a real-world example, let us look over the shoulder of Rupert Gandwiller, who has been assigned the role of Abraham, with his friend Penelope Newelpost taking the role of his wife, Sarah. It is the night of their second rehearsal, and the two veterans are scribbling the director's instructions into their scripts as she walks them through the blocking.

After Martha Dunwiddie, their director, gives the two of them their essential blocking instructions for a few pages, she excuses herself to take a call in the church office. While her instructions and comments are still fresh, Rupert takes the opportunity to go back and fill in the blocking with more details that will help him remember what to do in future rehearsals—even when rehearsing at home. Rupert walks through the blocking, noting in his script room landmarks that will give him something with which to line up.

Notating room landmarks in one's blocking instructions are only worthwhile when all or most of the performances will be at the same venue. For a production that is to be taken on the road, it is better to note references to other actors on stage, or set pieces that will always be in the same relative place, no matter the venue.

The script segment on the next page shows us Rupert's script after Martha's initial blocking instructions. The script segment on the page after that shows us how his script looks after he adds more detailed instructions.

A page from Rupert's script showing essential blocking as given by the director. (script: *Restless Dawn*)

Abraham ends up away from Sarah, overwhelmed by the sudden intensity of his emotions—and embarrassed to be showing such weakness around Sarah. He stands, sobbing, with his back to her.

Sarah

(going to Abraham; soberly)

Abraham, what's wrong?

Abraham

(still turned away)

O, dreams and voices— dreadful silences— visions of what will be—

(turning quickly; Sarah takes him into her arms; Abraham clings to her)

Oh Sarah, can one man be the beginning for so much?! Can one man bear the burden for so many?

Sarah

(tenderly; calming him)

Sssshhhhh—— You've borne your burden. The trials and waiting of yesterday are behind us.

Abraham

(with a weary sigh)

Oh, I wish they were. How I wish they were.

Sarah

See what happens when you've been up all night? I've never heard such foolish talk!

(leading him toward the exit)

I'm putting you back to bed and telling the servants to let you sleep.

Abraham stops, centerstage, noticing the approaching dawn (toward the audience).

Abraham

(looking out)

Dawn. It will be light soon.

(shivering)

Oh, why must there be such a chill to mornings?

(not quite in his right mind)

The night so unwillingly sheds its cold. And the sun grudgingly gives its warmth——

(regaining his composure; turning to look at his worried wife; quietly, after gazing upon her; solidly; more a statement than a question)

Do you know that I love you?

Sarah

(with the confidence that comes with years of being married)

Yes.

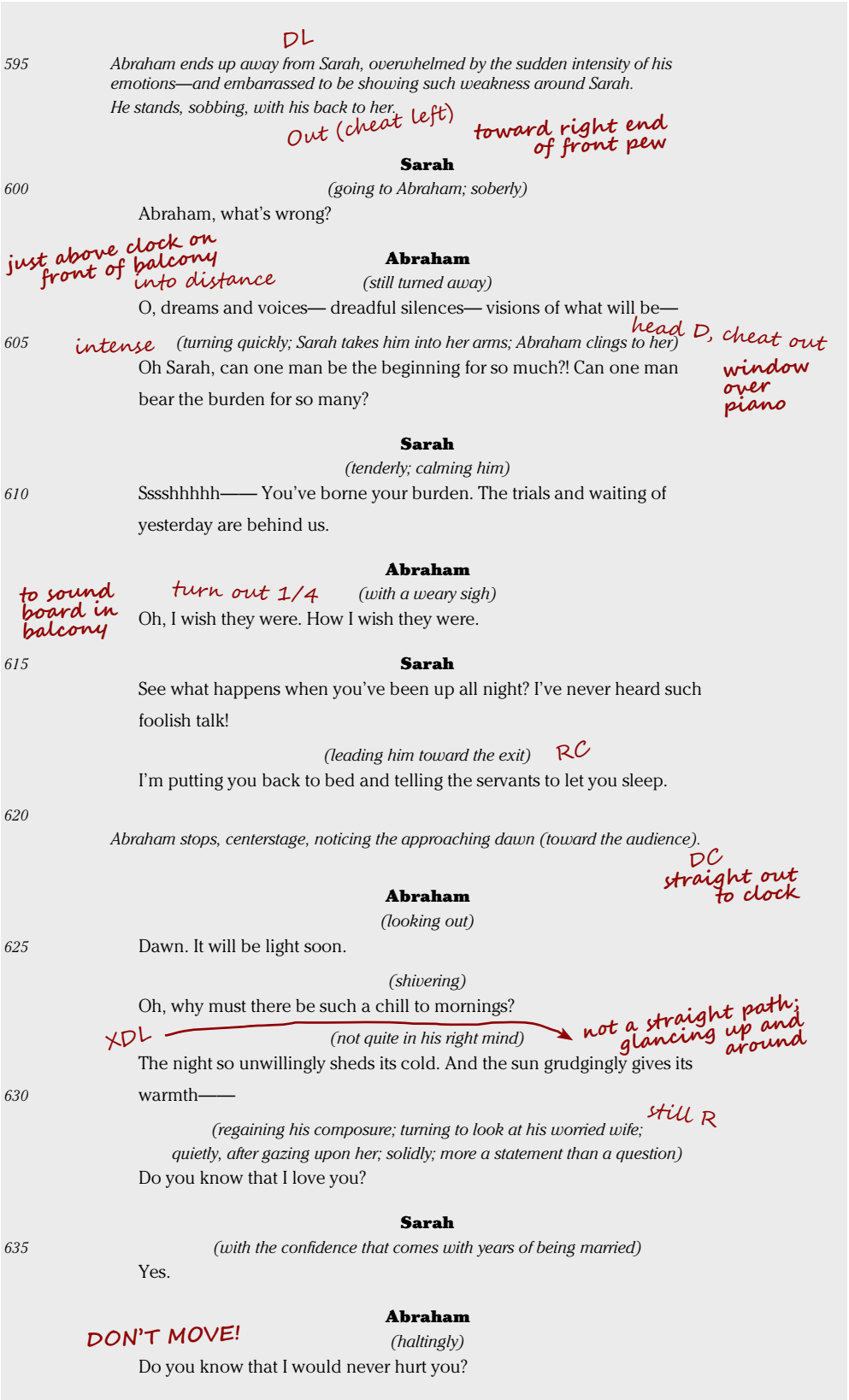
Abraham

(haltingly)

Do you know that I would never hurt you?

The word "cheat," as used in the context of stage blocking, can mean different things to different people. But it is typically used as a shorthand term that means to angle the body or head just slightly—usually toward the audience—so more of the face can be seen, or so a line of dialogue can be projected out more toward the audience. In the example here, Abraham is in a tight clinch with Sarah—an intimate blocking that could easily hide his face and muffle his line. The director blocks the moment to emphasize the intimacy of husband and wife, and Abraham's desperation. For the audience to hear his line, and see that desperation on his face, however, Abraham (either by direction or on his own initiative) needs to angle his face slightly out—not so much as to detach himself from the powerful moment with Sarah, but just enough for the audience to be made a part of the moment.

Something like "cheating" is hard to teach or direct. It is something that comes with experience on stage— and the actor's sense of how he or she is being seen and/or heard by the audience.



Abraham ends up away from Sarah, overwhelmed by the sudden intensity of his emotions—and embarrassed to be showing such weakness around Sarah. He stands, sobbing, with his back to her.

DL

Out (cheat left)

toward right end of front pew

Sarah

(going to Abraham; soberly)

Abraham, what's wrong?

just above clock on front of balcony into distance

Abraham

(still turned away)

O, dreams and voices— dreadful silences— visions of what will be—

intense

(turning quickly; Sarah takes him into her arms; Abraham clings to her)

head D, cheat out window over piano

Oh Sarah, can one man be the beginning for so much?! Can one man bear the burden for so many?

Sarah

(tenderly; calming him)

Sssshhhhh—— You've borne your burden. The trials and waiting of yesterday are behind us.

Abraham

to sound board in balcony

turn out 1/4

(with a weary sigh)

Oh, I wish they were. How I wish they were.

Sarah

See what happens when you've been up all night? I've never heard such foolish talk!

(leading him toward the exit)

RC

I'm putting you back to bed and telling the servants to let you sleep.

Abraham stops, centerstage, noticing the approaching dawn (toward the audience).

DC straight out to clock

Abraham

(looking out)

Dawn. It will be light soon.

(shivering)

Oh, why must there be such a chill to mornings?

XDL

(not quite in his right mind)

not a straight path; glancing up and around

The night so unwillingly sheds its cold. And the sun grudgingly gives its warmth——

still R

(regaining his composure; turning to look at his worried wife; quietly, after gazing upon her; solidly; more a statement than a question)

Do you know that I love you?

Sarah

(with the confidence that comes with years of being married)

Yes.

Abraham

DON'T MOVE!

(haltingly)

Do you know that I would never hurt you?

The same page after Rupert adds more detailed blocking instructions of his own. (script: *Restless Dawn*)

For a discussion on the importance of rehearsing on your own, see Emphasis Three, "Rehearsing at Home," in Part Four.

Reviewing Your Blocking

Whether it is done at the public rehearsal, just after all the blocking instructions have been given, or privately at home, it is important that you review your blocking for the entire play soon after it has been given. It is very easy to forget—even with detailed notes in your script—the specifics and purpose behind the movements you've been assigned.

Lock it in quickly and soon, and it will stay with you over the full rehearsal schedule.

Blocking: *Review*

- Come prepared with several pencils, ready to take lots of notes.
- Record every detail of blocking given by the director.
- If you do not understand the *reason* behind any blocking, ask the director. Understanding this will go along way to learning your blocking.
- Familiarize yourself with the common blocking vernacular and abbreviations.
- Be patient. Blocking rehearsals—especially for larger productions—can be long and tedious.
- Add even more details—such as room-specific or stage-specific landmarks—to help you faithfully duplicate the blocking instructions each time.
- Review your blocking right away—either during the rehearsal or at home, just after the rehearsal.

Your Primary Goal

To record your blocking instructions in a descriptive way for accurate reference during both private and public rehearsals.

chapter four

Regular Rehearsals

The Basics

- Learn your lines quickly.
- Review the script before every rehearsal.
- Be someone your director can depend on.
- Keep your script handy during the first few rehearsals.
- Keep taking notes.

By this point in the rehearsal schedule you should be well on your way to having your lines memorized. For some actors, memorization is the most difficult part of the acting process, while for others it is something accomplished quickly and painlessly. Most fall somewhere in the middle, however; for most of us memorization is a sometimes arduous, but manageable part of being an actor.

The experienced actor knows that there is a built-in reward for memorizing lines early and accurately: With the lines plugged in, the character starts to become a real person, and starts to blossom into a three-dimensional human being with whom one can have a relationship. This is truly when the fun of acting begins. Until the lines are learned, the character remains just words on a page, a mere dim reflection of its true potential.

Whether the task of memorization is easy or difficult for you, it is your responsibility to accomplish it as soon as possible. Procrastination in learning your lines makes life unnecessarily difficult for your director, your fellow actors, and delays your progress in refining your character. Just do it. Quit making excuses, and just do it.

See a discussion on memorization in Emphasis One, "Memorization," in Part Four.

The Habit of Review

If you have not already, now is the time to establish the habit of reviewing your script before every rehearsal. Because the public rehearsals represent only the *collaborative* portion of the rehearsal process, it falls to the individual actor to be up to speed, ready for every rehearsal. The bulk of your "wood-shedding" will take place at home, privately. Your goal is to step into each public rehearsal with the script as a whole and your character fresh and resting comfortably in the front of your mind.

Before each public rehearsal allow time to

- read through the entire script to fix in your mind the context of the play;
- walk through your blocking while reviewing your lines;
- review your lines and blocking, whenever possible, at the public rehearsal site, just prior to the scheduled rehearsal.

Be Dependable

What all of this—memorization and review—boils down to are good work habits and good *manners*. As an actor, you are part of a team; it is part of your responsibility to show up for each rehearsal fully prepared to carry your part of the load. Memorizing your lines early-on and reviewing the script before each public rehearsal are simply part of the mechanics of being a good team player.

During *all* rehearsals, turn off the sound of your cell phone or other portable device—and then *put it away*.

- It goes without saying (but I'll say it anyway): *Don't be late!*
- Don't just show up on time, but be early: coat off, bathroom-stop

out of the way, ready to go.

- When unforeseen circumstances make you late, apologize.

- When preparations need to be made for rehearsal, such as pulling props out of storage or setting up lights, be there early to lend a hand.

The Script in Hand

So it's time for the first regular rehearsal to begin. Act Two, Scene One is called; you've reviewed the script prior to the rehearsal, and you're reasonably confident about your memorization of the scene. Wanting to impress the director, you leave your script on the front pew and mount the stage.

Wrong!

Go back and pick up your script—and while you are at it, grab a pencil. It may be that you are a Wunderkind, and have memorized absolutely every syllable of your script before the first rehearsal. Bravo; go get your script anyway (see "Inevitable Changes" below). More than likely, however, you are a rather average human being, and while you have been working hard at it, you really can't say that you are ready yet to solo. If that is the case, don't inflict your hesitations, stumbles, and lapses of memory on the rest of the cast and your director. Keep the script in hand, or within easy reach, for those moments when your memory falters.

And by the way: you're not there to impress the director, or your fellow actors, but to serve your Lord.

Inevitable Changes

Memorization progress aside, there is another reason for you to keep your script handy. Directors, like actors, are human, and they seldom get everything right the first time. They may have labored for hours over the blocking, but invariably they will change their mind during the first few rehearsals. They may have spent days on end crafting what they wanted your character to accomplish within the scope of

the play—but you can safely depend on changes to that plan to occur early on. And (heaven forbid) even into the third rehearsal they may want to change a word here and there in the script (shudder).

So keep the script and pencil within reach for the first few rehearsals, to record the inevitable changes.

Remaining Flexible

There is a classic bit from the old Dick Van Dyke Show of the 1960's that illustrates the importance of remaining flexible during the rehearsal process. In this particular episode Rob and Laura Petrie's New Rochelle neighborhood is putting on a variety show. Rob is directing a love scene, in his living room, between Marc Antony (played by a dashing Bob Crane) and Cleopatra, with the femme fatale lounging across the sofa. But the dashing Marc Antony keeps flubbing his lines. Instead of, "Ah, Cleopatra, I have arrived from Rome," the neophyte actor keps saying, "Ah, Cleopatra, I have a-Romed from rive." When called on it by the director, the leading man repeatedly complains, "As soon as I get the helmet, Rob. As soon as I get the helmet!"—meaning, "As soon as I get my costume, and all the right props, and a real stage to work on, I'll quit flubbing my lines."

The unmistakable mark of an amateur.

It is not uncommon to rehearse in a room different from the place of performance. It is not uncommon, in the church, for the drama team to rehearse in a Sunday School room while Choir Practice is being conducted in the sanctuary. It is also not uncommon for props and set pieces to be supplied to the actor only later in the rehearsal schedule.

The theatre arts are based on imagination. They may strive to portray reality for the audience, but in themselves they are pretend. As it is the role of the play to suspend disbelief in the audience, it is the role of the individual actor during the rehearsal process to suspend disbelief in himself. The actor must invest himself fully in the imagined moment, thereby participating in something unreal to portray (for the audience) something real. It is slight-of-hand; it is fantasy.

For more on the subjects of imagination and flexibility, see Emphasis Four, "Being Something One is Not," and Emphasis Five, "The Adaptable Actor"—both in Part Four.

The terms "amateur" and "professional"—especially as used in this book—are relative.

We begin with the premise that most of us are amateurs—in the traditional sense that acting, or directing actors, may not be a profession for which we receive remuneration. Not many have received formal training, and the majority have had very little experience beyond high school or college productions.

Yet within that context of essentially amateur productions, we can subdivide the group—and thus adapt the two terms for a different use.

Within the non-professional production there can be individuals of either amateur

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or professional *attitude*. Using these new definitions, the "amateur" is one who takes forever to learn his or her lines, who is chronically late for rehearsals, who suddenly discovers a pressing engagement every time there is work to be done. The amateur does little to pump life into his character, thinking it is enough just to memorize the lines (eventually) and show up.

By contrast, the "professional" is not just on time for rehearsals, but arrives early to either help with extraneous tasks, or practice his role on the stage. He learns his lines early on, and doesn't make excuses when he makes a mistake. The professional participates fully in the project, learning how to do his or her own makeup, anticipating the needs of the overall production and volunteering whenever possible.

We all recognize the "amateur." Churches the world over are filled with them. They comprise the group subscribing to the "Sunday School skit" mentality so prevalent today: Just learn your lines at the last minute, then show up and walk through your part. Hey, it's just for church—why bother?

This attitude is incompatible with the His Company philosophy. Over the years there have been a number of excellent, professional-quality actors who expressed an interest in being a part of His Company, but were rejected because of their "amateur" attitude. In contrast, most of the individuals who made a substantial, lasting contribution to our effort were just rank amateurs, but with a dedicated, "professional" attitude.

Part of the mechanics of fantasy is the actor's ability to pretend when left virtually on his own.

> "Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand?
> Come, let me clutch thee…"
>
> (*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 1)

The professional could convincingly rehearse this scene using a pencil, or stick, or even nothing at all as a stand-in for the dagger. A really good actor—I mean a *really* good actor—could play the scene with nothing at all in his hand—but make you believe it is there.

No Excuses

The point is, no matter what kind of actor you are, or choose to be, it is your responsibility to get the job done. I believe it was Lillian Gish, that great lady of the American cinema, who had a rather short retort for a fellow actor that was expressing frustration over developing suitable motivation to play a scene. He was a "method" actor, you see, and he kept blowing the scene because he couldn't conjure up a deep enough empathy for the character's situation. He queried the actress as to how *she* accomplished it so well, so effortlessly. To this the venerable Gish replied with something like, "I just do it. I fake it. It's called acting."

In a similar vein, Dame Wendy Hiller, the superb English actress, was once asked by a reporter, "Miss Hiller, what is your method of acting?" She replied, "Well I have a *bash* at it, and if it doesn't go, I have *another* bash at it."

There is no right answer. Some breathtakingly great actors swear by the method; others just as accomplished don't bother with any method at all, but just show up and fake it. The difference between a professional and an amateur is not so much *how* they act, but whether or not they pull it off—whether or not they get the job done! The audience doesn't really care about the tools you use to create a character, or work a scene. They don't care *how* you do it, only that you do. They don't care about technique, only that they can believe what you

are doing on stage.

