.e alchemist's stone . . . [can] turn
elf / From dross, till all is gold."[77]
nmunities of faith.

RESPONSE

Andy Mangin

In 1984, Wheaton College's Arena Theater got a new space. Jenks Hall had been purchased that spring and the theater was moving from the basement of Fischer dorm. The basement of Fischer dorm was quite a place to do theater. Space was limited, with low ceilings and the audience stacked on walls. As the story goes, they used to bribe the dorm floor above the theater with pizza during shows to keep the residents from flushing the toilet. Nothing quite ruins a tender moment of theater like the sound of dorm plumbing. Jim Young, the director of the theater at that time, had been praying fervently for a new space and was excited to move in. Jim and the theater students carried all the set pieces, furniture, clothing racks, and props across campus in what must have been a wild procession. Once everything had been moved out of Fischer and there was no object left to carry, they began the process of carrying something else. Jim believed the prayers of all those who had worked in that basement were in the walls. So the students put their hands against the walls in Fischer, and in the last leg of the procession, the students carried those prayers to the new space in Jenks and placed them into the walls. They literally carried the prayers from one building to the other. This is a powerful image of both prayer and community. It's a perfect story of how theater had given Jim and those students a way to embody belief and give it action. And it served to connect them to a community of the past, present, and future.

In Arena Theater, this tradition is still in practice today. Each school year we start with a time of prayer during which we put our hands on the walls of the theater. And we add to the prayers. I have learned, through the practice of theater, that things matter, prayer matters, and embodiment matters. Jim Young loved the work of Dorothy Sayers. He taught her plays every year. He directed *The Zeal of Thy House* in 1978 at Wheaton College. And I believe Dorothy Sayers would have loved Jim Young and that story of carried prayers. It is that very kind of display of belief, community, and action that Sayers recognized in her address at the Malvern Conference in 1941: "I recognize in the theater all the stigmata of the Real and Living Church."[1]

As Dr. Colón has clearly laid out for us, there was something important and transformative for Sayers in the theater. Dorothy Sayers was intrigued and engaged by the community of theater makers united in the goal of putting on a play. I want to go further and explore the levels of community possible in the theater, not only in the process of theater making but also in the audience's experience of that creation. Theater is the only art form in which both the medium and the subject are human. It seeks to explore who we are; it is a laboratory of the human condition. In order to do this work well and with honesty, theater is dependent on a series of collaborations, each requiring belief, commitment, and relationship. This call to community and away from isolation is the very thing Colón is pointing us toward in Dorothy Sayers's work.

A play, unlike other written material, is unfinished until this collaboration begins. "That is why all good stage scripts read rather

[1]Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Church's Responsibility," in *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society. Being the Proceedings of the Archbishop of York's Conference* (London: Longman's Green, 1941), 58.

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crudely and badly," Sayers wrote in a letter. "If the playwright tries to prescribe every movement or tone of voice he merely gets in the way of the actors and hampers the production."[2] Sayers, who had primarily written novels, would be working in a different way with the material for her plays. But she was energized by this collaborative model, perhaps out of that hunger for community she had sought in other arenas. In 1936, beginning with *The Zeal of Thy House,* she entered the theater world in a way that was new for her and saw how theater was made from the inside. In the early days of the production of a play, a group of designers and a director will sit down and bring their visual experience and storytelling acumen to the material. Each is intensely focused on their own phase of the production—set, costumes, lights, music, and so on—but all in the shared service of the script. They must complement one other to allow the story to be clear.

When I'm directing a play, I find this collaborative process to be enormously helpful. It is in these first few meetings that the play begins to become clear. These initial meetings give life to the script, which is essentially dead material, and are the very important first step in the collaborative process. The play is drawn out of the study in which it was written and into a world where others begin to engage with it artistically. Designers and directors wrestle with the play to try to tell its story to the audience, lifting it quite literally from the script to the stage. Then a play goes into rehearsal, where it gains another important set of collaborators, the actors.

