

# **Sacred and Profane: The Common Roots of Theatre and Worship**

Pamela R. Hendrick

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You've heard my professional theatre credentials, so just to give you a spiritual point of reference, I am speaking today as someone who has always considered herself to be a devout agnostic. But more recently, I've come to think of myself as a spiritual humanist. And I realize that that perspective has usually been present in my theatrical work.

A while ago I was asked if I would talk about the common origins of theatre and religion, and I certainly will. But I don't want this to turn into a history lecture, so I also want to talk about what is, at least for some of us who practice our art, a common impulse between theatre and religion.

Some theatre historians and cultural anthropologists argue over whether what we, in the European tradition, call theatre emerged from religious ritual or from storytelling, but many argue that religious ritual and storytelling are not discrete and that theatre could grow from both simultaneously. And in fact it is likely that storytellers and spiritual leaders were often one and the same: shamans, bards, seers, keepers of the communal wisdom.

If we look at the roles of ritual in pre-industrialized cultures we can identify several: Ritual established a sacred relationship between members of the group and to the divine. It offered a forum for communal petitioning to the divine for health, abundance, peace. It offered a communal forum for offering thanks for the above. It offered explanation of the natural world, stories of creation, divisions of powers and jurisdictions of the gods. It recounted the history of the people, their origin, their great tribulations and victories.

Most importantly, it did this communally. The community claimed its identity through these rituals that came to include dancing, singing, drumming (eventually adding other instruments), chanting and storytelling – in short, all the elements of the performing arts.

This form of ritual celebration or practice may once have been condescendingly called “primitive.” But many such rituals exist today across the globe. They have been preserved or resurrected. (Years ago, at a festival in Wisconsin, I heard an Iroquois storyteller recount the Iroquois creation myth. I took great spiritual solace in one of the lessons of that myth. It gave me a way to feel the balance in my life between chaos and order.) But theatre, as we know it in the western, Eurocentric sense, has gone through much evolution from its tribal roots.

Let’s pick a point in time and space: 441 BCE in Athens. The festival of Dionysus, a major annual religious celebration centered around public performance. Dionysus, Bacchus as the Romans called him, was the god of wine and revelry, ecstasy, the liberator from daily oppressions (escapism was OK with Dionysus). He was also often called womanish or androgynous. He was revered for these attributes, not denigrated.

Let’s set the scene: an outdoor amphitheater seating 14,000 people. The performances were sponsored by the civic leaders of Athens and were offered in competition for prizes and recognition. Bill Worthen in one of my trusty theatre anthologies describes the annual event as “a public spectacle, a kind of cross between Inauguration Day, The Super Bowl, The academy Awards, Memorial Day, and a major religious holiday.” The stage is a semi-circular thrust with a structure at the back. In the middle of the semi-circular stage is a stone altar, lest we forget that this is a sacred celebration.

The play is *The Bacchae* by Euripides. The title refers to the cult followers of Bacchus or Dionysus. Here is a choral excerpt that Theresa will perform for us. It would have been sung or chanted and danced by a chorus of, well we’re not sure how many, but several:

*The Bacchae*

Chorus:

For now I raise the old, old hymn to Dionysus.

Blessed, blessed are those who know the mysteries of god.

Blessed is he who hallows his life in the worship of god, he whom the spirit of god possesseth, who is one with those who belong to the holy body of god.

Blessed are the dancers and those who are purified, who dance on the hill in the holy dance of god.

Blessed are they who keep the rite of Cybele the Mother.

Blessed are the thyrsus-bearers, those who wield in their hands the holy wand of god.

Blessed are those who wear the crown of the ivy of god.

Blessed, Blessed are they: Dionysus is their god!

This passage evokes the ecstatic state that can be reached by performance. But this play is not just jubilant exultation of Dionysus. The play is a cautionary tale of what occurs when the gods are not revered. Pentheus, King of Thebes, refuses to acknowledge the divinity of Dionysus.