If you are going to use the "method," or what Uta Hagen calls "transference," then it is up to you to make that commitment to character background, personality, motives; it is up to you to do all that homework to bring the character up to a level acceptable to you, the director, and the audience. If, on the other hand, you are able to produce a complete range of emotions on demand, mechanically, then go ahead and do it. No one says you have to *live* the role.

But if you are like the rest of us, you will probably use some of both techniques—if one can call the latter a "technique"—along with several more of your own devising.

More Than Sincerity

There are times when a role will require little more than the appearance of sincerity. If a 40-year-old father of one is asked to play the role of a 45-year-old father of two in a contemporary setting, he will not have to spend a lot of time at the library researching his part. If, on the other hand, a 29-year-old single man takes the same role, he may have to interview some of his older, married friends to reach some understanding of what it is to be a middle-aged father.

For the first production of *Restless Dawn*, our one-act play about Abraham and Sarah on the night before Abraham is to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22), playing opposite my Abraham was a young woman of substantial acting talent. To take on this role, however, she had three obstacles: the fact that she was not a Christian, and wasn't familiar with the story; the fact that since her mom was divorced, she had no immediate example of a long-term marriage; and the fact that she was so young (around twenty, I believe).

She turned in a pretty good performance, as I recall, but it was thin. She mostly relied upon talent and mechanics to pull it off—and using only those, she did better than an actress with less talent. But she never did the research that would have brought more depth and believability to the role. By contrast, several years later my wife Linda took the Sarah role opposite my Abraham. This time the actor *was* a Christian, and quite familiar with the original story; she also had

plenty of familiar examples for a long-term marriage—not to mention her own; and, though certainly not close to Sarah's age, she was sufficiently mature to have more of a feeling for a woman of age. This time the performance had much more depth and believability.

When it comes to an individual choosing how best to assay his or her role, there is no one right answer—except that you are to do whatever will bring your character to life in an authentic, believable way.

Regular Rehearsals: *Review*

- Learn your lines quickly. Just go ahead and do it!
- Review the script before every rehearsal.
- Be someone your director can depend on.
- Keep your script handy during the first few rehearsals.
- Keep taking notes.
- Do whatever is necessary to develop your character.

Your Primary Goal

To participate fully in every rehearsal, well-prepared, investing your energies in developing the full potential of your character—and the play as a whole.

chapter five

The Technical Rehearsal

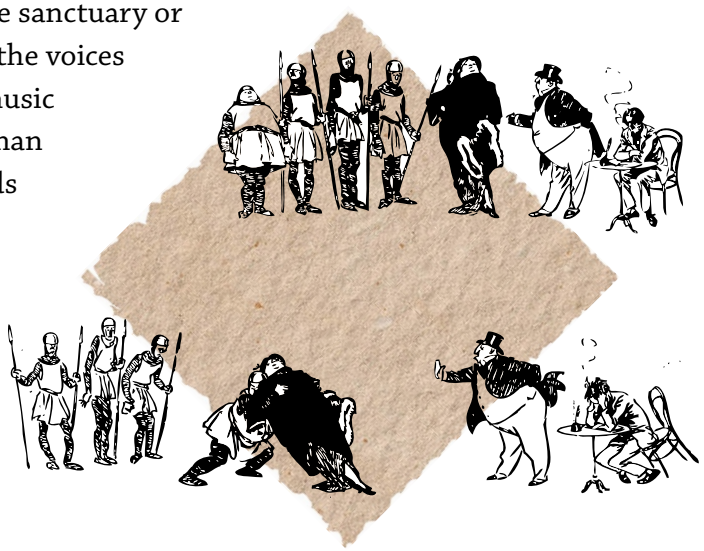
The Basics

- Be patient! You will do lots of standing around. Expect it. Live with it. The technical rehearsal is not for you.
- By this point the mechanics of your role—lines and blocking—should be automatic; use the waiting time to work on character and familiarize yourself with the technical components of the production.
- The technical rehearsal will be on the performance stage; if this is your first time on this stage, use the waiting time to familiarize yourself with it.
- Be cooperative, quiet, and agreeable. The tech rehearsal is not for your benefit.

Write the following on a slip of paper in big, bold letters, and paste it to your forehead: *"The technical rehearsal is not for my benefit!"*

There should come a moment during the rehearsal schedule for any substantial production in which the director will need to rehearse with the technical crew. Typically this will occur near the end of the actor's rehearsal process, but near the beginning of the technical personnel's involvement. They haven't had any lines to learn, no character to develop, no blocking, no costumes with which to become familiar. Ideally, they will come to the technical rehearsal with some familiarity with the script, some instruction on what will be expected of them. But this will probably be their first opportunity to actually observe and work with the production on stage.

With a simple, Sunday morning monologue or sketch, there may be no technical crew larger than the regular sound man who works the microphones for every other service. But with a moderate to large-scale production, the technical component will surely be larger, and will take on a greater importance. In a large sanctuary or auditorium one needs the sound people to get the voices to the back rows. In a musical, one needs the music cued at just the precise moment. When more than the standard room lighting is needed, one needs the lighting people to arrange and adjust the stage lights for maximum impact, and to cue the lights at the right moment. Property personnel are needed to organize everything carried onto the stage, and stage hands are needed to move the larger set pieces on and off the stage. Those helping with makeup and wardrobe need to know how much time will be allowed for changes between scenes. Special effects need to be practiced and timed. And, not least of all, the director needs to know that all of these mechanical components will work together smoothly, and for the production's good.



So repeat after me: *"The technical rehearsal is not for my benefit!"*

Working Out the Kinks

So, *why* are you there? It isn't that the tech rehearsal is a totally selfless exercise for the actor; the investment in time and energy will be well-spent. But the first reason for your presence at the technical rehearsal is, well, technical.

The lighting crew needs bodies on stage for them to be able to make their adjustments. They need to actually see the blocking to know where the bodies go and when. They need to see the colors of the costumes, along with the shades and design of makeup, to know where to set their levels and choose the right gels. The person working the board needs to know how each scene begins, and how each actor enters. Do the lights come up slowly or quickly? Do they come up

cued to the music, or to the entrance of the scene's first actor? Does a scene close softly and slowly, or with a dramatic flourish? How long before the next scene?

The sound crew needs to hear the actual voices—from the booming baritone playing Herod, down to the timid junior high girl playing Mary—to know where to position their mics and set their levels. If microphones are to be hidden amongst the set pieces, they need to observe the blocking to know where the actors will be moving and standing. If the mics are to be worn or held, they need to know which actor will use which mic—and who it will be handed off to when they exit. They need to know how much time there will be between each scene so they can reset their board, or cue up the next song on the Trax.

When live musicians are used, the conductor needs to know many of the same things as the sound and light crews. The conductor needs to hear the voices in performance to determine the volume level of the orchestra; he or she needs to know how long between scenes, and what the entrances and exits will be like.

If the actors are not doing their own, the makeup people need to practice what they are going to do with each face, and see how it will work in the lights. They need to know how long it will take them to do each actor, and what their costumes are like: Will the arms and legs need to be done, or just the face? What will the hair look like, and how will it and the makeup look from the back rows? Will anything need to be changed between scenes—such as the mother of Jesus aging from a teenage to a middle-aged woman—and if so, how much time will they have to accomplish it?

Wardrobe personnel will need to have the actors try on every costume and make final adjustments where necessary. They, too, will need to know how much time they will have between scenes, who should be dressed first before curtain, and who may wait until later. How well do the fabrics they have selected work in the scheme created by the

lighting people? Do the long robes of a Pharisee work without getting tangled up in the actor's feet, or brushing against a set piece? What will he have to do with his costume to walk up the temple steps?

The stage manager needs to work out the organization, dressing room assignments, and backstage traffic patterns. He or she needs to observe the flow and pace of personnel backstage, the noise level, the means by which set pieces and props are carried on and offstage. The stage manager needs to work out all the details on who belongs where and when.

All of these behind-the-scenes considerations are important to the success of the production. Your job, as a member of the cast, is to be attentive, cooperative, agreeable and quiet, doing nothing that would distract the director and others from the work at hand. The director has had days and weeks to work with you and your fellow actors, rehearsing and polishing your individual roles. Now he or she has only a short window of time in which to accomplish a lot with the technical crew. It is important that you be cooperative without getting in their way.

Your Opportunity

The first reason for your presence at the technical rehearsal is for the tech crew to become familiar with what you are doing on stage. The second reason is for you to become familiar with all these new production components that have not, to date, been a part of your rehearsals.

After rehearsing for several weeks on a barren stage illuminated only by ambient light, it can come as quite a shock to suddenly be bathed in the full trappings of the well-dressed stage. Suddenly there is a mic clamped to your costume, with a wire and transmitter hidden beneath, or you are being asked to adjust your blocking to hit a new spot near a pre-positioned mic. All the set pieces heretofore only imagined are suddenly in place, and now when you look out over the audience seats you are blinded by the bright white of a traveling spot. Now there is a scratchy beard on your face, and strange new objects sitting about the stage. That "pregnancy pillow" you've only imagined is now in place, and it feels awkward strapped to your belly. All of a

sudden the empty room in which you have been rehearsing is peppered with the distracting commotion of tech people going about their business. And, without warning, that deep level of concentration to which you have become accustomed has just flown right out the window.

The Complete Environment

This rehearsal is your opportunity to set your character, and the play as a whole, into the more complete (and sometimes complicated) environment of the production. The subsequent dress rehearsal will offer an even more complete and polished setting, but the technical rehearsal is the moment when you will begin to absorb and become familiar with the myriad components that will work in cooperation with your contribution. As such, the most important thing you can do during this rehearsal is to have every sense awake and aware of what is going on around you.

You may wish to have your script handy. Though by this point you don't need it for lines or blocking directions, it is possible that because of new-found constraints—because of adjustments that need to be made to what the actors are doing as a result of unexpected technical or artistic requirements—you may want to note any changes in your script for the few remaining rehearsals and performances. For example, you may have been rehearsing for weeks with blocking that put you two feet from the left edge of the stage on a certain dramatic line. But during the tech rehearsal, discussions between the director and lighting chief determine that you need to deliver the line more center than left. It is a good idea to note that change in your script.

Assimilation

Beyond the mechanics of simple changes, such as with blocking or wardrobe, your responsibility is to quickly and efficiently incorporate these technical elements into your performance. As mentioned in the Emphasis entitled "The Adaptable Actor," the actor should perceive each scene in terms of space, movement, and his physical relationship with the other actors. He is to "carry the set around in his mind." No

matter the ultimate design of the production, during much of the rehearsal process the actor's space has remained portable and self-contained, tucked away in the individual actor's imagination. By the tech rehearsal, however, some of what had heretofore been only imagined will become reality. That plastic kitchen stool that had been standing in for a crude wooden one will now be exchanged for one that actually looks the part, and the fading glow of a setting sun may now actually look just like that. As a consequence, one of your responsibilities during the tech rehearsal is to quickly acclimate your character and blocking to any props, set pieces, or technical contraptions that are suddenly new.

Even after all these considerations, even after you have familiarized yourself with all the new production components, there still can be a lot of dead time for the actor at the technical rehearsal. Instead of letting yourself get bored or, worse, doing things that will be a distraction for the director or members of the tech crew, use this time to polish your own responsibilities. Without getting in the way of others, silently run your lines, review blocking, begin getting ready for opening night by imagining every seat in the house filled and every eye on your performance. If none of these are necessary, help out the tech crews where you can, or excuse yourself to go rehearse in a separate room until you are needed next on stage.

The Technical Rehearsal: *Review*

- Be patient!
- Use your time to familiarize yourself with the performance stage.
- Use the waiting time to work on character, and to familiarize yourself with the more technical components of the production.
- Be cooperative, quiet, and agreeable. The technical rehearsal is not for your benefit.

Your Primary Goal

To acclimate your role to the new (to you) technical components of the production, while doing nothing to get in the way of the director and technical crew.

chapter six

Dress Rehearsal

The Basics

- Review thoroughly every responsibility you will have at the dress rehearsal.
- Treat every aspect of the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance before an audience.
- *Stay in character!* No matter what happens, *stay in character.*
- Debrief yourself after the dress rehearsal to fine-tune your performance in preparation for opening night.

For the attentive, fully involved actor, the dress rehearsal is really his Opening Night. This is the first opportunity to put to the test all the many hours of work on character, all the blocking and movements that have been repeatedly rehearsed, the dialogue timing, and practice with props and set pieces. This May very well be the first opportunity for the actor to experience the production as a unified whole, from beginning to end, without stopping for direction.

Dressing Up

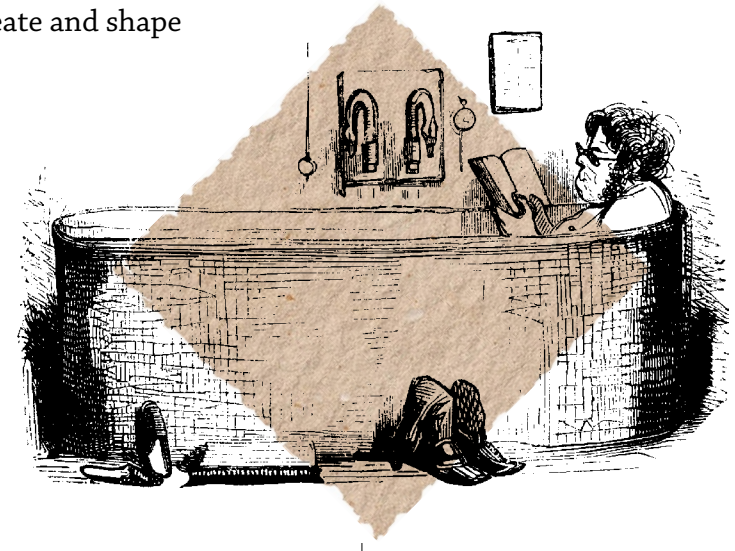
During my grade-school days, back in the 1950s, the last day of the school year was a special event when all the students celebrated the beginning of summer vacation by dressing up in their very best. We knew it would be an abbreviated day of fun, with no actual school

work being done, and we all made an occasion of it—even the teacher. We would rise early, our minds filled with exhilarating expectations, and arrive at school on that one special day presenting ourselves at our very best, fresh-scrubbed and decked out in our finest. We would arrive with our heads filled not only with the events of that special day, but of the many carefree days of summer vacation to follow.

That is similar to how the individual actor should approach the dress rehearsal of any production. It is not only a special occasion, but one in anticipation of something even better. The actor should arrive well-prepared and ready to go, expecting the very best from himself and his fellow actors. For the actor with a professional attitude, the only difference between dress rehearsal and opening night should be the presence of the audience.

Homework

As with every other rehearsal up to this point, this one begins at home. But preparation for the dress rehearsal should be even more complete, and more meticulous than your preparation for previous rehearsals. Leave sufficient time beforehand to walk yourself through—both mentally and physically—the entire play, from the moment you will walk in the door, to the final curtain. Using the same imagination you have been using to create and shape your character, while still at home:



- Review the instructions you have been given about the dress rehearsal. Does the director want you in costume and makeup right away, or will there be a run-through in street dress before the actual dress run-through? Do you have any other responsibilities before being on stage?

- Remind yourself which room you have been assigned for dressing and makeup; think about the process, and how long it will take for you to get into costume and makeup.

- Do you know where your props will be located?
- Run through every one of your scenes, including lines and blocking.
- Review every on-stage and off-stage responsibility you have.
- Go in the right frame of mind. Commit the entire process to the Lord, asking the Spirit to be in charge of your every word and action. Go with an attitude of cooperation and calm, centered not just in *what* you are doing, but, more importantly, in *why* you are doing it.

On Your Own

You should also keep in mind that the dress rehearsal is of critical importance, as well, to your director, since it is his or her first (and possibly last) opportunity to confirm the overall vision that has heretofore existed only in his or her mind. You and your character are now on your own. You are now past the point of lengthy discussions with your director over motivation, emotion, or interpretation. The director must now be occupied with the production as a unified whole, and not so much its smaller, component parts. The director also must now deal more with the technical aspects of the production than with any one actor's interpretation of a particular scene.

Now is the time for you to take full possession of your character—mature, fully realized, locked in, competent. Now is the time for you to be completely professional in attitude, appearance, dependability, punctuality and cooperation. Now is the time for you to add as little weight as possible to the burden already on the shoulders of your director and his technical crews.

In Rehearsal: A Real Performance

The "amateur" attitude regarding the dress rehearsal is to treat it as something only slightly more important than the average rehearsal, whereas the "professional" attitude is to treat it as a priceless opportunity to simulate a true performance. The first approach will accomplish very little, but with the second, the actor will reap valuable insight into the actual performance process.

So your goal is to treat every aspect of the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance.

Ideally, the director, or a disaster, will not interrupt the dress rehearsal, but it will proceed without break, as if there were an audience in attendance. It is important for the director—and each actor onstage, as well as the technical crew—to know how to proceed when the unexpected occurs. What do you do when a stage light suddenly winks out, or your mic goes dead? What do you do when an actor in your scene forgets his or her line? And what do you do when you (shudder) forget a line?

Uta Hagen on proper rehearsal attitude…

"Before, during, and after rehearsals, limit your conversation to the subject of the play, and resist and keep to yourself all comments about the weather, your or other people's state of health, past and upcoming jobs or auditions, opinions about the latest TV series or the state of the world."

Mechanical Surprises

Your response to these and other potential disasters will, first, be determined by your director. Follow his counsel, as it will be based on experience, your unique venue, and your customary audience. Absent that counsel, however, there are certain basic rules you can follow.

- First and foremost, *stay in character*. Unless the ceiling drops out of the sky, or a hurricane blows away every member of the cast, *stay in character!* This is very important: Treat the unexpected occurrence *as your character* would treat the unexpected occurrence.

- If a microphone goes out, just keep going—but with greater volume. Find ways to cheat your dialogue out more to the audience, so that your voice will carry further. If stationary mics are being used on stage, cheat your lines toward one nearby that is still working. Don't radically change the blocking, as this will cause more problems than it solves, but make small adjustments that will help project your voice.

