

1 THEATRICAL GOD

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All of creation is a theater for God's glory.

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The Bible's story is utterly, profoundly, fundamentally dramatic. Think about it.

ACT ONE

The houselights dim. On the stage, all that's visible—and it's barely visible—is a vague, dark, scary-looking mass of . . . well, you're not sure. It doesn't have much shape. It's not a place you'd want to be. In fact, if you got up close to it, you'd find it's somehow *actively* dark. You can't see to navigate. This picture lingers—and you wonder if this play is going to be any good at all. There are no words. Nothing's happening, nothing breaks up the ominous murk. Perhaps you misunderstood—maybe it's a horror story. Or a bizarre, abstract . . . what? You can't even really describe it. But you don't like it. At all.

Just as you're about to get up and go home, you stop. Where there was silence, you hear breathing. Rhythmic, patient breath. Sloshing. A voice.

"Light."

Who—? A pinspot of light—dim at first—grows slowly, almost imperceptibly, brighter. You don't realize how strong the beam is becoming until all of a sudden you can see what was sloshing around up there. You were right: it's a deep, dark, surging mass of . . . wastewater. Ugh.

The breathing, speaking, lighting force acts. "Dome."

A spectacular effect: Suddenly a large blue

dome rises out of the murky water, taking half the water with it and sealing it, somehow, in the flyspace.

"Earth."

Platforms, places to stand, rise out of the water, creating islands, where you imagine the action will take place.

Now things move more quickly. Grass actually begins to grow—*how did they do that?*—on the islands.

"Stars! For signs and seasons."

Sparks appear in the blue dome—so many stars, with a sun and a moon.

You have to look twice—and yet again—to believe there are actually fish now visible in the water. In the watery, lifeless place there are now hundreds of species, colorful, swimming. And birds swoop from the rafters onto trees, which, you realize, have grown while you sat there. And these aren't just pigeons, but birds you've only ever seen in *National Geographic*.

"Be blessed, be abundant, make more! Fill up the space."

The voice, again, "Creatures."

From every corner of the theater, animals make their way to the stage. Tapirs. A couple of toads. Capybaras. A zebra. Several capuchin monkeys. An enormous ox. A pack of Siberian huskies. A long green iguana. What do you say? It's like . . . a zoo—except the animals aren't in cages, and even the bright orange tiger looks calm, collected and not at all interested in eating you.

The animals actually take their places, as though they've been rehearsing for weeks. The lights shift. The voice:

"We will make humans. Male and female, in my image. Like me."

And it happens. A woman and a man rise from one of the dry places, looking around at the animals, the dome with its stars, the water, each other.

"Be blessed, be abundant, make more! Fill up the space. Eat from these plants. Be my partners. Keep this place, its animals, its beauty."

And that's the end of the first act. God is a creator, an artist. And that is dramatic.

ACT TWO

The stage lights come up. We see the world just made. It's beautiful, alive, perfectly balanced, abundant. God made people and made them the keepers of this place. It's all theirs, save for one single, solitary tree. They are set up for life, God's partners. They know God personally, intimately. He walks through the garden in the cool of the day, just as night-blooming jasmine gives off its scent and crickets start their song. He has come to meet them, to spend time with friends.

But on the other side of the stage there are the people—God's partners, the ones he's waiting for. On the other side of the stage, something else is happening. By that one tree, a conversation is taking place between the people and a snake. The snake says—no, he sibilates—that maybe God hasn't really set these people up so well. Maybe this isn't such a good deal. Perhaps this "God," as he insists on being called, is actually out to use these two, to keep them down so he can pump himself up. Maybe this is all an elaborate way for God to fill his résumé. "God is keeping you from the fruit on this tree, and it's the best stuff in the whole garden. He's keeping it from you. Think about it. He's using you."

The conversation ends when the people buy it. They slurp the suasion whole and take

the unthinkable step: they commit outright treason. They cross the line. They decide they don't need a "God," thank you; they can do it on their own just fine. They dis God. And they make the down payment on what will cost them all of their life—their garden, their God, each other. They eat the fruit.

They are no longer who they were. The garden is no longer their warm, spacious, green, sweet home. Now it's a place of terror because—*what was that noise?*—they might encounter God. And they will know it is all undone. Undone. They panic. Maybe they're not—*get a leaf!*—maybe they're not quite able to manage on their own. The whole of creation is threatened. Will it revert to the dark, dank abyss? Will the lights go out, the dome collapse, the sun bears and rhinos and geckos and snowy owls be crushed under the weight of the stars slamming down? The crickets stop, the jasmine closes; will it all—just—end?

No. The voice, now walking—like us—comes searching. He finds them, his pathetic creatures, shivering now in their leaf-clothes, defeated, small, dorky. And he speaks again.

"What is this you've done?"

Thus begins the conversation of the rest of the story of God and his people. We are left wanting. How will God respond? Will he end the whole thing right there? How could you possibly get back to the way it was? Who could repair this damage? It seems beyond rescue.

But it's not. And the play returns after an intermission.

ACT . . . THREE?

God is a great hero, a rescuer, a repairer, a physician. And, as we all know, when you have people in a terrible predicament, you need a hero. It makes for great theater.

The story of God is theatrical. Every part of it could be its own play. Perhaps you've seen one of God's stories played or have been in one. Or perhaps you've noticed how the stuff that happens to biblical characters is so much

like the stuff that happens in your own life. The story of God is theatrical, universal, good for all time. We know what those Bible stories are talking about. We've been there, shivering in the fig leaf outfit, feeling stupid, aware we've blown it, searching for a way out . . . looking for the Hero to make his entrance.