Here is an excerpt from Dorothy Sayers's poem *To the Interpreter Harcourt Williams*:

[2]Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers 1944 to 1950, Vol. 3,* ed. Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1999), 193.

So is the play, save by the actor's making,
No play, but dull, deaf senseless ink and paper,
Either for either made: Light, eye; sense, spirit;
Ear, sound; gift, gold; play, actor; speech and knowing,
Become themselves by what themselves inherit
From their sole heirs, receiving and bestowing;
Thus, then, do thou, taking what thou dost give,
Live in these lines, by whom alone they live.[3]

Sayers describes beautifully the embodiment that is necessary in the process of a character coming to life. She admires Harcourt Williams, an actor who played multiple roles in her plays, including William of Sens in that original production of *The Zeal of Thy House*. She recognizes that without the actor, the lines are dead, and by extension, so are the characters.

I'm reminded of another Jim Young story. In one of his classes, two actors were working on a Shakespeare scene. Although they had memorized their lines, they hadn't rehearsed as much as they should have to present the scene in class. According to one of the actors, they believed they could stumble their way through it. Because they felt awkward that they were not ready, they did not take it seriously, even laughing at themselves at times. When they finished the scene, Jim Young put down his clipboard and left the room. The actors and the rest of the class didn't know what to do. When he came back a few minutes later, it was clear he had been crying. According to those who were there, he said something like, "These characters are real. They are stuck on a page and you are their only chance to have life. An audience will never know them if you do that to them. They will never live. That

[3]Dorothy L. Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays* (Deerfield Beach: Oxford City Press, 2011), 107.

is your responsibility and this is what you do? How would you like it if someone told your story like that?"

Apparently, there wasn't a dry eye in the class. It's a lot to demand of a college student, but that was Jim. He was moved by the process of the characters coming to life. It is an almost holy act of transformation, the deepest kind of empathy. Such empathy is possible through the practice of embodiment, through extended imagination, and through a commitment to love the character. In justifying and advocating for a character, an actor will often discover how similar they are to a character. I have always found sound theatrical reasoning and practice in the phrase *There but for the grace of God, go I.*

It is out of this internal collaboration—actor with character—that the play begins to come to life more deeply. The human beings come out of it embodied and relatable. But theater is dependent on yet another, and perhaps most important, phase of collaboration. Unlike film, theater is dependent on a live audience. This is not to say that there is not a vital process that happens in the rehearsal hall. But every rehearsal, every set and costume, and all the intense focus in preparation are pointed toward the future audience. Theater is dependent on an audience—and not a passive one. In the theater, the audience is being asked to be more than consumers. They are being asked to engage and participate. They are being asked to be co-creators of the play. Dorothy Sayers knew that the audience was necessary for a play to work. In the words of the Recorder at the very beginning of *A Just Vengeance*,

> Playing all the parts as best we may. But yet
> We, who are actors, bid you not forget
> That all these images on which you look
> Are but pictures painted in a book—
> No more like they that bid you think upon

Than this yellow disc is like the sun;
Though, in a picture, this might stand for that,
And the great sun take no offence thereat.[4]

This is similar to William Shakespeare's prologue in *Henry V*:

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings.[5]

It is a challenge and a call to recognize that there will be holes and that the audience will need to step into the gap. As the great theater director Peter Brook wrote in *The Empty Space*, "The only thing that all forms of theater have in common is the need for an audience. This is more than a truism: in the theatre the audience completes the steps of creation."[6] The audience is necessary for theater to work.

Ayad Akhtar, the playwright, described the experience this way in a recent essay in *The New York Times*:

A living being before a living audience. Relationship unmediated by the contemporary disembodying screen. Not the appearance of a person, but the reality of one. Not a simulacrum of a relationship, but a form of actual relationship. The situation of all theater, a situation that can awaken in us a recollection of something more primordial, religious ritual . . . the act of gathering to

[4]Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 281.
[5]William Shakespeare, *King Henry V* (London: Routledge, 1988), 7.
[6]Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1968), 127.