- If one light goes out, keep going, as if nothing has happened. It is remarkable what an audience will accept as normal. We can blow our lines, change the lyrics of a song to garbled nonsense, or throw half the stage into darkness—and the audience will think it was all done on purpose, for effect. So don't be too quick to assume that the audience senses disaster.

- If *all* the lights go out, freeze. Stop the scene and stay where you

are. Once the tech crew has repaired the problem, resume where you left off—*as if nothing had happened*. Make no verbal or visual reference to the occurrence.

- If a prop is on stage, but in the wrong place, just go to where it is. If you suddenly have to cough or sneeze or wipe your eyes, well, people sometimes have to do those things. Just do it in character and the audience will applaud the authenticity of your acting! In general terms, if any relatively minor thing is not as it was rehearsed, just adapt—in character—and no one in the audience will know the difference.

It will be to your advantage, as an actor, to take an active role in ensuring that all your props and wardrobe pieces are where they are supposed to be. Don't make yourself a pest to the properties crew, but you can make it a point to double check everything necessary to your role before you go on stage.

- If one of your props is unexpectedly not available at all, your response will be influenced by the level of importance of the prop. But, generally, you can just proceed—either as if the missing prop were not meant to be a part of the scene, or faking it: go ahead and "pick it up," and "use it" as if it were real. Different situations will call for different solutions. But always *work around* the missing prop; never stop the scene because of it.

Absent Dialogue

- If you realize that you have dropped a line (i.e., left something out of the middle of a speech), do not go back and get it. Just keep going.

- If you trip over a line, mixing up the words, or change a word here and there, just keep going. Chances are very good that no one will notice.

- If you (horrors!) suddenly go blank, and cannot for the life of you remember your line, your companions onstage may help you out (see next paragraph). But no matter what happens, *stay in character!* It is far better that your *character* be stumped for words, than for the audience to realize that you, Joe Jones, cannot remember your lines. Play it as part of the scene, as if at this point in the play your character is at a loss for words. Meanwhile (while you are stalling), mentally back up in the script and take a run at it again, to see if that jogs your memory. Picture the printed script page in your mind, and the line may leap out at you.

- If the actor on the other side of your dialogue suddenly goes blank, help him out (depending on your quick-witted abilities) by either inserting a clever line that will accomplish what the missing line would have accomplished, or simply move past the missing line in hopes that the actor *will* remember his next. A momentary hiccup in the dialogue is preferred over a major shutdown. Chances are good that many in the audience will not notice anything at all, and if they do, it will not be for them an obstacle to understanding the message of the scene.

Quite a few years ago, during the first performance of the musical, *The Prophecy*, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, the actress playing Elizabeth momentarily forgot the lyrics to a song. In the first scene of Act One, during the song "Where Do We Go From Here?", I blocked it with Zechariah (yours truly) and Elizabeth singing antiphonally from opposite sides of the stage, each facing out toward the audience. I sang my lick, but when it was her turn, she sang a few bars then fell silent. She remained facing the audience, in character, but silent while the Trax played. Then, when it came my turn again, I picked up as if nothing had happened. And it was remarkable the number of people who weren't aware that anything had gone wrong. And for those who *did* notice something wasn't right, because we proceeded as if nothing had, the small glitch was quickly forgotten.

The ultimate solution to the problem of forgotten lines is the application of the thorough rehearsal methods described in this book. When the actor—and participating actors as a team—approaches his work on stage with a sense of commitment and excellence, he will not need to worry about forgetting his lines in performance. When the actor has thoroughly apprehended his character to the point that it has become second nature to him, there will be no reason to expect that he will forget lines.

A thoroughly rehearsed and prepared actor forgetting his lines is a rare occurrence indeed.

The Debriefing

Your director, typically, will conduct some sort of debriefing of the cast and crew after the formal dress rehearsal. Pay attention; if necessary, take notes. But whether the director does this or not, conduct your own private debriefing while the events of the rehearsal are still fresh.

- Was your preparation for the dress rehearsal sufficient, or will you need to make adjustments before opening night? Were you able to get into character easily, or will you need to do things differently to better prepare for your role?

- Did your costume and makeup work well? Were all the accessories there, and did you allow sufficient time for getting into

costume and makeup? If changes were made between scenes, did they go well? Was there sufficient time?

- Were your props where they were supposed to be, *when* they were supposed to be?

- Were there any moments when you were unsure of your lines or blocking? If so, review those scenes right away, and be sure to emphasize them in your review before opening night.

- Was your performance *solid*? Did you perform with a firm, confident grasp of your character? Did the lines seem to flow as if from your own mind and imagination, rather than just something memorized? Were your movements onstage fluid and logical, or did they seem mechanical or forced? The experienced actor knows when he is "on"—when everything is working as it should. Were you "on," or did your performance seem awkward, unnatural, ineffective? If the latter, can you pinpoint the reason why? Did you prepare for the performance as well as you should have?

- Was everything you did your very best effort?

Dress Rehearsal: *Review*

- Beforehand, review thoroughly every responsibility you will have at the dress rehearsal.
- Treat every aspect of the dress rehearsal as if it were a real performance before an audience.
- Stay in character! No matter what happens, stay in character.
- Debrief yourself after the dress rehearsal to fine-tune your performance in preparation for opening night.

Your Primary Goal

Now is the time for you to be completely professional in attitude, appearance, dependability, punctuality and cooperation.

chapter seven

Opening Night

The Basics

- Prepare at home, as you did for the dress rehearsal
- Be careful not to get carried away by audience reaction
- Stay true to your character

Few moments are sweeter for the actor than a production's opening night. Every minute of memorization and character development, every hour of arduous rehearsal is now distilled down to this moment of anticipation. A real audience will now be filling those seats out beyond the footlights, and that expectation fills the actor at once with exhilaration and dread.

Homework Redux

But before this paradoxical process can take place, the actor must go through the mechanics of preparation. As with the dress rehearsal, preparation for the first performance (and, naturally, every subsequent performance) begins at home. So it is worthwhile to briefly reiterate the points outlined in the previous chapter:

- Leave sufficient time beforehand to walk yourself through—mentally and physically—the entire play, from the moment you will walk in the door, to the final curtain.

- Review the instructions you have been given about this performance: Does the director want you in costume and makeup right away, or will there be a run-through in street dress before the actual performance? Do you have any other responsibilities before curtain?

- Remind yourself which room you have been assigned for dressing and makeup; think about the process, and how long it will take for you to get into costume and makeup.

- Do you know where your props will be?

- Run through every one of your scenes, including lines and blocking.

- Review every on-stage and off-stage responsibility you have.

- Go in the right frame of mind. Commit the entire process to the Lord, asking the Spirit to be in charge of your every word and action. Go with an attitude of cooperation and calm, centered both in what you are doing and, more importantly, in why you are doing it.

Dismiss these more mundane, mechanical preparations at your peril. The concert pianist does not create moments of creative genius in performance without long hours of woodshedding over his or her scales; the painter does not create magic on canvas without first understanding the mechanics of brush and oils. "Genius" is often a misnomer for the result of many hours of hard work combined with attention to detail. (For example, most people are blithely unaware of the countless hours of work that Fred Astaire put in to making his dancing technique appear "effortless.")

Community

Part of the exhilaration of opening night has nothing to do with the new component of the attendant audience. There is a powerful community dynamic that takes place within a company of actors. Like a company of young soldiers that have just survived boot camp by relying on each other, the cast of a play approaches opening night bound together by their shared triumphs and woes. Behind them are the times of wailing and gnashing of teeth when problems arose, when an actor just couldn't get it right, when tempers flared and intemperate words were said. Behind them, as well, are the times of brilliance—those sharp, penetrating moments in which characters suddenly sprang to life, or the essential meaning of the play was dramatically drilled home. All these episodes combine to create a sense of community, and a familial bond.

This bond is one of the key elements in holding together a production—and it can have its practical benefits. For the first performance of *The Essence of His Death*, several members of the cast were ill—including this writer: the director of the production and player of the Theodosius role. A flu-like malaise filled the dressing room area backstage, and many of us wished only to be at home, in bed, feeling sorry for ourselves. But, as they say, the show must go on, and by helping and encouraging each other, we were able to push beyond the malaise to turn in a respectable performance.

Over the many weeks of hard rehearsals all of us had developed a strong sense of community—a community not only committed to the success of the play, but to the well-being of each other. Without that bond, that dressing room would have housed little more than a miserable collection of isolated souls, each depending only on themselves, and the performance that followed would have been a resounding flop. As it was, through the power of community, prayer, and mutual determination to excel for the Lord's sake, the actual performance became a powerful statement of Christ's love and sacrifice.

The Essential Audience

Another of the mysterious engines that motivates a performance is the added component of the audience. For its members are not just

spectators—anonymous voyeurs hidden beyond the lights and the "fourth wall"—but they are actually candidates for inclusion in this new community. We are not just playing to them, but are doing our level best to include them in this society that has developed around the play! We want them to understand what is going on, to become a part of the story, to invest themselves in the new reality we as actors are striving to create.

Lynn Redgrave on the importance of the audience…

"They are the missing ingredient that you're working towards, and only when you finally have an audience do you have a play. They're part of it. The participation of the audience in theatre is essential, and what they bring to it or don't bring to it alters the nature of the performance."

The experienced actor does not ignore the audience, but establishes a relationship with it. Earlier it was said that the rehearsal process is not a linear path toward a static performance, something locked in, frozen, and simply repeated ad nauseum for the allotted number of performances. What the individual actor does on stage has a life of its own; it is a living, breathing, evolving, adaptable being. The play is not a photograph, something two-dimensional, displayed in a frame for the public to pass by and view for a moment before continuing on to their lunch. The play is a tightly condensed moment in time, a new reality that exists for the sole purpose of *drawing in* the audience, to make them a part of this new thing being created for their sake.

So a reciprocal relationship is established between the actor and the audience. The actor uses every practiced skill to draw in the audience, to involve them in the performance—to convince them that it is something real. When this is successful—even on a limited basis—a symbiotic relationship is set up so that the involvement and response of the audience actually *feeds* the actor, energizing his performance, making it more substantial and real. Both are challenged; both are rewarded.

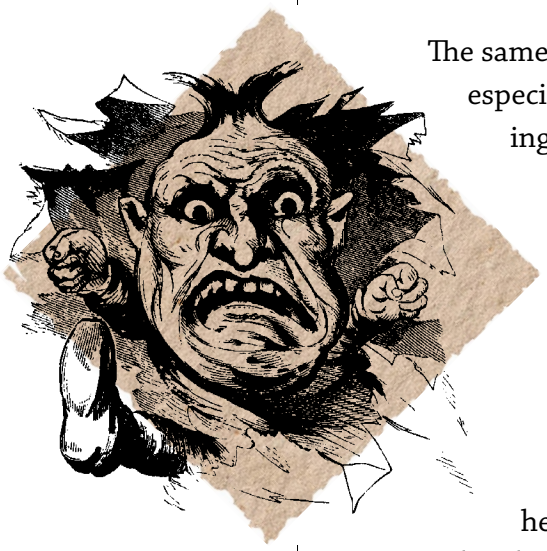
Over the Top

One of the easiest mistakes for the committed amateur to make is to get caught up in the rarefied atmosphere of the opening night and to give too much, or to "go over the top," in his or her performance. It is easy to take a good thing too far. Years ago I was guilty of this myself.

We were in rehearsals for the first musical I had written, *The Journey Back*, and I was playing the role of "Paul," who at one point is reminiscing about his baptism experience. The line was

…and I kept telling the pastor that I couldn't swim, and was afraid to let him put my head under the water. He said: (in a slight caricature of an evangelist) "My boy, just think about Jesus and you'll be fine."

Well, at the first rehearsal I played the line pretty straight, but when I added some juice to the word "Jesus," I got a favorable reaction from the director and fellow actors. So (conveniently forgetting the stage direction of "a *slight* caricature") I kept adding juice, until about four or five rehearsals later I was delivering the line as a strident, offensive cartoon of the stereotypical fundamentalist—and the director had to tone me down, because I was, indeed, taking it over the top.



The same thing can happen to an actor in performance—and especially on opening night, when the adrenaline is pumping at full force. Buoyed by favorable audience reaction, the actor can get carried away by the opportunity to entertain, and take his or her character into places it doesn't belong. This can be a dangerous situation where the actor begins to lose control of his character; suddenly—and it can happen with alarming speed—after weeks of rehearsal and careful construction of a believable character, the character is behaving way over the top, in a caricature of what he is really supposed to be. And for the price of an easy laugh, or an approving gasp from the audience, the integrity of a character—and, maybe, the whole play—lies in tatters.

The long hours of rehearsal are meant not only to create and develop the character, but also to *cement the character in place*. This doesn't speak against necessary *flexibility*, but is meant to prevent the actor taking the character into places he shouldn't.

Leaving Some to the Audience

In an interview conducted around 1978, the venerable character actor, Barnard Hughes, offered another reason for not taking a performance too far.

> When I receive that measly pension from the mistress after having been her gardener all my life [in the play *Da*, for which Hughes received a Tony for Best Actor], I'm sitting with my son and I say, proudly and sadly, "I planted them trees there, and I set up the tennis court." He tells me, "You've been diddled." And I say, not wanting to admit it, "What, diddled?" and then almost break into a tear, knowing he's right. But I've been wondering whether I'm taking that too far by almost breaking down: maybe I'm playing out the reaction that I want the audience to feel. If I play the emotion for them, you see, they don't have to feel it themselves. An actor should only suggest, suggest, suggest and let the audience do the feeling. Allow them to play out the emotions.
>
> I remember when I was playing Kurt in *Watch on the Rhine*, I said goodbye to my children, and the tears just flowed. I could hardly control myself, hardly get through the performance. When I'd take my curtain call about five minutes later, I'd still be choked up. And everyone thought how wonderful it was that I could cry so facilely—but I really shouldn't have been crying at all. The audience should have been dissolved in tears instead. The very fact that people admired my ability to cry showed that I was not acting well: it reminded them that I *was* acting. Anything that draws attention to the fact that you're acting isn't acting.
>
> James Agate once said that when he looks at a watch, he does so to learn the time, not to admire the works, and I think that's a good thing for actors to keep in mind. These fancy actors who call attention to their technique are keeping the audience aware that they're actors. And yes, I'm afraid that I might be playing that moment in *Da* a little bit too strongly for the audience; they might not empathize or sympathize with me because I'm playing it so fully that they don't have to.

The wise actor approaches every performance with expectation measured by caution—enthusiasm informed by sobriety.

Stage Fright

Finally, a brief word about that old nemesis, stage fright.

In a word, it is unnecessary. While there may be among us those individuals of chronically terrified constitution, for the rest there is no need for anything more than a normal, healthy case of pre-curtain butterflies before a performance.

With only rare exceptions, those standing in the wings consumed with stage fright—or those who have just made their entrance and find themselves staring mute at the audience, paralyzed with stark fear—are those who have not properly prepared for the moment.

The actor who follows a methodical system of rehearsal, such as that outlined in this book, and who commits himself to the concept and pursuit of excellence in service to the Lord, will meet opening night with little more than a healthy, motivating case of nervousness. The actor who has rehearsed well approaches the first curtain confident in his or her character. Everything about the role—lines, blocking, behavior—have long ago become second nature. The play is so familiar that it has become an almost parallel universe, as familiar as real life.

Given this, there is no cause for stage fright, only an overwhelming desire to get out there and finally give full flower to the moment up to which the long rehearsal schedule has been crescendoing. The well-prepared actor meets this moment head-on—maybe with butterflies in the belly, but also with a powerful hunger to give life to the character and play.

Now— Go break a leg!

Opening Night: *Review*

- Prepare, at home, as you did for the dress rehearsal.
- Be careful to not get carried away by audience reaction.
- Remain true to your character.

Your Primary Goal

Remember and put to use all the work you've put in on your character and the play.

chapter eight

Curtain Call

The Basics

- Be modestly gracious in your response to those who applaud your work.
- Evaluate your work after the first and subsequent performances.
- Make sure that your motives have been righteous, and that God receives all the glory and praise.

So you've just made your final exit. Perhaps it was out the wings, stage left, or through the audience, down right. Perhaps it was after a blackout, or after being run through by a soldier's blade, left to bleed and die in writhing agony down center, slow fade to black.

However it ended, the performance is over for you, your work done. If you had a sizeable role at all, and if you did your job well, you should be exhausted—exhilarated and exhausted. No matter the dimensions of your role, you should be experiencing a sense of accomplishment—a sense that you have just served the Lord to the very best of your ability. You have employed His gifts in serving His kingdom; you have served not yourself and your own aggrandizement, but you have just done your best to bring glory to God.

And that feeling is worth more than all the applause resounding across the Broadway stage.

A Gracious Response

If you have read Part One of this book, you will know that the idea of a traditional curtain call—the practice of the cast trooping out to bow and receive the praise and adulation of the audience—is abhorrent to the His Company way. There is something inherently repugnant about receiving personal praise for serving the Lord. It leaves a bad taste in the mouth—as well it should.

It is not up to the individual actor to decide how the play will end. It is up to the individual, however, to be responsible for his own motives, the purposes of his own heart.

If, at the end of the play, the cast does take a bow, it is your responsibility to receive the applause with grace and humility. If, later, you are uncomfortable when people approach you to say what a wonderful job you did, don't reproach them, and don't preach. Just smile graciously and say "thank you." Just as it may have been hard for you to learn how to have a servant heart when performing before an audience, it can be hard for members of the audience not to applaud your efforts. Thank them for their appreciation, and, where appropriate (and if you mean it), use a simple phrase to redirect their praise, such as, "I give God the praise," or just "Praise God"—always with an attitude of *Thank you. Let us praise God together*.

The Debriefing

It may well be that your opening night is also your closing night. It may be that there will be only one performance of this play for which you have worked so diligently. Or it may be that another performance will follow the next night, or next week. Or, in some cases, after the final curtain of opening night, you may be facing a run of ten or more performances.

In any case, your work is not yet done. Even if this was the only performance—and certainly if there are to be more in this run—it is important that you debrief your own performance. Your goal, throughout this process that is nearing its end, is to be a better actor tomorrow than you were today. And one of the most valuable tools in accomplishing that worthy goal is to take a moment to review the work you've just completed.

Your director may conduct a more formal, full-cast debriefing. But whether he does or not, I would encourage you to spend some time evaluating your own performance. By all means, enjoy the moment; revel for a while in the joy of the theatre. But then step away from the applause and the praise; let the euphoria of the performance fade. Then make a cold, hard examination of the work you've just done.

