

INTRODUCTION

When you're in trouble, you need a hero.

That reality has powered storytelling from ancient nomadic campfires to the latest Saturday morning cartoons. And throughout human history, people have told the hero's story not just through words but through words acted out: drama.

Many of us grew up seeing the story on flannelboards with flat, felt figures representing the great people of faith. *Look, kids! This little stick figure is Moses. You can tell because he's got little felt tablets in his hands (well, actually stuck to his little felt robe), while the other felt guy, Aaron, is carrying a yellow felt cow idol. Boo, Aaron! Yay, Moses!*

Once we outgrew the flannel, we went to worship and heard the stories of faith . . . recited by guys in robes reading books with gilt edges, intoning thees and thous. You'd think God is the most formal being ever to have lived. And to be honest, he seems a little, well, dry. Distant. Perhaps even boring.

But the story of Jesus is *the* hero's tale. It's not boring, and it's not flat.

Jesus' story is more scandalous than a novel and more thrilling than the most frenzied action flick. Dorothy Sayers said Jesus

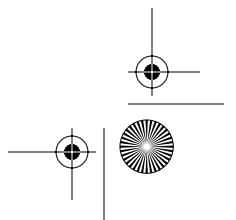
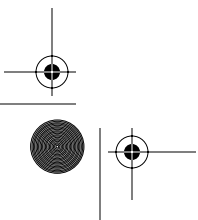
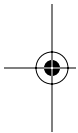
was tender to the unfortunate, pa-

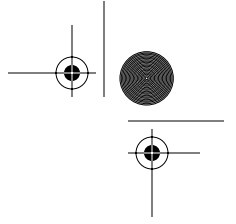
tient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites. . . . He went to parties in disreputable company. . . . He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple. . . . He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth or social position. . . . He was emphatically not a dull man in his lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God, either.¹

It's a great story, and it really ought to be told well. The gospel is supposed to come off as good news, not as a goofy afterthought or a deadbeat drone on the meaning of life. If this book helps you tell the gospel story like it's a story and as though it's pretty interesting, then great. That's what I'm hoping for.

WHY DRAMA?

Drama is the compression of our experience into a story we can watch on a stage. It's a way of communicating





what's valuable, how we got here, what we're hoping for. Drama describes our condition, and creates symbols and stories in which we find release.

We need to think about drama because it is everywhere. Murray Watts says, "Drama, largely because of technological factors, has become the dominant form of artistic communication in the western world."² People like drama because it allows them to project, to process, to relate their own lives to the staged lives of characters. Maybe we don't always think of it this way, but television is a dramatic medium. It may be in large part a sick and frivolous one, but it thrives on drama—whether it's good or bad, cheap or deep.

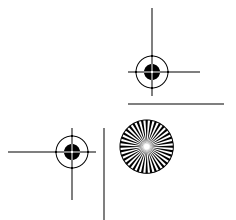
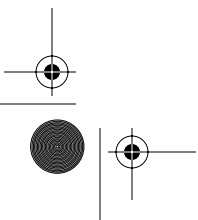
You can figure out a lot even in an unfamiliar culture by watching its dramas. Think about how much of Elizabethan England we know through Shakespeare, or what we know of Greek society through its plays. Aeschylus, Puccini, August Wilson, Zhang Yimou, *The Fugees*—all have created stories through which we understand human cultures and human hearts.

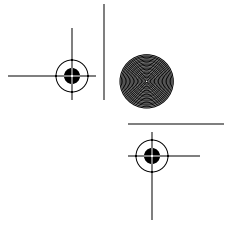
Drama is a language our world understands, a coin of the realm. Erudite, rational discourse has its place, and so do textual studies. But drama does something for us that a sermon or a theological treatise cannot. It evokes rather than explains. It gives access to experience. Drama taps into what's

deeply felt and intuitive. Dramatic forms hold heightened importance for the church in the postmodern age. They need to carry more weight, not less. And our theatrical work needs to be good—really good.

Slick and powerful—even manipulative—dramatic entertainment is what our culture expects and gives its attention to. We are not called to reproduce that. As Calvin Seerveld observes, "Art, like anything else, is relevant if it supplies what is needed. Art that is popular is supplying what is wanted, but not necessarily what is needed."³ We have an opportunity to make art with quality and substance—art that reflects what's truly important, whether popular or not.

The world needs to hear the gospel, and we are called to communicate it in ways that it can be understood. Note that Jesus called the fishermen to be *fishers of people*, not shepherds of flocks. He talked to them in terms they understood from their own experience. Of course the disciples likely *knew* what a shepherd was, but none of the fishermen had *been* shepherds, a fact that would have made a call to shepherding, however intriguing, difficult for them to imagine and accept. The fishermen had been fishermen all their lives, so Jesus put his invitation in language that resonated with their experience. Dramatic communication is the water we float in: Jesus wants to get in it with us. That's the invitation.





WHAT'S A SKETCH?

A sketch is a short, focused drama. As with visual art, a dramatic sketch is meant to convey not every detail of a scene but rather its overall shape, something outstanding about it, a single detail, a way or moment of seeing. A portrait-artist friend of mine often does several sketches of a person before she paints the complete portrait in oil on canvas. The sketching process helps her see her subject from many perspectives. She often notices things she would not otherwise have seen: the way a person's hand drapes on the sofa, or a strand of hair out of place.

Dramatic sketches do the same thing for the audience. They offer a view that helps us think about the whole, often in a new way. Sketches are different from skits, which are those things you do for talent night at camp. A sketch is meant to evoke and provoke. It's not made just to be funny or to draw attention to the performers. It neither lays it all out there like a play nor informs like a sermon. Sketching is an art form of its own within drama.

This book includes sketches that were written for and used in worship, outreach and other performance settings to engage the audience in exploring a story. They were not written as complete plays. The stories do not always include the entirety of a passage of Scripture. They don't generally quote the passage. Locations, names and his-

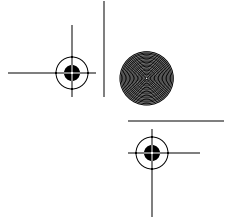
torical periods have been changed.

If you've been in Christian circles much, you know that we tend to go flannelboard—to wrap our stories up with a nice, neat, flat ending so we know that God is good and the hero is okay at the end. But life isn't like that. It wasn't like that for the people described in the Bible. Even if we trust that God makes “all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28), we don't know ahead of time *how* he will accomplish that. We usually don't know how things are going to turn out; sketch characters shouldn't know ahead of time, either.

These sketches are written, with few exceptions, to be underplayed. That means the characters stick close to natural ground. Big gestures, sentimental line readings and overly emotional responses should be set aside. For example, rather than the actor having to *play* confusion (“Look at my face. See? I'm sooooo confused.”), the script creates the *sense* of confusion in the actor's words. The audience should be able to identify *with* what the character is experiencing (“I've felt sad like that”) without overtly identifying *what* the character is doing (“Oh, look, Suzanne is doing a really good 'sad' look right now”). The experience of the sketch comes through the words spoken by the characters. Trust the script. If it doesn't work, let me know.

We need to draw the audience into





the story. We want them to wonder. We want them to want more. I hope this book will help you create moments of wonder and wanting, and that over time and through experience your audience will find themselves, like the characters, wrapped up in the story of the Hero.

NOTES

¹Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), p. 7.

²Murray Watts, *Christianity and the Theatre* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1986), p. 2.

³Calvin Seerveld, *Bearing Fresh Olive Leaves* (Toronto: Toronto Tuppence, 2001), p. 36.