PENTHEUS: I happened to be away, out of the city, but reports reached me of some strange mischief here, stories of our women leaving home to frisk in mock ecstasies among the thickets on the mountain, dancing in honor of the latest divinity, a certain Dionysus, whoever he may be! In their midst stand bowls brimming with wine. And then, one by one, the women wander off to hidden nooks where they serve the lusts of men. Priestesses of Bacchus they claim they are, but it's really Aphrodite they adore. I have captured some of them; my jailers have locked them away in the safety of our prison. Those who run at large shall be hunted down out of the mountains like the animals they are – yes even my own mother Agave.

Well, this is a tragedy, so guess what happens to Pentheus. Dionysus drives Pentheus' mother and the other Bacchae to delusional madness beyond ecstasy. In their frenzy, they mistake Pentheus for a wild animal, kill him and parade his severed head back into Thebes. Does this seem a religious event to us, today? As Christianity makes its way into Greece a few hundred years later, one can see how the crucifixion story could inspire ecstatic followers. If you saw how many Christians responded to the recent film, "The Passion of the Christ," you may find some modern resonance.

Here I want us to pause and contemplate the phenomenon of live theatrical performance. About a hundred years after Euripides a man named Aristotle is trying to puzzle this out. He maintains that tragedy, at its best, should move the audience to fear and pity. This should occur at the moment of catharsis, when the hero recognizes where he or she went wrong. This depends on empathy with the hero, not just sympathy but empathy – feeling with, not just for. So the audience members had to see themselves reflected in the person of the tragic hero. And what may seem surprising to us is that Aristotle claimed that, when done skillfully, the catharsis would bring pleasure. He speaks of the pleasure derived from fear and pity through means of imitation.

Ursula K. LeGuin (a storyteller, not a performer) describes it thus, through the voice of one of her characters who is talking about live storytelling:

Even when it's somebody else's life, somebody who lived a hundred years ago, whose story I've heard told time and again, while I'm hearing it I hope and fear as if I didn't know how it would end: and so I live the story and it lives in me.

During the Festivals of Dionysus the gruesome tragedy would have followed choral songs and comedies, and been followed by very ribald satyr plays in the day's events. Comedies in Ancient

Greece were filled with bawdy humor. The actors were often costumed in large phalluses. Sex and bodily functions – the body out of control, the basest human functions - this is still the stuff of comedy. Could we picture that at a religious event today? But to the Greeks, this wasn't profane. Some scholars speculate that Greek comedy grew out of ancient fertility rites. And all comedies in Europe during the renaissance era end in marriage. This is still true in many comedies today.

But there were strict rules governing the Greater Dionysia, including allowable number of speaking actors rather than chorus members. The really violent scenes occurred off stage and were reported by an array of messengers. But what would have been considered truly profane was the presence of women on the stage. All the performers were male. The chorus of “women” was all male.

As Europe became increasingly Christian, what happened to fertility rites? Well we know that May Day celebrations persisted, just not in churches. So a split is occurring. Following the medieval years when much public performance outside of The Church was the reenactment of biblical stories and morality plays, the renaissance comes along and greatly expands the realm of public performance, but it is becoming increasingly secularized. And the Puritans mistrust it altogether, but Queen Elizabeth adores it. In England women still aren't allowed on stage. The Puritans think that men playing women is most profane. So when they oust poor Charles I and chop off his head the first thing they do is close all the theatres. Almost forty years later, when the monarchy is restored, Charles the second brings back a very good idea from his exile in France – let's put women on stage! Even more profane, the Puritans cry! But there's no putting that cat back in the bag. The debate about sex in public performance, of course, persists today, and reference to sexuality as anything other than profane is excluded from virtually all mainstream churches. Sex and language are far more problematic in America than is violence of course. So using too many Anglo-Saxon

words for urinating, defecating and especially fornicating is considered profane, but graphically dismembering a victim is not (remember, in Ancient Greece, Pentheus gets his head chopped off OFF stage, though the head itself does make an appearance in the final act.)

So the definition of sacred and profane in performance is somewhat fluid.