Post-performance Checklist

- Did you run through the entire play before you arrived for the performance? Did you review all your lines and blocking?
- Did you arrive on-time?
- How was your pre-performance preparation? Were you ready for opening night, 'up to speed'? Were you organized with the tool-kit of your performance—your costume, makeup, and props?
- When you made your first entrance, did you feel confident, thoroughly in character, or did you enter a bit tentatively, even off-balance?
- Were your lines and blocking comfortably plugged in, a natural part of you, or did you spend the performance struggling to remember your next line or move?
- Did you forget any of your lines? If so, how well did you recover?
- Did you, at any point during the performance, lose your concentration? Were you distracted by anything unexpected in the audience, or from one of the other actors? Did this cause you to

drop out of character, or blow a line? How could you have avoided this situation?

- If any of your fellow actors forgot a line or their blocking, were you able to do anything to help? How could you have handled that better?

- Did you behave like a professional backstage—keeping quiet, and concentrating on the overall production, as well as your role?

- With your script in hand, review your performance. Honestly, how well did you do? Were you solidly in character throughout your time on stage, or was there a moment when you relaxed, and slipped out of character? Make a note of where in the play that occurred.

- Did you deliver your lines as rehearsed? Did you either intentionally take liberties or accidentally change a line? With your script in hand, remind yourself of the correct line. (And if, in the heat of the performance, you intentionally changed a line, *don't* ***ever*** *do that again*.)

- How well did you establish a relationship with the audience? Were they working *with* you, or *against* you? Were you comfortable with them, or did the audience leave you feeling ill-at-ease?

- Were you "on"? Did you enjoy yourself? Did you "feel" like your character—or did you feel like an actor?

- Finally, what can you do to do a better job the next time?

Motive

The Christian actor's situation is very different from that of the secular actor. The secular actor, with rare exception, is serving primarily himself and his career. He may feel a sense of responsibility toward the project as a whole, and his fellow actors, but he wants prominent

billing, a fat paycheck, and most of the glory for himself. At best, he does it not for money or fame, but for his love for the craft.

This is not meant to denigrate the intentions of secular actors. Theirs is an honorable profession with honorable rewards. I do not fault their pursuit.

In contrast, however, the actor in the Christian or religious production has a higher calling. Our calling is not to be the glorification of self, but the glorification of God. From the selection of the script, through casting, rehearsals, and final performance, every aspect of the Christian production is to be focused on and informed by the Godhead. It is all to be energized by the Holy Spirit, performed out of a love for and gratitude to Jesus Christ, and dedicated to the glory of God and His kingdom.

At the end of a production run—after the sets have been broken, the props and costumes put back into storage, the extra sound and light cables put away—after the dust has settled, the Christian actor is to be filled not with admiration for himself, but the wonder and praise of His Lord.

For that is the His Company way.

Curtain Call: *Review*

- Be modestly gracious in your response to those who applaud your work.
- Evaluate your work after the first and subsequent performances.
- Make sure that your motives have been righteous, and that God receives all the glory and praise.

Your Primary Goal

To be a better actor tomorrow than you are today.

part 4

The Next Level

emphasis one

Memorization

Memorizing lines is fundamental. Few people actually enjoy the process of cramming lines into memory, but the process is necessary—and accomplishes two important things in the early life of a play.

- Memorization permits rehearsal. No *real* rehearsing takes place until the lines are memorized.

- Memorization begins the important process of the actor acquiring the character. Memorizing the lines is like ingesting the essence of who the character is—and, more importantly, equipping the actor to speak as or for the character.

Non-negotiables

There are certain hard and fast rules to follow when memorizing lines.

- Learn your lines *verbatim*. The actor, by himself, does not make changes to the script; the changing of lines—if it is to take place at all—is always the result of discussion between the actor and director, or writer and director.

This is not to suggest that the writer's words are somehow holy writ that dare not be changed; lines are changed all the time when there is good reason. But the play requires a common foundation from which all participants work. It cannot be something that twists and turns at the whim of the individual actor.

- Take great pains to learn your lines correctly the first time. It is twice as difficult to *unlearn* lines that have been memorized incorrectly.

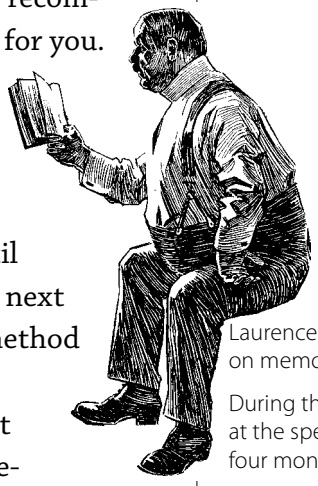
- Learn the words first. Don't try to develop the character while you are memorizing lines; that will come later.

Realistically it is difficult to draw a strong, bright line between memorization and character development. Depending on the role, there are times when "being in character" can be a help in much the same way as blocking. The critical point is that you add in nothing that becomes an *obstacle* to quick memorization of your lines.

- If someone helps you learn your lines, make sure they hold you to the printed lines. Make sure they don't let you get away with changing the lines—either accidentally or on purpose.

Methods

Every actor has his or her favorite method of memorization. So long as the lines are learned correctly, and on time, personal methods—no matter how odd—are perfectly acceptable. Here are some recommended, tried and true methods; use any or all that work for you.



Laurence Olivier on memorization…

During the summer I worked at the speech day and night for four months.

I knew from experience that it was essential to get the words first. Then, when I'd got the words absolutely so that they were tripping off my tongue, I'd get the accent. Trying to learn the words and the accent at the same time was dreadfully unwise, for then you had twin problems to contend with.

- Break down the script into manageable chunks. Learn one sentence so that you can say it perfectly. Then learn the next sentence perfectly. Go back and learn the two sentences together; don't move on until you are perfect on the two sentences. Then learn the next sentence; add it to the two previous. Use the same method for paragraphs and pages. Don't add more until you are solid on everything up to that point. At your next memorization session, do not proceed into new material, until you have successfully reviewed the lines from the previous session.

- Do not work without your script in hand until your lines are solid. Actors begin learning their lines inaccurately when they too quickly set aside their script. What this means more specifically is, for example, don't run lines in your car, while driving to

Lynn Redgrave on learning lines…

And then I do try to learn the lines [after reading through a new script]. The bigger the part the more I like to know them. It's the biggest bugaboo of my life that most actors, through sheer laziness, do not do the same. I know it sounds arrogant, but it's true. Many actors justify their laziness with excuses like, "Oh, I can't possibly learn my lines, I have to know my character and my moves along with it." But that is absolute rubbish, and it's the biggest time-waster in rehearsals. It is boring to learn your lines… but it pays off one-hundredfold the minute you start rehearsals. You see, you cannot really act with a book in your hand, and so it's a great thing to hide behind.

work or the store, until you can say them flawlessly—or at least until you learn them well enough to know when you've made a mistake, and can correct it immediately.

- When working from the script, cover your line while reading the previous character's line. Work your way down each page in this way. This will help you learn the *context* for your lines—*when* to say them.

- Think photographically. One way to remember lines is to recall their placement on the printed page. Is it the line at the top of the page? The one right before the page turn? Or is it the long one in the middle of the page, broken into several paragraphs?

- Use the phrasing and rhythm of words to help you remember their order.

- Use the script line numbers (usually running down the left-hand side of the page, if they are there) for reference—much like one would learn a passage of Scripture by remembering its chapter and verse.

- If you are still memorizing lines after the play has been blocked, it will be to your advantage to learn the two together. Always walk through your blocking as you work your lines—and always run your lines as you rehearse your blocking. This practice will not just reinforce the combination of the two, but is also a good memorization tool: The best way to remember a line is to associate it with where you are standing on stage; likewise, the best way to remember your blocking is to associate it with what you are saying when you are there!

Again, it is less important *how* you learn your lines, than it is that you *do*—with dispatch. The most important contribution you can make to the success of the play—especially in the early days of the production—is to learn your lines early and accurately. Your director will appreciate it, as well as your fellow actors.

emphasis two

The Character

The process of an actor acquiring and shaping his or her character begins with the moment the script is in hand and continues through the final performance. The process is discussed throughout this book, but here we will develop it to a deeper extent. What are the first steps to an actor building the character?

Building

The term "building" is used intentionally. The character is not something already in existence that can, in an elemental sense, be viewed and understood. Assuredly, the character is created by the play's author, but the author has only erected the *framework* for the character—as well as the scaffolding on which the workers will stand to put up the walls, windows and furnishings. Though created by the author, it is up to the actor to fill in all those walls and windows and furnishings.

Using a more human analogy, the author may supply the skeleton, but it is the *actor* who puts on the flesh.

Kit Bag

Every person has a past and a present. Every person has a kit bag crammed with life experiences, memories, loves and hates, and people: people observed and people experienced. Every actor has thoughts, opinions, fantasies and dreams. Every person on the stage brings with him a life filled to overflowing with raw material.

Following the building analogy, these could be seen as the items filling the warehouse from which the building will be finished. These life experiences will be brought into the actor's realization of his character.

The venerable actor and master teacher Uta Hagen refers to this process as *transference*—but we can de-mystify this concept by simply thinking of it as the actor making selections from personal life experiences and giving them to his character. It is how the flesh is applied to the skeletal framework.

This process supplies some of the "what" of a character, but, more importantly, it supplies most of the "how" and the "why." Let's look at this in greater detail, using the Biblical character of Ruth for an example.

Our one-act play, *Family*, is based on the first eighteen verses of the Old Testament book of Ruth.

Beginning With the Facts

You have been given the role of Ruth. What is the first step? You settle into a comfortable chair with the script and the Bible. To discover how the author has interpreted the character, you read through the script several times. Even though your character is a familiar Bible character, you familiarize yourself with the script first—not because the script is more important than Scripture, but because your first job is to perform the *character* of Ruth as created by the author, not necessarily to perform the historical character as described in the Bible.

In this context, Scripture is the *background* resource, whereas the play's script is your *primary* resource.

Once you have read through the script a number of times, and believe that you have at least the beginning of an understanding of the role, you then turn to the book of Ruth in Scripture. Your purpose is essentially two-fold: to discover or remind yourself of the established background for the character, and to verify for yourself that the character as written does not run counter to the Biblical account. From Scripture (if not from the script) you learn that

- Ruth is a Moabite.
- She has married into a Jewish family, originally from Bethlehem in Judah.
- She was married for no more than ten years, at which time her husband, Mahlon, died.
- Ruth has made the decision to leave her native Moab and go to Judah with her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Although there is certainly much more to glean from the Biblical story of Ruth, for the purpose of this discussion let us stop there for the moment, with just these four points, and consider how you will begin to build this character and make it your own.

You begin by asking yourself the fundamental question:

"If *I* were _____..."

supplying the name of your character:

"If *I* were Ruth..."

From the start, your purpose is to personalize the character—to see yourself living the life lived by Ruth. So let us now reconsider the four facts about Ruth gleaned from Scripture—facts reworded to reflect your acquisition of the character.

- *I* am a Moabite.

- *I* married into a Jewish family, originally from Bethlehem in Judah.

- *I* was married for ten years, at which time my husband, Mahlon, died.

- *I* have made the decision to leave my native Moab and go to Judah with my mother-in-law, Naomi.

Learning All You Can

The next step—that is, when your character is an historical figure such as Ruth—is to learn all you can about the real person. Using only the above four items (for this example), you begin your research.

- Go to the library and learn everything you can about ancient Moab. What was the place like? the climate? What kind of culture was it? What were the people like? Did they get along with neighboring Judah, or were they at war most of the time? What was the status of women in the Moabite culture? What freedoms or restrictions did they have? How did they dress? Did they wear makeup, wigs?

- Based on what you've learned about the Moabite culture, how common would it have been for a woman to marry into the *Jewish* culture? Would this have ostracized her from the rest of the community? Would Jews have been looked down on, looked up to—or accepted as readily as anyone else?

- What would have happened to a widow in the Moabite culture? Would she have easily remarried—or would she have been stigmatized for the rest of her life?

- What kind of culture shock would a Moabite have experienced moving to Judah? How would she have been received?

Uta Hagen
on character origin…

If, like Laurette Taylor, you want to ensure that you will be "wearing the underpants" of the character, you will have to start at the beginning with transferences from your own life to the very origins of your character, to ensure faith in the reality of your new existence.

Transference

Now it is time to begin the process of injecting *your* life experience into the character of Ruth.

- "You" were born and lived the early years of your life in Moab—a rugged, desert land. Are you familiar with the desert? Have you experienced how hot and dry it can be—so hot breathing can be difficult? You may not have spent much time in the desert, but have you driven through it while on vacation? If not, surely you've experienced the occasional day of brutal heat. Maybe—if not the desert—you've spent time on a dry, sandy beach. Do you remember what it was like getting the sand all over and in everything? What would it be like living under those conditions all the time? But it could also rain in Moab. Have you ever lived in or visited an area that had been dry for an extended period, which then received welcome rain? Do you remember how it smelled afterward, how everything looked suddenly green again?

- Have you ever married or dated someone from another culture? How did you feel when visiting that person's family? Did you feel awkward—at least at first? out of place? alienated? If you haven't a romantic situation to draw from, have you ever had a friend from another culture? Did you invite that friend to visit you and your family in your culture—or did you visit theirs?

- Most people have lost a loved one or intimate friend to death. Remember those feelings of loss, emptiness, of feeling left behind. Were you angry? angry with God? What did the loss feel like down deep in the pit of your stomach?

- Have you ever left home for good, or for an extended period of time? Was there a queasy feeling of homesickness associated with it? After a while, did you long to return home again? Or maybe there was an opposite reaction: maybe you were glad to leave, and happy in your new home.

Observation

The actor cannot always build his character from personal experience. Sometimes—in fact, quite often—we must add in our observations of other people. The actor *must* become a student of people, observing their actions, behaviors, quirks and idiosyncrasies.

So the actor must become a *voyeur*, of sorts—not prying into people's private lives, or peering through their window shades, but always keeping his or her eyes open to what is going on around him. The observant actor collects characters like other people collect seashells or buttons, always keeping an eye out for something interesting to add to the collection. Let a button collector visit a swap meet or garage sale, and she will come away with a new treasure. Likewise, let an actor stand on a subway platform, and he will come away with a pocketful of new characters to add to his storehouse of material.

An actor's mind becomes a catalogue (or a database, if you'd prefer) of qualities that can be retrieved and used at will. For example,

- THE FOIBLES AND BEHAVIOR OF THE STRANGER in an adjacent plane seat—such as the woman I observed one time on a plane from Nairobi to London. She had probably boarded in Johannesburg, from where the flight had originated. I didn't hear her voice, but she *looked* South African: mostly Dutch, slightly Germanic, with short blonde hair. It was the hair, in fact, that caught my eye. It was greasy, you see; not wet or damp, but greasy. Yet she repeatedly brushed her fingers through it and tossed it about as if it were long and luxurious, and she were a blow-dried starlet in Hollywood. Yet it was short and greasy, for crying out loud! I imagined it left little slivers of grease stains on the paper-covered headrest. This woman seemed full of life, radiant. She fairly *glowed* with vitality, and it occurred to me that she knew her hair was rather unkempt, and just didn't care.

- A POMPOUS OFFICIAL DOING AS LITTLE OF HIS DUTY AS POSSIBLE—such as the Mexican customs agent I observed as a teenager when our missionary group paused for inspection at the border crossing at Nuevo Laredo. He sat at a tiny desk, a desk barely larger than his own substantial girth. He wasn't doing a thing,

Laurence Olivier on observations…

I hear remarks in the street or in a shop and I retain them. You must constantly observe: a walk, a limp, a run; how a head inclines to one side when listening; the twitch of an eyebrow; the hand that picks the nose when it thinks no one is looking; the mustache puller; the eyes that never look at you; the nose that sniffs long after the cold has gone. Rhythms. Observe the speech patterns; keep them in your head, in your magic box. Store them until you need them, then use them. The way people walk down a bus or a subway train, one arm bent behind or both hands brought forward, elbows in as if in fear of accidental indecent contact.

but just sat there as if expecting no one to notice him. While he waited (or daydreamed, or stared at the flies on the wall) he smoked a cigarette—methodically, rhythmically, patiently. And the most remarkable thing was that I never saw him *exhale*. For the entire length of that cigarette I never saw one particle of smoke emerge from either his mouth or his nose.

- THE DESPICABLE PERSONALITY OF A HOUSE PAINTER—such as the man who was hired to paint the exterior of our house a few years back. He was not terribly bright, since he got lost repeatedly while trying to find our house. He was an ugly man, with a face pockmarked and distorted by scars. His personality, as well, was coarse and abrasive, his language profane. He constantly cut corners and reneged on promises made. He yelled at his men and called them derogatory names. His behavior was churlish and abusive, full of empty boasts and small-minded excuses. Throughout the job, he was argumentative with me, and even expressed his pique that though I was younger than he, I apparently lived better. This man remains to-date the ugliest person—both in visage and personality—I have ever met.

Along with observations of real people, in real life, one could also add to the personal catalogue characters and situations seen on television, in movies, and on the stage. And it is rarely necessary to physically compile these observations, writing them down; when one gives full attention to the observation it will be fixed into memory, waiting for just the right moment to emerge, and contribute to the building of a new character.

The Hard Slog

It is not uncommon for actors in church theatre to invert the logic of an actor's responsibility toward a role. They—as amateurs in the traditional sense of the word—will spend little time working on character, when they, with their lack of experience and training, are the ones who should be working at it the hardest. Meanwhile, the professional—again, in the traditional sense of that word—exhibits his professionalism by working hard at those things the amateur believes are unnecessary!

If ever there was anyone who could phone-in an acting job, it was Laurence Olivier. Without a doubt, he could read through a script, cold, with more expression and verve than most of us after a 60-day schedule of rehearsals. He was the consummate actor, a chameleon, an artist. Yet it may surprise the amateur to learn that he worked hard at his art, as the following notes on his preparation for Shakespeare's *Othello* illustrate.

I began to think about the play again, and look at it from Othello's point of view. I began to sniff around the man, like an old dog inspecting yesterday's bone. I began to read and reread it, worming my way into the text. Scratching at the veneer I had left on it from my previous experience of Iago's point of view, chipping away and getting back to the bare, fresh page. Throwing off the harness of a previous production.