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Arthur Miller wrote abo
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[7]Ayad Akhtar, "One Mind, One
[8]Arthur Miller, *Arthur Miller's C*
Press, 1957), 11.

> witness the myths of our alleged origins enacted—this is the root of the theater's timeless magic.[7]

This connection in the moment between performer and audience, this shared experience of a glimpse of humanity, demands something of us. It asks us to tell the story too. An audience, inclining and co-creating, might be able to experience things they might never experience in their own lives. It gives us a chance to see the embodied stories about the extremes of humanity, times we might never face; yet in it, we might also recognize ourselves. And importantly, out of this last collaboration can come reflection. The great paradox of theater is this: an audience is being asked to look past themselves, to engage in a story about others with the hope that who they are will be reflected back at them.

Arthur Miller wrote about the role of the audience while watching a play:

> My conception of the audience is of a public each member of which is carrying about with him what he thinks is an anxiety, or a hope, or a preoccupation which is his alone and isolates him from mankind; and in this respect at least the function of a play is to reveal him to himself so that he may touch others by virtue of the revelation of his mutuality with them. If only for this reason I regard the theater as a serious business, one that makes or should make man more human, which is to say, less alone.[8]

In this way, the theater fights isolation. It allows us to see that our struggles with life and sin are not unique. Theater can allow us to see

[7] Ayad Akhtar, "One Mind, One Heart, One Body," *New York Times* 30 (Dec 2017): AR 5.
[8] Arthur Miller, *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays: With an Introduction* (New York: Viking Press, 1957), 11.

how interconnected we really are. *There but for the grace of God, go I.* How can we fit into the arch Colón has described until we see how we are similar? I have had this experience of connectivity many times as an audience member, and I know of many other stories of people who were shown something like this by a play. This kind of experience often sneaks up on you. It is often revealed where and how you least expect it. And even that reflection doesn't happen in isolation; it happens while you are sitting in a crowd. The theater is not for single viewing. It is not for private consumption. It does not take place on your phone. You are meant to be sitting with others, laughing when they laugh, crying when they cry—in some cases, moved to do so by those around you. This is what the ancient Greeks would call *catharsis.* Catharsis is a release of those emotions caused by viewing or experiencing art. It was believed that out of catharsis could come restoration and renewal. It could cause realization and change.

I had the unique opportunity to be involved in a play based on the poems of my late colleague and friend Brett Foster. Brett had been fighting cancer for some time, and an idea developed to dramatize and embody his poems in a night of theater. The title was taken from one of his poems, "The Future Belongs to the Good Old Days." We rehearsed for several months, collaborating with Brett on which poems might work. He gave us new material that he was still working on. At that point, we didn't know what it would be or how it would work. But we started the work, connecting to the truths of life and death in his poetry. There was so much humanity in his work as he struggled with the sickness. There were poems about doctors and airports and his family. As we worked toward an opening night, our friend became more ill. During our first performance, Brett went to be with the Lord. The audience that night was made up of people who

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knew Brett and who wanted to celebrate his work. We were also celebrating his life as we communed in the theater that night. I will never forget the faces of his friends in the audience. I, an actor, and they, the audience, were sharing a moment that could never be repeated. Rarely is the moment as charged as this. And yet, this very thing is the power of theater. The shared experience, live and ephemeral, affected and changed by a live audience, is a recipe for community.

Dorothy Sayers clearly loved the theater. She deeply connected to the artists who worked on her plays and found in them, as Colón has shown us, a community that she saw as unique—even in comparison to the church. On a deeper level, her plays were asking questions about what it means to be a human, what it means to be redeemed. And she was able to do it because designers brought her plays off the page, actors brought their characters to life, and audiences connected to what they saw. Unlike her novels, her characters could come to life on the stage. Plays are embodied by real, living human beings, being watched by other human beings, who could watch the characters actually breathe, fight, and change. And in this way, she could draw a community into questions about who they were and how they could fit into "the arch." She could ask them what their keystone would be. And as Colón has shown us, she hoped to draw them toward each other, toward reflection, and toward action.