WHY DRAMA?

God is theatrical. And we need drama. Drama is the compression of human experience into a story we can view on a stage. It's a way of communicating what is and has been important, of describing our condition, of making symbols and stories in which people can find meaning, release and hope. Drama is a means of evoking our deepest longings and greatest need.

Dramatizing our experience is an important way we understand the world. We do it subconsciously every day. Have you ever told a story? Then in some sense you've done drama, or at least you've dramatized. You've chosen particulars—details, feelings of an event—and told the story in their terms. It wasn't just a long book about clown ministry; it was an unbelievably loooong book on clown ministry. And in the last three-and-a-half seconds of the game, you didn't just make a basket: You looked left, pivoted right, reached past the guard, caught Kevin's pass . . . and got the ball off for three a split second before the buzzer sounded. Drama describes our lives.

DRAMA REVEALS

Drama helps us see ourselves. It suggests that life is bigger than we are. It makes space for all that's ambiguous, thrilling, painful, uncertain. Theater helps us know life. It draws our attention not only to our own personal reality, but also to the bigger world outside us, to our context. It gives us the chance to see our lives differently. It says things to us that we desperately need to hear, and says them intuitively, by pointing rather than explaining.

DRAMA ASTONISHES

Drama helps us see God. The woman at the well comes to know God because she admits who she really is—and in the very next turn, she hears Jesus speak who he really is (John 4). God makes no sense to a needless person. We have to know who we are if we hope to want and know God. Seeing the fullness of God prods us out of our cynicism and sloth and into amazement. We have to know who we are, and we have to be awake to hear and see who God really is.

DRAMA ENLARGES

The small story is really about the big story. The local is universal. This is why art makes sense even across time and culture. Our lives seem small in the grocery checkout and dull over morning coffee. In the giant picture, we are all alike in our shrunken stature and our vague regret. We all need rescue. But in finding ourselves small and leaf-covered, we also discover we have elicited the attention of the Hero and have become his mission. And as he approaches, we see ourselves reflected in the giant, shining eye of God.

DRAMA SPEAKS PROPHETICALLY

Drama interprets the present in God's terms and helps us know the future in his terms. Theater can ask hard questions by pointing to them on the stage, and we can say things in the context of theatrical dialogue that we would struggle to speak in any other context. Because an audience hears indirectly, observing characters talking to one another from the stage, we can offer people something that speaks to them without any finger pointing. We don't control this. The speaking is God's. But if we participate in it, both talking and hearing, we receive the Word too.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is about how we can use theater to tell the story of God and people. We want to help you explore how to incorporate drama in

your context—in worship, outreach, campus, church and arts events. Our focus will be on settings that use drama as part of a larger experience, rather than on full-length theatrical productions. We call this approach a mosaic, or aggregate communication pattern. We see drama as a piece of the whole, rather than the whole communicative process.

This book draws on our experience in community. Even before the Bible was written, it was memorized and spoken in communal settings, with one or a handful of persons reciting the sacred story as others watched and listened. In the Bible we receive the diachronic legacy of those who memorized and recited the great story of God. Theater gives us an opportunity to participate in the dramatic approach to God's Word that is our Christian legacy. Drama continues to make sense in the Christian context, because Christianity and theater are communal. You can't really perform alone. (Well, you can . . . but if your housemates walk in, you may need an explanation.)

Theater, like a good Bible study, is an opportunity to hear, see, experience and feel the story together with other people. This makes it inherently different from video, recorded music and other electronic media, which are usually created ahead of time and played as recorded performances. The kind of drama we're talking about draws on, and might incorporate, multiple media but centers on the live performer in the room with the rest of the community. In live drama there is something being created in our midst.

The story of God and people is not found only directly in the Bible. If you watch the news or read a paper, you know that people are still doing the same basic stuff they've been doing since they had coffee and donuts with the snake. And God is still, amazingly, working to bring people and creation back around himself so we can have the good he intends for us. Constant, basic themes of human struggle weave their way through all sorts of life paths everywhere and all the time. So we're not only

going to explore traditional Bible dramas—we will do that some—but we also want you to stretch with us, to think about how God's story is getting worked out, day to day, in your life and the lives of people around you. Consider how the story looks in different places, told by different people. What does God have to say about what happened today? He does have something to say. And our task as dramatists is not only to say what's been said but to wake it up, make it fresh, let it grow.

We want to experience the story in ways that will impact, startle, renew, energize, anger, help, pester, move, surprise. We want the people who've been coming to worship every week for eight hundred weeks to find a new way to see God. We want people who've never been to worship, and who think they would never come to worship, to come to the theater to experience the story.

We wrote this book not because we have all the answers—or, really, even a lot of answers. Of course, there are theological concerns that we mostly leave to other writers and to Bible study (see appendixes A and E). And there are technical rights and wrongs, but we won't focus much on technical theater here. What we're really, deeply concerned for is people who want to take a risk and try to express their stories and God's in new ways.

We're looking for people who want to communicate to a world that's heard it all, who are willing to get uncomfortable, to go around the old buildings and muck through back paths and pathless fields. We're searching for people who are willing to work at making art. This book is not intended to help you construct pieces that always tie up in neat solutions; we will avoid any attempt to give you a big, neat solution to theater problems. Because there isn't one. There is only hope, good conversation, the Scripture, reflection and prayer—and, in the end, following our theatrical God in the risk of getting out there and doing the play.

If you're up for it, keep reading.