To create a character, I first visualize a painting; the manner, movement, gestures, walk all follow. It began to come. Pictures and sounds began to form in my mind, subconsciously at first, but slowly working their way to the surface. You keep the image in the heart and then project it onto the oil painting. I say "oil" rather than "watercolor" because for me, acting will always be in oils.

I was beginning to know how I should look: very strong. He should stand as a strong man stands, with a sort of ease, straight-backed, straight-necked, relaxed as a lion. I was certain that he had to be very graceful. I was sure that when he killed in battle, he did it with absolute beauty.

Black… I had to be black. I had to feel black down to my soul. I had to look out from a black man's world. Not one of repression, for Othello would have felt superior to the white man. If I peeled my skin, underneath would be another layer of black skin. I was to be beautiful. Quite beautiful.

Throwing away the white man was difficult, but fascinating. Of course, you can never truly do this, but there were times when I convinced myself that I had. The oil painting.

A walk… I needed a walk. I must relax my feet. Get the right balance, not too taut, not too loose… He should grow from the earth, the rich brown earth, warmed by the sun. I took off my shoes, and then my socks. Barefoot, I felt the movement come to me. Slowly it came: lithe, dignified and sensual. Lilting, yet positive.

The voice. I was sure he had a deeper voice than mine. Bass, a bass part, a sound that should be dark violet—velvet stuff.

Working At It

A process such as that which Olivier followed for his Othello is what brings both clarity and depth to a performance, and a variation on that same process should be carried out by every actor in every role down to the smallest bit part in the shortest sketch.

Since I don't do a very good job of acting and directing at the same time, when I am directing a larger play I may reserve for myself (if necessary) a small, one-scene role, often a character part, with which I can have fun for a short time, then get back to my directing responsibilities. And one such role was that of Theodosius in our three-act, *The Essence of His Death*.

Into the script I had written only the merest suggestion of the character…

Enter THEODOSIUS, a Roman merchant on his way toward Egypt. He is a trader in silly and inconsequential trinkets, a commodity ill-befitting his "robust" stature. Theodosius sweats a lot.

It wasn't much to go on, so I began layering on a look, a demeanor, a personality for this merchant. For his demeanor, I drew from every fat person I had ever met (including myself)—but primarily the irretrievably disheveled appearance of a Social Studies teacher I had had in the eighth grade. For his bargaining skills and wily ways, I drew on a thoroughly amoral store owner I had once worked for in San Diego—a person who would not have lost a minute's sleep over cheating a customer out of his life savings.

At home I tried out many possibilities, not worrying about going "over the top" in private. I worked out a voice, facial expressions, behavior. I practiced repeatedly how to smoothly slip a necklace from my bag and present it in an artful manner to my customer, fingers curled just so, displaying the necklace to catch the glint of "sunlight," making it sparkle like something worth more that its real value.

Then, in rehearsal with the two leading men of the story, I warned them to be on their toes, because I was going to do everything in my power to steal the scene. (Which, of course, I did.)

On Stage

A final note regarding the character: *Stay in it!*

One of the most difficult challenges for the inexperienced actor is to stay in character. Certainly during the earlier rehearsals, while you are struggling to put legs on your character, and the rehearsal is being repeatedly interrupted by direction, it can be almost impossible to remain in character. But as the rehearsal process continues—as the time between interruptions lengthens—you should also be rehearsing the art of staying in character.

Somewhere, buried deep within the cobwebbed annals of amateur productions, lies the root and source of a gross fallacy—the fallacy that an actor need only be in character when he or she has actual lines to recite.

This is horribly wrong. In fact, the most critical work an actor does on stage is what he does while *not* speaking: while listening to the opposite side of a dialogue; while pausing between speeches; while standing in the shadows, as seemingly insignificant as the set piece against which he leans.

The "professional" actor realizes that it is of critical importance that he remain in character at all times—especially when he has nothing to say.

The quickest way to deal a death blow to the fragile relationship between your character and the audience's supension of disbelief is to—even for the briefest moment—step out of character. Relaxing for a moment, letting your attention drift, or letting your eyes wander while standing in the background of a scene—any one of these can immediately and fatally remind the audience that you are, in fact, Mary Jones, and not really the Queen of Sheba.

As the rehearsal schedule moves into its final days, as your interpretation and realization of the character deepens and matures so that it becomes less a description on the printed page and more a three-dimensional human being, you should be spending increasingly more of the rehearsal time in character—until, at least by the dress rehearsal, you get into character before you even step onto the stage, and you remain in character until the final curtain.

emphasis three

Rehearsing at Home

The His Company philosophy and method includes the following principle: Public rehearsals—that is, a scheduled rehearsal with the director and other cast members—represent only the tip of the iceberg; the *real* rehearsing takes place at home.

The Professional Way

The amateur way—and that term is not used here disparagingly, but only to accurately describe the typical church drama participant—has traditionally been to consider the regular, scheduled rehearsals as the only time that rehearsing of the *individual* role takes place. The amateur returns home from play practice, tosses the dog-eared script on the dresser, and forgets about it until the next scheduled rehearsal.

That, however, is not the His Company way.

Character-based

The His Company performance method is character-based. By that it is meant that every other production component is secondary to the authentic, richly developed character. Without the believable character, nothing else will save the play; with it, very little else matters. All the splendid scenery of the Broadway stage will not save a play in which the characters are little more than stick figures. Set pieces, special effects, or gloriously authentic costumes will not salvage a play in which the actors have not done their homework.

His Company began with (and always specialized in) the short sketch performed to illustrate some other component of the worship service, such as the sermon or special music. A two-person, three-minute sketch stuck in the middle of a service just before the sermon cannot depend on elaborate sets or lighting to create a mood. It rarely begins with a blackout, has no curtain, and is typically performed in the harsh sunlight of a Sunday morning—with a red exit sign overhead and choir members whispering in the background. The audience is usually taken by surprise, the pastor is seated just a few feet away, and someone's unruly infant is caterwauling in the front pew.

In these circumstances, everything, e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g, depends on the immediately believable character. Authentic wardrobe helps, certainly, and, in some cases can be almost as critical as the character wearing it. But what really makes or breaks the performance is the woodshedding each actor has put in on his or her character.

The aforementioned three-minute sketch will typically require twenty-four hours of public rehearsal. Assuming a weekly, rather than daily rehearsal schedule, this would mean eight three-hour public rehearsals spread over two months. For the individual actor to fully invest himself in his character—to pump real flesh and blood, emotion, depth, and authentic clarity into the role—requires at least an additional twenty-four hours of work at home.

Uta Hagen
on invisible technique…

I am only impressed when the actor's technique is so perfect that it has become invisible and has persuaded the audience that they are in the presence of a living human being who makes it possible for them to empathize with all his foibles and struggles as they unfold in the play. It is my firm belief that when you are aware of how a feat has been achieved, the actor has failed. He has misused his techniques.

The Goal

The goal for the individual actor is to *bring the character to life*. It is as simple and direct as that. If you, once you have exited from your per-

formance, hear the audience exclaiming, "Didn't Jimmy do a splendid job!" or "My goodness, Alice sure put in a lot of work on that!" you have failed miserably. Your goal—not always attained, but always in sight—is to so bring to life your character that within the first minute after your entrance the audience has utterly forgotten that you are the one playing the role. Your goal is to leave them exclaiming, "Now I know what Moses (or Paul, or Jesus, or Mary) was really like." Or, better yet, you want to leave them so moved they are stunned into silence.

It is true that with the typically unsophisticated, home-church audience this result may be next to impossible. Unless they are seeing drama on a regular basis—unless they are accustomed to having Scripture and its principles being played out before them by actors in costume, they will inevitably be preoccupied with *process*, instead of story or moral. Realistically their response will be a blend of both.

Nevertheless, the actor should never stop striving to attain the goal of presenting the audience with a character so deeply and authentically realized that the *actor* disappears before their eyes.

This level of performance does not happen without homework. The real, fundamental crafting of the character is done by the actor alone: researching, practicing, experimenting, trying out voices and movement. This is where the character is given birth, depth, maturity. Then, with that homework under the belt, the actor arrives at the public rehearsal ready to share with the director and cast that which has been created.

The private work is where the character is developed; the public work is where the individual character is assimilated into the overall production.

The Home Stage

Find an area at home that approximates the shape (if admittedly not the dimensions) of your stage. Like the prayer closet in which you regularly meet with the Lord, use this same area for all rehearsing at home. Consistency of space is a valuable tool in the rehearsal process. Just as with landmarks in the auditorium, consistently "hitting your

mark" when rehearsing at home will help you do it right every time.

For example, if, when practicing at home, you always end up staring at the third shelf of the living room bookcase when you say the line, "Oh, how I wish they were. How I wish they were," then you will establish the habit of associating the two. If you fail to remember the line, you will recall it by remembering what you always say when you are staring at the third shelf of the bookcase. Likewise, if you temporarily forget your blocking, you will remember that whenever you say that line you are to be staring at books!

If you are in an area and climate where you can rehearse outdoors where there is more room, by all means, work *al fresco*!

Atmosphere

When rehearsing at home, do everything necessary to focus on the task at hand. Minimize distractions: don't permit an audience (unless you find that it actually helps the process). If someone is there to monitor the script for you, they must keep quiet except to correct mistakes or supply other characters' lines—and make sure they hold you to the script, not permitting you to take liberties with your lines.

The essence of acting is the willingness to make a fool of oneself. As early as possible in the process, make your rehearsals private. With no one else in the room you will be free to experiment and stretch the boundaries of your character, to try out different voices, to practice giving free reign to all aspects of your character.

Visualization

Rehearse physically and visually. Unless your blocking has you there on stage, don't sit comfortably in an easy chair, silently reciting your lines in your head. Get up! Move through your blocking, practicing it along with your lines. Run your lines out loud, full voice.

Meanwhile, visualize everything else that will be going on on stage; see in your mind the other actors, the set pieces; if you will have a prop in your hand on stage, then have something similar in your hand when rehearsing at home. If you have your costume already, wear it; if you don't, wear something similar. Do it for real!

And use this time to exercise your "flexibility" skills, preparing yourself for those moments to come when not everything will go as planned.

For more on being flexible, see Emphasis Five, "The Adaptable Actor," in Part Four.

emphasis four

Being Something One is Not

Acting is essentially an art of the mind. It depends on a director to envision the finished, completed production sometimes months before it is actually realized; it depends on an individual actor imagining herself as someone she is not, standing somewhere she is not, saying things she herself would never say; it depends on everyone on stage working together in concert to create something that doesn't really exist.

When handed one of my scripts for an Easter musical, a teenage girl grimaced and said rather imperiously to me, "*I* would never say that." I quickly conceded her point, but then rather pointedly told her, "*You* may not say that—but your *character* would."

Unseemly Actions

Acting is a frightening high-wire act in which a person volunteers to

stop being what he really is, to become, for awhile, something he is not. This can present moral quandaries for the Christian performer. For example, in *Closets*, the character of Loraine tries to light a cigarette in a restaurant.

Loraine is dressed shabbily—not like a street person, but as someone who once knew better days, but is now down on her luck. Her clothes are clean, but almost worn out. She has tried to arrange her hair, put on her face, but hasn't done a very good job of it, and there's a run in her hose. She slouches when she walks, as if hoping no one will notice her… Loraine removes her jacket, busies herself with her purse, then buries her nose in the menu. Meanwhile, Betty returns to her own perusal of the menu, occasionally glancing up at Loraine—not unkindly, more wanting her to be at her ease. As the waiter returns to take their order, Loraine fumbles in her purse, removes a pack of cigarettes and places one in her mouth. When she starts to strike a match, the waiter stops her.

The first performance of this sketch, in the commissioning church, was a logistical nightmare, since the actress playing the part of Loraine became ill at the last minute. After weeks of rehearsals, just a few hours before performance I was not seeing any way to proceed with only two-thirds of a three-member cast. But the pastor of the church insisted that we go ahead with the performance—with one of his willing parishioners standing in, *reading* Loraine's lines.

I anticipated disaster, but actually—after a few feverish run-throughs—it turned out to be something less than terrible, since virtually the entire sketch was performed sitting at a table, making it easier for the stand-in to read her lines. The problem, however, came in the direction with the cigarette: The woman refused to put the cigarette in her mouth. The short version of the tale is that I eventually compromised, and had her just fumble with the pack of cigarettes and matches.

In another instance, a pastor turned down a performance of our short one-act, *Sand Mountain*, in his church, based on his conviction that no one would ever buy into the premise of a man and woman being close, yet Platonic friends.

The decision to actually book a performance of a play will be outside the responsibilities of the individual actor, but he or she will often have to decide about things such as the mechanics of how their character is portrayed. These decisions, however, should be covered early-on in the production process. Objections should be raised at the first reading session with the new script—not later on, after rehearsals have begun.

Displays of Affection

A more common example deals with displays of affection on stage. Our three-act Easter musical, *The Choice*, has the male and female leads embrace and kiss in the final scene, before they part company, perhaps forever. This scene (which originated in *The Essence of His Death*) was performed without objection or insurrection in a number of different venues, until a church in the Midwest decided the only way they could stage the play and include this scene would be to cast two actors who were already married to each other as the leads.

The Kiss

In rehearsals for the inaugural performance of *The Essence of His Death*, I was faced with a different, but all-too-common problem: two willing, but clumsily nervous actors. The female lead was already married, and the male lead was engaged, and though they were trying their best, we spent long hours discussing the hows and whys and wherefores of this brief embrace and kiss. Finally, during one late-evening rehearsal, I, as their director, reached my breaking point. I had run out of words to *talk* them into doing it the correct way, so, instead, I decided to demonstrate. My point all along had been for them to quit thinking about it so much, and *just do it*. So I unexpectedly grabbed the leading lady, hugged her close to me and planted a stage kiss smack on her lips. *Just like that,* I said to them. Just *do it*.

The term "stage kiss" refers to an outwardly authentic, but actually passionless, touching of the lips. From outward appearances it is the real thing—as real and deep as necessary for the scene—but in fact expresses no feeling whatsoever between the two actors. It is just one more device in the actor's toolkit for portraying something that doesn't actually exist.

The inexperienced actor often makes the mistake of writing too much of himself into his character, when, in reality, acting is the glorious opportunity to step *outside* the confines of one's personality. In the example of the aforementioned scene, any number of valid arguments could be put forth for not doing the scene as written. The leader of the church venue could raise an objection on moral grounds; the indi-

vidual actors could object on personal moral or decorum grounds; the director or actor could object on the basis of character development, electing to have the two characters, at this point in their relationship, for example, embrace without a kiss.

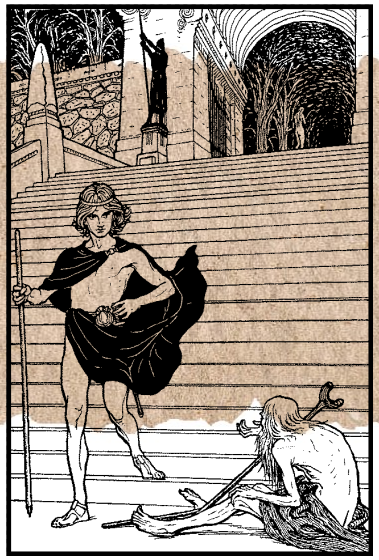
But what is *never* a valid argument against playing a scene as written is the actor claiming that he or she "would never do that." The response to this amateurish stance is simple: No one is asking *you* to.

The Final Call

Decisions such as these will always have to be made by directors, pastors, Boards of Deacons or Elders (!), and even the individual actor—and local standards will invariably win out. But within these constraints, if the actor is unwilling to become something or someone he is not already, then he is demonstrably in the wrong profession. For acting, at its root, is make believe. It is, by definition, the art of being something different from what one is—and someone unwilling to do this, should look for another means by which to serve the Lord.

emphasis five

The Adaptable Actor



From the beginning, it was customary for His Company to take a shorter play—either a sketch or one-act—to several different venues, rather than invite the general public to come to a central location. We were mobile; besides, without a stage of our own, it was the practical way to reach as large an audience as possible.

It was impractical, however, to take larger productions—such as a musical or three-act play—on the road. We would then offer several performances at one venue and, instead of performing the entire piece at different churches, we would visit them during one of their worship services to promote the larger production with a short excerpt. These occasions are good examples of the individual actor remaining flexible about such things as the configuration of the rehearsal/performance space, use of props, and even blocking.

Staying Loose

When we staged *The Essence of His Death*, I scheduled several promotional visits around town. In each case, I visited the church prior to our Sunday-morning promo to speak to the person in charge and get the "lay of the land," so that we wouldn't be walking into a completely unfamiliar environment. The two actors, however, had never seen these sites. They would be stepping out onto a strange stage, before a live audience, to perform a short scene lifted out of a larger play.

Our visit to the first church went without a hitch. I hustled the guys into a back room, leaving them to change into costume. Meanwhile I worked my way around to the back of the church to check the room. Everything was much as I had remembered it from my earlier visit, so I returned to my actors and gave them instructions for their entrance. They did the scene, exited, quickly changed clothes, and we piled back into the car to arrive on time at the next church.

At our next stop, I again sent the two actors into a back room to change while I went around to scope out the sanctuary from the back of the church. To my horror, all the platform furniture had been changed since I had last seen it. This meant that our original blocking would no longer work. I quickly returned to where my actors were changing. "Uh, guys," I said, "you're going to have to *reverse* your blocking. You'll have to enter from the opposite side of the stage, reverse your blocking right to left, then exit right instead of left." And this without any run-through. The worship service had already begun.

Well, by God's grace and my players' dedication to craft, they pulled it off. And we piled back into the car to make our appointment at the next church.

All this to say, it is important for the individual actor to not become locked into only one way of doing a scene. This does not by any stretch mean that the actor ad lib his or her way through rehearsals. What it means is that the actor think of each scene not as a series of repetitive tasks to be memorized and repeated, but as a living, breathing moment in time. The actor should perceive each scene in terms of *space*, *movement*, and his *physical relationship* with the other actors.