What persists, perhaps both in worship and performance, is that spark between audience and performer – the recognition of what it means to be human and how we can fight for control over our destinies, but only up to a point. There are always forces, divine or natural, out of our control. And the collective experience of bearing witness to these human struggles brings us pleasure. And when it is done with artistry, we are often transported. Shakespeare, through the voice of Hamlet, instructs a troupe of itinerant performers in how to finesse their craft:

HAMLET: Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, (here he invokes the origins of the ritual) was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature (and here he clearly means human nature) – to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

And Hamlet is in awe when he sees one of the players transported by his role and moved to cry real tears on stage:

Oh what a rogue and peasant slave am I  
Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,

Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wann'd  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in's aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!  
For Hecuba!  
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba,  
That he should weep for her?

Three hundred years later a Russian director name Stanislavski would call this “living the part” or “being in the moment.” This clearly is a transcendent state. His theories on how to achieve that heightened state of inspiration would later morph into American method acting that we bear witness to on movie screens and stages regularly.

Cognitive scientists have recently become very interested in the phenomenon of performance. Performance study has always been interested in the paradox of the performer – that she can be both herself and other at the same time (and I wish I had time here to talk about the non-European forms of sacred performance such as the West African Yoruba rituals in which the performers embody or channel the spirit of the ancestor or the god). Actors learn that they must be both mindful of the audience and erase its presence to be “in character.” Cognitive studies have discovered that the audience unconsciously embraces that duality. The “willing suspension of disbelief” may not be so willing. When we are caught up in a performance we both give ourselves over to the fiction and evaluate the quality of the performance at the same time. But as we empathize with the actions on stage our bodies and brains respond emotionally and kinesthetically as though we were, ourselves, the

actors. As we watch Billy Eliot dance, the neurons are firing between our brains and our arms and legs – we are living that pirouette. Aristotle’s concept of empathy and catharsis may be more or less hard-wired.

So as we watch performance we momentarily erase otherness. There is an exchange of energy between performers and audience that, when approached with dedication and respect, can expand our humanity on both the conscious and the unconscious levels.

Does it always happen? Of course not. I’ve seen many live performances where my watch held the bulk of my attention. And I’ve been to religious services where that was also the case. Just as the ladies gossiping behind their hymnals in the Methodist church are not probably not having a spiritual experience, so too, live performance can fail to connect. But I believe there is a spiritually transformational potential whenever we gather collectively to perform and to witness performance.

So in modern theatre, what do I consider profane? I’m really pretty relaxed about language and sex. I am a child of the sixties, and I’ve been part of the theatre world for around forty years. Gratuitous violence really offends me, but it’s often more disgust and annoyance than a real sense of violation. Given what I understand about our psyche’s empathetic response, I would call performances that exploit that response profane. I’ll cite Stanley Kubrick’s 1970s film *A Clockwork Orange* as an example. I know it’s considered a masterpiece on many levels, but the director uses all the artistry of the film medium to manipulate the audience into empathizing with a brutal sociopath. I first saw that film when it came out in the early 1970s, and I felt violated. I tried watching it again with students in one of my classes a few years ago. My feelings were the same, and I was not alone.

Another example of the profane in modern performance, in my opinion, is the TV sitcom laugh track. I read an account a few years ago, maybe in the Times Magazine, about how sitcom writers had learned to manipulate the audience into thinking they had heard jokes when they hadn’t.



They wrote what they called jokelets – snippets of dialogue that had the rhythm of a joke: (set up, set up, punch line, response, punch line) but that really had no punch line. These were neatly married to the appropriate laugh track and voila! The audience laughed too. I consider that sort of mental manipulation profane.

Aristotle maintained that theatre has a double mandate: to delight and to instruct. When I think of what I'm looking for in a UU service today that might well sum it up. At the beginning of human society we came together to praise, petition, enlighten and connect. To help us understand what it is to be human. The experience was considered sacred. As a spiritual humanist I believe live performance can yet be a transformational experience for performers and witnesses alike.