Lynn Redgrave on staying loose…

The hardest thing about developing a subtext is not to get too wedded to one way of thinking. Sometimes you see a situation very strongly in a particular way and you set up a whole load of conditions surrounding it. In order to fulfill those conditions, you desperately want the other actors to react in a certain way, but they may be off doing their own interpretations, and those may not coincide with your own… Quite often it's just a matter of being reminded that if the other actor does this, then you must do that; or maybe he doesn't want to do this, so you must not do that. You have to fit your parts together somehow. But [from] that exploration, wonderful new insights can come.

Space

The rehearsal hall, the Sunday School room, the sanctuary platform, the living room—they all can become, for a moment, the destination in an imaginary journey. Gnarled olive trees grow in the first row of the choir loft; a carpeted step is a crude, wooden stool; colored light cast by stained-glass windows is the sun setting on a far-distant, desert horizon; a sofa is a funereal bier; hard linoleum is a mountain stream.

The actor's responsibility is two-fold: to convince the audience, surely, but first, to *convince himself*.

The actor operates inside a false world. The space may be defined by bedroom walls, a masking tape outline on tile floor, or an elaborate stage set—but they are all false. The actor knows that even the finely painted backdrop behind her is just oil cloth or cardboard; the actor knows that his realistic beard was purchased as a strand of wool, then glued onto his face in pieces. And all the actors on stage know that they are not really standing in a Jerusalem street, or on a New York subway platform, but on the carpet of their sanctuary stage. It is all make-believe—the actor making *himself* believe, in order to make the *audience* believe. And that is the challenge and glorious joy of the stage.

The early stages of the rehearsal process, in which the actor studies and researches his role and the play as a whole, begin the process of cementing in his mind the setting of the play. All the elaborate scenery and set constructed by the stage crew are not really for the actors, but for the members of the audience, who have shown up at the allotted time to be fooled for an hour or two. They haven't the advantage of knowing everything beforehand; they haven't had four to eight weeks of rehearsal. So the scenery and set are there to help "set the scene" for the unknowing. The actor, on the other hand, is to carry the set around in his mind.

Learning one's role is not just a matter of reciting back, at the right time, a collection of memorized lines. It is not just putting on a

costume and fake beard, or learning how to walk like an old, arthritic woman. Learning one's role is *learning to see what the character sees*.

In the first performance of the sketch *To a New Life Born*, a fleshing-out of the John 3 episode between Jesus and Nicodemus, the inquisitive Nicodemus enters a moment after Jesus.

Nicodemus
(formally, yet with an underlying air of anticipation)
Rabbi, I don't mean to intrude. Your disciple outside gave me entrance.

Jesus
You are welcome, councilor.

Nicodemus
I am Nicodemus.

Jesus
And I am honored by a member of the Sanhedrin. What brings you at such a late hour?

Nicodemus
(after thinking for a moment; looking about nervously)
Discretion.

Jesus
(with a knowing smile)
Ah yes. Discretion.

This sketch was written for, and first performed in, a Sunday morning worship service. There were no props, no backdrop, and no set pieces. The choir was in the choir loft behind us (I took the role of Nicodemus), and the pastor sat just a few feet away on the platform. The first thing in my line of sight when I entered and approached the other actor was a red Exit sign over the opposite door. All we had with which to convince everyone were two actors: in costume, and thoroughly in character.

I knew that when I walked through that door, as Nicodemus, my physical eyes would be seeing carpet, a sanctuary full of people, a clock on the wall, a pulpit and mic stands. As I stepped up to the platform, I would be seeing the choir members and pastor, the music minister, a red Exit sign, and, last of all, my friend and fellow actor. To remove my senses from reality, I created in my mind a different

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

"Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?

John 3:1-10

scene. Standing behind the door, awaiting my entrance, I was Nicodemus, the learned and respected member of the Sanhedrin. It was late evening, dark, and I was approaching a nondescript alleyway off a darkened street. I was alone, and moving furtively through the shadows, fearful of being seen. Opening the door for my entrance, I was walking down the alleyway; stepping up onto the platform, I was entering a dimly lit room that no one would have discovered by accident. The room was sparsely furnished—just a simple table and stool. On the table were the remains of a Spartan meal, half-finished. Sitting before me was not my good friend, Guy, but a weary and lonely Jesus—a teacher, the adopted son of a carpenter, and just maybe (in the skeptical, yet inquisitive eyes of my character) the Son of God.

That was my space, and no matter where we performed, no matter the ambience and conditions of the venue, the "set" remained the same, tucked away comfortably in my imagination. And by creating that altered universe for my character, I could present to the audience a Nicodemus that was authentic and thoroughly believable.

Movement

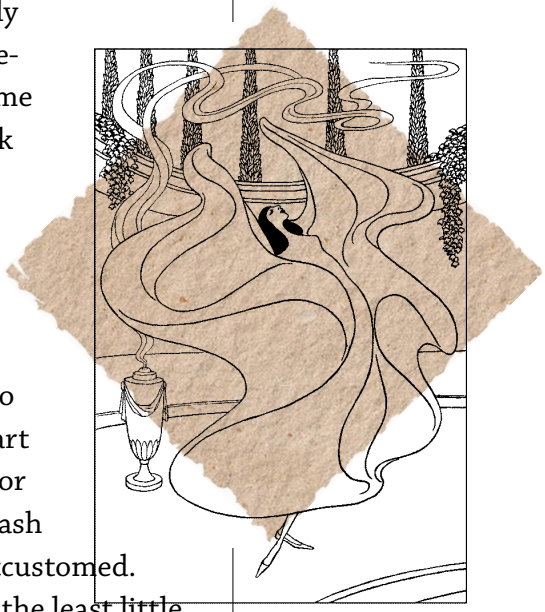
Earlier in this book, in Chapter Three of *The Actor's Guide*, the blocking of a play is compared to the poetry of ballet:

> Although it may not seem so to the actor being mechanically moved about from place to place during the rehearsal, blocking is really the play's *choreography*. It is the fluid dance that gives pace, rhythm, and physical tension to the scene being played out before the audience. When a scene is artfully blocked, one can stand at the back of the theatre, squint the eyes, and see the poetry of ballet being performed upon the stage. Each entrance or exit adds or subtracts dramatic tension to the scene; movement flows from actor to actor like a Rembrandt come to life. It is art, and it can be beautiful.

This movement—this *choreography*—is an essential part of the play's rhythm and pace and, ultimately, its message. The director will spend a lot of time working out the movements for each character, weaving the individual into the fabric of the whole to present a cohesive and meaningful tapestry. The actor then takes this fabric and, while con-

centrating on his or her individual part, takes the whole as a physical environment in which his character will operate.

The movement of the actors within the play—the blocking—is not just a roadmap that keeps everyone from bumping into each other, but also becomes, over the course of rehearsals, a familiar framework that makes the play more portable, even adaptable. This is not an easy concept for the inexperienced actor, who may think of a play in more two-dimensional terms. A play is not a factory assembly line, in which individuals perform prescribed actions repeatedly—actions learned to the point where, as in some factory situations, the actors need no longer even think about what they are doing.



Some less-experienced actors may think of their role in a play in these terms. Their goal is to memorize their prescribed lines, learn their prescribed blocking based on a specific performance space, then go out on opening night and simply walk through their part by rote. Granted, some directors would happily settle for this method from their actors, as opposed to the slapdash kind of preparation to which they are more typically accustomed. But it is a mechanical method fraught with danger: let the least little thing be out of place, let another actor forget his line, let someone make their entrance at the wrong moment and go to the wrong place—let anything go wrong, and the mechanical, by-rote method immediately falls apart.

Instead, a safer way to prepare—a way which has the added benefit of producing a deeper, more believable performance—is to think of the role in more three-dimensional terms.

Why

This process begins by asking the simple question: *Why?* If the blocking has your character moving up and left before saying a line to the other character, ask yourself, *Why? Why is this important? How does the move influence the dialogue? Does it change the way I think about the other character, or react to him?* If you understand the *why* behind your blocking, you then will have taken a large step toward making your

performance more flexible, and more adaptable when unforeseen changes arise.

The Wide View

You may not be the director, but the overall production—as well as your individual performance—will be enhanced by your taking the *wide view* of what it all looks like. This means you understand not only why you are doing what you do on stage, but you also understand how and why the overall scene looks as it does. *What is being accomplished here, and why? What is the overall texture of the scene? Is it dark and moody, or bright and cheerful? Is there a lot of dramatic tension, or is everyone just sitting around chatting about the weather? What does the moment look like, and what is my responsibility within it?* Understanding this makes the individual actor a more integral, vital component of every scene.

Physical Relationship

This component is related to Movement, so many of the same principles apply. But of the three—Space, Movement, and Physical Relationship—this is the most intimate, for it is the one that brings you the closest to your fellow actors. This is also the one most adaptable, the most portable. An intimate dialogue between two or three people can be performed just about anywhere—and often is.

In the production mentioned above, of *To a New Life Born*, once Guy and I had established our characters; our characters' reasons for being there in that moment (motivation); the general definition of the "space" in which the scene was taking place; and our authentic, motivated movements within that space—after all these components were in place, we were free to perform the piece anywhere, under most any conditions, in the smallest or largest venue. Our two characters had established a relationship that transcended any external considerations.

Inhabiting the Imaginary World

Even this writer is sometimes caught referring to acting as a "craft," as if positioning it alongside basket weaving or pot making. But act-

ing is more an art of the mind, in which individual actors, creating individual roles, come together to create something that has never existed before—something greater than the sum of its individual parts. Acting is more mystical than basket weaving; the actor must participate in the process by establishing, in the mind, the imaginary world in which his character moves, and speaks, and relates to the others that inhabit the same imaginary world.

emphasis six

Costuming the Biblical Character

His Company philosophy is grounded in the well-rehearsed and authentically costumed character. With these two elements in place, little else is needed to move the audience with a powerful message. If every character in a play is thoroughly believable, in both personality and appearance, the purpose of the piece can be accomplished with scant window dressing.

Second in importance to the behavior of the actor—but only just—is the actor's appearance. Elsewhere we have discussed the creation of the character, the research that is often required to give a meaningful presentation, and personal rehearsal methods that will result in a performance of substance and believability. It is now time to consider the methods of costuming that will faithfully complement this work put in by the actor.

Creating the Biblical Costume

The goal in costuming is for the individual actor's attire to look authentic and believable—to the attendant audience (ideally, from the first row to the last), and for the time period of the play. Taken as a whole, this dictum suggests that a certain measure of compromise may be necessary.

As a general rule, the clothing worn by people in either New or Old Testament times was dirtier, grittier, more unkempt and less uniform than the costumes created for the typical church production. The thin, bed sheet fabric often used doesn't look anything like what would have been worn by the people of the period. And outfitting every man and woman to look like pristine, cookie cutter clones, changing only the bright colors of the bed sheets, bears little relationship with the reality of the times.

For example, why did a good host wash the feet of his dinner guests upon their arrival to his home (Luke 7:44)? Because conditions out in the streets were filthy, and the host or hostess would not want all the dirt and mud of the street tracked into the home. People had fewer clothes, and garments were not washed as often as they are today—which is one reason why workers would strip off their outer garments when doing heavier work (John 21:7). The ideal Biblical peasant garment should be simply cut, rough around the edges, made from coarse homespun in earth tones—and not look like everyone else's on stage.

> Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.
>
> *Luke 7:44-46 NIV*

Fabric

Just as stage makeup is often exaggerated so that it appears normal under bright lights from a distance, it is sometimes necessary to use fabric that has an exaggerated texture to achieve the look of homespun on stage. We have found that old drapes often fill this requirement. When new costumes are needed, our first visit is usually to the local *Goodwill* store, or other used-goods charity. Here we find a selection of used drapes, being sold at a low cost, that have colors or texture that work well for Biblical costumes on the stage. Up close, the open-weave texture of a drape may look nothing like something a person would wear as clothing, but from a distance it may look exactly like the coarse homespun worn by a Semitic peasant. (Though

Figure 4.1

Figure 4.2

Figure 4.3

Figures 4.1-4.3 — Three views of a costume made from secondhand drapery fabric. Originally created for the role of Judas in *I Never Called Him Lord* (the disciple in hell), the fabric was crudely shaped, torn, and painted to represent soil. Yet, the faint shimmer left in the fabric hinted at a garment originally meant for someone with wealth—which Judas certainly could have been. The same costume was used later for Erastus, in *Who do you say that I Am?*, but dyed to darken color and to mute the shinier elements.

it is hard to work with—and even harder to wear—we have, on rare occasions, even used burlap to costume a rougher character, such as John the Baptist.)

No matter the source, be sure to use fabric for Biblical costumes that has sufficient weight and suppleness to hang and move properly. Using the bedding metaphor, think cotton or thin woolen *blanket*, rather than bed sheet.

Some Indelicate Advice

Those of fragile constitution may wish to blushingly turn away, for the subject now turns to (gasp!) underwear.

An Authentic Experience

The His Company philosophy regarding costuming is this: The individual actor is to do everything possible to not only look authentic to the audience, but to have an authentic experience within the costume. What this means in practical terms is that the actor should not wear any unnecessary, modern layers under the costume. The teenage boy or girl should not wear jean shorts beneath the more flowing garment of a peasant; the adult should not wear white socks or pantyhose in sandals.

The reason for this is simple: We feel different and move differently in modern clothing. If you, as an actor in a period piece, are fully dressed in modern apparel beneath a period costume, you are not going to move and behave as someone from that period. The difference may be subtle, but will still be noticed by some members of the audience. Even hidden garments will affect your body language.

There is, as well, a psychological component to what the actor is wearing beneath the costume. The actor who insists on being fully dressed beneath his costume is not fully invested in the character. The convincing performance comes from entering as the character—not just seeming to look like him. If I am Abraham about to sacrifice my only son upon the altar of obedience, I cannot be wearing beneath my outer robes a pair of jeans and a polo shirt. It just doesn't work.

By all means, modesty and common sense, as well as the typical church venue, dictate that the actor wear normal underwear while on stage. But no second layers—such as shirts or pants or stockings—should be worn, as they will not only impact movement, but may also awkwardly bulk out the costume. Likewise, care must be taken on occasion to select the most appropriate undergarment for a character's costume. Male Egyptian merchants dressed in short, white skirts shouldn't be wearing voluminous, multicolored boxer shorts beneath. Women dressed in light, diaphanous gowns must take care to wear a modern bra that will not be seen through or around the fabric. Sometimes—such as in the case of Sarah, in *Restless Dawn*, just out of bed and wearing typical Chaldean attire, which would be worn off one shoulder—it is best to wear a low tube top, which will give support while having the appearance of a more authentic article of clothing.

Sir John Gielgud on costumes…

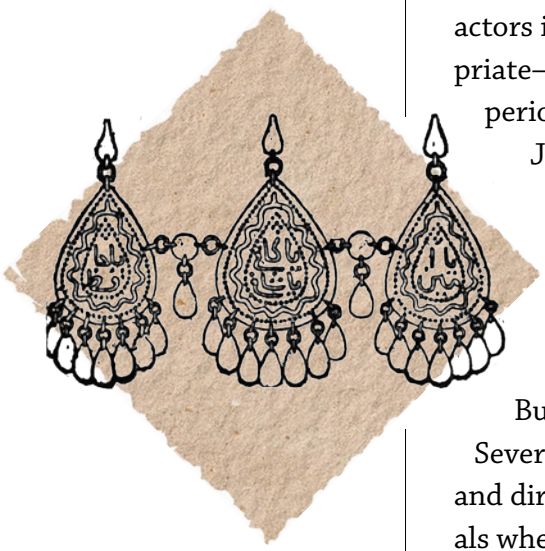
Costumes in correct period can be a problem for an actor. But designers are determined to have their own way and they are quite right… If given a chance, costumiers will often take short cuts, and actors and actresses too can be very difficult about their costumes. The high heels and heavy coats for men in eighteenth-century plays alter your balance, and actresses used to be very reluctant to wear tight corsets, although the young actresses today seem to be very good about it all. I have noticed in the last few years how they all wear the correct corsets and petticoats, perhaps because television and films insist on greater accuracy. Edith Evans was exceptional, as she always said she could not play a costume part unless she was dressed absolutely in the right period, right down to the underclothes. Nowadays, directors are also anxious that the actors and actresses should have some rough idea of what they are going to wear at rehearsal so that they can get used to it.

There are circumstances, of course, under which compromises are permitted. For example, if the timing of a scene-change dictates that a female actor must quickly change costume in a less-than-private location in the wings, she might wear a modest leotard or swimsuit under her costume. And, certainly, no one with delicate skin should be made to unnecessarily suffer the scrape of harsh fabric against bare skin; the man could wear a thin undershirt, the woman a slip. But no matter the exception, at no time should anything be seen by the audience, or leave an awkward outline on the surface of the costume.

The Accouterments

For the most part, the local director dictates the total appearance of each actor—which is as it should be. The director designs the overall appearance of the production, of which the individual actor is only one part. Once the director has approved the hair, makeup, and costume of the individual, the actor is not to make any changes to his or her appearance—from rehearsals to first performance, and from one performance to the next. Perhaps the following two negative examples will serve to illustrate…

Jewelry



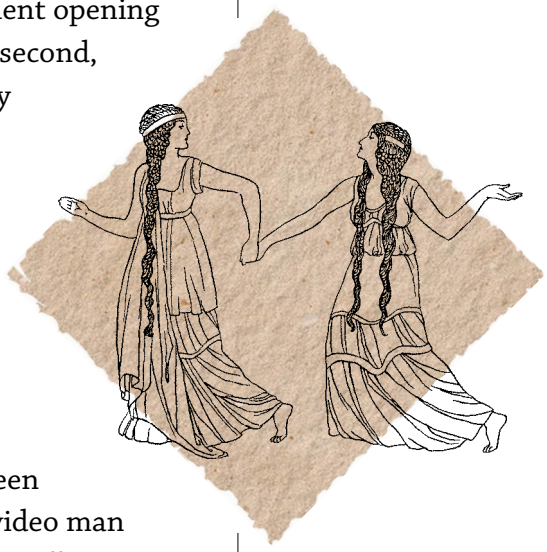
One mistake that some directors make when costuming their female actors is to have them remove all jewelry. But it is entirely appropriate—as well as historically accurate—for Semitic women of the period to wear *more* jewelry than their modern sisters. The typical Jewish woman—even one of relatively modest means—might wear gold necklaces and earrings to an extent that would be considered extravagant today. The custom among Semitic women of the Biblical period was to display whatever wealth they had, wearing it in the form of jewelry.

But then, like anything else, this can be taken to the extreme. Several years back I wrote the script for a church's Easter musical and directed rehearsals for the dramatic players and the few rehearsals where they were combined with the choir. This arrangement was necessary since the church's music minister was also playing the male lead.

A dynamic, but strong-willed actress who was playing one of the principal support roles in this production had been issued my standard instructions regarding jewelry, and over the later rehearsals we had settled on her look. Quite unexpectedly, however, as we moved from dress rehearsal to first performance, this actress began making her entrance wearing more and more jewelry—until finally, just before the final performance, I had to tell her to remove her rather gaudy, gold-ball necklace that would have made this support character the center of attention in every scene!

Hair

The individual actor should never change his or her appearance without first consulting the director. In the same Easter production, the music minister in the male lead turned in an excellent opening night performance, which was on a Sunday night; our second, and last, performance was to be the following Saturday night. Upon arriving for that performance, I was horrified to discover that my leading man had been the recipient of a rather short haircut just the day before! He now looked very different—and *very* inauthentic.



If he had consulted his director, this actor not only would have been told not to get a haircut because the look would be wrong for the role, but he would have been informed that on opening night the week before, the video man had taken all his wide shots, reserving close-ups for the following performance. Because he *didn't* check with his director, the actor not only looked wrong for the closing performance, but the final edit of the musical's video cuts back and forth between his character with long hair, and his character with short hair!

Needless to say, the actor's costume, makeup, and hair are to be as much fixed in place by opening night as are his lines, blocking, and behavior.

Details

Here are some points to remember when costuming Biblical characters.

- In any crowd, some will be peasants, some middle-class, and some will be aristocrats; let their costumes reflect the difference. Peasants would look scruffier, dirtier, their apparel cut from meaner fabric; aristocrats (just as with the wealthy today) would be cleaner, and wear more expensive clothing, possibly brighter colored, and the women would wear more jewelry; the middle class would split the difference, looking better than the former, but less well-off than the latter.

- Never iron (press) Biblical costumes. Depending on the characters' societal station, leave them as wrinkled, roughed-up and dirty as possible.

- Begin wearing costumes as early in the rehearsal process as possible. The bulky robes without pockets of the Biblical period are alien to contemporary sensibilities and habits. Take every opportunity to become comfortable with the way they hang, the way they move, the way the hems sometimes get tangled in the feet. The goal is for them to become so familiar to the actor that he gives no thought to them at all.

- Head gear of some sort—turbans, knitted caps, etc.—is historically accurate, but putting something almost identical on *every* character looks unnatural to the modern audience. Mix it up, and leave a few characters bareheaded—such as laborers or shopkeepers.

- Most male and female characters should wear a "girdle" (or belt). This would take the form of a long strip of fabric (at least several inches wide) wound several times around the waist. This not only holds the other garment(s) off the ground, but also serves as pockets. It would be in the girdle that someone would carry their coin purse, or hide a knife.

- People in Biblical times did not wash their hair every day with shampoo. They also didn't comb it every few minutes, nor did

they use hair spray to hold it in place. Leave most of the characters' hair scruffy and uncombed, and in the case of some women (such as the wealthy), hold the hair in place with the use of combs, clips, or fabric, instead of hair spray.

- Use a dark-brown shade of makeup to streak "dirt" on all the character's feet. It's not necessary to cover the entire appendage; just some streaks here and there will give the illusion of dirty feet. For some characters (depending on their profession or activity), apply the dark makeup in the same way to the arms and hands, even face.

- Dirty-up some of the costumes, as well—especially those for characters that do manual labor for a living, such as fishermen, brick makers, or gardeners. For example, the script *Who Do You Say That I Am?* includes in its three characters one each of the aforementioned classes: Erasmus, the gardener, would be about as scruffy and unkempt as any character could be, covered with the soil of his trade; Shara would be more middle class, as the owner of her own bakery, but sweaty and dusted with flour; and Hananiah, the money-changer, would be more wealthy, and richly attired—as well as cleaner than the other two characters.

- Modern accouterments are not permitted, such as glasses; diamond rings (those who refuse to remove their wedding ring should turn them to hide the diamond inside their hand); watches (use makeup to camouflage the pale skin beneath); modern-looking jewelry; radical, modern hairstyles; piercings, T-shirts or other modern clothing visible at the open collar, sleeve, or below the hemline; modern socks or pantyhose; and modern footwear.

Always rehearse without the articles that you will not be permitted to wear in performance. For example, if you typically wear eyeglasses, be sure to rehearse without them, to become accustomed to navigating around the stage.

Likewise, if you never wear jewelry, but will be expected to in the play, be sure to rehearse with it, so your performance will look natural.

References

A discussion on Biblical costumes would be incomplete without some tips on where to locate appropriate illustrations.

Libraries and web sites are filled with reference material, so that the intrepid director or wardrobe mistress will discover a cornucopia of source documents to illustrate costumes for a full range of Biblical

characters. There are many good, scholarly resources that will supply a precise description or picture for every time period and national culture. Here, however, I will recommend a handful of sources less scholarly—from popular culture but generally accurate, and appropriate for the average church production.

Films

Originally produced by *Turner Pictures* for TNT, but now distributed by *Warner Home Video*, *The Bible Collection* consists of six DVDs, with each film based on the story of one or more Old Testament characters. Included are biographical films on Abraham, Samson and Delilah, Moses, Joseph, Jeremiah and more. At this writing the DVDs are available individually or as a set from Christian Book Distributors (CBD.COM) and Amazon (AMAZON.COM).

I favor these films for Old Testament costume ideas because in all of them they have employed a grittier production standard than is more commonly used—one I believe to be more authentic. Some of the Biblical epics produced in the Fifties and Sixties were laughable in their fresh-scrubbed, smooth-edged rendition of how people lived in a rough and dirty desert land.

If the TNT productions err, it is in being a little too rough around the edges. There was, of course, wealth and finery—even in the time of Christ. For some good visuals of how aristocrats lived and dressed during this time period, view a copy of the classic 1959 production of *Ben-Hur*, with Charlton Heston.

Two, more recent films are worthy of mention. *The Nativity Story* and *The Passion of the Christ* are both excellent resources for more authentic and interesting Biblical apparel, and are readily available from a number of sources.

National Geographic

Past issues of the venerable magazine, National Geographic, contain many full-color illustrations that can be used as the basis for ancient costumes. Here are a few:

- Abraham/Sarah (Chaldean culture): December 1966, p.739-789.

- Egypt: October 1941, p.436-515.
- Rome: November 1946, p.567-633.
- Israel: "The Last Thousand Years Before Christ," December 1960, p.812-853.
- Israel: "Bringing Old Testament Times to Life," December 1957, p.833-863.

Books

A standard text for descriptions of how people lived in Biblical times is *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Moody Press), by Fred H. Wight. This small book is available in most Bible book stores.

Finally, here are some books to generally *avoid* when looking for costume illustrations. These are older, revered volumes that many of us grew up with, but have been for many decades the source for the typical Sunday School "dyed bedsheet" standard we have seen for far too long:

- *Egermeier's Bible Story Book* (The Warner Press)
- *The Bible in Pictures* (Greystone Press)
- *Hurlbut's Story of the Bible* (The John C. Winston Company)

emphasis seven

True to the Word: a case study

The words and behavior of the two characters in the His Company sketch, *Only for a Time* (which originated as a scene in the larger play *The Surrender*), may seem controversial to some. Jesus is preparing to begin His public ministry—which will be initiated by His baptism. First, however, Jesus must leave his home—and say good-bye to His mother, Mary.

The background research and rationale for this sketch serve as a good example of His Company's efforts to remain true to God's word in all that we do. The picture of a middle-aged Mary is based primarily on three groups of scripture:

- at the temple - Luke 2:40-52
- the wedding at Cana - John 2:1-11
- Jesus' family calling to Him - Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21

A Painful Good-bye

I began with our traditional image of Mary, which is taken from the Annunciation and the Magnificat; but then I overlaid that with time, the aforementioned references, and (most importantly) human nature. Mary was not a supreme being, nor was she a perfect human. God chose a virgin without blemish (at that moment) as the vehicle by which to incarnate his Son, who was utterly without blemish. My reading of scripture has left me with the foundational premise that Mary was first and foremost a mother—nothing less, and very little more. We do ourselves a disservice by leaving Mary with the personality of a fragile, awe-struck teenager for the rest of her life. She *did* believe; she *did* accept her role as mother of the Son of God; she *did* believe the angel—the Magnificat so beautifully tells us she did. But look at the later passages.

Luke 2:40-52

Only twelve years after the birth she has already forgotten. She and Joseph "…found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening and asking questions," questions and answers that "…amazed all who heard Him." What was his parents' response to such an amazing thing? Mary scolded Him: "Son, why have you treated us this way?" Wouldn't the Mary of the Magnificat have said something like: "How wonderful! It's finally beginning!" No, verse fifty tells us that even after Jesus explained to them that He now had to be about the things of His Father, "…they did not understand the statement which He had made to them."

> The Child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him. Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast; and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it, but supposed Him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for Him among their relatives and acquaintances. When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him.
>
> Then, after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers. When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You."
>
> And He said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.
>
> *Luke 2:40-52*

Now, approximately eighteen years after the temple event, Mary is probably in her late forties or early fifties, her husband is (as most commentators agree) probably dead, and she is left with several children—the oldest of which is Jesus, who has learned the trade of his earthly father. Surely, as the oldest, it would have fallen to Him to support the family after the passing of His father. But let's leave the good-bye scene and skip ahead to those two events recorded where Jesus had further dealings with his mother and family.

John 2:1-11

In just three succinct verses, at the scene of His first recorded miracle, we get a clear picture of their new relationship from the perspective

of both Jesus and Mary. I defer to the *Wycliffe Commentary*:

> Mary came to Jesus with the tidings that the wine supply had been exhausted. In His reply, the use of "woman" does not involve disrespect. "What have I to do with thee?" (KJV) The words indicate division of interest and seem to suggest a measure of rebuke. Mary may have expected Jesus to use the situation to call attention to Himself in a way that would have furthered His Messianic program. But His hour had not yet come. Later references point to the cross as the focal point of the hour. Jesus wanted His mother to understand that the former relationship between the two of them was at an end. She was not to interfere in His mission. Mary wisely did not dispute the matter. If she could not command Him, she could instruct the servants to obey His directions. Thus she showed her confidence in Him.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine."

And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Whatever He says to you, do it."

Matthew 12:46-50; et al

Jesus further defined this separation later in His ministry when He was surrounded by a crowd of people and His family wished an audience with Him. When informed that His family was outside wishing to see Him, he gestured to those immediately around Him and said: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

While He was still speaking to the crowds, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. Someone said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You." But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Matthew 12:46-50

These scenes from the Scriptures tell me that Mary went through a time of transition—and that probably that transition was not easy for her. The New Testament is replete with examples of how people—and especially His family—did not understand what Jesus was about. Even His disciples—twelve men who lived with Him day in and day out, witnessed miracle after miracle, heard him teach—did not understand until the Holy Spirit arrived at Pentecost—just as we don't understand any of it without the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

Mary had thirty long years to accept Jesus as her son, to know him as a man; she nursed him, cleaned up after him, fed him, bathed him, watched him play with the other boys in the neighborhood. She had thirty years to conveniently slip away from that momentous visit by the angel. She didn't change her mind, and she didn't entirely forget. She just chose to deny that He had never really been hers to begin with. He belonged to God, and I think any mother of thirty years would have wanted to hold onto her first-born.

Only For a Time

ENTER Mary and Jesus, already in conversation.

Mary
(frustrated)
But I don't understand this.

Jesus
(quietly, but firmly)
I must leave.

Mary
You haven't given me a reason. Have I done something wrong?

Jesus
I—I'm compelled.

Mary
Jesus, when your father died, he left with his heart at peace, knowing that you—his first son—would continue his business and care for his family.

Jesus
I am the first-born to another.

Mary
Again you speak of it!

Jesus
(tenderly)
Mother, when I was twelve years old you and father took me to the temple in Jerusalem. Do you remember? It was my first time and I was so excited. It was all so new and special to me. But I stayed too long. I was separated from you and stayed behind and made you angry. Do you remember what I said to you when you found me there in the temple? Mother, do you?

Mary
(emphatically)
Your father's business is here!

Jesus
Would you have me deny my Father's will?

Mary
(missing his inference; nostalgically)
He wanted only the best for you. You learned his trade so easily—you were born to it. And he was so proud of you. Why, Joseph always said—

Jesus
(firmly)
Mother!

(pause; softening)
I loved Joseph with all my heart. With all his uncertainty, all his questions, he accepted me. He loved me as his son. But it was a love that held much pain. He put up with so much vicious talk.

Mary

Oh, was I immune to the gossip of neighbors?

Jesus

I was at least of your body. He held no claim to me but marriage to you. A man and woman join to create life. That child is then a special miracle to those two people. Joseph never had that with me. He could love, even accept, but never fully understand. I was never a part of him. My beginnings were not stirred from his loins—and my end will not be his memorial.

Mary

(turning away; sadly)

At this moment, I think I miss my husband very much. I feel so—alone.

Jesus

(going to her)

I will always be a part of you. You brought me to this world. You gave me the warmth of your arms, the nourishment of your breast— You gave me life! You're my mother!

Mary

(turning back quickly)

Then how can you leave?

Jesus

(stronger)

It's my time.

Mary

(angrily)

Time for what? To break your mother's heart? Time to walk away from your responsibilities, your family? Your life is here! You are the oldest.

Jesus

I go to be baptized.

Mary

(stunned; incredulous)

Baptized? Why? Only the Gentiles require baptism when they accept our faith. Why would you have need of this?

Jesus

To fulfill all righteousness. In obedience to my father.

Mary

(harshly)

Your father died nine years ago. He left you to take care of his family.

Jesus

(sternly)

Woman! You can no longer keep buried in your heart the reality of my birth! Remember. Remember how it began. I have never been yours to keep. Only for a time.

(pause; softer)

I have no one closer to me on this earth than you. But, it is my Father's plan that I walk the rest of the way alone.

Mary

(after a pause; in catharsis)

Oh, Jesus! I've denied the possibility of this day for thirty years. I prayed that, somehow, God would show me mercy—that He would change His mind.

Jesus

The Father will never forsake you. Through you He has accomplished His purpose. Don't be afraid, Mary.

Mary

(smiling through her tears)

A long time ago, an angel from the Lord said that to me. I wasn't sure how to take it then;

(seriously)

I'm not sure how to take it now. I am very much afraid—for you.

(pause)

Will I ever see you again?

Jesus

I'll not be a stranger to you. We'll meet from time to time and others will keep you informed of my whereabouts. But,

(painfully)

you must understand, I now walk the lonely path of my Father's design. It's a way narrow and hard. Mother, you will never completely understand why I came. To you, I'll always be your son. But now I must be His son—and only His son. That, too, is my Father's design. He has given you thirty years—more than even I imagined.

(pause)

It's now my time. And my time is short.

They exit.

emphasis eight

First Time: a case study

The centerpiece of this chapter is a first-person account penned by someone brand new to the stage. It serves as a candid, sometimes frustrated, yet ultimately encouraging narrative of what it is like to be someone serving the Lord as an amateur actor. It serves also as a journal of sorts by someone experiencing the His Company rehearsal methods for the first time.

Mike was cast in the role of Hananiah for our one-act play, *Who do you say that I Am?*, which was performed during a Good Friday service. During the final days of production he informed me that he had jotted down some notes that might be helpful for anyone going through a similar experience. I heartily agreed, and his notes follow, accompanied, where appropriate, by my own.

Hananiah was my first ever theatrical role. I was without even a high school play to my credit. As something completely new and foreign, the thought of appearing on stage was intriguing. My director, David, would not accept my first reluctant "yes" to his offer. Rather he asked that I read a few chapters of his book and then the script before a final yes was accepted. Doing that, I was as well prepared as any first timer could be for what would be expected and what it would take to rise to an acceptable level of performance quality. Notice I wrote "acceptable level." Make no mistake: unless you are playing you *in the production, you will not master the part as an amateur on stage.*

Even with all the background preparation, I was surprised and pushed beyond what I expected at most every turn. This was hard work. Harder than almost anything I can remember doing in the past twenty years.

Those who are inexperienced with drama, whether on stage or in the audience, always seem surprised by what it takes to rehearse and perform to an "acceptable level"—which, by the His Company standard, means performing to the very best of our personal ability *and* doing it for the Lord's glory alone.

I suppose it could be considered a compliment, of sorts, that people assume from watching a performance that what we do takes little effort. Even Mike remarked, after getting a few rehearsals under his belt, that Linda and my performance (in an earlier Christmas musical) flowed so smoothly that it never occurred to him that there was so much work involved in producing that "effortless" performance.

And even though in the flesh a part of us wants people to know how much work we have put into a performance, the goal really is to make it seem so natural, so seamless and effortless that they think, at least for the moment (even if they *do* know better), that it is all happening naturally right before their eyes. That is what is called, in the trade, the "suspension of disbelief."

The performance was a success. It was well received by the church body and the whole Good Friday service that went with it made an impact and I believe was glorifying to God. If it had not been, what follows might have had an altogether different tone. This is a list of my thoughts and guidance to any novice who is

For more on the His Company method of casting and involving people in a project, see Chapter Two, "Our Philosophy," in Part One.

considering a role in the company of experienced stage actors, or being directed by an experienced stage director.

This director, too, learned something from this rehearsal/performance process—something that should stand as a cautionary note for *any* director. It had been quite a while since I had directed someone so inexperienced on stage in a play this size, and I had forgotten what it was like for him. I just went about the normal procedure I have used for many years, forgetting that it was all brand new to Mike. Happily, he was not reluctant to ask questions—which helped immensely, and clued me in to his thought process. Therefore…

New actor, when you don't understand something, ask questions. **Experienced director**, remember that some in your cast may be hearing and experiencing all this for the first time. Don't be reluctant to explain.

Before you Rehearse

Stage acting is much more demanding, I imagine, than screen acting. There are no second chances; a blown line is not an option on stage. Therefore, memorization of your part is absolutely critical and the barest minimum of what is expected. Without your lines solidly memorized the rest of your character cannot be developed. I was slow to appreciate this and slow to memorize my part.

Your lines matter to everyone else on stage. I struggled in early practices with lines. I really didn't get it until someone else had a bad night and I personally felt the impact that poor script work has on everyone. I was confused and unsure of my cues when the lines were paraphrased or all-out bungled. Your ability to deliver cue lines is imperative to other actors performing up to their ability. That night was a light bulb moment for me; I had no idea how much the others were being pulled down when I was off.

This cannot be emphasized too much. Not only is the director fighting against the all-too-common "volunteer" attitude so prevalent in the church today, but (as was the case with Mike) simple ignorance over the importance of knowing one's lines. Perhaps even some new *directors* don't get it yet.

When the actors' lines are learned quickly and early in the rehearsal schedule it places the entire production light years ahead of the game.

> *Early on, run your lines daily. You must work with someone else so you can hear your cue line delivered and begin associating your line with the cue.*
>
> *For me the most important line in the script was the one that came before mine.*

Even though I had given Mike the standard instructions about memorizing his lines (in fact, I gave him a copy of this book, which he dutifully read) he was not as careful as he should have been to always have someone there to help him plug in his lines accurately.

As a result, more than once he showed up to rehearsal technically knowing his lines—but not knowing where they went! He knew his words, but not his cues, and this was because he had failed to learn them with someone always reading the surrounding lines of the other characters.

There is an even larger issue to this business of learning lines. Mike, like so many before him, was nervous (perhaps even scared to death?) over the prospect of forgetting his lines in performance. I assured him that he needn't worry about that. Was I just blowing smoke, bolstering his confidence with wishful thinking? No, from experience I knew that this would not be a problem. But how could I say that with such confidence?

More than one inexperienced actor has looked with chagrin at the typical lengthy rehearsal schedule handed them for a His Company production. The amount of work and time dedicated to the task is so far afield from what they have been accustomed to for presenting "church drama" that they think we are either joking or are sadists.

The purpose behind the many hours of rehearsal—combined with at-home rehearsing for the individual actor—is to instill the character so deeply into the actor, to work the dialogue so many times that come performance there is no thought given to remembering lines. They are simply there. And the actor can thus devote all his or her effort to

For more on memorizing lines, see Emphasis One, "Memorization" in Part Four.

For more on organizing the rehearsal schedule, see Emphasis Nine, "The Rehearsal Schedule," in Part Four.

pumping life into the character and interacting with the other characters, without wasting energy or concentration on remembering lines.

About Rehearsal

> *Be prompt or even early to rehearsal. When you're there, be all there; focus on the tasks at hand—not on the work place or the chores waiting at home. Don't cheat the others by giving them only part of your attention.*

For more on the actor's preparation for rehearsals, see Chapter Four, "Regular Rehearsals," in Part Three and Emphasis Eight, "On Excellence," in Part Four.

This is the bane of the part-time actor (and his director). As mentioned elsewhere in this book, Christian drama is usually peopled by nonprofessionals, and almost every one of them will have many other things going on in his or her life: job, situations at home, paying the bills, problems with kids—the list could go on endlessly. But it is the actor's responsibility to do everything possible to set aside all those distractions—not just during the rehearsal, but during the time leading up to it.

> *Come with your part ready and with an idea of how you would play the part. There are plenty of hints in the script to help you form the character in your mind.*
>
> *Now forget implementing anything you conjured up as to how to play the part. That is simply helpful in giving the director a starting point to work from. It isn't how you want to play the part that is important. It is how the director wants the part played that matters.*

Mike is *sort of* correct here. It is true that more often than not in Christian drama the vision of the director is the one that must prevail. The actors in this environment typically depend on the director to help them with their character development and role interpretation. But I would not go so far as to say that the actor is to "forget implementing anything you conjured up." I prefer to think of it as a *joint effort*, as this was expressed in Chapter Two, "The Reading Session," in Part Three:

> While preparing for and approaching the reading session, take hold of your character—but hold it lightly; take possession of your character and call it your own—but understand that it will be a joint-ownership. In an amateur production, especially, your director will have some-

thing to say about the ultimate composite that becomes your character. It will be a joint effort.

> *I had to check my pride and inhibition at the door when I came to rehearsal. There is no place for them in the rehearsal or in the performance. Remember, it isn't you the audience sees; it is your character. More importantly it is the version of your character the director has in mind that should be seen on stage. Do it the way the director wants it done.*

> *Help the director to communicate with you. Repeat back key instructions so he knows you've heard and understood. Don't say yes or nod your head when you don't understand. This will only result in the director having to repeat himself, often with a notably different tone. Directors will use language that you may not understand; ask questions. If the script says to say the line "sheepishly" and you don't know how to do that, ask.*

This is excellent advice! Deep in the throes of a rehearsal, the director will assume the actors have understood his direction if he hears no response. It is up to the actor to seek clarification when it is necessary.

> *Be prepared for the director to change his mind about how you should play the part. You may not be able to play it as the director envisions the part, or, during rehearsal, you may say a line in a new and intriguing way that the director likes. Either way the director may change how you deliver a line to improve the whole play—not just your part.*

Even those who have an appreciation for the work that goes into a theatrical production may not grasp how really *organic* the rehearsal process is. There is give and take, and wonderful, remarkable discoveries can be made as the actors and director work together. It is great fun! And one of the delights for this director is when an actor delivers a line in a fresh, new way—demonstrating not just proficiency, but *interest*—an interpretation superior even to the director's original intent.

> *Remember, the director is concerned for the whole, yet he has to coach the pieces. This is much like an orchestra conductor but without the precision of musical notes to work from. If you think what is asked is silly, do it anyway; it will pay off in the end. Impatience* [or vanity] *doesn't serve the actor.*

Good advice again. Acting, by its very nature, is a narcissistic profession, and it is easy for the actor to be protective of his method, his interpretation of the role. He can feel slighted, or put upon, by the demands of the director. But the director must take into consideration *all* components of a production—not just the individual actor's ego.

> *We started in January for a late April performance. By February I thought shooting myself would be less painful than continuing. By March I could see progress occurring but knew I'd never get there. During the last three weeks before the performance the mechanics of the part were in place and I got to add more color to the character. That's when it became fun and when I at last felt like I was contributing.*

After more than a quarter-century directing, I still marvel at the wondrous, almost magical transformation that takes place in an actor and his role from the early days of rehearsal to the final days before performance. And it is a blessing to be permitted the privilege.

About the Performance

> *Did I say show up on time, or even early? Well, do it again. The last thing anyone needs is to rush around cramming too much into the minutes before the curtain goes up.*
>
> *Our run through was flat, with missed lines and little energy. David pronounced that good. A little humble pie keeps pride away. I guess pride before the performance fuels over-confidence that may kill the quality. At least it worked that way this time.*

It is an old rule of the theatre: Bad run-through, good performance. It is not chiseled in stone, but there is sound logic behind the proverb. Actors should always be at least somewhat nervous before stepping out into the lights of opening night. Overconfidence from a perfect run-through or dress rehearsal can spell disaster. Better to have a less-than-perfect run-through to keep everyone on their toes for performance.

> *You should be relaxed, focused, nervous, confident—and hoping that the place will catch fire so you won't have to go on. Seriously, be ready for a mixture of emotions; they are good and will add to the energy you bring to your part. In all likelihood you will perform your part with more emotion than you practiced it.*

> *Remember to breathe during the performance. If you try to work slowly you'll find the pace of your lines are about right, because all that good nervous energy will probably speed you up some.*

What Mike refers to here is the tendency—especially in the inexperienced—to get caught up in the adrenaline flow of first performance, and begin rushing through everything. It is remarkable how quickly one can lose the carefully rehearsed pacing when suddenly there is an audience beyond the footlights. Better to take a breath and, as Mike suggests below, concentrate on what is going on within the scene.

> *Ignore the audience. You won't be able to, but try. Your work is on the stage. You will properly play your part only if you participate in the scene and interact with the other actors. The audience is a voyeur just watching. They have no part to play.*

This is very good advice for the inexperienced actor, but does not necessarily apply to the veteran. The experienced actor can *use* the audience for feedback, for motivation, going so far as developing in the best of circumstances an actual *rhythm* with them. But this is not something that should be attempted by the novice. Better for him to concentrate on the scene, and the interaction between his and the other characters.

Devotion

Throughout the production process for *Who do you say that I Am?* Mike demonstrated not just a workable proficiency on stage, but the spirit of a true servant: sticking his neck out in what was for him utterly foreign territory; willing to take direction and play the fool; willing to show up on time and work hard at the task, even though he had pressing commitments elsewhere.

Here is the faithful template for the His Company actor, in which devotion to the task takes precedence over innate acting ability. And from that willingness invariably emerges a pretty good actor, as well.

emphasis nine

On Excellence

In few areas of the church is there a greater need for a reappraisal of purpose than in the area of drama. For far too long the corporate body of Christ has settled for sloppy, half-hearted, childish efforts in the service of Biblical drama—that is, the use of drama to exposit, illustrate and invigorate our knowledge of God's word.

The typical "Sunday School skit" mentality that has infested the church for decades is anathema to a life of healthy, reviving service offered in devotion to a loving and gracious God. The act of hastily throwing together something shabby and under-rehearsed, then calling it "drama" is an offense both to our heavenly Father and the body of believers united under His Son's name.

We have a higher calling than that, ladies and gentlemen. We are called not just to entertain, but to offer a holy sacrifice up to God

by means of the gifts He has entrusted to us. Church drama, done well, is on a par with the choir anthem or special music, the Scripture reading, the receiving of the offering, the sermon. It is the holy act of bringing to life the word and will of God, and if it is not based on our best efforts, it will—as much as a lazy, ill-equipped pastorate—inevitably collapse under the weight of its own hypocrisy.

A. W. Tozer
on our obligation…

The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems, for he sees at once that these have to do with matters which at the most cannot concern him for very long; but even if the multiple burdens of time may be lifted from him, the one mighty single burden of eternity begins to press down upon him with a weight more crushing than all the woes of the world piled one upon another. That mighty burden is his obligation to God. It includes an instant and lifelong duty to love God with every power of mind and soul, to obey Him perfectly, and to worship Him acceptably.

Beginning

Our relationship with our Maker is based on faith—not works. We do nothing to buy His favor, because His favor has already been purchased at the cross. We cannot add to that; we can only believe that it happened.

Some, however, have committed themselves to the one-time *event* of salvation while disregarding the *process* of living a life that has been saved (sanctification). Some have confused the error of "salvation by works" with the call to "work out our salvation."

> So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.
>
> *Philippians 2:12-13*

It is a hollow faith that ends with the "right hand of fellowship." It is a shallow relationship that does not seek to please the one through whom salvation has been given. Most of us have been effusively warned against working to *obtain* that relationship, but few of us have been encouraged to work as a *result* of that relationship—and thereby obey the one with whom it is shared.

Excellence on stage begins with obedience. Before even that, excellence begins with the *desire* to obey.

The Debt

> "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."
>
> *John 3:16*

Evangelical types love to talk about grace. They like to emphasize the doctrine of salvation by *belief* or *faith*—that "whoever believes in him shall not perish." But many evangelicals get sick and nervous when you raise the issue of service or works—or debt. It's almost as if they base their religion on the second half of John 3:16 without remembering the first.

There are certain conventions of courtesy and decency we follow in our dealings with each other. When someone invites us over for dinner, we write or telephone our expression of appreciation, and very often reciprocate. When someone gives us a Christmas present, we thank them, and maybe give them a present in return. When someone does something nice for us, we generally like to do something nice for them in turn.

So where did we get the idea that—if for no other reason than out of basic decency—nothing is owed our God for the gift He gave us?

God the Father—the one omnipotent, omniscient God of the universe—loves us so deeply, so intensely, that He chose to nail to a wooden cross His one and only Son as a final blood sacrifice for our sins. There had to be a sacrifice, and since He knew we couldn't do it ourselves, God had His Son take our place on the cross. His one and only, dearest Son. It was the brother of Jesus who said:

> For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.
>
> *James 2:26*

A Debt of Gratitude

What does it say about us—as people and as Christians—when we show greater courtesy to the one who gave us a birthday present than to the one who gave us eternal life through the death of His only Son? What does it say about us when we happily take possession of grace, yet turn our backs on gratitude?

We owe our heavenly Father the debt of our lives—our eternal lives. This is not a covenant debt, where if we fail on our side, He will retract His promise. No—and this is what makes our payment of the debt so important, so necessary—God the Father will love us no matter what, because our salvation debt has been paid by Christ. Our debt of *gratitude*, however, is still outstanding. We owe our Father the common courtesy of living for Him, out of a full and joyful heart of thanksgiving. We owe Him the very best of which we are capable, nothing less.

What are you doing for God, simply because you are grateful? How—and how well—are you working in His name, simply because you love Him?

The Reason Why

Have you ever wondered how things would be if God the Father adopted toward us the attitude we often have toward Him? How would things be different if the Father approached our needs with the same, lackadaisical attitude we often have toward His needs and service? It might sound something like this…

The Time: Eternity past
The Place: Heaven
God the Father and God the Son are having a last-minute discussion prior to the latter's departure for Bethlehem.

Father: You have everything you need?
Son: I think so. Don't really need much.
Father: Right. Well, here's just a few last-minute notes before you leave. Listen, I like these people, I really do. But I don't see any reason to break a sweat for them. They'll probably go along with our plan no matter what, so let's just take it easy. Now, about your disciples…
Son: Right. Twelve of them.
Father: Well, I've been giving that some thought. We don't really need all twelve. Ten would do just as well. I think we could get the point across just fine if we left these names off. ***(hands the Son a list of names)***

Son *(reading the list)*: Matthew and John?
Father: Right. Who needs four different versions of your story? Two will do. Now, about this crucifixion business.
Son: You wanted me to die on a cross, didn't you?
Father: I've been rethinking that, too. That's really going to a lot of bother—I mean, all that blood and pain and death… and then there'd be the business of the resurrection. What a hassle! Wouldn't it be a lot easier if we just had you scourged, then run out of town? A lot cleaner, don't you think? I think being whipped will say a lot about your love for the people. After all, we know none of them would voluntarily go through that for you.
Son: Well, if you say so. But I'm willing to die if you want me to.
Father: Hey, why bother…

Ludicrous, isn't it. Thank God that isn't really what happened. What really happened was that the triune Godhead loved us so unspeakably much that they willingly suffered separation and a tortuous death on our behalf. For us. They gave their very best—the very best thing that has ever existed in all of time and before: Jesus—just to save our wretched souls.

Yet still people will ask, *Why? Why should I expend the energy and time to reach toward excellence? After all, we live in a state of grace: we don't earn our way into heaven. Isn't all this talk of excellence and hard work just an attempt to make us into something we're not? After all, God isn't impressed with flash and glitter—and we're certainly not supposed to be trying to impress each other.*

God *is* "impressed" with us, no matter what. He can be impressed by our faithfulness, our devotion and giving heart—or he can be impressed by our sloth, and the cheap price we have placed on the sacrifice of His Son.

The righteous person serves the Lord with joyful excellence and a commitment to both His worship and the needs of His body out of the gratitude of a forgiven heart.

> He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.
>
> *Colossians 1:17-18*

To Be Like Him

Serving the Lord through drama—for the correct reasons—can be a form of worship. We are called to worship and serve our Lord with excellence—the very best of which we are capable. We do this out of a sense of obedience, indebtedness, and thanksgiving. But how is this accomplished? How do we go about offering excellence to God?

> Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
> The God of my salvation,
> And my tongue shall sing aloud of Your righteousness.
> O Lord, open my lips,
> And my mouth shall show forth Your praise.
> For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it;
> You do not delight in burnt offering.
> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,
> A broken and a contrite heart—
> These, O God, You will not despise.
>
> *Psalm 51:14-17 NKJV*

All things begin with God—even the service and worship we offer to Him. We begin by approaching Him with humility and an open, broken heart. This establishes our position in relation to His. As we proclaim His lordship, we confess our inability to live without Him; as we magnify Him, we diminish ourselves; as we establish His high and lofty plane, we comprehend its contrast to our own.

> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.
>
> *Romans 7:18*

An Origin in Him

Whatever beauty we offer up to God must have its origin in Him. It is only through the blood of Christ and the indwelling Spirit that we

even gain access to the throne; we are incapable of manufacturing praise out of our flesh—it must be God Himself who energizes the worship process.

Likewise, striving for excellence in our service devoid of the energizing motivation of the One for whom the service is rendered, is nothing more than "striving after wind" (Ecclesiastes 2:26). It is empty effort, offered for unholy reasons. Look, instead, to the example of Christ, the epitome of excellence.

> …who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.
>
> *Philippians 2:6-8*

There are those who denounce the pursuit of excellence as nothing more than showing off. But when we understand that true, Biblical excellence can only exist in an atmosphere of contrite humility before God, we understand that when we strive for holy excellence we are no more "showing off" than was Jesus, when He debased Himself to become the ultimate servant and sacrifice for man.

> Even youths grow tired and weary,
> and young men stumble and fall;
> but those who hope in the Lord
> will renew their strength.
> They will soar on wings like eagles;
> they will run and not grow weary,
> they will walk and not be faint.
>
> *Isaiah 40:30-31*

To Soar Like Eagles

Soaring does not happen accidentally. Excellence is not something that just springs from us unattended. We serve our Lord with excellence because we intend to, because we love Him so much that we are compelled to serve Him to the very best of our ability.

The Lord has gifted you with certain abilities; it is your responsibility to identify those abilities and place them in His service. He has not entrusted those abilities to you for them to be squandered or spent lazily. He has entrusted them to you for their quality investment in the work of His Kingdom. True Biblical excellence is not flash and glitter—it is not "trying to impress people." True excellence springs from a heart devoted to a God who loved us enough to spend His excellence at the cross.

How, then, can we offer Him anything less than our very best?

an afterword

The stage can be a magical place—a place of creativity, imagination, a place of wonder and delight. The stage can be a place where timeless truth is declared in a new way, a place where imaginative shadings are added upon deep, old colors.

The stage is a powerful, dynamic platform from which the truth of God's word can be declared—but declared in a winsome, creative way that speaks directly to the heart, the spirit, the unbridled soul.

Our most earnest wish is that this book has excited in you—the director, the actor, the backstage worker—a desire to serve the Lord deeply, and authentically, according to His call for you. And if it is His will for your life that you serve Him upon the boards of the dramatic stage, then our prayer is that you will remain true to that call: *A Calling to the Stage*.

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Scripture References